Summary

In which Cloud Strife and Zack Fair are glaives and are sent to the Nifelheim magitek lab, only to encounter and rescue a baby prompto and raise him on their own. But then again, it's so much more complicated than that.

AKA, What do you get when you put ffxv and ffvii in a blender?

Notes

Blame it on the fresh memory of prompto feels in my brain (cause of bomb ass DLC goodness) and blame it on the fact that i replayed a bit of ffvii not long ago AND on the fact that i read a shounen ai manga about LGBT parents not too long ago, or alternatively blame it on the fact that I'm a goddamn Genius!

Because when i woke up yesterday, i had an epiphany. Wondering who on earth could be the people that absconded with Prompto to Lucis and who could be the ones that raised Prompto, my head immediately screamed at me.

"Omfg, wouldn't it be cute if Cloud and Zack raised baby prom? hahahaha, prom is excited like zack, but has doubts and hair like cloud, hahaha, wouldn't family life of those two be absolutely adorable."

--
Simple premise right? Yet here I am, presenting you with a monster of a crossover.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Decisions on Frosty Winter Days

The sky was icy blue and the sun was a blinding ball of shining white light that lit up the snow duvet of Nibelheim in shimmering flickers. It was the first day of snow, and Cloud was sitting atop the tall water container in the town where he could see the vast fields of snow surrounding the small northern village. Cloud exhaled, and a puff of white mist exited his mouth – Cloud smiled with glee as he saw it, suddenly feeling like a small dragon.

It was early in the morning, far too early for anyone else to be roaming around town. Cloud had gotten up just so he could see the virgin snow in all it’s glory, before vendors made their way towards the village, and before the villagers themselves began to trample around.

Cloud knew he didn’t have long before some kid threw a snowball right at his face just so he’d come down to make room for others. Yet just as he figured he’d rather avoid that and walk down on his own, he saw something across the white horizon.

In front was a large snowmelter of course, but following suit behind was a military vehicle and, strangely enough, a very luxurious and posh car.

At the sound of the snowmelter approaching, most people decided to either peek their heads out of their homes, or walk out entirely (the people of Nibelheim were all a curious bunch, after all nothing of much really happened here)

Soon the entourage of mixed vehicles arrived just outside Nibelheim, and waltzing into the city were six soldiers and what looked like an official from Insomnia.

Seeing the soldiers, most kids had come running, yet cloud remained atop the water container, content that he could watch events unfold from up there.

A door further back suddenly busted open, and out came the mayor of Nibelheim, clumsily dressed and obviously not quite ready for such official matters. Yet he made his way over, his big belly bouncing up and down as he jogged on over, arriving a little red faced and out of breath next to the group.

He shook the official’s hand and then turned towards the Nibelheim crowd.

“People of Nibelheim! Today we are graced by the presence of Teneus Follium, a member of the royal council and a trusted servant of King Regis himself. They have travelled here to our village and will stay here for a week’s time, I entrust you all to make them feel welcome. And now, a word from the good Mr. Follium.” The mayor finished, obviously content to leave the rest to the thin man from Insomnia.

Cloud thought he looked rather uptight and serious, a real boring by-the-book kind of man, and honestly way too thin to possibly function. However, as soon as the mayor passed the word to him, Cloud was proven that one does clearly not judge a book by it’s cover.

“First of all, it is a true pleasure to finally set foot in the lands of Nibelheim, and at the first day of snow no less! Travelling here has been tough, and I imagine you all must lead very hard lives considering the weather challenges, so I feel honored that my men and I are receiving such a warm welcome.” The man spoke fondly and with great honesty, Cloud couldn’t help but gape as he was presented with such an incredible contrast, Cloud didn’t think this kind of speech could come from someone with such sharp and grey features. “We all look forward to spending time here in
Nibelheim, yet as you can see, we are all wearing our uniforms and as such we come on official business.” Teneus cleared his throat before he started in a more professional manner. “The recently appointed King Regis has begun recruitment for his Kingsglaive.”

At that, all kids went into fits of loud glee, their parents however, intrigued, were very quick to hush them.

“As you all may or may not know, members of the kingsglaive consists of boys and girls that react to the power of the crystal. I have come here, on behalf of King Regis, to see if the children of Nibelheim have what it takes to become a part of his royal highness’ small group of elite soldiers.”

Once more, the kids couldn’t stop their excited noises, and even the adults began to chatter lively among themselves.

“Should there be candidates with aptitude for crystal magic, they will be offered a life in the Royal capital of Insomnia, where they shall study and train to become part of the most elite group of soldiers. However,” And this he said loudly to shush the chattering voices. “The invite is not extended to the candidate’s families. Should families wish to join their children in Insomnia, they can do so with their own money. At the same time it should be noted that the children will still live in a dorm alongside the other candidates, and as such whether or not a family chooses to move to Insomnia, they will not be able to live with their child.”

Teneus took a break as he looked around the grave faces of the parents. Nibelheim wasn’t a rich village; certainly not rich enough to live in Insomnia, which by all standards was one of the most expensive cities in the world.

The man sighed. “I know this may sound quiet harsh for all the parents, but the candidates will have all expenses paid until they graduate and become members of the Kingsglaive. This is a chance at an esteemed education and a guaranteed job thereafter. Not to mention of course, the glory that comes with serving our great King.”

“I’m gonna do it! I’m gonna be a cool Glaive and warp around everywhere!” Some kid said excitedly, effectively lightening the mood.

The official laughed at that and then concluded. “We ask that all who would bear interest in this invitation come to the elementary school gym where we shall test the aptitude for crystal magic.”

And so concluded a very interesting morning for Cloud. As he sat and watched the people scatter, he wondered if he had what it took to become a glaive.

Then a snowball hit him in the face.

“Hey Cloud, get down from there! The water container isn’t yours!”

~

“Hey mom, did you hear the announcement this morning?” Cloud asked as he dipped his spoon in his soup.

His mom giggled. “You know me Cloudy, mommy was still sleeping by then, but Mrs. Rosa did tell me about it.” Her eyes glittered with calm glee. “It’s quite interesting isn’t? Something exciting is
finally happening in Nibelheim.”

Cloud looked down at his plate again, a little sullen.

“Why do you look so down Cloud? I thought you always wanted to be a part of the Kingsglaive, wasn’t Sephiroth the coolest hero ever? He’s in it you know, but I think you know that don’t you?” When Cloud didn’t answer she lightly asked instead. “Are you at least going to try your hand at the test tomorrow?”

Cloud moved his spoon aimlessly around the soup for a bit. “You couldn’t afford to go with me if I left, could you?” He finally asked.

“Of course not! I don’t think anyone in Nibelheim would have the money to go along!” she exclaimed, apparently finding Cloud’s question hilarious. Nevertheless, seeing his sullen mood persist, she reached out to hold Cloud’s hand. “But we all want what’s best for our children Cloudy, even if that means we won’t get to see them as much. This a chance at a new and much more exciting life, you won’t have to worry about a part-time job, because you’ll have paid housing and food, even allowances from what I heard from Rosa.”

Cloud frowned then. “But I won’t get to see you if I go.”

“I know that Cloud, but you don’t have to worry so much about that right now, you might not even be cut out for it after all. Try your hand at the test and see what happens.”

Then she took her hand away again and resumed eating.

~

Sometimes, Cloud didn’t understand his mother.

Did she want him to leave or did she not want him to leave?

As the sun rose on yet another frosty day, Cloud went to school, prepared for the overly loud kids, annoyingly excited for the test later today.

Cloud didn’t talk to a lot of people that day, mainly because he was too lost in his own thoughts of how big of a decision this Kingsglaive business was, but also because Cloud never really spoke to anyone in school.

There was Tifa though.

“Why is that I’m not surprised to see you moping on a day were the literal whole school is ecstatic?”

“Because everyone else is stupid.” Cloud countered, he turned to Tifa then, eyes serious. “This is a decision that defines the rest of your life Tifa, you give your life to the King.”

“Yeah? And so what? The king is awesome and he does good! Don’t you wanna do good Cloud? And be cool?” Tifa asked, seemingly pumping herself up, even going as far as to shadowboxing the air. “I would do it, for sure. Kick ass and save the day! And Cloud, more than that, you get to live in Insomnia! Insomina Cloud! The most beautiful city ever!”

Cloud wasn’t impressed, and seeing this Tifa rolled her eyes.
“Suit yourself.” She told him.

Then class began.

~

Once class ended everyone in school sprinted towards the gym.

Cloud was unsure of what to do, the whole day he kept on thinking and thinking about it but in the end he came to the conclusion, that yes, thinking so much about it now didn’t make sense. He’d think about it after he’d seen the result.

Nibelheim didn’t have a lot of children, after all, there was only one class of 7 students per grade, some classes even had fewer students, so the tests were conducted rather fast. Sadly, as the odds of having crystal aptitude was 1/100000, the chance of finding one in Nibelheim was rather slim.

Being one of the last kids in line and seeing no one come out happily both depressed yet delighted Cloud. He wouldn’t have to make a hard choice should he not even have a chance in the program, yet somehow it was disappointing and sort of anti-climactic when he’d been mulling the possibility in his head ever since yesterday.

As the one in front of him in line disappeared into the gym, Cloud remembered Sephiroth, the Silver Captain of the Kingsglaive. Cloud looked up to the man and had wanted to be like him since what felt like forever… Like a lightning bolt, sudden determination struck Cloud. All unnecessary thoughts seemed to fade as one strongly remained.

“I can do this.”

Walking into the gym, Cloud saw that it was completely void except for a simple table, were two masked soldiers were sitting on either side of Mr. Follium.

“Hello there.” He greeted. “And what might your name be?” he asked kindly.

“Cloud Strife.” Cloud answered as confidently as he could.

“Such fierceness, the mountain kids of Nibelheim truly are a strong bunch.” He commented lightly.
“Well, the test here is simple. I want you to come up to the table and hold in your hand a shard of the crystal.”

Cloud couldn’t help but narrow his eyes in confusing. “Is that it?” He asked.

“That’s it. Simple right?” He said, and then he placed the glowing shard on the table, casually presenting the challenge.

Cloud walked up to the table. “I just have to hold it, right?” He asked again.

“Yep.”
Feeling sceptic, Cloud picked up the crystal. The shard seemed to glow stronger in his palm, and Cloud felt a strange warm energy seep its way from the shard into his body.

At this, the three men in the room collectively gasped.

The chair in the middle screeched as Teneus Follium stood up from his seat.

“Congratulation Cloud Strife! You’re the first one to prove himself compatible with the crystal!”

At that moment, a surge of pride unlike any other surged through Cloud’s body. He smiled shyly as the thin man shook his hand enthusiastically and bashfully said thanks as he put down the crystal.

“Go tell your family about this and discuss what needs to be discussed. When you reach your decision, come to the inn and tell the receptionist to come get me. Then we can go about planning your road to the Glaive life.”

Then Mr. Follium gave Cloud some papers and sent him on his way, saying he expected to hear from Cloud in 3 days at the very most.

The image of Sephiroth warping through the air on television seemed on replay in Cloud’s head.

Cloud couldn’t believe it, he had the potential to do stuff like that! To become someone as cool as Sephiroth!

Nevertheless, soon far too many contradicting thoughts bombarded Cloud’s brain, and the pride he’d felt after the test started to disperse. Coming home, Cloud wore a frown again.

“I’m home!” Cloud called.

“Welcome home sweetie.” His mother called back.

Suddenly all Cloud could think about, was how he was going to miss being welcomed back by his mother and smelling delicious soup or stew in the air.

“So?” She asked once Cloud sat on a stool in the kitchen.

“What?”

“How did the test go?”

Cloud fumbled a bit with his fingers, but then, smirking he said: “Guess.”


At that, Cloud felt tears grow hot in his eyes.

His mother sensing this turned off the stove and quickly went to kneel beside him.

Instead of consoling him however, she told him instead: “I knew you had it in you Cloudy. There has always been something special about you.” She chuckled then. “But you think too much. In your head you’re like an old man already. I think part of that is what makes you so special, but please, you don’t need to worry about this so much. If you really hate it, you can drop out.”

Cloud sniffed at that. “Can I?”
His mother wasn’t actually sure about that. “Of course sweetie, its your life after all. They can’t force you if you don’t want to.” She smiled then. “The thing is, I know you want to Cloudy.”

She pushed his bangs aside and made him look up at her. “Isn’t that right?”

Reluctantly, Cloud nodded.

“Then why are you so sad?!?” She said as she stood up. “Isn’t this amazing Cloud?? To think you’d actually be capable of doing it when so few others can! It’s incredible! Do you have any idea of how proud I am?” She laughed again as she turned back to the stove. “Mommy won’t be lonely, mommy is going to be bragging Mrs. Rosa and the other ladies’ ears off!”

Cloud smiled at that, his smile growing until it was genuinely happy.

“You’re going to be a hero like Captain Sephiroth.” She said, turning her head from the stove to give him a happy grin.

Cloud grinned back.

~

And so arrangements were made, discussions discussed, contracts signed and belongings packed. With some bitterness, the kids bid farewell to Cloud, the adults waved fondly and her mother hugged him fiercely.

She told him she would do her best to get money to visit him and Cloud told her that once he earned proper money from the program and eventually his job as a glaive, he’d send them to Nibelheim so she could relax.

Cloud left Nibelheim with no doubts, he was going to become a glaive, one of the best there ever was.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I told myself I was gonna pace this fic out, try n' get a good shedule for it, but nooooo, of course i just had to be too excited and thus needed to put this chapter out :P I hope you guys enjoy, last chapter was a bit of a prelude i suppose, now the real fun begins B)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cloud definitely wasn’t prepared for life in the big city.

More adequately put, Cloud wasn’t prepared for life in Insomnia.

The place was unlike anything he had ever imagined. There were buildings so tall Cloud got dizzy, and cars where zooming by so fast he thought they might be arrows, there were more people on one street corner than Cloud had ever seen in his life.

Mr. Follium chuckled inside the car. “Quite different from life in Nibelheim, isn’t it?” He asked, and just as the words left his mouth, the car turned, and from it was a clear view of the palace. As Cloud sat and gaped at the wondrous view, someone told him: “Welcome to Insomnia.”

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Apparently the dorms, and the facility in which Cloud would now spend a great part of his life in, was located only a block from the palace.

According to Mr. Follium, children from other regions had already been gathered and had been waiting for the last few candidates to arrive before they could present themselves to the king. Of course, Nibelheim being the furthest region from the capital (a fjord being the only border between it and Nifelheim), Cloud was the last candidate to arrive.

Thus they had no time to get cozy and settle in at the dorms, maybe even greet the other kids, no no, they were going straight to the palace.

Of course.

“I know it’s a little unfair that the other kids have already gotten to know each other before you arrive, but I’m sure you’ll be able to fit in quickly.” Mr. Follium reassured him.

Ah yes, how very reassuring. Cloud almost wanted to roll his eyes, sure, cause’ cloud was soo efficient in making friends, of course he’d be able to just fit right in.

Riiight.

Cloud was quick to decide that yeah, friends was a thing that probably wasn’t going to happen.

Oh well.
Mr. Follium guided Cloud towards the waiting room in front of the throne room, explaining on the elevator ride how it was all going to happen.

Thankfully it didn’t seem all that hard. It wasn’t like he was going in there to swear an oath or anything, it was more so the king that was welcoming them. Then they had to kneel down or something like that, and that was literally it.

Cool, easy.

Once the elevator dinged, Cloud was surprised at the sheer number of kids in the waiting room. There had to be at least 60 kids! Which was probably more than his whole school in Nibelheim combined.

Feeling rather small, Cloud tried to hide partially behind Mr. Follium. Mr. Follium however, was either rather dense, or didn’t want to stick around for quickly he headed towards what looked like other officials overseeing the kids.

All the kids here looked so enthusiastic and confident, bright young boys and girls that smiled and laughed and positively oozed happy energy.

Amongst them was someone that stood out even more. Most kids had flocked to him, and the atmosphere there was even better than anywhere else. The kid was a bit taller than the rest, a bit more tanned, and he grinned and joked around with most anyone that chimed into the lively conversation.

Quite suddenly, Cloud’s mood plummeted.

He wasn’t anything like these guys…

Then, a man suddenly called out to the room. “Everyone,” He started, his voice booming across the room and effectively silencing the kids. “My name is Angeal Hewley, and I am going to be your head instructor and overseer on your path to the honorable title of Kingsglaive.” He introduced. “All the candidates across Lucis have now been gathered and in 3 days time, your education will begin. To start this off, as per tradition, the King will give a welcoming speech.” He looked around the room of recruits with a fierce authoritative power that held everyone’s gaze. “I expect everyone to be quiet and respectful, and I expect everyone to kneel during the King’s speech and only rise once asked to do so. I’ll demonstrate how the kneel is performed.” Once he’d shown then how it was done, he asked everyone else to follow his example a couple of times. When he was more or less satisfied, his face turned a lot less stern. “I’d give an encouraging and welcoming speech, but then I’d be hogging the good Kings job. At the same time, I can’t just not tell you anything, so let me tell you this: You’re all probably gathered here with the aspiration of becoming a hero, and trust me, I’ll make you into one, but if you want to be a hero you need to have dreams… and honor.” He looked at the room of now beaming jittery kids and smiled. “Without further ado, let’s go meet the King.”

Then the doors were pushed open by Mr. Follium and one of his colleges.

Instructor Angeal waltzed right into the throne room and the kids followed suit behind.

In the throne room sat the King looking very kingly indeed, one did not fear him, yet respected him all the same. On the King’s right side stood his shield, Clarus Amicitia, and to his left stood the Kingsglaive Captain Sephiroth and vice-captain Genesis Rhapsodos.

Cloud made a squealing noise at the sight, he couldn’t believe it! Living legends! Right in front of his eyes!!

Next to him, a kid chuckled and effectively pulled Cloud out of his barely silent hero worship.
Glancing to the side, he saw that standing next to him was the tall and popular kid from earlier. Cloud swore he could hear the kid mutter something along the line of “cute” and Cloud almost shrank in embarrassment.

Instructor Angeal then shushed the room, and once it was quiet enough, he bowed to the King.

“Your Majesty, to you I present the new generation of Glaives.” Angeal introduced shortly as he motioned at the kids.

Hearing their cue, the kids all kneeled before his Majesty, some more clumsily than others, but in general it was all rather properly done.

From the corner of his eye however, Cloud saw the kid next to him kneeling in what look like a textbook perfect stance. Seeing this, Cloud tried to adjust his own stance slightly.

Once silent, the children having settled more or less into presentable poses, the King smiled and stood up from his throne, clearing his throat before he began.

“Boys and girls, first of all, I warmly welcome you all to Insomnia.” He told them fondly. “You have all traveled long ways to be here today, and for that I personally thank you.” He looked around the room, his eyes falling on every kid that stood there. “As I look around me, I am delighted and fascinated to see a gathering of such unique individuals. It is truly fantastic, that while you all come from vastly different places in our great kingdom of Lucis, and have entirely different backgrounds, you are all connected by one common element – and that is the crystal. Your very souls resonate with the crystal and as the power from it is flowed from the crystal through me and to you, you too shall be able to wield crystal magic. To think that this invisible power binds all of us in this room together is quite the fascinating phenomenon. Having been appointed king for a good 3 years now, it is now under my reign that the new generation of glaives come to fruition. I will be older by the time you finally graduate and become true glaives, nevertheless I look forward to it. Work hard and stay true, the path of the Kingsglaive is old and honorable, though I am sure Instructor Angeal will be happy to teach you all about honor.” he finished, sending a cheeky look at the honorable Angeal who kept his perfect soldier poker face.

“You may all rise.” He told them, and so they did. “Our time together today has been short, but I assure you that we will see more of each other in the future. Good luck with your new lives, I’m sure it will tough to begin anew, but as you miss the family and friends you have left behind, in the true spirit of the royal glaive I say this to you: For Hearth and Home! Never forget the truly admirable role you are to play in protecting the realm, in protecting your homes and families, in protecting what you love.”

Once more he nodded towards Angeal, and this time the instructor nodded back in understanding before he turned to the group of children. “Dismissed!” he called out, and just like that, the heavy doors were being opened up and the children ushered out.

Cloud was... positively awestruck.

It was all so amazing, so incredibly unreal. Was Cloud really here? Was this a fever dream? Wasn’t this a little too badass?? Would something this cool truly happen to Cloud??? So many thoughts and emotions bombarded Cloud’s poor brain so fast, that all functions seemingly crashed, leaving behind nothing but a feeling of pure concentrated awe. It glowed from him like a golden halo whilst the stars in Cloud’s eyes began to shimmer, he didn’t even know that he’d been smiling at empty air before someone next to him chuckled.

“I know how you feel.” a boy told him, and Cloud turned his head to see the popular brunette kid
who’d been in throne room next to him, still standing there. “The king was so cool! And the instructor, and the captain and vice-captain! Aw man I can’t wait to get started!” He flashed Cloud a winning smile and then extended him his hand. “I’m Zack by the way, Zack Fair.”

Cloud regarded the hand in obvious wonder.

...What?

Uhh, what was he supposed to do again?

Zack wiggled his hand playfully, and realization dawned on Cloud. “Oh!” he exclaimed, cheeks flushing embarrassingly as he took the hand and shook it. “Uh, Cloud Strife.” He returned.

Zack grinned, obviously unperturbed by Cloud’s blatant awkwardness. “It’s nice to meet you Cloud!” He told him happily and oh, well that was odd. Was it nice to meet Cloud? Cloud wasn’t so sure about that... after all, no one had told him so before. Cloud had to stay on his toes. “You were the last one to arrive right? Umm, Nibelheim if I’m not mistaken?”

Their hands each went back to themselves; Cloud’s falling limply by his side while Zack’s own now rested atop his hipbone.

Cloud regarded him skeptically. “Yeah... How did you know?”

Zack laughed at that. “Well I’m just really nosy is all, and I asked Instructor Angeal about it enough times that he eventually caved in.”

Cloud was amused by that, and an entertained smile graced his thin lips. “That’s stupid.” Cloud told him, because he just couldn’t quite help himself. Perhaps it was the effect of coming into contact with this Fair kid, and yet here Cloud was, relaxing.

Zack laughed again, that easy, contagious and sunny laugh that was just so distinctly his own. “Maybe.” he teased, but with a cheeky grin he caved. "Okay, so I miiight have asked because I didn’t want to be the only backwater kid.”

“Oh yeah?” Cloud asked, suddenly interested now that he and this magnetic kid had something in common. "Where are you from then?"

Inflating his chest with pride, Zack answered him: “Gongaga!”

Just hearing the name was enough to make Cloud laugh, something which made Zack visibly pout, his cheeks flushing a bit darker despite his obvious efforts to stay cool. “Hey don’t laugh! Haven’t you ever heard of Gongaga?” The question made Cloud laugh even harder, but the way in which he was laughing, tears of laughter at the corners of his eyes as he clutched his poor stomach made Zack laugh crack a big smile. Nudging Cloud he told him, “It’s waaaay down south, essentially we live in the polar opposites. Each from the north and south borders of Lucis respectively. Gongaga borders Wutai and I’m pretty certain Nibelheim borders Nifelheim, right?”

When Cloud still hadn’t stopped laughing, Zack tried nudging him once more. “Heyy, is it really that funny?” he asked, though he was still laughing as well.

“What? You talking about Gongaga again Zack?” Someone asked, and the presence of a stranger was enough to make Cloud stop his laughing fit. “You’ll scare blondie away with your backwater Tarzan antics.” He told him, amusement clear in his tone.

“Cut it out Nyx, just because you think being closer to the capital makes you cooler... Well, it
doesn’t.” Then Zack slumped a possessive arm around Cloud’s shoulder, almost as if to say 'he's mine, so don’t you start’. “And me and Cloud here are both backwater kids, so just you wait until school starts, we’ll show you the power of the countryside!”

Cloud was unsure of what to do about the physical contact. Of course, it was nice, that is to say, Zack was leading him into a world of friends just because they had a little background story in common. But then again, People in Nibelheim didn’t exactly do physical contact; they preferred to stay bundled up in sweaters and snow gear and stay far too overdressed and huge to make hugging and PDA a comfortable situation. Cloud was no exception to this, which is why he didn't do anything but blush red under Zack's protective care.

Cloud wondered how to handle the situation, but at the same time he also pondered on what it all meant. Was he truly being treated as a friend right now? This wasn't just some horrible prank, right? To be honest Cloud had a hard time believing that he'd be able to make a friend this fast. Barely 20 minutes had passed since he showed up!

During all this, he also couldn’t help but be amazed at how much broader and more defined Zack’s arm were despite them both being 12 or 13 years old.

Unfair.

“So you’re the last kid?” Nyx asked, and for the first time now, Cloud looked up to see his face. He wasn’t quite as tan as Zack was, but there was a distinct southern vibe to him, the braids and beads in his hair enough of a tropic clue to cue Cloud that the guy definitely wasn’t from the north. “Where you from?” He asked, and dang, this kid seemed to be naturally cool.

“Um, Nibelheim.” Cloud answered, dimly noting that Zack still hadn’t taken his arm off of him, but finding oddly that he didn't quite mind.

“Oh wow, you two really are some extreme cases of backwaters” He said and laughed. “I’m Nyx Ulric by the way.” He introduced, extending his hand much like Zack had done before.

“Cloud Strife.” Cloud returned.

Then some other kids seemed to make their way over to Nyx. “Nice to meet ya Cloud, this here is Libertus and Crowe. We’re all from Galahd.” He said as he motioned to his friends.

“Hi.” Cloud said shyly.

Then Instructor Angeal cleared his throat, getting all mouths to shut and all heads to turn.

“Alright. So that concludes the welcoming ceremony so to speak. As mentioned before, classes are only going to start in three days. Use this time to get to know your comrades and explore the city, you won’t have much time for it when school starts. Trust me when I tell you that there will be little free time. You will all be given a small allowance as of today, the pay getting gradually higher as you age, and the money will always drop on the 1st of the month, so there you go, that’s something to look forward to. Now we’ll all make our way back to the dorms. Any questions?” A young boy raised his hand. “Yes?”

“Are we going to go around the city on our own?” He asked, obviously very excited at the prospect.

“Yes. We expect future glaives to be able to maneuver through the town and find their way back on their own. It’s a basic expectation, so be warned that if you get lost, we’re not going to go looking for you.”
Instead of nervous muttering, the kids broke out into wondrous cheer and only now did Zack’s arm leave Cloud’s shoulder in favor of cheering along with the rest.

“Crazy.” Cloud muttered.

“What’s that?” Zack asked.

“That we’re going to go around on our own. Have you seen the size of the city?”

“What, are you scared?” Crowe asked and laughed, she seemed a bit of bully this one, if only just a bit...

Her comment for sure made Cloud quite embarrassed and quickly he was trying to think of a way to mend what he’d said to sound less weak.

Thankfully, someone stepped in. “Don’t be a bully Crowe.” Nyx told sternly, but a smile played on his lips so that you knew he wasn’t too serious.

“I’d be pretty overwhelmed too if I came from Nibelheim.” Libertus chimed in with a shrug and okay, Cloud knew the kid had said that with the intention of being nice, but that actually kind of hurt. What was wrong with being from Nibelheim? Did they think he wouldn’t be able to take of himself in a big city like the capital?

“Yeah alright I get it. But let’s get going guys!” Crowe said impatiently.

“Crowe is right! Three days are gonna fly by fast, and just like Cloud said, the city is huge!” Zack exclaimed excitedly, unintentionally, or perhaps intentionally, making Cloud seem a little less pathetic in regards to his earlier statement. Cloud found himself grateful to the guy.

On the way back to the dorm, the small group of five discussed what they wanted to go see first. Cloud was quiet for most of the part, but he did give his opinion on some occasions. Most of the time however, he was lost in the fact that he’d been made a part of a group of obviously very popular kids. Some moments he thought about how stupid they were to let him into the group, and other times he just dwelled in how stupidly happy he was at having the chance to make actual good friends.

Because, as Cloud spent the day with them, he found out at these kids weren’t just cool. They were cool.

Cool in the right way.

The way most prepubescent kids yet understand nor appreciate.

Cool in the sense that they were open minded and teased with the right amount of respect. They were kind, and made jokes and laughed a lot… and honestly, wow, Cloud wasn’t expecting to have such a good time, yet here he was. Giggling at something or another.

While Cloud and Zack didn’t know a lot about the must-see things in town, apparently the Galahd trio, while never having been to Insomnia, still knew what was worth seeing.

“We should obviously go to an arcade next.” Libertus told the group, and it wasn’t really up for discussion. Every time someone dared suggest something different he would glare, and on the way to the arcade it became kind of a joke to suggest they go do something else. “Arcade and food, then we can go do something else.”
The group shrugged, but continued their teasing.

Cloud was more than a little overwhelmed as they made their way to the city center. They had to take the metro, and the metro was packed, then they had to walk, and the streets were packed. The sole consolation was that Zack was always beside him, telling him that he was just as overwhelmed and that he’d rather stick with someone that could sympathize. The Galahd trio were naturally a bit more street smart. Apparently, Galahd, while being significantly smaller than Insomnia, was bustling city full of commerce and street vendors. Sidewalks were always a riot, Libertus would tell them, there was always music and always something crazy going on. While that kind of busy obviously differed from the busy streets of Insomnia, where people were going somewhere and they were going fast; their experience in Galahd was still enough to leave them more or less trained for the big city.

Cloud however, was getting dizzy, and funny enough, so was Zack. As such, it was a relief to hear Nyx say they’d arrived. Yet arriving at the arcade wasn’t much better!! The arcade was six stories tall! Six whole stories of fun and games and oh my god Cloud was getting dizzy again.

Cloud had never seen anything like it! All the sounds and lights everywhere, Cloud didn’t know what to do or where to look.

And hold the phone, wasn’t this going incredibly fast? Zooming out for a second to see his situation, Cloud realized that he’d moved into Insomnia, met the king, made friends, and now he was out playing games?? How was it possible to do all this in just one day?!

Noticing Cloud and Zack’s obvious gaping faces, the Galahd trio started to laugh.

“You guys should see your faces!” Crowe said as she cackled. “Come on idiots, let’s go have some fun!”

And so Cloud and Zack tried gaming machines for the first time. As they got the hang of things, their faces started to light up with glee. Zack got competitive against Nyx, both going crazy at a shooting machine, Crowe invited Cloud to the dancing machine where she absolutely murdered him, and Libertus nonchalantly kicked everyone’s ass in everything.

“Call me the Arcade King for I am your ruler.” Libertus told them as reaped from the profits he’d made because of the bets he’d placed against his friends.

“I kneel not for you Arcade King!” Zack played along.

“Silence.” Libertus told him, open palm in Zack’s direction and everything. With a surprising amount of ignorance and evil kingly demeanor Libertus continued. “Tell me, who do you kneel for, if not for he who gives everyone a round of ice cream?”

“Sire!” Nyx and Zack exclaimed, both getting to their knees in much the same manner they had earlier today.

Everyone cackled at the scene, so much so that a staff member even had to politely tell them to keep it down.

Deciding it was about time to go see something different, the group headed towards the exit of the arcade. On their way down however, Cloud stopped as he spotted a crane game with some cute bird looking plushies inside. Seeing Cloud stop up, Zack turned his gaze the same direction.

“Ah! Chocobos!” He exclaimed as he made his way over to the machine, pulling Cloud along towards it.
“Ugh guys, there’s other stuff to do.” Nyx complained, but still followed.

Cloud looked at the plushies with confused expression. Chocobos, was he supposed to know what that was?

“What are chocobos?” He asked.

The group collectively gasped.

“What?!”

“Are you serious?”

“He’s kidding right?”

“You don’t know what Chocobos are??”

Cloud looked even more confused now. “Sorry?”

“I can’t believe this, it’s outrageous.” Crowe said, apparently the avid chocobos fan.

“Maybe they don’t do so well in extreme climates?” Libertus suggested.

Nyx shrugged, but both Zack and Crowe looked crazed.

“Chocobos are big birds… People ride them.” Zack told him gently.

“And they are so cute Cloud. Cute and fluffy and amazing.” Crowe added.

“When did you get so girly?” Libertus teased, to which Crowe huffed.

As they discussed how on earth you were able to live for twelve years and never come across the term chocobos, Zack pulled out some coins and started the machine.

“You know you’re wasting your whole allowance on one day, right? There’s a whole month until we get paid again.”

“It’s fine.” Zack told him, far too focused on the crane game to properly listen to what Cloud had to say.

It took him 4 tries, and almost all of his money, but Zack got the chocobo.

“Here!” He told Cloud.

“Um, what?” Cloud asked, his face already blushing pink.

Zack scratched the back of his neck. “You look like a chocobo, so I figured you should have it.”

Cloud blushed even stronger, but finally he accepted the gift. He wasn’t able to look at Zack of course, he was far too embarrassed for that.

“I can’t believe it. That is so sweet.” Then she looked in between her taller friends. “Why don’t I get a chocobos from you guys? Huh?” She demanded.

“I’m not wasting my money on that.”

“Ditto.”
Crowe huffed angrily at that.

~

The following days three days passed way too fast, the kids had way too much fun and laughed way too much.

Of course, Cloud's life couldn't keep on like that.

The first day of day of school finally arrived.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun duuuun!!! See ya next chapter amigos!
Do you have what it takes?

Cloud liked to think he was in all right shape; he was a mountain kid after all. That meant he was outside all the time, that he walked up and down steep slopes very often, meant that he was active and that his lungs were accustomed to thin air.

Apparently, Cloud wasn’t in very good shape. In fact, he was in the worst shape of the whole group. Perhaps even in the worst shape of a Glaive recruit in history!!

“Now you’re just exaggerating.” Crowe told him.

Cloud sighed.

He wasn’t though.

First day of school had been murder.

“I wouldn’t necessarily call it murder.” Nyx chimed in.

The first thing they had to do was a physical test.

“I would.” Libertus consoled.

Instructor Angeal had been wearing a jogging set and a whistle around his neck, his hair tied back into a half-up half-down style. Cloud thought the man looked like a young and friendly fitness uncle, the sight of him certainly hadn’t felt ominous, but then again, Cloud didn’t know any better. If perhaps his senses had been honed, he’d been able to feel the impending doom that lingered around the man.

Zack chuckled.

Hmph, there was nothing to laugh at.

The whistle blew.

Soon the most grueling sequence of exercises and running know to man was being drilled.

Most kids did relatively well, all things considered, but Cloud... well, let's just say he didn't do quite as well.

Cloud failed.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself Cloud.” Zack told him.

Cloud absolutely failed.

“Cheer up man, it wasn’t a test, the Instructor said that. It was just to see what level we were at.” Nyx said.

Nevertheless, a failure was a failure and this one was just... humiliating.
“Come on Cloud, don’t be so dramatic. We both sucked, you’re making me feel bad here.” Libertus complained.

“One is too big, the other too small. Opposing situations, yet the same problem How fascinating.” Crowe said teasingly.

“Hardy-ha. Just because the three of you are practically superhuman.” Libertus grumbled.

“Three? You mean two right? Those two are practically fighting over who gets to be the main character.”

“Hero” Nyx and Zack corrected in unison. Then they turned towards each other and huffed.

“You two aren’t allowed to be salty that you had the same record. I came in at rock bottom.” Cloud whispered to himself, hands in his head in disbelief.

The worst part of it all, was that Captain Sephiroth had been there to oversee the process.

“24 minutes.” Cloud said out loud. “That number is going to haunt me for a long time.”

“27 minutes, and ditto.” Libertus said as he scratched the back of his head.

“Yeah, sorry to tell you guys, but you really need to catch up.” Crowe told them.

Then Cloud looked at Zack, his eyes far too sullen, and his spikes far too deflated. “What was your score again?”

“Cloud quit rubbing salt into the wound.” Libertus complained.

But Cloud kept looking at Zack, and after being exposed to the expression for too long, the brunette caved. “Sorry Spike… 72.”

Cloud dramatically dropped his head unto his desk with a loud thump.

“I can’t believe it.” He muttered into the wood.

Cloud felt Zack’s hand comfortably on his back, but the brunette didn’t say anything to console him.

The gang had all gathered in his and Zack’s dorm room after the first day, Crowe claiming it was better than how nasty Libertus left Nyx and his room and also claiming that boys weren’t allowed into a ladies room.

“That number is insane. You know that right?” Cloud said as he looked up at Zack.

Zack had the gall to look sheepish.

“You shouldn’t compare yourself to them Cloud, they’re just strong idiots, obviously. Just kick their ass in school for now.” Crowe told him kindly.

“What kind words Crowe, don’t you have any for me?” Libertus asked, obviously messing with her.

“Stop eating snacks fatso.” She told him harshly.

“Ouch.” Came from Nyx.

“That’s gotta burn.” From Zack.
Cloud just smiled, however evil, Libertus getting picked on did make him feel a little better. Plus, the guys face was priceless.

He dropped the candy bar he was eating, also as if he was doing a mic drop, huffing once he walked right out of the room.

Crowe rolled her eyes and went to follow him. “Soooorry Libertus.” She said as she exited the room.

Nyx took this as his cue to get going as well. “Alright, see you guys tomorrow. I look forward to you kicking our asses in class Cloud.” Nyx told him.

This seemed to fire Cloud up, he took the challenge head on. “I will.”

Nyx laughed at that, waved and walked out the room.

The moment he left however, Cloud quickly deflated onto the desk again.

“I’m ignoring you right now.” Cloud told Zack.

“Wah! Why am I being ignored??” He asked, clearly incredulous to the treatment.

“I think you know why.” Cloud muttered into the wood.

“Why aren’t you ignoring Nyx then??”

“Nyx was nicer about it.”

“What?! No way! I tried my best to spare your feelings Spike!”

Cloud turned around then. “Don’t do that Zack. I’m here to become a Kingsglaive just like you, so I’m eventually gonna reach your level.” Then he smirked. “and go beyond.”

At this Zack smiled, something akin to pride making him glow. “I swear Cloud, sometimes you’re like the coolest kid I know.”

Cloud snorted at that. “Right.” Then he got up and walked over to his bed, the lower part of the bunk bed he and Zack shared.

“I’m not kidding!”

“Uh-huh, I’m sure.” Cloud said, dismissing Zack entirely. “Goodnight Zack.”

Zack turned off the light and climbed into his own bed.

“And so it begins.” He said lightly.

“What?” Cloud asked, too curious to pretend to be sleeping.

“Our path to being glaives! Aren’t you excited?”

“This isn’t your first day here, why are you only excited now?” Cloud asked, rolling his eyes but smiling all the same.

“Yeah, but it’s just sinking in now you know. It’s gonna be hard, I can tell.”

A lot harder for me than for you, Cloud couldn’t help but depressingly think.
“But we’re surrounded by all these cool people and we’re in this big city, we’re all gonna be heros Cloud! Isn’t it awesome?!” Zack asked excitedly.

“Zack, while I do agree, I don’t think you should be hyping yourself up right before bed.”

Zack chuckled. “Don’t worry about me Spike, I never have trouble sleeping.” Then he sighed. “How many years is it gonna take?” he asked.

Cloud wondered if now was the time to ignore Zack and go to sleep, but as Cloud was quickly discovering, he wasn’t capable of ignoring the other.

“5 years in school, 2 years in the field. Then we’re officially fully trained Glaives, we swear our loyalty to his Majesty once more, and then..”

“The we gain the title of Kingsglaive.” Zack’s eyes glittered in the dark room, he could already see his future self, kneeling before the king and receiving the emblem of the Glaive. Zack snickered, and so did Cloud.

~

Apparently, school at the Glaive Academy wasn’t much different from a normal school.

“You all still need a basic education after all.” Angeal had told them.

They had math, history, chemistry, physics, geography and English. While these were most definitely taught at a higher level than average schools, they were still normal subjects, taught by normal teachers.

Then there were of course the other subjects.

Combat, taught by Angeal.

Strategy, taught by Angeal.

Politics, taught by Angeal.

Linguistics, (a rare subject they only had once a week) taught by vice-captain Genesis.

Computer Science, aka. Hacking, also taught by Angeal.

And then, the most exciting subject of all, Crystal Magic, Crystal Magic Combat and Magic Power Enhancement, all taught by Angeal, though occasionally graced by Captain Sephiroth himself for demonstration purposes.

Of course, these classes weren’t even on their curriculum just yet. According to Angeal, the kids had to become strong enough physically before they could bond their energy to the crystal and receive the gift of the King. They also had to know how to wield a weapon, most uses of crystal magic was after all tied directly together with enhancing weapons and warping was usually done by throwing said weapon around. And so lots of basics had to be drilled before they were deemed ready.

No surprise there, but Zack was incredibly displeased by this.
“A whole year before we even get to the good part!”

“I know.” Nyx had sympathized.

Cloud for one, was quite content with this arranging. He obviously had a lot of catching up to
strength wise, so he was going to work his buns off to get to the same level as everyone else and
hopefully not look like a blundering idiot when they’d be able to use the power of the crystal.

As Crowe had foreseen however, Cloud definitely kicked everyone’s ass in subjects that didn’t
require physical strength.

Instructor Angeal even voiced out loud how impressed he was with his skills in strategy class, but
even better was the praise he’d received from vice-captain Genesis in linguistics.

The man’s classes were notorious for leaving everyone in the dark. Being able to speak a good 12
languages fluently, the man would often switch from language to language for a change of pace. He
always made students read aloud from his favorite piece of literature “Loveless”, and always
demanded perfect pronunciation and passion. While his classes were decidedly fun because of the
man’s flamboyant yet genius personality, people still dreaded it because of the terrible marks they got
in it.

Also, Genesis disliked most his students, simply because they couldn’t keep up, but also because
they didn’t share his views on the beauty of language and sound and literature and all things
combined.

“Art. Think of my classes, as an art class.” Genesis would say these kinds of things and leave his
students in the dust.

Then there was Cloud who was perfectly comfortable in Genesis classes.

More than that, Linguistics was his favorite class right after Strategy.

He was of course embarrassed whenever he had to read something aloud passionately, a blush would
always redden his cheeks, sometimes he’d even stutter; but apparently Genesis loved that.

“Oh youth, how very beautiful and frail.” He’d say, only serving to embarrass Cloud even more.

“It’s not fair though, you obviously have an advantage with this, don’t people in Nibelheim speak
like, 3 languages by default?” Nyx asked.

“Yeah, I guess.” Cloud replied shyly.

“Really? I didn’t know that.” Crowe chimed in.

Cloud nodded. “English, German, Old Norse and Icelandic, but me and mom mostly spoke
Icelandic.”

“Ugh, what are you kidding me? You speak four languages??” Zack complained.

Being the worst in the whole class at linguistics, Nyx sighed dramatically. “Now I know how it must
have felt to hear the number 72…” he said sullenly.

“But hey, why Old Norse? That isn’t one of the official languages, right?” Libertus asked.

Suddenly Cloud blushed, he knew he was going to get teased about this. “Eh no, I err, self-taught
myself because there were lots of fairy tale books in Old Norse about Odin.”
But instead of being teased they all asked in unison: “Self taught?!"

This made Cloud blush even harder. “U-uh, yeah.” He admitted.

“You’re being cruel here Cloud, come back to the bottom with me, you’re being too much of an overachiever right now.” Libertus complained. Though Cloud thought he really shouldn’t say that, Libertus really wasn’t all that bad at most subjects, he’d actually been praised a couple of times.

“Uh, sorry?” Cloud said sheepishly.

“That is seriously so cool Spike, you’re freaking amazing.” Zack told him, his eyes shimmering in wonder.

Cloud had to look away at that, or else his head was gonna turn into a damn tomato.

~

Despite Cloud’s success in most classes, the fact that he was faring so badly at combat was really taking a mental toll on him.

One day, at a particularly brutal session of cardio, Cloud wasn’t able to keep up. He tried though, tried so hard to keep up, but his legs felt like lead and he couldn’t breathe and his vision was blurring.

That day, Cloud feel and threw up in the middle of the gym.

He hadn’t talked to anyone for the rest of the day, and angry tears constantly threatened to fall. He didn’t let them fall though, he had to be strong, even though… even though everybody knew he wasn’t, even though everybody knew he was pathetic and weak.

After dinner, Cloud didn’t stay to hang out with his friends. He went straight to his room instead.

Cloud knew his body, and he knew he had to cry.

However pathetic that was, it was the only way to get it out of his system.

Entering his room, Cloud didn’t even turn on the light. He just threw his clothes off until he was down to his boxers before climbing into bed. On the bed was the Chocobo plush that Zack had given him the first day he came, and despite how childish Cloud knew it was, he still hugged the stuffed toy and cried into it.

Zack didn’t come back to the room for a long time, probably wanting to give the blonde some much needed privacy. Cloud was thankful for it, he knew that Zack probably wanted to come comfort him, but he didn’t, he knew Cloud wouldn’t like that.

He’d knew that Cloud often wanted to deal with these things on his own and probably also knew that Cloud liked to cry to get his frustrations out. He respected the way Cloud got past his own problems.

The thought made Cloud smile weakly, the two of them had gotten close enough with each to know that cloud was an introvert, and while he was happy with the friends he had, he also really appreciated some alone time. With a ghost of a smile and a positive thought, Cloud fell asleep.
Deciding that giving his all in P.E and combat classes wasn’t going to cut it, Cloud decided to train beyond the curriculum.

He woke up early and took a run, depending on what muscles were sore, Cloud would either take a run again or lift weights after classes. But the best of it all, was that his friends would each take turns at sparring with him after dinner.

Despite this however, Cloud couldn’t see a marginal change. Someone who did change was Libertus, who despite his weight, was starting to catch up to everyone’s level, effectively leaving Cloud in the dust.

One day, Cloud felt so humiliated in P.E, that Instructor Angeal told him to come to his office after school.

“How’s it going, Strife?” Angeal greeted as Cloud entered the office “please, have seat.” He told him as he motioned to the chair in front of him.

Cloud gulped but did as he was told.

“I think you know why you’re here, right?” He asked, as pleasantly as he could, but the sentence itself was beyond terrifying.

Cloud nodded.

“So, unfortunately it seems you’re not faring as well in P.E and Combat as your fellow classmates.”

Ah yes, Angeal, ever so straightforward. Did he know how that that one sentence tore through Cloud’s heart? Did he know how hard Cloud was working so he wouldn’t have to hear that?

Cloud’s chest tightened with sorrow.

“Of course, seeing as this an education to turn you into a soldier, it is expected that all students fare exceptionally well in combat. Now, I’ve only been appointed as instructor for this generation of Glaive’s, so I was unsure of how to handle this. But I’ve spoken to some of my colleagues about this and Captain Sephiroth himself told me that this doesn’t need to hinder you on your path to becoming a glaive, it merely acquires some slight adjusting.”

