### Black Faction

**by** Radiklement

#### Summary

The year is 19027 A.D. The Black Faction is a secret organization which goal is to protect the Earth against inner and outer threats. Its members are all human or semi human and fight under the orders of a secret man –or woman?- who has never been seen by any living soul. Their group, expanded through every country and spatial bases and colonies of humankind, is the most developed intelligence form in this galaxy. The workers of this company are known as soldiers and agents. Working for them is Lightning, who lost more than she could ever gain in one terrible operation. Her best friend and partner, Squall, is trying to help her through it all, even if he's losing his own bearings.

On the other hand, her ex, Noctis, another Faction's agent is lost in a 2 years long coma, without her knowing. Her twin brother, Cloud Strife is having it hard in the army, as the chief of his own squad. He has to put up with a new recruit, Yuna, a young and promising engineer, but a shy girl, who's no soldier but ends up on the battlefield anyway.

And then, there's Aeris, Aeris who's chased around the planets and will need a saviour. As they all do.

#### Notes

This story has known various changes and problems along the way. The work is actually complete and can be found on both my FF.net and DA accounts. It's one of my biggest work so far. I'd just like for you to keep in mind that I'm a french writer first, so English isn't my...
native tongue. Enjoy!
Episode 1 - Soldiers and Spies - Part I

Black Faction

Episode I – Soldiers and spies

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 1th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Focus: To localize and dispose of Sazh Katzroy a.k.a agent Trauma

Agents: Squall Leonheart and Lightning Farron

Permitted delay for Focus completion: Two days

Warning: The target is more than just a great pilot and has face WWV and VI. A force to be reckoned with. Get him alive and bring him back to HQ. “asap…”

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission.

A baby was crying in the night. His cries were strong, but getting fainter. She was running to him, to calm him down. Her. It was a girl, she knew it. She knew her. She was a part of her. Or was it the other way around? She had to run faster, the poor child was crying so loud. Why couldn’t anyone answer her? All of a sudden, Light realized that the cries were coming from inside of her. She stopped and looked at her feet. There was a pool of blood on the floor. And drowning in it, a little hand that reached out for her and two eyes looking right at her… She began to fall. And no one would catch her in her fall. She had failed her little girl. She had failed everyone. She had failed! It hurt so much just to think those words.

Lightning woke up suddenly, her eyes full of tears, her body painful from the stress she was under. She tried to hold back her yell, not to awake anyone. But she was shaking from her head to her toes. She shoved the sheets to the end of her bed, shivering. Her breathing was quick and hard. The covers tangled around her legs as she turned around, trying to close her eyes and to forget everything. She brought her hands to her head. Her heart hurt so much, why didn’t it stop to beat just for once! Her sight was going blurry. It was just a nightmare, but the pain was still so vivid.

“It’s all in the past.” she whispered in the dark. “It’s all in the past…”

But her voice sounded as the one she had when she was still a little girl and she was so scared. It felt so lonely. But she wasn’t alone. A hand touched her tensed back and she screamed. Then, she realized it was Cloud and she started to cry, unable to hold anything back.

“Gosh, Light, it’s been two years already.”

“I can’t forget her, Cloud. I just can’t!”

He grabbed her in his arms, holding her close and she cuddled against him, trying to hide in his chest. The young soldier thought that his twin sister had never looked so frail before. But then again, he knew better. There was a reason why she was having those nightmares. She had suffered so much in the past few years. Why did she have to keep on suffering even now? He sighed, before to stroke her hair.
“It’s okay Claire. You hear me, don’t you? It’s okay. It was just a bad dream. You’re not alone.”

“I’m sorry.” she whispered.

“Claire, instead of apologizing, you should go see someone and ask for help. You won’t get over this by yourself and all I can do is comfort you when you break apart like that.” he reminded her.

Her hands that were clasped over his shirt turned into fists and hit him in the chest.

“I can’t go and tell them! It’s my first nightmare in months.”

“But your crises are getting worse with every new nightmare. What will you do if I was gone on a mission the next time you wake up like that?”

Cloud had always been worrying about her, from the very start of their life. She was his bigger sister –technically, since she was born five minutes before him- but he had always treated her as a little sister. After all, with their real lil’ sis, it was easy to get use to that.

“I’m sorry to worry you like that, I know it’s stupid…”

“Light, it isn’t! You’ve been tortured and brutalized and it’s only normal that even you can’t get over it. You’re human, for heaven sake! You should just face it and reach out for people that can help you.”

“I don’t wanna forget her!” she replied, shaking her head from side to side.

Cloud knew there was no way that he’d get any reason into her, but he still had to try.

“I’m not talking about forgetting her, sis. You know, even Serah is worrying. Last time she saw you, you’d lost some weight and I know that you haven’t gain any since that time. And it was months ago too.”

“I’m…”

“Claire, all that I want to say is… There’s no one that resent you for what happened back there. It wasn’t your fault.”

She wasn’t crying anymore, but she didn’t let go of her brother’s shirt. She was so used to be with him like that. No one could ever saw her breaking up, but Cloud. He had always been her greatest support in life. When their parents had died, they were still kids, but were forced to become parents themselves, for Serah. Lightning had been a good mother, even if she never should have been one at the young age of seven. Cloud had been a wise dad and a cool big brother, always looking out for his little sisters. With every years and every bigger or smaller problem, Lightning and Cloud had always supported each other and helped their twin to get back up when he was down. It hadn’t been easy.

Cloud had become a soldier for the American army when he turned fifteen, to earn money that could pay Serah’s studies. Lightning had studied at Shinra’s school, to become a spy. Now, she was one of the top members of the Black Faction, an organization which had most of its activities in spying, politics and intergalactic affairs…

“Say Cloud, do you think I’m crazy?”

“Of course. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be putting up with me after all those years…”

They were both 27 years old. Still single, still living together as they ever had. Serah had moved
three years ago, when she had decided to go steady with Snow. Lightning had had trouble to accept that her little sister, that she almost see as a daughter, had became a woman. But life was life and she still had Cloud.

“Moron. You’re my twin. Every time that I would feel hurt while nothing happened to me, I would worry about you.”

“You already do, Light.”

“Yeah, but… It wouldn’t feel right to think that you aren’t in the next room when I’m falling asleep. I know it’s childish, but even if I don’t see you during a complete week, just by knowing we’re living in the same place, it reassure me.”

“You know, it’s the same on my side.”

“Anyway, it’s not as if you could live without me. Whenever I’m not here to cook for you, you’re eating nothing but military rations or fast-food.”

He pushed her back to her bed, a little frustrated by her remark. She was right, there was no denying it.

“You look better. I guess you’ll be fine now.”

“Oh, Cloud, you’re no fun!”

“Hey, I don’t have time to be fun, it’s three in the morning and I’m getting up at four for work!”

“Then, why did you came and comforted me?”

“Did you forget? I’m your twin and whenever you do a nightmare, I have one too.”

“Oh, so this had nothing to do with me?!”

She knew he was half joking, but still!

“Lightning, could you let me sleep? We’ll talk about it tomorrow, when I’ll be back from work.”

“You got an assignment?”

“Yeah, you could say that.”

She frowned. He was a little mysterious about this. Maybe was it a serious mission and that he didn’t want to worry her. She breathed in and out and smiled at her brother.

“Alright. At ease, soldier.”

“Thanks, captain.”

“It’s general!” she retorted.

“Yeah, whatever…”

They were both joking and it didn’t feel entirely right, but it was hard to talk about what had happened two years ago. Cloud still felt bad for not being there for his sister before. And she felt bad for still reminding him of that fact with her nightmares and the crises that followed. If only she was stronger! But hell knew how hard she was with herself most of the time. At least, before Cloud, she had the right to let go her guard. She sighed as he walked back in his room. It still felt
dark. And she shivered, taking back the sheets of her bed, to cover herself. Someone was missing here. Not Cloud, but she fought with herself for the nth time. She wasn’t thinking about Noctis, no, she wasn’t! That jerk wasn’t the one she needed, but still, sometimes, she wished she hadn’t made that decision to break up with him. Who was it she needed really? Her little girl, which had been gone for months now? She lay down, trying to think about everything she still had.

First, there was Cloud. Then, she had her best friend, Squall, who was like a second brother. He and Cloud were so alike. She couldn’t forget Serah. And her job, which occupied most of her life… But after all that, what was left of Lightning Farron? Who was Lightning Farron? She sighed once more. There was no way she was getting any more sleep with all those questions on her mind. She got up and turned her computer on, to get her mind off things. Her only mail was about that mission to find agent Trauma. Sazh Katzroy, she thought. He was a good agent and a great man. Why would he turn his back on Black Faction?

…

Squall stood still as Rinoa cried before him, trying to explain herself. They’d been together for three or four years, but it was all over now. He hadn’t seen it coming. He wanted to yell at her, but he was scared that she’d cried even more. He was sitting in his living room, on the largest futon ever seen and Rinoa was standing right before him, with the strong moonlight behind her, tearing her shape in shadows and light rays that were hurting Squall’s eyes.

“Seifer?” he repeated.

He couldn’t believe her. There was something malfunctioning in his brain, this must be a bad dream. Rinoa was sad, she was sorry, but she had made her choice. She needed someone that could depend on her, that would rely on her and that would care about a future with her! As she said all that, the only fact going on in Squall’s mind was that she had been going out with Seifer during the last five months. They were still together at that time and he still slept with her most nights, thinking that he loved her and that she loved him back. But he wasn’t enough.

“I… I’m really sorry Squall, but with all your missions, you were always out, and… Every time that I would talk about children, you would back away, even if you know that I want a family of my own. We’ve been together for years, but nothing ever changed between us. We’re not even living together, because you don’t want me to move in your place, or… When we’re at work, you always seems to forget that I exist, it’s just as if… as if you don’t care about me at all!”

“But… We’re not supposed to be together, since we’re working in the same team, Rinoa! It’s just pretending I don’t…”

“Well, you won’t have to pretend anymore, because we’re not together anymore! I’ve had enough of your cold stares and you getting lost in your mind! I need more attention than a dog!”

“I never treated you as a dog!”

“No, that’s right, and I can’t say that you weren’t nice, as long as no one could see us together. You were always calculating everything and I can’t stand it anymore. I’m not an equation, I’m a woman!”

He looked away, unable to stand the tears rolling down her cheeks and the fury in her eyes. It was the light that hurt his eyes, he wasn’t going to cry. But his chest was painful and there was a lump in his throat.
“Look at you, even now! I know I’m hurting you, but you won’t let it show at all. It’s okay to be weak, alright? It’s okay to need comfort and tenderness every now and then, and it’s not because you don’t want to need it that I do too!”

She was attacking every spot that she could. Every sides of him that she knew was a target and she had always been good with a gun. Was it really only his fault? He hadn’t many people that cared for him in his life. He wasn’t very sure of himself with love. He was scared of being hurt like in the past and he thought she knew that. But she wanted him to get over it and he couldn’t, even for her sake.

“I’m sorry to do this, but I can’t go on like that, Squall. You don’t seem to love me, you just like the fact that you have someone to prevent you from being entirely alone.”

He tried to think an answer, but his mind was going blank. All the thoughts were running wild. He wanted to shut her up, he wanted to wake up from this nightmare. If only this could only be a nightmare… He wanted to hold her in his arms and tell her that this was all wrong. But he hated her for going out with Seifer. And he knew she had lied to him. She had lied to him. She hadn’t been fair. She asked sometimes for more than he could give, but she never told him all that. And now, she was blowing up, when he wasn’t ready to take the shot. And it hurt. Even more than that time when Ellone had gone away. It was his fault again, wasn’t it? He had blown his chance.

His heart was beating fast and he wanted to get up and defend himself, but he couldn’t move. If he’d get any closer to her, he would maybe sense Seifer’s smell on her. He would break apart and he wouldn’t give her that satisfaction. Maybe because that was the very reason why she was rejecting him now… Squall had never been able to open up as much as she wanted him to. But it was so hard to let go all his defenses.

“So you’re leaving?” he asked coldly.

Rinoa’s tears were doubled by his reaction.

“How can you say that? Did you even care when you said you loved me?”

Even if I did, it didn’t prevent you from cheating on me, he thought.

“It seems to me that your mind’s set. You want me to implore you or something? You want me to spill my guts and open now that it’s too late?! I’m not playing your game, Rinoa. I’m not a toy or a fool, even if you treated me as one lately.”

She seemed to feel guilty as he said that and took a step backward.

“All that I wanted…” she began.

But he had heard enough of what she wanted. More than enough!

“I think I got your point. This is my apartment, so you can go back to your Seifer and your life. I think you know where to find the exit,” he snapped at her.

Rinoa stood still for a minute, not believing it. But Squall had a right to be angry after all. She quickly gathered her things and came back to the living room to see that Squall hadn’t move and was now looking at her with his coldest eyes. The scar on his face was dark and the moonlight was tainting his skin with blue shades. Since the earth was slowly burning and the moon was covered with colonies and cities of light, there was no more dark night on Earth. But it was even creepier to walk outside late at night with the strong moonlight in the sky.
“You know, Squall, we can still be friends…” she tried to say.

She was sincere, but she had been sincere in all the other things that she said before and Squall hated her for being nice now, when he wanted her to be harsh so that he would have a right to hate her for real.

“It’s all over, you said it yourself.” he replied.

She jumped a little. His voice was hoarse and growing dark. He was going to break down and he wanted her gone before that it happened. And she felt bad, but at the same time, disgusted because she still hadn’t the right to see him breaking down. He didn’t trust her enough for that. He didn’t trust anyone.

“That’s right.” she whispered. And there was venom in her voice as she held back her meanest words. “It’s all over.”

She walked out and shut the door of the apartment with all her strength given to the loud noise that made him jump with surprise. It was as if everything sank in with that. She was really gone. He had chased her away. She had left him. As his mother had and as Ellone… As everyone else that ever was worth loving and suffering for.

He looked at the hall next to the living room, his eyes widening as he felt the pain growing inside of him. She didn’t love him anymore. Maybe she never was able to, since he was so frustrating all the time. She was gone. She was still crying, still because of him. She had left him. He stared down at his hands, still sitting in this stupid futon. He breathed out. Breathed in. She was gone, and he was alone now. As he always had before to know her. As he never wanted to be again. He was angry with Rinoa, but mostly with himself. To believe that him, Squall Leonheart, one of the greatest spy in all the American branch of the Black Faction, would miss all the facts showing him that his girlfriend had been cheating on him!

To think that he was the one to drive her away in the end! His hands started to shake. His mind was going over all that she’d said. About him and how he had treated her. I’m not a dog! I need someone I can rely on and someone that will depend of me. You never seem to care. With Seifer, I…

He yelled as he tried to keep her voice down in his head, not to hear her talking about Seifer again. He had always hated that guy. He was his rival in everything. And now, he had to go and steal his girlfriend from him? Just because he wasn’t as scared as him about getting really engaged to someone?

“I tried, Rinoa, I tried…”

But she was gone. And his heart was gone with her, leaving a large and bleeding void in his chest. It was still there somewhere, pounding with every breath that he took, but she was really gone. She hated him. And he wanted to cry so much, to let the pain take over him and to hide. If she could saw him now, she would know just how weak and vulnerable he really was and would take back all of her words. But he didn’t want her back knowing that she’d been with Seifer. It hurt just as much as the fact she was gone.

He put his hands on his knees to stop them from shaking. He wouldn’t crack down like that. He wouldn’t, not now, not if it was what had taken Rinoa away from him. He tried to remember how he thought before her. How he kept everyone far enough from him, how he never got attached to anyone… How he felt lonely when he got to bed every night at that time. How he’d met with girls he didn’t know to get a vague impression of being warm. Or being whole. He felt so empty now. He couldn’t touch a woman without feeling something, even if he wanted to be harsh and cold and nothing else. He had desires, he had needs, he had a heart deep inside! But it had been broken so
many times.

I wanted kids, I wanted you to be the father of my child, I wanted to marry you and we could have live together forever, Squall. All that I wanted was to feel protected by your love, just by looking at you, whenever and wherever I did. Was it really too much?

How could she ask for all that? How could he be a father when he hadn’t had one? How could he marry her when he had already given her everything he had? He was just a poor man, with only his job and one stupid silver necklace that once belonged to his mother. He wanted to love her, but he was so scared to see her going away, to see people mocking him, to be judged for being jealous or overprotecting with her, that all he could do was pretending that he didn’t care.

We can still be friends… But no, it’s all over.

Squall breathed hard as he remembered her face at that moment. He slowly got up. He had to get her out of his mind. But her scent was all over the place. As he walk in his room and let himself fall on his bed, he found one of her hair on the pillow. She was everywhere. And at the same time, she was gone. He looked at the clock on the wall. It was three and a half in the morning. Would he be able to sleep in his state of mind? Wouldn’t Rinoa come and hunt him in his dreams? His mouth was dry and his heart was still beating way too fast. He felt a shiver running over all his back and let a strangled moan get out of his throat. He turned on his back and looked at the ceiling. It’s okay to need comfort and tenderness every now and then, and it’s not because you don’t want to need it…

“What do you think I want now, Rinoa?” he sighed.

His voice was faint and his hands started shaking again. He put an arm over his eyes, trying to erase all the feelings and the pain. Not to feel. He wished he could achieve something like that. Then, for a minute, he thought about calling Lightning. They had a mission together tomorrow and he sure didn’t feel that he would be up to it. But a tear ran over his cheek, under his arm and he decided that he would stay like this a little longer and wouldn’t call anyone. Lightning was maybe his best friend, but she wouldn’t know in what state he was in. He still had his pride. He cried just a little, silently, as a man would. And it was way more heartbreaking than any sobs or any teary woman. But there was no one there to see or heard it and maybe was it why he cried in the first place.

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Date: 19 027 A.D. December 2th

Location: Planet Earth, Canada, Ottawa

Noctis felt weird as he slowly opened his eyes. He remembered being in an important mission, on a colony of Mars, and fighting against a gang of terrorists to prevent them from attacking a big city in the colony. He remembered triggering a trap or something like that. Then there was an explosion and his mind was an absolute blank after that. His eyelids opened slightly and the light that he saw made him close his eyes instantly. Why was it so blinding? Was he in a hospital or something?

After all, he had been caught up in the explosion. What kind of explosion was it already? Not nuclear, he wouldn’t be here if it was. His brain seemed to work slowly. His thoughts were all fuzzy. He stretched his shoulders slowly and reopened his eyes. The ceiling looked far from him. He realized that he was lying on a strange table. When he raised his right arm, his hand touched a transparent matter, right over his face, as if he was trapped in some kind of cocoon or… He was surprised. Maybe was he in an isolate chamber of the hospital? He had got hurt before, his job almost always implied getting hurt and he was used to hospital and all. But this was new. And as
he looked at his arm, he realized there was a wire planted in his flesh. He couldn’t sat up, the transparent thing hanging over him was quite solid and too close to let him any liberty of movement. But he shifted his shoulders and head to look at him, feeling a little more awkward with everything that he could realize of his situation. First thing wrong, he was naked. You aren’t naked in a hospital—at least, not in the ten hospitals he had been to before…-. The ventilation around him was warm enough to prevent him from being uncomfortable, but he didn’t like that. There were wires in each of his members and he discovered he was attached to a lot of things, with certain parts of his anatomy that shouldn’t be touched by many people…

He freed himself from every cables and wires, even if most were for medical purpose and that he probably shouldn’t touch anything. But he knew a few things. He didn’t know where he was, and as he looked around him and saw scientists-looking-people working over computers, he felt his stomach churned in protest. This was bad. Had he been turned into a science project? He tried to get up, or at least to sit up. He felt weak and his body wasn’t entirely responding to him. For how long had he been in here?

“Hey, look, he woke up!”

“He doesn’t look too happy.”

“What’s going on around here!” he yelled back.

That was a mistake, his throat was dry out and his voice came out hoarsely, as if he hadn’t drank anything in years. A man walked in the room after being called by someone and Noctis recognized him. It was his boss in the Black Faction. And for some reason, the young man didn’t like the idea of being imprisoned in some kind of a super plastic cocoon. Rufus looked amused by the situation, and his secretary, Jihl Nabaat, walked next to him, a slight blush on her pale face.

“Please sir, you must calm down.” one of the scientist told him.

“Let me out!” Noctis replied.

His voice wasn’t as he remembered, and well, nothing was quite as he remembered. He felt his long hair brushing his shoulders and understood he might have been out cold for more than just a few days! He didn’t like that. The anxiousness inside him was growing into an incredible wrath.

“Calm down, Raven.” Rufus Shinra said with his cold voice.

“You’re telling me to calm down?!” Noctis repeated.

And this time, as he yelled, his anger seemed to run out of his body and a violent shockwave broke his cell, letting him sit up. And he automatically jumped on his feet, ready to jump at the first scientist that would get close to him, but he almost immediately collapsed to the ground. His legs were weak. His body shivered as his bared skin met the cold floor. His breath was uneasy and the shattered piece of transparent matter that’d been imprisoning him fell around him with clicking noises.

“Alright Raven, so it’s seems you’ve really been in a coma all along.”

“A coma?”

“Stop repeating everything that you hear, Raven!”

Why is he calling me Raven? Wait, that’s my code name, ain’t it?

Noctis tried to focus, but he was still mad for not understanding where he was. What had happened
to him? Why was he here? Why did his legs couldn’t hold his own weight? Why was he naked?

“First things first, I need to see if you’re still intact mentally speaking. Could you give me your agent number?”

“Hum… Wait a minute. Where are we? When are we?!?”

Rufus sighed while Jihl was trying to look at Noctis’ face, and not at the rest. The poor man wanted to hide, but his arms were almost as weak as his legs.

“Your agent number, first, Raven.”

“04-567-45-32-911” he acidly replied without even thinking.

“Great, at least, you remember that.”

“You answer me now, Rufus.”

“Well, the doctors said that this could give you a shock, so, I’m maybe not the best person to tell you what happened. If you wanna know, Raven, after that explosion, we almost lost you. That was almost two years ago.”

“What?!”

Was he saying that he’d missed two years of his life in a coma after the explosion? This wasn’t right, but then, that would explain his hair that was way too long.

“We had to isolate you because of the radiations that you’ve been exposed to. You’ve been in a coma ever since, so we studied your state. It seems that your body mutated a little. You’re still totally human on the outside, and as vulnerable and mortal as before. But you got some kinds of powers. Just like this shockwave you used a moment ago.”

“Has it really been two years?!” His voice cracked a little. He was panicked. Last time he was up, he was still 25 years old, he had a life despite his work, even if things weren’t looking too good. And now, he was 27 years old, all of a sudden, and the whole world had continued to turn while he was in a coma?

“Well, yeah, but you didn’t miss anything important,” Rufus commented lazily.

How does he know anything?

If Noctis had been in his full shape, he would have jump at that guy throat to teach him a lesson. But he simply shivered and looked down to the floor. How was he supposed to accept all that? He’d been in a coma, alright. He had weird powers thanks to the radiation he was exposed to, okay. He had missed two years of his life?!

“What about Light?”

“Light? Oh, you mean Lightning. Well, she’s still an agent.”

Noctis couldn’t believe it. After all that she’d been through, she was still putting up with this kind of life? She had been so scared by their last mission together. He had failed her and she certainly still resented him for what had happened. He still missed her. Even her harsh words. And it had been two years already for her? Had she forget him? Did she even know what had happened to him?
“Officially, Raven, you were moved to colony’s quarters, on our moon base. None of your ex-co-workers know that you were in this coma, since we didn’t know if you would wake up. And about waking up, I must congratulate you. A week later, and we would have given up on you.”

“Oh, thanks, gee.”

“What’s that?”

“Get me some clothes instead of talking me crap!”

“I know this is hard to take, but you’re still my employee Raven, and I won’t have you talking to me like that!”

“It’s freaking cold here and I want some damn dignity, is it too much to ask?!?”

An hour later, Noctis was left alone in a small room. He was dressed in a hospital gown, but it was still better than nothing, and Rufus had taken arrangement so that he could have some things from his place sent to him. He couldn’t walk without using the walls to support him and he felt as a child, or a very old guy. But after all, his arms and legs hadn’t been in use for two years, if it wasn’t for electrical stimulations to keep him alive and prevent his body from decaying. He had to eat mashed food, since he hadn’t eaten in two years and all felt frustrating. He sat in his bed, the pillows supporting his back and grab the laptop that he was given. Just lifting the small computer was a great effort and he winced from pain and resentment against this body that wasn’t reacting as he wanted, before to finally put the laptop on his legs.

He looked for news on the Internet and tried to catch back all that he had missed. He managed to find Vanille’s blog, where she talked about every guy of Boston’s American branch of the Black Faction. There, he found some picture of Lightning, and Squall, and all the others that once were his comrades. Lightning seemed pretty close to Squall. Too close for his taste, even if he had no right over her anymore. This was so unfair! As he read on, he understood that Light’s new partner was the famous Squall. His heart sank to the bottom of his chest. At least, she had a strong man to count on. Stronger than he was, maybe?

“Oh Claire… You look so happy with him. But are you really?”

He pushed the computer over the bed and let it crash on the floor. That wasn’t like him at all to mourn like that, but he just had missed a part of his life. The doctor had told him to sleep, so that he would regain energy, but he was scared to close his eyes and lose track of time once more. Would he wake up tomorrow, or in years? Instead of going to sleep, he got up, using the walls to support him. He had to get back to the Noctis he was before this. He had to train! After taking a few steps around the room with the walls as his support, he let go to use only his legs. And as he fell on the floor after six steps, he felt like yelling, and cursing, and crying, but he got up instead.

“All right man. If you don’t manage to walk now, you can’t forget Lightning. She would never give any credit to a guy that can’t even walk.”

I couldn’t save her and now, I’m like a little baby, he thought, desperately.

He fall again, a little later this time, and his legs hurt from the effort. They hadn’t moved like that in the past months, they only reacted to electrical stimulations and his muscles were all protesting against their treatment.

“Once, I could run faster than most soldiers in the army. I was better at hand-to-hand fighting than
Zell. And I’ll get even better”, he tried to encourage himself.

But it was hard to see how low he had fallen. He was so thin that he looked like a teenager with a too big stature for his age. He wasn’t that build before, but he had more muscle and flesh than that. His stomach was a little hollow on the inside, as if he hadn’t eaten enough.

“If all I had were water and mashed food, there’s no reason to worry about it. But man, I can’t wait to eat a steak!”

He was hungry, and angry, and scared to death, but at least, he was up and alive. All that was left was to get back to his ancient life. Maybe then, he could meet with Lightning. That scared me even more than going to sleep, but he had missed two years of her life. And even if she’d said that everything was over between them, he could still be her friend. She sure didn’t have that many friends with her temper!

As he fell for the fifth time, he decided he would exercise his arms too. In the middle of the night, when a nurse came to check on him, she found him walking on his hands, his legs pointing in the air, and his gown had fallen on his eyes, but he was laughing. At least, his strength was coming back! The nurse almost had a heart attack and Rufus threaten his agent to tie him to his bed if he wasn’t more careful. Noctis took this opportunity to ask for more clothes and continued the training that would lead him back to the life he once had…

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 2th, early morning

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Sazh hated sleepless night. But he hated uncertainty even more. Dajh whereabouts where still unknown and as long as he didn’t give to his son’s kidnappers the intel they wanted, the poor little boy wouldn’t be release. He had try to localize the kid himself, running away from his agency at the same time. He had to tell them all that they wanted, Dajh was all his life, but this wasn’t going to be easy to live with him after that. The Black Faction would chase them both all over the world. If he tried to contact one of the agents, they would bring him back to the agency.

But fortunately for him, Sazh had his ways with computers and mechanics and he had checked everything that he could from the Black Faction’s systems. He could crack all their codes so easily that Rufus Shinra would have been scared, but the black man was a force to reckon with, and it wasn’t a joke.

“I need to make a plan.” he thought out loud. “Lightning and Squall will be after me from today on. If I can catch them before they catch me and force them to listen to my reasons, maybe they could lend me a hand in rescuing Dajh. But I mustn’t put him in danger. If something was to happen to him, I couldn’t live with myself. My poor Gloria would be so sad. Huh, Bokko?”

His little chocobo, which was still a chick, kweeeed in agreement from the depth of his hair.

“Alright then. Lightning and Squall will certainly understand me. If they don’t, I’ll just have to get away from them and betray the agency. But I’d rather not…”

Dajh would be in so much more danger if the knowledge of the Black Faction was to get into evil hands. No kid of earth would be safe, no matter where their parents would hide them. And I can’t let that happen.

To be continued…
Episode 1 - Soldiers and Spies - Part II

Black Faction

Episode 1 – Soldiers and spies – Part II

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 2th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

First focus: To localize and dispose of Sazh Katzroy a.k.a agent Trauma

Second focus: Secure a colonial woman, Gainsborough, being chased by aliens

Agents: Squall Leonheart and Lightning Farron

Permitted delay for First focus completion: One day

Permitted delay for Second focus completion: a week, earthling’s time

Warning: Kill Katzroy on sight and get to the second assignment asap

Message from G.I. eight. End of transmission.

Lightning gasped in shock as she read that. Kill on sight? But Sazh had once been Squall’s trainer! And their first day wasn’t over already. Was the agency lacking spies so much that it had to send the same agents on all the missions? That sure was sudden. She heard her brother growling and looked to his side, to see him trying to get into his uniform. He was still half asleep, but the few medals were all aligned on his chest. He had just trouble buttoning the buttons of his coat. She looked at the gun and the blade crossing on his badge, right under his name and rank. Lieutenant Strife.

“Did you eat something?” she asked him.

“I took health pills, I’ll eat later.”

“But Cloud!”

Lightning hated health pills. Food wasn’t getting any cheaper lately, since the soil was burned to a crisp and all the real food that earthlings could eat was exported from space’s colonies. So, scientists had created the best cheap and healthy solution possible. Health pills. Take one of them, and you have a complete breakfast in your organism. Take two, and you’re ready to get intoxicated in nutrients. Cloud often use this option to skip a meal or two. With his job, he had to be up so early it was getting troublesome to eat. And with the little sleep he had had last night, health pills sure were the only solution that he got. Still, Lightning felt bad, because this was partly her fault. Maybe she should think about moving someday, instead of staying here, being a burden to her twin.

“What’s that assignment about, Cloud?”

“I’ve been summoned by the top-general of medical branch.”

Cloud wasn’t your usual soldier. He never did paperwork and he never really was on the battlefield. He wasn’t making strategies either. He was a squad leader and a specialist at one thing, being a body guard. In every conflict or disaster, when a medical team was dispatched from the
American army, he was off to protect the docs, the drugs and the injured. He acted on instinct and had saved a lot of peaceful missions. He had a team of five men and women under his order to check onto the medical or rescue team. He had started working on those kinds of missions at sixteen years old, after completing his training. It was during world war six…

“Does this mean… you’ll be gone on a mission soon?”

“I don’t really know right now. I’m taking the first plane for Washington. And I should go now if I don’t wanna miss it.”

“Washington?!”

“I’ll call tonight to say when I’ll be back.”

Cloud looked a little more tensed than he should have been. And Light felt how anxious he really was, even if he did all he could to look tough on the outside.

“Be careful, okay?”

“Always.” he answered her with a smile.

They didn’t have a lot to say, since this kind of scene had happened a lot of time. He walked out and she shut her computer off to get ready for her focus of the day. She had to hurry up and find Katzroy. And find out what he’d done to earn such a condemnation that quickly. In the silent of this early morning, she heard Cloud’s motorbike starting up. The motor gave one loud growl before to go silent. He was maybe a soldier and all, but the army still hadn’t broken his style and tastes.

I should hurry up and meet with Squall. If the bosses want us to get rid of Katzroy, there must be a reason, she thought.

…

Squall was woken up a few moments later by loud bangs on his door. For one minute, he thought that was Rinoa, but she would never hit the front door that hard. Then, Lightning called his name and he knew that last night wasn’t a dream or a nightmare. It had been real. And it still was. He groaned and turned around in his bed. Then, he felt it. Something else than Rinoa being gone was wrong here. He swiftly got up, still dressed in last night’s clothes. It was six in the morning and the sun was already out in the sky and his rays were strong. But that was usual. No, there was something else in the air.

A scent that wasn’t here yesterday. There was an animal here. And something else. A man? Squall had quite accurate senses and he carefully stepped into his living room. But that was without taking account of Lightning’s impatience. She used her own keys and opened the entrance door to enter the apartment. Squall had had to give her a copy of his keys once during a mission and she had kept it in case she would need to come to his place suddenly. They were friends after all. It had happened that once or twice, she suddenly arrived here and stayed a whole night. The first time, they’d listen to movies all night, like little kids, but the second time, she was kinda interrupting something… But this morning, Squall was glad that she still had her keys to get in here. That meant that the door hadn’t been forced open by the intruder he felt. But still, someone was here, someone familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Before that he could think of what to do, Lightning was in front of him, looking utterly frustrated.

“Did you read our last focus mail?!”

“I don’t think that I did.” Squall said on a lower tone than his partner.
“Of course he didn’t read it, but I did!” a strong voice said.

They both turned around to be met by Sazh Katzroy’s guns aiming for both of them.

“I know that the bosses changed the condition and want me dead. But that’s not happening. And you’re gonna help me clearing my name.” he said.

“What?!” the two agents replied.

“Listen, kids, we’re friends, right? But what choice do I have now? The Black Faction’s guys want me executed without questions. The Feds got my son.” he added, his voice almost shattering at the end of his sentence.

“If you stopped pointing a gun at me, I would consider listening to your story.” Lightning warned him.

Squall shook his head. He had always been surprised by the importance Sazh was giving to his only son. But he liked that about that guy. Maybe was that why he believed his story before that Lightning does. Maybe was it solely because Squall never had a father of his own…

“I’m sorry about that, but I thought I had to find you both before you did find me.”

“You sure save us some trouble, but I guess you’re aiming to bring us in even greater trouble.” Squall said.

Sazh lowered his guns and smiled.

“Well, I haven’t betrayed Black Faction yet, but I’ll need help to get a chance not to become a real traitor. If you’d give me just a few minutes to explain myself…”

“I wanted to know the whole story anyway.” Lightning interrupted him.

A moment later, they were all sitting in Squall’s kitchen, around three coffees and Bokko was running on the table, to stop before Sazh’s coffee and smell it curiously, before to venture to Lightning and try to pull on some of her locks.

“Five days ago, I received a letter with no expeditor’s name on it. I thought it was suspicious and wanted it to be analyzed, but Dajh opened it before that I could call headquarters…”

“So, what was the letter saying?” Lightning asked.

“Nothing. There was only a little chip in it and a mic. They wanted to make sure I had got in contact with their first attempt. To check if I was a bit careless, I guess.”

“They should just have checked your record to know about it.” Squall whispered.

Agent Trauma was a really good element, but he was a bit clumsy every now and then, and that was a well-known fact between all the people that had worked with him.

“Well, they soon discovered there was a good way of having me in their pocket. They kidnapped Dajh in the middle of the night. I was shot with a sleeping drug and couldn’t do anything… The poor kid is still in their hands, and I have until one in the afternoon, today, to tell the Feds all that I know about Black Faction.”

“And if you can really crack all our computers just like that…” Lightning said before to snap with two fingers. “Then, you must know way too much for Black Faction’s safety.”
“I’m sorry to say it, but I don’t really know that much. One of my friends was killed because he knew too much and I never forget that lesson.”

They all felt silent for a while, looking at each other before to look at the chocobo chick that was now playing with Squall’s coat’s fur.

“So, basically, you want us to help you find where they’re hiding Dajh, and to get him back before the H hour?”

“That really sums it up Lightning. You think that you’re up to it?”

Squall raised his eyes to the ceiling, unable to believe it. They were plotting some kind of rebellion plan against the Feds? Those were the stronger people on Earth after the Black Faction. And their ways were even worse. They preferred assassination to spying most of the time and anyone that could be seen as a “problem” for them was to be eliminated in any fitting way. They were the new genre of Earth’s good old mafia. And one of their top dogs was none other than Seifer…

“Alright, Sazh. Do you know who you’re talking with?”

“Two kids.” the man replied.

Lightning looked furious, but Squall just chuckled. This was really like Sazh.

“Let’s think about Dajh’s safety first here, Light. Sazh would never lie over something touching the little guy. And if we can be of help in saving two lives, I don’t see a problem in that.”

“You’re right and that was exactly my state of mind. But I won’t have you treating me as a little kid!” she added, pointing one finger in Sazh’s direction.

“I don’t have time to change my ways, Light. All that I want is to know that my little boy is safe.”

She sighed as he said that. She could understand him, quite much more than he thought that she could. But this wasn’t the time to mourn anymore. They had to act!

“You’re looking for the Feds and a place where they keep prisoner? I’ve been caught by them once and we freed one of their hostages last month. There’re only two possibilities. Dajh could be right here in Boston. Or he could be on the Moon base.”

Squall was almost certain that the Moon base was out of option, both for them and the Feds. It was still too far, even in the latest rocket ever invented.

“Let’s hope he’s in Boston.” Lightning added, completing the thought of both her companions.

Bokko kweeed impatiently and went back to Sazh, as if he’d been waiting for them to get to a decision. Lightning was still hesitating a little, but Squall finished his coffee and got up and she followed.

“There’s no time to lose then. Let’s go!”

…

Yuna couldn’t believe it! The Strife’s squad’s quarters were a real mess and she was the one supposed to clean it up?!

“Just my luck…” she sighed as she managed to open the entrance door which was blocked by soldiers’ boots, guns and a few beer bottles.
Cloud sure knew how to fight and hide on a battlefield, but he wasn’t checking his quarters or the order inside of them a lot. As long as his men could have fun when they were at their base, he didn’t mind what his own quarters looked like. Anyway, he had a civil apartment, so, he didn’t really use his soldier’s room.

“Lieutenant Strife really should do something about his men’s behavior. Each time I come here, it’s to face a disaster.” she thought out aloud.

The tables and chair had been pushed in a corner and were covered with food and liquid remains that gave Yuna a stomachache just by looking at them. She managed to sweep the floor with her broom and pushed the biggest trashes, like a broken camera and a slip(!) in a corner of the room, near of the trash can. Then, she started washing the floor. And as the second janitor of the Boston American Branch, she had to wash the floor as a punished soldier would have to. On her knees. But Yuna was a bit rebellious in her style and she had recently bought the latest model of washing slippers. She just had to skate through the room, with her feather duster in her hands to clean everything in an hour instead of two. As she attacked the table and started fighting with the dried spots of liquid that smelled just as beer, she found a radio under one of the chairs. She turned it on, deciding she had a right to hear some music.

A pretty old song, which she liked a lot, was the first track of the disk in the radio and she put it on repeat, humming the melody as she continued to work. Cloud arrived then, surprised to hear music coming from his squad’s quarters. He was just back from his encounter with the top-general of the medical branch, a weird guy a bit rough on the edges named Cid. It was doctor Cid and the guy always talked to himself, but still, he had incredible news for Cloud.

“You’re one of our top soldiers and we decided to give you a promotion. From now on, you’ll be colonel Strife and the official leader of Squad 8, our medical protection team. We’ll need you to train some of our newcomers, as the backup soldiers. Oh, and you should get ready for your next mission, which will take place on Pluto.”

A miners’ team has been attacked by indigenes and they needed rescue. Cloud didn’t like traveling from a planet to another a lot, but it wasn’t as if he had any choice. Still, he wanted to check things a little, since he hadn’t been to headquarters for a week or two. He heard that Barret and Yuffie had made a party with the rest of the squad and he had to make sure his things were still in one piece. Most of his equipment was in his quarter after all.

Yuna was still singing with the singer and she skated a little slower as she carried the table back to its place and put the books back in the shelves and threw the empty beer bottle in the trash can. Cloud entered the room, the music filling his ears, his eyes slightly widening with surprise. The young girl swirled around, playing with her feather duster. Her brown hair was a bit untidy and really short. She was wearing a boiler suit, opened on her black tank top. The soldier had seen her once or twice in the building. She was one of the janitor’s aids and a back up soldier. Quite a cute one, not to say the least. He carefully stepped inside, smiling at the music she was listening too.

“It’s you and me…

Let me play the lead role in your wildest dream…

So baby, tell me what’s your fantasies?”

Yuna was playing as a little girl, dreaming in the back of her head about the guy that could be singing this song to her. Cloud managed to stay out of her view, to let her continue her kinda skate-dance, staring at her all the while. He had seen her before, but never like that. She looked so far, so full of life and joyful at the same time…
“I’m talking about candle lights dinners, trips around the world. There’s nothing I wouldn’t give her, if she was my girl…”

She sighed, obviously sad that there wasn’t a guy on earth that could call her his girl. Or maybe was it something else. She turned around and Cloud moved quickly to stay behind her. He really liked the way she moved and was afraid she would stop if she’d realize she was observed. She emptied the garbage in her janitor’s tray, before to switch her washing slippers for wet one, so that she would be able to rinse the floor.

“I’ll show you things you’ll never believe. Let me be your fantasy, yeah… I know you’ll dream of me. Every time you fall asleep.”

Yuna started to sing again, repeating the words, especially, “let me be your fantasy” and Cloud was mesmerized by her voice. It was so small and pure. There was strength too and boldness in the way she sang. She closed her eyes, and turned around again, facing Cloud. Damn it, he couldn’t take his eyes off of her! The way her hips moved, and that boyish suit over her woman curves… If he wasn’t awake a moment ago while he talked with Doctor Cid, now, he certainly was! This wasn’t every day that a pretty woman like this was dancing in your squad’s quarters! As she turned a little too abruptly, she slipped and began to fall. Cloud ran on the wet floor, never losing his balance and caught her in the middle of her fall, with the song going on behind him.

“Let me be your fantasy…”

It was at this very moment that Yuna opened her eyes, startled by the arms that suddenly were around her and had prevented her from falling. For the first time, Cloud was met by her blue and green iris and he was surprised that such a disparity made her look even prettier.

“You should try to be more careful.” he warned her.

There was a faint smirk on his face and Yuna was astonished to find herself in such a position, almost sitting in the lieutenant Strife’s arms, his face right next to her, only a few breaths away from hers. His mako blue eyes were like pools in which she wanted to drown. The way he looked at her… He was amused and it was rare that this guy ever looked amused. But she felt her cheeks burning with the blush growing on them. What a fool she was to forget where she was to go in her own little world like that!

“I… Have you been here for a long time?” she asked shyly.

“Only a few minutes.” he whispered in response.

Cloud was surprised by how warm she felt. Her lips had parted a little as she seemed lost in her contemplation of him. She was trying to understand how he could have entered the room without her noticing. For a back-up soldier, she was a bit careless. He held her a little closer, questioning himself. When was it the last time he had held a woman to him like this? When had he been with a girl that wasn’t his sister or his co-worker for the last time? He’d been so busy lately with missions and all…

“I’m really sorry!” she suddenly exclaimed, jumping on her feet and out of his arms.

She almost slipped once more, but managed to keep her balance this time and Cloud just stood up, still smirking. Yuna was a bit scared. She hadn’t met that man a lot, but she’d heard all kind of rumors over him. He was one hell of a fighter and a great soldier. A murderer some would says, but he was on the medical team and all he took were protection mission. He was never out in the front lines. All he did was trying to fix things up during and after wars, or crises. And Tifa had told...
her how sexy he looked, but she’d never guess his uniform would fit him that well. And from up
close, smelling the scent of his after shave…. Was it really after shave? It smelled good, no matter
what it was…

“Hey, it’s okay, your job’s to clean and you were cleaning.” Cloud tried to encourage her.

He wasn’t too addicted to punishing soldiers and he’d sure hated the idea of putting that girl in
trouble.

“Well… I guess I’m done with the main room.” Yuna said, looking the other way and hurrying
herself to shut off the radio.

For some reason, it didn’t felt right to still hear *Fantasy* playing as she was talking to Cloud. This
guy was so perfect all the time, he fit in most girls’ fantasies way too much. And Yuna
remembered some things Tifa had told her about how Cloud was given certain situations. And she
blushed even more remembering that. Once upon a time, lieutenant Strife had been Tifa’s
boyfriend and even if it was over and they were only friends now, the young woman still had
incredible memories of the passion that blond man could show under his cold looks and stares.
And as he smirked, Yuna couldn’t help but think about Tifa’s confidences and it felt so wrong to
stand before him, while seeing such pictures running through her mind!

“If you’ll excuse me lieutenant, oh, pardon me, *colonel* Strife, I gotta clean all of the rooms!”

She rushed to the first room and almost locked herself in it to escape his eyes and smirk that make
him look way too sexy with the thoughts she couldn’t help but have in mind. She was surprised to
see a gun pointed at her as she look to the “room” she had chosen to hide.

Vincent Valentine was the eighth squad’s sniper, and one of the best guns of all the American
Branch. He was coming from a European branch of the army, but anyway, the fact was that he
didn’t look too happy with the intrusion. Which explained the gun aiming at her… Yuna quickly
scanned her option, slowly raising her hands over her head, still clutching to her feather duster.
Vincent was sitting on his bed, half if not entirely naked –thankfully, the covers were hiding the
essential-, but a girl was lying next to him, turning her back to the young cleaner and snoring
gently. Looking at the floor, Yuna recognized Yuffie’s tight shorts and understood finally what
was going on here. She looked back at Vincent, who was now removing the safety of his gun,
ready to pull the trigger.

“I haven’t seen anything!” Yuna yelled before to turn back and rushed out of the room. She almost
ran into Cloud, who was still standing in the middle of the room, looking a bit puzzled by her
attitude.

“What was that just now?” he curiously asked.

“It was no… nothing sir. I’ve just remembered I’d already cleaned this room!”

With that, Yuna quickly switched her washing slippers for real shoes and locked herself in another
room, which was empty, thankfully. Cloud didn’t know her well, but her ways were quite
entertaining. And she was cute! He couldn’t help but laugh and Yuna felt like a real moron, before
to hear the door unlocking behind her and be surprised by none other than colonel Cloud himself.

“Sorry to follow you like that, but I came to get something from my room, and it happens to be this
one.” he apologized.

*I didn’t know he was so polite*, she thought raising her feather duster to shield her body from his
Well, she did it unconsciously, and Cloud didn’t realize that he scared her at first. He only thought that she was shy and quickly took the book he’d come to get off the only shelf of the room. He was about to get out when he turned around and asked Yuna, who hadn’t move from an inch:

“Am I scary or are you always like that?”

“What?! No, you’re not scary, I just feel bad for… being surprised cleaning like this, with the music and the skate moves. I’m not supposed to clean like this.”

“You mean, to have fun in cleaning, huh?”

She stared at her feet, her cheeks still red as cherries.

“What’s your name already?”

“It’s Yuna. Yuna Al Bhed, colonel, sir!” she added, looking up and raising a hand to bring her to her head, doing the military salute.

“At ease, Yuna. As long as the job gets done, I don’t mind if you have fun doing it.”

He gave her another smirk, which made her feel all warmed-up inside, but then he was gone without another word and the door closed behind him. Yuna couldn’t believe that she’d been acting like that before him, as a poor teenage girl! But she’d been so surprised and she was so sure he was going to send her to the major office. Major Jetch didn’t really like her to begin with and was always happy to have a reason to send her back to the trainee camp, where she would suffer the orders and training of Seymour for hours, Seymour that most called the slavery-maniac trainer!

“Well, Yuna, make an adult of yourself and get to work!” she tried to cheer herself.

But started dusting off everything, opening the only window to get some fresh air inside. And as she did, she tried to forget the picture of Vincent Valentine and Yuffie Kirasagi lying in the same bed. She was a bit jealous, even if she knew that having a relationship with a fellow soldier was dangerous, especially if he was your superior. As a back-up soldier, she wasn’t supposed to count in those laws and she didn’t really have time for love stories… She misses having no one that cared for her, except her best friend, Rikku, but she thought most of the time that she had her whole life before her for love.

Anyway, she was working as a janitor for the army to get money for her studies and she hoped that someday she would get her engineer’s diploma and become the first woman to create an airship of her own. With this kind of plan, she hadn’t time for love. Was it why she was so easily fluttered? Or was it because of the music she listened to? Or because it was lieutenant… nah, colonel Strife? He was attractive. And the fact that for once, he talked to her really sent her emotions off the scale. This wasn’t good.

“I don’t have time for that.” she thought out loud.

As she dusted the room with all her might, a book fell off the shelf behind her and made her jump. When she turned around, she was surprised to see that it was an album. She took it and the book opened between her hands and she couldn’t help but look. And she saw Cloud, in civil clothes, sitting with a girl hanging to each of his arms. One of the two girls really looked like him and they looked so happy together. Like a family. And Yuna wished for just one second that she could see this side of that man that was usually so cold and distant with everyone. Then, she pushed that fantasy out of her mind.
She had been lost in the clouds for too long. She shook her head, not believing how the words could get so confusing. But his name was Cloud. And as she think about him, she felt a little hole inside of her chest. Maybe was it only a little girl fantasy, but she could have sworn her heart was torn up by a surprising feeling. As if something would go wrong for that man. Or a premonition that she was bound to see him again. And she was scared that she could act just as shyly as she just did now.

“This is so irrational, Yuna. Get back to earth.”

But the hole was still there. And when Cloud had smirked at her, it had felt whole for a second. A mere second…

…

It had taken one hour for Lightning to localize the place where the Feds usually kept their prisoners and hostages in Boston. They changed it a lot, but they always did the same thing in the end, because, it was easier for them and this trick had failed them only once. They were installed in the neighborhood of the old Harvard University, which was progressively turned into Shinra’s Academy. The Feds liked to send their future agents in the spy school to know about the ways of the Black Faction. Fortunately, most of the double agents were spotted right at their entrance exam and expelled.

Lightning thought that she should really focus on the task at hand instead of letting her mind drifting like this. Squall was driving, Sazh was sitting in the back, checking his chargers and making sure that his guns were correctly charged and wouldn’t jam in the middle of a shot. She had her retractable blade and her pocket knife with her and was looking at the streets, trying not to think about her teenage years she spent here with Reno, Vanille, Rinoa, Tifa, Rude, Al-cid, Sephiroth, Tidus, Rikku and Gippal. There were a lot of memories on these streets. And she remembered Noctis too. That last mission with him that had gotten her captured right here and gotten him tortured to death… Still, she couldn’t accept his fail in rescuing or protecting her. They were among the only that knew why, except from Cloud and Squall. But still. She had believed in Noctis with all her heart and soul and he had proven himself unworthy of that trust.

“He got only what he deserved.” she whispered, thinking to herself.

“Say, Light, are you with us or not?” Squall asked her, a bit preoccupied.

She jumped a little, taken aback. She had just thought that she shouldn’t let her mind drift away, but still, there she goes. The nightmare from last night wasn’t helping one bit…

“Sorry, I’m a little… I’m here, okay, I just got a lot of things on my mind.”

Squall shook his head and she realized that he didn’t look too good himself.

“Say, what’s been going on in your life lately, Squall? We’ve been so busy that I hadn’t gotten any news from you recently.”

“Oh well, nothing much. Rinoa’s dumped me and it’s about all.” he coldly replied.

Lightning was shocked by the news. And even more by the ton he have when he said Rinoa’s name. He was really angry. And she could understand why. It was so sudden! The last day, Rinoa had told her for the nth time that she couldn’t think of a fitting present for their couple anniversary that was coming soon. And now, she decided to break up with Squall?! Lightning couldn’t believe it and started to hate Rinoa. No one, not even a nice girl, had the right to hurt her friends!
“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

“You’re my friend Light, not my therapist. And anyway, it happened just yesterday, so I don’t want to talk about it. Especially not now.”

She understood and accepted. But she knew that they would have to talk later. She wasn’t a big talker usually, but she had gotten used to the idea that talking could help people, even herself.

It was then that Squall parked the car in a back alley and Lightning realized they were in the place where everything had gone wrong in her life, two years ago.

“You know Light, if you don’t feel up to it…” Squall started, not looking at her, knowing just too well that she would just glare back.

She got out of the car, taking one of her gun out and just gave one glare at Squall from over her shoulder.

“I’m not lingering on the past and don’t you ever suppose again that I’m scared of being here.”

Her voice was harsh and Squall couldn’t help but smile. She never barked like that against any other agents. Usually, she wouldn’t even talk to people. Some words were sometimes better left unspoken. He hurried after her, looking around just once to check the area. The air was burning hot and they were all sweating under the heavy temperature. It was certainly more than 40 degree Celsius under the shadows of the buildings. The bricks were burning through Lightning’s gloves as she took a deep breath, one hand on the wall, stopped next to the back entrance of the building. She remembered how Noctis had rushed out of here, carrying her in his arms at that time. They were both half death and it had felt as if they were letting hell itself behind them. But the whole earth was becoming hell now.

And Noctis had collapsed before to find any shelter for both of them, exhausted to death. She remembered how worried she was and how hurt. There were still traces of blood on the ground. It certainly wasn’t her or his blood, but Lightning couldn’t help but remember. She shivered despite the hotness of the air and Squall joined her, on the other side of the room. Sazh looked a little confused under the big coat he was wearing to hide his face and features; and he was already looking for his breath. It was hard to stand the heat.

“At three, we enter.” Squall said. “There’ll be two corridors. I’ll take the left and you’ll go on the right.”

His voice was a mere whisper and Lightning nodded in agreement. She wanted to get done with this as fast as possible. Even with all that she could say, she didn’t really like the idea of staying here for too long…

She opened the door herself, unlocking it with a small rod of metal. There was a click and the door squeaked as it turned open. They walked inside without a sound. Lightning wasn’t sure if Squall would be alright alone, but she could understand that he was sending her with Sazh. They had to make sure the man wasn’t going to do anything foolish. And at the same time, it seemed that Squall wanted to be sure that someone would keep Lightning in check. As for him, well, he had borrowed Sazh’s chocobo. So at least, he wasn’t entirely alone. With what she’d just learn from Squall, letting him go like that was maybe a mistake. But they had to split; there was no other way to get a good look at every place in this building at the same time.

“This was once a hospital.” Lightning whispered.
Sazh followed her in the right hall, aware of everything around him. The stench of antiseptic and cleaning products was almost too strong to bear. They stepped carefully in the dark corridor, staying in the shadows. All the curtains were down and it was clear that this part of the building wasn’t in use anymore. Lightning had her gun raised and ready to shot. They searched quickly through the few rooms, to find only the remnants of operation tools and furniture. They even met some corpses lying here and there, but they both ignored them. The Feds had always used this place to conduct the weirdest experiments. And they liked to keep prisoners here. It was quite useful every now and then. Lightning knew just how hard it was to escape this place.

“Could they really have brought my Dajh here?” Sazh asked her after they turned the nth corner of that stupid corridor which seemed never ending.

“We’ll soon see.” Lightning replied.

They went through a few stairs, up and down to the cells quarters. It once served for the craziest of the patients of this hospital. It was now a real prison. But, much to Lightning’s surprise, she soon realized that all of the dark cells were empty. The floor was covered with cracks and a few rats ran past her as she turned around, trying to understand what was different from the last time. She couldn’t be wrong, could she? If she was, than a little boy would die! And his father was right next to her and started to look a little more anxious than he already was.

“Say Light, maybe we took a wrong turn. It seems that the whole place is abandoned since some time.”

“But it can’t be. We rescued someone here just…”

She stopped death in the middle of her track. A new scent was filling the air. Another man than Sazh was here. And he was armed.

“Get cover!” she ordered Sazh.

Gunshots followed instantly. Sazh had took shelter in one of the abandoned cell and she was in the other one, on the other side of the corridor. As the cells were all inside the walls, their attacker would have to advance to reach them. But they wouldn’t give him any time to do it. They shoot before to look at him. The bullets filled his flesh, ripping his clothes. He fall to the ground and Lightning jumped out of the cell, to quickly scan the area from where he was coming. There were noises and yells.

“He’s not alone and his friends are coming for us.” Sazh understood.

“Dajh isn’t in this part of the building. We could try to get higher, but there never was any cell in the other parts. If Squall doesn’t have more luck than us…”

“I know it too well, but we don’t have time to chat about it, they’re coming down and the two of us won’t be enough to stop them.”

Lightning breathed deeply before to turn to the stairs going down.

“You’re right. But I won’t give up now.”

“Me neither.”

Lightning asked herself for a second if her father would have been like that if she had been the one being held hostage and if he had still been alive. At least, Cloud would be the same. But she couldn’t know for her dad and it kinda sadden her. But at that moment, she couldn’t understand her
feeling. All that she knew was she had to run. And fast. Otherwise, the guys coming would get her. And living until now wouldn’t mean anything then.

...

Squall mostly preferred to do his missions alone. It was always better that way… Well, he didn’t really mind having Lightning around. She didn’t act as a girl like Rinoa or any other woman agent would. She was so boyish sometimes. It was as having a brighter Zell around. Plus, she was less irritating than Zell.

*I hope that we’ll find him soon. Must be hard for the poor kid*, Squall thought.

He hadn’t took out his gun already. There were no signs of life. But, as he walked up the stairs and get himself to the second floor, he discovered that the Feds were still using this building. He smiled inwardly as he spotted Seifer, watching TV in an office. Did Rinoa know what kind of job her new boyfriend was doing? Did she care? The Feds had a far greater salary than any agent for the Black Faction could ever dream of. But their job was even dirtier than what the agent of the Faction did. Squall managed to refrain the urge he felt to go and punch Seifer in the face. There was a kid to save here. He carefully walked around the blond spy’s office and venture further into the building. A few doors and stairways later, the chocobo hidden in his hair –Squall was the only person other than Sazh which had hair that fitted the chick as a nest – the chocobo hidden in his hair kweeed with excitement.

And as Squall took one more step, wishing that no one had heard his little friend, he saw Dajh. The kid was being detained in a new kind of prison. The walls were all made of glass and Squall could see the little boy sitting on the bed of the room as clear as the daylight was. He gazed around, looking for cameras or traps. There didn’t seem to be any.

*I could always rush in and grab the kid and just ran my way out of here*, he thought.

But, Sazh wouldn’t like to discover how foolishly Squall had acted to rescue his son. Before that he got out of the shadows, Squall noticed the robots guarding the entrance of the room. He felt glad for bringing his sword.

*I won’t have a second chance on this. Better do this right on the first try*, he ordered himself.

The chocobo jumped off his head and flew through the corridor, passing just before the robots. One of the machines followed the chick, surprised to see such an anomaly. Where could a living thing that small come from?

*Nice diversion*, Squall smiled for real this time.

He took out his sword –which is a retractable gunblade if you wanna know- and charged the robot left. Dajh raised his eyes surprised and couldn’t help but smile.

“Uncle Squall!” he exclaimed.

The sword hit the steel and pierced through it as Squall tried not to let himself being distracted by the kid. He was sure that he would get him out of here. He just hoped that Lightning and Sazh would be there to see it.

To be continued…
Episode 1 - Soldiers and Spies - Part III

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 4th

Location: Planet Earth, Canada, Ottawa

Focus: Testing our latest weaponry system and mastering radiant powers

Agent: Raven

Permitted delay for focus completion: two weeks

Warning: try not to overexert yourself, we won’t pay anymore hospitalization’s bill for you…

Message from G.I. two. End of transmission.

Noctis woke up suddenly, with Lightning’s yells of pain resounding in his ears. During the last days since he awoke from his coma, he hadn’t any dreams but nightmares. Most of them were including Lightning and it wasn’t really a good thing for his mind’s well being. It seems that all he could do lately was to remember how he had let her down two years ago. How she was lying, unable to move because of the drugs injected in her veins. And the pain in her eyes as she was looking at him and as he was fighting against his own weakness, to be able to help her. Those men touching her as he was bleeding like a pig, kept against a wall by four metal sticks planted in his arms and legs.

The scientist looking at him and grinning all the while… The pain in his heart was as vivid as it had been. And it hurt a lot. He felt the taste of blood in his mouth and swallowed hard as he looked around him. The floor was cold. And his whole body felt so numb he couldn’t move as much as he wanted to.

“It seems that you’ve fallen from your bed in your sleep. Had a bad dream, maybe?”

“Whoa!”

Noctis had never realized that someone else than him was in the room and as he rolled on his back and tried to sat up, he saw a woman leaning over him, her golden hair falling around her smiling face.

“Hey there, I’m Stella. I’m your personal nurse and your physician!” she explained.

She looked awfully cheerful and Noctis wasn’t sure if he was ready to get in that kind of mood after the dream he had had.

“Hi”, he managed to reply.

“Oh, don’t act like that, you don’t have to be shy. I’ll work with you on your next mission for the Black Faction.”
“What mission?”

She shook her head with a wide smile as she helped him up and pushed him on his bed gently.

“Rufus Shinra wants you to get back to work as soon as possible, so he asked that you get to know your new power. We called them radiant powers. And I must say that I’m quite interested in seeing you developing and mastering those powers.”

She had a strange way to look at him, with a curiosity that wasn’t only professional. She was a scientist, Noctis could at least understand that much, but she kinda made him nervous.

“So, my mission is…”

“To test and learn how to control your powers, basically. Anyway, we won’t get to it before that you’re used to your body again. You’re so stiff, come on, relax a bit, or the blood flow will never get back as it was.”

She forced him to lie down and he discovered that it wasn’t easy to resist, since his body was even more reluctant than usual to obey his orders.

“I feel so numb…” he whispered, furrowing his eyebrows.

“I injected you something to help your muscle getting back into shape. But for now, it will be a little hard to move.”

“Do you have a license or something?” he asked.

“Of course, but your boss was the one that had to look at it. Let’s see.”

Noctis had managed to turn on his side to get a better look at her and his hair had fallen all over his face, hiding his features. She brushed his locks behind his ears a little, and her fingers brushed the sides of his face for a short instant. As he was still thinking of Lightning, the impression made his heart slow down for a second. How he wished Light was still in his life and would still be the one to spoil him like that…

“Keep your eyes wide open, I need to check if everything’s alright,” she said before to take a small flashlight out of her pocket and point it right in his eyes. He winced in protest and pushed her flashlight away.

“You could warn me before to do that.”

“Well, that’s exactly what I’d done, but it seems you weren’t listening. Open your mouth now.”

“What does I need any examination?”

She smiled in response and took his chin in her hand to make him move his head from one side to the other, and then up and down, so that she could check all of his face. Then, she sat on his bed and forced him to lie on his back, grabbing his shirt with one hand.

“Do you mind if I take this off for you, I’ll check your pressure and heartbeat, okay?”

“I…”

_I can’t even fight back to stop her from doing it, why is she even asking?!_ he thought.

He gasped as the cold metal from her stethoscope touched his chest. She gave him a quick look.
with an excuse in her big blue eyes, before to get back to her check-up. And Noctis couldn’t help
but feeling a little too vulnerable. As she leaned over him, her hair brushed against his skin. And he
wished for a second she was his Lightning. Then, she started telling him what kind of exercises he
had to do to get back in shape. And he wished she would just go away and let him in peace for a
while. Of course, he wanted to be back on his feet and all, but it was so hard to retake life in with
all his past in account and thinking of what he had lost in the last two years.

“You know, Raven, it seems you’ve been pretty hard with yourself during the last years. You got
so many scars…”

“Well, I’ve been pretty reckless in most of my missions.” He admitted. “But that’s just how I am.”

And for a second, he wished that he would think a little more instead of just reacting. If he had,
maybe that Lightning would still be his girl. Then, he shook his head, remembering that Lightning
was still alive and not entirely lost, no matter what she said or what he thought. And even if she
was lost forever, he wasn’t and he had to live on and for his own sake, he had to get back some
strength and get back up. At least to show the world that he was still alive and to catch back
everything that he had missed during the last two years.

“Talking of that, you said that it would take me about a month to get back to my feet?”

“And to your good old shape, yeah, about a month, if you follow every rule and do as you’re told
by your doctors.”

“Can I do it in two weeks?” he asked.

“What?!"

“I’ve already lost two years. Isn’t there any quicker way to get back to myself? I mean, I already
think and talk as I always did. I can already walk, well, at least my arms are responding well, and
my legs shall soon follow. So should I really wait for a whole more month? I need to go out, to see
people that I know. Like friends. I don’t even know if they think that I’m that dead or just don’t
care anymore.”

Stella seemed pretty touched by this comment and smiled shyly to him.

“Well, if you respond well enough to the treatment, maybe we could shape you back up in just a
few weeks. But it’ll be hard.” she warned him.

“You don’t know what’s hard…” he replied.

And Stella had nothing to answer him; since she could see just how hard life had been with him by
looking at the scars on his chest. And she could guess that those weren’t his only scar. But he gave
her a sly smile and she understood that he wasn’t the type to mope for too long on something. And
she was glad to have a patient that wanted to heal fast for once.

…

Squall’s blade went through the steel, almost getting him electrified by the energy going through
the arms and pieces he was ripping off the robot’s body. The other robot turned around, but he was
in another corridor and Squall had already opened the door to Dajh and taking the little boy’s hand
in his.

“Wow, uncle Squall, I never thought that you came to my rescue. Is daddy with you?” the kid
asked his savior, looking around for Sazh.
“Yeah. But we have to get out before to meet him.”

The agent was a bit worried. What was he going to tell the little boy if something was to happen to his dad? He kept his blade in one hand, letting the broken robot behind him. He wanted to run, to grab the kid under his arm and jump out of a window to be out as soon as possible. But things weren’t going to be this easy and that was exactly why he was so nervous.

The chocobo chick flew back to them, as Squall was leading Dajh through the hallways and stairs. The young boy refrained a shout of glee as he saw Bokko flying in front him and kweeing with joy in return to the child’s smile.

“Shhh… We’re trying to sneak out.” Dajh whispered to the chick.

Squall rolled his eyes. Did Sahz’s son had any idea what sneaking out meant?!

“Hey there, going out?” A cool voice asked them from behind.

Dajh instantly coiled over himself, hiding the chocobo chick in his hands. Squall turned around, furrowing his eyebrows. He had already recognized that man voice, but he had to look at him to be sure that it was really him who dare to prevent him from taking the poor little boy to his father.

Seifer was standing tall in front of him as the brown haired man stopped to move. The blond had this cocky smile on his face and Squall felt anger and hatred filling up his heart. He still had enough brain to think about hiding Dajh and gently forced the boy to stay behind him, so that he would at least be protected from Seifer.

“This is a precious little guy you got there, man. I was ordered to take care of him about now if his father didn’t show up. And it seems that Trauma-guy is trying to outsmart us using some of his old friend…”

“I don’t have time to waist with you Seifer.” Squall replied, removing the surety of his gunblade and aiming for the Fed’s head.

“You won’t shoot at me in front of a little kid, now, Squall, would you dare to traumatize the poor thing? Rinoa would be outraged…”

That almost was enough to make Squall shoot at him right away. Hearing Rinoa’s name in the mouth of this filthy bastard was more than he thought he could take. But in a sence, Seifer was right. Dajh was still only a little boy. He didn’t deserve to see someone being killed before his very eyes.

“Don’t go and play with my nerves, Seifer.” he growled in response.

“I’m not here to play, man. Unless Trauma-guy spits out all his knowledge of the Faction, the boy is to be killed. As for you, I’d be glad to show you a thing or two about fighting. But that can wait.”

He had a gunblade too, held high, the blade pointing right at Squall’s heart. And he smiled deviously.

“So, what will it be, Squall? Even if you try to die in protecting the kid, he’ll end up dying unless his dad shows up and you know it.”

Squall was utterly pissed. And he decided that there was only one way to settle this. And it wasn’t by giving up on the kid.
“Dajh, I want you to run in that direction at the first gunshot, you hear me. And don’t you turn back.”

“Okay, uncle Squall.” the little whispered back, still hiding his chocobo in his hands.

…

Lightning jumped a couple of steps from the stairway, followed closely by Sazh. She was mad with herself for getting them both in such a situation. She was mad at the Feds and wanted to turn back and kill any of the men that would try and attack them, as payback for the suffering they had put her through two years ago. But she knew that Noctis and Cloud had already killed every man that had tortured her. They both had a tendency of being overprotective with her…

“Do we have a way to contact Squall?” Sazh asked her.

“Yeah, but I can’t know for sure that I won’t put him in trouble by calling him. He could be in the middle of a fight, or trying to sneak past someone.”

“I thought I told him to always put his cell on vibration mode not to face this kind of…”

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t really tend to keep his cell on him much. He hates it that people can reach him wherever he is.” Lightning replied.

She jumped over another bunch of stairs and steadied herself, breathing in quickly. Sweat was running down her forehead and cheeks and she hated the feeling growing in her chest. The men chasing after them were still pretty far, but an impression of emergency was rushing her. It was almost one o’clock, Sazh’s deadline for spitting out what he knew. And she didn’t know for sure that Squall had found the kid.

A moment later, she was forced to admit that Squall never had failed any of his missions and wasn’t going to start today. As she took another turn after a bundle of stairs, she was met by the vision of her partner shooting one bullet at his enemy’s feet before to leap forth and force Seifer into a fight. Their sword clashed together as Dajh’s face was illuminated by the sight of his father, who had lost the coat hiding his face in the middle of his run.

“Daddy!”

Before that the kid could even start to run, his dad’s arms were around him and clutching him into a bear hug like Lightning had rarely seen. But she was worried for Squall now. So, instead of staying behind and securing this happy family reunion, she rushed to her friend, who was still fighting against his archrival.

Both agents were jumping back and forth to let their sword do the talking in their stead. Squall was pushed by one of Seifer strongest hits, but he used it as a swing, steadying himself for a second on a wall before to jump back at Seifer. Lightning had to stop before to arrive close enough to them. The corridor was too small for a three persons fight. But for some reason, the young woman knew that they weren’t fighting only because of their jobs or Dajh. And she knew who could be the cause of all this. Rinoa, with only a few doubts… And this could prove a lot more dangerous than an average fight between enemy agents. Squall hadn’t gotten this scar in the middle of his face for nothing. As long as time could remember, those two guys had always been fighting.

The steel clashed and creaked as the swords hit together, drawn out for flesh and blood. Seifer took out his gun while Squall kept his two hands on his gunblade’s hilt. There was a gunshot noise that resounded for what felt like an eternity. And Lightning realized that she wasn’t joining the fight,
not because she couldn’t, but because she was too afraid to fight here. All the bad memories were coming back from this single gunshot and she couldn’t take it. It was too much, way too much at the same time. She tried to concentrate on Squall’s face and shape which was moving so quickly and raising his sword again, to block the bullet coming at him.

Noctis had done that too once, right in this place. It seemed so far.

Squall noticed Lightning and Sazh and yelled at them that they should get out.

“Get out now, before that it’s too late.”

None of them knew why things could too late, but Sazh obeyed, especially since his son was found and back under his protection. He grabbed Lightning by the arm and dragged her back to the stairs. She stopped him in the middle of his run, to yell back at Squall:

“ Aren’t you coming with us?” she called out for her friend.

“Get moving already, I’ll catch back with you later!” Squall ordered her.

He didn’t sound reassuring. On the contrary, it seemed that he was willing to stay there and fight until he wouldn’t be able to anymore. And she understood his feeling. Rinoa had just break up with him. There was no one waiting back home for him now. And that meant one hell of a lot for Squall.

Will he really be coming back? she asked herself.

Lightning still thought about her nightmare from last night as Sazh hurried her down the stairs. He was a little less nervous than a moment ago and carried Dajh in his left arm, keeping one gun up in his right hand. And Lightning remembered how Noctis had just vanished after that new mission he had out in space. In two years, he’d never given any sign of life, not even an e-mail or a call. Alright, she had pushed him away, but she had every rights to!

What are you thinking, Light, get a hold of yourself, she tried to get herself back to the reality.

But she was scared that Squall could be never coming back, just as Noctis. She was scared by the very idea that she could still be missing Noctis even now. It was all crazy, to dwell on all that after all this time, but her nightmare was too fresh in her memory, especially when she found herself in this place. The gunshots multiplied and there were yells and Dajh shout with fear this time, grabbing to his dad with all his strength.

Why was Squall staying behind? Why was he risking his life when he could have been counting on her? Why was she so emotional?!?

As they got out of the building, the upper windows were blown by a strong explosion and they had to roll down on the hot cement to dodge the shattered pieces of glass falling all around them. And Lightning couldn’t help but worry even more. Would Squall really get out of this? Would he, in one piece?!

…

Date: 19 025 A.D. October 5th (otherwise, this took place two years before the storyline)

Location: Planet Earth, America, Boston
It had all begun in the early morning. Lightning was waiting, turning around in the bed, unable to fall asleep. There were a few noises outside, like ambulance’s sirens and police’s cars. She hadn’t seen Noctis out of their work for two whole weeks. And he was coming home, he had promised her that he would. After hours of waiting, she heard the door creaking as he pushed it opened. The noise of his boots kicked in a corner and one heavy sigh as he locked the door behind him. He was certainly tired. He had been chasing Hypellos smugglers all day long. She recognized his voice as he called her name throughout the apartment. She smiled but kept silent. He would come and find her here.

“Lightning?” he called again. “Don’t tell me you’re already asleep…” he groaned as he opened the door to his room.

She was lying on his bed, wearing a pretty short nightgown, her hair undone scattered over her shoulders and she faked to sleep, as he did for her a hundred times. Noctis sighed again, but with relief, because at least, she was there, even if asleep, and he quietly joined her on the mattress, to check if she was really sleeping or not. His scent was already surrounding her, but suddenly, it was everywhere and she couldn’t help but smile. He smelled like an exotic garden, filled with spices and dark flowers. His arms snaked around her body and his lips brushed against her face as he asked her if she was still awake.

“I’ve missed you.” she replied, opening her eyes to be met by his blue gaze.

He kissed her gently on the lips, as she hugged him tight. Their lives were simple at this time. Being together and living through everything else to get back together. They needed nothing else.

“I missed you too, Light. So much…”

He grabbed her head with one hand, kissing her again with more passion this time. And she already knew what he wanted. They had been together for years already, but the alchemy was still running between them, just as the first months. He had a way to touch her, to kiss her… She messed with his hair to get a moan out of him. How she liked to hear him doing that. It was hard to get any time together lately and tonight, they had planned to catch back a few lost occasions of the year. Like those few times when Cloud had interrupted them because he wanted to sleep, or that other time when their boss had called right when they were getting to the good part…

Noctis was kissing her neck now, while his hands were running over her legs, his nails gently stroking her skin. And she who wanted to talk a bit realized that their body would do the talking first. They had been apart for too long. When was it the last time that they’d made love? Six months ago? She undid his shirt, fighting gently with him to know who would win over the other. Which one would really start? Which one would be pushed to his limits first?

He whispered her name. And then the phone rang. They almost immediately stopped, at first to see if the phone would stop to ring, or if one of them would answer. Lightning was breathless and Noctis was sitting on top of her, looking for his own breathe. He looked angry.

“Did you expected someone to call you at… three in the morning?” she asked him, doubtfully.

“No, but we’re not going to answer.” he replied before to start kissing her again.

“But Noctis, what if it was…”

“I haven’t slept at all in the last three days, and it’s the first time we get together for real in months. Even if it was the Black Faction’s director himself, I wouldn’t care,” he said as he resumed undressing her.
Lightning was a bit surprised, but not entirely. Noctis had been having a hard time lately, since dissidents from the people that had killed his parents and expelled him from his birth’s rights had come back in his reality. She didn’t know how many times he had looked at her from up their desk and she’d seen how much he needed her with him during the last weeks. And she needed him too. Especially with him caressing her as he was right now. She fought a short while with his belt, trying to ignore the phone ringing right on the night table. It was quite easy in fact, with Noctis kisses and hands that drove her mad. But then, the person calling start to let her message on the answering machine… And Lightning sat up suddenly, unable to continue like this with this voice in the background.

“Noctis! It’s Rufus!”

“Come on Light, we could just switch the damn thing off and…”

“If agent Raven or Lightning is there, and I know you both are…” said Rufus in the phone.

“Ah, dammit! I thought there weren’t any mics or cameras left!” Noctis growled.

“Mics? Cameras?!” she repeated.

Lightning tried to hide as she imagined herself being filmed like this and seen by her boss, but Noctis pointed towards the kitchen, and she understood they were safe in his room, at least.

“If none of you answer, I’ll shorten both of your salary.”

That seemed convincing enough to refrain Noctis’ desire a bit. Lightning slid under the covers to put a little distance between them, so that he wouldn’t be tempted and grabbed the phone.

“He…hello sir” she said, trying to shut her feelings back to her heart.

But Noctis had got her quite off the scale and her voice sounded a bit warm.

“Is that agent Lightning on the line?” Rufus asked. “What in the world took you so long?”

“I’m sorry sir.” she blurted out, blushing a bit.

Noctis sat on his side of the bed, crossing his arms on his chest and trying to hold back his smile. He could seem a bit rushing for anyone, but he had grown up in the streets of a foreign world, far from earth, before to start fighting against terrorism as an agent for the Black Faction. He was a fallen prince and more a bad guy than a dashing prince, but he still had nice manners and was pretty gentle deep down. He never took anything without sharing. He never gave half of himself to people that he cared about, but all that he could give. And as he stared at Lightning intently, his eyes shine with pride to think that such a woman could be his girl. And Lightning stuttered as she felt the weight of his gaze on her. And she stuttered even more when he came closer to her, to surround her with his arms and resume kissing her neck, gently brushing his nose to her hair and nape.

“Another mission?!”

Noctis winced a little from the high yell of his girlfriend, but he didn’t let her go. His naked torso against her back was really distracting. Not to say that she could fill just how much he was turned on…

“Hang up, Light.” Noctis murmured to her.
“Was it Raven that I heard?” Rufus asked playfully in the phone.

Lightning groaned, a little frustrated by her partner’s childish behavior.

“Wanna talk to him, boss?”

“Oh no, I’m just back from another of his crazy missions!”

But Lightning forced the receiver on his ear and he took it not to hear Rufus’ yells from too close.

“My crazy missions? Those crazy missions given to me by my own boss are the only things keeping you alive, Raven!”

“Hey there, man, calm down. It’s my paycheck that they change, that’s all.”

“I didn’t call you for money. We got a problem.”

Noctis sighed and exchanged a quick look with Lightning. She wasn’t blushing anymore and there was a strange twinkle in her eyes.

_Payback time_, she thought.

“The Feds? Again? I see. Couldn’t this wait any… whoa!”

It seemed that Lightning was going to play the same game as him. And she was a bit more daring than he was…

“Ok, boss, we’ll be there in just a while.” he quickly said, trying to hold back a long moan of pleasure.

“I’ll give you a few minutes, this should be enough.” Rufus joked.

This time, Noctis was pissed.

“We’ll arrive when we’ll arrive.” he replied before to hang up.

Three hours later, after a few breaks and a lot of love, Noctis let himself fall next to Lightning, utterly beat. They waited for a moment in silent, listening to the breathing of each other. After a few minutes, it seemed that he was still looking out for his breath.

“Again.” she whispered.

“Again you say?”

He sounded a bit scared, not feeling up to it.

“Do you feel alright?”

“You’re always taking me so far, it feels as if someday, I won’t be able to get back to reality.”

She smiled shyly.

“Don’t say things like that. It must be the same with every woman.”

“No, it’s not.”

He took her in his arms and she sighed with relief. None of them had settle down with someone for
so long before. They were together since almost two years. Of course, they were still pretty young and anything could happen, but they were sure of their feelings.

“I love you Light, do you know it?”

“I don’t think I’ll ever know for sure. It always feels as the first time you’re telling me.”

“I love you Light.” he repeated, kissing her on the forehead.

And she whispered that she loved him too and it was right. But it was all going to turn so wrong. They had made only two mistakes here. The first was from Lightning, when she answered the phone. The second and the greatest was from Noctis, when he accepted the mission against the Feds. There was no way to know about it before. But that mission was a trap. Even Rufus didn’t know. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have sent his two better agents of that time. (Squall was in another state at that time…)

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 2th (now!)

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston (close to Harvard)

Light came back to herself, rolling on the hot cement, with shattered glass falling around her. She remembered how they had come out of the building. How they were panting on the ground. It was two years ago. And now, the upper part of that hated building was blowing up with Squall inside of it. She covered her face with her arms, to protect herself from the fragments. And she felt tears filling her eyes.

What’s going on with me? What’s wrong? It can’t be only this nightmare, there must be something else… she thought angrily.

She was completely out of it!

After a few minutes, the explosion calmed down and Lightning got up to take a few steps away from the hideout of the Feds, soon followed by Sazh, who was still holding his son in his arms. Both of them looked alright. But what about Squall?

“He said he would catch up with us, but…”

Lightning realized how lost she would be if her friend was to be killed in a mission. She jumped as she heard a gunshot coming from the building, but soon, she widened her eyes at the sight of Squall jumping out from a window and controlling perfectly his fall to roll on the ground and get back on his feet, without even a scratch!

“Oh, I’m gonna kill him!” she thought out loud.

Sazh chuckled.

“Wait until we’re back at the headquarters and after you’ve convinced the bosses not to kill me.”

“What is daddy talking about?” Dajh asked, not too sure of what he had heard.

“Kweee?”

“Oh… Daddy’s joking. Let’s just get out of here.”
Yuna sighed deeply as she sat in the bus. Her day of work for the militia was almost over when Jecht had burst in the room she was cleaning. He had ordered her to get on a mission with the eight Squad, under the orders of colonel Cloud Strife.

“Why me?” she had asked.

“Cid Highwind, the squad’s engineer is in vacation, because his wife’s expecting a baby. We need a technician to do maintenance on the ship that will take them to Pluto and bring them back with the miners. I would have chosen someone else than you if I had a choice, kiddo, but you’re uncle Al-bhed said that you were one of the best. And at least, you have some shapes that could rise up morale in the troops, not like that other girl of the squad…”

Yuna had repressed the urge to slap the guy in the face. He was too high-up in the ranks for her to take such a risk, but she wouldn’t let anyone else talk to her like that. She shivered just at the memory of that instant. Had he forgotten that Tifa was in the squad? Well, she was a nurse, even if she knew how to fight, but still.

“Hey, miss, that’s your stop, aren’t you getting off?” the bus driver asked her.

“Oh, yes, I am, thanks!” she shyly replied, jumping on her feet.

She had to get her things for the trip, and then, she’ll rush back to the HQ to catch the 8 squad’s flight. She was excited, it would be her first trip in space. But she was frustrated too, because she had to cancel her school for a few weeks, if not for months and she would be thrown on a battlefield without the proper training.

“Ah, why me?” she repeated as she ran through the streets to get to her place. People turned their head to look at her running like that. She was always so composed and shy usually.

…

Cloud smirked as he looked at his notes. Cid Highwind’s replacement was a young student, a back-up soldier unused to battle or space.

“I hope nothing bad will happen out there for her.” he thought out loud before to look out by the window next to him.

It was snowing. And for a second, he wished that he could be home for Christmas, at least.

_I should call Lightning before that we took off. She’ll be so mad_, he thought.

To be continued…
Episode 1 - Soldiers and Spies - Part IV

Black Faction

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part IV

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 2th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Hour: 10 h37 15 sec.

Notice: You got one message from … your brother. Call made at 16h02 21 sec.

“Beep.”

“Hi, Light, it’s Cloud. I hope everything’s going fine on your side. Finally, I got myself a new mission. I’m sent on Pluto with the whole squad. A rescue mission… I should be back in a few weeks, with some luck. I hope we’ll be all back for Christmas. Until my return, just try not to do anything rash, okay? Take care, sis. I… gotta leave, we’re taking off. Bye.”

“End of your messages.”

Lightning sighed as she closed her phone. Cloud was out in the space and she wouldn’t see him before weeks or even months. Just thinking about it, she felt lonely already. She looked at Squall, who was simply staring at the wall before them. Sazh was meeting with their bosses to get things explained on “his” case. And that meant that they had to wait until that Rufus Shinra would have decided that their Focus was completed or not. Then, they would have to fill a report. And get on onto the next case.

“Hey, Squall…” she started.

He didn’t even flinch at his name, but jumped when Lightning’s phone rang suddenly. She sighed and turned it on to answer. There wasn’t a lot of people that did call her, so this could be just as important as Squall’s problem.

“Hi, Lightning speaking.”

“Claire, I’m so glad I finally got you! I called home again and again and neither Cloud or you were there to answer!”

“Serah!”

Lightning hadn’t talk to her younger sister for weeks! They weren’t getting along as well as before, not ever since Serah had started dating Snow…

“I got good news for you, Light, you won’t believe me! Are you sitting down right now?”

“Huh, yes. Why should I…”

Squall raised his head, furrowing his eyebrows. Lightning’s voice was a little weird. Usually, she would go so motherly when talking to her sister.

“You know, Snow and I have been together since a year and a few months now. And you’ll never
“guess what’s happening to us!”

“Just tell me, Serah!”

Lightning was tensed now. Squall readied himself. She could blow up at any time now.

“I’m pregnant!”

Lightning almost dropped the phone. That was way more than she could take. Serah, her Serah, pregnant? The sister that was almost a daughter for her, going to be a mother… When she had lost her own chance of having a real daughter?! Her eyes lighted up with furry. Squall was now sitting straightly next to her. A few minutes went by, while Light just tried to take it in.

“Hey Light, are you okay?” Serah asked her.

“Yeah, yeah.” she lied. “It’s just, so unexpected.” she managed to blurt out.

“I was really surprised too. But Snow’s so happy. And… and I thought that you and Cloud would be too…”

Serah sounded sad now. Her sister wasn’t approving what happened in her life. And Lightning realized what she had just done. How selfish could she be?! Serah counted on her. Her opinion was important for her.

“I never thought it would come that soon. But I’m happy for you, Serah. The family’s growing up. It’s wonderful!”

“You really think so? I’m happy myself, but I’m a little scared too.”

Lightning felt her heart sinking in her chest. She had felt the very same thing. And she wished from the bottom of her heart that nothing bad would happen to Serah’s baby.

“It’s normal, Serah, it’s your first time having a baby. Everything’s new. How many months has it been already?”

“Two months and a half.”

Lightning smiled and Squall relaxed a bit. It was alright. But soon, he felt Light’s hand on his fingers, trying to grab his own hand. And as he looked back at her, he saw that she was slightly trembling. He let her took his hand and held her palm gently. This was comforting for him too.

“You’re going to be alright, Serah. And Cloud and I will both help you if you need anything.”

“I’m not calling for your help, you got a lot of work already I wanna know if you want to be the aunt of my baby and if we’ll see each other more often…”

“I… It’s very nice to ask it. I’ll be glad to see you and the baby, of course! But maybe, it will take some time. With my work, I wouldn’t want to put you in danger.”

“Oh, come one, Lightning, don’t say things like that! You’re always telling me that your job isn’t as much dangerous as it seems. I’m gonna get worried.”

“No, it’s not that bad. But, I’ve got a big mission with Squall. So, I don’t know when I’ll be free to come and meet you.”

“Ah, I see. Am I calling at a wrong time?”
“No, no, I’m glad to talk with you Serah.”

“Thanks, Light. Do you know if Cloud’s home?”

“Oh no, he won’t be, the army sent him on Pluto for a few weeks.”

“Oh my god! I hope that he’ll be alright.” Serah whispered.

“He’ll be, don’t worry, sis.”

“I hope so. Well then, I guess I’ll let you get back to work. Don’t overexert yourself out there.”

“Yeah. Take care too, Serah.”

“Bye Light.”

“Bye bye, Serah.”

The ringtone died and Lightning hung up. She sighed once more, her smile fading. Had she used the right words? She looked up at Squall.

“Serah’s pregnant.” she said.

Her voice was weak and faint. Merely a whisper of her usual cold ton. Squall hadn’t to hear anything more. Two years ago, Lightning had been pregnant herself and had never gotten the right to live that experience to its fullest. She had lost the baby after only three months. And she thought it was Noctis’ fault. It had happened in the very building where Dajh was being held captive until they’d rescued him. … Squall thought once more that he shouldn’t have let Lightning come. She looked so down now. And so sad…

“They say it’s normal to envy other people when they get what we couldn’t have for ourselves.”

“Even when these people are my sister and brother-in-law?”

“Especially your sister in your case, Lightning.”

Saying that, he put one arm around her shoulders and let her lean on his ride side, even if it was a bit too nice coming from him.

“You’ll have kids of your own, Light, if you really want to.”

“Are you feeling right Squall?” she asked him.

“Yeah. I recently learned how important family can be to girls. I guess it’s only normal you regret loosing that baby.”

Lightning realized that Squall still had his own problems. And it sounded like one of Rinoa’s reasons for leaving was the question of family.

“It’s normal alright, but it’s been two years.”

“Sometimes, it takes a whole life to get over some things.”

And she felt that he really was talking from experience. And she leaned a little more on him. She couldn’t get over losing her baby. But why? Because she hadn’t a family of her own? Because she was still single and had nobody that could give her the baby she wanted? Was it really a child that
she needed? Did she only need love, or was it only her mind playing tricks on her? After all, she had her brother Cloud, and Squall. Why did she wanted more? What could she asked of more? Noctis? The guy could be death, for all that she knew, he’d never had given her any sign of life ever since she had broken up with him…

…

Location: Planet Earth, Canada, Ottawa.

Time: December 4th, afternoon

Noctis collapsed on the floor, panting and swearing in the back of his mind. This had been four hours. Four hours of trying to relearn how to walk. When he was a child, it had taken him years, but right now, it felt so enraging! He was a grown man, dammit! Why couldn’t he manage such a simple thing? He was only able to do a few steps. Stella said he was pushing himself too hard, but this wasn’t right. He should be able to walk right now. He wanted to run, but he could barely stand up!

“Noctis, you should try simpler exercise,” Stella told him for the nth time.

“I did your stupid exercises.” he barked back.

It was even harder to accept his weakness with that girl looking at him failing to walk more than three or five steps. His body wasn’t as strong as it was before. He felt weak. Frustrated. Deceived. But overall, he felt useless. He had already been deceived by many things in his life. But never did his body fail him before.

“Noctis, you must accept that this will take time. Your nerves were kept in shape, but your muscles were only activated by electricity during the last 24 months. You’ll need to regain control of yourself. To learn to walk again. It’s normal after what you’ve been through.”

“It’ll take as little time as I decide.” he groaned back.

He jumped on his feet, despite the pain that his reluctant muscles sent through his nerves at the motion. He had been helpless once. That one time that had cost the love of his life. And being helpless again, even for a second, was beyond everything that he could take. At least, he could still stand at that time. He had managed to walk them both out of there.

Lightning…, he thought.

He closed his eyes, just standing the pain and staying up. He tried to relax his shoulders and to focus on his breathing. On Stella’s breathing, from the other side of the room. The final exercise he was supposed to achieve at the end of the reeducation was to walk through the whole room, from one side to the other. And Stella was standing a few feet before him, as a mother would, when her son tries to walk up to her in his first attempt of walking. And he remembered his own mom very well at that moment. He hadn’t known her that long, but all the memories that other people would lost of their youngest years were still clear in his mind. He remembered how she cheered for him when he was learning how to walk for the first time. And how she held him in his arms when he would fall or reach her…

He shook his head, angry with himself. Even thinking about that hurt. It made him realized that all he truly wanted was to be able to walk up to his nurse and get her to hug him, as his mother once had… It was so childish! But he felt just as vulnerable as a kid.

“Noctis, do you feel alright? We can stop whenever you want to. There’s no need to jump any
steps, you’ll learn at your rhythm.”

He breathed out harshly, clenching his teeth. He knew all this already!

He raised one of his feet and took one step forth. He almost lost his balance in doing so and hurried himself to take another step, and a third one. Then he stopped, to let the pain calm down a little. Each step was like a fire lightning up in his flesh and burning him all over. It wasn’t good. It felt as if he was bleeding from each pore of his body. It never hurt like that when he was a child. Why did it hurt so much? The circulation, he thought. But he couldn’t entirely understand. He had to concentrate on staying up, and breathing and keeping his balance all at the same time. He took another step. He tried to walk faster. So that the torture would end. Stella told him to stop, but he didn’t listen to her. He was counting every step. He was making bigger steps now. It was even more painful, but he couldn’t stop now. He wasn’t going to fall again. He was stronger than that.

Eight… Nine… Ten…

“Noctis, it’s enough now!”

Eleven… Twelve…

Stella shoes entered his sight, as he was staring at the floor, focusing on each of his step. He looked up, his eyes widening a bit. Had he really walk over all the distance that was between them already? His nerves were begging for mercy and his breathing was a little quicker than he wanted. He hated to feel so out of control. He was still so weak! But…

“I made it!”

“I can’t believe you manage to do it the very first day.” Stella replied.

He felt a small smirk growing on his face. But at the same time, this was such a small victory on all the things he still had to do! He wasn’t able to walk without feeling a pain that almost make him collapse at each of his steps. His legs wouldn’t hold him up for much longer after what he had asked them to do. He grabbed Stella’s shoulders to get back his balance, and end up leaning on her, pushing her in the wall behind her.

“Hey!” she tried to protest.

“I’m sorry.” he apologized. “I’m a real mess.”

And Stella felt his shaking as his face leaned over her right shoulder. He hugged her with all of his strength. And she gently hugged him back, realizing that this was even harder then she thought it could be for him.

“It’s okay. You’ve just lost too many things at the same time. You’ll be back to yourself in no time.”

“Don’t talk about time.”

She bitted her lower lip. He hadn’t just lost the ability to walk. He had lost so much time, it hurt to him just thinking how much more time he was wasting right now.

“It’ll be okay, Noctis. You’re already pretty good.”

“Pretty good isn’t enough.”
She stroked his hair to calm him down and he tensed up against her. He felt so vulnerable. He didn’t want her to get any ideas. But he hadn’t been touched by anyone that cared in so long… He shivered when her fingers brushed against his skin. He felt scared for an instant. He felt so open, so weak. She would catch him off guard. He didn’t know her, this wasn’t right, he couldn’t get into something like that. Dammit, he still loved Lightning!

“All that you’re going through is normal, Noctis. It’s not a crime to be lost and dependant.”

He gulped down anxiously. Her left hand was still playing with his locks. He couldn’t get away from her; his legs weren’t supporting him anymore. He started to shake even more.

“Don’t mess with me. I already know all that.”

“I’m not here to mess with anyone, Noctis. I’m here to help you.”

His breathing was quieting a bit. He sure needed help. But what kind of help would she give him?

“I would get off you if I could,” he said, wanting to apologize for pinning her to the wall.

“I know.” she replied.

And Noctis didn’t feel entirely comforted by her answer. She scared him. She was nice, and gentle. He needed tenderness and she was comforting and tender. But…

“We’ll take a few minutes to rest.” she decided.

As she said that, she made him rest his head on her shoulder and hugged him a little closer. And all the defenses Noctis had left fall down. He started to cry. For the first time since he had awoken from his two years sleep. For the first time since he was alone. And he cried a lot. He needed that to.

“I’m sorry.” he pleaded between his sobs.

Stella held him up as he cried. He was her patient and she was only helping him releasing the pain. But as she looked up at the ceiling while he grabbed on to her with even more strength, almost hurting her, she felt her heart breaking apart. Whatever had happened to this man, it wasn’t fair at all. And she had to help him getting better. If it was even possible.

“I’m sorry.” he repeated.

“It wasn’t your fault.” she told him softly.

It felt even worse, but Stella hadn’t anything else to say. And she knew he wasn’t talking to her anymore. He wouldn’t be holding onto someone he didn’t knew so strongly otherwise.

…

Location: Nightingale – Squad’s 8 rocket – outer space

Time: December 2th

First day report – By Colonel Cloud Strife

We’ve been in space for a whole day already. The taking off went pretty well, Vincent sure knows how to pilot that thing. Until now, there were no big problems to notice. As always, the squad gets
along with the docs. Yuffie’s sick like a dog and she vomited on my seat twice already, but fortunately, I never was sitting when it happened. Since Yuna’s working on the engine and doing maintenance, the nurse Penelo had to wash everything. We’ve forced Yuffie to stay in her room for the whole trip. Vincent thinks we should arrive in three or four days. I hope she’ll be able to wait that long.

We couldn’t reach Pluto’s miners with our radio, so we can’t know what the situation is out there…

Except from Yuna, nobody seems really anxious about the mission, and that was expected. She hadn’t even gone through the right training for space traveling and she only know Tifa in all the crew. I’ll have to check on her to make sure she hasn’t collapsed in the engine room because the atmosphere’s change that’ll happen in a moment. We’ll soon be traveling at the speed of sound, which is faster than light speed itself. Vincent is entering the coordinates right now for the jump. I sure hope that he knows what he’s doing…

Cid really owes to be with his wife right now, but it’s strange not having him around on an important flight as this. It’s been a few hours since we departed. I guess I should check if the communication system is alright. If we can reach the moon base and March, than we should be able to reach Pluto once we get closer.

End of first report…

…

Yuna had had to run all afternoon to get in the rocket soon enough for the launch. She had only a few things that she was able to pack and the soldiers from the base had forbidden her to take anything that she wanted, except her toothbrush and mechanic tools. The rest was furnished by the army. After all, she was expected to wear her uniform. Even when she was going to sleep… Now, she was wearing the biggest overall she ever had and was bent down in the heating system. The doctors’ quarters were over heated and she was trying to find what could explain that. Her short hair was falling in her face and she groaned as she wished the soldiers would have let her bring her hairpins to make this easier for her.

“So, where’s the problem, little girl?”

The creaking voice that echoed through the room gave her shivers. It was Hojo. She didn’t know why, she had been on the rocket for only a few hours and that mad scientist had already chosen her as his next “victim”.

“I still don’t know.” she replied, concentrating on the devices she had to turn off to check the upper levels of machinery.

The oil was staining her hands, but she didn’t mind, she was more freaked out by the weight she felt on her shoulders under Hojo’s gaze.

“Well, if you would hurry up to find out, I could get back to my work. If you were to need any stimulation to fasten your…”

“Hojo!”

Cloud’s strong voice interrupted the scientist in the middle of his sentence, must to Yuna’s pleasure, since the words of the “doctor” weren’t quite reassuring.

“Oh, lieuten… ah, that’s right, Colonel Strife. How is our favorite mako soldier faring today?”
Cloud made as if he hadn’t heard anything. He wasn’t a mako soldier, especially not Hojo’s, but he was done trying to get some sense into that crazy man’s skull. In fact, Cloud was one of the few descendants of a governmental project prepared by his late father. He and Lightning had been injected with mako as little embryos and were a little bit stronger than usual people. Lightning looked perfectly normal on the outside, while he had mako blue eyes that scared most people. Blue eyes were growing rare lately, with all the time that had passed and the genetics being as it is. Brown eyes were more regular, mostly since it wasn’t cheap to choose all of your kid’s traits and features. The only thing manipulated in Cloud and Lightning’s genes had been the mako factor. Serah hadn’t been injected, since the Mako project to make super humans had failed and was judged illegal just after the twins’ birth.

So Cloud was a mako soldier, but it wasn’t because he was a soldier. His parents had decided that for him. And he didn’t like to have the fact thrown back in his face often. He didn’t really miss his parents, contrarily to Lightning.

“Hojo, I’d like it if you would let our technician do her job. The rocket wasn’t revised enough before to launch and we have a lot of things to check over, so… We’re already going to need a lot of her help. So don’t talk to her or try anything funny, or I’ll make sure you get back on earth tied on the bottom of the ship.”

“Always protecting every cute little girl that shows up around, huh, colonel? Why shouldn’t I talk to her? I’m just curious to know what could have caused this disturbance. After all, she’s some kind of scientist too.”

“Hojo, don’t make me repeat myself.” Cloud growled.

The thin man replaced his glasses on his thin nose and turned around, his brows almost knit together from both indignation and annoyance. What was he supposed to do if he couldn’t keep on his little experiences in his lab?

Yuna sighed with relief as she heard the footsteps of Hojo getting out of the engine room. Then, as if the pressure of having around was enough to clear her mind, she realized that one of the breaker had simply burned down. The circuits were all burned and the box controlling the temperature’s changes in the ship was to be remade from scrap. She smiled as she reached out for her cutting pliers. She quickly cut the cables still connected to the box, removed them from the machinery around and hurriedly replaced them. As she connected the last one, she felt a burning sensation invading her hand and running over her whole arm. What was that? She had turned everything off!

She brought her burned hand to her, sitting down and banging her head on the upper part of the heating system. She had forgotten why she had been bent down. She got back down, unable to refrain a little moan of pain.

“Owww…”

“Hey, are you okay?” Cloud asked her.

He was still here! She almost banged her head again on the metal piece that was standing over the heating system. Gosh, he had scared her!

“Owww, owww, owww. Oh man, you could talk a little more if you stay somewhere, you surprised me.”

“Well, I did said that there was a lot of other things we needed to check around the ship. A lot of
instruments aren’t working. The radio seems to be unusable, Vincent can’t program the coordinates for our destination and the right motor is getting weaker with each passing minutes. I just thought I’d give you some time to find out what was going on with the heating system. We can’t go around in an half freezing half burning rocket…”

Yuna understood that things were a little worse than the last time she had checked the main computer. It seemed that everything was breaking in the ship. And this wasn’t right. Cid Highwind would never leave his rocket be launched if it have any mechanic problems to be checked over.

“Well, the control box of the whole heating system has burned up, seems like a short circuit, but… It’s weird. I turned it off, and there’s still electricity running through it.”

“You’re sure you really turned it off?”

“I’m positive!” Yuna replied.

Cloud couldn’t help but smile. She was still half hidden in the heating system and she didn’t seem ready to come out, but as long as she wasn’t looking at him, she sounded so fiery and sure of herself. Quite unlike the shy girl he had surprised dancing in his squad’s quarters.

“If you’re hurt, you should take a break.” he suggested to her.

But Yuna was greatly frustrated by Hojo’s words from a moment ago. He was saying that she was slow and there was no way a second year student like her was going to back down and let some electricity burns won over her. She had to finish this part of her job. There were a lot of things to get fixed if she wanted the trip to go right and as quickly as it could go, since she wanted to miss the fewer courses possible.

“I’m alright…” she whispered, while setting back her burnt hand on the metallic floor and checking through the components.

Her eyes widened with surprised as she saw, in the back of the farther parts of the heating system, two golden eyes, looking at her. Could it be some light bulbs or something? Wait a minute, they moved! And before that she knew it, a small shadow surrounded by small lightning bolt jumped at her.

Cloud had found the situation a bit amusing, until that Yuna started to yell and to kicked in the air with her legs like a crazy. Something was definitely wrong. He caught her by the waist and pulled her out of the heating system panel. She yelled with even more strength and Cloud saw a quick flash of light before that a little fury thing jumped at him. He let go of Yuna and grabbed the thing that was making its teeth on him and barking furiously. He felt a little burn on his hand, through his glove, but it was so small that he could stand it.

The young engineer sat down, breathing quickly and looked up, a mix of surprise and shock printed on her face. The small animal trying to get out of Cloud’s grip was a little doglike creature, with pointy hair, greenish fur and a golden crystal on the middle of his head. His eyes were as shiny as the crystal and there were sparks and lightning bolts running over his body.

In his mouth, the beast had a few broken cables and components and Cloud understood why his ship was breaking from everywhere.

“It seems we have a clandestine onboard. A lightning Carbuncle clandestine at that.”

“It’s the first time I ever get to see one! He’s so cute!” Yuna said without thinking, jumping on her feet.
“Well, that cute thing has bitten you, hasn’t it? I hope you won’t catch anything. And I hope he hasn’t done too great damages to the ship. I knew we were setting out way too fast, but general Jecht was never known for its patience…”

*Cid is going to kill me if he knows that something like that got on his ship,* Cloud thought for himself.

“My!”

“Do you really think that you’re scary?” Cloud barked back at the Carbuncle.

The little alien animal’s eyes flashed with furry and he emitted a strong wave of bolt, all aiming for Cloud. Taken by surprise, the soldier let go of the beast, his nerves pretty hurt this time by the shock of electricity. The Carbuncle managed to get away and Yuna couldn’t help but laughed at Cloud’s face. His hair was pointing in even more direction than usual, he almost looked like a hedgehog! He gave her a glare, half mad at himself and mostly mad at the stupid Carbuncle. She took a step back, a bit afraid, before to burst in even more laughter.

“I’m sorry…” She said between laughs. “But it’s just so… Oh… To see you overcome by such a small little dog.”

“Yeah, you can laugh all you want, Yuna. But if we don’t hurry after that thing, a Chihuahua sized alien is going to wreak havoc in my ship! And this isn’t happening.”

Yuna laughed even more, but stopped when Cloud caught her by the wrist and dragged her behind him and out of the engine room. Suddenly, she remembered who he was, where she was herself and why they both were here. They were on a mission for the American army. Lives were depending on the well going of this mission. And it could be funny to think that a Chihuahua sized alien had gotten away from colonel Cloud Strife. But it wouldn’t be if they ended up lost in space because that little beast liked to bite and play in the circuits and components of the rocket.

As they ran through the corridor to chase after the thing, Yuna felt shameful for not being more serious. Her hand hurt and part of her face too, since the electricity had burned her more when the Carbuncle had rushed at her, furious of seeing his environment invaded. Cloud called all his men with his PHS to warn them of the “threat” they were facing.

“That Carbuncle doesn’t know what he’s doing.” she said, trying to defend the poor thing.

“I don’t care, if this mission fails because of it, we’ll have at least twenty deaths on our mind.”

And there was an emergency in Cloud tone. He looked really angry. But Yuna wasn’t scared of him. But of the failure he was talking about. Twenty deaths. That was a lot of people. She had never seen anyone died before. And she started to run faster, to keep up with the soldier. She couldn’t let people die just because she hadn’t recognized the signs of a lightning Carbuncle’ passage in the heating system!

…

A few hours later…

Soldier Yuna Alphred reporting – First day in space

We managed to catch it! I almost burn my overall in the process, but we finally realized that the poor thing was only traumatized of being in the ship. It’s only a baby still. He’s naturally attracted by electric components and things like that. That’s why he was eating cables and disrupting the
ship’s systems. Carbuncles were magical creatures that venture through space during their migration. He must had been lost by his mother and found himself resting on the rocket. He had made his way inside and started a little rampage, trying to find his parents in the electrical web circulating through the ship.

Cloud and Barret wanted to throw the poor thing back in the space, but the girls had convinced them that it could make things even worse, since he could get back into the ship, since he already did it once. The little Carbuncle was almost adopted immediately by the girl. Penelo had vowed to keep an eye on the beast to prevent it from doing any more harm to our ship. Tifa had mixed feelings about this and thought that he was more urgent to get Cloud and me fixed up from the wounds that little monster had gave us.

Vincent was as indifferent as ever and I kept far from him. Since our last encounter, he never seemed happy to see me around him. Not that he ever seemed happy in any other occasion, but… Since I don’t know him that much, I’m still convinced that he resent me for barging in his room the other day…

Anyway, I almost got everything fixed up in the rocket. It’s around midnight for earth’s time and I still have the ventilation system to arrange, but the others said that it was alright. At least, we were able to enter the coordinates of Pluto in the driving computer and we should arrive in two days. I reconnected the radio and we were able to call both the moonbase and March’s operatives. We still weren’t able to contact Pluto’s miners, but we hope that we’ll be able to when we’ll get closer.

