Terrorism & Anarchy

by VarianN

Summary

Cloud's first thought on waking in the Shinra training grounds..."Where's the hidden camera?". What is one supposed to do when they find themselves inexplicably in the past? Become a terrorist four years early, of course. And look up a few old friends.

Notes

Originally posted on fanfiction. Reposting here with minor cosmetic updates. Will be putting up all the chapters.
What's the Joke?

"Strife!"

He jerked upright, the people around him scrambling away. His hand immediately rose to his smothered head only to realize it felt smothered due to his visored helmet.

Helmet?

A quick second look at the people revealed an entire squad of young, Shinra infantry in uniform.

Since when did Reeve let Rufus put WRO recruits in old Shinra uniforms?

"What the hell, Strife?" A much taller man in a Soldier Second Class uniform pressed through the crowding infantrymen. "Did you think it would be funny to collapse and get up in less than two breaths? Were you practicing a fainting spell for some Loveless rehearsal?"

Everyone stared. No one gave away any kind of hint what the joke was. He glanced around again, looking for perhaps Tuesti with a video camera or Yuffie and Reno ducking around a corner. If he didn't know any better, he'd say he was on the old Shinra army training yard. But that was impossible. He and Sephiroth had made short work of the remnants of the Shinra complex when they fought there.

"Yes, you, Strife! Get off your ass and back in formation!" The man spun on his heel and pushed back through the troopers.

The two nearest Shinra impersonators swooped in and hauled Cloud to his feet by his arms. In simple shock, he let them. No one, not even his closest comrades and teammates during the Sephiroth crisis had manhandled him quite like this.

"Hurry it up," the one on his left hissed. "None of us want any more extra laps than we've already had this week."

On sheer instinct, he shifted to fall in line in the middle of the block of troopers. He kept his movements subtle only because he didn't want to give whoever was responsible for this farce the satisfaction of seeing him flustered. He'd faced off against monsters and sadists and evil aliens, in real life and in his head. He could certainly keep his cool with someone trying to convince him he was an infantryman back in the Shinra army.

He fidgeted again, waiting for some kind of instruction, wishing the culprits would have gotten him clothes that fit instead of what he'd probably worn when he actually was an infantryman. He wasn't the tallest of men, a little below average perhaps, but what he lacked in height, he made up for in demonic strength and mental baggage.

But that wasn't the point. The waist was tight on his pants, the belt practically cutting into his bones. The boots would leave blisters on his toes and heels if he had to wear them that tight for long. And though he did prefer formfitting shirts, to keep any material from getting in the way when he swung his sword, the one he had on was a bit ridiculous. If he even tried to wield a sword he'd rip the seams.

A shrill whistle ripped through the air. A memory shoved its way to the surface, though somehow it was Zack's, and he remembered being on the blowing end of the whistle. It meant that the infantry ran. The formation leapt into motion and he kept pace. The Soldier Second Class impersonator didn't
immediately start screaming at them so he took the opportunity to get a better idea of where he was. The sooner he figured out the prank, the better. He was going to perhaps cast Toad on the culprit. Toad and Slow and drop them in the middle of downtown Edge to see how many times they got stepped on.

Dozens of infantry impersonator squads scuttled about on the practice yard, each with their own bellowing Third or Second Class impersonator. It was a ridiculous waste of resources to reconstruct the area and make all these uniforms for the impersonators. Edge needed those funds. If it turned out to be Reno then he'd hunt down all the remaining Turks then strangle Shinra for not keeping his dogs under control.

They weren't even a third of the way around the yard before half the troopers around him began breathing heavily.

He scowled within his helmet. Something about this situation tickled his memory. He ran along with the troopers, but let his attention wander. With the battlefield experience he had, he didn't have problems multitasking.

The set he'd been dumped in was certainly elaborate. It had to be some kind of simulator. The Shinra building, whole and pristine, loomed just over the far wall. Simulator or not, that still meant the lot of troopers around him could be real or fake.

When they swung past another squad, he caught the glow of mako-bright eyes giving a bit of shine despite the sun. That was a twist. Whoever it was really did want to convince him he was a teen back in the Shinra army.

On completing the first lap, everyone around him was breathing heavily. Three more laps and he was getting bored. If he had chosen to prank someone with a scene from their past he would make it more interesting than this.

Another three laps and two puking infantry impersonators later, he was really bored, and getting heavy flashes of familiarity. And he was less convinced that the environment was a simulator the longer it went. He'd never seen a simulator, even the fancy ones in Zack's memories that Shinra used to have, that replicated things like bird shit on the running track and the smell of puke and pillars of pollution from the plate reactors.

But that left him with the theory of an incredibly elaborate set.

Another sharp whistle ripping through the air startled him to a stop.

"Alright grunts," the Soldier bellowed, "head to the armory to check out your weapons for tomorrows, get in whatever practice you think you need, and don't forget to eat. You lot had better hope you get through the Soldier entrance exam tomorrow because its remedial lessons before you're allowed a third try."

His eyed widened behind his visor as a name floated to the forefront of his mind. Second Class Soldier David Brenholt. That one name seemed to open the floodgates and names of the infantrymen around him blossomed within his mind.

With a growing sense of anxiety, he readjusted his assessment of reality to "hallucination". It certainly didn't glow like it did when Aerith or Zack pulled him into visions. However, it didn't have the sharp edges his mako-induced coma hallucinations bore. He racked his brain trying to figure out if he'd told anyone about this particular day.
The group broke formation, and he ambled with the ones headed toward the armory. He did feel rather naked without a sword.

A knot formed in the pit of his stomach as he forced himself to consider that this might actually be reality. He'd seen his fair share of spine tingling horrors, but the thought that he might be back in Shinra's army unnerved him more than he would ever openly admit, even more so than having somehow travelled through time. Army life was tough the first time around and didn't think he'd fare much better this time round, though for an entirely different set of reasons.

He knew without a doubt that he still had all his mako and Jenova enhancements, not to mention his height, weight, and muscle. That would explain why his clothes fit poorly. Of course he could probably be grateful that he didn't grow much after actually being in the army. But that could possibly be the fault of being trapped in a test tube and experimented on for years.

He shook his head ruefully. If this was real then that would mean –

His pocket vibrating interrupted those thoughts. He froze. The PHS in his pocket continued whirring.

He pulled it out slowly, eying the caller ID. Zack.

He took a deep breath and flipped the PHS open. "Strife speaking."

"Whoa, Spiky, what's with the new phone answering technique? I got used to that soft little 'hello'."

He swallowed hard, squeezing his eyes shut as hope flared inside him. He'd know the voice that generally existed only inside his head anywhere.

"Zack," he whispered.

The silence stretched a little too long. "Hey, Cloud, what's going on?" Zack's voice turned serious.

Rapidly recalculating, he decided it best to play along before he could determine what to do. "No, it's nothing Zack. I just finished drill. I'm heading to the armory to pick up a sword for the first of the exams tomorrow."

"Great," Zack piped, all seriousness gone. "I can meet you in the mess afterward."

He cringed. That certainly wouldn't work. His best friend would certainly notice if he was several inches taller with a swordsman's musculature and mako bright blue eyes. "Sorry Zack. I really have to study tonight. I'm not failing the exams this time. I'm just going to grab some rations and eat over my books."

"Aww, that's no fun Spiky. You'll make yourself sick with the stress."

"Please Zack. I just need to study."

He heard his friend blow a raspberry into the PHS and couldn't help the upward twitch of one side of his mouth. "You've got to promise me we'll head out for some fun your first free day after the exams then."

"Only if you don't have a mission."

"You can bet I won't. I can't have myself working too hard now can I? I still haven't taken you down to that church I found yet." Zack's voice took on a softer tone that he'd only heard once in his life. "I know you'll like the people there."
Aerith was here, too. "If they like you, Zack, then they're probably great."

"Aww, Spiky, you're making me blush." Contrarily, the man burst out laughing afterward.

"I'll see you later, Zack."

"Later, Cloud."

He snapped the phone shut and dropped it back in his pocket. Folding his arms, he scowled at the Shinra tower.

Just on the off chance that he had somehow wound up in the past, either Aerith and the Planet were responsible or Sephiroth was. If it was Aerith, she had some explaining to do. If it was the Planet, then Aerith could get the explanation for him. If it was Sephiroth, then he desperately needed to figure out what was going on before the whole world went to hell in a hand basket years earlier than it was supposed to.

"Strife!"

He half turned to see Brenholt.

"Get going. You've been dismissed. And requisition a new uniform. It's good to see you're finally filling out but now that uniform is too small."

He turned without a word and headed off the yard.

But first things first, he had to get out of Shinra. If he was doing anything, it wasn't sticking around to act out the exact same scenario of violence that started with Sephiroth burning down his hometown and culminated with Sephiroth trying to knock the planet out of orbit with a meteor, thereby leaving the entire world vulnerable to further calamities like Deepground and Geostigma. And he was definitely not going to spend another four years as a lab experiment. No doubt it would be even worse the second go around because Hojo would be trying to figure out how he got his enhancements in the first place.

No Shinra, no sir. He'd been a pretend Soldier long enough. He had no desire to be one for real.

* * *

"You sure you can carry this sword, infantryman?"

He took the blade by the hilt and gave it a quick spun. The Third Classes overseeing the armory flinched. He bit down a smile. It had decent balance and about the same weight as First Tsurugi from his fusion sword. It would have to do until he could get the funds to travel to Bone Village or Wutai for a better weapon. He couldn't even think about having something custom made yet. At least he could do harnesses on his own and carry several blades as he gathered more.

"No problem," he said.

"Good. Just be sure to keep it clean while you have it and check it back in promptly after your tests this week."

"Yes, sir."

He slung the sheath and belt harness over his shoulder and set the blade hanging against his back just the way he liked it.
"You'd like to be discharged?" Both Third Class Soldiers behind the administration desk paused in their work to stare. He probably looked exceptionally odd.

He changed into the clothes he'd stolen from the free day laundry and had a bandana tied across his forehead to force his unruly hair to lie flat over his face and obscure his eyes. Of course, they still glowed so he decided to be a bit more creative when it came to covering it up.

Among his survival gear, he'd found a headlamp. He reasoned that if he could con a bunch of touchy feely men in a public bath out of their special underwear and then cross dress convincingly enough to make a mobster believe he was a woman, he could walk around Shinra with a headlamp angled to shine on his face without destroying his pride. If it meant he didn't have to be tortured again, he was more than willing.

"Yes. Turns out this soldiering thing is a bit too much for me. I'm going to find something else to do that doesn't involve army rations or calculus."

With his enhance hearing, he heard one whisper to the other, "Damn country coward."

He almost chuckled aloud. That Soldier would be a coward, too, if he had to face losing his best friend and spending several years being tortured.

"You do realize that if you withdraw, it's the equivalent of a dishonorable discharge and you'll never be able to work for Shinra?"

"Yeah," he said wistfully, or at least as regretfully as he could, "I know it ruins a lot of chances but I just can't take it. At least pulling out looks better than being kicked out. I don't think I'll be able to pass the Soldier exams this second time around anyway."

Frostily, one Soldier demanded his ID. He dutifully handed the card over.

"Looks like you've got a sword checked out."

"I'm turning that in next. Once that's done, I'll clear out my bunk and leave."

"You really sure about this kid?" His hands hovered over the keyboard. "Once I submit this there's no going back."

He smiled. "I'm sure."

He ambled through the slums like he belonged. Gone was the headlamp and in its place, a pair of riding goggles hid his eyes. A bandana contained his hair as best it could. It stuck out the back and tickled his ears but at least it didn't stick up in that recognizable crest. The sword rested comfortably against his back, already feeling like a part of him and keeping the locals from bothering him. He'd already been pleased to use it to take out some low level vermin and get several thousand gil and some items. Nothing particularly useful but it was enough to get him a place to stay if he needed it.

When the church came into view, he smiled to himself. This had the great potential to be very interesting. If anyone either knew what was going on and explained it, or believed him when he told the story, it would be the flower girl.

When he pushed one door to the chapel open, he felt the squeak begin and immediately paused to
circumvent the sound. He slipped inside with a wry smile. Sequestering ones brooding self in the ruins of a church certainly had its perks when one wanted to be quiet in the same church when finding themselves inexplicably backward in time.

He paused just inside the building, quietly swinging the door shut behind him. Aerith knelt, back toward him, hair done up in the high ponytail he knew from Zack's memories rather than the braid he knew from his own. And the white sundress suited her just as well as the pink.

He strolled silently up the aisle, avoiding the squeaky boards, and took a seat on the front most pew. He watched her work, deft fingers churning the dirt and plucking away dead leaves and flowers. The one thing he'd never really gotten to do, as either himself or Zack, was simply watch this young woman work. Zack couldn't hold still long enough and he'd never been given the chance.

A handful of minutes must have passed before she caught sight of him with her peripheral vision. She actually jumped to her feet with a small shriek.

"What are you doing here?" she blurted, hand over her heart. Then she squinted at him. "Cloud?"

At least she knew something. "How much do you know?"

"You could at least say, 'I'm happy to see you Aerith. So glad you're not dead yet.' , and make me feel somewhat valued, you know."

Grinning, he moved forward in a flash and swept the lithe girl up in his arms. "I've missed you. I had no idea if you would even know who I was."

When he set her down, she slapped him on the shoulder. "So you came in here like a creepy stalker and waited for me to notice you? Seriously, Cloud, you look like a creep. Why are you wearing the bandana and goggles?"

He lifted the goggles to rest on his forehead. He quirked a brow and pointed at his eyes.

"Ohh." One of her delicate hands rested on his cheek. "How did no one notice these at Shinra?"

"I had my helmet on most of the time, and when I didn't I wore a bandana to force my hair into my face, and wore a headlamp to hide the shine."

He already expected the young woman to burst out laughing, he just hadn't expected it to bring her to tears.

As her laughter died down, he said, "I've already taken care of that and withdrawn from Shinra."

Aerith instantly sobered. "Why did you do that Cloud? The Planet has been whispering that you're not doing what it's expecting and you're making it very worried. You need to be in Shinra to stop Sephiroth."

"Do I?" He shook his head. "You look like you're seventeen Aerith. That means you've either just got your future memories or the Planet told you I was coming. You still look like you belong. I didn't just get memories. I've still got all my mako and Jenova enhancements. For Gaia's sake Aerith, I'm twenty-six. I'm about the same age as Genesis and Angeal. I'm older than Zack. I'm older than Zack was when he died. How am I supposed to explain to Shinra that a seventeen year old suddenly has enhancements that rival Sephiroth? How can I possibly pretend to be an infantryman?"

She sighed. "You have very valid points Cloud. But how do you expect to stop Sephiroth if you aren't in Shinra?"
He smirked. "Become a terrorist."

The comical widening of her eyes brought out his laughter.

"A terrorist? Cloud, what are you thinking?"

"I worked as a mercenary after I thought I was Zack and got scooped up by Avalanche right off the bat. They're eco-terrorists against Shinra. I thought I'd just start on that a bit early and form my own terrorist group because it's not like Tifa or Barret are part of the current group." The side of his mouth kicked up again. "I thought I'd call it Strife Delivery Service."

Aerith tried to scowl but couldn't help a few giggles. "You have a terrible sense of humor." Getting herself under control, she asked, "What are you planning to do first?"

His smile faded. "I figure I'll keep the first plan to myself so you can deny knowing anything just in case. But once it happens you'll know it was me. After that, I'll phone you and keep you updated."

After they exchanged PHS numbers, she asked, "Do you want me to call to keep you updated on Shinra news?"

"No thanks. I've got that covered. I've joined the fan clubs to keep up on the gossip, the conspiracy email lists to watch the other terrorists, and I rigged Zack's PHS to blind copy me on everything so I'll get any communication he does." He paused. "He gets a lot of weird stuff from Kusiel."

"How did you do that Cloud?" she asked incredulously.

"I picked up a few things from Reeve last time around. He likes talking about his toys."

"Are you leaving Midgar?" she asked, taking his hands.

He smiled. "In the morning. I'm going to patrol the slums and take out as many monsters as I can for the gil and items they've got. I've got enough for some basic materia and bangles. With my enhancements it's not like I need much."

"Do you want a mat in the back of the church? I would offer you a bed at home, but I don't think my mother would keep from asking questions if I brought you back with me."

"The mat is fine. You know I like it here anyway. And the fewer people who see me the better." He started backing toward the doors. "I'll be back pretty late in the evening."

Aerith smiled. "I'll leave a lamp for you even though I know you don't need it."

He smiled back and headed out of the church. He pulled his goggles back over his eyes and strolled toward the more slummy part of the slums. There would be slightly better useless vermin to kill there.

Midway through Sector 6, he spied a shock of red hair he did not want to be seeing. Even from this distance he could pick out the Turk's slightly nasal voice and irritating laughter. It wasn't that the man was entirely unpleasant, but it disturbed him to have to contemplate how someone could sound like they were purring nasally.

He kept his pace measured and gave Reno and Rude a cursory glance like other passersby so as not to look like he was ignoring them.

"Hey man," Reno said directly at him, lifting his chin.

He slowed but kept his motions smooth.
"Those 'er cool goggles. Where'd ya get 'em?"

"Wall market."

"Thanks." Reno mock saluted him and moved on with Rude.

He exhaled in relief and continued past them. He caught Reno saying, "Did that guy look familiar?" before passing out of hearing range.

* * *

"Aerith?" Zack called, jogging into the church. "I've come to visit," he continued in a sing-song voice. On reaching the flowers, he saw no sign of the lovely flower girl. He scratched his head and peered around.

His eyes narrowed at the rolled bedroll and lamp near the back wall behind some of the chapel pillars. He did a quick lap around the chapel to search for squatters. No one was allowed to stay in Aerith's church.

He was contemplating climbing into the rafters when the church doors squeaked open. He spun and sent the entering woman a blinding grin. "Aerith! Just the girl I was looking for. I came to visit. Do you need any chores done? I can help." He strode forward and pointed the direction of the bedroll and lamp. "You haven't been having trouble with squatters have you? I'll make sure they leave your church alone. Can't have them ruining the flowers."

She giggled, a hand covering her mouth.

"It's good to see you too Zack. I was just going to tend the flowers this morning. And no problems with squatters. I let a friend stay here last night. He left early this morning. He was going to stay in the inn in Wall Market but I insisted he shouldn't have to pay their prices."

"A friend?" he asked, suddenly suspicious of some stranger's intentions.

"Yes Zack," she said, soft smile widening, "a friend. He's sort of like a younger brother." She shrugged. "Or like an older brother depending on the day."

Grin returning, he said, "That's awesome. I wish I'd gotten to meet him. I have a friend who's like a little brother. I want to introduce the two of you. He's a great guy. He could do with a little more confidence but I just know he's going to be great. He said he'd meet you after he's done with his tests this week. The twerp told me to leave him alone so he can study. Can you believe that? I plan to take him under my wing when he gets into the Soldier program. It'll be great going on missions with him. And the kid reveres Sephiroth, wants to be a hero just like him. And you know what else he told me? He said that anyone who liked me had to be great and since I was talking about you that means he thinks you're great already. Isn't that awesome?"

"That's amazing Zack," she said with a soft smile. "I can't wait to make friends with him."

"And then you'll introduce me to your friend?" It never occurred to him that Aerith might have other male friends. He would hate having to compete for her attention.

"I'm sure he'd love you," she said.

"Sweet. I can't wait until Spiky is done with all these tests. We're going to have a party."

* * *
Cloud had to say he was getting quite used to his disguise now. It had been interesting in Junon. Apparently a bandana and goggles meant you were from Midgar. He'd gotten pretty decent prices on the bits of vanquished monsters he sold there. He'd even managed to get enough high level items and gil to get in on the pricier weapons and materia the stores had to offer. It had nothing on the rare materia and weapons he'd had before but a second good sword and leveled up materia were always nice. He felt better with two weapons anyway.

The trip across the ocean to Costa del Sol hadn't been much fun but he'd made sure to pick up buckets of motion sickness meds before leaving.

He passed through a thriving North Corel and picked up a third sword along with a pack full of dynamite. He hadn't stayed long as Scarlet was apparently heading their way. But rather than take the long way around via central Corel, he headed straight up over the mountains. He'd come up on the Nibelheim reactor from behind to see what sort of security he was looking at. Then he'd swing down to the mansion and see what was going on. Hojo should be in Midgar fiddling with Sephiroth and gloating over Hollander's imminent downfall. Or failure. He was still a bit unsure of how far back he'd been thrown.

He huffed in exasperation as he finally spotted the reactor. It was one more mountain over. Without all the mako enhancements he'd never have survived the snow or temperatures at these altitudes, but even still, it was cold. Not even the Nibel wolf pelt he was using for camouflage did much for warmth.

He'd swapped the bandana out for a white one to help hide his shock of bright blond hair. He wasn't sure he needed to bother. A little observation showed only six Shinra regulars guarding the reactor. They split the shifts in three and served in pairs, staying at the entrance and patrolling around the building once every hour. For being in such an out of the way place, he had to commend them for their dedication to regulations. That still didn't stop him from slipping in through the front entrance when they made a circuit around the building.

He slipped through the reactor like he knew the halls second nature. He worried for a moment about slipping past the cameras before deciding that by the time anyone looked at the video feeds he'd be long gone…along with the reactor.

In the core, he found exactly what he'd been expecting, pods filled with mutated soldiers and a vault housing the evil alien bitch responsible for the whole downward spiral of society. He sneered at her quietly floating in her tank and laid an extra couple of explosives around her specially. Thankfully, he didn't feel the slightest sense of awareness from her. He'd been hoping she wouldn't wake unless Sephiroth showed, despite all her genes he was carrying, and was pleased to see that seemed to be the case.

A bit of red caught his attention though and he picked up a summon. It stirred sleepily and he sensed fire. His eyebrows rose. Who just left an Ifrit summon lying on a shelf in a mako reactor.

On his way out, he laid enough explosives to do Cid proud and slipped out the next time the current pair of guards headed around the reactor.

His pace slowed as he neared Nibelheim. He had to keep a careful eye out for the town residents. Tifa especially liked to prowl the upper trails to practice her hand-to-hand.

But he encountered no children while coming up behind Shinra manor. He couldn't afford to wait long before getting inside. Even if the Shinra people didn't see him, Chaos would sense him and wake Vincent. He could already sense the Turk and his demonic companion from this distance and he couldn't expect Chaos to ignore his own powerful presence.
He shrugged off the wolf pelt and pulled the materia he'd picked especially for this mission and powered up. He'd managed to get it to level 3 and paired it with an All to cover the whole manor. He packed his impressively deep magic reserves behind the casting, the air quivering with green energy as he did so, and cast on the entire house. He pushed the spell farther than it was meant to go, into the basement to catch any scientists that might be loitering there.

Spell complete he sprinted forward and threw himself into the air and through the second story windows. Infantrymen sprawled sporadically on the second floor. On seeing each one, he stripped them of any protective accessories and cast Mini. He gathered them up in their shrunken forms and headed back outside. He deposited them at the back of the property and cast Stop. Then he sprinted back and covered the ground floor, shrinking scientists and troops alike and taking them out to join the first batch.

The basement was easiest to clear out, no troops and only three scientists. He ignored Vincent's room for the moment and headed upstairs. He pried up the floor boards in the hall and took the safe's code with him across the manor. He dialed in and stepped back as Lost Number oozed out of the safe. He waited just until it cleared the safe before pulling two swords and hacking it to pieces. The neon colored monster was resistant to magic anyway but couldn't possibly stand a chance against such a powered up opponent.

He found Nanaki's Cosmo Memory in the safe, surprised that Shinra already had that bit of treasure. Then nabbed the basement key and Odin from inside the safe. The summon materia hummed for a moment and he sensed Odin stir, assessing its new handler. It seemed pleased enough as it gave a off a few red sparks and quieted. He huffed in amusement. Shiva hadn't been quite as pleased when he found it in Junon. It tried to freeze his hand off for stealing it from the dolphin.

Key in hand, he headed to the basement. He rifled through the library, skimming over passages of misinformed text declaring Jenova a Cetra and Sephiroth her biological son instead of just the experiment born of Lucrecia that he was.

He set more explosives than strictly necessary and steeled himself for the meeting with Vincent and Chaos.

When he opened the door to Vincent's proverbial prison, he saw all the coffins he expected, but what he did not expect was to see Vincent calmly sitting on top of his coffin. He supposed he should have taken into account that it might happen given the senses the former Turk and the demon had.

"Have they sent you to deal with me?" the gunman asked, voice deep and rough from years of no use.

"I don't work for Shinra." He pulled up the goggles to expose his eyes.

Red eyes narrowed at that. "Your mako glow says otherwise."

Measuring his tone, he said, "Then your mako glow says you work for Shinra too."

Equally cautious, Vincent asked, "What makes you so confident I don't?"

No real point in answering that. "I'm here to make you an offer."

"I'm not looking for a job," Vincent said, pushing to his feet. He turned and lifted his coffin's lid.

"Might you be interested in information on Lucrecia?"
Vincent froze.

He continued, "Or her son?"

Vincent turned, glare evident on his features despite the cape collar trying to mask them. "What do you know of Lucrecia?"

Unwilling to have this discussion in the home of his own torture and modification, he said, "I've cleared the manor. I'm going to blow this building up. I'd appreciate it if you evacuated as well."

At the hard look from the gunman, he said, "I'll answer your questions once I'm done in Nibelheim."

Vincent nodded sharply.

He nodded in reply and spun on his heel. In the hall, he didn't wait, he sprinted up the stairs and headed out the back of the manor. He leapt over the sleeping, shrunken, stopped Shinra personnel, scooped up the wolf pelts, pulled his goggles over his eyes, and headed straight up the mountain. He didn't aim directly for the reactor, but the mountain slope overlooking it.

He crouched on the edge of a cliff among some trees and pulled out his PHS.

"Are you blowing the reactor as well?" Vincent's voice next to him didn't startle him, though the gunman's silence often took him by surprise. Though he supposed he couldn't say it happened often as this was technically the first time they had met.

"Yeah. Gaia is no place for evil, alien parasites." He couldn't help smirking at Vincent's speculative look.

He dialed a number on the PHS and hit 'call'. A bright flash shone from the edge of the town far below them. He hurriedly dialed the second number and waited. When the explosive boom rocked the air, shaking snow from surrounding trees, the two guards in front of the reactor lurched forward. They sprinted to the edge of the clearing to peer down the canyon at the town.

He hit 'call'.

The top of the reactor blew out in the multicolored fire of a mako explosion. The blast threw both infantrymen to the ground where they slid down the trail. The nearest trees ripped right out of the ground and caught on fire. He cast ice at the trees to keep the mako flames from spreading but let the reactor burn. He enjoyed watching the remaining structure deform and melt under the heat of the fire.

"Lucrecia?" Vincent's voice cut through the relative silence following the blast.

He pushed to his feet and fished a plastic encased envelope out of a cargo pocket. He flung it like a shuriken, thank you Yuffie, to the clearing in front of the rapidly disappearing reactor.

"Do you mind if we walk while we talk?" He actually waited for an answer.

"Walk," Vincent demanded.

He turned, angling southeast. By the time he finished his story, they would probably be near Lucrecia's cave.
Nothing seemed to make sense anymore, and Zack was seriously considering having a panic attack. He knocked on the door in front of him. Probably one or two too many times as the voice that called him in sounded irritated.

"Come in, Zack." Inside, Sephiroth's glowing green eyes met his with some modicum of exasperation in an expression faintly reminiscent of Angeal. "What is it? I only have so much time before my meeting with President Shinra."

"Something's wrong," he said. "Something's weird and I can't figure out what to do." He shook his head and his voice took on an edge he refused to think of as slightly hysterical. "Something's going on and it doesn't make any sense."

Sephiroth turned from irritated to serious in a flash. "What is it?"

He flipped open his PHS and began firing messages to Sephiroth's email. "So you know my friend Cloud Strife?"

"The infantryman," the general confirmed. "You've spoken of him before."

"He blew me off a few days ago to study for, and take, the Soldier entrance exam again."


"No joking, Sephiroth," he snapped, drawing a quirked brow from his commanding officer. He took a deep breath. "Sorry sir." He shook his head again. "It's just that I called him the day before the exams started. He told me to leave him alone this week so he could concentrate. It's no big deal because he usually does that before evaluations and the like. But he promised we'd go below the plate next week when he had leave. Only this morning I got bored because I really didn't want to wait another three days before exams were done. So I pulled up the in-progress exam results. I figured Spiky couldn't get mad at me for checking on him because I'd never tell him I'd done it."

That got him a sharp look but he didn't care.

"Only I don't find his name anywhere, like he's not taking the exams. So I dug a little deeper and found that he withdrew from Shinra forty-seven minutes after I talked to him. After our call, he went straight to the armory and checked out a sword I know he can't wield because I've done a little on the side training with him. Then he waited a half hour and went and withdrew entirely."

He liked the growing frown on Sephiroth's face. It meant the man was beginning to feel the oddness of the situation.

"So I thought maybe the records were wrong and pulled up the video feeds. This is where it gets really weird. Pull up the files I sent you."

Sephiroth turned to his computer and immediately opened all the attachments. He walked around to the general's side of the desk and pointed. "This one first."

The Shinra training yard appeared on the screen. It was filled with groups of infantrymen and the Soldiers training them. He pointed again. "That one there is Cloud. Third row, second from the right." He looked visibly smaller than the others though not quite skinny.
The video screen suddenly went white as though from bright lights or electrical interference. "I checked the system," he said. "Every camera in the whole Shinra complex flared out like this for exactly two point nine seconds."

When the recorded images returned, the infantrymen were clustered around one of their members on the ground. "That's him on the ground."

The tinny yell of the Second leading the group piped through the audio feed above the general white noise. Cloud bolted upright, his helmet swiveling around as he took in his surroundings and looked around like he didn't know what was going on. A few moments later, a couple other infantrymen hauled him up and they all fell back in formation and resumed their run around the yard.

"Now fast forward until he's closer to the camera and pause."

Sephiroth did so.

"Pull up the same video in a second screen and pause when he's closest to the camera before the white out."

Sephiroth operated these machines with ridiculous efficiency.

"Now look at the two. After the white out he's taller."

He thought he might be losing Sephiroth when a brow quirked at him.

"No seriously Sephiroth. Look at him compared to the two troopers he's between. He's clearly shorter than both. But look here," he pointed to the other window. "He's clearly taller than that one on the right and he's almost as tall as the other one."

"These two images aren't at the same angle Zack. It could be an optical illusion."

"I'll show you an optical illusion," he muttered, snatching the mouse from Sephiroth. He left the image with the smaller Cloud there but fast-forwarded the other one. "Now here he's talking on his PHS with me. Look at his clothes Sephiroth. They're way too small. The belt looks like it's going to cut him in half."

"He's a growing teen Zack. He's bound to go up a uniform size or two."

Ignoring his commander's words, he pulled up the next video feed. Cloud popped up, still in his too small uniform, in the armory.

"You sure you can carry this sword, infantryman?" the Third Class asked in the video feed.

Cloud took the weapon and flung it around like nothing. "He couldn't lift a blade that size with one hand three weeks ago Sephiroth. I know, I was there," he paused and pointed. "See that little quirky thing he did there? He's trying not to laugh. He made those Thirds twitch on purpose. Cloud is a quiet kind of kid. He doesn't poke fun like that. And he definitely doesn't fling broadswords around like nothing."

"No problem," the weird Cloud said.

"Good. Just be sure to keep it clean while you have it and check it back in promptly after your tests this week," the Third said.

"Yes, sir."
"See? There's that quirky thing again." Then, as Cloud flung harness and blade over his back, he said, "And I checked Cloud's last sword class. I've never even heard him talk about carrying the weapons on his back. It's always been on his hip."

"You wear your sword on your back," Sephiroth said flatly.

"That's because my sword is as tall as me."

"That is a fairly large sword for his size."

"That he shouldn't be able to wield."

"You said you're friends. Perhaps he's trying to emulate you."

"That doesn't explain why he spontaneously grew and quit Shinra." He pointed to the paused images again. "Look at that. You can see because the clothes are so damn tight that he's got some serious muscle going on there. I ran him through the physical profiling software the Turks have."

"Zack-"

"And it estimates his height at three inches taller than at his physical last month and he put on about twenty-five pounds of muscle."

A smidgeon of doubt entered Sephiroth's features.

He pulled up the last feed of Cloud at the administration offices. "And just look." He pointed again. "What the hell is he wearing?"

He knew those clothes weren't Cloud's. His friend always had a penchant for t-shirts and shorts, not these baggy, dark clothes. "Who the hell wears headlamps?" he demanded of the universe. "It's not like he's going spelunking in the Shinra building."

"Turns out this soldiering thing is a bit too much for me. I'm going to find something else to do that doesn't involve army rations or calculus."

"Strangely enough," Sephiroth said thoughtfully, "it sounds like a sentence you would construct, Zack."

"I didn't quit Shinra," he snapped.

"He did what you call that quirky thing," Sephiroth added.

They watched Cloud hand over his ID card.

"Looks like you've got a sword checked out."

"I'm turning that in next. Once that's done, I'll clear out my bunk and head out."

"You really sure about this kid?" His hands hovered over the keyboard. "Once I save this there's no going back."

Cloud smiled slightly. "I'm sure."

He paused the video feed. There was no point watching him wander through the halls and brazenly take the sword he'd promised to leave, but abandon all his gear except food rations.
"He stole the sword Sephiroth. He took the sword and his rations and disappeared below the plate. His PHS is disconnected and he's just gone. I called his mom on the pretext of asking about his medical history and she thinks he's retaking his Soldier exams too. The kid grew three inches and put on twenty-five pounds during a two point nine second surveillance white out then stole a sword and withdrew from Shinra while wearing a damn headlamp," he said all in one breath. "Something's going on and I don't know what it is."

"I'll admit," Sephiroth said cautiously, "that something suspicious is going on here, but I don't know that it warrants your borderline panic."

He glared and grit his teeth. Sephiroth's eyebrows rose, the man clearly not expecting to be regarded so venomously. Zack took a deep breath and bent back over the mouse and keyboard. He shook his head and grumbled angrily. He rewound the video feed where Cloud withdrew from Shinra. He got the angle as close to full on his face before zooming in and cleaning up the image a little.

He pointed at the screen and said, "Tell me if you see anything even slightly odd."

Sephiroth turned his eyes to the screen and studied. The general's eyes slowly narrowed and Zack took no pride in Sephiroth seeing exactly what he'd seen.

"It's difficult to say for sure," Sephiroth said, "as the headlamp interferes with proper lighting, but it appears as though Strife's eyes have at least some mako glow."

"I can tell you for sure the kid didn't have a glow last week when I saw him. I checked through his file. He hasn't been anywhere near mako. He hasn't made any trips to the infirmary for a Cure or a Heal, and he's not high enough in the troops to even allow for materia training. You agree yet that something is going on?"

"It might not be actual mako," Sephiroth said slowly, "but a glare from the headlamp." At least he didn't seem like he was trying to brush it off anymore. "However, this definitely needs to be investigated. The lapse in security on account of the video feed and the sword say something." His green eyes turned up to Zack's. "I assume you wish to handle this as quietly as possible?"

He nodded. "I want to know what's going on with Cloud before we start accusing him of anything."

"Agreed. The more I see, the fishier it-"

Sephiroth's door slammed open. The general froze in assessment while Zack reached immediately for his sword.

Reno barged in, closely followed by Cissnei and Rude. "Big news!"

Cissnei stepped forward and handed a thin file to Sephiroth across the desk. "There's been a terrorist attack," she said.

"Why are you reporting it?" Sephiroth said, whipping the file open and scanning the first page's contents.

He saw the pictures first. Fire and rubble and ash falling from the sky onto snow.

"Tseng sent us over straight away. Wanted you to have the information directly," she said.

Reno crept around the desk to peer at the file too. His eyes flicked to the computer screen and he did a double take. "Whoa, who's this guy? I saw 'im the other day and couldn' figure out why he looked familiar and now ya got surveillance of 'im in the Shinra building?"
He opened his mouth to demand answers but Sephiroth beat him to it. "When and where did you see Cloud Strife?"

"Cloud Strife?" Reno repeated. He pointed at Zack. "Isn' that your infantryman buddy?"


"Shit Sephiroth, that's only four hours after he left."

"It's a start."

"What the hell's goin' on?" Reno asked.

Sephiroth said, "You have full discretion in this Zack. Draft a few Seconds or Thirds if you need, but I might need you for this Nibelheim attack."

He was halfway to the door before that registered. "Wait," he said, spinning back, "Nibelheim attack? The terrorists attacked the Nibelheim reactor?"

"The reactor and the Shinra manor."

"No casualties," Cissnei added, "but both buildings are less than rubble."

"No casualties," Reno said, amusement thick in his voice, "but a damn wicked sense of humor. Everyone from the manor was put to sleep, shrunk, an' stopped out at the back edge of the property. Whoever it was only wanted the buildings an' everything in it."


"This just went from strange to a priority, Zack. I'm ordering you to find Cloud Strife and bring him into custody. If you have to, request aid from the Turks. This still needs to be kept as quiet as possible. It would be horrible for public relations to have it leak that one of our own started blowing up reactors."

"Do you really think Cloud did this, Sephiroth?" Zack asked with a halfhearted cringe.

"I don't know, Zack, but it's too much of a coincidence to ignore. It could be that someone within Shinra is coercing him somehow. His file says he's only got the one relative. If they threatened him, he's got the right psychology to do something to keep her safe. We need to find whoever's behind this."

"What the hell?" Reno demanded. "What does Zack's infantry buddy have to do with terrorist attacks?"

"Reno, Rude," Cissnei said, "go with Fair and get the story. I'll work here with the general on the explosions directly."

* * *

"What are you doing back here?" Sephiroth asked when Tseng joined them in the briefing room.

"I felt it best if I delivered this personally." He held an envelope across the table to Sephiroth.

"Any word about the suspects?" he asked while Sephiroth unsealed the plastic bag and peeled open the envelope.
"There's been no evidence of your friend Strife in Nibelheim Zack," Tseng said. "There's tracks around the ruins of the manor and the reactor but nothing particularly telling. We're only reasonably sure there were two people involved."

"Has anyone taken responsibility?" Sephiroth asked.

"Several groups," Tseng said. "Avalanche first among them. But we've ruled every confessing terrorist group out. No one had anyone in the right place to do it and none of the groups have anything we haven't purposefully leaked to the media. Not even the underground conspiracy mailing lists have anything of relevance on the subject." He indicated the envelope in Sephiroth's hands. "That's the only thing left of either bomb locations. It appears to have been left after the reactor explosion."

"Two envelopes in one?" he asked when Sephiroth produced two thinner envelopes from the first.

"One is addressed to me," Sephiroth said, "and this one is addressed to Rufus Shinra."

Tseng pulled out a PHS and hit one of the speed dial numbers. He waited a moment then said, "Do you have a few spare moments sir?... Would you please join General Sephiroth, First Class Zack Fair, and myself in the briefing room...? Thank you."

The PHS returned to his pocket. "Vice President Shinra will be down shortly."

"What does yours say Sephiroth?" Zack asked. He didn't want to wait for the vice president. He figured if Cloud really did have something to do with this, he would be able to tell from the language in the letters.

With a sigh, Sephiroth opened his envelope and scanned the contents. He frowned. "This is... unusual." He appeared to read it a second time more closely.

"Read it aloud will you," he said.

"Read it yourself Zack," Sephiroth said, proffering the paper.

He snatched it up and read aloud for Tseng's benefit. "Hello Sephiroth. Your eyes see reality and your memory carries illusions. However, reality can be shaped to create illusions that create lies that crystallize paths of madness in your mind. It's very important that you always get a second opinion before believing anything you read in a certified Shinra document, even if you think they must be true because it's highly unlikely you would ever read them. Signed CS Delivery. P.S. Despair is a horrible present." He scowled at the sheet. "What the hell?"

"My thoughts exactly," Sephiroth said.

"Sephiroth," Tseng said, "excepting those last two lines, it all sounds like something you would say during your more dramatic moments."

"I agree," the general said with a frown. "It's somewhat disturbing considering I've given extensive thought to reality and illusions and which sources of information can be trusted."

"This suggests that there's something the culprit or culprits believe you might react to in a very negative way if you see something that they believe to be misinformation."

Zack asked, "What exactly was being kept in Nibelheim?" Tseng and Sephiroth stared at him. He shrugged. "If they think Sephiroth is going to react badly to something wouldn't it follow that they try to get rid of it? Especially if it isn't true? They just blew up a couple of Shinra facilities in
Nibelheim. If I were a bad guy, I would blow stuff up first and then start talking about why. If you start throwing why's around first then people might catch on and you won't be able to blow stuff up for all the security measures."

"I knew there had to be a reason they promoted you," Reno said from the doorway. "That's exactly what it sounds like to me."

"Were you eavesdropping?" Sephiroth asked archly.

"Just got here before everyone else."

Vice President Rufus Shinra swept in, followed by Cissnei and Rude. The seated occupants of the room stood and waited for him to wave them out of attention. "I assume this has something to do with the explosions in Nibelheim."

"Yes sir," Tseng said. "We believe an unknown terrorist or small group is responsible for the terrorism. They left letters at the reactor. The first we just read was addressed to General Sephiroth."

He quickly handed the letter over. Shinra read through quickly before speaking. "Quite theatrical. And it seems to indicate they thought something significant existed at one or both sites that would affect the general." He dropped the paper on the table and prompted, "The second letter?"

"Addressed to you, sir." Tseng handed over the second letter.

The vice president made short work of the envelope. The sly, pleased smile that crept over his face was chilling. What could have the young man so impossibly pleased?

Zack just couldn't take the silence as Shinra read through the letter a third time.

"Sir?" he prompted, leg bouncing uncontrollably under the table.

Sephiroth and Tseng both shot irked looks this direction but the vice president didn't seem to mind.

"Rufus Shinra. Controlling the world with money seems to work. The population thinks Shinra will protect them. Work at Shinra, get your pay. If a terrorist attacks, the Shinra army will help them. It looks perfect on the outside. Might you have a better idea? Might it take a little something else less wasteful to control the common people? People are ignorant after all. A good son would know what to do with his father. Signed here at the bottom with CS Delivery. P.S. It's possible to like giving speeches too much."

He had no idea what to make of Shinra's increasingly pleased, satisfied smirk.

Shinra dropped the page on the table and pointed to both letters. "This person, this responsible party for CS Delivery, whoever they are, knows us. I can't say which of us they know better. Both letters are of a rather intimate nature," he eyed Sephiroth critically. "There are things the writer alludes to here that I've never spoken aloud. They're polite enough not to point them out directly, but as it is written with language I would use myself, there's no doubt in my mind what it means."

"But why would this terrorist group want to destroy something that might upset Sephiroth to somehow go after President Shinra?" Zack asked, genuinely confused as to how all that might connect. He didn't expect every eye to turn to him in surprise.

"How did you reach that conclusion?" Vice President Shinra asked sharply, glacial blue eyes landing on him in uncomfortable consideration.
He scratched his head. "It's kind of obvious don't you think?"

"No," Sephiroth said. "Explain how you got there."

Shinra said, "Not obvious to many. Though I reached the same conclusion. Do explain how you reached this conclusion First Class Fair."

"Well," he rubbed the back of his neck, leg bouncing under the table, "we already went over Sephiroth's letter. CS Delivery thinks there was something in the mansion or the reactor that might send Sephiroth into a bad place mentally. That would mean he could go off the deep end like…other enhanced people have. So then looking at Vice President Shinra's letter, it talks about how CS Delivery thinks Shinra Company is run. With them asking if you would do things differently, that means they don't approve of what the President is doing. Then I just go back to the letter being left at the reactor. Why would they leave the letter at all if only Sephiroth's letter had to do with the Nibelheim attacks? Both had to have something to do with it. That leaves three pretty simple messages."

He held up one finger. "Sephiroth shouldn't believe everything he reads." Up went the second finger. "Vice President Shinra might be a better leader than his father." Then the third finger. "Blowing up the reactor and the mansion gets rid of something Sephiroth can't deal with and some misdeed of the president's."


"I'm surprised to hear it from you," Reno said.

Shinra held up a hand before anyone else could speak. "Did anyone besides Fair and myself make those connections?"

Only Sephiroth nodded.

"I thought you said it wasn't obvious," Zack said to the general.

"It isn't Zack. It surprised me that you saw."

He rubbed his forehead. "But the thinking is upfront. I don't get all the high flying words or the personal implications and all that but the basics are just hanging out there, flapping in the wind."

"No matter how obvious you say it is," Tseng said evenly, "it's not the most obvious conclusion."

"Is it time to point out the name signed?" Reno waved his hand around airily then pointed at the letters. "The initials 'er pretty incriminating for your little buddy, Zack."

"What's this?" Shinra asked, narrowed eyes regarding the group.

"We've been trying to keep a certain bit of information as closely held as possible," Tseng said. "It would look bad for the company if it leaked before we had any solid proof."

Zack couldn't help but scowl. This was Cloud they were implicating in a terrorist bombing.

Sephiroth picked up when Tseng paused. "Five days ago, a certain infantryman of First Class Fair's acquaintance withdrew from Shinra under highly peculiar circumstances."

He silently fumed throughout the general's recounting of everything leading up to him walking into Sephiroth's office.
"And this infantryman's name?" Shinra asked at the conclusion.

Sephiroth eyed him expectantly.

He sighed before straightening. "Cloud Strife. He's from Nibelheim."

"CS Delivery," Reno added unhelpfully.

"I'm not inclined to believe in coincidence," Shinra said, "but this act of terrorism is tied to the infantryman in question only circumstantially. Have we discovered anything new about his whereabouts or activities since Reno identified him in Sector 6?"

Tseng answered. "Subsequent sweeps searching for witnesses have him slaughtering monsters in the slums until very late the day he withdrew. He was seen in Wall Market afterward, selling monster parts and buying materia and armor. Wall Market has relatively basic provisions but he knew what he was doing. If he went through the mountains on his way to Junon instead of going around by way of Kalm and Fort Condor, he would have encountered relatively high level monsters and it would have been easy to level up the materia he had to cast the spells cast on our personnel in Nibelheim if he had enough innate magic packed behind it."

"Does Strife have those sorts of reserves?"

"Unknown," Sephiroth said. "He hasn't even been tested for mako tolerance let alone magic ability. He failed the Soldier exam the first time through."

"We haven't found any sign of him in any place he might have stopped between here and Nibelheim."

"Nothing in Junon, Costa del Sol, North Corel, Corel, or Nibelheim itself."

"Is the mother the only relative Strife has?"

"Yes," Zack said. "If anyone was talking about Cloud himself, he would be the one doing it."

"And she still doesn't know anything about her son?"

"Nope. I called with follow up questions this morning and she still hasn't heard from him. We've got surveillance in place now so if he goes anywhere near her we'll see."

"Any trace of mako in the belongings he left behind?"

"No."

"Who knows of his possible involvement in the Nibelheim attacks?"

"The people in this room and Second Class Soldier Kusel."

Shinra quirked a brow. "The president hasn't been informed?"

Tseng said, "Plausible deniability, sir. Besides, we knew he would inform the board of directors and as we can't be sure Strife isn't involved and isn't following someone else's orders, we couldn't risk telling that many people. Especially if Strife has been enhanced. That would require executive level authorization."

"I can see why you're bringing me in now," Shinra said. "Fair, do you have any idea why Strife might go after the Shinra facilities in his hometown?"
"No sir. Whenever we've talked about home or here, he's always gone on about how awesome soldiers are and how much he wants to become a hero just like us and protect some childhood friend."

Rufus quirked a brow. "Perhaps he's thinking he's playing hero now. If something in Nibelheim will affect Sephiroth, he'll destroy it and save one of his heroes. If President Shinra is doing something wrong in his home town, he'll stop it and protect his childhood friend."

"If he's the one doing this," Zack couldn't help saying.

"Your loyalty is admirable," Shinra said, "but that doesn't make Strife innocent. Don't worry about him being condemned without evidence. We're speaking hypothetically and merely not ruling anything out. It may not be solid, but it is the best lead."

"I understand, sir." No matter how much he didn't want to.
Vincent strode alongside Cloud silently through the red dirt of Cosmo Canyon. He hadn't spoken once since they left Lucrecia's cavern. Of course, he hadn't left either, and he certainly wasn't above participating in battles against the local monsters.

When the fires of Cosmo Canyon came into view, Cloud breathed a silent sigh of relief. With no Shinra troops in sight despite the flurry of communication that named him suspect number one, he had to believe he and Vincent hadn't been tracked on their way out of Nibelheim.

On the outskirts of the village, they were met by two spear-wielding guards. "State your business," tall, tan, and lanky said.

"I'm here to request a consultation with Bugenhagen on matters of a planetary nature."

The two of them exchanged a glance then tall, dark, and lanky disappeared into the village. The remaining guard, mentally dubbed scraggly hair, said, "You're welcome to wait at the bonfire."

"Thank you," he said. "I appreciate the honor." He knew better than to include Vincent in any of his statements.

Scraggly hair led them to the center of the village. Passing residents eyed them with interest but there was none of the fear he suspected might be in evidence should Nanaki have been taken by Shinra.

"Are we here to ascertain Nanaki's safety?" Vincent whispered.

"Primarily."

"And secondarily?" The gunman's eyes glowed a deeper red in the firelight.

"I want to know if Bugenhagen can feel anything about me or perhaps hear what the planet has to say about my existence as it currently is."

"Thirdly?"

"To see if Nanaki wants to come with me. A few, less imminent threats need to be taken care of."

The silence stretched between them, filled with nothing but the crackling fire.

"Us," Vincent said.

He regarded the gunman, corners of his mouth quirking up. "Penance?" he asked quietly.

"Perhaps." Vincent's blood red eyes met his. "You said you once tried to find forgiveness and posed the question of its possibility to my future self."

Cloud nodded.

"My reply was that I had never tried." Vincent nodded to himself. "If you're doing everything in your power to prevent the calamity Sephiroth has yet to bring, then you present me with a unique opportunity. If I never tried to ascend from the darkness and gain forgiveness for my sins, even though the situation with Deepground thrust some semblance of release on me, the most radical decision I can make would be to seek that which I have never aimed for. I'm not sure what else can be done to prevent Sephiroth's insanity beyond what you've already accomplished, but if I cannot
seek absolution from Lucrecia, I will do so through her son."

The gunman's speech lifted Cloud's spirits more than he expected.

Vincent's stare sharpened, his red eyes glowing darker in the firelight. "If Chaos were to break free of my control and rampage through a population, would you destroy me to protect the innocent?"

"Without hesitation."

A ghost of a smile flit across the gunman's face.

He didn't have a chance to celebrate Vincent's decision before Bugenhagen, Nanaki, and another Guardian of the Planet joined them at the fire. The old man was actually walking but Nanaki looked the same. It seemed his longevity made the difference of ten year time jump negligible.

The three sat across the fire from them, Bugenhagen looking like he would start laughing at any moment and Nanaki deceptively serene. The one he didn't recognize looked smaller, and a slightly more orange rust color than Nanaki.

"So you're the one the Planet is going on about," Bugenhagen said.

Cloud kept silent, waiting to see where the man would go with the conversation.

"The Planet seems to think you're the next hero." He tilted his head, eyes bright behind his spectacles. "But you're also beyond human and not behaving as the Voice of Planet seems to think you should. Do you have an excuse or a reason?"

"If the Planet knew how to deal with the situation, the world wouldn't have gone the way it did my first time through. The Planet seems to think I can save it before disaster strikes. That will never be by doing the same thing I did the first time."

The old man said, "As you've already demonstrated by destroying the calamity. The Planet is quite joyous on that matter. I'm still unclear of the specifics, but is seems a great many complications are removed with the calamity's demise."

He finally smiled. "She was part of the trigger for Sephiroth's insanity, part of the medium for his continued resurrections, and a gruesomely debilitating disease."

"So you think you've prevented his mental decline?"

"I removed the only trigger I know of. That doesn't mean there aren't others."

The unfamiliar cat joined the conversation. "But you did destroy the largest source of his power." She was female.

"True," he said with a nod.

"Why are you here?" Bugenhagen asked.

"My first priority on realizing that I'd been thrown back in time relative to my own history was to destroy…Jenova and all the misinformation in the Shinra mansion that initially set Sephiroth on his path of destruction. While there, I also hoped to persuade Vincent," he held a hand up to indicate his comrade, "to leave his solitude."

"Would you have blown the building with Vincent still inside?" Nanaki asked.
"As much as I would have hated killing a man I know could be my friend, destroying Jenova was more important." And if he'd killed Vincent, he'd have a reason to spiral into another self-destructive depression. Fortunately, he didn't need to do anything to jeopardize the mostly stable mentality he'd spent years piecing together.

Both giant cats nodded thoughtfully.

"With Jenova and the research gone, and Vincent awake and moving forward, I have a chance to focus on my second priority. I was never clear on the timing," he said vaguely. "I never asked. But I have to ensure that another friend doesn't end up as an experimental subject in the Shinra science labs. I've been there. Vincent has been there. I'll do anything to keep that fate from touching anyone else."

He left it at that, wondering if Nanaki, with his deceptive maturity, would pick up on what he left unsaid.

Bugenhagen asked, "So why are you here?"

His eyes flicked to Nanaki, asking the question silently.

Nanaki straightened. "I journeyed with you to defeat the calamity."

He nodded slowly.

"You came to inquire on his welfare." The unfamiliar female stated.

He nodded again.

"I was fated to be experimented on," Nanaki said thoughtfully.

One last nod. "I have something that belongs to you." He fished around in a pants cargo pocket. Cosmo Memory glowed in the palm of his hand, shooting out flickers of fire so near its place of origin and its fated wielder.

"Cosmo Memory," Nanaki said, almost as if in a trance.

"Where did you find that?" the unfamiliar female asked, face an array of feline surprise.

"I collected it from the Shinra manor before I blew it up."

"Thank you for not destroying it," the old man said. "It would have been disastrous to lose this."

He shook his head slowly. "The limit breaks are as resilient as summon materia, even more so. These things are natural. The methods of humans aren't generally enough to destroy the Planet's creations."

"Is that where you fall?" Bugenhagen asked. "Are you a creation of the Planet?"

"I don't know," he said honestly. "A great deal of the calamity runs through my veins. I was modified to be a host for Sephiroth, for Jenova, to be their spare. Somehow, I accidentally became Sephiroth's equal, his superior even. I can't say if that's because the Planet intervened or because Hojo made me too well. I'm made up of more than just my own memories. I've sometimes wondered if that was the only difference between me and Sephiroth. I've had many more stable and loyal supporters, even if some of them were dead or only in my head."

"So you're walking the world of your past in attempt to change the future. You think you have the right to determine the Planet's fate?" the old man asked, tone carefully neutral.
"Of course not. But I will do whatever I can to keep people alive so they actually have a chance to determine their own fate."

"An experienced answer." Bugenhagen nodded sagely, then burst out into his obnoxious, old man laughter.

He eyed Nanaki and waited patiently as the other returned his stare.

After several speculative moments, Nanaki said, "Yes, I think I would benefit from journeying with you."

"What's this?" Bugenhagen demanded.

"The Planet's chosen warrior wishes to invite me to journey with him." Nanaki considered all those present. "I believe I can learn a great deal traveling the world with him. And if my first fate was to suffer at the hands of Shinra, then where better shall I go to shape a new fate than with the one the Planet has chosen to do the same for itself?"

Bugenhagen eyed his adopted grandson critically but the other cat had no problem speaking. "You would abandon Cosmo Canyon and your responsibilities here?"

That sparked a fair bit of annoyance on Nanaki's part. "How may I convince you that I am not hesitant to perform the rite out of cowardice? I don't cherish the idea of leaving you in stasis for the years following it."

He felt he needed a bit more understanding of the conversation before he agreed to take Nanaki anywhere. "What rite?"

The three eyed him with surprise. Bugenhagen spoke then. "You claim Nanaki traveled with you but you don't know about the customs that have shaped his life?"

This appeared to be more delicate than he anticipated. Cautiously, he said, "I know of the war with the Gi and how in your observatory is one of the best places on Planet to hear the Voice of the Planet. I know of your relationship to Nanaki and have a concept of the depth of your knowledge regarding Gaia. I know of Nanaki's strong ties to the Canyon and desire to protect its people and keep the fires burning."

To his amazement, the unfamiliar female scoffed. "You must not be thinking of the same Nanaki. This one is a coward."

Cloud's eyes narrowed and his vision tinted slightly blue as the glow in his eyes brightened. He quickly suppressed the anger-induced mako flare but resolved to try to remain civil to this unknown beast.

"Perhaps my perception of a potential comrade is different than yours," Cloud said. "Perhaps Nanaki's time spent as an experiment changed his outlook." She flinched at that. "Perhaps the events that led to his capture by Shinra occurred because of events that happened here. I never asked because the subject always seemed to pain him. What I do know is that Nanaki traveled the world with me fighting to protect the Planet, destroy Sephiroth, and defeat Shinra. He walked with me when my fractured psyche nearly became the downfall of this world. He remained with me in mourning as we watched a dear friend murdered. He traveled to near to the center of this world with me to destroy the parasitic life form that Sephiroth had become."

She looked sufficiently cowed, but he wasn't done yet.
"I may not know who you are or your relationship to Nanaki but based on what I know of his potential and capacity for understanding and compassion, as well as what I've heard today, I wouldn't be surprised to discover that in large part, he did what he did for you."

Even Bugenhagen and Nanaki seemed flabbergasted at his little speech but he didn't give anyone time to recover. "Regardless, we must travel through the Cave of Gi before anyone goes with anyone."

"What?" the old man demanded. "Why? How do you know of that cave?"

He gave the old man a hard look.

"Nevermind how you know. Why? That cave is sealed."

Nanaki eyed Bugenhagen with some confusion. He apparently, didn't know the cave existed yet.

"Nanaki," he said, drawing the other's eyes. "What do you think of your father?"

He watched as the beast's features hardened. "Seto was a coward to abandon the village as he did in the middle of the war."

Bugenhagen's jaw dropped, widening further when the female nodded in agreement.

He said, "This issue must be addressed, don't you think, Bugenhagen?"

"What issue?" Nanaki demanded.

"I had no idea," Bugenhagen whispered. "Agreed. The cave must be unsealed before you leave."

Besides, Cloud wanted to get at the accessories and materia in there. Some Gravity and weapons for Nanaki and Cait Sith, if Reeve ever even made the robot, would come in handy eventually.

Clearly fed up with the lack of explanation, Nanaki said, "You introduced in passing your red clad comrade as Vincent," he nodded to the female, "and this is Deneh. You clearly know myself and grandfather. What do we call you?"

One side of his mouth quirked up. "My name is Cloud Strife."

* * *

Conversation was sparse as he, Vincent, and Nanaki trekked around the continent. None of the three of them had a propensity for chatter in the first place but when they did speak, it was usually of tactics and philosophy. Cloud divulged the whole story their second night away from Cosmo Canyon and at no other time did either of his companions inquire of anyone else's history.

Both seemed quite interested in meeting Aerith, perhaps to get a second perspective on the future they were preventing.

They made good time, having excellent stamina between them. He recalled his first journey over the continents. All his former companions had strength and stamina but none of the others could match the three here. The buggy, then later the plane and the airship, had been necessary.

There had been some talk about bringing Deneh. However, the Cosmo Canyon residents determined that the combined forces of Nanaki and Deneh would not have been overcome unless they were in the middle of their local ritual, which would require Deneh to remain in a sort of stasis. If that were the case, the group would return for the ceremony. If that weren't the case, Cloud could simply
rescue Deneh instead of Nanaki and get it done markedly faster. Bugenhagen had Cloud on speed
dial just in case.

They swung around the bottom of the continent through the Ancient Forest and Gongaga picking up
Summons, other materia, and weapons, especially his Apocalypse sword. He made a stop at the
weapon seller's house and commissioned the man to make him a sword the equivalent of his fusion
sword. The man had no idea how long it would take him to make it perfectly.

They bypassed Corel, and with the town still standing, the Gold Saucer didn't exist.

He'd have liked to blow through the battle arena, collecting all the worthwhile prizes. Perhaps he
could track down Dio and work with the man to establish the Gold Saucer somewhere else. At least
he wouldn't have to reacquire Omnislash. Though whether there were two of his Level 4 Limit now
in Gaia he wasn't sure.

He made a mental note to start up his chocobo breeding program again. Without Cid's airship, he
would need a gold chocobo to reach some of the more valuable materia and weapons. And probably
Wutai. Shinra certainly wouldn't grant him passage so close to the war.

North Corel was their next stop. Shinra hadn't torched the town yet. If he blew up the reactor himself
and left a signature, the crime would be attributed to him and the town wouldn't be accused of
conspiring with Avalanche. It might prevent Barret from ever taking up the fight against Shinra, but
it would also give him his wife back and he might have a child of his own instead of adopting his
best friend's little girl. Not that he wouldn't miss dear, little Marlene. She had such wonderful
common sense.

"We're returning to North Corel," Vincent observed.

He shook his head. "The reactor."

"Another bombing?" Nanaki asked.

He nodded.

"You don't expect Shinra to blame Corel for this one?" Vincent's red eyes seemed to be watching for
some sort of reaction.

"They haven't blamed Nibelheim for the explosions there. All the messages I'm seeing from Shinra
having them focusing on CS Delivery as the sole culprit. They don't seem to suspect any coalition
anywhere."

"There's still risk." Nanaki almost sounded scolding.

"I only gamble when I know I'll win."

"Another letter?" Vincent's voice seemed a touch amused.

He nodded.

"To point out that you acted alone?" Nanaki asked.

"No. If I behave in any way differently here than I did in Nibelheim, it will draw attention to the
town. I'll ignore them and so will Shinra. Besides, there's something there that Shinra shouldn't
have."
"Why the North Corel reactor?" Zack demanded. "It doesn't make any sense."

"I don't know Zack," Tseng said, pace remaining even as they traversed the upper halls of Shinra tower.

He eyed the letter in the Turk’s hand. Another attack on another reactor. No casualties again. "If Spike's the one doing it I can sort of understand Nibelheim, but he's never even mentioned Corel."

"It is the closest reactor to Nibelheim."

"But Gongaga is easier to get to." He had called his parents twice a day every day after the Nibelheim bombings just to make sure they were alright. "Or the terrorists could have gone after Rocket Town. We're still in the middle of construction right? If they blew all that science stuff up it'd cost the company about as much as a reactor right?"

"We don't know yet what exactly they're after Zack. We can't say for sure it's to drive Shinra into the ground or demand changes in leadership or policies. It's too early to say."

Sephiroth and the other Turks were already in Vice President Shinra's office when they arrived. Tseng promptly handed over the letter, a second one addressed to the vice president. Shinra's face bore amusement long before he opened the letter and read.

"Rufus Shinra. Weapons and safety go hand in hand. At least they should. Weapons breed arrogance and a lack of respect. Safety can often be disregarded or only utilized under convenient circumstances. Safety breeds stupidity. Without some element of danger, safety grows lax and thinks whimsical use of weaponry is acceptable. Weapons and safety, left to their own devices, can have unintended effects for current or former handlers, especially when said handlers are thought to be out of commission or too weak. Signed, CS Delivery. P.S. Kya's and Gya's are difficult to tolerate for all parties involved."

Shinra actually struggled to keep from laughing, using a hand to cover his mouth. "This CS Delivery certainly takes a unique approach with these communications. I would not have expected them to mock Heidegger's and Scarlet's laughter." Smile still on his face, he gestured at the letter. "Does this sound like your friend Fair? Is Strife this verbally playful?"

He shook his head. "I know Cloud would understand it. But he never talks like this. He's straightforward and honest. Not all this weird symbolic talk about the Shinra executives. What I don't get is why the writer thinks they would try to take over Shinra Company. I mean, why would people who like weapons development and overseeing safety want to run Shinra?"

"I find it interesting," Shinra said, "that you so easily understand the content of these letters. It's clear that the person they are addressed to should understand them, but they also seem to be written in a manner you inherently understand. That implies the writer intends for you to understand. Or perhaps they think like you and the overlap is unintentional."

"An interesting observation," Tseng said. "Perhaps if we were to look at this through a filter Zack dictates, we might track down this CS Delivery before they strike again."

"That said," Sephiroth weighed in, "based of this letter, why do you think they struck North Corel?"

He shrugged, folding his arms, uncomfortable with suddenly being considered an expert in something that didn't make sense. "With Nibel, they wanted the science stuff there gone. We know Hojo was doing one of his experiments there."
"Yeah," Reno said, "and that's why the doctor keeps throwin' hissy fits. He wants whoever destroyed all 'is precious research."

"So if the science there endorsed by the president would send Sephiroth into some mental fit, then it follows that the something going on at North Corel shouldn't be happening and is Scarlet and Heidegger's fault."

"North Corel is under Scarlet's jurisdiction," Tseng offered.

"And she and Heidegger often ally," Sephiroth said, "despite her derision of his intelligence."

"Tseng," Shinra said, "see if you can unearth anything about what's was going on there." He tapped his lower lip thoughtfully. "Fair, if it were you, where would you go next?"

His brow furrowed and he set his mind to think like a terrorist.

Nibelheim was first. The reactor and mansion were filled with Shinra biological science. Corel was second. The reactor was possibly filled with weapons and questionable safety precautions.

Regarding Shinra installations, Gongaga didn't have anything but the plain old reactor. Rocket town had regular, non-medical science. Fort Condor didn't have anything but nesting birds. Wutai could probably be counted for the military presence there. Junon had an impressive array of weapons including the cannon and was the second largest city on Gaia. Midgar had less weapons but it was Shinra headquarters and the Soldier stronghold along with most of the biological science in the company. Midgar was a big entity to tackle. He would want to gain a little strength and support, and perhaps practice at evacuating civilians before going after something on that scale.

"If it were me," he said finally, "if I was going to attack somewhere, it would be Wutai or Junon."

Frowns all around made him uncomfortable. Reno's amused grin didn't help.

"Why?" Sephiroth asked. "There are less well guarded targets. Why not Gongaga or Fort Condor?"

"Or Rocket Town," Tseng added. "You thought that might have something to do with it earlier."

He shook his head before any of them even finished talking. "Fort Condor doesn't have anything but birds. No science or technology. Gongaga either. It might get targeted later but there's nothing going on there. Rocket Town doesn't have anything to do with medical research or weapons. Midgar is too big. Wutai maybe because of the military presence but CS Delivery hasn't really gone after the military itself, just special weapons, maybe. They might think people would need to be saved but there aren't really many battles and the people that would need to be saved are already attacking us. Junon has the cannon and a relatively strong Shinra element considering it's a Shinra city. It would be practice if they wanted to take on Midgar."

"Practice?" Shinra repeated.

He shrugged. "It's the next biggest city after Midgar. There'll be Turks and Soldiers and the army, but not as many as in Midgar."

Shinra stared. Everyone stared at Shinra.

"It's worth considering," Tseng offered.

"Clearly." He stared for several more moments before speaking. "Tseng, take all the best Turks and get to Junon yesterday. Take command in Junon and search every vessel coming from the western
continent for Strife, and thoroughly investigate anyone even slightly suspicious. Sephiroth, increase patrols in the slums so it looks like we're ramping security in both Shinra cities and not singling out Junon. Don't touch the troops in Wutai. If we do anything there, it may prove to be a more attractive target. Let's see if Fair's hypothesis has any merit."

Zack frowned. He didn't want to be right about this sort of thing.

* * *

"There's more security in Junon," Cloud said, flipping his PHS shut.

Vincent and Nanaki regarded him questioningly.

"I still think we should raid the underwater reactor. The Turks will be in Junon while Soldier holds down Midgar. We'll have to be quick."

He eyed his friends critically, faint smile on his face. "None of us are going to pass the port checks when we get in." He stared at Junon on the horizon. "We have two options so far as I'm concerned. Hide among the cargo and plan on them missing us in the search despite the increased security. Or wait until almost all the other passengers disembark and storm the dock. If we plan on the cargo and they do find us, it will be that much more difficult to get on the dock and into the city and down to the reactor. If we plan on storming the dock from the get go, we abandon any chance to sneak in stealthily."

"I doubt extra security will overlook the cargo hold," Vincent pointed out. "Shinra is frantic. You've blown up two reactors and a Shinra research facility."

"We three are all exceptionally quick on our feet," Nanaki said. "I expect we can lose quite a few of them and get to the underwater facility's entrance before they catch us. In the narrower passage, your spells will be more effective, I'll have a better chance at debilitating enemies, and Vincent can snipe from the back to target particular limbs."

"Nanaki's assessment is sound," Valentine said.

He nodded. The plan was set. He pulled the hood of his knit, sleeveless jacket up over his head, obscuring the blond ends of his hair sticking out from under his bandana. With hood, bandana, and goggles, nothing but skin showed and though Shinra seemed relatively sure he was involved they appeared reluctant to find him responsible. If they caught him here on surveillance, he would prefer it if they couldn't positively identify him. It would keep them that much more confused.

Perhaps the full, four-sword harness resting comfortably on his back would help with that. Of course, none were the sword he'd stolen from the Shinra armory. That would be the easiest way, barring his hair, to identify him.

He was grateful that the Turks had Junon. Zack could probably pick him out of a crowd, goggles and hood or not. The more he could do without seeing Zack, the better.

He smiled softly as the boat pulled into the harbor. Aerith would probably enjoy this story the best. It would involve the most scolding.

The Shinra troops milling about on the dock turned his smile into a smirk. No Turks in sight meant they were observing from a distance.

"No Turks on the dock," Vincent observed. "Surveillance from the upper stories. I see seven pairs. So long as department policies haven't changed, there will be at least five in plain clothes."
"Any particular strategy?" Nanaki asked.

"Stay as close together as possible. If they separate us we'll be hard pressed to accomplish the goal without casualties on their part."

"I also don't enjoy the prospect of ending up an experiment despite your fate-changing efforts." Nanaki sounded almost sarcastic.

He offered the cat a wry smile and he caught a flicker of expression on the gunman's face. He could feel the ties of friendship settling around them. His friends had always been the bedrock he anchored his sanity in. Dumped in a foreign time without their benefit had been daunting. He may never have Barret's friendship with the way he'd changed things, but he still had Vincent, Nanaki, and Aerith. These two would definitely like Aerith.

The boat pulled into the dock and someone among the troops whipped out a megaphone and started yelling instructions for passengers to disembark and prepare for screening. His sharp hearing picked up the civilian passengers whining about the inconvenience. Not one wondered aloud if there might be a particular reason security measures were tightened.

They calmly watched passenger after passenger disembark, answer questions, and suffer a search of their belongings. The number to pass through the line dwindled.

He rolled his shoulders and did a squat on reflex. "Let's mosey on forward shall we."

* * *

"Send me on a mission Sephiroth." Zack's hands were planted on the general's desk and he leaned forward, actually trying to invade the man's space.

Sephiroth was ignoring him.

"I need to do something, man."

The general paused at being called man.

"I'm going crazy. No Spike. No terrorists. No answers. No sanity."

"If you had any of the former, Zack, you would still lack sanity."

"This isn't funny Sephiroth! I've been through Sectors 5 and 6 so many times that I've got the rubble piles memorized!"

"You could always start cleaning up the garbage instead of just the monsters," Sephiroth suggested blithely.

"Sephiroth!"

The general heaved a sigh and lifted one elegant brow. "Think outside your little box Zack. Check the nearby sectors if you think you can find anything."

Unbidden and unexpected, a memory floated to the forefront of his mind.

"I let a friend stay here last night. He left early this morning. He was going to stay in the inn in Wall Market but I insisted he shouldn't have to pay their prices."

"A friend?" he asked.
"Yes Zack," she said, soft smile widening, "a friend. He's sort of like a younger brother."

Cloud could be anyone's younger brother. But if Cloud knew Aerith then why hadn't he mentioned knowing anyone that hung out in a church? And if Aerith knew Cloud, then why hadn't she mentioned that she knew anyone else from Shinra?

Normally, he would chalk it up to coincidence. He shook his head. Normally, it wouldn't even make it up to coincidence because the events would be totally unrelated. He hadn't known Cloud was gone then, but the night Aerith let someone stay in her church was the first night Spike spent outside of Shinra.

"Zack?" Sephiroth was frowning at him now. "Did you think of something new?"

He shook his head again. "Probably nothing. But I want to check to make sure. It seems dumb, even to me."

"So long as you follow all leads," Sephiroth said cautiously.

"Don't worry, General," he said, smile spreading over his face. He straightened and pointed a thumb at his own chest. "I'll make sure everything is taken care of. Now if you don't mind, I've got a ridiculous hunch to check out."

He backed toward the door only to have his PHS ring. He flipped it open and paused in Sephiroth's doorway. "First Class Zack Fair."

Smooth and collected even through the communication device, Vice President Shinra said, "Report to the air pad and board the Gelnika immediately. You'll be briefed on the way." He paused. "You're in Sephiroth's office. Tell him to call me." Then he hung up.

He stared at his phone for a moment, blinking stupidly. He snapped it shut and shoved it in a pocket. To Sephiroth, he said, "VP Shinra says to call him." As the general opened his mouth to speak, he didn't wait. He took off at a sprint through the halls.

He took the stairs as the elevator would be too slow. He didn't have to stop off at his own office as he and every other Soldier had taken to carrying their weapons all the time, just in case. He reached the roof and the Shinra plane in under two minutes. Kusel and Shinra were already onboard.

He caught the tail end of whatever Shinra had been telling Sephiroth. "I'll meet with Tseng on arrival with Fair and Kusel as personal guard on the way. Just ensure nothing happens in Midgar while I'm gone." He didn't appear to wait for a reply before snapping the PHS closed.

The Gelnika rumbled, engines whirring to life. He threw himself into a seat and buckled in.

"It seems your assessment holds some weight," Shinra said. "Junon is currently under attack."

"Cloud?"

"No positive identification on any of the terrorists or that they're even CS Delivery," Kusel said. At a questioning look, he added, "I've got the live communications coming in now." He paused. "Three assailants. There's a giant, rust colored cat using magic and fighting with headdresses. A dark haired gunman in red with what appears to be a prosthetic arm in the shape of an armored claw hand. The leader and the strongest of the three has four swords he keeps switching between. No visual as he's wearing a deep black hood. He definitely doesn't want to be seen. They're working through the underwater reactor now. No word on casualties yet but they're debilitating everyone in their path. The infirmaries are flooding with leg and shoulder injuries. The attackers are definitely
professionals."

"What are they aiming for?" he asked.

"Can't say. They're leaving the reactor mostly intact. Most of the damage is circumstantial. They've broken into a number of sealed areas to go through inventory."

"Looting?"

A short nod. "But we don't know if they're looking for something specific or just taking whatever is lying around."

So confusing. "Enhanced?"

"The gunman's eyes have a glow but they're also red so it might be something else entirely. No for the cat and can't tell on the swordsman. They're pretty sure he's wearing goggles under that hood."

Even stranger.

"Will you recognize Strife?" Shinra asked.

"I hope so." Gaia forbid he didn't. He didn't know what he'd do if he faced something akin to betrayal again.
Improper Use of Summons

Cloud eyed the information displayed on his PHS, and stepped over unconscious Turks. He fought the urge to kick Reno in the head just to see what would happen. The man could take more beatings than just about anyone he'd ever seen. The redhead lasted longer than any of the other Turks that tried to ambush them on the way out. Tseng, however, was still nowhere to be seen.

"Looks like reinforcements have arrived."

Vincent and Nanaki turned their attention to him.

"The Gelnika is landing on top."

"We already have what we came here for Cloud," Vincent said, clearly seeing something in his expression the gunman didn't like. "Are you willing to tempt these reinforcements?"

"There are things on the Gelnika that Shinra shouldn't have. I didn't expect them to bring the airplane here."

"This changes everything then?" Nanaki inquired.

He nodded.

"What?" Vincent asked, visibly unhappy, Cloud mentally noted in amusement, with the decision to prolong the fight.

"The next most powerful sword after the Apocalypse, the most powerful shuriken type weapon currently in existence, the gun with power beaten only by your Death Penalty, at least until you start building your own guns, a couple other high level weapons, another's ultimate Limit, the Double-Cut materia, and the summon Hades."

Disbelieving, Vincent said, "All those things are on that plane?"

Quirking a smile, he said, "They're using it as a storage facility while they repair the damaged areas of Midgar and Junon after the mass desertions and subsequent attacks."

"And they brought it here?" Nanaki asked.

"From the speed of the communications, it seems Rufus Shinra dropped everything the second Tseng reported our raid. I don't know if he even knows all that equipment is there." His smile morphed into a smirk. "I wonder if they're using it as a mutated monster storage facility yet."

He started for the open air. The three of them could bypass the stairs and jump straight up Junon from level to level.

"Pay attention," he said as they walked. "I expect to keep Rufus' guards tied up while you two get all the equipment, so I'm going to tell you approximately where all of it is. With all the experience you've gained you shouldn't have a problem even if they've got mutations onboard."

* * *

Tseng was waiting on the airport pad when Zack jumped out. Kusel remained close to Vice President Shinra's side, eyes alert. The Turk didn't even wait for prompting before speaking.
"Everything in the reactor has gone quiet. All the troops and my Turks must be unconscious. It's not safe here, Vice President. There's no telling where the terrorists are."

Something stirred in Zack, an overwhelming sensation of presence, and a prickling tingling across his skin that made the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. His eyes turned to the edge of the structure, the edge that would overlook the ocean. He steeled himself at the sight of those three figures, a giant cat, a dark haired man in red, and a black hooded swordsman, arms bare and gloved hands free of weapons. Any of the four hilts of those giant weapons would be easily reached.

"Sure there is," he whispered to the rest and pointed. "The bad guys came to play."

Kunsel and Tseng both moved in front of Shinra, each pointing their guns at the intruders. Zack wasn't sure how much guns would help if these intruders had already taken down the rest of the Turks. But Tseng's secondary weapon was a helicopter with missiles and Kunsel's small broadsword wouldn't be as useful as Zack's Buster Sword. A sword which Zack drew slowly, not wanting to provoke a sudden reaction. But the three intruders didn't move toward their weapons, though he supposed the cat didn't have to ready a headdress to make it accessible.

"What the hell do you want?" Zack shouted across the air pad, finding himself somewhat unnerved by the lack of a declaration of intentions.

No response.

Zack searched the visible features of the swordsman like his life depended on it. Had Cloud's arms been that muscular? Would his profile look like that beneath a hood?

The swordsman slowly reached up and over his head to draw the widest blade in his arsenal. He gave it a quick, exploratory rotation and a spin, like he was testing an unfamiliar weight.

In an instant, the swordsman went from standing casually to charging, moving so quickly his image blurred.

Zack swung his sword to meet the charge and the swordsman made as though to connect their blades when suddenly he was flying through the air over Zack's head. The black hooded man landed behind Shinra and the others, and his blade whipped out lightning quick.

Zack bellowed an attack cry and charged forward but the swordsman already connected and all three, Soldier, Turk, and vice president, flew sideways. The indignant grunts of surprise startled him into hesitation and his eyes widened at his fellows on the ground some distance off to the side. The swordsman had used the flat of his blade to push them out of the way. Tseng looked like he might have broken an arm, from the way he was cradling it in combination with the wavering way he held the gun aimed at his attacker.

A rush of air on Zack's opposite side warned him moments too late that the other two attackers rushed past him to join the swordsman and immediately disappear into the airplane. He jerked to go after them but the swordsman darted into his path. Clearly, the man wouldn't allow him to pursue without a fight.

One shot rang clear through the air. Zack didn't even see the swordsman move but his blade was suddenly a shield between him and Tseng's gun, ricocheting the bullet uselessly into the air. His invisible gaze, however remained on Zack. The swordsman's free hand rose to clasp a second hilt.

The sword he drew was breathtaking. A deep red and black with gold near the hilt. The somewhat triangular shape made the weapon look unwieldy but with the ease the swordsman handled it he
knew the blade would sail effortlessly through the air. Also, if the large groves scooped out of the blade edges caught his own beloved Buster Sword, the metal could snap. He trusted his own weapon but he couldn't even tell what his opponent's blade was made of. If it was one of the legendary ultimate weapons then he was in a great deal of trouble.

