Eir's Tomorrow

by jukeboxhound

Summary

Cloud is the Planet's greatest weapon, and if he can't fix old wrongs and battles then he may end up being the means by which it all ends (again).

Notes

This fic was born way back in 2008 and has gone through a few revisions. I'd have given up on it a long time ago if people hadn't been so supportive over the years, and so to everyone who's ever commented, critiqued, and cheered, thank you.

Canon: Original game and Crisis Core, miscellaneous parts of Before Crisis, absolutely none of Dirge of Cerberus.

Overall warnings: torture of both an adult and a child; non-graphic description of attempted assault of an underage girl; blood and gore of both the battle and scientific kinds; a fuckton of PTSD, including night-terrors and questionable decisions; and odd moments of humor because I can't take something of this dramatic magnitude entirely seriously. I dealt with issues of racism in regards to Wutai as best I could, but I'm white, so if I fucked it up then please, please tell me. Just be aware that there's lots of Bad Things in this, but it won't end in tragedy for the main characters.

Disclaimer: Knowing Shadows' Fusion, Twig's A Long Hard Road, Guardian1's But That Was In Another Country, and Lena ban Obsidian's smokethoughts trilogy have been the main sources of inspiration. I was also given permission by tir-synni to use the idea of the Strife family being worshipers of Hel. Fusion was, at the time I started this, the only other time-travel fix-it I knew of, so any similarities between this and other one(s) is entirely incidental.
See the end of the work for more notes.
Prologue

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It took one year, eight months, and three days for the Planet to die after Jenova's final defeat.

After the nightmare brought by Jenova's Remnants, a vague wind of optimism had swept through village and city alike for the first time in decades. The convenience of mako-derived energy was gone, but the rain had come and suddenly things were green again, green and growing. And maybe it would take a while for things to settle and for technology to get back on track, but everything was alive in ways it hadn't been before.

Later, the quick-spawning creatures were the first indication that something had gone wrong. When frogs croaked with two heads and three-eyed fish went belly-up, when snakes started crawling on vestigial legs and water-lilies rotted through their blossoms, it was the first crack in the optimism. It didn't take long before birds were developing teeth and trees bore fruit dripping a black, viscous fluid that seared human flesh.

Moving from place to place every few days meant that Cloud was one of the first to notice the changes. He stopped at a small stream in one of the jungles near Gongaga to wash the monster gore from First Tsurugi, but the moment his bare fingertips touched the water, he jerked them back with a sharp hiss. It felt like the time he'd accidentally spilled industrial cleaner over his hands, nerves screaming in protest, and he quickly used the bottled water he carried to rinse off his hands. When the burning lessened to vague tingling Cloud sat back on his heels and stared thoughtfully at the stream, wondering how he could have missed the complete and utter silence in the jungle.

Then reports of new monsters starting coming in to WRO headquarters. Not the usual monsters that sported tentacles or pointy teeth, but monsters made of darkness, things that smothered a person and left behind an empty shell, monsters impervious to all but the most powerful of weapons. The day they came to Edge, they came in through the vents. The pipes. The electrical wiring. They came in and slithered like oil over pavement and metal and bodies.

The worst part was that Cloud could hear them. Not audibly, because in the beginning the monsters were as silent as the shadows they appeared to be, but because of the void that surrounded them. Nowadays, after the last time he'd felt Sephiroth's breath against his face, Cloud always knew where someone was, could feel in the back of his mind the faintest touch of that little bit of Lifestream in a living being. These new monsters were just black holes: not darkness, but something worse than that, like negative space cut from thin air.

Cosmo Canyon was the first to fall. Nanaki was last seen throwing himself at the tide of the Plague, buying just enough time for the last survivors of his village to escape.

The Gold Saucer and North Corel were the next to lose contact with the outside world. When Cid and Vincent were abruptly cut off in the middle of a report from Rocket Town, it was all Cloud could do to keep the others from running out to find their bodies. He knew bodies were all they would find, at that point, gods, let that be the worst of it.

Negotiations between WRO's Neo-Midgar and Wutai were interrupted when Yuffie led her people to battle against the Plague. It was well known by now that it was nearly impossible to destroy something that had no form of its own and had to borrow corpses, but Wutai was a proud country that had been broken once already. Never again. So Yuffie died with her nation while the rest of the world desperately tried to barricade itself against the ruthless onslaught of the monsters.
(It was Cloud's private opinion that Wutai's warrior empress had fought to the bitter end partially because she hadn't been there in Rocket Town when she felt she was needed most, but, as usual, he kept the thought to himself.)

While Tifa grew thinner on the meager rations and Marlene lost her smile, Cloud went to Aeris' church and pleaded for answers. When Denzel, so solemn and so earnest, came up to him and asked very straightforwardly what happened to the souls when the Lifestream was destroyed, Cloud went to Aeris' church and raged.

*It was supposed to get better. You promised. You said it would be better.*

All he got in reply was an echoing silence, like someone screaming just below the edge of his hearing. The only escape that could make him forget for a little while about the not-screaming and the not-life and the not-anything was Tifa's arms, the pale skin stretching over her ribs because she didn't have more mako than blood and her rations always seemed to end up going to the kids. He didn't love her, not like that, and maybe it was cruel irony that it was only now he was able to share her bed. He didn't love her. But Reeve had killed himself just last week and Barret was starting to lose it and there just wasn't any hope, not when it finally became obvious that the Planet was losing its own battle with death and it was all they could do to grab onto this last shred of humanity.

When the Plague came for them, it was unnaturally silent. It surged like a black tide in the streets over debris cobbled together into ramshackle barricades. Guns retorted and swords clashed, but the battle cries of hollow-eyed humans were cut off by the darkness as they died unnaturally silent deaths. Cloud could feel the pinpricks over his body as every nearby heart simply stopped mid-beat, the vague whispers of Lifestream that made them feel alive dissipating like a heat wave. 

When the souls of Marlene and Denzel had all been crushed out of existence, when the brilliant fragile light inside Tifa faded, Cloud felt something in his head crack.

(A memory came to him from a long time ago, before everything got burned up and torn down. *It's the jötnar,* his mum whispered as the wind howled outside the window, *but they can't hurt you in here.*)

Something in his head cracked and he wasn't really Cloud anymore. Cloud had been a lost soul but this new incarnation, heartbroken and traumatized and so tired, had a purpose, and that was to take as much of the Plague with the dying Planet as he could.

Cloud was the only creature left alive to see the air turn to fire as it condensed into falling droplets of black water; he watched the sky break because there was no atmosphere, the blue turning into a starry darkness that opened like a great maw over the horizon. He witnessed the Lifestream splintering, snapping apart like a taut rope and tearing the landscape apart. Through the crack in his head he could finally hear the screaming as the Cetra flickered, evaporated like so much fog under starlight no longer blocked by sunlight or human pollution. There was *pain terror despair love regret anger,* and what remained of Cloud's worn, exhausted body was burned and flayed with everything else; what remained of *him* was thrown into the Lifestream flailing in its death throes.

If this was how life ended, perhaps it was better never to have existed at all. Except someone didn't agree with that, or maybe it was several someones, but either way the Lifestream suddenly changed its direction. Purpose, it said to him, keening through the shattered remnants of his mind. Rebirth.

Once upon a time Cloud might have questioned that, demanded some straight answers for once, but he wasn't Cloud anymore, not really, because the Plague had won and the Planet was dead and he had, quite literally, lost everything.
It took a year, eight months, and three days for the Planet to die after Jenova's last uprising, and that was how the story ended.

Until Cloud woke up in a lab.
In Which There Are Collective Hallucinations and Hojo Is an Asshole

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Disturbing medical imagery, a child in pain.

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It wasn't how he remembered it.

Laboratories were places deep underground where their secrets couldn't leak out into the world. They were cramped with metal things and tubes and wires, smelling of damp earth and old blood, always kept cold to keep specimens from spoiling. But this laboratory was so clean, so white, that for a moment Cloud thought he'd gone blind, and it took a few seconds for his slit pupils to adjust and for him to see several people leaning over the steel table dominating the room. They wore white lab coats and there was a small body lying restrained on the table. Blood dripped onto the floor.

Mako burned his nose. Made his skin crawl. Made him remember his fingernails breaking off as he scrabbled at the glass, the near sensory deprivation as the thick green fluid swallowed his sight, muffled his ears, filled his throat. He could remember those same scientists looming over him, turned into inhuman silhouettes by the light, his own blood spattering their clean white coats. He would recognize Hojo's hunched form anywhere.

There was a heavy pressure against his skull that was the same pain terror despair he'd tasted earlier between the cracks in his head. But it wasn't him, wasn't Cloud, and that was what made him lash out, still mindless with horror.

One of the computers exploded in a cascade of sparks and smoldering wire and plastics. Immediately the scientists whirled around. Terrified that they would see him, no fucking clue what was going on except that he needed to get out, Cloud swung at a row of consoles with First Tsurugi and turned the sterile lab into smoking, broken chaos. The lab assistants rushed for the door that Cloud knew led out into the caverns underneath the ShinRa mansion. Hojo remained, not to taunt Cloud or mock him as useless even for an experiment but instead hovering over the operating table, yelling at the backs of his fleeing assistants.

"Get back here!" the man screamed shrilly. "How dare you abandon your duties in the middle of such a delicate procedure – "

When the two large tanks shattered, however, flooding the floor with mako, Hojo had no choice but to leave the laboratory cursing and ranting.

The lab wasn't perfect anymore. Smoke hovered thick near the ceiling and the floor had turned into a shallow pool of mako. Delicate instruments now lay in sad heaps of glass and scrap metal that occasionally sparked. Cloud stood by the broken glass from the tanks with his chest heaving, sword in hand, and wondered if this was his punishment.

Movement from the table caught his eye. Cautiously stepping closer (he couldn't feel the mako eating through his shoes to his skin, but maybe that was because his body pumped more mako than
blood anyway), he looked down.

…Sephiroth.

Only it couldn't be, despite the silver hair and slightly inhuman facial features, because this was the small and underdeveloped body of a child. The boy's body was pierced with long needles like a bizarre form of acupuncture, focused around joints and major muscle groups in a way that Cloud immediately recognized as a nerve-response test. A breathing tube trailed from his mouth, and it took a few seconds to realize that the boy was staring at him through thinly-slit eyes. A complicated tangle of revulsion, horror, and pity tied Cloud's stomach into a hard knot.

"Sephiroth," he murmured aloud, feeling the insane urge to laugh. Before he could think about it, his bare hands – dark with gore and ash – were carefully but quickly pulling the needles out and tossing them to the side, too aware of the thin rivulets of blood trickling down skin. When he gently guided out the breathing tube, the boy started coughing harshly.

Cloud could have removed the restraints. He didn't.

After he could breathe properly again, the boy looked up at Cloud with an eerily blank expression. "Are you an angel?" he rasped.

"What?"

The boy stared at him, waiting patiently for an answer. Cloud felt the urge to laugh again (and never stop) but instead leaned on the edge of the steel table, one hand gripping the edge and the other braced on Tsurugi's hilt. "What makes you think that?" he asked quietly.

"You made it stop hurting." The boy (it couldn't be Sephiroth, and yet the only difference here was the age, everything else was exactly the same) spoke as though it were self-evident. "And you have wings."

A single black wing stretched from Sephiroth's shoulder—

"I'm not an angel," Cloud snapped.

The boy obviously didn't believe him, but approaching voices raised in argument interrupted him.

"– clearance to do such a thing! He may be different, but he's still a child – "

"Sephiroth is no child." Hojo sounded petulant. "It's our responsibility to keep thorough records of his growth – "

"But not at the cost of his humanity!"

Cloud's hands tightened around Tsurugi as the scientists' voices gradually got louder, a fine tremor of anticipation running through him. The moment the door opened and they spotted him, he could kill Hojo and whomever he was arguing with, take the kid and run –

But when the door opened, the scientists didn't even seem to notice him.

"Sephiroth, my boy," called the man that had been arguing with Hojo, "are you all right?"

"Yes, Professor Gast," the boy next to him replied calmly. His eyes never left Cloud, who twitched in recognition of the name. Professor Gast was an unremarkable man in his late thirties, dressed in the same lab coat as any other scientist, but his eyes were kinder behind his glasses. Hojo stood
slightly behind his shoulder wringing his hands and watching the scene with extreme irritation as lab assistants milled around nervously behind their bosses.

"As soon as we find the proper equipment, we'll get you out of there." Gast eyed the spilled mako, then added more softly, "Sephiroth, child, are you certain you're all right? And...how did you get the breathing tube out?"

"I'm fine, Professor Gast," Sephiroth repeated tonelessly. Cloud's attention moved from the scientists to the boy, scrutinizing him, and started when Sephiroth continued, "An angel helped me."

Hojo started muttering about things like visual hallucinations and mako poisoning, but Gast just smiled. "And what is she like?"

"He isn't female. He's covered in blood." Pause. "He looks very sad."

Cloud couldn't help flinching. There was an odd sensation beginning in the center of his chest, like the ache of waking up alone in a house, and the presence that was not—Cloud was making his head feel distant, karmic punishment or cosmic joke or long-overdue insanity. He didn't know why he was suddenly back in the lab, why the scientists didn't seem to notice him standing right in the middle of the wrecked room, why Sephiroth was so young and wouldn't stop looking at him—I've lost it, he thought wildly, and wanted to laugh.

An unfamiliar Turk appeared in the doorway by Gast and Hojo carrying the specially processed charcoal that absorbed mako spills. The trio's conversation was a faint buzzing in Cloud's ears.

"Where are you going?" Sephiroth asked placidly, tilting his head so that he could follow Cloud's backward stumble.

"Away," Cloud gasped, tightening his hands around Tsurugi's grip and ready to slash his way out. The walls were closing in on him, the stench of mako making him lightheaded. Away.

...He lay on his back in a sea of white. It wasn't the harshness of the lab but something softer, warmer, and just as familiar.

Aeris?

It wasn't Aeris' voice that responded but a presence much larger and deeper, intimidating in its sheer scale. Cloud suddenly felt very small at the overwhelming pressure and recognized it as the other that had tried to keep him whole as the Planet died.

Purpose. Rebirth, it repeated to him. It wasn't screaming like it had before, but it was just as powerful.

But the Planet died, Cloud whispered without moving his lips. I saw it. I...

Determination. The will to survive.

Cloud remembered Bugenhagen's three-dimensional display room and the old man's descriptions of the Planet, how it was an autonomous entity, developing over the ages through the experiences of the tiny lives on its surface, and how it would sacrifice them if it meant ensuring its own survival. That's why everyone was dying, he realized numbly. Why everyone grew too weak to resist the
The Planet didn't understand. What were a few flickers of light compared to its own brilliant glow? If the Planet itself died, then there wouldn't be any life at all. A sacrifice of individuals to save the whole. It had needed that extra life, the last burst of power, for the final act that could save itself.

What?

Rebirth. Cycles, because anything that began had an end, and everything that had an end could begin again. The will to survive.

Without Aeris to translate things, Cloud had a kind of confused vertigo at the rush of images that the Planet was pushing at him. Humans were a small percentage of all the little souls scurrying around its surface, so it had only the vaguest concept of how to condense its geological-age thoughts into something that Cloud could understand. He could feel himself starting to buckle under the weight of something so old and enormous, the outermost edges of his self threatening to get lost in the wild currents of the Lifestream.

Cleansing. Excising the gangrenous flesh so that it could heal.

It was like the Planet was reaching through to the innermost parts of his soul and twanging its fingers discordantly across the strings. A pain worse than anything Hojo or Sephiroth had ever done to him made Cloud scream, at least the soul's equivalent of it, and writhe frantically to get away before he was washed under the stream of memories that weren't his own. The Planet was cutting something out of him, raking through his essence with ruthless efficiency.

Stop, Cloud tried to cry, but couldn't quite wrap his breaking head around the word.


But Cloud was beyond trying to untangle the too-big thoughts that the Planet was communicating to him, he was being torn apart and rebuilt and physical death was nothing compared to this. The stars were blinking out one by one but he had the unsettling feeling that he was seeing things that had already happened and which hadn't happened at all.

Just let it stop, let it end. I don't care anymore, I don't want to try anymore, just let me go.

... Sephiroth's room was a small, cell-like space with a bed, a desk, a small bookshelf, and little else. The walls were painted white with security cameras tucked into the ceiling's corners, the floor made of simple dark wood. The only sign that it was occupied were the books stacked neatly on the shelf and the boy leaning against the bed's headboard with a text open on his lap.

The book wasn't like the others he was given. Professor Gast was prone to moments of whimsy, and in one such moment he'd presented Sephiroth with a book of stories, including one about a god that hung himself from a tree. A local legend, the scientist told him with a smile. The god had remained there days after his death and then inexplicably returned to life with new, sacred knowledge. Sephiroth didn't understand the point of such a story since it didn't explain things like thermodynamics or military strategy, which were the kinds of books that Professor Hojo gave him, and didn't seem to have any practical value. But Sephiroth read it anyway, the only sound in his room being the occasional dry sound of paper against paper as he turned the page.

After a while the back of his neck prickled with some sixth sense telling him he wasn't alone. He jerked his head up, a few strands of shoulder-length hair falling into his eyes, and blinked in mute
surprise. The angel was sitting on the floor by his desk, knees drawn halfway up with his folded arms resting on top. The shadows of two translucent wings arched gracefully from his bowed shoulders.

"Hello," Sephiroth said politely. He'd been told it was the proper greeting when one entered into another person's company.

The angel slowly looked up at him from under spiky yellow bangs, and though his eyes shone as brilliantly as Sephiroth's own there was something absent in them that reminded him uneasily of some of Hojo's lab animals. "Are you real?"

The voice was low, male, and raspy, not at all what Sephiroth had imagined angels sounded like when Gast described them. But the wings were there, and the angel had taken away the pain when Professor Hojo was putting him through yet another one of the endless tests, so maybe the voice difference was just a fluke. Then he thought about what the angel had said, and debated on whether he should ask for clarification on what sense he meant 'real.' Sephiroth decided to go with the simplest answer and deal with contextual issues as they came up. "Yes."

The angel continued staring at him before he finally nodded and murmured under his breath, "Okay. That's...that's good."

The room lapsed into silence again. Sephiroth let the book lay open and forgotten on his lap, more interested in his supernatural visitor. Perhaps the latest mako shower was having unexpected side-effects that caused hallucinations, as Hojo seemed to think?

What would Gast say about this? a little voice whispered, and Sephiroth thought, Take a chance to believe.

Closing the book and setting it aside on the bedcovers, Sephiroth calmly walked over to the slumped angel and seated himself on the floor in front of him, just out of arm's reach. "Are you real?" he asked in turn, honestly curious.

Those weird eyes didn't seem able to properly focus on him as though they were looking through Sephiroth instead. The angel's mouth opened and closed once or twice before he was able to speak. "I don't know," he whispered finally.

Sephiroth's brow furrowed slightly. Apparently that hadn't been the direction to go, and he wracked his memory for the few social etiquette lessons Gast had given him. "What's your name?" seemed like a safe place to start.

"...Cloud."

Cloud. Sephiroth nodded his head once and said decisively. "That's a good name for an angel." Not that Sephiroth would really know, given he'd never named so much as a goldfish, but he thought that maybe Gast would be proud. The angel, Cloud, looked at him with a strange expression, but Sephiroth was used to people looking at him like that.

"What do angels do?" Sephiroth continued, unconsciously tilting his head to one side.

"I don't know," the angel whispered.

"You don't seem to know very much at all," Sephiroth pointed out.

Cloud drew his knees closer to his chest and put his head down on his forearms as though to block out everything else. Absently plucking at his plain shirt and trousers, Sephiroth stared at the curled
form and wondered what he was supposed to do. It didn't seem right that those wings should be drooping so low, so he fell back on his usual trick for getting through these unexpected situations. *What would Gast say?*

Inspiration struck and Sephiroth was up on his feet, grabbing the slim book from his bed and resettling himself on the floor. The angel hadn't moved. Hoping that he'd gotten something right, Sephiroth opened the book and flipped past several painted images.

"‘Odin was the lord of all the gods,'” Sephiroth read aloud. He had learned to read not long after learning to walk, and Gast encouraged him to keep practicing until he could do so without faltering. He stumbled in a few places, but pressed on, determined. "‘And because he was their lord, he set out to learn everything he could from the nine different worlds.'"

Cloud wasn't reacting, but Sephiroth didn't let that stop him.

"'He hung himself from the lowest branches of Yggdrasil for nine days. Hunger wracked his body and thirst parched his throat, and when his body succumbed to a mortal death he sent his soul to the Otherworld – ‘"

He sensed the angel's eyes on him, but didn't stop reading. When he finally looked up after he finished the last page, the angel was gone, and the sight of the bare floor bothered him more than Sephiroth expected.

... 

Once more Cloud floated in the endless horizon of the Lifestream. He didn't bother to struggle. The pain was still there as the Planet went through every fiber of his being, determinedly tracking down the poisonous traces of Jenova and indelicately ripping them away, but it didn't hurt as much as long as Cloud didn't resist.

*Why are you doing this?* he asked, not for the first time, and received the same thought-answer as before: the determination to survive, whatever it took.

*That's why you took the Lifestream and left everything to die.* The rapid mutations, the deaths of thousands of people from a Plague no one understood. The panic and grief that had ruled him since he witnessed the Planet taking its last gasping breath had subsided into a dull hollowness, a suspension that left him in a vague sort of apathy.

Not death, the Planet contradicted him. Rebirth. Cycles.

*You used all those deaths to…what? Start over?* Maybe this wasn't hell so much as limbo created by a traumatized mind.

Rebirth, the Planet repeated. Cloud was starting to hate the word. Correcting mistakes. The relativity of events.

*You sent me back to…to Before.* When no refute came, Cloud suddenly laughed, long and hard and bitter. *You want me to go through it all again.*

The Planet didn't deny it.

*If you had this kind of power, why the hell couldn't you stop Jenova?*

It took a moment of struggle for the Planet to find a way to conceptualize things in human terms, and even then it was a confused tangle of thoughts that threatened to crush Cloud under its weight.
Symbiotic partners, not slaves. Growth through memories and experiences, not by harvesting. Free will. The relativity of events – of time.

*I can't do it.*

Strength. Determination. A sense of ruthlessness.

*I did what had to be done. That doesn't make me strong.*

The will to survive.

_Every animal will fight for survival_, Cloud snarled, refusing to believe that he was special in any way. He was a failed copy of two extraordinary men who couldn't even keep his promises to the people he loved. Not a hero, not like Zack, who had died with a sword in his hand and a fuck-you grin on his face.

Fire. The shine of newly-forged steel. Mako – the Planet's lifeblood.

*What?*

WEAPON.

*I don't*, he started, but then he felt the harsh tearing against his already rough edges, and without thinking he reached for the familiar darkness at the back of his mind and _pulled_ –

– and found cold hardwood under his hands and knees, his panting for nonexistent breath ringing loudly in his ears. Tsurugi was almost unbearably heavy against his back. Slowly Cloud lowered his arms and sat back on his heels to press his forehead against the cool floor, willing his heart to stop racing and his hands from shaking.

A soft sound from somewhere to his left had Cloud rocking back into a crouch with his hand on Tsurugi's hilt, but the sight of Sephiroth sleeping peacefully on his bed made him blink in mute surprise. Cloud stood up and watched him for a long moment. Sephiroth (who broke the world) just looked like another kid, hardly any taller than Denzel had been.

Cloud leaned Tsurugi against the wall and carefully sat at the edge of the bed, frowning slightly when he realized that his weight, bizarrely, didn't seem to affect the plain woolen blanket. Sephiroth didn't stir except to briefly wrinkle his small, pointed nose.

It could've been so simple. A sharp, quick blow to the back of the head and Nibelheim would never burn, Meteor would never fall, and Jenova would never be able to dig her psychic claws into a strong but emotionally fragile warrior. Then Cloud could fade into the Lifestream, and it would be like the two most powerful of Jenova's puppets had never existed.

Sephiroth made a small harsh sound in his sleep and his thin eyebrows drew together. Without thinking, having been trained with Marlene and Denzel, Cloud gently brushed hair out of the boy's face and smoothed the frown line with a calloused thumb. Then he froze.

*What am I doing?*

Mako already flourished in that little body, making Cloud's ghostly fingertips tingle. He could hear one of the murmurs that haunted him suddenly come into focus; Sephiroth's voice, more familiar to Cloud than his own name with the tainted darkness of Jenova just a mere whisper behind it. It startled him, but it wasn't what made his heart suddenly turn cold.
Even if he killed Jenova, killed Sephiroth, it would only delay the inevitable. ShinRa still had its reactors, its processing plants, its SOLDIERs.

"If you could go back in time, would you kill Sephiroth? Knowing what you know now, even if he hadn't done anything yet?" Tifa had once asked him, and Cloud said, "I don't know."

Sephiroth unconsciously turned his cheek into the hand Cloud still had resting on his forehead. Cloud snatched it back as though he'd been burned, stood up and started pacing restlessly. There were a few papers stacked neatly on the desk, just underneath the dim lamp, covered in mathematical equations Cloud couldn't even begin to understand, and the contents of the bookshelves would seem more at home in one of the scientists' studies. The only indication that a child lived there was the slim book from which Sephiroth had read, tucked alongside a text on advanced physics.

Cloud glanced over his shoulder at the sleeping kid and the way Tsurugi cast a long shadow over the bed from the dim light of the desk lamp.

... It probably shouldn't have been so easy for Cloud to accept that he was being used by the Planet. The worst was having the Lifestream sift through him, tearing out the parts Jenova had withered away and tweaking odd bits so that Cloud temporarily forgot how to speak or couldn't remember who he was for a few days because it was too easy to get lost in the Planet's sheer vastness.

Sephiroth seemed to take Cloud's erratic company in stride. Often he would sit at his desk and quietly work on whatever task Gast or Hojo had assigned him, or run through his forms with a sword only half the size of the Masamune, and Cloud would watch silently, focusing on keeping himself grounded.

"What's it like being an angel?"

The unexpected break in the quiet made Cloud twitch in his corner. "You ask a lot of questions, don't you."

"How else am I supposed to learn?" Sephiroth's voice carried a heavy undertone of 'are you really that stupid.'

Good point, but Cloud still didn't really have an answer. "It's like being human," he responded after a moment of thought. After all, he certainly didn't feel like an angel, although to be fair he didn't much feel human on most days ending in 'y' anyway.

"How so?"

"Angels can hurt just as much as humans can."

Sephiroth leaned forward intently, fingers curled under the seat of his chair. "You made the pain go away before. Did you feel it too?"

Cloud's stomach clenched. "...Yes."

"Is that why you're so sad?"

He didn't respond, and after a long silence Sephiroth obediently went back to his work.

Cloud was learning new things: that Sephiroth had a habit of gnawing on the ends of pens until he
caught himself in the act with a grimace, that he tended to straighten things compulsively when he was unsettled or bothered, that he had a strong dislike for certain vegetables but would eat them anyway so that Hojo wouldn't lecture him. It was...humbling. And rather terrifying, when Sephiroth turned around in his chair one night and asked, "What is sex?"

Cloud, distracted by the whispers that floated through the air around himself and around Sephiroth, nearly slid off the bed. His first instinct was to run for the door and let Tifa deal with it. "What?"

"Sex," Sephiroth repeated patiently, hands resting over his bent knees. "What is it?"

"Sephiroth," Cloud said slowly, "where did you hear that word?" Because very few of the lab assistants were female and Cloud still remembered hazy bits and pieces about the regular guards.

Sephiroth's brow furrowed. "I overheard some of the assistants talking about it. They were discussing my phenotype, and—"

Cloud was moving before the boy could finish, dropping to his knees in front of Sephiroth and putting his translucent hands on bony shoulders. Immediately it was difficult not to get distracted by the way the Lifestream in him tried to reach out to the mako in Sephiroth.

"I want you to listen to me," he said quietly, holding his gaze. "If anyone ever tries to make you do something that makes you feel wrong, then don't. Do you understand? And I'm not talking about sparring or training. Sex should be something shared between consenting adults. This isn't something you need to understand right now, all right?"

Sephiroth nodded after a moment of hesitation, but Cloud's hold on his shoulders just tightened. "Promise me," he said lowly. "I'll explain it to you as long you promise not to go looking for it. I know you and your curiosity, but it can only hurt you until you get older. Promise me."

"I don't understand why it's such a big deal," the boy admitted quietly. "The assistants didn't seem to think anything of it."

"Because...because sex is something intimate," Cloud tried. "Even if you don't love the other person, you still let them see you vulnerable. It can be used for good and bad." If someone was looking around where they shouldn't be... "Just promise me, Sephiroth. And if you have any doubt, ask me, all right?"

Maybe it was because he'd gotten so protective over the orphans during the Plague, when humans were being reduced to something vile and animalistic, or maybe it was as practical as trying to keep Sephiroth relatively intact so that he wouldn't snap later on. Whatever the reason, his relief was nearly palpable when Sephiroth finally reached up and squeezed his wrist lightly.

"I promise."

Suddenly realizing how awkward this was, Cloud nodded sharply and made to stand up when Sephiroth's grasp on his wrist tightened.

"Is sex what made you so sad?"

Cloud barked out a laugh before he could stop himself.

But Cloud couldn't always be around, not with the way the Planet was... was shaping him, and time didn't follow the same rules in the Lifestream as it did outside, didn't even have the same measure when the entity doing the measuring was several billion years old. But it didn't take Cloud long to realize that the whisper in his mind that had always been Sephiroth was fading while
simultaneously a dark poisonous energy seemed to be growing inside the boy.

Stop it! he yelled into the Lifestream. If you cut me off from him, there's nothing to stop Jenova from breaking him!

But the Planet dealt with immediate threats, not the vagueness of the future. It didn't understand the subtleties of a mortal psyche, only knew that it had to fortify its weapon for the battle against the Calamity and its Son.

He's no more her son than I am!

Injected cells. Embryo. Genetic inheritance.

I have her cells too, damn it, Cloud snarled, but that doesn't make her a mother. That isn't what made him weak against her.

Genetic inheritance. Animal instinct. The Planet understood animal instinct very well.

You're wrong, let me show you –

The Planet wouldn't be deterred. After a small eternity enveloped in agonizing green, Cloud managed to grab onto that sixth sense and pull himself to the miserable real-world labyrinth of laboratories underneath the ShinRa mansion. He found himself inside an enormous glass container, like a round room with a metal floor slated with drainage holes, and had to hold back a burst of hysteria.

Mako showers? What –

Sephiroth was screaming. He was naked on the floor, back arched so far that for a terrifying moment Cloud thought it would snap. The whole interior was thick with airborne mako, clogging the boy's nostrils and throat and making his eyes water, stinging his skin as though acid was being poured over his head. In such close proximity and with so much mako Cloud could feel it all like it was his own body back in the tubes, Hojo looking in from the outside with such smug arrogance and –

Choking, Cloud fell to his knees and pulled the writhing boy into his lap against his chest, trying to keep him from hurting himself while he thrashed about. Without thinking Cloud started humming, since senseless noise was just as useful as words when someone was in this state, anything to keep Sephiroth rooted here in the exposed glass room and not lost in the cacophony of voices roaring in his head.

And it was a cacophony when the mako was so concentrated, magnifying the low whispers of the Lifestream inside every living thing within ten miles, one voice rising above the rest and singing of war victory death power. Sephiroth froze mid-arch, fluttering eyelids showing only the whites of his eyes. Cloud wrapped his arms around Sephiroth, trying to get as much contact as possible, and pressed his lips against a white-haired temple.

Come back, Sephiroth. You promised me. He twisted against the Lifestream, willing his voice to get through Jenova's, and physically mouthed the words at the same time. You promised you'd find me if you had doubt.

Sephiroth's mind was different from any other child's but he was still young, still lonely, still lost amid so many others. Cloud could see the way the mako and the viable cells worked together against their host's body and mind and how Jenova's will twisted them into something powerfully insidious. You promised me, Sephiroth, Cloud cried. She's lying to you. Gast told you about
mockingbirds last week and how they imitate other birds before killing their competition.

Sephiroth!

The boy's spirit felt fragile in his arms, stretched paper-thin and bewildered by the voice of Mother and hurt that his father would put him through this. His skin was clammy against Cloud's arms and lips.

…Angel?

Cloud couldn't help tightening his hold around Sephiroth, both physically and otherwise.

I found Mother, she –

She's not your mother, Sephiroth, Cloud told him fiercely, she's not, your mother was beautiful and kind and gentle.

Sephiroth's spine finally relaxed, little by little, until he was able to curl into a ball on Cloud's lap. His bangs were stuck to the sweat on his forehead and he trembled slightly, his small hand closing around the sword harness that ran across Cloud's chest. They stayed that way until the mako dissipated enough for the assistants to enter the room, their eyes sliding through Cloud's form to the other side. The assistants dispassionately lifted Sephiroth onto a gurney and wheeled him back to his room under Hojo's disappointed eye and Gast's ashamed one.

Strengthened by the mako that passively pervaded the entire place, Cloud followed closely. Without Sephiroth's fear and pain intruding he was free to silently seethe, never noticing the overhead light in the hallway that sparked dangerously without any apparent explanation.

Hojo was going to die. Again. But this time it would be slow and as excruciating as anything he ever did to his specimens. Cloud was viciously certain that Vincent wouldn't mind lending a claw, so to speak –

He nearly stumbled over his nonexistent feet. Vincent. Vincent was here somewhere, down in the underground caverns; he could vaguely recall an annoyingly difficult lock to break and bursting into the Turk's tomb.

One of the assistants was entering the password into the keypad outside of Sephiroth's room. In his haze of fury, Cloud caught snippets of conversation like aberration of nature and what is Hojo thinking, is he trying to kill the kid? Then they moved the still-nude Sephiroth to his bed and left, one of the people casting less-than-scientific glances over him as the door closed. Cloud leaned Tsurugi against the wall at the head of the bed and sat down next to the boy.

"You need to live, Sephiroth," Cloud whispered after a long silence, staring at the other's profile. "You're the kind of person that can change the world, and if you gave up now, I…I'm not sure I won't, either."

Sephiroth remained unresponsive, thin chest rising and falling with shallow breaths.

"Zack would be disappointed if you gave up so easily, and you don't want to disappoint him. He gets this look that makes you feel worse than you ever thought possible. Like kicking a puppy."

He reached up to smooth the tension from Sephiroth's forehead.

"I know what's going to happen." His voice dropped even lower until it was little more than an exhale. "You're going to try to destroy the world in revenge. You always said it was for Jenova, but I think that maybe you were doing it for yourself, too. You're going to leave Zack and me to rot with Hojo, and you'll stab Aeris through the back. You'll summon Meteor because I'm not good
enough to stop you and thousands of people will die. And then I'm going to kill you three times, and each time you'll be a little more like the empty shell that Jenova wants you to be.

"I'm sad because I watched the world end." A corner of his mouth briefly twisted, then faded quickly as Cloud leaned forward towards Sephiroth's ear. "But it doesn't have to be like that. If you keep your eyes open, you'll see you aren't a monster. Not unless you include me and Zack in that." Questions concerning Cloud's character aside, he couldn't imagine anyone ever accusing Zack of being something less than human. Less than a hero.

"Why can't you make it stop hurting?"

The threadlike voice startled Cloud. He opened his mouth, couldn't find the words, then licked dry lips and tried again. "I'm sorry."

Very slowly Sephiroth turned his head until he could look at Cloud through pain-blurred eyes. "Did you really kill me?"

"Yes," Cloud whispered.

Sephiroth stared at him for a moment longer before he shared a rare small smile. "That's okay, then," he decided softly.

Eyes wide, Cloud felt something in his heart breaking. All the old guilt and anger came back and made him wrap his arms around the little boy desperately.

...

Gast watched with growing horror as the routine mako shower went wrong.

It started out well. Gast had checked and rechecked the chemical levels programmed into the mako chamber, then signaled for the assistants to lead Sephiroth into the glass room. Under his careful eye they handled the boy gently and Sephiroth stood alone in the chamber looking unruffled, even bored, as the mako filtered in. But then he twitched violently, whirling around as though someone had suddenly called his name; he doubled over coughing, the sound harsh through the voice feed; he fell to the grated floor with his body contorted by spasms.

"Abort!" Gast cried, hitting the chamber's release button with a fist. "Damn it! Hojo, what's going on?"

The other scientist was fixated on whatever a computer readout was telling him and didn't answer. Gast was sick to his stomach as his fingers flew over the console, desperately trying to shut off the showering process.

"Hojo, we have to stop this now or he'll go mad!"

"Sephiroth is too perfect a specimen to be so weak," Hojo snapped at him, but he was already working to shut off the shower. Lab assistants milled anxiously near the door, waiting for the mako to dissipate and their bosses to open the chamber. When the fans finally kicked in and the thick green began fading inside, Gast watched with bated breath. Sephiroth had stopped seizing, was now curled up defensively, but that could be just as bad a sign as the screaming –

Only he could see someone in the chamber, someone other than Sephiroth, with mussed hair and two great wings that curved around from his back to wrap protectively around the boy.

*Projection of psychological tendencies onto an external source,* his analytical mind tried to say. But
the figure didn't disappear after several seconds, and he remembered a young voice telling him, *An angel helped me.*

The assistants were rushing into the chamber, guards hovering just outside. Hojo watched from the observation deck with a hooded gaze. Gast was unable to move his eyes from the angelic form and all his numbed mind could do was wonder what Ifalna would have to say about this.

... 

Hojo was displeased. Sephiroth's promise was obvious to even the most plebeian of the fools that ShinRa required he work with, and this should have been the turning point in the boy's development. Young and receptive while still physically and mentally resilient, there should have been signs of Her manifesting in Her son. At first it seemed like his plans were finally beginning to bear fruit under the annoyingly close watch of Gast, but then *something* had gone wrong.

It seemed that he would have to allow Hollander's two brats to live, for now. As long as he bore any sort of doubt in Sephiroth's growth towards perfection, he would have to suffer the lesser existences of Project G's specimens until Sephiroth could take his proper place as something godlike and, perhaps find some use for Hollander's creations. The first thing to do right now, though, was to take care of certain poor outside influences.
In Which Sephiroth Is Awkward and Cloud Isn't Much Better

... From the way Gast wouldn't quite meet her eyes, Ifalna could tell that something had happened. If she'd had a real kitchen she would have provided a plate of freshly baked biscuits, but all she could do was heat up a kettle of water on a coil burner and maneuver him into a chair.

The silence in her small quarters stretched on as Gast swirled the teabag in his cup listlessly. Ifalna sat across from him with her legs tucked up neatly beneath her, long fingers wrapped around the calming warmth of her own tea, and waited patiently.

"Something unexpected happened today," he started suddenly. He distractedly turned his cup round and round in his large hands. "During a routine showering. I'm not...exactly sure what happened."

"Is Sephiroth all right?" she asked worriedly, and Gast's expression darkened.

"Yes, no thanks to Hojo," he muttered with an uncharacteristic amount of vitriol. "What that madman is up to I can only guess."

"Was there a guard or tech with him?" Ifalna asked calmly. He shook his head.

"No, and given the nature of mako I thought that perhaps I was merely seeing things. But the image didn't go away. And there's something else." He leaned forward, putting aside his teacup and taking her hand in both of his. "Hojo was performing an unauthorized test on Sephiroth some weeks ago. There was an accident in the lab that spilled some mako and forced an evacuation. Somehow, while everyone was out of the room, every reflex pin and a breathing tube had been removed without Sephiroth even leaving his restraints. Also, a damage report claimed that while two mako tubes were shattered in such a way that required outside force, the fracturing had been done by a sharp edge. A weapon's edge."

Through her anger at Hojo (and Gast, because even though he was mostly a good man he was still playing with the life of a child), Ifalna couldn't help blinking in surprise at the oddness of what Gast was saying.

"But that's not what's bothering me," he continued fervently, the words rushing out like a confession. "Sephiroth claimed to have seen an angel. The person, or hallucination, I don't know, that I saw also had wings."

"The assistants that oversee the security cameras in Sephiroth's room also reported seeing him talking aloud when no one else was in the room. At first I thought that he was just lonely, or maybe it was something carried over from the last showering, but...maybe it's real."
"Most scientists wouldn't be willing to accept that, you know," Ifalna pointed out quietly. Gast snorted.

"Just because we can't see or prove something doesn't mean it can't exist, and there's so much about the Lifestream we still don't understand."

She raised an eyebrow. "If you're not careful, someone might think you're not quite a man of science."

Some of his attention seemed to turn inward to some dark place. "Sometimes I wonder if you weren't right, my dear. The way that the others think of the poor boy, sometimes I can't help but wish that things were different."

Ifalna squeezed Gast's hand again. "There's no harm in that, so long as you don't forget to take care of him now." Just a child, just a child. "As for this angel, I'm sorry I can't help. I've never seen one myself."

He smiled wearily at her. "Just the fact that you don't think I'm mad does wonders, dear."

Laughing softly, she replied, "I hear the Planet in my dreams, Gast, what right do I have to call you mad?"

She put his tea back in his hand and sipped her own. They talked until Ifalna could see the tension lessening in his shoulders and he could smile more easily, and by then an hour or two had passed before he was paged back to one of the labs. He left her quarters with a regretful sigh and a chaste kiss on the cheek.

Blushing faintly, Ifalna bid him goodbye. When he was gone, she retrieved one of the plain emergency candles from a drawer and settled herself with a book of matches on the floor of her quarters. Her place was utilitarian, obviously built for someone who expected to be working most of the time, but Veld had been ever so kind in bringing her a lovely Wutaian rug during one of his visits from Midgar. It was thick and soft when she sat down on that rather than the hard, cold floor.

Striking a match, she lit the candle, then melted the bottom of it just enough for it to stick firmly to a small ceramic plate. Then she blew out the match, set the plate and candle at the edge of the rug, and settled herself into a comfortable position. Technically she didn't need any props for something that was as instinctive for her as breathing, but the little flame made it easier to concentrate.

It was silent in her quarters. Closing her eyes until she was just able to see the flickering of the candle, Ifalna let her concern over Gast and Sephiroth fall away along with the unease that had been growing ever since she last spoke with Hojo face-to-face, reaching for the gentle warmth that always lay at the back of her heart. It was like putting one's face into a cool running stream, feeling the ripples and movement of the Lifestream, the lighter presence of other lives on the surface with her.

Under the surface of the stream was the dark vastness of the Planet. The Planet's voice was a strong, silent current that swept through her and carried her along, giving her brief glimpses of lives that had come before her and would come after. She could also sense something huge building, a thunderstorm charging the air and making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

What's happening?

Rebirth, the Planet told her. Evolution. Conserving one's strength for a coming battle.

Battle? She felt a tremor of fear, wasn't sure if it was hers or the Planet's.
WEAPON. The swiftness of a bird's flight.

An angel, Ifalna finished, since the Planet had no conception of a creature that didn't actually exist. It seemed Sephiroth had abilities that the obsessive Hojo hadn't discovered, if the boy had sensed this change in the Planet before even she had. This angel is a weapon? Against what? ShinRa?

WEAPON. The Calamity. The Lifestream, slowly being drained away.

The sensation of a slow, agonizing death that the Planet was giving her was thick, heavy, and she was unsurprised to find that there were tears on her cheeks. As the Lifestream was consumed, the Planet's voice got weaker and the farther away the other worlds sounded. The Planet was dying and it felt alone.

What does Sephiroth have to do with it?


Ifalna's short nails cut into her palm, keeping her grounded at the sudden rush of the inhuman equivalent of emotion. She hadn't ever spoken directly with Sephiroth, but Gast always described him as a quiet boy eager to learn. Maybe socially awkward, but not insane.


Gritting her teeth, Ifalna forced herself to remain calm, wasn't entirely sure what was going on even though she was Ancient. Sephiroth was somehow deeply involved in the matter, although she refused to believe that such a young child could be capable of such astronomical destruction.

Hojo had always been too paranoid to allow her close to the Cetra specimen that ShinRa had unearthed, leaving her with whatever secondhand information was deemed appropriate for her. It was frustrating, especially when there was so much she could learn from the poor body, but she had learned patience, and stubbornness. And though she hated to consider it and felt part of herself recoil at the duplicity of the act, perhaps she could use Gast's affection to meet Sephiroth and gauge for herself whether or not he was a danger.

"I'm sorry," she whispered aloud, clasping the pale materia hanging on a cord around her neck.

... 

"Where do you go all the time?"

Ear pressed to the floor and concentration broken, Cloud looked up at Sephiroth in some confusion. "Nowhere."

"Then why don't you just stay here?" the boy pressed, sliding off his bed to lie down on the floor and look him in the eye.

"It isn't my choice."

"Then whose is it?"

"The Planet," Cloud replied absently. Sound vibrated through the floor. He could hear the footsteps of scientists and the pacing of strange beasts in cages. There was a little flicker of life from a mouse's nest some distance away. Unfortunately the wood under his ear was too old to have retained its memory of once being a tree and was now little more than recycled dead weight. He
petted it with his fingertips soothingly.

"Tell the Planet to let you stay here all the time," Sephiroth commanded. Cloud blinked at him.

"No."

"Why not?"

There it was again; the brief sound of a familiar note, like a half-forgotten childhood tune, fluttering on the wind of the Lifestream. Cloud wasn't sure where it came from or how he knew it but it made his heart clench.

"Why not?" Sephiroth repeated insistently.

Cloud replied with a soft, "Because I can't. It doesn't listen to me."

"Then I'll do it."

Cloud twitched. "No, you won't."

"I've gotten better at my lessons," Sephiroth went on, "I can nearly unarm the Turk. The Planet doesn't have any sort of weapons, and – "

"Sephiroth, stop!" Cloud snapped, because the thought of Sephiroth already deciding to take on the Planet was making the edges of him fray in panic. "What's going on with you?"

Sitting up and pulling his knees to his chest, Sephiroth stubbornly closed his mouth and stared back steadily. After dealing with Zack and little kids, Cloud recognized it as the you're a meanie and I don't talk to meanies look. He resisted the urge to smack his head on the floor.

"Sephiroth. Talk."

"Why? You don't," the boy replied in as sullen a voice as Cloud had ever heard from him.

"Why do you want me here so badly?"

"Because."

 Damn it, where's Tifa when you need her? "There are things I need to do, Sephiroth."

"Are you going to kill me again?" and Cloud suddenly felt like someone had punched him in the solar plexus. "I don't understand why you would've made the bad voices stop, but – "

"No," Cloud broke in quickly, sitting up to put a hand on Sephiroth's head and tug lightly at his hair, "no, no, no. I'm not going to kill you again, Sephiroth. I can't. And that's one of the things I'm going to fix, all right? No one's going to kill anyone and everything will be okay."

It wasn't until the boy flinched that Cloud realized his fingers were pulling a little too hard. He ruffled his hair in apology. "I'm going to make sure everything works out and no one hurts you again," he repeated more calmly, "but that means I can't always be here."

"But you're mine!" Sephiroth cried. The pupils of his eyes flexed very slightly and a sense of foreboding formed a lump in Cloud's throat.

"Sephiroth, what have you been dreaming about?" he asked slowly, but Sephiroth's expression was already shuttering closed. Ever since the last mako showering had gone poorly, the boy hadn't had
a single night of sleep that wasn't broken by restless tossing or cold sweats. "Have you heard her again?" A long pause, then Sephiroth responded with a tight nod, and Cloud let out a mental stream of curses in a few different languages and a couple that weren't human. He nearly yelped when a small hand suddenly latched onto his wrist.

"Don't go," Sephiroth pleaded, very softly, letting his bangs cover his face.

"I'll stay a little longer," he promised, although it would be difficult with the way the Lifestream was calling for his attention again and he'd been stupid to think that resisting Jenova once would make her leave Sephiroth alone. He needed to keep the Planet convinced that battle could be avoided and that keeping his own memories would be rather nice, thanks very much. He needed to keep the boy from learning to hate the Planet already, and the thought that he could be the reason for that was too frightening to even consider. Somehow Jenova needed to be contained, at least in regards to said child, and hey, Vincent was still lying around somewhere with only the literal demons in his head to keep him company. And there was that damn flicker of familiarity in the Lifestream again.

But right now he had a little kid sitting in front of him with his head bowed and a small hand still wrapped tightly around Cloud's limb. Sighing silently, Cloud leaned forward and tilted Sephiroth's head up with a gentle finger under the chin.

"Hey," he murmured, "look at me. I'll always be around somewhere, yeah?"

Sephiroth nodded slightly.

"Good. And you don't ever have to bow your head to anyone unless they deserve it, understand? You have nothing to be ashamed of." You're just as human as everyone else. More so than some.

Sephiroth nodded again, a little more hesitantly. Cloud managed to reclaim his arm and leaned back down to press his ear to the floorboards, unaware that the glow of his eyes intensified as he let his mind finally wander into the puzzles of the Lifestream again.

Hands curled into the hem of his shirt, Sephiroth watched his angel be weird. He didn't know who 'Planet' was, but if it was a voice like Mo—no. He stopped himself. If it was a voice like Jenova (his angel had explained to him that he had some of Jenova's cells, but she wasn't his mother, not in the ways that really mattered) then he wanted to make sure that it didn't hurt Cloud. It wasn't fair for his angel to protect him all the time and not do the same thing in return, and Sephiroth could nearly disarm any of the Turks now.

Cloud nearly hit his head on the wooden edge of the bed when Sephiroth started talking again.

"What are angels made out of?"

"What?" He felt like he said that a lot around Sephiroth nowadays.

Sephiroth tilted his head at him in thought. "You don't belong to one of the known scientific classifications of organisms, and I don't know what's left. Professor Hojo said I inherited my looks from my mother—I mean, Jenova—and that it's all in my genetics, but if angels had genetics that would make them like us. Like humans. And they're not. So what are you made out of? Do you have a mother? Are all angels sad like you? Where do you live?"

"Um."

"Professor Gast told me that angels live in the sky and watch over us, but how did you get up there?"
"...I flew?"

From the way Sephiroth's nose scrunched up, he didn't seem to think much of this answer. "But how did you evolve wings to get up there in the first place? Did you get too much mako? But why would mako matter if you don't have genes to mutate?"

"Sephiroth," he said, "sometimes there aren't explanations for everything."

His expression was clearly incredulous as he blew strands of hair out of his face, cheeks briefly puffing out. "That's not true. It just means you haven't found the answer yet."

You really are a marvel, thought Cloud.

The door opened and Cloud instinctively flattened himself behind the bed, momentarily forgetting that only Sephiroth could see him. Sephiroth jumped to his feet as a Turk and two assistants entered the room, the first leaning casually against the doorway with his arms crossed.

"You've been called in for a routine physical, Sephiroth," said the female assistant without looking up from her clipboard. "Please come with us."

When Sephiroth didn't move, the other assistant, a man, frowned. "Come on, boy, you don't want to keep the professors waiting."

Shoulders back and arms at his sides, he looked them straight in the eye and said, "I don't want to go."

The assistants were visibly surprised. The Turk's gaze sharpened. Cloud wasn't sure if he should be amused or alarmed. Don't call the guards in. Just don't. The woman looked over the top of her glasses and repeated sternly, "Sephiroth, the professors are waiting. Please don't be difficult."

"I'm not. I don't want to go."

"These checkups are necessary to maintain your health," she said tersely, but he shook his head and asked, "Then why doesn't everyone else have to do them?"

The Turk stepped forward with the same lethal grace that Cloud recognized in Vincent and Tseng, and he slid forward to hover unseen at Sephiroth's back with First Tsurugi in hand. The Turk stopped in front of Sephiroth, forcing Sephiroth to lean his head back to look up into the man's finely-boned face. A thin scar meandered from the rim of his wire glasses to his jawline.

"Are you afraid, Sephiroth?" he asked neutrally, to which the immediate reply was, "No."

"Aren't you?" Cloud unconsciously drew closer to Sephiroth, hand tightening around Tsurugi's hilt. "You know what to expect."

"Yes, I do." Which probably made it worse when going into one of Hojo's labs.

"Then why do you refuse to go?"

Cloud could feel the tension that Sephiroth was radiating. Without thinking he put his free hand at the small of Sephiroth's back, and the little spine straightened up tall.

A slight shift and the black handle of a katana came into view at the Turk's side. The sudden movement made Cloud's hand tighten around Tsurugi's hilt, but the Turk just slid the sword about two inches out of the sheath so the blade glinted under the light.
"A swordsman is, above all else, honest with himself. That means admitting you're afraid, Sephiroth," he said quietly, just low enough so the assistants couldn't catch the words. "But a swordsman is also practical. What good do you think rebelling against the professors would do?"

"I don't understand why I have to be so special," Sephiroth retorted. To Cloud's surprise, the Turk's mouth quirked into a wry smile.

"It's the price of being unique."

Before Sephiroth could open his mouth, Cloud leaned forward and whispered, "Everything will be okay."  (Everything will be okay, kid, Zack had said, often repeating it long into the night. Just stick with me. Everything will be all right.)

Sephiroth was silent for a long moment, leaning back into Cloud's hand. Then, apparently having come to some sort of internal decision, he nodded sharply to himself and stepped forward. The two assistants followed the Turk and Sephiroth with bemused expressions, but Cloud watched them leave with his heart torn.

He needed to be there with the kid, just in case.

He needed to take care of Jenova herself before there was a repeat of the incident in the mako shower and she dug her claws deeper into Sephiroth.

...Damn it.

Finding Jenova wasn't difficult. He followed the need obsession want through the mansion, found the mako paths in the rock that permeated the Nibel mountain range, allowed himself to be pulled to mother goddess master.

Cloud stared at Jenova through the glass that kept her separated from the outside world. His eyes traced the sterling death mask, the long curves of the sarcophagus, and back up to the empty eye sockets that glowed with a faint malevolence and, oh, it felt like Reunion, somewhere between coming home and walking to the gallows or maybe somewhere between heaven and hell.

If he wanted, he could enter the cylindrical chamber. Her body had long since turned to crystallized mako, but her hold on both him and the Lifestream was still there like a rotting wound on the surface of his brain. Without the limitations of a physical body, it would just take a thought, a bare moment for Cloud to slide his hands around (Mother's) the monster's metaphorical neck.

Being so close to her presence while he himself existed in a place that was neither alive nor dead allowed him to see things he'd never seen before: it unfolded like a diorama, the Calamity falling from the heavens, a tiny organism with so much power that found beings of even greater power – the Ancients, the Cetra, and it wasn't difficult to infect just one heart without the others knowing. Innocence couldn't see darkness for what it was and the tiny alien organism flourished within its new host, learning about things like eternity and transcendence and control.

Cloud could feel the echo of that one Ancient's pain, her confusion as her thoughts turned cruel against her brethren, when the Planet's voice turned into something that made her skin crawl. He was aware of the way Jenova's sentience grew in leaps and bounds, until she rained terror on the Planet. He could see the reflection of flames in the glass as he whispered, "You're a monster, Jenova."

Monster implied an aberration of nature, but She was a God from the skies whose nature had simply been superior to another's. Predator prey victory. Behind the death mask was the corpse of
a fallen Ancient whose body had been as much as a puppet to the alien as Sephiroth and Cloud.

She reached for him with tendrils of love and tenderness and protection, *motherneed*, *adorationcompletion*, and Cloud wasn't immune. He remembered his real mother dying in his arms with her hair burned away and her clothes blackened, remembered the loss of her and a brother like Zack and a hero like Sephiroth that he never really recovered from. It was hard waking up to find that five years had passed and suddenly he was supposed to know how to act like an adult when he was still sixteen in his head. No, Cloud wasn't immune to the temptation of a mother's arms. In that, he and Sephiroth shared the same dreams.

But Tifa's arms, once so strong and able to shatter brick without effort, had been worn thin and frail from hunger while the amount of mako in Cloud's body kept him going strong. It was Jenova's fault, Jenova's cells that had poisoned the Lifestream beyond redemption and her Plague that had reanimated the bodies of dead family and friends. It was *her fault* that Tifa starved and Reeve shot himself in the head. Jenova's cycle of death and unnatural resurrection had only been broken by the Planet withdrawing its Lifestream and letting everything else break.

*You're a virus*, he told her in the voice of someone who had once been the last living thing on earth. *A cancer.*

She was hurt, angry, she could sense that he was her son – not her perfect son, but the younger, the softer, and yet he was also one of the evolved apes that dared stand against a superior creature. Her instincts were conflicted, one part wanting to eliminate a flawed offspring and another wanting to pull him close and never ever let him go.

*You were never meant to be human,* and it was that conflict which was sowing the foundational cracks in Sephiroth's mind. *You shouldn't exist,* Jenova, and just as he'd expected the denial of her existence infuriated the alien, went against everything her instincts told her. Cloud braced himself, feeling the Planet looming behind him like the shadow of a predator, and Jenova threw herself at him. She brought with her all the fury and impotence that had built up in her frozen self for thousands of years, driven by all the desperation of a human faced with execution. She brought the knowledge of a thousand other worlds she had consumed, the pain of a star eating itself from the inside out, the loneliness of being the only one of her kind –

Cloud *screamed*, thought he was being torn to pieces all over again. But the Planet was there, just behind him, the full force of the Lifestream opening like a great fanged mouth and clamping down on what made her *Jenova* until she was crushed, consumed by the weight of a world that refused to fall victim again. It was like seeing the blue heavens open up again into a horribly empty blackness.

(When *you look into the abyss, the abyss looks back into you*, Sephiroth had once wryly quoted to Zack, but Cloud didn't know why or when or where.)

The final threads of Jenova's presence snapped, *one-two*, and Cloud was falling to the floor. He was too incorporeal to feel the real pain of his knees hitting the floor or his head striking the metal grating of the catwalk, but now he *knew* what it was like to be Jenova, not a badly made clone but the source of it all, and for an instant he *knew* what it was like to have been born in the heart of a supernova. It was knowledge that his small mortal mind couldn't hope to comprehend and could someone

please

tell him who
... 

Alone in her quarters, Ifalna let out a small cry as the Planet surged like a tidal wave. She fell forward, knocking over the little emergency candle, but she managed to pat out the flame with shaking hands. She had the sneaking suspicion that she was still alive only because the Planet had been looking in another direction.

... 

Normally Sephiroth wasn't one to start a conversation, but as he sat shirtless on the counter and allowed Gast to check him over, the scientist was startled by a quiet, "Are there different types of angels?"

"Like good ones or bad ones?" He noted Sephiroth's pulse on his clipboard.

"My angel saw the end of the world."

Gast inadvertently made a zero into a crooked six. He decided to pick the less loaded question. "It's 'your' angel now, is it?"

"Yes," the boy replied firmly.

Gast took the chance to get his thoughts together while adjusting the blood-pressure cuff on Sephiroth's upper arm. "Well, I don't know what kind of angel that is," he said finally, "I suppose you're going to have to decide for yourself. Remember to keep breathing normally, please."

"How? He doesn't have blood to test."

"Blood doesn't determine whether you're good or bad, child," Gast told him gently, "it's your actions and how you treat other people."

"Stop filling his head with such nonsense, Gast," said Hojo, abruptly walking in. He irritably adjusted his glasses. "Ethics is far too complex a subject to make so subjective. Often others' motives are too obscure and misleading to judge with any sort of accuracy."

"Perhaps," Gast responded mildly, "but nevertheless we must make the attempt. Otherwise, where would we be?"

Shaking his head, Hojo picked up a tourniquet and began tightening it around Sephiroth's other arm. "Your sentimentality is unbecoming of a man in your profession."

Aware of the way Sephiroth was watching intently, Gast merely pursed his lips and didn't bother arguing. Once Hojo had convinced himself of something it was nearly impossible to make him see anything else.

"I was told you tried to refuse coming, boy," Hojo continued, eyes narrowed behind his glasses. "Why?"

Normally Sephiroth answered any question put to him with frank honesty, but now he glanced between the two scientists. "I was afraid," he said carefully. "The mako shower went poorly. I didn't think you would want to risk a repeat of that, Professor."
Deceit, Gast noted, carefully observing the interaction. Development of the ability to empathize with another entity and act accordingly. He didn't think Sephiroth was lying directly but being purposefully misleading, and while it was a sign of growing social understanding it was also a saddening reminder that the strange paradox of intelligence and innocence that was Sephiroth wouldn't last forever.

Hojo smiled thinly at Sephiroth as he pressed a needle into the skin at the bend of the boy's elbow. The boy didn't flinch. Just after Hojo finished drawing blood, however, Sephiroth's back arched sharply and his eyes went painfully wide. Immediately Gast pushed him flat onto the table as Hojo retrieved a sedative, but before they could use it Sephiroth was already relaxing, eyelids fluttering, into a tense unconsciousness. The two scientists stared at Sephiroth in silent surprise.

Shit. Not again, Gast sighed to himself.

...When Cloud next became aware of himself, he was on a narrow bed with a plain woolen comforter and a small bundle of warmth pulled tightly against his chest. The warmth smelled of mako and human, and the familiarity of it made his arms tighten around the bundle.

But then reason caught up to remind him that he couldn't possibly be wrapped around Zack, and though it was about the right size and shape for a kid, Denzel had never had the acidic stench of mako clinging to him. Cloud slowly cracked an eye open and found silver hair doing its damnedest to stuff itself up his nose.

...Stop. Think. What? Who...no. Don't ask the question, down that path lay existential insanity, and Cloud, he needed to do something, needed to...protect something. Several somethings and – and it was Sephiroth curled against him. His hands were twisted in Tsurugi's harness and his head tucked beneath Cloud's chin, bony knees digging rather uncomfortably into the top of Cloud's legs. He appeared to be sleeping deeply, breathing slow and unhurried, but his fingers were white-knuckled with the force of his grip. Cloud's first reaction would've been to draw away sharply, probably throwing himself to the floor in the process, but some new instinct had him drawing the boy closer like he was...no, he wasn't a parent or even a caregiver. Except.

What's changed?

Jenova. He couldn't sense her, couldn't feel the restless violence that had plagued him for so many years. There was an odd hollowness underneath his thoughts, as though Aeris or Zack had reached into his head and scooped out the gangrenous root of his madness, that nevertheless didn't feel quite right. But the phantom ache left over from the Geostigma was completely gone from his left arm and shoulder and Cloud felt...light again. Like he had after defeating the Remnants and before the Plague, when Aeris smiled at him and Zack teased him as he always had, and he couldn't help smiling into the hair still trying to suffocate him. Sephiroth shifted with a small sound, trying to wriggle closer but inadvertently digging a knee into Cloud's thigh.

"Sephiroth," he whispered, repeating the name a few times before the boy stirred and looked up hazily.

"Your wings are pretty," Sephiroth observed inanely. "And soft."

Cloud craned his neck to look over his own shoulder but didn't see anything. "Thank you," he replied.

With a small frown, Sephiroth continued, "I feel strange. Did I have another mako shower?"
"No," and Cloud couldn't help smiling again. "Jenova's dead." (Something still felt off but her insidious voice was gone and that was what mattered. Too easy, he thought, there must be a catch, but it was a thought he'd eventually forget.)

"Oh. That's a good thing, right?"

"Yes, it is. Now it won't hurt as much anymore."

"Oh. Okay. Is that why you aren't as sad?" Cloud wasn't sure how to answer that, but Sephiroth went on, "Did you know my real mother?"

Carefully, Cloud murmured, "Not personally. But I knew someone who loved her very, very much."

Sephiroth's frown was replaced with a rather wistful little smile. "Will you tell me about her?"

"Well, she was smart, like you." Probably one of the only women to break through the ShinRa ranks purely by virtue of her intellectual talent, actually. Unfortunately, the moods where Vincent was willing to talk about Lucrecia were few and far between, so Cloud added in bits of scant fuzzy memories about his own mother and talked until Sephiroth fell asleep again from sheer mental exhaustion. (What Cloud didn't say were his doubts about Hojo's claim of being Sephiroth's father. There was something too fine about the structure of Sephiroth's face, a certain tone of voice and physical grace that had kept Cloud stealing glances at Vincent during their worldwide quest.)

The changes in Sephiroth became obvious over the next several days. He seemed more aware of himself, as though he'd never considered his own individuality before. While he never outright rebelled again, he began finding ways around Hojo's constant supervision. He no longer simply mimicked the weapons exercises he was being taught but started tweaking them, making them his own. In his academic lessons, he now thought to ask, "Why?"

Hojo, meticulous as he was, noticed almost immediately. He was less than pleased. But when Gast smiled at Sephiroth, the expression was a little brighter each time.

The Planet seemed to subside after it consumed Jenova, turning inward upon itself and ignoring Cloud. Hardly one to question the sudden freedom, Cloud began trailing the boy and keeping a closer watch. He started noticing things he'd always been too distracted to see before, like the way Sephiroth handled his practice sword as though it were precious, or the fearful disdain that all the assistants had for Hojo. Cloud had never realized that the guards scattered throughout the labs remained in a constant state of wariness, nervously waiting for the time when the scientist might get bored with his current specimens and go looking for new ones.

He also learned, through intermittent eavesdropping and Hojo's habit of muttering to himself, that Sephiroth wasn't the only child in SOLDIER. But no matter how many times Cloud went through his and Zack's memories, he couldn't remember ever hearing the names 'Genesis' and 'Angeal' – and that made him nervous. Had his mere presence already managed to change something, or were the two other children one of the best kept secrets in ShinRa even after Meteor? Maybe the answer was something as simple as the two children not surviving very long. Considering how some of Hojo's other experiments turned out, that wasn't so unreasonable. But. But.

Watching Sephiroth's weapons practice soon became Cloud's favorite thing to do. Sephiroth had already been a war hero by the time Cloud had gotten old enough to read Nibelheim's single newspaper, and yet here was proof that there had been a time when even Sephiroth had to be corrected on his stance or when he'd drop the sword because he wasn't quite strong enough to block an opponent's blow.
"You need to relax," Cloud whispered into the boy's ear at one point. Watching the Turk carefully, he put his hands on Sephiroth's shoulders and pushed them down into a more natural position. "Don't think about it. Just react. Your body knows all the movements already, your head's just getting in the way."

("Relax, kiddo, you hold that sword too tightly and you'll make it too easy to knock the thing right out of your hand!")

Sephiroth huffed in frustration but didn't argue. The next time the Turk's katana flickered towards his throat Sephiroth was able to duck beneath it and bring his own sword up under the Turk's guard in a draw.

Unseen, for the first time longer than he could remember, Cloud grinned.

Ifalna kept close to Gast as they walked quickly through the corridors. So many conversations and questions and pleading later, she was finally going to meet the poor child. Sephiroth's quarters were closer to her own than Ifalna thought, near the center of the warren of hallways and rooms that made up the ShinRa laboratories. His door was the same plain steel as every other door in the place, and the sight made her frown to herself. Gast paused with his hand on the keypad to look at her.

"I have no doubt that this will get back to Hojo," he said quietly. "Just…be careful."

She patted his arm and gave him a false, reassuring smile. He caught her hand and pressed a PHS into it.

"In case anything should happen," he explained, holding her gaze with utter seriousness. "My personal number's been programmed into it already."

"Gast, everything will be all right," she replied as she accepted the phone, but he just shook his head with a quiet, "I wish I could have your certainty, my dear."

Knocking briefly on the door, he entered the code and led her inside. The room was a single, lacking the bedroom and tiny kitchen that her quarters had, and the starkness of a bedroom meant to belong to child was unsettling. Sephiroth himself was sitting at his desk with a pen poised over what looked like something from a college-level textbook. "Professor," he acknowledged, laying down his pen and standing up with a curious look at Ifalna.

Gast's expression was fond. "Hello, Sephiroth. How are you feeling?"

"I'm well."

"Sephiroth, I would like you to meet Ifalna. She's a good friend and also lives here in the labs."

Holding out a hand, he said, with flawless manners, "It's an honor to meet you, Miss Ifalna."

Instead of taking it, she leaned down and pulled him into a hug. When she pulled away, he was staring at her with confusion and wariness.

"It's wonderful to meet you as well, Sephiroth." She made sure to keep smiling. "Professor Gast has told me a lot about you, but don't worry, it wasn't anything embarrassing."

The boy glanced over at the professor for prompting. Apparently 'teasing' wasn't considered
important enough to include in his curriculum.

"Ifalna is something of an expert on mako," Gast hedged. "She's just here to talk to you, nothing more, and I'll be right outside, all right?"

It had taken a bit of effort to convince Gast that she would rather be alone with Sephiroth, but he'd relented after a while. Still looking skeptical, Sephiroth hummed his understanding, keeping an eye on her as Gast hesitantly closed the door behind him.

"What are you studying?" she asked kindly, meandering over towards his desk.

"Molecular biology."

That struck Ifalna as rather ironic, but she kept the thought to herself. "I don't know much about it. Do you enjoy it?"

"How is that relevant?" he inquired politely, not moving as she sighed ruefully and sat on the edge of his bed.

"I've wanted to meet you for a very long time now, Sephiroth. I think I may be able to help you." He didn't say anything, but there was definitely something defensive in the way he held himself. She continued, "Do you hear voices in your dreams?"

"No," he replied immediately.

"I do," she admitted gently, leaning back on one hand and resting the other on a bent knee. "Ever since I was little girl, even younger than you. I used to hear my name being called when no one else was in the room." He was silent again, but she could imagine what he was thinking. "Hallucinations," went Hojo's logic. "I found out later that it was the Planet itself, speaking through the Lifestream. Do you know what that is?"

Sephiroth reluctantly shook his head. Ifalna discretely shifted herself towards the headboard, leaving plenty of room between herself and the foot of the bed in case the boy got up the nerve to sit next to her.

"Think of the Planet as a giant organism and the Lifestream as its blood. Every living thing, from insects to President ShinRa himself, are like single cells cohabiting in the same organism. The Lifestream nourishes us, and when we die we return that energy to the Planet greater and richer than it was before. Our experiences and dreams and thoughts are like the Planet's metabolism."

It felt like a small victory when Sephiroth slowly started moving towards the bed, eventually sitting on the edge as far from her as possible without being blatantly rude. "Have you ever heard of the Cetra?" she asked.

"Yes. It was a race of people that preceded the evolution of mankind and which died out from unknown causes. Materia is their wisdom condensed into physical matter," he added, sounding like the textbook on his desk.

"In a sense, that's right." Keep smiling. "Materia comes from the Planet and the Planet thrives on the knowledge from our own lives. They were able to hear the Planet as well. It was never something to be afraid of."

His head tilted like a cat's. "Are you a Cetra?"

Her eyes flickering towards the camera, Ifalna didn't think it would hurt to say so, considering all
the scientists knew about her anyway. "Yes, I am."

"Am I?"

There was an odd heaviness in the room that Ifalna couldn't place. Unconsciously clasping a hand around the small materia hanging from her neck, she laughed a little. "No, you aren't. But your body has a lot of mako and that makes you a lot closer to the Planet than most other people."

Sephiroth chewed briefly on his lip. After a pause, he tried, "Is that why I can see angels?"

Ifalna mentally breathed a sigh of relief that he'd brought the subject up himself. "I think so, though I've never seen one myself."

The heaviness in the room seemed to be getting stronger, as though the walls were closing in on her. Ifalna couldn't help glancing around the room, noting that Sephiroth's attention was suddenly fixed somewhere behind her. A powerful hand slid around the nape of her neck, fingers pressing unrelentingly against the hollow of her throat, sudden adrenaline making her heart feel like it had frozen.

"Who are you?" a voice demanded quietly in her ear.

Holding herself very still, she calmly replied, "My name is Ifalna. I live here in the labs – "

Abruptly the cold hand released her and the suffocating feel of the room lightened.

"Ifalna?" the voice repeated. It sounded unsure this time, almost lost. Sephiroth was already up and moving, and she turned to see him embracing the narrow waist of a young man, only he wasn't a man, really, if the elegant white wings twitching anxiously over his shoulders were any indication. His arm rested across the boy's shoulders with unconscious protectiveness as his outline wavered slightly, like a reflection in a warped mirror. The sword slung over his back was ridiculously larger than any other weapon she'd seen before.

Ifalna's fingers tightened around her materia pendant. "You must be the angel that Sephiroth was talking about."

He looked over his shoulder for some reason, frowning in confusion, before glancing back at her from the corner of a glowing blue eye. "Why are you here?"

"I was worried about Sephiroth." It took a sincere effort to release her necklace and fold her hands in her lap. The thought that the Planet was such a powerful presence behind this 'angel' was terrifying. "He had a poor reaction to a mako shower, and I wanted to see if he was all right."

Ifalna trailed off when she saw the angel's eyes narrowing.

"Did you ever believe a child would be 'all right' in this hellhole?" he asked coldly, but the sudden harshness softened when Sephiroth made an inquisitive sound and tightened his arms around the angel's waist. Ifalna watched, saddened; Sephiroth was a lonely child, and the angel – well, what was there to say?

WEAPON, the Planet whispered to her again. The swiftness of a bird's flight. Madness. Fire. Death.

"What I think we need," she declared suddenly, getting to her feet and peering into the small bookcase, "is a good story."
Sephiroth and the angel both stared at her. The sight of neatly alphabetized textbooks didn't discourage her (although it did make her want to know where the hell Hojo had gotten his parenting ideas) and she soon found a slim volume of local fairy tales.

"The One-Eyed God in the Underworld," she read aloud after flipping to a random page, and promptly moved on. That wasn't something that a child, however prodigious, needed to hear. Still skimming, she went back to the bed and leaned back against the headboard. "'In the beginning' – " Ifalna stopped, raising a brow at the other two. "You can't very well enjoy a story over there, now, can you? Sephiroth, dear, come sit here, and bring your angel with you."

Sephiroth chewed on his lower lip again in consideration. "How come you can see him?" he demanded.

"I'm a Cetra, remember?" She waited patiently as Sephiroth carefully weighed the pros and cons, ignoring the piercing scrutiny of the angel.

"His name is Cloud." Sephiroth pointedly tightened his arms around the angel's waist, then let go and sat on the bed near Ifalna.

"Cloud, then. Now: 'In the beginning there were only the two worlds of Muspelheim and Niflheim. Muspelheim was the land of fire, whose flames gave birth to the light of the stars and comets. Niflheim was the land of ice to the north, and when its mists met the heat of Muspelheim there was quickened the beginnings of life.'"

"That's impossible," Sephiroth broke in immediately. "Spontaneous generation was proven false on the grounds of poor scientific control."

"That's true, but sometimes there isn't an explanation for everything. For some people, these stories were as real as you or me."

The boy muttered something about 'angels' and 'flying' that Ifalna didn't understand, but whatever it was made Cloud laugh quietly under his breath. As she continued reading, the angel paced restlessly around the room, and Sephiroth slowly scooted closer until he was leaning against her side and reading over her shoulder.

Not long after she started, however, the door opened. Sephiroth was immediately on his feet, face wiped clean of the thoughtfulness he'd had as he tried to puzzle out the apparent irrationality of myth. Ifalna silently tucked the book behind a pillow. Gast entered but he wasn't alone: Hojo came in just after him, and the ever-present Turk hovered in the doorway.

"Come now, Sephiroth must return to his studies." Hojo adjusted his glasses and gave her an oddly calculating look.

"Of course," Ifalna replied blandly, standing and giving Sephiroth one last smile. "I enjoyed my time with you, dear."

"It was a pleasure," he said formally, which made her want to sweep him up into another hug. She resisted when she saw Cloud standing behind Sephiroth and snarling at Hojo with the darkest hatred she'd ever seen. Gast was staring transfixed at Cloud, but Cloud didn't even appear to notice anyone other than Hojo. The strength of the angel's fury was making Ifalna feel nauseous, and instead of buffering her the Planet amplified that black, poisonous sensation. The pen on top of Sephiroth's desk shuddered and suddenly rolled off without any apparent reason.

"Hojo," Ifalna said quickly, "I had some questions for you concerning the properties of materia.
May we go to your office?"

She was walking towards the door before the scientist could answer. As she passed Gast, she gave him a significant look and he nodded, visibly drawing up his composure. "Sephiroth, my dear boy, please remember not to stay up too late studying. Hojo, if we could…?"

Ifalna could feel the angel's darkness long after she left.

... 

Gast hated the sense of inferiority that came from standing in front of Hojo's desk, waiting to be acknowledged as the other man scrawled in his notebook. Technically he was the head here in the Nibelheim labs, but he wasn't unaware of the slow shift of power.

"We will be moving our headquarters to Midgar within the year," Hojo said suddenly, still writing. For a moment Gast was struck speechless.

"I never authorized any such transfer," he finally managed.

"Regardless, the fact remains that Sephiroth is quickly outgrowing our capabilities here. It's only right that we move him to the facility best equipped to make sure nothing goes wrong, yes?" There was no warmth in Hojo's beetle-black eyes, no compassion, just the same shadowed calculation as a crow's. "Besides," Hojo continued as he went back to writing, "I have taken your ideas for socializing Sephiroth to heart. Hollander's two specimens will also be brought to the Midgar labs. It will be good for Sephiroth to be around people who understand their places in society rather than filling his head with local nonsense."

"I've read the reports on Hollander's subjects," Gast said, "and I was under the impression that Genesis has displayed periods of unstable behavior. Throwing Sephiroth into a situation like that when he's never known anyone his own age would do more harm than good."

"That 'unstable behavior' is merely Hollander's lack of experience in handling such enhanced specimens. No doubt the boy is merely acting out in a childish effort to demonstrate the mistakes made in his production. No, it would be best for Sephiroth to meet those who are closer to his own superior abilities than normal humans."

Hojo's last argument made a twisted sort of sense. If Sephiroth were around other children that had been as enhanced with mako as he was, then perhaps he wouldn't be so lonely. On the other hand, there was just something about the whole thing that Gast couldn't put his finger on that was making his skin crawl.

"The fact remains that my authorization for this move was never granted and I remain head of this project." Gast put his hands on Hojo's desk and leaned forward, forcing him to meet his gaze. "I want all documents pertaining to this move. I've been lenient with you before, Hojo, even with the unapproved tests you've been performing, but you've completely overstepped the boundaries of your position. Do you understand me?"

Instead of getting angry or looking cowed, Hojo's smiled. It didn't look natural. "I understand you perfectly, Gast."

... 

Under Gast's anxious protection and Hojo's scrutinizing observation, Ifalna continued to visit Sephiroth periodically over the following months. After she finished reading the book of tales, she took to composing her own, gently drawing Sephiroth into imagining characters and adventures of
increasing depth and complexity. Sometimes she would simply tell him what she knew about the Planet, about the voices and the Lifestream and how it was very important not to let himself get lost in them. The boy listened to her with the same focused attention that he gave to all his lessons, and the way he desperately soaked in her undivided attention made Ifalna wish he really was her own child.

After the first day, Ifalna didn't hear Cloud say more than two or three words at a time. When he was there, and the angel usually was, he typically perched himself like a gargoyle somewhere to watch or paced around the room. Once he'd determined she wasn't a threat, he seemed to forget all about her, getting lost in whatever world was in his head.

On one occasion he'd cried out and crumpled, disappearing in wisps of green before hitting the floor. Sephiroth had been beside himself in his own introverted way, and the boy didn't speak a word or sleep at all until Cloud returned looking haggard and more distant than usual. He wouldn't explain what had happened – if anything, it was almost like he'd forgotten how to speak – but Ifalna would think back to all the Planet's whispers, and then his silence would make horrible sense.

"Ifalna," Cloud called quietly, on an evening when Sephiroth had fallen asleep against her shoulder. Ifalna had continued reading long after the boy's eyes fluttered closed and she'd gotten so used to the quiet that Cloud's voice made her jump slightly.

"Yes, Cloud?" She looked up at the angel, telling herself she was being silly for feeling unsettled by such an intense stare.

"Have you ever heard of a man named Vincent Valentine?"

She thought about it for a moment. "It sounds familiar. I think I might've heard the name in passing. Why?"

He finally turned away, letting her breathe easily again, as he fought some internal battle with himself. "He was a Turk stationed here just before Sephiroth was born. Hojo shot him, but he's still alive and being kept in one of the rooms."

Ifalna's hand rose to cover her mouth in horror. "Hojo shot him? Why?"

"Since when has Hojo ever needed a reason to kill?" Cloud hissed lowly. "Vincent confronted Hojo about his plans for Sephiroth. Hojo eliminated the threat to his precious experimentation. But…I think something is going to happen soon." He rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead tiredly. "When it does, find Vincent. He's in a coffin in an abandoned room just off the library corridor, got it?"

"Where will you be?" she asked solemnly, and his mouth twisted bitterly.

"I don't know."

"I don't think you'd tell me this if you were able to get to Vincent yourself. Why can't you?"

The angel's eyes flicked briefly to Sephiroth as he said, "The Planet doesn't like what Hojo did to Vincent. It makes things…difficult while I'm...like this."

Setting down the book, Ifalna carefully maneuvered Sephiroth's head onto a pillow propped against the headboard without waking him and then approached Cloud. He watched her cautiously from behind his hair, one hand twitching in an unconscious reflex to reach for his sword.
"My mother used to tell me stories about angels," she said gently. "I was never sure whether they were real, or just legends." Moving slowly, Ifalna brushed the hair from his eyes, her fingertips tingling with the presence of the Lifestream. "The Planet told me that you're a weapon in a war, but I think you're much more than that. You were human before, weren't you?"

Cloud was silent.

"Say 'Yes, Cetra ma'am,'" she teased, but sighed when he didn't crack a smile. She added more seriously, "No one can fully understand the Planet, Cloud, but it can't lie, and it's telling me that you're human still, whatever might've happened to you."

Cloud blinked at her slowly. Then he reached out and pressed a hand against her flat belly, whispering randomly, "Name her Aeris."

Nonplussed, Ifalna wanted to ask how he'd known that she liked that name and that she'd always wanted to give it to a daughter, but he was gone before she could open her mouth. Whether he was angel or human or something monstrous in-between, from then on Ifalna nevertheless took to carrying a few stolen materia in a small bracelet-shaped bangle. Just in case.

A few months later, Ifalna's lower abdomen took on a distinctly rounded shape. Sephiroth was fascinated. He would press his ear against her growing belly and listen intently, or he'd put his palms against her and spread his fingers as he waited for that slight movement. Despite the dreariness of her surroundings and the tense circumstances, Ifalna couldn't help but glow brightly. The Lifestream swelled within her, breathing strength into the little bundle of cells that would one day become another Cetra like her, and at night her dreams were filled with the song of a new soul. If there was one thing a Cetra could do well, it was create life.

Aeris, she sang back in her thoughts, putting a hand over her belly. Ifalna knew this new soul would grow into a strong young woman and Ifalna was determined that she would be there to pass on their people's wisdom, just as her own mother had done for her.

Despite Gast's stress and fatigue, the lines of tension in his face would disappear whenever he saw her. His face would brighten and his smile turn warm, and when he kissed her he would press his own hand over her swollen stomach just as reverently. At one point Ifalna wondered if her daughter would grow up to be a tactile person herself, given all the touching on her pregnant belly. As she explained the concept of babies to an attentive – and somewhat disgusted, though he would never show it – Sephiroth, Ifalna dearly hoped that her little Aeris would show that same love and care to the poor boy.

Cloud touched her belly only once. He kneeled down so that he could lean close and whisper butterfly-soft, "I'm going to save you this time, too."

(Battle, Ifalna had often heard the Planet sing, and her heart skipped a beat.)

The day that everything changed started out with an innocuous cup of tea. Ifalna sipped at her favorite brew, wincing as her unborn daughter put up a fuss, and rinsed out the mug in her tiny kitchen. She put on a woolen shawl from the nearby town of Nibelheim around her shoulders and made her way towards Sephiroth's room, cheerfully greeting the guards as she passed them, and knocked politely on the boy's door before entering. Ifalna entered with a 'Good morning' on her lips only to stop in puzzlement when she realized the room was empty.

"Sephiroth?" she called, peering around the edge of the bed. He wasn't the type of child to play tricks on adults, but there were a few times when he'd surprised her, only this didn't seem to be one those times, since he didn't immediately crawl out from under the bed. It was possible he'd been
taken for a surprise physical or something, but something about the whole thing was off. Looking around the room again, she took in the rumpled blanket on the bed and the book of fairy tales on the floor. Sephiroth had always been painstakingly neat, almost to the point of being obsessive-compulsive.

Frowning, she pulled out the PHS that Gast had given her some time ago and tried calling him. After six or seven rings and no response, her unease turned into full-fledged worry. *He's probably just busy with Sephiroth*, she told herself, even though he hadn't mentioned a word about it last night. *And of course Cloud wouldn't be here, not when he's always shadowing Sephiroth.*

Still, Absently putting her hand over her belly protectively, Ifalna headed back to her quarters. Perhaps Gast had left a note that morning while she was still sleeping and she just hadn't seen it.

Halfway back to her rooms, a sharp agony suddenly blossomed in her chest. Ifalna fell against the wall gasping for breath, biting out a small cry, and she felt the Lifestream around her shift dangerously. Forcing herself to stand upright, Ifalna kept a hand against the wall and hurried as quickly as the pain and her baby would allow. Panic lent her speed, but when she threw herself through the doors of her quarters she was brought up short by horror.

On the floor was Gast, face slack in death. Blood pooled around his body, still dripping from the bullet holes riddling his chest. Hojo unmistakably stood over the body, gun in hand, with the Turk (the same Turk that had given her the shawl, *how could he do this to her*) and several guards standing around. She choked.

The sound made several heads turn towards her, but before Hojo could raise the gun or the Turk lift his katana more than a few inches Ifalna's hand was taking the bangle from the pocket of her dress and casting. The materia responded instantly to her; whether it was because she was a Cetra or because of her fury and terror she didn't know or care, all that mattered was that flames were suddenly licking up the men's clothes, leaping to the furniture and turning her quarters into a confused chaos of fire and smoke and yelling. Being closest to the door, Ifalna was able to duck the wild bullets and slip back out into the corridor, vision blurring with tears.

*Cloud, where are you?* She took her fear and anger and threw it at the Planet, reaching through her connection with it to find some kind of answer.

*WEAPON,* was all the Planet said. The sacrifice of one cell to save the body.

*No!* she screamed back as she pounded through the door that led out from the labs into the caverns underneath the ShinRa mansion. *He wasn't supposed to be a sacrifice for anything!*

Guards were pursuing her. Ifalna could hear their boots and their guns and she knew that a woman so near to giving birth wouldn't be able to outrun a group of soldiers, but Cloud's words came back to her and she thought, *Library, get to the library.*

Already feeling her body burning for breath, Ifalna forced herself forward as fast as she could. When she took the corner leading towards the library, she paused just long enough to reach for the materia in her pocket again, not bothering to stay and listen to the guards' screams as fire once more sprang up around them. A very small part of her was crying in guilt because it *hurt* for a Cetra to kill, but there was no way she was going to let her daughter die the way the father had.

*I'm so sorry, Gast.*

The room that Cloud had described was well hidden against the dark stone walls and Ifalna nearly ran right past it. She managed to pry it open, horrified once more to find several coffins lined up.
neatly around an altar. When she reached for one, the venomous taint of a monster's presence made her draw back.

*Damn it, Vincent, where are you!*

One of the coffins still felt tainted, but it was a purer darkness accompanied with soft breathing. Knowing she was running out of time, Ifalna unhesitatingly pushed it open, nearly tumbling onto the man inside.

"Vincent?" she gasped, breaths coming short and her abdomen aching fiercely. Her limbs felt weak and she nearly sobbed in relief when blood-red eyes opened to stare up at her.

"Who are you?" the man whispered in velvet voice.

"Vincent, please, I need your help," Ifalna pleaded, hearing the guards getting closer, "Gast is dead and Hojo's planning something, I can't find Sephiroth or Cloud and oh…"

A spasm of pain ripped through her abdomen and she fell against the wooden side of the coffin. Two strong hands (no, one was a claw) grabbed her arms to keep her from falling on the floor, and *damn it* she shouldn't have to be running for her life so late in pregnancy.

"You said 'Sephiroth'?"

"Yes," she panted, cringing at another spasm, "Vincent, please, Cloud told me you could help and I don't – I don't know what Hojo's planning – "

Something sharp pierced her shoulder, jerking her forward against the cloaked man. Immediately the world spun crazily and she didn't know which way was up or down, all she could see was Vincent's cloak turning into great scarlet wings before the world went black.

... 

Hojo snarled to himself. If people would only learn to listen to reason, then messes like this one wouldn't have to happen.

The Cetra woman was slumped against the old altar, the tranquilizers having taken effect almost instantly. Valentine had been more difficult to subdue, especially once Galian Beast had manifested itself, but he'd been disoriented from the sudden waking and subsequent transformation. The loss of a few guards in the process was negligible, since there was a constant supply of troopers coming in from ShinRa, and Valentine was now crumpled on the floor beside the woman, long hair scrawled across his pale features.

"Sir," said his current Turk, some man from Gongaga, Hojo could never be bothered to remember his name, "you should receive medical attention. I've already called the infirmary, they're preparing for your arrival."

Hojo knew better than to touch his face. He could feel the skin cracking as he spoke. "Fine, fine. I want this cleaned up quickly, as well as the waste in the Cetra's quarters. We move out to Midgar tomorrow."

"Sir –"

"Just do it," he snapped irritably, wincing as the motion sent cold fire through his face. Damn woman and her materia.
Something was wrong, Cloud knew, it was like someone had set up a choir of screams in his head. Sephiroth was calling him, crying *why aren't you here*, but the Planet's voice drowned him out.

Rebirth. WEAPON. Potentiality becoming actuality.

*No, I need to be there, I need to protect him, I can't let things happen all over again*—


*Jenova's fucking gone, Sephiroth's not a threat!*

But the Planet had already decided.

... 

Almost a year after Gast's death, a little boy was born to one Missus Strife in Nibelheim. She named him Cloud.
In Which Spontaneous Reincarnation Is a Thing

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: Bullying, animal death (due to fighting other animals).

... The hands holding back her hair were cool against Elfreda's fevered brow. Muscles contracted painfully a third time before she slumped back in bed, gasping for breath, and the midwife wiped her forehead with a cold cloth.

"He's being a mite rough on you, dear," Brunhild observed sympathetically, laying a gentle hand on the other woman's swollen stomach.

"My Lady Frigg...has blessed me," Elfreda managed in a strained voice, biting her lip against another wave of pain low in her abdomen. Brunhild frowned uncomfortably.

The birth was agonizing. Elfreda screamed while blood soaked the bedsheets and the midwife's hands. Brunhild half-expected the baby to be stillborn, but it – he – looked at her with bright, alive blue eyes.

"Malasintha, get in here, girl!" Brunhild ordered, putting the infant into the frantic young maid's arms. "Hold him, support the head...where's the plantain? Gods damn it..."

"Cloud, my son, Nebel –"

Brunhild ignored Elfreda's cries, more concerned with the unceasing flow of blood. Without a Cure materia it took yards of linen and handfuls of poultices before the rush of blood slowed. Elfreda was ghostly white and barely awake, but when Malasintha gingerly passed over the baby, her face was transformed with joy.

"My little dream-cloud," she crooned against his fuzzy head, and she started humming, lost in her own exhausted world with her newborn son while Brunhild and Malasintha cleared away the blood-soaked rags. The midwife and her apprentice exchanged glances when the infant was quiet.

"That ain't natural, not making so much as a peep," Malasintha hissed to Brunhild. Brunhild just gave her a sidelong glance as she washed the blood from her hands in the water-bucket.

"She's a Strife, girl. That's all that needs to be said on the matter."

Elfreda wasn't listening. She held her newborn's tiny body to her heartbeat, softly singing the lullaby that her own mother had sung to her in the old Nibel language.

... It felt like the world had been rocked on its heels and still hadn't regained its balance. The transfer from one lab to another had passed in a blur of barked orders and Hojo's constant presence, leaving Sephiroth feeling entirely disconnected from everything. He was an observer outside his own body, watching as dispassionately as one watches a television show.
"Where's Professor Gast?" he asked once. Hojo had given him that sly smile of his, made more sinister by a burn scar that hadn't been healed in time and which pulled at the skin of his face oddly. Sephiroth wished that Ifalna would give him one of her warm hugs but he hadn't seen her since the day before either.

"He retired unexpectedly."

Sephiroth hadn't asked again, and maintained his silence all the way to Midgar. Now he was faced with two other boys, also ten years old just like he was, and told to 'go play.'

The three stared at each other mutely. All of them were well aware that scientists were observing them from behind the one-way mirror spanning one wall of the plain white room.

"Who are you, then?" demanded the shortest of the three. Genesis, Hojo had called him, so Angeal must be the quiet brunet standing half a step behind the other.

"Sephiroth," he replied, adding out of habit, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Well, you've been trained, at least," said Genesis. "Professor Hollander expressed doubt over the matter."

"And it appears you're not a drooling mutation created at inept hands, either."

They stared at each other down. Angeal just sighed. "I think you're both being fools. Unless you want to fight and play into the professors' hands, I suggest you stop posturing."

Genesis huffed, but Sephiroth felt too numb to react. He was acting on autopilot, could honestly care less about 'making allies' or 'establishing social ties.' There were only three people he wanted to speak with and two of them had gone missing, having supposedly retired without warning. The third…

You promised you'd always be there, Cloud.

It hurt to realize that angels could lie just like humans.

... 

He didn't understand why the people around him wouldn't stop dying. There was a man with laughing eyes that got shot to death on a cliff and a woman with long pretty hair that was stabbed through her middle. A man with a short beard and blue suit, holding a stuffed kitty with a crown, put a bullet through his head and got blood and bits of brain all over his office.

Cloud didn't understand why his mum wasn't there, why she wasn't making the bad things go away. He huddled his little six-year-old body under a crate, wrapped his twig-like arms around his knees, and fervently wished for it to all go away. But even with his eyes squeezed shut he still knew what was happening; it wasn't just a bad dream like the jötnar under his bed but he had the gut-wrenching feeling that this had all happened before.

The village was burning. In the flaring red-orange-yellow light he saw his home, went running inside with the man who would die on a cliff, the same one he knew better than his own name – found his mum and the pool of red she lay in –

He woke up screaming, struggling against the hands that tried to hold him.

"Cloud! Cloud, darling, wake up, it's just a nightmare!"
All Cloud could think about was that he'd seen his mum dead, yet she was right here, crooning and rockin
g him, and with a desperate sob he threw his arms around her neck. He clung to her as hard as he could
without choking her, terrified to let go for a second.

"Oh, Cloud," she murmured, rocking soothingly on his small bed, "it was just a nightmare, it
wasn't real."

"Was too," he mumbled into her neck. She smelled like smoke, but it was smoke from the hearth,
not burning bodies, and of dried herbs. "People died and the village was on fire and you weren't
moving at all and no one could hear me, and I think the whole planet was dying too – "

"Breathe, Nebel." She stroked his back and his sweaty, sleep-mussed hair, humming quietly until
his crying slowly lessened into hitching breaths and sniffing. He stayed curled up on his mother's
lap until his eyelids drooped in exhaustion, but when she said, "Go back to sleep, everything's all
right," he murmured back unthinkingly, "No, it isn't, but it will be."

Elfreda watched her son fall back asleep with troubled eyes.

... Though the basket was too large to put his arms all the way around it, Cloud hiked on gamely into
one of the small fields outside the village. The sky was still dark, only the barest pink touches of
dawn peeking over the trees, but he knew that there wouldn't be any berries left if he didn't get up
before the other children. Damp chill seeped its way through his heavy sheepskin coat, making him
shiver, and his boots were already wet with dew.

A patch of blackberry bushes twined its way at the edge of the trees into the field, thick and
tangled and nearly as high as Cloud's head, but he'd come prepared. He pulled on his mum's
gardening gloves and started plucking the ripened berries. It was a game of dexterity to dart his
fingers in between the thorns without disturbing them and just as quickly pull out a berry, dropping
it into his basket before doing it again. Every so often his eyes darted back in the direction of the
village.

Cloud worked quickly and silently in the grey wash of dawn. The sun was rising by the time the
peace of the field was broken by the sound of chattering children.

Tensing, Cloud glanced down into his half-full basket. He weighed the pros and cons of
disappearing before the others arrived, but the decision was taken out of his hands when the small
group of kids came around the corner of the trail.

"Hey, what're you doing?" yelled one of the boys, waving his fist in the air. "You aren't supposed
to be here!"

"They're not yours," Cloud scowled as he tightened his arms around the basket.

"My mama says you aren't natural," another boy said as they all drew closer. There were only four
other boys and two girls, one of whom was Tifa.

("I don't know what to do, Cloud," Tifa whispered into his neck. He had his arms around her and
her hands were fisted in his dark shirt, clinging to him as though he were the last tether to sanity.
"The rations are running low, they've been running low for a week now and the last team that went
out to try and find supplies never came back. This Plague, it's – I don't know, the children, they're
all too scared to sleep unless they've driven themselves to exhaustion."