As for me, it’s hard to fit in the crew. The doctors are all new for me, especially Hojo and Lucrecia. At least, Tifa is a great friend. Penelo seems to be only interested in men and cute things. She hates dirty things and oil and I don’t think that we’ll ever get along, since I’m always messy and covered with oil and other chemicals.

Yuffie’s pretty sick, I’d thought that by now, humanity would have find a way to prevent seasickness and motion sickness, but it seems that Yuffie’s sickness isn’t curable, despite all advancement we’ve reach in modern science.

I’ve supported the antigravity system pretty well. It still feels pretty weird, since the launch, I’ve been “trapped” in the engine room, fixing everything that I could. I haven’t even the chance to watch the earth reducing to a star sized planet behind us. It feels a bit lonely here. I can’t believe that I won’t be going to school tomorrow and that we’re really heading to another planet. I’ve never been in space before. It’s a lot darker than what I thought it would be…

I don’t really miss my home. I’m never home for real, after all, since my parents died while on an expedition for another galaxy. After living for most of my childhood with my uncle, Cid Albhed, and Rikku, my cousin, I’m finally having my own place, for me alone. Without my job for the military, I couldn’t even afford to buy me clothes, but at least, I have a decent place to stay in. I miss my apartment. And my plushie Valefor… May sounds silly, I know. Oh, I shouldn’t be writing this in my report! It feels a bit more as a diary than a report. Tifa said we’re supposed to write down everything that we think about during the travel. I guess that I’ll revise my different reports before to submit them…

Oh, doctor Lucrecia is calling for me, she said we have to run some tests. I hope Hojo won’t come. He really creeps me out. Well, that must be the end of this report. I’ll be back tomorrow, and I sure hope that everything will turn out alright for me in this travel.

First day in space – Report ends…

To be continued
Episode 1 - Soldiers and Spies - Part V

Black Faction

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part V

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 3th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Announcement: Agent Trauma was reintegrated in the Black Faction American branch after a little misunderstanding due to the Feds’ doing.

Focus: Agents Squall and Lightning still have to rescue the Gainsborough girl and have five days left to find her.

Note: We’re currently trying to track down the girl’s location. While waiting for further indication, our both agents working on this case should take a few hours of break to be ready for departure anytime.

Message from G.I. seven

End of transmission

…

Lightning woke up in peace that morning. She was lying in a warm embrace, two strong arms wrapped around her. It felt so familiar and safe like this. She had had no nightmare. But she knew she wasn’t with Cloud. And still, she wasn’t scared. Squall was holding her tight and they had slept together last night, but he was only her friend and they were both agreed with that fact. They did nothing but watch tv, talk and sleep yesterday night. Nothing else. Lightning was still wearing her brown shirt and her jeans. She smiled as she opened her eyes and see the white walls of Squall’s living room. They had fallen asleep on the couch. Which wasn’t a big surprise… This thing was so comfy. The TV was still on, but the sound was off and 3D actors were fighting against each other in a semi apocalyptic world that looked like March.

“Hey, Squall.” Lightning called her friend, turning her head to his side.

He simply held her even tighter to him, cuddling up against her. As every man, he was so vulnerable when he was sleeping.

“Morning, Squall.” she insisted.

He mumbled something inaudible before to sigh and answer her with a : “Morning, Rinoa.”

She was a bit taken aback, but she still smiled as she shook slightly her head, before to shake Squall up.

“It’s Light,” she whispered to him.

Squall looked at her with hazed eyes that suddenly brighten from the shock of reality sinking back in. He almost pushed her off the couch, backing away to the other side of the futon, trying to remember what could have gotten him in such a position with his job partner and best friend.
“Hey, I’m not mad.” she wanted to reassure him.

Squall sat up, his hair a mess and his white shirt even worse. He looked terrified for a second, as if he could really have done something terrible, then he looked down and his hair fall over his eyes, letting only the lower part of his scar into sight. His mind was still a little sleepy, but he knew that nothing wrong had happened and that he was just overreacting. Lightning needed comfort, company. And he needed to know that he could give some. It wasn’t sexual or anything. They just needed the presence of someone close. But…

“I really thought you were Rinoa.” he said on a very low voice.

He raised his head and his eyes were now ice shards, as if he couldn’t accept his mistake.

“Squall, it’s normal, it hasn’t been a day already that she left you.” Lightning answered him, sitting up on the very edge of the couch.

“I don’t care if it’s normal. I almost threw her out of here myself, and now I mistake you for her…”

But I don’t want her around anymore, so why would I call you by her name? he added in the back of his mind.

“Squall, you mistook me for her because you were used to having Rinoa around like this. It’s not because you need her, and even if it was…”

He shook his head, trying to clear out his mind. He was thinking too much once more. He could see Rinoa’s face talking to him, rejecting him. He could picture her with Seifer. It hurt. It hurt so deep. He didn’t want to care. He wanted to erase her from his mind and to let all of those thoughts of being abandon, being alone, wanting Rinoa back, he wanted all of these thoughts gone. But he couldn’t help it. He was thinking it all over, again and again.

Had he done something wrong? Had he really thrown her away of his life himself? Wasn’t it her who had ran away from him? Shouldn’t he try to help Lightning instead of running all those thoughts in his head?

“I hate feeling like this.” he whispered.

And his freezing eyes melted slowly, even if he didn’t shed a tear.

“Feeling like what?”

“A moron.”

He lowered his head again and Lightning sighed. Squall was still so hard with himself on everything. He had been dumped and left by the girl of his life the very last day, and he was already beating himself up for not getting over it already.

“Hey, you know what, moron?” she jokingly asked him.

He looked right back at her, his teeth clenching at the word. He could use it himself, but to hear it in Light’s mouth felt a bit too much.

“I’ve felt like that often lately. Just yesterday, when you were fighting against Seifer and I was just frozen, paralyzed by fear. And when Serah told me she was pregnant and the only thing I could think was how jealous I felt. You can’t know how to act and to react to everything at every time.
You know, I’m still lingering over things that happened to me years ago.”

“It’s not the same.” he said, looking the other way.

The guys on the screen of the TV weren’t fighting anymore. One of the two camps had won the fight, and the survivors were in a hospital, and a guy was clinging to a girl’s hand. She was dying.

“It’s the same thing!” She barked back.

He jumped at her strong voice.

“So it’s the same?” he asked, thinking of the girl dying and feeling a sick feeling growing up in his chest.

He missed Rinoa. He really did. And he felt awful for missing her while she was already gone to another guy.

“I said it’s the same thing because…! I’m still lingering over the past because I…”

Suddenly, Lightning didn’t felt as much angry and her voice lowered to a whisper.

“Because I still haven’t forgiven anyone for what that had happened. Not me, neither Noctis.”

They both stood silent for a long moment. She seemed really surprised herself by what she had said and Squall couldn’t believe she was finally admitting it. Because, he and Cloud and everyone else knew that even if Lightning had had her good times every now and then, ever since that accident from two years ago, she had never been the same. And they all knew the reason why. Even if she faked that she was alright, she was missing Noctis. And she had pushed him away herself. She would never admit that fact though. And Squall wasn’t ready to try and point it out to her. He still wanted to live, even if it was a lonely life!

“Don’t tell me you just figured that out.”

He still wanted to live, alright, but he was a bit rash at sometimes…

“What does that mean!?” she barked again, before to throw her right fist at his face.

Squall merely dodged and was saved by his phone that began to ring at that very moment. The weird little incident was immediately forgotten for professional cause, but Lightning cursed again herself inwardly as her partner answered the phone. She had managed to change his mind, but not really as she had wanted to. While helping him forgetting about his problems, she had managed to bring back really bad memories in her own mind. Maybe was it important that she did. Because, as she thought about it, what she’d said was right. She hadn’t forgiven Noctis or herself for what happened. And, in fact, it hadn’t been their fault. At least, it really wasn’t Noctis’ fault. He had done all that was humanly possible to protect and defend her…

…

Cloud was surprised to see how happy every girl was to have the electric carbuncle onboard. They were almost all crazy over the thing. Nanaki didn’t seem to like it a lot and Cloud could understand. He was the only dog of the team and usually had the petting treatment since he was covered with soft fur and could be very gentle, if you’d forget his claws and fangs…

“Hey, Cloud, we’re finally in contact range with Pluto!” Tifa called him, interrupting his thoughts.
He was sitting in his commander chair for once, and Yuffie was still tied up in her room, to make sure she wouldn’t wonder through all the rocket and vomit everywhere. It’s was already a handful to have her around when she hadn’t motion sickness, but that…

He looked up at Tifa, who was smiling to him slyly. Penelo was playing with the Carbuncle in a corner of the room and the little beast seemed to have lost all of his rebellious ways since he received food and attention.

“Alright, Barret, plug the radio and try to get a connection to the miners’ canal. I wanna know what’s going on down there.”

Barret cursed a little as he executed the colonel’s order. He wasn’t pretty good with mechanic stuffs, if it wasn’t for his prosthetic arm in which he had a few guns and other stuff that scared even Cloud.

“We’re plugged in, lieuten… colonel. And I can’t get a signal.” Barret groaned a moment later.

Vincent was still piloting the rocket, Yuna was repairing something in the room next door to make sure everything was ready for their landing. Nanaki was looking jealously at the Carbuncle being pet by Penelo but moved back his gaze to Barret as he heard the news. The communications seems to have been impossible with Pluto ever since they had started this flight. And Cloud, as everyone else in the command room, knew that this could only mean one thing. This mission was going to be a hard one. If the miners were already death on their arrival, it would be more of a burial mission then a rescue. It had happened once or twice before to the squad, but it wasn’t really good for anyone’s moral.

“Their radio could have been broken, try to contact the government instead.”

“I already did, colonel. There’s no signal coming from anywhere. All that I can get is parasites and alien’s talking. And it has nothing to do with Pluto’s indigenes. I can tell you that.”

“I wanna hear it Barret. Maybe could we find some clue on what’s going on in these alien’s talking.”

Barret’s dark face grew a little darker, but he complied and soon, the whole commanding room was filled with screeching noises and voices that were speaking in a language that none of the crew members had ever heard before. Cloud frowned. There was something familiar in these voices. Something from a time he had almost forgotten. Suddenly, a voice talked and he recognized it. He couldn’t tell any of the words she was saying but he had heard that voice before. He shivered as he understood what that meant.

“Jenova…”

“What, Cloud, you don’t mean, Jenova the ancient? The calamity?”

“It is her.” Cloud replied to Tifa’s shocked expression. “It can’t be anyone else than her.”

The other voices responded to Jenova’s with utter respect and compliance. Suddenly, a chilly atmosphere filled the airship command room. This mission was going to be even harder than what they had first thought.

“Shut down the transmission, they mustn’t be able to locate us before that we’ve landed!” Cloud ordered abruptly.

Tifa walked up to him, looking pretty concerned. Cloud was one of the only men she knew that had
ever met with Jenova, which was a legendary conqueror in every galaxy! He didn’t really remember it, but he was in the Majo project, and Jenova had started it from the inside of the government, without anyone knowing. And he had been one of her favorite test’s subject, because he was reacting to the mako as an Ancient would. Lightning knew nothing about this. Cloud had known because he had become a soldier and had met Jenova at 16 years old, in a mission out in the front. He would never forget her voice or her ton. Or her terrible powers that had ravaged a good part of the Earth during World War 6.

“We’re still going? But we need back up!” Penelo said.

And she was right. But Cloud knew that he would fail this rescue mission if he was to wait in orbit around Pluto to give a chance to back up to arrive.

“Jenova’s here. And that’s bad news. You know what the miners were excavating around here?” Cloud asked his men.

“I tried to get information over this, but I couldn’t.” Tifa whispered. “It was classified information, as always.”

“They’re excavating frozen mako and crystals.” Vincent whispered, making everybody jump at his sudden intervention. “They say they even found a frozen ancient a dozen of years ago in there. She’s being chased all over the universe by all kind of mercenaries, if the rumors are true.”

“How does he always get to know all this kind of things?” Tifa asked herself out loud.

“I really don’t know.” Cloud answered her with a smirk. “But I think that it could be a good explanation as to what Jenova’s doing here. Each time she can have a chance to create new ancients or to find survivors of her race, she runs in followed by all of her goons.”

“Does that mean that Sephiroth could be there too?” Penelo asked, fear ringing in her voice.

“I certainly wish he won’t be, but that’s a pretty good reason to land as fast and go as unnoticed as we can. The miners down there are all in dangers.” Cloud replied.

He jumped on his feet and clapped his hands together.

“How much time would it take us to land right now, Vincent?”

“About half an hour.”

“Great. I want everyone ready to disembark with everything needed for our rescue mission in half an hour. We’ll start by hiding the rocket and we’ll do only one trip to get everything we need packed for our stay on Pluto. Time is important on this. As much to go unnoticed from the Ancients than to save the miners… Any question?”

Nobody made a move. Cloud looked cold and decided. And his orders were pretty clear and wise given the situation. He repeated his message in the radio system of the rocket, warning all the other persons in, which were the doctors and their only engineer, Yuna.

“I’m coming too?” the young girl asked Tifa, her eyes wide with surprise and fear building up inside her. Cloud wouldn’t sent her on a battlefield, she had heard Penelo talking to doctor Lucrecia, and it seemed that they wouldn’t fight against indigenes but Ancients and robots…

“Well, Cid used to come with us on the field to make sure that the machinery we use to treat the wounded keeps on working. If one of our instruments is broken out there, we can’t save anyone.”
“I see. So, it all depends on me in the end for all the machinery?”

“Well, Cloud is supposed to be there to protect us with Barret and Vincent, and Yuffie. They’re our bodyguards you know and they protect us and the wounded and the machinery…”

_He sure has a lot of things on his shoulders_, Yuna thought as she saw Cloud passing by them, a flamethrower in his hands, a sword attached on his back and setting materias in his equipment.

Materias were quite rare, but they really worked better than anything else. The Earth was exporting them from Pluto and other planets throughout all the Milky Way. Only soldiers could use them, or mercenaries. Cloud was kind of both…

“Hey, Tifa, make sure that Yuna has at least a gun to defend herself.” Cloud suddenly said.

Yuna blinked, surprised to see him before them, while he was passing by just a moment ago. She had been lost in her mind for the nth time and hadn’t seen him turning around and walking in their direction.

“Wait… I never trained to fire with a gun before”, Yuna tried to warn them.

“Nothing should get wrong enough for you to be obliged to use it, but it’s a question of safety. I’ll try to protect everyone, but if anything was to go wrong, I want to have taken measures to prevent things from getting even worse.”

“That’s reassuring.” Yuna whispered under her breath as Cloud turned around and went back to his preparations.

“Well, Cloud has never been a man of many words.” Tifa observed simply.

And since none of them knew exactly in what they were heading, they had to be extra cautious.

…

Two years ago, somewhere on earth, where everything went wrong…

It was really early in the morning. The sky was grey and the sun was shining bright behind the heavy clouds. A single car was rolling down the streets. Harvard was getting closer. And the Feds building too. Noctis was driving. Lightning was looking out the window. She looked lost in her mind. She looked really pretty like that, with half a smile on her face and Noctis thought once more about how lucky he was to be her man.

“Hey, Light, mind to share with me what makes you looks so dreamy?”

“Huh? Oh, I was just… thinking about the future. Our future…” she admitted on a low ton.

“I see. Any plans in the near future?” he asked her playfully.

“I think that I’ll have a nice surprise for you after this mission. It’s only surveillance, you’re sure about it.”

“Usually, you don’t mind getting into fights.”

“Well, it’s just that I’m still sore from last night.” she quickly replied.

Noctis should have looked at her at that moment; maybe he could have guessed she was lying. But he was looking at the road; and he chuckled a little, before to stop, seeing her glaring at him in the
rear-view mirror.

“Maybe was I a bit rough, but you weren’t all that gentle yourself.” he retorted to her glare.

“As if you mind.”

“That’s right, excuse me miss. I had forgotten that a man should never complain about this kind of things.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“And I’m just joking. Relax, Lightning. It’s just your everyday surveillance op. Nothing could go wrong and if anything looks bad, we’ll get out of there before that you even get a scratch.”

“What? But I’m not scared or…”

“Maybe that you should.” a voice whispered to both of them, coming from the radio that had been turned off since the beginning of the drive.

They both jumped, though Lightning did more than Noctis.

“What was that… a bug? A mic?!?”

“Man, they’re getting better with each month. They’ve even bugged my favorite car!” Noctis groaned.

They looked at each other, thinking fast. They were being observed. Maybe followed. Or was it all a trap from the beginning? Rufus had sent them on a surveillance mission, but it had happened before that Rufus’ bosses’ orders were modified to drag agents in a suicide mission without them knowing. That would explain the emergency of the mission and the very few details both of them had got from their boss. They couldn’t talk to sort things out or decide what they were going to do. They were clearly being listened to. Lightning felt terrible for bringing their last night “activities” in the conversation. Noctis didn’t really mind. He was used to being spied on for a longer time than her.

“Say, Light, should we get out of the car or something?”

They had to look like amateurs to get out of this. They exchanged questions and answers with their eyes as Lightning was looking for a fitting answer.

“I don’t know… Let’s park somewhere near and figure this one out.”

As she said that, she undid her belt and started to check around the car. Hopefully, there was no camera hidden in any corner of the car. The voice that had talked to them didn’t add anything. Noctis started to drive a little faster and Lightning used the screeching sounds of the tires to hide her movements in the car. After a few minutes of search, she found the mic and the bug on the back seats side. She was walking on her knees and give a look at Noctis, in the rearview mirror, saying she had it. A moment later, they had parked in Harvard parking lot and Noctis had destroyed both the mic and the bug after making sure they weren’t linked with a bomb or something. They got out of the car to talk a little more freely.

“We haven’t much time, if they wanna come and get us.” Lightning started.

“I know. I guess we should head back to headquarters right now before that things get out of hand.”
“But if we do, we’ll never know how they managed to infiltrate our agency to give us the phony mission.”

“Light, you’re not talking about playing their game. We don’t even know what they want from us. This could get dangerous.”

“Maybe, but you’re with me. What could go wrong?”

Noctis felt his heart sinking to the bottom of his chest. Alright, he would protect her against anything, but … He wasn’t invincible, did she knew that? He wanted to answer back, to talk some sense into her, but she gave him a light kiss on the lips and pointed him towards the car.

“Let’s try to figure out what they want with us, alright?”

“Are you sure about this?”

“It’s important, don’t you think? If we don’t find out why this is happening now, it could happen again. To other agents…”

“Alright, you win.”

She smiled at him and Noctis asked himself why he was feeling so nervous. He was a daredevil usually and would never fear a little more challenge. Maybe was it because it involved Lightning. He hated to see her getting hurt.

“We’re going to play their game, but… let’s be careful, okay?”

“Why are you so worried all of a sudden?”

Lightning’s smile faded as she saw his dark expression. Her voice sounded so pure in the silence. The air was burning hot already and Noctis wished they were still in his apartment, lying next to each other, without any danger hanging above their head.

“I don’t know. I’m just… I just got a bad feeling about this.”

For a moment, Lightning touched her stomach, as if she was hurt. And Noctis asked himself if it wasn’t his fault, but she shook her head and grabbed him by the collar.

“Listen Noctis, we’ve faced many dangers already. It’s not a few Feds that are going to stop us.”

He couldn’t help but think that this whole thing was a caprice coming from her. Lightning liked risks, and she was a professional spy who loved her job, but usually, she would never rush to trouble like that. She kissed him again, with more passion this time, as if she wanted to win him to her cause. He didn’t know at this moment that she was almost three months pregnant and was going through an invincible phase. If he had known, he would never had let her in that car and drive them both to the Feds building. But she hadn’t told him. Lightning was waiting for the right time to say it. And that time never came…

A few blocks and driving minutes later…

“Screeech!”

Noctis parked in the back alley behind the Feds building.

“Alright, here we are. Since they’ve used their device to talk to us a moment ago, there must be a welcome committee waiting for us.”
“We shouldn’t make them wait.” Lightning replied.

They got out of the car, letting the doors open to hide behind them in case they would be fired at. But there was no sign of any attack. Lightning had her gun ready and Noctis took his blade out of the car, sighing inwardly as the metal screeched a little against the car frame.

“So, finally, Raven and Lightning care to entertain us with their presence. I must say, I’ve been waiting for you both for a very long time.” A man said from up above.

They looked up, Lightning aiming her gun at the silhouette standing tall on the very top of the building, his shape kept in shade by the sun that was right behind him. The clouds had moved and the sun was blinding, Noctis had to look back down, cursing against himself inwardly for not bringing his sunglasses. Lightning covered her eyes with one hand, still aiming at the guy with her gun.

“That voice…” she whispered. It sounded familiar.

“Should I introduce myself to you, poor rats running into my trap?”

“Watch your mouth!” Lightning yelled back at him.

“Miss Farron is as fiery as I remember. But I don’t really have time for idle chatter.”

Noctis, after regaining his vision, scanned their surroundings. There were three snipers on the ceiling and a guy was waiting behind the only door leading into the building. This was even worse than what he had imagined. But he exchanged a quick look with Lightning. She had noticed the other guys too. And they were both ready to take care of them, in their own way. First, they had to figure out what kind of threat the man talking to them from the top of the building could represent.

“To make this short, I’m Galenth Dysley. An old friend of the Farron family. And the Mako’s project’s first director.”

“Mako’s project?” Lightning thought out loud.

“I don’t like this.” Noctis whispered to himself.

He wanted to get rid of the snipers, but he didn’t want to let Lightning alone on her side of the car… Why the crazy guy on the ceiling was talking about mako, he had no idea, but mako never meant anything good.

“You’ll understand soon enough, child.”

As he said that, he tossed something in Lightning’s direction. Before that Noctis could move, he felt three bullets diving into his flesh. One in each arm and the third in the left legs.

_Silent bullets?_ he thought.

His sword hit the ground. The pain was so searing, he almost couldn’t stand it. But he had to. Lightning was on the other side of the car and that Dysley guy had…

“Aaaaaaaaaaaarrgh!”

“Light!”

He hung on to the car to stand and turned a little to look at her. She was grabbing her chest and looked in big pain. He wanted to do something, but he couldn’t, his arms felt too weak and his
unwounded leg was barely holding him up.

“Bring them in. Now.” Dysley asked his men.

He then walked away and Noctis plunged into the car, to grab Lightning in from the inside of the cockpit. He managed to catch her by the arm and dragged her in. The young spy couldn’t stand up much longer, but he could still drive.

“Lightning, I’m getting you out of this, okay? Just stay with me.”

He was bleeding a lot, while she was looking for her breath and still moaning in pain. There was a needle in her right arm. And Noctis understood his bad feeling about all of this had been an understatement.

*What have we gotten ourselves into?* he asked himself.

His arms were killing him and his blood had made the wheel sticky, but he didn’t care. This looked like one of the worst time of his life. His heart skipped a couple of beats. He was scared. Lightning was losing consciousness. He started the car.

“I don’t know what kind of drug they gave you, but it’s working, dammit!”

Gunshots flew through the air and he closed his eyes for a second as he drive backward and make a violent u-turn to get out of the Feds territory. He would come back as soon as he knew that Lightning was alright to teach this guy he could beat them at their game. He felt shameful for being caught off guard like that. But he wasn’t going that without a fight. His car roared and he drove it off, pushing its speed to the maximum it could reach. Then, something went wrong, but he couldn’t tell what. A bullet in a tire? His loss of blood making his sight blurry? Lightning’s yells distracting him from the road? Or the guy that jumped on top of the car and cracked the windshield open with his bare fist? Noctis lost consciousness somewhere in the middle of all that.

He was woken up by the pain a moment later and found himself kept against a wall with four rods of metal planted in his arms and legs. He was dizzy and his stomach churned at the rotten smell in the air.

“Oh, Raven, so you’re up.” Dysley smiled.

Noctis looked up, his teeth clenching at the already hated voice. What he saw let him shocked beyond words. Lightning was lying on an operation table, seemingly naked under a single sheet and still drugged. There was blood on the floor around the table and his face loose all color as he understood what had just happened. His Lightning, which had been counting on him to protect her, was treated as guinea pig while he would just bleed to death.

“You wanted her from the very start, huh?”

“Did you know, Raven, that your girl had mako running through her veins?”

“What?!”

He winced as his brutal movement reminded him of the rods in his limbs. What was this way to keep a prisoner? Crucifixion?

“It was a special project the government had made to create stronger human. We took babies from willing parents and injected them with Mako and Jenova’s cells.”
“What did you just said?!”

“Jenova’s cells. Right. That’s why the project stopped right after the beginning. When the government found out about Jenova, everyone panicked. But what was already done to the babies couldn’t be undone. Do you know that on this earth, there’s only two human being with mako running in their blood still alive? The first is Lightning Farron…” Dysley explained, stroking Lightning’s hair as he talked.

“Don’t you dare touch her!”

“As if it wasn’t already done. We needed the essence of her mutated mako. She’s of a rare kind, this girl. The other person with mako in his blood is a well known soldier, Cloud Strife, the girl’s twin, if I recall. Unfortunately, his blood has rejected part of the mako and only kept Jenova’s cells. We needed a purer sample, with only the mako. And Lightning was the only one we could get.”

He patted her on the head and Noctis felt his anger rise even more. He had to get Lightning out of this nightmare before that she woke up. She would be so panicked if she woke up right now. His breathing was going erratic and he felt on the verge of tears as he understood his uselessness. He had lost too much blood and his whole body was so weak. He hurt from everywhere. He had failed her. He started to shake from both anger and rage. And it hurt even more.

“Why did you do this? What exactly did you do to her?!”

“Oh ho, he’s getting angry now. Calm down, calm down, Raven. She shall live. Oh, but there’s a little problem. Did you know she was pregnant?”

“What?”

Noctis was already pale as a ghost, but he turned even whiter, if possible. His heart skipped a beat. She was pregnant? Wait, she was?

“You didn’t…”

“If we’d known, we’d be more careful about catching her, but she kept that secret for herself, as it seems. The drug we used on her killed the baby and caused a miscarriage, if you see what I mean. That’s mainly why there’s so much blood around here, despite of your own condition.”

Noctis realized that things were even worse than they looked. Lightning was bound to be devastated.

“At least, I can console you with one fact. The baby really was yours and it was only a girl, so it’s not a big waste and your girlfriend has never cheated on you.”

Is this guy for real? Noctis thought in the back of his head.

Now, he was seeing red. He tried to move, to release himself from the rods in his limbs. By thrusting himself forward, he managed to move over the metal rods, getting a little closer to freedom, but he thought that the pain it also caused would kill him before that he could be thankful to his try.

“Dammit, what’s your problem? You’re not even a Feds, aren’t you?”

“You’re wrong. I’m with the Feds…” Dysley smiled as he said that, with a devious smile.

Noctis had to close his eyes for a second, he felt weaker. His body was nothing but pain. His mind
was even worse. And his poor Lightning… Scientists were working around her, injecting things in
her veins with some needles, taking sample of her skin, of her blood. One single tear rolled down
the young man’s cheek. And he clenched his teeth together, to hold back the pain as he moved
once more. He wouldn’t stand anything else of this nightmare, he couldn’t! He managed to free
himself from the rods pinning him to the wall. He almost collapsed on the floor as he found
himself standing on his own at new. Dysley had taken one step back.

“Sir, she’s waking up.” Someone said.

Every noise felt pretty far from Noctis. He knew what the words meant. But they had crossed
every of his limits and he wasn’t entirely himself anymore. He could tell that he wouldn’t be able
to do many things, but as he was bleeding as a pig, he was still up and his eyes lighted with a furry
that could scare even the most trained Feds’ agent there ever was. He looked more like a beast
than a man at this moment. Noctis grabbed the first thing that could serve him as a weapon,
namely one of the metal rods that had kept him against the wall. Where did he find the strength to
pull it out from the wall? How did he manage to hit Dysley with it? Why weren’t there any other
guy with guns in this room? Was it the surprise to see him up and attacking when he should be
crawling in his own blood?

Noctis didn’t care. Lightning had been hurt beyond any words and it was partly his fault and there
was no pain he wouldn’t stand to get her out of here before that any of those crazed Feds could
hurt her anymore.

As she woke up, she began to yell and tried to defend herself but realized she was still pretty
weakened by the drug in her veins. She wanted to hide, but something in her mind knew that her
being naked in this weird place wasn’t the worse. Something was wrong. She was hurting. There
was a burning sensation between her legs and something deep within her wanted to cry. By sheer
instinct, she already knew what was going on. Her baby was gone. The blood on the floor told her
as much and she loose her sanity for a moment, not able to picture how all of this was even
possible. What was going on? Where was Noctis? What had happened to her? What did those men
and women around her had done to her while she was unconscious? Sickening picture ran through
her mind at the speed of light. She grabbed her head with her hands, trying hard to calm herself
down. She heard Noctis yelling and that brought her back to reality, but only for an instant.

Looking up, she saw him being pushed into a wall. She saw his wounds and his white face. What
was left of her heart started to crack down inside of her chest. She wanted it all to stop. She wanted
to be back in Noctis’ apartment, lying next to him, in peace. Why did everything had to go wrong?
Why was she naked, why was she feeling so lost, why couldn’t she jump on her feet and fight to
help the man that she loved?

A thought echoed through her mind.

*He didn’t protect me.*

It was wrong to think this way. She didn’t even realize what she had thought at first. But
afterwards, she understood that it was the only thing that could explain the betraying impression
she felt right after. Noctis had been with her and for the first time, he hadn’t been able to protect
her.

With a shout of rage, Noctis managed to throw the men fighting against him out of his way. He
walked up to Lightning, wrapped her clumsily in his coat as she was trying to get away from him
and yelling and crying all at the same time.

“Don’t touch me!” She begged him. “Don’t look at me!”
He didn’t know what to tell her. He felt so broken inside. This was all so wrong. He lifted her up in his arms, pushing his nerves and muscles to their limits. He was getting her out of here. It was the least he could do. The walk out of the building was almost as worse as everything else. She was crying and he wanted to cry with her, but she was hitting him with her fists and saying it was his fault, and he felt the same. He held her tighter to him, feeling even more hatred and rage building up in his heart. Those men that had dared to touch her, to profane her! How he wanted them all dead right now.

A little later, Lightning’s doctor would tell them she hadn’t been rape, at least, but it was almost the same. Her baby was lost because of the drug. She had been manipulated while being unconscious and entirely unable to defend herself.

After a few minutes of being carried by the man she loved, Lightning got back to her senses a little and he dared to talk to her.

“Lightning, try to grab my phone in my pocket. We must call for help.”

“You’re hurt, Noctis. Put me down, I should be able to walk.”

“No.” he replied, leaning on a wall for a few seconds. “I’m getting you out of here.”

As he walked out in the open air of the street, Noctis tripped and fall down to the hard cement of the back alley they had first came in. Lighting moaned in pain as she hit the ground with him lying partly over her. But soon, she turned her head in his direction, scared by the fact he wasn’t moving anymore.

“Noctis, are you alright?”

“I’m sorry, I can’t… Can’t go any further…” he winced back to her. “Take my phone. Call for an ambulance. Anything.”

His breathing was hard. He seemed to hurt so much.

“Noctis, hang on!”

“I should be the one saying that.”

At that time, there was no resentment in Lightning’s eyes. And she seemed to care. And she did. But that too had been taken away from him. Noctis woke up suddenly, in the reality where he had been in a coma for two years of his life. In a reality where Lightning despised him and…

“Hey, hi Noctis. I’ve made you some real breakfast.” Stella said cheerfully, before to notice the look of utter despair on her patient’s face. “What’s wrong?”

Noctis felt bad for forcing Stella to put up with his depressive mood. He wanted to smile at her and to thank her for the wonderful breakfast she had made for him, but he still felt like crying. He held it back, sitting up in his bed.

“Can I… May I ask you a personal question Stella?”

“Why… yes, you can.” she answered, a little taken aback.

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“Huh…”
“It’s not… It’s not what you think it is, it’s just…!” He paused, breathing in and breathing out slowly to keep all the pain inside. “I need a woman’s advice…”

“I’ve had a boyfriend once, but I’ve been single for some time now. What do you want to know Noctis?”

“I… Is this room bugged or anything?”

“Oh no, this area is entirely private. You can talk freely here.” she reassured him.

“I’m having nightmares ever seen I’ve woken up from my coma. About my last mission with Lightning. She’d been my girlfriend for three years and… She was pregnant, but she hadn’t told me, and we… She lost the baby on that last mission we made together. I failed her out there, but I never found the right words to say after it, to calm her down.”

Stella sat down on Noctis’ bed, shocked by the story he had just told her. Noctis looked down at his hands, unable to stand his nurse’ stare. He’d never told anyone about that. He’d never dare to show off this weakness. But he felt so close to break apart. He wanted to apologize for crying the other day. He wanted to find a way to stop doing these nightmares.

“I don’t know if there’s a way to forget her or what she told me after that mission. She hates me now, I could swear my life on it. But I still love her. And I don’t know what I should tell her if I was to meet her again.”

“Noctis…”

“I mean, what will be left for me when I’ll be back to my old self, huh? I… I want her back, but at the same time, I’m scared. It’s been only a few months in my mind, but it’s been years for her.”

“It’s… It’s normal to feel like that.” she tried to comfort him.

“No, it’s not!” he snapped.

Stella jumped and Noctis realized the tension that was suddenly standing between them in the air. Stella was sensible and she looked devastated just by trying to imagine what it could feel to be in his shoes. Or in Lightning’s…

“I’m sorry, I…”

“It’s okay.” she cut him off. “That’s why I’m here. To help you.”

“If you were Lightning… No, I shouldn’t say that, I apologize.”

“Say it. Maybe, you’ll feel better.”

Noctis hesitated. He looked at Stella right in the eyes. Had he really the right to use her like that? To confide every of his fears to her? It felt wrong. But he felt a bit lighter already.

“If you were Lighting, do you think you could find the strength within yourself to forgive me?”

Stella’s eyes widened with surprise at his question. Was it all this was about for him? To be forgiven? She felt tears swelling up in her eyes. He had so many reasons to cry yesterday. And that was why he was apologizing to her so desperately.

“…”
He waited for her answer, holding back his breath.

“I don’t know.” she finally said.

“Oh… I guess I really shouldn’t have asked.”

As he looked down, he was surprised to suddenly feel Stella’s arms hugging him tightly. He panicked inwardly, for a moment. Her face was right next to his, her cheek brushing against his neck, and her hair stroking his chin. And those arms around him, just like yesterday… This was so sudden. His heart jumped in his chest. Suddenly, he felt even more vulnerable.

“No, no, you were right to do it. Now I understand. I understand everything so much more. It’s just… Even if I said that I would forgive you, it wouldn’t comfort you at all.”

One of her hand was in his hair while the other was pressed tightly against his back. And he slowly hugged her back. Somewhere, deep inside, it felt wrong. He was scared. Had he said all that to gain her pity? No, this wasn’t what he was looking for. He wanted her to comfort him. To hold him. To make him feel alive. To remember what it felt to be human and to break down.

“I gotta get stronger. As I was before.” he whispered as he realized she was crying silently in his arms.

“I know. We’ll go one step at a time. I’ll help you all the way, I promise.”

“I didn’t mean to make you cry, Stella.”

“I know. I don’t mind. I’ve never felt that important since a long time.”

Noctis understood that maybe she needed him just as much as he needed her. He didn’t know her story, but she seemed to have seen her share of hurt to be that sensible to his problems. That helped him swallow back the sobs. He had a reason to relive the nightmare. He would make sure if it was his fault or not. Then, when he would be back to shape, physically, at least, he would force Lightning to recognize the truth. Not to have his forgiveness, but just to have her admit she had no right of pushing him away after what had happened. They needed each other. He could still be her friend. Maybe her man. At least, he knew he still wanted her as his girl. But that depended on so many things. For example, maybe had she already someone special in her life. Someone that would never fail her. And that thought could have destroyed him if Stella hadn’t been with him at this moment, to remember him that life would go on, with or without Lightning.

“Thanks for being here, Stella. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

To be continued.
Episode 1 - Part VI

Black Faction

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part VI

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 4th –Space’s time–

Location: Planet Pluto –renamed as so around 19 000 A.D.-, between 4,4 and 7,4 billions kilometers away from the sun, south face

Mission: Rescuing the human miners working on Pluto that were attacked by indigenes.

Soldiers out front: Colonel Cloud Strife’s squad, Yuna Albhed –reserve- and alpha medic team.

Warning: Jenova has been heard talking to her troops by Cloud’s squad during their approach of Pluto. No back up team were sent, none were asked to come. The colonel thinks he can get through this alone.

Message from general Jecht. End of transmission

…

“Four, three, two, one…”

The whole ship growled as it entered Pluto’s cold atmosphere. Yuna was standing next to Tifa, a gun attached to her belt, her whole body wrapped in the white and warm spatial overall that had been designed for the human army’s soldiers. Her face was covered with a transparent tissue that helped keeping her warm, without preventing her from communicating normally to her comrades. Their special clothing was really resistant to any normal use and could extend to incredible size, which meant why each guy of the team could wear the same size of outfit without feeling terribly embarrassed. Barret looked just as comfortable as Cloud or Vincent. Well, Vincent didn’t like to be dressed in white; that was clear as day in his face; but at least, they would be difficult to spot on Pluto’s surface. Nanaki at been covered with a white dye that had totally covered his fur usual shade. He wasn’t pink, fortunately, but completely white, if not for his mane that had turned pitch black.

“Everyone gets out. Barret will hide the ship for us. Nanaki is going to find exactly where the miners are being detained. Yuffie, Vincent and me are going to cover the medical team and I want each of you to make sure you don’t lose any piece of equipment. Otherwise, just focus on following Nanaki.”

Cloud didn’t ask them if they had any question. As he ended his sentence, the ship touched the ground and he opened the door, letting the cold air of Pluto rush in.

They all jumped off the ledge, their feet hitting the ice covered rocks. Yuna looked over her head, to check out the sky. She was surprised to see walls of stones, as if they were in the center of a gigantic cave. As she exchanged a surprised look with Tifa, who simply smiled at her, she understood that there were a few things she still had to learn about Pluto. She had always dreamed of making an airship, to travel around the world, but she wasn’t aiming for other planets and galaxies and was often dozing off in her galactic geography’s class. It was mostly her part time work for the army that caused that anyway, so, it wasn’t entirely her fault. How was she supposed to pay her school and her apartment otherwise?
Yuna wanted to talk, but as all the other people around her remained silent, she kept it shut. Nanaki had already started to run ahead and she followed Tifa and Penelo, who were going first, between Yuffie and Cloud, who were scanning their surroundings intently, in case of any surprise attack. Behind her, came Hojo and Lucrecia and then, Quistis. Vincent was closing the walk, his red eyes looking far beyond what everyone else could look, making sure there was no one hidden behind the rocks pointing out of the cold ground or anything waiting under the snow fields covering most of the horizon and the surroundings.

They walked for half an hour like this, before that Cloud disappeared to do some reckon. Barret had taken his place and Yuna was focusing on keeping an eye on every member of the team. It was stressing, because, with their white outfit, she couldn’t really manage to see them all that well at all time. As if their body were disappearing, their faces the only thing visible for a moment, before that she blinked her eyes and realized that the rest was really following. She was surprised to feel so comfy in her new overall and not to feel the cold at all. She wished she could have talk a bit with Tifa and even Penelo, because this forced walk in a rocky and snowy no man’s land was a bit depressing, not to say boring.

But it wasn’t a vacation trip. The gun bumping in her hip at each step she took reminded her of that.

*It feels so strange. Somehow, I’d feel safer if I could see Cloud. It’s been some times since he ventured on his own,* she thought.

Yuna kept thinking inside of her mind as she continued to walk next to Tifa, an oppressing feeling building up in her chest. It didn’t felt right to walk like this, as mechanical robots, or pure strangers. But they could be in danger if they were to be noticed by someone. Nanaki was constantly running farther away, before to rush back to them to lead them in the right track. After three hours, they arrived at the mine where the miners were. And it was clear at that moment that the miners weren’t there anymore.

Traces of fighting were all over the place! The snow hadn’t the time to cover it, as if it had happened only a while ago. Yuna remembered that the time wasn’t revolving the same way on each planet. Technically, Pluto’s time was going on really faster than Earth’s time, but due to her distance with Earth and a few strange facts that Yuna couldn’t remember really clearly, Pluto’s time was actually seeming slower than Earth’s time. So the alarm message that had reached them on earth could have been send only hours ago from here, even if it had already been days back on Earth.

“Let’s inspect the place quickly, just to make sure there aren’t any wounded persons that could have been left back.” Tifa ordered.

For some reason, it was clear that she was the leader when Cloud wasn’t there. It could have been strange if Yuna had stopped to the fact that Tifa was only a nurse. But she had been Cloud’s girlfriend for years before that they split up and she was even scarier than Cloud at sometimes.

Yuna stood where she was for a while. It was only when she realized she was the only one left if not for Vincent, who was keeping an eye on the outside. Most of them had moved into the mine in pairs of two. She braced herself, deciding she should help looking for wounded. She started looking around the computers coordinating the mines, in case there was any clue of where the miners had been took. Since there were even clear trace of people being kidnapped. She gasped in shock as she saw a death man lying in a pool of blood, right behind the head machineries. A computer’s screen was lying next to the man, and the screen was stained by his blood too. And Yuna was surprised, as she managed to look at it closely, -after overcoming her first need of looking away from the dead- that she could read something. It was written in al bhed, a para
human language, but since her cousin was one, Yuna had learned the Al bhed before. And she understood what the miner had wanted to tell before to die from his fatal wounds.


She tried to take it in, to memorize each word, as her teacher had asked her too in her last army’s class. But she was panicked. She had almost never seen death from so close. Her body was shaking as she took a step back. And finally, she understood the three last words. Mine’s trapped. The guy wasn’t talking about himself, but about the mine!

She rushed to Vincent and grabbed to his shirt, panicked beyond words.

“We must get everyone out of the mine. It has been trapped by Jenova’s men!”

Vincent didn’t ask her how she knew. He was a man of a few words. He turned on his radio to reach all of the guys down in the mine.

“Everyone gets out right now!” he asked them.

Yuna turned around, looking at the three mines entrance, as if her friends and comrades could jump out of there just with her looking in their direction. She just had the time to blink once, and as suddenly as her panic had started, the whole mine blew up. She was thrown to the ground and the first thing she felt as she tried to get up was a strong hand on her shoulder.

“You’re okay?”

Cloud had kneeled next to her.

“What… What just happened?”

Yuna knew it, but she needed to hear it from someone.

“There was a leak. They knew we were coming. That’s why this happened.”

“What are we going to do?”

“First, we rescue our guys. Then, we find the miners. And then, if I can get my hands on Jenova, I’ll make her pay.”

Cloud was glaring at the mine’s entrances filled with smoke. He helped Yuna in getting up, never looking away from the mine.

“You think that they’re okay?”

“They’re my men.” he simply answered. “Come on. We’re going in.”

“But what if there were other traps?”

“As long as you’re with me, there’s nothing to fear, Yuna.”

There was something else that he meant behind those arrogant words. Yuna thought of it immediately, remembering that Cloud wasn’t there a moment ago, when Tifa had decided to inspect the mine. If he had been, maybe that everything would have been different. At least, that was what he thought. Yuna couldn’t help but wonder. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try at something, you may only fail. But still, she hadn’t the heart to talk back to Cloud. She wanted him to be right at this moment and to find that all of their comrades, even Hojo, had survived to this
explosion. And she followed him in the smoke.

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 3th, mid day

Location: Planet Earth, United States, New York

Focus: Secure a colonial woman, Gainsborough, being chase by aliens around Times Square

Agents: Squall Leonheart and Lightning Farron

Permitted delay for focus completion: Five days, earthlings’ time

Warning: Protect her life at all cost. Security Level ‘S’

Message from G.I. Five. End of transmission

Squall shut down his cell, smiling a bit to himself. At least, the G.I. Five guy had saved him from one hell of a beating. Morally or physically, anyone wouldn’t like to be opposed to Lightning. She was strong, depressed or not.

“Times Square… It’s a few hours’ drive from here.” Lightning observed.

“Time’s important in this. We must localize that girl and her purchasers to make sure she’s in security. We should take something faster than a car.”

“You just don’t want to rent a car.” Lightning retorted to him.

Cars were pretty rare on the Earth of 19 027, since the pollution had almost reached its limits. While gas and oil weren’t used since centuries, people had to fuel their car with electricity, water or sunlight. Whichever way they used, for some reason, it was costing an awful lot to own a car. Noctis did once ago, but most of his salary had been used just to keep his toy working. Cloud had his motorcycle, but he was a soldier and had a first class salary, which meant he could afford the bills. Lightning wasn’t rich enough for a car –it was pretty easier to rent one anyway- and the Black Faction always offered its employees top class ways of traveling. Like VIP’s passes for the fastest magnetic train of the occident world.

“We wouldn’t be able to drive in Times Square with a car; this place is such a mess now.” Squall replied.

“Wait, I know what this is about. You’re still paying for the last car that you destroyed, is that it?”

His teeth squeaked with annoyance at the reminder. For some reason, Squall was good at destroying cars. If they were cheaper, he could have made it a habit. After all, he could survive through most anything, for some reason. But they weren’t cheap and he had already paid three whole cars without having the time to own any of them for more than a few hours. For some reason, when it was a friend’s car –the other day, while saving Dajh, they were in Sazh’s car- he could be careful. But on mission, he normally avoided using cars.

Lightning laughed. How she could laugh right after talking about that baby she’d lost, it was beyond Squall.

“I guess I’ll never get you girls.”
“What?”

“Never mind. Come on. We have five days, but I don’t think that this Gainsborough’s girl have them too.”

They took the magnetic train and disembarked in the old Times Square Station. They had to show their Agents ID to walk off the wagon, since nobody normal could enter Times Square as it was now. After an incredible explosion in 15 396, this part of New York City had been contaminated with radiations that could kill a normal human right on the spot. Squall had already undergone a pretty rough training to be able to sustain the radiation on Mercure’s base. With her mako blood, Lightning could endure a lot of things that most human couldn’t. They carefully walked out of the train’s station. The buildings still standing on the outside streets where covered with the roots of burned plants, black birds and old unidentified graffiti.

“What’s that smell?” Lightning asked herself out loud.

“You don’t wanna know.”

There were dark clouds in the sky and the temperature was even hotter in this part of the city than in the rest of the United States. There were other “dead zone” like this over the world, but Lightning had never been to any of them and she certainly didn’t wish to try.

“So, the woman we’re looking for is supposedly an Ancient’s descendant. She has brown hair, green eyes, wears pink clothes often, ties her hair in a braid and… That about sums it up,” Lightning whispered, going back on what they knew about their target.

“What’s that smell?” Lightning asked herself out loud.

“Where do they get all that info on someone?”

“No idea. What do you got on your side of the reports?”

“Caucasian woman, about 26 years old, 5’3” tall.”

“And you’re the one surprised on the info I got?”

“Well, my rapports weren’t good enough to recognize her quickly in a crowd. You got the radar on?”

“Yeah. It’s detecting a lot of interferences. Like non human life forms.”

Squall had brought his gunblade once more. He never relied a lot on simple guns. Lightning had her own blade, in her belt, next to her gun. The radar in her hand was a small device that shined a little under the few rays of sun reaching through the dark clouds.

“I’d like to go unnoticed to the neighborhood.”

She checked the radar one last time and turned it off.

“It must be farther ahead. Near Central park’s crater.”

She pointed out a direction and they resumed to their walk. They weren’t doing much noise, and hid their shadows in those of the building surrounding the streets. The wind was burning hot and it felt hard to breath, but they were both experienced athlete and could take a lot more than that. But still, they were sweating bullet as they approached their destination.

Squall had never heard the stories of what Central’s park had looked like before the explosion that
had destroyed Times Square and almost half of New York. All he knew was that the burned and
naked earth around the cement’s trail had once been covered in fresh and green grass. It was hard
to picture such a thing in his mind. He was still thinking a bit of Rinoa, but managed to focus as he
heard some noises closing on them. Running footsteps on an uneven ground…

“Could be them.” he whispered.

“Could be anyone.” Lightning replied.

Exchanging only one look, they both agreed and hid behind debris that were lying around, to get a
chance to see who exactly was coming in their direction before to be seen by this anonym runner.
They were both on one side of the road, ready to surround the person who was going to run
between them. How the Black Faction’s agency could detect an ancient’s descendant around here
with all the possibilities there was, none of them could exactly tell. They were here to localize one
woman and bring her to safety and that was exactly what they intended to do.

A shot hit the bricks right above Lightning’s head and she ducked the falling pieces of scrap,
holding back a gasp of surprise. Squall clenched his teeth. This sure looked like it. But it felt a little
too lucky to stumble on their target at the first skirmish they met.

Then, he took back all his pessimist thoughts. A young woman with long brown hair tied in a loose
braid, dressed in pink looking out of breath and being chased after by a gang of Hypellos armed
with guns and rod ran past him.

Now, I’ve seen everything, he thought.

There weren’t a lot of chances that a girl fitting so much that Aeris Gainsborough’s description
could be someone else. And even if she wasn’t, Squall couldn’t let her be captured or hurt by those
Hypellos. Hypellos were water creature that couldn’t move pretty well on the ground usually. But
those Hypellos were mercenaries and were using jet rollers… They were a lot faster than they
should have, but fortunately, their natural clumsiness was saving some time for the poor Aeris. He
waited until the Hypellos went past him, so that they wouldn’t see him and Squall swiftly jumped
on his feet and exchanged a quick look with Lightning.

“I’ll catch up with them and keep the girl safe. You find a way to get rid of all those Hypellos.”

Lightning seemed ready to talk back, but he turned around and rushed off before that she could
decide what to do. There wasn’t much time to argue after all, the person they were supposed was
being pursued. And as Squall drew out his gunblade, he realized that the Hypellos were all
carrying flamethrower and machine guns. They were all wearing force bracelets to permit them to
carry such heavy equipment, and Squall realized that they weren’t chasing Aeris to just catch her.
They wanted to kill her. Unfortunately for their plot, their weaponry served better in close ranged
combat and Aeris had managed to keep a good distance between her pursuers and herself. But her
run was going a little erratic.

She needs help, now, Squall thought.

He raised his sword and pulled the trigger, aiming for the farthest Hypellos, the one getting closer
to his target. The alien fall to the ground, creating a lot of disarray in his comrades’ run, that had to
jump and stumble on him to keep going forward. Squall slashed through most of them. Aeris
looked over her shoulder, scared but surprised by the sudden disturbance in her pursuers’ run. She
slowed down seeing the guy dressed in black that was making his way through the Hypellos. For a
second, the blue and sharp eyes of the lion met with Aeris’ green and terrified stare. Something
deep inside Squall was moved by the expression in her face. But his mind was thinking as always,
faster than sound.

“Don’t stop running!” he called out to her.

Her eyes widened and she turned her head back. Squall rolled on himself to escape from the Hypellos’ shots and ran faster, to catch up with the young woman in pink. She was running slower than before, he could tell so. She looked exhausted.

“Don’t come near me!” she yelled at him, trying to get away while running ahead.

“I’m here to help you.” he shouted back.

“How… I don’t know you!”

She had one hand on her waist, as if she couldn’t take it anymore. The Hypellos were skating behind them with even more fervor since Squall had killed some of their comrades.

“Well, at least, I don’t want you dead.” the young man retorted to her.

She was about to reply but was cut off as the Hypellos opened fire on them. The blue flames from the flamethrower licked Aeris’ left leg and she stumbled on the ground, yelling from pain. Squall had been thinking—as always- on every little thing that could go have gone wrong and was ready even for that. He lifted her up before that she could entirely hit the ground and dragged her with him, running even faster. The shots were numerous and the bullets were hitting the ground and the building around them, but for some reason, the Hypellos could only miss the two humans before them.

“I can’t… I can't go any further.” Aeris pleaded, exhausted by both the run and the sudden pain of her burned ankle.

She could barely touch the ground with her left foot and Squall quickly scanned the area around them. The air felt heavy and way too hot for all that running and the Hypellos round cheeks were looking threatening next to their wide yellow eyes as he looked over his shoulder. There wasn’t much place to take cover, and Squall’s breathing was getting harder because of the radiations. He could face it for a little while, but his chest was oppressed and his eyes hurt a little. He closed them tightly for a moment. He’d thought he could stand this longer than that!

“They’re closing on us.” Aeris whispered while trying to find back her breath.

Squall wrapped an arm around her waist and carried her as he resumed his run. He knew that Lightning was having one hell of a harder time than him, but at least, he knew she was safe. He didn’t want to put her into trouble or any fight. That was why he was the one with Aeris right now. The girl had felt light at first, but she was getting heavier. And that meant the radiations were making him weaker. He blinked to chase the sweat drops from his eyes.

“I’ve got a friend out here. If anything happens to me, she’ll rescue you before that you know it.” Squall tried to comfort his target.

“What?!?”

Even if she was yelling in his ears, he thought that her voice sounded nice. There was something familiar within it. Something comforting.

“Hang on.” he simply replied as he turned around to face the Hypellos and raised his gunblade.
Aeris coiled up against him, her face white and her body trembling from both exhaustion and fear. Squall fired four or five rounds, all hitting their target, but it wasn’t enough to halt every Hypellos left. He asked himself where Lightning could be. And why he felt that each of his last missions had been lazily prepared lately. As if he wasn’t really up to the challenge anymore.

He turned his back on the Hypellos and resumed his run. This time, he was sure that the radiations were taking effect. His skin was burning him under his clothes. His sight was getting blurry. He let go of his gunblade, losing track on his thoughts. That never happened to him normally. But the heat combined with these radiations was too much for his organism. He turned in an alley, Aeris grabbing strongly to his neck as if he would let her go now.

“Are you okay?” she asked him.

“How about you?”

“I… I don’t know. Oh no, there’s no way out of this!”

Squall looked up, breathless, his chest hurting even more with the seconds passing by. This was a death end. Of all the turns he could have take! The heat must have been getting to his head. But this had never happened before. As he glared intently at the wall before them –as if it could make the dark bricks disappear- he caught a glimpse of something. Pink hair. Green eyes. Just a few seconds, no, a fraction of second’s sight. But he could swear that it was Lightning. And she had a plan. He just had to keep Aeris safe. And he’d said that he would, so he would.

“This… this will be over soon. Just do as I say for now.” he asked the girl still clutching at him.

“ Alright.” she hesitantly replied.

Who was that man? Why was he helping her? Was he really helping her, or would he only try to use her because she was an ancient? He’d to know she was one. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have come to save her. She had value only because she was one of the last ancients alive. And it had been a burden for most of her life, until now.

Then, she felt a wall against her back and Squall’s body was pressing against hers. She almost panicked at that feeling. He was so bigger than her. He felt heavy. He was all over her. She wanted him away. But she couldn’t make him move, he was way stronger than her.

“Think of me as your shield.” he said, forcing her to let go of his neck. “I want you safe. No matter what it'll take.”

“I don’t get it. I don’t…”

“I know you’re scared. And I’m really sorry. But I don’t have any other way.”

“Herez zey are! Zey can’t getsss away!”

“What will happen to you?” Aeris suddenly asked, realizing they were surrounded and Squall was protecting her with his own body as a shield.

He forced her to put her face down, in the hollow of his neck. She could feel his heavy breathing on her forehead. And the pain in her ankle felt so terrible. He wasn’t going to let them burn him up just to protect her?

“I don’t care.” he whispered to her.
And as she made herself as small as she could next to him, feeling his heart beating next to her face, she felt a pang of guilt cutting through her chest. How could he say something like that? He didn’t know her, but he wanted her safe, never caring about what could happen to himself. It was insane! She felt reassured by his big body pressed against hers and it felt so wrong at the same time. She wanted to tell him to get out of the way of their fire, it wasn’t his problem, he didn’t have to suffer for her or anything, she didn’t even know him, why was he doing all of this?

All she could blurt out, right before that the Hypellos started to fire, was:

“What’s your name?”

And Squall chuckled in response. She shivered at the sound of his laugh. It sounded so ironic and cold. As if there was no importance attached to name, no meaning. At least, not when he was the one being considered. She wanted to ask him why, to punch him, to get out and breathe freely, but she held back her breathing instead. And the flames hit them. He pushed her even more against the wall, and she gasped, being aware of the pain hitting him. The smell of burned skin and leather invaded her nose, but the worse was his grunts of suffering. There were a few gunshots resounding around them and the fire stop burning his back, but Squall couldn’t move immediately. It hurt a lot more than he would have thought. It was as if his whole back and shoulders were being eaten by ants, million of them. It burned deep, so deep he thought the flames had went right through him.

The hot air hitting his freshly burned flesh felt cool for mere seconds. Then, it was a living hell. And at this point, he thought of Rinoa. Just for an instant. And he moaned of pain, unclenching his teeth, letting his plaint grow to its fullest. Damn, it hurt even to breath. His hair was on fire and Aeris managed to put it out after struggling to get one hand out of his grasp. Her hand felt so soft against his skin. He breathed out slowly. Breathed in. Started to cough as the air was way too hot in his lungs.

“Are you okay?!”

“Squall!” Lightning called his name, jumping off the ceiling. Aeris pushed gently against her savior’s chest to try to understand what was going on.

Lightning grabbed him by the arm and he let go of the brown haired girl, taking one step back. His eyes weren’t cold anymore, he looked so hurt. And for some reason, Aeris felt that it wasn’t only physically.

“Squall, what have you done to yourself? You’re all covered in burns, you’re…”

“The mission report said to protect her at all costs.” He replied softly.

His voice was really small and almost boyish. He tried to stand tall, but as Lightning pulled on his arm, to shake him up, he lost balance and fall to the ground.

Aeris fall on her knees, her ankle still throbbing from the burn. And as she saw Squall’s back, she felt her stomach churned. His flesh was red and black from all the burns. She could pass out just because of the pain from her ankle, and he…

“Squall, hang on, alright? Squall, if you hear me, answer me!” Lightning pleaded.

She sounded as a little girl as she gently brushed off his locks from his face and bit her lower lip. Her best friend was lying on his side, hardly breathing, hurting so much she almost couldn’t recognize him. And this was her fault. He had asked her to find a way to get rid of the Hypellos and she had taken too much time.
“I’m… I’m okay Light. It would take a lot more than that to...” He was interrupted by a violent
coughing and soon, coughed up blood, as Lightning was shaking from head to toe, trying not to cry.

“You moron! You should have told me the radiations were getting to you. I would have go alone
and…”

“I’d never let you do that. Anyway, I was alright, just till a moment ago.”

“Why did he protect me like that?” Aeris softly asked, really shaken by everything that had
happened until now.

It was only then that Lightning remembered their mission. She slowly looked up, as if she was
scared that not staring anymore at Squall could make him die or something. As she met Aeris’
gaze, she felt a little guiltier. She had to bring them both out of this hell. ASAP.

“Doesn’t he value himself at all?”

“He’s never done anything like that before.” Lightning admitted.

“So then, why would he sacrifice himself for a pure stranger? I don’t owe anything like that.”

“Squall, could you answer her? I’ll get you out of here right after, I promise.”

“I don’t… wanna hold you up. Don’t waste time or energy on me.”

“Aren’t you listening to us?! She asked why you protected her like that? You could have jump on
the ceiling or something, you could have beaten all of those guys and…”

“I couldn’t. My sight was blurry; I had let my guard down. Had no more gunblade. It was some
luck there was a dead end here, since I couldn’t run any further. The radiations are too strong
around here. I have no mako or ancient blood to prevent me from feeling it.”

Lightning felt angry at him for his last comment, but then again, he was right. And she was so
scared that he could leave her now. Cloud was gone in outer space, she had no one left than her
best friend, Squall. And as she thought about it, she could understand why he would have done
this. Rinoa’s loss was still pretty clear in his mind. He was unstable.

“It’s not an answer.” Aeris said as she held up her hands and slightly touched Squall’s burned back.

He winced at her touch, but she gently stroked his hair before to look back at his back. Her hands
started to glow with a strange green light and she healed his burns, making his breathing way
easier.

“Now, tell me why, please.” she asked again.

“Why what?”

His mind was still pretty far from them.

“Why you protected me like that? You could have been killed.”

“I didn’t want to lose someone I don’t know again.”

Both girls looked at him with sheer surprise and confusion. He had a weak smile on his face and he
fainted before that they could ask him anything else. Lightning sighed from relief as she saw that
Aeris’ treatment had at least helped him recover from the burns. Looking up at the brown haired
girl, she managed to smile.

“Well, we were supposed to rescue you, but we’re both a little on edge, so, I guess you couldn’t get anything better around those times. Sorry for the scare. He’s a lot more serious normally.”

“Well, you did rescue me.” Aeris observed.

“And now, it’s time to get back to Boston, where Squall will get some treatment and where we can keep you somewhere safe. It must have been hard, being chased around like that.”

“Why did you save me, really?”

“Because our boss ordered us to. But I guess that Squall had his own reasons. He’s having a hard time. Can you get up? Here, I’ve got a medic kit, we’re going to fix you and then, we’re outta here.”

Lightning had managed to regain her composure as she understood that Squall hadn’t gone mad or suicidal. He was just depressed. It was so normal given his current situation.

“What is going to happen to me then?”

“I don’t know. Your name’s Aeris, right? I’m Lightning. And he’s Squall.”

“Are these code names?”

“Actually, they’re our real names.”

Aeris smiled at that. Those two were a weird pair, but Lightning felt friendly. Maybe was she friendlier than usual because Squall had been badly hurt. Maybe was it because Aeris had gone through so much already that Light didn’t feel like forcing her to put up with her usual attitude.

“Let’s get out of here.”

…

An hour later, Squall was being hospitalized for severe exposure to alien radiations. The doctors weren’t too happy about this, especially when they discovered the few burns left on him. It was a miracle that he was still alive. But he was and shall survive, if he could get a few weeks of peace, lying down in a bed, in the Black Faction’s hospital. Lightning was relieved that he was going to get better, but pretty sadden to see how hurt he still was since Rinoa’s betrayal. It was only natural, and he should have asked for a few days off, but the agency was running her cases pretty fast and it was hard to keep up with her at some point.

Aeris had been hospitalized in a room close of Squall’s own room, at her asking. She wanted to keep an eye on her savior. Moreover, she wanted to understand his final answer to her question, about not wanting to lose someone that he didn’t know. It sounded wrong, but somehow, it seemed to fit with the character she had barely met in that incredible pursuit.

After going through a lot of test to make sure she wasn’t radioactive or dangerous for others, Lightning get out of the hospital. She wanted to check on Squall, but he had to be left alone for a while, since the radiations had infiltrated his body. The hospital people didn’t know that Lightning was alright and could sustain the radiations, since she had mako blood. Her mako had become so pure that no one could see it in any blood test result. That was why nobody knew before that fateful mission two years ago what she really was. After all this time, Lightning wasn’t all that sure herself.
“Ring. Ring. Ring.”

“Hi, Lightning speaking.”

“Hey, Lightning, nice going in that mission with the Ancient. Too bad Squall got that hurt. He’ll be hospitalized for weeks now. And I really need you on the field. With a working partner.”

“Why don’t you pick another team for him, Rufus?”

“It’s sir, for you, dear Lightning.”

“Alright, sir, why don’t you just use your brain and pick another team?”

“Well, because I just got myself an agent ready for some action. And I need to test him on the field. And you two should get along. I don’t know if the name Raven rings a bell for you.”

“What did you just say?”

To be continued…
Chapter 7

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part VII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 6th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.

Agents chosen for the mission: Agent Lightning. Agent Raven.

Warning to the superiors: This is the first mission of Raven since some times. His radiant powers could get out of hand, but this is a test mission before anything else.

Message from G.I. four. End of transmission

…

“And he hung up just like that!”

“I can totally picture Rufus doing that.” Squall replied to the angry Lightning.

He was still in the hospital. His state wasn’t all that much stable and he couldn’t get up or move too much. Black spots had started to appear on his skin and he looked pretty beaten, barely sitting in his bed. The burn had reappeared on his back, many times even after that they were treated and re-treated. The radiations he had been exposed to were taking their toll and it wasn’t a little price to pay. His voice was still pretty weak and it pained Lightning to see her friend like that. She had no news of Cloud nor Serah and had went through the last days with a lot of questions on her mind. Rufus had asked her to do a mission with Raven. Couldn’t it be her Raven? Noctis?

“I really wish you could come with me so that I would be able to keep an eye on you. You look so miserable like this.”

“Thanks.” Squall answered to her last comment, looking pretty bored to be described as miserable. He certainly was, and he knew it pretty well.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m still so angry with myself for not seeing this coming.”

“All I did was my job.” Squall tried to defend himself.

“It didn’t sound like that. When you said you didn’t want to lose someone else that you didn’t know. It didn’t make sense, coming from you.”

She was sitting next to his bed and smiled vaguely as she whispered her observation. Squall looked at her with a mix of disbelief and shock. He really had said something like that?!

“Somehow, still, as I think about it, I managed to understand what you meant.”

“I didn’t mean anything.” he cut her off. “I was rambling nonsense because of the pain.”

He was looking the other way and Lightning knew he wouldn’t accept the truth, even if she was to
“I’m worried to let you here, like this. With Rinoa gone, you haven’t much company left, have you?”

“I don’t mind being alone.” he lied. “And anyway, I’m under sedatives most of the time…”

“It’s just so weird to think that you’re stuck in a hospital room like this. Ever since we started out as a team, you almost never got hurt during our missions.”

“Never too gravely, I guess… Anyway, you got that mission with Noctis that starts today, don’t you?”

“Well, I don’t know if that Raven guy is really Noctis, it could be another agent. They say they want to test him on the field and Noctis has been an agent for some time now after all.”

“I don’t want to disappoint you, Light, but there never was two agents with the same code name before.”

“I know that.”

They remained silent for a moment, Lightning trying to figure out something to tell Squall that could really make him feel better. He looked weak and vulnerable in this hospital gown sitting in his bed. He had a large and dark spot of burned skin on his left cheek under his scar. And he coughed a little after a few minutes, and the cough was real and coming from deep within his chest. His body was slowly decaying from the exposure to the radiations, and the doctors were constantly treating him to keep him in good conditions. He could survive this, but this was going to be harsh on him. He had to overcome the radiations and heal up. Lightning could stand being next to him without any trouble, since she had her mako blood to protect her from the remnant of the radiations he was exuding. Even with all this weakness he was showing, he still looked cold in some way, as if he wanted to keep some distance with her, to stay in his corner…

“Look, I didn’t come here to bring you down, Squall, all I really wanted to say was to… that I wanted you to heal up well. If you’d die, I don’t know what I’d do…”

“I’m not going to die.” he sighed.

Lightning looked up, putting on her “serious worried” face to make him understand she wasn’t playing around. Squall bit his lower lip and looked down to his hands, which were lying on his knees, motionless. He felt so helpless, so useless!

“I can’t die right now, Light. I still got to punch Seifer in the face once or twice, at least.”

She laughed and was a bit reassured. The other day, on their mission, he almost sounded suicidal and she was scared to leave him like that, in the middle of a depression.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’ll make sure not to let you forget about that.”

Her beeper beeped suddenly, making her jump.

“I guess you should head back to headquarters to get on with your new mission.” Squall half smiled.

He was a bit mad to see her going in another team with another guy than him, but he wasn’t jealous or something. Just a little possessive and protective. Lately, Lightning hadn’t been like herself. He
hoped that her partner really was Noctis. Maybe that would help her.

“I guess so. Well then, be sure to take a lot of rest and recover.”

“I will.”

Lightning wanted to tell more, but her beeper insisted and she walked out. As she headed through the corridor, she met Aeris. The young woman had had her wound treated the first day she came in and she looked a lot more cheerful than she had.

“Are you going to see Squall?” Lightning asked her.

“Why… yes. I… I’m trying to keep an eye on him. He saved my life after all.”

“That’s really kind of you. Take good care of him.”

“I’ll do my best.” Aeris responded.

And her smile gave some confidence to Lightning. Whatever was waiting for her out there, Squall was in good hands here. Aeris was a gentle girl with a pure heart. She really owed to be rescued. The young agent just wished she could have made this rescue mission without as much casualties.

…

“Alright, agent Lightning. I’m glad to see that you’re finally here.” Rufus hissed between his teeth as Lightning entered his office.

She walked it, thinking about sitting down in front of his desk in one of the chair that was waiting for visitor to the office.

“No need to take a seat, dear, you’ll be leaving in a few minutes, or less. Your target is leaving in an important airship in an hour and you have to get on that airship. It shouldn’t be too hard. We reserved you a suite.”

“Oh yeah? But where’s that Raven you talked about the other day? And what kind of airship…”

“Oh oh, calm down, Lightning. Here’s the files that should help you understanding and preparing your mission. As for your partner, he’s right behind you.” Rufus observed.

He was so obnoxious, Lightning wanted to punch him, but she just turned around and gasped in shock as she saw him! The grey raven hair was even messier than she remembered. But it looked soft and she knew that it was. His golden eyes were half closed and he barely looked at her. But Lightning recognized him nevertheless. His face, his posture, the feeling in the room. She hadn’t manage to realize his presence a moment ago. He was like a shadow between the shadows, hidden even further than darkness itself. But as she stared at him, she couldn’t help but get the impression his presence was overwhelming. He hadn’t been around for two years and suddenly, he just popped in the scenery as a picture fallen from an album. But he was way more alive. Her heart raced in her chest and she felt her cheeks burning as she tried to stop staring at him.

Noctis was playing it cool, but deep inside, he was falling apart. She was even prettier than he remembered. She looked so angry with him. And that pissed him off enough to give him back some strength. He wouldn’t let her walk on his pride like she had right after the terrible accident that had seen them breaking up. He wanted to say her name, to tell her how he had missed her, or to run away, but he just stood where he was, his back leant against the wall, his arms lazily crossed over his chest.
“Long time no see, heh?”

That was the very same cocky attitude he had when they had started working together before. Lightning turned back to Rufus, her face bright red from anger.

“You’re not putting me in team with him!”

“He was one of our only choices for that mission and I thought that the other agent that could have gone along with you would make you even angrier, Lightning.”

“Oh really?”

“You know, you’re posing as a married couple in this airship to track down some intel on Seymour? I thought that you could do that a little better with Raven than with Reno. Not that Reno would mind, I’m sure we could arrange this…”

And that’s how Lightning accepted to be teamed up with Noctis for the first time since two whole years.

…

As they walked out of the office, both of them were really careful not to walk too closely, so that they wouldn’t touch each other by accident. There was something separating them, as an invisible barrier. A borderline they couldn’t cross. Noctis remembered the last time he had seen her, in the hospital, two years ago.

He had threatened every doctor and nurses approaching Lightning, until that they consented to treat her with materias. She had been back up on her feet in a few minutes, while he was still half dead. And the first thing she had done as they’d met for the last time; had been to punch him right in the guts. He had collapsed at her feet, too weak to take even one shot. And that had been as a final betrayal, that one she couldn’t take. Her harsh words were still resounding in his mind as he was walking next to her. Fortunately for him, his phone rang before that he could start to mourn and he picked it up, knowing already that it was…

“Stella?”

Lightning raised one eyebrow at the name, which was clearly a girl. Was it his girlfriend? So quick to show up. Her fist tightened and she felt her heart skipping a bit. She wasn’t jealous now, was she? She hadn’t seen him for two years and she had been the one to push him away, why would she be…

“Hey Noctis! Wow, you’ve recognized me before that I could even talk! How are you doing?” Stella asked in the phone.

“Fine, fine. How about you?”

“Well, I’m working my way with the agency to be sent to the same airship you and Lightning will be on. Gotta keep an eye on you, you’ve done an incredible recovery, but I want to make sure there will be no relapse.”

“You shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Well, it’s part of my job! Have you met Lightning already?”

“Yes.” he carefully answered.
Noctis sure liked the idea of getting Lightning jealous, if she still could be, that was, but he wasn’t going to make her angry before their very first mission together. He didn’t want to go right back to the hospital.

“How is it going? Is she mad? Happy?”

“Pissed.”

“Okay, I guess I should call you later. I just wanted to say that if you needed any help or someone to talk to, I won’t be too far.”

“Yeah. Thanks. Take care, Stella.”

He hung up on that, hoping that he hadn’t let out too much in front of Lightning while he hadn’t said too little to Stella. It was nice to still have a friend that he could count on. After looking everywhere for his old friends from two years ago, he had discovered that most were dead, had disappeared or had settled down and couldn’t see him even if they remembered him. He was restarting his entire life over, from the beginning. He still had his name, his job, his features, his memories, and it was about all.

He held the front door opened for Lightning and she walked past him, looking right in front of her, without even a thank you. He could tell she was mad, but he wasn’t sure if it was his fault anymore. But if she wanted to play it the hard way, he would play by her rules. He had missed her, but not that cold part of her personality. Someone had to teach her a lesson about forgiving. She had had one hard life and a lot of hard times, but seeing her acting like that remembered him the first opinion he had over her. She was hiding something. And moreover, she was a spoiled brat. She hadn’t been one because of her parents, but her brother Cloud had been overprotective with her. And when Cloud wasn’t, Squall had been and then, Noctis had taken his turn in this protecting Lightning play. The play was over and Lightning didn’t need anyone’s protection anymore. At least, she wanted it to be clear in the way she acted.

“We’re taking a train for the airship dock, am I right?” she asked.

“You sure are. But spare me the obnoxious talking. We should go over our cover’s story on our way there. And I won’t have you acting like that for the three weeks we’re spending on this mission, princess.”

Lightning bit her tongue not to talk back, but she had to admit she hadn’t been very friendly. But she felt so mad for being imposed to be with him like that! She would have preferred to choose to see him again. To be warned before, at least. He was the same as always, but all her memories with him were so perfect and now he was acting as a stranger.

“I thought you would have sent me a message or something, in two years.” she finally said, getting in the train first.

Noctis followed her, painfully aware that she was right to be angry on that. He could have given her a sign or something. The fact he was in a coma all along wouldn’t be his excuse. He wasn’t going to tell her that. It would be too easy to gain her sympathy by gaining her pity. He wanted to play this one fair and square. She hadn’t written either and hadn’t given him any phone call.

What was I supposed to write, huh? Saying I’m sorry a thousand times wouldn’t change anything… he thought.
“Alright, let’s sum it up. For how long have we known each other?” Lightning asked.

“Three years.” he answered to her.

It was a lie, they had known each other for around five years, but they needed a story for the people that would be around them on that cruiser airship…

“When did we start going out together?”

“About two years ago.”

“How did you propose to me?”

“I gave you a Chinese cookie with the question written on the paper inside.”

“That sounds so childish.” she commented.

“I bet you’d liked it if I really had.”

“In your dreams!” she answered bitterly.

They both sighed inwardly. This was such a harsh reunion. How had they come to that?

“Alright, my turn…” Noctis decided. “What’s my favorite color?”

“Black.”

“Favorite food?” he asked then.

“Any kind of meat. But you’re crazy over sushi…”

He smiled at that, before to answer back with what he remembered of her. For all of these questions, they had decided to keep it on what they already knew. It was easier that way for both of them. And there was something reassuring in the fact they still remembered everything.

“And you prefer tonberry’s meat, and pastas. And your favorite color’s red.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“When’s my birthday?”

“You hate birthdays. The only one you ever celebrated was mine.” she said. “And I’ve always thought it was pretty sad, but…”

“Yeah, I know. Fortunately, I wasn’t born in December, so the subject shouldn’t be brought up by anyone.”

They remained silent for a moment, trying to forget all the other things they were remembering with each new question. He hated birthdays since the terrorists that had destroyed his family had made it on the very date of his birthday. That day was a day to cry his parents and nothing else now. But he had always made her the nicest birthdays’ presents.

“Do we have any step family problem?” he asked to change of subject.

“You don’t get along with my brother, but my sister really likes you. As for me, I can’t stand your mother.”
“Alright. As long as you don’t tell me why.”

They were still making some of the facts up, so that it would give them a chance to keep in mind that they were on a mission. It wasn’t supposed to get personal.

“Are we…” Noctis paused for a moment, trying to find the right words. “Are we madly in love or just… happy together?”

Lightning was surprised by his questions, but it was important after all. They had been together before, so it should be easy to pretend, but at the same time, it hurt to think they were going to act as if they were in love just to pretend and keep their cover to spy over some crazy guy and…

“I’d say… I’d say we’re happy together, but not really demonstrative in public. You’re shy after all.”

“Yeah. And you hate to appear weak in public.”

She cleared her throat, blushing a little even if she tried to hold it back. He gave her a light smile and for a moment, he was the Noctis from back then, when there was no pain to share, but only joy.

“Tell me, Noct, for real this time. What happened to you in the last two years? Why haven’t we met until now?”

“I thought you were angry with me. And I’ve been real busy with missions all over the place. And I got myself in the hospital for a couple of months after the moonbase’s mission.” he lied. “I guess we were both waiting for one of us to make the first step.”

“Who’s that Stella?”

“My physician. And a friend. What about you anyway? Still single?”

“To be honest, I’ve been single ever since we broke up. And don’t go asking me if we’re planning to have children for fun or to test me. I’m still having nightmares about it.”

He looked the other way. He hadn’t meant to ask her about that. But he was surprised she hadn’t managed to move on. They were in the same boat, at least. Maybe he could help her get over it? Another hope grew in his mind as he realized what she had just said. There hadn’t been any other man in her life after him. Could that mean she hadn’t been able to get him out of her mind? Did he still have the chance to one day call her “his girl” again?

“I see.”

“Hey, look up, we’re supposed to be freshly married and happy about it.”

“Rufus is still toying with all of his agents, isn’t he?”

Lightning didn’t answer, but this fact was clear as day. They’d been sitting in front of each other for the past half-hour, asking themselves what they should know of each other as a freshly married couple. Their cabin was small but comfortable and a little beep announced them that they were approaching their destination.

“I guess we should get ready.” Lightning said while getting up.

Noctis got up and took the wallets they had been given after entering the train. In those wallets
were their wedding clothes. He had already his pants on and quickly changed to the tight white shirt and black vest, pesting against the moron that had decided he would wear a tie on his wedding. Ties and Noctis had never get along. Lightning, on her side, had to change entirely, but she quickly undressed herself and started putting on the white silky dress. As Noctis was busy with his tie, she wasn’t as perturbed as she should have been by the idea he was right next to her.

“Hey, Noct, stop fighting with that poor tie, you’ll only make it look worse. Give me a hand here, would you?”

She couldn’t manage to close her dress in her back. It was made with clips and strings and for a second, the poor guy thought he wouldn’t manage to picture how all that worked. Noctis helped her, a bit clumsily, since it was the first time of his life he was confronted to a wedding dress. After five minutes, the dress was closed. Lightning turned around to arrange his tie correctly, making Noctis blush suddenly.

“What is it? It’s not the first time I’m doing this for you, ain’t I?”

“I’m trying to get this idea in my head. That you’re just pretending to be my wife.”

She looked so delicate in that white dress. Her skin was soft, he could tell after stroking her back while trying to close her dress. And suddenly, he remembered how long it had been since he had held a woman in his arms for the last time. Since he had held a woman that he loved.

“Don’t… don’t say it like that.”

“Please, don’t be scared now.”

“I’m not scared!”

As she said that, she looked up and realized just how close they were. It felt right, they had been so closer before. But she was scared. Scared that her heart and body still wanted this man to be her man. And he was playing her husband. Her brand new husband, of all things!

“I don’t know if I can only pretend all of this.” he whispered to her, wrapping his arms around her.

She kept her hands on his torso, in case she’d need to push him away, but she sure didn’t want to.

“I’ve missed you so much, Light, you can’t began to imagine.”

How could he be saying that while they were still fighting just a moment ago? Why was he so gentle after all the harsh things she had said? Their life together was over, this was just a play, a cover. But his hand was on her neck and his lips was on her own and he was kissing her before she could even understand what was happening. It was as if time had stopped. There hadn’t been any accident, nor two years to separate them. He was lighting up the same fire inside of her. The same feelings. She kissed him back. She wanted to cry. From sadness or from joy, she couldn’t tell. She felt complete in his arms. But this was wrong, she couldn’t let this happen now!

“Noctis stop,” she asked him as they parted a little from each other.

He looked at her in the eyes, afraid to see any fear in them. And there was. He had let her down before and she couldn’t let it in so quickly right after that. For god sake, she didn’t know if he was just toying with her or if he was serious.

“If you really want me to.”
He didn’t try to kiss her again. But he didn’t let her go out of his arms.

“What are you doing?”

*I know it’s too soon, but I want you, Light. I want you so much that it hurts,* he thought. *I can’t hold it back. I’m too vulnerable to resist to it.*

“I don’t want to take advantage of the situation, but I don’t think we ever got things straight about you and me. And I need to know where we stand. Cause this doesn’t have to be all pretending.”

“This is just a mission, there’s no we, there’s no you and I. I’m not ready to…”

“To trust me, huh?”

She bit her lips, feeling his body tensing a little. He was getting angry now. He had every right to. But this was too fast.

“I don’t know what you want out of this, Noctis, but if you really wanted to be with me, you should have come before to have such an occasion… I mean…”

He let go of her at that. If she knew what his situation was, maybe she would understand, but… It felt as if they’d been away only for a few weeks in his head. He still loved her and nothing was over in his heart. How could she ever understand that?

“I’m sorry, Light. Seeing you like that, from so up close brought back too many memories. There hasn’t been…”

He stopped dead in his track, not wanting to look vulnerable. He sure was, but she had no need to see it.

“Don’t try to tell me that there were no girls in your life for the past two years. You’re a man and you always were pretty dependable. And if you thought I didn’t hear about that Stella a moment ago…”

Noctis looked puzzled for an instant. Was she simply jealous? No, of course, it was more than that.

“Stella’s my physician.” he tried to defend himself.

“I don’t care what she is, you’re a big boy and you can live your life as you please. All I want is that this mission remains a mission and that you don’t try to take advantage of the situation in any way. We can be friends, and we can work together. But I want it to remain at that. So keep in mind that all the things I could say or do in public will be nothing else than a pretend for the sake of our covers.”

As she spoke, she was leaning closer to him, her fists tightened and her eyes flashing with fury; and he backed off to finally whisper:

“Alright, alright.” as he sat back down, to put some distance between them.

When she was that aggressive, there was no way to talk back, Noctis knew that pretty well.

“Why would you need a physician?” Lightning asked then.

“I thought you didn’t care.” he ironically retorted.

“I don’t. But does that mean you’re on rehab or something?”
“I was. Got caught in an explosion sometimes ago.” he casually answered.

“An explosion?!”

“There’s no mission when there’s no risk, wasn’t that how you used to say it?”

“In two years, you haven’t changed at all.” she sighed.

...

An hour later, they were entering the airship, arm in arm, smiling and laughing just as newlywed truly in love were. Only a few people could tell that it was fake and Lightning herself was a bit scared by how good they were at pretending. Because something deep inside her didn’t want to pretend all of this. And she could have sworn that Noctis was enjoying her company. He had been switching his mood just to match hers, being nasty when she was and turning all sweet when she was letting her guard down. But, still, as they proceed in the airship, she felt his agent’s instincts awakening. As he held her in his arms to take a few pictures as souvenirs, he whispered to her ear, asking her to look slightly to her right. He had already spotted their target. Seymour.

“Smile!” the photographer said.

They were smiling and Lightning really felt good in Noctis’ arms. But the words he was whispering to her weren’t of love, but of warning.

“If it’s all a pretend, at least, I want you to know that we’re really a team in this. And I want you to be careful out there, partner. Seymour does really nasty work. And I don’t want our honeymoon to get ugly.”

“I can take care of myself, you know.” she whispered back to him.

“This time, I won’t fail you, Light.” he said.

His voice got really soft at that and Lightning felt her heart twisting in her chest. How she wanted to believe him. How she wanted to trust him and go back at what their life was before…

I won’t give you any chance to fail me, Noctis, rest assure, she thought to herself.

And she raised her head, looking at him, smiling. Noctis wanted this smile to be for real. But as she gently brought one hand up to his cheek and lead his face down to hers, so that he would kiss her, she murmured:

“This is only a pretend, Raven.”

And her lips had never tasted as bittersweet before. This was another of her revenges for what he had let happen to her, for sure. And it hurt to realize it. But Noctis kissed her nevertheless. He knew that a part of her wasn’t pretending. And as he deepened the kiss and as she kissed him back, he was sure of it. She wasn’t entirely lost. There was still hope for them. He just had to persuade her to give him a second chance.

The bouquet of flowers she was holding rolled to the ground and a young woman blond woman smiled in the few people walking around the married couples coming in the honeymoon ship. Stella was meeting Lightning for the first time. And if Noctis hadn’t been in a coma for the last two years, she could have sworn that those two had never left each other and were a real couple. And as she smiled, she felt something inside of her that hurt with each more second she spend looking at them together. It was burning and her throat hurt and her eyes were filling with water.
Noctis looked so…

You can’t Stella, you can’t. He’s your patient. He shouldn’t even be your friend, so why would you feel jealous of this girl? she thought desperately.

She turned around, to make sure he wouldn’t spot her if he was to ever let go of his dear Lightning. She felt so bitter suddenly, this was so wrong.

“I need some air,” she whispered to herself.

“Why don’t you come with me then? I just got married and I sure need fresh air!” a younger girl said to Stella on high pitch voice.

“What? Are you… talking to me?”

“Yes, yes, sis! Come on! My man got one hell of a suite and our balcony is FA-BU-LOUS for fresh air!”

“But I…”

Before that she could even understand what the young and cheerful girl was talking about, she was being dragged by a crazy Rikku. On the other side, Noctis and Lightning had broken apart to get back some air. Lightning was blushing a bit, furious to have let herself go that far right after saying this was all a pretend. He was still turning her on and this whole mission was going to be quite difficult for her, especially since she wanted to stay professional with her partner.

“Hey, Light. Whose Seymour’s wife already?”

“A Rikku girl. Pretty younger than him. Why are you asking?”

“Well, I’m just guessing that it’s time we decide of our plan as how we’ll get the info we need on him.”

“I guess you’re right.”

She was even more furious to see how unmoved he was right after kissing her like that. Noctis wasn’t going to make this easy for her. She wanted to pretend, alright, but he wouldn’t give her the pleasure of falling for it. She would be the first to beg him to stop this farce and get things straight. She was playing with her words. She just tried to hide from him because she was scared of what could happen if she let him back in.

“So, Mister Caelum, madam Caelum. Now that the pictures are taken, would you want to have a tour of the airship, or the keys of your suite?” The photographer and room service’s guy asked them.

“Ahem.” Noctis cleared his throat before to answer him with a laugh. “How about a tour, darling?”

“That sounds wonderful, sweetie.” Lightning answered, sounding over girlie.

“Then, if you would follow me.” the guy started, turning around to guide them.

“Oh, I’m sorry, man, I never mentioned we need company on this tour. We’ve got our map and all, we should be alright on our own.”

Noctis winked exaggeratedly at the young man and he understood, finding an excuse to disappear and let them some privacy.
“If you ever call me darling with that tone again.” Lightning hissed.

“And if you could spare me that voice for the whole trip, I’d be grateful too. I can’t stand this kind of morons.”

“Neither can I.”

“Guess you haven’t changed that much either.” he smiled.

“Enough with all of that. Let’s get changed and go check where Seymour’s suite is.”

“Now you’re talking.”

It didn’t feel entirely right to pretend to get along. But the old habits were coming back. And both of them felt better in getting along at least for working together, instead of bickering with each other.

To be continued.
Chapter 8

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part VIII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 6th

Location: Planet Earth, United States, Boston

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.

Agents chosen for the mission: Agent Lightning. Agent Raven.

Warning to the superiors: This is the first mission of Raven since some times. His radiant powers could get out of hand, but this is a test mission before anything else.

Message from G.I. four. End of transmission

Lightning and Noctis had spent their whole afternoon visiting the airship, acting as a perfect newlywed couple, but mostly spotting the place for bugs, cameras, mics, and of course, intel. They managed to find Seymour’s suite, learn who his wife was, meet with them – for a very brief encounter – all while appearing perfectly normal. They even danced in the ballroom for half an hour and it was past eleven as Noctis sat on their bed, declaring that their room was secured and that they could talk freely.

His partner had smiled at him, before to decide to go and take a long hot shower. Noctis looked pretty beat and his expressions were softening, becoming like those he had once they were a real couple. That was hard to withstand and Light preferred to get some free space, even for only a short while. He looked so cute when he yawned and stretched himself like he did.

A few minutes later, when Lightning came back in their room, which was incredibly luxurious in both furniture and decorations, she discovered her “husband” sound asleep on their bed. He was lying on his back, his eyes closed and his mouth open. He hadn’t removed any of his clothes, not even his shoes.

“Falling asleep as easily as ever. But are you sleeping for real, Noctis?”

Lightning first tried calling his name, gently, and then a bit louder. As he didn’t flinch, she assumed he was sleeping. She went to his side of the bed, shaking his head.

“Still acting as a little kid too, huh?”

She removed his shoes and tossed them aside. He couldn’t sleep like this, he would eventually feel uncomfortable and wake up if he stayed this way. She got on the bed, standing on her knees and observed Noctis’ features with more care than she had when he was still up.

His hair looked so messy and unruly. He was smiling slightly in his sleep, and she knew he wasn’t faking this smile. His skin looked pale, as if he hadn’t been out enough. And his breathing was uneven, but Lightning couldn’t tell if it was his snoring that came out every now and then or just her mind playing tricks on her. With a sigh, she started undoing the buttons of his shirt and
managed to get him out of the black clothing. She knew how he liked to sleep usually. And she always liked to treat him like that when he would fall asleep from exhaustion. She was a bit clumsy with her hands and her fingers brushed against his skin for an instant. There were more scars on his chest than she remembered.

He moaned a little in his sleep, before to whisper:

“Mom.”

And Lightning felt her heart shudder in front of that word. She had been a mom, for such a long time and such a short moment… Serah’s mom. But never the mother of her own child. She shook her head. Noctis wasn’t talking to her. He wanted his own mother. The one that had died so many years ago already.

“Oh Noctis. Why do you have to be so cute? You’re making this way too hard on me.”

Noctis shifted his head a little, and she could have sworn he was awake, but his eyes were close and he simply smiled, and snored once more.

“Alright. I guess you were really beat from our wedding day.” she joked to herself.

She remarked his belt and removed it from his pants to make sure he wouldn’t hurt himself in his sleep or something. Then, she gently turned him around so that she could pull the covers out and push him under the sheets of their bed. She brushed his hair, feeling a knot building up in her throat. This was real. It was Noctis. They were together. But why then couldn’t she be utterly happy about it? Why was she so furious deep inside and feeling so moved on the other side?

“Goodnight Noctis.” she whispered to him before to slip herself under the covers.

Still sleeping, Noctis turned to his side, turning his back on her at the same time. Lightning knew he wasn’t doing this consciously, but somehow, it still hurt. She crossed her arms and turned to look at the other side of the room.

*Talk about some honeymoon,* she thought.

…”

In the middle of the night, Lightning was woken up by strange noises. First thing she knew, there were arms wrapped around her. Strong arms. And the smell wasn’t that of her brother or her friend Squall. She frowned before to remember she was with Noctis. He certainly had turned around in his sleep and hugged her unwillingly. She smiled to herself, before to concentrate on the noises that had woke her up.

The room was dark and she could see only shadows of the furniture around her. But she could hear the cracking of the wooden floor and wall. She felt Noctis’ breathing on her neck and shivered between his arms. Someone was around here. She could hear his footsteps. The noise of something against their door. Jingling sound of keys being toyed with… She tried to turn around, to get a better view of the door, since it was on the side of Noctis and she had been turning her back to the door in her sleep. But Noctis snuggled against her, making it impossible for her to move. She sighed. That was her Noctis for sure!

“Hey, Noctis!” she whispered.

“Hmmm.”
“Noctis, wake up.” she insisted, grabbing his arm and shaking him up a little.

“It’s way too early.” he complained.

She couldn’t tell if he was awake or not, but she knew she was on the right track. Soon, he’d be awake.

“Come on, Noct, wake up.” she tried again.

He snored in her ears.

“Noctis, don’t play this game with me, or I’m going to punch you so hard…”

“Could you calm down and give me a chance to sleep, Lightning?”

“Don’t you hear it too?”

“Hear what?!”

She managed to turn around in his arms and put two fingers on his lips, to have him talking lower.

“Listen.”

The jingling noise of keys was still there, right in the corridor, in front of their room. Noctis tensed up, concentrating on the noise. Was someone trying to enter their room? Had they been spotted that fast?

“Maybe a drunk guy trying to find his room.”

“He’s not laughing or talking loudly, he’s just playing with his keys, and he had for some times now.” she retorted under her breath.

As she finished her sentence, there was a knock on the door.

“Excuse me, room service, do you need anything?” a voice came from behind the door.

Lightning frowned and Noctis’ mouth hanged open with surprise for a moment. None of them responded and after a few minutes, footsteps walking away could be heard, before to faint in the distance. The two agents looked at each other with bewilderment.

“Are they checking on us or something?” she whispered.

“Maybe was there a leak and the guys of the ship know that there are agents onboard. They could be trying to spot a couple that doesn’t act like one.”

“And what do you think he was expecting from us right now?”

Noctis was still holding her and suddenly, she felt that he was nervous.

“I… Well, we are supposed to be on a honeymoon.”

Lightning suddenly felt terribly hot and wanted some air. She put her hands on his chest, to push him away, but he held her even closer in return.

“I’m not here to take advantage of the situation Lightning. It’s just a hypothesis. I could be wrong. It really could be a drunk guy.”
“He wasn’t drunk.”

She couldn’t help but blush now. Could a regular room service guy come to offer his services in the middle of the night without having been called? No, Noctis’ hypothesis sounded pretty right.

“Do you think we should try to fake it that far?” she asked him.

Noctis pushed her away from him to look at her in the eyes, surprised.

“What do you mean by “that far” exactly?”

“Don’t get me wrong on this, Noctis. I just mean that we could… try to make some noises every now and then. Just so that people think that we’re really in love and all.”

“I think I’m still too sleepy to get you at all.”

She smiled at his expression while he said that. He looked half scared and half amused. As if this whole situation was reminding him of something pretty nostalgic and a bit funny. She felt more herself like this, lying next to him. Was it that feeling she had missed all this time, or the impression of being with him? She wanted to get mad for that idea, mad at herself at least, but she couldn’t. Noctis was looking at her. His eyes were so blue and he looked so cute with his hair all messy. But then, another noise started. One that broke the fragile magic that was just setting between them.

It was a bed cracking. And people panting. And groaning. That was coming from above them and Noctis looked to the ceiling, unable to believe it at first.

Then, a girl started to moan. And the way she did, with the bed cracking noises, it felt as if she was… going through something really good.

“This can’t be what I think it is.” Lightning whispered.

A few minutes later, the girl started to yell from pleasure and cried the name of her lover. Noctis rolled on his back, shaking slightly his head. He wouldn’t have minded this, not really, if he was in any other situation then that one he was now. The girl was so expressive; it almost turned him on all by itself. And it wasn’t the time, really. But now that he was thinking about it, the last time he had sex was… Like a million years away. Well, the doctors said they had stimulated every of his nerves to make sure he would be in good shape to get back to work once he woke up but…

Get that idea out of your mind, man, out of your mind, he thought to himself, panicking inwardly.

Now, the pants and groans were growing frantic, as the girl was ecstatic and she kept on yelling from pleasure.

“Seymour! Oh yes, Seymour!”

“I can’t believe their room is right above ours.” Noctis growled.

Lightning bit her lower lips, feeling a pretty well known tension building up inside her. She wanted to hide, hating to invade anyone’s privacy like this, but at the same time, this was arousing her a lot more than she’d thought.

The yells kept on for a moment and at a point, they looked at each other, thinking that this awkward situation would never end. It didn’t last that long, but it felt pretty long when they were lying so close to each other and trying to stay apart and not to think about how they had shared
heated moment like the one going on above their heads. Then, it finally ended, much to Lightning’s relief.

“Wow. Talk about soundproofing walls and floor.” Noctis joked.

She laughed at that, before to cover up her mouth, afraid that they could be heard as easily as they’d heard the couple above them.

Noctis looked for something to say, but he was worried that if he looked at Lightning, he would unintentionally look to her body and curves and that couldn’t mean anything good for him in the state he was in right now. He knew how to contain his impulsions, he always had. But now…

He let out a deep breath and Lightning turned to her side, looking in his direction.

“Are you alright?”

“I don’t know.”

“You look nervous. And tensed.”

“Lightning, let’s not talk about me being tensed now, okay?”

Just hearing her voice was nerve-wrecking. Damn, was it possible to want somebody that bad? He felt guilty for feeling like this.

“Normally, you wouldn’t react like that.”

“People change in two years, you know.”

“But you didn’t.”

She wasn’t saying this to hurt him, she was just telling him what she was thinking. But her observation only remembered him the two years he’d lost. And he hadn’t evolved at all since then. He was still rash, centered over himself, emotional but unable to admit his feelings directly. Lightning hadn’t changed much, but she had tried to. He hadn’t really any choice not to change, but at the same time, he felt guilty. If he wasn’t so weak, he wouldn’t have been caught in the explosion, he wouldn’t have let Lightning being hurt and they would still be together.

“Lightning, I…”

He made the mistake to look at her. For one second, he was ready to tell her what he’d been through for real during the last two years, so that she understands him for real. But it would be a cheap shot. But as he looked at her, all his feelings mixed up together and the last thought in his mind was to kiss her. He barely managed to hold himself back and sat up suddenly, breathing quickly.

“What… What were you going to tell me?”

“I… I was going to say something stupid, so I thought it was better to shut it.”

“Oh, really?”

This sounded as a silly excuse to hide something from her. But she realized she was trying to flirt with him because of what they’d heard. Or maybe was she really trying to be nice. Anyway, she thought she could use a quick and cold shower. It was then that the couple above them started to do some noises again.
“Oh no, don’t tell me they’re going for another round!” Noctis growled angrily.

And Lightning, who had been unsure of it until now, finally understood why Noctis was acting so strange. This whole situation was playing with his nerves.

“You know, if you’re really uncomfortable, you could go and take a shower, or sleep on the floor, I won’t mind.”

“Sleep on the floor?” he repeated.

“It was only a suggestion.” she defended herself.

Ultimately, Noctis went to take a really really cold shower to clear his mind and stop hearing “them”. Lightning tossed and turned in the wide bed, not feeling that much more comfortable than him. While it was nice to have their target close to them to spy on him, it wasn’t that much great. The last thing she wanted was to know this about that Seymour guy. Noctis came back only an hour later, and Lightning teased him, saying she was sure he was going to drowning himself in the shower. That first night was something they wouldn’t forget soon, but Lightning hoped that if she was to ever get married in her real life, her first night as a wife wouldn’t turn like this one.

…

Aeris was walking through the hospital corridors, on her way to go and see Squall to keep him company. He was so worn out, he mostly slept all the time, but she liked to be with him, awake or not. She hadn’t been protected like he had protected her before in her life. And she liked him and all the mysteries he was keeping around him. As she was turning a corner, she saw the entrance counter, where a young woman was talking to the nurse.

“Excuse me, could you please tell me where’s mister Leonheart’s room?”

“I’m sorry, but visitors aren’t allowed to meet with him. His state is still pretty unstable and only close people have the right to meet with him.” the nurse answered the black haired woman.

“But I… I’m his girlfriend!”

Rinoa was on the verge of tears as she said that and Aeris, who didn’t know her, thought it was pretty sad that she couldn’t meet with her boyfriend. As she liked to help people, she went ahead to see what this was all about.

“Ah, so you’re sir Leonheart’s girlfriend? You know he’s been here for two weeks already? How come you haven’t shown up when he entered our hospital?”

“Never mind that, all I want is to see him.”

“But you can’t. He was exposed to radiations and…”

“Excuse me,” Aeris stated, walking in the big entrance room, which was empty at this early hour. “I’ve overheard your conversation, and I think you’re talking about Squall Leonheart, am I wrong?”

“Why… yes, we were talking about him.”

“I learn he wasn’t exuding dangerous radiations anymore and I was going to see him myself. I could bring this woman with me.”
She gave a look at the nurse, meaning she would protect Squall if something was to go wrong.

Rinoa looked relieved and followed Aeris in the many corridors and stairs to finally enter Squall’s room. As she saw him, she let out a gasp of shock and ran to his side.

“Oh my god. I’ve heard you’ve been hurt, but all those bruises, it’s…”

“Hey, don’t talk too loudly, he’s asleep and he needs all the rest he can get.” Aeris warned her.

Rinoa sighed and bit her lower lip. She then sat on Squall’s bed and stared at him intently, as if it could wake him up.

“I hope he didn’t do anything rash because of me.” she whispered.

“What do you mean?” the brown haired girl asked her.

“Well… Nothing. Could you give me some time alone with him?”

“I don’t think I can. He is still unstable and nobody told me he had a girlfriend.”

“Well, that’s because it was never really known to other people. Only our closest friends were in on it. We were working together, so it couldn’t be known. At least, that’s what Squall used to say.”

Squall mumbled in his sleep and Rinoa grabbed his hand, acting very motherly with him. Aeris frowned.

“Why do you use only past tense in all you said just now?”

“Well. After almost five years of being together, I decided I had had enough of hiding. And I quit him.”

Aeris was speechless. Put that way, it seemed a bit harsh. Even more, pretty harsh.

“You told him that you wanted him to change his ways before, didn’t you? You know that guys are all pretty dense.” she managed to say after looking for a moment at a sad Rinoa gently stroking Squall’s hair.

“I know, but Squall is different. He always thinks before that he acts. He’s brilliant. But he’s so closed over himself, and so cold. I never had the impression that he trusted me, or that he counted on me. I was just… his girl, you know?”

They remained silent for a moment, and Squall tensed in his sleep, as if he was having a nightmare. He still had a lot of bruises and the doctors had said he wouldn’t be able to get out from his bed before at least another week.

“Hey, now that I think about it, who are you to have the right to come and see Squall like that?”

“I’m Aeris Gainsborough. Squall had a mission to rescue me from alien criminals and ended up in the hospital. I’m looking after him ever since then.”

“I… I see.”

Rinoa had looked ready to get angry for a moment, but she wasn’t that type of woman. She gave all her attention back to Squall and tried to gently shake him up as she saw he was still having a nightmare. She managed to wake him up, but the reaction he gave out as he saw her shocked both women in the room.
His cerulean blue eyes, that seemed lost for an instant, locked on Rinoa’s face and his visage turned cold immediately. She tried to smile as he sat up and looked around him.

“Is there a party or something?” he asked.

In fact, there hadn’t been too many people around him lately, so he was a little surprise to see two persons in his room, but he was trying to look bitter to hide his fear of being confronted to Rinoa so soon. She was so close to him. Her scent was already coming to his nose and he still remembered, for god sake, why did he still remember everything about her?

“Squall, I… when I heard you were in the hospital, I was worried, so I came to…”

“I’m perfectly alright and you don’t need to worry anymore.”

“Squa…”

“Don’t…!” he was stopped in the middle of his sentence by heavy coughs and Rinoa looked even more worried about him.

“Don’t get all worked up. You know you need to stay quiet.” Aeris reminded him.

“I… cough… I know.”

His voice was as harsh as his cough and he darted his ice blue eyes on Rinoa.

“Why are you here? Already unhappy with your Seifer?”

“I should have prepared myself for something like this, I guess. So you know, I’m perfectly happy with Seifer. But that doesn’t prevent me from caring about you and when I heard that you were in the hospital…”

“Spare me the details. You can care all you want, just do it out of my sight, alright?”

All of Rinoa’s good intentions melt down at his cold remark. She forced herself not to cry and got up, clearly understanding his message.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you from your rest. I hope you’ll get better soon. If you ever feel nice again, you can call me.” she said before to turn back.

Squall grinned at her angry reply. That sounded more like a couple that was over. And they were. At least, she had told him so. He didn’t flinch as the door closed with a loud bang. He looked unmoved and untouched. But deep inside, he was falling apart, once more. Thinking that this wasn’t logical. If she had had enough of him, why was Rinoa coming back to check on him? Why couldn’t she leave him alone? He still needed time to get her out of his head. He wanted to yell at her all the time, but at the same time, he wanted her back. But there was no turning back. Her betrayal hurt so much.

“I know I don’t know anything about what happened between the two of you, but did you have to be that harsh with her?” Aeris asked him.

“As you said. You don’t know anything from us.”

“Squall, you won’t get better if you keep moping as you are.”

“I’m not…”
“You are moping ever since we met. Is that… It’s because she had left you were so careless about your own safety, isn’t it?”

“It’s Lightning who asked you to do that, huh?”

“To do what?”

“To question me about all this.”

She smiled a little. How could she help someone so reluctant about being help.

“You’re just running away from it. Locking your feelings inside to make you think you don’t feel pain. I was like that before. I know how it feels to be alone. Ever since my parents died, I was chased all around the world for my ancient powers. And they aren’t that great, you know.”

“Every girl in the world thinks we should open up and tell whatever we feel. But it’s unfair. She decided to tell me what was wrong when it was already too late in her mind. She’s ditched me for the greatest bastard I’d ever known. I never saw anything coming. She’d replaced me before that she even had the courage to leave me!”

He stopped there, realizing he had spoken up his mind. His voice which was bitter had turned soft with each new words and he felt vulnerable as Aeris sat down next to him, her face painted with compassion.

“It’s alright to feel pain, and it doesn’t mean that you are weak if you show it. What’s wrong is to give up on your life.” she observed.

“I didn’t give up.” he said, looking away.

“But you still wish you were dead out there every now and then. Sometimes, I wished it myself. That I was dead, and that nobody would try to use me to get power.”

“I don’t know why anyone would do that. You look so harmless, Aeris.”

Though you know how to attack where it really hurts sometimes… he thought, swallowing down his mental and physical pain.

“I’m not here to complain about my life. I want you to know that I understand you.”

“You’d be the first to if you really did.” he whispered.

His voice was growing soft. Did he mean that he himself couldn’t understand the way he acted? Squall coughed a little and he looked so pitiful, like a lone puppy abandoned in a box on the streets. Aeris couldn’t help herself, she hugged him suddenly. And Squall felt like crying as she held him like that. But he simply coughed, to hide the sobs he had trouble swallowing down as she whispered that she would understand him. Even if she was the first one to.

“I’m… I’m really sorry.”

“What?”

“I never wanted to die. To be referred to as something over and in the past. But when I tried to rescue you, I forgot it. And if Lightning hadn’t been there, you wouldn’t be here. I’m not the one who rescued you, I let my feelings interfere and put you in even more danger.”