"Zack." Tseng's voice sounded slightly strained.

Zack didn't take his eyes from the swordsman, but used his peripheral vision to note the other three still standing. Tseng seemed slightly dazed, and the vice president's glare was murderous. Kunsel had his sword drawn and stood half in front of the vice president. From the grim set of the Second Class Soldier's mouth, he must have known he probably wouldn't have stood a chance against this swordsman.

"Don't worry about us," Tseng said. "Keep them from stealing the plane."

Zack didn't need any more indication that that. He charged the swordsman. He would take this guy out and get up to the cockpit before the other two could do anything. Such a small guy couldn't possibly stand up to a First Class Soldier, history of downed Shinra troops and Turks or not.

But then the wider blade was back in its sheath and the swordsman gripped the hilt of the second sword and set his whole weight behind the swing to meet Zack's weapon.

The impact rocked Zack so badly he almost dropped the Buster Sword. As it were, he was still thrown backwards through the air and hit the ground hard, rolling several times. He did release the hilt then.

"Gaia," Zack breathed. He lurched to his feet, expecting to have to dodge an attack. But the swordsman remained at his post at the opening of the Gelnika, blade at the ready, ignoring Shinra and the others, merely watching.

Zack grit his teeth. What an insult. The guy wasn't even going to come after him when he was down. He'd just stand there as sentinel until the other two incapacitated the pilots and crew and stole the airplane. Zack darted forward, scooped up the Buster Sword, and fired up his Power Attack materia. He slammed into the swordsman, magic thrumming through his body. But the swordsman didn't stagger like he was supposed to, he didn't even flinch. In fact, he sent Zack flying across the air pad again, exactly as far as he had the first time, the only difference being that Zack wasn't quite so unprepared, so he didn't drop his blade, and rolled to his feet for his third charge.

Wielding Vital Slash, he prepared for the shock this time. The swordsman's stance didn't change but at least the power behind the strike meant the man didn't throw him through the air. But if Zack even unconsciously thought withstanding the man's first strike meant he'd won something, he was dismally wrong.

The swordsman's blade blurred along its path, near impossible to follow. It took everything Zack had to keep that glisteningly sharp edge from biting him. He thanked whatever deity made his opponent decide not to even try catching the Buster Sword with its wicked grooves.

A sudden kick to Zack's gut caught him off guard and he flew backward again. Only this time, he was in position to see the swordsman come after him. He could have laughed when the man caught up to him before he hit the ground. But he couldn't understand why that beautiful, dark sword had been sheathed.

Still too stunned to react, the swordsman had free reign to practically pluck Zack from the air and
slam him face down into the ground. Zack's sword arm, still gripping the Buster Sword, was stepped on, the heavy boot digging into his bare arm. Another knee dug into his back, making breathing difficult. His free arm was twisted around behind his back.

Lacking any sort of leverage, Zack grunted in frustration, wriggling around to get a better look at either Shinra and the others or the swordsman. Gloved fingers dug like steel into his wrist. He really couldn't imagine his little friend Cloud with this sort of strength.

His eyes widened as the implications fully set in. This swordsman manhandled a First Class mako enhanced Soldier like it was nothing. He hadn't even used any magic. He beat him with nothing but a kick ass sword. Zack hadn't even been this powerless against Genesis. Doubt stole through his mind about how well Sephiroth would fare against this swordsman.

Movement from the Gelnika caught his attention. The gunman and the giant cat leapt back outside, positioning themselves near the swordsman. The gunman was carrying a spear, a giant shuriken, and another gorgeous broadsword, of all things.

He took his chances and tried to get a better look at the three assailants. The cat wasn't just a cat. Tribal tattoos inked its fur in geometric patterns along the length of its back and the end of its tail appeared to be on fire. The gunman's eyes glowed a deep, blood red and not only was his prosthetic arm a giant claw, his boots had armor with pointed toes that would be just as bad as a bayonet if he ever chose to kick someone. His vantage point didn't afford him the best view of the swordsman and nothing about him seemed remarkable.

His skin within the confines of his hood shone faintly pale, a more natural pale than Sephiroth's stark white pale, but that could hardly be used to identify him.

"Are you Cloud?" he ground out despite his difficulty in breathing.

Those goggle-covered eyes regarded him silently, and the other two exchanged a glance. His question was ignored as the swordsman reached into a cargo pocket and withdrew a familiar looking envelope. He could just make out the script on the front. Rufus Shinra. He threw the letter shuriken style and it spun to a stop in front of the vice president.

"CS Delivery," he hissed.

At the momentary twitch of a mouth within the confines of that hood, his heart dropped. Could that expression really be shared by two people?

The swordsman's free hand lifted, the bangle on his wrist glowing red.

"Shit," he spat, renewing his efforts to get free. He had to stop the summon before it manifested.

Tseng's gun fired several shots and even Shinra pulled his own short-barreled rifle to attack, Kunsel dropping to one knee in front of him so he could aim properly. The air crystallized around them, the bullets stopping in their tracks, as the gunman had a hand raised and Physical Barrier erected.

It was too late. Flames licked through the sky as Ifrit dropped out of the air above them. The structure around them cracked under its weight. But then it didn't attack. It held out a hand. The gunman and the cat leapt from the ground into its open palm. In a flash, the swordsman released him and joined his cohorts. He twisted on the ground just in time to see the swordsman offer a mock salute from the giant, open palm of Ifrit.

Zack's jaw dropped as the summon leapt into the air, like it usually did before throwing molten lava balls at its targets. Inexplicably, once it reach the apex of its jump, it threw the people, like they were
a ball of molten lava, east toward the mountains then disappeared with a crackle of magic.

He pointed in the direction the three had been thrown. "What the hell?" he demanded of the universe. "Ifrit threw them. How the hell are they going to survive?"

"I suspect," Shinra said behind him, closer than he'd expected, "they'll be just fine." He held the unopened letter in his hand.

Tseng said, "I've never heard of a summon used in that manner."

Shinra said, "That's because no one can control them that well. Not even Sephiroth has managed to force a summon to do anything but exactly what it wanted to do. Until now, I believed it impossible."

"Was that Strife?" Tseng asked.

He shrugged, shaking his head. "I don't know. At first I thought no. But then when I called him CS Delivery, he did this little quirky thing that Cloud always does. But that guy," he pointed in the direction of the mountains for emphasis, "was ridiculously strong. I never had problems like that with Genesis."

Shinra asked, "Do you think that's because he caught you off guard?"

"I don't know."

He pushed to his feet, clutching his ribs. "Damn. I think he bruised my ribs."

Tseng shook his head. "With your healing, Zack, he probably broke your ribs and they're only bruised now. He did break my arm with the flat of his blade."

"Seriously?" He lurched toward the Turk before he realized he couldn't do anything by standing closer. "What about everyone else?" He did not want to be held responsible for the vice president getting hurt.

"I took the brunt of it," Tseng said. "Bruises all around—"

"And ruined clothing," Shinra interjected sourly.

"—but he clearly didn't intend to actually harm any of us. Even you I think Zack."

Kunsel said, "That explains why there haven't been casualties yet. He's purposely trying to keep people alive."

"The letter," Zack blurted, trying to fully straighten and wincing while doing so, "what about the letter?"

Shinra's expression smoothed as he opened the envelope. The contents didn't produce laughter but they did draw another sly smirk.

"Rufus Shinra," he read, "No making fun this time. Just one question. Have you figured out what was in all the facilities I've visited? Signed, CS Delivery. P.S. You've got one chance left to stop me before the game begins." He shook his head. "Beneath that he's written something extra. Did you know the Gelnika is being used by Shinra Company for weapons and materia storage until all the damage to the interior of Shinra tower is repaired? Beneath that it says, Please keep the puppy in good health. I'd like to play with him again sometime."
His jaw dropped. CS Delivery mentioned him in one of his letters. How had the terrorist known he was coming? No, that wasn't right. He'd written all that below the main body of the letter. He hadn't expected that. CS Delivery penned the letter before the attack on the reactor. He hadn't known the Gelnika or Zack would be in Junon until later. But he'd known before they came up to meet the Gelnika.

"They raided the Gelnika storage units?" Kunsel sounded puzzled. "We wouldn't have been storing anything important in a plane would we?"

Shinra pulled out his PHS again and fired off a message. Only moments passed before he got a reply. "I had Sephiroth send me the plane's inventory." His eyebrows climbed halfway up his forehead. "A level twelve firearm, a level thirteen lance, a level fourteen shuriken, a level fourteen broadsword, command materia Double Cut, and summon Hades."

"Well shit," Kunsel muttered.

"It seems Heidegger requested that Scarlet move them as a safety precaution until repairs to a more secure facility are complete. He recommended the Gelnika and she approved."

Tseng said, "CS Delivery pointed out that he didn't need to make jabs at administration practices of various departments. His intelligence gathering capabilities are impressive. Very few people knew you were coming. Based on their behavior in the city and reactor, I would say they found out about the Gelnika and your arrival perhaps five minutes before you landed, no earlier."

Shinra's smile was somewhat chilling. "That leaves us with wondering if he has contacts in Junon who were watching, someone among the passengers on that ship, or someone in Shinra."

Tseng said, "Shinra has only been infiltrated on rare occasions but it's not entirely unheard of. I doubt they had someone among the passengers. As that ship came in, the long range surveillance flagged them as potential threats. They stood on deck watching Junon and didn't move from that one spot until making their break for the reactor. I've sent the video feeds back to information analysis to see if one of our lip readers can catch something of their conversation."

The vice president nodded.

Zack couldn't help that his thoughts wandered another direction. "Shouldn't you get your arm looked at Tseng?" He pointed lamely. "It's broken you know."

"There are more important matters to discuss."

Kunsel put a hand to the side of his helmet. "Looks like people are starting to regain consciousness down in the reactor. It seems CS Delivery didn't bother with status spells much this time. There are a lot of cracked heads, gunshot wounds, and disorientation, but no one has found any casualties yet."

He paused. "Reno seems in the worst shape and he's swearing up a storm."

Tseng whipped out his PHS with the uninjured hand. After several moments of silence, he narrowed his eyes and called a different contact. "Send Reno and Rude up to the Gelnika. Direct everyone else to search the reactor. We can't chance that CS Delivery left any explosives." He paused. "I don't care if he's been shot in the leg. If he has the energy to curse over the com links he can come up to the air pad." He didn't wait for a reply before hanging up.

"Fair," Shinra started, "any thoughts on this letter?"

He didn't particularly like being the resident psychological expert on an unconventional terrorist. He massaged his smarting ribs while thinking.
"He stole something from all the places he's been, including here. He blew up Nibelheim because he thought stuff there shouldn't be happening. I don't get that same sense about North Corel. He blew it up for another reason. But I don't think there's going to be any bombs here. He only talks about stealing stuff. He was here to steal. Wherever he's going next, if it were me, I wouldn't blow anything up there either. You blow up the most dangerous places and then go for the secondary targets."

He scratched his head. "Whatever he stole from Nibelheim isn't what he got in North Corel or here. But whatever he's got left is what he got here and in North Corel. If we've got any weapons or materia that come in pieces or sets of three, wherever the last piece is, that's where he's going."

Shinra turned back to Tseng. "Anything on what Scarlet had in North Corel?"

"We've managed to acquire inventory lists despite Scarlet's cooperation. What they might have taken from there isn't anything spectacular, just mid level weapons and materia. The only thing that perhaps they might have gone for is some experimental materia. We're having trouble getting details on it because it was Scarlet's new pet project." Tseng paused. "I'll look into whether or not she was attempting the same thing here. And if she's got anymore anywhere else."

Shinra nodded then refocused on Zack. "What other thoughts on the letter?"

"Once he's got what he wants, he's going to start something he sees as a fair competition between you."

"How do you figure that?" Kunsel asked.

"He called it a game. He's not killing people. If he does what I think and doesn't take out the reactor here, then he's only taking out the pieces he thinks Shinra shouldn't have. The stuff about the Gelnika tells me he was probably going to go for it eventually but us bringing it here saved him the trouble. The way he says it makes me think he thinks it's kind of a riot that we brought all this stuff straight to him."

He folded his arms, wincing again at what the motion did to his ribs. "I'm not as sure about when he's talking about me. I guess it could mean that he's met me before to use my name or that he likes me from reputation or something. He's been getting friendlier to you in the letters but he's talking like he already likes me." He paused. "That doesn't really make it look good for Cloud."

"Tseng," Shinra said, "we don't have much time before CS Delivery strikes again. Find out what he's looking for and send everyone there."

Any reply the Turk might have offered was forgotten when Reno and his string of curses limped onto the air pad. He had one arm slung over Rude's shoulders to keep his feet while said partner sported the hugest purple bruise on his head.

"Report," Tseng demanded.

"Hell boss, we didn't stand a chance," Reno said, then hissed when he shifted. "All the shitty newbies and mid ranks went down by that damn cat. It just knocked people over. The people that made it past the cat got smacked in the head by that asshole swordsman an' anyone who tried to snipe from the back got a shoulder or leg shot by the gunman. Anyone who wasn't unconscious after bein' shot was smacked in the head until we all went down."

"Why were you shot so many times?" Tseng asked.

One leg shot and two shoulder shots by the looks of the blood. Not to mention the massive bruise
blossoming on one side of his face.

"The damn *freaks* couldn't take me down," Reno said smugly. "Last Turk standin'. The gunner got my shoulder first but I just switched arms and gave that damn cat a smack in the head. So they shot me a second time. I threw my mag rod at the asshole swordsman before I couldn't feel my arm an' the cat *headbutted* me. Damn little pansy cat made my head spin. So I get up to kick its head in an' the gunman took out one of my legs. Had trouble standin' after that but they finally got me when the asshole swordsman threw me into a wall with the flat of his big ass blade."

"Your resilience is admirable," Shinra said levelly.

Zack couldn't tell if the man was being sarcastic.

"Any indication of what they were after?"

Reno was shaking his head before the question was even done being asked. "No one heard any of them speak. They didn't even point shit out to each other. Just wandered around like they were telepathic."

"Or professional," Tseng interjected.

"They're damn *monsters*. The swordsman didn't even flinch when my mag rod hit 'im. The asshole just smacked it away with a bare hand an' the electricity cracklin' around 'is arm. It didn't even slow 'im down."

Tseng nodded. "He subdued Fair in an equally effortless manner while the other two raided the Gelnika."

"Why didn't you shoot 'im boss?" Reno asked in confusion. "If the other two shits were gone you all could have ganged up on 'im."

Shinra said, "He deflected bullets with his sword and seemed to enjoy throwing Fair across the air pad."

"But didn't kill him," Reno said sharply.

Not liking the tone, Zack said, "He didn't kill any of the rest of you either."

"He was playin' with you Zack," Reno said with a pained shake of his head. "Your ex trooper friend would do that wouldn't he?"

"There's no proof it's Cloud," Zack said, scowling.

"There's no proof it isn't," Reno shot back. "His name is CS Delivery for Gaia's sake. They're your friend's initials. Cloud Strife. *Cloud Strife* Delivery."

"Two letters aren't *proof*."

Reno shook his head, turning his attention back to the vice president and Tseng who'd been observing the argument silently. "Wherever the assholes go next, you gotta send Sephiroth." The Turk sounded tired. Of course that should be a given, he'd been shot several times, head butted, and thrown into a wall.

"Or more Soldiers," Kunsel suggested.

"Tseng," Shinra said, "figure out what CS Delivery took. We're going back to Midgar."
Zack just hoped they wouldn't expect him to know where the mysterious object of CS Delivery's attention was with nothing to go on. Junon had been a fluke. He couldn't fluke his way through the whole scenario.

* * *

Cloud flipped his PHS closed. "No casualties apparently. VP Shinra and the rest are back in Midgar, mulling over where we'll go next." As they were already near their destination, he didn't expect they would encounter trouble beyond the mistrust of the locals.

"Where are we going after this?" Nanaki asked. The giant cat had taken quite well to adventuring and antagonizing Shinra.

"The Cetra city ruins. Places there are meant to keep things like what we've got safe. Places I think the planet won't let anyone but myself or Aerith get into deep below the surface."

"And there," Vincent said, "you might be able to find some way to acquire the Black Materia without the mechanical mog and cat or sacrificing a person."

He nodded. His PHS buzzed again it. He checked. Message from Zack's fan club. He couldn't help the smirk on his face. "Apparently, someone in Zack's fan club found out about what I did to his ribs. I've been put on their most hated list and there's a twenty thousand gil reward for figuring out who I am so the club can dispose of me before Shinra does."

Vincent huffed a sharp breath and even Nanaki bared his teeth in a bestial grin.

"I would have liked to see your spar with your friend," Nanaki said.

"I'm sure you'll get your chance. Shinra is exceptionally displeased with me."

The wound their way silently up the snaking, dirt path toward Fort Condor. The giant bird wasn't nesting atop the reactor but it certainly enjoyed hanging out up there. Unfortunately, the rope he'd expected wasn't hanging where it was supposed to be. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he peered up to the hole in the bottom of the fort to find the faint outlines of a face.

"We've come to trade," he called. Sort of trade anyway.

"You look like Shinra assassins," came the old man's voice. Was that guy never young?

"Just trade I swear. I have funds for your mercenaries if you're interested."

A flurry of unidentifiable movement washed through the dark up there and the rope uncoiled right down to the ground. He gripped the rope and climbed, trusting the others to follow.

* * *

"How do you do that?" Vincent asked as the made they way down the path in the soft sunset light, fort and giant condor behind them.

"What?" He frowned at the taller man.

"Tell people what you want and have them give it to you. You did the same thing in Corel and Gongaga."

His frown deepened. "I paid for what we took."
"They handed you a huge chunk of experimental materia and a summon that revives instantly and simultaneously deals damage to enemies for a mere hundred thousand gil."

"They want to protect the condor," he said. "They need the money for mercenaries. It will last for several months. They need that more than something they'll never use. None of those people have the magic reserves to summon Phoenix anyway. Besides, I'll send them more money later. I left my number with their leader."

"That's not the point Cloud. If I were to have asked for what you asked for at the price you offered, I would have had a gun pulled in my face."

He shrugged uncomfortably. He'd never really thought about it, but he had noticed. "I don't know," he admitted. "I never really realized it was unusual until after I separated my memories from Zack's and pieced myself back together. I used to... just waltz right into people's homes and take their stuff and nobody batted an eyelash. I could walk out with gil and potions and weapons and no one ever said anything. Half the time I never even had to do that. I'd just go talk to someone and they'd empty their pockets and give me stuff." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "I consider it an improvement that I pay for things now and kill monsters for money instead of just taking it."

"That's... very unusual Cloud," Nanaki observed.

He nodded. It wasn't like he could do anything about it. He couldn't decide if it was something the Planet did to him or something he got from his Jenova cells. Everyone seemed to do what Sephiroth wanted, too. Though that may have been born from fear as opposed to whatever made anyone give Cloud things.

His PHS vibrated in his pocket. He pulled the device out and quirked a brow at the caller ID. "Aerith?"
"Here's the transcript of what the lip readers could make out," Sephiroth said, handing over a single sheet of paper, "if you're interested."

Zack was interested. He snatched the paper and scanned.

Anything the animal said was unreadable.

Hardly surprising. Who learned how to read a giant cat's lips, let alone anyone else's?

Gunman: "No Turks on the dock. Surveillance from the upper stories. I see seven pairs. So long as department policies haven't changed, there will be at least five in plain clothes."

Beast: unintelligible.

Swordsman: Stay as close together as possible. If they separate us we'll be hard pressed to accomplish the goal without casualties on their part.

So they definitely were trying to keep from killing anyone.

Beast: unintelligible

Swordsman: Let's mosey on forward shall we.

He threw the paper back at Sephiroth's desk. It fluttered uncooperatively and landed gently on the surface. "That's useless. They could have at least said each other's names or something. They're not friendly at all. How can they form a terrorist cell if they're not even friendly with each other?" As an afterthought, he demanded, "And who the hell says 'mosey' before raiding a mako reactor?"

"CS Delivery, apparently," Sephiroth said dryly. "The Turks aren't too pleased either. Even the Soldiers who would normally be gloating over a Turk defeat are anxious that they'll be beaten in a similar manner. Especially after reports of how you fared against the swordsman." Sephiroth sent him a hard look. "Do you think you would have fared any better if you were better prepared?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "He didn't even use any materia but Ifrit. I could barely follow his movements and I know he didn't have Haste cast. He actually reminded me of you. I don't know if I could tell the difference between you and Genesis or…Angeal so I don't know what level that puts him on. I just know all three of you got to enhancement levels much higher than mine." He paused. "I'd like to see what I can do if I were prepared for the toughest battles I face on S-Rank missions. I only had the basics equipped earlier."

Sephiroth nodded thoughtfully. "It still might be a better idea to allow me to handle this. Turks are clearly inadequate and there's question as to whether or not a typical First can do well."

Zack nodded, the information stinging, but still undeniably true.

"Focus on finding Strife," Sephiroth said. "If he turns out to be CS Delivery, you're probably the only one safe from immediate attack. If you find out that Strife is CS Delivery and he hasn't realized you know, don't make him suspicious. If he's somehow involved and turns to you for advice, draft him to double cross CS Delivery. Understand?"

"Yes, sir." At least he knew exactly what to do when Sephiroth used his no-nonsense-General tone.
"I believe you have a hunch to follow in that regard."

"Yeah, yeah," he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He'd nearly forgotten what with the sudden trip to Junon and subsequent kicking of his ass. "Am I good to head out now?"

"I order you to go." The faintest hint of upturned corners to the general's mouth declared him teasing and attempting to hide it.

"I'll tell you all about it later, Sephiroth." He sent the man a manic grin and bounded out the door.

No one stopped him in the hallways, perhaps said manic grin kept them fearful of whatever he might involve them in. The trip train down below the plate was uneventful, boring even. Except for the old lady who kept winking at him. That was creepy.

He wandered through the slums. He didn't really feel comfortable with the direction his thoughts took. The idea that Aerith, sweet, lovely, scrumptious Aerith, had anything to do with terrorists churned his stomach. The idea that Cloud, shy, naïve, adorable Cloud, had anything to do with terrorists did the exact same thing.

It was painfully simple and unbelievable. Cloud couldn't possibly have been staying in Aerith's church. Cloud couldn't possibly have known Aerith for as long as she implied she knew her guest. Cloud couldn't possibly have been farming monsters in the slums and selling the parts for gil. Cloud couldn't possibly have gone to the other continent and started going on a terrorist spree of bombings, assault, and burglary.

He swallowed hard and steeled himself as the church grew closer. All it took to clear up this mess in his head was a single question posed to Aerith.

The doors loomed in front of him far too quickly but he didn't hesitate before slipping inside. "Aeeeer-iiiiiiith," he sang out. "I came to viiiiiii-siiiiiiit."

"Zack," she called back, her own delighted laughter tickling the air. She straightened from next to her flower patch, dark soil raining down from her hands as she brushed it off. Her smile just melted his heart.

He jogged through the aisle and joined her. Leaning down practically into her face, he continued to grin. "How's my favorite flower girl?"

"I'm doing well, Zack. How are you?"

His smile fell just a little. "Things are getting a bit crazy, and I'm really worried."

He watched the change in her face. Her eyebrows pulled incrementally closer and crept higher. She always was a softie for a sob story.

"Worried? What's wrong?" She placed a gentle hand on his arm. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

He took her slender hands in both of his and softened his smile. "I don't know." He took a deep breath as surprise crossed her face. "I know it's a long shot, a really long shot, a ridiculously long shot, but you know my friend that I wanted to introduce you to? He disappeared the same day you let your friend stay in the church. Everything is really weird about how my friend left and now no one knows where he is. His mother doesn't even know he's left Shinra yet."

Her expression turned curiously neutral. He took a deep breath and posed the question. "Was Cloud
Strife the friend you let stay in this church, Aerith?"

Her expression didn't change. The silence stretched. His eyes widened. What the hell? "Was I right?"

"It's a little difficult to say," she said vaguely.

He didn't drop her hands but he did fight to keep from squeezing harder. His world rocked on his axis as Aerith, his perhaps girlfriend, secretly knew the kid he'd taken under his wing and the both of them had been lying to him about knowing each other.

"Well say it," he blurted. "I'm trying to figure out how to feel here. Spike disappeared without telling me, and you might know where he is, and Shinra thinks that he might be-" He caught himself before blurtting something else he shouldn't be saying.

"Please, Aerith," he pleaded, "tell me what you know about Cloud."

Her face melted into this pained sort of understanding expression. She nodded once, took a deep breath, then nodded again. She pulled one hand free from his but gripped him tightly with the remaining one to let him know she wasn't going anywhere. Inexplicably, she pulled a PHS from her dress pocket and flipped it open. She kept her eyes locked with his while she held the device to her ear. With his enhanced hearing, he listened to the ringing as they waited for whoever was on the other end to answer.

"Aerith?"

His heart jumped at the surprised voice on the other end. He couldn't say for sure who it belonged to, the speaker being next to her ear and not his and all, but something was going on.

"He came," Aerith said.

They, Cloud maybe, had expected him to come looking in Aerith's church?

The silence stretched so long he thought the call might have dropped.

"Twelve days," he heard from the other end. "Do I need to add anything?"

"No," she said. "I understand."

"See you then." The call cut out and the beep tone rang.

Aerith replaced the PHS in her pocket and place her hand on top of their already existing hand conglomeration. "Come back in twelve days and certain things will be made more clear."

"Twelve days?"

He nodded.

"You- he- you expect me to wait twelve days?"

"I'm sorry, Zack, but I can't tell you things that other people are responsible for telling you."

His head spun a little. "What am I going to do for twelve days? Spike has been missing for so long already. I can't hardly sleep at night Aerith. What am I supposed to do?"

"Why don't you," she paused searching for the right words. "Why don't you come help me find
materials for that flower cart we're always talking about the day after tomorrow? We'll gather up all the materials and in three days we'll build a cart and you can come help me see how well it works." She squeezed his hands and offered an empathetic smile. "I'll think about what to say."

Aerith took great pains in choosing her words, and she never did that. He couldn't help but notice that she'd never even actually agreed that she knew Cloud. She'd never sidestepped his questions before so some serious confidences had to be being kept.

"I…guess I'll have to live with that." He looked at the floor to gather himself. Hoping he could make himself look as pathetic and needy as possible, he widened his eyes and stared at Aerith again. "Is Cloud alright?"

She bit the inside of her cheek. Excellent! He had her there.

"My friend who stayed with me last week," still not mentioning Cloud, "he's alright." She paused. "For now."

Though it settled his mind somewhat to hear that Cloud, probably, was alright, he didn't like hearing that that might not always be the case. It knotted his gut in a completely different way than not knowing what was happening at all.

He kissed the back of her hand and grinned. "I'll be back the day after tomorrow. You're the best Aerith."

"I'll see you in two days," she said with her own soft smile.

* * *

"You'll see Strife in twelve days?" Sephiroth asked.

"Maybe," Zack said. "The person who might know him said as much."

"Who's this contact that might know Strife?"

"I can't tell you. No one will talk to me, and Cloud won't come, if I tell anyone." He didn't really know that for sure but he wasn't willing to risk it.

"How do you know your source is trustworthy?"

"What?" he scoffed. "How can you ask if-" He bit his tongue to keep from blurting out Aerith's name. "They're trustworthy. They're really trustworthy. You can try to trust me, right? Besides, if Shinra has troopers all over the slums, I won't be trusted and I'll never see Cloud." He held up his hands and straightened. "They may not be telling me much but I do know something big is going on. I just know if I can talk to Spike I'll get something. I'll have something or learn something or he'll do something for me. I may not get what's going on with him right now but I know the guy. I know Cloud, Sephiroth. He's a softie at heart and we're friends."

Sephiroth's expression softened from steel to rock, so it wasn't much, but any was an improvement. "Will you at least consent to surveillance during the meeting in twelve days?"

His mouth twisted to the side. He really didn't want anyone knowing it was Aerith who might have helped Cloud out. "Let me think about it alright? Give me a week and I'll give you an answer."

"Think about it carefully Zack. In the meantime, I'm going to let Tseng know about your progress. Also, I've got a mission here for you. With the Turks shorthanded they've been sending some of their
missions our way. We've got reports of more Genesis copies in a network of caves outside Midgar. You shouldn't have a problem taking care of them."

"Haven't seen many missions with them lately," he said, scratching the back of his head.

"I've been sending squads of Seconds so you can focus on Strife and CS Delivery. Go take care of this mission Zack."

He clenched his fist and pumped it triumphantly. "Can do, boss."

* * *

"I just don't get it," Zack shouted, throwing his hands in the air. "I thought that wagon would be a total hit. It looks super technological and cool."

"It's sort of odd, Zack," she said with a giggle. "The flower wagon is probably better. People bought all our flowers when we took that wagon out."

"But it's just that the wagon is awesome." He bounced along backward so he could watch Aerith's expressions. Her smiles were lovely. "So can I come selling flowers with you again tomorrow? I can chase down all the people again that don't stop at your wagon to look."

"Oh, Zack," she said, shaking her head. "You don't have to chase people down. People who want flowers will come."

"But if people don't know they want flowers then they won't stop." He pointed a thumb at his chest. "That's what I'm there for."

He bounded up the church stairs before her and swung them open. He froze in the opening, instantly sobering. Someone was in the chapel. They sat at the front, dust motes swirling around them, but jerked to their feet at the creaking of the doors.

He spied goggles and a bandana that forced spikes of bright yellow hair down to line face and neck. He wore a loose sweatshirt, board shorts, and sneakers. No visible weapons.

He held a hand out to Aerith to keep her from moving but she touched his fingers. He turned a glance her direction in surprise. She nodded significantly in the guest's direction.

His eyes widened and his head whipped back around. Blond hair? Cloud?

* * *

Cloud's heart beat heavily as he watched Zack run through a gamut of emotions. Surprise, suspicion, caution, tentative curiosity. Cloud rubbed his hands on his shorts to try and clear his clammy palms. So much rode on convincing Zack of little bits of the situation. He would tell Zack everything eventually, hopefully, but now he had to give his friend something, just enough to keep him pacified. Just enough to keep all those people back at Shinra distracted with the possibilities.

He shifted away from the bench to give himself extra space in case Zack inexplicably flipped out. But Zack looked equally as cautious as Cloud felt. He shoved his hands in his pockets and waited to see what the Soldier would do. It was important to appear more fearful than he was. At least the anxiety wasn't entirely false. He didn't want to lose his best friend.

He shifted his weight and folded his arms instead. Zack approached cautiously, gaze cautious and wary, but still hopeful. He stopped some seven feet away, his eyes searching.
"Cloud?"

"Uh, Zack." Better to keep calm and neutral until he figured out what Zack was going to do.

Apparently, Zack thought the same thing because he didn't do anything but stare. It was like Zack was trying to figure something out just by looking at him. Probably determine if he was CS Delivery. He went to great pains to make himself look as un-terrorist-like as possible. The sweatshirt and shorts were supposed to make him appear more like the kid he should be.

"Take that stuff off Spike," Zack said, waving a finger at his face and head.

He slowly reached up and pulled the bandana off, his unruly spikes practically singing in freedom. He ran fingers through the locks just to get them to feel right. He shoved the bandana in his pocket but only fingered the goggles.

He dropped his chin to eye Zack's boots. "There's some things," he said, voice quieter than he expected. He fiddled with the strap bracket on the goggles.

Zack moved closer and put a hand on his shoulder. He kept the muscles loose beneath that hand. "Tell me what's going on, Cloud."

He wasn't particularly fond of lies of omission or misdirection, they were partially responsible for Sephiroth's psychosis, but Zack would only be able to take so much truth at the moment. Because how could one really tell their best friend that in some future timeline they died and had chunks of their memories absorbed by someone else who was in the midst of a catastrophic mental breakdown.

"There are...holes...in my memory Zack." He paused, lifting his head enough to eye Zack's neck. "I don't remember how I got on the Shinra yard. I just kind of...," he shrugged, "woke up with all those infantrymen and that Second Class yelling at me. I can remember...seeing the results that I failed the Soldier exam, but I can't remember taking the exam. But Zack," his voice dropped to a whisper, "I do remember things I don't think I did. I've got bits and flashes of...of storming a compound in Wutai. I can remember pagodas everywhere and all these ridiculous false walls that the Wutai troops kept popping through."

He rubbed his forehead and dropped his chin again. "There's this really weird memory too. There's green everywhere and I can't breathe and it all burns like acid. In my lungs and on my skin and on my eyes."

He had to stop talking. Even thinking about the bits and pieces he remembered of his time in the Shinra manor basement made him shaky. In the years since Sephiroth, he'd started to remember more and what he saw in his mind sometimes gave him nightmares.

He needed to focus. He needed Zack to not want to take him back to Shinra. He needed Zack on his side without telling him what was really going on.

"I freaked out Zack. I can't go back to Shinra. I won't go back to Shinra. I'm sorry I took the sword. I'll bring it back. But I needed gil and the only way to do that was to kill monsters in the slums."

"Spiky," Zack said, second hand clamping over his shoulder, "look at me." Zack bent at the knees to shorten his considerable height to bring them closer to even.

He lifted his head so he could eye his friend.

"I don't care about the sword. Something is going on, and we're going to figure it out." The concern oozing from Zack's being lifted his heart, even though it caused a twinge of embarrassment. "Let me
"see your eyes alright? I need to know if what I saw on the video feeds was real or my imagination."

"Probably real," he mumbled, grabbing the goggles and pulling them down to leave them hanging around his neck.

Zack used one hand to angle his head up more for a better look. He wasn't quite expecting it when Zack leaned in close enough that he hovered right on the edge of getting so close his vision would blur.

"Damn, Spike. You've got some pretty advanced mako shine in your eyes."

He was aware of that, and so just shrugged awkwardly. He was also aware of the fact that it was so advanced that when mixed with all his Jenova cells, he sported spots of green and slightly elongated pupils when his emotions spiked. Which they might be doing at that moment because he was still desperately hoping his friend wouldn't try to drag him back to Shinra and inadvertently force him to reveal his ridiculously monstrous fighting abilities. It wasn't entirely disastrous to have Shinra Company find out exactly who he was, but it made things easier if it took them a while longer, and if he could reveal things on his own terms.

"What other things do you know that you've forgotten?" Zack asked. "You remember me, right?"

He huffed a laugh. "It's kind of hard to forget you, Zack." It took years of experimentation, fragmented mental capabilities, and a boatload of alien genetics to forget him, and even then it wasn't complete. But at least the comment drew a smile. "And it'll be kind of hard to know what I've forgotten. But I get what you mean. I can kind of guess what's in some of the holes. I don't remember crossing the ocean to join Shinra Company. I remember actually being on the boat but not getting on it. I'm pretty sure I must have been in Costa del Sol to get on the boat, but I don't remember that. I remember being stationed in Junon, but I don't know how I ended up in Midgar."

"You shouldn't have eyes like this without lots of exposure to mako."

Understatement in the extreme. Cloud shrugged. It wasn't like he could just randomly say that he'd been imprisoned in the Shinra manor basement for years of experimentation in an effort to replicate Sephiroth after he'd killed him for burning down his hometown in a future that might not happen now that he'd blown said manor to smithereens.

"How do you know Aerith, Cloud? I never told you her name."

"Zack," Aerith said, stepping closer to the two of them. Zack still didn't let him go but straightened and turned to acknowledge her. "Cloud came to me for help. He remembers falling through the church roof and meeting me."

That was the clincher and one of the few deliberate misdirections Cloud and Aerith agreed on. Zack's eyes widened.

Aerith asked, "Did you ever say anything about…?"

"No," Zack breathed. "I never told anyone."

He watched Zack's mental wheels turn without knowing why. Would this be enough to ignite Zack's protective fire? Was it too little? Would he need to give him more? Did he give too much? The tension was making him jittery. This was why he kept to himself. People made him nervous and energy without an outlet made him strange. As it was, his blood felt like it started to buzz.

"Where have you been, Cloud?" Zack asked.
He folded his arms. "Around," he mumbled, dropping his chin again. He had to focus on keeping still.

"You left Shinra at a really bad time, Spike," Zack said gently. "There's been some bad stuff going down and you leaving when you did makes things really suspicious."

He brought his head back up, brow furrowed. "Suspicious? What's suspicious?"

"Cloud," Zack said deliberately, "you withdrew, stole a sword, acted really bizarre, and then Shinra facilities in your hometown started blowing up. Throw in the fact that no one can contact you and even your mother still thinks you're in Shinra, it all looks very shady." Zack gave him a hard look. "Have you had anything to do with a group or a guy called CS Delivery?"

Aerith coughed, probably at his liberal use of his old delivery service's name.

He shifted nervously again and looked away from Zack. "There's some people," he paused, "who've been helping me. There's something about them. Maybe they...." He shrugged. "I don't feel like they're going to try and run experiments on me to figure out why I am the way that I am. Don't make me go back to Shinra, Zack." He shuddered, hoping the deflection worked. "I don't think I felt like this before, Zack. I'm honestly terrified of ending up in labs somewhere. I can remember people talking about labs, and in a very bad way."

A little prick of pain zipped through his head. He put a hand to his temple as a memory flashed through his mind. "Commander Rhapsodos?" That didn't make sense. "He told me something about labs. But he looked really weird, like he was going gray or something." He shook his head. "Zack, when did I meet Commander Rhapsodos?"

He could feel the mako and Jenova cells in his blood starting to hum. That wasn't good. Why would the Jenova cells be activating? Jenova was dead and there was no one hovering in the Lifestream waiting to take control of him. He needed to calm down. Things always went weird in his head when he got emotional because it left him vulnerable to outside influence. But there wasn't anything that he could consider an outside influence.

His thoughts took an abrupt shift. Vincent and Nanaki were waiting for him in Kalm. What if something happened to them? He blinked rapidly, shaking his head. That didn't have anything to do with anything at the moment.

Another memory flashed through his head. Sephiroth talking about Project G. Didn't that have to do with the mass desertions? And there was some other scientist. The guy looked like a freak in beat up shorts and a t-shirt under his lab coat. It practically made Hojo look professional.

"Whoa, Spikey," Zack said, bracing his hand on either side of his face, coming back down to his height, "you look like you're freaking out. Or you're going to have a seizure or something. Just breathe."

The taller man took a ridiculously exaggerated breath. "Breathe in…and out. Just breathe with me, Spikey."

As stupid as it seemed, he did what Zack told him. Oddly enough, it worked.

Then it hit him that those must be more of Zack's memories. But that tingling, zippy hum of Jenova cells only happened when he was taking in new memories. He vaguely remembered it happening a lot when he first joined Avalanche. It wasn't something that should be happening now.

"Thanks, Zack." He grabbed one of the Soldier's armor harnesses. Something solid to anchor him.
He would never understand it seemed. Technically, he was the older of the two now. But Zack, in his infinite energy, understanding, and devotion, could ground him like nothing else. It was no wonder the guy's spirit kept having to resurface to give him pep talks in the middle of battles. He'd go worse than clinically insane without all the extra help and the Planet seemed to know it.

Then he remembered. Jenova might be nothing but cosmic dust, but the entire Soldier department had been infused with small amounts of Jenova cells. It wasn't Reunion levels as Hojo hadn't started trying to replicate Sephiroth until after the general was dead, but they still had a bit of evil alien parasite in them. Maybe...when he was emotionally agitated, it left him particularly open to the memories of someone else with Jenova cells. Jenova cells liked Jenova cells after all. And having chunks of Zack's memories already floating about in his head probably made him even more attuned to picking his up.

"I won't make you come back to Shinra Cloud." Zack shook his head. "But you've got to give me something to work with. It may come as a bit of a shock but Shinra's got you on the suspect list for those terrorist bombings and a raid on Junon. If you know the people who did it, you've got to help me catch them. They took some very dangerous things and when they use them, it'll hurt a lot of people."

"But if I help you then Shinra will know about me, and I can't go back there. I just can't Zack." If he convinced Zack of nothing else, he needed the Soldier on board with his not going anywhere near evil researchers.

"Don't you worry about that, Spiky. You're not going back there. I'm not going to let even one of those scientists get a hold of you. I'll figure out what's going on. But you've got to give me a way to get hold of you. Will you give me your new PHS number?"

He stared into Zack's mako bright eyes and studied him. He knew Zack about as well as he knew himself. He had enough of the important memories to know the best bits and he learned a lot of the rest. The Zack in front of him was every bit as honest as the one in his memories.

He nodded. It wasn't like Shinra would be able to backtrack the signal anyway. He'd taken care of the hardware. Thank you again, Reeve.

Suddenly, Zack had him wrapped up in a bear hug and picked him up off the floor, swinging him around like a dog with a new toy. "I missed you Spiky! Don't you ever do something like this again. If you decide to take off on a random trip you've got to tell me so I can get time off work to follow you like the big stalker best friend that I am. Things have been crazy and I don't get to see you often enough. But you'll work with me right? I'll make sure everything gets worked out just right and the people you're hanging out with don't have anything to do with terrorists. Then we'll all throw a party with all our friends. We'll even invite Tseng and vice president Shinra. I know that guy is pretty young to be the vice president but he seems to know what he's doing."

He returned Zack's hug as best he could, resigning himself to being swung around like a toy, and chuckled. He'd forgotten what it was like to have Zack around in the flesh without the somber attitude that permeated his being once he'd died.

He just hoped Zack was still this happy once he had the whole story.
"How many times must I tell you to knock, Zack?" Sephiroth sounded like he hadn't slept for at least three days.

"It's really important, General Sephiroth," Zack said, closing the door quietly behind him.

Sephiroth straightened, clearly caught off guard by the formality of address.

He sat in the chair across from Sephiroth's desk and immediately stood back up. Sephiroth watched him pace across the office and return to the seat.

Zack knew he had to tell his commanding officer something but he wasn't sure what to start with. He wasn't even sure he was comfortable telling him everything. This was Cloud he would be talking about, and while he couldn't say the guy had done exactly the right thing, it all looked mighty suspicious on the Shinra side.

"You have something to say," Sephiroth said by means of prompting.

Zack sighed, figuring he'd just start talking. "I went down to the slums today again. Cloud managed to…get away…earlier. Those are the words he used, get away. So he came to see me today."

Sephiroth's eyes widened.

"Something's going on, Sephiroth. Something bigger than I expected."

"CS Delivery?"

"Maybe. But something else." He leaned forward, staring his commanding officer hard in the eyes. "Sephiroth, Cloud is pumped full of more mako than I am."

Sephiroth was shaking his head even before he spoke. "No Zack. That's not possible. There's nothing in his record indicating enhancement."

"Cloud shines brighter than I do. And the guy already had ridiculously bright blue eyes, just look at the photos in his file. But I saw it myself Sephiroth, he's got so much mako that his blue eyes have little fiddly bits of green in them." He waggled his fingers significantly to emphasize the point. "And he started zoning out just a little while we were talking and his pupils started to go catty like yours. I measured his height against mine and compared muscle mass to what I remember. He's taller and more toned than should be possible. I even picked him up to test his weight. He's put on a fair number of pounds. The visual profile I ran on him off the video feeds seems pretty accurate." He leaned back in his seat. "I just know someone's been experimenting on him, Sephiroth. You've heard the rumors. Some of the scientists are a little too free with their morals. Just look at what Hollander did."

"Supposing all this is true," Sephiroth's eyes narrowed with more than skepticism, "why didn't you bring him back?"

"He's really…suspicious of Shinra Company in general." He could hear the pained empathy in his own voice. "He thinks he'll end up in a lab somewhere."

Zack propped his elbows on the edge of Sephiroth's desk and kept talking. "He doesn't remember how he got in the Shinra training yard before he collapsed. He said he just woke up there with that
Second Class yelling at him. He remembers seeing his failed results for the first Soldier exam he took but doesn't remember taking the exam itself. The list goes on.

Zack flattened his hands on the desk to keep from clenching his fists. "And even weirder, he remembers things he shouldn't, Sephiroth, classified things." And things that didn't even happen to him, Zack thought to himself. "He remembers an attack during the Wutai War. He hadn't even joined Shinra yet. And he remembers having a conversation with Genesis."

Sephiroth's expression hardened. "If he has anything to do with the deserters—"

"No, Sephiroth, listen to me." Zack ignored the general's momentary surprise at being ordered in such a manner. "He remembers a conversation I had with Genesis on one of the missions when you and I were confronting him. Cloud described it using my words that I didn't even put down in the reports. I never told him about any of that stuff. He didn't have the clearance. It's like he has my memories. It's freaking me right the shit out that my best friend may have been experimented on and given my memories and there's no way I'm bringing him back here until we figure out what's going on."

Sephiroth tapped a pen on his desk. "This is very important, Zack," he said slowly. "Do you think he could be CS Delivery?"

Zack clenched his jaw for a moment, knowing this question was going to be asked. He took a deep breath. "He's the right height and build. He was pretty relaxed around me so I didn't get anything like muscle response or that. But given his memory issues, I think he could be CS Delivery and not know it. He says there are other people helping him, and he got really cagey when I tried asking about them."

"You think the others are handlers of sorts?"

"Could be."

"If Strife is CS Delivery and someone is pulling the strings from behind, then we need to figure out who and how and you need to make sure he keeps trusting you."

"I would do that anyway." A wash of indignant irritation swept through Zack. That anyone would even consider he abandon Cloud was insulting. "I'm not leaving Spike to the jackals."

"I'll bring Tseng up to speed and get him to covertly combing through Shinra for unsanctioned mako experiments."

Zack said, "I've got a couple missions lined up and then I'm going to try and set up another meeting with Spiky."

Then Tseng unceremoniously barged into Sephiroth's office without knocking. "News on the stolen property, Sephiroth." Tseng threw an absent "Zack" his direction and laid out several papers on the general's desk.

"We're still working on Nibelheim but we're reasonably sure about North Corel and Junon. Everything is in these manifests if you look closely enough," Tseng waved a hand over the papers and kept on with barely a breath, "but I'll give you the abridged version. Scarlet dubbed this prototype materia Huge materia. It's exactly what it sounds like. These pieces are so huge that they can't be used in weapons or armor and they're not meant to be used that way. They're used in conjunction with the most straightforward materia to actually create a new kind of materia that not even the science department has attempted. They're calling the new materia Master materia."
"What does it matter what they're called?" Sephiroth asked tersely.

"Quite a bit General. Huge materia may be about the size of a human head but it weighs near one hundred pounds. With the speed CS Delivery and his comrades travel, if he isn't enhanced, it's impossible for him to carry around that much weight."

Tseng took a deep breath as though to steel himself. "And Master materia is exactly how it's described. If you take one piece of every mastered materia on that list and pretty much pile it together next to its corresponding Huge materia, the Huge materia forcibly fuses together each of the mastered pieces to make one typically sized materia that holds every single spell and ability the pile of individual materia was capable of casting."

Zack's brain didn't want to wrap around that.

Sephiroth blinked several times, brows lifting. "You mean one materia would be able to…" he paused to look over one sheet of paper, "cast Cure and Ice?"

Tseng's face hardened. "And Demi and Life and Flare and Haste and Bio and Fire 1, 2, and 3 and every other basic magic that comes with tiered green materia, not the focused materia the materia department churns out for fusion purposes."

Zack liked the focused materia as it usually cast faster and worked better for his fighting style, but anyone could get tiered materia if they had the gil. They sold that stuff in the slums.

Tseng kept going. "It gets even worse if you think about one piece of materia being able to summon sixteen different summons. And if you think about putting the Master Magic in a paired slot with say, an Added Effect, if they're wearing it on their armor it makes them immune to every status effect possible and if they're wearing it on their weapon then they'll inflict every status effect possible. That's why they didn't bother making it compatible with the Dark or Hell materia series'. It would be redundant. Fortunately, the Master Command is a bit more limited and there's nothing for the Independent class but that doesn't make much difference if you pair the Master Magic with an All."

"Which ones does CS Delivery have?" Sephiroth's voice was abnormally level.

Zack had to admit the idea was somewhat chilling. One person being able to have all that power at their disposal was frightening. He had the inane thought that he might almost hope that Cloud was CS Delivery. Even if his young friend had become a terrorist, he'd trust that sort of destructive power to Cloud over the average, run-of-the-mill terrorist.

"He picked up the Huge Magic Materia in North Corel. The Huge Summon and Huge Support Materia were both in Junon."

"That only leaves the Huge Command Materia," Sephiroth said. "Have we located it?"

"Fort Condor. I sent Reno and Rude out last night. With most of the Turks still recovering from Junon, and my unwillingness to send out Soldier and leave Midgar vulnerable, I had no choice. We can only hope Reno and Rude get there first."

Zack couldn't help asking, "Has Reno recovered enough from Junon?" The Turks hadn't accomplished much in Junon in the way of slowing CS Delivery down and an injured Turk was even less useful.

"Recovered enough," Tseng said flatly.

"Does Veld know what's going on?" Sephiroth asked.
"Yes. But he's neck deep in terrorist groups now. He's making headway with Avalanche but with this CS Delivery mess, all the dissident factions are scrambling around madly accusing each other and trying to figure out who really did it so they can either recruit or kill them. We're still not releasing CS Delivery's name in the hopes that someone else will and we'll be able to trace it back to the source."

Zack blurted, "I mentioned CS Delivery to Cloud."

Tseng straightened. "You met with Strife? What happened to the original meeting date and why wasn't I informed? It's only been three days since you arranged the meeting."

"Cloud just showed up," Zack said defensively, voice rising. "I was down in the slums and he was just there and I was trying to keep from freaking out and keep him from freaking out and I asked him if he knew what was going on."

"And his answer?"

"He didn't really answer," Zack grudgingly admitted. "He got really cagey about the people he says have been helping him."

Tseng scowled slightly. "At least if word starts circulating now, we'll know Strife isn't involved with CS Delivery. He would never release his own information since he hasn't made a public appearance."

"Of possibly equal importance," Sephiroth cut in, "Strife has definitely been modified. According to Zack's reports, the young man possibly has as much mako in him as me."

"How's that possible?" Tseng asked, incredulity creeping into his tone. "You've been subject to the science department since birth. Not even Genesis or Angeal were at your level when it came to the mako quantities they could survive. Their G cells started to degrade. Are we saying that this trooper, this boy can handle your astronomic mako levels?"

"We're not sure." Sephiroth shot Zack a look.

Zack had to give the Turk something. "Cloud really has grown. It's like he's a couple years older. And his pupils are sometimes cat-slit like Sephiroth's. And he's got more mako shine than me. And he's been implanted with other people's memories. He remembers things he never did. He's convinced someone in Shinra did this to him and refuses to even consider coming back. He thinks he'll end up in a lab somewhere and I agree with him. With Hollander out of the picture, what little restraint was inflicted on Hojo is gone and I'm not comfortable with that until we figure out what he was doing in Nibelheim."

Zack's eyes widened almost comically at the sudden turn of his own thoughts. "Cloud's from Nibelheim. You don't suppose Hojo did something to him before he even came to Shinra do you?"

"Circumstantially," Tseng said, "it's possible. It wouldn't have been difficult for one of the scientists to falsify Strife's physical exam data if they knew he was coming. There wouldn't be an original record to find because the false one would be the original."

Sephiroth said, "It could be that Strife's...change was linked to the start of these attacks, but there's no telling if it was accidental or purposeful. If Hojo is responsible, I would vote for accidental. In some way I could see him deciding to create something like CS Delivery, but he would never intend for his own research to be destroyed. Even if he was trying to fake being a victim, he wouldn't still be throwing his massive tantrums and demanding he be given CS Delivery when we finally catch..."
him."

Silence passed uncomfortably as they stared and wondered just how deeply this supposed conspiracy went. Tseng finally offered, "I'll redouble efforts to determine what was going on in Nibelheim at both the manor and the reactor."

The Turk's PHS vibrated and rang from his suit pocket. He pulled it out and answered, "Tseng."

With his enhanced mako hearing, he heard Reno's tinny voice on the other end.

"Too late boss. Shit. Sorry, Tseng. The locals are throwin' shit at us. Some of that's literally. Rude took a glob to the head. Ruined his damn sunglasses. Whoa – Holy! – Gaia!"

"Reno," Tseng said, tone slightly exasperated. "Try to be a little more clear."

"Before the locals started chuckin' shit, we got enough to know that they sold the Huge Materia to that CS Delivery asshole. They threw a special letter from 'im for the vice president at us first. They say the damn freak with his red gunman and the giant cat just strolled up, said Shinra Company shouldn't have the giant hunk of Lifestream, paid them for the shit, and strolled off with it. The damn yokels just up and sold our shit."

"Get back here and file a proper report as soon as possible." Then Tseng hung up on his fellow Turk with a sigh. "There goes that. CS Delivery has all four Huge Materia. We'll see what his letter has to say. I'll go tell Vice President Shinra."

* * *

"I think they're ignoring each other," Cloud said, voice almost swallowed by the wind on the cliffs above Kalm.

"It certainly seems so," Vincent said in agreement.

Nanaki asked, "Are we going to do anything about it?"

"I'd like to. With all these stalkers I can't take off my hood. It's humid today." He plucked at the edge of the hood, moodily.

"How about there?" Vincent asked, lifting his chin in a direction slightly closer to the beach than they were aimed. The plateau they were using sloped down toward the low, bumpy hills between them and the beach but in front of them there was a drop off that would allow them to slip out of sight for a few minutes. "You can double back along the beach while Nanaki and I head inland."

Cloud asked, "You can smell the mako on that group back there then?" Not even the heavy scent of salt and ocean masked the smell for Cloud.

Both his companions nodded. Nanaki said, "Every time the wind shifts."

Hints of dry amusement in his tone, Vincent said, "Considering my inhabitants and Nanaki's potential future as a specimen, it would be in everyone's best interest if you handled mako-enhanced individuals until their organizations of origins are determined."

Chuckling under his breath, Cloud nodded. If one thing was radically different between this past and his first past it was this trust from Vincent. The other Vincent rarely sent Cloud on reconnaissance missions, not exactly mistrusting his skills of observation but not giving his somewhat fractured mind the chance to miss something, or to give him an excuse to charge off on his own…like Aerith had.
The other Vincent much preferred to work alone, doing all the reconnaissance himself, then showing up at the opportune time to share all the information he’d uncovered. This Vincent from the past seemed more than willing to share the workload, and often relied on Cloud’s information. It was rather nice being treated like he wasn’t about to fall to pieces if something particularly shocking or stressful happened.

And honestly, he hadn't fallen to pieces in years.

They angled toward the drop off, keeping their steady pace. Before the edge, he asked, "Meet back up at the top when we're done?"

Vincent said, "With our guests."

Cloud nodded. Clearly, the Turk thought it best that they verify the two groups had nothing to do with each other. Since Nanaki didn't argue, he agreed, also.

When the three of them reached the edge of the drop off, they jumped down into the grassy valley some sixty feet below. As soon as Cloud’s feet hit the ground, he sprinted for the beach. He didn't wait to watch Vincent and Nanaki head the opposite direction. He didn't need to.

He stopped among some low hills, that wouldn't be quite tall enough to hide Zack, before actually reaching the sand. He slunk through those hills, the constant rhythmic wash of the ocean covering up the little sound he might be making, eyes cast inland as he waited for the barest hint of movement.

The scent of mako grew stronger, blown out to the beach from a sudden, swift breeze. After spending time in Midgar, it was difficult to differentiate between the different grades of mako, what with mako permeating the very air in that city. What he was smelling now wasn't normal.

It didn't bear the metallic tang of industrial mako. It didn't have the ozone flavor of raw mako fountains. It wasn't the muted, acidic scent of Soldiers. It did, however, remind him of the sharp, acrid flare ever-present in the mako Hojo used in the Shinra mansion on him and Zack.

When he remembered the source of that particular kind of mako, he wasn't surprised that he hadn't immediately placed it. Of all the different kinds of mako, it was one he'd rarely encountered.

A flash of metal in the tall grass sloping up to the top of the cliffs brought him to a halt. He caught glimpses of swords and thin lines of glowing mako as the pair ghosted toward where Cloud and the others had disappeared from.

Cloud started moving again, angling around behind them. They would hear him coming, but the faster he moved, the less time they would have to react. The only thing he wasn't sure about was just how much to temper his abilities. They weren't nearly as enhanced as Zack, and they would fight with less caution. Cloud had been careful and he still managed to damage, if not break, Zack’s ribs.

With a quiet sigh, he pulled the Butterfly Edge from its harness on his back. He needed a smaller blade to make sure he surpassed the pair's speed but something still weak enough that he wouldn't accidentally cleave them in half. He considered using the Force Eater but was only willing to give up so much in the way of attack power. His opponents were enhanced after all.

When the pair neared the edge of the tall grass, he had the best opportunity to strike. Given their mako-enhanced senses, it wouldn't exactly be a surprise, but he'd take what he could get.

Cutting through the tall grass would be pointless. The rustling would give him away long before he reached them. So he took a running leap up onto one of the low hills and propelled himself off the top, sending himself flying straight up to the top of the plateau to land behind the pair.
They didn't notice his coming quick enough to directly defend against his strike but they both rolled away from the sweeping arc of his blade. They recovered quickly, spinning to bring their long swords together with him in the middle. He jumped, flinging himself backward and over one blade while swinging his own sword into the one he was evading. The extra force sent the man off balance and he almost landed on his partner's weapon.

They regrouped in the next moment and presented a united front. One swept in low, blade at thigh height, while the other jumped about ten feet up to come in high with a downward stroke.

Cloud put on a burst of speed and gave a short hop, bringing his knees nearly to his chest. He twisted his hips to get the angle right and slammed both feet down on the flat of the low-swiping blade. True to his strength, Cloud's opponent didn't release the hilt, but the impact on the weapon when the tip hit the ground snapped the blade in two places with a resounding crack.

In nearly the same moment that Cloud broke the first sword, the Butterfly Edge met the second sword. Cloud's eyes widened behind his goggles as the other sword shattered on impact. Due to the angle of his swing, the metal shards didn't fly directly at him, but the pair he was fighting didn't come out so lucky if the sharp intakes of breath were any indication.

The one low to the ground seemed temporarily stunned by the combination of his broken sword and three bits of shrapnel in his back. The other one came down off balance and fell on landing, one extremely large chunk of his own sword embedded in his leg.

Without giving either opponent time to react, Cloud replaced his sword in its harness and grabbed the upper arm of the one with the shards in his back and dragged him closer to the other one. The second one got snagged by the collar, and Cloud hauled both of them out of the tall grass. He didn't take them too near the drop off, as they might decide to throw themselves off to escape, and shoved them onto the ground. Both were still coordinated enough to keep from exacerbating their injuries.

They sat side by side in the short grass, emotionally impassive in the safety of the helmets masking their entire head. With both of them quiet and compliant, Cloud got a better look at them. Their dull colored uniforms ran with bright blue mako lines, giving them their glow, even in the sunlight. The scent of mako hung heavy in the air. He wasn't sure what this pair's classification was as their uniform and weapon combination didn't match anything he remembered.

He briefly considered running a tiny lightning spell over them to short any electronic surveillance devices but decided not to risk shorting their suits. Disrupting the mako flow might kill them.

"No matter what you do to us, we'll never tell you anything," the one on the right said, voice muffled through his helmet. He prodded his suit around the metal in his leg.

Cloud crouched in front of them, bringing himself to their eye level. "Who said anything about questions?"

For some inexplicable reason, that seemed to be the wrong thing to say as the pair of them froze. Then they visibly relaxed and the one on the left said, "Torturing us to death won't get you the satisfaction of groveling. We've been through worse that you can imagine." His tone twisted disdainfully around that one word.

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. "I doubt that." The pair froze again, seemingly more tense than before. Cloud said, "Fortunately for you, I'm not torturing you to death either."

The two exchanged a glance. Cloud wasn't sure why, their faces were hidden by helmets and they couldn't see each other's expressions.
Cloud narrowed his eyes behind his goggles. He felt the faintest sense of Jenova cells. There weren't like what he felt from Sephiroth or the Soldiers he'd encountered here in the past. Perhaps when Cloud had made himself known in Junon, more than just Zack had felt him.

"What do you want?" the one on the right demanded.

"To save everyone," Cloud said simply, smirk tugging on the corners of his mouth despite his attempts to keep his expression flat.

The one on the left scoffed but before he got off some smarmy remark, Cloud added, "I'm told I have a hero complex."

Again with the pair's seemingly useless exchange of invisible glances. If Cloud were one of them, he'd be more interested in removing the sword shrapnel. They had enough mako in them that they'd probably start to heal.

The one on the left asked, "Why'd you attack us?"

Cloud shrugged. "You were following me." At least he managed to keep his expression flat this time. "And me and my partners want to check something. Besides, I figured you wouldn't give up your weapons if I asked nicely."

The pair radiated shock, if nothing else. "What," the one on the right started slowly, as though no longer sure what to make of Cloud, "do you want to check if it's not...an interrogation?"

Cloud stared at them for several long moments, watching the one on the left shift uneasily. Ignoring their question, he said, "If I were to ask you any questions, there would be only two." He held up one finger. "Were you sent to follow me or to speak with me?" He held up a second finger. "Who do you work for?"

Regaining a bit of confidence, the one on the right scoffed. "If you don't know what department we're from then there's nothing worth telling you."

Rather than allow the peon to ruffle him, he said, "I know which department you're from. I meant specifically, who do you work for."

"If you know our department then you should know who we work for," one on the left said.

"On the surface, of course," Cloud said, waving a hand dismissively. "I know who the bosses are." Carefully speaking each word, keeping his tone conversational, he said, "I meant specifically."

Both of them grew even more uneasy at that. Cloud waited.

Then the one on the right said, "We were just supposed to follow you."

"Quiet," the one on the left said uneasily. There wasn't much of an edge to his voice, though, so Cloud figured he'd probably been about to say something, too.

"I see," Cloud said noncommittally. The pair of them practically squirmed under his scrutiny. It actually amused him. He never understood why people would just start talking if he stared long enough. No one ever did it around Vincent. The action had become more pronounced since he started running around in the hoodie. Perhaps the lack of his unruly blond hair flying everywhere had an intimidating effect.

Mentally dismissing the ridiculous notion, he half turned to look inland at the faint sounds of
movement. Vincent and Nanaki came up onto the plateau, three men marching in front of them, hands held in the air. Their brown uniforms identified them as easily as the blue and black uniforms of the ones in front of Cloud.

The three of them were littered with grass, making Cloud wonder if Vincent and Nanaki had tossed them around a bit before corralling them. Vincent made the three sit some twenty feet away from Cloud's captives, then left Nanaki staring them down to join Cloud.

Cloud straightened but kept his eyes on the pair in front of him. He took several steps back to give himself and Vincent some semblance of privacy. Both knew the mako-enhanced pair would hear anyway, but at least the three under Nanaki's watchful eyes wouldn't.

"Deepground?" Vincent said, eying the two critically.

Cloud nodded. "Can't quite figure out what kind though. They're dressed like DG Soldier but they were wielding swords like the DG Heavy Armored Soldier. Still, though, the swords weren't nearly as big as the ones I've seen before."

Dryly, Vincent asked, "I assume the metal shards everywhere are what's left of their swords."

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. No other response was required.

Cloud lifted his chin toward the three brown-clad individuals. "You get anything out of them?"

Vincent said, "Avalanche scouts. We just looked interesting to follow when we left Midgar."

Cloud had carefully watched the Deepground pair during his exchange with Vincent. They only showed indifference and leftover uneasiness. It wasn't like Deepground and Avalanche were likely to collaborate anyway.

"This pair?" Vincent asked.

"Following us. No surprise there."

"Under whose orders?" Vincent's question was slow and measure, and made the Deepground pair stiffen.

Cloud shrugged. "I asked who they worked for, specifically, but didn't press for an answer."

Then the one on the left said, "Tsviets." The word was spoken low and quick. The Avalanche spies wouldn't have heard.

Leaving Vincent's side, Cloud returned to his crouch in front of the pair. In a voice pitched as serious as he could muster, Cloud said, "Nero has to deal with the deadfall first."

And yet another useless exchange of glances.

The one on the right started, "But…Weiss-"

"Might not care," Cloud interjected. He dropped his chin slightly. "You'll remember right?"

Both nodded.

Cloud said, "I might help." He lifted his hands, the appendages already glowing a soft green. When he cast the spell, both Soldiers slumped. Cloud lurched forward to catch the one from falling onto the shrapnel in his back.
Plucking the bits out quickly, Cloud asked, "Get that one out of his leg will you?"

The gunman silently complied casting a Cure on both once the metal was removed.

At some rustling in the tall grass, Cloud straightened and turned. His eyes narrowed behind his goggle at the sounds of stealthy movement headed toward them.

"More?" Cloud blurted in a surprised whisper. "Is all of Gaia out following us today?"

Vincent only huffed a breath. Easily a laugh in the man's repertoire of expressions.

Cloud prowled closer, hand rising to the Apocalypse's hilt. But when flame red hair, attached to the top of a battle-crying man, came barreling out after him, mag rod held ready to strike, he reflexively dodged. Reno hurtled past him and spun back around, easily regaining his bearing. The Turk's eyes flicking over Cloud's shoulder was all he needed to see to know Rude was probably behind him. But Vincent was no longer near the Deepground pair so Cloud didn't worry about anything behind him.

The flicker of surprise on Reno's face confirmed his confidence. Cloud took a measured step forward, deciding how best to handle the overeager Turk this time.

Apparent rage renewed, Reno just snarled at him and darted forward. Rather than dodge, Cloud caught the mag rod with one hand. The electricity surged, sending wild, airborne arcs up Cloud's arm.

Cloud's eyes widened even as his movements stuttered for a moment. Reno took advantage of the hesitation to pull against his grip and aim a side kick at his head. Compensating for the electricity, Cloud ducked below the kick and wrenched the mag rod out of the Turk's grip. Without a wielder, the weapon shut down.

Then Cloud darted in and smacked Reno in the head with the hilt of his own weapon. The Turk stumbled backward and made a startled sound of surprise. He feinted a lack of recovery to throw a roundhouse kick Cloud's way, which Cloud stepped and leaned backward to avoid. Reno followed with a couple punches, reminding Cloud that he was fast for someone who wasn't swimming in mako.

Deciding enough was enough, Cloud smacked Reno in the side of the head with the hilt of the mag rod again. And a third time. The Turk wobbled and stumbled like he was on a dingy on the choppy ocean.

"Stan' still asshole," Reno slurred, "an' figh' like a man." The Turk lurched sidewards, but Cloud got the impression Reno had been aiming for him.

Cloud tossed the mag rod over his shoulder. It hit the ground behind him with a dull thunk. He darted inside the Turk's range and snaked an arm behind him, taking a firm grip at the base of the man's ponytail. Reno sputtered indignantly and tried to throw a punch. The gesture lacked power, as he was still disoriented, and was quite difficult to execute considering Cloud had complete control of his head.

"Let go of me ya shitfaced ass hat," Reno snarled, attempting a poorly balanced back kick. Only Cloud's grip on him kept him from toppling over.

Cloud dragged the cussing Turk toward the rest of the captives. Vincent, gun pointed at Rude's head, already had the other Turk kneeling in the empty space between the pair of unconscious Deepground soldiers and the Avalanche trio. Those three looked about ready to keel over in fear. The one in the middle was shaking and looked about five minutes away from puking. Nanaki looked positively
ready to burst out with bestial laughter at any moment.

Knowing Reno would probably attempt something stupid, Cloud didn't let go of the man's hair when he started rooting through the Reno's jacket pockets.

"Oi," Reno snapped, "now you're muggin' me? What the hell asshole? Haven't you stolen enough shit?" The Turk tried to jerk out of his grasp but only succeeded in rocking himself around. His arms fell limp at his sides when Cloud fished out Reno's PHS.

Cloud pushed Reno so he fell on the ground next to Rude. Leaving them for the moment, Cloud moved over to Nanaki and the Avalanche trio. He crouched down in front of them and whispered, "After I cast the spell, the three of you should head back to Midgar." He smiled, unnerving the men if the way they shuddered was any indication. "It'll wear off in about fifteen minutes but I'd be as far from this lot," he waved a hand at the Turks and Deepground Soldiers, "as I possibly could before then. Understood?"

He received three hasty nods.

Putting as little power into it as possible, he cast Toad. The magic flared green around them as they shrunk. Moments later, three rather large amphibians quivered in front of him. He pushed to his feet and ambled back to the others, Nanaki following closely on his heels. The Avalanche troops hesitated only a heartbeat before frantically hopping away as fast as their little legs could take them.

Cloud took the opportunity to examine the hand he'd grabbed the mag rod with. The weapon had actually burned holes through the glove. He flexed his fingers, feeling a slight ache in the muscles and the brittle give of his glove. The glove was useless but the muscle ache surprised him. That was definitely not the same mag rod that Reno had chucked at him in Junon. This one felt like a weak, Bolt 2 spell.

The Turk clearly noticed Cloud's scrutiny of the ruined glove because his smirk had crept back over his face.

Removing the useless glove and stuffing it in a pants' pocket, Cloud flipped open Reno's PHS with the still gloved hand and started scrolling through contacts. There were surprisingly few and were almost exclusively Shinra employees so far as he could tell. There were only a few names he didn't recognize. Finding the one he was looking for, he selected it and started composing a message.

"On the heights above Kalm. Better come and remove the Stop. CS Delivery says hi."

To let Reno know what was in store for him, Cloud kindly leaned down in front of the Turk with the PHS and showed him the message, effectively wiping the pleased smirk off his face, before sending it to Tseng.

"Shit," Reno groaned as the soft green spell gathered for casting at Cloud's free hand.
Corruption vs. Betrayal

Sometimes Zack felt like he was the only one on pins and needles waiting to see if they finally had definitive proof that his best friend was a terrorist. Everyone around the conference table appeared calm. Vice President Shinra also seemed bored.

Zack felt like a nervous wreck. It had taken hours for Tseng to get out to Kalm and scour the cliffs for signs of Reno and Rude, then afterward it had taken almost an hour by itself for Tseng to get the spell off his subordinates. Tseng had taken Reno straight to medical on returning to Midgar because he had a concussion, and Vice President Shinra wanted to wait until more of the Turks could be present to discuss the letter and the encounter outside of Kalm at the same time.

Zack didn't like waiting, but could hardly demand the vice president comply with his wishes. Reno kept pushing for simply assuming Cloud was the culprit and now that the Turk had had another encounter with the terrorist, no one but Rude would be able to dispute the accusations and Rude usually backed Reno up. Zack would have to rely on the letter to keep Cloud from being unceremoniously accused. It wasn't like it would be a detailed list of how Cloud was responsible for everything.

"Zack," Sephiroth whispered next to him, "calm down."

Zack glanced at the general, spying cat-slit pupils staring sideways at him, then buried his face in his hands. "I'm just...worried...that it'll be like Angeal all over again." He paused. "And I hate sitting around like this. I feel like I need to be doing something."

Sephiroth put a hand lightly on his shoulder. It was only there for a moment, and the man's expression didn't change, but Zack took it for a comforting gesture.

The hand left when the briefing room doors slid open, admitting Tseng and a rather unhappy looking Reno, a bruise blossoming on the side of the latter's face back near his ear. "Rude's still showerin' to get the shit smell off his head." He tossed a sealed envelope across the table to the vice president. "I'm only stayin' long enough to hear what's goin' on then I'm returnin' to quarters to recuperate."

Shinra eyed the envelope with distaste. "Is that clean?"

"Yeah, Vice President, it's good." Reno exuded tiredness. He didn't even smirk at the vice president's distaste for possible contamination of the letter.

Shinra still looked somewhat disgusted touching the envelope. He discarded it as quickly as possible and turned his attention to the letter. A faint smirk crawled onto his face while he read. By Zack's estimation, he must have gone through the whole thing three times before finally reading aloud.

"Rufus Shinra, I have what I want so don't expect any ridiculously overt displays anytime soon. But don't think I won't take an opportunity if you give me one. I won't be entirely unavailable now that my initial aggressive maneuvers are complete. I'd also suggest you refrain from dealing with Avalanche. There are certain elements among its members that support questionable ethics. No, I'm not talking money or information. Both might end up in the hands of those elements of questionable ethics, and that's not something I'll tolerate. Just to put the offer on the table, I'd say I'm the more honorable, under-the-table ally. Given my present record, I'm more reliable and likely to succeed. The Turks are doing a decent job keeping Avalanche from running wild but you can see that I have my affairs moving according to my own plans. CS Delivery. P.S. If you would arrange for Sephiroth to be the one to meet me the next time I make myself available, I'd appreciate it."
Zack shifted uneasily, unsure of what to make of that letter's contents. He'd read all the right things into CS Delivery's meanings before, but this one didn't look good. He...hoped he was wrong.

"Fair," Shinra said evenly, "from the look on your face I would say you're hearing something specific in these words. Would you care to share?"

Zack shrugged uncomfortably as all eyes turned to him. Tseng's gaze was particularly sharp. "It could really mean anything.... And there's still the stuff in Kalm to talk about so...."

Shinra leaned forward, elbows on the table, and steepled his fingers together. "Fair, I need to know exactly how in tune with the language and meaning of these letters you are." He unclasped his hands to tap the paper sitting in front of him. "I know what CS Delivery means in telling me this. What exactly do you hear."

When Zack didn't immediately answer, Sephiroth said, "Zack, answer him."

"Pretty much," he started out slowly, "CS Delivery is focusing on Avalanche now and will take what he thinks they shouldn't have just like he did with Shinra Company. He's talking like...like Vice President Shinra is feeding them gil and intel and is telling him to stop or he'll be targeted right along with Avalanche. But then he's also putting himself out there as a candidate for alliance instead. Kind of like a hang out with me instead of Avalanche, or else deal. But in a really nice way. I guess the only reason he's ignored Avalanche until now is because he thinks the Turks are handling it. But the bit about Sephiroth, I bet he wants to talk." He rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably, wishing they would all stop staring at him.

Shinra stared at him speculatively for several moment before sharing a long look with Tseng. "Perhaps it's time to tell them."

"I was also thinking so, sir," Tseng said.

The vice president nodded then said, "See that the Second Class Soldier, Kunsel, joins us. I would rather brief them simultaneously."

It seemed this whole thing was much deeper than Zack expected. He exchanged a look with Sephiroth while Tseng slipped out of the room. His general seemed to have come to the conclusion that he had been right in the assessment of CS Delivery's letter and unhappily glowered at the vice president.

Zack eyed everyone in the room, wondering how the world had gotten this messed up again. He thought that after Genesis and Angeal, even though Genesis was only a missing deserter, things would quiet down and it would just be the Wutai dissidents, Genesis copies, and the regular terrorists to contend with. They were so much easier for him to deal with mentally speaking. At least Reno hadn't declared that Cloud was CS Delivery.

The vice president looked determined and Reno seemed more determined, no longer irritated and tired. Sephiroth just seemed frustrated and tense, his brow wrinkling slightly where his eyebrows pushed together. Zack felt like even more of a nervous wreck.

It took forever, maybe ten minutes really, but Tseng finally returned, Kunsel in tow. The Second sat next to Zack as Tseng resumed his seat next to the vice president.

Shinra leaned back in his seat and eyed Sephiroth. "I only ask that you listen to the whole of what I have to say before passing judgment. It's complicated and I would like a proper hearing before you reach any conclusions."
"Why me specifically?" Sephiroth asked, chill evident in his voice.

"Where you walk, Fair and Kuskel will follow. And it since you three are the only ones outside the Turks fully aware of the situation regarding both Strife and CS Delivery, you need to be included in the events CS Delivery is embroiling himself in."

"Speak," Sephiroth ordered.

"I've been supplying Avalanche with gil and intel on SOLD and Shinra movements, using the Turks as intermediaries." At Sephiroth's sharply narrowed eyes, the vice president said, "Don't get me wrong. I have no intention of destroying Shinra Company, it's going to be mine after all. I couldn't care less about the Planet, how could I resist using the opportunity to take power from my father? I plan to take the whole company from him eventually. So far, It's gotten me sole control of the Turks. They only do what my father says when I order them to."

Zack felt frozen. How could the vice president reveal that sort of information so bluntly and so casually?

"In the first letter CS Delivery sent me, he mentioned my father and his endorsement of questionable practices. When he told me a 'good son would know what to do with his father', could this not refer to my ultimate plan to assassinate my father should he refuse to step down as president? Considering only Veld and Tseng knew of that point, CS Delivery must have an unidentified source of intel that we can't track down.

"The next batch of information I planned to send to Avalanche was scientific data on the Soldier program. The primary mind behind Avalanche was planning to use it to create his own superior fighters, but given that the man idolizes Hojo, and CS Delivery has gone out of his way to destroy Hojo's most prized research and laboratories, I can surmise with confidence the 'element' in Avalanche CS Delivery will be targeting is that terrorist scientist. CS Delivery is clearly more capable than Avalanche and I won't hesitate in taking the presented offer of alliance. Even if I didn't think I would directly benefit, I would take the offer anyway as CS Delivery seems more prone to swift, effective action. How foolish would it be to put myself directly on the foul side of that drive unless I thought I'd win?"

"Also, CS Delivery might be violent and destructive but the lack of fatalities shows that he is both extremely careful and plans to execute his agenda with as few casualties as possible. Avalanche repeatedly proves that they don't care how much live collateral damage they cause. If I'm going to run the world, wouldn't I need the people alive?"

The warm, almost kind smile on the vice president's face sent a chill down Zack's spine, but he refrained from comment. He wasn't sure what he would say at this point anyway.

"Don't you think President Shinra is wasteful to invest in projects more likely to destroy him than solidify his power base? With Professor Gast gone, the last shred of practical thinking disappeared from the science department. Hojo has free rein to create his mutated monsters and waste valuable company resources in tracking down the monsters that escape to contaminate the surrounding areas. How can it be beneficial to the company's image to have mako-infused monsters and genetic mutations roaming this whole continent? If they haven't spread already, it's only a matter of time before they're on the other continents too. As the vice president, I can't do anything about the executive board and some of those people need to be relocated. Reeve, I would leave, but Heidegger and Scarlet are sloppy. Palmer is a pushover, and if anything happens in Rocket Town his whole department will be shut down. Hojo simply has to go. The science department shouldn't belong to an egomaniac that enjoys creating monsters and wasting gil."
"I don't have a hometown," Sephiroth said coldly.

"You weren't raised there," Shinra countered. "You were born there. You know perfectly well that you're the only Soldier without blue eyes, and that the Nibelheim facilities were under Hojo's jurisdiction, and you know perfectly well that the science department had you for your childhood. Perhaps the reason CS Delivery went after Nibelheim was primarily because of Hojo and what was going on there. We don't know exactly what happened regarding you, but we know that Hojo was creating...monsters in the reactor. We've recovered a few sparse reports on building facilities and personnel movements as well as biological materials, and the only possible conclusion is that Hojo was using Second and Third Class Soldiers to create super monsters."

Sephiroth clenched his fists so hard he shook. "Is that what happened to me? Is that why I'm different than the other Soldiers? Is that why I don't degrade like my friends? Am I just some super monster cooked up in Hojo's labs?"

"We don't know," Shinra said bluntly. "But we think CS Delivery does."

Shinra actually leaned forward in interest. Zack found himself enthralled, and having no idea of which direction the information would go.

Shinra said, "It took extensive investigation, but we know Hojo didn't have backups of most of his data in Nibelheim. Or more specifically, his backup data for what was going on in the manor was in the reactor and the backups for what was in the reactor was in the manor. He has a third facility we haven't been able to locate, but it only has minimal specimens and data. We also have to take into account what CS Delivery told you about believing what you find out from this company. If I were Hojo and I wanted to control you, I would plant data that I knew you would find and that I knew how you would react to. If Hojo had something in Nibelheim, and you were ever sent on a mission there, you would certainly find the mutants in the reactor, and what would stop you from combing through all the data in both locations?"

"Don't you see?" Shinra asked. "You can either go to my father and ally yourself with Hojo to perhaps find out, or more likely be told the possible lies planted for you that CS Delivery destroyed. Or you can join with me, the Turks, and this CS Delivery that thinks as poorly of President Shinra and Hojo as we do. To me, CS Delivery seems like the most advantageous bet of all parties involved. President Shinra is corrupt. Hojo is amoral. Avalanche disregards human lives. Don't I quality as a traitor and would-be committer of patricide?"