Cloud couldn’t stand hearing at this, he felt absolutely horrible, like all his efforts had been for naught. Trying to force the prickling in his eyes away, he interrupted the Instructor.

“Sir, a word if I may?” He asked, to which Angeal nodded. “I’ve been putting a lot of work into strengthening my body, even outside of school hours, I think, with enough time, I’ll surely be able to catch up.”

Angeal smiled at Cloud. “Strife, I’m very impressed by your determination. I’m happy that you’re putting in extra work to strengthen yourself, and as you say, I’m sure that it will pay off later. I think perhaps you’ve misunderstood why I asked you to come to my office today. It is not to tell you that you can’t become a glaive, not at all, you’re a brilliant student Cloud. What I’ve been discussing with the Captain however, is whether or not we should put you in the same position as the others when you finally become glaives. We were thinking that someone of your strategic skills, among many other skills, should not be put on the frontlines, but instead work underground.”

Cloud looked confused, and seeing the boy’s expression made Angeal chuckle.
“It’s simply a different type of glaive. Think about this, in the future, once we start weapon wielding lessons, you’ll eventually all be put into different groups depending on your weapon type. A squad usually requires a range of different weapon wielders, and as such we encourage different posts. Just like a broadsword wielder is different from that of a dagger wielder, we think different roles altogether might also become a good way to categorize you all so you can develop in the field that fits you the bets.”

“So, sir, what is it exactly that I’m supposed to do?”

“For now go about your classes as usual, but I want you to constantly think about your end game. What kind of glaive is Cloud Strife going to be? I’d rather you focus on what you do best, instead of struggling to be like the others.” Angeal looked sheepish then. “I do realize I’m not the best at counseling, and maybe I’ve just confused you even more with this. In the end, I just want you to know that you are good enough Strife, you’re doing well, and I’m sure you’ll continue to do well.”

Angeal nodded encouragingly at Cloud. “You have what it takes, kid.”

Chapter End Notes

when there isn't a very prominent increase of kudos from chapter to chapter, nor any comments, i start to wonder if people are actually reading and enjoying this... i don't wanna seem greedy, but i need feedback guys, otherwise it just feels like my words are going into empty internet void land. I write to share my imagination and stories with people, so if none are reading, i might as well just day dream these scenarios for my own amusement instead of putting in work to get them out there and sharing them with you.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Hellooooooo beautiful people!!
Wow! Last chapter must have been pretty darn good, because i sure was feeling the looove~~ ♡♡♡
Thank you all for the sweet comments, they warm my heart beyond measure and they make me so excited to show you all what I've got in store for these baby boys! !(•̀ᴗ•́)و ̑̑
I'm happy to present you all with a new chapter! I hope you enjoy (J^_^)/*: °透明

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On a nice and calm Sunday morning, light filtered beautifully through the window and warmed Cloud's face. Zack was still sleeping, snoring quietly like a great big cat as Cloud sat and shifted through a pile of letters by his desk.

They were from his mom.

Reading through them with a content smile on his face, Cloud realized belatedly how quickly time had suddenly passed. 24 letters, 2 each month… A whole year had passed already…

His mother had visited him in Insomnia a total of two times, thankfully coming on the weekends were the recruits actually had leave to spend time with families, and not just dropping by spontaneously (something which honestly wouldn’t surprise Cloud one bit). It be just like her to come on a mini-boot camp weekend were they weren't even in Insomnia.

As he read the latest letter through again, his index finger ghosted across the words “I’m so proud of you.” They made his chest swell with pride in such an unbelieving pleasant way.

Cloud liked to think that he was also proud of himself.

There was a rustling of sheets in the room that broke Cloud's train of thoughts, following it was a yawn.

“Cloud?” Someone asked. their voice muffled beneath a duvet.

“I’m here.” Cloud replied easily.

“Mm.” Zack sounded, then after a while added: “Is today Sunday?”

Cloud snickered. “I’m pretty sure you know today is Sunday Zack. You've been counting the days as of late.”

There yet another yawn. “I can’t believe its tomorrow already.”

Cloud kept on reading his letter until Zack eventually spoke again.

“Are you nervous?”

This caught Cloud’s attention. Incredulous, he turned towards the bed and asked. “Are you?”
Zack peeked his head out of his duvet. “Well, yeah.”

Cloud couldn’t decide on his own facial expression, eventually he just sputtered. “Why?”

Zack looked shyly away then. “Aren’t people usually nervous about this sort of thing?”

Cloud rolled his eyes and wore his best deadpan. “Zack look at me.” Zack did. “You’re the best in our year; from what I’ve heard, the best of the many years the Glaive has had.”

Zack blushed then. “You’re just saying that. Nyx is just as good.”

Cloud sighed. “Sure Nyx is good too, but why does that even matter right now?”

“I don’t know Cloud, it’s just a really big deal, isn’t it?” Zack complained.

Cloud smirked then, “If I lend you Honey, will that help?” Honey being the Chocobo Zack had given Cloud a good year ago.

Zack grinned at that. “Sure, I’d like that.” He said.

Rolling his eyes, Cloud fetched the plush from atop the windowsill and threw it to Zack.

“It be nice if you could sit here with me too. You’re like a Chocobo as well, aren’t you? Come console me Cloudy.” Zack grinned mischievously.

“You don’t need any consoling you doofus.” Cloud retorted, his face a little pink as he saw his roommate hug the plush.

“Stingy~~ You’re always so stingy with your hugs Cloud.”

“I think you’ll live you.. you great big lazy cat!”

Zack laughed at that. “First time I’ve been called a cat, the others seem to have agreed that I’m a puppy.”

“You’re like a cat in the morning.” Cloud retorted, and almost added the others wouldn’t know, but I do.

“Is that so?” Zack asked, hugging Honey tighter and effectively making Cloud look away. “So what where you doing while I slept?”

“Going through my letters.” Cloud replied.

“From Mrs. Strife?”

“Yep.” Then Cloud gathered the letters and put them in the drawer, he glanced at his watch and then turned back to Zack. “You wanna go for a run?” He asked.

“It’s our day off Cloud, can’t we just stay in and watch a movie? Just the three of us?” Zack asked pleadingly, his puppy eyes coming back in full force.

Just as Cloud was about to say firmly no, he turned confused. “Wait, three of us?”

“Me, you and honey here.” Zack explained, grinning like the fool he was. “Our little family.”

Oh my God. Did Zack even know what he was saying?? Embarrassing, way too embarrassing.
“I have to go running,” Cloud said as he stood up, making sure Zack wouldn’t see his blush as he reached the door. However when he reached it, he stopped for a second. “But I’ll think about it.” He said just before he left.

Inside the room, Zack hugged Honey even tighter and smiled to himself.

Walking down the corridor, Cloud almost stopped to knock on Crowe’s door to invite her along on his run, when he remembered that the Galahd trio had gone back to Galahd for a visit. Something about how the Galahdian food in the city was no match for the real thing.

Cloud pulled out the second hand Ipod he’d gotten from his friends on his birthday, and hit shuffle as he put the buds into his ears.

Then he was off.

~

Later that night, the crew gathered to play some games at the lounge, Crowe insisting that they all get together and have some proper fun before the big day. To unwind and whatnot.

Because of this, the scarcely planned movie night of three did not happen.

Was it just Cloud's imagination, or had Zack been a little disappointed at that?

~

As the year flew by, Cloud discovered that while he was still leagues behind the others in terms of strength and the ability to take punches, he’d grown agile.

Even better was that fact that Cloud was already impressively quick-witted and good at analyzing his opponents, so with his added agility, he sometimes did stand a chance in combat training. Yet in the end, strength really did overpower him, after all it wasn’t like the others weren’t good at analyzing opponents either.

Cloud wasn’t good enough.

...Yet.

Following his conversation with Angeal, Cloud had been far less frustrated at his failures, and instead of comparing himself to Zack and Nyx, he fared much better when he challenged himself. Striving to be better than yesterday instead of better than a mile away, seemed a lot less taxing on his mental health anyways.

Not too long ago, weapons classes had begun, and while daggers were the most common weapon associated with the Kingsglaive, for some reason Cloud didn’t think he’d be good enough for them. He was proven wrong however, when he was deemed most capable of wielding dual daggers, just like Nyx. Because of this, the two had begun to spar a lot together, and being used to sparring mostly with Zack, Cloud was surprised at how good Nyx was at explaining things. Zack was a “I learn
through experience” kind of guy, and while that was cool and all, Cloud didn’t learn the same way. He needed things explained. And so sparring with Nyx was making Cloud's combat skills evolve at a mild but impressive rate.

And in any case, sparring with Zack was getting a little too dangerous. The guy honestly didn’t know how to hold back! Did he think Cloud was on the same level as him, because news-flash, he wasn't. Just to make matters worse, Zack being Zack, just had to have his designated weapon be a broadsword.

A broadsword.

What.

There were only a couple of Glaive’s in history whose appointed weapon was a broadsword, and of course Zack just had to be one of them. The only other living Glaive with this expertise was Angeal and Clarus Amicitia, so Zack sometimes got private lessons with the Instructor himself! Talk about lucky!! Damned lucky!!

To be honest Cloud had been more than a little envious, and perhaps a tiny bit pissy. After all, Cloud had secretly hoping that he was destined to wield a cool broadsword. He had been picturing it ever since he was little after all... And wouldn't it be cool? The underdog gets to wield the coolest weapon of them all!

...In the end.. it just wasn't meant to be, of course Cloud's frail body wouldn't be able to handle it the weight of such a metal monster. To be honest it was really quite impressive that Zack was able to swing it at his age. (Even worse was the way Instructor Angeal made it look like it was made of paper. How insufferable.)

Anyways, Crowe had been appointed a spear and while she was a great wielder, she still complained that she had yet to find her true calling.

Libertus had been given permission to primarily wield guns, but was told to also train with daggers as knives made for much better warping tools than guns.

No one was really all that good at their respective weapons yet. The broadsword was still too heavy for Zack to wield correctly, both Cloud and Nyx had problems being suave enough with their daggers, Crowe didn’t seem to be putting a whole lot of love into her spear training, and nor Libertus into his dagger wielding (though he really was quite impressive with his dual guns). Despite all this, Angeal had deemed them ready enough to receive the gift of the King. After all, adjusting to the power of the crystal took a good couple of years, so they had to get the show on the road either way.

Now was the time for things to get started.

~

“So, you unruly bunch. Today is the day you’ve all been looking forward to. I know you’re all very stoked to get to the palace as fast as you can, but before we leave I just want to explain a couple of things.” Angeal told the dressed and ready group of Glaives. “I’m not sure whether or not you guys are aware, but this isn’t just an event that you rascals look forward too, it’s also something that civilians are a part of and enjoy. Put shortly, it's tradition. The people want to see the faces of the protectors of the kind. Thankfully, there aren't going to be any civilians at the scene. There are
however going to be cameras and reports as it is going to be broadcasted live for the nation to see. That means absolutely no fooling around. It’s already bad enough if you mess up before the King and his court, but if you mess up on live television… Well, let’s just say that there’ll be hell to pay, and that goes for all of you. Someone messes up, in my book everyone messes up. You all got that?” Angeal asked sternly, making sure to properly intimidate the recruits.

“Yes sir!” most responded.

“That’s good. Now, as for the ceremony, and I’ve told you this before but I’m going to repeat it now, as you kneel before the palace the King is going to lay his hand on your heads, it is through this touch that you receive the gift of the King, that is to say, the power to wield crystal magic. I know I’ve said this before so I really expect you all to have listened and actually washed your hair.” Angeal sighed, there were bound to be a couple kids with some dirty hair in the mix. “I’ll remind you guys why you don’t have any classes scheduled for the next couple of weeks. I’ll be straightforward here, you guys are going to be sick. And I mean really sick. It takes time to adapt to the energy of the crystal suddenly surging through your body, so the time you have without classes is not for vacations or fooling around, you’ve been told this before, those days were the weekend that just passed. I hope you all made good use of your time, because you’ll be bed ridden for a while.”

“Now, don’t let that discourage you! After all, you’ll be going to receive the gift of the King, and there really is no greater honor than that.” Angeal finished, and then he turned and opened the big doors that led out of the facility. "Let’s go."

~

For the sake of the event, all kids had been given a uniform reminiscent of that of a Glaive. Of course it wasn’t nearly as cool, but everyone had been stoked to wear something so amazing and reminiscent of their future goal.

They were only just outside and walking towards the palace when Cloud started shaking.

At first he wondered why his hands trembled and why his forehead felt so damp, his body seemed ahead of his mind, and Cloud wondered what was wrong until the anxiety hit him full force.

...What if he screwed up today?

There’ll be hell to pay, suddenly echoed ominously through his mind.

This was going live on national television, and while it was certainly nice that his mother could watch the ceremony all the way from Nibelheim, Cloud sure as hell wasn’t stoked on the fact that the rest of the nation was watching along with her.

Oh my God, Cloud was going to screw up wasn't he?

Cloud tried to distract himself from the menacing thought, thinking of how his mother had probably gathered all her friends to sit around and watch it together down at the Nibelheim Hotel common living room where auntie Rosa worked. They’d all be telling stories about young Cloud before the ceremony started, then they’d been dead quiet one it began. When Cloud finally received the power, his mother would yell incoherently words of praise at the television encouraging the others to do the same.
But then Cloud imagined himself screwing up on tv, his mother and the village watching him silently before sighing in disappointment as Cloud became unable to receive the power, it would reject him.

It would be typical really, and Cloud couldn’t say that he’d be very well surprised.

Ughh, this was making him dizzy, and looking at his trembling hands only made it that much worse.

A pang of guilt shot through Cloud as he remembered how he’d dismissed Zack’s own nervousness yesterday.

Cloud felt like an ass.

Well, at the very least he was walking isolated at the back of the group. Here no one would be able to see what an impressive mess he was.

It was just as Cloud finished that thought that he felt someone take his hand.

Looking up, Cloud saw that it was Zack.

Cloud almost wanted to laugh. Of course it was Zack, it was always Zack.

Smiling fondly at Cloud, he squeezed his hand reassuringly before whispering. “We’ve got this Cloud.” Then he released his hand and looked forward, determination clear on his face.

Then came a flash, startling Cloud enough to break the spell Zack had laid on him.

Cameras, cameras everywhere.

Cloud looked up and realized they’d already arrived at the palace. He gasped. It’d been a while since the last time they’d been here…

Cloud looked up at Zack once more, and seeing his determined expression still in place made Cloud steel his own.

Soon PR people and the like came swarming, seeing if the recruits were dirty and if their uniforms were just right, some even got a touch of makeup because “This just won’t do.” Tsk, tsk. Then the recruits were put into lines going up the stairs to the palace, once everything was set they waited for the King.

Time seemed to pass agonizingly slow, and damn Cloud’s knee was hurting. It was just as he shifted in his discomfort that several reporters started to talk before cameras. Must be getting close, Cloud thought with a gulp.

Then the double doors to the palace were spread open, there was some cheering and some clapping, because there stood the King himself in all his glory, waving kindly back at them all. Cloud didn’t see that of course, much like all the other recruits, his gaze was downwards and it was to remain as such until he received the gift of the King.

The King held a short speech, much along the lines of the one he’d held when Cloud had first come to the capital. Then he walked towards them.

Being the shortest of them all, Cloud was positioned at the very top step, Crowe also being a shorty, was just to the right of him. He gulped, they were the first…

Cloud closed his eyes tightly, waiting for the King to rest his hand atop his head and do whatever it was he did to make the bond.
But it was to his right that he heard something like wind chimes flutter in the breeze. He honestly
couldn’t help his curiosity, and from the corner of his eyes he peeked on over and saw how blue
energy seemed to flow like water or an icy mist into the top of Crowe’s head.

Would it feel cold? Cloud wondered, but as he recalled back to when he’d held the crystal shard in
Nibelheim, he couldn’t quite picture it being cold.

Crowe’s expression was stunned and rigid as her whole body seemed suddenly to glimmer with
crystal light, then small snowflake-like particles rose from skin slowly and haphazardly, then her face
began to twitch in obvious discomfort.

When the King released his hand from her head she almost fell from her kneeling stance, and it
became all too obvious that she’d been holding her breath throughout the entire thing.

Then the king turned towards Cloud, and Cloud quickly turned his gaze firmly downwards again.

His heart was hammering so loudly in his ears that he couldn’t even hear the King’s footsteps as he
approached. Only when he saw the feet in front of him did he gasp.

Then the King placed his hand on his head, lightly and kindly. He ruffled his hair for the shortest
moment, obviously trying to comfort the panicking boy. Cloud did calm down, and for a second he
wondered if this was the sort of fatherly touch he’d never received. Strong and calming, it was the
hand of someone who deserved the outmost respect, yet in its gentle touch it felt so loving.

Then a warm energy seemed to make fireworks crack through his brain, then pooling together to
wander down his spine like a liquid waterfall, passing through yet also wrapping around the bone as
it traveled down his body. Then it seemed to scatter, soon going through all bones, muscles, organs
and veins. His body turned hyperaware, and Cloud seemed to feel all the pieces of his body being
rebuilt with a new composition, he even felt the warmth of the crystal in all the hair strands on his
head, in the blond eyelashes that framed eyes, and in every little piece of everything.

Then Cloud saw the energy rise from his body, just like it had done with Crowe, and suddenly
Cloud felt quite nauseous. Suddenly the heat felt alien in his body rather than gentle and comforting,
soon he felt far too hot and far too full of something that he could not explain. It seemed like
something wanted to make it’s way out of his body, but Cloud didn’t know how to make it go away,
his organs felt like they were inflating, every bone and muscle expanding. Had Cloud not been so
busy feeling awful, he would have been amazed by the fact that his skin was able to keep all this
chaos properly inside of him. The Kings hand left him and Cloud dully noted him taking a step down
towards the kid behind him to continue the ceremony.

Cloud felt wobbly and horrible. He wanted to throw up, wanted to pass out…

Thankfully Cloud remembered what he’d been taught, he knew that now he was supposed to raise
his head and salute the King.

*All a part of the ceremony bla blah bleh, it’s easy to say that when your aren’t the one feeling utterly
miserable.*

Despite this, Cloud pulled through and raising his head, he saluted the king who had already passed
him.

*“Do not show signs of your misery when the crystal power flows through you, the people aren’t
supposed to associate it with a negative feeling. It’s supposed to look like you feel stronger,
empowered, so steel your faces and be proud. While you might want to hurl or pass out, you need to*
look strong and dignified. You lot are training to be Glaives! So you’re going to learn how to act like it! I’ll be watching all of you like a hawk, don’t let me down recruits!”

Angeal was truly an inspiration, just remembering his powerful speeches was enough to make Cloud steel his expression and look as much of a soldier as he possibly could.

He put his pain and misery to the back of his mind, focusing instead on listening to wind chime flutter of the crystal magic that was being infused into his classmates very souls.

He focused on the fact that in some strange way, now they were all connected together. Genesis had talked about it in his class once, telling them how eventually you’d reach a point where you literally felt the connection.

“Imagine invisible strings. If I close my eyes I can practically see it’s icy blue color binding together a network of people. I can tell Angeal is nearby, and I can tell that he’s alive and well. When a comrade falls in battle, you can almost feel a string snap.”

“When charging into battle most would pump themselves up when listening to the commander and at that moment you’d feel these strings in an almost electrifying manner You’d feel the power surging in the room. Also, even the enthusiasm and strength of someone else could sometimes empower you, you’d feel it at the tips of your fingers before it lit you on fire. Honestly, usually it is rather faint, still it’s there, and it’s this bond that in my opinion makes the glaive army the strongest in the world.”

“Then again, I might be saying this, but not all Glaives are as amazing your truly. I know several others that don’t feel the connection to this degree, moreover, on long distances you don’t feel it all. In the end, it's more of a poetic thing, brothers in arms and all that, some would probably venture as far as to say that it’s comforting, having this connection to these people that all fight for the same cause. They are people you can count on after all.”

Cloud tried to focus on vice-captain Genesis words and tried to picture the bonds as they were being formed, one by one being added to the network as the King descended the flight of stairs.

Cloud liked to think that he was able to feel it, see it even, but perhaps it was just his head projecting it too vividly. Right now, Cloud couldn’t say he was quite able to trust his body and his senses, it was a great big war inside of him after all.

Still he persisted in seeing this bond as it was being made and while it wasn’t quite so successful, it served as an excellent way to make time go faster.

And it did seem to help, for sooner than Cloud was expecting the king was ascending the stairs, passing by him before he turned around, said some final closing words and then left for the palace.

The recordings at the scene supposedly cut just then, Angeal roaring loudly that the glaives return with him to the dorms.

At that, Cloud finally exhaled the breath he’d been holding. He wasn’t the only one either, collectively the whole group seemed to groan in misery as they made their way down to Angeal.

When all had gathered as a group down by Angeal the man seemed to light up like a beacon. He was positively beaming, and his face was screaming that he was proud.

“I’m so proud of all of you, you really seemed to hold it together. You all looked fierce and honorable; like true soldiers.” Angeal’s eyes seemed to linger on Cloud just then, and pride made Cloud smile like an idiot.
Despite how awful he was feeling, he was happy, so so happy!

“I know how awful you all feel right now, but all the only thing left is making the trip back to the
dorm, then you can rest or hurl to your hearts content.” He said humorously, guiding the miserable
group of recruits back to the facility.

~

On the way to the dorms, the group of friends hadn’t talked much, preferring instead to communicate
their feelings via groaning in misery or snickering with pride.

Once back at the dorm, it seemed indisputable that they each retreat to their rooms. Everyone was far
too messed up right now – a nap and some painkillers were very much due.

After taking what Cloud presumed was a good long nap, he just couldn’t sleep anymore. Sure he
was groggy and still wanted to throw up, but at the same time he was just bored.

It was so quiet, Cloud couldn’t help but think as he looked up at the bed frame above his head. Was
he the only one awake? Were all the recruits still sleeping?

Was Zack awake?

“… Zack?” Cloud tried quietly, but got no response. “Zack are you awake?”

Something grumbled just then, and it made Cloud smile.

“What?” he asked, his voice still husky with sleep.

“Oh, nothing.” Cloud replied, a dumb smile sitting on his face.

“Ughh.” Zack groaned. “Is it just me, or are you taking this better than the rest?” He asked, his voice
obviously miserable.

Cloud laughed lightly, but just this simple gesture it was enough to trigger a booming headache.
He hissed in pain, “Nah, that’s just you.”

Zack mumbled something incoherent at that, obviously a bit grumpy at being woken up.

Feeling daring, Cloud steeled his nerves and stood up from his bed. Then, after recuperating from the
vertigo of suddenly standing vertically he picked up his tablet and stuffed chocobo.

(they had all been given a tablet when they enrolled so that they could access websites or other such
things for educational purposes(though they were still all supposed to give them back when they
finished their education though))

Cloud steled his raging tummy and booming head before he climbed the set of stairs up to Zack’s
bed.

Zack stirred when Cloud situated himself on his bed, and soon he peaked his head out from under his
covers.
He frowned. “What are you doing up here?”

Cloud tried to smile mischievously, but it most likely wasn’t looking all too convincing considering how much his head was killing him.

“I figured we’d watch a movie.” He said as he waved the tablet at him. Then, promptly placing honey on top of him he added. “All three of us.”

This seemed to crack Zack’s frown and made way for his terribly lovely smile.

“I’m up for that.” He told him. Sitting up, Zack too hissed in pain at his headache and it took some time to adjust a setting that was comfortable for the two of them.

Then they got a movie going, Honey sitting neatly between them as time passed nicely.

Eventually, Cloud broke the silence between them.

“I wanted to apologize.” He told Zack. “And thank you.”

Zack looked genuinely puzzled at that, he even quirked his head much like a real puppy would. “For what?”

Cloud shifted a little. “I’m sorry for making fun of you yesterday. Really uncool considering how nervous I was today. Despite all that, you still comforted me today. Thank you for that Zack.”

Zack nudged him then, so that Cloud would look at him. “Don’t worry about it Spike. In the end, it all worked out didn’t it?”

Cloud smiled at that.

It was so easy.

It was always so easy with Zack.

The two of them turned back to the movie and enjoyed that calm and uneventful passing of time.

Chapter End Notes

Yeeeee boi, so that’s that. They're gonna be even older next chapter, let's see what happens then! :D :D

On a more curious note, are people here mostly for the ffvii or the ffxv? I've been thinking about that quite a lot as of late :P
Okay, so there has been quiiiitite the time gap between this chapter and the last one. I'm really sorry about that. I have just been bombarded with all kinds of adult bullshit and it has been freaking hard. These past weeks have been horrible to be honest, and im quite glad its over.

On another note, I'm travelling to Japan the day after tomorrow (Yes, my time has finally come. fuck YEAH my dudes) Anyways, I'll be gone for a month, and that means i won't be able to post anything. After all, i won't be taking my computer with me.

I really really hope i can write a full chapter tommorow so i can finalize the "cloud and zack romance" arc and get onto the child prompto arc, still, i don't want to rush it (future plot reasons). so if i do manage to post tomorrow, i can't guarantee that it will be done with them, however i will try my best.

GOOD GRIEF WHAT LONG INTRO NOTE, if you've made this far i salute you.

On another note, please enjoy this chapter!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A whooping three weeks passed were no one was able to do much of anything.

There was always groaning when you walked through the hallways, and when you went to the bathroom (despite the intense cleaning the staff was doing) you’d smell the vomit, or even better, hear someone as they were vomiting. Everyone was miserable.

Despite this however, things were oddly cozy.

Of course, the staff was doing their best to make things cozy. As an example of this, per request, the common room had been filled with rental bean bags to make more seats available for all. Now, the room had essentially turned into a cinema. Every time you went there, a group of people would be watching something, either doing a marathon of a cool series or watching stand alone movies, sometimes there were even documentaries on. If people weren’t watching anything, there’d be others around tables playing cards or some such nonsense. Everyone would walk around with blankets and cups of tea or hot cocoa, and honestly, it was just so… nice.

Cloud who had been perfectly happy within his little bubble of friends suddenly discovered there were other really cool people in his grade. Perhaps it was due to the fact that everyone could suddenly sympathize with each other as they were all going through the same thing, in any case people were really looking out for each other, and Cloud was happy to get to see the rest of the recruits in a new light.

During the weeks of misery, practically everyone lived in common room. For some reason, everyone felt rather sociable despite their nausea – but then again, nobody really felt like suffering on their lonesome.
Eventually though, the nauseating feeling passed. Groups of people disappeared from the common room, shedding their blankets and mugs in favor for the outside world. In the wake of their misery suddenly there surged an overwhelming feeling of raw power in their veins. Not expanding and exploding like it had been before, rather, it felt a whole lot like water, calm as the heart was steady, but ready to turn fearsome and ferocious at any moment.

Many times, Cloud would close his eyes to focus on the sensation and when doing so he’d quite clearly see the glowing blue veins in his minds eye; veins lit up beneath his translucent skin, branching around like the skeleton of a crystallized tree.

It was warm and relaxing, almost pulsating with it’s gentle yet strong waves.

As the kids started to get better, along with the obvious energy came a lot of warping shenanigans through the hallways. Thankfully, the pranks came with a price, for almost everyone that succeeded in warping felt unbelievably queasy afterwards.

Still, this didn’t stop the kids from warping. Something which was quite understandable, after all, put simply: warping was beyond cool!!!!

Obviously, there was no 10 meter warping, nor 5 meters or even 2 meters. The kids moved, say, 30 centimeters max, from where they stood. Still it was enough for everyone to scream and cheer every time it happened.

Whereas most were quite happy to make their warping a public event, Cloud chose to go somewhere more private the first time he warped.

Down in the gym, Cloud started with baby steps. Calming his heart and mind, he went for the 30 cm and succeeded.

To his big surprise, it came quite naturally to him, he just had to see the spot before him and suddenly it felt like a gust of icy air went through his body, while his veins seemed to flare up in the slightest before simmering back down.

He'd warped.

Cloud was a little surprised at how good he was still feeling. No nausea, no queasiness, no feeling like you’re body was like a balloon about to burst.

Honestly, it actually felt rather refreshing…. like breathing in the cold morning air on a winter day.

And so Cloud tried again, this time daring to go for the 1 meter mark.

He succeeded again, once more without any problems.

Feeling cocky, Cloud tried warping upwards, in motion, sideways, downwards and just about everywhere and as quickly as he could.

Obviously he wasn’t able to warp long distances due to not having an actual blade and focus point with which to throw, yet he was still surprised at how proficient he was.

Especially since… well, Zack hadn’t even managed to warp yet…
Soon classes were back on, the first of the special classes being Crystal Magic. It was too early for Crystal Magic Combat, much less for Magic Power Enhancement classes.

There was a lot of theory classes, and they were all very very detailed lectures. It was obvious that the kids were than a little fed up with sitting down and hearing about theory, when all they wanted to do was getting better at warping. Angeal however was stern and relentless. These lessons were very much mandatory, and they were obviously going to have a test in it.

Cloud was more than happy about the development, after all, what they were learning was mind-blowingly fascinating! Crystal Magic classes easily took the spot as his favorite subject in school.

With all the notes he was taking and all the questions he was asking, it was no surprise that people started calling him a nerd. Cloud however, just blew raspberries at those who called him that, to which they laughed in return. Because of the strong bonding weeks, Cloud thankfully wasn’t all too affected by the light bulling. It did hurt a little, but it was fun, because on the inside, Cloud was smug with the knowledge that he was so much better than the others at warping.

When CMC classes finally started, everyone was asked to demonstrate how they warped and see how far they could warp. While most of the kids had definitely improved, Cloud effectively made the room completely silent when he warped a whopping 4.5 meters.

Angeal’s jaw dropped.

Cloud grinned with pride.

After that, there were suddenly no comments about Cloud being a nerd. Instead, people actually started paying more attention and taking more notes in CM class.

Angeal personally thanked him for that.

*Squeal!*

Cloud was ecstatic, never before had he felt quite so on top of the world as he did then.

Well… that was until they started wielding their weapons again.

Suddenly CMC classes weren’t that fun, because Cloud was still shit at using his daggers and Nyx was too busy concentrating on honing his own skill to be tutoring Cloud.

As time passed, Cloud’s classmates got more and more amazing.

Crowe all but dropped her spear in favor of the insanely offensive magic she was able to pull.

Libertus, while still awful at warping, was getting quite good at daggers and guns respectively. He even started going on about the mechanics of guns and some talk about customizing his own if Instructor Angeal gave him permission.

Zack, ever the wonderboy, was surprisingly mediocre at warping, but what he perhaps lacked in
warping ability, he made up for in sheer power. Zack was getting strong.

Now Nyx… Nyx had essentially turned into the poster boy for their grade. He was well rounded in everything, and even better, he was never cocky about it. He always strived to improve.

Soon a year had passed. Counseling time and new classes just around the corner, and after talking with each and every student, a new curriculum was created.

New teachers were introduced, all war retired glaives who had more than enough experience to teach, but no longer to serve. Students were split up in varying classes, though some of them they still had together.

Depending on your weapon type, you’d be split off from the rest, and if you decided (and were judged to have enough skill) you could get put into a raw magic user class were there was a focus on using magic without weapons (Something which Crowe was quick to sign up for.)

Cloud had been in a lot of doubt about whether or not he should have signed up for that class, seeing as his skill at warping was undeniable, and how magic control was amazingly precise. In the end however, he continued in dagger classes, and though he still had lingering doubts on his choice, as time passed, Cloud started to like where he was going. Soon, Cloud started to develop an image of his end game, and for once, he thought to himself that it seemed cool.

He started to learn how his body worked, and what strategies proved most effective considering his aptitude for warping. But just as Cloud was starting to develop his own technique, summer vacation came around.

Usually, the kids would go home during this period, but this time the gang decided that splitting the vacation up into two halves seemed like a radical idea.

One half for friends, the other for family.

With that in mind, the gang decided to pay for a trip to Costa del Sol together.

For Cloud, arriving at the sandy beaches was one hell of a hilarious culture shock. He’d never felt so hot in his life, there was sand, there were palm trees and fruit growing everywhere, and to top it off, everyone was walking around almost naked!!

Cloud was in shock.

Zack however, was quite clearly in his element. The boy was frighteningly quick to throw his shirt off and toss the sneakers for a pair of flip-flops, even better were the shades he threw on – just for good measure.

“Someone sure came prepared.” Libertus commented, all he’d brought was a floral shirt and a straw hat.

“I’m back baby! I sure have missed this place!” Zack exclaimed before deeply inhaling the sea breeze. Turning around to face the group Zack suddenly frowned. “Come on guys, you have to blend in.”

The gang looked down at their clothes and most shrugged. “I think we’re good Zack, we are tourists after all, you can be our guiding native. What do you say?” Nyx proposed, content with wearing his baseball hat, band t-shirt and a pair of baggy shorts.

Crowe nodded in agreement, not keen on switching her all black outfit of shorts and tanktop for a
skimpy and bright bikini.

Cloud was sporting simple beige bermuda shorts and soft blue t-shirt along with the straw hat Zack had given him (the one with the plastic sunflowers in it…sigh).

“Come on, no one actually walks around here with a shirt on unless they’re inside.” Zack countered, but quickly he sighed and agreed that whatever, they were tourists, sure.

And so Zack acted as the perfect guide, even going around and saying hi to some people he recognized even though he hadn’t been here in 3 years.

Finally deciding that they could explore some more another day, the gang decided to go relax at the beach.

And holy molly, sure, Cloud had seen the beach from the moment they stepped out of the bus in Costa Del Sol, but seeing it like this, the white grainy sand between his toes… Truly, the turquoise clear waters were a stunning sight to behold.

Both Nyx and Zack were quick to challenge each other to a game of death beach volley, while Libertus was simply took his chocobo floaty ring and marched towards the sea, telling his friends he was taking a nap. Cloud, unaccustomed to the glaring sun and scorching weather ended up sitting on a towel beneath a parasol along with a bottle of blessedly cool water. Crowe, not one for sunbathing nor death matches sat next to Cloud, propped up against a sand dune she’d made, now sitting with a book and reading silently.

“What are you reading?” Cloud eventually had to ask.

Crowe looked up at him then, apparently surprised he’d ask, but soon she turned her gaze back to her book.

“It’s a romance.” She told him blankly.

“Oh. That’s kind of surprising. “ Cloud accidentally said out loud.

Crowe laughed, “What? Didn’t peg me as the romantic type?” she asked him cheekily.

Well, to be honest, it wasn’t that he didn’t see Crowe as a romantic person. Cloud simply supposed… he didn’t see anyone as a romantic person. Romance wasn’t really a part of his life, all he knew was glaive training and magic theory; the only left over space invaded by lyrics to his favorite songs along with Zack's favorite action movies which they watched together.

Suddenly Cloud passively realized how the beach was completely littered with beautiful couples and how, in actuality, their group was the odd one out.

“Cat got your tongue Blondie?” Crowe asked, now having ditched her book on top of her stomach in favor of their conversation.

“Umm, I guess I didn’t.”

“What?”

“Peg you as the romantic type.” Cloud told her, finally a sheepish smile gracing his lips.

Crowe laughed at that. “Well, I don’t blame you. Intimidation comes in handy a lot of times, so I guess I it’s a hard image to visualize all of a sudden.” Then she joined Cloud in looking at the beach.
“But I’ve been thinking a lot lately.” She told him, a soft smile on her face. “I think I am quite the romantic.” Then she laughed at herself. "I mean, I think I'd like for something to happen soon."

There was an air of ease as the two enjoyed the scenery in silence, Cloud suddenly quite entertained with his newfound fact on Crowe.

“What about you Cloud, are you a romantic?” She managed to ask, just a second before Cloud had wanted to pry into her seemingly romantic life.

Cloud turned to look at her then, but her eyes were blissfully closed as the air ruffled her hair, so he turned his gaze back to the beach.

“I don’t know.” He told her honestly. “I guess I haven’t really thought about it just yet.”

“Food for thought then, I mean wouldn’t it be nice? To get a girlfriend?” She breathed easy. “You could get yourself a summer flirt here at the beach.”

This puzzled Cloud a little. “Why would I have a girlfriend for only two weeks? That doesn’t seem so nice.”

Crowe laughed at that. “How surprising, especially since you’re a boy. But I guess you’re right about that.” She hummed a little. “Yeah, a lasting love would be a whole lot nicer wouldn’t it?”

Now Cloud was the one to laugh. “I clearly underestimated how much of a romantic you actually were.” He joked, to which Crowe gave him a mercilessly punch on the arm.

*Ouch.*

~

Time at Costa del Sol passed faster than Cloud would have liked. Mostly, Zack and Cloud wandered around the mountainous areas around the place, going on adventures every single day. Nyx would often join them, but in the end, he mostly stayed at the beach where he had apparently made some friends that liked sports just as much as he did.

The strangest thing was how little Cloud saw Crowe, and it was just as he was wondering this that he spotted her at the pier… sitting next to… a girl?

Had Crowe made a friend?

Suddenly Cloud thought he could see the two of them holding hands, and just as his suspicion was confirmed, Crowe rested her head on the other girl’s shoulder.

Quite abruptly, Cloud decided that he was definitely intruding, but he was sure to ask Crowe about this mysterious girl later.

~
“Oh my God.” Libertus said upon entrance into the boys room. “Crowe has a girlfriend.”


“She has a girlfriend?” Cloud asked.

Libertus nodded. “At least I saw the two of them kissing down at the beach, so I think so.”

Nyx whistled at that. “Look at that, Crowe getting herself a summer time flirt.”

Wow, talk about deja vu.

“I’m impressed.” Zack commented.

“And I’m weirded out, Crowe is like a sister to me. I don’t want to see my sister going around kissing girls.”

“What, just because you haven’t kissed any yet?” Nyx teased.

“Tch, like you have.” Libertus countered.

“I might have.” Nyx told him, eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

“Yeah right!” Libertus huffed. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Zack boy here had though, with the way he flirts with anything that can talk.” He said, suddenly turning smug.

Nyx laughed at that. “I don’t think so man, with the way he keeps hanging around Cloud, I doubt he’s got the time for smooching or secret love affairs.”

Cloud was surprised by the comment, he turned to see how Zack reacted and was even more surprised to see the boy blushing.

That was odd, most of the time Zack would just counter their teasing with something even worse. This was a rare sight indeed, and with an adoring look Zack’s way, Cloud couldn’t help but think he was cute.

“Cloud doesn’t have anything to do with it… I just never really got around to it.”

“Hah! Don’t get too embarrassed if me and Nyx get ‘around to it’ before you then.” Libertus told him.

“Hey hey, we can't leave Cloud out of this.” Nyx interrupted, all eyes suddenly turning to Cloud. “So, have you ‘gotten around to it’ yet?” he asked, a bit too excitedly.

Cloud thought on that for a moment. “Mmm, Depends.” He told them simply.

“What??” Zack asked all of a sudden, the other two opting for the jaw-dropped expression of disbelief.

“What do you mean depends?” Libertus demanded after he shook the shock off of him.

“Depends on your definition of a kiss.” Cloud explained.

“Uhh, I’m pretty sure it’s when lips touch lips, doesn’t get more straight forward than that.” Libertus told him cheekily.
“Hold up, let him explain what he means.” Zack interrupted, he had a confused frown on his face which Cloud thought was a little weird.

“Yeah, tell us about this ‘depends’ kiss you had.” Nyx said smugly.

Cloud rolled his eyes. “It’s not really a big deal guys, it was just a childhood friend that was curious. She watched a movie and wanted to try it out. She claimed it didn’t count as a ‘real’ kiss since it was for science. It only counts as a kiss if you like like the other person.”

“Uhh, I don’t think that’s how it works.” Libertus told him honestly.

“Cloud totally had his first kiss before any of us!” Nyx said, suddenly quite impressed with Cloud, his eyes gleaming.

Cloud cringed. “Guys, it wasn’t a big deal.”

“Ohoho, Mr. Cool guy strikes again. You love leaving us in the dust at random intervals huh Cloud?” Libertus spat.

“Hey don’t be bitter man, just cause you’re so far behind.” Nyx teased, putting his arm around Libertus. “Anyways, I can’t believe the youngest in the group were the first ones to do it, we’re all way too far behind guys.”

Cloud noted suddenly that he hadn’t heard Zack’s voice in a while, and turning towards him Cloud saw that he had been looking at him all along. Face to face, Zack suddenly seemed flustered and turned his gaze away.

Hm.

Odd.

~

The most extraordinary thing about Crowe’s summertime flirt, was the fact that it was none other than Tifa who she’d been flirting with.

Tifa was at Costa del Sol working a summer time job. Apparently she was trying to get enough money to move to Insomnia. The guy who had offered her the job in Costa del Sol was a retired boxer that had inherited a juice bar by the beach. The two of them had met in Nibelheim. Apparently he’d visited with the hopes of tackling some of the winter mountains, and Tifa who was volunteering as a mountain guide was the one to show him around. As there wasn’t a lot of tourism in Nibelheim, they hadn’t been a group of people, rather, it had been just the two of them, and through their trip they had become great friends.

Tifa had expressed her love for boxing, and the boxer had been more than happy to show her some moves and tell her about techniques.

Eventually, he’d agreed to let her work at the juice bar for the summer and if all things went well and she trained enough and earned enough money, he’d take her along with him when he took off to Insomnia to open his boxing gym.

Cloud was happy to see Tifa again, but it was more than a little awkward when Libertus and Nyx connected the dots and were all smug because they knew it had to have been her he had kissed when he was younger.
Well, they weren’t wrong, but Cloud was a little uncomfortable with the way they were behaving. Mostly because it seemed to make Zack a little depressed.

Eventually, one half of summer passed, and suddenly Cloud was on a train on his way to the station closest to Nibelheim. Thankfully summer meant spring-like weather for the northern city, and there wasn’t too much trouble when he took the mini bus to it.

It was nice to spend time down in Nibelheim again, but it rather odd to know exactly where Tifa was now that she wasn’t here.

He’d told his mother about how Tifa and his glaive friend had gotten together and she had been ecstatic, demanding more gossip than Cloud had to offer.

But then that part of summer ended as well, and before he knew it, classes were back on.

Everything seemed as it always was, expect of course for the one big difference.

Almost everyone had turned 15, (expect for Cloud and Crowe whose birthdays were close by), and it seemed as if the number marked a development of character for all recruits. Suddenly, people weren’t just spending their time in the common room, their rooms, the park bellow, nor even the neighboring buildings. Now they were all taking the metro into town to have some fun, something which was only done on special occasions back when they were younger.

Now everyone was picking up unique hobbies and indulging in interests, all developing their personalities beyond their title as “future glaive”.

But perhaps most prominently, was the underlying sexual tension that practically hung heavy in the air. Everyone was suddenly at that age, and while others had of course gotten together when they were younger, now it was everyone’s turn to open their eyes to romance, boyfriends, girlfriends and all it entitled.

All it seemed, except for Cloud, who seemed like he honestly couldn’t care less.

~

Cloud’s birthday rolled around then, the gang had gone to town to watch a movie that day and returning to the dorms, Cloud found that his room had been littered with flashy birthday decorations. Then in came Crowe holding a cake they had all bought together at the bakery (Without Cloud) and it was a Chocobo and Moogle themed cake. The cake was adorable and delicious, but the best part of the evening was when Zack pulled out the guitar he’d bought some months back.

Of course Cloud knew that Zack spent the majority of his free time honing his guitar skill out in the park behind the building, but Cloud didn’t join him too often, usually busy running or honing his combat skills, so it came as a big surprise to him when Zack was able to play the guitar so beautifully.

What was even more touching, was the fact that he had seemingly only practiced songs he knew Cloud liked.

So there was a lot of Radiohead.
Even more mesmerizing, was that Zack was singing. And he... he had a really good voice.

Cloud was in awe.

Soon the tunes stopped, the Galahd trio all clapping at Zack who smiled sheepishly. Cloud who’d been in a daze through the entire thing, was rather slow to realize he was suppose to clap with them.

“Color me impressed.” Nyx complimented.

“Yeah Zack, that was pretty cool. I’m pretty sure you’ll be able to get some girls with that trick.” Crowe told him and winked.

Not expecting that angle, Zack blushed and laughed awkwardly at the compliment before thanking her.

Cloud frowned.

“The guy spends his time wisely.” Libertus agreed. “Still, some of us, apparently don’t even need those kind of skills to pick up girls.”

“No way! Nyx??” Crowe asked.

And suddenly the conversation turned into all about how Nyx had met a girl in town and had apparently hooked up with her.

After cake, good laughs and some hugs the guys left Cloud and Zack to themselves.

For whatever reason, it was actually quite awkward in the room. Something which…had never happened before.

As if to break this, Zack suddenly stood up, guitar in hand and asked Cloud if he wanted to take a walk.

Technically, they had a curfew, but what the hell.

Cloud agreed, and in silence he wondered why Zack was taking his guitar with him. They didn’t talk along the way, but eventually they sat down by the small pond they had in the park.

“There’s actually another number I was practicing, but... well, I was a little embarrassed to play it in front of the other guys.” Zack admitted, his hand scratching the back of his neck sheepishly.

“But you want to play it for me?” Cloud asked, suddenly feeling quite honored.

Zack seemed to blush then, but Cloud couldn’t be sure as it was rather dark. “Well... yeah. I guess.” He cleared his throat then and shifted his weight, his fingers poised above the strings but he seemed frozen. Suddenly he exhaled quite deeply and laughed meekly. “Thinking about it, I guess this is a bit intense and... um, surprising. But I was trying to go for bands that I knew you liked... so.” He finished in a quite whisper, exhaling deeply again he steeled his expression and began.

“Baby, I’m yours. And I’ll be yours, until the stars fall from the sky. Yours, until the rivers all run dry, in other words, until I die.”

I was Arctic Monkeys, another one of Cloud’s favorite bands ( though he wasn’t a fan of all of their tunes ). But even though it was Arctic Monkeys, somehow this was just so... Zack. Just Zack and his surprisingly lovely voice, the way he sat and played his guitar was so mesmerizingly... him.
Cloud felt warm in his chest as he listened to Zack play.

“Baby I’m yours, and I’ll be yours until the sun no longer shines. Yours, until the poets run out of rhymes, in other words, until the end of time.”

“I’m gonna stay right here, by your side…” Zack looked up at Cloud then, suddenly he didn’t seem quite so shy at all, and it took Cloud by surprise. He looked so…. charming. Cloud wasn’t too sure, but it quite felt like his heart had skipped at beat at seeing Zack's lovely lilac eyes looking at him like he was. “Do my best to keep you satisfied. Nothing in the world could drive me away. Everyday you’ll hear me say, baby I’m yours.”