As she was hugging him, she pressed her head against his chest, as he had pressed her body against
the wall, to shield her from harm. She could hear his heartbeat. So quick. Under the steady but tender voice, he was so nervous and scared.

“I never said that, Squall. What are you trying to prove?”

“I don’t know.”

“You saved me, Squall. Both Lightning and you, there’s no denying it.”

“You don’t have to be nice with me because of it.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“Because eventually... you’ll leave.”

A shiver ran through him as he said that and Aeris understood how deep his problem was running. He wouldn’t say anything more about it, he had already given out too much.

“I’ve got nowhere to go, Squall. So I’m not leaving.”

He chuckled, but his arms closed around her petite frame and she felt how much he needed that hug. And he needed so much more. They stayed like this for a while. Aeris felt reassured by being in someone arms. She hadn’t felt secure in a long time. And even if Squall was emotionally unstable, she felt nice with him. At peace. Under the cold glare and harsh words, he was a little and dependent child. And if she could help him, not as an ancient, but as your average everyday girl, she would with pleasure.

...

Cloud had been searching through a great part of the mines with the help of Yuna and Vincent. They had found Quistis, Penelo and Lucrecia. When Barret was discovered, he helped getting Hojo out of the pile of junk he was under. Nanaki had been buried by snow, but he managed to get out of it by himself and help looking out for the two others left. Cloud was growing more tensed with every minutes passing.

Yuffie and Tifa were still lost. And even if she was his ex, Tifa did count a lot for him.

“Cloud, slow down, please, you’re going to get yourself hurt if you rush in like that.” Yuna warned him, mostly to give herself a chance to keep up with him.

He was walking so fast, she wasn’t sure if they could still refer to this as walking.

“She couldn’t have ventured that far. Why isn’t she answering?” he mumbled to himself.

He wanted to call out Tifa’s name, but he knew that would be a grave mistake that could only get the situation more complicated. If the whole mine was to crumble on them, he would have to be rescued before to get to Tifa. And he had to keep in mind that Yuffie too was still missing. Nanaki was up before them, sniffing through the air to try and localize Tifa’s or Yuffie’s scent.

“So, how is it? Any trace of them?”

“There’re many gases and a lot of smoke in this air. It’s hard to tell every scent apart. I feel a human’s scent up this way.” the dog replied.

Yuna was still trying to accept the fact that Nanaki was a talking giant dog. He looked like a big furball on paws, but he was still just as intelligent as most human if not even more brilliant.
“Aaah!”

Cloud’s head turned so quickly on his shoulder to look in the direction of the yell that Yuna thought he was going to lose it. But he rushed off and she followed him, worried that he could really get hurt if he wasn’t any more careful. Fortunately, around the nth corner they turned, they were granted with a reassuring sight. Tifa was alive. She was stuck under a pile of rock walls and only her face and shoulders were propping out, with one of her arms.

“Don’t move Tifa. We’re getting you out of there.” Cloud told her.

He rushed to the pile of rocks, studying it quickly to see how to remove them without making them roll down or fall on Tifa.

“Are you alright under all of this? Are you hurt somewhere?” Yuna asked her friend.

“I’m just a bit tight in here, but… it seems alright.”

“Okay. Don’t panic, I’ll help Cloud in getting you out of this.”

“Don’t say the word panic. I’m perfectly quiet.” Tifa replied.

Yuna understood and went to Cloud’s side, to support him in whichever way she could. He was doing something with his gun, modifying the materia’s junction and switching some components of it for others he had in his pack bag.

“Cloud, can you tell me what you are trying to do with that thing?”

“These kinda rocks are too dense to be moved just with the two of us, and I’m sure that even Barret couldn’t get them to move. I’m setting my gun on matter defragmentation to destroy all the rocks at one.”

“That sounds dangerous.”

“There’s nothing to worry about, the shot shall only destroy the rock and not human tissue. I’ll never do anything that could threaten Tifa’s safety.”

He sounded sure of himself, but there was a glint of worry in his eyes and Yuna took a few steps back as he aimed. She had heard about matter defragmentation. It creates a sudden explosion in the molecule’s state of matter, to reduce it to shred. It was a way to erase certain material, like radioactive old junk or real everyday junk. That would have stopped the pollution before that the earth got where it was now, but this device’s first use had been to destroy people. Erasing someone was forbidden through the whole galaxy, but matter defragmentation has started with mass murderers and bounty hunters.

That was why Cloud always felt bad when he had to use this mean to get what he wanted. He had never used it on a person, but still, the thought of all the people reduced to nothingness in a flash. It was scary.

“Everyone, close your eyes,” he said as he aimed for the rocks at the pile’s top.

Yuna obeyed, a bit unwillingly. The light that she felt over her closed eyelids convinced her of obeying the next time, since she felt blinded even with her eyes close! Maybe at she been to slow to comply.

“Gosh, I’m breathing again.” Tifa whispered.
Before that Yuna could open her eyes, she heard Cloud running footsteps and the first thing she saw was him, bending down to the spot where Tifa was lying. He gently turned her on her back, quickly checked her vitals and her state, scanning her body from up and down, before to grab her in his arms and pull her in a bear hug.

“You got me so scared. Why were you so deep in the mines?” he asked her, sighing with relief as if he’d been holding down his breath until this moment where he was sure that she was alright.

“I’m sorry Cloud. I wasn’t that far, but the gallery I was in collapsed and I slid down here before that all those rocks fell on me.”

She tried to sit on the ground, or in his lap, since he didn’t seem ready to let go of her, but she wince at the motion.

“You must have broken some of your ribs, Tif, don’t try to move too much. Your suit seems alright, but if there’s a leak somewhere, you could freeze to death. We gotta get you out of here and back in the ship.”

“But, it’ll slow down the mission.”

“You can’t stay on the field like this. This rescue mission could get pretty harsh with Jenova in the way and I’m going to follow the trace of the miners’ kidnappers with a small rescue team. You’re in no state to walk for long or treat wounded.”

“You’re right, but I hate it when I’m useless.”

“It’s okay Tifa. Barret got frost bite and need to head back to the ship too. I’ll do better in this mission if I know that you’re safe and not getting yourself in danger.”

Yuna felt like leaving them alone, since they looked in their own little world. Where they really over as a couple? They sure looked friendly with each other like this. Maybe was it because there was not enough people around for Cloud to put on his play as the restless and cold leader. Well, he wasn’t that much cold. Maybe a bit direct in what he asked, but he smiled more often than she’d thought. And he was honest about his feeling to those that owed his honesty. She tried to silently turn around and walk back, but as she started to move, the gallery they were in started to shake furiously. She collapsed to the ground, losing her balance.

“WHO DARE TO PROFANE MY SLUMBER!?” a big voice echoed through the cold cave as the walls already covered with ice began to shine.

“What’s that?”

Cloud shook his head at his ex-girlfriend’s question. He was just as surprised as her and Yuna.

“YOUNG MORTALS THAT DARE TO ENTER MY DEN, ARE THOU PREPARED FOR MY TRIAL?”

The voice was resounding in their head, talking so strongly it hurt. Tifa covered her ears and Yuna managed to crawl up to rejoin Cloud and her. The earth shake once again, with more strength and the gallery started leaning down, as if the underground foundations underneath it were collapsing. The three of them started to slide down the uneven ground, but Cloud and Yuna managed to grab one of the stalagmites that emerged from the icy soil.

“We’re in big trouble. Are you all hearing this voice, or is it just me?” Tifa asked them.
“I hear too.” Yuna half whispered half yelled as the ground inclined itself even more, making it hard not to slide down the brand new slope.

“Me too.” Cloud added. “Hang on Tif’, okay?”

“AFTER WAKING ME UP, THOU DARE REFUSE MY TRIAL? THY SHALL PUNISH THOU INSOLENCE!”

The shaking of the ground became even stronger and Cloud’s gun fall down the slope, in a cricketing sound soon followed by a creepy laugh.

“At least, whatever that thing down there is, it speaks English,” Cloud observed.

“Is that supposed to reassure us?” Yuna replied, holding on to the stalagmite not to slide all the way down.

“COME TO THY, CHILDREN OF THE EARTH. I WILL GRANT YOU ONE WISH IF YOU OVERCOME MY PUNISHMENT.”

“I don’t wanna know what it’s talking about.”

“Well, I don’t think we’ll get out by the other end of this tunnel. The ground is inclined so steeply, we’d need a miracle to get back to the others without falling down.”

“Cloud, you’re supposed to calm us down!” Tifa shouted in his ears.

“I know, but we must be logical about this.”

“How does it know we come from the Earth?” Yuna asked herself aloud.

“Well, at least, she’s not panicking.” Cloud observed with a smirk.

“You think this is funny, huh?” Tifa groaned.

“Whatever.”

“Don’t whatever me!”

“I meant it’s not the time to argue, you’re gonna make me lose my balance.”

“CHILDREN, THOU ARE GETTING ON MY NERVES! COME DOWN HERE, NOW!”

A violent gust of wind rushed down on them, as the ground inclined even more and Yuna thought that if that was going to keep on, they would be standing in the air, held up only by the stalagmite on which her hands were now slipping a bit.

“I think I’m going to fall.” she said.

The other two couldn’t hear her. Cloud was too busy trying not to let go of either Tifa or the stalagmite while not being strangled by a Tifa grabbing onto him with all her strength.

“You see, you’ve made that thing mad, now, Cloud Strife. I hope that you’re happy with yourself.”

“I said it wasn’t the time to…”

“Aaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
“What? Yuna!”

She was now sliding down the slope, all the way down, where the voice was coming, and the ice walls were shining, and the stalagmite that Cloud was still holding was cracking under their combined weight.

“I think we’re going down.”

“Aren’t you worried at all?”

Cloud wanted to reassure Tifa, but he was furious at himself for not helping Yuna too. The stalagmite gave out and they began to fall and to slide too. Cloud did his best to hold Tifa next to him and prevent her body, especially her chest—and her ribs—to hit the ground. They turned and they slid for what seemed like an eternity, following Yuna’s yells. And the big voice of the unknown thing they had woken up was laughing all along, as Cloud tried to remember what this could mean in the end. He had a slight idea that this had maybe happen with the miners. Maybe was it the first reason why he had been called up here. And then, Jenova had intervened. Things were sure looking bad. His stomach churned as his body turned in a spiral motion for three or four turns. He hadn’t been trained for that, that was a fact. And his back was burning from the forced slide. Then, their speed augmented, if it was even possible. And his head hit something hard. The fucking stalagmite that had broken under their weight. Cloud tried to stay conscious, hearing Tifa’s yells and Yuna’s in the distant. They needed his help. Even if maybe he had been yelling too at some point, he was the man of the situation, as always. Wasn’t he?

But everything turned dark and then, there was silent. Cloud gave up. He was falling non-stop. He couldn’t help it. At least, it felt a bit more comfortable than hearing the girls’ yells.

“THAT’S RIGHT, MY CHILDREN. COME AND FACE MY TRIAL. MUHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

To be continued.
Date: 19 027 A.D. December 7th

Location: Planet Earth, around Dubai, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


Warning to the superiors: It seems that there was a leak in our system and that someone, maybe Baldin’s men, knows about our mission on their turf. Fortunately, our special agent Stella’s there to warn our agents.

Message from G.I. six. End of transmission

…

Report 3 for the Radiant Powers’ subject

Raven has stabilized lately, especially since he woke up. He still doesn’t control his powers, but they seemed to be limited to force waves shielding him. He can’t use them willingly for now and they appear only in critical situation, if he goes through feeling of great anger and confusion. As long as he’s in control of himself and his surrounding, his radiant powers can’t take place. I guess that’s why he was sent on this mission where he can’t control every factor. I don’t suggest throwing him off balance too much, though, because we still don’t know the full extent of his powers. I suspect that he could be pretty dangerous if he was to lose his temper. And though he seems collected, I have a few doubts about his patience.

G.I. eight a.k.a. Stella Tenebrae

P.S.: The data collected over his son isn’t working well. Ever since Raven has woken up, the kid has been having nightmares that have nothing to do with childish fears. We should isolate the subject. Especially from his father.

…

Location: Planet Pluto, in the deepest parts of the mines

Mission: Well, basically, getting out of there.

People stuck: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed, Tifa Lockart

“Cloud! Cloud, wake up! Oh my god, I hope he’s alright. Tifa? Do you hear me? Can anyone hear me?”

Cloud slowly woke up, hearing Yuna’s high pitched voice from pretty close. His head hurt a lot and his body felt numb. As he opened his eyes, he was met by Yuna’s face. He realized they were lying next to each other and her hands were on his shoulders. His arms were empty, which meant
he must have let go of Tifa in his fall.

“What… where are we?”

“Cloud! Oh, I mean, sir! You’re up!”

“indeed!” the big voice that had “brought” them down there by force observed.

Cloud jumped on his feet, the icy ground cracking slightly from the movement. His head was throbbing and his sight was a little blurry, but as he steadied himself and helped Yuna up, his senses came back to him.

“Where is he?” he asked angrily.

“he? thy refer to me as he?!”

“cloud, please, try not to make her mad.” Yuna warned him.

“It’s a girl?!”

Cloud was a little surprised, but after all, there wasn’t really a way for him to know what gender the voice was. It kinda sounded as a male’s voice. But Yuna was up since longer than him. He looked around them. They were standing on a wide and white surface of ice and snow. There was nothing around within kilometers, as far as the eyes could see. Cloud looked up. The ceiling itself looked far and it took him a while to spot the hole from where they had slid and fell down to this place.

“I’M A GUARDIAN SPIRIT, PETTY MORTAL!”

“Okay. Where’s Tifa?” Cloud asked to Yuna.

This was creepy and he really felt out of place. He was a soldier dammit, not an esoteric maniac! Guardian spirit existed in far away worlds, not in the Milky Way. Or at least, that was what he’d been told. He didn’t know much over guardian spirit, only that they were dangerous, stubborn and not to be taken lightly.

“I don’t know, that… spirit hasn’t told me anything about this place. She just kept on saying you had to wake up.”

Cloud frowned as he scanned the area for the second time. The ceiling above them looked like a big bundle of crystal shards mixed together. And as he looked up, a light shone from behind the crystal’s ceiling.

“Are you hurt anywhere Yuna?”

“No, no, I’m alright. Just a little confused.” she admitted.

“Anybody would be. What the hell did they disturb by mining here. Who are you? Where are you!”

“I’M GLAD YOU ASKED, CLOUD.”

The light behind the crystal wall and ceiling faded a little before to surround a shadow with big and wide blue eyes.

“I’M PLUTO’S GUARDIAN. THE SPIRIT OF ICE AND SLEEP. MOST PEOPLE CALL ME
SHIVA. IF YOU ACCEPT MY TRIAL, I’LL LET YOU OUT OF MY SANCTUARY.”

“Could you talk lower or… Never mind, where’s Tifa?”

“I CAN’T TELL YOU. HER MISSING IS PART OF THE TRIAL.”

Cloud clenched his teeth. In what had he gotten himself this time? He had heard about Shiva before, as a divinity or something, but he had never given that much attention to it before. The shape he could see behind the crystal walls looked like a woman with a really pale skin and cold eyes.

Yuna was scared and she wanted to hide behind Cloud, but the voice was so big, she seemed to be everywhere, so it was technically impossible to hide from it. She could see the dark shape through the icy crystal wall. It looked creepy and evil. Anyway, she wanted to look strong next to her colonel. It was her first mission as a real soldier, and even if she knew that this wasn’t an usual situation, she wanted to remain calm and prove at least to herself that she could do this job and be of any help to her friend Tifa and the others…

“What are we gonna do?” she asked.

“There must be a way out of here. But I don’t think we really have the time to look for it.” Cloud replied.

He felt his heart beating fast in his chest at the thought Tifa could have gotten even more hurt than she already was. How was he supposed to protect his men when he was faced to gigantic and magic guardian spirit?

“YOU’RE WORRIED FOR THAT LITTLE GIRL, AREN’T YOU?”

“Shiva, was it? I don’t have time for games.”

“I KNOW. THAT’S WHY I TOOK YOU HERE, CLOUD.”

Her voice sounded colder and Cloud felt a shiver ran through his spine. He didn’t like the way she was saying his name, not one bit. There was something suave and something laughing at the same time in it. It wasn’t nice to hear. It remembered it of something far in his past. Something that he shouldn’t have remembered.

“Just tell me what you want and let us out of here.”

“WHEN I’M TO BE WOKEN UP BY MERE MORTALS, IT MUST MEAN THAT PLUTO WILL BE FACING A THREAT THAT COULD DESTROY IT. AND THEN I’LL NEED A HERO TO WIELD MY POWER AND MY WILL, SO THAT THE THREAT IS ERASED FOREVER.”

Okay. Well, I…”

“LISTEN TO ME, CHILD OF THE EARTH!”

The ground shook under them and Yuna had to grab on Cloud’s arm to keep her balance while he was glaring at the ice walls.

“I’m listening, but make it quick. Your planet isn’t the only thing at stake here.”

“ALRIGHT, CLOUD. IF YOU OVERCOME MY TRIAL, I SHALL GRANT YOU MY POWER
As she said that, Shiva raised one arm and pointed toward the ceiling. Raising his head higher, his gaze following the direction pointed by the Guardian Spirit. Yuna let out a gasp of surprise. A ice crystal was now propping out of the ceiling, barely hanging to it, and Tifa was clearly stuck beneath the ice. Her head was down while her feet were up and her brown eyes were looking at them, as frozen as the thick ice. Her dark hair was kept around her head, as if it had been floating in the wind right when she was frozen.

“How dare you…”

“YOU WAKE ME UP BY LETTING THE DANGER COME TO THE CORE OF MY PLANET. IT WAS YOUR KIND WHICH DARE FIRST. TAKE THE TRIAL NOW, CLOUD.”

His fists were tight and his face was so pale Yuna was afraid he could faint at any moment. But he wasn’t going to. He had always been pale. And anyone would be, seeing Tifa in this state.

“I’ll do your trial Shiva, as long as you promise me that Tifa is still alive and well.”

“OH, SHE IS, HAVE NO FEAR, CLOUDY BOY.”

Yuna was looking at Tifa and Shiva’s shape alternatively, doubtfully. If Tifa wasn’t getting out from this ice shell, she wouldn’t be well for pretty long. She shivered at the thought of all this ice around. Was her friend still conscious in there? She couldn’t move, she couldn’t even talk! But could she still see through her eyes? Could she hear them in her mind? Could she call them for help in her head? Yuna almost heard Tifa’s yells. Maybe was it just her imagination, but she shivered even more at the idea of what it must be feeling like to be imprisoned like that.

Cloud was simply mad right now. His heart was pounding in his chest, but his glare was still cold as he looked into Shiva’s blue eyes, staring through the ice like two ghost lights.

“So, are you taking my trial?”

“I am!” he answered.

Yuna didn’t know where to put herself as she saw the ice before Shiva cracking and breaking down. She took a step back, while Cloud stood still, unmoved and still pretty focused on the situation. Shiva looked as a woman behind her curtain of ice. She floated into the wide room, her blue and grey feet soon meeting the cold ground. She was entirely naked and her long and shining hair was covering some of her curves, while one of her breast was left naked to the eyes. Yuna was utterly scared. Not by the fact that this spirit was naked, but because of her cold and dead eyes, staring at them intently, as if they could see through the very fabric of their soul. Cloud kept glaring at her.

“This trial is simple. The mortal which can be touched by me shall be granted with my power. A power that can burn you down to a crisp and freeze you to death. A single touch from me would kill those that aren’t fit to withstand my power. Are you still willing to go through my trial?”

“Whatever…”

Shiva smiled. And it was a cold, amused smile, a creepy smile in Yuna’s mind. She couldn’t tell what Cloud was thinking. She just wanted to run away. The power in the air was overwhelming,
she felt as if she was going to be crushed. It was painful to breath, the air was turning so cold. She suddenly realized that the transparent fabric protecting her head had been torn by the freezing breeze. She blinked her eyes and felt her skin burning at the movement. The cold air was almost freezing up her lungs! She wouldn’t be able to stand this for too long. And she realized that Cloud’s head protection too had been torn off. Of course. Shiva wanted to touch him. It was part of this whole trial thing. This was so insane! The tall spirit was walking up to them. She was a few meters away. With every step she took, she seemed to be growing taller. She was two meters tall, three, four. She was a giant! The ground was literally shaking under her steps.

Yuna closed her eyes an instant as the spirit of Pluto stopped a few inches away from Cloud. She didn’t want to see him freezing up. Maybe was this all a nightmare, maybe was she still in her bed in the ship and that she would woke up as she reopen her eyes. She sure wished.

“YOU ARE SO SMALL, CHILD OF EARTH.”

Yuna couldn’t tell, but Cloud wasn’t looking as brilliant as he had been now that he was face to face with that gigantic woman. He had no idea about what she was expecting from him. He knew she could kill him if she wanted. He could feel her strength. Her power was filling the air. The air was so harsh and cold. He hated to be opposed to enemies like that. He was so outmatched. And as she looked at him, only at him, he felt as a child. Naked. In danger. She could see behind his glare, behind his clothes and behind his flesh. She could see everything. And she liked that. Something deep inside him shivered. His nerves were the only thing keeping him still. He wanted to turn back around and run. She remembered him of Jenova. But it was different. Her malice wasn’t the same. It didn’t felt better or worse. It was almost painful just to look back into her eyes.

“I’m not that small.” he managed to reply with all the pride he had left.

She smiled even more. Yuna cracked one eye open. Before her eyes, Shiva altered her shape, reducing her height to fit that of Cloud. Her face became smaller, her shoulder frame too, everything. Suddenly, she was as tall as any normal woman. Cloud was just a few inches taller than her. But he didn’t feel reassure at all. She still felt so powerful. She took another step, closing in on him. Her breath touched his face, covering it with Goosebumps.

“YOU DON’T HAVE TO DO ANYTHING TO PASS THE TRIAL. JUST SURVIVING THIS WILL BE PROOF OF YOUR WORTH.” she whispered to him with her resounding voice.

She raised her hands, grabbing each side of his head. Cloud instantly felt the burning sensation of her cold palms. He could have winced if her mouth hadn’t caught his lips at this very moment.

Yuna’s eyes widened in surprise. Was this really a trial? Then, she took back her silent question. Cloud’s hair was covering with ice, as the rest of his body seemed to shine from the inside. Shiva didn’t let go of him at that and for a moment, the soldier thought she was going to suck the very essence of his life out of him. The ice was quickly covering every of his limbs. He wanted to get out of her grip, but Shiva was too strong. It was a scary feeling. He’d never been in a situation like that before. He felt the freezing feeling of her powers running all over him, and within. She forced his mouth open. It was too cold to fight against. So cold, he wanted to sleep. But he couldn’t! And as he could hear her laughs in his head, he felt a burning anger rising inside of him. The ice was pushed away from him. He felt blood on his tongue as Shiva freed him from her “embrace”.

“YOU BITE ME!”

“Oh, sorry… Did it hurt?” he bitterly joked.

He wasn’t going to pity her. He still felt so open, so cold. As if her hands had went all over him.
And inside. Under the flesh. His bones were frozen. His heart was beating too slowly to his taste. He wanted to move, to wipe off his mouth, to shake his head, to grab his gun, to do anything. But he was still too cold. Invisible nails were clawing at his heart. He grabbed his chest, clenching his teeth to withstand the pain. Was this the real trial? He couldn’t die just like that. It was way too easy for her. And Tifa… And even Yuna. They were both counting on him.

Yuna managed to run up to Cloud’s side and grab him by the shoulder, seeing that he was in pain.

“Are you okay?” she asked, even more panicked than she already was, if it was possible.

“I… I think so.” he tried to reassure her.

His voice felt colder than ever before. But when Yuna gave him one arm to help him standing up as the pain had him bending down, he felt a warm feeling in his chest. And Yuna’s breathe was just as warm on his face. He shivered. But for once, it wasn’t from fear.

“YOU SURVIVED TO MY TOUCH. YOU ARE MY CHOSEN HERO.” Shiva said, opening her arms before her, summoning a shining light between her hands.

The wind that blew at her motion pushed both Cloud and Yuna down to the ground. And then, a long howl resounded in the cave. Yuna didn’t try to get up, she just grab on to Cloud, to feel a little comforted by his presence. Cloud was still trying to get back to his senses, but the howl was followed by the trembling of the earth under them, and before he knew it, Yuna was snapped up by something and pushed away from him.

As he looked around, barely able to move, he saw a gigantic and grey wolf. At first, he thought of Nanaki, but then, he had to realize the wolf had no mane. The beast turned to look at him. He had blue mako eyes, just as Cloud’s.

“IT’S FENRIR, YOUR SUMMON AS OF NOW, CLOUD.” Shiva told him.

“What… where’s Yuna? Yuna, are you alright?!”

“I… think so.” she replied.

That helped him knowing in which direction to look and he saw that she was getting up. The wolf had just given her a push to get her away from him. Cloud managed to smile at her attempt of joking.

“FENRIR SHALL AID YOU PROTECTING PLUTO AND IN RETURN, HE’LL FOLLOW YOU UNTIL YOUR DEATH. HE DOESN’T KNOW FEAR OR DANGER AND HE’S A FAITHFUL COMPANION.”

As Shiva said that, Fenrir jumped on Cloud, barking as an excited dog. At first, the soldier was afraid he would be crushed under the weight of this summon spirit. But the giant wolf, which easily made something like six feet tall without his head, wasn’t weighing anything. He could feel its fur and its tongue on his face, but it wasn’t heavy or crushing. It felt warm and comforting, for once.

“IF I COULD, I WOULD KEEP YOU HERE WITH ME, CLOUDY BOY. I REALLY LOVE MAKO, AND MY FENRIR HASN’T LEFT THIS PLANET FOR MANY DECADES. BUT YOU COMPLETED MY TRIAL.”

She looked almost sorry about it. But Cloud wouldn’t be angry of getting out. He grabbed Fenrir’s fur and the wolf helped him up. It felt as if they had known each other for years. Any move Cloud would make, the summon would respond accordingly. And Cloud knew everything that Fenrir
could do. His head hurt a bit from all the new information in it. But it was alright.

“Let Tifa out of this ice, Shiva.” he asked.

It was easier to stand up now. Tifa’s ice shell gently float down to the ground and the ice melt, letting the young woman fall down in Cloud’s arms. Yuna went to their side, and before they knew it, they were all on Fenrir’s back.

“HURRY UP, CHILDREN OF EARTH. SAVE MY PLANET. AND GET AWAY FROM HERE BEFORE THAT IT’S TOO LATE.”

“Too late?” Yuna repeated.

Cloud wasn’t eager to know what Shiva meant. He wanted to forget her, and fast! He held the unconscious Tifa in his arms, his heart racing and his breath still harsh from the cold atmosphere they were under. Yuna was sitting behind him and grabbed on his waist not to fall down as Fenrir jumped in the hole in the ceiling.

They went back all the way they had first fallen - slid down. It took them around an hour and as they arrived at the entrance of the mine, Fenrir disappeared, letting them continue their road alone. Cloud didn’t walk pretty far. He wanted to check if Tifa was alright. And his limbs were still pretty cold from his trial with Shiva. Yuna thought that her nose was going to fall down from the cold as her colonel fell down on his knees.

“She’s still unconscious,” he observed.

His voice wasn’t cold but it wasn’t warm either. Yuna couldn’t recognize him entirely since that Shiva had touched him. He looked even farther than usual. But as he was holding Tifa in his arms, he really looked human. He almost seemed in pain.

“I’m so sorry, Tifa.”

“Why are you apologizing to her?” Yuna asked him.

“This is all my fault. I’m supposed to protect my men and I…”

“Cloud! ...” Yuna wanted to protest, but Tifa opened her eyes at this very moment.

“You know, you shouldn’t blame yourself. You did everything you could and ... look out of the mines! Everyone’s there, waiting for us to arrive.”

“Tifa!”

“Hey, don’t yell like that.”

“Oh man, you scared me!”

As he admitted it, he held her even tighter to him. And Tifa simply smiled as Yuna patted Cloud’s head. He was so hard with himself. Even when he could accomplish what normal people couldn’t.

…

Noctis was already in the training room when Seymour arrived. The blue haired man was taller than the spy remembered, but they had never really meet, so how was he supposed to remember anyway?
“Wow, I didn’t think anybody would be training as early as me.” the Guado observed.

Noctis had been exercising on the machines of the training room for an hour already, knowing the Seymour was a physic training freak. He wasn’t too built, but his endurance was renowned through the whole army.

“It’s my physician’s prescription.” Noctis replied.

“I see.”

Seymour frowned a bit, as if he wasn’t really understanding it.

“Rehab? I thought this was a honeymoon cruiser.”

“And it is. I do my workout while my wife is still sleeping.”

“Oh. Actually, I’m doing the exact same thing.” the Guado smiled.

“I just hope she’s not awake and angry by the time I come back.” Noctis joked.

They both laughed, even if it felt a bit fake. Seymour wasn’t the kind of guy to trust any dude he was meeting out of the blue. And Noctis couldn’t help but remember what he had heard last night from the room that was undeniably Seymour’s room. At first, they didn’t talk much, just working each on their side, but half an hour later, Seymour got bored and decided he would test this guy.

“Why do you need rehab? You look pretty healthy to me.”

“Well, I am in most ways. Just a job accident I had recently. The docs said I need rehab and I shouldn’t be walking, by I hate it when people give me limits.”

Noctis didn’t know it, it was mere luck that he said precisely those words, but Seymour loved to push his limits and to see people pushing their own limits.

“I understand you, really. How about a few laps?”

There was a run track from a hundred meters long, going all around the training room. Noctis had never back down on a challenge and if he could get buddy with Seymour, this mission could turn way easier. He agreed. And an hour later, he thought that he shouldn’t have. They had talked a bit, but Seymour judged that when you could talk, you weren’t pushing yourself enough.

When Noctis got back to his room, he was quite beat and couldn’t feel his legs anymore. He sank in the bed, trying painfully to remember just how many laps they had ran before to stop. He couldn’t tell anymore. He checked the clock. It was ten in the morning. The shower was running in the bathroom. He could hear Lightning humming a song. He closed his eyes for a moment. This reminded him of so many things. He almost fall asleep right there, but Lightning got out of the bathroom and joined him on the bed.

“You could have left me a note. I was worried.”

“I didn’t think you would be.” he said ironically.

“Don’t say that. Where were you?”

“I was in the training room. With Seymour.”

Lightning was sitting next to him and he had slightly opened his eyes to look at her. She smiled and
started playing with his messy hair.

“You look tired.”

“He made me run more than thirty laps. Just for fun. He wasn’t getting tired at all.”

“You workout that much? But you smell good,” she observed.

“We took a shower after the laps.”

“You and Seymour?!”

“Separately, each in our cabin, for what are you taking me?”

“I was joking.” she said.

He sighed. He really didn’t know how to take anything she was telling him.

“Are we pretending something now?” he asked her.

She widened her eyes. He sounded scared. He looked so vulnerable. There was no mask on his face. He was himself. The Noctis she knew.

“I don’t know.” was all she could find as an answer.

“I don’t wanna pretend anything.” he whispered, closing his eyes again.

She was still playing with his locks, gently and it felt so nice. He wanted her hands to linger on him forever. And he knew she wouldn’t interpret this right, because she thought he had spend this last two years forgetting her. As she had on her side.

“You want to get things straight right now, is that it?”

“Are you still angry with me?” he asked her bluntly.

“I…”

“I don’t want to bring you down, but… all this time, it had been on my mind. After what happened, I won’t force you to have trust in me…”

“Noctis…”

“I haven’t forgotten Light. And I know you don’t wanna talk about it. But I can’t stand the feeling I have you’re trying to get your revenge on me every time that we’re going all lovey-dovey in public.”

He looked at her at this moment with his piercing eyes and Lightning had to admit the other day hadn’t been one of her best. She had been mean with him, just because she was angry that Rufus had forced her to be with Noctis on a mission without even a warning. It wasn’t Noctis’ fault. At least, if it was, he would have reacted otherwise at first.

“I guess you’re right on that. We may be deceiving everyone around us for our job, but at least, we shouldn’t deceive each other. I’m sorry for yesterday. I really want us to be friends. I guess I took out my rage at Rufus on you.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.”
“Hey!”

She was about to punch him, but the phone on the night table rang and Noctis quickly answered it, rolling on its back.

“Hi! … Stella?!?”

Lightning frowned as Noctis sat up and she backed away from him a little, to give him space.

“Yeah, I ran a few laps, but I’m alright, what are you doing, spying on me?”

He sounded a little mad. Lightning cuddled up on herself, bringing her folded legs under her arms. Noctis looked at her absentmindedly and realized she was wearing one of his pair of shorts, showing off most of her legs. His eyes widened for an instant and he looked the other way, trying to focus on Stella’s voice in the phone.

“I know Stella, but…”

Lightning was thinking on her side of the bed, trying to understand how a single patient be so important for his physician. This Stella seemed to call him every day. And she sounded so worried every time Noctis answered her.

“I’m fine, I swear. … No, I’m not mad!”

“You sure sound mad, Noct.” Lightning smiled at him.

He sighed.

“I didn’t mean to yell. I know you want to follow my state and all and we’ll run a few tests after our travel is over, alright?”

Another pause. Noctis glanced another time at Lightning. She could tell this was getting on his nerves. She looked up, as if nothing was happening and that drive him even madder.

“I am careful. Yeah, you too. Bye Stella.”

He hung up.

“You know, if she’s only your physician, she seems pretty insisting to me.” Lightning observed.

“If you’d tell me you were jealous, I wouldn’t mind her calls.”

“I’m not jealous!” she yelled, jumping on her knees.

“And I’m just joking.” he replied.

“I had enough of your jokes, Noctis Caelum!”

She threw herself at him, her fists ready to punch, but he grabbed her forearms and they roll on the side, half fighting, half joking. She tried to punch him and to pull on his hair, but he started to tickle her and she fought to get away from his hands. They laughed as they tossed and rolled on themselves, fighting like little kids. She poked his stomach and that started a real poke fight that turned into a rash struggle. He was on top, she was on top, he was laughing, she begged for mercy before to strike back. It was as if all the tension standing in the air was getting out and they were just playing, letting their body do the talking. Their body brushed together, and their clothes were turning into a mess. Her shirt was showing a lot of her stomach now and her hands were under his
shirt to tickle him better. They shifted, their face next to each other, their gaze fighting, locking and letting go. This was just a game. But it was more than that at the same time. He wanted her, how couldn’t she understand that? He wanted to tell her he loved her, but he was scared that talking would break the moment. Right now, this was for real. She wasn’t faking. She was fighting back, playing with him. She was his friend. And she was so much more.

Lightning felt so weird and happy at that point. She hadn’t anything to prove, but it was fun to rediscover this side of Noctis. They had been fighting with words for so long. Being able to touch him without being accused of wanting him. Being able to get so close without letting out any of her feeling. It felt great. She was free. No gesture would be interpreted as anything weird. It was a game. He wouldn’t understand that she still loved him. She wasn’t sure of anything for now, she couldn’t go too far. At some point, they were half sitting half lying next to each other, just testing the other strength, then she pushed him back on the bed to tickle him to death. But for some reason, as their eyes locked together, she couldn’t move anymore. His face was so close to hers. His eyes were smiling. And his arms wrapped around her waist made her feel so secure. She wanted to kiss him right there and now, but she stopped herself.

“We’re only friends, huh, Noctis?”

He realized she was scared suddenly and he vehemently nodded, to reassure her. Though he wanted more, he wouldn’t take advantage of her. He would wait until the right time would come. Lightning rolled on her side, to put some distance between them. Noctis remained on his back, not looking at her. It was hard to feel her indecision like that. And then, she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder, sighing deeply.

“You know, Noct, I don’t blame you anymore for what happened two years ago. And I don’t want to be angry with you.” she said softly. “But I have a question.”

He waited for her to ask. As she was keeping silent, he looked at her and she buried her face in his shirt, so that he couldn’t see her.

“Why didn’t you come back?”

“…”

“It feels as if nothing had changed between us after all that time. But if you still…”

“I couldn’t.” he cut her off.

She sounded so hurt, this was a real torture. He wanted to look at her in the eyes and tell her the truth. But it was such a lame excuse to have been in a coma for so long. If he had had the possibility to come back, he would have come back to her, wouldn’t he? He still felt so hurt from all the harsh words she had said. But now, she was hanging on to him as if she was going to fall. And he hugged her. Repeating himself she didn’t want anything else than a friend. He couldn’t believe it. And he didn’t want things to stay like this.

“You couldn’t ?” she repeated.

“It wasn’t what I mean. Look, Light, I’m sorry, I should have show up before, but… I didn’t really know how to look at you or what to tell you anymore. I was scared.” he confessed.

At least, this was the truth. Lightning seemed touched by his words.

“You haven’t been this honest to me since so long.”
“Everything that has ever been between us feels so far.”

They both sighed.

“You know, I’ve missed you.” Lightning said. “I’m just not ready to try.”

“It’s okay, Light. I don’t know if I’m ready either.”

“What about this Stella?” she asked him, looking up at him.

There were silent tears in her eyes, but not because of Stella. The past still hurt, just as if it was yesterday.

“Stella is a friend. I’ve merely know her for a few weeks.”

“Wasn’t there any girl at all during those two years?”

“None. I had no time for any kind of relationship.”

“You were that busy?”

“I tried to keep myself busy, seriously.” he replied with a laugh.

Lightning remained silent for a while. Noctis seemed to feel the same way than her. The two last years had been hard on both of them, because she had forced their couple apart while all he wanted was to stay by her side.

“Say Noctis, we’re a team in this, aren’t we?”

“We sure are.”

“At first I was mad, but I’m glad that you’re here. It’s good to be with you again, after all this time.” she whispered, holding him tight.

Noctis smiled. It was nice to hear what she really thought and felt.

“I won’t let you down on this.”

“I don’t want promises, Nocis.”

He knew that too. But he still had to promise her. At least for his own pride.

…

“Hey, Stella, you’re sure that my daddy is here?” the little boy asked.

He looked about four years old, though he was only one year and a half.

“I’m positive Storm. He is. You should go to sleep now.”

“I’ll do nightmares again. I wanna stay with you.”

She stroked his grey and dark hair.

“You need to rest, Storm. We’ll be doing a lot of tests tomorrow, you’ll need to be in full shape for it.”
“Will I meet my daddy tomorrow?”

“No, but soon, you’ll see him.”

“Why can’t he come now?”

“He’s on a mission right now.”

Stella bit her lips as Storm’s blue eyes shone with happiness. He was really proud of his dad. The saddest thing about this was that the son and the father had never met. And for one good reason. Noctis didn’t know he had a son. He was still in his coma when the genes were taken from him. It was one of the higher G.I. who had forced her to do it. Because the radiant powers were too great to be lost with a dying agent.

“He’ll see me after his mission?”

“We’ll try to have you meeting, Storm, I’ll do all that I can. But things are complicated.”

Storm simply smiled. His head was light and his heart was beating from joy. He would meet his father in a few days. For the first time of his life, he would see him. Stella had always told him how cool and strong that man was. And he couldn’t wait to meet with him for real.

…

As they walked out of their room, smiling and looking peaceful, Lightning and Noctis had no idea of the next calamity ready to fall over them. They had managed to put some of the pieces back and felt a little lighter as they were together. Noctis finally knew where her limits were and what he could and couldn’t do or say. She felt even more secure in his arms, knowing how he wanted to hold her. It was real instead of being fake. But they were just friend. It was more than enough for now. They were close friends, right, everytime they’d met a guy walking alone, Noctis would hug Lightning so close to him, she felt he was still possessive, just as before. And when they met with Seymour and Rikku, the other couple couldn’t tell that they were in front of two single people.

“Hey, that’s my new training partner, Rikku. He runs pretty fast for such a thin guy.”

“He’s not that thin, it’s you who’s too big, Seymour!” Rikku replied.

The tall man laughed with his young wife. They certainly looked in love, though they didn’t really fit together. Rikku was a normal human girl, while Seymour was a guado. He looked like a human in every way, except from his spiky blue hair that resembled antennas pointing from his head. He had weird white lines running over his face, as a big brand or something. This was part of his kind, just as the long nails at the end of his fingers. But with the young and small Rikku, with her long blond braids, her wide green eyes and her daring clothing revealing nice curves but an average woman body, it felt out of place… Noctis had a picture of them together in his mind, producing the noises they had heard from their room last night. He chased it away, totally crept out.

“Hey, you’re one of the other married couples taking this cruise?” Lightning naively asked.

Noctis knew the play was starting at new. In front of others, they couldn’t let out who they really were. It was all part of their job. And he remembered how he had come to hate that.

“Yes, we are. I know it may sound crazy since Seymour is so older than me, but we really are together!”

At least, she knows it, Lightning thought to herself.
“Well, it’s pretty nice and all, but I’m starving…” Noctis interfered.

“Hey, we were on our way to the restaurant.” Rikku laughed. “How about you join us for dinner?”

Noctis and Lightning exchanged a quick look. They really didn’t feel like getting friends with those two. Light hadn’t many friends that were girls and she barely stand Vanille, who was just as jumpy as this Rikku. But, it was the perfect occasion for them to learn more over Seymour. And they needed all the intel they could get on him as fast as they could. Because, if they could get any proof that he was involved in the mafia, they could set up a trap and arrest him. And the mission would be over. As the tension between them every time they had to touch in front of people and do as if they were a couple when they weren’t and hadn’t been for months.

“That sounds good to me. What do you think Noct?”

“No prob, baby.”

Lightning smiled and they went together to the restaurant. Noctis was once more amazed by how good Light was at acting. She pretended to be just as joyful as Rikku, looking almost like Vanille at some point. She was laughing and exclaiming for all kinds of things. Like a little girl. Like someone she never truly was. And still, he liked that side of her too. She could be anyone. She could fool everyone. But he knew who she was. Even now, after all this time, they just had to exchange one look to be remembered of it. There was still the same link between them. And it felt pretty comforting, for both of them. As he talked a bit with Seymour, just to be polite, he couldn’t get his eyes off Lightning. She was his wife only for a few weeks. But every time she laughed and grabbed on his arms and leaned on him, he felt that it was real. She was with him. They were a team. They were friends. And that little play was their secret. When they laughed, it was true, because they couldn’t believe they were still that good to fool people.

“Hey, we’ll go get the food girls, just wait here and have fun talking about your girl’s things,” Noctis said as he got up with Seymour and directed himself to the buffet.

“But don’t be too long.” Lightning asked him lovingly.

And her voice was so tender at this time that Noctis couldn’t help himself. He leaned in to her, brushing his lips over hers in a light kiss.

“I won’t be long, promise.”

He walked off and Lightning asked herself for a moment if she was faking, and if he was, or if she was already missing his presence next to her. Her young table companion got her out of her thoughts fast.

“You two really get along.” Rikku observed. “Seymour would never be this demonstrative with me in public.”

“Hey, you look sad, Rikku. What’s the matter?”

Lightning would never be this open with someone she barely knew usually. But any information she could get from Rikku on Seymour could turn useful. She felt pretty sorry for using this girl like this. But maybe she could help her at the same time. If that young wife didn’t know a thing about her husband’s real occupations, she could be in a great shock once they would arrest him.

“I don’t know if I should bother you with my problem. You look so happy. I don’t want a ruin your day. And I must be just imagining things. Seymour really loves me, I’m sure of it. Last night was incredible. But every time we are out or whenever there’s people around, he turns so cold and
distant. He barely talks to me and he looks so bored when I’m enthusiastic about things. The more
demonstrative he can get when we’re in public is to hold my hand. And he’ll never tell me
anything sweet openly.”

“Maybe is he shy,” Lightning observed.

She knew this wasn’t right. Seymour was everything but shy. But he was a secretive guy. He hated
to get the attention on him while in his personal life.

“He had another wife once, a few years before me, and I know he was more direct and
demonstrative with her. But he’s different with me.”

“Aren’t you happy with it? You must mean much more to him than that…”

“No, it’s not the problem. It’s just that I feel sometimes… Oh, I’m crazy, we barely know each
other.”

“Hey, Rikku, you don’t have to be afraid to tell me what’s on your mind. I swear that your secrets
will be kept. I’m not one to gossip over other person’s lives.”

“I have the feeling sometimes that he’s ashamed of me. And of who I am.”

Rikku looked so sad as she said that, Lightning couldn’t help but feel sorry for her. At the same
time, she totally understood Seymour. She was often ashamed to have Vanille jumping next to her
if she had to go out with the red haired spy. And she was so sorry for Cloud who had to put up with
Yuffie’s attitude. But then again, Light knew that this was all pretty different than having the
impression that the guy you love is ashamed of being seen with you.

“I’m sure you’re wrong, Rik’. He wouldn’t have married you if he was ashamed of your
reactions.”

“Then, why do I feel like this?”

“Maybe that he doesn’t like it if you draw too much attention to you both. You’re freshly married.
He must wanna spend all of his time only with you and forget about the rest of the world.”

She couldn’t believe she was saying something this cheesy. It wasn’t that bad, it even make Rikku
smiled. Then, the guys came back.

“Here, your favorite Light.” Noctis said as he put a plate filled with the best tonberry stew ever
made.

Lightning almost forgot of Rikku’s problems, but she kept an eyes out, checking the young girl’s
interaction with her husband. Seymour sat next to her, putting a sushi plate between them.

“How sweet! We’re going to share our food!” Rikku exclaimed happily.

Seymour simply raised an eyebrow, a little smirk on a corner of his lips. His reaction seemed to
displease her, Rikku looked down. She wanted him to smile fully, at least, but this was too much
for him.

Lightning felt her heart beating fast in her chest as Noctis wrapped an arm around her shoulders. He
whispered to her:

“There’s something going on with Seymour’s men. He spoke with the buffet’s guy. Talked about
an *Antlion* Project. The guy ran away. And there’s a ship being constructed in space. Named the *Antlion*. Nobody what it’s for…”

She laughed and blushed, as if he had just told her something really cute.

“Don’t say things like that, Noctis. I’m going all red.”

“But it’s true!” he insisted, kissing her ear.

Rikku looked even more down. And Seymour groaned, thinking that this Noctis guy was a little too natural for his taste.

Inwardly, Lightning was thinking that this was good. Expect for Rikku’s, those news were good for them. It meant that Seymour was organizing one of his operations from this ship. What a nice cover, really, to be on a cruiser for his honeymoon!

To be continued…
Chapter 10

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part X

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 8th

Location: Planet Earth, around the Atlas, Africa, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


Warning to the superiors: Agent Stella isn’t making contact with the agents in place over the possible leak. S.T.O.R.M is still with her and she had to stabilize his state. Still waiting for report over that.

Message from G.I. six. End of transmission.

…

Lightning and Noctis parted with Seymour and Rikku with a smile, after spending most of the day together. They had gone and watch a movie together, they had been to the pool for the whole afternoon and as they waved goodbye, Light felt strange, feeling Noctis’ left arm still wrapped around her waist. They had played the perfect couple for all day long and it had never felt as a pretend. Every kiss and every smile were true to what she felt. She wasn’t sure what she was feeling anymore. At first, they both had tried to keep the mission first, but they decided they could take a break and have fun for real. They didn’t have to consult each other, it was like a silent understanding. And as he kept the door to their room open for her and she dragged him in with her, everything felt right. They were married, at least, on paper…

They laughed, a bit nervous as the door closed behind them. Had they been fooling themselves out there or had it really been real?

“We had a nice day today, don’t you think?” she asked him.

“We did. Though I can’t tell if it was as nice for Seymour and Rikku. She looked different after your girl talk.”

“Well, she did most of the talking and she confided to me over impressions she had on her husband. You remember, they’ve told us they’d met only six months ago. It was a quick decision they made, getting married after so little time. And he had a wife before, so I don’t really know what a little girl as Rikku could be thinking…”

Noctis and Lightning tried to put some distance between them as they kept talking. He sat on a chair and started removing his boots while she dropped herself on the bed, wondering about how it would have feel like for her, getting married as such a young age. With a mafia criminal. She felt protective over Rikku, because the girl remembered her of Serah. Maybe was it because they had spend a whole day together, maybe was it because she hadn’t seen her sister in months.

“She thinks that he’s ashamed of her in public. She tries to be happy, to make him happy, but he doesn’t like the attention they get from everyone around. She looked so depressed. So eager to be
acknowledged by him as his wife.”

Lightning sighed as she stared at the creamy white ceiling. The blue sheets of the bed were getting warm under her, as she felt her heart sinking in her chest.

“She loves him and she want to tell the whole world about it. But he doesn’t feel the same way. If he does love her.”

Noctis understood that Lightning was really sad about this. He had tried to be as attentive as he could all day long, but he was more cautious of Seymour’s doing. He had observed many things that could change their mission and turned into proof. But he had forgotten one important thing. Rikku could be the clue in finding proves to accuse Seymour. At the same time, he wanted to forget the innocent girl. Because she sure looked innocent and sweet and that her heart would be broken if she were to learn her beloved husband was a crime’s baron. He didn’t want to cause something like that, but sometimes it was part of his work.

“I think he really does. He’s just not the exhibition type for his feeling. He prefers to show off his skills and muscle than his heart.”

“Like most guys.”

“Hey! Don’t say it as if it was bad. Or as if I was that kind of guy!”

She giggled at his reaction, which let him quite surprised. She laughed sometimes, but never like that.

“Why do you always react when I comment guys in general, as if I was attacking you? You weren’t like that before.”

“We’re not before. And I’m a little on edge lately.” he gently replied.

There were no bitter tone or words and Lightning realized Noctis was decided not to fight with her anymore. He was just warning her of his state of mind so that she wouldn’t go and push his limits.

“Alright. I’ll be careful of what I’ll say of guys in general. How about you? What do we got on Seymour?”

“Well, except that antlion project referring to a ship launching in space somewhere, we don’t have much. He’s a training freak in the army and in his personal life. And he’s a better swimmer than me, or so it seems.”

Lightning laughed as she remembered how Rikku had gotten the two men in a terrible race in the pool. Noctis should have forfeited this one. He was a good swimmer, usually, but he had almost drowned while the guado was already on the other side of the pool. Actually, it was partly because Rikku had grabbed his leg and got Lightning to help her holding him back. Normally, Noctis would have slipped out of their grasp easily, but not this time. He was still weakened by his morning training and the wounds he had gotten from his famous explosion.

“You’re not still mad about that, are you?” she asked, raising herself on one elbow to look at him better.

“No, I just wanted to hear you laugh another time.”

She blinked and he gave her one of his warm smile, making her melt down inside.
They stared at each other for a long moment. She had so many questions in her mind. And maybe he would have answered her as she wanted if she dared to ask. But things were going too smoothly suddenly. It scared both of them. Where they still faking?

No, they both thought to themselves. And the word resounded in their head, as their eyes had shared it to make sure they wouldn’t be worried about this question anymore. There was no faking anymore. They were friends. Close friends, because of everything that had been between them before. Really close friends. He broke the eye contact between them, to stretch his arms over his head and yawned deeply.

“Are we sleepy?”

“What about you?”

She nodded.

“We could try to fall asleep before that our neighborhood gets too feisty.” she suggested, pointing the ceiling.

“Yes, maybe we should.” he smirked.

“I’ll get changed then.”

Lightning swiftly got up and headed for her luggage. Last night, she was wearing a pair of shorts and a big t-shirt, but she seemed to have something else in her mind. And as Noctis understood she wasn’t going to change in the bathroom, he felt his curiosity growing. It wasn’t as if seeing her undressing herself was anything new. He had seen her naked a lot of times, to say the least. And she had been in a bikini for half of the day after all. It had been kinda hard to concentrate solely on Seymour at some point during the afternoon, but now, it felt more intimate.

He thought it was maybe a test and looked the other way, while removing his shirt and going to look in his own luggage for comfortable pants. It was an awkward moment, getting changed each on one side of the room, listening to the clothing being folded and shifted. Lightning wasn’t really sure herself of what she was doing. She liked to be with Noctis, this was an undeniable fact. She liked to see him being so shy about her when they were alone. They knew each other so well, but after all this time, after all the bad things she had said, they were somewhat like strangers. Not entirely. But still, in a certain way, they were strangers. The moment turned even more awkward when they looked over their shoulders to meet the other’s gaze and exchanged a shy smile.

“Hey, I’ve got ourselves something this morning while you were training, in case the couple above us gets too… noisy again.” she said, choosing her words carefully.

“Buildup of wax for our ears?”

“No, I don’t think they sell that. Come here,” she said, sitting on their bed and pushing down the sheets.

Noctis wasn’t really sure of this, but after all, she had been talking of being only friends for some times and it was bound to stay this way for a while, even if he wanted things to evolve as fast as possible. He sat next to her and she took the “something” from under her pillow. It was a nano music player. And two pairs of earphones were connected to it. He chuckled as he understood.

“If we listen to the music loudly enough, we won’t hear them and we’ll be able to keep on doing our mission without any other awkward moment like yesterday night.”
“You really are brilliant.”

Just as he said that, they could hear a cringing noise from above their heads, soon followed by groans and panting.

“He sure doesn’t lose any time.” Lightning observed, looking a bit discouraged.

“Let’s test this music player.” Noctis simply replied.

With the earphones in their ears, they lied down, while Lightning was putting the music on. The first song was classic music, but as she raised the volume, they could erase the background noises and they both sighed from relief. It would be way easier to spend their night falling asleep to music instead of… bearing with the poor soundproof of the ceiling and walls.

“Is it the radio?” he asked her.

She red it on his lips and nodded. She quickly changed of channels until she found some music she liked. For some time, they dozed off with a few rock songs in the background. Then, after half an hour, Noctis grabbed the music player and chose another channel. Lightning frowned at first, but the music was nice. She couldn’t get all the words all the time, it wasn’t always English songs.

“It tells me something. What language is it?”

“French.”

In his far away colony, it was the first spoken language, especially his mother’s tongue. Noctis barely ever spoke in it anymore, it had been lost in almost every regions of Earth and most people talked English, when it wasn’t Mandarin, but he still understood it.

“I see.”

“If you mind, we can get back to rock songs.”

“No. These ones are better to fall asleep.”

“You mean they’re boring.”

“No, they’re relaxing.”

Noctis rolled on his back, looking at the ceiling. It was weird listening to songs and looking at each other. He had to concentrate to get the words coming to his ears. It had been so long since the last time he had heard French being spoken or sang. He missed it. Two years without any music. Two years that had slipped in his hands and his mind, without him even feeling it. He wanted to escape his thoughts in the music, in the meaning of the words that were buried so far in his memory. Lightning moved to get closer to him. He turned his head to look at her. She looked concerned. And she was, about him.

“I’m fine.” he told her.

They could hear each other talking over the music, because they were really close. And they were reading on each other lips when the music’s sound was too strong. They didn’t want to hear the couple above them. To be reminded of what they could be sharing and couldn’t just because of the past that had linked them before to break them apart.

“You look really far from here.” she observed.
“Maybe I am. But I’m still glad to be here.”

She blushed, since she could tell just by the way he was looking at her, he was happy being here because of her presence. She had missed hearing such sweet things. Cloud and Squall were both nice and pretty understanding, but they never felt the need to tell her things like that. They were strong and independent. They opened up before up, a bit, because she was a sister and a friend. But they never showed more than they should. Noctis could be hiding as much as he accepted to let out, but he was honest most of the time. All that he kept for himself was what truly hurt.

He hugged her and she turned around in his arms, to have her back pressed against his chest and feel his breathing on her neck and shoulder. She was wearing a light nightgown tonight. The fabric was soft against Noctis’ naked torso. And he knew why she was turning her back to him. She wasn’t going to provoke him. But as he held her, she put her hands over his arms, to keep them in place. So that he don’t let go anytime soon. A new song started in the music player. She brought the cover over them as they shifted a little, so that their body would feel as comfortable as possible in this gentle hug. It felt as if he was all around her. And they both liked the feeling.

The song that had started sounded sad and touching, though Lightning couldn’t understand any words. She knew many languages, but she had never learned French. Noctis held her a little tighter.

“You get the words, don’t you?”

“Of course. It was one of my mom’s favorite songs.” he replied, and she could feel his voice vibrating through his chest into her.

Les parois de ma vie sont lisses,

je m’y accroche, mais je glisse

lentement, vers ma destinée…

mourir d’aimer

“It looks sad.”

“It is.”

She took back the music player and rewound the song, since the radio had become quite better since the past centuries.

“Would you translate it for me?”

“What?”

“How about it? It’s not fair that I can’t understand it because it’s in French.”

“I don’t sing very well.”

“I don’t mind.”

She could guess he was smiling now. She let the song start and Noctis leaned his head over her shoulder, to whisper the lyrics in her ears. And his voice grew slowly, echoing through his chest, sounding bigger, stronger. Lightning closed her eyes.

Les parois de ma vie sont lisses,
“Walls of my life are straight lines
I try to grab on, but I fall down”
“...slowly, to my destiny,
dying from love”
“As everyone judges me
I can see one sole shelter for me”
“Every ways out are condemned
to die from love...”

And as she could guess now, she sang with him the second: “to die from love”.

Somehow, as he continued to sing and translate the lyrics to her, Lightning felt that this song sounded like their story. They had been condemned in that mission that had almost killed both of them, two years ago. And lately, the folly taking over her, the fear paralyzing her when she should be fighting, wasn’t it some kind of death?

“His body dies, but not his spirit.”

“Let the world to its problems
les gens haineux face à eux-mêmes
avec leurs petites idées

“let’s leave the world with his problems
hateful people with themselves
and their petty ideals”

mourir d’aimer

And once more, she sang with him : “dying from love”. They both shivered.

puisque notre amour ne peut vivre
mieux vaut en refermer le livre
et plutôt que de le brûler

“since our love cannot live
it’s best to shut its book
and instead of burning it…”

She removed one of her earphone, to listen to Noctis with more attention. She didn’t like that part. Since our love can’t live. It felt as a prediction for their future. One of her choice, since she wanted to be only friend with Noctis. But it wasn’t entirely right.

mourir d’aimer,

“to die from love”

mourir d’aimer

“Dying from love” they sang together.

comme on donne par n’importe quoi
abandonné tout derrière soi
pour n’emporter que ce qui fut, qui fut de toi

“as we give for nothing in return
abandoning everything behind
so that I take only what’s left… what’s left of you”

Lightning felt even more concerned about the song. Maybe because it was Noctis singing it softly in her ears. Because there wasn’t much left of her two days ago, when she was still apart from him, thinking he was maybe dead somewhere in space.

tu es le printemps, moi l’automne

ton cœur se prend, le mien se donne
"you are the spring, I’m the autumn
your heart is to be taken, mine is to be given”

This was right too and she shivered between his arms. Was this the true meaning of the words? Was he inventing something to make her feel like this? No, he wouldn’t. His voice wouldn’t be so shaken by the words.

*et ma route est déjà tracée*

“and my road is already marked”

For a moment, she was scared that this road would part from hers somewhere. But she was forgetting that Noctis was just translating.

*mourir d’aimer*

They sang together the last words, not minding if they were repeating it for the nth time.

“To die from love…”

They felt a little closer after listening to it all along.

“Your mom loved that song?”

“She loved everything that was sad. And she thought it wasn’t that sad. It takes courage to die from love. Or so she used to say.”

It was a touchy subject and she knew it.

“Thanks for singing it to me.”

“It was surely torture. I had trouble finding the right words and…”

“I love it when you sing. It reminds me of my dad.” she said without thinking.

If he had been anyone else, she would have taken it back, but she simply blushed and he slightly smiled.

“Well, I don’t know many songs. And Aznavour doesn’t really sing, though he was recognized through the world for his songs, even centuries after his death.”

“How should I know?! I don’t listen to music that much and to French music even less.”

“I know.”

They remained silent for a moment. She had shut down the music player. There was no more noise above or around them. They removed the earphones and simply snuggled against each other. There was still a lot of pain inside of both of them. And the song had awakened it a little. At the same time, it felt easier to be together after sharing this moment. Time passed by slowly. They were thinking of the song, of them, of the past and of the near future.

“Do you think people can really die from love?”

There was a long pause as Noctis thought over Lightning’s question.
“I think they won’t die openly nowadays, if you see what I mean. They would die from the inside. Living their life while not being really alive.”

She shivered. It remembered her of Squall’s accident in which he almost got himself killed. Because he didn’t care…

“Today, I felt really alive, for the first time in a long time.” he told her.

If she’d known he’d been in a coma for two years, she would have understood differently. But as she felt his lips brushing against her neck and the butterfly kiss he let on her ear, she shivered. Had he been dead inside? As she had been since she had lose her baby? Would she ever get over it? Right now, he seemed to have forgotten everything. They were together. He was holding her. Kissing her gently. And she let him. As long as he didn’t try anything more, as long as his hands remained still, she would be able to stand it. It was comforting. They were a couple of friends. They were married, only for a few days, but they still were. And for the time being, she didn’t want to close herself and not to feel anything. She needed to feel. Not too much, but enough to feel alive.

“Noctis?”

“Yeah?”

“Hmmm… Goodnight.”

“Yeah, sweet dreams, Light.”

She smiled as she closed her eyes for the last time this day. And they both fell asleep, snuggled one against the other.

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 15th  mid day

Location: Planet Earth, Boston Central Hospital

Mission: None

Agent: Squall

End of transmission.

…

It had been two weeks now since Squall was in the hospital. He was getting better, finally. Aeris was looking after him a lot and they had got to know each other, though the young man was still pretty close over himself and secretive. He always liked to wake up with Aeris standing or sitting next to his bed. He felt bad for putting her in this situation. It was certainly pretty boring to go on, looking some stranger sleeping all day long. He had gotten up by himself a few times, when nobody was there to keep an eye on him. His bruises and burns were finally healing. He had overcome the radiations effects and his body wasn’t decaying anymore.

Actually, it was only a matter of time till he would get out of this hospital. Rinoa hadn’t come back to meet him and Lightning had called him twice. She was getting along with Noctis. The way she talked about him, she sounded a bit unsure but pretty happy with how things were. If she was faking it on the phone, she was good, because Squall could have sworn she was happier than she had ever been since months. She sounded like the Lightning he used to know. And he was glad
about that too. It meant she was finally healing.

This morning, as he woke up, Squall saw Aeris loosen braid on the sheets of his bed, before to let his eyes travel up to her sleeping face… She had fallen asleep, half sitting in her chair, half lying on the mat of his bed. That mustn’t be too comfortable, but lately, she was getting really reluctant to leave him alone, even to go get some sleep herself. He felt a little guilty for it, but he liked the attention. They still didn’t know very much over each other. She was an ancient, but Squall wasn’t sure of what it truly meant. He knew that Jenova, the calamity, was an ancient. But just looking at Aeris told him how different she was from Jenova…

He shifted slowly, not to wake her up and picked her off her chair, to set her in a more comfortable position on his bed. As he touched her arm and their skin met, he suddenly felt images invading his mind and a screeching sound resounded in his head.

“Get away!” he heard.

He removed his hands, but the voice echoed in his skull. He blinked, trying to understand what was going on. It was a woman voice talking in his mind. It wasn’t Aeris’. The said girl was suddenly glowing and her quiet face changed, contorting with pain.

“Get away from them, Aeris!” the voice yelled.

“Squall,” she called for help.

His head was throbbing, now, it was hard to keep his eyes open. His breathing was uneasy. He felt his bruises burning him under his clothes. His body was getting heavy. The voice was yelling inside of him. He couldn’t hear anything else, not even his heartbeat, which had turned erratic. This was getting kinda creepy. Was it the ancient powers of Aeris awakening? Was it because of the radiations he had been exposed to? The doctors had said he could feel some changes in him after his recovery, but like this? Had he mutated into something? Was he turning crazy? The voice reminded him of Rinoa’s.

“Get out of my head.” he asked.

“They’re going to kill her. Run Aeris, run!” Another voice joined the first one.

Run, run, run! Squall wanted to run as they say, but he couldn’t understand why they were addressing their plea to Aeris. Was this one of her memory? Why was he hearing it? He had to stop this phenomenon, quick. But the noise and the voices were stronger than his will and he collapsed next to Aeris, forced into the pictures flashing under his eyes, forced into the noise and the commotion that had caused it. He loose contact. And the voices kept yelling at him, telling him to run. And he was running. With all his strength, he was.

“Aeris!” he asked.

He stopped abruptly, the ground under his feet feeling hot and unsteady. He realized that he wasn’t wearing any shoe or sock. He felt naked under the wind that blew around him. The voices were calling his name. His eyes looked everywhere they could, searching for the people to whom belonged those voices. His heart was beating fast. He tried to tell himself this was a dream, but it felt so different from a simple dream. The blue sky above his head had nothing to do with Boston’s Earth’s sky. As far as he could see, he was surrounded by a cracking and desert soil. Only earth and sky, as far as the eyes could go. He felt dizzy as he turned around another time. He spotted a tree behind him and rushed to it, even if it was a dead and withered tree. He was panicking inside. His face was showing it, he was sure. There was nobody to see it but he felt as million of eyes were
staring at him from above and underground.

The feeling was somewhat… mystic. His breaths were uneven, and as he looked around him, he could see other things farther, so far, each time that he closed his eyelids. He tried to focus on something, like the tree, but he still saw Aeris in the back of his mind. Aeris running and being chased by a gang of men. She was only a little girl at this time and her naked feet were hitting the cold ground softly as she ran for her life. He wanted to help her, to jump between her and her hunters. But he couldn’t. He was stuck in this no man’s land, next to that dead tree. He saw a younger Aeris, laughing and smiling with her parents. As they put her to sleep, he heard with her their worried discussion over her compromised future. Because she was an Ancient.

“She’ll never be able to get friend with anyone. She has too much knowledge. She doesn’t control her powers and they will fade on the people she’ll meet. Every time I touch her, I can hear the cries of our planet.” her mother whispered.

Aeris had no idea of it at that time. She was just an innocent little girl. She had terrible nightmares at night, of a planet being destroyed by evil people she couldn’t see. She was scared of fire and magic, because she knew only their destructive power. She liked to play with the birds out the house, but her father always told her not to go out, because she could get lost. In fact, it was because he was afraid someone would notice her and try to use her incredible powers. She knew everything that had happened, from the beginning of the time. And this knowledge could serve to destroy all that ever was created. She had no conscience over it, she could barely remember her terrible dreams of the past of all pasts, but it was still printed in her brain and genes. Jenova had used her own capabilities of Ancient to destroy and conquer. And the Ancients had been hunted down, so that none of them could ever survive to one day become the ruler of the universe. Because, they had that power too.

“I can’t stand not to take her by the hand just because I’m scared to see the past. It’s too hard and she’s noticing it, even if she pretends she’s not. When she sleeps, it’s even worse. If I stroke her head, I’ll hear people talking in my head.”

“It’s not her fault; Aeris is one of the purest Ancient still alive in this universe. Her powers want to express themselves. Ancients’ first resolve had been to share their knowledge to warn the people around them of the calamities that could occur if they repeated the mistakes of the past.”

“I know, but… We can’t keep her living like this forever…”

The clear vision faded with Aeris’ tears. She didn’t understood at that time, but Squall was a bit reassured, at least to learn that he wasn’t going mad and just being enveloped by one of Aeris’ ancient’s transmitting visions. He couldn’t try to understand or analyze what was going on or what he was learning. He just had to bear with things and wait till it stopped.

Another vision came, and he had to lean on the tree next to him as a violent cry hit his ears, almost making him loose his balance.

The house was on fire. Aeris was running and crying. Her parents were yelling her to run. She wanted to run back to them. But there were people all around the place, guys dressed in black and blue uniforms. They had special devices attached to their belts, looking like a mask and gauntlets covered with chains. They had no face in this vision, only a wide smile floating over their neck. It was a nightmare, Squall was quite sure of it. But part of it was the truth too.

Aeris wasn’t running fast enough as a little girl. The mask was closed over her face, blocking the light and locking her in the dark. The gauntlets were tied on her hands, and her hands were tied behind her back, as the men hands were searching and pinching her. She couldn’t understand what
was going on. She was crying, but the mask was so tight, she couldn’t feel her tears rolling down on her cheeks. Her parents’ yells of agony could be heard in the background. It was so unfair. Her heart was breaking inside. It was too hot under that mask, she was suffocating. She was raised in the air. Squall could see the guys carrying her on their shoulders, as a potatoes bag.

The vision faded. The voices remained for a moment. And at some point, Aeris’ voice crushed all the others, till she was the only one talking. She said only one word.

“Squall!”

He tried to find her, but the sun was bright in the deserted land, almost blinding him as he looked around once more. The wind was blowing right through him. He felt empty. Stupid. His breathing was slowing down, but he was still on edge. Why had he go through that?

“Squall? Are you alright? Squall, wake up!”

She slapped him in the face, which got him to awake entirely from the desert vision. She was kneeling on the mat, her head hanging above his, looking pretty worried and mad too. He was breathless as he realized he was back to his real body, in the real world. It felt a little better, since he was in control. But his cheek was burning from the slap she’d given him and he was astonished. She was mad?

“What did you see?!”

“I… Aeris, what’s going on?”

“Tell me what you saw!” she ordered him.

She looked panicked under her anger and it reassured him a bit. It was still the girl that he knew. He chose to be honest.

“I saw parts of your past. And people talking about Ancients and their powers. And I was in a deserted place for a moment. I didn’t mean to…”

“You touched me when I was sleeping, didn’t you?”

She backed away a little and he sat up. Squall didn’t like the way her question sounded. It felt as if he had tried something terrible.

“I just grabbed your arm.” he replied.

There was no denying it, if the discussion he had heard or seen or imagine between the two people he thought that were her parents, then, she already knew that when people touched her skin to skin while she was sleeping, she was sending visions in their mind.

“And why were you grabbing my arm?”

“Well, you weren’t comfortable, sleeping like that. I tried to install you in a better position. I wasn’t going to…” His voice turned uncertain and he wasn’t able to look at her in the eyes anymore.

She blushed, realizing what he thought she was thinking.

“I’m not accusing you of anything Squall, I just… It’s the first time since a long time that my power reacted to someone like that. I was got off guard.”

“I’m sorry.”
She knew that he wasn’t saying those words often and felt really touched that he cared enough about her opinion to apologize, when it wasn’t even his fault in the first place.

“What did you see exactly?”

He could understand why she would ask him to tell her precisely what had been under his eyes. It was partly her life that had been going on in those visions. It wasn’t really fair to have your past throwing itself in people’s mind. He tried to chose the right words to summarize what he had seen without hurting her. He certainly didn’t need another crying woman now.

“I saw your parents talking about your powers as an ancient. The house burning and the guards taking you away… The rest were only voices and the desert.”

She sighed with relief.

“So… No silver haired man?”

“Huh… no. Should there have been one?”

She quickly shook her head, realizing her mistake. As she looked up at him, she observed he was smiling lightly.

“What is it?”

“Nothing. I just thought it was funny that it’s the first time this happened. You’ve been taking care of me for two weeks and when I tried to rescue you…”

“Well, it only happens when I’m sleeping and if someone else’s skin get in contact with mine. And any normal human would never be able to awaken my powers just with that.” she replied, turning a little red in the face.

His smile faded at her last comment.

“Any normal human?”

“It’s nothing to be worried about Squall. You’re still human, it’s just the radiations’ effects. It seems you’re more perceptive than before.”

He still didn’t like that. His eyes were turning cold.

“How do you know it?”

His voice was so rough she backed away to the edge of the bed.

“I… Only someone aware of spiritual energies and life forms can awaken my ancient powers.”

“Spiritual? You mean like… ghosts?”

She shook her head. His voice was quiet but he looked kinda scared now.

“I mean like magic.”

Squall didn’t know what to think anymore as he stared at her. She tried to smile, to get him to smile in response. He was a bit shocked by what she had said. So he had mutated? His senses could perceive spiritual things? Magic? It made no sense!
“It’s not something bad, Squall.”

“But I can’t control It.” he retorted, looking down at his hands.

She took his big fingers in her small hands and he jumped a little at the touch, as if another vision was going to absorb him. But there was nothing this time.

“In time, you’ll learn how to. It’s not really dangerous. And maybe that I can help you getting use to it.”

Their eyes met. And as he gazed in her emerald eyes, Squall remembered the little girl being pushed around and treated as dirt by those guards before the burning house. He had wanted to protect her from the first day they’d met. And the feeling was even stronger in his heart now. He wasn’t going to push her away. He wouldn’t let her in too deep either. But he felt that he could trust her. And she felt the same way. They both smiled. And then, Squall’s stomach let out a terrible groan.

Their smiles broke into laughter.

To be continued.
Chapter 11

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part XI

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 15th

Location: Planet Earth, Antarctica, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


No warnings for the instant, no report as come in from any of our agents since the last six days…

Message from G.I. four. End of transmission.

…

“Look, look, it’s snowing!”

Rikku was almost jumping on the small balcony where the two couples were standing on. Seymour grabbed her in his arms to make sure she wouldn’t fall down as Lightning laughed at the girl’s reaction.

The last few days had been pretty normal. Rikku and Seymour seemed to be getting along just as well as ever, or at least, from what they could hear from them at night, before that they put on their earphones and fell asleep with music in French or in English in the background. Seymour wasn’t getting pretty more demonstrative in public, but he seemed to have gotten used to Lightning and Noctis’s presence. He kinda liked Noctis, they trained together every morning and afternoon; making it a four hours of training a day. And Lightning was really careful of Rikku, always listening to her, sometimes faking to confide into her. But before that she’d known it, Lightning was feeling that Rikku really was her friend. And Noctis wasn’t as gentle and loving in public anymore with her, which helped Rikku getting really attached to Lightning. It hadn’t been done on purpose, but Noctis was going slightly cold. As if something was wrong. It felt as if they’d become too close while she wanted nothing between them, but friendship.

In fact, Noctis was growing a little scared. His radiant powers were slowly showing up. The other day, as he was shaving himself and got cut, he had noticed his eyes turning red in the mirror. The sudden pain had almost burst out of him in a small shockwave and every object around him had been pushed to the ground or turned over. There was even a crack on a wall and he was certain it wasn’t there before. He hadn’t told it to Lightning when she had asked him if he’d noticed it before, since it could scare her to learn the truth. This was his payback for surviving this explosion. His body had mutated, from the inside. His DNA was different from every other human. Not that this fact would really be a problem for Lightning, since she had mako running in her veins. But she hadn’t any weird powers attached to it. And he still couldn’t control them…

As the snow fell around them, Noctis was smiling. But it was a smile filled with sorrow. He hated snow. It always held a nostalgic feeling. It meant cold to fight against while he lived in the streets, like a rat. It meant the blood staining the pure white when he would have to kill as a mercenary. It had been snowing when the terrorists had attacked his colony and destroyed his family. Why
couldn’t it be snowballs fights and snowmen, and the hot chocolate milk his mother would make for him, as every other guy?

“Are you feeling alright, Noct?” Lightning asked him.

He looked at her for an instant, through her white face and deep deep within her green eyes. Only a few locks were coming out from her furry hood. Her coat was all black and her breath was visible in the cold air. She looked worried. She had every reason to be. And Noctis was half content that she’d be and half mad at the same time.

“Am alright.” he replied, blinking quickly.

It was only the cold that stung his eyes. He wasn’t crying now, was he? Why would he? Lightning gave him a frail smile and grabbed his hand, holding it tightly through their gloves. He gave her back her squeeze, looking back up. Things weren’t going too well for their mission. Seymour was still a total secret, they hadn’t anything on the Antlion project and they needed evidence that linked this crime baron to whichever organization he was in.

…

Location: Planet Pluto

Time: Unknown to our favorite soldiers’ group

Situation: Locating Jenova’s hideout, or the Mako volcano…

People: Whole squad eight and the medical team, except Tifa and Barret, both were slightly injured and are staying back in the ship, recovering and defending the ship.

…

“So you were kissed by a naked lady wrapped in ice?! Why are you soldiers always the ones having fun?!” Hojo complained.

“What’s supposed to be fun in this “experience” Hojo?” Lucrecia asked, making clear quotation marks in the air at the word experience.

“I don’t know, really… Maybe the part where she’s naked. Or the fact that she kissed him.” Penelo interfered.

“The little girl knows what a man like.” The scientist observed.

“Could you all forget about it and keep quiet?” Cloud asked with a glare so cold he almost froze them all in place.

“Sorry sir.” Lucrecia apologized.

Hojo sighed and Yuna huffed from relief as she managed to climb over the ice edge she was escalating. They were getting all the way up the mako volcano, hidden by their white clothing, Nanaki leading the way, Cloud following him quite hastily and Vincent closing the march, keeping a close eye on Yuffie and every other girls, to make sure they wouldn’t slip all the way down.

They were all attached together, just in case and Yuna had slowed them down more than once, almost falling three times. Each time, she had dragged Lucrecia with her and she could tell the woman was getting pissed at her for it. Cloud was acting pretty harsh with all of his men ever since
the little “incident” in the cave. Tifa had told them the whole story on the way back to the ship and they hadn’t stop teasing him since then. Not that he really cared about it. Their words couldn’t seem to reach him. And that was what worried him the more.

He had always been tough, but he felt untouchable. Unbreakable from the outside, but ready to break down any minute. Shiva was still there, inside, her cold fingers still trying to touch his bared heart. Just fighting against that feeling was enough to drain most of his psychical strength. There was no patience left, not a care for the outside world. He hated it. He felt so disconnected from reality, right when he needed to be there, on the field, with his men. He was worried for Tifa, somewhere deep down. But even that feeling was under Shiva’s burning eyes. He couldn’t hide her anything. He was frozen to the bones. And the burn still bit.

“You shouldn’t apologize Lucrecia, you haven’t started it.” Vincent observed.

Yuffie gave him a glare, but he just smiled at her and Yuna could tell there was only a given few that received any gentleness from this vampire-like guy. Yuffie was one, and Lucrecia was certainly the other. She gulped as his red eyes met hers for an instant. He silently told her to hurry on and she resumed to her walk. Cloud was almost certain that Jenova was hiding inside the mako’s volcano. It was the power center of the planet. And Jenova liked mako. She would suck it all away from Pluto if she could, even if it meant to kill all that was living here. Because animals were living on this planet!

As Yuna was looking down at her hands and feet, forcing herself to move each of them quick enough to keep on advancing, she saw a tall shadow flying over her. Looking up, she gasped in shock. The biggest bird was flying right above them. His feathers were all covered with ice and his eyes were the purest blue she’d ever seen.

“Did he see us?”

“Of course he did.” Hojo replied.

Yuna felt alarmed, fearing that the tall bird could fly all the way to Jenova and warn her about their presence. But he turned as soon as he had come and flew away, as if he’d been blown by the wind. She sighed with relief. It was already hard enough to get herself to climb this mountain while carrying the gun Cloud had forced her to take. They were going to fight. She felt that this wasn’t a right place to go on a first fight and she had never handled a gun before. She would be a hindrance to everyone. But Cloud seemed sure he needed her to go all the way out there. Maybe would they meet some technology he wouldn’t be able to handle. She was the only engineer they had. And somehow, when she was close to him, Cloud felt a little warmer, as if she could chase Shiva away from his heart.

They walked in silence, climbing, huffing and breathing quickly with every step getting them higher. They’d been climbing for hours already and it had been a whole day and a whole night since they left Tifa and Barrett in their ship. The road ahead seemed still so far, it was discouraging to look up. But Yuna knew that by looking down, she would just get scared about falling all the way down. This volcano was about a hundred kilometers high! They surely would have to sleep before that they’d reach the top! But suddenly, Nanaki stopped and Cloud raised one hand, shutting every sound up. Everyone had stopped breathing.

“They’re just here. Just around the corner. They set their camp here.”

“Who’s here?” Yuffie asked, talking as lowly as she could.

It wasn’t too hard, even with her usual high-pitched voice. She was getting cold, just as Yuna. All
this walking, this climbing must have damaged their anti-cold clothes.

“Jenova… and the miners.” Nanaki answered.

They exchanged surprised looks. This dog really was amazing!

Then, Cloud cleared his throat. It was the signal. They cut the ropes linking them, forming three teams. Vincent was leading the first, taking Lucrecia and Hojo with him. He would defend them and lead them into the place where the prisoners were held. He was good for that kind of mission. Nanaki had Penelo with him. He would lead and protect her. They would cover more ground by splitting into two healing groups. That left only Cloud, Yuna and Yuffie, the ones making diversion. Of course, Cloud wouldn’t take any doc with him. He needed at least one experienced fighter. And he was keeping Yuna close so he’d be able to protect her if needed. The plan had been made over a dozen of time since the walk had been long enough to reflect over it…

“Okay guys. I’m meeting all of you down this mountain in three hours. Any of you don’t show up, I’ll come and get you myself.”

“Yes, sir.” said everyone else.

Yuna tried to repeat the same words as them, but with this gun on her back, her throat was too tied to let out any syllable. She was slightly shaking. The other teams moved on to get cover while Cloud was getting ready to move right in.

“Take up your gun Yuna. You’ll need it.”

Yuffie was already removing the security of her own gun, checking her loads and giving a thumbs up to her boss, meaning she was all set to go.

“I’ve never been trained to use one…” the young engineer tried to protest.

“Well, now’s the time to learn, Yuna. I need every man and woman that I have. Surely you know the basics?”

“Of course!”

Cloud couldn’t help but smile. She was just a girl, really. Getting angry at trivial things. Maybe was it wrong from him to sent her on the field like that. Maybe, but he wouldn’t let that slow him down. He needed two comrades to help him doing his diversion.

“Okay, we get in their camp and we start the most damage possible. Shoot the machinery, try to get to their central computer, destroy all you can get your hands on. Just make sure to spot the miners. Nanaki told me they’re being held prisoners in the bigger tents. So we avoid those, at all cost. I don’t want any casualty on our side.”

“What about their side?” Yuffie asked with a pale smile.

She liked the fight, a bit, after all, she needed to like it to be a good soldier. But some part of her, maybe the woman sleeping deep within this boyish girl, was afraid by the prospect of killing other people.

“They’ll shoot us on sight. Jenova’s men are killers.”

Yuna was now shaking a lot more. She was way more scared than Yuffie. After all, she had never been a killer. She was a part-time rookie soldier just because the pay was the best she could get to
afford her studies and her apartment.

“Don’t be scared, Yuna. I’ll be in the first row, I just want you two to cover my back.”

“But…”

“We don’t have time for buts. Come on now!” he cut her off.

Before that she knew it, he had turned his back on them, jumped in the air and resumed to his climbing. They followed him as quickly as they could, but Cloud was fast! And something seemed to be following him, covering him, as some invisible curtain. Yuna thought that her eyes were playing tricks on her, but as she blinked, she realized what he was doing. He was summoning Fenrir. How had he learn too, she couldn’t tell, but the giant grey dog was showing up, slowly, coming out bit by bit, raising the snow around him, turning the snowflakes into a maelstrom of white and mist. Soon, Cloud was riding Fenrir. The wolf howled to the cream white sky, jumping with a growl stronger than thunder and crashing in the middle of their enemy’s camp. Yuna couldn’t believe it entirely. Were they really needed for a diversion with something that… big?!

“Wow, the colonel really got himself one hell of a summon. It’s so cool! I want one too!” Yuffie exclaimed, raising her gun above her head like a little girl ready to go mad.

“Come on now, be serious. He could get hurt. He’s hard to miss as a target like this.” Yuna observed.

The young ninja agreed with her and they hurried on their climbing. It took them five minutes to get all the way up to the plateau were Jenova’s group had settled their camp. Cloud was doing his diversion, his Fenrir stomping the people running to him, tearing their limbs apart. His blond master held two guns, shooting around him, getting the more enemy possible down. It was a sight to behold. Something crazy, unimaginable. Scary to say the least. Yuna was petrified for a whole second. Was this really Cloud? He looked so strong, so invincible, like a myth. So cold. Dressed in pure white, his machine guns shining under the pale sky, his hair pointing on his head, his azure eyes locking on every target that dared to get under his gaze, his bullets covering the snow with drops of scarlet blood, Cloud looked unmoved by each falling soldier, unmoved, was it for their cries of pain or for the horrific images printing themselves in his eyes.

At this moment, he was a killer. A perfect killer, with no match. Precise as a machine. Cold as the ice under Yuna’s trembling feet. She almost slipped on it. But then, she saw Yuffie running next to her and forward, to join Cloud on his “rampage”. And she remembered why they were attacking so savagely. Why she was here. Men had been hurt. Killed already. Deprived from any dignity. She remembered the miner almost drowning in his blood and the awful wounds covering his body. Their killers had been just as savage as Cloud. It didn’t forgive any of his doing now. But the fact that other men, just and innocent men could be save because of this rampage gave it a different meaning. Yuna didn’t approve. But she felt a similar rage as Cloud’s building up in her heart. She raised her gun and started running too. She pulled the trigger once, releasing four of five bullets with one single shot. Right, she had a machine gun. The recoil almost threw her to the ground. And if it didn’t then, the result of her shooting really had her falling to the cold ground. Two more men were down. And she was their killer.

“Move, Yuna!” Cloud barked to her.

She barely recognized his voice. She knew that she didn’t know him, but it felt even worse now. She was panicking inside. Her breath was going out of control, her eyes couldn’t see any spot where there wasn’t blood staining the snow around her. Broken bones, broken men, broken aliens. She shivered. Her stomach churned. Was she going to die in such a place? On another planet,
fighting strangers to save other strangers? This was so unreal. How could her life come to this?

“Move!” Cloud ordered again, with a voice even stronger.

She jumped back on her feet, terrified by his voice. It sounded so big, as if it was all around her.

She heard the gunshots in the air, coming from everywhere. As if the fear had blocked some of her senses, she reopened her eyes to the world around her. Blood spilled over the snow. The brown trace of boots and cars on the melting ice. A laugh resounding back in the corner of the camp, a woman’s laugh, sounding as a demon’s cry. She gave one quick glance over her shoulder. Another blue skinned woman was standing between two tents, looking at them. With long white hair rolling down her shoulders. Red eyes staring at the three petty humans that had entered her camp. Wearing clothes, for once. Thin clothes, but clothes still…

Yuna shivered. That was Jenova. She had already watched some poorly made horror movies made over her. The actress chosen for these movies was nothing like the original. But it hadn’t been too far from it.

Cloud had stopped moving on his summon. Fenrir itself had froze. The guards stopped shooting for an instant, looking up at their boss. She gave them a brief, shady smile.

“I knew you were coming, my little mako soldier. You are drawn to me, as a fly is to the light, aren’t you?”

“In your dreams!” Cloud replied harshly, raising his machine guns, aiming for her head.

As he pulled the trigger, Jenova’s red eyes shone with pure hatred and the giant wolf he was riding collapsed into thin air. Cloud rolled on the ground, getting back on his feet, his bullets all lost in the snow. And Jenova’s men had resumed to their shooting. Yuffie threw herself in a dark corner to get cover and Yuna looked for somewhere to hide. With the tall Fenrir, they could have last way longer than that. But Cloud was clearly not expecting Jenova to come right up to them. Yuna spotted a space between some rocks. She fell to her knees and rolled down there; unfortunately she was met by a man hiding in the shadow. Another enemy, holding a gun, just like her. She shot without thinking. Hated herself for doing so as he fall down. She heard Cloud yelling something. An order, certainly. She crawled beside the fresh corpse she’d made and looked over the rocks for a moment.

Cloud needed cover. Yuffie was already providing him some, but the miners’ kidnappers were too many for only two soldiers. Yuna braced herself, though her heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to burst in her ribs cage. She wanted to close her eyes and all of this mess to be over. But it wasn’t going to be easy. And her superior needed help. She raised the gun. Pointed it to the nearest enemy visible. Cursed under her breath. Her sight was getting blurry from the panic growing within her. Her tears were preventing her from seeing things straight. Wait, she was crying? But she had to shot. And she closed her eyes before to pull the trigger, wishing that lady luck was with her for once.

Cloud could tell bullets were going all around him. But that wasn’t what scared him the most right now. Jenova really was here. She seemed pretty eager to get her hands on him. Dead or alive. They had to get out of this bloody mess quick. He was running as fast as he could, shooting to every target showing up around. His blood was boiling, rushing through his veins. And he felt so alive, so not ready to die, as always on the battlefield. He wasn’t scared. Not before to feel pain. This was an incredible feeling. What it surely felt to be invincible. But he wasn’t.

A bullet went through his left arm. The sudden bite got a single cry out of his lungs. He fell head
The pain hitting him like a thousand pounds mass. He immediately got up, hoping no muscle had been touched. Let go of his left gun. Cursed through his clenched teeth, turning over himself. There was nowhere to hide. He needed a way out of this. Surely, Vincent and the other had had every miner out. How many time had it been since he started this lame diversion? Five minutes, ten? They needed more time.

“Dammit!”

Yuna couldn’t believe she had made such a mistake as to close her eyes. Cloud had taken one of her shot instead of the guys she was aiming at! She would never forgive herself for it. As she saw her boss getting back up and running as if nothing had happened, she felt a little appeased. He hadn’t a mortal wound. Or at least, it wouldn’t kill him right away. Oh, this was so awful. She knew she had shot him, she was shaking so much, and tears were still rolling down her cheeks. How could she do something like this? She had killed load of mens and now, she was shooting her own superior in the arm. What kind of soldiers did that?! What would the others think of her? What was she going to do with herself if Cloud was to lost the use of his arm or worse, to die from this wound?!

Of course, at this point, Yuna hadn’t really the time to get all those thoughts straight. Her mind was a battlefield, thought running through it like bullet, making hole in her right mind, taking apart what was left of her senses. She was scared beyond words. And she had done a terrible mistake. She had to set things right. To give Cloud a chance to get out of this alive. Join the other down this fucking volcano. And quick. Taking down every man in this camp would be helpful, but she had no idea how to do that. She was no soldier, for heaven sake, she was your average every day gear girl maniac! It was then, as she get out from her shelter, nausea and fright fighting inside her, that she tripped on a pile of rubble. And as she got up, she discovered the rubble was sophisticated machinery. And refills for a whole army. Not to mention explosives.

The ghost of a smile crept on her lips. This was something she knew about. She had hated every of her class about it, but suddenly, she was glad she had been listening.

As Cloud was just turning around, breathless, realizing he was out of ammo, an explosion threw him to the ground. The next thing he knew, Yuffie was next to him, helping him up.

“What was that?!”

“I think it was Yuna, sir.” the young ninja replied.

Of course, she knew he was referring to the explosion, not to her sudden appearance. Cloud had learned long ago that asking personal questions to this girl was dangerous for his sanity.

“Where is she?”

“I dunno, sir. But we gotta get you out of here now.”

“We need our engineer on the ship,” he barked back.

“You’re wounded,” Yuffie observed.

“Yeah, seems Jenova’s men finally learn to aim.”

“It wasn’t their fire that reached you, colonel. It was Yuna’s. She shot with her eyes closed.”

“What?!!”
He felt like asking her how she managed to notice all that, but he was so mad, so surprised, shocked and in pain at the same time that talking was too much for him. He pushed Yuffie’s friendly shoulder away. He needed to get all of his men back to Earth safely, and he was going to see to it. If Yuna had shot him, well, blast it, she had warned him she hadn’t been trained to use a gun. Blame Jecht for giving him a soldier that could only do half of her job. He pushed the thought away. He was mad, but worried still. It was still a battlefield, and their only engineer hadn’t visited one ever before in her live. Was she going to be okay? Even when it would be over?

He was shaking a little himself. He had pushed Yuffie away so she wouldn’t notice. He hated feeling weak. And Shiva was still there. Laughing, as a ghost of Jenova. Jenova who wanted to get her hands on him, as much as the mako of this planet. The whole place was on fire now. Every tent, every man around. He and Yuffie had been lucky to avoid any casualty. But as he looked back at the ninja, he noticed her right leg was bleeding. Vincent was going to kill him.

“Yuna!” he called out.

The smoke got into his mouth and had his eyes crying a little. He coughed, before to be covered by stronger coughs, coming from his right. He turned to the direction, raising his only gun left. Yuna walked out of the smoke, her cheeks covered with frozen tears. It was dangerous to cry on Pluto. And even as he thought that, Cloud felt relieved. At least, two of his men were alright. For now.

“Is it over?” the girl asked him.

Her pale skin was covered with ashes and frozen blood and tears. She looked like the walking dead. She was trembling from head to toe. There was a cut on her waist. Superficial, or so it seemed.

“No, until we’re light years from here. Come on. And don’t get out of my sight this time.”

He sounded harsh, but she could understand. There was blood on his white clothes, dark mark from the smoke around them. And a dark light glowed in his eyes, beneath the mako and the sky where Yuna could almost drown as she looked at him.

Yuffie came back to his side.

“Let’s go.” was all he said.

They disappeared into the smoke, before that any wounded or unwounded could get to their senses and aim at them. They ran and tripped all the way down the mountain. On their way, they met with Penelo, and Nanaki, even Lucrecia, Hojo and Vincent. Everyone was alright. The miners were with them. Or at least, the few still living and able to walk. Nanaki was pulling a long line of bodies, all the wounded attached in a homemade toboggan. The dog was running fast and the soldiers followed with as much haste, pushing their protégés as must as they could.

Cloud tried to summon Fenrir, hoping he could help, but the wolf didn’t answer to his call. Jenova had broken their fresh link. And until she was far enough, the summon wouldn’t come back to his aid. He guessed he had owed it. He had been so overconfident all the way up that camp. They ran for what felt like days, scared to be followed or seen. But Jenova’s camp had to recover from the explosion and the fire. After an hour, Vincent found a spot where they could hide and take a breather. Behind a large wall of ice, they took cover from the wind and this vast no man’s land of snow.

Cloud let himself fell on the ground, his breathing sounding pretty hard, holding his left arm to his side, trying not to move it too abruptly. Yuna held her sides, before to try to remove the tears from
her face. It felt like a frozen mask that was eating her skin. She hated the feeling, but hadn’t dare to get rid of it while running.

Yuffie was soon taken away by Vincent, who wanted to check on her himself and Lucrecia and Hojo, after recovering, went to the miners’ side, to mend to their wounds.

“Ouch!” Yuna gasped.

Her tears had frozen on her skin with the blood and the dirt and as she tried to remove this awful mask from her face, she felt as if she was tearing off her skin. It burned so much.

“Yuna, try to calm down. Sit down for a bit and catch your breath. You’re going to get hurt.” Cloud suggested her.

“Why are you still so nice with me?”

“Still so nice?! When was the last time… I sounded nice, huh?”

“Well… Just a few seconds ago. But I… I shot you back there.”

“Yeah, Yuffie told me that much. But I know it wasn’t on purpose, since you were closing your eyes.” He marked a long pause, not looking at her, before to add with a smile: “Oh, I’ll have you punish later, don’t worry about it.”

He seemed to be joking, but Yuna couldn’t help but to shiver. Martial laws were rough and she wouldn’t dare to imagine what they’d do to a soldier who had shot without looking at his target…

“I’m not serious, come on. Just trying to release some of the stress.”

“I… see.”

“Sit down, soldier, it’s an order.”

She obeyed and sat next to him, letting out a small whine as her cut remembered her of its presence on her waist.

“This was the worst diversion I ever made. I should have sent Vincent to spy on them, or Yuffie. Anything to know where we were standing. But I had to rush everything.” he whispered.

“Everyone’s still alive, ain’t we?” she observed.

“Yeah, but…”

He glanced at her and realized her face was turning blue from the cold. At this rate, she was going to get one hell of a frost bite from those frozen tears on her face.

“Man, you should see your face. You look like a ghost… Here, help me take off my glove.”

“Huh? Why?”

“We gotta get this ice off your face.”

She blushed, and the blood rushing in her cheeks hurt her more than anything else, because of the freezing bite on her skin. As she hesitated to do as Cloud said, he ordered her to do so, and she did. As soon as his right hand was free from the glove, he brought it to Yuna’s face, having her jerk away in surprise.
“It will melt the ice.” he explained her.

It took some time, but not as much as Yuna would have thought, and Cloud’s warmth had managed toget her frozen tears off her face. He used a cure material to heal her burned skin and the cut on her waist. She was tomato red once he got done with healing her, but felt as good as new. Well, physically, at least. Her mind was still amiss.

“Thanks,” was all she could blurt out.

Cloud managed to smile. He had to keep himself busy with something, not to hear Shiva in his mind. And right now, as he was sitting next to Yuna, freezing his butt, his chest warming at the sight of her shy smile, Shiva seemed to wither away. He couldn’t feel her inside, or hear her. And he felt reassured. Even though that girl had shot him a moment ago. And Yuna was scared as he smiled at her. Because this man she had shot was the only one still able to stand. Still able to breathe. Her hands were stained in blood. Even in his. And this terrified her. She was a murderer now. What she had never wanted to become. She shivered, but not from the cold.

“How many men have died today?” she asked him suddenly, after a few minutes of silence.

He jumped a little at the feel of her voice. It sounded bitter suddenly. And he realized what he had done to her by forcing her on the battlefield. He had made her a killer. This poor innocent girl… She had wrapped her arms around her shoulders and was looking far, in the distance. Seeing the corpses on the ground and the men falling again.

“Too many. As always. But it was my doing. My orders. It is my responsibility and mine alone.”

It was how the army worked. The only way soldiers could comfort themselves in killing. But Yuna shook her head.

“I was the one pulling the trigger.”

She stared at him and for the first time, he couldn’t stand her eyes in his. Blue and green, both storming with anger, confusion and pain. He looked away, tried to swallow back the guilt. Not to feel the pain in his heart. He hated this part of his job.

“You saved all of those men before us.” he whispered.

“What about those behind us?”

“There’s no point in looking back, soldier. Forget about it.” he coldly retorted.

He got up, walked away. He couldn’t fight against that. Couldn’t see his reflection in her eyes, the side of him which liked to fight. The side which liked to kill. Because there was one. And he knew she had felt it too. It was mainly why they felt guilty now. Because that at some point in this last fight, a savage instinct had come over them and made them feel right about doing this. Taking lives. Playing gods. Being monsters. And it hurt. Because they were alive. And they were still glad to be alive. Though Cloud wasn’t really sure why at this time…

…”

Noctis entered Seymour’s suite silently, holding back his breath. It had been a long time since the last one he had broken into someone’s place. Lightning was out with Rikku for some shopping and Seymour had accepted to accompany the two girls to carry their things. How they’d managed to convince him to do it, Noctis had no idea but he was glad to have some time to check things out in here. He quickly scanned the main room, looked through most of the closets and the only
wardrobe. For such a young girl, Rikku had daring underwear… He let go of the clothing, he was almost already certain that Seymour wouldn’t hide anything there that could give Rikku an hint about his true activities. He went to the bedside table and sorted out its content, making sure to put everything back in order.

So first, paper, lots of paper. Notes taken in an illegible scripture. But Noctis was used to it. He wrote so badly himself that he could read mostly any kind of scripture… Unfortunately, it was Rikku’s writing. He sighed and changed of bedside table. Less paper. But some phone number where written down. Quick notes, like: Call Don, 645 139 8733. Ask him about Kai 4-7-4… Noctis memorized every number and name. Found a story book under the pile of paper.

The Antlion tale was the title. This one was way too obvious, but he went through the pages anyway. The Antlion was a mythology creature, bearing the head of a lion on the body of a giant ant, always starving, since its lion head wanted to eat meat and the ant could only digest weeds. The tale told of knights chasing the monster that killed and destroyed everything around him, leaving corpses in his trails. Noctis found it a little hard to understand why a grown man would carry this kind of book on his honeymoon. But then, he turned another page and saw notes taken between lines. A knight’s name had been underlined in red.

Kai.

Weren’t there a Kai in the numbers before? He read the notes carefully, printing the words in his mind.

The lion’s head can swallow down the people, while the ant turns them to fuel. Kai’s working on it. Anima watches over our success.

Noctis frowned. Seymour believed in Anima? That forsaken guardian spirit? The guy hidden it well. But this Kai was an important part of it now. He was working on the Antlion ship. Lightning had found out that much. There was a spaceship being built for the army, named Antlion. And Seymour had some rights over this project. So it was surely his final objective to use it. But what was his real purpose?

Swallow down people and turn them to fuel. That made no sense. Noctis shook his head. Maybe that Seymour was even more dangerous than they were thinking. If he was crazy, then… He remembered one of his discussions with Seymour. About how he liked people pushing their limits. How he hated to see petty human wasting their potential. Suddenly, Noctis realized how threatening Seymour could be. He wasn’t just involved with the mafia. Because Don was a common mafia nickname. But if he prepared something like a purge or…

“It can’t be…”

The last words written down between two lines were pretty troubling.

The strong shall prevail…

That sounded like Seymour alright. And if Rikku was to stumble on this, she would think it to be only note made on the little story of the Antlion tale. What a mess.

Noctis felt so confused at this point, a wave of furry burst out of him and break down the bed.

“Oh man…”

He had to get out of here quick. And how he could erase his intrusion, he couldn’t think. Maybe they would think the bed had broken by itself? He put everything else back in place and rushed to
the door. He quietly got out, keeping his cool, but his heart was racing in his chest. His powers were really getting out of control and it wasn’t good. He had to calm himself down. To get back to the Noctis he once was.

Having locked the door from the inside, he checked if the handle would block or turn completely. Thank every saint he knew about that he was wearing gloves. Removed them and stuffed the said gloves in his pockets as he walked away. He was thinking fast, trying to find something to erase his mistake and explain the broken bed. If he could find a way to send a shockwave through all the ship to have it shake a little, it could be good. But it would be risky for all the people inside. Was he supposed to hurt people just to correct his mistake and keep his cover? Noctis felt a headache coming. And his feelings were still out of hand. He had to do something fast.

After thinking of calling Stella, he decided to get down to the engine room. There was some free visits for the passengers and he could easily find a way to sneak in the more private spot and find something to break or set loose. He felt terrible just for thinking about it, but he knew mechanics enough to make his plan work without putting everyone on the ship in too much danger. He took three elevators, one down and two up, the ship was definitely too big for his taste, and he sneaked in the engine room, past the security cordons and the few guards and cameras. His heart was beating a little faster at the thought of what he was plotting. But had he any choice? A broken bed was something else. And he was angry at Seymour. From what he had read from his notes, he seemed planning something worthy of Hitler himself. And Earth had seen his share of Hitlers in the last centuries. *The strong shall prevail…* This was so wrong. Nobody could always be strong.

Noctis knew it better than anybody else. Mistakes happened; so much as weakness could show up. They had to stop Seymour’s scheme. But how?

What was he planning really, anyway? What was the Antlion ship? It was a governmental project. Army based. Seymour had every chance to get involved in it, every right…

“To believe he can appear normal in public. To think he even got me fooled.” Noctis thought. He hated that feeling more than anything else. And as he stepped between the components of the ship’s motor, he felt his rage building up. Maybe was it a bad idea to come down here and let his powers go out. But he had to find a way to control himself. And he was learning, slowly but learning still, every time he used the radiant power willingly. The shock wave came out from him, like sparks rushing out of his heart. It hurt a little as he tried to bound the waves and the sparks to his will, to lead them in one precise way. This energy was so beyond him, so over powerful. Unbearable to breath in the heated air. Sweat drops went down his forehead. His eyes were scarlet red. His hair raised on the back of his neck. He let go of the shock, let the furry out. It rushed into one sole engine, destroying it, turning it into tiny pieces.

The whole ship shook from the hit, and soon, started to incline to Noctis’ left. He lost balance, rolled down, all the way to the central corridor, where the visitors were screaming in fear at the sudden change of atmosphere. The air was turning hot, the gravity was a little loose. And the ship was shaking from within. All that wasn’t attached to the ground started sliding to the left. The floor was now going down in a slope, sharpening with every minute. Red alerts started to flash on the walls.

Noctis smirked as he grabbed on a pillar, got himself up and running. This was more like it now. So he could control the radiant powers, somehow. And with all the moving the ship was doing, Seymour and Rikku wouldn’t ask themselves how their bed could have break. He caught a sliding woman in his arms and forced her to grab on a set of unused tubes, so that she wouldn’t get hurt. Rushed out of the engine room. People were running and stumbling everywhere. Screams, cries of shock and panic all around. Noctis passed through it all, wishing he could reach Lightning’s side
before that things get really out of control. In the crowd trying to grab on something not to fall or to run away to a safer part of the ship, he was like a ghost, running through without being even noticed. Technicians went past him, not looking at him. Cursing under their breaths... He wasn’t smiling anymore. He barge out of the stairway and into the central square, where all the shops were. Looked around for Lightning, Rikku or Seymour.

“Come on Light, where are you?” he asked himself.

He wanted to hold her in his arms, to make sure she was alright even though he had just sent the ship into utter chaos. Wanted to apologize for putting her through this ordeal. But he couldn’t even tell her that.

As he tried to run over the sloping floor and to keep his balance, he noticed blond pink hair in the lot of people around. It couldn’t be anyone else. She disappeared from his sight, before to come back in it, and he dashed to her, stopping only when he was in arm reach and grabbed her wrist in his hand. She turned around, her eyes round with surprise, until she recognized him.

“What… what’s going on?” she asked him.

The next shaking sent them both down to the floor and Noctis hardly managed to grab on a signpost to prevent them from sliding all the way down to the side of the ship.

“I… Things got a little out of hand.”

“You don’t mean… You made this happened?!”

Nobody could hear them; everyone was too busy saving themselves. The sirens were so loud it was hard to hear your own thoughts in all the chaos. Noctis felt guilty as he heard Light’s voice. Was he really supposed to lie to her about this?

“I’ve discovered something about Seymour,” he whispered in Lightning’s ears as he held her close to him with one arm, grabbing hard with the other on the signpost’s rod. “Something worse than all we could have fear…”

“What about this?”

“I don’t know. I just got out from their room when everything went awry with the ship.”

Lightning seemed to believe him. After all, how could a single man do enough damage to get things so out of hand with such a ship? Although, she knew Noctis well. When he was mad, he could do most anything. That was one of the reasons why she loved him. Because she was just the same... But he seemed seriously worried about her now. And she was glad he was here. Even if she wanted to think otherwise, she felt that nothing could go wrong with him around.

To be continued…
Chapter 12

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part XII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 17th

Location: Planet Earth, flying over Argentina, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


Warning: A malfunction has happened on the airship but no casualty taken to any passenger. Still trying to find out what happened.

Latest report: Raven mentioned discovering a certain link between Baldin and a spaceship in construction, known as the Antlion…

Message from G.I. six. End of transmission.