Hints of a smile touched the vice president's lips. "How does CS Delivery's large scale property
damage compare to these other less-than-honorable acts?"

Shinra leaned back in his chair as though he hadn't just divulged his intention for sedition and a rather large conspiracy. "Choose your evil Sephiroth, I haven't got all day, and I'd like to move into deeper planning stages."

Sephiroth pushed back from the table and rose. "Zack, Kusen," he said, and made for the door.

They both scrambled to their feet and followed the general. Zack had no idea what to think. With logic alone, it would make more sense to go with the vice president. He already had the backing of the Turks and they influenced a huge chunk of Shinra company's operations. But that would mean turning traitor to the president. And bringing justice against a corrupt scientist. But CS Delivery was blowing up buildings. Sure he wasn't killing anyone yet, but that's all it was, a not yet.

But that would make Zack a traitor. Just like Genesis. Just like Angeal. Only worse, because he'd be pretending he wasn't a traitor and helping sabotage President Shinra from inside the company.

Ultimately, when picking between two halves of Shinra, when picking sides, he had to go with his heart. He didn't have that option last time. CS Delivery had Sephiroth's secrets. If Cloud had something to do with CS Delivery then that connected his friend to the terrorist group and to Sephiroth.

Sephiroth stopped only in the room outside the briefing room. He rounded on the other two Soldiers and said, "I'm not thinking clearly. Tell me your thoughts."

The desperate sort of crazed look lurking behind Sephiroth's bright green eyes unnerved Zack more than he would like to admit. So he blurted the first thing that came to mind. "You and Cloud have to be connected. Your catty eyes say as much. You're the only Soldier without blue eyes and Cloud's pumped full of so much mako he's got green flecks. CS Delivery knows about what was going on in Nibelheim and is willing to deal with the vice president. The president and Hojo are tight. If Hojo's done something, President Shinra knows about it. If they haven't told you yet, they probably won't tell you the truth."

"Tactically speaking," Kusen said, "I agree with Zack. The way the players stand now, Vice President Shinra is dumping Avalanche because CS Delivery's three-man team is stronger than an entire terrorist organization. If CS Delivery is on your level and it comes down to a fight, while you and he have at it, it'll be Soldier plus Scarlet's periodically malfunctioning weapons against Turks plus CS Delivery's lackeys. There will be heavy losses on both sides. Unless you can finish off CS Delivery quickly, I'd say there would be more losses on the Soldier side because of CS Delivery's companions and the Turks having intimate operating knowledge of Scarlet's weapons. Soldier still hasn't properly recovered from the desertions, but we're the swing vote, sir. If we side with the vice president, we'll win for sure. If we side with the president, I'd say it's about fifty-fifty."

Sephiroth took a deep breath and brushed a stray lock of silver hair out of his face. "Alright," he whispered, seemingly to himself. Then he headed straight back for the briefing room door.

Everyone inside was waiting silently, simply watching them.

"Soldier is in," Sephiroth said. "But if I find out any of you have purposely left me out of any planning or have withheld additional information, I will take your heads to President Shinra myself."

"Understood," Shinra said. With a slight smile, he continued, "If you resume your seats, we'll move on with the meeting."
Zack practically dropped into his chair, feeling a bit queasy. It was all so much to take in at once. His
general might be a monster like his mentor and their friend. Vice President Shinra had been working
with anti-Shinra terrorists. CS Delivery had medical secrets about Sephiroth and probably Cloud.

Politics sucked.

"Pull yourself together, man," Kunsul muttered under his breath. "You look like you're going to
puke."

"You do," Sephiroth said in a more normal tone, sliding into his own seat.

Zack stared blankly for a moment, unsure of what he was supposed to do with that information.

"Our primary objective," Tseng started, "is contact with CS Delivery. For now, we have to wait for
him to make his move. We have no sure means of contacting him. Our best lead is Cloud Strife. We
aren't positive they're connected yet but the odds are climbing. Since Sephiroth's experiment was
probably conducted in Nibelheim and Strife appears to be exhibiting similar physical characteristics,
chances are CS Delivery knows about Strife as well, if he isn't Strife to begin with. Since Strife is
vague about his allies, the most obvious scenario is that they belong to CS Delivery."

Sephiroth said, "Zack, your primary mission is Cloud Strife. Get as close to him as you can. We need
him. If you have to, swear that Soldier will protect him from Shinra's scientists. It would be best if
you could talk him into meeting with additional members of this little rebellion." Sephiroth waved
one hand airily as his dark gaze flicked over the room's occupants. "The more he trusts us, the more
likely he is to tell us who's been protecting him. Understood?"

"Yes sir." With that, he whipped out his PHS and scrolled through his contacts. He selected Spiky
and hit call. It only rang twice.

"Zack?" Cloud sounded surprised.

"Hey Spike, you got a few minutes?"

"Where I'm…-ly bad re-…I se-….." Then the signal dropped.

His eyes widened. "I heard the word 'bad'," he said. "What if he's in trouble? What if I called him in
the middle of something and he's not supposed to be getting calls and now they're going to kill him?
What if someone started strangling him for answering the call?"

"Calm down Zack," Sephiroth said. "If he wasn't supposed to be taking calls he probably wouldn't
have answered. It's quite unlikely someone would end the PHS call in the middle of strangling him.
And just so you're aware, I didn't mean you should start this mission in the middle of our briefing.
We still need to discuss the events near Kalm."

Zack frowned, still disturbed about the phone call. "Sorry. I guess I just got carried away. I feel like I
really need to do something."

Zack perked right up when his PHS vibrated. He flipped the phone back open and exclaimed, "He
sent me an email." Quickly opening it, he read aloud. "Sorry about the disconnect Zack. I've got
really bad reception here. If you want to talk send a message."

Zack sagged back into his chair. "Man, that scared me. Bad reception is horrible." He narrated as he
typed his message so the others would be in the loop. "I'm so boooored Spiky. I've been in the
briefing room all morning. Had a break and wanted to talk. When can we hang again?!!?!!?!!?"
"Seriously?" Reno's face was a picture of comedic confusion. "You really send shit like that to 'im?"

He nodded. "It's better than telling him I'm worried sick and feel like puking."

Vice President Shinra's expression told Zack that might not have been the best thing to say. Then his PHS vibrated again.

Zack flipped it open and read aloud. "You're not goofing off during work are you? Don't email me if you're supposed to be paying attention. And maybe next week."

"This former trooper seems to have a better attention span and sense of responsibility than you," Sephiroth said dryly.

Ignoring the general, he set to typing again. "No worries. I'm not goofing. Why next week? That sooooo far away *pout + puppy eyes*."

"You make me look mature," Reno said.

Zack pulled a face at the Turk and froze mid expression, remembering that Vice President Shinra was present too. Zack grinned a bit sheepishly and rubbed the back of his neck, offering a weak laugh.

The speed of Cloud's return message surprised him, as his PHS vibrated again. Aloud, he read, "I might be able to swing the end of the week but it won't be earlier than that."

"Sweet," Zack said under his breath. He set to typing. "Great! Can I bring my friend Kunsel? I haven't gone below the plate with him in a while and it'll be fun all going together. I can still call you right? I don't have to wait until I see you yeah?"

"Why Kunsel?" Reno asked.

Sephiroth answered for him. "Kunsel is the most innocuous of all of us and the least likely to draw suspicion. He's already Zack's friend. Strife is more likely to agree if he thinks it’s a social outing rather than a meeting with Shinra representatives. By putting the request in between the other two subjects, Zack implies it's the least important piece in the message, drawing more attention away from it."

Reno chuckled, smirking. "I never knew you could be that sneaky, Fair. When did that happen?"

"I'm just trying to make sure Cloud doesn't freak out." Scowl creeping onto his face, he said, "He's really touchy about Shinra."

"I can't say I blame him," Kunsel said.

His PHS vibrated again. "Kunsel's a Second isn't he? He won't try to make me go back will he? And yeah, you can call earlier. When I have better reception."

He screwed up his face in concentration and typed. "Yes and no and yaaaay!!! We'll have a blast!!! So when is earlier? When will you have better reception?"

"I didn't expect him to put forth so little fight," Shinra mused.

"He hasn't agreed yet," Sephiroth said. "Strife asked about the Shinra connection."

"But he didn't outright refuse," Tseng pointed out.
"Don't worry," he said. "Cloud didn't tell me no. In Cloud-speak that means I talked him into it and he's just procrastinating telling me I've won because he doesn't want me to think it was easy." His PHS vibrated again. "See?" He flipped it open. "Fine, Zack. But no one else. Tomorrow after dinner. That's at least seventeen hundred. No one has dinner at noon."

"He knows you so well," Sephiroth said, one brow quirking.

"Is anyone gonna ask about my actual meein' with CS Delivery?" Reno actually sounded tired. Tired and annoyed. Even the expression on his face was sort of pinched.

"I've already passed around your informal report," Tseng said.

"That shit's essentially an outline," Reno said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "When that asshole was talkin' to the Avalanche spies, 'is face looked damn friendly. He wasn't grinnin' but he had this little smile on. An' whatever he was tellin' 'em scared the hell outta 'em. Course then he turned 'em into toads an' shooed the shits off."

"Was it Cloud?" Zack blurted. He was sure the Turk would have put it in the informal report if it was but he wanted to hear it now.

"Don't know," Reno said grudgingly. Inexplicably, he brightened, eyes widening as he straightened. "The new mag rod made a difference, though. That asshole wasn't expectin' it either. He grabbed my rod with his bare hand." Smirking now, Reno said, "Practically lit him up like fireworks. I almost got a kick in before he recovered, threw my balance to shit, and started smackin' me the head with my own weapon."

"Are you saying he's susceptible to lightning attacks?" Sephiroth asked.

Reno scoffed. "I'm sayin' that asshole's not immune to the equivalent of a direct Thundara assault. And that I'm gonna see if I can get another upgrade. I'm gonna fry that asshole if it's the last thin' I do."

"If you utilize a stronger weapon," Tseng said, "it will kill anyone who isn't under extreme mako enhancements. I won't authorize that sort of weapon."

"I wouldn't use it on everyone, boss. I'll keep what I've got for everyday use and save the new shit for that asshole."

A knock on the door broke the almost amused atmosphere that formed after Reno's declaration. Peering through the glass, Zack was surprised to see Reeve Tuesti. Shinra motioned the Head of Urban Development to enter. When he stepped inside, Shinra said, "Please be quick Tuesti, we're in the middle of something rather important."

"I know," he said, gaze flicking over the group, "CS Delivery. Nibelheim experiments. Avalanche. Cloud Strife."

Tseng slowly rose to his feet but Shinra held up a hand to keep him from moving away. "To what, exactly, are you referring?" the vice president asked.

"I know you're investigating Cloud Strife, former infantryman of First Class Fair's acquaintance for his possible connections to CS Delivery, the man responsible for the recent string of terrorist attacks beginning in Nibelheim." He paused. "I also know you're going to break your alliance with Avalanche and ally yourself with CS Delivery in attempt to wrest control of the company from your father."
"Such heavy allegations," Shinra mused casually. "Where are you going with this?"

"There's no need to attempt covering it up sir. I've been monitoring all the activity everyone at this briefing has been conducting." Looking over at Zack, Tuesti said, "Excellent move Fair in getting Strife to agree to meeting with Kusiel as well."

"How exactly do you know that?" Tseng asked, eyes narrowed. "Have you been bugging these rooms?"

Tuesti shook his head. "That wasn't necessary. I simply intercept all electronic communications. The Turks are monitoring enough that I piggyback their equipment." To Tseng, he said, "You're quite thorough. I don't need to use my own surveillance equipment."

"Why are you here?" Shinra asked.

"I would rather side with the lesser of two evils. The President lets Heidegger, Scarlet, and Hojo run amuck. They're unethical in the extreme. In the interest of complete honesty, I don't entirely approve of your practices either Vice President but CS Delivery appears to be cleaning up Shinra Company's messes and that is something I'm interested in."

"You want in?" Sephiroth asked.

"I do, General."

"And if we refuse?" Tseng asked.

"Then I will contact CS Delivery somehow on my own."

"You wouldn't go to my father?" Shinra asked.

"Not when there are better options."

"You consider a terrorist the better option?" Sephiroth asked dryly.

"True, CS Delivery has done millions of gil worth of property damage but each of the explosions was contained. He didn't even damage the grounds at the Shinra mansion. And fatalities are still at zero percent. I'm the Head of Urban Development. There's no reason for my job other than to help people and I worked toward this position for exactly that reason. CS Delivery appears to hold people at the same value."

"Interesting," Shinra said, polite smile taking an amused cant. He gestured to an empty chair. "Join us then."

When everyone was again seated, Shinra said, "It appears you're already up to speed on our plans. Do you have anything to add?"

"Only an oddity or two." Tuesti clasped his hands together on the desk. "Through all the messages you've sent back and forth between each other, I have all your PHS messages tracked, but Cloud Strife's PHS is another matter entirely. I can't get a lock on it. Whenever the signal bounces between your PHS and his, Fair, I can only monitor your side of things. Even embedding tracking bugs in the transmission itself is useless. I simply can't follow them. And when you speak with him instead of message, it's the same, my programs simply can't follow the signal. It's like his PHS doesn't exist and the messages and phone communications spontaneously appear in your PHS."

"How's that possible?" Tseng asked.
"It's very complicated," Tuesti said.

"That implies you know what's being done," Shinra commented.

"I can only theorize," Tuesti said. "I...invented a program to disappear in this same manner. It's how I've been tracking all of your electronic communications. I wouldn't even know how to describe it to someone who isn't well versed in technological...espionage."

"You think either Strife or CS Delivery stole your notes, or whatever it is you keep?" Shinra asked.

"That wouldn't be possible, Vice President. I've never written the procedures down. So far as I'm aware, that only leaves us with two possibilities, that I taught him how to do it, which I didn't, or that he found my programming and replicated it. This seems equally impossible because I created this method without having a way to circumvent it. I've been running scenarios for days now and this is in addition to all the program testing I did during development. I don't know how to track down this programming so if he's done it, he's better with technology than I am. And I don't know anyone better than me with computers even among the Turks."

"What makes you so sure?" Tseng asked.

"Because you would have noticed my spying by now if you had anyone at my caliber."

"You should have joined the Turks," Reno said with a smirk.

"I prefer a nonviolent approach," Tuesti countered.

"You said an oddity or two," Shinra said. "I heard only one oddity."

Tuesti nodded. "I suggest an alternate means of monitoring Strife." He smiled pleasantly. "I have just the robotic prototype to do it."

* * *

Four giant materia crystals hovered just above the water, rotating slowly on their own axes. The blobby Cetra ghosts hovered around with an air of vague uncertainty. Light flickered around the small room, refracted in little specks and rainbows.

He stepped back toward the entrance and the air around the Huge Materia shimmered. He turned and leapt out of the nook, landing on a crystal pillar some twenty feet away. A glance over his shoulder revealed a solid wall, the base of a tower stretching high inside the cavern as part of the Cetra under city. Even if someone found their way into the under city, the Cetra remnants would never let them find that small, unobtrusive room.

He leapt from pillar to pillar, winding his way back up in the main under city. On the path made of light, he climbed back up to the surface city entrance. The likelihood of anyone even finding the under city was ridiculously slim. In the two thousand years since the Cetra's war with Jenova, the under city remained pristine and untouched. Even Kadaj and the others seemed to have remained above ground. It made him wonder just how he and his comrades had managed to find it the first time he'd followed Aerith in. He would have to remember to ask the young woman if she'd let him follow on purpose. If she did, he was going to have to yell at her. Who in their right mind let someone follow them if they were essentially possessed by a psychopath intent on murdering them?

At the top of the glowing staircase, he stepped through the shifting light to find himself back in the Cetra house. Vincent was leaning against a nearby wall and Nanaki climbed to his feet.
He glanced over his shoulder and the shimmering image of the giant fish hovered in place.

"That didn't take long," Vincent said.

Cloud shrugged. "I was expected."

"The Huge Materia is safe?" Nanaki asked.

Cloud nodded.

Vincent pulled away from the wall and Nanaki loped after them both. He blinked and scowled at the bright midday light outside. The under city, though beautiful and crystalline and adequately lit, was a far cry dimmer than anything bathed in straight sunlight.

"Wark."

He couldn't help the smile that cracked his face at the sound of chocobos. Three of the bright creatures shoved through the rest to quibble over who head butted him in greeting first. Of the entire flock, these three had adopted him as their favorite. The feeling was mutual. He scratched the feathers on the backs of gold, blue, and black heads. A young yellow chocobo hung hesitantly back behind the three fully grown ones. He particularly liked Cloud too but felt really intimidated by the adults.

He handed the three each some greens and then left them to pay some special attention to the smaller one. The chocobo just about quivered with delight at such attention. His warks turned to the chocobo version of a warbling purr. The rest of the chocobo flock looked up at that, another seven heads lifting from their browsing of the sparse foliage. They apparently all liked it when a younger one was so pleased.

"These creatures have a surprising affinity for you," Vincent said.

At least Cloud didn't have to worry about chocobo-head jokes with these two.

"I did a lot of work with chocobos before coming back. They're very useful." And very lucrative in the racing circuits.

"They certainly ease transportation. Especially when you have so many of them." Vincent vaulted up onto a green chocobo, the only one of the lot that had taken a liking to the gunman.

A particularly cantankerous black chocobo allowed Nanaki to leap onto its back. "It's interesting being allowed to use another beast for transportation."

"We can't travel with all these chocobos everywhere, Cloud," Vincent added.

"I know," he said with a slight, half smile.

* * *

Cloud ignored the stares of the townsfolk. And the pointing. And the laughter. And the chatter. And the shouted questions.

A strong shove from behind nearly sent him stumbling. He reached back to scratch beneath the gold chocobo's beak. It preened his hair affectionately. He glanced around the chocobo to see the whole flock still trailing happily behind him. They ignored the townsfolk in favor of vying with each other to walk closest to him. He made sure to catch a glimpse of the smaller, yellow chocobo before
resuming his quick pace through and out of town.

Vincent and Nanaki would already be waiting for him.
"What do you think it is?" Zack asked.

"I don't know," Sephiroth said.

"If Reno says it's weird then it's got to be really weird right?" Zack half jogged to keep up with Sephiroth's quick strides.

"I imagine so."

"But it's got to be something about Cloud or all this CS Delivery stuff, right? Otherwise he'd have told you on the PHS." He couldn't decide if he hoped it was or wasn't Cloud.

"In all probability."

He couldn't read Sephiroth's expression as they walked into the briefing room. Only Tseng and Reno were there.

Tseng said, "Vice President Shinra and Mr. Tuesti didn't feel as though their presence was necessary for this briefing." He gestured for both Soldier's to take a seat.

The large viewing screen in the office flickered to life as they sat.

"It's creepy," Reno muttered, handling the console's controls.

"Creepy?" Zack asked, exchanging a look with Sephiroth.

"Just watch."

A video appeared on the screen overlooking a village or small town. A handful of small buildings ringed a central tower of some sort, perhaps a well pump or communication array. In the distance beyond the village, the ocean stretched gray through a permeatingly gray sort of overcast atmosphere. A few ships were docked in the bay beyond the beach.

"What are we looking at?" Sephiroth asked, voice clipped, probably wondering why he was in this briefing.

Tseng said, "The small settlement under construction where Kalm used to be."

Nothing seemed to be happening. He rubbed the back of his neck where the tiny hairs there stood on end and asked, "What are we waiting for?"

"Just watch," Reno said somewhat sourly.

Zack scowled. It took a lot to get Reno riled up like that.

"Be patient, Zack," Tseng said.

A few moments later, a smaller barge pulled right up onto the beach. A ramp extended from the deck and people with cases and bags started climbing off.

"A transport?" Zack asked, ignoring the continued prickling on the back of his neck.
His question was met with silence.

Then something sort of...colorful started moving around on the deck. Colorful and *large*. It seemed to take up most of the deck. One last person climbed down the ramp, closely followed by a huge blob of moving green, then a yellow blob, and a black blob, and they just kept coming.

"Are those chocobos?" Sephiroth asked.

"Yes, General," Tseng said.

Zack's mouth moved but no words came out. He'd never seen that many chocobos all together. He'd never even seen anything but a *yellow* chocobo.

As the flock neared the village and surveillance camera, it became clear that the last person off the barge was who all the chocobos were following. "There's green and black and blue chocobos in that flock," Zack blurted.

"There's a *gold* chocobo," Sephiroth said.

Then Zack really took a look at the man leading the flock and gasped. He pointed at the screen, recognizing that shock of blond hair anywhere. "Cloud's leading that flock. He hasn't even got any harnesses on them."

"Zack, has Strife ever indicated an interest in...chocobos?" Sephiroth asked.

"I don't think I've ever heard him even *talk* about chocobos except when someone is calling *him* a chocobo." Zack huffed a laugh. "Unless he told me about getting motion sickness on one and I don't remember." He had to admit he was feeling a bit uneasy though.

"It's damn creepy," Reno said darkly, while Cloud paused to pet a chocobo. "They're following him like his clothes are made of gysahl greens or something. Or he's got a Chocobo Lure running the whole time. Or he's using Manipulate on *all* of them. Or his crazy hair has them thinking he's one of them." He eyed the Soldiers seriously. "It's really damn creepy."

Then Cloud and the chocobos all marched off screen. Zack stared at the empty monitor and said, "That's weird. Where's he going with all those chocobos?" The uneasy sensation strengthened a little, he fidgeted and glanced over his shoulder. No one was peering through the briefing room windows to watch the odd display of Cloud's.

"When was this video taken?" Sephiroth asked.

"Yesterday afternoon," Tseng said. "Their communications array shorted last week and they had to wait until someone was free to bring the recording."

Sephiroth's brows drew together in a scowl. "If Strife has something to do with CS Delivery, what does CS Delivery want with chocobos?"

The Turks only looked at each other. Tseng said, "I've sent Rude and Cissnei to the chocobo ranch in the east. I can't imagine Strife traveling with a large flock of chocobos very far. If he'd brought them to Midgar I'm sure we'd have heard of it by now."

"I thought Reno and Rude were partners," Zack said, eying the two Turks. Sephiroth gave Zack a sidelong look.

Tseng said, "Reno is allergic to chocobos."
"Creepy bastards," Reno muttered. "Won't leave my hair alone."

Zack had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing and even Sephiroth cracked a smile.

"Ha ha," Reno said, scowling, "laugh it up."

Zack's skin prickled, forcing him to look over his shoulder again. Still no one there. Weird. And somewhat familiar.

"You're fidgeting, Zack," Sephiroth observed.

Zack gave a half-hearted laugh and rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get rid of the unwelcome prickling there. "I guess I'm more weirded out by the chocobos than I thought. I kinda feel like I'm being watched."

Reno's eyebrows shot up and Tseng straightened.

"Do you," Sephiroth hesitated, narrowing his eyes, "feel a prickling sensation in your skin?"

"Yeah, how'd you know?" Zack's PHS vibrated. He whipped it out to see a message from Kunsel. He frowned. Kunsel always seemed to know when he was in meetings and never sent him any messages then. Thinking something might be wrong, he flipped it open and read, **Have you heard anything about any departments testing something like lightning or static, Zack? All the Soldiers are complaining about goosebumps and being watched. I can't get my skin to stop twitching.**

After reading the message over his shoulder, Sephiroth immediately asked the Turks, "Do you feel anything? A prickling in your skin or the feeling that you're being watched?"

"No," Tseng said while Reno shook his head. "What's wrong?"

"It seems all the Soldiers are reacting to something. Second Class Kunsel just sent a message to Zack asking if he knew anything about any experiments."

Tseng immediately whipped out his PHS while Reno's fingers flew over the keyboard as he appeared to be searching for something. After several moments, Zack heard Vice President Shinra's voice on the other end.

"Sir, it seems the Soldiers are all experiencing some sort of reaction. A sense of something akin to static electricity and feeling like someone is watching them."

"None of the departments are running anything." Reno scoffed. "Just got a message from Tuesti. He says nothin' off the record could be causin' it either."

Leaving the two Turks to their work, Zack leaned closer to whisper to Sephiroth, "It feels kinda familiar. They don't do something weird to us during mako enhancements, right?"

"Like what?" Sephiroth whispered back harshly. "Run low level voltage through our bodies? Of course not."


He heard Tseng say, "First Class Fair seems to think the sensation familiar. So far as I know, no one else is getting that sense."

Familiarity flaring, Zack surged to his feet, knocking his chair over. "He's here! He's somewhere
close to headquarters! Maybe even somewhere in the building!"

"Who, Zack?" Sephiroth demanded, also climbing to his feet.

"CS Delivery!" Eyes widened all around. "This was how I knew he was on the landing pad in Junon. I could feel him."

Rufus Shinra came through the briefing room door after that. Both he and Tseng snapped their PHSs shut and Reno worked furiously at the computer.

"Nothin' on the ground floors," Reno said distractedly. "Workin' my way up. Tuesti says there's no sign of the asshole in the labs or executive offices. He's not seein' any weird signals." He leaned closer to the screen and muttered, "I'll check the external feeds. Tuesti's faster with the stuff inside." He shook his head. "Nothin' in the trainin' yards, nothin' in the barracks, nothin' on the Soldier floor."

He leaned closer to the screen again, eyes narrowing. "Got somethin' on the north wall at the edge of the headquarters complex. It's pretty dark outside with this damn storm goin' on. I can't make out a thing."

The other residents of the room eyed the surveillance feeds, trying to make any sense out of the dark, shifting images. The screen suddenly flickered, flaring green, then the tones finally smoothed out to show a clearer, if incorrectly colored view of the compound.

"Cool," Zack said, grin creeping over his face. "Night vision."

"Tuesti overlaid some kind of filter on the transmission," Reno said.

As the greens sharpened into better detail, they could all clearly see a man, six ridiculously large swords strapped to his back, sitting on the wall, legs dangling off the edge. The bright glow in his hand seemed to be a PHS that he was paying attention to. There wasn't much detail to him, he had that black, sleeveless hoodie on and the dark pants, but his bare arms glowed nearly as bright as the PHS. He seemed to be alone.

"He's increased his number of swords." The amused cant in Sephiroth's voice made Zack uneasy.

"No kidding," Zack said. No one should have that many swords on them at once.

"Sephiroth," Shinra said.

"Vice President." The general eyed the shorter young man.

"I trust you know what's appropriate to say to him."

"Yes."

"You know that if the opportunity presents itself, you should subdue him for questioning?"

"Yes."

"And you know better than to let him realize Tuesti has your PHS tapped so we may all hear the conversation?"

"Of course, Vice President."

"Work hard, General Sephiroth," Shinra said.
It sounded like a challenge. Zack didn't really like how the vice president was speaking to his general, but didn't dare voice a protest. It probably wouldn't go over too well with his commanding officer.

* * *

Cloud knew it was only a matter of time after Kunsel sent Zack that message before someone put two and two together. He just hadn't expected it to take quite so long.

He sensed the shift in Jenova cells and felt Sephiroth coming. He took a deep breath and put his PHS away. His nerves thrummed with anxious excitement as he tried to mentally prepare, yet again, to face off against Sephiroth. He wasn't sure what to make of the man now. He hadn't gone insane, did his job well, and seemed liked enough by the general populace that didn't hail from Wutai or hate Shinra Company in general.

That didn't mean Sephiroth couldn't be a sarcastic, sadistic, ticking time bomb of planetary destruction if he wanted to be though.

Cloud didn't have much to go on in the way of information pre-psychosis for the man. He'd only met the general once in passing shortly before the Nibelheim tragedy. He only had snippets of Zack's memories containing Sephiroth, and they weren't hardly enough to form an opinion on.

He reigned in his senses, no longer needing to make his presence known or look for any sign of significant levels of Jenova cells that Hojo might have sequestered somewhere. He didn't need to try sensing Sephiroth. The man wasn't attempting to hide his presence, but he did seem to be waiting. For what, Cloud had no idea, but the general clearly had his own notions about meeting in a timely manner.

Cloud fought back a flinch when he saw a blur of pale silver leap out of the darkness close enough to straight at him that the tiny hairs on his arms stood on end. His first instinct was to draw a sword and attack before the man had a chance to stab him half a dozen times. But he didn't. And Sephiroth landed some fifteen feet away.

They stared at each other.

With minimal effort, Cloud focused the tiniest of thunder spells and swept the invisible prickling of static charge through the general's clothes until he found the man's PHS. He didn't want to deal with Reeve or any possibility of voice recordings getting back to Zack so he promptly shorted Sephiroth's electronics. The general didn't even appear to notice.

"CS Delivery," Sephiroth said flatly.

"General Sephiroth," Cloud said in reply. He narrowed his eyes behind his goggles. Something felt off about the general's presence and he couldn't put his finger on it.

Sephiroth said, "Your last letter indicated you wished to speak with me."

Straight and to the point. Not the taunting and superior exposition he was expecting. "We'll get to that," he said. "What does Rufus Shinra have to say?"

He watched those glowing, cat-slit, green eyes narrow at him. Sephiroth certainly didn't like not having his questions answered promptly.

Sephiroth asked, "Do you have anything to do with the Genesis deserters?"
Cloud quirked a brow. "What does Rufus Shinra have to say?"

Sephiroth's eyes flared brighter. "What does Cloud Strife have to do with the lab facilities and reactor in Nibelheim and the experiments on myself?"

The corners of his mouth quirked up. "What does Rufus Shinra have to say?"

The general openly scowled. "Why didn't you steal the Gelnika?"

This was going nowhere fast. Cloud needed Sephiroth to answer the first question. Sephiroth was all about power and being forced to answer the first question would prove that he wasn't a complete megalomaniac and show the general that not everyone would be intimidated.

A more unconventional line of questioning seemed to be in order. "Why did you lurk in the dark like a creeper for so long before finally coming over here to talk to me?" Perhaps Aerith's way of speaking was rubbing off on him.

Surprise flashed over the general's face before quickly being covered. The glare he adopted didn't look quite as sincere as it had before. "How do you know Zack Fair's nickname?"

"Do you really have to use an entire bottle of shampoo and conditioner every time you wash your hair?"

Sephiroth didn't appear as startled that time but he still showed a remarkably displeased demeanor. After an awkwardly prolonged silence, Sephiroth said, "Vice President Shinra concurs with your logic. He's willing to redistribute his support."

"I'm sure he is," Cloud said dryly.

"He needs a reliable way to contact you," Sephiroth said with equal dryness.

"I'll consider granting it another day."

Perhaps the oddness about Sephiroth that Cloud felt was in his closed caution. That wasn't to mean that the psychotic Sephiroth of the future was open in any traditional sense, but that future Sephiroth's mind was expansive. Now that the sensation was gone, Cloud could say it was like Sephiroth had always been there, tugging at the fraying edges of Cloud's mind, whispering his poison, inviting Cloud to reciprocate. That Sephiroth was more than willing to invite a select few into his mind, like Cloud, if only to put them in a position to warp his guest's perceptions and consume the other's mind from the inside out. Once connected with that Sephiroth's mind, it was near impossible to escape. Even though Cloud had done it before, it hadn't stopped him from getting sucked back in again.

Cloud suppressed a shudder as Sephiroth began speaking again.

"Vice President Shinra would like to know if you require any information or financial resources."

Cloud scoffed. "Why would I need any of that from Shinra? I'm doing just fine on my own funds and intel."

"It was an offer of cooperative courtesy," Sephiroth said archly, fingers of his left hand twitching as though they would dearly love to grasp Masamune.

Cloud hadn't meant to goad the possibly unstable man yet. But Sephiroth didn't appear unstable at all, only aggravated and suspicious. "I'll let Rufus Shinra know if I need something. And you have to
admit, my intel is better than his in the areas worth knowing about at the moment."

"At the moment?" the general repeated.

Cloud regarded the man carefully before saying, "The deeper I go, the more things will change. I'll need new intelligence sources then."

"Why Rufus Shinra and not his father?" Sephiroth asked, shifting the topic.

"My letters explained that." Cloud paused, deciding to try and get a better handle on the general's reactions. "Thank the puppy for the spar the other day. He's got great potential."

"As a First Class Soldier," Sephiroth said with aloof chill, "he shouldn't need to rely on potential."

The man was clearly insulted, but just exactly why was a mystery.

It gave Cloud an eerie sense of awkwardness to see Sephiroth irate over anything that didn't involve his own plans for planetary destruction.

"Compared to you, though, it's just potential. He's a relatively new First Class. He hasn't gone through as many mako enhancements."

"He's enhanced enough to stand against Genesis and Angeal," Sephiroth countered.

Cloud's eyes widened beneath his goggles. He hadn't expected Sephiroth to throw Zack's triumphs over his own friends in as a validation for anything.

"Genesis and Angeal were degrading. You know full well they were fighting far from top capacity."

Sephiroth scowled at that. "Don't insult their talent. Lessened strength doesn't impair strategizing." It seemed the general couldn't make up his mind what topic to be angry about.

"I wasn't trying to insult them. You'd know if I was." Cloud eyed the calculating general carefully, deciding to refocus their topic. "What exactly does Rufus Shinra think I'm going to do for him?"

"Bring down his father," Sephiroth answered immediately.

Cloud sighed. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not doing anything for Rufus Shinra. He's a natural born liar. I'm doing what's best for the people and the Planet."

"Who gave you the right to decide what's best?" Sephiroth demanded.

Sephiroth didn't seem as irate but his eyes were sharp and probing. Perhaps searching for a particular answer or trying to gauge Cloud's frame of mind.

Cloud tried not to glower when he said, "Shinra Company does the same thing and you endorse them. What gives them the right to decide what's best?"

"And the anti-Shinra terrorist shows his true intentions," Sephiroth said condescendingly, a sneer creeping over his mouth.

Smirking, Cloud asked, "Did I ever claim to be anti-Shinra?" He was more anti-Planetary-destruction than anything else. He huffed a laugh. "I noticed you conveniently ignored my questioning of Shinra's privilege to rule the populace."

Sephiroth's hand twitched toward his sword again. "Are you intent on questioning my philosophies or are you going to stop wasting time?"
"If I had the patience, I would interrogate you and your philosophies."

Another flicker of surprise passed over the general's face. It was certainly odd seeing anything other than fury when his plans were interfered with, condescension when telling someone how little they were worth, amusement when causing pain or anguish, and disbelief immediately before being killed. The surprise and caution were expressions he'd never imaged to see on the general.

"But certain other matters are more pressing." Cloud glanced at the Shinra tower, Sephiroth's hand moved toward the Masamune again but aborted. That's when Cloud realized the general was waiting for an opening. Of course Rufus would have ordered him to take advantage of the situation if he could.

Slight smile fixing itself in Cloud's expression, he figured if he could give the man a not too terribly obvious opening, it would give Cloud a chance to gauge the possible psychopath's abilities. "I'll make this clear. Rufus Shinra will jump if I tell him to. If he thinks of this as some sort of mutual alliance, he's mistaken. Unless he can prove he's willing to stop lying, I'm unwilling to consider him a partner."

Cloud angled his head further away so he could barely see Sephiroth with his peripheral vision. He rubbed the back of his head with a voiceless chuckle. "You could say this is a probationary period. With so many changes I don't know how the lot of you will rea—"

Cloud flung himself off the wall when the Masamune sang through the air. The blade caught a flash of light as Sephiroth whipped it around, readying for another strike as he followed Cloud's leap off the wall.

Cloud pulled one of his longer, lighter weapons to counter Masamune's speed and range. Yes, Heaven's Cloud would fare quite well in this match up.

Broadsword free of its harness, Cloud spun midair to clash with Sephiroth as the general caught up to him. Sparks and mako flares flashed around them from the friction of their equipped materia and the swords themselves. He wondered if Sephiroth ever considered a thicker weapon so that the blade's singing movement wouldn't be so easy to follow. Probably not. Sephiroth was too fast for most to follow even if they could track the blade's singing.

Cloud's feet hit the ground. He spun, trying to temper the force behind his blade. He didn't want to actually throw Sephiroth through the Shinra building like he'd done the last time they fought, or rather, like the last time they'd fought in the future that possibly didn't exist anymore.

Sephiroth seemed to be holding back also. Hardly surprising considering he'd done his fair share of throwing Cloud through buildings. And at least the general wasn't cutting the building to pieces and throwing giant chunks at him, all the while talking through the filter of his god complex. This quiet focus was an interesting change. And quite promising in convincing Cloud of his present sanity.

The restraint was somewhat comforting as well. He could feel the materia Sephiroth had equipped but the general didn't use anything. Perhaps that was in response to Cloud's lack of materia use.

A particularly strong swing from an awkward angle sent Cloud reeling backward. The general tried to knock him all the way down with a surprise kick. Cloud twisted away, touching one hand to the ground to regain his balance before leaping back to regroup and throwing himself forward again.

After another flurry of spark spraying exchanges, Cloud decided to up the stakes. He switched to one-handed fighting with Heaven's Cloud and drew the smaller Butterfly Edge with his off hand. Of course, less power went into his attacks, but he made up for it with speed. In return, Sephiroth had to
move his single blade with less power to make sure he blocked every swing.

Cloud drove Sephiroth back with a rapid flurry of swings, the mako flares illuminating the whole area as the close proximity of their magic grated again. He doubted he could ever send Sephiroth sprawling, but his last attack sent the general flying some twenty feet back and he had to release the Masamune with one hand to balance for a graceful landing.

He hung back to see where Sephiroth would attack from next but the general remained where he was. He didn't retake his sword with both hands, but lowered the point to the side.

"Even after Zack's reports, I didn't expect this strength," Sephiroth said, hints of grudging admiration in his tone. "But you're holding back."

"So are you," he said in reply.

As they stared off, he realized Sephiroth probably didn't know where to take the conversation and didn't have the desire to continue their halfhearted fight. Cloud straightened, putting the Butterfly Edge away. Sephiroth narrowed his eyes.

Then Cloud took a chance, reaching tentatively with his mind, to the place in his own thoughts where that psychotic Sephiroth always lurked, waiting for him to make one misstep. Nothing stirred. He could even feel this Sephiroth there. Quiet. Closed. Perhaps even unaware that he could open his mind and step into another's thoughts. Given that Cloud was the only clone in existence, perhaps Sephiroth would have no reason to have tried reaching out. Cloud knew he could make the other Soldiers feel his presence through their Jenova cells, anyone with a high concentration of S Cells could do that. But sensing the way this Sephiroth remained closed to casual awareness, it made him wonder if he could open his mind further and sense someone in the same way Sephiroth always seemed capable of doing with him. If such were the case, when it came to telling Zack what really happened, shared memories might be easier than mere words.

It was something to consider another time.

He pulled a letter from one cargo pocket and flung it toward Sephiroth, who caught it with his free hand.

"There are a lot of things you don't know about," Cloud told the general. "Don't trust Hojo. Don't trust President Shinra. Don't trust Hollander or Heidegger or Scarlet. Don't believe anything they've written, reported, or say, even if it appears as though they don't think you'll see whatever you get your hands on."

Sephiroth scoffed quietly. "That's what your letter said."

"I'll say it as many times as I think it will take to convince myself you'll actually do it." He put Heaven's Cloud away. "I'll show you reality, Sephiroth. I'll shatter every illusion the evils of this world construct."

"You're starting to sound like me," Sephiroth said with dry suspicion.

And that wasn't entirely unintentional. "Your mother's name is Lucrecia," Cloud said. "Jenova is the name of the experimental material contributing to Project G and Project S and was operating primarily in Nibelheim when I destroyed it."

As Sephiroth's eyes widened, Cloud spun and sprinted off and away from the Shinra building.

He didn't sense the general following and found himself surprisingly uneasy about the fact. Not only
had that been the lamest fight he'd ever had with Sephiroth, or any clones masquerading as him, the
general hadn't even tried to follow him. He tried to convince himself that was a good thing.

He went down through the maintenance tunnels into the plate. After crawling out of an air duct, he
found Vincent lounging on a catwalk.

"You didn't expect him to be so agreeable," Vincent said flatly.

Cloud shook his head and pulled off the sword harness with all his blades to lay it on the ground. "I
feel better seeing him behave in a non-psychotic way, but he still makes me uneasy."

Vincent nodded.

Cloud pulled off the black hoodie and picked up the loose, gray one folded up on the catwalk next to
the gunman.

He paused and eyed Vincent again. "I guess that's expected considering it's the first time I've been
anywhere near him in over a decade when he didn't try to stab me or get me to help him try to
destroy the Planet."

Vincent just arched one brow at him.

Ignoring the expression, Cloud pulled the bandana off and retied it to force his unruly blond spikes
into his face again.

Mostly changed, he pulled his PHS and dialed Zack. He didn't get the best signal from inside the
plate but he'd work with what he could get.

It rang three times before his best friend picked up. "Spiky!" Hearing the smile in Zack's voice
brought his own smile on.

"Hey Zack."

"Does this mean you're in Midgar?" Zack asked excitedly.

"Yeah. Are you busy tonight?"

"My calendar is oh so clear, Spike."

Before Zack could get another word in, Cloud interjected, "You not going to cancel a mission are
you, Zack? The way you said that is kind of suspicious."

"No, Spike," Zack blurted. "I mean yes. I checked my calendar and I don't have any missions. I was
just trying to make it abundantly clear that I can make time for you without compromising Shinra
Company's ability to operate. Me and Kusel can meet you near the entrance of Wall Market in a
couple hours."

"A couple hours?"

"Just wrapping up some work. You don't need it to be later right. If you're not there in two hours, I'm
hunting you down and Kusel and I will drag you out for some much needed fun."

Cloud chuckled. "I'll be there, Zack."

"I've got a present for you, too."
His smile widened. "A present?"

"Sure thing. You'll love it."

"It's not like those weird wash cloths you have with pictures of First Class Soldiers sewn on them is it?"

Vincent sent him a strange look.

"What?" Zack spluttered. "Of course not. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh," he said. "Did you get rid of them? Or give them away. Did that red-headed Turk finally talk you into selling them?"

Zack burst out laughing and he could hear some muffled laughter in several different tones in the background. Just as he'd suspected, Zack was talking with the whole investigation team present.

"Just no," Zack said. "It's nothing like wash cloths. It's something so much cooler."

"Oh. Well what is it then?"

"A surprise. Spiky, a surprise."

"It's not alive, is it?"

"No. Now stop asking. I'll see you in a couple hours and if I don't get off and finish up this work I'll never get there."

It was kind of nice being the one to tease Zack instead of the other way around like it always used to be. "Okay. See you later, Zack."

"Later, Cloud."

When he hung up, Vincent asked, "Do you really think you should be meeting with Dio alone? I don't trust the looks of the man who set up the meeting. And given the location with your recent interactions with Shinra Company employees...."

"I don't trust the man either," Cloud said, putting the PHS in his pocket. "But Wall Market information is Wall Market information. I'll only stay five minutes if he doesn't show. I'll be watching for security." He shook his head. "And we've been over the rest before. It'll be fine even if I have to blow my cover. A bit harder, but fine. Just take my stuff back to Elmyra's house. I worry at how well that woman is taking to Aerith suddenly bringing us all home with her. I'm the most normal looking of the lot of us, and she didn't really like me last time around."
Zack slid the PHS in his pocket, exchanged an uncomfortable look with Reno, and wished he'd never put the call on speaker.

"Wash cloths?" Sephiroth asked dryly, amusement tinting his tone.

"They were a present," Zack hedged. At least his fear of Sephiroth destroying them should they ever be discovered didn't seem to hold water. Those things were far too funny for him to want to get rid of them. And if the general decided to search his quarters to find them, he would undoubtedly find all the other ridiculous things his fan club sold. Zack had collected everything all the fan clubs put out. They might be collectors items one day and he wanted to have originals.

Keen to change the subject, Zack turned to Tuesti, who was still fiddling with Sephiroth's PHS. "You figure out what's wrong with it yet?"

Tuesti shook his head. "It seems like it only shorted. A new power cell will fix it."

Eying Tuesti, Sephiroth asked, "You didn't hear anything of the conversation with CS Delivery?"

Tuesti shook his head.

Vice President Shinra said, "That's why your PHS was tapped. With the darkness from this storm, we don't even have clear enough images for lip reading."

"What did CS Delivery tell you general?" Tseng asked.

Sephiroth's expression gained a fair amount of chill. "He accepts the Vice President's overtures but refuses an equal partnership. He claims you're untrustworthy, sir," he said to Shinra. "He says he'll consider providing a reliable means of contacting him. He did indicate he may ask for our help with intelligence gathering in the future, but for now, his sources are better. He was quite belittling in that."

Unable to keep quiet, Zack asked, "Did he say anything about Cloud?"

"No," Sephiroth said. "He did, however, send his thanks for your spar in Junon."

"What did he have to say to you?" Shinra asked. The vice president slowly spun the unopened letter in his hands. "That he even asked for you specifically makes it seem as though he had something particular to say to you."

Sephiroth scowled in exasperation and folded his arms. "He reworded the letter he'd written me after the Nibelheim bombings. He specified that he would be shattering any illusions and reiterated all the people and sources I shouldn't trust. After our initial, more casual conversation, it was surprisingly dramatic. It sounded rehearsed." He paused, frowning. "And like he wanted to come across as condescending."

"I expected more," Tseng said vaguely.

"He did indicate that he knew what happened in Nibelheim regarding myself and would be divulging information piece by piece."

"Simple teasers then," Tseng said, nodding to himself. "What was the purpose of your fight?"
"I was testing his abilities and it seems he was testing mine. Both of us have enough skill that the only thing either of us managed to ascertain is that neither of us were willing to destroy buildings merely to see how proficient the other was at fighting."

"He's that skilled?" Shinra asked.

Sephiroth nodded. "He can wield those broadswords properly for immense power or one-handed with a blade in each for an unusually quick and relentless assault. Neither of the swords he used were as large as the one he fought with against Zack, but they still fit the broadsword class. With as serious as either of us were willing to be, we seemed equally matched."

Shinra said, "I presume he didn't indicate when we would next see him."

Sephiroth shook his head. "Tuesti," the general said, catching the executive's attention, "when you replace the power source in that PHS and verify that it won't short again, please bring it to me."

Tuesti stared for a moment before saying, "I understand." He headed for the briefing room exit. "I'll come by your office." Then the Head of Urban Development slipped through the door.

Shinra asked, "Did you garner anything of importance during that meeting?"

"That letter," the general said, nodding his head in the vice president's direction.

Shinra hummed thoughtfully and finally, in Zack's estimation, deigned to open the envelope. The vice president didn't look nearly as amused as he usually did on reading CS Delivery's letters.

"Rufus Shinra," he said, "This meeting begins a test. I'll let you know how everyone does if I feel like it. CS Delivery. P.S. Don't you think it's kind of paranoid to always pick the furthest point of a room from the door for your bed?"

Zack covered his mouth to muffle the laugh that tried to burst out. Shinra's bed placement might not have had anything to do with paranoia before, but with CS Delivery throwing tidbits like that around, it was certainly a cause for concern now. Zack kind of had to wonder, though, why CS Delivery was choosing to spend his time stalking the vice president and commenting on his furniture arrangement.

At Shinra's darkening expression, Zack asked, "Doesn't a terrorist have better things to do than offer decorating commentary?"

The exasperated half-glare Sephiroth shot him declared that he didn't believe for one second that Zack was laughing at CS Delivery's hobbies. At least the vice president's expression turned neutrally professional again.

"I think," Sephiroth said, "from Zack's reaction, that this isn't the most serious of CS Delivery's communications. We already know he's testing the waters in working with us. He might be purposely trying to provoke us with something other than property damage. But if there's nothing else to discuss, I want to go over some of the details of the encounter, that the cameras didn't pick up, with Zack, to compile a comparison of mannerisms between CS Delivery and Strife. I can provide the results but I don't know that everyone needs to be present for that meeting."

"Dismissed," Shinra said simply, with an airy wave.

Zack followed the general from the briefing room. "Just how long do you think it's going to take?" he asked Sephiroth. "It's not like I can help you with Cloud's sword technique. I'd have known if it was the same from Junon."
"We'll be talking mostly about the way Strife speaks. He phrased several things strangely and had odd reactions to some sections of our discussion."

"But how long is it going to take?"

Sephiroth eyed him sideways. "As long as it takes, Zack." He paused. "I do, however, remember your meeting with Strife is in less than two hours. I won't detain you from going but if we aren't finished, when your outing with Strife is done, you'll come straight back to my office so we can complete the analysis."

Zack wasn't sure whether to perk up or feel let down after that. Sephiroth wasn't going to take away his "Cloud time" but was going to fill up the rest of his day with some philosophical debate on Cloud's mannerisms versus CS Delivery's.

In Sephiroth's office, the general made him sit across from his desk and told him to be quiet while he created a document to show everything they were going to talk about in a comparative way…or something. His mind sort of glazed over when Sephiroth started talking about spreadsheets. He was glad he wasn't the general. He was content filling out mission reports and thought he'd go mad if he had to handle analytical documentation too.

When his PHS vibrated, he pulled it from his pocket, secretly hoping it was Cloud. Waiting in Sephiroth's office was exceedingly boring. He cringed when he read the message. "Are you ignoring my texts Zack? Do you know why it stopped?"

He keyed a quick message back. "We had a visitor. I'll fill you in later. By the way, meet me in an hour. We've got a meeting with Cloud in about an hour and a half."

He didn't wait for Kunsel's confirmation before putting the device away. He'd tell the Second everything on their way below the plate.

At a soft knock on the door, Zack straightened. Sephiroth looked up from his computer and called, "Come in."

When he saw only Tuesti enter to room, he slouched again. Then Sephiroth shot a hard stare his way so Zack straightened again.

Tuesti closed the door and stepped up to Sephiroth's desk to place the PHS on top. The man looked like he was waiting for something and so did Sephiroth.

Tuesti spoke first. "I was under the impression you wished to speak with me alone."

Sephiroth said, "It's best if Zack is here so I don't need to brief him."

Zack frowned. Did he miss a meeting memo? He thought he was here to talk CS Delivery catch phrases.

Tuesti asked, "Was my impression that you wished any possible Turk surveillance disabled so we could speak in private incorrect also?"

"No," Sephiroth said. "Did they have anything on my office?"

"One sound bug."

"And you're sure they won't hear anything now?"
"Absolutely." The executive eyed Sephiroth speculatively. "May I assume this is about CS Delivery?"

"Partly." Instead of elaborating, Sephiroth turned his bright green eyes on Zack. "Do you trust me, Zack?"

"Of course," he said, scowling. How could he not? He was the only one of the Soldier bigwigs that hadn't deserted.

"Then you'll swear to keep what we speak about here between the three of us?"

"If that's what you want. But what about Kunsel?"

Sephiroth shook his head. "We can't bring him in yet. The situation is too delicate. It's not that I don't trust Kunsel—he's one of my Soldiers after all—but he won't refrain from attempting to investigate for himself on my behalf, and we can't risk alerting the Turks or Vice President Shinra."

Tuesti nodded slowly. "I suspected as much."

"Why?" Sephiroth asked sharply.

"You didn't seem particularly perturbed when I informed you the surveillance in your PHS shorted. I thought it odd because vocal recordings would have been the best way for Fair to identify Strife's voice. At first, I wrote it off as my unfamiliarity with your reactions. But then you told the vice president that essentially nothing of importance was said and that CS Delivery didn't have anything new for you. I thought that was odd. Then I realized the PHS power cell was deliberately shorted. I didn't believe you would have done that so I wasn't sure why you requested a surveillance blackout. Then when I left and heard the vice president read CS Delivery's letter, I decided that CS Delivery is probably testing you. That would require him to have told you something specific and deliberately give you the chance not to share with the others."

"And he did tell you something of significance?" Tuesti asked.

"Given how much Vice President Shinra and Tseng withheld from me in the beginning, I'm apprehensive of simply sharing everything with them when CS Delivery so deliberately gave me the chance not to."

Zack's knee started bouncing. Why couldn't they just skip the boring stuff and tell him what CS Delivery thought was so important.

"And the reason you're telling me?" Tuesti asked.

"Because you prefer CS Delivery's agenda to either the president's or the vice president's. I can't say I'm entirely pleased with either of them at present, the president for Hojo's part and the vice president for withholding information concerning my history. If anyone is going to keep secrets from them, it would be you, and I don't have the resources to investigate what CS Delivery told me."

Tuesti's eyebrows shot up. "I take it this information is of extreme significance."
Sephiroth nodded.

The suspense was killing Zack and it must have started to show because the general stared him down with another half glare.

Sephiroth said, "CS Delivery told me that my mother's name is Lucrecia, not Jenova as I have always been told, and that Jenova is the experimental material used as the base for both the G-Project and the S-Project. This Jenova-Project was being run primarily out of Nibelheim when CS Delivery destroyed it."

Zack didn't think his eyes could get any bigger. Tuesti wasn't doing much better, his jaw was actually hanging open a little.

Zack asked, "He just told you your mom was someone else and that who you thought was your mom was actually some massive experiment before he blew it up?" Zack swung a hand through the air sharply, cutting off his own thought. "No wait, he told you what his primary objective was with the original bombings?"

Tuesti frowned. "I don't think we can say that blowing up this Jenova, whatever it was, is necessarily CS Delivery's primary objective."

"But that's what makes the most sense," Zack asserted.

"I agree with Zack," Sephiroth said.

Tuesti turned a somewhat disbelieving expression the general's direction. "But why? There could be any number of things in Nibelheim CS Delivery could have been after."

"Aside from Zack's odd affinity for CS Delivery's motivation," Sephiroth said, "numerous subtle things line up with the assessment. Nibelheim was the first target. The research and experiments belonged to Hojo and was endorsed by the president. Blowing up everything there was somehow meant to keep me from doing anything foolish. He's repeatedly told me not to believe anything Shinra Company puts in front of me, and if he's right about this Lucrecia and Jenova then I truly can't trust anything I find."

"That's right," Zack interjected. "We don't know what Jenova is if it isn't Sephiroth's mom. What if Sephiroth ended up in Nibelheim and found it? What if Jenova is a blob of radioactive goo? What if she's a mutated tonberry?" Sephiroth scowled at him. "What?" Zack protested. "Tonberries carry knives relatively large compared to their bodies."

Zack shook his head sharply to refocus. "But no matter what it is, if it isn't Sephiroth's mom and he thinks it is, then he could decide to do something crazy like Genesis and Angeal. I mean, Hollander gave Genesis and Angeal parents so they grew up with people they thought were parents. Hojo is kind of twisted. What if Lucrecia is Sephiroth's mom, but Hojo didn't want Sephiroth to have anyone, and so he pretty much erased her existence from Sephiroth's life and set it all up to look like a gooey tonberry is his mom." He shook his head seriously. "I don't know about you two but if my mom turned out to be a gooey tonberry, I'd need some serious therapy."

"As unflatteringly as Zack put it," Sephiroth said dryly, "he has a point. First Class Soldiers aren't known for their stability and emotional shocks to our systems seem capable of wrecking an entire lifetime's principles and beliefs. Not to mention that I wouldn't put it past Hojo to do exactly what we're theorizing. It's well within his lack of moral boundaries."

Tuesti nodded. "I'll look for any trace of Lucrecia and Jenova then. Don't send me any messages
about this search. The fewer tracks we have to cover, the easier it will be to hide our activities from the Turks. Besides, if CS Delivery can track our electronics somehow, I'm assuming you don't want him knowing offhand what you've decided to do with the information he supplied."

"That's exactly what I thought," Sephiroth said.

"Then I'll get to it," Tuesti said, then immediately headed for the door.

With the Head of Urban Development gone, Zack turned hopeful eyes on the general. "Does this mean we don't really have to sit here and talk about partial facial expressions and weird sayings?"

"No, Zack. We still need to do that. Do you not remember me telling the vice president and Tseng they would see the results?"

Zack's shoulders sagged as he realized they'd never finish before he had to leave to spend some time with Cloud and he would have to come back just like Sephiroth had threatened earlier.

* * *

Cloud hadn't expected Dio to be there early, and he wasn't disappointed, so he waited by the Hardy-Daytona motorcycle. It was kind of interesting seeing the old thing again. It had done him good until he'd acquired Fenrir.

He was debating between stealing this bike again or hunting down Fenrir's owner first. He wasn't sure what he could offer the guy this time. It wasn't like Tifa owned the 7th Heaven bar as a sixteen year old. Free food and drinks for a lifetime wasn't exactly an option. Perhaps he could just throw hundreds of thousands of gil at the man.

"You're into motorbikes, boy?" came the deep, resonating voice from beside him.

Cloud bit down a chuckle when, on turning to look at the bulky man, he realized that Dio wasn't wearing a shirt, his hairy chest on display for the other sightseers to gawk at, just like that little girl and her mother by the photo of the Highwind. Dio's mustache looked about ready to come to life and the only difference between this Dio and the Dio in Cloud's memories was that this Dio was wearing muscleman pants instead of tiny muscleman shorts. He supposed that was an improvement.

To answer the man's question, Cloud said, "Very much."

"What model is yours then?"

Smiling, he shrugged. "I'm between bikes at the moment, but my last one was like this. I've heard about one with an oval-piston twin cylinder engine with a hip based turning system and a non-returning dual throttle combination."

Dio's eyes widened. "That's top notch equipment you're talking about there. How's a guy like you supposed to afford something like that?"

"How do you think I'm going to financially back your Gold Saucer venture?"

Dio folded his arms, narrowing his eyes. "How did you hear what I wanted to call this resort?"

"I have my sources. So are you willing to go into business with me or not?"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, boy. What makes you think I'll go into business with you at all? You look like you're trying to wear a disguise. I'm not starting a venture with a criminal."
"I obtained my gil quite legally," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "And if I was a criminal, don't you think Soldier would have pounced on me by now? This is their headquarters and there are cameras everywhere."

"What's in it for you?" Dio actually sounded curious.

"I don't need the investment," Cloud said. "If I did I wouldn't be backing you. I'll only rarely ask for gil, if at all. What I'm after is mostly items of interest. First is the Keystone. A man near Gongaga village has it and I want you to get it for me. I don't have time right now. The other things are the Omnislash Limit and the W-Summon materia. You find them, they're mine. After that, I want unlimited access to chocobo racing."

"You breed chocobos?" Dio asked, surprised brows lifting.

"And race, quite successfully," he said.

"Anything else you want?" He definitely sounded more interested now.

"Go negotiate with Lord Godo Kisaragi in Wutai for permission to build in Wutai."

"But that's so far out of the way. Something nearer Costa del Sol would be more convenient."

He was shaking his head before Dio even finished. "They've been trying to turn Wutai into a tourist spot ever since the end of the war when they had to agree to ban materia use. The tourist industry would greatly benefit from the Gold Saucer's existence. Think about it like a tourist. Not only would your resort be in an exotic place, it's got the draw of Wutai culture just around the corner."

"But won't they be cautious of someone coming from the Eastern continent? The war with Shinra is probably still fresh enough in their minds," Dio pointed out shrewdly.

"Do you really think Shinra Company would try to take advantage of Wutai with a tourist resort? They could just send Sephiroth to destroy the pagoda again. But give the Wutai people an influx of gil and it will give them the ability to impose high taxes on any imports, then making it the best idea to go for local goods and services, further strengthening their economy."

Dio suddenly burst out laughing, startling Cloud and everyone else in the exhibit room. "I'm beginning to see how you might have gotten all your gil."

Cloud chuckled voicelessly. "I've never done something this large scale before. But trust me, Lord Kisaragi isn't going to refuse."

"My assistant said your name was Cloud Strife," Dio said, clapping Cloud hard on the shoulder.

Cloud nodded.

Dio extended his other hand. "It looks like we're going into business together. Let's talk initial investment gil."

* * *

When Cloud stepped through the door, the first thing he asked was, "Where's Aerith?" A quick glance in the kitchen revealed Elmyra's back at the sink, probably doing dishes. Vincent was sitting at the table with a cup of some steaming beverage, probably tea, and Nanaki appeared to be asleep curled up under the stairs.
"Upstairs…organizing," Vincent said.

He gave the man a nod and headed to the second floor. When he knocked on her bedroom door, he heard her answering call from the second room. He opened the second door to find all his swords neatly lined up against the wall and her own array of staffs that he'd been collecting for her lined up next to them. She was fiddling with the staffs' arrangement.

He leaned against the open door frame and she smiled at him. He said, "I sent Dio to get the Keystone. As soon as he gets it for me I can pick up your Princess Guard."

She nodded. "It'll be nice to have it for a while." She left unsaid, instead of dying shortly after acquiring it.

"I'm heading out to meet Zack. He might want to come see you in the church afterward."

"I'll go there in a few hours. I imagine you boys will play around for at least that long."

He nodded. "Especially if Zack is trying to make me trust Kusiel." He huffed a laugh and shook his head. "At least with Zack around I won't have to do much talking and if Kusiel's conversations are anything like his messages to Zack, I'll certainly be entertained. But Dio kept making me explain things."

Aerith giggled, hiding her mouth with a hand. Abandoning the weapons, she stepped lightly across the room and patted his shoulder. "Poor Cloud. The big bad muscleman made you do a lot of talking."

"Hey," he said, attempting to scowl around his half smile, "I'm better than I used to be. I already explained everything to Vincent and Nanaki."

She nodded sagely. "And you don't screen all your calls anymore."

He rolled his eyes at her and stepped back into the hall.

"Bye Cloud," floated down the stairs after him.

Vincent merely watched him leave and Nanaki didn't wake. Outside, though, Cloud didn't get far before Elmyra called after him. Wisps of the woman's hair that had broken free of her bun fluttered around her face and she closed the house's door. It wouldn't really keep either Vincent or Nanaki from hearing their conversation but he didn't bother telling her that.

"Cloud," she said, his name like a hesitant plea. "You'll protect my girl…this time right?"

Ah, so Aerith had told her adoptive mother what happened.

"Yes. I don't make the same mistakes twice."

She offered a stern smile. "Good."

* * *

Cloud sat on a relatively sturdy crate near the south entrance of Wall Market, across the lane from the Item Shop and near the inn. He pulled out his PHS to check the time again. Zack and Kusiel were late. Going on ten minutes late. He fiddled with the PHS, debating on whether or not to call. He'd actually expected Zack to arrive before him, which was why he'd showed fifteen minutes early and had been waiting for almost a half hour.
He'd almost talked himself into calling when he heard Zack's voice yelling from well beyond the south entrance. He slid off the crate and peered around the corner. Further out in the slums, he could see Zack jogging toward him—clad in full Soldier gear, missing only the Buster Sword. Even from that distance, he could see a grin break out over the First's face when he was spotted. Then Zack picked up speed.

His eyes widened behind his goggles and he slipped immediately back around the corner. He was not going to have one Zack Fair barrel into him. He moved to the other side of the crate he'd been sitting on and waited.

Moments later, Zack streaked into view, panic written all over his face. Cloud screwed his expression up in confusion before Zack caught sight of him and relaxed. The Soldier put one angry hand on his hip and pointed accusingly at Cloud. "Don't scare me like that Spiky."

Defensively, he said, "You looked like you were going to run into me."

Zack froze for a moment, telling him he was right, but then immediately moved on. "Would I ever hurt you? Of course not. But more importantly," he strode around the crate to sling an arm around Cloud, "sorry I'm late. The train got stuck halfway down the plate and they wouldn't open the doors so I couldn't come down myself. Kusel wouldn't let me bust a window."

Cloud shook his head at his friend. "You should have just sent me a message. You have your PHS don't you?"

Zack chuckled weakly, scratching the back of his head. "I let Kusel distract me."

"Don't blame me for your attention span," came a new, level voice from where Zack had come.

Assuming the newcomer was Kusel, as he'd never actually seen the man, Cloud gave him a once over. The Second wasn't quite completely out of his Soldier uniform but he looked less official than Zack with only his fatigues, boots, and a sleeveless turtleneck. He didn't have his Soldier belt and had ditched his helmet for some goggles strikingly similar to Cloud's and a dark, blue black tuque that hid every single scrap of hair that might be on the man's head. Perhaps it was meant to be reassuring to Cloud that someone who wasn't hiding from Shinra scientists and their labs to be concealing their appearance too. It seemed like a weird way to relate but he brushed it off as possibly one of Zack's ideas.

What really had Cloud wondering though was the immobile Cait Sith dangling in Kusel's arms. He eyed the cat speculatively, raising one eyebrow. Kusel, apparently following the stare despite being unable to see Cloud's eyes, shoved the unmoving robot at Zack.

"I'm done carrying your shit, Zack."

"Hey," Zack said, whine edging around his voice, "be nicer to the little guy." He held the robot like it was fragile. "Here," he said, proffering Cait Sith to Cloud, "this is the present."

Cloud gingerly took the robot, noting a few minor cosmetic differences between this one and the ones he was used to. His boots were black instead of brown and he was missing the red cape. He stared at the robot's narrow, inanimate eyes, imagining Reeve, and possibly Sephiroth, Rufus, and all the Turks staring back at his face on one of the large monitors back in Shinra headquarters.

"Your special present is a stuffed animal?" Cloud asked Zack.

"Your special present," Zack said, smacking him in the back. "His name is Cait Sith. He can be your best friend when I'm not around."
"Thanks," Cloud said faintly, wondering if Zack thought he was still so much a child that he played with stuff like this and that's why it wouldn't be suspicious. He looked at first one, then the other Soldier. "Why were you making Kunsel carry the present?" Cloud wasn't quite comfortable saying Cait Sith was his. It felt sort of like choosing to adopt Reeve.

"He wanted to hold it before I gave it away," Zack said, something akin to panic in his face.

Cloud turned to Kunsel, raising one brow in askance.

Kunsel said, "He tried to get some kid on the train to laugh by making it dance around and the kid started screaming and wouldn't stop. Then he shoved the cat at me and ran to the next car to get away from the kid's glaring mom."

Sheepishly, Zack said, "I think she was considering throwing her shopping bags at me."

Cloud couldn't help chuckling at that. He spun the cat around so it was facing Kunsel and held it with both arms. It couldn't hurt to look like the kid they thought he was. Besides, he could have some fun with whoever was on the other end of the camera.
Reeve turned to Sephiroth, worry creasing his brow. "Fair knows that Cait Sith is a highly advanced, surveillance prototype, right?" Reeve had briefed the exuberant First on it himself, but with the behavior on the train he wasn't entirely sure Fair had been listening.

"He didn't break it or take it apart," Sephiroth said, "so I assume he does."

Vice President Shinra was frowning at the monitor. "Is this how Fair behaves on his missions?"

"No," Sephiroth said, lines of exasperation forming at the corners of his eyes.

Reeve was grateful Fair had decided to go into Soldier instead of his department. He turned back to the controls, only half listening to the voices coming through Cait Sith as the two Soldiers and the suspect debated on where to go first.

His attention refocused on the information in front of him. "Cait Sith is transmitting the first batch of preliminary data." The others quieted for his summary. "Strife's temperature is running a little high, much like a First Class Soldier. His heart rate is slightly elevated but if Kusel's presence is making him nervous, that easily explains it. Blood pressure is normal. I'm not detecting any abnormal electronic or bioelectronic signals."

"Other than the elevated temperature," Shinra said, "he's the average teenager."

"Apparently. We might have a better idea of that once we have data over a longer time range to pull an average."

Letting the database grow, he turned his attention to the large monitor. All three men must have been walking on a line because Cait Sith couldn't see them. At least they appeared to have decided on a first destination and were happily discussing the menu. Strife seemed to be a staunch supporter of the sole barbeque dish while Kusel and Fair were trying to talk him into getting the special. They claimed it was better if you didn't know what you were getting, and didn't know what it was when you ate it.

Reeve agreed with Strife.

"I'm gettin' hungry," Reno said unhappily.

"You can eat once this observation mission is over," Tseng said. "Pay attention."

"I am payin' attention. That's why I'm hungry."

Inside the restaurant, the three took seats at the counter, Strife the furthest in, Fair in the middle, then Kusel. The video feed tilted startlingly as Strife laid Cait Sith down. They had a perfect view down the length of the counter. Fair's animated gestures repeatedly swung into view as he went on about some gym in Wall Market.

"The tournaments they hold are the absolute best outside of Shinra," Fair asserted. "They have them practically every night. After we use our Pharmacy Coupons we should go and check it out."

Kusel leaned on the counter, putting himself in full view of Cait Sith. "Will we still have time for the arcade? They just installed that new game and I want to try it out."
Fair said, "You just want to see what the deal with the machine gun on the ceiling is for."

"Yeah, well not all of us are solely interested in squats and physical exhibitions."

"Well, what about that materia seller's shop? That place is pretty cool to browse around, even if the owner is a bit weird."

"What do you think Cloud?" Kunsel asked, face pointed somewhere slightly to the side of Cait Sith.

Fair swiveled in his seat, one arm disappearing while the other braced him against the counter.

"What's with the weird look Spiky?"

"Uh," came the quiet sound from the possible terrorist. "Zack…are you, uh…kind of…into…cross-dressing?"

Whatever may have been said down in Wall Market was drowned out by Reno surging to his feet with a loud "What?" and knocking over his chair.

"Sit down," Tseng ordered with some amount of disgust.

On the monitor, Kunsel's mouth was hanging open as his face jumped back and forth between looking at Fair and looking at Strife.

"Seriously, Spike," Fair said, "what the hell gave you that idea?"

"Uh, most of the guys at that gym are into cross-dressing, including the owner, and…the man who owns the materia shop hands out tiaras to people who run errands for him. I know you like to do favors for people so I thought that you might have...uh...gotten yourself a tiara or something." Strife left it completely unsaid what hanging out at the gym with cross-dressers implied.

There was a very pregnant pause down in Wall Market and in the briefing room where Reeve and everyone else were watching. Then Kunsel burst out laughing. Reno did too. Then Cissnei started chuckling and even Tseng and Sephiroth each put a telling hand over their mouths. Reeve could tell from the Kunsel's motions that he started smacking Fair on the back, hard.

"That's fantastic!" Kunsel said through his laughter. "I haven't seen Zack go that pale in years."

Reeve wished he could see Fair's face but it was still out of Cait Sith's video range.

Fair's voice sounded half strangled when he said, "I don't cross-dress, Spike."

Kunsel leaned on the counter, obviously facing Strife even though the possible terrorist wasn't visible either. "Cloud, Zack here probably had no idea what the gym regulars or that shop owner were doing. This guy," Kunsel punctuated with another sharp smack to Fair's back, "only takes off his Soldier uniform when he's on vacation."

Again, Fair said, "I don't cross-dress, Spike." He sort of sounded like he didn't remember that he'd already said it once.

"Uh, yeah," Strife said, "okay. I believe you, Zack."

Kunsel started laughing again.

Then a plate was set in front of the Second. The view on the monitor spun. Strife picked up Cait Sith and moved it. In the new position, its eyes were mere inches from some bottle of red condiment. Nothing else showed on the monitor.
"Well *that's* informative," Reno said, scoffing.

Fair seemed to recover with the arrival of food and began telling some elaborate, most likely untrue story, about having to eat nothing but Gigahandi monsters for two months.

As they continued on, Kunsel arguing with Fair about the story's legitimacy, Shinra asked Sephiroth, "Does Strife's voice sound familiar?"

Sephiroth seemed to be trying to stare a hole in the video monitor. "I can't tell. Strife is speaking in a reserved, quiet manner. It's nothing like CS Delivery's mode of speech. But unless Strife speaks with more assertiveness or CS Delivery speaks quietly in the future, I can't make a comparison."

As silence stretched in the briefing room, Reeve tuned out most of the chatter Fair offered. It seemed that if he wasn't telling strange stories of his childhood, he was rambling about spam emails or the unclassified parts of his missions, mostly involving fights with giant birds trying to peck him to death and bouncy balls with attacks that only pretended to be elemental lightning.

Reeve took to watching the room's occupants rather than the screen. Vice President stared at the monitor with a glazed fixedness that hinted his mind was elsewhere. Tseng seemed to be having trouble paying attention as his gaze would wander from the screen until Strife offered one of his rare comments on Fair's litany or Kunsel's questions. Reno and Cissnei kept shooting each other significant glances after pointedly staring at various people in the room. If there were some hidden meaning in the subtle quirks of their expressions, he couldn't quite follow it but Tseng seemed to be ignoring their nonverbal conversation. Who knew what Rude was thinking or where he was looking with those sunglasses covering his eyes. For all Reeve knew, the Turk was asleep.

Sephiroth seemed to be the only one actually devoting his complete attention to surveillance. His eyes searched the image on the monitor as though somehow, the red grain of glass and condiment bore some secret for him to pick at.

Reeve sighed and started running the video feed through a series of filters on one of the smaller monitors in front of him to see if he could catch a reflection. He managed nothing but vague shadows even by the time the three of them finished eating.

Strife swung Cait Sith around in time for everyone in the briefing room to see Fair snatch the Pharmacy Coupons from the waiter behind the counter and hand them to his friends himself.

The image spun again and suddenly they had a view of the ceiling. Lights moved slowly across the screen at the speed of walking. Then they saw the top of a doorframe. All that remained were shifting ambient lights and the blurred grayness of the plate far above.

"Is the robot on Zack's buddy's shoulder?" Reno asked. The Turk kept lifting his chin to look at the ceiling then back at the screen, as though comparing the images.

"Most likely," Tseng said.

Through the speakers, they heard Fair say, "I never know what to get with these coupons."

"You come down here often enough," Kunsel said. "What do you use the rest for?"

"Well," Fair said, "there's this guy who's always in the bathroom at the bar so most of the time I get digestives for him. He gives me all this cologne that I don't really need so I give that to the perfume lady in Sector 6 and she gives me perfume that I give to a friend."

Vice President Shinra turned to Sephiroth and asked, "Does he always do things like that with his
The general nodded, as no one really paid attention to what Fair did when he couldn't find the man in the bar. Sephiroth said, "Strife wasn't off base when he wondered if Zack was running errands for tiaras. Based on some of the stories he's told me I suspect the trade and barter system in the slums continues on as well as it does due to Zack's perpetual use of it."

The view on the monitor shifted and spun. The clerk in the item shop swung into view, right side up. Fair thrust his Pharmacy Coupon toward the clerk and demanded a Digestive. Kunsel selected a Disinfectant while Fair tried to force Strife to take his item.

"Think of it as another present Spike," Fair said.

"What am I going to do with a Digestive Zack?" Strife's arm came into view on the monitor, pushing the small item back at Fair.

"Use it the next time you get motion sickness."

"It's a Digestive, Zack. It's for helping settle your— It's for helping digestion after you eat. It doesn't have anything to do with motion sickness."

Kunsel was grinning in the background.

"But if you ate something and feel like you're going to puke, the Digestive will help you digest."

The view on the monitor shifted as Strife set Cait Sith on the counter. The screen now sported a sideways view of an open pamphlet for laxatives, complete with…stoppage informational diagrams and suppository insertion visuals.

Reno snorted and snickered. Shinra looked quite disgusted as he couldn't keep his eyes staring at the screen. Sephiroth actually appeared to be reading and examining, as though he somehow expected it to be useful for the situation.

"Disgusting," Cissnei hissed.

No one else showed any sort of reaction. Reeve still thought Rude might be asleep.

"Fine," Strife's voice came floating over the audio feed. His murmur to the clerk was too low. "Here."

"What's this for?" Fair asked, bewildered.

"The next time you end up covered in monster guts."

Kunsel's laughter rang clear through the monitoring. "That's awesome. You're great Cloud. You need to come out with us all the time."

"I don't need this Deodorant!" Fair yelled.

The images on the monitor lurched and nothing settled as the picture continued to swing rhythmically. Cait Sith was perhaps held in a free-swinging arm while the carrier walked. Reeve could tell when the robot went from the well-lit interior of the shop to outside, but beyond that, details were difficult to discern. He would replay the images in slow motion later and see what he could discern.

"Cloud!" Fair's call was small, obviously much further away from Strife and Cait Sith. "Wait up,
"Clooo-oud!" Somehow, he'd managed to turn Strife's given name into a word with two syllables.

The image on the monitor swung wildly before coming to a halt, Cait Sith oriented sideways to put the ground along one side of the screen. A few food stands and a garish display of the Honey Bee Inn advertisements glowed under the bright yellow market lights.

"I'm sorry, Spike," Fair's voice sounded clear over the audio feed, lightly laced with something akin to panic. "I didn't mean to make you so mad. I was just having a little fun."

Strife sounded petulant in his reply. "But you got offended when I tried to get you back."

"And that was horrible of me." The camera gave a little shake as though Fair had given Strife a little shake. "I promise not to do it again on purpose."

Whatever Strife's reaction was, it seemed to be a positive one because Kusiel's voice sounded next. "Now that this touching moment of reconciliation has passed, can we go to the arcade?"

The image shifted again. It remained sideways but their view changed to give them a partial glimpse down an alley. They could see one arm holding a spray can and an odd, blocky artistic representation of General Sephiroth being drawn on the back wall of a vendor stand.

"Who's putting that on the wall?" Sephiroth demanded, talking over the top of Fair and the others.

"Unless Strife moves further, we can't see around the edge of that stand there," Reeve said.

"That gross misrepresentation needs to be removed immediately," the general demanded.

"It's Wall Market," Reno said, smirk playing across his features. "It'll probably have somethin' sprayed over it tomorrow."

Strife turned, the graffiti artist's arm and the work disappearing. With how Strife was walking, Cait Sith dangling in his hand, Fair's legs swung across the screen with every stride. It was actually rather disorienting and he wasn't the only one to have that opinion.

Vice President Shinra asked, "Is there any way to at least compensate for the robot's orientation and flip the image upright."

Reeve turned to the computer and input a series of codes. The monitor image corrected, showing only a slight swing in tandem with Strife's swinging arm. "I can manually correct it for now," he said, "but I'll need to build another prototype with an auto correction feature to make the transitions smoother."

"I prefer the uncorrected image," Sephiroth said, drawing everyone's attention. "It gives me a better sense of Strife's movements. If you're constantly changing the camera angle, I can't get a proper notion of how he holds his body." The general was frowning in concentration at the screen, then he actually turned his head sideways to restore the actual tilt for himself. "It's harder to visualize what he's doing."

Reeve looked at Shinra. The vice president seemed somewhat put out but he nodded anyway. Reeve removed the compensation programming from the data and the monitor image swung back around.

By this time, the trio had made it to the arcade. Strife placed Cait Sith on a rather high shelf, "to keep it out of the way and safe from being stepped on" as the ex-trooper said. All they could see on the monitor was Fair's black hair darting back and forth and waving as he jumped around while the three
of them played whatever games they played.

But nothing useful happened. Absolutely nothing. Strife never spoke in the manner Sephiroth claimed he needed for confirmation. Strife never said anything incriminating. And they never got a decent video shot of any of the three people enjoying themselves down in Wall Market.

After the perfect view of Fair’s hair in the arcade, the three wandered the souvenir stalls. All they had was an upside down video feed that occasionally gave them a view of Fair or Kusel's knees. From Cait Sith's internal sensors, one of the robots legs must have been fastened to a belt because the other leg was dangling free.

The trio did end up going to the gym, with half a dozen more assurances from Fair that he didn't cross dress. Strife again put Cait Sith in an odd corner "to keep him safe and out of the way". Only this odd corner seemed to be slid partially under a stool with the camera angled toward the ceiling. Considering the robot was under a stool, everyone in the briefing room had an unobstructed view every time some muscle-bound gym rat decided to sit for a break. Everyone seemed disgusted in their varying shades of graying pallor. Everyone except Sephiroth, who seemed to still think he would get something meaningful or useful from the video feed.

After the gym, the trio visited half a dozen shops and it seemed that Strife accidentally found the most ridiculous things to point the camera at wherever they went. The worst part was that Sephiroth kept asking questions about it.

"Why is that balloon decorated like a Dorky Face?"

"Children find it endearing," Tseng said.

"Why would anyone wear a hat covered in artificial fruit?"

"Poor aesthetic notions," Vice President Shinra said.

"Why would a potion made of liquefied Hippogriff increase one's romantic partner's desire for intimacy?"

An awkward silence stretched before Reno said, "Some of the Hippogriff's around Mideel can cast Confuse. Some people think if you liquefy the birdies that can cast it you can use it as an aphrodisiac to get your partner a little more willin' to play."