Cloud tightened his hold around her, feeling the knobs of her spine pressing into his forearms. She
was pushing herself past her limits, had been reduced to a painfully thin shadow of her former strength. He wished he could say something to make her feel better, but he couldn't bring himself to open his mouth when they both knew he'd be lying.)

"She says it's your fault when the animals die and the rest of us go hungry. She says your family's a bunch of witches and heevans."

"It's 'heathens', dumb-butt!" one of the other boys hissed.

"You're dumb, dumb-butt!"

It took a conscious effort to look away from Tifa's wide eyes. "Don't be stupid," Cloud retorted, voice shaking slightly, "if you all go hungry, so do me and my mum."

"But you got your witchery," one of the kids snorted, reaching out to shove against his shoulders. "You aren't normal."

Cloud thought of the dreams that he was secretly terrified weren't dreams at all, of the voice thought feeling he often heard that wasn't his own. He took a half-step back, looking at the others from behind his bangs. Maybe the villagers really were right. Maybe being a Strife was a curse and that was why he seemed to know things that no one else did.

"Stop lying," he cried as he stamped a foot, not wanting to believe it even though it made a horrible sort of sense. Tifa, the other girl, and one of the boys hung back, looking torn, but the other three were visibly angry.

"Don't you call Aldric a liar, you freak!"

"Freak!"

One of them pushed against his shoulders again, hard enough to knock the basket from his hold. Cloud stumbled, nearly falling on his rear, but caught himself with a dark glare. *Children can be so cruel to each other,* he remembered someone saying but he didn't know who or when or why, wasn't thinking when he instinctively ducked another shove. Another, much older and quieter part of him was going, *Really? Are we really going to do this bully scene?*

"Heathen!"

A rock hit his chest. When the second one flew at him, he sidestepped it and shifted forward to plant a small fist into another's face. The other boy went down on the damp ground with a pitiful cry. All the others stared at him, shocked and scared.

"Y-your eyes," the girl beside Tifa stammered, pointing a shaking finger at him. But Cloud couldn't see anything beyond the now-crying boy and his own skinned knuckles.

("You've gotta learn to stand up for yourself, Spike! How else you gonna be a SOLDIER?")

He turned and fled, forgetting the scattered blackberries.

... 

Late summer in the Nibel mountains, Cloud believed, was like living at the edge of heaven. When the sun started setting, the trees turned gold and the mountains were gilded with polished metals. The calls of both wild animals and monsters rose in their last chorus before twilight and echoed through the canyons. It was Cloud's favorite time to sneak away from his overprotective mum the
disdainful villagers to watch the last explosion of life before nature settled down for the night. Sometimes he rolled gleefully down the grassy hillsides until his head spun, or climbed the highest tree he could find and subsequently made himself nauseous at the height, but usually he would lie at the edge of a cliff with his arms behind his head and stare up at the sky. In the sky, he could pretend that his new dream wasn't as impossible as it was on the ground below.

**SOLDIER.**

He'd been sitting at the kitchen table practicing his reading on the town's only newspaper when he'd run across a grainy black-and-white photograph. "General Sephiroth," his mum explained when he pointed it out somewhat breathlessly. "They say he's a hero."

A hero. For some reason the word made Cloud wrinkle his nose. But *General Sephiroth. Those* words made him feel like he'd gotten an extra bowlful of ice cream and was allowed to stay up past his bedtime: a little sick to his stomach, but totally worth it.

**SOLDIER.** And that one made his heart beat faster. He was going to get out of this village and find a place for himself and his mother. He was going to make a difference.

A thoughtfeeling that wasn't his own uncurled in his chest with warm approval, making him feel a little stronger. He wasn't sure why he needed to try so hard, but it felt right.

... Eight-year-old Cloud held himself very still, ignoring the spikes of ice that the creek drove into his legs. His hands were held loosely in front of his body as he watched and waited and… *there.*

His hands flashed downwards into the freezing water and captured the slimy squirming body of a fish. It struggled wildly, fins flapping, and he quickly tossed it into the tall basket sitting on a nearby boulder before shaking some feeling back into his chilled fingers. He finally grabbed the basket and trudged back to shore.

The morning was clear but cold, a sharp wind already beginning to pick up in the higher parts of the mountains. Cloud kept his trousers rolled up to let his calves dry and tied his bootlaces to his belt, walking barefoot back to the village with the basket of fish on his shoulders. It took another hour of carefully climbing down trails, which wound through the spring growth still spotted with clumps of melting snow, to reach Nibelheim.

Villagers were already bustling about their business, men hauling firewood and clearing the road while a few women haggled with shopkeepers over food and supplies. Several younger kids ran about underfoot, escaping their chores in favor of waving sticks at one another. Cloud kept to himself, slinking unnoticed through the shadows of houses until he reached the one at the end of the road.

"Hello, dear," his mother greeted as he closed the heavy wooden door behind him. Her fingers worked quickly with the needle and fabric in her lap.

"Hello, Mum."

"Did you have a good catch? Spawning season should be going strong right now. The other day I overheard Hans talking to Mr Huttner about the abundance this season – "

As she chattered away happily Cloud was busily sharpening the knives to gut and clean the fish. He allowed her words to flow around him, not really caring what Hans or Huttner or Mayor Lockhart's left asscheek had to say but soaking in the simple cheer of his mother's voice.
"What do you think?" He looked up to see her holding out a half-finished blanket, pieced together from some worn but clean woolen scraps. "Brunhild has been complaining that her boys won't stop using her blankets as tents and bringing them back ruined with mud. I told her I'd be more than willing to make her an especially strong one. It's the least I can do, considering all she's done for us."

"That's nice of you, Mum," Cloud replied. He picked up the basket of fish and the knives. "I'll be right out back with these if you need anything."

"You're such a good boy, my Cloud," Elfreda declared, putting aside her sewing to kiss him on the head. When she glanced into the basket, her smile widened and she said, "Thank Njördr, dear, and do be careful with those knives, I'm still not entirely sure you should be messing about with those."

"I'll be fine," Cloud said.

"Well, I'll clean out the icebox, best not let that fish spoil when you're done. Should probably get the ashes cleared out of the fireplace as well, there's not a soul in this village that doesn't like smoked fish…"

Cloud shook his head as she drifted towards the kitchen. Behind the cottage he spread a clean plastic tarp over a wide tree stump and began methodically gutting the fish, letting his mind drift as he did. Which was, naturally, probably not his best idea.


Cloud dropped the gory knife he held with a wince as his temples suddenly pounded with the rumble of the Planet. Go away, he snarled, but once the Planet got started on something it was hard to stop its momentum. Battle, it whispered to him. Massacre. The fallen ones.

Only sheer force of will kept Cloud from falling forward onto the gutted fish as visions of a battlefield flickered in front of his eyes. It was a fortress with shattered stone walls and dead bodies slumped every few feet, brightly decorated spears broken everywhere and the standard of Wutai's Leviathan charred by a Fire materia. His sword drawn and spattered bloody, Sephiroth cut a frightening figure against his surroundings.

Beside him stood two other teenage boys that Cloud didn't recognize, just as terrible and with the mako glow of SOLDIER in their eyes. The redhead was canting Sephiroth a sidelong glance and saying, "We didn't need your help."

"I was merely following orders," Sephiroth replied calmly. His voice was still slightly higher than it would be as an adult.

The third boy put a hand on the other's shoulder with a quiet, "Genesis," and the redhead went sullenly quiet.

"In any case," Genesis casually began after a long silence, "there will be more opportunities for us to test ourselves. ShinRa's greed is as reliable as the rising sun."

Sephiroth's expression was inscrutable. Without thinking Cloud tried to reach out, not really sure if the words in his head were protect or keep or mine, but the Planet was already cutting him off and leaving him so disoriented that he toppled to the ground. He blinked up at the blue sky dizzily, waiting for the world to come back from its lunch break.

"…Ow."
The fallen ones. The enemy, flourishing unchecked like a thunderstorm.

*Sephiroth isn't the enemy anymore,* Cloud replied firmly, holding the thought and forcing it to be seen. (*Mine.*) The Planet's heavy presence finally subsided and Cloud let out a long shaky sigh.

"Cloud? Cloud, are you all right?"

The back door of the cottage banged open and his mother rushed out, heavy woolen skirt tangling with her legs, and she dropped to her knees by his side. She slid a hand under his shoulders to help him sit up, her other hand fluttering with panic.

"Goodness, Cloud, what happened? Are you hurt? Did you drop the knife?"

It took Cloud a moment to remember how to speak. His mother's sudden fussing wasn't helping. Swallowing a few times, he managed, "No, I'm fine, Mum, really. I think I just didn't get enough sleep last night." Which was true enough.

"Was it another nightmare?" his mother asked immediately.

"It's nothing," he assured her, forcing himself to stand up on his own. She ignored him in favor of patting him down, seeing for herself whether he was gushing blood or internal organs. "Really, I swear I'm fine."

It was somewhat embarrassing to realize he was small enough that his kneeling mother was still able to look him straight in the eye. "I don't think it's just 'nothing,' dear."

"Mum, I promise, I'd tell you if there was something wrong. I just didn't sleep well before I went fishing this morning."

Elfreda stared into his face for a few more seconds before finally nodding and getting to her feet, running a gentle hand through his hair. "All right. Finish those fish then, but be careful. I'll be watching through the window."

Though Cloud's smile was rather forced, not because of her mothering but because a headache had settled down stubbornly at the base of his skull with a pickaxe, she didn't seem to notice. What he didn't realize was that as Elfreda went back to the cottage and thoughtfully resumed cleaning out the fireplace, she could only think about how his eyes had had a suspicious shine.

Once he was alone, Cloud slowly went back to filleting the fish so he could pretend his hands weren't trembling. It was like someone knocking their head as they walked through a doorway and shaking loose old cobwebs; it was one thing to see Sephiroth in a blurry propaganda photo and another to see him, to suddenly remember just how sharp the Masamune was, to wonder if Sephiroth still had a habit of doodling stick figures in the margins of his study notes, to remember the viciously purred innuendo, *On your knees, begging for forgiveness* - but to also remember the first time Sephiroth had ever hugged him, his head barely halfway up Cloud's chest and his arms wrapped so tightly that Cloud had actually gasped for breath. (*Mine.*) And now was the time to start thinking about other things, like Genesis and Angeal and who exactly they were. Why he didn't know about them. Why *Zack* hadn't known about them before...all this. *What's changed?*

A sudden thought made his eyes widen and hands pause, knife poised over a fish. The Planet had always been free in manipulating his memories, so how did he know that he was being told everything? How could he even be sure that he hadn't gone through this time collapse bullshit before, that the Planet wasn't *planting* a past into his head? Should he start wrapping his head in tin foil?
The wooden knife handle suddenly snapped. Cloud slowly released his fist, hardly noticing the splinters in his palm, and put the ruined blade to the side. Curling his fingers around the edge of the stump he was using as a worktable, he forced himself to take several controlled breaths until his knuckles weren't so white. The thought that he was being used as indiscriminately by the Planet as Hojo would have –

He cut off the thought before he could finish it. He knew that the Planet wasn't being malicious, that it could hardly conceive of such a petty human emotion and was merely acting blindly on its own equivalent of a survival instinct, but damn it. He was – some part of him was still just eight fucking years old, this wasn't fair and why was the Planet giving him just enough information over the years that he was never quite sure if he was Cloud: World Savior or simply Cloud: Village Oddball. He'd been through this which-memories-are-the-real-ones thing before and he...he just wanted to hug his mum. He just wanted Sephiroth to hug him with skinny little arms, all solemn sincerity and awkward questions.

Cloud stared down at the plastic tarp under his fingers and sighed. He'd better figure out what he was physically capable of, for a start.

... 

"Thank you, dear, it's just lovely," gushed Brunhild as she reached across the kitchen table and accepted the quilt from Elfreda. It was thick and woolen, worn but clean and whole.

"It's the least I can do," Elfreda said brightly, smoothing out her skirt in an unconsciously nervous gesture. "You've been a lifesaver for Cloud and me. I don't know what we would've done without you."

"And how is Cloud?" Brunhild asked as she neatly folded the quilt and set it down next to their mugs of tea. When Elfreda bit her lip and didn't answer right away, Brunhild managed not to sigh aloud. "Has he been having his night terrors again?"

"Not any more than usual. He collapsed today while doing his chores. He said he'd just overexerted himself, but…"

It wasn't unheard of for younger children to have random bouts of nausea or dizziness, Brunhild knew, with the nearby presence of the old mako reactor. But generally those children developed a resistance to the passive mako poisoning by the time they reached puberty, and Cloud had never shown other symptoms of being anything other than a healthy kid.

"How did he seem afterwards?"

Elfreda was wringing her hands slightly in her lap, tea forgotten. "Disoriented. He looked at me like he didn't know me. It was like waking him up from one of his nightmares, only he wasn't sleeping."

"Has he told you what these are like for him?" Brunhild asked gently. "Does he hear or see things? Maybe notice weird smells or tastes?"

"My son isn't touched in the head," Elfreda snapped fiercely, startling Brunhild.

"I didn't mean to insult you, dear. I think your son is quite intelligent." Unusually so, for that matter, far ahead of the normal development curve, one of the many strange things about the kid she'd noticed over the years. "But it's possible that these night terrors and now this collapse could mean there's something physically wrong. Maybe it's the reactor, maybe it's something genetic, but
you need to consider the possibility." Epilepsy, for example.

But Elfreda didn't appear to be listening. Her eyes had widened as she quietly repeated to herself, "He's not…touched."

"Elfreda, what – "

"Thank you for the tea, Brunhild," she said quickly as she jumped up from her seat, "I'm sorry to rush off like this but something has just come to my attention…"

She was whirling out the door as she spoke, leaving Brunhild sitting alone at her table with two unfinished cups of tea and a bewildered expression.

Elfreda wasn't aware of the strange looks she received as she ran through the village, holding up her skirt to keep it from dragging in the mud. As she approached her cottage she had the sense to stop running and let her breathing slow back down to normal so that her son wouldn't think anything was different (because things were different now, she felt like she'd glimpsed the beginning of something new and wonderful, like peeking behind the curtain before the start of some grand opera, even though she'd never actually been to one). When she entered the cottage, she found her son standing on a chair in the kitchen reaching for the dried herbs strung up on the ceiling.

"Did Mrs. Huttner like the quilt, Mum?" he asked, glancing at her before managing to tug down a sprig of rosemary. It took her a moment to realize that he'd asked her a question.

"Oh, yes." How could she have missed it before? The way her son was so quiet, how he seemed to skip right past that age where he stumbled into everything as he worked out which parts of his body did what, the fact that he rarely seemed surprised by anything or needed much of anything explained more than once.

Cloud gave her an odd look. "That's good. Do you want me to save some fish for dinner tonight?"

"If you could, thank you, love." She managed to smile. He nodded, slowly, and headed back outside with the rosemary in hand, and Elfreda thought about those moments when her son had seemed a little more... off than most kids. Well, if the Norns had indeed picked her son, they certainly could've done far worse.

... Cloud crept along the trails as quietly as a deer; it was the dragons' mating season and he would prefer not fight against huge claws and dripping fangs and generally lethal unbeatable scariness if he could help it. He carried only a light pack with a water bottle and a small amount of food. The morning had been grey and cold when he slipped out of the cottage while his mother still slept, cold enough for him to sneak past the Death Claws and Needle Kisses sleeping on the farthest outskirt of Nibelheim without forcing battle, and the onset of winter meant that he had to step lightly around growing snowdrifts to avoid crunching the ice beneath his thick boots.

The rough road that led to the ShinRa mansion, little more than a wide neglected trail nowadays, was less precarious than the one leading to the reactor. For a while his small size and silence helped him avoid monsters, but with fate being what it was, it wasn't long before he was ducking and rolling to avoid a group of Bombs.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he chanted to himself as he watched one of them swell up. Nibelheim wasn't exactly rolling in materia, since they involved equipment and money the village didn't have, but
crap, even a low-level Blizzard would've been nice, and why the hell did fire monster things live here anyway? Cloud managed to squeeze behind a large rock just as one of them exploded violently, sending a pulse of thundering sound and a wave of heat over the area.

The two remaining Bombs danced in the air with menacing faces, the crackling of their flames loud in the stillness of early morning. Cloud groaned internally when he heard the rustling of other monsters woken up by the fiery explosion. Gods damn it, Vincent, you couldn't have chosen a place in the village itself to sleep, could you.

Waiting for the Bombs' erratic dance to carry them a few feet to the side, Cloud prepared himself for a mad dash up the trail. Before he could move, however, the distant sounds of other monsters suddenly spiked in loudness and animalistic anger and several large, dark forms streaked past the snowdrifts.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself emphatically when he realized it was a fully-grown Nibel wolf being pursued by two Death Claws. The wolf was already wounded, judging from the blood that streaked both its shaggy fur and the long poisonous spikes of the Claws, but the Claws hadn't escaped unscathed from the wolf's teeth and viciousness. Cloud forced himself even smaller behind his rock despite the wet chill seeping into his trousers, holding very still even when a flailing spike struck the same rock he hid behind.

One of the Bombs that had been harassing Cloud fled, leaving the other to explode in a brilliant haze. The backlash caught one of the Claws, killing it, but the wolf was so far gone that it whirled around to face what it thought was a new threat, inadvertently turning away from the last remaining Claw.

Cloud didn't flinch when a thick spike broke the wolf's spine and shattered the ribcage, spattering the ground with blood and intestine. He was focused on the wolf's eyes, shining with the same mako glow that almost all Nibel monsters possessed, and was unable to hear anything but the long howl of agony and fury of its death. Before he could think it through Cloud was on his feet and running, lips pulled back into a growl with the hunting knife poised in his hand for a slashing stroke, feeling something not altogether human coursing through his veins.

The Death Claw screamed shrilly when the spike that had dealt the wolf's killing blow was severed from its body. The limb twitched spasmodically on the ground but Cloud ignored it, smoothly dodging the Claw's five other limbs to slash a second time at its long throat between chitin plates. It screamed again, managing to score a long gash along Cloud's arm by pure luck as it flailed, and ended up just another pile of dead meat.

Cloud stood over it with his chest heaving, half-expecting it to resurrect itself because nothing ever ended neatly. It took a few seconds for some semblance of sanity to reestablish itself, and once it did he winced at the sudden flaring of pain in his arm. He huffed.

"You're not a SOLDIER, Strife," he reminded himself. Hell, wasn't a failed clone, wasn't even really a kid anymore, and things like a claw through certain body parts could actually kill him again.

A small cry from the direction that the monsters had come made Cloud turn quickly, knife raised. When the cry continued but nothing leaped out with human flesh on its mind, he slowly relaxed, flicking the monster's blood from the blade before creeping in the direction of the sound. It led him away from the trail up into the mountains where the snow and undergrowth would've made passage difficult if the wolf's fight hadn't smashed things flat. Eventually he tracked the destruction to the shadow of an enormous tree, not far from a dark hole hidden between the tree's roots.
Two wolf pups were huddled together. One was obviously dead, its tiny body crushed in the depression left from a Death Claw's footprint. The second was the source of the pitiful wail, huddled against the body of its sibling, crying. Cloud might very well have left the pup there for Mother Nature if it hadn't looked up at him with big, sad eyes.

("Just stick with me. Everything will be all right.")

He cast one last glance in the direction of the ShinRa mansion, hidden somewhere behind the rise of hills and trees. Then he knelt down in the snow and reached for the pup, which promptly bit his hand. "You little shit," Cloud whispered, thankful that he'd stolen his mother's gardening gloves again that morning. He could feel the warmth of blood inside the sheepskin leather and one of his mother's stories, of which there were many and often unintentionally repeated, suddenly came to mind. "C'mon, Fenrir," he murmured, managing to get his hands around the pup without getting a finger taken off, "screaming isn't going to solve anything. Tried it. Just managed to piss off the neighbors."

The pup continued to struggle stubbornly long after Cloud managed to wrap it in his coat against the warmth of his chest. The look that his mother gave him when he managed to get back home with a wild animal in his coat was rather eloquent.

"Cloud, what in the world—"

"Mum, please," he interrupted, moving around her to grab a blanket one-handed and stuff it into a large basket, "his mother was killed this morning. He would've died if I left him out there."

"It's a wolf," she stressed, following him around the cottage with her hands fluttering nervously. "Darling, you can't keep him, he'll tear everything to pieces…"

But Cloud was tucking the whimpering pup into the basket before standing and holding his hand out. "Could you take a look at this, please?"

He'd worked the glove off so he could show her the torn skin on his right hand. The bite had formed a series of holes in a crescent shape on the skin between the thumb and first finger, tearing up the flesh, and Cloud kept it tilted upwards to keep blood from dripping too much onto his mother's floor.

"Hel's gates, what did you do, try to pet it?" Elfreda exclaimed, taking his hand gingerly and using the edge of her skirt to try wiping it clean.

"No."

"You don't know what that thing might be carrying! It might be rabid or mako-poisoned or…or rabid…" She trailed off when she saw the crescent-shaped mark, something odd passing across her expression.

In the end she dragged her son to Brunhild and had the healer pronounce that there wasn't anything diseased about the bite that she could see and his hand wouldn't rot through and fall off, but Cloud would have to exercise it regularly to keep the muscles from stiffening and change the bandages. When the gash on his arm from the Claw was discovered, he was treated to a second round of scolding and was sewed up with a little more force than was strictly necessary.

Between the newest family member and the heavy snowstorms, Cloud didn't have the chance to try and get up to the ShinRa mansion again for several months. Fenrir was more difficult than any of the strays that Marlene and Denzel had tried to hide under their beds; Cloud and his mother learned
very quickly that if it wasn't made of stone or wasn't kept on a table or shelf, it was fair game to claws or teeth. Often both. That winter, Missus Strife had more material for her quilts and cloaks than usual.

When villagers realized that the unusually large, lanky dog that started shadowing Cloud Strife at the beginning of spring was in fact an adolescent Nibel wolf, there was an outcry. Mayor Lockhart himself went to Elfreda about it, trying to reason with her on matters of Public Safety and Keeping the Peace, and when that failed he resorted to threatening that if she didn't make her son get rid of the beast then the villagers had every right to defend themselves and their property as they saw fit.

Elfreda Strife drew herself up to her full, tiny height, looked Lockhart in the eye, and declared that if anyone so much as touched her son or his wolf then she would bring down the curses of the gods like never before. Perhaps Lockhart and the rest of Nibelheim needed a reminder of exactly why her family name was 'Strife'?

"You should remember that Hel listens to those who honor her," she said fiercely, "and good luck finding someone else who can starch your underthings the right way."

The mayor backed down with ill grace. The problem might have continued if a snowstorm hadn't struck Nibelheim the next day and caused some substantial damage – an event that was a complete coincidence, Cloud wryly thought, but he wasn't above taking advantage of the villagers' misplaced fear.

(Cloud was reluctant to admit, even to himself, the reason why his chest tightened whenever he saw Fenrir's eyes shine a soft familiar violet in sunlight, or the way dark fur tended to spike up around the canine's scruff. Don't be stupid, he would tell himself. Zack's alive again. You have a chance to make things right. That didn't stop him from sneaking Fenrir extra scraps from the dinner table when his mother's back was turned.)

The snows had melted by the time Cloud was able to sneak away to the ShinRa mansion again. Without the high snowdrifts and freezing temperatures keeping her son from getting into trouble, Elfreda was unable to keep an eye on him all the time, and the top of Fenrir's head already reached Cloud's young shoulder. On the pretense of gathering firewood Cloud returned to the trail heading towards the mansion, better armed with a hatchet and a half-grown wolf loping along behind him.

The mansion had fallen into obvious disrepair in the eight or nine years since Hojo had moved his operations to Midgar. Keeping himself pressed against the wall, Cloud moved silently through the long shadows towards the sweeping staircase. Fenrir was more concerned with sniffing out the dusty corners and snapping at the floating pumpkins than following his strange packmate who didn't want to hunt, horror of horrors.

Cloud's recollection of things from before was still far from perfect, but the stairs he climbed now were sending chills down his back, kept him expecting to hear the yelling of security guards, the deafening retort of gunshots. He could swear that he saw the glint of lazy sunlight off a large blade, smell the strange mix of mako and human sweat as hands gripped him around the waist and someone whispered, I'll get us out of here –

At the top of the staircase he had to stop. His breath was quick and shallow, barely under control as his head swam fuzzily. Several long minutes passed before he was able to relax his deathly grip on the railing.

Ignoring the monster-possessed safe, Cloud easily found the hidden door that led to the rickety wooden stairs spiraling down into the basement. The strange screeching of Yin-Yang echoed through the stone corridors. Once again Cloud kept to the deepest shadows along the walls,
shaking off the horrible sensation of déjà vu to keep his breathing steady, and though the only light came from the eerie glow of mako tubes that hadn't been emptied he didn't dare light the lantern he'd brought from the village until he was in the library. He pushed open the heavy door nearly hidden by the bookshelves.

The first time Cloud had been in Vincent's crypt, he hadn't exactly been paying attention to the décor. Now he was able to see the other coffins, cast into strange outlines by the lantern he held over his head, and the stone altar that they appeared to be surrounding. Sudden curiosity made him step up the dais. *A sacred place*, he realized with wide eyes, remembering his mother's scattered history lessons. *Before ShinRa, before Nibelheim was even settled, our family, our people lived here worshiping the gods that hadn't yet gone to sleep under the mountains.*

He ran a finger lightly over the letters carved into the rock. He'd seen them before on his mother's few precious possessions, but he'd never bothered to learn how to read them in this life or the last one. It all had seemed like just another one of his mother's eccentricities, a mark of her inability to let go of the past and live in the modern world.

Absently he switched the lantern to his other hand, flexing the stiffened muscles of his left, and turned back to the coffins. The presence of the Lifestream, normally content to lie quietly in the back of his mind, was reacting to something in the room with restless intent. Friend-enemy-ally, it murmured to him, unable to decide.

*Friend,* Cloud told it firmly, and pushed the top off the closest coffin.

*He kind of looks like Sephiroth when he sleeps,* Cloud mused, staring down at Vincent's emotionless face. That thought was followed by the Zack-like urge to draw a mustache on his face.

Vincent opened his eyes and stared up at Cloud. He stared back.

"Hi," he said finally.

"...Who are you?"

"Cloud."

A long moment of silence passed.

"...Go away and let me sleep."

"No."

Vincent's eyes narrowed and his top lip curled to show off two pearly fangs. "You have no idea what you are getting yourself into."

Depended on a person's point of view, really. "I need your help." When a dubious brow rose, Cloud added seriously, "You owe it to Sephiroth."

He fell back as Vincent rose from the coffin in a wave of red and black and shadowed menace. "You're only a child."

A winter spent agonizing over what the hell he could tell Vincent to recruit him for this world-saving mission had been less than productive and given him nothing but tension headaches. 'The truth' and a fair amount of prayer was all he'd been able to think of. "I know far more than you think," he replied, then internally winced at how dramatic that sounded. "Right now Sephiroth is in Wutai fighting a war. He's already a SOLDIER First and is nearly a general, even though he's only
"Nineteen…?" Vincent echoed softly. Cloud politely gave him a moment to absorb that before continuing.

"Hojo's still pulling the strings behind him. If he isn't stopped, then…" 'He'll go mad and help a space alien destroy the world,' yes, going with the truth was obviously the better course here, "I'm afraid of what might happen."

"You don't sound like a child."

"Uh. Well." He managed not to yelp in surprise when he suddenly found Vincent's face a breath from his own.

"You have eyes that no child has," the Turk murmured.

"Cid had a point when he said you can't say anything that isn't cryptic," Cloud muttered to himself. Vincent blinked slowly.

An hour or two later Vincent was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed while Cloud rifled through the papers on the desk in the library, jacket on the floor and his sleeves rolled up. Vincent had listened to Cloud's story, told with a minimum of emotion or detail, without interrupting, giving no clue as to what he was thinking. Silence had fallen once Cloud had finished describing the Planet's last desperate action. Now he was going through the papers that had been left behind to see if there was any clue to what might've happened between his forced reincarnation and Sephiroth's removal to Midgar. He vaguely remembered something about Gast 'disappearing,' which in ShinRa was always a euphemism, but he had no clue what had happened to Ifalna except the little that Aeris had told AVALANCHE.

"You're not the first to awaken me," Vincent said suddenly. Cloud paused. "The first was a pregnant woman. Hojo was pursuing her, but his men were able to take advantage of my disorientation and subdue me. I don't know what became of her, but I recall her saying that someone named Cloud had told her where to find me."

"Shit, Cloud was thinking frantically, if things got bad enough that she was trying to run and had to wake up Vincent – gods, I saw what happened to pregnant women that tried to outrun the Plague, usually they miscarried and the fetuses were…oh, Aeris…"

"Yeah," Cloud answered without thinking. What if Aeris hadn't lived and it was his fault? What if Meteor was called again and no one could use Holy…? Most importantly, what if Aeris just wasn't there?

Through his panic he was vaguely aware that Vincent was studying him, probably trying to think of a more rational explanation. "I don't really expect you to believe me," Cloud said, a little shakily, "and I know that you don't help anyone blindly anymore, after the way Hojo and Lucrecia fucked you over." Vincent's clawed hand twitched. "The point is that Hojo's alive and I'm not going to let Sephiroth destroy himself or everyone else. But I need your help."

"You want to bring down Hojo."

"I want to bring down ShinRa. I intend to have Hojo suffer for as long as humanly possible, and then some." There was a thought: could the Lifestream resurrect Hojo as many times as needed for Cloud to work out some of his grudges? It could take a while.
"I cannot help you."

"This is about your 'sin,' isn't it?" Cloud asked, setting down the papers as Vincent looked absolutely gobsmacked. "We were never very close, but...some things don't need a lot of words, I guess. I was never able to save the people I loved most and more often than not it was my fault, and I used to think that if I just – went away, for a while, maybe it wouldn't be as bad.

"But it doesn't work like that, Vincent. People die anyway." Cloud's eyes narrowed. "Lucrecia's dead and Hojo is doing everything in his power to turn Sephiroth into something horrific, but if you still want to go back to sleep, fine. Be a fucking coward."

He tucked the papers back into their manila folders and tossed them in Vincent's direction so he could pull his coat back on with jerky movements. "Those are some of Hojo's notes about the procedures he performed on Sephiroth. The more extensive ones are kept on the computers. If you can read those and still pretend you don't give a shit about what happens to your son, then I won't bother you again."

It wasn't like Cloud couldn't understand exactly why Vincent seemed so willing to keep his head shoved under the sand, and he had to keep reminding himself that in Vincent's world they didn't share any history whatsoever except the gasps of a panicking, pregnant woman. But Cloud also knew exactly what was going to happen if everyone just sat back with a bowl of popcorn or their heads in the sand.

When Cloud opened the library door, he found Fenrir sitting on his haunches with a doggy smile, panting and thumping his tail against the floor. "Idiot," he muttered fondly, ruffling those big triangular ears. "C'mon, let's go hunt something while we wait for people to catch up with their common sense."

Inside the library, Vincent flipped open the top folder to a picture of a young green-eyed boy, hardly older than Cloud himself appeared to be.

My son.

... Sephiroth didn't know why he continued to dream of his childhood delusion. It didn't happen very often, and the angel looked years younger than Sephiroth had ever known him, but those few dreams stood out in his mind like sore bruises, and there was no mistaking those eyes.

This time Sephiroth was standing near a wooden table that looked freshly scrubbed, watching his angel stand on a milking stool at the kitchen sink. Cloud, little more than a boy, worked stubbornly with a bristled brush and a large pot, hair spiking out comically from its short ponytail as he cussed under his breath. He had to stand on tiptoe to reach the soap.

Sephiroth glanced around the cottage warily, though he already knew from experience that no one could see him. Morning sunshine shone through the windows, casting soft warmth over the floor. Slowly he moved to Cloud's side, looked at his snub-nosed profile and thought that if he hadn't known better he might have sworn he was just looking at an innocent child. One needn't be a psychologist to see the heavy-handed symbolism of Sephiroth's childhood abandonment and emotional issues.

Low growling made Sephiroth's hand fly unconsciously to the Masamune's hilt. A half-grown wolf was snarling in his direction, attention fixed unerringly on his throat, and Sephiroth drew his sword thinking oh gods, Cloud –
"Fenrir?"

Sephiroth was startled into pausing with the Masamune halfway out of its sheath, watching incredulously as Cloud stepped off the stool to put his hands on the wolf's face.

"What's wrong with you?" Cloud followed the still-growling Fenrir's line of sight and glanced directly at Sephiroth without seeing him. His brow furrowed as though he were trying to read something far away and Sephiroth's heart crawled into his mouth, but then the boy shook his head and looked away.

"It's okay," Cloud murmured, running his damp fingers through the wolf's thick fur. For a moment Sephiroth felt a sharp pang of jealousy (he's mine, he belongs to me) that immediately made him feel ridiculous. But he watched Cloud soothe the beast's raised hackles and remembered the same fingers running through his own hair, remembered the rare occasions that his angel hugged him and he'd stupidly thought that nothing could get him while he was protected there.

When Sephiroth woke up later, he kicked everyone out of the training room and worked himself over furiously. It took both Genesis and Angeal to keep him from collapsing hours later, but he refused to explain anything. Instead he let them guide him back to his quarters, strip him, and shove him into the shower, where Genesis pressed up against him and Angeal ran the soaped-up rag over his sweaty skin. He didn't resist when they followed him into bed and Genesis pulled him down between his legs while Angeal draped himself over his back so that Sephiroth was held protectively, possessively, between them.

But the other two SOLDIERs had always had each other. He'd only ever had Cloud, but he'd never even existed except in the mind of a lonely little boy.

A few days passed since Cloud had woken Vincent. He was trying not to be judgmental, but the longer that Cloud went about his mundane daily routines without hearing a word, the harder that was. Saving the world was more than a one-man job, especially when the one man needed a stool to reach the kitchen sink and hadn't yet hit puberty.

The son. The father. A wide divide like a great fault-line in the earth.

Cloud clenched his teeth at the sudden intrusion. The bucket of water he was carrying back from the well jostled and he put a hand on Fenrir's head to keep his balance.

Maybe if Sephiroth knew that he really did have family, it'd help.

The father. CHAOS. The clashing between two storms. The agony of losing a WEAPON.

They're not going to kill each other, Cloud retorted flatly.

"Cloud?"

The only sign of his surprise was his hand tightening around the handle of the water bucket. "Uh. Hello, Tifa."

Tifa stood awkwardly beside him, eyes flickering from him to their surroundings as though checking to see who was watching. Fenrir growled and she took a small step back.

"Um, I was wondering if maybe you'd like to, to spar with me sometime or something," she rushed, as though desperate to get the words out before she lost her nerve (or her reputation, a mean little
voice whispered). When Cloud just stared at her, she added quickly, "Well, you know I've been training with Master Zangan and he's been showing me how to read people's body language and stuff and...and I think you'd be pretty good at it."

She didn't quite meet his eyes as she spoke, her fingers twisting together anxiously in front of her blouse. Cloud immediately knew that it was Zagan's idea, not hers, but Cloud missed her, missed her sincerity and insecurity and the way she could look death straight in the eye before punching it.

"Okay," he said, giving her an awkward smile, and walked away before he made her more uncomfortable than she already was. He wanted to hug her, and he also wanted to demand that she act like the Tifa he knew, which wasn't fair to anyone and just brought old hurt into sharp focus.

It was only a few days before he was standing in front of Zagan while Tifa watched apprehensively, the trio standing in one of the small fields scattered around the village away from prying eyes. Fenrir had been forcibly left at home, scratching woefully at the door while his packmate went somewhere without him.

"Tifa told me you defended yourself from the other boys," the old man said quietly. He was a Wutaian that had appeared in Nibelheim a year or two ago with little explanation, but when he didn't do anything exciting or exotic the rumor mill had mostly forgotten him.

Cloud didn't answer. Zangan watched him with a slightly tilted head, then nodded to himself. "Stick to the basics, you two. Remember that this isn't a competition, so stay relaxed and just let it flow."

Tifa got into a ready stance, expression suddenly focused. Cloud copied her, nervous and a little excited. He took a breath and let it out slowly to center himself, ignoring the whispers of the Planet that tried to grow in volume.

Tifa struck first. She led with a punch and followed by a roundhouse kick that would have hurt like hell if Cloud hadn't danced out of the way. Tifa followed him with swift, sure movements that would only get better with time, but Cloud had the advantage of half-remembering her style and was able to counter most of her offensive. But inevitably, the differences between a larger, enhanced body and the reality of his smaller one caught up with him and he forgot his reach, extending himself too far, giving Tifa an opening that she didn't hesitate to take. Her foot connected hard with his sternum and he fell hard on his ass, the wind knocked from his lungs and his vision spinning.

"Are you okay?" she cried as Zangan knelt beside the boy.

"Relax and try to breathe slowly. It'll pass," Zangan said soothingly while Cloud gagged into his hand. When he was able to draw a normal breath, Cloud got back to his feet and grinned at Tifa. "I'm okay. I just need to learn to duck."

She smiled back tentatively, and they went on sparring until they were disgusting with sweat and limp with exhaustion. Zangan praised them, then immediately made them promise to come back the next day and do it all over again. At the end of a week Cloud's body was aching and exhausted, but Tifa was starting to talk more openly, less self-consciously, and at the risk of sounding maudlin Cloud decided that was worth a few nights of being one large bruise.

...
bothering to turn around. The WEAPON inside Vincent sang clearly to Cloud.

"You called him my son."

It was odd hearing Vincent speak in the light of day, voice drifting like smoke. Cloud shrugged slightly. "I'm not entirely sure," he admitted, "but I see too much of you in him. Hojo's always claimed Sephiroth but the bastard would kill his own mother if it got him what he wanted." He looked over his shoulder. "Does it really matter?"

"No. Either way, he is still Lucrecia's son."

Fenrir had returned to Cloud's side and was watching the motionless figure standing tall in front of them, the only movement coming from his cloak. Judging from the low growl in his throat, the wolf didn't have much appreciation for the gothic aesthetic.

"You'll help, then?" Cloud asked, putting a free hand on Fenrir's scruff.

Vincent's gaze was sharp. The Planet's voice rose between them until it was nearly audible; CHAOS visibly stirred behind Vincent's neutral expression, and for a moment Cloud was suddenly aware of the Lifestream flowing through his own body, through the wolf at his side and the man before him like music notes. The sensation faded before it blinded him, leaving a dull ache pounding in Cloud's temples.

"Your story is incredible, but that matters little so long as our goals remain the same." Vincent didn't seem to have noticed anything.

With a hand discreetly using Fenrir for support, Cloud nodded and took a moment to find words again. "I need to know what's happening in Midgar, specifically within ShinRa. Things have already changed from the way I remember them."

In the rush of moving Hojo's work to Midgar some minor supplies had been left behind in the ShinRa mansion, including several phones. Cloud had snitched a few and tinkered with them, half the time cursing at such ancient technology, but at least now he was able to stop by his house, drop off his armful of firewood, and grab the now-working and secured phones while avoiding his mother. One was tossed to Vincent, who immediately stowed it somewhere in the subspace of his cloak.

Cloud then led the way to the Mt. Nibel reactor, passively allowing Vincent and Fenrir to take care of the monsters they met on the way. Fenrir appeared to have developed a slight grudge against the Turk, judging from the way the wolf occasionally trotted so close to the man's feet that Vincent nearly tripped several times.

When they entered the reactor, Cloud forcing Fenrir to remain outside, Vincent stopped short and stared at the rows of tanks lining the staircase leading into the main room. The small portholes on their fronts glowed with mako.

"These are…?"

"Failures," Cloud answered. He went to the first one and opened it, letting mako and something bulky and soft rush out onto the floor. The thing started to screech and Cloud unceremoniously cut its throat. The experiment died quickly, body slowly falling apart in a mess of fluid and tissue. "Their bodies are unstable," Cloud explained softly. "It's the pressure of the mako holding them together. It's better this way, dying slowly like that is – "

Agonizing. Worse than any other torture Hojo could've developed because you can feel yourself
falling apart and there's no way to scream or stop it and...and don't think about it. Oh gods.

With a shuttered expression Vincent checked the other tanks until he found the next specimen, then released it and shot it mercifully in the skull before it could draw breath.

The two worked their way up the rows until they had destroyed the specimens left behind and finally entered the main room. A long catwalk led to the beautifully sculpted death mask covering Jenova's container, which Vincent ripped aside with his claw. Cloud didn't realize he'd been bracing himself until he was staring at Jenova's petrified face and his mind stayed silent. Her pale flesh and hair had been turned into mako-crystal, and he wondered abstractly if a Summons materia could be derived from it. Terrifying thought.

"Jenova," Vincent read off the nameplate. His expression was unreadable. "Then this is the creature that so enraptured Hojo."

"More or less. The most dangerous part of her is gone, but it'd be stupid to leave this thing lying around where anyone might find it." Like, oh, Sephiroth, perhaps.

"You said she was able to possess anyone injected with her living cells, but if the body here remains, where is her will?"

Cloud didn't look at Vincent. "The Planet ripped it apart."

"Strange that the Planet wasn't simply able to do so before."

"Yeah. Strange," Cloud agreed neutrally. Curling his claw into a fist, Vincent punched at the shatterproof glass and sent a long web of cracks running around its circumference. Another hit, three, and the tank broke entirely, spilling its contents over their legs and disappearing through the grated floor. Cloud found himself suddenly lifted into the air, feet kicking automatically.

"Vincent, what the hell!"

"...I was concerned," Vincent said hesitantly, and to be fair, Cloud did look like a little kid, but still. "Neither of us know what is in Jenova's tomb."

"Oh," said Cloud intelligently. "Uh. Thank you. But mako doesn't really hurt anymore."

He kicked out his legs again demonstratively, the mako-soaked denim sticking to his skin. Vincent set him back down with a face that would have been embarrassment on anyone else. "My apologies," he said stiffly.

There was an awkward silence.

"I think our best bet is just dumping her into the reactor."

Cloud starting clearing away pieces of glass while Vincent carefully pulled out the corpse itself, taking care not to break off crystallized parts. It was as cold as the crystal it resembled and awkward to lift, having been frozen with its body straight and arms outstretched as though in flight. Her eyes were brilliantly green-blue with slit pupils, vaguely almond-shaped and altogether wholly inhuman. Cloud saw himself reflected in them and he shivered, remembering the same sight in a very different time and in a not-so-different face.
Vincent was finally able to hoist Jenova's corpse into his arms and tip her over the edge of the high catwalk. He and Cloud both waited until they heard the dull splash of her connecting with the mako, and when the earth didn't tremble and the stars remained in the sky they relaxed.

"If you ever need it, there's someone that might be able to help you," said Cloud, all business again. "Look for the church in the Sector Five slums. There's a woman there that can help, you'll know her when you see her."

Later, as Vincent disappeared for the eastern continent, Cloud prayed that he wasn't hastening the very deaths he was trying to prevent.

... 

Her son had had another one of his nightmares. Elfreda stayed with him until he fell back asleep, the hand with a crescent pale scar curled loosely on the pillow near his tear-streaked face, Fenrir watching drowsily from the other side of Cloud's bed. She tried to smooth the furrow on his brow, and when she couldn't she leaned down to press a kiss against his temple. She stayed up until the sun started to rise, sewing furiously because this was something she could do.
In Which the Story Finally Starts Moving and Vincent Makes Zack Nervous

... "Honey, I don't think the sailors will be very happy to have a hundred and fifty pounds of wolf on their ship," Elfreda pointed out. Cloud's hair and Fenrir's ears drooped.

"I know," he said despondently. Fenrir looked up with soulful eyes from where his head rested in Cloud's lap. Taking the wolf's face between his hands, Cloud asked, "You'll take good care of Mum while I'm gone, right?"

The wolf's tail thumped against the floor.

"I'll have you know I was taking care of myself long before you were a twinkle in my eye," his mother sniffed, but she was wearing a smile as she spoke.

"Or a thorn in your side?" Cloud quipped, grinning as he ducked a swat to the back of his head.

"You've been an absolute darling, Cloud." She reached for the collection of necklaces around her neck - some of which had bits of rounded colored glass, one that had a few bottle caps - and gently untangled and took off a thin leather cord supporting a carved Ice materia. It was shaped roughly like a war hammer, which Cloud recognized it as his deceased father's handiwork, so he was surprised when Elfreda held it out to him. "I'd like you to take this, Cloud."

"But Mum, this is your favorite," he argued, confused, as the necklace dropped into his hand. The materia was cold against his skin.

Her eyes crinkled into a smile. "Yes, your father made it for me before he went away, but I want you to have it. You should never forget where you come from."

Heavy words, lightly spoken. Cloud slipped it over his head, tucked the necklace under his shirt, and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. "Thank you."

Elfreda squeezed his hand, got to her feet, and, the moment apparently over, wandered back into the kitchen to finish the dishes. "I don't know what Fenrir and I will do without you. Where did I put that pan? Goodness, what on earth did I cook in here, it smells horrid now."

Cloud watched his mother examine the dirtied pot carefully and just shook his head. Patting his leg as he stood so that Fenrir would follow, he headed out the door and called out, "I'll be back in a bit, Mum, I've got something I need to do."

"Do be careful, darling, and please don't bring home any more monsters. And don't you be thinking that you can get away with spoiling your appetite on some of Gretchen's pastries like Brunhild's boys always do. Hel only knows what the army will feed growing boys, I need to pack you with as much real food as I can before you leave in a week..."

Cloud slipped out while Elfreda carried on, Fenrir close on his heels. He felt slightly guilty, not-quite-sneaking-out like this, but ever since he had quietly told her that he was going to leave for Midgar she had been all but smothering him. On the front step of the cottage he was able to take a breath, let it out loudly. Sitting down and leaning back against Fenrir's solid side, he watched the villagers with the sort of detached fondness of an adult watching kids on a playground and wondered if he should be upset that he wasn't going to miss any of them. Except Tifa.
"All right, Fenrir, time to tie up a few loose ends," Cloud muttered, fingering the Fire materia in his knapsack. It was very weak, the color more translucent than the higher-grade materia, but it would do. At the very least, Mayor Lockhart probably wouldn't be able to figure out that Cloud had been the one to break into his house and steal it; after all, no one else knew that the mayor even had materia, and Cloud himself wouldn't have known if the magic hadn't practically screamed at him one day as he passed on the street, not long after one of the routine visits from Rocket Town traders. Besides, the man was an asshole.

Cloud eventually took the trail towards the ShinRa mansion, pleased to see that his training with Tifa and Master Zangan was paying off against the monsters. Fenrir was running back and forth on the trail as though demanding to know why Cloud had to go so damn slow, why are humans so terrible at hunting and all the things a pack is supposed to do.

The mansion was eerily quiet save for the occasional sounds of monsters rustling behind closed doors. Cloud went straight for the rickety spiral stairs leading down to the basement, wincing when the old wood planks creaked under Fenrir's weight. He hadn't been back to the mansion since waking Vincent a few years ago, and the decay had continued unchecked; several times he had to duck beneath bats and other animals that had started reclaiming the place. The labs had long since gone dirty, musty, and full of cobwebs.

Unable to help himself, Cloud stopped in the circular room where two mako tubes and the hated steel table dominated the center. The tubes had been repaired just after he'd shattered them when seeing Sephiroth helplessly spread on the table. Now he stared at them silently, easily able to imagine the fingernail-scratches that would one day mar the inside of the glass, focus on my voice, kiddo, c'mon. Please, Spike, Cloud, don't let him win, just listen to me, I'll tell you anything, everything, just please stay with me –

Tearing his eyes from the empty mako tubes, Cloud approached the computer consoles and turned them on, vaguely surprised when they actually started booting up. He kept his eyes resolutely on the blinking cursor as he waited, determinedly keeping his breathing even and his mind away from a traumatic meltdown. Fenrir's weight against his side helped and he managed not to groan when the computer demanded a password.

All right, Hojo, somehow I doubt you would've used your birthday as the password. Words like 'sephiroth' and 'lucrecia' didn't get Cloud anywhere. Too obvious. If I were a paranoid bastard, I… I'd use a random string of digits.

Damn. Okay, think, the only other person who knew Hojo better than Cloud was Sephiroth and, hey, there was an idea. Maybe it wasn't a random string of digits so much as a very specific string of digits, like the one that marked Project S in the ShinRa database. At the first the computer didn't respond, but then it reported with a crackling sound, "Accessing Project S files. Two-hundred-four files found. Sorting files by type. Four types recognized."

He shouldn't have been so surprised by the sheer number of notes Hojo had kept on his prize specimen, but the scientist's level of obsession still managed to make Cloud's skin crawl, especially since these were just the files left behind after the move to Midgar. But he already knew what those files would tell him, much of it from personal experience, so Cloud didn't waste his time looking through them. He found some unused data discs and indiscriminately downloaded all the information into a few copies, then stowed them safely in his knapsack.


It wasn't likely that Vincent would want to know how both Hojo and Lucrecia had fucked him
over, but better safe than sorry. Cloud also transferred those files to empty discs. Finally he stood and went to the door, pulling Fenrir along with him.

Knowing he wouldn't get another chance after today, Cloud decided to take a last look in Ifalna's quarters to see if he could find some clue revealing what happened to her. He had to break through the door, since dampness and disuse had rusted the keypad, and promptly found a dark, faded stain on the floor. Old blood, and judging by the size of it someone had bled out and died there. At least the body hadn't been left there to rot.

Cloud got to his hands and knees and pressed his ear against the floor underneath the stain, but the memory in the wood was too faint to hear properly now. All he found was painangerfear and the sense of a father desperately trying to protect his family. Gast. But last time the man had died while hiding Ifalna and newborn Aeris in Icicle. Right?

Cloud crawled across the floor, not really sure what else he was looking for. Fenrir snuffled alongside him in the dust, wondering what the hell his packmate had found that was so interesting. Since Vincent had also spoken of Ifalna it was likely that she had lived longer than her husband. Her status as the last living Ancient would have given her some measure of protection against Hojo; it was Aeris that Cloud was starting to worry about.

Fenrir gnawing gently on his fingers brought him back to the present. "Quit," he muttered, flicking the wolf lightly on the muzzle. "We've only got one more place to go and then I'll take you back outside."

Fenrir huffed.

In contrast to Ifalna's quarters, Sephiroth's room was exactly the way Cloud remembered it. The same textbooks were on the shelf, the bed was as neatly made as any trained soldier's, and there were even a few pages of handwritten notes stacked neatly on one side of the desk. It was like the room's occupant had simply stood up and left on a temporary errand and just never bothered to come back.

Cloud ran his fingers over the painfully neat penmanship of the notes. He was torn between one of Zack's memories of watching Sephiroth fill out forms in ShinRa and one of his own, standing behind the younger version and chin resting on a bony shoulder, watching Sephiroth quietly work at the equations Hojo had assigned. When Cloud idly turned the top page over, he blinked in surprise at the badly-drawn doodle of a small stick figure holding hands with a larger, winged stick figure. Three tall spikes stood out from the taller one's head, while several long lines on the first denoted long hair, and Cloud's heart broke. Picking up the doodle, Cloud looked around for something safe to keep it in and noticed the unusually worn cover of a slim book between two heavy texts on the shelf. Immediately he pulled it out and slipped in the paper between the book's pages, just after "The Lands of Ice and Fire" and before "The One-Eyed God in the Underworld."

Cloud paused again, rereading the titles of the fairy tales, and then laughed softly to himself. He hadn't realized before that Gast had gotten this book in Nibelheim itself, and he tucked the book in with the data discs in his leather knapsack. He snuck back through the lab and the stone corridors, through the mansion and out onto the trail with Fenrir at his side. When the two of them were a fair distance away, he pulled out the Fire materia and cradled it in his hands. It warmed against his skin.

Five years he and Zack had been trapped in a hell of green haze and screams. Five years of losing his mind, then waking up and one day learning that he was a sixteen-year-old in a twenty-two-year-old body and he needed to save the world; saving the world, then watching it burn. It was frighteningly easy to call up all the darkness that even now, fourteen years after being reborn into a
quiet (if lonely) existence, still flourished under the surface. He channeled it all into the stolen Fire materia.

The ShinRa mansion went up like fireworks.

... 

The hall was unlike anything Sephiroth had seen anywhere else but in Wutai. It was long and spacious with delicate silk screens along the walls that could be used to section it into smaller rooms, and the dark stone columns were carved in relief with the symbols of the nation's most ancient and powerful clans. He wasn't impressed; in the end, it was just stone and cloth.

Sephiroth kneeled in front of a low table with the Masamune on the floor in front of him. Across the table was Kisaragi Godo, still in his armor with dirt and blood dried to a hard crust. Sephiroth's leathers were immaculate, as though he had simply strolled untouched through war. The patriarchs of Wutai's main clans kneeled two arms' length behind Godo. Sephiroth had only Tseng, sitting directly on his left. It was a subtly insulting reminder that the ShinRa General didn't need to worry despite being outnumbered, like fighting a duel without ever unsheathing his weapon.

On the table between them were two pieces of paper, a bamboo brush, and an inkstone. One piece of paper laid out the terms of Wutai's complete surrender to ShinRa; the other paper said the same, but in Wutaian. Both already bore the requisite signatures from ShinRa and were now set before Godo and his twelve clan heads for the final agreement.

Godo's eyes were red-rimmed but dry. His wife had been the last to die, killed by Sephiroth's own sword. Silently he picked up the brush, dipped it in the freshly prepared ink, and wrote his name with sweeping, elegant strokes on both copies of the terms. Then he set it down in the porcelain holder and put his hands on his thighs, looking at Sephiroth with hatred and fury and despair. "My only solace from now on," he said hoarsely, "will be the hope that, one day, the great General of ShinRa knows what it is like to lose everything he loves, the hope that he will look to Wutai and see its empty, blood-soaked fields in his own heart."

Dramatic, but heartfelt to the core. Sephiroth smiled thinly. "I've learned that it's unwise to put your heart in something you already know won't last forever." Standing, he picked up the Masamune and settled it once more at his side before turning to Tseng and saying, dry as a desert, "I'll be returning to Midgar at the earliest opportunity. I trust you'll be able to handle things now that the strongest fighters are dead."

He strode out of the room, leaving silence in his wake. But on the long sail back to the eastern continent, a nagging thought refused to be lost in the sound of the waves and yelling sailors. He couldn't shake the feeling that if his angel had been real, had still been around, then he'd be looking at Sephiroth with sorrow and disappointment.

... 

Tifa waited at the base of the water tower, feeling her stomach trying to tie itself into knots. She hadn't fidgeted for years now but there she was, twisting her hands together, and she had to forcibly remind herself to stay still. It wasn't easy, not when there was still a red glow at the burning mansion that the villagers were having trouble putting out and she could see Cloud walking towards her...

She only barely managed to keep back the small squeak of surprise.

"Hi, Tifa," said Cloud as he approached, smiling that odd, lopsided little smile of his.
"Hey, Cloud. Um, you've got a minute, right?" She wanted to smack herself as soon as those words came out, embarrassed at how insecure and stupid they were. But he didn't laugh, just nodded, and she led the way up the water tower with a little more confidence. They sat with their legs dangling over the edge, the flickering of the burning mansion bright in the darkness. "When're you leaving tomorrow?"

"Around dawn," he said quietly, attention fixed on the mansion. "Herr Schwartz is taking a load of monster parts to sell down in Rocket Town and he agreed to take me with him. I'll catch a train or something when I get there."

"Aren't you nervous?"

Something indefinable passed across his expression, but even after years of training together Tifa had trouble guessing what he was thinking. "Yeah, a little," he admitted finally, and he gave her one of his small, ironic smiles. "But hey, I've got the gods looking after me, right?"

Mention of the Strifes' weirdness made her uncomfortable, but Cloud didn't seem to mind. "And you're going to be a hero, huh?" she said quietly.

"No," he retorted sharply, catching her gaze and holding it with one of the most serious expressions Tifa had ever seen on him. "I'm not a hero, Tifa." He must have seen something in her face because that seriousness softened. "You don't need a hero, Tifa. Just someone who can show you what it's like to live a happy, normal life."

She looked down at her scraped-up knees, bared by the hem of the dress she'd put on as a sort of special occasion. "What if I don't want normal?" she whispered.

"I..." Cloud pulled up his legs and wrapped his arms around them. "You know, there was a time when I would've given anything to hear you say that. But...there are things going on you don't know about, and I think you'd hate it – hate me – if you did."

She didn't like the straightforward way he said that, as though he were stating a fact and not a personal fear. "How do you know what I'd think? Why can't I decide that for myself?" she demanded. "What could be possibly be so bad that I – "

Cloud's arm suddenly going around her shoulders surprised her into silence; she couldn't remember a single occasion in which he'd touched her outside of a sparring match. "You're already angry and you don't know why," he pointed out quietly, speaking into her hair. "My family name alone makes you uncomfortable. Maybe I'll tell you one day, but Tifa...I'm not a hero, and I can't be one for you."

He smelled like sweat and firewood and something else that reminded her of the mako springs on the trails, she noticed wearily. Without thinking she threw her own arms around his shoulders. He tensed, visibly fighting his fight-or-flight reflex, but gradually relaxed into her hold.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair that Cloud was leaving to become a SOLDIER – there was no doubt in her mind anymore that he'd make it – and she was left behind in this tiny, inconsequential village. She wanted to do things, she wanted to make a difference somehow, not blindly follow her father's wishes to marry early and start a family.

It wasn't fair that her only real friend was leaving. It figured that the one guy who saw her instead of her developing breasts or her family's social status was the one that was skipping out, and damn it, this was one of the occasions in which Tifa wished she had a family like the Strifes. It would've been immensely satisfying to call upon some random god and curse the shit out of someone. "Just
promise you'll kick someone's ass for me," she muttered into his neck, and felt more than heard his laughter.

"Yes, ma'am."

...  

The sun was beginning to rise and cast a dull grey ness over the village. Cloud sat on the front stoop of his mum's cottage, watching Herr Schwartz load up his truck. Cloud had offered to help, but the burly man just waved him off with a possessive growl and Cloud prudently decided to wait on the sidelines.

Cloud's duffel was at his feet and Fenrir sitting at his side, the wolf's ears low. He ran a hand through the thick fur, memorizing the feel and the musky scent of a Nibel wolf, and allowed himself to exist for a few moments without thought. The first time he'd done this migration to Midgar he had been a nervous wreck, only his determination to be someone giving him the courage to say goodbye to his mother and go. Now, he wasn't entirely certain what to feel at all. Everything seemed unreal.

The sounds of his mother moving around in the cottage warned him just before the door opened and his mother sat on the stoop on his other side. He could feel her presence through the heavy coats they both wore.

"Nebel, please, be careful."

"Ja, Mor."

Then she surprised Cloud by pulling him into a hug. Cloud hesitated before putting his arms around his mum's narrow shoulders, feeling the hard sinew that came from scraping out a living in the Nibel mountains. He found himself wondering what kind of woman she'd been before his birth, whether she'd always been somewhat unbalanced or if the treatment from the villagers had made her that way.

Cloud suddenly tightened his arms around her. "I'll put the fear of Hel in them," he promised.

...  

"We're gettin' a new shipment, boy! Get your skinny ass back there and make it organizational!"

Vincent refrained from pointing out that he was at least two decades older than the grizzly man running the slum weapons shop and silently made his way to the back. The building behind the counter was even darker and more chaotic than the front, and a month or two of working for the owner hadn't given him much time to clean it up. He wove his way between boxes and piles of junk to the door that opened up onto the back alley, where most of the shopkeeper's shipments of varying degrees of legality were dropped off. He wasn't surprised at all to see the young man in sunglasses sitting on a crate in the damp alley.

"Shit, do you have to sneak up on me every time?" the young man grumped as Vincent slid into view. When Vincent just looked at him, he quickly went on. "Four infantrymen got recruited into SOLDIER. The most impressive is Zack. Zack Fair, I mean, and damn is he good. He's still got to prove himself, of course, but everyone knows that's just a formality, there's already talk among the officers of promoting him at the first possible opportunity."

While the kid spoke Vincent crossed his arms and leaned against the other wall of the alley, listening as still and patiently as a statue.
"The Turks keep leaving at odd hours. That's not unusual but there's always one that leaves and gets replaced when he returns, almost like they're taking shifts somewhere underside the Plate. I'm not sure who or what they're after, but Tseng himself is a pretty regular guy for it."

"The generals?" Vincent said lowly, and the kid shrugged.

"Genesis still gives me the creeps. Looks at you like he's trying to decide whether or not he should waste the time killing you. Whenever I'm in the same room I get the feeling that there's something wrong going on between him and Sephiroth. Sephiroth isn't the friendliest of people anyway, but when Genesis walks into the room it's like someone's poured ice water down his back."

"And Lazard does nothing?"

"What can he do?" the informant sighed helplessly. "The Firsts are big boys, they should be able to take care of themselves."

"He's their director."

"So? What's he going to do, order them to get along?" He shook his head. "Rumor says that Lazard and Heidegger were heard arguing the other day, and while that's not exactly newsworthy it sounded like something serious. Maybe it had to do with Sephiroth and Genesis? Although that doesn't make sense, neither of them can stand Heidegger anyway…"

"What do the other department heads have to say?"

The kid shook his head. "Sorry, but I don't know. Reeve's the easiest one to make excuses to see, and even though he's a nice guy he's also a sharp one. I can hardly get anything out of him. All I've heard is that there's some bad blood between Heidegger and Lazard and that Heidegger would do almost anything to get rid of our director. Oh, I heard from Rob – he's one of the security guards, you know, nice guy – that Heidegger apparently tried to contact Hojo and got rebuffed. I don't know the hows or whys, but there you go."

Vincent narrowed his eyes at the mention of the doctor. "What else have you heard about Hojo?"

"Not much. He still follows Sephiroth around like one of those creepy, ugly dogs that yap and bite at your ankles, only scarier, with all that ShinRa funding at his back. He's around Genesis and Angeal almost as often, though. They say it's something to do with making sure their mako levels are stable. I mean, everyone's heard the horror stories about disembodied voices and memories that aren't your own. They say it's better to be safe than sorry, but if you ask me Hojo's a bit too interested in the Firsts for it to be just about mako testing. He hardly even looks at the Seconds, and they're pretty enhanced themselves. Of course, then you get people like Zack who haven't had more than the preliminary shot and it's like they're already SOLDIER." The kid sounded like he'd seen a prophet and was ready to follow him to the ends of the Planet.

"So, working for old man Smith? I don't know why you don't get yourself a real job, Vincent. If the way you keep sneaking up on me is any indication, you'd be real good at some of the places that are offering."

"Thank you for your information," Vincent said shortly, cutting him off before the kid could start in on full mother-hen mode. He had a talent for making everyone else's lives his own, of which Vincent obviously took full advantage, but oddly enough it seemed to come from a strange sense of compassion. "Your payment is in the alley two blocks east."

The informant just stared at him from behind the tinted lenses that hid the slight, telltale glow of a
SOLDIER recruit, idly kicking his feet against the crate. "You're being awfully abrupt, even for you. You all right, man?"

"Yes." Vincent carried in one of the crates, effortlessly hoisting it onto a high shoulder before retreating into the shop. When he went back out into the alley, the kid had apparently taken the hint and disappeared.

Taking in the last of the crates, he efficiently opened them, put away their contents, and disposed of the packing materials. When he walked back out to the front of the shop, Smith looked him up and down before handing him several hundred gil. "Don't rightly know how a skinny pretty-boy like you is bein' such a good worker."

Vincent said a polite thank-you as he accepted the money and ducked out of the weapons shop into Wall Market, where he promptly ran into a little kid making off with someone's wallet. His human hand grasped the boy's shoulder and held him in place while a panting, mako-eyed young man sprinted over.

"You rock, man," the apparent SOLDIER gasped, putting his hands on his knees to catch his breath. "Holy shit, kid, you ever thought about joining the military? You'd give Sephiroth a run for his money! Better than my money, anyway, and what the hell—"

"Maddox," Vincent said firmly, "what did we agree on?"

"I'm sorry!" the kid cried, "but mum's sick and it's not like he doesn't have cash to spare!"

"Maddox."

The boy finally stopped struggling against the iron grip on his shoulder and hung his head. "I'm s'posed to come to you," he mumbled.

"Indeed." Vincent deftly plucked the stolen wallet from Maddox's pocket and tossed it to the staring SOLDIER. "ShinRa employees must be careful under the Plate," he said mildly.

The SOLDIER put an arm behind his tilted head, looking like a confused puppy. "Um, thanks. Oh hey, my name's Zack."

Vincent glanced at the outstretched hand. It seemed like too much of a coincidence to be possible, maybe a deus ex machina, but apparently he'd just run into the same Zack Fair his informant had talked about. Releasing his hold on Maddox with a silent warning for him to stay put, Vincent shook back his long sleeve and took Zack's hand. "Vincent," he replied shortly.

"Sweet name. With your looks and a name like 'Vincent' I bet you'd be the best bodyguard ever, you'd just have to look – yeah, just like that, you're not a vampire, are you? Because I know my blood is tasty but it's spoken for by a pretty lady already."

Vincent slowly blinked at him. Maddox tugged on his sleeve and stage-whispered, "He talks a lot. Can I steal from him now?"

"No. Next time, come talk to me. If I can't help you, then you may steal, but you must be careful not to get caught. Always make sure to exhaust your legal means before resorting to the illegal ones."

"Aw man."

"Hey, you aren't a Turk in disguise or something, are you?" Zack asked, leaning forward into
Vincent's personal space. "Maybe one of Tseng's long-lost relatives?"

"If I were, I'd have to kill you for undermining my cover."

While the SOLDIER tried to figure out if he'd been joking or not, Vincent surreptitiously slipped the few hundred gil into the boy's hand, put his hand on the bony shoulder again, and steered him towards the slums.

"You're not serious, are you, Vincent? Nah, you wouldn't do that. …Would you? Hey!"

Midgar was even drearier than Cloud remembered. After the Turks had brought down the Plate and Meteor destroyed the rest, the city's ruins had gradually grown into a more open space without the shadow of ShinRa blocking out the sun. People's attitudes had been different, too, more willing to help now that tragedy had visited everyone in equal measure regardless of wealth or heritage. But now he returned to Midgar's corrupted, grey, polluted glory, and as Cloud stood on the train platform while people passed him on all sides he just felt old.

It took a young man bumping into him and snarling before Cloud got moving again. Hoisting his pack higher on his shoulder, he set off for the slums, maneuvering through courtyards and alleyways that gradually got darker and filthier. He walked quickly with his head down and a strange sense of déjà vu, but a sudden throbbing behind his temple forced him to find an abandoned corner before he blacked out mid-step.

Distance, the Planet told him. A mother eagle watching one of her chicks fall to its death because it hadn't learned to fly.

*I'm fine*, he flung back; being a newbie in the slums, he didn't have the luxury of getting distracted from his surroundings. *I've done this before, remember?*

Distance. WEAPON. Possessiveness.

At the last stop before arriving in Midgar Cloud had bought a plain, dark hat that he now pulled low over his bright hair, drawing his knees to his chest and pretending to be just another street urchin. He'd almost forgotten how the Lifestream had difficulty reaching Midgar with the reactors and the death and the unnaturalness of the city, and he realized that the Planet was feeling the panic of having one of its guardians pulling away. It was a self-preservation instinct kicking in, especially since the memory of the WEAPONs' future deaths was still fresh in its metaphorical mind like a child that flinched away from every dog after being bitten once.

*There's nowhere I can go to escape from you*, Cloud reminded the Planet with a tinge of bitterness. And unlike the real WEAPONs, Cloud was (relatively) human. Theoretically, he could be resurrected indefinitely, but don't think about that, *there be monsters*.

Incomprehension. Acting against nature.

Cloud hadn't realized before that the Planet didn't have a sense of 'self' – it probably *couldn't*, with the sheer number of souls and memories that made up the Lifestream. As far it was concerned, a part of itself was acting against the well-being of the whole. So he forced himself to remain calm, focused on the determination and iron stubbornness that was driving him forward, not *away* from the Planet but merely in a direction that would head off the Enemy – he *was* going to save Zack, and Aeris, and Sephiroth, no matter the cost.

Reassured, the Planet subsided, taking the tide of overwhelming Lifestream with it. Cloud sat with
his back against the damp wall for a little while until he stopped shaking, to remember how a human body should function. When he could move his head without the landscape tilting, he used the wall to help himself back to his feet and then adjusted his clothes to look a little less out of place. Absently he pulled his hat down low again and merged back into the crowd thronging the streets. Wall Market, he mused as he passed under the shadow of the Plate and the afternoon light suddenly became dim and grey, Wall Market, where...oh, there it is.

It was as chaotic and grimy as he recalled, dirty children ducking between the tired adults with their quick little fingers waiting for an opportunity. He kept close to the high walls, eyes half-lidded to hide their glow. When a hand reached for him out of the shadows, he reacted without thought and grabbed the attached wrist, whirling around with his mum's hunting knife. His attacker stepped back quickly to avoid the sharp edge, but Cloud followed through with a twist and a step and brought his attacker down.

"Oh. Hi, Vincent."

Cloud blinked down at Vincent. Vincent was too busy trying to catch his breath to do more than a grunt. Now that Cloud thought about it, he could sense the bitter tang at the back of his throat that meant CHAOS was saying 'hello.' "You really shouldn't sneak up on me."

"Evidently."

Cloud took Vincent's clawed hand and pulled him upright, uncaring of the sharp claws that came dangerously close to the veins in his wrist. Instead of releasing his hold, however, Cloud brought the limb up for inspection. "Why do you have this on?" He gestured at the thin black glove pulled over his claw.

"People pay less attention to a slightly misshapen hand than they do to shiny talons."

Cloud opened his mouth to ask about the rest of it; now that Vincent wasn't lying on the ground he could see that Vincent was wearing normal trousers and a shirt, still all black, rather than the scarlet cloak and leathers. But he figured he'd either get the same reply or something cryptic, so he let it drop.

"So. Long time no see?" Cloud said awkwardly.

The corners of Vincent's mouth lifted slightly. "Yes. You're looking only slightly closer to your real age."

"And you look less like your real age every time I see you," Cloud replied. He followed Vincent through Wall Market towards a hole in a wall that he recognized was the path to the old playground, and though it was abandoned he tugged his hat even lower. Both took seats on the rusted swings.

"Upon my arrival a few years ago, I contacted Miss Aeris as you suggested," Vincent began unceremoniously, "but the presence of the Turks since then has restricted my interactions with her. From what I've observed, the Turks are content to simply watch and occasionally protect her from common criminals."

"So she's alive?" Cloud asked, managing to keep his voice low, and Vincent gave him a strange look.

"Why tell me about her if there was any doubt?"

Cloud shook his head and gripped the swing's chains more tightly so he didn't topple over with the
relief. "No, I…it occurred to me later that things might've changed more than I thought. Never mind."

Vincent nodded in understanding and gave Cloud a more concise summary of what his SOLDIER informant had shared. When he was done, Cloud's brows were pulled together into a frown. "Do you know what Sephiroth and Genesis might be fighting about?"

"Sometimes it's not a fight so much as unwillingness to face a truth."

Cloud checked a groan. At this point, being straightforward would probably kill Vincent. "You gave me the impression before that Genesis is prone to anger."

"Perhaps, though I've heard nothing about him having anything less than strict self-control, at least where it would cause rumors within ShinRa. Some have questioned the closeness between the generals – "

"They're lovers?"

Vincent gave him one of those stares that seemed to look straight through the soul. "Many things are possible when a group of people is isolated from others."

Cloud hadn't understood until he himself had become a freak of nature how it was possible to feel alone in a crowded room. He had always been shy, but to feel truly misplaced was to be intensely aware that he was different from everyone else in every meaning of the phrase, even at the genetic level. All this time he'd thought that Hollander's kids might satisfy Sephiroth's need to belong, but to consider that such companionship would have a…a sexual aspect – it was just. Well. He couldn't wrap his head around it. Part of him still remembered what it was like to be God's favorite, God's chosen; a larger part was angered at the mere thought that someone would take advantage of someone raised as a lonely child, let alone this one.

"Cloud?"

"I'm fine." Cloud was surprised to find his hands clenched so tightly around the chains that it hurt to loosen them. He let out a discrete breath. "I'm more worried about Heidegger and Lazard. A conflict between those two could put SOLDIER right in the crossfire, maybe literally."

"Departmental politics isn't strange in ShinRa," Vincent reminded him mildly, tactfully allowing Cloud to change the subject without comment.

"No, but where it concerns SOLDIER it concerns Sephiroth, and thus Hojo. The Urban Development Department is one thing, but a disagreement in SOLDIER could be felt throughout the entire company."

"Perhaps that might be used to our advantage," Vincent said softly, but when Cloud asked he refused to elaborate. "And what do you plan to do now?"

"Enter the SOLDIER program," Cloud replied immediately.

"You're fourteen." The minimum age to join was sixteen. Cloud shrugged.

"Didn't stop me last time."

"Why not simply wait? You've sat back for this long, what's two more years?"

It was the same question Cloud had asked himself over time. He could simply not go to Midgar at
all and remain in Nibelheim now that Jenova was dead, maybe deal with the ShinRa problem more indirectly. But that would mean never seeing Zack except on the off-chance that he might get a mission to Nibelheim, which he wouldn't, because without Jenova there was no reason for Hojo to set them up. And the thought of staying in that village for the rest of his life gave him the kind of claustrophobia that called to mind empty mako tubes and abandoned cities and old insecurities.

He'd considered waiting until he was sixteen. He'd considered getting a job as a freelance mercenary, since he already had the experience and only had to get his body up to par with his memories. But in the end, it all came back to three things.


It wasn't even for the ability to finally call himself a legitimate SOLDIER. He'd suffered through that skewed dream already. But all he told Vincent was, "Because I have to."

Protecting those three people wasn't even a choice for him anymore. They were all that stood between him and losing his mind to the Planet completely, and if that was the price he had to pay for their happiness, it was the least that he owed them.

... 

Aeris hummed to the flowers as her fingers deftly wove between their stems, straightening out leaves and smoothing ruffled petals, paying no mind to the way the plants appeared to lean ever so slightly into her touch. The afternoon had been so uneventful that the only warning she had before her vision turned white was the heat coming from her mother's materia under the top of her dress.

Arrival. WEAPON. Strength. Conflict. Fate.

She caught herself on her hands before she toppled face-first into the patch of dirt. What — ?

The swiftness of a bird's flight. Protection. The relativity of events.

Aeris gasped aloud with relief when the Planet finally withdrew. That kind of presence, it almost felt like being possessed, like her thoughts and motivations weren't her own, and the ancient vastness of the presence left her small and trembling. For a long time she kneeled in her flower patch in the middle of the abandoned church.

... 

Hojo wasn't a happy scientist. Not that he ever really was, but he was feeling particularly irritable and petty. The Jenova samples weren't working, although officially nothing had changed in regards to SOLDIER. Dead cells had been easy enough to harvest from the Cetra fossil before the move to Midgar and still produced the enhanced effects that the President was so keen on developing in his precious attack dogs. Hojo had no interest in the dead cells; they were merely a lesser product, a means to an end.

But the reactions of the specimens injected with the living cells had changed. SOLDIER-like effects were still produced – glowing eyes, enhanced physical abilities, sharpened if sometimes unstable mental processes – but Jenova herself appeared to be completely absent. That shouldn't have been possible, considering every one of her cells was the same as the whole the way that the smallest part of a hologram recapitulated the larger image. Because the cells were akin to the type of viruses able to disguise themselves within the host's body, the mako that would have otherwise eliminated the infection instead acted as a conduit, enabling contact between cells in different hosts.
Unfortunately, no such resonance had occurred since a year before leaving Nibelheim. Around the same time, in fact, that Sephiroth's personality began to change. After reviewing his notes, Hojo found a few interesting coincidences: for one, it was the first time that Sephiroth began reporting visions of an angel. This wouldn't have been noteworthy as anything more than a mako-induced hallucination if not for the fact that it was an occurrence repeated over time. Mako-induced hallucinations were, normally, like dreams, vivid but evanescent and rarely the same. Second, Ifalna had begun visiting Sephiroth regularly. Hojo wondered if the close proximity of a living Ancient had changed something in the boy or if the annoying woman had managed to sabotage his development.

Hojo watched the latest specimen injected with a Jenova sample convulse on the operating table. It was no longer recognizable as an adolescent male human, not with the way the front of the skull had gone soft and bony growths protruded from its limbs, but that was all that changed. There was no spark of that alien intelligence, no method to the madness of the mutating genetics. Nothing. Just a human worse off than before.

With a growl of frustration, Hojo turned off the machine keeping the specimen alive and left the laboratory, not hearing the cadet's last gasps.

With a silent sigh Cloud dropped his bag onto his bunk and looked around. The cadet barracks were exactly as he remembered: a room far too small for the ten people it was meant for, plain and almost uncomfortable in its utilitarianism, with five sets of bunk beds lined neatly against the far wall. Cloud had immediately claimed the bottom bunk farthest from the door, automatically gravitating towards the place safest from an attack at the entrance. His squadmates would trickle in throughout the day, but for the moment he was alone.

He methodically unpacked the few clothes he'd brought and tucked them into the dresser he would share with the person sleeping in the bunk above him, and left a few key items in the bag before kicking it under the bed. With nothing else to do, he fell back on the hard mattress and stared up at the bare springs of the other bunk. Cloud had forgotten how slow and nerve-wracking registration week could be.

It was disturbingly quiet in the dorm, no sounds of townspeople or trains or animals in the nearby mountains. The lights hummed quietly, just enough to irritate if he focused on them for too long, but otherwise he was cut off by several floors of concrete and steel. After a week or two of constant travel and the meeting with Vincent yesterday, the sudden forced inaction was making Cloud feel jumpy.

Aeris is alive. He turned over onto his side to stare at the wall, unable to help the slight smile on his face. Aeris is alive and free. Fuck you, Hojo.
When the slow, steady breathing and occasional shifting of his new squadmates became the only sounds in the dorm, Cloud opened his eyes and looked around. A faint orange glow emanated from the safety light placed over the single door, allowing him to see from silhouettes that the nine other cadets were properly asleep.

Moving slowly, taking extra care not to make the springs in the mattress squeak, he sat up and slid from the bed to land lightly on his feet. Cloud gently pulled his knapsack from under his bed, keeping an eye on the others and a hand on the bag's buckle to smother the metallic clinking. Someone turned over with a muffled snort. He paused, holding himself still until that someone's breath evened out once more, and then he crept towards the small dresser opposite his bunk.

The furniture might have sounded like a bit of luxury, but in reality the dressers were really more like lengths of particle board with drawer slides that tended to stick. Pieces of crap, really, and Cloud poked at one, amazed that the thing didn't just fall apart at the touch. ShinRa and its gil-pinching (sometimes at the expense of the troops, Cloud suddenly remembered; Zack would snarl as he talked about platoons that didn't have enough backup artillery in Wutai and half the men would end up dead or worse. SOLDIER always had the best, he said caustically, which left the regular grunts with the leftovers).

Setting the knapsack at his side, Cloud reached for the lower drawer and started to work it open. The slides creaked, and one tried stubbornly to stick in its track, but with patience and several pauses as some random cadet stirred Cloud managed to work it open. Then he lifted out Sephiroth's storybook and buried it under his extra uniform. The data discs followed, on which he'd written Mum and Dad's Wedding and Family Pix, knowing that when the officers pulled a surprise check on their dorm they'd see the bundle and figure him to be one of those homesick sentimental types.

He put away the empty knapsack and slipped into bed, hoping his night-terrors wouldn't choose that night to show up.

...
way he moved screamed of a self-discipline the others noticeably lacked.

He tracked the oblivious teenager, using both experience and the talents that having CHAOS in his head gave him, and found himself in a dingy street lit by the sad, dim glow of oiled-paper lanterns. A few people were out walking, occasionally conversing with one another in their native language. Vincent observed gil being traded for what looked like packets of tea or other mundane items, certainly nothing that appeared to be some kind of weapon. Of course, it was unlikely that someone from the slums would be so sloppy. But. One could never be too careful.

The boy was now looking around surreptitiously. He couldn't see Vincent, he was far too young and unskilled for that, and yet suddenly Vincent felt his shoulderblades prickle with the weight of someone's gaze. Immediately he pulled himself into the shadows as far as he could, narrowed eyes picking apart the gloomy alley. But when he spotted no one and the feeling didn't leave, he wisely backtrack the way he'd come, making a mental note of the area to explore later.

He'd started his information-gathering in Midgar in the name of vengeance against Hojo, willing to accept the word of a little spiky-headed boy if it ended in the man's death, but over the years he'd come to see just how deeply ShinRa's corruption infiltrated every aspect of life on this Planet. These days he couldn't even be sure he was still doing this entirely in the name of revenge.

They stood in a blue-uniformed line of panting, sweating recruits in front of the sergeant. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with straw-colored hair that looked down on the newest cadets without pity. "Stop whining and stand up straight, children," he rumbled, "or you'll be doing another circuit."

Immediately the cadets struggled to force themselves into some semblance of order. Even Cloud was reacting to the strain of having to run so many laps while taking periodic breaks for push-ups, but in his head he was invigorated, finally doing something to prepare for the known future. It didn't matter that this was only the first of the seventy-two weeks of physical training, and that was before he could even think about taking the SOLDIER exam. It didn't matter because all he had to do was look up at the soaring ShinRa skyscraper and know that somewhere inside, Zack was alive and laughing and driving Sephiroth up the wall.

The sergeant had the kind of voice that didn't need to yell for his classic sergeant-talk to be heard very, very clearly. "I ain't here to mother you, so save your tears for your pillows tonight. If you can't handle a few laps around the track, then you're in the wrong fucking place, sweethearts."

Cloud tuned him out and was one of the first to get back to the locker rooms. He stripped and showered perfunctorily in the lukewarm water and was dressed in time for his class on materia. He'd forgotten how strictly regimented a recruit's life was: there wasn't a minute that passed in which he wasn't told what to do or think, and after the independence of his last life and the freedom his mother had given him growing up it was stifling.

Keep your head down and your scores up, he told himself. It was becoming his personal mantra. Don't make waves, don't hit the sergeant, don't kill the other cadets. Of course, it only stands to reason that when one makes a solemn oath not to stand out, Fate will nod agreeably and then hit you with a blunt object.

Women were rare in SOLDIER, mostly because ShinRa was a machine of perpetual hypermasculinity, and so the ones that did manage to pass the recruiting benchmarks usually ended up with the Turks or as troops and field medics in the regular army. With that in mind, Cloud was somewhat surprised to find that one of the few girls among the cadets was in his own squad, and
that her name was Elena. As in, Elena with the big mouth and more bombs than Cloud had neuroses, and the event that gave him a reputation among his peers naturally had to include her.

It happened a few weeks after the start of classes and physical training. Until then he had successfully avoided exchanging more than a few words with her at a time, and he was thought of as one of those kids that was far too serious to be interesting and so was usually left alone to study or hide in the gym. That evening he was heading back to the dorm to drop off his books before going down to the cafeteria when he passed what should've been an empty classroom and overheard two masculine voices speaking over a feminine one. *Fuck off, motherfuckers,* snarled the feminine one, and it sounded so familiar that Cloud paused, thinking of blue suits and explosives, of cold blue eyes in a pretty face looking at him over the silver barrel of a pistol. Elena, dear gods, it sounded like Elena. *Fucking cunt,* grunted one of the others, and Cloud let his bookbag drop quietly to the floor before slipping towards the closed classroom door.

The voices got a little less muffled. *Keep struggling, bitch.* Cloud wondered why Elena hadn't already shot her attackers as he reached for the door handle, saw his own small hand reaching for the door handle and remembered that she was a barely-trained recruit, let alone a Turk. *Slut,* he heard. *Whore.* And he thought of some of the horrific things that followed in the Plague's wake, much of it committed by regular people against regular people when they should've been united against a common enemy, much of the human evil going ignored and unpunished.

The door opened onto a scene of two boys trying to hold down a hissing, spitting girl against the lecturer's desk, one of them attempting to slide his hands under her uniform; their bookbags were lying in sad piles by the door, carelessly thrown aside when the boys ambushed the girl (*Elena*) and dragged her into the classroom. Poison dripped from their tongues and spread in bruises from their fingers, but it wasn't until he realized his knuckles were stinging that Cloud realized he'd taken three long strides forward and planted a fist into the first boy's face.

The boy reeled back with a small cry, stunned, and then Elena managed to wrench herself out of the second boy's grip, spin around, and kicked him so hard in the groin that he dropped like a stone, couldn't even make a sound through the pain. Elena stepped back several times, panting for breath and straightening her clothes with shaking hands as the first boy escaped out the door. "Are you okay?" Cloud asked tentatively, making sure to stay well out of her personal space.

"I'm fine," she said roughly, but there was a burr in her voice and her teeth were bared and she was staring at her remaining attacker like she was preparing herself to rip him to pieces with her bare hands. "I'm gonna be a Turk," she declared abruptly, "a better one than my sister."

Cloud winced, glanced at the boy on the floor. "Just, uh, be careful not to say that too loudly."

"Fuck you," Elena said, but she wasn't actually looking at Cloud, and it sounded more like a reflex than an actual insult. "If you're looking for a reward for being a decent fucking human being, you're out of luck."

"No," he replied quietly. He thought about asking her not to say anything, didn't want to risk anyone looking too closely at him, but honestly, even if she did, who would want to believe her? "Is there anything you need from me?"

"No," she snapped as she stalked past him and grabbed her bookbag, paused, then grabbed the other two bookbags as well. She paused again in front of the door and muttered, "Thanks, y'know. Not a lot of people would've done anything."

"Yeah," Cloud said noncommittally, and watched Elena walk out with her head high.
As luck would have it, during the next several days, no one came up to Cloud and demanded to know why he was such a hooligan, no one tried to have him written up for participating in violence outside of classes. Now that he was paying attention he noticed that one of his squadmates, under the helmet and unflattering uniform, had more feminine curves, but Elena never said anything to him and he figured, well, okay then.

(Later, rumors circulated of two cadets being dishonorably discharged for various offenses. Sexual assault wasn't one of the crimes mentioned, but there was a distinct edge of satisfaction to Elena's expression that said there were always ways of playing the system, and he also caught her counting gil in the dorm at one point, two empty bookbags beside her. When she caught him looking, she grinned and winked.)

A month into the grind of ShinRa training, Cloud's night terrors came back.

"It's been a long time, Cloud."

Poisonous eyes, a smirk as sharp as the Masamune. Cloud's heart stopped, horror and revulsion twining with the sickening urge to kneel down –

"When I grow up, I'll be an angel like you."

Cloud looked down at the boy curled sleepily against his chest. "Why?"

"Because you made it stop hurting. I want to do that for other people too, I think. Miss Ifalna said that love is the only commodity that increases the more you give it away."

"I got Nanaki's latest report today," Tifa told him when he strode into the safehouse, which had been constructed from what was once the Seventh Heaven. Her voice was as tired as her shadowed eyes. "He said that his scientists have confirmed the acceleration of the Planet's dying, that at the rate it's going we'll be finished inside of six months even if we somehow manage to fight off the Plague."

Cloud nodded in acknowledgement, unashamedly stripping off his clothes in front of what had once been the bar. He was soaked in the black fluid that was the Plague's equivalent of blood and it was starting to make his skin burn. Tifa watched him without desire, too emotionally raw to even think about sex or love.

"We lost the northern sector of Midgar today," he told her quietly. "Approximately two hundred thirty-nine casualties. Over a hundred-fifty of those were reanimated."

Tifa covered her mouth with a hand.

"Where's Denzel?" Cloud shouted above the din of panicking people, roughly shoving his way through the safehouse until he found Tifa. She was helping to calm a group of kids, but Cloud just grabbed her too-thin arm and demanded, "Where's Denzel?"

"I told him to help Marlene watch the other children...isn't he there?"

But Cloud was already moving again, knowing that Denzel wasn't with Marlene at all and the surge of human bodies confined to such a narrow space wasn't helping matters in the least. He couldn't leave the safehouse until he knew where the boy was, the kid that was more like a little brother, and Cloud did not leave family behind.
The spare bike in the garage was missing.

"Denzel, get back!"

Cloud was screaming with rage and fear, throwing himself headlong into the shapeless masses of darkness and Plague-animated bodies. First Tsurugi slicing through rotting flesh even though he already knew he was too late. Blood and filth streaked Denzel's pale face as he tried to fend the creatures off with a stolen kitchen knife, but he was small and human and didn't stand a chance. Cloud hissed and spat like a furious wildcat and Tsurugi was a devastating force in his hand, but he couldn't reach Denzel, couldn't stop the black claws of the darkness tearing the boy to pieces.

... 

Zack was in the middle of a very pleasant dream concerning himself, a can of whipped cream, and a certain girl with the brightest green eyes ever when the sound of a PHS intruded.

"What the hell?" Zack held up the can of whipped cream playing a ringtone that sounded an awful lot like the funeral march he'd programmed with his official SOLDIER contact number.

Aeris giggled beneath him and said chidingly, "Don't be silly, Zack, answer the phone. Fate gets petty when she's kept waiting."

"Wha–"

Trying to blink the fogginess of sleep away, Zack reached over for the persistently wailing PHS.

"S'up?" he slurred.

"Fair, medical needs –"

"Didn't steal those meds, I swear."

"Medical needs you down in the recruit barracks five minutes ago!"

"Barracks?" he repeated, frowning as he managed to sit up in bed and the world became a little clearer. "What's wrong?"

"Just get down to B-461 immediately!"

"Right, right," he groaned, flipping off the phone and forcing himself to get up and into a uniform that passed the smell test. After a short pause, he grabbed his sword and then headed towards the barracks with a judicial amount of grumbling.

It took a moment to realize that when he got off the elevator and turned the corner, screams were echoing down the hallway. Zack broke into a run, nearly sliding past the open door of the guilty dorm. Nine cadets were standing at one side of the room, looking either terrified or confused, while two medical personnel tried vainly to hold down the tenth one.

"Thank the gods!" one doctor exclaimed when he caught sight of Zack staring in shock in the doorway. "We can't hold him down, grab his hands! Fair, did you hear me?"

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," Zack said, barely able to hear himself over the screams as he reached for the cadet's flailing limbs. The boy was blond and slick with a cold sweat, writhing like he was being murdered, and Zack had to grab his wrists and pin them firmly against the bunk.

"We've already used twelve ceecees of sedative, any more and we could shut down something
"vital," the doctor was yelling at the other medical officer.

"At the rate he's going he's going to shut something down anyway," the officer snapped. Zack could admit he was starting to panic a little; the bunk beds made him twist awkwardly to hold the boy's arms, and the way the boy himself was writhing in the sheets made the SOLDIER feel worse.

"Gods damn it, kid, calm down!" he finally cried, voice high in panic. Angeal wouldn't be too happy if a cadet died on his watch, and he wouldn't be much of a hero anyway if he couldn't even save a kid. "Snap the fuck out of it and wake up!"

As he usually did when he was on edge, Zack went on rambling, saying whatever came into his head. It wasn't until the doctors were able to hold the boy's ankles down completely that he realized the cadet was calming, slowly going quiet until the only sound was his panting breath. "What the hell was that?" Zack demanded, glaring at the medical personnel.

"I don't know," the doctor told him seriously, "we just got the call from the floor's proctor. I don't think it's anything to do with drugs, but if you can help us get him to the infirmary I'd like to take some blood tests just to make sure."

Zack gingerly slipped his arms under the kid's knees and shoulders and lifted him. The doctor hurried after him out of the dorm towards the infirmary while the medical officer remained behind to calm the other terrified cadets. Zack wondered if this could get him out of early-morning training, but he didn't think Angeal would take a possibly life-threatening, harrowing emergency as an excuse. "What's his name?" Zack asked the doctor. A sidelong glance to the nametag pinned on the white lab coat declared the man to be one 'Dr. Libra.' Zack had the desperate urge to ask about Dr. Graviga and Dr. Blizzara.

"Strife. Cloud Strife, I think. Why, you know him?"

"Nope," he replied cheerfully enough, "just wondering who to blame when Angeal kicks my ass in a few hours because I didn't get my beauty sleep."

When they got into the infirmary, Zack laid Strife down on a hospital bed while Libra went to retrieve a syringe. Before the SOLDIER could pull away, however, a hand with surprisingly rough calluses latched onto his forearm. "I'm sorry, Zack," the cadet murmured, allowing Zack to catch a brief glimpse of bright blue eyes lit with the glow of what must be a fever.

"Er, no problem, kiddo." He patted the hand on his arm awkwardly, and got a wan smile. The doctor returned with an empty syringe, and when Strife's eyes tracked the man's movements he mumbled, "Will you give me a number, doctor?"

Doctor Libra looked at Zack, who shrugged, and slowly started tapping for a vein. He said, "How about four?"

"Four..." The word came out nearly soundless as Strife slipped back into sleep. Zack exchanged glances with the doctor but couldn't think of anything funny to lighten the mood.

Time apparently held a grudge against one Zack Fair and made the next day pass agonizingly slowly. When Angeal finally decided that his student was too distracted to do much more than flail about weakly, he called a halt to the virtual training session and grabbed Zack's shoulders to keep him upright.

"You look like hell," he observed bluntly, noting the shadows under the kid's eyes. "Didn't you get any sleep last night?"
"Nah, I was kept up all night by this little blond number. A real screamer." Zack tried to wink and ended up using both eyes to do it.

"Were you, now? I suppose the memo I got from one of the doctors down in medical was just someone's lame idea of a joke then."

"Memo? You got a memo? Damn doctors always ruin my fun. And sleep. Especially sleep."

Angeal shook his head and pushed Zack over towards the benches. Zack dropped down with a long, loud sigh as Angeal sat beside him with a little more dignity.

"Wasn't anything major, just weird," Zack explained with his head tilted back and eyes squeezed shut. "Some kid flipped out like someone was torturing him in his sleep or something. The doctors couldn't keep him held down, so they called me. Planet only knows why, though. I thought becoming a SOLDIER would get me out of doing the gruntwork."

"Probably because everyone in ShinRa knows that you're the best when it comes to dealing with the recruits. Must be the immaturity talking." He laughed when Zack made a half-assed attempt to smack him. "Besides, you don't truly get out of doing the gruntwork until you make First, and even then there's more paperwork than you could shove a sword through."

"Isn't that what Seconds and Thirds are for?"

"Exactly."

Zack Fair, SOLDIER Third, made a noise somewhere between a groan of disgust and an indignant growl. Angeal started to say something, but the beep of a text message on his phone interrupted him, and Zack watched as his expression cycled through being exasperated to concerned to something dark and thoughtful.

"What is it?"


"Like, poof? How?"

Angeal shook his head slowly, then snapped his phone shut with a sharp motion and put it back in a pocket. "No one knows. Now, I want to see you run through the fourth form again."

With a suspicious glance at his mentor, Zack obediently picked up his sword.

Elena might have a hard time with tact or keeping her mouth shut, but she wasn't stupid, even when she was sitting in her pajamas in a cold infirmary at four in the morning at the bedside of someone she didn't actually know, staring at him and impatiently willing him to wake up. She could tell that Cloud had some serious shit going on behind that solemn baby-face, and who could resist a mystery that masqueraded as a halfway-decent person?

Fortunately for what remained of Cloud's sanity, he started waking up on his own. A soft exhalation and then his eyes slit open, silently taking in the hospital room and Elena herself. She unconsciously lifted her chin under the weight of his stare. "You had the whole medical staff freaking out, you know," she told him. "They had to call a SOLDIER down and everything to help."
He didn't say anything. After a minute, Elena finally blurted out, "What the hell happened last night?"

That was definitely embarrassment she saw. "Nothing," he muttered, turning his face to the side.

"'Nothing'? Either this happens on a regular basis and I'm going to end up running laps while half-asleep, or you're trying to be a macho tough-guy bro." He didn't react, and she asked, more subdued, "Were you on something? The doc thought so, he took a blood test. You weren't, were you? Because if you were, I sure as hell don't want whatever you had."

"I don't know what happened," he said after a pause, meeting her gaze without flinching, and she mentally shouted, Liar! Liar! Lowering her head and twisting her fingers in her lap like someone struggling with her emotions, she murmured, "You scared the hell out of me."

The blanket rustled as his hand curled into a fist. "I'm sorry," he muttered, "I…didn't mean to do that. Scare anyone, I mean. But I really don't know what happened."

He sounded sincere, at least, and maybe Elena was just projecting her sister's paranoia. It wasn't like there was a single person on the Planet without a secret of some kind. But dear gods, waking up to someone screaming as though they were being torn apart by a dragon had nearly given her a stroke. "Yeah, all right. But you're going to get quizzed by the doctor, I hope you know. I'll get your homework just this once, but only if you let me copy."

"What?"