…

Lightning was sitting next to Noctis, in the last restaurant standing in the whole airship. They were alone, Rikku had sealed herself in her own room while Seymour was threatening to court-martial the people that had let this terrible ship malfunction happened. The principal responsible, our favorite spy, was shifting uneasily on his chair as only a few people where talking, laughing or dancing around. Lightning hadn’t eaten much lately. She was pretty worried, as everyone else. The engineers hadn’t found any way to explain what had happened. One piece of the main engine had been destroyed, taking all the ship’s stability down with it. They had almost crashed down, but the pilot and the mechanics had managed to save the day, replacing the broken piece with a spare one in the blink of an eye. Noctis had been acting weirder than ever since the accident and Lightning had some doubt about his whereabouts. She knew he had been sneaking in Seymour and Rikku’s room to get some clues. He had had some, terrible clues of what lied ahead. But the fact that the ship broke while he was away from her sounded strange. Why this precise moment? And why had he come so quickly to find her, as if he’d known something was happening? He wasn’t panicking at that time, at least, not for all the commotion. As if he knew everything all along. And what if he did?

“What’s bothering you, Noct?” she asked him.

“Wha… Nothing, Light. I’m just a little… on edge.”

He felt so bad for lying to her. And for doing something like that to all those innocent people just to keep up his cover. What was he thinking, really?! They both sighed. The news of Seymour’s plans was a pretty heavy weigh to carry. He was preparing a large scale operation. The whole planet seemed threaten. But what could they do? It was just a getting more intel mission. They weren’t supposed to work on the making things right part. That would come after, in another mission, for other agents, maybe…

“I guess it’s only natural. After all that happened…”
They didn’t really feel like eating and Noctis forced himself to finish his plate. Lightning pushed her dish away from her and looked around, trying to find something that could occupy her mind. She needed to do something, anything.

“What time is it?” she asked him suddenly.


His watch was broken since the little incident in the engine room. Heck, the damn thing was in pieces! He hadn’t noticed it at first. His shockwaves were so quick there was almost no rebound to them once they destroyed their target. Sadly, he didn’t know how to aim this kind of weapon. He would have to ask more over it to Stella. At first, he didn’t want to hear anything over Radiant powers. He was so disgusted at the feeling of being a stranger to his own kin. He couldn’t be different. He had already missed two years of his life, wasn’t it enough?

Lightning looked back at him, a little smirk on her face.

“How about a drink, Noct?”

And her smirk gave him the chills. Lightning wasn’t a big drinker. She’d got herself drunk only when she knew some guy she could trust was there to back her up. And he wasn’t sure if he was ready for a drunk Lightning.

“Things are looking that bad?!”

“Alright then, how about ONE drink?”

She wouldn’t fool him with just that. She hated to lose control, but when she was giving up and starting to drink, it was hard to stop her. And would he know when to stop himself?

“One drink, huh?”

“Oh man, and you were a mercenary once in your life? Even if I did get drunk, it wouldn’t be that bad!”

Alright, now she was playing with his pride. As if he wasn’t game for a drink or two. Then again, hadn’t Stella told him he shouldn’t drink too much? He couldn’t recall anything like that in her few recommendations considering his health. And he wasn’t really listening to the few she had done, so far. Not overusing his powers. No exaggeration in physical efforts. His last training sessions had been easier, but his legs were always hurting a lot when he would get to sleep.

“Alright, Light, we’ll have it your way.”

A moment later, they were in the ship’s bar, which was almost empty at the instant. The barman looked surprised to see people, and the DJ was almost shocked. But after two beers and three shooters, Lightning was asking for music to dance on and Noctis followed her on the dance floor. More people joined in, deciding they should take things lightly even if they had been scared a moment ago. It would make it easier to release all of the stress. Because it was all it was really about for Lightning. The usual pattern started, as Noctis noticed, a drink, a dance, a drink, a dance, and so on. An hour later, there were so much people on the dance floor; it was getting hard not to be crushed between two persons.

They had to be so close not to lose each other in the crowd it was hard to bear it. But it was good, oh so good. Noctis felt light as a cloud on a sunny day. His mind was clear of worries, which he was thankful too and in this state of mind, he couldn’t see how he could put anyone in danger with
his powers. They wouldn’t work unless he was really angry or confused. And he was anything but that. Oh, slightly confused, maybe. Not that he mind. Lightning was confused too, by anything that wasn’t him. Noctis had never like to dance, not that much, he was too shy usually. But to lighten up his Lightning, there wasn’t much he couldn’t do. And with a few beers down, it was getting easier, as most things.

The lights and shadow switching in the air were hypnotic and Lightning had to focus only on Noctis to forget the other bodies brushing sometimes against hers. It felt as if they were one with a human wave, just moving to the groove, loosing their mind. She liked that feeling. She never had a chance to surrender to it when she was a teen. Too busy working in part time jobs and taking care of Serah. Looking after her. Going down in bars to find her if she was running off and bringing her back home, to give her the telling-off of her life! Cloud often helped her, playing the dad’s role. It hadn’t been easy. Though they’d share joy, she still felt bad for playing the strict mother as she did. Serah didn’t seem to resent her, but somehow, a guilty feeling lingered.

And right now, she felt so pleased to let go of all her worries, to forget about everything connected with reality. Only listening to music, letting the beat run through her. It was so loud, so overwhelming. Not to think about what she was doing, about people looking at her. Pressing herself against Noctis’ chest, forcing him into an embrace that was permitted only by the fact most of the place wasn’t always lighted. His hands were on her, all on her. And at this moment, friend or faking husband, she couldn’t care less. It was Noctis. It was all she needed to know.

“Light,” he managed to whisper in her ears.

He had to yell to cover the volume of the music, but it sounded as a whisper, really.

“What is it?” she yelled back.

Her throat was dry and her lips felt sticky from the beer. Not to mention the sweat all over her body. Suddenly, she realized that the people around looked strange. They had two or three heads. Funny, she thought. Alien had joined the party.

“Let’s get out.” he suggested her.

Getting out?! But she was having fun for the first time since so long!

She swung around, to look at him and make him understand they weren’t going anywhere. She almost lost her balance and could have been stamped over by the other dancers if Noctis hadn’t been with her. He dragged her out of the crowd. He felt that he was losing his self control and that was bad. His mind was going in all kind of directions. Most of them implied getting Lightning naked and he still knew he couldn’t do that with a public around. He tried to shake himself back to reality, but reality was nothing but chaotic music and Lightning grabbing on his neck to keep herself steady. She had left her brown coat at their table and was wearing a white top and a tight black jean. Her breasts were round next to his chest and he could tell all their “dirty” dancing had awakened something within her. He was aroused too. She smelled beer and sweat and even that seemed appealing right now. He held her as close as he could, trying to find the exit of the bar. She was giggling a bit. Stroking his biceps in awe. Dammit, she was drunk. And so was he!

For some reason, he doubted there was only alcohol in his last shooter. Or maybe the mix of beer and otherworld shooters. How should he know what a Shoopuf glass was, anyway? All that matter now was to find the way back to their room and fast! Lightning let him drag her all the way out of the bar, burst into laughter as she saw someone in a corridor and he couldn’t help but think that her laugh was funny. She was pretty even now.
“Where are we going?” she asked him.

He had pushed an elevator button, waiting for the thing to arrive.

“To our room,” he replied.

She started to laugh again. Her hands were under his shirt now. Oh she was going to drive him crazy before that they even get there, why did she had to put him through that right now? He needed the relaxing sensation of not having a care in the world for a moment, right, but this? Something deep deep within his brain knew this was wrong. It had to be. Lightning pulled on his hair and forced him into a kiss. She tasted a strange mix of beer and sweets. What had she eaten to taste like that? He pulled away from her, trying to focus. He didn’t mind her taste now, not really, but he had to keep priority. First, they needed a room. The elevator doors opened. It was empty. That could do the trick. He pushed her inside. She lost balance and fell down on her butt. Started laughing even more. Gosh, she was way too drunk. He helped her up. Pushed every button of the elevator. As he tackled her to the elevator wall, he felt bad. This wasn’t like him at all. And this had nothing to do with the Lightning he was used to.

“Noctis?” she asked, her face slowly turning red.

Was it from the alcohol in her veins or the heat from the dance floor, or his breath on her. Or maybe was it the lust in his eyes… He could see the reflection in her own irises… And this was wrong, really wrong. He wanted her, even while not drunk, but to get to her like that, it was a cheap shot.

He stood back, one hand on each of her side, to keep himself away from her. Apart from her warm body. His legs felt weak under his weigh suddenly.

“What’s going on?”

“I think we’re both losing it, Light.”

“Losing what?”

“Come on, you know what I mean, deep down.”

The elevator came to a stop. On the wrong floor. She pushed a button and had it closing on the exit. The good one this time. Nine floors away from where they were.

“Deep down,” she repeated, letting her hands trail all over him.

Was she really drunk? Was it him who had gone too far? Was she testing him? Toying with him? Why would she be?

“Light…”

“I’m still angry with you, you know. It’s just… Tonight, I think we can come to a truce. But only for tonight.” she whispered.

Her arms laced around his neck. And her breath went down his collar, through to fabric and on his skin. Getting to their room seemed as the only good thing to do right now. Hell, was there drug in their food? He felt weird. Alcohol never turned him on that easily. And normally, he wouldn’t even have the strength to go all the way till the act was complete and would just fall sound asleep before to know what had happened to him. He almost tripped as he rushed out of the elevator and into the corridor when they finally arrived on it. Lightning laughed and he joined her, letting the haze come
over his eyes too. She had gotten him into it, this was what she wanted, surely. Or maybe not? Was he taking his own desires and dreams for reality?

She kissed him on the chin and went down to his neck, lifting up his shirt. He raised her in his arms, grabbing her butt, not caring from the fact people could see them anymore. There was a limit to what he could bear. Lightning’s back hit the door to their room, gently, as he pulled her lips into a passionate kiss. It tasted salty, because of the sweat. She felt her stomach churned in protest. But her inner legs were heating up. His hands unclipped her bra under her white top and she gasped as he cupped her breasts. Oh, she wanted it to happen, disregarding everything else!

“Get us in.” she asked him between two kisses. “In the room.”

There was emergency in her voice. He tried to remember where his keys were. She helped him search out his pockets. Let her hands wonder under his pants, under his boxer. He groaned. The keys fell to the floor. Noctis grunted this time, angry at himself. Let go of Lightning’s breasts and slowly, slowly got down, letting his head brush against her chest and lower stomach till he could grab the stupid keys. She laughed a little, putting her hands on his shoulder to keep herself steady. He was driving her mad! She was shaking a little. And as he raised himself up and stood tall before her, he felt dizzy. They both laughed as he fought with the keys to open the door. She finished removing his shirt and he would have stripped her naked right there if she hadn’t asked him to wait till they were in.

Noctis managed to close the door with his foot, to push her on the bed and to land on her before to lose all that was left of his balance. She huffed under his weight. Groaned as he moved over her.

“You’re heavy,” she hissed, trying to push him away.

He rolled on his side. Missed the end of the bed and fell on the floor. She burst into laughter. Noctis felt something like rage building up inside him. Tried to hold it back. He had no idea why he should hold it back, he just knew it, but he was pissed now.

“Damn, I’m too drunk!” he said.

“Ha ha ha, ha ha ha, oh, oh…”

Lightning laughing turned into strangled breaths and he fought against gravity to sit up, suddenly worried about her. She was holding her stomach, her bra barely hanging to one of her shoulder under the white top. He tried to avert his eyes from her chest, not to let his body think about it.

“What is it?”

“I don’t feel really good.”

“How surprising…”

He didn’t feel that much better right now, but as long as he didn’t move, he could stand it. She tried to get up, only to fall back on the bed. Rolled to the floor, moving carefully. Brought a hand to her mouth and half ran half crawled to the washroom. Noctis rolled his eyes, before to feel the content of his own stomach going all the way up because of the noises his partner was making in the other room. Yeah, really, drinking with Lightning was a bad idea. Especially when he wasn’t able to stop himself from drinking…

This was even worse than before they went to the dance floor. Noctis leaned with his back on the wall, trying to focus on the ceiling and to forget that his head was turning and that his stomach was churning and that Lightning had tried to make a move on him just a moment ago. To believe that
one or two glass less and she would be his right now… Maybe was it better this way. How would he have faced her if they had woken up in the morning, with him having taken advantage of her in this state? Oh, she would have killed him, surely. So he would still live tomorrow morning. If he could hold back his urge to vomit until she was done herself. Dying seemed like a nice option for a moment. And he knew that tomorrow morning would be even worse…

Fortunately, for once, Noctis was wrong. As he woke up the next morning, he discovered that Lightning was out of sight. His neck was painful, and he realized that he had been slipping in the bath. Still wearing all of his clothes. Alright, so basically, after that Lightning went to throw up and he’d kinda lost count of what was going on, nothing bad happened. His mind was still a mess, he couldn’t understand why he felt reassured to still have his clothes on. Well, only his pants. Lightning had taken off his shirt after all. His shoulders were numb from the hard cold ceramic. He got out of the bath, moving slowly. His head was a battleground.

Strange pictures were running through his head. Lightning in a mix of flashing lights and shadows. Stella’s face. Words ringing in his ears, while the world was silent all around. And Rufus talking to someone, while he was imprisoned behind transparent walls. He remembered the time when he woke up from his coma. Naked and confused. It felt slightly the same, but at least, he had his pants on. He forced himself to chase his boss out of his mind. But the pictures imposed themselves to him. As he got on his knees, he felt hands running over his body. Nasty, unwanted hands… Pain, as needles plunging in his flesh. But he could tell nobody was around. It was only memories. Or the remnants of a bad dream. He shook his head. Curse under his breath for doing so.

“He could die any moment, all he can do is breath on his own. Take whatever you can from him so that we don’t lose everything we had.” a man was saying in his mind.

“But sir…”

Was it Stella’s voice? She looked kinda scared. He closed his eyes. The pictures came back, and he was seeing himself lying motionless on the operation table, surrounded by scientists. What were they doing to him?! He could feel their gloved hands on him, it made him sick. No, they weren’t, they couldn’t… ! He quickly opened his eyes, to get the images away. He’d consider the possibility of being manipulated during his coma, it had lasted two years after all. But something inside him couldn’t let him consider every side of the question. It was too disgusting to even think about it. And now, it felt as if he was remembering. Or imagining? He held his skull in his hands, trying to get all the thoughts away.

To shut his mind off whatever could have been done to him while he was unconscious. To forget the sickening feeling. To focus on the present. On Lightning that must still be in the other room. He wanted to yell, he wanted to punch someone in the guts. Was his mind playing tricks on him? This looked real. It was possible, dammit, anything could have happened to him back there. Any traces of anything could have been erased by time and healing. But how could they… Why would they…?! He couldn’t put the thought into words, he couldn’t, that would just break down what was left of his courage. And the rage, the rage at the very thought of it truly taking place. It filled him as he was starting to shake.

The shockwave burst out of his body, breaking the bathroom’s mirror to pieces. Noctis tried to swallow it all back down, but he hadn’t much strength left. He got up, slowly, his teeth clenched, his head throbbing in protest to his every move. The shards fell to the floor and cracked under his shoes as he walked out. It was hard to breath. Hard to think. He wanted to call Stella and ask her if what he’d just seen was right. But how could he even supposed she would have been involved in
something like that? It was so low, so low and dirty to take advantage of an unconscious man. But then again, hadn’t he almost did the same to Lightning yesterday?

“Nothing happened. Not yesterday, nor ever.” he told to himself.

His voice was a strangled whisper in the dark room. And he knew the scientists hadn’t gone that far. If the pictures still running in his mind were truly part of his memories, then, those men… Whatever they needed from him, it was in the name of science. For the Black Faction. But to think he’d been touched by them without knowing, to think they could take anything from him without his consent, just to save whatever could be saved from him… He felt used. And he didn’t even know what he’d been used for!

The rage gave place to despair. He focused on the here and now, managing to see Lightning lying on their bed, all curled up to herself. He walked up to the bed and gently lay down next to her. He was shaking so much, he’d thought he would wake her up, but she was sleeping soundly. How could he face her in his state? He felt ashamed for yesterday. Even under alcohol’s effects, he shouldn’t have act as he did. Even if nothing had happened. She had toyed with him too, and that made him mad. But it was nothing compared to the feeling of this men and women around the comatose him.

He stared at Lightning, trying to think only about her, to remember all of their good moments together. So that he would forget. And suddenly, as his thoughts started to mix together, he remembered the terrible ordeal she’d been through because of Dysley and of his own fail at protecting her… She had been through the hands of some scientists at that time. She had been traumatized and that was why she had never been able to entirely forgive him for what had happened. And suddenly, he felt that he could understand her. How awful it had been for her. How terrible he was to resent her for resenting him.

His arms snaked around her waist and she immediately hugged him, holding him close. Her presence and warmth comforted him and ease his shaking. Even if these creepy memories were real, it didn’t mean it would change him now. He was still Noctis. And Lightning was still with him. Still needing him. He sighed before to fall asleep.

As Lightning woke up an hour later, it was to feel something clutching at her. She slowly looked down, to see one sleeping Noctis, holding tightly to her. Somehow, he had managed to inverse their role and was lying with his face on her chest. She could feel his breath through the fabric of her white top. She had no bra underneath. And that’s how yesterday’s events suddenly came back to her mind. She couldn’t believe what a fool she’d made of herself! And Noctis’ naked back got her worried for a sec. If she was ever going to throw herself back in his arms, at least, she’d like to remember it. And not to be drunk while doing it. Her mouth was sticky, and they both smelled terrible. She needed a shower. And so did he!

And she couldn’t remember what had happened after that Noctis dragged her away from the dance floor. She kinda remembered his hands on her. The lust in his blue eyes. His passionate kisses. How she laughed at him. Well, if her memory was clear enough, they hadn’t gone and had sex, so at least, her pride over that fact was saved. She tried to have him letting go of her, to get up and have a shower, but his arms were strongly tied around her.

“Noctis…” she whispered, her tone turning harsh.

He started to shake and she couldn’t add a single word. What was that? Why was he shaking?

“Noctis?” she asked worriedly.
“I don’t want them to do this. I don’t!”

And his voice felt weak. Vulnerable. Unlike him. He was having a nightmare. She gently shook him up. His eyes were red as he looked at her, but she ignored it. Instead to mind it, she stroked his hair and his head, even gentlier.

“It’s alright Noct. It’s alright.”

He could have cried if it wasn’t for his pride. To think she was the one comforting him while she didn’t know a thing about the pain he was feeling. While he was lying to her on so many things. It was wrong. And it pained him even more. But at the same time he was glad. She still cared. So there was at least someone who still cared for real…

“I know…” was all he managed to say through his tight throat.

As to prove his thought, Lightning decided they both needed a shower. He was surprised at first, since she decided they would go together, but she suggested that they wear their swim suit and he finally complied. As she entered the bathroom, he remembered his little loss of control, a little too late to hide it.

“What happened in here?!”

The broken shards of the mirror were shining on the floor.

“Huh… I don’t know. Maybe that yesterday night got a little more out of hand than I remember it…”

Lightning could have argued that he never got that violent when drunk. But her head hurt too much to think about it. Now, he was sober. She let him clean up the mess and went to change to her swim suit in the room. They brushed their teeth in front of the broken mirror. As a weird couple. And before that he knew it, they were taking a shower together, trying to erase what was left of last night’s “party”. They had taken shower together before, but never with clothes on. Never on a hangover. They didn’t drink that much together. None of them liked to lose control over their selves. The warm water was comforting as it poured on their skin. Noctis let Lightning watched his hair.

“I don’t remember ever seeing you with such long hair,” she observed.

He hadn’t gotten himself a haircut for the last two years. Stella had told him his hair had been cut once, a year ago, but he was still in a coma, so, how was he supposed to remember it?

“Well, it’s the first time you noticed it. So, does it look that bad?” he joked.

“No, it’s just, weird. It’s the only part that seems different about you…”

Saying that, she let her hands wonder over his face.

“I don’t know where you’re heading Light, but you’re playing with my nerves.” he warned her.

“Well, it’s the first time you noticed it. So, does it look that bad?” he joked.

“No, it’s just, weird. It’s the only part that seems different about you…”

Saying that, she let her hands wonder over his face.

“I don’t know where you’re heading Light, but you’re playing with my nerves.” he warned her.

“How come you haven’t changed in any way? Why do I feel like you’ve been missing me all this time and that nothing has changed between us? It’s been two years, but…”

He’d never been good at fooling her. But he wasn’t going to let her drive him on this track.

“I can tell there isn’t much that has changed on your side either, Light. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be
here. You wouldn’t have gotten drunk with me around yesterday. You wouldn’t look at me like that. And I’m sick of this game.”

He gently grabbed her hands and forced her to let go of his face. Damn, he wanted to kiss her now, but he couldn’t without knowing what she thought. Not while lying to her on everything.

“Noctis…”

“Yesterday, you were pushing me to my limits. You’ve been testing me from the very first day we started this mission together…”

“I…”

He pushed her on the bathtub’s wall. Kept his distance, only touching her wrists. The water was dripping down his shoulders and over his face. His hair was saturated. And his eyes were of pure gold as he asked her:

“Why can’t we be as we were? Why must everything change? It’s been two years, right. You don’t know how fast time went for me while you were away. I wanted to come back if that’s what you’re going to say, I truly wanted to come back. But I was sure you hated me, Light. And I couldn’t face that. I’m still not sure if I can now.”

“But I…”

“No buts!” he cut her off. “Claire… Just answer me.”

Hearing her real name in his mouth softened her even more. How could she let her pride seal off her feelings anymore? He was wide open before her, only asking for the truth. But she still wasn’t sure of herself. She didn’t know if she would ever be able to feel certainty while next to him.

“I’ve missed you, Noctis. I’ve missed you more than you could ever imagine. But that scared me. That and the feeling I couldn’t trust you again. But I want to… And I don’t want to at the same time.”

Now it was her turn to seem lost. He let go of her wrists, putting his hands on the ceramic wall behind her. So this was about trust?

“I’m stronger than I was back there, Lightning. I may not appear so, but I’m much stronger.”

And this wasn’t a lie. He was so powerful it was scary, but if it could reassure her to know he could protect her without failing this time.

“I don’t want you to be stronger! I want the Noctis I had back then.” she replied, her voice shattering in her throat.

Now he was at a loss of words. How could she say that after pushing him away so many times? He stared into her green eyes, trying to understand if the water pouring down her face was only coming from the shower or from her eyes. She turned the water off. Breathed deeply in and out.

“What I meant is… I never really resented you, Noct. And I wanted to tell you, but I was so mad at myself. Because it was my fault, for real. I should have told you everything, about the baby, about the mako in my blood. I shouldn’t have put the blame on your shoulders for what happened. You’ve almost died back there and the only thing you could worry about was still me. And all I did to repay you was to crush you with my wrath…”
So she was really crying. And he wasn’t sure he could understand a word of what she was saying anymore. So all this time, all this bickering… Yeah, of course, he’d known, but still… He was the man of every situation. He should have been able to protect her. And he still had failed her.

“It wasn’t your fault, Light. Don’t cry now, I…”

“But I was a real monster with you.”

“I DON’T CARE! Crying over it won’t change anything, right?”

His sudden yell had stopped Lightning’s weeping. She blinked, looking even more confused. Even a little scared. But she had earned being shaken up a little.

“All that I want, that I ever wanted, is to be with you now. I know I should have come back before and I have no excuses. I guess we were both scared on our side, but now that it’s all said and clear, won’t you… won’t you take me back?”

“But I just said I wanted you back!”

“You said you wanted the Noctis you once had back. And I haven’t changed that much, but I’ve still changed. And I gotta know if you’ll take me back as I am now.”

She shook her head, unable to understand what he meant. His voice was cracking a little on the last words. How had he changed? She looked him all from up and down. There were a few new scars on his body. He was thinner, as if he hadn’t eaten as much as always. She put her hands on his chest, raising her head to look up in his eyes as she closed the distance between them.

“What has changed Noctis? You had missions out there, without me, you got yourself into an explosion and you’ve had hard times, I can tell, but what’s so different about you? You always were like this. Except for the hair. And you’ve lost some weight…”

“Well, so have you.” he replied.

“Tell me what’s on your mind, Noct.”

“I…”

I’m a monster Light. A monster. Whenever I get angry or confused, everything around me starts breaking up or blowing up. I’m like a walking bomb. But how can I… How can I tell you that and still have you back in my life for good? he thought desperately.

“I want you back as you are, silly, don’t get so worked up over the fact you’ve changed. I was just… I was crying because I thought I wasn’t good enough for you anymore.”

“What?! Now, YOU’re saying silly thing!”

She smiled. Her eyes were still a little red, but he could feel her heart beating fast and her finger gently grabbing his shoulders. In the storm of her eyes, she was telling him everything her pride couldn’t hear. That he was meant for her. That she couldn’t take it and keep on faking her love for him. Because she really loved him. As he was now. She muttered the three words. “I love you.” And then she asked him:

“Is that silly?”

That made him smile and he quickly shook his head. Her wet body was pressing against his. Her
hands slipped behind his back, holding him closer and he leaned his head down to her, to pull her into a deep, passionate kiss. And this time, it felt for real. Not an urgent feeling of tasting her before that the drunken feeling wore off. Not a need awakened by suggestive noises above their heads. Nobody was there to see them. There weren’t any harsh words to be whispered between their kisses. And as he pushed her to the ceramic wall again, she welcomed his embrace. Shivered at the touch of the cold wall. He raised her in his arms so she could be closer to him. Their kiss deepened, taking away their breath. They parted at some point, as if the warm feeling building up inside them was too much to take.

“I’ve missed you Noctis. Every part of you. Your voice, your shyness, the way you dare, the way you joke at me. Your body. Your hands…”

“Don’t… don’t go telling me things like that now, Light. I’m this close to…”

“Does it matter now? We’re married, aren’t we? And this is supposed to be our honeymoon.”

“Oh. So you really were after my ass when you got me drunk.” he realized.

“Hey! I never said that! Take it back, Noctis Lucis Caelum! And I didn’t got you drunk, you do that yourself!”

She punched him in the shoulder and he slipped on the watery bathtub’s surface, bringing her down with him in his fall. After the first pain and panic from the sudden fall was passed, Lightning couldn’t help but started to laugh.

“Gosh… I’m not fit for romance, really.” she said to herself.

“Hey, just because I made a stupid joke doesn’t mean you have to forget your plans. I was just teasing you.”

“I know. But I’m still mad at you!”

He looked worried for a sec, but soon understood she was paying him back for the joke with another one. She resumed kissing him, before that a loud bang a their apartment’s door cut them short in their making out session.

“Hey, Lightning? Are you there? I gotta talk to you.”

“Who…” Noctis started, furrowing his eyebrows.

“It’s Rikku. She looked worried. Oh, can you believe it, you made me totally forget about the mission!” she hissed under her breath as she tried to get up and out of the bath.

“Oww. And, watch where you’re putting that foot.”

“Noctis, I gotta get out, let go of me!”

“Hey, it’s not my fault this time, I’m stuck. How did we fell…”

“Lightning?! Am I interrupting something?”

Lightning was sad of letting Noctis down on this one, but she had to be there for Rikku in case it could help their mission advance. There was way too many things at stake if Seymour was left to complete his terrible plans.

“No, just give me a moment, I was in the shower!”
“Don’t yell in my ears,” Noctis warned her.

“It’s not my fault, if you would let me get up already.”

“It wasn’t a joke when I said I was stuck. This thing’s been made for dwarves or something…”

“Well, it seems you haven’t lost enough weight yet.” she mocked him.

“What was that?!”

“I’ll come back later, I didn’t mean to annoy you two.” Rikku said from the corridor.

“No, no, just give me a sec, Rikku, I’m coming. Ah, where’s my wardrobe?”

Finally, Lightning managed to find a way out, much to her brand new boyfriend discomfort.

“Oww!” he protested as she almost stepped on him and was finally out.

“Help me here Noctis, haven’t you seen my wardrobe?”

“Why would you need one for a honeymoon trip, huh?”

“You…!”

To be continued…
Chapter 13

Episode I – Soldiers and spies – Part XIII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 19th

Location: Planet Earth, Boston, Squall’s apartment

Mission: Protecting Aeris Gainsborough while waiting for new orders

Agents chosen for the mission: Agent Squall

Latest report: Squall and Aeris seems to have develop a friendly relationship

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission.

As Squall woke up that morning, he could tell something nice was being cooked in his kitchen. He rolled over his back. It was so nice to feel the fluffy and big futon’s mat groaning under his weight instead of the small and hard hospital’s bed he had slept in for the last two weeks. Not to mention he could finally wear real clothes instead of the hospital’s gown. He hated that thing. He yawned, trying to remember how there could be someone cooking in his kitchen. Then, he remembered why he was sleeping on the couch. That’s right, his new mission. At the very instant he got out from the hospital, he was notified with an express mail saying he was to be Aeris’ bodyguard. Until that every people that could want to use her Ancient’s powers to do evil where found and made prisoner, or executed, or something… Anyway, Rufus Shinra himself had ordered that Squall took Aeris under his wing and kept her in his own apartment, to have an eye on her.

Fortunately, the Cetra hadn’t been mad or anything. She had agreed so quickly. Squall had been surprised. But then again, she had nowhere to go. Her life had never been anything but running away from pursuer since her house was attacked when she was just a little girl. And despite all the hardship, she was always smiling, always trying her best to help others. Squall couldn’t even start to understand her. She was hyper sometimes and he had trouble keeping up with her whenever he would take her out, was it to get the groceries or just for a walk.

She was trying to help him understand his new abilities, to have him listening more to others, to the spiritual energies in the air. It was harder than he’d thought. And it was getting on his nerves. Now, whenever he was having a dream, he couldn’t tell if it was him dreaming or someone else. Just this night, he had had a nightmare where he saw Rinoa running away from terrible shadows. And he had wanted to help her, but now, he couldn’t tell if it was a premonition or just a bad dream. He still resented Rinoa. And the smell from the kitchen made him hungry. He swiftly got up. All his old reflexes were back and it was good to feel in control at new, at least for one thing. He went to the kitchen, wearing only his boxer and a white sleeveless shirt. His hair was a mess and Aeris jumped a little as she felt his shadow falling over her.

“Wow, I thought you were going to sleep a lot longer than that.” she said, looking at him from over her shoulder.

“Well… I’ve slept enough in the hospital.”

She turned back to her cooking and he got a little closer to her to check from over her shoulder what she was preparing. Sausages and potatoes were gently roasting while she cracked some eggs...
opened and poured them in another frying pan.

“You look terrible, Squall. Did you have a nightmare or something?”

“Sort of… Why are you making breakfast for me? I could cook.”

“I thought it would be nice to share breakfast. It’s been two days we’ve been living together here. It feels strange, somehow. We still barely know each other…”

That made Squall took a few steps backward. He still missed Rinoa so much, sometimes, he was forgetting that Aeris wasn’t his girlfriend. And she was so gentle and comprehensive, just like his Rinoa. T’was hard not to forget himself every now and then. He was acting a little too familiar with her. But then again, she was sleeping in his room while he was now occupying his living room. She was intimidated by this fact, but he had made some place for her in his things, removing his closets and buying new one for hers. His closets, filled with his clothing, were now sitting beside the living room’s window and they had decided to go and buy her some new clothes today. She hadn’t much thing and the Black Faction had given her a complete bank account to supply to any of her need.

Aeris wasn’t really comfortable with that. She had a meeting with Rufus in two days, where she would learned what the Faction was expecting from her. Until then, she just had to get installed and comfortable in Squall’s place. And it felt wrong. This guy was a nice fellow, but he was still hiding so much of his thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, he would get so cold and rough with her, she would be scared. He never did it on purpose though. He just hated to let anyone see what he truly felt.

“Well, I guess we should try to make things clear over the situation. Although I thought I had done it when we first got here.”

He’d given her a spare copy of his keys, so that she could get back in the apartment at any time. He had given her his room, since he was a gentleman and especially because the futon was just as comfortable as his bed, and he didn’t mind sleeping on it. He had tried to get the mess of the place out of her sight and they had ended up cleaning the whole apartment together, to get his and her things in separate room. As for the bathroom, well, they had made a nice arrangement over it, to take turns every day. Aeris was a morning person, she wanted to take one shower per day, which was fine with Squall. Rinoa was always taking two showers a day, one in the morning and the other before to go to sleep. Though he’d often join her at night, to save the hot water and be sure to have some for himself—and to enjoy her company, of course-, Squall didn’t really understand why his girlfriend would need a shower in the morning too. To wake up, maybe?

Anyway, the problem wasn’t there.

“I… I really feel like an intruder.” she whispered.

“What did you say?” he asked her.

She looked up and smiled a little at his sight. He was so funny looking early in the morning. She shook her head.

“Nothing. Just take a sit, breakfast will be ready in a moment.”

The table was already set and Squall felt pretty awkward as he sat down. Aeris was already dressed up, wearing once again her pink dress and her red coat. Her braid was a little loose on her shoulders and he couldn’t help but ask himself how she’d look with her hair undone. At the same time, this
whole situation just reminded him of Rinoa. And it hurt. It still hurt, thought it had been some time already. This time, with Aeris, it was just business. They were merely friends; there was nothing more to it. Aeris served him a full plate of sausages, potatoes and eggs and he ate silently, trying to remember any situation of his life that could have felt like this. Except all those involving Rinoa. He remembered the orphanage. And the healthy food served coldly on nameless plate, one for every lonely kid of the house. The tired smiles from the grown up of that time, the disillusion in their way of talking and of praising. He swallowed down his bite.

Aeris sat in front of him, smiling slightly.

“I… I would like to know if you’re really okay with how things are right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I… Except doing the cleaning and cooking in the house, I can’t be of any help. Your organization won’t even let him go and look for a job. I was imposed on you and…”

“Aeris, I’ve said already that I didn’t mind.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean that you like that. I can’t keep on preventing you from sleeping in your own bed, I mean… This is your place.”

“You know, this is just a mission. I’m paid to live with it. And I don’t… I don’t entirely mind having someone waiting at home when I come back.”

He looked away before to add in a mere whisper:

“It’s kinda reassuring.”

“You’re a little insecure, aren’t you?”

He looked back up, looking slightly annoyed.

“I wouldn’t say that. I don’t need anyone’s help. And I don’t care if I get none.” he mumbled back, concentrating on his food.

“I’m sorry, Squall. It’s just… I got you in the hospital for rescuing me, and now I’m imposing myself in your apartment for an undetermined period of time.”

“Well, your cooking’s good.”

The sudden compliment shut her up for an instant. Squall wasn’t going to get mad, but he wanted her to understand that there was nothing she could do to change the situation. They’d better bear with it and make the most out of it. They ate breakfast, exchanging a smile. Squall dressed himself up while she was doing the dishes. As he walked back in the kitchen, she was already done with the dishes and he finally looked normal. Aeris felt a little reassured, seeing him in his black coat with the white fur around the collar. Seeing him walking around in his underwear felt weird. She had gotten into his intimacy, somehow, and it wasn’t right. He didn’t care, he seemed to care about only a very few things, but she was still a little shocked by how familiar they had become at each other.

“So then, do you still want to go with me while I’ll buy new clothes?” she asked.

He was about to answer that he had nothing better to do, but he realized this could be a little rude and simply nodded in agreement. They walked out, in the burning sun of the mid day. The air was
scorching and it felt sad, thinking about how close to Christmas they were. When he was but a small boy, Squall remembered playing in the snow. That seemed like a fairytale from their point of view…

“We’ll take the subway, huh?”

“Right. Gimme your hand. I don’t wanna lose you down in the crowd.” he told her.

It was just from a bodyguard’s point of view that he said it, but she felt her heart jumping slightly in her chest at the feeling of his naked hand wrapping around her wrist. And those words. *I don’t wanna lose you…* Somehow, it felt as the only feeling inhabiting Squall since the day he was born. Though he was denying it, she could tell how scared he was of being alone. It was clear every morning when he’d wake up and smile at her, finding her sitting next to his bed. It was even clearer when he would answer the phone and that his face lightened up as he recognized Lightning’s voice. And as she followed him, holding his hand in hers, she was smiling. The sun was hot and the air hurt their lungs, but Squall’s apartment was pretty close to the subway station and as they walked down the stair and into the conditioned air, they were really happy to have a coat on. It was cold down there to compensate the hot temperature outside…

A few people bumped into them and Squall forced Aeris to stay closer to him, to be sure that they wouldn’t be separated. Crowds of people were coming from every sides of every room and each corridor were already so filled in person, human and non human that Aeris had trouble understanding how they could even advance in there. She grabbed on Squall’s shirt, scared by all the eyes suddenly on her. She wasn’t used to that much public. Nor was she used to be walking out in the open so freely. She was so used to be a fugitive. Squall had forgotten about that, since she was acting so casually in the hospital. In his apartment, there was only one person to fear, and since it was him, she wasn’t scared all that. But out here, the world felt dangerous, at new.

“Don’t fret. I’m here. I’ll protect you if anything goes wrong.” he told her.

She shivered at the sound of his voice. And the souvenir of just how far he was ready to go to protect her. She didn’t want to see anybody putting their life at risk for her. She didn’t need a hero, be it a friend or a total stranger. But at the same, she couldn’t help herself but feel reassured. Squall was here and he was seriously going to protect her. She felt a little comforted when she sensed his right arm wrapping around her waist.

It was only a preventive measure, but Squall wasn’t rough or cold. He was thinking and his body seemed to act on his own. Maybe accordingly to the feeling he wanted to hide deep inside. She remembered that Rinoa girl, his ex. He hadn’t had the time to come back from that loss and was still pretty bitter about it. And she guessed he needed to feel someone close, anyone, to feel better.

A few minutes later, he had bought their tickets and they were standing in one of the train’s cabin. It was just as crowded as the corridors outside, and Aeris couldn’t help but wonder why so many people would be here. Earth had been polluted so much; having your own car was really a pain, not only about finding the money to afford it, but getting every licenses and stuff. Most people were using the common measures of transport.

“Say Squall, there’s a lot of boutiques where we’re heading?”

“Yeah.”

“And there’ll be all kind of clothing? I kinda need to restart my wardrobe from scraps.”

“Guess always being on the run can’t help it.”
Aeris was a little too shy to tell him she had to get every part of clothing he could imagine. Socks, dress, shirts, underwear… Gosh, how was she going to find that with him keeping an eye on her? She blushed just at the prospect of it… At the hospital, they gave her simple hospital spare clothes, but the Black Faction thought she could use new clothes. They wanted her to get indebted to them, she was almost sure. She didn’t want to use her Cetra’s powers, not for anyone, it was too dangerous. But at the same time, spending time with Squall and having a life, a “normal” life, it felt incredible.

As they got out to the central square Station, Squall let Aeris take the lead. She was the girl. She was bound to know where nice things were. And well, if she didn’t, at least, she would have the woman intuition that would guide her to the right spots and boutiques. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to follow her all the way, even if he was supposed to, being his bodyguard. He just suddenly wished Lightning was with him and he could ask her a favor so that she would accompany Aeris in his stead. He wasn’t a shopping freak. He’d rather sat on a bench and wonder over what happened recently in his life, carelessly reading a newspaper or something. It was then that he saw Rinoa, at the opposite side of the wide room linking all the bigger markets together. She was chatting with Seifer and laughing. He was carrying some bags and she had one or two in her own hands. He felt his heart burning up with jealousy. How was it the very first time he would go out for real, he’d have to meet with these two?

Aeris felt Squall’s strong fingers gripping with a lot of strength over her wrist suddenly and looked up, blushing a bit and blinking her eyes with surprise.

“What… what is it?”

“Nothing. You seemed confused. If the people around scares you or if you see any enemy around, just tell me, alright?”

She nodded, doing her best to believe him. But she felt something different in his voice. Something like anger…

“Is everything okay with you?”

He suddenly realized that Aeris had nothing to do with Rinoa’s betrayal and he sighed, releasing her wrist.

“I…” he looked back in Rinoa’s direction and Aeris followed his gaze.

“I see. This guy… it’s her new boyfriend, right?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“Squall…”

“Don’t say my name like that. It’s nothing, alright?”

She shook her head. How could he say that? This girl had been the love of his life, the other half of his heart. And she had replaced him, without any warning, just like that.

“Hey Squall. Wanna help me chose my clothes? Are you good with calculations? I don’t want to go overboard with my expenses.” Aeris asked, grabbing Squall’s sleeve and pulling his arm in the direction of a shop.

This changed his mind and he followed her, turning his eyes back to her. Just as he did, Rinoa looked up and noticed him. How couldn’t she, when this guy stood out that much? He was with
that other girl. Brown haired, pink dress girl. He’d never let her drag him around like that. And now… Was it because she was gone? Had he decided to change when he couldn’t change for her?

“Hey, Rin, you look pale, what is it?” Seifer asked her.

“It’s… Squall. Look at him. He’s with another girl.”

“Want me to teach him a lesson?”

“A lesson? For what?”

“Well, you name it. I don’t care. As long as I beat him up…” Seifer laughed.

Rinoa frowned. Somehow, she couldn’t remember why she was on this side of the Faction. The Feds had been clear. Just as her bosses. She sighed.

“No, let him be. For now, he’s not interfering with our plan.”

“Wait a minute… That girl. She seems familiar.”

“Just drop it Seifer, we should get back to our shopping. I still need to find some food for Angelo.”

“At this rate, you’ll buy more things for this dog than for me!”

...

Date: Unknown

Location: Close to Pluto planet, outer space

Mission: Getting back to Earth with all the rescued miners...

Soldiers out: Cloud Strife, Yuffie Kirasagi, Vincent Valentine, Barret Wallace, Nanaki a.k.a Red XIII, and the whole medical team. Yuna Alhbed is there too, as their engineer

Latest report: Every soldier except Vincent Valentine were slightly wounded during this mission, but it seems the Squad got off of Pluto without any major casualty. Waiting for detailed report.

Message from Jecht. End of transmission.

...

The walk back to the ship seemed to last forever and at some point, Cloud asked himself why they hadn’t received permission to use skidoos or something. Alright, that would have leave a bigger mark on the snow and made things difficult to hide their tracks. But it was already a pain to erase every of their step along the way and it felt pretty worse with his wounded arm. He hadn’t let the doc examined him, he wanted to be back on the ship to receive any treatment. Any big medical intervention was forbidden in this cold wasteland and they couldn’t tell if the bullet was still in his flesh or not. He hadn’t talk to Yuna since their last break and he wasn’t ready to talk to her right now. The pain was so strong, he was cursing under his breath against the whole wide world.

He had charged Vincent to keep guard on their surroundings, since he was unable to focus over anything else than his wound and the walk. It took them about half a day to walk all the way back to the mines. Fortunately, Cloud had had the brilliant idea of calling Tifa and asking her to bring the ship there, so that they wouldn’t have to walk the entire way back. It would have been attempted suicide.
Yuna was quite relieved when she got back inside the ship. She could have cried from relief in fact, if she hadn’t lost consciousness right after feeling the bright and artificial lights of the ship on her face and still stuck in her dirty protective clothes, that weren’t that much white anymore since the fighting back at Jenova’s camp. Cloud barely managed to organize the entrance of all the wounded and Lucrecia took the command for all the medical issue, backed up by Tifa and Penelo, the first being completely healed, the second still having some strength to mend everyone who needed some care.

Cloud didn’t give himself any time to rest until that everyone, his men as the rescued miners, were sitting, lying or sleeping somewhere in the spaceship and not until that Vincent launched the ship back into space, taking the direction of planet earth. He knew that Yuna should have take a look at everything to make sure the vessel was in good shape for space travel, but she was out cold and he could understand. Though right now he was mad at her too, the first priority was the miners’ comfort. Only when he was sure that it had been taken care of and that he wouldn’t be needed for a couple of hours, he finally went to his cabin to dive into a dreamless sleep. And he was quite thankful to be riden of Shiva, who had stopped laughing in his mind at the very moment he had closed his eyes.

When he finally made it back to the awaken world, it was to find out Tifa had decided to treat his wounded arm. And she must be out of tranquilizer, because the pain was fresh and stinging, just as if real claw were diving in his arms and cutting through all the flesh from the inside. He had trouble remaining still and bit his tongue not to yell. She would tease him if he did. He knew. Just as he knew it was Tifa. The feel of her hands and this nice smell was the same as always. Sometimes, it was hard to believe she wasn’t his girl anymore. They still get along so well. But she had been clear and they were over. Not that he totally mind. He had treated her more like a mother than a girlfriend when they were going out. He had always had trouble with girls, except for his sister. Was he too serious or too blunt? He couldn’t tell. Maybe had he the same problem than Squall. He couldn’t let them in.

And now that Shiva had become a resident of his mind and was toying with every of his feeling, he wasn’t sure if he could let anyone in safely. He wanted to understand what was going on with him, he truly wanted to. But right now, he was just too scared to try and think over it. He tried to picture how he’d write his report with all that had happened so far.

…

Two days later

…

Colonel Cloud Strife reporting from duty, just arrived back on Earth from Pluto.

The planet was covered with ice and our main mean of traveling have been on foot, since it was easier to go unseen that way and that our ship was equipped with the right equipment to have a faster mean of travel. We got to the mine on day one, where a small incident took place. While looking for survivors to the attack made on the miners, or any clue left, sergent Barret Wallace and the war nurse, Tifa Lockart were both hurt by the partial collapse of the mines. Their injuries and chilblains were too serious to be left without any treatment, they were both sent back to the ship.

Commanding the rest of my squad, I followed the only indication we got on the mines, as a last message left by one of the dead in his own blood. Mako Volcano. We headed for the only known Pluto’s volcano. The travel was quick and quiet and we easily spotted a camp stationed on the left side of the volcano. This camp was occupied by Jenova herself and some of her men, who seemed
to have capture the miners to make them excavate a very pure mako from the volcano. We attacked the camp, making a diversion with a few soldiers while the other were getting all the wounded and prisoners from the mine out of the camp. Though we faced some casualties on our side, there was no dead amongst the soldiers and only two of the fifty miners rescued were lost. The rest received first aid on our way back to the ship, before to be treated properly in the said ship. The travel back to Earth was without any problem, except for a little disagreement between some squad members.

This mission was relatively easy, but Jenova’s presence got us all pretty worried and I suggest that a search party is sent later on to investigate on the reason why Jenova could be in our solar system without us even noticing it.

End of report. For further details, contact Colonel Strife at the post 7-87

Col. Cloud Strife from eight squad

“Pff… Alright, this one’s done. Now, I just have to collect those from the rest of the squad. I hope the girls didn’t write too much.” Cloud sighed.

They were about to land on Earth, finally, and the trip had last for about two weeks. Cloud was eager to get back to his apartment and see Lightning again. She had been pretty done last time he’d seen her for real. He sure hoped she wasn’t out on one of her crazy missions. Though his wound had completely healed thanks to Tifa’s cure materia, he was still a little bitter from this mission. It hadn’t turn out as fine as he wanted to make it sound in his report. And he still had to check everyone else report to make sure they would accord with his without telling too much. Of course, he had already threatened everyone so that the Shiva “accident” wouldn’t be mentioned in the report. Hojo had already put him through a whole session of physical test to make sure the guardian spirit touch hadn’t left any mark or dangerous effect over him. And there was nothing on the scanner or the IRM or any other of the medical and scientific crap the mad scientist had found to test him. Cloud was sick of tests. Sick of answering question and of seeing Yuffie being space sick everywhere she was walking. This was a space ship, for heaven sake, they couldn’t even feel it move!

As for the rest of the crew, well, Tifa had wanted to comfort it lately, but he had pushed her away. If he was to have some sisterly advice from someone, he’d preferred to receive it from one of his real sister. And whenever Tifa would get close to him, Shiva seemed to go crazy in his mind and to be impossible to ignore. How could he tell her that without looking mad? Cloud couldn’t see any way of this living nightmare. The best he could do was to stay away from Tifa, so that he wouldn’t hear too much about that Shiva following him. As they had got farther and farther from Pluto, the strange curse had became but a simple headache, except when Tifa got really close to him. And it would totally disappear whenever Yuna was around him.

And Cloud had no idea why! But he tried to let Yuna some space, even if he would have done many thing to be with her, be it only to stop feeling Shiva’s eyes looking at his every thoughts and judging him. Fortunately, it was getting a lot more quiet in his head and heart. Maybe he wouldn’t need Yuna’s company anymore. Not that he really want to stay away from her. Under her shyness, she was a really nice and cheerful girl. Well, or so he thought she was, before that he brought her to the battlefield. Now, she was gloomy and close over herself and Cloud tried –to no avail- to cheer her up in any way he could. Without the rest of the squad noticing it, of course. He couldn’t be nicer with a precise someone without starting a civil war between his own men. And he didn’t want that.

As for Yuna… She was roaming the whole ship night and day like a ghost, repairing broken parts; fixing and refixing the same stuff a dozen of time just to reassure herself. She had taken the thunder
carbuncle in her care and had managed to tame it. It was following her everywhere like a little dog and it even slept with her. Tifa was pretty worried about the young engineer. She had come as a back up soldier and found herself on the battlefield without being prepared for it. But who could be prepared for it?

“You should talk to her Cloud. She won’t listen to a word I say and she still feels pretty bad for shooting you in the arm.” Tifa observed.

“The way you say it, it sounds as if it was my fault that she shot me…”

“Well, she wasn’t trained, and you knew it.”

“Her report never mentioned it!” Cloud tried to defend himself.

And it was right, Jecht had said she had been trained for most things. And with his Fenrir, Cloud had thought things wouldn’t have gotten so hard for Yuna. But he had thought wrong. And now, he had to pay the price. Tifa was right, as always. He sighed to himself.

“I’ll go talk to her.”

And that’s how Cloud found himself standing before Yuna’s room’s door, puzzled as to what he was going to tell her to cheer her up. He was sick of thinking he shouldn’t have brought her to the battlefield. He was angry at her for forcing him to feel guilty about it. Mad at her for starting to work for the army. Wasn’t there any other job she could have taken instead? He was even mad at her for making him feel so nicer whenever she was around him. And he had no right to feel like that, he knew it. But man, was it hard to put on a smile that could look decent and to knock at her door!

“I’m not taking any of your tests Hojo, you can…”

Yuna’s voice trailed off as she violently opened the door and realized it was her colonel that was standing in front of her instead of that mad scientist.

“Oh, hi sir. Anything wrong with the ship or maintenance?” she shyly asked, looking down.

Somehow, it seemed as if nothing had changed about her. But her eyes were different. They were dark and surrounded by wrinkles of fatigue.

“You’ve been doing a good work, Yuna, Cid won’t complain when he’ll get back on this ship. Do you… mind if I come in? I’d like to have a little talk with you.”

“Of… of course, come in.” she replied, taking three steps back to give him space to walk in the room.

It was filled with components and mechanical tools and Cloud had trouble spotting Yuna’s bed in the whole mess her room was. Was she even sleeping? Her skin was all grayish and she looked like she haven’t slept in the last three days. Which wouldn’t surprise him; he had had some trouble sleeping whenever he’d come back from a fight. But this was bad. She needed rest. Especially now…

“Say, Yuna, when was the last time you sleep? We’ve seen you doing maintenance over the ship so often, it felt as if you weren’t taking good care of your own health. I can’t have you fainting now, not when we’re going to land back on Earth in only a few hours…”

“I… I’m taking care of myself. I’m perfectly alright, sir.”
“Would you mind calling me Cloud?” he asked her, leaning his back against the door and folding his arms before his chest.

“Yes, I would, sir, hugh, colonel sir!” she replied coldly.

He frowned. She looked so out of reach, and so lost. She stood pretty stiff in front of him, trying to make a salute like the one she was forced to keep before higher-ups on the training ground. She was a soldier. Cloud was her colonel. He had the right to give her orders and she had obeyed everything he’d asked her to do so far. That had mean killing people. Human or alien people, it didn’t matter. She had ended up taking lives, being a murderer, just like him. And he was a perfect killer machine. He already had every reason he could find to give himself the right to kill. And this was wrong. It shouldn’t even happen. No reason was good enough to explain murder. Not even self defense. Or was it?

She was so confused. Whenever she closed her eyes, she would see blood on her hands, and only by getting her hands even dirtier, with oil and grease, would she be able to look down at her hands. She was an engineer, not a killer. Or well, that was what she’d been before that Cloud decided different. And she hated him for it. Thought it wasn’t entirely his fault either. She knew that to. It made it difficult to hate him. So she just had to put some distance between them, by referring to him as she would to Jecht or any other higher ups.

“Don’t act like that Yuna. I know you’re mad at me for what happened.”

She jumped a little, but kept her pose, her shoulders stiff and her gaze looking at some void point next to Cloud’s head. He felt a little angry about it, but managed to swallow it down. It wasn’t the time to get mad at her. She was a gentle girl, a fragile, easily impressionable girl. He felt really bad for putting through all this. So the least he could do was to get her out of her lethargy.

“You’re angry because I forced you to become a killer. And I did it, even if it wasn’t my first intention. And I know there’s no way I can apologize or make up for it.”

He paused, looking for his words. Yuna’s shoulders lowered slightly as he went on:

“But all the killing you made wasn’t in vain. I don’t mean it was right, but it helped freeing about fifty men and women from a certain death and if the landing goes alright, they will get back to their family on Earth. If they have kid, or wife, or husband, parents, waiting for them, it’s as if you’d saved each of them at the same time. Do you understand what I mean? It’s not just a number of person secured out on a strange planet. It’s countless people that will feel the joy of relief instead of losing someone dear. And that’s important.”

Yuna wasn’t looking away from him anymore, her eyes were locked with his and she was finally reachable. He’d managed to touch her with his words. Was it because he was telling what he truly felt, because he was letting out the side of him that wanted to find a better reason for the killing? She blinked her eyes.

“Is that really enough?” she asked him with a shaking voice.

“I don’t know.” he admitted. “But it sure gives me the will to keep on living, so that I can save more people and see their family’s faces as they come back.”

He didn’t mention the time when he would fail or be too late and would still see the family’s faces as he would be the only one to come back with his soldiers…

“It’s… It looks so simple when you say it. But how can I sleep when I still see the faces of the men
I killed back there in my mind?”

“If you give yourself time, they’ll fade. Not entirely, but you’ll be able to sleep. Even to dream. And in fact, it’s kinda fair. If you stopped living after killing them, where was the point of you surviving this fight?”

This was more than she could take. Suddenly, her shaking voice ran through Cloud’s ears as she rushed to him and started to cry in his shoulder, shaking from head to toe. He opened his arms to her as she gripped on his shirt, staining it with oil and tears. He didn’t really care, as he gently held her to him. She felt like a little girl, asking him to make them disappear from her mind, to have time going faster so that they would fade entirely. At some point, her feet weren’t keeping her up anymore, and it was only Cloud’s arms that prevented her to fall. He didn’t say anything else. Didn’t try to reassure her with some “it will be okay”, “it’s alright” or “it’s over”. Those were empty words. They meant nothing, would have been needed only if he wanted to reassure himself. He just held her. Stroke her head and hair. Let her grip on his shirt, let her punch him in the chest as she started to cry even stronger. That remembered him of his sister Lightning so much. And of Serah. She almost got him crying, but he stood strong.

Time went by slowly. His shirt was wet and smelled of oil, Yuna was weeping now, shaking a little less. The fatigue was getting to her. Cloud guided her to the spot where her bed was, pushing the tools and books lying on the sheets aside. He tried to have her sitting down on the mat, but she fought against him, as if she was scared he would let go of her.

“Yuna, you need some sleep.”

“Don’t leave me alone with them! I don’t wanna hear their voices. I can’t sleep. Don’t leave me alone!” she begged him.

Cloud felt something melting inside him. If she could have seen his face, she would have been surprised. He looked just as lost as her suddenly. Why was she clutching to him like this? She pressed her head against his torso, holding him close.

“Please.” she added as he was hesitating.

If someone found them like this, he wouldn’t stop to hear about it from all of his squad. And anyway, the more time he spent here, alone with Yuna, well… The other were bound to start gossiping about it. He sighed. Tried to shut back his heart that was slowly opening in front of Yuna’s pain. She was so vulnerable. His mind was going to wonder over forbidden thoughts. Suddenly, he was aware of her body next to his. She was just wearing her mechanic overall. And somehow, he guessed she hadn’t much under it. He mentally slapped himself. Sat on the bed with Yuna sitting in his lap. Her shaking was slowly calming down. He stroke her back, following her spine, letting his big hands massaged her tensed back. He forced himself not to take advantage of the situation. Not to wander to far, not to take her hug for an invitation. But he hadn’t been with a woman for a so long time. Hadn’t been held like this since weeks. It felt like month. And he wanted to feel alive in her arms. More than alive.

He pushed the thought away, feeling even guiltier. She was pure and he had already tainted her with murder! It was more than enough.

As time went by, Yuna’s weeping stopped and her body relaxed next to him. She leaned over him a little more. He looked down at her face, realizing her eyes were now closed. Her breath was steadying and she felt a little lighter, as if her consciousness leaving her made her lighter. She was sleeping. Finally. There was a little smile on her lip. So he had managed to comfort her.
She let out a slight moan in her sleep. Cuddled up against him even more. And Cloud sighed as he looked at the ceiling. This had been one hell of a rescue mission. And he could use some sleep too. He leaned his head on the wall and closed his eyes. Stretched his legs and moved Yuna to be a little more comfortable. She didn’t wake up. And soon, they were both sleeping soundly, holding on to each other, so that no voice, be it human or spiritual could reach them or hurt them. They didn’t need anything more to feel secure. But then again, Cloud wasn’t sure if this was really right. Be it because they were soldiers and he was her boss in this mission, or just because she looked so younger than him and still was so appealing to him? It sure felt nice, still, to feel of use to someone. And somehow, it felt nicer since it was Yuna.

End of episode 1 – To be continued in Episode 2
Chapter 14

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part I

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 18th

Location: Planet Earth, undetectable spot around earth, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


Latest report: It seems that Seymour was acting violent to his young wife the other day. He’s losing his patience. He’s acting different, irrational…

Message from G.I. four. End of transmission.

…

Noctis had been waiting for about an hour when he got bored and went out on his own. Lightning had gone with Rikku to talk to her and comfort her. Noctis had tried to find something constructive to do, like contacting their boss or Reno, to ask for some intel over the Antlion project, but he finally opted for something else and went to train. There, as always, he met Seymour. For once, the guado soldier looked amazingly nervous and unable to focus on his training. Finally, the two men joined for a little chat. Which explained to Noctis why Lightning wasn’t coming back as soon as he’d wanted and was still with Rikku right now…

Seymour had had a fight with his wife. First fight ever. Things had gotten out of plan. She’d made him mad.

“…and then, I hit her.”

“Hit? You don’t mean like a punch?”

“Of course not, it was just a slap. But… with my nails, I cut her face. She was bleeding and crying and… She wasn’t Rikku anymore.”

“Fucking god. What had she done to make you that mad?”

Seymour sighed before to take another sip of his tea. Noctis would never have guessed this guy was a tea maniac. But he sure was. Go figure, the young spy thought to himself.

“I don’t know… She was asking stuff over the army. Over scraps of paper and notes she had found in my things. You know, our room was a real mess after the ship turning all upside down. Our bed’s broken, we had to be transferred somewhere else. She tried gathering both of our things while I was getting the keys and first thing I knew as I came back, she was jumping at my throat, asking for details over some Antlion tale. It’s an army project, you see, man?”

“Oh, right. So you couldn’t answer her questions about it. But why was she mad in the first place?”

“Her father’s a big engineer and he happened to have spent the last twenty years of his life on the
Antlion project. I’m just in charge of a few details, I don’t know a thing about this, I’m just a
ground trainer, for heaven sake, but she got all worked up, saying I was involved in something bad.
I’m a soldier, she should know already just how bad it’s supposed to get.”

“Why do you say that? That Antlion thing, it’s some weapon or something?”

“I didn’t say that. I shouldn’t even be talking about this.”

“Alright, forget it. I don’t wanna be drag in any army problem.” Noctis replied quickly which made
Seymour smile.

“You’re smart, man.”

“You’d be the first to say that in a long while.”

“Well, I sure feel stupid. I’d never raise a hand on a woman for something that stupid before. Usually, I
fight them to save my ass, not because they piss me off. But suddenly, I just couldn’t take any of her words
anymore. I had to get her off my back.”

“What did she say?”

“That I was mad. And that I scared her. All I managed to do was to make it come through in the end…”

“You just lost your cool, how could she say anything like that?”

Noctis couldn’t believe Seymour was confiding in him. But then again, Seymour was pretty shocked of
what he’d done and the face that Rikku had gave him right after this bloody slap.

“I have no idea…”

Noctis sighed, asking himself how’d he got involved in something like that…

As Lightning got back to her room with Noctis, it was to find him already sitting on their bed,
working on his laptop for the first time since they’d started their mission. He greeted her entrance
with a smile, which she gave back to him, although she looked pretty tired and kinda sad.

“I heard from Seymour about his fight with Rikku. Did it look bad?”

“The poor girl was in tears when I finally managed to get out of this stupid bathroom.”

“Well, Seymour seemed really sorry for slapping her.”

“She was more worried of what it meant he was able to slap her just because she was asking him
some questions.”

They both sighed as Lightning walked up to the bed. Noctis turned off his computer and stuffed it
in its place.

“Isn’t it better that she discovered it now than later on? He’s crazy and he’d hurt a lot more people
than just her if he could… All he cares about are the strong…”

“But she thought she knew him. And she loves him.” Lightning replied, sitting down and wrapping
her arms around her folded legs.
“It’s harsh, but I think he loves her too. But the guy’s pretty messed up in his head.”

“Being messed up gives him the right to hurt her?”

Noctis shook his head. He was getting tired and thought he had had a day long enough already not to have such a philosophic chatter about someone else’s love.

“You know I’d never punch or slap you, this isn’t some kind of test or something?”

“Of course I know. It’s just… Whenever I stumble on a situation like that, I can’t understand any side of it. She loves him. He loves her. But he’s mad. So he hurts her. And now she’s scared of him. But she’s still in love. What am I supposed to tell her? Cross your fingers and hope he’ll change? Wish for your life with him to be an endless honeymoon?”

“There’s another option. You tell her the truth. He’s a jerk. He was before to meet you and he won’t change for anyone. But somehow, he loves you. If you wanna take the risk of being with him until he get mad again or walk away right now, it’s entirely your choice. But you have to choose for yourself, and not let him chose for you. That’s all there is to it.”

“What if she can change him?”

“Hey, I’d like to see that.”

Lightning didn’t answer and they remain like this for a while, Noctis lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, his arms crossed under his head, his partner sitting next to him, still feeling pretty down… She had never faced anything like a violent man in an intimate relationship. Her brother Cloud had always been nice with her, Squall was her buddy, but he still treated her as a girl, never hitting her too hard if he’d give her a buddy’s pat on the shoulder. As for Noctis, he looked rough around the edges, but he was tenderness made human. And as she wondered over this, she remembered all the good times they had shared. And she remembered yesterday, when he was kissing her and that his hands were toying with her breasts. She remembered most of it now. She flushed at the thought. She was daring in many things, but never had she been one to have anything like sex in public. And they could have crossed the line yesterday, if it wasn’t for her.

Deep down, she still felt bad for Rikku, but somehow, Lightning found herself staring at Noctis. He had folded one of his legs and she remembered how long they were. His shirt was slightly unbuttoned at the top and she followed his chest raising and lowering with every of his breaths. His naked neck which gulped down. The dark locks falling over his face. Damn, he was sexy even when he didn’t try to.

“Say, where did we left off when we were, interrupted, this morning?” she asked him with a seducing voice.

Noctis stretched his arms over his head, smirking.

“If I recall correctly… I was kissing you.”

“Were you?” she asked playfully.

“Here.” he whispered, rolling on his side and grabbing her in his arms. “Like this.”

His lips were on hers before that she could even blink. She hugged him tightly, pressing herself against his firm torso. The tender kiss turned passionate and she realized he was eager to taste her. To eat her all from head to toes. As they started fighting together to have the other pleased, he got her pinned under him. Her hands were running over his back. Under his shirt. He was looking for
her clothing. Kissing and biting the skin of her neck. She threw her head backwards as he undid her
shirt. Gasped as he pressed his cock against her stomach and grabbed her breasts through her bra.
She really just had to say a word. She felt over aware of him, of his touch. She hadn’t been this
close to anyone in so long. She was moaning so easily at his caresses, it almost scared her. He felt
terribly hungry, hungry for her taste, for her skin. She pulled on his hair so that he would kiss her
again and they got on their knees, fighting with the clothing remaining between them. Their bodies
were brushing together as their breaths melt in each other mouths. This fight turned into a dance,
into a war. She was pressing, it was getting urgent, her nails dug in his back, but the pain was
nothing.

The light was still on, and suddenly, Lightning realized they were both naked. His hands were
everywhere. She was a bundle of nerves, as if this was her first time with a man, as if she didn’t
recognize him. There were scars on his skin that shouldn’t have been there. And his hands were so
big, so firm. She felt as if he was going to turn her into someone else, as if he was reshaping her.
And as their lips connected again, she remembered this was a part of her. This lust, this need and
this desire of being covered with kisses and shivers. Not fighting anymore, just taking from him,
taking all the pleasure he could give her. She had forgotten how it felt. To love him. And to be
loved like this.

She tried to move, to give him back everything, so that this would be fair, but the panic was still
strong inside of her heart. Though she was happy, she was scared. Had he looked at her? Could he
see her as he moved over her? The small light of the night lamp felt as a neon standing above her.
Noctis was whispering sweet words in her ears. She wanted to answer, but she felt him raising
himself up, to gaze at her. And suddenly, she remembered the last time she had been naked under
someone gaze. She tried to hide her breast with her arms, panicking even more. Noctis was looking
for his breath and blinked at her reaction.

“What… What’s wrong?” he asked her.

He hated seeing fear in her eyes. He didn’t know if he could stop himself now, even if she asked
him to stop, but he had to make things right. They were starting everything over. He had to make
this the right way.

“Don’t look at me, Noct. You can touch me, but don’t stare at me. Turn off the light.”

“But I wanna see you, Light. And I’ve already did, remember?”

“Yeah, but the last time… The last time I was naked with you around, we were in the Feds’…”

“Come on Light, can’t you forget about it?”

“I wanna forget. I thought I had, it’s just…”

He sighed, before to lean down to her and kiss her once more. He kept on kissing her until she
started answering him and kissing back and then, he gently took her wrists in his hands and moved
them aside. She didn’t fight back, she knew she was acting like a little girl. But she shivered as
their chest met. The room’s air felt cold and he was so warm…

“You’re the prettiest woman in the whole galaxy, Light. With or without scars.”

He turned off the light, but they could still see each other, thanks to the moon rays entering the
room between the folds of the only windows. And he looked at her. And his blue eyes were so
gentle and so full of love, she had to pull him into another kiss. Soon, his hands were back on her,
as his body tried to fit with hers. They took their time, exchanging sweet words and soon
whispering each other’s names as they rocked together. At first, he hurt her, of course. Lightning had been forbidding herself any pleasure and it took her sometime to get used to him at new. But he managed to get her to yell his name at some point as she held him close, so… he had to be doing this the right way, right?

When Noctis collapsed next to her, Lightning was stuck in blissful silence. She had totally forgotten how far he could take her. He grabbed the sheets of the bed and brought it up to her neck, so that she would stop to shiver. He hugged her then, pressing her back against his chest. And she felt so small in his arms, so warm and tired, it was… It must be a miracle she was there. She moaned as he moved next to her, sheltering from the outside world. Put her hands on his arms that were around her waist. He trembled a little, pretty worn out. But he still could tell she was closing her eyes as she let out another long moan.

“That was…”

She stopped, looking for a word that would describe it perfectly.

“…perfect.”

He chuckled in her hair and she smiled. She wanted to look at him right now, to see his smile in his eyes. But he was too vulnerable and he wouldn’t let her. Not now. Maybe later. He sighed.

“I had forgotten.” he simply said.

“Me too.” she replied.

“Say Claire?”

“Hmmm?”

They both felt kinda sleepy right now.

“I love you.”

He kissed her shoulder again and she shivered. This was what she’d been missing. All those months. Those two years without him. Why had she pushed him away again?

“I love you too you know…”

His arms around her felt so good, so reassuring. Nothing could reach her here, but him. There was only both of them here.

Only us, she thought.

“Hey, Noctis… I… I know this may not be the right time, but since we’re back together and all…”

“Yeah?”

“How about you tell me if you’d want to have kids with me. I mean, in the future?”

“Huh?!”

He tensed up next to her, and for a moment, she couldn’t feel him breathing in her neck, thought he hadn’t moved from an inch.

“We… we never had that discussion, and I thought…”
“Oh Claire… I… I don’t know. We’re not in the right line of work to raise a family and I’d never seen myself as a dad. I mean…”

“It’s okay, Noctis. I was just asking. You don’t have to answer now. It’s just… I would like us to be more serious together. I’m almost twenty six years old already, and I don’t intend on being a spy all of my life.”

“I guess I’ve never really think about the future that much.”

“Maybe is it the right way to do things.”

“I don’t know, Light. All that feels right in my life is holding you in my arms.”

Somehow, thought this felt really sweet and Lightning felt ready to melt again, she was scared by his statement. As if there was nothing else in Noctis’ life that ringed certainty to him. And he’d seemed quite lost lately, so maybe…

“Don’t… don’t say things like that.”

“Why? I’m only being honest.”

“Noctis… Did something really bad happen to you during those two years?”

“What?!”

“Sometimes you sound… you sound pretty desperate.”

Noctis felt his throat tightening at the thought she had understood that much. Maybe should he tell her, right now. But somehow, he couldn’t get himself to talk. Not as he thought of those scientists around him. The sickening pictures ran through his mind in a flash and he held her tighter.

“I had hard times,” he admitted. “But it’s over now.”

He had to get in contact with Stella and check with her what had truly happened during his coma. Then, he would tell Lightning. She would understand. But she was going to be so mad too…

“Everything that hurt is over now.” she whispered.

And she fell asleep in his arms, half reassured. He sighed. Things weren’t entirely right like this. He felt bad for hiding the truth to her. But then again, he had no idea how to tell her he had been sleeping in a coma for the last two years. And the memory of those men and women around him. He shivered. The woman of his dreams loved him. It was more than he could have ever asked for. But still, it didn’t feel like enough. Though it had to be enough…

“I wish you could be right, my love. I’d wish that I wouldn’t care about what happen.”

But he was still scared.

*Tomorrow, he swore to himself. Tomorrow, I’ll make sure to know what really happened. And I’ll tell you, if I have the strength to.*

…

Date : 19 030 A.D. Rallyenbirth 20\textsuperscript{th} –Galactic time-

Location: Above planet Earth, on the spaceship of squad 8
Mission: Landing safely on Earth

Soldiers: The colonel Strife, his squad and the medical team

No recent report from the ship, they haven’t try to communicate with us…

Message from Doctor Cid Archadia of the first branch. End of transmission.

…

Yuna was the first to wake up. She felt a nice breeze toying with her hair and was surprised as she looked up slowly. The colonel Strife was sleeping in her bed! She slightly panicked at the simple idea of what that could mean, until that she realized he must have fallen asleep after calming her down. Which he had done, somehow. She felt relaxed and better, though she needed a good shower and something to eat.

“Huh… Colonel?”

He seemed quite peaceful and she felt bad for having to wake him up, but she couldn’t let things like they were right now.

“Cloud?”

“Come on, Light, just another hour…” he replied.

“Hum…. You’re asking for too much. I don’t know what the others are going to say just knowing you’ve spent the whole night here…”

She flushed as she realized what they would gossip over for the next days. Her reputation was done for!

She gently shook him up, unable to believe she was worried with so trivial details. Just yesterday, all she could think about was the blood on her hands. But after all, time was taking effect. She had to live on for all the dead. She was already getting back to herself. And her colonel was in her room, sleeping in her bed and it wasn’t right! Some could have thought that Cloud would wake up for anything, since he was a trained soldier and always ready to react to a potential attack or something. But he wasn’t paying attention at all time. And as he slowly opened his eyes, he looked pretty surprised to see Yuna’s face hanging right above his.

“Huh… Hi?” he whispered with a hoarse voice.

“Hi.” she replied.

“So… I take it I’ve fallen asleep too.”

Yuna sat up, feeling slightly awkward and tried to keep her distance from him. Cloud observed her shyness and quickly got up, though he was feeling slightly dizzy.

“I guess I should get back to my quarters now. You’ll be alright on your own?” he asked as he walked up to the door, trying not to stumble onto any tool or thing lying around.

“Yes. Thanks for your help yesterday. It really reassured me.”

She gave him a shy smile and Cloud felt his heartbeat accelerating a bit at that. She could still smile! And she looked quite pretty when she did. And as much as he felt guilty for throwing her on the battlefield, right now, she was smiling because of him. As he walked out, he realized he
couldn’t hear Shiva anymore. And Yuna almost rushed out of her room and passed by him, running all the while.

“What’s the problem?”

“I forgot to check the landing system!”

Her lightning carbuncle was running after her, whining as a dog. Cloud smiled for real this time. Then, he felt eyes resting over his shoulders and looked around, frowning.

Tifa was standing behind him, her arms crossed on her chest.

“You two sure talked a lot.” she observed.

“…”

“All night long, huh?”

“Ah, give it a rest already, okay?”

Cloud would have to order everyone to forget that too in their report. And to tell Yuna not to include it in her report either. Earth was approaching in the small windows of the ship. Soon, he’d be back home and would see Lightning again. He sure could use to sleep in his own bed. He felt like sleeping for a whole week and he wondered if he could pull that off.

…

One day later, Cloud was woken up by the doorbell of his apartment. He sure wished that Lightning was already back from her trip with Noctis. And that she was alright on that mission trip… But he was already sure that it wasn’t her waiting in front of the door. Who would ring the doorbell of its own apartment?

“Hey Cloud!? Are you home? I heard from the army that you were finally back!”

“Serah?” he realized, waking up almost as soon as he recognized his younger sister’s voice. He had trouble getting up of his bed, since he was trying to break his latest sleeping record and get more than three days of sleep in four day. He sure needed it, after all the running around and the stress he was put under. He rolled on his back, got stuck in the sheets, clumsily fought his way out, grabbed a pants lying on the floor and quickly put it on, almost falling while doing so, before to head to the kitchen, then to the entrance corridor and to open the door to Serah.

She was dressed in a long skirt and a tight shirt that let her arm bared to the eyes. She was wearing sandals and almost jumped in the room as she saw Cloud standing in front of her.

“So you’re really back, Cloud! I’m so glad I’m finally able to see you!”

“It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?” he replied. She smiled in response and directly went for a hug that he gladly gave her.

Although she had grown up really fast in Cloud’s point of you, he still thought of her as a little girl most of the time.

“So you wake up? You look sleepy.”

And his hair wasn’t pointing on his head as usual; it looked pretty messy and tangled.
“Well, I’m just back from a mission and Lightning’s still out for the Faction. I needed to catch back some sleep. Anyway, come in, you didn’t come on foot did you?” he asked her, letting go of her and looking around his apartment, realizing the place looked quite inhabited.

“Snow dropped me just before your block on his way to work.”

“Things are still going well with him?”

“More than well.”

She was smiling a lot more than usual. Cloud let her in the kitchen to go and put a shirt on, and as he came back, she had already started to make some coffee.

“Let’s see what I could do for breakfast…”

She rummaged through the fridge and cupboards before to turn back to Cloud, looking surprised.

“There are nothing put health pills around here!”

“Army’s rations. Haven’t gotten time to go and buy food.”

“Cloud, you’re terrible! When Light’s not around, you eat nothing at all!”

“Oh come on, Serah. I’m in perfect shape.”

She shook her head, disapproving him despite all the arguments he could use.

“Whatever…” she said, imitating him almost perfectly.

He smirked and sat before the little kitchen’s counter. She sat next to him and gave him a large cup of coffee.

“You didn’t come to verify what I was eating, did you?”

“No, I wanted to announce you something…”

“Announce?”

“Yeah… But I don’t really know how to say it.”

“You’re not getting married with Snow, huh?”

“Well, he asked me, but we don’t have enough money for it.”

Cloud looked at her, frowning, and spotted the necklace she had on, with the engagement rings on it. Snow was a big guy, looking all tough and rough, but he sure knew how to make a woman happy. Serah was shining from joy.

“I wish I could be of help with that, but I don’t have much myself.”

“I’m not here to ask for money, Cloud, you’re not my father.”

“I know… Anyway, why are you here then, Serah? Shouldn’t you be working today? You don’t have much more time off your hands than me or Lightning usually.”

“The kids have a day off today, and me too for once…”
Serah was working as a teacher in high school. Cloud had no idea how she could live in such an environment. But she liked to teach history and geography. It was pretty hard, since she had three or four different classes to give, over earth’s history, and universal wide history too.

“That’s nice.”

He gave her sometimes to tell him whatever she had come to see him for, but the young woman didn’t seem ready to talk.

“Say, Cloud, what’s new with you? You haven’t called me for months, not even sent an email. Every time that I call, I get to your receiver and it’s always full.”

“Well, I’ve been living half here and half at my quarters back in the Army’s building. Got assigned training troops, had to revise the Squad, doing field test, you know… I was busy. And Lightning was…”

He paused, realizing he shouldn’t mention Lightning’s nightmares or latest fears to Serah. His twin would kill him if she learned he had…

“What about Lightning?”

“Well, she was pretty lonely since she broke up with Noctis.”

“But they’re back together now.”

“What?!”

Cloud almost jumped out of his chair as he heard that. Could it be true? That Noctis had shown back to the living world and gotten back in his sister’s life? But how? That bastard hadn’t done enough harm already?!

“You didn’t know? I called Lightning the other day at her workplace, they gave me a number where I could reach her. She was on a honeymoon cruiser, with Noctis. And she sounded really happy.”

Cloud’s mouth hanged open for a whole thirty seconds. Serah started laughing and he looked away, unable to understand how Lightning could go from the resenting she still felt last time he’d seen her to jumping right back in Noctis’ arms.

“We’re still in December, right? I haven’t been gone for more than two weeks, how can she…?”

He felt so confused suddenly, he started walking back and forth to help himself think over this new mystery.

“Aww Cloud, don’t make that face. Lightning is a big girl. She knows what she’s doing.”

“Right…”

“How about you? Haven’t you been busy with anything else than work? Like a girlfriend, or something?”

“Nope. I’m a lone wolf and I prefer it that way.”

Serah looked sad at his answer. She was fumbling her fingers together, as if she was looking for something he couldn’t see.
“No food, no girls. Always busy with work. When do you have fun in all of this, huh?”

“I got my bike to work on and… hold on, Serah, have you really come to teach me how to live my life? I thought you had something to tell me. You’re acting all nervous, beating around the bush. What’s up?”

“You’d better sit down, Cloud.”

“Huh… Okay.”

He sat back, right in front of her. She grabbed his big hands in hers, putting on her face a shy smile.

“Well, it’s… I don’t know how to say it since you’ve always been treating me like your daughter instead of your sister. I don’t want to shock you or anything. You see, I’m… I’m pregnant!”

She sounded so scared of his reaction that Cloud froze a moment. The news sank in. Serah, his little Serah, was pregnant. He was going to be a grand… no wait, an uncle. After all, Serah was his sister. His baby little sister. She was expecting a baby? But… But…! He blinked, trying to find something to say. Her hands were so small in his, she seemed so frail. He remembered Lightning losing her baby. Remembered Tifa talking about having a family. Remember how he felt as he held his two sisters in his arms when they’d learned their parents’ deaths. He’d promised himself he would protect them from harm. Had teamed up with his twin to raise Serah to a proper woman, to someone just and pure, who could stand on her own, fight for her dream and spread happiness wherever she’d go. Had failed protecting them sometimes. But he had tried and always been there to comfort them as time went by. And he loved his sisters. He loved them more than anyone else in this world.

“…”

He looked down at Serah’s belly, which was still quite flat and back to her eyes and back to her belly and once again to her eyes. Could she really be…?

“You think I’m joking or something?”

“No, no, it’s just…”

She took back her hands, biting her lips. Why was it both her big brother and sister couldn’t be happy about this news?! Was it wrong to be pregnant nowadays?

He shut up, looking away, pretty lost as to what he was supposed to say. Of course, he should have cheered her and congratulate her. But somehow, such an idea, seeing Serah pregnant or with a baby seemed so out of the picture… He had always seen her as a little sister. As a child. He knew she was a grown woman now, but he couldn’t imagine her having sex, or… She was his little sister for heaven sake! He felt mad at Snow, because it was that big guy’s fault. He felt mad at Lightning for not warning him about it.

“What? What’s so wrong with it? You’re just like Lightning, she almost sounded angry at me at first when I told her!”

“…”

“Come on, say something!”

Cloud was trying to find something brilliant and nice to say, but his mind was a complete blank. And then, an ambulance went through the street and they both could hear its siren roaring in the
apartment. Serah jumped a little at the sudden noise, but her brother really jumped over the counter, as if this was a war alarm or something. Before that the ambulance had turned the corner of the street, Cloud was out of Serah’s sight and she blinked, surprised beyond words by his reaction.

“What… What’s the meaning of this?”

“Hum…”

Cloud slowly got up from being the counter. The first thought that had run in his mind as the siren roared was: take cover! And he felt pretty dumb for reacting like that.

“I think I switched back to the battlefield mode when I got up…’’ he tried to joke, scratching his head and looking away.

“Did something happen back there?”

“Where, on Pluto you mean? Well… Nothing much.”

“You’re all tensed up. You should sit down, Cloud.”

“I’m alright.” he protested.

“You look for cover when you heard an ambulance’s siren!” she retorted.

“Alright, maybe I’m a little nervous. But try to understand me. If Lightning was to tell you she was pregnant, wouldn’t you be nervous or… something?”

“I would be happy for her!”

She seemed on the verge of tears now. Cloud sighed and walked up to her, grabbing her into a bear hug.

“I’m really, really sorry for reacting like this Serah. It’s just… I never expected you to come up to me with something like that.”

“All I wanted was your approbation, Cloud. Is it too much to ask?”

“You don’t need my approbation, I’m not your dad, remember?”

“You still feel like my dad most of the time.”

They both sighed as he started patting her back and stroking her hair.

“Well, you were a nice daughter. I guess you grew up too fast. I never got to follow. I still feel like a teen in most things I do.”

She pushed him away, to look in his eyes.

“Aren’t you exaggerating it a bit?”

He shook his head.

“It’s just weird to think I’ll be an uncle in a few months.”

“Uncle Cloud, that’s right, I hadn’t think about that!” she laughed.

He gave her the half of a smile, looking pretty serious.
“As if I’d made a nice uncle.”

“I’m sure you will!”

“Well, I won’t have to. I know you’ll be a nice mother. I don’t know why you were so scared of my reaction about this, though. I’ll be there to help through it all if I can get the time to.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about time.” she observed, taking a step back and crossing her arms over her chest. “You’re never home when I call. You’re always working!”

“Well, we saved about… fifty men and women back on Pluto. That was worth one week and a half, for sure.”

“Sure, but what about you Cloud? You always play the tough guy, but you’re all marshmallows inside. You’d need a nice girl to make you eat real food and remember you to take a break.”

“Well, Lightning still lives here. She’s an awful cook, but she sure reminds me to take a break every now and then.”

“I don’t mean a sister, I mean a girl. Like in girlfriend.” Serah insisted.

“Aaah, man, I know, I know. You think it’s that easy to get one with my job? And my character? I’m not easy to put up with, I know it. And the last girl I met hates me for throwing her on the battlefield.”

“You did what?”

“Don’t worry, she shoot me in the arm as payback. Now I gotta train her so that she can use a gun right…”

“She… what?”

“Exactly what I told my boss at the army. Jetch sure laughed at me on that one.”

“Cloud, could you stop your monologue and tell me what happened with that girl?”

He shook his head and sat on the counter.

“I don’t wanna talk about it. I don’t even know why I said all that…”

It just felt as if suddenly, he couldn’t stop himself from talking. Did Serah think he liked his life how it stands right now? Did she think it was easy to wake up alone every morning? To have no one to hold on through the night… To be surrounded by the same responsibilities since he was a kid and to be a killer. And he liked killing. Not that much, but enough to stay in the army. Enough to keep on pulling the trigger. What had he choose this job already? To protect the one he cared about, right. Bullshit!

“Cloud, do you feel alright?”

“No,” he honestly answered. “I guess I’m still on Pluto in my head. It was so cold, so cold, you wouldn’t imagine. We met Jenova, you know?”

“Jenova?!” she repeated.

“That bitch’s still crazy about mako.” he whispered, looking down at his right arm, turning it so he could glare at his veins through the skin.
The blue matter in all the green blood. The pure mako running through his veins.

“What… what about that girl you taught me about earlier?”

He chuckled, still looking down and Serah sat next to him on the counter, pushing the coffee’s mugs aside. She wrapped one arm around her big brother shoulders. And he felt so tall and strong, even now, as he was fighting against the pain. Since he wasn’t looking at Serah in the eyes, it felt easier to talk.

“Her name’s Yuna. She’s a part time soldier for the army. She’s studying in Harvard’s University to become an engineer. Or so I heard. She usually only do chores around the army quarters. But… Cid is having a baby with his wife and got himself a long vacation. We needed an engineer for the ship, so Yuna was added to the squad. She’s pretty shy and kinda clumsy, but… That makes her quite cute in fact. “

Serah giggled at that and he blushed slightly.

“Don’t get me wrong, alright, I don’t… She’s too young for me anyway, it’s just… I’ve tried to protect her along the way, since it was her first mission and all. But I brought her to the battlefield, so that she would help me and Yuffie in our diversion to rescue the miners that Jenova had kidnapped. I thought I could do it. I really thought I could. I put a gun in her hands. And I ordered her to kill people, so that we could save our miners. And she obeyed. She’s a good soldier, really.” he paused for a while, trying to hold it all back inside.

“You should have seen her crying yesterday. I destroyed her, totally. All I could do after was… trying to convince her I was the only one responsible, since I had given the orders. But she’s still messed up. I made her a killer. And I don’t think I’ll ever forgive myself for it.”

“Oh my gosh…” was all Serah could muttered.

“Yeah. I felt like saying that too at some point.”

She tried to smile, but she was pretty shaken up.

“I’m sorry about telling you all of this. I… don’t wanna weight you down with my problems. I really am terrible, I shouldn’t put any strain on you in the state you’re in.”

“No, I can take it, Cloud, I’m stronger than you think. It’s just… Now I think I understand why you and Lightning don’t talk to me all that much anymore. You’re both dealing with problems that are so beyond me. To think sometimes, my biggest fear of the day is forgetting my students exams back home.”

That made him laugh. And it was a real, honest laugh, one she rarely heard from him.”

“Oh, Serah, we should talk more, really. That could help me relax a bit. And I always feel better whenever you listen to me.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

And she managed to smile at new. So Cloud just needed someone to listen? He was so simple in fact. So much simpler than she thought he was. But somehow, it was hard to accept it. He was like a father and her only big brother. And even now, as he was having dark thoughts, he looked so damn strong. And he was still cheering her up, somehow. She had to smile. Cloud had faced so many terrible things in his life and had always smiled to her even though it was hard. She felt so lucky to have him. She suddenly gave him another hug and Cloud put it on the pregnancy’s
account. She was quite demonstrative for once. Not that he minded. It was nice having his sister/daughter around. Even if he didn’t always know how to look at her…

To be continued…
Chapter 15

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part II

Date: 19 005 A.D. January 5th

Location: Planet Earth, Old Brooklyn, Research facility

Op: Building a new race

Master: Jenova

Subject: hasn’t been numbered yet.

Human name: Cloud Strife

Age: about five years old

Doctor H. reporting. End of transmission.

Cloud’s dad had told him that he would take him and his twin sister to a vacation the first time. And Cloud had believed him, but only the first time. The second one, he knew what was really going on. And he was the only one going back this time. Claire wasn’t answering the treatment too well. She had gotten a fever. Cloud wasn’t sure he understood everything about this. His mother looked scared as she held him in her arms. His baby sister, Serah, was crying. And he ran away as his father tried to have him sitting in the car. There was snow on the ground, the sun wasn’t as strong at that time. His father had chased him around. Yell at him. Cloud had kept on running until he was out of strength and was pinned to the ground by the taller man. He yelled as he was raised from the ground.

He remembered the stings in his arm, the weird people talking to screens and into weird mic on their shoulders. And that blue woman… Jenova. She scared him. She had even made Claire cry the last time with her big laugh.

“I don’t wanna go. I don’t wanna go! Please dad, let me stay here.”

He started to cry.

Jenova had an awful smile. Her red eyes were so creepy when she looked at him. And he was the only kid in there. Always surrounded by adults, talking in his back and above his head of things he couldn’t understand. Doctor H was scary too. His glasses were always sparkling before his eyes, Cloud could never tell where that man was looking.

“I wanna stay home!”

“I’m sorry, son.”

His dad held him in his arms and Cloud realized that daddy too was scared. This was bad.

“I hate vacation.” he complained, sniffing back his tears.

“You have to go. I know it’s scary, but you got to. It’s for everyone’s future. The whole family’s counting on you, you know, Cloud?”
“You’ll be okay, Cloud.” his mother said. “You’re really strong. Like a real soldier.”

Cloud liked to play soldier as a kid. His mother had always called him his little soldier. Always. And in his games, he could beat every enemy and saved all his friends. All of his family. But now, as the kid he was, he had to follow his dad. To wait in the car. To walk out under the falling snow and to face those tall people, all dressed in white and black. And Jenova… Jenova who was waiting, smiling at him.

“My mako soldier.” she said that day.

“I’m not your soldier!” he replied.

His voice was small and girly, frail as a child.

“Oh oh, that’s what you think, Cloud. But you’re my chosen heir. Today, you’ll feel it. You were born to carry my power and my will.”

Cloud looked at her, frowning, and took a step back as doctor H. came to him. Against his will, he was attached in a metal cabin, his arms and legs bound to heavy locks. The stings plunged under his skin and his eyes were covered with blue and green mist. The air was heavy. Hard to breathe in and out like this. Cloud’s body was trembling. And he couldn’t see anything, except from that hole in the cabin, the hole from where Jenova was looking at him. It was high above his head, since the cabin had been made for man first, but he could still see her. She was smiling. Again.

“Let me out! Let me out, let me out, let me out!” He started to yell.

He knew they wouldn’t listen to him. Nobody ever did. The cabin started to move. His eyes were welling up with tears. He could hear Jenova’s voice in the background.

“The mako in your vein Cloud, feel it’s call. Feel my call, mako soldier.”

His clenched his fists, but soon, as a burning feeling started up in his chest, his body started moving on its own. The cabin walls opened as he was still going up, still attached to the metal skeleton of an operation table. One of his hands was freed. He was so high in the air, he felt his stomach churned.

“The mako gives you powers Cloud. Power to create a new kind of man. You’re but a child, but you possess it in you to overthrow those chains keeping you captive.”

“Get me down!” he asked, trying to control the sobs he wanted to let out.

“You don’t believe me, or are you even listening Cloud? You need this power and this power needs you. It will grow as you’ll grow stronger. It’ll make you tougher than any man on this planet, strong as my son. You just have to summon it for it to happen.”

“Get me down!” he pleaded.

He was scared to look up or down, he tried to close his eyes, but he couldn’t, he was shaking from everywhere, and this burning fire in his chest, those burning hot tears on his cheeks. He was so scared! What was this witch talking about? What power was that? What was mako? What was wrong with him? He wanted to be back to his room, sitting next to Claire and watching her sleep. He wanted to be back in his terrified mother’s embrace. He wanted… He wanted…

“Aaaaah!”
Cloud suddenly woke up from his nightmare. The room was really dark and he looked around with utter confusion, trying to understand where he was. His heart was beating so fast in his chest, it almost hurt. He blinked once or twice. He felt taller. Right, this dream was but a memory. He wasn’t a kid anymore. But he sure felt like one.

“Serah?”

No answer. Of course. He had taken her back to her apartment in the afternoon and had gone back to his sleeping record.

“Lightning?”

This was childish, he knew, but he felt so scared right now. He had talked a lot with Serah. Made her laugh. Gosh, he needed to act like someone normal, to feel normal. He only seemed to feel comfortable when he was around Lightning and Serah. And Yuna, for some reason. He tried to calm himself done, but the visions and Jenova’s laugh were too clear in his head. Too close. Was it Jenova or that Shiva? Damn, that other witch was back? He sighed as he got up from bed. A long and hot shower. That should be all the he’d need to get back in his usual shape. Maybe should he call Tifa. Or Lightening. But she was back with Noctis. As he stepped out of his room and heard some noise in the kitchen, he ran to check things out, to see it was just the wind entering by the open window. It had made something fall of the living room table. He sighed again. Remembering the past now was the last things he needed. Because he was still a soldier. A mako soldier. The only one which ever existed on Earth. And maybe in the whole universe. And that was scary. To be one of a kind. Even if he tried to fit with everyone else, he always felt so different. As if he was tainted.

He sat on his couch, looking down at the vase that had fallen on the carpet. Still remembering the cold metal on his limb and he was being lift in the air. The cry of the monsters send at him. The burning sensation of the mako rushing out of his hands. And the blood falling over his face. The monsters falling down to the ground, half destroyed. The noise of shattering bones. And Jenova’s laugh over all of it.

He brought his hands to his face. He still didn’t understand most of what had happened to him back in those days where his father was making the decisions in his place. Back in the time he was still a kid. This hadn’t last long. And sometimes, maybe even more when he forced on a smile, he wished he could go back to that time. Just before Jenova. Before that he learned what fear and blood were. Before everything.

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 19th

Location: Planet Earth, Boston, in the subs’ markets.

Mission: Protecting Aeris Gainsborough at all cost.

Agents: Agent Squall

Warning: Seifer from the Feds was spotted lately close to our Agent. They aren’t really friendly to each other… Things could heat up out there.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission

…
Squall followed Aeris in the first store she choose to explore, feeling pretty out of place, and seriously mourning over the recent loss of Rinoa. Just spotting her right here, in a common place, reminded him how his ex had wanted to act around him, in public. And how he had always refused, because with their job, they could be seen together in any public zone. At least, not while acting as a real couple. Which they were. Well… That seemed so far away right now, he wasn’t sure of anything anymore.

While he was thinking too much, as always, Aeris spotted the underwear section of the store and sighed. She hadn’t many things that weren’t falling into pieces and she didn’t know how many times already she had tried to fix and re fix her pink dress. How was she supposed to get rid of Squall to find out which size of bra she needed and to get two or three of them? Could she possibly try “that” on with him waiting on the other side of the changing room? She felt so embarrassed right now.

“What should I look for…” she asked herself.

“Before to ask that to yourself, you should try to figure out what you need.” he observed.

Always such a logical mind, even when he was sad. Aeris pretended to start counting on her fingers. And as she did, suddenly, Squall remembered she hadn’t any bag when she was running from the Hypellos. Her feet were even naked, as if she had lost her shoes. Now, she was wearing new ones, a gift from the Faction. He looked at her with more attention, checking her attire. From close up, he could see that her dress had been sewed up again and again, in almost every spots. Her hair was tied with an old pink ribbon. As she looked around, it fell down and Squall caught it in its fall. The fabric was so worn out, it seemed ready to fall in pieces. Suddenly, he started to realize what her life could have been, as she was always on the run. Only the clothes she was wearing could be called her possession. She had nothing else. Nothing more… Nothing else. His throat tightened at the idea.

“Don’t look at me like that.” she asked of him, taking back the ribbon from his open hand as their eyes met an instant.

She turned her back on him. And Squall felt bad to know that despicable people could really chase someone without even worrying of the kind of life it gave that person. Even now, as she walked, she was looking everywhere around her, she seemed to jump for every stranger showing up around. She looked all tensed. And that made him forget Rinoa and Seifer once again. Aeris was here. Right now. And she needed his help. His support. At least, until she could get used to the fact she wasn’t a fugitive anymore. That she didn’t have to be one.

*I’ll help you in whichever way I can,* he swore to himself.

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 19th

Location: Planet Earth, undetectable spot around earth, post-wedding airship

Mission: Getting intel on Seymour Baldin, a mafia’s baron who’ve never been caught up in anything before. Still known only as a drill instructor and trainer for the army, he’s a harsh and independent man.


Latest report: Raven and Lightning haven’t taken contact with the Faction lately. Stella should try
to contact them soon now.

Message from G.I. five. End of transmission.

…

Like most of the time, Lightning was the first to wake up. Noctis was sleeping like a baby next to her and she remained lying in his arms for some time, relaxed and content. It was then that the phone rang, making her jump a bit.

Her reflexes reacted right afterwards, to answer the phone quickly enough to prevent it from awakening Noctis. He looked so peaceful right now; she didn’t want to force him out of his sleep.

“Hello?”

“Heya Lightning! I’m waking you up, babe, ain’t I?”

“Reno?! Why are you calling me?”

“Well, because I’m at work instead of sleeping! What, you thought I missed you suddenly?”

“In your dreams. What’s up then?”

“There’s this Stella that wanted to contact you. Needed to ask you some tricks. She’s got an ant problem in her home.”

“Oh… That’s funny, I heard of a Stella recently.”

“She just moved in United States from some colony. There’s no insects on the moon, right, so she has trouble getting used to the planet and all. The boss wanted you to help her.”

“Guess I could give it a try. Though I’m not on work here, right? How can I contact her?”

“You’d be an angel, sweetie pie.”

“Reno, don’t make me mad, okay? Or I’ll make sure you’ll never take any girl on an honeymoon trip. Or anything like it.”

He laughed in the phone, in his lazy way of laughing. Reno was so bitter underneath his smile and jokes; Lightning was reminded of it by his laugh as she bit her lips.

“Just call the 894 post. She’ll answer right away. This problem’s getting on her nerves.”

“Okay. I’ll do my best to help her getting through it.”

“Yeah, do that. And remember to call once in a while. The boss wonders how you’re doing.”

“Doesn’t he have anything else to wonder about?” she playfully asked.

“Oh, he sure has a lot on his minds. But your own of his favorite worries. Well then, see ya later!”

He hung up. And Lightning tried to remember what favorite worries meant in their codes… This didn’t make her feel too comfortable. What was Rufus preparing? And this Stella working with them, was she the same Stella that been calling Noctis lately and whom he referred to as his physician and friend? This felt weird… Was she somewhere around the ship? Why?
“Post 894.” she whispered to herself.

Right, but she had to take a shower first. She slipped out from the bed and walked carefully to the washroom, so that she wouldn’t wake Noctis up. As she came back from her shower and got dressed, he was still sleeping. He was lying on his left side, turning his back to her. His hair was messier than usual and the sheets were twisting around him, letting his back bare to the eyes barely covering his butt. His body was entirely relaxed. Abandoned to sleep. She grabbed the phone and went to the other side of the room, to see Noctis’ face while dialing the numbers of the post. He sure was cute when he slept. All this manly muscles and flesh, lazily exposed, as he mumbled in his sleep some non understandable words… And his relaxed face. It had been quite long since the last time she saw him with that expression…

“…Lightning…” he clearly whispered.

She smiled as she put the receiver on her ear and heard the ringtone. Noctis was beyond cuteness. She just wanted to get back in bed and sleep in next to him for the whole day if possible. But work couldn’t always wait.

“Hi?” a woman’s voice answered.

“Hello, am I talking to Stella?”

“Hum… Yes, yes. Can I ask who’s on the phone?”

“I heard you had some ants’ problem and you needed help.”

“Ha, I’m so glad you called…!”

“Should we meet to talk over it?”

“I don’t want to be of any annoyance for you. I heard you were on a honeymoon trip.”

“Which I am, I gotta admit it. But my husband is sleeping soundly and I don’t really have anything to do at the moment.”

“Alright. How about you come to my place? I’m currently on the same airship as you. The company paid me a trip to save me the displeasure of sharing my house with the ants…”

“Wow, this must be one hell of a problem if there that serious about it.”

“You have no idea…”

Lightning took Stella’s room number and hung up. After checking one last time on Noctis, who was still off in dreamland –he sure owed it, she hadn’t let him sleep all the much last night- she decided to go meet with Stella right away.

…

Still, she thought it was strange that Stella was their informer. Could it be that she was the same Stella than that physician who was always calling Noctis? Why not? After all, Noctis was bound to receive treatment from the Faction medical’s branch. Otherwise, he couldn’t afford any hospitalization. For some reason, their work didn’t pay off as much as it should. Anyway, Lightning reached Stella’s door, rang the doorbopper once or twice before to hear a child voice ringing in the room:
“I’ll open the door, mommy, I’ll open the door!”

The door opened as predicted and a small boy, with dark grey hair and deep blue eyes stared up at Lightning, barely able to keep the door open.

“Are you Light?” he asked.

His voice was just as small as his frame and as she looked at him and smiled –children had always made her smile- she couldn’ t help but think that this boy looked just like someone she knew. His pale complexion was really contrasting with his dark hair. His eyes turned red for an instant, a mere second, or so. Suddenly, his smile had vanished from his face.

“I am.” she replied. She thought she could have choose the wrong door. Noctis had never told her that Stella had a kid.

“Mom’s been waiting for you. Don’t just stand there, come in!” the little boy ordered her.

He pushed the door open and she heard a giggle coming from the back of the room, a laugh that sounded as Stella’s voice.

“Don’t be like that Storm. I must apologize for my son’s behavior… We rarely have any guest and this is his first trip away from home…”

The room was gently lighted and the furniture were all really elaborated and a blond haired woman was sitting in the back of the room, at a glass table covered with folders, sheets of paper and stuff. The first thing Lightning observed was that Stella, if it was Stella, was beautiful. She looked gentle and sweet. But there was a hint of sadness in her eyes.

“I take it you’re Stella?”

“That’s right. And if you’re asking yourself the question, I’m Raven’s physician. And a general instructor for the Black Faction.”

Lightning’s eyes widened at the news. A G.I.? Nothing less. Noctis didn’t seem to know that he was closely checked by a general instructor. One of the most powerful members of the Faction.

“Oh… Nice to meet you! I’m Lightning. No trademark or title goes with the name.”

“I didn’t mean to sound arrogant. I just wanted things to be clear between us.”

“Okay. So you want a report or something?”

“No. Take a seat. We’ll talk over how things are. What happened yesterday with Seymour and Rikku?”

Lightning sat at the glasses table and looked over her shoulder, to see Storm staring at her. He looked confused. And slightly annoyed. Though he was just a little kid, she had the impression he was pretty much older than what he looked like.

“They… They had a fight.” She started, a little surprised by the kid’s stare. “It seems Rikku has found some notes on the Antlion project. And…” She looked over her shoulder again. The feel of his eyes in her back was like bullets digging holes in her shoulders.

He looked angry.

“Hum… Storm, would you come here, sweetie?”
He nodded and walked, looking down at his feet for an instant. Lightning sighed with relief but as he walked up to the two women, she still felt that the atmosphere was strange. She should have understood something about what was going on around her, but she couldn’t put her finger on it.

“I think I need to tell you what this whole Antlion project is.” Stella stated as her son stopped next to her.

“You know it?!”

“Well… To be precise about, he knows everything known about it.” the blond woman admitted, putting one hand on Storm’s head. “We’ve been closely watching the construction of this ship. As closely as possible. Tell her Storm.”

“You think that she can be trusted, mom? This is very sensitive information…”

“Lightning has been working for us for a really long time, Storm. She’s one of our best agents.”

He eyed Lightning, his eyes filled with doubt. Then he looked at his mother and her smile convinced him.

“The Antlion project is a military airship development project.” He started. “It has been running for over twelve years. The main objective was to construct a ship that would be able to fight alone against a whole armada. Its completion is near now. The ship can travel through space, water and air. It will be equipped with…”

“Wow, wow, Storm, I didn’t ask for the whole detailed history background. Just tell Lightning about the link between Seymour and this ship.”

“Wait an instant. Why is this kid the one who knows everything about it?” Lightning asked.

“Because my intellect is far superior and my memory is just as perfect as a computer of twelve Gigs. Or so I heard. I think my cortex is…”

“Storm!”

“Okay, okay… I’m the only one who can tell you all this because the higher-ups in the Faction consider that this project shouldn’t be kept in any computer or material files. So we encrypted it in my brain instead.”

“Huh…”

The fact it was a four years old talking to her about something of this length made Lightning pretty uncomfortable. Stella seemed sad in some way. Of the little kid, there was nothing left but the appearance.

“Before to mention Seymour in this explanation, I must tell you that the Antlion is made so that it can use sunlight and even starlight as his fuel. You know, like solar alimented stuff. But if no light is available, which can happen, the second option is to sacrifice one member of the crew.”

“What did you say?!”

“The second option is to sacrifice one member of the crew.” Storm repeated.

“Hum, but I meant… why?”

“Oh, I misinterpreted your reaction… I’m sorry, this happen often. I’m not use talking to new
people all that much.”

“It’s okay Storm, I’m sure Lightning understands. Just continue your explanation.”

“Okay mom. Well, the sacrifice idea come from the guados. The first principle of the ship was to carry about one or two thousands of people. It’s a mass emigration airship, providing protection and able to fight against any kind of threat. It was made in anticipation of fighting against Ancient’s technology and Jenova’s minions. The sacrifice part is a pretty recent idea brought by a Guado engineer. It follows the new turn in their religion, where the weak shall be killed in the name of the strong. One’s life, any life, can give out the same amount of energy, and some people learned how to exploit this energy. By sacrificing one of the meekest members of the passengers, the ship would be allowed to fire at his enemies, to travel at light speed and even to crash land onto some unknown planet. It seems pretty accurate to think that Seymour would worship the strong instead of the weak, since he’s the one who should evaluate who the sacrificed persons should be in the future. That’s the delicate mission the military had for him. Well, only one branch of the military.”

He paused, seeing that Lightning was turning even paler with each new sentence he made.

“I’m sorry. Maybe I haven’t tell it slow enough. Did you miss some part in this, madam? Want me to sum it up? Need more details?”

So, this kid was able to remember all kind of things, to a level that it was terrifying, but he had trouble understanding the expression of the people around him? He sounded like a robot. A human child robot. This scared Lightning. And the fact that he looked so much like… Suddenly it hit her as Storm hesitated once again. Those golden eyes turning blue or red depending on his feelings, those grey and dark hair, almost silver. It was… It was… He looked like Noctis. Like a colder and wiser version of him. And younger too. But still, it couldn’t be anyone else. But it was impossible! This boy couldn’t be older than four or.. five years. And five years ago, Noctis was with her. And he wouldn’t have cheated on her. Or did he…?

“She looks confused, mother. Did I say something wrong?”

“No, I don’t think you have, Storm. Do you feel alright Lightning?”

“This kid…” Lightning said.

The said kid suddenly seemed to understand her confusion and looked away, his face shading with something looking like grief.

“You mean Storm? Ah, I see. He’s a really, really special kid. His growth has been accelerated and he has a maturity exceeding by far the one he should have given his age. I wasn’t agree with it, not at all, but the Faction… They didn’t give me any choice.”

“Mom… Should I… Should I go to my room?”