Sephiroth's frown deepened. "Wouldn't Manipulate materia be a more effective means of eliciting that?"

The rest of them shared an uncomfortable series of glances as they wondered if Sephiroth realized exactly what he was suggesting.

"Why has no one arrested that boy for pick pocketing?"

"What boy?" Reeve asked.

"That nondescript child there." Sephiroth pointed. "The robot has caught him stealing seven wallets."

Tseng said, "I'll have someone look into it."

As the questions kept coming and the strange camera angles were starting to make Vice President Shinra look a little queasy, everyone but Sephiroth was pleased when Fair and the others decided to call it a night.
When the trio made their way back to the south entrance of Wall Market, Sephiroth asked, "Why does that woman have a live Mu living in her purse?"

And indeed, a willowy woman with vapid eyes and a brawny escort passed Fair and the others on their way out of Wall Market. A small round head belonging to an adolescent Mu peered around curiously from over the lip of the woman's purse.

No one had an answer for the general.

A small, exasperated sigh escaped the man and Sephiroth briefly touched his forehead as though it pained him. Sephiroth refocused his attention on the screen and remained silent.

Reeve couldn't help the slight pang at the quiet lack of comment. He knew the general asked because he didn't understand "quaint, ritualistic behaviors" and was curious about them. Sephiroth's lengthy discussions on etiquette and customs with Angeal and Genesis were well known throughout the company. Sometimes the three Soldiers would sit for hours with a newly arrived crate of dumbapples and simply converse.

The forced concentration on Sephiroth's face reminded Reeve that Shinra Company's prized Soldier had recently lost his two best friends. Did Shinra Company even offer counseling for that? The only person Sephiroth seemed to associate with now was Fair. That association might only be because Fair happened to be another First and Angeal's protégé. Even then, the association with Fair couldn't really be called a friendship. They never socialized outside of work.

Sephiroth had essentially nothing in the way of friendship or family. And now, no one could even answer his question about crazy women carrying adolescent monsters in their purses.

Reeve wasn't sure if he could do anything about that but set the notion aside for further thought.

Turning his attention back to the monitor, he found Fair to be describing some sort of building to Kunsel.

"It's kind of weird," Fair said, "like someone just randomly pried up the floorboards and up popped a whole bunch of flowers."

Flowers?

Sephiroth had resumed his intent study of the screen and Tseng looked to be paying strict attention, his eyes slightly narrowed.

"So what," Kunsel started, "the flowers just grow on their own? Under the plate?"

"Gaia, no," Fair said, one of his arms swinging through Cait Sith's field of vision. "There's this amazingly awesome gi—"

The high-pitched shriek of feedback through the audio feed had everyone in the conference room cringing and in Reno's case, cursing. The video images from Cait Sith rocked violently and Reeve immediately started the commands to set the robot's motor functions on standby. If something was attacking the trio he would at least try to save his technology from the possible crossfire.

But then the screen stilled and Fair came into view on the monitor with a look of amusement and concern.

"That was a mighty sneeze you gave there, Spiky. You're not getting sick are you?"
"No," came the quiet reply from off camera. "I guess it's just really dusty."

Reeve noticed a faint signal Cait Sith was detecting. It was odd, though, he couldn't pinpoint the source or the exact type of signal. It didn't have the right kind of pulse to be a beacon and the frequencies were skewed for a PHS. It was probably also too faint to be another robot. Perhaps some kind of surveillance. He set to running it through a series of identification algorithms but kept an ear open to the conversation in case anyone dropped clues.

"If you say so." Fair's smile widened. "You know certain people would be really upset if you got sick and didn't tell anyone. In particular—"

Another violent sneeze sent feedback screeching through the speakers.

"I think the dust got in my nose," Strife said.

A mechanical chirp brought faint surprise to Fair's face.

"Oh, sorry," Strife said, "just a sec'. I got an email." The side of a PHS flashed along the edge of the video feed.

Reeve immediately brought up another video window, visible to everyone on the large monitor, and pulled up the section of the image with the PHS in it. He slowed it down to see if he'd managed to catch a partial number or a screen on the communication device.

His heart sank a little when he realized the angle was wrong and too far to the periphery of Cait Sith's range.

"Pity," Shinra said. And the group left it at that.

Strife said, "I'm sorry Zack but I've got to go. I didn't realize how late it was."

Then Tseng's PHS rang. The Turk quietly excused himself and stepped out of the room.

Fair's face was the perfect picture of sadness. "I guess that means I have to share you with your other friends then?"

However Strife reacted to the question made Fair grin again. He reached forward and smacked Strife on the shoulder, if the way the video image shook was any indication.

"Don't be a stranger," Fair said.

"Of course not, Zack." There was a pause before Strife said, "It was fun meeting you, Kuscel."

"You too, Cloud," the Second said from somewhere off screen. "See you around."

"Yeah. Later," Strife said. Then the suspect turned another direction, both Soldiers slipping off the screen and set off at a jog through the slums, the video feed bouncing with his even pace.

Tseng stepped back into the room, appearing to be dialing another number on his PHS. He waited less than two seconds before the other end picked up. "Zack," he said.

That had everyone's attention.

"Go stop Strife. Ask him what he was doing in the Shinra Headquarters Exhibit Room between talking to you on the PHS and meeting you at Wall Market. We have him on surveillance speaking with a known explorer and business entrepreneur that recently deals in starting up entertainment
businesses in the slums. Call me when you find him."

Sephiroth and the other Turks had all taken to their feet during the short conversation.

"Cissnei," Tseng said, "take another Turk, female if any are recovered enough from Junon, or someone much more muscular if they're male, and head down to Wall Market. Track down a man named Dio and get him here."

Without further explanation, the redhead sprinted from the room.

"What's the meaning of this?" Sephiroth demanded.

"Indeed," Vice President Shinra said.

"We've been shorthanded since Junon with so many people recovering in the infirmary. Review of headquarters video surveillance is on time delay right now. We just came across a stretch of the feed showing Strife approximately fifteen minutes after the PHS call with Fair with a man named Dio in the building near the Hardy-Daytona Exhibit downstairs. The recording has been sent to intelligence to see if the lip readers can get anything but Strife never faced the cameras when he spoke and from what I've been told, Dio's facial hair is making the process of understanding difficult."

Tseng's PHS rang again. "Do you have him?" The Turk frowned. "What do you mean you can't find him?" Tseng immediately put the PHS on speaker.

Fair's voice came over the line. "I ran after him. I know I went the direction he did. But I can't find him anywhere and he's not answering his PHS. He sent me an email that says he hasn't been gone that long and he knows he didn't drop anything so playing some silly game isn't going to get him to stay longer and that he's busy."

Reeve turned to his screen, and put a tracking display up on the monitor next to the still jogging image Cait Sith was projecting back. He pulled up the history for the last several minutes and a bright, dotted red line appeared on the map.

"Damn," Reno hissed under his breath. "The kid's windin' all over the place."

"One has to move like that through the slums," Sephiroth said, voice cold, eyes narrowed.

"He looks like he's headin' for Sector 7," Reno said.

"Zack," Sephiroth said, raising his voice to be heard on Tseng's phone. "Return here with Kusel. Strife is too far off the obvious track. If we send you to him he'll know he's being tracked."

"Yes, sir," Fair said.

Tseng flipped the phone shut and edged toward the door. "Reno." The other Turk straightened from his slouch. "I'm heading down to the slums. When Cissnei brings Dio in, just question him on Strife. He's not being taken into custody. If he has evidence of anything Strife might be doing that's illegal, give him impunity if he'll turn on Strife. Just figure out what the two of them were planning."

"Where are you going?" Shinra asked, expression smooth and voice placid. Not exactly the most calming of combinations on the vice president in Reeve's estimation.

"The slums, sir."

"Wait until Strife reaches his destination," Shinra said, eying the Turk speculatively.
Tseng’s sense of urgency drained and he put his PHS away. He resumed his seat and said, "Of course, sir."

Sephiroth and the other Turks sat also, turning their attention back to the video monitor. If Strife really was headed to Sector 7, they wouldn't have to wait long. He was already jogging through the Sector 6 park to the gate between the two sectors, the mog slide slipping past the moving camera.

Strife didn't go far into Sector 7. He only jogged past the pillar zone and into the first inn in the populated area. He climbed up to the second floor and went immediately into one of the rooms.

Reeve could barely bring himself to breathe under the charged atmosphere that flooded the briefing room.

Book in one relaxed hand, nonchalantly sitting at the one table in a corner of the room, was the red-clad gunman of CS Delivery's. Glowing scarlet eyes looked up at Strife's entrance.

"How did it go?" The gunman's voice was deeper than expected, but still quiet, like he didn't want to distract those around him with speech.

"It was pretty fun," Strife said. "Zack and Kuskel took me around to eat and to the arcade and gym. Other than that we just wandered. Kuskel is pretty funny. He and Zack are really entertaining together. Kind of like a comedy duo." Strife paused. "But Kuskel kept saying I was the funny one and wanted to bring me around to torture Zack."

The gunman's expression didn't change and the silence stretched between the two for several moments. Then those red eyes moved to Cait Sith and stared directly into the camera. Reeve knew the gunman couldn't possibly know he was staring down a handful of Shinra officials and military personnel but he shuddered nevertheless. That calculating, red-eyed stare unnerved him.

"What's that?" came the quiet question from the gunman.

"Zack gave it to me," Strife said, clearly lifting the robot higher and closer to the gunman for inspection. "He said it's name is Cait Sith."

The gunman's, eerie red eyes finally left the robot and a slight breath escaped Reeve's lungs. Eyes on Strife, the gunman slowly closed his book and set it on the table. "Leave it," he said. "It's only a short errand. We'll pick up our things before leaving."

"Okay," Strife said, the tilt of the camera angle indicating Cait Sith was simply set carelessly on the table.

Only some shuffling was heard over the feed. Reeve broke the stillness in the briefing room and turned to his computer, seeing if he could pick anything up with sensors. The prototype had very limited range but he might luck out anyway.

"Where are the others?" Strife asked, voice quieter with the distance between him and the receiver.

After a several second pause, the gunman said, "About their own business."

A door opened and closed then only silence came through the audio feed.

Reno shattered the quiet with an amused, "Well, shit. Zack's not gonna like that."

"Unfortunately," Vice President Shinra said, "even this is not conclusive of Strife's guilt in associating with terrorists. Nothing incriminating was said. Strife might not know what CS Delivery
is doing. He might even still be under some sort of coercive force. He could think he's under their protection."

Reno scoffed. "Or the brat could be that asshole."Apparently the redheaded Turk was still quite sore about Junon.

"The only scenario this rules out," Sephiroth said, "is that Strife has nothing to do with CS Delivery. It's now rather obvious that the CS in CS Delivery's chosen name probably has to do with Cloud Strife but knowing it stands for Cloud Strife Delivery doesn't give us any additional clues. Of course it could equate to delivery belonging to Strife or that Strife is going to deliver something and any number of meanings could be put to just exactly what is being delivered. But it could also mean delivery of Strife. In that case, the differences in nuances of meaning could indicate Strife needs to be taken somewhere or that he's the one who needs to be saved."

That left contemplative silence hanging in the air.

Until Tseng stood. "Sir," he said, turning to the vice president, "I appreciate the need to follow through with this investigative lead regarding Strife, but I do need to get to the slums. Every passing moment drastically reduces the time frame I have to act. I have nothing to add to the investigation at the moment and this business needs to be taken care of now."

"What business is that?" Shinra asked.

Sephiroth's eyes were narrowed at the Turk.

"Plausible deniability, sir," Tseng said slowly.

Shinra eyed the Turk for a moment and slowly nodded his head.

Then Tseng actually ran out of the room.

Reeve turned back to his computer and pulled up the security feeds to the building. He searched for the clip flagged by security and played it on the large monitor next to the unmoving video feed from Cait Sith. There was no sound with the security video but Strife with his goggles and bandana were clearly visible next to a large, hairy man who wasn't wearing a shirt.

They were a few minutes into the unenlightening security video when a high pitched whine threaded through Cait Sith's audio feed and the video feed tinted yellow. Frowning, he ran a quick diagnostic of the robotic prototype's systems. His eyes widened then the audio and video feeds shut down with a resounding pop. Static played over the monitor and all his readings went dead.

"No," he ground out, fingers flying over the keyboard in attempt to revive the link.

"What just happened?" Sephiroth asked, voice sharp.

Reeve ignored the question, running a more complicated program to prove what he was seeing was wrong. It didn't work.

"Tuesti," Shinra said, voice authoritative.

Reeve's hands stilled on the keyboard. He stared blankly at the screen, letting the loss of the first Cait Sith prototype sink in. "Cait Sith was destroyed," he said flatly. "There was a build up of electrical charge and everything from sensors to transmitters fried. I hadn't modified Cait Sith for combat situations yet. He didn't have any defenses."
"What was it?" Shinra asked, tone noticeably less harsh.

"The only thing that comes close to the readings right before Cait Sith stopped transmitting is the monster attack Trine. The only monster we know of that has that ability lives in the frigid, glacial cliffs above the crater on the northern continent. It's called a Stilven. There wasn't anything close enough to Cait Sith's sensors to identify what attacked it. As a prototype it has an extremely limited range."

"If I remember correctly," Sephiroth said, "the Stilven is the size of a small truck. I doubt something that large and dangerous is wandering around the slums this far from its native hunting grounds and attacking robotic cats."

"Maybe someone's got an Enemy Skill materia then," Reno said. "Those things are damn rare. Professor Creepy Pants has one. The Turks sometimes make a game outta findin' monsters that might have magic the little thing can duplicate. I don't know if Trine is one of those learnable skills though. It's not on the list but there are a bunch of empty spaces in the creepy professor's materia still."

"Considering the other items CS Delivery has acquired," Shinra said, "it wouldn't be surprising to find that he had a rather full Enemy Skill materia on hand."

Sephiroth said, "And he clearly has contact with Strife and it's not unreasonable to think he would be able to detect the surveillance devices inside the robot. If he's trying to protect Strife, then he would remove any means of interference we introduce. " The general paused and a hint of amusement entered his voice. "He doesn't seem to have a problem destroying Shinra Company property when he feels like it."

"But why is it that my Cait Sith had to come out as collateral damage?" Reeve lamented, burying his face in his hands.

"My condolences," Sephiroth said in a clipped, professional way, using the same tone one would normally use for polite agreement when someone else was complaining about extra paperwork. A hand patted Reeve's shoulder exactly two times. Reeve glanced sideways to find Sephiroth's expression as awkward as the attempt at consolation had been.
Cloud dumped the charred Cait Sith in a trash bin and headed off through the slums, Vincent at his side and Nanaki slinking through the shadows ahead of them. He pulled his hood tighter.

"Did Aerith say anything about the change in plans?" Cloud asked.

"Only that you should remember that Shinra still has the funds for surveillance toys."

The three of them slipped quietly through the slums all the way to Sector 5. He breathed a sigh of relief to see that Aerith was nonchalantly tending the flowers around Elmyra's house. If Zack had taken Kusel to the church and somehow alerted all of Shinra's upper management to the Cetra's location, Aerith wouldn't be playing in the dirt.

Aerith caught their approach from the corner of her eye and stood with a bright smile, brushing the dirt off her hands.

"How did it go?" she called.

"Just fine. Zack was very enthusiastic."

"Let's go inside. Mom probably has some tea ready."

Nanaki came from behind the house and joined them in going through the front door. Elmyra did in fact have tea for them. Cloud pulled his hood and goggles off and took a seat. Vincent and the women joined him at the table while Nanaki declined and curled up out of the way beneath the stairs.

"Vincent told me what happened," Aerith said, "so there's no need to talk about it. But I've got news."

He couldn't help his slight smile on his face at her enthusiasm.

"There are rumors in the Lifestream about you Cloud."

Even Vincent straightened at that.

"None of the voices seem to know for sure, but there're whispers about Minerva."

An image flashed through Cloud's mind of a pale, regal woman wearing silver, blue, and gold armor. One of Zack's memories from the feel of it.

Cloud said, "That's new. I didn't think she really ever interfered with anything."

Aerith nodded. "The only incident I know of was with Genesis. Any other happening would have been too far before our time."

"Do you think Genesis has anything to do with it?" he asked.

"I have no idea and neither does anyone in the Lifesteam. And I find it interesting that the whispers are only about you, not me." She gave a quiet giggle. "Those souls in the Lifestream seem to be quite disbelieving when I tell them where I used to be."

He folded his arms and stared at the teacup in front of him. He was rather reluctant to rearrange the plans for Avalanche, but any lead on how he and Aerith ended up in the past needed to be
investigated. Especially so if Aerith coming back with him was accidental. There shouldn't be any reason for him to deserve a fresh start more than her.

"I guess we're heading to Banora then," he said. "Or what's left of it. If we don't find anything there, we can try the caves up near the Northern Crater."

"The underground caves in Banora?" Vincent posed the question quietly.

He nodded. "Once we finish our tea."

"So soon?" Elmyra asked.

It was Nanaki who said, "We've been stirring up trouble most of the day and the storm above the plate will help with cover once we reach the desert outside the city."

Changing the subject, Cloud asked Aerith, "Any luck on your healing water, yet?"

She shook her head. "It's like it doesn't exist. I can't imagine where it could have disappeared to, though. It isn't one of my Limits, as you know, but something I drew straight out of the Lifestream." Aerith paused. "You know there's a chance the Geostigma won't ever appear. Without Sephiroth directings things from the Lifestream or all those dead clones, it might not."

Cloud frowned. "You should know better than to assume that, Aerith. It isn't as bad, but all those Angeal and Genesis copies are infected with Jenova, too. Every dead Soldier puts Jenova's taint into the Lifestream, too. There's also all the escaped monsters from Hojo's labs. At least some of them, if not most of them, have Jenova cells, too. The Jenova buildup is slower, but that doesn't mean it won't reach critical mass and manifest as Geostigma again."

Aerith roached over to put one hand over his for a moment. "I know Cloud, but we can hope, can't we?"

He nodded a bit begrudgingly.

The silence stretched comfortably while they drank their tea, until Aerith giggled to herself. "Poor Reeve," she said. "That Cait Sith was probably one of his first."

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. It probably was.

* * *

Tseng didn't like waiting. Particularly in situations where he risked simply being knocked out when his target happened upon him. He also wasn't entirely sure he should have given the vice president a plausible deniability excuse. Backup would certainly be helpful at the moment. But his target was skittish and would no doubt remain elusive if there was surveillance or backup of any kind. That much was painfully obvious.

He'd positioned himself just around a blind corner, standing in full view on the poorly lit street. Even in his dark colors in poor light, he would be seen. The best path out of the city was easy to extrapolate once he understood some of the underlying patterns.

Quiet footsteps sounded around the corner, just on the edge of his hearing. He made sure he was staring at exactly the right spot, hands visible and relaxed. It wouldn't do any good to appear to be reaching for a gun, or even to be ready to do so.

They appeared from around the corner. CS Delivery in his sleeveless, black hooded sweatshirt, the
red-clad gunman, and the giant cat, its tail tipped with seemingly live flames. The three terrorists froze in place some ten feet from him. Despite the obvious surprise, their expressions remained neutral.

Tseng’s hand itched for his gun. This trio could probably pick him apart if they so chose.

After several silent moments, both the cat and the gunman stepped backward then slipped away in opposite directions. Tseng carefully kept his eyes on the swordsman’s goggles. It wouldn’t look good to eye one or all of those six giant swords strapped to his back. So far as he could tell, the swordsman stared back at him. If this was going to work, Tseng had to let the other man take the lead. Making the first move shifted the power to Tseng's field and he needed the power in the swordsman's field if he were to get what he wanted.

Several long minutes passed before the gunman and the giant cat reappeared, each from their separate directions. The swordsman eyed each in turn and got a negative headshake. Attention back on Tseng, the swordsman slowly reached into a pocket and pulled out a PHS. He waggled it around in the air and held out his free hand to the Turk.

Tseng took a deep breath and produced his own PHS. He stepped slowly toward the terrorist and handed it over. The swordsman stared at him for a handful of heartbeats then turned his attention to the PHS. He fished a short cord out of another pocket and connected the two devices. The swordsman spent several minutes fiddling with both before handing the PHS back.

Tseng frowned, eying the device. Perhaps the terrorist had been expecting surveillance.

"What are you doing here?" the swordsman demanded, voice confident and smooth in a way completely unlike the unassuming Strife.

"You gave yourself away keeping mention of the Cetra from being recorded."

CS Delivery lifted his head a little.

"I came straight to the slums after you shorted Tuesti's robot and did some long distance surveillance on Mrs. Gainsborough's house. It was a simple matter to figure out which path you would take to leave the city."

The swordsman nodded slowly. "I…forgot that you're…friends…of a sort."

Tseng's frown deepened. What was that supposed to mean?

The terrorist reopened his PHS and dialed. After a few moments, he said, "We're coming back…. I know. We ran into an unexpected guest…. A friend of yours…. Yes…. I'm sure he would appreciate it." Call ended, the PHS disappeared into his pocket. He stepped to the side and held up an arm in the direction he'd come from. "I assume you know the back way to Mrs. Gainsborough's house, to Aerith's house."

Tseng nodded and strode calmly past the trio of terrorists.

It seemed like the longest walk to the secluded corner of Sector 5 that he'd ever taken. CS Delivery quickly moved in front of him when they reached the quaint little house and opened the door. Tseng followed the other to find himself uneasy in the remarkably relaxed environment. Mrs. Gainsborough was in the kitchen washing dishes and Aerith was moving around the table, setting four places for tea.

The giant cat moved around him and curled up under the stairs. The gunman seated himself,
immediately picking up his steaming cup of tea while the swordsman methodically removed each sword from the harness on his back and propped them up along one wall.

Tseng cautiously took a seat and waited. Once she was done with the placemats and tea, Aerith seated herself next to the gunman, across the table from Tseng, leaving only one seat for the swordsman. When that one sat, he pulled off the hood, revealing a large black bandana, which he promptly removed to allow a bright shock of blond hair free. Then the goggles were pulled down to rest around his neck, exposing mako bright blue eyes. And Tseng had visual proof of what he'd already known.

"It was easy to suspect everything you pointed the camera at to be a deliberate action, but I knew when you kept Fair from mentioning Ms. Gainsborough where it would be recorded that you knew her and I had only to follow her to find you."

"So you said earlier," Strife said.

Aerith said, "I've told you to call me Aerith, Tseng."

"And I've told you to remain inconspicuous," Tseng said. "I don't recall collaboration with terrorists falling under that category."

The Cetra actually had the gall to giggle. "Cloud," she said, "how much do you plan to tell him?"

Strife shrugged and took a sip of his tea. "I was figuring everything."

"Is that wise?" the cat asked from under the stairs, his voice not as deep as Tseng had expected.

"The cover is just a distraction anyway. If he knows this much, it's better to tell him everything. If he believes even a fraction of it he'll agree to keep the important parts quiet. It's too much of a risk not to."

Tseng narrowed his eyes. "Your cover is a distraction? Am I to think that means your friendship with Zack is as false as the reserve you show in his company?"

"No," Strife said, hints of a sneer on his face. "Zack is my friend. Always will be. But he, along with the rest of Shinra, are better off chasing leads and trying to make connections. It keeps them out of my way."

Tseng took a slow sip of his tea and processed those words. Meaning flickering to life in his mind. He offered a faint smile. "You made the possible connection between Strife and CS Delivery obvious on purpose." Strife didn't speak because he didn't have to. "Sephiroth, Vice President Shinra, and even myself have spent valuable time trying to find the links between Strife and CS Delivery when we should have been investigating your actions. Allowing Cait Sith to see Strife with your gunman gave them a morsel to keep them hunting down that path."

A faint smirk graced Strife's face at that. From the way the gunman was staring at Strife, Tseng suspected the red-clad man hadn't been entirely aware of that bit of a plan.

"Why were you in Shinra Company's army in the first place and why did you suddenly leave? What prompted this rapid series of terrorist attacks? Was it something to do with the Nibelheim experiments?"

Strife stared at him for a moment before letting out a quiet sigh. "Everything I told Zack was the truth. I woke up on the training yard with no memory of how I got there."
"So it was experimentation that produced this alternate personality of yours."

Aerith actually burst out laughing. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you Cloud," she forced out between sputtering laughter. "I didn't really think they'd actually believe you had some kind of split personality." Strife gave her a hard look. "Oh I know you sort of do have a split personality. But they really think you're some kind of spy or weapon with a manufactured personality."

Ignoring the giggling teenager, Strife turned his attention back to Tseng and said, "I'm from the future."

Tseng's teacup hung suspended halfway to his mouth. This terrorist was insane. And he kept talking. "So is Aerith. I'm from about ten years into the future. When I was a teenager, I actually was in the Shinra army. I joined after the Wutai War because I wanted to be a hero." His mouth twisted somewhat disdainfully. "I was a stupid kid. Being a hero isn't all it's cut out to be."

"But someone has to do it," Aerith interjected with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

Strife ignored her. "I was a trooper in the army. Some really bad shit happened. Me and my friends saved the world a few times. A whole lot of people died in the process. The world was getting on alright when I was twenty-six—"

"You still are twenty-six," Aerith interjected again.

"—and then I just woke up in the Shinra training yard a few weeks ago and realized that I, as my adult self, have replaced my teenage self."

Absolutely certifiable. "You said Aerith is from the future also?" Tseng prompted, taking another sip of tea.

Aerith spoke instead of Strife. "I was twenty-two when I died," she said, smile small and soft. "I came back when Cloud did. But I was dead. I didn't have a body. I continued on in the Lifestream with the others, but I would have been twenty-seven were I alive. Much like Cloud, I woke up to find my would be twenty-seven year old mind had replaced my teenage mind."

In the silence that followed, Tseng asked, "Assuming I believe that...story, why in Gaia's name would you have traveled through time?"

Strife and Aerith exchanged a look. Strife said, "We don't know why. We don't even know how."

"And yet," he said dryly, "you felt the need to start blowing up Shinra facilities."

Strife actually cracked a half smile at that. The expression disappeared quickly as he began to speak. "My memory is pretty fuzzy about this time in my life but I'm reasonably sure that either this week or during one of the next couple weeks was when Shinra got a mission dispatch to Nibelheim. There were a few dragons and unusually strong monsters lurking around, and the locals asked for Soldier to come take care of them."

Tseng nodded. "Two days before you blew up the Nibelheim facilities, we did receive a mission request. If the Turks hadn't taken care of the mutated monsters on the mountain during our investigation of your attack, a dispatch of Soldiers would have gone out sometime the beginning of next week when it reached the top of the queue. That's hardly something significant. A small group of Thirds accompanied by a Second would have been sufficient."

Strife was already shaking his head. "Not if you'd gotten word that Genesis had been seen in the
area. Sephiroth and Zack were both sent with a small contingent of troopers, including myself. Genesis really was there and what—"

"Was Genesis there? Did you kill him?" Tseng demanded, heedless of interrupting the delusional man. "Was he in the reactor when you blew it up?"

"No," Strife said sharply. "Pay attention, Tseng. In the future I came from, when Sephiroth, Zack, myself, and another trooper were dispatched to Nibelheim, Genesis was there. What Genesis told Sephiroth and what the general found in the reactor and mansion sent him off the deep end. Shinra's Soldier general, the hero of the Wutai War, went completely nuts. He razed Nibelheim to the ground and decided to destroy Shinra and kill everyone on the Planet after having a little cuddle time with oozing experimental material in the reactor. The other trooper died in Nibelheim but Zack and I followed Sephiroth to the reactor. Sephiroth mortally wounded us, but not before I managed to push him into the mako reactor core and kill him."

It was rather presumptuous of this clearly disturbed young man to think he could so easily kill the general. He mentally paused. Perhaps given his handling of Zack, it wasn't too far fetched.

Strife continued. "Hojo was furious that his ultimate creation was destroyed, so Zack and I became the first of his test subjects in attempt to create Sephiroth clones."

Tseng narrowed his eyes. "Like the Genesis and Angeal copies?"

Strife shook his head. "The copies were of Hollander's work. Hojo's project was entirely different. Anyway, Zack and I spent several years floating in mako tanks and being experimented on. When we finally got out, I was catatonic with mako addiction so Zack dragged me around trying to figure out what was going on. Just outside of Midgar, the entire Shinra army mobilized and gunned him down. I came out of my catatonic state just in time to watch him die. He gave me his Buster Sword and I set out to take down Shinra."

"Meanwhile, Sephiroth, though dead, hadn't dissolved into the Lifestream properly and figured out how to use most of his clones as avatars to make Jenova manifest herself as him on the mortal plane. His clones assassinated President Shinra and Rufus took the company. Suffice it to say, Sephiroth tried to destroy the planet several times and I had to keep killing him. He managed to kill Aerith, though, and turn Midgar into a ruin. In my time, people built a new city around the Midgar ruins and they lived there."

Strife shook his head. "Eventually, Sephiroth just came back to try and torture me because I'd killed him through his avatars so many times that my pain became more important than destroying the world. Go figure. But the most recent crisis in my time was Hojo. He was fundamentally the reason behind Sephiroth's psychosis so we killed him too. But he made an artificial copy of himself and hijacked Deepground. Then he tried to destroy the Planet. So when I woke up and found myself in a past where the worst thing to happen was the Wutai War and the mass Soldier desertions, I decided to start making changes."

That this terrorist knew of Deepground was another disturbing point. Even Tseng didn't have the clearance to know exactly what they did. He couldn't even fathom why or how a digital copy of the head of the science department would forcibly take control of it. "Meaning the first action you took was to destroy Nibelheim facilities and all the material there," Tseng said instead of voicing his true concerns, hoping to get Deepground information eventually.

Strife nodded. "If we get through next week and Sephiroth doesn't decide to kill every person on Gaia, I'll count that as a success."
Tseng really wanted to ask what any of that had to do with why Strife was now running around burglarizing Shinra facilities, and writing letters to the vice president, but didn't think he would get an answer. "So what about the other two?"

Aerith half glanced at the giant cat beneath the stairs. "In five years, shortly before I was killed, Hojo ordered you to bring me back to Shinra and you couldn't keep me hidden anymore so you took me back. Then Hojo tried to breed me with Nanaki over there. He was trying to get a longer lived specimen as Nanaki's people live several times longer than people."

"More than several," the so named Nanaki muttered.

Sheer lunacy. Tseng had to wonder if they all realized how crazy they sounded.

Strife leaned back in his seat and waved a hand absently at the gunman. "That's Vincent Valentine."

Something must have shown on Tseng's face because Strife didn't elaborate. Tseng said, "That's impossible. Vincent Valentine is dead. He was shot decades ago."

The gunman lightly tapped the center of his chest with one armor claw. "Shot through the chest at point blank range. Hojo used my half dead body in experiments meant to strengthen me and give me the ability to transform myself into monsters. I have three rather savage beasts I'm capable of becoming. Later, Hojo's wife attempted to fully revive me by infusing me with Chaos and succeeded due to Hojo's experiments making my body a strong and ideal vessel."

He stared at the calm, red-eyed man slowly sipping his tea and his conviction that these people were all crazy wavered.

He'd seen the reports. He'd seen Vincent Valentine's profile. If this man wasn't Valentine, then he'd been cloned and somehow given Valentine's marksman skills. If Valentine was who he claimed, then that was one truth. If there was one truth, there might be something in the rest of it to believe.

Turning his attention back to Strife, he said, "Please start from the beginning and...explain everything about this...future you came from."

* * *

"Did Tseng tell anyone that he would be late to his own meeting?" the vice president asked flatly.

Zack shook his head. He and the other two Soldiers had already compared messages. Tseng had sent them all the same email requesting they meet in the briefing room regarding their special project. Tuesti, the vice president, Reno, and Rude were in attendance. Cissnei was still off hunting Dio.

The vice president posed his question to the two present Turks. "I know he didn't wish me to know expressly what he was doing for deniability's sake, but do either of you know what he went to do in the slums?"

Reno shook his head. "Boss just took off. He booked it outta the buildin' an' no one's seen 'im since. It's been hours. I was surprised when he sent the email. Tseng hates sendin' emails even more than Veld does."

"It's possible watching Cait Sith's video feed gave him a lead to investigate," Sephiroth said.

"That's what troubles me," Shinra said.

Tuesti nodded in agreement. "What if his lead panned out?"
"Our resources are spread too thin," Sephiroth said. "We don't have the manpower to search for Tseng, too. If there weren't so many different problems I would say CS Delivery was the source of all of them."

Vice President Shinra's PHS rang. The man frowned and arched one brow. "I do believe I turned the ringer off." His frown deepened when he spied the caller identification.

Zack leaned forward in his seat in anticipation.

"Where are you Tseng?" Shinra demanded. A pause, then, "Answer the question Turk." Reno winced. "Will you answer the question if I put you on speaker?"

Barely holding in a scowl, the vice president set his PHS on the table and said, "Everyone can hear you."

"Thank you for coming," Tseng said through the device, electronics slightly distorting his voice. "I felt it best to inform you all at the same time that I'm currently with CS Delivery and his comrades."

Questions erupted from nearly everyone.

"Is he Spike?"

"He kidnapped you?"

"Did you apprehend him?"

"Why haven't you brought him in?"

Rude didn't speak, and Tuesti had immediately produced a small, portable computer and was typing furiously.

"Please, hold your questions," Tseng said. "Vice President?"

"Go ahead, Tseng." Shinra's voice was smooth and polite.

"The situation requiring me to give you plausible deniability was in direct relation to CS Delivery, but he isn't the only party involved. I must inform you sir, that most of what I know will be remaining under the plausible deniability clause."

Shinra's expression tightened but he showed no other visible reaction.

Tseng said, "Given the current situation, there are two options. I can go with CS Delivery and act as a liaison between you and him, keeping the majority of his movements and motivations secret. Or I can return to Shinra Company and still keep the majority of his movements and motivations secret."

Zack scoffed. What kind of options were those?

Sephiroth seemed to agree. "That's no choice at all, Tseng. What was the purpose in your meeting him?"

Reno asked, "Has that asshole got dirt on you, boss? Is he forcin' you to do whatever shit he wants?"

Some faint shuffling filled the pause that followed the question. "No, Reno. I'm doing this of my own accord. I understand CS Delivery's...position and am in agreement that certain things need to be kept secret from anyone actively involved in certain areas of Shinra Company."
"Are you claiming you aren't actively involved in certain areas of Shinra Company?" Shinra asked, tone positively glacial.

"If you require it, sir, I will offer my resignation, but I'm acting in your best interest."

Zack caught the faintest widening of the vice president's eyes.

"That won't be necessary." Shinra said, voice regaining its diplomatic lilt. In that case, I authorize your reassignment within the CS Delivery project. Please operate in a manner conducive to the positive image of Shinra Company."

"Yes, sir," came Tseng's immediate reply.

"Reno," Shinra said, the redhead straightened, "you have command of the Turks until either Veld or Tseng completes their missions."

A look of utter disbelief flashed across the general's face. Zack leaned over to Kunsel and whispered, "CS Delivery's going to win now."

Kunsel didn't seem to be sure how to respond and neither did Sephiroth as the general let the comment slide without so much as a reprimanding glance.

Shinra asked, "Is there anything you can tell us now, Tseng?"

"It would be easier, sir, if you and the others would pose questions. I'll answer as many as I can."

Zack asked, "Is CS Delivery in the room with you?"

"Yes."

Zack's eyes narrowed. "Is this call on speaker at your end?"

There was a slight hesitation. "Yes, I assumed you would realize this as I requested you put me on speaker at your end. This is a conference call between Vice President Shinra's investigation team and CS Delivery's team."

From the expressions around the room, it seemed only Sephiroth and Shinra had realized it was probably on speaker at both ends. Zack just hadn't been sure.

"Is he scripting anything for you?" Zack asked.

"Not yet." Hints of a smile bled through the Turk's voice. "We discussed what I would tell you beforehand and for particular topics, he will be answering by writing a reply down with me reading it."

"Why's he so damn afraid to have 'is voice recorded?" Reno demanded.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it," Tseng said.

Several moments passed before Tuesti asked, "What did you do to block the tracking capabilities in your PHS? I can't pinpoint your location."

"When I first confronted CS Delivery, he physically linked his PHS to mine. I can only assume he rendered it electronically invisible."

"You don't know?"
"It's not something we've specifically discussed yet."

Shinra asked, "What was the main reason for the destruction of the Nibelheim facilities?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it," Tseng said.

"Can you provide any reason for the Nibelheim bombings?"

"It set back certain...undesirable situations."

Zack scoffed. That was too vague to be of any help.

"Scenarios of President Shinra and Hojo's making?" Shinra asked.

"Yes, sir."

Sephiroth asked, "Was there any sort of physical altercation when you confronted CS Delivery?"

"No, General. After tampering with my PHS, he and his comrades escorted me to another location, and tea was served while they explained certain things."

"Tea?" Zack repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, Zack," Tseng said, "tea. High quality tea at that. I found it quite enjoyable." The humor in the Turk's tone didn't escape Zack.

"Are you still in Midgar?" Sephiroth asked.

"I'm not at liberty to discuss it," Tseng said.

Zack sent a lopsided frown Sephiroth's way. If they'd been served tea and having a long conversation, odds are they weren't camped out in some random hut in the wastes between Midgar and Kalm.

Reno asked, "Is CS Delivery Zack's buddy Strife?"

Tseng said, "I'm not at liberty to discuss Shinra's ongoing investigations into CS Delivery's identity."

Shinra asked, "Does that mean you won't be contributing to said investigations?"

"That's correct sir. I'm sure you will find it in your best interest to conduct any investigations as you and the remaining members of the investigation team seem fit."

That was rather sneaky. The Turk wasn't even going to tell them whether or not they should keep trying to figure out who the terrorist was. He probably wouldn't have helped even if he wasn't planning on gallivanting off with CS Delivery.

Sephiroth asked, "How did you find CS Delivery?"

A long silence stretched over the PHS line before Tseng said, "Something I saw during Cait Sith's live video feed gave me the information necessary to track him down."

"Something before Strife separated from the two Soldiers?" Sephiroth asked, eyes sharp.

After a pause, Tseng said, "One moment please." After that, his voice dropped significantly in volume as he was clearly directing his speech somewhere other than the PHS. "Yes, I initially made
my intentions to go to the slums known shortly after that and before seeing the gunman on the video feed…. That was hardly my intention and you know it…. No…." Voice returning to its normal volume, Tseng said, "Sephiroth, the answer is yes. I saw something before Strife separated from the two Soldiers."

"Had you not discussed that particular point with CS Delivery?" Shinra asked.

"No sir."

A shorter silence hung tensely in the briefing room. Zack couldn't think of any question that he thought CS Delivery would let the Turk answer.

"Tseng," Shinra said, tone taking on an air of authority.

"Yes, Vice President," Tseng responded formally, apparently hearing the difference.

"Does CS Delivery, or any of his allies, pose an immediate threat to Shinra Company or the citizens of Midgar?"

"No, sir."

"What makes you sound so sure?" Sephiroth asked.

The following pause was filled with what sounded like shuffling paper. "If CS Delivery's plans go accordingly, Shinra Company will remain intact and Midgar's citizens will adequately prosper. He has no intention to economically cripple the Planet or destroy all its inhabitants."

Zack frowned, scratching the back of his head. Reno moved closer to Vice President Shinra to whisper, but rather than listen, he leaned closer to Sephiroth, who inclined his head to accept Zack's whispered comment. "Wasn't that phrased kind of weird?" No one else seemed to hear the question, even Kunsel.

Sephiroth simply stared for a moment, then his eyebrows lifted minutely in a small show of surprise. In an equally low whisper, he said, "I wouldn't know how to properly phrase the question to ask about it."

Zack shrugged, "Me either. At least not without implying he isn't an inhabitant of the Planet or is planning on picking and choosing which people to kill."

"Something to save for later, perhaps," Sephiroth murmured.

Vice President Shinra quietly asked the general, "Do you have any more questions Sephiroth?"

"Not now," Sephiroth said, shaking his head.

In a louder voice that would more easily be picked up by the PHS, Shinra said, "It seems we'll need to have a private meeting on this end before we have a more comprehensive list of questions."

"In that case," Tseng said, "CS Delivery has a few things he'd like to say."

Zack shot a glance at Sephiroth, but the general was paying rapt attention to the PHS sitting innocuously on the table.

"First, to Zack Fair," Tseng said.

Zack's eyes widened. CS Delivery wanted to speak directly to him?
"CS Delivery wants to make it clear that he never intended to damage your ribs in Junon."

"Is he asking for me to *forgive* him?" Zack asked incredulously. "I'm not going to just *forgive* him for raiding Junon and attacking Shinra Company employees."

There was a pause and the slide of paper on the other end. Tseng said, "CS Delivery says *good*, because he's not apologizing."

Zack opened his mouth to spit out a reply but stopped when Sephiroth touched his arm. Scowling, Zack reluctantly slumped back into his seat. If his commanding officer wanted him to pipe down then he was certainly going to follow orders.

Tseng went on unimpeded. "To Reeve Tuesti," the Head of Urban Development perked at mention of his name, "CS Delivery says that, though he didn't take particular enjoyment in disabling your prototype, its destruction was necessary. If you want to retrieve the robot, he left it in a trash bin outside the building of its last known location and that the area waste removal teams won't be by for three more days."

"Thank you for not completely annihilating my work," Reeve said, surprise evident in his voice. Hints of a smile in Tseng's voice, he said, "CS Delivery says not to thank him. He's the one that destroyed it."

"Still," Tuesti said, "I appreciate the effort to not destroy Cait Sith in its entirety."

"Moving on," Tseng said smoothly, "for Sephiroth, CS Delivery asks if you think – " Tseng cut off abruptly. In a more muffled tone, voice clearly not directed at the PHS, Tseng asked, "What's the meaning of this question?" Some paper shuffling later then Tseng said, "You can't honestly me expect to pose this question to General Sephiroth."

Zack shot another glance Sephiroth's way and found a dark scowl on his commander's face.

Tseng sighed audibly over the line. "General Sephiroth," he started again, voice clearer and directed at the PHS again, "CS Delivery asks if you think using half a bottle of each would save a significant amount of gil."

While the general's fists clenched, his voice became eerily smooth, silk-like even. "That never was, and never will be, any of your business, CS Delivery."

A chill shivered up Zack's spine. If the terrorist were there in that moment, Zack was positive Sephiroth would have strangled him. Not even Reno looked like he was willing to question what CS Delivery was talking about.

Tseng broke the silence. "As there are no more questions on your end, and CS Delivery has nothing else to add, I suggest we adjourn until a later date."

Under his breath, Reno muttered, "I'd tell the asshole to watch 'imself because next time I'm gonna fry 'im."

Further away from the PHS, Tseng said, "I didn't hear him say anything." Tseng paused. "Reno, CS Delivery says he hopes you enjoyed receiving a concussion from the hilt of your own weapon and that he'd gladly brain you with anything you used to attack him, even if it's nothing but a materia ball."

After an obviously surprised silence on Reno's part, the Turk barked a laugh. "Try it, *asshole.*"
Tseng sighed over the line. "Sir," he said, "we'll be in touch." Then the PHS line went dead.

"Tuesti," Shinra said, "after retrieving your prototype, go over every millisecond of that video footage of Fair's outing and figure out what Tseng knew that the rest of us didn't."

"Of course, Vice President," Tuesti said.

Zack eyed the quietly seething general while everyone but the three Soldiers filed out of the room. If nothing else, CS Delivery was putting himself on Sephiroth's bad side.

Kunsel's PHS rang and the Second excused himself before stepping outside. Zack continued watching the general, wondering if this was one of those times when he should try to befriend the solitary man again. Sephiroth didn't exactly encourage casual conversation, but at least he hadn't threatened to kill Zack if he didn't stop trying.

Kunsel drew Zack's attention by calling his name from the doorway. Zack sprung to his feet and hurried over. Kunsel stayed in the doorway so it must have been something quick. Kunsel said, "Cissnei finally brought Dio in. It took her a while to convince him we weren't planning on putting him in prison or something. Cissnei asked me to come help with the questioning." Kunsel's mouth twisted up in a smirk. "She says my never taking off my helmet puts some people on edge."

"Report back afterward," Zack said, throwing a glance over his shoulder at the general.

Kunsel turned his head, the angle of his helmet indicating he was looking at Sephiroth's back. He said, "I think we'd better both hope Cloud isn't CS Delivery. The general looks like he wants to skin that man, and I think Cloud's pretty fun."
Cloud’s hair ruffled in an unusually strong gust of wind. A few white dumbapples fell from the trees sloping over their path, hitting the ground with several thumps. Vincent ignored the fruit, his red eyes glowing even in sunlight as he scanned their surroundings. Nanaki sniffed one in passing, but left it alone. Tseng appeared disinterested in general, much like he always did when Cloud or one of the others wasn't speaking.

The closer they drew to where the village had been, the more patches of burned ground littered the landscape. The charred patches were few and far between, like the fire had jumped from spot to spot. When they crested the next hill, the blackened ruins of Banora came into view.

When they reached the village edge and stepped fully within the blackened ground Tseng said, "There's no information I've ever seen detailing caverns beneath Banora."

Without looking at the Turk, Cloud said, "Genesis used to play there as a child. And there are plaques on the walls with lines from Loveless. Also, Emerald Weapon is there, dormant for now."

With a sidelong look at the Turk, Cloud spied the suspicion in Tseng's eyes. Mentally, Cloud just brushed it off. He couldn't expect the man to believe everything so easily.

Cloud's steps slowed when he felt something stir in the back of his mind. Nanaki tensed at his reaction and Vincent's hand moved to his gun. Tseng, however, paused before readying to draw his weapon.

Cloud didn't immediately draw a sword. His eyes scanned the charred earth, then the clear sky, and watched for even a flicker of movement. He really didn't want to get caught flatfooted if Genesis was around to rain a wash of nasty attack feathers at him. He'd have to buy a new hoodie.

It wasn't feathers that rained down on him, but what looked like a volley of Firaga fireballs. If Cloud didn't have mastered Ice materia, he would never have cast in time. The green magic shot away from his open palm, the large chunks of ice spears forming in the air. Ice collided with fire in a cracklingly brittle clash, both spells bursting into mist and vapor, dissipating and forming a mostly transparent mist of moisture that dampened Cloud and the others.

When the noise settled, and silence crept over them again, Cloud scanned their surroundings. Vincent and Tseng both held their weapons at the ready, but from their postures, neither saw anything to shoot at just yet.

Nothing came. Cloud wasn't sure what he expected. He hadn't truly thought he'd run into Genesis or his army of copies, but he also hadn't really thought there wouldn't be anyone here. This quiet, though, this lack of attack left him puzzled. Genesis copies weren't exactly known for their restraint. One volley of fireballs wasn't enough to kill anyone even marginally prepared for battle.

That's when Cloud realized the slight stir in the back of his mind hadn't gone away. He focused on the sensation. It was tangible in the way that he felt Sephiroth, but with a different texture. Sephiroth was a concentrated point with fine tentacles of awareness floating around, waiting for something to latch onto. But this new feeling was jagged and faint with shuddering tremors constantly shifting its lines. He'd never felt anything like it.

If it were actually a sense similar to what he felt of Sephiroth, and even the faint presence of Soldiers, then perhaps he could focus on it like he focused on the others.
So he concentrated. With only one question circling in his mind, he sought to locate the source of this new sensation. Where?

A blur of a shadow was the only warning Cloud had before the threat descended on him from right out of the sky. On reflex, he drew the Apocalypse. Red blade met red blade and the crimson glow of power already wrapping his opponent's sword engulfed Cloud's in turn. Cloud activated his Ice materia again to counteract the flare of heat emanating from the swords before it could make their surroundings combust. Simultaneously, he slid one foot back to brace himself, and used the force of his whole body and the broadsword to throw his attacker back.

There were no outcries from his companions, but he didn't dare look away from his opponent. The man stood tall in his red leather duster but wide streaks of gray in his hair washed out nearly all of the original gingered red. The long, black wing extending from his back, stretching out on display, was also littered with large chunks of gray.

Then the former commander began reciting. "The goddess descends from the sky, wings of light and dark spread afar."

Cloud huffed a silent laugh and said, "Don't tell me you're calling yourself the goddess now, Genesis Rhapsodos."

Genesis smirked even as his eyes narrowed. "I merely speculate on you and I being her wings." Genesis tilted his head ever so slightly. "She said you would come. She said I would hear your whispers in my mind as I hear hers." His eyes flicked away from Cloud's for a moment, presumably to survey the others. "I was not expecting you to be a scion of Shinra Company."

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. "I'm not."

Pointing with his sword, Genesis said, "There stands Tseng, second in command of the Turks. Didn't you notice him following you?" came the dry question.

"I reappropriated him after he figured out who I was," Cloud said.

"Oh?" This seemed to amuse Genesis as he lowered his sword. "And who are you?"

"Didn't your goddess tell you?" Cloud shot back. He relaxed his own stance a little.

"For you are beloved by the goddess, hero of the dawn, healer of worlds," Genesis recited. Face losing its composure, one lip curling up to reveal teeth, he said, "But all I see is the man who destroyed Jenova. Hollander could have used her to cure my degradation."

Cloud scoffed, gripping his blade tighter. "If you think pumping yourself full of more mutated poison is going to help you then you're an idiot."

"That's quite the hypocritical statement coming from someone who has his own fair share of mutated poison flowing through his body. You positively reek of Jenova." Genesis' eyes gave Cloud another once over. "And you've clearly had your enhancements for a while. The lack of degradation declares the possibility of purity to be had. From your appearance, you clearly aren't part of the G-Project."

Genesis' smile tightened again. "Would that make you part of the S-Project? Does the difference lie there? I wasn't aware that Hojo had any subjects for that project other than Sephiroth. The general is a bit difficult to get to, but you are quite out in the open aren't you."

Cloud shifted uneasily, unhappy with how quickly Genesis' mind made connections. Instead of properly responding to the former commander's assertions, he said, "I don't care how much Jenova runs through me, don't smell me. It's...creepy."
Genesis chuckled at Cloud's unease, one hand flitting to his forehead for a moment. "Infinite in mystery is the gift of the goddess." Eyes back on Cloud, Genesis asked, "Do you hear her voice whispering to you? Is that why you came? To answer her call?"

"I came," Cloud said, "to figure out why I'm here." He didn't dare indicate he meant the particular time he was in because he couldn't tell how much Genesis actually knew. He'd already seen how quickly the man put things together, and he didn't want to see how much faster that would get if he started handing out clues.

Genesis only arched one brow at him. "Careful now, you'll talk yourself in circles if you don't pay attention." He paused. "I've been warned not to impede your passage. The goddess is expecting you." With that, he turned gracefully and strode deeper into the village ruins.

Cloud put the Apocalypse back in its harness and followed after Genesis. He heard his companions trailing behind him.

Vincent appeared at his side and murmured, "You never said anything about Genesis being some kind of spokesman for Minerva." There was less accusation in the whispered words than curiosity.

In equally quiet tones, Cloud said, "That's because she'd never talked to him before that last fight. This is new."

If the smirking glance Genesis threw over his shoulder at Cloud was any indication, the man's hearing was still quite excellent despite the progress of his degradation. So much for Cloud not giving anything away.

Tseng distracted Cloud from further thought by actually calling out to Genesis. "There's been a great deal of debate, Commander Rhapsodos, on whether or not you were actually alive. It seems that question is answered."

The mirth that had been on Genesis' face the last time he looked back was missing in his next glance. Genesis' only reply was, "There are no dreams, no honor remains, the arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

Disturbed by the bleakness of Genesis' declaration, and struck with a sudden impulse to speak, Cloud said, "The world isn't ending yet, Genesis." No one should ever think it was too late to do something. Zack had taught Cloud that. Not even dying had gotten that man to quit interfering.

Genesis' expression flattened, consideration gleaming behind his eyes, but he didn't respond, only disappearing into the basement beneath the apple factory ruins leading down into the Banora underground. Cloud's eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and found Genesis waiting just inside.

"I've scattered the Goddess Materia throughout the levels. We'll need to gather it all if we're to open the way to—"

"No," Cloud said, narrowing his eyes at the darkness deeper in the tunnels. He could feel a pulse of power, not in his head where Jenova cells echoed, but in his chest. It was faint, but he could feel something tugging at him. He shook his head and pressed a hand to his sternum. "That will take too long," he said absently.

Without really considering what he was doing, Cloud strode into the open tunnel leading out from this first cavern. In the deeper darkness, his eyes picked out thin strands of the Lifestream seeping out through the cracks in the tunnel walls.

"You expect to easily navigate the mazes and find all the barriers removed?" Genesis called after
Cloud heard his comrades' footsteps following behind him. Without raising his voice, knowing Genesis would hear him, he said, "Mazes don't mean much to me and there's always more than one way through a barrier."

Genesis offered no reply but Cloud heard his footsteps following anyway.

The tunnel opened into a large cavern full of glowing crystal formations towering above his head. He wound his way to the largest area of flat ground and immediately angled left. He knew he could go the other direction but to the left would be quicker.

A giant Evil Eye swooped down from the blackness out of the illuminated crystals' light. Its one, red eye gleamed dully in the dim light. Cloud was leaping forward before even fully drawing the Apocalypse. The Evil Eye barely had time to blink twice before Cloud's blade swung down and cleaved the monster in two.

Without breaking his stride, he hit the ground and whipped his blade through the air to fling the thin sheen of monster blood off it. The sword was on his back in a matter of seconds.

Cloud heard Tseng pose the question, "Is Strife usually this single minded when raiding a dungeon?"

"No," Nanaki said. "Cloud usually acts as support for myself and Vincent."

"As you can see," Vincent said, "his skills are often beyond what's needed. That monster was at least level thirty but a single sword swing eliminated it."

It was Genesis who spoke next. "Such a trifling monster should be easy for any who choose to walk these caverns. Perhaps you three should pray that your leader never chooses to forsake you."

Nanaki casually offered, "Cloud has never forsaken us before."

The side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. At least his friend was accurate in that Cloud had never forsaken them in this timeline. Though he wasn't quite sure if leaving them to fend for themselves while he drooled away off in mako poisoned, comatose land counted as forsaking anything except his own brain.

With little deviation from the straight shot he was taking, he entered a new area, the path winding around in one long arc before opening up to another large cavern. This one glowed green with an almost mako-infused, luminescent fungus glow. Cloud didn't even slow his stride across the cavern toward the pedestal and sealed off pathway.

Cloud drew the Apocalypse again when a trio of dark blue Grenades bobbed frenetically into his path, mouths open, exposing their flaming innards. He swung the sword in a wide arc as the monsters converged on him. When he cut each creature in half at the mouth, the flames in their bodies erupted in a weak flash, spurned on by the sudden access to oxygen. Globs of flaming remains splattered all over the cavern floor.

Cloud slowed near the pedestal, eying the ornate surface with its seven, smooth indents critically. The pulse of power in his chest throbbed with its own cadence, not synchronizing with his heartbeat, but grew in strength with every step he took that lead him deeper underground. Standing before this pedestal, the pulse was almost maddening. He did feel drawn, like Genesis had asked about earlier, but if this was the goddess calling, he didn't want to listen. But he had the niggling suspicion that leaving now wouldn't make it stop.
Without thinking, Cloud pressed his palm to the center of the pedestal. The pulse slammed up through his arm like silent thunder. The ground jolted, and for a moment, his arm lit up with an inner golden glow.

Cloud threw himself backward, twisting slightly as though to shield his no longer glowing arm. The limb tingled and ached like he'd strained his muscles. The faintest hints of numbness crawled across his hand and forearm. He shook his hand a little then massaged his wrist with his free hand, trying to normalize the sensations.

"Shit," Cloud hissed under his breath. "I don't know what kind of energy trap that is."

None of his startled companions said anything. It was Genesis that drew Cloud's attention.

The former commander had moved up next to Cloud and held a hand over the pedestal. In some kind of curious awe, Genesis said, "This pedestal has never been more than inanimate stone unless the various Goddess Materia are resting in it."

Genesis' hand drew back as the seven indents in the stone face began to glow. The stone itself actually lit up. When seven bright golden glows illuminated the indents in pedestal, the entrance, spurned by its magic and machinery, opened, revealing a painfully bright vortex of light.

"Interesting," Genesis said, seemingly musing, "all the Goddess Materia glow red here, but it seems whatever key you have shines like sunlight."

Unsure of how he felt about unknowingly possessing some sort of key, Cloud brushed it off and walked around the pedestal to move straight into the tunnel. The light in the tunnel was almost blinding, but when he stepped through, it wasn't what he expected. A simple, large cavern stretched out before him, its only feature a statue of a woman. The Goddess as Genesis saw her. Light broke through the cavern ceiling, admitting one bright ray of sunshine all the way from the surface, spotlighting the statue.

Cloud cautiously stepped forward, the pulse in his chest reverberating almost with the same strength as the pedestal had triggered in his arm. The whole cavern thurmmed with energy, the air practically shimmered with it.

He glanced over his shoulder at the others. Genesis was only a few paces behind him but his three comrades hovered just this side of the tunnel. Cloud stopped, frowning and half turned to face them. "Why are you all waiting there? It's not like the cavern isn't big enough. And I don't think this stuff in the air is going to actually do anything."

Nanaki sat where he was and said, "The whispers of the Lifestream are quite audible here. I can tell I'm not meant to walk in this place. I'll wait here for you to finish."

Tseng put a hand out but the air shivered, the power in the air solidifying. "I can't pass through the barrier."

Vincent was hovering as far back as he could without disappearing into the bright light of the tunnel. It actually seemed to take the gunman several moments to collect his thoughts. "Chaos is unexpectedly uneasy to be in this place. I find myself needing all my concentration to keep from leaving."

Frown deepening, Cloud turned his stare to Genesis, silently questioning.

Genesis seemed amused at the look, a slight smirk making its way into his expression. "I've never brought anyone down here before. I wouldn't have known not everyone would be permitted
entrance." Genesis paused, tilting his head ever so slightly. "I'm curious, though, as to what you see in the air. Not even dust motes drift through the shaft of sunlight."

From the entrance, Vincent suggested, "Perhaps you're hallucinating, Cloud."

Cloud sent a sharp look the gunman's way.

Vincent said, "You've already said you sometimes have visions of the Lifestream. Hallucinations are a plausible suggestion."

Unable to decide if the gunman was joking or not, Cloud turned his attention back to the cavern and resumed his slow progress toward the statue. With the hammering pulse in his chest and a tingling thrum in his skin, he stopped some ten feet from the statue, worried that if he got any closer, it would actually damage him somehow.

Cloud stared at the statue, the circle of stone cradled in its hands shimmering, deep shades of red swirling in its depths. He glanced at Genesis, who appeared to be watching him more than the statue. Cloud glanced back at his companions. Tseng was still prodding at the barrier but the other two remained as they were.

Eyes on the materia again, he voiced the question floating around in his head to no one in particular. "What now?"

The pulse and thrum of power in his body shivered and completely stopped. Cloud's eyes widened as the shimmer in the air stopped in the same moment. The disk the statue held turned gold and the air shimmered green with flowing bands of Lifestream and magic. Cloud squinted as the light grew brighter and brighter, finally bringing up a hand to shield his eyes. He would have shot a glance Genesis' way if he dared look away from the ever-brightening statue.

A sudden flare of light had Cloud flinching and squeezing his eyes shut. When the light died down, he cautiously peered around, ready to close his eyes again to keep the damage from that blinding light to a minimum. The ground glowed with a soft green Lifestream light. The ground faded to nothing about forty feet out. His comrades and the statue were nowhere to be seen. Genesis stood next to him and couldn't tear his eyes from the only other occupant of their space.

Where the goddess statue had been, stood an ethereal and tall woman, a warrior with her shield a good four feet across and an eight foot tall staff crested with a simple framework of wings. Her armored dress gleamed in the soft Lifestream light in golds and silvers; the blue accents and billowing cloths attached to the giant metal apparatus gave her the appearance of wings and made her look somehow made of the sky and about to take flight on her own all at the same time. Even the sprays of feathers and wings gleamed with their own metallic silver light.

Her yellow hair hung straight like threads of silk and was a much paler blond than Cloud's own hair. But her face was what held Cloud's attention. The solemn acceptance and warmth there, despite her lack of a smile, reminded him of Aerith, of a person with knowledge far deeper than their appearance would indicate, but who still felt each and every person deserved a chance.

Her eyes were a kind of crystal clear blue, green, and gray Cloud had never seen before, like materia in clarity. They held gentleness and authority all at once.

Cloud did, however, revise his opinion of her to include that she reminded him of the summons in Knights of the Round. Her armor was similar. That's when her eyes locked on his and she quirked a brow as though to ask, You would compare me to them?
On reflex, Cloud offered a small, sheepish smile, just a slight upturn to the corners of his mouth. When her expression softened, he froze. It was like she'd read his mind.

Both her eyebrows lifted slightly at that as though to ask, *You noticed, did you?*

Cloud half glanced at Genesis to see if he could spot some sort of reaction, the man was merely alternating between suspicion directed at Cloud and reverence toward Minerva.

Attention back on the goddess, Cloud watched her slightly tilt and angle her head away while her eyes remained on him as though to say, *Only you can hear me.*

Deciding there was no way he could actually be reading such pointed statements in her expressions, he figured she was somehow putting thoughts in his mind using a similar method to what Sephiroth had done to him. He thought back at her, *Why?*

With no pretext of simplicity, Minerva's thoughts began to unfurl in his mind. *I don't appreciate the comparison but I can understand why you might think of me as invasive.*

Scowl slowly creeping onto his features, he thought, *That doesn't answer my question.*

She closed her eyes for a moment before thinking, *Genesis is not ready to hear more than whispers. Before, in your past and his future, he embraced his Gift. Here, he has yet to learn what it is. You are the only one who can guide him now.*

Cloud's eyes widened. *You threw me ten years into the past so Genesis can learn his lesson early?*

One side of Minerva's mouth curled up as her eyebrows lifted. *No Cloud, I didn't bend time so you could be Genesis' mentor. He is simply one of the few other beings capable of metamorphosis like you, and as you are more advanced than he, you are well suited as an example.*

Cloud rubbed a hand across his forehead in attempt to alleviate the slight headache beginning to form there. *So babysitting Genesis is somehow a bonus. What am I really doing here in the past?*

Minerva lifted her head, face turning solemn again. *You are Gaia's catalyst for change. You're rewriting our future and healing the Planet before Jenova's legacy has a chance of irreparably damaging the Lifestream as happened before. If you happen to prevent a few more tragedies, all the better.*

Cloud didn't even bother pretending to be belligerent and threaten to let the Planet spiral into destruction. He knew he wouldn't just sit back and watch as Sephiroth went crazy and Hojo tried to experiment on everyone. Minerva obviously knew it, too, if the well-veiled smugness in her demeanor was any indication.

"Cloud," Genesis asked, obviously deciding they were already on a first name basis, "why are you and the goddess making faces at each other?"

Perhaps Genesis didn't know his last name. "We're having a conversation," Cloud said simply.

Choosing to take a different line of questioning with Minerva, Cloud thought, *What about Aerith then?*

Minerva's expression flattened immediately. *She sensed my alterations and followed you. I had already bent time back several years before I noticed her traveling in our wake. She would have damaged herself if left alone so I pulled her with us and kept her asleep while I changed you.*
Cloud straightened, his heart stuttering. *What do you mean you changed me?* The thought of more experiments was unsettling at best. The way Minerva's expression softened had him equally wary. Aerith always wore that expression when she was breaking bad news to him.

*You were not experimented on in that way, Cloud. The experiments Hojo performed and the partial healing the Cetra child performed left you fragmented and only partially purified.*

Partially purified probably had something to do with being cured of Geostigma, but he wasn't sure of the rest. Outright scowling, Cloud thought, *Fragmented?*

Minerva angled her head somewhat speculatively but didn't make him wait. *Hojo changed Jenova and grafted the changes onto you. You were a fragmented piece of Jenova just as Genesis is a fragmented piece. It was mere coincidence and caution that Hojo rearranged Jenova fragments into something that wouldn't degrade. While we traveled, while you slept, I used the fragments of both experiments and pure Jenova to repair you to something complete.*

Cloud's eyes widened. *Are you telling me that I'm a Jenova clone instead of a Sephiroth clone?*

A fleeting smile graced Minerva's lips. *You are more than Jenova. You still have the enhancements granted by both projects. I simply corrected the extremes of both experiments to provide the balance needed for healthy maintenance.*

"That's hardly simple," Cloud blurted aloud. He shook his head to dislodge thoughts of how he was now more of an alien freak than perhaps even Sephiroth. *Tell me about the purification,* he thought.

Minerva arched one elegant brow at him and his order but appeared willing to indulge him. *The Cetra child repaired the damage Jenova's taint inflicted, but Jenova cells remain foreign to creatures of our world. Were you to remain dead, you would add to the high levels of tainted Lifestream no matter your intentions. Now is not the time to discuss how I purified you. Suffice it to say, you are purely a creature of Gaia.*

Cloud rubbed at his forehead again. *Is that why I could see all this stuff no one else could, and get through barriers Genesis said were impassable?*

*In a manner of speaking,* came Minerva's enigmatic reply.

Realizing he probably wasn't going to get a straight answer, he abandoned that line of questioning. *But what about Genesis? You're so keen on my teaching him lessons but how am I supposed to do that if he's dead? Sure the degradation won't kill him for a few years but he's just going to get bitter and desperate the longer it goes. He's already upset that I blasted Jenova. He'll be more likely to attack me than hail me as some all-knowing sage.*

The corners of Minerva's mouth lifted in a slight smile. *Among the many abilities your new fate grants, one is the power to cure his degradation yourself. You will learn how before he gains an understanding of himself. When the time is right, you will grant him the health he deserves.*

Minerva's eyes left him then and, without being told, Cloud realized the discussion was over. She turned her gaze to Genesis, who stared at her with unmasked adulation. Then a warm smile slowly spread over the goddess' face. Genesis' eyes widened in shock.

Cloud rolled his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying not to imagine the undoubtedly sappy and literary things the two of them might be mentally spouting at each other.

*Cloud.*
His head snapped up at the thought, reflexively feeling guilty for a moment regarding his thoughts before he remembered he shouldn't regret flippant thoughts. Minerva's clear eyes were sizing him up again. At least she didn't seem perturbed by his random thoughts.

She released her hold on her staff, the weapon remaining standing on its own, and extended a hand toward Cloud, beckoning him forward. With the half confidence that she probably wouldn't attack him with her bare hand, he cautiously closed the distance between them. Her hand withdrew before he could even consider taking it, but then, her fingertips landed on his chest. He barely registered the light touch through his clothing.

Her voice no more than a whisper through his mind, Minerva thought, *I'll gift you a glimpse of the power you now hold. It will be up to you to draw it out of yourself again.*

Cloud took a deep breath, steeling himself for whatever the goddess planned to do. He just hoped it wasn't tentacles. He always wondered why Hojo never gave anyone tentacles. The Jenova mutants had them, but that hadn't been the mad doctor's doing. Wings wouldn't be so bad. But he would rather have two instead of the one all the other high-functioning experiments seemed to get. He could never figure out how they managed to not fly themselves in circles.

The barely perceptible scowl on Minerva's face broke his rather frivolous line of thought, so he waited. If he'd realized what she was going to do, he might have at least thought slightly more irreverent things. He would rather have high-tailed it out of there if given the chance.

In the same way that the pedestal outside Minerva's cave had set off silent thunder in his arm, whatever was happening now released an impact ten times worse, thrumming through his entire skeleton. He convulsed once as every muscle in his body tensed. Haltingly, both his hands jerked up to grasp her armor-clad wrist. She may as well have been made of the stone statue her living form replaced.

Cloud couldn't take a breath as the sound of waves crashed through his ears at a riotous volume. Every cell in his body vibrated in a way it never had when the old Sephiroth of the now past future tried to hammer his way into Cloud's skull.

The faint call he'd felt on first entering the Banora underground was a mere echo of what he felt now. The colors he saw warped, the darkness around them turning the pale green of the Lifestream, while the soft glow the ground previously had turned near blindingly bright. He wondered at how he was able to see. But Minerva still stood in front of him, clad in her blue, gold, and silver armor, but the difference took place in how those colors presented themselves. No longer were they the bright, metallic sheen of metal and dyed cloth. They glowed with their own light and depth, the blue like the sky, the silver like the moon, and the gold like the sun.

Her eyes held his attention though. Then shone more brightly than even the Tsviets of Deepground with their unnatural mako glows.

That's when Cloud realized he should probably pay attention to himself. His own skin had turned a rich, golden bronze and bore a faint glow all on its own. He wasn't sure what was going on with his hair, but the locks that usually framed his face and intruded on his peripheral vision lifted and felt like they were standing on end along with the rest of his hair.

If it were only his physical characteristics that were changing, Cloud could have written it off as mako poisoning or drugs in the air. But he felt his mind open up and he actually *heard* the voices of the Lifestream in a constant chatter. He knew if he focused on them he would be able to make out what they were saying, but he was more interested in the random spells he could feel bursting into being.
In his peripheral vision, a giant pyramid of caged lightning slowly rotated in place. Cloud knew his Enemy Skill materia wasn't firing, but that was a Trine spell all the same. Even though he couldn't see it, he could feel a whole slew of fire burst into being from a Flame Thrower spell, again untriggered Enemy Skill magic. Then dozens of rotating circles in a handful of different colors appeared to spin and twirl around him. That Dragon Force spell came from him too, but again, not from the Enemy Skill materia.

Due to everything else spinning around and flaring in the cavern, he almost didn't notice Genesis. Certainly, Cloud couldn't see the man, but he felt Genesis' blazing presence in the back of his mind. It was a far brighter sense than ever anyone ever inflicted on his mind except Sephiroth. If Cloud could close his eyes, he knew he could point straight at Genesis. What worried him more, though, was that he could feel the Jenova cells. If he could move, he would have gagged at the foul sensation.

Minerva hadn't been joking, at least, when she said Genesis needed to be purified. Cloud mentally shuddered at the thought of feeling Sephiroth through his heightened awareness. According to what Minerva had already said, anyone with Jenova cells except Cloud was impure and not even Genesis came as close to Sephiroth when it came to the amount of Jenova that had been integrated into their body.

Then the feelings began to fade. His skin resumed its paler tone while his hair fell back down to frame his face. Minerva looked simply elegant as she had before before beginning to fade herself. The cave came back into focus, the statue looming up where Minerva had been.

Then Cloud's legs gracelessly gave out.
Jenova's Shrine?

His vision blurred as he crumpled backward and hit the ground, his head banging rather hard. When his fuzzy vision came into focus, it was Genesis bending over him and thumbing open his eyelids. But then Vincent was there too, eyes narrowed as he checked Cloud's pulse.

Cloud heard Genesis' voice, but couldn't make out the words, as the roaring in his ears hadn't died down much. He did, at least, catch the end of Vincent's reply.

"—disappeared, and I had no problems with a barrier."

"The same goes for me in regards to the barrier," Tseng said from somewhere he couldn't see.

Cloud blinked rapidly, breathing a bit stilted.

Oddly enough, Genesis pulled one of his own gloves off and pressed his hand to Cloud's forehead. Then he said, "He's not running a fever. Perhaps whatever the Goddess did was relatively taxing."

"Goddess?" Vincent repeated. "We saw no one in the cavern with the both of you."

Genesis stared at the gunman a moment before saying, "Perhaps the Goddess thought you weren't ready for her appearance."

Cloud jerked a little, trying to make himself move, and emitted a breathless grunt at the echoing ache it sent through him. At least he had the others' attention again.

Jaw aching, he managed to grind out, "That was worse than the pedestal."

Genesis appeared momentarily shocked, but the expression quickly disappeared. Tseng and Nanaki were out of sight but the barest of smiles flit over Vincent's face.

Vincent said, "I assume something similar to what happened at the entrance to this room happened when you approached the statue."

Cloud tried to nod but his neck muscles only spasmed in response. "I think Minerva drugged me."

Genesis' eyebrows lifted, but the question came from Nanaki, who seemed to be standing somewhere near Tseng out of sight. "Would the scent of intoxicant not linger in the air? I smell nothing here now."

"But at the end there," Cloud said a bit more smoothly, as the ability to move properly began returning to his limbs, "everything started turning bizarre colors and I was thinking about how Minerva was the sky, the moon, and the sun all at once. The air turned green and everything was glowing."

Cloud tried to sit up, but couldn't quite manage on his own. Vincent slipped an arm beneath his shoulders and helped him up.

"Though I can't comment on your thoughts regarding a person I never saw," Vincent said, hints of amusement coloring his tone, "certain things did turn strange colors."

"Was the air really green?" Cloud asked, one hand on his forehead, massaging it in small circles.

"No," Genesis said, "but you turned an interesting shade of golden bronze."
Cloud's gaze whipped sideways to stare at the former Shinra commander incredulously. The man seemed torn between amusement and confusion.

"Might I add," Nanaki began.

Cloud twisted to find Tseng and Nanaki only a few feet behind him.

"Your hair turned an interesting shade of pale green."

Cloud's eyes widened.

Nanaki nodded and continued, "It gave off a noticeable glow here in the dimly lit cavern, but I suspect in direct sunlight it would have been white."

"Like Sephiroth's?" Cloud asked dumbly.

It was Tseng who said, "The general's hair is silver, or gray if you prefer, and not white." The Turk paused. "And I can honestly admit I've never seen his hair glow."

Vincent said, "The luminescence reminded me of a much dimmer version of the mako trees in the forest around the Cetra capital."

Genesis narrowed his eyes and, apparently, decided it was time to change the subject. "Are you going to share with me what the Goddess told you when you were making faces at her?"

"My hair was glowing," Cloud said flatly.

"Might I remind you," Vincent said, "that your skin was a rather bright gold."

Cloud groaned, burying his face in his hands. "If Zack ever sees something like that, I'll never hear the end of the chocobo jokes."

"What did the Goddess tell you?" Genesis asked again.

Cloud didn't fully lift his head but stared sideways at Genesis. The former commander managed to hide his emotions well behind that mask of a sneering smirk, but this close, Cloud could see the worry lines. He had the rather untimely thought that Genesis might not take kindly to being told he was wrinkling.

Cloud could tell, though, what Genesis really wanted to be asking instead of his vague questions. But Genesis probably wouldn't outright ask for the sake of his personal pride.

With a pang of empathy, Cloud resolved to hold as little back from Genesis in certain respects as possible. Cloud had hated it when people left him in the dark and he imagined Genesis was no different.

"I have no idea how I'm supposed to do it," Cloud said, "but she told me that I could heal you myself and I'd learn how before it was time to cure your degradation."

Hope flared in Genesis' eyes, only to be quickly replaced successively by anger then suspicion. Genesis pushed smoothly to his feet. "My friend, the fates are cruel. Would you have me beg for your favor then?"

Cloud scowled and shook Vincent's steadying hand off to climb to his feet. Glaring hard at Genesis, Cloud actually went so far as to jab an angry finger at the man's chest. "I'll cure you as soon as I figure out how, Genesis."
Surprise flashed over the former commander's face before he flattened his expression.

Cloud added, "I won't make you jump through unreasonable hoops to stay alive." Cloud turned away from the main and headed for the exit, brushing past Nanaki and a confused looking Tseng. With every step he took, the ache in his bones faded slightly. He heard his comrades' footsteps behind him, and a little further back, Genesis'.

No one said anything on the climb back out of the caves. Cloud thought it was just as well. He had a difficult enough time accepting what Minerva told him and what she'd done to him and didn't fancy divulging it all when he'd really rather take a nap. He was just relieved that not a single monster attacked on the trek upward. Perhaps they'd all realized with their animalistic little brains that messing with Cloud would be the last thing they did.

Fortunately, on reaching the surface, he could further put off talking to anyone as Dio had left three emails for him. The first, telling Cloud about Shinra interrogating him several days earlier and Dio having to admit that Cloud's activities must not be illegal because there were no arrests. The second to say he'd reached Wutai that morning. And the third to say that Lord Godo Kisaragi was open to the proposition and was willing to begin negotiations but refused to agree completely until all business partners could be introduced.

Cloud sighed and rolled his shoulders. He couldn't procrastinate beginning things with Avalanche. But he needed to move quickly on things in Wutai as well. He really needed a larger party than just the four of them, one of which couldn't be entirely trusted to run errands on his own. Vincent could certainly handle solo missions but wouldn't be able to do what Cloud needed at the moment for the sole reason of his not so subtle appearance.

Cloud scrolled through his contacts and called Dio. It only rang twice before the man picked up. "Where have you been, boy? I've tried calling."

Cloud turned his back on the others so he could focus on the call. "I was in a meeting. And don't complain, Dio, you've only been trying to get a hold of me since this morning."

Dio huffed on the other end of the line. "Lord Kisaragi is a patient man but it's insulting that both of us aren't here."

Cloud ran a hand back through his hair. "I can make it out one week from today."

"A week? These people of Wutai are a ceremonial lot. Do you really want to make them wait like that?"

"I'll take that long to reach an agreement right? I'll be there at the end for the contract. I trust you won't make a deal unprofitable for either of us. Besides, I'm on the wrong continent to come quickly. And I have to make another stop before I can come."

Dio laughed, his mirth booming through the PHS at near deafening volume. "You've got your fingers in more than one pie, haven't you, boy."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

"I can stall Lord Kisaragi until then. I can start sending hiring representatives out to get construction workers. You wouldn't have a hand in that would you?"

"Not exactly," Cloud said, but it did present an opportunity to have Dio take care of one of his problems. "But I do have another odd request."
"Weirder than that weapon maker?"

"I want you to hire the whole town of Gongaga."

"Why?" Dio sounded more incredulous than anything else.

"It's very important, Dio. I don't care what you have to pay them. Get even the old and retired people out of there. Hire them as door greeters or as table monitors to make sure people don't take more than their fair share of juice. Buy their houses and get them out to Wutai."

"You wouldn't happen to know if anything was going to happen to the Gongaga reactor would you?" Dio asked flatly.

"It's…damaged," Cloud said cautiously. "Shinra Company doesn't want to repair it because they think it's an acceptable flaw." Cloud had absolutely no idea if that was true. For all he knew, the company didn't realize anything was wrong until the reactor blew up and killed half the town's populace. "It's on my tab anyway," Cloud continued. "The southern part of Wutai is hot and the Gongaga people are more used to that than people pulled from Nibelheim. Everyone in Costa del Sol already works for the tourist industry. We don't need entertainers until there's a place to entertain in. Everyone in Rocket Town is working on the twenty-six rocket. You could pull from Kalm but they're already doing reconstruction there."

"Midgar and Junon both have a sizable work force, boy," Dio said, humor back in his voice.

"And I'm sure the entire populace of Gongaga isn't enough for the construction team. Just get them first."

Cloud heard Dio sigh on the other end. "Fine, Cloud. I'll hire the entire town. But you'd better be here in a week. Were there any other odd requests?"

"Give Yuffie Kisaragi my PHS number."

"The Wutai princess?"

"Yes."

"Why would you give that little brat the ability to call you whenever she wants, boy?"

"Just give it to her." Satisfied they'd finished the conversation, Cloud hung up and replaced the PHS in a pocket.

"Cloud," Vincent asked, "why were you using your Enemy Skill materia down in that cavern?"

Cloud turned back to find his three traveling companions and Genesis watching him. Figuring now was as good a time as any, he popped the yellow materia out of his bangle. "Nanaki," he said, tossing the piece to have the giant cat catch it in his mouth. Nanaki held up a leg and the materia disappeared into an empty slot in his bangle.

Concentrating, Cloud tried to replicate the feeling he'd had when Minerva had been doing whatever she'd been doing. He held out a hand for focus, aiming at the charred remains of a dumbapple tree. It was easier than he expected to call out the flames that flew over the ground to impact his target.

"That was Flame Thrower," Tseng pointed out, disbelief tainting his voice.

Cloud nodded. "When those spells were firing off, it wasn't channeling through the materia. It seems
I am an Enemy Skill materia." He sighed. "I need to talk to Aerith about Minerva."

"Are we returning to Midgar?" Nanaki asked, subtly directing the conversation away from Cloud's newfound enemy skill absorption properties.