"Don't tell me you thought ShinRa would let you get out of classes for free just because you had a bit of a rough night."

Cloud was staring at her with wide eyes, looking as though she'd proposed breaking into a general's private quarters instead. The way he always looked at her, calm but disinterested, was a welcome change. Finally he managed, "No, but…why?"

"Because I don't do things for free."

"No, I mean, why offer at all?"

Elena blinked at him innocently. "Why not?"

He squinted suspiciously and she couldn't help giggling, but she wasn't about to tell him that she was also a bit lonely, surrounded by so many people who saw her pretty hair and cute face and never bothered looking underneath. Cloud had been a quiet fixture in the background all this time and that was a talent she could admire, maybe even use.

They were interrupted by the arrival of the doctor. He was a small, thin man with a permanent furrow between his dark brows from constant stress, and he looked over first Cloud and then Elena with tired eyes. "Your visiting time is up, cadet. Please return to your barracks."

"No." She raised her chin stubbornly. "I'm staying here."

The doctor sighed. "Cadet, please, I don't want to have to report you to your commanding officer."

"He already hates me, it wouldn't make a difference."

"Cadet – "
"It's fine," Cloud broke in softly, "I don't mind."

The doctor must have truly been too exhausted to argue. "Strife, do you know what caused your paroxysm last night?"

"No."

"Have you consumed any alcohol or drugs within the last seventy-two hours?"

"No."

The doctor flipped through the pages on his clipboard. "We performed a bloodtest and found several anomalies, including the presence of mako. Were you aware of this?"

Elena felt cold shock run down her spine. Cloud's face, on the other hand, was suddenly carefully neutral. "Yes, I was."

"May I ask how it got there?" If the doctor's voice was rather dry, well, Elena couldn't exactly blame him.

"I'm from Nibelheim and the reactor there has been up for almost two decades. Some of the pipelines aren't exactly…up to date. It's pretty common for the kids there to get mako sickness, before they build up a tolerance, but I..." He paused, apparently to get possibly painful memories in order. "I got stupid one day, wandered off...I fell into one of the springs."

The doctor's mouth opened and closed a few times before he found his voice. "How are you not comatose?"

Cloud shrugged and turned away as though embarrassed.

"I'm going to have to make a report on this," the man muttered, half to himself, as he flipped through several pages once more, "come up with some kind of control regimen, I can't imagine what that much mako must have done to someone so young..."

At the doctor's words Cloud's head whipped around so fast Elena thought he might give himself whiplash. "What?"

"Your records say you're applying for the SOLDIER program. We'll need to develop some kind of medical procedure to make sure you haven't been harmed or somehow left weaker from your accident that might cause, uh, problems."

That last word wasn't what he was going to say, Elena noted with narrowed eyes. She had been all but forgotten by now, left to watch the doctor try to gather up the remains of his professional calm while Cloud seemed ready to break something.

"It happened years ago and nothing's gone wrong yet," Cloud said angrily. "Last night – "

"Two nights ago," Elena chimed in before she could help herself. "You slept through a day of training."

"– two nights ago is really rare. I'm fine." Cloud's tone gave Elena the urge to salute him. He was now sitting up, face scrunched up with determination. "I'm not the first person to have been so clumsy and the fact that I'm still alive and functioning should be more than enough proof for you."

A staring contest ensued between the two that left Elena rather impressed.
"Fine," the doctor finally sighed, "on two conditions. I want you in here at least twice a month for a physical, and your company commander must be made aware of your situation. Who is it?"

"Commander Gysahl."

The doctor sighed again and ran a hand through messy hair before scribbling something on his clipboard. "I don't need to tell you that I'm uncomfortable with this arrangement, but considering the uniqueness of your circumstances and the fact that this is the only incident to come of your mako sickness, I'll make an exception. For now. The second I see something going wrong then I'm bringing this forward on an official level, got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I've already made a note to schedule an appointment for you exactly two weeks from today. My name is Doctor Libra, I'll be handling your case directly."

"Yes, sir." Now that Cloud had gotten his way, he was perfectly polite and contained. Elena had to raise her hand to cover the threat of a smile.

"Since you don't seem to be suffering any ill effects, I'll leave it up to you whether you rejoin your squad for the remainder of the day or head back to your barracks. Cadet, please make sure he doesn't overexert himself."

"Yes, sir," Elena agreed.

"Good. You're free to go, Strife."

...That day Vincent was dressed in dark trousers and a plain brown shirt, leather gloves pulled over both his human hand and the clawed one. The intent was to make himself as nondescript as possible among the drab crowd under the Plate.

It was what was becoming a routine recon mission. Walk unhurriedly through the sectors, picking up and dropping off packages as per his cover as a delivery man, and gradually make his way towards the slums of Sector Two where the influence of foreign culture had begun to leave its mark. Ever since he'd first followed the lone boy there, Vincent had returned several times by a different path each time, keeping his head down and a politely disinterested expression on his face as he got a feel for the environment.

Farther up the street, two young Midgardian men came out of a shop. They carried a small paper shopping bag, and one of them was sniggering as they passed, uncaring of the few Wutaians in the area whose expressions ranged from uncomfortable to embarrassed to angry. Vincent watched them as he approached the same shop, where an older woman stood framed in the doorway.

"Vir-san," she greeted him pleasantly. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you, Yoshida-san," he replied, inclining his head respectfully. He glanced back down the street. "They didn't seem like your usual customers."

"They come to gawk and laugh before buying my things as novelties to take home. Unfortunately, their money is as good as any other's, and people in my position do not always have the luxury of turning them away." Vincent tried not wince at how matter-of-fact she sounded. "I do, however, have a lot of time for thought."
Vincent handed her a box that, judging from its shape and lack of weight, was most likely filled with paper. "Thought can be the most dangerous of man's talents," he said, and the lines in her aged face deepened as she smiled.

"Good thing we have the heart to balance the brain," she replied cheerfully. "Thank you. Would you like some tea?"

"That would be lovely." Vincent graciously bowed his head a little and Yoshida laughed again.

"Charm is far more dangerous than any thought," she said, and waved him inside her small shop. He ducked through the doorway and passed the threshold of a cramped space, the only kind that Midgardians would rent out to Wutaians, that was filled to bursting with handmade crafts. Most the items were made of dyed rice paper and delicate sticks of wood, formed into lanterns or folded figurines or scrolls of various size and content. One had a painting of Leviathan proudly displayed in shades of metallic greens and blues. Vincent had gathered that the shop's purpose was less one of practicality and more to provide small comforts in a hostile country.

The small old woman bustled over to her sale counter and set down the box to take out her tea things. While the water heated Yoshida looked over at Vincent. "Why do you often think so hard? You'll get wrinkles, and then all the lovely ladies and gentlemen will be disappointed."

"My health is fine, Yoshida-san."

"Hmm." She glanced sideways at him as she lifted the kettle. "You're avoiding my question. You like my shop?"

"I do. You're very talented."

"I was a teacher and a scholar before the war. Even before your SOLDIERs came, ShinRa was waging war, infiltrating our culture. I made it my duty to collect as much of our country's history as I could, even the things that almost been forgotten already." She pushed a teacup across the counter in his direction. "Let the leaves steep for few minutes. What you see as talent is just understanding – if you know how the paper will bend, you'll know how to manipulate it."

That didn't sound ominous at all. Vincent pulled over a tall stool and sat in front of the counter, automatically keeping his altered hand below the counter and using his human one to accept the teacup. "That's true, I suppose."

"But you're obviously not paper," she continued wryly, gesturing at him with a pair of chopsticks. "I don't know who you are."

He tensed.

"You are a stranger in a place already surrounded by strangers who think Wutaians aren't human. You make people nervous."

"I promise you, Yoshida-san, I'm not here to make trouble," Vincent told her truthfully, holding her gaze. She stared back in silence before casually turning back to her own cup and stirring the tealeaves.

"I can see you like that Leviathan."

Blinking slowly at the apparent non-sequitur, he admitted softly, "I can see how much heart you put into painting her." The brushstrokes in the god's sinuous body were broad and sweeping, powerful and graceful.
"She protects us, even her children born outside of her country," Yoshida added quietly. Vincent's eyes narrowed slightly.

"...How interesting."

"We know our own. It's the only thing that has kept you safe in this neighborhood."

Well. Either Vincent's talent for subterfuge was rustier than he'd thought, or his talent for recognizing conspiracies was failing, but either way there appeared to be something much more organized than he'd suspected going on here. "My mother was from Jinnan, on the coast of Jinghai county." The tea was bitter on his tongue.

"Ah," said Yoshida gravely. "Leviathan follows her children."

"That is reassuring to know," Vincent managed to say without irony or dryness. As he sipped at his tea, Yoshida opened the delivered box and pulled out sheaves of delicate, brightly colored paper. He watched her fingers deftly fold a black sheet, half-listening to her chatter and he rifled back through his memory of their past conversations. By the time he finished his tea Yoshida was holding out a finished bird. A crow, he realized after a moment of examining it, and he accepted it with a polite bow.

"Lao gua is an omen of death and war," she said, face inscrutable, "but remember, death comes with rebirth."

He nodded in acknowledgment, bowed again and thanked her for the tea once more, and slipped out of the shop. Once on the street, Vincent's gaze flickered around, and he wasn't disappointed. Three men, all wearing traditional dress in open defiance of ShinRa's rules, waited for him in the shadows of a nearby alley. Still holding the folded paper crow, Vincent casually strode past them.

"Sector Four, three days from now," came a fleeting whisper. "I don't think we need to tell you to come alone."

Vincent didn't look at them, just smiled thinly and headed off for the next odd job that would feed him for a few more nights.

Cloud stood in front of Commander Gysahl and reminded himself to relax. The commander was a man of average height and build with a hawkish nose and tangled red hair that made Cloud think of a Nibel wolf's scruff, and he spoke with the remains of an accent that sounded like something from the eastern side of the continent. He read over the report that Doctor Libra had sent him while Cloud stood quietly in front of the desk, then finally set it down and fixed Cloud with a sharp blue gaze.

"This is a serious situation," the commander said softly.

"Yes, sir." Cloud was being examined from head to toe and he tried to stand perfectly straight.

"This could give you an unfair advantage over the other cadets."

"With all due respect, sir, I disagree," Cloud replied. "The SOLDIER program tests each cadet on his or her own merits, not on class ranking, which accounts for the differing number of cadets accepted into the program each year."

Gysahl sat back in his chair and pressed his fingertips together thoughtfully. "That is true. But it's
also true that I won't allow one cadet to break the rules when all the rest are held accountable for them."

One of the rumors in the barracks claimed that the man would sell out his own mother if he caught her cheating. Personally, in the cesspit that was ShinRa, Cloud thought it admirable.

"Why do you want to be a SOLDIER, Strife?"

Cloud's breath caught in his throat. "For my family, sir," he said finally.

Gysahl raised an eyebrow. "Explain."

"I…wasn't able to protect them when it was most needed, sir."

He forced himself not to look away. After several long, tense minutes the commander said, "I'll give my approval for you to continue the program as long as you keep your medical appointments. There's no precedent for this sort of situation, which is all the more reason for us to stick to the books, got it?"

In other words, he would be under close watch and he'd better not fuck up. "Yes, sir."

"Yes, I think you do," Gysahl said quietly. "Dismissed, Strife. Have a good day."

"Thank you, sir."

As soon as he was able to close the office door behind him, Cloud allowed himself a brief moment to lean back against it and let out a long, shaky breath. While he made his way back to his barracks to prepare for firearm training, he mused that Elena never did tell him which SOLDIER had taken him to the infirmary.
In Which There Is Alcohol and Sephiroth Gets Suspicious

Chapter Notes

Warnings: minor, potentially PTSD-based behavior; some of Elena's actions are based off my own in the immediate years following an emotionally and sexually abusive relationship. Some shaming of introverts.

There are vague references to Twig’s *A Long, Hard Road* and chibirisuchan's *A Shoggoth on the Chimney*.

Sephiroth dreamed. A field of flowers stretched on forever under a white sky that seemed to press down on him with its sheer emptiness. He turned in a circle, wondering what he should be expecting, when he found himself facing a young woman that seemed familiar on a level he couldn't explain.

"Hi," she chirped at him.

"…Hello."

"Don't worry, you're not crazy."

That wasn't what Sephiroth had been concerned about, but it was nice to know.

"You're thinking about Cloud."

Sephiroth jerked. "What?"

Her smile was sad, her eyes as green as his Mastered Curaga. "You think about him all the time, ever since you were left alone."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he snapped. It took a moment for him to tamp the sudden rush of anger down into a hard ball of ice in his heart. "Cloud was nothing more than the desperation of a foolish child turned into a hallucination, induced by the mako showers."

The young woman reached up to put her warm hands on either side of Sephiroth's face. He held himself very still, waiting for her to drop the innocent act. "Please don't be angry at him," she whispered. "If he'd had a choice, he never would've left you."

Her words struck something inside him that had been scarred over and left to atrophy since a little boy had woken up alone. He wanted to break her, wanted to snap her neck for daring to be so bold with him – but the green of her eyes was expanding and taking up his vision, pulling him down. It was like falling down a well without hitting stone or water and he could have fallen forever except there was soft warmth wrapping around him, bringing him close in a familiar embrace.

"Sephiroth," breathed Cloud's voice, sounding shocked and happy and nervous all at once. Sephiroth's dream had become a confusion of color and sensation – there was skyblue and sunshineyellow and creampale tied together with possessiveness and mako and things too
complicated for Sephiroth to put a name to. So long as he reminded himself that this was just a coping mechanism for his brain when neuroceptor response during the sleep cycle intensified, he was able to push away the old hurt and let himself press closer to the angel.

When he finally stopped retching bile, Cloud flushed the toilet and leaned against the long counter of sinks. It was too early for anyone else to have seen him roll out of bed and rush to the bathroom to vomit up an organ or two – probably had something to do with dreaming about Sephiroth and the Planet's natural revulsion towards him, or maybe the stars were just in a certain alignment, although the dream had felt so real, had left him with that acidic Lifestream aftertaste in the back of his throat. And, and Aeris, she was alive and healthy and probably driving the Turks insane, for once something had gone right. But if she were actually poking around in his dreams, if it wasn't just his subconscious being desperate, then what did she know? What if the Planet had learned how to...to 'take her form' or something?

When his head stopped spinning, Cloud glanced up into the scratched mirror and had to smile grimly. The pastiness of his skin and the bruised shadows under his eyes made him look like hell; he could already anticipate the sergeant's commentary. With the taste of bile still strong in his mouth, he started making a list that included finding a way to get in contact with Vincent, whom he hadn't heard from since he'd managed to bully his way into ShinRa a month or two ago.

He also needed to figure out what he was going to do about having First Tsurugi built, he thought, as he left the bathroom and walked silently down the hall back to his dorm. The problem was that all six blades had components taken from the fallen WEAPONs and the Ultima blade itself, and he didn't think the Planet was about to give up five of its WEAPONs because he wanted his rather awesome sword back. (And if the sword's main blade had been Ultima, once dripping with Sephiroth's blood, and was the support for the other blades, it wasn't like there was any symbolism in that, no sir, and anyone who claimed otherwise could go fuck themselves.)

The bed had gone cold. Cloud hardly noticed as he curled up beneath the blanket and stared unseeingly at a dark wall with fingers curling around his mother's necklace. He'd only seen Sephiroth once: the day of the recruits' welcoming ceremony, delivering a short speech with keywords like 'honor' and 'heroism' that Cloud honestly hadn't even pretended to listen to. That smooth low voice had hooked itself under his breastbone and yanked at the tangle of complicated emotions and memories that fourteen years of a quiet life had only covered with a thin layer of paper, my child, my god, mine, and his body was frozen. Probably for the best, since Cloud wasn't sure what he might've said or done if he had been able to move.

Daylight never reached the slums under the Plate, leaving them in a gloomy, subterranean underworld. The grey half-light was beginning to deepen to a true twilight before Vincent received any sort of contact.

The boy that Vincent had originally followed into the refugee neighborhoods sauntered casually through the rusted gates of Sector Four, dressed in a ragged mix of Wutaian clothes and eastern-continent castoffs that were turned dull brown by a uniform layer of filth. He glanced briefly at Vincent before he continued ever-so-calmly slouching towards Wall Market. Allowing some minutes to pass, Vincent finally roused himself from where he sat on a crate against the wall with a beggar's cup, bones creaking with protest. He trailed after the boy, pausing now and then to vary the distance between them and to murmur hoarse pleas at the wealthier-looking people he passed.

"Oh, excuse me!"
The gentle voice made Vincent look up from under his unwashed hair. He managed to limit his surprise at seeing Aeris to a slow blink.

Smiling, Aeris held out her basket. "I'm sorry, I really should watch where I'm going. Will you take a flower? On the house."

"Thank you," he rasped, accepting a yellow blossom with his human hand, and her smile broadened.

"It's amazing how the smallest things can make such a difference, isn't it?" She winked at him and disappeared into the shifting crowd, leaving Vincent in her wake. He tucked the flower into a buttonhole in his shirt, cast one more glance in the direction she'd left, and bowed his shoulders once more into someone under the weight of the world.

The boy hadn't gone far, had stopped to chat with one of the shopkeepers. Keeping to the shadows and moving his lips as though speaking to himself (no one ever goes near the homeless and the obviously crazy ones, their footsteps just quicken and their eyes slide nervously away), Vincent watched the exchange grow more heated. It appeared that the shopkeeper was refusing to sell anything to the kid, and from what he could read on the man's mouth it was because the street-rat was too obviously foreign.

While idly pondering philosophical thoughts on the nature of hypocrisy, fear, and desperation, the skin on the back of Vincent's neck tightened at the same time the three demonic entities in his head snarled like wildcats. Vincent was already dropping and turning under the blow that would have otherwise crushed his skull against the wall, Death Penalty materializing in his hand.

He looked up at his assailant from the cowl of his dirtied cloak, gun pressed against a narrow ribcage, and somehow failed to be surprised that he — no, she — had dark eyes and the grace of formal training. Without any change in expression, she tugged the last section of her sanjiegun from the wall, leaving a long, narrow dent in the rusted metal.

"Follow me."

The Wutaian waited for Vincent to lower his own weapon, and then she was moving, retreating several paces before slipping through a previously unseen narrow alley squeezed between the high Sector wall and a dilapidated brick building. He trailed after her, automatically keeping a distance beyond the reach of her segmented staff. The deep shadows and overall shadiness of the place kept anyone in the Market from noticing them, or at least caring.

Vincent did manage to catch the eye of the boy he'd followed, who shot him a smirk before continuing to cuss out the shopkeeper.

After ducking some protruding pipes he was beckoned through a door and up a grimy stairwell that came out into a large, square room. The plaster on the walls was peeling away from the corroded brick beneath, and the only furniture was a few chairs around a table on the bare hardwood floor. Several Wutaian stood along the walls, watching silently, while a middle-aged man (warrior, Vincent corrected himself, seeing the scar that bisected one of the man's eyes) sat at the table. His hands were folded, weaponless, on the table.

"Hello," said the man calmly. "Please, sit down. I promise you that my men will not act unless I say so."

Vincent pushed back his hood and politely sat down. A few moments passed in which both men regarded one another silently, and finally the man said, "Your disguise is very...thorough."
Even down to the unwashed smell. Vincent inclined his head vaguely. "Thank you."

Amusement crossed the man's expression before it turned somber. "We have been watching you, and we know you're not just a delivery man. Why are you so interested in our neighborhoods?"

"Mere curiosity."

"About these new, exotic people and their odd ways?"

Perhaps Vincent could have chosen better words. "Times are changing," Vincent murmured. The people lining the walls shifted, as though they thought he was mocking them.

The warrior that faced him, however, was as still as a snake. "Indeed they are. For instance, I do not imagine myself or any of my people would have expected to see a Turk tailing defenseless teenage boys."

"I was once a Turk," he admitted, because there was no use denying it, "but not any longer."

"Oh?"

He didn't respond. The woman that had guided him there hissed, "Once a Turk, always a Turk."

"Once a fool, always a fool."

The man laughed aloud at Vincent's mild retort. "You are a smart one, young man. But smart men are often the most dangerous, and you freely admit to having been a Turk, even if you claim not to be one now. So, what are we to do?"

"I bear no ill will towards any of your people." Despite its softness, Vincent's voice was undeniably firm. "I've no interest in war or cultural politics."

"And yet that is what the winds of the future speak of nowadays. ShinRa has conquered most of the known world. It has destroyed the people it could not subjugate. Wutai is the last hope of a free world—and you say you have no interest? Either you are truly still one of ShinRa's trained dogs, or you are a fool."

The pain of remembering a time when he really had been a naïve, reckless fool stabbed through his heart. Reaching into his cloak, Vincent pulled out the paper crow that Yoshida had given him and set it on the scratched table. He said, "I was killed for my foolishness. My only purpose now is to kill the people responsible in turn. Your war, your politics...the only difference between those and the past are the names involved."

There was no need to mention Cloud, or Sephiroth, or even Hojo. The man picked up the crow, turned it slowly in his fingers, and said suddenly, "You disguised yourself as a homeless man, and yet for many of my people that is their reality. Our homeland has been conquered by gaijin, our temples raided for wealth, and our culture dismissed as primitive nonsense. You, at least, have the luxury of knowing that at any time you are able to take off that disguise."

The atmosphere in the room was heavy. Oppressive. Vincent had no idea what to say, so he remained silent, and eventually the man declared, "For now, I believe our goals are similar enough for us to work together against ShinRa. Their regular army is laughable, but they have the advantage with their SOLDIERs, Turks, and resources. As a former Turk, you would be a valuable ally."

"In return, my people will help you with whatever you might need in tracking down your enemies."
Within reason, of course."

"Of course," Vincent said, and the man patiently gave him a moment to think it all over. On the one hand, Vincent was damn good all on his lonesome, had familiarized himself by now with over two decades' worth of new technology; on the other, there was a reason Turks tended to work in pairs. And as for the Wutaians themselves? Vincent looked around the room, and most of the refugees met his eyes with either hostility, hope, or neutrality, and only a few turned away.

The man seated across from him nodded briefly. "We will be in contact with you."

None of the refugees moved as Vincent stood. He was halfway to the door when the commander spoke again. "The crow is a herald of death and war. What do you think of that?"

"Symbols only have power if you allow them."

... 

Loneliness was something that had followed Elfreda throughout life like her own shadow, a subtle, insidious curse that she'd learned to deal with or risk going crazy. Crazier. The birth of her precious baby boy had made her feel like they were two of a kind, but now that Cloud had left her to go to the city she found the loneliness creeping back over her with a vengeance.

She had two weapons, however, that she hadn't possessed before. One was Fenrir, who seemed to understand that an important member of the pack was missing and tended to cling closely to her nowadays, lonely in his own right. She had only let a hand fall to feel a cold nose or thick fur.

The second was knowledge: knowledge of her son, of his extraordinary soul.

*My Lady Frigg has blessed me,* she acknowledged for the thousandth time since that painful, torturous birth that nearly took the lives of both mother and newborn. *She's blessed me more than I ever thought possible,* and gods did she hope that was true, that her son wasn't going to end up going the way of all legendary heroes. Immortal fame was cold comfort for a mother burying her son.

Summer was fading into winter, bypassing autumn for the steadily worsening storms. By then the fire that had consumed the ShinRa mansion was gone, everything reduced to ash and black, skeletal remains that crumbled under the weight of wind and rain. Anything still usable had already been salvaged by the time the storms began and people retreated into their homes, so she was surprised on an overcast day to hear a knock on the door.

Expecting to see Brunhild, who was her only semi-regular visitor, Elfreda was caught flatfooted at seeing one of the village's young men on the step. "Hello, Aldric," she managed after a moment in which he seemed just as awkward as she. "Did you rip your cloak again?" The boy really was the clumsiest thing while out fishing or gathering firewood, Elfreda had repaired a fair number of his clothes over the years in return for some of his mother's soda bread.

He flushed a little. "Uh, no, Missus Strife. Mayor Lockhart's sent for you." He puffed up his chest a little, evidently proud to be considered one of the 'big boys' and trusted to be given errands by the mayor himself. Elfreda kindly didn't say anything about that.

"Oh dear," she sighed, "will you tell John that I'll be along in a bit? I've a new blanket in the works for Brunhild, I swear her boys never seem to grow up and stop tearing up the old ones — "

Aldric opened and closed his mouth a few times in surprise. "I was told to get you straight away, no dawdling."
By now Fenrir had lumbered out of the old cloth scraps that served as a nest by the warm hearth and made his way to the door, peering out from behind Elfreda's skirt with grey eyes glowing like the sun behind dark clouds. The Nibel wolf's ears slanted back a bit, and that alone was enough to make Aldric stammer.

"P-please, ma'am, he's w-waitin' with the others at the mansion."

"The mansion? What on earth is he wanting to do with anything up there?" Elfreda sighed. "Fine, go tell him that I'll be there as soon as I can find my boots. If you've chewed them up, Fenrir, I'll swat your tail."

Aldric took off as soon as the door was closed. Elfreda grumbled to herself about men with too much money in this town for their own good while she pulled on her boots. (They'd been half-hidden under Fenrir's bedding, one of the heels scored with teeth-marks, and now the wolf was sulking under the kitchen table with a stinging rear end). Walking stick in hand to keep herself from tripping in the thick mud, she set off up the trail towards the ruined mansion with the wolf trailing along behind her, his nose in the scraggly weeds.

Unsurprisingly Mayor Lockhart greeted her with an expression like he was sucking on a lemon. "One of the men found something I thought you should see."

"Unless it's a torn jacket, John, I don't see what I can do that no one else can," replied Elfreda, wondering why his jaw tightened in further irritation. With Fenrir distracted by rabbits, she tried leaning around the mayor to see what was so interesting in the mansion's ruins.

"It's a bit more serious than that," he said with forced patience.

"Then why don't you just tell me so I can get back to my sewing?"

Some of the men standing around in their overalls with mud-spattered tools shifted in irritation. Before Lockhart could get snippy, someone stepped forward and gently took Elfreda's elbow.

"This way, if you please, Mrs. Strife."

It took her a moment to place him as the odd Wutaian man that had wandered into Nibelheim some years ago and never left. She thought she remembered Cloud saying that he was practicing with Tifa under the man's tutelage.

"Your name is Zangan, isn't it?" she asked as he led her through the muttering villagers. "Cloud mentioned you. You must be a very nice man, if my dear Nebel was having business with you, and very skilled." She didn't mention that Cloud probably hadn't needed the training at all. She didn't want to sound rude.

"Thank you," he smiled at her, and she returned it.

"I don't suppose you know why I'm here? I was just about to make a lovely dumpling stew for myself and Fenrir, Cloud would never forgive me if he came back home to find his companion starved halfway to the grave. Perhaps you'd like to join us? It would be no problem at all, and I always keep a good stock of ale."

"I'm honored by your offer," said Zangan, and used a soft touch on her elbow to make her stop walking, "and I just might take you up on it. However, I think Mayor Lockhart would be displeased if we didn't finish our business here first."

"What – oh!"
Elfreda hadn't been paying much attention as she talked. She was mountain-born and her feet could find footholds in the most treacherous ground instinctively, so it took a few bemused moments for her to realize that she was standing in what looked like a cellar or tunnel below the mansion's skeleton. Zangan had guided her downwards to the center of the room, part of which had collapsed beneath the weight of fire-cracked stone and timber, and they were now staring at the grand centerpiece that dominated the space: an altar.

"Oh," she breathed, completely forgetting the man beside her and the villagers that had followed them down into the caverns. Her skirt rustled softly over the rock floor as she moved forward slowly, reverently, finally kneeling down to run her careworn fingers over the grooves carved into the rock. The markings were deep but faded, suggesting that at one point in time this stone had endured the elements aboveground. Elfreda was sure that it would have been magnificent.

"What is it?" Lockhart called to her from the cellar entrance. Elfreda didn't hear him. She could read the runic writing but the glyphs were more archaic than any she'd seen before, and it didn't help that in some places they had been completely worn away. The stone was cool and smooth beneath her fingertips.

"What is it, Strife? What are we looking at here?" Lockhart repeated testily, and the interruption made Elfreda twitch.

"I'm a heathen, not an Ancient," she replied with an uncharacteristic snap, shooting a glare at him over her shoulder.

As Lockhart visibly bit back a retort, Zangan asked calmly, "I think what everyone would like to know is that the village isn't going to be destroyed by a heretofore unknown materia, Summons, or some other force of magic."

"Not as far as I can tell, no," she said, and poked at a couple words still barely legible. "There's something about a fallen goddess asleep under the mountain who would destroy the world if she was woken, but I can't read the rest."

"Oh, is that all?" muttered a random villager, and Elfreda shot him a cross look before asking, "Whose coffins are those?"

"They're empty," Zangan answered. Elfreda frowned. She had never agreed with the idea of hiding away a loved one's corpse like a filthy, dishonorable secret, much better to send them to Hel with a purifying bonfire, but it didn't seem right to leave these empty caskets just lying around to rot.

Turning back to the altar, she stared hard at the carvings, but no more understanding magically leapt out to her.

If it wasn't for the fact that he'd likely get kicked out of the SOLDIER program, Cloud would have happily taken his stupid goddamn rifle - what was the point of those things anyway - and shoved it down Sergeant Tokka's throat. "All the grace of a chocobo in high heels," the sergeant was yelling, and wasn't that an interesting mental image.

"Chocobos are among the most versatile creatures on the Planet," Cloud said without thinking, and flinched when the sergeant's face turned dark as a thunderstorm.

"Well, it could've been worse," Elena later told him as Cloud gloomily cleaned himself up and got ready for their first afternoon class. He might've appreciated her efforts to be sympathetic a little
more if she'd been any good at it. "Instead of a week's worth of night-duty it could've been, like, a week's worth of toilet cleaning."

"I'm honestly not sure if cleaning shit off the floor is better or worse than several hours standing around and staring at the same spot on the wall," he muttered darkly, and wondered if there was a way to change history that eliminated rifle formation training from the hearts and minds of traumatized cadets forever.

But a month of repetition and monotony and the ruthlessness of the military machine was wearing on him in other ways. This wasn't exactly five years in a slim glass tube of acidic plasma, but in the future he'd only been limited by the width of the horizon and his bike's fuel tank, and in the past he'd walk all over the Nibel mountains and be the only human around for miles. He'd look up at the endless vault of the sky and feel so amazingly small, so insignificant and also a part of something larger than himself - but here, here, he was just one young face among a thousand others meant to be little more than canon fodder to pave the way for the SOLDIER vanguard, and he couldn't even kid himself with dreams of a bright future anymore. Only three things made the days a little more tolerable: the occasional cryptic message that Vincent sent via PHS, Elena's sudden and inexplicable determination to Make Friends, and the few times he saw Sephiroth from a distance. *I'm so sorry*, he wanted to scream, and would escape to the privacy of a bathroom stall each time to let his heartbeat slow down and get his thoughts back together.

He also started those bi-monthly doctor's appointments. Elena had stopped trying to accompany him after he'd bodily picked her up, deposited her in the hallway, and closed the door in her face.

"How are you feeling, Cloud? Any strange voices, visions, night-terrors?"

Cloud held himself very still on the table, eyes fixed on a far point over Doctor Libra's shoulder. He had already taken off his shirt and was now willing himself to continue breathing calmly, to not react, as the man poked and prodded at him with gloved fingers.

"No, I'm fine." He wasn't about to say that hardly a night passed in which he *didn't* have nightmares. The times he woke up screaming were rare; more often it was little more than a quietly choked breath in the dark that gave away his restlessness. He had learned over the years to let the images slide like smoke through his mental fingers until he was able to look up at the ceiling or the bunk above him without seeing old failures and grief. (*Post-traumatic stress disorder*, Reeve had once tried to say, but Cloud had promptly turned on his heel and stormed out of the newly built WRO headquarters.)

"You've been eating properly?" the doctor continued.

"Yes." As properly as the army mess allowed, at least, even when his appetite was nil. He was a little surprised to find himself missing his mum's hot shepherd's pie.

"You're a bit underweight, but your records show that you've always been a little thin." Libra had enough tact not to say 'small.' "Your blood work came back with elevated levels of mako, of course, but you haven't demonstrated any physiological mutations, and you seem stable enough, despite a few write-ups for insubordination."

Cloud maintained his one-sided staring contest with the wall. The appointment in which Libra had insisted on drawing blood for testing nearly had him walking out the door because oh gods *needles*; the only thing that stopped him was Libra's threat to take his situation to higher command.

After the doctor finished his routine, he took a step back and rubbed the bridge of his nose tiredly beneath his glasses. "Even though you fell into unadulterated mako," and, really, that passive-
aggressive tone was unwarranted, "you seem fine, for the most part. What I'm worried about at this stage is how you'll react to the mako showers if you make it into SOLDIER."

For a moment, time stood still, and Cloud numbly wondered if the Planet's tinkering would be what held him back in this lifetime. Now that's vicious irony, a voice murmured darkly.

Still massaging the bridge of his nose, Libra didn't notice his patient's sudden tension. "Soon the recruits in the SOLDIER program will be going through the preliminary mako trials. You only get exposed to a fraction of the amount that a proper SOLDIER does, just enough to judge what your body's reaction will be, but it's possible that it'll be enough to harm you or others. Your body appears to have reached an equilibrium, and if it gets tipped, well. Bad things could happen."

"But you don't know that," Cloud insisted. "Of course it's possible that I'll mutate or lose my mind, but it's just as likely that I'll simply absorb the extra mako. The reason people get mako sickness is because their bodies aren't used to such high levels of it, but I've been living with it for years." Ha, understatement..

"I'll get a second opinion from my colleagues – "

An image of Hojo looming over his prone body with a scalpel and a quiet mutter of fascinating, just fascinating had Cloud snapping, "No. No, just Commander Gysahl, if anyone. Please."

"Strife, I understand why you might be uncomfortable with it, but you're in no position to be making demands of me. This matter is far more serious than you seem to understand."

Libra had been willing to accommodate Cloud thus far, but the sternness in his voice clearly said that he wouldn't do so for much longer. Thoughts racing (this can't get back to Hojo and it will if this leaves the infirmary), he tried to come up with another brilliant excuse, to pull off some bit of acting that would make everyone just leave him alone to do his job, but all he could concentrate on was the knowledge that he couldn't, couldn't live through those years of hell again and that there was a reason he'd never liked theater.

"Please, sir," Cloud whispered, please. I know this is a big deal, but I don't…I don't want anyone else to know." A little bit of truth makes lies more believable, Vincent had once told him. "There was a doctor in my village who always wanted to mess with me. He thought my survival was fascinating, and he…he hurt me and the people I loved. Can you honestly tell me that the same thing won't happen here in ShinRa?"

Doctor Libra was visibly stunned and for a moment Cloud felt like the most shameful creature on the Planet. It was like being one of those teenagers that used to try sneaking into Tifa's bar and using their own sordid history to win pity and booze, like one of those old men that spoke endlessly of past battles to try and validate their existence in a world that had left them behind.

But then Libra said quietly, "I'll speak with Commander Gysahl on the matter. You're dismissed, Strife."

Cloud escaped without another word. That night, he pushed weights until hecollapsed into a sweating heap.

When the cadets were finally given leave to go under the Plate for the first time, Elena managed to catch Cloud's arm as they filed out of their Tactics classroom. She was practically vibrating with energy, hair flying about her face.

"Cloud, you've totally got to come with me and the others down to the bars."
"No, thank you."

"Why not? And if you say it's because you've got to study, or because you're gonna go to the gym and practice the exercises you already know how to do, then I'll - I'll kick you. In the balls."

"All right, then I won't." Besides, they were approaching the locker rooms and Elena would soon have to leave him for the girls' side anyway.

"Cloud, seriously, you act about as socially acceptable as herpes. That's sad."

Cloud opened his to keep arguing but made the mistake of looking at her big, pleading eyes and his will faltered. "Fine. I'll see you tonight."

Before he could disappear into the locker room, however, Elena tugged him into a stop. "If you really don't want to go, fine," she said seriously, "but Cloud, this whatever-this-is isn't healthy. You probably haven't realized it, but the other cadets are wondering what the hell's wrong with you. You hardly talk to anyone, and they know you only talk to me because I make you." Something like pain briefly crossed her expression. "I know you want to be a SOLDIER, but if you have to turn yourself into a freaking robot to do it, then what's the point?"

Cloud wasn't sure what to say.

"Seriously, just one night getting drunk and doing stupid shit. You won't get court-martialed and your parents aren't about to see their baby boy acting like the kid he is. C'mon, Cloud, please?"

He stared back at her and her earnestness, but eventually he sighed and allowed himself a small smile. "All right, I'll come."

"Yes!" Elena threw her arms around his shoulders and pulled him into an awkward dance that forced the other cadets to scurry out of the way of flailing limbs. "This is gonna be so awesome -"

She left Cloud standing in the middle of the hallway, dizzy and bemused.

Of course, by the time he'd dropped off his schoolbooks in the barracks that evening and been ambushed by Elena (who had decided that he needed intervention in his fashion taste), shouldered his way onto the cramped train, and finally found himself in a bar, well, Cloud had to keep reminding himself of how happy Elena had been when he agreed. Otherwise he was liable to bolt.

The bar that Elena had decided on looked only slightly less sleazy than the others dotting the slums, and of which 'less sleazy' meant the grimy front windows were whole and the sign had a fresh coat of paint.

It said Seventh Heaven.

Cloud froze in his tracks, mentally thrown back to another time in which the sign, older and flaking, had only been able to say Seventh He before the rest was swallowed up by the black stains of Plague.

"Don't chicken out now!" Elena grabbed his wrist and pulled him along, flashing empty smiles almost unconsciously to the men leering at her. Cloud stumbled after her before remembering his balance and deftly slipped his wrist from her grasp. She pouted briefly, then got lost in the excitement of her first day under the Plated granted by ShinRa, bounding up to the bar and ordering the most unnaturally neon drink she could find. The bartender was a young woman with short-cropped brown hair and lidded eyes that made her glance feel weighty; when Cloud settled for a regular beer, she looked at him sharply.
before popping the top of his bottle. He took a sip and thought about Cid.

Elena cried, "Let's go!" and suddenly Cloud was swept up into the whirlwind that was Elena determined to make him relax in a greasy, dimly lit, and cramped environment. There'd been corpses clogging up the floor the last time he'd been here but he told himself not to think about that, please, not when there were people to see him fall apart.

It had crossed his mind that he should keep an eye on how much he drank, he didn't exactly have a SOLDIER's metabolism anymore, but as time passed in that grim little bar where so much had happened to make him who he was, and as Elena grew progressively more flushed and excited, his vision began imitating curved glass and his balance cheerfully waved goodbye. Between remembering the password for the jukebox that would take him to the HQ of the future AVALANCHE (or had they already been founded? He couldn't recall, his head was feeling oddly muzzy) and telling Elena once again that he didn't want to dance around, damn it, he lost track of how many pints passed through his hands.

(Unfinished work, the Planet whispered dimly.)

"No," he was saying to her. He couldn't count how many times she would appear and he would sigh or growl or simply give her a flat stare. But this time she didn't go away and instead leaned forward until her big brown eyes swallowed up his vision.

"Why're you so sad all the time?" she slurred, unknowingly echoing a little boy from long ago, and added that blonds had to stick together in the face of adversity. No, adversity, she enunciated carefully, and for some reason Cloud was suddenly having to stifle slightly manic giggles. No. Manly chuckling.

"Giggling," declared Elena as she leaned forward farther, and Cloud was forced to put his hands on her waist to keep them from toppling off his corner stool. She paused and blinked and then leaned forward to mash her lips against his. Cloud's teenaged body automatically leaned forward, hand curling around the soft skin of her hip under the line of the blouse she'd assured him was very fashionable, but it - it didn't feel right, didn't feel right.

He forcibly pulled away, slid off the stool and headed for the side door that opened into a narrow alley. It was dank and dark, but most importantly it was quieter than the bar, empty, safe. He braced himself against a brick wall and took carefully measured breaths, wondering why he was feeling so thrown when he wasn't a stranger to sexuality, had never had strong feelings about it one way or the other.

After several long minutes he ducked back inside the bar, looking for a bright blonde ponytail and a very fashionable blouse, but Elena seemed to have disappeared. Cloud started losing time after that, only aware of it as brief snapshots as he stumbled back out of the bar and his feet took him somewhere.

Sometime later, he woke up, muttered, "Fuck," and then opened his eyes to find Aeris smiling down at him with a cheerful, "Hi."

"You look like shit, yo," Reno added, just as cheerfully. His words sent a curl of cigarette smoke wafting into Cloud's face.

"...What the hell?"
Aeris hadn't had a good night. She'd woken up around four in the morning with a mild headache and crept from her room, stealing away to the abandoned church that had unofficially become hers. The cool interior soothed some of the aching in her temples, but the voice of the Planet was even clearer. It came as a susurrus of whispers that trailed along the slight wind, and when she kneeled at the edge of her flower patch and dug her hands into the soil, the ghostly chill of running water streamed up her fingers.

WEAPON, it murmured, then fell silent without explanation.

Aeris didn't know how long she kneeled there at the edge of her flowers, lit by the faintly orange light of the Plate that came in through the broken roof, but it was long enough that a firm grasp on her shoulder shocked her back into her own body.

"Reno!" she gasped. She rarely saw the Turks that shadowed her.

"Look sharp, yo. You've got a customer that followed you home."

Blinking in surprise, Aeris followed him to the door of the church. An unconscious teenager was slumped on the worn stone steps, drunk if the smell was anything to go by. Early morning light was easing the greyness of the underside of the Plate. Aeris leaned over the boy and checked for a pulse, found it was strong and steady beneath her fingertips. She asked Reno, "Will you help me carry him inside?"

With much grumbling and insincere talk of sordid favors, Reno hefted the kid over a shoulder and brought him none-too-gently to the edge of the flower patch. Sitting back on her heels, Aeris watched the boy sleep, patiently waiting for him to wake up. She didn't know why but he felt familiar, like an old dream. She could imagine what he looked like when he smiled, but she couldn't think of a name or even where she might have met him before. Perhaps he'd been another specimen of Hojo's, like Elfé, but her time in the lab was a faint childhood nightmare that only gave her momentary chills, nothing concrete, nothing she could work with. But there was mako inside of him –

No, she corrected herself. It wasn't the derivative that ShinRa produced and pumped into its SOLDIERS. It was purer, lighter, as though a minute part of the Lifestream had been diverged and now flowed through him like the small tributary from a larger river. *Mother, I wish you here*, she thought, brushing aside some wayward strands of hair from the boy's face unselfconsciously.

A frown was forming on the kid's face. Aeris withdrew her hand and leaned over him, casting a shadow over the upper half of his face.

"Fuck," came the quiet groan, earning a chuckle from Reno. His eyes shot open.

"Hi," Aeris said, smiling.

"You look like shit, yo."

"…What the hell?" He tried sitting up, but Aeris immediately put a hand on his chest and firmly pushed him back. He looked sickly enough as it was without him trying to be all stoic about it.

"Don't sit up, silly, you'll just make yourself feel worse." She moved her hand to his forehead, laying her palm over the damp skin, and allowed some of that green coolness to pass through her fingertips. The lingering traces of the alcohol were like lines of rust being washed away, and when she pulled back her hand, the boy was already looking healthier. Reno had wandered away to lean
nonchalantly against a pillar, pointedly pretending he didn't know these kids.

"You're in the old church in Sector Five. We found you on the steps," Aeris told the boy. This time she didn't argue when he slowly sat up, his eyes flickering everywhere as though expecting something to explode. "I - I don't…"

"You were pretty wasted, I think," Aeris grinned. Her smile widened when he flushed slightly. "My name's Aeris."

"Um, Cloud. Strife."

Reno audibly snorted, ruining his image of apathy halfway across the church. Aeris herself didn't laugh, even though she wondered if it was a made-up name or a porn-star kind of a name, but he looked serious enough. That just made her wonder what he would look like with a good night's sleep and possibly some makeup. Those eyes would look great with a bit of eyeliner, she thought. "Are you a Cetra?"

The swiftness of a bird's flight, the Planet showed her, which was all kinds of not helpful.

"What?"

"You're not a SOLDIER and the Planet keeps whispering. So...are you a Cetra?"

WEAPON. Rebirth. Evolution.

Cloud was looking a little dazed, as though someone had woken him abruptly from a dream, plunked him down in a classroom, and told him that the rest of his future depended on how well he did on the surprise exam. His gaze was also still doing that restless flickering-around thing, and Aeris got the strangest feeling that he was trying not to look at her, that when he did then he didn't want to look away. It was eerie.

"No, I'm not, I'm…" He paused with a furrowed brow. Aeris tried not to show the disappointment that sunk heavily in her breast. "Aeris? Are you okay?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine, Cloud," she said automatically. "I'm sorry, I tend to drift away sometimes."

What she didn't know was that Cloud was staring at her and trying to fit in his distant memories with the present. Somehow Aeris seemed less confident than he remembered, a little lonelier, not quite the same girl that huffed at him indignantly when he tried to pull his macho protectiveness on her. Shit, he was thinking frantically, things are already so different – Sephiroth used to be the only general – but Planet, don't tell me Aeris herself is different!

Without thinking, Cloud shifted to sit on his heels and put a hand on Aeris' shoulder. When she looked at him, surprised, he managed a small smile and said, "I'm not an Ancient, but...I'm not sure what I am, either. The Planet, it wants me to do something and it, er, messed with me, inside."

(The relativity of events, the Planet was saying to Aeris, but she couldn't quite grasp what it was trying to say. Potential. Rebirth. It said a bunch of other things that were just too big for her little mortal brain to understand.)

When he trailed off, she laughed genuinely. "That's okay, Cloud, you don't need to explain it to me."

No, he probably didn't, and fuck but it was hard not to stare at her with blatant creepiness, to fight back the urge to memorize every detail of her face before he lost her again.
"Just be careful not to be too careless down here," she teased, which really wasn't that funny, considering how dangerous the Sectors could be, but Cloud couldn't help snorting quietly. Hel, he could still feel the remnants of what would've been an incredible hangover if Aeris hadn't helped, and he decided that was the reason his mind kept tripping back to Ifalna, practically glowing with joy over her unborn daughter, and Sephiroth, his little face scrunched with disgust when Ifalna tried to explain what was so great about babies.

But then Aeris took his hand as it fell from her shoulder and asked seriously, "Cloud, do you know why you're here?"

The question made him tense again. Aeris must have felt it, because she shook her head and continued in an increasingly distant tone, "There's a lot you probably can't tell me, but I know there's something coming. The Planet feels…restless, like it's waiting. I can feel it moving inside you (like a puppet?) and whatever it is – um. I want to help you any way I can."

Cloud blinked. She giggled again and the strange distance in her eyes disappeared. "You should probably go get some real sleep while you can. I've heard the drill sergeants can be…what did Zack say? A real pain in the ass?"

"Probably with a bit more swearing," he couldn't help adding in a mutter.

"You know Zack?"

Realizing his mistake, Cloud tried to backpedal, only he wasn't used to lying to Aeris. "N-no, not personally, but everyone knows what Z – er, Lieutenant Fair is like."

She hummed, unconvinced.

"I hate to break up this little slumber party," Reno suddenly chimed in, "but I think Private Strife better be gettin' his ass back to the barracks before it gets nailed to the Plate by the higher-ups, yo."

Almost immediately Cloud's hands tightened around Aeris' as he fought the urge to push her behind him. Back off, a part of him wanted to snarl, she's mine, mine, and his own unexpected possessiveness startled him enough that he was able to pull away and stand up, albeit shakily.

"He's right –"

"Oh, pish," she said with some of the same fire of the person Cloud remembered. She deftly plucked a flower from her garden without disturbing the others and tucked it behind his ear before he could protest. "You look sad even when you're not hungover," she told him wryly, "but it's hard for anyone to look mopey with a flower in his hair."

...Doctor Libra had served on the early Wutaian battlefields as a field surgeon and seen things that, even now, gave him the kind of nightmares that caused him to wake up in a cold sweat. He decided that entering the office of General Sephiroth with delicate, potentially top secret news took the same sort of courage as amputating limbs while under enemy fire.

"Enter."
The general's office was scrupulously clean and efficient; the only object out of place was a copy of LOVELESS sitting unread on the windowsill. Sephiroth himself was seated behind his desk with several folders opened in front of him, which he closed and put aside.

"You said you had something of urgency to discuss with me." Though there was nothing in his voice to say so, no doubt the general was confused by the doctor's presence. After all, the SOLDIERs were attended to by either Hojo himself or his closest assistants, whereas Jerold Libra handled cadets.

"Yes, sir, I do. It concerns a cadet slotted to take the SOLDIER exams."

Sephiroth gestured to the chair in front of the desk. Libra sat down, grateful that the general didn't waste time with pleasantries. Handing over the folder, the doctor said, "Some weeks ago there was an incident in one of the barracks that required the intervention of myself, another doctor, and SOLDIER Zack Fair. One of the cadets was having severe night-terrors that his squadmates couldn't wake him from.

"Naturally I gave him a complete physical. Blood tests confirmed the absence of drugs, recreational or otherwise, and on the whole he had no obvious symptoms of a mental disturbance." One of the papers that Sephiroth was flipping through had the complete results of Strife's medical tests. "I checked his entrance psych exam and found only mild tendencies towards depression and social anxiety, certainly nothing beyond the norm for a teenage boy. He passed the other sections more or less successfully, but the exams that the recruiters make candidates take just isn't detailed enough to tell for certain. There may be potential PTSD, but I don't have enough information to know for sure."

"What do you suspect, then?"

"Take a look at his blood tests."

Sephiroth flipped back a few pages before going very still. "He has mako-poisoning?"

"That's the strange thing, General – he doesn't. He's fully cognizant and aware and is able to keep up in his classes. Easily, if I'm remembering his grades correctly. It defies all logic. All known medicine, for that matter."

"Did he explain how he came to have such high levels of mako?"

"He claims to have come from a small town on the western continent that surrounds one of the earlier ShinRa reactors. On top of the constant low-level exposure typical to those towns, he apparently he fell into a pool of mako as a child and somehow managed to survive."

A slight frown line marred Sephiroth's brow. "There shouldn't be any mako leaking to the surface near a reactor."

Libra just shrugged. He wasn't exactly an engineer himself.

For a long moment Sephiroth stared at the folder in his hands, considering. Libra didn't interrupt, and was startled when he was suddenly asked, "Do any of the cadet's superiors know about his condition?"

"Sergeant Tokka is his squad commander, sir, but as far as I know, he doesn't. Strife specifically requested that I keep the matter between him, myself, and Commander Gysahl."

"And you felt it unnecessary to alert Strife's sergeant?"
"There are circumstances that made me feel such discretion was necessary." Like the sergeant's utter irascibility and renowned dislike for new recruits. If nothing else, working in ShinRa forced employees to learn diplomacy.

"Yet you would share this information with me?"

Libra had the uncomfortable sensation that he was being tested somehow, but he didn't know how, or why, so he replied truthfully. "You're the leader of SOLDIER, General. Lazard may be the legal head, and you share your rank with the two other Firsts, but you are the one that will have to lead Strife when he passes the SOLDIER exams. I believe it necessary for you to know more than anyone, except perhaps myself as the boy's current physician."

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Doctor," was the uninformative response. "I will consider the matter and speak with you further at a later date."

"Thank you for receiving me, General." Libra stood at the same time as Sephiroth and they shook hands over the desk. He could tell that the SOLDIER was carefully holding back the strength in his grasp.

"'Strife'," Sephiroth was saying, "is an odd name."

The corner of Libra's lips quirked. "His first name is Cloud. Odd as it is, it has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?"

He winced at the sudden tightening of Sephiroth's hand.

...  

When Cloud finally left the church at Reno's less-than-subtle urging, his mind was detached from his surroundings as though separated by a pane of glass. He sidestepped street kids and harried-looking strangers on autopilot, unaware of where he was going, trapped in a mental world of muted nothingness.

Gradually the odd blankness of his thoughts gave way to slow observation of the people around him. Most were poor, overshadowed in more ways than one by the Plate that covered the sky. A few were obviously Wutaian refugees, looking hunted and drawn. The presence of small mako-poisoned monsters, slinking in the shadows of alleys, was like the muted rasp of sandpaper against his skin. The lingering headache was due more to the constantly looming presence of the Lifestream than anything else, the mako having chased away the last of the alcohol.

And he thought of Aeris, more subdued than he had ever seen her, smiling in the crumbling ruins of a church.

CHAOS. Darkness. Unnatural –

"You're losing focus on your environment," Vincent told him, dressed like he lived in a gutter and smelling like it, looking down unconcernedly from where Cloud had pinned him by the throat to a wall. Cloud had to resist snarling back and released him with ill grace, ducking farther into the shadows away from the shifting mass of people behind them. "Did you get my last communication?"

If 'communication' was what it could be called. The encrypted message that Cloud had received on his PHS took more than an hour to decipher and left him wishing he had Cid's creativity with cursing. When Cloud nodded sharply, Vincent kept his voice low and straightforward. "To lose sight of one's goals is to take the rest of your allies with you."
"And to be too careful is to let opportunity slip past you," Cloud retorted coldly. He made a fist with one hand and had to consciously make himself relax when the knuckles creaked. "I was...just reminded of those goals, Vincent. And I'm tired of waiting. I've spent months doing nothing but doing training I don't actually need, and for what, to become a SOLDIER? Dear Hel, Vincent, I've got the whole fucking Planet breathing down my neck, but they're all still alive and the Plague, it isn't -"

Cloud bit down against the words tripping to get out of his mouth, not really knowing where it'd all suddenly come from or why he was starting to feel shaky again.

"You once told me that only cowards don't try," Vincent said mildly and Cloud growled, "I am," making a sharp cutting motion before he could stop himself, knowing it was something Sephiroth used to do when he was making his speeches about the inferiority of the human race and. Oh. Oh shit.

"Then think, Cloud," Vincent said coldly. "You may have the Planet behind you, but what do you think will happen if you turn it against ShinRa? It may destroy the company, yes, and Hojo, possibly. What then – Midgar? The continent? The whole of humanity? You of all people should understand that once the Planet gains momentum, it doesn't stop. ShinRa itself has become the backbone of modern society. You cannot rip it out without killing whole populations in the meantime, not when people rely on mako energy to sustain their way of life. Brute strength will not serve you now."

The Planet was billions of years old and sang with the stars and didn't understand the concept of all things in moderation. Cloud's fingernails carved crescents into his palms but he didn't say anything, and Vincent finally moved away from the wall to press something into his hand.

"I've made contact with the Wutaian resistance," he said. "This will be the last time I speak with you in person. My messages will be brief and sparse, to avoid detection by Wutaian operatives who think I might be betraying them. If you get cornered or captured, show that. It'll give you limited protection."

Cloud found himself holding a small paper bird.

"I'm sorry, Vincent," he whispered.

Vincent melted back into the crowd. Cloud stood with the black bird in his hands and, for a moment, wished for one of Zack's tackling hugs.

... 

Zack was having problems of his own. First Genesis goes MIA with a large number of SOLDIER troops, then Angeal. Director Lazard was acting strangely. Sephiroth was becoming less of his hero and more of an annoying bastard with every passing day. Hour. Nanosecond.

Building a flower cart or three for Aeris was a welcome break from the general oh-crap-everything's-falling-down-around-my-ears kind of day he was having. The first one he built was a piece of shit, but he was a SOLDIER, not a fucking carpenter, and at least it managed to get one of those beautifully heart-stopping smiles. And a kiss. Damn but he was one smooth operator.

"Zack, do you know someone named Cloud Strife?"

Or not, if she was thinking of another guy.

"Strife? Nah, don't think so."
"Really?" Aeris tilted her head thoughtfully, a length of brown hair sliding carelessly over a bare shoulder and drawing Zack's eyes like a magnet.

"Huh? Oh, yeah. Uh. Well, it sounds a little familiar. Maybe it was that one cadet with the nightmares that got so bad they had to call me and a couple doctors in."

"Nightmares?"

The sincere concern in her voice made Zack look up from the temptingly pale shoulder under the thin strap of Aeris' dress. "Yeah. It was kinda scary, but it must've gotten all worked out. I haven't heard anything else about it since then, and that was some months ago. Maybe it was just a one-time thing. The crap they call 'food' would be enough to make anyone have nightmares."

Even though she laughed, there was still tension in her shoulders, and Zack silently made a note to look into things when he got back to ShinRa.
"His first name is Cloud. 'Cloud Strife.' Odd as it is, it has a certain ring to it, doesn't it?"

"Yes, Doctor, it does," Sephiroth murmured aloud, staring at the door that had just closed behind the doctor. After a moment of stillness, he whirled back around for the file on his desk and flipped through it so forcefully that several papers fluttered to the floor. And there it was: the headshot that every ShinRa employee, from the President to the lowliest recruit, was required to have in his or her file. An unsmiling face with hair as wild as a chocobo's crest stared up at him from the glossy page. It was the face of a teenager, hardly more than a kid, but the features were unmistakable, particularly when Sephiroth had traced them over and over in his mind since the day he'd woken up to the sound of Hojo and his assistants had invaded his room. "We're leaving, boy," Hojo had said as the assistants began packing up Sephiroth's few belongings.

"Where?"

"We're moving to my lab in Midgar. This one is no longer sufficient for our needs."

"What about Professor Gast?"

"He's disappeared. A pity, given his contributions to science," Hojo had said dispassionately.

"But…Miss Ifalna?"

"She was found trying to steal a highly important specimen. She's been dealt with."

And as Sephiroth was herded from the lab he'd grown up in and loaded onto a vehicle bound for Midgar, he prayed for the first time in his life. He prayed for Cloud to wrap his arms around him and take him away from Hojo, because he knew even then that Gast had been the only shield between him and the other doctor. He prayed to see a flash of feathers or a voice in his ear saying, It'll be all right, I'll protect you.

A few years later, three mako-infused boys on the verge of adolescence developed wings of their own. Genesis once asked Sephiroth why he couldn't stand to look at the beauty that made them so unique, but Sephiroth had answered with the sharp edge of the Masamune and Genesis, for all his insensitivity, never asked again.

...
"What the hell are you talking about?"

They were whispering from the corners of their mouths, facing forward so as not to disrupt the sergeant's thorough humiliation of the poor recruit.

"Why're you avoiding me?"

"I'm not avoiding you," Elena growled, lowering her voice again when Cloud nudged her in the side. "I'm not avoiding anyone. What do I have to avoid, huh?" She flushed slightly when Cloud raised a brow. "I don't know what you're talking about, now shut up before you get us both onto toilet duty."

Even if Elena hadn't been so obviously lying, her refusal to admit anything was wrong when she normally couldn't keep quiet to save her life was a huge red flag. "Does this have anything to do with the other night – "

"Strife!" Sergeant Tokka called out, "I see you have something to share with the class."

"No, sir, I'm sorry, sir," Cloud replied as demurely as he could.

"Speak up, Strife, we're all listening! Or is all that chocobo fluff around your ears keeping you from understanding what you're supposed to do?"

Frustrated with Tokka's cliché, petty cruelty, Elena's distance, and pretty much the whole Planet in general, Cloud threw a perfect salute and said in a clear voice, "No, sir, sorry, sir. I actually wanted to offer my condolences, sir, as your constant criticism of everyone's performance but your own indicates a psychology deeply traumatized by years of seeing other people achieve what you yourself failed at. I'm sure SOLDIER is all the less without your company, sir, but fortunately, we useless canon-fodder recruits have you to keep us in our place. Sir."

There was stunned silence among the squad. Elena let out a breath that sounded like a dying animal. Cloud couldn't help a toothy smile that would have done Kadaj proud. Two and a half hours later, he stood in Commander Gysahl's office with ringing ears.

"Strife," the officer said dryly, "I admit, I wasn't expecting to see you again anytime soon after our last discussion."

Cloud very carefully kept his eyes forward on a point just about the commander's left ear.

"I've heard that you were rather insubordinate to your sergeant."

When Cloud still didn't reply, Gysahl sighed and put his elbows on the desk with his chin resting on laced fingers. "Strife, I took a look through your file. You've been written up several times for insubordinate behavior, most of which seems to be antagonism towards Sergeant Tokka. Perhaps I misjudged you, Strife. I thought you were determined to prove to myself and ShinRa that despite your unique condition, you were suitable for SOLDIER. Obviously, I was wrong."

Wait, what? "Sergeant Tokka – "

"Is your superior officer," the commander cut in smoothly. He didn't have to raise his voice to make his words cutting, "and yes, complaints have been filed against him before. But Strife, you're achieving nothing but black marks on your record, marks that you can ill afford, as well as demonstrating a willing inability to work as a team with your squad. Are you going to allow personal dislike to affect your performance in the field? Are you mature enough to handle such responsibility, or just too idiotically stubborn to admit you can't?"
"…No. No, you're right, sir," Cloud said quietly, and jumped when the commander suddenly snapped, "Damn right, Strife! I've half a mind to block you from taking the SOLDIER exams if this is an example of your self-control."

"Sir, may I have permission to speak freely?"

Gysahl fixed him with a sharp stare. "You have it."

"Sergeant Tokka is condescending and constantly undermines the morale of his squad. He's not a leader, just a bully who takes out his failure in the SOLDIER program on the recruits."

The commander sighed. "I'll look into it. In the meantime, I'm putting you on probationary status within the SOLDIER recruitment program. At the end of the four months between now and the preliminary exams, I'll review your records and decide then whether I'm going to allow you to take them.

"I'm serious, Strife. You're the first cadet we've had with mako exposure beforehand, and I'm sure you understand what I mean when I say that we don't want the mako showers to trigger something dormant in you. This is new and potentially dangerous ground."

"I understand, sir," Cloud replied softly. And he did, intellectually, and he was discovering a newfound appreciation for the freedom he'd had outside the damn company.

"Dismissed."

After the cadet left, Commander Gysahl rubbed at his temples wearily. Life had to maintain some semblance of normalcy in the scandals that were taking over SOLDIER, but as one of the officers of the regular army that acted as a liaison with Lazard's department, the stress was beginning to become overwhelming.

He glanced at the clock. And he had a meeting with Sephiroth in an hour, who had insisted on meeting in Gysahl's office supposedly for a chance to escape his own paperwork. When Sephiroth showed up, Gysahl gestured to a chair. "Hello, General. Please, have a seat."

"Thank you, Commander," said Sephiroth, moving with the creak of well-worn leather. The Masamune was tucked away outside of missions and training, but the man didn't need it to be intimidating. "Long day?"

Gysahl snorted at the wry question. "Aye, but at least the problems of the Regulars tend to be more about ammo shortage and having to back-order new uniforms."

Sephiroth snorted in return. "Indeed. Sometimes I wonder if I'm in the wrong career."

"Somehow I don't think you'd manage as a kindergarten teacher."

"Ah, perhaps I should contact your relatives. Chocobo breeding always did sound wonderfully mundane."

The commander laughed outright. "Touché, General, touché. And as enjoyable as this is, I'm afraid I asked you here for an official reason."

Sephiroth raised a hand, cutting him off. "Let me guess. Does it have something to do with a cadet named Cloud Strife?" When Gysahl arched a brow, he continued, "Doctor Libra came to me a few days ago. He said that Strife had had contact with mako as a child and was slotted to take the SOLDIER exams. He seemed certain that Strife would pass them."
Gysahl wondered what his instincts were telling him was there behind Sephiroth's otherwise inscrutable expression. "I reviewed Strife's scores, and if he were to continue as he's doing now, then yes, he would pass them. But you know better than anyone that it takes more than talent with a sword to be a SOLDIER."

"Yes," Sephiroth agreed quietly.

"I admit that in the few times I've spoken with him, Strife already stands out. He's unusually mature for his age and more driven than troops twice as old."

"An effect from the mako?"

"Possibly. But lately he's been getting written up for insubordination. Granted, his sergeant is known for being a hard-ass, but it does make me wonder how effective he'd be in a unit, whether Regular or SOLDIER. Particularly SOLDIER, which was full of superpowered persons of varying degrees of eccentricity.

"What would you suggest, then?"


"You think it wise?"

"No," the commander replied dryly, "not at all. The risk of being accused of favoritism is always a factor. But as I've said before – "

"This is a unique case," Sephiroth finished.

"Indeed."

There was a pause before Sephiroth nodded sharply. "I will take a look at the mission itinerary."

When Cloud got back to his barracks, it was empty. He let his bag fall to the floor and flopped onto his bunk with a long sigh. Better get your head out of your ass, Strife, said Cid's voice.

Cloud gave himself one more minute of lying with his arms spreadeagled, staring up at the springs of the mattress above him. Then he pulled himself upright and slid to the floor beside his bunk with a light thump, folding his legs and taking a deep breath. "All right, Strife," he muttered aloud, closing his eyes and taking another breath.

He'd been letting the pressure get to him. Routine and tests and more routine that did nothing except wind him up like a spring until he lashed out at Vincent, of all people, who was right, of course. The Planet's solutions tended to involve using the Lifestream as a weapon and Geostigma and the Plague and oh, yeah, changing the essence of a person to suit its own needs without so much as a tip of the hat, not that he was bitter about it or anything. The Planet took a while to build its momentum and then it couldn't stop until that momentum had been worn down, even if it ended up killing itself. So, he probably shouldn't try chucking the Planet at anything unless he wanted to kill everything on it, he concluded, which meant that this would be a battle of human wit and resourcefulness. AVALANCHE would be useful, it suddenly occurred to him, as well as the Wutaian resistance. If I can contact AVALANCHE, perhaps it can work together with Wutai.

Cloud let his head fall back against the side of his mattress as he turned the burgeoning idea over, looking for strengths and flaws. AVALANCHE and Wutai both wanted to see ShinRa fall, but
there was still the problem of a cultural divide. Then again, Yuffie certainly hadn't hesitated to insert herself into Cloud's party…

He set the idea aside to worry over when he couldn't sleep. He needed to focus on things he could do now. Like learning why Vincent had thought it important enough to mention the tension between ShinRa departments when Cloud had first come to Midgar. Who Vincent's contact within SOLDIER was. Figuring out what Hojo meant to do if Jenova's cells weren't responding like they used to. Who the hell Genesis and Angeal were in the grand scheme of things.

Cloud glanced at the hiding place of the two data discs. There was always a possibility that if Cloud could discredit Hojo, then the SOLDIERs, who were under his direct medical control, might reconsider their loyalties to a company using them as human test subjects. Simply killing Hojo wouldn't work; it would just leave room for another scientist of like mind to take his place.

Cloud sighed, and waited for lights-out.

Long after it went dark, long after his squadmates were asleep, Cloud slipped out of bed. He got as far as the hallway outside his squad's barracks before there was a hand on his shoulder. Twitching in the orange light of the emergency signs, Cloud barely refrained from putting his boot knife through Elena's eye.

"Anyone ever told you you're really jumpy?" she hissed, long hair messy from shoving it into a hasty ponytail. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Oh, for Hel's sake," Cloud muttered, grabbing her by the arm and dragging her into the nearest bathroom.

"Cloud, this is a men's toilet, what the fuck – "

"Why are you following me?"

She glared as she jerked her arm away defensively, and Cloud immediately regretted grabbing her. "I already know you have trouble sleeping, but this is the first time you've actually snuck out. Why wouldn't I follow you? Besides, it's not like you care what I do."

Cloud paused and wondered how this had so quickly become a discussion on something else. "Why have you been avoiding me? And don't give me that 'I don't know what you're talking about' bullshit, just tell me."

"Gods, you're such a – a guy!" This was apparently a dire insult. "We got drunk and I - I kissed you - "

"...Okay?" said Cloud, who was trying to understand but drew a blank instead.

"I kissed you," she repeated, but instead of sounding angry she just sounded a little lost, and Cloud suddenly remembered hearing harsh words, seeing violating hands.

"It's okay," he said softly, "it doesn't have to mean anything. It's not a - a promise or obligation or whatever."

"I know that," she snapped, but some tension left her shoulders. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"Do you, uh...like me?" he asked tentatively, dear gods, being an awkward teenager sucked.
"I don't know," she replied, quiet, and Cloud, telling himself he was perfectly capable of being an adult, added, "I like you, but only as a friend. Is that enough?"

There was a brief pause, then, "Yeah." Another pause, and she repeated more firmly, "Yeah, I mean, that's enough. Weird, but...good. I think."

They exchanged small smiles, but the sense of camaraderie was broken by, "Are you gay?"

"Uh. What?"

"Are you gay?"

Red flushed horribly across his cheeks until his face felt hot. "I - I don't, uh. I guess I never really thought about it?" Only a partial lie, as no one could look at Zack Fair or General Sephiroth as a teenager (the first time around) and not be haunted by filthy dreams that night. But generally, no, he'd never actually really thought about it; sex had usually been about human contact, not sex itself.

Elena gave him an uncomfortably thoughtful once-over. "Hmm. Okay."

The quiet was less awkward and more comfortable, and Cloud, whose heart had only had room for very few people for a long time, was surprised to feel so much relief.

"So now you get to tell me what you're doing sneaking around after curfew."

And there it went. "Elena, just go back to bed."

"It's something illegal, isn't it?"

"Elena," Cloud said seriously, and she visibly wilted.

"So it really is something illegal."

"I'm just going to take a look at the class scores. You know how much I want to be a SOLDIER and I'm screwed if I don't pass the prelims."

"Give me a break, Cloud, I'm not that stupid," Elena huffed, looking both hurt and pissed off. "We both know all the instructors love you. Except Lisam, he never did get over you correcting him on the best way to scrape a chocobo's talons, and you never did tell me how the hell you even knew that."

Well, no, he hadn't known that about the instructors. "Please, Elena, just go back to bed. This is something I need to do on my own."

She bit her lip, shook her head and straightened her shoulders. "Cloud, you're too quiet and too serious and sometimes your tunnel-vision is so bad you can't see the most obvious shit – "

"Thank you, Elena."

"– but you're my friend and I'm not going to let you do something stupid by yourself."

They stared each other down. Is it so bad to ask for help? whispered his mother's voice. Sometimes being strong means knowing when you need it. Elena's talent with computers, if that was something she had as a teenager as well as an adult, would probably make things easier. "Fine, but promise me something."
"What?"

"I'm looking for information that could get us both killed if we're discovered," he said bluntly. "If you tell anyone, or even hint at it to someone else, ShinRa will hear about it, and the Turks won't hesitate to make us disappear."

"Cloud –"

He took her by the shoulders and held her gaze, willing her to understand that this wasn't just him being melodramatic. "Elena, I'm serious. There's a reason I never told you why I went into the SOLDIER program. If you come with me, you have to promise that you won't so much as breathe about it."

Timidly, she asked, "Cloud, have you ever killed anyone?"

There was a long silence.

"O-okay," she said shakily, "I promise."

"You have to mean it, Elena. You can't just blurt this out."

She narrowed her eyes and drew herself up to her full height, which happened to be a good inch taller than him. "I can handle it, Cloud. I'm gonna be a Turk. And if I fuck up, which I won't, then you've got your blackmail on me anyway."

Knowing the family member of a Turk could put the company in a very sticky situation indeed, if he'd been the type to consider using her against her sister. "I'm looking for information on Hojo," he finally told her quietly.

"That creepy professor guy that follows Sephiroth around?" she whispered back, and to her credit, she looked completely serious. "What on earth do you want with him? Isn't he the main doctor for the SOLDIERs or something? He looks like he was spawned by a sewer rat."

"Yes, him," and now he had some interesting mental images about Hojo's ancestry. "Hojo was part of the team that discovered the process for creating SOLDIERs. After another scientist named Gast was killed, he was instated as head of the science department."

"So?"

"He's a narcissistic sociopath that experiments on humans. How do you think they figured out how to make SOLDIERs?"

Her mouth opened and closed a few times.

"Still want to know?" he asked dryly.

"Hell yes!" Elena cried. "What kind of experiments? Why hasn't he been caught yet? How the fuck do you know about all this? I mean, no offense, Cloud, but you're not exactly Rufus ShinRa."

"I can't tell you."

"Can't, or won't?" she asked shrewdly. "Because like you said, just what you've told me is enough to get us dragged out and shot."

"Both."
Visibly struggling with that answer, she finally huffed, "Fine, at least you're honest about it. Asshole."

As they crept out of the restroom, Elena kept sneaking glances at Cloud. He looked like Cloud, with those unfairly blue eyes and the scrunchy little frown line between his brows, and as far she could tell he hadn't ever lied to her without her catching him at it. But what was he up to, and who was he working for? Was 'Cloud' even his real name? She knew it sounded too fake to be true.

Unlike the dimmer dormitory hallways, the main corridor was lit by a stark fluorescence that made them blink owlishly. "Pretend we're going on duty," Cloud whispered, hardly moving his lips. Elena shook her head slightly and clucked her tongue as they walked.

"Amateur," she sighed and, hesitating for a moment and with the slightest glance at a security camera tucked near the ceiling, grabbed Cloud by the shoulders and planted her lips on his.

"Wha – " was all he managed, and Elena tried hard not to think about what she'd just done.

"A guy and a girl cadet, sneaking around after hours? If they catch us, they'll just think we were fucking around and give us a warning, at most," and he whispered back, "Seriously? Do people still fall for that one?"

She made a show of straightening her ponytail before she walked away, Cloud shaking his head as he caught back up to her.

They managed to pass through the main floors without incident, mainly through Cloud's talent at slipping around; obviously he'd made a point of memorizing the locations and timing of each security post and camera. On the occasion they were spotted by a couple guards, Elena's fast talk and pretty face got them past.

"You know, I bet you could do that too," she murmured to Cloud as they ducked around the corner, "you've got the eyes to do a bit of good fluttering – ".

"Fuck off," Cloud muttered.

Eventually they made it near the elevators. When she started towards them, Cloud took her elbow and shook his head, instead pointing towards the door that led to a computer lab. It was the sort of lab that had rows of computers where cadets and lower-ranked officials could conduct their business, but given the time of night a cadet's card wouldn't be enough to get them past the doors.

"But Cloud, we don't have a passcode," she hissed, but Cloud held up a keycard with a decidedly vicious smile and replied, "The tall one never felt me take it."

(It hadn't been Yuffie that taught Cloud such a skill, however, but Neo-Midgar's orphans.)

"Awesome," she cried, clamping a hand over her own mouth when she realized that she'd all but yelled. The two waited a few tense moments, but no one came running. Cloud swiped the card and was slipping inside the moment the door opened. He started booting up a computer in a corner, where the glow faced a blank wall rather than a window, while Elena prowled around in restless curiosity.

"Why here?" she called out softly, casting her eyes back at the door every so often. It wasn't like ShinRa was stupid enough to give cadets access to computers that were linked to any kind of important information without loads of security and gods knew what else. She wondered if any guards would believe her if she claimed they just wanted to download some porn. But Cloud didn't answer, his face eerily lit by the glow of the screen and his fingers clicking quietly across the
"Elena, come here, please, I need your help."

She took his seat and peered at what he'd pulled up. "Are you in the financial department? What the hell for?"

"Because that'll tell us how much money is going to each department," he said softly, leaning over her shoulder and staring intently at the screen. "It'll give me a starting point."

"Uh, how?"

"If Hojo's working on a big project, there'll be increase in funding, right? Then it's a matter of figuring out which lab it's being directed to, which in turn would give us an idea of what he's working on."

If she was impressed by his cleverness, she'd sooner shoot herself than admit it. Because the information wasn't considered very sensitive, it wasn't as difficult as it could've been to find a way into the company's financial records. Elena's sister had given her a few pointers before they'd stopped talking, and then her sister had been given an assignment in Wutai.

"Hold on," Cloud said suddenly, leaning over more closely.

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"Two hundred million gil on a single project?" she asked dubiously. "That's a lot for this kind of thing, right?"

Cloud looked shaken, which was disturbing in itself. "Yes, it is. Usually that kind of money only comes with the bigger stuff."

"'Bigger' as in 'human-sized' bigger?" she asked quietly, and felt herself pale when he nodded.

"It's not surprising, since it's listed under the SOLDIER program."

She shuddered. "Weird name, too. Doesn't it have something to with resurrection?"

"What do you mean?"

"I dunno, I think I remember hearing it used somewhere. Something to do with resurrection. Oh, but I guess you wouldn't hear that kind of thing way out in Nibelheim, huh?"

It was Cloud's turn to go pale.

"Cloud, you okay?"

He was abruptly logging them off the computer, casting glances out the lab to where the next nightshift would soon begin. "I think I know where to start looking now."

Elfreda Strife was a rather interesting person, in a cheerfully insane sort of way, and prone to fluttery birdlike gestures with her hands. Zangan wondered who, before Cloud had left for Midgar, had actually taken care of whom in this household, or if Cloud had come by his habit of spacing out at random moments honestly.
"Oh, my grandda' would've remembered when the reactor was built," Elfreda had told Zangan when he helped her back to her cottage from the ruined mansion. "It's what brought all the villagers, you see, their own grandda's were employees that brought their wives and families with them to the mountains. Bit of a shock, I imagine, finding yourself at the edge of the world before Hel's gates!"

She'd laughed, then, and Zangan had smiled wryly, thinking about what it meant to have a home not just for the body but also the heart and what happened when one or both were taken away.

When Elfreda laid down a fresh loaf and another pot of tea on the table, Zangan asked, "What do you think of the altar?"

"Oh, it's a beautiful piece of work," she gushed, clasping her hands around one of the necklaces strung around her neck, "it's such a pity that it's not above ground anymore."

"It used to be?"

"Of course! You don't hide your warnings, do you, otherwise what would be the point of making them?"

Good, solid rural practicality, Zangan thought with kind amusement. The bread was warm and soft, though grainy, and he could tell that the butter had been handmade by Frauke, the herder's wife. "What sort of goddess is it warning us about?"

She kept fiddling with one of the necklaces, which appeared to be a length of black cord strung with an assortment of shiny metal pieces. "There's only one I can think of," she said. "She doesn't have a name because the Nibel gods forbade anyone to speak it. They say she fell from the sky like a ball of fire and would have destroyed everything if the Æsir hadn't stopped her."

"The who?"

"The gods," she explained, as though it should've been painfully obvious. "Ancients."

The term tickled Zangan's memory, but he'd never made a point in studying general history.

"Oh! And speaking of death, Mr Zangan, the new year is coming up. Fenrir and I would love for you to join us, there's nothing so depressing as celebrating alone." She was smiling, but he saw her glance at the single plate and cup sitting in the kitchen sink and the way her fingers tangled themselves in the wolf's fur.

"I would be honored," he replied, and she practically glowed.

Genesis was...displeased.

"I'm telling you," Hollander gasped, "I don't have any of Jenova's cells! The little I had was used up in your and Angeal's conceptions!"

Genesis stared into the small blue eyes of the doctor he had pinned to the wall by the throat and mused that Hollander really was a pathetic man.

"Let him go, Genesis," Angeal said softly.

His hand tightened briefly around the doctor's throat, eliciting a weak whimper. His lip curled.
"Isn't it amazing that this is the man who became our father in all but blood?" He allowed Hollander to drop to the floor, and the man immediately scuttled back with a pained grunt. Genesis stifled the urge to kick him, the same kind of urge that drove children to stomp on insects without any real thought; it wasn't kindness that held him back but rather a twisted sense of disdain. This laboratory had been so fascinating to him as a child, but with older eyes he could see it as the escapist retreat for a scientist that it truly was. Hollander, he thought unsympathetically, was like a squirrel mindlessly hoarding food and then forgetting where he'd hidden it all.

"Killing him won't get us anywhere."

"Perhaps not," Genesis agreed mildly, "but I'm afraid I don't have the same time to be diplomatic that you do, old friend." Every day that passed brought death a little closer. Every morning, a few more strands of auburn hair were greyed.

Angeal's hand on his shoulder provided a strange mix of annoyance and unexpected comfort. "Contact Sephiroth," he murmured, his breath stirring the smaller hairs on the back of Genesis' neck. "Tell him."

"You always were a naïve fool. Sephiroth was never one of us, Angeal. Something broke him inside before I ever got the chance to do that myself."

It would be hilarious if it weren't infuriating: the hero of Wutai, a self-made island in a sea of worshipers because something had shattered that fragile little heart long ago. Neither Genesis nor Angeal ever knew what it was that had kept a wall between them and Sephiroth, not even on the rare occasion they'd invited him into their bed, and to be quite honest Genesis hadn't particularly cared. It was just one more crack in the cold face that he wanted to pick and claw at until Sephiroth – so fucking perfect – finally fell apart in his hands.

Angeal's hand tightened on Genesis' shoulder until a clavicle threatened to snap. "Don't keep fooling yourself, Genesis, it ruins your image."

He finally shrugged off the hand and stepped away, thinking with cynical amusement that if all this mayhem kept up then Angeal might actually develop a sense of biting sarcasm.

"'When the war of the beasts brings about the world's end, the goddess descends from the sky'."

...  

"Wait, what?"

"Decorum, Strife."

"Sir, sorry, sir, but...what? Sir?"

Cloud knew that Commander Gysahl was amused at his bewilderment, but he was too damn bewildered to care.

"You're being put on assignment with SOLDIER Second Zack Fair and Tseng of the Turks," the commander repeated patiently. "In one week, you will go to Banora and assist in the investigation concerning the disappearance of General Rhapsodos and his men."

"Yes, sir, but – but sir, I'm not a SOLDIER," Cloud said numbly, pointing out the obvious. And when did Zack become a Second? His heart twisted to think that he hadn't even noticed such a change in Zack's life. Selfish. Or a bad stalker, whichever distracted him from the fact that he was going on a mission with Zack, dear gods.
Gysahl looked at him gravely. "No, Strife, you're not, which makes this a very delicate matter. You've demonstrated the kind of potential that, if trained properly, could make you a good one, but myself and General Sephiroth aren't willing to take chances. This is a test, Strife. Perform well, and I will allow you to take the SOLDIER exams. Act poorly, and I'll make sure you never see the mako showers."

Sephiroth…?

Feeling like his head was spinning (was it only last night that he and Elena had sneaked into the computer lab?) Cloud quietly replied, "Yes, sir, understood, sir."

Gysahl's worn face softened a little. "This is quite a burden to bear when you're only sixteen. Just remember your dream, Strife."

Sixteen, fourteen, forty…it was a good thing there was no one to worry about Cloud's birthday. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Cloud dreamed.

"This Plague is essentially a virus," Nanaki explained, voice crackling through the PHS. "Transportation was now impossible between Midgar and Cosmo Canyon, but they hadn't yet lost radio. "Kadaj, Yazoo, and Loz were manifestations of the splintered aspects of Sephiroth, and between Cloud's Tsurugi and Aeris' rain, they should've been destroyed. However, it appears that what we're dealing with are the entirely unintelligent forms of Jenova. Think of her cells as a mindless cancer, spreading and mutating without need for any input from the original host, and you'll have some idea of what's going on."

"So how do we kill it?" Cloud demanded harshly.

There was a dark chuckle. "That's the problem, isn't it? The living show no signs of this infection, it's when the body dies that the inert cells become active and reanimate. How do you kill something that's already dead?"

"Zombies!" Yuffie exclaimed on a third line, nearly incomprehensible through the distance between Neo-Midgar and Wutai.

"But where do the cells come from?" Tifa asked.

"Perhaps that's the wrong word to use," Nanaki amended, "my apologies for bringing that up, Cloud."

He grunted.

"It's not a physical infection so much as a…spiritual one. Jenova was able to influence anyone who carried her cells as though the cells were a sort of transmitter for her will, but now, without a single conscience to hold it all together…it's like breaking the wall of a cell and allowing the fluid inside to spill out, I believe it may be the Lifestream itself that's poisoned – "

"Bullshit!" Barret interrupted with a growl, slamming his fist onto the table. Tifa caught the PHS before it could tumble to the floor of the bar.

Suddenly Cloud twitched, eyes flickering to the northwestern wall. He was already up and moving as he said, "Sector Four. Tifa, make sure the kids are safe. Yuffie, these things attack in waves –
Outside the bar, a few seconds behind Cloud's sudden action, the alarm sirens started blaring.

Outside the city, piles of dead were burning so that the corpses couldn't be used against the living. It stank like hell, and eventually Cloud was one of the only ones left out there, stoically casting Fire until the last bit of flesh was consumed. He would never admit it to Tifa, but sometimes he stared at the flames and wished he was one of the corpses; wished that the Masamune had taken him down with Sephiroth in the reactor all those years ago; wished that Zack had been a little more reasonable and a little less sentimental and left him to die, comatose; wished that all those close calls with monsters and Sephiroth and the Remnants had been just too close to survive.

Sephiroth wrapped his arms too tightly around Cloud's chest from behind, whispering into his ear, "Why do you keep pretending to be human, puppet?"

"Why not?" he replied wearily, staring at the burning piles of mutilated bodies, and then he was no longer the Cloud from Before but the Cloud that was trying to stop it all happening again.

"Humans always wish they were angels," said a new voice, and Cloud was looking up a handsome face, eyes blue and mako-bright, auburn hair going grey. He was slightly shorter than Sephiroth, dressed in red rather than black, and Cloud knew that this was a cruel man.

Sephiroth's arms tightened further around him as the stranger shoved a hand into Cloud's chest, breaking bone as easily as twigs, ripping muscle and vein. The agony was so unexpected that Cloud just choked and stared, wide-eyed, as gloved fingers wrapped around his fluttering heart and jerked. Vital things snapped apart.

"And angels always wish they were human."
In Which Elena Gives Herself a Stern Talking-to and Cloud Is Dramatic

Chapter Notes

Warning: Night-terrors, Cloud being dramatic. (These two things are unrelated.)

...When Cloud woke up, he was on the floor of the barracks tangled in his blanket and the limbs of several other cadets, panting as though he'd come out of a battle. Hanging over the room was the kind of ringing silence that follows loud noise. One of his hands stung as though he'd slapped the palm down on a hard surface.

"Shit, you're stronger than you look," muttered one of his squadmates, breaking the odd spell. Cloud felt a flush of humiliation start on his neck and spread up to his face as three boys released his arms and legs. Elena leaned over from his bunk.

"Told you," she said to them cheekily.

"...What happened?"

"Another night-terror. Not as bad as the first one, but damn, Cloud."

His flush, if possible, deepened. He managed to get to his feet, despite the one kid (Smith? Small?) who, despite his brawny bulk, appeared too scared to let go of Cloud's left leg. "Sorry. Um. Thanks, but why...?"

"Why didn't we call the doctors this time?" someone provided.

"Well, yeah." Doctor Libra wasn't standing over him with aggrieved exasperation.

The eight other cadets shifted uncomfortably. Elena, the only girl, watched them for a moment before sighing loudly. "Because you did what we've all wanted to do but were too afraid to."

"...Which was?"

"Man, you totally gave Tokka a heart attack," one of the cadets burst out with no small amount of glee.

"That asshole!"

"Fucker deserved it."

"Too bad you got in trouble for telling the truth, though."

Taking pity on Cloud's nonplussed expression, Elena explained, "The guys realized that you're not always an antisocial ass, so if you're already going for check-ups twice a month and the higher-ups haven't kicked you out yet, well, they can be cool too."

"I…thank you," he finally managed through the blush he knew was raging on his face. Okay, the
nightmares were really kind of hard to miss, but did Elena tell everyone about his required health exams? Thank Hel that 'prostate' wasn't a regular item on Libra's checklist.

"Why do you have such bad nightmares, anyway?" asked the biggest guy. Small, Cloud remembered, that was his name, because the universe often had a sad sense of humor. When Cloud glanced at Elena, she pointedly leaned back on his bunk and said nothing.

"I don't know," he said.

"Then why does it sound like you're getting your ass kicked seven ways to hell?" another pointed out doggedly.

"You're such a nosy bitch, Lee."

"Fuck you too, asshole!"

"Fuck your mom!"

"Fuck your face!"

Cloud rolled his eyes at this stunning display of maturity as he got to his feet, absently checking to make sure his boxers hadn't fallen off in the ruckus.

"All right, kiddies, shut the fuck up before you keep us all awake until reveille," one of the older cadets grumbled, "you can all circle-jerk later. Strife, try to keep the screaming to a dull roar when we have early-morning Tokka torture."

It sounded enough like something Cid would say that Cloud said drolly, "Next time I've got nightmares I'll make sure to crawl into bed with you."

There was scattered laughter and some more ribbing as everyone made their way back to bed. Someone commented about needing to report to maintenance, the lights had been flickering oddly. Elena didn't try to worm her way under the blankets with Cloud, but as she went back to her own bunk she wolf-whistled quietly. He snorted, but was pleased to see that she was apparently comfortable enough with him to actually do things like that.

It wasn't until the room was once more filled with quiet snores and slow breathing that Cloud was able to let out a long breath. He stared at the darkness behind his eyelids and thought about his dream, or maybe it was a flashback mangled with lingering trauma and ShinRa's overabundance of propaganda posters featuring the SOLDIER Firsts. Official ShinRa policy claimed that Genesis and his men were on a prolonged mission in Wutai to suppress the remaining insurgency groups, but Elena whispered that, according to underground rumor, he'd actually defected, and that Angeal had gone to join him.

And now Cloud was due to go look for them both in a week's time. With Zack.

With Zack.

Don't chicken out, he told himself sternly, absently resting a hand over his sternum where the Masamune scar had once been. Lying on his back, he closed his eyes and took several long, slow breaths. In the darkness behind his eyelids he could trace the flickering contours of the pyres rising from the Midgar plains, the warped and mutated Plague-animated corpses, and the small smile on Genesis' face as his fingers crushed Cloud's heart. His thoughts wandered to his mum's stories. Is this how those men felt when challenged by the gods to something impossible?
The gods were bloody lazy, he mentally sighed, if they had mortals running around doing their errands all the time. *That's right, Planet, I'm looking at you.*

He could swear he felt a grumpy rumbling in return.

…

Elena was confused.

It wasn't an emotion she was used to. Anger, sure, and cheerfulness, and maybe sometimes she could admit to being embarrassed when she shoved her foot in her mouth. But if she was ever confused or, gods forbid, *insecure*, then it was just her teenage hormones talking. It wasn't like she was jealous of her smart, successful Turk of an older sister, and she most certainly did *not* resent the fact that their father had obviously favored said older sister when Elena had been a perfectly good pupil in ShinRa's academy.

But then she met Cloud. He was cute in a kind of serious, country boy way. There were other guys in the trooper ranks who were more serious or more attractive, smarter or quieter, ones who didn't act like gatherings of more than three people were enemy territory and others who also wouldn't have hesitated to interfere when a couple assholes felt entitled to a woman's body. So it wasn't any one quality in particular that made all her Turk-senses start tingling but rather the head-tilting picture they made as a whole. The first time she'd woken up to his night-terrors, half-blind with panic, she'd wondered, *What goes on in your head? Do I even want to know?*

His story to the doctor about falling into mako as a kid was too convenient and full of plot holes – maybe it explained the glow in his eyes that was only really visible in dim light or at odd angles, maybe it actually explained a lot about him in general – but she knew, she *knew* it wasn't the whole story. If it was even a part of the story at all.

And Elena was confused because she didn't know what she actually wanted from Cloud. The kiss had been...a kiss, sloppy with alcohol and not really something she probably would've wanted while sober, especially not when she still sometimes heard *whore* and *slut* being hissed into her ear no matter how much she knew it was bullshit. Friendship, maybe, she didn't have much of that, which was admittedly often her own fault because people were just so easy to manipulate sometimes, but more often than not he seemed about as emotionally invested as a rock. And that *hurt*. Fuck, did it hurt, this was one of those rare times she'd decided to ignore her more misanthropic tendencies and take a chance, and there were times she regretted that but there were other times when she *didn't*, and *that* was the most confusing thing of all.

Then Cloud went and yelled at their superior – *Cloud*, he'd *lost his temper*, what the hell – and snuck out later to pull his own Turk impression and, and…

Cloud wasn't who she thought he was.

Cloud was going on a mission in a week with a SOLDIER and a Turk.

Okay, so the guy was passing their classes with flying colors and spent more time training than sleeping, and he was just a driven person, a country boy trying to make it in the big city and all that jazz, so if anyone was going to be given this chance it stood to reason that it'd be him.

But he wasn't who she thought he was.

And he was going on a mission with a SOLDIER and a Turk.

And *that* hurt.
Now Elena was standing in the bathroom at some unholy hour of the morning dabbing paper
towels soaked in cold water against a forming bruise on her cheek. She'd made the mistake of
getting too close to Cloud when he started yelling and been rewarded with a glancing blow from
the flat of his palm. She'd staggered back, let some of the other cadets tackle Cloud and hold him
down until he woke up, and pasted on a grin until everything had calmed down and she could slip
out alone, like she was the one that should be ashamed.

In the harsh light over the sinks, the bruise was already shadowed. It'd probably be nearly purple
by morning. The fucker had one hell of a swing. Wasn't likely that a monster would be able to get
the jump on him during his mission. And where was little Elena? In a bathroom by herself in the
middle of the night wincing over an accidental bruise on her face. Not training in the gym. Not
dazzling the instructors with her quiet, reasonable answers in class. Not preparing for a high-profile
mission. Not breaking through security to dig up dirt on the world's most dangerous and powerful
corporation.

("I'm gonna be a Turk," she declared fiercely, "a better one than my sister.")

When had she forgotten that this wasn't just another year in the academy? When had she forgotten
her ambition?

When you thought putting on a uniform would be enough and you went right back to being a little
girl, part of her replied snidely.

But how to get noticed?

Act like the goddamn Turk you want to be.

Her bangs puffed out with the long breath she let out as she pressed more paper towels against the
bruise and wondered how soon she could sneak off alone to the computer labs on the upper floors.

…

The week passed in a whirlwind, leaving Cloud standing in Commander Gysahl's office wondering
where all the time had gone. Gysahl himself was, as usual, sitting behind the large desk. A tall, thin
man that Cloud didn't recognize straightened from where he'd been leaning a hip against the
furniture and held out a gloved hand.

"Hello, Private Strife. My name is Director Lazard. Sephiroth was going to see you and Zack off,
but I'm afraid that something urgent came up and so you'll have to make do with me."

"Um, thank you, sir," Cloud managed as the surreal feeling of the morning worsened. He shook the
man's hand, silently impressed by the strength of the grip.

"No need to worry, Strife, everything's fine," Lazard smiled. "I know Commander Gysahl has
explained to you how unusual it is for a trooper to accompany a SOLDIER on this kind of mission,
and I merely wanted to meet the young man that has all the instructors in an uproar."

"I promise, sir, none of it's true."

Lazard laughed aloud. It was a pleasant sound, low and relaxed and a little tired as though they
were old friends sharing a joke after a long day at work. "Oh good, I was worried there for a bit
that ShinRa was going to meet its end in you!"

A muscle in Cloud's back twitched.
"I need to be going, but Strife, it was lovely to meet you," said the director. "Commander Gysahl will brief you on everything you need to know. And don't worry, Zack will take care of you, he's as good a man as he is a SOLDIER."

_I know._ "Thank you, sir."

Lazard left with a small smile and slight bow, and Cloud spent the next half hour listening closely as Gysahl filled in the details to the general outline he'd given Cloud a few days before. It appeared that this was essentially a recon mission to find clues on Genesis' whereabouts and activities rather than a direct confrontation of any kind. The reason for the relative secrecy was mostly due to the missing general's high profile and notoriety, he said. By the time Gysahl dismissed him to get suited up, visit the armory, and go to the transport, Cloud was experiencing a strange mix of anticipation and anxiety; anticipation, because he finally had a mission more important than clearing the monsters between Nibelheim and the ShinRa mansion, and anxiety, because both Zack and Tseng were going to be with him. He played restlessly with his helmet as he waited in the helicopter, feeling like he was being melodramatic but unable to help it.

"I hear you're going out with Zack and Tseng," the pilot yelled from the cockpit over the loud whirling of the copter's blades. He was grinning under his goggles, and when Cloud nodded he continued, "Don't worry, kid! Zack won't let Tseng leave you behind!"

"I don't know, sir, Tseng _is_ a Turk!" he called back loudly. The man chuckled.

"This your first mission? It is? Bah, you'll do great, kid, just remember to keep your head down, your eyes open, and your weapon at hand. Everyone starts at the bottom, remember!"

"Yes, sir!"

The pilot was about to reply when they both noticed a SOLDIER and a Turk heading towards them. The sight of Zack with the distinctive outline of a sword over his shoulder made Cloud's heart start pounding.

("Everything will be okay, kid. Just stick with me. Everything will be all right."

(\_Cloud couldn't respond, so he stared up at the narrow hilt protruding over Zack's stooped shoulders and wrapped the words around his broken mind.\_)

"I will be piloting," Tseng called out in greeting. The pilot shrugged and gave Cloud a conspiratorial wink before jumping out of the copter, handing over the cockpit without argument. Tseng gave Cloud a brief, disinterested once-over before taking the controls.