Cloud’s face was hot then, cheeks tinged pink by the way Zack was still looking at him.

Zack continued the song until it’s very end, and when he finished Cloud felt like he was finally able to breathe. Composing himself, he adorned a great big smile.

“That was so good Zack! How come you’ve gotten so talented in such a small amount of time?”

For whatever reason, this apparently wasn’t what Zack wanted to hear, and thus he looked quite depressed. He looked like a kicked puppy, and the expression physically hurt Cloud.

“Thanks Cloud.” He said, but he just sounded so sad, and Cloud was unsure of what to do with that. Hadn’t he just complimented him? Shouldn’t he be happy? Should Cloud have told him it was bad?? What was going on right now?

“I mean it, you’re really good Zack.” Cloud told him softly.

Zack looked up then, and managing a small smile he told him once more. “Thanks.” The he fell into silence, looking over the pond with an expression Cloud couldn’t discern.

“How long did you practice it for?” Cloud asked casually, trying his best to mend the mood.

“A loooong time.” Zack replied as he ripped some grass absentmindedly.

There was only the sound of insect chirping then, the dark night, illuminated only by the moonlight was suddenly quite calm and chilly.

Neither of them spoke, but Zack did sigh a couple of times, and sometimes his expression would change into a mild frown, but then back to the kicked puppy look, but then it seemed to settle on a unsettlingly neutral one.

“Are you okay Zack?” Cloud finally asked.

“Me?” Zack looked over to Cloud, and seeing the worry on his face, for once wasn’t enough to put on a fake smile. He turned away from it instead and looked back on the pond. “Yeah, just lost in thought.”

“You can… talk to me if there is anything you need to.. talk about.” Cloud tried, but it felt as if he was walking on eggshells all of a sudden.

What had gone wrong?

What was on Zacks mind?

Despite how much Cloud wanted to know, none of these questions were answered. Simply because Cloud didn’t have the guts to pry more than he already had, and it seemed like Zack wasn’t in a
sharing mood.

Cloud was almost under the impression that he was mad with him; but what had Cloud done?

Though Cloud kept thinking about this, soon there came an event so grand that it was even able to break the strange mood that had befallen the two.

A baby had been born.

And not just any baby, the next king had been born.

~

Two weeks after Noctis Lucis Caelum was born, the recruits were all summoned to the palace by the good King Regis to meet the prince.

They were led into the nursery in groups of four at a time, inside the huge room was the kings shield, Clarus Amicitia along with his three year old son Gladiolus Amicitia. It was quite cute really, the little guy stood much the same way his father did, much like a well trained guard, hands behind his back and everything. Cloud couldn’t help but smile at the sight, the kid however, seemed very much serious about his duties.

Inside the room was also the King, Queen Aulea however was nowhere to be seen, something which Cloud wondered a little about.

The king greeted them warmly but quietly.

“It’s good to see you kids again, it surely had been a long time. You have all grown so fast! My, I think you’ll turn into fine Glaives once graduation comes due.” He looked over all of them fondly, but then turned back towards his infant son. “I invited you all here today because I want you to meet my son, the future ruler of our kingdom. Come closer.”

The recruits did, and soon Cloud stood leaning his head over the prince’s crib only to gasp at the sight. “He’s so small!” He exclaimed quietly to which the king chuckled.

“Yes, the prince was born rather small, but I assure you he is quite the heathy boy. Eats and sleeps without any problems.”

Right now it seemed as if the prince was torn in between sleeping and waking however, not sure if a nap was more important that taking a good look at the strangers above him.

“He’s so cute!” one of the girls whispered excitedly.

The king chuckled warmly once more. “He is isn’t he?” They all regarded him then, the king with a painful fond look on his face before he turned back towards the recruits. “You’re all going to be his glaives one day. When he comes of age, he’ll be your king. That’s why I wanted you all to meet him. I think it’s important to get to know what you’re fighting for, but fear not, you will be seeing more of him when he gets older. I’m sure sparing with some of you will prove a great exercise for him once he learns how to wield a weapon.”

Cloud almost couldn’t imagine what the king was talking about, there was such a long time before
that was anywhere near happening. Still, the prospect was adorable, and Cloud couldn’t help but gain even further respect for his King who so wanted to show off his new born son to the glaives.

Perhaps it was because there were all these kids watching the prince, but Clarus’ son suddenly walked over to one of the recruits and asked to be picked up. Confused, Pelna picked the heavy kid up so he too could watch the baby.

“Small.” He said simply.

The king chuckled then. “You’re also quite small Gladiolus.” He told him.

The kid frowned and pouted at that. “No.” the he seemed to inspect the prince further, then he pointed at the sleeping infant and asked: “Why does he sleep all the time?”

“Because there isn’t a lot else he can do. He needs to grow.” The king replied. “When he’s older, do you think you can play with him?”

“When he is bigger? Like Iggy?”

The king chuckled. “Yes.”

“I will show him how to play.” He announced, now pushing Pelna’s chest so he would set him down.

“You’re a bossy little guy aren’t you?” Pelna told him as he sat the kid down, but the kid didn’t even pay the comment any attention. Just like that he returned to his ‘post’ next to his father.

Then the King gasped and quickly turned to look at the wall clock, suddenly exclaiming that they had spent too much time on this group and how he seriously needed to work on his time management skills.

Cloud's group was led out and another in, and so it continued until everyone had met the prince.

Everyone was talking about it after that, and as a new topic was introduced the awkwardness between Zack and Cloud seemed to melt away.

Everything seemed much like it was before, but despite this, Cloud seemed to think that sometimes he’d see Zack acting… hesitant. His behavior settled badly with Cloud who still couldn't get his birthday night out of his head.

When he became too distressed with the small changes that had appeared between him and his best friend, he’d recall the vivid image of Zack singing that song.

It wasn’t until a few months later that he’d blush like a red bell pepper in embarrassment as realization finally decided to whack his stupid head.

**Chapter End Notes**

okayyyyy, so were getting there friends!! the sweet sweet romance is approaching, and hopefully next chapter will be loaded with it B)

Also baby Noctis is cute but omg, i am going to have some fun with baby Gladdy and
Iggy in the next chapter!! Cute Noctis things will have to wait until he's older, right now he literally just eats, sleeps and shits. The kid is surprisingly easy to raise :P

Also, the song Zack sings is Baby I'm yours by Arctic Monkeys.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

omggggg YES
Writing this chapter has healed my soul.
Please enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zack was a year older than Cloud.

There wasn’t a lot of age differences in the glaive recruits, the absolute max being 2 years.

Usually Zack liked to think that the age difference between them all really didn’t matter. It was 1 year, what did it matter?

But recently Zack had been thinking about a lot of things, and though he knew that thinking too much usually amounted to him finding strange answers, he still couldn’t help himself.

Everyday he seemingly came up with a new theory on why Cloud was so completely disinterested in all things romance; it was almost as if… almost as if he didn’t know what it was?

Today Zack thought that maybe in a year the blonde would be in the same boat as Zack, desperate to love and to touch and to get a dang lover! 16 years old was apparently the age were it all happened….But then, that that theory suddenly didn’t seem so solid once he recalled the fact that Crowe was now in a long distance relationship, and she was even younger than Cloud.

Moreover, the way he’d talked about his first kiss… it hadn’t seemed right for Zack. It was just so… nonchalant, like, like he didn’t even care!

Zack kicked a light pole in anger at his mental outburst.

That had been Cloud’s first kiss! First kiss!! Zack… Zack should have been the one to give Cloud his first kiss; it would have been so romantic and amazing.

Zack had been imagining several scenarios since quite a while ago and he had been so sure that it would have been amazing and perfect and…

Then again… would it even matter?

Cloud didn’t find a kiss amazing the first time he tried it, would Cloud like the kiss, just because it was him? Somehow that seemed oddly conceited.

And wait, maybe.. Did Cloud like kisses at all??

Zack’s train of thought was seriously derailing, and with a gasp he suddenly wondered if Cloud simply held no desire for anything sexual, period.

Aughhhh… how depressing.
Wouldn't confessing his feelings just put a burden on Cloud's shoulders if there was no way he wanted to reciprocate?

Zack's head was hurting.

And to be honest, so was his heart.

It had taken him a lot of courage to sing Cloud that song, and to no avail.

Zack didn't understand anymore, but as he walked around the park, he figured that he'd respect Cloud no matter what. However depressing Cloud's impassiveness towards romance was, Zack still... he still loved him.

Zack would go back to the old days! As much as possible anyways. Because there really wasn't anything better than simply being Cloud's friend; romance be damned, Zack just wanted to be near him.

Though his mental resolve was strong, Zack still sighed, and he continued to do so for a long long time.

~

Of course people noticed. Everyone noticed.

And really, how couldn't they? The biggest puppy of all suddenly sulking??

People were bound to talk, and talk a lot.

Cloud had actually thought it wasn't all that bad, that was of course only up until the Galahd trio all ganged up on him.

IT'S BAD." They told him in perfect unison, almost as if they'd practiced it.

"What happened?" Nyx then asked, his worry obvious in his tone though he was rather cool about it.

Indeed. Cloud wanted to know that too. And so he told them. "I'd like to know that as well."

The three friends looked between each other then, and when none could come up with a conclusion shrugged their shoulders and moved on.

~

Surprisingly, Nyx had a lot of tact. Just to add more to his perfect hero persona, the guy was able to pick up subtleties others couldn't, and his intuition... it was damn perfect.

Cloud discovered and appreciated later when Nyx came and asked if Cloud wanted to go on a walk with him.

"So, I'm here to talk about Zack." He told him honestly.

"Oh." Was all Cloud could utter. "Alright." He told him.

Nyx looked at him oddly. "Are you...? There isn't anything... you want to tell me?"

Cloud frowned at that. "Well, no."
Nyx nodded at that, seemingly understanding something that Cloud clearly did not. “I see what’s going on.” He told him.

Yeah?”

Yeah. You haven’t noticed.” Nyx told him easily.

“Noticed what?”

“Can’t blame ya really, no one else seems to have noticed it. Expect for the fact that its goddamn obvious.” He said, even going as far as to massage the bridge of his nose in apparent frustration.

Cloud was the frustrated one here! “Cut the act Nyx, what is it I haven’t noticed?”

Nyx scratched the back of his neck then. “Man… this really isn’t my place to meddle.” He said, and now he looked somewhat uncomfortable.

The secrecy of it all was really starting to piss Cloud off. “Spit it out Nyx.”

Nyx looked up with wide eyes then, before suddenly settling for a grin. “Cloud getting angry? Is this because it’s about Zack?” Nyx watched for Cloud’s reaction, and as expected, his cheeks tinged pink. “Man, this is probably a good sign for Zack.”

Cloud, fed up with him dancing around the subject threw him a killer glare.

Nyx instantly threw his hands up defensively. “Okay, Okay! But Cloud, I’m only telling you this because you for some reason don’t see it, and I’m sure Zack is thinking up all kinds of “honorable” bullshit and isn’t going to make it more obvious than he already has.”

Once more, the look of discomfort returned to Nyx’s face. “I uh, Zack likes you.”

Cloud frowned at that. “Well, I like Zack too.” He retorted easily.

Agh!! Now I see what the issue is! You’re freaking dense as brick wall Cloud!” Nyx sighed. “Look, when I say like, I mean like like, as in, romantically likes you.”

Cloud took a few seconds to process this, but once he did, his eyes practically bulged right out of his head. He wasn’t even able to exclaim anything; the shock was that great.

Nyx started laughing at that, but while Cloud wanted to ask things such as “Are you joking?” “Is this a joke?” or “Are you serious right now?”, all Cloud’s brain did was piece together the puzzle. The final piece of information had been given, and now a perfectly clear picture was presented to him.

Cloud’s head turned so red he looked like he was about to explode, apparently Nyx found that even funnier, if his laughter was anything to go by.

“I suppose this must be good news from the way you’re reacting.” He told him cockily; Cloud hit him on his arm for that.

They fell silent then, Cloud too busy in his own head to pay attention to Nyx. Eventually though, he (along with his facial color) calmed down.

So,” Nyx started gently, “does it make sense to you now?” he asked.

Cloud looked up then, almost dazedly.

"Yeah… it does.” Then his head fell onto the table. “Oh my God Nyx, it was so obvious… I can’t believe I did that..”
"Did what?"

"I…"

"Was it something that happened on your birthday?"

"Wah! How did you know?!"

Nyx shrugged. “A qualified guess, I noticed Zack started acting weird on that day. He’s been stuck in his own thoughts much too often, and he makes these faces. They’re too serious for his personality, and it’s been… unsettling.” Nyx physically shivered at the recollection. “So, what happened to make him that way? Since you didn’t know about this you can’t have rejected him, so I’m really curious.”

"Yeah no… he didn’t, um, confess.” Cloud’s face was getting warmer again, and for the life of him he couldn’t look at Nyx right now. “He sang a song.”

Nyx narrowed his eyes. “What kind of song?”

"Baby I’m yours.” He whispered quickly.


“Yes?” He asked, peaking at his friend from the corner of his eyes.

“That’s basically the same thing as confessing.”

Cloud hid his face behind his hands in embarrassment, and he stayed that way for a long time.

After some time had passed, Nyx gently tried again. “Cloud, can I ask you something?”

Cloud still wouldn’t look up at him. “Yeah.”

"I don’t want to sound rude asking this… But how come you didn’t notice?"

"I…I guess…” Cloud took a small pause to collect his thoughts, and Nyx waited patiently for him. “I don’t know Nyx, me and Zack were just so close. I just never... thought it was anything more than that, I don’t think I can imagine being closer to anyone than I already am with Zack. I mean, how could you make something so perfect, even better? I guess I just couldn’t see it. I was just really really happy where I was.” Cloud chuckled sadly then. “To be honest with you, maybe a lot of this stems from the fact that I just can’t wrap my head around the fact that someone else likes me… like that.” He looked up at Nyx then, his expression painfully vulnerable. "I still don’t get it Nyx.”

“If what you’re saying is true, then… then why? Zack is amazing. He’s nice, he’s strong, he’s good looking… he’s… he’s Zack.” Cloud chuckled again. “It’d make more sense if it was a one sided crush from my side. I can't even... ugh, I suppose I didn't think it could get any more amazing than it already was... that I was deserving of something more."

“I guess I'm just a little confused, I mean you obviously like him, but it was subconscious? You really never thought of… having anything more intimate?” Nyx tried cautiously.

Cloud blushed the slightest at that. “No… I was too happy with what I already had Nyx. You don’t know how…” Tears started to form in Cloud’s eyes as he spoke.

"How happy he makes me.”
Nyx came around and put a supporting arm around Cloud’s shoulders to still his shaking shoulders. "I can’t believe I’ve made such a fool out of him.” He said, his voice broken up by the sobs that came erupting.

He sobbed for a good few moments, but then with a sudden inhale he looked up at Nyx again, his eyes red and face tear stained. “Are you sure Nyx? Are you really sure?”

Nyx smiled gently at his friend and rubbed some circles on his back. “Yeah Cloud… I’m pretty sure.”

Suddenly Cloud’s face split into a smile so happy, so messy yet so very happy. Wiping his nose with the back of his sleeve he said: “Isn’t that nice?” he laughed a little. “I’m so lucky!” he said, now breaking out into gleeful laughter.

Nyx tapped his back. “You’re not lucky Cloud. Have some more confidence, of course Zack would fall for you. You’re a lovely guy.” He told him, throwing in a charming wink for good measure.

Cloud laughed at that, now wiping his eyes from the tears. “I still can’t believe it you know.”

“Take your time Blondie, I’m sure Zack is giving you lots of it. To be honest, I don’t doubt he would leave you be despite how infatuated he is with you, just because he wouldn’t want to burden you or some such nonsense. Honestly, I sometimes can’t figure out what he’s thinking.”


“No problem.” Nyx said into the hug. When Cloud pulled back he frowned at him playfully. “If you’re lying about this…”

Nyx grinned, “I will gladly get my ass beat if that’s the case.” Cloud rolled his eyes at that, and then the two started laughing again.

~

Thinking back on it, Cloud supposed it was odd how he hadn’t noticed Zack’s rather obvious wooing.

Cloud wasn’t stupid, nor dense as a brick wall, as Nyx had so rudely put it. Hmph.

Leave it to seemingly buried insecurities and anxiety to subconsciously affect him and make him look so damn dumb. Sigh.

Still, while it was hard for Cloud to understand, now that he knew… by God, Zack was obvious.

There was obviously the fact they cuddled a lot when they watched movies (well, Zack cuddled Cloud), or sometimes Zack would find an excuse to sleep in Cloud’s bed instead of his own, claiming he was lazy.

Pft, Cloud had to laugh at that.

Then there were the nicknames. Cloudy, which only Zack and his mother used. But then there were Zack’s more original ones like Sunshine, Haystack, Chocobo and a more recent one… Beautiful.

Good God, Cloud was blushing again wasn’t he? Aghhhh!!

Then there was how Zack would mock flirt with him, saying cheesy pick up lines and whatever. Cloud had thought those were just to piss him off, and wow, Cloud really hoped those weren’t
serious attempts at wooing, because by God those pick up lines were horrendous.

Still, it was charming.

Most everything Zack did was charming.

And above all, Zack was charming.

Yeah, yeah. Cloud had to admit, he was definitely head over heals for the other boy.

Just recalling the song from his birthday made butterflies flutter in his stomach like crazy. He’d feel so warm in his chest and in cheeks, it was insane.

Now there was of course the question of where did they go from here?

~

So now everyday life was turning into a pain.

Suddenly every touch sent sparks through Cloud’s body, all comments made him blush and Cloud would catch Zack staring and then he’d catch himself staring.

There were a lot of reasons why this was a pain, most of which involved how on edge Cloud was, along with how giddy he was.

But above all, this affected how he performed in classes. And that, that just wouldn’t do.

Cloud could have kept up the game for a longer while, simply because it was quite fun being that only one that knew it was mutual. Alas, Cloud couldn’t afford to get behind.

So, jittery and nervous, Cloud decided to take matters into his own hands.

It was him that suggested a movie night, his plan already somewhat formulated in his head.

Zack was ecstatic of course, it’d been a while since the last movie night anyways and soon he started to talk about how they’d been neglecting Honey along with many other domestic comments.

It was cute. And Cloud was smiling way too much.

The day passed painstakingly slowly, but eventually nightfall came, both boys quick to reject any after school activity with anyone else.

This was their night.

Zack was enthusiastic as hell, he was going all in. He went out of his way to buy popcorn and ice cream for them to share, and even got his bed all ready with lots of pillows for them.

How embarrassing.

When they made themselves cozy however, Cloud noticed there was a distinct lack of proximity.

This posed a problem, for it was around the expectation of this proximity that Cloud had formulated his plan!

But Cloud wasn’t about to back down because of something like that. No, no, he was taking matters
into his own hands! Yeah!

Under the cover of a yawn, 45 minutes into the movie, Cloud leaned into Zack.

To be fair, it was quite the tame gesture. This should have been normal for them, less than normal even!! Usually Cloud was pressed tightly against Zack who had his arm around him!!

Yet for some reason, some annoying reason, Zack gasped.

He turned rigid for a second, but then quickly relaxed and Cloud didn’t need to look up to know that he was smiling like the damn idiot he was.

Cloud tried to keep it cool, by the Gods he tried, but it was hard.

He even positioned his hand so that their pinkies were touching! Their pinkies!

Suddenly the movie came to an end, the credits rolled and none of them had made a move yet. Whilst they had been watching movies night had fallen, and now the room was almost completely dark.

Prime conditions.

Cloud suddenly linked their pinkies together, and he could hear Zack’s breath hitch.

“…Cloud?” He asked quietly, oh so quietly that it seemed as if he was scared to break whatever it was that happening.

Cloud’s chest felt tight with love, and he turned his face up to look at Zack’s dimly lit expression of adorable confusion and felt the sensation even stronger.

Cloud only looked at Zack’s lips for a split second, and there came over him only the simple thought of I should kiss him.

It was slow, he approached him, getting closer and closer and craning his neck up to him, his eyes going up to Zack’s confused one’s before looking down at his lips again.

Then they were centimeters apart, and Cloud simply leaned his head a bit to the side and… went for it.

He kissed him.

Kissed his best friend.

Kissed his crush.

Zack was quick to react, God bless him, and quickly he turned his own body towards Cloud and sneaked an arm around his body.

He sighed into the kiss, and at that moment it seemed as if all their worries melted away, the whole world disappearing as just this moment prevailed.

And it felt so nice, and felt so natural, as if they had been destined to do this all along; some way or another, ultimately it had to come to this.
This wonderful moment of warmth and intimacy and love. The adoration was so evident in the kiss that it was almost overwhelming.

Zack pulled away the slightest, just to place a kiss on Cloud’s lips once more. And once more, and once more and once more; at this Cloud couldn’t help but smile, and feeling this Zack began to laugh.

Through their happiness, Zack peppered Cloud with kisses, only breaking away to say Cloud’s name or tell him how happy he was.

Eventually Cloud ended up sitting in Zack’s lap, Zack’s arms around his middle and Cloud’s own arms around his neck. And for whatever reason, Cloud wasn’t embarrassed, nor was he shy, this all just felt so natural, it came to both of them so easily.

“Not that I’m complaining, but why did you kiss me?” Zack asked as he made soothing motions on the small of Cloud’s back.

Cloud’s own hands were playing with Zack’s hair, and tilting his head slightly he told him. “Well, you weren’t about to, were you?” He replied, a cocky grin blooming on his face at his own sneakiness.

Zack kissed that as well. “You little.” He said, before he began a ferocious tickle attack.

Cloud fell over laughing, and Zack continued to tickle him until he was breathless. Eventually he laid down in the cramped bed next to him, and both turned to face each other.

Zack’s hand wandered over to Cloud’s face and caressed his cheek lovingly, and wow, there sure was a lot of love in that warm touch of his, it was almost dizzying.

Cloud smiled softly at him, and Zack smiled back before he stole yet another little kiss.

"The why’s are not important.” He told him easily. “I’m just happy to be here right now..” His grin turned wider then. “You have no idea how happy I am right now.”

Cloud rolled his eyes but chuckled. “You’ve said that a thousand times now.”

“And I’ll say it a thousand more, with your permission.”

Cloud laughed again but understanding what Zack was trying to say made him look away shyly. “Permission granted.” He told him quietly.

Zack got closer then. “Those that mean…” he started, but then he had to turn it around and ask instead. “What does that mean?” He asked, his shit eating grin on full display.

But two could play at this game, getting even closer Cloud moved some hair away from Zack’s ear and whispered into it. “It means that I’m yours too.”

Zack shuddered and Cloud laughed.

From then on, life just seemed a little sunnier.

Chapter End Notes
So I decided to take my computer with me to Tokyo. Simply because there was no way I was gonna survive a 15 hour waiting time in Doha without means of entertaining.

I can’t promise I’ll be able to post more chapters this month as I'll be busy enjoying my time here, but if you want to follow along with my travels head on over to yunayoyoe on instagram. Many shenanigans await us B)
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

i'm baaaack!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was absolutely no way Cloud and Zack could keep their relationship a secret. In fact, the two were apparently so obvious in their loving gazes that the very next the rumours spread and just the day after that they became an officially known couple.

That is to say, *Everyone* knew. Absolutely *everyone*, even the teachers, even Instructor Angeal.

On the flip side, it wasn’t exactly as if Cloud and Zack were trying to keep it a secret. They just didn’t think to announce it to the world, because a) why should they? And b) not a whole lot had changed between them anyways.

Having been best friends for such a long time made their love less passionate and wild, and more so domestic, their pdas also very subtle. Yet however subtle they may be, in classes they’d sometimes glance at each other, and when their eyes met they’d giggle slightly. It was obvious that they were very happy and very much in love.

Everything seemed to fall into such a normal, lovely routine that Cloud couldn’t quite believe how happy he was. Somehow, it almost seemed surreal. Sometimes he’d catch himself smiling or outright laughing out of the blue, simply because he couldn’t quite believe how everything had turned out.

Life was good, so very good.

Training was going well too! And now Cloud finally seemed to have somewhat mastered his rapid warp technique! A technique, that while incredibly draining made him almost completely untouchable for a short period of time! The moment he reappeared from his warp he’d disappear yet again, continuing this for as long as it was required or for as long as he could hold it.

The thing was, that not only was the technique draining, it also required crazy fast reflexes, along with a good stomach for warping. Most wouldn’t dare attempt the technique as even one warp could make their insides rumble. Cloud however, seemed to have mastered it anyways.

But perhaps most excitingly was what Cloud had prepared for today.

It had been a few months in progress, but Cloud had been doing a lot of independent research for CM classes. His intense desire to learn more about it, made him spend lots of his time conducting experiments, and really, besides Zack and his friends, Cloud didn’t have any hobbies whatsoever. He was *that* engrossed in it.

(Honestly, Cloud was so lucky and grateful to have Zack as both a roommate and a lover. That way they could cuddle at night and kiss and giggle, even if Cloud had spent his whole day researching or training.)

Anyways, Cloud’s efforts had paid off and now he had made an amazing discovery! He’d even prepared a presentation on it for Angeal and everything!
Cloud told the instructor about this right at the end of class, but Angeal told him that he was supposed to train Zack after classes today, along with a little fella that was about to visit. However, Cloud was welcome to watch and they could talk right after that.

The little fella was apparently none other than Gladiolus Amicitia, the son of the King’s shield. Seeing the three together was actually rather comical now that he was witnessing it. They were all so similar that they could easily pass off as a band of brothers.

Apparently the kid had turned 4 years old, and now he (not so humbly) requested that Angeal teach him how to fight. Not so surprisingly, the kid wanted to learn how to wield a broadsword. Angeal had laughed heartily at the kid; and then he’d said no. In a very wise, mentor-like manner, he passed that responsibility on over to Zack, claiming that teaching other would cement his own basics.

Zack wasn’t afraid to call bullshit on that right to Angeal’s face, but the thing was, the two were so close already that this didn’t even faze Angeal in the slightest. It was of course, not alright to be that buddy-buddy in front of the rest of the class, but when it was just the two (or three, with Cloud as the rare observer) they were like family.

Still, despite Zack calling bullshit, Angeal didn’t give in. Suddenly Zack found himself stuck with teaching the persistent and hard-faced little man after his own special classes. While this meant more work for Zack, Cloud was quite content with this. Now he didn’t feel so bad for working as much as he did instead of spending time with Zack; now the two of them were (almost) equally busy. What a win-win!

The kid wasn’t allowed to join Zack and Angeal’s practice, and so he settled for watching, plumping down angrily next to Cloud.

Cloud wanted to laugh; the kid was ridiculous. How could he have such a serious personality at this age?

Out of the corner of his eyes Cloud regarded him, wondering whether or not the kid even had any facial muscles. He’d only ever seen him wearing one expression anyways.

Throughout the whole practice, Cloud and the kid didn’t speak a single word to each other. The only sounds in the room where the two fighters grunting, laughing, or Gladiolus barking orders and exercises.

As Cloud watched Zack work, he felt his cheeks grow hotter. The exercises where making him glisten with sweat, and the rigorous training had toned his arms and chest to a wonderful degree. And then there was the glint in his eyes, the smirk on his lips every time he did something successfully.

Zack was damn attractive.

As if to stop Cloud from drooling right then and there, the kid finally opened his mouth. “Is that your friend?” he asked.

Cloud looked down at him, almost in wonder at hearing his voice not so demanding and persistent. “Well, yeah.” Cloud wondered if should call the two of them friends now… but then again, they were still friends, they had just evolved into something much more awesome.

“That’s nice.” He said dumbly.

Cloud quirked his head at that. “Thanks?”

The kid nodded. “It’s important to have strong friends.”
Cloud was thankful the kids gaze was intently on the sparring session in front of them, that way he couldn’t see how his lips had quirked up in amusement.

This kid was something else. “Yeah… I guess you’re right.”

Then the kid looked up. “Are you strong?” he demanded.

Hmm, well. That kinda put Cloud on the spot. His own head was screaming NO! Are you even seeing this fight???? I’m nowhere near their level! Damn anxiety… But then he couldn’t tell the kid that. What would become of his (non-existing) reputation? His pride as a glaive?

“Well, I am going to become a glaive.” He told him instead.

The kid nodded sagely at that. “True.” Was all he said before turning his gaze back to the fight.

~

Eventually their special lesson ended, and just as Angeal was about to head off, Cloud promptly caught him and reminded him that he had something to say.

Clearing his throat, Cloud began explaining some theories he’d developed about the crystal and crystal magic. He proposed several ways in which they could research the crystal and bring about more ways to enhance their militia.

Needless to say, Angeal was silent but astounded.

Once Cloud had finished speaking Angeal finally cleared his throat and spoke.

“I am at a loss of what to say Cloud.” Then he cracked one of those special grins that made ones chest swell with utter pride. “You are probably the student that have surprised me the most; every time I think I have you pinned, you break free and surpass all my expectations. Honestly, it’s a joy to watch you grow, and frankly this is some amazing stuff you’ve presented here tonight.”

Then he scratched his beard sheepishly. “I will say though, I don’t think I’m the right one to be telling all this to. Honestly, magic has never been my forte, I just know enough to teach it. There aren’t a lot of people interested in the crystal magic research, to be honest, that isn’t really a thing. The closest you’ll get to someone to theorize with would be vice-captain Genesis. Also, I can’t get you the authority to go do experiments with the crystal, frankly, even suggesting that is mild blasphemy.”

Cloud cringed at that, living so faraway from the capital, he didn’t really know what was and what wasn’t okay. Even though it was the same country, their cultures were vastly different, that applied to religion just the same.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that. It’s not that bad, just… be careful how you word it. I’m not a religious man myself, but hey, better tread carefully in those kind of areas; just to be safe.” He said with a kind wink.

“Anyways, you’ll have to convince the vice-captain that this is something we should go through with, and then he will have to convince Captain Sephiroth. The Captain will probably have to make inquiry to meet the king, and then convince the king. Then, the King will have to confer with his council. And only then my knowledgeable little friend, will you know whether or not you have the authority to mess around with the crystal as you suggest.”
By now Cloud was looking regretful in an alarmingly shade of green, even Zack had to leave his new brat for a second to come put his hand on his boyfriends shoulder reassuringly.

Angeal laughed and ruffled Cloud’s fluffy hair. “Don’t be like that Cloud! I want to see determination in your eyes! Don’t you want to do this? Don’t you want to evolve our ways?” Angeal smiled at him, every bit as confident as Cloud wasn’t. “Personally, I think this is the best initiative I’ve heard in ages! I really think you have what it takes to make something incredibly grand happen Cloud; you have the potential.” He said the last words softly, as if he knew Cloud didn’t believe that himself.

“You just have to believe in yourself.” He told him kindly, and for the first time since Angeal had started praising him, Cloud looked up properly. Tears were making his eyes glossy, and when he saw his mentors smile and tried to reciprocate, it became too much. It was overflowing, and suddenly the damn just broke and Cloud hiccupped into a waterfall of gleeful tears.

By then Zack took over, lovingly embracing Cloud and telling him how amazing he was. Cloud just laughed, laughed and cried and laughed and cried.

“I’ll arrange something with the vice-captain, I’ll let you know tomorrow Strife.” Angeal said in the background, the sound of the door closing to signal he was gone.

Cloud continued to laugh into Zack’s broad and welcoming chest, not caring in the least how sweaty the other actually was.

Suddenly Zack pushed him softly away, only to look at Cloud with so much happiness and excitement that you’d think he was vibrating with it.

“You’re seriously amazing Cloudy.” He told him, and then kissed him happily.

It was sloppy, both smiling and grinning into the kiss and either throwing compliments or comments of disbelief around.

Eventually though, a small but unnervingly deep voice broke their bubble of sunshine happiness. “Are you actually really amazing mister?” He asked.

Cloud stumbled back, suddenly quite embarrassed and at a loss for what to say. While Cloud dried his eyes with the back of his sleeves nervously, Zack just smugly threw an arm around him and told the kid proudly. “That’s right, he’s my little prodigy.” And turned his head to give Cloud a wet smack of a kiss right on his red cheek.

“Zack!” Cloud hissed, only to blush further.

The kid narrowed his eyes at the display. “Are you… a girl?” he asked quite bluntly.

“Who? Me?” Zack asked, suddenly cackling while Cloud turned his expression into an obvious pout.

“No.” the kid said simply, turning his gaze to Cloud once again.

“I am not.” Cloud told him easily.

Miraculously, a new expression finally graced the kids face. He looked confused. “But boys kiss girls, right?”

Zack scoffed. “Boys can kiss boys too little guy. Hell! Girls can kiss girls too! Trust me, it feels very
nice either way.” Then he turned to Cloud with a stupid grin. “Very, very nice.” He said whilst he moved closer with some kissing fish lips.

Cloud pushed him away this time; he’d had enough of being embarrassed for one night. Zack simply laughed at that, whilst the kid now digested this new information with a simple “Oh.”

Then his serious and almost annoyingly determined expression was back. “So are you going to teach me now?” He asked him simply.

Zack sighed at that. “Yo, why don’t you ask your dad to teach you? Isn’t he super powerful?”

The kid seemed to twitch at that. “He told me he doesn’t have time.”

Thankfully, Zack caught on to that small twitch and swallowed his dramatic “Well neither do I!” and changed it into a contemplative “Hm.”

He pondered for perhaps two seconds before his easy smile was back into place. “Alright well, first things first!” He started, and at that, the kid seemed to turn his posture even more straight than it was before.

Cloud covered his grinning mouth with his hand as he took a seat to observe.

“You,” Zack told him, turning his body down low so he could poke the kid right in his chest authoritatively, once satisfied with how he was effectively towering above the kid he cracked a grin. “You need to smile!” he told him, laughing stupidly as he watched the expression on the kid change into one of confusion once more.

“Why?” the kid asked once Zack no longer hovered ominously over him.

“’Why’ he asks!” Zack said dramatically, flaring his arms around as if it was the most absurd thing he had ever heard in his life. Cloud chuckled cutely in the background; Zack was honestly such a goofball. “Let me ask you something kid; do you need to learn how to fight, or do you want to learn how to fight?”

The kid’s confused expression remained, and after pondering for a few panicky seconds he replied: “I need to learn.”

“And why is that?” he asked him interrogatively, obviously giving off the impression that that wasn’t the answer he had wanted to hear.

The kid steeled his expression then; “It is my duty to protect the next king! The Amicitia line guards the protector of the realm and acts as their shield!”

It sounded so recited, Cloud wondered if the kid had heard it from his dad, or if it was something he’d been telling himself until now.

“Honorable.” Zack told him. “But I ask you then, why is it that while you need to, you still don’t want to?” He asked him, but didn’t give him enough time to reply before he continued. “A fighter learns to fight so he can protect what’s important, so he can protect what he loves. Do you not want that? Gladiolus Amicitia?” He asked him, and whoa Cloud was goddamn starstruck at what he was seeing unfold. Zack was absolutely perfect for this! He was seriously nailing it!!

The kid finally cracked another expression, well, actually two! Nervousness and… shame?

“I do.” He told Zack, his voice finally like that of a small child.
“Well of course you do!” Zack said, cracking the serious faced and blooming out with a grand smile. “I didn’t think any less!” he told him as he ruffled his hair.

“And this is where you smile! Smile because you’re happy! Because why wouldn’t you be happy?? You’re going to learn how to protect what’s important! You’ll be able to do something, when bad times come along. You can be... a hero.” He told him, the way he said the last word almost made it seem as if the title was covered in shimmering gold. “As long as you want to learn how to fight, I will want to teach to you. We need strong people in this world to make sure that everyone will be alright, we don’t want any grief now do we?”

Now, now the kid was smiling. A genuine, excitedly and elated smile. “Yes sir!”

Zack laughed. “You probably mean, no sir, right?”

The kid looked confused for a second, but then he looked up again. “No sir! No grief!”

Zack smiled at that, “That’s right!” in return, the kid smiled back. And it was so perfect, because it was just so genuine. Zack had singlehandedly completely altered the kids view on fighting.

Cloud felt warm in his heart, his love for Zack growing even stronger. Somehow, Cloud couldn’t help but think how Zack would make for a perfect parent in the future.

Thankfully, anxiety didn’t decide to strike him right then and there and Cloud was able to enjoy Teacher Zack and Gladiolus the Pupil work around the basics of fighting, making way in between to talk about honor here and there of course.

Gosh dang was it cute! Cloud had to catch himself giggling and smiling dumbly quite a number of times.

Later on that evening however, when Cloud had decided to leave the two to their own devices and go to bed a little early for once, Cloud’s thoughts began to darken.

Lying in bed alone had become rather uncommon now... actually scratch that, Zack’s top bunker had been effectively abandoned months ago and now the two always slept together.

Since Cloud was almost guaranteed to be the one going in late, he never lied in it alone.

So yeah... sitting here alone... with his thoughts... Well, let’s just say it wasn’t the most pleasant he’d felt in a while. Now that he wasn’t occupied with, well, Zack, or his studies or his training... suddenly darker thoughts began to surface. His anxiety slowly but surely began clawing its way back up from the darkness of his being.

What if Angeal was wrong about it him? What if he didn’t have potential?

What if everything he was saying was just foolish nonsense? What if he got permission to experiment, and then he ruined everything? Broke the crystal somehow??

Cloud shook himself, he tried to think of Zack instead. Of their honey flavored kisses of happiness and how it felt to be held in his arms.

Oh wow, that really was an effective way to feel good again. Cloud shifted further into his duvet, suddenly feeling nicely warm beneath it, even though Zack hadn’t been in them to warm them up first.
He recalled Zack and little Gladiolus, Zack’s amazing speech and the way he dropped down on one knee to correct the little guy’s posture. Cloud smiled at that, and suddenly his earlier comment came back to him.

*Zack would make a great parent.*

For a second the thought was nice, and just as soon as it felt nice, it felt absolutely *awful*.

A parent??

How would he have kids???

Surely with a… a *woman*.

“*Are you… a girl?*” A small but unnervingly deep voice asked and Cloud shuddered.

“I am not!”

Is Zack a girl?

…Well, no.

Then the two of you can’t very well have kids, can you?

Suddenly Cloud felt sick.

Zack would leave him.

For sure he would leave him!

Maybe not now, but later… he’d find a pretty girl, sweet and funny just like him. They’d be the perfect couple, they’d marry, and she’d get pregnant. Zack would have a child of his own… he’d… he’d.

“He’d be a great parent.”

Tears started to well up in Cloud’s eyes, his heart hurting, his throat constricted and tight.

He sobbed, and just as he sobbed he heard footsteps coming down the hall. It was Zack, Cloud knew the way he walked, it was definitely Zack…

For some reason that just made him sob even harder.

When Zack came into the room, he was positively radiating good energy. He was quick to dim it down however when he heard Cloud’s bitter attempt to smother his sobs.

“Cloud?” he asked into the darkness as he closed the door behind them.

Quickly throwing his shirt and shoes off he climbed in bed next to him, but Cloud wouldn’t face his way. He just kept on sobbing, his face hidden by Honey who he was tragically staining with his tears.

Zack started to run his fingers through Cloud’s hair absentmindedly. “Why are you crying Cloudy?” He asked him sweetly, placing a loving kiss on his shoulder just to smother him even more in his love.
Cloud tried to pull himself together, but oh *damn* was it hard. He hiccupped, once twice, and finally he managed. “I’m just… so *happy.*” He lied, and the lie made him cry *ridiculously* harder.

He lied, but it made Zack happy.

Cloud could hear the soft smile spread across his face, and *feel* it when Zack kissed on his neck again. “Me too.” He told him softly.

Oblivious to how his love right then was making Cloud suffer, he hugged Cloud and planted more easy kisses on his neck, right until they fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

yeeeee boooooo! the plot is gonna thicken from now on B)))}
Chapter 8

Cloud was a bundle of nerves.

Today was the day; today Cloud was finally going to have a meeting with vice-captain Genesis.

“Take it easy there sunshine.” Zack mussed as he flicked some dust off of Cloud’s clothes. “Just do it like you did for Angeal. I was there, it was perfect.”

Though Zack tried his best to comfort Cloud, his kind words fell on deaf ears. The poor blonde was jittery and his eyes way too wide. “This is such a big deal Zack! If I… if I screw this up…Agh! I’m going to look like such an idiot!”

Zack threw himself onto the bed, his attempts were courageous, but Cloud was in another place right now. “You’ll do fine.” Zack told him easily. “Just tell him about it casually, that makes it more interesting I think. He doesn’t seem like the type to enjoy formal conversations.”

Cloud gazed at the clock again.

“You’re not bringing any notes are you?”

“Uhhhh.”

“Cloud, you didn’t bring any notes when you talked to Angeal.”

Cloud turned around at that. “Yeah, but what if I forget something important??”

Zack gave him an unamused look. “Did you forget anything when you talked to Angeal? To me? To the guys?”

Cloud cringed and turned away from Zack to look at the clock again.

“Genesis hates notes~” Zack told him with an annoying sing-song voice.

“AUGH!” Cloud said in a fit, suddenly throwing the small cue cards into the air. “I’m going now!” He told him, opening the door and closing it just in time for Zack to say good luck and blow a kiss.
As he marched towards the meeting room, his steps were rather quick to decline in speed along with the heat in his head. As he slowed down, he started to suddenly feel pleasantly blank, not even registering it when he arrived at meeting room A2… perhaps a small explosion had been due to calm him down.

Huh, thanks Zack.

Sitting on the on the floor in front of the door to A2 Cloud could see his thoughts quite nicely, not overwhelmingly there, but just drifting by as if they were not his own.

Quite abruptly though, he was bonked out of this. Rather literally bonked, because the door to A2 quite suddenly opened outwards and hit him harshly on the head.

“What are you doing down there?” an elegant voice laced with sass asked of him.

Cloud looked up, rubbing what was undeniably going to turn into a bump later. “Uhhh.” He uttered dumbly. After all, he was 20 minutes early, why was Genesis already here?

“Get up.” Genesis told him, leaving the boy and turning into the room.

Getting up and following the man, Cloud couldn’t help but fell silly. What was he so nervous about?

He knew Genesis.

“So, it’s been a while, Cloud Strife.” Genesis said as he stood by the table, but then he seemed to look around the room properly and his nose instinctively scrunched up in apparent disgust. “Ugh I hate these rooms, too official and white and… distasteful.”

Woah, distasteful was probably the absolute worst thing Genesis could say about anything. Taste was everything to the man, but wisely Cloud chose to ignore the comment, he knew Genesis would go crazy off track if he did. “It has been a while yes.” He responded, but inwardly cringed a little at how robotic he sounded.

Genesis sized him up for a second before agreeing. “Indeed, linguistics ended quite a while ago, didn’t it?”

“Uh, yes. Yes it did.” Cloud agreed.

“Mm, but that isn’t why we’re here today, now is it? This is something rather exciting, is it not?” He said, a curious glint in his eye as he did. “So by all, means, do tell. All I know is that this is a proposal that should reach the king, with mine and Seph’s approval of course. And that certainly sounds interesting already.”

Cloud almost wanted to roll his eyes at the mans obvious attempt at intimidation. Oddly he didn’t feel very tense, just the expected amount of tense that you feel when Genesis has his eyes on you; if anything, it was rather nostalgic.

“Err, okay, should I just.. start? Oh- yeah okay, so um, I’ve been doing some independent studying on crystal magic for some time now, and mostly I was just curious about how exactly we are able to even be able to use the kings magic. Also, erm.. why us? What makes the crystal react to us in particular? With the resources I had, at the time I had no way of discovering so mostly it’s all speculations. I know that just presenting these kinds of questions and talking about my theories wouldn’t amount to much.” Genesis nodded, and surprisingly didn’t interrupt Cloud. “So I shifted my research into something which I had better ways of actually doing research on, so that you might
see that I’m actually capable. Okay, so the main question was: How much of the Kings magic can we use? There is of course the matter of how much our bodies can handle, and this much I already know. The Royal lineage was obviously born to be a medium for the crystal; this is why they sit on the throne, among many other things. But… I was wondering about summons. There is of course the fact that in our kingdom, the astrals are regarded as heavenly beings that guide us and are to be worshipped. Such it has been for a long time; but it is also an undeniable fact that they are used in battle on the kings side."

Genesis suddenly held his hand up to stop Cloud. “Now, I’m going to stop you here for just a second. But don’t flip out just yet, I just want you to know, you are threading in some very rough waters here. I can kind of see where you’re going with this, and let me tell you, there are reasons why there hasn’t been done much research on the crystal, trust me, I would love to do some poking around myself, but well, to put it bluntly the crystal is the kings territory and the kings territory alone. I know you didn’t mean it in a bad way, but to diminish the position of the king to a medium… let’s just say that you would usually get you in a lot of trouble for that.”

Cloud looked down at the floor at that, he’d tried to be respectful to the king, but obviously that hadn’t gone so well.

“What gives the king power is that fact that he can control this crazy artifact and use it to protect his people, even strengthen them it as he does with his glaives. If it suddenly turned out that we’d be able to do just as much as the king… well, you see where I’m going here? Don’t get me wrong Strife, I’m interested in what you have to say, but…” Suddenly Genesis looked quite tired of speaking, which was by all accounts, truly an odd sight to behold. “Ugh… to hell with all this nonsense! Just continue, proceed!” he told him quite suddenly, waving his arms in an erratic manner to keep Cloud going.

Cloud looked confused. “Ugh, speaking? Sir?”

“Yes damn it!”

Cloud cleared his throat, and proceed he did. “So, uhh, in regards to astrals, we have six. Six of which we refer to as God’s.” But this time, he seemed more to be talking to himself than anything. “Of course, I don’t intend to suggest that we put in research to find out how glaives would be able to summon them. That would almost be considered blasphemous. These astrals are referred to as God’s because they are protectors of Eos, and the strongest Astrals there are. Obviously, the summoning of these is only fit for a king.”

Cloud was quite proud of himself as he spoke of honoring the king, it had only been thanks to Angeal’s pointers that he did so, or else he most likely would have dismissed his honor and position in his presentation entirely. For when living that far away from the Capital and the influence of his Royal Majesty, Cloud simply didn’t hold the king nor his achievements and position in high enough regard. That obviously didn’t go for everyone living near the borders though; Zack for example was beyond loyal and respectful, when they were younger and even now, he’d gush about how cool the king was.

Cloud shook his head, he shouldn’t think about Zack right now.