Cloud rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. "Yes. And I need to do something about Avalanche sooner. I shouldn't be putting off dealing with them. I've been thinking about it, and I don't expect they'll attack Junon. I've messed with enough of their plans that they've got something new in the works. When I was an infantryman, there were a lot more Avalanche attacks than we've been hearing about. And they haven't even gone after Aerith. Besides, all I need is to get close enough to that girl leading them that I can get the Zirconiade piece. We don't have to know where any of the others are if we just get that one."

Vincent nodded. "And that one missing piece saves the entirety of sector 8 and leaves the Turk organization intact."

"Wait," Genesis said, jumping into their conversation as he tried to evenly distribute his glare. "Are you part of Shinra Company or aren't you? It doesn't take a genius to realize you're the ones that have been blowing up and pillaging Shinra facilities."

Cloud's eyes narrowed.

Genesis asked, "If you're the terrorists then why are you intentionally saving the Turks and not assaulting Midgar? If this Zirconiade you speak of can destroy an entire sector then why not use it yourself?"

Cloud's expression hardened. "I'm trying to remove the corrupt from power, not murder innocent people."

A strange look passed over Genesis' face. In a voice entirely lacking accusation, Genesis quoted, "My friend, do you fly away now? To a world that abhors you and I?"

Cloud scowled. "I hope you're not implying some rubbish about not saving people who wouldn't accept someone with a few experimental mutations."

If the slight tilting of Vincent's head was any indication, the gunman seemed to be enjoying the exchange. Tseng's expression was flat, so he was probably confused. Nanaki had sat some time ago and his gaze flicked between the two men like he was watching some sort of gaming match.

A smirk crept onto Genesis' lips. "All that awaits you is a somber morrow, no matter where the winds may blow."

"That's the biggest load of chocobo shit I've ever heard," Cloud said, distinctly unamused.

Genesis' eyes widened.

Cloud said, "If you tried even just a little, I'm sure you could have found allies. Sephiroth at least would have listened. Instead, you just ran off with a chunk of the army. If you invade with a bunch of your brain dead copies and start attacking everyone in sight, of course they're going to send the Soldiers and Turks on you. What exactly were you planning to do with all those attacks anyway?"

Seeming to compose himself, Genesis said, "I was seeking retribution against the graceless fools who wronged me. And in case you were unaware, Sephiroth is more of a monster than I am." Genesis' eyes narrowed. "Though I suspect he may be more human than you."
"Mock me all you want," Cloud said. Genesis' insults didn't hold a candle to Sephiroth's anyway. "But I have to ask what you planned to do after you got your so-called revenge. It's not like it would keep you from degrading. Not even Jenova could have stopped that."

"But I'll never know that for sure," Genesis said quickly. "You deprived me of that experiment quite efficiently." The smile that crept over the former general's face seemed as strained as it did condescending. "It's also a pity you deprived Sephiroth of meeting his mother. I'm sure he would have liked to know where he came from."

Vincent quirked a brow and Nanaki's tail whipped through the charred dirt behind him.

Cloud scoffed, the sound wiping the smug expression right off of Genesis' face. "Jenova is no more Sephiroth's mother than Gillian Hewley was yours."

Genesis' face darkened thunderously as he smoothly intoned, "Don't you dare cast aspersions at my origins."

"Then don't cast aspersions at Sephiroth's," Cloud's mouth twisted around the ridiculous word. Who said aspersions anyway? "Sephiroth isn't that alien parasite's child any more than you are. And just for your information, I told Sephiroth his real mother's name the last time I saw him. Gaia, he was defending Sephiroth now. The world must be coming to an end."

That strange look passed over Genesis' face again. Cloud clenched his teeth and turned away. He didn't see a need to remain. His companions would follow without asking.

"The Goddess told me to listen to you, Cloud Strife" Genesis said, his voice easily picked up by Cloud's ears despite the growing distance and lack of increasing volume.

Keeping his voice level, without turning back or slowing, Cloud said, "Then get rid of all the Genesis copies too brain dead to think for themselves even if they were cured of their degradation." He scowled. "Don't tell anyone who I am. And bring me Hollander."

Genesis didn't follow Cloud or the others out of the ruined town.

* * *

"Nothing in Dio's behavior indicates he's doing anything but negotiating for land," Cissnei said, obviously nearing the end of her report. "We've pulled the team for lack of anything else to observe in Wutai and a disinclination for making Lord Kisaragi suspicious."

Zack watched the Turk woman retake her seat. She must have kicked Reno under the table because the other Turk suddenly straightened and appeared to be paying attention.

Reno said, "The spies in Wutai will watch 'im for any lies. Looks like Zack's buddy is just gettin' into some kind of investment work after all."

Zack was both relieved and confused. Cloud could hardly attack Shinra by going into entertainment investing, but that still left the fact that Cloud was going into entertainment investing. Mentally, Zack brushed it off, but made a note to himself to ask Cloud for free passes for whatever it was he and Dio were up to. No point in having a friend with access to something like that if he didn't at least ask. And it wasn't like he would want to play without Cloud's presence, too. Zack would talk Cloud into throwing a party at the earliest opportunity.

"We also have additional information on Nibelheim," Vice President Shinra said. He tapped a closed file on the table in front of him.
Zack shot a glance at Sephiroth. The general's expression had tightened in a predictable manner. "What might that be?"

Zack held his breath, silently praying that the others haven't discovered what he, Sephiroth, and Tuesti were doing. As it was, the Head of Urban Development didn't so much as blink.

The Vice President said, "We don't wish to cause any alarm, but we believe that a woman named Jenova was being stored in Nibelheim."

Sephiroth's chin lifted slightly.

Zack asked, "Stored? Like a dead body?" Bewildered, he couldn't understand why they might have been keeping gooey tonberry corpses in either the reactor or the manor.

"It would be wise," Vice President Shinra said to Zack, with a pointed look at Sephiroth, "to speak with a little more decorum as Jenova was the general's mother."

Zack stiffened.

With a bit of aloof chill, Sephiroth said, "So I have always been told."

Even more confused, Zack tried to simply keep his expression flat. Either the vice president and the others didn't know the gooey tonberry might not be Sephiroth's mother or they were feeding Sephiroth the same lies the president and Hojo would.

"So you have been told?" Shinra asked, curiosity obvious in his tone.

Without missing a beat, Sephiroth said, "It's difficult to ascribe a matronly role to a name I've ever only heard in passing." He paused, eyes narrowing slightly. "I might also remind you that Hojo is the one who supplied my file with data on my origins."

"Of course," the vice president said, resuming his pleasantly diplomatic mantle, curiosity sliding away. "I see you've outraced me in sharing that conclusion. We've already begun compiling data provided by the professor and are planning an extensive fact checking project to sort out his fiction from our fact."

Sephiroth had no reply for the vice president, and it sort of seemed to put Shinra out. The vice president slid the file across the table. "We've been able to glean some information on how Jenova was being stored based on mechanical schematics. Might you be interested in seeing how she was housed?"

Without reply, Sephiroth pulled the file closer. Zack leaned toward the general so he could read while Sephiroth did. Most of it was technical jargon he didn't much comprehend, way far above the basics he was familiar with. But the schematics bits, those Zack recognized.

"It looks kinda like they built a Jenova shrine in the reactor," Zack said, faint creases marring his brow.

"Look here," Sephiroth said, pointing, "and here. The corpse was integrated into the machinery. The hydraulics looped through the body and inner workings of the female facsimile then circulated down into the reactor."

"They were processing her?" Zack asked.

Sephiroth nodded. "This apparatus in its stomach forced highly concentrated and toxic mako into her
and withdrew it once saturated with the corpse's genetic material." Sephiroth gestured airily at the open file. "The genetically saturated toxic mako is distributed to more than a dozen different refinement stations and modified for various unspecified purposes. Each modification apparatus is numbered with alphanumerics but no purposes are listed."

"That sounds," Zack paused, "scary." He found himself imagining Cloud being on the receiving end of a dozen different kinds of mako injections responsible for spontaneous growth, memory loss, and encapsulating unwitting donors' memories.

Zack's jaw clenched and his eyes narrowed as the world took on a faintly blue tinge when the mako in his eyes brightened.

If Cloud, who was only a teenager, had been put through who knew what kinds of experiments, and he had something in common with Sephiroth, then Zack didn't even want to know what Sephiroth had been put through, as the general was a good deal older than Cloud.

"Zack," Sephiroth said, voice barely a whisper, "calm down."

Zack took a deep, shuddering breath. He forced his clenched fists to relax, spreading fingers out to lie flat on the table. As the blue receded from his vision, he circumspectly eyed the other briefing room occupants. The vice president stared at him levelly while Tuesti looked worried and the Turks appeared nervous. Even Rude didn't look completely calm. Of course it was hard to tell what Kunsel might be thinking beneath his helmet and Sephiroth just seemed to be waiting to see what Zack would do.

"Might you care to explain your stress, Fair?" Shinra asked.

"If Hojo says Jenova is Sephiroth's mom," Zack said, voice flat, "then he probably injected the general with some of that shit." He started to tense up again as he tried to stare a hole through the schematics laid out in front of Sephiroth. "Because of the possible connections, that means Cloud's probably been shot full of this shit, too."

"Zack," Sephiroth said again.

It was enough reminder for Zack to bring his emotions under better control.

"Damn," Reno said, eying Zack, "I forget how much of a big, badass, angry First Class Soldier you can be."

"All my First Class Soldiers are quite capable," Sephiroth stated, condescension tainting his voice.

"Yeah," Reno protested, "but Zack is like a big, fluffy puppy most of the time and it's easy to forget he has a brain for anything besides play."

The words stung, more so than Zack would have expected. Reno probably didn't mean it the way the words came out, but still.

"Optimism and energy is not incompetence and superficiality," Sephiroth said, eyes narrowed slightly with a hint of a smirk tilting his mouth.

Zack couldn't help sporting his own, tempered smirk at the compliment. He was still upset about the implications in the file, but Sephiroth understanding Zack's reaction and even backing him up in front of the Turks and the vice president was quite heartening.

"This was all in the Nibelheim reactor at the time of destruction?" Sephiroth asked.
Zack tried to focus on the discussion rather than what might have happened to Cloud and Sephiroth.

"Yep," Reno said. "Hadn't been moved in years before that asshole blew it up."

Zack couldn't help but think that CS Delivery would be amused to know the Turk had given him an expletive for a nickname.

"And the manor?" Sephiroth asked.

"Lab facilities squirreled away in a hidden basement," Reno said.

Vice President Shinra said, "It's reasonable to assume experiments involving the different batches of Jenova suffused mako were used there. We haven't discovered schematics as of yet but supply requisitions list containers used for Soldier treatments, but they were sent long before Shinra Company began infusing Soldiers with mako."

Zack's eyes widened. No wonder CS Delivery wanted to blow all that shit up. "So there might be those different kinds of mako floating around in all of us Soldiers?"

"It would explain rather peculiar things," Sephiroth said, frowning.

"Such as?" Shinra prompted.

"It would mean all Soldiers have something in common besides mako." Sephiroth arched one brow. "I'm not the only one who could call Jenova mother."

"Gross," Zack blurted, utterly disgusted, feeling as though he wanted to puke just to try and make himself feel better. The gooey tonberry might be floating around inside him, too.

Ignoring Zack's outburst, Sephiroth said, "It would also indicate that CS Delivery has a great deal of this Jenova riddled mako in him as well. As he is keeping his identity secret, he could be one of the early experiments, someone that escaped. The red clad gunman has clearly been experimented on as well."

"Why is it clear that CS Delivery is a recipient of Jenova mako?" Tuesti asked.

"When he came for his visit, all the Soldiers felt his presence," Sephiroth said. "No one else felt a thing. I highly doubt he has some kind of electronic transmitter capable of producing paranoia in those possessing Jenova mako. People who've undergone extensive experiments have developed rather unique talents. Take the Subject P missions the Soldier department gets. Those are psychically located energy spots. If CS Delivery has as high of levels of mako enhancements as I suspect, any sort of latent psychic abilities could be channeled into activating a link with anyone else genetically attuned to him."

"Wouldn't that mean he'd be able to feel Fair's young friend?" Tuesti asked.

"Yes," the general said. "Considering the level of mako enhancements Cloud Strife has, there's no way he wouldn't react to activating the Jenova mako. I've interviewed most of my Soldiers and the higher ranked Soldiers felt CS Delivery's presence more keenly. Zack is the only one whose experience parallels my own. There were few differences between what he felt and what I felt. I imagine Strife's experience would be identical to mine if subjected to whatever CS Delivery did." Sephiroth paused. "It also means that Strife probably has the mako levels required to activate this link."

"Is this something you would be willing to test?" Shinra asked.
Zack's frown matched Kusel's and Sephiroth's.

"How do you mean?" Sephiroth asked.

"If Strife has the necessary levels, do you not think you would as well?" Shinra clasped his hands together and tilted his head slightly. "If you could replicate the, shall we call it a declaration of presence, then would it not lead to you being able to block him? I can't imagine paranoia to be something useful to be distracted by during an unpleasant altercation."

Surprise flashed across Sephiroth's face before a smooth mask of professionalism covered it. "I think that would be extremely unwise, Vice President."

Zack eyebrows slowly climbed. The general had certainly switched over to his professional army leader mode.

"Really?" Shinra asked, slight confusion and vague curiosity in his tone. "I'm surprised to hear that."

"I don't think I should be attempting something like this without training and I can hardly ask Hojo's department for telepathy lessons without exciting comment." Mouth curling in distaste, Sephiroth said, "Hojo would no doubt refuse the Science Department's help unless given an in-depth explanation and it would draw the president's attention if you tried to overrule Hojo's demands. Aside from the political ramifications, I can imagine how badly scenarios might go should I attempt to experiment on my own. If something went wrong, what if I was unable to turn off that sense of paranoia in someone else? What if the prickling in the skin is an actual sensation instead of psychosomatic? I could do serious damage if I don't immediately stumble on the proper control."

The surprise on the vice president's face lasted too long for Zack to believe it genuine. It was like he wanted all of them to see he hadn't thought about it before.

"In that case," the vice president said, "do you think it possible to ever try replicating what CS Delivery did?"

Expression betraying nothing, Sephiroth said, "I will study what CS Delivery is doing when he next uses the ability. I believe it gives him a sense of location as well. He stopped making his presence known when I exited the Shinra building."

Reno's eyes lit up. "Is that how that asshole is avoidin' Soldier patrols when he's in Midgar? He feels the Soldiers comin'?"

Sephiroth nodded. "In all likelihood."

Zack smiled. If CS Delivery knew when Soldiers were coming, Zack would just have to do everything in his power to sneak up on Cloud and get an unsurprised reaction. Not only would he get to scare his friend as often as possible, it might help prove Cloud's innocence.

"What's with the shit eatin' grin?" Reno demanded, making every gaze fall on Zack.

Zack said, "I've got a plan."
"I was brought accidentally?" Aerith asked.

Cloud nodded. "She said you followed me and when she noticed, she put you to sleep. There was some talk of damage if she didn't."

Aerith nodded. "Perhaps that's why I don't remember following you. If it was damaging, I might have destroyed some of my memories." She probably would never have said something like that if Elmyra was likely to overhear them. As it was, the woman had gone out for groceries.

Scowling at the still full teacup on the table in front of him, Cloud said, "I think Minerva knocked me unconscious before she ever grabbed me. I was heading downstairs for breakfast before I woke up in this time."

"If she was changing you like you've described," Aerith said, "I think she would have needed you asleep."

"What of Genesis?" Vincent asked.

Cloud turned his attention to the gunman. "I don't think Minerva told him much and he's certainly not from the future."

Nanaki, from his customary place under the stairs, asked, "If Genesis is destined to learn a valuable lesson, and had, in your future, why did Minerva not simply pull him from the future alongside you?"

"That," Cloud started, "is a very good question."

Cloud had absolutely no idea. Why hadn't Minerva simply pulled back his entire team plus WRO members and allies like Bugenhagen? Sure the old man was dead in the future and even if Aerith had forced her way back, Minerva certainly hadn't forbidden the trek so other dead people could have been brought back as well. If anyone deserved to be brought back, it was Zack and Aerith. Perhaps Zack hadn't had the same kind of power as Aerith, and he hadn't managed to follow because he wasn't Cetra.

"Maybe," Aerith said, "Minerva needed to conserve her energy to travel backward and to change in you whatever she changed." The young woman smiled. "It's not every day a person turns into Enemy Skill materia."

"Or has glowing hair," Nanaki offered.

Vincent murmured, "Or has chocobo gold colored skin."

Cloud groaned and let his head fall back to stare at the ceiling. Even Vincent was getting in on the mocking. It was only a matter of time before Tseng shook off his confusion and started harassing Cloud, too.

"Can we ignore that for the time being?" Cloud asked. "I don't know what she did to turn me weird colors and I don't know how to do it myself."

"Bioluminescent fungus," Vincent offered quietly. The gunman's expression remained utterly devoid of emotion, but it didn't take a genius to realize the man was messing with Cloud.
Cloud glared at him. Aerith's expression looked very smooth, and Nanaki promptly closed his eyes and laid down, pretending to immediately drop off to sleep.

"Strife," Tseng said, tone actually serious, shifting the atmosphere. "Do you know what Commander Rhapsodos is going to do from here?"

Cloud knew what he hoped Genesis would do. "No. I never actually met him before the caverns." He shrugged. "At least not when I wasn't in a mako addiction stupor. I've got a vague memory of a thought Zack had about not letting letting Genesis eat my hair, but it doesn't make much sense to me." Cloud shook his head. "I just have stories from the Turks and a few snippets of memory from Zack. I know he had something to do with Deepground, but I never knew if it was before or after his degradation was cured."

Tseng frowned. "Did you lie to Commander Rhapsodos then? You know how to cure his degradation?"

"Minerva did it in my future," Cloud said with a scowl. "I don't know what she did and no one else ever told me. Zack might have known, but it never came up in any vision he gave me. Sketchy reports have him showing up after Omega was defeated, but nothing terribly reliable, and no one seems to think he did anything but dramatically stare at things and make off with Weiss' body."

"And this time," Aerith said cheerfully, "Minerva has set Cloud the task of healing Genesis."

Turning her warm smile on Cloud again, she said, "Perhaps she's decided to take you on as an apprentice."

Mildly uncomfortable with the thought, Cloud waved a hand in Vincent's direction. "Vincent would be better for that. He has Chaos."

Vincent's expression darkened, and Aerith laid a hand on Cloud's arm. "Chaos is destruction, Cloud," she said softly. "You know that. Minerva doesn't need destruction for this. She needs a catalyst and she says that catalyst is you."

"What if I don't want the responsibility?" Cloud asked, swishing the dregs in the bottom of his cup around. "What if I'd rather let someone else save the world for a change?"

Aggravatingly enough, Aerith's smile widened into a grin. "Then you're doing a horrible job at working to get what you want."

* * *

"Are you sure this is a good idea," Nanaki murmured. "That was the fifth man to try buying me from you in the last twenty minutes."

"We'll just keep telling them no," Cloud said, voice equally low.

Cloud subtly directed Vincent and Nanaki to turn with him down an alley to cut to the next street to avoid another Soldier patrol. It seemed that even with the depleted Turk and army numbers from the Junon raid, Shinra Company still hadn't let up on the heightened patrols in the slums.

The three of them browsed the open-air stalls in Wall Market. Cloud couldn't very well start asking around about rival terrorist cells, but at least the one he wanted to attract would recognize him. Avalanche probably had spies all over Midgar as they liked to ambush lone Soldiers and troopers.

"Anything yet?" Vincent asked.
"Spies, probably Deepground, but no one else," Cloud said. "Nanaki?" he prompted.

"If it's Deepground," Nanaki said, "I can't separate their scent from the rest of the mako in Midgar air."

"But we have passed spies," Vincent said calmly.

Vincent had recognized careful watchers in the midday crowds and shared his observations. By the time the three of them made a full circuit of Wall Market, the so-called spies were nowhere to be seen. Cloud had hoped that meant they would soon be approached, but a half hour later, still nothing but the random outcropping of men trying to buy Nanaki as a pet.

"Do you think they're trying to get everyone to buy Nanaki?" Cloud asked.

"Possibly," Vincent said. Nanaki didn't offer his opinion on the matter.

Three avoided patrols later, as they were cutting through a short lane between two market streets, two men and a woman blocked the path leading to the next street. Cloud didn't have to glance back to know three more people blocked their return path.

"Our boss would like to speak with you," one of the men in front of them said.

Cloud paid careful attention to the six people around them, taking note of their edginess. They wouldn't be that tense if they had more people waiting in the background. They were all in civilian clothes, but Cloud easily spied the outline of guns beneath their jackets.

"Who's your boss?" Cloud asked bluntly.

"Introductions on arrival," the Avalanche member said flatly.

"Is there not some human tenet," Nanaki asked, "that claims one should never go unfamiliar places with strangers?"

The six Avalanche members shifted, hands moving for closer access to weapons. Cloud remained loose, head tilted slightly to one side as he eyed the ground in front of them. He noted that Vincent hadn't made to unholster his weapon so the gunner didn't feel particularly threatened either.

"Do you know who we are?" Cloud asked, eyes narrowing behind his goggles.

The six of them shuffled about again, this time more uncomfortably. One of the men in front of them edged back a couple inches.

"You three are the ones openly attacking Shinra Company," the one Avalanche operative said. "You've been blowing up reactors and raiding." He paused. "Our boss wants to get in touch with whoever you work for and figured a meeting with you three would be the fastest way to do that."

Perhaps the man thought Cloud more likely to follow orders if given more bits of truth.

Expression still blank, Cloud said, "I don't work for anyone."

The tension in the air grew palpable as hands actually touched weapons. The Avalanche members didn't draw them, they were still in too crowded of an area with people strolling idly past both entrances to the path between streets.

Cloud had left all his swords at Aerith's for that very reason. Too many people. Besides, short of Sephiroth or a Tsviet, nothing could take him down. He was too fast. And he still had most of his
materia. Plus an extra spot where he no longer had to carry Enemy Skill.

The Avalanche lackey who'd been speaking said, "Fuhito wants to speak with you." Perhaps he thought the name of his leader would induce Cloud into compliance.

At least now Cloud knew which branch of Avalanche he was dealing with. He'd have gone if it was Elfé asking. He'd have considered going if it was Shears asking. But Cloud wasn't going peaceably anywhere near Fuhito. And it was too early to declare war on Avalanche. Besides, going to a meeting with Fuhito, into that madman's own territory, was as stupid as taking an invitation for tea from Hojo.

Cloud said, "Go ahead and tell Fuhito that if he wants to talk, he should come talk to me himself. I don't take invites from peons." Even Rufus would know better than to try and ask for an audience with anything less than a Turk or First Class Soldier. Cloud despised political maneuvering but still recognized when he wasn't being taken seriously.

The Avalanche fighters shuffled uneasily again, but didn't leave.

Cloud dropped his tone. "Do you really think the six of you can take out the three of us when we already took on the Turk department?"

The one who'd been speaking only hesitated a moment before saying, "We'll give Fuhito your message." Then all six Avalanche members disappeared among the rest of the milling market goers.

Cloud and the other two waited in the alley for several minutes, just to make sure the Avalanche fighters wouldn't return. Something stirred on the edges of Cloud's perception. It was familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. It was jagged like Genesis, but subtler, actually feeling more natural than anything with Jenova cells had ever felt. It still felt remarkably unnatural, but far less so than anything else he had ever felt.

Of course, he'd never been able to tell what his own genetic makeup felt like to others with Jenova cells. Even if he had known, it would probably be different now that Minerva claimed to have "purified" him.

"Signs of anyone else?" Vincent murmured.

"If I had to guess," Cloud started, "I'd say a Tsviet is observing."

"What makes you say that?" Nanaki asked. "I had not thought they received Genesis' cells until after his defeat at Zack's hands."

Cloud stared absently in Nanaki's direction, trying to get a better feel for the vague impression. "That's when they got Genesis' mutated Jenova mako after Minerva purified him. I'm reasonably sure they shared genetic traits with him before that." Cloud paused. "I can't even tell if this is Jenova cells I'm feeling, only that it's similar to Genesis."

"Could you be sensing them as an extension of him regardless of the Jenova factor?" Vincent asked.

Cloud nodded. It made more sense than him randomly being able to locate anyone with high levels of mako in them.

"If we stand here much longer," Nanaki said dryly, "we're sure to gather unwanted attention. You should run your next errand. We'll slip back to the house and retrieve your change of clothes."

"You're both coming afterward?" Cloud asked, curious as to why it wouldn't be only Vincent again.
Nanaki nodded. "The place you described seems to pose interesting navigational issues for a quadruped. I wish to try my skills."

Cloud shrugged and separated from the two. If Nanaki wanted to try navigating ladders and air ducts, Cloud wouldn't stop him. A smile flickered into place as he remembered the giant Guardian of the Planet crammed into a Shinra trooper uniform and wobbling around on only his hind legs. Nanaki had always been proud to so easily pass for a human, but Cloud thought the ship's crew thought themselves drunk or hallucinating and chose to ignore his friend.

A slight smirk ghosted across his face as the source of this new sensation followed him, seeming to leave Vincent and Nanaki alone. At least whoever was following Cloud didn't seem likely to interfere as they kept their distance, even following him up through the plate.

The shadowing was somewhat impressive all by itself as Cloud moved through places he knew he couldn't be seen in. It gave him the inkling that perhaps he might not be the only one who could sense the other's presence. But as his watcher wasn't making a move to interfere, Cloud decided to let whomever it was alone.

Above the plate, Cloud slipped around the outside of Shinra headquarters like a spector. If the lack of any response to his proximity was any indication, they no idea he was there. He kept his presence tightly leashed so as not to inadvertently alert Sephiroth of his arrival. He made his way to the stairwell entrance and went inside without a second thought. The place was just as easy to get into as it had been last time, and just as full of trash.

It didn't take long to sprint up the stairs as far as they would take him. Rather than tempt the elevators, he slipped out of the stairwell on the fifty-ninth floor and immediately crawled into the ventilation system. Cloud was utterly filthy by the time he reached the sixty-sixth floor. He wasn't really all that worried about the dust on his clothes, but smears of dirt on his exposed arms and the smears on his cheeks would definitely need cleaning.

As soon as Cloud found the office, he waited in the air vent for his target. Mentally, he reasoned that he shouldn't refer to Rufus as his target. He only wanted to talk with the vice president after all.

Cloud waited a half hour before Rufus entered his own office, Reno in tow, Rude nowhere in sight. Rufus situated himself behind his desk and Reno sprawled across from him, slouching in the chair.

"I wasn't expectin' Sephiroth to make such…insightful comments about all that Nibelheim info. I was expectin' him to sorta flip his shit."

Seemingly unperturbed by Reno's speech, Rufus said, "I thought he would be more than willing to attempt CS Delivery's techniques."

Cloud frowned. Techniques?

"At least the general had a point," Reno said. "It'd mean big trouble if all our Soldier boys went nutso."

Cloud dearly wished to ask exactly what they were talking about, but didn't know if he could bring it up when he had his own conversation with Rufus.

"Enough of that," Rufus said dismissively. "I'll think of something else to bring CS Delivery under control. He's too effective to leave running around on his own. Any progress on that front?"

Reno shook his head. "Not really. We still can't find solid proof that Fair's buddy likes bombs. Veld says his Avalanche contacts haven't heard that they've caught that asshole either. That Fuhito freak is
keen on the asshole though. Rumor is the freak wants to dissect 'im."

Rufus hummed thoughtfully. "I doubt CS Delivery is easy quarry. We've had our own issues. Perhaps the next time you run across him, you should attempt bribing him instead of kidnapping him."

Cloud scowled uselessly down through the vent grating. Reno had been trying to *kidnap* him. The Turk really sucked at it if that's what he was trying to do.

"It wouldn't look right, sir," Reno said. "That asshole won't even talk when I'm around. How am I supposed to negotiate?" The smirk that spread over Reno's face screamed deviousness. "Besides, that *asshole* is a pretty fun spar."

Cloud couldn't see Rufus' face with the angle, but he could practically hear the arched brow in the vice president's voice. "A fun spar?"

Reno shrugged. "Last time we met, I electrocuted him and he gave me a concussion."

"How delightfully masochistic of you," Rufus said dryly. "Any progress on acquiring more of Professor Hojo's data?"

Cloud listened with only half an ear as they rattled on about stealing Hojo's data. He was more perplexed by Reno's statements. It almost sounded like the Turk was trying to befriend him.

A rather dull hour passed before Reno finally left Rufus' office and the vice president set to reading through a packet on his desk. Cloud waited only fifteen minutes before quietly pulling a slip of paper from a pocket and dropping it through the air vent.

The little slip of fluttering immediately caught Rufus' attention. The vice president watched its path with narrowed eyes all the way down to the floor. Then he stared searchingly at the air vent, but no signs of realization changed his expression so he must not have seen Cloud in the dark of the duct.

Rufus slowly rose from his chair and approached the innocuous slip of paper with more caution than Cloud expected. The vice president delicately picked up the paper with his first two fingers. After reading it, Rufus stared searchingly at the vent, one brow quirked.

Still holding the slip of paper, Rufus strode casually over to his door and locked it. He then resumed his seat, laying the slip of paper on the desk.

"At the risk of sounding like I'm talking to myself," Rufus said quietly, "yes, I *am* available for a while. I have no pressing engagements for the next two hours."

With that, Cloud took a leap of faith and pulled the vent grating up into the air duct and wriggled his way out into the office. He dropped to the floor in a cloud of dust, leaving a frosting of gray on Rufus' pristine carpet.

"You should really look into getting those air ducts cleaned out," Cloud said, brushing more dust off his clothes to thicken the layer of it on the ground.

"And save myself the trouble of coming up with an excuse for why the ventilation system threw up all over my carpet?" Rufus asked in arch amusement. "I think not." He paused, eying Cloud speculatively. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this rather unexpected visit from the infamous CS Delivery? You haven't decided to take up assassination as a hobby have you?"

"If I was going to assassinate people, I wouldn't start with you." Cloud remained standing, deciding
he would at least try to be polite and keep the dust in one spot.

"My dear father perhaps?" Rufus asked casually.

Cloud only stared at him. The effect was probably far less than it would have been if he wasn't wearing his goggles. One couldn't really be intimidated by an invisible piercing glance.

Rufus asked, "Have you forgotten, my dear terrorist, that you still haven't told me to what I owe the pleasure of your company? I can't very well conduct the conversation you desire without knowing the topic."

Cloud sighed. "The eco terrorists aren't exactly wrong, you know."

Rufus quirked one brow but didn't speak.

"The mako the reactors are pulling out of the ground is damaging the Lifestream."

A small smile crept onto the vice president's face. "You actually believe all that ritualistic folklore?"

Cloud would have laughed if it weren't such a serious matter. "That folklore is my fact, Rufus. Mako extraction is damaging. When was the last time you cracked open a geography book? The lands around Midgar didn't used to be desolate the way they are now."

"Climates change," Rufus countered. "That is also geographical knowledge."

"Climates change over centuries, not decades. If the Shinra reactors do enough damage, the Planet will send the Weapons after you."

"More children's stories," Rufus said. "I expected something less philosophical from someone of your capabilities."

"There are seven Weapons in total," Cloud said, brushing off Rufus' insults. "Six can be released in an attempt to subdue threats to the Planet. The seventh is the last ditch effort to preserve the Lifestream when the Planet is a hairs breadth from destruction."

Rufus' expression took on some semblance of consideration.

Cloud said, "Sapphire Weapon is aquatic, with a long tail for moving through the water. Ultimate Weapon looks like a Bahamut and has an equally nasty temperament. Diamond Weapon looks like a well-armored humanoid with a tasteless cape on, but its energy attacks are quite nasty. Ruby Weapon prefers deserts and only comes out after at least one other Weapon is defeated."

The consideration on Rufus' face was slowly morphing into somber seriousness. Perhaps the executive was actually beginning to believe the lecture.

"Emerald Weapon is slow and remains entirely under the ocean. Jade Weapon is the smallest and probably the weakest of all the Weapons. It's always sent out first. It can even be awakened for particularly powerful monsters or summons behaving in a threatening way."

When Cloud stopped, Rufus waited several long moments before speaking. "You said there were seven Weapons." The utter lack of amusement told Cloud that the vice president wasn't dismissing him out of hand.

"I'm not telling you about that one yet," Cloud said, "and you'd do better to wait until I'm willing to talk instead of poking around for information. Or having your pet Turks search."
"Why's that?" Rufus asked, smile retaking its place on his face.

Hoping to convey the gravity of the situation, Cloud spoke slowly to enunciate clearly. "If Hojo hears even one rumor about it or sees anyone else looking into it based off information that might even remotely come from a mysterious source, he'll get interested. If you don't trust me on this, Rufus, we're all quite thoroughly screwed."

The small smile morphed into a slight smirk. "Why share information at all if it's so important even the small pieces remain secret?"

"Because somewhere underneath your politically correct exterior, with all its penchant for tidy, white clothes and grandiose speeches, is a lying, two-faced, power hungry dictator," Cloud said.

Smirk strengthening, Rufus said, "That hardly seems like a good reason to divulge sensitive information."

Smirking sneer tugging at Cloud's expression, he said, "Beneath that lying, two-faced, power hungry dictator is someone who actually wants to keep the people he rules alive and stupid enough to keep civil unrest from brewing open rebellion once your old man is out of the way."

"That's the bluntest assessment anyone has ever had the honesty to give me," Rufus said, amusement ringing clear in his tone. "I think I might be flattered."

Cloud huffed a silent laugh. "You've got to have the people alive in order to rule them. I can agree with the 'people alive' part. If Hojo hears about it, far too many people will die."

That seemed to curb some of Rufus' amusement at least.

"Again, I ask, why tell me any of this?" Rufus made an airy gesture at the room.

Cloud shook his head and sighed. "Did you really think I was going to start demanding things from you and not give you anything in return?" Cloud retook his smirking sneer then. "Or that you'd have to trick me out of things?"

Rufus' smile deepened at that.

Cloud said, "I do know how you operate, Rufus."

Apparently satisfied with Cloud's answer, Rufus asked, "How well is my Turk serving you?"

The waters got a bit murkier there. At least Cloud was prepared for it. "Tseng could make a fine babysitter if he ever decided to switch career paths."

A flicker of irritation flashed over the vice president's face. "Tseng is far more useful in other capacities. If you aren't going to utilize his skills, I would appreciate his return."

"I'll bet," Cloud said flatly.

No irritation that time, but the politician's mask slid firmly back in place. "I didn't expect you to admit so openly to your association with Cloud Strife. What prompted this openness?"

"Yes," Cloud mused, "because we both know how useful it would be to pretend I didn't know him after you captured my comrade on video."

"What do you want with the boy?" Rufus asked.
Boy? Cloud reasoned he was supposed to be a teenager after all. "Everyone needs a little rescuing now and then," he answered vaguely.

"From what exactly?" Rufus asked.

"Take your pick of the crazy scientists running around Gaia."

Smile widening slightly, Rufus asked, "Are you here to tell me about the damage my company is supposedly doing to the Planet, tell me about the Weapons, or give me further incentive to get rid of Professor Hojo?"

"Didn't I just do all three?" Cloud asked dryly.

"I suppose I'll need to determine that on my own," Rufus said. "Unless you have anything more to offer," the vice president said vaguely.

Cloud shook his head.

Gaze sharpening, Rufus asked, "You wouldn't happen to be that seventh Weapon would you?"

Cloud huffed another silent laugh. "I'm no Weapon, Rufus." A smirk stretched across his face. "I'm told I'm a catalyst. From what I've seen, I'm not inclined to argue yet."

Ignoring the vice president's calculating gaze, Cloud climbed back into the air vent.
Zack glared at the circle of dust on the vice president's formerly pristine, white carpet, willing the dirt to divulge the secrets of CS Delivery's origins. He shot a glance at Sephiroth, who was eying the vent.

Sephiroth asked, "Do you think all the ducts are that filthy inside?"

"Probably," Zack said. "I hear the air on the sixty-sixth floor reeks pretty badly. Maybe this is why."

Sephiroth hummed in agreement. "Scarlet is always complaining about the stench."

"As she should," the vice president said, leaving Reno and Cissnei to organizing whatever it was they were doing with all the information Shinra had given them. "That demonic scent makes executive board meetings nigh unbearable."

Seemingly not paying direct attention, Sephiroth asked, "He came without any swords?" His eyes were still scrutinizing the air duct.

"Must I repeat myself?" Shinra asked archly.

Ignoring the question, Sephiroth said, "I imagine it would be difficult to navigate the corners with even one sword that large."

Zack scoffed. "I can't even figure out how he would have crawled around in those tiny vents."

Reno snorted from across the room. "That's because you're a giant. That asshole is the size of your little buddy, remember? His eyes are about even with your chin."

Zack scowled at the Turk. They weren't that much different height-wise. Though he did concede that Reno didn't have nearly as much muscle. Then Zack frowned at the air duct. "Do you think CS Delivery really has Tseng babysitting Cloud?" he asked the room in general.

"It's possible," the vice president said. "He's rather unpredictable when he isn't blowing up Shinra Company properties. He doesn't seem to be doing anything but paying us enigmatic visits and leaving enigmatic messages."

Reno left the file he and the other Turks had been sorting through in Rude's possession and threw himself into one of the chairs in front of Shinra's desk. "Even Veld says he doesn't think Avalanche has been targeted yet. Only the one accidental toad party so far."

"Regardless," Shinra said, "CS Delivery doesn't plan on returning my Turk any time soon."

Zack couldn't tell exactly whether or not the vice president was pleased with that. "I'd rather he give Cloud back," Zack said sourly.

Sephiroth nodded, eyes turning clouded and thoughtful. "It would certainly allow us to straighten out a few rather tangled matters of identity and information significance."

"And paradoxically enough," Shinra said, "we cannot simply take Strife into custody when he appears to play with Fair if we are to have his trust."

Zack's PHS broke the frustrated silence following the vice president's declaration. Zack pulled the device out of his pocket and answered without checking the caller. "Zack Fair speaking."
After a slight pause, he heard on the other end, "Hi, Zack."

A grin split Zack's face. "Spiky. We were just talking about you." He immediately put the call on speaker, praying that Cloud wouldn't come up with another of his embarrassing questions or declarations. The guy really didn't seem to know what kind of ammunition he had against Zack's pride.

"We?" Cloud asked, a thread of wariness entering his tone. "Are you busy? I can call later."

"No, no," Zack said, waving a hand even though Cloud couldn't see it, "we're good now. Are you free? We could all meet down in Wall Market again for something to eat? Maybe after, if you have time, we can window shop. I know you've been saying you're pretty busy so I won't steal all your time."

Cloud was silent for several seconds. The vice president exchanged a glance with Sephiroth.

Cloud said, "Who are your friends?"


The silence stretched again before Cloud warily asked, "They won't make me come back will they?"

"No, Spiky. You ask that every time. I'm not going to let anyone near you that's going to drag you anywhere you don't want to go."

A quiet chuckle came from the PHS. Cloud said, "That's right, you wouldn't let anyone but you do the dragging around."

"Of course," Zack declared, grin widening. Again, Cloud hadn't objected even though he was stalling. Poor kid never seemed to realize he was doing it. "I'm the only one allowed." Sobering a bit, Zack said, "I haven't managed to get another one of those Cait Sith's for you yet. I'm sorry about the first one. I didn't know they could overload and fry like that."

"You've already apologized six times Zack. It's not like you fried it yourself."

"But it was defective merchandise," Zack protested, wincing about calling poor Tuesti's prototype defective. But he didn't want to make Cloud angry by accusing his possible friend of sabotage.

"Just drop it already." The smile was clear in Cloud's voice.

"So you'll be in Wall Market in an hour right?" Zack asked.

"Yeah," Cloud said quietly. "I'll see you there, Zack."

"Later, Spiky," Zack said cheerfully.

After returning the PHS to his pocket, Zack said, "I probably don't need to take Kuskel, but at least two of you guys need to come." The three Turks exchanged glances.

"There's no way I'm missin' this," Reno said, smirk stretching across his face. Rude simply nodded in agreement.

Cissnei said, "I'd probably better come in case Reno decides to be too much for the kid to handle."

The vice president nodded his assent at the Turks. Zack eyed Sephiroth, who said, "I agree with your
assessment. Second Class Kunsel is unnecessary." Then to Shinra, the general said, "It would probably be wise not to attempt surveillance as CS Delivery seems intent on destroying any hardware meant to spy on him and anything related to him."

"Agreed," Shinra said, "as annoying as it is."

"Twenty minutes until we leave for the train below the plate," Cissnei said. "Do you think we should be in plain clothes or work clothes?"

Zack shrugged. "Whatever. I don't think it matters. I'm usually mostly in full uniform."

"Let's just go now," Reno said, smirk still lingering. "I wanna check out the slums and make sure that asshole doesn't scope the place out or leave traps for us."

The vice president smiled in amusement at the Turk. "Do remember, Reno, there's no evidence that Strife is CS Delivery."

"Yet," Reno said.

Zack's gut churned a bit. He would protect Cloud from even the Turks if he had to. Then his gut twisted for an entirely different reason. If all the Turks were there, he couldn't exactly go through with his plan. Reno in particular would wonder what he was doing and Zack couldn't bring himself to including Reno in the plot. Poor Cloud would go batty with Zack and Reno trying to startle him at every turn.

* * *

The crowds were fairly thin as Cloud wound his way through Wall Market. It was early for the evening masses, and the market streets would be busy then.

He took a deep breath when the little restaurant came into view. It would be much tougher to fool the Turks than Zack. Zack was no slouch, but the Turks were trained to be sneaky. Tseng was enough proof of that. And it didn't help that a few minutes after he'd entered Wall Market, that pesky, not quite identifiable sensation in the back of his head showed up again, this time a bit stronger. He still thought it was probably a Tsviet, but whoever it was still wasn't closing the distance between them.

Cloud had barely stepped inside the restaurant when Zack was yelling to catch his attention from a mere twenty feet away. Zack and three Turks were all the way at the far end of the counter. Rude was right up next to the wall, then Reno, then a ginger haired woman Cloud vaguely remembered from the force in Junon because she wielded a shuriken like Yuffie, an empty seat, and Zack.

Cloud smiled slightly and moved to join them. It was a smart move to put the woman as a buffer between him and the other new faces. Not really new faces to him, but he had to at least pretend they were new.

Zack clapped him hard on the back and pulled him onto the empty stool, as though he thought Cloud might bolt if given the opportunity.

"Meet my friends," Zack said, grinning. "Over there at the wall is Rude." The man in sunglasses simply nodded. "In the middle is Reno. I've told you about him before." Reno mock saluted, a smirk gracing his face. "And this is the lovely Cissnei," Zack said, indicating the woman. Her dark red curls looked a whole lot more natural than Reno's bright shock of red hair.

All three wore their Turk suits, though Reno still displayed his habitual sloppiness in the form of an untucked shirt and several undone buttons. Cissnei and Rude at least looked professional. Zack had
opted out of armor and weapons, but otherwise still sported his full Soldier uniform.

"Pleasure to meet you," Cissnei said, extending a hand to shake.

"Pleasure," Cloud said quietly, returning her handshake.

Reno reached around Cissnei to offer his hand, too. "Kunsel says you're good for harassing Zack here."

"That's what he tells me," Cloud said, smile widening a little. "I thought he and Zack were pretty funny together." Hoping to unsettle the cocky Turk a bit, he said, "I remember you."

Reno's eyes widened and everyone seemed to stiffen.

Smirking on the inside but keeping his face flat, Cloud said, "You asked me where I got my goggles." He fingered the edge of the goggles covering his eyes.

Confusion flashed over Reno's face before the man burst out laughing. "I remember that, kid. I still haven't been able to find a shop that sells those things."

Cloud shrugged. "If we have time after this, I could show you. Zack told me we might go window shopping later."

"I'll just have to make sure we don't waste time here," Reno said, flagging down the cook behind the counter.

After they'd all ordered, Reno wasted no time in starting what Cloud supposed was an interrogation. "So how did you an' Zack make friends?"

A quick glance at Zack showed the Soldier First sporting a slightly pinched expression. Quietly, Cloud said, "We met on the Modeoheim mission."

Understanding, and in Cissnei's case, empathy, flashed over the Turk's faces. Even Rude winced a little.

"It wasn't all bad," Zack said, grin plastered a little too wide on his face. He clapped Cloud hard on the back. "Tseng crashed our helicopter—"

"How's that not bad?" Cissnei interjected. Clearly still a bit uncomfortable with the topic of Modeoheim.

"So we just set off to hike through the snow—"

"Still not seein' the good," Reno said.

"Then we made fun of each other's respective home towns—"

"Because all friendships are based on mockery," Reno added.

"And it was friendship at first fight," Zack concluded.

"We weren't fighting," Cloud said.

"Yeah," Zack said, scratching the back of his head, flashing a grin, "but friendship at first mocking sounds weird."
"You're weird," Cloud mumbled, eying the counter, letting the conversation fall flat. He glared at nothing from the relative safety behind his goggles. He wasn't quite sure how to act around the Turks. They were tricky and Zack would only serve as a distraction to them so much.

"So what about other friends?" Cissnei asked.

"What?" Cloud asked, frowning. Were they really going to just ask about his CS Delivery connections?

"You know," she said, smile gracing her features, "friends from back home? Friends from the army? You can't tell us Zack here is your only friend." Her smile wasn't at all like Aerith's or even Tifa's. Cissnei's smile had an edge to it, though it was still friendly looking at least.

"There's a girl back home I'm friends with," Cloud said. "Haven't talked to her in a couple years." He shrugged. "We didn't talk a whole lot to begin with, though. There was an accident on the mountain when we were kids and her dad blamed me for it so she got in trouble if we spent too much time together." He paused. "I never made friends in the infantry. I was never really loud or aggressive enough to stand out."

"That's lame," Reno said with a smirk.

Cloud's eyes widened a bit behind his goggles.

Reno said, "If you were too quiet for the army, you shoulda tried for the Turks. Rude hardly says anything."

The bald Turk just scowled at Reno.

Cloud frowned. "You can't join the Turks. You're recruited."

"For being sneaky," Reno said, eyes glinting mischievously. "You walked outta Shinra Headquarters with a stolen sword and your best buddy Solder First Class Zack Fair didn't notice for days. I'd say that's pretty sneaky."

Cloud wasn't sure if he should be laughing or worried. Reno seemed to be complimenting him and pointing out that he knew about the thievery at the same time.

Reno must have noticed the uncertainty because he said, "Don't worry, kid. I'm not getting' paid to bust you for stealin' swords from the army." Reno shrugged dismissively. "I'm just sayin' it's sneaky."

That didn't really help Cloud figure out how he was supposed to react. They couldn't be hinting at possible recruitment could they?

Cissnei patted his arm. "Don't worry. The idiot is trying to compliment you. He just means that to get into the Turks, you generally have to get the amused or impressed attention of one of them."

Cloud nodded, curious, and also not, about what each of the three of them had done to catch the attention of the Turks.

The Turks then proceeded to ask him a slew of questions. Everything from what his favorite color was to whether or not he cared what the missing act of Loveless was. Their food came, and the conversation kept going as though they weren't eating. Zack didn't say much while the Turks bombarded him with all their random questions and Cloud couldn't even call them on being nosy because at least one of them answered every question that he did. It was as the meal wound down
that the questions got weirder.

Rude, in one of his rare moments of speaking, asked, "What do you think of bombs?"

"Bombs?" Cloud repeated, wondering if it was a reference to his blowing up two reactors and a mansion.

Rude just readjusted his sunglasses and nodded.

Slowly, Cloud said, "I've never really given bombs much thought." He paused. "I guess they're useful for blowing stuff up."

Rude nodded as though satisfied with the answer. Then he asked, "What about hand-to-hand combat?"

Cloud frowned. Was Rude trying to relate by talking about his own interests? It was weird, whatever it was. "I always did better with a gun in the infantry. In martial arts training I was fast but couldn't really take any hits." His stamina had been laughably low before his mako enhancements.

Reno snorted a laugh. "You should probably train with someone who's smaller and faster than that lurkin' giant of a Soldier friend you have."


Reno just brushed that off with a scoff and asked Cloud, "What do you think about electricity?"

Cloud didn't miss the sharp, calculating glint in Reno's otherwise amused eyes. Cautiously, he asked, "Like lightning?" He couldn't remember if he was supposed to know about Reno's mag rod and so opted for ignorance.

"Sure," Reno said, smirk stretching wider, "like lightning."

Having absolutely no idea what anyone was supposed to think about lightning or electricity in general, Cloud offered, "Flashy?"

Zack burst out laughing while Reno snickered, shaking his head. Rude said, "Flashy is for bombs."

Cloud gave a slight smile, unsure if he wanted to ask what the inside joke was.

It was Cissnei who moved them along, ushering the lot of them out of the restaurant and confiscating all the Pharmacy Coupons, much to Zack's obvious distress. Cloud didn't care after Cissnei refused to tell Zack what she was going to do with them.

As Cloud edged his way into movement, the others followed, obviously not entirely invested in Zack and Cissnei's argument. Cloud led them to a small, open-air stall around the side of the dress shop. Reno made a lot of noise about the bemused shop owner's array of goggles and bought a pair identical to Cloud's. In a surprising move, Rude bought four pairs of sunglasses. Zack managed to find a ridiculous pair of joke spectacles that made his eyes look bloodshot and crazy. When paired with his manic grin, Zack looked about to go off the deep end by means of a killing spree. Cloud shuddered, unable to decide if he would hate to be around when Zack managed to run around with his Buster Sword looking like that. It might be fun to watch everyone else panic but he didn't think Zack would let Cloud get away without being threatened himself.

Cloud only paid half attention as the group wandered. He was more prone to following the sense of his apparent stalker. The possible Tsviet hadn't left while Cloud and the others were eating, nor had
they entered the restaurant. Whoever it was, was still content just to observe.

Cloud and the others looped their way around to near Don Comeo's mansion to find a small festival of sorts going on. Cloud scowled and the many stands and milling people. It was probably a front on the Don's part for selling a bunch of girls or drugs or something. Cloud couldn't wait until he crossed off some of the more important players on his hit list so he could get to ridding Midgar of the local crime boss.

Whatever the reason for the festivities, Zack and the Turks didn't care. They dragged Cloud along with them to explore. Zack and Cissnei both were distracted by a weapon's vendor and Reno had to be forcibly removed from a fireworks stand. Cissnei bought a thin string of beads to work into her hair sometime later, and Rude seemed content to follow everyone around and help keep anyone from getting distracted in any one place for too long. Cloud managed to finally spot his follower. His heart kicked up a notch when he recognized pitch black eyes and lanky black hair framing pale features.

Cloud waited until all three Turks were distracted with some game stand and were trying to outdo each other by tossing rings onto bottle tops—Cissnei was winning by a large margin—to talk to Zack.

"I'm going to go grab a snack," Cloud said, catching Zack's attention. "You want anything?"

"I'll come with," Zack said.

Cloud waved a hand dismissively. "I'm just going to that stand there." He pointed at the food stand his stalker was standing by. "Watch the Turks. I think they might start accusing each other of cheating if they don't have an outside referee."

Zack hesitated, eying the Turks, eying Cloud, and eying the somehow offensive food stand, and appeared to think. And think. And think some more.

The Soldier gave a quick nod and said, "Surprise me if you want. Don't get lost."

Cloud chuckled and turned toward away from him. He felt Zack's stare on his back and decided to ignore it. The Soldier was likely to watch him the entire time.

Cloud didn't immediately made for the stalker, making a show of examining the menu on the board suspended from the food stand's sign. The jagged sense of presence in the back of his mind crackled softly the nearer he got. When he finally managed to shuffle around enough to stand near the other, he said, "Hello, Nero."

The Tsviet made no verbal acknowledgement, instead opting to slip his hands into his pockets and shift to give Cloud a glimpse of guns. If Cloud watched closely, he could also see faint hints of the glowing lines of the mako suit beneath Nero's plain clothes.

Cloud asked, "You here to do anything besides stalk me?"

"I haven't decided," came the quiet answer. "What are you doing with them?" Neither had to look to know Nero meant Zack and the others.

"Distracting them," Cloud said. "You going to tell them about me?"
"Not yet." Nero's eyes studied him intently, seemingly searching for something. "Are you threatening my brother?"

"No." Cloud tried to at least decide on something from the menu so he could order it.

When he didn't offer another question, Nero did. "Who is?"

Cloud scoffed quietly. "You should already know the person most likely to do that."

Nero's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What's the deadfall?"

"A failsafe," Cloud answered vaguely.

Nero's head tilted speculatively. "So if the restrictors..." he trailed off. Picking up again, he said, "Then all of us would——"

A slight shake of Cloud's head cut him off. Cloud said, "Only Weiss."

A couple dark sparks buzzed to life around Nero before disappearing just as suddenly.

Cloud sighed and ordered some random snack he'd never heard of. He just hoped it wasn't chopped up sewer monster.

While Cloud waited for his mystery snack, Nero said, "Your power doesn't feel like the Soldiers exactly, or the experiments." He paused. "Nor even like myself and the others."

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up. "I'm not born from Chaos' darkness," he whispered, "or negative Lifestream."

"You're certainly well informed," Nero said, hints of dryness coloring his tone.

"Necessity for survival."

Nero seemed to hesitate before asked, "What are you really doing with them?" Again, referring to Zack and the others.

"Keeping the vice president, Sephiroth, and the Turks distracted while I do as much damage control as I can before my flimsy ruse goes up in smoke." Cloud paused. "And Zack's my friend. I'm trying to work him into the idea of what I'm doing to keep him from thinking he has to kill me." And there went one more piece of information with the potential to stop the whole charade. All Nero had to do was tell anyone affiliated with Shinra Company and Cloud would definitely be on the run, sans Zack's friendship.

Nero frowned. "A friend. Like a brother it seems."

Cloud thought about answering automatically—Nero was obsessed with protecting his own brother after all—but thought better of it. Nero was also good at leaping to conclusions and wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone and anything that might even obliquely threaten Weiss.

After a moment, Cloud said, "Zack's the closest thing to a brother I've ever had."

Nero watched silently as Cloud took the purple colored snack from the vendor. Cloud scowled at the supposed food, wondering if it would look strange if he tossed it and just went back empty handed.

Nero's words drew his attention though. "A brother for a brother then?"

"I know," Nero snapped back, eyes narrow. "Whether you realized it or not, you showed me your brother to prove you know what I think about mine." He paused. "I'll watch for now. I'll keep Weiss from...triggering this...deadfall. If you're lying, I'll kill you."

Cloud smirked at that, and turned back toward Zack and the Turks. None of the Tsviets could touch Cloud in the future. They didn't stand a chance in the past. At least the meeting had gone well. Nero hadn't tried to kill him and only made subtle threats. It was an improvement over getting shot at or sucked into Chaos' black oblivion.

Expression losing its intensity as he neared the others, he tossed Zack his purple snack. "Here."

Zack eyed the thing warily. "What is this, Cloud?" Even the Turks paused in their game to look.

Cloud shrugged. "I have no idea."

"You know," Zack said, licking the purple thing, "this is really fun. Don't you think so, Spike?"

Cloud shrugged again. Unsure of what to make of the smiling Turks.

"Next time," Zack continued, "we should invite Sephiroth, too. He doesn't get out much for playing purposes."

Cloud froze at the suggestion.

Reno nodded, full blown smirk in place. "I'd like to see the great an' mighty silver general eat whatever the hell that purple thing is. I'll have to bring my camera."

Cloud had no idea how to behave around Sephiroth should Zack actually decide to go through with that threat. Cloud wasn't quite so happy with the way the evening went anymore.

"Don't look so spooked," Zack said, patting Cloud's head. "Sephiroth isn't so bad once you get to know him."

* * *

Two hours later, sure that he'd finally managed to lose Nero, Cloud returned to Aerith's house. Elmyra was nowhere to be seen. The three other humans were around the table and Nanaki was curled under the stairs in his customary place, apparently asleep. Cloud sat in the empty seat and leaned forward, letting his forehead connect with a solid thunk on the table.

Aerith giggled. "Dare I ask how your play date went? Vincent and Nanaki said you would be meeting with Reno and the others."

"It went fine," Cloud said. He pulled the bandana off, freeing his hair, then tugged the goggles down and away from his face so they hung loosely around his neck.

"Of course," Aerith said, "that's why you're making close friends with the table top."

Cloud sat up with a glare for everyone in the room and the universe in general. Aerith looked a hairs breadth away from giggling again. Tseng looked perplexed. If Cloud didn't know any better, he'd say Vincent had a spark of amusement in his eyes.

"The Turks asked weird questions about what I think about bombs and electricity, and Zack wants to invite Sephiroth the next time we meet up."
"That could prove…awkward," Tseng said. "The general isn't the most socially adept of individuals." A slight smile flashed across the Turk's features. "When we have time, remind me to tell you about his comments and questions and general narrative on the footage from Tuesti's Cait Sith robot."

Grumpily, Cloud said, "I'm more thinking about how to be around a man that makes me want to show him up." At the questioning glances from the other three, Cloud shifted uncomfortably. "I know I've been trying to sound egocentric with a bit of megalomania, but I may have been a bit dramatic when we talked. The more I think about it, the more it seems like he was looking at me like he thought I was being stupid. I think it was making me try harder."

"But you'd be Cloud this time," Aerith said with a much softer, less amused smile. "You wouldn't have to prove anything, like you think the CS Delivery side of you needs to."

Tseng nodded. "The general would probably appreciate your more reserved nature. He's not overly talkative himself. And if he asks anything even remotely related to societal norms or customs, rituals as he usually calls them, he appreciates honest answers."

Cloud's eyes widened a little. The Turk was giving him social advice concerning the general? Deciding to ignore that for the moment, Cloud eyed Vincent. "You're being awfully quiet."

Vincent arched one elegant brow. "I have no interest in speculating on Sephiroth's social competence or behavior." His tone sounded flat, but Cloud could hear the implied snark.

Instead of calling the gunman on it, Cloud said, "The one who's been following me is Nero."

Vincent lifted his head at that. "To ask about your message?"

Cloud nodded. "He pretty much told me he's keeping an eye on me."

There wasn't anything Cloud could think of to fill the following silence with.

Aerith asked, "Are you leaving in the morning?"

"We won't make it to Wutai in time if we don't."

"What are you going to do about the Avalanche base?" Tseng asked, taking a sip of his tea.

Cloud frowned, staring at the Turk, absently noting the others do the same. Even Nanaki had roused at some point and was sitting up with interest. Cloud asked, "What Avalanche base?"

Tseng's expression flattened. "The base in Wutai."

Frown morphing into a scowl, Cloud asked, "What base in Wutai?" He didn't remember anything about a base in Wutai. Wutai was Wutai. They had their Crescent Unit and the fallout from the Wutai war. He knew there was Avalanche activity in Cosmo Canyon, but he'd avoided that by speaking with Bugenhagen and Nanaki directly, and not staying for more than a night.

"What do you mean, 'What base in Wutai'?" Tseng asked.

"I mean, what base in Wutai?" Cloud demanded, voice rising in volume.

Tseng narrowed his eyes. "You expect me to believe you know the classified things you do and not know about the Wutai Avalanche base?"

Glaring right back, Cloud said, "It's not like you or Rufus sat me down and explained the whole of
Turk activities over the course of *ten years*. You fed Aerith and me random little bits in attempt to manipulate me. I got more out of Reno when he came to Tifa's bar to get *drunk* than I ever got out of anyone else." Hands clenching, Cloud demanded, "What base in Wutai?"

Tseng remained stiff, but appeared to back down as his expression relaxed slightly. "It's as simple as it sounds. Avalanche has a base in Wutai in Lord Kisaragi's village. He's doing what he can to aid their anti-Shinra sentiments and supplying additional funding to their operation."

Cloud glowered at his empty teacup. He didn't realize he'd have competition in Wutai. He'd just have to see about fixing that.
"What on Gaia is going on?" Zack asked, flipping through the photos. Image after image showed surveillance of a small band of Genesis copies mercilessly slaughtering other Genesis copies. Dead Genesis copies had been cropping up for days but this skirmish in Junon had showed exactly why. Genesis' forces were having some kind of civil war.

Vice President Shinra said, "I would hazard a guess that it's too optimistic to believe Rhapsodos has seen the error of his ways and wishes to clean up after himself."

Sephiroth simply frowned at his own stack of perplexing photos. It was impossible to guess what the general thought of his former friend's forces imploding in on themselves. Zack didn't know what he thought for himself let alone the general.

"The one leadin' the rebel charge," Reno said, "is probably Genesis because of that sword, but that psycho bastard never stops to chat after slaughterin' his own damn copies so we can't say for sure."

Almost absently, Sephiroth said, "It's certainly lightened the mission load not have to hunt down the copies ourselves."

Zack eyed the general worriedly, wondering if Sephiroth could see his friend in the one leading the Genesis copies to kill all the rest. Trying to imagine a crazy Cloud leading a group of Cloud copies to kill a bunch of other Cloud copies left him marginally unsettled.

"Genesis or not," the vice president said, "it does have a connection to CS Delivery."

"What?" Zack demanded, blood running cold at the prospect of two dangerous groups combining forces.

Sephiroth's sharp gaze landed on the vice president and even Reno looked a mite surprised.

"What the hell do Genesis copies have to do with that asshole?" Reno demanded.

Cissnei asked, "Where did that intel come from?" The question seemed a bit vague to Zack, like she didn't want to outright accuse the vice president of believing questionable sources.

"Tseng," Shinra said.

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "When exactly did you receive intelligence about Genesis from CS Delivery?"

Shinra's head tilted ever so slightly. "Three days ago, and from Tseng, not CS Delivery. Though the terrorist didn't exactly disapprove of Tseng's communication."

The general's jaw clenched for a moment, but he didn't say anything. Zack had to wonder why Shinra hadn't even told Reno about it. The redhead was supposed to be in charge of the Turks after all.

As though answering the silent question, the vice president said, "It seemed imprudent to act on unverifiable information."

"What was said?" Zack asked.

Shinra regarded him neutrally for several moments before directing his words to Sephiroth. "The first
message was cryptic. 'Crimson alive. Movement possible."

Sephiroth nodded. "Notification that Genesis is alive and may begin to take action."

The vice president nodded slowly. "Approximately two hours later, I received a second message saying, 'I've been informed sneaking messages is useless. We crossed paths with Genesis when we were in Banora. It's difficult to say if he and CSD have made any sort of agreement. There was a great deal of arguing.'"

Zack had to wonder at why the vice president went to the trouble of memorizing the message.

"It's quite possible," Sephiroth said, expression dark, "that Genesis' actions or those of his copies resulted from the disagreements he had with the terrorist." Sephiroth's gaze slid to Zack. "Any word from Strife?"

Zack shook his head with a worried frown. "He won't pick up his PHS and all the messages he's sending just say he's really busy."

"Any more from Tseng?" Sephiroth asked the vice president.

Shinra shook his head. "I tried only once. Yesterday. No answer. I surmise leaving messages would be equally fruitless."

Sephiroth frown deepened to a scowl. "What possessed you to think no one needed to know that Genesis may be on the move and may begin to act out again?"

The vice president smiled. "'Act out' is a rather peculiar turn of phrase for a traitor."

Sephiroth's jaw clenched for the barest of moments. Zack hardly dared breathe. He felt like the general should be spitting mad at the vice president but he was only getting hints of deep irritation. Zack would have been mad if someone deliberately evaded a question like that. Was the vice president trying to irk Sephiroth? Zack had thought the general made his opinion of being left in the dark perfectly clear.

Voice morphing into something chill and polite, Sephiroth asked, "Why was this information kept classified from me? It would have been prudent to make preparations or at least give the troops some semblance of warning."

Shinra's slight, friendly smile freezing in place, he said, "I didn't wish to alert CS Delivery or Rhapsodos that we were taking the information into account."

That...made no sense to Zack.

"I understand," Sephiroth said. Then he spun on his heel, and with a quick flick of his wrist, motioned Zack to follow him from the room.

Out in the hall, Zack whispered just loud enough for the general to hear, "What the hell was that, Sephiroth?"

In an equally quiet voice, Sephiroth said, "The vice president wanted to see what CS Delivery and Genesis would do. He's taking his so called alliance as he sees it, rather than how CS Delivery has declared it. He seems to think it's a good idea to let that terrorist do as he pleases." The general's expression darkened. "Vice President Shinra also wished to see how I would react to a more abrupt display of evidence supporting Genesis' continued survival."
Zack's eyes widened. "Does he think you'll defect, too?"

Sephiroth's eyes flicked to his for a moment, probably gauging his reaction. "Possibly. First Class Soldiers aren't exactly renowned for their stability."

Zack moved his gaze to stare straight forward. He didn't know what to think about the vice president's actions or what he seemed to think about the general. It seemed so counter productive and confusing to test the general's loyalty in a way that might actually push him away.

Zack followed Sephiroth's lead through the halls and in the elevator, both remaining silent. Zack didn't even know where the general was going. When they slipped into one darkened room full of computers and random pieces of half assembled electronics, he knew they had to be in Tuesti's office…or lab…or perhaps a hobby room.

"Tuesti," Sephiroth called, frown tugging down the corners of his mouth.

The executive appeared from behind a tall rack of monitors, eyebrows lifted and eyes wide in a marginal show of surprise.

Sephiroth asked, "Did you know about those messages the vice president received?"

Tuesti shook his head. "As soon as he started telling you about them, I pulled up the message logs. They didn't show up on my alerts because they didn't seem conspicuous to the monitoring program I use. I've rewritten it already."

"How could they not show up?" Zack asked. "They seem pretty conspicuous to me."

"Your flurry of messages with Strife sends up flags because of frequency and keywords my software looks for," Tuesti said, rearranging a few unidentifiable parts on a rack near the wall. "I'm still building the keyword database and these single two messages didn't register as unusual in frequency."

Zack frowned. "But did they show up like Cloud's messages show up on my PHS?"

Tuesti shook his head. "They came from Tseng's phone, no strange back tracking blocking. I can't pinpoint the location the messages came from because the communication tower tags are scrambled. Strife's messages appear out of nowhere." The executive massaged his forehead briefly. "Rest assured, I'll catch the messages next time."

"Any more progress?" Sephiroth asked.

"Aside from finding oblique references to a Lucrecia Crescent working with the Science Department alongside Professor's Gast and Hojo, and Grimoire Valentine, nothing. Her records were expunged decades ago. Whoever erased her has had a number of years to be thorough. It also seems as though Professor Hojo had a hand in getting rid of her research. He thinks that whatever this Chaos Theory is, it's ludicrous."

"Chaos Theory?" Sephiroth asked.

Tuesti shook his head again. "I haven't been able to find details yet."

After a moment, Sephiroth redirected the subject. "Lucrecia Crescent?"

"Nothing really new. She only worked on the early stages of Project S. She simply vanished after that."
Zack frowned. Even he knew that no one simply vanished from the Science Department. Especially not when they'd been working for Hojo.

Sephiroth actually blew out a small sigh as he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Any progress on getting in touch with that terrorist or tracking him down without the Turks or the vice president knowing."

Tuesti grimaced, shaking his head.

Zack couldn't help but add his sigh to Sephiroth's.

Tuesti couldn't find anything. The vice president was keeping secrets, sort of. CS Delivery had kidnapped Tseng. Cloud wasn't answering his calls and Zack still hadn't had a chance to try out his plan.

"There is one thing, though," Tuesti said slowly.

That brought Sephiroth's attention into sharp focus.

"Reno received a call from Veld early this morning."

Zack tilted his head. The way Tuesti said it sounded ominous.

"Avalanche is divided over how to deal with CS Delivery."

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed as Zack's eyebrows climbed.

Tuesti said, "Their leader and their muscle want to see what CS Delivery is going to do. Their brains want to kill, capture, or control CS Delivery. There's been...quite a lot of infighting about it."

Zack's face twisted up in slightly amused confusion. That was...good? Perhaps it would leave CS Delivery as the reigning terrorist group.

* * *

Tseng still hadn't decided whether he preferred Strife's presence or absence. Neither Valentine nor Nanaki were any more prone to conversation than the probably delusional swordsman, but Strife was, oddly enough, more approachable. In the days Tseng and Strife's two companions had been trekking south along the western continent, no one had said a single word. Valentine and Nanaki even had the scouting and hunting split between the two of them with precision despite the nonverbal nature in which they coordinated duties.

Tseng had thought that with Strife gone, the two might discuss their unofficial leader. Tseng had hoped to glean better insight into Strife's character that way.

He shook his head and brushed back a lock of hair that had strayed from his low ponytail. Such useless musings. His thoughts had looped through the same logical trail countless times since Strife separated from them in Costa del Sol.

The swordsman wanted to go to Wutai alone and neither Valentine nor Nanaki had disagreed. In fact, both seemed unusually eager to run this errand for Strife. Tseng wished to know what they were actually doing, but the others all seemed to know without explicit explanation and without Strife's presence, Tseng didn't think he could afford to seem nosy about the terrorist's business.

Despite what Strife said about Tseng's participation, Tseng felt as though he was in a precarious
Strife hadn't reacted the way he'd expected after the vague message about the meeting with Genesis, and so Tseng didn't know exactly what the swordsman thought of it.

Strife watched him warily when he was there. Nanaki's bestial expressions were difficult to decipher. Valentine only ever watched him speculatively, but didn't seem to make any facial expressions at all in Strife's absence.

With a sigh, Tseng brushed away those useless, circling thoughts and focused his attention forward. They'd been heading through the high grasses on the plains toward a rather distant cottage since early morning. Considering the ocean stretched out to the horizon beyond the dwelling, he gathered that was their destination. But why Strife would have errand at some remote cottage east of Gongaga, Tseng had no idea.

Perhaps if he spoke, neither of Strife's companions would acknowledge him.

Tseng asked, "Where will we meet Strife after this errand is complete?"

Both Valentine and Nanaki directed their stares at him. Fortunately for Tseng's nerves, they refrained from exchanging a glance between them.

Valentine said, "Costa del Sol."

Tseng sighed. They would be taking the whole trip back with still no conversation. Tseng wasn't a proponent of excessive chatter himself, but even he enjoyed a reasonable discourse every now and then. He was still debating the merits of asking what the other two would think of him making a few calls when they reached the cottage's door.

Valentine rapped sharply and nearly two minutes passed before the door swung open. The middle aged man was unassuming looking, a hat on backward to keep his hair out of his face. The scent of metal wafted through the open door.

Valentine said, "Cloud sent me to pick up his order."

The man's facial expression didn't change much, but it seemed to light up in an unexpected way with his crooked, half smile. "Yeah," the man said, "the kid told me he couldn't make it himself. Described you pretty accurately, too."

"I expect so," Valentine answered in that vague, quiet way of his.

When Valentine moved to enter the cottage, Tseng steeled himself and asked, "Do you mind if I make a personal call?"

Valentine paused on the threshold and eyed him, speculation tainting his neutral expression.

Tseng said, "I won't tell anyone anything critical."

After several moments of consideration, Valentine shot Nanaki a look and the beast nodded. Without further comment, the gunman disappeared inside the cottage and Nanaki turned to face the near endless plains that stretched inland, sitting down on his haunches, tail wrapping around him idly.

Taking that for permission, Tseng pulled out his PHS and stared at it.

Who on Gaia should he call?

Reno would do nothing but insult Strife. Rude was no conversationalist. Cissnei would tell the other
Turks. The vice president would be irritated with no pertinent news. Zack would only ask about Strife. Kunsel might need to be bribed not to tell Zack. Most of Shinra Company employees were not an option. That left him with trying to hold a conversation with Sephiroth or Tuesti.

He stared blankly at the PHS.

Sephiroth or Tuesti.

A faint frown pulled his mouth. Both had their positives and negatives.

A conversation with Sephiroth would be awkward. The general asked questions and Tseng didn't know how to explain that he was bored of the silence. A conversation with Tuesti would be equally awkward in an entirely different way. Not only would he have to listen to something about gadgets, he would have to endure Tuesti's subtle teasing about the reasons why Tseng was calling.

Tseng flipped open the PHS and dialed. It rang only twice.

"You have news, Tseng?" Sephiroth asked.

"No, general," Tseng answered quietly.

Sephiroth didn't immediately respond. "Then why did you call?" he asked cautiously.

Tseng took a calming breath and said, "We've been traveling for two days without speaking."

Again the silence stretched. "But you've stopped traveling now?" The question was vague and slow, as though Sephiroth were aware that Tseng couldn't say much.

"For the time being," Tseng said. "I don't expect much conversation for a while."

"If you can't say much," Sephiroth paused, "is this call simply to break the silence?"

Tseng didn't hesitate before saying, "It is."

Sounding marginally uncomfortable, Sephiroth asked, "Is there a particular procedure for this type of conversation?" He paused. "Neither Angeal nor Genesis ever called without a particular topic in mind."

"No particular procedures," Tseng said, wondering if he should have just dealt with the boredom and monotony of silence instead of making any calls. "As my topic list is restricted, if you had anything you thought interesting to share, I would suggest bringing up that topic."

The silence stretched for several moments. "Angeal told me that making small talk involved discussing topics of mutual interest for politeness' purposes. However, Genesis said that I should talk about my own interests because if people don't like what I like, then they aren't worth talking to. What philosophy do you hold to?"

Tseng was left at a loss for words. Who discussed the philosophies behind small talk? With a sigh, he said, "I suppose I have always been more inclined to say whatever happens to be on my mind, if it isn't classified."

Sephiroth then said, "That seems to be an acceptable compromise between the two stances. In this case, I would ask for your opinion on something I've been thinking about for a while."

"Yes?" Tseng asked, more surprised than anything else to hear the general ask for his opinion.
"Do you think it feasible to use the ventilation system as an alternate means of sending messages within Shinra headquarters during emergencies? I thought it might be possible for the Third Class Soldiers to use them for means of stealth as I don't believe the regular administrative personnel would have the necessary musculature to climb between levels."

Tseng snapped his lax jaw shut and listened in amazement as Sephiroth continued.

"Since CS Delivery's last infiltration of headquarters and subsequent use of the ventilation ducts to speak with Vice President Shinra, I've been analyzing the logistics and I think it presents a viable opportunity. I've never heard of anyone using a ventilation system in such a way, and there are bound to be fewer intruders or monsters in the ducts, allowing messengers to get to their destination more quickly. I've been considering creating a proposal to present at the next board meeting, but have been hesitant for the fact that I've never heard of something like this before. I'm not sure what building maintenance would think."

"That's," Tseng started out slowly, "an…interesting idea." And it truly was. It sort of bothered him. And he wondered why no one had thought of it before. Then he wondered why the air ducts were so large anyway. Fully armored Soldiers could move around in them if they wanted. "If you would, show it to Cissnei, she can give you input from the Turk's end. She does well in communication coordination. Even if she doesn't think it's the best plan for the Turks, she could give additional input for your Soldiers."

"Cissnei?" Sephiroth asked. "Not Reno? He's the next in command."

"Reno has many talents. Neither communication nor coordinating lines of communication are included as any of them."

Sephiroth hummed thoughtfully. "He does excel within his specialties, though."

"Of course," Tseng agreed, wondering what the general thought Reno's specialties were.

Tseng's attention was drawn back to his present thought when Valentine exited the building. Tseng frowned slightly at the sight of a single sword.

Tseng said, "It appears my free time is at an end."

"We'll speak another time," Sephiroth said. The line went dead immediately afterward.

Tseng returned his PHS to a pocket and rejoined Nanaki and Valentine. Running a quick eye over the weapon, he didn't think it looked much different than Zack's Buster Sword, perhaps a slightly different shape.

"For Strife I assume," Tseng said.

Valentine regarded him with an unreadable expression for a moment before nodding. The gunman then slung the sword onto his back and started back the way they'd come. He presented an odd picture with the atypical weapon.

"That's it?" Tseng asked, following after gunman and beast. "We're done here?"

Nanaki glanced over his shoulder and said, "Yes. We're going back to meet with Cloud."

Tseng stopped walking and closed his eyes for a moment to take a deep, calming breath. Days of silence to pick up a sword. And days more just to deliver the sword.
Subject: Introductory Test

From: Treasurer of Wutai, Assistant to Treasure Princess Yuffie Kisaragi

Your partner with the weird mustache and ugly shorts told me about your interest in the Treasure Princess. I want you to prove yourself first. If you pass, I'll let you talk to her. The Treasure Princess has more important things to do than interview treasure hunting fakers.

Somewhere along the beach in South Wutai, there's supposed to be treasure hidden by Wutai's Crescent Unit members. If you manage to find it, I'll ask the Treasure Princess if she wants to give you her own test. That's a good deal, right? Good luck.

Cloud never would have thought going back to traveling by himself would be boring. The others never said much, but he never really needed to hear the words to know what they were thinking. He'd spent enough time with Vincent and Nanaki before coming back, and they hadn't changed enough that everything he knew about them seemed to still be true.

Tseng was a bit easier to read, flashes of emotions—mostly confusion—showing in his expression. Cloud didn't know him as well but the company wasn't so bad. He was intelligent and not overly chatty.

Being shadowed by marginally incompetent Avalanche troopers was not, however, alleviating his boredom. They weren't attacking. They weren't closing in on him or trying to herd him in any particular direction. They weren't doing anything and they hadn't been doing anything since the boat had dropped him off at the beach.

He sighed, fiddling with his goggle and pulling the bandana off entirely. It was far too hot to have anything but hair on his head.

Subject: Real Introductory Test

From: Treasurer of Wutai, Assistant to Treasure Princess Yuffie Kisaragi

What were you thinking!? You never showed up for the test. That's really rude you know. >:( I've decided to give you a second chance though because someone stole the treasure before I got there.

Somewhere near the Wutai bridge, there's supposed to be treasure hidden by Wutai's Crescent Unit commanders. Go find it. The Treasure Princess is the best ninja ever so you'd better do your best. She won't wait forever.

Cloud eyed the wide, rickety bridge with a slight half smile. He rubbed the back of his neck and vowed to himself that he would never take his attention off Yuffie again. It wasn't like he couldn't live without his materia but a teenager with boatloads of leveled up materia was bad enough. A child with boatloads of leveled up materia would be even worse.

His smile left him as his gaze fell on the far side of the bridge. No less than two dozen Avalanche troops were arrayed in rows, the front on one knee and the back standing, all training their guns on him from afar.

There would be no using the bridge then, he thought wryly to himself. He didn't really want to know if they planned to capture him or attempt to gun him down in the middle of the bridge.
Without another thought, he moved up next to the bridge and eyed the drop to the valley below. He cocked his head as the corners of his mouth drew down. It wasn't a straight drop. With a shrug of his shoulders, he stepped off the edge of the cliff and set to skid down to the bottom. Thankfully, his boots were extra durable.

* * *

Subject: Are You Serious?

From: Treasurer of Wutai, Assistant to Treasure Princess Yuffie Kisaragi

You didn't show up again! Do you really care about working for the Treasure Princess!? How are you supposed to do that if you won't even take the test? >:((( I'm so nice that I'm going to give you one more chance to prove yourself. Besides, that thief stole the treasure I wanted you to find again.

Somewhere behind the Da Chao Mountain, there's supposed to be treasure hidden by the Five Saints of Wutai. The monsters are pretty nasty but if you'd have found the first treasure I sent you after, you wouldn't have to fight them. You'd better get the treasure for me this time.

Cloud was starting to get really hungry. Of course he had plenty of rations and water, but he wanted real food and he'd been wandering around outside of the main Wutai settlement for hours without so much as recognizing an edible plant. It didn't help that there were more traps in the forest on and around Da Chao Mountain than the entirety of the rest of the world. Perhaps Lord Kisaragi let Yuffie do whatever she wanted back here.

A tiny movement caught out of the corner of his eye had him somersaulting out of the way as three crossbow bolts sliced through the air where his chest had been, and embedded themselves in a nearby tree.

Cloud took another survey of his surroundings and swore under his breath. He was mere inches from a leg trap. He plucked up a nearby rock and threw it down onto the trigger. The trap snapped up viciously, sending leaves flying up in a fountain of dead vegetation.

Cloud sighed. This was ludicrous. It would add hours to this leg of the trip to keep tiptoeing around traps. He pulled his single sword and readied the blade.