Zack, on the other hand, waved to the departing pilot before leaping easily into the copter. "So, who's the lucky guy they stuck us with – hey, I know you!"

"…You do?" Cloud's voice did _not_ crack.

"Yeah, you were the cadet that medical was trying to sedate – "

Zack was interrupted by the lurching of the aircraft and, having been standing, was sent face-first against the metal wall with a yelp.

"Tseng, you asshole, you did that on purpose!"

Cloud blinked slowly. Fortunately for Zack's dignity Tseng didn't attempt anything while flying thousands of feet above the ground, and so he took the chance to ramble at the top of his voice.
Cloud listened to topics that ranged from the weird jungle monster called a Touch Me to just how awesome Angeal was at practically every time of day, trying not to look like was listening too intently. Zack was animated as he spoke, using both hands and sometimes entire limbs to illustrate a point. Somehow he seemed more...excitable than Cloud remembered.

The moment they touched down in Banora, Zack was leaping out the helicopter and practically kissing the earth. "Oh thank gods, I think Tseng has it out for me!" he bemoaned to the world at large. His voice was slightly raspy from having talked non-stop.

"If I did, you wouldn't have enough time to complain about it," the Turk replied. Zack blanched while Cloud took the chance to look around. It was the kind of landscape that could only be described as 'pastoral.' Rolling green fields under a blue sky were broken up by the occasional small farmhouse or orchard, and the warm air was touched with a pleasantly cool breeze and the smells of hay and ripening fruit. Apples, if Cloud guessed correctly, with a hint of peaches or apricots.

"So this is Angeal's home, huh?" Zack observed, turning in a circle to get the full effect. "This explains the paisley apron in his kitchen."

Cloud grinned.

Tseng was already walking up a path shaded by the curved trunks of white trees that reminded Cloud uncomfortably of the forest near the Forgotten Capital. But in the clear sunlight they simply shone a brilliant marble-white, lacking any sort of glow or reminders of death.

"Weird trees," Zack commented, pausing to peer more closely.

"White Banora," Tseng called back over his shoulder. "You probably know them as dumbapples."

"Seriously? Man, awesome! Wait, Genesis is from Banora too? Since when?"

"Genesis and Angeal are childhood friends."

"Hey, Angeal never told me that. How do you know? Do you have some kind of Turk mind-reading thing going on? I bet you do. You assholes always seem to know the things no one wants anyone else to know about."

It suddenly hit Cloud just how much he'd really, truly missed Zack and the force of it nearly had him sitting hard on the ground. He caught himself against a tree, breathing hard and fixing his eyes so hard on the shine of Zack's sword to remind himself that this was now, not then, that he almost blinded himself.

Up ahead, Tseng was suddenly forced to leap back a few steps as several monsters dropped down from the trees and brandished their weapons.

"Oh hey, company! Dibs!"

And Zack slaughtered the monsters without Tseng or Cloud having to lift a finger. He posed and flashed them a heroic grin and Cloud found himself able to breathe again.

No, not monsters, Cloud was realizing as he crouched over the bodies. Humans, or at least humanoid, dressed in strange red armor and wielding sickles. No one tried to stop him as he pulled the helmet from one of them, though Zack said increduously, "Hey now, Cloud, what're you doing?"
Fully human face, as well, and damn him if it didn't look exactly like Genesis Rhapsodos. There was something...wrong with the body that he couldn't quite put his finger on, but it reminded him vaguely of the mental buzzing he'd gotten whenever he was around a Sephiroth clone. He couldn't hear the cacophony of rage madness vengeance that had always been Jenova's trademark, but the sensation was making his skin crawl.

"A Genesis copy!"

Tseng looked at Zack sharply. "Where did you hear that?"

"Sephiroth," came the absent reply as he knelt down beside the other body and took off its helmet. It also mirrored Genesis. "How...?"

"Some technology was stolen from ShinRa," said the Turk, a little reluctantly.

"You mean ShinRa can clone people?" When Tseng just arched a brow, Zack threw his hands in the air with, "Ugh, that is so creepy!"

Among other things, Cloud thought. Instead he stood and removed his rifle from his shoulder, grasping it in a ready position. (Oh, what he would give to have Tsurugi or even Ultima back in his hands, particularly with the way he could feel his pupils contracting into pinpricks, and without the pollution of Midgar, the Planet's presence was looming like a shadow behind his shoulder.) "Ready?"

He got a strange look from Zack, but then he cried, "Yeah, yeah, ready. Let's go!"

... Several clones and a huge robotic spider thing that made Zack conclude ShinRa personnel were utterly blind if someone had stolen it without getting caught, he and the Cloud kid were walking into Banora village. Tseng remained behind to examine the odd grave beside the fair-sized manor, which Zack thought was even creepier and seriously, maybe one had to have a certain creepiness factor to make it into the Turks. Tseng had his unblinking Stare of Doom, and Rude was a walking statue, and even Reno – who played a mean game of poker, it should be said, and once brought Zack back an awesome skin mag from some random place – gave off the creepy vibes that made other sleazy characters give him a wide berth below the Plate. Then again, Cissnei wasn't so bad, although it was hard to believe someone who still giggled behind her hand was, technically, an assassin. And she seemed to agree far too easily with Angeal on certain things.

"'Puppy,' my ass," Zack grumbled under his breath.

"Did you say something, Zack?"

Shaking himself back to the present, he said, "So, is it weird to be away from the whole city thing and plopped down in the country?"

Cloud gave him a small smile. "No. Banora isn't that different from where I'm from, only there are more fields and much, much less snow."

"A country boy, eh? Where from?"

"Nibelheim. It's on the west continent. What about you?"

"Gongaga...hey, don't you snicker like that, or if you're not careful a Touch Me will somehow, mysteriously crawl into your tent at night."
"More action than you might otherwise get, with so few people around," Cloud replied, and Zack burst out laughing.

"You know what they say about villages in the middle of nowhere – "

"There's a reactor in it!" they said simultaneously, and Zack knew he was grinning rather goofily as he slung an arm around Cloud's shoulders and turned to look back up the path they'd taken. "Yo, Tseng, you better be careful or us country boys are gonna take over your stinky city!"

There was no reply, but he hadn't expected one. Feeling like he'd just won major social points, he kept his arm on the boy's shoulders as he sauntered into the town. Upon approaching the first house, however, Cloud frowned and pulled away to inspect something green and glowing.

"What'd you find, kiddo?"

"A mako spring." Cloud was frowning in a way that looked well-practiced.

"Eh?" Zack left off peering nosily through the darkened windows to look over. "Is that what a mako spring is? How'd you know?"

"We discussed it in our materia class," came the easy reply. "But springs usually only happen where there's essentially zero human interference. For one to come up in the middle of a village means that either some really powerful magic was used, or…"

"Or what?" Zack prompted him as the trooper trailed off. After a moment of quiet, Cloud blinked and shook his head.

"I don't know, just…it'd have to be something pretty drastic, right?"

Honestly, Zack had no idea. He was more the action type of guy rather than the bookworm kind, so as long as he knew that mako made him awesome in battle, he didn't need to know the particulars. But he certainly wasn't stupid or unobservant, and what Cloud said made sense.

"Yeah," he agreed, some of his good humor slipping away as he scanned the tiny village with narrowed eyes. The sudden retort of a ShinRa rifle had him whirling around, sword raised and ready for some smiting, but Cloud was just standing over the corpse of a canine monster that had tried to sneak up on them. A Blood Taste, he identified automatically.

"Shit, Cloud, you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Keeping his hand on the trigger of the rifle, Cloud asked, "Did Tseng tell you which house Angeal used to live in?"

"Uh, no. No, he didn't."

"Do you want to start at opposite ends of the village and meet in the middle, then? The faster we secure the area, the faster we can move on."

Zack wanted to protest, wanted to say, You're just a Regular and there're monsters everywhere, you should stick with me – but Cloud had just killed one and, really, the monsters they'd seen so far didn't seem that dangerous. And damn it, he wanted to find Angeal.

"Yeah, okay, that sounds good. Just – just be careful, okay? If you get ambushed by something you don't think you can handle, don't hesitate to scream for me."
Cloud just gave him another one of those small smiles and moved away to the first house on the right. Zack shook his head and started with the houses on the left.

As luck would have it, Zack was the one to find the first sign of human inhabitants. Said sign was an older woman seated at the kitchen table, face roughened with the stress of a hardworking life and dressed in a patched but clean white smock. Given how worn she appeared to be, he couldn't tell how old she actually was. "May I help you?" she asked kindly, making Zack feel like a bit of an ass for just walking into her home without knocking. It wasn't like he'd expected to actually find anyone.

"Er, sorry, ma'am, but are you Angeal's mom? I'm Zack, and I'm kinda looking for him."

Her face crinkled into a smile. He wondered why he seemed to be getting so many smiles today. "Are you Zack the Puppy?"

"What?" he yelped, and she laughed behind a callused hand.

"My son told me about you in his letters. Just like a puppy, he said, so much enthusiasm and no attention span whatsoever."

"Oi!"

He was aware of Cloud slipping into the room and standing unobtrusively beside the door, no doubt alerted by Zack's indignant outburst. Angeal's mother glanced over Zack's shoulder briefly. "You aren't friends of Genesis, are you?"

"No, ma'am, I'm just here to find out what happened to Angeal and if he's all right, I promise."

"Has something happened to him, then?"

The note of resigned sorrow in her voice was like a string, tugging Zack forward a step before he could stop himself. "I don't know. I hope not, but..."

"A month or two ago, Genesis came back with some soldiers under his command," she said abruptly, looking down at the table where her hands were folded together. "He started killing the other villagers. I believe he only spared me because I'm the mother of his best friend. He used to be such a good boy."

Mrs. Hewley's words, all the more horrifying for how calm she was, left a bitter taste in Zack's mouth. The thought of a man returning to the village of his birth and slaughtering the people sickened him. It was nothing that someone with any honor – hell, someone with humanity – would do, and though Zack had never known him that well, how could he have been Angeal's closest friend, of all people?

"What about Angeal?"

"He came back for a while," she said after a long pause, "and he left his sword here. That sword...I had it made for him when he became a SOLDIER. It was meant to defend our family's honor."

He drags it around with him into battle without ever even using it...and he leaves it behind now? "I'll find Angeal," he declared. "In the meantime it'd probably be best if you went into hiding."

"Genesis won't kill me." Mrs. Hewley's voice was quiet and firm; Zack wondered if it'd be rude to ask why she seemed so sure of that when Genesis had apparently been able to kill all the other villagers. But then he felt Cloud's hand squeeze his shoulder as he went to Mrs. Hewley's side and
got down on one knee.

"I've never met Angeal, but Zack told me that he's an honorable warrior. Is that true?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"Then Angeal still has a chance to come back," Cloud suddenly chimed in. "Genesis is probably using their old friendship to manipulate and use him. But if that sword means what you say it does, then on some level he already understands the hypocrisy of his actions." Cloud sounded oddly certain, but the moment passed and he tossed a wryly amused look to Zack. "He just needs the puppy to beat some sense into his thick skull."

Zack contemplated the appeal of sitting on Cloud and knuckling that chocobo head until the kid begged for mercy. Turning back, Cloud continued seriously, "But if Genesis thinks Angeal betrayed him, then he'll probably go to whatever means necessary to get revenge. Including killing you."

Mrs. Hewley didn't reply.

"If you come back with us, Midgar can protect you." Zack blinked and wondered why Cloud didn't say 'ShinRa.' "Otherwise you'll just become a liability to your son."

"Hey now, Cloud, wait a minute, that's not fair – " Zack started, but Mrs. Hewley interrupted him.

"My son is a general. I know too much about ShinRa. Sooner or later I'll die, be it by Genesis' hand or by the Turks. At least I'm one of the few people who ever cared about Genesis for himself."

Zack couldn't see Cloud's expression, so he could only guess what it looked like from the flat tone of his voice. "I understand."

Outside the cottage, Zack stopped with his head bowed under the weight of the sunlight. Cloud paused a few paces behind him, almost tangibly tense, as though expecting the SOLDIER to turn on him with his blade. The thought made him snort with tarnished laughter.

"…Zack?"

"Sorry, kiddo, just thinking," he said with a grin over his shoulder. Cloud nodded silently. Zack felt like a bit of a bully when Cloud remained so tense, but the ringing of his PHS interrupted the moment.

"Zack Fair, extraordinaire."

"I've found what looks to be the base for the Genesis copies," Tseng's voice crackled at him. "I want you and Strife to meet me at the manor."

"Aye-aye, Captain, over and out." He snapped the PHS shut and gave Cloud what he hoped was a friendly, reassuring grin. "Tseng thinks he found the HQ for Genesis' creepy buddies and wants us to rendezvous. I don't think there's anything else we can do here."

Cloud nodded again and the two crossed back through the village towards the small white manor at the crest of the hill. Zack easily dispatched several red-draped clones, aided by Cloud's rifle, but along the way he couldn't help worrying over Angeal and the Buster sword and Mrs. Hewley.

"The grave belonged to Genesis' parents," Tseng told them when they caught up. "He seems to have killed them."
"What? How could he do that? Why?" Zack yelled in horror. Tseng didn't blink when he replied, "It appears that they were no longer useful to him."

Maybe 'fucked up' was a better description for Tseng. Cloud's leather glove audibly creaked as his hand tightened around his rifle.

"Did you find Angeal?" Tseng asked dispassionately.

"No, but hey, just give me a bit more time! Angeal ain't stupid, you know, just let me talk to him and he'll come around. He wouldn't abandon anyone he cares about."

Tseng was giving him a careful, weighing look that made Zack feel like he was being put on trial. "What?" Zack demanded.

"I can see why Sephiroth chose to send you on this mission," Tseng said quietly.

"Me?"

"The three generals are also close friends. I imagine he didn't want to face the possibility of having to kill them in battle."

Cloud made a soft noise that could have been anything from a shocked protest to a quiet sneeze.

"Whoa, hey, no killing's gonna be happening here!" The thought that ShinRa would even consider executing one or two of its best SOLDIERS was just…it wasn't possible. Okay, maybe Genesis hadn't gone MIA so much as he had a mental breakdown and taken a squadron with him for the ride, but it wasn't like he'd declared war on ShinRa or anything. And Angeal – the guy wasn't like that. Betrayal wouldn't be able to break his adamantine wall of honor with all the Summons and Mastered materia on the whole damn Planet. If he'd left behind his beloved sword, it was for a damn good reason.

Fortunately Tseng didn't argue the matter and led the two along a dirt path that wound towards a second, smaller valley in the hills a little ways from Banora village. Crouched in the dip of the valley like an ugly, rust-colored spider was what looked like an abandoned warehouse complex.

"What a dump," Zack muttered, hunkered down between Tseng and Cloud on a rise overlooking the area.

"This place was once a research outpost. It was abandoned when the Science Department moved the employees here to another facility."

"Which is how Genesis finds the resources to produce his clones," Cloud said, so quietly that the wind nearly stole his words away.

"Indeed." Tseng canted an inscrutable glance over Zack's back to the trooper. "I trust you understand that if it hadn't been for Sephiroth's express orders, you wouldn't be present on such a potentially sensitive mission."

That made Zack blink in surprise, but Cloud didn't even twitch or look away from the complex below them. "Of course, sir."

Infiltrating the main warehouse was ridiculously easy. Zack and Cloud covered Tseng while the Turk slipped past several clones and a few monsters, presumably to whatever information center was in the heart of the building. Zack didn't hesitate to take out his confusion and frustration on the enemies, and was pleasantly surprised to find that, while not actually necessary, Cloud was able to
fight alongside him as though they'd been fighting together for years. It brought back a portion of his usual good cheer, along with the bittersweet nostalgia of how he and Angeal had been so seamless.

"I don't remember ShinRa teaching the cadets how to use blades," he commented after the last enemy had fallen to the swing of a sickle Cloud stole from one of the bodies.

"It doesn't, but my mum insisted. She said it was a family tradition."

"And here I thought stringing popcorn on thread for the holidays was more typical," Zack snorted, and got yet another little smile. Man, he was on a roll today, the only bright spot in a sea of crap. They caught up to Tseng in an old study, where he was leaning over a desk and no doubt hacking into an unsuspecting computer. After the easy thrill of fighting clones, the sudden stillness was rather anticlimactic.

"Anything interesting?"

Tseng didn't reply, so Zack rolled his eyes and meandered towards the bookshelves with a disinterested eye. He was startled when Cloud, wearing an oddly intense expression, suddenly said, "I'm going to go back and make sure we weren't followed by any clones."

"Wait, Cloud, is that really a good idea – ?"

But the kid was already slipping out of the doorway they had just entered, back to the main warehouse of the complex. Huffing to himself, Zack let him go, figuring that they had just secured the area and so it wasn't likely that Cloud would get ambushed.

"He's not used to working in a unit," Tseng observed casually, still scrolling through whatever it was he'd pulled up on the computer screen.

"Hey, he's got time to learn," Zack protested. He was already wandering away from Tseng and into the next room, hoping to find something interesting. Maybe Genesis' childhood journal. Dear Diary; Someone made fun of my totally girly hair, so I kicked his ass and slaughtered his family…

"Infinite in mystery is the gift of the goddess," a voice interrupted, making Zack whirl around with a hand on his weapon's hilt, "we seek it thus, and take to the sky; ripples form on the water's surface; the wandering soul knows no rest. You're quite the noisy one, Zack the Puppy."

His heart froze. Genesis was pacing like a lazy tiger at the far end of the room, giving Zack the characteristic smirk that claimed he was laughing at the rest of the petty little world. The enormous window behind him cast stark lines over his features, and the large black wing added a certain level of what-the-fuck as well. Seriously, a wing, what the fuck.

"Genesis," Zack breathed, barely aware of Tseng entering the room behind him.

"It would appear that anyone sent before us to investigate has been killed," Tseng said calmly, and was Zack the only one here that was at least mildly startled? "Oddly enough, in the same manner as your parents," he added to Genesis.

"Really now? You may want to check the veracity of your information."

"Stop fucking around, Genesis," Zack finally snapped in anger and disgust and whole lot of other emotions he didn't have words for at the moment. "What kind of man are you to go around killing his own family?"
The dark smile faded into a twisted, furious expression like a switch had been flipped on his mood. "What would either of you know, you blind, barking lapdogs!"

Zack wasn't prepared for the Fira that roared towards him; he managed to throw himself to the side, felt heat scorch the shirt of his uniform and blister the skin, but Tseng didn't possess SOLDIER reflexes and took the brunt of the attack. His body was lifted off the floor and thrown against the wall, and he ended up in an unconscious heap on the floor. Shit, Zack's mind was screaming as he scrambled to draw his sword, as the air crackled across his senses with magic, he's not pulling his punches and oh gods he's a fucking First for a reason—

But then he wasn't holding his sword anymore. It took a moment for him to register that, no, he hadn't dropped it, Angeal had taken it and was standing in front of him defensively, facing Genesis, proof enough that his brain had just completely broken.

"My old friend," Genesis murmured, and right then Zack would have given up being a SOLDIER if he could've just seen Angeal's face. "I see that your heart –"

Whatever he was going to say about the other's heart, however, no one would ever know, because Cloud was suddenly standing at his shoulder and pressing a curved blade against his throat. Zack recognized it as the same weapon the Genesis clones used.

Okay, no, now it's broke.

Genesis was forced to tilt his head back slightly, a thin line of red just below his jaw line already forming. "Another ShinRa lapdog, or simply a little boy with a deathwish?" he purred.

"What are you planning to do after you find Jenova?" Cloud asked in a voice sharp as glass. Finding some semblance of balance, Zack managed to straighten up and put a hand on Angeal's shoulder. "Angeal?"

The man twitched and lowered Zack's sword. "You shouldn't have come here, Zack," he said softly.

"Angeal, I don't understand…"

The harsh clang of steel against steel immediately drew their attention back across the room as Genesis tried to take Cloud by surprise with his sword. But Cloud ducked, deflecting it with a second sickle in his other hand and turning rapidly to bring the first back up to Genesis' throat.


"What are you planning to do after you find Jenova?" Cloud repeated.

"Wings of light and dark spread afar; she guides us to bliss, her gift everlasting."

Cloud said quietly, "No matter what you've been told, she won't stop you from deteriorating. Whatever the doctors have done to you, it can't be reversed."

Zack's breath was taken away by the undiluted hatred and despair that turned Genesis' handsome face into a mask, the fury that made his wing stretch out into a tense arch like a threatened bird.

"Then I will take the rest of the world down with me."

Cloud deflected a second blow from the scarlet blade and grabbed the front of Genesis' shirt, pulling him close to whisper to him. Zack couldn't hear, but he definitely saw Genesis' eyes widen.
"And you," Cloud snapped at Angeal, releasing Genesis, "I spent almost the entire flight here listening to Zack go on about how honorable and great a warrior you are, but all I see is a man with no common sense or the will to do what's right for your loved ones."

Angeal stiffened. Zack couldn't help crying, "Whoa, whoa, Cloud, hold on a second! You can't go judging him like that – "

Cloud tossed the stolen sickles aside, looking tired and irritated and not like a cadet at all. "No, Zack, I can, because whether anyone likes it or not Angeal and Genesis are going to drag the rest of the world into their affairs. And that can't be allowed to happen," he said with a weird intensity. "Angeal, you're an idiot, and you're betraying Zack and Sephiroth and Genesis. Jenova's not a miracle cure and all this stupidity is going to destroy everything on the Planet."

"What else is an angel good for? Being a monster?" Angeal murmured.

"Angels can hurt just as much as humans can," Cloud spat. "You want revenge? Take down ShinRa. Kill Hojo. Destroy the reactors. But you're no more a monster than Zack or Sephiroth, and if you think either of them are anything less than human then you should just go ahead and kill yourself now, save the rest of us the trouble of having to deal with you."

Cloud moved past a gaping Zack and silent Angeal to Tseng's side, carefully lifting up the unconscious man and bracing him over a shoulder in a fireman's carry. He slowly left the room without another word, the muscles of his jaw still clenched with rage.

There was a very long silence.

"Your new friend is… interesting," Angeal said quietly. Shaken, Zack turned his stare from the empty doorway to his mentor and desperately wished he understood what had just happened to the world in the last ten minutes. Angeal's face softened. "Nothing worth having in life is easy, Zack."

There was a sudden flurry of movement and the odd sensation of something sliding through space; when Zack looked, Genesis had disappeared, leaving a lone dark feather on the floor where he'd stood. When he looked back, Angeal was also gone.

For the first time in years, Zack had to fight not to cry.

…

Elfreda Strife was standing in the middle of the village and staring up at the water tower when she felt a soft touch against her arm. She turned to find a pretty young woman looking at her worriedly, wearing the kind of dark suit that only ShinRa employees ever wore.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" the stranger asked. She had wavy auburn hair and warm, golden-brown eyes that Elfreda immediately thought were lovely. Well, she always had thought an older woman would be good for her boy…

"Oh yes, dear, I'm quite all right." Elfreda patted the other woman's hand. "May I help you? ShinRa rarely sends anyone out here anymore, I'd been half-convinced they'd forgotten about this little corner of the world. I can't imagine they would've been able to tell you how to get around properly without losing bits of yourself to frostbite."

"I haven't even introduced myself, how do you know I'm not here on vacation?"

"Only fools would vacation here, and I can tell you're not a fool, sweetheart."
The stranger laughed. "My name is Cissnei. I was sent by ShinRa to check up on things, make sure everything’s running smoothly."

"That's very kind of you." Giving the water tower one last glance, Elfreda picked up her shopping basket and walked on to the baker's. "Call me Elfreda. Have you eaten at all today? Hel's bells, my dear, you're a tiny thing!"

This amused Cissnei, who was no less petite than Elfreda herself and hardly more a decade younger. "Yes, I ate before coming up here."

"At the base of the range? Why, that's at least a three-hour drive on winding roads! Here, you come with me and I'll make sure this elevation doesn't go to your head and make you lose your appetite."

Basket over one arm and Cissnei on the other, Elfreda guided her to the baker's home. Though the baker was rather frosty, Elfreda didn't notice, happy as she was to be chattering away. Cissnei frowned at the baker's rudeness, but didn't say anything.

"Have you noticed anything odd happening around here?" Cissnei asked when Elfreda paused for breath, adding, "If I have an idea of what to look for, it would make things a lot easier."

"Odd?"

"ShinRa sent me because it's been getting reports of unusual monster activity and unexplained phenomena."

Elfreda frowned slightly, thoughtful as she looked over the tiny town and broke a loaf of freshly baked bread in half. She passed some to Cissnei. "Well, I don't recall hearing anything about monsters. But there's Brunhild, she's speaking with Anneliene. She's our healer – Brunhild, that is. Anneliene wouldn't know plantain from poison ivy if it jumped up and bit her on the nose. Not that that would stop her tongue from wagging, Hel forgive my words."

Cissnei had to bite her lip to keep from laughing as she was led to the other women and introduced. Brunhild was a tall, willowy woman with eyes as sharp as a Turk's, while Anneliene was smaller, prettier, and young enough to turn even a happily married man's head.

"I haven't seen an increase in monster-related injuries, at any rate," Brunhild was telling Cissnei as Anneliene contented herself with smiling contemptuously at Elfreda, "nor anything outside the usual bites and burns. Why Bombs bother to live in such a snowy region I'll never understand."

"Has there been any trouble with the reactor?"

"Not that I've heard, but then, you'd be better off talking with Mayor Lockhart about that."

"What about the mansion?" Anneliene commented, trying for innocence but just sounding sly.

"The mansion?"

Shooting a quelling look to the younger woman, Brunhild said, "The ShinRa mansion was burned down a little under a year ago, and no one's been able to figure out why. Most people blame it on monsters finally just getting a bit too rowdy in there, but Lockhart's convinced it was vandalism."

Elfreda was shaking her head. "That's silly. No one in this village would burn it down unless they had a reason."

"Oh?" Cissnei prompted.
"Of course. Throwing stones at some of the younger children is one thing, but burning down the mansion? It's too big a responsibility for anyone here," she explained with startling perceptiveness. "Too scared to cross such a big line."

"Your family would know all about crossing lines," Anneliene sneered.

Elfreda said serenely, "That's because the lines you people draw are nonsense."

Anneliene was opening her mouth to deliver some cutting insult when Brunhild shoved a small glass bottle at her. "Here, it's eyebright extract. Mix four drops in a small glass of water and dab it on your sister's eyes three times a day. The infection should be gone within a week."

Affronted but unwilling to stand up to two older women, Anneliene left with a flounce of her skirt. Brunhild and Cissnei watched her leave.

"Such a handful, that one," Brunhild commented sourly. "I don't envy her mother having to chase her away from all the young men."

"How else is a girl supposed to find what she wants?" Elfreda asked in complete seriousness.

Brunhild's lips thinned with disapproval, but her attitude was still considerably softer with her than it had been with Anneliene. "You know that the rest of us think differently than you do, Elfreda."

"Perhaps, but a girl can only be ashamed if she lets herself. How unfair it is that men are allowed to find what they want before marriage and women can only hope for the best!"

Cissnei was starting to think that being sent out to this tiny village in the middle of nowhere, regardless of her mission, might be a little less boring than she'd anticipated.
In Which Sephiroth Has Issues and There Is a Reunion (Double-meaning Intended)

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: some medical/body horror.

... 

The urge to lie down and cry himself to sleep was a tempting voice in the back of Cloud's head. *Too big, too much,* it was saying. *Too big and too much and there are three generals this time around, what could you possibly do to change things?*

He adjusted his hold on Tseng so he wouldn't topple over and started down the path that threaded back towards Banora village. He should probably wait for Zack, but Zack would no doubt want some time with Angeal and Cloud was not, was *not* going to begrudge him that. *Was not.* It was slow going, maneuvering the trail without dropping Tseng, but eventually he made it back to the houses. Mrs. Hewley opened her door and gasped when she found an exhausted trooper and unconscious Turk on her doorstep.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Hewley, but Tseng needs a place to recover. Do you mind if we wait here for Lieutenant Fair to return?"

"N-no, no, of course not." She opened the door wider to let him in, then shut it and hurried to lay a blanket over the sofa. Cloud managed to slide Tseng off his shoulder without banging anything on the wooden furniture and got him into some semblance of a comfortable position. He didn't have a Libra materia to do a proper scan, but he could tell that Genesis was carrying some damn good magic.

"What happened?" Mrs. Hewley asked softly.

"Genesis." He glanced up in time to see a painful moue twist her lips. "You know that ShinRa's going to come after you, right?"

"I knew that the moment I heard Genesis had gone missing," the old woman said with a sad smile, and Cloud felt a wave of suspicion, heard a voice whispering, *Sephiroth's human mother let herself be used in Hojo's experiments, what is there to say that this one hasn't done something similar?*

"Then why are you still here?" In an empty village, he didn't bother to add.

"There are some things you can't outrun," she said kindly, sounding an awful lot like her son, and Cloud felt a wave of suspicion, heard a voice whispering, *Sephiroth's human mother let herself be used in Hojo's experiments, what is there to say that this one hasn't done something similar?*

"Then why are you still here?" In an empty village, he didn't bother to add.

"There are some things you can't outrun," she said kindly, sounding an awful lot like her son, and Cloud thought of the Remnants and reanimated corpses and had to take a moment for some calming breaths.

"True," he said, carefully calm, "but ShinRa isn't one of those things. If nothing else, get out of here for Angeal's sake. He's already lost his best friend, he doesn't need to lose his mother, too."

"And where would a trooper have me go?" Her voice wasn't malicious or condescending, just tired and honest and perhaps actually curious. If she died on Cloud's advice, General Hewley could
legitimately blame him, but on the other hand, he'd apparently been willing to leave her behind. (And where were you when Nibelheim burned?)

"My hometown is a small village in the mountains. It has a reactor in it, but it's easy to hide there."

"I could put your village in danger," she pointed out.

"I'll tell you how to get there if you're willing to keep an eye on things."

"What makes you think ShinRa might do something?"

"Why do you think they'll destroy Banora?"

She gave him a brief, tired smile. "What makes you think I'll keep my word?"

"Lieutenant Fair has told me at great length about General Hewley's sense of honor. I'm hoping the general got it from his mother."

When she smiled again, it was so bittersweet that Cloud was reminded of his own mother's darker days, the days when she looked at him and saw 'husband' instead of 'son' and a young beautiful woman looking back at her from the mirror. "I will do my best to help, Private Strife."

She listened as he told her the best way to get to the western continent and that the only way to get into Nibelheim itself without walking or riding was the supply route that came in from Rocket Town. Cloud was finishing before he saw one of Tseng's fingers twitch, and then he shut up, watching as Tseng went from unconscious to awake in seconds. He took in his surroundings with characteristic aplomb.

"Mrs. Hewley," Tseng said politely, sitting up and absently straightening his jacket as if he did this sort of thing every day and hardly noticed the ache of waking up from magic attacks anymore. Cloud was impressed. "Private Strife."

"Sir," Cloud saluted sharply. "You were incapacitated by a magic attack from General Rhapsodos before he disappeared. I brought you back here to recover. Lieutenant Fair remained behind with General Hewley and hasn't yet returned."

"I was under the impression that there was no one left in the village."

Cloud was silent, but Tseng didn't appear to expect an answer. He stood carefully and bowed to Mrs. Hewley. "Thank you for allowing us the use of your home, ma'am."

"Of course."

Awkward moment much? the old Zack-voice in his head dryly commented. Then the real Zack chose that moment to knock on the door, obviously upset but pretending he wasn't. "I've been looking all over for you guys! C'mon!"

The flight back to Midgar was silent. Mrs. Hewley had waved them off with a quiet, "I'll be fine," giving Cloud a knowing half-smile, and Zack appeared too… brooding? Overwhelmed?...to notice. Tseng was at the helicopter's controls again, face unreadable. Cloud had no idea what the Turk was thinking.

He wondered if he'd messed up somehow, even though he'd done his best in what was a bizarre and unexpected situation, and he wouldn't be feeling so unsettled if only Zack would fucking look at him. Cloud absently wrapped a hand around his mother's necklace and told himself that Zack had
been hit with a lot today, he just needed time to absorb it all and then Cloud could work on (re)building a friendship. He wouldn't take Zack for granted this time around, not that he ever really had, even if this time around Zack wasn't quite –

No, no, Zack was Zack, even if the man that had once taken up a large part of Cloud's mind would've done more than stand and stare. Maybe the SOLDIER was a bit more immature than he remembered, but that didn't mean anything. Even Aeris hadn't been the same. If people were different and if Sephiroth wasn't the only general anymore, it was only because Cloud was fucking around with things and, Hel, sometimes it hit Cloud at the most random moments just how much influence – or power, or whatever the fuck someone wanted to call it – he was throwing around here.

"Planet to Cloud!" said Zack loudly, making Cloud flinch and reach for a sword he hadn't worn in years. Zack was still too pale and too distant under his otherwise friendly grin and Cloud hated it. "We're back in Midgar, kiddo, Tseng's already hauled ass back inside. Make sure you report to your commanding officer, yeah? I'll be seeing you around!"

And then Cloud was alone in a silent helicopter, Zack already half-jogging away before he could say anything.

Cloud's grip on the carved materia was so tight he could feel its corners pressing painfully into his palm through his leather gloves. Letting out a long breath, he forced himself to let go and tuck it under his shirt again before pulling himself out of the cramped helicopter. Technicians scurried back and forth across the helipad, ignoring him as he headed towards the entrance that would take him down to the recruit barracks. He should probably report to Commander Gysahl first, but he was too damn tired to care.

... 

Sephiroth stared blankly at Zack's mission report.

_Private Strife was professional_, it said. _He knows his way around a rifle well enough that it’d take something totally serious to mess him up. He appeared confident acting with and without orders._

And what, precisely, did that mean? From what the rest of the report said, everything had gone relatively smoothly, even with the appearance of Genesis (_see, sooner or later they all leave you_) and Tseng’s subsequent casualty. According to the report, the three had come across the two wayward generals while investigating an old warehouse, Genesis had knocked Tseng out of action before Angeal interfered, and then the two Firsts were gone again. One, two, three. Considering how Zack's reports tended to be more rambling than anything else, this was too cleanly cut, which meant _something_ had happened, and it wasn't considered paranoia if there really was a conspiracy out there. Sephiroth calmly straightened the papers on his desk, lining up his pen parallel to the edge of the blotter, and reminded himself that coincidences did exist, it was just a matter of probability and chaos theory and otherwise rational explanations.

It was late enough in the evening that most employees had gone, only a few officers still loitering around, which is why the arrival of a particular presence was even more startling. Checking a sharp breath, wiping his expression clean, Sephiroth said clearly, "Come in."

Angeal entered his office. Both of his wings, one smaller than the other, arched from his right shoulder and brushed the floor with their pinion feathers.

("You're my angel!")
"Angeal," Sephiroth said calmly, heart fluttering. "This is…unexpected."

He'd never seen Angeal look so exhausted, even in Wutai. "Do you remember the time we had to talk Genesis out of killing Hojo?" Angeal asked without preamble.

"Yes," Sephiroth replied, thinking of waking up from a brief coma to Genesis in such a rage at Hojo's constant experimentation that President ShinRa had considered having Genesis terminated.

"I see now that I made a mistake. Then, and now," Angeal said quietly, holding Sephiroth's gaze. "And in the process, I hurt one of my closest friends."

Sephiroth pressed his fingertips together and looked over the top of them with a half-lidded stare. After a moment Angeal asked, "You sent Zack after us, didn't you?"

Sephiroth remained silent. Angeal broke eye contact to look somewhere on the far wall.

"And did you also choose to send that particular trooper for a reason?" Something must have changed in Sephiroth's body language because Angeal continued, "He said that angels can hurt just as much as humans. An odd thing for someone who isn't you or Genesis to say."

("What's it like being an angel?"

"It's like being human."

"How so?"

"Angels can hurt just as much humans can.")

"What?" Sephiroth said numbly.

"He also knew about Jenova. What's going on, Sephiroth? What's being kept from us?"

Sephiroth stood up and walked over to the window, restless. "I don't know, Angeal."

He sensed Angeal moving towards him, something in his bones singing more loudly the closer their bodies were until Angeal's breath came quietly by his ear. "Genesis is dying, Sephiroth," Angeal murmured. "He's decaying, while the both of us are stronger than ever. He thought that Jenova would be his best chance, and so did I. So I followed him. What else would you have had me do?"

"You think I wouldn't have left ShinRa for you two?" Sephiroth replied just as softly, and felt Angeal jerk in surprise.

"Sephiroth, I -"

"I spoke with Hojo not long after Genesis left Wutai. The man is insufferably proud of himself and seems to think Genesis' condition is because Hollander made a mistake somewhere. However, I think Hojo truly doesn't know why this is happening, or he would've either used it against Hollander or taken Genesis as his own experiment. I wasn't able to access Genesis' records myself."

Angeal audibly hesitated before allowing the sudden change in subject. He always did have difficulty standing up to either Sephiroth and Genesis. "Hollander never gave Hojo any record of Project G, as far as I know, and Genesis has destroyed all the hard copies he could find. If any more exist, they're with Hollander."
"Then we are at an impasse," Sephiroth finished flatly. He absently wished the night sky was visible through the light pollution of Midgar; then he might have something to look at through his office window other than the upper Plate. "Only Hojo knows exactly where Jenova is, assuming Jenova's cells would help at all."

*Genesis is dying.*

He was the most arrogant and infuriating man Sephiroth had ever known, but they were the *same*. Both born by artificial means to a predetermined future, both so damn powerful with all the frailties of being human on the inside. Genesis and Angeal had always been the closest among the three of them, and Sephiroth. Well. He'd been content to guard that, to be nearby while knowing he'd never actually be a part of it. They weren't meant to die, they were practically gods, and yet the one of their number who most hated and envied humanity was the one dying like a human. *You were right, Cloud.*

"I'm sorry, Sephiroth," whispered Angeal, sounding like a man who'd lost everything. Part of Sephiroth wanted to turn around and put his arms around Angeal. Another part sneered and also whispered, *You only say that because you failed. One day, they all leave.*

So he moved back towards his desk and deftly fished out both Zack's mission report and Strife's file. He said calmly, "My decision to send Private Strife to Banora was made in conjunction with Commander Gysahl. One of the doctors of the Regular army saw fit to inform me of the boy's condition, as he apparently fell into a mako pool as a child and survived. Both his blood tests and his physical performance scores support this story, but he seems to have a talent for insubordination."

Angeal was silently walking back around to the front of Sephiroth's desk, his smaller wing giving a small twitch of tension. Sephiroth went on, "Because he's a candidate for SOLDIER, both myself and Commander Gysahl wanted to send him on recon with an actual SOLDIER to see if he could act as part of a group."

"He fought and threatened Genesis," said Angeal.

"…What?"

"I assume you know the gist of what happened." Sephiroth nodded. "After Genesis knocked out Tseng, I tried to interfere, but…Strife, you said?...took him by surprise with weapons he'd taken off the clones."

Sephiroth stared at him.

"Somehow he knew that we were looking for Jenova. I don't know what he said to Genesis afterwards, but Genesis is refusing to speak." *Not even to me,* were the unspoken words.

"Strife is fortunate that Tseng didn't witness that," Sephiroth replied slowly. "It's obvious that more is going on and it seems Strife is indeed involved, but I would prefer to keep the Turks out of this. And Heidegger, for that matter."

"What about Lazard?"

"The man has enough to worry about as it is." Sephiroth laid down the files he was holding, absently straightening them again. "I will confront Strife myself and judge his answers before taking action."

"You know, Zack called him 'Cloud.'"
Sephiroth's shoulders tightened. "Yes. His name is Cloud Strife," he answered stiffly.

"That's not a very common name."

"That just makes it an improbable coincidence, not an impossible one."

Angeal didn't press the issue, but Sephiroth was already regretting the moment of adolescent weakness when he'd woken in the middle of the night and Angeal asked him what his nightmare was about. And Sephiroth had answered truthfully, told him about the angel he'd dreamed up as a child, the way he probably wouldn't have if Genesis had been there and not away on a solo mission.

("You would have an angel called 'strife,' Sephiroth."

Elena's absence the day after he returned from his mission was noticed, but Cloud let it go. If there was something else bothering her, then he'd wait until she was ready to talk.

His report to Gysahl was unremarkable, the commander listening and asking few questions before dismissing him. He was given the rest of the day off, which meant that Sergeant Tokka would be drilling him into the parade ground the next day. Cloud couldn't muster up the motivation to care. With nothing else to do but study for subjects in which he already had practical experience, he pulled on a worn pair of jeans and a plain, faded black shirt and slipped off to the train station.

He was surprised to find an unusually high amount of tension in Wall Market. People cast suspicious glances everywhere, jumping at any loud noise; Cloud made sure to walk in a slouch rather than with military strides and that the knife in his boot was hidden but accessible. On one of the steel walls of the sector someone had crudely spray-painted SHINRA AUTHORITY IS SHINRA OPPRESSI. The last two letters trailed off abruptly, as though the vandal had been unexpectedly interrupted.

*I know it's been a few weeks since I last saw Vincent, but what the hell did I miss?*

Now that it wasn't dark and Elena wasn't along to drag him anywhere, Cloud could appreciate the sight of the new, unmarred SEVENTH HEAVEN sign. Because it was only late morning the bar was empty, rows of salvaged tables and chairs with cleaning supplies sitting untouched on one of them.

("Tifa, get the kids down behind the bar! You there, cover the fucking window before they get through!"

Cloud took a moment to remember when and where he was.

"What do you want?"

The sudden voice made him twitch, and he looked up to find a woman with short brown hair and unsympathetic grey eyes. She was smaller than Cloud, dressed in a green tunic, long shorts, and heavy black boots, and though he didn't immediately see a weapon he had no doubt that she had finished her fair share of battles. It took a bit of mental searching through the fog of a hangover, but he finally recognized her as the bartender he'd seen

(the One Who Will Burn the World, said the Planet)

when Elena brought him here. "Looking for something to bury my troubles," he finally replied.
"We're not open for business."

"I just need something cold. All-natural."

Her eyes narrowed. There was something odd about her that was plucking on Cloud's nerves, not like a SOLDIER's mako but more like the heaviness that clung to Vincent.

"We haven't had anything like that in a while," the bartender finally replied.

"Why not?"

But she was already turning away and heading back towards the counter, dismissing him as coolly as a military officer. "Go home, boy."

"Please," he said, following her. "Please. I need your help."

She paused by the counter, glancing at him over her shoulder. "I told you, we don't have anything like that anymore."

"The people and the Wutaian rebels are too busy resenting each other to actually do anything," Cloud blurted, "but AVALANCHE was founded by people from all over. AVALANCHE could fix that.

"You want to turn the conflict with ShinRa into a racial war?" she asked mildly.

"No, I want to see AVALANCHE give the Wutaians and the Midgar people a reason to work together against ShinRa."

She turned to face him more fully. "AVALANCHE doesn't exist anymore. There's no one left to fight. People died, the reactors still stand. The Turks…" She stopped. Cloud tilted his head, wondering what the Turks had done to successfully break up the first incarnation of AVALANCHE. He hadn't bothered finding out much about the organization's history when he'd been hired on by Barret, and he hadn't inherited many of Zack's memories about it.

The woman seemed to mentally shake herself and stared at him impassively. "Why do you care about this?"

"I'm…afraid for the Planet," he said carefully.

"Bullshit. Get out."

"I'm not lying."

"No, all ShinRa cadets are secretly concerned for the life of the Planet," she deadpanned.

Cloud briefly closed his eyes. This would all be so much easier if he could just track down the Black Materia and blow the hell out of ShinRa and its reactors, or march into the president's office and run him through with the Masamune.

"Do you know the work that's being done in Cosmo Canyon?" he asked with a sudden burst of inspiration. Suspicion pinched her lips as she nodded slowly. "A researcher from there came to my village because we have a lot of mako pools. He told me about what was happening to the Planet because of the reactors. I didn't really believe him at first, but after I joined the ShinRa army, I started thinking he was right. Why else would we be sent out to kill all these monsters that didn't even exist even a few years ago?"
"Even if you're telling the truth," she said tonelessly, which he was, if joining AVALANCHE was like joining the ShinRa military and one took 'researcher' to mean Bugenhagen, "that doesn't change the facts. AVALANCHE fell apart about two years ago when its leader tried to destroy mankind so that the Planet would no longer face that threat. The Turks were the one to stop him. Certain benefactors decided that they couldn't afford to fund an operation so unstable, so AVALANCHE was forced to disband before more permanent damage could be done."

Cloud inhaled sharply and wondered how the hell he hadn't known that, unless the Turks had interfered quickly enough that the Planet hadn't been particularly threatened. Certain benefactors?

The bartender continued in a distant voice, "This conflict isn't as black-and-white as you would make it, kid. It's not just ShinRa versus the Planet. It's also quality of life versus quality of integrity, people who want to fight for their ideals and those who just want to feed their families. Even if you brought down ShinRa, what then? It's the largest single employer in the world and produces the most reliable and affordable source of energy to heat our homes. It doesn't matter if people like ShinRa or not, they're not going to sacrifice their jobs and lifestyles for some unknown future."

"If the Planet dies, then they won't have to worry about that anyway," he pointed out, but she simply shrugged.

"Would it better to live a shorter life with a greater quality of life, or a longer one in struggle and unhappiness?"

"This isn't like that at all," Cloud said flatly. All he could think about was the Plague that was Jenova's legacy, spreading through the world like a black fungus that turned food into poison and the dead into mindless, savage caricatures of life. "ShinRa isn't a disease. The real question is whether people will be happy living shorter lives in safety or potentially longer ones in freedom. If they stick with safety, then the Planet's going to end that much sooner."

The lean muscle in her forearms flexed smoothly under her skin as she moved the dishrag between her hands. "There's nothing I can do," she finally said, and turned away. "If you want answers, go talk to Rufus ShinRa."

What?

"And who should I say referred me?" he demanded to her disappearing back.

"Elfé."

He left the bar and stood on the street, people pushing past him on all sides. It was almost enough to make someone an atheist, Cloud thought cynically, hands in his pockets as he stared down the crowded street. For a moment he craved a cigarette, one of the ones that Cid had chain-smoked and Cloud had tried once or twice out of curiosity, just to give his hands something to do.

He should probably figure out what to do now. He could go back to the bar and keep uselessly begging Elfé for help. He could track down other former members of AVALANCHE and try his sob-story on them. He could hope and pray that Vincent would be getting somewhere with the Wutai rebels. He could simply lie down and die and let everyone else deal with the consequences of their collective actions because fuck if he hadn't been near the end of his rope for years now. Except he couldn't, because then Sephiroth, Aeris, and Zack would all die. It would be so easy to hate them.

"Shit," he muttered.
It was late afternoon by the time Cloud climbed to the top of an abandoned half-constructed building, high and close enough to the edge of the sector for natural light to break under the shadow of the Plate. He sat on the middle of a steel girder, legs dangling into empty space two hundred feet above the ground, and leaned into the wind channeled by the curve of the Plate’s underside. Harder to hear and feel the Planet that high, supported by little more than a half-foot width of metal and shifting air currents. Just a little closer to freedom.

The pollution in the city made for a stunningly vivid orange-red-purple sunset.

It was well past twilight by the time he finally dropped back down to the street. When he went back to the barracks Elena still wasn't around, so he asked one of his squadmates in the mess hall.

"Hey, Small," he called, ignoring the surprised looks he got. It wasn't like he was that unsocial.

The brawny teen blinked at him a few times. "Yeah?"

"Have you seen Elena?"

The other boys hooted and leered ("What's the matter, Strife, can't keep track of your girlfriend?") while Small flushed. "Haven't seen her since Tokka ran us into the fucking ground."

"Yeah, I think the old bastard misses your pretty face, Strife," snorted another. Joe, maybe? Or John. Something simple. Whatever, Cloud just knew that he was eyeing the chocobo rider division. "He looked pissier than my mum did during menopause."

"Oh gods, thanks for that mental image, asshole," someone groaned.

"Thanks," Cloud said dryly and left his squad to their impromptu mother-insulting competition. After a quick meal of what was supposed to be chicken and rice but looked more like the clotted pale gunk Cid scraped out of the Highwind's engines, he slipped back to the barracks and changed into some gym clothes. With Elena still nowhere to be found, he finally gave up stalling and left for the training rooms.

It was populated but not crowded, just the remains of the pre-dinner rush. Cloud set himself up with the machines, preferring to wait until there were fewer people before taking out one of the practice swords. He was mostly left alone, just another kid with big dreams.

Time passed quickly once he allowed himself to get lost in the repetitive motions, and before long there were only a few people left. Then four, then two, and finally Cloud was alone and free to take down one of the blunt-edged steel swords meant to be used only by more experienced cadets. He swung it in a lazy circle with one hand, making a face at how crap it was and wishing he had Tsurugi.

It was easy to lose track of time, so to speak. Okay, so it wasn't Tsurugi, or even Nailbat, and the steel would do better service as soup cans, but light still sparked off the blade and his fingers still fit the handle like he'd been born with it. There was a fine balance that had to be found between complete control and maximizing momentum which required not thinking about much of anything, particularly everything that could and might be going wrong.

Cloud would've been happy to stay in the gym all night and screw morning drills anyway, but then he brought the sword down in a slashing stroke and it was interrupted by another blade. The sudden movement shocked Cloud into ducking low and whirling around to bring his sword under the guard of the other's, but it was blocked once more, forcing him to take a defensive step back.

"...Sephiroth?"
The general stood tall and expressionless above him, the Masamune bare in his hand, and Cloud felt his heart stop.

It was one of those moments some people encountered in their lives in which the principles that provided the foundation for their whole understanding of the universe were suddenly popped like balloons, leaving them scrambling to hold on to empty air and loose strings. Sephiroth had been reasonably certain that there wasn't much left that could faze him, but the possibility of this moment hadn't really prepared him for the reality of it.

Hair as yellow and wild as a chocobo's crest, eyes mako-blue-bright; the only difference Sephiroth could see between this cadet and the man from his memory was age. This was a physical, flesh-and-blood existence, no blurring around the edges or suggestion of Lifestream. No shadow of pale wings. Sephiroth's name, spoken in a voice that was younger and higher, but still recognizable.

"Isn't it odd, Private Strife," he said softly, "that you're not around when you're wanted, but when you're unexpected?"

He watched the subtle barb hit home through a slight jerk in the boy's thin shoulders, but instead of getting angry or flinching away, Strife just lowered the practice weapon until its point rested on the ground.

"I try to be where I'm needed," he replied, just as quietly.

"Did it never occur to you that certain individuals might need you elsewhere?"

"Sephiroth, I – "

"I received a report about your performance on your first mission," Sephiroth continued, beginning to pace in a slow circle just to be moving. Strife's own body didn't move, just his eyes as he followed Sephiroth's path. "Not only did you act well above the expectations of myself and Commander Gysahl, but you managed to get Generals Hewley and Rhapsodos to stop and think. On the other hand, you know things that should only be known to a very select few individuals. One might wonder how that knowledge could've been used earlier, before this whole debacle."

Cloud, for his part, felt those words inflame the years-old self-doubt, am I doing this right, what if I fuck up, questions without answers that vacillated wildly between desperation and anger and despair. He whipped around on his heel with a sharp, "I'm doing this for you!"

"...I'm doing this for you," he repeated quietly, holding Sephiroth's gaze and refusing to look away again. "You…and Zack. And Aeris. No one else. The rest of the Planet could burn and I wouldn't care except that the three of you happen to live on it," and what kind of person did it make him when he actually meant that kind of selfishness?

"Then abandoning children in the hands of madmen is now the mark of a hero."

Cloud flinched, felt the words like Hojo's needles under his flesh piercing veins and thoughts and hope. The mantras he'd used to keep himself sane these last fourteen years, do it right and it won't happen again, won't see Aeris' blood on your hands, won't watch Zack die to save your worthless ass, won't watch Denzel get ripped apart by Plague-infected warps – just do it right and then you can rest, no one else can ask anything else of you. Do it right – they started falling apart and Cloud stared at Sephiroth, felt something already tenuous inside of him start to unravel. Sephiroth lifted a hand to his temple, and the familiarity of the movement made Cloud automatically step forward,
reach out, and the moment his hand touched the general's arm the world went

green as mako, opaque, thick in his lungs

red blood of genocide streaking the masamune, his leather, his skin

blackwhite monochrome monotony, rather amusing how spending too much time in the lab could make everything else as stark and lifeless

yellowblue suninthesky, but even angels leave and

he couldn't hear mother angel jenova cloud anymore

and it took an almighty wrench of will and physical strength to tear his hand away from Sephiroth, who had fallen to one knee. Both of them were panting, Sephiroth's eyes squeezed shut in pain, Cloud frozen with horror. The urge for contact, to consume, made Cloud choke on bile and holy shit it can't be Reunion, it can't, I don't have Jenova inside me anymore, it can't be, it can't.

When Sephiroth finally lifted his head, he looked utterly lost. Cloud didn't dare to look closer, knew that if he did he'd hear why do you keep pretending to be human, Cloud, my puppet, such a good boy.

"Cloud?"

When the Planet had been remaking him there'd been a time, an instant or an eternity, he didn't know, but there'd been a time when he couldn't remember what it meant to speak and make meaningful sentences out of so many possible sounds. Cloud swallowed past the bile in his throat, had to do it a second time before he was able to find words. "I – I don't. I'm sorry," he managed. "I should. I should stay away, this isn't. Isn't."

Stopped. Couldn't find the right sounds.

"No, wait," Sephiroth started, but Cloud was already half-running to the door, leaving the useless sword behind.
In Which Cloud Doesn't Like Infirmaries and There Is Nearly a Riot

Chapter Notes

**Warnings:** Racism, some racist slurs, imperialism.

Chofi linked me to stopthatgirl7's analysis of Wutai (found on LJ), and I'm happy to use it as my personal canon as well. She does an amazing job, to my admittedly ignorant eye, of explaining the apparently eclectic mix of culture.

*es tut mir leid* = "sorry" as in making a mistake (German).

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Once he was out the gym doors, Cloud broke into a sprint. He was just able to make it to the bathroom down the hall from his barracks and slam into an empty stall before his stomach rebelled violently, vision blurred by tears, shivering from the cold sweat that had broken out all over his body. The tiles were cold and hell on his knees, the smell of chlorine and vomit thick in his nose, and he leaned his forehead against the seat until a second wave of nausea had him dry-heaving. He wondered how many more times he was going to end up with his face in a toilet bowl.

Dimly he registered cool hands holding back the longer pieces of his hair from his face. At first he thought Sephiroth had followed him before he realized the hands were too small and feminine.

"Elena, what're you doing here?" he finally managed, wincing at the raw burn in his throat. She snorted.

"Keeping you from getting puke in your hair, apparently. Saw you running by. Done?"

A minute passed without his stomach trying to crawl out his throat. "Yeah, think so," he rasped, flushing the toilet and turning to face her, sitting on the tile floor. She sat on her heels with a hand braced against the plastic door of the stall, serious and concerned.

"What happened?"

He nearly retched again, skin still crawling, whispers still in his ears promising power and darkness, and behind it all were the rolling waves of the Lifestream. He focused on the ache in his knees, the coldness from the floor starting to seep into the seat of his pants, and the gentle rise and fall of Elena's chest as she breathed.

"Did you fall asleep somewhere and have a nightmare?" she hazarded, and he latched onto the excuse with a sickly, lopsided grin.

"Yeah, I was in the gym, fell asleep on the mats while stretching."

"Liar," she said mildly. "How're you feeling now, able to stand?"

"Give me a few." He paused to take in the dark circles under Elena's eyes, the shadows bringing out the lighter brown of her irises. "Are you all right?"
"What? I'm fine."

"You've been avoiding me."

"Have not," she replied automatically, but when Cloud just crooked a brow, she added, "Okay, maybe I was a little jealous."

"Of what?"

"You got picked for a mission because you're a special snowflake. With a SOLDIER and a Turk. But that's not important anymore."

"It's not?"

"Look, I found some stuff I need to tell you, but not if you're going to keep vomiting or whatever."

He couldn't help the laugh that bubbled painfully out his throat. Bracing himself against the side of the stall, he managed to get to his feet with only a little dizziness and the wry acknowledgment that he probably wouldn't be sleeping that night. "What did you find?"

"I went poking around on that whole Project LAZARUS thing," she said quietly.

"What?"

Elena opened the stall door, glanced around to make sure they were alone, and then closed it again with a conspiratorial air. "After you left for your mission I went back to the computer lab. The problem is that the financial spreadsheets you found before were all that was stored on that server. I figured the more interesting shit would be on a higher level somewhere, so I got a passkey to the fiftieth floor – "

"Shit," said Cloud.

"– by being the awesome resourceful lady I am, and guess what?"

Elena was so normal, so her, that he was beginning to feel a little more grounded, the whispers seeming a little more distant. "You found Heidegger's porn stash?" and if the stupid humor was strained, well, at least it was there.

"No, asshole, and remind me to spread some rumors about you later. I got into the server and found loads of sensitive shit you wouldn't believe. Did you know that President ShinRa has a fund just for permanently renting out a suite in the Honeybee Inn?"

"Yes."

"...Okay, well, thanks for telling me. So this LAZARUS thing is the current baby of the Science Department and is being headed by Hojo, big surprise there, but apparently it's also being called the 'alternative SOLDIER method.' It seems that for whatever reason Hojo's old way of making SOLDIERs doesn't work anymore and he's trying to find another. Five specimens have already died and he's working on the sixth."

"It said all this?" Cloud asked numbly, and Elena shook her head.

"Don't be stupid, of course not. It was all in legalese, stuff like 'alternative methods required' and 'search for suitable experimental subjects ongoing, funds requested.' But if what you told me about him experimenting on people is true, then, well, it doesn't take a genius to read between the lines."
"Shit," Cloud breathed again. Elena huffed wryly, long bangs fluttering.

"Yeah, that's what I said. So how do you make a SOLDIER, and why wouldn't it work anymore?"

"It's the mako showers," he said softly. "You introduce mako to a living being in small amounts to build immunity, like a poison, and while it enhances the body, it also would make most people go crazy. It's why there's such a rigorous program to make the cut. Hojo also gives the subject his own special cocktail, but why wouldn't they work? The regular SOLDIERs just get dead cells anyway, so it's not like he needs..." He stopped.

"What? What does he need?"

"He's not trying to make new SOLDIERs, he's trying to make more...Firsts." He caught himself before he said 'clones.' "The Firsts get an added boost to make them that much more powerful than other SOLDIERs, it's why there're only three right now."

"And whatever that 'boost' is, it isn't working anymore and he's trying to find something new," Elena realized. "And he's testing it on humans until he gets it right."

"Probably." Without Jenova calling the shots behind the scenes, Hojo wouldn't have the god that he was trying to create. "Wait, how are you not dead yet?"

"Told you, I'm just that awesome." When Cloud continued to stare at her, Elena wilted slightly and admitted, "All right, I was caught."

"Then you've got to get out of here, if they realize that a trooper - "

"Who also happens to have a sister as a Turk and a father who's an instructor in their Academy," she interrupted. "And the guy who caught me was a Turk."

"Did he know what you were looking for?"

"Most likely. But Cloud, he was a Turk."

"I give you until morning, at most."

She ignored that. "Think about it. What's a Turk going to do when he finds what he thought was a Regular breaking into top-secret files?"

"Don't tell me you got recruited."

"Well, no, not yet. But I'm not dead, either, and that should tell you something. Remember, I have a pretty good idea how the Turks operate."

"Hel, Elena, just...be careful. You're fucking around with some powerful people."

Elena didn't reply, just stared at him for a long moment before suddenly leaning forward and kissing him. She pulled back with a grimace. "Oh, ew. You taste disgusting. You really need to get rid of that bile flavor."

"What." He often said that around her, didn't he?

"It doesn't mean anything, remember?"

"Elena - "
"Besides, that's the first time you've ever acted concerned for me," she smiled, a little sadly and unfortunately accurate, and it was too much like Tifa and even Reeve, so long ago, when someone was well aware that he or she didn't matter in the grand scheme of things. It scraped Cloud's already raw nerves and he fumbled, managed, "You don't know what you're getting yourself into."

"Turk family," she reminded him, and he sighed, looking down at his feet. "So, what really happened? I know you weren't puking out your spleen because you fell asleep and had a nightmare."

"I saw Sephiroth in the gym," he admitted. She blinked several times.

"General Sephiroth? Huh. Wait, you saw him, or you actually talked to him?" When Cloud didn't reply, her eyes got round. "You talked to him? You like him, don't you?"

"Wait, what?"

"You've got a crush on him, and because you're so emotionally stunted you had to run to the bathroom to puke."

"I don't have a crush on him."

"I wonder if his talent with a sword translates into talent with other things."

"Elena, seriously."

"What? You both need to get laid, anyway."

Cloud groaned. Thinking of Sephiroth like that made him jittery and confused and maybe a little panicked, and when Elena got into this sort of mood it was…difficult. "Elena, is that all you found on Project LAZARUS?"

She gave him that sly look. "You know it took me ages to get that info, and I had to deal with Rude getting all up in my face."

"Rude, as in, the Turk?"

"Um. Forget I said that."

…

It was dark and silent in his quarters when Sephiroth finally walked through the door, draping his long coat over a chair and heading straight for the bedroom. He fell on his bed without bothering to turn on a light or take off his boots and stared up at the ceiling. You've built everything you know on straight-out denial, you idiot. So Sephiroth braced himself for some painful self-reflection. Can't blame other people this time.

…

"Who among you likes being lied to? Who among you is satisfied scavenging for your family's food from the gutters while what little money you have goes to feed men eating off crystal? Who among you is happy to stand back while those same men fuck your women and exploit your children? Who among you is happy breaking your backs to build palaces?"

There was a roar from the crowd. Vincent made sure to keep his head low under the filthy blanket he still wore, listening carefully while shuffling through the mass of people that stamped and
yelled. The speaker was a man who sounded young despite a face already as deeply lined as someone twice his age, dressed in the greasy overalls of a salvager and standing on the back of an overturned crate.

"I got two little kids at home!" he cried. "Am I going to die knowing that my daughter will have to sell her body and that my son will have to sell his soul just to eat? ShinRa promised us a better way of life, but all it's given us is death!"

Louder cheering. Vincent, knowing what to expect, was moving steadily towards the fringe of the crowd near an alley.

"ShinRa says it took over Wutai to bring 'civilization' to them, but what do we see? Foreigners! Refugees, coming in and taking the jobs from the very citizens ShinRa swore to protect! How can those assholes expect to take care of the world if they can't take care of their own fucking people?"

"That's not our fault!" a little girl in a silk tunic cried, her almond-shaped eyes dark with fury, but her voice was too small to be heard over the cries of the crowd. Vincent only heard her because she had been pushed back to the fringes near where he crouched.

"We can't trust some distant authority to remember us and our children. Now is the time for us to take our lives into our own hands! Now is the time for us to rise up and bring power back to the people!"

The crowd was deafening.

The gunshots were louder.

The man on his crate took a bullet between the eyes, the back of his head exploding into fragments of bone and tissue and his body crumpling. The cheering of the crowd became screaming and cursing as people fought to get away from the open market area.

Pressed against a wall in the shadows, Vincent tuned out the chaos and visually tracked the bullet's trajectory. One of the crumbling buildings overlooking the less permanent ramshackle shops was hiding a sniper, perhaps a SOLDIER, but most likely a Turk. He was already moving along the walls, avoiding the surging crowd: somewhere little-used, with easy entrance and multiple exits in case the position was compromised. The building he was eyeing looked dangerously decrepit and wasn't used by anyone other than squatters and junkies. A stranger in their midst wouldn't be noticed.

Vincent slipped into the building, the yelling and noise from outside dimming. It was cooler and damp inside, with old wallpaper hanging in strips to trail on the filthy floor from otherwise bare walls.

Something shifted behind him. Whirling around, Vincent pinned – a kid?  "Get your filthy hands off me, I ain't into older guys, asshole!"

It was the little girl in tunic and shorts. He blinked at her slowly in bemusement but didn't loosen the claws he had around her neck.  "You're following me." And she hadn't done a half-bad job, either.

"I ain't following no one, Mister Demon, and if you don't let me go I'll have no choice but to go all ninja on your butt," and when he tightened his claws briefly she changed tactics without missing a beat, "and it's your fault for being all sneaky and whatever and if you kill me then my tousan is gonna whip you like a whippy thing!"
'Mr Demon'? No, he was wasting time with her when he should be tracking down the sniper, who was likely long gone by now. With a grunt he released her and moved towards the stairs that looked dangerously unstable, ignoring her indignant cries for him to come back and face her like a man, damn it.

On the second floor he came across someone passed out on a pallet of rags, a reedy young man with a track-pocked arm thrown wide. There was no one on the third floor, just more old needles and dirty clothes. He silently raced up the stairs to the fourth, weapon half-drawn and back covered by the stairwell.

Against all logic and hope, the sniper hadn't fled; he was leaning against the broken window, a red ponytail standing out brightly from the blue suit of a Turk and a pair of goggles roughly pushed up to his forehead. Vincent could only see part of the left side of the other's face, just enough to note part of a crescent tattoo or scar just under his eye. The Turk's hand curved around the butt of his rifle, which rested on a tripod braced against the windowsill. Not one of the old M89SR models. An M110 semi-auto, because naturally one of the first things Vincent had done when he got to Midgar was brush up on the last twenty years of firearm innovations, and not just because he didn't have much of a life. It took Vincent just a few seconds to cross the room, and by the time the Turk had turned and lifted a smaller pistol, a blow was already coming down to the base of his skull and stunning him into unconsciousness.

The little girl that had followed him up the stairs whistled. "You've done this a lot, haven't you, Mister Demon?"

When Sephiroth was next aware of his surroundings, daylight was coming in through the bedroom window. Late for work, then. Pity.

Shifting brought his body awake with screamingly stiff muscles. He had spent most of the night tossing and turning because of a mind racing with all the possibilities, not just in a metaphysical sense (were angels real, then, or were they just human souls, and could they see the future or did they exist outside of time) but also in – gods, he didn't even know, except that he wasn't crazy, had never been crazy, and maybe he'd never actually been abandoned, maybe the Planet had done something. Well, no, it had undoubtedly done something, since Cloud was now walking around in a body corporeal not just to Sephiroth but to the rest of their environment, and.

And. Well. It was about here that Sephiroth's talent for language finally fell apart. This was Cloud, his Cloud, because even though it defied conventional scientific understanding every one of Sephiroth's senses, physical and otherwise, knew it with the same certainty as he perceived the sky to be blue according to the average weather patterns of the eastern continent. But – why.

("I'm not going to kill you again, Sephiroth. I can't. And that's one of the things I'm going to fix, all right?")

Oh.

Maybe he should find Cloud and talk to him. Or at least try, and hope that they wouldn't have a repeat of his skin shivering and making him want to crawl inside Cloud's flesh to wear him like a blanket.

Cloud's dreams were green fire. The Planet had sensed his touch with the Calamity's Son and
wasn't unhappy but something much more visceral, the primal fear of a threatened animal. Its WEAPON was still young and growing and more vulnerable for not having yet realized its full potential. As soon as Cloud's head hit the pillow that night the Planet was waiting with the cosmic version of an angry parent.

*Sephiroth isn't the enemy,* he cried as he had cried so many times before, but the Planet had sensed the way Cloud's touch had ignited something, the force between two powerful magnets or colliding thunderstorms.

The Calamity. Clones. Unnatural drives.

*Fuck you and your 'unnatural drives,'* Cloud snapped without thinking, and for a short eternity his senses were overloaded with agonizing white static.

Reunion.

He clawed his way to some semblance of language. *Wasn't Sephiroth's fault, Hel knows it couldn't have been Reunion, impossible, can't be, wasn't Sephiroth.*

But the Planet was already beginning to comb through the threads of his being, ruthless in its determination to root out whatever the Calamity had done, angry enough to reach through the dead-zone of Midgar.

*momma, help me*

…

Zack wasn't dreaming at all. It was after curfew and he'd been summoned to Sephiroth's quarters. He'd never been there before and never dreamed he'd have a reason to be, and he was in *Sephiroth's private quarters* while the man himself, wearing casual slacks and a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, leaned against the kitchen counter and sipped tea. *Tea.*

"Um, sir, if I may ask, what the hell?"

Zack could swear Sephiroth's expression was *amused.* "I spoke with Angeal today," he said, and Zack, who had been shifting his weight right at that moment, tripped over himself with a yelp.

"Angeal? Seriously?"

"Yes. It seems he's reconsidering the wisdom of his recent actions."

"So is he here then?" Zack couldn't help rocking on the balls of his feet restlessly, torn between wanting to hug the crap out of his mentor and knocking his teeth in for being such an idiot. But Sephiroth just shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, he isn't." Figured. "Actually, I called you here because I wanted to talk about Cloud Strife."

These days, who didn't? Zack thought wryly, but there was no heat behind it.

"I know quite a bit about Private Strife, more than most in this company do." A subtle warning that even Zack understood: keep your mouth shut. "Angeal told me that you'd taken a liking to him at the beginning of the mission. What I want to know is how you feel about him now."

Zack shifted in place again. "He's a good kid," he said finally, because as weird as Cloud was, he
seemed genuinely earnest. "Pretty serious. Quiet, I guess." Sephiroth's eyes gleamed, but he didn't say anything. "I think he handled the blades from the Genesis clones better than his rifle. Didn't seem intimidated by Tseng at all, and you know how scary that guy can be. I mean, who can talk about dead people like he was discussing the weather? That's just screwed up."

"Tseng has a certain frankness about him, yes," Sephiroth said mildly. "Now, what do you really think of Private Strife?"

"Sir?"

"You're repeating your mission report. I want to know what you actually think."

"Why?" Zack asked suspiciously.

"Lieutenant, I promise I have nothing but his best interests in mind. There are circumstances, however, that may require my interference, and I need as many details as possible."

Zack peered at him closely, resisting the urge to poke at him. "I got called down to the trooper barracks, y'know, had to help restrain Cloud. He was flipping out over a nightmare or something. Talked him out of it, but I didn't see him again until the Banora mission. He was all intent and serious and like 'bring it on' without being an ass about it. I guess it was a little creepy, too, he kept looking at me like I had all the answers to something.

"Then he went all SOLDIER on Genesis, which was kinda crazy. He said some things…"

Sephiroth was staring into his teacup, a pensive frown pulling on his lips. "I'm going to tell you something that ShinRa can't know. Cannot. Do you understand, Zack?"

First name. Crap. "Uh, yeah. I mean, yes, sir."

"You may have heard that Cloud has a high level of mako in his body. The real reason is rather complicated and involves the Lifestream, though I don't know everything myself. Hojo can't be allowed to get his hands on him."

"Professor Hojo?"

"Yes. The rumors about his human experimentation are true."

Zack's eyes went huge.

"How do you think Genesis, Angeal, and I all came to be how we are?" Sephiroth smiled humorlessly. "Angeal's told me how much you've always wanted to be a SOLDIER, even now, but Zack, you have to understand that SOLDIER was designed as a police force - not for peace, but to maintain ShinRa's power. Hojo's own motive is little more than sadistic curiosity. If Hojo found a way to make SOLDIERs even better than we are, he wouldn't hesitate to take it, and I believe that Cloud might be the kind of specimen he's looking for. It helps that cadets are relatively easy to make disappear without anyone except the family really caring, especially ones that have only been around for the last four or five months."

Wake up one day thinking about kinky sex, and now I'm getting into government conspiracies. "And the reason he would want Cloud is because of the mako or Lifestream or whatever?"

"I believe so, yes."

"And whatever he has to do with the Lifestream is also the reason he knew about whatever's
making Genesis and Angeal go AWOL."

"Most likely."

There was sudden shrill ring of his PHS. Startled, Zack flipped it open with a sharp, "Excuse me, sir. Fair here, what's up?"

"Doctor Libra wants you down in East Medical five minutes ago. Apparently there's a situation that needs your attention."

"What – "

"Just get down here to East, ASAP."

Zack snapped the phone shut with a scowl and blinked when he realized Sephiroth was coming back out of the bedroom with his black coat and the Masamune at his side. The general arched a brow. "I think I know who the cause of this emergency is, and I would like to be there."

"Wouldn't that be kind of suspicious?" Zack pointed out as he was herded out of Sephiroth's quarters. "Big famous general visiting a measly little recruit? Seems to defeat the whole 'hide and protect' thing."

"Not unless it's the same general that sent said recruit on a difficult mission."

Zack grinned. "Ooh, smooth one, sir."

"Thank you."

"I bet no one's beaten you at chess ever."

"I haven't played since the last time I lost to Lazard."

"You just totally lost all your cool points. Sir."

When they reached the infirmary's double doors, they slammed open, sending Zack reeling back a step with an awkward squawk. Libra shot him a poisonous look.

"Took you long enough…er, General Sephiroth, sir?"

Sephiroth bowed slightly. "I apologize for the intrusion, Doctor, but I wish to know if the problem comes from Strife's recent mission."

"Oh." The doctor blinked a few times behind his thin glasses, but there must have been a sound behind him because he suddenly flinched and grabbed Zack's arm. "Both of you come in then, please. Lieutenant, I don't know what you did to calm Strife down last time, but you need to do it again."

"Uh – "

Zack was hustled into a private room barely large enough for the bed. Cloud's limbs had been strapped down to the metal rails on either side of the mattress, the padded leather restraints already chafing skin as Cloud twisted against them. Cloud's eyes were narrowed in glowing slits, mouth moving.

"We got the call about half an hour ago," Doctor Libra said tiredly. "Same deal as last time – went to sleep with his squad, woke up like this. His squadmates said he wasn't screaming, just flailing
and hissing. When they couldn't wake him up, they called the infirmary."

"Why?" Zack demanded. "The SOLDIERs have mako too and don't act like this."

"When the SOLDIER program first began, some did," Sephiroth broke in softly. "The scientists hadn't perfected the procedure and some of the candidates began displaying symptoms similar to both mako poisoning and Cloud here. Doctor, may we be alone?"

Libra looked at Cloud helplessly, visibly frustrated. "His regular exams have been completely stable, there's no reason this should be happening."

"Doctor," Sephiroth said firmly. Libra finally nodded, letting himself out of the room and closing the door quietly.

Zack had seated himself on the edge of the bed, struggling unsuccessfully for a moment to find a comfortable way of draping his legs over the long rail, and took Cloud's clenched hand in his own. It was smaller than his, with blunt fingers and a square palm lined with calluses. He tried to ignore Sephiroth looming in the background.

"Geez, kiddo, don't you know you're not supposed to end up in the hospital the day after a mission? Especially when you were all badass with the clones' sickle things and whatnot, I mean, seriously. I hope none of the older cadets said you had to have a quota on hospital visits, you'd be stupid to do this on purpose."

Cloud's lips stopped moving, though his eyes still glowed faintly.

"I don't know what's got you screaming so much at night, but maybe you should think about talking to someone. I'd listen, or try to, wouldn't even talk back all that much. Or hey, maybe Sephiroth, although," and his voice dropped to a stage-whisper, "I have it on good authority that he's even scarier than Genesis before morning coffee."

Cloud didn't laugh, but his head turned slowly to face Zack and his eyes focused on the lieutenant's face. Before Zack could start again, he murmured, "I don't want them to give you a number."

Numbers again. Apparently it meant something, judging from Sephiroth's suddenly sharp breath. Zack patted Cloud's hand. "Don't worry, kid, the only number I've got is Aeris'." He hesitated. "Speaking of Aeris, I went to see her the other day. She said she'd actually met you."

"Always teasing me," Cloud muttered.

"Yeah, she would. But she said some weird things."

"Bitte, es tut mir leid! Bitte!"

"Cloud?"

"Bitte!"

"Cloud!" Zack barked, and bit the inside of his cheek as Cloud shook his head with a groan, blinking several times to focus.

"Never getting used to that," he whispered, "what a fucking trip," and that pretty much endeared him permanently to Zack. Cloud looked at him, then Sephiroth, and finally the white walls around them. "I started screaming again, didn't I?" he asked hoarsely.
"Close enough," Zack admitted.

"You've been screaming?"

Cloud twitched at Sephiroth's flat question. "Planet," Cloud said, going distant again, and Sephiroth frowned.

"Cloud," Zack said seriously, "Aeris said you're a Cetra."

"No, I'm not. Pretty sure. No."

"She tends to be right about this kind of thing."

"I'm not a Cetra, I'm." He cut himself off and winced, tried to move his hand and finally realized he was tied down. Panic twisted his face, but his gaze shot to Zack and he slowly relaxed.

"It does explain a lot," Sephiroth thought aloud.

"Sephiroth, I need to talk to Rufus."

"The vice president?"

"Yes."

"Whoa, Rufus ShinRa?" Zack interrupted. "What the hell do you want to talk to him for?"

Cloud didn't answer.

"I don't know what you're planning, Cloud, but do you really think Rufus ShinRa is the way to go?" Sephiroth asked as Cloud pulled uncomfortably at the restraints, body tense with a nervous, tightly-wound energy. "I don't think – "

Doctor Libra came in at that moment, saw Cloud's anxiety, and managed to throw both SOLDIERs out of the infirmary with the threat of impromptu prostate exams.

…

"All right, people, listen up."

Cloud had been carted off to the infirmary already, but all of the remaining cadets were too keyed up to go back to sleep. For some reason the near-silent pantomime of fighting had been worse than the actual screaming. Now they turned to Elena, who stood in the middle of the room with her hands on her hips.

"I know this is really inconvenient when we've got Sergeant Tokka breathing down our necks at reveille, but we owe it to Cloud to keep our mouths shut about his night-terrors."

"Why?" demanded an older cadet, Ricky. "He's the one that keeps waking us up."

"Remember the time you fucked up royally in the obstacle course and Tokka was ready to rip you apart? And who was the one that distracted him and got yelled at instead?" she snapped. "It certainly wasn't one of your other squadmates."

"Not to mention Cloud got a bit of payback on the old asshole a few weeks ago," Joe the future chocobo-rider commented dreamily.
"Kinda wondering why he's got such bad terrors anyway," Small added timidly.

"I'd like to see one of you get thrown in mako and survive," she growled, and there was promptly an uproar.

"Thrown in mako? Why isn't he in a coma?"

"Is that why he's so intent on SOLDIER?"

"Explains a lot, though, doesn't it?"

"Shut up!" Small roared, his large frame towering over the other cadets. The noise died down again as Elena mentally kicked herself six ways from Sunday for her big mouth.

"Look, he's one of us, weird as he is. Until he actually hurts one of us, let's just keep this to ourselves, got it? Who knows what would happen if the wrong people heard about him."

There was a general mutter of agreement, even if Joe had to smack Ricky upside the head.

…

When Cloud met up with Vincent in Midgar the afternoon he got out of the hospital, a day after he'd been admitted (and hadn't that required some fast talking with the increasingly paranoid doctor), he stopped in his tracks and narrowed his eyes.

"Okay, start talking."

Vincent, now in simple worn workclothes, merely stared back.

"Last time I was here, it was like walking into a warzone. What the hell did I miss while I on that mission?" The noise of Wall Market did better to give them privacy than any number of coded messages or thick walls. But the tension was still there, making the shopkeepers more short-tempered than usual and the children less unruly. Cloud swore that some of the people wandering around weren't civilians at all but troopers.

"There was an anti-ShinRa rally," Vincent told him, ushering him along the street into Sector Two as though he were just another guy heading home from work. "What happened to you?"

"What?"

"You're too pale and you smell of disinfectant."

How kind. "I'm fine, not a big deal. An anti-ShinRa rally?"

Vincent let the matter drop. "People are getting sick of the conditions that they've been driven into, and the increasing number of refugees is only making it worse."

"Who died?" Cloud asked cynically.

"Four people, including the one on the literal soapbox. Several others were injured in the panic. It was very nearly a riot."

"I'm guessing it was a Turk that killed the preacher?"

Vincent looked at him sideways. "You're familiar with ShinRa tactics."
"Bad for my health, I know. So where are you taking me?"

Instead of replying, Vincent led Cloud through a narrow alleyway that opened up into a filthy, rundown street strung with paper lanterns and tiny multicolored prayer flags. The few people they passed, all of whom appeared to be Wutaian, watched them like hawks. If Vincent hadn't been even paler than Cloud nor his eyes so red, he would've fit in. Cloud had felt like an outsider over the years for a wide variety of reasons, but this was the first time he'd been acutely aware of his own skin and hair color, something he'd never really thought about before. Barret had just been Barret and Yuffie just been Yuffie, but now that he had at least a slightly better grip on his sanity for the time being he wondered, for the first time, what else had been driving Yuffie besides conflict with her father.

Cloud was led into a shop that was cramped with handmade wares, most made from paper and thin wooden sticks. It smelled like tea and wood fiber. A long scroll painted with a stunning image of Leviathan drew his eye, and he was so intent on following the whorls of color (not unlike the Lifestream, such rich greens and blues) that he almost didn't notice the small elderly woman that appeared from the back of the shop.

"Yoshida-san," Vincent said politely, bowing at the waist. The woman returned his gesture with a crinkled smile as she came around the counter, her eyes sharp.

"Vir-san, I see you have brought a friend."

"This is Cloud Strife."

Cloud awkwardly bowed and nearly leapt out of his skin when his wrist was grabbed. Yoshida's hands were gnarled and liver-spotted, but her fingers were strong and her palms crossed with the deep lines of hard work. He forcefully fought the urge to lash out. Only Elena touched him on a regular basis, and even then it wasn't that often since he'd nearly decked her after she tackle-hugged him from behind.

Yoshida-san examined him closely, finally tugging at him until he leaned forward so that she could stare him in the eyes. Cloud had no idea what she was looking for, and she didn't say anything when she eventually released him and went back around her counter. "You know what's more dangerous than thought, Vir-san?" she asked in the tone of a well-worn conversation.

"Charm?" said Vincent drolly, and the woman's eyes crinkled in another smile. Her voice was croaky, but her accented words were clear and purposeful.

"Dreams." Cloud couldn't help thinking that this old woman reminded him of his mother. Vincent seemed to be taking it all in stride. "Thoughts are powerful, but also useless without the power of dreams. Thoughts change the present, but dreams shape the future."

"Dreams can be deceptive," said Vincent, with the kind of gravity common to people who spoke in cryptic riddles.

As she spoke, Yoshida was sorting out what looked like some claws and teeth taken from monsters outside the city. A dealer, then, the kind that paid people like Cloud and his party for bringing back the carcasses of monsters for valuable parts. "Dreams are deceptive only if you're too stupid to see behind them," she said, and if Cloud didn't know better he'd think she was actually teasing Vincent. He kept half an ear on their odd exchange as he looked around the shop, trying to figure out why Vincent had brought him here and why his fingers were beginning to itch as though he was holding a materia. "Where does the boy come from?"
"He's from the western continent, between here and Wutai," Vincent answered as Cloud twitched. The boy is standing right here, he thought darkly.

"You have an unusual last name," Yoshida observed.

"My mother always did have a rather morbid sense of humor," said Cloud. He couldn't help thinking that when Vincent arched his brow – yes, just like that – he looked an awful lot like Sephiroth. Yoshida crooked a finger at him, and when Cloud approached the counter her wrinkled hand snatched at the carved materia under his shirt and held it up, making Cloud stumble forward with the sudden tug against its cord around his neck.

"Death is only a part of rebirth."

*That's one way to look at it.*

"My people were not happy when Vir-san said he was bringing an outsider here, but you understand. You know what it's like to be without home or loved ones. That makes you a child of Leviathan in spirit, if not by honor of blood."

"I…thank you," he whispered.

She let go of his necklace and patted him on the cheek with a grandmotherly smile before turning to Vincent. "No more dawdling. They're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Yoshida-san," he replied with another bow, and guided Cloud out of the shop.

Wondering what purpose that whole thing had served, Cloud followed Vincent to another building that looked like a general store. Barrels stood outside alongside a table of fruits he'd never seen, jars and packages of equally unknown foods lining the shelves inside. Much of it appeared preserved, though he didn't know if that was because of the distance between Midgar and Wutai or rampant poverty.

Vincent led him into the back of the store and up several flights of stairs, somehow managing to be completely silent on the rickety steel staircases. They came out onto an abandoned floor, bare and gutted save for evenly spaced support columns. A few of the windows were cracked, all were grimy, and the dust and cobwebs were thick against the walls. Several Wutaian warriors and a slumped figure bound to a chair occupied the middle of the empty space.

"Reno?" Cloud said in confusion, earning a sharp look from Vincent.

"You know him?"

"He's a Turk. He was the one that brought down the Plate. Well, *would* have brought down the Plate. Rather picky about his booze, too. What's he doing here?"

"He was the one that shot the man trying to convince the crowd that ShinRa was oppressive and needed to be brought down."

"Ah." He waited, and finally Vincent added, "Given your unique position in the grand scheme of things, it might be prudent to speak with him."

"Reno won't break," he said immediately. "He'll tell you everything except what's useful."

"Of course." Vincent almost sounded offended at the thought of a Turk giving in so easily. The Wutaian still tensed as Cloud started forward, hands in his pockets, body language relaxed but
"Sorry to say this, boys, but jailbait don't much do it for me," Reno slurred through a bruised face. "Nice change in tactics, but you might've had more luck with tits."

He was slouched in the chair, hands bound behind its back and his shirt torn. His goggles were gone and most of his visible skin was bruised but not bloodied. Cloud stood a few feet away in front of him and wondered if time was actually going to mellow Reno. "What do you know about AVALANCHE?" Cloud asked, and from the way Reno's green eyes flickered, he knew he'd taken the Turk completely off-guard.

"Big fucking snowball. Fart too loudly in the mountains during winter and suddenly you're in deep shit, yo."

"What does Rufus have to do with AVALANCHE?" Cloud continued, unperturbed.

"Careful, kid, the VP won't be too happy if hears you shitting up his name like that."

"What makes you think I was talking about Rufus ShinRa?"

Reno looked impressed, but said anyway, "You kidding me? How many fucks have the misfortune to be named 'Rufus', yo? You say 'Rufus,' I think that spoiled rich bastard. Say 'Sephiroth' and I'll probably think of the general, but hey, that's how word association works. So, why'd the slant-eyed sons of bitches bring you in? Like I said, you ain't too hard on the eyes and all, but I prefer a bit more flesh up top and less between the legs, you catch my drift. Less of the hick accent too, yo, makes me think of chocobos and the weird shit you country people get up to with 'em."

It was almost reassuring to know that Reno never really changed. Once upon a time, after the Remnants, before the Plague, Cloud would get to drinking with Rude and Reno and either end up reminiscing about their sordid history or trying to beat the shit out of one another for old times' sake. "Used to hear stuff about the SOLDIERs, yo," Reno would smirk. "You want my opinion, they were just a bunch of fucked-up mako junkies boning each other, sometimes taking some time out to go kill shit so they'd still get their pension. Whoa, Strife, hold your shit, I didn't mean no disrespect!" Or sometimes, "Shit, Strife, you must be a damn good fuck to keep Sephiroth coming back from the dead. Fuck, what're you doing, trying to kill me?"

"No more than the shit you Turks get up to," Cloud retorted dryly. "Always did wonder about Dark Nation and why the VP would need a dog if he's got you."

Reno snorted with laughter, voice cracking from dehydration. "I like you, kid. I might've taken you out drinking if I wasn't gonna die at the end of all this pussyfooting around."

"You probably will," Cloud agreed mildly. "but then again, I've learned Turks are a bit like cockroaches. You'd survive even if a big fucking meteor hit the Planet."

"We would, yo," he declared proudly.

"You're lucky, then. Most people would die if that happened. Too bad that the Planet's dying anyway, but hey, you'll find a way to survive, right?"

"Ah, fuck," Reno groaned, "you're one of those gods-damned eco-terrorists, aren't you? What the hell you quizzing me about AVALANCHE for if you're fucking part of it?"

"I'm not. AVALANCHE just happens to want the same thing I do."

alert.
"Saving the Planet? Good luck with that shit, yo. Fuck a couple chocobos and kiss some whales while you're at it."

"No, I don't particularly like the Planet." Good thing said Planet was too vast and old to really understand subtler human emotions. "But Rufus had something to do with AVALANCHE, and I need to know what that was."

"He's a ShinRa, fucktard, the only thing he'd have to do with AVALANCHE would involve bullets and bombs."

"That's not how Elfé put it."

A pause. Reno looked at Cloud with new interest. "She mentioned Rufus to you, did she?"

"Yes. And I'd threaten to kill you if one of the Turks tried to take her out, but she seemed like she could take care you herself."

"I should fucking say so. That broad took out a hundred bandits at once, all by her cute, asocial little self."

"And then the Turks let her wander around freely," Cloud finished sardonically.

"What can I say, we're just a bunch of bleeding hearts."

"That, or Rufus had ulterior motives."

Another slight flicker in Reno's eyes. It seemed time would also teach him better self-control when taken by surprise. So if Rufus was quietly sabotaging the company but not willing to go so far as to encourage mass destruction, then it was possible he was angling for a different approach in ruling the people than his father. He was also more politically acute than President ShinRa, which meant he was as aware of ShinRa's role in society as Elfé.

"Reno," Cloud said suddenly, "do you think Rufus has abandoned his original goals?"

"People like him are stubborn, yo," he drawled vaguely.

"You know Hojo, right?" Reno's look was as dry as Cosmo Canyon. "Then you should know that even Turks aren't safe from him." He glanced over his shoulder pointedly. "You should ask that guy Vincent sometime about it, since Veld isn't around anymore."

…

After her two visitors left, Yoshida hopped off her stool. She knew every inch of her shop despite the clutter, knew the location of every little lantern and tea leaf and cardboard doll, and so she didn't hesitate when she reached for an object sitting on a low shelf behind a carved cat.

The object was about four feet long, six inches at its widest point, and light enough for the old woman to lift it with little trouble. It was pearly white and looked not unlike an enormous tooth or spike. Yoshida hefted it a few times thoughtfully. She hadn't been unaware of the boy's distraction while in her shop, his presence as strange as anything she'd ever felt but still human, nor had she missed what was most likely causing his restlessness.

She'd seen the calluses on his hands and the empty space at his side. It was a pity for a swordsman not to have a sword.
Cloud didn't know why his squadmates were acting so strangely around him, but he ignored it. He was more concerned about having two SOLDIERs in the room.

Zack was sitting on his bunk and looking around with the pained nostalgia of a student returning to the high school he'd thought he had managed to escape forever. His friend, some SOLDIER Third named Kunsel, leaned against the wall with a neutral expression that made Cloud feel defensive. He stood with his gym bag over his shoulder and fiddled absently with the shoulder strap.

"Man, you wouldn't believe how glad I was to get out of this place," Zack was saying. "You think Sergeant Tokka's bad, just be happy that Sergeant Browning retired before you got here. Now there was a guy with a bug up his butt and a sadistic streak half a mile wide."

"I don't know, Zack, Tokka's streak of sadism must be at least a full mile," Cloud disagreed.

"Bah," the SOLDIER huffed dismissively. "C'mon, Kunsel, back me up here. You had the bastard a year longer than I did."

"Not all of us can be prodigies, you know," he smiled. As Zack snorted and waved off the praise, Cloud couldn't help narrowing his eyes.

"I hear Gysahl's really impressed with Cloud's record and his mission report," Zack grinned and winked. "If you can keep your cool and not piss off any more of your superiors, kid, you could be a SOLDIER within a year."

There was a time when Cloud would have given anything, anything, to hear that. Now it only made him feel cold. "Zack, can I speak with you? Alone?"

Surprised, Zack glanced at Kunsel before nodding. "Yeah, okay. Hey Kunsel, I'll meet you in the cafeteria on the fifty-fourth floor. The secretary there, he makes the best coffee in the building."

"Coffee that doesn't taste like burnt sludge, you mean?" the Third laughed, subtle tension underlying his words. As soon as he left the dorm, Zack asked seriously, "You all right, Cloud?"

"I'm fine. I just…wanted to ask you a favor."

"Sorry, man, not even I can get you into the girls' locker rooms."
He snorted as Zack grinned again, and the sudden pain in his heart came from the smile and the laugh and the stupid jokes that hadn't changed.

"Cloud?"

A hand on his shoulder jerked Cloud out of his thoughts. "Sorry, just thinking."

"Have anything to do with those nightmares of yours?" Zack quietly asked and he no doubt felt the sudden tension in Cloud's shoulders. Cloud wanted to tell him, _Next time you try being a hero and saving me, don't. Just keep running_, but he also knew that Zack wasn't like that, wasn't going to leave anyone behind even when he knew it'd end up killing him.

So he shrugged. "I was hoping you'd be willing to give this to Sephiroth for me, since I don't have the security clearance."

Zack examined the object Cloud pulled out of his gym bag. "A children's book?"

"He'll know what it is."

Zack leaned in close. "What's going on with you two, anyway?"

"Nothing," Cloud replied in honest confusion.

"...Are you crushing on him?"

He threw his arms into the air, feeling that jitteriness again, the not-rightness and the need to protect and Planet knew what the fuck else. "Hel, why do people keep asking that?"

"Maybe they know something you don't," Zack said as he smirked. Cloud glared.

"It's kind of hard to crush on him when you – you know what, never mind. Will you please just give him the book?"

"Er, I'm sorry, Cloud. Yeah, I'll give it to him."

"Thanks," he mumbled, feeling somewhat guilty for getting snippy over something that wasn't really a big deal, just...weird.

"Hey, kiddo, s'okay. I'll take this to Sephiroth and I won't even tease you anymore, okay?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm just tired." Cloud managed a smile, and Zack tossed his arm over his shoulder and squeezed a bit.

"That's not surprising," Zack muttered. "Look, I know you've got to get going to one of your sergeant's torture sessions, but, y'know, I might not know everything that's going on, but I'll still help, yeah?"

"Why?"

Zack blinked. "Why what?"

"Why would you say that? You haven't known me that long." And even though Cloud's voice was level, his heart was pounding.

"Hey, like I said, us country boys have gotta stick together!"
Zack walked away with the small victory of putting a smile on the kid's face. He set off for Sephiroth's office, smiling automatically at the people he passed, and as he stood in the elevator he turned the book in his hands over and over. It was old and worn, bound in plain brown leather, and once he was alone in the car he flipped it to the table of contents.

"The Lands of Ice and Fire, The One-Eyed God in the Underworld, The Binding of the Great Wolf...what the hell?" Woodcut illustrations of giants and battles and, at one point, an enormous wolf in chains littered the stories. When he let all the pages fall against the left side, he found a piece of paper tucked between the last leaf and back cover. On one side were notes in a vaguely familiar hand detailing the influence of mako on mitosis – Zack made a face – and on the other was a badly drawn picture of two stick-figures holding hands. One had three yellow spikes on its head and bird's wings, the other had long hair drawn in grey pencil.

Zack stared so hard at the image that he didn't realize the elevator had passed his floor and was descending again. He flipped the paper back over to the handwriting, and – okay, the letters were a little more childish, but that particular swoop to the 's' and the harsh stroke crossing the 't' were all Sephiroth's. Considering how many times Zack had forged the man's signature, he would know. How the hell did Cloud get his hands on something like this?

"Aw, crap," he muttered when he finally noticed that he was nearly back to the floor he'd originally left. Smacking the button for the fifty-ninth floor, he practically danced with impatience for the near five minutes it took people to get on and off the elevator all the way back up. As soon as the doors opened, he squeezed past a few executives towards Sephiroth's office.

And promptly ran into the man himself.

"Forgive my saying, sir, but you're built like a freaking brick wall," Zack muttered, rubbing his nose. Sephiroth blinked at him.

"In a hurry, Lieutenant?"

Glancing at the secretary watching them with interest, Zack firmly nudged Sephiroth back into his office and closed the door behind him. He turned around to get the full force of Sephiroth's vaguely amused scrutiny. "Don't look at me that like sir, it makes me feel like a bug under a microscope."

"Would you mind explaining why you were in such a hurry that you felt the need to manhandle my person?"

Zack winced. "Um. Please don't report me. Cloud wanted me to give you something." He pushed the book into Sephiroth's hands, and the general looked at it blankly. "He didn't tell me where he got it or anything, just that you'd know what it was." Yeah, except that Sephiroth looked as confused as Zack. "Maybe you should look at the back, though that's just a suggestion, it's not like I was looking through it or anything, I'd never go snooping like someone who, y'know, snoops. I mean, Cloud gave it to me in confidence for you, that'd be a real lousy thing to do."

"Lieutenant, shut up," Sephiroth said kindly. Zack shut up. Sephiroth flipped to the back of the book and pulled out the piece of paper, expression briefly darkening when he saw the topic of the notes, then turned it over. Zack was rather fascinated to see the range of emotion that passed over the man's face. After a few minutes of awkward silence, Zack started timidly, "I, uh, take it you know what Cloud was talking about now?"