“However, these are not the only astral beings in existence. Not by a long shot.” He continued.

The statement made Genesis rise his brow in interest, something which was always a good sign with him; this only happened when he was very intrigued. Seeing this made Cloud more than a little
flustered.

"Um, t-the astral plane is a big of mystery, but there are some tales of other beings residing in it beside the six astrals as we know them. In my hometown, many know the story of Odin. A lot of people seem to believe he was a man who lived on earth, but became a heavenly being of folklore after his death, simply a historic tale over exaggerated for the sake of having a good story. This assumption however, is incorrect. According to scriptures, he is indeed an astral."

"I’m sorry." Genesis said, blinking furiously for a second before focusing again. "I’d like to think I know about the astrals, how come you’re telling me this unheard of information all of a sudden? How do you know all this?"

Cloud smiled sheepishly. "Well, it’s not unheard of, just not very well spread." He cleared his throat again. "In Nibelheim, we have quite a few books telling of the Ice Princess Shiva, while most in Nibelheim are not religious in the same way Insomnians are, if we were to have a God, it would be her. However, our books depict several other astrals that are also tied to the north, and in very little detail tells of the astral plane as well."

"It sounds more like you want to do research on astrals then you do the crystal." Genesis disrupted cheekily.

Cloud sighed. "Well, one leads to another, as they say."

Genesis looked amused, but motioned for Cloud to continue.

"Anyways, the books are all in old norse, as that used to be the spoken language many years ago so not a lot of people are able to translate it."

Genesis eyes positively twinkled. "But you are." He stated.

"Uhh, well…"

"Yes." Genesis answered for him.

Cloud scratched the back of his neck meekly. "Yes."

"Marvelous." He told him, the word seemingly covered in glitter as it fell from his tongue.

Cloud cringed, did he really have to use that word?

"What… what I’m trying to get at is essentially that I think it’s possible for glaive’s to form pacts with lower tier astrals and summon them for combat."

"So what would you need to test you theory?"

"Time, most likely a trip to the Nibelheim archives and ice caves, access to withheld information and…"

"Access to the crystal." Genesis finished.

It was rather unnerving how gleeful the man was. "Unheard of. It is quite positively unheard of!!" He laughed then. "My God, your thoughts are ridiculously blasphemous and revolutionizing!!"

Genesis got up from his chair then. "Strife, perhaps you are exactly what this kingdom has been needing, that or you are the craziest student I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. I shall go to Seph right away." He told him, and quite suddenly… he was gone.
Cloud fell onto a chair quite out of breath, and faintly realized that the two had not even managed to take a seat...

~

Apparently, convincing Captain Sephiroth took only a little longer than it did to convince Genesis. A fact that was positively mind blowing.

Some part of Cloud deeply regretted ever starting this whole affair, because wow he was seriously put under a spotlight right now. And as much as he squirmed and cringed, that spotlight definitely wasn’t leaving any time soon.

Cloud didn’t realize Zack’s social endeavors would mean that the whole school was now talking about him. Of course, Zack probably didn’t even think about it, he was just so proud that he couldn’t help but gush over how great Cloud was. But…ugh, Cloud was a little resentful that he was the reason why Cloud was the hot topic on everyone’s lips.

It took a week, a whole week, where apparently Sephiroth had asked for an audience with the king and explained the proposal alongside Genesis. The king had in this time brought it up with his council as well, and now they were summoning him to do a presentation before them.

....

................

PANIC

EVERYONE PANIC.

HOLY HELL.

Cloud was NOT ready for this.

After a horrible moment of hyperventilation and Zack being scared and trying to help him calm down, Cloud now sat on his bed with his head in between his knees, pressed close to his body in an attempt to make him as small as possible.

Zack wasn’t here, he knew Cloud was shook, so shook in fact that Zack’s presence was just as imperceivable as a dust particle. So instead of staying in the room and looking like an annoying fool, he’d checked in on him from the tree outside their window (what a damn convenient tree), and Cloud was still frozen in in the same position! How long had it been now? Two hours??

Finally, Zack had enough and barged into their room.

“We’re going out.” He declared.

With hardened features, Zack dragged Cloud on of his bed, pulled one of his own big black hoodies over Cloud’s head and a black cap just for good measure.

Thankfully, Cloud didn’t protest, just kept his head down and dutifully held Zack’s hand as he walked the two to a pizza place.
As with everywhere in Insomnia, it was a damn expensive pizza place, but here on one of the side streets to the main shopping street, it was surprisingly cheaper and more quiet than a lot of other places.

Zack ordered for them, not even asking the still mute Cloud about his preferences. When the food finally arrived and Zack started eating, still not talking to Cloud, Cloud’s head finally started to clear and make way for a frown.

“Did you bring me here so you could eat on your own?” He asked.

Zack gestured to all three pizza on the table with great graciousness and with a mouth full of food told him. “Go ahead.”

Cloud rolled his eyes and tentatively reached for a slice.

The two ate in silence, Cloud sending his boyfriend odd looks from time to time, not quiet understanding the others method of consolation.

“Do you know why I’m not saying anything?” He asked, Cloud looking up from his food in mild surprise before a frown contorted his face. “It’s cause’ you’re smart Cloud. You know what I’m going to say anyways.” He told him coolly, drinking some soda loudly from a straw right after.

Cloud looked down at that and seeing this Zack turned soft. He put his hand on the table, indicating for Cloud to do the same, which he did after a sigh. When their hands meet, Zack intertwined them, and after giving it a reassuring squeeze and making Cloud look up again, he told him sweetly. “Whatever happens, happens.”

Cloud was quiet for a moment, for some reason, that hadn’t been what he’d expected to hear.

Usually, people would say something along the lines of ‘it’s all gonna work out’ or ‘it’s going to be okay’. This however, this felt much better than any of that.

Whatever happens, happens.

That was nice.

Nice because it was true.

An ambiguous, but undeniable truth. And while that statement was always true and in effect, hearing it under these circumstances felt unbelievably nice.

It was something to hold onto, while the future was a dark and unpredictable and Cloud certainly didn’t know what was going to happen… it was still going to happen. Nothing could change that.

Life goes on, so to speak.

Cloud smiled for the tinniest moment, but then pushed Zack’s hand away. “I’m hungry.” He told him.

Because really, nibbling on a single slice for a complete 20 minutes hadn’t done his stomach any favors. 

~
Two weeks after the pizza night, Cloud found himself sitting on a small pier leading into a laughably small lake. Reeds grew tall on all sides and there was a dimmed chorus of cicadas, croaking frogs, crickets and windblown reeds all around.

With his sunflower straw-hat above his head, Cloud rested while Zack sat in a tiny boat, in this tiny lake, trying to fish up its tiny fish.

“This is going too slow!” Someone declared angrily.

Another softer, more accented voice agreed. “It’s um, low. Your… er, success rate.”

Cloud cracked a smile beneath his hat, this was honestly so hilarious.

It was one of their only days off, and Zack had been asked to take care of Gladiolus. Off course, Zack wasn’t about to spend the whole day training the kid, so he brought him along for his and Cloud’s fishing date.

Apparently, one of Gladiolus’ friends had been interested in coming along, and so Zack was now babysitting not just one, but two kids.

Zack had been apologetic, they hadn’t gone out on a date (pizza thing didn’t really count) in what seemed like ages. Finally, now that the tension in Cloud’s shoulders had more or less dispersed, it seemed the perfect time for some romantic alone-time. And yet, here they were with the kids, kids who weren’t about to be turned into an audience for their pda.

Cloud was happy though, quite relaxed even.

The King had been so enthusiastic about Cloud’s honest desire to research the Crystal and with that didn’t make him feel at ease, nothing would. This was the king! There was absolutely no higher praise than praise from him. With the King on Cloud’s side, all his doors had been opened.

The King was so pleased in fact, that he expressed how he hoped that more students would one day follow in Cloud’s steps and choose a path of knowledgeable pursuit, and the lab Cloud was to work at was being built in preparation for that.

While the kings council were not nearly as enthusiastic as the king (they were all very traditional people after all) they all still agreed that it was a fine initiative for a young man.

Per Genesis instructions and crash course on good presentations, Cloud had drawn a clear focus on what the council had wanted to hear the most out of the presentation.

That is to say, how exactly would this benefit the kingdom?

And while there was of course the matter on blasphemous research, that didn’t seem to matter nearly as much as improving the kingdom did (mainly because Cloud’s endeavors wouldn’t be announced to the public anyways).

When it was obvious that the purpose of Cloud’s research was for the improvement and betterment of the militia, it seemed as if most straightened their backs and looked at each other in agreement.

Things were starting to get rocky between Nifelheim and Lucis, and if Lucis could prepare themselves even more for the very likely war that would happen, then all the better.
Right now, Cloud was just relaxing.

Relaxing because he’d soon get his own space to fiddle and do what he wanted, he’d be alone, he’d have access to files he usually wouldn’t have access to, and even better, he’d be allowed to request permission to go on paid trips to locations in direct connection to his research.

_Score._

But now it was just a matter of waiting, waiting for the lab to finish, and waiting until he had sufficiently enough data on crystal reactions to request permission to go to Nibelheim. And of course, waiting until after graduation (which was thankfully around the corner).

There came some splashing sounds from the lake, and Cloud looked up from the pier to see Zack, Gladiolus and his friend Ignis horsing around.

Well, Zack and Gladiolus were horsing around to be more exact. Little Ignis was just talking about how unwise it was to move and bicker in such a small boat.

Cloud chuckled, that kid was a riot. All shy and cute but trying to use these long intricate words which he usually just ended stumbling all over.

Apparently, the kid came from a family of royal caretakers, and as such, he was tied to the young highness just like Gladiolus was. That was apparently enough common ground to make the two friends, best friends even.

Cloud’s line of thought was abruptly cut off by a loud splash, and after quickly jumping up into a defensive stance, he saw how the boat had flipped and how the boys were flopping in the water.

Thankfully all knew how to swim, even young three-year-old Ignis and as such Cloud merely laughed at how miserable they looked.

After spitting some water out, Ignis soft voice said monotonously. “Fools.”

Cloud just laughed all the more.

With an eased expression of happiness he couldn’t help but smile at the future, somehow it all just told him that there were so many good times ahead.

~

Time passed. And with its passing Cloud saw less and less of his friends and his lover.

He was really quite thankful to the dorms, otherwise he might not have seen them at all.

When the lab had finally been built and Cloud was doing his research, he simply didn’t have time for anything else. Everyday he was testing reactions (mostly on himself, though sometimes genesis would volunteer), seeing how the crystal reacted and so on and so forth. But more than just that along with still taking his classes, he had to periodically send reports of his work to his Royal Majesty and the Captain (vice-captain Genesis of course got a copy too). But as it was becoming obvious that Cloud’s work efficiency was steadily declining (due to intense overwork) the royal council demanded that Cloud stop his studies as a glaive entirely and commit himself solely to the
crystal. Afterall, things were growing more and more tense with Nifelheim, and while a sole glaive could do little good against an entire nation, lower tier astrals certainly would be able to.

This command however, didn’t go over very well with Cloud who had, amidst such patriotic comrades, grown to expect the day in which he’d be able to call himself a glaive. His opposition had been so strong in fact, that he’d even been close to closing this researching deal altogether and going back to being an average glaive.

It was soon apparent however, that due to missing a lot of classes and being unable to do the extra work he always put in, Cloud was now far too behind everyone else. A deep depression overtook him once he realized that all the hard work he’d put into becoming physically stronger and doing techniques to improve his capability in combat…had all been for naught.

Zack had been there for him though, as he always was, and reminded him how his combat ability was still impressive. There was no doubt that he was incredibly strong in comparison to the rest of the human race, but more importantly, stronger than Cloud himself could ever have imagined himself being. And while Cloud would have liked to have been strong compared to a glaive, that obviously would have been a lie, and Zack wasn’t anything but honest.

All seemed to go downhill for Cloud all at once, and nights of crying and self-hate started to become the norm for him. He didn’t even sleep together with Zack, instead he’d gone back to his own bunk and would not even let his lover try to comfort him.

It was amidst this dark spiral, that Angeal seemingly flew down from heaven to make everything better again.

Being the fatherly figure was, it was hard not to feel comfortable in his presence, and yet, Cloud was so far gone, that he didn’t even register the loving yet pitying gazes the man sent his way. They talked for a long time (that is to say, Angeal did most of the talking whilst Cloud nodded or shook his head until he finally began to give verbal answers), eventually Angeal asked him what Cloud had pictured himself as, all those years ago when he’d been depressed about his physical ability. What had been the endgame Cloud? As a glaive?

Cloud had been quiet for a while, but then with tears in his eyes he’d admitted that even back then, he’d known that he’d never be as strong as his comrades, he was smart, and so he knew his physical build could never evolve into something comparable. Cloud was fragile and thin, that was just how he’d been born. And even though he’d put on toned muscle and grown taller, he still couldn’t compare. He told Angeal that begrudgingly, he’d accepted this as a the undeniable truth.

What kept him going back when he was younger, was the thought that he was indeed smart. Smart enough to plan attacks that wouldn’t need him to have nearly as much combat finesse as his friends. Smart enough that he’d develop techniques like his rapid warp technique, that utilize his quick wittedness and made for less upfront close-combat. Another thing that kept him going were his friends and the knowledge that they’d be there to back him up no matter what.

And lastly, it was the fact that despite everything, the crystal had still chosen him. Surely, the crystal wouldn’t have chosen someone inadequate for the job, right?

Angeal had smiled, and somehow, citing all this, had made Cloud believe more in himself all over again. Finally, Cloud was able to feel the warmth of Angeal’s kindness, and slowly he started to feel a little better.

Kindly, Angeal revealed that he didn’t think too much had to change from his image then. Cloud had
blinker at that, unable to comprehend what he meant.

Graduation being just around the corner, Angeal proposed that just as the others were put into units, that Cloud be put into one as well. In Cloud’s unit however, as a constant, there would only be him. He’d be assigned someone to go on missions with him to act as muscle while Cloud could focus on reconnaissance and infiltrating the enemy’s information center to gather and understand as much intel as he possibly could.

Cloud would still be a glaive, Angeal assured him. That would never change.

And just as promised, when graduation day came, he wore the glaive uniform just like all the others, displaying his badge proudly for the world to see. The king had shaken the hand of all the glaives, and with his soft fatherly gaze, he’d moved Cloud to tears (along with many others).

Now they were all glaives, all that rested of course, to be considered capable enough to protect his royal majesty, was two years of missions, city patrols, and fieldwork.

But that was just to protect the king; by all other accounts they were all fully fledged Glaives!!

Now, as if a perfect follow up to his conversation with Angeal, Cloud was assigned Crowe as a partner for his requested research mission to Nibelheim. Crowe had been chosen for having the highest level of crystal magic control, right after Cloud, along with great fighting strength. Because of this, in the setting of this mission which focused on crystal magic, she was deemed the most adequate partner, a partner which could also be used as a volunteer for data collection.

And so it was, that the two headed to Nibelheim together.

Chapter End Notes

Ayy, so what did ya think about that? B) Cloudy is pretty damn impressive isn't he???
:OO

By the way, from now on you'll see the worlds of ffxv and ffvii blending together more and more, so for those of you who have played both games, you're all in for a treat, he he he B))

As a little note, if you think the later half of the chapter (aka. Cloud's depression ) went by too fast and without detail, i am more than willing to put in some dialogue and extra scenes (focusing on Cloud's mental state, as well as the distance he takes to Zack during that period)

The reason i didn't write that segment more detailed, is because i'm pretty sure most of my readers are ffxv fans and are dying to meet prompto and get the show on the road already, so i was unsure if you would all think of it as filler or nah.

Anyways, if there is demand for the extra scenes, i'll definitely oblige, but if not, onwards with the plot!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Hi friends, it's good to see you all again :)  
Sorry, i know its pretty shitty to promise a consistent update day and then not deliver... but well, i've been a bit mentally drained, i hope you all understand :)  
Still, i love this fic and my readers so very much, and i am happy that i could finally get some 'me' time to get this done. Originally, this chapter was supposed to be hella long, but i decided to split it up and post this bit today :)  

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cloud had always known he didn’t have the best of personalities, and somehow, coming back to Nibelheim always reminded him of that. Tifa always reminded him of that.  
Cloud hadn’t been a nice kid, everyone in Nibelheim agreed.  
He’d been nice to his mom and that was it.  
He didn’t have any friends growing up, not because he wouldn’t be able to make any, rather it was because he didn’t want to make any. Cloud liked to be alone above anything else, isolating himself in the never ending white of Nibelheim was indeed one of his greatest pleasures. Paradoxically, Cloud still longed for friendship. He wanted to connect with others, people he could learn to like, because as Cloud realized from a young age, there wasn’t much he liked.  
He wanted friends, but didn’t want them; or at least that’s what Tifa used to tell him.  
Cloud had been surprised, he’d respected her for understanding him as much as she obviously did. Still, while Tifa was the only girl he could talk to, for some reason, in his head he couldn’t label them as friends.  
Friends had to be something more than that, right?  
Being friends was something special, someone you could show your naked soul to, someone that understood you.  
Getting off the bus and feeling the cold mountain air swoop past his body made him remember all of this, and as Cloud always did when he came home, he felt a bitter sweet smile tug at his lips.  
This disappeared soon however, when Crowe’s sounds of obvious awe became one with the howling wind.  
“WOAHHH!” Crowe exclaimed, brown doe eyes blown to even bigger proportions as she saw the never ending landscape before them. The cold wind made her cheeks turn raspberry red, and with the obvious awe in her expression and bundled up in their big grey and fluffy glaive winter uniforms, she look like an adorably blushing baby penguin.  
With a squeak of glee she threw herself head first into the 40 cm thick snow, and honestly, Cloud had to commend her for that, even though it was her first time in the snow, that was pretty wild of
her. She turned around, laughing stupidly as she attempted to make a snow angel.

“Is this your first time with snow?” Cloud asked her, looking at her change of personality with a raised and entertained eyebrow.

Crowe sniggered at that, and with a mischievous grin she gathered some snow in her hands and threw a snowball right in Cloud’s face. Cloud was jokingly offended, this was his turf after all, no way she was gonna beat him in his element and thus commenced a long and intense snowball fight.

Once they were finally way too cold to function, they decided to go into town (Crowe claiming that she definitely won the fight as they walked (though she definitely hadn’t)).

In town, Cloud was met by his mother and several other townspeople that congratulated him on graduating and becoming a glaive. He was happy to see them all again, but as always, his eyes were soft only for his mother, and it was by her side that he stayed whilst attention turned to Crowe. Cloud’s mother had asked who she was, and Cloud had introduced her to the small group of villagers that had gathered around them. Crowe looked decidedly bashful as she was welcomed warmly by all, but her eyes kept darting around, obviously looking for someone in the crowd. It was then that her name was called, and she looked over in the direction just as a way was being paved for the girl making her way over.

In a great hurry, a smiling Tifa quickly approached, and just as she got close enough she did a small sprint and lifted Crowe easily before spinning her around in the air with her, the girls smiling way too fiercely and laughing in each others arms. Setting her down, the girls shared a fierce hug before looking at each other with a heartbreakingly warm gaze. Tifa’s family who had been watching the exchange along with everyone else soon invited Crowe to come over to their house for some cake (although Tifa had yet to tell them that this was Crowe her girlfriend, it was obvious that the two were more than just friends and thus the family had to be properly introduced, they just didn’t think that needed to happen out in the cold and in front of a big part of the townspeople no less.).

Cloud had watched the group go, and as the hype began to dwindle, so did the townspeople, and soon it was just Cloud and his mom left standing in the snow.

Suddenly his mom elbowed him weakly in the side and speaking to him in Icelandic she told him. “I made some glögg for us.”

Cloud looked down, mouth agape at what she had just said, seeing this she winked cheekily.

Cloud loved glögg.

~

Coming back to the house, Cloud and his mother were cozy in front of the living room fire with glögg in their hands. They talked quietly about this and that, but rather quickly, they came to the topic of Tifa and Crowe, wondering how she was settling in with Tifa and her family. Staying on that topic, his mother had inquired about how everything was going with Zack.

Running his thumb along the warm ceramic of his mug, Cloud smiled softly, just the mentioning of his boyfriends name was enough to make him feel more comfortable than any expertly crafted glögg.

“We’re fine.” He responded kindly.
His mother smiled warmly over the rim of her cup. “There is nothing more wonderful than to love and to be loved. I’m happy for you Cloud.” She told him.

For whatever reason though, Cloud felt his stomach drop at that. “Mm.” was all he said to her in reply.

This behavior was quick to make Cloud’s mother frown. “Cloud, look at me.” She told him, and hesitantly Cloud did. “You are loved. There are plenty of reasons to love you.”

But there weren’t.

And yet, she was still right.

If anything, Cloud knew that Zack loved him.

Zack sure as hell made sure he knew.

….

If miracles did exist, this would have been one alright.

~

Surrounded by the of love and grief he felt for his hometown, Cloud was happy to have an academic reason to excuse his need to get away from it all.

It felt terribly nostalgic as he made his way over to the mountain range that was the backyard of Nibelheim. He hadn’t taken many trips to them during his vacations back to Nibelheim over the years, usually opting to stay cozy with his mother and doing things with her.

But now, as he breathed in the impossibly pure air of the mountains, Cloud felt freer than he ever had.

“The air is really different here, huh.” Crowe commented as she scanned the mountain view. “Nothing like polluted Insomnia air.”

Her comment quickly reminded Cloud that he was not alone here, but contrary to his behavior as a child, he was happy to be with someone. And as Cloud lead them forwards, enthusiastically pointing at locations and telling stories and facts, he couldn’t help but wonder what had changed.

When had he changed into this new Cloud?

This Cloud, who preferred to hike with a friend instead of on his lonesome.

This Cloud, who was happy to share his mother’s homemade knekkebrød and brag about it instead of hogging it all to himself.

This Cloud, who could finally think his kindness to be true and honest, and not a fake and convenient façade to seem likeable.

Seeing as he couldn’t possibly give himself the honor of having been his own catalyst for change, he wondered instead, about who else it could have been.
And as it always was, the thought was warm and laced with gentle light. An image of someone who was nothing like him, someone whose skin always was sunkissed and warm, whose smile was as brilliant as a thousand stars and whose hearts was as big and as growing as the universe.

It was interesting how someone else could turn your life around as subtly as Zack had, a change so soft and gradual had occurred in Cloud’s heart from the moment he had met him.

Zack, his other half.

Yet Cloud couldn’t think about that, about him. Not right now.

And while he had a lot of reasons for this, most prominent of all, was the one reason only a dark though could explain.

After all, he just… shouldn’t.

The good thing about Cloud’s brain, Cloud liked to think, was the fact that it was good at concentrating. And whilst Cloud’s train of thoughts usually derailed and crashed on the daily, in this environment, on this mission, it was simple for him to forget all that was irrelevant at the moment.

Cloud hadn’t been to many of the ice caves as a kid, but he did know the locations of a couple. Nevertheless, though most ice caves in the Nibel Mountain range remained unexplored (by anyone at all), Cloud didn’t suppose the rest would be hard to find. It was early on the day, the sun was shining brilliantly from its strikingly clear blue canvas. The mountains were positively glittering with the (not nearly warm enough) sunlight. There weren’t many trees either, and so, with a good with a pair of good binoculars and an already stellar knowledge of the area, it wasn’t hard for the two to locate the caves in which they were to work with.

They used the whole day to look from cave to cave, and seeing no sings off wildlife in them, they deemed them safe for Cloud to work in alone.

That was however, only up until they reached one of the taller mountains that had a rather extensive ice cave at its base. It was deep and it was dark, making a small flame in both their hands, the two started to walked further into to the amazing geological structure. They could see themselves mirrored in the polished ice wall, as well as on the beautifully formed pillars. With the light of their fire, the whole structure revealed to have an unbelievable clear aquamarine color, its radiating light reminding Cloud of the very same light the crystal emitted. Their awed walk came to a full stop however when the two suddenly stood face to face with a huge pack of snow white Nibel wolves.

Crowe gasped, Nibel wolves were a lot bigger than average wolves. Even standing on all four legs, most of their heads reached just below Crowe’s chest.

Just as Crowe got ready to blast them with some fire however, Cloud stopped her.

“You’re going to destroy the cave!” he exclaimed (with good reason). Crowe’s style of attack was excessively destructive, and given free reign she was more then liable to destroy everything in sight with a single blow….as well as cave them in and ultimately kill them along with the data they came here to collect…

Cloud reflected in that back of his mind, that in that sense, she really wasn’t the best candidate to bring to such a delicate research environment.

Just as Cloud figured he would be the one to do most of the fighting due to his rather stealthy and precise style, he suddenly wavered.
Cloud… Cloud had never killed anything before.

Suddenly he felt quite awkward with the blades in his hands, even more so when he looked at the unnervingly passive pack of massive wolves.

“They’re… not attacking.” He muttered, astounded at this information. Nibel wolves were known in Nibelheim as the silent death, mainly because if you encountered one, before you knew it, you’d have your jugular ripped out. They were a quiet, but insanely aggressive race, they killed effectively and flawlessly and as such, it was completely unheard off to stare into their eyes without it being the last thing you saw.

Yet here they were, all staring passively back at Cloud and Crowe.

“We should still attack them before it’s too late.” Crowe whispered. “While you’re the squad captain, I still want to keep my body non-devoured.” She commented.

Her dark humor was not appreciated considering the situation.

“Wait.” Cloud instructed, and while Crowe was certainly jittery and didn’t especially want to wait, she waited.

Cloud stopped standing in battle stance and took on a more relaxed posture, he exhaled deeply and tried to move forward. For whatever reason, the wolves were not tense in the slightest, some were actually beginning to lose interested and took a seat instead.

“I’m freaking out Cloud.” Crowe informed him. “Do not literally walk into the wolves den please.”

Despite Crowe’s very sensible plea, Cloud pressed on, walking further and further into the wolves den. One curious wolf bowed its head and turned to sniff Clouds trembling hand. As the hot air exited the wolf’s nostril and dampened Cloud’s skin, Clouds heartbeat sped up so much that he was quite sure a heart failure was even more eminent than death by wolf’s attack.

Yet, nothing happened.

As Cloud pressed on, he noticed in fact that the wolves were actually making way for him.

Cloud frowned, and as he sheathed his blades he said softly “Stay here Crowe.”

“WHAT?!” she whisper yelled back, her hand trembling with sparkling magic.

Cloud slowly turned his head around. “Trust me.” He said instead.

And perhaps it was the fact that Cloud had never been so confident about anything in his life, or perhaps it was the simple fact that, despite everything, despite the situation, Crowe did trust him.

The fumes coming from her hand seemed to disperse as her shocked expression set in, when Cloud didn’t wave, she turned determined, and nodded in his direction.

“Yes captain” she replied.

While Cloud would have normally smiled at being referred to as captain, in this situation, it was simply impossible.

Cloud turned around again, and making the flame in his hand just a little brighter, he continued down the dark cold path
As Cloud had figured, the more he walked, the more obvious it became that this was not a simple ice cave. Markings soon began to appear on the increasingly narrowing hall of ice, runes and words so faded he could not decipher them. He’d take a proper look at them later, for now though, Cloud was making his way down into the heart of the cave.

Soon he feel the vein-like crystal flow beneath his skin to react. Much like when he was in his very meditative state, he could see them every time he closed his eyes, a vibrant blue coursing around with radiating light.

It was odd however, being suddenly thrust into this very delicate state of mind, and the sensation made him briefly loose control of the flame in his hand. Suddenly darkness enveloped the cave and a sudden misstep made Cloud loose his balance and fall onto the slippery cave floor.

Looking up however, his eyes blinked as he saw the same vein-like pattern he was so used to dimly lighting up the cave walls. Cloud gasped and held his breath, because while this was indeed beautiful beyond comparison, this also raised an unbelievably interesting question.

What did this mean?

As Cloud got up and went deeper he noticed that the veins got thicker and a tad brighter as well, though not by much. Soon he reached the heart of it all, a small dimly lit crystal trapped behind a thick impenetrable glass.

This crystal however, was so different from the one true crystal Cloud had over time grown used to seeing and dealing with. The crystal locked up in his Majesty’s palace was shaped much like a gigantic amethyst geode, and while the light it emitted was certainly blue, the inside of it was not.

This crystal however, Cloud almost wanted to call a crystalized form of the magic and energy that coursed within himself and many others. Moreover, the shape of it was perfectly round, further giving off the impression that this was not a crystal at all. Rather... it was something Cloud felt he could not yet explain.

Cloud reached out towards its pulsating light, his bare palm coming into contact with the ice. Almost disregarding all reason, Cloud concentrated crystal magic into his palm and transformed it into heat, slowly but surely melting the ice that kept him apart from it.

Soon he was able to gently extract it from the wall, but just as his fingertips made contact, he witnessed the vein-patterns along the walls pull back at dramatic speed, all of them rushing back into the crystal. Just as if the core could not live without its roots, with the ‘roots’ now back inside, the crystal now turned brighter, and while complete darkness had now overrun the cave, the crystal gave off a light strong enough to be compared with a well-functioning flashlight.

Cloud slipped down onto the floor, somehow mentally exhausted at such unbelievable an event unfolding so quickly after his return to Nibelheim.

Cloud looked down at his hands, and a small smile graced his lips as he rolled it slightly in his hands.

For the sake of not getting confused (and for later not being accused of blasphemy) Cloud decided that calling the artifact a crystal wouldn’t do.

As he smoothed the clear surface with his thumb, the word ‘materia’ popped into his head.

“Materia” he said softly, barely above a whisper.

The thing seemed to glow just a little brighter in response, and Cloud smiled softly once more.
However, despite such an absurd discovery taking place, and despite how happy Cloud should be… his smile wavered, trembled and then fell. He sighed, and a puff of white mist exited his mouth, reminding him of winter days where he used to feel like a tiny dragon.

Somehow, Cloud could feel himself in a state of awareness unlike anything he has every experienced. He felt himself, and the ice that touched his body despite the layers of clothing separating them. He felt the ice cave continue down its intricate course, and he felt canals in the walls, empty veins where crystal light had once pulsated. He felt the mountain, the footsteps the big Nibel wolves took, and the feel of Crowe’s body sitting tensely against a cave wall. Everything felt connected. He felt dissociated, yet mind-blowingly present all the same.

Above it all, he felt a strange sadness.

For whatever reason, he couldn’t help but feel that he wanted nothing more than to just sit in this cold dark cave, his fingers caressing the smooth orb in his hand and never leaving.

A bittersweet happiness tugged at his heart, and for some reason his eyes strained with an unbearable desire to cry.

Chapter End Notes

So for those of you wondering, i will indeed be adding in the stuff that went 'unwritten' in the last chapter. It was going to be added in as flashbacks in the later part of this chapter, but i am moving them over to the next chapter instead as i think it contextually makes more sense.

Anyways, i hope you guys are enjoying everything, i know i sure am, and let me tell u, i can't wait for future chapters, i am rather proud of where this is going.

sorry for my obvious lack of energy, im a bit tired. i won't promise a new updateday as i don't want to dissapoint anyone, but next chapter is probs coming uóut sometime mid next week as i will have finished my stupid exam by then.

See you guys next chaper! and please tell me what you think about this chapter, its the first step down a ladder of interesting lore merging, haha :P

EDIT: OH! I forgot to add, if people are wondering about nibelheim and if it's a specific Nordic country that is the inspiration, we'll forget it, because I decided that it's just a smoothie of them all. So some spellings and traditions can be German, Norwegian, Icelandic, whatever. I am Nordic myself (live in Denmark) so trust me, I'm not just spitting out bullshit from wikipedia. Glögg and knekkebrød are actual things and they are delicious, look it up! :D
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Omg, I'm so sorry T-T

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Cloud had always know that he was always a tiny speck of dust in the greatness that was the universe.

A tiny, insignificant lifeform that just… was.

One would expect, that coming into contact with an Astral would further drive that philosophy home.

After all, human beings had yet to even understand the existence of superior beings. The concept of it all, was more than a human brain could wrap itself around, even if they believed they did understand.

Cloud wondered, as he felt himself dissociate, whether or not reaching nirvana was to finally understand.

If that was the case, Cloud figure he should start to meditate, for he could not understand what on earth was happening right now.

Despite that, Cloud felt calm, even as he seemingly lost connection to the world and his consciousness drifted into himself.

The last thing he could feel was the crystal energy inside him vibrate in tune with the materia in his hand before the world turned whiter and whiter.

He found himself curiously surrounded by snow, a feminine laughter omnipresent in the universe he found himself in. All around him, the soft laughter seemed to echo in tune with the crystal-like chimes that fluttered in the non-existing wind.

He could hear a something trotting in the snow, and he turned his head to see a grey horse, two times his own size along with an impressive 6 legs.

Atop the horse sat a demonic looking rider, a helmet covered his visage (should he have one) and gave him two long intimidating horns. He looked down upon Cloud with glowing orbs, the color of which the materia he held mirrored perfectly.

“A human.”

Cloud hears, a gruff voice like rusted metal scraping against the floor, spoke in old norse.

Cloud, looking up at the Astral Odin, found himself stupidly smiling.

This was so surreal…
Odin looked away from Cloud and up at one of the faraway mountains where a large full moon was
starting to rise on the pastel blue canvas that was the sky.

Somehow, words were not needed.

Cloud wasn’t sure whether or not this was because of the personality of the Astral Odin, or some
other reason entirely. Yet as the horse started to trot forwards, Cloud following silently, Cloud simply
understood.

Cloud could feel it, feel the confines of this white universe, and he knew that he resided in a universe
that belonged to Odin alone. He reigned here, yet he reigned alone and as such, he did not reign at
all.

Cloud could tell from the Astrals aura that he’d been a king once. The books about him had not
mentioned him as such, but Cloud knew, the same, if not a stronger kingly aura surrounded him and
every step he took.

Odin was a being of legend and power, yet he was a slave to the snow globe that encased him. There
was something which connected Cloud and Odin other than the crystal magic that coursed through
one, and made up the other.

There was a sense of empathy.

Again, whatever thoughts Cloud had, whatever things he felt inside the Astral’s world… he simply
could not understand. It was all so above him, and yet, blue crystal veins inside him tied him to this
place.

To Odin.

As Cloud walked however, he came to realize with a faraway sadness, that no being more lucky than
the other.

All life, even life which could not be understood, suffered.

For to live, is to suffer.

And in the grand scheme of things, everything is useless.

…

…..

Cloud opened his eyes and found himself back inside the ice cave.

All was dark, even the materia in his hand.

Only the trained eye could see the shifting colors within it. As if light was shining from the inside,
yet a thick layer of cloudiness prevented it from escaping.

From somewhere far away, Cloud could hear someone shout just as powerful blast of magic shook
the ground beneath his feet.

Then he heard someone shout his name.

…Crowe!!
Cloud started to sprint, sprint as if his very life depended on it. Which it might as well have been, because this was his friend’s life that was in danger, this was Crowe calling his name.

Cloud ran and ran and ran, but it was never fast enough.

Soon enough he spotted Crowe fighting tooth and nail against all the Nibel Wolves in the cave combined, fire magic lashing around her like an inferno.

She was *ablaze*.

Her beauty when fighting was unparalleled, like a goddess of fire and war she would bring upon destruction on everything in her way.

But the thing was, now, she wasn’t doing that. She wasn't quite living up to the fierce name her comrades had bestowed upon her.

Despite fighting against the biggest threat she had ever faced, she wasn’t going all out.

In the end, it was all because of Cloud. Of course it was.

She knew Cloud was still inside that cave, and she knew, that going all out was going to bury Cloud alive.

Cloud screamed Crowe’s name, but in hindsight, perhaps that had been his fatal mistake.

Crowe had looked up, and for a split moment, their gazes met.

It was unbelievable how a look of absolute relief could overtake ones features in such a flash.

Crowe was relieved that Cloud was alright, that he hadn’t somehow been eaten by a monster wolf in the deepest depths of the cave. Relieved, that putting her faith in Cloud… had been the right choice.

Even more unbelievable, was how fast that expression disappeared.

How fast, this millisecond of a glace, an emotion, morbidly spelled the end.

Crowe was tackled to the icy floor of the cave, the sound of the air leaving her lungs at the impact was the last thing Cloud heard before the most horrific sound echoed amongst the wolves snares.

It was the sound of flesh being ripped apart.

A splatter.

And suddenly steaming blood tainted the polished walls of the ice cave.

Cloud couldn’t see it, couldn’t see what had truly happened at that moment.

That one decisive moment.

But Cloud was from Nibelheim, and he knew what Nibel wolves did.

It was too late.

Cloud…. *Cloud* was too late.

It was, as Cloud feel to his knees, that he couldn’t help but blank.
Too fast.

Was life truly over this fast?

Was there no slow motion that could make this less bearable?

Cloud didn’t even have time to lament his loss, for the longer he sat on his knees, the more Crowe was being… consumed.

It was as if, all of the sudden, his body simply knew what to do.

A bright light enveloped the cave, and Cloud saw himself inside Odin’s universe.

In contrast to when he has first found himself within it, now it was dark and grey, devoid of snow altogether, instead the mountains and the ground alike was made of black rock.

The only thing in this world beside himself and these jagged sharp mountains was the wolf pack and Odin himself.

There was Odin, and there was his target.

From atop the tallest mountain, Cloud watched with blank eyes as Odin’s six-legged horse reared aggressively at the very edge. The full moon was bright against what had turned into a midnight blue sky devoid of stars, turning the horse and rider into a shadowy and demonic being that now stormed its way down the mountain.

In the blink of an eye, the air seemed to part in two.

The very world seemed to part in two.

Zantetsuken.

Suddenly, all the wolves split in half and morbidly slid apart to make a river of blood flow.

There was another bright light, and cloud saw that this very river of blood now flowed fast towards him, down into the heart of the mountain once more.

Cloud rushed towards the pile of dead animals, and removed with great effort those that lay above Crowe.

At this point, Cloud’s feelings finally condensed into one big emotion. One that overtook his whole body, making his hands shake, his eyes water, and his knees weak.

Despair.

Despair had taken a deathly grip on his heart.

This couldn’t be true.

“This cannot be true.”

Crowe shrugged.

“Are you for real?!?”

Hesitantly, she nodded.
“OH my GOD!” Cloud exclaimed, suddenly bursting into laughter.

“Kenny the Crowe? More like Crowe the Crowe?” Cloud joked, wheezing as he tried to catch his breath.

Of course, Crowe had punched him for that.

“Hardy har, very funny you big chocobo baby.”

Cloud would have normally been offended, but this was just too funny, so he could overlook the chocobo comment that he begun to loathe.

“Seriously though, why are you working there?” He asked once he’d gotten a hold of himself.

Crowe sighed. “Lost a bet.”

Cloud cackled; absolutely cackled. Crowe looked amused at that, after all, getting Cloud to laugh this much was quite rare.

Cloud was literally wiping the tears from his eyes when he asked who the bet had been against.

“Nyx of course. The bet was only to last there for a week, but…”

Crowe surprisingly trailed off, looking strangely embarrassed.

“But what?” Cloud asked, most of the mirth now under control again, yet ready to overtake him on a moments notice should Crowe continue down her streak of hilarity.

“To be honest, it’s kind of fun?” Crowe said, clearly not understanding her sentiment herself. “I honestly don’t get it.” She admitted.

“So you’re still working there?” Cloud asked, surprise evident in his voice. This wasn’t what he’d expected to hear.

“Well, yeah. And I mean, making an extra penny for when I move in an apartment with Tifa is never a bad thing, you know.”

Cloud was just smiling, smiling because that was so cute. So unbelievably cute.

Crowe smiled as well, but per Crowe attitude, she of course hit him in the shoulder. “Don’t you dare tell the guys I’m still working there.”

Cloud laughed. “I won’t.” he promised. Then he snorted, he just couldn’t take it. “Can you, pft! Can you say the motto?”

Crowe grinned mischievously, “CAW kids! It’s Kenny Crow!” she suddenly cried.

And just like that, the two were hollering in laughter.

Cloud’s body, probably due to the immense toll the summoning of Odin had taken on him, was shaking like a leaf.

Cloud was weakened, both mentally as well as physically, and nothing was ever going to be okay again.
Even cut in half with liters of blood gone down the floor, the wolves were heavy beyond anything Cloud could have imagined.

Yet he kept on, hot tears made his vision blurry, and his head was starting to hurt beyond compare, but Cloud kept on calling Crowe’s name.

“Crowe.”

“Crowe.”

“Ugh, Crowee.”

“Goddamnit, come one Crowe!”

“Will you call down Blondie? I’m having a good time with my book here. Don’t you see?”

“When will you be done??” Cloud whined.

She looked up from her book, clearly unimpressed. “Why?”

All of a sudden, Cloud looked quite shy. “Umm, it’s uhh, it’s valentines day soon and I was wondering if…”

“If what Cloud?” she asked impatiently.

“Well… Since you read so many romance books, and you know, have a girlfriend. I was wondering if you could give me some ideas on how to celebrate valentines… with Zack. We haven’t really, done that yet.”

Crowe rolled her eyes, “You could literally give the guy a rock as a present and he’d call it a precious gem and treasure it for the rest of his life.” Cloud pouted at her, clearly not satisfied.

Crowe sighed at that, running a hand through her hair before closing her book. “I mean, sure, ideas. Ummm, how about you wrap yourself in some red giftwrap and lay on your bed or something with some chocolates, roses, the whole shebang.”

Cloud was getting tired of her shit and wacked her on the head with a pillow to showcase the sentiment.

She just laughed at that, her hair suddenly a lot messier than before.

“You want some advice? Just treasure each other. This goes for all relationships out there, whatever type. Treasure each other while you can.”

“While you can? Don’t be so morbid.” Cloud complained.

“I’m always a little morbid.” She said with a wink.

Finally, Cloud was able to remove the Wolves enough so that he could see Crowe’s face.

A horrific sob erupted from inside of Cloud as he saw her face.
It was Crowe, the one and only Crowe he knew.

Pale with splatters of blood tainting her face.

He pressed his forehead to hers, and felt how the heat beneath her skin faded and turned to ice.

While her forehead was nice and warm and soft, Cloud wasn’t happy, because he knew his own was cold and clammy with sweat and there was no way Crowe was liking the feel of that.

“I didn’t even know it was possible to get physically sick by being mentally sick.” She commented, her words surprisingly without its usual edge. “I guess that’s a feat in its own stupid way.” She said with a wry smile. Then she pulled away, making Cloud shiver and freeze again. “But yeah, you’re definitely feverish. We have to get you some medicine asap.”

Cloud merely tugged his bedsheets closer and looked away from her. He hadn’t talked for such a long time, he was even unsure of how his voice sounded at this point. He only cried these days.

Nothing worked, and time just passed, Cloud getting more sickly by the minute.

Honestly, Cloud didn’t even know what he was doing.

He should be fighting shouldn’t he?

But fighting for what?

Some part of him couldn’t even remember how he’d fallen into this endless hole, and he scorned himself further for that.

The worst part was of course the distance that grew between him and Zack.

He’d been patient at first, trying his best to get Cloud up and running again, gentle words and pats on the back, one sided hugs and cheek kisses. When this continued and nothing happened, he’d gotten angry, and a one-sided fight broke out almost every night.

For a long time, Zack refused to sleep in their room together, telling Cloud to pull himself together every time he took his pillow and duvet with him to the common room to sleep.

Then, with how much Cloud started to neglect his health, Zack got worried. He even started to apologize, even though he obviously had nothing to apologize for.

Cloud hated himself for making Zack do that, yet still, he remained unresponsive.

One night, Cloud had been whimpering feverishly, trashing around in his bed with a cold sweat and a weakened body. He hadn’t eaten almost anything that day, hadn’t even gotten up from his bed, it was as if he was slowly dying.

That night, for the first time, Cloud had heard Zack crying.

The sound made something shatter inside Cloud’s heart, tears streamed down his own face as he listened to his lover cry.
Yet despite it all, once more, nothing changed.

The next day, Cloud didn’t see Zack at all.

Instead, Crowe had moved in.

She checked his temperature, force-fed him meds and porridge, made sure he drank water, opened the windows periodically and took down the window covers at night and then… she talked.

She talked a lot.

She talked about the book she was reading, about a movie she had watched, about some thoughts she’d had, about she’d had for dinner and breakfast. She just… talked.

Yet she never mentioned anything about the glaives, about the state of the world, the looming war, their friends… all she talked about were silly everyday things, stories that had nothing to do with the lives they led.

Crowe was clever like that.

Eventually, Cloud wasn’t sick anymore, he wasn’t happy, nor was he talking but something had cleared.

Somehow, Crowe convinced Cloud of taking a walk in the park that day. She properly dressed him in a thick hoodie, sunglasses and a hat so that he was shielded against the strong winter sun, his lack of UV exposure was frightening, and she had to make sure he got some vitamin D one way or another.

It wasn’t a very beautiful walk, after all, the trees were all bare and Insomnia had no snow to beautify them with. But still, it was nice.

“I believe in you Cloud, despite everything I always have. You’re gonna get through this.” She’d told him, setting her own gloved hand atop of Cloud’s and giving it a gentle squeeze.

“Everything passes.”

Cloud took Crowe’s hand in his and wailed.

He wailed so fiercely that the sound carried solemnly all across the Nibelheim mountain range.

A horrible sound of grief and sorrow howled in the mercilessly cold wind.

To live is to suffer.

Crowe was dead.
And Cloud had killed her.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: this chapter was written at a Starbucks in between a morning of school work, and a night of actual work work. Also I was running on nothing but a brownie and a pumpkin spice latte. Lmao what is life.

Okay, so there was an awesome comment last chapter that theorized that fenrir had been found, because of the wolves and whatnot. GOOD SUGGESTION: and... you're kinda right? though not really, lol (will be elaborated upon in the next chapter)
But just to make things very clear, nothing from advent children is going to be featured in this fic and I do believe fenrir is first introduced there? I could be wrong tho.
Also, fenrir isn't a summon in either xv or vii, and i am limiting lower-tier astrals into being actual summons from those games.

Please leave a comment telling me what you think, i'm dying (pun intended(god, i am RUDE)) to know ^.^
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Can i get a whoop-whoop for my awesome 97 subscribers??  
WHOOP_WHOOPPPPPPPPP!