Headless of the triggers, he charged directly through the woods toward the back of the Wutaian village. He set off three more crossbows, jumped over a pitfall, and sliced his way out of a falling cage in under thirty seconds.

At least charging his way through this ridiculously over trapped forest would get him a tiny amount of exercise.

* * *

Subject: This Means War!

From: Treasurer of Wutai, Assistant to Treasure Princess Yuffie Kisaragi

I don't care that you STILL haven't shown up to find any of the treasure you're supposed to get!! That thief took the treasure from last time again!! It's time to show me what you're made of! You'd better get this next treasure or I'll make that thief rob you, too!!

Somewhere inside Da Chao Mountain, there's supposed to be treasure hidden by Lord Kisaragi himself! You'd better find it first and protect it from the thief, or else!
Turtle's Paradise was the first building he entered in the main village. The bar's atmosphere differed greatly from all the other bars Cloud usually frequented. Everything looked rather polished and tacky, like the tourist trap it was. He spotted Dio in his creepy shorts right off the bat.

"There you are, boy," Dio shouted across the length of the bar, through the small group of poorly disguised Avalanche troopers. Cloud ignored them and headed straight for Dio.

"I got here as soon as I could," Cloud said, joining Dio at the far end of the bar. "I was a few continents away, you know," he muttered.

"Hungry?" Dio asked. Then without prompting, the businessman ordered him a meal. "Eat up before we meet with the locals. Lord Kisaragi can be a tough man to deal with, shrewd business mind that one, but it's all those Crescent Unit and Avalanche people that we really have to watch out for. They're working together supposedly, but they don't much like each others' methods or philosophies." Dio smacked a hand down on the table, startling the nearby Avalanche troopers. "Such childish behavior if you ask me. Who needs all this warring when there's profit to be had and people to entertain?"

Dio was still nattering on as Cloud's food was brought to him.

"Lord Kisaragi seems rather keen on our business proposal but his Avalanche advisors and all their troops are unreasonably put out and keep trying to push for him to ignore us. You'll have to impress him to override what they're saying. He may like the idea, but he won't simply agree unless you actually make sense."

Cloud sighed, pushing the noodles around in his bowl. "I thought we were closer to closing the business deal than this. I thought I was just supposed to come sign paperwork or something."

"That's the way it was." Dio huffed and folded his arms. "I don't know what changed the Avalanche people's minds but for the last three days they've been pushing for Lord Kisaragi to completely ostracize you, and by extension, me. I don't know what you did to piss them off but they're set to ruin any ties you might form at this point."

Dio kept on in this vein throughout the whole of Cloud's meal. Cloud mentally warred between wishing Dio would shut up and grudgingly admitting that quite a bit of useful information was threaded through all the chatter. Even well after the meal, Dio kept nattering on. It actually took the Avalanche spies complaining to the pub to ask Dio to be quiet before the man quit talking long enough to lead Cloud deeper into the village.

When they turned down another path leading somewhat into the trees, Cloud realized that Dio had been having his meetings with Lord Kisaragi in the pagoda, or at least right outside it. There was nothing in that corner of the village except the pagoda.

When they entered the small clearing in front of the pagoda, not a person was in sight. Cloud couldn't help feeling wary. He would have at least expected someone from the Crescent Unit guarding outside. The lack of visible Avalanche troops was questionable but still more understandable than troops from Wutai.

Dio slid open the sliding doors of the pagoda like he had every right to be there, and perhaps he did because no one came flying out of nowhere with a spear to ward him off. Cloud followed the businessman inside to find the whole bottom floor of the pagoda full to the brim with soldiers, warriors, and probably half of Wutai village. The only reason he was able to spot Lord Kisaragi was because he sat cross-legged in the middle of a small opening among the people in the center of the floor.
The severe looking man sported a rather pointed goatee with accompanying moustache. His black hair was slicked back and that narrow-eyed scowl was probably his default expression. A few high-ranking officers of the Crescent Unit sat near their leader. Several high-ranking Avalanche officers were also prominently positioned near the center, but Cloud still saw no sign of any of the three leaders. As for everyone else, it appeared as though anyone was allowed into this meeting with Cloud and Dio.

Conversation ceased on Cloud and Dio's entry, leaving Cloud somewhat unsettled. Attention almost always led to being shot at.

"So this is your young business partner, Dio," Lord Kisaragi said, breaking the silence as Dio and Cloud made their way to the center of the room through the only path clear of people.

"This is him, Lord Kisaragi," Dio said, throwing himself on the floor.

Cloud gave the lord of Wutai a short bow before sitting cross-legged on the floor himself. "Cloud Strife, sir. I hope we'll be able to finally agree on a mutually beneficial arrangement, Lord Kisaragi."

Lord Kisaragi narrowed his eyes at Cloud for a moment before turning to the Avalanche officers. "He doesn't sound like an impudent brat." They shifted uneasily but didn't respond.

Attention back on Cloud, Lord Kisaragi said, "Dio has already told me your plans and we have the corresponding contracts drawn up. I want to hear what you think we're doing, why it's a good idea, and what's in it for you and for us."

The corner of Cloud's mouth quirked up. It seemed like Lord Kisaragi just wanted to hear Cloud's side. Cloud wouldn't put it past Avalanche to just feed as many hysterical lies to Lord Kisaragi as possible to keep him from allying with Cloud.

"You allow me to set up a tourist resort as a sovereign province in Wutai. We buy local and give you gifts proportionate to what we earn. We bring in tourists and you expand your profit base by providing additional attractions. Provided we are a sovereign province, we aren't bound by your treaty with Shinra Company in banning the use and possession of materia, meaning anyone in the boundaries of our resort may use materia belonging to our establishment. Anyone who is a resident of our territory won't be bound by the treaty either, and it will be a prime means of bringing materia into Wutai. I will get a base of operations free from any and all Shinra regulations and control and every excuse to protect my assets."

Cloud quite liked the bright gleam in Lord Kisaragi's eyes.

"I may have one or two more…points to cover," Cloud said, "but I would prefer them without the Avalanche or business audience."

Dio and the Avalanche officers protested at the same time as everyone in the crowd of onlookers broke out in irritated whisperings.

Lord Kisaragi held up a hand, the people from Wutai quieting instantly, but the Avalanche people took a few more moments to settle.

Dio leaned in close to Cloud and whispered, "What do you think you're trying to pull, boy? We're negotiating a business deal here. You can't lock me out."

Cloud fought the urge to roll his eyes and whispered back, "Trust me on this one, Dio. Leave when he sends out Avalanche."
Dio glared and huffed in irritation but didn't say anything else.

Through his little conversation with Dio, Cloud nearly missed Lord Kisaragi's order to the Avalanche officers that all were in fact going to leave. The terrorists actually tried to convince the leader of Wutai that he wouldn't be safe against one man even with the Crescent Unit in attendance. Lord Kisaragi had laughed at them then and said that if they didn't leave in the next ten seconds, the Crescent Unit would escort them out with due force.

Cloud was amused to say the least at the speed with which the Avalanche troopers vacated the pagoda. Dio followed after, taking his grumblings with him.

With no one but Cloud and the Wutai citizens left, Lord Kisaragi turned his attention expectantly to Cloud and said, "They're gone now. What's so important that you didn't want any Avalanche witnesses?"

"Would you also ask your daughter, Lady Kisaragi to join us?" Cloud asked instead of answering.

Lord Kisaragi gave another narrow-eyed scowl but the man motioned toward one of his Crescent Unit officers who promptly disappeared through the pagoda doors.

"Why," Lord Kisaragi started, "may I ask, do you want my daughter in on these negotiations?"

"She contracted me for a bit of work," Cloud said, eliciting a confused turn of the man's frown. "I thought you would like to be present when I reported to her."

"Yuffie contracted you?" Lord Kisaragi demanded. "For what?"

Cloud whipped out his PHS and scrolled through the emails. He opened it up to the first message and handed the device over. Cloud thoroughly enjoyed watching Lord Kisaragi's incredulity increase with every passing second as he read through Yuffie's not so subtle messages, though he was careful to keep his expression as flat as possible so as not to aggravate the man.

Lord Kisaragi sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose while he handed Cloud's PHS back. "Did you see the thief that did manage to raid our stores?"

Cloud quirked a brow. He supposed he should have expected that conclusion. "Let's wait until Lady Kisaragi arrives. I don't want to tell the story more than once."

Scowling, Lord Kisaragi gave a sharp nod.

Cloud sat quietly, letting nothing but his eyes behind their obscuring goggles move about. He didn't recognize any of the regular villagers or the Crescent Unit members. His encounters with Wutai natives were minimal beyond the regular interaction with Yuffie. Zack's memories were few and far between regarding Wutai as well. About the strongest recollection he had was of the Crescent Unit taking it into their heads that Zack was their ultimate nemesis.

"It's the failure!" came the sudden childish shout from the pagoda doors behind Cloud.

He twisted to see Yuffie standing petulantly, fists on her hips, glaring at him. Once she had his attention, she took the opportunity to dramatically storm into the building, her Crescent Unit escort trailing behind. Yuffie marched straight up to him, for once, taller than him because he was sitting on the floor.

Yuffie shook her fist angrily in Cloud's face. "It's your fault the thief took all my treasure!"
"Sit down, Yuffie," Lord Kisaragi demanded in exasperation. "He claims to have something to say to us both."

Yuffie narrowed her eyes and glared for all her nine-year-old little self was worth, but sat next to her father. It was all Cloud could do to not crack a smile. The little thief probably wouldn't take well to that. Cloud was actually surprised she shut up to do what her father ordered.

Lord Kisaragi gestured for Cloud to speak, curiosity sparking in his eyes.

Delving into one of his pants' cargo pockets, Cloud felt carefully for the first item. "Treasure number one," Cloud said. He waved it about in the air and set it on the floor in front of Yuffie. "A deck of playing cards with pictures of important Wutai places and people like Da Chao Mountain, Turtle's Paradise, and the Young Lady Kisaragi."

Yuffie's mouth hung slack-jawed while the bit of curiosity in Lord Kisaragi's curiosity turned to amusement.

Cloud made for the second item and pulled it out of the same cargo pocket. "Treasure number two." The folded up sheaf of papers joined the deck of cards. "A ranking of how well the Crescent Unit commanders like their underlings and the duties they are assigned based on that ranking."

Yuffie still sported her gob smacked expression but Lord Kisaragi was attempting to hide a smile in his mustache.

Cloud produced the third item from his cargo pocket, and this time, Lord Kisaragi's eyes widened and some of the Crescent Unit officers had the grace to look abashed. "The tag says this is Godo Kisaragi's lucky belt." Cloud laid the purple, gold flower patterned monstrosity with its short tassels next to the other two items.

Lord Kisaragi glared daggers at the surrounding Crescent Unit officers and Cloud spied three surreptitiously slip out sight behind their leader's back.

Cloud pulled one last item for the Kisaragi's to see. This one was a small box and Lord Kisaragi's cheeks darkened, probably in some form of embarrassment. "A collection of photos of Yuffie Kisaragi as an infant and toddler."

Tense silence hung in the air when Cloud placed the photos with the other items. Yuffie's mouth hung open and all the color drained from Lord Kisaragi's face. The Crescent Unit officers looked ready to curl up and die while what appeared to be average Wutai villagers seemed about ready to burst out laughing.

Yuffie practically rent the air with her shriek and sudden lunge toward the treasure items. Lord Kisaragi moved even faster, though, and snatched up the box. Yuffie surged to her feet and stomped with another inarticulate shriek, but made no move to try and snatch the box from her father.

Yuffie rounded on Cloud and shook her fist at him again. "You lied to me, you thief."

Cloud spoke flatly. "You contracted me to retrieve your treasure. You never said you wanted confirmation. I brought it to you in the end. I never lied. I did what you wanted."

Yuffie deflated in confusion before scooping up her precious and rather useless treasure and sitting back down next to her father.

Seeming to recover himself somewhat, Lord Kisaragi asked, "Are you actually this CS Delivery terrorist that Avalanche claims you are?"
"Would it matter either way?" Cloud asked.

Lord Kisaragi's mouth quirked up. "Are you planning on pilfering our treasures anymore after this?"

Cloud smirked. "Not unless Lady Kisaragi contracts me to do it."

"So any skills you have would be used for the benefit of this tourist resort and the betterment of Wutai?"

Obviously careful to choose his words, Cloud said, "Any skills I have are going to be used for the benefit of people, not corporations."

"What about your own corporation?"

"A tourist attraction is for entertainment and stimulating the economy. It's not for building countries or supporting political parties."

"You know," Lord Kisaragi said, "what makes your proposal so suspect is that it doesn't look suspicious. It's an unquestionable prize worth having, but that just makes me wary. It's too good to be true."

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up in a rueful way. "I'm not looking to take advantage of you. I'm looking to reduce the monopoly Shinra Company has on everything. The only places they don't have a choke hold on are the little, out of the way farms and extremely remote settlements. If we set up this new place, there won't be anything I've got dependent on Shinra. And for you, it's a completely Shinra-free venture."

"And I know that by Shinra-free you mean none of the business contracts are with them. Once Shinra Company hears about this, they won't let it alone."

Cloud nodded. "They like their monopoly."

Yuffie glared at Cloud with a rather pinched expression, but Lord Kisaragi regarded him speculatively for several long moments before gruffly saying, "This requires some deliberation. Return after sunset and we'll have an answer for you."

Taking that as his dismissal, Cloud nodded and pushed to his feet. Surprisingly, he didn't feel the itch of impending attack between his shoulder blades when he turned his back on the best warriors of Wutai to walk out of the pagoda.
"You sure you'll be alright on your own, boy?" Dio asked for the seventh time.

"I may have left Shrina," Cloud said, "but they still trained me while I was there. I can handle myself."

"Against a whole squad?" Dio's frown hid almost entirely behind his moustache.

"No one is going to attack me with a whole squad of troops." At least he would tell Dio that. Cloud had no problem with thinking either Avalanche or Wutai would send a whole squad after him, though Avalanche was much more likely to do that than Wutai.

"But you're just one boy," Dio said.

Cloud grit his teeth, staring skyward for several moments. The businessman had been arguing with him for the last ten minutes on the edge of the village. Dio needed to go. Dio would rather whine about Cloud's supposed inadequacies in the event of attack. Nothing Cloud seemed to say would placate the man.

"You researched my history right?" Cloud asked. Dio gave him a suspicious glare. "You know I'm army trained. Why are you worrying about this?"

"You're just a kid," Dio said gruffly, "and I don't want this business deal falling through. This is the biggest venture of my entire life, and the Wutai people won't give me the time of day without the novelty that comes with your oddness. If any of the local gangs decide to do you in, this plan is burnt to a crisp."

Cloud huffed a silent laugh. "Just go, Dio. I'll be fine."

Before Dio got another chance to retort, Cloud's PHS rang. Cloud jumped on the opportunity to get Dio to shut up for a few minutes. He hesitated only a moment after seeing it was Zack calling. He probably should stop ignoring his friend's calls.

Cloud flipped the PHS open and said, "Cloud Strife speaking."

"Spiky!" Zack shouted. "You answered!"

"I noticed," Cloud said dryly. He quirked a brow and mouthed at Dio, I'm fine, just go.

The businessman glared and grumbled under his breath but finally started on the path out of the village. Cloud sighed and allowed himself to focus on Zack, who was just finishing a rant about how horrible Cloud was to ignore him.

Cloud ignored the accusation because he had most notably been replying to all of Zack's emails. "Is that what this call is really about, Zack?"

"No," Zack said, "but I figured I'd get the lecture in before you hung up and started ignoring me again."

"I'm not ignoring you, Zack. I was busy."

Zack scoffed. "But you won't tell me with what."
"Zack," Cloud said, a bit of pleading in his voice. He wasn't sure what he'd do if Zack started making demands for information. It was difficult enough telling his friend half-truths. Cloud figured his story would fall apart quite spectacularly if he tried to lie.

"Fine," Zack said with an exasperated sigh. "But don't think I'm not going to force a favor out of you later. What I really want to talk about is where you are."

Cloud frowned, unsure of whether or not he should be wary of that line of talk. He wasn't in Wutai as CS Delivery. He wasn't doing anything construed as terrorism. Even though Lord Kisaragi suspected he was CS Delivery, that could hardly have gotten back to Shinra this fast, unless there was a spy sending messages during the meeting.

"What do you mean?" Cloud asked.

"Please tell me you're not in Wutai."

"What?" Cloud asked dumbly. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to not be able to leap to the conclusion that Shinra Company would be keeping track of his movements and that Zack would know about it.

"There's really heavy Avalanche movement in Wutai right now and the situation looks like it might get volatile." Zack hesitated. "I kind of have a confession to make."

Tensing, Cloud asked, "What?"

"I know you met with a man named Dio, and you seem to be doing some sort of business with him, and that he's been in Wutai. I don't want you in Wutai."

Cloud relaxed a little at that. Shinra Company didn't obviously know where he was, probably.

"You know, Spiky, if you don't want people to know who you're meeting with, you shouldn't have meetings in the Shinra Building where there's boatloads of cameras."

"It's not like I didn't think anyone at Shinra would notice," Cloud mumbled.

Zack just chuckled. The sound set Cloud a little more at ease because it meant his friend wasn't holding the fact that Cloud hadn't told him about Dio against him.

"So tell me you're not in Wutai, Spike."

Cloud winced, hoping Zack would have forgotten about that during his little rant.

"Oh, Gaia, Spike, please tell me you're not in Wutai. I was serious when I said we've got terrorist activity picking up there. Avalanche is on the move, and I don't want you caught up in it. You've got enough to deal with without bad guys with bombs showing up to spoil your day."

"I'm fine, Zack," Cloud said. The movement just beyond the edge of the village that Cloud caught with his peripheral vision completely belied his statement and the sun glinted off the barest hint of metal.

"You sound like you're trying to convince yourself there, kiddo," Zack said wryly.

"No, I just spent the last fifteen minutes arguing with Dio about how 'fine' I am," Cloud said. "I'll tell you what I told him. No one is going to jump out of the bushes and attack me. And I swear if you start calling me things like 'boy' or 'kiddo' on a regular basis, I'm not going to pick up the phone
when you call for at least a month."

"Right, then," Zack said hurriedly, "no little kid appellations. I'll stick with Cloudy as the most embarrassing nickname I use for you, alright? Just don't throw a tantrum on me. I just want to make sure you're alright."

The sharp sense of guilt prickled through Cloud's gut. "Sorry, Zack," Cloud said, voice infinitely softer. "I shouldn't have taken it out on you like that. Dio can be so damn annoying and he's half convinced I'm going to trip over my own shoes and impale myself on a passing rock or something. I have to wonder why he's even working with me if he thinks I need so much help."

"Whoa, Spiky," Zack said, incredulity obviously lacing his tone. "I think that's the most emotional and silly thing I've ever heard you say."

Cloud used his free hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. At least it seemed like his stalker in the woods was going to stay there until Cloud finished his call.

"That's not a bad thing," Zack said, almost sounding like he was trying to verbally backpedal. "I'm glad you're being a bit more open. You've always been a bit secretive you know. Not in a bad way."

Cloud couldn't help but smile a little at that. Zack was calling the teenage reticence that Cloud used to have secretive.

"You're just so quiet most of the time, and I think you could do with a bit of loudness in your life."

Cloud certainly didn't lack for that with Zack around.

"For Gaia's sake, Cloud, just say something back. I don't want you mad at me."

"I'm not mad," Cloud said, hearing the slight smile in his own tone. "You just kept talking. It's not like I'm going to interrupt you when you keep tripping over yourself like that." Cloud's smile deepened. "It's funny."

Zack spluttered incoherently, for obvious lack of a better response. Cloud couldn't help a quiet chuckle.

"But seriously, Spiky, Wutai isn't a safe place right now," Zack said.

"I'm good, Zack," Cloud said, catching the glint of yet more weapons in the forest. It seemed more than one attacker was getting antsy about ambushing him.

"That's what you think, Cloud, but that's all according to their plan."

Cloud quirked a brow even though Zack couldn't see it. "Whose plan?"

"Well, uh," Zack offered up intelligently, "that's not the important part. You're not safe in Wutai, and I think you should come pay me a visit."

"You do?" Cloud asked dryly.

"Of course," Zack said, sounding slightly affronted. "Friends look out for each other that way."

Cloud rolled his eyes but found the sentiment endearing. Zack certainly wasn't thinking of pushing Cloud away if he was still thinking about looking out for him.

"I'll swing by the next time I'm near Midgar," Cloud said.
"Hey," Zack snapped, "you can't sidestep the fact that you're in Wutai and I don't want you there."

More movement in the trees told Cloud he didn't have much time.

"I'm going to be busy here in a few moments, Zack, so we'll talk later, alright?"

"You're just ignoring my worry now, aren't you?" Zack asked.

"Bye, Zack."

"Later," Zack said sullenly.

Cloud smirked to himself, shaking his head as he stowed the PHS away. He stood, seemingly staring off into space while he watched the movement in the trees with his peripheral vision. He was still in full sight of the village so, feasibly, he could simply walk back in and wait in the Turtle's Paradise until sunset for Lord Kisaragi's answer. Of course, it wouldn't be too much trouble for him to walk out of the village and take care of all his stalkers. He just didn't want to be accused of provoking anyone and fighting on Wutai ground.

One sharp crack and a faint whistle through the air made the decision for him. He jerked his upper body sideways to dodge the bullet and caught the telltale sound of more bullets tearing toward him.

Cloud ripped the simple sword from its sheath on his back. He thought he heard one of the harnesses tear. He whipped the blade around, deflecting the bullets he couldn't dodge. A scream rang through the village behind him, and he hoped he hadn't accidentally caught one of the bystanders with a ricochet.

Unwilling to let his attackers fire into the village unchecked, he threw forward one hand and cast the only spell he had paired with an All materia. Lightning shot from his fingertips as the nearly mastered Bolt 3 crackled through the air. The magic left bright, discolored afterimages across his vision. Several trees burst into flames and pained screams floated out from where the Avalanche troops were hiding.

Without waiting for retaliation, Cloud threw a second Bolt 3 into the trees, squinting to minimize the afterimage. He could only imagine how blinding the magic would be for someone not wearing goggles like him.

Cloud was only marginally surprised when several troopers hurtled out of the trees to avoid his lightning. Of course, the screams from within the trees said he'd still hit a fair number. The three troopers who escaped his magic charged in a slightly uncoordinated manner from three slightly different angles. Cloud snapped his sword around, smacking bullets out of the way and shuffled to the side as two of the projectile sprays converged. This put him within striking distance of one of the three.

The trooper swung his gun around in attempt to bash Cloud with it. Lamenting the lack of a second sword, Cloud kept low to the ground and brought his sword around again. The clash of metal sent the Avalanche fighter soaring through the air, weapon flying in a different direction.

Cloud rounded on the other two to find guns still blazing, though the aim was a bit wide, like they were following him instead of trying to anticipate the direction he was moving. He supposed it wouldn't matter if they tried to anticipate his movements as he sprinted around them. He would look like nothing more than a blur anyway.

With a twist of his wrists, Cloud slammed the flat of his sword into the middle of the back of the nearer Avalanche trooper. Cloud wasn't sure if the obvious crack was the trooper's armor or his ribs.
He suppressed a grimace as his sword shuddered with the impact. This simple long blade probably couldn't take the kind of abuse he was used to giving his weapons.

Ignoring it for the time being, Cloud focused on the next trooper. This one already had his gun aimed at Cloud's head. Rather than trap himself on the ground, Cloud vaulted sideways, twisting and throwing his weight to flip over the path of bullets that clumsily tried to follow him. Again, Cloud brought the flat of the blade hard against his opponent. Rather than the crack of ribs or armor, he focused on a small, metallic snap. He immediately reduced the force behind the blow and the trooper merely stumbled forward to collapse.

Cloud's sword didn't appear cracked or crumbling. It looked fine. But Cloud could tell the difference with an experimental swing. Something had given and the weapon didn't feel balanced anymore, the movement was strange.

Cloud didn't have time to more deeply examine his clearly insufficient blade before another spray of bullets had him twisting and dodging away. Only this attack was coming from the direction of the village.

A quick assessment of his new opponent showed another Avalanche terrorist, but with a darker uniform and a sword strapped to his back. His eyes were covered by his helmet's visor but a cold sneer twisted his mouth, giving Cloud the vague impression that this fighter might be a bit different from the others. Perhaps this one was a commander instead of a little peon like all the rest.

Cloud's new opponent closed the distance between them with what would be considered shocking speed by anyone not mako-enhanced. As it was, the continuous rain of bullets kept Cloud where he was, deflecting projectiles without sending them back into the village. This possible Avalanche commander didn't stop firing when he switched the gun to one hand only. Of course, his aim became nearly nonexistent. With his free hand, his opponent drew his sword and swung wildly at Cloud.

Cloud brought his blade up from underneath the other's weapon, planning to break the Avalanche commander's grip and send the weapon flying. Cloud was not expecting his own sword to snap practically at the hilt, the blade embedding itself in the ground mere inches from his foot.

Cloud flung himself into a sideways roll to avoid the other sword, as he no longer had an effective means to block it. A spray of poorly aimed bullets followed him, definitely too close for comfort, but still being directed with only one hand.

Cloud threw a Fire 3 spell at his attacker and gained himself a temporary reprieve from the projectiles. He tossed away the practically useless hilt and wracked his brain for what to do now. He didn't have another sword.

The Avalanche commander burst out of the fading fire spell blade low and swinging toward Cloud. With a quiet curse, Cloud darted away again, attempting to put some distance between them. Cloud fired another Bolt 3, but his opponent simply dodged. Cloud couldn't help but wish he had decided to bring along a summon. Sure, he had Counter materia to make himself all that much more effective during a fight, but that didn't do much good when he didn't have a weapon to attack back with.

In his minor mental distraction, he missed the Avalanche commander casting Haste on himself. The man whipped his blade around and Cloud threw himself out of the way. The weapon licked up the side of Cloud's arm, sending a light spray of blood across two of the already downed troopers. His blood hissed on contact, creating a faint, green mist.

"Shit," Cloud growled under his breath as he dodged out of the way again. That damn Minerva had made his blood evaporate on contact or something. She just had to mess him up even more than he
already was.

The gash and evaporating blood distracted him enough that when he dodged the next swing of the blade, he stumbled over the third body on the ground and had to stumble out of the way.

Cloud sprinted around the small clearing, cursing under his breath and mentally lamenting his own stupidity. He'd spent years and mission upon mission upon mission with Tifa, and not *once* had he asked for a little hand-to-hand combat training. Cloud could demolish whole buildings with a few flicks of a sword, but he didn't know how to punch properly. He'd probably break his hand trying to attack anyone even halfway competent. He always sliced his hands to ribbons whenever he tried to grab an opponent's sword in a fight and he certainly wasn't about to try *that* with his trigger-happy swordsman of an opponent.

Additionally, if he tried to kick anyone, he'd probably strain his tendons or ligaments or something. He didn't think he'd *ever* had his leg stretched that high. How the hell did Tifa do it? How would he kick a blade away without cutting his boots and feet off? And how would he stop the bullets he couldn't dodge? Punch them out of the way?

Cloud evaded another spray of bullets and fired off a Fire 3. The pillar of flames scorched the grass where the Avalanche commander used to be. Cloud wondered if he could somehow get up a tree to jump on the man without getting riddled with bullets.

* * *

Raisa wished she could get away with rolling her eyes at the collective military leaders of Wutai. The imperial guard didn't want anything to do with Strife, Dio, or his business venture. The five saints wanted to give Strife the go ahead with a few more rather ridiculous conditions. The captains, colonels, and sergeants were all divided. The ninja who guarded the pagoda with Lord Godo were remaining as silent as him.

Raisa just wished they'd all agree to it and have it done with. This Strife character was an interesting guy. He was probably the single worst thing to ever happen to Shinra Company, and yet he went off running trivial errands for Lady Yuffie like he didn't have a care in the world. She was a bit perplexed as to why Strife appeared to be keeping his identity as a terrorist secret from his business partner and from Shinra, but not from the ragtag group of weirdos that intelligence gathering said he took on his terrorizing missions. Who traveled with a talking cat wolf thing and a guy who wore pointy gold armor and a raggedy cape anyway?

Refocusing on the discussion, she realized Primus was in the midst of yet another rant about how Strife was clearly the best ally for taking on Shinra Company because not only did he blow up reactors, he ran around with flocks of chocobos just to throw people's suspicions off. Wutai intelligence *still* didn't know what Strife was planning with all those birds.

Raisa's eyes slid surreptitiously to Lady Yuffie. The young ninja couldn't seem to decide what expression to keep on her face. As she stared at the *treasures* Strife presented her, her face flickered quite rapidly between confusion, elation, and childish anger. Raisa fought back a sigh as she thought over the Lady Yuffie's "plan". It was utterly ridiculous and Raisa didn't think there was even the smallest chance Lord Godo would be fooled into it, but this was Lady *Yuffie*. Perhaps she would just pester her father to death to get what she wanted.

Her gaze moved back to the pagoda guardians. Shake looked like she was about ready to split to find a little fun. Staniv and Chekov were whispering to each other about who knew what, and Gorkii didn't even look like he was paying attention.
Gaia, this meeting was boring. They all knew Lord Godo had probably already made up his mind and that he just wanted to hear what everyone had to say. Even knowing that didn't make it any less boring for her.

The pagoda doors were thrown open with a loud crack, effectively shutting off all conversation. The villager who barged into the meeting shouted, "Avalanche is attacking Strife!"

The five saints were out the door in a flash with most of those from the regular armies. The imperial guard formed a protective circle around Lord Godo and his daughter. Raisa took up her position next to Lady Yuffie, readying her overly large shuriken in defense.

Without conversation to fill the air, Raisa could hear the gunshots from the direction of the village. The occasional boom heralded a spell. Raisa could only hope that neither Strife nor Avalanche was blowing up the village.

Then everything went silent. Raisa couldn't tell if that was a good thing. It could mean that the village was gone or that they'd just run far enough away in their fight to leave hearing range.

And then Secundus appeared at the door. "My Lord, you should see this."

The imperial guard relaxed a bit as the saint wouldn't invite their lord into danger. Raisa made sure to remain near Lady Yuffie even as the young ninja just about vibrated as she walked with impatience to run out and see what was going on before her father.

The knot of worry in Raisa's gut unwound a bit as they reached the village. Nothing seemed out of place, and the smoke hanging in the air seemed to be in the trees on the other side of the houses.

Raisa couldn't see more than hints of yellow hair and bits of a dull sweater through the crowds of Wutai troops. At least the villagers were hanging back.

Primus joined Lord Godo and the guards and whispered, "We got out here just in time to see Strife launch himself out of a tree and land on the last attacker's head."

They finally got close enough that the troops parted. Strife was sitting cross-legged on the ground, no sword, no gun, no weapon of any kind, blood covering his arm. Oddly enough, he looked kind of exasperated, even with those ridiculous goggles covering up his eyes.

Lord Godo stopped in front of the potential business partner terrorist, who looked up at him neutrally. Lord Godo said, "You can certainly take care of yourself."

Strife huffed what might have been a quiet laugh. "It would have been easier if I hadn't broken my sword."

Raisa's eyes found the useless hilt with its blade a good twenty feet away.

"We have a fine weapons dealer in the village."

Strife simply nodded, peering unconcernedly around at the now groaning Avalanche troopers.

"I'll sign your contract, Strife," Lord Godo said.

Strife only looked at Lord Godo in response.

"I'll sign if you agree to the additional stipulation that a Wutai operative is to remain with you or your subordinates at all times."
Strife asked, "Who do you want to send with me?"

"Me!" Lady Yuffie shrieked in her high-pitched, little girl voice.

Raisa expected it, but to hear Lady Yuffie screech it out like that was a teeny bit startling.

"You're not running around Gaia with some stranger, Yuffie," Lord Godo said with no small amount of exasperation.

"I will," Lady Yuffie countered. "Even if you don't let me go, I'll escape you and my guards and I'll follow him and he'll let me because I've agreed to let him work for me finding treasure."

Lord Godo glared at his daughter for several moments then turned his gaze to Raisa. "Raisa Hazuki, you will accompany my daughter on this little excursion of hers and keep her safe."

"Yes, my lord," Raisa answered with a nod. She couldn't help but catch the slight smirk tugging at the corners of Strife's mouth. Raisa wasn't sure if she should be irked that Strife thought the whole situation was funny or not.

* * *

Cloud eyed Yuffie sideways, keeping half an ear on her chatter about Wutai supremacy the art of treasure stealing. The little girl was bound and determined to mold Cloud into the perfect treasure hunting assistant and figuring out all his secrets. She wasn't the best spy. Cloud would simply have to make sure Yuffie never ended up with a way to speak with anyone in Shinra Company that he didn't have control over, especially Zack or Sephiroth. One well thought out question and Yuffie would send Cloud's whole farce tumbling down around his ears.

Cloud reached over his shoulder and touched the hilt of his new Murasame sword. The thin blade was so light it rarely felt like it was actually there. He had to wonder if Sephiroth ever had problems with forgetting he had the thin bladed sword on him. He figured the Masamune would be long enough to weigh more than the Murasame, but Sephiroth was taller and therefore he weighed more so a heavier sword might go unnoticed for that man as the lighter sword went unnoticed for Cloud.

Brushing that ridiculous train of thought aside, Cloud eyed the brown-eyed, brown-haired Hazuki, wondering just how much of her role was meant to spy on him and how much was meant to protect Yuffie. The ninja looked a great deal like a grown Yuffie with different coloring and a slightly rounder face, but her temperament wasn't nearly as volatile.

"So, Strife," Hazuki started during a lull in Yuffie's rambling, "where exactly are we going?"

Cloud shrugged. "For now, we're meeting up with the others."

"Where?"

"The western continent."

"Where on the western continent?"

"Somewhere between Rocket Town, North Corel, and Costa del Sol."

"That's not very precise," Hazuki said, hints of sarcasm creeping into her voice.

"Where we meet them depends on how long it took them to run the errand I sent them on."

"What errand?"
Frowning, Cloud asked, "What does it matter?"

The woman huffed and said, "I need to know how it affects Lady Yuffie's safety."

Fighting the urge to roll his eyes, Cloud said, "If you look at it a certain way, it makes her safer." Cloud was markedly more efficient with his custom swords than any other weapon or weapon combination he could use.

"That's not very specific."

"Nope." Cloud figured he'd make sure this ninja bodyguard knew exactly how likely he was to answer questions he didn't feel like answering.

"Well, what about the people we're meeting?"

"What about them?"

"Who are they?"

One corner of Cloud's mouth quirked up. "Do you think you'll know them?"

Rather than answer, Hazuki huffed and glared at the horizon. They still had at least half a day before they reached the boat landing on the southern beach.

Cloud had a blessed thirty-two seconds of silence before Yuffie broke the silence.

"Why are you wearing those stupid goggles?" she demanded.

With a sigh, Cloud pulled them down so the goggles rested loosely around his neck.

"Liar!" Yuffie shrieked, promptly trying to kick Cloud's shin.

Cloud hopped out of the way, scowling.

"You work for Shinra, you lying thief," Yuffie continued.

"Why would I be working against Shinra," Cloud asked, "if I was working for them?"

Confusion twisted Yuffie's face and gave Cloud a chance to check the bodyguard's reaction. She just seemed wary, her expression a bit too hooded for Cloud to properly read.

"But your eyes are glowing," Yuffie pointed out, as though he hadn't known.

Unwilling to justify himself to a nine-year-old, even if the nine-year-old was a former friend, he started walking through the tall grass again.

Yuffie followed, no longer walking next to him, but behind him. Cloud made sure to keep his attention on her because he didn't want to lose all the materia he had. Mastered magic was not something that belonged in a child's possession.

Hazuki asked, "Were you one of their experiments?"

Cloud's frown deepened.

"Experiments?" Yuffie asked, actually sounding more wary than curious.

Fortunately, Hazuki took it upon herself to explain to the child. "Shinra Company experiments on
people with mako to make them stronger soldiers. Not everyone they experiment on volunteers for the tests."

Yuffie was instantly at Cloud's side again. He surreptitiously checked his materia.

"So did they lock you in some secret medical lab and pump you full of evil, mutated mako then and that's why your eyes glow like that?"

Cloud couldn't help the small smile that crept across his face. Leave it to Yuffie to accurately guess what happened. Of course, he couldn't exactly tell her that. Zack and Shinra Company still thought he'd just woken up enhanced in the training yard. But Tseng knew the real story, and Cloud figured it would come back to bite him if he told Yuffie the lie and the Turk said something telling both ninja that there'd been something deeper going on.

He sighed, unable to figure out how to get around telling the ninja what happened. Eventually. Perhaps if he just told them as little as possible. So Cloud said, "Yeah. That's what happened."

Indignantly, Yuffie demanded, "What were you thinking between when I asked and when you said yes?"

Hoping it would shut the little girl up for a few minutes, Cloud said, "I was trying to decide whether or not to lie to you."

"So what?" Yuffie aimed another kick at his shin that Cloud dodged. "You just decided not to say anything?"

Cloud shook his head, one side of his mouth curling up slightly. "I decided not to lie."

"That's not telling me anything," Yuffie said, scowling as best as her little girl face could. With a shaken fist and an inarticulate roar that sounded remarkably like a shriek, Yuffie launched herself at Cloud with a flying kick.

Cloud sidestepped and snatched her by the ankle. She thrashed and squirmed so he dropped her on her head, where she collapsed with an indignant squawk. Hazuki seemed more shocked than anything else. The bodyguard stared slack-jawed at her charge. Cloud just shook his head and kept walking. They'd catch up with him eventually. The trip would certainly be interesting if Yuffie kept trying to attack him.
Zack slammed a fist into the conference table. "This is serious. We have to deploy in Wutai again."

Vice President Shinra, in his immaculate white suit, massaged his temples, eyes slightly narrowed at Zack. "Shinra Company does not deploy on foreign soil for your hysterical whims, Fair."

"But Avalanche could be selling Cloud on the black market," Zack argued.

"Zaaaaaack," Reno drawled, head resting on the table, "those damn Avalanche psychos don't do the slave trade." The Turk looked rather drab in his faded, gray, baggy shirt and pants. Reno wasn't even wearing any shoes.

"They could capture him," Zack said, trying to get his sense of urgency across, "and send him to a training camp where they'll brainwash him into hating Shinra Company more than he fears being dragged into experiments."

"But Zack," Tuesti said, words slightly slurred with tiredness, "Avalanche doesn't have a shortage of volunteers. They don't even have training camps, let alone brainwashing camps."

"But Spike doesn't have enough training to stand on his own if he gets caught in the crossfire between Wutai and Avalanche."

"Strife has been running around Gaia for ages without you," Cissnei said, looking just as asleep as Reno. "What makes this so different?"

"Because Spiky was lying," Zack said, hoping the pleading edge in his voice would persuade at least one of them.

"How do you know that?" Shinra asked. "You already explained that you don't have legitimate proof."

"Cloud got all emotional during our conversation."

Kunsel scoffed. "That kid is too quiet to get emotional, Zack."

"He was emotional," Zack said. "He froze when I confronted him about Wutai, like he was guilty of something. He snapped at me about a stupid nickname then got ridiculously repentant over it. Then he was amused like nothing had happened, and he practically hung up on me. Erratic behavior in Spike means he's under stress. He only gets like this around the Soldier evaluations." Glaring at Kunsel, Zack demanded, "And why the hell are you wearing your helmet?"

The Second Class Soldier was indeed wearing his helmet, along with some pale green, baggy pajamas and fuzzy, brown socks.

"I wasn't thinking when you called this emergency meeting, Zack," Kunsel said irritably. "I grabbed my helmet and ran out the door. It's the middle of the damn night. Besides, you can't claim to be better dressed in that hideous, yellow monstrosity."

Zack's scowl deepened as he stared down at his own pajamas. A happy, cartoon dog posed playfully on the front of his chocobo yellow shirt. Miniature versions of the same dog littered the pants. "At least I'm wearing proper shoes and brought my sword," Zack countered. Indeed, he had his pajama bottoms tucked into his combat boots, and his sword was slung across his back in its harness.
"Yeah," Reno drawled, "and you look like a damn nutcase."

"Zack?" Sephiroth said, effectively cutting through the useless conversation.

Zack turned to face the fully dressed general, wondering if the man slept in his uniform.

"Why were you calling Strife in the middle of the night? You didn't know he would be on the opposite side of the planet where it would still be daylight."

"I couldn't sleep," Zack said. "Something felt wrong, like a disturbance or something, like Cloud was in danger."

Reno scoffed. "Did your overprotective brother 'oh-shit' alarm go off?"

"This is serious," Zack insisted.

"He's got a point, Zack," Kusbel said. "You're an awesome pal, but you should invest in more friends. You're gonna wear Cloud out if this keeps up."

Zack threw his head back with a frustrated growl. Why didn't they understand? Why didn't they see? Cloud was in trouble, and no one believed Zack. While they all sat there complaining about being tired, Cloud was getting into who knew what kind of trouble in a country that hated everything associated with Shinra Company and consorting with a terrorist group that also hated anything related to Shinra Company. Cloud may have withdrawn from the military, but he was still pumped full of mako and everyone knew that meant Soldier. The thought of what Avalanche or Wutai might do to Cloud made Zack nauseous.

"Zack," Sephiroth said, catching Zack's attention again. "Why is this call different? You've had countless conversations with Strife and expressed worry about him, but this is extreme even for you."

Zack ran a hand over his face. "It's because he was stressed and hiding something from me. Spike doesn't usually try both at the same time."

"Strife tries to be stressed?" Shinra asked.

"Kind of?" Zack offered, scowling.

Whatever the vice president may have offered after that was lost as his PHS rang. Shinra answered in clipped tones before his frown grew somewhat pinched. He set the PHS on speaker and set it on the table. "Tseng has something to report."

The Turk's voice immediately started. "One faction within Avalanche attacked CS Delivery, or possibly Cloud Strife."

"What?!" Zack bellowed.

"Zack," Sephiroth snapped sharply.

Zack actually found himself on his feet again and hastily sat back down.

"As I was saying," Tseng continued, "Veld is getting mixed information as the factions he is most familiar with didn't participate in the attack."

"It was Strife," Sephiroth said, raising his voice so the PHS would pick it up. "Zack has been attempting to convince the vice president to mobilize the military on his behalf."
"And now we'll have to," Zack said. "Cloud's been captured by Avalanche, and we can't let them keep him."

"There's no need," Tseng said, "Strife handled them. He apparently also got his business deal that he's working on with Dio to go through properly. The issue isn't exactly Strife here. The issue is that Avalanche essentially lost its Wutai stronghold and CS Delivery through this business deal and the unprovoked attack. The issue is that Avalanche is splintering. Fuhito went against Elfé and Shears in this attack, and they're extremely close to cutting ties with him."

Suddenly seeming awake, Reno demanded, "How the hell did Strife handle Avalanche?"

"I don't know," Tseng answered bluntly. "I don't know how advanced his opponents were. I don't know what sort of weapons they might have used. I don't know what weapons Strife used. I don't know what the Wutai did. I don't know what happened to the defeated Avalanche troops. The only thing that's clear is that Strife and CS Delivery have ruined Avalanche. Avalanche may not be gone, but they're splintering and have lost their staunchest ally."

Zack wasn't sure what to make of things. His buddy Cloud had defeated a number of Avalanche operatives. By himself. Of course Cloud had encounters with low-level Avalanche troops before on his Shinra missions, but he'd always had backup, been part of a group, and used a gun. How could Cloud have taken on more than one enemy by himself?

Zack's first instinct was to whip out his own PHS and call Cloud until the other answered. If Cloud didn't want to pick up, he'd probably run his own power cell dead. But what else could he do but try and call Cloud? He couldn't just leave to go look for him. He had obligations to Shinra Company, and Gaia knew Sephiroth shouldn't have anyone just up and leave again after that debacle with Genesis and Angeal.

With Cloud being able to supposedly handle himself, the likelihood of Shinra mobilizing was practically nothing. Even if Cloud had the strange protection CS Delivery offered, there was less than any reason for Shinra to offer additional support.

Zack attention refocused at a hand waving in front of his face. Reno had vacated his seat and come around the table to catch his eye. "You've been spacing out for five minutes, Fair."

"Zack," Sephiroth started.

Zack eyed the general, feeling a bit numb.

Sephiroth frowned. "Are you alright, Zack?"

"Cloud's out there by himself getting into fights with Avalanche." Zack's voice sounded vaguely absent even to himself. He watched with detachment as everyone around the table exchanged glances.

"Fair," the vice president started, "when was the last time you slept?"

Zack scowled in confusion. "Maybe night before last?"

Shinra let out a light sigh and more than one head shook in exasperation. "I order you to go to sleep, Fair," the vice president said. "If you have to, ask for a tranquilizer from the science department."

Zack gaped at the vice president. "But there's work I need to do."

"You can't contribute," Sephiroth said, "if you don't pay attention. I second the order for you to go
Zack wanted to object but the protests died on his lips. He couldn't really come up with a reason as to why he should. Perhaps the others were right, and he should get some rest.

* * *

Cloud had to conclude that Hazuki was excellent for keeping Yuffie entertained for short stretches of time. Cloud could handle Yuffie's antics as she was no where near as competent as her future counterpart, but he didn't even have to do anything half the time.

Yuffie would ask a question. Then Hazuki would ask a question. Then Yuffie would ask Hazuki a question about that question. The two usually ended up arguing and forgetting either of the original questions and never seem to realize Cloud hadn't told them anything.

Cloud found it difficult sometimes to keep a straight face when their questions took random turns about the optimum length of chocobo tail feathers and how to tell what day of the week it was by the shape of clouds at midday.

He had to secretly admit that he enjoyed having people around him, but what made it better was that he didn't actually have to speak a great deal of the time as his companions unintentionally entertained themselves.

This was how Cloud found himself entering Costa Del Sol. Yuffie and Hazuki were arguing about the best type of sand, not noticing Vincent, Nanaki, and Tseng approaching through the crowds of swimwear-clad beach goers. For being ninja and thieves, Cloud would have expected them to notice the only people in sight wearing a suit and a tattered, red cape with a giant creature with a fire lit tail. Cloud shook his head to himself. Perhaps it wasn't subtle enough for them to pay any attention. If Vincent was on the roof trying to hide, it would catch their attention.

Cloud slowed to a stop in the middle of the street, Vincent doing the same in front of him. The gunman eyed Yuffie and Hazkui before saying, "I was unaware you would be bringing guests."

"Quiet, you big idiot!" Yuffie snapped, brandishing her fist at Vincent. "We're not guests. We're here to keep an eye on Cloud to make sure he doesn't do anything fishy."

Rather than address the supposed monitoring, Tseng said, "That's Lady Yuffie Kisaragi, Lord Kisaragi's daughter." The Turk didn't manage to keep his surprise hidden, if he was even trying.


Cloud caught the barest hint of an amused twitch to Vincent's mouth. Tseng looked a bit perplexed. "I'm Shinra Company's liaison with Strife and his companions."

Of course there was the obvious lack of his identification as a Turk.

"I knew it!" Yuffie crowed, drawing the curious gaze of a few of the people passing them on the street. "The evil man confessed, Cloud!" Yuffie pointed at Tseng. "I declare him guilty of treason and demand you execute judgment and throw him in prison."

Hazuki looked mortified with her mouth hanging open, and Cloud could tell Vincent was fighting off a slight smile. Cloud wondered when the two of them would realize Tseng was Wutaian and what they would think of the ex-patriot.
"Yuffie," Cloud started slowly, "I'm the one that brought Tseng." Shock flashed across her face. "Besides, you can't throw him in prison for having a job. We're not even in Wutai. You can't just go around condemning people to prison." Cloud had never had a more difficult time not laughing in his entire life. Of all the harebrained things Yuffie had tried, throwing a Turk in prison for admitting to working for Shinra was not one of them.

"But you have to do what I say," Yuffie said incredulously. "You're my minion."

Vincent coughed to cover up a laugh, and Hazuki was having trouble schooling her features now, too.

"This doesn't have anything to do with treasure hunting missions, Yuffie," Cloud said. "I can't go around throwing people in prison either."

"Why not?" she demanded, belligerence creeping back into her tone. "You beat up all those Avalanche troopers."

"They attacked me so I subdued them." Cloud shook his head. "I didn't try to arrest them. There's a difference."

"Fine," Yuffie blurted, "I'll do it myself." With that, the little girl darted forward. It was Vincent who took the opportunity to stop her. The gunman picked the girl up by the back of her shirt as she tried to slip past him. He hoisted her off the ground and held her aloft even as she tried to kick and punch her way free. Her efforts weren't very effective as she couldn't quite reach him to kick properly.

Hazuki didn't seem quite sure whether or not she should intervene as her eyes constantly darted between the others. Tseng still seemed a bit startled at being confronted with Wutai's heir and Nanaki only stared on as he watched the scene play out.

With his free hand, Vincent reached over his shoulder and drew a long blade from off his back. Extending the handle to Cloud, he said, "Your sword. I've never seen a design like this, Cloud. I assume it functions as you explained to Nanaki and myself?"

"Yes." Cloud carefully took the weapon proffered him, feeling the familiar weight of it in his hands. The weapon maker had done an excellent job. With his fusion sword in hand, Cloud breathed a sigh of relief, releasing the tension he didn't realize he had. Fights were always sketchy with the other swords he'd been using. They were good, but nowhere near as excellent or familiar as his own sword. He was never entirely sure he would be able to fight properly without his fusion sword. His sword skills were meaningless if they didn't match his weapon.

"Crazy weirdo," Yuffie declared, a bit of disgust coloring the child's tone.

Cloud tore his attention away from his fusion sword to stare her down. Vincent had apparently set her on her feet while Cloud was reacquainting himself with his sword.

Shifting uncomfortably with a scowl, Yuffie said, "You're looking at the sword like it's your best friend."

Cloud huffed a quiet laugh and rolled his eyes. He slung the sword onto his back and started toward the docks, hearing the others following behind while Vincent and Nanaki kept pace next to him.

Loud enough for Yuffie to hear, Cloud said, "The fusion sword is my best weapon. Hopefully, you'll never have to see me use it to its full functionality."

"Why not?" Yuffie scoffed. "It's just a sword. Shuriken are much better than swords."
Cloud bit the inside of his lip to keep from smiling. Just a sword indeed.

* * *

“This is the most awesome place ever!” Yuffie yelled from the top of a nearby, crumbling, conical Ancient house. “I’ve already found three treasure chests! Treasure Princess Yuffie rules!” With that, the tiny girl jumped through a hole in the roof she was standing on and disappeared. Again.

Cloud shook his head and kept walking. He could spy the smirk on Vincent’s mouth from the corner of his eyes. Cloud had to agree with the sentiment. He had a hard time keeping in his mirth.

Hazuki fell into step on the other side of Vincent and eyed the two men nervously. Cloud was only thankful she wasn’t shooting narrow-eyed glares at Tseng when she thought no one was looking.

“Yuffie isn’t going to be in trouble for looting the ruins, is she?”

Mouth twitching, Cloud said, “The only person who can try to claim these ruins is my friend Aerith, and she won’t mind.”

Tseng cut in from behind them, “Ms. Gainsborough won’t mind Lady Yuffie stealing?” The Turk seemed more perplexed than Cloud would have expected.

Cloud shrugged, glancing at Tseng over his shoulder. “Aerith would probably think it was cute.”

“From what I know of her,” Nanaki said, “she would probably hide more so-called treasure just to amuse the small ninja.”

Cloud nodded, the corner of his mouth kicking up.

Cloud’s PHS rang, interrupting the conversation. Cloud fished it out of his pocket and scowled at the small device. He pressed a button on the outside to silence it and shoved it back in his pocket.

“Fair again?” Vincent asked quietly.

Cloud nodded sharply.

“You can’t ignore him forever,” the gunman said.

Cloud shrugged, trying to ignore the feel of Tseng’s gaze on his back.

“Is the prospect of facing Sephiroth so dangerous?” Hazuki asked. “I mean, I know he’s the demon of Wutai, but you already faced him once and he couldn’t do anything to you.”

“Strife’s plans right now depend on Shinra Company not discovering his identity as CS Delivery,” Tseng said. "The general has the best chance of seeing through the ruse."

Cloud scowled.

“That’s wrong,” Nanaki said.

“What do you mean?”

Cloud could hear the frown in Tseng’s voice.

Nanaki said, “Cloud doesn’t wish Zack Fair to learn the truth before Cloud is ready to tell him.”

“But he’s your friend,” Hazuki said. “He’s not going to hate you.”
Cloud sighed. “I don’t know if Zack can ever really hate anyone. But he might think it’s a betrayal, and he wouldn’t have to hate me to never want to talk to me again.”

Hazuki muttered something suspiciously similar to “overly dramatic five-year-old” before speaking for all to hear. “If you’re so worried about him finding out when you don’t want him to, why don’t you just tell him?”

“Because then he’d have to tell Shinra company.”

“But he’s your friend. Why would he inform on you?”

“Because the big oaf still believes in Shinra Company. I can’t ask him to betray that.”

“Why?” Tseng asked. “Because then he’d have to choose between you and Shinra Company?”

Cloud shook his head. “Because he’d probably leave Shinra just because of me.” He eyed the Turk over his shoulder. “Did it never occur to you that if that idiot Angeal had actually told Zack what was going on and asked him to come, he probably would have?”

“Zack is loyal to the company,” Tseng said.

“Zack is loyal to certain people in the company first,” Cloud said. “There’s a difference. Shinra Company was lucky Angeal was the only person Zack lost to that stupid, failed insurrection, and that he didn’t like Genesis. Zack already told me he won’t make me go back to the company and that he’s going to protect me from whoever did whatever he thinks they did to me. Aerith is on my side. Zack might stick with the company for Sephiroth, but the chances of the general going berserk are decent.”

Several quiet moments passed before Tseng said, “I see your point.”

An uncomfortable quiet fell over the group. Hazuki drifted back to walk with Nanaki behind Tseng. Cloud only hoped the woman didn't think she was actually being subtle. If Cloud had noticed, then Tseng had probably noticed, too.

Cloud almost felt bad for the Turk. Tseng was still obviously uncomfortable with Vincent and Nanaki, only speaking to Cloud if the others were a polite distance away or a conversation was already underway. It didn’t help that Yuffie tried to chuck rocks at the man when she was bored. Of course, Yuffie tried to chuck rocks at everyone but Hazuki when she was bored. And Hazuki, of course, always had this air of wariness around Tseng.

The woman was clearly more suited to something that didn't involve infiltration or socializing. As far as Cloud was concerned, she only came with three states of being: horrified—generally at Yuffie’s behavior, confused—generally at anything Cloud tried to explain, and wary—generally in regard to everyone but Cloud and Yuffie, but especially at Tseng.

Cloud's pensive mood broke entirely his PHS rang again. When he got a chance to see the screen, he frowned at Aerith’s number.

He flipped it open and answered. “I’m busy, Aerith. Can I call you back, or is it an emergency?”

“I knew it!” Zack screeched through the line. Everyone on Cloud’s end heard, probably even Yuffie, who was off somewhere pilfering ruins.

“You’ve been ignoring me!” Zack yelled.
“I told you I was busy and would call when I was in the area,” Cloud said, keeping his tone down in the hopes that it would curb some of Zack’s volume.

“You answered Aerith’s phone,” Zack shot back.

“To tell her I was busy and to ask if I could call her back, which is exactly what I did with you two days ago.”

“But you aren’t answering my calls now.”

“Because you should already know that I’m busy and will call you back later.” Cloud sighed. “I’ve got to go, Zack.”

“Wait, Spiky,” Zack blurted, suddenly sounding pleading, “Talk with me for just a minute.”

“What, Zack?” Cloud asked exasperatedly, sorely tempted to hang up on the man.

“When are you going to be in Midgar?” Zack asked, clearly trying to sound innocent.

“I don’t know. A few days maybe. A week.”

“Great,” Zack said. “Then you can meet up with me and Sephiroth, and maybe Kusm, too. He says you’re really entertaining.”

“Zack,” Cloud said with a sigh.

“Sephiroth is not that bad,” Zack said. “He’s a nice guy. Kind of awkward, but nice. He won’t try to kidnap you. I promise.”

“I’ll think about it,” Cloud hedged.

“No more thinking, Spiky. Make up your mind,” Zack said. “I made him promise not to do anything. Even if you don’t trust him, trust me. He’ll play nice. You’ll be fine. It’ll all be good.”

Cloud desperately wanted to bang his head against something. Of course Zack just had to bring up trust issues. Cloud couldn’t do anything but trust the only one of the two of them who was telling the truth. “Fine,” he whispered.

Zack let out a prolonged whoop that actually caused a feedback whine over the PHS. Grumpily, Cloud said, “I’m hanging up now,” and did exactly that, cutting off the sounds of Zack’s continued jubilations.

“Did you just agree to meet with the general?” Tseng asked as they approached the mostly intact building that housed the re-entrance to the underground capital.

Cloud scowled in response.

“How did Zack accomplish that?” the Turk asked in bewilderment.

Cloud clenched his jaw in irritation at Zack’s unwitting connivance.

Vincent said, “Fair accidentally implied that Cloud didn’t trust him by refusing to meet with Sephiroth.”

“How do you do that accidentally?” Hazuki asked.
Nanaki said, “Fair is aware that Cloud doesn’t trust Sephiroth, but told Cloud that he should trust Fair.”

Yuffie jumped down into their midst from another roof. “What are you all doing heading to that building?” she asked, pointing to Cloud’s destination. “I’ve already been in there. The only awesome thing is a fish projection that I couldn’t figure out how to steal yet.”

Brushing off his thoughts about Sephiroth, Cloud kicked up one side of his mouth at the pint sized ninja and said, “That’s where I’ve hidden all my treasure.”

Yuffie gaped, stopping dead in her tracks. “No way!”

Cloud glanced over his shoulder at her and kept walking. Even Vincent was hiding a small smile, and Nanaki’s tail was twitching a bit more exuberantly than usual. Hazuki seemed worried.

Like a bolt of lightning, Yuffie shot off in front of them, sprinting straight toward the building. Cloud chuckled to himself. Clearly, the little girl thought she would now find his treasures and pilfer the lot before he could stop her.

Yuffie was spitting mad and stomping up a storm when Cloud and the others finally joined her. From her position on top of a rickety table, Yuffie pointed at Cloud and demanded, “Hand over your treasures, minion, and you won’t be punished.”

Cloud rolled his eyes and headed straight for the holographic fish. Over his shoulder, he eyed Vincent and Nanaki. “Don’t let her destroy the building.” Both nodded.

Cloud took one last look at Yuffie’s thunderous expression and stepped through the portal, almost wishing he could hear her tantrum through the barrier.

Cloud encountered few ghosts on his way down, and the hidden chamber he had everything in was empty of other beings. He deposited the replacement sword he’d picked up in Wutai on the weapons rack with all the rest of the swords he’d acquired. With the fusion sword in his possession, he no longer needed anything else.

He eyed the shuriken he’d picked up and smiled thoughtfully. Yuffie would probably assault him for hiding such weapons away from her, but she wasn’t even ready for the least lethal of the ones he’d picked up. She would just have to wait, even though she didn’t know it.

Ignoring the weapons, he headed toward the Huge materia and started fishing all the mastered magic materia he had out of his bag. Once he had a nice pile of green materia beneath the hovering Huge materia, he touched the chunk of mako to activate it so he could get his Master Magic materia.

Nothing happened.

No flash of light. No building energy. No nothing. The pile of mastered green materia simply sat there.

Cloud sat back on the floor and massaged the bridge of his nose. Just on the off chance of something happening, he touched the Huge materia again. Still nothing.

He knew he’d never get a reliable, steady signal out so he pulled out his PHS to send messages. To Aerith, he wrote, “Remember the Master materia? I’ve got a pile and the Huge stuff and nothing is happening. Suggestions?”

A few moments later, he got his reply. “Are you sure you have them all? P.S. Don’t neglect Zack.”
He’s like a puppy that requires much positive reinforcement.”

He chuckled and composed his reply. “I’ve got them piled up in front of me. I counted them. Zack’s visited you more than three days in a row, hasn’t he?”

After reading Aerith’s next response, he smacked himself in the forehead. “Cloud, dear, you have to be holding the materia, or have it in your bag, or the larger one doesn’t see it. And Zack would visit more than once a day if he could get away with it.”

A short time later, Cloud emerged from the under-city through the holographic fish, and in possession of his first Master Magic materia.

He ducked out of the way as Yuffie launched herself at him from the top of a decaying railing. “Let me in there!” she demanded.

Vincent intervened by hauling Yuffie into the air by the back of her shirt before she could perform another attack. The young ninja thrashed ineffectually and screeched some nonsense about red eyed monsters planning to eat treasure princesses. Then she just plain screamed when a Cetra ghost popped into the middle of the small group.

The ghost bobbed around a bit as Yuffie calmed down. It stared at Cloud and floated slowly toward the door. Cloud sighed and followed. At least he didn’t have to chase it down, running through a dozen doors just to catch it.

Vincent stepped up next to him to whisper, “Is that one of the remnants of the Ancients you told Nanaki and I about last time?”

Cloud nodded.

“Where is it going?” he asked.

Cloud shrugged. “Maybe the coliseum with the projector.”

The group made their way to the far side of the Forgotten Capital, Yuffie still glowering and everyone else seemingly nervous or pensive. Cold light filtered through the coliseum arches as Cloud picked his way through the sparse rubble. He listened to Yuffie purposely kick rocks in front of everyone and over the outer edge. No one else in the group made a sound.

Cloud’s thoughts wandered skittishly as they approached the narrow walkway out to the projector, slightly anxious and more than a little curious about what they would be shown. At least he knew it wouldn’t be like last time where he would have to relive Aerith’s murder. His friend was very much alive and marginally safe back in Midgar. She could take care of herself, even if she was stuck in a younger body.

Even Yuffie grew silent when they reached the walkway. Cloud followed the ghost without hesitation, but the others followed with more caution. The ghost fluttered about once they all reached the platform, then the central apparatus began to glow. Light rushed into the air in a cascade of images, looking like falling water.

Cloud screwed up his face in confusion when images of his fight in Wutai with Avalanche’s forces lit up for the group. He watched the first three gunmen go down and his own pause to stare at the soon-to-be-broken long sword. At least with the strange, Cetra cinematography, he got to watch his final opponent slink out of the trees behind him and start firing.

Cloud cringed when his blade snapped. The broken end had been closer than he remembered to his
foot, dangerously close. The image lit up with spells as Cloud was left with no options besides that other than to dodge. He watched the Avalanche fighter take advantage of his distraction to cast Haste on himself and give the resulting injury to Cloud's arm.

The images took a surprising turn then when the focus followed the spray of blood from his arm and the splatter on the unconscious terrorists. His blood evaporated in a green mist, and then the image flashed white.

Cloud scowled at the Cetra's ghost. "I don't understand." He shrugged. "Minerva decided my blood was better off evaporating."

The ghost frantically shook its head, and the images restarted. Cloud folded his arms in irritation. The last time Cloud had seen anything on this projector, it had been for the purpose of showing him Holy had been already summoned. That told them what their next step was supposed to be. This sequence was obviously supposed to do the same thing, but he couldn't reason as to why his blood evaporating would be important. Knowing Holy had been summoned was the reason Cloud and the others went to the center of Gaia. What sort of quest was evaporating blood supposed to send him and this new group of cohorts on?

Vincent stepped up next to him and whispered, "Have you never had any hand-to-hand combat training, Cloud?"

Cloud's scowl deepened, his eyes flicking to the rest of the group. Only Nanaki seemed to have heard what the gunman asked.

"Nothing useful," Cloud whispered back. "I utterly failed as a new recruit at hand-to-hand."

The corner of Vincent's mouth turned up as he continued to stare.

"Shut up," Cloud whispered irritably, turning his attention back to the images just as his blood hit the unconscious fighters again.

Cloud turned cold as he felt the color drain from his face. He knew what the Ancients wanted him to see. The ghost bobbing in front of him seemed to realize this as the lights in the air died and the ghost itself faded out of sight.

"Oh, hell," Cloud whispered to himself, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Turn it back on," Yuffie demanded. "I'm not done watching. What kind of materia is that, Cloud? Where did you get it?"

Ignoring the girl, Cloud brushed past the others and started back down the walkway. He had to talk to Aerith. He wasn't even sure what the hell this meant, but he couldn't imagine it was entirely good.

"Don't run away, you coward," Yuffie yelled after him. "Where'd that materia come from?"

Nanaki caught up to him first and had to trot to keep up with Cloud's strides. "What did the vision from the Ancients show you, Cloud?"

Cloud eyed his friend sideways, then glanced over his shoulder to see everyone at least ten feet back. He faced forward, the shadows from the arches passing over his face. "Something I wasn't expecting."

"For the good or for the bad?" Nanaki asked carefully.
Cloud shrugged. "I need to talk to Aerith."

"Something mysterious then."

Cloud didn't bother to respond. A faint sense of cracked and shifting glass woke in the back of his mind. He held a hand out, indicating for Nanaki to stop before Cloud stepped into the sunlight outside of the coliseum. Now that he knew how to track it, he could follow the movement like he could with Sephiroth.

A volley of Firaga announced Genesis' presence. Cloud didn't bother with magic as he knew where his opponent was, and leapt off the ground, twisting between the fire balls. Clear of the magic, he pulled the fusion sword from its magnetic scabbard and held it in the ready position. From the bit of surprise on Genesis' face, he had either not expected Cloud to simply dodge or not expected Cloud to join him in the air.

Genesis brought his own Rapier around to block Cloud's lightning quick swing. The force of the blow combined with Cloud's momentum threw Genesis into the ground. The former general actually created his own small crater as he threw up a cloud of dust. Cloud landed on his feet not far from Genesis as the other man shakily pushed back to his feet.

"Ripples form on the water's surface. The wandering soul knows no rest," Genesis said, brushing all the dust off his clothes.

Cloud just scowled at the apparent disquiet Genesis was alluding to, and placed the fusion sword back on his back. He made a quick motion over his shoulder at those still in the shadow of the coliseum and the others started making their way toward him. Not in the right frame of mind to wait for the others, he headed back toward the heart of the ruined city. He heard Genesis following behind him.

"I ask you to heal me, Cloud," Genesis said quietly.

Cloud scowled, but didn't turn. He opened his mouth to speak but Genesis beat him to it.

"I need to protect the people, Cloud. For that, I must fight. Degradation only increased the uselessness I have been building for years. My honor, as Angeal would have called it, began degrading long before my body did. Even if the morrow is barren of promises, nothing shall forestall my return."

Cloud's scowl softened. He glanced over his shoulder to see the serious expression gracing Genesis' face. Facing forward again, Cloud was careful to keep the accusation from his voice and asked, "What makes you think you're good enough to protect people anymore?" He didn't think touching on the other man's honor directly would be well received.

Genesis was quiet for so long that Cloud thought he might not answer. When the silence broke, it wasn't entirely what he expected. "The goddess gave you the task of healing me. That could only mean she had some task for me. Given the nature of the goddess, I cannot think my task would be any less than yours. Even if it is for only one person, I must do as the goddess bids. There is no hate, only joy."

Cloud huffed a laugh. Even Genesis' reasons for helping people had to be wrapped up with faith and the goddess.

"Oi! Hey minion!" Yuffie yelled from back with the group. "Is that a monster?" she screamed in question. "Does it have any materia I can take?"
Cloud picked up his pace, hoping Vincent would distract the little girl before Genesis lit her on fire in a violent fit of irritation.
"Guess what," Zack said, stepping into Sephiroth's office without knocking.

"What, Zack?" Sephiroth asked absently, not even looking up from whatever report he was reading.

Zack's preexisting grin widened. "Spiky finally agreed to let you come to one of our little get-togethers."

Sephiroth did glance up then. "So he's not ignoring you anymore?"

Zack's smile flickered into a frown for a moment before the grin reasserted itself, and he waved a hand dismissively. "He was just busy. I managed a few minutes with him from someone else's PHS."

Sephiroth frowned. "Someone else's PHS?"

Zack nodded. "A friend of mine met Cloud right when he left the company. Remember when I went to check out my hunch below the plate? I went there. Used their PHS to call him. I was going to chew Spiky out for answering other people's calls and not mine, but the first thing he said when he thought I was someone else was that he was busy and needed to call back."

Sephiroth still had a somewhat calculating gleam in his eyes, but he just scoffed quietly. "So you're saying you didn't yell at him anyway?"

Offering a weak laugh, Zack just shook his head and changed the subject. "So Cloud agreed you could come the next time he's in Midgar."

Eyes sliding back to the report on his desk, Sephiroth asked, "And what social ritual are you planning to subject me to for this meeting?"

"Don't be such a spoilsport," Zack said, throwing himself into the chair across from Sephiroth, the desk in between them. "You'll have fun. And I'll think of something for us. I know you don't like wandering around below the plate so we'll do something up top. Maybe out to eat and a movie or a play or something."

Sephiroth was eying Zack again, one eyebrow quirked. "You make it sound like it's my fault I don't like going under the plate."

Zack scoffed. "You'd be perfectly fine if you didn't make such a big deal out of it."

"The people stare and point, Zack," Sephiroth said. "Occasionally, when they don't notice me until I'm within ten feet, they scream. Sometimes they faint, the reasons varying from fear to excitement. A group of adolescents once threw rocks at me. A group of my fan club members who saw, hospitalized them. I had to arrest them. They asked for my autograph, and now the club members count the anniversary of the incident as a holiday."

Zack gawked. "I didn't realize it was that bad."

"People are strange," Sephiroth said. "I don't think I'll ever understand why they treat me the way they do."

Zack grinned. "I'm sure you'll get it some day."

Sephiroth scoffed but didn't verbally respond.
"So I guess I'll let you know when Cloud's in the city," Zack said.

Sephiroth's expression suddenly turned grave. "You do realize that your friend is probably CS Delivery, right, Zack?"

Zack scowled. "Where's this coming from? Has Reno been whining again?"

"Reno has nothing to do with this. Strife was in Wutai alone," Sephiroth said deliberately, as though he thought Zack might not understand. "You know he was there, and information from Veld says that either Cloud Strife or CS Delivery fought with Avalanche. We've received additional information that Wutai didn't interfere, and Strife was alone in his fight against half a dozen conscripts, three basic trained troopers, and one experienced soldier. One of the reports says Strife's sword broke and he still beat them."

"But Cloud's been enhanced," Zack protested. "His mako levels are near yours. With the training he has, he'd be fast enough to take out unenhanced fighters. And you know that CS Delivery could very well be training him one-on-one." Why did everyone insist that Cloud was a terrorist? Zack didn't even want to think about it.

Sephiroth sighed. "I will allow that the proof isn't conclusive, Zack, but Reno does have a point in all his arguments about it. You must realize that there's no proof Strife isn't CS Delivery."

Zack scowled but couldn't bring himself to protest the point. There really wasn't any conclusive evidence that Cloud wasn't responsible for blowing the reactors up and stealing all that materia. "There's no point arguing about it again," Zack said petulantly. "I'm not blind. I'm just not going to jump on the let's-arrest-Spike train. The kid is one of my best friends."

Sephiroth nodded gravely. "And Genesis and Angeal were mine. Sometimes we just have to deal with the fallout of the decisions our friends make."

Zack sighed, deflating and slouching in the chair. That was so depressing. He didn't know exactly what he'd do if that were the case. He wasn't sure he'd actually dealt with Angeal's decisions.

"How did you cope with it?" Zack asked.

Sephiroth shrugged. "Perhaps I haven't." He shook his head slowly. "I tried to help without truly betraying Shinra Company. I tried to stop them. I tried to figure out why they were doing what they were doing. I still don't rightly know. With Angeal dead and Genesis still missing, I think I'm on the verge of moving past caring. Perhaps that's what happens after the grieving process," he said thoughtfully. "I think I just had to come to terms with the fact that the men I thought were my friends cared more about this ambiguous cause of theirs than whatever relationships I'd deluded myself into thinking there was."

Zack couldn't help the wave of sadness that washed through him. Sephiroth was right in a way. His friends had simply abandoned him without explanation, and the general had been left to deal with not only that, but the mess with all those deserting Soldiers and trying to come up with satisfactory explanations for the president.

The general's door swung open then, disrupting the depressing atmosphere. Zack twisted and immediately straightened on seeing Professor Hojo. A twinge of anxiety flickered through him as the scientist's gaze passed over him. Hojo always said some of the most oddly disturbing things that Zack fervently hoped were jokes, morbid though they were.

With a slimy little smile, the professor pushed his glasses up higher on his nose and addressed
Sephiroth. "It's so good to see you, Sephiroth. You don't visit nearly often enough."

"I've been busy." Sephiroth said casually, a serious and attentive expression taking the place of the earlier sincerity he'd been showing Zack.

"Indeed," Hojo said, "with this terrorism nonsense no less."

"Yes," Sephiroth said.

Hojo tilted his head a bit and clasped his hands behind his back. "And how goes the investigation? I would dearly like to express my displeasure to the miscreant who desecrated my research facilities."

Zack bit down a scoff. Decimated would be a better word than desecrated.

"It's slowed down," Sephiroth said. "The culprit has seemingly gone to ground. There's been no overt activity since all the materia thefts."

Hojo chuckled, his suddenly higher pitched voice almost making it sound like cackling. "Director Lazard could be a bit incompetent for investigations like this, Sephiroth. You, as a superior creation and Soldier should do better. Don't be a disappointment," he said, voice hardening. "I want that terrorist for my experiments. Make it happen, general."

Hojo didn't wait for a response before leaving the office.

Zack scowled once the door closed and twisted in the chair to face Sephiroth again, only to see the general's expression dark, eyes narrowed at the where the professor had been standing.

"Sephiroth?" Zack asked, seeing if he could get the man's attention.

The general pushed away from his desk and jumped to his feet. "Come with me, Zack."

Zack silently followed Sephiroth, eyebrows drawn together in worried curiosity. Sephiroth's expression didn't change as they traversed the halls and took the stairs when the general was unwilling to wait for the elevators. Zack's frown deepened when they reached Sephiroth's destination floor and realized they were headed to Tuesti's office. The last time they'd visited the man, Sephiroth had asked the head of urban development to ally with him because he didn't trust the Turks or the vice president. Zack couldn't imagine a trip to talk to Tuesti without equally unsettling circumstances, though he was perfectly content to lie to himself for hope's sake for the next few minutes.

Sephiroth wasted no time once they'd sequestered themselves in Tuesti's electronics filled domain. "Reeve, we might have a problem."

"What is it?" Tuesti asked, lurching out, bleary-eyed, from behind a stack of circuit boards.

"Hojo visited my office just now. He was checking on the CS Delivery investigation."

"That's not surprising," Tuesti said, rubbing at one of his eyes. "He's rather furious over the destruction of all his experimental samples."

Sephiroth shook his head. "I've known that man for my whole life. He wasn't angry in my office, not in the slightest. He's gone to curiously amused. That means the terrorism has taken second seat to something else. Is Hojo doing anything for President Shinra right now? Does he have any new experiments? Has he caught wind of Strife's new mako enhancement? Anything, Reeve?"

Somewhat alarmed now, Tuesti said, "Nothing that I'm aware of. A team brought in some new
mutated monsters yesterday but Hojo shunted the project off to someone else."

Then Sephiroth's PHS rang, interrupting the conversation. Sephiroth held up a placating hand to Tuesti and fished out the device.

Zack busied himself by trying to flatten the frown making his face sore. Hojo finding a new mysterious project wasn't the most comforting revelation.

"General Sephiroth speaking." After a moment, Sephiroth nodded, mostly to himself, and said, "Yes, sir. Zack is with me." Then he hung up. Sephiroth pointedly eyed Tuesti, and said, "Figure out what Hojo is up to." Motioning Zack to follow, Sephiroth took off at a jog out the room and down the hall.

They both moved so quickly that Sephiroth only managed to say that the vice president had an urgent announcement before they were on another floor and entering the conference room. Reno and Vice President Shinra were the only ones in attendance.

The vice president didn't even greet them before speaking. "I've received word from Veld through Tseng that it's official. Avalanche has splintered. Fuhito took a quarter of their forces and rebelled. Elfé and Shears are still in a scramble trying to figure out what to do after their losses in Wutai, but Fuhito and company have dropped off the grid. Veld has no idea where they are and no solid contacts in the people most loyal to Fuhito."

Silence hung for several moments before Reno said, "I think, shit, pretty much sums it up."

"But isn't the group breaking up a good thing?" Zack asked, head spinning from lack of understanding how he should be reacting.

"Not without a spy in the ranks," the vice president said. "We have no idea what this new group is going to do or what their aims are. They've already attacked Strife. They might attack what's left of Avalanche, or they could go after Shinra Company themselves. Shears and Elfé were the moderate leaders. Fuhito could be comfortable with a much higher body count than they would have allowed."

"Frankly," Reno said with a sigh, "I hope your buddy Strife is that CS Delivery bastard."

Zack scowled at the lack of venom in the Turk's tone.

Reno continued, "If that bastard is good for anything, it's keeping the casualties nonexistent. If that ass Fuhito decides to start attacking people, it might tweak that bastard's delicate sensibilities and CS Delivery will beat the shit out of the splinter group."

Put that way, Zack couldn't honestly say he didn't hope someone could take out a possibly murderous terrorist group, even if it was Cloud.

* * *

"So," Yuffie said woozily, hand hovering near her mouth, "you're like a super hero in disguise?"

The little girl gagged again and Cloud grimaced. Yuffie had thrown up more than a dozen times this boat trip. She hadn't been nearly this bad between Wutai and the central continent or between the central continent and the northern continent.

"Not really," Cloud said. "Shinra Company is calling me a terrorist."

"Shinra Company people are liars," she hissed, shooting a glare, albeit a nauseous one, at Tseng on
the other side of the deck, who was talking to Nanaki. "If they say you're a terrorist then you must be a hero. Besides, you're wearing your special hoody and goggles, and they don't know you're really Cloud." With that, Yuffie lurched over to the railing and puked over the side again. How such a small girl had that much to throw up, he had no idea. The only upside Cloud could find with the whole situation was that Genesis was so disgusted by all the throw up that he had hidden himself somewhere down in the hold.

Hazuki rushed up from below deck with another handful of wet cloths. She went straight to Yuffie in attempt to soothe the child's rebelling stomach. Perhaps Yuffie had eaten something bad at the mining village before they'd left the northern continent. Cloud moved away as his PHS rang.

"Yes," he said simply on answering.

"I've got most of the Gongagans already moving across the ocean to the new work site," came Dio's voice. "Will you be giving me a proper explanation for why I had to coerce them, boy?"

Cloud sighed. "I did tell you. The reactor in Gongaga is a death trap waiting to happen. Do you have a list of everyone who took the offer and moved?"

"Yes," Dio said warily. "You don't want me to read the whole thing off do you? Because that's insane, even for you."

"No, I just want you to look for one surname. Fair. Is there anyone on the list with the family name Fair?"

"Let me look," the man said grumingly.

Cloud felt a bit jittery under the silence. He knew he had to save as many as he could from the Gongaga explosion, but he'd never be able to face Zack if his parents stayed there and were killed.

"Yep," Dio said. "Got a middle-aged, married couple by that name. The both of them are starting in basic construction, but the woman will be moving to hospitality when we've got a need and the man is going into maintenance. Why? Who are they? Are they important?"

"Not important to scheming if that's what you're asking," Cloud said dryly. "They're the parents of a friend of mine. I just wanted to check that they decided to pick up and leave." Cloud paused. "Was there anything else?"

"Just me checking that you aren't going to spring anymore small town hiring evacuations on me," Dio groused.

Cloud snorted a laugh. "No. That's it. Go get the rest of the workers wherever you feel like it."

"Bye, boy," Dio said, and hung up on Cloud.

Cloud shook his head and pocketed the PHS.

"I think we have a problem, Cloud," Vincent said, startling Cloud. Cloud tried to hide the reaction, but there was no telling if the gunman was just being polite and ignoring it. Cloud hated how the ocean and the ship covered up so many sounds. At least wearing his goggles would prevent the other man from seeing the comic widening of his eyes.