“Yes, darling, I think you’ve said all that was needed to be heard. Thanks.”

He ran away and Lightning felt her heart tightening in her chest.

“What… you can’t be serious about his growth? And what about a ship that use human lives as fuel!”

“I’m sorry, Lightning. I guess I was careless in the way I chose to explain things to you just now. Things are getting out of hand in the faction. And for my son, I… Let’s say the very fact he lives is a miracle in itself. Even if he’s different from other kids, I don’t care. He’s all I have in this world.
Even if the Faction uses him. He’s still my son.”

Stella’s voice wasn’t really strong at that. This subject was touchy. Lightning couldn’t understand the whole thing about this, but she still felt that something else than the accelerated growth and the brilliant mind of that Storm was off. His resemblance with Noctis was stunning. She couldn’t get that thought out of her mind. And what had he that looked like Stella? Nothing as far as the eyes were the only ones concerned.

“I… I got the impression I just stepped in the fourth dimension.” Lightning whispered. “Just this Storm. It’s… it’s madness.”

“I’m sorry that it shocked you that much to meet him. He’s a very sheltered kid. Mainly because of his knowledge and peculiar… abilities. I wanted him to be a kid like everyone else. But as a G.I. I was forced to let the Faction people… reshape him as they saw fitting for our current situation.”

The two women stood in an awkward silence for a while. Stella had always tried to keep this problem for herself, to tell herself it wasn’t that bad. She didn’t want to tell Lightning anything else about her son. Didn’t need the judgment she felt in those aqua eyes. She had always did her best for Storm. Always. It had nothing to do with their job. Though the Faction had made everything they could to turn Storm in a tool of the Black Faction. And Stella had let it take place. All she wanted was a kid of her own. Someone she could love and cherish and that would never leave her. Someone who would need her and only her. She had had her own problems in her life. She hadn’t always made the right choices. But her son would never be a mistake. He would still have come to life if she hadn’t accepted to be his mother. So maybe was it better if it was her that took care of him, instead of some scientists that didn’t remember the word “love”.

“Could we keep this professional? My bugs problem is the Antlion, I’m sure you’ve understood that much so far.” Stella said harshly, taking Lightning back to reality.

She was here to talk to her about her son, but about their job.

“The army branch that got control over the project is one of the most extremist that exists. The idea of sacrifice and purging a race, any race, of the weakest element came to them as a perfect weapon. Many people have started disappearing in the lowest part of towns, all over the Earth. It’s not only here. The same thing happened on the Moon base, on March, Venus, Jupiter… The whole Milky way seems to be losing it. And Seymour could be one of the key from it. The army’s branch controlling the Antlion isn’t official. It’s an underground organization. It corrupted the official army. The Antlion will be there weapon in this. And as the tale of the real mythological Antlion, this ship will devours itself in his hunger for power.”

“I don’t think this is what happens in the official tale.”

“Right… Storm knows this pretty better than I do. I’m a physician, a life specialist. I’m no good when it comes to mechanics and stuff. And I wasn’t good at history or legend.”

“Neither was I. But this seems to be a lot more than a simple reckon mission.”

“I know. We had no idea Seymour was linked with the Antlion’s project. Thanks to Raven, now we know. We’ve investigated this information. It came out that Seymour was chose by his ex wife, Yunalesca. We still don’t know who their boss is, but this ship mustn’t fall under their hands. We’ll send a team to take control of the Antlion before that it’s completed. Your only job here is to see what kind of choice Seymour could do. To find evidence to arrest him for anything, so we could slow down their progress. And prevent him from ever joining this Antlion’s crew for real.”
Lightning felt as if the weight of the whole world was on her shoulders suddenly. Why hadn’t she slept in with Noctis instead of coming all the way up here? She missed Noctis’ arms suddenly. But the picture of Storm’s straight face and the resounding of his small voice, naming all the atrocities that were going to take place if the Antlion was ever given the chance to take off… It reminded her of his resemblance with Noct.

“Is that all you had to tell me about this mission?” She asked.

Stella agreed, shaking her head approvingly.

“Then, as Raven’s physician, could you tell me something?”

“It will depends…”

“This explosion he got in…”

Lightning wasn’t sure where she was heading right now. She knew something was up with Noctis. And Stella had to know some of it. She had to know. She couldn’t be kept in the dark. Noctis had something on his mind. She remembered the shattered pieces of mirror in the bathroom. There was no blood on the floor. He hadn’t broken it with his hands. And how he had came running to her when the whole ship was nothing but confusion. How he looked scared and lost whenever she would talk to him about the last two years. Every pause, every mark of hesitation. It was all coming back. And that talk they had in the shower. About taking him back as he was now. His voice in her memory suddenly sounded as he wasn’t sure of what he was. He had been holding something back. Something painful. And this little boy, this Storm. Stella’s need to tell her she was a G.I. at the very moment she entered the room. It was all so weird. So suspicious.

“You mean, on the Moon base?”

“Right.”

Lightning wasn’t sure what she wanted to hear. She wanted the truth. But how could she get to it? Noctis had been away for two years. Two years. How could she know what could have happened that scared him that much the other day, when he had a nightmare? Because she knew Noctis. He had stopped having nightmare purely made of his imagination when he was a small kid. His nightmares had always been based on his real life, ever since. She couldn’t sweat to it, but she was pretty sure. And she had to know.

“What about it?” Stella asked.

She tossed some paper from the glass table away, to put her elbows on the fragile surface and put her chin in her hands, looking at Lightning straight in the eyes.

“He had had to be hospitalized and had to undergo some rehabilitation…” Lightning carefully continued.

“Well, after all, it was a nuclear explosion.”

“What?!”

Stella’s eyes widened.

“He hadn’t told you? About this or his coma?”

“His coma?” Lightning repeated.
She didn’t sound worried anymore. She was beyond worry. And she felt angry at the same time. A coma was something pretty serious. Why didn’t Noctis tell her about it? Stella bit her lower lip. It seemed she had said too much. But why hadn’t Raven told all that to his partner? Lightning should have been told, shouldn’t she? Why had he kept all that to himself?

…”

“Noctis!”

Lightning burst into the room she was sharing with her “fake” husband. The said “fake” was still sleeping in their bed and barely opened his eyes as he heard his name yelled by Lightning’s voice. For some reason, he felt awfully tired. Maybe was it last night… Or the counter effect of his alcohol abuses from the other day. But whatever it was, Lightning’s next sentence got him totally awake.

“You spent the two last years in a coma. A coma! When were you planning on telling me?!”

He sat up, his eyes darting open and he shivered under her angry eyes.

“Who… who told you?” was all he could blurt out.

“Stella, who else? It seems she’s a G.I. and your physician.”

“A what?!?”

“Were you even planning on telling me about this coma you got into?”

“Lightning, I…”

He was looking for his words, looking for his breath. He felt so guilty and confused…

“A nuclear explosion! Not just an explosion, a nuclear explosion! How careless can you be?!!”

“I…”

“You didn’t trust me enough to tell it? It explains everything! Why couldn’t you tell me? Because of Storm?”

“What storm?”

Lightning suddenly realized Noctis was just as confused as her. And all she found to do was barking at him like a mad dog. But she felt so mad. So angry. He should have told her everything. About his coma. Which explained why he had never come to see her, never called. He couldn’t do it! And it explained that he wasn’t toying with her feeling either. He was honest. For him, the accident of two years ago was only months away. He hadn’t had any time to move on. Hadn’t had any time to start anything with someone else. And suddenly, it seemed he didn’t know about Storm. About the kid the Faction had forced Stella to conceive, using science, Noctis’ cells and DNA, to keep in their possession the incredible Radiant powers he had developed through the mutation of his healing organism after this explosion. He knew nothing. And it explained so many things.

“Forget it, Noct. Just tell me why you hid this from me.”

“It felt too… I felt so cheap. And I didn’t want to win you over with pity.”

“But I don’t pity you…”
“Well, how are you looking at me right now? Why is it a catastrophe? I wasn’t the first to hide things between us, as far as I know.”

He felt bad for saying that last sentence, but it felt right. After all, she was the first who had been hiding something to him. So, keeping this coma a secret was some kind of revenge? Noctis had never thought of it that way. But yeah. Suddenly, it was clear. He still was mad at her for hiding him something like that. It was the very reason why they had broken apart.

Lightning took the hit. Noctis saw the pain on her face as she looked away. It didn’t last though.

“If you’d told me about those two years, I wouldn’t have been so nasty with you during the last week.”

“Maybe. But if I hadn’t gotten in that explosion in the first place…”

“It was two years, Noct. Two whole years of your life.”

“I know.” he replied, his voice cracking with emotion. “Don’t remind me, I already know what I’ve lost. It’s… It’s scary just to fall asleep now, when I think that I could wake up years later.”

She went to his side, sitting next to him on their bed and hugged him tightly. So she wasn’t entirely mad. She was mainly hurt by the situation. It was so unfair to him. And to them.

“It won’t happen again, Noct. You’re with me now.”

“What did Stella tell you about me?”

“She told me about the radiant powers. That you were surely the one who wrecked the ship. And…”

She wanted to tell him about Storm. But he was already so shaken just to know she knew the rest. He owed a little peace after all that. His arms around her felt a little weaker than usual. His breathing was uneasy. He wanted to cry, she knew it. And she knew he would if she told her all that she knew. But did he need to know right now?

“And what?”

“And that’s about it. So now, I know just how much you’ve changed.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind Noctis. I think I can understand. It was too much. Too much to tell it all out at first. And I was so bitter and harsh with you; you had every right to hide it.”

“Claire…”

“I love you Noct. This won’t change.”

His shoulder started to shake as she held him as tightly as she could and he forced her to lay down in the bed. Hid his face in her hair, trying to hold everything back down. The fear, the emotion. Everything.

“Aren’t you scared?”

“By what?”
“I’m not entirely human anymore… Not in every way.”

“I never was entirely human myself and you still love me today. Why should it be different for me?”

He sighed with relief and, after staying like this in silent for a moment, gently kissed her neck. He was a bundle of nerves, but he wasn’t shaking anymore.

“I’m sorry.” he repeated.

“Why?”

“I should have trust you from the start.”

“It’s okay now, Noct. We’ll face both of our problems together. As we always had.”

“Together… Always. You really love those words, don’t you?”

“I guess it’s my childish dream resurfacing a little.” she tried to joke, blushing as he rolled on his back, holding her close to him.

His body felt so warm next to hers. So full of life. To think he had been sleeping between life and death for the two last years. To think not so long ago, he couldn’t even walk.

“Don’t ever get yourself in an explosion again, okay?” she asked him, stroking his chest carelessly. “If you had died, if you had never come back into my life, I would still only be the ghost of myself.”

As she spoke, she remembered the little boy. Storm. Another secret. She wasn’t sure if Noctis was ready for such a news. She had asked him if he wanted children, and he looked so tensed and nervous about it. To think he was already a father. To think that his son was one years old, looked like a four years old boy and was already more brilliant then his father. It was scary. And Noctis had had his share of fears. But still, since the boy was on the same ship as them, wouldn’t Noctis meet him sometime soon? Was he ready for this?

“I’ll do my best.”

She smiled, hearing his voice through his chest, vibrating in her ears. He hadn’t changed all that much. Maybe was he just, just a little more vulnerable than usual. But she didn’t mind. He was finally honest with her. Totally honest. And his arms wrapped around her were the only thing keeping her to reality. The rest of her mind was still so confused from all that she’d learned. All this thing about the Antlion’s project. And that little guy. That Storm.

She fell asleep, her mind full of worries. And Noctis kept holding her as he joined her in her sleep. He was still pretty worn out. He’d have to speak with Stella about that too. He had no idea of the news she had in store for him…

To be continued
Chapter 16

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part III

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 19th

Location: Boston, Metro Station Market Place

Mission: None except to guard Aeris Gainsborough at all cost

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Warning: Seifer from the Feds was spotted lately close to our Agent. They aren’t really friendly to each other… Things could heat up out there.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission

...

Squall sighed deeply. Aeris had selected a few piece of clothing and was trying them on as he waited next to the fitting room. He felt pretty out of place, surrounded by women clothes. Aeris had suggested to come out, so that they would pretend they were together, to get that annoyed look off his face. And she did come out sometimes, when the clothes felt really fitting and when she thought he would find her pretty. Squall tried not staring at her, but she was trying to stop him from mopping and hell, that worked. And it was every girl dream to do a fashion parade at least once, even for only one person. She tried many shoes on, mixing attire with them. Squall was surprised by the length of her imagination. It seemed that every color fitted with her frame. At first, she was coming out with this shy look in her eyes. It was so cute, Squall couldn’t resist it. Then she won confidence and he was totally done for. He had observed how pretty she was already, but she suddenly reminded him of it.

After showing him about ten different attires, she suggested that he go and get her some food.

“Aren’t you getting hungry yourself Squall? I could really use something to eat.”

“Huh… Wait, I can’t leave you like that, it’s too…”

The young woman working at the fitting room and that had been assuming the pair was a couple shook her head.

“Possessive men spent most of their life single!” she observed, disapprovingly.

Squall frowned. This had nothing to do with him being possessive! Aeris was under his protection. If he left her for a second, who knew what could happen? Hypellos could suddenly drop from the ceiling, or jump out of some clothes’ racks with gun aiming for her! He sighed. That very thought was crazy. But still, he was obliged to keep her around him at all time to be sure she would be fine. But the vendor’s remark made him pretty uneasy about refusing to go get some food. It wouldn’t take too long. And he was a possessive man… And he was single. And at the very prospect of food, his stomach started growling, quite against his will.

“You’ll stay here?” he asked Aeris.

She agreed with a smile.
“I guess I could give you a few minutes of liberty.” he joked.

“Don’t take it like that, Squall. I just thought you were getting bored. And it’s almost dinner time already.”

“Okay, I get it. What do you want to eat?”

“Anything!” she quickly answered.

She grabbed him by the shoulders, forced him to turn his back to her and pushed him in the direction of the restaurant. She sure seemed in a hurry of seeing him away and he sighed again.

“Alright, but don’t complain when I come back with something you dislike.”

Aeris just laughed and he walked away, feeling pretty awkward. It seemed she had him wrapped around her little finger. He felt so clumsy around her. Around everyone. He looked over his shoulder, but the brown haired girl was already off, looking for more clothes. At first, she had had trouble finding the right size for her. She didn’t even know which size of clothes she was wearing. That made him pretty sad to realize how disconnected she was from his world. To what was judged as common knowledge by normal people.

Being always on the run, she hadn’t the time to find herself some work, to get money and to buy new things, like clothes. Squall remembered how Rinoa was always buying a new skirt or blouse or dress every two weeks. How Lightning used to spoil herself with earrings and boots. How he was crazy over his real paper book collection. Aeris couldn’t collect anything. Couldn’t keep any precious things. How did she eat? He was starting to ask himself all kind of questions about her. He wanted to stay with her. To hold her in his arms. To shield her from this outside world that had turned her life in a terrible game of hide and seek that could have killed her… And still, she could have such a bright smile. It warmed his heart whenever she smiled. She was so full of life, of joy, though she had nothing. He hardly gulped down as he compared himself to her for an instant. He had everything. A roof over his head. Friends. Food. Even a source of income. And still, he could make his life miserable. While Aeris had nothing and still enjoyed life…

All of this being said, Squall was at a total lost when he arrived in the restaurant and tried to find something that Aeris would like to eat. It couldn’t be a whole meal, she was still trying things on. It had to be consistent though. Maybe should she stop to try clothes on and eat with him in this restaurant or another one around the place? The options were getting more and more numerous in his brain and he felt dizzy. What would she like? A muffin? A cup of coffee?

Something to eat, moron, something to eat… he reminded to himself.

In the end, Squall opted for a chocolate milkshake— you can’t be wrong with chocolate-covered with fruits. No walnut, he had no idea if she had some allergy to it. It wouldn’t fill any hungry stomach, well, not for pretty long, but girls tended to like sweets. At least, Lightning, Vanille and Rinoa did, so he had to be right.

Aeris had used her little time alone to find herself some bras and tried them on, and had hidden them underneath all of the clothes in her store caddy with a set of panties and some other underwear. She looked surprised seeing the milkshake, but ate it with pleasure and they walked up to the checkout so that she could pay all of her things. As the cashier took the clothes and shove them into bags, Squall spotted the laced bras and suddenly understood why he had been sent to get some food. He eyed Aeris with a slight frown and she blushed a little under his gaze.

“You could have told me, you know, I would have understood. I’ve lived with a girl for the past
four years…”

“Well, I never bought bras before.” she whispered back to him, flushing now.

For some reason, this gave Squall some very wrong ideas. As the one: does this mean she’s not wearing one now? And the other ideas were even worst. His eyes moved on their own, following her frail neck all the way down and he mentally punched himself for thinking something dirty just there as he averted his eyes from her. It was easy to get distracted around her. Even easier since he felt so lonely right now.

…”

After that weird moment, they went to a couple more stores, until that Aeris had spent about 400 dollars on her clothes. She had received a word from the Faction, telling her that she should get all kind of clothes, from the most conventional to the more elaborate, as fancy dresses. She hadn’t found anything fitting this description. Squall brought her to a restaurant, where she used the bathroom to get changed into some of her new clothes. The more things she had, the more she felt ashamed by her dress. But she never talked about getting a new ribbon or something for her hair. They ate together, mostly in silence, because they were both hungry and because Squall loved silence above all else. Anyway, this silence wasn’t awkward. It felt even comfortable. He was staring at her, as most of the time, but it wasn’t a naughty or nasty stare.

He was trying to understand her. Listening to all the secrets kept around them in the air. His new sense was pretty confusing when he dared to use it. Objects seemed to take life and told him stories. This table had seen a lot of things. Except from food. He knew the cook was worried about his wife, who seemed to be turning alcoholic over the years. A girl among the customers of this restaurant was utterly sad and her soul was crying instead of her. He couldn’t tell who it was though. It could have been anyone. He still wasn’t that good to understand his more accurate perceptions. And it still scared him somehow. He focused his attention on Aeris. She was a total mystery to his senses. As long as she was awake, he couldn’t hear anything from her, couldn’t see her energy. It made him feel a little more normal. Human and mortal. Being able to sense all kind of things was weird…

“Will you take a dessert?” the waiter asked them gently.

“I don’t think…” Aeris started

“You should take one,” Squall cut her off.

He was smirking at her. Shouldn’t she let him spoil her a little? She was all tensed, though she was trying to relax. They were so many people everywhere around her. So many strangers that could be a threat to her life. She tried to believe that her life of running away and being a fugitive was over. It was easier to fake it when she felt as if she was alone with Squall.

“Okay…”

She looked down to her plate, feeling pretty nervous. She wasn’t used to this. To being normal. Too many things were happening too fast. She felt scared. But she wanted to keep it to herself. So that Squall wouldn’t worry. But as the waiter walked away, her body guard grabbed her hand in his.

“What’s wrong Aeris? You look pretty nervous suddenly.”

“I… I don’t like to linger in the same place for too long.” she quickly answered, unable to look at
him, feeling ashamed by her own reaction.

“Oh… You should have told me. We can go back home right now.”

The word “home” made her smile. It felt so unreal. And she felt bad for imposing herself on him. But he seemed delighted to have someone around, though he was acting cold every now and then. His dependant side was comforted by her presence. And it was nice to think that her life could help someone, be of use to anyone.

…

After eating a chocolate cake –because chocolate still was the best- and having a little fight over who should pay the restaurant bill, which fight was won by Squall –because a man has his pride and that he judged he was the only one who should pay for the food- they walked out, carrying a lot of bags and boxes, all containing of Aeris’ new clothes. As she started wondering how they would be able to bring all of this back home, Squall stopped in a little gadget shop, bought a capsule and used it to warp all the stuff they were carrying in the small capsule, which he gave Aeris.

“You’re sure that everything is there?”

“I swear. It should be pretty useful, don’t you think? You can keep all of your thing just in a pocket.”

“I never thought something like that existed. It must have cost you a fortune!”

Squall was about to lie over the price of this thing, when he suddenly heard his name being called out in the crowd. And the voice wasn’t entirely friendly.

“Hey, Squall! Wow, I never thought we’d see you out of that hole you call an apartment so soon!”

Squall didn’t have to turn around to know it was Seifer. Aeris got closer to him as she saw the tall blond man walking up to them. Rinoa was half following half dragged by Seifer.

“Seifer.” He coldly acknowledged him. “If you got something to tell me, say it.”

“Always in a hurry, huh? It seems you’ve recovered much faster then I’d expected. Who’s that chick you got here?”

“Seifer, please, try being nice with him.” Rinoa asked of her new boyfriend.

“It didn’t seem that he was nice with you lately.”

Seifer’s scar was really clear on his white skin and Aeris wondered why he had this mark, which looked just like the scar on Squall’s face. They were the same, except from their orientation. It was kinda scary.

“Seifer, please…”

“I just wanna speak with an old buddy, Rin’, don’t get so worked up for it.”

Squall frowned and evaded Rinoa’s sorry eyes that were looking for his. He didn’t like the impression this whole situation gave him. As if Rinoa wasn’t happier than him to be with Seifer. As if she was with him against her will. But could that really be?

Seifer walked up to Squall, stopping at a distance of one feet or two from him. As they were facing
with an angry look, each clearly hating the other, Aeris took a step back. For some reason, she felt that this guy was one of the only ones that could get Squall to lose his temper.

“Say Squall, is it true that…” Seifer started before to lean closer to Squall, to whisper down his question.

He had a corny smile on his face and Aeris clearly saw the reaction on her bodyguard’s face. He went really pale, his eyes widened with shock before to glare at Rinoa from over Seifer’s shoulder. He tried to swallow the anger down, but he snapped; he punched the blond guy in the guts, to receive a knee in the stomach almost right after. They could have jumped at each other throat and start an all out fight if the two girls hadn’t gotten between them at this very moment.

“Squall, he’s just toying with your emotions.” Aeris observed.

“How can you attack him like that, Squall!”

Seifer smiled as he got up and reassured Rinoa about his state. Squall was already up, but he was trembling from rage and if Aeris hadn’t be holding one his arm, he would have jump right back at this sorry excuse of a man. His rival had asked him something, something so personal, something that only Rinoa knew except from him, it felt so frustrating! To think she had shared something like that, something that belonged only to him, something that made him looks vulnerable. It was another blow in his already shattering armor.

“I take it it’s the truth then,” Seifer laughed.

“You…!”

“Squall, please calm down.”

Aeris’ voice sounded really scared and that convinced Squall to regain control over his self. He realized they were starting to get a lot of attention. People were looking at them. The last thing he wanted was to attract attention.

“The lion’s just a kitty after all.” Seifer teased him again.

Squall wanted to have him swallowing down his words and to punch him, to beat him till his fists would hurt too much to punch anymore. He would have if Aeris hadn’t gotten in front of him, putting her hands on his chest, exhorting him to calm down.

“His words are empty, Squall. They shouldn’t even reach you.” she whispered to him.

Seifer laughed at that, which owed him a cold glare.

“Say, Squall, where did you get that chick? She looks familiar. I think she was in the Feds’ files recently. Does the word “Cetra” sounds empty to you, missy?”

Aeris jumped a little and Squall understood his trivial rivalry’s problems could drag Aeris, which he was supposed to guard at all cost, in a lot more trouble than it should. And she had seen her share of threats for a whole life.

“Say Rinoa, could you take your exuberant boyfriend out of my sight before that I really get mad?”

He glared at her instead of Seifer and she looked away. As her hair fell over her eyes, he saw one trail of tears rolling down her cheek. And it hurt. He felt almost as if she had been forced to betray him for Seifer and wasn’t enjoying any part of it. But could it really be? It hurt even more to think
about that. But the incident was over with that. Squall and Aeris walked away. Rinoa’s sobs and Seifer’s tries at cheering her up followed them for a while. The brown haired spy looked over his shoulder once and felt his heart twisting in his chest at the sight of them together. Rinoa was being held in another guy’s arms. She was being comforted by someone else. She even managed to smile to her new boyfriend. He stole a kiss from her. And Squall could have frozen right there and kept watching them, just to convince himself that any hope was futile. But Aeris was with him. She pulled on his wrist and got back his attention.

“It’s normal to be jealous. And you have every right to be angry at her, Squall.”

“Don’t try to comfort me on this, Aeris.”

“Okay... What do you want me to do then?”

“Anything that could help me forget.” he said without thinking.

The very fact he could have stopped to think meant trouble, but Squall’s mind was turning blank. He couldn’t get Rinoa anymore. And Seifer had threatened Aeris. A Cetra was an Ancient, it was just another word to say it. The last thing Squall needed was that Seifer hurt Aeris. She wasn’t a replacement for Rinoa, but she counted a lot in his life. It was the first time someone had to help him getting back up both physically and mentally. The first time he was acting so openly with anyone, though they weren’t really intimate. Somehow, Squall knew there was something really wrong in this situation.

“How about a little revenge on her then?”

“What?!”

“Giving her back a piece of her own medicine, you know.”

Aeris looked over her shoulder in a quick motion. Rinoa was still in sight, a couple of meters away from them.

“If I’d kiss you, you wouldn’t get any ideas, huh?”

Squall was so surprised, he couldn’t even answer to her question. She took his reaction as a “yes” and pulled on his fur collar till his face was mere inches away from hers. And their lips met for an instant. A butterfly kiss. It triggered something within him. The feel of Aeris’ gentle skin… The need he’d been feeling for the last few days. He didn’t let her go instantly. And he gave her a real kiss. One that he’d never give to Rinoa with any public around. It wasn’t dirty but passionate and Aeris realized she had awakened something more than a simple and small revenge there. Squall’s arms were around her. It felt as if there was nothing else in the world, but his embrace. She was protected here. She wasn’t a fugitive anymore. But it was wrong, wasn’t it? What kind of impulse had she been following to suddenly kiss him?!

She found herself clumsily trying to kiss him back, raising her hands from his chest to gently grab his head. But as soon as her fingers touched him, he parted from her. It was too much. Too soon. Far too intimate. He tried to look at Rinoa from over his shoulder. Just a peek. She was looking at him. Seifer wasn’t around her anymore. Her brown eyes were filled up with tears. And for an instant, Squall felt good.

Yes, be sad, Rinoa. If you can suffer just a little from this, you’ll understand what I’ve been through, he thought selfishly.

But then, as fast as it had came, it vanished. And his heart sank to the very bottom of his chest. He
wanted to walk all the way back to her and apologize. To tell her there was nothing between him and Aeris. But it wouldn’t be the truth. There was some kind of connection between this Ancient and him. He liked her. And if he could get to kiss her again in the future, he would. If he could ever move on from Rinoa… But it hurt, because the dark haired girl was still a part of him.

“I’m sorry.” Aeris whispered, biting her lips.

“About what?” Squall asked her, looking back at her.

“I don’t know what got into me.” she replied, blushing madly.

He gently forced her to resume their walk and looked around, for the last shop they needed to visit.

“Well, whatever it was, it helped me forget. Let’s just… keep it at that. If Rufus finds out, I’m dead meat.”

“What?”

“Well, I mean… I’m your bodyguard, Aeris. We should keep professional.”

“It wasn’t an invitation or something. It was just revenge on her for putting you through all of this.”

Squall realized the very fact Aeris knew almost everything about his recent breaking up with Rinoa and its circumstances made their relation unprofessional. And he needed a friend right now. Still, he wished he wouldn’t have to explain this to his superiors. Or to anyone else! It had felt pretty awkward.

“Okay. Well, I’ll let it pass just for this once, but… Don’t play that kind of game with me, okay? I may be acting all soft, but I’m no cat.”

“Seifer really hit a nerve with all his crap talk… What did he ask you to make you so mad in the first place?”

Squall just glared at her and she took the hint. They resumed to their shopping. Squall went back to his cold silence. But sometimes, when she would show up in a new dress and swirl over herself, he would smile at her. And a twinkle would sparkle in his eyes. And that meant it wasn’t that much far. It meant he could still feel joy. And that he wasn’t mad at her for the little incident. Aeris still wasn’t sure why she had had that weird idea and still remember the feel of Squall’s hands on her, as he had held her closer to him. It had been different than everything she had ever experience in her life. It had felt so powerful. This man who was her bodyguard had so much to give. All he asked for was a little care. And some respect. He was lost right now and he needed some help to get back on tracks. He was trying his best to act normally. To stop being depressed. And she was going to help him, somehow. Just as much as he was willing to be helped. He was protecting her from the physical threats of the world. And she wanted to protect him from everything that could attack his fragile heart. Inside, he was only a little kid. And whenever she could make him smile fully, it warmed her heart so much, she felt as a better person. And who knew, maybe was she already falling for him? It was maybe cliché but should she fight against her own feelings? Being true to them was the only thing she had ever been free to do…
Mission: Teaching Yuna Albhed how to use a gun properly

Soldier: Colonel Cloud Strife

Message from Professor Cid. End of transmission.

…

“Alright Yuna, let’s take all of this from the start. Take the gun.”

Cloud’s patience was wearing thin. Yuna had been refusing to even try to train herself at using a gun for almost an hour. Her punishment for shooting her commander officer—even if it was by mistake—had been to run a hundred laps around the training field. She was barely standing on her feet and was trembling of fatigue, not fear. Well, that was what she would have said if the colonel had asked her. Her hair was still wet from her brief shower, but Cloud had no idea of her punishment. Jecht had told him her punishment was to be trained by him, not to run around. And even if he had known, Cloud was a soldier, just as Yuna. And a good soldier could go through anything when his uniform was on.

“No!” she protested.

“Yuna, I tried to do this the gentle way, but you’re toying with my patience right now. So take this fucking gun before that I grab it myself.”

Though most of Yuna’s worries had gone back to normal, she was really scared of carrying a gun and aiming at anything. Especially with Cloud around. She had shot him once…

“Alright then.” he sighed.

They were alone in the targeting zone of the training block. The machine gun wasn’t too heavy, Cloud had already explained her all the basics over it. Everything about the machinery, the recoil, the reloading method. Yuna was looking down at her feet, trying to find the strength within herself to take this stupid gun. But it was hard just to stand straight. And Cloud’s patience was shattering. He grabbed the gun and raised it, his index on the trigger. Yuna looked at him with uncertainty.

“This baby is a caliber 5-0-9. It hasn’t been created for a century already, but it’s used massively all over the galaxy.”

The blond soldier turned his back on her, aimed for the targets and pulled the trigger. All hell broke loose for an instant as the bullets ripped through the air and into the helpless mannequins. Two of the five were shot in the head, the three others straight in the heart. Yuna was frozen in place.

“It’s deathly and brutal, but it kills instantly if you know how to use it right. It’s the least you can do for your victim.”

Yuna flinched at the word “victim”.

“Take it,” he ordered.

His voice wasn’t harsh as it had been on Pluto. As the gun touched her hand, the metal was already warm from Cloud’s warmth. And it felt weird to think that a tool of death could carry the warmth of life. She kept the gun in her hands as he let it go, afraid that it would start up if she let it fall to the floor.
“Now tell me… What are you scared of?”

“I… I…”

Her arms were trembling. It was so hot in here. Her voice was shaky. Cloud put it on the fear’s fault.

“Scared of shooting me? If you don’t close your eyes, it should be alright.”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

“I will as long as you play the scared little girl Yuna. When you’re holding your gun, you have the lives of the whole squad in your hands. If you miss one single target, one of your friends could die.”

“But…”

“Your weapon can be what you want it to be.”

Cloud grabbed a part of her gun and made the ammunition fall to the ground with a clinking sound.

“But if this ever happen on the field, it will be over and out.”

Yuna stared at her feet again. It seemed she couldn’t do anything else. She felt like jumping at every word he yelled and she was shaking a lot now. Her sight was getting blurry. She was so tired.

“Reload it!” Cloud ordered her.

She got back the ammunition and started to reload the gun, but her hands were shaking too much. She had always love mechanics. Steel had always been attracting to her, and not because it was shiny. But these pieces of metal were all made to kill people.

“Reload it faster!” Cloud insisted, his voice growing stronger and harsher. “You think that enemy soldier will give you all that time? You need to be…!”

“I’m not a soldier! I’m a back up soldier, I shouldn’t even get on the battlefield!” she snapped.

She threw the machine gun to the ground, finally looking up at him, tears filling her bicolor eyes. But beneath the tears, there was a fire burning.

Cloud smirked at her reaction. It was exactly the reaction he wanted to get from her.

“But you got on the battlefield.” he observed.

“And it was all your fault! Stop ordering me around! I don’t wanna be a soldier, I wanna be an engineer!”

“Oh, this was all my fault, but why did you become a soldier, even a back up one? You knew there was a risk you could be sent on a battlefield. Why would you choose such a job?”

“Well. I.. It gave me access to the most selective classes to learn everything about airships’ development.”

She sniffed a little and dried her tears with her sleeve. Cloud felt a little bad once again. He barely knew her, but he already had scarred her for her whole life.
“I’m sorry for yelling Yuna. And for all the rest. I was testing you as a soldier. You weren’t train to be a soldier and it was a mistake to give you this mission in the first place, but you helped me back there. And you sure are one heck of a good engineer!”

“You really think so?”

She managed a smile through her tears and that comforted Cloud. But then, she collapsed to the ground!

“Yuna?!”

He got to his knees and raised her gently in his arms, shoving the machine gun away. She was shaking from head to toes. Her eyes barely remained open and she looked pretty lost. Sweat was running down her forehead.

“Am I really that scary?” he asked her.

That made her laugh, though it wasn’t a joke.

“I was so dizzy after all this running…” she explained.

“What running?” he asked, removing one of his gloves and putting his hand on her forehead. She was burning up. Had she been running outside in this heat?

“Jecht had me doing a hundred laps. Said it was part of my punition for shooting a superior officer.” she explained.

Nobody told me, he thought to himself.

Jecht must have thought that Cloud would have been a little too soft if he knew.

“Why didn’t you say so?”

Yuna lose consciousness before to be able to answer and Cloud sighed, feeling even guiltier. He was barely getting to the point where he could apologize for putting her on the battlefield and she was collapsed and unconscious because she had overworked herself running in the unbearable heat of the outside sun. He raised himself up, carrying Yuna in his arms and walked out of the training ground, hurrying to his squad quarters. Tifa was bond to get mad at him for what had happened to Yuna, but it wasn’t his fault. If he had known, he wouldn’t have yelled or forced her to stand up.

“Tifa? Penelo?” He called out as he kicked the door to the Eight’s quarter open. Nobody answered him and he understood they weren’t here. After all, most of them were still recovering from their wounds.

Maybe should he treat Yuna himself. She needed some care. Some fresh water. He gently lied her down on one bed, undid the upper buttons of her uniform to let her breath more freely. She didn’t seem to have many clothes underneath the uniform, but he didn’t really care about seeing her underwear or something right now. He had to lower her temperature. He grabbed some materia and cast blizzard around Yuna’s bed, building up an ice cocoon around her. He didn’t let it last too long, casting fire with another materia right after. An aero materia would clean up the water on the floor after and he checked on Yuna right away, to see that her fever had fallen. She had gotten a sunstroke –if it wasn’t anything worse- and Cloud guessed that his treatment was alright, even if it was a little too straightforward. But as he wiped of the fresh water from Yuna’s face, she woke up and looked at him, her eyes filled with questions.
“You’ll need some rest, but you were starting a fever and it’s stopped.”

“Why am I all wet?” she asked him.

“Let’s say I took care of this fever in a drastic way,” he answered her, raising one materia so that she would understand.

“I’m surrounded by crazy soldiers.” she whispered, rolling her eyes.

Cloud laughed. He liked it when she was acting normal around him. Then, she realized her uniform’s top was slightly undone and covered her cleavage with her arms, blushing before to glare at him.

“Hey, it was just…”

He was interrupted by a slap in the face.

Yuna didn’t know what to think of that guy. He could be so bitter and cold and then, he would turn all marshmallow in the blink of an eye. She wanted things to be clear. Crystal clear. Was it too much to ask?

“Colonel or not, you have no right to… to try and help me in some way involving undoing my uniform, alright!”

“O… Okay…”

Somehow, the way she said it, Cloud felt even more awkward about it. He hadn’t seen anything dirty in the gesture. But she was attractive. And he missed having a girl in his life, he couldn’t deny it. She shouldn’t lead him on such a track. Anything between them was impossible. She was too young, too pure. And anyway, relationship between higher ups officers and soldiers were forbidden.

He looked away from her as she slowly sat up on the bed and Yuna suddenly remember who she was talking to. This guy was Cloud Strife! How could he lose his self control and look so vulnerable?

“Wow, it’s actually the first time you’re at a loss of word in front of me.”

“…”

“What’s up?”

He wasn’t really talkative, but he rarely looked so confused. It was like being in front of a whole different person and somehow, she was worried about it.

“You know, I could have you running a few more laps for insubordination and talking back to a higher-up officer?”

Yuna’s face grew paler at his threat, but Cloud would never do anything of the sort. He just wanted to remind her of her place.

“I know that.”

Cloud sighed.

“I’m not your enemy Yuna. And I won’t ever try to take advantage of my position or any situation
like you seemed to imply. I have two sisters, you know. I had to calm them down many times after some moron had gone too far with them. And though I’m a moron in many ways, I’m doing my best not to be this kind of imbecile.”

She looked down, feeling bad for suggesting he could have act perversely.

“Anyway…” he cleared his throat before to continue. “Just… try to get some rest. We’ll get back to more training later, when you’ll be in full shape. As for this little incident, nothing never happened, alright, soldier?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” she replied with a frail smile.

He smiled back at her and walked away, letting her to rest. Yuna let herself fall back on the bed. She wasn’t entirely wet, the room just felt a little humid, but the air from the ventilation was fresh and felt good in her lungs. Her feet were still throbbing in her boots from all the running. She was in good shape. She just hadn’t the resistance needed to run a hundred laps in the burning outside world of Earth. It felt kinda sad, since it was her home planet. She was a little mad at Jecht for not telling Cloud about the first part of her punishment. If he had known, maybe would she have had a lot of rest already. But this incident had revealed another side of Cloud to her.

He was respectful. He was a big brother. He worked as a soldier to protect. And somehow, she knew this meant a lot more than just that. Protecting people all over the world. He always repeated to her how they should think of the people that they saved, the ones that they were protecting by killing others. Was he trying to amend for something? To protect others to repay those he hadn’t been able to protect before? There was such sadness in his eyes sometimes.

But whenever he smiled, she felt a void in her chest filling up with warmth. There was butterflies in her stomach at the thought he had carried her all the way here. She had never lived anything like the relationship she had with Cloud. Could they be friends? He was a superior. But he acted so casually with her on the ship. He was barely even trying to keep his distance. And though she should hate him for making her a killer, she just couldn’t.

She sighed. Life sure was complicated sometimes.

To be continued…
Chapter 17

Episode 2 –Song of Storm – Part IV

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 20th

Location: Airship

Mission: Keep investigating on Seymour to get more intel.

Agents: Lightning, Raven and Stella

Warning: It seems Raven has been investigating on the thing that could have happened during his coma.

Message from G.I. seven . End of transmission

…

“You did what!!”

Even though Noctis had been pretty shaken up to learn that Lightning knew everything about his coma, he was kinda relieved at the same time. And that had reminded him just how much he needed to know what had really happened during his coma. Knowing that Stella really was on the same ship as them made him feel uneasy. It was odd. He now knew she was a G.I. One of Black Faction’s general instructors. A top spy.

And now, standing in front of her, asking for answers, he was getting the last news he wanted to hear. But Stella looked serious. Seriously uneasy herself, but dead serious over the matter. His cells had been taken during his sleep, his cells and DNA, and sperm too. After his sixth coma’s month, the Faction’s leaders had discovered about his new radiant powers and the fact they couldn’t be used. It was a terrible loss for their organization. And even if their agent was to wake up sometimes, it would be pretty difficult to manipulate him as they see fit. So why bothering with the wait when they could use his DNA to create a new agent with the same radiant powers? Thus, STORM’s project was started. A baby was created, using half of Noctis’ DNA codes, and half of Stella’s. She had been chosen in the project for her great medical knowledge. And the fact she was in the Faction and hadn’t any relatives was pretty nice for them.

At that time, she was pretty unstable on an emotional level, having just breaking up with an abusive boyfriend. She had nothing left in the world. And her bosses knew that. They approached her, suggesting they could give her someone new. A reason to live. A kid. At first, she didn’t want to go on with their schemes. It sounded terrible for the unconscious father and the poor kid. After all, Storm’s growth had been artificially accelerated so that he could be of use as soon as possible. In three months, from the embryo, he was a full fledge baby. Born directly from a time machine, nothing less. From there on, he had been stuck in a time capsule, to accelerate his learning and growth once again, until he was around four years old in height. All the while, the only thing he could heard from the outside world had been his mother’s voice. And the rest of the time, knowledge of the faction and the world was engraved in his brain. He had been really alive and living as a “normal” kid for the last eight months only. And Stella had no idea how she was supposed to explain all that to Noctis. She wasn’t even sure he was ready to learn that he was some kind of dad. And the father of her son, as if it wasn’t enough already.

But now, Noctis knew. Well, for the father part. The DNA stealing, which explained the weird
impressions and flashbacks he’d been getting recently. It wasn’t entirely reassuring him, though at least, he knew for what purpose he had been manipulated by all those scientists in his nightmares. Stella had managed to explain him about Storm’s accelerated growth, though he couldn’t believe her. He didn’t really wanted to understand her either. At this point, there was already too much going on. His voice sounded angry as he spoke. And Stella wanted to hide somewhere, fearing that he could really get mad. It was already bad enough when an ancient lover surfaced suddenly to dump a kid on your hands, but when a total stranger was telling you they had used your DNA to make themselves a kid and used the said kid for the dark schemes of a spying organization. Well, it had to be pretty worse.

“I’m sorry.” was all she could blurt out.

She wanted to get angry at him and to tell him how hard this whole story had been on her while he was off in coma’s land, but she couldn’t. It wasn’t in her to be like that. She felt so helpless. So wrong.

“Sorry, huh?”

“Mom? What’s going on?” a little voice asked from behind them.

Stella’s face turned even paler then before, if it was possible. Noctis turned over himself and froze right on the spot. Storm had stepped in the central room of his mother’s suite. His gray hair was all tangled from a whole night of sleep and he was wearing a big pajama, his hands barely coming out of his sleeves. His blue eyes were still sleepy, though a sparkle flashed in them as he saw Noctis. The said man stood still for a whole twenty seconds, his mouth hanging open at this sight. So it was true. This little boy looked just like him when he was a kid. He barely managed to close his mouth. He wasn’t ready for this. Of all the things he hadn’t expected to live in his life. He wasn’t standing before his son. Even if the child was born from a machine, it was still his son, right? In flesh and blood, right? He almost wanted to touch the little boy to make sure he was really here, that he existed for real. But he couldn’t move at first. And much to his father surprise, Storm stood pretty still as he observed him for the first time.

“So you…” the boy started, before to pause, looking rather confused. “Is he Raven, mommy?” he continued, turning slightly to Stella.

She shook her head accordingly. There was a knot in her throat, so big, she couldn’t even talk. This wasn’t how she had wanted to make them meet. Noctis barely acknowledged the fact he was a father. He had no reason to do so, in the situation. But Storm had been wanting to meet him for quite sometimes now. And it had been so hard to try and make him understand that maybe he would never have a real dad, since his father had never choose to have him. How could she tell him something like that? The poor kid had always been able to suppress his emotions to manage his powers without causing any trouble around him. It had been part of the reason why he was never going outside, and why he had been forced into an accelerated growth…

“So you’re Raven…” the little boy muttered to himself.

“And you’re Storm, huh?”

Noctis was forcing himself not to explode from anger at this point. It was so unreal. That little guy looked so cold. So calculative. So unlike everything you’d expect from a kid. And still, everything about him made it clear to the eyes, that it was a kid.

“It stands for Son-Trade Of Raven’s Magnification. Technically, I’m the Faction’s only living database.”
Noctis blinked at that. Living database? Son-trade? Didn’t this kid know how to say hello? What the hell was going on? Wasn’t this all a nightmare that proved he needed a good psychologist and a new job?!

“Storm, please…” Stella whispered.

“Oh, I’m sorry… I’m not really good at greeting strangers.”

“How old are you?” Noctis asked, his eyes turning dark.

He was a stranger to his own son and the said son was a freak. A brilliant freak. And this felt scary. He wanted to turn to Stella, to ask her all the questions he suddenly had, but he didn’t want to have the kid thinking he was acting as if he wasn’t there.

Seeing the change in his father’s face, Storm looked half puzzled, but answered right away, his small voice sounding pretty sure in the silent room:

“I’m four years old given human standards. Accurately, I’ve been living for about eight months since my birth.”

Noctis grimaced at that. It was even worse then everything he could have imagined in a nightmare. This had to be real. He was awake, surely. But it didn’t make the situation any easier. Storm seemed surprised by his grimace. He looked at his mother, who still couldn’t mutter a word about all this. She wasn’t sure which side she should take. The little boy was too direct and honest about everything. He talked like a robot. She knew all that. But she had always find that cute. And after all, he had been living for so little time, he needed to learn everything, like a baby. Though he looked older… And at the same time, she knew this was really terrible on Noctis. He was going from bad news to even more bad news ever since he had woken up from his coma. He needed peace to swallow it all down. But life had kept on turning while he was away. And he had to catch back with the flow too…

“Was this a bad answer?” Storm asked. He seemed a little scared now.

“No, it’s just…”

Noctis couldn’t find any way to tell how it felt right now. Could he say unfair? Unfair to whom? To him, who was imposed with this kid, or to this kid, which was imposed with a comatose father at the very start of his life?

“If you’re angry, you can say it, you know. It’s better to talk than to keep your emotion to yourself. Especially for us. With the radiant powers, not being able to keep feelings in check could mean putting a whole lot of people in harm. The other day, when you wrecked the ship, I felt you using them. Though you have no idea what you’re toying with. A lot of people have gotten hurt, you know.”

At first, Noctis had felt sorry for the little guy, but now, this was more than he could take. He was getting a lecture from his own son?!

“The radiant pow…”

“Shut up! Who do you think you are, telling me all that? I know it! I’m 27 years old. If I act rash and get people hurt, I’ll face the consequences, I don’t need you to…”

“Noctis!” Stella cut him off. “He’s just a kid!”
“Precisely! He shouldn’t even mind about things like that. He should be playing instead of being a living database or I don’t know what… He shouldn’t…. He shouldn’t…”

“…exist, huh? Is it the word you were looking for?” Storm asked.

Noctis turned back to him, shocked to have been seen through so easily. He was angry at himself for reacting like this, but this was all so confusing, so scary. And Storm looked so untouched. His eyes had turned to red, but he was staring at his dad with pure incomprehension, nothing like hate, or fear, or even anger.

“No, it wasn’t what I…”

“You grown-ups are all so unrational.”

“Huh… You mean irrational?” Noctis suggested.

“Unrational!” Storm replied, getting angry for the first time since he was under his father’s eyes. “It sounds way better than ir… or whatever you said. Unrational! Like unrealistic, like meaningless! What’s the point in being angry or getting all scared, or shedding tears or…?”

He paused, a tear rolling down his left cheek and Noctis thought his heart was breaking in his chest. That little guy had been fighting against his feeling all this time. And he remembered being like that at some point of his live. When he had lost his parents, he had vowed to himself he would never feel again. And right after drying his lone tear with an angry gesture, Storm return to his questions, his voice growing a lot more high-pitched with each new word said.

“What’s the point in crying or letting words hurt you? Words are just an assembly of letters on a computer screen. A mix of sounds that have meaning for only a little couple of given people at a given time in some given place. It’s… It’s unrational to get all worked up for relative’s link or unclear situation or a physical activation or… or…”

Stella was silently crying as she saw all the new tears welling up in Storm’s red eyes. He looked ready to break apart as he tried to keep his logic up and swallow back all the pain. And for once, this was something Noctis could understand. He walked up to the kid and kneeled in front of him. At first, the boy wanted to back away, but it was “unrational” too, so he stayed right where he was. And his dad hugged him in his arms. It felt really awkward at first. It was the first time a man was hugging him. Soon, his feet couldn’t touch the ground anymore, since Noctis had raised him in his arms, so that his small head could rest on his shoulder or the hollow of his neck. And Storm could feel his father’s heartbeat next to him. It was going fast. Maybe just as fast as his little heart was pounding in his chest.

“It may be irrational or unrational to feel, Storm. But that’s what makes us all human. And you are human. You have emotions. Just like me. And I know that words can hurt you. I didn’t mean to be the one telling them. This… this is all new to me. I wasn’t prepared for it. I’m sorry.”

Storm started to cry for real this time, hearing the gentle words echoing through his father’s chest and into his ears. Those arms felt so bigger than Stella’s. Even stronger. And this tall man, all grown up that he’d never known. Wasn’t he his dad? Did this word mean that much more than the three letters composing it? He had tried to understand before why his mom looked so happy when he called her “mom”. Why it felt so good to see her responding with a smile? To be held up securely in someone’s arms. To feel things…

The sobs came out too. And Noctis felt terrible for being the cause of all this suffering. If he hadn’t been so rash, and hadn’t gotten into this explosion, this kid wouldn’t have to suffer like that.
Though, if he hadn’t, Storm would have never existed. And as he felt the oh so frail and small arms of his son wrapping around his neck, he felt so important and needed, even more than when it was Lightning holding onto him, he could have cried too if it hadn’t been for Stella. And even with her presence, well, he certainly had cried a little. It was just too much.

…

Later that day, when Noctis got to sleep with Lightning and she snuggled against him as close as possible, he was feeling a little lighter than before.

“You aren’t mad at me, you’re sure?”

“I’ve answered that question a hundred times already, Noct, you’re going to make me mad if you keep asking.”

“It’s just… All this time, you wanted to have kids with me and I got one while in a coma with another woman.”

“You know, said like that, it feels totally impossible. But since it’s you, I guess I should have expected even the impossible.”

“I don’t know if I should take this as a compliment.”

“Take it as you want.”

They remained silent for a moment, but Noctis couldn’t get to sleep, which was pretty serious. Lightning felt a little left out since he had met with Storm. He had spent the whole day trying to arrange things with Stella and had barely managed to remember he had a mission to accomplish with the woman of his life.

“Say Light… If I wanted to… If we ever were to start living together, would you mind it if I took Storm in for two weeks a month? You know, as if Stella and I had divorced, or… Gosh, I really don’t know how to phrase it all.”

“You want to be his dad, while still being with me as a couple, is that it?”

“Well… Yes. I know it’ll be hard. All of this was really unexpected and I’m still trying to piece myself all back together. But, even if I didn’t plan to have a kid… He’s still here. And I want to be a part of his live.”

“I guess I could put up with being a nasty step mother.”

He laughed a little at her attempt to a joke, before to go back to silence. Which didn’t last long.

“I’m serious about this Light. I know it will be a big change and… I don’t want to impose you with it….”

“I’ve always wanted kid, Noctis. Though I was surprised when I learned you already had one, and you’re lucky to have gotten this kid when you were in a coma and that they kinda forced you to be a father on this, well… Though I was surprised and all. The fact this kid isn’t mine doesn’t mean I can’t be a second mother or a big sister for him. After all, I’ve been a replacement mom and a sister for all of my life. And I sure can help you with him.”

He sighed with relief, while holding her as tightly as he could without hurting her.
“Thanks, Light. I don’t really know where I’m heading in this.”

“It’s the same for every parent.”

“Heh. To think I’m a father…”

“Well, let’s say it’ll be a good practice for the time when we’ll have our own kids together.”

He tensed a little at that. He feared the prospect of ever having kids with Lightning, with the terrible accident they had shared two years ago. And he didn’t want just to be practicing his parenthood with Storm. He was surely going to make mistakes, but he didn’t want to regret them.

“You know, this really scares me.”

“I know, Noct. But you’ll do good. Especially because it scares you that much. It means just how much you care.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you.” he sighed.

“Well, at least, I know what you couldn’t do without me.” she playfully said, turning around in his arms.

He was smiling as they exchanged one kiss. That night, as they made love, if felt a little stronger than the other. There was no secret holding any of them back. And they wanted to be so much closer to withstand the pain that was still to come. They didn’t sleep a lot. They were back together. For real. Knowing just what had changed and just what they still wanted to change. They were a team at new. And when Noctis collapsed next to her for the nth time, in the early morning, Ligthning thought she couldn’t ask for anything more. He loved her. She loved him.

He had a son, a son which needed help, just as every human on this planet. And she would help. This was why she had become an agent at first. To be of some help to the others, because she hadn’t been able to help as much as she wanted in her own family…

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th

Location: Boston, Squall’s appartment

Mission: None except to guard Aeris Gainsborough at all cost

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Warning: our agent could be undergoing a depression. He seems to take his guarding mission the wrong way. He was seen kissing miss Gainsborough in the supermarket. I was quite: WTF?! Has someone replace our agent? Note to self: erase the two last sentence of this message…

Message from G.I. twelve . End of transmission

…

Aeris was looking for some place where she could put her new clothes in Squall’s room. He had emptied half of his closet, but she had bought a lot of dresses and skirt. She liked those, way more than pants, even if it wasn’t always the most convenient way of clothing herself while being on the run. Anyway, she wasn’t supposed to be running all that much more right now. As she was placing her thing, rummaging through some of Squall’s boxes lying on the closet’s floor and doing her best
not to make anything fall from the upper shelf, she was met with something that shouldn’t have been in a man’s wardrobe. It was a cream white, silky dress. She took it out of the closet, her eyes round with surprise. Surely, this had belonged to Rinoa. But it seemed strange that it would still be here. The skirt of the dress was cut really short and its straps were pretty thin. Aeris wondered if this would have looked good on her. Not that she would try it on. If this really belonged to Rinoa, as she had guessed, if Squall was to see her wearing it, he would be even more sad and grumpy than he usually was.

She had been trying to find a way to make him feel better, but nothing seemed to work. She had let him keep his mysteries over this breaking up, suggested that they talked about it, tried to get his mind off things with TV, food and herself. She felt really sad, seeing him acting all closed off from the whole world around, playing the role of the strong guy that felt nothing. He always seemed to be on the point of breaking down.

“Dring! Dring! Dring!” the phone started ringing in the living room, making her jump.

This place was so silent that every sound seemed to be amplified a thousand times. Aeris gave one last look at the white dress before to put it back in the closet. Then, she heard Squall answering the phone. Not his first sentence, he wasn’t yelling at first. But then, she heard quite well:

“What happened to her?! Where is she? Wha… when did it start?!”

She walked up to the door and leaned on the cold wooden surface, to hear him better. His voice sounded so tensed, it couldn’t mean many things. The “her” and “she” mentioned had to be Rinoa.

“It’s that bad already?!”

Now, panic joined the tension in his voice.

“Tell me where she is, Vanille. I don’t care about the Faction’s orders, just tell me!”

Aeris felt a little scared as she heard him yelling. Whatever was happening, it didn’t sound too good.

“Darn it!”

He hung up strongly enough to break the phone and next thing Aeris knew, the door of her borrowed room was flying open. She backed away from the entrance, trying to look normal, but failing to. Not that Squall noticed anything.

“We’re going out.” he almost barked at her.

He was barely able to contain his composure.

“To where?”

“Rinoa has been… hospitalized.” he managed to say.

His throat was so tight; he found it hard to talk. He had to see her. To talk to her. Right now. But he couldn’t leave Aeris here without any protection. Then again, it could have been a trap from the Feds. Seifer seemed interested in Cetras. Cetras was just another word for Ancient or so it seemed. But then again, it was Vanille who had called. Vanille was one of Rinoa’s friends. She was part of the Black Faction. One of those teasing informers, which dragged the bad guys to get info out of their cases. She was with him. Or had she turned to the Feds recently? He would have heard something about it, wouldn’t he? Had he checked his mails recently? Squall had trouble to think
right now. And this was wrong. Utterly wrong.

“I see.”

“Then, come on!”

He grabbed Aeris by the wrist and dragged her out of his apartment. She could have stumble all
the way down the stairs if he hadn’t been half dragging, half carrying her out. They rushed outside
and entered the subways so quickly; she’d barely seen the sun outside.

Her heart was beating as a drum when they finally stepped out of their wagon and he dragged her
once again, all the way out of the subway station. They were in the hospital a few minutes later. By
this time, Aeris was looking for her breath and Squall looked ready to kill. His impatience was so
strong, he almost yelled at the first nurse he spotted. But something within him was still working
properly and he simply talked a little too loud, asking where Rinoa Heartilly was.

“Are you an acquaintance, sir?”

“I’m…”

Suddenly, Squall seemed all out of breathe. Had Seifer shown up? She was with Seifer right now.
He couldn’t tell that he was Rinoa’s boyfriend. But he still was deep down in his heart. And it still
hurt. Dammit, it still hurt so much he was about to get mad at himself for being so weak and
sentimental.

“Could we… talk about this elsewhere?” Aeris gently asked.

After clearing things up, the nurse checked with the staff that had been taking care of Rinoa, to see
if Squall could meet her or not. Aeris found herself waiting next to Squall. She was a bundle of
nerves and he was even worse. He switched between pacing back and forth from one side of the
room to the other and sitting still. Really very still. After seeing him like that for about ten
minutes, Aeris couldn’t let him be anymore.

“Did Vanille told you anything about what happened to… her?”

She wasn’t sure if naming Rinoa’s name right now was the right thing to do. She had no idea what
she could do to ease Squall’s worry.

“She said she was ill. Like in terminal illness… I still can’t believe it.”

“Oh my gosh…”

“Just two weeks ago, I was still seeing her every day, and I never noticed…” he whispered before
to take his face in his hands.

Aeris was lost as to what to tell him, but fortunately, someone arrived in the waiting room and
called out:

“Is there a Squall Leonheart here?”

Squall looked up, his face a mask of coldness and the nurse’s expression saddened as she met his
eyes which were the only sign of life in his face. His blue iris were trembling from expectation and
fear…

“I’m really sorry, sir. She’s already dead.”
Aeris couldn’t believe it, they had seen Rinoa a few days ago and she still looked alright, so why… how could she…?

“Can I see her?”

“She’s still contagious, it would be too dangerous, sir. But someone wanted to see you. A Julia Heartilly.”

“Her mother…?” Squall muttered to himself as he slowly got up.

Aeris wasn’t sure if she should follow. But right when he was about to walk out of the room, he looked over his shoulder and gave her a brief and clear sign. She had to follow him wherever he was going right now. Even if it meant that she could see him in emotional turmoil, as long as he could keep her in his sight, to make sure nothing was going to happen to her. It was his job. His mission. And the only thing he seemed to do the right way nowadays…

…

“Oh, Squall, you really came… You must be so confused!”

Julia’s eyes were still red from all the tears she had shed. She was sitting in a white corridor on the intensive care floor of the hospital. Squall noticed a glass in the wall in front of the old woman, a glass behind which Rinoa’s body was securely isolated. His sharp eyes noticed the people dressed with large antiviral overalls working around her. She was already enveloped in a large and transparent plastic bag, her eyes closed, her mouth shut. Her skin was greenish and there were dark spots on her neck and chest. His heart skipped a beat. Just two days ago, she still looked quite alive while he was feeling all dead inside. And now… Now they were both dead.

“What is the meaning of all this?!?” He asked with a faltering voice.

“It’s… pretty complicated. My daughter… got infected with an unknown virus while on a mission. On the moonbase.”

“But that was… That was one year ago.” he replied.

Aeris bit her lips at the sound of his voice. He was already so broken inside and now he had to go through this…

“I know.” Julia whispered. “It was dormant until recently. But as soon as it awoke, Rinoa became contagious. She learned she was dangerous to everyone close to her a few months ago. Your employer was told too and they decided to give her one last mission, since she was going to die in a matter of weeks.”

“It… Why didn’t she tell me?”

“She told me that she feared you would oppose to her mission and would stay with her at all time, risking your own health just to be with her. She was scared to shorten your lifespan with this illness and had to put some distance between the both of you. She knew telling you the truth would have you running everywhere to find a cure. And none exist…”

“But… Until recently, we were still…”

He couldn’t finish his sentence. It was hard to stand up. Hard to keep his eyes in Julia’s eyes when Rinoa’s corpse was just in the next room. That very though gave him the chills. She hadn’t just abandoned him. She was…
“Rinoa had started taking some distance, hadn’t she?”

“But why getting with Seifer instead of me? She’d never want to kill anybody.”

“I know… Seifer was immunized from this illness for some reason. Or so Rinoa told me. She was hard to follow during the last few days. Always worrying over her mission that she had to complete. It was vital, quoting her. And she wasn’t using this word a lot anymore, since she was slowly dying. In the end, it seems that she failed accomplishing her mission.”

“Who cares if she failed! What… What was the whole point dumping me if she was going to die?”

“So that you wouldn’t interfere in her mission or get close to her and catch her disease.”

“But… She came to see me in the hospital and I met her two days ago… She wasn’t wearing a mask or… She looked healthy.”

This was a nightmare, he was going to wake up, someone was going to tell him this as all an horrible farce. It was almost Christmas and he couldn’t have a clear thought in his mind with all the confusion created by this… How was he supposed to call this? What kind of wicked twist was this?!

“This virus can only be contracted by the exchange of fluids, like saliva and…well, you know. It can be transmitted only when it’s awake. In his dormant form, it lingers in his host body, waiting for a weakness to give him a chance to start up.”

“What kind of virus is that?!”

“It was created by scientists on the moonbase. It was supposed to serve as a healing protein, but mutated accidently and turned… as this dangerous virus that took away our poor Rinoa…”

The more she spoke, the more Julia was looking ready to burst in tears again. She slowly got up and walked up to Squall, while Aeris sat up in one of the lone chairs put against the wall. It was too much to take, even for her. And she couldn’t start to imagine how Squall could feel right now. Julia grabbed his collar to have him looking at her, and maybe to help herself keep standing, as she started to explain:

“She never told you because she wanted you to live on after her. She went with Seifer because her mission was to infiltrate the Feds’ department. She dumped you for him because it was the only way to make sure you wouldn’t track her down and get infected by accident, or killed in trying to find a way to save her.”

“How can Seifer be immunized to this… virus?”

The name sounded too weak to describe it. It was a monster. A machination.

“The Feds are the one who developed it by accident.”

When she said that, Squall understood and remembered. One year ago. The moonbase. The Feds’ medical department they had assaulted. Rinoa had been cut in some lab. Bullets had ripped down glasses’ flasks. Rinoa had fallen down. Her blood had mixed with some unknown substance. She had undergone a lot of medical checks after this mission, but she was healthy and the virus lying dormant inside her had remained unnoticed. Until the time it awoke. And then, it was too late. There time together was done for. And she had to destroy it in order to protect him from herself.

Suddenly, all the tears she had cried every time he had been pushing her aside felt heavier on his
conscience. She still loved him when she broke with him. She… It was insane!

“Tell me this isn’t for real. She can’t be gone. Just like that…”

“I’m sorry Squall. I wished I could tell you otherwise. But she’s gone. She really is. She called me tonight, when the fever started. She asked me to tell you the whole truth. She was sorry to hurt you. Because she knew how hurt you were. And she hoped you would be able to move on, if you hadn’t already did so. Not that I understood what she meant at that point, she was…”

Julia’s trembling voice broke down as the sobs won over her will. And Squall stood still as she was gripping on his fur collar to keep herself steady and crying, crying and yelling her pain as he never seemed able to. He tried not to look through the glass, at the dead Rinoa. He tried not to think, at least not about all of this, so that it would stop to hurt. He had to be able to hold it back till he was out of this place. He had to clear his mind. He had to throw his head in some wall and get a commotion so that he could forget. And his heart was beating in his chest, so fast. So fast. While Rinoa’s…

Why, oh lord, why, he thought.

And it was the first time in his whole life he was ever turning to God for something. No one else would have been able to answer. Sadly enough, no one did answer at all.

…

As they walked out of the hospital, Aeris feeling pretty down and Squall looking much more lost than he ever did before, the heat hit them as a wave. It was nearly suffocating outside and the young Cetra was glad to be wearing a skirt and a t-shirt. She thought they were heading for the subway but Squall removed his jacket and stored it in a retractable capsule.

“Would you mind if… we walked all the way back to my place?”

His voice wasn’t cold, or even harsh. There was no strength left in it.

“I won’t mind.” Aeris replied gently.

She wasn’t sure what she could do to ease this kind of pain. She wanted him to smile, she wanted him to cry and to be able to comfort him, but Squall wasn’t like that. They were out in the open. And even if they were to be alone together, with no one to see him breaking down, maybe even for something this terrible, he wouldn’t give himself the right to cry. But as he started walking and she slowly followed him, she observed his shoulders that were slightly shaking. He looked over his shoulder, his blue eyes wide open and desperately looking for her.

“Don’t go astray. Walk right beside me, okay?”

She nodded and walked up to stand right next to him as they resumed their stroll. For a moment, Squall seemed unable to find a way to move. She saw his hand moving towards her and getting back on his hip, as if he was too nervous to touch her. But he needed contact. And suddenly, his arm was wrapping around her waist and bringing her close to him. She held him in turn, sighing to herself.

“Do you believe any of the things Julia’s said could be true?” he asked her.

“I…”

“Rinoa had always loved being mysterious. The first time I met her, she already seemed to be
playing with me. We were both on a mission. We just had no idea we were on the same side. I had just moved in United-States… It was like, five years ago, at least. It was during a ball. She was wearing that white dress, it was way too short. I could see all of her tights. I was on a reckon mission, I wasn’t supposed to get involved with anyone. She kinda jumped on me back there, asking for a dance.”

Suddenly, it felt as if he couldn’t stop himself from talking. As if remembering out loud could bring her back.

“I refused, but she insisted. She was always getting what she wanted. And she always got me off guard. We’ve danced that night… For hours. Though I’d learn all kind of dances for some missions I had, I forgot it all when she touched my hand. I never felt that clumsy before. Not until I realized I just had to follow her. She could be so impulsive at sometimes…”

Aeris bit her lips. He sounded so nostalgic. So sad.

“Now that I think of it, I’ve never took her to dance in some rich place. It only happened when we were pretending to be together for a mission in a high-class club or something like it. She hated it when we were forced to pretend being together even if we really were in fact. But agents in the same branch aren’t supposed to go out together. They say that it clouds our judgment.” His voice died in his throat as he said that and he looked down to his feet.

“Squall…”

“I bought her a puppy once. She was mad at me, saying she hadn’t the time to take care of it, but she was so happy, she was barely able to lecture me. I think it’s one of the only crazy things I did for her. She had had a dog when she was little girl. And dogs aren’t that much common on earth anymore. That puppy cost me one month of my salary. Not that I minded it. She’d never smiled or laughed like that day when she was playing with that dog in my apartment. And she cried a lot when the poor beast died, a year later.”

Aeris wanted to tell him something, but he barely stopped to talk to catch back his breath between each three sentences. She could start to imagine what his life with Rinoa was. How perfect those days were.

“She wanted kids. I don’t really get it, but all women seem to want kids. As if this world was worth putting some more innocents into it. She used to say that she was working to make this planet a better place. But I already knew any place where she would have been would have been worth it. I just… I never saw how I could get myself to share her with anyone.”

Now, Aeris wanted to cry. And Squall kept on talking. Kept on confiding everything that he’d ever felt thanks to Rinoa. He was jumping to every kind of subject, reviewing every part of his life with Rinoa.

“The first time I asked her out… she burst into laughter. I thought I was done for and should have given up on it. I had no confidence at all, I felt like a teen. But then she said she was laughing because she had been waiting for me to ask for months already.”

He laughed and even his laugh felt bitter.

“To think I’m already talking of her in the past tense…”

“Squall…”

“Don’t say my name like that, Aeris.”
“Okay… Well, how do you want me to say it, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s okay to feel like that, you know.”

“…”

Instead of answering, he just held her a little closer to him. It felt reassuring to have someone around. And anyone wouldn’t have given him this feeling. Aeris was growing really important to him. As long as Rinoa was still alive, it had felt kinda bad, but still alright. Now, he felt as if he was already trying to replace his girlfriend. And it was wrong. He had to mope over her dead for at least one year, hadn’t he? Or were men supposed to mope for a few weeks and settle down with someone new? Was there really some law for this, or was he just trying to give himself reason not to do some things that scared him?

“Do you think she really knew me that well? So that she could decide what to do and knowing in advance how I would react to everything she’d do?”

“I think she loved you a lot and wanted to spare you the suffering of seeing her dying slowly.”

“…”

A slight, pained moan escaped his closed mouth. He was ready to break down, his apartment was just a few blocks away right now. She started to cry, unable to hold her tears back as she saw him like that. There was no way any situation involving the last events could have been fair to him and she didn’t see how she was supposed to comfort him…

“I’m sorry for putting you through this, Aeris.”

“Don’t say things like that, it’s… It’s just another part of life. I mean, losing people close to you. I’ve just… forgotten how it felt, since I couldn’t get really close to anyone while always being on the run…”

It pained him a little to hear that, though he already had guessed. He noticed she was crying. It was the second time in the same day. And though he was sorry for putting her through this, he was a little mad. Why were they all crying when he should be the one to cry?!

“Why are you crying for, Aeris?”

“I’m crying in your stead.” she managed to whisper.

“You shouldn’t. I’m really not worth it. I wasn’t even worth Rinoa’s confidence in her last days. If I had married her and forced her to give up on this crazy job before… If I had…”

His voice cracked down and he pushed the door of his block, forcing himself to withstand the grieving and the pain. Just a little longer. He let go of Aeris’s waist but grabbed her hand and she followed him all the way up the stairs. To the eight floor. He fought with his keys and she couldn’t see his face, because of his hair falling all over his eyes. But his hands were shaking. And all the while, all the possibilities that would have kept Rinoa alive and with him were echoing through his mind. If he hadn’t fear to become engaged more solemnly with her. If they had had kids. If he had loved her as she owed to be loved… And it hurt. It hurt to think that she wasn’t just out of his live. She was gone for good. Forever more. And though Aeris was with him as he entered his apartment, he felt so alone. So lonely deep inside.
There were still so many things he’d wanted to tell and to show Rinoa. Could she see him now? Had she been serious when she had told him they were over? Was she crying because he had yelled back at her or because she was torn between her love for him and her need to protect him from herself? Wasn’t this a nightmare? He locked the door behind him. Leaned his back over it, letting go of Aeris’ hand.

He didn’t want her sympathy. It wouldn’t bring back Rinoa. It wouldn’t fix his heart. It wouldn’t stop the tears from welling up in his eyes. He wanted to die, to disappear. But could he? Aeris was still counting on him to protect her. But could he protect her when he hadn’t been able to protect Rinoa? Had he missed some signs, some holy or mystic message that would have warned him of the disaster to come? Should he have spotted something in Rinoa’s behavior. That would have told him she was cheating on him, or that she was dying inside. How couldn’t he have noticed if he cared that much for her? They were living together most of the time. But it was true, she had been evading him during the last week. She had never kissed him back as passionately as before. She was always pretending to be too tired for love game and sex. But she still snuggled next to him, holding him tight through the night. Until that fateful day when they became history.

And now he knew why. All the reasons were melding together. His legs felt too weak to keep him standing and he slowly sat down, still leaning on the door.

“Squall?” Aeris asked.

The shaking gained his whole body as he started to cry for real. This time, the sobs were almost impossible to hold back. The tears were rolling down his face already and he tried to hide them with his hands, but they were shaking too much. As Aeris kneeled next to him and tried to wrap her arms around his shoulder, he yelled, like a wounded beast, from the bottom of his heart. And the sobs won over him. Wherever Rinoa was, she couldn’t pretend he wasn’t suffering. It was so painful; he wanted to hurt himself to make it less hard. At first, he fought against Aeris’ tries to comfort him. His voice was shattering in his yells and his whole body cried. The young Ancient stood beside him, waiting till he’d let her touch him. When he stopped yelling, he opened his arms, sobbing like a child and she wrapped him in a tight embrace, hoping that somehow, her very presence could ease his pain.

There was no word she could find to calm him down, so instead, she kept on whispering his name, gently, as she let him snuggle against her. She stroked his hair and shoulders. And she cried with him, because it was impossible to stand seeing him like this. Squall seemed to want to disappear inside her, his head resting on her chest, making himself as small as possible, though she had to sit on his lap to be able to hold him like this. He cried for a long time, maybe for a whole hour. He stopped only from exhaustion, his voice broken, his breath uneasy, sniffing in his sleep. And though Aeris felt just as broken as him, she was glad to be here. Finally, she had been able to help him for real. Just by being there…

To be continued.
Chapter 18

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part V

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th

Location: Washington, Army quarters, Squad eight HQ

Mission: Pending…

Soldiers involved: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed

Warning: Last mission seems to have gotten those two closer. Better keep them in check even if the engineer is just some back up soldier…

Message from S. G. 0. End of transmission

…

Yuna sighed deeply as she finished weeping the floor of Squad 8’s main quarters. She was back on cleaning duty after all. It felt so unreal. And honestly, she was bored. She had no more class since Christmas was coming, her cousin Rikku was still off on her honeymoon and had totally forgot what email and phones were for as it seemed. She had no relatives to party with while most people were getting busy with Christmas preparations. She was pretty sure she wouldn’t get any gift this year. So she was doing lots of overtime not to feel lonely and get all grumpy. But cleaning was getting on her nerves. No member of the Squad was still in the HQ. No one had of the Squad was still in the HQ. Vincent and Yuffie had went to Japan –since Yuffie’s family was still living there-. Tifa was in Canada, with her new boyfriend, a Cid with dark hair and pretty looks from what Yuna had heard. The young girl was starting to feel it strange, the number of Cids in her surroundings. Her uncle Cid Albhed, general doctor Cid, from the army, and Tifa’s Cid. Not to mention the engineer of Squad’s 8, Cid Highwind.

“Maybe is there a Cid planet somewhere in the universe.”

Yuna was smiling as she got back to cleaning. This time, she knocked on every door before to enter any room, even if she knew already that nobody would be there. When she arrived to Cloud’s room, she hesitated a little. And as she entered, since no one had answered to her knock, it was to see that Cloud was in his room. Sleeping soundly, like a teenager, his chest bare to the eyes, his both arms above his head, looking lazily content. His hair weren’t as pointy as usual, but she could still notice his spikes here and there. He looked pale as a ghost. But he looked amazingly real. And quite unlike a soldier. He seemed so exposed. And unaware of everything around him! Yuna couldn’t help herself but to laugh as she saw his bare foot coming out from one side of the bed.

She silently came in and started cleaning up, trying not to stare at him when he would fall back under her sight. At some point, he mumbled in his sleep, and she couldn’t help but wonder what kind of dream he was having.

And she asked herself why he would still be in HQ three days before Christmas… It was kinda sad. Though thinking about it remembered her that it was almost Christmas for her too. Cloud had two sisters, and it seemed to be about all. If they both were busy, maybe was he just as lonely as her. She forced herself not to think over it. Somehow, the very idea of Cloud being alone at the same time than her give her the impression she should try to be with him. To help him a little. Since he had helped her so much on her first mission. She was still mad at him for sending her on the battlefield, but she was mad in the back of her heart, while something else was taking place.
She was starting to like him, somehow. The way he tried to be honest around her. The fact he didn’t take pleasure in ordering her around, like the other higher-ups did. The fact that he tried to understand. It was all pretty unlike the character she had heard of. He was Cloud Strife. A cold guy, unmoved and unscarred. Nothing could seem to reach him. But lately, she was realizing this was just a rumor. He was a man like any other. And it wasn’t the fact she had had the rare chance of seeing this, or that she felt lonely right now. Other guys didn’t make her feel like he could. His laugh and smile seemed so precious. She felt more complete whenever he was around. Just seeing him sleeping right now, it made her happy. It reminded her of that time when he had held her in his arms, while she was crying. She wished she could be back, hold securely in his embrace. But that was mere fantasies. She shivered at the thought. It was then that Cloud whined in his sleep.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw his grimacing face. He raised one hand in the air, turning it into a fist. His teeth were clenched and his muscles were all tensed up under his pale skin. So he was having a nightmare now? She bit her lips as he tossed and turned in his bed, fighting some invisible enemy.

“Cloud?” she tried, feeling bad for saying his name.

It sounded so childish for a grown up man. But he looked just as fragile as a cloud, ready to be blown off by the wind.

“Hmmm…”

He shivered and she walked up to his bed, before to gently grab him by the shoulder. His reaction was instantaneous. His fingers wrapped around her wrist, so tightly it hurt and his eyes darted open as his breathing was going frantic.

“Where…? Yuna?! What… what’s going on?”

“Ouch… You were just having a nightmare. Let go of me!”

He complied, slowly sitting up as she took a few steps back.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m on cleaning duty. As always!” she retorted.

Cloud looked pretty confused. His mako blue eyes were blinking a lot, as he tried to adjust his sight to the light coming in the room from the window. Yuna could see dark veins under his skin, over his throat. He moaned from pain and tried to massage his nape, still looking for his breathe.

“Is something wrong?”

“I… It must be the mako in my blood reacting to something.” he replied.

“Okay…”

Yuna made herself a mental note to stop getting close to weirdoes.

“You can leave if you wanna, Yuna. You can finish cleaning later…”

“But… Are you… are you alright?” she asked, stuttering a little, and blushing for doing so.

“I’m must be scaring you a lot right now.”

“No… Just… tell me if there’s anything I can do to help!”
“Heh… So you wanna help me now? Even after all that I did?”

He couldn’t seem to look her in the eyes and Yuna felt pretty awkward. Wasn’t it still Cloud Strife in front of her? Why couldn’t he be more like him? Why couldn’t he yell instead of looking so… so pitiful? She almost felt bad for still resenting him. After all, the fact he had mako in his blood was an abnormality he hadn’t choose. Tifa had told her how his parents had been using Cloud in their political projects, which were to create a new kind of human.

“Would you stop playing the victim here? I just tried to wake you up from a nightmare. What happened on Pluto is… in the past now. I don’t wanna keep moping over it. We’re… I don’t know what I am to you, but I remember how you’ve helped me in the last days. And for that, I want to help you, if I can.”

“I’m okay Yuna, don’t get mad, it’s just… I’m fucking tired”, he whispered.

“How can you still be tired? You’ve been sleeping all day long, it’s already four in the afternoon!”

“Really?”

He let himself fall back on his mat, and looked at the ceiling, before to close his eyes for a long time. Yuna wasn’t sure if he needed help or was just toying with her. He looked so calm, though he had had a nightmare. She crossed her arms on her chest, seeing that he wouldn’t add anything else than this stupid question. She turned back on her chores. Cloud made some noise, moving in his bed, but she kept focused on the work at hand, dusting off every piece of furniture in the room and picking up the scattered books and piece of clothing he had left here and there.

“This isn’t like you, to let things lying around,” she observed, mostly for herself.

“So you know everything about me now?” he asked.

Looking over her shoulder, she saw his smirk. He had rolled on his side and was lazily staring at her while she worked.

“Maybe that I don’t, but you could have tried to keep this room tidy. What if someone came for an inspection, huh?”

“They never do inspections around this time of the year. And even if they did, it’s not as if they could fire me for a messy room.”

Yuna gave him a quick glare before to resume her cleaning. Cloud chuckled.

“What don’t you get up if you don’t need any help?”

“What if I was, huh? Would you get up, then?”

“No. And I would have to punish you for your insubordination.”
“Well, you’re not my boss today, Cloud. I’m on my cleaning duty. I refer only to Jecht when I’m cleaning.”

“…”

She glanced at him to see that he was still smirking.

“What is it?”

“It’s pretty funny to see you all fired up like this.” He observed.

“I’m not…! Arrrgh! Stop messing with me, colonel!”

The word chosen to refer to him –“Colonel”- seemed to take him aback. His smirk vanished. So she was really mad?!

“Don’t take it like that Yuna. I was just trying to lighten the mood. You looked so scared a moment ago…”

“I wasn’t scared! I’m not that easy to scare, okay?”

“Alright, alright, I get it. Sheesh…”

Yuna turned to face him, giving up on her chores.

“Just get out of this room and let me work in peace, okay!”

“But… this is my room.”

Cloud had no idea why she was getting so angry and Yuna wasn’t sure herself. She was getting the impression Cloud was way too familiar with her. He wasn’t calling her soldier anymore, and every time he said her name, it reminded her how much she missed hearing her name. It reminded her of Christmas coming, and that idea she had had in the back of her head, that they could spend Christmas together, as friends, maybe. But this was wrong. They couldn’t be friend. So then, why was he staring at her as she worked and smirking all the time? He had to stay professional. He had to stay only a colonel and a soldier. He wasn’t like any man, he wasn’t a man, she didn’t need a man or anyone. She was a strong girl, independent, her life couldn’t be ruin by something as complicated as love, even if this was the start of what could be called love. She felt so confused. And that drive her mad. She liked her life to be organized and crystal clear. All this confusion when he looked at her with his mako eyes. This warmth in her stomach as she saw his half naked body moving around. And the hole in her heart that filled up whenever he would smile… She hadn’t asked for all that.

“What is this all about, Yuna?”

He was puzzled and she had no idea how to explain this. She was still scared. Her heart was beating so fast. She wanted to hide. And the only place she could think of was between his arms. Next to his heart. Because it had felt so right when he had held her. She flushed and mentally slapped herself for doing so.

“I… It’s nothing!”

She turned around, making her way to the door, but Cloud got up and stopped her, forcing her to turn back around and face him.
“The way you’re acting, there’s definitely something’s up and if you don’t tell me right now, things will get worst. What’s going on? Did I say or do something? Are you feeling ill? Jecht had you running more laps?”

Yuna felt her face turning all red. He was standing in front of her, with nothing on but a boxer. And this felt awkward. Why did he want things to be clear between them? Why did she felt so weird as his hands were on her wrists?

“Put some clothes on, dammit!”

She bit her lips as soon as the words were said. She must be looking like a teenager right now. Cloud didn’t even blush. He frowned for an instant.

“Is that all?!”

“Hum…”

He laughed and she wanted to run away even more, before to admit to herself that it was pretty laughable. It wasn’t her only reason, but she kinda preferred that he think it was really all there was to it.

“You can be such a schoolgirl sometimes.” he managed to say between two chuckles.

“Hey!”

It was then that he blinked, as if some sudden pain had been running through him. And suddenly, Yuna felt his weight pushing her dangerously to the nearest wall. What was he doing?! As she tried to push him away, she realized there were more dark veins visible under his skin. And suddenly, he felt really cold. As if he was freezing from the inside.

“Cloud? Cloud!”

“Nghn…”

He managed to get back his balance before to really get her falling or pinned to a wall, by grabbing on her shoulders.

“There’s really something wrong with you!” she complained. “You’re so cold.”

He coughed a little, just as she said that, and Yuna felt something in her chest being squeezed by a horrible feeling.

“Cold, you say? No, I’m just a little… dizzy. I got up too fast.”

She shook her head and forced him to walk back to his bed, where she got him sitting down. She brought one hand to his forehead, which was freaking cold, before to grab his wrist, to check on his pulse. His heartbeat was quite fast, despite the cold he was exuding.

“What’s happening to you Cloud?”

“I’d like to know.”

He winced a little as she forced him to raise his head, so that she could observe the dark veins clearly visible under the skin of his neck. She ran her fingers over the complex maze drawn on his white skin, making him shiver. Suddenly, she wasn’t that much aware of the fact he was almost naked. He was a mystery to solve. And the patterns from the veins looked like something she had
seen before. He hardly gulped down, feeling so weak and exposed under her eyes and fingers right now. Her touch was warm and soft. So welcome in the cold wasteland his life had turned into. His mind was hazy, his sight was turning blurry and his blood felt boiling hot in his veins.

“This looks like. The ancient’s symbol.”

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It’s funny. I thought it was your veins at first, but it seems to be something else.”

“Yuna…”

“What?”

“I think it’s Shiva.”

“What?!”

“I can hear her voice in my head.”

He wasn’t too happy to tell her about it, but the witch was back in his mind. She seemed closer to every of his thought. Her cold fingers were wrapped around his heart and it hurt. It hurt so much. He didn’t know how to explain it. He was slightly shaking, maybe from the cold. Yuna tried to stroke his arms, to get the cold away, but he winced again and she realized she was doing more harm than good.

“I don’t know what to do…” she whispered.

“Get her out of my head.” he asked her.

“But how?”

“Whenever you’re around, she used to vanish.”

Yuna sat on his bed, trying to think about this problem properly. It seemed that Cloud’s trial with Shiva wasn’t finished yet. She remembered how that blue woman had touched him to test his worth. It had felt weird. And somehow, he was still suffering from it, though he had tried to hide it.

“This is all so weird.”

“I know.”

And as he talked, his breath reaching her was so cold that Yuna understood she had to act now. Otherwise, he would probably die from hypothermia. She gently pushed him down on the mat. He kinda tried to fight back as he felt her hands on his face, and he looked scared as she slowly wrapped her arms around him. The feeling of her closing in remembered him of his helplessness in face of Shiva. Which reminded him of Jenova. And all the terrible memories were under Shiva’s eyes. And she was messing with his heart, laughing and angrily tearing down all the joy that could be left within him. But as Yuna’s body pressed against his, and as she shivered at the contact, Shiva seemed to melt away. And Cloud let out a sigh of relief as his heart was freed. His arms wrapped around Yuna’s small frame. Her warmth felt so good. Her smell was even better. He could feel her through her clothing. Her hair was tickling his neck.

“What happened just now?”

“She’s gone.” he whispered.
His voice felt really, really weak, as if no defense was left. And the hint of a strangled sob escaped his throat.

“Will you be okay, Cloud?”

He was slowly warming up, but he felt so numb.

“Only if you stay just a little longer.”

They both blushed as he said that. The silence felt awkward as he was slowly realizing in what kind of position they were. She was laying on top of him.

“Cloud? We’re… we’re friends, right?”

“Well, as long as we don’t have our uniform, yes… We’re friends.”

“You know, it doesn’t mean I wanna see you not wearing anything else than a uniform, okay?”

As clumsy as her respond was, it made him laugh. And Yuna felt reassured. Somehow, though it was deeply hurt by the experience he had lived on Pluto, which she hadn’t understand wholly, he was still able to laugh.

“Say, Cloud. As a friend… Will you tell me why this happened?”

“Maybe is it because I took too much health pills. Or just the remaining of Shiva’s touch on me. I don’t really know how to phrase it but… somehow… She lingered inside me. And if I could erase her, I wouldn’t mind…”

“How does it feel?”

“What?”

“To have a spirit lingering inside you?”

“I… It may sound silly, but… Ah, forget it. She must be gone for good now.”

He felt too ashamed already to add anything to it. Because it felt so painful.

_It’s like a rape. She’s everywhere inside me. In my mind. In my thoughts. In my memories. And she toys with everything. As if she could tear me apart from the inside. And you’re the only one who can drive her away Yuna. The only one that keeps me in one piece. It’s scary, isn’t it? I’m not as strong as I want. I’ve already shown enough weaknesses in front of you. I don’t want any pity. I didn’t want to get you to hold me for this kind of reason. I don’t even see how I can explain what has just happened right now. But if you ask me to let you go, I don’t think that I will. I need this too. To feel someone’s touch. A real touch. That means that someone cares. Does this make me weak too?_

He sighed and she kinda understood.

“You know, you should go see a doctor.”

“Yes. I’ll try to.”

Yuna wanted to ask him a lot of questions at this point, but she forced herself not to. He sounded pretty ashamed and the situation felt pretty embarrassing.
There was a knock on the door. Noctis was already up while Lightning was taking a shower and he went to answer. He was pretty surprised to be met by Rikku’s worried face. She had three clear scars on her right cheek, mark of the slap given by Seymour. For some reason, Noctis doubted they had been as lovey-dovey as they used to. And suddenly, he remembered the mission he was on. The fact that he was still supposed to be on a mission and not to spend all of his time sorting out all of his own problems.

“I’m sorry to be coming all the time, but… I don’t know what to tell him anymore.” Rikku said at first, before to realize she was in front of Noctis, instead of Lightning.

“Hmmm.”

“Oh, sorry, I thought… Is Lightning here?”

“Yeah, she’s… taking a shower, but you can come in. This is about Seymour, right? What has he done this time?”

“Nothing, for now. But he won’t listen to me…”

Rikku entered the room and went to sit on the edge of the bed, twitching her hands and looking pretty desperate.

“He said he was sorry, but he’s involved in something so terrible…”

Lightning walked in the room as this moment, and immediately went to Rikku’s side, much to Noctis’ relief. He wasn’t really ready for a teary young girl. He stood close, but still, a few steps back from the two women.

“What has happened, Rikku? He didn’t hurt you again, did he?”

“No, he didn’t. But he… He won’t listen to me, Light! He won’t accept that what he’s preparing is wrong. He wants to… They want him to judge which person should be sacrificed to become fuel for the battleship my father has spent the last ten years of his life building!”

“What?”

Lightning had understood immediately, but she was playing dumb, to save her cover.

“I’m talking too much, this is… This is a state’s secret, but… Seymour has been chosen to execute people. To determine which are weaker and disposable. But it’s wrong!”
“It certainly is, though I don’t get everything that you’re saying… How can people be turn into… fuel?”

Rikku tried to explain and as she did, Noctis realized this was their big chance to unmask Seymour. The young girl was giving him all the knowledge he wouldn’t have been to explain before without breaking his cover. And that meant that Seymour was done for.

“I’m going to talk to him. To try to get some sense into him.” he said.

Lightning exchanged a look with him. She warned him to be cautious and he gave her a slight smile. Everything that has been happening lately felt so unreal. Seymour couldn’t be any worse than all the bad news and surprises Noctis had had in the last few days. And if he could get over with this mission, maybe he would have real time to relax and take everything in. Time to accept the fact he was some kind of father, and the fact he had lost two years of his life, and the fact he had superhuman powers. And he needed to learn how to control them too. He sure could use a few days off.

…

Seymour was in the training room, as always. He wasn’t training though. He was sitting on the floor, his legs and arms crossed, his eyes closed, doing some meditation.

“Wow, man, I never saw you meditating before!”

“The point is to stay calm, Noctis, don’t yell like that.”

“Sorry.”

Seymour cocked one eye open, looking rather annoyed and Noctis put on his most stupid smile on his face, before to turn back to being serious.

“Maybe you should teach your little wife how to meditate and relax. She’s always coming to see Lightning now, seeking for advice.”

“Oh really?”

Seymour’s voice sounded like anything but calm.

“Today, she was talking some nonsense over a battleship in which you would choose among the weak and the strong. It reminded me of some new religion, how is it called already? Guadoism?”

“Guidism.” Seymour replied bitterly.

Noctis knew he was going to lose the fragile friendship he had managed to build with that guy, but he needed his proof so that Seymour could be arrested. Believing in some weird religion wasn’t a crime. Plotting to kill countless people to turn them into fuel, that was something else. Working with the corrupted branch of the army to be promoted and get more cash, well, that sounded like something illegal.

“The weak sacrificed in the name of the strong, right?”

“Why are you here? What’s your business in this?”

“Well, Rikku sounded really desperate. And since you too had a fight the other day, I thought it was kinda sad if things keep going worst. And that battleship talk made me curious.”
“She talks too much.”

“Well, you gotta like that part of her too, because I don’t see why you’d gotten married with her otherwise.”

Seymour got up, unable to pretend his meditation anymore. Noctis wasn’t half sure of where he was heading. He had to get him talking. He walked around the room, while Seymour stood still, looking quite pissed.

“What are you getting at, Noctis? Trying to save my marriage?”

“Oh no, that’s up to you, man.”

Right when he said that, Noctis asked himself if he shouldn’t have kept it shut. It was his only alibi, in some way.

“I had doubt, but now it’s getting clear.”

“…”

Noctis stopped walking around and Seymour walked up to him, his red eyes shooting glares that were probably haunting the nightmares of every person that had to train under this guy’s orders.

“You’re Noctis Caelum. From the Colony on Titan. You’re a mercenary. You work for the Faction.”

“What kind of crap are you talking about?!?”

Noctis forced himself to control his voice. Only hearing the word “Titan” gave him all kind of flashback from the few years spent on this faraway planet with his family. He ignored the picture running in his head, staring at Seymour’s angry eyes.

“You’re way too curious about this battleship.”

“Well, it’s Rikku’s main worry over you.”

“Stop talking about her! You don’t understand anything of what’s going on!”

Seymour was way too on edge. He was slowly losing it.

“She said you had been chosen to determine who were to be sacrificed.”

The guado seemed ready to jump at his throat.

“I didn’t get everything she said, she cried a lot during it all, but she mentioned human fuel. And it sounded pretty serious to me. Though it must be some kind of sci-fi…”

“You know everything, don’t you? Rikku has betrayed me.”

The room felt colder suddenly, as if Seymour’s anger was absorbing all the warmth around them. Noctis wanted to get mad too, because this moron wasn’t giving him the information he needed to have him arrested.

“Betrayed you? She’s worried sick about you! I don’t even see why she cares. As soon as she stopped doing what you wanted her to, you slapped her. She still has the mark on her face you know?”
“Don’t talk about Rikku like this. Don’t mess with me, Noctis. You’re no simple mercenary. You’re a spy! You’re toying with me to have me saying what you want to.”

“Well say it then. I don’t know what you’re getting at with your paranoia, but if you’ve got something to say, just go on. I had enough having your Rikku messing up Lightning with all her fears.”

“Fears? Are you saying that she fears me?”

“Seeing you like this, I would be on her side.”

Seymour didn’t smile at that. He knew he wasn’t scaring Noctis, not even one bit. And somehow, even this was driving him mad. Who was this guy? He had thought he was like him. But he was getting into his affairs as if he knew everything. He had no right to even pronounce Rikku’s name. The girl was his. All his. Even if she was scared of him. Even if she wasn’t agree with his future job. Noctis hadn’t anything to do with this. So, if he was so curious, it absolutely meant he was one of his enemies. After all, the guy was strong. And Lightning wasn’t a usual name. Those two remembered him of something, they had been bugging him since the very first day they had met. Rikku needed a friend on this trip, but somehow, he’d wished she choose some dumb girl that would do nothing but to laugh and worry over her polished nails. But did that kind of girl even existed? Was it really the matter now?

“So you’re on her side, Noctis Lucis Caelum.”

Noctis’ eyes widened at this. How… How could he know his full name? He’d never even told him about his first name.

“You wanna know about my part in the Antlion Project, right? You’ve been listening to me and following me everywhere you could, just to get the intel you needed for your bosses? You’ve even been in my room. Don’t try to hide it. I found silver hair lying around Rikku’s things. And seeing how much you’re into that Lightning, I mustn’t fear that you’re some kind of creepy obsessed stalker. Don’t try to say anyone else around has grey silver hair. You’re a spy. And you wrecked the ship to prevent me from knowing you had been spying on me. Though you forgot the most basic trick.”

This gave Noctis a doubt. Had he been careless enough to leave any trace behind him? How could Seymour have figured everything out otherwise?

“Whateve…”

Seymour’s fist punched him in the face in the middle of his sentence, turning his voice into a mumbled shout of pain as he was send flying in the air. Noctis hit a large piece of equipment with a brief whine, his breath cut short and his mind a blank for an instant. Where this Guado was packing all of that strength?

“Don’t mock me!” Seymour yelled again. “You wanna know what to tell your bosses to stop me, huh? I can tell you. In fact, I will. But you won’t live to repeat it to anyone.”

Okay, now, he’s really mad, Noctis thought.

“The Antlion will be the greatest battleship ever taking off in our space. It will save humanity. But sacrifices are needed for something of this scale. I’ll be the one choosing. We’ve already gathered our human material to compensate in fuel in any malfunction is to happen.”

Seymour spoke as if he was preaching.
“You don’t mean you’re imprisoning people as a back-up plan?”

“Well… It sure helps to get rid of annoying dudes. Like you for example. Or maybe that Lightning should be send with the lot of them.”

Seymour’s smile was intolerable. But Noctis remembered the registering device he had brought with him. And even if the very idea that this guy was threatening Lightning made him mad, he had to get a little more intel. He slowly got back on his feet, his back hurting almost as much as his jaw. He felt his anger building up and tried to control it, fearing that his power would manifest. He still couldn’t control it.

“Where would you take her?”

“You really wanna know that much? Heh. It could be anywhere.”

“People would look for her.”

Seymour frowned as he headed to the only exit of the room and locked the door, before to take a gun out of his pockets.

“Usually, we find reasons to keep people quiet. Be it a quarantine, a promotion to a faraway land or planet or a simple car accident. Anything can work.”

His smile was growing as he raised his gun and Noctis felt his heartbeat accelerating. This guy was truly mad. All this Antlion project. It was sheer madness. An organization turning people that was dangerous or disturbing to their operations into fuel. What an easy way to get rid of someone.

“Who benefits from it?”

“But, the army, of course!”

Seymour aimed for Noctis head and his target froze, blinking.

“You won’t get away from my death if you pull that trigger.”

“I can get away from most anything. That’s one of my many privileges as a soldier.”

“Alright then… Be my guest!”

Noctis had had enough of hearing Seymour praising himself. He had had enough of the whole character of that guy. He let his rage out. The rage for everything that wasn’t going right lately in his life. He tried to control it, somehow, so that he would be directed only at Seymour. But he wasn’t used to this. The light flashing around blinded him for a moment as he could hear a gunshot. He dived to the floor. The guado let out a grunt of pain and annoyance.

“What the hell…?!?”

When the light vanished, Noctis realized he had managed to destroy every pieces of equipment around him. It looked as if a bomb had exploded in the room. A bicycle had been cut in two, and the nearest things had all been reduced to dust. Seymour’s gun was still in his hand, but the bullet was flat on the ground, having hit directly the wave of powers pouring out of Noctis.

“Gosh, this works better than I’d thought.” our favorite spy smirked.

“This… this was your doing?”
“Maybe I overdid it. Did you get cut?”

Some of the exercisers’ parts had hit Seymour before to crash in the walls of the room and there was a trail of blood on his left shoulder. Not to say he was holding his right side, looking for his breath.

“What in the world ARE you?”

“It’s not…”

As he was just about to answer that it wasn’t any of his business, Noctis was cut short by a worrying cracking sound. The next thing he knew, the floor was collapsing under his feet and both of them, and the remaining exercisers, were falling down to the lower floor. This time, it was a little harder to get up and the silver haired man decided the next thing he was going to do once Seymour would stop threatening him was to learn more about those Radiant Powers. They weren’t as handy as he wished they were.

Seymour got up first, brandishing his gun, blood trailing down his face and his blue hair all messy from the dirt, the fall and the shock. Before that he could pull the trigger, both of the man realized they were now in the central plaza. People were yelling around them, scared by this sudden accident and appearance.

“Where are…”

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, my leg!”

“The ceiling just collapsed over us. This ship is falling apart!”

“I wanna cancel my fly!”

“I wanna get back home!”

“Jimmy!”

“Rachel!”

Noctis realized what he had done. In some way, this kinda made him even angrier. Seymour’s brows twitched as he hesitated between firing again at the spy or hiding his gun so that nobody saw him. Killing him now would be pretty troublesome with all the people around. But as they exchanged a glare, Seymour made up his mind. Who cares if there was any witness. He’d killed them afterwards.

“Eat this!”

Just when he pulled the trigger, the gun’s barrel burst, automatically disabled.

“How can you do something like…”

“Wanna fight me, Seymour? Then fight like a man!” Noctis answered, picking up some piece of metal that had crashed down and swinging it around him as a blade.

“You asked for it now!”

The guado dropped his gun and started muttering inaudible words. Sparkles of light started to shine
around him, before that a giant monster took form next to him, adding to the yells of panic and the people running away. The beast was covered in chains and was whining in agony and pain. Its red eyes were crying bloody tears, and Noctis had trouble understanding that a woman was hidden under the shells and chains covering this tortured thing. Soon, the whole plaza was empty, leaving only the two men, standing in front of each other. And that thing. Anima.

“It’s been a long time since I haven’t let her free to kill. I don’t think even your power can stop her.”

Noctis had to raise his head to see the thing wholly. It was about six meters tall, at least. As he awed in sheer surprised, he didn’t sense Seymour charging and was hit right in the stomach by his kick. He rolled on the ground, before to feel the said ground shaking. Anima was charging. Utterly confused, Noctis felt what was left of his consciousness leaving him. The radiance took over. The air became hot and hard to breath around him, as wave of powers flashed in the air. A fake three was cut off and fell through the wall, tearing it up, letting the cold wind from the outside atmosphere come in the ship. The whole structure started to tremble. Noctis tried to keep his mind straight. He rolled on his back. Jumped on his feet. Was pushed right back on the floor by gigantic claws. His powers pushed the monster away. But it was painful. He could feel her resistance against him. And he wasn’t controlling anything anymore. Things were getting destroy everywhere around him. And in the chaos, Seymour stood with his arms crossed on his chest, looking at him with a smirk.

“What a weird spy you do, really. A human weapon, huh? I’ll show you what real power is!”

Noctis focused his mind on getting back up. Used the metal stick as a rod to keep himself steady. The toll he had to pay to use his power was taking place. His energy was running away. The monster yelled and swung her long arm in his direction. He jumped and merely avoided her. And he realized his head was getting a little clearer. Maybe had he switched on surviving mode? Seymour wanted him dead. But everyone on the ship was in danger, because of that freak –and partly because of Noctis too-. And dying wouldn’t protect anyone. He had to stop the guado from his schemes. That man wanted to kill anyone that he judged too weak. And it wasn’t fair.

Anima charged again. And this time, Noctis didn’t try to dodge. His eyes were crimson red. The air around him was filled with shards of steel and dirt. But he could see through the haze over his eyes. He could sense a lot of things that didn’t exist the rest of the time. He remembered Lightning. And Storm. He remembered his life. And he wouldn’t let anyone take it away from him. Not without a fight. Raising his metal stick, he let the steel shards collide with it and forged them all into a blade, melting and freezing the matter as he pleased. He didn’t think that he wanted a blade. It just happened. His instincts or maybe his mutated genes, were working in his stead. And he was ready. This was hell out here. Hell coming right to him, ready to tear him apart. And he was fucking ready to throw it all back in Seymour’s face.

To be continued…
Chapter 19

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part VI

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 21th

Location: crashing wedding airship

Mission: Survive the fight against Seymour

Agents: Raven – currently out of reach - Lightning – better send her after him - Stella

Warning: Seymour has lost it, just as Raven. Their fight has reached the civils and could make the whole airship crashed down on earth. Any extra casualties must be avoided at all cost.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission

Lightning was sent to the floor by a sudden turn of the ship. She heard yells as the phone in her room started ringing. There had been some shaking and she was readying herself to go out, to check if this wasn’t Noctis’ doing. Rikky yelped from surprise and fear as she was sent to the other side of the room by a loop the airship did. Luckily, she landed on the bed, while Lightning had grabbed on the door stand to keep herself from being tossed around like a toy in a shaking box.

“What’s going on?!”

“Ring, ring ring!” the phone insisted in the background.

“I don’t know, but this ain’t freaking right.” Lightning retorted, steadying herself.

“Don’t tell me this has something to do with Seymour.”

“Ring, ring, ring!”

The ship was still shaking, but it seemed to have stabilized and Lightning grabbed the phone, knowing that it was surely going to be someone from the Faction. She was surprised as she heard a child’s voice on the other line.

“Miss Lightning? “

“Storm?!”

“Things are getting out of hand, miss. You gotta come and see me quickly. At this rate, nothing will stop them.”

“Stop who?”

“Raven and Seymour. They’re fighting right now. I don’t think the ship will be able to avoid a crash landing. I need to see you.”

“Why’s that? I should go see Noctis right now, we don’t have time for…”

“There’s no way you can stop him right now, you don’t have the strength needed. But I can give
you the right knowledge. I have Radiant powers too. Come Miss Lightning, please."

She was almost as shocked by the fact he was saying please then by the fact it was a kid talking about saving the whole ship. Her life sure had gotten insane. Why was he calling her Miss Lightning?

“I’ll be right there, but this better be worth my time.”

“It will be.” he answered before to hung up.

Lightning sighed. But then, she remembered of Rikku. Turning around, she realized the girl had vanished from her sight and her room. Frowning, the young spy wondered what could have gone through this sorry girl’s head.

“Don’t tell me she’s going to try to stop them?!”

…

The hallways seemed endless and she lost herself as she was running around, avoiding the elevators and jumping down the stairs. The shaking often threw her in the walls and she would soon be covered with bruises, but Rikku didn’t care. She couldn’t have been so naïve as to misplace her love. Seymour wasn’t a bad guy. Well, at least, not entirely. He really loved her. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. He did, didn’t he? Was it all fake? Had he been playing with her? Would he dare to…

“No!”

And if he had, then, he was certainly going to pay. But first, she had to put some reason into him. He couldn’t keep on endangering people like this. He was a soldier, alright, and that mean he had killed before in his life. But nobody was perfect. And she knew that he was a soldier to maintain order and peace in the world. He wasn’t a war loving freak. He wasn’t a mass murderer. He had ideals. Dreams. His religion was kinda freaky, but somehow, she knew this was just a façade. The rest didn’t meant anything. He wasn’t…

She stepped in the central plaza, were all the shaking were coming, her blond hair all messy and one of her braids was cut by a sharp gust of wind. She shivered at the cold feeling. The air was coming from the opening made in the ship’s walls. There were blinding lines of light, flashing through the air. Seymour was standing in the middle of the large room, a tall monster standing next to him. A summoned spirit. Rikku remembered the tales Yuna’s mother used to tell them when they were just little girl. She tried to understand what the monster was fighting against. Or who. Seymour’s adversaries was moving so fast, it was hard to tell. He could climb up on walls. He was running over the ceiling, like a bug. Sword were floating around him, he was surfing on some incredible weapons. Nothing could reach him. And as she stared intently at this moving form, surrounded by darkness and light, she realized it was Noctis. The grey silver hair and red eyes couldn’t be missed with anyone else. But how could a single human have so much powers? Was it really Lightning’s husband up there?

As she wondered what she could do, she saw the swords diving into the monster’s body, as Noctis charged Seymour, brandishing his own blade. Rikku stopped to think. She started to run. And maybe because Noctis was in the air and still didn’t control his skating on blade in the air, or because Rikku’s strength was multiplied by her fear of losing Seymour –even if nothing was clear at the moment-. Well, whatever it was, Rikku managed to reach Seymour before that Noctis did and stood in front of him, her arms extending, her body like a cross, closing her eyes as the shock seemed inevitable. Raven managed to stop himself right before to hit her with his blade. He fell
down from the floating swords at the sudden halt and the said swords vanished into thin air.

“What… what was that?! Do you wanna get killed?!” he manage to yell, barely regaining his self control.

“You were trying to kill Seymour.”