Sephiroth didn't immediately respond. When he did, it was to say quietly, "I did this when I was approximately nine years old."
"Wow."

"Lieutenant, do you believe in fate?"

"Uh," said Zack, "is this a quiz? Because I didn't study." When Sephiroth looked at him with those vivid feline eyes, just looked as though honestly interested in what Zack had to say, he shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, I never really thought about it. Probably not, I guess, because otherwise I'd still be stuck in Gongaga hunting frogs and living the country life. Which would suck."

"If you were given the chance to do something differently, anything that's happened in your life, would you take that chance?"

Zack thought of Angeal and said, "Hell yeah." Then he paused. "Well, maybe. Sir, what's going on? What's with the Twenty Questions?"

The general looked back at the drawing. It appeared he was about to say something but changed his mind at the last moment. "Thank you for bringing this to me, Zack. You're dismissed."

"Wait, hold on a sec – "

"Lieutenant. Please."

And that was such a bizarre request to hear from General Sephiroth that Zack couldn't do anything else but hesitantly salute. He glanced back at the office before the door closed and saw Sephiroth staring fixedly at the drawing.

He was rather subdued when he met up with Kunsel in the cafeteria on the fifty-fourth floor, accepting a cup of fresh non-sludge coffee from the guy without thinking.

"Zack, you all right? You're a bit quiet," Kunsel said gently. "Usually when that happens, people hit the deck."

"Huh?"

"Never mind. Was it something Cloud said?"

Zack swirled his coffee with the little plastic stick. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to talk to Kunsel; after all, the guy was always there even when Zack didn't want him to be and he was both level-headed and observant. And Zack hadn't had anyone to really talk to since Angeal defected, and while part of him was saying you could always talk to Cloud, the problem was that Cloud was part of the problem.

It took a moment, but he was able to summon a grin and say, "Nah, just worried about Angeal. So what's on the SOLDIER agenda for today?"

Kunsel didn't look convinced, but he didn't push the issue.

It took some maneuvering, including a favor called in with Gysahl, to get Cloud dismissed from his evening classes and into Sephiroth's office. Sephiroth leaned against the front of his desk with his arms loosely crossed, looking at Cloud's neutral expression and taking in his blue uniform, the eyes far too old for such a young face. He was careful to keep some distance between them, and if there was something fluttering in his chest, nervousness or anger or a child's awe, he didn't show it.
"How are you doing, Cloud?"

Cloud's brow furrowed. "I'm fine."

"Are you?"

Cloud looked surprised, as though no one ever bothered to ask him that. "Is something wrong, sir?"

Sir. Sephiroth held back a frustrated sigh and laid a hand on the old book sitting on his desk. "Where did you get this?"

Cloud tilted his head forward, watching from behind his long bangs. "Before I left for Midgar, I made sure to go through the ShinRa Mansion."

"You were in Nibelheim? How long?"

"I was born there. Sir."

Which would make it almost exactly the amount of time since Cloud had disappeared and Sephiroth had been transferred to Midgar under Hojo's orders. He'd been a twenty-something man that wasn't quite real, and was now a teenage boy in a very real body. "You were reincarnated?" he asked tentatively.

Cloud shifted.

"Reincarnated."

"Blame the Planet, I had no choice in the matter," he muttered. Sephiroth pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Reincarnated."

"Sephiroth?"

He glanced through his fingers to see Cloud withdrawing his hand, as though he'd started to reach out and changed his mind halfway through the motion. "Does anyone else know?" he asked.

"Just one, but he's not in ShinRa." Cloud was making tiny, restless movements, a slight curling of the fingers, minute shifts of his weight. He remembered the times his younger self had crawled into Cloud's lap when everything got to be too much, and he suddenly wanted to return the favor, wanted to be useful in a way that Genesis and Angeal had never needed him because they had each other.

"Am I making you uncomfortable?" he asked quietly, and Cloud looked sincerely surprised.

"No, just. No."

There was an uncomfortable lull before Sephiroth commented, "I see your loquaciousness has improved with time," and Cloud ducked his head, unable to help a small smile. "Cloud. What happened in the gym?"

"I don't know," Cloud said quietly, not quite meeting his eyes. "Jenova's dead, I made sure of it, that shouldn't have happened. The Planet should've stopped that, I didn't think it was possible."

"Cloud, I don't understand. What are you talking about?"
"It's nothing," Cloud replied, apparently having mastered the trick of closing himself off without actually moving. "We're fine now, I don't know why, but it doesn't matter now."

"I felt your mind. That isn't something you can just dismiss."

"I'll make sure it doesn't happen again."

"How?" Sephiroth demanded, skepticism making the words sharp on his tongue.

"Don't worry, it's fine. I've got it under control."

"Do you? Because I've been on the battlefield often enough to know when a man is desperate." Cloud hissed out a breath between his teeth, but Sephiroth pressed, "You shouldn't fight alone, Cloud. You talk about not wanting to kill me and wanting to protect certain people. Why? And why do you have it do it yourself?"

But Cloud was shaking his head. "You don't understand, Sephiroth, I don't want you to understand. This isn't – this isn't anything that someone should know, it wouldn't be fair to you – "

"But it's fair to you?"

"That's beside the point," Cloud snapped.

Sephiroth stood up to his full height, purposefully invading Cloud's personal space. "You are many things, Cloud Strife, but I didn't think stupid was one of them. You said you wanted to save Zack, Aeris, and myself. While I don't personally know Aeris, I am reasonably sure she would agree with me when I ask you, did it never occur to you that we might want to do the same in return? Allow us the agency to make decisions for ourselves."

"You don't understand," Cloud snarled so suddenly that Sephiroth almost took a step back into his desk. "You die. All three of you, you die, and I survive. It doesn't matter that she's an Ancient or that you and Zack are SOLDIERs, the two of them sacrifice themselves and I have to kill you because you weren't able to resist Jenova."

"That's why you so determined to destroy her," Sephiroth realized, feeling disconnected. He could remember the way she'd curled into his thoughts, whispering promises of power and love and belonging. "How is this possible, Cloud?"

"What, living the future before it's happened? Ask the Planet, good luck getting anything even slightly human out of it. But I can't, I can't do it again, Sephiroth. I can't."

Eyes wide, something not right in his tone as though he were constantly on the edge. Desperation, but also obsession, like the men under Sephiroth's command who'd gone into battle with no intention of returning. Keeping his voice low, Sephiroth said, "But you've already changed things, Cloud. Jenova's gone."

"Except not, not if my body suddenly wanted to crawl into yours," Cloud replied bluntly. "That happened before, too. It's the living Jenova cells, they want Reunion, they want to make you a god and the rest of us yours. I don't even know. Disciples, or sacrifices, or something. I'm still not sure, Hojo wasn't very clear. Never is, all that fucking rambling."

Sephiroth's patience was an odd thing; he could stand silently for hours, watching for an enemy or simply sitting through another useless executive meeting, but people were frustrating. There was no clear-cut motive or goal, no real predictability, and it unbalanced him. "Cloud, I'm not understanding," he managed calmly. "How did you get living Jenova cells? Were you a First?"
"I told you, it's nothing."

"Cloud."

"Gods damn it, Sephiroth, let it go, all right? I've got it under control."

"Do you, now? It appears to me that you're just being stubborn."

"There's nothing more to be said."

"Why not?"

"Because I said so!"

There was a long silence. Cloud put a hand over his face.

"Would you like to send me to my quarters without dinner?" Sephiroth quipped dryly.

"This is so f*cked up," he muttered, anger melting away.

Sephiroth's lips quirked. He reached out to put his hands on Cloud's shoulders, fingers tightening against the instinctive attempt to twitch away; and yes, there it was, the slowly rising wave of wantneedmine that wasn't natural but didn't feel inherently malicious, either.

"Cloud, please look at me. Please," he repeated when the other didn't move, but finally Cloud lowered his hand and looked up at him through his bangs again. "It matters. I'm not...reconciled to your leaving when I was younger – no, Cloud, listen to me. I know it was the Planet now, but it will take some time. Even so, you aren't alone." I want to help. I want to do something worthwhile with my life. "If you're determined to save the three of us from whatever you saw happen, then at least respect us enough to let us do the same for you."

Cloud was silent.

"I'm starting to believe you have no intention of surviving whatever is going to happen this time around."

When Cloud didn't deny it, a knot of emotion so tangled Sephiroth couldn't hope to understand it all at once twisted around his heart.

"...It started with a mission to Nibelheim," Cloud whispered unexpectedly, fixing his eyes somewhere behind Sephiroth. Sephiroth didn't take his hands off his shoulders. "You, Zack, me, and someone else, I don't remember his name. Hel, I don't even remember his name. It was supposed to be just a check on the reactor, but it was a set-up from Hojo. He knew that you'd find Jenova, and you – you didn't fight her. You burned Nibelheim to the ground."

"Zack and me, we tried to stop you, but you stabbed us. Ran us through. I tossed you into the reactor core before Hojo got to us, and he was...angry. That I'd managed to kill you. He wanted to make us clones of you, but for some reason it didn't take with Zack, maybe because he was already a SOLDIER Second, I don't know. So I...I got the cells. And mako. And probably whatever else Hojo found lying around, he's not exactly careful in his methodology. Zack was the one to get us out."

"How long?" Sephiroth had to know.
"Four years. No, five. Something. I was comatose, Zack had to drag my useless ass around, gods know how he got us as far as Midgar before ShinRa caught up. They killed him, shot him because he's too much of a fucking hero to leave me and get himself out of there. I only lived because they thought I was already dead, got involved with AVALANCHE in time for you to – no. It was one of your clones that looked like you and had your memories, he started trying to destroy the Planet. So I had to kill you again. Aeris died."

"Genesis and Angeal?"

"They didn't exist before. I think Hojo let them stay alive as back-ups, since I destroyed Jenova this time."

Sephiroth's fingers had tightened to the point where he was probably leaving deep bruises on Cloud's shoulders, but Cloud didn't say anything and Sephiroth didn't think he was capable of letting go. "How did you get sent back?"

"After you died, part of Jenova infected the Lifestream," he answered dully. "It created a sickness called Geostigma that made your body attack itself, killing you from the inside out. We managed to stop it, but too much of the Planet had already died. The Plague, it…" Cloud swallowed and snorted humorlessly, "It was like one of Zack's crappy zombie movies. The dead started coming back as these, these things, we called them warps and scions because that's what they were, these warped monsters born from Jenova. Cosmo Canyon went first, I guess because it's always been closely tied to the Lifestream, and so did Mideel. Then North Corel and that whole area, and when Cid and Vincent died I thought Yuffie was gonna go mad, I…I couldn't… Tifa was wearing herself thin, kept giving her rations to the orphans and she still somehow managed to keep me from going insane. Sometimes I wonder if she actually succeeded, I could hear them, everything infected with the Plague kept whispering about hunger and – "

"Cloud - "

"We lost, Sephiroth." Cloud finally looked him in the face. "We lost and I was the last thing alive when the skies burned."

Sephiroth released his shoulders and pulled him close instead, wrapped him in human warmth and the mundane smell of leather. It was like holding a mannequin. Sephiroth tightened his grip until, very slowly, Cloud's hands twisted in his coat. "Listen to me," Sephiroth said quietly. Cloud came up to just past Sephiroth's chin, so his words went straight to Cloud's ear. "Jenova is gone, which means no Nibelheim, no Reunion, and now we know the risks involved. You won't end up alone again. Cloud didn't respond, didn't do anything but breathe shallowly against Sephiroth's collarbone. He smelled like generic soap and clean sweat. "Let us help you."

"You can't promise that," Cloud whispered.

"Perhaps, but the statistical possibility has been greatly increased."

It won a shaky laugh and Cloud pulled away, meeting Sephiroth's eyes, and if there was something raw and distinctly not-okay about him at least the suicidal edge was gone. Sephiroth wanted to push, to know the details of what happened, why Cloud had been the one trapped with this weight, what Sephiroth himself had done to Cloud in another life. But Cloud was visibly pulling himself together, locking it all down tight, and the moment had passed. So instead he leaned against his desk again, gesturing Cloud to a padded chair in the corner of the office, and asked, "Why do you want to talk to Rufus?"

Cloud pulled one of his knees to his chest and wrapped his arm around it, letting the other leg
swing and brush the carpet with his toes. It made him look startlingly young. "I think he was AVALANCHE's financial backer a few years ago."

Sephiroth raised both brows. "That is...unexpected. I was under the impression that AVALANCHE had disbanded by now, however. Why does it matter?"

"The Planet's still dying. Maybe more slowly, since Jenova's gone, but the reactors are still draining it."

"You want to take down the whole company.\" The smirk he got was a complete surprise. "Cloud."

Cloud explained more seriously. "I don't see any other way. ShinRa's invested too much into Zack and especially you to let you walk away, and if Tseng didn't like Aeris so much, she'd have been taken back to Hojo years ago. President ShinRa is determined to find the Promised Land because he thinks it'll provide endless amounts of mako, he won't consider alternate energy sources."

"And how do you plan to do this?"

"I'm not sure," Cloud admitted. "Killing the president comes to mind, but there are plenty of people in the company ready to take his place. Someone also pointed out that with the refugees and people's complete reliance on ShinRa, a sudden change like this could do more harm than good."

"Which means more subtlety is called for.\" Sephiroth smiled at Cloud's irritation.

"I was thinking that if Rufus had the motivation to back AVALANCHE, maybe putting him in as president means he'd be willing to make some concessions in turn. Like alternative power sources. I mean, he's a bastard, but he's a bastard I know."

"You should know that Heidegger and Palmer are too close to the president to just step aside and let his son take over. Heidegger is holding something over Lazard's head, though I don't know what. If push comes to shove I believe that the SOLDIERs would follow my lead, but until then, involving anyone else is dangerous."

"Reeve," Cloud said immediately.

"Tuesti? Of the Urban Development Department?"

"When ShinRa fell, before, Reeve was the one that kept things together. Come to think of it, rumor said that Rufus was helping to fund him too."

"It'll be hard to keep the lower sectors from outright rebellion when they sense ShinRa's weakness."

"I've got someone working on that."

Sephiroth other eyebrow rose. "Who?"

"Vincent Valentine. Have you heard of him?"

"He's supposed to be dead."

"Hojo got to him first."

That actually explained a lot. "You trust him?"

"Hojo...ruined him." Cloud's voice started going distant, somewhere Sephiroth couldn't reach him.
"And he was always there for me. I couldn't leave him behind."

..."I feel like a gargoyle."

Angeal rolled his eyes at Genesis.

"Do you realize how undignified this is, sneaking around like truant schoolchildren?"

"First, you never went to school," Angeal growled. "Second, you're the one that was so determined to push everyone else away that you made things worse, which is far more insulting than your indignity."

Genesis sulked.

The two were on the balcony that ran around the ledge of the sixtieth floor of the ShinRa building, able to look through the steel grating and into Sephiroth's office window. It was unspoken that Sephiroth allowed this sort of mild breach in security because it made people looking for blackmail less likely to look much deeper into more sensitive matters, and normally Sephiroth did nothing more interesting in his office than paperwork. But the bare window must have slipped his mind because Genesis and Angeal could see him clearly talking to a Regular cadet, which was very unusual. Except they knew this wasn't just any cadet.

"How does he know that boy?" Genesis murmured thoughtfully. Angeal had explained to him what Sephiroth had said about this Cloud Strife being exposed to mako at a young age, but neither were stupid enough to believe it was the whole story. "They're familiar with one another." Sephiroth, who normally guarded his personal space jealously, didn't seem to mind the cadet standing so close.

"I hope you aren't suggesting that Sephiroth has suddenly developed a taste for underage cadets."

Angeal's words fell flat between them. Genesis just smiled like a feline. "I wasn't, but now that you mention it, I imagine the kid would look lovely on his knees with his lips wrapped around a cock. And obviously he already has some measure of how different the three of us are from the rest of humanity, so Sephiroth won't even have to angst about it."

His casual cruelty made Angeal feel sick. "Stop it, Genesis."

"Best of all possibilities, really, knowing our big terrible secret but still young enough to manipulate."

"Genesis."

He stopped, but didn't lose his dark smile. Angeal watched him carefully. It sounded like Genesis had formed a personal grudge against Strife. Angeal glanced back down through the grating and found himself looking back into Strife's face. "He sees us."

"Not in this light," said Genesis, straightening up and stretching out his dark wing. "No, he senses us."

It was a shift in perception, a thought-twist and the sensation of being in a thousand places at once before Angeal was standing just behind Genesis' shoulder, where he always was, in Sephiroth's office. Sephiroth had reacted by throwing an arm in front of Strife and arching his own suddenly-materialized wing aggressively, standing tall and cold.
"Genesis, Angeal." His voice was lacked inflection, though his eyes had narrowed.

"Sephiroth," Genesis replied, and probably couldn't help the note of mockery in it if he tried. "I see you have company." Neither Strife nor Sephiroth said anything, and Genesis' tone tried for conciliatory. "I'm merely looking for answers."

"Everyone does."

"I'm not interested in pedantry, Sephiroth. Hollander is useless and, if various sources are to be believed, then Jenova has been destroyed. I'm running out of options."

"Hojo."

"He was never one of those options and you know it."

Angeal could see Sephiroth closing himself off, hiding away the openness that he'd apparently been comfortable sharing with the cadet, and a small voice whispered, See what you've done.

Strife pushed Sephiroth's arm down. "Why should anyone help you, Genesis?"

Angeal could sense the twitch of muscle in Genesis' back. "You would judge another person's life?"

"If you were preparing to take everyone down with you, yes."

"Cloud," Sephiroth whispered, but Strife ignored him.

"You've already taken a squadron of innocent people and turned them into clones." For some reason, that made Sephiroth flinch. "You've already dragged Angeal down. You'd take Sephiroth, if you could."

"This is not your story, boy," Genesis snarled, his already unstable emotions flipping into anger, and Angeal automatically put a discrete hand to the small of his back. Sephiroth cut in with a calm, "Cloud, what are you thinking?"

"A fair amount. If you bothered to speak with him anymore, you'd know this."

"Who?" Genesis demanded, but Strife shook his head.

I'm not telling you about her unless you swear not to harm her. If you do, I'll kill you." Said so mildly, as though it weren't a ludicrous threat, and it became more surreal when Sephiroth agreed with, "He will, Genesis, and so would Zack."

"Zack? What does Zack have to do with any of this?" Angeal broke in with a sudden burst of anxiety.

"A fair amount. If you bothered to speak with him anymore, you'd know this."

Coming from Sephiroth, that was a harsh blow. Angeal lowered his eyes. "I didn't want to get him involved."

"I understand, but that's not possible anymore. Cloud, I'll speak with him about taking Genesis to
see Aeris. He'll make sure she is kept as safe as possible."

"The Turks will be there."

"I'll talk with Tseng," Sephiroth was saying.

"The Turks' loyalties are to Rufus first." Sephiroth's amused half-smirk made Strife scowl and say, "Angeal?"

"...Yes?"

"Talk to Zack. You're hurting him."

Angeal flinched. Cloud glanced up at Sephiroth, quietly said, "I'm going back to the barracks," and left the office on silent feet.

"What the hell is going on, Sephiroth?" Genesis demanded.

"Well," the man said as he moved to sit behind his desk, "it appears that we're going to start a revolution."

The following morning, all of Cloud's squadmates were off in the gym or cafeteria or lounging around until an officer caught them, leaving him alone in the room. Or he would've been, if Zack hadn't decided that he had unlimited access to Cloud's bed and was sprawled over the scratchy cover like a lazy cat. Cloud was trying very hard not to stare, to memorize every one of the man's movements like a stalker.

Zack, meanwhile, had been watching Cloud read the same textbook page over and over for the last several minutes and was wondering when the kid was going to give up. When it looked like Cloud was set on out-stubborning him, he said, "What're you studying for?"

"Passing classes is one of the requirements for SOLDIER," Cloud pointed out, and Zack huffed.

"Well, yeah, but shouldn't you be out with your 'mates right now?"

*I'd rather be here with you,* Cloud didn't say. "I'm fine." He paused, then dared, "Um, why *are* you here?"

He knew without having to look that Zack would be shrugging as best he could while horizontal, expression sheepish. "What, I can't just be hanging out?"

Cloud gave him a wry glance. Zack shrugged again, more somberly. "I've been seeing you around a lot lately, y'know, but I don't know anything about you other than that you have nightmares, know things that could probably get you killed, and are short."

"Hey," Cloud protested before he could stop himself, and Zack grinned.

"So, Nibelheim, huh? Western continent? What's it like?"

"Cold," Cloud replied slowly. "Lots of snow."

"Does everyone speak the language you were using earlier? In the infirmary?"

It took a moment but then Cloud flushed. "I didn't realize I was doing that."
"Hey man, nothing to be ashamed about. Sometimes I wish I'd actually paid attention to my grandpa when he was still alive, he was fluent in old Gongagan."

"My mum taught it to me," Cloud admitted, self-conscious.

"Tell me something."

"Huh?" said Cloud intelligently.

Zack flailed his outstretched arms a bit. "I mean, anything. Here, I'll go first. My favorite color is green."

Cloud wondered if it was because of Aeris' eyes. Green just made him think of mako and, yeah, not thinking about that. "Purple, I guess," he countered, closing his textbook and tilting his body in the uncomfortable desk chair to face Zack more fully. Purple, why not.

"Swords are the best, none of this long-distance rifle stuff."

"I agree." Cloud smiled a little.

Zack face scrunched up in thought. "Tseng's creepy as hell."

"Also agree. Then again, Turk."

"True. Uh. Girls wearing hiking boots with pink dresses are hot."

"Aren't you rather biased?"

"So?"

"Good point," Cloud acceded, then dared to put out one of his own. "Autumn is the best season."

"Lies!" Zack cried dramatically. "Spring. Or maybe summer. No, spring, in summer Gongaga gets like a hundred-twenty degrees and swarms of bugs that always try to eat your flesh. Okay, I take it back, the best weapon is bug-spray because, man, I value my flesh, thank you."

Cloud ducked his head, hiding the apparently permanent smile behind his hair. The pause was somewhere between awkward and relaxed, acquaintances wanting to get to know each other but not quite sure where to go. Finally, Zack said, "So, fairy tales?"

"What do you mean?"

"The book you gave Sephiroth. Some crazy titles in there."

Cloud shifted in his chair, self-conscious all over again. "They're stories from my...ancestors, I guess. The people that lived n the Nibel Mountains before ShinRa decided to build a reactor there. It's not a huge thing, but my mum, she's. Uh." 

"Traditional?" Zack supplied.

"I guess that's one way to put it," he said, and started rambling, "Sephiroth's been in Nibelheim before, so I thought he'd like it. Which is silly, I know, but he's never really had anything that wasn't meant solely to be functional, and --"

"Hey, I'm not judging. So, what's your favorite?"
"I don't really have one."

"Aw, c'mon. Pick one."

"Er. Well, my mum's rather fond of the story of Týr and Fenrir. Fenrir was this giant wolf that the
gods kept trying to chain down, but he broke out each time. So the dvergar – uh, dwarves, I guess?
– made a rope out six impossible things, and Fenrir agreed to be tied down with it only if one of the
gods sacrificed a hand. So Týr, this warrior of honesty and courage and stuff, volunteered, and
Fenrir bit off his hand when he was chained up. Supposedly at the end of the world, Týr will be
killed by the giant hound of Hel, one of the death goddesses."

"...Huh," said Zack, and Cloud flushed again.

"I think it's his willingness to lay down his life for the sake of others that makes her like it so
much." But when does someone decide that some sacrifices aren't worth it? Where does someone
draw the line between the courage of dying willingly and the courage to keep living? "She always
says that our family's blessed by Hel, though, so even after all these years I'm still not really sure
where she's coming from."

Zack was looking at him like he was seeing something he hadn't expected. Cloud wasn't really sure
what to make of it, so he glanced down and idly picked at the cotton of his uniform trousers. "Do
you have anything like that in Gongaga?" he asked, although he already knew, vaguely
remembered long hours of Zack talking about anything and everything through the mako tubes
until his voice was raw.

"Nah, we've just got the Touch Me frogs," and Cloud laughed aloud.

...
"I missed your birthday?"

It was the weekend, a few days after Cloud had gone to Sephiroth's office, and Cloud had just discovered that having a friend like Elena who could and would hack into otherwise private files could be rather annoying.

"It's not a big deal."

"It was three months ago and you didn't tell me. How could I have missed your birthday?"

"Because I didn't tell you?" he ventured.

"Exactly! How could you?"

Cloud automatically ducked the blow to the back of his head but wasn't able to avoid being manhandled to his dresser. The few other cadets in the room were snickering as Cloud tried, "Elena, what –"

"Get dressed. Not in a uniform, mind you. We're going down to the Seventh Heaven again."

"But –"

"You didn't tell me about your birthday, so you owe me this. Here." She flung a pair of cheap black slacks at him, the kind issued to cadets for formal functions, a simple white button-down shirt, and a clean undershirt, similar to what she was wearing herself. "Put these on."

"But –"

She leaned against his bunk with her arms crossed and face stony. Cloud sighed and bid a fond farewell to his plans of training all day on his own as he quickly changed his clothes, and so it was that early on a Saturday evening he found himself sitting at the counter in Seventh Heaven nursing a beer and smiling at Elena's wild stories.

"So Kelga is hanging outside my window, right, and he's butt-naked while Dad's tearing up my room trying to find the guy, and I'm freaking out at this point. So by the time Dad gives up and leaves and Kelga crawls back through the window, his balls are literally blue."

"That doesn't actually happen, you know," Cloud said as he took a long pull.

"Does too, I saw it. You might be seventeen now, but you're about as horny as a monk."

He briefly debated telling her that he'd snuck into the army two years under the age limit and was technically fifteen. "I wouldn't say that if I were you. I've heard stories about monks."

"Ha, yeah, right, you're just saying that because you don't want to admit..."

It took Cloud a moment to realize that her attention had completely wandered. He glanced over to find her staring intently at the far side of the bar where he saw a very familiar figure wiping down the tables. "Tifa?"
"You know her?" Elena asked without looking away.

"Yeah, she's from Nibelheim too," he replied dazedly. What the hell?

"Well then." Elena slid to her feet, set her beer down deliberately, and straightened her clothes before yanking Cloud off his stool. "Introduce us."

"What?"

She pushed him towards Tifa. He stumbled a few times before finding his feet.

"Tifa?"

"Yes, can I help – Cloud?" When she turned and saw him, her eyes widened and her face split into a grin. Cloud felt an answering smile on his own face and didn't even flinch when she threw her arms around him. "Cloud, what're you doing here?"

"It's the weekend, ShinRa's letting the cadets off the leash for a little while. But what are you doing here?"

She laughed and put an arm behind her head sheepishly. "I might've been a little jealous of you getting out of the village, so a few months ago I convinced my dad to buy me tickets to get to Midgar. I've been working part-time here in the bar since then."

It was strange to hear another Nibel accent again. Cloud opened his mouth to say something about how hard it must've been to get Lockhart to let his only daughter go anywhere without a chaperone, but a hard elbow nudged him in the spine. Suppressing a wince, he said, "Tifa, I'd like you to meet Elena. She's in my squad. Elena, this is Tifa Lockhart."

Elena slid smoothly past him and took Tifa's gloved hand with an easy smile and a small toss of her long blonde hair. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Tifa. Cloud's told me so much about you."

He tried to look as though that were true.

"Oh dear, I hope it was all good," Tifa laughed, and Elena's smile turned lazy as she replied, "Oh, it was all good."

Cloud stayed where he was and tried to keep his jaw from dropping. Tifa was blushing slightly as Elena maneuvered her to a table and sat her down, all the while looking perfectly innocent and earnest. Cloud sat backwards in a chair, resting his forearms along its back, and watched.

"So what do you think of Midgar?" Elena was asking, voice pitched just right to be friendly without being nosy.

"It's different. I mean, there are so many people! And there aren't any monsters to worry about, no wolves or dragons wandering too close to the buildings. It's so busy. Um. Sorry, I sound like such a country girl," and Tifa's flush darkened. Cloud had the feeling that she didn't see how predatory Elena's smile was becoming.

"Nah, Midgar's got people from all over, your accent is hardly anything compared to some of the others. Even if Cloud doesn't think so."

Snorting, Cloud explained, "My squadmates still give me shit for being from the country. It's not my fault they're all so horrible with our survival classes."
Tifa laughed, and the three of them sat for a time just talking. Cloud was content to add the occasional commentary to Elena's conversation while Tifa smiled and gasped in all the right places, but mostly he just watched from the outside in. Tifa was still reserved, more inclined to simply listen to Elena – which suited Elena just fine, of course, her attention fixed on the other as she embellished her tales almost beyond the point of recognition.

"Cloud, you didn't!" Tifa suddenly cried, smacking him on the arm.

"No, I never put on women's clothing," he deadpanned.

Elena stuck out her tongue. "Denial isn't attractive, y'know. What would Sephiroth say?"

"Sephiroth? General Sephiroth?" Tifa echoed confusedly.

"About that," said Elena, but Cloud was saved from having to respond by someone yelling his name halfway across the bar.

"Zack?"

"Cloud, how could you!" boomed the SOLDIER as he draped himself against Cloud's shoulders and smooshed him against the back of the chair, wrapping long arms around him and hooking his chin over his shoulder. Confused by the unexpected contact, breath catching at the sudden familiar smell of Zack, Cloud had to consciously tell himself to relax before he tried to twist away. "I try to find you up at HQ but your squad buddies are all like 'he isn't here, sir' and I'm like 'where on earth would Cloud go besides a gym or classroom because he's a dork like that' and they're like 'Elena took him to the Seventh Heaven, sir' and I'm like 'why' and they're like 'because he didn't tell her that she missed his birthday.' Which is not cool, because dude. Birthday."

"But his birthday was back in August," Tifa pointed out, and was immediately pinned in place by two stares.

"You told her but not us?" Elena gasped, wounded.

"I grew up with her, Elena, of course she'd know," he grunted against the weight on his back. "Tifa, this is Lieutenant Zack Fair, SOLDIER Second. Zack, this is Tifa Lockhart. She's from Nibelheim too."

Cloud could feel Zack's grin against the side of his own face as Zack stuck out a hand without bothering to stand. "Nice to meet you, Tifa. I'll have to find you later so you can give me all the good blackmail on Cloud here."

"Not if I get there first," Elena said sweetly, and Cloud wished he could stop himself blushing.

"You ladies mind if I steal Cloud for a bit? I promise to get him home before midnight."

"Wait, what – "

"Of course not! Have fun, you two!" Elena waved cheerfully, utterly ignoring Cloud and Tifa's bewilderment. Cloud was hauled out of his chair and propelled towards the door, though not fast enough to miss hearing Elena comment, "If the lieutenant didn't already have a girlfrien, I'd say those two were totally doing each other."

Zack tripped over his own feet. Cloud shared the sentiment.

"What the hell, Zack? I haven't seen Tifa in ages."
"She's living in Midgar, isn't she? She'll still be here later."

Cloud knew he was undeniably sulking as Zack led him by the hand through the crowds of Sector Seven towards Sector Six. He didn't notice that even when the crowds thinned, Zack never released his wrist until they had to go through the hole in the wall behind the playground, and then all he could think about was how Aeris' house must be similar to what the Forgotten Capital had been like in its golden age. Patches of yellow flowers dotted the uneven terrain around the small, cozy house, effectively hiding what had once been a trash heap.

Aeris was standing on the front step as though expecting them. She held an apple in one hand and a peeler in the other, which she waved in the air as they approached. "There you two are! Mom and I have been waiting ages."

For a heartbreaking moment Cloud thought she meant Ifalna before he remembered Elmyra. He hung back, absentely smiling, as Zack wrapped his arms around Aeris' waist and spun her in circles, making her squeal with laughter and cheerfully smack him with the blunt side of her fruit peeler. After he stole a kiss and set her back on her feet, Aeris turned to Cloud and held out her arms. "Well, come here, silly!"

Blinking, Cloud obediently stepped forward and hugged her gingerly. She huffed, wriggled out of his hold to hand her apple and peeler to Zack, then threw her arms around Cloud's neck and pressed herself against him.

"Er," he said.

"This is how you're supposed to hug someone," she told the curve of his shoulder. "Now get inside, both of you, we should help my mum finish her pies."

"Pies!" Zack crowed, narrowly missing Cloud's head with the apple.

Aeris sat at the kitchen table and watched the boys get bossed around by her mother. Zack had been set to work mixing ingredients in a large white bowl with a spatula, making him pull a long face at the boring job. Elmyra chopped the peeled apples while keeping an eye on Cloud, who was laying dough into shallow pans and crimping the edges. He was conscientious and careful and had obviously been roped into the same duty by his own mother many times before.

"How come she likes Cloud, but not me? He works for ShinRa too, y'know," Zack whispered across the kitchen table, and Aeris giggled at his scowl without taking her eyes off Cloud. The boy was listening to something Elmyra said before nodding and replying with a respectful, "Yes, ma'am." Unlike the first time they'd met, the Planet was quiet, content to hum softly inside of him like a giant housecat.

"Because you don't need the same things that Cloud does," she murmured, distracted by the Planet's purring. Zack poked at a few stubborn lumps of sugar in the mix thoughtfully.

"You said he's a Cetra too, right? Do you think…was he in Hojo's lab too?"

She blinked and finally looked away from the interaction in the kitchen. "What makes you think that?"

"I think he and Sephiroth knew each other a long time ago, so I thought that if Cloud was like you, well. Even though he says he isn't. Maybe he was there?"
Timid as his voice was, Aeris smiled to let him know that she wasn't angry about him bringing up such a horrible subject. "I don't ever remember seeing him, but he might've been kept in another part of the lab. It was a long time ago, too, so maybe I just don't remember at all."

"I feel like I'm missing something that's right in front of my face," Zack said quietly. "It's annoying. There's something going on between him and Sephiroth, and Sephiroth's told me a little – more than most people know, actually – and Cloud isn't exactly a talker himself. These nightmares he gets, and the effect he has on Genesis…"

Seeing Elmyra still distracted by Cloud, Aeris leaned across the table and took one of Zack's hands. He sounded frustrated, but sad, too. "Are you worried about him?"

"Well, yeah," he said. "I mean, look at him. He's like this little package of, of 'on a mission' and 'I've got a lot of weight on my shoulders but won't admit it' and, I dunno."

Aeris had been with Zack long enough to understand what he was trying to say. "Well, that's when you decide if you think he's worth sticking around or not. If he isn't, then bug out before either of you gets hurt. But if he is, then all you can do is your best."

Zack watched Cloud coax Elmyra into taking a break so he could take over the apple slicing. He said slowly, "I haven't really known him long, y'know. But the way he looks at me, and you too, for that matter, it's like. Like he's really seeing you. It's weird, but I think he might really be worth whatever happens."

Aeris listened as the Planet continued humming through the oblivious Cloud.

The burn scar on the side of Hojo's face was itching uncomfortably when one of his assistants came to his side. "Sir," the man said (Hojo didn't know his name, but it hardly mattered when ShinRa sent him a constant stream of incompetent help), "I think you might be interested in this."

"Will it solve the problem of finding a way to introduce higher amounts of mako into a human body without breaking the cellular walls? Will it find a way around the finite ATP-producing capabilities of a mitochondrion?" he demanded irritably, taking a step back when his latest specimen oozed too much fluid and it spilled over the edge of the table. Useless.

"It might," the assistant said firmly. He was obviously unsettled by the results of the failed experiment, which was just one more indication that the assistant would never rise to the position of a true scientist, but at least his expression was determined.

"Well?" Hojo went over to a sink to rinse the blood from his gloves. "What is it, then?"

"There's a rumor going around the cadet barracks that one of the newer recruits already has mako – "

"Impossible, I would've known about it."

A short pause, then, "It seems the mako didn't come from an official source. I took the liberty of ordering a copy of the cadet's medical records from Doctor Libra's office."

"From the man himself?" Hojo didn't like him. He was far too soft a personality to be an effective doctor in such a high position, even after having served in Wutai, and made no secret of his distaste for Hojo's methods. One would think that a battlefield would kill off such weakness.
"No, one of the other doctors under his direction. Apparently Libra's been checking up on the boy regularly himself. Here are his notes."

Hojo flicked water from his gloves and took the proffered papers, skimming them. He didn't realize that his fingers were tightening on the pages.

"You're absolutely sure that this is correct? This is complete?"

"Yes, sir."

If the assistant wasn't lying and if Libra wasn't as incompetent as his manner suggested, then this cadet had been poisoned with mako at a very young age and assimilated it with negligible mental side effects. His mind hadn't snapped and his damn mitochondria were obviously in fine condition, if he was still breathing. Flipping to the basic information on the cadet's profile, one word immediately stood out: Nibelheim. There was no such thing as coincidence in Hojo's science.

"I want this cadet in my office by the end of the week. Make it happen."

"Yes, sir, but…"

Canting a sidelong look at the assistant, Hojo sneered. "Do it and you get a raise. Work it out with the payroll people, it's what they're there for."

Maybe the assistant wasn't useless, but he was no man of science, just another bottom-feeder trying to profit from something he didn't understand.

…

Later that same Saturday, Cloud and Elena were sitting in one of the small courtyards that dotted the ShinRa complex. There were no plants, but there were benches arranged around a fountain under the open sky, and at that time of the evening there was no one else around. Cloud wrapped both hands around his paper cup, warmed by coffee that was only slightly burned and not too much like sludge, while Elena sprawled across two-thirds of the bench and rested her head on his leg. It was warm and muggy with the slow transition from summer to autumn.

"So. Tifa?" Cloud said as the silence stretched unusually long for Elena being around.

The girl huffed and bit her lip and made a face before finally shrugging. "Well, I've always said brunettes were the most attractive."

"About the same time you got me drunk and molested me?" said Cloud casually, and grinned when Elena had to twist her arm awkwardly to smack him.

"You were better than nothing, asshole."

He hummed noncommittally. "I guess I drove you away from men, then?"

"No," Elena barked irritably. She wriggled on the bench a bit before admitting, "No, it's just…um. She's. Like, really pretty. You know?"

"Yes," Cloud said dryly.

"I don't know, I never really looked at other girls before. Guys, sure, occasionally, but a lot of them are - well. You know." Her eyes flicked away as she seemed to remember old hurts before turning back to him. "Tifa's just – different. I think. Gods, she's got killer legs but it's like she doesn't even
realize it, y'know?"

"She doesn't, most of the time," Cloud agreed mildly, thinking of Tifa's awkwardness when she wore a satin dress the night before he left the village, the short skirt that was at odds with knuckles made large with training, how easily she adapted to rare showers and the dirt of constant travel when they chased Sephiroth around the world.

Elena fell silent. Cloud sipped his coffee patiently.

"I hate being a teenager," she muttered. "Shit like this isn't supposed to happen."

"It's not the end of the world." There was no way he could keep out the heavy note of irony. "Elena, it doesn't have to be a big deal if you don't want it to be."

"Tell that to my father. He's bad enough when I bring a guy home."

"At least you won't get pregnant."

Her burst of laughter nearly knocked the coffee out of hands, and he quickly raised his arms until she settled again. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Not care about this stuff."

Cloud tilted his head back to look up at the night sky, tinted orange by the city's light pollution. "It's not that I don't care, I just...have other things to worry about."

She leaned her head back to see him properly, the back of her skull digging into the meat of his thigh. "You don't want that, what's it called, that 'human connection' or whatever?"

Hard to say when one wasn't even quite sure he was human anymore. Didn't know what he was and not sure he wanted to, and it was hard to say when he'd seen sex used as both a weapon and a comfort and sometimes both at once. He shrugged. "Elena, it doesn't matter to me what you decide you are. But if you hurt Tifa, I'll hurt you."

"That macho bullshit just makes you sound like an asshole, you know."

This time, when the silence returned, it was comfortable. The back of Elena's neck was warm, her long hair spilling over into his lap without embarrassment, and who needed sex when this kind of intimacy was possible? For a moment he sharply missed Fenrir and the way the wolf would curl against his back at night.

"Did you hear that?" he asked suddenly, tilting his head to listen more carefully. Midgar was never really quiet, with the trains and crowds and creaking of skyscrapers, but he swore he'd heard something underneath all that.

"Hear what?" Elena sat up, reaching for the very much illegal firearm under her coat. She'd probably stolen it just to see if she could and carried it because she shouldn't. Cloud set down his coffee and reached for the small knife in his boot. "I don't know, I - "

Hands grabbed Elena and yanked her off the bench so roughly that her pistol spun uselessly away into the courtyard. Cloud was up and moving before they could grab him, falling into a roll and coming up on his feet behind their attackers. Four men, he identified immediately, two trying to hold down a hissing and spitting Elena and two more after Cloud. They were too slow turning,
were probably surprised by Cloud's sudden action, and he was able to stab one from behind in the kidney before the second grabbed his shoulder. Holding on to the dying man, Cloud twisted sharply and knocked the second attacker away with sheer force of momentum before letting the body drop dead to the ground. The Planet writhed in the back of his head, distracting him with a sharp flare of pain.

"Get the fuck off of me!" Elena was screaming. She managed to kick in the knee of one of her attackers before getting pinned to the ground, head held still by large hands gripping her hair and pulling until she was nearly scalped.

Cloud's world narrowed down to the simple kill or be killed. He saw Elena, nearly sobbing with helpless fury, and he saw an enemy, and his grip on the blood-slick knife tightened. The man that he'd knocked away had gotten back to his feet, but then Cloud's knife found his throat.

"Drop your weapon or we kill the girl!" one of the men holding Elena yelled, but Cloud was faster. The third man was dead by the time he hit the ground, and the fourth didn't even hesitate to release Elena and take off running. Cloud threw his knife, but long-range fighting had never been his specialty and so he only managed to stick the man in the side and not the throat.

And then the man was gone. Cloud was left standing with three bodies and a crying Elena. He looked at her blankly for a moment, body vibrating with adrenaline while his mind tried to remind him to breathe.

"Elena," he murmured, falling to his knees and pulling her into his arms, "Elena, it's all right, they're gone."

Elena sobbed into his shoulder, shaking with anger and shock. It had all happened so fast, so completely from left field, and Cloud was feeling very old as he fumbled for his PHS, keeping one arm around Elena's shoulders as he punched in a number.

"Fifi's Massage Parlor, where all your dreams –"

"Zack, I need you to get down to the first-floor courtyard right now," Cloud said evenly. "Elena and I were attacked."

"Holy shit, Cloud!"

"Just get here, Zack, please," he repeated tiredly, then hung up his PHS and put his other arm around Elena as well.

…

Zack wouldn't forget the details of that night for a very long time.

By the time he managed to get down to the courtyard, less than ten minutes had passed. Under the stark yellow light of the streetlamp he found Elena curled in the circle of Cloud's arms, trembling, with the unmistakable shape of three bodies and enough blood to fill a bathtub staining the pavement. It never ceased to amaze him just how much blood was in a human body.

He'd been talking with Angeal for the first time since the Banora mission when he got Cloud's call. Uncomfortable, his heart already twisted up because of Angeal, Zack had immediately called Sephiroth while Angeal followed him to the elevators. Sephiroth remained eerily silent while Zack related what little he knew, then commanded that Cloud and Elena be taken to Libra's infirmary as discreetly as possible. Zack wondered if this was related to Sephiroth's paranoia about Hojo, which wouldn't be paranoia at all but common fucking sense.
"Cloud, what the hell happened?" he demanded, kneeling next to the duo and looking them both over. He couldn't see any obvious injuries, although it looked like Elena's hair had been yanked hard enough to leave blood at her hairline.

"We were sitting on the bench when four men came out of nowhere," Cloud said lowly. "Two went for Elena and held her down. The other two went for me. I killed three but one escaped." He cursed softly. "Damnit, lost my knife, too."

Zack wasn't sure if he should approve of Cloud keeping track of where his weapons went or disturbed that he was capable of doing so in the middle of action. "Did you know them?"

"No, and they didn't say anything."

Which suggested it wasn't something personal or a sick prank. "Who the hell did you manage to piss off now, kiddo?"

The rhetorical question made Cloud's mouth twist. Angeal, inspecting the three bodies, said, "I recognize them. They're the Regulars that Hojo has assigned to his own command."

Zack blinked. "A scientist can do that?"

"A scientist in Hojo's position, yes," the general replied softly, and he turned to Cloud. "They were killed very efficiently."

"They were hurting Elena," he said simply. Elena had stopped crying and was now just sitting with her face pressed into Cloud's shoulder, looking very small.

"I'll take care of these bodies. Zack, will you get them both to the infirmary? I'm sure Sephiroth is out of his mind by now."

"Sephiroth?" Cloud echoed.

"I called him on the way down," Zack told him. "He was real quiet."

Cloud muttered something under his breath that made Angeal snort. With Zack's help, he got Elena to stand up, and she stared at the ground while hugging herself. "Elena?" Cloud tried gently, but she didn't respond. It looked like he was going to reach out for her again before he noticed the blood liberally streaking his arms and clothes and winced.

"C'mon, let's get you both cleaned up." Zack put a hand on Elena's shoulder to steer her and an arm around Cloud's shoulders. He was a little shaken to realize that Cloud could've died or disappeared and he wouldn't have even known.

... By the time Sephiroth could get off shift without being suspicious and be down in the infirmary, he was ready to kill something with anxiety. He knew Cloud could take care of himself – hell, Cloud had once been a match for Sephiroth himself, apparently – but he was only fifteen now and in a mortal body and could make perfectly human mistakes like anyone else and...yes. Just breathe.

"General," Dr. Libra said with some surprise as Sephiroth swept through the infirmary doors and into his office. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm here to see Cloud. Strife, that is." Damn it. Be professional.
The doctor's brow wrinkled and a cold knot of fear began twisting up Sephiroth inside. "Private Strife hasn't been here since his bi-monthly exam last week."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes, sir, I always treat him myself."

But Sephiroth was already storming away with his phone in hand, mentally willing Zack to pick up on the other end. When he was taken to voicemail, he snapped the phone closed and strode on faster.

…

If Cloud had a gil for every time he woke up disoriented and with a pounding head, he'd have been able to buy that summer house in Costa del Sol and the whole damn town at the same time. Instead of panicking, he waited for the screeching in his head to die down to a dull roar before opening his eyes very slowly, letting them adjust to the light.

Except that the light was intense, forcing them closed again. So he tested his limbs, pleased to feel them respond but confused when he realized that they were strapped down to a hard surface.

Infirmary. He must've had another night-terror and been taken to Libra, except he didn't remember going to sleep. He'd spent the evening with Zack and Aeris, and then came back to the ShinRa compound to hang out with Elena in one of the little courtyards…there was a fight, he thought they must've been attacked…blood, but that was nothing new…Zack, Zack was there, and Angeal? Yes, Angeal was going to take care of the bodies while Zack took Cloud and Elena to the infirmary, except…they never got there. There'd been a commotion, Elena yelling and the flash of Zack's buster sword.

"You're awake. Finally. I was beginning to think that the incompetence of my inferiors was beginning to outweigh their occasional usefulness."

The voice, *that voice* that was like sandpaper on the inside of his skin.

Cloud woke up in a lab.
In Which Shit Starts to Go Down

Chapter Notes

Note: Aeris saying 'pish' is entirely taken from chibirisuchan's, *A Shoggoth on the Chimney*.

Warnings: medical/body horror, torture.

... 

Dr. Libra was flitting between the beds holding Zack and that particularly aggravating cadet, Elena. Both were unconscious, and both had taken blows to the back of their heads that were making the doctor mutter things about concussions and aneurysms. Zack would probably be fine because he was a SOLDIER, but Elena was near critical, and the moment she'd passed through the doors Libra had started barking orders to the nurses to get her on an IV, blood tests taken, and where the hell was the gods-damned radiologist? Skull fractures didn't wait for people to get out of bed on their own time!

At Sephiroth's insistence Libra kept both victims in the same room for the time being, not questioning being asked to take care of a SOLDIER when he normally dealt only with the Regulars. Sephiroth loomed at the back of the room where he wouldn't be in the way and watched through narrowed eyes as the panic died down and Elena was stabilized. Libra had no expectation of her waking up for several days at the least, which left Zack as the only other witness to what had happened and why Cloud *wasn't there* when the cries had gone up from the cadets that stumbled over their bodies.

"Sephiroth?"

Angeal's voice barely registered. Nodding towards Libra, who looked gobsmacked at seeing a previously AWOL general nonchalantly hanging out in his infirmary, Angeal moved to lean against the wall beside Sephiroth without taking his eyes off Zack. "What happened?"

"You tell me," Sephiroth ground out. "The last time Zack called me, he had Cloud and Elena with him and they were going to the infirmary. Sometime between then and my getting here, *this* happened."

"Were they Hojo's men?" Angeal asked quietly.

"If by 'men' you mean 'monstrosities,' then yes," he bit out.

"What do you mean?"

"There was a lot of blood." All over the walls and floor, splattered in long streaks as if a kid had gone crazy with a can of paint. "I found this." He handed a large tooth to Angeal, who studied it in silence.

"It looks like a wolf tooth, but it isn't natural."

"No, it's not. I think it's from one of Hojo's pets."
"Sephiroth, the man is crazy, but he isn't stupid. He wouldn't allow those things out of the lab, the president would cut off his funding for something so reckless."

"Not if Hojo thought the risk was worth the rewards," Sephiroth said flatly, watching the steady spiking of green on the heart monitor beside Zack's bed. "Think about it. Four of his men attack Cloud and Elena without any provocation whatsoever and they fail. One manages to get away. Before anyone is able to plan a counterattack, he returns with stronger forces: Hojo's pet experiments. If Zack was distracted with Cloud and Elena and if Cloud wasn't so stubborn and off in his head like he always is…" Sephiroth bit down on his anger before it could blossom.

"I took care of the bodies, but now I'm starting to wonder if that was such a good idea," Angeal murmured thoughtfully. "They were proof of Hojo's involvement."

"No, Hojo would have taken steps to make sure that their identities wouldn't incriminate him."

"Hollander's as unscrupulous as Hojo, but at least he was never as cunning," Angeal said ruefully. Sephiroth didn't reply. He was remembering a time when he was a child, seeing how Hojo's presence always sent the angel into a cold, dark place of fury and hatred. It didn't matter that Hojo couldn't sense Cloud at all, that blackness would sometimes manifest as flickering lights and moving objects, and Sephiroth had always found reassurance in knowing that there was someone who could feel so angry on his behalf when everyone else treated him like the contents of a Petri dish. He had a much better understanding of that hatred, now, and the thought of what Hojo could do terrified him. It made the dark voice that had lain quiet in his head except at his loneliest moments begin to uncurl and whisper.

You could kill him. He was never a real father to you. You owe him nothing. He's taken what is rightfully yours and that is not acceptable.

"Sephiroth," Angeal said sharply, putting a hand on his shoulder and jerking him away from his thoughts. Sephiroth was about to snarl back before he realized that the glass beaker that had been sitting on a shelf next to Angeal now lay shattered on the ground.

"I'm going to go follow up on something," he said shortly, pushing away from the wall and Angeal's hand. "Stay here with Zack and Elena. I'll return as soon as I can."

Angeal didn't argue, and Sephiroth swept out of the infirmary towards the elevators. He didn't notice the way people flattened themselves against walls as he passed. He needed to speak with Rufus, but it was probably a bad idea to do so when his hand was already so tight around the Masamune's hilt that the leather of his gloves creaked.

He went to Reeve's office instead. The man was there despite the late hour, fiddling with some electronic thing and cursing quietly when it seemed to reject his tiny screwdriver with a little shower of sparks. Sephiroth walked in without so much as a hello, slamming the door behind him and making Reeve jump in his chair.

"General! You scared the –"

"Is your office secure?" Sephiroth demanded flatly. Reeve blinked.

"What?"

"Is. Your office. Secure?" Sephiroth asked again, very slowly.

"As of eight o'clock this morning, yes."
Putting his hands on the edge of his desk, Sephiroth leaned forward. "A cadet named Cloud Strife has disappeared. Hojo has taken him as a lab specimen," he said quietly.

Reeve's eyes widened before he could stop himself. "Why are you telling me? I create buildings, not SOLDIERs."

"Because you are going to help me make sure that Hojo and every person that has enabled his work is neutralized. You aren't like Heidegger or Palmer, Reeve."

There was a long silence. "And if I decide not to help you?"

"You are far more easily replaced in this company than I, Director. I suggest you consider your options very carefully," he said mildly, and, point made, left to find Rufus ShinRa.

Hojo wasn't impressed with what he saw. The specimen had the phenotype of the northern mountainous peoples, which meant he was smaller and more compact than the type Hojo preferred. But there was a telltale glow in his eyes, and the scientist could have cursed himself; it stood to reason that specimens gathered from a mako-rich region would naturally have higher resistance to poisoning. If ShinRa hadn't threatened to pull his funding if he returned to Nibelheim – something about public relations – then perhaps he wouldn't have had to waste his time for so long with the canon-fodder of Midgar.

The restraints on the operating table were the reinforced kind generally reserved for enhanced specimens. The boy jerked against them hard enough for thin lines of blood to well up over his wrists, and Hojo was intrigued by the level of panic and…recognition?

"This would be easier if you would tell me how you came to have such high levels of mako in your body. I suppose it doesn't ultimately matter, since you appear to be the most promising test subject I've had in quite some time, but for the sake of thoroughness."

"Fuck you," the boy snarled, so much hatred dripping in his voice that Hojo was taken aback. The bright lamp over the table flickered, even though all of the lab's electronics were connected to multiple surge protectors. Hojo smiled.

"I knew it!"

Vincent raised an eyebrow at Reno's exclamation.

"I knew I recognized that bit of jailbait. His name's Cloud, innit?"

Vincent just stared at him levelly, and Reno huffed and slouched against the ropes still tying him to the chair. "Look, man, I ain't got shit to tell you and I've been here for fucking ages, yo. If you freaks are gonna kill me, just get it the fuck over with already or let me go."

"That, unfortunately, is not my decision," Vincent told him mildly. He was sitting as still as stone in a windowsill on the far side of the abandoned building, watching the people below through cracked, grimy glass. His reflection was distorted in the panes, making the cloak he'd put on again look like a smudge of blood.

Reno snorted again and made of show of getting comfortable. Rather difficult, given he hadn't bathed in days and the friction burns he was probably going to have on his wrists from the ropes.
"So, you know Veld, huh?"

No reaction.

"Met the fucker only briefly myself, yo. Nice guy, gotta wonder how he got mixed up with the fuckin' Turks, y'know? Between you and me, I think Tseng used to get all hard up for him with all that hero-worship."

Vincent let Reno's words pass over him without comment. He entertained himself with thoughts on what talents Reno might be hiding that had gotten him into the Turks; surely there was something.

"Seriously, man, I don't know what you got against me, but I don't know shit. Turks ain't exactly confidantes, yo, we're just good little dogs."

"You're going to have to make a decision, Reno," Vincent said suddenly, just loud enough to carry across the empty space between them. The redhead gave him a cocky grin.

"Yeah, what's that? I mean, I'm all for the whole 'saving my own hide' thing, but if I'm gonna have to take it up the ass or something, I'm out."

"ShinRa is going to fall. You will have to decide if you'll die with the company like a good little dog, or if you're going to be your own master." Vincent unfolded himself from the windowsill and moved towards Reno, face cold and his clawed hand on display in front of his chest. Reno hadn't lost his sharp grin, but his eyes were narrowed. "I know Cloud told you to ask me about Hojo."

"Yeah, well, I'm wondering if that's such a hot idea when you're waving that thing around," Reno said, eyes flickering to the claw warily.

"Hojo and I had a disagreement. He shot me, enabling him to fake my death, and then turned me into a specimen until he decided to abandon that particular project." His voice was calm and relentlessly matter-of-fact. "He interred me underground until I was woken by Cloud a few years ago. You were all told that I had died in an accident while on a mission, and so most of ShinRa believed. However, the president and his aides were fully aware of the situation and continued to fund Hojo's projects."

Reno was shaking his head. "I know the company ain't exactly innocent, but they wouldn't do that to a Turk. We're the ones that do the disappearing, not the ones that get disappeared, yo."

Vincent flexed his clawed fingers and raised an elegant eyebrow.

"Look, man, that sucks, we all got our tragic pasts. But Turks are too valuable to just toss aside, and if one of us fucks up then we get a bullet to the head. Safer for the company that way."

"Unless the project is deemed more important than an individual Turk," Vincent said mildly. "And do recall the past actions of the president's son against his own father's company. That alone should be quite revealing."

"Oi –"

Vincent turned for the stairs, nodding silently to the Wutaian that passed him to take the next shift guarding Reno. There was nothing more Vincent had to say, and in the meantime, there was other business.

Unfortunately, he didn't get too far down the street before the pavement shuddered under his feet, nearly unbalancing him. Cries went up all across the sector as a second earthquake shook loose
mortar and brick from the buildings and made steel scaffolding groan dangerously.

*Midgar isn't near any fault line,* Vincent thought quickly, immediately heading towards the nearest cries to see how many were hurt. *The mountains all run south of here, through the center of the continent.* And no Zolom's Earth-based magic was nearly powerful enough to make that kind of quake.

*Need to find Cloud, he hears the Planet, he'll know.*

A third quake, the strongest yet, forced Vincent to drop low and brace himself against the trembling ground with his hands. The ear-splitting screech of metal and brick echoed across the sector and sent a wave of dust barreling down the streets. Vincent bowed his head against it until it dissipated, then shook himself and took off running towards the yelling.

The damage near the exit of the sector was the worst. Deep cracks broke up the pavement into uneven flagstones and split the foundations of the surrounding buildings. One of the buildings had listed to one side and crashed into the neighboring structure, the cause of that horrible explosive sound, and sent several tons of rubble and steel scaffolding into the street below. People were stunned, utterly bewildered by the sudden destructive chaos, as muffled screams came from under the wreckage.

"Get moving!" a Wutaian man was yelling as he went at the rubble with a vengeance, shifting as much of the concrete and steel as he could. A few people seemed to finally shake off their shock and started helping, and then more joined in. Some people were crying, others grim-faced and pale, while more were nursing their own and others' wounds. There was blood staining some of the rubble as the first of the victims were uncovered.

Vincent was already sweeping down the street to where the Wutaian man was trying to lift a huge slab and losing his grip. He steadied it with his brass claw, meeting the man's eyes across the pitted surface of the concrete and expecting to hear cursing; instead he was met with a stern eye and gruff thanks.

The slab had fallen across a long steel girder, which propped it up at an angle. The girder itself was twisted and bent, and it was pinning down a fairly young but worn woman. In her arms was a squalling child.

"*Mi tian gong,*" the Wutaian murmured.

Ignoring the expletive, Vincent swiftly kneeled down and reached for the child. The woman stared at him with shock-glazed eyes, still alive but not for much longer. The steel girder couldn't be moved without shifting several dangerous tons of rubble, and the way she was twisted under it suggested that her spine had been snapped at least once. "My babies," she whispered, "my little girl's gone, my boy – oh gods – "

Vincent gently but firmly took the child from her arms, unfazed by the wailing of the tiny boy. The woman's rambling was getting choked with blood, but she didn't seem to realize it, too far gone to notice the spatter on her lips.

"Please don't take my Denzel too, please, my babies – "

"He will be safe," Vincent said quietly just as the woman's words dissolved into wet gasps. Her body twitched and then lay still as Vincent stood, striding past the silent Wutaian. More people had joined in the rescue effort, moving concrete and steel and pulling out crying, broken victims.
"I'll find a safe place for him and then come back."

"Hai."

…

The restraints were too sturdy for him to break through, they'd probably been used for Sephiroth once upon a time and Cloud wasn't properly enhanced anymore, not like a SOLDIER, so if they could hold Sephiroth, then. Then he didn't stand a chance, oh gods. Hel.

Reeve once said something about post traumatic stress disorder not long after Meteor, before the Remnants, but he learned never to bring it up again in front of Cloud. Because Cloud wasn't going to be put into neatly labeled boxes anymore, he'd been there, done that. Sometimes with pieces in more than one box, though Hojo had been careful enough not to leave even a failed specimen permanently maimed. Well. Physically, at least. Otherwise it would be bad form. Sloppy.

Needles.

The Masamune was kind of like a needle, maybe, long and thin and sliding so easily into flesh but the Masamune had never put mako in him. Not that he could remember, anyway, though he couldn't remember much at the moment because Hojo was standing over him with an impersonal expression and using needles to put mako in his flesh again. Baseline measurements. Building up foundational requirements to carry the experiment forward into new areas.

Oh gods.

The break in his head had scarred over these last fifteen years but now the old wounds were being ripped open again.

No, he screamed.

…

Zack woke up thinking that an asteroid must've been dropped onto his skull. "…Ow."

There was movement somewhere off to the side, but he wasn't in any hurry to open his eyes. Doing so might make his head crack open and his brains fall out.

"Zack."

"Yes, sir – ow ow ow. " A fire started burning in his head. He paused, then said more slowly, "Please tell me that if I'm going to die, it's at least because I did something really awesome."

"You were attacked, Lieutenant."

By whom, Wutaian ninja? Those fuckers certainly moved fast…oh shit. "Cloud!"

His eyes shot open and he tried to sit up in what he realized was a hospital bed, but the room spun around him like a ride at the Gold Saucer and would've sent him face-first onto the floor if Sephiroth hadn't caught him. "Sephiroth, Cloud – oh fuck, we need to find him – "

"Lieutenant, Zack. Zack," Sephiroth barked until the SOLDIER stopped trying to wriggle away. Setting Zack upright on the bed, he put a hand on his shoulder and murmured, "You and the girl were brought to the infirmary. There was evidence of a battle, no sign of Cloud. What happened?"

The stern calm in Sephiroth's voice allowed Zack to grab onto it and steal some for himself as
Sephiroth stepped back a bit. "Um. I was taking them to the infirmary. Cloud was walking behind us, I think he thought the blood on his clothes was just going to make Elena more upset or something – dude, you know he took out three guys and left his knife in the fourth?" When Sephiroth just arched a brow in that way he had, Zack hurried on. "I don't know what happened. I could swear…but it shouldn't be possible, we're in the middle of the ShinRa tower. Sir, I could've sworn it was one of those Blood Tastes you get in Banora, except these were bigger and meaner than any monster canine I've ever seen."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed, but in a darkly thoughtful way. "Did they have any tags or tattoos? Some sort of identification?"

"I don't think so, but it happened so fast." The beasts had come charging down the corridor, barely giving Zack enough time to push Elena behind him and draw his sword. The first two enormous dogs were slaughtered quickly enough, but the third took advantage of the narrow area and slipped under his guard. After that it was a blur of blood and fur and wrestling with six-inch claws trying to gouge out his throat, and he must've hit his head somewhere hard enough to lay him out. Which was embarrassing for a guy who kept talking about being a hero.

"Doctor Libra found traces of a sedative in both your and Elena's blood," Sephiroth said softly. "It seems that there was a human component that took advantage of your distraction."

"I got tranq'd?" Zack demanded indignantly. "Damn it! Sir, what – I'm guessing they went after Cloud, but why risk so much? I mean, acting out in the middle of ShinRa like that, it wasn't exactly subtle."

He watched the way the muscles in Sephiroth's jaw tightened and relaxed several times before the man could speak. "I imagine this is the very move of Hojo's I was attempting to prevent."

"Wait, shit, you mean it was Hojo? Crap. Where would Hojo have taken him? Where's he doing his SOLDIER upgrading project?"

"I don't know, but this means I will have to act sooner than I anticipated. I trust you have kept what I last told you to yourself?"

"Of course," Zack said blankly, he wasn't the type of guy to break his promises or go blabbing about the important shit.

Then Sephiroth laid on him the most insane, impossible story he'd ever heard: a future that never happened, the end of the world, and single man trapped in the center of it all. He baldly explained that Zack had died for Cloud's sake and Cloud was obsessed with preventing that to the point of psychosis, that and also the deaths of Aeris and Sephiroth himself. *ShinRa still has the power to kill the Planet,* and that couldn't be allowed to happen again, and I'm sorry, Lieutenant, but you're a part of this whether you want to be or not. It was crazy, and while Zack had heard about the circle of Lifestream rebirth from Aeris he hadn't really believed it, honestly, that kind of spiritual stuff wasn't really his thing. It was...big, bigger than the situation with Angeal with Genesis, bigger than anything Zack had ever faced.

But Sephiroth obviously believed it wholeheartedly, even if he was vague on the reasons why, and he was the most rational, painfully analytical person Zack had ever known. "What are we going to do, sir?" Zack asked, and Sephiroth's lips thinned.

"I intend to find Hojo."

"Okay," Zack said slowly, and winced when a bolt of pain flashed through his skull. "So I guess
Angeal should take Genesis to Aeris – and yeah, I know about that, Angeal told me and I made him swear in like three languages that he'll keep her safe."

"There's a man currently in the slums that's been working with Cloud named Vincent Valentine, and he's had past experience with Hojo. I want you to find him and see if he knows anything."

"Got it," and Zack stopped, squinting his eyes at Sephiroth. "Sir, are you all right?"

"If you have to ask me that question now, Lieutenant, then I must question your basic understanding of psychology."

Ouch. "If I may speak freely, sir, you look like shit. If you don't take care of yourself too, then the chances of you missing something get pretty high."

"I will take your words into consideration, Lieutenant." Zack could swear the temperature dropped a few degrees.

Libra came in then to poke and prod and ask uncomfortable questions. Zack was scolded on being impulsive and having the common sense of a SOLDIER, which meant none at all, and sometime during all this Sephiroth disappeared to do Planet-knew-what. Zack honestly wasn't sure if he wanted to know, not just because he was having hard enough of a time assimilating everything he'd been told but also because Sephiroth's cold anger was nearly a tangible thing.

("I haven't really known him long, y'know. But the way he looks at me…and you too, for that matter, it's like. Like he's really seeing you. It's weird, but I think he might really be worth whatever happens.")

Zack was changing into a clean uniform and waving goodbye to the doctor when the floor beneath his feet suddenly shuddered and shifted and sent him flat against the wall.

"What the hell was that?"

"Must be an earthquake," Libra called from where he'd caught himself against a countertop. "Didn't hear any explosions."

"But Midgar isn't on a fault –"

A second tremor, less powerful but far longer than the first, made the entire ShinRa tower roll under them. The lights flickered, which should've been absolutely impossible with nine mako reactors powering the city and the tower, and Zack's earlier sinking feeling came back with a vengeance. He waited a moment in case there was a third tremor, and when the floor stayed obediently still he took off for the stairs. He ducked past panicked employees and ran through the first-floor lobby to the main courtyard.

It was chaos. Earthquakes were unheard of in this region, and no one seemed to know what to do or expect. The trains were still running, at least, but when Zack managed to get down under the Plate, he found the slums in even worse condition. Grabbing the nearest person, he demanded, "What the hell happened?"

"Are you blind or just stupid?" the woman snarled, yanking her arm out of the SOLDIER's grasp and backing away. "It was a fucking earthquake, but I guess you wouldn't notice it as long as you were all hiding in your golden fucking tower." She quickly disappeared into the constantly shifting flow of people.

How the fuck am I supposed to find Vincent in this mess? His head still throbbed. A few of the
buildings had toppled and he could see a nearby house that had been turned into a makeshift infirmary, as much of one as was possible below the Plate. He needed to find Vincent but the cries of people scared and wounded pulled him towards the wreckage instead.

"Hey, you two – yeah, you! Take that side of this girder, I'll get the other. Don't just stand there, these people don't have a whole lot of time!"

It took some bullying, but Zack got some semblance of order going on with the survivors that quickened the rescue. It helped that he could take on obstacles that would take three or four men to move. Angeal was going to kick his ass when he found out what Zack had used his sword for, though.

After pulling out a young man and holding him around the waist to keep the guy's weight off his shattered leg, Zack yanked out his PHS. As soon as Lazard's cool voice answered, Zack was barking, "No time to talk, sir, but there's a situation under the Plate. The earthquakes or whatever took out a number of buildings and we've got dead and wounded down here – sir, I'll explain why I'm down here later – send down any SOLDIERS and medics you can spare, this is pretty fucking bad. Er, General Sephiroth's kinda busy at the moment – whoa, wait, just because Genesis and Angeal are AWOL doesn't make me next in chain of command – damn it, sir, just send the fucking troops already!"

Slamming his PHS none too carefully back into his belt, he was muttering, "Goddamn bureaucrats…what? "

The young man was staring at him, and seriously, was there something on Zack's face that was making people do that to him today?

"Did you just call for backup?" He sounded shocked for some reason.

"Of course. Just because I'm a SOLDIER doesn't mean I can do this all myself. I'm guessing the other sectors aren't in much better condition, we need more manpower if we're going to get this fixed and, no offense, but you probably don't have many good doctors down here."

He left the young man with the other wounded and went back to the rubble.

…

When people said that blood was red, just 'red,' they didn't really know what they were talking about.

Flat on his back on a table, stripped of clothes and basic human dignity, Cloud's head tilted to one side to watch one of the many tubes exiting his body. This one was connected to an IV in the bend of his elbow. Contained by clear plastic so it wouldn't oxidize in free air, the blood was a dark, ruby red, nearly purple-black, like a bruise.

…

He was coated in a fine layer of dust and sweat by the time Zack was able to slump in a pile near the outdoor hospital. It was well past evening, well past midnight, and the sun was due to rise in just an hour or so. Exhaustion made his eyes sting, head still pounding from the attack hours ago, but he was still in better shape than the slum citizens, who were falling over themselves after being organized into shifts. The SOLDIERS that Lazard sent had worked all through the night, and at this point anyone that could be rescued alive had been found. The rest of the victims would most likely be dead by now.
Kunsel collapsed on the ground next to him, also covered in dust as though someone had thrown a bag of flour at him. There were open scrapes on his forearms where some rubble had unexpectedly shifted and tried to take his hands with it. "What a nightmare," he muttered, earning a snort.

"I'm surprised Lazard was able to send so many people so quickly," Zack replied, too tired to even glance over at the ShinRa doctors working furiously to the side of the wreckage.

"Wasn't without some sacrifice on his part, the way I hear it. I guess the President and his idiot lackeys were trying to keep all the SOLDIERs in the tower, claiming that his own life and the future of ShinRa was at stake and needed to be defended. Defended from what, I couldn't tell you, because earthquakes aren't exactly something you can fight off with weapons."

"What, and the Turks are just decoration? Their jobs were created to protect him."

"Yeah, but except for Rude, they don't exactly look intimidating, do they?"

Zack snorted, thinking about a Turk that had recently died in Wutai, slender body but a scar down his face, a sword in his hand, and the kind of honor that Angeal had once upheld. "So what changed the president's mind?"

"Seems Lazard managed to get Sephiroth on his side, and with those two, how can the prez seriously say no?"

"Hope Lazard doesn't get shit for this."

"He probably will," Kunsel predicted darkly. "Office politics being what they are. What were you doing down here, Zack?"

"Looking for this guy named Vincent…dude, why're you looking at me like that?"

"Vincent?" Kunsel repeated slowly. "Tall, long dark hair, looks like a vampire?"

"Should I even ask how you know him?" Zack asked tiredly, because honestly, this was Kunsel.

"Meet up with him every so often," came the vague, quiet answer. "Nice enough guy, if creepy as fuck. How do you know him?"

"I can't tell you why, but I really need to find him."

"He plays messenger between the Wutaian rebels and some of our own homegrown factions. Rumor has it that AVALANCHE isn't as defunct as ShinRa might've liked."

Zack rubbed his temples with fingers. "So how do I find him?"

"He takes odd jobs every so often, especially for the weapons shop down in Wall Market. If you want to find him faster, though, I guess you might as well find a Wutaian and try to claim asylum."

"Fuck," he muttered with feeling.

Specimen C didn't scream as much as the others. Of course he did scream, but not endlessly, not crying out for his mother or father or the family pet. Instead he stared into space, retreating far into his head. Hojo was mildly intrigued by this aberrant behavior; normally such a mental defense occurred late in an experiment. Libra's paperwork had noted a tendency for depression and some disregard for authority, but not to a dangerous degree, and nothing else very far from the standard
On rare occasion, C sang. It was little more than breath shaped by chapped lips, more like a vague hum, but Hojo recognized it as a lullaby. Other times C murmured in an unrecognizable language, though the scientist thought he might have heard it a time or two in the Nibel region. An indigenous dialect, then. It seemed that C was beginning to succumb to one of the more common symptoms of mako poisoning which the few survivors had described as a constant stream of chatter from invisible people.

Fortunately, Hojo didn't need a mind for this particular project. He needed a method of creating better SOLDIERs without the aid of Jenova's cells, and finding a way to make a human body assimilate record amounts of mako seemed the most promising.

With clinical precision, he snapped the metacarpals of the specimen's right hand. C hissed out a cry before falling into twitching silence. Hojo noted the time and then waited patiently to see how effectively his body would be able to repair such damage. As he did so, he caught the title of the project in his own handwriting from the corner of his eye, and smiled. Using outdated religious terminology in the process of science had always amused him.

Elena stood in front of the bathroom mirror with a large knife in one hand and a fistful of golden hair in the other. She was dry-eyed as she let the thick lock of hair fall into the sink, and then gathered up another fistful, slicing through it with a harsh stroke of the knife. It joined the first, almost bleached of color against the stark white porcelain. In the mirror, she could see the thin thread of scabbed skin following the curve of her hairline. Save for a persistent low-grade headache and some bruising, that red line was all that remained of the attack.

The doctor wasn't going to be very happy when he came back in the morning and found her gone, but she couldn't handle being there right now. Lying flat on her back and useless, the way she'd been when they took Cloud – too helpless to even save herself – and the mere thought made her so nauseous that she had to hurriedly bend over a toilet as she was sick. When her stomach stopped trying to turn itself inside out, she went back to the sinks, rinsed out her mouth, and sawed through the last remaining sections of hair.

A pale teenaged girl with uneven, short hair stared back at her, dark shadows under her eyes. Her reflection suddenly snarled.

So fucking useless!

She didn't do anything as dramatic as punch out the mirror, but it was a close thing. Instead her hands gripped the edge of the long counter, and when she realized that the high-pitched whine echoing in the bathroom was coming from her, she had to bite her lip and consciously force herself to stop.

When Elena was sure that she had herself under as much control as she could manage, she picked up a pair of scissors and evened out the ends of her hair. The result was a cut that ended at the nape of her neck, the right side a little longer than the left. After staring blankly into the mirror, she finally swept up the cut hair with her fingers and dumped it all in a trashcan before taking herself off to the elevators.

Elena had always been good with computers. She couldn't fix anything for crap, and had no talent for making explosives even if she was deadly at throwing them, but there was no software program that could keep her out for long.
The keycards she'd stolen during Cloud's mission to Banora would be useless by now, but she'd gone through the trouble of stealing new ones a few days ago. Never knew when they'd come in handy, and now she used the cards to slip past distracted guards on her way upwards. She was likely to get caught again but this time she was counting on it.

Rather than the computer she'd used last time, Elena went to the next floor up and chose another at random. It didn't take long for her to track down the information she'd found before – whoever was in charge of security should be dragged out and shot – and started downloading the information to a disc. Several minutes passed in silence, save for the quiet hum of the computer.

"Say something or fuck off," she suddenly snapped without turning around.

The darkness broke as Tseng stepped forward into the glow of the computer. He looked like a ghost still dressed in shadows, his fair skin a stark contrast against his somber suit in the sickly light. "You're trespassing into classified property, you know," he said mildly, and Elena glared at him. And to think that she'd once thought this asshole was attractive.

"I know exactly what I'm doing. I am going to make sure that Cloud Strife doesn't become the latest body in Project LAZARUS. That's what's going on, isn't it? Someone found out that Cloud isn't normal, so Hojo nabbed him. Something's gone wrong with the SOLDIER process and he thinks Cloud is the answer."

Tseng was silent.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

"You certainly seem sure of yourself."

"Oh, fuck off," she growled. The computer gave a quiet bleep and she put the finished disc in her pocket before standing, facing Tseng with her arms crossed. "If you were going to kill me, you would've done so the first time Rude caught me up here. Instead you guys have been tailing me at odd intervals, though where you find the time to do so is a fucking mystery to me, so either I've been marked as a new specimen for Hojo or you're planning to recruit me. And since Hojo left me behind when he went for Cloud…"

"That is quite an assumption," Tseng said quietly, expression utterly neutral.

"Not really, no."

"So how do you propose we proceed?"

"Make me a Turk. You know that my sister died in your service and that I have the makings of a good one on my own merits."

"And if I decide that you need to be eliminated?"

"You won't be able to stop me before I get this information to Sephiroth, and some influential people are gonna be fucking pissed that their most promising cadet is now a lab rat. So, either you make me a Turk and I spin it to look like the Turks weren't involved, or I point a really angry Sephiroth in your direction."

Despite her words, Elena's belly was a tangled mass of anxiety and adrenaline and fury and gods knew what else. She was acutely aware of the way her dress shirt bunched under her crossed arms, the unfamiliar feel of her hair brushing the back of her neck, of the scalpel that she'd filched from the infirmary as the quickest replacement for her pistol and then hidden in her trouser waistband.
"I could kill you now," Tseng pointed out in the same voice he'd use when talking about the weather.

"Yeah, but that'd be a stupid idea. Remember, the SOLDIERs know by now that there's something going on with Sephiroth, Zack, and Cloud, and now Zack's been hurt and Cloud's gone. Everyone knows that I'm Cloud's closest friend, so if I go missing or turn up dead, those SOLDIERs are gonna know it was you. I don't know about you but I'd rather not have several beefed-up super-humans after my blood."

Elena managed not to squirm in the following moment of silence, even if she had to bite the inside of her cheek to do so. Then Tseng gave her a small smile.

"Well, it would've been interesting to see how you might have gotten along with Reno," he mused.

Cloud dreamed.

He dreamed of silver and green and pale, of dominance and owning and mine, he's mine.

He dreamed of fire and blades, of earthquakes and hurricanes and giant beasts that knew nothing except how to kill.

(there had once been a young blond soldierexperiment with a dark, round thing of power in his hand and he'd given it to a fallen angel, but that hadn't been cloud because cloud was in the sky flat on his back on a table while sharp things sliced into his belly)

Cloud dreamed of screams and blood and mine and didn't know what was real.

Yoshida smugly looked over the items on the table in the back room of her shop. Sometimes it paid off to have a reputation like hers: half reverent, half fearful, all with deep respect due a woman of her age and ability. Honestly, half of it was about reputation.

Her research had shown that the boy with blue eyes was a northern heathen. As she worked, she meditated on what she had found out of his gods and people, so different from her own.

When Specimen C manifested two white wings, Hojo was fascinated. The three SOLDIER Firsts all had one, of course, but that was the issue: they had one, unless one counted Angeal's withered second, and two of those Firsts had fully integrated, live Jenova cells at that. But this boy had two wings. Why? What were the implications?

Like the SOLDIER Firsts, the wings could be retracted, for lack of a better word, but when manifested they reacted as normal flesh-and-blood limbs, able to bleed and break and heal. It defied the laws of mass and energy, once more raising the question of what exactly the wings meant in the grand scheme of things. Perhaps he needed to alter the direction of his procedure.

The specimen let out a wordless, high-pitched whine when Hojo's blade scraped bone.
Aeris found two SOLDIER Firsts on her church doorstep the night after the Planet screamed through the Lifestream and tore down half the city with its shaking. "Miss Gainsborough?" said the brunet one, tall and powerful and sad.

"Yes?" she said. Her normal cheerfulness muted with tiredness.

"We need your help."

Judging by the horror pain decay she sensed in the man standing behind the first, she could see that well enough. "Are you Angeal?" she asked. "Because if you are, I hope you know that, as Zack's girlfriend, I'm obligated to scold you for being silly and not talking with him. He's been absolutely miserable these last few months."

The other SOLDIER choked on a laugh.

"I understand," Angeal replied quietly.

Pursing her lips, Aeris finally beckoned them into the church. "Genesis, right? What can I help you with?"

He arched a slender eyebrow as though to say, Isn't it obvious? His hair, once a reddish auburn, was now almost completely grey, and his skin looked as washed out as old linen. Aeris looked right back at him with a patient smile, long enough for Genesis to start talking. "I'm dying."

"Do you know why?"

"Because the man who created me is an inept moron."

Angeal sighed. "We think it's because the...substance that makes him more powerful than most SOLDIERs is being rejected by his body."

"You mean Jenova's cells?" Aeris asked, and Genesis hissed between his teeth.

"Is this common knowledge, or did Hojo and Hollander start keeping the confidence of children?"

"Gast was my father actually, and I was in Hojo's lab for a little while. And really, I'm an Ancient. I can sense the presence of the Calamity in you quite clearly, thank you."

Ignoring their surprised looks, Aeris poked Genesis in the side to make him move over and sit cross-legged on the ground close to her flower patch. She settled herself in front of him while Angeal sat on the nearest pew, and lifted her hands in the space between them. "I'm not going to touch you, so relax, all right? On the best of days it'd feel like a bit of a tickle between your ears, but the Planet...something happened and it isn't very happy. Oh, but you would know about Cloud, wouldn't you? What happened to him?"

After a moment of silence, Angeal said, "He was kidnapped, most likely by Hojo."

Anger and fear made her catch her breath. "Where's the most likely place Hojo would have taken him?"

"We don't know for certain. Somewhere with security but little known, given the nature of his human experimentation." Angeal's calmness wasn't enough to hide the revulsion in his voice. "Wutai is the most remote lab that I know of, but it's mostly a materia research outpost and security there is far from the best given our, ah, relationship with the Wutaian people. I don't think he would've taken Cloud there."
"It depends on what Hojo is planning," Genesis said flatly. "If he's trying out some kind of new enhancement, he'll want to be near a reactor for all the mako. If he's just using the boy for spare parts, then he'd likely just remain in Midgar and play dumb when the search party comes around."

WEAPON, cried the Planet, worsening the tension headache that already ached at the base of Aeris' skull and making her hiss under her breath. The Calamity. Death. WEAPON. Blood and agony. Defending one's family/litter/den/pack. WEAPON.

"Miss Gainsborough, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," she gasped, putting a hand against her forehead. "Really, I'm all right, the Planet's just. Well, upset would be putting it mildly."

"The boy is important enough to rouse the Planet?" Genesis asked with that raised eyebrow again, and Aeris huffed.

"He's important to Zack and Sephiroth too, you know, but yes, he's also important to the Planet. Now, close your eyes and relax."

"What are you going to do?"

"Everyone has a bit of the Lifestream inside of them and SOLDIERs have enough mako to make it that much stronger. I'm going to try and feel out what's wrong." How to explain something that came to her as naturally as breathing and walking? When his expression remained skeptical, she huffed again. "Don't be silly, General, I'm hardly enough of a threat to overpower you and Angeal over there. Just relax and go with the flow, all right?"

Clearly begrudging, Genesis slowly closed his eyes, right hand twitching in his lap as though resisting the urge to grab his sword. Aeris once more raised her hands with her palms facing the SOLDIER. Slowing her breaths to something rhythmic and even, she closed her own eyes and followed the bright whisper of life immediately in front of her.

Aeris woke up sometime later with Angeal hovering over her worriedly. "Well, that was interesting," she said once she found her mental bearings. "You ready for another go?"

Genesis gave her the oddest look while a small grin crossed Angeal's face. "You passed out, Miss Gainsborough," Genesis pointed out flatly.

"Just a bit more presence than I was expecting," she told him absently, sitting up and stretching her fingers. "I just have to be a little more careful. Please sit down, General."

"Miss Gainsborough – "

"Aeris," Angeal continued calmly, "please. I promised Zack and Sephiroth that no harm would come to you. You just passed out. You should give yourself some time to recover."

"Oh, pish. I'm just fine, General, really." She was liking Angeal more and more, even if it was rather hard to forget that he'd been making Zack so upset lately, and she really needed to meet this Sephiroth beyond the carefully posed images on the recruiting posters. If Zack and even Cloud could speak so highly of him (and it hadn't escaped her notice how Cloud said the man's name, carefully enough that he obviously didn't take it for granted, rolling through his voice in a tangle of emotions), and if Sephiroth could show concern for her well-being despite having never met her and in the midst of all this chaos, he must be a very interesting man indeed. Much more than a
publicity figure.

"Angeal," the man corrected her gently, and Aeris' smile widened.

"I'm fine, Angeal. General?" She waited for Genesis to sit back down in front of her, his eyes narrow, body language trying for 'languid' but landing somewhere between 'tense' and 'nervous desperation' instead. The presence of the Calamity was stronger in Angeal than in Genesis; perhaps that was why Genesis was decaying like this and Angeal wasn't? She thought about what it would be like to have her body at war with itself, struggling to stay alive while its cells were dying. To die in so much physical pain, and so slowly rather than the lightning-quick end from an enemy's sword, would've been cruelly horrible for anyone let alone someone as proud and insecure as Genesis seemed to be.

"I don't need your pity," Genesis suddenly snapped haughtily.

"You never had it," she said softly, then raised her hands again. "Let's try again."

Before she'd started dating Zack, Aeris had never done anything like this. While able to sense the presence of another person more easily than normal people, it was her mind's inherent fascination with the mako in Zack's body that had encouraged her to really start listening. The Lifestream usually manifested itself as a combination of emotion and sound, like hearing the hush of a wind and the rush of happiness or sorrow or anger that it carried along with it. Most people were flickering whispers, making a trip through the crowds to Wall Market twice as noisy and almost as distracting. Zack didn't really understand why Aeris wanted to do things like listen to his heartbeat or just sit quietly with her hands somewhere on him, but he'd always been happy to indulge her, so now it didn't take Aeris much effort to mentally reach out. The Planet was so agitated it was like trying to grab the reins of a panicked horse, but she scowled determinedly.

Angeal sounded like a low, steady drumbeat off to the side, as solid and reliable as a healthy heart. Genesis was sharper, a violin's bittersweet twang that would shriek at odd moments, and each twisted sound brought out an arrow of sympathy in Aeris. Whatever kind of person he was (and Zack would complain loud and long about how aggravating Genesis could be), the fact remained that the ShinRa scientists had done something to him that now resulted in this slow, awful decay no one deserved.

Aeris leaned into the Lifestream more cautiously, keeping part of her attention on the Planet's restless murmuring while reaching for Genesis. Pain arrogance determination, she heard. Desperation and the pride that refused to bend for help. Conviction in his superiority, underscored by a terrible and cynical awareness of the monstrousness of his existence. Something that should never have existed in the first place. The drive to live if only to spite both natural law and fate. An insidious fear of being forgotten, erased like a simple mistake, and willingness to become the hand of destruction if just to make sure he wasn't the only one.

The moment Aeris had that realization, the Planet lashed out.

WEAPON. The will to survive.

Aeris cried out as the connection between her and Genesis was snapped and it rebounded in her skull. Angeal caught her before her head struck the floor in her fit, though she was only dimly aware of it.

Stop it! she screamed, but the Planet wasn't listening to her. Instead it carried images to her of blood and flashing metal and the starkness of a bright light – the kind of light that doctors used, she knew, even though the Planet itself couldn't know such fine details, could only reflect general
concepts from the memories in the Lifestream.

*Oh gods, Cloud* –

WEAPON, the Planet roared, the Lifestream surging out of its normal passivity into something intent and dangerous. Aeris felt tremors worse than the earthquakes that had hit Midgar, centered far away to the southeast…

*Mideel.*

She was abruptly thrown back into her physical body. She must have been seizing for her muscles be aching so badly and Angeal to be holding her down.

"Thank you," she breathed into his broad chest.

"What happened?" and though he was visibly trying to be calm, worry and fear made his voice cold and sharp.

"Genesis?" she asked instead, trying to sit up and not managing much more than a twitch.

"Pounding headache, but otherwise fine. Now, *what happened?*"

"The Planet's waking up the WEAPONs," she said faintly.
... Zangan couldn't find it within himself to be surprised upon learning that Elfreda had a good singing voice. It was soft but clear, perhaps an ability trained by her longstanding habit of humming or singing to herself during the day.

For him, the New Year didn't start for several more months, nearer the end of winter. But for Elfreda it began at the start of the season, and these last few days she'd been in a high-spirited flurry of action, stocking up several cords' worth of firewood and making berry jams. There was a small cellar underneath the floor of the cottage that had been carved by both herself and Cloud's father, just before the man had died, and the trapdoor tended to remain open as she steadily filled it with preserved foodstuffs and ale. Elfreda had taken advantage of Zangan's presence and made him her official firewood stacker.

So it was that one day Zangan went inside and found the cellar door propped open by the hearth and both Elfreda and Gillian chatting in the kitchen over mashed blackberries.

"Zangan, dear, there you are! I've chilled a pint for you, it's sitting on the table," Elfreda caroled, waving a hand stained deep purple. He smiled in thanks and gave Gillian a brief bow of acknowledgement before seating himself. It wasn't rice or plum wine, but Elfreda had gone out of her way to use apricots from Rocket Town rather than her usual hops. "I haven't heard from my little Nebel since before his birthday nearly a month ago," Elfreda was saying. There was a furrow of concern between her eyebrows. "He's usually so good about this sort of thing. You don't think he's found a girl, do you?"

"Could be," Gillian smiled, "he's a handsome boy with an accent, the city girls won't be able to resist."

Gillian Hewley had been in Nibelheim for a while, living in the Inn, and already told the story of having met Cloud Strife on one of the boy's first missions. He was very professional, she'd said with a smile that Zangan knew meant she wasn't telling the whole story. He really impressed his superiors. Oh, don't worry, none of the monsters in the area stood a chance against him. Elfreda, of course, had glowed with pride over her little warrior and said something about the Norns; she still wouldn't explain what or who that was.

"I hope she's a bit older, it wouldn't do for him to be alone."

"What does her age have to do with that?" Gillian asked in confusion, and Elfreda tossed her hair a little.
"I don't want Cloud stuck with a girl that can't even defend herself. How would she protect her family if he's not there?"

Only Zangan saw Gillian's silent sigh and smiled in amusement behind his cup.

"Perhaps he'll find an angel," Gillian teased, but Elfreda just looked her quizzically.

"'Angel'?

"You've never heard of them?"

When Elfreda shook her head, Gillian, blinking in surprise, said, "I guess they're not so well-known outside the Mideel area and the east continent. They're like humans with wings, only without physical bodies. People say they're messengers of the gods and that they're beautiful and terrible all at once."

Elfreda hummed thoughtfully as she levered a pot onto the stove and turned up the heat to thicken a mass of crushed berries. "So, angels are like," and then she said a word that would tie Zangan's tongue in knots if he ever tried to say it himself.

"I have no idea," Gillian said wryly, and Elfreda's blue eyes crinkled with her grin.

Zangan spent the evening listening to the two women talk, occasionally adding his own tidbits and goodnaturedly putting up with their teasing. Elfreda insisted that the two stay for dinner, and afterwards Zangan insisted that it was only fair he clean up. Elfreda accepted and, when she went outside to get a bundle of firewood, he took the opportunity to say quietly, "You're worried."

"Is it that obvious?" Gillian sighed, keeping her eyes on the leftover food she was scraping into storage containers.

"No," he said gently. "What is it?"

She stared into an empty bowl for a long moment. "I left Banora because ShinRa is losing control. Genesis – you know of him – turned traitor to SOLDIER and convinced Angeal to join him. It… wasn't a monster that killed the other villagers in Banora."

He considered putting a hand on her shoulder, but restrained the instinct.

"Cloud was there with his superiors to hunt down Angeal and Genesis, not monsters. He's obviously involved in something. If Elfreda hasn't heard from him…"

"Aah," he murmured. "And now we have Turks in Nibelheim and people trying to rebuild the ShinRa mansion."

"I figured the mansion was just an abandoned country estate when you told me about it, but if they're rebuilding…it just seems like too many coincidences."

"Have you spoken with Cissnei?"

The young Turk had been adopted by first Elfreda and then Gillian, earning the three women a collective reputation in the village that made the other people nervous. Brunhild, the doctor-healer, just sat back in the middle and watched the drama with amusement, saying, The favorite pastime of a small town is gossiping.

"Yes, but she doesn't know much more than we do. Which makes it worse, because why would
they keep information from a Turk?"

Zangan had no children of his own, and it wasn't until Cloud had left for Midgar with Tifa following not long afterward that he realized he'd come to see his students as something like family. With what Gillian was saying, his first instinct was track the two down and tie them up in a cave where no enemy could find them. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asked.

"I was just thinking that you might do your ninja thing at the mansion and see what you can find out."

'Ninja-thing.' She laughed aloud at his exasperated expression. When Elfreda came back inside with her arms full of wood, the two shared a brief look. Zangan felt that he was risking dishonor by not sharing their concerns with her, but all that would be achieved if they did was Elfreda going on the warpath and earning a ShinRa bullet through the head.

Cissnei, meanwhile, was having other concerns on the other side of the village just outside the ShinRa mansion. The sun had only just begun to set, but the mountain peaks were so high that it was already approaching twilight.

"Why wasn't I told about this?" she demanded. The trooper, cowering under the force of her glare, stuttered, "I, I don't know - "

With a frustrated growl she pushed her way past him to the scientist that stood just inside the gates of the estate, directing the construction workers in the growing gloom.

"What's going on?"

"Turk," the scientist acknowledged, and then ignored her. "Don't drop that box, its contents are worth more than your yearly salary!"

Cissnei took the man's elbow in a grip tight enough to bruise. When he winced and opened his mouth to yell at her, she said coldly, "I am the Turk stationed in this village. Why was I not told that the mansion was going to be rebuilt?"

"Maybe it's a matter of trust," the man snarled, trying to jerk his arm back. She didn't release him.

"Not good enough," and perhaps this man was smarter than he appeared, if he could recognize the falsely polite tone of her voice and turn pale. "Let's try this again. Why wasn't I told?"

"I don't know. I'm here on Hojo's behalf to make sure everything goes smoothly."

Abruptly he shut his mouth, but the damage was done. Cissnei's eyes narrowed at the mention of Hojo's name and her mind was already racing. As a Turk she was well aware of Hojo's human experimentation, though she'd always taken care never to see actual evidence of such in case the company deemed her unnecessary. Hojo had three main laboratories that she knew of: one in Midgar, one somewhere near Mideel and its endless upwelling of Lifestream, and the last…

*If they're rebuilding the mansion, it's because Hojo's moving himself to the lab underground. Why? New project? Change in the company's hierarchy?*

She allowed the scientist (fair hair and hazel eyes, slightly underweight for his height, she noted, just in case she needed to find him again) to pull away and shoot her a dark look. "You should be more careful, Turk, you never know when you might get the attention of someone you shouldn't have pissed off."
Cissnei was small and slender, cursed with auburn curls and large eyes that made her too cute to be particularly threatening, but she was also strong, and fast, and well-trained, and had had blood on her hands since being adopted into the Turks straight from an orphanage. Her gun was digging into the soft flesh under the scientist's jaw before he could do more than blink at her sudden movement. "Sound advice," she said pleasantly, and smiled the little-girl smile that once made Zack Fair blush.

The scientist practically scurried away when she lowered the weapon. She let out a long breath, accepting the curl of self-loathing that tainted the moment before letting it go. The moment Cissnei was back in her room at the Inn, she went straight to her PHS.

"Tuesti speaking."

"Reeve," she said softly, automatically keeping her voice low despite being alone and having already checked for bugs. "It's Cissnei. You're right, there's something going on here. The mansion's being repaired and there are scientists here, it can't be anything but a lab. I don't know how long it's been going on or how far along they are, but it looks like their primary concern is the lowest floor. Maybe a basement too or something, I don't know, I've never seen the layout of the mansion before."

"What do you mean their priority is the lowest floor?"

"They've got the skeleton of the place done, but it's almost like they're just taking their time with the upper floors when they've already finished the first. Like it's mostly for show."

Clicking of computer keys. "That mansion did indeed used to have a lab underneath its foundations. I'm guessing that when Hojo moved out of Midgar he went to Nibelheim. That the mansion is being repaired suggests that the President is entirely aware of his activities and continues to fund him."

"What's going on, Reeve? Why is everyone suddenly so concerned with a tiny village in the middle of nowhere? I mean, first they send a Turk here, then Angeal's mother shows up out of nowhere."

"Gillian Hewley's there?"

She bit her lip. "I take it her arrival wasn't exactly planned then."

"…No, I don't believe so."

"Talk to me, Reeve."

Cissnei idly toyed with one of her shuriken's edges as the silence on the other end of the phone stretched on. Then, "Keep your eyes open, Cissnei. Trust no one from the company except the other Turks. There have been…monsters, these WEAPONs, waking up across the Planet that a few SOLDIERs seem to believe have to do with someone's disappearance. Just, keep your eyes open."