"What is it?" Cloud asked.
Vincent merely pointed to the approaching shore. Cloud turned, narrowing his eyes at the village of Kalm, his enhanced vision giving him a decent look at the place without the need for binoculars. He grew uneasy as his focus flitted over the buildings he could see and the empty stretch of beach and grasses between them and the water.

Cloud frowned. "Where are all the people?"

Vincent nodded. "That's the pertinent question. My eyesight is probably better than yours, and I've not seen a soul in the village in the last ten minutes."

"So not the same kind of ambush as in Junon?" Cloud asked, more rhetorically than anything else.

Vincent shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Nanaki asked, the creature padding up silently on Cloud's other side. He stared for several moments before, "Ah. No people in sight. A trap waits for our landing."

Cloud glanced over his shoulder to spy Tseng hovering some behind them and within hearing range. Cloud faced the beach but fished around in one of his pockets. He pulled a worn looking letter, its edges crinkled and folded down the middle. Cloud proffered the letter to Vincent. "I think it's time you go pick her up."

Vincent took the letter carefully, as though he didn't want to disturb the already rumpled paper. "So Dio has people settling in southern Wutai?"

Cloud nodded. "The letter should explain everything, but remember—"

"Whatever means necessary," Vincent finished for him.

Cloud nodded again. "If anyone can slip around this trap, it's you."

Vincent offered one of his rare slight smiles and started for the back of the boat. Cloud watched for a few moments before glancing at Nanaki. The giant beast spared a glance toward him before turning his sharp eyes back to the rapidly approaching shore.

"Where’s he going?" Tseng asked.

Cloud eyed the Turk for a moment before saying, "There's an ambush waiting for us on shore, Tseng."

Tseng frowned, but stepped up next to Cloud. "Are they being that obvious?"

Cloud huffed a laugh. "There's no one visible in the town or on the shore. It's mid-afternoon and not too hot. The town should be bustling right now. It can't get much more obvious without the troops stationed out in the open like they were in Junon."

Tseng nodded, unperturbed at the slight. After a quick glance back over the few other passengers and sailors on deck, Tseng asked, "Is Genesis still hiding from Yuffie?"

Cloud nodded. "Will you go make sure he knows no one on shore is to see him? I need to go talk to the captain and get him to hold everyone on board so we can deal with whatever's going on in town. I don't want a whole bunch of civilians stumbling into our trap."

Tseng nodded and spun on his heel.

To Nanaki, Cloud asked, "Do you think you can keep Yuffie and Hazuki from getting killed? The
second we hit shore that little brat will be bouncing around like a crazed monkey again."

"Of course, Cloud. Consider it done." Nanaki paused. "You'd better go talk to the captain. The other passengers are already gathering on deck."

Cloud glanced over his shoulder to see luggage and more people than before.

* * *

"Why do I have to stay behind?" Yuffie demanded indignantly.

The captain had been more than obliging when Cloud asked him to keep everyone on board for their own safety for a while, but here Cloud was, on the beach arguing with a belligerent nine-year-old.

"You just need to wait ten minutes before following me. That's not staying behind."

Hazuki stood there hopelessly and Tseng didn't bother trying to help as he would likely start Yuffie on one of her "evil Shinra" rants. Nanaki was doing the sensible thing and eying Kalm while Cloud argued.

"That's a lie and you know it!" Yuffie snapped. "You're just trying to keep me from all the treasure you know is there."

"This isn't about a treasure hunt, Yuffie," Cloud said, praying to Gaia that the little girl would spontaneously develop reason in the next five seconds. "There's an ambush in Kalm. I'm going to take care of it before everyone follows me."

Yuffie brandished a fist at him. "I can fight, too! Those cowards won't know what hit them when they find themselves facing the Treasure Princess of Wutai!"

"They aren't cowards to be setting up an ambush. It's called tactics. You need to be outside the town so I can either fight or reason with whoever they are without distraction."

In a flash, Yuffie dug her foot into the sand and kicked a spray up into everyone's faces. Cloud closed his mouth and breathed out to keep from breathing in sand. Goggles were good for more than hiding his eyes apparently.

"Then you really are trying to keep me away from treasure!" she said, glaring mutinously.

Fighting off the desire to massage the bridge of his nose, Cloud tried, "Aren't minions supposed to take care of these things for you?"

A rather troublesome gleam lit Yuffie's eyes. "Yes," she said, drawing the word out with a manic grin. "You'll go into town, minion, and cause a raucous. While everyone is distracted, I'll slip into their houses and take all the treasures they aren't treating properly."

Cloud sighed. "I think all the townspeople are hiding in their homes right now to stay away from whoever is planning the ambush."

Tseng was brushing sand off his suit with a vaguely disgusted expression on his face. Nanaki shook himself off while Hazuki ignored it entirely.

"Don't you worry about that, minion," Yuffie said, grin stretching impossibly wider. "I'll handle the people. You just get into that town and cause my distraction." She pointed imperiously and Cloud rolled his eyes.
Cloud turned away from the group and headed into the town if for nothing else than to escape from more of Yuffie's orders. He could hear her giving directions to Hazuki. Cloud leaned his head forward and shook sand out his hair and off his hood while walking. He scowled faintly, realizing by the gritty feel that the sand had managed to get down under his shirt and he would probably have to shower to actually get all the sand off him. He really should have expected Yuffie to be able to kick sand with precision.

A hint of movement on one town roof caught Cloud's attention. He hadn't expected them to start moving around until he'd reached whatever point would spring the ambush. Movement before ambushing tended to give away the attacker's position, exactly like it had.

As he approached the edge of the town, a pair of people appeared from around a partially constructed building surrounded with scaffolding. The woman in her pale clothing with dark belt and scarf was probably Elfé, while the loosely clothed ruffian of a man with his bandana was probably Shears.

Cloud slowed to a stop as the pair clearly wanted to confront him before he entered the town. Cloud kept himself visibly relaxed, but with the speeds he was capable of, it really didn't mean anything. He would simply need to watch Elfé as she was currently enhanced as well. Though, she was only about as advanced as a Sephiroth who didn't want to destroy a city, so she probably wouldn't give him that much trouble.

The woman appeared as apathetic as her reputation said she would. Cloud knew it was only an enforced image that the bit of Zirconiade in her brought on. Elfé had no memories from before after all. Her apathy was belied by the easy grace with which she walked. He took note of the nondescript katana at her waist and wondered how many other weapons she might be hiding in her modified, khaki-green fatigues. Neither the short sleeves or the pants cut off at the knees would do much for hiding something as small as throwing stars.

The man looked even more nondescript than the woman. Cloud remembered Reno from his own time in the future drunkenly rambling about the bastard bandit more than once. Cloud was inclined to take that remark literally and believe the man would fight dirty and cheap like any other bandit. He probably had knives galore hidden in somewhere in that simple white shirt and plain, pale fatigues even though only a single semi-automatic was visible.

The two stopped a good fifteen feet from Cloud. Cloud remained silent, letting them take the lead.

Elfé slowly lifted a hand and pointed at Cloud. "You are a menace to all organizations seeking liberty from the Shinra monster."

Cloud blinked, frowning slightly. Of course, Elfé and Shears probably couldn't see the expression properly as he was still buried under his hood and goggles. Regardless, that wasn't exactly what he'd expected to hear. He hadn't thought he'd get praised for usurping Avalanche's functions as a terrorist, but he also hadn't expected to be criticized for being a detriment to groups against Shinra Company.

"Have you nothing to say in your own defense?" Elfé demanded.

"I'm not the one who attacked you in Wutai," he said dryly.

"Irrelevant," she said with a dismissive wave. "Your unplanned and purposeless acts of destruction and theft are leaving nothing but anarchy in your wake. You're systematically destroying all opposition to Shinra Company."

Cloud frowned. "Is this about Fuhito running off with a bunch of your troops?"
Elfé's jaw tightened as she pursed her lips.

Cloud said, "I wasn't trying to break up your terrorist cell. I've been removing very specific threats from within Shinra Company. At least my movements don't have Shinra blaming civilians for my actions and killing them in my place."

"You unscrupulous bastard," she ground out, drawing her sword. "You'll pay in blood for your crimes."

Cloud slowly mirrored her action, drawing his own fusion sword, the weight familiar and comfortable in his hands. "Hojo buried a piece of materia in the back of your left hand, you know. It's slowly killing you. I'd remove it for you if you asked." He actually planned to take it whether she wanted him to or not, but he didn't have to say that.

Dropping into a rather dramatic stance with her sword parallel to the ground but still above her head, Elfé said, "I see reasoning with you is useless. Prepare yourself."

Cloud only had a moment to wonder when she'd tried to reason with him before she darted forward, blurring even against his enhanced vision. He moved the fusion sword ever so slightly to meet her blade. The collision let out rather faint mako sparks, leaving Cloud to wonder if the materia in her hand was reacting to what he had equipped. Elfé drew back, lips pressed together tightly, only to rush him again, this time swinging at him from the side. He whirled his blade around, catching hers, and continuing his arc in such a way that it threw her off balance as her sword tried to twist itself right out of her hands. He was actually surprised that she didn't drop the blade.

Obviously deciding to up the stakes, Elfé leapt above him, her boots actually several feet higher than he was tall, so she could bring something closer to the full force of her blade down toward his head. Instead of moving to block, he leapt sideways, bringing the fusion sword around. He swung a bit slower than usual to gauge her reaction times. She hit the ground and seemed to spin only just fast enough to catch him.

Cloud frowned. He thought she was supposed to be on par with Sephiroth. He could recall another conversation he'd had with a drunken Reno who'd read the report Sephiroth filed about the altercation the general had with Avalanche's leader.

Cloud pressed forward with a flurry of quick swings. Mako flares were a bit brighter, and Elfé didn't lose her footing or her balance again. Elfé leapt straight over the top of him this time, a thin trail of sand flying off her boots. Cloud swung fast enough to catch her before she hit the ground, so when their blades connected, he flung her toward the beach some twenty feet.

He gathered his energy, whipped the fusion sword around once, and slashed straight toward the ground, releasing a bright blue Blade Beam at the woman. Grass and earth sprayed up on either side of the Limit attack as the lower edge of energy gouged the ground.

Elfé rolled out of the way of the Limit, but not the displaced earth, and found herself littered with grass and dirt. Rather than immediately re-close the distance between them, she lifted a hand and threw a fireball at Cloud. A simple Ice spell threw her magic to naught but steam. Cloud followed up by tossing a Bolt 2 at her, just to see if she'd dodge or shield.

The woman attempted to dodge but wasn't quite fast enough. The magic caught her shoulder and sent her spinning onto the ground with a startled cry as the electricity induced convulsions for several seconds.

Cloud ignored the Cura that flew across the impromptu battlefield at Elfé. He hadn't exactly expected
Shears to sit quietly by and watch Elfé battle. Elfé staggered a moment on regaining her feet, shaking off the last of the tremors from the lightning spell. Face set with determination, she ran at Cloud again, sword moving so quickly as it slashed at him that the tip whistled through the air. Cloud allowed her to close the distance, then traded lightning quick blows with her.

Cloud could see why Sephiroth might think the woman could stand her ground with him. She was remarkably fast. But Elfé didn't have the stamina. Cloud's rather heavy blows had already slowed her down. She wasn't nearly as fast now as she had been after that first strike, neither was she hitting as hard. Elfé was probably actually on par with Zack at the moment, Elfé having a bit more speed while Zack had better strength. Even then, Zack would still win in an outright fight because the Zirconiade Materia, for all its gifting of enhanced abilities, was still sapping her strength.

Cloud whipped the fusion sword around again, preparing to twist the blade to catch her with the flat when she couldn't block, when he sensed movement behind him. Abandoning the strike, he rolled sideways as Shears planted a long dagger in the ground where Cloud had been. Cloud quickly popped one of the side blades out of the fusion sword for his off-hand to meet another of Shears' daggers while Elfé whipped her sword around again to meet the remainder of Cloud's sword.

After throwing Elfé off balance, Cloud temporarily turned his attention to Shears, slamming him in the side with the flat of the main blade. One loud crack and Shears lay crumpled on the ground. Cloud was rather tired of breaking people's ribs when they refused to back down.

Quickly re-fusing the side blade to the main sword, Cloud bore down on Elfé, slamming blow after blow against her sword to drain as much energy as he could. Gunfire rang through the air as bullets began zipping past his head, and one particularly painful sting zipped across the top of his shoulder. Cloud spared a moment's attention to throw up a Wall spell before continuing to wear down Elfé. Gunfire from the beach told him Tseng was offering cover fire.

Elfé finally stumbled backward over herself, sprawling in the grass as her sword flew from her grasp. Panting for breath, she attempted to scramble out of the way. Cloud stepped on her cape, keeping her where she was as she half choked herself on her own clothing.

Face abruptly slackening as the tension drained from her muscles. "Go on then, murderer, and end my misery."

Rolling his eyes behind his goggles, Cloud said, "How about I take the materia out of your hand, and we'll call it even. You go your way, I'll go my way, and I'll never try to unintentionally splinter your precious little group of terrorists again."

A fresh rain of bullets stirred up the ground around them and slammed into Cloud's Wall spell. Fortunately, Tseng seemed intelligent enough to realize Cloud had things well in hand and didn't return fire. Or at least Cloud thought that was the case. The Turk could have been shot, after all.

Elfé held up a hand and the gunfire ceased. Not a sound floated through the air save the ocean breeze and Shears' pained moaning.

"What did you do to Shears?" Elfé demanded cautiously.

"BROKE his ribs," Cloud said flatly.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, voice quieter.

"I just want the materia. I don't plan on doing anything with you."

Elfé closed her eyes with a resigned sigh. "My life is in your hands."
Cloud rolled his eyes skyward again. He pulled out his PHS and selected Aerith's contact information. It rang twice before the young woman picked up. Before she could get a full greeting out, Cloud asked, "Are you alone?"

"Yes," she said slowly. "Is everything alright?"

"Fine," he said. "Have you ever given any thought to how to get the bit of Zirconiade out of Elfé without having to perform surgery?"

"Uhm, a little?" she said, more question than statement in her tone. "This is a little random, even for you. Why do you ask? I thought you weren't going to worry about Zirconiade unless someone started collecting the pieces or you had nothing better to do."

"Avalanche ambushed here. I've got Elfé here thinking I'm going to kill her…and I may have broken Shears' ribs, but I'm just gonna take Zirconiade and leave."

"I see," Aerith said cheerily. "I do have one idea, but if it doesn't work you'll have to make one tiny incision."

"What do I need to do?"

"You remember how some materia responds to being called? Like Meteor? How Sephiroth drew it to himself the other time? Or how you can feel the Master Materia and the summons?"

"That man drew Meteor to himself because he was telekinetic, not because materia moves on its own," Cloud said dryly. "And having an affinity for summons does not give them a life of their own or give them the ability to go where they please."

"Just hear me out, Cloud," she chided. "Zirconiade is different. Concentrate on it. It's still fact that poor Elfé has been hosting it for a while. She's draining. If nothing else, Zirconiade may think you'd be a better host and leave her."

"So what?" Cloud asked, a bit incredulous, "I show a broken quarter of Zirconiade that I've got lots of power, and it'll rip itself out of Elfé's arm?"

"No, you silly mountain backwoodsman," Aerith said with amusement. "Show Zirconiade power, and it will unequip itself from her."

"That makes no sense," Cloud said. "I hope you realize that. It's like saying Chaos will unequip himself from Vincent if he finds a host he likes better. The materia was surgically implanted in Elfé's hand, not equipped in a bangle or a weapon."

"Cloud," Aerith said sternly. Cloud could practically see the woman planting her hands on her hips. "Trust me. Who is the intermediary between the Voice of Planet and you? It's me. Not you. I'm still older than you even if my body is younger. Trust me, Cloud."

Cloud sighed. Aerith obviously heard because the smile returned to her voice. "Now be a good boy and call Zirconiade out of her. Call me back if you have any problems. I'll see you when you get into Midgar."

"Bye," he said, then listened as she disconnected them. He put the PHS back in his pocket and crouched down next to Elfé. She was eying him with equal parts curiosity and anxiety.

Cloud snagged the woman's left wrist and pulled her into a sitting position. "Hold still," he
murmured. Cloud positioned his free hand above hers, focusing on the feel of channeling magic without actually focusing on any of his materia.

Cloud blinked in surprised when he felt an answering vibration through the air beneath his palm. Elfé actually flinched.

She asked quietly, "Is the power I rely on actually draining me?"

"Yeah," he said absently, pushing more power through, as though he were using a summon like Knights of the Round instead of just green materia.

The air between his palm and Elfé's wrist distorted as tendrils of mako-laced energy writhed lazily between them. Cloud grimaced, pushing enough power out for his Meteorain Limit, hoping he wouldn't have to drudge up everything it took to do Omnislash. The grass around them was fluttering about as though in an invisible wind and even the ground was vibrating.

Elfé's hand began glowing in the soft red that equipped summons had. Then she made a startled sound as a jagged red orb fragment seeped from her skin and floated up to Cloud's grasp. He let go of Elfé and turned his hand over. Letting his power fade, the bright color in the materia disappeared.

"That's it?" Elfé asked.

Cloud quickly pocketed the fragment and straightened. Facing the beach, he made a sweeping motion toward himself. Tseng appeared from behind what seemed to be a six inch bump in the sand and started slowly toward Cloud. Cloud sighed. There was no sign of Yuffie, Hazuki, or Nanaki. The wretched little monkey was probably pilfering the rooftops with the other two either trying to corral her or keep her from killing herself.

Elfé staggered climbing to her feet. The action seemed to have her slightly out of breath again. "You're just going to let me go after this?"

"I'm not going to kill you unless you start attacking civilians." He waved at the still deserted looking Kalm. "Putting them under house arrest isn't the same thing."

"How do you know I haven't ordered the town killed?" she demanded.

"Unless you poisoned them all, they're still alive. No scent of burned bodies, and there's no blood in the air." Cloud started over toward where Shears was still trying not to move on the ground.

Cloud stared, a bit unsure of what to do with the unenhanced terrorist. If Shears had mako in him, it would have at least put his ribs back in the right place and Cloud could have tossed a Cure at him. But Cloud didn't know if Curing him would set the bones in the wrong place. His memories of battlefield first aide weren't clear enough and Aerith, Yuffie, and Nanaki had always been the ones to patch up the rest of the group after a particularly nasty battle. He didn't even know if the latter two had any medical training at this point. All Cloud was good for was throwing around overpowered Cure spells.

"Are you going to kill him?" Elfé asked darkly from behind him.

Cloud twisted around with a scowl. "I'm not killing anyone. How many times do I have to say it?"

"Then what are you doing?" she demanded.

"Trying to decide if throwing a Cure at him is going to make his ribs heal wrong."
"Are his ribs broken?" Tseng asked, finally coming within speaking distance. Cloud noted the Turk kept a wary distance away from Elfé.

Cloud gave a short nod.

"Straighten him out so his ribs can have the most movement possible. He's not coughing up blood so I doubt his internal organs were damaged so a low powered Cure from you should set them."

Cloud motioned Elfé to come around him and follow Tseng's directions. The leader of Avalanche did, albeit with a faint scowl on her face. Shears grunted and moaned a few times, but otherwise kept quiet, a sheen of sweat plastering the bits of hair free of his bandana to his skin. Cloud used the lowest Cure he had, and didn't wait to see the results before turning to Tseng.

"Where are the others?"

"The treasure princess disappeared with her babysitter half way through your fight. Nanaki as well, so I can only assume he's supervising. I haven't seen Vincent since we landed, and your other friend seems to have found a cloak.

Brows drawing down, Cloud turned toward the ocean to see someone striding toward them wearing a crimson, hooded cloak. Cloud bit the inside of his cheeks and purposely drew his brows further down as he eyed Genesis walking toward them.

He supposed that if the former general folded that one wing rather tightly against himself it would fit under the cloak. But still…it was a bright red cloak. Cloud didn't make a sound as Genesis closed the distance between them.

Genesis' eyes were glowing with thinly veiled anger. "Dreams of the morrow hath the shattered soul." He paused. "If you laugh, I will incinerate you where you stand."

Cloud was coming dangerously close to drawing blood with how hard he was biting his cheeks now. After a steadying breath, he said, "That's a very bright red. Not very inconspicuous." There. He hadn't laughed. He hadn't even sounded amused.

"I refuse to drench myself in black," Genesis drawled, tension draining a bit.

Speaking more slowly, Cloud said, "It's very bright." He couldn't help that one side of his mouth curled up toward a smirk.

"Perhaps I should amend my declaration to include sarcasm," Genesis asked, voice turning smooth and dark. "I do believe incineration is a viable disciplinary action."

Cloud just went back to biting the insides of his cheeks. He almost wished he had a camera he was willing to risk sacrificing, as Genesis would likely try to melt it. No one who didn't see it would ever believe Genesis wore something so garishly bright.
"Get back here, Yuffie," Hazuki pleaded as the tiny ninja disappeared behind yet another chimney. Cloud would feel bad for the thief's guard if he wasn't so exasperated. He hadn't been inside Kalm more than two minutes before he found Hazuki running frantically through the square searching for Yuffie, who'd given her the slip.

Cloud took pity on the woman when Yuffie very visibly climbed out a second story window, and scrambled up the rain pipe to the roof. A red-faced townsman was brandishing a gardening trowel as he leaned out the window shouting obscenities at the retreating thief.

Thus, Cloud found himself on the roof with Hazuki, trying to chase down a clever little girl with delusions of grand thievery. Every now and again, he would catch glimpses of red as Nanaki tried to cut her off, but Cloud had clearly underestimated how evasive Yuffie was. He'd never actually tried to chase her down like this when she was running like a wild rabbit with no clear indication of direction instead of trying to hide and set traps.

Cloud felt a massive wave of materia backwash flash across his skin before he heard the combined explosion of fire and lightning in the central town square. Cloud slid to a stop, roof tiles rattling beneath his boots. Hazuki kept her sprint across the roof after Yuffie, but Nanaki showed up next to him.

"Genesis?" Nanaki asked.

Sensing the faint, cracked, mental presence of the former commander flaring in the back of his mind, Cloud gave a sharp nod. He said, "Get Yuffie and Hazuki out of town. Track me down afterward, or head to Midgar. Use status materia on the little brat if you have to. Just get her out of here."

Nanaki gave a short nod and shot off between the chimneys. Cloud sprinted for the square where the occasional fireball or lightning bolt soared harmlessly into the air before dissipating or blew up part of a roof, send debris into the sky instead. Cloud pulled the fusion sword off his back and activated a MBarrier around himself as he neared the square. He slowed only the barest bit to take stock of the site.

Genesis, still wearing that ridiculously red cloak, had his sword in hand and was currently hurling fireballs at a handful of Turks. Cissnei, Cloud recognized, and a man with brown hair and a scar down one side of his face to the jawline, probably Veld. There was also a blond, slim man running around with nunchaku, and a black haired woman, who was taller than the blond, throwing knives into every available opening.

Shears and Elfé were both attempting to assist Genesis. Cloud could only wonder at their stupidity for fighting again so soon. Tseng was actually standing at the edge of the central square snapping pictures of the altercation, and Cloud could only wonder what the hell the Turk was doing.

Assessment made, Cloud leapt right down into the middle of it, landing between the blond, nunchaku wielder and Shears. In a flash, he shoved at Shears' shoulder, pushing the man down. Then he swung the flat of his blade at the nunchaku-weilding Turk to knock him out as gently as he could. He wasn't sure how well that worked out when the man crumpled like a puppet who's strings had been cut.

He flung the fusion sword around, the knife-throwing Turk's weapons clattering against it before uselessly flying off across the square. He darted toward the woman and slammed his sword into her
shoulder, hearing one quick snap. He winced at the sound. It was a bit more reverberating than if he’d only broken her arm. He might have damaged her collarbone.

When he turned his attention to Elfé again, the woman lowered her weapon and slightly relaxed her stance. Clearly, she didn't want another fight with *him*.

That left only Genesis, the man who was probably Veld, and Cissnei. Genesis was in the process of throwing another fireball, while Veld attempted to erect some kind of MBarrier and Cissnei desperately threw her shuriken, probably in attempt to distract Genesis or throw off his aim.

Ice crystals formed at Cloud's fingertips, then released with a shock and a chill that echoed up through his arm. The mid-powered Blizzard spell slammed into Genesis' fireball, freezing it with a steaming hiss. The frozen fireball veered off course and slammed into the ground, shattering on impact at Tseng’s feet. A second Blizzard hit Cissnei's shuriken mid-flight, sending the weapon clattering to the ground. Cloud was actually surprised that didn't shatter, too.

Genesis deigned to halt his onslaught against his opponents, who temporarily ceased their attack out of shock or injury due to Cloud's arrival. Genesis' mouth twisted in an arrogant sneer as he attempted to stare Veld down. Veld wasn't even paying Genesis any more attention. His gun of a prosthetic arm was pointed at Cloud. Cloud hadn't even realized Veld *had* a gun arm. None of the Turks from his former future ever told him *that*.

Keeping his sword out for a shield in case Veld decided to start shooting, Cloud surveyed the now quiet scene. The whole lot of them had torn up and burned the surrounding buildings. Several nearby, peaked roofs still smoldered, gray smoke curling into the sky, no doubt attracting yet more attention.

Cloud threw a questioning glare over his shoulder at Genesis, though his goggles dampened the effect. Genesis just glared right back. Cloud's gaze moved to Tseng for an explanation.

The Turk took a few cautiously slow steps forward. "Veld and the others confronted Genesis when he entered the square. Elfé and Shears came to his defense."

In other words, no one had said anything, and simply started shooting and throwing fireballs.

"Genesis is to be taken into custody," Veld said rather authoritatively, "for crimes against Shinra Company and the civilians who depend on Shinra for protection." It was an odd thing to say, Cloud felt, while the man's gun was pointed at him instead of Genesis.

Cloud could have rolled his eyes. The Turks were trying to arrest people. Ignoring the comment, he moved his attention to Elfé, and pointed to Veld. "Veld is your father." Elfé's eyes widened while Shears took in a sharp breath. Veld jolted as if struck. "Your real name is Felicia." Elfé's mouth actually dropped open.

Tseng said, "You do realize that sufferers of amnesia need to be worked into knowledge of their past or they risk mental breakdown, don't you?"

Cloud's mouth twisted in confusion while his gaze turned to the Turk. Was that supposed to be some sort of jibe at his own delusions and mental breakdown? Tseng's calm demeanor gave Cloud no indication if the man was mocking him or simply making a factual statement. Cloud supposed his best bet was to ignore it.

"Are you openly working with other terrorist groups now?" came the question in Cissnei's cold voice.
Cloud’s attention moved to the woman, who was clearly asking the question of him. “Avalanche ambushed me,” he said bluntly and without further explanation. Eyes moving unseen behind his goggles, he noted the Turks slowly repositioning themselves, regrouping closer to Veld and Cissnei as it were.

"You don't seem to be fighting now," Veld stated, eyes wavering between Cloud and Elfé.

Cloud didn't glance around at the sound of Elfé's voice. "I fought him one-on-one," she said. "He triumphed where I failed, and he took the poisonous materia fragment from my hand."

Veld tensed all over again, his gun arm trained more tightly on Cloud. "Hand that piece of Zirconiade over, terrorist," he demanded.

Cloud frowned. Did the Turk actually expect him to just hand it over? The gun trained on Cloud's face certainly seemed to indicate so. A quick glance at the remainder of the Turks revealed the knife thrower subtly readying herself for attack and the nunchaku wielder feigning unconsciousness, if the slight glint of visible eyes were any indication. Even Cissnei seemed to be positioning herself to reach for some hidden back up weapon.

"Stand down," Veld commanded. "Hand over the Zirconiade piece, don't interfere with Genesis' arrest, and we'll ignore your presence for now."

Scowling, Cloud wondered if it was the fact that Genesis had killed a bunch of people that made him higher on the priority list of "persons of interest". Gaia knew Cloud had stolen a ridiculous amount of property and blown up even more.

The more practical side of his mind wondered just how he would get both Tseng and Genesis out of Kalm. Genesis didn't seem to want to leave, and Tseng could hardly keep up with the speeds Cloud or Genesis were capable of.

"Enough of this," Genesis said.

Apparently, Cloud wasn't going to be making the decision as to what was going to happen next.

"My soul," Genesis began quoting, "corrupted by venge—agh!"

Genesis' words choked off when Cloud took a fist full of jacket collar and propelled them both to the roof of the nearest building. Cloud ignored the choked rasping and the whizzing of bullets as he ran across the roofing, intentionally keeping Genesis from recapturing his feet.

They were out of the town in under a minute with no sign of pursuit. Cloud didn't release Genesis until they were in a sparse stand of trees two miles out of town. The man immediately called a fireball and attempted to smash it in Cloud's face. Cloud sidestepped, leaving the still disoriented Genesis to overbalance after not hitting anything with his fireball. The only thing the man succeeded in doing was lighting that ridiculous red cloak on fire.

Genesis hissed and quickly put the fire out, and turned his furious glare back on Cloud. "Give me one very excellent reason why I should refrain from melting down your very bones," he ordered malevolently.

Nonplussed, Cloud said, "There are more important things to be done than letting you posture for the Turks."

Surprise flickered across Genesis' face. "You mean to tell me that wasn't some altruistic attempt to keep me from burning yet more bridges with Shinra Company?"
Cloud rolled his eyes and started walking out of the sparse grove. "Who am I to tell you not to burn bridges with that company? What's fighting with a handful of Turks to blowing up a couple reactors?"

Sometimes, Genesis seemed really dumb for all his devotion to literature. Weren't people like that supposed to be more intelligent?

* * *

Nero's eyes fixed themselves on the end of the street. The sniper they'd stationed at the edge of Midgar had signaled that Strife was entering the city along the expected path. He had only one companion with him.

"What do we know about this partner?" Weiss asked, his white hair shifting as he glanced at Nero.

Nero didn't remove his gaze from where he expected the terrorist to appear. "Nothing. This one is new. He's wearing a red cloak and appears to be carrying a type of longsword at his waist. Strife has no known companions meeting such a description."

"We'll find out soon enough then," Weiss said. "Here they are."

And indeed, there they were. Strife was wearing his disguise, though how the rest of Shinra Company hadn't seen through it, Nero didn't understand. The man looked both more nondescript and tougher without his blond hair sticking up all over the place, though the ridiculously large sword hanging on his back destroyed any sense of inconspicuousness he might have been attempting.

The red-cloaked companion was obviously trying to hide his identity, hence the cloak. However, he would be painfully obvious in a crowd because of said brilliantly crimson cloak. From the man's walk, Nero could tell he was a competent fighter. Normally. There was a slight hesitation in the man's movements, perhaps indication exhaustion or weakness of some kind.

Strife's behavior was unpredictable at best, and always perplexing. None of Nero's spies had yet to discover what the man was doing with that flock of chocobos. Perhaps he was also collecting injured fighters as well.

"Let's go," Weiss said, dropping off the edge of the building.

Nero fought back a sigh at his brother's impulsiveness, and followed. He watched Strife's gait slow slightly, so they'd been noticed, but the man didn't stop or speak to his equally silent companion. Both appeared unperturbed to face off with the two highest ranking Tsviets, making Nero curious. Were they actually more capable than he and his brother, or did they only think they were? Blowing up reactors and subduing Turks was no true indicator of mako-enhanced skills.

When Nero and his brother stopped some ten feet from Strife and his companion, Weiss wasted no time in getting to the point. "What's this trap that's supposed to take me out? It sounds like propaganda and a pathetic attempt at intimidation."

Strife's expression didn't flicker, but what was visible of his comrade's face, namely his mouth and chin, twitched up into a smile.

"If a restrictor dies," Strife said, "a dormant virus already in your body will activate and kill you within three days," Strife said bluntly, ignoring the vagueties he'd been dealing in so far.

Nero's eyes widened. That was very specific.
"Doesn't matter," Weiss said, making Nero wince at his cavalier attitude. "There will be a cure. I'll find it in Shinra's systems."

Flatly, Strife said, "And when you perform a Synaptic Net Dive, you'll be invaded and possessed by a malignant artificial intelligence that then tries to kill the rest of the Tsviets, including your brother."

Weiss' eyes went wide at that. Nero's heart just about stopped. The thought that his brother would attack him at all was unfathomable, but perhaps it would shock his brother out of his normally impulsive manner.

"In fact, the malignant AI," Strife continued, "will probably try and infect you regardless of whether or not the virus has been activated because it recognizes you as the best specimen for its agenda."

"How do you know this?" Weiss demanded. Strife shifted, but didn't immediately speak. In a flash, Weiss drew one of his revolver swords and had the blade tip hovering in front of Strife's face. "How do you know this!?" Weiss snarled.

Nero had to give Strife some credit. He hadn't so much as flinched at Weiss' behavior. But then the situation broke.

Strife's companion drew a longsword in a flash, the red blade sizzling silently with barely restrained power. He knocked Weiss' blade away and stood defensively in front of Strife. Nero drew both his guns, readying for a fight if Strife's comrade couldn't control himself. That Strife was still standing there without a weapon drawn was the only thing that kept Nero from opening fire on them both.

"I don't care how tolerant Cloud is of your disrespect," the stranger said darkly, voice smooth. "I will not tolerate it. Legend shall speak of sacrifice at world's end."

Nero faltered. Was that a Loveless quote?

"Stop it," Strife said, words directed at his comrade. "There's no need to start a duel to the death because Weiss is twitchy."

The red-clad comrade's mouth twitched toward a smile again. Nero saw the hesitation in his brother's frame. People didn't just say things like that in front of the Tsviets.

"Genesis Rhapsodos?" Weiss asked, his tone matching the incredulous expression on his face.

Nero's eyes widened, gaze snapping back to the stranger. All the clues were there. Red leather was visible under the cloak. General Rhapsodos' Rapier was unmistakable with the magical energy making the blade shimmer. Nero could mentally kick himself for not realizing immediately who Strife's comrade was. He could only account for the oversight on his part by blaming the sheer improbability of the rogue general joining forces with Strife blinding him to the possibility of it actually happening.

Rhapsodos didn't so much as acknowledge Weiss' identification of him. "We've been searching for you," Weiss said, lowering his sword, apparently choosing to ignore Strife's presence for the moment.

"Obviously not thoroughly enough," Rhapsodos drawled. He didn't lower his sword until Weiss and Nero lowered their weapons. Nero didn't like how it felt to have a blade pointed at him while his own guns were lowered. But he would follow Weiss' lead in this particular situation.

"We're planning to overthrow the Restrictors," Weiss said conversationally, as though talk of sedition were commonplace. Nero mentally winced. They were lucky the Turk wasn't traveling with Strife at
Weiss said, "You're an excellent leader, General Rhapsodos. Our Deepground Soldiers would benefit greatly under your tutelage."

"Not interested," Rhapsodos said with a slight sneer and an uplifted chin.

"With our combined skills," Weiss pressed, "nothing Shinra has will stand in our way, not even Sephiroth."

"Not. Interested." Rhapsodos' words were like ice, in stark contrast with his usual fiery vehemence.

"But we're like family," Weiss protested, anger creeping into his tone. Nero had never known his brother to take well something being denied to him. The look of slight incredulity on Rhapsodos' face told Nero his brother definitely wouldn't be getting what he wanted in this instance.

"The experiments done on all of us in Deepground stemmed from the work done with you. We even have elements of your same genetic coding."

"The only thing we have in common," Rhapsodos said archly, eyes narrowed, "is that we were grown in a lab. That does not make us brothers. I follow the path of my own choosing. I follow the path Cloud shows me at the behest of the Goddess. To become the dew that quenches the land, to spare the sands, the seas, the skies. I do not seek the destruction of all things. I seek to protect those that need it."

"You don't think we're worthy of your help?" Weiss asked darkly.

Sneering, Rhapsodos finally sheathed his blade. "I don't think you need it. Cloud already gave you the information you need. I don't see why I should bother with people who can already fight."

The anger leeched from Weiss' frame at the backhanded compliment, and his eyes widened fractionally. "You'd choose to help that terrorist over us?" Weiss asked incredulously.

Rhapsodos shook his head slightly, rolling his eyes with a faint sigh. He didn't deign to respond to Weiss, simply giving Strife a look and a sharp nod indicating they should leave. Without another glance at Nero and Weiss, Rhapsodos continued down the street around them. Strife lifted a hand in farewell, his expression remaining flat and uninterested before following the red cloaked man.

"I didn't expect him to refuse so soundly," Weiss said with disbelief.

Nero nodded rather than answered. He hadn't expected it either. He frowned. He still had to figure out how to keep his brother from dying or being possessed when they killed the Restrictors. If Weiss couldn't do a Synaptic Net Dive without being compromised, perhaps they could use the Shelke girl. She seemed to be far enough along in her enhancements. She would be a good alternative to risking his brother. And it would be no great loss if she were possessed instead.

* * *

"We need to talk," Cloud said without preamble when entering the Gainsborough house. Aerith and her mother both snapped their gazes to the door, conversation ceasing on Cloud's entrance. The two were seated at the table, a pot of still steaming tea and two full cups between them.

Aerith merely nodded, rising from her seat. Mrs. Gainsborough, however, had spotted Genesis. "Commander Rhapsodos?" the woman blurted, clearly surprised.
Cloud pulled his hood off and his goggles down as he crossed the room to the stairs with Aerith. He shot a quick, "Be nice," over his shoulder at Genesis and headed upstairs. He slipped into the second bedroom with Aerith and closed the door behind them.

At Aerith's glance, he didn't bother leading into the topic. "I found the Healing Water, Aerith." Her eyes widened. "It's in my blood. The Cetra showed me my fight with Avalanche in Wutai. Some of my blood splattered one of the soldiers and it healed him. Damn Minerva hid all the Healing Water in my blood."

"I see," the girl said softly, understanding lighting her eyes. "She probably needed a way to send it into the past with you. It probably didn't exist in the original timeline's past, and she didn't want to take the time to recreate it." She frowned at him. "Why are you so upset? With this we can probably heal Genesis now. We can cure any of the copies that still have minds."

"How are we supposed to do that?" he demanded, throwing his arm wide in frustration. He didn't understand why she was taking this so easily. "Do we pour my blood on Genesis' head? Do we tell him he has to drink it?"

Cloud wasn't sure what he was expecting, but it certainly wasn't for Aerith to burst out laughing. The girl was actually laughing so hard that tears leaked out of her eyes as she clutched her sides. His ire evaporated like mist on a hot day. "Aerith?"

When she tried to speak, her laughter renewed. She held up one finger, obviously asking for a moment. With a sigh, Cloud sank down on the edge of the bed. The thought of continuing to feel frustrated seemed a bit ridiculous in the face of Aerith's mirth.

The young woman sat hard on the bed next to him, making the both of them bounce a bit. She tried three more times to speak, only to restart her own laughter.

"Oh, Cloud," she breathed, voice colored with amusement and another chuckle, "you silly, country bumpkin. Here in the big city, we have a little something called a blood transfusion. There's no need for some evil ritual involving bathing in or drinking blood."

Cloud's face heated up sharply as he buried it in his hands. It didn't help that Aerith started laughing again. With as much time as Cloud himself had spent in labs, he really thought he should have realized that it would be a simple procedure to give Genesis a bit of blood. He wasn't even entirely sure he could blame the oversight on being surprised by finding out where the Healing Water was. Or the bizarre memory he still didn't understand from the original timeline when Zack was trying so very hard to keep Genesis from eating Cloud's hair.

When Aerith's laughter was dying down again, Cloud asked, begged really, "When everything comes out, please don't tell Zack."

Aerith burst out laughing all over again.

* * *

"Are you alright, Zack?" Sephiroth asked from the other side of the desk.

Zack looked up from his PHS, blinking in confusion at the general. "My parents moved," he said, surprise evident to his own ears.

"Is this surprising?" Sephiroth asked carefully.

"Yeah," Zack blurted, eyes going wide. "Our family has lived in Gongaga for at least ten
generations. My parents aren't supposed to just up and move."

"You did."

"Well, yeah," Zack said, shrugging one shoulder, "but I figured I'd go back to Gongaga when I retired." He shook his head. "But my parents even sold their house. They say they packed up all my stuff and took it with them."

"Did they indicate why they left?"

"They got new jobs," Zack said, pointing at his PHS. "It says right here. 'Hello Zack. Dear, your father and I got new jobs. We've sold the house and we've moved away from Gongaga. Don't worry, we've brought all your things with us. We'll let you know when we have a permanent address. The new company is making the arrangements. We love you, dear. Write when you get a moment.'"

Sephiroth still wasn't making any facial expressions, so Zack asked, "Am I supposed to worry when my parents tell me not to worry? Isn't that something you tell your kids when you don't want to trouble them with your problems?"

Sephiroth arched one brow. "While I have not had parents of my own to gather that sort of information," Zack winced, "I would imagine that if there was a problem, they would ask for assistance. You've never indicated that your parents are prone to lying, and I can't imagine how obtaining new employment where the company is willing to pay relocation costs is in any way dangerous."

"I guess you're right," Zack said grudgingly. "Still, I thought they had a pretty good thing going at the reactor. The pay raise must be pretty significant if they're willing to move."

Sephiroth frowned slightly.

"What?" Zack asked with his own frown.

"I didn't think any reputable employers had better salaries in general than Shinra Company." The general paused. "Do you think your parents would be likely to take positions performing questionable work?"

The blood drained from Zack's face as he imagined his father beating up some poor blue collar worker who couldn't pay back a loan shark while his mother watched on in the background, wearing one of those outfits the girls at the Honey Bee Inn pranced around in.

Zack shook his head violently. "No," he said firmly. "My parents wouldn't do anything like that. It's got to be something they're already good at. My mom worked reception in the reactor, and my father was in maintenance. Maybe they just got promotions."

"Perhaps," Sephiroth said, sounding less than convinced.

Zack pushed out of the seat on his side of Sephiroth's desk. "I think maybe I'll just go look up if they got promoted. Maybe they were sent to Junon."

"The message said they had a new employer," Sephiroth said as Zack opened the door. "It's not likely that they work for Shinra Company anymore."

Zack frowned again. "I'm going to check anyway."

His PHS vibrated again. As he hadn't returned the device to his pocket, he flipped it over to see the
display. Grinning and opening the PHS, he said, "Message from Spike." A quick perusal of the message had his grin even wider. "Cloud's back today. He says he's free tonight unless we're busy." Grinning at the general, he asked, "You ready for a night on the town."

"We'll be staying above the plate?" Sephiroth asked, one brow quirked.

Zack nodded. Sephiroth nodded in return. Zack said, "I'll have Spike meet us at the train station at six. Good?"

The general nodded again, so Zack slipped away. That would give him plenty of time to do some digging on his parents and decide what to do with his friends.

* * *

"That's all?"

Cloud winced at the incredulity in Genesis' voice. He nodded.

Warily, Genesis said, "I was expecting something slightly more dramatic. Are you positive a simple transfusion will work? How can you even know your blood is compatible? I refuse to die of blood poisoning because you think a transfusion will work."

Ignoring Genesis' worries, because his own had been so outlandish, Cloud said, "The Healing Water removed Jenova's taint before. My blood should do the same. And because it's in my blood, it means it will purify the Jenova cells instead of removing them. You'll still have your enhancements."

At least he hoped so. After talking it over with Aerith for three hours that morning, they couldn't come up with any other way that made sense. Cloud was supposed to heal Genesis, and was supposed to learn how to do so before Cloud felt Genesis should be healed. That Cloud had had his epiphany mere minutes before Genesis showed himself to be in the right mindset confirmed for both Cloud and Aerith that this was the solution.

"And you believe you're qualified for the procedure?" The question was directed at Aerith, who was standing next to Cloud in a white frock with surgical gloves and a face mask on.

Cloud had never seen that dress, in person or in Zack's memories, and frankly, she looked creepy, especially when her eyes crinkled up in a smile while her mouth was hidden by the mask. He just tried not to look at her.

"Exceptionally qualified," Aerith said.

Cloud kept his face a neutral mask. He wasn't going to ask questions. It would throw their already shaky credibility to the wind.

"And this will cure my degradation?"

Cloud fought down a wince at the glimmer of hope in the man's voice. All Cloud did was nod.

Genesis sighed, closing his eyes for a moment, and whispered, "She guides us to bliss, her gift everlasting." Opening his eyes, he gave a silent nod, and the trio headed upstairs, Aerith leading the way.

Sealed away in the last bedroom down the upstairs hallway, Aerith directed Genesis to lie down on the bed and Cloud to seat himself in the chair closest to the head of the bed. Cloud was grateful Minerva hadn't done something stupid when she altered him, like give him wings. Genesis didn't
look too comfortable lying on the single wing folded up beneath him.

"This won't take but a minute," the young woman said, moving to the closet to pull out a nondescript, white bag. She sat in the chair facing Cloud's and set the bag on the floor before opening it.

Cloud cringed slightly at the second pair of medical gloves she pulled on. He still didn't like anything medical-related even after all these years away from Hojo's labs. Next came two blood bags, two lengths of thin, clear tubing, and a small device that Cloud vaguely recognized.

"Normally," Aerith said as she set up a small metal stand between Cloud and Genesis, "we would need to test blood types and clean things up a bit. But you're both stronger than normal." She smiled softly. "Cloud, we're going to send your blood straight to Genesis without filtering. Genesis, Cloud's blood will correct what's wrong with yours and reverse your degradation. It's as simple as that."

"How long will it take?" Genesis asked, staring narrow-eyed at the woman.

"Less than a half hour, I think," she said. "We shouldn't need more than half a pint of blood. It shouldn't make a strong, strapping, young man like Cloud even mildly lightheaded."

"And that will be enough?" Genesis asked.

"Oh, yes," Aerith reassured. Cloud had discussed this very fact earlier. The girl thought they shouldn't need more than a spoonful, but she wanted to use half a pint just to be sure.

Aerith tied a tourniquet around Cloud's bare bicep then slid the needle into the vein at the crook of his elbow on the first try. His deep, red blood immediately flowed into the tubing and up into the bag, pushed by the force of his own heartbeat. She quickly and precisely inserted another needle in Genesis' arm just as the small device hanging between the bags began forcing Cloud's blood down the other tube and into the other man.

Cloud kept his face blank while Genesis watched on with mostly concealed trepidation. Cloud didn't speak, feeling the atmosphere wasn't right for conversation. The other two apparently agreed as fifteen minutes passed in silence.

Genesis' expression slackened somewhat as his gaze moved from the flowing blood to the ceiling. With a somewhat thoughtful frown, the man said, "The stars shine with the Goddess' laughter beneath my skin." Then his eyes closed, and he apparently dropped unconscious.

Somewhat alarmed, Cloud asked, "This shouldn't poison him, right?"

"No," Aerith said, reaching over to press a bit of gauze to Cloud's arm and withdraw the needle. "I expect he'll just be asleep for the rest of his healing." She let the blood continue dripping down the tube still hooked up to Genesis. "After all, he's healing much more than just geostigma." The young woman fingered a lock of the unconscious man's hair. "See, he's already getting color back."

Taking a closer look, Cloud realized she was right. Though there was still gray in Genesis' hair, it was more red than gray now. Even his skin had more color.

"You should go," Aerith said quietly. Cloud looked up, but her eyes were still trained on Genesis. "You're off to meet Zack and Sephiroth after all. You wouldn't want to be late." She cracked a smile and eyed him sideways. "After all, even the great General Sephiroth might not be enough to make sure Zack shows up on time if he gets it into his head that something needs to be taken care of along the way."
Cloud huffed a laugh pushed to his feet. It was true. Zack was rarely on time, usually being rather early or late instead. Though he suspected that because Sephiroth was coming, it was far more likely that they would arrive early. He would swing by the church first and leave the fusion sword there. After all, if the situation blew up in his face, he'd rather regroup there for a fight than at Aerith's house. Besides, he'd rather keep Yuffie out of the fight if he could, and the girl might show up with her escort and Nanaki before Cloud came back. He definitely didn't need the half sized ninja trying to attack Sephiroth.
The train station was packed this early in the evening with people both heading home from work and those already heading out to have some fun. Cloud tried not to shift uneasily. With as high a profile as his terrorist persona and his actual self had now, even he questioned the intelligence of running around above the plate. Certain elements of Deepground, Avalanche, and the country of Wutai knew he was the terrorist Shinra was after. And he wasn't exactly keeping a low profile as himself, forming a partnership with Dio and such.

Cloud shook his head slightly, forcing himself to focus. Now was not the time to be second guessing himself. He needed to stay sharp. Sephiroth would be at this meeting, and he was the next most likely person after Zack to see through Cloud's act.

He was out of his element already with what he was wearing. He'd ditched both the shorts and sweatshirt and had on plain, black, cargo pants, a gray shirt, and a loose, black jacket. Above the plate, his normal attire would look odd, be it the "Cloud" or the "CS Delivery" outfit. Most of the other people traveling through the train station were dressed a bit more formally than Cloud, but he just couldn't bring himself to dress up anymore than he already was. He could not, however, abandon his goggles. If anyone still wasn't aware of his enhancements, it would be certain parties within Shinra, and those were the ones he would prefer never to find out.

A stirring at the edges of his mind signaled the two Soldiers' arrival. Zack had ditched his armor, but he was still wearing his uniform. Sephiroth actually looked less formal in black slacks, a black button up, and a dark gray vest. The general, with practiced ease, was ignoring the gawkers that stared as they passed.

Cloud decided to meet them halfway and got a few incredulous looks of his own as he walked across the station toward them. He was careful to keep his pace casual, not wanting to show the confidence of his usual stride as that was something either Sephiroth or Zack could recognize.

"Hey, Spiky!" Zack said with a grin as he swooped in and just about broke Cloud's ribs with his hug. When he pulled back, his expression turned slightly morose, and he added, "Sorry again about meeting you up here." Zack shot a mock scowl in the general's direction. "Someone refuses to go below the plate."

Completely unruffled, Sephiroth said, "I refuse to allow another riot to start."

Cloud couldn't help but ask, "You started a riot?" as his brows rose. He'd never heard about rioting in Midgar until after he and Zack had escaped the labs and one of the Sephiroth manifestations had assassinated the president.

Expression remaining flat, Sephiroth's eyes locked on Cloud. "I did not start the riot." But the man wasn't volunteering any other information. Cloud certainly wasn't going to ask and risk antagonizing him.

Fortunately, Zack felt like elaborating. "Some idiots threw rocks at him, and his fans hospitalized them."

Cloud choked on a laugh.

Sephiroth appeared not to notice Cloud's reaction as he was glaring at Zack. "If those so-called fans had any true respect for me, they would not have forced me to arrest them."
"They don't care," Zack countered with a grin. "You said yourself that the anniversary is a Silver Elite holiday now. They were likely giddy to commit a felony in your defense."

A hint of a grimace flashed over Sephiroth's face. "They were only charged with misdemeanor crimes. The judge didn't consider the various purses and shoes used to beat the adolescents to hospitalization with as deadly weapons. It was merely battery instead of aggravated assault."

Zack burst out laughing. "You didn't tell me that before. We should go down there. I want to see your fans riot."

Sephiroth narrowed his eyes, but didn't respond.

Zack shook his head and threw an arm around Cloud's shoulder. "Come on then, let's get out of this crowd."

The people parted before them as Sephiroth fell into step on the other side of Zack. Cloud kept a surreptitious watch on the general, but he allowed himself to think about what had just happened.

Zack and Sephiroth had seemed rather at ease with each other. Zack was always friendly, but it seemed as though Sephiroth had been friendly as well, at least so far as the man could be friendly. Not a single one of Cloud's memories from Zack showed the two Soldiers to actually be friends, even though they had shared a friend in Angeal. Cloud hadn't thought the two had had enough time before the one went mad and the other nearly died to even become friends.

Cloud mentally shook himself. Perhaps he was reading too much into it. He could certainly imagine the pair putting on a false front to make Cloud feel more at ease.

"I hope you like the theater, buddy." Zack said as they left the train station. "There's not as much fun stuff to do up here, but the plays are alright. And then we'll go out to eat after."

So far as Cloud knew, he'd never attended a play in his life. They didn't have them in Nibelheim. He'd been poor as a Shinra infantryman. He couldn't afford the public exposure once he'd joined Avalanche. After meteor, there weren't any theaters left. Finally, once Edge had become a city in its own right, he was too busy with his delivery business, the bar, and the children to think about taking in a play.

Fortunately, Zack didn't seem to need an answer. "I thought 'I Want to be Your Canary' was pretty good, but that troop is performing in Junon now."

Cloud kept his mouth shut about how silly the title sounded. He'd never even heard of it.

"Loveless is always good." Zack grinned. "I haven't seen a bad performance of it yet no matter which company does it."

Loveless? Cloud eyed Sephiroth sideways as best he could with his goggles on. The general's face showed no expression, but Cloud had to wonder how the reminder of Genesis would affect him.

Of course, Cloud was curious about Loveless. The older Yuffie from the non-existent future had tried to explain it to him once. He wasn't quite sure how much of her explanation to accept considering all the bizarre analogies she used. After all, how could the relationship between the three friends in the story be similar to the nature of the Steal, Enemy Skill, and Mime materia? He could understand how, in Yuffie's mind, the hero would be the Steal materia, because everything revolved around stealing for the the White Rose of Wutai, but how the wanderer was an Enemy Skill and the prisoner was Mime he couldn't quite comprehend.
Sephiroth remained quiet as they walked while Zack nattered on about some mission he went on near Kalm where he was attacked by flocks and flocks of seven-foot birds. In fact, Sephiroth didn't say anything until Zack maneuvered Cloud into one of the ticket lines outside the theater.

"There's no reason to wait in line, Zack. I purchased our tickets earlier today."

"What?" Zack asked. "Why? Those things aren't cheap. This is supposed to be my treat." He actually sounded a bit upset.

"You would have purchased tickets in the lowest section closest to the pit orchestra," Sephiroth said simply.

"That's because those are the best seats," Zack said, apparently incredulous that this would even be a topic of conversation.

"I refuse to have half the audience staring at me instead of the performance."

Zack scowled. "You bought box seats, didn't you," he said flatly.

"Our seats are this way," Sephiroth said. He spun on his heel and aimed straight for a nearby staircase to the upper floors.

Zack sighed and tugged Cloud into following the general. "The big baby just doesn't want to sit in the middle of a bunch of people that might impede his movement in an emergency."

Sephiroth didn't react to Zack's assertion, but Cloud knew there was no way the enhanced Soldier wouldn't have heard the comment.

The main theater lobby had by no means been a loud area, but the upstairs hallway with its plush, maroon carpets and gold-gilded lighting fixtures was eerily quiet in comparison. There weren't even any other theater-goers to be seen. In fact, the only person Cloud had seen at all was the usher they'd passed at the top of the stairs that quietly pointed Sephiroth down the correct hallway.

They went through the door marked seventeen into a darkened room. Cloud hovered near the doorway while Sephiroth navigated across the room in the dark to what appeared, in the dim lighting, to be a food bar. Zack went the opposite direction of Sephiroth, apparently to the light switch. A soft lighting filled the space from a small, delicate chandelier in the center of the ceiling. This room was a bit more subtly colored, all in pale golds and creams.

Cloud shifted uneasily as he allowed the door to swing closed behind him. Being this close to the general in an enclosed space made him uneasy, especially with the Fusion Sword being secreted back at the church. It was like one of those dreams where halfway through, you realized you'd been naked the entire time. Cloud even felt like he had eyes on him, like he was being watched by someone he couldn't see.

Trying to distract himself from the sensation, Cloud watched Zack prowl around the room, poking into every nook he could find, even going so far as to pull up the cushions of several lounge chairs in search of loose change, or so he claimed. He kept about half of his attention on Sephiroth as well, though the man was rather boring. He pulled a plate from a lower cupboard, sparsely arrayed a few bits of vegetables, fruit, cheese, and crackers on in, poured himself a small glass of something that smelled like a mild wine, and slipped out the door opposite the one to the hall. He left it open so Cloud could see the theater auditorium beyond.

"Make yourself at home, Spiky," Zack said, as he picked up a potted tree that was actually taller than him. "Don't mind me." Cloud frowned as the man proceeded to move the tree across the room.
Cloud moved toward the food bar as Zack pushed one of the chairs to where the tree had been. Cloud couldn't figure out why the man would be rearranging the suite, but he figured it would annoy Zack more not to get the chance to explain himself.

Cloud took a few strawberries and a couple slices of cheese for his plate. He hesitated, and took one stick of celery and a carrot. He didn't want to eat much, didn't think he could really with Sephiroth so near, but also they were supposed to go out for dinner afterward. He didn't understand why they couldn't just eat here; there was certainly enough food for a meal.

Cloud ignored Zack, as the man was standing on a chair, fiddling with the chandelier now, and made for the door to the theater. Unlike the lower auditorium, which Cloud could see from this high up, the seats were movable chairs, not the smaller, folding ones bolted to the floor like the lower auditorium had. These were actually plush chairs, upholstered in a pale green. But this presented Cloud with a problem. There were only three chairs, and Sephiroth was seated in the middle one.

There was clearly enough space for four chairs. Sephiroth was seated in the one second to the left, and there was an empty space on the far right, leaving Cloud to sit either on the end to Sephiroth's right or to sandwich himself between the general and the wall.

Cloud half turned to eye the chair Zack was standing on. Yes, the Soldier had taken one of the chairs off the balcony to stand on. Why the man couldn't have used one of the chairs already in the lounge was a mystery. Cloud scowled. Dammit Zack. He'd been planning on putting Zack between himself and Sephiroth because the general was far less likely to plow through one of his own men to eliminate a threat, at least while he was sane.

But Cloud had already been standing there for too long. With a grimace, he walked out onto the balcony and angled to sit in the chair to Sephiroth's right. The general didn't visibly react when Cloud sat, but Cloud hadn't really expected him to. It was a bit surreal, however, to see Sephiroth casually eating a bit of cheese.

A few quick footsteps were all the warning Cloud had before Zack's hands were on his shoulders and the man himself was leaning down around Cloud's side. "Can I borrow your goggles, Spike? The lights are going to blind me."

Cloud's brows drew down in a frown, but Zack kept on. "We're too high up. No one will see your eyes. It's not like they have cameras on the audience." Then the hands on Cloud's shoulders darted up and Zack outright stole the goggles before Cloud could stop him.

Frown creasing his forehead, Cloud refocused on his food and the auditorium in front of him. He supposed Zack was right about the surveillance, and it wasn't like Zack hadn't already probably told Sephiroth about Cloud's mako-infused eyes. But now he couldn't eye the general sideways without the man seeing. The googles had hidden Cloud's watchful gaze, and now he'd have to rely on hearing it if the man made any sudden moves. Cloud couldn't even risk opening up his senses to feel the man because surely both Soldiers would recognize the sensation from the last time Cloud used it. The slight presence that trickled through his clamped down senses just wasn't enough to properly discern intent.

"I assume," Sephiroth said quietly, "that proper introductions are not necessary. Zack failed to actually introduce us."

Cloud was proud that he hadn't flinched when the man broke the silence. "No, it's fine. I know who you are." The general wasn't looking at him still, his eyes focusing more on his food or the filling theater below their balcony.
Sephiroth nodded. "Zack has spoken of you as well."

Cloud only nodded, unsure of if he was supposed to keep the conversation going. Turning his eyes back to his plate, he tried to drum up some of the appetite he didn't have much of in the first place. Gaia, this was awkward. And he still didn't know what the hell Zack was doing with the chandelier. The light was flickering now. What perhaps perturbed him, if anything did, was that Sephiroth was completely unaffected by Zack's behavior. That this was normal for Zack, while Cloud didn't have any memory of or strange inclination to meddle with furniture and light fixtures, was a bit unnerving.

* * *

Sephiroth's observations were woefully inadequate. He wasn't used to people not giving away things they didn't mean to, but Zack's friend Strife was a careful person. It didn't help that many of Strife's reactions were hidden in his eyes behind those goggles. Despite the ridiculous, romantic notions many had about reading the soul in the eyes, there was a grain of truth. Many emotions could be discerned through pupillary reaction alone, and intention could be predicted with how the eyes moved.

Zack had said at the beginning of the evening that he would try to get Strife to remove the goggles, but apparently, Zack's propensity to rearrange these suites to better suite his tastes had given him the perfect opportunity to do exactly that.

Strife clearly wasn't happy, but he apparently didn't think it was worth it to argue with Zack. That was something Sephiroth agreed with him on. Sometimes, it was easier to simply let the First have his way. He was less inclined to argue about important things when he "won" meaningless concessions like this.

Refocusing on Strife, he ran through the observations he'd made so far, attempting to determine if he actually could make a comparison between him and the elusive CS Delivery.

Strife was confident—it was clear in his stride—but not so confident that he matched the persona of the man who didn't so much as flinch at facing off against Sephiroth himself. Strife was wary and observant, as he seemed to always have a bit of attention on Sephiroth and Zack, but he didn't have the seemingly preternatural awareness that CS Delivery had fought Sephiroth with. Strife wasn't completely averse to being near him. He could have waited until Zack was finished with the chair, but he chose to sit next to the general anyway.

Perhaps these observations would be useful if the motivation behind them wasn't so ambiguous. Perhaps Strife was more confident when he had a weapon and would match CS Delivery if he were armed. Perhaps Strife was wary and observant because he worried about being found out as a terrorist. Perhaps he was simply anxious about being detained in a lab. Perhaps he felt he didn't need an uncanny awareness of his surroundings when he wasn't suspected of unlawful behavior.

Any and all of his behavior could be explained away by simple nerves. And it grated on Sephiroth's analytical skills. He should be able to puzzle this out. He'd been training on strategy and psychology since before he could remember. He'd explained it away before as having never met Strife and it being difficult to assess someone through another person's vicarious experiences.

So far, the only thing Strife had legitimately in common with CS Delivery, besides being identical in height, was Sephiroth's seeming lack of ability in reading him. At least Sephiroth could continue his observations peripherally. It was a skill he'd perfected in the labs, and he was reasonably confident that Strife hadn't noticed Sephiroth's observations as of yet.

"There," Zack declared, emerging from the suite, the fourth chair in hand. "All finished."
As he set the chair down on Strife's other side and flopped down in said seat, Sephiroth turned his head slightly to see the lights in the chandelier shining a bit more dimly. He really wished he could find some kind of regulation about illumination that he could use to force Zack to stop fiddling with the wiring of lighting fixtures. It didn't make any sense to him that the man wanted dimmer lighting, or why he insisted on messing with other people's wiring when it was unlikely he'd ever be in a position to benefit from his ministrations again.

"What were you doing?" Strife asked. Not even the man's voice was quite like the one Sephiroth had heard.

"Making the lights a bit more efficient," Zack said. "They're dimmer now, but they're still bright enough, and now the theater will save a bit of gil."

Sephiroth didn't believe it. Zack had given him the same line the first time he'd asked. Out of curiosity, Sephiroth had estimated the reduced power usage and compared it to the costs of normal lighting and the savings was perhaps forty gil for an entire year. Children in the slums pick pocketed more than that in a morning. Unfortunately, Zack refused to admit to any other motivation and Sephiroth was unwilling to push for such a seemingly inconsequential thing.

If Strife's skeptically quirked brow was any indication, he didn't believe Zack's reasoning either. Zack paid no mind, however, and turned his attention to the plate overflowing with food. It made Sephiroth wonder if he should eat more, or suggest that Strife eat more, because surely it meant Zack thought wherever he was taking them to dinner didn't have terribly good food if he was eating this much now.

"Looks like it's starting," Zack said, in between bites. At least the man was eating quietly.

And he was right. The lights were dimming, the ushers vacating the theater floor, and the other patrons were quieting. There was a bit of a frown on Strife's face as his gaze darted everywhere in the theater from the ushers and patrons to the gathering pit orchestra. If Sephiroth had to explain it, he would say the younger man had never been to a play before, which didn't entirely make sense. Infantrymen certainly made enough to afford the tickets, and their schedule weren't so demanding that it prevented them from having a social life. According to his file, Strife had been in Junon and then Midgar for two years.

But then, as the theater went dark and the lights on the stage grew brighter, some of Strife's attention seemed to fall away from Sephiroth and Zack as it shifted to the play. Sephiroth disliked that he couldn't tell if the shift was from overconfidence in his abilities against two Soldiers should he suddenly be attacked, or genuine interest in the play.

At least the dimmer lighting gave Sephiroth a better view of Strife's eyes. Zack wasn't exaggerating when he estimated Strife's enhancement to be at or near Sephiroth's level. The glow was far more than Zack had, and Sephiroth couldn't say it was less than his own. He also found it intriguing that there were small flecks of green near the limbal rings of Strife's clearly blue eyes. He'd not seen that even in Angeal or Genesis, who were the only documented cases of having received mako in nearly the same quantities as Sephiroth.

The opening overture filled the hall with a haunting melody. The curtains swept open slowly, revealing a single actor on stage. As he was wearing a suit, Sephiroth took him for the narrator. His voice carried through the hall, over the music, as he said, "When the war of the beasts bring the world's end, the goddess descends from the sky, wings of light and dark spread afar, she guides us to bliss, her gift everlasting."

He exited the stage as the other actors swept onto the stage and the lights came up. The orchestral
music swelled and moved to the movements of the performers. They weren't dancing per se, just utilizing rhythmic movements and gestures frequently emphasized by the music.

Sephiroth didn't pay much mind to the actual play. A war starts. Some divine being participates. Three men seek her, but are separated by the war: one a hero, one a prisoner, and one a wanderer. The prisoner escapes, runs from the war, and falls in love. Eventually the prisoner leaves to find his friends as the war is bringing about the end of the world. The wanderer finds him first and engages his friend in a duel to the death. The prisoner can't kill his friend and willingly dies. This changes the wanderer, the prisoner's death being the gift of the goddess, and the world is saved.

It was all very dull. The wanderer was a spiteful fool in Sephiroth's opinion, and the prisoner was just as much of a fool. It didn't make any sense that one idiot's self-sacrifice would save the world when the wanderer wasn't even on the enemy side. Did a ridiculous duel make the opponents in the war realize that their enemy wasn't worth destroying? And where was the hero in all this? He didn't even factor in the significant plot events of the second half of the story in any of the versions of the play that he'd seen.

No, Sephiroth wouldn't be paying much attention to the performance. He'd attended enough plays under Genesis' urging that it didn't matter. This outing was about Strife anyway, not a play.

The subject in question was paying unusual attention to the performance. A slight crease marred Strife's brow as he frowned faintly at the stage. Even if Sephiroth's vision wasn't enhanced enough to see in the dim theater lighting, the glow from Strife's was bright enough to show exactly where the young man's attention was.

Strife's focus on the play was...odd. It was like he didn't know the story. On top of it being strange that he'd never been to a theater, apparently, not knowing the story of Loveless while living in Midgar was equivalent to not knowing who President Shinra was. It was simply unimaginable.

Perhaps Sephiroth was wrong. Perhaps he could bring it up as a topic of conversation during dinner. No one could accuse him of poor social skills if he asked how this performance compared to the others Strife had seen. The question implied Strife was cultured, assuming he'd attended plays before, and implied he had analytical skills for assuming he could make a comparative assessment between two different events of a similar nature.

Throughout the entirety of the play, Strife's attention didn't waver. Even Zack's comment during the fourth act about the conclusion of the fight between the prisoner and wanderer being "touching" was completely ignored.

As the lights came up and the cast was taking their bows, Zack threw an arm around Strife's shoulders and asked, "What did you think? I don't like the silent ones as much, but this was was still pretty good. It had great music. It almost made up for the fact that the only person that talked was the narrator."

"It was interesting," Strife said introspectively.

"Interesting?" Zack repeated dryly, pushing out of his seat then pulling Strife up as well. "That's all you've got to say? You've got to have more of an opinion that that."

Sephiroth followed as Zack pulled Strife toward the door.

"It was better than I thought," Strife said.

"How? Come on, Spike, details."
Rather than immediately answer, Strife snatched his goggles from Zack's pocket with speed only Soldiers, or particularly enhanced humans, possessed, and pulled them on before he opened the suite door himself. Strife then proceeded to stride quickly out of the room and down the hall, weaving between the other theater patrons as though he already knew where they were going to step. Zack was right on the younger man's heels, leaving Sephiroth to make his own way through the throng. He would have thought his passage easier, because as soon as people started noticing him, they immediately parted, leaving him a clear path, but Zack and Strife still beat him outside and were waiting for him in the square in front of the theater.

As he stepped outside, before he even approached them, he heard the thread of their conversation. It left him wondering about Strife’s mental capacity.

"Seriously?" Zack asked, "how is it realistic. I get it from a literary standpoint, but it's hardly realistic. It's a story, it's not supposed to be realistic."

If Strife thought anything about Loveless was realistic, aside from the fact that people fall in love and die idiotically, then there was something gravely wrong with him.

"It's a metaphor, Zack," Strife said, frowning a bit. "I didn't mean realistic like the news or something. The characters and events are symbols that represent other things. What they represent is realistic, not what they are at face value."

Sephiroth quirked a brow, but if either of the two noticed, they didn't react. Zack just rolled his eyes and clamped a hand on Sephiroth's and Cloud's shoulders each, starting them walking down the street. Sephiroth was wondering if Strife had stumbled upon something similar to whatever understanding of the play that Genesis had. The former Soldier had always been fond of waxing poetic about the soul of the play. Even after he'd thrown a fireball at Sephiroth for pointing out to him that a play, lacking any sort of biological systems, could not house a soul as defined by popular philosophy.

"What exactly is the realistic part then?" Zack asked.

Strife sighed, giving Sephiroth the impression that he thought Zack should already understand this. "Any war is a war with beasts and it always threatens to bring an end to the world. Soldiers dehumanize their opponents all the time. It makes it easier to kill them. And everyone knows that if they lose the war, their enemies will win, and probably run roughshod all over the country changing things and generally getting rid of anything they don't like. That's the end of the world in a literal sense. It's just always left out that it's only an end that precedes another beginning. But that's not the point."

Sephiroth found that to be a rather astute, and surprisingly accurate, observation. It certainly made more sense than Genesis' insistence that all men are beasts, which, while true under the definition of a beast being an animal and humans being under the classification of all animals, still didn't make the play make any sense. And Strife was correct in the dehumanization of enemies. It was a common military tactic to promote support among the civilians and confidence in the troops.

"The goddess at the beginning is just hope. But since people have different hopes, it's not specific about what her gift is. And anyone with a lick of common sense or determination knows their hopes won't happen just because they wish it. They have to go out and push for it themselves."

Again true. And certainly made more sense than when Genesis said that the gift was ever changing, thus earning its description of infinite in mystery. If this was what Genesis meant, he'd certainly done a poor job of trying to explain it.
"Looking at the three friends, it's reasonable to assume that one would rise through the ranks, one might get so lost in obscurity that the armies just let him go, and another would be taken prisoner. If one's a prisoner and the other isn't part of any organized military, it makes sense that the high ranking officer, the hero, would leave the story at this point. He's got more to worry about than two old friends, he's got soldiers and civilians he's responsible for."

At least that point contradicted with Genesis' views. He'd always told Sephiroth that the hero had cared more for glory than his friends. It seemed Strife was of a similar mind to Sephiroth. A hero, or war veteran, had a duty to uphold that mere friendship couldn't negate.

"And people fall in love all the time. The prisoner found someone while he was in hiding. That could happen to anyone."

"But he abandoned the war," Zack said, confusion clear in his voice, "shouldn't he have gone back to help?"

"Anything could go through a prisoner's mind, Zack," Strife said. "What if he thought he'd be caught and killed before he got back to his own lands? What if they put him back in prison? What if he thought his former allies wouldn't believe he escaped and killed or imprisoned him because they thought he deserted or turned spy? It's reasonable to think that any escaped prisoner of war would decide to hide in foreign territory rather than try to return home."

All valid, irrational thoughts, Sephiroth agreed. Anyone who didn't have the mental stability to cope with wartime imprisonment should be expected to have erratic behavior.

"But like just about anyone, he started to feel guilty and tried to go back. The wanderer finds him first, and he's just as irrational as any anyone else is capable of. He's probably jealous the prisoner found love. And jealous the hero had glory. All he had was a war with no one to recognize his deeds because everything he did was eclipsed by his friend. The hero was a better fighter and the prisoner was better at actually living a life outside of war. So in an irrational fit, he killed his friend."

Again, a rational assessment of human psyche. There were numerous cases within just Midgar itself of spouses killing each other over perceived slights and business partners killing each other over minor grievances. Even a pitiful thief might turn into a murderer if the victim they were robbing looked at them strangely enough.

"For whatever reason, the prisoner's death ended the war, be it from the enemy side winning or the wanderer feeling guilty for what he'd done and going to help the hero turn the tide. With the whole thing ended, hope is achieved. The prisoner's lover survived, the hero saved a bunch of people, and the wanderer learned to quit whining so he'd have some kind of peace. When you told me we were going to see the play, I'd actually thought it would be a whole lot more frivolous, full of some stupid rivalry between a bunch of soldiers, and a sappy romance. I think the original writer gave a whole lot more thought to the story than I expected."

That answered Sephiroth's question about whether Strife had seen the play performed. But now he had a new question. "How did you fail your psychological warfare and tactical application class three times, Strife?"

Strife's head angled slightly sideways, indicating he was likely looking at Sephiroth, though he couldn't say for certain as the goggles hid the younger man's eyes.

"There's always a right answer for a test. I never got the correct right answer."

Sephiroth could certainly believe that. Strife showed a highly intuitive approach to psychological
analysis. Any of the classes offered to the army and potential Soldiers would have begun with the basics and followed strict guidelines meant to be used to build on knowledge, to build a more intuitive response. Strife's analysis was already intuitive.

"Enough of that," Zack said, throwing an arm around Strife's shoulders again. "Let's go eat. It's just around the corner here."

Sephiroth silently followed the other two, wondering just what else in Strife's file was incorrect because he didn't fit well within the standard parameters for assessment.

They were quickly seated in a back corner of a small restaurant that smelled of cilantro and cinnamon. An odd combination in Sephiroth's estimation. Sephiroth took the seat where his back would be to the corner, Zack had his back to the bulk of the restaurant, and Strife's back was aimed toward the kitchen.

Zack snatched up the menus before either Sephiroth or Strife could look at them and ordered when the waitress came to introduce herself. If he was so determined to order a large sampler platter for them, Sephiroth didn't think it worth it to argue.

"So what did you think of the play, Seph?" Zack asked. Sephiroth narrowed his eyes. "I know you've been to a few of them. How'd this one rate?"

"The orchestra was impressive. The acting was adequate. The presentation was above average. Overall, it was an adequate rendition of Loveless. I would not object to seeing it again, Zachary."

Frowning, Zack said, "My name's not Zachary."

Sephiroth countered with, "My name is not Seph." His mouth twisted around the ridiculous moniker.

"But Seph is a nickname," Zack said slowly, as though Sephiroth didn't understand the first dozen times Zack had tried to explain.

"Then so is Zachary."

"But it's longer than my real name."

"I can find no supporting evidence that nicknames must be shorter than the original. Therefore, if you insist on calling me by a name I do not like, then you will answer to a name you dislike."

"Can't you at least call me something more awesome sounding, like…," Zack frowned. "Like Zax or something."

"That's not even a real name," Sephiroth said simply.

Zack just huffed, rolling his eyes as his attention moved to the waitress bringing their appetizers. As with the main meal, the appetizers came in a sampler array. Sephiroth pulled some stuffed mushrooms and fried vegetables from the mix. Zack availed himself of something that looked rather like slime in a sea shell. Strife started with a skewer of small pieces of meat and fruit.

A bit of movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention. A woman three tables away had a small, cinnamon-colored mu poking its head and tail out of the purse she had sitting on the tabletop. The corners of Sephiroth's mouth turned down. He still couldn't figure out why someone would willingly carry around a rodent type monster with them, let alone in a purse that likely had at least an ID card and cosmetics for it to defecate on.
"A couple years ago," Strife said, catching Sephiroth's attention as Strife appeared to be directing the comments at him, "some actress found a half dead mu in a dumpster behind a theater. She carried it around in her purse and nursed it back to health. Now people think it's trendy to carry a monster around."

Sephiroth stared. How could Strife know the answer to the question he'd never been asked when Turks and Soldiers didn't have a clue. Surely Genesis would have known the answer, but he and Angeal had been unique in their perceptiveness of Sephiroth's attention focus and unasked questions. How on Gaia's green ground did Strife possess an ability that only the most physically advanced and intelligent beings on the planet had? He was a mere adolescent military dropout.

* * *

Cloud wished he'd never even opened his mouth. It had been instinct. He was too used to Marlene's and Denzel's incessant curiosity. Too used to Yuffie's insipid questions. He'd seen Sephiroth's eyes zero in on that stupid woman's damn rodent and just blurted out the answer to the unasked question so he wouldn't be pestered about it later.

Now the general was staring at him with an expression that was somewhat of a cross between the focused attention that generally came before he impaled Cloud with the Masamune, and what Cloud saw on other people's faces when they looked at Jenova's headless corpse in the old timeline.

Even Zack was staring at Cloud like he didn't recognize him, or he expected him to grow a third arm.

Just as Cloud was about to apologize for whatever had them so flabbergasted, Sephiroth asked another question.

"Why would emulating a celebrity's actions raise one's social status?" What made the question even weirder was that Sephiroth still had that hideous hybrid of an expression on his face.

"It doesn't," he said. "It's just fans posturing for each other, trying to prove they're more fanatical than all the other fans. They hope it will get the attention of their celebrity."

A bit of the incredulity in Sephiroth's expression faded while Zack's grew more shocked. Sephiroth's brow furrowed slightly. "Is that why my fans rioted?"

Cloud blinked behind his goggles. That was a strange leap in logic, but Cloud supposed it would only be natural to think of himself like a celebrity, especially with regards to the Silver Elite.

"You're a war hero," Cloud said with a slight shrug. "There are bound to be people who think you'll respect action the most."

Frown deepening, Sephiroth asked, "Do they think I'm a liar?"

Cloud could only assume that meant Sephiroth had tried to explain to them he'd rather have his fans follow the law, but they didn't change their behavior. "Not your fans. They probably think either you have to say that but secretly condone unlawfulness, or you only think you want them to do it because you either don't realize what you want or Shinra Company brainwashed you."

"Why?" Sephiroth asked sharply.

Cloud shrugged slightly again. "You are who your fans think you are regardless of who you actually are. Unless you get really involved with communicating to them, they're going to attempt to fill in the gaps themselves."
"By fabricating so-called facts?"

Cloud nodded. He had to wonder why no one bothered to explain fans to Sephiroth. It hadn't been as bad for Cloud after Geostigma, because people were too busy trying to rebuild so they had better things to do, and Vincent took the brunt of admiration after Omega, but he still knew a thing or two about what to expect and how to deal with the fanatical masses.

"Can we talk about something else?" Zack asked, a bit of uneasiness clear in his tone. "You guys are starting to freak me out."

After only a heartbeat's hesitation, Sephiroth turned back to Cloud and asked, "Why would this type of intelligent conversation unsettle Zack?"

One side of Cloud's mouth kicked up in a half smile. He could already see the indignation in Zack's eyes over the question. Perhaps this outing wasn't such a bad idea after all.
Sephiroth frowned at the screen. Nothing in these records made the slightest bit of sense considering the current information regarding the present situation, and his observations of the subject.

**Strife, Cloud**

**Age:** 16

**Weight:** 125 lbs

**Residential History:** Nibelheim native, departed city of origin at age 13, resident of Junon at age 14, transferred to Midgar at 16, departed Midgar at 16, no further history available.

**Military Record:** Failed to meet requirements for Soldier, enlisted in Shinra Infantry in Junon, transferred to Midgar, failed Soldier entrance exam to transfer military branches, resigned from Infantry.

**Medical History:** No illnesses or injuries of note prior to Shinra enlistment. No illnesses or injuries requiring medical leave during Infantry participation.

**Evaluations:**

*Physical:* Subject shows no physical prowess beyond below-average Infantryman. Build does not give him advantage in any particular discipline.

*Mental:* Subject exhibits low self-esteem, asocial behavior, and a passive aggressive dislike for authority. Shows signs of short temper and jealousy. Behavior potentially unstable. Re-evaluate every three months.