Anima collapsed to the floor with a bang as Rikku said that and Seymour clenched his teeth, feeling even more infuriated by the situation. Noctis was getting the upper hand. And this wasn’t fair. He had to get him out of his hair, so that he would be able to complete his mission for the army and enter the Antlion. But this ship was in no condition for a fly out in space now. It was as if the Faction knew what he had planned. To get Rikku kidnapped by some his men, so that she would be taken in the safe quarters of the Antlion. And to rejoin her there, making her believe that they were going to live on a colonial ships, to travel around the entire galaxy. That would have made her happy, surely. But now, the dream was all over. And the mission could as well be aborted if things kept up.

“Rikku, why didn’t you stay in your room as I asked you too?”

“Being your wife doesn’t mean you can tell me what to do at all time, Seymour. I was worried about you. Won’t you listen to me for once? I don’t what’s going on, but this…”

“This guy’s a spy, Rikku. He and Lightning have been spying on me, on us, since the very first day we got on this ship. They’re not even married! It was all a cover up to get to me.”

Noctis bit his lips, looking for his breath. He hated Seymour even more with each passing seconds. What did that guy had to bring an innocent girl into this mess? He was planning murdering, sacrificing innocent people just in order to keep some ship working. It was insane and no girl would be able to love a guy like that. And though she seemed to know everything about what was going on, Rikku was unable to believe. Which was kinda understandable, but still! How could she remained so blind? Noctis was the good guy in this.

“This would only mean that you have something to hide. And you did hide something to me!”

“Rikku…”

Seymour sighed and Rikku noticed the blood on his face and shirt. Noctis’ clothes were messy, but he didn’t seem to be hurt anywhere. And this whole situation felt incredibly weird.

“You’re going to get hurt if you don’t let me do my work here, Rikku. I need to kill him. And to erase everyone around that could repeat what happened here. So that there’s no proof left to stop me. You can believe that I’m wrong, but I’m not. The Antlion project is a lot more than just the biggest airship ever made. I’m doing all this for you too, you know.”

“Seymour, you can’t… you can’t mean what you say, this is insane!”

“You may disagree, but you’ll have to move.” he severely replied.

“I’m not going anywhere till you…”

“If you won’t obey, then I’ll make you!” he shouted, raising one hand surrounded by dark thunderbolt before to shove her out of the way.

Rikku rolled on the ground as a doll, till she was about ten meters away from them. She held her stomach, moaning from pain, as Seymour barely looked at her and turned back his attention on
Noctis.

“I’d better get rid of your Lightning before that she comes to meddle in my affairs. Girls are all the same you know.”

“I won’t let you…!”

“I never said I would hurt her personally. I got more than one summon spirit, you know.” Seymour smiled mischievously, before to snap with his fingers.

Another monster appeared, all covered with shadows and scales. Its wings spread as it slowly got up. Noctis remembered the carving and legends from his homeworld, Titan. The sky’s lord. Bahamuth. Before that the young man could even move, the summoned spirit had taken his flight and had disappeared in the hallway, breaking open the parts of the ship separating him from his target.

Noctis felt his heart drumming against his ribcage as he realized in what danger he had managed to put Lightning by making this guy mad. He stopped using his powers to run after the monster, but was stopped right on his way by the guado’s fist in his face. The anger rose so high this time, Noctis felt as if he was going to explode from the inside. With a terrible yell, almost inhuman, the radiant powers burst back into forms. A wide series of explosions shook the whole ship, almost blowing Rikku away, but she managed to grab on some metal stick coming out from the wrecked machinery coming out from the opened floor.

“I see that… whenever you get mad, you control all those messy powers even less, Raven. You’re making things quite easier for me.”

“I don’t have TIME for your games, Seymour!”

“Well, at least, you game me all the time that I needed!”

With that, Seymour charged, seconded by Anima, which was destroying everything in her trails. And Noctis suddenly realized how worn out he was after all this abuse of powers he’d already made. He heard some cries of pain in the distant, as four clawed hands fell over him, raising him in the air while piercing through his flesh. Someone needed help out there. Except for him. Maybe Lightning? She was in danger; that was already sure. Why couldn’t he do things right for once? What was wrong with him?

…

Lightning could have decided to run right away to the place where Noctis and Seymour were bound to be, but she finally decided against it, especially since the people were all out of their rooms and running to the higher levels of the ship, where the rescue boats were. She was dragged by the flow and the fact she managed to enter Stella’s room was a pure miracle!

“I don’t get what you could mean by giving me the knowledge to defeat…”

“You took your time. My father is destroying a lot of things. Seymour sent a beast after you. At this rate, it will be here before that you get to know Odin.”

Storm had his arms crossed and looked rather annoyed. He was dressed all in black, and once more, the resemblance between him and Noctis hit Lightning. The fact he said his father while referring to the love of her life was almost unbearable. But she was so confused, she really hadn’t the time to get mad at the kid.
“What? Odin?”

“Listen closely, alright? I’ll do as fast as I can.” Storm retorted.

He raised one hand, his eyes slowly turning into pure gold circles. The floor shook abruptly enough to have him bumping into her legs and she grabbed the boy by the shoulders to keep him steady. There was a scary cracking sound and a woman’s yell in the background.

“Was that Stella? Where is she?”

“That’s another reason why we should hurry up…” Storm added. This time, his usually cold voice was hesitating a little. “You’re my only way to help mom.”

His little fingers grabbed her hand. And in the chaos this shaking and turning ship had become, Storm started to sing. She had expected a lot of things, but not that.

“I sing of the tales of The Wanderer
The rider of Yggdrasill
He gave up an eye into Mimir’s Well
Where deeply, he drank his fill.”

Storm’s voice was really clear, though the words sometimes seemed to fade in his throat. As he kept on singing, Lightning realized the shaking she was feeling from the ship was slowly fading. As if she was slowly entering another dimension, filled with this child’s voice singing of legends from a faraway time…

“For nine long nights, Old Hárr, hung he
In search of the spoken spell;
The Runes that he found drew sounds for man
And down, from The Tree, he fell.”

The German words sounded clearer than all the rest of them and a loud noise was audible in the distance, as if a three had fallen to the ground. But nothing else from the outside world could reach her. Lightning was standing in a lighted space, only feeling Storm’s hand gripping on her as he sung. And little sparkles of light were slowly coming from his eyes and skin, as particles of energy, or something else, slowly floating around her.

“A snake, he slid through Gunnloð’s court;
The Mead of Poetry sought;
Three sips, and he fled as eagle’s wing;
By Suttung, was never caught.”

Storm caught back his breath for an instant, closing his eyes to keep focused on the words and the song. But it wasn’t just a song anymore. The lights floating around Lightning where moving so fast, she started feeling dizzy. She could have fallen if Storm’s grip hadn’t been as strong.

“Two sticks on a beach Hárbarð had found;
His brothers heard his call;
He gave his own breath and his blood to the wood
And told them of his hall:

“Valhalla holds the Einherjar
“Who’ll fight on Vigrið plain.”
As Fenrir sinks his fangs to the bone
The life of Odin will wane."

Pictures started to pour down in Lightning’s mind. She realized the sparkles were reaching her, reacting to her. For an instant, she could see the blue and green mako running through the veins of her arm, absorbing the lights, while she felt a distant wind on her face. There was a sun burning her back as she was riding a horse on a field. She couldn’t breathe, being filled with a new strength, which she had never experienced. And Storm kept on singing, though he could still hear the cries of fear out in the corridors, and still feel the shaking of the ships.

“Fear not, my kin, of the Ragnarók,
For Fimbultýr truly has won;
He saw his own death at the end of time
And whispered this to his son.”

It was only then that Storm reopened his eyes. Lightning let go of his hand, trembling from head to toes. She had no idea what had just happened. But the fact a kid could do something like that to her… She stared down at him with disbelief. She was coming back from so far away, it felt hard to accept there were only artificial lights around and that the only air on her face was coming from an air conditioner.

“I… I guess you’re pretty shocked. Mom said anyone would be. I was engraved with the knowledge of two summoned spirits for the Faction. Unfortunately, I can’t use their powers, because of the Radiance within me. The mako in your blood made you befitting of real magic. And summoning. And since Seymour is a summoner, I thought… Fighting fire with fire would be appropriate.”

“Storm, do you mean that… you gave me a summon spirit? That Odin…”

She felt ready to get mad. A kid had absolutely no right to randomly give her something like that. He had just imposed her with that… thing. Whatever it could be… Summon spirits weren’t supposed to exist. But then again, she had seen so many things in her life, she shouldn’t get that much worked up over it.

“I’m sorry for rushing you. But… If nobody stops Seymour and Raven, everyone will be killed. And if something really bad was to happen to my mom… I could do even more damage than my father.”

“You… really don’t know how to say things.”

Storm stared at his feet, a bitter smile on his face. Then, there was another yell, coming from the room in the back, and he looked up, his eyes widened by fear. He turned his back on Lightning and ran to the place which had to be his mother room. The ship shook even more, as the right wall of the room was torn open by an angry Bahamut. Lightning took out her blade, even though it seemed pretty out of place to fight against such a monster. But as soon as she thought that, Storm remembered her of Odin.

“Use it now, miss Lightning!”

“How am I supposed to…!”

Bahamut made his way into the room, breaking everything around him, his red eyes glaring threateningly at Storm. And for an instant, the little boy looked as a real kid, paralyzed by fear, helpless and defenseless. Lightning decided she had had enough letting everyone else save the day in her stead. She was a fighter too. This kid, Stella’s and Noctis’ kid—the very thought was enough
to drive her crazy—may have no right to give her a summoned spirit out of the blue. But it still didn’t mean he deserved to see his mother getting hurt or to be hurt himself.

She switched her sword to the gun mode and fired at Bahamut. She tried to remember the words of the song. Of the Wonderer, rider of Yggdrasill. And the next thing she knew, a horse was neighing beside her and his rider, a tall man covered by a silver armor, was combining two blades into one, his blue eyes shining under his knight helmet.

“To my master call, I shall reply, and to your aid my lady I shall fly!”

Lightning frowned.

“This is getting crazier with each passing minutes…”

…

As Noctis’ back hit the ceiling, his breath cut short, he realized the four clawed hands were but an illusion. Spiritual energy had hit him and lifted him up, without hurting his flesh. The pain was spiritual, which didn’t mean it wasn’t feeling real. He wasn’t physically hurt. And somehow, this felt even more frightening than if he was. This kind of pain was new to him. And he had no idea how a human being—or a guado—could inflict this to someone.

“I’m going to break you down to so many pieces; nobody will ever be able to fix you.”

Noctis sighed. This was getting him nowhere. With all the shocks he had been through, his registering device mustn’t be working anymore. Though the camera around this plaza must have taken something on tape. Seymour had admitted more than once of his evil deeds. So, all that was left to complete his intel mission was to wish some of the tape had survived to all his use of Radiant powers…

“Seymour!” Rikku called from afar.

She sounded desperate. And Noctis kinda envied her for an instant. He had had enough being punched, kicked and tossed around. His Radiant powers weren’t answering anymore, since he was more tired than confused or angry. Not that he minded. He was such a disaster whenever he used those stupid powers…

As he thought that and felt an invisible hand closing over his neck, a clicking noise resounded from the distance. It sounded as a horse galloping. Seymour frowned and turned around to see Lightning entering the plaza, riding a gigantic white horse with six legs, brandishing two round blades.

“I borrowed a friend’s mount to join in the party. It seems you guys haven’t been really careful about your fight. You wanted to bring the whole ship down or what?”

“Lightning?!” Noctis, Rikku and Seymour whispered, yelled or sighed, each of them surprised beyond words.

Noctis was relieved to see her, because that meant that Seymour’s threat hadn’t bare any fruits. At the same time, he was a little mad at himself for not being able to get out of this situation without any help. Especially her help. Because she seemed to be coming to his rescue.

Next thing he knew, she had charged at Seymour, brandishing her blades before to merge them into one. She jumped of her horse and slashed the guado soldier, breaking down his spiritual powers and thus making Noctis fall back to the floor.
“Seymour, are you alright?”

“Ouch!” Noctis complained as he hit the ground.

Lightning was looking for her breath as she turned to Noctis. All she could see around was signs of destruction. And she knew this wasn’t all Seymour’s doing. And it felt scary. How could her Noctis… How could he be able to cause so much damage? He looked helpless and totally worn out right now, but he had been in full shape when he had gone to “talk” to Seymour.

The said guy was whining from pain, finally shut up and quite incapacitated. Rikku hurried to his side, worried despite all that he had done and said. She checked his wound, which was bleeding a lot. Lightning had cut him in various place of his body, making it impossible for him to keep standing and surely impossible in the future to fight as he used to. Muscles were ripped down under the flesh and his cries of pain were the only thing resounding in the wide ravaged room, as Odin’s mount slowly vanished.

“What… What was that all about, Lightning?” Noctis asked when he finally caught back his breathe.

“What were you waiting for to stop him!” she barked back at him.

“I… I was just about to…”

“To get yourself killed? Hadn’t I told you not to do any trouble? Hadn’t I told you to be careful? Look at this place! Look at you, Noctis! You’re covered with bruises and cut and… And this place is in ruin. I don’t even know how this ship is even flying!”

Rikku started crying in the background and Lightning wondered if she shouldn’t try taking care of the poor girl and her husband before to sermon Noctis.

“I’m sorry, Light. Things really got out of hand.”

She crossed her arms on her chest, frowning angrily and he looked away, before to remember something. The registering device! He fumbled through his clothes, getting out the device, to find out it was still in perfect shape.

“At least, I’ve got all the proof we needed to arrest him!”

“Wow, that’s a relief… What about the mess you made here?”

“That… Well, that wasn’t only my doing,” he retorted, crossing his legs and pouting a little.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll let you explain all that to our boss later.” Lightning sighed.

It felt as if they were back on some old missions. It wasn’t the first time that one of them would mess up everything.

“So…” Rikku whispered, sniffling a bit. “Seymour said the truth. You’ve been lying to us only to get him confessing something about his job? You two are… spies?”

Lightning looked over her shoulders, biting her lips and Noctis looked up, his blue eyes filled with guilt. This was the worst part of their job.

“Rikku, listen…”

“Did you really have to hurt him like that? I mean… He hadn’t do anything to anyone here. He was
just planning…”

“Just planning to mass murder all the people annoying his organization and to use their lives as fuel for an airship?” a child voice completed.

The three of them—Seymour was unconscious from his wounds—turned around to see Storm walking up to them, followed by Odin on his left and Stella on his right.

“Who… who are you?”

“I’m here to arrest your husband, miss. So that he gets proper treatment to be able to stand in his trial.”

Lightning’s eyes widened from shock. Why was Storm here? Noctis looked just as confused and shocked as her. This whole situation had gotten out of their control for a moment now. And they weren’t sure if they could understand any of it anymore.

“Before that you panic, my dear,” Stella started. “I want to reassure you. This nightmare will soon be over. And we won’t keep any charge against you. You were never a part of Seymour’s bad doing. And though you don’t understand everything right now, I’m going to explain everything. To all of you.”

“It’s about time!” Lightning whispered between her clenched teeth. She exchanged a look with Noctis, who was thinking the very same thing.

“I know. But before to say anything, we must tend to the wounded and get this ship to land somewhere safe to evacuate the civilians.”

The two spies before her sighed. They were going to work extra time for all this mess. And they still weren’t sure about half of what was going on… But Noctis sighed, a little from relief. At least, Lightning was safe. Mad at him, which was understandable, but safe and sound. Right now, this was all he needed to know.

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th

Location: Squall’s apartment, boston

Mission: protecting Aeris, as always…

Agents: Squall

Warning: It seems that agent Angel aka, Rinoa Heartily, has died before to complete her mission. She was a close friend of agent Squall…

Message from G.I. eight. End of transmission.

…

Squall woke up slowly. He didn’t open his eyes at first. He wasn’t sure of where he was. His body felt numb. His chest hurt and his eyes too. He wondered why. He was all curled up over himself. Somehow, something felt wrong. His shirt felt kinda wet. He rolled on his back, pushing away the sheets covering him. The ceiling was white. So he was sleeping on his couch? But the sun was still up outside the window…
Suddenly he remembered. Rinoa, his Rinoa was dead. He sighed as the urge to cry came back. To think she hadn’t told him anything to keep him safe. And that she died alone, in the name of humanity’s safety. The she dumped him in the name of love. Her being with Seifer was all a play in which he had been a fool. And that hurt so deeply, to think she knew him that well when he thought that he really knew her. To think she had fooled him all this time. Why hadn’t he seen through it?

He breathed in and out, slowly, to calm himself down. He still wanted to cry. He really wanted to yell and kick whatever would come around him just to let the pain out. He wasn’t able to contain it. But at the same time, right when he felt ready to burst, he felt silent tears running down his cheeks, softly, just as Rinoa was. He tried to picture what she would tell him now. What would she think? Would she laugh?

No, she wouldn’t. She would smile at him and hug him close. She would sing him a song or just keep on ruffling his hair, whispering that she loved him. That it was alright to be like that. She would try to cheer him up. Because there was always a new reason to smile in life, even in the darkest hour. As he thought that, he heard water running in the background. He remembered of Aeris. Aeris who had seen him crying. He quickly dried his tears, his first reaction being to feel ashamed. Though he had to admit, Aeris’ presence had really reassured him. And the fact she was still here was still really reassuring. He sighed once more. The water stopped running.

Aeris was humming a song as she got out of the shower. He rolled on his stomach, stuffing his face in the pillow for an instant. He was going to pretend he was sleeping. Rinoa had just died. But somehow, as the washroom cracked open, he couldn’t help himself and raised himself up to look at her. She was only wearing a towel and her hair was still soaking wet. She blushed as she realized he was awake and had seen her as she tried to tiptoe back in her room.

“Hi.” she shyly whispered.

“Hey.” he replied with a tired voice.

It was still broken from all the crying and screaming he’d done just a while ago. As she realized he was still pretty vulnerable, Aeris turned around to face him, holding her towel closed over her shape, her other arm wrapped around her waist. Carelessly, he stared at her legs. She sure had nice legs. And as he gazed back up, he changed his mind. All of her features were nice, really. He focused on her eyes, because he knew why he was eating her up with his eyes. She reminded him of Rinoa in so many ways.

“How do you feel?” she asked him.

“How… A little better?” he replied, as a question, because he wasn’t all that sure.

“Maybe you should sleep a little more?”

“How long did I sleep?”

His voice still sounded so sleepy and frail, it made him slightly mad.

“How… for half an hour.”

He rolled on his side, while keeping his eyes on her. She flushed a little more and hesitated. And Squall couldn’t help himself but fin her cute when she doubted. He felt bad for thinking like that, but if his thoughts were to wander over Rinoa again, he would get back in the state he was in half an hour ago.
“Do you want to eat something? I made some supper for you, just in case.”

Squall gulped down. She was so gentle with him. And she still didn’t know him all that much.

“Aeris…”

“Then again, if you’re not hungry, it would be perfectly understandable!” she tried to reassure him.

One of her bangs came out of her hair and stuck to her skin. And Squall remembered Rinoa when she was right out from her shower. He closed his eyes only to open them even quicker afterwards. He could see Rinoa under his eyes lashes.

“I… I forgot my clothes in my room. Well, it’s your room, but… Maybe I’d better get changed,” she nervously suggested.

“You look okay like this.” he tried to joke.

She blushed even more and bit her lips before to look away. She seemed really confused between her options. Should she locked herself in her room to get changed or should she stay with him for a little longer? Squall slowly sat up on the couch, shaking his head a little, just to move his sore neck.

“Say, Aeris… About… about when we just arrived here…”

“You don’t have to feel embarrassed about…”

“I wanted to … to thank you. You being here really… It helped.” he gulped down again.

He felt as if he had no pride left at all. And somehow, he had to save something from it.

“Could you… not tell anyone about this… I mean like… Lightning or… Some Faction’s guys.”

“Of course I wouldn’t! Even though it was totally normal. And even if you needed to cry again…”

“Don’t go tempting me.” he sighed, looking down.

There was a long silent, during which both of them looked for something to say. Squall was angry at himself for letting everything out, for being so open about his pain. Somehow, it made him feel guilty, because he had never been able to express himself like that in such a situation to Rinoa. Then again, his usual worries had never been as painful as the loss of Rinoa.

“I… I gotta get changed.”

Aeris turned on her eels and Squall looked up to see her back as she entered the room. He noticed a mark on her left shoulder, a strange looking mark that couldn’t be natural. He wondered what it could mean. But as he wondered, he became quite sure that he shouldn’t ask her about it. He still barely knew her and all that he was sure of was that her life hadn’t be a really happy one. This mark didn’t look like a tattoo, but more like a scar. And as he tried to remember the sign he had seen, he realized it was looking like a number. Which was bad. And it meant he totally had to forget to ever talk to her about it. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt her. After everything she had done for him, it was the least he could do. She had been there, by his side as he slowly healed back from his physical and mental wounds. And now, as he was lost in the pain of his loss, in the reality where Rinoa wasn’t alive anymore… Aeris was still here. Though all he’d done for her was save her life once.
He sighed again. And as the tears started welling up in his eyes again, for no reason, or so he thought, he held back a yell and stuffed his face back into his pillow. How he wanted to sleep. To escape. Drinking wasn’t an option. He was still on his mission to protect Aeris. Anyway, he hated drinking. It meant losing control. And losing control willingly was something he’d rarely do.

…

Squall hadn’t move at all when Aeris came back in the living room. She was wearing a white dress, barely covering her shoulders with its short sleeves. She went up to the couch, to look down at her bodyguard. He was lying on his side, all curled up on himself, his eyes looking straight in front of him, without looking at anything for real. He didn’t blink as she sat on the couch, he barely moved away to give her any room to sit. Kneeling next to him, she reached out one hand and gently touched his face.

He closed his eyes for a few seconds as she started stroking his hair.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“Don’t ask me.”

It was more a plea than a declaration.

“It’s normal, Squall. And it’s okay to still feel sad.”

“Don’t lead me on that track…”

“I don’t know what else to say, Squall.”

“Then don’t say anything.”

She smiled at his reply. She kept on ruffling his hair. And slowly, he closed in, wrapping his body around her sitting form to lay with his head on her lap, making himself as small as possible. He needed comfort. He felt like a child. He hated himself for it. But Aeris repeated that it was alright. That everything was alright. And he slowly relaxed in his posture, accepting the contact, accepting the pain. Rinoa was still with him. In his heart. And as he closed his eyes, he could feel so many things around him. Inside him. Emotions were filling everything. He remembered all the good and the bad times with Rinoa in this apartment. Remembered how they would fight over stupid things. How he would apologized and how she would rushed in his arms.

They waited together for a long time, in silence. Squall was letting everything sink in. And Aeris was happy, that she could be of some help.

“I still feel mad at her,” he whispered.

“For not telling you everything?”

“Doesn’t it mean that she didn’t trust me?”

“On the contrary. She trusted you. She trusted you would be able to understand without her explaining. And she believed you would be able to live without her. This means how generous she was.”

He looked up at Aeris and she blushed a little. Suddenly, their position felt way too intimate. Squall realized it and lifted himself up a little, before to gently get Aeris to lie down next to him. At first, she panicked a little, because this meant she was getting even closer, but he kept his
distance, just staring in her eyes. But the couch was big and there was a few inches between their face, which make the position a little less intimidating.

“You really think…”

“She didn’t seem as a nasty person. She was kind-hearted and…”

“Don’t. Don’t say that she was. Don’t talk about her in the past. She’s still… She still exists.”

Aeris smiled a little as Squall said that. His voice had won back some strength. His eyes had gotten back this sparkle of life there was before, when he was fighting the radiations’ effects in the hospital.

“Yes. She does.”

As she said that, she put her hand on his chest, right above his heart. And Squall gently forced her to remove her hand. Because his heart was beating too fast and it was hard to stay motionless next to her when he missed Rinoa so much. When he wanted to forget so much…

“Yeah… There. But don’t… don’t be too comprehensive about it. And stop going all motherly on me.”

He looked away.

“Why…? What’s the problem about it?”

“I… There’s no problem about it!” he said, sitting up suddenly.

He had gone too soft. He had forgotten his place. Suddenly, he realized how infatuated of her he risked to become. He was vulnerable. In need. And she seemed so ready to help, he was getting ideas. He remembered that kiss in the market’s plaza. He remembered… But moving on right now would be an insult to Rinoa’s memory. And it wouldn’t be moving on, but… just trying to escape the pain.

Aeris sat up too, frowning slightly.

“I’m… I’m hungry. You mentioned supper, huh?” he nervously mumbled as he started getting up.

It was then that she understood. She could comfort him when he was too lost in his pain to care if she was there or not. But now, as he was understanding and accepting the loss, slowly, but progressively, she had to keep her distances. He wasn’t in full control. And as he went in the kitchen, looking pretty confused, she was smiling faintly. This guy could be so cute sometime. It was sad she had to know him in these circumstances. But somehow, he was able to make her forget all of the bad things in her life. Remembering what a normal, everyday life, truly was…

To be continued…
Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th
Location: training quarters
Mission: teaching Yuna to use guns
Soldiers: Colonel Cloud Strife and Yuna Albhed
No warning.
Message from commander Jecht. End of transmission.

…

“Just a little higher. Okay, ease your grip; you’re going to hurt yourself with the recoil.”

“Do you have to be this close to teach me?”

Cloud chuckled as she was tensing up next to him. Yuna had finally accepted to try for real her gunning training. But she wasn’t able to hold every kind of gun right. The one she was handling now was pretty heavy, which didn’t help… Her colonel was guiding her arm, setting it into place with one hand, the other one on her shoulder, while his body was brushing slightly against her back. She could feel his breathing in her neck and was doing all she could not to lean on him.

“You didn’t say that you mind when I got closer…”

Yuna knew he was just messing around, as a friend would. It was weird, because she never had a boy among her friends before. There was Brother –but he didn’t count–. And she had never expected Cloud to be like that.

“Now focus on the target.” He reminded her.

She could almost feel his voice vibrating through his ribcage and into her. She held back her breath before to shake him off to be free of what she was doing. As he let go of her gun, she felt the weight pulling on her arms and her muscles… Clenching her teeth, she kept focused, aimed and fired. Her target was torn in two and she was thrown backward, dropping the machine gun as she yelped from surprise. Cloud caught her immediately, preventing her from losing balance.

“Hey, easy there. I had told you the recoil was something else…”

She laughed at that, as she tried to stand on her own while his arms were keeping her up, slipped under her armpits. Her legs were all limp from the shock.

“This one was stronger than I’d expected.”

It was right then that footsteps could be heard and that general Jecht arrived next to them, frowning before to cross his arms on his large chest.

“What are you doing, you two?”
Cloud instantly let go of Yuna, who fell on the floor before hurriedly getting back to her feet to make a salute to her higher officer.

“The colonel Strife sure like training you, to keep at it even now. You know, the army’s grounds are closing today?”

“Closing?” Yuna repeated.

“Did I ask you to talk, sweetie?”

“No sir, my mistake, sir!” she replied, looking down.

“Don’t look down, sweetie pie, you’re a soldier, soldiers look straight in front of them. STRAIGHT you hear me?” Jecht yelled at her after taking two steps closer to her.

She didn’t answer, looking up and forcing herself not to glare at him.

“Well then, it seems she’s gotten good with gun.” Jecht observed as he looked at the various targets that were all hit in different “vital” spots. “You’ve been doing a pretty good job, Strife.”

Cloud took the compliment with a simple nod. His training sessions with Yuna had become enjoyable over time, as she had started to accept that in here, with those paper targets, it was only a game. He had started to get a liking to these moments spent with her. In the last few days, she had been his only company. She had forced him to go see Lucrecia to receive a complete examination, and he had been decreed way too healthy to make the young woman lose her time in a whole examination, though she observed he could use eating more real food. Everyone around him seems to be obsessed in reminding him that he had to eat real food. What was their problem, acting as if he was a little kid? Health pills were just as good as real food. And he had no idea how he could keep the right weight to stay in the army if he had to start eating for real. He sucked at cooking. And he’d rather buy new parts for his motorbike than real and expensive food.

“Alright then, soldiers. You’re dismissed for the rest of the week. It’s Christmas’ Eve and you’d better enjoy it before that I change my mind and send you back on Pluto to enjoy a white Christmas.”

“Sir, yes, sir!” Yuna replied as Cloud’s shoulders relaxed.

A moment later, they were back in the squad’s 8 quarters, Cloud packing his stuff and Yuna trying to understand how she could have forgotten they were Christmas’ Eve.

“It’s crazy, I don’t even have a present for any of my relatives!” she squealed, desperate.

“Well, now that you mention it, I think I don’t have any presents either... Lightning’s gonna skin me alive.”

“For something like that?” Yuna looked even more surprised and Cloud realized he was starting to act way too casual with this girl.

But it felt so natural to have her around him and to chitchat with her like that. After all, she was agreed with him on the fact that they were friends.

“Well, she won’t mind if she don’t get anything, but it was always a tradition that I get something special for Serah, at least.”

“That’s sweet. Wanna do some shopping?” she suggested.
As soon as it had come out, she couldn’t help but ask herself why she had had such a crazy idea. But Cloud simply smiled and accepted her invitation. Next thing she knew, she was sitting on his enormous motorbike and he was riding the streets, going at a speed that was highly prohibited in Yuna’s own system of law. But she couldn’t help but like the sound of the roaring bike and wonder how much he had changed the thing from its original design. She had heard he wasn’t really good at mechanic, except when it came to his bike. This thing was his only passion except fighting and rescuing people.

“Here’s the stop.” He whispered to himself before to park his bike and let the motor die in silence.

They were stationed in front of the biggest store center of Boston. There were a lot of people walking around, coming out from the subs or teleporters. The very fact they could have a parking place was because only a few people were still using cars or bikes. In this heat, a bike was better.

“You’re sure you wanna go shopping? This place will be so crowded.”

“I need at least a present for Serah, and the more I’ll wait, the less chance I’ll have to get one for her. Come on, don’t tell me you’re scared of crowds?”

“I’m not, it’s just...”

Shopping couldn’t be fun with this many people around. And she was bound to lose Cloud at some point, by being drag by someone passing by or...

“Hey, Yuna! Is that really you?” a teenager voice called.

Yuna looked around as she got off Cloud’s bike and her eyes widened in surprise as she saw...

“Tidus?! Wow, what a coincidence! I thought you were still on Mars!”

“And I was!”

Cloud sat back, not really sure of what was going on, until that he saw Yuna –the shy Yuna who barely ever talk around him a few days ago- running to the young and tanned man, literally throwing herself in his open arms. Who was this guy? A student going to Harvard with her? Her boyfriend? Did she have a boyfriend!? How come she was so shy around him then?

Cloud felt angry at himself for panicking like this, but he couldn’t help himself. This man... well, boy would be more average, he had still the baby face from his youth and his brown hair were dyed in blond, to give him some style. Still, he was built as a man. His clothes must be looking cool. Cloud thought he was simply weird looking with his sleeves that weren’t equal. His face told him something. Was he a soldier? Or some popular guy? Yuna sure looked happy to see him. She barely looked over her shoulder to gaze at her colonel. The said colonel forced himself to get back his composure.

“Oh, Cloud... Sorry for not introducing you. This is Tidus! He’s one of my friend at Harvard. He’s a big shot in sport.”

“I see...”

Cloud felt out of place. He had stopped thinking of college and university for sometimes now. He was into sport, to keep himself in shape and well trained, but... This guy bugged him. He had slipped one arm around Yuna’s shoulders and she seemed unaware, or just, undisturbed by it. But just seeing him half naked got her stuttering and uneasy. Could this mean he was making her uncomfortable while she was carefree and perfectly alright with being next to this Tidus?
“And this is Colonel Strife, my new boss in the army. I used to clean up his squad’s quarters, but they sent me on a real mission with him, as an engineer,” Yuna said to introduce Cloud himself.

Tidus exchanged a brief look with the soldier, not looking impressed one bit.

“Yeah, I heard about that guy from my old man. General Jecht, sounds familiar?”

So this kid was general Jecht’s son? Now, Cloud was surprised. Where was the resemblance? Where was the toughness of the general in this boy?

“Your father is a slaver! Sure I wouldn’t forget about him,” Yuna retorted, which made Tidus smile.

Cloud felt terribly out of place. And he didn’t like that fact to be presented as a colonel and a Strife. His first name didn’t even fit in Yuna’s sentence. As a soldier, he had’t been a very good friend for this girl. And he felt as if Tidus was his rival, somehow. Though there was no way...

“I don’t have any time to waste on this.” Cloud muttered to himself, making himself a reason and walking away, to enter the supermarket and get something for Serah.

Yuna didn’t call after him as he left and he didn’t look over his shoulder to check if she was glancing at him. He could hear her laughing at some of Tidus’ jokes and his heart felt cold and deserted, though he was smiling just a few minutes ago.

_Is this what’s really happening? Is she getting to me? She’s lovely and... I want her to trust me... But she’s way too young. And after all that I’ve done..._, Cloud thought, refusing to accept any reason explaining why his heart would twist in his chest right now.

When he came back from the shops, a single package held under his arms, he was surprised to see Yuna sitting on his bike, waiting under the brilliant sun. She gave him a smile as he approached.

“Are you trying to catch a heatstroke?” he asked her.

“ Nope. After chatting a bit with Tidus, I let him go back to his shopping, and since you had disappeared and this crowd out there would have swallowed me alive, I decided it was best to wait for you. You expect me to walk all the way back home in this heat?”

Cloud wasn’t sure if he understood that girl anymore. Did she just want to spend more time with him? Did she guarded his bike or was she just expecting to hitch another ride? Though she seemed to have waited here for sometimes—it had been hard to get a cashier without any clients in the markets...- she had a little package on her lap, already enveloped as a fitting present. Maybe had she done some shopping herself? Or was this Tidus’ present to her? Yuna observed his staring at the package and blushed since it meant he was staring at her. She had changed herself in normal clothes and was wearing tight jean shorts, a white top and a small decorative scarf. It was a nice change from her overall suits from the army or her engineer combination. Though Cloud always found her nice looking, whatever she was wearing. He hadn’t the time to study her attire, since he had gotten changed himself while they were still in Army’s quarters—he had now blue navy pants and black sleeveless top-.

“Oh this...” she sighed, looking down at the package. “This is just something I got for my cousin. She’s out on her honeymoon for all December, but when she’ll come back, I wanna give her a little something!”

“Honeymoon, huh? That sounds like Lightning’s last mission.”
“What do you mean?”

“Oh, nothing... How about I gave you that ride back home, huh?”

Yuna was a little surprised. Cloud looked so uneasy right now, when usually, she was the one acting weird around him. What was going on? Was he mad or something? As he sat back on his bike and she gently put her arms around his chest to keep herself steady, his cell started to ring. With a sigh, he answered:

“Hi, Strife speaking? ... Serah? Hey, hi! ... I’m doing fine, fine. ...Yes, my boss reminded me it was Christmas’ Eve. ... I don’t know where she is. ... Yeah, with Noctis, surely... Right now? ... But,... Well, no, it’s not a problem, I’ll be glad to come for supper, it’s just... There’s someone with me right now, I’m supposed to drop her home. ... What, no, it’s not...!” He sighed. “You should have went in divination, Serah, you know that? ... Okay, I’ll ask her. ... See ya.”

Hanging up, he twisted his neck to look over his shoulder, as Yuna backed away from him while remaining sitting on the bike’s seat.

“What’s up?”

“Well... Serah asked if you wanted to join us on Christmas’ supper.”

“Wait, but... She doesn’t even know me. How come she knew I was the one with you?”

“I don’t know. Woman instinct, I guess. She’s pretty perceptive with this kind of thing. Anyway, you don’t have to take it seriously, you would be surrounded by strangers and you must have something else in mind for tonight...”

Two sides of Cloud were waging war within himself right now. One of them wanted Yuna to decline the invitation and have him dropping her in front of her place –so that he wouldn’t be all flustered just by the idea she had been waiting for him when she could have leave with that stupid Tidus!-. The other side wanted her to accept and stay with him as long as possible. But it was stupid. Wasn’t it?

“I... I don’t know what to say. It’s really nice, and I don’t... Well, to say the truth, I was preparing myself to have a lonely Christmas. My parents being dead and my cousin being out on her honeymoon, I don’t really have any relatives left to celebrate with.”

Cloud looked away, realizing Yuna’s situation was just the same as his, even more than he would have think. Her small voice as she spoke so close to him gave him the urge to hold her in his arms, but he knew this was too soon. This was just going on in his head, for heaven sake!

“Well... If you wouldn’t mind having me around for longer, I think this sounds like fun. Your sister Serah sounds really nice.”

“I’m sure you’d get along with her.”

Then again, he was sure Serah would try something if he was to bring Yuna with him. This sounded like a date. As if he was taking the young engineer out. Meeting his family. Getting to know him in a sphere of his personal life. Could he permit something like that? Was it right to feel all those doubts, to wonder this much over something this trivial? She’d said they were friends. Friends could hang around. But he wasn’t looking for a friend right now, he could be frank with himself on that at least.

“So...” Yuna was blushing and thanking god that Cloud couldn’t see her right now. “Do you want
me to come?"

*Man, girls are all the same. Why does she have to give me hope on this? Why is she making this so hard?!* He thought angrily.

“I don’t ca...” he was about to lie, but he noticed that Yuna’s arms were still wrapped around his chest. Even if the bike wasn’t even turned on. He gulped down. Suddenly, he felt like a teenager taking a girl on his bike for the first time. Biting his lips, he looked for an answer that wouldn’t give him away, while not discouraging her from coming. “If you have nothing else bet... Hell, won’t you tell me what you think?! You wanna come or not?”

“Just answer my question, Cloud.” She asked, leaning her face on his back.

That calmed him down a little. His heart was beating fast under her ears. And the fabric of his shirt was so warm, because of the sun hitting it directly. So unlike the other day, when he was freezing cold.

“I... I’d like it if you were coming too.” He admitted under his breath.

But she heard him, even hearing his voice vibrating through his chest. She smiled and hugged him.

“Oh, then, I’ll come.” She whispered.

And Cloud had no idea why, but at this very moment, just when he put the key in the contact and started his motorbike, he felt happier than he ever had in weeks. Things could be so easy sometimes. This girl took his advice, his personal advice in account. She was hugging him. She had waited just to see him and have a chance of spending more time in his company. Somehow, she liked him. And hell, this had been such a long time since he had felt like that. His sisters’ presence was nice, their hug comforted him. But it was different. Nothing could compare to this. His heart racing in his chest. All the dark and gloomy thoughts gone. His body feeling so light, he couldn’t understand why he wasn’t flying into the sky. Maybe was he getting excited over nothing? But he liked Yuna. It was something even deeper than that, but her very presence made him go all soft and warm inside. And maybe was she ready to have something more than a friend. Maybe was he really jealous, seeing her with Tidus, maybe was he really falling for her. And that wasn’t a bad thing. Because maybe... just maybe, she was falling for him too.

... 

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th

Location: Landing wedding airship, close to Boston, United States

Mission: status completed

Agents: Raven, Lightning, Stella, STORM

Warning: It seems that Noctis isn’t really in control of his Radiant powers. Better check on that before to give him any new mission.

Message from G.I. nine. End of transmission.

... 

After securing all the other passengers and landing the ship—and sending Seymour to the hospital—, Noctis, Lightning, Stella, Rikku, Storm and Odin all gathered together in a big helicopter that
would take them to the Faction’s HQ. Storm was sitting on his mother’s lap, Odin next to them, looking around him with shining eyes under his helmet. He looked pretty out of place in his large armor. Noctis was trying to understand why that guy was there and who he was, and moreover why he was always looking at Lightning more than anyone else around. She had talked about a summon spirit while getting on the helicopter, but he hadn’t really understood anything about it. Rikku was fighting back with him, wanting to go with Seymour instead of them and Stella had asked him to force the young girl to follow them.

His bruises and cuts started to hurt a little, though they were all pretty superficial. Lightning was holding his hand, maybe to get some comfort from his presence, but she was giving all her attention to Rikku, trying to calm her down.

Odin was on the other helicopter’s side and Noctis felt pretty stuck, sitting between Lightning and Stella. Storm was glaring at him under his grey hair and looked incredibly mad.

“You’ve been pretty rash out there. You could have killed someone.” The kid whispered between his clenched teeth.

Noctis blinked, unable to believe he was getting a sermon from his own son.

“Moreover, you could have killed mom. What were you trying to achieve by showing off? You don’t control the Radiance. You don’t even know what it is.”

“No, he’s right. What I did was wrong and irresponsible...” Noctis sighed.

“Storm!” Stella whispered, biting her lips...

“But it seems that there was only a few wounded and no deaths among the civilians, my good sir.” Odin observed with his aristocratic voice.

“You’re sure lifting my spirit with comments like that. Anyway, who’s that guy?!” Noctis asked angrily now.

“He’s my summon spirit,” Lightning replied. “Storm kinda forced him on me.”

It was the father’s turn to glare at the kid and the said kid flushed at the idea he was suddenly the one in fault.

“I didn’t know he would linger in our world after being summoned! The ship was almost crashing and I couldn’t call him myself and that Beemoth...”

“Behemoth.” Stella corrected him.

Her intervention turned her silent and the five adults remained quiet for an instant, wondering what was coming next. Rikku had dried her tears after receiving a few explanations from Stella. It seemed that Seymour had done a lot of illegal things besides preparing himself to sacrifice people. He had organized kidnappings throughout the whole galaxy, and he had kept captive his victims on the Antlion’s deck, to keep them in place, ready to be used as sacrifice.

“I think I can understand for that Odin guy, he’s following Lightning since she’s his new master, Seymour was a summoner and told me a little about it... But this kid. What is he doing here? Why is he talking like this? How old is he? And what... What gives him the right to arrest Seymour? I would have understand if it had been any of you grown-ups, but that boy...”

“Well, we weren’t expecting Storm to act on a wimp like that,” Lightning hissed between her teeth.
“But everything about him is unpredictable.”

“Unpre...what? I’ve never heard this word before...”

Noctis sighed. That boy was so brilliant and lost at the same time.

“Does unforeseen sounds any clearer to you?”

“It has something to do with the future, right? Mom, is miss Lightning making fun of me?”

“Why don’t you explain instead of messing around!” Rikku snapped, furious of being left unanswered.

“Well... Our covers are already blown for the spy’s job... Might as well explain her that Storm is working with us for our organization.” Lightning stated, explaining it more or less just saying that.

“You’re kidding, right? He’s just a little kid!”

“I can hear you, missy, don’t pretend that I don’t!” Storm warned her.

Noctis chuckled at that. Somehow, the kid reminded him a lot of himself. At that time, when the streets were his only home. The time when family was but a nightmare of people dying all around him. Storm’s reality had been hell except from Stella’s presence. And still, the poor woman looked so nervous right now.

“Don’t address her like that!” Stella told him.

“But mommy...”

Lightning looked really pissed, if she already wasn’t enough. Her hand was almost crushing Noctis’ fingers now. It must be pretty hard for her to see Storm for such a long period of time.

“We’re landing!” Odin exclaimed suddenly as the silent was growing heavy.

“Good, this means I’ll get some real answers about what’s going on.”

“You really wanna know more about all of this? If you get involved with the Faction, you’ll have a lot of trouble forgetting all of this and living a normal life.”

“My life never was normal to begin with. Do you know any normal girl that got her husband almost killed during their honeymoon?”

“I’ve seen a lot worse.” Stella sighed.

...

A few minutes later, Rikku was meeting with Jihl Nabat, Rufus’ assistant in everything involving meeting civilians. Lightning and Noctis were first asked to fill a report before to be freed by their superiors. While Raven was sent right back to Stella’s office –as a G.I., she could request his presence by snapping her finger- Lightning was forced to undergo some tests, because of her new summon spirit. Odin seemed rather surprise by all the technology around and the young pink haired woman wondered when he was supposed to vanish from heir sight. Not that she dared to ask him. He looked so strong and proud, she was a bit impressed by his presence. And she didn’t want to make him hungry. He was carrying those terrible swords with him.

“Unhand me, woman, I won’t remove this armor of mine! What are you doing to my master?”
The scientists were connecting some cables to Light’s skin, to check her pulse, brainwaves and much more.

“Don’t worry, it’s completely harmless.”

“I don’t get your world. It’s been a pretty long time since I’ve been summoned here. Is this planet Earth?”

“Yup.” Quistis replied as she started running the scan over Lightning.

“When are we?” Odin asked eagerly.

Lightning was pretty curious about this guy. He was so tall and large, all clothed in this flashy armor. She couldn’t see even a spot of skin, except from the tips of his fingers, his hands wrapped in gauntlet and a very small part of his neck. As he heard the date, he nearly collapsed to the floor.

“This far in time? Has mankind forgotten about us?”

“I don’t know about us. We’ve developed a lot of technology that benefits to us as much as having summoned spirit. And magic has become quite rare, except for Materia.”

“What’s that, milady?”

“I like this guy, you heard how he called me?” Quistis almost squealed from joy.

“Yeah, whatever... Can’t I go see Noctis now?”

“You mean Raven? I heard you too got back together. That was pretty fast after all this time.”

“Oh shut up!”

Lightning was eager to see him, but it wasn’t to jump right back in his arms or congratulate him for his good job on their mission. She wanted real explanation about everything. From both him and Stella. And Storm could used some spanking. That brat was starting to get on her nerves.

“My dear master seems pretty determined to achieve her goals. I like women with such spirits! I just wish she weren’t using this kind of words.”

“You know, Odin, you’re pretty weird, for a summon spirit.” Quistis observed, half smiling.

“Oh, my last master used to say that. He was a funny man himself. I wonder why people gets the impression I’m weird. I was a god before to be a spirit, and I got a human form, unlike Carbuncles and Fenrir. It’s only normal that I can talk and think by myself. So then, how is it I’m the only one drawing this conclusions? Am I that much different of summon spirit?”

“Well, usually, summon spirit doesn’t linger after they were summoned and used in battle.”

“This isn’t a video game, milady, I’m much more than just a fighter! Using my skills and strength only on the battlefield would be an outrageous waste!”

Lightning sighed as he kept on talking. He must have been pretty bored from remaining where the spirits all went after being summoned. But still, what had she gotten herself into this time?

...“Storm, go to your room now. I need to talk with your father.”
Noctis had never thought he’d heard something like that. Especially while he’d be the said father. Somehow, his throat suddenly felt really tight. And Storm looked just as shocked as his dad. His eyes were wide with surprise. This had to be one of the first time that his mother was brushing him away from things, telling him to go in his room. As if he was a little kid!

“You can’t be serious?! It concerns me too and...!”

“I think you’ve gotten involve into this way too much. You’re still the kid here and we’re the adults. Go and get some sleep.”

“But mom...”

“We’ll talk all together later; just do as I say right now!”

Storm looked sad and at a total loss of what he was supposed to do right now. He wanted to run up to his mother and hide in her arms, but she looked so angry and tired. She had been hurt during Noctis and Seymour’s fight. She wasn’t showing it right now, but he knew. He had heard her yells. She had done everything she could in all the few months of his life to prevent him from seeing her wounded or hurt. After all, he could become quite dangerous if something was to happen to her. And there was no way she was letting him losing control. His newly awakened dad was already enough problems.

Pouting for one of the first time in front of his dad, he looked away and crossed his slender arms over his chest.

“Unrational...” he whispered to himself as he went to his room.

So, Stella and Storm were living in the head quarters? Noctis was going from surprise to surprise. But after all, Storm was a real mine of information over the Faction, they couldn’t take any risk as to let him live out in the open, where the Feds could have kidnapped him easily.

“He’s so cute... I just can’t stay angry at him. But he really went too far this time. Taking all those decisions by himself...” Stella sighed as she let herself fall in a chair, in front of a small wooden desk.

“I’m sorry about what happened on the ship. I lost it. Again...”

“You don’t have to resent yourself for it. It was partly my fault too. I let you get into a new mission before to even teach you how to use your Radiant Powers...”

“I’m getting sick of hearing about those...”

“You didn’t get your wounds treated, did you?”

Noctis raised one brow, asking himself why something as trivial as that should be of her concerned. Was she going to turn back into his physician?

“What about you, huh, Stella? I heard you had a few problems on your side. Storm sure sounded worried about you.”

“He’s always worried about something...”

Noctis bit his lips. He wasn’t meaning to talk about the whole Storm matter now. He was bound to get angry if he thought of what all the crazy Faction’s scientists must have done to... get Storm to be born. Just trying to phrase anything related to it made him sick. But then again, maybe was it
because he had just too many things on his mind that he couldn’t get anything done right.

“Stella. Who decided… Whose idea was it… to take my cells and create Storm?”

She looked up instantly, her face even paler than before. She looked so tired and lost herself. He missed that cheerful smile she had faked the first day they’d met. He was angry at her for accepting all of this and didn’t really want to know her reason to accept to get in such a deal. He had already asked her. The subject made both of them so touchy. They weren’t related by anything, but the very small start of a friendship. He had thought that he could trust her. And he had. But she had already stabbed him in the back, right when he was in his coma, defenceless and unaware.

“It was… It was G.I. one.” She whispered, looking away from him, unable to withstand his scrutinizing gaze.

“The… the big boss you mean?”

She nodded. Noctis’d never thought he would get the big boss’ eyes over him any day in his life. Most G.I. were unknown to the public. The first one of them was the Faction’s founder. Nobody had ever seen him, which sounded false somehow, the guy or woman had to start somewhere with some agents after all… But then again, it was almost a legend. G.I. one…

“What’s their interest in a human bomb? I mean, the Radiant Powers. Can’t it do anything but destruction?”

“Just destruction would have been enough for them, you know. But there’s more to it. Radiance is about light after all.”

“Light?” he repeated.

The first picture coming to his head was Lightning, and somehow, Stella understood she had chosen the wrong word.

“Anyway, I guess we’ll have time to train you with this side of the Radiant powers later.”

“Okay. So what was it you wanted to talk with me about?”

She sighed deeply as she leaned back in her chair.

“About Storm. And everything that happened with Seymour.”

“Ummm…”

“I know, I have the same question… Where to begin? You know, Storm still doesn’t know what to think about you.”

“As if I had a clue on my side. I know how hard it is not to have a father all too well. But I can’t… I mean, it’s already so hard for Lightning.”

“I guess it is, with everything that has happened…”

“No, it’s not just that… I… I don’t know if I’m up to it, but I want to try and be a father for Storm. A real one. But I can’t fake I’m with you or anything and I’d still be with Lightning. And I don’t know. If any of them could get along. Or if I could even live through it. I never settled down with anyone and I’ve lived most of my life out on the streets and ghettos. The Faction has sold my apartment to some rich guy. They took my bank accounts and even my life insurance while I was
out. And with the mess I just made, I guess I really can’t complain about it.”

Stella was now massaging her temples. She looked pretty tensed and worn out. Noctis sat on her desk, crossing his legs right next to her –his boots were almost brushing against her chair-, expecting her to get mad at him or something. He knew she was a neat freak and he was still covered with dirt. She didn’t even gaze at him.

“Okay, I guess we should focus on something else right now than the prospect of me taking Storm to my place anytime soon. “

“Changes can’t be good for him.”

“Everything changes in life. And you’re overprotecting him. He needs to go out and to act like a normal kid.”

Stella looked ready to cry as she looked up at him.

“Everyone tells me that all the time. But…”

“I bet this wasn’t any easier for you, Stella. But you never had to face this all alone. Storm isn’t a mission from the Faction. He was a little imposed on me, I can’t deny it, but… He’s still a kid. And despite everything, he has good intentions. I don’t know if the little guy already hates me or not. He said you got hurt because of me. And he looked so mad.”

“It’s almost nothing. Anyway, I’m not the only one who got a little hurt, but it seems that you never kill anyone when you lose control of your powers. At least, so far, we’ve been lucky.”

Noctis didn’t talk back to her, though her way of saying it was pretty harsh. He was trying to understand her right now. After all, this woman was the mother of his son. The thought bugged him. He barely knew her. At least, if she had been an ancient love, or something… He felt dirty just by being close to her. As if he was cheating on Lightning just by being in the same room as Stella. It was scary. He had to keep his feeling far away from his mind. To remember how he had considered Stella at first. She had been his friend. She had helped him back up when the whole world had forgotten about him. Then again, at that time, she had been lying and hiding things to him. But Lightning had done the same. Were all girls like that? Was it just him being sexist and selfish? Human nature was filled with lies and bitterness.

“You know Stella, I’ve killed many people in my life. I was a mercenary before to become an agent. I hurt innocents in the past. And I’m not always proud of who and what I am. Don’t let your pity for my situation clouds your judgment. I’m not a good or a bad guy. But I know one thing. A son knows when his mother’s hurts. And if she tries to hide it to him, it will only pain him more. Sharing pain means that you trust the people with whom you share, right?”

“But... I really trust him.” She sighed, crossing her arms and wincing a little as she did.

“Did you hurt your arm?” he asked her as she tried to stroke her right shoulder to ease the pain.

“I... It just got dislocated when I was thrown in a wall; I replaced it before to check on Storm in all the commotion of the ship.”

Noctis looked down an instant, understanding what he had put every civilian on the ship through with this abuse of power. Most of them mustn’t have understood what was happening to them. They hadn’t done anything to live something like that.

“It still hurts a lot, huh?”
“Well...” She blushed as she looked away.

“Let me take a look,” he suggested as he jumped back on his feet and reached out his hand, to pat her shoulder. “I’m used to this kind of injury.”

After being reluctant, she accepted to let him check her shoulder. It felt weird, since she had always been the physician and he, the patient. She removed her jacket and let him stroke her red and throbbing shoulder, and even massage it. She was terribly tensed and she couldn’t hold back a little moan of pain at first. The articulation wasn’t entirely replaced. Pinching his lips together, he forced the bone back in its socket, as gently as he could. Stella bit her lips not to yell.

“You shouldn’t have remained like that...” he sighed as he kept on massaging both her shoulders. Slowly, the pain vanished from her body and she leaned back in her chair. Noctis sure knew what he was doing...

“What do you think you are doing?!” Lightning abruptly asked, taking both of them by surprise. She had just entered the room, Odin seemed to be gone –in fact he was still with Quistis- and she seemed furious. From her point of view, her Noctis was massaging Stella’s shoulders, skin to skin, since the G.I. was wearing a tight sleeveless white top under her jacket. It was pretty suspicious.

“Light... I... You’re getting the wrong idea here!”

“He was massaging mom to ease the pain from her dislocated shoulder. I would have done it if my hands were strong and big enough, but I can’t... What’s wrong with this? Why do you always get angry at mom when she’s around Raven?”

Lightning took a step back as she realized Storm was standing right next to her. He must have sneaked out of his room while Noctis and Stella were still talking together.

“Well I...”

“It’s because of me right? After all, I’m the only connection between them. If I didn’t exist...”

“Oh Storm...” Stella sighed.

Lightning understood that she better keep her anger for herself as long as Storm could see it.

“You shouldn’t say something like that. No matter how you were born, you being alive can make a whole difference in other people’s lives. You make your own worth with your actions.”

“Worth?” the little boy repeated, clearly confused.

It sounded weird, since he knew so many difficult worlds and never stopped himself from using them in front of others... Lightning was fidgeting in front of the door, feeling even more nervous than she already was. She couldn’t seem to understand that kid.

“Hmmm...”

“I think what we all really need is to settle down and relax a little after everything that happened.” Noctis interfered. “And Light isn’t mad at you Storm. If she has a bone to pick, it’s with me.”

Saying that, he walked away from Stella and all the way up till he was standing next to Lightning.

“Take good care of your mom, alright? I’ll come back soon and you’ll teach me how to use the Radiance.”
Storm looked even more puzzled, but Noctis ruffled his hair clumsily before to grab Lightning by the arm and to walk out.

“What was that?” Light asked, getting away from him in the corridor.

“He’s just as traumatized as us, okay? He’s been born for eight months. He shouldn’t even be able to walk or to talk and he already has to go through all these impossible problems.”

“But...”

“The situation isn’t fair to anyone, but... At least, don’t take it out on Stella or Storm. It wasn’t their fault. The big boss ordered this mess. And Rufus accepted to go through with it. If you have someone to hate and be angry at, it’s him and all the scientists that... worked on this crazy project.”

“Noctis... We don’t have to talk about it if you...”

“I’ll never feel like it, Light. And I know you must be pretty scared and mad even if you’re trying to hide it.”

“Well, you always were perceptive for this kind of things...” she sighed.

“If there was something I could do to turn back time, you know I would do it.”

“Don’t say things like that! You’re just like Storm saying he’d better not existed. Somehow, all that we’ve lived brought us here, and we’d better have understood something from it.”

“Okay... So what have you understood, Lightning?”

“I’ve understood that no matter what happens, no matter who are our enemies or what we will be fighting for, I’ll never be myself or able to fight without you around. And I know that this doesn’t make me weak. Because you made me stronger.”

“You’re too good to me.” He whispered, warping his arms around her.

“I’ll be how I want to be to you, alright? Let me judge about it.”

“Okay,” was all he could mutter before that they exchanged one long and tender kiss.

As they parted, they both knew none of them was as strong as they wanted. But they were going to put all the pieces back in the right place. Even if the puzzle had grown bigger and much more complicated. They were still a team. And they would get everything straight together. As they always should have been...

To be continued...
Chapter 21

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part VIII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th

Location: Boston, American States – Squall’s apartment-

Mission: Protecting the ancient Aeris Gainsborough at all cost

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Warning: It seems that agent Squall is slightly unstable...


…

The phone rang. Since Aeris was still sleeping, Squall hurriedly picked it up, to prevent her from waking up. But as he answered, he was pretty unsure of being able to talk to anyone. Especially to the person calling.

“Squall speaking.”

“You’re always so formal, Squall...”

“Rufus? What do you want with me?”

“I’ve got a mission for you, Squall. A big one.”

“…”

“It involves your protégée, the Cetra.”

“What?!?”

“We saw you recently with her. You’re taking the protection role to a very personal level, don’t you?”

“That’s... That’s a misunderstanding.”

“That looked more like a kiss to me and the others, but hey, you can call it as you want. Anyway, you’ll like this mission. You’ll be able to kiss her even more. We’re sending you two to a ball. Under Count Leon’s name... There will be big aristocrats around. And Sephiroth should be there. I want you to check on him. And check his interest in the Cetra. If she seems valuable to him, then she’ll be for us.”

“Sephiroth?!”

“Yeah, the one and only. Feds’ pet dog. You’re feeling up to it?”

“I don’t know... Aeris is still...”

“Don’t forget what she is, Squall. Don’t go acting casual with her. She’s an Ancient. She’s the biggest source of intel we could get our hands on. She has the knowledge for all kind of things.
Like weapons... She’s met Sephiroth once in her life. He’ll recognize her. Maybe that he’ll let some info slip out if they meet again. Maybe that some other aristocrat will know her, of her capabilities. We need to know who’s chasing her.”

“Why?”

“You don’t have to think about it, Squall. Just get the intel for us. Protect the Cetra from other people. Keep playing her friend. Win her affection if you can. We’ll need her soon.”

“Rufus...!”

Squall wanted to get angry at him, but that would give him away. He forced himself to stay calm, but the very idea of bringing Aeris into such an operation... She was so shy around people, so scared of being recognized and tracked down at new. She had helped him in the last few days and he wanted to repay her for that. Why couldn’t he? Rufus was asking him to take her to the lions’ den!

“Your mission will take place tomorrow night. If she doesn’t have one already, get her a fancy dress so that she fits in the Winter Ball of Rosch Society.”

“Rosch? You mean Yaag Rosch?!”

“Who else? Anyway, this discussion is over. You’ll get further instruction later tonight.”

With that, Rufus hung up. Squall glared at the phone, as if it could change anything. Then he started walking back and forth in the living room, trying to understand why he was so mad. Because Rufus was referring to Aeris as a thing? Because he was really starting to like her? Because this darn Sephiroth and other Feds’ goons would be there and that those creeps had indirectly caused Rinoa’s death?

“She’s my friend.” He told himself. “And now, they’re forcing her to join the Faction’s missions just to get the intel they want. They don’t care about people. They doesn’t even ask for our opinion.”

“Hey, Squall! Good morn... What... what’s wrong?” Aeris asked as she walked out of her room.

“Why should anything be wrong?” he retorted.

“I don’t know. But you’re pacing.”

He stopped instantly, sighing to himself. He was still so vulnerable, he couldn’t fool her or hide her anything.

“I just got a call from my boss. They want to send us on a mission.”

“Us?”

“You and me.”

“Oh. I didn’t think they would ask me to do a mission this soon. But then again, why would they take the trouble of having me guarded by you if I wasn’t going to be of some use to them... I should have seen it coming.”

“Aeris, don’t talk like that...”

“Why shouldn’t I? I’m just stating the truth. I’m not sad or anything. I was getting a little bored
anyway of not doing anything. No stress at all during so many days...” she whined, pretending to be eager to get to this mission.

_She’s lying_, he realized.

And that made him sad. Though he had thought nothing could hurt him after Rinoa’s death, he realized it was the contrary. He wanted to protect Aeris even more. He couldn’t lose anyone else.

“I sure was boring lately,” he admitted.

“Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that!”

“I know,” he smiled at her.

“Well then... What’s that mission about?”

“It’s a ball that we’re supposed to attend to. So that we meet a certain Sephiroth.”

“What?!”

Her yell was so strong and filled with panic, Squall could almost see her fear coming out from her. Maybe was he able to see it, since he could sense spiritual energy and all... She certainly knew Sephiroth. But not in a good way.

“Aeris...”

“I can’t! They can’t ask me to meet him. I don’t ever wanna see him again!” she cried before to turn around and lock herself up in her room.

That startled Squall. What kind of reaction was that? He’d never expect something like this coming from Aeris! It was the first time she wasn’t honest and straightforward to him. Alright, it was quite honest to yell that she wasn’t planning to see Sephiroth ever again. But what could be her connection to this Jenova’s freak? Why would she look so scared just as his mention?

He remembered that time in the hospital, when he had seen parts of her memories by mistake, when he had touched her arm. She had asked him if any silver haired man was there. And Sephiroth was silver haired after all. There were only a few men amongst the universe with this particularity.

As he called her name and knocked on the door, he heard her crying and felt mortified. What has this man done to her to put her in this state? What was he supposed to do to calm her down?

After staying on the other side of the door, listening to her sobs, he decided he had enough of this. This was his room after all! He unlocked the door using his own keys and opened it slightly. Aeris was all curled up on herself, sitting on the bed and crying to her heart’s content. He felt his heart skipping a bit at this sight. This was so wrong. Aeris was always smiling and playful. How could so much pain hide beneath her tender smile?

He walked up to the bed, sat next to her, and clumsily brought her in a friendly embrace.

“We don’t have to go if you don’t want to. Rufus’ reasons are stupid anyway.”

“But I...”

“Whatever happened in the past, I’m here to protect you now, Aeris. And I won’t let Sephiroth or anyone else lay even a finger on you.”
“I don’t need protection,” she managed to say between two sobs, trying to swallow down her tears. “I just... If I meet him, it will all come back.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The nightmare.” She replied.

As she grabbed on to him and he secured his grip on her shoulders, as if she could fall or something, he saw in a sudden flash what she meant.

He could hear all the voices mixing in her head. All the orders barked around her as she was pushed around. The taste of blood in her mouth as they were forcing all the knowledge out. Of the world’s making. From the planet’s strength. From her unlimited powers that could be unlock only by... Aqua eyes, staring at her in the darkness, as she tried to make herself as small as possible in her cage. The strong hands forcing her up and out of her prison. Sitting her in that torture chair, where they would force her to let every Ancients’ secrets out. The spiritual energy rushing into her, sapping her strength. And the pain. The tremendous pain, it was a mystery she was still alive and able to smile now.

“Let go,” she asked him, bringing him back to reality. “Let go, get away from me!”

She slapped him in the face, which made him let go of her instantly. As they parted, they stared into each other eyes, Aeris still crying and unable to believe that he could see everything so easily, even when she was awake, Squall trying to understand why she was mad at him.

“I was just trying to...”

“To help... I know.” She whispered, looking down, wrapping her arms around herself to get some comfort. “Maybe was I too exposed just now... Since they did all their experiments on me, I had trouble controlling the pouring out of my memories.”

He just kept staring at her, trying to find something to say. But the more he thought, the less he knew what to do. Aeris dried her tears with the back of her hand, breathing strongly.

“I... I overreacted,” she tried to apologize.

“I don’t think so.”

“Sephiroth is some kind of an ancient too, you know. That’s why... He seems to have some kind of... attraction to me. And if I was to see him now. I wouldn’t have the strength.”

“Of course you’d have it. You were able to keep me on the right track during the last few days.”

She slightly smiled at that. Maybe was he right. Maybe was she really overreacting. But Sephiroth meant so many bad memories. So much pain.

“If we go to this... ball. You won’t leave me, won’t you?”

“I’ll be by your side for the entire ball.”

“I don’t have any flashy dress.”

“We’ll get you one.” He said. He was reassured to see she was calming down.

“Alright then. I’ll consider it.”
They exchanged another smile. And Squall’s stomach grumbled, reminding them this was still the early morning and that none of them had eaten anything. They got up and went to the kitchen. As if nothing had happened, they made breakfast together, somehow, as an old couple would. And even if she had cried and even if Squall wasn’t sure that he had understood every flashbacks he had just seen from her, it felt alright. Simply alright.

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 22th
Location: Boston, Black Faction’s HQ
Mission: completed, next mission pending
Agents: Lightning, Raven
Warning: Raven is still dangerous and doesn’t control his power. Proceed with care when meeting with him...

...  

“I must insist. You can’t be allowed to see these files!” Elena declared.

Noctis glared at her, which would have normally worked, if the question hadn’t been so delicate.

“Lightning has doubts over the fact I could have been in a coma for the last two years. As he always does, Rufus must have gotten the whole thing on tape. Just let her see it. Not everything, but enough for her to trust me on this. I’ve lost two years of my life, Elena. They’ve stolen me the birth of my first kid, and most everything that made my decency and dignity. I can’t lose Lightning again.”

“I don’t understand why she suddenly needs to see it.”

“I myself have no proof. All we got is what the scientists and Rufus said. And I don’t trust them that much anymore.”

“But...!”

“She’s done her best to stand up by my side so far, but she doubts everything. And she has every right to doubt. All of this is pure madness!”

“You’re right, I understand... But Rufus will kill me if I let any of you...”

“Noctis, it’s alright, let it go...” Lightning tried to convince him.

She wasn’t that sure if she really wanted to see. But she had whispered something under her breath a moment ago. About this whole thing being a nightmare. About this being way too easy for him to walk back into her life. She had accepted everything so far, because they were stuck together. Because she wanted to believe. But as her feet got back on earth, suddenly, she started to doubt. Could Noctis have lie? Where was the proof of this so called coma? Why couldn’t Storm really be the result of a hidden love with Stella back in the past? This whole story was too big to be a lie, she knew it, but some pieces of it weren’t fitting at all in the picture.

This was all way too suspicious. And she needed proof. Even if she didn’t really want to need it.
“I’ve got nothing to hide. I said the truth about everything. I’m not falling for Stella and I haven’t known her for more than a few weeks. And before that this is clear in your mind, I won’t have you going anywhere else than in this room, where we can find all the truth of what happened to me during the last two years.”

“Alright, go on in.” Elena whispered. “Just stop arguing in the hallway.”

Lightning followed Noctis in the archive room. It took him a few seconds to find the numerous discs covering his two years long coma and to put them in the disc reader. The first video started with his panicked arrival, right back from the explosion he got involved in, two years ago. He was covered with burns and cuts and Lightning had to sit down, to accept that this was real. It had all been filmed. She took control of the media player and forwarded through the different videos. The hour indicated in a corner and the date were always reminding her of the time he’d lost. And as she advanced in time and started seeing Stella working around Noctis, she felt her stomach churning in protest. She wasn’t sure what to expect.

Just seeing Noctis’ sleeping form standing still on the mat, his naked body covered with cables and sophisticated machinery, under this transparent cage... it was almost unbearable. And after a few minutes of watching, a group of scientists joined the small group of people looking after him. They surrounded him. And she already knew what they were going to do. This couldn’t all be faked. Noctis had really gone through a two years coma. And while he was out and unaware... She looked over her shoulder and saw his face growing really pale. He was white as a ghost. On the screen, the scientists were getting down to business. And to think that something like this could have been done, that he’d been invaded in his privacy and life like this by all those unknown people. It was horrible.

Lightning stopped the disc, her heart pounding in her chest, her stomach twisting from the very thought of what Noctis had lived. And she was mortified to think he had had to see it again. Suddenly, she felt ready to forgive anything. It wasn’t his fault. He would never have gotten himself in something like that willingly. And right now, as he was leaning his shoulders against the nearest wall, he seemed so desperate.

“You didn’t have to let me see it...”

“At least, we know...” he whispered.

His voice was trembling. The sickening pictures were still moving under his eyes. Even if he kept them wide open, he could see those men around him and... He shivered, bringing one hand to his face.

“I know my memories were right and not just playing tricks on me.” He bitterly laughed.

“Noctis..."

“I didn’t have you watching this to pity me, Light.”

“But Noct...”

“Don’t talk like that, okay? I’m still... I’m stronger than I was then! I won’t ever be that vulnerable again. I won’t let anyone manipulate me, ever.”

“My vision of you won’t change Noctis. You’re still you, even after that.” She tried to reassure him, reaching out her hands to grab his shoulders.

He pushed her away with a yell of anger and she jumped a little.
“I’m not just me, Light. I’m...! I’m still a man, right?” he asked her, his voice dying slowly in his throat.

She felt the urge to cry at his question. She could understand what he was feeling. She had been through the exact same thing when the scientists from the Feds had killed her child and done experiments on her while she was unconscious.

“Of course you are!” she replied, walking up to him, opening her arms to hug him.

But he kept her away.

“You have no idea... how used I feel. And how dirty...”

He looked down to his feet and she snapped.

“I don’t care how unworthy you think you are! Let me help you, Noctis! We’ll erase this. We’ll fix everything. Together.”

Her arms hugged him in a warm embrace and for the nth time in such a short amount of time, he felt ready to break down. Was he really worth it? He hadn’t been able to protect her in the past. Hadn’t been able to save their child. He was imposing another child— which had been imposed on him too, but which wasn’t her child-. It was all so unfair to her. To both of them. He held her close.

“Lightning...”

“I trust you, Noctis. I won’t doubt anymore. Let’s just try to... get back to the couple we were.”

He was mad at himself for always being the one needing to be comforted. Had he always been this soft, or was it all because of what had happened to them in the last two years?

He swallowed back his pain. He had to be strong for her too.

“I think we need some vacation.” He whispered.

“And you’ll have them, Raven, Lightning.” A gentle voice whispered.

Looking up, surprised not to have notice the other presence in the room, they saw Tseng, looking at them with half a smile. Tseng was notorious in the Faction for being the head agent of the American branch, before that he had accepted to become a G.I. He was the seventh one. And he had once been one of Noctis’ best friends, among Prompto and Ignis, two other agents that had been lost while on duty.

“I heard you’ve been through a lot. And it’s almost Christmas. So I thought you’d needed a little peace for once, after this crazy mission with Seymour. What do you think about three weeks to clear up your mind and get back to your ancient life, Lucis?”

Tseng was also the only person that could call Noctis by his second name and get away with it in Lightning’s knowledge.

“Sounds good to me.” Noctis replied, a shy smile perking up on his lips. “As long as Lightning gets some vacation too.”

“Of course, you’re both on vacation. You’re not our only agents you know.”

Tseng didn’t say that to sound unkind and Lightning laughed.
Sometimes, it feels as if we’re the only one you have to send out.”

“Oh, Squall should do the next few missions. And Reno will spend Christmas’ day working.”

“Sounds good, I can’t wait to congratulate him on that.” Lightning’s smile grew bigger.

It felt good to see a friendly face which had good news for once. The idea of spending the three next weeks of her life with Noctis cheered her up even more. She would make sure Stella wouldn’t keep him away from her and that he settled back to his ancient life. They would slowly relearn to be together, as a couple. Not just because they were faking to be together on a mission. Not just because she was in distress mentally or emotionally. But because she wanted to be with him. Even after everything she had seen and learned. It would have taken much more than that to stop her.

“Are we free to go right now?” Lightning asked.

“Well, as long as you two keep at least one of your cells around so we can call you.” Tseng replied.

“Don’t worry.”

They walked out of the room. They both needed a lot of time alone, to think. Alone together. Without any mic or camera around to spy on them. They borrowed one of the Faction’s car and Lightning drove it all the way back to her apartment. She called her brother, Cloud, to warn him about their coming, but he didn’t answer. At this moment, Cloud was still at the army HQ, trying to teach Yuna how to use a gun.

“Guess we’ll have my apartment only for us.”

“That’s good. I’m not sure if I feel ready to meet with your brother.”

“I’m sure he would be happy to see you.”

“He’ll be, only if he thinks you’re happy with having me around.”

“Well, I’m happy.”

Saying that, she parked in the back alley next to her block and they exchanged a smile. It had been sometimes since Noctis had been out in the real world. He looked even paler under the burning sun. But as they got out of the car, he hurried himself and held the door to her block opened for her. And that reminded her of his gallantry for the time when they had started dating each other. And though he hadn’t, she had forgotten everything seen about the men taking his cells to create Storm. All she knew was that she was back in her home and that Noctis was with her. The Noctis she had been longing for all this time. As they entered the apartment, she almost threw herself in his arms, pinning him to the door. This could have ended up with love making in the middle of the living room if a certain knight in shining armour hadn’t cleared his throat at this very moment.

They parted from each other instantly, taken by surprise, to look up and see...

“Odin?! You’re still here?” Lightning choked.

“I must follow my master wherever she goes! I can only remain in this world if I stand in a 10 meter radius around my master!” he explained himself.

“But... You shouldn’t remain this long after that I summoned you.”

“We didn’t take the time to set any rule about me being around or not, milady. I’m sorry to
interrupt, really, but I’d like to be properly acquainted to this young sir.”

“Hmmm. If I do as you ask, will you give us some space?”

“As long as I know this good lord hasn’t any ill pretention towards you, milady.”

Noctis frowned, forcing himself not to let his mouth drop open from the shock. This summon spirit was something else.

“Okay, well, Odin, this is Noctis Lucis Caelum. My boyfriend.”

“Boy what?” Odin repeated, sounding dumbfounded.

“He’s my lover.” She added.

“Oh, I had asserted that much, milady.” Odin replied, looking away from under his silver and golden helmet.

“I trust him and I love him a great deal Odin. As for this crazy knight, well, it seems that I’m stuck with him around for the rest of my life, or so.” Lightning said, turning back to Noctis.

Her comment made him smile.

“Alright, alright, I’m going back to the spiritual world for now. Yggdrasil must be getting lonely and I’m a little nervous without my mount. But don’t think that I’m trying to embarrass you or something. I just want to be useful. If you need any help, just call me, master. I shall always heed your call!”

With that said, he vanished, which made Lightning sighed with relief.

“I like his style, but he’s a little overdramatic for me.” She whispered.

“He sounds pretty possessive of his master.”

“You’re not jealous from a summon spirit, now, Noctis?!”

“Well, having a real knight in shining armour could get to your head.”

“Silly!” she retorted, giving him a light punch on the head. “All I want is you, you should know it!”

That set back their previous mood. Not the punch, but her last comment. He resumed kissing her. A little more passionately than usual, as if he was running away from something. And she knew what it was. But she was ready to run with him, and to let his fear burn her all from head to toes. He started undoing her clothes and as they fought together to find their way to her room - or at least, the sofa! - they stumbled on something, making the phone fall from the kitchen counter to the floor. Thus, it never rang. They wouldn’t have answered anyway...

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th

Location: Boston, Serah’s and Snow’s apartment

Mission: Attending a Christmas supper with Yuna around
Yuna got down, feeling a little unsure now that she was facing the block. What was she doing? Did she really want to meet with his sister and step brother? This was certainly going to be awkward. Then again, she didn’t want to be alone or to leave Cloud’s side. Following him in the stair way, trying to replace her hair that had been all tangled by the wind, she realized she wasn’t even bringing a gift. Cloud had his gift under his left arm, wrapped in a small package. She wondered what he could get to his little sister. As he ringed the door bell, she was shifting uneasily from one feet to the other.

“Hey, Yuna, don’t get too nervous. It could be contagious. Serah’s pregnant and I wouldn’t want her to overexert herself or to get anxious over this.”

“What? She’s...”

“She’ll be happy to see you, just smile and relax. You’re a guest. She invited you here.”

“Right.”

The door swung open and Cloud’s sister appeared in the doorway, beaming them with a wide smile.

“Cloud, I’m so glad you were able to come. It’s so rare to have you around here.”

She gave him a hug before to drag him inside. Yuna awkwardly followed. She observed the light pink brown hair of the young woman, and her blue eyes, reminding her of Cloud’s mako eyes. Unlike her brother, Serah had wavy hair and smiled easily. She took Yuna hands in hers and showed her around the place. Yuna was surprised when she met Snow, Serah’s fiancé, who was even more built and tall than Cloud. Next to him, Serah looked like a little girl, but it was easy to see that this giant was a big teddy bear, like Brother and Tidus. For once, Snow had removed his black bandana. His hair looked longer that way and were slightly spiky on the back of his head.

“Wow, Cloud, you brought such a cutie... Is she really in the army?!’

“I’m... I’m just a backup soldier in fact.” Yuna whispered, blushing and looking away.

“Don’t embarrass her like that, Snow! You could say hello to her first.” Serah reprimanded him, frowning her brows.

“I’m sorry babe, you’re right. I have no manners... Well, welcome to our place, Yuna! We don’t have anything fancy, but suit yourself!”

She blushed even more and Cloud rolled his eyes. Snow was such a moron sometimes. Luckily, Serah was there and she dragged Yuna with her in the kitchen, to have a talk and get acquainted. Snow and Cloud remained together in the entrance, sharing an awkward silence.

Cloud had never been too friendly with the guys stealing his sisters from him. Serah being like a
daughter to him, he had eyed Snow like an enemy for a long time. Exchanging one look, the taller man wondering if his future brother-in-law was mad or not, they realized they should try to talk a little. At least, for appearances.

“Well, Serah told me the good news. Congratulation.” Cloud mumbled.

Snow smiled at that. This sounded like approbation.

“Thank you, bro. I don’t know if I’m ready, but she sure is. You know how much she loves kids.”

“Yeah.”

Cloud felt a little bad for bringing the subject. This reminded him so much of Lightning. How she had wanted her baby and grieved for losing it. He was scared of what it could make in the family if Serah was to learn about it. How would his sisters get along now? He wanted to punch Snow just for making his baby sister a woman. But at the same time, he was happy for Serah. She was living with a man who loved and protected her while letting her being free and happy. He would be the father of her children. He would share all of her life, as long as he had the strength to.

“Take good care of her, alright?”

“You don’t have to ask Cloud.”

“Of course I have.”

They fell back in silence. Their relationship as brothers-in-law had never been easy. Cloud had always feared that Snow would hurt Serah. They had caught into fights together, back in the days she had just started going out with him. Cloud remembered a few dirty tricks the big guy had pulled on him in those few fights. He had needed a whole session of treatment with Tifa afterwards. Snow had gotten in the hospital and Serah had sworn she would never forget any of them. But both man had been able to understand after some more quarrel and fights. Lightning had had another way of protesting, less direct than Cloud. They had played Serah’s parents for too long and they were still her brother and sister at the same time. It had been really hard for Snow to enter this family. Their bonds were so tight and strong, as if there wasn’t any place for anyone new.

“I heard you were on Pluto the other day...”

“Yeah, we went there.”

“You’re sure you wanna keep working for the army? Serah is really worried and...”

“I know... I could have chosen any job, but in the end... Rescuing people is what I do best.”

“You should have been a firefighter. You would have made an awesome firefighter.”

If some people are wondering, Snow’s job was to be a firefighter...

“Well, playing with fire isn’t my thing.”

This time, Snow didn’t let silence linger between them and find something new to say.

“Hey, thinking about playing. I’ve got this new video game. You’ve gotta tell me if it’s any more realistic than the last one.”

“Sounds good.”
If Snow and Cloud had trouble at getting along on most things, gaming was the total opposite. Snow collected all kind of consoles and games. He was especially used to shooters. And Cloud was almost unbeatable at those. Professional deformation obliged...

Yuna was happy to be with Serah. They were sitting at the counter of the kitchen, while the turkey was still roasting in the oven and chitchatting like two teenage girls.

“I’m really happy that Cloud could make a new friend. Lately, he sounded pretty depressed. You know, he’s still living with our sister, Lightning, his twin. Those two were like a father and a mother to me. It wasn’t easy for them...”

“He didn’t tell me much about it. We’re just friends you know. Though I was Tifa’s friend and she told me lots of things about him.”

“Oh, Tifa? How is she doing?”

“Pretty good. She’s in Canada right now.”

“I heard there’s still snow back there.”

“You mean real snow, right?”

“Huh?”

“It’s just, really confusing, with your boyfriend’s name and...” Yuna blushed saying that.

Now that the boys were out of the picture, she was talking a little too freely and felt ashamed for saying something so stupid... But Serah started to laugh.

“That’s right! With a brother named Cloud and a sister named Lightning, I’m just getting so used to these kinds of names. But it must be confusing. The fact is... I don’t really know what to talk about. I don’t have many friends of my age. How old are you Yuna? You’re around your twenties, but Cloud kept saying you were so younger than him...”

“Well, I’m turning twenty four in February.”

“Really? Wow, you’re older than me then!”

“What? But you look so mature!”

“Is this a way of saying I’m looking old?”

“Of course not. Anyway, next to Snow, you look like a school girl.”

“My students often think I’m one of their classmate at the start of school year.”

“So, you’re a teacher?”

“Yup! I graduated two years ago and got myself a job in a highschool. It’s so much fun, you couldn’t begin to imagine.”

“What do you teach?”

“History and geography are my favourites. But enough about me; tell me more about you!”

They were soon laughing as two friends and smiling, when a sudden yell of frustration made them
both jump.

“Damn, I’m death! Again!” Snow complained.

Cloud’s chuckles made them understand, though Yuna was surprised to think the two men were fighting against each other in a video game.

“Those two will never change. Cloud’s always doing all he can to beat Snow at everything...” Serah sighed.

“Well, all guys are like that.”

“I’m sure that if it was anyone else, Cloud wouldn’t have to prove himself in everything.”

For an instant, there was the hint of grieving in Serah’s eyes. It fade away as soon as Yuna saw it. The young teacher stroked her belly, falling silent.

“I heard from Cloud you were pregnant.” Yuna observed.

“He told you?”

“Yes. He sounded pretty nervous about it.”

Serah smiled at that.

“There’s still a few months left for him to prepare. He’ll only be an uncle, for heaven sake, why does he take this so seriously? Oh, I’m sorry Yuna, I didn’t mean to start talking about all our family’s problems.”

“I don’t call this family’s problems. Cloud cares about you and the baby. I think it’s lovely.”

“Cloud always was like that. Though he tries to hide it. He’s just like Snow beneath all his cold looks.”

Yuna blushed as she thought that Cloud was hotter and cuter than Snow in her opinion. He wasn’t as imposant and had just the shape that pleased her. She liked leaning over him on his bike, or being hugged in his arms. But she felt bad, somehow, to think about something like that in front of the sister of the guy!

“Beep!”

“Oh, the dinner’s ready. Stop shooting each other, guys, come and give us a hand to set the table.”

“Argh, he killed me again. You’re bro’s a cheater, Serah!”

“You’re hard to miss as a target, Snow, get over it.”

Yuna couldn’t help but smile. This was a real family. Cloud’s family. She felt so lucky to discover it like that. But as they settle the table and Serah got them sitting side by side, Yuna felt her face flushing again. It seemed she couldn’t do anything but blush around here. Snow wasn’t mad anymore about his numerous losses in the video games. He was looking after Serah and preventing her from lifting any plate or anything around the kitchen or the table. Cloud had suggested to help, but Serah said he was a guest, just as Yuna. Her pregnancy gave her the right to exploit her boyfriend and Snow sure seemed happy to be exploited. They exchanged a few kisses between each new plate he was bringing to the table.
This made Yuna nervous. She was sitting next to Cloud. The table was so small, their chairs had to be really close and their naked arms were brushing together at each of their move. Cloud didn’t seem to mind the contact. But somehow, this made her even more anxious, though she was happy about it too. What did Serah thought they were to each other Cloud and herself? Did Snow and Serah thought they were together?

_Oh my gosh_, Yuna thought as she started eating. _In what have I gotten myself?_

To be continued...
Chapter 22

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part IX

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th

Location: Boston, American States – Villiers apartment-

Mission: having fun without getting embarrassed(?)

Soldiers (out of duty) : Cloud Strife and Yuna Albhed

No warning for the moment.

Entry from Yuna’s mind. End of transmission.

...

“And then, Bunkle shocked him with its bolts! You should have seen Cloud’s face. His hair had never been that spiky!” Yuna laughed.

The wine was slowly making it easier to talk and to joke. Serah’s attitude and Snow’s carefree mood were helping too. Cloud looked just a little annoyed by this small anecdote from their trip to Pluto. They had eaten all the turkey, chitchatting as normal young people. The latest politic or sport’s event had been the central subject for a while. Yuna’s studies too. She was on winter’s break and was still expecting her grades. That started up a discussion over Serah’s job.

“The kids aren’t too rough on you?”

“Well, this isn’t the military school, Cloud, they’re normal kids.”

Cloud straightened up at her comment. He heard a reproach in it. After all, he had been to a military school. It was the only way to learn while he hadn’t any money to spend on it...

“Right... Some of them must be trying to boss everyone around.”

“They better be prepared if they want to take me on. I’m a tough nut to crack!”

“And that’s so right!” Snow went on. “You know, it reminds me how elusive she was when we first met. It was love at first sight, you see, but she was acting all shy and...”

“You just had to get her phone number to be sure you could reach her somehow.” Cloud completed. “He sure sounded surprise when I answered: caporal Strife reporting for duty sir, hi sir!”

“You didn’t answer like that?!” Yuna asked, her eyes widening with surprise.

“Of course. Every time a stranger called. It could have been one of my superiors.”

Serah burst in laughter as she remembered those old times. Back in the days she still lived with Cloud and Lightning. Back in the days they trusted her wholly, or so she thought at this time... Now, even if Cloud was letting down his defences and smiling, she felt that he was holding back. The sparkles in his eyes only got brighter when he would look at Yuna. His smile seemed wider too.
“Say, did you two really met because of the army?” Snow asked.

“Well, that’s right. I became a back-up soldier and ended up assigned to clean up his squad’s quarters.”

“Oh good lord, poor Yuna. Cloud’s room always was a battlefield!”

“His squad’s quarters are too.”

“Hey!” Cloud wanted to protest, but exchanging a quick gaze with both Serah and Yuna, he understood he couldn’t say anything to defend himself. Except for the rooms he shared with Lightning in their apartment, he wasn’t too clung to order.

“You shouldn’t feel ashamed about it Cloud. Girls just have a thing for brooms and cleaning. They like it when we mess up everything.”

“Oh, you’re taking that back, Snow Villiers!”

“If you had to clean up the mess HIS squad can make after a party, you wouldn’t say that!” Yuna added.

“Alright, alright, girls, calm down...” he said, still smiling.

They resumed to their food, Cloud focusing on his gestures so that he wouldn’t throw sauce at Yuna incidentally. He really didn’t want Serah to ask him over his squad or any mess. This would remind him of Tifa, who had a new boyfriend. The first one that she would love after him. Somehow, though he was pretending it was all over, he still felt a little jealous. And there was Cid, having his baby, and Barret, out with Marlene, his adopted daughter. And Vincent and Yuffie, pretending not to be together but being so obvious. He was happy for them, really. But he was so envious at the same time. So, he had to keep a low profile. Not to remember. Not to feel the burning envy and the sad sorrow coming with it...

“Say, Cloud, how is everyone doing in Squad’s 8?”

“Heh... Pretty good.”

He summarized the news, naming each of them briefly. Yuna realized his tone changed as he mentioned Tifa. Serah was kind enough not to observe it out loud.

“That’s good to hear. I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“We’ve been working like crazy...”

“As if that was new...”

“Well, it’s getting hard for everyone. If I could stop working and focus on my studies, I would,” Yuna added quickly, hoping this would prevent the brother and sister to get into a sad discussion.

Serah blushed at the comment. She hadn’t worked that much while she was still studying. Her brother and sister had been paying for her and she had managed to become independent just recently.

“It’s never easy. But you sure sound to love your studies.”

“That’s for sure.”
“So you’re into mechanics? You should come and check my old bike sometimes,” Snow smiled.

“She’d find it boring, Snow.”

“It depends on the model. My uncle is an airship crafter.”

“Really? That’s cool.”

They went back to laughing chatters, Cloud barely talking or smiling back, feeling a bit awkward. This was Christmas’ Eve. And Lightning wasn’t there. Their family was incomplete. Suddenly, he missed his twin. Though he knew she surely had something else on her mind right now. It felt sad to think they wouldn’t wish each other merry Christmas. That they wouldn’t watch over Serah together nor give her a twin hug... It was part of their Christmas tradition. He was still happy to be here, with Serah and Yuna. And even Snow. But without Lightning, it felt... Strange.

The hours were passing by and soon, the dishes were empty and Serah suggested that they attacked the cake and pie she had made.

“Wait, dear. It’s Christmas in a few hours now. How about we give out our presents right away?”

“It’s still too early, Snow.” she protested.

“Well, maybe too early to say we’re Christmas, but it’s already running late. I should take Yuna back to her place.” Cloud observed.

He felt as if Snow wanted to tell them to go back home while staying polite. After all, this was only his second Christmas with Serah...

“He’s right; I wouldn’t want to impose... And I don’t even have a gift for you...” Yuna added.

“Oh, we didn’t invite you to get some gift for Christmas!” Serah replied with a gentle smile.

“Well, instead of arguing over this, how about you take my gift, huh, sis?”

Serah jumped a little, surprised by the way he called her. It was rare that he referred to her as his sister.

“Well, why not?” she accepted, blushing.

Yuna felt envious for an instant to see how Cloud was simply smiling at his younger sibling. There was so much love and care in his usually cold eyes. And his features were full of light for once, as if he was truly happy for the first time since a long time. Serah took the small package from his hands and undid the paper enveloping it. The box revealed was a light shade of blue. There was still no telling what was in it. Looking happily puzzled, she opened the box. Her eyes widened with surprise.

“Cloud, you couldn’t, it’s...”

A set of keys fell on the table as she got up, her expression a pure miss of gratefulness and shock.

“Hey, babe, calm down, it’s just a keyset, why are you so upset?” Snow interferes.

Cloud was smiling.

“Those are the keys to our parents’ house. It’s close to the school where Serah works, and from all commodities. I’d thought that... since you’re having a real family and all, you could use a bigger
place to live in. There’s a lot of space for kids to play outside and inside.”

Serah still looked shocked.

“But Cloud... You hadn’t even told me you’d kept the house all this time! And now, you’re giving it to me?”

“Well, I just finished paying it, so there’s no bill or anything. Plus, a lone wolf like me couldn’t use all that space. Lightning wanted it to stay in the family. She was agreed with me, so it’s a gift from us both.”

“You were both paying for it, during all those years?”

“I don’t wanna talk about money, Serah.”

This meant yes, of course... Yuna understood both of them. Cloud wanted his sister and her future children to live in the best environment possible. Snow looked as shocked as his fiancée. Serah was happy, because it was part of her passed parents’ legacy and a gift she would never have hoped for. But it was way too much. And if Cloud had been working just to finish the payments over it while paying all the rest he needed to live in his own apartment. No question there wasn’t any food in his fridge but army’s rations.

“It’s... It’s...” She looked at Snow, trying to see if he was wounded in his pride. After all, the place where his family would live should have been paid with his money. Not his brother-in-law’s.

“Well, that’s an awesome gift.” Was all her boyfriend could mutter.

“It counts for the next two years, for both your anniversaries and Christmas, of course.” Cloud added with a smirk.

That was all Serah needed to be able to laugh about it. She turned around the table’s corner and forced Cloud to get up to give him a hug. She punched him in the chest too, still mad at him.

“It’s wonderful, Cloud. You didn’t have to do that.”

“Of course I had to.”

He hugged her tight and she gave him a butterfly kiss on the cheek, tears of joy coming out from her eyes.

“A house. A whole house.” She whispered, unable to believe it.

“It was our house once. It’s just right that you get it back after all this time.”

He gently pushed her away from him.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry, but I take it you’re happy?”

“Of course I am, silly! I’m getting emotional because of the baby. You know, hormonal disorder and all that!” she retorted.

Laughs came back. Snow and Serah gave their gift to Cloud, which was a pair of sunglasses for his bike: high tech sunglasses that could calculate and store every kind of things; like the weather, the hour, and an agenda. And they could even play the radio!

“It’s not a house.”
“And I don’t want one!” Cloud replied, laughing. “They’re really cool.”

“I never know what to get you at time like this. I’m still wondering if I chose the right gift for Lightning.”

“Not a hand knife this time, right?”

“What?”

“She almost killed me with it the last time she got mad.”

“Well, I don’t think she’ll be able to kill you with prepaid money in a shoes’ store.”

“Good.”

Yuna wanted to slap her forehead, unable to believe they really were joking. This family seemed so out of the ordinary. But then again, it reminded her of her own family. Once her parent were still both alive. It had been like that, in some ways. They had their weird talks. And they would joke about things that shouldn’t be joked about.

“Well, then I guess we should take our leave.” Cloud whispered after a few minutes of silence.

“Oh you’re sure, you really have to leave? You didn’t even taste my cake...”

“Well, we wouldn’t want to keep Yuna’s from her family at a time like this. And the later they end up on the streets, the more you’ll be worried about them.” Snow reminded her.

“And I’ve eaten enough to work up for the next three days. I gotta stay in shape with my work, you know?” Cloud joked.

“You’re both right. Well then.” Serah gave another hug to Cloud, before to give one to Yuna, much to the young woman surprise. “You both take care, alright? And merry Christmas to both of you!”

“To you too, Serah.”

“Thanks a lot for the supper!” Yuna added.

“It was our pleasure!”

Snow gave Cloud’s a light punch on the shoulder, to tell him goodbye and the soldier answered with a brief nod of his head. Yuna following her colonel from up close was surprise when Serah called them back, right when they were crossing her apartment’s threshold.

“Wait, wait, you’re right under one holly branch! You’ve got to kiss!”

Cloud looked up, unable to believe he could have missed such a fact. The holly branch was there, hanging right above their heads. Snow must have put it there after they entered, he didn’t remember it being there when he came in. Then again, he was busy being hug by Serah. He’d never get bored of her hug. It was remembering him all that was good in his life... He exchanged one look with Yuna before to stare at Serah. She wasn’t really expecting them to kiss, was she?

“It’s Christmas’ tradition, you have to kiss.” Snow added.

“But...”

Yuna was blushing. She looked so cute like this. Cloud had been wanting to kiss her for a while
already. He wasn’t entirely agreed with the reason he had now, but hey, a guy had to take advantage of the situation sometimes. He gently put one hand on Yuna’s left shoulder.

“Tradition or not, we don’t have to if you don’t want t...”

Yuna felt stupid for being so shy. If she stayed like that, he was going to take advantage of the situation! And though some of her fantasies were willing to see what that could mean, she couldn’t let that happen. Not now. Not when she felt so lonely and... She grabbed on his shoulders to have him leaning down to her level and planted a brief kiss on his lips, catching him unaware. She then walked out, as quickly as possible, her face turning bright red. Cloud stood behind an entire second, baffled.

“Go after her, brother!”

He glared at Serah, which owed him a wide smile and giving up on teaching her what was her place in his friendships and love life, he went after Yuna.

She had already gone down every stairs and he jumped a few bundle of stairs to catch back with her, risking to miss one and to fall in the process. He safely got on the ground and called out her name since she was turning her back to him.

“What is it Yuna? Are you scared of me, or what?”

“I don’t like being tested or... I don’t know what they were thinking about us, but...”

“Stop stuttering and say what you wanna say.”

“I don’t like being toyed with like that. She literally forced us to kiss!” the young engineer replied, turning around.

“And so what? She’s in a hormonal disorder; you’ve heard her, haven’t you?”

It was a cheap excuse, but Cloud couldn’t see any other way to get him away from it. He still had the light impression of Yuna’s lips on his mouth. And he wanted to have another taste. A real one. This girl was such a mystery. All shy and going all daring suddenly to run away the minute after. And as he gazed into her eyes, he knew he wanted to know her even more. To understand why he liked this blue and green iris so much. Why butterflies were flying in his chest as she looked back at him, with a mix of anger and clumsiness on her face.

“I... I felt as if she was trying to bring us together.”

Cloud had felt the same thing, and he wasn’t entirely agreed that Serah tried to interfere in his personal life. But what was he supposed to tell his sister? He liked Yuna. He really liked her. And after what happened with Tifa, he needed help. Love scared him, somehow. Feelings had always been his enemies. Because feelings could be exploited by the higher-ups. Jenova had used his own feelings against him. And Shiva was still somewhere within him. In his mind, ready to close her hands over his frail heart. He rarely trusted someone enough to show who he was. Wasn’t sure who to show anyway. Who was he, huh? Except from being a soldier, and a brother, he couldn’t find anyone for whom he could be a man. A real man.

“And she sure was. As much as I try to play her father, she’s trying to switch the roles between us. She thinks I’m lonely.”

*And you are,* Yuna thought, looking down.
“I didn’t want to peek into family’s secrets.”

“You didn’t. All of this just now wasn’t family’s secrets. And exchanging a kiss like that under some holly won’t kill you or me.”

A weak smile crept over her lips. She wasn’t sure what she wanted. Cloud was... interesting. Appealing. She liked the link that was growing between them. She wanted it to deepen, somehow, but she didn’t know if she had the guts to do it. She could talk with him now, and this was already some big progress!

“Well...”

She didn’t want to tell him she barely had had one or two real kisses in her life. She remembered the look he had on his face when she had jumped in Tidus’ arms. Tidus had been the closest thing she could consider as a boyfriend in her life, and they did have kiss, but it barely counted. Because Tidus was just a friend. It was a sportive guy and had needed her engineering skill often for his favourite stadium. He was winning the matches for all his blitzball competition and she was just making the stadium hold on for the whole match. It was good practice for her future job. She liked being with that guy, but she never felt as safe with him as she did with Cloud. Tidus didn’t excite her like the soldier could. And moreover, Tidus didn’t need help. Then again, he never ordered her around or asked her to kill someone. Cloud had, but she knew it wasn’t his choice.

The wind that blew over them was warm, almost scorching. The lights were still bright in the sky, because of the close moon, covered with attractions. Yuna wondered what she should say. And what she wanted. Cloud looked almost confused. He wasn’t in control right now. What did HE want, what was he expecting her to say?

“I should take you back home.” He whispered before that she could find anything to add.

He had taken her silence as a clear message that things shouldn’t go farther. He understood, oh well, he thought that he did. After all, who was he to understand a girl? He had two sisters, all right, but that didn’t meant that every girl in the world were like them. Tifa had been different. And Yuna had to be. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be attracted to her like this. It would have been too weird to flash on a girl like Lightning or resembling Serah.

“You know where I live?”

“Not really. Though I guess you’re staying close to Harvard, since you study there...”

She felt stupid. Of course, he knew. It was in her files at the army. He could know everything about her, being her superior and all. And even if he didn’t, Cloud was bright.

“Well, I have an apartment two blocks away from Harvard.”

“Name me the street and I’ll take you there.”

He got on his bike and gave her a hand so that she could sit behind him. He put his sunglasses on; pestering over the fact the moon was shining way too brightly. As if nothing had happened. But before to turn on his motorbike, he froze:

“Hey, Yuna, did you like the supper here? It was kinda weird, I guess, but, you were our guest and...”

“It was really nice. Your sister and I could be really good friends.”
“Don’t refrain from it. She sure needs a friend. She’s a nice girl, but she’s kinda solitary. With a soldier for a bro and a sister working in intelligences, I guess there’s no other way...”

“Lightning’s a spy?!?”

“Oh, forget that. You liked the supper or not?”

“Yeah. I’m kinda solitary too whenever I get back home. It was nice to be in around generous people like you three.”

“Generous? You include me in that?”

“You gave a whole house to your sister!”

“Oh, that... Well, in fact, today, I just had some repairs done on the keys holder. The house had been paid for a while now, a year or two already. She can’t even marry Snow because they don’t have enough money. If they can settle themselves in a place they don’t have to pay for every month, they could save up a little for a wedding or something...”

He realized he had talked too honestly, but Yuna wrapped her arms around him.

“Your job is to protect and save people. You do all you can to help everyone’s around you. When do you worry about yourself, Cloud?”

He gulped down. He wanted to reply: *Now! With you!* But instead, he let his engine roar and the wind rushing over his face cooled him down.

... 

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th

Location: Boston, American States –Cloud and Lightning’s apartment-

Mission: Pending...

Humans involved: Lightning Farron and Noctis Lucis Caelum

Warning: My master seems to dislike my staying in the human world. I should try to keep a low profile to give her a chance to get used to me...

Odin –thinking to hisself-

...

Noctis was abruptly woken up by yells of panic and fear. He sat up in his bed, alerted, to realize the yells were coming from Lightning. She seemed in great mental pain as she tossed and kicked in her sleep, lying next to him. He quickly wrapped her in a tight embrace, to prevent her from hurting herself –or him- before to shake her awake. She wake up screaming, calling out for her baby.

“She’s crying, I can’t even hold her, where is she, Noctis? Where is she? Where’s my baby?”

Tears were welling up in her aqua eyes and she looked so desperate and lost, unlike the strong woman who had helped him back on his feet during the last few days. His heart broke down in his chest. Of all the things he needed to hear. Of all the things he needed to see. She was still so shocked by what had happened two years ago. Still missing the poor innocent child, tore away from her insides. The very thought gave him the urge to punch someone. And even worse. He held
her close, stroking her head gently.

“She’s not crying Lightning.”

“She is! I can hear her!” she protested.

Her voice was cracking down. Her hopes were all smashed down. She wanted to hear the baby. Wanted to turn around in his arms and see the little girl, sleeping in a baby’s bed, right next to their bed. But the dream was over. Reality was sinking back. And their baby was dead.

“I’m sorry, Light.”

Noctis couldn’t find any other word to calm her down. Saying the truth would only hurt her. Talking about anything of what had happened recently would hurt her even more. He was mortified to think he had suggested to take Storm with them, even for half a month. Seeing this kid, this boy alive, the living proof that Noctis had had a son with someone else than herself, while their own and only child was cold as stone... It was bound to give her nightmares. Maybe had he reawaken her old fears by forcing her to look at the tapes over his coma, too? She was crying, as she had been when she was trying to push him away and to hide, back in the Feds’ lab. And it hurt to see her like that.

He kissed her forehead, as she hugged him back, gripping on his shoulders as if she could fall back in her nightmare.

“I just want my baby...” she sobbed, hiding her face against his chest.

And as she said that, she was mad at herself for being so weak. Noctis needed peace. Not her fears and her inaccessible wish. But she couldn’t hold it all inside anymore. In this apartment, in this room where she had spent the last ten years of her life, she remembered. All the nights falling asleep with tears swallowed back, with the pain of what had been done and could never been undone. All those nights when Cloud had had to come and see her, to calm her down. It was still pretty recent in her mind. The last two years had been a farce to her friends and bosses. She had pretended she was still strong, but she felt so broken inside. Cloud had tried to help her. Tried to support her, while keeping his job and taking his own blows in his life. It had been hard for both of them. And now that Noctis was back, Noctis who was the only man she trusted enough to let her guard down in front of... Now that he was back, maybe that everything was possible at new. But his return reminded her of the lost baby. The lost little girl she had so wanted to have. She couldn’t remember the name she had wanted to give her. She had tried to erase everything about it, to ease the pain. It had only become worse.

“My baby...” she repeated, her voice growing fainter.

And Noctis listened silently to her pain and her demand. He had never realized what it really meant for her. He had always tried to keep walls around this question, to hide the truth from his eyes. To protect his own heart from it. Because deep inside, he knew she wanted that kid. And he still couldn’t tell if he’d wanted it, if he had had the choice, even for an instant. Becoming a parent was so scary. The only picture he had from a father was his dying dad, with his chest covered by bullet holes. And his mother... His dear mother... Tears started welling up in his own eyes. He couldn’t see himself with a baby or a kid. Even Storm. With his job? With his and Lightning’s job? Could he really let an innocent behind him, knowing that if he’d died, if he’d died and that Lightning died, the kid would be left alone. Without any care in the world. Without real parents?

Of course, Cloud or Serah could take care of the baby. But for having been an orphan himself, he didn’t want to let anyone else live such a life. The saying was, missing father, messed up son,
wasn’t it? He remembered words his mother used to say. Remembered Lightning’s will whenever their missions involved kids before. How she had cried, back in the time, when a boy had been killed by their enemies.

He shivered and forced his sobs back down his throat. But he cried with her, sharing the pain. Sharing the guilt. He wanted to be stronger and to calm her down. Somehow, feeling his sadness and sympathy, she understood how he cared. It soothed her heart. Right now, she needed his arms around her and his shoulder to cry on. Once the nightmare was far enough for Lightning’s tears to dry up, she sighed next to him.

“It’s good to have you back.” She whispered.

And somehow, it sounded as if it was finally real. That he was back and that they were together. Their whole mission back on this wedding airship, where they had been lost between pretending and feeling for real what they meant... It was over. They had the right to play their own roles. To be themselves.

He kissed her forehead another time, and her naked shoulder. The sheets of the bed standing between and around them were warm and soft. They felt safe.

“You know Light, if you really want a baby...” he sounded pretty serious as he started saying that, but she forced his mouth closed, putting her fingers on his lips.

“I want us to think it through, Noct.”

“Claire...”

“I don’t want to replace my little girl. Or to lose anyone anymore.”

But losing someone is the only certainty we can have in life, ain’t it? It took so much courage from both of us just to get together and to take the risk..., he thought.

“I’ll be with you whatever you decide for us, Claire.”

“Light.” She gently corrected him.

“Light,” he agreed with a smile.

“Well, maybe Claire is better right now.”

“Make up your mind, love.”

“Seems whichever name you call me makes me feel great.”

He chuckled softly at that. So his Lightning had demons to fight on her side, but was still there for him, just as much as he was there for her. He made a note to his self, so that he wouldn’t forget about the fact she needed his help and all the attention he could have for her. She was bound to try and hide whatever problems she may have if she thought he had greater problems.

“You should try to get some sleep, Claire. It’s still early in the morning.”

“We both need it. I’m sorry for waking you up earlier...”

“There’s no prob.”

“Sleep well.”
“Nighty night,” he whispered back.

He rarely said that and Lightning found it so cute. It sounded so childish somehow...

... 