"Yes, sir," she murmured, and hung up.

…

Life could be explained by three things: physics, biology, and the mathematics underlying it all.

All matter is a series of binary computations; the intersection of 'yes' and 'no,' the most basic state of existence. Either something exists, or it doesn't. The unique characteristics that define a particular existence can be determined by a specific series of 'yes' and 'no.' Does this bit of matter
have substance and therefore existence? Yes. Is it sentient and a rational agent? Yes. Is it organic? Yes. Is it human?

…I don't know.

Sephiroth stood unmoving at his fifty-ninth story office window.

**Biology:** Something exists within Sephiroth and Cloud that prevents the former from functioning at full capacity when the latter is not near. May be due to pheromones; may involve psychological factors, as the symptoms worsened after the second exposure to one another and followed the first subject's acceptance of the other subject's existence.

**Physics:** Emotional stability is proportional to the distance between the two subjects.

**Mathematics:** Probability predicts that in a given situation certain consequences are either of equal chance or are more likely to occur than others.

Cloud enters basic army training and signs on for the preliminary SOLDIER tests. Two months pass; Dr. Libra comes to Sephiroth with an anomaly in the cadet ranks. Soon thereafter, there is a meeting in the gym and a mind-meld thing straight out of Zack's science fiction novels. More time passes; during this interval Cloud presents Sephiroth with a book of fairy tales; Sephiroth comes to accept Cloud's existence in the past and in the present; Zack becomes a surprisingly prominent figure in Sephiroth's own life. Then, the mission to Banora. Almost a year after Cloud's entrance into ShinRa he celebrates his birthday the same weekend that Hojo takes him away.

Away from Sephiroth. Should've remembered not to get attached to things that can be taken away.

("My only solace from now on will be in the hope that, one day, the great General of ShinRa knows what it is like to lose everything he loves. The hope that he will look to Wutai and see its ravaged country as a mirror to his heart.")

Two weeks pass since Cloud's kidnapping in which Sephiroth could find no evidence of Cloud's whereabouts. He couldn't simply go to every one of ShinRa's many laboratories and science facilities and ransack them, not when Hojo could pick up his new specimen and continually relocate him and make Sephiroth's efforts a waste of time. Too easy for Hojo to find defenses, ways to control Sephiroth's search and behavior.

Two weeks of people flooding the earthquake-damaged streets above and below the Plate, protesting with voice and sometimes with fists. Midgar natives and Wutaian refugees had struck an uneasy truce to focus on ShinRa, classic the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Cries of tyranny, corruption, exploitation, and genocide rang through the steel skeleton of the city. "We won't let anyone else be the master of our fates!"

Two weeks in which the visions that Sephiroth once had of Cloud as a little village boy returned with a vengeance, but there was no warmly-lit kitchen anymore, just blood and pain and screaming. Every night, fourteen nights, where closing his eyes meant hearing Cloud's inarticulate fear and agony. It was enough to drive a man to madness.

**Battle strategy:** The power of surprise. Even when one's men were dying. Ruthlessness. Cloud was slowly dying but acting too soon would definitively kill him. If his physical body could be saved then there was a chance, a probability, to heal the mental scarring.

Maybe, maybe, maybe.
So Elena wasn't the most tactful of people on her best day, but even she could recognize the tension under General Sephiroth's skin. That made her task rather more daunting, but then she remembered Cloud and the bloodstains left in the corridor that night and she drew herself up to her full height.

"General."

Sephiroth didn't move away from the office window, so still that his long hair never shifted against the black leather of his coat, and Elena was ashamed by her relief that he wasn't looking at her, not with that sort of intensity. Knowing what she knew, now, made facing Sephiroth easier in some ways and so much more difficult in others.

"Sir, I found something in," don't stutter, you idiot, act in control even when you're not, "in Cloud's possessions that I think you might be interested in." Slight tilt of his head in her direction, not quite glancing over a shoulder. Elena held up two data discs, one labeled *Family Pix* and the other *Mum and Dad's Wedding*. "They're copies of some of Hojo's, uh, experiments."

Finally she was pinned under that intensity, Sephiroth's catlike eyes narrowed and lips pressed into a thin line, and Elena was suddenly very aware of just how tall the man was.

"Where did you get them?"

"Cloud's had them since he got here. To ShinRa, I mean. I found them once but he wouldn't tell me what was on them, he hid them and I only just found them -- " Damnit, girl, shut up shut up shut up! "I took a look, I thought maybe there'd be something useful on them since he basically threatened to kill me if I didn't leave it alone, and. Uh." Why wasn't there a delicate way to say this? "They're records of Project S and Project CHAOS."

"And Cloud had them?"

She got the feeling that Sephiroth was only repeating her words in order to give himself a little more time to absorb their content. "Yeah. Well, granted, I had a hell of a time finding them." Cloud's idea to stick them between the endpaper and the cover of one of his Materia textbooks was rather clever. "But, uh, yeah."

One of Sephiroth's black-gloved hands was laid flat on his desk, fingers carefully spaced to give him something external to focus on. "And how much of them did you read?"

"Just enough to know what kind of information it was," she lied.

"What do you want?"

Because of course few people would bring something like this to him without an ulterior motive, and Elena ruthlessly suppressed a flicker of guilt. "I want into the Turks."

"Guilt alone is not enough."

"I was gonna be a Turk anyway, sir." Even she'd had to camp outside Tseng's office door for a year to prove it. "But if I can make a difference now, then maybe I can repay some of the debt I owe Cloud when he was always there for me."
When Sephiroth continued staring at her in that unsettling feline way, Elena heard herself starting
to ramble a bit. "I think I know where Hojo might've taken him. I found the locations for a bunch
of his labs."

"How?"

"With all due respect, sir, the upper-level guards aren't any more immune to a pretty girl than the
cadets. So one of the locations was Nibelheim, right, which is where Cloud is from, and yeah, you
could argue that Hojo would rather take him to a place where no one's even heard of him – "

"Get to the point."

Elena couldn't help a slight flinch. "So it turns out that Hojo was keeping that Cetra fossil, Jenova
or whatever, in that area, maybe because there's a mako reactor there or something, I dunno.
Anyway, this guy named Professor Gast used to be stationed there too once upon a time working on
Project S with Hojo, and according to some of the old lab reports it's where the SOLDIER formula
was worked out. Well, I found – actually, Cloud found – references to this new project Hojo's got,
Project LAZARUS, and the thing is." She paused, fighting off a wave of nausea. "Thing is, it looks
like he's using people as test subjects. Something went wrong with the usual way of making
SOLDIERs and he's trying to find another method, and the whole medical department knows about
Cloud's mako thing – "

"You think that Hojo wants Cloud for this LAZARUS project."

"Makes sense, right? Nibelheim's in the middle of fu – er, freaking nowhere with that Cetra thing
and the mako reactor and it's the origin of SOLDIER, and now he's got his hands on someone
young and fit with crazy-high levels of mako already in him without causing mako sickness. I can't
believe you haven't already combed the Plate above and below, so where else would he take Cloud
except Nibelheim?"

"Do you realize that if you're wrong, Hojo will certainly be made aware of our pursuit and find a
way to stop us?"

"Well…"

"And Hojo is not above killing Cloud. If he cannot keep the boy, then he'll ensure that no one else
can."

Elena huffed, her frustration and worry overriding the general's otherwise intimidating presence.
"Better Cloud be dead and not suffering anymore than us sitting around too scared to try."

Sephiroth stared at her a moment longer (dear gods, was this how the Wutaians felt when they
realized they had to face him on a battlefield?) before saying, "Give me those discs and all the
information you've found on this new project of Hojo's, and I will speak with Tseng."

…

Reno wasn't having the best day.

Those Wutaian assholes had finally, finally released him under the word given by Valentine (holy
shit it's fucking Vincent fucking Valentine, that's both fucking awesome and really fucking creepy),
and the first thing he'd done after getting back topside was to take a hot shower. Like, scalding, past
the point where his skin threatened to slough off in red peels, because being tied in a chair for
several days and shitting in a bucket? Sucked ass. That too-hot-to-handle-but-so-good shower was
probably the highlight of his pathetic day.
Well, no, that was a lie. The highlight was having Rufus ShinRa himself calmly lay out to the Turks how his father's company was going to go down, and by 'go down' he meant 'kill the President and take over.' And maybe Reno would've once protested, he had a pretty sweet badass job that had nothing to do with drugs or druglords, but sometime after putting on that blue suit his loyalties had shifted from purely yours-truly to spoiled, wealthy, proud, merciless Rufus himself. Wasn't that a kick to the fucking balls. Rule number one: every man for himself. Except now it was every man for himself and the other Turks and his employer that somehow had turned into some kind of almost-friend when Reno had had his head stuck up his own ass and wasn't paying attention.

Okay, so Reno had somehow wrangled himself into a misfit group of people that probably wouldn't betray him for the next hit of 'dragon dust' or some shit, so maybe that was the highlight. Wasn't everyone that got shit as awesome as that. Or it could be that in the midst of all this plotting, he, Tseng, and Rude got another lady in their ranks. Cute one, too, short blonde hair and big brown eyes and enough attitude to keep Reno interested, especially when it turned out that Sephiroth himself had recommended her to Tseng and Rufus.

Okay, okay, so Reno's day was actually turning out pretty awesome, what the fuck ever. As long as he got to kill some shit when this so-called revolution went down, he was cool with it. And maybe kick a few Wutaian ninja asses, then take them out for drinks; nothing personal.

The only true downside to this whole situation was, y'know. The Planet trying to fuck them all up the ass with those WEAPONs. And having to deal with Wutaians. That could put a bit of a sour note in anyone's day.

Then Cissnei called.

..."ave you seen Sephiroth lately? It's like someone killed his puppy or some shit."

Tseng interrupted Elena's growl again. "Our local Ancient claims that Strife's disappearance was the prompt for the appearance of the WEAPONs."

"No shit?"

"Indeed. Officially, Strife's retrieval is our best bet in keeping these WEAPONs from fully activating."

"Unofficially?"

Tseng smiled thinly. "Would you like to be the one to break the news of our failure to Sephiroth?"

Vincent watched all of this from his corner of the office. He was once more in his dark leathers and red cape, claw uncovered and resting over the handle of Death Penalty, waiting for the Turks to finish their preparations. Elena was flushed and restless as she loaded explosives under her jacket; Rude was silently checking over their shared firearms while Tseng double-checked; Reno was idly tapping his electromag against a bony shoulder, seemingly as restless as Elena to get moving. The redhead, though a little haggard and bruised, had survived his captivity with admirable strength, though to be fair the Wutaian rebels had been relatively merciful. Reno appeared to be of the opinion that everyone had just been doing their jobs, nothing personal about it. Which didn't mean that Reno wouldn't happily shoot any of those rebels if push came to shove, but hey, no use crying over spilt milk and all that. Vincent wasn't sure if that attitude was surprisingly healthy or incredibly repressive, but he wasn't exactly in a position to talk, and events were coming to a head.
He was already imagining Hojo's blood spattering the golden shine of his claw.

"Sephiroth contacted Highwind yesterday at seventeen-hundred hours, so he should arrive outside Midgar shortly," Tseng reported. "Elena, you will go with Vincent and Lieutenant Fair to rendezvous with Cissnei in Nibelheim. Reno, Rude, you two will remain with me to handle the fallout of Rufus' change in position."

"You sure the timing of all this crap is a good idea?" Reno asked.

"No. All we can do is proceed and plan for every eventuality."

"Well, never let it be said our lives are boring, yo."

Vincent had met with Zack, Sephiroth, Angeal, and Genesis the day before to discuss the practical things. It was pure luck that Sephiroth, whose mind was second to none in retaining details, had remembered ShinRa's former airship captain, once the leader of the burgeoning space program and then tossed aside with his beloved ships. At first Cid Highwind had simply hung up when he realized who was calling him all the way from the eastern continent, and it had taken a good deal of Zack's charisma and Sephiroth's straightforward way of conducting business to convince the man to at least hear them out.

"Yeah, and why the fuck should I help you out?"

"Not only does it give the Highwind another chance to fly, but it's also a flight straight into the face of ShinRa."

"You give me the funds to fix 'er up proper after this and you've got a deal."

"I'll write the check myself."

By then Genesis' hair was almost completely grey and his once-young face scored with lines of age and exhaustion. Angeal had become a hovering constant presence behind his shoulder, never more than two steps away. Zack, youngest of them all, had been torn evenly between the problem of retrieving Cloud and his mentor's obvious distance. Vincent could see the way the young SOLDIER's eyes kept returning to Angeal, looking a little more lost each time when Angeal was entirely consumed with Genesis' deterioration. Vincent himself had been finding it harder than usual to concentrate: *Sephiroth could be my son, mine and Lucrecia's, and was the shape of Sephiroth's eyes like Vincent's own or was he looking for signs that weren't there?*

So many knots and complications of individual motives, of emotions and drives and desperation that made one person's fate inextricably tied up with another's. One person's decision could so easily change the circumstances of another's and it was downright terrifying to think that not every eventuality could be planned for, that it was impossible to know every decision that a person might make and its ramifications on everyone else. The consequences of free will, Vincent thought without amusement, or perhaps merely the illusion of having it.

Now Tseng and Rude were preparing themselves for the President's assassination and Rufus' ascendancy. Reno and that SOLDIER Third, Kunsel, were going below the Plate. Sephiroth, as the most powerful fighter among them, had no choice but to take a regiment of SOLDIERS and confront the WEAPON that had finally roused itself from the well of Lifestream in Mideel. Only Vincent, Zack, and Elena would be going to Nibelheim to meet up with Cissnei.

"Vincent Valentine?"

He looked to the side without moving his head, watching a blue-suited man with a neatly trimmed
goatee and a case in his hands walk towards him down the corridor outside Tseng's office. The man just smiled slightly. Vincent wasn't fooled, kept his body relaxed but prepared.

"My name is Reeve," the man said easily enough. "I want to help you."

"Why?"

"Well, primarily because Sephiroth threatened me with a painful end if I didn't cooperate," came the rueful answer. He added more seriously, "I've been trying to do what I can to mitigate the effects of the other directors, being head of the Urban Planning and Development Department and all. I haven't been especially successful in that regard given how carefully one must tread in the upper echelons of ShinRa, but now my services may prove useful."

Reeve didn't try handing the unopened case to Vincent. Instead he set it on the ground and unlatched it slowly, without any sharp movement, but Vincent nevertheless kept one hand on Death Penalty as the director pulled out a plush cat. It had a small cape and smaller crown.

"This is a toysaurus AI. An artificial intelligence," Reeve explained, as though he pulled robotic animals out of suitcases every day. "It has an adequate level of fighting capability, albeit limited. It's also equipped with a long-range communication radio that will give you permanent access to my private line."

"No explosives?"

Everyone except maybe Cloud would have taken his utterly flat tone at face value, but Reeve seemed to find some humor in it. He laughed a little. "If I had any intention of killing someone, there are far easier and more remote ways of doing so. Besides, the moment I killed any of you I'd have both Turks and SOLDIERs after my blood. I'm a survivor, Mr Valentine, but I'm neither stupid nor heartless."

Vincent arched a brow but Reeve just stared back calmly. Under the collected exterior was a sharp intelligence, no doubt expertly hidden just enough from his own coworkers that he flew under ShinRa's radar. Some slight nervousness. "All right."

The cat in Reeve's arms suddenly twitched and came alive, its tiny mouth curving up in a smile and chirping, "Off to some poor damsel's rescue, then?"

Unable to help himself, Vincent stood there for a moment and just blinked. It hit him at the strangest moments that in losing over two decades of time he'd missed witnessing the advance of technology, and sometimes it was like watching a piece of magic.

"Cait Sith is able to function autonomously, but I can also override his basic personality and communicate directly through him. If you need my help with anything, use him."

"...All right."

If nothing else, this new world was never going to be boring.

... 

Sephiroth was too absorbed in his own plans to immediately understand was Lazard was telling him over the PHS.

"Thank you for remaining you, Sephiroth. And I'm sorry."
"I – what?"

Only the dial tone responded.

Jonathan Small wasn't the type of cadet to rock the boat, for all of his size. He performed well in the physical training and struggled through his classes on materia and battle strategy, had a bit of a crush on that girl in Squad Forty-Six, and he worried about whether his poppa was treating his momma right back home in Shell Village.

So Cloud Strife had always seemed a little out of reach to him because the guy was intense and, well, those nightmares were kind of crazy. Jonathan had known this one veteran of the Wutai War that lived over in Bone Village, all scarred up his left side from a Fire materia, and rumor had it that he would scream out in the night as though he were still trapped on the battlefield under the weight of his dying comrades. Why would someone put themselves through that? Jonathan had asked, and one of the older villagers replied, Few of the soldiers are out there for glory. Some had no other path in life, some just want to protect and provide for their loved ones, but most of them have no business being there.

Okay, so Cloud was kind of too young to have fought in Wutai. But he did help Elena that one time, just before a couple guys in Squad Sixteen got dishonorably discharged, and when some of the guys sniggered behind Jonathan's back about his being all brawn and no brains, Cloud was there to glare them into silence. And he could glare, like, almost General Sephiroth-level glare, even though he looked about as threatening as a chocobo. Really, Cloud was generally a cool kind of guy, and that vaguely countryside twang of his made Jonathan feel a little less self-conscious of his own.

No one knew what had happened to Cloud two weeks ago except that around the same time Elena and Lieutenant Fair had been found unconscious and bloody in a random corridor. Since Elena and Cloud were practically inseparable most of the time and Fair had started coming round more often lately to visit, it was pretty safe to assume that whatever had attacked those two had also taken Cloud. One rumor said it was the Turks, that Cloud had stumbled over something he wasn't supposed to know and got himself disappeared. Another claimed Cloud himself had gone batshit and taken out Elena and Fair before skipping town. A third, quieter rumor whispered that it had something to do with Hojo. The scientist had always been spoken of in hushed tones, since it wasn't exactly a secret that he'd done something to make Sephiroth what he was or that he'd been one of the developers of the SOLDIER process, and if one thought about it then the moral implications of that were pretty fucked up. Naturally, most people made a point of not thinking about it. Whatever had happened, no one had missed the fact that General Sephiroth had gone from a distant but relatively mild authority figure to a general that had conquered a nation before he was old enough to legally drink.

It was incredibly strange to go about his cadet duties with Cloud gone, leaving nine left in their squad, and then again when Elena suddenly got into the Turks, leaving eight. Not that Elena getting into the Turks was a total surprise after her constant monologues on doing so. But when another squadmate, Lee Hamel, was suddenly promoted a few ranks from private to specialist, Small felt rather uneasy. It wasn't that Lee was bad at this army thing, but he wasn't particularly outstanding, either. Not enough to skip a rank or two.

"It's fucked up, man," John muttered, glaring at the empty bunk where Lee had cleaned out his belongings earlier that day. "If they were gonna promote someone from this squad that wasn't Strife, it'd have been Gildas."
"That's not all," Gildas, one of the older cadets, said darkly. "I heard from someone in Squad Twenty-Six that he saw Lee chatting it up with a couple of scientists and officers. I'm thinking Lee was either blackmailing or squealing."

"Squealing about what?" Ellis demanded. "It's not like any of us is sneaking girls in here or whatever. Well, _I'm_ not," he added with a snort of amusement. "But seriously."

Jonathan's eyes wandered towards the two empty beds where Cloud and Elena had slept. "You think it's got something to do with Cloud?" he asked shyly, instinctively hunching his shoulders under the attention that swung in his direction.

"Huh," said Gildas slowly. "Lee _was_ here whenever Cloud had a fit…"

"Wouldn't everyone know about that, though?" John pointed out. "If he went to the infirmary, then the doctors would've had to report any conditions to our officers."

"Not necessarily. Only if the doctor thought something would interfere with a cadet's training or make him a liability to the company, patient confidentiality and all."

"And Elena was acting pretty fucking weird about it all, and if anyone knew anything about Cloud, it'd be her," said Ellis.

"You think Lee might've ratted out some big secret of Cloud's and gotten him disappeared in return for a promotion?"

"Doesn't seem too unbelievable," Gildas replied to John. "Lee always did seem kinda jealous of Cloud."

Jonathan thought that was pretty stupid. How could anyone look at Cloud, at the dark circles under his eyes and the way he watched the world, and possibly be jealous?

"Cloud was all right, too," Ellis muttered. "Crazy little motherfucker, but man, he could give Tokka a taste of his own bullshit."

Jonathan piped up, "We should find a way to help."

Cid Highwind landed outside Midgar in the small hours of the morning, an hour ahead of Sephiroth's estimate. Sephiroth watched Zack, Vincent, and Elena board the airship with a blank expression on his face. Aeris was going as well, although Zack had fought it as long and hard as he possibly could without resorting to tying her down. Angeal had brought her from below the Plate, looking a little chagrined at his own inability to say no to her, but there was something too serious about her to argue.

Angeal and Genesis were also going, but it had less to do with Cloud and more with finding Hojo. Sephiroth kept telling himself, _Genesis is dying and this is his right, he needs to find Hojo and either kill him or wring answers out of him_, but it felt a little too much like being abandoned (_again_) for him to truly believe it. There was a WEAPON tearing Mideel apart and Sephiroth was one of the only ones capable of destroying it, and only the knowledge that Cloud would be pissed if he ignored it kept him from boarding the _Highwind_ himself. So he watched the airship disappear over the midnight horizon and tried to find that center of cold objectivity that could keep him going through the worst of battles.

He wished it wasn't so easy to do so.
His PHS rang with Tseng's name lit up in electric blue letters. "Sephiroth," he answered shortly.

"I've received orders to stop your mission," Tseng said without preamble. "Your actions have not gone unnoticed, and Lazard is now missing. Heidegger believes that you and Lazard are in conspiracy."

"Do you know where Lazard is?"

"No. The President is unconvinced that you're guilty of anything more than probing too deeply into Hojo's business, considering your…distaste for the professor is well known. But Heidegger will continue to push for more than just a cease and desist."

"The timing is too convenient."

"Indeed," Tseng murmured. "But since Hojo was so indiscrete as to leave a SOLDIER bloody and unconscious in a public hallway, as well as the public protests that have been pushing at the doors, the disappearance of a department director is forcing the President to sit up and take notice."

The phone connection crackled slightly in the stretch of silence.

"This is an official order to stand down and stop pursuing Hojo."

Sephiroth smiled faintly. Tseng had technically followed Heidegger's orders to the letter. "I understand."

A contingent of SOLDIER Seconds and Thirds waited for him back at the ShinRa launch pad, but Sephiroth passed it by and returned to the tower. He was quiet as the elevator took him up to the highest floor, where the President's business office and living quarters took up the entire level. When he entered the office without knocking, he found himself faced with the President seated at his desk and the primary four department heads standing before him. Reeve, fortunately, didn't act like he was meeting a fellow conspirator.

"Sephiroth!" the President smiled, spreading his hands wide over his desktop as though granting some sort of benediction. "I take it you heard from Tseng, then?"

"I did."

"Well, then I'm glad you've seen things our way. Now, your men are waiting at the helicopter."

"Mr. President, if I may," and there was absolutely no way for him to pretend that was in any way respectful, but at least it hadn't come out derisive, "I have matters I wish to discuss with you. I was told that Lazard has disappeared and I need to know who my liaison with ShinRa will be while myself and my men are abroad."

"Well, me, of course," said Heidegger, puffing up his already expansive chest. Palmer and Scarlet seemed amused. "I am the senior director of SOLDIER, after all."

"You are. The matters I wish to discuss with the President, however, extend beyond your station."

"Now see here, Sephiroth – "

"Calm down, my good man, there's no reason to get upset," said the President with a smile. "Why don't you and the other directors wait outside in the hall while I hear what Sephiroth has to say, and if it's appropriate, then I will discuss the matter with you in turn."

"I understand."

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Reeve didn't so much as throw Sephiroth an unusual look. When the room cleared out and the door closed, the President said with a sly, congenial smile, "So what did you want to talk about, Sephiroth?"

He could see why ShinRa was playing along. The thought of having General Sephiroth needing him for anything was enough to rouse the President's ambition and sense of control. Not even Hojo had managed to retain full control of Sephiroth. Hand resting lightly on the Masamune's hilt, he said, "That was very stupid of you."

Then Sephiroth put the Masamune through the President's chest until the tip of the blade hit the floor.

His PHS rang again. "Yes?" he answered, one hand holding the phone and the other gripping his sword. A choking, spasmodic twitch from ShinRa's dying body sent a shudder down the length of the weapon.

"Sir, the men are awaiting your presence to proceed to Mideel."

"I'm on my way."

He called Tseng.

"The cover story we arranged with Rufus concerning insurgents from below the Plate is no longer necessary. I imagine he'll want to be briefed."

Tseng disapproval was almost audible.

"…I see."

On any other day Elena would've been happily getting on Highwind's nerves by asking question after question, but all she could bring herself to do was busy herself in the ship's armory. There wasn't much there, just some old firearms and a few grenades, but it was enough to give her hands something to do in straightening everything and triple-checking the firearms. She was so intent on working the old grease out of grooves that she didn't hear the door shift a little more open behind her.

"Elena?"

"Fucking shit!" She whirled around with an ancient revolver in her hand, lowering the barrel almost immediately after. "Gods damn it. Tifa? What the hell?"

The brunette stood in the doorway, blinking in surprise at all the cussing. "Um, hi," she said.

"Tifa, what the hell?" was about all Elena could get out. They were nearly a mile above solid ground as the sun rose, it wasn't like Tifa could have jumped on board. …Right?

Tifa ran a hand self-consciously over her short skirt to smooth nonexistent wrinkles. "I was worried," she said quietly. "I talked to some of the SOLDIERs working under the Plate, they said Cloud was missing. I figured you or Zack would try to go after him."

"So you stowed away on a freaking airship?"

Tifa crossed her arms (Eyes up, eyes up! Elena yelled at herself) and stared back defiantly.
"Tifa, this isn't like Cloud went missing down an alley or something, this is, like, way bigger than that."

"I know that, but it doesn't mean I can't help. Cloud and I have been training together since we were kids, and if you guys are going to Nibelheim then there's no one that knows those mountains better than the two of us."

Which was actually a fair point, but it was the principle of the thing. "You don't know what's going on."

"So tell me."

"Trust me, you don't wanna know."

"Cloud's obviously in danger, and it's important enough for three SOLDIERs and a bunch of ShinRa employees to take an airship to Nibelheim," she pointed out flatly.

"First of all, I'm a Turk now. Second, seriously, you don't want to know."

"Elena. Please. It's Cloud, and I. Please."

Why did Tifa have to have those big red-brown eyes and that earnestness and goodness and, well, legs that went up to there. And Elena had to admit that she did want to share, it wasn't like she could talk to Vincent or Cid or one of the generals and Zack was practically vibrating with enough nervous energy to put her teeth on edge, and Aeris had her hands full as it was.

"You know how to make a bomb?" Elena asked casually as she eyed the supply shelves lining the shelves, seeing a few empty bottles and rags.

"Um, yeah," Tifa said, confused, and if Elena liked her even more for knowing she could handle explosives, no one could blame her.

"Grab that bottle of turpentine and help me out here."
Interlude I - In Which Genesis' Prognosis Doesn't Look Good

Chapter Notes

Note: Set during the events of chapter 13.

Warning: more crude innuendo concerning a minor.

...

("I'm sorry, Genesis.")

"Genesis?" Angeal moved up quietly behind him until his breath warmed the back of Genesis' neck. The contact made his skin crawl. He wanted to shove Angeal away, off the dilapidated roof of the church to the concrete below. He wanted to pull Angeal closer until they lived inside the same flesh. "Yes, Angeal?" he said, pleasantly.

Angeal didn't say anything. Instead he slid his arms around Genesis' waist and pressed his chest against the other's back.

"You know, if you stand too close you might catch your death." Wouldn't that be ironic.

"Don't," Angeal said gruffly.

"Don't what? I'm just pointing out a possibility. Your genetics are perfectly fine, after all." It was a low blow, but then, Genesis had rarely cared about that kind of thing.

("I'm sorry.")

"We'll find Hojo, Genesis."

"Eventually, yes," he replied, knowing Angeal hated it when he was pedantic. "Whether or not anything comes of it save the dead body of a scientist is the real question." Hollander had been useless. He was just as useless in death, his broken corpse left to rot in his trashed laboratory.

"I've been hearing him," he said suddenly, and smiled thinly when he felt Angeal tense. "The kid's got a good pair of lungs, it's a pity we never had the chance to try out his pretty mouth."

Genesis remembered watching Sephiroth embrace the cadet, like a god bestowing some benediction on a common worshiper. It was more than Sephiroth had ever shown the other two men, even on the rare occasions they shared a bed; the other two who were just like him and yet still weren't worthy of what he was giving so freely to a child. Except little Cloud Strife wasn't a child, was he? For nearly two weeks his voice had consumed Genesis' thoughts, painrageterror and mineminemine, and for two weeks the bursts of agony that were slowly eating away at Genesis' body had doubled with the instinctive need to followfindprotect.

Not long ago Angeal would've been disgusted with his insinuations, but now he hardly noticed. Maybe he was getting used to Genesis' casual cruelty. Maybe he was finally breaking enough on the inside to match the breaking of Genesis' body. Well. At least Genesis wouldn't go down alone.
"Sephiroth once told me about Cloud," Angeal said quietly.

"Oh?"

Angeal's breath was warm against his ear. It was both irritating and soothing. "It was almost ten years ago. You were away on a mission. Sephiroth was asking for Cloud in his sleep." Genesis was tempted to say something vicious about that, but it didn't seem worth the effort anymore. "He said he'd had an angel named Cloud Strife, before he came to Midgar."

Which was no mean feat, given that the boy's file said he had joined ShinRa when he was sixteen. Or, more likely, when he was fourteen. He looked too young and it wouldn't be the first time some enterprising little whelp had managed to slip through the red tape. If Sephiroth had known Strife, it suggested Strife had _also_ been in the Nibelheim lab since Hojo was too paranoid to even consider letting his prize specimen run loose in the nearby village. "Well, that certainly explains Sephiroth's recent behavior."

"What?"

"Strife's similarities to Jenova are hardly coincidental, are they? Little wonder Sephiroth starts acting like an idiot whenever the boy is brought up."

Utter stillness.

"And how he was able to confront me in Banora," he added thoughtfully. _I am a WEAPON_, the boy had whispered tonelessly. _You won’t stand a chance against me_. Before, Genesis hadn't truly believed. _Before_. Now, a WEAPON who looked like a human child and screamed into the Lifestream like Jenova once had? What _had_ Hojo been getting into?

"We'll find something," Angeal said again, as though blind determination could change reality, as though his once-spotless sense of honor hadn't been twisted into interesting new shapes. Genesis' smile was bitter.

("I'm sorry, Genesis, I – I don't think I can heal you.")

The Cetra girl had looked _so sincere_ when she apologized, too.
This is how Missus Elfreda Strife told the story:

Before ShinRa conquered the world, before science replaced the gods with mako energy, Nibelheim and its mountains were home to clans of great warriors. Life wasn't easy in a land of ice and snow, but these men and women, the Nebel-volk, were strong, and fierce, and as tough as the granite beneath their feet. They stood as firm as the mountains in the face of hunger and death, and the gods were proud.

The names of the gods, the Æsir, or sometimes just Ancients, were just as strong as the land, and while each clan revered them all as was proper, each clan was also promised to its own patron. One carried Baldr as its standard; another favored Odin; yet another Freya.

But only one family was able to really look death in the eye, and for this Hel favored that clan with the name Strife. The light will darken, knowledge will be forgotten, life will fade. You will never know peace, but you will endure when all else is dust, for death is the beginning and the end of all things.

But the harsh elements and constant battle with foreign invaders, with each other, whittled away at the clans until their numbers were few. Then other people began colonizing the mountains, and the old ways were slowly lost, and when ShinRa sent its SOLDIERs and materia the clans were scattered to the winds. Only the Strifes remained.

Legend said that there was another god, an unnatural god that slept beneath the mountains, and only the power of the Ancients, the Æsir, kept it chained. When the clans died and no one was left to make the sacrifices, the Æsir were left powerless. ShinRa came, and it stirred the slumbering evil, which began whispering its name to the ones that could hear such things.

Jenova.

Monitors hummed in the otherwise quiet laboratory. Hojo had left, the torture that he did in the name of science finished for the day. There was no more screaming or bones breaking, or flesh being torn, or the awful whirring of strange tools.

Nanaki was very tired. The cold of the cement beneath his body seeped through his fur, leaving
him with the constant edge of a chill, and the cage was just small enough that he couldn't lie down without his paws bracing against the even colder metal bars. Bars made of steel, maybe, though he didn't think so, not when his teeth and claws and the weight of his muscled body were useless on them.

He didn't know how long he'd been here, under Hojo's control, and not in this new lab, after he'd been moved from Midgar to somewhere high in the mountains. There was another specimen that he'd arrived with, a human, or something very like one. Hard to tell, really, as there was an undertone of Lifestream in the other's scent that humans didn't normally have, but maybe that was just his senses getting tricked by the constant exposure to mako. Nanaki hated himself for the feeling of vague relief at no longer being the center of Hojo's attention.

"Pity both specimens are male, it would've been fascinating to see what could have been bred from them. Nevertheless, perhaps one will serve some purpose to the other."

The human specimen, Cloud, was slumped naked on his knees, padded leather restraints pulling his arms out to either side, leaving him at an awkward angle. Two white feathered wings protruded from his back, a series of wires keeping them upright and spread out for easier examination. The wings had bled, and bled red, which had initially surprised Nanaki; usually such mutations were more mako than flesh, or tended to ooze a yellow-green ichor. But Cloud was turned towards him so Nanaki couldn't see how the wings were attached to his body, if they were natural or grafted on.

"I truly wish you wouldn't struggle. It makes my measurements unreliable."

"Fuck you."

"Hold still."

"You know why you can't make any more SOLDIERs, Hojo? Ever wondered why Jenova suddenly went silent all those years ago?"

Quiet. Then the screaming started.

Cloud had been conscious in the beginning, snarling and spitting and, once, severing a guard's finger with his teeth. He'd fought like a wildcat, with the strength of a trained fighter and the desperation of a cornered animal. When Hojo and his assistants left and it was just the two of them, they would whisper to one another, and Nanaki realized that he was in the presence of someone far older than he looked with knowledge that no one should have. "Your father died a hero, Nanaki."

But then had come the syringes with chemicals that dulled the senses and slowed the body. Bones broken to test healing speed, muscles cut away to observe depth of regeneration, raw mako pumped into the tender flesh of organs. Now, now Cloud had the body of a grown man, as though Hojo had somehow found a way to fast-forward a teenager's growth. Hardly taller, still thin, but somehow fitting better into this older body than the younger one. Eyes like materia. So much screaming when bones lengthened and his shoulders broadened. Now Cloud was still and silent, half-lidded gaze so far away from the white-and-grey starkness of the laboratory. Nanaki's heart in turn bled for him.

He was so tired.

…

sephiroth i need you mineminemine

it hurts
Zack couldn't help a wry smile as the *Highwind* landed on a long stretch of snow-dotted meadow outside of Nibelheim. The village was tiny, as tiny as Gongaga, as though people had passed through and forgotten a few of their own on the journey. (*"We country boys have gotta stick together!"")

A warm, dry hand slid into his own and he turned to look down at Aeris. "You all right, babe?" he asked, only just loud enough to be heard over the airship's engines and Cid yelling out orders to his poor crew.

Her smile was underlined with sadness, but it was sincere. "No," she said gently, "and I know you aren't either. This isn't going to be easy, but it'll work out eventually."

"Wish I could believe that," he muttered, wondering without resentment how she could be so certain when Genesis was dying slowly and Angeal was going out of his mind with worry and Cloud, oh, gods, Cloud. What were they going to find when they got there?

"Remember, Zack, the Planet itself wants so badly to protect him. You can't ask for more than that."

"If it wants to protect him so badly, then why the hell is it waking up these WEAPONs?" he asked helplessly. "Sephiroth couldn't even be here because there's one trying like hell to destroy the southern continent, and did you know there're rumors of another one coming out of the ocean? Rufus has got the entire R-and-D department on monitoring detail and we'd better hope that it's just another earthquake because otherwise we're so screwed."

Zack wanted to bite his tongue as soon as the words were out of his mouth because it wasn't fair to take it out on Aeris, but Aeris just squeezed his hand. "We'll find him, Zack, and he'll have you and me and Sephiroth to help him out of whatever condition Hojo's put him in. Did I ever tell you how he found my church?"

"No," he blinked, startled.

"He was so drunk," she said with a growing grin. "Like, falling-down drunk. I think he was at Elfé's bar. Reno found him first."

"I'm surprised Reno didn't shake him down while he had the chance."

Aeris' eyes crinkled at the corners in amusement. "Reno's not that bad, Zack, he's really very nice."

"Babe, I don't think anyone could be mean to you and not kill themselves with guilt afterwards."

"Mm, probably not," she agreed knowingly. After a short pause, Zack squeezed her hand back.

"We're here, now everyone get off my ship!" Cid yelled from the cockpit, cigarette dangling precariously from between his lips. "If you're not back by lunch I'm damn well leaving your asses behind!"
A searching look around the deck revealed that Angeal and Genesis had already disappeared, leaving behind nothing but a few black and white feathers, and hurt that was becoming far too familiar gripped the inside of Zack's chest. He cried, "Let's mosey!"

"Get your spiky ass off my ship!"

So only Zack, Aeris, Vincent, Elena, and Tifa left the ship (and hadn't that been a surprise, when Cloud's childhood buddy walked out next to Elena with her face set in stubborn determination that just dared anyone to make her stay behind). That weird contraption of Reeve's, Cait Sith, bounded after them.

"Hoo boy, this is gonna take some tricky work," the cat quipped, hopping about on its Mog.

"I will go to the mansion while you meet with Cissnei," Vincent said softly, creepy eyes already looking towards the far side of the village where the single road began twisting up into the mountains. "I want to make certain we're in the right place before we proceed."

"All right." Zack glanced at the others. "Cissnei said there's an inn. We'll wait for you there. And Vincent?"

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

Eyes narrowing, he said, "I want to know the name of every person that's had a hand in hurting Cloud."

Vincent gave him a long, searching look, then, "Of course."

Zack nodded sharply and turned to enter the gate into the village, not turning back as Vincent disappeared with a whisper of his cloak. He had Aeris at his side, allies behind him, and Cloud within reach; if his mentor was no longer around, well, that didn't seem so important anymore.

…

who am i

weapon

or angel

i don't remember

what does it mean to be 'i,' singular personal pronoun

i am planet

…

In a village so small with a single square around a water tower, it wasn't difficult to find the inn. People gawked at the group that included a SOLDIER and a Turk and, yes, one of their own.

"Tifa?"

"Aldric?" Tifa blinked, and it suddenly occurred to Zack that he hadn't really thought about this being Tifa and Cloud's hometown. Were these people aware of what was going on in their backyard?
"I thought you went to Midgar," said the boy, glancing at Zack's mako eyes and Elena's distinctive suit every few seconds. He was seventeen, maybe eighteen, and from the way he was looking at Tifa it seemed a few months of her living on another continent hadn't been enough for him to forget her. Beside Tifa, Elena was growling a little under her breath.

"I did. Aldric, have you seen another Turk around her? Her name's Cissnei, she's got reddish-brown hair?"

"Yeah, but she, uh. Well, she hangs out with Missus Strife a lot, y'know. Ain't proper, that."

Ah, small-town gossip, Zack thought dryly to himself.

"We need to speak with her."

"I'm here," called a feminine voice. Cissnei was striding quickly towards the water tower with two older women in her wake, one blonde and the other dark-haired. Zack nearly choked when he recognized Angeal's mother, and then again when he saw the sword being carried by a man that looked Wutaian, who was bringing up the rear. Then a third time when he saw the enormous wolf trotting along behind.

"Mrs. Hewley?" he managed, suddenly absurdly grateful for Aeris' presence at his side. Gillian smiled at him and cupped a hand on his cheek.

"Hello again, Zack. I'm glad to see you're well."

"I. What." "I just got the call from Reeve saying you guys had arrived," Cissnei added. Aldric's presence had already been dismissed and, getting the hint, he backed off. The wolf that sat down at the blonde woman's feet might've had something to do with that too. "I have a room in the inn, we should go there."

"Before you do, Zack, I want you to have this. Zangan, please?" Gillian glanced at the Wutaian man and he held out the Buster Sword, albeit with some difficulty. Zack stared, thinking wildly, Angeal's nearby somewhere, he should have it right now. But maybe Gillian was psychic because she added, a little sadly, "This sword was meant to represent our family's honor. You're the best person to have it now."

He wanted to argue, Don't say that, it isn't like Angeal's dead or something, but Angeal wasn't there. Hadn't been there for months, too consumed by Genesis and his own guilt to remember the distinction between true loyalty and blind obedience. So he reached out, took it by the hilt, wondered if it would ever feel natural in his hands.

"Thank you, Zack," she murmured. As though Zack had given her something.

"Aeris, I think you should stay with Elfreda," Cissnei said, obviously trying to be respectful of Zack's silence. "Hojo would be only too happy to get his hands on you again, and we need you sound in case Cl – well, in case someone needs your help." She cast a nervous glance at the blonde woman, who hadn't seemed to notice Cissnei's near slip.

"I'm telling you, dear, you could use my help." Elfreda (and this was Cloud's mother? Impossible to mistake that hair, those eyes) looked a little huffy. "If you're going anywhere into the mountains,
you could very well wake up a jötunn, and then where would we be?"

She was a tiny woman in a long skirt and necklaces that were obviously handmade. The country accent she shared with Tifa and that Aldric kid had an extra twist to it, something Zack had only heard from Cloud. She matched up pretty well with the mental image he'd gotten from Cloud's stories, but there hadn't been mention of a wolf, let alone a Nibel wolf. They were rather larger in person than the small database photograph had led him to believe.

"It's all right, Elfreda," said Zangan, putting a kindly hand on her shoulder. "They have a SOLDIER with them, and Tifa was one of my best students. They can take care of themselves."

"What's a jötunn?" Zack whispered to Gillian, who replied, "I think it's some kind of giant." He remembered Cloud once saying something about his mother not being the best judge of reality and now thought that the kid might've been right.

"Where's Cloud? Where's my Nebel? Cissnei said you all knew him."

"That's what we're trying to find out, ma'am."

"Elena," Cissnei hissed, and the younger Turk reflexively slapped a hand over her own mouth. But the damage had been done and Elfreda was drawing herself up to her full height, a good six inches shorter than Zack himself.

"What's going on?"

Zack said gently but firmly, "Missus Strife, Cloud's gone missing, but we know where to find him and there's no need to worry."

But the woman was muttering to herself in that throaty language Zack had occasionally heard from Cloud. The wolf got his feet, ears tilted back slightly as he sensed her agitation, and her hand buried itself in his scruff.

"Elfreda," said Aeris suddenly, "I need your help. While the others are going to get Cloud, I need a place that's ready for them in case anything happens."

"If my son is missing, then I will find him," she said fiercely, and, yeah, no doubt this was Cloud's mum. "I know these mountains better than anyone."

Aeris laid a hand on Elfreda's arm. "Please, Elfreda. You're the best person to help me." Zack didn't know how Aeris did it, but eventually she managed to convince Elfreda to let the others search for Cloud while she herself remained in the town. Gillian and Zangan led the two women away, and Aeris glanced back over her shoulder only once, green eyes worried but determined. Come back to me, Zack Fair, or I'll find some way to publicly embarrass you in the Lifestream.

Zack tightened his grip on the Buster Sword.

Though it was nearing late morning, the overcast sky made it look like grey-tinged evening. Angeal was tired and felt far older than he really was, as though he were the one that was dying. Toothmarks still faintly scored his shoulder from the last time he and Genesis had had sex - bruising, near violent, more an act of saying I'm here, I'm alive than anything to do with love. Hard enough that the marks didn't heal so quickly.

He stood just behind Genesis' shoulder as he had for years, observing the men that were rebuilding
the mansion. They moved between the mansion itself and what looked like a convoy of trucks that had carried the supplies up the mountains, timber and steel protruding from the open ends of the truck beds. A pilot with some serious skill had managed to land a helicopter on the estate grounds. Among the yellow-vested construction workers was a fair smattering of blue-uniformed Regulars and a few white-coated scientists, and even from a distance it looked like the scientists were flailing in frustrated anxiety over the workers' laid-back attitude about the lab supplies.

When Angeal sensed Genesis beginning to draw on a materia, he slid a hand along the single black wing that protruded from Genesis' left shoulder, just where the wing curved into a shoulder blade under the coat. "It won't do anything but warn Hojo that we're here," he whispered.

The insanity that had been growing this last year warred with the man's common sense. Angeal held very still, but then Genesis relaxed his hold on the materia. "You're right," Genesis said idly. "It can wait until we've spoken with Hojo. 'My soul, corrupted by vengeance, hath endured torment, to find the end of the journey.'"

_These people haven't done anything to hurt you_, Angeal wanted to say. He didn't. Those men wore ShinRa's uniforms and so were as guilty as if they'd been the ones who wanted to inject children with mako and unnatural cells, and Genesis would never believe otherwise. Without conscious thought his own white wing curled over Genesis' right shoulder, brushing the ends of hair gone nearly as white. _Sephiroth could have stood here with us_, he thought. _And one day, Zack might have, too._

"You're getting maudlin in your old age, my friend," Genesis murmured, moving away from him. Angeal's wing withdrew. Genesis gave him an inscrutable look before there was a thoughttwist and he disappeared in a rush of dark feathers, and after a breath Angeal followed him.

The world reasserted itself in the form of a laboratory observation room, dimly light by a computer console that lined the wall under a one-way window and the faded light that came through the glass. Leaning over the console was Hojo, his eyes fixed on something in the other room below.

"Hello, Professor," said Genesis. A sharp blow sent the scientist reeling against the console.

"Genesis," came the pained hiss, "I see you still haven't resolved the issue of your degradation."

Another blow had Hojo sprawling on the floor. "I'm working on it."

As Genesis prowled around the scientist, Angeal walked the perimeter of the room to the window to look down. He stiffened.

"Genesis."

He was too busy breaking one of Hojo's fingers underfoot to hear at first.

"Genesis!"

"I'm a little occupied, darling." But Genesis walked over anyway, following Angeal's line of sight with a disinterested glance. Then he stopped, and looked again, and couldn't find any words.

Lying on the floor behind them, Hojo wheezed in laughter. "It's truly amazing, it really is. He manifests similarities to Jenova without possessing any of her cells – fascinating! It's as though he took her place all those years ago! She was never actually gone!"

Which would make Jenova cells useless to Genesis.
"What are you talking about, old man?" Genesis snarled, grabbing the front of Hojo's lab coat and hauling him upright to dangle several inches above the ground. Hojo kept laughing, sounding more triumphant and unhinged than either general had ever heard.

"The boy, except he's not a boy anymore, is he?" the scientist choked out. "Those idiots in the medical department thought they were dealing with a case of mako overexposure, but they were wrong, they don't have the technology or the intelligence to see – the boy's very genetics are riddled with mako, with Lifestream!"

Genesis slammed Hojo against a wall, his face twisted with fury. Angeal would've intervened but he couldn't take his eyes off the laboratory on the other side of the window.

"What did you do?"

"I didn't do anything, the sheer amount of mako must have mutated him. Imagine, being able to speed up the growth of children to produce SOLDIERs!"

Even when Genesis dug his fingers into the scientist's clavicle and ground the bone down until it fractured, Hojo never lost his crazed smile or sick satisfaction. Angeal stared at Strife, at the wires holding two shredded white wings outspread, at the man's body that had replaced the child's as though he'd lived a decade within a matter of weeks. On the console in front of Angeal was a video feed that filmed continuously from several different angles: from the front, from behind, from the side, to capture the smallest change in this extraordinary specimen. Every so often a shudder would run through Strife's body, making the wires and tubes quiver.

It took Angeal a long moment to realize that the whispers he'd been hearing for the last two weeks were growing in volume. Genesis said softly, "If I'm going to die, then it will be on my own terms."

He drew Rapier and drove it through Hojo's chest, pinning him to the console and causing a shower of sparks. (*In some ways you and Sephiroth are more alike than either of you would like to admit, Angeal thought without humor.*) Hojo's cry was high and thin, like the screams of some of his specimens just before their voices cracked.

Neither saw Hojo's right hand shifting towards one of the console's keyboards.

…

Elfreda stopped in her tracks, saying, "Wait a moment," before slipping out of Aeris' gentle hand. Aeris, Gillian, and Zangan watched her dash back to the water tower and quickly climb up the ladder to the reservoir, leaning over the edge.

"What on earth is she doing?" Gillian muttered. Elfreda seemed to find whatever she was looking for, however, because she reached into the water and pulled out a small red sphere.

"Materia?"

"How did she know it was there?" Aeris asked in surprise, but no one had an answer. Elfreda climbed back down and jogged back, hiding the materia somewhere in her clothes.


When they got to the Strife cottage, she couldn't help stealing a look around. This was Cloud's home, and it looked utterly normal, just a two-room affair with a mess of blankets near the hearth that the wolf immediately flopped onto with a loud sigh.
"Cloud brought him home," Elfreda said out of the blue, gesturing towards the wolf. "Fenrir, that is. He still has the scar on his hand. Cloud does, I mean."

Normally Elfreda would be a proper hostess and offer ale or bread to her guests, but *her son was missing* and she needed to find him. The pretty girl, Aeris, wore a reassuring smile and said, "Do you have any extra blankets? Bandages?"

"What's bad enough that they'll need bandages?" Elfreda demanded, trying to bite down on her impatience because none of this was Aeris' fault, most likely, but the girl simply said, "It's just to be prepared, Missus Strife."

There was a bin of fabric under her bed, scraps that were too oddly colored to be used in the things she sold, and she passed it over to Aeris. Aeris settled on the floor and started sorting them according to width and length while Zangan went to fetch scissors and Gillian sat near Fenrir, stroking his head.

"Hel promised that when the world began to die, our family would continue to live," Elfreda told her helplessly. Aeris took her hands and gently pulled her down to sit, and Elfreda couldn't help noticing the pale, very slightly green-tinged, materia in the girl's hair ribbon. "Cloud can't die. He just. He can't, he was chosen. Hel promised."

The girl's eyes were very green, like newly unfurled leaves in spring, like the polished jade that the traders from Rocket Town sometimes brought to Nibelheim. "It'll be all right," she said. "If anyone can bring Cloud back, it's Zack. Zack cares about him, you know, and so do I. You have an amazing son."

Elfreda was getting the sense that someone was standing just her shoulder, a presence that was heavy and old as time. *The Planet*, she guessed, awed, and behind it was something that could only be *Cloud*. She stared at the girl and thought, *Freya.*

Two hours ago:

*Cissnei had taken them all to her room at the inn, pointedly locking the door behind them. She had just finished explaining everything she knew about Gillian Hewley's presence as well as what she'd seen concerning the mansion when a dark shadow blocked out the window. Tifa unlatched it to let Vincent inside.*

"That was fast," Elena commented.

Vincent shot her a withering look as he grabbed a pad of paper and a pen from the bedside table. "I'm already familiar with the mansion itself. I only wished to know its exterior." He pulled a small table doing service as a desk away from the wall and spread a piece of paper across it.

"How do you know the layout of the mansion?" Zack asked.

"Hojo interred me in a crypt just off the main corridor of the basement labs," Vincent said. Maybe it was the need to hurry and get to Cloud that was making him more forthcoming than usual. "After Cloud woke me some years ago, I ensured that there were no other projects of his remaining."

"Oh."

As Vincent's human hand smoothly guided the pen over the paper, he said, "Hojo's impatience will work to our favor. He did not wait for the construction to finish before relocating Cloud, which
means that security won't be so effective.

"At the main gates are only three guards, likely to keep the villagers from suspecting anything."

Tifa cocked her cowgirl hat to one side and made sure her skirt was hiked up a little higher than usual before approaching the mansion's entrance.

"What's going on?" she asked brightly, pasting a smile on her face as she pretended to peer over the guards' shoulders.

"Just rebuilding, missy," said the tallest of the guards, "nothing to see here."

"But if it's ShinRa's mansion, it's gotta be absolutely gorgeous. It gonna take long to finish?" She made sure to keep her eyes wide with innocence, playing up the part of a fifteen-year-old girl from a rural village. One of the men couldn't seem to move his eyes higher than her shoulders. Tifa felt a little sick, purposely pandering to the sort of demeaning attention she'd always hated getting. (If she didn't know better she'd say Elena sometimes looked at her like that too, if much less meanly, but it was a ridiculous idea, anyway; they were both girls.)

"Depends on how bad this snow gets," the third groused, casting a dirty look over the mountain peaks surrounding them. Tifa resisted the urge to kick him in the shin. This was her home, damn it.

"Winters here get real rough," she agreed vaguely. And you'd never be able to handle them. "Think maybe I could get a look before we all get snowed in?"

The guards glanced at each other, and that was when Tifa saw Cissnei melt out of the shadows of the gate walls.

"Asshole," Tifa snarled, and promptly kicked the nearest guard in the knee. He buckled with a yell that was sharply cut off as a blow from her fist sent him reeling into unconsciousness. She turned in time to see another guard collapse and Cissnei yank her large shuriken from the third's throat. When her eyes widened this time, it was in horror.

"Cissnei, what…"

"Save your sympathy, Tifa," Cissnei said quietly. "We need to get going."

" Someone should remain with a PHS at the entrance to the labs." Vincent pointed at his makeshift map with a claw.

" Tifa, Cait Sith, that's you," said Zack, and when Tifa opened her mouth to argue furiously, he added, "Elena and Cissnei are both Turks, we might need their help. We don't know what we're gonna be facing in the labs and we can't afford to get ambushed by whatever backup Hojo might call for."

" But Cloud – "

" Whatever's down there won't be human. We can't risk it. Stay with Cait Sith so we've got a direct line to Reeve. " Zack felt strange, like he was channeling Angeal or even Sephiroth. He was only seventeen, he wasn't supposed to be commanding anyone, but Angeal hadn't been around for a long time and Sephiroth wasn't there and there was no one else left but him.

" Please, Tifa," Elena broke in, utterly serious, and Tifa slowly sat back on the edge of the bed with a bitten-out, "Fine."
"Heard from Tseng that you're a right genius with technology, little missy!" Cait Sith chirped at Elena, jumping around on his Mog. Because of the tight confines of the room, Zack had to take a hasty step back to avoid getting a face full of fur. "Hojo's got some tricky security goin' on, so that's where you come in!"

Tifa, Elena, and Cissnei slipped through the gates while Vincent and Zack jumped the wall farther down, out of sight of the workers. Vincent led them along the perimeter of the estate, avoiding the construction crew around the front of the building. At the rear was what looked like an enormous sinkhole some twenty feet across, surrounded by a line of yellow rope marking off the circumference, with clods of soil and plant roots hanging over the edge into empty air.

"What the hell?"

"Quiet, missy, you'll bring the whole crew down on our heads," Cait Sith whispered to Elena.

"It leads into the tunnels," Vincent murmured. "When you drop down, you'll be in a crypt. Go out into the corridor and to your left will be the main library."

Zack followed Vincent into the sinkhole, absently brushing the dirt off his gloves before helping Cissnei and Tifa down. Elena refused his help and jumped down herself.

It was eerie. The sinkhole was like a giant skylight several feet above their heads in what would've otherwise been a pitch-black crypt with crumbling stone walls and an uneven floor. Several coffins were arranged in a loose semi-circle around an enormous altar, one so cracked and greyed with age that the carved glyphs were nearly worn away.

"I remember this," Tifa said quietly. "The mansion burned down right before Cloud left and my dad had Missus Strife come out and take a look."

"Why?" Zack blinked, and Tifa shifted uncomfortably.

"Well, his family's lived in these mountains for ages. She's the only one that could read what that altar says."

"Cloud burned down the mansion," Vincent said from near the door. He was working open the rusted lock with a claw.

"Wait, what?"

Vincent cast them all a sidelong look. "There is much that has happened that none of you know, most of it concerning Cloud."

"Like what?" Elena demanded, like a dog that had gotten sight of a bone, but the lock suddenly popped off and Vincent pushed the door open. "Let's go."

"But –"

"We'll figure this out later, Elena, preferably with Cloud," Zack broke in, just short of a snap. Keep it together, Fair. "Cait, does Hojo have any special security? Maybe a mutated pet dragon in a closet somewhere?"

Cait Sith listed to one side briefly, presumably as Reeve took control. "No, Zack, not that I can tell. Be careful anyway."

"Intend to, sir. Tifa, Cait Sith," he said, "take my PHS and wait out in the corridor. Let us know if
anything vaguely resembling a mad scientist comes down the tunnel. If anything else goes wrong, like, way wrong, get back out this way as fast as you can."

"And how're you guys gonna get out?" Tifa demanded. Vincent had already disappeared into the gloom, Zack and Cissnei close behind. Elena was checking her stash of grenades as she grinned.

"We're Turks, we're worse than cockroaches." Then she kissed Tifa firmly, pulling away before Tifa could react and running into the corridor. "Don't do anything we wouldn't do!"

Zack swallowed a laugh as they left Tifa standing in stunned amazement in the light coming down through the sinkhole, Cait Sith looking nearly as surprised.

Cissnei and Elena allowed Zack and Vincent to take the lead, relying on their enhanced senses to keep an eye out for unexpected monsters or uneven ground, but they reached the library without incident. There was a keypad on the door and Elena immediately dropped to her knees, poking at it.

"Can you do it?" Zack asked quietly, scanning the corridor for either monsters or scientists. One hand rested on the Buster's hilt, just as Vincent kept a hand on Death Penalty. They were nearly obscured by the deep gloom of the tunnels, the light of the electric bulbs almost reluctant to push too far into the shadows.

"Of course I can," she scoffed, remembering to keep her voice down, and then pulled out… something. Zack had no idea what it was except that it looked a little like a pen and had a blinking light on the end. She started poking the keypad again with the pen-thing.

"Right," Zack muttered, "better you than me."

The keypad let out a soft bleep and Elena pushed it open with a pleased smirk on her face.

"Elena, Cissnei, you two stay in the library while Vincent and I get in the lab."

Elena opened her mouth to argue, but Cissnei put a hand on her arm. "We don't know what's going to be in there, Elena. Hojo might've created anything, it's better to let a SOLDIER and Vincent," because no one really understood what Vincent was, exactly, "take care of it. Besides, you and I need to go through the library. If what Vincent says is true, then Hojo will probably have left his reports lying around. We find the reports, we might find a way to fix whatever Hojo's already done to Cloud."

Elena chewed at her lip anxiously. Then Tifa spoke up. "Besides, wouldn't Turks be best at finding the information that no one wants them to know?"

Zack snickered as Elena was visibly torn between arguing and preening.

"Look for anything labeled with 'C'," Vincent told the Turks. "Hojo's usual method is to take the first initial of his victim's name."

*Dehumanization*, Zack thought sickly. Elena was already sitting down at the lone computer on the desk while Cissnei rooted through scattered papers and upended books. "Fine, fine," the latter said distractedly, "just get going."

"Zack," Vincent said quietly, staring at him across the small table, "I need to know that you'll be able to keep your head."

*Visions of flying death machines and beheading flitted through his brain. "Huh?"*
"The lab that Hojo uses for SOLDIER mako showers is just for show. The labs that hold his true experiments are…very different. He has no need to hide what happens there."

Vincent was chronically dramatic, yes, but Zack had the horrible feeling that this time it wasn't an exaggeration. "Yeah. Yeah, I will."

The door to the laboratory was at the rear of the library and was already gaping open. Zack and Vincent entered warily, eyes peeled for a trap, and Zack would swear that for a moment his heart stopped.

"Oh gods," he moaned, and even Vincent was struck into stillness because Cloud was there, but he was trussed up and spread wide, streaked with blood and full of needles and tubes –

Zack was moving, his world suddenly narrowed to Cloud. He slid to his knees and put shaking hands on either side of Cloud's face (he looked older, what the fuck), lifted his head, said. "Cloud, Cloud, wake up, it's okay now."

An unfamiliar voice growled, "You need to get him out of here."

Vincent twitched when the enormous red cat in a too-small cage spoke. He made his way around the operating table in the center of the room (shouldn't think too hard about where those stains came from), stripping off his cloak and tossing it to Zack with a sharp, "Wrap Cloud in that, Zack." No reaction. "Zack. Focus, Lieutenant!"

Zack caught the cloak one-handed on pure reflex. He could see only Cloud and the horrible stillness of his body and brilliantly glowing eyes that had no awareness, no fear or recognition. When he tried to remove the intravenous tubes he spent a long moment with his hands just hovering, utterly torn on where to even start and how to keep from hurting Cloud further, before finally reaching for the ones in the bend of Cloud's elbows. The skin was so thin and pale that Zack had to remind himself that he'd seen worse things in Wutai. But he'd never been so personally invested in a tragedy; that was war, people could point to reasons both good and bad, personal and public, for fighting, but this was senseless, cruelty for the sake of cruelty, and Zack tasted bile in his throat.

Beads of blood welled up with each IV he pulled out. The thick viscosity of mako required heavier tubing and wider needles, opening up veins farther, leaving purple bruises at each puncture site that alternated between healing and swelling as mako conflicted with the internal bleeding. Zack didn't realize he was crying as he crawled around behind Cloud (how the fuck did he get so much older, he looked like he was nearly somewhere in his twenties) and wondered how to remove the wires forcibly holding those wings outstretched. Can't remove the restraints until the wires are out. If he falls over he'll rip right through them.

Oh gods.

He leapt up and started slamming through drawers, looking for pliers or cutters or something, and when he came across a pair of wire cutters he nearly didn't see them in his haste. Zack grabbed them, threw himself behind Cloud again, cut through the first couple wires before realizing that if the wings weren't supported when he got down to the last few then the weight of the appendages would yank them out. Some of the feathers were twisted or broken, and in one or two places the flesh had been torn until the bone shone pink-white in the harsh lights. Zack's stomach turned again when he wrapped one hand around the bone and cut the wires with the other. There was no reaction from Cloud, and that just made it worse.

The first and then the second wing fell limply against the ground like dead limbs. The leather cuffs
of the restraints were attached to thin chains bolted to two freestanding rebar, but Zack was pissed and scared and he snapped them easily, catching Cloud as the boy – no, man – slumped forward. Zack awkwardly pulled Vincent's cloak over Cloud's nakedness while whispering, "It's okay, Cloud, it's me, I'm gonna get you out of here and it'll be okay."

On the other side of the lab Vincent had found the passkey to the cage and was helping the cat limp out. Tight confinement and poor treatment had dulled his coat and wasted his muscle, and it took him several moments to find his balance.

"What is your name?" Vincent asked.

"Hojo has named me Red XIII, but I was called Nanaki by my people. You need to get Cloud out. If he is still in there, somewhere, then he won't last very much longer."

Vincent was familiar enough with Hojo's methods that he didn't need an explanation, but before he could say anything he heard Zack's half-incredulous, half-hopeful, "Cloud?"

There was an explosion and a sudden blast of flames.

... 

Inside Cloud's head was a howling storm and he could see through the eyes of (mine, my children) the others.

Angeal Hewley was born in Banora his family was poor the Buster Sword was his honor he loved Genesis but that love was going to destroy him.

Genesis Rhapsodos was born in Banora his family was wealthy his body was falling apart like a walking corpse losing bits of himself in the process.

Zack Fair was born in Gongaga his family was loving and probably missed him he was in love with a beautiful amazing girl he was going to be a hero except Cloud was breaking his heart oh gods no.

Sephiroth had no last name and was created in Nibelheim he was so insecure in his humanity and his own heart on the inside he wantedneededdesired Cloud he was power he was a child he was god.

Cloud could see through Genesis' eyes and saw what Hojo was doing. Saw the sequence that Hojo was painstakingly entering into some kind of screen. Knew it would result in the mansion's destruction.

unacceptable

WEAPON, said the Planet. The relativity of events. The will to survive.

protect aeris zack sephiroth

a doctor gave me a number it was four

protect the other three

hojo wants reunion

Cloud had been taken apart and then put back together, he was as much a part of the Planet as the Lifestream and he. He had to protect, to save, because he'd failed before but he wouldn't fail again.
Destroy Hojo, destroy ShinRa, and then there'd be no more laboratories and no more agony and no more Reunion or Remnants or Plague. He'd been the very last living thing and seen the end of the world.

So he reached out to the voice that was like the strong beat of a heart and tugged on it, sending Zack into unconsciousness. Zack was always the one determined to protect Cloud so it was better this way. Vincent was there too but he was good at surviving, so Cloud turned him aside. There was green crowding into his vision, and it was mako, pouring out of the tubes that were shattering. That was good because it meant that no one would be trapped inside the glass anymore, like being buried alive in acid-filled coffins. He lifted Zack onto the steel table (don't think about it, don't remember the knives and needles) so that he wouldn't drown. No one was ever ever going to hurt Zack ever again, the mere thought was pulling on something deep inside Cloud, the pathway that kept him attuned to the Planet, and fire began licking up the walls like dragons. That was good because fire cleansed. Sometimes things had to be broken down before they could be remade into something better.

There were wings spreading from his shoulders. Cloud had never seen them before but no wonder Ifalna and Sephiroth had thought he was angel. The wings stretched out to their full limit for the first time, and it made him feel powerful which meant he could protect the other three even more effectively, so he kept them wide and arched.

There was tiny, meek voice coming from a drawer. Cloud let some of this new power reach for it, and if the row of cabinets exploded, well, no matter. The voice came from a little materia, an icy one that wasn't round but carved and strung on a cord, and it seemed familiar. He took it with him and the weak voice quieted with contentment. He also picked up the sword that Zack had dropped, hilt fitting his hand so familiarly because once upon a time it had been his sword.

He walked through the library and remembered the reports that had driven Sephiroth into madness. He made sure the flames consumed them. He thought there might've been other people in the room but they weren't AerisZackSephiroth so it didn't matter.

He walked past Vincent's crypt and didn't see the altar turn charred-black.

He walked up the stairs that had been mostly repaired and came out into the mansion. It looked different, but not enough, could still see the similarities. Zack had carried him through here. Cloud remembered the glint of sunlight off the hilt of the Buster and the pulse of Zack's heart, but that was all, he'd been too sick at the time to protect Zack in turn.

He made sure to burn it all. Won't let it happen again. He walked out of the front door. There was screaming. Then the flames rushed forward like Cloud's honor guard, and the screaming stopped.

He walked through the gates and down the path towards the town. The town that had hated him and his mother for their last name. Because of the people's prejudices. Because they were so consumed with themselves that they feared what wasn't normal. Because they were the same people who let Hojo get away with hurting CloudZackSephiroth.

That was all right. Nibelheim had been rebuilt before, they could do it again.

The fire roared into a noonday sky, echoing in the mountains.

…

The screaming outside started.
Zangan and Gillian were already up and dashing out of the cottage. Aeris, the kind girl, stayed to help Elfreda up. Fenrir streaked past their legs and out the door, and Aeris took Elfreda's hand as they followed. It was noon, but all Elfreda could see was fire.

Villagers were running through the town towards the gates, screaming and sobbing in terror and there were the words *Strife* and *gods* echoing through the roaring fire. Flames leapt and crackled along thatched roofs, swept across the ground like a flood to crash down on the people. (*Those Strifes*, the villagers used to say. *A bunch of witches. Superstitious heathens. Practically child abuse, that woman raising her son to believe in that crap. Better to forget such nonsense, learn to accept the changes in the world.*)

"Zangan," Aeris was yelling, "they're at the mansion, Tifa and Zack and everyone!"

He hesitated, looking between the three women, but Elfreda barked, "We can take care of ourselves just fine, now listen to what the girl says!" So Zangan said, "Stay safe."

She huffed but there was a slight blush giving her away. "Don't be silly, Zangan, just go find the others while I take care of my son."

The flames forced him to take a second, smaller route out of the village towards the mansion, ducking low as he did so to avoid the worst of the smoke and heat that made the air shimmer. Fenrir was howling, teeth bared and tail stiff as a bottlebrush, and Gillian and Aeris were both grabbing at her and crying, "Elfreda, please, we have to get out of here!"

Then from the path came her son, and it was a terrible sight. He was older, somehow, naked and pale under a red cloak he held around his shoulders with one hand, eyes that glowed like materia and turned molten in the light of the inferno. From his shoulders arched wings white as fresh Nibel snow, like the wings from a hippogriff or tycoon that had been bleached of color save streaks of blood that dripped to the ground. For all that Elfreda had believed he had some divine purpose, fear had never occurred to her; fear *for* him, yes, but never *of* him, because he was her son and she was his mother. But now her small, carved Ice materia glittered from the space between his collarbones, as brilliant as his eyes, and the sword he carried in one hand could have been made in Thor's forges, and Elfreda was afraid.

Aeris suddenly made a sound that broke Elfreda's heart, quiet and gasping like a hunter's poorly made shot that didn't kill a doe quickly enough, and dropped unconscious to the ground, narrowly missing a rock near her head.

"Shit," Gillian breathed, and then with eyes wide in horror she threw herself at Elfreda, knocking her down as flames rushed between them. Coughing through dirt and smoke, Elfreda pushed the other woman aside.

"Gillian? Gillian, what – "

Soft brown eyes stared sightlessly at her and it didn't sink in for a long moment that Gillian wasn't just unconscious, she was *dead*.

(cloud had sensed the calamity's presence in gillian hewley she was angeal's mother she had seen so much death and lost so much that death was a mercy)

"Nebel!" Elfreda cried with desperation clawing in her throat, scrambling to her feet, "Stop, bitte!"

The water tower was beginning to groan as its wooden supports sagged and then cracked, sending up plumes of sparks. The noonday sun was being swallowed up with smoke and ash and heat and
some of the screams had turned into shrieks of agony as flesh bubbled and flaked from living bodies. Her son didn't hear her, and he continued walking, as relentless and pitiless as Hel. From him the fire spread like a wave to the cottages, the inn, the gates, and then farther beyond, climbing up the mountainsides like packs of wolves and turning the trees into pillars of hellish light. Elfreda finally realized it wasn't a natural fire caused by any materia but something far more dangerous, something that didn't need a material source to consume and grow – snow melted into streams of freezing water that just as quickly evaporated into hissing steam and collected with particles of ash and fell back down to earth in black rain.

Hel had promised that their clan would live beyond all the others, had never said that theirs would be the cause for Ragnarok. But Elfreda was a mother and she would do what was necessary to protect her child, even from himself, and her hand found the red materia in the pocket of her skirt. Not Nebel anymore, she thought as those wings arched higher. Wolke.

She didn't have any silken rope that would bind a god (odd how she immediately thought of Aeris' hair ribbon and that unusual materia tied up in it) but sometimes another god could serve just as well. Elfreda had no regrets, she'd lived with honor and with pride and tradition, and as the fires finally came for her she activated the materia. The last thing she saw was the sky opening up on her son - and Odin.

…

Zack woke up to a world that was strangely muffled. There was movement, but he wasn't the one moving. Was someone carrying him? He thought so, even if those thoughts were rather muzzy. Sound trickled into his brain very slowly, a quiet shout somewhere, harsh breathing from the chest that he was pressed against. Weird, it was like he'd just come through a mako shower, only a thousand times more intense. Everything was distant like it was all happening behind a thick pane of glass.

"Angeal?" he managed, thinking that the person who carried him looked familiar. Only his voice came out more like aaan-jeeel, all long and thick like syrup. How much mako was in that damn shower, anyway? And why was Angeal, and yes, it was Angeal, and Zack shouldn't have been nearly so proud of himself for figuring out that much, crying? Was something burning? It must've been the coffee again, Genesis was going to be so irritated.

"Go back to sleep, Zack," it sounded like Angeal was saying, but the world was coming in a little more clearly and now he knew something was burning.

"Cloud?" and it was a little more human this time, just a little trouble with the 'L' part.

"Genesis is getting him, Zack, go back to sleep." Yeah, Zack totally wasn't imagining it, Angeal really was crying, and why had his voice nearly shattered on Genesis' name? Sure, the guy was an ass, but everyone had their issues. He wanted to ask but his head starting pounding like whoa, like he'd just had his ass kicked six ways from Sunday by all three generals, so he let himself fall back into darkness.

…

Neither Genesis nor Angeal had seen what Hojo was doing until the glass of the observation window suddenly exploded inwards from a percussive force. Only SOLDIER reflex and the thick feathers of their respective wings had prevented the shards from slicing their upper bodies to ribbons, and an instant later a man in black leather slipped into the room through the now-empty frame with unnatural grace, a great metal claw lashing out and pinning Hojo's hand to the console. The scientist was mostly dead, only managing to cough up a fresh wave of blood through a garbled,
"Valentine."

More glass was shattering in the laboratory and Angeal thought he stopped breathing when he saw Zack slump to a floor awash in spilled mako, when Strife lifted him like he was a child's toy and laid him on the steel table. Not Zack, his mind screamed, and suddenly he felt all the regret and self-loathing slam into him. You left him behind without a second glance, even Strife noticed before you ever did.

There was the sucking sound of a sword being yanked out of a body. Genesis didn't seem to care about the stream of blood running down Rapier's blade and over his glove as he snarled, "Hojo is mine."

"Hojo doesn't matter anymore," the man (Valentine?) growled, and as the SOLDIERs watched his skin was turning from parchment-white to slate-grey and stone-black, scarlet wings wrenching their way out of his back with the shredding of muscle. "Cloud's lost, he's – "

"A WEAPON," Genesis supplied, but whatever else he was going to add was lost in the fire that erupted in the laboratory. Angeal was leaping for Zack before he was conscious of doing so, had to get him out –

Genesis saw the look on Angeal's face and smiled wryly to himself. So you've made your final choice, old friend, and he couldn't be surprised, wasn't even really hurt anymore. His sense of self was threatening to get swallowed up by the roaring of Strife's mindless fury, tempting him to give in, to fall at the feet of this new god, but it was that very urge that strengthened his resolve and pride. A thoughttwist and he left Hojo behind, left Valentine-CHAOS behind and followed the destruction that Strife had left in his wake.

Perhaps he would die a hero after all, and the irony of it all made him laugh aloud.

The Nibel valley was already mostly consumed. Genesis could see that some of the fleeing villagers were enshrouded in flame as they ran until their bodies gave out and collapsed in on themselves. It wasn't just the town but the trees, then the mountainsides, and he knew as instinctively as he knew how to breathe that Strife would keep walking until the whole Planet burned itself out.

A WEAPON made from a human is the most dangerous one of all.

The airship that had brought them all here had taken to the sky to avoid the fire. Good, because Genesis wasn't going to be very happy if he sacrificed himself and everyone still died. Morbid humor. Sephiroth would've appreciated it. "Humans always wish they were angels," he'd once told Sephiroth, and he now added to himself, this is what happens when they are.

Strife was beautiful in the way that a hurricane or a battlefield was beautiful. In the LifeStream that was a part of every living thing Genesis could hear the boy's sephirothprotectme neveragain that was drowning out the sound of anything else. The Planet was waking up with its smallest and most powerful WEAPON and behind him the reactor was groaning, letting out metallic snapping and screeching as the mako surged up through the deep channels that had been drilled through the earth's surface. If it wasn't the fire that destroyed the town it would be the reactor's meltdown and the flood of distilled, acidic LifeStream.

There was something of freedom in seeing, and choosing, one's own death. Genesis activated the Barrier materia in his bangle as he strode down the path after Strife, blocking the waves of fire and heat that washed back towards him. He saw the water tower collapse, the cottages go up like torches. He saw Angeal's mother die. The compassion he'd thought years-gone suddenly threatened
to buckle his knees because after this, Angeal would have nothing, not even Zack and his trust.

When Genesis was young and still living in the labs he'd heard the far-off calls of a woman's voice, or something that was a close approximation of a woman's voice, speaking of mothers and power and everything he'd ever wanted, until one day it was silenced as abruptly as a knife to the throat. Now that voice had returned and it was Strife's. He reached out, tangled himself with the rage that was all that remained of Strife's mind, and forced the boy to turn around. Above them came the ozone-smell of an Odin Summons.

*killing rage, stop, unnecessary* he snarled.

*protect at all costs* was the reply, and Genesis fell to his knees with the force of Strife's cry, but he used the position as leverage to throw himself forward, black wing held high and Rapier steady in his grip. More sparks flew when Rapier struck the Buster Sword – shock, seeing Angeal's beloved blade – and the force sent painful frissons down Rapier's blade into Genesis' hands. Strife wasn't human anymore, however, and he tossed Genesis back enough steps to be able to swing down with the Buster, narrowly missing Genesis' body as he ducked to one side. Rapier was just as long as the Buster but narrower and therefore lighter, making it easier to swing more quickly. Genesis wasn't entirely sure that a direct slash would actually kill the boy – would he bleed red or mako, would the Planet keep bringing him back every time? – but he pressed forward ruthlessly, gaining a few feet of ground.

Above them Sleipnir bore Odin into the sky and the god drew his own weapon, called up the storms, and drove them down against the fires.

*i am weapon*

Through the chaos threatening to grip Genesis' own mind he could see flashes of a future that never happened: Sephiroth being the one to burn the world, as terrible as Strife could ever hope to be; the Remnants, just as cruel and lost as Genesis himself; humans and animals alike turning into twisted dead things that still crawled on broken limbs and bled black acid; the Lifestream splintering and the Planet ripping itself apart. Knowing what it was like to live through it all. For a moment Genesis was lost in the horror, his soul turning into a gibbering mass of madness so he couldn't feel the Buster split apart his ribcage.

*never again*

"And you thought you had to protect the Planet from me," Genesis managed to laugh through numbed lips, drowning in the blood filling his lungs.

Strife let out a strangled sob.

…

The SOLDIERs were slapping one another's backs in congratulations, and though Sephiroth had been the one to actually take down the WEAPON they weren't stupid enough to approach him. Almost no one in Mideel had been killed and the monster had been destroyed, and for them, that was enough.

Sephiroth stood beside the massive body of the fallen WEAPON and felt hollowed out. The body had been sliced into more pieces than was strictly necessary. He wondered if he should return to Midgar or just go to Nibelheim, one never knew and

*sephiroth*
i need you
mine
now

his mind went greenblackblood as his wing burst from his shoulder in an explosion of feathers, and he fell back into lifestream, into cloud -

…

Vincent tore out Hojo's throat with a flat, "For my son."

…

Aeris had never fully been unconscious. She'd sensed Cloud an instant before he reached out and touched something inside that sent her mind reeling, Gillian following almost immediately – except whatever Cloud had done had killed her, killed Gillian, and Aeris lost a few moments to darkness. She came back to herself in time to see Elfreda reach for that materia, but then there were teeth gripping her around the waist and the pain sent her off again.

She came back to silence, and for a moment she thought she was dead. But her nose was thick with the stench of charred flesh and wood, and the sky was still dark with ash. Her head pounded and she thought there might be blood soaking her dress around her midriff, but she was alive, and something was whining beside her. Fenrir, his nose nudging underneath her shoulder as though he couldn't decide if he needed to hide or get her moving.

"Ow," she managed weakly, and with the wolf's nose against her shoulder she managed to sit up slowly, gasping when the movement tightened her abdomen. Aeris glanced down and realized that the only reason she was alive was because Fenrir had gripped her the only way he knew how and dragged her away from the flames. A glance at the blood on his muzzle confirmed it. "Good boy," she rasped, then coughed as her smoked-out throat protested.

There was no more fire, no more screaming. The Nibel valley was a burnt-out husk, snow and vegetation and buildings scorched away to bare grey rock. There was nothing left. No roots, no housing foundations, no bodies, except for the heap of white feathers and red cloth in the center. Aeris was only able to get to her feet by leaning most of her weight against Fenrir, and he seemed to understand, pacing slowly at her side and helping her hobble all the way to Cloud's side. She dropped back down to her backside and leaned over him.

He was completely still. A slight breeze likely left over from Odin's storm ruffled blood- and smoke-streaked feathers, but he didn't move, just remained curled in on himself with his forehead turned towards the ground. All she could sense from him was mako and...nothing else.

"Oh, Cloud."
In Which Cloud Relives some Memories that Could Be George Romero's

Chapter Notes

**Warnings**: violence of the battle and horror-movie kinds, PTSD, interrupted sexuality involving dubious consent.

... 

For the last two weeks, the SOLDIERs in Midgar had been uneasy. Rumor had it that Genesis and Angeal were in the city causing all the recent civil unrest, or maybe inciting rebellion within ShinRa itself, no one really seemed to know for sure. Zack Fair, SOLDIER prodigy, had been not only attacked but taken down, right in the middle of the ShinRa Tower. And Sephiroth, usually so cool and collected, was growing visibly agitated to the point that people flattened themselves against the wall as he passed. Something was going on, but the few people who knew weren't talking right up until General Sephiroth took some SOLDIERs to deal the threat of some unimaginable monster.

So when Genesis died, several unexpected things happened.

Every SOLDIER, in Midgar or abroad, felt it like a blow to the skull. The Thirds and most of the Seconds were only dazed; a few of the higher-ranking officers collapsed into what seemed eerily like the delirium of mako sickness. It was unspoken, uneasy knowledge that the three Firsts could manifest wings, but when Sephiroth suddenly disappeared from Mideel in a flurry of dark feathers, he left behind panic and confusion.

In Nibelheim's ShinRa mansion, Angeal felt Genesis' death as a soul-ripping agony. It was a Wutaian general's spear breaking his ribs all over again, it was every one of Sephiroth's cold and distant stares, it was every time Genesis' words had dripped with poison, all at once. But he had Zack in his arms and the mansion and its labs were burning, and he could hear the enraged roar of the beast that Valentine had become, and his head rang with Strife's wordless screaming, and he couldn't do anything. He *couldn't save Genesis.*

In Nibelheim itself, Odin had called up a storm. He was the god of such things and the elements obeyed him: the sky turned black, the rain came in punishing force, the wind howled alongside the thunder. The fires that Hel's child had created weren't natural, were more suited to Muspelheim rather than Nibelheim, and were the kind of flames that couldn't be put out by mundane means. But he remembered the woman who had Summoned him (*protect my child, keep him safe*) so as he looked down upon the destruction being wrought by Hel's child, he extended his own version of mercy. The villagers, their flesh splitting and lungs shriveling with smoke and heat, dropped painlessly to the ground and their souls went Hel for *her* to deal with. Odin's storms would last long enough to drown the fire.

And through the unnatural connection created by mako and cells and Jenova-Cloud's will, Genesis had insinuated himself into the screaming chaos of Cloud's mind. When he died, he took part of Cloud with him.

Cloud's last thought was *Sephiroth.*
Cid was pissed. Seriously, the next time he saw that kid with the spiky hair he was going to throw a serious shitfit. Focusing on the flames that had nearly consumed the Highwind was a good fucking way of not thinking about the village he'd just seen massacred.

He was getting too old for this shit.

He'd been in his cabin going over weather reports when one of his men on the top deck burst into the room, screaming his fool head off about fire, fire in the village, it's heading towards us! The ship was already lurching under his feet as his second-in-command got the motors running and the wheel spinning, and he'd burst onto the deck yelling for the damn idiot to get the ship into the air, seven hundred feet at least, ain't no fucking way he was letting his Highwind go so easy.

As the ship rose, he heard screams over the roar of the flames, and he froze as reason kicked a space through his adrenaline and reminded him that there were people down there. Dying. And he had a big fucking airship that wasn't no damn good to any of them because the heat of the fire would turn her hull to slag. All he and his men could do was watch as the village turned into a nightmarish slaughter. They watched as the tiny, distant figure of a young man strode unhurriedly from the mansion, a red cloak and the feathers on arched wings buffeted by combustive wind. They watched from a distance as the already overcast sky grew dark and angry and an Odin Summons tore it apart, bringing with it a storm that washed away the fires and made every poor soul in that village drop dead on their feet. When Genesis died, he apparently took the terrifying young man with him and both fell to the ground as useless corpses, and Cid's hands were wrapped so tightly around the helm that tendons creaked.

Was there fucking anyone left alive?

The ship's PHS on the navigation array started ringing. Cid scattered papers and cigarette butts in his mad dash to find the fucking thing, managing to ram his finger against a steel lever in the process. When he found it, he yanked a piece of gum off the earpiece and jabbed the button. "What the fuck is going on?" he snarled.

"Cid?"

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Cid, it's Reeve. Cait Sith is my robot – just listen to me, Cid, you need to get them out of there. They're still alive – well, most of them, I don't know, Cait Sith is having trouble getting through all the static in that area – you need to fly down and get them!"

"How the fuck do you expect me to do that when it's fucking raining cats and dogs and all this fucking lightning and whatever's going on down there is fucking with my navigation systems?"

"You're the captain, Highwind, figure it out!"

Cid threw the phone somewhere to his right and started barking at his crew as he switched the ship from autopilot to manual. "Stop staring and get your asses in gear! You two, take the rudder, keep us from getting shoved sideways against a mountain. You, get over here and keep an eye on the system while I take the wheel. The rest of you, get the fuck down to the engine room and keep her from fucking blowing herself up!"

The power of the wind outside made the wheel push against his hands with the strength of a bull. Cid ground his feet into the deck planks and heaved, tilting the Highwind at a dangerous angle
before the rudder forced her back upright. He turned in the direction where the ShinRa mansion 
used to be, cursing ShinRa engineers and SOLDIERs and the goddamn kitchen sink just to be 
thorough, and because it was easier than thinking about how many people he'd just seen die.

When the PHS crackled again, he yelled at his copilot, "Get the fucking phone!"

"We see you!" came Cait Sith's voice, no longer cheerful but rather manic. "Approximately five 
hundred feet starboard!"

"Give me some fucking margin for error! You, check the gyrocompass, I can't see for shit out 
there!"

"But sonar – "

"How do you expect to use the sonar in this weather? Check the fucking gyrocompass!"

As suddenly as it had come, the wind dropped, the rain dissipated into a light drizzle, and the deep 
gloom began to lighten as though someone had flipped a switch. The Summons must've been 
dismissed, Cid thought wildly, as the ship rolled under their feet with the sudden shift of balance. 
Fucking Summons and their unnatural magic, screwing with goddamn physics –

"Let down some ropes!"

His men threw rope ladders over the side. Cait Sith kept up a running commentary to warn the 
crew when to start pulling them back up, and that was how Cid knew that some rather unpleasant 
sounds were coming from the mako reactor, a mile away but still loud enough to be heard.

"It's a meltdown," Cait Sith groaned, voice broken up by white noise. "I don't – shit!"

There wasn't any time to worry about the cat as the first people were pulled up. A giant red feline 
had somehow managed to keep a firm enough hold on an unconscious Elena to get her to the ship, 
and then Angeal followed, his body hunched over Zack's defensively.

"Where the fuck is everyone else?" Cid demanded. "Where's Cait Sith?"

"He went back for Tifa," Angeal grunted.

"And that flower-girl?"

"She was in the village," the general said hoarsely.

Aeris, meanwhile, could hear the engines of the Highwind and the groans of the reactor. She 
looked at the distance towards the mansion, where the ship hovered, and back down at Cloud, and 
nodded to herself.

She'd never be able to move him with those broken wings flopping about all over the place, so she 
pulled out Vincent's cloak from under him and wrapped it around the wings, pinning them safely to 
his body. Then she knelt behind him and pushed him to a sitting position. She could have cheered 
when she realized that he was still in there, somewhere, enough that his body would respond to 
being moved, less like being outright dead and more like being in a mako coma. Thank you, thank 
you, thank you, it meant he wasn't gone, but then something up near the reactor exploded and she 
really shouldn't be getting distracted right now. Aeris stumbled a few times, but she managed to get 
one of Cloud's arms around her shoulders and him on his feet. His balance was shot and she was in 
pain herself but he could just about move one foot in front of the other as long as she held him 
upright. Aeris tried hard not to look at him too closely, not because of his nakedness but because of
the bruises and half-healed scarring, because there was still ash floating on the wind and she didn't know how much of it was human.

Cloud was pressed close against her side. He was far too cold, and she still couldn't sense anything that was Cloud, and even Fenrir seemed to know something was wrong from the way he kept nudging Cloud's dangling hand and whining. "If we get out of this," she murmured, "you and Zack and I are going to take a nice, long bath before wrapping ourselves up in blankets and eating ice cream until we're sick."

Cloud didn't respond, but she could imagine how he'd just shrug and go with it because he seemed to trust her that much, and the tears she had to blink back weren't from smoke. She kept speaking as they stumbled towards the Highwind, not just to reassure herself but to give Cloud something real to hold onto, to remind him that there were things worth coming back for. "And you know Zack's going to want to watch one of his bad horror movies, so I'll need you to distract him while I change the disc, and maybe Sephiroth could join us too. I'll make another apple pie, but I don't think you've ever tried my peach cobbler, and we can watch Zack flail or how Sephiroth probably eats fancily and make fun of them both…"

It was slow going. The bruises around her midsection were hurting like hell and her breath was coming out in short gasps because of the smoke damage, but she didn't stop. She just kept talking about Zack's loud music and how Sephiroth really needed a vacation, so who better to spend it with but the three of them? Underneath it all Aeris knew that the Planet was angry, as angry and terrified as something so ancient and enormous could be.

The will to survive. The relativity of events. Destroying one cell to save the rest.

Someone on the airship must've had a sharp eye. Angeal was coming down a rope ladder already, a harness in hand for the very unhappy wolf. He gently took Cloud from her, and they all watched from the deck as the earth shuddered when the reactor snarled and spat in the background of ripping, screeching metal. Its enormous external pipes shattered into pieces and there was raw mako flooding out, streaming down the mountain like a flooding river and swallowing up everything in its path. By the time the Highwind left, the Nibel valley was a lake of glowing green.

"Where're Tifa and Cait Sith?"

"Where's Cissnei?"

…

When Sephiroth later tried to consciously reconcile himself to everything that was happening he found himself at a loss for words. Human language simply didn't have the words for the way one being could be so intrinsically tied up with another, what it was like for a small animal mind to hear the planets singing.

Resisting Cloud when he screamed into the Lifestream was like trying to stop a hurricane with his bare hands. It pulled at every cell in his body like an enormous magnet to metal filings, it resonated through him like a tuning fork on piano strings, until the external world and every one of his other senses were drowned out. When his wings manifested, it was because that was the only way his human mind and physical body could understand his soul being yanked out of him.

All SOLDIERs had some level of Jenova cells, but the Firsts had the most. They also had the highest level of pure mako in their veins. Perhaps that was what gave the Firsts, and only the Firsts, their wings. Perhaps that was why Cloud had manifested two complete ones, and perhaps that was why some measure of rationality calmed the mindless instinct when Sephiroth pressed himself
against Cloud's body, buried his hands into the blood-stiffened feathers. Cloud was grown now, fully grown, but in his shock and confusion Sephiroth couldn't find anything strange about that. Of course Cloud was older, that was how Sephiroth had first known him and that was how he should've been all along anyway.

So Sephiroth wrapped his larger body around Cloud (in a bed, he was dimly aware that they were lying on a bed) and curled his single wing over them both to block out the soft evening light coming in through open windows. He wasn't sure where his coat or gloves had gone – had he taken them off? Might've been lost in the fight with the WEAPON. He couldn't remember but it didn't matter. Not when he could slide his arms around Cloud and tangle his fingers in the downy feathers at the curve where wings met skin. Minemineminine was the only thing his thoughts and senses seemed to agree on, one voice crying with a child's relief at feeling safe again, another voice urging him to crawl into Cloud's skin and take him. To take him and keep him, to dominate him so that Cloud could never leave again or hold that kind of power over Sephiroth again, to surrender so that wherever Cloud went, he could follow.

Two days passed without change.

Cloud was in a future that no longer existed.

Sephiroth had been stopped three years ago, though not without consequences. The Remnants' arrival six months ago had been taken care of before more irreparable damage could be done, but now, now, something else was going wrong with the Planet.

Not that anyone knew what it was, exactly. The groundwater was coming up from wells with a dark oily sheen and Cloud had the bodies of mutated frogs and fish for the WRO researchers in his pack. He was just outside the door of Reeve's office when he heard Tifa's raised voice.

" – falling apart," she was saying with what sounded like tears tightening her throat. "He's gone for weeks at a time. I thought things would be better now, but I don't know what to do."

"Tifa," said Reeve tiredly, "he's trying to help us figure out what's going on, and you're expecting too much of him."

What does that mean? Cloud thought in bewilderment.

"What are you talking about?" she unknowingly echoed.

"Hojo took him when he was sixteen, Tifa. Do you remember what you were like at sixteen years old, in the middle of puberty? Whatever sense of his own identity he might've had was completely taken away from him. He didn't even know he was Cloud until five and a half years later."

Cloud started wondering if he should leave or burst into the office and demand to know what the hell, Reeve, shut up. Tifa was tellingly silent.

"From what I understand, he didn't exactly grow up in a supportive environment," and if his voice had been any drier it would've rivaled Cosmo Canyon, "and if his voice had been any drier it would've rivaled Cosmo Canyon, "and he lost both his best friend and idol. If Cloud didn't have post-traumatic stress, then I'd truly start worrying."

Stop talking about me like I'm something to study. Stop treating me like I'm weak. Not you two.

Cloud pushed the door open with a blank expression, ignoring the combined guilt and surprise on Reeve's and Tifa's faces. He slung the pack he held onto Reeve's desk, uncaring of the paperwork,
and said quietly, "I got these down near Gongaga for your scientists about two days ago. They should still be fresh enough for them to study." He left without another word, not wanting to hear whatever else they were going to say.

... 

When Zack woke up to a room with silk wall hangings and a gentle breeze coming in through the open windows, he thought he'd died and gone to the Promised Land. Which was, okay, a nice thought, wasn't like he rather wake up somewhere a little more fiery, but it would've been nice to have company.

"Zack?" came Aeris' voice from somewhere to his left, and hey, awesome. Wait, that'd mean Aeris had died too. Not cool, heroes weren't supposed to let their girlfriends die, although if the pain that was starting to wake up in his body was any indication maybe he was still alive after all.

"Ow," he managed, and wished he hadn't. Seriously, ow.

Aeris giggled. "How do you feel?"

"Like Genesis just kicked my ass." That guy never bothered to pull his punches, however much Angeal bitched at him for it. It hurt to talk, but not because of his throat. More like the words throbbed inside his head, too loud and close. So maybe he really wasn't dead, and Aeris was looking pretty good herself, and Cl –

"Cloud!" he yelled while trying to sit up, but gravity had other ideas and his vision swam. "Aeris, Cloud – "

"He's here, Zack, it's all right, he's here." She gently pushed him flat again and remained sitting on the edge of the bed, one hand in his and the other stroking through his mussed hair.

"Where?"

"We're in Wutai. Cid brought us here in the Highwind, but you were unconscious. Cloud's in the room down the hall."

"Angeal?"

"He's here and walking about," she smiled. "I think I saw him in the garden a few hours ago."

Zack stared up at the patterned wooden ceiling for a few quiet minutes, absently wondering how many more times he was going to wake up from a concussion worrying about the kid. "How is Cloud?"

When Aeris didn't respond immediately, he added, "When I found him, it was… horrible. Hojo had him, I don't know, strapped in these restraint things, and there was blood and gods know what else." He didn't realize he was starting to cry until Aeris put a cool hand over his forehead, and he sobbed, "What's wrong with me?"

"Cloud was the one that knocked you unconscious," she said quietly. "He didn't want to hurt you, so he – well, think of it as smacking you really hard inside the head. You'll probably feel off-balance for a little while. But Zack." She stopped stroking his hair to cup his cheek instead. "With everything that's happened lately, I think you're allowed to be upset."

He wrapped his fingers around her wrist and held her hand there, feeling the warmth of her palm, struggling to stop crying like a little kid. When he was able to breathe again, he repeated, "Aeris,
how is Cloud?"

Her visible hesitation made his chest tighten. "He's still asleep. I honestly don't even know where to start. I can't feel him anymore, and his body's healing so slowly. Sephiroth's with him right now."

"Sephiroth? I thought he was in Mideel?"

"He was. I think that Cloud might've...called him."

Zack's first thought was, Where did Cloud get a PHS with Sephiroth's number? "Oh." He blinked, asked inanely, "Are you wearing a kimono?"

"Yukata, I think Yuffie called it." It was made of light cotton and dyed a soft red with small pink cherry blossoms, tied around her middle with a cream-white thing. Stay focused, Fair, c'mon.

"Yuffie? She's here?" That little shit.

"This is her house," Aeris said wryly, but then she bit her lip. She told him about the ShinRa mansion and its labs burning, about Nibelheim being completely destroyed with Elfreda Strife and Gillian still there; that Genesis had died to stop Cloud, that Angeal had gotten Zack out. When he asked about Hojo, she shook her head and said he was probably dead but she didn't know who had done it.