*Weapons Proficiency:* Passed firearm safety certification by one percent. Only basic firearm use allowed. Unable to pass blade safety certification. Prohibited from using blades during missions. May only be used for practice.


**Recommendations:** Subject is poorly suited for life in the Shinra Company Military. Though he is adequately proficient in the physical application of mission execution, his mental capabilities, particularly problem solving, strategic theory, history, and diplomacy, are lacking. He does not socialize with other recruits, exhibiting underdeveloped social skills. He has attitude problems with his commanding officers, short of being outright insubordinate. His unstable behavior indicates he would become more unstable if subjected to Mako treatments. Considering his problems with so many aspects of his current career, and apparent dislike of standard procedures, I cannot determine a reason that he has remained with Shinra Company for this long. As he has no particular physical or mental aptitudes that set him apart from other recruits, do not consider him for rank advancement or transfer to other departments.
Sephiroth's frown deepened to a scowl as he opened the attachment containing the most recent batch of Strife's examinations and scrolled down to the section assessing strategic theory.

**Question Posed:** Hypothetically speaking, a terrorist cell has established itself and its dogma in three sectors beneath the plate. What measures must be taken to eliminate the propaganda this terrorist cell circulates among the proletarian populace that is most likely to sympathize with them?

**Respondent's Answer:** The terrorists need to be taken out by arresting them or banishing them. Terrorists might kill innocent people.

**Question Posed:** Hypothetically speaking, a terrorist cell has stolen sensitive information from Shinra Company. What measures should be taken to minimize the damage done to the company's reputation by the release of this information and what preparations should be made to compensate for potential public retaliation that occurs in response to release of said information?

**Respondent's Answer:** Shinra Company should work to take the information back and arrest the terrorists that stole it.

It didn't make sense. Strife didn't even address the actual questions. The answers sounded like those of a child who didn't understand the words he was being asked, like Strife picked out a few words and strung them together in a new question. With as meticulous and observant Strife seemed, Sephiroth found it difficult to believe that Strife had poor focus and little attention span. Strife was also resoundingly articulate. It was like the person who answered the questions posted in Strife's file was not the person Sephiroth had met that evening.

The file showed an adolescent of average physical capabilities, below average physical potential, and dismal intelligence. Yet Strife now appeared to be above average physically and on par intelligence-wise with the some of the most brilliant people Sephiroth had ever known.

It might make more sense if Strife actually was a completely different person, such as if whoever CS Delivery was had actually replaced Strife. But Zack still asserted that Strife was Strife, despite some differences that seemed to perturb even the ever-optimistic Zack.

Sephiroth leaned back in his chair, pulling a rarely used notebook out from its usual place in the bottom of a drawer. He didn't want his theories available on the company network, but he felt he needed to get the words in front of him so he could examine them altogether and perhaps see some kind of pattern.

Under a column labeled "Strife Prior to Power Disruption Incident", Sephiroth listed out:

*Low intelligence*

*Poor social skills*

*Average physical abilities*

*Poor physical potential*
Repeated failed attempts to join Soldier

16 years old

No contact with Shinra Company pre-enlistment

No prior exposure to mako

No criminal record

Kept as friend by Zack

Under a column labeled "Strife Post Power-Disruption-Incident", he listed out:

S-Project level exposure to mako

Potentially physically on par with Soldier

Physical development at early adult levels

Stole Shinra weapon

Extensive travel across Planet

Skilled chocobo handler

Business associate of known entrepreneur

Highly intelligent with regards to strategy and psychological analysis

Identity verified by Zack

He wasn't sure it wouldn't bias his formulations, but he wrote out a third column for "CS Delivery", listing:

Appeared post power-disruption-incident

Mako levels unverified

Soldier strength, physical abilities, and possibly training

Thief, bomber, aggravated assaulter

Averse to murder

Enjoys playing psychological games with victims

Apparently non-psychotic
Identity unknown

Physically comparable to Strife post incident

Allies keep company with Strife post incident

Has never been seen in Strife's company

Currently gone to ground, possibly waiting for something

Sephiroth set the notebook down and scanned his lists again, hoping if he did so, something would pop out. Unfortunately, all he saw were contradictions.

Strife was unintelligent, but the person Sephiroth spoke to not an hour ago was extremely intelligent and insightful. Strife was sixteen, yet appeared to be the physical age of a young adult. Strife had no mako exposure, but his eyes indicated infusions over the course of years, possibly equaling Sephiroth's own enhancements. Strife never exhibited criminal behavior, yet showed no apparent hesitation in stealing a sword.

Perhaps the only thing that Strife kept before and after the power disruption incident was his willingness to travel. An adolescent leaving his mountain village by himself with only an ambition and no guarantees to keep him showed a certain amount of recklessness and confidence that wasn't reflected in Strife's records. But as soon as Strife had left the company, he'd started traveling all over Gaia, that recklessness appearing again. He'd also somehow found business contacts and had time to catch, tame, and hide an entire flock of chocobos. While the rest was explainable, Sephiroth still couldn't figure out what Strife would be doing with a flock of chocobos.

Still, Strife was very actively doing something, and he'd not shown this same initiative to his commanding officers or trainers. Had there been something about the company that stifled Strife's core personality? Was Strife's behavior more erratic and restless, and the company had given him the stability to function safely? Was Strife now unhinged? Had he developed some kind of split personality? Had Strife been somehow purposely oppressed by someone within the company?

Sephiroth hated not having evidence regarding CS Delivery's identity. It would be easiest if he were Strife. There was already a documented, unusual event that could be traced and used to determine what happened to Strife to create CS Delivery. The idea of some ridiculously enhanced terrorist coming out of nowhere was unnerving to say the least.

Equally perplexing was that there was also no evidence that Strife wasn't CS Delivery. Sephiroth had to admit that if Strife was CS Delivery, this was the reason why they hadn't been able to confirm CS Delivery's identity. If there was evidence either way, it would give Reeve and the Turks something to trace, something to investigate. But CS Delivery was little better than a ghost. There were no records of him. He left no trace of himself behind at the scenes of his crimes. He didn't even leave any demands for Sephiroth to try and use to puzzle out bits of his psyche or as clues to track him down with.

One thing he hadn't yet done was formulate hypotheses to explain how Strife could be CS Delivery. He had to admit that this was at least partially because Zack was so resistant to the idea. That was not something he should have done.

Sephiroth leaned back in his chair, folding his arms. Hypothetically, if Strife was CS Delivery, what other assumptions and hypotheses could be made?
Assumption one: Strife did not want Shinra Company or Zack in particular to know his identity.

Assumption two: Strife did not want information from Zack, but did appear to want his friendship.

Assumption three: Strife suddenly gained intimate knowledge of people he had never met before.

Assumption four: Strife had mako enhancements possibly equal to Sephiroth's own and had no qualms using them.

Assumption five: Strife knew where all the stolen Huge Materia and advanced weaponry was.

Assumption six: Strife was somehow managing a business venture, terrorizing Shinra Company, and socializing with Zack in coordinated tandem across numerous locations all over the world.

Assumption seven: Somehow, a giant flock of chocobos was related to terrorist actions against Shinra Company.

Sephiroth scowled at the thought of his final assumption. The utter ridiculousness might as well be downright offensive. He didn't want to consider it, but couldn't ignore it if Strife was in fact CS Delivery.

He sighed, reminding himself that this was an exercise. He couldn't ignore improbable possibilities just because he didn't like them.

Shaking his head, he put himself back on task. Assuming all these assumptions were true, he now needed to formulate hypotheses on how they could be true.

Assumption one was simple. Strife didn't want anyone to know his identity because action could be taken against him that way. CS Delivery didn't have friends or family that could be used as leverage, but Strife did. Assumption two was nearly as simple, though still slightly confusing. Strife was genuinely friends with Zack before and didn’t want that to change. Though why Strife would choose to keep such an exploitable weakness as a friend among his enemies, Sephiroth didn't think he had enough information to hazard a guess on yet.

Assumption three was where things got tricky. Strife could have an informant within Shinra who was feeding him information, though that person would need to be high enough ranked to have psychological profiles intricate enough to allow for extrapolation of thought processes, as evidenced by the earlier letters to Sephiroth and the vice president. That would have to be someone on the executive board, the Turks, or someone within the science department.

Scarlet and Heidegger were out of the question. They'd both been stolen from. Palmer wouldn't have the reason or gumption to try anything that might jeopardize his own department. Reeve was a possibility considering his carefully veiled dislike of the way the others ran their departments. He was also on par with the Turks for information gathering skills. The President didn't make much sense because this whole thing seemed to be destabilizing his hold on the company without his knowing it. The Vice President was likely out of the question. While he’d openly admitted to feeding confidential information to Avalanche, one of the bargains struck with CS Delivery was the cessation of this. CS Delivery seemed too smart to trust someone he’d only just stopped being outright enemies with. The Turks also seemed too frazzled to be in collusion with Strife.
The Science Department was both likely and not. Strife had an obvious, and likely genuine, if Zack was to be believed, fear of ending up there. Hojo and his experiments had been outright attacked. If Strife ended up there, the scientist would pick him apart. Perhaps literally. However, it was not unlikely that someone was trying to discredit and usurp Hojo's seniority.

Barring insider information, Sephiroth couldn't discount the possibility that Strife was reading people's minds, as loathe as he was to even admit that was possible. The Subject P experiments that he'd seen reports on was proof enough that at least clairvoyance was possible. Since different materia could induce all kinds of effects forcing people to act a certain way or lose certain mental capabilities, the possibility that one could hear another's thoughts was not beyond the realm of consideration. Given the episode that Zack described Strife as having at their first reunion after Strife withdrew from Shinra, the telepathic scenario was certainly plausible.

Assumption four was both more and less confusing than the previous assumption. Strife was enhanced, that much had already been confirmed, and skilled, as demonstrated if he was CS Delivery. Enhanced was understandable. Secret experiments took place all the time. Skilled was less understandable because Strife had been publicly visible since he'd joined the company. Even if the Science Department had experimented on him, it would have had to have been years ago. And Strife would have had to purposely hide his skills. Sephiroth knew that if he pretended incompetence and didn't practice for years, he would not be in his prime condition. While someone having skills similar to his own was understandable, he just couldn't suspend his disbelief enough to think that someone whose skills were rusty dropped down to his level.

Assumption five was troubling. If Strife was as unstable as his personnel file indicated was possible, leaving advanced weapons and highly destructive materia in his possession was idiotic to say the least. However, Zack liked to expound on how trustworthy his friend was, so Sephiroth was more inclined to think the personnel file was incorrect.

Assumption six showed impressive organizational skills. Strife would have to have his attention pulled in numerous directions and would need the ability to keep it all straight right along with the ability to keep it all hidden. Turks especially were excellent at figuring things out, but even they couldn't determine what Strife was doing.

Sephiroth didn't even know what to do with assumption seven. His best guess was that somehow, Strife was planning to train a small, marauding force in hit and run tactics and have them mounted on chocobos. This seemed at odds with his apparent intelligence, but there it was.

Looking at all the assumptions together, Sephiroth was left with the notion that a mind reading Strife was hoarding weapons of mass destruction while setting up some kind of entertainment business and training a chocobo-riding army. Or, it could be that a mentally unstable spy created by the science department was sabotaging other departments and setting up businesses outside the company to produce more funding without the executive officers of Shinra Company being able to siphon off their cut. Or perhaps Reeve had liberated Strife from some carefully concealed experiment and was using him to set up a business to serve as a front for an anti-Shinra organization that would root out the unethical practices the current executives allowed to happen.

Sephiroth pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh. This was ridiculous. There had to be something more logical than these farfetched theories. Perhaps an accident with Time materia trapped Strife, allowing him to age as he did, allowing dormant psychic abilities to give him access to others' minds, then the materia absorbed straight into his bloodstream, giving him an enhancement boost in an unusual way that resulted in more abnormalities.

He paused. That actually made more sense than his other theories. Unfortunately, he didn't have
enough knowledge of materia theory to know whether it was truly possible. But he knew someone who might.

He pulled his PHS from a pants pocket and flipped it open to scroll through the contacts. Selecting one, he put the device to his ear and listened to it ring.

"Sephiroth?" came the mumbled query from the other end.

Sephiroth quirked a brow, but ignored the tone. "I have a question regarding materia theory as it relates to all forms of time materia." Considering how Reeve sounded, he added, "Are you busy?"

"No," Reeve said, "it's just late. I fell asleep in my lab. What's your question?"

"Is it possible to accelerate someone's aging while keeping them in unmoving stasis?"

"Is this about—" then he cut himself short. Sounding more alert, he said, "No. If someone were to be held in stasis while their body rapidly aged, their physical requirements would remain. If someone were aged beyond a few days, they would starve to death. Even if they had some kind of intravenous source of nutrition, the body would degrade under the stress and the organs would fail. Not even mako enhancements would help, in fact, they would accelerate fatality because they increase energy demands on the body." Reeve paused. "Why are you asking?"

"I'm trying to fit the pieces of the investigation together," he said with a frown. Sephiroth bit back a sigh. He had hoped that if it was that dangerous, Shinra Company hadn't tried what he'd been thinking, but Reeve's answer seemed too detailed for them to have not.

"And a Time materia accident is your best theory?"

Sephiroth ignored the trace of amusement in the man's tone. "Even with the impossibilities you've given me, something to do with time still seems the most probable. Other theories involve some rather unrealistic sounding scenarios."

"So time is what you're looking at?"

Sephiroth leaned back in his chair, pinching the bridge of his nose. He said, "The simplest explanation is that a number of years passed while the subject was free to communicate in some fashion. However, evidence also suggests that these several years did not happen in actuality. If the years did happen, this ties almost all the pieces together. Logic dictates the scenario must be investigated."

"Have you considered that it was the rest of the world, and not the subject, that was affected by Time materia?"

He blinked. "You mean perhaps everyone else was under a magnified version of Slow while the subject remained immune? Would it even be possible to put the entire planet under Slow? Or Stop? It couldn't have changed the planet's rotational or orbital speeds or we all would have died. How precisely would it need to be timed to line the seasons up so no one noticed? Is it even possible to have such a powerful status effect that years could pass in only a moment?"

"I suppose it's possible, if somehow the magic were channeled through the entirety of the Lifestream. Geological surveys indicate the mako reserves of the planet are large enough that something of this scale could be feasible." He paused. "Anyone not affected by the status effect would have had years to accomplish anything without interference, which doesn't appear to have happened in this case. Have you also considered time travel for one person rather than a planet-wide status effect?"
Sephiroth thought for a moment. "If the subject was taken to the past, kept isolated, and fed confidential information as time passed, then returned to the place they were taken from originally, it fits logistically and doesn't appear to induce some kind of paradox."

"You think being from the future would?"

"Logic dictates one cannot change the past and prevent their own existence or reason for returning to the past. Therefore, someone from the past could have removed him from this time, kept him isolated, provided him with information, then put him back in the place he was taken from when the time caught up. This removes the possibility of a paradox because nothing that lead to the time displacement would be changed."

Even as he said it, he realized it made the most sense. With enough perseverance, anyone with the right resources could have tracked down the intelligence and given it all to Strife. He could have been amassing knowledge for a decade and preparing everything down to the last second. It would explain how all of his attacks had gone off without a hitch.

"Perhaps I should come to your office in the morning, and we can discuss more particulars," he said into the PHS.

"I'll be available," Reeve said. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night," Sephiroth said before hanging up.

Sephiroth frowned pensively at both his computer and his notes. While the time theory still made the most sense, it didn't make complete sense. Perhaps the largest hole was how this supposed trip through from the past caused the strange phenomenon Zack observed of Strife seeming to copy his memories in that first meeting after Strife had left the company. Sephiroth could fall back on the psychic explanation as the company already had one, but so far as he knew, that particular experiment didn't involve mako enhancements. And Zack had clearly stated that when it happened, Strife's eyes had shown increased mako reactions.

He mulled over the possibilities of some different Soldier enhancement program. Hollander had tried it with Project G. Genesis had grown a wing and begun degrading on a cellular level. Angeal had begun absorbing monsters until he became so mentally unstable that he contrived to use all his metamorphic abilities at once and force Zack to kill him.

There was no denying that Strife may have developed some previously unseen ability. Assuming he was CS Delivery, that led into the connection with the strange sensation of being observed that the terrorist seemed to intentionally induce when he'd come to speak with Sephiroth. However, that led to more troubling questions. If Strife could control this ability to touch someone else's mind, then what went wrong when he accidentally started picking up Zack's memories? The instability could hardly be safe.

He pocketed his PHS and pushed away from his desk. He tidied up a bit, burned his lists about Strife and CS Delivery with a bit of Fire materia, and headed for the door. He wouldn't figure anything else out tonight so he would simply wait until speaking with Reeve in the morning.

He felt he was close though. If Strife was CS Delivery, then the situation was beginning to make itself clearer. Motivations were completely obscured, but at least the state of things was less confusing. Slightly.

Perhaps Strife would make a mistake. Even if no one else saw it, Sephiroth would, and everyone gave themselves away eventually.
"I'll let Dio know you said hello," the man said to Cloud with a half grin, before he turned around and headed back into the crowd. Cloud lost track of the nondescript, dark-haired man fairly quickly, but Cloud figured that was intentional. Dio seemed to like his dealings kept secret before the big reveal.

Cloud shook his head and started toward Wall Market's exit back to the rest of the slums. It was getting pretty late, and it wasn't like Cloud needed to do any follow-up with Dio's questions, via the messenger, about chocobos. Apparently, the man was having trouble finding qualified handlers willing to leave their own farms or ranches.

He'd just slipped into the small market near the Gainsborough home when his PHS buzzed. He flipped the PHS open, and his eyes widened a bit when he saw the email was from Vincent. He immediately opened it.

She agreed after reading your letter.

Cloud released a breath along with a bit of tension he didn't realize he was holding. One less thing he had to worry about.

He slipped the PHS back into his pocket as he came in sight of the house. A moment later, he cringed. He could hear the racket from here. He didn't even have to get to the door to tell that Yuffie was having a shouting match with someone. He amended the thought to two someones when another voice joined the mix.

Cloud opened the door and simply stood in the entrance to stare.

"I am the Treasure Princess White Rose of Wutai and I say no!" Yuffie punctuated the declaration with a rather violent foot stomp. The girl was covered in mud, her face and clothes smeared with it.

"It's unhygienic!" Hazuki shouted right back.

Before the child could retort, Aerith's mother added, "No child in my home will walk around like a dirty mud monster!" Her voice was loud and resonating, even though it didn't feel like she was really yelling.

Gaia. Were they really fighting about Yuffie getting cleaned up. He tried to tune the shouting out and eyed Tseng, who was standing near the front door, holding a cup of tea. He stared pointedly at the man.

After a moment, Tseng said, "I slipped away when the others were arguing about what to do with the remaining Avalanche members." He paused. "I believe Shears helped Elfé do the same when the others noticed I was gone." Tseng nodded toward the shouting match. "I found them with Nanaki coming out of the swamp. We arrived an hour ago and they've been like this ever since."

Tseng gave him a sidelong glance. "I hear you met with the General."

Cloud nodded. "It was interesting." Frowning, he asked, "Why hasn't anyone ever explained to him why his fans are so crazy?"

Tseng's eyebrows rose. "I thought he knew."

Cloud huffed half a laugh and headed across the room to the stairs. The women and child didn't even notice him. The second floor proved to be only marginally quieter than downstairs. He opened the
door to the room he'd left Aerith and Genesis in earlier to find them in much the same position. Aerith had only moved her chair closer to the wall opposite the bed and was reading a book, which she closed on his entrance.

"How did it go?" she asked with a smile.

"Good," he said, slipping in and closing the door behind him. It dulled the noise a bit better. "The play was better than I expected. And Sephiroth can be like a little kid with his questions"

Aerith covered her mouth to apparently stifle her laughter. "What did he ask?" Her tone was both amused and curious.

Cloud shook his head. "First question was about why those stupid women carry around little mu monsters in their purses. Problem was he only looked like he was going to ask, didn't actually ask the question. I'm still too used to Marlene, Denzel, and Yuffie. I answered on reflex so I wouldn't get pestered. He and Zack both looked at me like I'd gone insane, but then Sephiroth didn't stop asking me questions the rest of dinner. I think he'd have followed me home if I hadn't made it clear I was going alone."

Aerith grinned. "I'm sure he appreciates your honest and insightful answers, Cloud. He's been very isolated his whole life. First in the lab, and then by his abilities, and now by his rank. He could use a friend. Maybe it will keep him clear-headed."

Cloud scoffed. "I'm a terrorist attacking the organization he stands for. I don't think that makes us friends."

"You're still friends with Zack," she countered.

"That's different."

She arched a brow at him, her grin turning more sly. "Because Zack is only second in command and not the general himself?"

He opened his mouth to say he'd been through more with Zack, but bit his tongue. He'd only been friends with this Zack, not lived through hell for four years in a lab. So perhaps Aerith was right, and he simply didn't want to really be friends with the man who had killed her in a non-existent future and tried to destroy the planet. But if he said that, she would just point out that this Sephiroth hadn't done anything yet.

At his long silence, the girl's grin intensified, but she didn't say anything. Deciding not to give her any more ammunition, he changed the subject. "Where's Nanaki?"

"Sleeping in the other room. He came back with the girls." Her smile took on a sympathetic tilt. "I've never seen him so exhausted."

"Tseng said he found them coming out of the swamp."

"Yuffie insisted they had to throw the Turks off by going the wrong direction. Nanaki didn't say so, but I think he suspects she was hoping for treasure."

Cloud shook his head. "Wouldn't surprise me." He gave the unconscious Genesis a look over. "He's looking better."

Aerith nodded, gaze moving to the former commander. "All the gray is gone now. I don't think he's in pain anymore. The transfusion did the trick. We've just got to wait for him to wake up."
"The others that are degrading, the ones that aren't too far gone, do they all have to get a transfusion from me, or can Genesis provide the blood now, too?"

"I don't know. We could try it," she said a bit dubiously. "But I think it would be better to use your blood. Since the healing water is in there, your body probably makes it now. It's less likely that Genesis' will, even if you've reversed his degradation."

"It still might work, though," he said.

"We'll try it," was all she said.

A crash broke Cloud's focus on the conversation. A new round of shouting indicated the likely cause. Cloud sighed. "I'm going to sleep at the church tonight."

Aerith chuckled. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Cloud slipped back out into the hall. He could probably get back out without Yuffie even noticing he was there.

* * *

Zack stole into the church without a sound. He knew it was early, but he had to try, especially after he'd woken up with the idea at five in the morning. He'd only been able to make himself wait half an hour before setting out for the slums. He'd snagged a mission though and finished that before heading for the church.

It was eerily quiet in the whole sector this early. Only merchants seemed to be about, getting things ready or even just heading for their shops.

"Spike?" he called through the church. His voice sounded a bit unnatural in the stillness.

The door swung closed behind him on barely audible hinges. He hadn't made it more than a quarter of the way into the church before he spied Cloud lying down on a mat between a couple pillars near the flowerbed.

He let out a relieved breath and made his way across the chapel. "Spike?" he asked again as he rounded in front of the benches.

"I hear you, Zack." Cloud shifted on his back, folding an arm behind his head. "What are you doing here?" He was still wearing those ridiculous goggles and the bandana.

Zack pulled the Buster Sword from the harness on his back and set it on the ground next to him when he sat cross legged. "I'm here to talk."

Cloud sighed and pushed up. He pulled the bandana off and ran a hand through his hair. "About what?"

"Just like that?" Zack asked. "You spend weeks off who knows where, not telling me anything, sometimes avoiding my calls, and now you're just fine with talking? Aren't you even wondering how I knew to look for you here?"

"Really, Zack?" Cloud asked, brows lifting. "We met in the church before. You had to think I had somewhere to stay when I was in Midgar. You knew where I'd slept once. It's not like Aerith is going to refuse to let me stay here again. And yes. Just like that. What do you want to talk about?"
Zack huffed a laugh to himself. It wasn't exactly weird for him to think Cloud might be in the church when Cloud put it that way. "I want to talk for real," he said. "Not the dumb casual stuff we talk about when there're other people around."

Cloud's brow furrowed slightly even though he didn't appear to actually frown.

"Take off the goggles, Spike." He was tired of not being able to read anything in Cloud's mood because his eyes were hidden.

Cloud dutifully reached up and pulled the goggles down so they hung around his neck. Zack didn't like the hint of anxiety in his friend's eyes. He didn't like that Cloud had anything to be nervous about around him.

"Tell me about the other people you've been around." When Cloud's expression started to blank in what Zack recognized as a defensive direction, Zack said, "No names, descriptions, nothing like that. I know they're helping you hide from Shinra. I know you said you're fine, but I don't like not knowing what kind of people they are for myself. Just tell me about them. Personalities and stuff."

Cloud expression lost the stiffness almost as soon as Zack had started talking, and he didn't look terribly upset about the idea. "You want to figure out their personalities by what I have to say about them?"

"You're a pretty perceptive guy, Spike," Zack said with a shrug. "And I figure you're a good judge of character." He grinned. "You decided I was an awesome guy after all."

Cloud cracked a smile and huffed a laugh. Taking a more casual pose, Cloud propped his chin on a hand, his elbow on one knee and held up one finger on the opposite hand. "First one, I trust almost as much as I trust you and Aerith. Just a hair's breadth behind you, and probably only because I know you two better. Great eye for details. Not a big talker. Keeps secrets. Issues over the past but working through them as a sort of penance."

"Second one, wise beyond years. Loyal beyond reasoning. Kind of naive but well meaning and unintentionally kind of funny. Overestimates abilities at blending in. Great listener. Surprisingly insightful at times. Has my trust almost as much as the first, but comes in after only because of prior loyalties that I think should definitely be kept." Finger number three.

"Third one, calculating and methodical. I'm pretty sure thinks I'm generally delusional, but rational enough to work with me just in case I'm right. Reserved, but a pretty wicked sarcasm."

Finger number two joined the first. "Fourth one. Annoying brat. But keeps the conversation going without my input so that's pretty nice. Resourceful." Then the thumb. "Babysitter. Don't know that one very well. Follows the annoying brat's lead though."

Cloud dropped his hand. "Last one…," he trailed off before shrugging one shoulder, the side of his mouth kicking up again. "Melodramatic drama addict. Honest to a fault though. Pissy beyond reason. Obsessive about making things right. Now anyway."

Cloud just watched him when he stopped talking, as though he were holding his breath for a certain kind of reaction. Zack figured he'd be fine trying to digest what he'd been told. He wasn't sure if Cloud realized how telling his statements were. The first two were friends. Third one not so much, but an ally still. Cloud seemed to like the fourth, but didn't want to admit it, and he clearly didn't even know the fifth. And the sixth was someone Cloud seemed to think he could be friends with.

One thing was abundantly clear though. Cloud was into covert ops and quite possibly some fighting. One didn't talk about trusting people with their life if they weren't talking about life and death.
scenarios. And no one talked about those with the casual seriousness and vague disregard unless they were no stranger to battles. Though, he was surprisingly touched by hearing Cloud so openly admit to trusting him. He knew the kid trusted him, but hadn't really realized how much.

But he didn't want Cloud guessing the direction of his thoughts so he changed the subject. "So you gonna try getting a job?"

Cloud gave him a flat, exasperated look. "Seriously Zack? You already know about me meeting Dio. He said the Turks brought him in for questioning."

"Okay," Zack said sheepishly. "Caught me. I know you're probably investing in some kind of business. And changing the subject is because I'm a little spun, alright. I still don't get why you just up and left without telling me. And now there are all these other people that you're going to for help instead of me."

Cloud's chin dropped slightly, a bit of guilt flickering through his eyes. That at least reassured Zack that even if Cloud had hid things on purpose, he didn't like doing it.

"We're building a resort," Cloud said.

Apparently, Cloud wasn't quite ready to address that yet. Then Zack's brain caught up with what his friend had said. "A resort?" he repeated with a grin. "What kind of resort? And do I get a discount for being your friend and all?"

"Everything," Cloud said, a half smile creeping onto his face. "And I was planning on getting you a lifetime pass. Just keep all of it to yourself. Dio wants to make a big deal out of it."

Zack reached forward and smacked Cloud on the arm in a brotherly way. "Awesome, Spiky! I'll be there every time I take leave." He huffed a laugh. "At least when I'm not visiting my parents."

Cloud's expression froze at that, making Zack pause. Then he put two and two together. "Shit, Spike! You and Dio are my parents' new bosses? How much are you paying them that they left the reactor? Those were good jobs, you know. And why didn't you say anything? And why on Gaia did you empty out Gongaga? I know we harass each other about being from small towns, but you didn't have to go and turn mine into a ghost town."

Cloud relaxed a bit, and that made Zack feel better. Apparently, he'd not done whatever negative reaction Cloud thought he might get.

"Their pay is good. Everyone's is," Cloud said. "And I'm going to keep hiring everyone I can out of Gongaga until Shinra Company fixes what's wrong with the reactor there. It's an accident waiting to happen."

That caught Zack's attention. "There's something wrong with the reactor?" he asked sharply.

Cloud shrugged. "I don't have details. I just know that it won't take much for a meltdown. I figure if I can't fix the reactor, seeing as I don't know how, I can just get all the people out of there. Everyone is working on construction of the new place now. Afterward is when everyone gets their normal jobs. Your dad got something in maintenance and your mom in hospitality. And I'm not the one who did job placement, so I didn't favor them. I didn't even ask about them until they'd moved to the site. The lifetime pass is your friend bonus, not the jobs. In case you were wondering."

The thought had crossed his mind, but Cloud was decent enough at guessing what Zack was thinking anyway.
"Hot damn, Spike!" Zack burst out excitedly. "I just realized that's what all the chocobos are for." He shook his head. "You've got everyone beating their heads against a wall trying to figure out what you were doing with all those birds."

Cloud nodded, slight smile getting a bit bigger. "We'll use them in the race track to start with, but we figure after a while the jockeys will start to bring their own. Then we can open up a pay-to-ride thing where anyone can ride the docile ones."

"How'd you find all those chocobos, Spike. I've never seen that many in one place before. And you had all the colors."

"I'm a good racer and a good breeder. I just kind of have an affinity for the birds." Cloud pointed at him with a faux glare. "And no hair jokes about chocobos. They do not think I'm one of them."

Zack frowned. There was something he could call Cloud on. "A good breeder and racer? Since when?"

Cloud shrugged. "It's just something I picked up."

Giving Cloud a disbelieving look, he said, "Cloud, you only left Shinra forty-five days ago. Since when is that enough time to just pick up chocobo breeding or racing?"

Cloud frowned at him. "Really, Zack? Don't you have anything better to do that count the days I've been gone? You're worse than my mom."

Zack scoffed. "Considering the things you run around doing, I pity the woman."

"Shut up," Cloud groused, rolling his eyes.

"Cloud," Zack said more sternly, "I am using your actual name here for a reason. This is serious. How can you have just picked up breeding and racing?"

Cloud shifted a bit, looking like he was thinking. Zack just hoped he wasn't coming up with a story to make this new talent believable.

"I've been gone awhile, Zack."

"Forty-five days is not long enough for that." He pointed at Cloud. "And no cracks about your mom. Knowing how long you've been gone is a friend thing. You scared the shit outta me and I spend half my time wondering if you're throwing a party without me or have been sold into slavery."

At the odd expression that got from Cloud, Zack debated on whether or not he should have mentioned his sold into slavery theory. But then Cloud gave him a wry, half smile. "It wouldn't be a party without you."

Zack grinned before remembering what the current point of this conversation was. "Flattery won't distract me. Just answer the question, Spike. Or at least give me a hint as to why you won't."

"We've already hashed this part out, Spike," Zack said dryly. "Forty-five days, remember?"

Very deliberately, Cloud said, "It's been longer for me."
Frowning, Zack asked, "You mean like it's seemed longer or something? Like when I have to sit through one of the President's really boring meetings and an hour feels like it turns into ten?"

"No, Zack." Cloud gave him this really intense look, like he was expecting Zack to read his mind or something. "It was literally longer for me since I was actually part of Shinra."

Zack huffed a confused laugh. "You sound like you're talking about time going wonky or something. Even I know that's ridiculous, Spiky."

Cloud opened his mouth, but a rush of wind and feathers coming down through the hole in the roof diverted their attention. A moment later, Genesis dropped in, no signs of degradation. So a new copy then. Zack didn't think there were any more of those being made.

Then Cloud breathed out, "Damn."
Cloud's brain stuttered in indecision as Zack sprung to his feet, sword in hand, and rushed Genesis. The former general leapt back, drawing Rapier as he moved. The Buster Sword hissed through the air where Genesis had been, and Zack accidentally kicked up a small halo of flower petals with how fast he moved. Aerith wouldn't be happy.

Cloud took to his feet somewhat hesitantly, unsure of exactly what he should do here.

"When the war of beasts bring the world's end, the Goddess descends from the sky," Genesis said, a smirk on his face.

Zack hesitated, eyes widening. "Genesis?" he breathed before a stormy look of determination took over his face. He charged the former general, stirring up more flower petals as he went. Zack swung wide, Genesis parried, Zack twisted his blade sharply and thrust, and Genesis used the barest force to deflect while he spun away.

The two were moving at speeds no one save Cloud, Vincent, and Sephiroth could possibly follow. One thing was made clear to Cloud during that short exchange, however. The two were not as evenly matched as some might have expected given the battle history between them. Genesis was better. Not by much, but he was better. With his degradation reversed, he had that little bit of an edge now that came with having more experience than Zack.

Any hope Cloud had of somehow explaining the situation away disappeared when the church doors burst open, admitting a dour looking Sephiroth, Masamune in hand. A flicker of uncertainty passed through the man's expression before he strode purposely forward toward them.

Cloud was glad that Zack and Genesis were keeping their fight somewhat contained, neither had resorted to Materia yet. However, he marveled at how neither fighters noticed the general until he stopped near Cloud, when both paused, trying to keep an eye on each other and Sephiroth.

Zack's gaze flicked toward Cloud for a moment before his attention was again on Genesis. Zack's expression hardened, he took an odd half leap and twisted. The Buster Sword had begun pointing nearly directly away from Genesis and picked up an impressive amount of momentum by the time it reached him. The former Soldier actually braced himself to block the blow instead of parrying as he'd done with the previous ones, but the power behind Zack's attack was enough to force Genesis back. Zack didn't stop, though. With another twisting leap, and a hint of Materia glow about him, the Buster Sword came around for an even heavier blow.

Genesis opted to evade rather than block, and darted diagonally away. From Cloud's angle, it seemed like Genesis barely managed to dodge the blade, but former Soldier used Zack's motion, and slammed his Rapier into the back edge of the Buster Sword, sending Zack stumbling off balance.

Cloud shifted slightly to a position that would allow him to go for his Fusion Sword, which was hidden just on the other side of a pillar four feet away. He barely kept from flinching when a hand landed on his shoulder.

Sephiroth was standing next to him, a staying hand keeping Cloud where he was. "It's best to let Zack handle this," Sephiroth said quietly, his intense gaze seeming to try to pin Cloud in place.

Cloud glanced at the scene again. Genesis' blade was a blur as he drove Zack back across Aerith's rapidly degenerating flowerbed, a few Mako sparks flying between the weapons.
It didn't take much to make a decision, though he wasn't sure whether he would regret it or not.

Not giving Sephiroth a chance to react, Cloud shrugged the general's hand off his shoulder and lunged sideways, reaching around the pillar to grip the Fusion Sword. He leapt towards the combatants.

* * *

Sephiroth's grip tightened on the Masamune as Strife's sword slashed downward. Zack and Genesis sprung apart, seemingly on instinct, and Strife's blade cut through the air between them. The only reason Sephiroth hadn't intercepted the strike was because he recognized it for a move of intervention.

Sephiroth would have edged sideways to position himself near Zack, but Strife turned his back to Zack, and Sephiroth wanted to see Strife's expression to better gauge what he might do.

Strife sent a withering, narrow-eyed glare at Genesis, but a spark of eagerness and challenge lit in the former general's eyes that Sephiroth hadn't seen in a long time. Without a word, Genesis launched himself forward, Rapier at the ready and the glow of Fire Materia on his other hand.

With a negligent flick of one hand, an Ice spell streaked from Strife's fingertips, impacting directly with Genesis' arm, his Fire spell fizzling out before he could fully cast it, his jacket and glove freezing for a moment. But Strife hadn't waited after casting his spell, his blade flashing through the air.

Sephiroth couldn't say Genesis deflected so much as had his sword swatted out of the way by Strife's, but really, how could he be expected to do anything one-handed as his other hand was still recovering from being hit with Strife's spell? The former general recovered somewhat for Strife's next strike, actually getting that second hand on the hilt of the Rapier, but Strife was too fast, knocking Genesis off balance. Then Strife's sword was hovering next to Genesis' neck, and Genesis didn't immediately move to attack again.

"Not here," Strife said, tone low, voice calm.

Sephiroth had a good view of the side of Strife's face as he glared at Genesis. He appeared upset and frustrated, but perhaps not angry, though Sephiroth did note the sort of steely resolve that one didn't typically see in someone who'd never participated in war. But who could say at this point what Strife had or hadn't done? That he was CS Delivery? Sephiroth no longer had any doubt, he recognized the style even if Strife was using a different sword. That he had done nothing but cause massive amounts of property damage and hospitalized people, Sephiroth couldn't be sure.

Some of the tension left Genesis' stance as he lowered his sword. He inclined his head ever so slightly toward Strife in what, to Sephiroth, was a rare show of deference. Strife stepped back, drawing his sword away from Genesis as he did so, and Genesis sheathed his blade. Then Strife turned, gaze flicking warily over Sephiroth for a moment before moving further, to land on Zack.

Sephiroth chanced a glance at the other Soldier, and wasn't surprised at what he saw. The Buster Sword was held low at Zack's side, but his knuckles were white on the grip. Emotions flashed through Zack's eyes faster than Sephiroth could identify. Sephiroth saw shock, disbelief, anger, and a desperation that made him worry. Desperation had turned to despair in Angeal, and made the former general follow Genesis.

Sephiroth's gaze darted back to Genesis at the thought. A quick assessment showed him unlikely to do anything, his attention seemingly focused on Strife. An unnerving whisper of worry threaded
through Sephiroth's gut. Genesis never had followed orders very well, yet here he was, following Strife's orders. It just seemed…unnatural.

"Cloud," Zack said, catching Sephiroth's attention with his carefully controlled, nearly flat tone, "are you going to explain what's going on?"

Sephiroth's gaze moved back to Strife in time to see him flinch. "Everything I told you so far," Strife said quietly, "was true."

"And the things you haven't said?" Zack snapped back, making Strife flinch again. "Like how you've actually been bombing reactors? Or stealing weapons and experimental Materia?" But now Strife was frowning as Zack kept on. "Maybe you could tell me about assaulting Junon or taking down Avalanche terrorists."

A creaking floorboard near the back of the church drew Sephiroth's attention, and apparently everyone else's as the three all turned to see Tseng in the company of the Ancient girl Zack knew and the quadruped from CS Delivery's…Strife's group.

Strife looked slightly pained as he lifted his eyebrows slightly at the group. The girl said, "We came to tell you Genesis decided to take a celebratory flight," her eyes moved to the former general, who seemed entirely unabashed, "but you clearly already know that."

Even Sephiroth recognized the following silence was awkward. And he had to wonder why none of them thought to use a PHS. Before anyone present could verbalize a reaction, a shout of, "I knew it!" from the front of the church shattered said silence.

Reno was standing in the open door, mag rod at the ready, a feral smirk on his face as his gaze locked on Strife. Rude and Cissnei ran into view from behind Reno, flanking him, and slightly out of breath, leaving Sephiroth to wonder if they'd actually run all the way here. They didn't have Sephiroth's stamina and he would have expected them to have the presence of mind to use a vehicle.

"You're cover is blown, asshole," Reno declared, brandishing his mag rod.

Zack snapped half around, and bellowed, "Shut up!"

The Turks, including Reno, flinched, surprise flashing across their faces. A glance at the others showed that Strife's expression had shuttered slightly, Genesis was sneering, the Ancient girl wore a concerned frown, Tseng was unreadable, and the quadruped had slipped out of sight at some point.

Turning back to Strife, Zack asked, "Are you going to tell me why my girlfriend knows what's going on, but I don't?" Strife's eyes widened slightly. "Are you going to make more cryptic hints about time?" And that certainly caught Sephiroth's attention. Time did have something to do with this? "I thought we were friends, Cloud," Zack said, volume rising again. Strife's brow furrowed slightly. "Are you even going to tell me what you've got against Shinra Company that's caused you to turn traitor?"

Face twisting into a snarl, Strife snapped, "Because Jenova needed to burn!"

Zack flinched back as though he'd been slapped, quite likely surprised at the venom in Strife's tone. Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. He was far more interested in the reference to his supposedly not-mother.

"Because if I hadn't, Sephiroth would have burned Nibelheim to the ground sixteen days ago, killing nearly everyone there. You and I would have ended up floating in Hojo's test tubes for four years."

That at least explained somewhat why Strife attacked the Nibelheim facilities. Sephiroth didn't like
the thought that whatever might have been found there before would cause him to burn down a
town. It seemed…excessive.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Zack asked incredulously. "Sephiroth wouldn't burn down
Nibelheim. And you and I aren't going to end up in a lab."

"I'm from the future, Zack!" Strife ground out. "I'm twenty-six years old. And I am damn well going
to do everything I can to disrupt the timeline so the hell that struck Gaia won't happen again."

"That sounds crazy, Cloud," Zack blurted. "You can't just rewind time. It's time. It doesn't go
backward."

Sephiroth couldn't agree more, but being twenty-six years old would certainly explain Strife's new
appearance. Of course, it was strange to think that Strife might in fact be three years older than him.
Strife didn't look older than twenty, certainly not twenty-six.

"I didn't rewind time," Strife retorted tersely. "Minerva did. She pulled me back. I have no idea
how."

"That's insane! Just listen to yourself. You're from the future? Minerva pulled you back?"

Zack might as well have been yelling, the volume wouldn't be much different. Though Sephiroth
wasn't sure how wise it was to be escalating this argument in the presence of so many drawn
weapons.

"I woke up in that training yard, Zack!" Strife's volume wasn't much lower than Zack's. "I had no
idea what the hell was going on! I haven't been part of Shinra Company for nine years! I don't even
remember most of it because Hojo kept me Mako poisoned and scrambled my brain!"

"Cloud," the girl said, stepping tentatively into the room, "maybe this isn't—"

"It took me years to get my head on straight, but it hardly mattered by then!" Strife didn't even seem
to hear the girl. "You were dead! Most of the cities on the planet had been half obliterated! Hundreds
of thousands of people were dead!"

Such an utterly alarming number of casualties had Sephiroth mentally cringing. There would be
hardly anyone left. Sephiroth couldn't truly fault Strife if he honestly believed what he was saying.

The girl came closer, her attention all seemingly focused on Strife, but when Sephiroth caught sight
of her anxiety, he took a harder look at the swordsman.

"The Midgar ruins were so toxic that people had to build a city around it!"

Strife's grip on his broadsword was as white-knuckle as Zack's.

"The Weapons blew up mountains and put craters in the continents!"

The tiny hairs on the back of Sephiroth's neck stood on end as he noted that Strife's vibrantly blue
eyes were actually far more green than they had been earlier.

"Geostigma alone nearly wiped out what was left of Midgar!"

A charge seemed to fill the air, and Strife's eyes turned completely green, his pupils slitting like a
cat's, like Sephiroth's. That permeating sense of presence was back in full force. Sephiroth could feel
it buzzing along his skin and plucking at the corners of his thoughts.
In one blindingly fast motion, Strife slammed the tip of his sword down, embedding it in the floor with a resounding thunk. "This is serious," he declared. "We have to deploy in Wutai again."

Sephiroth narrowed his eyes. The charged feel in the air didn't fade.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Zack demanded. "Even if the rest is true, that you're from the future, a future where the planet is nearly destroyed, what does that have to do with Wutai?"

Strife didn't even appear to hear what Zack said, though he did continue to stare in Zack's direction.

"Cloud?" Zack's voice toned down as a hint of concern entered it.

"He's stuck," the girl said, coming closer, not quite within the range of Strife's sword, should he pull it from the floorboards. "I know I'm probably asking a lot," her eyes slid to Zack for a moment, "but please try to relax, Zack. He's particularly susceptible to you, it seems."

Susceptible? Stuck? The strange feeling of presence that Strife caused? This almost telepathy-like feeling? Sephiroth's eyes narrowed as a theory formed. He said neutrally, "Shinra Company does not deploy on foreign soil for your hysterical whims, Fair."

"But Avalanche could be selling Cloud on the black market," Strife replied.

"The hell?" Reno asked from the front of the church.

"They could capture him," Strife said emphatically, "and send him to a training camp where they'll brainwash him into hating Shinra Company more than he fears being dragged into experiments."

"What's going on?" Zack demanded. Strife still didn't respond to him.

"But Zack," Sephiroth said, "Avalanche doesn't have a shortage of volunteers. They don't even have training camps, let alone brainwashing camps."

"But Spike doesn't have enough training to stand on his own if he gets caught in the crossfire between Wutai and Avalanche," Strife said, turning to look at an empty space to the right of Sephiroth.

"What the hell is going on?" Zack asked, an anxiety bordering on fear bled through his whole demeanor. "That's my memory again, just like last time."

"His modifications," the girl said, wincing, "they open his mind to others with similar enhancements, especially you, Zack, because he already has so many of your memories." When Zack opened his mouth to speak, the girl just kept on, "We'll explain more, Zack, just please, try to calm down. You're distressed, and so is he, and it's making his defenses think he's got to reach out. If you calm down he'll probably realize he's absorbing memories again and he'll back out."

That supported the theory Sephiroth had already formed at least. He was almost tempted to try and
push a memory toward the vibrations around his mind, just to see if Strife would pick it up, but thought better than to try and aggravate an already precarious situation.

Zack seemed to waver in indecision, but on eying Strife's still form, he hesitated.

Sephiroth didn't think the memory he was apparently absorbing should remain stagnant so he continued what he remembered of the meeting. "Strife has been running around Gaia for ages without you," Sephiroth said, "What makes this so different?"

"Because Spiky was lying," Strife said, an edge of pleading in his tone that Sephiroth remembered from Zack's the first time this conversation had taken place.

Zack finally closed his eyes with some trepidation and seemed to be attempting to meditate, if his breathing was any indication.

"How do you know that?" Sephiroth asked. "You already explained that you don't have legitimate proof."

"Cloud got all emotional during our conversation," Strife said, seeming vaguely uncomfortable. Then he pulled his sword out of the floor and set the blade against his back. Sephiroth frowned. There wasn't a harness back there, the blade simply stayed. Perhaps there were extremely powerful magnets in the harness Strife was wearing.

Sephiroth said. "That kid is too quiet to get emotional, Zack."

"He was emotional," Strife insisted. "He froze when—" Strife blinked rapidly for a moment, his pupils losing the slit appearance for several seconds. "He froze when—" Strife winced, a hand going to his head. "Dammit," he hissed under his breath.

* * *

Cloud kept a hand pressed to his forehead as the pounding subsided. Of course, he hadn't paid attention to the headache until after he realized he was, in fact, not conducting a meeting to plan his own rescue from Avalanche. And now, an uncomfortable number of Shinra employees had seen his Jenova cells in uncontrollable action.

Flattening his expression, he braced himself for the reactions, and mentally prepared himself for the possible fight that might ensue now that his cover story was shot to hell.

Aerith was the closest, her expression a simple mix of pained sympathy and silent support. At least she knew full well that he could handle his problems better than he could handle pity or mothering.

Sephiroth's gaze was sharp, calculating, and Cloud could actually feel the man's thought's buzzing around in his mind. That he could even feel anything through their shared Jenova cells despite the link being closed on Sephiroth's side was telling.

He couldn't see Genesis, as the man was behind him, but he could feel the curiosity slithering along the faint presence he knew to be the former general.

Cloud's gaze didn't linger on Reno. The redhead was staring at Cloud like he might spontaneously combust. The other Turks toward the front of the church weren't looking much different.

Zack's eyes were wide, and alarmingly dazed. His grip was loose on the Buster Sword, the tip of the blade resting on the floor. Cloud fought to keep his expression neutral. If Zack was in shock, anything could set him off.
"Explain what you know of the time travel, your reactions to it, and how it has affected events," Sephiroth said neutrally, not quite sounding demanding. He hadn't spoken loudly, but it wasn't so quiet that Cloud was sure everyone heard. And he couldn't help the twinge of relief that he wasn't being asked about his…episode. And at least in answering Sephiroth's question, he would be explaining things to Zack.

"It was just a normal day," Cloud said, tone measured. "I went downstairs for breakfast, the next thing I knew, I was being screamed at in the training yard. I thought it was an elaborate joke. Then Zack called." Cloud could hear his own voice flattening. "Anyone who knew me well enough to make that elaborate of a joke would never throw a Zack impersonator into the mix. Nothing but time travel could explain the situation."

Lifting his chin slightly, and moving onto less…emotional…subjects, he said, "It gave me an opportunity I refuse to pass up." He left it unsaid that the opportunity was to destroy Jenova. They already went over that. "It didn't stop me from trying to figure out how I got here, though, so I started was with Aerith. If anyone knew what was going on, I thought it would be her."

"And I did," Aerith interjected. "I'm from the future as well."

Sephiroth heard Zack's breath catch at that.

"I was dead," she said. "Where Cloud's older self replaced his younger self in body, I was only memories. I replaced my younger self in mental form only. I had no idea how I came to be here either. Eventually, I heard whispers of Minerva."

"So I went to Banora where her shrine is," Cloud said. "I met her and she gave me some cryptic answers that didn't really explain things, but now at least I know Minerva is the one who brought us here."

Cloud tried to ignore the flat out disbelief displayed by the assembled Shinra employees. Reno in particular looked as though he thought Cloud had sprouted a dozen tentacles.

Aerith said, "It's also how we know I came back by accident. Minerva said I followed Cloud and by the time she noticed, we were too far removed for her to prevent my movement through time as well."

"I don't know if I physically reacted to time travel, but Minerva…modified me. I'm still trying to figure out what everything is that she's done. As for what I've changed in the timeline," he couldn't help the small smile that crept onto his face, "hopefully a lot."

"How could you do that?" Zack asked, a hint of incredulity in his tone. "How could you just mess with people's lives like that?"

The questions wiped the smile right off Cloud's face. He couldn't afford another episode right now, though, so he squashed his emotions down as far as he could. He would have winced at his own flat, tone if he wasn't holding back his reactions.

"To keep people alive." Gaze returning to Sephiroth, he said, "Sephiroth had a mental breakdown and burned down Nibelheim. There were only three survivors. Sephiroth was killed shortly after. Jenova leeched off Sephiroth, who was too strong-willed to reabsorb into the Lifestream, and she tried to start an apocalypse. She failed, but Sephiroth managed to use his influence on those with immense amounts of Jenova cells in them to get hold of a Materia that would help him literally destroy the planet."
Cloud spied a flicker of realization flash in Sephiroth's eyes and wondered what exactly the general had concluded.

"That's when I was killed," Aerith said. "I used a different Materia to help protect the planet, but Sephiroth's presence in the Lifestream prevented the protection from taking effect."

Cloud was relieved that Aerith talked around who killed her. He didn't exactly want to bring that up now or go into more detail about the Jenova-Sephiroth copies and how much influence the actual Sephiroth might have had on them.

He said, "Myself and a team of my allies got rid of Sephiroth again so the planet could keep itself from being destroyed." He paused. "But not before almost all the Weapons had been released and destroyed half of the planet's population. We only had relative peace for about a year after that. People started getting sick." And that was putting it mildly.

"We called it Geostigma," Aerith said. "There was so much corrupted material in the Lifestream from all the Jenova experiments that it contaminated the general population. People's immune systems started fighting off the cells, but people's bodies had already incorporated the genetic material, so the immune system was essentially destroying the person's body. It caused debilitating weakness, pain, open and oozing black sores, and seizures. It was fatal for anyone who progressed far enough in the disease, and luck was the only thing that could keep a person from developing it."

It didn't surprise Cloud how green Zack seemed to be turning on hearing Geostigma's description, but he was surprised that Rude seemed equally affected.

Cloud said, "During that crisis, Sephiroth was able to manifest three clones of sorts. He used one of them to get Jenova cell concentrations high enough to manifest himself physically." He didn't really want to bring up that Kadaj had been carrying around Jenova's head so hopefully they wouldn't ask for more details. "When I killed him again, it opened a gateway to the Lifestream."

"I had found a cure for Geostigma in the Lifestream," Aerith said, "and I was able to send it through the gateway Cloud made. We were able to purify the Jenova cells in people and stop the Geostigma. Most of the population was cured over the next year."

"Then Hojo took control of Deepground," Cloud really didn't want to get into the details of that conflict. "Deepground troops were rounding up everyone who hadn't contracted Geostigma and killing them. It triggered the planet's final, failsafe Weapon. It would gather up all of the Lifestream and leave the planet in search of a new world. That would have killed everyone left. After it was stopped, there weren't that many people left."

"And the planet and Lifestream were badly damaged," Aerith said. "There was speculation among those of us who were still left in the Lifestream, that the planet might not have enough energy to keep going."

"It might be why Minerva sent me back. It might not," Cloud said, shrugging uncomfortably. "I wasn't going to sit back and let hundreds of thousands of people die if I could do something about it." And it gave him the chance to get rid of Jenova more thoroughly.

* * *

Sephiroth found the entire situation surreal. Strife and Gainsborough showed every sign of the conviction necessary to believe what they were saying. Their story, though, was difficult to digest. It seemed…fantastical. While he knew he was a high priority figure in current societal, political, and militaristic affairs because of his skills, reading between the lines, they seemed to be saying that his
continued sanity was the only standing between the world and a potential apocalypse. This did, however, explain almost everything. Including why Strife seemed to watch him so carefully. He still wasn't convinced on the veracity of traveling to the past, as he couldn't understand how it would be possible to undo the reason for the travel in the first place. He couldn't deny how much it explained.

He frowned. Still no reason for the chocobos, though. But there were more important answers to be had.

It was clear that something in Nibelheim did indeed cause Sephiroth to break, if this time travel were true. He could well infer that his behavior in this alternate future seemed to be that of a sociopath. That he had not, as of yet, incinerated any small towns, or felt the impulse to do so, counted as a success for Strife's meddling, he thought.

"Why did you destroy the Mount Corel reactor?" Sephiroth asked, doing his best to keep a casual, conversational tone. Perhaps if he didn't sound too aggressive, Strife would respond in kind.

Strife and Gainsborough both focused their attention on him, the former in wariness and the latter in surprise.

"Avalanche destroyed it originally," Strife said. "Shinra blamed the town of Corel and set the town on fire. Three quarters of the residents were killed and the majority of the survivors were maimed."

And with CS Delivery clearly taking blame for the destruction, there was no way for Shinra Company to conclude that the town assisted in the attack.

Clever.

"How did you know the Gelnika was going to be in Junon?"

"I was taught a few things about basic hacking," Strife said. "I've been monitoring PHS messages."

If anyone thought what Strife was doing was basic, it had to be Tuesti. So Strife had clearly collaborated with him in his former future.

"What are you doing with the Huge Materia?"

A hint of wariness crept back into Strife's demeanor, but he still answered. "Hiding them from Shinra. They tried to make more powerful bombs with them."

Sephiroth's gut actually clenched at that. A Mako-enhanced bomb of that magnitude would be enough to decimate an entire continent. He wasn't sure he trusted anyone in the company to have that sort of power.

"What are you doing with the Zirconiade piece?" Reno asked, with narrowed eyes.

"Keeping it hidden from Avalanche's Fuhito," Strife said without hesitation. "He actually summoned it. Midgar's Sector Six was essentially destroyed subduing it."

"The whole, damn sector?" Reno asked incredulously. Strife nodded.

That was also a not insignificant number of people.

"How did you cure Genesis' degradation?" Sephiroth asked.

"Minerva put the cure for Geostigma in my blood." Strife actually looked uncomfortable at that. "A blood transfusion yesterday did it."
For some reason, Gainsborough seemed to be suppressing a smile. Strange, but he had other, more relevant questions.

"Why are you investing in Dio's startup business?" Sephiroth asked.

"I know it will be a successful tourist attraction, and it's a way to disrupt Shinra's monopoly."

*That* would explain the chocobos. And why he hadn't done more damage to Shinra Company. Disrupting a monopoly was not destroying the establishment.

"You knew about all this shit?" Reno demanded, looking not at Strife, but at Tseng in the back of the church.

"It has been explained to me in detail, yes," the Turk said. "While I am not convinced it is true, the knowledge had to come from somewhere. It's far too accurate far too often to be mere coincidence."

That made Sephiroth feel less discombobulated. Tseng had had far more time to process all this information and he was still skeptical.

"Why lie about all this?" Zack asked. He sounded exhausted.

Sephiroth eyed his second in command with some amount of trepidation. He needed Zack focused if this situation deteriorated, not tired.

"Why not tell *me*?" Zack asked. To Sephiroth, it didn't appear that Zack even *tried* to disguise the confusion and hurt he felt.

Strife shifted uncomfortably. Sephiroth had seen nothing like it in either persona by which he knew the man. He wasn't sure if Strife was contemplating fleeing or fighting. Clearly, Zack was an exploitable weakness, should they ever need leverage against Strife.

"I didn't want to see you decide our friendship wasn't worth it and choose Shinra over me because you thought I was lying about the time travel," Strife blurted. Zack opened his mouth to respond, but Strife kept going, "And I didn't want to be the reason you defected from Shinra if you believed me. Besides," he said with a shrug, gaze sliding away from Zack, "I needed everyone busy and distracted with trying to figure out who CS Delivery was instead of trying to figure out what I was doing. I thought I'd have a better chance of getting my primary objectives complete if your attention was split."

Zack seemed to perk back up at the answer, but not with tension. Though Sephiroth couldn't fathom why, Zack actually seemed pleased.

"I'm surprised the ruse lasted as long as it did," Gainsborough said. "Cloud is a terrible liar."

Strife scowled in what Sephiroth would categorize as an embarrassed way. The young woman's comment, however, seemed to diffuse some of the tension in the air. Zack, at the very least, looked calmer, perhaps less emotional and more observant would be the better way to put it. And the Turks weren't quite so poised for hostilities. Sephiroth would rather not have to try and contain a battle in the slums if he could help it.

"What's with the stupid ass CS Delivery name?" Reno asked, mag rod casually held up to rest on his shoulder. "Couldn't you think up a more threatening alias?"

"Didn't try," Strife said with a shrug. "In between emergencies in my old timeline, I ran a delivery service. I thought it would be a distracting enough name."
Strife was a...messenger...in his spare time? Sephiroth had a difficult time believing someone of Strife's skills and intelligence would choose such a mundane profession.

Reno barked a laugh.

Tseng said, "It was effective in its simplicity. It was not one of the naming reasons I thought of."

"Still," Reno said with a smirk, "a damn messenger boy became an asshole terrorist."

Rather than take offense, Strife actually smirked at Reno's comment. It was that which sparked the idea in Sephiroth. Strife clearly knew many people who didn't currently know him. Reno appeared to someone Strife was more comfortable with. Just how much time had they spent in each other's company?

It wasn't only Reno, though. There was the quadruped who hadn't reappeared, the mysterious gunman whom Sephiroth found suspicious in his absence, Tseng, Sephiroth himself, Tuesti, and even Vice President Shinra. Adding that to all the memories Strife had absorbed, he likely had unprecedented insight and intelligence on people who had no idea who he was or what information could be compromised. Tuesti's theoretical technical espionage was only one example.

Perhaps he could garner a clearer picture of Strife's motivations if he could gather evidence of the time travel, but how could he find proof of something that couldn't be repeated without the cooperation of some intelligent aspect of the planet?

"Can you show me memories?" Sephiroth asked, allowing a hint of curiosity in his tone. It would give him the opportunity to observe Strife's psychic skills, and possibly provide insight into the truth of the situation. He wasn't expecting Strife's reaction.

The man's eyes narrowed at him in an obvious glare as he folded his arms across his chest. "Why? What memories?"

He would need to proceed cautiously. Strife's defensiveness could prove problematic. "If what you say is true," Sephiroth said with measured evenness, "then steps must be taken to prevent the events of your time." He paused, "I can think of no better verification method than viewing your memories myself. If the connection between Jenova cells allows for mental awareness, it's logical to posit that you may be capable of showing your memories to others, especially given your ability to see the memories of others. If I view your memories of my alternate self, I should better be able to determine their authenticity."

A hint of surprise flashed over Strife's features in the form of a slight widening of his eyes before the glare was fully back in place.

With trepidation, Gainsborough said, "That might not be the best idea."

"I think I could do it," Strife said firmly, seemingly to the girl, though he still maintained eye contact with Sephiroth.

The girl hesitated, throwing a concerned glance Strife's way. Looking back toward the assembled Shinra Company employees, she asked, "Are we expecting more company? I mean, you were all chasing Genesis. Should we expect anyone else?"

"No," Sephiroth said. "No other personnel are skilled enough to cope with Genesis or his more developed copies." He ignored Genesis' smirk. "And the search teams aren't expected to report to base for another half hour."
Wryly, Gainsborough said, "I suppose we have time for a few memories then." She laid a hand on Strife's arm. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Strife's tone was borderline defiant, as though he expected Sephiroth to contradict him. It was strange, but Sephiroth certainly had the distinct impression that Strife expected him to disagree.

"Really?" asked Zack. He stowed his sword away with a flourish, also seemingly dissipating the perplexing belligerence Strife was displaying. "With the way Aerith is acting, I'm starting to think it's dangerous."

Strife seemed slightly taken aback by Zack's observation. "I'm sure," he said. With slightly more trepidation, Strife asked, "Are you…alright with this whole thing?"

"Alright enough," Zack said with a dismissive wave. Adopting a halfhearted glare, he pointed at Strife. "But you're not allowed to make decisions for me. You've got to tell me everything so I can decide what to do for myself. You worrying about what I'm going to decide doesn't change the fact that it's my choice. Got it?"

Strife nodded. Zack stepped forward and positioned himself on the opposite side of the man from Gainsborough. He threw an arm over Strife's shoulders and started slowing pulling him toward Sephiroth.

"So this memory thing won't hurt you or Sephiroth, right?"

"It shouldn't," Strife eyed Sephiroth speculatively.

"Great, then let's do it." Zack said brightly. "If Sephiroth believes you, then he can convince other people if we need to tell them." Zack nodded pointedly at Sephiroth.

Sephiroth returned the gesture, understanding that Zack wanted proof as well.

"We should probably sit," Strife said. "The first few times I saw others' memories, it gave me seizures. That might have been caused by the Mako addiction, but I'm not sure."

Sephiroth nodded and the two sat where they were. Zack sat beside them, probably so he could watch the pair more closely.

Sephiroth asked, "Do I need to do anything specific to assist?"

"Don't close me out."

Easier said than done when Sephiroth had little notion as to what Strife would actually be doing, but at least he could try.

Strife closed his eyes, and took a deep breath. The sense of presence built rapidly, causing Sephiroth's breathing to falter with the sudden pressure of it. It was three times stronger than what he'd felt when Strife absorbed Zack's memories earlier.

There was a flash of light, and a slight warping of sound. The air around Strife seemed to shimmer like a heat mirage. A low hum hovered just on the edge of hearing range, vibrating through his bones instead.

Strife opened his eyes and the pressure doubled, bordering on uncomfortable. Though Sephiroth could barely see it through the shimmering, Strife's eyes were fully green and cat-slit again. Flickers of images flashed across Sephiroth's vision, like overlays. Snippets of himself, silver hair flowing in
the wind, swords flashing, upward-sweeping gestures with his arms. Seeming unconnected to the images, however, were sounds, a few words strung together, metal grinding, the hum of Materia.

Beyond the hallucinations, Sephiroth felt as though he were pinned in place, pressed into an unmov ing case by Strife's presence. He clamped down on the instinct to push back, to throw this presence away from himself, reverse it even. That would be counterproductive. He asked for this after all. As the images grew in length, gaining clarity, he began recognizing fragmented pieces of emotions slipping through as Strife pressed memories closer. Wariness and suspicion threaded with curiosity, determination, and the faintest slivers of hope.

Everything lacked context. This was near useless.

Perhaps if he tried helping, pulling Strife's presence clos—

Sephiroth was seated in the back of a covered, military truck, hunched over, clutching his stomach and feeling more nauseous than he had since the Mako experiments of his early adolescence.

"I can't wait until we get there," came Zack's exuberant, though strangely muffled voice. "We haven't seen much action in a while."

"A quiet mission would be completed quicker," came the slightly derisive reply from...himself? It was Sephiroth's voice, but he hadn't spoken himself.

Sephiroth looked up, nausea protesting the action, and found himself eying...himself. A perfect facsimile of himself was seated diagonally across from him. Zack was directly across from Sephiroth's other self, doing squats, of all things, in the moving vehicle.

But that was Sephiroth, that was himself. Every detail was perfect. It was the same face he saw in the morning every day. Then his own eyes glanced at him, gaze distant, dismissive, superior. A sense of intimidation swept through him.

No, not him, through Cloud— Strife. No wonder Strife had issues if something like this came on suddenly. Sephiroth could barely pick himself out of the onslaught of Strife's remembered emotions. And he was only dimly aware of his own body. The memory seemed more real, more vibrant, than the present, almost like his body was a memory of a dream instead of where he was in actuality.

Sephiroth suddenly found himself walking, nausea gone without a trace, following behind Zack, his other self, and a young girl wearing a cowboy hat. An ominous crack echoed in the canyon they were crossing, and the bridge dropped from underneath them. His stomach floated up his throat as he flailed for purchase that wasn't there. It was only moments before he slammed into the ground, pain quaking up his limbs as his vision dimmed. He felt like he'd sprinted fifty miles and then sparred with Genesis and Angeal for five hours.

Sore, aching, stiff, twitchy. Gaia. Was this how un-enhanced people felt? This was horrible.

Through blurry, swimming vision, he watched his other self stride into view. "Let's go. We don't have time to look for the missing trooper."
He pushed slowly to his feet and hobbled stiffly after the others.

The next transition involved a bit of a blur. He felt better, enhanced, and the heavy weight of a broadsword on his back. A memory of the other Zack's?

He was in a large room with a staircase leading up between three tiered rows of Mako tanks. With a sinking feeling, he recognized the location as adjacent to the Jenova processing center from the reactor blueprints.

The other Sephiroth peered through the viewing window of the nearest tank. His eyes widened slightly, pupils constricting, as some of the color drained from his face. When the other Sephiroth pulled back, Zack immediately took his place, finding a humanoid monster in stasis inside. He recoiled, disgust and horror curling in his gut— Zack's gut. "What is that?"

"You average Soldier members are Mako-enhanced humans.

Zack wrenched his gaze away from the tank.

"You're enhanced, but still human. But then," the other Sephiroth had an almost glazed look in his eyes as he stared back at the Mako tank. "Their Mako levels are exponentially higher than yours."

Sephiroth suspected he knew where this was going. After all, that other Sephiroth would have known as well as he did that his own Mako levels were also exponentially higher than Zack's. "Are they…monsters?" he— Zack asked.

The other Sephiroth stepped away from the tank, moving back to the platform at the base of the stairs. "Yes. The Shinra scientist Hojo was the one who created them. The derision that grew in the other Sephiroth's expression with every word perplexed Sephiroth. He was exhibiting an alarming amount of emotionality. "Abominations spawned by Mako energy. That's what monsters are."

"You said average member," Zack said. "What about you?"

Then the other Sephiroth twitched, and a moment later, he jerked, and clutched his head. When Zack tried to move in to help, Sephiroth shrugged him off.

Sephiroth wondered if that was the presence of Jenova that Strife had mentioned.

The other Sephiroth had an almost glazed look in his eyes as he stared at his hands. "Could it be… that I…was created the same way?" Staring up at the door at the top of the staircase, he voiced, "Am I the same as these monsters?" A large metal plaque above the door read, Jenova. "I knew, ever since I was a child, that I was not like the others. I knew mine was a special existence. But this," he said, outright disbelief in his tone, "This was not what I meant." Staring at his own hands again, he asked, "Am I…a human being?"

Sephiroth did not like that gleam in his own eyes. It reminded him of the light he'd seen in the eyes of his former friends. Taking in the situation's context, Genesis' and Angeal's desertions still being unprocessed, suspecting he was a monster like them, wondering if they knew and thought he was so much more of a monster that they wouldn't want him with them, wondering if his mother was nothing but an experiment.

Mentally, Sephiroth cringed. First Class Soldiers weren't known for their stability.

Then he was surrounded by ceiling height bookcases, an operating table, and empty Mako tanks, tanks large enough for people. The other Sephiroth stood before one of the bookcases, brow furrowed as he read through a research journal.
"It's been three days," Zack said. "You haven't slept. Have you eaten anything?"

"Professors Gast and Hojo found her in the Northern Crater," the other Sephiroth said, ignoring the questions. "She's a Cetra, the reason for the entire Jenova project." Brow furrowing further, he mused, "Why was I not told of her?"

Sephiroth tried to recoil, but he had no control over this memory body. The mere thought of some thousand year old corpse that Hojo had been experimenting with being his actual mother repulsed him more than he expected. He couldn't help but follow the logical path this other Sephiroth saw. His mother, Jenova, providing tainted Mako to all the humanoid monsters in the reactor. Him growing up in labs, realizing he might not have had a woman that birthed him, but a tank he that incubated him. The situation was far more inhuman than Genesis or Angeal, and perhaps the other Sephiroth still thought their behaviors best to model his own after, he decided a greater monster should take a grander target.

"Are you alright?" Zack asked, concern threading through his tone.

"Go away," the other Sephiroth said, refocusing on reading. "You're distracting."

"Really, though, Sephiroth," Zack said, "are you ok?"

"Leave," the other Sephiroth snapped, throwing a narrow-eyed glare at Zack that made him flinch.

The image flickered, suddenly there were journals and notebooks all over the lab, strewn atop desks and the floor. The other Sephiroth stood in the center of it all. When his gaze turned to Zack, Sephiroth tried to recoil again. He no longer recognized himself.

It was not calculation, restraint, and objectivity he saw in the other Sephiroth's eyes, but derision, amusement, superiority. Perhaps Sephiroth thought himself better than some, but he knew better than to display it in such a provocative way. People were afraid of him enough. Only enemies deserved such open intimidation. Not Zack. Not Zack, whom he respected as a soldier, a comrade, perhaps even a friend, especially with all the time they'd worked so closely together the last several weeks.

"So the insect has arrived," the other Sephiroth drawled.

The sensation was so strong that Sephiroth felt the shiver go straight up his spine in his body as well as the memory Zack's.

"The Cetra settled this planet first," the other Sephiroth said conversationally. "The humans spread like vermin, displacing the Cetra, killing them, acting like the plague they are." A smirk turned up the corners of that Sephiroth's mouth. "This Planet, the Promised Land, they belong to the Cetra, to my mother. I'll take back what was stolen from my mother."

Sephiroth was in the reactor again, Buster Sword in hand, staring at the other Sephiroth's back. Beyond him was a strange mechanical edifice of half a woman with metal wings made of Mako processing tubes.

"Mother," the other Sephiroth said almost...lovingly, "let's take back the planet together."

Sephiroth still couldn't recoil as he wished.

"I," the other Sephiroth continued, "I had an epiphany."

Sephiroth surmised it was actually a mental break down.
"Let's go to the Promised Land," he said softly. "Mother."

"Sephiroth!" he shouted—Zack shouted. "Why did you kill the townspeople? Why did you hurt Tifa. Answer me, Sephiroth!"

Then, the other Sephiroth laughed. Sephiroth felt bile rise up in his own throat outside the memory.

"Mother," that one said with amusement, "they're here again." He paused. "You should have ruled this planet. You were stronger, smarter. But then they came. Those inferior dullards. They came and took this planet away from you."

Sephiroth wasn't sure what he found more appalling. That his alternate self was talking to an inanimate piece of machinery, or that he was being affectionate about it.

"But don't be sad, Mother. I am with you now."

That was just…just…wrong. That Sephiroth could in no way be considered sane. This wasn't like Angeal, who had grown suicidally depressed, or like Genesis, who'd become an anti-society terrorist. That Sephiroth was insane. He was having a conversation with a Mako-processing edifice.

Then the insane Sephiroth reached up to gently take hold of the machinery and rip all of it out. Some sort of black lubricant seeped from all the creases in the representation of a woman as sparks fizzled out of the snapped connection wires. The caricature of a person was tossed carelessly aside to reveal a veiny, ice burned, blue corpse of a woman that had a fist-sized tube embedded in her gut, a mess of mutated tissues curling out of her back, and was missing the top of her skull. Her one remaining eye had a sickly, pink, Mako glow.

Perhaps it was the fact that she had the same silver hair as Sephiroth that made the insane Sephiroth say, "We meet at last, Mother."

Sephiroth was relieved when the memory abruptly shifted, genuinely please he no longer had to see that grotesque display of affection for a thousand year old corpse. Then he noticed Zack crumpled face down on the stairs outside Jenova's processing room.

"Cloud," Zack wheezed out, eyeing him earnestly, "finish Sephiroth off."

Resolve, and anger, coiled in his gut—Cloud's gut. He picked up the Buster Sword, it definitely felt heavier than in Zack's memories. He sprinted up the stairs and back into the Jenova processing room. The other Sephiroth didn't even acknowledge Cloud's entrance. Cloud readjusted his grip on the sword and charged right up the piping.

The other Sephiroth didn't even flinch until the Buster Sword impaled him through the back, barely missing the spine. Sephiroth would never have expected that insanity would remove one's situational awareness. Logically, he would have tired from a legitimate fight with Zack, as had to have happened to reduce Zack to the state he was in before passing his mission on to Cloud. But still, to not even attempt to dodge being run through with a sword was unfathomable. It was mere luck that Cloud didn't kill the other Sephiroth instantly. The Buster Sword missed his spine only barely. The other Sephiroth half collapsed and Cloud pulled back.

The memory shifted and Cloud was back in the tank room, cradling the teen cowgirl when the insane Sephiroth staggered out of Jenova's processing room, his gaping chest wound oozing blood, holding the Masamune in one hand, and Jenova's severed head in the other.

"How dare you," the other Sephiroth ground out.
"Cloud," Zack wheezed out again, gesturing at the other Sephiroth, "finish him."

Cloud retook the Buster Sword and charged Sephiroth, leaping into the air for a stronger downward strike.

The extremely weakened, insane Sephiroth swung at Cloud, blocking his strike and flinging him back into the Jenova processing room. He rolled across the floor, head spinning.

Before his mind cleared—before Cloud's mind cleared, Sephiroth found himself—Cloud, run through with Sephiroth's blade. The metal was like a rope of fire threaded through his torso, as it pulled him to his feet.

Cloud grasped the blade, and Sephiroth felt the desperation, anger, and determination welling up through the memory. Then the unenhanced infantryman braced himself and pulled upward on the Masamune, lifting the other Sephiroth right off his feet. The sword seemed to turn to lava in his torso as he did more damage to himself.

"Impossible," the other Sephiroth breathed out, his eyes wide and disbelieving.

Cloud wrenched himself sideways, throwing the other Sephiroth off the catwalk and into a wall. The electrical behind the panelling immediately shorted, sending sparks and smoke everywhere as the other Sephiroth was electrocuted. Then, he fell into the reactor core, sinking below the surface of the Mako. The other Sephiroth was definitely dead then if the electrocution hadn't already done him in.

Sephiroth had to wonder why that other Sephiroth hadn't simply let go of the Masamune hilt.

Then he—Cloud, was standing on a large window ledge, watching a slim, silver-haired teen who jumped straight off the building. The teen twisted slowly and his keen eyesight—Cloud's keen eyesight, spied his hand reach into an open container he was clutching to his chest. Sephiroth mentally recoiled when the teen withdrew Jenova's severed head. Cloud shifted his grip on the sword, the Fusion Sword, the memory whispered to him, and dove off the building after the adolescent. Oozing, black ichor seeped from the head's orifices before it wrapped around the teen like a sentient, billowing fog.

The teen landed hard on his feet, head low, and straightened, lifting his arms as Cloud rapidly closed the distance between them. Cloud broke his aerodynamic profile to swing the Fusion Sword downward toward his opponent. In the moment before impact, a flash obscured his vision, and the Fusion Sword struck another weapon that hadn't previously been there, stopping Cloud's advance in a bone-jarring way. The other Sephiroth stood where the teen had been, wisps of black motes still settling around him, Masamune in hand to block the Fusion Sword.

"It's been a while, Cloud," the other Sephiroth greeted in low, rumbling tones. Sephiroth wasn't sure if the bile that rose in his throat was his own or Cloud's.

Sephiroth recognized the ruins of Shinra Tower as he was thrown up atop another building. The other Sephiroth followed, landing on a higher roof. Then, when Cloud asked what he wanted, Sephiroth was completely flabbergasted when the other Sephiroth simply shared his plan to destroy the planet and use it as some kind of interstellar ship to get to another planet.

The fight ensued, marveling at the complete disregard either combatant had for additional destruction. The other Sephiroth actually took to flinging chunks of Shinra Tower at Cloud.

Then came the line from the other Sephiroth, "I thought of a wonderful present for you. Shall I give you despair?"
Sephiroth cringed. He could infer that Cloud likely derived amusement from throwing this line back at him, but now that he had the context for where it came from, it induced more queasiness than he'd like to admit, even to himself.

This other Sephiroth spoke of destroying the world, continuing his supposed mother's work, but he seemed to be spending more effort on tormenting Cloud than completing this goal. He suspected his alternate self actually prioritized Cloud's suffering over his mission to use the planet as a vessel to another world. A hypothesis that seemed supported when Cloud slowed down, physical weakness dulling his movement. It didn't help that Cloud had muscle weakness where his memory told Sephiroth the Geostigma had been along patches of his arm.

Sephiroth pulled back slightly, distancing himself somewhat from the sensations in the memory as the other Sephiroth impaled Cloud. Still, the alternate didn't complete the job.

Even with Cloud's injuries, Sephiroth felt the end result of his alternate self losing control of his manifestation was a forgone conclusion. Too much inefficiency, too much focus on toying with his opponent, too much arrogance and refusing to finish quickly.

A wave of dizziness swept through him as he faced Cloud, seated as they were across from each other on the church's floor. The dizziness passed quickly, though his mind still felt slightly jittery, and the collective group, bar Cloud, were obviously waiting for some pronouncement from him. Cloud, though, his eyes were sharp, searching, still somewhat challenging, undoubtedly waiting for Sephiroth to naysay him. Sephiroth understood that better. Every encounter, every interaction, Cloud had been watching for the confrontational insanity the other Sephiroth had displayed.

Sephiroth had no doubt that Cloud would attempt to kill him the moment he saw any of the illogical behavior the counterpart had. And Sephiroth was now less confident he would be able to turn homicidal intentions from the supposed time traveler aside.

The other Sephiroth displayed less proficient sword skills than he knew himself to possess, favoring some form of telekinetic or Materia-induced power he didn't currently have. Cloud had been able to mostly match him, and clearly best him, even with the weakness his own recently healed Geostigma had caused. Cloud's obvious skill with the Fusion Sword, which Sephiroth now recognized as the new weapon Cloud carried, definitely rivaled his own with the Masamune. That final attack against the other Sephiroth was...astounding.

Should this situation deteriorate, he quickly came to the conclusion that the odds were not in favor of the Shinra group. Even if Tseng and Zack, whose loyalties were currently in question in his mind, sided with him, the presence of Genesis and the unknown location of both the gunman and the quadruped tipped the balance of skill and power to Cloud's side.

One thing he was certain of, though, was that whether or not Cloud had traveled in time, or had been given a vision of a possible future by some unknown power of the planet, that other Sephiroth could never be allowed to come to be.

So he wasn't sure what prompted him to say, "It was a rather flat joke to tell me despair was a horrible present without providing the context."

A flash of surprise broke the sharp watchfulness Cloud's gaze before one corner of his mouth quirked up slightly. "It was less a joke than a jab for my own satisfaction."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!