As Noctis woke up a little later, with the sunrise, he was alone in the bed. A shower was running in the background, so he stayed there, lying quietly beneath the sheets. For once, he didn’t feel tired, but just lazy. He looked around him, staring at the room’s furniture. A single desk under the only window. A few pictures frame on the walls. Serah and Cloud were the only faces around. Except for two grown-up persons he had never met, a man with pink brown hair and a blond slender woman. Lightning’s parents.

On the night table, he spotted another frame, where Lightning had been shot, arm in arm with Squall. The guy was already her best friend when Noctis had first met her. He had always found their friendship particular. Squall seemed to treat Lightning as his buddy, thought she was a girl. And Lightning seemed to have another brother in that tough spy. Noctis rarely got to work with Squall. He was sent out more often with Rinoa, the guy’s girlfriend. Though the bosses had doubts, none of them knew that. It wasn’t right, since Rinoa was in another branch and in a higher rank than Squall in the Faction. Lightning and Noctis being equals at work, they could go out together in the open.

“I wonder how they’re doing...”

Lightning still hadn’t told him much about his ancient co-workers. He remembered Vanille’s exuberance and Reno’s bad habits. How Rude was silent and focused on work and how Rufus could get on his nerves with his numerous orders. He guessed they hadn’t changed while he was out in his coma, but still, people could change a lot in a few months, so in two years?

As he kept on looking around, he noticed a plushie’s chocobo in a corner of the room, sitting on a lone chair. It was big and fluffy. He had given it to her at their second year anniversaries of going out together. She had been so embarrassed at first, since a few known people had seen him giving it to her, but she had kept it. After all this time... That warmed his heart.

“Hey, you’re already up?”

“Well, I’m still in bed.”

Lightning joined him with a smirk and curled up next to him. They stood lying next to each other, Noctis warping his arms around her, in silence, for a little while. Then, he cleared his throat.

“Tell me, Light. All that happened during this last two years while I was... out cold. Would you mind telling me about it?”

She tensed a little at his question, but finally accepted to comply and started telling him. She talked mainly about Cloud, and Squall, who were the one helping her the more to get back on her feet after her staying in the hospital and everything that had tear them apart. She taught him about Squall and Rinoa’s breaking up. About Serah’s pregnancy. About Sazh’s kidnapped son. He listened to her silently, taking it all in. It was a lot to learn about, even if she was skipping some facts and anecdotes. She couldn’t recall everything about it right now. It was a too wide amount of time.

But talking about it made her feel lighter. Even if she wasn’t sure if he was ready to hear about it all. He listened. Stroking her hair. Snuggling against her. Growing tensed and relaxing in turn. It
took a whole two hour to get across all she could think about.

When she fell silent, Noctis hesitated about the idea of getting up. He wondered if he couldn’t sleep for another whole day before to go out.

“I know it makes a lot in little time.”

“It’s okay.” He lied.

She sighed next to him.

“Don’t try to fool me. I know what’s going on in your heart. Now, you’re feeling guilty for not having been there to help your friends when they needed help. But most of them aren’t your friends and you were the one needing the most help at those time. Don’t resent yourself. Just get some more rest. I’ll go and make us some breakfast.”

She kissed him lightly on the lips. For an instant, Noctis thought they were just any married couple, living their normal life. He’d wished it was true so many times. But the fact they weren’t married hit him. It was right after all. This whole honey moon airship had been naught but a pretending. He never had asked Lightning if she wanted to marry him. Even after going out with her for three whole years and a few more days. It was a lot of time. He knew he wanted to live with her all the time that was left in his life. But he never had the nerve to get officially engaged. He could have sacrificed his life for her, but asking her hand seemed like too much. Wasn’t it unfair? He knew Lightning had her girly dreams, which she had buried deep down, with her childhood, somewhere in the forsaken spots of her memories...

She walked out of the room in her light nightgown, to come back only a few minutes later to get some clothes out of her closet.

“What’s up?” he asked, sitting up on the bed.

“Nothing. There’s only army’s ration in the fridge. Cloud mustn’t have done any groceries for weeks. When I’ll get my hand on him, I’ll teach him what’s good for a man of his age.”

“You’re still treating him as a kid.”

“Well, he’s acting like a kid. Anyway, I’m going out to buy a few things. Just stay here, rest up. You need it.”

“I could come with you...” he retorted.

Thought he didn’t really want to go out and face the outside world all that much soon. He felt lethargic. He wanted to shut down his mind for an hour or two, to get a chance to accept every new piece of information in it. Lightning throw her nightgown in a corner of the room and jumped in a pair of skinny jeans, before to clasp her bra and put on a sleeveless black top. She added a light coat and looked around for her boots.

“You’re staying here, Noctis. You’ve been pushed around way too much lately. You need stability. Rest. And it could do us some good to take a few hours by ourselves, don’t you think?”

“Maybe you’re right. You’re sure you don’t want me to come?”

“I’ll be alright. I’m just going to do some groceries.”

“Two days before Christmas?”
“I’m a martial art master, remember?”

“How could I forget?”

“Then I’m going.” She declared, putting on her boots. She walked up to the bed and gave him a long and sweet kiss, shuffling his hair. “Will you survive without me?” she asked.

He pouted, pretending to wonder over her question.

“Guess I’ll try. Be careful, okay?”

“Of course, Noct.” Since she had kneeled on the bed, he stole another kiss from her, which made her smile. “Bye now.”

“Bye.”

She walked out of the room and soon, he heard the door outside being locked behind her. He let himself fall back on the pillows. Closed his eyes, thinking of Lightning. Her perfume was everywhere in the room. He rolled in the bed, to stuff his face in the pillows. Trying to forget about Rinoa breaking up with Squall. About all the horrors that took place while he was away. This stuff over Rinoa breaking up sounded so impossible. She was so in love with him. And suddenly, it had been over and she had run to his rival? The poor man had to be devastated now. He knew how it fell to be rejected by the woman you love. Sighing, he thought about getting up and getting a shower. After fighting Seymour and his passionate night with Lightning, he was bound to look pretty messed up. Lightning wasn’t difficult about this kind of thing. She was a survivor. He remembered a month they had spent on a mission, out in the wild, in Amazonia.

How dirty they had gotten. After three weeks, he could have killed for a shower! But since the mission came first for both of them, they had gone through it. And she had kissed him once or twice along the way, when they had a little time to...

“Is my master still here? Did I just miss her?” a quixotic voice resounded in the room suddenly.

“Oh not that freak again.” Noctis hissed between his teeth.

Now he was really going to be forced to get up. He managed to put his pants on before that the knight in shining armour entered the bedroom.

“My good sir, this is no way of walking around, half naked!” Odin exclaimed.

“Well, aren’t knights supposed to knock on the door of a room before to enter? It could have been Lightning half naked in here.”

“I could tell my master wasn’t here.”

“Oh really. How come you weren’t sure when you arrive, just a minute ago.”

“I was still materializing in the place. My senses weren’t wholly awakened.”

Noctis pushed the knight aside to walk out of the room and get in the kitchen. He had to clear up his mind. At least from the dirt he still had on from his fight against Seymour. He turned on the water and washed his face in the sink –and his hair- before to grab a towel Odin was kindly holding up for him.

“You know, sir, you look pretty better like this. Though you should try to dress a little more.”
“You know, Odin, I’m not taking orders from you, okay? I just woke up from a two years coma and I don’t have time for wandering spirit.”

“Oh, talking about wandering, I wandered here and there to give my master and you some privacy...”

Noctis glared at him, pretty annoyed, as he dropped himself on the couch in the living room.

“And I couldn’t help my surprise, but I must ask you a personal question.”

Odin looked kinda uneasy about asking the said question and Noctis sighed.

“I don’t think you can cross a line someone hasn’t already cross before, so go on.”

“Does my master have a child? Did she have one, with you, maybe?”

“Why would you ask something like that!!”

The last thing Noctis wanted to talk about was their lost baby.

“Well, I sensed my master’s energy somewhere else than in this apartment. So... I had to check it out, to see what it meant. And I saw a baby, floating in a tub, surrounded by busy men in white blouse. The baby had silver grey hair. But she has the very same energy and mako than my master in her frail body.”

Noctis heart skipped a beat. Could this mean what he thought that meant?!?

“You don’t mean... You saw OUR baby?! She’s alive?!”

He jumped back on his feet, electrified by the very idea he could do something to ease Lightning’s nightmare.

“Well, she had the same signature than my master. Same eyes, if the liquid in her tub wasn’t green, I could testify the eyes are the same. But I can’t tell for sure...”

“Where is she?!” Noctis asked, his voice growing harsher. “WHERE IS...!?”

“Calm down, sir, please calm down. I had no idea where I was. I just sensed lady Lightning’s energy, so I went to see.”

“Can you go back there? Can you still sense it?”

Noctis tried to calm down, but he was a bundle of nerves. Could it be the baby had been stolen from its mother’s womb to be raise up artificially and used for the mako in his blood? Was their little girl alive and waiting to be rescued somewhere? His heart was beating fast in his chest. He had to know. Had to find her. It would turn his whole life upside down all over again, but if it was true. If it was true, Lightning would be so happy...

“I think I can.”

“Then do it. And keep me informed about anything about this. But...”

If this wasn’t their baby... If the baby should die before that to get to her. Lightning wouldn’t survive it.

“But don’t tell you mast... I mean, Lightning about it.”
“You’re sure.”

“It’s for her own good...”

To be continued...
Chapter 23

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part X

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th

Location: Boston, American States, Squall’s apartment

Mission: Protecting Aeris Gainsborough at all cost and pretending to go with her – as her boyfriend-in-a ball

Agents involved: Squall Leonheart, (potential ancient agent Aeris G.)

Warning: Agent Squall is proving to be reluctant for this ball mission. Keep an heavy surveillance on him and his protégé.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission.

...

Squall woke up this morning with tears in his eyes. He chased them away, furious. Though Aeris was there, in the very other room, he still couldn’t do anything else than mourning over his loss. Rinoa would never wake up again. Would never smile again. Never. He hated this word. He hated his mind for thinking faster than he could endure it. He wanted to have his mind a blank, devoid of thoughts and of memories. To numb his senses with anything that could get him numb enough not to feel. He wanted to beat Seifer till the guy would die choking on his own cursed blood. He wanted to go in his room, where Aeris was surely still sleeping and to lie next to her, pretending she was Rinoa. Holding her, kissing... He hated himself right now and held back a yell of frustration.

Aeris was his only escape of this dreadful mourning. And this was just as wrong as mourning. It was too quick, too soon. It had taken him sometimes to realize how attached he was to Rinoa. But now, his mind was playing tricks on him. Pretending that this was right. That this was fair. It wasn’t. It never could be. Replacing Rinoa this soon? With poor Aeris who had been secluded from any human contact for all of her life, obliged to run here and there for her very life? He bet she never had a boyfriend. He couldn’t tell what Sephiroth had exactly done to her. What he had seen in her head was enough, but he could guess what had happened. If anything worse had happened. Maybe had she been raped? This drive him mad. Was he supposed to take her to a ball where the man who had hurt her in more ways he could imagine was waiting to meet her, just to please his bosses? Was he supposed to expose her to more hurt when she had been there, to support him through his yells, his growling and his tears?

It was unbearable. And still, she had accepted, because he had sworn to protect her. But he knew he wasn’t infallible. Far from that. Though he had always pretended otherwise. Though he had to be infallible tonight. Aeris needed protection. And he was even more ready to give his life for her if it proved useful. Though he still clang to his life. With him dead, who knew who would look after her? He couldn’t give up while ignoring if she would be safe. With mourning over Rinoa and dreaming of Aeris, this was his only obsession. To make sure she was safe.

They had found a dress for her. A wonderful red dress, in which she looked... Damn too sexy to really give him the urge to bring her to a ball, where other men could see her. If he could have, he would have kept her beauty all to himself. He sighed, grabbing his phone. He needed to wonder
over something, anything else than Aeris, or her dress, or the ball, or Rinoa or... well, anything.

He dialled Lightning’s number. He had no idea what he would tell her if she answered and fortunately, she didn’t. He decided to send her a text message instead of a call. Started to write out of pure boredom. He didn’t like taping message usually. The words went farther then he meant to. Giving away his true feelings. Lightning could understand even if he’d changed his sentence and tried to sound happy. Why not tell out loud he wasn’t okay? He needed help. Help from someone he couldn’t desire like Aeris. From someone he wasn’t force to bring to a ball and hurt and protect and... Damn, he didn’t want to need any help. But he needed it. Suddenly, he could admit he needed a whole lot of things.

He signed with his old name. Leon. The last name his mother had chosen for him before to pass on. It was such a joke that he choose that name for every of his code. Only a few people knew why it was so easy for him to answer it. This was bound to sound as an alert signal. At the moment, he didn’t care. He needed to hear another voice than his own or Aeris’. He tried to calm himself down by pacing silently in the living room. Tried to sleep on his futon, but whenever he closed his eyes, Rinoa would crept back to his mind.

He wished he could hide somewhere where no one could find him and cry to his heart content. Hadn’t he cried enough already? Wasn’t he stronger than that? How many days had it been? Two? Three or four? He couldn’t seem to count. Time had stopped since he knew that Rinoa had left the world of living. He was scared. Because her tender eyes would never watch over him again. Because he wasn’t sure if he still could be strong without her. Even if he had to. Even if he wanted to be. What was going on with him? What was wrong with his mind? Every piece of furniture in the room reminded him of her. Of his mother and adoptive sister. As if the three women of his life were still here. Watching with reproach as he walked around, pacing back and forth, ready to attack anything that would disturb him. He jumped as he heard the mattress in the next room crack as Aeris moved on it. His senses were all on edge. He was a bundle of nerves. He sighed. He hated feeling like that.

Time went by as he kept on pacing, sitting helplessly on couch and resuming sitting. He ate a bite or two. It was four in the morning. He watched the hours passing by. Counted the minutes in his head. The seconds. Anything to divert his attention from what was scaring him. He was alone. Never wanted to be again. This was his greatest weakness. He had let Aeris see it. And he knew she could fill the void. But how could it be right? Wasn’t he betraying Rinoa’s memory? What was happening with Rinoa anyway? Wasn’t she going to be buried somewhere? Where would be her grave? Were they going to incinerate her? Hide her in a lab to study the illness that had killed her, devoured her and eaten all the years left of her life... He felt as if he was living in a bad fiction movie. He wanted to jump out of his role. To break something. To yell. To yell till he had no voice left. He wanted to take his sword and cut something, someone –why not Seifer?- into tiny little pieces.

The thoughts were running wild in his mind. He was considering everything he could do to calm himself. Took a cold shower. Almost went out for a run before to rethink over it. Aeris was still inside. He couldn’t leave her alone like that, without any warning. Maybe some people had seen them strolling together the other day. Coming all the way to his place. Maybe a spy was waiting for a moment of inattention on his account to get to the Ancient. Maybe was he just going paranoid and crazy!

Around ten o’clock, the phone rang. At first, he couldn’t tell who could be calling. His eyes were red and his hands shook a little as he grabbed the phone. His voice was weary. Even if he hadn’t said a word, he realized how tight and dry his throat was. He needed some water to drink. Lightning’s voice on the other end of the line was worried. So it was that stupid message he had
sent coming back to him. What a moron he was.

“Hi Squall. How are you doing?”

“Fine...” he answered. But the lie was too clear and he gave up, feeling her annoyance on the other side. “Well, not as fine as I’d want.”

“Squall?”

“I shouldn’t have send you this stupid message. I just... couldn’t fall back to sleep and... You must be tired of your comeback down on earth, I don’t want to get you down with my problems.”

Darn, now he was admitting he had problems... He felt ready to hung up, but she understood and tried to prevent him too.

“Wait, I...” she sounded so concerned, it was breaking his heart. She had been Rinoa’s friend. In a way. Was he really going to tell her on the phone that she was...

“Rinoa’s dead,” he whispered with a trembling voice. The tears were coming back. He couldn’t care about Lightning’s feelings over this, not when he felt this empty.

“Oh my god...!” now she seemed shocked. He could imagine her face. The look in her eyes. His voice left him for an instant.

“...!” half a sob came out of his throat and he cursed against himself. Just talking about it was taking him back to such a sorry state. He felt ashamed, ashamed, but the tears were welling up. Lightning cared. Of course she did, but the fact she was on the other line on a phone as he was still alone here, only connected to her voice, it wasn’t enough. It didn’t ease the pain. Nothing would.

“Squall wait, Squall...”

“I can’t talk about this... I have a mission to prepare.” He breathed in and out to help himself before to add in one whole breath. “Rufus wants me to take Aeris to some ball to find out who could want to get their hands on her. I...”

“Of course you can’t go! What’s going on in Rufus’ head?” So she was thinking that same thing then him. This was crazy. Especially in his state of mind. Why did he felt so weak? Why did he longed for those hated tears? Would he felt lighter without those few drops of water? Would he cry a whole river before to have cried enough? What was enough in this kind of situation?

“I’m going anyway.” He whispered, steadying his voice, blinking. The tears were rolling down his cheeks. Between his skin and the phone’s material. “I’ll be fin...”

“Don’t try to tell me you’re fine!”

What did she wanted him to tell her? That he was crying like a baby over Rinoa, while Rinoa wanted him to live on? That he wanted Aeris since hours and wasn’t sure he would be able to control himself around her with the sorrow and urge to forget all the rest he felt? That he hadn’t been able to protect Rinoa one year ago and that she had left him to save him and that he still was able to be sad and angry at her? Should he yell on the phone as he wanted to? It was hard to breathe and to hold back the sobs at the same time. He needed to collect his thoughts. And he was still thinking. Still thinking so much it almost hurt.

“It was good to talk to you, Light, but I... I’m gonna be fine.” His voice sounded strangled and he felt mad at himself. “Forget about me. It’s been two days already. I’ll get over it.”
This sounded so stupid. So unrealistic.

“Squall wait, Squa...”

He couldn’t hear her concerned voice anymore. He almost crashed back the phone on the receiver. Breathed in and out. Blinked and wiped away his tears. He suddenly realized he wasn’t alone anymore in the living room. Two hands slipped on his shoulders. Wearing only a grey top, he felt the gentle palms of Aeris on his skin. Warm and welcomed.

“Was it Lightning?”

“Yes..” His voice was cracking, so he forbidden himself to talk. Forbidden himself to look at her.

“It’s normal to still grieve over it.”

“I should get over this. At least for today.”

“For your mission, you mean?”

She gently forced him to turn around. She was wearing a white dress, with a black vest that clung to her slim waist. Her hair was untied and all curly. Her face was cream white, except from a little blush on her cheeks, caused by his staring.

“For our mission,” he replied.

“Squall, you don’t have to carry the whole world on your shoulders you know. You don’t have to protect me or...”

“Of course I have to!” he replied, his energy all back just at the idea...

“I’m grateful to see how eager you are to defend me against everything. It’s very kind from you. I don’t owe it.”

“You owe everything that’s good in this world.”

She blushed and smiled shyly at that. No one had ever told her anything that sweet. He looked away, surprised himself. But this was what he felt, honestly. Looking back in her eyes, he smiled hesitantly.

“I... I mean... Aeris, I don’t want to take you to this ball. I don’t want to send you back in a sea of sharks.”

“Then be sure you stay by my side. I shouldn’t have anything to fear.”

But he felt so weak.

“How can you have all this trust in me when I’m...”

“I think you being depressed doesn’t mean you’re any weaker. On the contrary, you’re maybe more dangerous. ‘Cause you have nothing to lose. So I’ll try to keep you in check out there, tonight,” she tried to joke.

Her smile was contagious. Her presence next to him. Biting his lower lip, fighting against his inner thoughts that told him this girl was too good to be true and that he should just run away with her to hide in a faraway country where the Faction couldn’t reach or use her, he smiled wholly. What was this warm feeling in his chest when she was looking at him?
Love? Attractiveness? Lust? No, that last one had nothing to do with a warm feeling in the chest. As they went to eat some breakfast together, Squall’s mind was set on finding out what was really going on in this heart of his. Cause his heart was concerned. Rinoa had left a terrible scar in it. And Aeris was gently trying to mend it with her magic. And somehow, he was willing to be mended in more than one way. He didn’t want only her magic on him. And he felt ashamed for thinking that. But as he fought that thought too, he swore to himself he wouldn’t fail her tonight. At least, well, he would protect her from all the other people that could come close to her. As to protect her from himself, it was another thing...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th
Location: Boston, American States –Cloud and Lightning’s apartment-
Mission: Finding my master’s child and its location for sir Caelum
Humans involved: Lightning Farron and Noctis Lucis Caelum
Warning: My master shouldn’t get to know about the existence of her baby. Though I don’t like that idea of lying –or hiding- anything to her, I agreed with that with sir Noctis.

Odin –thinking to hiself-

... When Lightning came back, it was to find Noctis pacing in the living room, in deep thought, far from resting or staying calm. She frowned, asking herself what could have happened to put him in this state.

“Hi?” she whispered, closing the door behind her. “Is something wrong?”
He noticed her and looked up, smiling immediately to calm her down.

“Hey, want some help with all those bags?”

“I asked you a question Noctis. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I was just... doing some exercises. You know, since I was in the coma...”
Lame excuse... Lightning was almost sure that something was up. But still, maybe was he telling the truth? Stella had told her he had had to do some rehabilitation to get back on his feet after sleeping during two years.

“Okay... I thought you should have been resting up instead of...”

“What did you buy? You want me to make some pancakes?”

“Noctis, do you even listen to me?”

“Of course, but I’m not dying. Let me help you around. I’m not impotent.”
She smiled, understanding he only wanted to be of use. She let him take the bags from her arms and started undoing the groceries with him, to put all the food in the fridge. They baked pancakes together and ate breakfast together, as they used to do in the past. It was fun to have vacation together. Their boss had rarely gave them the chance to relax together, acknowledging they were a
couple and all. Noctis was especially sweet and didn’t stop to whisper nice things in Lightning ears, as they sat together on the couch, to listen to television, until they decided they had better things to do, like kissing till they couldn’t feel their lips anymore.

He felt bad a little, for hiding her the fact their baby could still be alive. If the little girl was really still in the living world, Noctis presumed she might have one year and a few months. Still a baby. A fragile, weak little thing, that needed protection. Their baby. His... The thought made him so nervous. After half an hour of making out like teenager, they slowly got back to the real world.

“You know, I forgot to buy you something for Christmas,” she whispered, considering all the shopping she had done.

“You know I don’t want anything for Christmas.”

“You never want anything from my money. Always too proud to accept that I pay anything for you.”

“Well, it’s good that I still have my pride for some things.”

Their fingers laced together, they remained like this, Lightning sitting on his lap, wrapped in a gentle embrace. The outside world made almost no noise and the young woman was happy that her brother hadn’t shown back home already. She wasn’t too ready to meet with Cloud and explain him everything about Noctis’ big come back in her life. And all that he’d been through during the last two years. Cloud was bound to get mad over something about this crazy story. She still wanted to get mad somehow. But at the same time, she was so happy, she didn’t want to let her anger over the fact Storm existed destroy this happiness. She had to settle back into real life.

As she reflected over that, she remembered of Squall and suddenly how she hadn’t contact him with everything that had happened to her. But he had been in such distress lately, though he had refused to admit it. She had to do something, anything, to check if he was alright. He was her best friend. And as she grabbed her cell phone on the living room table and checked through her message, she realized he had send ten messages to her. Each was really brief and only mentioned about Aeris, or the fact he was out of the hospital. But the last one felt awkward. She tensed up as she read it.

“What’s up, Light?” Noctis asked, looking down at her cell.

She hid it immediately, from a pure spy reflex, before to change her mind and show him the little screen of her cell.

“It’s... It’s Squall. He sent me a message. At first, it looks perfectly normal, nothing out of the ordinary. But...”

_Hey there, Light,

_Hope you’re doing good with everything going on that airship, with Raven. Here’s, earth has never seemed as dull and scorched. Aeris is the only thing keeping me from forgetting my place. Heard you were back from your trip. Care to call?

–Leon

“Leon?” Noctis repeated.

“That’s what bugged me. Squall usually signs with his name, Squall. I mean, Leon is one of his codenames. I know it was the second name his passed mother gave him. He only uses it when he
has problems. When he’s mad at himself. Or when he’s confused.”

“Then you’d better call him. He rarely looks around for any help. And since Rinoa has broken up with him, he has to be mad at himself and confused.”

The message was from this morning. Lightning got up and dialled Squall’s number, starting to pace around the living room. Noctis sat back, crossing his arms, watching her. This was the Lightning he knew. Always on the alert for her friends. She seemed ready to lash at anyone who would have dared to hurt Squall in any way. She really considered the guy as her brother. And though Noctis had always been jealous, he had let her keep on this relationship. They were free, though they were together. She didn’t belong to him as a possession. As the contrary was also true. This had always been clear between them. And fortunately, it still was.

“Hi Squall. How are you doing?... Squall? ... Wait, I... Oh my god...! Squall wait, Squall... Of course you can’t go! What’s going on in Rufus’ head? ... Don’t try to tell me you’re fine! Squall wait, Squa...”

She looked at Noctis, stopping dead on her track. Getting up, he waited for her to explain what was going on. She rarely seemed that shocked.

“He hung up on me!”

She sounded surprised about it. Though it wasn’t unlike Squall. He rarely cared about other people’s feelings. Or well, he was really good at pretending he didn’t.

“What has happened?”

“Rinoa’s dead.”

Noctis felt his legs giving out under his weight at the news and sank back in the couch. Rinoa was dead? Not Rinoa Heartilly? She had been a good partner in mission. An incredible woman, she was. Always smiling, always bringing happiness around her. If he hadn’t been in love with Lightning when he had met her, maybe that this girl could have get through his steel heart. And this wonderful person was dead? But how?! She was ... she was so young!

“Some kind of terminal illness. He couldn’t talk about it clearly. He was almost crying on the phone, Noctis! But he don’t want to see me. He said he had a mission tonight and couldn’t... But how can they send him on a mission when he’s all messed up from this? He can’t think straight. He can’t possibly carry anything’s out while grieving for her. She was everything in his life. Everything.”

“The poor guy must still ask himself what hit him. First she breaks up with him and now she dies?”

Lightning walked up to him and sat back on his lap, surprise giving place to shock and fear.

“He said the Feds had something to do with it.”

The Feds... Again. It seemed those guys were the only one killing people on Earth. How many friends had they already lost to their hands? How many more love had to be broken by those greedy scientist working with the corrupted branch of the government to achieve their awful goals? Noctis felt his heart, tighten in the new hole made in his chest. So many people lost before he could even see them again. So many things he could never get back.

“Squall must be trying to play the strong guy, as always. Trying to tell himself he’s not hurt. But he’s bound to be. I’d wished I could have been with him when he learned about it. I’d wished I
could find something to ease the pain he must be going into.”

“Isn’t that Aeris with him?”

“Yes, she is, but he barely knows her. They’re living together though. He’s supposed to be her bodyguard since she’s an Ancient. He mentioned her help in his message. She must be holding him together. If he’s given her a chance to get under his shell...”

“An Ancient... A Cetra you mean?”

“You know about it?”

“Of course. Their last known colony was on Titan. My grandmother was one of them.”

“You never told me that.”

“Well, I never talked a lot about my family, did I?”

“And we both know why.”

Thinking about it, Noctis understood even more what Squall had to be going through. He had been an orphan even before to know his parents. He hadn’t a care in the world. He had lived his life as a lone wolf. A strong and fierce lion, ready to bite at anything that would threaten his security. Rinoa had been the first one to tame him. And now, he was losing her twice.

“If you want to go and see him, I won’t hold you back, you know?”

Lightning hid in his arms, making herself as small as possible against his heart. She seemed scared. As if this news remembered her of all the people death had stolen from her life before.

“To tell him what? The love of your life is dead, but life will go on with or without you, so hang on and swallow it all down? I’m not... I’m not good with this kind of things. I could calm him down when she had just walked away and rejected him. This is... This is so much worst.”

He gently held her, understanding she needed help before that she could give anyone help. She was strong. Stronger than most women he had met in his life. But Rinoa was a friend to her too. She had worked with her. Risked her life with her. Just as him.

“How could she die from some terminal illness? She looked fine just the other day, as we met at the office.”

It felt scary. It was the last news she needed to hear. And as Noctis saw Odin materializing in the kitchen, looking a little lost, he wondered if finding her baby would be enough to get Lightning back to herself. She felt so fragile. He couldn’t let her know until he was sure about everything. He exchanged a stare with Odin. The summoned spirit saw the pain in the young man eyes and understood. He sat down on the floor, crossing his legs and remained silent. Turned transparent, as to give them space. And Noctis kept on patting Lightning’s back, as they felt ready to cry together for the second time in the day.

“Life’s unfair,” he whispered.

“I should be stronger than that,” she sighed, angry against herself.

“You don’t have to be, now. Let it out right now, Light. Holding back will only hurt more.”

Outside, it was raining, a soaking and boiling rain. The sky was turning grey and dark. Noctis felt
his throat tightening. Somewhere out there, maybe not that far, a baby without parents was waiting, manipulated by scientist. Stolen from its mother and father. He had to find her. Even if it meant having more responsibilities and less time for friends in need. It would give him a real purpose. Lightning would find back her will to fight, whatever the odds. And though nothing could come back to what it had been in the past, something could still be made right. His life seemed in ruins. Whenever he was getting news from a friend, it was to hear about disaster. And he had to make it stop. They needed sunshine. He kissed Lightning’s forehead. If it hadn’t been for her, he’d have given up way before...

…

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th (half an hour before Christmas)

Location: Boston streets, American States

Mission: Getting Yuna back to her place without letting her know Cloud’s flustered from the kiss she gave him under the holly...

Soldiers involved: Colonel Cloud Strife, back up soldier Yuna Albhed

Entry from Cloud’s mind. End of transmission.

Cloud was driving around Boston’s city. Yuna’s block was ten kilometres away. It was nice that it wasn’t snowing or cold outside, but still as warm as usual. At the same time, it made him sad. He remembered his white Christmases, back in their family’s chalet in Canada. Back in the time he was still a child. So much had changed since then. But right now, he felt as a small boy. Yuna was leaning on his back, her arms tight around his waist. The wind was playing with his hair. There weren’t many people out on the streets at this late hour, even if it was Christmas’ Eve. Maybe because it was Christmas’ Eve. He felt as if the whole world belonged to him.

The road was all his. He liked taking quick turns and feeling Yuna gripping on his shirt, squealing in fear at the dangerous speed. He would always slow down afterward, before to forget carefulness and have her yelling again. He knew she wasn’t entirely scared. After all, she was with him. And her yells seemed like laughs in his ears. She just had to yell so that he could hear her voice.

They arrived in no time at this pace. He got off his motorbike, before to help her down the said bike. Her hair was all tangled and her legs were shaking a little, both from the ride, but she was smiling, shyly, but smiling. And damn, she was beautiful.

“Thank you for riding me home.” She said with her soft voice.

A bell rang in the distance. It was midnight. Christmas’ day very start. Cloud felt the excitation from when he was a kid arise in his chest. This was so unlike him to get worked up like this. But he liked to listen to her talking to him. He liked being with her. Hell, Serah had understood he was falling for this girl right when he started talking about her. And remembering that, he felt so guilty for even having hope of any relationship stronger then friendship building up between them. She was his subordinate. It was against the rules of the army. Jecht was bound to kill him if he knew. And she looked so younger than him. He was turning 27 next year after all. So close to the dreadful thirty, which would only bring him closer to forty. And still desperately single, after all this time.

“Merry Christmas.” She whispered, blushing since Cloud was holding both of her hands in his.
“Merry Christmas,” he answered her.

Her fingers laced between his, fearing that he would try to leave before she was ready. She wanted him to stay, but had no idea how to ask it without giving him wrong ideas. And Cloud wasn’t sure if he was reading the right things in her eyes or just seeing what his heart wanted to see. Her smile was sweet and her mouth appealing. He had had such a brief taste of her lips, he just begged to lean in and get more of it. But he was scared that it would scare her. Wasn’t sure how she would take the gesture. After all, he had made her a killer... It wasn’t something one could easy forget. But right now, there weren’t any clue of what had happened back on Pluto. Her eyes were innocent, shining brightly, in expectation.

The bell still rang, back in the distance. Cloud remembered a church, where he had been once. A white cathedral, with a bell that rang like this one... He remembered the sad painting on the walls, the bricks, painfully aligned together; the stairs he had climbed after two coffins. And his baby sister in Lightning’s arms. Why this memory, all of a sudden? He felt Shiva’s ghost laughing in the back of his mind.

*Such petty concerns, for such petty human. To think you were worth my strength and power. To think you have so much strength and can be so weak,* she laughed in his head.

He felt his heart tightening in his chest. Not her again, not now! His grip tightened as he grabbed Yuna’s wrists. He pulled her to him. As she came closer, Shiva vanished with all the bad memories. He felt bad for using the young girl to get rid of that witch. But he had felt so weird, staying motionless like that. With or without the frozen guardian spirit, he would have surely acted. He gently lifted her chin, to have her bent her neck as he leaned down. Their lips met as Shiva melt away. Yuna tensed up in his arms, but didn’t push him away. He wouldn’t have forced anything on her. Her lips were soft as spring’s buds. She smelled good, like autumn’s rain over the fallen leaves. He felt her hands running clumsily over his chest and shoulders, to tie behind his neck. She opened her mouth, for an instant. He took it as an invitation and their kiss turned passionate.

Before he knew it, Cloud was lost beyond saving. He wanted to part away from her to whisper her name, just to rush back to her mouth and feel her need for him. Yuna was trying to convince herself this was but a dream and that she would soon wake up. Cloud had no reason to be kissing her, had he? They parted to catch back their breath and were surprised by mocking whistles.

“Wow, you two should get yourself a room!” young voices laughed.

Looking up, Yuna spotted some of her school mates, staring down from their apartment’s windows. They were eying her with disapproval and drunken mockery. She flushed and realized what the gossips would go about after seeing her brought home by someone like Cloud. Her reputation was done for. She had a hot and older boyfriend out from the campus, in Boston. It wouldn’t take long to identify him. Her job would be done for too.

As the teenagers laughed and kept whistling, suggesting dirty things, Cloud shut them up with a single glare. Yuna dragged him in her apartment, thinking it best to get away from those moron’s eyes. Too surprised to resist, the blond soldier found himself standing in the hallway of her small apartment, the door closing behind him with a click, and the young panting girl of his dream standing in front of him, at a loss of word.

“Yuna, you shouldn’t mind those pesky...”

“What was that about?”

“Huh... what what?”
“This kiss just now.”

Cloud remembered dealing with a girl meant giving heartfelt explanations. And he wasn’t sure what to say. There were always too many ideas in his mind and too many that weren’t the right one. If any answer could be the right one.

“I...”

I felt like it, he thought to himself.

“I’m growing fond of you,” he admitted in a whisper.

His husky voice sounded really light in the cool air of the room. Yuna blushed a little more, both from shyness and pride. This was some sort of compliment coming from him.

“Then, will you stay here tonight?” she dared to ask him.

“Tonight?!” he repeated. He remembered where he was suddenly. When they were. “But I... I don’t have any gift for you, I forgot...”

“You could be my gift,” she stopped him.

His eyes widened in wonder of what she could mean by that and she turned around, unable to believe she had uttered something like that. Cloud being her gift? She could ask him to get naked already at this rate. It would be clearer.

“I didn’t mean that... well, I mean, not... Oh, I don’t even know what you think of what I said and I’m already panicking! Forget what I said, okay? What I wanted to say is that... It’s running late and I don’t like the thought of you being alone on the streets. It’s Christmas and...”

I don’t want to be alone, she thought to herself, unable to say it out loud.

He chuckled in front of her panic and raised his hands in the air, to show her no harm had been done.

“It’s okay Yuna, I don’t mind staying here. I don’t mind at all.”

Since she had turned around to hear his answer, he could see her cheeks, still red with shyness and her eyes, that didn’t seem able to stand his gaze. And he wanted to see the Yuna who was daring and feeling comfortable next to him. The Yuna he had started being friend with over the few days he spent training her to use gun.

“Why are you always so shy about everything? Do I still scare you somehow?”

“No, yes... No, no you don’t, but... You kissed me.”

It sounded as the end of the world.

“You didn’t seem to mind a moment ago.”

“I don’t want to say it wasn’t nice, but... We’re friends. It’s already more than we should be, since we’re soldiers and you’re my boss back in the army. I can’t lose my job, Cloud.”

He bit his lips, understanding her uneasiness. There was more than just her job to save, of course, but how could he understand. She was scared he was just trying to get the tenderness he had lacked during the few last days. He had been flirty for her, he was falling for her. But there was no real
promise. No real word or vow of love. It was surely too soon, but she didn’t want to let him win her over like that. She hadn’t time for love, she had already sworn to herself she wouldn’t fall in love before that her career was started and assured.

“I’m sorry. Must be the wine from our supper with Serah. Or this kiss under the holly branch. It just... wasn’t enough.”

He looked away saying that, ashamed of himself. He was such a good liar when he really wanted.

Yuna seemed hurt by what she understood of his answer.

“You’ve been alone for too long, that’s it, right?”

It was a good part of it, but Cloud felt something more. Something stronger. She could chase Shiva away from him and that meant something. But he didn’t want to mention Shiva now. Never again. It couldn’t be his excuses for trying to get closer to this girl.

His silence was all the answer she needed.

“Well, you can still stay here. I’ll make sure you take a good breakfast in the morning before you leave, so that your sisters won’t have to worry about you.”

“What?”

“Serah asked me to watch over you if I could. She said you weren’t treating yourself properly.”

Her remark eased the tension in the room. Calmed down Cloud’s lusty desires.

“She should mind over her fiancé and herself instead of worrying about me.”

The electric Carbuncle Yuna had adopted walked into the room and ran to its master, roaring from pleasure. He barely noticed Cloud, which he seemed to consider as irrelevant. Maybe because of his spiky air or the fact he was a male, just like the carbuncle.

“Hi Bunkle! Did you miss me?” Yuna playfully asked, forgetting about Cloud an instant.

She patted the green and small doglike thing’s head, smiling. For an instant, the soldier envied the space creature. It could live here with Yuna. See her every morning and every night. Always receiving her smile. Without even saying a word to get her sympathy.

“You really called him Bunkle?!”

“Why not? He likes that name.”

The carbuncle barked in agreement. Cloud still wondered how Yuna could keep this thing home as a pet. After all, it was coming from outer space. But before that he could understand why or how, she had trusted the dog in his arms.

“I have to get changed, try getting acquainting with him for now,” she suggested before to lock herself up in her room.

It seemed that the little animal’s presence was giving her the courage to be herself in front of Cloud. And for that, he was almost even more envious of Bunkle. Why was it he couldn’t get that effect on her on his own? Had he lost his touch? Tifa used to like him, to love him. Once, he could conquer a girl’s heart without much effort. He had the looks and the wealth. Now, he was broke, but still dashing. Well, at least, he thought so. He knew it wasn’t all it took to get a girl head over
heels for a guy. But he felt so lost whenever these kinda of mood or feelings was getting over him. He remembered Tifa. How everything had ended. And he knew he had been wrong at that time. Now, he was so scared of being wrong again, he couldn’t dare to try anything too risky. Which meant doing almost nothing in the end.

Bunkle tried to bite him and he let the dog fell back on the floor.

“Got a problem with me being here, little guy? I don’t mean any harm. To anyone.”

Maybe was that why. He was scared of hurting Yuna anymore than he already had. And if he was to get hurt... To show her anything that could hurt him, anything from his past or his life. Would he survive it? He hadn’t many things left to hang onto.

“Warf, warf.”

“Bark all you like, Bunkle.”

The Carbuncle bit his shoe and sent him a shock through it.

“Ouch! Ah, you darned green Chihuahua! What’s your problem?!”

To be continued.
Chapter 24

Episode 2 – Song of Storm – Part XI

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th

Location: Boston, American States, Yaag Rosch’s mansion

Mission: Protecting Aeris Gainsborough at all cost and pretending to go with her – as her boyfriend – in a ball

Agents involved: Squall Leonheart, (potential ancient agent Aeris G.)

No warning.

Message from G.I. eight. End of transmission.

...“And here comes Count Leon, scion of Godlord Loire. And his fiancée, lady Rhis of Gaia.”

Holding on Squall’s arm as she stepped out from the wide entrance into the cozy and even wider central room of the mansion, Aeris gulped down, forcing a smile. Crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling were letting a soft but magnificent light fall from above and down to the crowd of nobles. A sweet song was played by a musician’s band. Long red carpet under her heels. Servants standing and walking around every side of the room, carrying stuff, making sure every guest had anything he could want. Woman dressed glamorously. Wine glass’ gently clinking together, for a toast. Polite laughs and an unending rumour running in the crowd down the golden stairway. This looked like a fairytale. If she forgot the few hypellos and guados dressed with tuxedos and the guards standing out and at every window, with space gun. And the dancing mumbas, which seemed to be the central attraction of the night, except from the music, the dance and the rich’s talk. She felt ready to turn back and run for her life, confronted to this many people and action at the same time. She forced herself to focus on Squall to stand all of this.

Her bodyguard was entirely changed from the lost and confused man she had seen in the morning. His brown and spiky hair seemed longer than usual and had been attached into a nice plait. Dressed in his shining black tuxedo, he looked slimmer and pretty dashing. His smile was playful and his eyes were unreadable. Slightly cold. But they warmed up whenever he would look at her.

She hadn’t anything to envy him for. The few men who looked up at the “scion of Goldlord Loire” looked astonished by the girl standing next to him. Usually, he had been seen with Rinoa, Fang or Lightning, which were all distinguished and pretty. But never had he brought up someone like Aeris. She looked innocent in a way not even Rinoa could have pretend. Her looks were refreshing. She had accepted only little make up for the occasion. The most important work had been done on her shoulder blade, to hide her scar.

Her crimson dress was flattering to each of her curves. The cleavage showed a nice bit of skin, without turning vulgar. Her shoulders were revealed by the low sleeves and she had small silver gloves, covering her hands up to her wrists. The dress’ skirt was filled with pleats that were twisted in the end, to turn into roses. Five flower in all. It could have been out of place on anyone else, but it fitted Aeris perfectly. She had high heeled shoes underneath, onyx black, just as her onyx’ necklace. The stones were cut like crystal and pointed down her neck, in various directions. Her hair raised up her head in a complicated hairdo was decorated with red dots and flowers. She was
simply exquisite. And Squall felt that somehow, he wasn’t really standing up to her. He barely had made an effort in dressing.

*She looks stunning,* was all he could think for the first five minutes when he had seen her.

He’d almost wished it could have been cold outside, so that she would have had to wear a black fur coat over this all. He had a thing for fur. Still couldn’t explain why...

“What’s that Godlord guy they talked about?” Aeris asked Squall after that they’d got down the stair and slipped into the crowd, still hanging to his arm.

“My father. Laguna Loire.” He whispered back to her.

Her eyes twitched with surprise. The Laguna Loire?! Even if she had been away from most everything from the known world and politics because she was running everywhere she could to hide, she knew that name. Who wouldn’t? Loire was the top manager of Loire’s enterprise. He owned half of the human army and had his personal branch of mercenaries in most known organization across the galaxy. He had hotels, restaurants, stores, amusement parks, spaceship, space colonies, space stores. He was certainly the richest human on Earth. All his success was thank to his clumsiness, as only a few knew. Without Edea, he wouldn’t be anything and his empire could fall to nothing, but his third wife was ruling over his empire while he was writing in his daily Laguna (his own journal), and helping charity’s group and more.

“Is he... Is he really your dad?” she asked him.

“Of course. My cover wouldn’t work otherwise. Not that I’m really happy from it.”

Aeris was baffled by the news. Squall was certainly the sole heir to a real fortune –Laguna had no known children so far-. He had no need to work. No need to risk his life. But he still did? And he wasn’t living in the richest apartment, on the contrary.

“Before that you ask me any sensitive question, I’m not on good term with that guy. He doesn’t send me money, cause he doesn’t owe me anything. All I take from him is this title so I may have one more role to play for my job.”

Aeris understood there was way more to it than just this. She guessed it was about Squall’s mother. He’d never mentioned her, or his dad. She had thought he was an orphan, somehow. Lightning had always said so. But his dad was alive? How could he be...?

The dark look on the spy’s face told her she was better not trying to understand what this could mean right now. It wasn’t the time or place. Even if she wanted to, she couldn’t have wondered over that anymore.

“Sir Leon, I must say, your companion is a charming creature. You’re from Gaia, leady Rhis?”

A fat old man, dressed in purple and white had came all the way up to them. Squall gave him half a smile, barely acknowledging him, giving a quick glance of warning at Aeris.

“This is sir Disley, darling.” He said on a strange tone. As if his voice wasn’t sure what she was supposed to express.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, good sir. I’m from Gaia, as you’ve heard. The third colony was my home till recently.”

“Oh, I see. Such unfortunate events, that it was taken out by Al bhed.”
Disley was staring intently at her and Squall already felt ready to punch the old freak in the guts if he dared to come just one inch closer to Aeris. But he couldn’t start some political incident. Instead of letting his urge to fight burst out, he started to talk casually, bringing another subject, pretending he didn’t want to hurt his fiancée’s feelings. Aeris jumped a little as a word was mentioned by the old man eating her up with his eyes.

“I must say, lady Rhis, you have a really... Ancient perfume. It brings back lot of memories.”

“I’m sorry sir. I...”

She was about to say she didn’t have any perfume, but Squall squeezed her arm, to make sure she wouldn’t fall for that trick.

“You’re a little direct with your compliments, Disley. You’d better try not to shock Rhis. She’s a shy and conceited girl.”

“Leon!” She playfully snapped at him.

It had came a little late, since it was weird telling herself she was supposed to call him Leon here.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, milady. It’s just so nice to see two young people getting along. Seeing others in love always make me forget myself.”

Squall was wondering about some way to get away from Barthandelus when three young women approached their little group.

“Hey Leon!”

“Hi girls...” he replied, looking relieved about the diversion.

Disley took the hint and walked away, after giving a brief reverence to Aeris. She wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do in this place. There was way too many people around her and if Squall had let go of her arm, she would have certainly run away right now. But she turned around and smiled to the three women gathering around them.

“I’d never thought you’d proposed to someone one day!”

“Well, this was quite unexpected too.” Aeris whispered.

Her comment made them laugh, as if it was a joke and Squall realized how uncomfortable his protégée was. This mission was about getting to know who wanted a Cetra in their schemes. The faster it would be done and this ordeal would be over for Aeris.

“Rhis changed my life.” Squall replied.

This started a chattering between the girls, and a little distance too. The spy grabbed Aeris by the waist and took her all the way to the dance circle, where they did a few waltz. Since she had almost never danced in her life, Squall had had to teach her a few tricks, but she was doing good now. Running all her life had made her a quick learner. As she twirled and danced, slowly, she started to forget the crowd around them. And she could have kept on forgetting and push the limit to whispering Squall’s name instead of “Leon”. But when he was forgetting their mission himself, someone tapped on his shoulder, halting their waltz.

“Excuse me, sir, could I borrow your partner?” the cold and controlled voice which said that belonged to no other than Sephiroth himself.
Dressed in a silver and white tuxedo, his long hair braided and hanging on his left shoulder, he looked dashing and mysterious as a vampire.

Aeris froze, all the colors vanishing from her face.

“Prince Sephiroth. What a pleasure.” Squall hissed between his teeth.

He had never liked that guy. Now that he knew how he’d hurt Aeris, he hated him even more. Both men exchanged a small bow of the head.

A prince? The cetra had no idea there was still such high rankings in noble society. The fact there was still a noble society made no sense. They were in 19 027 after all, the very fact the planet was still in one piece was a miracle. But human hadn’t evolved that much. They were still hurting their home world. Earth was crying so loudly as Sephiroth took one step closer to her, she could have fainted from the pain. But Squall wrapped an arm around her waist and held her protectively to his chest.

“I think we’ve met before, lady Rhis. Under different names, in another time.”

“If it’s true, I don’t remember any of it,” she lied.

This made the albinos smile widely.

“You’ve got yourself a precious fiancée, count Leon. Be sure to look closely after her. It would be terrible, if she was to fall in the wrong hands.”

“You’re talking of a human being, your highness.”

Squall couldn’t hold back his rage over this. He barely held back his voice not to yell.

“I know, good sir. She’s just not as human as you believe she is. She has way more potential than any other girl around here.”

At least, Sephiroth was making it pretty easy to understand he wouldn’t mind having Aeris back in his organization. It was well known that this guy worked for the Feds. He was their only state representative. The only link that made this group questionable. Because whoever Sephiroth allied with, his “Mother” Jenova was bound to be tied with too. And Jenova was a calamity mankind had been trying his best to avoid as long as she’d known about her existence.

“And her potential isn’t only about woman looks, if you see what I mean…”

Sephiroth’s smile was dark and frightening. And Squall though about punching him in the face for an instant, before that reason took over him.

“I... see. Well, if you’ll excuse us.”

As he walked away, he whispered to the frightened Aeris still hanging onto his arm:

“I hate being polite like this.”

Somehow, it made her smile and he decided the party was over. He knew the Feds wanted her (Disley was the proof). He knew Sephiroth was eager to use her. He had no idea in which way and didn’t want to let his imagination run wild over this. He wanted to make her forget all the meetings with those false people, pretending they were respectful while spitting on each other under pretty words. But there was still one or two sharks to put to the test. Yaag Rosch himself. And the army’s
leaders...

...  

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 25\textsuperscript{th} –early morning–  

Location: Boston, American States, Yuna’s apartment  

Mission: Getting through the night or finding a good reason to go away without looking like a moron, before that something undoable takes place...  

Soldiers involved: Cloud Strife, back up soldier Yuna Alhbed  

Warning: There’s no clue over what Yuna expect from Cloud at this rate. She could want anything. And this isn’t reassuring. Proceed with care, whatever you decide to do!  

Message from Cloud’s mind. End of transmission.  

...  

When Yuna stepped back into her living room, Cloud was sitting on her couch, glaring time to time at Bunkle, and carelessly reading one of her engineering books. It was already past midnight, but she didn’t feel like sleeping. Not after that her colonel had kissed her like he just had. She silently walked up to the couch, trying to surprise him. He looked up from his reading at the very moment she stepped on the living room’s carpet.  

“Trying to sneak up on me, are you?” he asked, looking rather amused.  

She blushed and he couldn’t help but stare at her. She had switch her shorts for tight jeans and her top was replaced with a nice red tunic. While her sleeves were stopping above her elbows, her neck was offered to the eyes by her tied up hair. How she could tied her short hair was a mystery to Cloud, but then again, he knew girl had some tricks he could never understand. He had helped Serah getting ready for school a few times, until she was old enough to decide a guy, even her big brother, couldn’t know how to fix her hair properly...  

“I obviously failed.” She sighed.  

“Why did you have to get changed anyway?”  

“You don’t like this attire?” she asked playfully, bending down to him with her arms crossed behind her back.  

His eyes widened for a mere second as he saw her clivage growing wide till he could see half of her breasts and the start of her bra. Her shirt was slack, though it fitted her shape when she raised herself back straight.  

Purple, he thought to himself.  

He felt his face heating up a little. As she made that on purpose? Certainly, but why? She was always so shy, and suddenly, she seemed ready to rush him up all the way...  

“Earth to Cloud?”  

“Whatever...” was his only answer as he looked the other way, mad at himself for getting ideas. She just wanting company, there was no way...
But he had kissed her just a few minute ago. So maybe she thought? He felt pretty confused suddenly. His heart was beating fast as she sat next to him. It felt good. He couldn’t tell she was just as stressed as him. Why was he stressed anyway? He was older than her, he had more experience in this...

*Who are you trying to convince with that, colonel? You’re only real girlfriend was Tifa. And you ruined everything with her...* he thought to himself.

“What are you reading?”

He pushed the book on her laps to let her see, trying to understand what he could do to feel less awkward about this situation. She let out a gasp of surprise.

“You get this kind of reading? It’s about alien’s craft engines. It’s super tough.”

“My bike is made from outer space material. For the speed and the aerodynamics. I took classes to learn how to disrupt alien ship in the army, so, I had to know the basic over their engineering. I suck at human technology though, except for my bike.”

That got her laughing, which eased his heart a little. Silent came back. And he felt that somehow, he had to say something, but he couldn’t find anything. He just wanted to know if he could resume kissing her. Not that he’d want to go any further than that. Well, he sure wanted to, but he wouldn’t push her. He guessed he had to explain himself. But how was he supposed to when he was so scared of starting a real love based relationship? If she was to reject him at some point...

“It seems you don’t get along with Bunkle.” Yuna observed.

The small electric dog was groaning whenever it looked at Cloud. And Cloud would always answer with a glare.

“It’s been two times already that this thing shocked me with its electricity. He hates me would be more appropriate than we don’t get along.”

“Oh, don’t call him a thing! Bunkle has his own feelings and he understands everything we say.”

“Well, I’m not apologizing.”

“Cloud!”

“He bit me first!” he protested.

“You’ve called him a Chihuahua’s sized alien, Cloud.”

“You remember it?” he sounded surprised that she did.

“And you too, as it seems. Just take it back, I’m sure he won’t hold any more grudges at you.”

“I don’t care what he thinks about it.”

Bunkle whined and tried to climb on Yuna’s lap, as a wounded kid would do with his mother to receive comfort.

“Aww... Poor little thing,” she sighed as she stroked Bunkle’s fur behind his ears. “Why don’t you apologize? Just for me, please?”

She blinked, letting her eyelashes waved at him and Cloud looked the other way once again. He
wasn’t sure if she was using Bunkle to get some answers from him without asking any questions.

“Yuna, I don’t get what you want from me. Couldn’t you just say it?”

“What’s the problem?”

“I don’t know what I’m still doing here.”

“Well...” she flushed as she wondered over what she wanted to tell him.

*Filling the void* had been her first thought. Whenever he was around, she felt more complete, as if his presence was lighting her dark thoughts and bringing sunshine when she needed it. She wasn’t sure how he would understand something like that.

“You kissed me, earlier.”

He gulped down. So it was said. She was going to ask him why again. He tried to think of something to halt her questions. To make her happy.

“I could do it again.” He heard himself saying.

He felt like a moron. He wasn’t even able to look at her right now. Too much butterflies in his chest. Too much heat in his face. Too much fear in his heart.

“Of course, you could. But first, I gotta know... If you kissed me because you wanted to... or because you just wanted to have fun?”

“Huh...”

Gosh, heavy question this late?

“I...”

“Look at me Cloud.”

It had taken all of her courage to tell him all of that. And she was glad he had kissed her, somehow. This gave her the chance to clear up things with him. He reluctantly looked at her. He felt so wide open under her green and blue eye, he wanted to hide. But she smiled shyly at him, giving him back courage.

“You’ve told me you were growing fond of me. But is it just that? Do you just like the fact I can chase away Shiva from your head? Are you after my company, or my looks, or...”

“Whoa, whoa, Yuna, give me a chance to answer!”

“Well, answer then.”

“I...” he bit his lips. She was looking right to his soul, he was almost sure of it. Could he tell the truth? Could he get something else than pain from this? “I really like you. Not only because you’re cute, or because you can chase away Shiva.” He stopped, looking for his words. The right words.

“I think I’m falli...”

“You can’t!” she interrupted him.

This was the first hit in his coffin. What was that now? She wanted answer and as soon as he was talking honestly, she decided that he couldn’t?
"But... Yuna!"

"We work together," she reminded him.

"You’re a back-up soldier, you won’t be in the army all your life and..."

"I don’t have time for..."

The pain that showed on Cloud’s face was too clear for her to end her sentence.

"I know I have no right to ask anything from you, Yuna. Not after everything I already put you through."

"Then don’t... Don’t let your feelings grow." She asked him.

She looked scared, but he couldn’t understand.

"Earlier, you didn’t push me away." He reminded her.

Cloud grabbed her hand. And she seemed torn between her words and her wants. He felt it. Felt her body that wanted to move closer. Her fingers that forced themselves not to move, not to tie around his hand. Grabbing her wrist with his other hand, he realized her heart was beating fast. Maybe too fast.

"I was caught off guard," she defended herself.

"What do you want me to stay here for the night then?"

She eluded his stare. Her throat was filled with such a tight knot, it seemed hard to breathe. Why was she pushing him away now? Because it was the right thing to do, her reason tried to remind her. Love would only lead to more time lost. To pain. What could she asked from Cloud? He was superior to her in everything. He was every girl’s dream. And if she obtained him now, or at any time, she was bound to lose him to someone else, a much prettier, wiser, hotter girl than herself. How could he like her? Could he be falling for her? Falling in love? This man? She knew he could. She wanted him to, since he had her falling in love for weeks already. But was it right? Wasn’t it too fast? Wasn’t it too soon? Wouldn’t he laugh from her inexperience? Why was he even still here?

"Yuna..."

He couldn’t find anything else to say. But he couldn’t let her get away with it. If she had to reject him, she had to do it clearly. Otherwise, he couldn’t accept it. She had asked him to stay. She was sitting right next to him. She wasn’t backing away. This had to mean something else than all she said. He brought her hand to his mouth, to kiss the back of her hand. And her fingers. And then her wrist. Her skin tasted so sweet. So warm. She shivered. Try to ask him to stop. But he brought her in a tight embrace and locked his lips with hers.

And her reason melted under his kiss. She took his head in her hands. Let him run his hands over her trembling body. Let his words come back to his lips without listening. She liked those lips. She never thought she could have been so attracted by lips. But he knew how to light a fire in her only with his mouth. At first, she clumsily kissed him back. She wasn’t sure what to do with her tongue. With her body. They fought together, to get closer. As close as humanly possible. His hands felt heavy. Went between them, looking for the button and zip of her jean. Grabbing his wrists, she gently made him leave the matter for later. His lips ran down her jaw, down her neck. She couldn’t tell where his hands were touching her anymore. But her inner legs were wet from the need he
She gasped as he bit her skin. Bite him in response. Let her hands wander under his shirt. Try to find back his head, to have his mouth kissing her on the lips again. She felt that he wanted her. Somehow, in the haze wrapping them in this passionate fire burning up their skin, she realized he was ready to go all the way. But was she? Her bra unclipped in her back. His hands covered her hard breasts. She moaned from pleasure. It was too quick. Really too quick. But she liked it. Cause it was him.

... 

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th, around 4 o’clock pm

Location: Boston, American States, Lightning and Cloud’s apartment

Mission: Getting to know where master Lightning and Noctis’ baby is kept prisoner without Lightning learning about it

Humans and SP involved: Noctis Lucis Caleum, Lightning Claire Farron and SP (summon spirit): Odin

Warning: If lady Lightning was to learn about this and that her baby cannot be safely bring back to her, she would certainly die from the pain, so it is vital to keep her uninformed. This makes me feel pretty uncomfortable...

Odin thinking to his self. End of transmission.

...

As soon as Lightning went to the washroom, Noctis called out Odin, which appeared instantly.

“So, did you find her this time too? Where is she?”

“The poor child is sitting in a strange tube filled with liquid. The tube is surrounded by old men and woman, doing some research. They talked about mako and... exploiting energy’s sources.”

Noctis went through the library and after fumbling in the books and other things –even if most belonged to Cloud- he found a map of the city.

“She’s in Boston, at least, you’re sure of that, ain’t you?”

“Well...” Odin looked uncertain. “Is Boston this city?”

“Of course it is.”

“How wide is it? I can’t properly localize myself. I can materialize close to places with my master’s energy, or her child’s energy. I can’t read your words, they’re not written in my language.”

Noctis rolled his eyes and unbend the map on the living room’s table.

“Come here and do your best to talk as low as possible. We don’t have much time.”

“I don’t like working in my master’s back.” The knight complained, sitting on the other side of the table, directly on the carpet.
“It’s for her own good. Now help me!”

After one minute, Noctis had taught Odin of the present kilometres and metres used for measures instead of miles and all. The summoned spirit was pretty sure the house was about a hundred of kilometres away from the apartment. It was high from the ground. A tower or a big building. This made almost every construction in the city suspicious.

“Did you watch the city from the sky?”

Noctis needed real hints to localize a few buildings where his child could be. He felt ready to go obsessed over this. He was sure that somehow, all his troubles will disappear if he could at least make this one thing right.

“What do you think, that I can materialize right in the sky and drop myself all the way down to earth? I always appear on the ground. Especially when my mount isn’t accompanying me.”

“This means you can fly if you want, right?”

“I don’t have wings!”

“But you’re a spirit!” Noctis insisted.

“That doesn’t mean I’m a ghost, my good sir.”

“Just what is going on with you two? You’ve become friend while I was gone?” Lightning asked, coming out from the washroom.

“I needed to know your chosen partner better, master! How could I serve you right if I wasn’t able to get along with your closest friends and loved ones?”

Lightning looked at the ceiling, before to stare back at Noctis, and at the map he had put on the table. He seemed to be hiding something to her. What were they plotting in her back?

“It’s pretty suspicious though. You both hurry to get talking between yourselves the very second I get away from your sight...”

“Well, it may look strange, but I had something to ascertain with Odin.”

“Something of the highest importance,” the knight added solemnly.

Lightning was still full of doubts. And as Noctis was desperately trying to find a way to make this look normal, he suddenly realized something. Even if he get to know where was the child and went all the way there, the mako baby was sure to be highly protected by heavily armed guards. How was he supposed to overcome a battalion without the Faction’s support? Because he totally couldn’t the Faction into this matter. It was too personal. And he had so much power right now. So much power, he could easily snatch the baby away from its kidnapper and take her back to Lightning without a scratch. But then again, he couldn’t control the Radiant powers. And... Just the idea of the glass tube breaking around the small thing, tearing it apart and killing his own child while he wanted to save it. He shivered. It could happen. He had no idea how to rescue the baby. No idea what to do to take her out from the tube she was in.

What was the liquid she was floating in? What were the scientists doing to her? Was she healthy? Would he be able to hold her in his arms the right way? He had always trouble with kids. Storm was already a problem. And he was still ready to run in the wolf’s den, to get his little girl back?!
“I forgot...” he said, looking around him.

His eyes were searching the whole room. He looked frantic. Lightning remembered a few of their first missions at this sight. How obsessed he could get when he wanted something done. Usually, the something was of great matter. But what could be worrying him this much right now? When everything was supposed to be fine? Of course, maybe was he still panicked from the news of Rinoa’s death? He had been one of her good friends and they had worked on many missions together. If she hadn’t been Squall’s best friend, she would have been jealous of Rinoa’s relationship with Noctis. But it wasn’t as her own friendship with Squall. Just wondering about him made her sad. He needed so much help right now. But he wouldn’t let her help him. And even if she tried, what was she supposed to tell him. She was still helpless in front of dead.

“Ha!” Noctis got up and grabbed his cellphone, sitting on the kitchen’s counter.

He dialled a few numbers and started pacing around the kitchen, while Odin was asking Lightning what was the thing the young man was putting on his ear.

“It’s a phone.” She answered, forcing herself not to sigh from desperation.

“But phones are... Where’s the wire connecting it to the wall? How can it get a signal?”

“It’s a wireless phone.” She added, wondering who Noctis was calling in such a hurry.

Odin looked astonished. Then again, he had been from surprises to surprises since he had been called in this world. Wireless phone, map’s covered with red, blue, yellow and green lines, sun and moon shining outside as daylight for the whole day and the whole night.

“You know, Odin, how about you get back to Yggdrasill for a few hours? The poor horse must be missing you.”

“I shall take my leave if you want me so, master.” Odin bowed slightly. “Be sure to spent good quality time with sir Noctis while I’ll be gone,” he added, pretty seriously, though it sounded as a joke, somehow...

He then disappeared into thin air, still bowing down.

“Hey, Stella. ... I know, I’m calling late, but I have a favour to ask. ... No, it can’t wait. ... It’s about Storm. ... I’m sure he’s doing fine, in fact, I need his help. ... Exactly, to train me. ... You know, with my Radiant powers.”

Lightning crossed her arms in front of her chest and went in the kitchen, to stop him from pacing and forced him to look at her right in the eyes. Though he avoided her gaze, he did freeze on place, still talking to that Stella.

“What do you think you’re doing, calling HER?” Lightning asked, doing her best not to explode.

“What, the background? No, it’s just the tv...”

“Noctis!” Lightning barked.

“Alright, she has every right not to be happy about this, but I really need to control the Radiance. It can’t wait, Stell’ it’s a matter of life and death.”

“You call her Stell’? What does that mean? Stop doing as if you don’t hear me, Noctis!”
He walked away from her to concentrate on Stella’s answers in the phone and Lightning followed him, even angrier.

“I know it’s his first Christmas, I just need his teaching for ten hours or so. ... Of course it will plenty enough! ... Yeah, you’re right. Maybe he could come for a few days to our place.”

“Noctis!”

Lightning was beyond anger at this point. What was he doing right now? Preparing all of this without even asking her first, without even telling her why he needed Storm to “teach” him how to use his power right now? This was pure provocation. She wouldn’t have him treating her like that. No, she wouldn’t.

“Well, if it comes to this, you could come to,” he suggested doubtfully.

“What are you saying, you’re inviting her here? Don’t you remember where we are? Cloud lives here too! There’s not enough place for three more people. Where is she going to sleep? I don’t want to sleep under the same roof as this...”

“Get Storm ready in the training room back in the Faction, Stell’. I’ll be there in an hour. ... Yes, right now. There’s no time for question, we’ll discuss the rest later. ... Thanks. And bye.”

He hung up, looking up at Lightning. She was glaring at him with so much furry, he was surprised that he wasn’t already dead. She had every reason in the world to be angry at him right now. But he needed the control over his powers fast. And if it meant he needed to spend one day with Storm, so be it. If the kid wanted to come to his place as payback, he could play his father role for once. After all, he was plotting to get back his other child so that Lightning would be happy. He was preparing himself, willingly, to get back his daughter and be the father he was supposed to be since two years. And this was frightening him way much more than any glare could have throw at him.

“Light...”

“Don’t you Light me! You dare to invite her and her son here, without even asking me what I’m thinking! It’s our first Christmas back together. You’d said you wanted to spend time with me. And when you said that, I thought it meant solely me, you get it? What’s so important you have to learn how to use your Radiant power so quickly? Did something happened?”

“No. Well...”

How was he supposed not to lie to her again while hiding her the truth? Their baby was alive. Well, if Odin was right and if it was really their little girl out there, held captive by scientists. But if it wasn’t, could he risk to deceive her like that?

“I need to do something as soon as I can. If you knew what it is, you’d be glad I’m taking all these precautions.”

“How come you can’t tell me what you’re planning to do if I’d be so glad to know?”

He grimaced. She was better than him as those games. So much better. He had nowhere to be without her. He couldn’t stay anywhere else, hadn’t his own apartment anymore. He was lost without her. But how could he put her through the joy of their baby being safe when he wasn’t sure that the child was their baby, and that he would be able to rescue her without failing this time? He had failed last time. And he couldn’t bring Lightning back in a dangerous mission before testing himself first.
“You don’t have to think I distrust you because I’m not telling you anything. It’s just...”

“Is it for one of your friends? Prompto? Ignis? You can tell me if they got into trouble, I may help you.”

“It’s not about them.”

Lightning looked doubtful. What was he hiding that was so important he couldn’t tell her?

“Who is it about?”

_Us, Light, us, can’t you understand I wouldn’t be hiding it if it wasn’t us that were concerned?_, he thought, despairing himself.

“I... I can’t tell you right now, Claire.”

“Well, you won’t have any choice! We’re going through everything together, I’d told you already, didn’t I? We were agreed!”

“Not for this,” he couldn’t changed his mind over the matter.

Lightning seemed ready to jump at his throat. He went back to pacing across the room, feeling his nervousness and anger rising in his chest. What was best to do? Tell her and take the risk... No! No, he wasn’t deceiving her again. All of this was based on too many conjectures and too many false hope. He had to be realistic. But if he’d lose her now, what good would it make, to rescue their baby.

“If I’d tell you right now, you wouldn’t accept to wait. You would run head on into danger and I’m not prepared. I couldn’t help you. I couldn’t make everything right. I need to be in control this time.”

“In control of what?” she yelled at him.

“Of myself,” he retorted on the same ton, turning back to face her, his eyes turning red. Something cracked in the background and they realized he had almost broken every window of the apartment. The glasses were filled with cracks. “You see!” he shouted again, a bit lower this time, pointing at the windows. “You see how dangerous I am right now? I can break anything coming near me. Just by getting mad.”

“And why are you getting mad at me, huh? You’re the one keeping secrets to me! I’m the one who should be angry!”

“Well, I am mad too, because you should trust me on this!”

This time, the light bulbs on the ceiling burst and Lightning covered her head with her arms, surprised and shocked. Noctis’ anger fell back down as he realized what he’d done. At this rate, he was going to harm her. And it was the last thing he wished to do.

“Light, I’m sorry, I should have calmed down...”

“No, it’s alright, I see how things are now. I don’t have a choice but to trust you, or at least, give the impression that I do. Otherwise, you could kill me without even wanting to, is that it?”

“Light...” his voice cracked a little as his face darkened with shame.

They stood still for a moment, Lightning still glaring at him, a small hint of fear in the back of her
eyes. But this wasn’t enough to chase her away. And Noctis stood on the other side of the room, shameful, his heart filled painful guilt. Both of them wanted answers. Excuses. They both wanted to apologize. Both were too proud to do so. In the end, Noctis was the first to talk. Though it was still painful to bring up the subject.

“How would you have named her?” he asked, his voice white with sorrow.

Lightning seemed taken aback. What was he talking about now?

“Named who?”

“Our daughter.” He replied, looking right into her aqua eyes.

And since it was the first time he admitted they had had a daughter together, the first time he talked about it, Lightning felt the tears gathering up in her eyes. He looked dead serious. And if he was bringing their lost child, could it mean...?

“I... I still wasn’t sure... Maybe...” A held back sob escaped her lips as she turned away from him.

How could he ask such an insensitive question when their daughter was dead?

“You’d better think something up then. Because Odin said that he’d found her.”

She swiftly turned back around.

“He what?!?”

“I mean that she may be alive, Lightning. The scientists back in the Feds from two years ago could have stolen her as an embryo to use her mako. None of us could know, we were both unconscious.”

“Are you insane?!?”

She walked all the way up to him and slapped him in the face. Noctis supposed it was because he had said something wrong, though he was sure what. The next thing he knew, she was wrapping her arm behind his neck and bringing him into a heated and panicked kiss. As if this lie could have them both disappearing in the following seconds. His cheek still burning from her slap, he tried to resist her, to get her away from him, just to understand what she was thinking. She was trembling in his arms. Her lips tasted salty from her tears. Her panic was contagious.

“Could she really be alive?” she asked, letting go of him, not even catching back her break.

“Odin said... he sensed your energy somewhere else than here, the other night. And we can both tell you were only here. And it wasn’t Cloud that he found, though you and your brothers are the only human beings alive with mako in your veins. But he found someone else.”

He paused, gulping down. It felt good to tell her everything, but he was really scared at the same time. If it wasn’t right. What he was claiming as true could be nothing but his own imagination playing tricks on him.

“Who did he found?”

“A baby. Kept in a tube filled with green waters. In a room full of scientists talking about mako and energy. He said her hair was silver and grey. And her eyes gotta be green.”

For an instant, Lightning seemed ready to punch him again. But she saw in his eyes he wanted to believe all he had said. And though Odin was driving them both crazy with his weird ways, they
trusted his senses. Lightning’s energy was bound to be peculiar. Being her summoned spirit, he had to be able to localize it among all other human beings. So then...

“My baby... Our baby’s alive?” she asked.

Her voice was faint. Huskier than usual. And softer at the same time.

“I wanted to rescue her. To bring her back home. It’s why...”

“And you hid it to me in fear something bad would happen and that our baby would die... a second time.” She whispered.

Suddenly, there was no fear in her eyes, nor anger. Incandescent love was burning in her shining eyes. She understood now. He was trying to protect her. Protecting her feelings from another heartbreak.

“How about Raine?” she suggested.

“Raine?” He repeated, unable to understand this time.

“Our little girl’s name. If we can get her back.”

Noctis felt the new weight on his shoulders. Now, she was thinking of a name. Now she was ready to go with him wherever it takes, to rescue their child. Their daughter. What had he done, telling her everything? Was he going to be ready after training a few hours with Storm? What would Storm think, if a baby stole him from his father? Had he really the time to get worried about all of that right now?

“Come on, Claire. We’ll go to the Faction’s training quarters first. This could give some time to Odin to localize the place where she is.”

“I’m right behind you.” She said, wiping off her mixed tears of joy and fear.

To be continued.
Cloud was the first to wake up. He felt really confused and numb. He was still wearing all of his clothes and somehow, he thought that this wasn’t right. Hadn’t he been with Yuna last night? As he opened his eyes, he saw her. She was lying right next to him. Still wearing most of her clothes. Though her arms were wrapped around him, under his shirt. They were both going to get cramps like this. He tried to raise himself up. Try to clear up his mind. They had been kissing as if they were the last humans alive on earth. Then, there had been a sudden pain. But what could have caused it. Looking around, he spotted Bunkle, looking at him with sharp eyes. The green dog seemed to be smiling at him.

“So it was you.”

Cloud could easily imagine that the Carbuncle had gotten mad at him for getting too close to Yuna and had bite him and electrocute him at the same time. This could have easily knocked him out. Yuna’s hair was spiky. She must have been shocked too.

“Darn you, Bunkle.”

“Hum... Cloud?”

Yuna had just woken up and sounded just as confused as him.

“What... what happened yesterday night? Or this morning? I... I remember we were kissing and...”

She was turning bright red and Cloud realized that maybe she was regretting what had started between them. And she was bound to believe that something that shouldn’t have taken place had happened between them.

“I think we both...”

“Merry Christmas Yunie!” a cheerful and young voice covered his sentence.

Yuna looked up with wide eyes at her cousin Rikku who was coming in her apartment with a big smile, pushing before her a wheel chair in which her husband was sitting.

“Wow, you two had a nice Christmas together.” The blond girl observed, seeing Yuna’s bra lying on the floor.
Cloud turned white as he recognized Seymour.

“Is this lieutenant Strife?”

Yuna almost threw Cloud to the floor, panicked that they could have been discovered in such a pause.

“No, no, it’s just a big mistake, he was going back home but... but Bunkle gave him an electric shock and he lose consciousness!”

Getting up and kicking her bra under the couch, she forced Cloud to get up and pushed him all the way to the entrance, ready to throw him out of her apartment.

“Wait a minute, Yuna, we...”

“There’s nothing to explain here, Cloud. You got me offguard. This... yesterday’s night never should have happen. And if it was Bunkle who stopped us, than it’s better. I can’t mix my personal life with my work. Not now. Not ever.”

“But...”

He felt terribly rushed. How could she reject him like that? Why was she reacting like that? Why was she coming back on everything that had happened, while she had felt so welcoming yesterday? He remembered her hands in his hair. Her lips kissing back. And now her warm hands was pushing him away, her eyes were looking anywhere but at him. She couldn’t stand his gaze. She couldn’t take his questions. He hadn’t even said that he loved her. But he had tried to get everything she had to give as a woman. Though she had said she couldn’t get involved with him like that. Right now, it pained her to push him away, but how was she supposed to react, with Rikku here, and her husband as a witness of her weakness?

Love was a waste of time. A source of pain and torture to the heart. She couldn’t go through that. She had killed people. How could she enjoy herself while she had taken away all of their joy and all of their chances to live joy?

It was scary too that Cloud’s hands which were so deadly could give her so much pleasure. And she felt guilty for taking it. Guilty for letting her guard down while nothing had been promised. While nothing was clear between them. If he just wanted to use her, well, he wasn’t going to have his ways. Even if he had seemed sincerely fond of her yesterday, it wasn’t enough.

Lost beyond words, Cloud walked out of Yuna’s apartment to hear the door shutting close behind him. So that was it? No time to explain anything? No time to understand what had taken place yesterday? His bike was the only thing waiting for him right now. With his empty stomach and his empty heart, he jumped on the motorcycle and turned it on; letting it roar with the anger he felt before to drive off.

This time, he drove without being cautious. Almost got arrested by the police, but used Christmas’ day as an excuse to walk out of a pricy contravention. He wished he could crash in a building, but that would mean to hurt other people and his priority was to protect. To protect those around him that still could be protected, while he was falling to rumble himself.

Reaching his apartment, he was surprised to see a map on the living room table, shattered piece of light bulb on the floor and the broken glass of the windows.

“What happened here?” he wondered.
“Cloud?”

He blinked, slowly recognizing his twin sister’s voice. Lightning came out of her room, their vacuum in one hand, her hair all tangled and messy from the hard time she had looking around for it.

“You’re back?” he asked, almost unable to believe she was.

As she saw his chalk white face and his wary eyes, she understood something was amiss.

“I thought you were out at Serah’s place, she told me you came to visit with a friend.”

“Yeah, everything was still right until I left Serah’s place.”

His voice sounded as the ghost of himself. As if he had just been through unspeakable torture and couldn’t hold back anything inside anymore. His mako eyes were filled with tears. His shoulders were hanging low and he seemed so tired.

“Cloud, you look terrible.”

“Why is it the only girls I understand are you and Serah, huh?”

“What happened?”

He needed to talk. Needed Lightning to comfort him. He wanted to hide in her arms. To have her telling him what he could do to make this mess right. He wanted to know how he could get Yuna back with him. Get her heart to trust him. He felt so ashamed for still needing help for things like that. He swallowed it back. Tried to find something else to be comforted about.

“You talked a lot with Serah, lately. You could have tried and call me.”

“Every time I tried, I got your receiver.”

“Well, you could have left a message, or something. I was getting worried, you know. And when I come back here, it’s to find the place in pieces. Did you have a fight here? Is this Noctis’ doing?”

“Wait, you know that Noctis is back?”

“Well, Serah told me. It seemed you were on a honeymoon cruiser with him.”

His voice was full of reproach this time. He hated seeing his sisters running ahead of problems.

“It was for a mission. And anyway, I still love him. We’re back together for good.”

“But Lightning, this creep vanished from your life for the last two years!”

At first, the young woman wondered if Cloud could ever consider things the way she did now. Would he believe Noctis’ story over the two last years? Was she supposed to tell him about Storm, about their daughter they were going to rescue?

“Well, I was the one who broke up with him.”

“And with a good reason, Light. This guy is a...”

“He got himself in a nuclear explosion and was in a coma for two whole years of his life, Cloud! He lost two years from his life. And from my life!”
“A nuclear explosion?!” Cloud repeated, his voice growing with his surprise and anger. “And you bought that?”

“I love him,” she insisted.

“Well, good for you then. I’m glad that some girls can be sure of what they feel like that.”

“Seriously, what happened to you Cloud? You look as if the whole world was crashing down...”

Lightning walked up to him and let go of the vacuum. She gave him a hug and he didn’t let her go. She realized he was shaking a little.

“Is your Noctis here right now?”

“No, he’s training back in headquarters right now. We have a... another mission to attend to in a few hours.”

“On Christmas day?!?”

“Just tell me what happened. Is this about this girl you took to Serah’s place? About Yuna?”

“You should stop gossiping over me in my back.”

“It’s her, right? What did she do to you?”

“Claire, please...”

“Cloud, the last time you were in this state, it was when Tifa had decided you were history.”

Why did it still pain him so much? To think about Tifa, and now, about Yuna.

“Don’t say her name. I don’t wanna hear about any of them.”

“Then you tell me what happened.”

“Don’t you have a mission?”

“I have the time for you, Cloud.”

They sat together on the couch. And started to talk. He took it back from the start. From the mission on Pluto. Mentioned Jenova, explained how he had forced Yuna to kill her first victims as a soldier. Tried to tell his sister what Shiva had done to him. And what she was still doing to him. As he started, he couldn’t stop himself. Lightning was holding his hand as he talked. Holding his hand as she would always do when things were too hard for both of them. He felt bad for weighing her down with his problems. But she was the only person he trust enough to do so. So he kept talking. Told her about Yuna’s training. About their ride to her apartment. About the feelings he had. About what had begun and had been abruptly halted. He didn’t cry over his sorry self. Was still too proud for it. But as Lightning listened to everything, she realized her brother had been needing her help for some times now. Right after Pluto, he could have used a caring presence. Who wouldn’t ask question, but would just hold him up whenever he was about to fall.

“It’s stupid, to get mad over all of this, I know. I didn’t even say that I loved her, that must be why...”

“Do you love her?”
“Hell, I do.” He sighed, forcing his voice not to break down.

“Then she must have felt it. You’re so sentimental Cloud, she couldn’t miss it. Maybe on the contrary, it scared her, for some reasons.”

“She rejected me. Said it was all a mistake.”

No matter how strong he was, that hurt enough to draw tears from his eyes. Lightning hugged him gently, stroking his hair and ruffling his head.

“She must be crazy. You’re the best guy a girl could find in the whole world.”

“You’re just saying that cause you’re my sister.”

“Of course not! Cloud...”

“I made her a killer, Lightning. How can I say I love her?! I have no right to...”

“She took this job herself, nobody forced her to.”

“But she’s so naive...”

“Cloud...”

“Sometimes, I can tell that I scare her.”

Sighing, Lightning patted his back as he tried to regain his calm. He was so sad, almost even more than when everything had ended with Tifa. He felt as if he hadn’t even gotten a chance. As if his fate was decided from the very start. As it had always been in his life.

“She has no idea how scared you are yourself.”

This caused a sob in his throat. He felt so terribly weak and pathetic. But Lightning gently remembered him that it was right. And god, was it good to cry on someone’s shoulder, instead of always being the one standing tall and strong.

“You think I still have a chance?”

“She’d be crazy to reject you more than once. The way you described her, she did this because she was panicked and hadn’t the time to think. Her cousin showing up without any warning was the only cause of her rudeness. Otherwise, she would have tried to explain everything with you.”

“But I did go too far, didn’t I?”

“If you really had, she should have stopped you. And in the end, nothing really happened, so where’s the harm?”

“This wasn’t “nothing”.”

Chuckling, she gave him another pat on the shoulder.

“That’s what I wanted to hear, Cloud. You’re seriously in love, bro.”

“Then I’m doomed, right?”

“You just have to fight to win her over. You’re good at fighting, you’ll see, she’ll be back in your
arms in no time!”

“Heh. If only things were as easy as you make them look.”

“You just have to make it easy yourself, Cloud. Easy or not, it’s all in our heads.”

“Right.”

He hugged her close, happy to have her with him in this new ordeal. When it came to his heart, he was turning back into a little kid and couldn’t defend himself. But after talking with Lightning, he felt a little more sure of himself. There was no reason for Yuna to pretend that nothing had happened, even if they hadn’t gone all the way. He still had time to get an explanation before to see her again. And he’d take the time to make everything clear between them. Before that he get into a real depression over this.

... Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th early morning

Location: Boston, American States, training quarters

Mission: Getting Storm to train Noctis

Agents involved: Noctis Lucis Caelum, Lightning Farron, Stella Fleuret and project S.t.o.r.m

No warning.

Message from G.I. seven. End of transmission.

...

“Why do you want to perfect your powers, Raven?”

“There’s something I must retrieve.” Noctis answered to Storm.

The kid looked tired. After all, it was one in the morning and they had already been training for hours. Noctis didn’t feel any fatigue. Not with the prospect of rescuing his daughter in a few hours.

“You’ll have to kill to get to it, right?”

“There’s good risk.”

“Killing’s easy. Being precise and managing to kill only who you want to is a whole other deal.”

“They didn’t train you in the prospect to kill?” Noctis worriedly asked.

“Only to defend myself. And my mom. Anyway... What is this something you have to retrieve?”

“It’s... It’s complicated.”

“You sound defensive about it. And sentimental. Unrational.”

“Irrational.” His father corrected him.

“Whatever!”

Noctis couldn’t help himself and smiled at the child’s anger. That instantly cooled off Storm and
he smiled back to him.

“Try hitting the new targets. Not destroying them, but just hitting this time.”

“Hitting them with what?”

“With a shockwave of matter. We can will any matter to reorganize itself how we want it. You materialized swords out of thin air the other day. I never managed anything like that. Until now, you’ve just destroyed matter, blowing up anything around you. It’s the easiest way to use the Radiance.”

“What is this Radiance anyway?”

Storm hesitated a little.

“I don’t know for sure in fact. There has only been one other case of this power in the whole universe.”

“Who was it?”

“A subject for human experiments. A mako soldier. He refused the Radiance. Almost died from it. Nowadays, he’s supposed to have tremendous powers, but nobody knows anything from it.”

Noctis understood and gulped down. Cloud Strife. His almost brother-in-law. He had had the Radiance before him. So Jenova was involved? This story was getting crazier with each passing days.

“You know, you’re talking about Lightning’s twin brother, Storm.”

“So the world’s a very small place indeed. Or coincidences are happening often. Now hit the targets, Raven.”

It was slightly scary how the kid was keeping distance between him and his father. He couldn’t call him dad. Noctis wasn’t sure if he was sad from it or not. His paternity had been so sudden, it was hard to get used to it.

“Here we go, then.”

Launching his attack, he materialized ten wooden arrows that all hit the targets. The Radiance was slowly taking its toll, but Noctis was getting better at using his powers. Storm insisted on knowing what he was going to look for, but his father refused to talk. He wasn’t sure about how he could present to the young boy the fact he had a step sister. It was already enough he had told Lightning about it.

“You know, if you’re really worried about all of this, you could let me go with you. I could be of help.”

“It’s going to be really dangerous.”

“All the more reason that I come. You’re learning fast, but I still have more experience than you at it. And somehow, I get the feeling you’re going to need more than just brutal strength in this mission.”

“Well, your mother and I don’t believe that you should get yourself into missions before a few years.”
“I’ve understood that this wasn’t going to be an official mission. You’re doing that in secret, just Lightning and yourself. And I’m curious about it.”

Noctis sighed. Storm had a right to know about it. But could he understand? He was still just a kid. In fact, he should only be a baby right now, even if he looked older.

“Well…”

“Try something like this to raise your precision.” The young boy suggested, creating a shiny target which flew through the room. “If you hit it without breaking anything else, you pass.”

It took about five minutes to Noctis to understand how to hit a moving target. As he did, Storm sat down, looking out for his breath. He was getting tired from the use of his powers as example. His eyes were closing down.

“You should get some sleep, son.”

“Don’t call me like that.” He yawned back.

Noctis shook his head and raised the little boy in his arms, letting him lean against his side.

“Hey Storm, did I pass?” he asked playfully.

“You did, daddy.”

The single word touched Noctis’ heart deeper than he would have expected. Storm fell asleep next to him, comforted by his warmth and his presence. And Stella and Lightning, who were both looking from the other room, into the windows that showed the training room, were moved by this sight. Father and son, finally acting like a father and his son.

“If it wasn’t all about training himself to master incredible powers, I would say this is a wonderful Christmas for my little boy.” Stella whispered.

“I guess Noctis is happy too.” Lightning admitted.

Though she was reluctant to accept this situation, she could endure it. Especially when she thought the next thing they were going to do was to rescue her little girl.

“This is quite complicated, I get it this boy is sir Noctis’ dolphin. But he hasn’t any mako, unlike you master.”

Odin was standing next to the two women, looking out of place in his big armour.

“Well, it’s too complicated to explain. Especially at such a late hour. We should all get some rest.” Stella decided, unable to explain to anyone else the situation with Storm.

She went to meet up with Noctis, to get back her son and carried him all the way to his room. Exchanging a brief kiss with Lightning, Noctis wondered how this would all turn. The whole situation was so complicated, even for him who was inside it.

“Odin has localized the place clearly now,” Lightning told him. “We could go there first thing tomorrow, but before that, I’d like that you go and sleep. There’s been too much going on at the same time.”

“You’re right. But you’ll get some sleep too, won’t you?”
“Of course. I just need to go back to my place. To tidy things up before that Cloud came back. Serah told me he has met with a new girl. I wouldn’t want her to see our apartment with all the windows cracked and the shattered light bulbs on the floor.”

“I should come and help about it, it was my fault if...”

“No, stay here and train more with Storm when he’ll wake up. I need you ready for this mission. And I don’t think that Cloud would like to see you before that I explain everything to him.”

“Maybe you’re right.”

They parted, pretty much against their will, and she walked away, followed by Odin. Noctis went to one of the rooms kept for spies staying at HQ. He had a hard time falling asleep. There were way too many things in his head. He started toying with his powers, creating lights that flew around the room. Lightning would have liked that kind of things. He had to get good at it to show her about it, in time. He liked the fact he could create instead of destroying. It felt good. He was preparing himself to create something new. A real family. Like the one he hadn’t any chance to have himself. Though he was scared, he felt up to it. He had to be. This time, failure wasn’t permitted. He didn’t fall asleep and went back to train instead. When Lightning came back, after seeing Cloud, the morning had come, it was Christmas’ Day and Noctis looked ready to kill and to destroy anything that would try to stop him for achieving his goal.

“Are we all ready?” Odin asked them.

“We are.” They both answered.

“Then, follow me my good people!”

And thus, the three of them walked out of HQ. Unfortunately, they never saw the shadow which followed them outside. They were too focused on their goal. Just as the young boy sneaking up on them...

... 

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 23th

Location: Boston, American States, Yaag Rosch’s mansion

Mission: Protecting Aeris Gainsborough at all cost and pretending to go with her –as her boyfriend- in a ball

Agents involved: Squall Leonheart, (potential ancient agent Aeris G.)

No warning.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission.

... 

Squall had taken Aeris to the dance floor, to change her mind from the meeting with Sephiroth. She had had trouble at following him at first, but had soon gotten used to the dance. He liked the fact she was moving so close to him and was slowly forgetting about his mission, until he spotted Yaag Rosch, dancing with Vanille on the other side of the dance hall.

“Hey, Rhis?”
“Hmmm, oh, what is it Squa... oh my, yes, Leon?”

“There is still one guy you should meet before that we can call this ball over.”

“Not the owner of the place?”

“You guessed right, dear.”

Aeris wondered if Squall wasn’t half playing, half saying the truth over what he felt when he called her dear. One way or another, she felt her face burning up as he held her close and had her waltzing in the direction of Yaag and Vanille. She knew this was all a mission, but this was still her very first ball. The first time she was dancing in such a nice dress, with such a nice partner in front of her. And she was getting all flustered from it. She remembered the one time when she had kissed him, as vengeance against Rinoa. And how he had held her in his arms and prevented her from going anywhere. Whenever he held her in his arms, she felt so secure. So wanted. The fact there was still so many people around was the only thing preventing her from adoring this moment with him.

On purpose, Squall had Aeris bumping into Vanille’s back. The red haired girl squealed in surprise and almost fall—all on purpose- as Yaag looked up at the couple which had interrupted their dance.

“I’m sorry, sir, milady, I’m such a clumsy dancer.” Aeris apologized, feeling ashamed even if Squall had almost forced her to do this. “I’ve told Leon he shouldn’t have me as a dancing partner.”

Suddenly, he wasn’t as enchanting as before. Yaag’s eyes widened as he recognized Aeris.

“Oh, there’s no harm good lady. No harm at all.”

Gosh, Squall thought. Every powerful men around were eying Aeris as if she was the key to ruling over the world.

“Excuse me, Vanille. I’d like to have a talk with my guests.”

Vanille pretended to be saddened, but she blinked at Squall.

“Sir Leon, it’s been a while since you’ve come to one of my feasts.”

“I was pretty busy.”

They walked away from the dance hall and sat around a table to chat. A waiter came, asking if they wanted anything to drink. Yaag asked for three glass of cherry wine. As soon as the man left to get their drinks, Yaag’s eyes went back to Aeris.

“Your friend, lady Rhis... I’ve seen her face elsewhere before. Far from the nobility and the pretending of our kind. You’ve always surrounded yourself with influent people, but now, sir Leon, you find quite the intelligentsia.”

“Intelligentsia?” Aeris repeated.

“He must be talking about your innate knowledge...”

“So you’re really an Ancient my child?”

Yaag feigned surprise was so clear, Aeris felt disgusted. There were way too many people knowing
what Ancients were to her taste.

“Please, not here, Leon. I thought you weren’t out on affairs today.”

Squall felt ashamed for forcing her to play such a game. They were pretending that he was her “protector” and lover, while selling her knowledge to those ready to pay the prices.

“Well, I needed to gather a few new clients. Like Dysley. And Jenova’s son.” He mentioned them on a higher voice to make sure Yaag would understand the threat: that he could go and get what he wanted from someone else.

“Are you preparing something, Leon?”

“Maybe. But it only concerned those involved.”

“Well, you can count me in, Godlord’s scion.”

“And why would you be interested?” Aeris asked.

“In our business, those falling behind are quickly wiped out by the other sharks. The Rosch family had always been the runner-up type. I want us to become the winners.”

“Sharing first prize with you would be an honor, Yaag.” Squall smiled, getting up.

But he put both his hands on Aeris’ shoulders, as to remind his interlocutor that the Ancient was his possession. Or that she was the first prize. Anyway, Aeris wanted to hide under the table or anywhere, to forget the shame that filled her chest at this impression.

“Well then, we’ll have to see each other again soon.” Yaag added. “All three of us, of course, to talk over the knowledge we could use.”

He stared at Aeris intently. And he wasn’t just looking at her body. He seemed interested in something farther behind. Beneath the skin. Beneath her eyes. The “Knowledge of the world”.

She barely endured his stare, looking back right into his eyes. He couldn’t see anything. He wasn’t connected to the same reality as her. Wasn’t sensible enough to feel it. Unlike Squall. But this little discussion made her so unsure about her bodyguard. She disliked this comedy. She wanted to run away. From all of them.

“We’ll stay in contact then.” Squall replied, before to wrap one protective arm around Aeris.

He felt her shaking, which was so slight, nobody could notice just by looking at her. She was scared. She was terrified. All those people who wanted to use her. To buy the knowledge hiding in her head. To rip off her skull if necessary to get to it faster.

“Is it over now?” she asked him.

“I’m sorry, Aeris. I’m sorry for putting you through all that. I won’t let them use you, you hear? Even if my boss orders me too, I’ll protect you against any threat.”

“Is that an act too? You’re good at pretending for your job. How am I supposed to believe...”

They whispered to each other, trying to get away from the crowd. From anyone that could realized this had been another lie.

“Why would I pretend this?”
“To win my confidence.”

“Didn’t I already have it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know who to trust anymore.”

She had followed him from the start because she had no other choice. There wasn’t any other reason. She was falling for him, maybe. But it was so easy to fall for someone when she had been so lonely and when he was so lonely and lost himself!

“I’m scared.”

“I don’t want you to be scared, Aeris. Have faith in me.”

“Why should I?”

“Cause I trust you.”

Looking up at his cold blue eyes, she realized the ice in his gaze had melt. He seemed... he was sincere! How could she distrust him after all they’d been through together? He had let her see his most fragile side. He had let her comfort him when he was in pain. And now, he asked for her trust. It was the least to give? How could she live with him without trusting him even a little?

“So do I, Squall. But this... this whole masquerade here...”

“It’s all over now, Aeris. Come on. We’re going back home.”

They finally got up the stairs and out of the wide mansion. A steward took Sir Leon number and went to get back his car. It took only a few minutes and they were driving back to Boston’s lower quarters. Since Rude was driving, they snuggled up close on the back seat.

“You really make a nice pair.” The black agent observed.

“Be a dear and close that window, Rude. Aeris is pretty shaken up from meeting all those crazy Mafiosi.”

“Alright, sir Leon.”

He closed the window and Aeris held back a smile.

“I won’t ever get used to that name.” She sighed.

“You don’t like it?”

“Well... Squall sounds really better. Maybe because I’m more used to it.”

“My mother had chosen Leon as my second name. In case I’d got bored of Squall.”

“You never mentioned her before.”

“Well, as most women involved in my life, she’s dead.”

“Oh...”

Judging by his tone, the subject was as fragile as Rinoa or his father Laguna.

“Well, it’s kinda sad.” She whispered, with a sly smile.
He understood she was going to change of subject and looked at her with curiosity.

“Wearing such a pretty dress and I almost didn’t dance at all.”

“It’s true that you’re looking wonderful tonight.”

Blushing, she thanked him with a nod.

“We could have Rude dropping us in a nice club and go to dance for real, if you wished.”

“What? But we can’t...”

“After forcing you to meet with an old enemy who hurt you in many ways, I guess the Faction owe you a little fun.”

“But, I’m...”

“You’re perfect for the club I’m thinking about. And I’ll protect you if anything happen. We could both use a little refresher to get our minds off things.”

“Hey... Why not then?”

With her agreed, he got Rude dropping them in front of the Mumba club. It had been named after his favourite kind of alien –Mumbas- which were fire orange lion like pets, walking on two legs and renowned for their engineering skills.

Instead of waltz and classic, party music was playing in the background. The lights weren’t always everywhere and the people dancing were hard to tell apart. Squall had left his vest in the car and undid the first buttons of his white shirt, to get a chance to breathe. Aeris undid his hair and ruffled his hair, so that it got back to how it used to be –spiky and unruly- just as she liked.

“You’re sure this is alright.”

“Well, this ain’t as rich as Yaag’s mansion, but there were so many false prince charming back there, I’d rather be here, with everyone acting as they mean to.”

They went to the dance floor, took one or two drinks before to hit the floor again. After an hour or so, they decided they wanted more intimacy and went out on the streets. They took a stroll, hand in hand, under the stars.

“In the end, I had a nice night.” Aeris smiled.

“Oh, but it’s far from over.” Squall reminded her.

He sounded playful and she didn’t mind the change. She liked his eyes on her. They were staring sometimes, but not maliciously. He liked her. Liked what he saw. Eat her up with his eyes instead of letting himself a chance to cross the line. She liked that, cause she felt pretty. And things were as they should be, cause she was pretty, but only for him. As she wanted to be. Only for him...

To be continued...
Chapter 26

Episode 2 – Song of Storm –Part XIII

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 25, around 10 am

Location: Boston, American States, out in the streets

Mission: Following Raven and Lightning in their mission without being seen

Agents involved: Storm C. F. –mind you, I ain’t just a project-

Warning : If I have to be spot by anybody, it better be my father. I hope we’ll get back before that mom realize that I’m gone...

Storm, trying to clear up his thoughts. End of transmission.

...

It wasn’t easy to follow Noctis and Lightning. They were walking fast. But Storm knew how to use his powers to run faster. He hadn’t told his father about these. It was a little too hard to manipulate for a beginner. Even a quick learner as Raven. The kid realized the out air was pretty hotter than he’d expect. He had never been in the outside world before. It felt as a total rebellion and he knew he was surely going to get the spanking of his life for it. But he didn’t care. What his father was hiding had to be important. And he wanted to know. He knew a lot already over many things. But people were still a mystery to him. And he wanted to understand. As much as possible. So he followed them, glad that they weren’t jumping in a car or something.

In fact, Raine’s kidnappers had kept her almost right under the nose of the Faction. They were still installed in one of Harvard’s ruined laboratory. Half of the school had been taken out and almost destroyed by a fight between the Black Faction and the Feds, but the rest of the Campus had been kept and was still a learning center for people coming from all over the world. Both the Faction and the Feds were using this place to recruit their future spies. Not that anyone normal knew about it.

...

“She’s in the basement, you’re sure about it?”

“I swear master, I wouldn’t be lying on something this important to you! Anyway, I never lie!”

Odin’s metal boots were doing lots of noise on the cement, which annoyed Noctis, but since it was Christmas’ day, there weren’t many people out on the streets. It was too hot outside to remain under the sun without a reason.

“How can he make noise while he’s spiritual?”

“Excuse me, sir , but I’m...!” Odin started to protest.

“Listen, man, you’ve been a good help in this and I’ll never forget your part in it. But we need to be discreet now. So, if you could...”

“Vanish again, I take it? Alright, lady Lightning. But if I sense that anything goes out of your capable hands, I’ll rush to your aid! I want this quest...”
“Odin.”

Lightning sounded on the edge of losing her patience and the summoned spirit understood and vanished. Storm cursed as the two grown-ups stopped abruptly and hid behind a pair of trash cans.

“Okay, Light, you’re sure you wanna come?” Noctis asked her for the nth time.

“We’ve lost her together. We’ll get her back together, Noct.”

Exchanging a long gaze, they agreed silently. Resumed their walk. Harvard’s walls were closing in. Storm rushed behind them, making sure to envelop himself with matter that would make him invisible to untrained eyes.

Spotting the building was easy. In one look, Noctis could tell where the guards and the snipers could be. He could also tell that there weren’t enough of them to stop him and his girl. They broke inside by the back door, without even being spot by someone. Inside, they disarmed the alarm system and knocked out the few guards which saw them coming in. Storm was surprised to see how easy things worked for these two. He followed them, lingering in the shadows, his eyes wide open to see more. To learn.

Noctis crushed down the door to the central computers room using his powers and they barged in the place. Lightning shot the further enemies and cut down the closer one with her retractable gunblade.

“How could you...?” a man asked before that Raven cut him off with a kick in the face.

For once, Storm realized how dangerous his father was. He felt his anger building. The Radiance was resonating from everywhere.

*What happened?* He wondered. *What could make him this furious?*

“Let’s see, the prison, empty,” Noctis whispered as he got onto the computer. “Higher ups’ offices, empty too.”

Lightning kept guard of the only exit, cursing against people who didn’t know how to create defendable rooms.

“Look for the labs, Noct.”

“I’m doing what I can, Light. There’re a hundred of them in this place. Damn Feds. Hey, I got it! Mako’s lab.”

*Mako?* Storm asked himself inwardly.

“It’s down in the basement. Fifth room on the left. I can get the surveillance tapes from it.”

Hitting a few keys over the computer’s clavier, he changed the plans shown on the screen for a dark and blue room, filled with tubes of liquid and scientists. Looking over her shoulder, Lightning’s mouth gaped open.

“Those monsters. They really...”

Following her gaze, Storm saw a human baby in one of the tube. The child was floating, wires diving under his flesh in his armpits, and in his nostrils and mouth.

“They’re really using her as a test subject!”
Her voice was roaring with anger and a hint of fear.

“Keep your cool, love. The reports say that she’s in perfect health.”

“Perfect health for what? Compared to a guinea pig?!”

“Keep it down, Light. We have to get to her now.”

Who’s that baby? Storm wondered as his dad and Lightning walked out of the room and ran in direction of the stairs.

He hurried after them, his mind filled with questions. What was going on here? He froze in place as Lightning looked over her shoulder and right at him.

“Wait, Noctis, I think... Someone’s after us!”

“No, it’s not... It’s someone else.”

Storm had never thought someone could see him while he was keeping up his matter shield around him. How could anyone surpass his powers? He had been created to be the mightiest being in the world. To serve the Factions purposes and to protect all their most sensitive data. He felt shaken and could have blown his covers if Lightning hadn’t blinked and looked away.

“You gotta be right. It’s just the stress playing tricks on me. But I hate it when it’s too easy.”

“You should get used to it Light. With this Radiance, the Feds will have a hard time getting back to my level.”

Lightning wasn’t sure if she liked how powerful Noctis was now. As long as it didn’t go to his head, as long as he wasn’t cocky, it was alright. But he sure looked almighty. And he knew it.

“Yeah, well, don’t forget that I’m backing you up here.”

“All the more reason they can’t get either of us down.”

This made her smile. So he wasn’t cocky after all.

They ran down the stairs. Rule one when you were invading enemy territories. Never trust elevators. Unless the building is about a hundred floors. And even then, don’t trust the damn elevators. Getting in it will only get you in trouble. If it doesn’t get you killed.

Storm followed cautiously this time. He was doing well at running. Walking had no secret for him. But he hated stairways. He often rolled down them because he tripped on a stair. After all, he had been alive for little time. His muscles weren’t as strong as he’d wished they’d been. So he hurried down after his dad. Just a little slower than he could have. Thus, he slowly fell behind.

He heard yells of panic and gunshots and the next thing he knew, people were dying on the next floor. He walked over one of the Feds’ men. He was getting kind of scared now, but he wasn’t going to turn back now, after coming so far.

Noctis ripped off the fifth room’s door, alerting the scientists of their arrival. The few guards around had already been shot down by Lightning. Noctis and her had decided they wouldn’t fire with anything else than her gunblade. She had a permit to use it to defend herself in any situation seen as adequate. Since this wasn’t an official mission, they couldn’t do anything against the laws.
Though Noctis’ powers weren’t covered by the laws. Or at least, that’s what he had decided to give
himself a chance of keeping up. He felt slightly bad as he pushed the scientists in the wall and tied
them by twisting metal’s tool and stuff. They knocked every of them down to make sure no one
would alert anymore Feds.

No question had to be asked. They had come here for one sole purpose. And it was already great
that they weren’t killing every creep daring to run experiment over a poor human child. Lightning
stopped in front of the tube where her “daughter” was sleeping. Her nerves were losing their grip in
front of the real thing. Her child. Her child she had thought dead for so long and seen so often,
calling for her help in her dreams. Her child was right here. In front of her, still a victim of his
parents’ mistakes and of man’s greed. She let go of her gunblade, letting it clung to the floor. This
was way more than she could take.

Walking up to the large tube, she gently put her hands on the glass surface still separating her from
her baby.

“How can we get her out, Noctis? What did those creeps did to her? She’s in perfect health you
said? She’s been living in nothing but experiments since the day they stole her from my womb!”

Just saying what had truly happened to her that terrible day was giving Lightning the urge to retch.

“Let’s not be hasty here. Though the only thing I’d wanna do is to tear apart this tube and snatch
her away from here, we can’t take the risk of acting without knowing what we do.”

“But Noctis...!”

Lightning seemed ready to cry. And suddenly, Storm knew why his father was almost enraged and
in such a hurry to control his powers. This baby was their child. A child they had surely wanted and
dreamed to raise up together, as a family. She had been stolen from them. Stolen and discharged of
her every right as a human being. Just as him. The small boy hardly gulped down as he stepped in
the room.

“Maybe... Maybe I could help you with this?” he suggested with a small voice.

“What?! Who’s there?” Lightning asked, turning around, protectively standing in front of her still
caged daughter.

“Storm?”

So his dad already knew him well enough to recognize his voice without seeing him? The kid let
go of his radiant shield, appearing almost magically before the two spies.

“So it was you, following us?” Lightning understood.

She wanted to get angry, but she was so shaken by the situation, she couldn’t yell. Talking was
already hard and her voice was sounding terribly weak.

“How... Why did you follow us all the way here? I’d told you it was dangerous!”

Though he was shaken too, Noctis still felt strong enough to reprimand his son.

“But I’m alright, as you can see.”

Clenching his teeth, the young man forced himself not to let his anger burst out.
“Luckily for you, Storm, I can’t get any madder than I’m already am. But I’ll make sure you won’t take any other risks like this in the future, when we’re all somewhere safe.”