I always like looking at my fic subscriber stats the most, mainly because you guys are the first ones to see my chapters! You guys actually want to get notifications for when there's new stuff and that is honestly so freaking flattering omg♡♡♡

Of course, there is now also a shit ton of Kudos and Comments, thank you so much for those! But most importantly, it is so so nice to see what you guys think after each chapter in the form of comments, makes me so dang happy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Perhaps the strangest thing about a traumatic experience, is the fact that the world still goes on. The skies didn’t come crashing down, nor did Cloud perish in his own grief even though it had all seemed so eminent that it would. It was interesting, that despite what had just transpired, that Cloud was still able to properly function.

He wondered how it was possible, through all this pain, to still be able to contact Captain Sephiroth and relay the information. Perhaps it was due to practice, after all, he had been sending short progress reports every hour ever since he came to Nibelheim, even a short “nothing to report” still a mandatory requirement.

Truthfully, Cloud loathed himself simply for having the ability to send his report this time around.

His strength had returned, and with it some clarity over the situation. A strange and cynical clarity that felt far too clean, almost as if all feelings had been purposefully wiped off with a disinfectant cloth and now his insides seemed to reek with potent sterility.

With the return of Cloud’s strength, he’d been able to push the wolf corpses further away from Crowe. He’d made a spot for himself beside her and had placed her head in his lap, his frozen tear stained face impossibly blank as he stroked the hair of his deceased friend.

With a surprisingly calm voice, he’d contacted the Captain, the words “comrade fallen in battle” came out hoarse due to the crying and wailing he’d done some moments ago, so hoarse it was that it was almost an inaudible whisper. Still the words seemed to echo loudly throughout the cave, bouncing around and growing in volume like a wicked curse.

Cloud had wondered, as he stroked Crowe’s unbelievably soft and fine hair, about what would happen now.

The Captain had told him to stay put inside the cave and wait for the help that was surely on its way. But what about after that?

Would Cloud fall into despair once more?

Would his friends leave him?
Would he lose his job as a glaive?

And what about the materia? What about this ginormous discovery that could without a doubt turn the tides of the looming war?

In the face of what had just happened, all these questions seemed terribly irrelevant.

Instead he thought of memories with Crowe, and as he did, for some odd reason a small smile started to play on his lips.

Far off, a part of him concluded that people truly do react differently in the face off trauma and that a tiny smile, despite the situation, might just be a way for him to cope without losing his sanity. It was a reasonable assumption, yet another far off part of him concluded instead that the lack of a more prolonged dramatic grief was due to not being even remotely deserving of shedding a tear for a death that he’d caused himself. A more naïve part, concluded instead that perhaps Cloud had already used up his tear glands to an irreparable degree and his body simply didn’t allow him any more grief.

Mostly though, Cloud didn’t think at all. He just thought about Crowe.

Thought about the times they’d shared, and the wise words she’d sometimes bestowed upon him. Somehow, despite her younger age, the woman had seemed the wisest and most experienced of all his friends.

Cloud looked down upon her face, and in it he could still see the traces of relief she’d had the moment she had laid her eyes on Cloud. Somehow, while the rest of her body had been torn, eaten and mutilated, her face remained spotless and perfect. She was without a doubt, a most serene picture of someone who’d gone to sleep relieved and relaxed.

“Everything passes” Her voice seemed to echo inside his head, and as he turned to stroke her cheek, a silent and final burning tear rolled down his face.

He almost believed her.

~

The problem with finally coming to terms with one’s own trauma, is the simple fact that this victory had absolutely nothing to do with how the outside world reacted.

While Crowe was such an incredible being that she’d somehow nursed Cloud into moving on even after she’d perished, the rest of the world was not nearly as kind.

There were of course people that worried about Cloud’s safety above everything else. These people mainly being his mother and the villagers in Nibelheim who hadn’t gotten to properly know Crowe.

But then there were those who did know Crowe.

Tifa for example.

At first, she’d been far too busy to spare Cloud even a glance. She’d been a rollercoaster of anger and grief that rampaged through the town whenever she wasn’t mourning and holding the cold hand of her deceased lover.
Come night however, Cloud had been nothing less than abducted by her.

She had dragged him silently into the snowfields, and Cloud had let her, out in the vast snowfields while the villagers slept, she’d beaten Cloud to a pulp. Cloud didn’t resist in the slightest, he was actually quite content to let her. Perhaps he thought he’d feel better afterwards, since his consciousness strangely wasn’t strangling him from the inside out, perhaps some outside pain would bring him closer to a warped sense of redemption.

And yet, as Cloud lay in the snow, broken nose, rib, arm, as well as countless bruises, staring up at the moon above, he could do naught do let out a bitter chuckle.

The moon was full and white and it shone its light passively upon the snow, tainted only by the red splatters of Cloud’s steaming blood.

Pathetic, a voice sounded, familiarly hoarse yet feminine, he hadn’t bled nearly as much as Crowe had. She was one step above him, as per usual. He could almost taste the smugness.

And that was a little entertaining.

~

Crowe had been burned to ashes in Nibelheim to make transportation back to the capital easier, and that was more than a little morbid when you thought about it. To think, that you could see someone leave, smug comments and all, just to return in an urn.

“I’m always a little morbid.”

Cloud chuckled.

What an idiot.

Crowe had no family, the closest thing to a family were the boys she’d grown up with: Nyx and Libertus. As such, it was decided that Cloud bring her back home to them.

Cloud figured his friends had already been told, or at least he hoped that was the case, for he feared immensely that he wouldn’t be able to properly tell them what had happened. After all, no matter if Cloud came back crying and grieving, or depressed or even resolved, the end result would be the same.

Cloud was going to lose his friends.

Thinking clearly, he probably wouldn’t lose Zack. Zack loved him far too much for that, Cloud knew as much, it was not boasting nor baseless confidence. Cloud didn’t have confidence, the fact that Zack would stay by his side was merely a fact of life. A beautiful, unbelievable fact of life. Nevertheless, the death of Crowe would still affect their relationship; a strain would grow between them and they probably would never be able to go back to what they had been. And it made sense, after all, Zack had loved Crowe just as much as all the others had.

As Cloud ran his thumb across the urn, he couldn’t help but think that he should truly treasure these
last moments he had with Crowe. As soon as he arrived, they would undoubtedly take her away from him, probably do a ceremony without his presence and proceed to ignore or loathe him until the rest of eternity.

And Cloud understood. Understood their reasoning, their hatred and their grief.

Cloud’s fingers gripped the urn tighter; he understood *perfectly*.

~

Cloud couldn’t figure it out.

Was it due to Crowe’s death that he had evolved so?

As Libertus had torn the urn from his hands without letting him say even a single word in defense and protest, he didn’t feel affected in the slightest.

Maybe it was because he’d expected as much.

All the despicable words Libertus threw his way, the way he pushed him into the wall with an unimaginable force and yelled in his face… he knew that would happen.

But oddly, despite being told from all sides that it was all his fault, Cloud somehow believed that he was not the one to blame.

Was it the memory of Crowe and all she stood for, that simply forced Cloud to believe this?

Or was it something else?

To be honest, Cloud didn’t know.

The only thing he could reason, was that the Crowe inside his heart still lived on, and however cheesy that might have been, he couldn’t help but think that it was indeed her that kept on shouting words of comfort. Her reassurance pumping out from his heart and into the rest of his system.

It kept him alive.

It kept him breathing.

~

As predicted, Cloud did indeed loose his friends.

Every. Last. One of them.

But then there was Zack.

There was always Zack.
The one and only constant in his world.

Zack, the pillar that refused to budge no matter what.

The amazing thing about Zack, was that while Cloud knew Zack wouldn’t leave him, he still managed to surprise Cloud in the way that he stayed by his side.

Zack did not project his anger on Cloud.

Never did he blame him when he surely could have.

No strain grew between them, for there was no malice whatsoever. There were no fake smiles or a crackling mask barely held together above torn insides.

Cloud almost felt ridiculous for even thinking Zack capable of such.

Zack was Zack, and Zack was nothing if not honest.

He was grief stricken though. He turned silent and small and fragile in his grieving, and he put his naked and wounded heart in the hands of Cloud; the one all else loathed for what had happened.

Zack mourned holding Cloud’s hand, or with his head in Cloud’s lap as Cloud stroked his hair, or curled up together in bed while cold freezing rain fell outside.

And somehow, through Zack’s sadness, Cloud felt himself turning human again, his emotions finally catching up with what had happened.

Cloud felt his heart beat once more, but he could feel how raw it was, how damaged and weak it had become.

Despite the pain, the two healed together, their love for each and other and for Crowe was all they needed. Their love healed like a burning ointment, but one that healed unlike anything else.

In the dark, beneath covers that shielded them from the rest of the world, Cloud was finally able to whisper out sentences that felt like throwing up needles one by one.

“It was all my fault.”

“No it wasn’t.”

“She shouldn’t have trusted me.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I shouldn’t have called her name.”
"You couldn’t have known."

"…"

"……"

“She... called me Captain.”

“Did she?”

“Yeah.”

"..."

“That must have been nice.”

“…"

“It was.”

“……”

"……"

“I miss her.”

“…..”
“Do you miss her too?“

“…. I do.”

“…”

“She looked like she was sleeping.”

“Did she?”

“..Yeah.”

"She did."

~

sobs were muted pretty well beneath duvets

~
Zack was amazing.

The rest of the world however, was not.

Cloud still didn’t blame it though, he could still understand it all. In fact, the one he had a harder time understanding was Zack when it came to that.

Cloud was sad, but at the same time, he knew he could expect no less of the people around him. Thus he accepted it.

However, Zack having returned from his fragile state of grief did not accept this. Once more, he turned protective of Cloud. He knew that Cloud was being bullied and hated, and Zack started to burn in anger at the treatment his boyfriend was receiving.

Cloud had calmed him down every time, but Zack soon announced that he couldn’t take it anymore. Effectively, Zack lost all his friends as well and Cloud would have been sad about that, but Zack didn’t let him.

Lamely, Zack proposed the two move into a house together instead. For while Cloud did indeed encounter other glaives who harassed him on patrols, it was always worse in the dorms, there he couldn’t even leave his room. And at least if he stayed away from that environment, Zack was less viable to start fights.

Zack had been embarrassed, saying how he would have liked to suggest they move together on a happier, more romantic, note.

Cloud smiled, and although his smile did not contain as much sunniness as it used too, it was still genuine. He had kissed Zack lovingly and agreed.

~

Thankfully, Cloud and Zack hadn’t been big spenders throughout their education and thus they could afford a rather nice house.

Both had agreed on a suburban house and not a trendy apartment in the city, after all, both wanted a garden, and Zack wanted a dog at some point in the future.

They found a perfect little place, a house that wasn’t too close to a school, yet neither was it populated entirely by old people. After but a single silly day of shopping for furniture they were moving their stuff into their new house.

It had been a tragically cloudy day on the day that they moved, but as Cloud and Zack transported the silly floral second hand sofa they’d bought online into the garden, the sun suddenly decided to show its face.

Zack had pulled the both of them down onto the sofa and stretched his legs as he put an arm around Cloud.

With his eyes closed and the sun shining upon his lovely face, he began to sing:
“Here comes the sun~” he began, his face breaking into a smile as Cloud snorted cutely and poked him in the side for how stupid he was being.

“Here comes the sun~” Zack continued, then, busting one eye open to glance at Cloud he sang cheekily, “And I say~” His gaze demanding cutely that Cloud sing along with him.

Cloud giggled. “It’s alright~” he supplied.

Zack’s smile turned impossibly wide as he did a horrible rendition of the tune that followed before continuing the song “Little darling, it’s been a long cold lonely winter~”

And it was absolutely mind boggling how such a sweet simple song could describe their situation so perfectly. Indeed, what a long, cold and lonely winter it had been.

Cloud’s long winded depression, the distance that had grown between him in Zack during that time, Crowe’s tragic death and Cloud’s and Zack’s exclusion from their group of friends and trusting comrades.

“Little darling, it feels like years since it’s been here~”

Yet despite how meaningful the tune truly was, Cloud couldn’t even spare enough brain power to think about that.

All Cloud could see was the brilliant smile in front of him, those glittering eyes that turned into a wonderful festival of color in the sunlight and all Cloud could think about was living together in this house, with this man, who made him so unbearably happy.

And Cloud felt so blessed, blessed that he could think like that at all. Focus on the future, on the small things in life, and on his own happiness.

“Here comes the sun~” Zack continued.

“Here comes the sun~” Cloud supplied in between his cheek aching giggles.

“And I say~”

“It’s alright!” The two finished, Zack exclaiming fiercely while Cloud purposefully did it in an awful baritone.

Both started laughing happily beneath the sun, and it was suddenly as if he was finally, properly, feeling warm again.

The winter frost was starting to thaw, and flowers were starting to bloom again.

Despite it all,

Spring had arrived.

Chapter End Notes
Calm before the storm, as they say.

.... lol, i am one mean motherfucker, get ready guys. Btw, there are hints of future plot development in this chapter, let's see if anyone can pick it up!

Oh! also, check out my profile for some newly added info :D if you feel like it of course ^3^
Chapter Notes

Omggggg, literally why haven't I updated in so long??? I know, i hate me too. But I've been busy making huge life decisions and I am happy and scared and busy! But honestly, I needed a little brake, and there is absolutely nothing more fun than writing this fic for you guys, and omg we're getting to the good stuff now!! AHHHHH. Okay, calm down, let's all just enjoy this chapter. Next ch. is gonna be out soon as well, because I'm on a roll baby!! Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a nice evening, or well, as nice an evening as a night shift could possible get. It had been peaceful though and that was really all Cloud could ask for. There was about 1 hour left and there had been no scowling glaives (which was thankfully becoming rare as time passed), nor any pitying gaze of superiors who would whisper among each other once they’d passed him. In fact, Cloud hadn’t seen anyone at all.

Cloud had stopped coming to the crystal lab, as it had been dubbed, but because of his previous role, everyone knew him. And worse, after coming home and not presenting any results of significance, he’d become even more famous. Known for being a major failure, and consequently, something to jab the king for. After all, they had invested quite a lot in him, only to regret it after the very first field mission. He was a disgrace.

And yet, time had its magical way of working out most knots, but just as Cloud thought himself living the life of an average glaive, footsteps echoed atop granite floor.

There was just something about those footsteps, a cold precision and calculation that just indicated instantly who it was that approached.

Suddenly, the silver commander himself stood before Cloud.

“Cadet Strife.” He greeted, and Cloud saluted back.

“Sir!”

“At ease.” He said easily, scrutinizing Cloud’s body with his green cat-like eyes. There was something about how he regarded Cloud, it was almost seemed as if he didn’t understand quite what he was seeing, his wandering gaze searching for something to make sense out of Cloud.

Honestly, Cloud felt it was a little rude, even if General Sephiroth was his commander.

“Haven’t seen you in a while.” He commented, and Cloud was glad he’d been trained to maintain an impeccable pokerface, because he wasn’t under the impression the commander was one for small talk, and was more than a little confused at the strange approach.

Cloud, not knowing how to reply, kept silent.

The commander brought a long slender finger beneath Cloud’s chin, tilting the head up a little
Cloud gulped, his nervousness now finally cracking through.

Apparently, the commander enjoyed that, and the corner of his lips quirked the slightest. “I wonder about you Strife, your mind works in interesting ways.” He said, and he did look honestly interested, Cloud didn’t know why though. He couldn’t help but find his superior very cryptic and uncomfortable at that moment.

Then, the minimal pressure from his finger disappeared, “Keep up the good work.” He’d then said, and before Cloud knew it, the commander had strolled away. Disappearing just as fast as he’d appeared.

~

Little by little, like a bad omen, the encounter with the commander gently broke Cloud out from his small reverie of normalcy.

“Have you been hearing the rumors going around the palace?” Zack had asked as he worked on a vegetable stir fry by the stove.

Cloud groaned from where his face was smushed against the wooden dinner table. He was hungry, he was tired, and he really didn’t want to talk about work.

Yet, apparently, Cloud’s non-verbal reply was more than enough for Zack to continue. “It’s weird Cloudy, all the officials seem so rushed and hushed. It’s giving me a bad feeling… kinda feels like the rumors might be true.” He said depressingly.

“Zack.” Cloud said into the table.

“Yes dear?” Zack retorted without missing a beat.

“Can we not talk about this in our house? Our house is sacred. Not to be tainted with political bullshit.”

“Ohoh! Cloudy bringing out the swearwords! I guess I gotta keep my mouth shut if it’s like that.”

Then, finally, Zack placed two plates of food down on the table, effectively resurrecting Cloud from the dead.

“Dig in.” Zack told him, which he honestly didn’t even need too, Cloud was already wolfing down food as if he hadn’t eaten in years.

“But I mean, we can’t talk about stuff like this at work cause’ we can’t really talk at all at work. So when can we talk about this?” Zack prodded again, making Cloud groan once more. “I know it’s an annoying topic but… well, it affects our lives Cloud. A lot.” Zack said, sounding more than just a little depressed.

Zack was so lost in the topic that he hadn’t even moved to grab the cutlery yet, and suddenly his still hand looked quite lonely. Cloud decided to put his free hand on top of Zack’s in a show of comfort and drawing in a breath he said.
“You know I’m a pessimist Zack. Do you really want to talk to me about this?” the he huffed, bringing another forkful food into his mouth. “I wouldn’t want to talk to me about it.”

“Well, maybe I need someone to bring my optimism down to realistic levels.” He tried, a sheepish smile on his face as he moved his hand to intertwine them instead.

Cloud couldn’t believe it, had Zack forgotten the food entirely?

Ugh, he supposed this was more pressing though. So with a sigh he began.

“I think the war is just around the corner.” He told him. “Honestly, I’m surprised it hasn’t broken out yet, with the way the Emperor has been taunting the nation in his recent speeches. It’s a miracle nothing’s happened yet, a miracle we owe to the impressive patience of his majesty and the sturdiness of the wall.” Feeling bitter, Cloud put down his fork, suddenly losing all appetite.

“You think we’ll be sent out?” Zack asked, his gaze resting on their joined hands.

“Can’t say… Though I know this, something’s gonna happen soon. I can tell, it feels vile, right in the pit of my stomach.”

Zack gave Cloud a lazy beautiful smile. “Was my food really that bad?” He asked cutely.

Cloud rolled his eyes fondly and released Zack’s hand, turning back to his food despite not feeling all that hungry anymore.

~

And so it was that the most strangest possible thing happened.

Cloud was summoned before the king.

It was in a conference room no less. In fact, it was in the very same conference room in which Cloud used to relay his findings regarding the crystal research he conducted.

It was odd, sitting there before the king without any proper reason for meeting. Or at least, Cloud couldn’t see why the king would meet with him, seeing as Cloud has more or less been relieved of his scientific duties.

“My boy, it is good to see you again.” He started, and Cloud couldn’t help but feel undeserving of the king’s casual fatherly speech. The king laughed then, apparently sensing Cloud’s discomfort. “Though I suppose you are a boy no longer, as with all the others from your grade. Time really flies… I. would like to apologize for not reaching out after your mission, incidents that grave are so rare during a glaive’s trial years… I am sure you must have suffered in more ways than one as a result from it.”

Then the king smiled sadly. “Unfortunately, I am not so kind a king as to having the time to reach out to glaive with such a reason. I am afraid my advisors would scold me quite a deal if I did, and so I must admit that I wanted to meet you for other reasons.”

Cloud nodded, of course he understood. He’d find it weird if the king did contact him just to tell him that, after all this time no less.
The King straightened then, and Cloud took that as a clue that they were now going into official matters.

“You must have sensed that the relations between our nation and the emperor has grown… well, unstable to say the least.”

Unstable was a kind way of putting it, Cloud couldn’t help but think.

“As a result, I have been much less concerned with preventing a war from happening, and instead have been trying to figure out how and when they will first strike.”

Wow, so here it was, confirmation from the King himself, the war really was just about to happen.

“You are a smart boy, I’m sure you know that the war has always been unavoidable. Moreover, I have the feeling you and I might have a similar opinion as to how the emperor might first strike.”

The King paused then, obviously waiting for Cloud to say what he was thinking. And so Cloud did.

“Magitek” Cloud said, the words feeling awful on his tongue.

The king nodded gravely. “For years, the wall and the magic from the crystal has protected us, but the science department in the empire works horrifically fast, and we fear that they might be working on something quite grand. Or so the confidence of Emperor Iedolas would suggest.” The king added the last statement not without spite, the emperor really had been throwing some rather disrespectful terms around in his speeches lately and even the King’s seemingly endless patience couldn’t quite hold up to it.

“Intel tells me that a magitek lab has been discovered, very well hidden in the snow fields of Nifelheim, close to the border. Close to…Nibelheim, your home town as I’ve been told.”

Cloud gasped. He couldn’t believe it, and yet, the more he thought about it, the more it made sense? After all, who would expect a lab that close to the enemy country??

“I know this is a lot to ask of you Cloud Strife, considering what you have been through as well as the experience you are lacking. And yet, I find that there truly might be none other than you fitting for this role.”

Cloud was shooked, and his expression did not betray his feelings. He looked like he wanted to stop the king, but out of sheer politeness hadn’t interrupted him yet.

The king noticed of course, and smiled kindly at Cloud.

“My boy, I am sure you think you have failed your first mission. And yet, I have read the mission report that the commander gave me, have talked with the commander himself and most importantly of all, I have met you, several times. I have grown to trust you Cloud Strife, and despite your own conception of how the Nibelheim field mission turned out, I do not regard it as a failure on your part. There was nothing you could have done.”
“I still regard you as one of the most brilliant and revolutionary minds I have met, and I still want to encourage you to continue to study the crystal, the astrals, magic and all the other topics of mystery that exist in our world.”

Cloud looked down at his lap, his fist clenched tight as he tried to hold back tears.

“You’re being assigned to a mission with Glaive Zack Fair as your support.” The king said then, and Cloud looked up fast as he heard that. “Nothing is able to keep us quite as safe the ones we hold dear.” He said kindly, but not without a knowing glint in his eye. “I leave the mission details to the commander, who you will be meeting with tomorrow. I imagine you will receive an email with the time and location, so keep your eyes peeled for that.”

Then the king left, but not without resting his hand on Cloud’s shoulder for a brief second.

~

Zack was busy training Gladiolus when Cloud stormed into the gym.

“Intruder!” Gladiolus exclaimed, impressively fast to get into a defensive stand once he’d turned in Cloud’s direction.

“Cloud?” Zack asked instead, putting the large wooden sword on the ground as he saw Cloud storming towards him.

Once reaching Zack, Cloud strongly grabbed Zack shoulders and stared with wide eyes into the other’s soul.

“HAVE YOU HEARD?” he asked into his face, eyes as wide as platters.

Zack winced at the strength in Cloud’s fingers.

“Oooh~ your boyfriend is maad~~” Gladiolus chanted in the background.

“Heard what?” he asked, taking Cloud’s hands off his shoulders. “Geez Cloud, you’re scaring me? What’s going on?”

Cloud walked in circles, quite crazed and ran his fingers through his messy spikes.

“We’re going on a mission Zack.” Cloud explained, still walking in circles.

“What?! No way! Finally!!” Zack exclaimed, already jogging over to Cloud to hug him. “Mann, I’m one of the last ones to get to go on a mission. And I blame training you for that little man.” Zack said, giving Gladiolus a pointed stare. Gladiolus just stuck his tongue out in response. Then Zack turned back to Cloud, his chin resting on Cloud’s shoulder. “Did I hear you say we? How many is we?”

Cloud sighed quite deeply then, and shrugged Zack off in favor of taking a seat against the wall. Soon, Zack sat on his right side, and for some reason, Gladiolus sat on his left.

“No, it’s just the two of us.”

Zack’s eyes got wide at that. “Wait, are you serious? But… why? I mean, not that I’m complaining, obviously. But… I mean, what are the odds?” He said, a smile present on his face, obviously happy
at the prospect of having each other’s back.

Cloud turned around and faced Gladiolus. “Gladdy, baby” he started, putting a hand on Gladiolus’s head sweetly. “This is a very important exercise for your future as the king’s shield. You must know how to keep a secret. Can you keep secrets?” He asked, blue eyes looking fondly into brown innocent ones.

Gladiolus nodded vigorously.

Cloud smiled and ruffled the kid’s head slightly. “That’s what I like to hear, you’ll grown up into a fine man so soon. Okay, so what I say now, can’t leave this room. Got it?” He asked again, just to make sure.

Gladiolus nodded again, but this time added “You have my word.”

Cloud smiled fondly before turning back towards Zack who had the sweetest expression on his face. But then, as if knowing he’d been caught with moon eyes, he huffed a laughter out to save face and said “You even have my pupil wrapped around your finger, you really are something Cloudy.” He teased, and Cloud rolled his eyes but still planted a brief sweet kiss on Zack’s lips.

But then Cloud sighed again, and suddenly the atmosphere was heavy once more.

“Zack, they’re reviving my special unit.”

Zack looked understandably confused. “What for? Wasn’t the astral case… closed?”

Cloud shifted his weight uncomfortably. “It was never officially closed, but… that’s not what this is about.” Just then, Cloud felt Zack taking his hand, and Cloud felt himself wondering how he’d even be able to get through life without Zack’s constant support. He smiled a little at the gesture, and seeing his smile, Zack squeezed his hand the tiniest bit. Cloud turned and looked into Zack’s eyes.

“They found a Nifelheim lab at the borders to Nibelheim, and they want my unit to go there and for me to… read up on what it is they’re cooking up down there.”

“Oh wow…” Zack said, taking his free hand and running it through his hair. “Wait, was this what the king wanted to talk to you about?”

Cloud nodded, but then, as if too tired to talk about the whole ordeal, rested his head on Zack’s nice broad shoulders. “He assigned the two of us together because he knows we’re friends. But honestly, it looked like he knew that we were a little more than friends.”

“Really now? I’m surprised the king knows… though well, it’s not like we exactly keep it under wraps or anything.”

“I know… it’s just funny that he keeps up to date with glaive gossip. Probably palace gossip as well.”

“Know your staff, I think it’s cool that he knows. Signs of a good leader.”

“Yes, yes Zack. We all know you’re terribly infatuated with his royal Majesty.” Cloud said, making it obvious just from his tone of voice that he’d rolled his eyes at him again.

“Shush you, he is a great leader. I mean, he assigned the two of us together.”

Cloud was quiet at that.
Too quiet.

Zack squeezed his hand.

“Cloud, please look at me.”

And Cloud forced himself to do it.

Zack cupped his cheek then, his eyes soft as he told him “nothing’s going to happen.”

Cloud leaned into Zack’s hand and closed his eyes. He sure hoped nothing was going to happen. If it was anything like his last mission…well.

Then Cloud felt Zack’s warm lips on his, and there was just so much love, condensed into that one point of impact, Cloud was overwhelmed.

“Ewww.” Gladiolus complained when the kiss lasted more than 3 seconds.

Zack reached past Cloud with one hand and smacked the kid on his head without even breaking the kiss.

When they parted, a tear had fallen down Cloud face, and Zack leaned over to kiss it away.

“We won’t leave each other, okay? I have your back, and you have mine. We’ll do the mission, and we’ll succeed and pull through.” Zack ran a thumb across Cloud’s cheek and gave him a light peck on it. “Just like we always do.”

Cloud gave Zack a quivering smile, then turned his head and kissed his boyfriend’s hand before standing up.

“What am I’m going to do when you’re gone on your mission?” Gladiolus suddenly asked.

Zack turned around at that. “You’re going to train. Duhh.” Zack told him childishly, sticking his tongue out teasingly.

But somehow, Gladiolus’s spirits weren’t lifted. “When will you be back?” he asked sadly.

Zack turned towards Cloud for that one, but Cloud just shrugged. “I’m not sure Gladdy, but, well, expect a month without us.”

“A whole month??”

Zack looked uncomfortable at Gladiolus’s uncharacteristic behavior, and on a whim kneeled down and said. “How about you come on over for dinner tonight then? Hm? Sound’s good doesn’t it? I’ll teach you how a real man cooks.”

Gladiolus looked like he was positively shining, and then he ran off to his backpack, saying he’d have to call his dad to make sure.

“Really now?” Cloud asked, hand on his hip and a judging stare. “You have such a weakspot for that kid.”

“I think kids in general, you remember Ignis right? That kid is seriously adorable, last time he was here I did pushups with him reading on my back.”

“What a shame, I was hoping we’d get to do some more… well, 18+ type things.” He said, wiggling
his eyebrows as Zack blushed and looked flustered all of a sudden.

Flustering Zack had started to become one of Cloud’s favorite past times as of late, it was hilarious attacking his boyfriend randomly with suggestiveness and seeing his reactions.

Cloud loved having the tables turned, even if the moments were rare. After all, when Zack wanted to… he could be damn flustering.

Suddenly Gladiolus was back and noticing how red Zack was he told him: “You look red and stupid”

This was apparently good enough a distraction for Zack to sober up. “Say that again and your dinner won’t taste as good shorty.”

Then Gladiolus looked somewhat sad. “Dad said I can’t.”

“Oh.” Was all Zack had to say, and it was evident that he was quite disappointed at that, so Cloud stepped up instead.

“We’ll just do it when we get back from our mission.” Cloud said, “A feast of celebration.”

That got Gladiolus smiling, and Cloud hugged him, told him to take care of himself, and Zack fist bumped him, telling him to remember to train and take care.

~

The next day, commander Sephiroth had briefed them on the mission details and what the ultimate goal was.

“We have received intel that the head scientist, one Verstael Besithia, has been summoned back to the capital and is to stay there for two weeks. Whether it is because of the holidays or because he’s going to present his works is unknown, but even his assistants will go with him, effectively leaving the facility empty.”

“We want you, Strife, to study the works of Verstael during the time that he is gone, and get a grasp as to what it is that the empire is cooking up. Afterwards, we want you to destroy everything, but make it looks like an accident. Right now is not the time to be obvious about our advances, so exercise extreme caution. If you judge however, that the works cannot be destroyed without making it obvious that it was an attack, refrain from destroying it and find a different solution.”

“There must be absolutely no evidence that you were ever at the facility, so be vary of cameras, fingerprints, and not to disturb items. You will also have no radio contact with me or any superiors because of radiowaves. So consider yourself on your own.”

Then the commander stood up, “You leave tomorrow, do not pack anything, just show up at the glaive hq tomorrow at 0300.

“For hearth, and home. Good luck boys.”

“For hearth and home!” Cloud as Zack shouted back.
Considering only 2 months had passed since the last time he was there, going back to Nibelheim was the worst possible thing Cloud could imagine doing.

Zack had been excited, babbling on about meeting Cloud’s mother and seeing all the people Cloud had grown up with, see their house, look at silly childhood photos. He’d been so excited in fact, that Cloud had neglected telling him he wouldn’t meet his mother at all.

They were going to stop in Nibelheim, yes, but only because there were no methods of transport past that point because of the mountains and because going past the border on vehicles was too obvious.

Eventually, though Cloud did tell him that he wasn’t going into Nibelheim as Cloud. Zack should refer to him as Mark, apparently, and Cloud was going to be wearing his ski mask and googles so as not to be recognized.

Zack had deflated at that, but had been very understanding.

Cloud had then told him that he was free to go talk to his mother and present himself as Zack the boyfriend during the one hour they had in the village and that had lifted the other’s spirit.

So when they did come to Nibelheim, the two parted ways, Cloud heading to the town pub to get some warm apple cider and gossip while Zack headed towards Cloud’s old house.

“Remember, just one hour. No more, no less. In one hour we’ll meet by the well in the center of town, okay?” Cloud had said, making sure he didn’t go absolutely mental talking to his mother and hearing about stories of what Cloud was like as a child.

Zack had waved him off and practically skipped over to Mrs. Strife, Cloud had snorted at that.

Exactly one hour later, Zack did in fact emerge from Cloud’s old house, looking happier than ever.

“She gave me biscuits!” He exclaimed with his mouth full of said biscuits. “And we drank the wine thing you’re always going on about, wasn’t really my style, but then she made one with blackberry juice instead and that was really good!”

Zack kept on talking about the stories they’d shared and what he thought of Mrs. Strife a good way into the mountain range.

Not before long however, Zack’s started to grow quiet.

The cold really was no joke, and hiking up and down with backpacks wasn’t an easy job. But once they started to grow tired, they also found the energy to complain.

“Why can we use the crystal hyperspace for weapons storage but not backpacks and stuff?” Zack had asked.

Cloud had shrugged. “Dem the rules.” He’d replied.

“But why though?” Zack had asked, and then “…Do you think I should try?”

Cloud gave him a look. “And risk not getting it out again? I don’t think so.” Zack put on his begging puppy face, and as usual Cloud fell for it. “Maybe when we’re heading back and don’t need those supplies to survive.”
“Yay!” Had been Zack’s small exclamation.

Cloud took out their GPS then, “Not very far now.”

“Yeah well, we have been walking for ten hours straight so I’m not surprised. Couldn’t we have paced this out a little though? I’m dying Cloudy.”

“Hey, I thought you said us backwater boys had this in the bag. That mountains could bring it on.” Cloud said teasingly.

“Yeah, well. It’s cold.” Was Zack’s childish answer.

Cloud rolled his eyes.

“3 more kilometers straight and there’ll be 5 kilometers between us and the facility, or so the GPS claims.”

“So, where gonna build a little snow hut to have as a base?” Zack asked.

Cloud shrugged. “I don’t know if that’s gonna be necessary though? We can just sleep on the floor in the facility, that shouldn’t be a problem, right?”

“Yeah, guess you’re right.”

Zack was quiet for a while then.

“Is this normally how missions go though? Should we be told a lot more clearly what we’re supposed to do?”

Cloud shrugged. “This is why it’s a special unit I suppose.”

“I know, but like… aren’t they putting a whole lot of trust in us?”

“Yeah… that’s what’s got me worried as well.”

And after that, the two remained quiet, their limbs on autopilot as they walked through the heavy layers of snow.

And then, before they knew it, the facility was in sight.

Chapter End Notes

I think most of you know what's coming now *squeals on the inside*
Cloud had gotten the horrible habit of twirling Odin’s materia in his hand when he was stressed.

It was quite risky really, not only did he not know whether or not outside forces applied onto the materia would affect the wellbeing of the summon trapped inside, he also had yet to tell anyone, even Zack, about the existence of said materia and risked exposing the discovery of it with each twirl between his thumb and index finger.

And yet, he still couldn’t quite help himself.

It was odd, twirling the materia around, he felt like he possessed a trump card and a ticking bomb all at once. The chaos of it all was astounding, and yet there was a calmness radiating from the materia that reacted almost like a sedative with the crystal magic coursing through his body. His mind finding peace when the world seemed to cave all around him.

Looking at Zack’s figure walking a mere two meters in front of him, Cloud couldn’t help but wonder why he neglected to tell him about such an important find, and furthermore why he also neglected to tell his superiors.

Undoubtedly, the discovery of a power this great would aid Lucis in the coming war, but Cloud had a feeling, that at the same time, it would bring a wave of destruction so grand that it would prove unrepairable.

Death.

But was this all the summons were capable of?

Surely there were variations. After all, not all gods were known for their prowess in the art of war.

Nevertheless, Cloud still wasn’t overly inclined into blindly handing over something as major as this. Perhaps it was due to his upbringing in Nibelheim, no one there seemed too loyal or attached to the government nor the royal house leading the country. It was all so far away, their power never seeming to reach across the snowy mountains.

People in Nibelheim were naturally gossipy because of how secluded they were, but as a result, they were also really a rather suspicious folk. Cloud even more so.

*The best person to take care of your problems, is always yourself.*

*Trust your own judgement above all else.*

*Do what you can on your own, and confide only in those you trust the most.*

These were beliefs of the northern folk, and Cloud was not exempt from having these belief carved
into his bones.

He felt a major responsibility for what he’d started and discovered and he knew that if this power fell into the wrong hands, it would mean a catastrophe. Only when he was absolutely certain of the capabilities of the materia and that the lower tier summons being usable to literally anyone was a safe concept to introduce, would he return before the king.

But for now, Cloud was calm.

And not only because of the calming sensation that seemed to radiate coolly from Odin’s materia, but also because Cloud felt almost certain that the empire couldn’t possibly come up with a weapon more powerful than the shiny gem in Cloud’s gloved hand.

Cloud was calm, passive even, but Zack was… well, he wasn’t exactly nervous, more like… giddy and jittery.

“First mission!!” he squealed at the sight of the facility. Cloud pocketed the materia and slapped Zack lightly atop his head so he’d be more quiet, but Zack just turned around and blew a raspberry at him. “We are still damn far away Cloudy, there’s no way they can hear me.”

“Yeah, but the Nibel wolves might.” Cloud scolded, and he was surprised to notice that he didn’t gasp our turn anxious at the mention of the creatures that had killed his friend.

Cloud wondered about that, and found that he strangely didn’t resent the creatures. He felt blame should have been placed somewhere else. He just… didn’t quite know where exactly.

Zack, who had not needed to know that Crowe was killed in such a horrific way by wolves of all things, had the pleasure of remaining oblivious to Cloud’s implications and simply rolled his eyes before keeping quiet as requested.

Focusing back on the mission, Cloud took out his military issued binoculars and scanned the premises from afar.

“Intel said they had already arrived at Zagnostus Keep, right?” Zack asked whilst he scanned the premises with his own pair of binoculars.

“Yeah, all of them accounted for. That’s the only reason the spy actually knew that the lab was empty, apparently they keep zero contact with their HQ, so reports have to be handed personally.”

Zack grimaced. “Yeah, but what if the spy was wrong? Maybe there’s still a guy in there.”

Cloud smiled at Zack. “That’s why we have to be careful.” He said and gave his boyfriend’s hand a squeeze. “Though I do think intel is correct, I can’t help but wonder why they’d leave their lab completely unmanned. Seems a bit… strange, doesn’t it?” Cloud asked, more so to himself than Zack.

Nevertheless, Zack answered. “I guess we’ll have to see what happens.” Then he leaned over and gave Cloud a light peck on his red frostbitten cheek. “No matter what, I got your back though spikey.”

Cloud grinned, the heaviness of the mission and the responsibility on his shoulders suddenly all the lighter, “And I’ve got yours.” He replied.

Cloud shook his head at the blinding grin Zack gave him then, and the last personal thought he allowed himself before entering professional glaive mode was:
What a strange way to say ‘I love you’.

~

Utilizing all of their glaive training, with some creative twists and turns here and there, the two successfully entered the facility in what they both believed with almost 100% certainty, was completely invisible and untraceable.

The security had been tight, but perhaps not as tight as Cloud believed the Empire capable of.

Was it perhaps because they believed the existence of their remote facility to be unknown to their enemies, or was it something else entirely? Cloud couldn’t shake the strange feeling of being somehow discreetly manipulated, like a mouse in maze with only one path to follow.

“Creepy.” Zack commented once they were inside and in the clear, finally breaking their bubble of professionalism.

“Yeah...” Cloud silently agreed, a bad feeling washing over him as their steps echoed ominously atop the metal flooring.

They’d already been to the living quarters of the scientists and the surveillance room to check for possible remaining occupants, and also to loop the footage so that they could walk around the facility freely. A simple trick really, too simple, but it worked, and Zack had to insist that Cloud stop being so skeptical and be thankful instead, that everything was going so smoothly. Cloud tried.

“So I suppose I don’t have much else to do now.” Zack suddenly commented, in a clear effort to sound nonchalant, but utterly failing when he looked at his feet with an obvious edge of solemnness.

Cloud bumped into him on purpose, trying and succeeding in getting Zack’s attention. “Don’t be like that. The stuff I have to do is really boring, and our mission thus far had been super important. Your role was important, I couldn’t have done this without you, so don’t go moping around now Zack.”

Zack grinned sheepishly when Cloud hit the nail on the head. “Was I too obvious?”

“Not at all.” Cloud retorted ironically, something that made Zack furrow his brows in blatant confusion.

“Are you being ironic or not right now? I can seriously never tell with you.”

Cloud chuckled at that. “I wonder, what do you think?”

Zack positively growled in frustration then, “I sometimes wonder what to do with you.” He said with a sigh and a grin.

Then silence fell upon them once more, but once more it was broken by Zack (unsurprisingly). “Can I come with you and watch? I promise I’ll be quiet.” He asked, and Cloud really couldn’t believe he was even asking him, Zack always did what he wanted with him after all.

But then Cloud remembered, that technically he was squad captain. Sure it was a small deviant squad, but nonetheless, it was still a squad. And he was captain!

His grin spread in obvious pleasure at that notion, and he unconsciously puffed himself up a little,
like some proud baby chocobo. “Of course, I will permit it.” He said with what he believed to be a really cool captain-like voice.

Zack, being the absolute oblivious puppy that he was, beamed at this and practically skipped once they started to make their way towards the labs.

~

Cloud hadn’t really known what to expect.

Of course, he expected something rather dark due to the nature of the Empire, but this?

“Deamons” Zack whispered, and a shudder ran down Cloud’s spine as his gaze scanned over cages and cages full of man-made deamons of all types and sized.

Cloud didn’t known what any of them were, but he knew that they were all miserable creatures, laboratory hybrids crafted for the sake of war.

War was truly upon them, Cloud realized. And the dread that followed this realization almost made Cloud take out his materia, just for the sake of reassurance, though he was stopped when Zack squeezed his hand instead.

“You alright?” He asked, and Cloud turned to see Zack looking at him with a worried frown.

Cloud placed a hand on Zack’s cheek and smiled at him in what he hoped was a soft and confident manner, and that his actual worries didn’t show. He’d relied on Zack too much throughout the years, and now, he felt, it was time to make Zack rely on him.

“I’m fine Zack.” He leaned in and kissed Zack’s frown, hoping to make it go away “Look, don’t let all of this get to you, after all, while it may exist now, we’re here to make sure it stops happening.”

Unfortunately, Zack frown had yet to disappear, and now he looked even more worried and almost confused.

“Since when…” But then he shook his head and started again. “Doesn’t this scare you Cloud?”

“It does, but at the same time, I’ve kind of switched to science mode.” Cloud told him and Zack turned his head in such an endearing puppy-like way, Cloud would have laughed were their surroundings not so grim. “It’s a coping mechanism.” He explained.

Zack apparently didn’t know what to say to that, so he looked down and “Oh.”, was all he managed to utter.

Cloud squeezed his hand. “Look, you don’t have to be in here with me Zack. You wouldn’t even be doing anything anyway.” This made Zack look up, so Cloud continued. “Actually, as squad captain, I want you instead to patrol the premises, after all, we can never be too safe. Also, find us a place to sleep for the night and something for us to do when I’m not doing this, we’re going to be here for a while I think.”

Zack looked relived but guilty. “What about moral support?” he asked cutely.

Cloud smiled again. “I’d rather see you and make out with you in another environment than this lab.
I don’t really want memories inside this place you know, I just want to do my job and get back to you.”

Zack sighed, “Alright Cloudy.” But then he looked up at him in a chastising way, “But you better get out the moment you think it’s too much” he jabbed a finger at Cloud’s chest, three times for good measure. “I’ll protect you, and find a place for us to sleep.”

“You do that.” Cloud said, and soon he was left with the devilish howls and moans of wretched creatures.

Alone.

~

Cloud was thankful for his ability to focus, because otherwise, working inside the lab full of deamon experiments would have been utter torture.

To his great pleasure and surprise, understanding the way the deamons and wild animals had been synthesized was not that hard to get. Of course, it was some gene-modifying science that he wasn’t all too familiar with, but the lab assistants took very good notes and wrote some really good reports.

A mere three days passed and by then, Cloud felt himself already immensely familiar with the science behind these creatures. He had no need to conduct experiments of his own, practically everything had already been done and really, all Cloud had to do was a lot of reading and understanding.

On the fourth day, as he was walking around, he stumbled upon a new corridor. Confused as to how he could have overlooked it, Cloud wandered down the corridor and into a room that took his breath away and simultaneously made him want to vomit.

Humans.

In glass chambers.

Human… experiments.

The world suddenly started spinning too fast for comfort and Cloud felt awful.

He tried to hold onto to something as his legs turned to jelly, but found nothing. Quickly he was collapsing atop the metal grating.

Cloud dry heaved as his head spun in the green lighting from the liquid-filled chambers and whirling of the machines and flesh-colored blurs of ARGHH!

He wanted to get out.

But his legs felt trapped, heavy like lead and he just couldn’t. He couldn’t get up, up, UP!

“Magnificent aren’t they?”

A cold voice began, and Cloud’s head was still dizzy and awful but the voice resounded so clear inside his head.
“Truly, the good doctor did some marvelous work.”

It was otherworldly, as if drifting in like a breeze from the cosmos itself. Cloud didn’t know what to make it of it, what to even think.

“So soon they’ll be big boys you know, all with a single purpose in their soulless little bodies.”

Cloud was so far gone, and yet the voice inside his head forced him to focus, to not pass out as his senses went on overdrive at the sights and sounds and smells inside the lab.

“Do you perchance, know what it is?”

The voice continued and Cloud felt like he was dying.

There was laughter then, and it was such a dreadfully gleeful laughter, it sent heavy shivers down Cloud’s spine.

“To KILL!”

Cloud gasped, as if shocked, his senses suddenly came back to him full force and he quickly found himself scrambling to stand up on his shaking legs.

He needed to get himself under control, this hyperventilation business was not needed right now.

He need to Breathe!

Cloud hit his chest hard as his eyes whirled around and his body shook, breathe Cloud, BREATHE!

With a big and sudden inhale Cloud looked upon the room again, forcing his eyes to truly face the bodies in the glass chambers filled with a green gooey almost self-lit liquid. With a weakened body, he breathed in and out, clutching his chest as he took in the sights.

Calm down… calm down, he told himself.

Cloud shook his head. That voice from before… had he imagined it? Had it just been his mind making auditory illusions inside his head?

God… that las ‘kill’ was still running through his brain, bouncing around in his skull with a deadly force.

Okay now, this was fine, this was… yeah no, this was definitely not fine.

This was fucking awful. What the fuck was this even?

Cloud’s head was hurting like a fucking bitch, ugh.

And holy shit, if Cloud wasn’t fan of the empire before…. Let’s just say he was feeling some very real rage roaring inside of him at the moment.

But that was going on hold, right now, he needed to bring professionalism to the table and truly follow what he’d told Zack. They were here on a mission, and this mission would lead to the stopping of this horror house and the monsters it was creating. He needed to put his emotions on definitive hold.

So Cloud steeled himself, straightened his back, and started to properly enter the lab. He told himself not to react as he looked upon the specimens in the tubes, some obvious failures, some old and
decaying, some young and lithe and then there was one, a tiny little guy, at a glance, he looked almost to be one year old.

Cloud got closer to the tube and the child in question and he almost wanted to cry.

The boy looked so soft, a tiny little thing, short blonde hair swaying in the green liquid that surrounded him. He looked like he was sleeping.