"And all those construction workers and lab assistants...?"

"They all died."

Most of those people had probably been innocent. Zack was finding it difficult to care.

"Zack," she went on softly, "we lost Cissnei and Cait Sith. After you were knocked out, the fire moved too quickly to get everyone out. Cait Sith went back to get Tifa, and Reeve called us later to say that he managed to get her away from the mako before it got her but that he didn't...oh. Oh." She paused. "Zack, the Nibel reactor had a meltdown. There was nothing left."

Fuck. A guy goes to sleep for a little while and suddenly half the world ends. "The others?"

"Elena and Nanaki – he's the other one you and Vincent found in the lab – are also here. We haven't heard from Vincent, and the last anyone heard of Tifa was whatever Reeve managed to get from Cait Sith before he died. Cid's been terrorizing the poor people in the ship hangar." As he listened Zack wove his fingers between Aeris'. She squeezed them lightly. "Zack, you did it. You were a hero. You got Cloud out, and now we can start healing him. We'll move forward."

"Then why do I feel like shit?" he whispered, staring at their joined hands.

There was a snuffling sound from the far side of the room, and then a hundred-fifty pounds of Nibel wolf were jumping on Zack's bed and shuffling to the empty side. Fenrir didn't seem to notice that he had nearly given Zack a heart attack.

"Fenrir saved me," said Aeris, reaching over Zack to pat the wolf's haunch. "He's really quite a big teddy bear."

"Fenrir, huh?" Zack muttered, remembering a story. The wolf's fur was coarse under his fingers, but also thick and warm.

…
Even rationing couldn't make food last forever and supplies were running low into the red. This was the first day they'd been able to leave Seventh Heaven in over two weeks and Cloud wasn't taking any chances. First Tsurugi lay heavy across his back, and alongside him walked several of the tougher slum-rats and a SOLDIER Third sergeant.

Edge lay in ruin, as though Meteor had hit all over again. Almost every building was missing walls or roofs, whole floors, or had simply been reduced to its foundations, and rubble made most of the roads either difficult or flat-out impossible. It was both a curse and a blessing: while all of the shadows and obstacles made it more difficult to be seen by enemies, it was just as difficult to see those enemies. But the refugees were scraping the bottoms of canned food and the children complaining more often of hunger, and so there was no choice but try to find a storage warehouse and hope it was still standing and still stocked with military rations.

"I don't like this," muttered one of the slum-rats for the fifth time.

"We know, Kert, shut the fuck up already," Phillipa growled. Cloud ignored them both, his eyes sweeping from one side of the street to the other and his ears strained for any sound other than his party's footsteps. For the most part the people were smart enough to keep their mouths shut, but nerves could affect the most seasoned of fighters, and the complete silence in what had once been a technological metropolis was unsettling.

They passed through Sector Three without incident. When they reached Sector Two, Cloud stopped abruptly, Kert nearly smacking into him. There was no movement in any of the empty windows or doorways, no bits of gravel tumbling from the rubble, but he said lowly, "We're going right."

"What's wrong with straight?" demanded Phillipa, then promptly ducked the SOLDIER Third's hand.

"Just do what he says," said Sergeant Barklee. He sounded distracted as he watched Cloud intently. Phillipa wisely fell silent, and after another long moment of staring at something none of the others could see Cloud turned right down an alley. At the end of it was a high wall that he easily jumped, then reached down to help up the three civilians. Barklee got up himself, and all of them huddled together.

"The warehouses in this sector are ten blocks to the northwest," Cloud murmured. "I wouldn't trust on having much cover in there. I'll take point. Barklee, take the rear. You three, shut up, keep an eye out, and don't question orders."

"We ain't SOLDIER," started Kert, but Cloud cut in with a sharp, "Exactly."

Barklee and the third civilian, Feris, just nodded. Cloud dropped down the other side of the wall like a cat, landing lightly with one hand on Tsurugi's hilt. When nothing happened he waved the others down.

"Well, shit," Kert muttered. The sector's warehouse district consisted of a long, wide road and a line of several squat buildings on either side of it. About the only cover was the square shadows cast by a midmorning sun.

"Move quickly and quietly. They aren't far from here," Cloud told them.

"How do you know that?" Phillipa whispered, but Barklee muttered something about curiosity and cats and hushed her. Not for the first time, Cloud was thankful for him.
"Single file, and for gods sakes keep your mouths shut," Barklee added.

Cloud was already moving forward, Tsurugi held out with both hands, its blade wrapped in old, thin linen to keep sunlight from reflecting off the metal. Feris was a former thief, quiet on his feet, but Kert and Phillipa's louder footsteps were enough to make him wince. When they came to the first alleyway between two warehouses, Cloud stopped and held up a gloved hand, cautiously peering around the corner. There was nothing but weather-warped cardboard boxes and a number of small skeletons that looked feline, the bones scored deep with tooth marks; most likely the result of an attack by Plague-infected, which hopefully meant they'd long since moved on from this area.

The sunlight that came down through the battered remains of the Plate was already hot and dry. Dust scuffed their shoes and caused a few sneezes as they passed a second, then a third warehouse. Cloud froze.

"They're here," he snapped and pushed Feris forward roughly. "Run. Get to the storage warehouse and bolt the door. Don't wait for Barklee or me!"

"But – "

"Run!" Barklee yelled, and the civilians took off for the end of the road. Already the faint sounds of inhuman screeches and roars were growing louder, echoing off the metallic walls of the warehouses, underscored by the sounds of flesh scraping against asphalt. Cloud was roughly shaking off the linen wraps and pulling Vendetta away from Tsurugi's main sword when Barklee laughed quietly.

"You might not've been a proper SOLDIER, Strife, but it was an honor serving with you."

Cloud glanced at him, a long blade in each hand and his body poised lightly on the balls of his feet. "Take them as they come and make sure you get back to your girlfriend."

The horrible screeching was already starting to drown out their voices. "Bold words for such a little guy," yelled the SOLDIER, and Cloud barked in sudden laughter as the creatures fell onto the road. Thick black fluid oozed across the asphalt, dripping from limbs twisted out of joints, the faces that were once human now half-fleshed skulls, jaws gaping and long serpentine tongues lolling. Some had too many limbs, tentacle-like mutations that had once been trademark with Jenova. These things, these walking dead, were called a lot of things – warps, infected, scions, occasionally 'zombies' by the younger kids – but never 'human.'

"Makes you wonder," shouted Barklee with black humor, "what made you and Sephiroth so special!"

Cloud was already running at the corrupted dead, eyes narrowed intently as he watched jaws dislocate like a snake and stretch open wide. They hit him as a wave, in front of him one moment and surrounding him the next, forcing him to slam to a stop before his throat was torn out by a tentacle. A sixteen-inch claw tried to rip out his lungs and he threw one of the swords, falling backwards from the force and using the other blade to take off the head of another monster that tried to slam down on him. Rotting blood spattered over him and wherever it touched skin he felt a crawling, stinging burn.

He leapt back to his feet and yanked Vendetta out of the dead clawed beast to spin around in place, both hands working independently of one another to slash and parry and stab and defend and – Comet3, he wanted to say, but both he and Barklee were in the thick of the Plague and the falling stones could just as easily kill them as well, and Barrier was just a waste of strength when it didn't
last more than a minute or two against these things. Instead he whispered *Firaga* and the materia in his bangle responded reluctantly. Didn't work so well these days, the Planet dying, but it *responded*, and he made sure Barklee was at his back before releasing the spell.

Fire roared through the blackened, mutilated dead, making them scream so piercingly that Cloud's enhanced senses rang like bells, turning the warps into flailing, moving torches. Plumes of oily smoke billowed up into the air, casting a shifting shadow over the warehouses and road.

These things – once wild animals, pets, mothers and fathers and children – were already dead, were nothing but spare genetic material that Jenova-poisoned Lifestream had mutated, so the only way to stop them was to make it impossible for them to move. Hacking off limbs, in particular; Fire, Ice, Graviga, and little else. The *Firaga* consumed whole ranks of monsters but many of them kept moving forward, pulling themselves on charred limbs if their legs had given way, and Cloud back-flipped over the ones behind him to fist a hand into Barklee's collar.

"*Move*," he yelled over the cacophony, bodily throwing the man away from the thick of the horde. Barklee stumbled, managed to catch himself with his sword before he did a faceplant into the asphalt. Cloud landed next to him, knees bent and both swords held out wide.

"We need to lead them away from the others," Cloud said. "I'm going to head back to the alley – if I destroy that wall then the warps'll be bottle-necked. Get up on the roofs and keep an eye on the area without leading them right back here."

Barklee wanted to protest but Cloud was already sprinting across the road with a whooping cry, drawing the attention of the monsters. Shit, but there must've been fifty or sixty of them still left, Barklee calculated bleakly, leaping aside when the nearest ones tried spitting that acidic black fluid at him. Twist right, jump and grab the edge of a metal roof and thank the *gods* for mako, pull himself up and roll onto his back just in time to block the ragged-toothed beak of what was once a condor.

Cloud was nearly back at the alley and the wall they'd all jumped to get to the warehouses. *C'mon, c'mon, work for me*, he silently chanted as he drew a weak Quake spell, and he grinned wolfishly as most of the wall crumbled without taking down the solid buildings on either side.

He was nearing the pile of broken brick when a searing pain went through his body. He'd been caught by a monster's tentacles, longer and thinner than any sea creature's, that went straight through his upper chest and abdomen. *Missed the lung*, he catalogued automatically as he fell and sprawled over the monster, starting to cough over the blood welling up in his throat, *clipped something else, could go septic, Tifa's going to be pissed.*

The long hollow blade of Vendetta skittered away from him. Fingers slick with blood, Cloud managed to detach Ascalon from Tsurugi and slice through the limbs holding him down, gritting his teeth through the fire of the tentacles being ripped back through his body as roughly as they'd entered. As soon as his back hit the ground he was rolling to his feet, crouched down with the blood starting to run into the shorter sword's distinctive gears. It felt like Hojo had poured raw mako into his belly – broken organs and the corrupted acid-blood was a *really bad* mix – and the world was starting to spin. They were flickers of vacuums where *life* should be and he could sense them like a nightmare behind his thoughts, a rotting foulness in the back of his throat. He was very good at what he did but sometimes he wished he wasn't.

*Sephiroth's done worse*, he told himself as he yanked the severed tentacles out of his flesh and tossed them aside. His chest and abdomen screamed in protest as he ducked sharply to one side, avoiding the claws that raked the stone where he'd been standing, but he managed to scramble over the remains of the wall into the narrow alley with Tsurugi and Ascalon still in each hand.
Here they come and he snapped Ascalon back into the main weapon now that he was in a narrow alley. The first monster to breach the rubble was once a woman, but the left side of her face had been cleaved off and a second too-long tongue had burst through her throat to lash about. Her flesh was mottled grey and black as though it couldn't decide if it was a dead thing or a shadow, and the sound she made wavered between the two extremes of screeching sheet-metal and the low, rumbling roar of a wildcat. Tsurugi took off her head and sliced her torso in half, but the pieces continued flailing in place as more creatures crawled over them. Cloud was slowly being forced back, but he did so as slowly as he could, trying to draw it out so that he could get as many warps as possible into the alley before he came out the other side.

He gritted his teeth as more blackened blood spattered across him. If he closed his eyes he'd still be able to see them as holes of empty darkness where green Lifestream should have been.

From his peripheral vision Cloud caught the end of the alley coming up behind him. He threw himself just that little bit more into the fight, ripping apart several more before he rolled backwards out into the next street and came back up with an arm outstretched, hand splayed wide as he drew on another Firaga.

Flames poured down the narrow alleyway, licking up the walls of the buildings and consuming the wriggling, shrieking monsters. Cloud was nearly thrown head-over-heels by the blowback of heat, but he found his footing and took off down another alley. He jumped another wall, backtracked a bit to find Vendetta lying in a pool of blood, and took off once more in the direction of the warehouses. He'd only taken a portion of the monsters and there was only one other SOLDIER to deal with them – civilians could handle one or two on their own but never a horde, and warehouses were hardly fortresses.

He was just in time to see Barklee have his ribcage torn out in a spray of blood and soft tissue and intestines. Snarling, he pounded up the road to the farthest warehouse, suddenly feeling cold when he saw that the warps had already begun to swarm the place. Or maybe that was shock.

He vaulted up the side of the building onto the roof without breaking stride and skidded across the corrugated metal. When he was roughly halfway across he dug in Tsurugi and sliced open a hole large enough for him to slip through, falling a rough twenty feet to the ground and ignoring the blood starting to seep more heavily through his shirt. None of the monsters had managed to break in yet, but he could see the panic in all three of the civilians as they rifled through boxes.

"There's nothing here!" Phillipa shouted. "It's all spare mechanic parts! Those blueprints, they weren't right!"

"Shit," Cloud swore, quietly but fervently.

"Where's Barklee?" Feris demanded, and all three blanched when Cloud said flatly, "Dead."

"Now what?" Kert cried, too panicked and wild-eyed to help search the boxes.

"All the warps are on the road. You three go through the back while I deal with them."

As he spoke he was striding forward, absentely spitting out the blood that was still trying to well up in his mouth. Internal bleeding. Tifa was going to be very pissed.

"And how is that going to work? They'll hear us, and we all know that you're the only one who can deal with them now," Feris pointed out cynically.

"It's either stand here and die for certain, or run away and have a chance of survival." You can't
Without waiting for an answer he stood by the main doors, fifteen feet high and fifteen feet wide. Claws shrieked on the other side of the metal.

"You asshole," Kert was shrieking, "I can't believe people thought you were a hero!"

"Shut up and get moving!" Feris yelled, and then Cloud lost track of who was doing what because the first of the broken limbs and gaping mouths were pushing through.

... 

After an hour or two Zack was able to sit up without the laws of physics playing havoc with his head. Both Aeris and Fenrir stayed with him the entire time, the latter curled up close to Zack's side. He wondered if Fenrir had done that with Cloud, too.

"When can I see Cloud?"

"He's still asleep," but Aeris seemed to understand that that wasn't the point as she started to get up from her chair. "I'll go check on him and speak with Sephiroth – "

Except fate, naturally, chose that moment to throw more wrenches into their plans. A hoarse cry suddenly echoed down the hallway and Zack was out of bed before he could think about it, nearly stumbling into the wall before catching himself and bursting out into the hallway. He didn't notice the sliding rice-paper panels or graceful ink paintings, only the distance between his room and what must've been Cloud's, and with Aeris right behind him he came in on Sephiroth trying to keep Cloud from rolling off the bed. The latter was vomiting over the side onto the tatami, but the fluid coming up was bile and blood and black.

The noise had attracted what must have been servants. One hand pressed against his pounding head, Zack barked, "Get a bucket, some towels and fresh water!"

They scurried off. Sephiroth held back the Cloud's hair as he shook and dry-heaved, eventually falling back into a ball of cold sweat and eyes tightly squeezed shut.

"What's wrong with him?" Zack asked desperately, but Sephiroth just shook his head and said quietly, "I don't know. This is the first time he's moved or even made a sound."

Aeris held a hand loosely over her mouth as she leaned over him. "I can feel the Calamity, or...something similar to it."

The servants returned and Zack took one of the towels, laying it across the mess on the floor and passing another to Aeris. "We're not leaving here until we figure out what Hojo's done to Cloud," he said, even though he knew that ShinRa was on the verge of facing a full-out civil war, that there was a WEAPON heading straight for Midgar and others across the globe that were probably starting to wake up. But Cloud was his best friend and, with Genesis dead, supposedly one of only three people powerful enough to take on those WEAPONS.

Sephiroth's wing was spread wide into the air, the single outward sign of his agitation, and Zack suddenly realized that the general was only wearing his leather pants. Boots and coat were gone and what had Aeris said? That Cloud had called him?

"Cloud is not Jenova," Sephiroth hissed, but Aeris just stayed quiet and didn't argue as she wiped the sweat from Cloud's face. There was something off in Sephiroth's expression, almost wild.
"Sephiroth," he said slowly, "why hasn't Cloud been cleaned up?" Those wings were still bloodied, and while Zack couldn't see much because of the long pinions and the sheets that had gotten twisted around Cloud's body, the memory of bruises and lacerations was burned on the inside of his skull. It was hard not to choke.

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed, looking at Zack like he was something to be hunted. Zack hesitated, decided that the matter could be dropped for now. "You said Elena's here?" he asked Aeris tiredly, and she nodded. "When she wakes up, will you tell me? She was in the library when Vincent and I went into the lab. Maybe she found something before the fire.

"And you," he continued, poking his head out into the hallway and addressing one of the nervously milling servants, "go find Nanaki and see if he's got a working PHS."

The servant bowed shortly and hurried away.

"What about Angeal?" Aeris' voice was gentle, and Zack bit his lip briefly before shaking his head. Immediately he regretted the motion.

"No, no, he...he's gonna want space. I also think one of us should stay here."

Sephiroth's eyes were still slit as he looked at him. "You think I can't protect him?"

"It's not a matter of protection so much as making sure that he doesn't slip into a worse condition. Remember, we don't know what he went through."

"Data discs."

"What?"

"There are data discs in my inner coat pocket," Sephiroth clarified, impatient, attention flicking compulsively between Zack and Cloud. "Elena found them in Cloud's possessions, though I don't know how he got them. They have information on the methods involved in producing myself and Valentine, and I have little doubt that Hojo would have used them on Cloud."

"Stop it," Aeris said firmly, eyes hard. "Stop talking about yourself like you're just a specimen. You're more than that."

Raising his hands peaceably, Zack said, "We'll compromise. Sephiroth, if you want to stay with Cloud, that's fine, but one of us will check in every hour, all right?"

After a long moment, Sephiroth nodded once, and Zack breathed a silent sigh of relief. "Babe, do you mind staying here a little longer? I want to talk with Nanaki, see if we can get a hold of Reeve. He might have an idea of what to do, and if a WEAPON has already reached Midgar..."

"Of course," she replied, smiling again, and Zack returned the gesture before going off to do what no one else seemed capable of at the moment. Maybe someone around here would have some painkillers, since there was obviously no time for sleep, grief, or nervous breakdowns.

... After Aeris left, Sephiroth had finally managed to fall into a doze when he was abruptly woken by a weight settling over him. Reflexively reaching for a weapon, it took a moment to realize that it was Cloud straddling him, as naked now as he'd been when Aeris had managed to get him onto the Highwind. Sephiroth didn't speak and there was no real awareness in Cloud's eyes, just a green-blue glow that nearly swallowed up black pinpricks of pupil. Lying on his back was uncomfortable
with his dark wing still outstretched, but Sephiroth hardly noticed because the space in the back of
his thoughts that had always missed motherjenova was filling with whispers. Desperate whispers
and angry ones, terrified and suicidal ones because it never ended. The Planet could bring him back
over and over again and it would never end as long as there was the Lifestream.

we could destroy it all

angels make the pain go away

Sephiroth could taste it: Nibelheim burning, Midgar splitting under the force of a meteor, the Black
Materia setting off the chain of events that would eventually destroy the Planet. It would be so
easy. It would make the pain go away. They were too strong to be killed, not by the WEAPONs or
AVALANCHE, not by the Calamity. Except.

humans were never meant to be angels

Cloud's hands were braced on Sephiroth's chest, and they slid up over his shoulders to the mattress
on either side of his head. Cloud leaned forward until they were nose-to-nose, his hips angling
forwards, his face as inhumanly blank as a statue. The wings that rose were still blood-splattered
and the muscles still torn. Couldn't let anyone else touch what was his, not even to clean away the
gore. The Ancient hadn't been pleased, but she couldn't even begin to rival their strength.

we're not human anymore

There was something broken in the whispers, something that had cracked under the weight of the
world. Cloud tasted like blood and oil, and he shifted his weight to one arm to run his other hand
down Sephiroth's skin. Sephiroth sat up, tried to throw Cloud onto the bed but Cloud fought back,
tangled his hand in long hair, pulled harshly and forced Sephiroth's head back. Teeth bit down on
the curve of his neck as Cloud's free hand worked uselessly at Sephiroth's pants.

not right

but it's a human thing to do

The voice of reason in Sephiroth's head was being drowned out by the others that wanted him to
destroy something, and why not the one responsible for all this disaster? Wouldn't be difficult,
Cloud was already hollowed-out and a breath away from screaming.

And Cloud was already a breath away from ripping apart the fucking zipper and Sephiroth sat up,
forcing Cloud to shift his balance and let Sephiroth feel the strength in his thighs, bony hips
pinning his lower body to the mattress. The wings instinctively curling around them made the bare
distance between them hot and close, as though shutting out the rest of the world, the rest of the
Planet, the rest of reason. Sephiroth couldn't resist moving his hands along the line of ribs and up
to Cloud's shoulders, wrapping long fingers around the delicate bird bones that curved into human
scapulae and pulling down. Pulled Cloud down as he pushed up, digging his teeth into the muscle
over Cloud's heart, hissing mindlessly as the blond's weight rubbed against his cock. Can't leave
ever again.

this isn't right

Cloud threw his head back and Sephiroth looked up, wanted to see his features twisted with
arousal, but there was nothing in his expression, his body was just going through the motions.

The haze of instinct from (jenovacloud) the whispers became sudden crystal-clear sanity, washed
away the urge to crawl inside Cloud in any way possible and left behind sickness. He gripped one
of Cloud's wrists and twisted his hips sharply. Through the roaring in his ears he heard something snap in one of the wings – too fragile – as the blond hit the bed and he held Cloud down, snarled, "No."

("If anyone ever tries to make you do something that makes you feel wrong, then don't. Do you understand?")

Cloud didn't fight him. He lay on his back, not reacting to a bone breaking or the hands that held his wrists down, and just stared up at Sephiroth silently.

Angels were never meant to be human

Sephiroth fell on his side and closed his eyes so he wouldn't have to look at Cloud.

... There was a siren blaring when Sephiroth opened his eyes.

He didn't recognize where he was. It looked like a bar, if someone had turned it into a refugee safehouse, boards nailed over windows and all but two doors, the greasy tables pushed aside to make room for sleeping bags and blankets. It was full of thin, hollow-eyed people of all ages, some of them repairing torn clothing and others turning what looked like household implements into makeshift weapons and explosives. Preparations for a last stand, he realized, recognizing the air of desperation and hopelessness.

In the kitchen was a group of children in stained, ragged clothes and a woman that was undoubtedly Tifa Lockhart. He didn't know how he knew, since he'd only heard Zack mention her once or twice, but this felt like the kind of dream where one could simply know. She was pure muscle and sinew, all the normal softness of a female body worn away by hunger and stress, and she was splitting what looked like the last bits of food rations into carefully equal proportions.

From the front door came a hard knock, twice and a pause and another knock. One of the refugees leapt up, glanced through a small hole in the reinforced door, and yanked it open. Cloud stalked in covered in what looked like the same vile fluid he'd been vomiting before, an enormous sword that looked like a modified Buster strapped to his back, with a sobbing woman stumbling in after him.

"Cloud?" cried Tifa, moving quickly around the bar, but the woman (Phillipa, a little voice provided) was hysterically yelling a litany of why couldn't you save them, you're a monster, why. The other people were watching this drama silently.

"People die, Phillipa," Cloud said suddenly, breaking into her tirade. "Whether now or later, people always die."

"Then why do you bother fighting?" she demanded, tear-streaked. "Why do you bother going through the motions? Is this some martyr complex you've got going on in that fucked-up head? Do you think you don't deserve to live like everyone else?" When Cloud didn't respond, she snarled, "Fine, you know what? Fuck you. Act like one of those warps for all I care, but at least have the decency to treat the rest of us like you aren't a gods-damned hypocrite!"

Tifa slapped her soundly across the face.

Cloud just continued walking into the back. After a pause, Sephiroth followed him down a dim hallway and out a rear door that opened onto a narrow alley. There was a barrel of filthy, undrinkable water just to the left, and Cloud unceremoniously started to strip off his gore-streaked
clothing to dunk them in. The smell that came up was sickly-sweet, reminiscent of a battlefield's aftermath, and the near-black mess that streaked his bare skin had left reddened, irritated welts. *If it's not washed off as soon as possible,* said that dream's voice, *then it starts to eat through the skin.*

Unwillingly Sephiroth hissed when he saw what looked like enormous puncture wounds through the man's upper right chest and abdomen, which Cloud was trying to flush with water. They were too slick with blood, too deep, and Sephiroth's immediate reaction was to reach for the FullCure he wasn't wearing. Cloud didn't bother wasting his time trying to clean the clothes and brushed unknowingly past Sephiroth back inside the bar, heading up a set of narrow stairs with bare sword in hand. They came out into a white-walled bedroom that had an army cot in one corner, a desk in the other, and little else. He sat on the edge of the cot in his underwear, so unattractively thin and pale that Sephiroth cynically wondered how many of his rations had been slipped to the kids.

Sephiroth felt he may be in a bit of shock.

Now that he was out of sight of the others, Cloud gave in to body-wracking coughs that brought fresh blood on his lips and hands. Sephiroth automatically tried to reach out for him, panic seizing his heart, but his hands passed right through Cloud's shoulders. Cloud didn't notice a thing. He held his hand over the hole in his abdomen and cast what should've been a Cure3, but the spell came out so weak that it did little more than weave some of the internal tissue back together. Gritting his teeth until the muscles on his jaw stood out, he cast again, and again, until the filth that had infected the wound oozed out over his belly and down his legs and the gaping wound was no longer life-threatening. At least he wasn't so stupid that he forgot to take a Remedy before getting back to the bar.

A bare amount of gauze and mostly-clean bandages went around his middle and then diagonally over his chest, the latter done with a lot of wincing and hissed curses. Sephiroth could only watch helplessly and wonder where the hell Lockhart was.

*Sephiroth blinked.*

He stood in what he immediately recognized as his bedroom in the Nibelheim labs, an advanced biology text lined up neatly with his handwritten notes on the desk and the security camera set near the ceiling humming in its electronic little voice. He blinked again when he saw his child self lying on the bed with his head on Cloud's lap. Cloud himself, slightly translucent and once again winged, sat with his back against the wall, a hand on the crown of Sephiroth's head and his eyes staring intently at the desk. Sephiroth looked again and saw two scribbled stick figures on the biology notes, one with spikes on its lopsided head, the other with long penciled hair.

As a child, he'd never noticed the edge of insanity in Cloud's eyes, nor the unusually fierce protectiveness of gestures as little as a hand on the head. Sephiroth tried to take a step closer.

*Sephiroth glanced to the side for just an instant.*

And he felt sudden heat on his face, not the heat of a Fire materia but the gentle one of a fireplace. The walls around him were thick stone and plaster, the few windows small but enough to let in weak winter sunlight. *Where am I,* he wanted to ask, *what is all this,* but no one answered.

A woman in worn but clean clothing sat in a chair near the fireplace, sewing, and at her feet sat Cloud, all of eight or nine years old and grinning over the puppy (gods, that was a *Nibel wolf*) rolling about on the floor. His hair was spikier than ever, worse than Zack's on a bad day, and though there were shadows in his expression there was no madness or desperation.
So he remembered everything after he was...reincarnated. It still sounded ridiculous to him. But he'd been raised to observe the empirical facts and he couldn't deny it. It seemed that a few years in this relatively stable home unable to worry about anything more than finding enough firewood had softened the beginnings of madness. Some part of Sephiroth was fascinated. This is what a mother is. This is what a home is like.

Envy, and so much of it. Then guilt. Protectiveness. Sorrow. Sephiroth wanted so badly to take off his coat and kick off his boots, to sit on the floor with Cloud and laugh over the antics of the roly-poly wolf pup while Missus Strife went on in her half-crazy ways about things that no one else remembered. Or he could destroy it all, just rip apart so that he didn't have to look at what he couldn't have. It would be so easy.

He shook his head sharply.

And found himself sitting in a plain wooden chair in a field of flowers. The sky above him was completely white from one horizon to the other. The flowers were white and yellow and looked vaguely familiar.

"Hello," Cloud said to him. He sat in an identical chair facing Sephiroth, one leg drawn up to his chest with an arm wrapped around it, wingless and wearing a white shirt and a pair of jeans. He looked like a man. Just a young man that wasn't particularly special in any way.

"...Hello." The general prayed that all of this was truly a dream, or else he was far more cracked in the head than he'd thought. Perhaps he was still in shock. Guilt. Anger. Helplessness.

"I don't know what to think anymore," said Cloud. "What do you think?"

"I...don't know either."

Cloud shifted on his chair, gaze flickering to the flowers, then Sephiroth, and back again.

"Um. Now what happens?"
"You look upset," Cloud observed.

Understatement. But the first thing that came out of Sephiroth's mouth was, "I almost fucked you."

*Subtlety, meet brick wall.*

"I think it was more the other way around," Cloud replied softly. He frowned. "Maybe. I'm not sure."

"…You don't remember?"

"Maybe. No. I don't know."

"Cloud, *I almost hurt you,*" Sephiroth stressed, nauseous.

Cloud shrugged, but didn't meet his eyes. "But you didn't, and I think it. It might've happened before. At the Honeybee Inn, when Tifa got kidnapped. I'm not sure, I blacked out, but it happens to a lot of people."

"And that makes it acceptable?"

"Of course not," Cloud snapped.

"So it's only acceptable when it happens to you?"

"No," he said, except Sephiroth heard it as a *yes,* "but it's…just a body. I don't spend much time in it anyway."

Cloud seemed to curl in on himself without actually moving. Sephiroth's first reaction was to sneer, to say, *That woman in the bar was right, you have either an incredible martyr complex or just hate yourself that much, and at this point I'm not entirely certain there's much of a difference.* It was something Genesis would say and he bit back the bitterness, very deliberately placing his hands on his knees and taking a deep breath. Cloud was deep but not an especially complicated man, at the end of the day.

"You once asked me about sex," Cloud said quietly, picking at the knee of his jeans. "It scared me when I saw one of the assistants looking at you like that."

Some people were monsters, and some were angels, and somehow all of them were human. "What did you do," he said, knew it wasn't a question of *if* but *what.*
"I killed him. It wasn't difficult, everyone has a piece of the Lifestream inside them. I can hear it and I...I can silence it." Cloud suddenly blinked a few times and tilted his head confusedly at Sephiroth. "What're you doing here?"

Sephiroth's breath hitched. "We were talking, Cloud," he replied slowly.

"...Oh. I'm...sorry." Confused look. Hand pressed to the temple. He remembered when Cloud used to lay on his bedroom floorboards and listen to the wood, or the flash of terror just before the Planet forcibly pulled him away. Everything could be reduced to biology, physics, and mathematics, Sephiroth believed, but more than that was logic. The absurdity of reincarnation, and yet - time wasn't as incontrovertible as most people believed, the mind could be as powerful as the physical world, and men would fight tooth and nail just to be able to have a choice in their fate.

"Cloud...what is this?" He gestured at the flowers and the white horizon.

"The Lifestream. I've been here before, but they always throw me back out."

"No, I mean...were those your memories? Why was I seeing them? What was the point?"

"I don't know." Cloud pulled his other leg up to his chest and wrapped his arms around both knees. Sitting very still, he asked, "Are you doing this?"

"I don't know! Hel, Sephiroth, I don't know. I don't know what to think."

As Sephiroth took another long breath, he noticed a subtle noise that seemed to come from below their feet, and the longer he listened the more certain he was that it was the Planet.

The Calamity. One of the fallen ones. Enemy.

Cloud's head jerked and he said fiercely, "No. I told you, he's not the enemy."

A mother wolf protecting her pups. Family. The WEAPONs. Protection.

"I told you not to touch him!"

Sephiroth flinched as the Lifestream around them seemed to contract, as though the air suddenly discovered more gravity while the earth lost some of it, and Cloud grunted in pain. Getting to his feet, Sephiroth started pacing in a wide circle, eyes narrowed at the flowers and wishing sorely that he had the Masamune in his hand.

"Tell the Planet to let you stay here," he said harshly, "tell it to just leave you alone."

"You've said that before," whispered Cloud distantly. "When you were little. You never cried when you were little."

"If you won't say it, Cloud, then I will."

"You said that, too. It scared me."

Sephiroth continued pacing around both chairs, feeling like that cat in the box caught between two possible fates. "What do you want, Cloud?"

"I've done this before."

"...What?"
Then Sephiroth had a flash of that dream-like knowledge: Cloud as little more than mindless puppet, washing ashore in Mideel in a mako coma from which Tifa had to pull him. Cloud said quietly, "I don't...I don't know what to do."

Sephiroth examined him from a distance, ignoring the way Cloud flinched under such scrutiny. "Sometimes," he admitted slowly, "when I am confused, I pretend that another person is in my situation and that I am the observer. It provides context."

Cloud shifted in his chair again, glanced off to the side, tilted his head as though listening to the Planet. He looked like a young man that had been hunted all his life, self-conscious, often lost in thought and dreaming of things being different.

"I think that I, that I would like to be alone for a little while."

No, was Sephiroth's immediate thought. Tell me what's going to happen. Don't run away. But all he said was, "If that's what you want."

... 

Sephiroth woke up. He was half sprawled over Cloud, pinning him down. For a long moment he didn't think of anything, just felt the softness of the sheets, the warmth of Cloud's body, the faint but steady beat of both their hearts. A window was still open; he could feel a slightly humid breeze with the scent of ocean salt and flowers. The room was silent.

Raising himself up on his elbows, he stared down at Cloud. There were no wings, no feathers, just two exhausted men in a room he didn't recognize and a self-awareness he hadn't felt for a long while now. When he sat up, every muscle protested sorely, making him wince and run a tired hand through the tangle of his long hair. There were still red marks down his chest from Cloud's nails and his bottom lip was crusted with a little blood from...one of them, he wasn't really sure whom. Sixteen years old and he'd had thoughts like that sometimes, about Cloud, or at least how he remembered Cloud and the security and the...well. Not love, maybe. But something close to it.

He needed a shower and a damn hairbrush. Standing up was an interesting experience. His balance wavered, nearly sending him through a sliding rice-paper panel. Wait. Paper?

Wutai?

He found his coat neatly folded on top of a beautifully enameled dresser, his boots tucked underneath. He ignored both and pulled on a short, black cotton happi over his leather pants, and with one last glance at Cloud he padded barefoot from the room. As a wordless peace offering, against all his common sense, he left the Masamune behind, and he listened carefully as he wandered down the hallway. He sensed someone, several someones, just before he found the restroom, and with careful casualty he slid the door closed and shucked off his clothes. His mind was scraped raw but his body had taken the chance of two days' rest to heal from the battle with the WEAPON, and the hot water was a miracle balm.

Eventually showered and brushed with a bone comb he'd found on a shelf, he opened the door and found himself staring back at three very stern Wutaian men in military garb.

"General," the one in front, a captain to judge by the colors of his sash, said neutrally. Sephiroth arched a brow silently and allowed himself to be escorted down a second hallway, one man in front and the other two behind, to a wide reception room that was uncomfortably familiar. Godo sat on the far side of a long, low table, and if there weren't any treaties or conditions of surrender on it, the gesture was clear enough. "My only solace from now on will be in the hope that, one day, the great
"General of ShinRa knows what it is like to lose everything he loves," he'd proclaimed, dramatic but painfully sincere. "The hope that he will look to Wutai and see its ravaged country as a mirror to his heart."

"Lord Godo," he acknowledged without inflection.

"ShinRa General Sephiroth." His tone was inscrutable. He very obviously didn't ask Sephiroth to sit down, leaving him standing in the midst of soldiers. "I wonder, General, have you known heartbreak?"

He thought of the last fifteen years of his life. "I thought I had," he said. "I know, now, that it was because I was a child who didn't know better."

The gazes of the general and the emperor met over the bare table for a long, heavy silence. Godo spoke first. "The only reason I have allowed any of you to step foot on my land is for the sake of my daughter. I received a call from one of ShinRa's directors asking me to take you in, and the things he told me were corroborated by my daughter and by our own scientists. If it's true that this Cloud Strife is essential to defeating these WEAPONs, as you call them, then I will show him hospitality.

"But you no longer command an army. The moment you so much as look at one of my people the wrong way, ShinRa General, the Four Gods will destroy you."

Sephiroth nodded once. Godo watched him for a moment longer, then continued, "Your lieutenant is trying to make contact with your capital. You may join him, or you may return to your room."

Restricted movement, then, rather than outright imprisonment. The subjugation rankled something deep inside of Sephiroth, but he just nodded again and didn't fight when he was unceremoniously guided out of the room, told himself he should just be glad that the meeting was so brief.

He was led into another room with a low table on which Zack was sitting, legs crossed, stabbing irritably at a PHS while Nanaki fiddled with a second one. A Wutaian soldier was already standing in one corner of the room with a hand openly resting on the end of a katana.

"This fucking useless thing – "

"Lieutenant?"

" – swear to the gods I will take you out back and shoot you – "

"Zack."

" – and maybe I'll shoot you anyway for making me cuss in front of a superior officer in public. Yes, sir?" Zack saluted.

"At ease."

"Thank you, sir."

"Lieutenant, if I may, I would like a word with you."

Zack eyed him carefully, Sephiroth keeping his face impassive, and he shrugged, tossing the PHS onto the table. He followed the general into the corridor for some semblance of privacy.

"Lieutenant," Sephiroth started, then, "no. Zack. Zack, I wish to apologize to you."
"Uh."

"I would like to say that I'm not normally like this," said Sephiroth formally, "but in truth I've been acting irrational for a very long time. I must apologize for the weight it has placed on your shoulders."

Zack did a rather good impression of a goldfish.

"You have been acting as more of a commander than I. I...do not know the current situation in ShinRa, but if I have retained any power of my rank, I wish to promote you to SOLDIER First."

"No offense, sir, but what the hell? Where did this come from? When?"

"About five minutes ago," Sephiroth admitted, thinking, *When you make a decision, follow through, because you never know when it might be too late, *"but that doesn't make it any less deserved."

"Uh. Does this mean I'd have to get the same mako showers? Because no offense again, sir, but I'd rather stay a Second if that's the case."

"No. And stop calling me 'sir.' And, Zack? Take the time to consider it. You have a choice."

"...I will. And, er. Not to change the subject, but if you're awake, where's Cloud?"

"Still unconscious." Sephiroth said nothing of what had happened between them, physically or mentally, holding the hurt and confusion close inside. "I wish to also apologize for my behavior concerning him."

"Sephiroth, again, no offense, but please stop talking." When Sephiroth twitched hard enough to make the Wutaian soldiers start reaching for weapons, and Zack hurried on, "You don't have to apologize for anything. I know that there are things about you and Angeal and, uh, Genesis that can't be explained to anyone else, and I know that Cloud's at least partly the same way, and I think that whatever's going on is fucked up enough to really mess with you."

But there was a difference between having a reason and having an excuse. There was no right answer but a line had to be drawn somewhere, and Sephiroth had lived too much of his life passively. He hadn't fought Hojo's control, not really, only would've left ShinRa if Genesis or Angeal had asked but never for himself, and now that Cloud was incapacitated there was no one else, save Zack to some extent, that had any real idea of what was going on. He'd won a war but didn't know the first step in the battle to understand himself, and that, that was what Jenova must've promised him in that other lifetime. Another purpose, continued obedience, just more of the same, and while there was comfort in that there also weakness and dishonor.


"Cloud needs medical attention. It was wrong of me to deny him that." Honesty. Practicality. He was good at the latter; he could learn the former. "How long have we been here?"

"This is the third day, now."

"Have you gotten a hold of Reeve?"

"No," Zack growled in frustration, running a hand through his hair and glancing back into the room where Nanaki seemed to be getting nowhere with the phones. "We've gotten through to Cid just fine way over in the hangar, so it's not the PHS, but it's like there's a blackout over Midgar. Tried
calling one of my buddies, Kunsel, but that's not getting through either."

"Is it a WEAPON?"

"Seems most likely, doesn't it? Although how the hell it's managing that, I have no idea." Zack threw his arms in the air, not caring that it made the Wutaian soldiers scowl. "Best I can figure, some of us should stay with Cloud while the rest take the Highwind over to Midgar, see what the hell's going on." When Sephiroth hesitated, Zack grinned lopsidedly. "No one will hold it against you if you stay here."

"There's already a very limited number of people able to deal with this kind of situation."

"Yeah, but if you're there worrying over Cloud, and if Cloud wakes up in gods know what kind of state here, neither of you will be much good for anything."

"And you, Zack?"

"Well, someone's got to do it, right?"


"Sephiroth, you do realize that sending Angeal out to fight right now would turn it into some kind of epic suicide mission of honor, right?"

"I've known the man since I was ten years old, Major. Yes, I know."

"Then what're you…wait, what was that?"

"Field promotion. It seemed appropriate since about two minutes ago, but, of course, that is no reflection on the truth of your merits. And I reiterate that it's contingent on whatever power I still retain."

Zack looked torn between being dazed and about to hit him.

"But in regards to Angeal, whatever may result is his decision, whether he dies slowly doing nothing or in battle doing something useful." Cold. But nevertheless true. "Appeal to his honor, then, or what's left of it. Major."

Though obviously reeling, Zack's lips quirked in a way that shouldn't have been so bitter. "We'll figure it out. Oh, Elena's woken up, turns out that she managed to save some of Hojo's notes. I guess she stuffed them under her jacket before the fire broke out."


"I'm hoping they might have some explanation on how the hell Cloud got to be physically older than me or where the wings – well, I guess you guys have wings too, but still."

"Go see Cloud," Sephiroth half-smiled. "I will stay with this Nanaki."

"I…yeah, all right."

…

*The man was naked.*

He wondered why he wasn't cold; he knew very well what happened to people who didn't dress
properly in icy mountain ranges. He looked down at his own body, disinterestedly examining the way his arms ended with hands, the way his torso tapered down at the waist and went on to two legs. Huh. He remembered some scientists talking about this thing called *evolution*, about how after thousands and thousands of years some of the apes became human (*hydrophobic lipids, mitochondrial symbiosis, alleles, mitosis*), but he couldn't remember where he'd heard them. Wasn't that important anyway.

Was he supposed to have hands? The heavy weight on his back turned out to be two wings. Was he supposed to have wings?

He could hear the stars singing. He could hear the discordant notes underneath the harmony, just a few little mistakes but soon they'd start to add up. Human souls whispered, but the stars were singing.

There was something he was supposed to do. Something about the number three. *He* was number four, but what were the other three? Three what?

Family, said a voice – though less a voice and more a series of images and impressions – as deep and old as the icy mountains. Packmates. The animal instinct to protect one's own.

Oh. That made sense. Somehow. He wondered what his name was. Wasn't he just talking to someone? Someone who had two hands and two legs too?

*WEAPON*, said the deep voice. The swiftness of a bird's flight.

That…didn't feel right. Didn't make sense the way *packmate* did. The man didn't think he wanted to be a *WEAPON*.

The relativity of events.

Can I go back to my packmates? the man asked.

No.

Well, thought the man, that's not very nice. Please?

The deep voice's timbre dropped a few levels, which made the nearest stars a little nervous. The relativity of events. Catastrophe. Genocide. Death.

You know what's going to happen before it happens? That's interesting, said the man, even though he wasn't really sure what *time* was or why different entities all understood it in a different way. He remembered someone saying that *time* was linear, but the deep voice seemed to disagree, said that *time* was like a big circle with a bunch of little circles in the middle. Little lives like humans wolves monkeys insects monsters plants trees didn't know that. Only the stars, and only the planets, could see *time* like it really was.

Am I a planet too, then? asked the man.

No. *WEAPON*.

I don't like the sound of that.


The man thought hard. So if I'm not a *WEAPON*, then my packmates will die?
Yes.

But the pain never goes away. Never ever ever stops.

The deep voice understood pain. It had felt it in every living thing that crawled over its surface, had felt it when machines bored into its flesh to bleed it out. Souls, it said. Transcending the physical body. Lifestream.

So if I'm a WEAPON, does that mean I could join the Lifestream too?

No answer.

What happens if I say no?

A barrage of images struck the man in painfully vivid color and earsplitting sound. He saw a woman die with a sword through her back, another man slaughtered by gunfire, a third dead by his own sword not once but three times. He saw the dead come back to half-life and the sky turn into fire.

…Are they worth it? he asked, voice cracking.

Animal instinct. The attraction between mates. The protectiveness of an alpha over its pack. The drive to keep living when death would've been easier.

Then I choose life.

Who am I?

Cloud.

…

After the bruises and abrasions that hadn't yet healed were taken care of, Aeris went to visit with a Wutaian healer while Zack sat on the edge of the bed and stared at Cloud.

"You're one hell of a force of nature, kiddo, you know that?" He ran a hand through yellow bangs, amused despite himself at the way the spikes sprang back into place. Kicking off his boots, Zack scooted back on the bed and lay down on his side, facing Cloud, wondering how he could look like he was really just sleeping after…all that. If Zack let his mind wander, he thought he could feel a soft humming, as though he could literally hear Cloud dreaming, and if he could hear that, what must've it been like for Sephiroth?

"When this is over, you and me and Sephiroth and Aeris are going to sit on the sofa with ice cream, and I'll make you guys watch the worst movies ever," he whispered, didn't know he was echoing Aeris. "Sephiroth'll get that forced stoic look and you'll probably hit me with something, but it'll be okay."

He could see the slightest glow from behind Cloud's eyelids. He listened to the sound of a fountain from some garden outside, the quiet murmur of female voices, Cloud's slow, nearly inaudible breathing. The anxiety was still a little too strong for him to relax, kept thinking, I need to talk to Angeal, need to talk to Elena, need to know what's going on in Midgar, need Sephiroth's help to figure out what Hojo did. He picked up Cloud's right hand idly, stroking a thumb over the circular scar left by the teeth of a wolf pup, and muttered, "See, if Sephiroth had gotten that Chocobo Lure materia like I told him to, it wouldn't have taken us so long to find you."
Cloud didn't wake up to scowl at him indigantly.

"I swear, you need a keeper. I should get Sephiroth to tie you down. Which might be rather awkward, actually, unless you're into that. Though I can't imagine you or Sephiroth being into the whole restriction thing, and wow I'm glad you're not awake to hear me."

Cloud opened his eyes and Zack felt the breath freeze in his lungs as Cloud stared back at him, blinking slow and owlishly. Zack distantly realized he was gripping Cloud's hand hard enough to break the bones and had to consciously make himself relax. Cloud looked down at their joined hands, then back up to continue staring, apparently unbothered by the hair falling over his face. After a moment, he pulled back his hand and curled his fists under his chin.

"You look like hell," Zack whispered, grinning like a loon but hardly caring. Cloud's eyes tracked the movement of his lips like someone faced with a strange language. He did look like hell, wan and strained, stretched thin, and the now-older face had new lines of stress and worry etched into its features. "Blink once for yes, twice for no?"

Cloud just kept staring, and yeah, he was awake now, but Zack was realizing that the kid wasn't awake. Just…there, like a wary animal waiting for someone to make the first move.

"What do I do now, Cloud?" He slowly reached up to stroke Cloud's hair, watching how he got another slow blink and a head tilting away from his touch. "It's been three days and none of us know what to do."

Zack rather wished Hojo was still alive so that he could take his time killing the asshole all over again. Cloud's eyes had always had that faint shine of mako, but now they glowed as brilliantly as Sephiroth's, the pupils nearly swallowed up by blue-green. Experimentally Zack reached out again, and sure enough Cloud drew his arms closer to his body. "All right, no touching, got it. I'll just keep talking until you tell me to shut up then."

Cloud was watching the movement of his lips again, and while it was somewhat creepy, it was also…sad. There wasn't even any madness in his features, just a frightening sort of blankness as though he were waiting for someone to come along and give him a personality.

"We've all been worried out of our minds. Well, we still are, but hey, at least you're awake now, right?" Zack had to suppress the urge to reach out and reassure himself that Cloud was there, that they'd gotten him out and that there was some hope of reversing the damage done to him. "Elena's awake too. I hear she's been terrorizing the servants in this place." Don't tell him about the deaths.

"...Zack?"

The whisper nearly made Zack start crying with relief. "Yeah, kiddo, it's me."

Cloud reached out very, very slowly, obviously prepared to jerk back if there were any sudden moves, and touched his face. He seemed to be familiarizing himself with human features, tracing the curve of brows and nose, the dips at the edge of eyes and cheekbones. Zack couldn't help a wry, "I know I'm handsome, but seriously."

Apparently touch was all right if Cloud was the one initiating it as he carefully took Zack's hand. He examined it closely, poking at the lines on the palm and tugging gently on fingers, seemingly fascinated by all the little motions of tendon and muscle. Bemused, Zack held himself still and tried not to yelp with laughter when Cloud managed to prod him in the ribs. When he appeared content that Zack was indeed Zack and not some alien replacement, Cloud unceremoniously curled
up against his chest and went back to sleep.

"All right, then," Zack huffed.

...

Three days ago, the same night that the *Highwind* took off for Nibelheim:

Elfé finished wiping down the last table in *Seventh Heaven* and dropped the cleaning supplies back into the bucket under the counter. All the glasses were cleaned, the bottles straightened, the cash register emptied and the money safely stowed away. She paused to look around the empty bar, at the weak sunlight that came in through the vaguely-less-grimy-than-usual windows to light up the scuffed floor, and nodded to herself.

Her father was in one of the tiny bedrooms situated over the bar itself, sitting on a desk chair and cleaning the barrels of his pistols with familiar ease. The light of the desk lamp picked out the silver in his brown hair and shadowed the deep lines in his face.

"I'm finished," said Elfé, pausing in the doorway, and Veld glanced at her.

"We'll leave tomorrow morning, Elfé. Together."

"Yes, Father."

Veld knew she was lying. His daughter – beautiful, sharp as a dagger and just as dangerous – was too jaded from her time with AVALANCHE, from the Turks that had hunted them all and Rufus ShinRa's machinations, to think she didn't have to work alone. She was wearing the expression of a warrior already prepared for battle, whatever its outcome might be, and it made him wish that he had the power to go back and change things. To make it so that Elfé hadn't grown up with people who saw her as something to be used.

On impulse he set aside his firearms and stood up to pull her into a hug. She tensed in surprise, then relaxed.

Later, it was only Veld's Turk training that let him hear Elfé slip out of her room just before dawn. He lay on his back, old and useless and left behind.

Elfé could hear an airship taking off overhead as she walked out of Midgar through the large gates, leaving several unconscious guards behind her. A hand was curled loosely over the hilt of the katana at her side as she strode unhurriedly out towards the silhouette lumbering closer to the city, her other hand beginning to ache where a hard lump of materia was still grafted under the skin.

At the rate it was moving, Diamond WEAPON wouldn't reach the city for another few hours. Elfé sat on a boulder to wait, absently cracking her knuckles, the fragment of the Zirconiaie Summons making the tendons of her hand feel hot. As the time ticked past and the WEAPON came closer, she realized just how enormous it was, pearly white as the inside of a seashell, glittering in the sun, as broad and solid as a granite mountainside.

"There are rumors that when the Calamity first fell, the Planet created these warriors to defend itself," one of AVALANCHE's scientists had told her. "When the Cetra managed to contain Her, the Planet put the WEAPONs to sleep, keeping them until they would be needed against another global threat."

"What are they made of?" she'd asked.
"Anger. Self-preservation. They're forces of nature, Elfé. They have no other purpose but to protect the Planet at all costs."

"Can they be convinced to protect something else? If we could get one on AVALANCHE's side…"

"Don't be ridiculous."

Elfé half-closed her eyes and leaned back on her hands, breathing in the dry air of the plains already warm from the sun. She regretted having lied to her father, but she wasn't under any illusions; she would take down the Diamond WEAPON, but she wouldn't be walking away from the battlefield. No parent should ever have to see their child die.

…

Rufus was having something of a bad day.

It had started out well enough. When Tseng had informed him of his father's assassination, it had been a little sooner than expected, but nothing to truly worry about. He'd immediately ordered silence on the matter and, as planned, sent Tseng away with his orders before holding a meeting with the department heads. Heidegger, Palmer, and Scarlet vied for 'most grief-stricken and sympathetic.' Reeve was blinking in mute surprise, and Lazard…Lazard looked introspective.

"And you say it was Sephiroth who did this?" Palmer demanded, canting a sly look at Lazard.

"The wound that killed the late President was almost certainly delivered by the Masamune," Rufus said calmly, "although in these troubled times we cannot rule out an impostor."

"If you'll forgive my saying, sir, how does one fake being General Sephiroth?"

A fair point, Rufus admitted to himself. "My father was unable to find a viable solution concerning the rebel problem before his death, and so it's not inconceivable that these same rebels may be responsible."

"These people are nothing," Heidegger snorted. "Thieves and homeless, not to mention the Wutaian! Vice President, expecting them to have the organization necessary for something like this is like expecting the rats to start studying the scientists."

Predictably Reeve's lips thinned, but Rufus was the only one to notice. He said mildly, "But even rats can spread the disease that kills the scientists. It would be best, therefore, to hold my inauguration as soon as possible, to make this transition smooth and prevent further unrest."

And how satisfying it was to see the expressions on Palmer, Heidegger, and Scarlet's faces, the three who had the most to lose, particularly the two men, both of whom had been woefully unsubtle in their bids for the Presidency these last few years. It was embarrassing, their utter lack of political acumen.

"Holding the inauguration in Midgar would only be begging for another assassination," said Reeve, rather dryly. "Junon may be a better choice."

"Yes," Heidegger jumped in, "the dangers alone – perhaps it would be better to wait – what of Sephiroth, after all? It might attract his attention – "

"If General Sephiroth had meant to kill me, Heidegger, then I imagine I would've been dead before I ever realized there was a threat."
"Nevertheless, it may be safer to elect someone less important. Let him take the office as bait for any assassins, just long enough for the danger to pass, of course – "

"And would you elect yourself for the job, Heidegger?" Rufus purred.

"I have only your best interests in mind, Vice President," Heidegger replied stiffly. Rufus felt like the contented cat watching its prey struggle. Now, perhaps, he might be able to build Midgar into what it should've been all along: a true city of technology and progression, with the people both above and below the Plate elevated to a more equal status to demonstrate Rufus' benevolence. It was better to rule with the awe and worship of subjects rather than with the fear and resentment of his father. Midgar would become the next City of the Ancients with the loyalty of his Turks, the debt of AVALANCHE behind him, and the adoration of the populace.

"It seems to me that we're not looking at the true culprit. What do you have to say, SOLDIER Director?" asked Scarlet sweetly.

"Sephiroth's loyalty isn't something that can be bought. If it wasn't given to ShinRa all these years, then there's nothing anyone could've done," Lazard replied simply.

"That may be right, but you never heard a whisper? Never once suspected that Sephiroth would turn on us like this? It's enough to make one wonder what exactly goes on in your department, Director."

Despite being accused of what amounted to treason, Lazard looked entirely calm; this meant either that he'd expected this attack and had already planned for it or he had some other plan entirely, and Rufus wasn't sure which. "If you wish, I'll convene another meeting for Sephiroth's return. Currently he's in Mideel taking care of one of the WEAPONs."

"Sephiroth's distraction is another reason for us to go forward," Rufus said. "Scarlet, Reeve, I would like you two to evaluate Junon as the site of my inauguration – space, population, the works. Heidegger, Palmer, you will take care of security, I presume? After all, you are the directors of the Turks and the peacekeeping forces and so are most well-suited to such an important task."

Reeve and Scarlet agreed, as did Palmer, though not without obvious ill grace. Heidegger opened his mouth and Rufus gave him a lazy look, daring him to say something, and the man backed down. "Of course, Vice President."

The meeting went on well into the morning. Security for Rufus' inauguration was discussed, as well as the situation under the Plate.

"Some of the supply warehouses in Sector Two have been raided," Reeve reported. "Troopers and a number of SOLDIERs have been dispatched to the area, but I'm honestly not sure how much good that'll do."

"Surely you're not suggesting that a bunch of refugees can take on SOLDIERs?" Scarlet sneered.

"Not directly, but these people have fought a war."

"And lost."

"And have nothing else to lose," Reeve finished determinedly. "They managed to get the drop on a talented Turk, too. These are not people to be underestimated."

"What would you suggest?" Rufus asked, honestly curious. Reeve Tuesti wasn't known for speaking up at directors' meetings, after all, and the Turks had never been able to figure out the
man's true ambitions under that placid exterior.

"Diplomacy," was the immediate answer. "ShinRa needs to demonstrate its goodwill if it's to retain any sort of power. The only thing keeping the company safe is the people's reliance on mako energy, but I have no doubt that they've already begun looking for alternative resources. The presence of SOLDIERs in the wake of the earthquakes is the sort of thing the company should continue – food, makeshift shelters, all the medical personnel we can spare. Jobs can be provided through reconstruction, which would benefit both ShinRa and the people."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you have a certain fondness for these people," Palmer laughed, but his beady eyes were sharp.

"There's a kernel of common sense in what he's saying," Rufus said in a rather dry voice.

"The SOLDIERs –"

"Aren't immortal, for all of their power," Lazard interrupted quietly. "Their numbers aren't that great, particularly after the war in Wutai, and especially compared to the populations both above and below the Plate. If the riots became enough to stir more people, it's entirely possible that this Tower can be overrun, and with enormous casualties on both sides."

"Where the hell did all this come from?" Palmer demanded, turning to Heidegger. "You're in charge of the army, how long were you sleeping with your mistress for this to happen?"

"There's no sense in turning on one another." Although, in less serious circumstances, Rufus thought it had the potential to be rather entertaining. "The fact remains that the people's discontent has reached our front doors at the same time the company has lost all three of its generals and its long-term President. Thank you, Father, for leaving me to clean up your ineptitude.

And so it went, a line in the sand being drawn with Reeve and Lazard on one side and Palmer, Heidegger, and Scarlet on the other. Rufus sat back in neutral territory, watching for the telltale verbal slips and subtle expressions, playing devil's advocate to both.

Around midmorning, the ground beneath their feet rocked with sudden force. Scarlet and Palmer both shrieked as they tumbled to the floor while Reeve sprawled across the conference table. Rufus waited on the floor with a pounding heart for the rolling earth to stop.

"Sir," Reeve started shakily, "I should go to my office, there's something I must check."

After the last earthquakes, seismographs had been set up in the Urban Planning department. "Of course," he panted, "we must discern the real cause of these quakes."

Reeve shot him a suspicious look, but he left as quickly as he could on shaky legs. As soon as he was back in his chair, Rufus was barking, "Palmer, Heidegger, go find the commanders of the Regular army, organize a force to assist the one already under the Plate. Scarlet, evaluate the integrity of the Tower with whatever tools you have in your department, the last thing we need is it collapsing under our feet." After all, it wasn't like Midgar had had to consider earthquakes in their construction plans before.

"Lazard, I want you to –"

"Actually, Vice President, I have an urgent matter to discuss with you concerning SOLDIER."

A few seconds passed before Rufus nodded. "Of course. The rest of you are dismissed."
Not the most politically smooth of phrases, but it got the other three out quickly enough, leaving him with Lazard sitting across the enormous conference table in front. Rufus leaned forward, taking a moment to shrug off the burst of adrenaline and pulling nonchalance around himself like armor. "Go ahead, Director."

"I'm sorry, little brother," Lazard smiled sadly, "but I can't allow you to continue."

Straight to the point, wasn't he. "…Indeed. Perhaps I was wrong in thinking that Heidegger wanted the presidency the most," but Lazard just shook his head.

"I'd sooner leave the company than accept such a position. It was bittersweet enough to have reached what I have. Royal enough for this position, but not enough to be acknowledged." It must've been a dilemma for the elder ShinRa, not wanting to keep this bastard son but unable to forget that said bastard carried the same blood.

So, yes, Rufus' day was starting to develop that distinct 'should've stayed in bed' feeling. "I wasn't aware that your illegitimacy fell under the heading of 'SOLDIER.' Remind me to review the department guidelines later."

Lazard laughed under his breath before sobering. "The sacrifices being made in our name are too many. I know you've heard that SOLDIER Second Zack Fair was sent to Banora to investigate Genesis' disappearance with Tseng. I intended to promote him to First Class on his return, knowing full well that it would make him a target to both Hojo and Hollander."

"Obviously, you chose not to."

"No. And then he called me just after the earthquakes began. He was in the slums, Rufus, doing what ShinRa should have been doing since its inception."

"Your passion for the people below the Plate is commendable."

"You haven't seen what's been going on below our feet. There were riots. Twenty people are dead, several of them ShinRa troopers, and many more casualties. The recent earthquakes have killed many more and cut off some of the supply lines to the sectors. While I was down there with the SOLDIERs, the children..." Lazard paused. "Even if you don't want to believe what groups like AVALANCHE are saying about the Lifestream, not even you can deny how much ShinRa has poisoned its own people."

"And what do you plan to do to fix that? Install a board of Wutaians and anarchists? The system is too rooted into people's way of life. The only thing that will change in your revolution is the names. There has to be a change in people's belief, Lazard, and that takes time. But convince me. Tell me about your grand plan. Tell me how you will usher in this new idealistic era."

"Rufus, you tell yourself that you're going to be the benevolent ruler. A president for the people, whose worship will give you the power you want. You're good at making people believe what you want them to, but ShinRa – it has to stop. It's possible I'll achieve nothing, but it's just as possible that these people will all step up to the plate and make the Planet into something truly magnificent."

The sense of foreboding was getting stronger. Rufus kept his face impassive as he let a hand drop, surreptitiously sliding it over the handle of the pistol hidden under his coat. "And what, exactly, do you plan to do?"

In response Lazard drew out a small black cube of plastic and held it delicately between his fingers,
as though examining an interesting new piece of technology. "Symbols are powerful things, Rufus. Wutai lasted until the standard of Leviathan fell. ShinRa is no different."

And things had been going so well thus far, Rufus sighed to himself fatalistically. He was developing a pretty good idea of what the man was intending with that innocent little remote; obviously Lazard had felt the need for understanding, for explaining his motives, or else he would've just followed through while all the directors were still distracted with one another. A courtesy because of their shared blood, perhaps, or maybe he was just that sentimental. "A new generation is new hope, Lazard. I'm not your father."

"No, you're not, which is why I truly regret doing this to you."

Just as Lazard pressed the button on the remote, Rufus whipped out the pistol and fired several shots in quick succession. The bullets slammed into Lazard's chest, knocking him sideways in his chair and sending blood arcing across the table, but Rufus could already feel the tremors under his feet, not the shuddering of earthquakes but the deafening, jerking wrench of explosives. Sixty floors.

His last thought was desperate gratitude that his Turks had all been sent away.

…

One theory holds that when a timeline is altered, it will attempt to return to its original course. If a wife dies in a car accident and her husband tries to prevent it, then the self-correction of time means that, albeit in different ways, the wife will always die. Another theory claims that if someone goes back in time, then their actions in the past will have already been accounted for and in fact be an integral influence in the same future from which the person came. There are a hundred thousand other theories, but whichever one turns out to be true in the end, it seems that there will always be certain key events that happen no matter which alternate universe is created, no matter how many times someone goes back to change things. For example:

Veld was sitting alone at one of the tables in the bar, turning an empty pint glass around in his hands, when he felt the ground shake. After he was able to stand, he dashed outside with his heart in his throat (the WEAPON survived, it's here, Elfé's gone) and found Sector Seven in utter chaos. Grabbing the arms of the two nearest people, he demanded, "What's going on? Is it another quake?"

"The ShinRa Tower...the Sector reactor, it's having a meltdown..."

"A WEAPON fell – "

"The Plate's starting to collapse!"
After the dust settled, the world was quiet.

"How the fuck did we get dragged into this, yo," Reno muttered after he hung up on the phone. "Who did we assassinate in a past life?"

"Your mother," Rude deadpanned.

Reno snorted as he tapped his electromag against his shoulder. "Rufus is dead," he said bluntly. "Just about everyone except Scarlet and Reeve. Reeve said that Scarlet managed to rig up a broadcasting tower to replace the ones that got destroyed."

Where was Tseng when you needed the bastard? When Rufus had sent him and Rude out to the slums with the SOLDIERs on a 'diplomacy' mission, he hadn't expected to be the one participating in the diplomacy. Reno wasn't made for this shit, he was all about the *wham, bam, thank you, ma'am*, get out as soon as possible once the business was done. And hey, he knew better than to take shit like kidnapping and interrogation personally, but he wouldn't be inclined to say 'no' to putting a fist in the Crescent commander's face.

Unfortunately he'd never get the chance to tell Rufus exactly how fucking stupid he was for sending Reno on this particular mission, and Reno was very carefully not thinking about that too hard. Rufus had always seemed larger than life, almost freakin' immortal on some level, and yeah, *not thinking about it*.

"Time to face the music, partner," he sighed, and walked back over to the group of people standing in one of the emergency shelters. He landed himself in the middle of an argument, same one that'd been going on for years. Same song, different verse.

*You slant-eyed sons of bitches*, the Midgarians would snarl.

*Is that all you have to say – why don't you ever take responsibility for the imperialism of your government*, the Wutaians would demand.

*We were already struggling to survive before you refugees got here – we were just as much beaten down by a dictator and his armies*, the Midgarians would cry.

And the Wutaians would hiss, *How could you let it get to this point?*

"Yo, people!" Reno shouted. "Get your shit together, this ain't the time to be hashing this out!"

"What would a Turk know?" someone demanded, not sure who, and really, Reno had had a *long*
"Fine, y'all stand here spitting names at each other, see if I give a fuck. Or you can remember that the fucking Plate just destroyed Sector Seven, killed a shitload of people, and if you don't get your asses in gear then we're gonna run into some real problems. For starters, I hear having dead people lying around in your backyard ain't exactly good for your kids' health."

...  

It was early in the morning of their fourth day in Wutai. Aeris settled herself on the bed with a reassuring smile at Cloud, who had wrapped his arms around his legs defensively and was watching her carefully. He'd woken up again just a few hours after Zack had been dragged away from his side, though it had taken all of Aeris' persuasion to make the SOLDIER leave. Someone needs to be there when Sephiroth starts going through Hojo's information, she'd told him gently. I'll see if there's anything I can do for Cloud, even though she'd failed to help Genesis and couldn't do anything for Angeal or even Sephiroth.

So Aeris mustered up all of her stubbornness and now sat at the foot of the bed, Cloud still wrapped tightly in a sheet, her hands safely in her lap.

"I was talking with Zack," she said lightly. "He said you didn't like anyone else touching you, so I won't unless you want me to, all right? I won't pretend to know what's going on, Cloud. I don't think I'm a very good Ancient. But still...we're all here for you when you're ready."

He was watching her sidelong through his bangs, glancing between her face and open hands. Aeris closed her eyes, tilted her head slightly to catch the vague whispers that were always waiting for someone to listen.

WEAPON, said the Planet, and Aeris was really starting to get sick of that damn word, but she turned her face towards the presence immediately in front of her. At first she was afraid she was going to find that horrible nothingness that had been Cloud's mind in Nibelheim, but instead she heard something deep and quiet like the low rumble of thunder.

Fear, Aeris recognized, an emotion that sounded staccato and tasted sour in the back of her throat. And it was deep, like the gnarled roots of a tree, and decades old, so old that the original causes of it were long gone and was as much a part of Cloud as anything else. Alongside that was the presence of the Planet, and the way she could hear its influence inside of Cloud was frightening. No human was meant to be so close to the Lifestream, not when it had a tendency to wear away at a person's sense of self.

"The Planet was trying to make you into something inhuman, wasn't it?" she whispered. Cloud shifted, his eyes now flickering between the far wall and the materia tied into her hair ribbon.

Slowly, Aeris held out her hands with the palms up and her fingers relaxed into natural curves. She was wearing the soft red yukata with the cherry blossom print again, trying to make herself appear as unthreatening as possible. Perhaps it worked because, although Cloud was closely watching her every move, he didn't flinch.

"You know, I was thinking about the things a few people say about you and Sephiroth. I've heard them say that you two aren't anything more than superior officer and cadet, and Elena's pretty convinced you two are meant to be together. Zack's got so many theories I think his head's going to explode. But has anyone actually asked you, Cloud? What do you want?"

She waited as he finally met her gaze, startlingly self-aware.
"I don't...know," he said slowly and carefully, testing out the syllables as they passed his lips.

"Is there anything you know you don't want?"

The lights in the room flickered. His eyes widened and suddenly the fear doubled, tripled, until Aeris tasted real bile in the back of her throat. Gagging slightly, she managed, "It's okay, Cloud, you don't have to answer. You don't even have to think about it. I can tell you about my flowers instead, if you want." She cast about for something to say. "Sometimes I'm glad Midgar is pretty temperate, otherwise it'd be too cold now for them to bloom. The insides of their petals are almost as yellow as your hair, but don't tell Zack I said that, he'd make fun of us both and he doesn't need any more excuses for that."

She was able to swallow the bile in her throat, the terror no longer so overwhelming. Cloud slowly uncurled, shifted forward a little, watched her face from the corner of his eye as she talked about whatever came into her head, and hey, remember that day they all made apple pie? Elmyra thought he was a darling, of course, and Zack had managed to get the sticky mix of sugar and beaten eggs streaked in Cloud's hair.

"I totally didn't do that," Zack interrupted from the doorway. "You telling lies about me, babe?"

"Hardly lies, you giant child," she said as Sephiroth appeared behind Zack's shoulder. Both of their faces were drawn, Sephiroth's body visibly tense, but at least he'd put away his wing and the Masamune remained in the temporary sword rack on the wall.

Zack sat on the edge of the bed beside Aeris. Sephiroth hovered indecisively before leaning up against the wall, arms crossed, and all three were looking at Cloud. He had his face turned down and was picking at the sheet restlessly.

"We've decided that Sephiroth should stay here with Cloud," Zack said quietly to Aeris. "I'm going to go with the Highwind back to Midgar and hopefully convince Angeal to come. If there's a WEAPON going on a rampage, there aren't many people who can stop it."

When she didn't respond, he continued, "Aeris, will you stay here with Sephiroth and Cloud?"

"I don't know if I can help," she admitted softly, looking down at her hands twisting in her lap. "I couldn't help Genesis, and...I don't know."

Zack reached over and put his hand on hers. "Babe, not even Hojo or Hollander knew how to fix him. It was a shot in the dark, that's all. But this, now, this isn't like that."

"He's right. Genesis' own genetics were working against him. That isn't the case with Cloud." Sephiroth's voice was rather flat, distracted. His gaze kept returning to Cloud and Aeris wasn't sure she'd be able to understand everything in that expression if she had a lifetime to do it.

"Will you try?" said Zack.

"Don't be silly, of course I will." She slipped a hand out from under his and lightly smacked him on the shoulder. "But I didn't want you to get your hopes up too high."

"Aeris, babe, you pretty much exceed all my expectations."

Cloud, meanwhile, could sense the other three in the room with him, he could feel their warmth from halfway across the room and hear their breath and the beating of their hearts, more familiar than his own body. There was a memory tugging at him, are they worth it, but the question had become as nonsensical as wondering if there was such a thing as fate.
But the soul-deep sense of *rightness* that came from having them nearby warred with the instinct of his body to either lash out or crawl away. His body felt like a too-small prison with bars made of fear and violation. When Zack reached out to him he was torn between craving that touch and abhorring it, unable to help remembering the tools that had ripped him open, or hands streaked with blood and rain on a clifftop. When Aeris spoke, he could only hear the Planet and know that he was as much a puppet now as he'd been under Jenova-Sephiroth. And when Sephiroth looked at him with visible pain and guilt, Cloud looked inside himself and saw someone too twisted up to be a *person* in any sense of the word.

He was disconnected from reality, out of his mind and probably everything else too, as though he were back and bodiless in the Lifestream while the Planet reshaped him. He was in his mother's fantastic, unrealistic stories, he was in a mako tank while Zack talked and talked to keep him from fading away, he was watching himself follow Jenova-Sephiroth around the world like a dog on a leash, he still heard Jenova's voice and it almost sounded like his own.

**WEAPON.** The word sounded strange coming out Zack's mouth, wasn't something that Zack should ever have to face. Cloud pressed his face against the bars trapping him in his head and managed a faint, "Zack."

Immediately their voices went silent. It was jarring. Nearly made him panic because that kind of suddenness only happened when someone passed out from agony. "The WEAPON, you can't..." He shook his head. Kept getting distracted by all the green-tainted voices, and possibly also the stars singing around the Planet, and the syllables, they kept skittering out of his reach like insects. "They're too big, too...powerful. You need another one."

"Another what, Cloud?" Aeris asked gently when he stopped, but he was busy tracing one of the mostly-healed scars on the inside of his left forearm. It was where the tendons had been severed and then reconnected differently to see how his motor skills changed, the mako managing to seal hard tissue that didn't normally heal well.


There was silence again but he was expecting it this time, so it didn't really bother him. Sephiroth inhaled sharply, grabbing Aeris and Zack's attention. He was watching Cloud lean forward again, hiding his face in his knees. "He means another WEAPON."

"What, you're saying *him*?" Zack said incredulously. "Uh, Sephiroth, sir, I don't mean to point out the obvious, but he's like five and a half feet tall and a good breeze would probably knock him over at this point."

"No, it makes sense. The earthquakes, the sudden appearance of the Planet's guardians. Why Aeris thought he might've been a Cetra as well. I'm beginning to believe that this is what the Planet was intending him to be."

The intensity of Sephiroth's voice was making Zack uneasy. There was something still *off* about him and Zack couldn't wrap his head around the idea. Weird Lifestream reincarnations and a future that only happened for a single person, okay, he could accept that with a little time (ha), but. *This?*

"I was able to kill the first WEAPON, but we don't know how strong each successive one will be. We don't even know how many there will be, and there are too few of us."

"You're suggesting we take Cloud to Midgar and throw him at one of these things?" Zack demanded, barely noticing Aeris laying a hand on his arm. "Have you *seen* him lately?"
Sephiroth's wing snapped out with a whip-like crack. Zack held his gaze, unwilling to back down, but then Cloud was sliding off the bed to his feet. He was shirtless, only wearing a pair of linen pants donated by the servants, and he padded over to Sephiroth to slide his arms around the man's waist.

Sephiroth looked about as shocked as Zack felt. He stood there with his arms held out awkwardly to his sides, afraid to touch. Despite his face being pressed against Sephiroth's collarbones Cloud looked less like he was embracing and more just tilted against him, like a rolled-up carpet tipped against a wall, and a stressed-out Zack shouldn't be finding that as entertaining as he was.

"Zack, why don't you and I go talk outside," said Aeris, standing up and gently pulling Zack with her. He followed her wordlessly, leaving Sephiroth and Cloud leaning against the wall. Sephiroth looked down as best he could with spiky hair getting in his face.

"...Ah."

"It's hard," Cloud mouthed into his skin. "I'm not...right. I'm trying, but...I can't promise anything."

It was painful to hear Cloud struggling for words, tripping over them like a blind man trying to find his way through a stranger's cluttered room. Sephiroth thought of the voices he'd heard before, was only just now fully realizing that they'd all come from Cloud himself, and then Cloud was lifting his head and putting a hand on the back of Sephiroth's neck to pull him down. He pressed their foreheads together, noses bumping lightly, and something cool like water was slipping up Sephiroth's spine. It seeped into his mind and blossomed into an orchestra of sound, each voice a different instrument and the Planet itself the low, droning conductor underneath it all. It made him feel simultaneously very small and yet a part of something much bigger, and it would be so easy to let go and drift in all those shades of green, to just...let go. Sephiroth wondered if Cloud had been hearing this the whole time or if Hojo (dear gods the things that had been on those discs, those papers) had broken something inside of him, but the thought was pushed away by

\textit{i am a weapon}

\textit{protect zack, cannot go alone}

except the words weren't poisoned, didn't feel like sin sliding through the tissue of Sephiroth's brain but more like a gentle trickle of cool water. On the one hand he had a very real, living body against his own, but on the other he was looking into mako eyes and hearing something too vast and ancient to be human. He didn't realize that his wing had disappeared again or that the stress in his shoulders had smoothed out, and he felt his body slowly loosening.

It made Sephiroth feel very small, but also...hopeful.

Vincent had once asked Cloud about the Wutaian Rebellion and Cloud had replied, puzzled, "What rebellion?"

So Vincent had thought about what might be different, what might've kept people oppressed in one timeline and what may have inspired them in another. It seemed a special brand of racist hubris to think his own presence might've meant so much. \textit{"It's amazing how the smallest things can make such a difference, isn't it?"} Aeris had once said to him.

"I'm not a philosopher or anything. That was always Sephiroth's job," Cloud had said with a small smile that quickly faded. "I don't know why this happened. But does it really matter? I don't think
we have to be 'fated' to do anything. Hojo would've left me for dead a long time ago if that was the case. And the Planet may have brought me back, but I'm doing this my own way, for my own reasons. Not because of fate."

Vincent felt like he stood on the edge of such a precipice. Hojo was dead. The labs were irrevocably destroyed. Every year he'd spent punishing himself in the crypt, every dream he'd had of vengeance, had culminated in him standing on the edge of what had once been a small mountain town that was now a second Mideel. Worse than that, because there was no living thing left, just mako and its acrid stench stretching across the valley.

Being naked, it was also rather cold.

It took him two days to follow the road through the mountains to Rocket Town, traveling mostly as the Galian Beast. On the second day he arrived, not long after dawn, he caused a bit of a stir being naked and looking like hell and thereby earning the cooing concern of practically every matronly woman in the place. By the time he managed to fight his way free of the smothering it was nearly evening, but the inn owners were kind enough to let him borrow a PHS.

Reeve's line brought static, as did any other Midgar number. Cid finally answered.

"This had better be good," the pilot snarled down the connection, and for the first time since leaving Midgar a faint smile curved Vincent's lips.

"This is Vincent, Cid."

Swearing. Apparently he'd dropped his cigarette. "About fucking time! What the hell happened?"

"Hojo's dead," he said without thinking, then shook his head at himself. His voice was still rough from smoke. "I stayed long enough to make sure Zangan got Tifa out. I'm...not sure what happened after that." No doubt CHAOS had helped some of the destruction along. "As far as I know, the two of them are still alive. I'm in Rocket Town."

"Lucky bastard, we're way the fuck over in Wutai. I don't know what Reeve was thinking, there ain't no love lost between us and them and it's a damn miracle they haven't tried to slit our throats yet."

Wutai? Well, perhaps that wasn't so bad a choice, given the country was about as far from Midgar as one could go and that ShinRa's hold on it was still unstable. "I cannot get a hold of anyone in Midgar."

"Neither can we," Cid growled irritably. "We're flying blind over here."

"I'll see if there are any ships still leaving from Costa del Sol. I will contact you as soon as I'm able from Midgar."

"If you see him, tell Reeve he owes me a huge fucking ship overhaul. I'm getting too old for this shit."

It took another two days to get to Costa del Sol. Vincent crept onto the ship leaving soonest and all but passed out in the cargo hold, slept there in the dark and the chill until he heard the calls for Junon approaching long hours later. Surprised, he watched Junon's harbor approaching over the horizon and wondered how a ship bound for Midgar had ended up here. Muscles practically petrified into rock, he managed to get onto the dock without falling over or being seen and crept into a dim alley. He took the moment to get his bearings and stretch out the stiffness.
It seemed all trains, ships, and other transports to Midgar had been shut down and the rumors were unbelievable. *All those earthquakes, not just in Midgar, must've been the reason the Plate fell. No, there was an explosion, ShinRa was attacked. A WEAPON was killed just outside the city, no one knows how. Those monsters, those things, what are we going to do? Oh god, what if they come for us?*

In the end Vincent paid a man with filched money to take him over the mountains to Midgar, wryly remembering a young boy named Maddox and telling him not to steal unless Vincent was unable to help him. The man was gruff but willing, and Vincent, less intimidating than usual in slacks and a shirt under his cloak, brooded in the passenger seat of the tumble-down truck. When they passed a heap of pearly-white armor hundreds of feet high the man refused to go any farther and left Vincent a few miles outside the city.

He stood in the dirt and stared at the fallen WEAPON. Looked at the small, battered human body crumpled at some distance before turning away.

The Sector Seven gates were unguarded and wide open and Vincent walked into eerie stillness. The sector had been utterly demolished, brightly lit by the sky revealed from a large section of the Plate crashing down. It was likely the first sunlight this place had seen since the city was founded. Broken and tilted concrete slabs turned it into a labyrinth of twisted steel and silence, the only saving grace that the reactor hadn't yet had a meltdown, and the crunching of bits of glass and metal, occasionally tainted with spots of blood, under Vincent's boots was inordinately loud. Nothing stirred the hot air.

The destruction continued through Sector Six to Sector Five, Aeris' church somehow still standing whole and pale in the sunlight, and it all finally petered out halfway through Sector Four, leaving a fair amount of Wall Market remaining between the earthquake-rattled buildings. It was in Sector Four that he found the first hospital tents, the supply lines ranging back to the nearest warehouses, the startling sight of SOLDIERs interspersed with Wutaian and Midgar natives, a hive of activity. Ducking back into the shadows, Vincent slipped past the dirtied and sometimes bloodied people through Sector Three and into Two, passing under the frayed strings of paper lanterns and *shide* towards the small shop tucked into the lowest floor of a dilapidated building.

"Yoshida-san?" he called, and was honestly surprised when she appeared from the back room. The lines on her face were deeper, her back a little more bowed, but her smile was still there.

"You've chosen a bad time to return, Vir-san."

"What happened?"

The old woman settled herself at her counter on which several bowls and a mortar and pestle were laid out. She began picking through bundles of what appeared to be dried herbs. "There was a bomb. The Tower and much of the Plate collapsed. Many people have died, Wutaian and foreigner both. I can't dig or carry, so I've been making what medicine and supplies I can."

"Who's been organizing everything?"

"Quan Shang Xiao has been commanding our warriors, and Wuzhou is highly respected by our people here. Though I've seen SOLDIERs and Turks, I don't know about ShinRa."

Vincent flipped back through everything he remembered about what Cloud had told him over the years. He needed to determine which, if any, of the ShinRa department heads remained and pray that Reeve was one of them, and find out what he could about the WEAPONs.
"Strife, the boy you brought to me before. Where is he?"

Daring to be honest, Vincent told her, "Wutai," and her smile widened genuinely. She said, "Vir-san, I would like to ask a favor of you. Sometime soon, will you please bring to me a piece of this Daidarabocchi-like creature’s armor? This WEAPON?"

He agreed but didn't ask why, and she handed him a PHS that she explained had been found next to a body. "We don't rob from the dead, despite what your propaganda would have the world believe," she said sternly, "but the living are more important, and we know that you have been talking with more than just us refugees."

From anyone else that might've sounded like a threat, but her gaze was steady and he accepted the phone with only slight hesitation.

As soon as he was out of the shop and had found a concealed corner several stories up under the overhang of a roof, Vincent dialed Cloud's number. As expected, it was disconnected, so he called the Highwind.

"Hello?" answered someone who was decidedly not Cid. Vincent paused.

"Zack?"

"Vincent?" There was a rush of static that sounded like someone letting out a loud, relieved sigh right into the mouthpiece. "Cid said you were in Rocket Town, where are you now?"

"Midgar. Listen to me, Zack. The WEAPON has been taken care of, but the Plate has fallen. The radio towers were taken out and communication is almost impossible. It looks like they were able to rig temporary ones, but the situation is dire."

A string of curses that would've done Cid proud. "Holy crap," came the faint mutter. "Gods, Vincent, warn a guy before you drop something like this!"

Vincent looked out over the city as he patiently waited for Zack to calm down. From his vantage point it looked like only about half of the Plate had come down, including the Tower, and a faint haze of dust still hovered over the sectors.

"I'm going to look for the Turks," he said, when it sounded like Zack had started breathing normally again. "I'm hoping that they will have some information on the WEAPONs. If there was one in Mideel and one here – "

"Yeah, what the hell happened? How did they stop it?"

"– then it's entirely possible more will appear. Perhaps ShinRa figured out a way to defeat them."

"Well, nix that plan, then," Zack snorted. "We were just about to come after you guys, thought you were getting creamed by that hulking monster from the sea. So, what, hang out here and wait for you to call back with the coordinates of the next bad guy?"

"If you wish," Vincent replied mildly, cutting off Zack's squawk by flipping the phone closed, and took a moment to simply sit for the first time in weeks. He could see clear towards the mountain range in the south, casting long shadows from the setting sun.

…

Elmyra was warming a small bottle of fruit mash on a tiny camping stove when she heard a knock
on her door. Shutting it off, she went to answer it, checking on the cradle in the living room as she passed through.

"Hello? Oh! Gods, Vincent, you scared me."

He looked at her silently, and not for the first time she wondered how crazy she must be to let this creepy man in her home. "I wished to check on you," he said solemnly. "I've only just returned a few hours ago."

"Where's Aeris?" she demanded, fear seizing her heart.

"She's fine. She's in Wutai with Zack and Cloud," and Elmyra couldn't help interrupting, "Wutai? What in the world is she doing there?"

"There were, ah, difficulties, in Nibelheim. It was necessary for them to evacuate, and Wutai is the closest region to Nibelheim that ShinRa hasn't yet been able to strangle."

Denzel started to cry. Biting her lip, Elmyra whirled around and picked him up, holding him close as though she was the one needing a security blanket. "I shouldn't have let her go with you," she murmured. Vincent didn't reply. She juggled the baby lightly in her arms, turning his tears into surprised hiccups.

"How is Denzel?"

"Alive." It came out more snappish than she intended, so she hummed at Denzel instead. He wiggled in her hold like a floppy puppy. "He's been fine," she finally conceded, facing Vincent again. "Nothing was broken and the bruises have started to fade. I don't think he got any dust in his lungs, either, he hasn't had any problems breathing."

"Thank you," he said sincerely, and Elmyra pursed her lips. Her daughter's absence had made her cottage feel too large and cold, bare of the laughter or teasing that seemed to grow in Aeris' presence as easily as her flowers, and now she was on the other side of the world chasing ShinRa's messes and ShinRa's people and probably her own death, gods knew.

Denzel waved his chubby little arms, and she sighed.

"If my daughter doesn't come back, Vincent, I don't want to ever see you again."

"I understand."

…

It was only midmorning and Zack was ready to go to sleep, preferably for another month or two, except Cid probably wouldn't be happy to find him sprawled over the Highwind's upper deck like a rug. A well-timed ring from his PHS saved him the trouble of ending up on the wrong end of Cid's spear.

Vincent again. Crap. "Hello?"

"Zack."

"Should I be sitting down for this?"

"I imagine there isn't much I can tell you now to warrant that," Vincent said dryly, and flatly told him that the WEAPON now being called Diamond had been brought down in a suicide mission by
a girl named Elfé. Name sounded familiar, but he couldn't place it. Probably sensing that Zack was having trouble finding a response, Vincent finished, "Bring Cloud back here. He is the only one with any idea of what's going on."

"Cloud's hurt," Zack snapped, "and if you think I'm gonna stand here and let you – "

"He is the best chance we have of surviving. Sephiroth took out one, Elfé another, but what about the next? And yes, Zack, there will be more. This is the Planet's greatest defense and it has been set into motion. We do not have enough people capable of succeeding, even if we could afford to send them all on suicide missions. We need someone who actually knows what he's doing before there are more disasters."

Only Sephiroth, Angeal, maybe Zack and Vincent (and apparently Cloud, somehow) had much hope of success in these battles, and yeah, they were really pretty screwed, weren't they? The Planet really is just a mean dick.

"Vincent, I don't think you understand. He's only been awake for like a day and he's having trouble focusing, can't even stand to be touched most of the time. Sephiroth and I were looking through the files that Elena managed to save and gods, I don't understand half of it but I don't need to in order to see that this isn't exactly something Cloud can just bounce back from."

"He's more resilient than you believe."

"He's also just a kid," Zack growled. "Er, man. Whatever. The point is that everyone's starting to expect stuff from him and not only is it unrealistic, given his condition, but also totally unfair."

Vincent was quiet for a long breath, then went off on a totally different tangent. "Reeve has taken control of what remains of ShinRa. Rufus and Palmer are both dead, Heidegger unknown. Scarlet is the one who rigged the temporary radio until we can afford to spare men to rebuild them."

"What's being done with the people?"

Vincent told him about the remaining SOLDIERs and the Turks being ordered to help both the refugees and natives as best they could. The death count wasn't finished and hardly anyone had escaped without casualties, but for now people were alive and occupied. On a sudden thought Zack asked about Elmyra, muttered oh thank the gods when he was told that she was fine, just fine, if a little shaken. Also, odd tremors were being picked up from the western continent, somewhere near the Gold Saucer.

"Shit," said Zack, and hung up, because he thought that after Nibelheim he'd had an ally in Vincent.

The crews of the Highwind and the hangar itself were too busy to pay him much mind as he left, hands in pockets, a stone in his belly, and the unfamiliar lightness on his back from having to leave the Buster in his guest quarters. He found Aeris in one of the palace courtyards, a square garden surrounded on all sides by a covered walkway and partially shadowed by the evenly spaced rise of towers, and she was gesturing oddly with two Wutaian women and a man. Fenrir sat at her side with his ears perked up. Zack pretended to be fascinated by a small rock garden in the middle of a patch of tall white flowers until the Wutaian eventually left.

"It's amazing, Zack," said Aeris, looking up at him with a free smile that made her eyes so green. "I mean, I'm not a proper Ancient, not really, but these people know so much that we've never even heard of."
"Not a proper Ancient'?" Zack repeated blankly. "What're you talking about?"

Aeris looked down at Fenrir, who was watching them and lazily wagging his tail in the dirt, and scratched his ears. "If my mum – my real mum, I mean, Ifalna – had lived, she would've been able to teach me so much. I've had to make it all up as I go. But!" She brightened, sunlight reappearing from behind dark clouds, but said seriously enough, "Xi Feng was explaining to me some things that might help. All the Wutaians know what's going on to some extent, and even though there isn't enough time for her to really teach me, I'm sure I understand the basics well enough. Their method of healing fills in some of the gaps of the east continent's kind, and vice versa."

"Uh, basics of what?"

"I'm not really sure how to explain," she said ruefully, "but I think we should trust Cloud. This is just as much his fight as anyone else's, if not more so, and if we don't win then it's not going to matter much in the long run, is it?"

Zack bit his lip and absently stroked Fenrir's head.

... It was...strange to be outside one's own head, surrounded by the sense of another. Sephiroth wasn't sure why it seemed Cloud couldn't keep himself to himself, wasn't like he'd ever had much of a problem with Genesis and Angeal save during the occasional burst of adrenaline on a battlefield. He wondered if it had anything to do with Jenova. He wondered if Cloud had gotten lost in the Lifestream like the victims of mako sickness. (He thought it might have something to do with Jenova.)

Cloud allowed himself to be guided back to the bed, lay down with little prompting, but wouldn't let go of Sephiroth's waist. Sephiroth ended up in an awkward sprawl with his feet on the floor and his body twisted over Cloud's.

"Cloud," he started, but Cloud moved a hand up to Sephiroth's face, thumb resting along the arch of a cheekbone.

I don't know what's real anymore.

The words rang clear and sharp like bits of strung glass, none of that frantic, slurred confusion. They reflected two realities and for a moment Sephiroth couldn't remember if he was Jenova's son and trying to ruin the world or just an overwhelmed man. Couldn't remember if Cloud was the almost-SOLDIER that saw the end of the world or just a desperate man. And he realized this, this whole reincarnation business wasn't a matter of simply turning left when he'd once turned right but rather a mass of uncertainty that hopefully, hopefully, didn't end the same way. Chaos theory, butterfly wings and tsunamis – Cloud destroying Jenova's will had inspired Hojo to allow Genesis and Angeal to live and in turn Genesis had been the one to stop Cloud tearing the world apart. No single right answer and gods, gods, what if he fucked it up, what if 'choice' was just a delusion and it would all happen again, over and over and over.

Breathe, Cloud. Just breathe.

Eight years old and Cloud had been nearly blinded by the Planet's rage about the SOLDIER Firsts, and what if this wasn't the first time the Planet had brought Cloud back? What if it had changed his memories to make him think he was human, what if he was just an empty vessel that it used? And now Hojo, it'd all happened before, the needles and the mako and the knives hadn't changed –
Cloud. Breathe.

I don't know what's real anymore. Who am I?

Seven years old and Sephiroth thought that Professor Gast might have gone a little insane from the amount of mako he handled in the labs. He talked about things like friendship and faith and love, looking at Sephiroth the whole time as though he were expecting some kind of reaction and was always disappointed (heartbroken) when the boy just stared back. Every few days Sephiroth would either be flat on the steel tables or in one of the mako showers, and in between those moments Gast would sound like he was trying to find something human in the boy.

And gods, Sephiroth was the last person to talk to during an existential crisis. But he pressed his hand over Cloud's, leaned into the warmth a little and said hoarsely, "Whatever you think, Cloud, this is the reality you live in now, this is the one that matters. We're still alive and we have a choice, and even if the Planet has been toying with you it doesn't mean you cannot use it to your advantage."

tired, scared, lost

"I imagine this is the part where Zack would say, 'Welcome to the club.'"

It was a huge victory to hear Cloud's near-silent huff of laughter, but there was still that temptation to follow the instinct wired into his genetics and let himself become an unquestioning tool. Clear, predetermined purpose. No confusion. Sephiroth leaned forward until his face was pressed against the curve of Cloud's neck, his hair sliding over his shoulders and coiling on the sheets. Cloud tangled his fingers in it, turned his head slightly to whisper into Sephiroth's ear, "West."

"What's in the west?" he asked, lips moving against Cloud's skin. Most of the bruises were already gone.

"WEAPON."

*We already know about the one heading towards Midgar, it's probably already there*, he started to say, but Cloud interrupted, added *zirconaide* and *chaos.*

*Then the one, Diamond, at Midgar –*

*zirconaide, the one who will burn the world*

*both have been destroyed,* Sephiroth saw, his own thoughts starting to sound more like Cloud's, *diamond and zirconaide are destroyed and i took out sapphire*

*only three more, need to protect, i don't know what else to do*

Sephiroth's body had slowly relaxed without his noticing, pinning down Cloud, who just wound his hands more tightly into his long hair. If he could, Sephiroth would keep sinking down, burrow his way under Cloud's skin and carve out a place for himself until they were a single creature. *Reunion,* murmured an insidious voice, but no, it wasn't like that, it was different. Couldn't explain it but it was.

"Uh, did I miss something?" came Zack's voice – somewhere to the side, must've just walked in the door. Wasn't like Sephiroth could see anything other than shadowed pale skin and blond hair, his face pressed against Cloud's neck like he was a little kid again. "You want us to come back later?"

"Don't be silly, Zack," said Aeris, and through Cloud Sephiroth could hear the vibrant tones of life
coming from Zack and the softer, earthier sound from Aeris, "they're not having sex."

"Whoa, hey now."

It took a moment to remember how to speak, and then Sephiroth managed, "Diamond WEAPON has been destroyed."

"Yeah, just got a call from Vincent in Midgar – wait, how'd you know that?"

"There are three more WEAPONs," he continued as though the other man hadn't spoken. He was a little distracted by the way his breath was reflected back to him by the closeness of Cloud's skin. "One near Junon. One near the Gold Saucer. One…"

"Cloud can see it, can't he," said Aeris quietly. Zack made an odd noise in the back of his throat and it reminded Sephiroth of Professor Gast, who'd never stopped fighting for him.

"Junon first."

There were measured footsteps, a presence standing over them at the side of the bed. Zack said, "Cloud? I want to know if this is what you want. Can you tell me that, kiddo?"

There was a complicated burst of thought in Sephiroth's temples and he couldn't help a small sound of amusement.

\[\text{is there really a choice,} \quad \text{went Cloud's thought, suddenly everyone wants to know what i think and, in a suddenly clear voice out loud, I want world peace and a go at the chocobo races again.}\]

Zack laughed, more out of surprise than anything else, and Aeris grinned broadly, replied, "If we leave by tonight, we could be in Midgar in the morning."

Cloud's fingers tightened in Sephiroth's hair.

\[\text{let's mosey}\]

Cid wasn't very happy with this decision. Give a ride from Point A to Point B, fine. But traipsing all over the world after huge monsters that wanted to destroy mankind? Yeah, fuck that shit.

"You," he growled, gesturing at Sephiroth with his cigarette, "promised me a fucking makeover for my ship. All I've gotten is more grey goddamn hairs because of all the shit you attract."

"We promised, we'll deliver," said Zack, light but sincere.

Aeris, Zack, Angeal, and a fucking wolf stayed on the upper deck while Sephiroth and Cloud disappeared down below. Elena, still unconscious and wrapped in bandages to cover her burns, had already been carried to another room. Cid caught sight of Cloud swaying slightly as he walked, wrapped in what looked like Vincent's cloak.

"The hell is up with those two?"