And suddenly, Cloud was indeed crying.

Doctor Verstael Besithia was truly a monster through and through. To create life like this, for the purpose of war, playing God…

It was utterly disgusting.

Cloud wanted to be angry, and yet, in front of this infant, this child, he felt nothing but sadness. Tears streamed slowly down his cheeks and fell onto the metal floor without him even noticing.

This was too much, and yet, Cloud had to persist. Whatever ungodly things were done in this lab, Cloud couldn’t let it get to him, he was here to learn, study and understand.

He was to return to Lucis with enough knowledge to be able to recreate these beings… as well as destroy them.

Cloud took a deep breath and turned away from the infant, learn, study, and understand.

~

Cloud was staring at the field ration in his hand when the world suddenly started shaking.

“Cloud.” Zack called, “Cloud.”

Cloud finally looked up from where he’d been staring, just to see Zack’s worried expression once more.

“What?” He asked, his voice coming out quieter than he thought it would.

“I’ve been calling you for ages… What’s going on? You look so pale and you barely eat or speak.” When Cloud’s gaze almost sleepily feel downwards, Zack gently pushed his face up again. “You’re scaring me Cloud.”

Cloud didn’t like seeing Zack worried, but he especially didn’t like Zack looking scared. Even more so on his behalf.

Still, he couldn’t quite bring himself to smile, that required a certain amount of joie-de-vivre that he just didn’t have these days.

He grabbed Zack’s hand. “I’m fine Zack.”

Apparently, Zack didn’t quite like that.

He stepped up then, suddenly pacing the dimly lit room as he ran a hand through his hair in obvious
stress. He was grumbling something, though Cloud didn’t quite have the energy to strain his ear and listen.

Yet suddenly Zack stopped, and when he turned towards Cloud he looked so lost and miserable. He sat down again, taking Cloud’s hand back into his own, turning it over and caressing it as he murmured. “You’re not fine though.”

He sighed once more, this time speaking louder. “I know I probably won’t understand most of what you tell me, but I want you to tell me.” He tried a smile of his own, but it looked weak, and it suddenly dawned on Cloud, that Zack too, must be feeling miserable in this facility.

He could suddenly see it, Zack, the most social creature that he knew, pacing around in empty metal corridors, all on his lonesome. The only sound to keep him company would be himself, whistling a little tune, before he’d get tired of it and sigh. He’d probably do some squats to get the time to pass, and then continue to patrol the empty rooms and corridors.

Zack would have been lonely, and to think he’d be lonely on a mission with his lover.

Cloud would use so much time in the labs, he’d always return to him tired and without even a drop of energy to entertain and talk to the very lonely Zack.

He felt sad then, even more so than before.

He felt… guilty.

“I’m sorry Zack.” He told him, because he was.

Zack looked like he understood. “Don’t be sorry Cloud, just tell me. I know that compared to you I might seem like an idiot, but my intelligence is at least a little above average, so I feel like I won’t be that much of a dunce to talk to. And as I said before, I want to know… after all, I’d like to be at least a little morally supportive.”

Cloud nodded at that, and had he had more energy he would have told Zack that he didn’t deserve such amazing consideration (and Zack would have most likely scolded him for that).

Instead, Cloud began.

First he talked about the beasts, and Zack listened as best as could, making relevant questions where relevant questions were due.

But then his facial expression began to morph as Cloud started talking about the clones in the other lab, and now Zack was listening in absolute silence.

Sometime during his talk, Cloud had started to cry, and with a hand on Cloud’s back, Zack had asked him to show him the lab.

At first Cloud had thought the suggestion odd, after all, Cloud wanted nothing more then to completely forget about the existence of that lab, and Zack, knowing him the way he did, should know this. But Zack looked very determined in his decision to go see the lab, and so Cloud brought him too it.

Surprisingly, once Cloud saw Zack standing in the middle of the lab, washed in green light as he looked upon the specimens in the room, his gaze lingering just a little longer on the infant in the last tube to on the right side, Cloud let out a breath of relief.
Funny, how even if Cloud knew he was to some degree bringing unnecessary trauma into Zack’s life, it felt good, to not be the only one to bear the sight on his shoulders.

Zack had most likely known this, being as socially aware as he was, he knew that while he couldn’t take the pain of knowledge away from Cloud, he could at least share the load with him.

When Zack turned around, Cloud saw understanding in Zack’s eyes. And when Zack hugged him, despite nothing being alright, they were alright.

~

Somedays, Cloud would catch himself staring.

There was a reason for it of course, a scientific reason. After all, the growth rate of serial number 0204 was simply astounding.

Of course, the growth rate of all the specimens were astounding, but watching 0204 was perhaps most interesting, simply because of how small he was… You could almost see him growing by the minute.

Cloud had been studying it of course, how the green water inside was somehow altered into having a much faster aging process than normal. It was ingenious really, after all, when a war was looming so closely at hand, the Empire couldn’t very well wait until their army of clone soldier to grow of battle-ready age.

The formula itself had been created with the aid of a special little secret ingredient called ‘Mako’, or so it was referred to in all the reports. It was a tight lipped collaboration between Professor Hojo, from Shinra Corp. and Doctor Versteal Besithia himself.

Cloud wasn’t so much surprised by the fact that a major corporation like Shinra Corp. was already supporting the Empire. Thinking about it, it would probably have been a long standing collaboration, The Empire needed energy for their magitek warfare after all, and they probably paid Shinra good money for it.

It was stupid.

How could no one have figured it out yet?

And yet, staring at 0204, Cloud couldn’t help but care less.

Instead he wondered about the little boy, hooked to wires and floating serenely in Mako.

He wondered if the boy was dreaming.

And if he dreamt, what would he be dreaming about?

He wondered about the minutes that passed, how the boy wouldn’t have a childhood to look back to. Everything passed in flash while he dreamt his way through life, before ending up killing and dying in a war he had no choice but to partake in.

It was ugly.
The world which surrounded this child was ugly.

And yet, sitting crossed legged, and doing nothing but staring at this little kid, Cloud would catch himself smiling.

He was a cute kid.

But then, like a cold winter’s breeze, a voice passed through Cloud’s head once more “Soon they’ll be big boys, all with a single purpose in their soulless little bodies.”

As an echo, he could still hear the word ‘kill’ inside his brain, but now he seemed to focus instead on ‘soulless little bodies’.

Would they truly have no soul? Simply because they were made this way?

Where they actually monsters? Just wearing the skin of man?

As Cloud asked himself these questions, the murmur of machinery the only thing to break the silence of this morally deceased metallic hell hole, something broke through it all, hitting Cloud right in his heart.

0204 opened his eyes.

He had blue eyes, the same color as the Nibel winter sky. The same color as Cloud’s eyes.

They were only open for the briefest of moments, a glitch in the system. Suddenly the machinery of the tube roared louder, perhaps the solution of the liquid that trapped the boy amplifying, for soon he closed his eyes again.

It was funny - in the most tragic of ways, of course - for in those blue eyes, Cloud didn’t see a soulless little killer, waiting to grow big enough to be sent to war.

Indeed, Cloud saw merely what the boy looked to be; a child.

Just then, there was the quick mechanical sound of a metal door sliding opening, and in came Zack. Seeing Cloud on the floor in front of 0204, his otherwise serious face turned softer.

He appeared to hesitate for a bit, but eventually came and sat down next to Cloud, joining him in regarding the kid; just for a little while.

Then, just as 0204 was peacefully exhaling and letting tiny air bubbles out into the liquid, Zack broke the strangely wholesome silence.

“It’s time to destroy this place.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello my lovelies!! What an absolute ride these last two months have been for me. On top on holidays and end of the year stuff, I acquired an internship in my dream line of work and I’ve been super excited preparing for that, and also i went on a long ass
vacation and I'm only returning now. This is why it's taken me so long to get this chapter out, and I apologize about that cause I did it right in some hot climax stuff huh.

Anyways, ATM I am stuck in a hotel in Lissabon because my flight home was delayed, so I'm sleeping here for the evening, and having written a fair bit of chapters during my vacation, I figured now was the perfect time to FINALLY grace you all with a new chapter.

Anyways, I hope you guys enjoyed!!!
In theory, Cloud didn’t have much in common with the serial number 0204.

Cloud had been born to a beautiful mother, and had led a wonderfully generic life in the snowy Nibelheim Mountains. Sure, he hadn’t had a father, but really, Cloud couldn’t say he felt particularly devastated about that, and lots of kids all around the world lacked a parent or two. And anyways, his mother’s overwhelming love was more than enough to fill the childhood quota no matter the case.

Serial number 0204, on the other hand, had been artificially made. In some sense, yes, you could say he’d had a father; after all, you did need a parent gene to be created in the first place. Nevertheless, the fact remained he was different from Cloud, in fact, Cloud would like to think they were nothing at all like each other.

No connection whatsoever.

“He kind of looks like you, doesn’t he?”

It was cruel of Zack. Perhaps, it was even the cruelest thing he’d ever said to Cloud.

Zack had just pulled the plugs on all the Mako chambers and sending the magitek soldiers of Besithia into an eternal slumber.

All of them, every single miserable creature offed. All… expect for one little guy.

When Cloud away from 0204 and turned to Zack, he didn’t quite know how to feel. His facial expression lost and simultaneously certain, a mess of feelings he didn’t truly understand. Zack, looked much the same way, and the two of them shared a look which was truly indescribable.

They understood each other, and at the same time, they did not even understand themselves.

It was odd really. Appearances shouldn’t have mattered a single bit.

So what he looked like Cloud? Why did that even matter?

And yet, suddenly a connection was formed. And no matter how absurdly irrelevant it was, it was still a connection. A connection, that somehow only seemed to make more and more.

“I…” Cloud began, but he did not know for sure where that sentence was headed, so he cleared his
throat and started again, and somehow, despite his complete unawareness of what to say, these were the words that tumbled out his mouth: “Zack… I want to take him with us.” It was outrageous a sentence, from the moment it was born from Cloud’s lips and uttered into the almost deathly silent lab. The soundtrack to the most absurd sentence Cloud had ever spoken, was the buzzing of one lonely machine, the muted breath of one spared life.

Truly, Cloud hadn’t known that this was what he was going to say. Hadn’t even been completely aware that these were sentiments he’d been harboring. It all happened so strangely, a wish and a determination blooming like a fantastically beautiful flower; from a plant Cloud hadn’t been aware was growing in his heart. Suddenly everything just… was.

Yet when the words had finally been said, and the weight of that desire sunk into the skin of the glaives, Zack’s expression had turned so pained. “Cloud…” He’d started, reaching out for Cloud’s hand to hold. But in this moment, Cloud knew, that giving in to the affection would come off as a way of wavering, and this was something his heart, now full of a strange certainty, would not allow. Cloud flinched away from Zack’s hand, and set his face into a hard expression.

“No, listen.” He began, straightening his body as turned to face Zack squarely, looking the other straight in the eyes. “There is so much that I still don’t know about these clones, stuff that doesn’t exist in the reports yet! The only way to truly figure out everything about these… weapons, is to… to….” Cloud was filled with a passion so great, that should he have the need for it, he was prepared to present a list of perfectly good and logical reasons for taking 0204 with them. Yet strangely, he seemed to quickly get lost for words. Cloud knew suddenly within himself, that the reason for wanting to bring 0204 home, was not because of some grand idealistic hope of further aiding the kingdom of Lucis with his scientific endeavors. (Although certainly, there was indeed truth to the reality that there would be much to gain from taking a “sample” with him). Cloud, while there was still knowledge to obtain of course, had already learned a very sufficient amount. Everything else, like psychological studies of any such sort, would be absolutely pointless since it was in the kingdom’s great interest to completely destroy these creations before they even came into full fruition.

No, in the end, Cloud had no good reason.

And with the way Zack was looking at him, Cloud knew that he knew this already.

It was, in some way, beautifully simplistic.

Human, even.

For Cloud, despite the unlikelihood, despite the situation, despite everything.

Had just simply, beautifully, grown fond of 0204.

If you wished to, you could of course blame some sense of ethical morality, but locked in in this metallic hellhole, Cloud had been tumbling over morality far too much to even give a damn about that anymore. It was too complicated a mess to navigate through. Whether it was even mercy to kill the creations in this wretched lab or let them live… Cloud still had yet to reach an answer.

In the end, it was all because Cloud had grown attached. Cloud felt it was hard not to do so, thinking back on it, seeing as he had quite literally been watching the kid grow, sitting as he observed and studied the specimens inside the lab.

He’d caught himself so many times, sitting cross-legged on the metal flooring and simply marveling at the life inside the chamber. There he was, a little baby boy, unaware of the wretched world it had
been born to, unaware, that his life was not his own to live. The ignorance he held onto, for how
would he know, of the life he’d missed? Of the loved he could have lived?
The beauty and ugliness of that thought was truly staggering.

Cloud gave a defeated sigh as he thought of this, a sad and somehow empty breeze into the lab.

Belatedly, he recalled that by his calculations, 0204 would be about Prince Noctis’ age now.

Just before Cloud could start imagining 0204 playing around like he’d seen the little prince do, or
learning the art of the sword with Zack like Gladiolus did, or even trying to help out in the kitchen as
Ignis did, Zack broke the heavy silence.

“Do you even intend to tell his Majesty about this?” Zack had asked, effectively hauling Cloud out
of his whirlpool of thoughts and emotions.

For a moment, Cloud had been worried, scared even. Zack had always been so loyal to the Crown,
would he be against Cloud’s decision? Suddenly, he felt a great need to protect 0204, and he washed
away his emotional mask, in favor of strong determination.

“No” Cloud answered, because it was true, and he could never lie to Zack.

Zack sighed at that, but somehow, he didn’t seem surprised or angry. “Can I even stop you?” and
there was something strange about the way Zack had asked that. In his tone, there had been laced a
certain amount of...relief. Suddenly it dawned on Cloud, that perhaps Zack had, similarly, grown
fond 0204. He remembered then, the times when Zack had come to visit him in the lab, walking
around with Cloud as he explained in easy terms about the fast-aging agent artificially produced in
the Mako, as well as how the deamon DNA synthesized with Besithia’s human DNA.

And Somehow they’d always end up before 0204, finishing up the retelling of his literal birth, they’d
then turn to look at him. The kid just looked so calm inside his Mako chamber, serenely drifting
while others were sometimes deformed or old or continuously spazzing.

He was the latest model, much closer than all the others, to becoming a machine of death and
destruction that acted without thought or emotion. Simply following orders like soulless little doll.
For all they knew, he could be the perfect product, and all Besithia was waiting for, was for him to
grow of age so he could confirm this.

And yet, despite it all, 0204 seemed somehow – despite his horrible surroundings and his even more
horrible reason for existence – pure and innocent beyond any common comprehension.

Perhaps it was all a matter of twisted philosophy, but then again, but perhaps it was just something
quite as basic, as primordial, as a gut instinct.

Whilst 0204 was indeed the closest – for the time being at least – to becoming the prototype for what
would inevitably become a magitek army, something told Cloud that this was not so. Would it be
because of Cloud’s intervention though? Or would it be something even more grand and tragically
beautiful?

All Cloud knew, was that looking at him, for whatever odd reasons, lifted his spirits and gave him a
sense of...hope.

However misplaced and illogical it was.

“Do you even want to?” Cloud had countered, and he was just curious really. Suddenly he just
wanted to know, to somehow confirm his suspicion; those soft gaze, those talks, everything. Was
Zack having the same kind of feelings? The same thoughts as him?

Cloud, despite himself, thought back to how good Zack was with kids, and how good he was with kids. He remembered Gladiolus and Ignis, how well the two took care of them, how fun it was.

He remembered back when Zack had first been asked to train Gladiolus, how well he’d done with him, and the words he’d said to him. Cloud remembered suddenly the sentiment he’d gone to bed with back on that day, the lighthearted feeling of glee at seeing Zack being so cute and yet so responsible. Cloud had wanted to be a part of that, had wanted to have a family with Zack, but had been crushed by the genetic revelation that this could never be.

Perhaps it was egotistical, but maybe now, things could be different.

Perhaps now, was the moment their life stories could change.

It was stupid really, they were far too young, far too inexperienced, and far too low in ranking to possibly allow themselves to do this.

Despite the knowledge of it all, Zack smiled, but like all the smiles they’d shared in the facility, it was weak. Still, it was enough. For them anyways.

“I guess I don’t know.” He answered truthfully, because he too, couldn’t bear to tell his lover a lie.

The two of them turned towards 0204 and Cloud took Zack’s hand in his.

“He really does look like you though.” Zack said.

Cloud scoffed, but it was soft and without edge. “I presume you saw his eyes then, one of the many times you came to hang around.”

“I did.” He said quietly, “just once.”

Cloud squeezed Zack’s hand, if they wanted to do this, it had to be now or never.

Zack huffed out a breathy laughter. “You know, in the future, we’ll probably get in a lot of trouble for this.”

Cloud shrugged. “Maybe.” He answered, finally letting go of Zack in favor of walking over to the control panel of 024’s Mako chamber. “But those are worries for another time.”

Unspoken went the knowledge that indeed, the time for doing what they wanted was now. Soon they’d be sent to war. Soon they’d die.

Obeying or disobeying orders.

Either way, their fate would be the same.

“This is really dumb.”

“I know.”
The mission to the Nifelheimian lab had been easy.

Far too easy.

As such, one would think that the unexpected event, of one of the scientist’s from Besithia’s team returning too early, would make the mission that more predictably difficult. It would perhaps even, bring some season of reassurance, to not linger on the teetering edges of the dreadful ‘what if’s’, now that something difficult (if only mildly) had occurred.

It worked for Zack of course, being the lais-faire kind of man that he was, he was quite content to finally have a challenge present itself so that he could finally relax.

But for Cloud it wasn’t quite as easy. He couldn’t help but think, that this little course-changer, which should have posed problematic indeed, only seemed to further aid Zack and Cloud in their untraceable escape. And there was something truly off-putting about that.

Two days prior to Zack and Cloud’s chosen date of departure, a whistling and surprisingly aloof scientist had come bumbling into the facility. Zack, who had been doing patrols for the sake of passing time, had been quite surprised when a metal door suddenly slid open to reveal the careless and even more surprised scientist.

Thankfully, Zack had been trained to react quickly, whereas the scientist had not. Following their almost comical encounter, at the hands of Zack, the scientist had been bound and gagged for safe-keeping. Together, Cloud and Zack had fed him pieces of their rations and occasionally taken him to the bathroom, Zack had even chatted with him (all replies to his stories mere grunts and huffs however). All of this lasted up until the day where they wrote him his suicide note.

Surprisingly, despite Cloud’s otherwise grim mind, it had been Zack’s idea of a plan.

It was a perfect plan really, and Cloud had been more than a little impressed. It was however, an incredibly morbid plan, one that forced either Cloud or Zack to take their first human kill…

Zack had said he’d do it, it was, after all, his plan. Cloud had been only a little opposed, more than happy to rid himself of the duty when his mentality had already grown so frail inside the lab.

Zack had discussed with Cloud how to go about it, and Cloud had been appalled by Zack’s standoffish attitude, and ability to detach himself from the matter of hand and ableness to look at the big picture.

In the end, Zack and Cloud had decided to write in the scientist suicide note that he had grown to disgust the wretched experiments and acts that were performed in the lab. That the nature of it all was so disturbing and frighteningly unnatural, that he wanted nothing more than to atone for his sin by finishing off all the creatures and records, and even himself.

Cloud and Zack, being giving this God sent opportunity, now had no need to make anything seem like an accident.

“We can just blow it up!” Zack had said, strangely enthusiastic at the notion.

Later, when Zack and Cloud had stared the facility from afar, geared up and with a small sleeping child bundled in thick layers of cloth, Cloud liked to think he could understand Zack’s strange giddiness, despite him obviously killing a man through the explosion.

The explosion was, in some ways after all, a much more impersonal way of killing.
It was detached.

Now, Zack would have no lingering memories of the first death he’d ever faced. of the way blood would seep out, of the smell.

Zack had been very lucky in that regard, Cloud couldn’t help but bitterly think. After all, Cloud would never be able to forget the first corpse he’d ever faced…

~

Being two young men close to twenty years of age, and not a having had any siblings from which to learn how to take care of smaller children, Cloud and Zack were, in blatant terms, screwed.

Sure, Zack had been teaching Gladiolus how to fight, and sure, Ignis had been along for the ride a couple of times. But those kids were well developed, talking and speaking little boys with a mind of their own already.

Basically, there were clearly a lot of factors that played into Zack and Cloud’s little plan of rescuing 0204 and experience was one thing, that they certainly found themselves in a dire lack of.

Thankfully, 0204 had remained blissfully asleep as Cloud and Zack had progressed through the snow and back to Nibelheim. They’d bundled up the 2 year-old in layers upon layers of warm cloth, and transported him through the snow as If he was made of the most delicate porcelain.

Cloud would find himself staring at the boy, calmly sleeping and looking up at Zack with a smile. Zack would melt at the smile, and he’d sneak an arm around Cloud’s middle before turning to look at the boy too.

Cloud was still smiling gently when he finally spoke. “There are so many things we have to figure out. How we’re gonna take care of him when we both have full-time jobs, how we’re going to register him illegally into the country, which school to register him too, what to do about his serial code…”

Zack laughed then, also aware of what a tremendous decision it was that they’d taken, and realizing all the things that had yet to do and how comical it all was. “We have to learn how to change diapers.” He added to Cloud’s list.

Cloud laughed at that. “Probably teach him how to talk.”

“We have to buy baby clothes.”

“We have to learn how to ignore the neighborhood ladies and their meddling gossip.”

Zack groaned at that one. “Mannn, that’s a bad one.”

Cloud laughed again, somehow giddy despite the hardships ahead. Then he looked down at 0204 again, and brushed a stray golden lock away from his face. “For now though, I say we just think of a name for him.”

Just then, a presence seemed to appear as if out of nowhere and although Cloud had lived most of his life below freezing point, he’d never felt a chill quite so strong as he did now.
In front of the newly established family of three, stood a very elegant looking man with an outfitted
that bordered on royal. His hair had a purple-ish tint that distinctly reminded Cloud of some foul
poison, he had an unkempt stubble growing and a fedora atop his unruly hair. He looked like
someone who’d once lived a life of incredibly grandeur, perhaps even a gentleman of the
aristocracy, but had now somehow fallen from his throne of grace but still tried his best to keep up
his noble imagine. But it looked like he had forgotten some of the finer point of esteemed grooming
and especially to keep his rather blatantly malicious grin at bay.

“I do not find great pleasure in meddling, I will admit. And yet, I can’t help but wonder about all of
this. Is it just a side story that won’t affect me? Or will overlooking this be some grand mistake that
comes back to haunt me in the future? Oh I do wonder.”

“Who are you?!” Zack screamed, his body poised and ready to fight if necessary. “State your name a
purpose!” he ordered.

“My, oh my. How very… ferocious. I’ll say, you have the potential to rise quite high in your ranks.”
But then his gaze slithered down towards the giant pile of cloth in Cloud’s arms, and the little
innocent face that peaked out of it in ignorant bliss of the situation. Cloud, overcome with a need to
protect 0204, turned his body away from the stranger and steeled his gaze into a warning scowl. “Of
course, rising in ranks might not be a plausible future if you do something quite as scandalous as this.
I wonder what the good King Regis would say.”

And despite Cloud’s instincts already having known, now it was finally obvious, that without a
doubt, this was not just a stranger. This was an enemy.

With a mighty roar, Zack summoned the buster sword, which before they’d departed for their
mission, had been entrusted to Zack by Angeal.

However, just as soon as the blindingly cold sun had reflected the sharp metallic shimmer of the
barely scratched sword, the sword suddenly disintegrated with a puff, into blue flickers of crystal
magic, leaving Zack dumbfounded as he held onto empty air.

Zack, with a confused and panic expression turned his face to Cloud in search of answers. But on
Cloud’s face he no such thing, for the moment that the impossible event, that was them being
disarmed, happened, Cloud being the pessimist (or realist, as he liked to correct people) he was, had
known the two were completely and unavoidably doomed.

“What the fuck?!!” Zack had roared once more, now turning his undivided attention back to their
enemy.

“Perhaps it would be harmless to leave the two of you on your merry way, oh, excuse me, I meant to
say three.” The enemy continued, quite happily ignoring Cloud and Zack’s state. “But then again,
I’m sure he wouldn’t stay too mad at me, and why not be absolutely thorough? Do you not agree?”

Just then, Zack sprinted towards the enemy, a roar of anger and desperation as he came towards the
enemy like a fully grown and feral tiger, looking like he was ready to positively rip the other’s throat
out.

“Tsk, tsk.” The enemy said, before he a flurry of purple magic flared and a long sword appeared in
his arms.

“ZACK!” Cloud cried out, and thankfully Zack’s reactions were fast enough for him to dodge and
change course before the blade could rip his chest open.
The enemy laughed at that. “Truly a skilled fighter. Perhaps I could you use you as an asset? I wonder.” He said as he made his way over to where Zack was crouching in the snow.

Zack was obviously shocked, his world turned completely around as he witnessed a power that belonged to the King, being flaunted around so casually by a stranger, an enemy.

Cloud knew Zack didn’t have the time to react anymore, and despair clutched as his heart horribly as he screamed at the stranger to get away!! ZACK!

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Cloud could hear a child crying with a piercing clarity and for some reason, it broke him out of his panic and he remembered the gun attached to his hip.

Holding 0204 in one arm instead of two, Cloud detached the feather light gun, so light a gun that he’d even forgotten it was there, so light it didn't even need to be put into crystal hyperspace like their other weapons. It was his only hope of defending himself and Zack, his only hope, there by the unexplicable randomness that was Cloud forgetting or just neglecting to place the gun where it would be out of physical reach.

Five consecutive shots sounded through the air, mercury rounds piercing a human head in five different areas.

Blood spluttered the fluffy snow and Zack’s body alike, there was an awful silence in the air, just before a body toppled over and fell onto the snow with a thud.

Cloud was shaking, shaking so much that he was afraid he might drop 0204. Zack looked up then, finally back to his senses at the sight of the dead body in front of them. He leapt up, and sprinted over to Cloud and steadying his lovers arms.

“We have to go Cloud.” He told him, but when Cloud’s panicked eyes couldn’t leave the dead body alone Zack shook him. “We have to leave NOW!” And with that last shout he picked up the fallen quicksilver and urged Cloud to run beside him.

Zack was obviously speaking.

His mouth was moving and his gaze was worried. It was indeed, a great indication that he was speaking.

And yet, Cloud couldn’t hear any of it.

All he could hear was the sound of his own heartbeat booming loudly throughout his brain, and his breath, loud and jagged in his own ears. In the background, he could still hear a child crying though, and soon he felt a body thrashing around within the confines of his arms.

Eventually he heard Zack’s voice triumph over everything once more.

“CLOUD!” He yelled, “CLOUD GET IT TOGETHER!!”

Cloud looked over at Zack in confusion before looking at the blue eyed boy, completely red in his face as tears streamed down his chubby cheeks, mouth open wide as his wails sounded throughout the empty snow fields.

“Give him to me.” Zack said, and Cloud blinked a few times before the sentence finally made sense. He handed him over as gently as he could, and Zack started to try and shush the boy, running his hand up and down the kids back as he spoke gently to him.
They continued to walk at a brisk pace, more than eager to get the fuck away from whatever that incident had been.

Cloud watched as Zack managed to calm the boy down until he was only hiccupping from time to time and clinging to Zack, hiding his face in the crook of the glaive’s neck.

Cloud then noticed the splatters on Zack’s face.

They weren’t…red.

They were supposed to be red. After all, it was blood that had been splattered on top of him.

…. Right?

It should have been blood, right?

But this was black. Black like the most richest darkest ink Cloud had ever seen.

A sense of dread overcame him as he discreetly turned his head back towards the site of the incident.

There was… nothing there.

Cloud and Zack had not moved nearly enough away from the site for Cloud not to be able to see the corpse.

So why wasn’t it there????

All sorts of questions and all sorts of worries started to bombard his brain all at once. And his head started hurting as he saw a million trillion different ways the future could play out. All horrible and filled with death and… darkness.

He was about to open his mouth to tell this all to Zack, but when he saw 0204 sleeping on Zack’s shoulder, breath even and expression serene, Cloud lost all desire to speak.

Cloud decided, that perhaps this wasn’t the time.

Perhaps, there wasn’t even anything the two of them could do about this dark and grim future that awaited them.

And so, Cloud figured he would enjoy the silence.

The sound of footsteps upon virgin snow and the feeling of life right next to him. Life that he loved, and life that loved him.

This would have to be good enough.

So they continued onwards.

To whatever future may await them.

Chapter End Notes

wtf, am I right?
I'm so sorry!! Life is hard and i have little time, I'll try to post more often, but i just can’t promise anything :( 
I hope you guys enjoy though! This chapter is extra long and i baked it with lotsa loooove~~ <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were quite a lot of issues with bringing back 0204 to the capital, so throughout most of the hike back to Nibelheim, all Cloud and Zack did was discuss how they would go about the whole thing.

First off, they couldn’t exactly bring 0204 with them straight back home. By all means, this was impossible.

Glaives returning from missions weren’t allowed to go home first, even battered and beaten, they were all required to report to the commander as well as undergo an inspection to make sure they weren’t bringing back things illegally into the capital.

This was standard procedure and there was just no way around it.

Knowing this, Zack suggested that they ask Cloud’s mother for help. Cloud, who had not even met up with his mother, was reluctant. But despite Cloud’s obvious discomfort at the notion, he couldn’t think of a better way to resolve the issue.

By asking her for help, she would be able to care for the baby until things settled at the capital. It would be easy to pretend that the child was Cloud’s baby brother and that due to her poor health, his mother was now unable to take care of him. Cloud didn’t figure anyone would really check up on the health of his mother. No one had ever bothered asking questions before, and Nibelheim was such a faraway place, the capital honestly probably couldn’t care less.

Another blessing from the village of Nibelheim, was the fact that everyone was acquainted with everyone. That meant that befriending people with power was rather easy and something that usually happened completely accidentaly. And it so happened that Mrs. Rosa, Cloud’s mother’s best friend, had a husband that worked with registration. It wouldn’t be too hard for Cloud’s mother to convince Mrs Rosa to help them, and it would be child'splay for Mrs. Rosa to coax her soft-hearted husband to do them a favor.

Cloud and Zack grinned, somehow the future was looking a little brighter.

~

Cloud’s mother was known notoriously throughout Nibelheim for a being a rather aloof, kind hearted and exceptionally patient woman. She was often seen giggling or hitting people bashfully on
the shoulder, known as an optimist and a mood lifter, she was the smile of the town. Being the extrovert that she was, everyone had found it quite the amusing contrast when she gave birth to the introvert that was Cloud. She was always so light and soft, her blonde hair swaying and her face looking so much younger than what she was.

Cloud couldn’t remember her frowning in anything other than confusion. Never had disapproval been settled in her features, only ever perhaps, slight nervousness and concern had been there to wrinkle her face.

Today however, today she was frowning.

“Cloud…” She started, not even seeing Zack or 0204 behind him. “I was told that you weren’t here.” She was practically grinding her teeth in anger, her eyes shaking with the desire to lash out. “Do you know? Do you know how worried I was?” Cloud couldn’t help but look down at the floor in shame, but this apparently riled up his mother even more. “Your friend dies and the very next day you turn up beaten up??! And then you leave?? Without a word of explanation??!!” Cloud’s mother was positively roaring, a pale winter dragon on the loose, spitting angry fire in its wake. “And then what! No letters for months??!! I suppose it is convenient to just forget about your mother!!”

“móðir” Cloud said near-whisper, looking his mother straight in the eyes he spoke the language which they held so dear “Því miður”. Hearing Cloud's word's, his mother seemed to melt and almost slump into the floor. Her uncharacteristic anger faded away like mist from a hotspring, and now her face contorted into that of pure relief.

“Ský…” She whispered, tears welling in her eyes.

Cloud walked into the house, snowy boots and all, and enveloped his mother in the tightest hug he could muster. “Því miður” he repeated, tears of his own making his eyes sting.

Then they separated, and Cloud’s mother finally looked at him with a smile. Holding both his cheeks in her hands, she reached over and planted a kiss on his forehead. “I’m glad you’re alright Cloudy.” She told him sweetly, caressing his cheek.

But when Cloud smiled back, he was met with a rather ferocious kick to his shin. “But don’t you ever do that again!” she exclaimed, huffing one last time before she turned and walked into the house. “And take off your shoes!”

Cloud turned around, facing a slack-jawed Zack and an amused looking 0204.

“You’re awake.” Cloud said fondly as he turned and walked over to 0204 and pinched his little cheeks till he got a bashful giggle.

“Hard not to be I’d wager, I personally feel like I’ve splashed in the face with cold water.” Zack said as he shook off his ‘shookness’.

“Then imagine how I feel.” Cloud retorted while taking 0204 from Zack’s arms.

“What did you say to her? To make her calm down like that?” Zack asked as he took his gear off. Cloud shrugged as he sat 0204 on the floor. “The only reasonable thing a son should say to their mother after fucking up.”

Being a son who often fucked up, Zack immediately understood. “Oooh.” Was therefore his only
Not having had the chance to acquire any clothing for 0204 yet, Cloud tried his best to wrap the cloth around the baby so that it would somewhat resemble clothes. But well, it was still quite obvious that the wide-eyed baby was definitely a fugitive and Cloud didn’t have a very thorough understanding of how clothes worked anyways.

Meh, this was Cloud’s mother, surely she wouldn’t overreact twice in a day.

~

Cloud’s mother overreacted.

Each question the boys meekly answered was met by her fury turning ten-fold, the pale dragon of Nibelheim back and spitting fire right at their feet. Of course, at the very least, her anger wasn’t directed at them, it was directed at the Empire and the unethical scientists of their country.

Cloud and Zack didn’t tell her too many specifics, but Cloud’s mother wasn’t stupid, she got the gist of things very fast.

But then, as if to put a stop to the dragon’s fury, 0204 tried to worm his way out of Zack’s lap with cutesy little sounds. The living room turned quiet at that, all eyes on 0204 as Zack gave into the little one’s wish. With a pleased little oomph Prompto was on the floor and soon crawling his way over to a potted plant on the floor.

Cloud’s mother took that moment to sit down and rub her throbbing temples. “Does he even have a name?” she asked, her voice tired from the recent yelling.

“No... just a serial number.” Cloud replied, his eyes fixed to the barcode on the baby’s wrist.

“Surely you’re going to give him one, right?”

“But then, as if to put a stop to the dragon’s fury, 0204 tried to worm his way out of Zack’s lap with cutesy little sounds. The living room turned quiet at that, all eyes on 0204 as Zack gave into the little one’s wish. With a pleased little oomph Prompto was on the floor and soon crawling his way over to a potted plant on the floor.

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“No... just a serial number.” Cloud replied, his eyes fixed to the barcode on the baby’s wrist.

“Surely you’re going to give him one, right?”

“Of course!” Zack this time replied, rather loudly at that. And the sound of his own volume, his cheeks flushed in embarrassment. “Ahem, on our way here... I thought of a name.” he announced.

Cloud frowned softly, taking Zack’s hand in his. “You didn’t tell me this.”

Zack smiled sheepishly, “I know, it’s just... I wasn’t sure you’d like it.”

Cloud was about to say something along the lines of you idiot, of course i’d like it when Mrs. Strife interrupted: “Let’s hear it then.”

“Well, the name has to sound Insomnian, right? Because we want him to fit in well and all.” Zack started, and Cloud squealed on the inside. Cute. “And since we both have foreign last names, I figured he shouldn’t have any of them. Also I couldn’t possibly pick between one of ours, and the both of them put together sound weird.”

Cloud rolled that around in his brain. Fair Strife, Strife Fair. Hmmmm, yeah, definitely weird enough to become bullying material.

“So I figured the last name should sound Insomnian too. He’ll have an easier time getting jobs that way, not to say Insomnia is racist, but then, we know how it is.”
Cloud nodded, just as all the glaives probably would have as well.

“So,” Zack said, looking at Cloud and Cloud’s mother with cute nervousness. “I figured, Prompto Argentum sounded quite nice.”

And the meaning behind it all hit Cloud like a bolt of lightning.

Prompto Argentum.

Quick Silver.

Quicksilver, the gun that had saved their lives earlier.

Of course, Cloud’s mother didn’t know, didn’t understand the implication. After all, they hadn’t told her about the encounter with the strange man in the snowfields.

But Cloud understood, and to show Zack that he did, he gave his hand an emotional squeeze.


Prompto Argentum, Quicksilver, the gun which protects.

It was both a blessing for his future as an adult, and a hope for his present.

By giving him this name, Cloud and Zack hoped that this heavenly protection would remain and keep 0204 safe for years to come. At the same time, the name was a wish that the boy would become someone who would be able to protect others. Someone who would be there for his friends when they were in a pinch, reliable, good.

Prompto Argentum.

“Insomnians sure have strange names.” Cloud’s mother broke in, effectively breaking Cloud and Zack’s reverie.

“Mom” Cloud deadpanned. “Really?”

“Come on, we’re all ‘foreigners’ here, let’s be honest. It’s important to be honest Cloudy.” His mother lectured.

Cloud rolled his eyes, he wasn’t at the age to be lectured anymore, come on. “You say this cause’ you’re uncultured.” Cloud retorted childishly.

“You got that right little man.” She retorted right back, her laughter like a silver wind chimes fluttering. “No no, you know Mamma is kidding, don’t you?” then she turned to Zack. “I’m kidding of course, Zack. The name sounds lovely.” She said with a smile, and Zack audibly sighed in relief, which in turn made Cloud laugh.

“Prompto baby~” Cloud’s mother called towards 0204 who was still marveling at the potted fire lily, which indeed gave off its own warm glow.

When 0204, or well, Prompto didn’t react, Cloud got up from his seat and sat next to the baby boy, looking at the flower with just as much interest.

“This used to be my favorite flower too Prompto.” Cloud told him. “I’m glad you like it.”
When Cloud turned his head towards the boy, he saw that his big blue eyes were staring right back at him and when Cloud smiled, so did Prompto.

He took Prompto's little hand and guided it to the fire lily, and when the small chubby fingertips touched the petals, Prompto squealed with impressive high pitch before he fell into a fit of giggles.

Somewhere in the background, Cloud's mother mentioned that she was going to find Prompto some proper clothes.

“Isn’t it nice? This flower helps keep our house warm.” Cloud continued.

Prompto this time carefully touched the flower on his own, and he squealed and giggled just as he’d done the first time.

“You can take a petal with you and use it as a natural hotpack. Isn’t it super awesome?”

“Dahh! Da!” Prompto replied

“That’s right.” Cloud cooed. “Actually, the plant isn’t native to Nibelheim. It’s too cold for something like this to grow here. It comes from across the country-”

“It comes from Gongaga.” Zack finished for Cloud, sitting down on the other side of Prompto, and giving the kid a big goofy grin that made him erupt into another giggling fit.

“That’s right. The plants were a gift to the people of Nibelheim when all the small countries where united under our king, a longgg long time ago.”

Prompto turned to touch the flower again, this time with great enthusiasm. And Cloud seeing this, reacted faster than he could think, gripping the boy’s hand as it was mere centimeters from the plant.

At this Prompto face started to redden, and with one warning hiccup, he started to cry.

“Ahhh! I’m sorry! It’s not that you can’t touch it Prompto! You can touch it! You just have to be careful! I’m sorry!” Cloud said, completely panicking as Prompto wailed and wailed.

Annoyingly, Zack was laughing his ass off at the spectacle, and of course, Cloud’s mother choose that exact moment to come and judge the hell out of Cloud.

“Come to granny.” Cloud’s mother cooed as she picked up Prompto, running a hand across his back as she shushed him gently. “I see you boys have a fair bit of catching up to do if you want to raise this kid right.” She told them.

Cloud just made unreadable hand movements to try and convey his distress at the situation, making his mother laugh and put the clothes on sofa before making her way over.

“Come to granny.” Cloud’s mother cooed as she picked up Prompto, running a hand across his back as she shushed him gently. “I see you boys have a fair bit of catching up to do if you want to raise this kid right.” She told them.

Cloud and Zack both got up from where they were sitting on the floor, “You think our plan is going to work?” Cloud asked his mother.

She smiled gently at that. “Sure it’s going to work, two great brains are working on it, isn’t that right?”

Zack barked a laugh. “I’m flattered Mrs. Strife, but I think we both know who the brain is.”

Mrs. Strife chuckled. “Is that so? Well, Cloudy here has told me numeral times of your intellect, so I
wouldn’t put it past you to come up with something like this Zack.” She told him sweetly before turning to Cloud. “I was wondering though, why do you boys have to raise this kid? I know I’m getting older, but I’d like to think I’m more than capable of raising one more rascal.”

Cloud shifted his weight where he stood, a clear sign that this was a topic he’d been avoiding. “You’re totally right mom, and I agree with you one hundred percent. The thing is though… Prompto, as you know, comes from a bit of a… dangerous background. I for one, know all about, umm, his circumstances, and I don’t know if I feel comfortable with having him out of my sight since I am in fact, the only one that understands this all. Fully.”

Mrs. Strife sighed, but relented. “Of course, I understand Cloud. It’s just, this is quite young an age for you to settle, isn’t it?”

Cloud shrugged, a cocky grin now on his features, “look who’s talking”, he challenged.

Mrs. Strife scoffed, obviously a little put off, but also impressed. “You’ve gotten cocky since the last time I saw you.”

“I’m sure you’re quite happy about that.” Cloud continued.

Mrs. Strife shrugged. “It’s not bad.”

And then they were laughing.

~

“So we should probably wash him.” Cloud commented after eating the quick meal that his mother had fixed for the four of them.

Mrs. Strife rose an eyebrow at that, knowing Cloud was saying this for a reason. “Why?” she asked.

Cloud looked sheepish. “He… he actually might be covered in some very uhhh… weird green gooey stuff.”

Mrs. Strife’s eyes considerably widened at that, but quickly this expression made way for exasperation, punctuated nicely with a long sigh. “That sounds… well, a little disturbing, I must say.”

“It’s a long story.” Zack said by way of explanation.

“I’m sure.” She said in kind dismissiveness, then she turned to Cloud. “Well? Aren’t you going to get him?”

“Oh, right.” Cloud said dumbly as he turned to Prompto. “Prompto.” He called, but to no avail. “Promppto.” He called again, once more, no response.

This time Cloud got up and walked towards the baby boy, “Prompto?” he asked, poking the kid on the shoulder, only to receive indifferent “mm” in return.

Huh! Was he still sulky about before?? About the plant thing?!

Then, like a sudden storm, feet approached with the agility of… well, of one Zack Fair.
With no warning, Zack picked the kid up and mock-flew him around the living room. The reaction was immediate, joyful laughter sounded from Prompto loud and clear. Zack made all kinds of silly noises and brought Prompto closer and further away from objects all over the house.

Cloud was almost jealous at how successful Zack was being in cheering up the kid.

“Aaaanddd, next destination is the Strife bathroom, nyooooommm!!” Zack announced just before whizzing past Cloud and into the bathroom.

Inside the bathroom Mrs. Strife was already testing the water to get the temperature just right. She looked up and smiled when Prompto and Zack where in the bathroom. “Whose ready for a bath?~” She asked playfully, and Prompto, still on a happy high giggled at her. She nodded to Zack in a you-can-undress-him-now kind of way, and Zack gave an understanding nod back.

Tickling Prompto, Zack managed to get the kid out of his clothes just as Cloud peeked his head in awkwardly.

Mrs. Strife, sensing Cloud’s unease, smiled at him. “Come in Cloud! Join the party!” she then sang out, effectively making Cloud relax and enter the small bathroom.

When Cloud had made his way over to his mother, crouched down by her side, she whispered to him: “I will teach you what I know, but once I do, I will leave. Alright?”

Cloud hadn’t been expecting this, so it took him a few seconds before he nodded. “Alright.”

His mother nodded, pleased, then she raised her voice. “If the boy is really covered in… whatever it is you say, then I suppose we must be quite thorough.” She caught Zack’s eyes and made a motion for him to hand the baby over, which he did after softly pinching Prompto’s soft belly a couple more times. Mrs. Strife placed Prompto down on the warm white ceramic and started gently running the water over his body.

Prompto absolutely loved it.

In fact, he might have loved it a little too much.

Soon he was shaking his head like a dog a spraying water whichever way he could.

Mrs. Strife laughed. “How funny! You used to hate showering Cloud. You just wanted to stay cuddled up in your blankets all day!”

Cloud mumbled something bitterly and Zack laughed, and Prompto laughed because they were laughing.

Then Mrs. Strife handed Cloud the water and told him to shampoo Prompto’s hair and be wary that no excess get in the kid’s eyes when he washed it out.

Apparently Prompto loved to get his hair washed, and they all marveled at how happy and easy it was to take care of the kid.

Well, of course, they were all wet now, so there was that. But at least he wasn’t crying.

“If we want to cleanse him right, we should soak him.” Mrs. Strife said sagely.

Zack nodded as a pupil does when his teacher speaks wise words. “I agree.” He agreed.

“Cloud, I’ll get what you’ll need and then you can do the rest.” She said as she got up, “I want to
Cloud shrugged. “Well, there’s salt.”

“I see that. But what’s all the rest?”

“Sea witch stuff” Cloud said easily

Zack seemed interested. “And what does that mean?”

“Means that the worship of Leviathan used to be done a little differently in the North.” Cloud said as he gathered the ingredients. “This is sea salt.”

“From the northern sea I’d wager?” Zack asked as he regarded the blueish tint of it.

Cloud nodded as he put it in the tub, sprinkling it prettily to entertain Prompto. “This is alpine jasmine.” Cloud continued, this time making the flower petals rain down as Prompto tried to catch them. “And this is icecrown, which is technically associated with Shiva, but oh well. Leviathan is generally known to not being exactly the protecting type, so we get that from Shiva.”

“Okay stop, what?”

Cloud grinned, now swirling the water around Prompto with his index finger. “It’s just old mumbo jumbo. Nifelheim hasn’t really adopted the new ways of understanding the Six, after all there were never really any “Six” in the first place. There are lots of God, some are just more powerful than others. Odin was an example of that.” Cloud explained, suddenly recalling all those old dusty books he’d read as a child instead of out and making friends. Funny. Despite it all, Cloud found he no longer had any childhood regrets.

“Old books tell of leviathan being one with the northern sea. People would bathe in sea at winter in the hopes that Leviathan would wash away all negativity and wrong-doings. But a lot of people died doing this, since well, you might have heard of how unmerciful the sea Astral is.”

Zack snorted. “I might have.”

“So people did offerings instead, in their own little altars. Tried to communicate with her through her favorite things. Trying to get her blessing and all that.”

“So… is that what were doing? I thought you weren’t religious.”

“I’m not. I just do this cause’ its relaxing and it smells good. In the end, I do believe in positive vibes, and that’s sort of all in trying to soak Prompto in. Should there be any protecting benefits from a mere bath, I’d like to think it was my own energies doing.”

The boys continued talking, and Cloud continued explaining about the old ways of Nibelheim which had by now just turned into habits which no one remembered the origin of. Zack asked why Cloud had never mentioned any of this, and Cloud had admitted that he just hadn’t thought about it. Just like the rest of the Nibel people, this was just something that came to him without much thought.

As they pulled the plug on the bath and watched the water drain, Cloud, as his mother had taught him when he was little, was to imagine that all the bad things were washed away in the water and left
behind a body ready to start anew.

He dearly hoped this could be the case for Prompto, and he suspected fondly that this had been his mother’s intention all along.

~

“So your mom doesn’t just look young?” Zack asked as they changed clothes and got ready for a nights rest before heading back to the capital.

Cloud looked over just as he was taking his pants off, “Yeah, she had me when she was... what? Twenty-years-old?”

“Damn… that means my mother is ten years older? Holy hell.”

“Well, she sure was a free spirit. At least for Nibelheim standards.”

“So are the two of us I should think. We’re younger than what she was.”

It was quiet then, the only sounds audible where that of Mrs. Strife playing with Prompto downstairs. “That’s true.” Cloud replied absentmindedly, his eyes somewhat vacant.

“Cloud…” Zack started, putting a hand on the other’s back. “Do you… have regrets?”

This quickly brought Cloud back to the real world, and with a reassuring hand on Zack’s thigh he smiled softly and replied: “Of course not.” But hen Cloud couldn’t help but look down, and soon he was mindlessly biting his lip.

Way to be obvious.

“But?” Zack asked, a smile in his voice.

Cloud looked up again. “But… I don’t know. I just… What are we going to be? Now I mean?”

Zack looked confused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Cloud started, rubbing circles on Zack’s bare thigh so as to distract himself. “In our made up story, I’m Prompto’s big brother. Simple as that, right?”

Zack still looked as if he didn’t fully understand. “Right.”

“And yet…” Cloud looked up then, over to where a bundle of clothes had been put up and an old teddy bear on top of it. “I don’t feel like that title is… adequate.”

Zack too looked over to where Prompto was, and suddenly a soft smile appeared on his lips. The hand he’d had on Cloud’s back went lower and eventually slinked around Cloud’s thin waist, pulling the smaller glaive closer to himself.

“Yeah.” He said. “I know what you mean.”

And Cloud desperately hoped that Zack did. For what was in his heart, was too heavy a thing for him to say. Cloud could only hope, that Zack would understand, and somehow, that he’d share the
same sentiment.

“You know, I never had the courage to say this before,” Zack started, and Cloud could feel himself go rigid in anticipation “But I always wanted to have a kid.”

“I can’t remember ever feeling that I didn’t want to have one to be honest. Weird, I know, but maybe it’s because I never had any siblings.”

Zack chuckled, but there was something to it… embarrassment?

Cloud tried to turn his head and look to confirm it, but Zack quickly sprawled a gentle hand in his face. “Please don’t look at me right now Cloud, or else I might just never be able to say it.”

“Alright.” Cloud responded, but just as he did, he turned his body completely and got on top of Zack’s lap. Zack had frozen in place at first, thinking perhaps that Cloud wouldn’t heed his request. But once Cloud was situated just right, his head hanging over Zack’s shoulder and facing the wall, and his arms wrapped loosely around Zack’s neck, it became obvious that he was just getting cosy.

Zack laughed once he realized, but instead of saying anything, he just squeezed Cloud in a loving hug.

“Go on then.” Cloud instructed when Zack’s hold started to loosen.

Zack chuckled. “Right.” He said, and then he did go on. “When… When I fell in love with you Cloud… For a moment, I didn’t really know what to do.”

“I had always imagined myself getting together with a nice girl, getting a big house, a bunch of dogs, and with her… I’d have some kids.”

“I always loved taking care of kids, and I… I really wanted to see how my genes were going to be passed down. Would they have some of my personality? Their mothers? Or would they turn completely different from their parents?”

Hearing Zack speak, Cloud’s eyes were slowly beginning to water. He couldn’t help it really, he’d wanted to be mature for the time when they finally discussed this…but hearing Zack talk about his childhood plans of establishing a nice normal happy family, just made an old and deep wound bleed inside his heart.

“I always planned on how I’d raise my kids just right, they’d be good boys and girls. Well mannered, happy, kind…”

Cloud couldn’t help it, sucking in a breath he added: “Honorable?”

Zack chuckled again his laughter vibrating through his toned chest and sending waves of warmth through Cloud’s body.

“Duh~” Zack said childishly. “But,” Zack began again, now running a finger carefully across each of Cloud’s vertebrae. “then there was you, and you, Cloud, from the moment I fell for you, I knew I didn’t want anyone else in my life.”

“You were the one.”

“It was so obvious to me. Like…like a fact of life.”

“Like getting a notification saying ‘Ding! You’ve found your soulmate, congratulations!’”
“Zack~” Cloud chastised him for getting off topic, but at the same time, a smile had now appeared on his face, along with a swarm of butterflies in his tummy.

“Anyways, at some point, I was just really sad. I thought too much about the future that I wouldn’t get to see if I stayed with you. But then I talked to Angeal about it and he told me something really cool.”

Cloud snorted “You think everything Angeal says is cool.”

Zack smiled and pinched Cloud’s side a little. “Shush will you?”

“It’s not even a lie.” Cloud murmured brattily.

“Anyways, Angeal… he actually laughed at me. Told me that he didn’t think I was that big of an idiot. Then after thoroughly criticizing me, he told me that life didn’t come without a small amount of sacrifice. Some people have to sacrifice more than others, and he told me I was lucky, if it was only something like this, that I should be thankful.”

“He told me that most people couldn’t dream to find their soulmate, not even in a lifetime of searching.”

“I had found mine so young, he said that having so many years to spend with the love of my life was the biggest blessing I could ever ask for, and that I shouldn’t take it for granted.”

Zack huffed. “Then he called me an idiot again.”

“After I left, I imagined my childhood dream of paternity once more. But without you in the picture… it just seemed so… empty. And the more I thought about it, the sadder I got. I even dreamed about it that night. Dream, hah! More like nightmare. Suddenly, it just frightened me. Because more than anything, I just needed you in my life. Nothing, would never feel right without you by my side.”

Cloud buried his head in the crook of Zack’s neck. “You wouldn’t have to sacrifice anything if you hadn’t met me.”

Zack, hearing this, rather forcefully pried Cloud back so that he could look him in the eyes.

They were on fire.

With a lot of passion and gusto, Zack leaned in for a faceplant of a kiss. Then he encased Cloud’s cheeks with his hand, somewhat forcing them into a fish-like kissy shape. “There is no way that I could ever be as happy as I am as when I’m with you! If I had never met you.. ugh! I don’t even want to think about it!”

“You understand what I’m saying Cloud??” Zack asked passionately and Cloud could do nothing but nod.

Zack grinned and kissed Cloud’s fish mouth before letting his poor cheeks go.

“I feel, just like I think you feel.”

“That I want to raise him. As a parent.”

“With you.”
“With you, with you I would do anything.”

Chapter End Notes

:DDDDDD
To be honest, this fic project was way too big for me. The sheer amount of lore and amount of character development i wanted this to have... so overwhelming.

And then there was this chapter.... this chapter was the END OF ME. You cannot IMAGINE how many times i had to write and re-write and then just get so fed up with this chapter because it is SO lore heavy, and tbh i suck at lore.

There is this whole theory of Materia in this, which is based on several FF games all at once, and omg, the sheer scale of research i've been doing just to get some very mediocre and not even that impressive lore, just sucks. This chapter sucked the life outta me, and it took me a goddamn YEAR before i wanted to tackle it again. Worst part is that it has been sitting and being very much done, for a long time, but i was never satisfied. I am STILL not satisfied. And yet, i still want to have an end to this behemoth sized project i got myself into, and SO, FINALLY, this chapter is out. love it or hate, but getting over this one, means GOOD TIMES ahead! and i am excited for it B) I hope you are too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On their final day in Nibelheim, Cloud found himself lying on the floor of his old living room, Materia dangerously out in the open, and Prompto playing with some toys right next to him.

Cloud held the Materia up towards the ceiling and stared at it, as he sometimes did, cursing himself for ever having discovered it.

He could feel the magic coursing from his very fingertips and fairways down his forearm, just by holding the damn thing.

He wondered once more, about the kinds of rules it followed, was the Odin that resided within it, physically within it, or was the Materia merely a portal to the world in which the astral was locked within?

Was Odin a sentient being with a mind of his own? Did he think and feel like humans did, or did he act on instinct, much like animals did?

It was common knowledge that the Six, the Holy Astrals, were very much sentient beings. In fact they were considered much wiser and knowledgeable than any human would ever have the capacity of being. Which, go figure, wasn’t it always like that with so called holy entities?

But before Cloud’s train of thought wandered too far, he focused back on Odin and the danger he posed. Cloud figured he was coming closer to understanding how he worked, and how he’d been able to summon him on that night. But perhaps one of the more pressing facts, was the one that make Cloud absolutely sure that Odin was not the only one of his kind…

Surely, if the Empire was to rise against Lucis, Odin, and whichever more Lower tier Astrals were found, would certainly be able to help them in their victory. Cloud’s biggest worry however, was the Mako fluid he’d found with the lab that they had now blown to pieces. The nature of it greatly disturbed Cloud, and he felt suddenly that he hadn’t quite managed to study it enough to feel certain
about leaving the doctors behind it, alive and intact.

He wished suddenly, to know whether the Mako could affect or interfere with crystal magic, and if so, whether or not it was able to activate Materia.

Zack and his mother would soon be back from their stroll around town, and so Cloud put down the Materia on the soft carpet. All Cloud did was quickly get the holster he’d now made for the Materia, so that it wouldn’t be affecting the flow of the crystal magic in Cloud’s body. But just as Cloud had turned, the house suddenly began to shake, and a strange rumbling, not unlike the sound of approaching horse hooves, bellowed throughout the room. When Cloud was back in the living room, he came back just in time to see Prompto sitting very still, his blow eyes glowing so strongly they were almost white, just as the Materia, which was now in his hands, glowed just the same.

Cloud rolled forward with quick military grace, and quickly removed the Materia from Prompto.

The child was immediately crying afterwards, and Cloud tried his best to calm the child whilst his mind and his heart was running so fast he felt he was about to have a panic attack or a heart attack or anything that might result in his very untimely death.

This meant so much, and once more Cloud pessimist outlook on the future turned even darker. He was now desperately shushing and rocking Prompto back and forth, but he no longer really knew who he was trying to calm.

Naturally, Cloud couldn’t tell a living soul about this occurrence.

~

Going back to the capital without Prompto felt wrong.

It was a, after all, a life they were responsible for now. To simply leave him behind, even if he was safe in Cloud’s mothers arms, left behind a nauseating feeling in their guts as well as a bitter aftertaste…

They were able to cope however, as both Cloud and Zack knew that they’d see Prompto again, of course, this would only be after a sufficient amount of time had passed for the whole ordeal to seem less suspicious. After all, just waltzing back to the capital, baby in hand, might just raise a couple eyebrows.

Thankfully however, the three weeks of waiting time they’d planned, didn’t include much waiting at all.

Time flew by fast with all the things Cloud had to attend to.

~

After returning to the capital and undergoing the needed inspections, Cloud and Zack had to relay their mission report directly to the King and his counsel, the mission was apparently of that great
importance. Even General Sephiroth and Vice General Genesis were present.

Needless to say, the King and his counsel seemed very content with the destruction of the research papers and the subjects. There was some discussion as to how the Empire would rebuke should they come to suspect Lucis of the sabotage, here Cloud and Zack held their tongue in fear of being reprimanded for speaking out of turn. Politics weren’t a glaives business after all, they just did the mission assigned to them.

Once the very lengthy three hour discussion concluded, Cloud and Zack interviewed for details every once in a while, the counsel left the conference room.

Left was the King, the General and Vice General.

Genesis was quick to approach Cloud, long strides crossing the room in an instant, his burgundy cape swaying brilliantly behind him. His eyes were alive with interest.

“You must tell me all about what you’ve learned Strife! You’ve kept your explanations very kid-friendly, which you admittedly should have, those old men and women wouldn’t understand a thing!” Genesis really was quite blunt, and nervously Cloud gazed over to where the King was standing and watching their conversation unfold, but instead of reprimanding stare, the good King looked like he was quite entertained. Genesis was quick to shake Cloud and get his undivided attention back to him “But as for me, you know I’ll understand, and I want every juicy detail! And I want to discuss it all right away!”

Just as Genesis was about to forcefully drag Cloud away, Cloud managed to catch the King’s gaze once more. “Your majesty,” he called, and this made Genesis turn and realize that not everyone besides him and Cloud had not disappeared after all.

The King rose his chin in silent acknowledgement.

“I wanted to ask if you could grant me an audience, I have some things I wish to discuss with you.” For whatever reason, Cloud’s gaze choose that moment to drift towards General Sephiroth, who looked like his curiosity was piqued now more than it was even when Cloud and Zack revealed the Empire’s secret weapon; and there was something quite off putting about that realization. “In private.” Cloud concluded, his eyes still on the General.

General Sephiroth’s thin silver eyebrow rose at this, a mixture of amusement, surprise, acknowledgement and underlying tones of annoyance crossing his mysterious features.

No doubt about it, Cloud thought as he turned his gaze back to the King.

Cloud didn’t trust the General.

He didn’t have any conclusive reason as to why.

He just… didn’t. Something had seemed off ever since the incident with Crowe, and as such, Cloud wasn’t especially keen on involving the Silver General in these very delicate affairs.

Cloud turned his gaze back to the King, who seemed to be racking his brain for a possible slot of time wherein he could possibly accommodate a mere glaive.

“How long would you need Glaive Strife?” He asked once he seemingly came back empty handed.

“Perhaps one hour, perhaps more. I’m sorry for being unprecise your Majesty, but I think it will depend on how you take what I have to say.”
The King furrowed his brows, “Is this of great import?”

Cloud swallowed. “It is, sir.”

The King scratched his beard at that. “I see.” He said absentmindedly as he walked towards the door and towards Cloud. “Well, as my father liked to say ‘things of great import should always be discussed over great food’, and I really do not have any other time than during dinner, so perhaps we could discuss it then?”

Cloud could almost hear Zack’s very faint and contained gasp, and the way his gaze rapidly turned to Cloud in a way that said ‘Did the king seriously just invite you to dinner????’ made Cloud want to snort at his goofy boyfriend.

Zack was going to hate him for this.

“It would be my honor sir.” Cloud answered with a bow.

~

“I hope you’ll forgive me, usually when I have guests for dinner, I dine with them in the great hall. You are, of course, just as much a guest as any other – still – it has been a while since I’ve dined with my son, I hope you can indulge me.” The King spoke humbly, almost embarrassed that he was treating Cloud any lesser than the important officials from overseas.

Cloud shook his head, this was a lot less nerve wracking.

The King and Cloud walked, Cloud one and a half steps behind the king, as was mandatory for someone of his rank, and soon the king pushed open two double doors with great gusto.

“Daddy!!” a shrill voice screamed and a great big smile bloomed on the King’s face.

“Noct,” The King called back fondly, getting down on one knee as his son, Prince Noctis, ran into his open arms.

The prince laughed as his father hoisted him up and spun him around but promptly stopped when he spotted Cloud, the stranger in the room.

“Whos zzat?” He asked shyly in his father’s ear, but before the King even had a chance of replying, a head peaked around the corner.

Light brown hair bobbed and green eyes grew wide behind a sharp pair of glasses, “Sir Strife!”

Okay, Cloud hardly qualified as a sir but alright.

“Hey Iggy,” Cloud greeted and waved, his smile coming to him easily now that there was a familiar face present.

The Prince looked from Ignis to Cloud, to his father and back to Cloud. Feeling confident he puffed himself and asked louder this time. “Who are you?”

“Cloud Strife, Glaive to the royal crown.” Cloud introduced, gracefully kneeling before the prince.
“He’s a guest.” The King elaborated kindly as he sat his son down.

Cloud was still looking down when small feet approached him, and when he looked up he saw that Ignis was standing before him. Cloud grinned, “You’ve gotten taller Iggy.”

But little Ignis didn’t reply, instead he hooked his arms around Cloud’s neck and dove in for a hug. Cloud cracked and melted into the hug, a dumb smile on his face, because oh my days, Ignis was such a cutie!!

“You’re safe.” Ignis concluded, but it somewhat sounded like a question.

By the Gods, Ignis already knew the dangers of going on missions, how on earth had the boy grown up so quick? Were they burdening him with too many responsibilities already?

“I’m safe.” Cloud reassured him.

Soon the Prince was standing next to Ignis, a jealous frown on his face. He tucked at Ignis’s shirt, obviously trying to get him away from Cloud.

Apparently Ignis didn’t give this much thought and mindlessly took Noctis’ hand into his own to reassure him that he wasn’t going anywhere; his eyes remained on Cloud however.

“Gladiolus worries.” He shot into Cloud’s heart and conscious, “does he know you are back? That sir Fair is back?”

Cloud laughed, it was so cute to hear this little kid trying his best to speak so formally “No need to call me sir Iggy, if anything, I should probably be the one calling you that.” Cloud said and winked. “But I’ve yet to see him, although I’m sure he’s most likely managed to hunt Zack down by now.” The two shared a smile at that, knowing well how obsessed Gladiolus was with Zack.

Just then, three maids entered and set down the dinner, a fourth maid, looking a lot older and superior, in both rank and grace, bowed to the audience and announced, with a formal and almost clean voice, that dinner was served.

She looked at Ignis then, and motioned very discretely for the boy to come with her. He nodded back, just as discretely, and turned towards the little Prince to give him a good bye hug.

“See you tomorrow Noct.” He told the boy before turning towards Cloud, a question in his green eyes.

“See you around Iggy.” Cloud reassured him, and Ignis couldn’t help the small upturn of his lips at the promise.

“See you around,” He replied and at last he turned towards the King, bowed to him and said a curt and polite goodbye before leaving, the older woman guiding him with a gentle palm splayed out across his back.

“Why can’t Ignis stay for dinner dad?” Prince Noctis asked petulantly as he made his way towards his seat.

“I’m sure his mother wants to eat with him, much like how I want to eat with you.” The King told his son.

Clever, Cloud couldn’t help but acknowledge when Noctis took the bait.
Finally they were all seated, and now that Cloud was awaiting the King to begin his meal, he wondered if discussing this in front of his son was a clever approach.

“Permission to speak sir,” Cloud began, and the king looked up in surprise at that, suddenly a laugh made its way out of him when he saw that Cloud was being very serious about asking permission.

“My boy, we’re having dinner together,” The king said, as if that suddenly made his rank any less higher than Cloud’s “There is no need for permission, speak freely.” He told him, making a ‘freely-looking’ gesture with his hand.

Cloud cleared his throat. “I’m not sure if… Does Prince Noctis usually… attend meetings of this sort?”

The King smiled, “Well, he has to at start at some time, don’t you agree?” The King was obviously teasing and Cloud couldn’t help but fidget in his seat, he didn’t especially want the kid to go off telling the whole world about what he was going to tell the King. The King chuckled as he saw Cloud’s unease, and in a reassuring gesture, he leaned towards Cloud and said, “Just between the two of us, my son’s attention span is very minimal. He usually forgets everything I tell him or gets distracted or falls asleep. You needn’t worry yourself too much.”

Cloud couldn’t help but think that the King was greatly underestimating the importance of what he had to say, still, Cloud couldn’t very well defy the King of this country, and so, with a last glance at Prince Noctis (who very conveniently seemed locked in a stare down competition with the veggies on his plate), Cloud began.

“It’s about my research your Majesty.” Cloud announced shortly.

“About the crystal? And the… what was the term you used again?”

Cloud swallowed, fuck… he was really doing this. “The lower tier astrals, sir.”

The King nodded, “Ah yes,” he acknowledged, and unsaid went the disappointment the King had felt when none of Cloud’s research had come to fruition. Despite the unsaid words, Cloud felt their weight all the same.

Cloud licked his dry lips, wondering for the last time if this was the right course of action. Cloud looked down at the plate of food he had yet to touch. “I have withheld information from you regarding my findings, sir.”

Cloud didn’t need to look to at the King to know that his eyes had probably widened considerably.

Withholding information from the King, Gods, and then admitting to it?? You’d have to be a complete fucking idiot.

Cloud tried, without much success, to push out of his mind the fact that not even two decades past, performing this crime issued a capital punishment.

This was perhaps one of the many things going through the King’s mind, it was all interrupted however, when a childish voice sounded through the room.

“Dad.” He called, “Dad.” He called again. When his dad did look over, he gave him a sheepish smile. “Beans?” He asked, clearly eager to get rid of his green beans, but his behavior said he already knew the answer to his question.

“It’s impolite to not eat the food that’s been prepared for you Noct. Do you want Ignis’ mom to be
Noct crossed his arms cutely and pouted in the defeat, and the King chuckled warmly.

And then, quite interestingly, the King’s attention remained on his son.

“So, Noct, what sorts of interesting things have you been doing today?”

Suddenly, Cloud was effectively locked out of the conversation.

It was, all things considered, a very light punishment. But of course, Cloud was sure that the punishment didn’t quite end here.

What if he really would be sentenced to die?

It wouldn’t need to be a public thing. Hiding it would be quite easy a thing to do.

Or if that didn’t happen, perhaps he’d be exiled from the country instead. Or perhaps the most likely of possibilities in this day and age, he’d be put in jail for an indefinite time.

…No.

Cloud couldn’t afford that.

King he may be, but Cloud had people to come home to. He had his mother, and he had Zack and he even had Prompto now.

With a surge of confidence, Cloud lifted his fork and began to eat.

He felt how the Kings gaze flitted to him at the action, understandably really, he’d most likely been sure the glaive would have neglected to eat due to his humbleness.

But no, Cloud needed to make his stance known. Needed, perhaps not to become equal in status to the King, but become equal as human. This was, after all, a matter that greatly affected the world at large, and the world belonged to all that live there.

He couldn’t be the fragile Cloud that people had grown accustomed to.

~

When the Prince had finished his dinner, he sprinted off to the floor to play with his very expensive looking toys.

At this, the King methodically wiped his mouth with a white handkerchief before finally turning towards Cloud. “Usually, I would question why on earth someone would admit to the crime you’ve committed… You could have gotten away with it you know, I did trust you.”

The words cut like the sharpest blade, twisting and turning right in Cloud’s gut.

_Trust._

Trusted by the King.
Well, he *did* trust him.

Past tense, very important.

And Cloud desperately needed to turn that trust to present tense.

“I had reasons your Majesty.” Cloud told the King as his gaze strongly locked with his royal Highness.

“Let’s hear them then.” He said, making a grand gesture that came across as rather mocking. Almost as if daring Cloud to say anything that could possibly justify his crime.

Well, justify he would.

Formally, he began to speak once more. “As you might recall, following the expedition to research Odin, I returned to announce that the nature of these lower tier astrals were purely mythical, and that I encountered no evidence of his actual existence.”

“This was a lie then.” The King said matter-of-factly.

Cloud’s legs were shaking with nervousness and he could he feel cold sweat on the back of his neck, he wanted to look down in shame so badly. But he stood his ground.

“Yes, your Majesty.”

The King made a gesture as if to say, *elaborate.*

“I found something,” Cloud started and extracted the materia from his pocket, placing it slow atop the table. “I’ve taken to calling it Materia.”

The King leaned closer, his eyes intently inspecting the foreign object atop his dinner table. All irritation seemed suddenly forgotten; replaced with it was a childish curiosity.

He looked up at Cloud. “What is it then?”

“I can’t quite say yet sir, but as I understand it so far. It is not a crystal, as in the same kind of the royal one that is kept in the palace. It is instead, a kind of crystallization of either life or magic. Which, from my research, are two things that might coincide either way. Therefore, it is, in a way, a crystallization of Odin himself.”

The King’s breath hitched. “Truly?” he asked, his eyes not leaving the materia.

Cloud nodded, although the king, fixated as he was, did not see it.

“What does this mean? How does it function?” he asked, his eyes roaming the marble.

Cloud shifted. It was now or never. “Your majesty, I don’t mean to come off as impudent, all though I’m sure it will sound like it either way, but before I share my knowledge regarding this, I would like to make a bargain.”

The King furrowed his brows, clearly he agreed that impudent was an understatement, what with Cloud already having committed the crime of negligence to relay information. “A bargain you say?”

Cloud nodded. “I would… like to retire as a glaive, sir.”

To this the King’s eyes widened, “You realize that this is not what I was expecting you to say,
right?” Then, unexpectedly, the king laughed. “Most would ask for riches!” Then he furrowed his eyebrows again in agitated thought. “And you, Strife, you’ve always been so, so… dedicated. I can’t fathom why you, of all people, would wish to retire, especially after a discovery such as this one.”

Cloud shifted his weight nervously, he was really trying to get himself killed. “Honestly sir, I don’t quite, umm, trust this matter with… well, anyone really. Not even myself, the grandeur of it is too much, the power… God’s… The only reason, with all due respect sir, that I am telling you this, is because I saw no other way of getting discharged. I know that it has never happened before, only in the exception of battle damage so severe that the body can no longer function, and… I really would quite like to keep my limbs in check.”

When the King said nothing, Cloud final dared to look up, and when he did, he saw an odd look in King’s eyes. They were almost fond. “My, my, we’ve got something truly big on our hands, don’t we?”

Cloud simply nodded.

“What more is there to your bargain then?”

“Right, well, as I’ve mentioned, my retirement. Secondly, I wish for a royal promise that this knowledge is to remain strictly confidential between the two of us, and lastly unlimited travelling to and from the capital.”

The King inclined his head. “Travelling? Care to explain why?”

“I will need to have your consent to these conditions before I do, your Majesty.” Cloud added, his tone level and surprisingly business-like.

The King looked impressed, so he nodded. “I’ve put my faith in you before Cloud Strife, I see now that I was not wrong in doing so. Therefore I shall put my trust in you yet again. To whatever your research may find, you have my full support. I accept the conditions.”

Cloud nodded, but a the tight feeling in his chest that had been borderline hurting, finally dispersed, like a dam that was finally being bust open so that water could flow naturally.

“The reason for the travelling pass is because I’m under the impression that there is more materia around the world. No, I know there is. The existence of Odin is enough to prove this.”

The King looked suddenly enlightened. “Ah! I see now your reason for wanting retirement from the glaive force.” Cloud nodded, knowing the King understood. “A normal glaive wouldn’t have the time nor access to travel to different places and research, they’d be suspected by their friends and superiors for their absences. You could of course have been given permission as well as the sponsoring to do this should you have continued your special unit Cloud, and yet you find this so dramatic a discovery that you dare not share it with the royal council or anyone else! Is this why you pretended to come back unsuccessful after the trip to Nibelheim?”

Cloud nodded once more. “Yes your Majesty, and as I’ve said before, this is to remain confidential between the two of us. It is not out of disrespect to your council members or your staff, it is simply a question of the impact of this knowledge.”

“I understand,” said the King gravely, “I must insist however, Cloud, that you explain to me in more detail exactly how these so called materia work.”

“It works much the same way that astral summoning from the royal lineage does. It does however, require a great amount of magical power, I would assume actually, that it would take everything that
coarse through a glaive. In most cases, it would mean certain death.” Cloud swallowed as he remembered the cold evening in with he had summoned Odin. “In more grim terms, it needs a sacrifice.”

The King looked quite serious at that, and carefully he spoke: “Does this have something to do with the death of Glaive Crowe?”

“Yes your Majesty.” Cloud continued, and he took a deep breath to control his emotions and continue on as professionally as he could. “After the event took place, I looked back upon it and tried to analyze what had come to pass. And I found that, despite being the one to summon Odin that night, Odin did not come into being from the crystal magic that resides within me. Instead, it took from Glaive Crowe, who was already in a... compromising situation. Glaive Crowe was a very capable Glaive, an expert in magic, with full capabilities of defeating the enemy monsters that night. She delayed slaying them due to my location further within the cave, and the risk of it collapsing due to the force of her magic. However, when I reappeared within the room, panic overtook me and with the desire to eliminate the threat, but without fast means to do so, the Materia reacted.”

“As I understand it, a bond is formed when the Materia comes into contact with a new user. And the Materia will, it seems, try to act in the best interest of the user, and if not, then to try and protect the user from harm. Because the Materia doesn’t necessarily need the magic of its own user, it can take instead, take the life force of another being. This ties back to my explanation about Mako energy during the report with the counsel. Mako energy, put shortly, is energy manufactured from life. Be it life of humans, be it the life of plants and animals, I didn’t specify this during the report – but this energy is considered magical, so to speak. If you were to imagine the crystal magic, as an energy of the universe, and the royal crystal itself, as a sort of solidification of this energy, Mako is, in contrast, energy driven on from life. The subjects exposed to liquid Mako at the facility, therefore contain just as much, if not more energy than we, the holders of crystal magic do.”

Cloud took a deep breath, it was clear that the load of information was taking not only a toll on himself, but on the king as well, so Cloud felt he needed to conclude.

“In short, this means, that if the Empire get a hand on these, and they produce an army of Mako fueled, Magitek soldiers, they will be able to completely destroy the whole world.”

There was silence then, only the sounds of Prince Noctis’s gamestation beeped in the background, and not even this was enough to break the tenseness in the air.

“My goodness.” Were the King’s first words. “The future suddenly seems very bleak indeed.”

Chapter End Notes

If you are a reader from when i was still actively writing this fic, its amazing that you're back and i am literally so thankful for it, you have no idea. But just out of curiosity, did you have to re-read chapters to even remember wtf was going on in this crazy ass fic, or did you just venture into this chapter? I'm curious, since i personally had to re-read everything before i could properly get back into it.

Anyways, i sincerely hope you enjoyed this chapter, even just a little, and i hope to see you next chapter <3 <3 <3 <3

BY the WAY, can anyone tell me which three FF games I've developed my theory of materia from? he hehe :)

Chapter End Notes
Getting dismissed from the Glaive force was apparently a very quiet and behind closed doors, kind of affair. The King summoned the general and vice-general into a meeting room (despite Cloud’s obvious discomfort at the notion), and explained to them, that following the meeting between the King and Cloud, King Regis had found Cloud’s mentality far too disturbed and traumatized following his mission to the laboratory and that this disability would undeniably compromise future missions. It was a very convincing story; the King and his arguments were solid, and Cloud nodded and agreed every time he was prompted, sure to keep his eyes downcast and seem as pitiable as possible.

It all seemed very real, so real in fact, that Cloud wondered whether or not he had in fact been, to some degree at least, mentally compromised following the long list of horrible events he’d been through.

Yet however convincing it seemed, no one in the room really seemed to buy it.

Genesis almost seemed disgusted and perhaps even disappointed at the lies he was being fed, Sephiroth… he seemed almost amused.

They all played their parts however, and the meeting ended with the conclusion that Cloud should be given a medal for his valiant efforts, and that he was then to subsequently be discharged from the glaive force. Effective immediate.

When Cloud left the palace after being discharged from the Glaive force, Cloud felt his mind draw a complete blank. He stopped by the main entrance, just before the steps, and felt so very empty, that he’d felt he might just float away like a plastic bag in the wind.

Being a glaive had been Cloud’s life for so long – he’d worked so hard on trying to become an admirable part of the force, trying to become someone like Zack, Libertus, Nyx and Crowe. All those years, all those joys and sorrows… he’d been working towards a position he’d just thrown away.

He felt like an integral piece of him had just shattered, a piece which ultimately made up his identity, his whole being as a person.

Suddenly, Cloud felt rather a lot like crying, and he found that he missed his glaive friends. He missed Nyx really quite a lot, Libertus too for that matter, even the other bunch of guys and girls that made up the Kings army. Despite the horrible things most had said to him, they were still Cloud’s family.
But could he even face them now? Now that he’d been discharged from the Glaive force?

There was still so much Cloud needed to do, so many details regarding his lifestyle from now on, bringing Prompto into the city and setting up a life for him among other things, but despite the long list, Cloud found, that he could make room for his friend amidst all of his to-do’s. That he should make room for them, because yes, they were important to him and goddamn it he missed them.

It was with this in mind, that Cloud gathered himself and turned around before marching straight towards the nearest glaive outpost.

It was Cloud’s rotten luck that it was Luche standing there instead of a bit of a friendlier face.

“Cloud Strife,” the man almost spat when Cloud had approached, “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.” He said mockingly.

“Shove it Luche.” Cloud spat back, and if there was one thing that Luche certainly pulled out of Cloud, it was a tone much ruder than his normal one.

“You got a lot nerve, walking up to me like that you little prick. Civilian clothes and all, don’t you ever work, Strife? Or are you too busy cuddling at home with your boyfriend?”

“Sad old Luche-duche, still can’t get a girlfriend can you?” Cloud spat back, a satisfied smirk on his face.

The old nickname Cloud had given him once actually managed to bring a laughter out of Luche’s cold and pessimistic heart. “luche duche? Only you Strife.”

“Whatever Luche, just tell me where Nyx is stationed.” Cloud said, having had his fun with Luche, whom he could only tolerate in very short amounts of time.

“And what do you plan on doing? Continue to harass those of us who are actually working? Get a life Strife.”

Cloud just rolled his eyes at Luche’s annoying dramatics.

“But if it’ll get your scrawny ass out of my sight, I’m happy to tell you that the idiot has guard duty by the outer wall again.”

Guard duty? Again? Cloud couldn’t help but wonder about that… Nyx had been the star pupil of their class. Surely he wouldn’t have guard duty, by the outer wall no less. Luche must have been pulling his legs, and Cloud told him as much.

“You’re pulling my leg aren’t you?”

“Goes to show you really haven’t been around if you don’t know about your ex-bestie and his rebel streak.” Was the last thing Luche said before he snapped to attention, as a particularly hard-faced old member of the Royal Counsel suddenly came out the main gate. Cloud left Luche be then, not eager to get any further on the bastards bad side.

In wonder, Cloud took the metro to the farthest station and walked to the gate which led out of the city, peering curiously at each corner as he tried to spot Nyx anywhere.

Finally, he did spot Nyx. He was looking exceptionally bored as he stood and looked out at the vast fields and mountains that stretched just outside the walls of the enormous city they now called home. Luckily, it seemed Nyx had his post alone, so with great caution he walked up to glaive in question.
Not really knowing what else to do, Cloud simply walked up to stand beside the other glaive. Nyx obviously turned and looked at him in surprise, but Cloud was too afraid to look at Nyx, and so he simply stared firmly ahead.

“Go figure that the star pupil of our class has guard duty by the outer wall. Is it fun having to stare at fields and cars all day?”

Nyx scoffed, now looking ahead as well. “Better than going to war I’d think, although others might disagree.”

Cloud didn’t really know what else to say, now that he was in this situation, with an old friend at his side, and not knowing at all what was running through his mind.

“It’s not so bad though, I like to look at the rest of the country.”

Through that statement, Cloud heard many unsaid things and he then began to truly wonder, about how Nyx had been during all this time that had passed.

“Nyx… I.” Cloud began, although he was not quite sure how to begin. He’d come here so spontaneously, he hadn’t had any time to plan this conversation, and now, he sorely wished he’d come a little more prepared.

“Where have you been Strife?” Nyx said instead, crushing all speeches and apologies Cloud was trying to think of.

“Oh… I’m not…” Cloud swallowed, feeling a lump swell in his chest with sudden emotion.

“Oh… I’m not…” Cloud swallowed, feeling a lump swell in his chest with sudden emotion.

“Why are you here now?” He impatiently asked instead.

And now Cloud although his eyes were shaking, “I know I have no right to be here… but I.”

“I didn’t ask that! I asked you why you’re here now, damnit!” Nyx yelled, and finally he turned. “I’ve been worrying, for so fucking long! I feel like all my friends just up and disappeared!” “I don’t see you, I rarely ever see Zack, and Libertus has apparently taken to talking shit about anything and everything and he’s being such a fucking pain in the ass that I can’t stand him these days! What the fuck! What the fuck is going on Cloud! Where the fuck have you been and why the fuck are you here now?!”

“I…” By now, Cloud was shaking like a leaf. He had never in his life heard Nyx talk like this. “I’ve just missed-“

“Don’t be such a fucking baby Cloud! I know you’re not one, so stop fucking acting like one.” Nyx fumed, obviously enraged. “I can’t have this conversation right now, I’m fucking working as you can’t see. So leave me the fuck alone.”

Cloud, who was about a second away from crying, mumbled something in affirmation before he turned to leave. Just before he did leave however, Nyx practically bellowed. “You’ll be at that fucking bar you hear me! 08:00 PM sharp, you know which one. Now fuck off.”

Shaken and more than a little confused, Cloud left the premises and somehow managed to wander back home.

Zack, who had a patrol of his own to manage, was nowhere to be seen, and so Cloud spent his time making preparations for Prompto’s arrival, until it was finally time to go down to the ghetto parts of Insomnia and visit the bar that Nyx was talking about.
Cloud, having turned 18 just recently was now finally allowed to visit the bar and drink for once. So he arrived early and ordered himself some liquid courage from the bartender, which Cloud suspected was not giving him as much liquor as he was paying the man for.

“I should report you, kids shouldn’t be daytime drinking.” Came a voice right next to Cloud, and when he turned he was happy to see that it was Nyx sitting there.

“So, Nyx just scoffed and ordered himself a drink, which was soon delivered to him.

“Who are you calling a kid huh?” Cloud asked, a smile on his face just from seeing his old friend.

“Forget about that, you know I sometimes get temperamental.”

Cloud did not, in fact, know this. “Um, no you don’t?”

Nyx laughed at that, but it was a hollow sound. “Yeah well, these days I do.”

Cloud took a sip from his drink. “Does this have anything to do with you having guard duty, by the outer wall? I recon you know that glaive talents are wasted up there.”

Nyx scoffed again. “Glaive talents…”

This got Cloud worried. “Nyx… tell what’s been going on with you lately.”

Nyx ran a hand through his hair and laughed emptily again. “Sorry for calling you a baby earlier Strife. I’ve missed you too you know.”

Cloud couldn’t help but think now was not the time to speak, so he waited for Nyx to continue, which he did, after a big sigh.

“The glaive force has been… tense. Ever since Crowe’s death and everything afterwards. I know I wasn’t there for you when that all collapsed on top of you, but I was lamenting you know. We all have our ways of… grieving. Libertus too, he’s just… God, he’s really awful at times.”

Nyx laughed, a bit more lighthearted this time, but he still seemed so slouched with a million worries and more, it ached for Cloud to see him like this.

“The commander has been acting weird too you know, or well, could be he was always weird. But it feels like he constantly thinks we’re all a big fucking joke. Like he’s laughing at us. I constantly feel like something is about to happen, but I just don’t know what to do about it…”

Nyx took a big sip from his drink.

“I’ve been getting into a lot of fights lately and I’ve been talking shit to superiors. That’s why I’m out there having guard duty, watching the fields or whatever. Since you were so curious Strife.”

“Nyx…” Cloud began, but Nyx wouldn’t allow him just yet.

“I hate not knowing what’s going on Cloud. Even before we graduate, you started doing stuff and I had no clue at all what it was. I have no clue what really killed Crowe, and I have no clue what you and Zack are off doing. I don’t know anything.”
Cloud was heartbroken.

All at once, his memories with Nyx came rushing back to him. All the times they’d confided in each other and helped each other when they were being stupid.

Nyx had cared for Crowe as much as any of them, Cloud couldn’t blame him for seeking solitude in his time of grief.

“I want to tell you Nyx, I promise you I do.”

And Cloud did, because he trusted him. He wanted to tell him everything, because Nyx had always some way of helping him on the right track whenever Cloud was lost.

Just like Zack, he was a hero.

“But… well, this kind of topic doesn’t really make for the best bar chatter.” Cloud told him with a meek smile on his face.

Nyx, despite it all, laughed at this. Laughed properly. “I bet it doesn’t! With all the shit that you get into, I bet most of your life is turning top secret.”

Nyx shook his head. “Cheers man, who would have thought that the little bumpkin form Nibelheim was gonna turn into such an important chess piece.”

They cheered and downed their respective drinks.

“But you’re saying you’ll let me in on the gossip? Nyx asked cheekily.

Cloud rolled his eyes. “Way to make me sound important Nyx.” Cloud laughed when Nyx stuck out his tongue in reply. “But yeah, I’ll tell you. On another occasion.”

The rest of the evening was spent on happier, more drunken terms, and despite the bartender obviously giving Cloud less alcohol, Cloud the lightweight, was getting significantly drunk.

Despite saying he wouldn’t get into any details, Cloud said he was going to raise a kid soon and that his name was Prompto. He didn’t feed him the story they’d prepared, wherein Cloud was Prompto’s big brother, but told him instead that they’d found him across the Nibel-Nifelheim border.

Nyx thought it was hilarious, but was simultaneously happy for both Zack and Cloud. He did say he thought it was a tad early in their lives, but he was quick to understand their reasoning. Being a fellow Glaive, and in living in constant fear of an approaching war, things had to get done faster if they really wanted to get it done.

Drunkenly, Nyx said he looked forward to being called uncle Nyx, and to hearing Cloud being called mama.

A lighthearted battle resulted from this, and soon it was very late, and Cloud’s stomach was rumbling.

Instantly he thought of Zack, and of their warm house and of Zack’s amazing food. Cloud made all kinds of excuses that he thought didn’t involve Zack’s name, but despite it all, Nyx still laughed at him and accused of being severely “whipped”.

Which, well, yeah.
Cloud was on cloud nine when he got home well past midnight. Zack, whom, Cloud had been excessively drunk texting (wanting food and hugs and kisses and cuddles) was sitting at home, with a meal ready to re-heat, and exasperated sigh on his lips.

He didn’t get to sigh for too long though, because soon Cloud claimed his sloppy kisses and his sloppy hugs. Cloud was smiling and being so dopey in fact, that it almost worried Zack.

“Has something nice happened? Or is your lightweight ass just always this happy?” Zack asked as Cloud lay on top of him on the sofa, meals and whatnot all but forgotten.

“Something reaaaaaaaaally nice happened!” Cloud said, kissing Zack’s nose for some reason.

Zack, not having seen Cloud this silly and happy in a long time, couldn’t help but smile lovingly at the goof on top of him. He brushed some stray hairs away from Cloud’s flushed face. “Really now? And what was that hm?”

“I talked with NYX! And he doesn’t hate me anymore!” Cloud said happily.

Bewildered, Zack frowned at this. “Wait, so were you drinking with Nyx just now?”

Cloud nodded several times in succession.

“Man… I haven’t seen Nyx in ages. It’s like we haven’t had any colliding shifts ever since, well, ever since I can remember.”

Cloud, drunk and somewhat uninterested in long sentences, started lightly running his hands across Zack’s biceps, admiring the specimen he was lying above.

“I’m so happy we’re friends again, but you know what makes me even happier?” Cloud asked flirty, and Zack could definitely see where this was going.

“Yeah?” Zack asked seductively, his arms tightening around Cloud’s middle.

Cloud bent down lower, low enough that his lips were now next to Zack’s ears. And then he whispered right into them: “Food.”

“You cheeky little!” Zack called after him, because as fast as a giggling lighting, Cloud was out of the sofa and running towards the kitchen. “You won’t be getting any meat then!” Zack laughed, finding himself perfectly clever. But Cloud had barely listened, he had already shoved a wonderfully big sized portion of red curry and rice into the microwave.

~

Days passed, everything Cloud had asked of the king was in order. He had his new title as civilian citizen on Insomnia, and the global travel pass which with the King’s official signature, allowed him to travel to virtually anywhere on the planet.

Leaving the King and the Glaives out of his business, Cloud had gone to the Insomnian government
and started the process of adopting his “little brother” and getting him registered as an Insomnian citizen as well as getting him into a school system. It works out easier than he thought it would originally be, but apparently, having worked for royalty has its perks. And officially, Cloud has a higher status than one would apparently think he had. Kings army for the win.

Cloud meets up again with Nyx during all this, and Nyx manages to drag Libertus along. At first, things are very rocky with Libertus, as he is a stubborn nut to crack. But eventually things work out. They aren’t able to open up and talk about their feelings, as Cloud was able to do with Nyx, but they talk about other stuff, and Libertus manages to get back to his favorite hobby:

Teasing Cloud.

Cloud sighs as he finds himself back in his loving but infuriating relationship with Libertus Ostium.

Much quicker than Cloud would have thought, 1 month passes, and he finds himself on a train station on his way to Nibelheim, to pick up baby Prompto.

Chapter End Notes

"cloud was on cloud nine"
Writing that made me stupidly happy, yes i am a cheesy fool with bad humor.
Cloud did have his worries about having left Prompto with his mother in the little unsuspecting town of Nibelheim. Afterall, he was nowhere close to even fully understanding the extent of what the effects of being exposed to mako for your whole life meant. Prompto could have had withdrawal symptoms whilst Cloud and Zack had just left him behind where no one would have been able to help him. He could have contaminated the village residents with some kind of virus no one knew of. Virtually anything could have happened, and Cloud spent so much time imagining and re-imagining these differently chaotic scenarios, that he felt like his head would burst at any given moments now. Just the fact that he was slowly but surely coming closer to Nibelheim now, made dark circles appear under his eyes.

The stress and anxiety must have really been rather obvious on his face, as the lovely lady selling lunchboxes on the train gave him a piece of candy with a motherly frown and a ”get some sleep, love”, before pushing her cart onwards.

Cloud then decided, that looking like this wouldn’t do. He might frighten Prompto, and worst case, his mother might even be reluctant to hand the child over when he was in such a shape.

So Cloud took out a notebook he’d bought well over 2 years ago, but never quite managed to write anything in; and finally, he wrote his first words.

M.E 738 – March 3rd

Whether or not choosing to save a manmade lifeform, born within the wicked laboratory of a twisted scientist, was a good idea, I can’t yet say. What I do know, is that I have, perhaps foolishly, taken it upon myself to make a decision that might affect the world at large and that in truth, I do not known what I am doing. A part of me knows that by taking Prompto into my care that I shall be on the verge of some major discovery, but I have so many fears about the possible outcomes, to many to even list on all the pages of this notebook.