"I'm not sure even I understand," muttered Zack. Aeris just smiled, but Angeal was staring out past the ship guardrails, expression distant.
Sephiroth chewed absently on his lip before remembering that it was a filthy habit and Hojo wouldn't stand for it. Sighing silently, he resisted the urge to shift in his chair and tried to remember the mechanism for the programmed death of eukaryotic cells. Something about the mitochondria or chromosomal telomeres, or maybe they were interrelated, or maybe he was forgetting something entirely and he was a disappointment.

Something moved in the corner of his eye. He twisted around sharply, nearly knocking his elbow into the chair back, mildly surprised when he saw the angel sitting on his bed and staring blankly off into space. "Cloud?" he ventured.

After a few long seconds Cloud blinked and slowly turned his head. He looked pale against the black of his clothes, the translucent wings behind him more washed out than ever. Sephiroth frowned. "You look sick."

At first he didn't think Cloud was going to respond – sometimes he couldn't, if the Planet was doing something weird to him – but then Cloud's lips quirked in a brief smile. Wry, Sephiroth thought, thinking of one of the fiction novels with lots of description that Professor Gast had given him, and decided it sounded right.

"Probably," Cloud agreed quietly.

Professor Gast had once said that sometimes taking a break from studying meant you could come back and study better, so Sephiroth didn't feel so guilty about leaving his biology assignment unfinished and sitting on the bed next to Cloud instead. The angel watched him with an odd expression as Sephiroth scooted about on the blankets trying to get comfortable.

"Why do you feel sick?" he asked, then went on more tentatively, "Is it the Planet?"

"Sometimes," Cloud hedged, looking away. Sephiroth followed his line of sight, but didn't understand what was so interesting about the wall on the other side of his room.

"Is it the mako? Professor Gast says that sometimes the lab assistants here get sick because there's so much mako here that it permeates the air."

"I…no. No, the mako doesn't bother me."

Sephiroth waited for Cloud to expand on that, but when the silence stretched on, he had to resist the urge to shift again. He considered the possibility of an actual illness, but he didn't think angels were susceptible to viruses, bacteria, fungi, or parasites, and he'd never seen Cloud eat or drink or sleep. There was no vomiting, sweating, fever, tremors, nor any other common symptom. Unless
angels didn't get sick the same way humans did?

Sephiroth inched closer to Cloud until his knee was nearly touching the other's thigh, and then he leaned forward to put his arms around Cloud's waist. He felt Cloud tense up, arms lifted awkwardly like he wasn't sure what to do with them, but Sephiroth held on stubbornly.

"Uh," said Cloud when a long moment passed.

"Miss Ifalna often hugs me," he explained, voice muffled by Cloud's ribs. "She says it helps. I'm not convinced, but maybe I just haven't had a large enough sample to know for sure." Maybe he should tell Miss Ifalna about this experiment the next time he saw her.

There was no way Sephiroth could know that Cloud was thinking of another kid from a lifetime ago and her angry, How are you supposed to take care of us if you can't even take care of yourself, but he definitely noticed the way Cloud let out a long breath as though all that tension had been holed up in his lungs and relaxed. Sephiroth couldn't help a slight twitch when an arm settled lightly over his shoulders. There was an uncomfortable pause, and then he said, "Does it have anything to do with what you talk about to yourself when you don't think I can hear you?"

"...What?"

Belatedly Sephiroth realized this might be one of those situations in which the truth shouldn't be mentioned aloud. Professor Gast said that sometimes the truth made people do stupid things, that some people could go mad from it, although he couldn't really imagine an angel going mad. Even if the things he did and said weren't always rational. "I hear you sometimes," Sephiroth explained. "Usually you're asking for forgiveness. Sometimes you talk about how selfish you are, although I don't think the floorboards really care."

Cloud didn't actually move or say anything, but Sephiroth could tell that he was mentally drifting away, maybe called by the Planet, and he felt a burst of anger. "You're sick inside, aren't you, like the lab assistants that get poisoned by mako. You need to focus on something external."

Sephiroth looked up as Cloud looked down, the wings flexing restlessly. "What would you suggest?" asked Cloud, the words barely audible, and Sephiroth sat up to budge himself over until his knees touched Cloud's. Books were too mental, they might tie Cloud up inside like they sometimes did to mako-poisoned people, whatever Cloud said about not being bothered by it, and there weren't many other distractions in his room.


"Shouldn't the adult be taking care of the kid?"

"I don't know," and for reason that honest answer made Cloud frown, eyes narrow with some dark emotion. "Should angels?"

"I'm not an angel."

Which was obviously wrong because there were wings, Sephiroth thought derisively. Maybe Cloud should be the one studying the methodology of empirical science. "And anyway, I'm not a kid. Professor Hojo says I'm superior to humans, although I once asked him why and he said not to ask stupid questions."

"Hojo isn't always right," Cloud said firmly, "and you are human. Remember what I told you about your mother?"
"Yes."

"So ignore him. Listen to Gast, he's the one that wants to take care of you."

"But why would he want to do that?"

Cloud twitched and looked at Sephiroth like he'd never seen him before, which he seemed to do a lot. "Because he thinks of you like a son and parents are supposed to take care of their kids, even if they're not related by blood."

"Oh," said Sephiroth. "But how do I take care of you?"

"You don't," Cloud told him bluntly, and Sephiroth felt a curl of anger, or maybe it was hurt. He was aware enough of the outside world to know that most children didn't grow up in laboratories, though he had a hard time imagining anything other than the scientists and the mako showers and his own room, and he was smart enough to realize that his unusual upbringing would've made him different. There was proof enough of that in the way Cloud sometimes looked incredulous when Sephiroth asked what he thought was a perfectly legitimate question. So, yeah, Sephiroth knew he wasn't really normal. But he still wanted to be useful in a way that had nothing to do with his genetics.

His thoughts must've been written all over his face because Cloud paused, then ventured, "Uh. We could… talk?"

"About what?"

"Um," said Cloud.

The silence dragged on. So Sephiroth tried, "What's your favorite color?"

At first Cloud's expression was as blank as usual, but then his lips pulled back into a smile and the corners of his eyes crinkled a little, and he started laughing like the sudden humor was welling up from deep inside his chest and spilling out. His teeth shone bright white and his mouth was a warm red, all human, and it was like years' worth of tightly suppressed humor just suddenly broke through some kind of floodgate. His eyes squinted all the way shut, head falling back, body shaking.

Sephiroth wasn't entirely sure what was so funny, but it was hard not to start laughing himself when he'd managed to make his strange angel so happy. He'd never made anyone feel like that and he thought he might want to do that again sometime.

"Purple," said Cloud when he managed to catch his breath, and of course Sephiroth didn't know that it wasn't the color itself but what it represented, messy black hair and eyes that glowed blue with a tinge of violet, of purple cloth pressed against his cheek as he was carried out of a lab. Sephiroth just said, "Oh," and mentally filed it away with the scant other things he knew about Cloud.
Cloud woke up, or thought he did. He was lying on a soft surface, and there was some kind of weight resting across his chest. Something hummed beneath him and around him so quietly it was more sensation than sound.

"Cloud," rumbled a low voice, and he realized the weight was Sephiroth's arm on his chest. It pressed down on him and he wasn't sure how much longer he'd be able to keep breathing. "You can breathe," said Sephiroth, and Cloud's ribs expanded, didn't collapse under their own weight or snap into pieces. He kept his eyes closed.

"Cloud," Sephiroth repeated, and for a moment Cloud wanted to punch him. But the spike of fury passed as quickly as it'd come, and he found himself holding on to that one syllable. That was his name, his name, human and clumsy as it was. Cloud wasn't stupid; he knew something had happened that made it feel like a heavy fog was slowly suffocating him, but he wasn't quite sure what to do about it.

"Where," he managed, and Sephiroth said, "We're on the Highwind. We left Wutai. Do you remember?"

The humming must be the ship, then. Opening his eyes a little, Cloud found that he was on his side in a narrow bunk, facing the wall of Sephiroth's chest, and a surge of blinding terror, of don't touch me, made his body freeze so suddenly a muscle in his back spasmed. "I," he tried, but his shoulder blades itched. He could sense something dark and powerful in the east, directly where the Highwind was heading. Without really thinking about it Cloud mentally reached out for Sephiroth, the utter familiarity of his presence (idol, officer, enemy, child, friend, more) oddly grounding. Sephiroth shifted but didn't tighten his hold or pull Cloud closer, so Cloud's muscles loosened a few degrees.

"What do you want?" Sephiroth whispered.

everyone's asking that lately

"We're concerned."

Another rush of fear. take care of myself, not helpless, not useless

Sephiroth couldn't help curling his arm tighter around Cloud and refused to let go even though
Cloud shuddered. (Sephiroth had to bite down on his own anger, a little bit because of Cloud but mostly at the rest of the world.)

The solidness of Sephiroth's body was…was restraints, holding him down. A cold voice sliced through the flesh of his brain, specimen c is responding – and Cloud pulled back forcefully, unaware that his teeth were wolfishly bared or that there was a flurry of sound and feathers as wings arched threateningly wide. Sephiroth braced himself, ruthlessly pushing down his own instinct to fight back and holding himself completely still to wait for Cloud to make the first move.

Fortunately Cloud was on the open side of the bunk. He slid off, ending up on his ass with the wings slumped limply to either side and a weird mix of bemusement and anxiety on his face. Sephiroth leaned over with an arched brow.

"Sephiroth," Cloud managed in a gravelly voice, "where are we?"

"The Highwind," replied Sephiroth, and Cloud suddenly remembered that he'd already asked that, hadn't he. They'd been in Wutai, but now they'd left, and it was because there was still something wrong with the Planet that Cloud couldn't fix on his own. "We're going to Junon."

"Zack? Aeris?"

"They're here. They're on the main deck right now with everyone else, I assume."

Cloud's wings twitched as some of the tension in his shoulders bled out. That was good, no one was dead and Sephiroth was here and, in the grand scheme of things, the Planet still in the process of dying just didn't seem so terrible. Or maybe he was just too emotionally traumatized to think otherwise –

Cloud paused. That thought hadn't been his own.

"Sorry," said Sephiroth stiffly.

Cloud just shrugged and muttered, "Used to it. S'okay," though for some reason Sephiroth didn't seem to find that reassuring. Cloud pulled himself to his feet long enough to sit on the edge of the bed, not really noticing the way his wings were getting dragged awkwardly around until he felt the shock of Sephiroth's hands along their edges. For a long horrifying instant Cloud expected to hear a sharp snap, feel a sudden burst of agony bloom through the wings to twist around his spine, but instead they were settled gently behind him on the mattress. Cloud couldn't remember how to make them go away.

"I'm sorry," Sephiroth said again from behind him. Cloud frowned and tried to figure out what there was for Sephiroth to be sorry about. The hands on his wings slid to his shoulders, softly enough to avoid tweaking feathers, and the mattress dipped as Sephiroth shifted closer until Cloud could feel his body heat along his back, so diametrically different from the icy burn of mako that Cloud wasn't really sure what to do with himself. "I'm sorry, Cloud."

The clean lines of Sephiroth's mind was getting blurred with guilt and hate and, gods, so much anger, mostly at himself, a lot of it towards one or two other people whom Cloud was decidedly Not Thinking About. He made a quiet sound in the back of his throat when Sephiroth's forehead pressed against the back of his neck.

"I'm sorry I didn't figure it out sooner," Sephiroth whispered. "I said I would help you and then Hojo – he – I'm sorry."

Cloud carefully gathered himself, said, "I'm sorry, I know you're not – not bad." 'Bad' wasn't really
the word he was looking for and made him feel stupid, but he could sense Sephiroth's understanding. He looked down at himself and found loose pants and a bare chest, Sephiroth's long pale fingers curled over his shoulders and digging a little into his collarbone. His wings probably would've ripped through a shirt anyway. His physical body felt confining and heavy, somewhat grimy like he'd been sleeping in cold sweat, and he took a moment to straighten out his thoughts. If he was borrowing some of Sephiroth to put them all in order, Sephiroth either didn't notice or didn't mind.

"I think I would like to take a shower."

Sephiroth got to his feet, moving slowly, and put a gentle hand at the small of Cloud's back to lead him to a door set in one wall of the room. The water ran warm in the ship's tiny shower and Cloud was momentarily distracted by the feel of soft linen sliding down his legs to puddle at his feet. It made him think of his mum's worn flannel quilts.

He distantly knew that Sephiroth was also naked, but it didn't seem so important. He ran a hand down his chest, touching the lines of nearly healed cuts and immediately jerking back so he didn't have to think about how they'd gotten there, focusing instead on Sephiroth's hold on his shoulders as the man guided him into the shower. He slid his arms around Sephiroth's waist and leaned against him again, keeping himself together with warm skin, a steadily beating heart, and the cool presence of a mind that made him think of solitary moments on mountain peaks. *I'm gonna be a SOLDIER*, he'd once promised himself at the top of the mountains, and Cloud almost laughed at the ridiculousness of that thought.

Cloud was sleeping again when there was a series of gentle thumps at the door (must be paws) and Nanaki entered. Sephiroth had only been peripherally aware of him while in Wutai and all he knew was that Vincent and Zack had found Nanaki alongside Cloud in the lab.

"Hello," said Nanaki quietly, sitting on his haunches a few safe feet away. Cloud stirred a little but didn't wake. Sephiroth was sitting on the edge of the bed, head bowed, hand resting on Cloud's thigh as though he might disappear without warning. "How is he?"

There were so many ways to respond to that question. Sephiroth finally said, "Alive."

"How are you?"

"Not dead," Sephiroth deadpanned.

The silence stretched, Nanaki's tail waving back and forth as he apparently mulled something over. "I was there sometimes with him. He told me things he couldn't have known and Hojo never seemed to surprise him, but how?"

This creature was certainly straightforward, which at any other time would've been refreshing. Sephiroth's hand twitched and he wished for one violent, insane moment that he'd killed Hojo himself, and he wasn't sure if he was profoundly grateful or horribly, hatefully furious that he hadn't been the one to find Cloud. "I wish I knew why he's the one that has to carry all of this."

"He has you, doesn't he? And the others?"

*Semantics,* he didn't snarl. He was an adult, he could control his temper, damnit, this wasn't like him at all. (But it was, he'd just been very, very good at keeping it all locked away behind steel towers and obedience.)
"You care for him."

"He doesn't make it easy," Sephiroth murmured without intending to, and immediately felt like he'd exposed a soft underbelly. Nanaki's flaming tail still waved lazily back and forth, the rest of him still and thoughtful.

"You think he's selfish?" Nanaki asked carefully, and Sephiroth had no idea why he'd chosen that particular adjective when Sephiroth hadn't even hinted at it, how he'd even gotten into this almost-conversation.

"I don't know." The words were so soft they were nearly inaudible.

"My grandfather used to say that everyone is driven by selfishness but that it wasn't necessarily a bad thing. We protect our loved ones to protect ourselves."

"Even if we die for them?" Sephiroth asked shrewdly.

"Especially then. We're not the ones that have to keep living without them. Grandfather said that death is something that happens to the loved ones you leave behind." When Sephiroth just stared at him, Nanaki admitted, "I came down to tell you that the others would like to speak with you, but you two seemed…busy, so I waited outside the door."

"And what did you grandfather used to say about eavesdropping?"

"If you get caught, pretend you had intended to get caught all along."

Zack, Aeris, Angeal, and Cid all looked at Fenrir. The wolf stared back, panting happily with perked ears and a wagging tail.

"When we decided to go save the world," Zack finally said, "I have to admit that I didn't imagine a wolf coming with us."

"Mm," Angeal agreed.

"What do we do with him?" Zack asked, and Aeris answered, "Well, if we crash in some snowy area, we could cuddle with him for warmth."

"If I find toothmarks on so much as a boot, I'm turning him into grease rags," Cid growled. "Give him to the lovebirds below deck and keep him the fuck away from the chocobos."

Fenrir's tail thumped happily.

Later, they gathered on the main deck by the navigation controls where Cid had a large map of the world pinned to the wall. Aeris stood beside Zack, Nanaki sitting between them and Cid, while Fenrir was crouched near the doorway with his eyes zeroed in on Nanaki. Cloud and Sephiroth stood a few paces back, arms brushing against one another, Cloud's expression thankfully more clear and alert than Zack had dared hope for. He felt a spike of protectiveness for both of them, for all of these people, really, and then wondered when he'd started turning into his parents.

"Okay," said Zack smartly, popping the cap off a marker, "we've had one WEAPON here, and one here." He put great big 'X's on the map over Mideel and the plains just outside of Midgar, paused, and then added a couple frowny-faces. Angeal interrupted with a quiet, "Zack."
Zack coughed. "Anyway, Cloud says we've got three more on the way."

"Do we know where?" asked Nanaki. Fenrir's ears twitched.

Zack looked at Cloud and Sephiroth. Sephiroth didn't seem to have anything to say, but Cloud stepped forward, sliding very carefully between Nanaki and Aeris, to peer at the map, with Fenrir following close on his heel. After a moment he reached for the pen in Zack's hands and took it with only slight hesitation, then trailed his fingers over the map with his brows furrowed. When his touch passed over the desert around the Gold Saucer, he made a circle, then repeated it over the shore off Junon. He bit his lip as he drew a thick, wandering line from one continent to the other.

"Junon and the Gold Saucer?" interpreted Zack, and he startled when Cloud murmured a rough, "Yes."

"The third one moves often, and quickly," Sephiroth added, understanding the wavering line bridging the ocean.

"Right now we're not far from the Saucer. Do we know anything about that one? Sephiroth, Aeris?"

"All I hear is the Planet. I'm not sure if it's responding to what Cloud went through, what happened in Nibelheim, or if it's something else entirely," said Aeris. "It's almost like...it's desperate. Like something's gone really wrong."

"You needed the Planet to tell you that?" Cid snarked.

"Is that why it isn't stopping these WEAPONs?"

"Maybe."

"An entity as old and large as the Planet is unlikely to be capable of reacting very quickly once it builds up momentum," Sephiroth broke in.

Trust Sephiroth to see it all in terms of physics and natural laws. "Okay, so what's the goal here?" Zack asked. "Self-preservation, obviously, but from what?"

"Jenova," Cloud said quietly, which drew odd looks and Aeris saying, "Cloud, whatever cells are left from her are useless, remember?"

Cloud scruffled Fenrir's ears and didn't answer. Zack was mildly disturbed by the...possessive? Jealous?...look on Sephiroth's face as he watched Cloud's hands. "Jenova may be gone, but the reactors aren't," said Sephiroth neutrally. "The Planet is still being drained. Cloud had always intended to take down ShinRa, but if what Vincent told Zack is true then part of the problem has already been resolved."

"What, most of the Plate getting taken out? That's not something to be celebrated, Sephiroth," Zack said sternly. "Lots of people are dead."

"Celebrated, no. Used to our advantage, yes."

Nanaki broke off his staring contest with the wolf to interrupt what could have easily turned into an argument on tactics, ethics, and possibly insults on each other's ancestry. "My people's work in Cosmo Canyon suggested that destroying the mako reactors would be the most effective way to slow the Planet's decline."
"One down, several more to go," Angeal said quietly.

"How are we going to convince people to just turn off their primary source of power?" Zack groaned, and Cloud replied softly, "The people in North Corel, they work the mines. Ask for Barret."

"It seems North Corel has begun mining coal for power," Sephiroth explained, too concerned with looking closely at Cloud to notice the way Zack and the others were looking at him. "We may be able to convince them to shut down the reactor of their own volition. Barret Wallace is one of the leading miners there, I believe."

Do you realize how creepy it is when you two do that, Zack wondered, not because this was Cloud and Sephiroth – which was still bizarre to think about, a few months ago Zack would've laughed hysterically if someone had told him a SOLDIER general and a cadet would end up like this – but because all of this had started happening so damn fast, going from mere acquaintances to, to a hivemind in a matter of weeks, and fuck he wasn't going to be able to keep reading the science fiction novels he sometimes stole off Reno. But Zack knew, beyond any doubt, that if something happened to just one of them then it was only a matter of time until the other went, too, and that little piece of knowledge was enough to make him start weighing the pros and cons of finding a safehouse in which he could securely lock the two down until the world stopped ending.

"Angeal, I'd like you to make that call, please," Sephiroth was still saying, and Angeal nodded once.

"Looks like we've got a couple more stops before we save the world – with a wolf, thanks, what even is that – and have everyone call us heroes. I suggest we take the time to prepare," Zack added, going for cheerful and knowing he fell flat.

…

Zack was on the phone with Reeve when the Highwind began passing over the Gold Saucer. "The map," he said loudly, a hand clamped over the mouthpiece of the PHS, people already beginning to check over their weapons, but Cloud replied, "It's still asleep. Don't stop," and the ship went on without incident.

Sephiroth looked at the map, troubled.

But he said there were three more.

…

Even with his front-row seat to the drama that was the inside of Cloud's head, Sephiroth didn't actually know what Aeris was doing. She was sitting on the bunk in front of Cloud, who mirrored her, and carefully held one of his hands as Sephiroth hovered in the corner of their room. He knew she'd been talking with some of the Wutaian doctors before they left, but their practice of medicine was different enough from the eastern one with which he was most familiar that he could only guess what was going on. "His body's already mostly healed," she'd said, "gods know how the Planet changed him. It's his mind, Sephiroth, and there's no potion or quick fix for that."

"But with his connection to the Lifestream, shouldn't he essentially be connected to the purest source of healing?" he'd demanded.

"The Lifestream is made of as much death as it is life, Sephiroth. If every living thing is born from the Lifestream, where did you think it all goes when they die?"
Sometimes Aeris talked gently, and sometimes they just sat in silence. Cloud never said a word.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Besides the consequences of being tortured by Hojo, you mean?" she asked dryly. "Cloud was born as a single, mortal human, but now he has access to millions of years of a billion other lives. It's like trying to hear your own voice in a room full of screaming people. He was never meant to be...this."

"This?"

When Aeris would leave after a few hours of this, Cloud would be able to hold most of a normal, verbal conversation. It lasted a little longer each time for the couple days they were on the ship, although once or twice he fell into a shaking, senseless heap of cold sweat pressed tightly against Sephiroth's chest as though he were the only thing keeping Cloud grounded in reality.

... 

The last time Elena had felt anywhere near so shitty, she'd woken in a spare bed upstairs in Seventh Heaven with beer soaked into her nice shirt and the dim hallway light threatening to crack her skull in half. She'd promptly vomited onto the floor and hoped that Cloud felt just as horrible, unaware that he'd somehow ended up in a Sector Two church with Aeris and Reno laughing over him, and had had to clean herself up under Elfé's flat glare.

This time, though, she had third-degree burns to go along with the migraine and the exhaustion, and nothing could hurt quite like burns did. A whimper managed to drag itself out of her throat before a wonderfully, beautifully cool hand settled over her forehead.

"Welcome back," said Aeris gently. "Here's a potion, it'll help."

A curved glass rim pressed against her lips. Potions always tasted bizarre, a little like fresh grass but more like the jolt that came from licking a nine-volt battery, not that Elena would ever do something like that, not at all, and also like the dim, aching memories she had of her mother. The pain lessened, and she felt like she was just recovering from drills on the parade ground rather than a blackout bender.

"You're on the Highwind," Aeris told her, giving Elena the distinct impression that this had become something of a speech lately, "and we're on the way to Junon."

"How long have you been sitting there?" she rasped.

"Ten minutes or so."

"How did you know I was waking up?" she demanded suspiciously, coughing.

"I have good timing. What's the last thing you remember?"

Cloud getting himself kidnapped like an idiot, she thought, irritated with the world in general and pretending that said kidnappers hadn't also gotten past her and a SOLDIER. Oh yeah, she was a Turk now, that was pretty cool, she should go to a bar and celebrate. Probably not a bar in which Elfé worked. Nibelheim – the ShinRa mansion, which had both Hojo and Cloud, and their intrepid rescue party had split up to do their respective thing. She may or may not have kissed Tifa, that would depend on whether Tifa had liked it or not.

"We were in the labs, I think Cissnei and I went to...the library? Shit, Hojo doesn't know shit
about organizing papers, I thought I was bad. There was a fire?"

"There was," Aeris confirmed. "Vincent managed to get you out, but you were still burned pretty badly."

Elena's first reaction was to mentally thank the gods that she'd left the explosives with Tifa and not in her pockets, the second was to swear vengeance on something if her trigger finger was fucked up, and the third was a mental note to throw a royal shitfit if her hair had gotten burned off.

"We got Cloud out and Hojo's dead, but, Elena…"

After Aeris left, Elena stopped trying to blink back the tears. At least Tifa had only been separated from the group, had still survived (she had, Elena wasn't going to believe anyone else was dead unless she saw the fucking body; she was tired of secondhand bad news, sorry, but your sister died in the line of duty a thousand miles from home, at least it was an honorable death and she'll probably get posthumous honors, or Cissnei, just in the wrong place at the wrong time with all the right intentions). Easy to hate Cloud, who seemed to attract people like stars orbiting closer to a black hole, who won their loyalty without even trying or sometimes even realizing it. What was it about Cloud that made the Planet sit up and take notice or made people willing to walk through Hell for him?

But then…he'd never asked for it, more often than not went out of his way to avoid people and never once demanded anything, and, well, this wasn't black-and-white shit, was it. All came down to people's choices, for better or worse, and if this was what it meant to be an adult, Elena wondered if she could take her adolescence back, please.

Elena struggled to sit up, biting her lip at the pain of her burns being stretched under their bandages. She was wearing loose cotton clothes and just enough bandages wrapped around her chest to preserve her modesty, but nothing else, probably to keep from irritating her cracked skin as much as possible. How thoughtful.

A new suit was folded neatly on the small chair beside her bunk, not a proper Turk one but still cleanly cut and dark blue. Her pistol was underneath it, somehow undamaged from all the fire, and there was a small washbasin that let her slowly, painfully wash her face. It helped her feel a little more alive and capable of facing everyone else and what was, at some point in the near future, likely going to be a horribly violent death.

…

Cid muttered darkly to himself when an operator told him that Midgar was closed to transports and that he'd have to land in Junon.

"Of course we do," said Zack.

"Think of it as saving a trip from Midgar to Junon," Aeris volunteered. "Cloud, do you know where the WEAPON is?"

"Underwater," he answered quietly. At least Junon had remained unscathed thus far.

"Well, crap. So, what, we wait for it to come rampaging towards the city then?"

"We get a submarine."

"What? Where?"
"The harbor."

No one in Cloud's state of mind should've been able to pull off such a perfect note of sarcasm, Zack mused in admiration as Sephiroth hid a small smile.

As they approached, Zack noticed a drastic increase in the number of military stationed around the city's borders and an obvious lack of civilian activity, as though everyone had decided to stay home despite the pleasant sunny day. The uniforms of ShinRa personnel stood out against the city's drabness in long, thick lines of blue and red far below.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I imagine the city's on high-alert after the last WEAPON that came through this way," Aeris reminded him, and he winced, reflecting on their latest haphazard plan and wondering how the hell they were supposed to steal a submarine under tripled guard. Elena, standing beside them with white bandages wrapped around half the surface area of her body because she refused to stay in bed, frowned but didn't say anything.

When they finally landed, the guards refused to let them disembark without a lengthy search, and Cid hissed and spat as ShinRa guards crawled all over his ship before bellowing that he wasn't carrying anything other than the usual trade cargo and a collection of idiots determined to martyr themselves for the world, get the fuck off before their regulations got shoved so far up their collective asses that President ShinRa would've choked on them if he hadn't already been dead. The guards slunk back to their posts like scolded dogs, and Zack nearly bit his lip bloody trying not to laugh as Cid stayed behind with his beleaguered crew. Zack's own party headed into the village below the city. Or they would have, if they hadn't been almost immediately ambushed by a little girl with too many pointy things on her tiny person.

"You," Zack said fervently. Yuffie huffed and ignored him with great dignity in favor of Cloud, who was trailing along behind Sephiroth like a shadow.

"I have something for you, although between you and me I think I should keep it, I mean it's pretty awesome and I'm a real warrior and also it's kind of shiny. I'm just saying, don't feel bad if you decide to let me keep it, I'll totally take care of it."

Cloud stopped in his tracks and stared at her, bewildered. Sephiroth somehow managed to loom without actually moving as she reached for the enormous wrapped bundle strapped to her back, looking suspiciously similar to the approximate size and weight of the Buster, and held it out. Cloud accepted it with both hands, let the linen slide off to reveal a blade made of...well, there was metal, and what looked like bone ivory for the handle, of all things, which really wasn't the best idea for a large combat weapon, with something pearly white and blue and hard as stone forming the hilt, edging up along the blunt side of the blade. It was somewhere between five and six feet long, about the same as the Buster, but slightly narrower. Despite the ridiculousness of its size, Cloud didn't seem to have any trouble lifting the thing.

"What," said Zack flatly, and Yuffie tossed him a filthy look for cheapening the drama.

"Yoshida-san made it, well, sort of, some of the men helped her with the forging bits, I think you've met her?"

"Yes," Cloud said carefully, distracted with running a free hand over the weapon.

"She said a hero needs a hero's sword." Yuffie sounded rather incredulous.
"Not a hero," Cloud spat with sudden weird intensity, then turned back to the sword. "The materials, they aren't – they're not normal."

"Yoshida-san got people to get her pieces of the WEAPONs that've been taken down so far, I guess, I dunno. She made me hitch a ride with some people hightailing it out of Midgar, like, two days ago." She clearly wasn't impressed with these nameless people's unwillingness to stick out the hard part of rebuilding a fallen city.

"She used pieces of WEAPONs?" Zack cried. "How?"

"I don't know. If it was that easy then everyone would be doing it, wouldn't they?"

Aeris giggling behind her hand didn't make Zack feel any more endeared towards Yuffie.

... It wasn't the Buster and it wasn't Tsurugi, but the weight of a sword, any sword, in his hand was reassuring in a way that only the occasional wash of calm from Sephiroth could be. Ultimate, it whispered, Diamond, Leviathan. He didn't have a scabbard or harness, so he rewrapped it and let the blade rest against a shoulder with a tight grip on the handle.

"Cloud, should you really be the one to carry that?" Elena asked bluntly. She'd been unusually quiet since she'd woken up, but when she did talk she'd done it to Cloud's face, straightforward and entirely uncaring of Sephiroth and Zack's narrow-eyed looks. You're traumatized, not stupid, she'd declared just before leaving the Highwind, and until you prove that you don't understand me then I'm going to talk to you.

So Cloud did her the favor of reflecting honestly on her question. It wasn't the Buster and it wasn't Tsurugi, but the new sword felt right, and it was his, and this was something he knew how to do even when he forgot his name. "Yes," he said after a minute. She stared at him expectantly, but when he didn't elaborate she sighed and muttered, "Fine, just make sure you swing it in the right direction."

Cloud twined his fingers through Sephiroth's belt loops and closed his eyes as they headed towards the elevator in the village that would take them up to the city proper, tried to ignore the vague disorientation that wanted him to go find a dolphin that would take them up the power grid instead. (He didn't think he was making that up, either). Nanaki walked close enough that every few steps Cloud could feel glass beads and feathers bump gently against his elbow. The beads made a rhythmic tinkling sound that reminded him of the small streams that crisscrossed the Nibel Mountains, and a little bit of the sound Holy made as it fell from Aeris' hands and bounced down white stairs, but then the tinkling stopped and Cloud opened his eyes to the interior of the elevator.

"Cozy," Elena observed. "Just so we're clear, I like you guys, but not like that."

One of Sephiroth's hands snuck back and wrapped itself somewhat too tightly around Cloud's wrist. Things didn't go so smoothly when they got to the top.

"Strip," commanded the leader of a military squad.

"What?" Yuffie squawked, but Cloud was more concerned with the guards' weapons, mostly rifles but with the odd pistol and blade, pointing in their direction, more specifically at Sephiroth and Zack and Aeris, which just – he felt the itch in his shoulderblades, the weight of the sword in his hand, the burst of adrenaline in his body, but then Elena stepped forward and barked authoritatively, "The hell do you think you're doing, soldier?"
"We're on high alert, protocol states – "

"You're looking at three SOLDIERs, two of which are generals, a SOLDIER candidate, and a gods-damned Turk. By the way, did I mention the generals? You really want to go there right now?"

"But, uh, ma'am – "

"We're here to monitor the progress of all currently known WEAPONs," Angeal broke in calmly. "You weren't forewarned because communication from Midgar is still unstable."

In the end, they didn't have to sneak around or steal anything; they ended in the harbor looking up at a submarine being prepared for their use by harried dockworkers with the blessing of the local military command.

"This was much more interesting the first time we did this," Cloud said mildly.

They got onto the submarine with only two minor incidents. Zack had managed to convince Yuffie to stay behind, and if it had involved a number of threats and possibly a rope and a lamppost, sometimes the ends did indeed justify the means. When it was pointed out to Elena that her extensive injuries already made walking difficult, how did she expect to handle a full-out battle, Cloud was bracing himself for a tirade. Instead she opened her mouth, paused, then closed it and turned away on her heel.

Cloud exchanged looks with Zack, but the thought to be concerned about Elena unraveled and drifted away as the submarine descended under the water, portholes turning blue-black and the sense of pressure surrounding the fragile metal shell that was the only thing keeping them from being crushed. Oh Hel. He could feel it choking him, clogging thick in his lungs.

"Breathe," Sephiroth whispered to him, and Cloud found himself automatically reaching out with mental hands to pull the essence of someone else around him like a thick, muffling blanket. The sword hummed under his hands, the pieces of the two fallen WEAPONs sounding like someone running their finger around the rim of a crystal glass, the bone ivory pleased with being surrounded by water.

"This isn't from a monster," Cloud muttered aloud to himself, tapping at the ivory.

Up ahead through the cockpit a light began rising through the blackness, running in a long line before arching up and over like a large, square hill – the reactor, Cloud remembered, and its glass-covered corridor, hulking and inelegant as a mechanical spider squatting on the ocean floor. It might have been intimidating if there wasn't an even larger shape lurking over it.

"I believe the WEAPONs are getting progressively larger," Sephiroth observed dryly. It was dark green and as deeply scarred as volcanic rock, its mountain-solid legs in danger of crushing the Junon reactor. As they watched it started to shudder, rocking the submarine with increasingly powerful currents.

emerald

This was the first time Cloud had encountered a WEAPON for – for years, anyway, not since he'd killed Sephiroth in the Northern Crater (his mind immediately skittered away from the memory, looped back around, thought of CHAOS in Vincent's head but knew it wasn't the same thing) and it sang, not as loudly as the Planet or the stars but enough to make his head ring.

Enemy, it said, speaking in the same tangle of impressions and weight as the Planet.
we don't want to destroy you, we want to save the planet, humanity too

Family. Littermate. Confusion.

going back to sleep

Incomprehension. The sense of betrayal.

going back to sleep

The submarine tilted sharply as the WEAPON rose, cracking apart into an identifiable head and long, insect-like carapaces that dwarfed the submarine. It was vaguely humanoid but utterly inhuman, eyes like deep holes scraped into solid stone and then filled up with the darkness of a very old, very skilled predator.

"Remind me why using a submarine was a good idea," Zack asked.

Angeal was pulling up what looked like every available weapons system on the ship. Cloud sensed Sephiroth beginning to draw on the materia equipped to the Masamune and the slim adamantium bangle on his wrist, a Command and a Mime to counter what would obviously be a devastating attack. It didn't take a genius to look at the WEAPON and know that, but the part of Cloud that had held in his arms a little kid with too much smarts and not much else glowed with pride.

The WEAPON's roar echoed inside Cloud's head.

…

Sephiroth killed one of these, albeit with a small squad of SOLDIERs behind him, and Elfé killed one. Zack wasn't entirely sure but he thought he recognized the name as one associated with rather dubious superhuman experimentation some time ago, and she still hadn't survived.

Torpedoes from the submarine exploded in a brief rush of flames, quickly drowned by the ocean, and enormous bursts of superheated water. It didn't even faze the WEAPON, didn't stop it from advancing slowly like it was the creation of some dramatic supervillain.

"Plan B?" asked Aeris, and Zack growled, "Fuck it, fire everything."

Torpedoes, missiles, gods knew what; mud was churned up in a thick tornado that swallowed both the WEAPON and the submarine, made the interior lights flicker wildly and Angeal curse softly as he nearly lost control. There was suddenly another blast, a roar so deep that it reverberated through the submarine and up through their feet, and Nanaki yelled, "The reactor!"

Zack was feeling distinctly mortal as Angeal fought with the shuddering submarine to get it back to the surface. The mud was clearing, but ignorance was definitely bliss when he realized that the WEAPON had stumbled onto the reactor, crushing its entire western side and overloading its core, mako spilling out like blood from a gut wound, barely slowed by the sheer strength of deep-ocean pressure. It was a haze of adrenaline and helplessness, trapped as they were by the confines of the submarine, their meek human biology, and their inability to use more powerful materia for fear of shattering the submarine itself.

The force of the exploding reactor propelled them upwards. The ship's hull creaked ominously as Zack's ears popped and nausea made bile rise in his throat, and only Aeris' repeated and frantic casting of a Cura kept him from vomiting his internal organs all over the floor.

"We're being followed," Angeal announced grimly, but then they broke the ocean's surface,
sunlight flooding the cabin with blinding light. The submarine slammed to a hard stop, tossing everyone to the floor.

"You missed the harbor," Zack groaned into Aeris' elbow, but Angeal was more concerned with the blood streaking his forehead from where it had collided with the console. *Likely concussion*, Zack noted, looked around. Aeris was bruised but had been mostly cushioned by Zack's body, Sephiroth dazed but generally unharmed, blood on Cloud's chin where he'd bitten through his lip. Nanaki was limping.

Another roar, not unlike a thunderstorm.

"Everyone out!" Zack commanded, slipping on the tilted angle of the floor, then slipping on the sand of the beach that looked to be about a mile outside Junon. The brilliant sunshine would've made him wince through his already pounding skull if it wasn't being blocked by the shadow of the WEAPON rising from the ocean. It was a hundred feet high, maybe more, Zack didn't know except that it was *fucking huge*, and armored, because his life wasn't already difficult enough. The sunlight picked out the scars in its craggy hide with stark lines.

*Oh shit.*

Because the destruction at Nibelheim had been so absolute, no one in the outside world knew of it until Tifa and Zangan stumbled into Rocket Town, worn and exhausted. *Meltdown*, they said, *everything was destroyed. We don't know if anyone else survived.*

Nice and vague without actually naming any names. They'd been caught in the Nibel Mountains for the last several days, slowly making their way down to the next town, and so by the time they got there people were already panicking over ShinRa's assassinated president, Midgar's fallen Plate, the Diamond WEAPON, the Ultimate WEAPON in Mideel (who was naming these things, anyway?), and what one or two of the more religiously inclined claimed to be signs of the apocalypse. News of Nibelheim being wiped off the map in less than an hour added fresh kindling to the fire.

"This is why one group ruling the world was always a ridiculous idea," growled an older man in the town's inn, "cut off the head and all the rest flails itself into extinction."

"Always were an anarchist, Miller," scoffed another. "Doesn't matter who's in charge, no one can take care of so many disasters all at once anyway. Can't blame ShinRa for that."

"Don't suppose one of you might have an extra bed you'd be willing to rent out for a couple nights," Tifa interrupted tiredly, bruised and sore and hungry, the skin on the right side of her torso blistered from heat four days ago. Zangan, in only slightly better shape, had her arm around his shoulders and was carrying most of her weight.

The innkeeper and her husband immediately hustled the two off into one of the ground-floor rooms with double beds and a little attached bathroom, the latter calling for a doctor. Tifa was just getting out of a short, painful bath and being wrapped in sensible clothes by the innkeeper when the doctor arrived, and she started poking around while the innkeeper's husband bullied Zangan into a bath of his own.

"Shouldn't have left these wounds so long. What happened?" the doctor asked, and Tifa briefly described a fire that had suddenly broken out in a basement, the bruising grip of her very small savior dragging her out and shoving her towards higher ground. She'd stumbled across her mentor
and spent the next few days sleeping on cold forest floor and eating whatever she and Zangan could scare up. She felt like she should be crying right now, or feeling guilty, or…or raging, something, but the best she could muster was a distant ache in her heart and the overwhelming desire to sleep for a month. She now had the rest of her life to feel all those things, thanks to Cait Sith's death.

Tifa waited for the doctor to ask how the reactor had managed to have a meltdown, what happened to all the failsafes that ShinRa had always assured the public were safe from ever failing, but thankfully she seemed more concerned with ordering up a medicated salve and bandages, a couple potions, and a bowl of stew thick enough for the spoon to stand upright. Tifa didn't realize how hungry she was until her stomach tried to claw its way out to the stew.

After the poking and prodding and fussing and overfeeding, Tifa curled on her left side like a comma under the bed's heavy quilt and slept for the next fifteen hours.

…

Elena was in the command center of the Junon military, pretending that the reason she was sitting still for such long stretches at a time was to intimidate the soldiers and not because of her burns, when her PHS rang. Her watch told her that the others had only been gone in the submarine for less than two hours, so who –

Unknown number, said her phone display.

"Um. Hello?" she answered ever so smoothly.

"Elena? It's Tifa - "

"Holy shit, Tifa, where are you, how - "

"Are you okay? What happened to everyone else? Zack and Cloud aren't picking up their phones – "

"They're fine, everyone's fine, they're just, uh, underwater. Doing a thing."

"A thing?"

"Yes?"

"Don't do this to me, Elena," said Tifa sharply, sounding so, so tired, "don't start treating me like…just don't."

The frustrated helplessness in her voice struck Elena hard in the chest, reminding her that it wasn't so long ago she'd heard that exact same one in her own. "It's a WEAPON," she admitted quietly, automatically glancing around at the soldiers in the room. "Zack, Cloud, Aeris, Sephiroth, Angeal, and Nanaki went – oh, you don't know Nanaki, do you, he was another one of Hojo's prisoners."

"Cissnei?"

"Dead," Elena whispered. "So is Genesis."

"Vincent?"

"In Midgar, last I heard. Guy gets around. Tifa, how…how are you doing?"

"I feel like I went a round with a Summons, but at least I'm alive. I wouldn't be if Cait Sith…"
voice trembled, but didn't break. "Zangan and I are in Rocket Town. I'm borrowing the innkeeper's phone."

"You memorized our numbers?" Elena asked, surprised.

"Just a couple. Can't be too careful when you're going into highly probably death, right?"

Maybe it made Elena somewhat sick, but the unexpectedly dry, dark humor was almost as sexy as Tifa's legs. "Yeah, about that," Elena started awkwardly.

"Elena, I'm not…I don't..." Tifa made a frustrated sound into the phone. "I don't know. I've never – um. There are so many things going on, I need time to think – "

"Yeah, totally, time to think, I can work with that. Unless you don't want me to work with that, I can do that too – "

"No, no, Elena, gods, just stop, that isn't an answer one way or the other, okay? Give me some time, we'll talk when we see each other again and the world isn't ending."

"What if it ends before then?" Elena definitely didn't sound a little plaintive right there, nope, she was cool as a cucumber and all that.

"It won't," Tifa replied firmly, and the weird thing was that she sounded like she truly believed that. Elena wasn't always the most practical person but she tried to be realistic about shit, and realism said that Tifa was being hopelessly optimistic. Thing was, Elena really wanted to believe her.

"Yeah, okay," she said faintly.
The WEAPON's hide was as hard as the stone it resembled, making weapons skid harmlessly across its surface. The sand under their feet was constantly shifting, upsetting any sense of balance or leverage as they kept trying so hard to kill the damn thing, and at odd, sudden angles the sun would reflect blindingly off the ocean and glass-riddled sand. It smelled like saltwater and human sweat, rotting seaweed and heated metal.

Aeris' staff had been striking just as powerfully as the other weapons, but she quickly had to fall back to cast all the healing she could as the WEAPON made the ground shudder dangerously, the enormous limbs lashing out unpredictably. Sephiroth was drawing on his materia at their highest possible levels until they threatened to crack under the strain, expression utterly cool and focused, while Cloud twisted and ducked under the spells as though he could predict every one of Sephiroth's actions.

Zack had automatically found himself falling into step with Angeal, the man that had taught him all he knew, who had built him up from a half-tamed teenager to a SOLDIER. Zack may have been the one now wielding the Buster and Angeal just a mundane copy of it, and maybe they'd never go back to the easy relationship they had before, but Zack was almost glad for this battle because it meant having Angeal at his back one more time. He took a heavy blow from the WEAPON and thudded hard into the beach, but then he was immediately getting back up and tossing a toothy grin in Angeal's direction, *I'm fine, keep going, we can win this.*

Everyone was startled into ducking for cover when the ground suddenly split into three long scars. The force of Cloud's shiny new sword hitting the earth cracked stone, tossed sand high into the air, and broke open the WEAPON's armor with an earsplitting shriek.

"Oh shit," said Zack eloquently, ears ringing.

The WEAPON flailed wildly, roaring in such a deep tone that they could all feel it vibrating in their chests. Face grim, eyes intent, Cloud landed like a cat and rushed back towards the WEAPON with a sudden burst of feathers from his shoulders. Sephiroth's voice was harsh as he cast spells so fast they practically tumbled over one another, Zack wondering dazedly how he hadn't yet passed out as he braced himself for Cloud's impact.

Cloud never got to the WEAPON. Instead it was Angeal who got there first, using the monster's distraction and ducking under a thrashing limb so he could shove his sword into the soft flesh underneath the cracked armor.

He didn't dodge the second limb, though.
At first the soldiers in Junon cheered upon their return, but then one by one they fell silent. Sephiroth hardly noticed, seeing only the bloody body in Zack's arms, the broken expression on Zack's face, their pyrrhic victory over the unmoving mass of the Emerald WEAPON dominating the shoreline behind them.

"Zack!" yelled Elena, who was hurrying towards them as quickly as her still-healing body was able, and then stopped in her tracks so abruptly she nearly fell on her face.

"We won," said Zack, with his voice splitting down the middle. In the corner of his eye, Sephiroth saw Cloud and Aeris exchange a look before Aeris put a hand on Zack's back and Cloud discretely took Sephiroth's hand, squeezing tightly, unflinching when Sephiroth squeezed back hard enough to fracture bone.

Cloud said, all gentle authority, "Elena, call the guard. Get the medics down here ASAP," so Zack doesn't stay with Angeal's body longer than absolutely necessary, he didn't add. Elena blinked a few times before shaking herself back and picking up her PHS with a terse, "Of course, right away."

Sephiroth wasn't even out of his twenties but he felt as old as the dirt filling the mass graves of ancient soldiers.

They managed to get themselves to the military headquarters. Two officers reached out to take Angeal's body, but Zack snarled, probably not even realizing he was, and it took Aeris' soft touch to his shoulder and a few murmured words for him to pause for a long moment before letting Angeal go. Sephiroth watched as he became the last of Jenova's little triumvirate, watched as Zack's world crumbled, and thought, I could burn the world for this.

Cloud's hand tightened painfully around his own and Sephiroth looked over at him, startled to see Cloud's blue eyes narrowed and edged in green. Never that.

Sephiroth willingly let himself be relegated to a quiet corner while Elena bossed around the part-terrified, part-grieving, part-harried soldiers. Cloud borrowed her PHS and moved towards Sephiroth, away from all the noise, to dial a number. He talked secretively, occasionally glancing back at the rest of the commotion, and Sephiroth suddenly realized that Cloud was trying to keep the noise of panicking people to a dull roar as he spoke with Vincent.

"The WEAPON in Junon is down," he murmured, "but we can't get to the one by the Gold Saucer. It's still asleep."

Sephiroth wished he didn't know how Cloud knew that with such bone-deep certainty.

"Casualties?"

"...Yes."

"...Ah. Midgar hasn't completely fallen. We'll see what we can do here."

"Thank you," said Cloud, his voice a little shaky, and hung up. His eyes caught Sephiroth's and Sephiroth thought of pressing his face against a firm chest, wrapped up safe in someone's arms, white feathers hiding him from the rest of the world.

"They've got some officer's quarters cleared out, guys," Elena called out, and even though it was barely noon the party drifted apart, retreating to lick their wounds. Everything happened on the
other side of thick, frosted glass, time skipping, and then Sephiroth found himself sitting on the
edge of a bed in the utilitarian space of a soldier's quarters. There were hands on his knees, Cloud's
hands, a surprisingly lucid Cloud looking up at him from where he kneeled on the floor repeating,
"Sephiroth. Sephiroth."

"Cloud," he replied softly, because at least Cloud was still there and actually looking at him.
Touching him. Still breathing.

"Come here," said Cloud, standing up and taking Sephiroth's hands to tug him gently to his feet. He
pulled Sephiroth toward the small attached bathroom while walking backwards. "Come on."

He didn't say, *It'll be okay*, because with Genesis dead and Angeal having martyred himself
Sephiroth was now the last of his kind, and if anyone understood what that actually meant then it
was Cloud. He didn't say much of anything, really, just stripped Sephiroth of blood- and sweat-
stained clothes and pushed him into the shower, which was apparently becoming something of a
tradition between them. There was emptiness in a corner of his mind, the lack of something he'd
hardly known was even there, and he didn't realize he was shaking slightly until Cloud pressed
himself against him. He could hate Angeal with the sort of bottomless intensity that sometimes
blindsided him.

"What do we do now?" he asked, lost, and felt Cloud huff a humorless laugh that clearly wondered
why Sephiroth would ask *him*, of all people, because seriously, it wasn't too long ago that he
probably wouldn't have been able to find his way out of a paper bag. That darkness was still
threatening to crawl over him so Sephiroth wrapped his arms tightly around Cloud, so tightly that
ribs creaked, and leaned down to bite at Cloud's lips. Teeth clacked and it wasn't very pleasant, less
a kiss and more a desperate need to remind himself that maybe he was technically the last of his
kind but he wasn't *alone*.

This probably wasn't a good idea, given all the trauma and madness and everything apocalyptic,
but sometimes even a monster needed the humanness of a warm body stretching long against his
own, scarred hands tightening in his hair and the growing hardness of a cock against his thigh.
Cloud growled low in his throat and Sephiroth tightened his grip on bony hips, leaving bruises that
would heal by morning, wishing he could burrow into the smaller body and make room for himself
around that rapidly-beating heart. He imagined he could feel an echo of fingers digging into his
own hips and teeth biting his lower lip nearly bloody, realized they were echoes of Cloud's
impressions, *want* and *mine* and a sense of *sorrow* of which Sephiroth couldn't quite pin down the
cause.

He crowded Cloud up against the shower wall so that the shower spray was beating against his
shoulder blades, a thigh between Cloud's slimmer ones, shivering as Cloud untangled one of his
hands from Sephiroth's hair and wrapped a hand around him. Cloud's grip was firm and unhesitant
because he was in Sephiroth's head, after all, or maybe Sephiroth was in his, he couldn't really tell
the difference anymore.

It didn't take long before he came, come streaking Cloud's belly, and a moment later Cloud's grip in
his hair tightened to the point of pain as he let out a nearly-silent gasp. Sephiroth rested his
forehead against Cloud's and closed his eyes, breathing harshly, and Cloud held on and didn't let go
until the shower had long gone cold.

Later that night, in bed and both of them sleepless despite everything, Cloud said, "Garmr."

"Bless you," Sephiroth said reflexively, then, "What?"

"My sword. I think I'll call it Garmr."
"What does it mean?"

Cloud just smiled sadly. Sephiroth wrapped himself tighter around Cloud, burying his face in the wild mess of hair as Cloud's nose pressed into the curve of his neck, their limbs wrapped around one another in a fair impression of clingy octopuses. He never really thought much about his childhood, or tried not to, but he could hazily remember feeling like this: the warmth of another person, the feel of carefully controlled strength in a body that would protect him from the world if it could, the knowledge that he could fight out of more than just a sense of duty.

He finally fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion, dimly aware that Cloud was still awake, staring unseeingly at the early afternoon sunlight painted on the far wall. He slept deeply enough that he stirred but didn't wake when Cloud slipped out of bed and reached for his clothes.

…

Zack was lying curled on his side, dead asleep with his face pressed against Aeris' thigh. Aeris leaned against the headboard, one hand in Zack's hair and the other worrying the materia on her necklace, when Cloud paused in the doorway and just looked. It took Aeris a few minutes to notice him lurking.

"Oh! Cloud, are you all right?"

"Peachy," he said, not unkindly. His eyes were drawn to Zack, whose mind gave off a confused knot of exhaustion and grief. It was underscored by the dull roar of the Planet that kept trying to get his attention, which he was resolutely ignoring. "How is he?"

Aeris looked down at Zack, petting his mussed hair. "I think everything is finally catching up with him. With all of us, really. There may be only two WEAPONs left, but there's already been so much loss that it's hard to believe that there's going to be a good ending."

Cloud crossed the room and sat gingerly on the edge of bed, trying not to disturb Zack, and hesitantly reached out. Aeris immediately took his hand without removing the one she still had tangled in Zack's hair, and Cloud said, "He was always there for me, sometimes to the point of stupidity." Aeris huffed a quiet laugh. "Everything will be all right. I'll make sure."

"What do you mean? How?"

Cloud didn't respond, just slid his hand from hers and rested it on Zack's shoulder. He could feel its warmth through the fabric of Zack's filthy uniform, strong enough to hold up the weight of the world.

"Is it very much different, now?"

The sudden question redirected his attention, but the sheer compassion in her eyes was almost enough to make him look away again. Not for the first time he wondered where she found so much of it, if she maybe swallowed back her own feelings of jealousy or anger or disappointment more often than anyone would've guessed. "What?"

"Zack hasn't told me too much because he thinks it's your choice to share, but the little I've heard from him, and you, and the Planet – "

"Me?"

"You're not used to lying to me, are you?" Cloud winced and looked away. "No, no, it's okay, it just means that, well, you and Zack don't hide things very well, and I was wondering how…"
different things are now."

Aeris seemed so young sometimes, though he didn't know if it was because he was technically that much older than she was or because circumstances had changed just enough to change her. He gave her a true, unreserved smile and answered, "A lot of it's different, of course, but the most important things...those aren't. I came back for you and I don't regret that."

There wasn't much to say after that, and for a long time Cloud sat there with two of the people who had most shaped him. He would finally be able to repay his debt.

... 

In the evening, Fenrir somehow escaped the Highwind and infiltrated the Junon military base, scaring the shit out of a number of soldiers and generally causing an uproar. During the chaos, Cloud disappeared without a trace except for a last wisp of sorrow breathing through Sephiroth.

"No," he gasped, stumbling against the doorframe of his borrowed quarters. The noise of panicked people had shaken him awake, and when he had instinctively reached out an arm he found only cold, empty space on the other side of the bed. He saw Aeris looking worriedly out the door of her own quarters and demanded, "Where is he?"

"Cloud?" As if Sephiroth would've been asking about anyone else. "I thought he was with you."

"No," he repeated, unsure if he was answering Aeris or still in denial. "Something's wrong, he's going to do something irrevocably stupid."

"You may want to put some pants on first," she said. Sephiroth looked down and thought, Well, she isn't wrong, and rummaged around for the pants he'd kicked off the night before. He pulled them on so quickly he nearly hurt himself, then pulled on a general's straight posture and cold efficiency as he strode down towards central command. Surrounded by nervous soldiers stood Elena, who had a hand buried in the damn wolf's scruff, and Nanaki, who patiently stood guard in the hallway and kept an unruffled eye on Fenrir.

"Where is he?" he snapped out, the sharp crack of ice, and Elena flinched before she could stop herself.

"Who?"

"Cloud."

There was something too intense in his voice, too possessive, and he felt again the grief of Angeal's death barely twelve hours ago, the horror of what was done to Cloud just a handful of days ago, and couldn't decide if all this was the fault of ShinRa or the Planet. (Both could be destroyed, though, couldn't they?)

"He's not here," Elena said carefully. "We've been working on clean-up and crowd control here all day and he never came in."

There were shadows under Elena's eyes and her bandages could do with some rewrapping; on another day, Sephiroth might have been sympathetic. "Check the security cameras."

Elena called over four grunts and pointed them in the direction of the security room: Watch every fucking second, I want to know exactly where he went. Sephiroth spent the next hour or so pacing and making the soldiers nervous, hardly noticing when the call for dinner came and went. The officers were disgruntled at being usurped but knew better than to argue with Turks or SOLDIERs,
and without a target for his turmoil Sephiroth just turned things over and over in his head, wondering where he went wrong, what he could have done to keep Angeal – steady, brilliant Angeal, how could he have done this to them, Genesis was supposed to be the selfish one –

"We've set up a quarantine area around the WEAPON, but we've already had to arrest a handful of treasure hunters trying to get close," a Regular reported to Elena. "The power plant engineers estimate that the grid is about halfway repaired and that power should be restored to the rest of the city by dawn tomorrow."

Sephiroth hadn't known the grid had taken damage in the first place.

"Have you heard from Midgar?" asked Elena.

"They're requesting additional men to help with emergency relief, as is Mideel," the soldier went on, and that was about the time Sephiroth left, heading towards the beach where the WEAPON's enormous carapace still loomed, still having enough presence of mind to know that bad things were going to happen if he didn't find something with which to distract himself.

It turned out that the clean-up crews needed the WEAPON to be divided into smaller, more manageable pieces. Sephiroth was more than willing to offer up the Masamune's services, and if those pieces turned out a little (a lot) smaller than they needed to be, no one was going to say anything. It was hot, sweaty work in the longest hours of the afternoon, and also lonely, since no one was quite brave enough to stand near Sephiroth, not that Sephiroth himself would've ever admitted it, and he could read the tracks in the sand well enough to know exactly where Angeal's spine had been crushed under the WEAPON's limb. Why are you never here when I need you most, Cloud, he wanted to scream, and kept his expression carefully calm as he cracked through another section of exoskeleton.

... 

The small conference room was blessedly quiet in the few minutes before other people began arriving. Zack put his head on his arms on the table and took a few deep breaths, picking up the faintly floral scent that always seemed to cling to Aeris no matter where she was, the chemical smell of the industrial carpet and boot polish. Beside him sat Sephiroth, who was so carefully composed and expressionless that he may as well have been a thousand miles away. Elena, Nanaki, Cid, and Yuffie ranged around the far curve of the table; of everyone that had been there in the beginning, these were the only people who remained.

"I managed to get a hold of Reeve. Assuming we're still alive in a few days, Angeal will be given a funeral with full military honors," said Elena quietly, knowing it was a cold comfort.

"Good," said Zack firmly, because however their relationship may have started to fray at the end, it didn't change the fact that, for a while, Angeal had been one of the best men Zack had ever known.

"So…now what?" asked Yuffie.

"We head north."

Everyone turned to look at Sephiroth, who still looked as impassive as ever. The remoteness of his expression was enough to betray how twisted up inside he was.

"What's in the north?" prompted Nanaki, and Sephiroth replied, "Cloud."

"We've spent an awful lot of time chasing after that kid," Cid pointed out, not unfairly.
"He said there were two WEAPONs left," Aeris broke in suddenly, "but the only one I remember him mentioning specifically is the one by the Gold Saucer. Where's the other one?"

There was a long silence in which people exchanged questioning looks that quickly turned more alarmed. Nanaki finally asked, "Is there any way to track these things without him? Sephiroth?"

"I don't know," Sephiroth admitted, and Zack's mind started racing, trying to figure why Cloud hadn't told them this last, vital bit of information. Cloud had just as much to lose as anyone else, if not more, and once Elena, Sephiroth, Zack, and Aeris had managed to worm their way past his ridiculous tendency towards martyrdom he hadn't hesitated to accept their help.

"No new reports of death and destruction have come in since this morning after, uh, you guys took down Emerald," Elena said, trying but not particularly succeeding in sounding delicate. "Maybe it's also asleep?"

Zack said, "But we can't count on it. Like Cloud said, once the Planet builds up momentum it's almost impossible to stop, especially with the mako reactors still running and pissing it off."

"I remember Cloud mentioning that to Reeve, something about North Corel and its coal mining being a possible alternative. I think Reeve's been working on it, but with Midgar in the state it's in…"

"Our first priority is the WEAPONs, the mako reactors second," Sephiroth told them decisively.

"With his connection to the Planet, Cloud may know something we don't," offered Aeris. "There may be a reason he left so abruptly for the north."

"Then why wouldn't he have said anything?" Elena retorted, visibly angry. "I thought he was over pulling this kind of bullshit."

"Something's changed," said Aeris, her voice sounding off, and when Zack turned to her, he found her staring into the middle distance, looking more…Ancient-ish than usual. "He's lost everything before and he's afraid of it happening again. It's something he thinks only he can do."

Zack stood and leaned over with his hands on the table, meeting the eye of every person present. "Here's what we're going to do: first, someone's going to call Vincent or Reeve and see what's going on with the reactors. We'll also see if there's some way to get troops together to take down the other WEAPON. Then Cid, you're going to take Sephiroth, Aeris, and I up north to wherever Cloud is and either stop whatever idiotic plan he's got or make it better. If there really is a way to stop the Planet's momentum, we'll find it."

"But," Elena started, and Zack interrupted, "No. We need you here. You're still hurt, but more importantly you've already got everything running here. We need people to hold down the fort, we can't afford to direct all our resources towards a single chance."

Huh. He was starting to sound like one of the Firsts. Damn growing up.

After that, everyone parted ways. Elena returned to the center of Junon's military base, pulling her rank as a Turk around her as a shield. Yuffie, who promised to kick 'Reeve-whoever-he-was' in the ass if she needed to, and Nanaki, who understandably needed to feel useful, decided to head back to Midgar. Zack, Aeris, Sephiroth, and Cid returned to the freshly-resupplied Highwind to face what felt like the last act of this whole, terrible war.

…
Daylight disappeared unnaturally quickly as Cloud walked farther into the gloom. The temperature dropped and the air felt charged, like licking a battery, except instead of dissipating the sharp shock of electricity crawled over his skin and seeped into his bones. It was disturbingly quiet, his footsteps echoing over uneven stone walls with the distant, unseen dripping of water and the thicker plop of mako.

*Home,* the cave walls whispered.

Everything felt like it came to him two degrees removed. He walked down, deeper, in something like a haze, terror and relief and regret and *happiness* playing discordantly on his heart. For the first time in more years than he could count, Cloud let himself remember: a time when he wished the dead could come back and then they did, but all wrong and twisted; his own mother, who never quite got it right but who loved as fiercely as a dragon in her own way; a young boy in a lab, so earnest and so lonely, who looked at Cloud like he was someone worth more than the sum of his broken memories; Aeris and Zack, sharing a conspiratorial smile, untouched by bullets or betrayal.

At this point, he figured he was allowed a level of sentimentality worthy of Yuffie's soaps. It was better than dwelling on the sensation of ripping skin on his shoulder blades, even though the flesh remained entirely whole, and the long, strong limbs stretching out to either side so that the cold air could sift through the feathers. It was better than dwelling on the sensation that he left a bit more of his remaining humanity in the small air currents stirred up by his wings, in the pools of each step behind him.

*Victory at all costs.* The slow bleeding from parasites; *burning the parasites to save the host.* Fighting until the last pack member dies. Weapon.

"I think you're the thing that's given me the worst complex," Cloud muttered to the Planet, trying to shake off the mental impressions by focusing on putting one foot steadily in front of the other. He forced himself not to think how this was going to affect Sephiroth. It seemed all he knew how to do was break promises.

…

"*We managed to get a hold of both North Corel and Cosmo Canyon,*" Vincent's voice crackled over the PHS. *"They're putting together a team to take on the Ruby Weapon by the Gold Saucer. They'll be able to reach it far more quickly than we can cross the ocean, especially without the Highwind."*

"Thank you," said Aeris, half-watching Cid grumble as he steered, half-watching Zack and Sephiroth standing together at the front of the observation deck. SOLDIERS always burned more brightly in her sixth sense than most people. Somewhere, very distantly, she thought she could feel Cloud as a small but intense flicker of the same icy burn as mako.

At night, she and Zack sat on their shared bunk with a two-foot space between them. "I don't know what to do," he admitted, so far from his usual cheerful confidence that her heart ached for him, and she replied, "You're stronger than you think."

He didn't smile, but he did manage several hours of sleep that night. She stayed up a while longer, feeling like her body was twice as heavy but reminding herself that they couldn't afford to have her give in to the sorrow and grief in her own heart, that right now she needed to be as much a foundation for everyone as the Planet's bones. *Later, when the storm has passed.*

It took two days before Sephiroth, who'd spent almost every waking moment standing stone-faced on the observation deck, said, "We're close."
Aeris looked out onto icy, barren tundra that stretched out long and flat with only a few sudden, jagged stone ranges breaking up the monotony. The center was dominated by a breathtakingly huge ring of broken rock that sliced up the sky in grey puzzle pieces, circling a crater that scarred the earth so deeply its bottom was just a hole of darkness. She was desperately grateful, not for the first time, that the *Highwind's* deck had a solid ceiling and floor that didn't leave it all open to the emptiness of the sky.

"Well," Zack said after a moment, "at least it matches the mood."

Aeris snorted. Sephiroth just stared ahead intently and ignored them.

There was no way for the *Highwind* to land anywhere near enough to the crater that they wouldn't have to go through several hours of climbing over sharp rock that would probably cause a lethal infection in the slightest cut, so Cid hovered over the crater as low as he safely could.

"Hope you ain't afraid of heights," he quipped as some of the crew opened a lower hatch and rolled out the longest rope ladder that Aeris had ever seen. She leaned over the hatch opening and watched the end of the ladder dangle about ten feet over a wide ledge.

"Guess we'll find out," she said faintly.

She, Zack, and Sephiroth each took a knapsack packed with water, some food, and as many potions and elixirs as they could stuff into them. There was no way to know how long it would take to find Cloud, assuming Sephiroth's directions were correct in the first place, or what they would encounter. Before they started the frankly terrifying climb down, Aeris stood in front of Cid and clasped one of his hands in both of hers.

"Thank you, Cid," she said somberly.

"Someone promised me upgrades," he replied, gruff, manfully pretending that the tips of his ears weren't turning red.

Sephiroth went first, Masamune slung in easy reach over his shoulder, and Aeris followed, trying very hard not to think about how the grey sky yawned so huge and so empty above them.

"Aeris?" came Zack's voice, his heavy boots a few feet above her head. Her eyes were so focused on the ropes in front of her face that she didn't realize she'd frozen in place until a hand pressed lightly against her ankle. While her boot was too thick to feel the touch itself, the pressure was enough.

"Miss Gainsborough," Sephiroth said gently, "the ledge is not far. I will not let you fall."

He sounded so *reasonable*, so calm; no wonder he could get through to Cloud when Cloud was looking at a pencil like it was going to take off a finger. "Aeris," she corrected him. She shivered, and it wasn't just because of the cold air insinuating itself through her dress.

"What?"

"Call me Aeris and I'll think about climbing down in the next month or so."

Zack barked out a short laugh above her and, when Aeris glanced down, she caught the slightest suggestion of a possible smile in the near future on Sephiroth's face. She considered making a comment on being the filling in an attractive SOLDIER sandwich, but she knew that it was the nerves talking and managed to unclench her hands just enough to finish climbing.
Sephiroth landed on the ledge with a light thump and immediately reached up to put his hands around Aeris' waist – dear gods, they practically covered her lower torso, he could literally break her in half without effort – and lift her down. When Zack joined them, she may have held his hand hard enough to actually leave bruises. Sephiroth waved, and the rope ladder was pulled back up as the Highwind slowly turned away.

"The radios have all been checked, we should be good to go when we get back up," said Zack, obviously firm in the belief that they would be getting back, with Cloud, if they had to tie him up and let Sephiroth carry him in a way so humiliating he would never think of pulling the martyr on them again.

"When I checked a few months ago, ShinRa reported this area as heavily infested with monsters. We'll proceed with stealth and try to avoid as many as possible. We don't want to waste time." Because gods knew what kind of bullshit Cloud was planning.

Despite herself, Aeris felt the tension in her body loosen as they descended into the gloom. The too-open sky was quickly blocked out by the jagged peaks, the weirdly diffused daylight dimming to a more natural darkness. When stone curved under their feet and arched over their heads, the Planet settled more heavily under her heart, so present she could almost pluck its words right out of the air. Mako ran thick through the chilly air.

Sephiroth led the way, spine so straight and shoulders so tense that Aeris half-expected to hear something snap, with a Fire materia activated just enough to cast gentle light without releasing the spell. Zack brought up the rear with another Fire materia in one hand, the other hand resting on the Buster.

"You know I don't need to be protected, right?" she asked pointedly, and Zack replied, "Obviously," but didn't switch positions. Aeris considered arguing the point, saw the tightness of grief and worry in the lines around his eyes, and let it drop.

In the beginning it was easy to avoid monsters; the scraping of claws against stone and echoes of odd growls told them when to press themselves more deeply into the shadows and slip silently past, sometimes edging dangerously close to the sheer drop. The first time they actually encountered one, it was because Zack tripped over the cavern's uneven floor and stumbled out of cover, and the monster barely had time to snarl before the Masamune sent its head rolling across the rock and over the edge into darkness. Aeris leaned over and counted to eight seconds before she heard a wet thunk.

"I'm guessing, what, two hundred-fifty, three hundred meters?"

A few hours in and they were down a water bottle and two MREs. The worst wound they'd suffered was a minor burn to Aeris' hand, hardly worse than the slice opened up on Zack's cheek by a chip of stone, and Aeris was feeling cautiously optimistic that, hey, this really could turn out all right.

Eventually they came to a crossroads. The light from the two materia wasn't enough to see very far down either tunnel and no slight wind came through to betray a distant exit to the outside world. For all intents and purposes, there was nothing that told them which tunnel led to Cloud and not an agonizing death, not even Aeris' Planet-whispering magic.

"Flip a coin?" Zack finally volunteered.

"You two take the right, I'll take the left," said Sephiroth decisively.
Zack and Aeris exchanged glances behind his back. "You sure that's a good idea?" Zack tried, as diplomatic as he could be. "We don't know what's at the end of either of these tunnels, it'd be better not to split up and divide our strength. I know you've seen a few sci-fi horror movies, I was there to blackmail you into it."

"We can't afford the risk of taking the wrong tunnel. We don't know how much time we have before Cloud does something stupid or the last WEAPON wreaks unspeakable damage. Splitting up guarantees that at least one person will reach our goal."

 Seriously, how could he sound so reasonable all the time.

"Sephiroth – "

"That's an order, Lieutenant."

Aeris winced at Zack's tone when he replied, "With all due respect, sir, you can take your protocol and shove it up your ass. This isn't a military operation and – "

"Zack," Sephiroth snapped, "I know. I know." He fell silent for a moment, then went on quietly, "I don't want to take the chance."

Zack would've kept arguing, but they were wasting precious time. "Compromise," she broke in, "we split up but the radios stay on at all times, and if you find Cloud and you don't call us then I will find a way to make you regret it, SOLDIER or not."

"Yes, ma'am," Sephiroth said automatically, which was rather gratifying, and she nodded at him officiously as she took Zack's hand and tugged him towards one of the tunnels.

…

As soon as he was out of the others' sight, Sephiroth sheathed the Masamune and followed his Cloud-sense deeper into the tunnel. It sloped downwards, sometimes so steeply that he had to slide carefully down damp, mossy stone without careening off the next ledge, and occasionally the ceiling ran so low that he had to walk with his shoulders hunched.

He was starting to wonder if he'd sent Zack and Aeris down the correct tunnel when it suddenly opened up into an echoing cavern and the uneven path under his feet took a steep drop and spiraled down towards a green mako spring. The spring was so large, so flooded, that green light rippled eerily over the walls. He stared at the way the light drowned out the red glow of his Fire materia, which he allowed to fade back into dormancy when he suddenly remembered he wasn't here to admire earth's natural wonders. It was so green, though, and all around him, settling over his skin as naturally as the mako showers once did and making his blood sing.

The voices drifting through the air didn't belong to the Lifestream at all; they came from one of several other tunnel entrances, dark holes cut into the green glow of the mako spring, and before Zack and Aeris could appear Sephiroth stepped forward without a second thought. The mako held up under his weight for a moment before suddenly giving way, swallowing him up with burning-cold pinpricks against his skin, even through his clothes, and just before it closed over his head he heard, "Sephiroth – !"

…

It felt like dying.

…
The Calamity. One of the fallen ones.

*He's not the enemy*, said Cloud across the years, and in the spaces between words and regret Sephiroth heard, *I am.*

... 

The Planet was burning and he was the last living thing in the world. The blue sky went up in flames and broke open into an endless void, and the stars fell.

... 

Sephiroth stood in a place that had no discernible walls or ceiling or boundaries of any real kind, the Masamune in his hand even though he didn't remember drawing it. Dim light effused through the space in odd ways, creating small eddies of light and shadow that mimicked the play of glowing mako against glass.

Cloud stood facing him with only a short distance between them. He was in a pair of black cargo pants and a sleeveless turtleneck that Sephiroth hadn't seen in over a decade, the hilt of an enormous sword poking over one shoulder and the two wings arching gracefully on either side making him look like he'd stepped right out of a childhood memory or a comic book. The last time Sephiroth had seen him, they were naked and pressed close, Cloud's eyes completely focused and unguarded for the first time Sephiroth could remember. Now, the thoughts that tried to come out as words just died between Sephiroth's teeth.

"This isn't the first time this has happened," Cloud said when the silence stretched too long. He looked down at himself and then back at Sephiroth. "The Planet is showing you how you remember me best, I think. I guess it isn't that hard when someone is more Lifestream than human."

"Is that what this is, coming here? Self-pity?" Sephiroth asked quietly, and Cloud flinched and frowned, confused. "All these years you've been fighting and now, when we're so close to being done, you're just going to give up?"

"I'm a WEAPON, Sephiroth," said Cloud, "and the only way to win now is to stop fighting."

The hand holding the Masamune felt cold despite its glove. "Why? Hojo and Jenova are dead and ShinRa is essentially gone, what -- "

Cloud's soft laugh was an ugly sound. "ShinRa was only part of the Planet's problem. The reactors still exist. The Lifestream is still slowly bleeding out. The WEAPONs have all been activated. You can't suddenly stop a sword mid-swing, you can only slow it down and hope it doesn't cut you in half."

"But if you refuse to do anything -- "

"Then the reactors will still all explode and the Lifestream will probably be weaponized again. It would work about as well as it did when I tried to say no to you," Cloud replied. When Sephiroth blanched, Cloud hissed between his teeth and shook his head, saying, "No, that's not what I -- that wasn't you, I know that, I'm sorry."

(Cloud still clearly remembered what it was like to think that his mind was his own and he was *free* only to find out that he was wrong, *so wrong,* and the people he loved were the ones who paid for that mistake.)
"Why here?" Sephiroth looked around where they were so deep inside the crater that for all he knew they were at the heart of the Planet. "Some attempt at poetic justice?"

"It's one of the two places where the Lifestream is nearest to the surface and the Crater was closer than Mideel," said Cloud dryly. "But that works too. I tried taking your advice, you know. Stepping back and thinking about what a stranger would do in my place and what kind of advice I'd give him."

"Did it help?" Sephiroth prompted.

"Not in the least."

Sephiroth snorted, and Cloud smiled, and for a moment everything was okay. It didn't last.

"Even though it's a shitty thing to do, I'm glad it's you."

For a split second, not for the first time, Sephiroth hated Cloud. "I'm not going to kill you."

Cloud drew Garmr and held it in a neutral position, neither offensive nor defensive. "I tried to do the right thing with you and still fucked it up. I'm sorry, Sephiroth."

"Cloud –"

Cloud was fast. Sephiroth barely had time to get the Masamune up and keep Garmr from cutting him in half, the clash of two blades ringing out across the cavern, the momentum sending reverberations through his hands and into his arms. He tried to shove Cloud backwards, but Cloud just bent with the motion and came back with flared wings and another jarring strike.

"Cloud," Sephiroth tried again, voice cracking, which had never happened to him before, and Cloud neatly sidestepped him and brought Garmr around in a smooth arc that would've severed Sephiroth's spine if he hadn't twisted neatly out of the way. A distracting whisper of oh god what am I doing that wasn't his own nearly cost Sephiroth a block; his body was moving thoughtlessly through the familiar steps of a fight, and a starburst of pain in his right shoulder blade burst open in a mess of bone and black feathers.

It was a little like sparring with Genesis and Angeal, the way that their respective wingspans turned their movements into wide, arcing flows of air current and momentum. And it was nothing at all like sparring with Genesis and Angeal, the way Sephiroth couldn't always tell where he ended and Cloud began and the fact that Cloud knew Sephiroth's fighting style better than Sephiroth himself. Sephiroth would step left and Cloud would already be moving right, wings snapping out to help him turn on a fine pointe and come up under Sephiroth's guard, except that Sephiroth would have already stepped back several paces to bring the Masamune back between them.

It wasn't until their eyes met over crossed blades, nearly nose to nose, that Sephiroth realized that Cloud's eyes were so bright less because of the mako and more because those were tears, dear gods – and then Cloud stepped back, left himself wide open, and so many years of fight-or-die meant that the Masamune had pierced Cloud's chest and come out the other side before Sephiroth could think, No.

No.

Cloud's weight was a stone that held the world in place and petrified Sephiroth's hands around the Masamune. Garmr clattered to the stone floor.

"Cloud," Sephiroth breathed, and Cloud smiled again, gripped the Masamune's razor-sharp blade
with both hands and pulled himself closer, gasping as the sword slid so easily through his flesh. The worst part was that there was no blood, no sign that everything had gone wrong until the blade finally sliced through Cloud's gloves into his palms. The feathers that once hid a scared little kid from monsters began drifting away like snow.

"Stop," Sephiroth choked out, but time didn't stop or rewind for him. The Masamune was so sharp that he couldn't even feel much resistance as Cloud forced it farther through his ribs. Blood slowly bloomed over Cloud's lips, finally, probably a collapsing lung, too much damage even for his inhuman body to keep up –

Cloud reached out a torn hand and pressed it against Sephiroth's chest, immediately smearing blood over his white shirt. He opened his mouth to say something, but his body slumped, head falling forward against Sephiroth's shoulder, and the only thing holding his body upright was the sword in his heart and Sephiroth himself.

Sephiroth's knees hit the ground hard. He couldn't even pull out the Masamune because it was too long, and he couldn't push Cloud away, so he knelt there with Cloud's body in his arms and the Masamune's hilt filling the space between them. He would never know what Cloud had been going to say.

A pair of booted, running footsteps behind him. A desperate, "Sephiroth!" that he didn't hear over the dead heartbeat in his ears. He buried his face in wild yellow hair and murmured, "You said everything would be okay."

...

The sight of Sephiroth cradling Cloud with the Masamune sticking out several feet past Cloud's spine seared itself permanently into Zack's brain. Mako still clung to Zack's skin after the fall through the fountain – and if taking Aeris' word that jumping into a gods-damned mako fountain was the right thing to do wasn't true love he didn't know what was – and he dimly heard Aeris' horrified gasp through the ringing in his ears and the pounding of his feet as he sprinted forward.

"Sephiroth!"

He slowed to a stop a few feet away, taking in the blood smeared over Sephiroth's clothes, Cloud's lips, Cloud's palms, the awkward angle of the Masamune between (through) them.

"Oh," murmured Aeris.

Sephiroth was silent.

Chapter End Notes

This is relevant.
Zack never really remembered how they managed to get back to the surface, call Cid over the PHS, and return to the *Highwind*.

"We lost another reactor," Vincent reported. "*Minimal casualties. Most of the civilians have been evacuated to a camp on the outskirts. They're calling it Edge, now."

"The Gold Saucer?"

"*The last WEAPON has been destroyed.*"

Zack thought of the body they'd left in the Crater, hands on its chest and wrapped around Garmr, made of the bones of Summons and WEAPONs alike. It was funny how Zack had never realized just how *small* Cloud was for a man his age; he'd always seemed like so much more.

"Yeah. I guess it has."

"Where's Cloud?" was the first thing Elena asked on their return, and she watched in confusion as Sephiroth left the Junon command center without a word.

"He," Zack started, pausing to unstick the words from the lump in his throat, but he didn't need to finish. Elena turned pale under bandages and had to brace herself with a hand against a console. She swallowed a few times, nodded, and if her eyes were red and her voice thick as she kept Junon's military running smoothly, no one commented.

"*Cosmo Canyon and North Corel were the ones who took down the WEAPON,*" Tifa told them, voice crackling with the distance between Junon and Rocket Town. "*We managed to get in contact with the Corel group working in alternative fuel methods. Their leader's name is Barret and he's a little pissed we didn't call them earlier for help, but he's volunteered to go down to Midgar to see about setting up a system to replace the reactors. Vincent and the reconstruction leaders have been working on it. The Wutaians are negotiating with what's left of ShinRa, but Reeve says he wants you and Sephiroth back as soon as possible.*"

Nothing like a global threat to bring the world together. Zack tried to convince himself that a few personal losses were worth the wellbeing of mankind, but he'd never been good at the whole 'leaving a man behind' thing.

Elena was the one who broke the news to Tifa. She was the one who listened to Tifa's muted sobs over the PHS, and she was the one who spent the better part of an hour sitting quietly on the line and wishing she was in Rocket Town to share Tifa's grief in person. Instead she was in her military guest quarters, sitting on the floor alone in the dark with her back against a cold wall, her slowly healing burns all itchy and her ass going numb.
In a lot of ways, basically every way possible, Aeris was a miracle. She took one look at Edge, metaphorically rolled up her sleeves, and told Zack and Sephiroth that she would help take care of it while they figured out how the future was going to unroll. After all, they didn't have anyone to tell them what was going to happen now.

A ShinRa executive, two SOLDIERs, four Turks, a dead Turk, a talking lion, five Wutaians, and a terrorist leader walk into a bar, Zack thought, looking around the warehouse temporarily serving as the newly born WRO's headquarters. Reeve, haggard and dark-eyed, sat at the head of a scavenged conference table that Zack recognized as belonging to the now-destroyed office of the SOLDIER head; somehow, something so mundane in the midst of all the upheaval was kind of hilarious.

It turned out that this Barret was a founding member of the same AVALANCHE group that had been giving ShinRa so much trouble. He was coarse, loud, temperamental, and probably the guy most qualified to talk about things like coal power and repurposing the fucking mako reactors once they get fixed up for the first time in two fucking decades of ignoring the common folk, now that ShinRa's finally got a personal gods-damned use for 'em. Well, he wasn't wrong.

My people have agreed to share their research with AVALANCHE, said Nanaki solemnly.

The Wutaians stood in a united front. Lord Godo will lend the aid of Wutai on a few conditions. Zack snuck a look at Sephiroth when it was agreed that all ShinRa forces would leave Wutai and return control to the rightful people, but he couldn't see anything past Sephiroth's marble-like expression.

When all eyes turned to him, Zack told them, Aeris says the Planet is quiet now. Then it had to be explained that there was one last Ancient still alive and she was down in Edge right now helping the doctors.

Then it's over, Reeve sighed, and for a little while while the warehouse was silent.

The news spread through the survivors. The actual cause of all the tragedy remained unknown, and so increasingly improbable stories ranging from geological instability to divine wrath ran rampant. Celebrations were muted and hope was a battered, cracked thing, but at least it was there.

It took a few weeks of hard, uncomfortable living before the first coal-driven power generators got up and running, and by then Edge was well on its way to becoming a permanent settlement with the fallen half of the Plate reduced to a still, dark gargoyle jutting up against the horizon.

There was talk of having a wake. What actually happened was that everyone ended up at the Seventh Heaven, which had managed to survive the chaos, around one of the big tables at the back: Elena, Tifa, Nanaki, Reeve, Cid, Vincent, Zack, Aeris, Sephiroth. Even the freaking wolf was there, sitting with his head on his paws under the table at everyone's feet, and Yuffie (who, much to her disgruntlement, was stuck with a glass of apple juice instead of the whiskey she'd demanded). Tifa and Elena were holding hands under the table. Zack looked around and couldn't get over how relatively few people had known someone like Cloud well enough, who cared enough, to show up, and who were still alive.
No one seemed to know how to break the tension until Cid grunted, raised his pint, and said, "To crazy, spiky-ass kids too fucking stubborn to give up."

"Did I ever tell you about the time me and Cloud broke into high-security ShinRa stuff?" grinned Elena, cheerfulness trying so hard to cover up the dark note under her voice.

Zack, catching on, chimed in, "The sci-fi movie incident."

"How about the time Cloud wasn't even tall enough to reach the cupboards and he still punched out a bully almost twice his size?" Tifa added with a lopsided smile.

No one left the bar until well after it was supposed to close. Veld (and what was it about Turks coming back to life, Zack had politely looked away when he saw the expression on Vincent's face the first time Vincent had seen Veld) remained a silent shadow behind the bar where Elfé used to stand, making no move to throw them out, and even if he had a different reason for it at least he was able to share in their mourning.

…

Zack only spoke with Sephiroth once about Cloud.

"At least he died a hero," he said quietly, but Sephiroth shook his head sharply.

"He wouldn't have wanted anyone to call him that."

They stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the edge of an overpass that had cracked apart, creating a high perch that gave them a view of the half-destroyed city below them and the new one rising from its rubble. Sunlight occasionally caught on the pendant hanging from a thin chain around Sephiroth's neck, lighting up the carved Ice materia like a small, cold star.

"He once admitted that you, Aeris, and I were the only reasons he kept going," Sephiroth said unexpectedly. "There were so many times he wanted to give up. I don't think he ever truly healed from everything – Hojo was just the final pressure point."

"Maybe," Zack said slowly, "but I don't think that's entirely true. He loved us, didn't he? That doesn't happen without a little bit of hope somewhere."

"I hated him sometimes. I hated how much control he had over me, like I was a puppet he could command. But he also gave me something no one else did."

"What?"

Sephiroth looked at him with old pain tucked in the corners of his lips. "He made he feel human."

"Did you love him?"

Sephiroth turned back to the skyline, brow furrowed. Zack was ready to give up waiting when Sephiroth finally admitted, "I don't know. He was…"

Everything, Zack supplied. Too many things to a traumatized child that had grown up into an extraordinary man.

"I suppose you're going to tell me not to be angry?"

Zack snorted. "Hell no. Be angry, you've earned at least that much. Just don't, y'know, let it be the only thing you ever feel."
They stood in companionable silence, sharing the weight on their shoulders. The Buster on Zack's back didn't make the weight any easier to bear, and he'd noticed that Sephiroth hadn't once used the Masamune since he pulled it out of Cloud's body and mechanically wiped the blood off with his shirt.

*Now what's going to happen,* Zack had asked Aeris the night before, and she'd replied, *Guess we'll find out the same way as everyone else now: one day at a time.*

... 

Once upon a time, it took a year, eight months, and three days for the Planet to die. Then the story got rewritten, and it took about that long for the Planet to heal.

Sephiroth parked his bike in front of Elmyra's house, tucked the box under an arm, and turned to the happily-panting wolf that had run after him the whole way here. "Fenrir, *stay.*"

Fenrir plopped his butt down on the ground beside the bike and looked up at him with his tail thumping lightly.

Sephiroth walked up to the door and knocked. An immediate duet of tiny voices still learning to talk burst out before Elmyra opened the door, balancing a solemn-faced toddler on one hip with a second one hiding behind her skirt and peeking up at Sephiroth.

"Hello," he greeted them with a small nod, taking care to meet the kids' eyes as well as Elmyra's.

"Come in, Sephiroth." She opened the door wider and stepped back to let him through the door. He was suddenly assaulted by the little girl jumping out from behind Elmyra and latching onto his leg with a happy coo.

He held out the box. "Aeris sent this."

"Aah, it must be the new clothes she promised. I swear it's impossible to keep up with how fast these little beasts are growing. Put it on the kitchen table, please, if you don't mind."

Sephiroth headed for the table with careful strides to avoid booting off the clinging child. She squealed and demanded, "Go! Go!"

"Marlene," Elmyra scolded, "Sephiroth's a person, not a playground."

Both children looked very dubious about this. The kid in her arms made grabby hands at Sephiroth's long hair and Elmyra said with exasperation, "Denzel, *really.*"

Sephiroth dutifully held out a thick lock of hair and managed not to wince when Denzel tangled his little hands in it and promptly yanked.

"You shouldn't encourage them," Elmyra scolded *him,* making Sephiroth feel a little like the kid who had once told Ifalna that knives were for stabbing, not eating.

"My apologies." He gently extricated his hair from Denzel's grip, ignoring the sulky glare he got in return. He made to leave and Elmyra said, "You don't have to run so quickly. Would you like something to drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you on a schedule?"
"I should return to the construction site." They didn't need him there at this point.

Elmyra had the same assessing gaze that Ifalna once had. Perhaps it came with motherhood. "All right," she said eventually, "but I expect to see you back here soon. The children miss having someone to play with that isn't their ol' mum."

"Of course, ma'am."

He removed Marlene from his leg, ignoring her protests, and left the cozy warmth of the cottage for the chillier air outside. It was nearing dusk and, without the Plate to act as insulation, the nights in Midgar's old slums got a little colder than they used to. Fenrir's tail started wagging again as Sephiroth approached.

"Let's go back," he murmured, patting the wolf on the head before swinging a leg over the bike and settling. Let's go back, not, Let's go home, because Sephiroth hadn't figured out where that was yet.

Neither Aeris nor Zack were at the church when he arrived, presumably still working over in Edge with Barret and the others. Fenrir bounded inside ahead of him and snuffled around the flower patch while Sephiroth climbed the rickety stairs to one of the makeshift bedrooms on the second floor. It had three solid walls and a ceiling, but where there should have been a fourth wall was just a few broken boards and empty space that spilled onto the flowers and pews below, and there was little more than a bed, a dresser, and a desk. He put his PHS on the desk and let the messages play as he shrugged off his coat and debated what the hell he was going to do with his time.

"Hey, Seph, it's me, listen, if you get a call about a barfight it was all Reno's fault – "

"It's Aeris. Some of the people down at the west construction site were asking about you today, they haven't seen you in a while – "

"Sephiroth, I need your input on the quarterly budget for SOLDIER – "

There would never be any new SOLDIERs. Sephiroth was thankful for that if only because it meant his obligations to them wouldn't last forever, and then he'd…well, he would figure that out if, when, it came to that.

The light coming in through the church's high arched windows was nearly gone when the experimental solar-powered generator, tucked away in one of the distant corners of the first floor, kicked on with a quiet hum and several warm-colored lamps on both floors lit up. Sephiroth started to go back down to check the readings that Reeve would ask about during their next meeting and was halfway down the stairs when he heard Fenrir bark and take off towards the entrance.

Immediately he had the military-issue knife from his boot, slightly more maneuverable in a church than a seven-foot sword, in hand as he pressed himself into the shadows along the wall and slunk towards the entrance. He was expecting a thief, or maybe Fenrir was just being overexcited and it would be Aeris and Zack laughing at his paranoia, but the first sight of unruly blond hair sent his knife jangling to the floor from nerveless fingers.

"Hey," Cloud said softly, and that single unremarkable word was enough to make time stumble into a frozen, suspended moment.

Cloud was in a pair of worn blue jeans and a black shirt washed so often it had become a soft, dark grey, and there was no blood, no hole where the Masamune would've slid through it like butter. The light of the lamps in the church sanctuary cast a healthy glow on Cloud's skin, made his eyes look so wonderfully, terribly alive as he leaned against the doorjamb with his hands in his pockets.
If it hadn't been for Fenrir butting up against Cloud's legs, knocking him back a step, Sephiroth would've been absolutely certain he was dreaming.

"If you're a hallucination," he says faintly, "we will have words."

Cloud straightened up. "I'm real. I'm not going anywhere." He bit his lip, a nervous motion that Sephiroth didn't ever remember seeing him do. "Unless you want me to. I understand if you do."

Sephiroth was walking forward purposefully without actually knowing what he was going to do when he got there, if he was going to punch Cloud or kiss him, since both seemed equally attractive. Cloud visibly braced himself but didn't back away, obviously preparing himself for whatever Sephiroth was going to dish out – which was, apparently, wrapping his long arms around Cloud and pulling him close so tightly that the breath was huffed out of him. He smelled like the plains outside Midgar, all dry earth and green grass, as though he'd been traveling for a while, with the faintest acid tinge of mako. Cloud didn't respond at first, holding himself stiffly, but slowly his muscles unwound and it wasn't long before his hands were fisting in the back of Sephiroth's shirt so tightly that his knuckles popped.

"You are an asshole," Sephiroth muttered into his hair. Cloud's shoulders shook with a laugh as he said in Sephiroth's chest, muffled, "You've been spending a lot of time with Zack."

"He's been here," Sephiroth said without thinking, and Cloud flinched, pulled back until Sephiroth's arms fell back to his side.

"So he…all of you…you've been all right?"

For a given definition. "Yes."

Cloud tilted his head and looked at Sephiroth hard, examining the furrow of his brows, the line of his lips, the steadiness of his gaze. Before he could push further, Sephiroth asked, "Why are you here?"

By which he meant how, and Cloud bought some time to search for words by stroking Fenrir's head. "I think this is the Planet finally letting me go. I don't…have anything to do anymore. In terms of, uh, saving the world or whatever."

"We did help with that."

Cloud ducked his head, though not so far that Sephiroth couldn't see a little smile. "Yeah. I was never very good at doing things on my own."

"Now what?" Sephiroth asked, unknowingly echoing Zack so long ago, and Cloud replied, "I hear there's still some reconstruction going on. There are always heavy beams that need lifting."

The thought that Cloud would suddenly appear on a day like any other and make it seem so easy – Sephiroth took a step back, leaving Cloud alone on the threshold. He didn't say anything, but it seemed that he didn't have to; there was guilt on Cloud's face, and fear, but also determination.

"I'm not…okay," said Cloud. "I'm not, and I've hurt you. But if you're still willing, I…I want to try anyway."

"You think it's worth it?" asked Sephiroth, because he was an idiot, because he could always be trusted to put logic over emotion even when his heart is pounding out, Yes, say yes, please.

Cloud took a moment to scrutinize Sephiroth, from the hair that had slid carelessly over a shoulder,
the long leanness of his torso, the strength of his legs. All that Sephiroth could do was stand straight and still and wait, feeling like it was important that he wasn't the one to reach out this time. A solid minute passed before Cloud stretched out a hand, gently pushed the wayward hair back behind Sephiroth's ear, and let his fingers trail down the curve of his jaw. "It feels different, now," he murmured. "You're still there, in the back of my head, but I feel like…me." He snorted wryly. "For what that's worth."

Sephiroth could feel it too, that small presence in the back of his mind that wasn't his own, but it wasn't nearly as consuming as it used to be. He waited, and Cloud went on, "I want to see what it's like when the Planet isn't going to hell and our worst fight will be about taking out the trash. I want it to be a choice that we both make."

It was after dark on a day that had started like any other, in which the most exciting thing to happen was Zack's bitch-face when Sephiroth and Aeris both tried banning him from hanging out so often with Reno, in which Sephiroth had volunteered to take a package to Elmyra to escape the chaos of the people-filled construction site, in which there was absolutely no indication – no prophecy, no prediction, no visions – that this would be the day Cloud came back alive.

Sephiroth laced his fingers with Cloud's and said quietly, "Welcome home."

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End Notes

Extended author's notes:

In all honesty, I don't much care for this fic. I suppose I have a little love it in the sense that it's by far the longest thing I've ever written and I managed to finish it, but it was stressful getting it done and actually burned me out on the fandom closest to my heart for a long time. It was meant to be an id!fic of guilty pleasures (c'mon, a wolf? Is Cloud a Disney princess now?), and my anxious wee self was intimidated by how positive the response was (because that makes sense, right?).

I'm sure the last two chapters won't meet a lot of people's expectations. The events themselves were planned right from the beginning, but I just needed to see this thing finished. I did my best with what I had emotionally available for ET, so if it doesn't meet expectations I hope it least provides closure. I did learn some valuable lessons, however: longfic and ensemble casts are fucking difficult to balance, always write for content rather than chapter length (classic FF.Net, ahaa), and never post an unfinished fic.

The plot was based shamelessly off of Knowing Shadow'sFusion, which was the only time-travel fic I knew of at the time, and even more off of Twig's A Long Hard Road. When new time-travel fics starting appearing, I made a point of not reading them because I didn't want to be tempted into stealing other people's undoubtedly better ideas. Any similarities between ET and fics not explicitly cited in the beginning are coincidences, but always feel free to ask.

For all that I've complained about and railed against this fic, I truly appreciate every comment of support and constructive criticism. Some people professed how they were affected and it's so incredibly humbling to think of that. The idea that others would dedicate time and resources to fanart and a podfic is amazing to me. I've flailed and blushed both online and IRL about it, and I really can't find the words to adequately explain how honored I am.
My Tumblr, if you want more FF7 screaming.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!