In that deciding moment however, my body would not allow myself to leave behind this child. In retrospect, perhaps those were just the tight ropes of destiny which are pulling us all in one direction. But I choose to believe that I am doing something right, not only for the world, but for this child, who left in that lab might have been killed or used against his will, in some great big evil ploy.

This is what I have chosen to do, whatever path it might lead to.

Cloud exhaled heavily, and steeled himself. The deciding moment of saving Prompto’s life had already passed, the time for doubts and worries were now long past. There was only one way to go, and that was forward.

A few hours later, there was the screeching sound of the train stopping, and just outside the window, Cloud saw that his mother and Prompto were already waiting for him. His mother waved at him, and
Prompto copied her in a cute and clumsy manner.

Cloud smiled brightly, although he felt his eyes start to water with emotion. So he exited the train as fast as he could. “Mom!” he exclaimed as he dove in for a big and emotional hug. She fiercely hugged him back, but soon let go so that Cloud could finally address the bundled up little doll that was standing on two feet.

“Hi Prompto! Remember me?”

Prompto looked a little confused, and he looked at Cloud’s mother for some kind of explanation.

“This is your daddy, prom. Remember that I told you what a daddy and mommy was?”

Cloud felt his heart catch in his throat. His mother was introducing Cloud as the father?? Cloud had not been mentally prepared for this... despite that, perhaps in the corners of his mind, he’d actually been waiting for someone else to say that for him. He wouldn’t have had the courage to call himself Prompto’s father, knowing full well whose DNA the child actually possessed.

Just then, tears began to fall down Cloud’s face. He felt happy, but so very emotional and vulnerable and confused, he didn’t quite know what to do with himself. So he laughed instead.

His mother smiled, probably knowing that Cloud was most likely overwhelmed. “Can you say hi to daddy Prom?” she asked the baby boy.

Prompto nodded, but he didn’t open his mouth, he waved instead.

Instantly, Cloud figured that it would take Prompto quite a while before he could talk. A side effect of mako perhaps?

“Can you give me a hug Prompto?” Cloud finally managed to ask.

And quite automatically, the little doll that was Prompto, opened him arms invitingly.

Cloud scooped the kid up into a hug and spun around with him a couple of times. “I’m your dad.” Cloud mumbled into Prompto’s neck, and by now he was properly shedding tears.

“Darling,” His mother’s voice interrupted. “Let’s get something hot to drink and pick up Prompto’s bags, the train only leaves again in an hour.”

Cloud agreed to this, and so they walked to Cloud’s childhood home, Prompto still neatly attached to Cloud’s hip.

His mother made them some warm apple cider, and revealed that she and her best friend Rosa had already made Prompto a decent amount of things to play with, but in general, Prompto’s things didn’t consist of a great many things.

An hour passed faster than he would have liked, and finally Cloud and Prompto had to leave the little town of Nibelheim behind.

At first, it was hard to get Prompto to stop crying when he finally saw that they weren’t taking grandma Strife with them. To be precise, it took about 1 hour and 13 minutes before Prompto got so exhausted that he fell asleep.

Cloud as well, was on the brink of complete shutdown, but he was apprehensive on falling asleep without anyone else to watch the baby, so he managed to force himself to stay awake on the long 10
hour train ride.

~

After having been awake for well over 24 hours, and having had to take care of Prompto who was missing his grandma ever so dearly, Cloud was about ready to crash into his bed and let it completely swallow him.

Thankfully, Zack was home from work when Cloud arrived and of course the oversized puppy that was Zack was lighting fast to take Prompto out of Cloud’s hands and play with him and make the kid giggle almost instantly. Cloud would have been jealousy of Zack’s amazing abilities with kids, but he didn’t quite have the energy for that. All he had energy for was crashing straight into the sofa, and fall right into a coma-like sleep.

Unfortunately, Cloud’s coma-like sleep only lasted about an hour before Prompto was poking and pinching his cheeks.

Cloud groaned, but then he smelled the food, and suddenly being woken up was a lot less disastrous.

“Mmmm, what’s for dinner?”

“Oh? So you’re alive are you?”

Cloud finally opened his eyes and saw little Prompto’s blue eyes staring right at him. “I was forced back from the dead by this little cutie pie.” Cloud retorted before he returned the cheek pinch on Prompto, which made the kid giggle and run off.

When Cloud was finally back on his feet, he saw that Prompto was essentially attached to Zack’s calf and making strange dove-like sounds.

“I think it’s his way of saying he wants to eat?” Zack asked, laughing a little at the display. “I was forced back from the dead by this little cutie pie.” Cloud retorted before he returned the cheek pinch on Prompto, which made the kid giggle and run off.

I think it’s his way of saying he wants to eat? Zack asked, laughing a little at the display. “I was forced back from the dead by this little cutie pie.” Cloud retorted before he returned the cheek pinch on Prompto, which made the kid giggle and run off.

“When, I guess? Mom said she’d been feeding him just about everything, and nothing bad has happened yet.” Cloud slouched his way over to Zack, and joined Prompto in attaching himself to Zack’s back. “By the way,"

“Hm?” Zack back rumbled pleasantly back.

“I’m physically unable to change diapers Zack.”

Zack laughed at this, of course he would. “You’re expecting me to change his diapers all the time? You know I have work right?”

“Zack, I almost vomited.” Cloud deadpanned into his back.

In response to this, Zack turned his body and kissed Cloud’s forehead. “Well get used to it pumpkin. Cause’ there are going to be a lot of diapers to change, and your prince charming here can’t come save you from all the monsters.”

“Why nooooot?” Cloud whined.
Zack sighed, “Don’t be a baby when we already have one Cloud. Put on the table will you?”

“Yesss~” Cloud whined cutely and got their plates and all the kid cutlery that they’d bought together the other week. The kid chair with the Chocobo theme on it was already situated by the dinner table, and it made Cloud’s heart swell with happiness.

Soon they were all eating together, and thankfully, as Cloud’s mother had said, Prompto ate with gusto and almost no difficulty whatsoever. He had already mastered the art of poking food with the fork and bringing it to his mouth, and he was very insistent on feeding himself which was overly cute.

Since it was already late, not long after dinner, the family of three was already in bed and ready to go to sleep. It wasn’t that easy however, for Prompto had a great big crying session once again, most likely he still missed his loving grandma.

It was surprisingly scary how easy it was later on for the three to become a family. Zack demanded kisses every time he went to work, and at first Prompto neglected him, but when he discovered that Zack started to positively dance with joy every time Prom felt so inclined to give in to Zack’s request, he started to give him kisses every time.

Prompto was making more and more sounds, although they were nowhere near anything tangible whatsoever. But he was often able to communicate quite clearly.

He would bang on the front door if he wanted to go out to the playground a little ways down the street, he would make his strange bird-like noises and sit by the fridge whenever he was hungry (which was damn often) and he would start running around the house at the speed of lightning if he wanted to play. Then, there were of course his long winded crying sessions; those were the guessing hours, because Cloud almost never had any idea why the kid was crying.

He was thankful however, that he and Zack had chosen to invest in a house and not an apartment, because Cloud didn’t think those neighbors would have loved him quite as much as the old ladies on this street did.

Ah yes, and the old ladies. Apparently one of them had spotted Cloud coming home with Prompto the very night the two had first arrived, and the gossip had spread like wildfire. Some thought that Cloud was coming home with a kid he’d had in an affair, others speculated that he’d finally decided to adopt together with Zack, others thought it was Clouds baby brother or any relative of the sort.

The thing was, that the day after their arrival, Elmyra Gainsborough was already knocking at their door, pie in hand and ready to congratulate Cloud. She was the only one who would ever confront Cloud with the gossip she’d heard, the other ladies seemed to prefer to keep the gossip amongst themselves (which Cloud was eternally grateful for).

“So you’ve decided to adopt have you?!” She asked excitedly as she made her way into Cloud’s home, her eyes already looking for the little boy she’d obviously already heard all about. “Quite young I would say, it’s a wonder you were allowed! But I suppose civil servants should have some kind of privilege! Isn’t it tiring however? If you need someone to take care of him, I would gladly do it!”

When she was finally in the living room and hadn’t yet spotted the child she was so eagerly looking for, she turned around, still with her pie in hand and asking. “So where is he?”

Cloud sighed, “You’re mighty curious today Mrs. Gainsborough.” He said as he took the heavy pie
from her hands and placed it on the table.

“Why of course! Something like this never happens on this godforsaken street full of grandmothers
and grandfathers! It has been so very exciting since you and your handsome husband moved in.”

“He’s not.” Cloud sighed again, he wasn’t even married to Zack but no one on the street seemed to
really understand that, so he let it go. “I can tell, you look very excited indeed. For your information,
Prompto is having an afternoon nap.”

“My goodness me! Is that his name?! Why, isn’t that the most adorable thing!” She said in
excitement before raiding Cloud’s kitchen in search for cutlery and plates from which to eat the pie.
Cloud joined her in the kitchen, deciding to put the kettle on as Mrs. Gainsborough was obviously
intent on staying and Cloud would need some coffee for that. “So will he have yours or your
husband’s last name or are you planning to mix them together?”

“Actually, we’re giving him an entirely different surname. Insomnians never had as much love for
outsiders as they do for their own, and we want him to be loved. So we’re giving him an Insomnian
name, he won’t have difficulty finding jobs that way either.”

Mrs. Gainsborough, someone who was indeed an outsider quite like Zack and Cloud, nodded sagely
at his words. “You’ll be sparing him a lot of pain, that’s for sure. I know I’ve lived through my
share.” She said with a smile, as they both returned to the living room where she parted them a slice
of apple pie. “What’s that lovely surname then?”

“Argentum.”

“Oh my! Prompto Argentum! It has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

Cloud smiled fondly. “It does… it was Zack who thought of it.”

“Lovely! Lovely indeed! Have some pie darling, it’s just out of the oven.”

And so the two talked a little here and there, drank some coffee and whatnot; but then the
conversation turned a little stale, and Cloud figured that Mrs. Gainsborough was simply waiting for
Prompto to wake up so she could see him.

“Mrs. Gainsborough, excuse me if this is a bit of a personal question, but do you.. have any children
of your own?”

“Why yes I do! And nothing is too personal for me darling boy, you know me, I love to talk! But yes
I do have a lovely daughter, a little older than yourself I’ll wager. Mind you she isn’t of my blood
and all that, Arthur having passed away before we could get to it and all. So it’s very exciting that
you’ve decided to adopt just like me, very exciting indeed!”

“Oh really? So you picked her up from an orphanage?”

“Yes I did indeed.”

“So how long was the actual adopting process?”

“My goodness, it was very long indeed! I think what might have helped speeding up the process was
the plentiful wealthy my dear Arthur left behind for me. As you well know, they are quite strict
should the adoptive parents only consist of… well, one person. Especially one that isn’t Insomnian.”

Cloud wasn’t entirely sure what he was doing or asking at this point. All he knew, was that this was
a situation far too coincidental for destiny to really not be playing along. Cloud had already formulated most of his plan, what concerned applying for the rights to adopt Prompto. Prompto had been given Nibelheimian citizenship as Mrs. Rosa had once more been able to wrap her husband around her little finger and come through once more for the Strife family. Prompto had been registered as Cloud’s mother’s child, but as his mother had no financial means (nor physical, due to her bad back) Cloud was going to adopt (or become the guardian of) Prompto.

Both Cloud’s mother and Zack had acknowledged that it was a solid plan, but the truth of the situation, was that Cloud didn’t have any proper insight into the world of adoptions, to be making so rash a plan.

“But you managed, in the end then?” Cloud asked, wanting desperately to hear a positive reply.

“Why of indeed I did! My daughter is quite the beautiful and accomplished young lady I will have you know. You should meet her one day.” Mrs. Gainsborough said with a smile.

Then, just like that, Prompto began to cry from the bedroom and their attentions were swiftly shifted.

~

After Mrs. Rosa had gotten her fill of baby Prompto, and given a crash course within every field of child caring, that she could think of on the spot, she finally left Cloud and Prom to themselves.

Cloud’s worries didn’t end just then however, because just as Cloud was feeding Prompto, he received a text from Libertus.

“Hey blondie! Don’t you work anymore? Where have been these days?”

Cloud hadn’t actually properly decided how much he should actually disclose to his friends, concerning his retirement from the glaive army and all.

Cloud sighed then, not wanting to use too much brainpower, he simply texted back: “I’m back in my special unit – it’s a headache to explain, but yeah no guard shifts for me :P”

Not even 3 seconds later, did Libertus reply: “Lucky big-brained bastard >: (“

And so, Cloud supposed that was the story he had to go with for me.

But Cloud really was getting a headache… at this rate, there were way too many secrets and lies and information, which he had to keep track of inside his constantly worrying big-brain, as Libertus so nicely put it.

But after talking with Mrs. Gainsborough, Cloud felt himself having an easier time focusing on the task at hand.

Which was getting Prompto his Insomnian citizenship, as well as properly adopting him.

Chapter End Notes
once again sorry for the wait friends, but i hope you like the chapter <3 <3
next chapter will have a lil' bit of timeskipping involved, and also, primarily fluff with
our baby boiiii.
right after that tho, we're back to plot heavy vibes haha :P
FINALLY!!!! I have returned, and the story can now continue to move forward!!! I really hope you enjoy, from this chapter forward, we're picking up the pace!

“IT’S GUYS POKER NIGHT!” Libertus bellowed as he practically broke down the door to Cloud and Zack’s house, two six-packs of Wutai beer in each hand and a smirk that said he was ready to gamble.

The reaction to his dynamic entry was however, not as favorable as he’d imagined.

“SHHHH!!!”

“Libertus shut up!”

But it was too late, and the sound of Prompto crying, rang like a siren throughout the house. Whilst Nyx looked confused, Libertus instantly froze.

“Is there a kid in this house?” Libertus mumbled with his mouth almost shut as Cloud scurried toward the source of the crying.

Zack nodded, and gave him a mean scowl. “We put him to sleep so we could have the guys poker night!” Zack whisper yelled.

“How was I supposed to know there was a kid here! Did you know about this?!” Libertus whispered-asked Nyx.

“No!” whisper came from Nyx.

Zack sighed, but then he began to laugh. “Get in you idiots” He finally said in a normal tone.

At this, both Libertus and Nyx cracked a smile, greeting Zack with a proper hug before setting down the beers, as quietly as they could.

“So which one of you got pregnant while I literally blinked?” Libertus asked with rough humor.

“Ha ha, such a joker you are.” Zack deadpanned back, rolling his eyes for effect.

“Yeah, no but, are you taking care of a kid or something? We could have done this some other day Zack.” Came Nyx’s rationality.

“I’m afraid, this kid is gonna stick with us for a while, so we wanted to introduce you to him.”

Just at that moment, it seemed Cloud finally managed to calm Prompto down, and out they both came into the living room. Prompto clinging to Cloud’s back like a proper koala, red tears streaming down his face, along with snot and all the good stuff.
“Hey Prom, look who’s in the living room.” Cloud said in a cutesy way, and *that* managed to divert Prompto from his leftover crying, making his big blue eyes, even more stark against his reddened face, look up with curiosity.

“Owah!” Prompto said unintelligently when he laid eyes on the strangers in the room. “OaH!!” He went again before he started to clap his hands with obvious glee.

“That’s right, it’s uncle Nyx and uncle Libertus!” Cloud introduced excitedly.

“Oh my GOD! Did you really have a kid?! He looks just like you Cloud!” Libertus exclaimed as he made his way over. “Aren’t you just the cutest!” He gushed, momentarily surprising everyone in the room with a comment they weren’t expecting, “Yes you are!” he answered for Prompto, before he began to tickle the kid.

“Wow, was Libertus always like this?” Zack asked, nudging an entertained looking Nyx.

“Pff… well, yes.” Nyx answered, trying his best to hold his smile. “He loves kids, why do you think he tried to baby Crowe so much?”

“Hm, I see what you mean.” Zack commented, before the two stepped closer to the commotion.

“Can I hold him?” Libertus asked eagerly, already with his arms out and ready.

“Be my guest.” Cloud said, obviously entertained as he passed on a very willing Prompto.

“I’m gonna be the best uncle oh my God. What’s his name?” Libertus asked excitedly.

“Prompto.” Cloud told him.

“Prompto, you look like a baby Chocobo! Just like Cloudy here did! You’re just cuter!”

“I feel like Libertus is gonna spoil him rotten if we let him near Prom too much.” Cloud commented as he went to stand next to Zack and Nyx, watching Libertus being acting exceptionally unlike himself as he played with the kid.

“He probably is going to.” Nyx told them

As the night progressed, Libertus, later joined by Nyx, managed to play Prompto into a night of heavy sleeping; the kid was completely knocked out.

Cloud and Zack decided to tell their friends the partial truth which they had also told Cloud’s mother, that in which they had found Prom by the border between Nifelheim and Nibelheim. The boys were very intrigued by the story, and found it all terribly exciting, but not surprising, that Cloud and Zack had gotten into this. This all led to the eventual poker game, which Nyx, the smartass, obviously won.

~

After a visit to the government and flashing the proxy letter his mother had written, along with the documents produced in Nibelheim, Cloud managed to adopt Prompto within a surprisingly short amount of time. Cloud and Zack officially, became Prompto’s guardians, furthermore, the process of turning Prompto into an Insomnian resident, took only a few more weeks to complete.

Cloud was truly impressed with the perks that came from being a Glaive.
As Prompto was 3 years of age (That at least, was the age they’d written on his documents) Cloud figured he could look into some kindergartens to put him into next year, as per. his deal with his royal Highness, he would soon have to start his exploration for the Materia scattered around Eos. Furthermore, Zack still had his job as glaive… someone would have to take care of Prom from time to time and Cloud didn’t particularly want to impose on the kindness of Mrs. Gainsborough too much.

Cloud remembered there was a school or a kindergarten of sorts in his neighborhood, and so, when Cloud and Prom were taking their daily stroll, hand in hand, he decided to actively try and find it again.

It wasn’t especially hard, before long they were hearing the happy screaming of playing children and they eventually came upon the kindergarten. It was a lovely little place with a beautiful front garden full of flowers, which all had a little sign with a child’s name as an indicator to who was taking care of it.

The children were running around and screaming happily after what appeared to be a robotic cat which was hopping around and verbally teasing the children, as well as sticking it’s tongue out and laughing. A young lady was sitting and laughing with her male co-worker whilst they watched the kids, and a red dog seemed to sleeping nicely in the late-spring sun.

It looked, absolutely perfect.

Just as Cloud had that thought, Prompto screamed in glee and clapped his hands as he pulled Cloud closer to the fence which ultimately separated the path from the kindergarten.

“Bwah! Bwah Bwah!!” Prompto yelled excitedly, and this got the attention of both the adults which had been sitting comfortably and chatting, the kids and the jumping cat, occupied as they were, didn’t even notice.

Cloud made eye contact with the female teacher, and for a moment felt like he’d seen her before already. Long hair light brown hair tied up into a thick braid that went all the way to her waist, a nice pink bow decorating the bottom. When she was closer, he noticed the green eyes and the kindness that was essentially radiating off her like a golden glow.

“Why hello there!” She greeted happily, opening the gate and closing it behind her before crouching down to Prompto’s level. “Hi there little man, want to shake hands with this big sister?”

Prom looked up at Cloud, confused, but then looked back on the hand with the lady had already extended, and finally decided to bring his free hand up to it. The woman shook it lightly, “Nice to meet you honey, I’m Aerith.” And then she pinched Prompto’s cheek lightly before she stood up tall again. “And hello to big brother or young dad!” she said happily, once again extending her hand, and Cloud had to laugh at her innocent straightforwardness.

“That would be young dad.” Cloud replied, shaking her hand.

“A pleasure! The name is Aerith Gainsborough.”

Cloud couldn’t believe the coincidence. “Cloud Strife, and likewise. Um, you wouldn’t happen to be the daughter of one Elmyra Gainsborough?”

“My Goodness! You must be her new neighbor then! She’s been telling me about the so-called ‘blonde cutie pie’, and his handsome husband.”

Cloud laughed, embarrassed. “I guess that must be me.”
Aerith smiled, “She speaks very fondly of you I’ll have you know, and of course, she is completely over the moon for this little pretty man down here.”

But Prompto wasn’t paying attention to the adults, he was back to observing the kids chase around the black cat that kept jumping around, making little noises of wonder and shaking the fence.

“He looks a bit young still, but are you considering enrolling him here?”

“Well, that was the plan. My uhh… husband and I, we work quite a lot, and unfortunately I also have to travel a lot… due to work you see. So we’ll need a place that can take care of him while we’re away. I wasn’t thinking, you know, right away, but… in the near future it will probably become a necessity, so we were taking a look around.”

“I see, I see. Very understandable! Well, I’ll have you know that there is still room in the sunflower class, but he will be the youngest in the class I fear, but that shouldn’t be too much of a problem, he seems like quite the social butterfly.” She said, just as Prompto made another sound of glee when the cat made a particularly special jump.

“Yes… well, he doesn’t quite speak yet though. Do you think that’ll be a problem? With the other kids I mean?”

“Hmmm, usually, that only frustrates the child in question. But while that could become a frustration for your child, usually this only speeds up the learning process and he’ll be able to speak that much faster. Parents always somehow end up understanding what their kids want, and this can sometimes stimulate the kids in the wrong way, so that they learn to speak that much later. But to answer your question, no, I don’t believe it would be too big of a problem with the other kids.”

While Cloud knew that reasoning for Prompto’s lateness in his ability to speak did not come from something as trivial as what Aerith had explained, he was still relieved that she had experience with this sort of thing and could professionally tell Cloud not to worry.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Cloud admitted, then looked down at Prompto fondly. “Well, I think Prompto here looks very captivated by your very lovely looking kindergarten, so I will most definitely stay in touch.”

“Please do so! You’re welcome to come here anytime and sometimes I’ll be at my mother’s house, so I will see you around Mr. Strife.”

Cloud laughed, Mr. Strife, Goodness, “Cloud is fine, and yes, I’ll see you around.”

The two of them shook hands again, and when Cloud carried Prompto up to his arm (so as to not have to drag the entranced kid away) Aerith kindly waved goodbye at him, Prompto waved back in return.

~

Now, there was no way around it. Cloud had to tell Zack everything.

In truth, the reason why he’d kept the existence of Materia unknown to Zack, was largely due to how he knew, Zack would react.
Ever his Protector, Zack would become depressed by the knowledge that Cloud had been carrying the heavy burden of the knowledge of these astral weapons. He would most likely want to go with Cloud, to whatever dangerous place it was that he was going to, and the worst part, would be that Cloud dearly wished that he would go with me.

In truth, Cloud was afraid.

Afraid he wouldn’t be able to decipher the whereabouts of these Materia. Afraid that an ill-intending person might also become aware of their existence. Afraid that through his expeditions he might be killed, and never be able to see Zack or Prompto again. There was just so much that scared him, and the only thing that was ever able to melt his fears away, was Zack.

But Zack didn’t know and Cloud couldn’t just go away, for most likely months on end, without telling Zack where he was going. But more than that, he couldn’t keep the lie in his heart any longer.

So finally, he did tell him.

Told him everything, in much more detail even, than when he had told the King.

It was a long and sleepless night that evening, and Cloud had shed tears while Zack had remained quiet and serious.

Undeniably, Zack had been angry that he had been lied to all this time, but also, overwhelmed by what this meant for the two of them… for the three of them.

He had gone out of their house and taken a long walk, his long forgotten habit of smoking, following him on that walk.

Finally when he had returned, he had hugged Cloud without a word and after the weight of everything had sunken into him, he began to cry in Cloud’s arms.

Zack never did say anything.

Only just before they fell asleep, Zack’s arms protectively around Cloud, he whispered.

“Be safe… please.”

~

Distinguishing what could be mere folklore, and what could indeed be the legend of a minor tier astral, proved itself a harder task than Cloud had imagined.

However, with Zack’s support and access to every recorded file in all Insomnia, was what helped Cloud along the way. Of course, it was hard taking care of Prompto, as well as observing him for any sort of abnormal features (in regards to his mako infused creation), whilst searching for the right lead to follow, was also taking a toll of him.

But after getting into the habit of sleepless nights and an above average intake of coffee, Cloud managed to find the legend of Kujata. Some tales of the astral where very lavish and of extremely large scale. *Four thousand eyes, and the equal amount of ears, mouths, noses, tongues, and feet, with a distance of a journey of 500 years between each of them*? Cloud wondered how much of that
was really true. *On the back of Kujata a giant mountain of ruby?* Very lavish indeed.

Finally, Prompto discovered the area of origin of the legend: Mideel.

There were of course, pros and cons in going to Mideel.

Con: It was very *very* fucking far away.

Pro: the people living there were harmless

Con: there were very poisonous animals lurking around

Pro: these animals were small and rare.

All in all, it seemed like a fine place for Cloud’s first expedition and it didn’t take long before he had finally geared up for his travels. The only thing missing was to speak with the King, which didn’t take much time, as the King was very eager to push Cloud into his tight schedule.

Once he had reported his mission, Cloud was suddenly all set.

The only thing left… was his family.

They were all watching TV at home, some cutesy cartoon about ChocoMog, which Prom absolutely adored to pieces.

Zack and Cloud were holding hands, but Zack was squeezing just a bit too tight.

“Zack, you don’t have to worry *that* much. I’m not completely incapable I’ll have you know.”

“I know babe… It’s just… “Zack sighed, “I know it might seem overly possessive… but I just can’t stand the idea of having you out of my sight… If something were to happen to you, I wouldn’t be able to do anything at all…”

“Zack, look at me.”

And Zack did.

“Nothing is going to happen. It’s Mideel.”

“You’ll be gone for so long though… What about Prom?” Both their heads turned to Prompto at that, and Cloud sighed in remorse.

“I know…” Then, Cloud laughed sadly, “I guess it might be selfish, but I really want to hear his first words myself, but of course, I also want him to learn how to speak faster…”

Zack was silent at that.

“Do you think it’s irresponsible of me?”

“What is?”

“Leaving… so soon after we’ve taken Prom into our care… I mean, we still don’t know how all that Mako had affected him… what if something were to happen to him? Or to the other kids in the kindergarten?”
“Cloud, I’ve seen your notebook. You’ve paying so much attention to him, literally recording everything that could possibly be considered an anomaly. I don’t think you’re irresponsible at all… If you really thought it was unsafe to leave him here, you would have waited.” Zack lifted Cloud’s hand and kissed it. “Your just being your usual worry-wart self.”

Cloud laughed at that, “Look who’s calling the pot black, kettle.”

Then it was Zack’s turn to laugh. “Yeah yeah, am I not allowed to worry about my boyfriend leaving me? What if you fall into the unsuspecting hands of some Island hottie?”

Now Cloud was laughing for good. “Oh my God Zack! That should be the least of your worries, I already have my handsome Gongaga Prince.” Cloud replied cheekily, accompanied by a flirtatious wink.

“You little,” Zack said with a smile, “What’ll do without you?”

“Have lots of fun with Prom?”

“That’s true, we will have lots of fun. Summer is coming up too, we’ll be able to go out without all those damn layers. Sit in the sofa in the garden… Uh! I’ll buy a mini pool and waterguns, I used to play with waterguns all the time when I was a kid in Gongaga.”

As Zack spoke of his long list of plans for the summer, Cloud couldn’t help but become depressed at the notion, that he would most likely not be back in time to enjoy it…

There was no other way around it, Cloud would just have to work hard or get lucky. There was no way he was missing out on making all those memories with his family. Which is he stated so with determination.

“I’ll be back for all of that Zack, just you wait and see.” Cloud said, hand on Zack’s cheek before he pulled the other in for a sweet kiss.

“I know you will, I’ll be waiting for you Cloudy.”

Chapter End Notes

Alriiiiiiight, so for the very technical and extra nerdy FF people 8^) you will maybe notice that the materia for Kujata, was in fact, not found in Mideel in the original FFVII game. It was found in Bone Village, in the Icicle area. However my friends, in the crossover world which i have created, certain parts of both words are left out so that they can successfully merge. I would love to draw you a map of what i have up in my head, but.... Ain't nobody got time for that, lolol.

Also yeah, I have no idea how adoption processes work and tbh, with school and whatever, I just really couldn't get myself to look up the specifics. I did a very halfhearted google search which went: "How to adopt my mothers kid."... it didn't get very many results, lmao. So yeah, please just... spare me ;;^^

ALSO, pls, I most probably won't be 100% consistent with the laws of this little universe I've created. Such as the theory of materia in this and so on and so forth, but thats just because the story is so huge omg, scrolling through it om my doc is such a
pain. It's 177 pages long now, loooool.

But yeah, as said in the intro, from now on, the story will have a few less scenes and more storytelling, as I really do need to move the story forward. However, if you feel like I've been overly superficial with certain parts (such as, fx, Cloud telling Zack the whole truth) feel free to let me know and I will most likely revise that section.

With that said, if someone wants to volunteer as proofreader, I would be over the moon, as that way, I would also be able to get input before I release a chapter as well as manage my, at times, godawful spelling.

Anyways, WOW, long end notes ;;^^
All I want to say is, I love you all!! and please leave a comment! they mean so much to me.!
Bye~! Kisses~! <3 <3 <3
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

FOR YOUR INFORMATION, I have NOT played episode Ardyn. I have read all about it though, and I’ve implemented bits of that story into the fic. I will not be 100% true to it however, seeing as this is a cross-over and all, doing a recount of what you guys already know, isn't really the point. The point is to put that ffvii magic glitter and make everything nice and sparkly.

WITH THAT BEING SAID!! I hope you enjoy this chapter! Alot happens in it, it's time to speed things up afterall!
Let me know what you think!!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes, the universe found itself being so outrageously merciful, that Cloud couldn’t help but worry.

That is to say, his expedition to Mideel had gone exceptionately well.

Kujata was surprisingly easy to find, so much sooner than Cloud would have thought possible, he’d acquired the lower tier astral that he was bringing back to the capital safely.

Cloud tried to forget about the worry, tried to enjoy the train ride back to his family in peace, but there it was again, nagging at the back of his head. He had given his assignments months to complete, and yet, there he was, returning after only 2 weeks.

Cloud tried to tell himself, what Zack most likely would’ve told him if he’d been there with him. That his rapid success was due to his amazing intellect and ability to get shit done. Cloud, having grown much more confident over the years, could partially agree to this… but still, in just 2 weeks he’d found Kujata... Never in his wildest dreams, would he have thought it would be that easy.

Of course, he needed the crystal energy to even be able to access the damn thing, but with everyday that passed, the empire was closer and closer to recreating a copy of that power. Mako energy… a ominous thing indeed. Maybe, the success of Clouds journey was by the blessing of Six, after all, even the great King Regis had his back.

Either way, Cloud had succeded and was now on his way back to his family. This was all that mattered.

~

When Cloud arrived at the train station in Insomnia, he ran into Zack’s open arms and was spun around several times before his feet where even allowed to touch the ground.

“Prom! Prom!” Prompto yelled out, though it mostly sounded like om or rom, but it was cute
nonetheless. But how amazing that was indeed! Only two weeks at Aerith’s kindergarden, and Prompto had unlocked his ability to speak.

“Oh my God!” Prompto exclaimed, “You speak!” Cloud was quick to lift Prompto up into his arms and hug him tightly. “How are you so clever? You clever little man!” he praised and tickled Prompto into a fit of laughter. “Can he say anything else?” Cloud asked Zack as they finally started walking towards their house.

“Weeeell, he makes this weird pigeon sound when he wants to eat. But other than that, he just says his name.”

“I can’t believe his first word is his own name.”

“Apparently it’s common for kids who start at kindergarden’s early on. Aerith told me, that it helps them in saying that they want to join playing. Which really, it’s no wonder that that would be number one priority on Prom’s agenda.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Social little butterfly.” Cloud said with a smile, pinching Prompto’s cheek and making him squeal with glee.

The rest of the way home was spent updating each other what had happened while they were each absent from each others lives. Apparently, each time Zack went to pick up Prompto, he engaged in enough pleasant conversation to become fast friends with Aerith and consequently, each time she went to visit her mother, she visited Zack and Prompto as well.

Once upon a time, Cloud might have shown anxiety about Zack hanging out in private with such a lovely and beautiful woman, but these days, he was just happy that Zack was in good company while Cloud wasn’t there to make him smile.

When they came home, Aerith and Mrs. Gainsborough were in fact, already at their house, a lovely pie making Cloud and Zack’s home smells deliciously homey, their smiles and hugs making Cloud smile even brighter.

Life was just good.

Too good to be true.

~

The day after, Cloud was reporting to his Majesty the King and Cloud was able to introduce Kujata to the best of his abilities. He still didn’t know the full capabilities of the minor astral himself, but he knew enough for the King to get the gist of how powerful the beast was.

As they had agreed, Cloud was to safekeep the materia as he saw fit and he was to make sure that absolutely no one knew of its whereabouts, other than him.

As Cloud walked away from the palace, he saw Captain Sephiroth smile at him strangely, but he decided to ignore it and march away.

This system continued on, and suddenly two years had passed!
Cloud had managed to find and safekeep a total of 12 minor tier astrals!

There had been some danger along the way, but all in all, nothing had happened to him!

Cloud and Zack had had the biggest fight of their life that one time that Cloud had actually needed to go undercover in the Empire. Even the King had been ready to call it off, but Cloud had persuaded both of the importance of collecting the materia, especially the one located in the Empire’s territory.

It had been a difficult mission, and he’d almost been discovered on several accounts; but in the end, he’d managed to fulfill the mission.

Prompto was now talking and walking and jumping around like crazy. He’d started going to acrobatic class as he’d developed a body which was lanky and flexible and Cloud was extremely adamant about utilizing the own bodies aptitudes to its fullest potential. Zack agreed of course, but he also insisted that self defense was of the outmost importance, and he managed to sneak plenty of lessons in, even though Prompto was as young as he was.

Due to his busy schedule, Cloud never did see Ignis or Gladiolus, and many times he wondered how they were doing. Zack mentioned that he saw them around the palace from time to time, and was sadden to say that even though the kids were still young, they too, were so busy already that they barely had the time to say hello.

Nyx and Libertus were taking care of Prom whenever Zack couldn’t get rid of his night shift at the palace and were building an amazing bond with the kid. Although Libertus was still spoiling the kid too much, especially with his bad habit of bringing donuts and chips and soda and nearly anything that was bursting with sugar.

Handling Prompto on a sugar rush? Not so fun for the parents, hilarious for the guests.

Everything was going lovely and in a few months Prompto was going to enter 1st grade, and have his school debut!

The thing was, that just around that time, Cloud, who was beginning to think he was nearing the end of his materia search, discovered the existence of a materia rumored to be much more powerful than anything he’d ever encountered. Many of the legends about materia sounded like that of course, but this particular legend was so well documented that Cloud couldn’t help but wonder if this one was truly, that much more powerful.

Knights of the Round

Located on the extremely remote Round Island.

Cloud planned the excursion so that he would be able to return home before Prompto’s school debut, which was all well and good… in theory.

Prompto, who already didn’t see that much of Cloud, was absolutely livid when he heard the news. Claiming, that of course something would happen and that Prompto would have to start school without both his parents to see him off and pick him up.

"Not all kids have the privilege of having two parents you know." Cloud had said, and at the time, having grown up with only his mother, he didn't see the harm in that statement. But when tears welled up in the five-year-olds eyes, Cloud realized that being away as often as he was, on as dangerous trips as they were, gave off certain implications when he'd said what he had.

Zack had been the one to further cue him in on it. How Zack being on edge everyday during Cloud's
excursion to the Empire, had affected Prompto extremely negatively.

Moreover, it hadn’t been that long ago, and Cloud had needed to extend the trip with two full months. You couldn't blame the kid for thinking Cloud wouldn't be able to make it back in time.

Nevertheless, Cloud had a duty to perform and he had to leave, no matter how Zack looked at him and no matter how much Prompto would cry.

On the day he was scheduled to leave, Prompto locked himself in his room after information Zack that he wouldn't speak to Cloud no matter what. Cloud thought was a little harsh, but the kid was a sensitive one; reminding Cloud far too much of his younger self.

“Prom?” Cloud asked, knocking on the kids door. The door wasn’t locked, they hadn’t installed that kind of mechanism on any of the doors in their house, but Cloud would much prefer if the kid permitted him entry, instead of him having to force his way in. “I’ll be back before you know it, okay?” Cloud tried at first, but there was no response from the other side of the door.

Cloud didn't know what to say, and he just stood there for a couple of minutes wondering how to get the kid to come out and give him the hug he desperately wanted before he left. "...I'm sorry about what I said Prom. I promise to tell you all about my trip when I come back, okay?” Cloud never did tell Prompto any of the details of his missions, which Zack had always encouraged him to do. Cloud hoped this would be enough bargaining material to get the kid out of his room.

Finally, Cloud heard tiny feet shuffle and the door was gently opened. It was a tiny sliver really, but Cloud easily see the yellow Chocobo themed interior that was splattered all about the room, and then there was the little blue eye, red-rimmed from crying, peak out in the tiny sliver.

“You will?” He asked carefully, sniffling his nose miserably, and at that, Cloud couldn’t help but smile. He went down on one knee then and Prompto opened the door a little further. Cloud could always tell when summer was around the corner, you could see it on the freckles on Prompto's face...

“I will,” Cloud promised, extending his pinky to seal the deal, which finally made the mopey kid smile brightly.

Cloud was then, overcome with just how much he loved his son and with a deep sense of regret at how much he’d been away. Prompto still loved him just as much as he loved Zack, which Cloud was eternally grateful for, considering how painfully often he was away. With those feelings making his chest swell, he couldn’t help but utter yet another promise.

“I also promise that I won’t be going on work trips for a long long time. This summer we’ll have so much fun kiddo.”

Prompto, who, when happy, looked like he was just about ready to explode with his emotions, visually did just that before he jumped and hugged Cloud as fiercely as his almost-six-years-old body could manage.

Cloud laughed, hugging the kid back and kissing his cheek. Finally he ushered Prom back inside his room, to get ready to walk him to the train station and Prompto nodded quickly before he went back inside. Cloud sighed then, relieved all had worked out, now, there was just Zack left...

Cloud knew where he’d be, and he did indeed find him out in the garden, in the chilly spring air sitting on the wooden steps they had built together last summer. “I should be used to this by now…” Zack spoke up, looking towards the sky as he did.

Cloud took a seat next to Zack, instantly intertwining their hands.
“It’s okay… I’m still not used to it either.” Cloud reassured him.

Zack sighed, leaning his body into Cloud. “I don’t think you understand how much I worry though… how much I can’t help but worry, you’re strong enough, you’re experienced enough… but you’re still… so far away.”

Cloud squeezed the others hand, “You have no idea how much I miss you… Every day that I’m gone.” Cloud bumped into Zack playfully then, trying his best to keep their conversation lighthearted. “But I always come back you know.”

Zack turned to him and smiled, “I suppose you do.”

They shared a kiss then, and as Cloud always felt in these moments, couldn’t help but think there was nothing more right in this world, then sitting in the gentle sunshine and kissing the love of his life.

“Ewwww! You’re kissing!” Came Prompto’s voice in the background, and the lovebirds smiled into each other, but Cloud steeled another kiss before they parted.

“Don’t be jealous Prom, I’m sure you’ll find a nice kid to kiss when you start school.” Zack told him cheekily.

“Ewww, no thank you!” Prompto said, making mock gagging sounds, effectively provoking Zack into chasing him around the house, laughing in that high pitch of his as he dodged and escaped under tables.

Cloud was happy to leave his family behind in such a happy mood, and as they he waved goodbye at the train station he became happy at the thought of this trip being one of the last he would ever take.

~

Getting to Round Island, the dormant volcanic island which lay in middle of absolutely nowhere, proved very difficult indeed. Cloud had to fish out a lot of royal cash to find anyone willing enough to go with him on a five days long trip on rocky waters and to wait the indefinite amount of time until Cloud had concluded his business there, to then go back to mainland.

Eventually he did find a girl, a young seafarer named Yuffie, who seemed more than inclined in helping out, for the right amount of cash of course.

Yuffie seemed much too young but when Cloud asked her about her parents she always came up with such vague answers, and so he figured, that this was a girl who’d grown up much faster than she should have but that she knew how to take care of herself because of it.

Yuffie did like to talk however, and talk she would…for five days straight.

Cloud felt she knew her whole life story by the end of the trip, who she was originally from Wutai but couldn’t stand how Shinra Corp. had made the place into a complete turist attraction, how she never felt she fit in anywhere she went and how much her heart called her to adventure. How she loved the sea, but enjoyed the forest and the mountains that much more – how she loved to hear stories from everywhere she went in the world and without even mentioning it himself, she told
Cloud of the legend of the knights of the Round.

“The people around these parts claim that the crystal they have locked up in Insomnia came from space! Like a meteor – boom! – it was what created that big old crater on Round Island.”

Cloud’s eyebrow rose in interest at that, this he hadn’t read anywhere. “I thought it was a dormant volcano?”

Yuffie shrugged, “That, I don’t know, you’re the biologist or geografist or whatever, aren’t ya? You should know better than me.”

Cloud shifted at that, suddenly caught in the lie he usually used with locals.

“All I know is the legend they told me, about how the first King of Lucis went to the Island to inspect the meteor and whatnot, and that he died there.”

This, Cloud knew a little more about.

The accounts of how Somnus the Mystic, indeed the first King of Lucis (if you didn’t count the refusal of his older brother, the Immortal Accursed, of course) would in the later years of his reign, pay a visit to Round Island, where he would eventually lose his life.

As Somnus the Mystic, was quite the brutal King, he’d made it law that his knights should die with their King, which is why legend said that 12 knights took their lives that day alongside him, on Round Island.

The legend told, that the power of the late King and his knights, still roamed about the island. It was on this basis that Cloud had come… but as Yuffie spoke, he found that there might be vital pieces of information he was missing.

“The folks here, 2000 years ago, thought that the island must have been cursed then and decided to never go to Round Island again!”

“How did they react when the crystal was taken to the capital then?”

“I can’t say, the granny didn’t really tell me. But I do know that the village folk there didn’t seem quite as inclined into worshiping The Six, quite as much as you city folk do”

“I’m not from Insomnia, I’m from Nibelheim.” Cloud answered, as a way of insinuating that he wasn’t one for worshipping either.

“Oh! That’s one place I haven’t been to! But now that you mention it, you don’t really look like any of the Insomnians I’ve met throughout my travels. Not that I’ve met too many, they don’t leave the city much do they? With their precious guarding wall and everything.”

Cloud shrugged, “I suppose they don’t”

Then the conversation started to change and Yuffie started to interrogate Cloud on how an outsider such as himself had an Insomnian passport, about how cold it could get in Nibelheim, about the Nibel wolves she’d heard so much about and much much more.

Cloud would like to say he’d been annoyed by the almost non-stop chattering, but despite it all, he found himself growing especially fond of Yuffie.

When they arrived on the Island, which it not being too large, they decided to share a base close to
the boat, instead of Cloud having to bring his heavy gear everywhere with him.

Then, Cloud was off and after half a day of strenuous hiking up the side of the crater, he was finally able to gaze at the dent in the Earth, Round Island.

From the moment he laid eyes on it, he could tell, that the crystal had been here once. Having studied the crystal for as long as he had, he could recognize the blue shimmer that sparkled in the sun every other second. He could quite feel it, from this distance, but he was sure the crystal magic inside him would tingle the closer he got to the epicenter.

But it did more than just tingle, it flared up all of his body and Cloud was able to warp greater distances than he’d ever been able to (which was very convenient right this moment).

Once he reached the very center on the island, he saw a large stone with old engravings written into it.

*Here did his Majesty Somnus Lucis Caelum, The founder of the Great Kingdom of Lucis, give in to the call of The Crystal and laid his life down to strengthen The Heart of Eos in the hope of aiding the coming Kings of Lucii in the war foretold by The Six.*

As Cloud struggled to process this much vital information into his brain, and apply it to everything he knew, about the astrals, about the crystal, about materia, about the goddamn *Ring of the Lucii,* he suddenly saw a terrible shadow creep over the whole island.

It was a Nifelheimian Airship Cloud realized with a chilling sense of dread which paved way for a great panic, as Cloud realized how there was absolutely no way for Cloud to gain cover from the enemies above.

There was *barely* enough time to even think about Cloud’s next course of action, because now, an enormous MA was coming down from the sky and Cloud couldn’t do much other than warp out of the way as fast as he could.

The MA landed with unexpected grace, and from it jumped out someone, who had been haunting Cloud’s dreams for a very long time now…

The first man he’d ever killed, a man whose blood had spluttered black and stained Zack’s face, the man whose body had disappeared in the middle of the biggest snowfield in the world.

“Aha! So this is where my *dear* brother met his end. How lovely!” he said, jumping atop the grave stone and sitting comfortable upon it.

“Oh, and I should say, you shouldn’t exhaust yourself darling, not when we came all this way for you.” He addressed Cloud, who was utilizing his rapid warp technique to come off as invisible as he tried to flee the scene. It was the best he could do, considering his predicament, but it was a futile effort, considering that they already knew he was here, and that despite the sparkles of crystal magic in the air, that Cloud would soon exhaust himself. “Come here dear boy, I don’t think we’ve even introduced ourselves to each other.” He said with a sly smile, “although you don’t need much of an introduction, we know who you are.”

“How?” Cloud asked, as he reluctantly, but bravely stepped closer to the enemy.

“Having spies is quite the wonderful thing.” The man replied happily.

Cloud couldn’t believe it! He’d been so careful, so meticulous about keeping everything a secret! *How??*
“I’ll fill you in on it later of course, when we’ve started to establish our friendship.”

“Friendship?!” Cloud bellowed, he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “With you?!”

“Oh yes, I might not look it, but I am quite the fun chap.”

“STOP FUCKING AROUND! WHAT DO YOU WANT?” Cloud demanded fiercely, the edges of his very being glistening with blue magic that flared up, ready to fight on a moments notice.

“My, oh my, you’re much more feisty than you used to be. I will tell you this though, Cloud Strife, as you can see, I am not quite as scared of you as would hope I should be, considering how deadly you’re looking.”

Cloud heaved, his breath heavy and the aura of magic intensifying all around him.

“You’ve already killed me once and failed. Think you can do a proper job this time?”

:)

Chapter End Notes

auspiciousness has entered the chat

End Notes

please leave a comment or a kudos if you enjoyed, internet validation is rad homie.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!