Nodding, Storm walked up to the computer console covering the major part of the room.

“So this is your daughter?” he asked.

His voice was devoid of emotion, but his small shoulders were slightly shaking. His curiosity satisfied, he was now falling under the shock of the truth. And of the reminding. His father had had a life before him. A life where he wasn’t involved. Noctis already had a child. How could he need another one? He had trained with him in order to rescue the daughter he had had with the woman he loved. But would he take as many risks to get the right to have his son by his side, if he had to?

*Of course not. He never wanted you. He never loved or knew your mom. You’re a stranger to him, as he’s a stranger to you. He was merely using you, as everyone else. It’s all your good at after all. So why not be of use again, huh, Son-Trade Of Noctis’ Magnification?* He thought to himself.

“I... This isn’t how I wanted you to learn about this, Storm.”

“I made the decision for you, so you shouldn’t feel guilty about it.”

“Okay, well, how about you two discuss about your father and son relation after that we get my little girl out of this place?”

Exchanging a look together, both guys decided they’d better make Lightning happy. She scared Storm. And even Noctis at this point.

“I grew up in a tube like that, it shouldn’t be too hard to get her out of it without harming her. Let me see.”

Jumping on a chair to get high enough, Storm started typing on the computer’s keyboard and got through the last security system in mere seconds, before to dive in RM-Project files.

“What’s RM’s signification?” Lightning asked.

“It seems to stand for Ray mako project. I’ll memorize the content of this research while finding how to get her out.”

“You can do that?!?”

“Well, for the last time, I’m brilliant!”

“Yeah, well, you sure aren’t humble.” Noctis sighed.

“Mom said I had time to correct that.”

Storm focused on the computer and started typing the keyboards with a speed that surprised Lightning. For a kid, he sure was getting along with computers and had a dexterity he shouldn’t have, even at four years old.

“Oh, first, I disconnect the wires. It seems she’s swimming in a pool of nutrients. Removing it by half and lowering the tub should be the right thing to do to get her out. I bet you were thinking of blowing it up with all the rest of the place, huh?”

“I wasn’t going to do that.” Noctis retorted.
“We can get her out? What has been done to her? During all these years?”

“Well, it seems the mako in her veins has transmuted into a stronger energy’s source. They’ve been pumping it out from her body, while letting her reconstructing more of it. The more they pumped, the stronger she’s gotten. So they kept on doing so. She’s mentally stable for all that they’ve checked and her physicals are incredible. She developed herself pretty well, given the situation she was in. With a little stimulation, she’ll get back to a normal growth in a few weeks.”

“But as she always been in this liquid? Won’t taking her away from it will...?”

“Well, it would be like a real birth. So she could cry and kick a little, but as her mother, you should get through it. I highly suggest that you’re the one taking her out though. She hasn’t been manipulated directly by any human since months. And it seems that she’s reacting to your voice. See, she’s waking up.”

While Noctis thought the fact Storm was handling the situation was pretty wrong, Lightning was starting to smile and to forget that there was another kid in the room, except from her daughter. They followed Storm’s instruction and the baby was soon crying in its mother’s arms. Guards came, alerted by the break in of Faction’s agents, but Raven got rid of them with a power wave that threw them into walls, which knocked them out.

“Hush, Raine, it’s alright now. Mommy’s here.”

She tickled the baby’s chest, having her babbling cutely. Noctis felt his heart skipping a beat at the idea Lightning was finally reunited with her lost daughter. It almost felt too good to be true. But he had to believe. And after all, they still weren’t out of this place.

“Light, come on, we can’t stay here.”

She nodded absentmindedly and enveloped her child in her coat, to keep her warm.

“We should go and buy things for her, Noctis.”

“Let’s think about it when we’ll be out of here.”

He hated to break the magic by staying practical, but they had to make sure nothing wrong would happen. Putting one hand on Storm’s shoulder, he had his son following him. Getting out was almost as easy as getting in. While Lightning was keeping Raine quiet. As they walked out under the sun, Noctis almost expected cars and federal agents to be deployed all around the place. But the only thing waiting for them was Odin and his horse, Yggdrasil. He had removed his helmet and his greyish face was smiling at them, his purple eyes bright with the proud of having been able to help his master.

“I remembered you came on foot, my lady, so I took the liberty of waiting for your appearance here, to suggest that you’d take a ride back home.”

“It’s a really good idea. But won’t people find it strange to see us riding home on a six legged horse?”

“Why, they won’t see you, master! Yggdrasil can make himself invisible, himself and his rider. Or should I say, riders. Every of your little family may get on.”

Storm looked pretty reluctant, but as Noctis helped Lightning getting on the horse while keeping her baby in her arms, he had to admit, he was somewhat linked to those people. His father turned to him.
“Come on, son. You can’t walk back home. Stella would kill me.”

Storm found himself sitting in front of Lightning, almost in Yggdrasil’s neck. Noctis was right behind his girl, and they held on tight as Odin’s mount rushed forward.

When the first Feds agent called in reinforcement arrived, the intruders were long gone, taking their baby with them. On the ride, instead of crying, Raine giggled excitedly, trying to grab on things around her and to eat Storm’s hair. The young boy was disgusted and surprised at the same time. Technically, this dribbling thing that could make the unmoved Lightning smiled so easily was his step sister. His elder sister too. She had bright aqua eyes and her hair had a pinkish silver color. She couldn’t deny who her parents were. Storm wondered if he wasn’t of too much in this picture. Lightning was leaning on Noctis’ chest, feeling truly content for the first time since years. If he hadn’t controlled his emotions with all his rational thoughts, the small boy could have cried. But Lightning put one hand on his left shoulder.

“Don’t go falling down, Storm.” She gently warned him.

It seemed she wasn’t mad at him for existing anymore. Not now that her daughter was back with her. He felt surprised, but finally comforted.

“Okay.”

Suddenly, he was back at being a kid. And he marvelled at the fact he was riding the legendary Yggdrasil. Watched around him the buildings pointing to the grey and blue sky. Stared at the sun until that his eyes hurt. He had never seen all of this for real. He looked around for threes. And green places. But there was nothing but glasses, stones and cements as far as the eyes could see. Colors were coming from the publicity’s panels standing around. He spotted the Faction building. It looked smaller than the picture buried in his mind. He could tell many things from what he was seeing. But suddenly, he realized how little and insignificant he was. And still, he was happy. The sun was touching his skin directly. He had been able to help his dad. Lightning seemed to acknowledge his existence. And he was alive! A real smile crept on his face.

Noctis was just as amazed as his son. Though he saw a few troubles awaiting them. Now, the time was coming, when he would have to meet with Cloud. Stella was going to throw him a tantrum for letting Storm follow them in the Feds quarters. He still had no idea how to regard his daughter. But Lightning’s smile had never seemed so true. And he knew he had managed to give her the greatest Christmas’ present he could have given her.

...

Cloud had a big surprise when Lightning came back in the apartment. She was carrying a baby in her arms, and was followed by Noctis himself, and a kid looking exactly like the said man. Being a soldier even on Christmas’ day, the blond man immediately started speculating on what this could mean. A kid. Noctis’ kid obviously. Four years old. Too old to be his sister’s child. This meant treachery. High treason. And the baby? Was this her daughter? Had she decided to adopt a baby? He was bound to be getting mad in the following minutes, since there was way too much going on. He jumped on his feet from the couch where he had been sitting, wondering on a strategy to win over Yuna.

“Hi Cloud!” Lightning said cheerfully.

He didn’t reply. Went directly in Noctis direction and grabbed him by the collar of his shirt.

“What’s the deal with you, huh? Pretending to be in a coma and now moving in my apartment with
a kid you obviously had by cheating on my sister?”

“This isn’t what you think it is, Cloud!” Lightning tried to told him.

“No, first he destroyed you, then he destroyed my place, and now he’s a cheater and you’re taking him back with arms wide open?!”

Cloud pushed Noctis in the nearest wall.

“I know this looks bad, man, but don’t jump to conclusion.” Noctis suggested, forcing himself to remain calm.

“Cloud, let go of him, right now. Stop playing my father and get a hold of yourself!” Lightning hissed, giving her brother a punch in the back.

“Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

“We just rescued Raine. The baby I had lost two years ago. She’s alive Cloud. And as for this kid, well, Noctis really was in a coma and the Faction stole his DNA to make Storm with all the powers Noct had gained from the nuclear explosion.”

“Raine? You’ve named her Raine?”

“Wow, it’s the only thing you’ve heard about what she’s said?” Noctis snickered.

“Look at her, Cloud, ain’t she beautiful?”

Lightning raised the baby so that she would face her uncle and he blinked, letting go of Noctis’ collar and trying to clear his head. This was all a mistake. It couldn’t be real.

“He had a son while he was in a coma?!”

“You don’t have to believe it right away.” Storm said, wondering why Lightning had told everything to her twin so quickly. Even him knew that it was a harsh way of announcing such weird news to someone.

“Is this your revenge on me, so that I get that you have your own problems, Light?”

“No!”

The baby started to cry.

“Tell me I can punch him, sis.”

“No, you can’t! He’s been the one who organized everything so that we could rescue Raine! She’s your niece; you could try to be nicer to her.”

“But...”

He looked at Noctis, and then at Storm, and back at Noctis, and finally back to Lightning.

“Are you counting on me to play the babysitter then?”

“Of course not!”

“Would you stop yelling and try to calm her down?” Noctis pleaded.
“Well, you can do it while I’m explaining everything to Cloud. Here, be careful with her.”

Lightning gently placed Raine in her father’s arms. Cloud wasn’t looking too sure about it, but he followed his sister into another room of the apartment. Noctis panicked a little as he tried to rock the baby in his arms.

“Why is she crying like that?” he asked himself, desperate.

He wasn’t good with kids. Why was Lightning doing this to him right now? He just wanted to make her happy by retrieving their baby. He hadn’t readied himself for what would come afterwards. To be a daddy.

“Maybe she’s hungry?” Storm suggested.

His own stomach growled and he looked away, slightly ashamed of himself. Noctis sighed, and just then, his phone rang. Grabbing it with one hand while doing his best to hold Raine the right way with his free arm, he checked at the caller’s number.

“Good, Storm? It’s your mother, you explain her.”

“But...!”

“I already have my hands full and you said this had been your responsibility. So you take her call.” Noctis insisted, before to turn his attention back to the crying baby in his arms. “Oh come on, Raine, I know this is all new and terrifying to you, but there’s not need to cry.”

He tried stroking her head and the warmth of his touch reassured the infant. Suddenly, Noctis couldn’t help himself but to smile stupidly at Raine. She was small, with her little hands and feet. Could this cute thing could really be coming from him? It was Lightning’s daughter alright. She had strong lungs for sure. But his child? The thought turned him upside down inside. He had a little girl. He was finally realizing it and was already charmed by her smile. He carefully dried her tears, enveloping her better in her mother’s coat.

“Good girl. You were just scared, right? Don’t be. Nothing bad will happen to you now.”

“You disgust me.” Storm whispered as he let the phone ring. “Already won over by her baby’s charm.”

“Don’t be jealous. And answer your mother. This ringing could scare Raine.”

“Right.”

*Now, everyone is going to be all over her,* Storm thought. *But he wasn’t entirely mad. If he had understood everything well, this baby had a right to live joy. But even if he wanted to smile, seeing his father talking to that small girl and smiling sheepishly in front of her, he winced at his worried mother’s voice rang through the phone.*

*Will she be as mad when she’ll know I’ve helped in the rescue of my little sister?* He wondered.

Then it hit him. He was big brother now. He wasn’t sure of what that could mean. But he knew it made him important in a different way than being a living data base.

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 24th early morning
Location: Boston, American States, city streets

Mission: Getting back home without straying too much

Agents involved: Squall Leonheart, Aeris Gainsborough

No warning.

Message from Squall’s rational mind. End of transmission.

...

The wind toyed with Aeris’ curvy hair. Her fingers entwined with his, Squall realized he had let himself act too freely. But he didn’t care. Was this really betraying Rinoa? When she had tried to destroy their relationship to make her death easier to live for him. When she had truly cheated on him with Seifer, therefore truly breaking the most intimate bond ever tying them together?

Squall smiled bitterly, listening to his protégée’s beautiful voice.

“The sun had settled down. The forest was still bright from his rays, drops of water running on the threes’ leaves. Animals running in the woods, a owl howled gently. At those times, hiding wasn’t bad.”

He had asked her to tell him more over herself. Of the memories she had from Christmas. After all, it was Christmas’ Eve. He wanted to give her some gift. To know her entirely, as fast as possible. To have her forgetting about the sharks back in Yaag’s mansion.

Her naked shoulders seemed blue under the moonlight. Her smile was shining. And he wanted this moment to last forever. Though it was the craziest thing he’d ever done. A few cars passed by them. A children’s choir was singing in a church, rehearsing for tonight. Or was it Squall’s imagination. He wasn’t sure when they were anymore.

“I used to make flower’s crown on Christmas’ Eve. We would exchange them with all the family on Christmas’ night. And we used to sing together. For the planet and the stars.”

“Which planet was it?”

“I think... I think it was Venus.”

“You think?”

“I’ve known so many planets, Squall. Each has the same stars.”

“This song you sang with your family, it wasn’t about something magical, it was just a song.”

That made her laugh.

“Of course, it was “just a song”. But it was more than that. It was our way of thanking the world for the year we had been given. And a vow to live to its fullest the new year to come.”

“I bet you’d made an incredible singer.”

“Oh no, my voice’s awful.”

“Nonsense! Just hearing you talking, I can tell...”
“What’s gotten into you, Squall? You’re so honest. So direct.”

“Does it scare you?”

“A little.” She admitted.

Though she liked it. And she liked to think that this change had been made by her presence with him.

“Sorry about it. I know I’m not easy to put up with. You’ve been stuck with me for the last few days against your will. Just so that I could protect you, cause my bosses decided they wanted to keep you under their watch, somehow. And you helped me so much, and learned so much about me, I wish I really knew you. In every way.”

His voice was really hot as he said that. Aeris felt as if she could melt right here. Blushed as she remembered the kiss they had exchanged back in front of all the stores.

“Squall, knowing me is dangerous.” She tried to warn him.

“My job’s dangerous.”

“I don’t even get why you’re working, with a father as rich as yours...”

“I’d get mad, doing nothing. And besides, I learned he was my father only a few years ago. I had already made my life and I never expected anyone to help me. I don’t need his money because he got my mother pregnant 26 years ago.”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Then I won’t say anything at all. I just can’t stand this guy.”

“Why?”

“He’s a clumsy moron! He has no idea where he’s going, he always get lost, no orientation sense at all. If it wasn’t enough, he left my mother right when she got pregnant and she died looking for him right after I was born to tell him he had a family that he should look after.”

“Oh my...”

As soon as he had said all of that, Squall felt bad for telling her about this. He rarely spoke of his family situation. He had considered himself as an orphan for most of his life and he couldn’t stand other’s pity. But when he started talking about his father, it was hard controlling himself. He often said more than what he wanted. It seemed that since Aeris was here, he always confided in her more than he wanted.

“Ah, forget it, okay. I didn’t want to ruin the mood with old problems.”

“Well, I think it is better that you’ve told me about it, cause I wouldn’t have been able to understand otherwise.”

They kept on walking, still hand in hand, staying in silence for a moment. The moon glow grew fainter and dark clouds covered it for an instant.

“Did you get a chance to know something over your mother?”

“Well, she was a flower girl. I mean, she sold flowers.”
“You know, I’ve always wanted to do that as a job.”

“You, a florist?”

“Yeah, why not? If I hadn’t to run, I would grow a garden and sell flowers to people. Flowers always make people happy.”

“That sure sounds like you.”

Exchanging a smile, they didn’t fear the darkness falling over them. There was still light in their hearts. As they walked, they finally arrived in front of his apartment. And for some reason, Squall was scared to walk up the stairs. Scared that the magic connecting them could vanish if they were to cage themselves between walls.

He grabbed her wrist and had her twirling over herself, which made her laugh.

“Maybe we should have stayed at this ball. Just so that I could make you dance longer.”

“I’m a bad dancer.”

She had walked on his feet once, maybe. He couldn’t remember about such a futile detail. What was pain like this when he had no one else in his world but her? What was a sore foot when the love of his life had disappeared and that he left a stranger piecing back his heart?

“I haven’t always been good at dancing. You should have seen me when I started learning.”

“Well, I prefer when I’m alone with you. Instead of feeling all those people in the crowd looking at me.”

“Why should they scare you, Aeris, when they don’t know you?”

“Well, I don’t want them to know me. And some of them already did. Like Sephiroth.”

“You did an incredible job at standing all his remarks.”

“I still don’t understand what the Faction was expecting from this. Do they want to sell me to the biggest buyer, or what?”

She tried to make this sound like a joke, but he saw through it. He had had the same fear about this mission. It was exactly why he had been so scared to obey his bosses. And he realized that if worst came to worst and if Rufus told him they were going to sell Aeris to some Feds or any guys. Or even if they decided to use her in their petty games. He wouldn’t be able to let them do so. He would run away with her. Anywhere where the Feds and the Faction wouldn’t be able to reach her. Even if it meant rushing her back into the life she’d always had before to meet with him. Because it would mean that she would be free and safe.

“Aeris... Say, would you sing your song to the planet?”

“What?”

“I’d like to hear it.”

He hadn’t let her learn that about him already, but he kinda liked music. And since he was still holding her hand and that the song was filled with good memories, she hesitated a little.

“I don’t... I don’t remember the lyrics.”
“Then, just sing the beat as you recall it. You know, la la la, or something.”

He was doing his best to have her forgetting about their mission, and the fact that someone could claim to own her and decide to sell her to a monster like Sephiroth, or someone even worst.

She laughed at his effort and accepted to sing. Closed her eyes, to give herself a chance of concentrating on something else than him, to remember the song’s melody. She took a deep breath and she started to sing.

Her voice sounded crystal clear. And pure, so pure. Squall had never heard anything like it. And she had lied about not knowing any lyrics. She remembered. But Squall couldn’t understand the words. They were in another language. Not a human language, though it sounded as an angel singing. Aeris dived into the memories and sung. Time froze as she did. Squall could have sworn that the night truly fell as she let her voice echoing through the streets. And the stars shined brighter in the sky. It was magical. Not just a song, but real magic.

And Aeris started to smile as she kept on singing. She had to know what she was doing. The streets filled with lights. The buildings around seemed to fall back, as if they wanted to give them some space. A red light surrounded the Cetra, as an aura. And under her feet, green sprouts came out from the cement. Squall let go of her hand, surprised and took a step back. Plants kept on growing as she sang. A bunch of flowers bloomed as ivy covered the entire east side of Squall’s block. Soon, the cement had cracked to let the plants grow and Squall was looking at this show with disbelief. So this was the power of Ancients? Aeris stood still in blooming plants, singing, her voice still as soft and pure. An angel, able to bring back every colors Earth had denied since long after the humans had polluted her for centuries.

Noises were starting to be heard. People were going to look out in the streets. Someone was going to notice what was going on. Aeris would be spotted, in her beautiful red dress, almost dancing in the middle of this new garden she had summoned only with her voice. Squall shivered as he realized what she was keeping to herself. She had to knowledge to create so much things. Which mean that she was certainly able to destroy too... And he was falling in love with her. Despite everything he tried to tell himself, he was. Even now, when he should be scared from her, all he could think was that he had to protect her at all cost. She was so good, so wonderful. And such a pretty woman too. He liked her magic. He liked everything about her.

“Aeris!”

She stopped and opened her eyes. Suddenly, she realized what she had been doing. She realized she was walking on real grass. The ivy running over the cement had purple flowers in it now. Crimson roses were blooming right next to her feet. She jumped back on the cement, her eyes widened by the shock.

“I... It wasn’t...”

“Don’t stay here.”

Before she could understand anything, Squall had lifted her in his arms and ran across the road and into his apartment’s block. He dragged her with him in the stairs and into his apartment, not to stop until the door was locked behind them.

Looking for her breathe, she eyed him with a questioning gaze.

“What... What was this about?” she asked.
“You’re incredible, but you can’t use this kind of magic out in the open.”

“I didn’t do that! If I did, it wasn’t on purpose,” she defended herself.

“Aeris, people were starting to hear the cement cracking. They would have looked outside to see what was going on. Seeing you in the middle of this jungle you created by singing would have bugged them. They would have understood something was up. And we don’t want anymore people interested in you.”

“I’m sorry.” She sighed, still looking out for her breathe.

“Well, it’s my fault. I asked you to sing.”

Since she looked down, he felt bad. His try at making her forget what had happened during the ball had totally failed.

“You have a beautiful voice, you know?”

_I want to hear my name called out by this voice_, he thought.

Looking back up at him, she blushed under his gaze. His eyes were telling her that it wasn’t the only thing beautiful about her.

“Thank you... Sorry for the unexpected... garden I started up by singing.”

“Well, it must be handy to be a florist, with such a power.”

She chuckled.

“I never did this before.”

“It was wonderful, Aeris.”

“Stop complimenting me.” She pleaded.

Her face was on fire. And as he got closer to her, she felt so... trapped.

“But I want to... So that you can be happy. So that your smile can be real.”

“My smile’s always real...”

“If I’m a good comedian, you’re a master at faking. You’re panicking right now.”

Her heart could almost jump out of her chest at the pace it was beating!

“You know I can tell.”

He was sensible to feelings. And since he already thought about the rest all the time, he was surely able to tell everything going around and inside her. His voice was soft. He didn’t want to rush her. He wanted to get back into the magic linking them. He gently removed the gloves on her upper arms. To touch her hands directly, skin to skin. As he moved closer in, she found herself with her back against the wall.

“You don’t have to be scared.” He said, gently putting his arms behind her back, pinning her to the wall with his body.
“Why aren’t you scared after seeing me doing something like... that?” she asked, putting her hands on his chest.

“To be honest, I’m scared. Because you’re as powerful as they all said. But your powers aren’t meant to hurt people. You gave life to all of these plants. You fixed me when I was in pieces. I’m more scared to have you running away from me than anything else.”

Squall felt bad an instant. Though he talked good –for once- he felt guilty for cruising her like this. But he wanted to touch her. Everywhere. To have her touching him. He wanted to take her, to take everything that could be taken. And to give in return. He had wanted for some time now. Though it was slightly wrong. He couldn’t stand sleeping alone with her in the very next room. He couldn’t stand thinking of Rinoa’s passing when his heart was beating for someone new. It felt wrong. The very morning, he was heartbroken over his loss. But it was more because he had had to talk over it. He felt even more heartbroken because he seemed to have healed up so fast. Was he really in love? Was this only a crush? Did it matter? Maybe wouldn’t he never had gotten this close to Aeris in another time. But he remembered how he had saved her. How he had focused on her to forget Rinoa when he thought she was cheating. She had been cheating. And now that she was dead, he was merely trying to live again. Without her.

“Squall, we can’t...”

“You don’t even know what I want already,” he chuckled before to lean in.

She was scared, but he could tell there was something else. She wasn’t scared of him. He could feel it in her body. In her spiritual energy. She was terrified by something else, her powers maybe, or the remembrance of Sephiroth staring at her. But he wasn’t a threat to her. She liked him. At least, a little. Heck, his new powers were proving useful. He gently kissed her lips. Just to remind himself of her taste. She cupped his face in her hands as he came back for more. He shivered just at this gesture. There was something so sweet about the way she was holding him, he wanted to hide in her arms forever. But he wanted more. His hands went up her waist, to her naked back. Naked shoulders. Pressed himself over her body, to feel her through their clothing. Her kisses were clumsy, but instinctive. Her mouth opened under his. He had her moaning as she joined his passion. Unclipped her curvy hair as she played with his spiky locks. Raised her up against the wall, to kiss her neck, all the way down to her shoulders. Her skin tasted sweet. It was so warm. And soft. She shivered under his lips. Her hands were running over him, trying to find a way to react, a way to please him back. He brushed her left breast through her dress. Gosh, her dress wasn’t even as soft as her skin.

Aeris was panicking even more now. She hadn’t expected this. Not this soon. Squall had seemed so stubborn on being loyal to Rinoa’s memory. She had bet he wasn’t indifferent to her. At least, she was sensible to his charm. But she had never gone real far with any man. Was she ready for this? Wasn’t it wrong? How could it be wrong when it made her feel so good? He had lowered her dress on her body, to uncover the more skin he could and she had wrapped her legs around his waist, after lifting the skirt of her dress. He stroked her legs, from the knees to the end of her hips, running his nails on her skin, giving her more shivers. He was still kissing her. And she was kissing back, almost inviting him to keep this up. But why was this so urgent? He hadn’t literally jumped on her, but now... Well, she knew exactly what he wanted. And despite the fact she was growing attached to him, she was scared. She had been through a lot in her life. Hadn’t gone too far with men, but she knew where this was heading.

And she remembered. She hated herself for it, but she remembered. And for an instant, since he was touching her everywhere he could, Squall saw it. Suddenly, two human shapes imposed themselves under his eyes. He could hear a man grunting. A girl whining weakly under his
repetitive movements. A silver strand of hair under the faint light. A pink dress lying on the floor. He froze in place. Aeris was trembling now, but he could tell it wasn’t from pleasure anymore.

He parted from her, looking for something to say. She slid against the wall, till she was sitting on the floor, her arms crossed over her chest.

“We can’t...” she repeated, tears ringing in her voice. “You know, now, you saw it, didn’t you?”

“He really... Aeris, I’m sorry, I...!”

She ran to her room before that he could add anything, wounded right to her heart. How could she have been stupid enough to think that it wouldn’t follow her here? She was an Ancient. A woman filled with powers that every man in the world wanted to use. And once her powers were used, there was only one thing she was good at. Sephiroth had used her that way a few times. Even if she resisted. And Squall had tried too. She knew it wasn’t the same, but the feelings from the past were all coming back. She threw herself on her bed and stuffed her head in the pillow to cry till her eyes would give out.

Still standing in the entrance, shocked by what he had seen but hadn’t foreseen, Squall was ashamed. He walked backward, till his back hit the wall. He knew she possibly had been hurt in such a way. And still, he had tried to get everything he could from her, just for his own pleasure. And he was calling himself her bodyguard? Her friend?!

“What... What have I done?” he whispered, bringing one hand to his face.

It was only because of the flowers still outside that he decided to fix this situation. Though he had no idea how he could. He had to get Aeris to forgive him for remembering her this. And in time, if it was possible... Well, he decided to forget about it right now. Though he was ready to swear on the fact she hadn’t hated this entirely, if only for his own pride...

End of Episode 2. To be continued in Episode 3.
Chapter 27

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part I

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 26

Location: Boston, American States, Cloud’s apartment

Mission: Teaching Storm how to play a video game.

Agents involved: Raven

Warning: It seems that sir Noctis likes to escape his father duty with baby Raine to spend time with the young Storm. My master looks slightly annoyed about it.

Odin thinking to himself. End of transmission.

... 

“So basically, all I have to do is to... jump on those things?”

“Yeah.”

Storm was sitting in the living room with Noctis. Cloud was out with his squad, to celebrate Christmas. Lightning was feeding Raine in the kitchen.

The first few hours of the baby girl’s arrival in her family had been pretty awkward. Afterwards, Cloud had went through old things to find any baby stuff that they used once for Serah, or anything that could serve for Raine. Like diapers. Clothes. Everyday things Lightning and Noctis never had to collect, since their baby had never been born. It hadn’t been easy, since everything was closed on Christmas’ day. Noctis had gone through the Boxing Day to get anything else that could be missing. Like covers, baby’s nightgown, toys, baby food. He had discovered a new world, where everything he could see in real life was adapted for babies. He had wished that Lightning was with him, but Cloud couldn’t babysit Raine today and they certainly wouldn’t bring her in the stores on the Boxing Day.

For Noctis who had been far from crowds for sometimes, seeing so many people around him was almost shocking. He grabbed a few clothes for himself. Find soap for babies, and real diapers. Women were looking at him with a sly smile as they saw the content of his caddy. He got a few things for Lightning too. He sure wanted to die as he arrived in front of the drugstore. She had asked for Tempra and other medicaments to heal Raine if she was to fall ill. And she needed new Tempax for herself. The joys of having a family. He wondered if his own father ever experienced that. Who bought the things a kind and queen would use in their daily life?

When he had came back with all the stuff, Lightning had almost throw Raine in his arms to check on everything he had bought, to make sure nothing was missing. She had gotten all crazy over the little dresses he had chosen –and Noctis thanked the god of good fortune- since he had taken every baby’s clothes without thinking too much. He was okay at dressing himself. He actually knew how to mix color. But baby’s fashion was far from his spheres of action.

“Ah! That... that evil mushroom touched me and I’m dead! What’s wrong with that game?” Storm complained.
“Of course. To kill those gumbas, you have to jump on their heads.”

“But if they touch me, I’m dead?”

Storm was baffled by this logic.

“So are my boots radioactive or something?”

“No. Storm, it’s a game, alright? Don’t look for logic in it.”

“Okay.”

He started again the level and jumped this time. As he went farther, he jumped and a mushroom appeared from the upper cases.

“Get this red mushroom, Storm.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

“I need to kill it?”

“No, you eat it.”

“I can do that?! Hey wait, I’m bigger now!”

Storm wasn’t sure if he liked this game. It was unpredictable and didn’t follow any logic. He couldn’t understand or expect anything about it. Though his father seemed to know exactly what was going on.

“This thing is insane.”

“It’s a very old video game. But it’s still a classic.”

“A classic?”

“Keep playing, you’ll see.”

“Ah, there’s turtles now?”

Noctis couldn’t help himself but smiled. Stella had agreed in letting Storm stay with him and Lightning for a few days. After all, he needed to know more about his dad. And the contrary was also true. For once, his son was acting as a kid. He panicked as he reached Bowser’s castle and got angry when he finally got through it and learned that the princess wasn’t there.

“They tricked me!”

“It would have been too easy if it ended so soon.”

“Mom always said video games were bad.”

“Well, she’s wrong. Keep playing. Wait till you see more.”

Though he was pouting, he kept playing. And at some point, he started enjoying it. He wasn’t too good in water levels and Noctis helped him getting through them. Before that they knew it, it was around five pm.
“Hey Noctis, mind giving me a hand with Raine? Stop messing around with Cloud’s relics.”

“Relics?” Storm repeated.

“This game is about 17 000 years old.” His father explained.

The little boy almost let go of the controller as he heard that.

“This belongs in a museum then!”

“Of course not. Keep playing, Storm. It’s still in perfect shape.”

Noctis got up and joined Lightning in the kitchen for an instant, as Odin was still sitting in the couch, gazing at the screen with amazement, cheering Storm to conquer more level and save the princess.

“You seem to be getting along with Storm now.” Lightning observed, helping Raine to sit up on the kitchen’s counter. “Look at her, she’s already able to sit!”

“I’m sorry if I gave you the impression all I care about is Storm. It’s just... Since he talks and all, it feel easier taking care of him.”

“Well, evading Raine won’t help you learn any faster how to handle babies. And I need you to look after her as I’ll make the supper.”

“How about I cooked?”

“You’re not much better than me at cooking. And I won’t let you run away from your daughter. I’ll be right here if she start to cry. She needs to have you around too. To learn who’s her dad. We used to take care of Serah in turns, Cloud and I. It worked well.”

“It’s just... so sudden Light. I hadn’t thought of what would come after rescuing her.”

“You don’t regret it, do you?”

“Of course not!”

Raine giggled, reaching out one hand to her parents. Lightning gently grabbed her small hands in hers, smiling back at the baby girl.

“You see, Daddy’s here, Raine.”

Noctis was a little jealous from Raine. She was getting all Lightning’s attention right now. Of course, he wouldn’t blame her, the poor thing had been secluded in a prison for the same amount of time he had been in a coma. They had shared the same fate, somehow, while Lightning was imprisoning herself in her pain.

“I don’t know what to tell her. Can she understand anything we say?”

“She’s learning from us. She’ll be learning all she can from everyone living around her. I’m sure she already knows a lot. Not from the people I’d wanted to teach her. But we’ll get back the time that was stolen from us. One day at a time.”

Noctis felt so anxious about all this. He wondered what would happened when Raine would start talking. What would she say? Would she be traumatized by her early life experience? Would she bare any scars from her past as a test subject? Had he let his little girl be born into a world which
had only hurt her? He had failed this child too, when he had failed Lightning. How could he hold her in his arms, claiming he loved her after doing this? How could he have her understanding in the future, when she would have nightmares over this and...

“Hi Raine. How are you doing?” he asked gently, stroking her baby’s face with his index finger.

Giggling even more, the baby looked up at his face. She had Lightning’s eyes. And there was so much curiosity in her innocent stare. But what had seen those eyes? What had happened to his child, while she was kept away from him? He wanted to know, wanted to turn back time, so that Raine’s life could have been normal in every way. At every time.

Lightning had dressed the little girl with a pair of short and a white and short dress. With her long hair brushed and arranged into two ponytails on each side of her hair, the small girl was even more adorable.

“She have a few teeth already. I guess she’ll start walking soon. For now, she’s barely able to stand up on her own. But with help, she’s good. How about you try?”

“What?”

“Like this.”

Lightning seemed to know how to do everything. She grabbed Raine around her waist and put her up on her feet.

“Don’t let go of her hands, Noctis, keep her steady. Her muscles still have to strengthen, but look at her.”

“Already want to walk, Raine?” he asked playfully.

Her hands were so small. Her smile so wide... Even while standing up on the kitchen’s counter, her head barely reached his neck. Noctis felt his heart sinking in his chest. He loved this child. He was so proud just to look at her and so scared that anything could happen to her at the same time.

“She’s so small.” He whispered.

As if talking too loudly could break that cute little thing.

“Don’t worry, she’s made strong. She’s your daughter after all.” Lightning reminded him.

“It’s still hard to realize it,” he admitted.

Lightning knew this was harder for Noctis. For starters, he had learned he had a daughter and that she was “dead” at the same time. He’d never managed to picture himself as a daddy. And he had lost his parents when he was even younger than herself. He hadn’t any brother or sister to back him up. He felt under a terrible weigh, under the responsibility of caring and taking care of Raine. Would he be up to it, while he had no idea of what a real family was?

“I know it all happened too fast. But I’m glad... And it’s thanks to you.”

She gently kissed his cheek as a thank you.

“You helped me. We saved her together.”

“But it was your new powers that made it all the more easier. And your determination to save her,
even if you hadn’t had the time to accept that you had a daughter.”

“Why don’t we keep this discussion for a time when she’s not right in front of us, huh?”

“I have no secret for my daughter!” she retorted. “As we better not keep any secret between us, huh?”

“Okay, Claire, you won. Next time Odin tell me something like that, I’ll tell you right away.”

He took Raine in his arms, and she snuggled against his chest, dribbling on his shirt. If it had been anyone else’s child, he’d surely find it disgusting. But it was his daughter. And he couldn’t think of anything else than adorable and cute as he looked down at her.

“Say, Claire, since we can’t keep any secret, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“What is it?” Lightning replied, tensing up.

“I love you.”

She relaxed, smiling. Their baby was turning him into a big child himself...

“I already know that.”

“I still have to tell it, Light. I love you.”

Walking back to him, they exchanged a brief kiss, careful of not getting too close, not to squeeze Raine between their bodies.

“I know, moron. And I love you too. Now let me get the supper ready, okay?”

Noctis went back to the living room. Sat on the couch, next to Odin. Raine was looking around, her eyes wide with curiosity.

“Look, it’s your brother Storm playing, Raine.”

“You really had to name her Raine, right?” the said boy asked, sounding annoyed.

“What’s the problem with that?”

“Oh, nothing. My mother’s named Stella, you’re Noctis, you’re girlfriend’s Lightning, I’m Storm, and now I have a sister named Raine and a step uncle Cloud. At this rate, there won’t be enough meteorological stuff to keep on naming people.”

There was reproach in his voice and Noctis wondered. Storm’s name existed to define him as a thing. He had to hate this fact. And Noctis himself had never been too found of the Latin side of his own name.

“You’d like another name? Like Sam or...”

“I don’t know what I’d like. I’d like that this stupid dragon stopped messing around with me and stuffing Toad in the bags where the princess should be.”

Noctis smiled sadly. He needed to have one good talk with Stella about Storm. Lightning didn’t seem to mind the boy’s presence anymore. But she disliked his mother. And given the situation they were all in, Noctis could understand.
“Your brother’s learning fast. He got through half of the game in a few hours. We’ll have to find another one much tougher to beat for him.”

Raine grabbed on her father’s shirt, interested with one of his shirt’s buttons. She tried to eat it and he gently turned her around, so that she wouldn’t do anything dangerous. If she managed to swallow down a button, she could strangle herself.

“Your daughter sure seems curious, sir Noctis. When she’ll start walking, I think it will be hard to keep up with her,” Odin observed.

“If she’s one bit like her father, I know I’m going to worry a lot.”

The summoned spirit laughed at that. And a moment later, when Lightning came to warn the men that the supper was ready, she saw Raine, sleeping in her father’s arms. And she beamed with joy just from this sight. Everything was right. Finally.

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December, Christmas day
Location: Boston, American States, Squall’s place
Mission: Patching up things with Aeris, since I messed up pretty bad.
Agents involved: Squall Leonheart, Aeris Gainsborough
Warning : As it is Christmas a gift would be a good idea. Though it won’t automatically work.
Squall’s mind, in a pretty worried state. End of transmission.

...

Squall hadn’t been able to sleep last night. He was wondering what had gone through his head to “jump on Aeris” like that. He had a right to miss Rinoa, but this was crossing the line. He felt ashamed and guilty and had wished that he could have known a way to comfort Aeris. But if she had been raped... His heart was beating madly at the simple idea that anyone could hurt her in such a fashion. He wanted to know what to tell her, to make her feel better. To erase his own actions. He had been thinking over that for the whole night.

But he still hadn’t found anything when she came out from his room, still wearing her red dress from yesterday’s ball.

“Hi, Squall,” she said, as if nothing had happened.

“Go... good morning,” he hesitantly replied.

She was holding her forehead with one hand, looking slightly in pain.

“I think I drank too much yesterday. I can’t remember anything from the time when we got in the apartment... Nothing happened, right?”

It was so blunt, so faked, Squall felt his heart shattering. She was trying to buy peace, to force him to do as if nothing had happened. She was lying to him!

“You’re kidding, right?”
“Why would I be?”

“So that we won’t have a difficult discussion? I’m not pretending Aeris. I... I went too far yesterday and I’m the only one to blame. Don’t try to do as if it wasn’t important.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

So she was truly lying.

“Aeris, you... I’m sorry, okay? Can’t I apologize?”

“No you can’t, cause it wasn’t your fault. I didn’t stop you, did I? Did I resist or something? Well, I should have before that you triggered those memories. You’re too sensible to spiritual energy, Squall! I knew that, and I’ve still let you touch me when I shouldn’t have. This can’t happen again. I’m not throwing pictures of my life and of Ancient’s knowledge in your mind on purpose, but it’s still happening.”

She stopped, to catch back her breathe.

“We should stay friend. Nothing more.”

He heard pain in her voice, and he couldn’t tell why it was there. Because she didn’t want to be only his friend? Or because she was still scared from the memories with Sephiroth?

“Aeris...”

He wanted to say something. Anything. If he’d dared, he’d hugged her in his arms. But he was afraid that it would scare her. And when he thought he knew what to say, the phone rang. They stood in silence, in front of each other, as it kept on ringing.

“You should answer, Squall.”

“I want things to be clear before.”

“Ring! Ring! Ring!”

“Things are crystal clear, Squall. It was Christmas’ Eve yesterday. We drunk a little too much, you were missing Rinoa. It’s okay. I’m not mad or resenting you for anything.”

And he hated that. If she had been mad, he had felt the right to feel so ashamed. Now, he was just getting even guiltier than before. And she wasn’t forgiving him anytime soon, since she wasn’t mad at him! But this was still his fault. Because he was too sensible to spiritual energy. Too sensible! When he always tried not to feel anything. How ironic!

“Ring, ring, ring!”

He gave up and looked away from Aeris as he grabbed the phone.

“Squall here.”

“It took you time, man!” Reno’s voice complained on the other line.

“Well, it’s Christmas for me too.” Squall replied.

“Here as well, it is. You’d better suffer with me than have all the fun on your side. The bosses have a new mission for you. You’re going into space tomorrow. You’re going to explore a spaceship
still in construction. Mission’s code, Antlion project. Lightning will give you a briefing and discharge you from guarding the Cetra.”

“What?!”

“You’ve been doing a good job, but Rufus thinks that you’ve gotten too close with Aeris. He heard about Rinoa’s passing. And about your connection with her. You think they were all blind, didn’t you? Anyway, he guessed sending you back to work would remind you of your place.”

“Fuck you, Reno.”

“Hey, I’m just repeating what he asked me to tell!”

“Like I care.”

“They’re discharging you only for the time of your mission. Afterwards, you’ll be reappointed at being her bodyguard, man. Lightning is supposed to be on vacation. And she broke into the Feds’ lab to get her baby back.”

“Her baby?!?” he repeated.

“It seems that child was still alive. They had stolen it from her while she was unconscious and kept it growing in some incubator.”

“Those creeps.”

“Well, that’s about all I can tell you on the phone. Show up tomorrow morning at eight in HQ to receive all the intel you need for the mission. Then, they’ll send you up high.”

“Very funny.”

Squall hung up. It was around 11 o’clock. He was starting to feel hungry. And his mind was pretty confused. He was going away for an undetermined period of time. Away from Aeris while everything was unclear. Lightning had gotten back her lost child, which was alive after this time. He felt ready to go crazy.

“What’s going on?”

“They’re sending me on a new mission. Lightning will swap place with me to keep you in check, while I’ll go into space to investigate over something.”

His voice was cold. He hated himself for it, but he was so mad and there was nothing around here to throw his anger at. Nothing but her.

“I see. When will this mission start?”

“Tomorrow.”

Aeris seemed shocked. But she quickly got back her cool.

“Maybe is it better that way,” she observed. “Taking some time to ourselves. To clear up our mind.”

“...”

He wanted to answer, to warn her that what had happened yesterday wasn’t only because of
Rinoa’s dead and his grieving. But it had been the main reason and he felt so bad for it.

“You still haven’t eaten anything, have you, Squall?”

“Why are you always trying to skip every discussion by baking me a meal?” he snapped.

“What?! I’m not always...”

“Well, right now you are! I don’t... I don’t care what Sephiroth did to you! I mean, it doesn’t change who you are. I’m just sorry for reminding it to you with my actions. I was careless. It’s just hard, cause you... you helped me so much and all I’m ever doing is messing things up.”

“Squall, I said that it was okay.”

“It’s a lie.”

“Squall!” she warned him, her voice turning harsher this time.

“I don’t want to have you turning your back on me. I can’t lose you too, Aeris.”

His blue eyes were looking at her intently as he said that. And she understood this wasn’t about getting sex with her anymore. He was such a child sometimes.

“I said we were friends.”

“You’ve been lying a lot lately.” He retorted.

_And you kissed me the other day, in the store. Though you said I shouldn’t get any idea from it, I did. And you have too_, he thought.

“Well, it’s not my problem if you can see through my lies so easily! And I’m not always lying!”

“I didn’t say that!”

Sighing, she understood they were getting nowhere. She breathed in and out to show him she wanted things to calm down.

“If you don’t wanna eat, what do you wanna do then? Try to master your spiritual sensibility for the mission?”

He frowned.

“There’s a way for me to control it.”

“I don’t know. Maybe you should try. But I’m hungry, so I’ll make us breakfast now, okay?”

She walked out of the room and into the kitchen and Squall wondered why she was still wearing her red dress. Was she trying to tease him? And what was that about his spiritual sensibility? There was a way to control it? There was truly a way to block it? If he could reach this state, they wouldn’t have to be only friends. Though he still wondered if he still desired Aeris out of mourning or out of love?

He hated himself for not understanding right away what was going on in his mind and heart. And he decided to remain here and to focus on his powers. As he sat on the couch, pictures from the past went through his mind. Lightning playing with him on this couch. Rinoa pinning him down with a smile on her lips. Angelo, Rinoa’s dog, driving him mad by trying to eat the said couch. The
pictures started running so fast, it made him dizzy. Rinoa was in most of them. And as he kept on focusing on it, he almost heard her voice.

“If I ever got you cheating on me, it better be because you’re in love, Squall. Otherwise, I wouldn’t understand.”

He had never understood her point. Cheating was cheating. But she used to say that a heart could move on. And if it truly did and that the person knew she couldn’t be happy with her boyfriend or girlfriend anymore, then, breaking up was the only solution. And then only, cheating seemed acceptable.

He still wasn’t entirely agreed with her. But somehow, he understood why she used to say that. Her mother had had two husbands in her life. And sometimes, for missions, he pretended to be in love with other girls. As he had pretended yesterday, with Aeris. But it had been different. Just as it was different when he had pretended to be with Rinoa while in fact he truly was. So then, was this love?

The pictures kept on running. And he remembered a discussion he had had with Lightning. Over their own relationship, as friends. And over Noctis’ jealousy.

“It’s already been three years since I’m in love with him. And still, he doubts and is acting all possessive with me. I know he trust me, but he’s still protective. He doesn’t take me for granted.”

Aeris wasn’t for granted. And Squall knew he couldn’t play with her as if she was his little doll. She wasn’t his to begin with. It was the last thing he should think about. But he couldn’t help himself but wonder. If he managed to take her all the way. To really fall in love with her and to show her what love could be, for a man and a woman. Maybe that her smile and her hopes would be even brighter. As Rinoa’s smile and kindness were, before that she fell ill.

“I must be mad, Rinoa, to think like this.”

And the last picture who ran through his mind was Rinoa, nodding.

“Of course you’re mad, Squall. All of us are, in our own way.”

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December, 27 December
Location: Boston, American States, HQ quarter
Mission: Respond to the call of general Jecht.
Soldiers involved: Cloud Strife and back up soldier, Yuna Albhed.
Warning : Something seems to be wrong between those two.
Message from Doctor Cid. End of transmission.

...

Cloud was waiting in Jecht’s office. His uniform was perfectly arranged and the gallons were shining on his shoulders. Yuna arrived late, as she often did. She had barely had the time to change herself in her soldier uniform and her bangs were all messed up from her run to the higher-ups HQ. She had been running everywhere for the last few days, since Rikku had decided she was squatting
her place with her invalid husband for a week. She needed food for three people now, and she had had to arrange the guest room in a hurry. Seymour was a pain in the ass and often joked at her when Rikku wasn’t around. He was taking out his furry of being stuck in a wheelchair on the poor Yuna.

The young girl, still confused over what had happened between her and Cloud, was stressed out at the very idea of being around him. Stepping in the room had taken her all of her courage and she had made arrangements with Tidus, to get herself out of the terrible situation she was in regarding Cloud.

“Well, you’re finally here, Sergeant Yuna.”

“Sergeant?” she repeated, raising herself straight, but blinking from surprise.

“You’ve done well on Pluto and your training results with Colonel Strife were brilliant. It seems you’re a quick learner. You’re already an incredible engineer and you were working for us to pay your studies in Harvard? If you accept to join the main army, we’ll pay your studies and give you real mission, like that one on Pluto, instead of having you wiping the floor. Wasting such talents as yours would be terrible. What do you say? Isn’t this promotion a nice Christmas gift?”

Cloud raised on eye brow, before to glance at Yuna. She was stuttering her thanks and refusal with such a small voice that Jecht didn’t hear anything and took it as a yes.

“Then, it’s cleared up. You’ll be Squad’s 8 second sergeant, serving right under Colonel Strife. If you do well on the next assignment I’ll give you, you could even go up to lieutenant.”

“But I...”

“You should thank me for my generosity, sweetie.” Jecht retorted.

“Yes sir, thank you so much, sir!” she replied, blushing slightly.

It sounded so fake for a thank you, she hated herself for ever joining the army. But she caught a glimpse of Cloud’s encouraging smile and was reassured. They had to make Jecht’s happy.

“I summoned you here for something else, in fact, Colonel Strife, Sergeant. It’s about Pluto in fact. Since you’ve spotted Jenova out there, we want you to learn what she’s doing. We’ll be sending you in the next few days for a reckon mission on this frozen planet.”

“What?”

Yuna bit her tongue right after the question escaped her lips.

“Please, refrain yourself from talking too much, sweetie pie.”

She hated Jecht for an instant, directing all her most nasty thoughts to him. Then, he resumed talking over the mission they were supposed to take, and she realized that a level beyond hate existed.

“We will send only both of you there. Since our pie is a nice engineer, she’ll take her of the navigation while Strife will organize the strategy. We wanna know what Jenova is doing. Sending too much ships would alert them. And since you know her well, Strife, even if you were to fall under her hands, not much harm would be done to you. It would be easy to escape too, as you did the other time.”
“Right, sir.” Cloud answered back, seeing that Jecht was remaining silent after his last comment, expecting a response.

“You’ll get all the instructions in your squad. You’ll receive extra payment for working on New Year’s Day, of course.”

Extra payment around here meant getting almost rich, but Yuna still didn’t like that. She was going to be alone with Cloud Strife for the few next days? In another mission on freezing Pluto? To run after Jenova, the freakiest and most dangerous alien ever known to mankind? What were they thinking? Getting a little training wasn’t going to make a better soldier and she wasn’t ready for something like that. But as Jecht dismissed them, she understood they hadn’t any choice.

“Is he trying to getting rid of us, or what?”

“It’s a great honor. And a great danger at the same time. But you don’t have to worry Yuna. I’ll keep you safe.” Cloud told her.

His voice was as hot as the other day and she hated herself for thinking again of that night –or morning?- when he had started kissing and touching her everywhere. He had lightened a fire in her stomach since then, and nothing she had tried could extinguish it.

She forced herself not to answer him. And Cloud wondered what he could tell to get her to talk about the other day. He wasn’t sure if the subject was forbidden or not. He wanted to follow Lightning’s suggestions. He was ready to fight to get her back with him. And he was ready to clear up things, or so, he thought. But he wasn’t ready for what happened.

Tidus, the tanned guy from the other day, suddenly appeared from a turning hallway. Yuna instantly smiled and rushed to him.

“Hey there, baby, I heard from my dad you would be here. So now, you’re a sergeant, right?”

They exchanged a long kiss and Cloud asked himself if he had missed something. What was up with this guy? Was this some trick to make him think there was no chance for him to get his hands on Yuna, or had he misunderstood everything. Was she going out with that... kid? How could she liked him? With his baby face and his skin so tanned it was almost orange? His hair was dyed, for heaven sake, everything about him was flashy and fake.

Well, Cloud just couldn’t stand the guy. Especially when his lips were on Yuna’s mouth and his hands roaming over her petite body. She gently pushed Tidus away, whispering something to his ear, shaking her head from sides to sides. He nodded and let go of her.

“Take care then. And don’t go forgetting me, huh?” He said, before to walk away, waving at her.

Yuna felt terrible for pretending she was going out with Tidus. She didn’t like what he said to keep his end of the bargain. Any boyfriend of her would be way more romantic. For once, Cloud would be. But Cloud had to remain how he was, unreachable. And uninterested in her. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be able to resist him.

Discreetly, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and turned to face Cloud, slightly blushing under his questioning look.

“I thought this guy was only your friend.”

“Had I said that?”
Is this why she hasn’t time for love? Because she’s already in love with someone else? Cloud wondered.

Somehow, he had trouble believing it. If it was this, why hadn’t she said so right away? Why was she kissing Tidus like this, right in the middle of army’s HQ, when she was so shy about any mark of affection, love or desire? This was deliberate. She was trying to keep him away from her. There was no other way to explain it. Such a petty game. Lightning and Serah had tried to force him pretending he was his boyfriend once or twice, to have their friends jealous, or to get rid of an annoying guy. He had refused every time. First, it was wrong. Second, he could just bust the annoying guy’s face with his fist. Third, he’d hated to be the tricked guy, seeing all his hopes crushed before that he even had a chance to try hitting on a girl. Cloud had lived that a few times, when he was a teen.

And he wasn’t going to let Yuna play this kinda game with him.

“You know, you’re ten years too early to try and trick me. So don’t lower yourself in this kind of game.” He warned her.

“I’m not that younger than you!”

“Just how old are you then?”

This was going to ease his conscience.

“I’m turning twenty five next year.” She retorted.

This made him feel better. She hadn’t the same age than any of his sisters. Somehow, he had trouble whenever the girl he was going with was as young as Serah. He did his best avoiding it, because he always felt bad about it.

“Which month?”

“February.”

“Hey, you’re actually older than I’d thought.”

She smiled. It was some kind of compliment. And Cloud was kinda happy that they had this mission together. He knew it would be dangerous, but it would give him time alone with her. This meant he was bound to get an occasion to explain everything and win her heart. Or at least, her confidence.

To be continued.
Chapter 28

Episode 3 – White maiden –Part II

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 26, night

Location: Boston, American States, Cloud’s apartment

Mission: Pending

Agents involved: Raven, Lightning Farron, Project S.T.O.R.M, baby Raine

No warning

Message from G.I. two. End of transmission.

…

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrrrghhhhh!”

Noctis was woken up in the middle of the night by cries which had nothing to do with a baby crying. It wasn’t Lightning either. And since Cloud hadn’t come back home, it couldn’t be him either, though Noctis doubted a grown man could produce such noise. It wasn’t long before that the cries woke Raine too and she started to cry herself. Jumping on his feet as Lightning was sitting up in their bed, scared and still pretty sleepy, he went for the only person left in the apartment. Storm.

He was still surprised as he entered the young boy’s room to find him, screaming and kicking in his bed. His face was covered with tears and a few things –like a painting- had been crushed by the panicked waves of power coming out from him. Noctis was pushed backwards by another wave and tumbled on the floor, while still trying to understand what was going on.

“What’s got into him? Noctis, do something!” a voice yelled from the kitchen.

Lightning was trying to calm down Raine, while being freaked out herself by the animal’s cries coming from Storm’s room.

“What’s got into him? Noctis, do something!” a voice yelled from the kitchen.

Lightning was trying to calm down Raine, while being freaked out herself by the animal’s cries coming from Storm’s room.

“Trying.” Noctis hissed as he got back up.

He had to use his own Radiance to get through Storm’s panicked attack to invisible enemies. He managed to get one hand on his son’s shoulder and shook him up before to get one knee on the bed. The energy waves vanished at the same time Storm stopped to yell. But that didn’t mean he wasn’t kicking anymore. Though he had no chance to win a fight against one angry Noctis.

“What’s the deal with you, kid?”
“Ah... ah... Get... get away from me!”

“It’s me, Storm! Calm down, okay?” Noctis asked him, doing his best at keeping his cool himself. “Nothing’s going to happen to you.”

The small boy looked at him with wide eyes, scared beyond words. And at this instant, nobody could have told he wasn’t a kid. He was trembling with all his limbs. He had cut himself somehow, while destroying piece of furniture in his panic. His right brow was bleeding. And big, crocodile’s tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry.” The boy whispered. “Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry.”

Now, he seemed desperate. He was slowly coming back to his sense after this weird crisis. Lightning slowly stepped into the room, holding Raine protectively. Seeing her stare from over his father’s shoulder, Storm panicked even more and hid against Noctis’ chest, apologizing even more with a broken voice.

If he still wasn’t entirely calmed, seeing the kid in such a state cooled down Noctis’ furry.

“I’m not mad, Storm. You surprised us, it’s all.”

“But I woke up Raine.”

His voice was trembling so much as he said that, Lightning had trouble understanding his words.

“Just tell me what happened? Was it a nightmare?” Noctis asked him, gently forcing the kid to pull apart so that he could look in his eyes.

Storm nodded, holding back sobs that made his whole body shake.

“Did it happen before?”

He shook his head negatively, biting his lips to keep inside any more disturbing sounds—like sobs, or his strangled voice—.

“I’m sorry.” He stuttered.

“I know you are, Storm! Just give us a chance to help you, okay?”

Storm stared at him, his big blue eyes filled with doubt.

“I saw people in my head. People hurting my mom.”

Noctis felt his throat tightening. The way Storm was yelling, those “people” weren’t just hurting Stella. And somehow, he could have an idea of what this nightmare could be. He himself had had terrible dreams over his mother’s death for years. He still had them sometimes. All the more reason he feared to become a father. Who had the right to make anyone that dependant to their existence, when life was so fragile?

“You know she’s fine.” He tried to reassure him.

“They were killing her!” Storm protested.

And the tears were mixing with his dark blood. Noctis lift him in his arms, unable to stand it anymore. Lightning had went back to their room. She seemed to think that this was between Storm and him. He carried the boy to the washroom and had him sitting on the ceramic counter. The child
never opposed to his dad, except in his words.

“It was a nightmare.” Noctis argued.

“But I know those people!”

Noctis froze for an instant at that. Was Storm a forensic or something, if being his son and a living database wasn’t enough? Then, he focused on the kid’s cut. Grabbed some medical tissue, to wipe off the blood and check how wide the wound was.

“Alright, you know them. Who are they?”

“Faction’s G.I.s.”

This time, Noctis couldn’t ignore it. He exchanged a long look with his son, trying to find something to tell him. Nobody knew G.I.s identity. Or their true goal behind all the missions they were giving. The Faction was supposed to exist for the good of mankind. But somehow, Noctis felt that the organization was wrong, or running astray at least, since all their actions and ways had become just as harsh as the Feds were. To strip a man from his DNA while he was unconscious to create him a son was unethical. The very existence of Storm was far from everything touching ethics.

“It doesn’t really make sense, don’t you think, Storm?”

“I’m not sure what makes sense or not anymore.”

“Well... Watch out, it’s going to sting...” Noctis warned him, before to use friction alcohol to wash the cut.

“Ow! Ow, ow ow ow!”

Storm weakly tried to push him away, to hold on his brow, but Noctis kept on washing the cut, before to put a small bandage on the wound.

“G.I. can’t start killing each other for no reason. And your mother is too brilliant to be trapped. And if something had happened to her, I wouldn’t have gotten ten new messages on my cell to check if you were doing fine here.” Noctis observed, gently wiping off Storm’s tears.

“You have ten new messages? And when did you check it?”

“She’s been sending me text messages every night since we’ve taken you here with us. Wanna check my cell to feel safe about it?”

“You’re treating me like a kid.” Storm complained, looking down.

“Well, as brilliant as you may be, you seem to forget it often, you ARE a kid!”

Saying that, Noctis ruffled his hair, before to bring him into a hug. He felt so closed to that poor boy. He had been through so many terrible things already. And he’d wished he wasn’t having those terrifying nightmares.

“Now, try to stop worrying over your mom. You need your sleep.”

“And you need yours too, right?”

Storm’s voice was muffled by his father’s chest. Noctis smiled and turned off the light from the
bathroom as he walked out.

“Right.”

Instead of taking Storm to his own room—which was the sole guest room from the apartment—he went to Lightning’s bedroom. As he stepped in, still holding his son in his arms, he found the young woman, watching over Raine’s sleep.

“Hey, Light.”

She looked over her shoulder. The picture of the father and his son printed itself into her mind. They were so alike, it was almost shocking. But she loved Noctis. And thought Storm was a handful and an egocentric brat on many things, he was a good kid. He had been pushed in the adult worlds way too soon. He hid his fears under a mask of self pride and false confidence. He was even younger than Raine in reality. But he had been forced to learn everything a normal kid would spend years learning in mere weeks. Like walking. Talking. When she started thinking of what it could have been, she was scared herself. And slowly, she understood her hate for this kid wasn’t only about the fact he was Noctis and another woman’s kid. It was so unfair and disgusting to mistreat a child in such a way. She hated Stella for being weak enough to accept to put her own flesh and blood through such treatment. Because it reminded her of Cloud. Of their parents. Of her mako blood. And of all her own demons.

“Hey, Noct. Storm’s calmed down?” she asked.

“I’m sorry.” The boy muttered.

“Could we keep him with us for tonight?”

“You mean, can he sleep with us?”

She was a little surprised, but somehow, Noctis’ eyes were irresistible. And Storm’s look as he realized what his father had in mind! So it wasn’t him who had asked to sleep with his dad.

“As long as he doesn’t start yelling like this again...”

“I won’t!” Storm promised quickly, blushing slightly. He was so ashamed of himself, after telling everybody how in control of himself he was. How could he trust himself, knowing how young and inexperienced he was?

Both adults smiled and they agreed to keep him company as he would fall back to sleep. They got to bed, Storm lying between them. He felt bad for it, as if he was forcing them apart for the nth time. His dad kept one protective hand on the boy’s waist. It felt as the start of a hug. And though Lightning was still really jealous that this kid wasn’t hers, she had to admit. It did a lot of good to Noctis to take responsibility, even if he hadn’t chosen to be a father. He was learning what it meant. And he seemed eager to fill his role. For both of his kids. And maybe that Storm helped a little in the process, just by existing.

“Goodnight, guys.”

“Goodnight, Light.”

Both adults closed their eyes as the kid remained between them, lying and wondering what he should do. Was he supposed to sleep? Right next to Lightning, who hated him so much, she would certainly try to kill him in his sleep? Why would she do that? She wasn’t that nasty. And she had a lot of good reasons to hate him. Though it was still scary being around her. He was only reassured
by the fact his father was there too. Considering the fact Lightning had accepted without any protest that he remained with them, he should be wake up the next morning. He just hoped he was going to pee in his sleep. It still happened often and it was the last thing he wanted to be laughed at with all that had happened. After thinking and rethinking over all of this, Storm accepted the situation and finally fell asleep.

... 

Next morning, when he woke up, he looked around him, pretty confused. He felt really small, lying between two grown-up bodies. As he looked around him, trying to remember why he was here and who was with him, he was met by Lightning gaze. Noctis was still sleeping. For some reason, his father was hard to wake at every morning.

“Hi, Storm.”

“Hi.” He shyly replied.

It wasn’t his time around Lightning, but for some reason, she was more intimidating like this. He wasn’t in known territory. Here, out in the real world, he couldn’t be considered as anything more than a weak child. And he knew that this woman wasn’t pretty fond of him. After receiving a good spanking from his mom, he had learned forcing Lightning to take a summoned spirit was pretty rude. And talking like a know-it-all was just as rude. He was scared of talking with her and saying the wrong things. Stella used to say that men had the bad habit of saying the wrong things to girls. And though he was anything but a man, he was going to be one one day, if he was given the chance to. So he was bound to make a mistake here, wasn’t he?

“Since when are you so shy?” she asked him, gently ruffling his hair.

Her hand on his head scared him too. It felt nice and warm when she acted motherly with him. And he hated that fact. His mother should have been the only one to make him feel like this. He felt as if he was betraying her by liking being treated well by other people. But at the same time, he longed for Lightning’s affection, since she liked his dad. And it felt so confusing. And scary. And “unrational”!

“I... You still hate me, don’t you?”

Lightning’s eyes widened with surprise. She wasn’t expecting something so straightforward. And his voice sounded so small. And it reminded her of something else... Another boy asking her the same question. And her heart, unable to feel any hatred towards him.

“When... where did you get such an idea?”

“It’s not just an idea. I popped out of nowhere and almost ruined your relationship with da... with Noctis.”

“You can call him daddy, you know. I’m sure it makes him happy.”

“But does it make you happy?”

“I’m happy if he is.” She retorted.

“He’s really lucky then...” As he saw her questioning look, he felt obliged to explain himself. “I wished mom had someone like that, who really cares. I don’t mean Raven, I don’t think it could work anyway, but... I know she’s really lonely.”
“But she got you.”

“I don’t make such a good consolation prize…”

“You know, you depreciate yourself just like your father. Come here, consolation prize.”

Lightning sat up on the bed and lifted the small boy to have him sitting on her lap. He froze, panicking at new. This was Lightning, for heaven sake! What had he been thinking, telling her how he felt? She gently stroked his back, smiling to him.

“I don’t see why she shouldn’t be happy. You got two legs, two arms. All your fingers, and beautiful eyes. No malformation, and you can even be polite when you try.”

“Stop making fun of me.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“Well, I may be a healthy kid, but she needs more than that…”

“You shouldn’t worry of your mother like that, Storm. It’s the other way around.”

“But…”

“If you want to make her happy, act as a normal kid. Smile to her. Give her hugs. Show her how happy you are to be around her.”

He frowned. Why was she helping him like that?

“I’ll try.”

He wanted to get off her, but she stared down at him, as if she was expecting something. He wondered what it could be. Then he realized.

“Hum... Thank you, Lightning.” He added, looking away, blushing slightly.

Had he already thanked someone in his life? He couldn’t remember.

“You can call me Light, Storm. After all, I should be thank you. It’s because you gave me Odin that I could get back my little Raine.”

She gave him a light kiss on the forehead as she said that, before to let him sit back on the bed, and to get up –Raine had woken up and was crying- so she went to check on her baby. Storm stood still for a moment, under a shock. He could call her Light now? She had thanked him? Had he ever been thanked before in his life? He couldn’t remember either...

...

In the early morning, Stella showed up, to bring Storm back to their place. As soon as she stepped into the apartment and that her son realized she was there, he rushed to her.

“Mom!”

He hugged her legs, repeating:

“I missed you, I missed you, I missed you!” with his cutest voice.
“Hi there, Storm. I missed you too, sweetie. Did you have fun?”

“Yeah! Daddy showed me how to play video games, and we went outside, I saw the sun with my own eyes, and Lightning cooked some pasta with chilli sauce. It burned in my mouth, but it tasted good!”

Stella looked a little surprised at first. Was this really her Storm? He acted so childlike. It made her happy, but it was a big change. And what was he talking about? Video games? She glanced at Noctis, not entirely pleased. Was he going to give bad habits to her son? But Storm was already pulling on her skirt to tell her more and she couldn’t help herself but smile back at him. She had wished for him to be happy, and suddenly, he was. It warmed her heart to see he could call his father “daddy”. Finally, Storm had gotten the chance to be a real kid.

“He behaved well and he got all the sleep he needed.” Noctis mentioned.

Stella nodded, spotting Lightning in the living room, holding a baby in her arms.

“I think we’ll have to explain to the other G.I.s, for this Raine. You know, it’s going to get complicated to send you on mission.”

“Well, we’re supposed to be on vacation for three weeks right now, it’ll give us time to find something to do about it.” Lightning replied.

“Mom, can I take back with me the toys daddy bought for me?”

“Toys...? Well, of course you can.”

Storm went to gather his things and Noctis and Stella found themselves alone for a moment, under the eyes of Lightning. The young man shifted from one legs to the other, pretty nervous.

“You didn’t have to do that much for him, Noct.”

Lightning’s eyes twitched at that and the spy could have sworn he was going to have a hard time when the woman and her son would leave.

“I was just trying to catch up... I’ve been missing a lot of things.”

Stella nodded.

“Well, thank you for taking care of him. It was weird, not having him around, but... Well, if you don’t mind, you could take him again in your place. It seems to have done a lot of good.”

“Well, we treated him as a kid.” Lightning observed.

It was a clear warning, telling Stella that she should have done this herself in the first place. The blond woman nodded and turned away.

“I’ll be waiting outside for Storm. I don’t want to intrude on your life or your vacation. I guess we won’t meet before you two get back to work. So happy new year.” She wished them, before to walk out of the room.

Noctis sighed. It sure wasn’t an easy situation for any of them. Storm gave him a brief hug before to rush after his mother, holding a paper box with his new toys. Lightning couldn’t help but feel amazed by the change in the little boy. She hoped it was for the better. Then she exchanged a look with Noctis. He seemed worried that she was mad.
“I’m not angry at you. I just think that Stella acts too friendly.”

“You aren’t still jealous of her?!”

“I don’t have any reason to be, do I?”

“Okay, the situation is awkward. None of us know how to act with each other. But she’s Storm’s mother.”

“How do we know that, huh? He only looks like you. He could be your clone, or...”

“Well, he considers her as his mother. So it means as much. I’m sorry for all the hurt it’s putting you through.”

“I know it’s now your fault.”

“Does it make it any easier?”

“I’m not sure. You’ll have to prove yourself to me.”

“Okay... How do I do that?”

“I’m sure you’ll find something.” She retorted, with a hotter voice.

... 

Date: 19 027 A.D. December

Location: Outer space, army’s 15th airship

Operation: Reaching Pluto in one week, or less if possible, to investigate over Jenova’s doing

Soldiers involved: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albehd.

Warning: There seems to be a connection between those two soldiers. Unfortunately, Strife has found and destroyed every of our mics and cameras. Pretty suspicious.

Message from general commander Jecht. End of transmission.

...

Cloud had barely taken the time to call Lightning to warn her that he was sent in another mission on Pluto. She had only asked him to say bye to Raine on the phone and for a moment, he had wondered how he could accept this. Both his sisters were mothers now. Real mothers. He was already Raine’s uncle and soon, Serah would have her own baby. Another niece or nephew. He wasn’t ready for this. But he was so glad to see how happy Lightning was since she had her little girl back. He felt a little bad though, for telling her to forget her. If he had tried to look deeper, he could have found her before.

He threw all these thoughts to the back of his mind. He needed to clear his head. He was back on duty. Yuna was moving around the ship, making sure everything was in check. They had launch in space three hours ago. He was spacesick. Homesick too. And he knew he wasn’t ready to face Jenova at new. Of course, they weren’t supposed to meet with the Ancient, but... He knew she wouldn’t let him escape as easily as last time. After all, he was her only mako soldier. Or at least, Shiva was repeating it in his mind. Laughing at all his fears again. He wondered why she wasn’t getting bored from it. And why it still hurt as much whenever she stirred with his thoughts. He
summoned Fenrir to chase her away and managed to fall asleep, in the warm fur of the giant wolf.

Fenrir barely fitted in his room, but Cloud didn’t care. He had waited some time to try calling the beast and he realized he should have called him before. Whenever the spirit was out, Shiva vanished. And somehow, the wolf felt as an old lost friend. They could understand each other. And as he fell asleep, Cloud simply wished that Yuna wouldn’t try to come and see him right now. Because she was going to have such a surprise...

Indeed, she had a surprise, but it wasn’t the one Cloud had expected. As morning came, though it was hard to talk about morning in space, Yuna got up and went to check on every vital functions of the ship. Everything was alright, and she ate alone in the small cafeteria. But as time went by, she started to wonder where Cloud was and what he could be doing. She had asked him to tell her more over Jenova, so that she could be ready for their mission.

As she went to his room, she was surprised to find him still asleep and in the middle of another nightmare, just as the other time, back in the Boston HQ. Contrarily to this time, his whining was slightly more insistent. As if the dream was worse.

“Cloud?” she asked.

He tossed and turned in his bed. She walked up to him and check on his temperature. His forehead was warm, but not boiling. He wasn’t running a fever. But still, something was wrong.

“Cloud, wake up!” she whispered, grabbing him by the shoulders. This time, as he opened his eyes, he didn’t attack her. But she saw fear in his mako blue irises.

In the back of his mind, the pictures were still running. Jenova was still there. And his wrists and legs were still chained to the awful machine that could force his power to rush out from his hands. His palms were burning up. His head was throbbing from the pain. And his heart was beating so fast. Cause he still remembered that time, when he was just a kid, and when his parents were forced to run away from him, seeing the monster they had let him turn into. He remembered how they had died.

“Another nightmare?” she asked him.

“I...”

He felt his tears welling up in his eyes and forced Yuna in a hug, to be sure she wouldn’t see them. He couldn’t have her seeing him weak like that. Not now. He wasn’t sure what he wanted anymore. He needed help. But did he deserve it?

“Cloud, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t think I’m ready to face Jenova.”

“Why? What has she done to you in your past?”

“...”

Yuna was a little stressed out by his way of acting, but she was doing her best staying calm and talking on a reassuring voice. She wanted to know. Correction, she needed to know. She was going to face Jenova too and if she wasn’t ready, having Cloud protecting her or not could be not enough.

“If it can make you sleep better at night and keep your mind clear and help you being ready to face her, tell me, Cloud.”
He reflected over it for a moment, unsure that he could trust her with this. It was so intimate. So painful. It made him weak and vulnerable. And as he held her to him, he realized telling her was a part of getting closer to her. Because he needed to trust her to have one more chance.

“You’ve heard about the mako project?”

She nodded, her hair stroking his neck. His shaking calmed down, thanks to her presence next to him. And they waited in silence, that he talked more, or that he let her go.

“Me and my twin sisters were only babies when they injected us with mako. We were the only ones to survive it amongst the test subjects. Lightning’s blood mutated and absorbed the mako, turning into something entirely new. She’s stronger than most humans and can withstand radiations and most things. But she wasn’t fitting Jenova’s plans anymore.”

“But you were. So she made you her mako soldier...” Yuna interfered. “What does it mean anyway, being a mako soldier?”

“It meant that she could use me as a weapon. To destroy her targets and to kill her enemies.”

Yuna tensed up at that. And Cloud felt even more unsure. How could he add anything and take the risk of seeing her rejecting him? Even Serah had no idea what had happened to their parents. She thought, as everyone else, that they had died in a car accident. But it wasn’t involving a car. And it wasn’t just an accident.

“But you were only a kid when...”

“I was around five years old. She used to put me in a weird machine that could force the mako out of my hands. At the time, I couldn’t defend myself. Or anyone else. At first, she had me killing monsters and aliens. But it was only a practice.”

“I don’t understand.”

Yuna had to cut him off, to get a chance to accept what he was telling her. She already knew he was a killing machine. But only with a gun in his hands. But now, he was saying that he could kill with his bare hands, using mako? What kind of guy was he?

“She can’t control you anymore, now? If she could, things would have gotten uglier on our last mission.”

“That’s right. Now, I’m free of her orders. Because I used my powers against her the last time she tried to have things her way.”

Cloud wasn’t sure if he should tell her more. But the pictures were still there. His heart still felt so weak. And he still wanted to cry. Nothing could ever erase this sin he had done. Even if it wasn’t on purpose. Even if it wasn’t his direct doing. It had still happened. And the results were still destroying his life.

“So your nightmare was about the past you share with her?”

He let out a weak yes. He wasn’t sure anymore if he was happy that they were sent alone on a mission together. This wasn’t how he had wanted to get closer to Yuna. This wasn’t how he had wanted to wake when he had summoned Fenrir the last night. Where was the wolf now? Was there a time limit during which the summoned spirit could come in his world? Had Jenova sensed his presence and tried to mess with his thoughts, to put him in such a sorry state? His throat felt tight and dry.
“Cloud, you seem so scared.”

“I was scared at the time. All tied up in her crazy plans. Ordered to kill my own parents.”

So it was said. Yuna froze with her hands on his chest, ready to push him away. She was holding down her breathe. As if breathing could stop him from talking. But lately, it had seemed that he couldn’t hold back many things over his secrets. Lately, he had needed to confide. And he couldn’t confide over this to any of his sisters. Even if Lightning knew. Because Lightning was old enough at the time to understand and to remember. Serah had no idea. No idea why he wanted to be her father so much, to protect her so much. Nobody could start to understand what it felt, to be the cause of its own eternal pain.

“She... Jenova asked you to do that?!”

“I refused. But I never learned how to control my powers. And as I tried to destroy her, I ended up destroying the whole laboratory. My parents ran for their life. But as I wake up afterwards, in all the crumbles and the devastation, and as I tried to find them...”

Another shiver ran through him. And suddenly, Yuna didn’t have to ask anymore question. She could see if she closed her eyes, the small and frail boy, stumbling and running across the ruined building. Meeting crushed members and people. Calling out for help. Running and falling in the desolation he had caused himself. She could see his shadow, yelling and crying at the same time, as he finally found the adults he had been looking for. The father and the mother who could never be there to protect him anymore. The parents who hadn’t protect him at all in the first place, and who had been killed, trying to run back to their two other kids. He didn’t have to say that there was blood all over the place. He didn’t have to mention any detail, like his father cut in two, or his crushed mother, which he had recognized with her sole hand, hanging out from a pile of destroyed materials.

“It was my fault.”

“Cloud...”

What could she tell him? He had lived thinking he had killed his own parents for his whole life. Of course, he would look cold to others. How could he even smile? How could he ever forget about this tragedy?

“Don’t go pitying me for this Yuna. You should be scared instead.”

“Why? It wasn’t your fault!” she protested.

Cloud wasn’t sure why he had told her all that. Was he trying to test her? Was he trying to make sure if she could remain with him, even after knowing something like that? Of course she would stay! She was stuck with him on a spaceship. She had a mission. A career opening its arms to her. She needed him backing her up, but that didn’t mean that she liked him one bit.

He chuckled bitterly, holding her close. And after some time, as both of them were expecting the other to talk, Yuna accepted the silence. She gently slipped her arms around his back, holding him closer. It felt so unreal to believe anything of what he’d told her. And it was harder to forget how soft and passionate he had been with her the other day. Especially when he was getting to her heart this easily. Though she doubted it was his way of flirting. She knew he needed comfort. Real and friendly comfort.

“Jenova still scares you?”
“Saying no would be a lie.”

“But you still agreed to go on a mission during which you could meet her?”

“Well, though I hate her and I hate seeing her, I’m the best except Sephiroth to guess what must be going on in her wicked mind.”

“That’s why Jecht sent you.” She understood. “But are you going to seek revenge or something?”

“I’ve forget about that long ago. Revenge along bring disaster. And I wouldn’t want to make my sisters suffer anymore than I already did.”

“You’re always thinking about protecting everyone around you...”

“Professional deformation.”

He wanted her to drop the subject now. It had made him feel lighter to confide about it. The nightmare seemed far now. And he wanted it to stay there. As much as he wanted Yuna to remain with him, lying on this bed, simply holding onto him.

“Say Yuna, you won’t start acting different with me because of this, right? I shouldn’t have told anything about it. It’s all in the past and...”

“Well, my cousin is married with an ex-mafia’s baron and my pet dog is an alien coming from space. I wouldn’t say this is something to laugh about, but, what happened to you seems almost normal in these weird times. So I won’t start considering you differently. Although, if you don’t let go of me soon, I could get ideas...”

“What kind of ideas?”

“Cloud.” She said, warningly this time.

She was ready to be his friend. But it couldn’t go any farther. And he was dying to know why she was so strict with herself.

To be continued...
Chapter 29

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part III

Date: 19 027 A.D. December ...

Location: Outer space, army’s 15th airship

Operation: Reaching Pluto in one week, or less if possible, to investigate over Jenova’s doing

Soldiers involved: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed.

Warning: Right now, Yuna’s been kinda cooperative with us and we could use this chance to ask her a few questions..

Message from Cloud’s mind. End of transmission.

... 

“Tell me Yuna. I’ve spill my darkest secret. Can you tell me something in return?”

He felt bad for asking that. But he hadn’t much time before that Yuna go back to the shy and evasive girl she was. Right now, as she was lying in his arms, he knew he could have her melting just enough. Well, he sure hoped he could...

“What do you mean?” She asked, her voice hesitating a little.

“About Christmas’ day. You said... you hadn’t time for love. How can that be?”

Yuna was surprised that he remembered. She was almost shocked in fact that he remembered now. Was this little nightmare just a trick to get her to talk? She couldn’t believe he’d go that far. He would never make up something like that. She decided to trust him. She wanted to trust him since so many weeks already.

“It’s kinda lame. But when I was just a little girl, my father left us. My mother said he had been chosen for something really important. But he never came back. And I saw my mom crying and suffering over his leave, whenever she thought I wasn’t awake or looking. She died waiting for him, not knowing if he was still alive or not.”

Cloud swallowed down the news. Suddenly, he had a slight idea about why Yuna was so shy and clumsy around guys. The first man in her life had betrayed her and her mother. But she had no right to give him the same traits.

“And you think I would be like your father?”

“I don’t know. I’m not looking for my father, I don’t need anything.”

“That’s called denying. Everybody needs something.”

“Cloud...”

“...”

He wanted to talk, to say that he loved her. But he felt her moving back, pushing on his chest with
her hands. She looked into his eyes.

“Don’t...”

“I want real reasons, Yuna. If you don’t like being around me, then, why would you still be here? Why are you holding on to me even now? Alright, we’re stuck on the same ship, but you’re still coming to wake me up from my nightmares. Like when you were just cleaning up my squad quarters.”

She blushed, before to hide in his arms. And then, she laughed. Cloud frowned. Even Lightning was easier to understand.

“Yuna?”

“I’m sorry Cloud. I’ve been acting really weird lately. That night I asked you to stay with me. And then, rushing you out of my apartment as if nothing had happened. Or as if it could erase anything that had happened. The truth is... I’m pretty scared that you’re interested in me. Usually, I never fell in love with the guys that liked me. I never felt this void in my chest when they left. But whenever you’re not around, I feel like I’m missing something. I bet it didn’t exist before that I met you.”

Cloud felt his heart skipping a beat at that. She... She loved him? Had he heard right, or was he still in dreamland?

“So you’re scared... But about what?”

“If I let you fill this void and get to know me more... Won’t the hole in my chest grow if you leave me? I can live like this. As it is now. But if I needed you anymore than I already do... Will I turn out like my mother?”

Suddenly, the role between them had changed. She was the one needing comfort. And Cloud understood. Though she was almost as old as him, her heart was still young. Like a newborn, discovering another side of love. One that mattered above every others.

“I know that I can’t predict the future. But if you don’t give yourself a chance, you’ll never know.”

He gently brushed her hair. Thought that they would have to talk more. To explain things. That she’d ask him words, and promises and solemn vows. All the crap girls asked. But she shifted in his arms. Her face moved from under his chin to be right next to his own face. Her unique eyes got hold of his gaze. And suddenly, as if some holly branch was above their heads, she kissed him. Swiftly, as if she wanted to hide right after being bold for a second. But there was a smile on her lips. And this meant she would give him a chance.

“Don’t move your hands,” she warned him as he closed in.

She wouldn’t let him drive her crazy another time. But she let him kiss her. And damn, was it good. They gently discovered each other, instead of rushing. She learned how to kiss him back properly. And as he wrapped his arms around her and as she gently took his face in her hands, Cloud could have sworn he couldn’t have asked for a better way to wake up. She had him rolling on his back. And as she stopped, looking for air, she blushed, realizing just how turned on she was just from that.

“We’re skipping a lot of steps.” She observed.

“Hey, there aren’t rules in love.”
“Love,” she repeated, looking at him with disbelief.

She had admitted what she felt. But as she sat here, right on his stomach, ready to lie back on him, to taste his lips again, she felt doubts invading her mind. She was giving up on her reason over this. She wanted him too bad. But wasn’t he just using her? Why did she have the impression she should resist him? He wasn’t forcing her. His hands were merely touching her hips.

“What’s wrong, Yuna?”

“It’s this really love?”

Wasn’t she just running after some wild fantasy with him? Were all those emotions in her heart a simple mix of animal instincts?

“Let’s see.”

Cloud raised himself up on his elbows, pushing her on his lap.

“The first time I met you, I’ve found you quite interesting. You’re cute. And pretty. And you’re bright. You care a lot about other people, even people you don’t know anything from. You’re shy, but at the same time, you’re bold when you forget yourself. Though you’re a girl, you’re not angry about ending up covered with oil and grease if it means you can do any engineering work. When you’re around...”

As he saw her blink and realized how much he had said, he felt his confidence failing. Love words were hard to say. They burned his throat. For a moment, his breathe was cut short. She was looking at him with such concentration. Her eyes seemed to pierce right through his soul. And though his heart was beating fast and he felt happy about being this close to her, he was scared too. Wasn’t he going to ruin everything?

“Whenever I try to tell you what I feel, I don’t... know what to say anymore. I...”

He looked away, ashamed of himself.

“I panic inside. I’m not a big talker. I’m better when I act. That’s why...”

“Cloud, it’s okay. Tell me what’s in your heart.”

His throat felt tighter as she said that. Her voice was so sweet. The way she said his name. The fact she was here, with him. Her smile. He didn’t owe that much. How could he ever owe anything like that? Any happiness, after all the evil he had already done? Why couldn’t he take his chance, after trying so hard to get it?

“You can reach me deeper than anyone else can, Yuna. I’m not sure why. If I... if I love you because of that, or if it’s happening because I love you.”

Her smile grew wider. And Cloud felt stronger and weaker at the same time.

“That’s... that’s the cutest thing I was ever told.”

He felt like a kid for an instant... But then she kissed him. And as soon as she parted from him, she asked him:

“Does this mean that we’re together now?”

He frowned. What was she getting at now?
“I mean, as a couple?”

He decided he had enough of being used as a chair and gently brought her to lie on the bed, next to him.

“What, you want this to be official? Then alright, as soon as we’ll be back on earth, how about we go out together, Yuna?”

“But what about the army?”

“Forget it, Yuna. We’ll go one day at a time.”

She accepted. And resumed kissing him. Cloud had hoped things would come to this along the trip, he just hadn’t thought it would have happened so quickly! Or that it would have gone so well. Then, they were brought back to reality by Bunkle’s barking. The young electric Carbuncle needed to be feed. And they should get back to their mission, even if they only wanted to have time together right now. Pluto was slowly growing closer. And with her, Jenova’s shadow seemed to cover any hope. But for once, the light in Cloud’s heart was stronger than any demons he could have from the past. And he was ready to thank Jecht for sending him on this mission. Even if it meant facing or fighting Jenova along the way.

...

Date: 19 027 A.D. December 28, morning

Location: Boston, American States, Cloud’s apartment

Mission: Leaving Aeris Gainsborough with Lightning

Agents involved: Lightning Farron, Squall Leonheart and potential agent Aeris Gainsborough

Warning: Aeris may have manifested her powers lately. Warn Lightning to investigate this discreetly.

Message from G.I. eight. End of transmission

...

Lightning had barely received a message from Squall to warn her of Aeris coming when the doorbell rang. She dropped Raine in Noctis’ arms to answer, to greet her best friend. The brown haired guy standing in the door frame looked almost grumpier than the Squall she was used to. But the scar and blue eyes were all the same, and as he replied to her smile with a weak one, she understood it was really him. Aeris was standing next to him, keeping a good distance, holding a suitcase in her hands.

“Hello, you too. It’s been some time.” Lightning observed.

She was happy to see Squall, but somehow, she had no idea how she should greet Aeris. And the woman was supposed to come to live in her place for a few weeks. It wasn’t what she had in mind when she was thinking about having a vacation with Noctis. Then again, she had never expected she would get back her little girl and be a mother for real.

“It sure has been. I hope I... won’t be too much trouble for you.” Aeris whispered, staying on the doorstep.
“Oh, come in, come in, both of you. Do you want something to drink?”

“I don’t really have time,” Squall whispered. “My rocket is launching in two hours.”

“You should have come before then. We could have talked a little.”

Lightning clearly wanted to comfort him for everything that had gone wrong in his life lately. And he clearly didn’t want to be cuddle again. Aeris had already been motherly enough with him. He was back on his feet, or so he thought. Now, he needed to grieve for Rinoa properly. To prove to himself he was still the same man as before, when Rinoa was still alive. He had to wonder over his feelings for Aeris. To understand them. And most of all, he needed to find a way to control his powers. Right now, as Lightning dragged him inside, saying he had to meet with Noctis, he felt all kind of things that weren’t coming from his own feelings. There was Noctis’ troubled mind. Now, he could ascertain who he was sensing. Aeris was a pale ghost, keeping her emotions to herself, and it saddened him to realize that she didn’t trust him to sense her. Lightning was true to herself for once, for some unknown reason, under her few doubts, she was beaming with joy. And soon, as he stepped in the living room and saw the baby girl who was walking around the living room with Noctis’ help, he understood.

“Before that you go out on your mission, I wanted you to meet Raine.”

He flinched at the name. The baby looked at him. Giggled. He looked at Lightning, to chase away the sudden pride he was feeling. Her best friend had named her child in honor of his passed mother. His heart was all moved just for this.

“I was wondering if you would accept to be her godfather, Squall. What do you say?”

Noctis looked as surprised as him, so Squall understood this had just come to her mind. But still, the intention was good and really touching.

“I…”

“You don’t have to make a decision right now. Just think over it. You’ll tell me when you’ll get back from your mission.”

He nodded with a smile. Exchanged a brief gaze with Aeris, as she walked in the living room. The Cetra looked the other way and Lightning noticed the uneasiness between them. But at this moment, Raine tripped and fell on her butt, which made them laugh gently.

“She’s really cute! You hadn’t told me you had a little girl!” Aeris interfere, kneeling down to look at the baby child.

“Well…”

Lightning hesitated to tell her it was a surprise for her too. She didn’t want to repeat her harsh story one more time.

“Raine is the greatest pride and joy of my master!” Odin exclaimed, as chivalrously as he used to be.

“Odin?”

“Lady Aeris? You’ve grown to such a fine lady!”

“Wait a minute, you two know each other?” Noctis asked.
He hadn’t been presented yet and he was starting to feel pretty out of place. The Black Faction had some nerve, forcing them to take this Cetra with them for an unknown amount of time.

“We met on another planet, a long time ago.”

“She was a very young girl back then. And the world used normal phones and horse, as they should.”

Squall frowned and Lightning turned her index finger in a circle next to her head, meaning the guy was a little crazy.

“Well, Aeris will be staying with us for sometime Odin. It’s nice to know you’re already acquainted.”

“How wonderful! How about I showed her around the place, master?”

Slightly surprised, Lightning agreed, wanting to talk with Squall before that he left. Noctis took Raine with him, exchanging a brief nod with the brown-haired spy.

“Okay. Tell me who you are and what you’ve done to my friend Lightning?”

“Don’t be silly. You haven’t stepped into another dimension. Things are just… kinda wild here. I’m back with Noctis, I got myself a summoned spirit who remains in our world all the time, and thanks to Odin, I’ve gotten back my little girl. She wasn’t dead. The Feds had stolen her from me.”

“Those bastards…”

“Don’t waste your anger on them. They’ll pay in time. And we hurt a good batch of them when we went to get her back. I’m just glad that she’s alright.”

Squall nodded. He had no idea what he should tell her. Congratulations didn’t feel strong enough, and all the other words coming to his mind were too cheesy for him to say.

“Seems a lot happened to you.”

“Not much more than all you had to face on your side. Seriously, Squall, how are you doing?”

“Fine,” he replied.

His voice remained strong this time, and Lightning barely spotted a glimpse of sadness in his cold eyes.

“With what happened to Rinoa…” she started.

“It’s okay. I’m getting over it. Maybe a little faster than I’d wanted to.”

She raised one brow and he looked away, biting his lower lip.

“Let’s just say that Aeris and me got a little too close. She’s glad to see me going away right now. Said we both needed to think on our side.”

“Oh… I see. Well, I’ll try to have a woman talk with her on that.”

“Don’t get me wrong on this, Lightning. I’m not asking for your help. I made a mistake and I’ll correct it myself.”
“I hope that you do. If you really made a mistake. Girls get mad over small things sometimes.”

“Don’t play my sister on this, okay? I’m really responsible and it ain’t some small stupid matters.”

“Okay. I won’t pry, this ain’t my business. But don’t you go mourning over this while you’re alone out there. Whatever you did, I know you had good intentions.”

“Well, as they say, the road to hell is paved with good intentions, huh? I really have to get going.”

“You can’t leave after saying stuff like that!”

“Don’t worry about me, Light. You said it yourself, I gotta give you an answer over the godfather question when I’ll be back. And even if I mourn on the road, you know I can get through anything.”

“Lying is a bad thing, Squall Leonheart.”

“Talking from experience, Light?”

“Oh, alright then, what are you waiting to leave if you take it like that!”

He walked away before that she really get mad and Lightning realized that somehow, she had managed to have him relaxing a bit. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have started teasing her like that. This eased her heart over his case. All hope wasn’t lost for Squall. But still, what he had mentioned was on her mind now. What could have happened to have a woman as goodhearted as Aeris backing away from Squall? Lightning knew he was a real gentleman. But maybe the loss of Rinoa had him crossing the lines? Sometimes, losing someone really close could change a person. And even if as her friend, he hadn’t changed, he could be a different man. It was a side of him she had never known. And she didn’t expect to get to know it either. There was already one man in her life and he was giving her enough headaches and heartaches as things stand, even if all of it brought all the happiness she could have asked for in her life.

“And this, as you must have understood already, is the living room! This conclude the visit of Lady Lightning’s apartment.” Odin declared with his bright voice.

Aeris was smiling, until that she realized that...

“Squall has already leaved?”

“He had to catch his rocket.” Lightning retorted.

She noted to herself that the Cetra’s voice had trembled as she asked her question. Her bodyguard was away. And somehow, even if she hadn’t meant to, she was scared about this absence. She had grown really attached to him. And if she was true to her heart, he’d never scared her. She wanted him to stay away so he wouldn’t see anymore of her memories. So that he wouldn’t know everything that had happened to her in her life. But staying away only meant keeping his distance. Now that he was gone, she felt lost. She barely knew Lightning. Her boyfriend, Noctis, reminded her of a man she had seen killed years ago.

As she wondered, she remembered Titan. After leaving her home, she had been brought to Titan. With the terrorists. She closed her mind to the memories, to hear what Lightning was telling her. Her throat was tight. Squall was gone. And she already missed him so much, it was hard to tolerate it. What a fool she had been!

…
Your mission will be to infiltrate the Antlion. Some parts of this spaceships are still in construction, but most of it is complete and we have reason to believe that people are kept hostage or simply against their will in there. Spot the prisoner, don’t get caught and bring us back the more intel possible.

Squall was shocked by his mission. His reputation was big enough to earn him something this difficult to do on his own. He was supposed to do this alone? Being alone wasn’t the main problem about this; the worst was the length of this operation. He had received the spaceship plans to memorize them. Now, he was sitting in his own spaceship, flying out in space, all the way to the construction base where the Antlion was stationed. His vessel was hidden with the latest reflection technology. He was the only one onboard. Which meant that nobody would save him if something went awry. And for some reason, he had the feeling this mission was going to turn out the wrong way…

…

Time: Unknown

Location: Antlion’s whereabouts

Mission: Infiltrating the ship and getting the more intel possible without being caught.

Agent: Squall Leonheart a.k.a Leon

Warning: Seifer Almasy has been spotted in the region, if the two men should meet, things could get hairy.

Message from G.I. seven. End of transmission

…

Squall had traveled for three days before to reach the Antlion construction’ base. He had stationed his ship next to it and had entered by the backdoor, or well, the security exit. As the artificial gravity dragged him to the floor, he swiftly removed his astro suit. He was wearing a grey overall –the maintenance members of the ship were all supposed to wear it and it was the best cover he could have and a single gun was waiting on his hip. His gunblade was stuffed in another of his capsule. It made it pretty easier to have a whole arsenal around without having other people seeing it.

He wandered around the place, a small case in his hands –the case being supposed to hold his tools as a maintenance member of the crew-. He met a few people, even a few alien, but everybody was busy ordering people and being ordered around. He got through those few meetings, his ears wide open for any hints on where the hostages were kept. His briefing mentioned that the persons held prisoners here would surely be used as fuel for the ship. And Squall had decided he would help them if he could, instead of just passing by. He had started questioning his orders and mission since the day Rinoa died. Obeying in bringing Aeris to this ball should be his last mistake. He had to wonder over what his boss asked from him. And he had to understand what the Black Faction wanted. When he had entered this job, his first objective was to be a mercenary, more or less. He hoped that he could help some people, if he couldn’t help himself.

But now, the Faction seemed to scheme just like the Feds were used to. And he started to believe that they would really consider selling Aeris to the best buyer. And he couldn’t have that. She wasn’t a thing. Seeing her treated like that reminded him of the way Ellone had been chased around before to vanish from his life. As every woman who had abandoned him, she hadn’t done it
on purpose. And still, the pain lingered today, as strong as the first day he had realized that she was
gone. He tried to chase the thought away, but was surprised when he saw Ellone’s face from
behind some glass door. She was sitting on an operation table, talking with some scientist. He froze
on place, before to find something he pretended to fix with some tool, to be able to stay here and
listen up. The voices barely reached him, but he could read the feelings of the people behind the
glass doors. Ellone was nervous. And scared. Though her face didn’t show it.

He tried to expand his powers, to hear what they were saying. And to his own surprise, it worked.

“We’ll try doing the first ceremony today, in two hours.” An old woman said.

The man talking to her nodded and exchanged a brief look with Ellone.

“Do you feel up for it, sorceress?”

“Don’t call me that.” She retorted. “I won’t do it!” she added, crossing her arms in front of her
chest.

“Oh, you certainly will.”

Squall flinched. That was Seifer voice. That bastard. He was grinning at Ellone, who had jumped
as he spoke.

“Seifer, don’t tell me you’re involved in… in any of this?!”

“I’m not. I’m just supervising everything.”

His voice was so cocky, Squall had to bit his tongue to retain his desire of jumping at his throat.
Had that jerk been around Rinoa in her last moment? Had he understood her plan and abandoned
her to die? Had he comforted her somehow, when Squall had been denied too? The thoughts hurt.
He had tried to forget Seifer’s involvement in all of this. And now, he had no choice but to admit,
he was dying to know.

But as some scientists move, he realized he had lingered here for too long. He had to find the
prisoners and to identify some of them. To find a way to get them out if it was possible. As he
turned the corner of another corridor, he started to believe he had gotten lost. He wasn’t sure on
which floor he was. But then, he realized his extra sensibility was still deployed and he could hear
something.

“Doodle, doodle, come and get some bread and butter;”

There was a child voice singing. The song sounded creepy and old. Any people that he met
around didn’t seem to hear it, or at least, they forced themselves pretending that they couldn’t hear
a thing. Somehow, Squall felt as if he already knew that song and followed the singer’s voice,
listening carefully to the words, for maybe they hold a secret meaning.

“Doodle, doodle, come and get a barrel of sugar.”

This sounded childish alright. But then, the next sentences had him understanding what this was
all about.
“Doodlebug, doodlebug, come up and get a grain of corn. 
Your house is burning up.”

So this was as creepy as he had excepted…

“Doodlebug, doodlebug, 
Come out of your hole; 
Your house is on fire, 
And your children will burn.”

The voice sounded really small and frail, but there was a laugh in it, which made it sound even creepier. If the kid knew that he was imprisoned here to be turned into fuel, he had every reason to sing something like that. But still… Squall remembered the orphanage, back when he was a child. There had been child songs, but never any like this one.

“Doodlebug, doodlebug, come out of your house; 
It's burning up with your wife and all your children, 
Except Mary—she's under the dishpan.”

Was that a secret code? Ellone was playing a part in the sacrificial ceremony. Or so, he thought he had understood that much. He wanted to run in direction of the song now. He could hear it clearer with every steps that he took. The thoughts and feelings are it were all blurry, but fear and fright were the strongest among them.

“Doodlebug, doodlebug, 
Come out of your hole; 
If you don't, 
I'll beat you black as a mole.”

He heard doors cracking opened and had to stop his running, since robots were rolling down the corridors. He had really started running. He was getting all worked up over this crazy song. He tried to remember how he had gotten here. He had taken lots of stairs. Turned many times. He had no idea where he was anymore. But he located a few things around. He was on the escape pods floor. This could come in handy if something turned bad. He checked the few control panels around. Guado technology. He would get through their codes easily. But he needed to find the prisoners.

“Doodle, doodle, doodle, 
Your mother and grand-daddy are dead.”

Squall sighed. Where was this song coming from?

He turned around. The robots were going somewhere afar. They were a recent trend of machines. Pretty tough to destroy, unless you knew their weak spot. And Squall knew it, of course. Heck, he seemed to know everything but the right things for his own personal life! He had a gift with machinery. He typed on buttons without knowing what he was doing, and it always worked. Lightning was pretty jealous of him. With codes, she managed all right, but she had no gift. Except the mutated mako in her veins, which made her almost invincible.
Squall sighed again. The song was over. How was he supposed to find the prisoners now?

“Hey, you! Where have you been?!” A soldier dressed in blue asked him.

“Huh…”

“Come on, already, we need you for the ceremony!” the guy added, grabbing his arm and dragging him in the elevator’s direction.

Squall would have protested normally, but he realized he had been mistaken for someone else. And this could turn to his advantage. If not, he would be captured, or something, but he hadn’t any other leads. A moment later, they stopped on floor eight, where a soldier dressed in a red armor was waiting, next to a tall and fancy door.

“Ah thank god, Wedge, you’ve finally found him!”

“Of course, Biggs! I’ll never fail you.”

“Somehow, I doubt that, but nevertheless. Come on, boss. The ceremony couldn’t start without you!”

As they pushed him into the room behind the grand door, Squall suddenly wondered if he hadn’t been discovered and if he wasn’t going to be used as a sacrifice. He heard Biggs doubting behind him.

“You’re sure it’s really the good guy? Something about him looks different.”

“Well, the scar is the same, ain’t it?”

So he had been mistaken for Seifer? That was grand! Fortunately, Seifer wasn’t the one to be used as fuel. Unless the Feds were really mad at him. Unless this was all a trap and that Squall wasn’t really getting paranoid. He braced himself. Looked around him. And what he saw was so incredible and terrible, he thought about turning to god for the second time in his life.

To be continued.
Chapter 30

Episode 3 – White maiden –Part IV

Time: Unknown

Location: Antlion’s ship

Mission: Infiltrating the ship and getting the more intel possible without being caught.

Agent: Squall Leonheart a.k.a Leon

Warning: Something’s off with our agent. Something happened. We don’t know where he is anymore. And most of all, we don’t know if he’ll obey orders.

Message from G.I. eight. End of transmission

... 

Squall had stepped into the sacrificial room. What his eyes were met with shocked him beyond words. He thought about turning to god, but he knew this wouldn’t work fast enough. Five rows of hostages were kept chained at the bottom of the room. He could see them through the transparent glass of the floor. His stomach churned. No distinctions between the prisoners. Old, young, male of female. Child and women and men. The lines were running under the whole room. Some of them were crying. They were covered with dirt and their tears had left a clear mark on their cheeks, through the soaked blood and dirt. There were two woman waiting in the room. Ellone was sitting in a mechanical chair, her ankles, wrists and legs all chained to it. Wire were planted right into her flesh, connecting her to the largest computer Squall had ever seen.

But he was more shocked by the woman standing in front of the said computer. He barely managed to look at Ellone as he recognized the witch. Feds’ queen, since Jenova was on the loose and unaccepted as a human leader. Her body could have been naked, with the little clothe she was wearing, it wouldn’t have made much difference. Her skin was perfect, just as her makeup. One would have said she was pretty. It wouldn’t have been a lie. But she was pretty as a too long winter, cold, efficient and ruthless.

“Ultimacia…” he muttered under his breath.

He knew the witch. She had been the second wife of his stupid father. The one Laguna had divorced with the fastest, for some reason. Squall could easily understand why. She was Rinoa’s arch-enemy since years. Because Rinoa had real magic in her veins and could have matched the sorceress’ powers one day. But unfortunately, she was dead. So Ultimacia was using whatever she got left as a witch. Like Ellone. Poor Ellone who seemed in such pained, tied to this cold chair, her powers drained by the scientist’s doing.

“Wow, I was expecting Seifer, but look at who I have!” Ultimacia laughed. “You should do fine, Squall. To start our sacrifice.”

“This ain’t why I came here.”

“Whatever your reasons could have been… they’re of little consequence to me. You’re stuck. If you obey me, those innocents below us will die. If you don’t, then it will be you and Ellone who’ll perish. And even if you try to be a hero by dying, Seifer will come and get the job done. And who
will oppose him, then, my boy?”

Squall slowly and carefully lowered his right hand to his belt. Wrapping it around his gun, which was transparent as long as it stayed where it belonged.

“What if I had another choice?”

The wide and complex machinery behind Ultimcia was shining under the cold lights from the ceiling and the walls. The piece of metal were connecting this floor and the one underneath it, where the prisoners were held captive. The five lines were disappearing into the machinery. Where their life would be turned into fuel. And Squall felt his heart beating fast.

“Be my guest, if you think you can harm me in any way! But you’ll regret it…”

And Squall believed her. But he still had to try. So he raised his gun. And fired, aiming for that spot right between Ultimcia’s eyes. Wishing, praying to see blood coming out from her head as her body would collapse. But the bullet went right through her. Ricocheted on the metal behind her and into the room until that it shattered the glass’ floor. Beneath his feet, he heard the yells of pain of those who got hurt by the shards showering over their heads. Heard a kid singing a song over a doodlebug.

*I’m going mad*, he thought. *Truly mad.*

Ultimcia was smiling wickedly. And he hated her with all his being. But Squall knew now wasn’t the time to linger in thoughts and feelings. And though the floor beneath his feet was reduced to some kind of gate connecting the door to the other side of the room, he started to run. Took his gunblade out from its capsule and unsheathed the blade. Ultimcia started to use her magic. But her casting took too long. The agent was on her before that she could finish her spell. She felt his own magic working on her. Freezing her in time, with a stop materia. And this time, she couldn’t disappear as he slashed through her. He thought this was too easy. But as always, when he was sent alone on a mission, it seemed to turn out easy. Nobody beside him could get hurt.

He looked beneath his feet as Ultimcia fell among the scattered prisoners. The blood on the floor below wasn’t only coming from the sorceress’ wound. And as always, he stood, unscathed. What could reach him, when he was so empty inside? He made up his mind. He was going to follow his orders this time. He wasn’t going to let one single hostage behind. Then, his bosses would know who those people were. He wouldn’t run away to save his own life. If he could save anyone, it had to be someone else than him first.

First, he got the people out from the machine. Then, he untied Ellone from her torture chair. At this point, every kind of alarms was flashing from every console. But Squall still took the time to wreck the evil machine supposed to turn human flesh and life into fuel. He opened the door from the room and rushed the people out, so that they’d run to the first escape pods they could find. If Biggs or Wedge tried to stop them, he couldn’t tell. There were so many people running around at this point, he couldn’t tell friends from foes. As the room emptied itself from the prisoners, he turned his back on it, ready to run away himself. He wasn’t sure if he should try to get to his ship in all this confusion. Maybe was he better grabbing an escape pod himself and...

“Squall!”

“Ellone, you’re still here? What are you waiting for? Get out of here!” he warned her.

“No, Squall, behind you!”
He jolted around, but it was too late. Ultimcia was still alive. Barely, but still enough to cast one last spell. Now that nobody else was stepping on her or throwing shattered glasses pieces at her, she could concentrate. And Squall received the thunder magic head on. As a prey bird, the bolts clawed into him. But for some reason, the shock didn’t create any pain in his body. Maybe because he was already suffering enough from the inside.

For some reason, the thunder bird was welcomed in his heart. And the creature felt it. Was it really a curse coming from the witch? Squall wondered, taking the shot without even a frown. Recognizing the creature, he whispered its name. “Quezacoltz.” He turned back to Ellone. Her face was tainted with surprise.

“Let’s get out of here, El,” he told her.

And the smile on his face reassured her. She hadn’t been able to understand anything lately. But now Squall was here. And she knew she could trust him in any situation.

...

Time: passing by too fast

Location: army’s ship

Mission: Finding Jenova’s hideout on Pluto and discovering her works on the cold planet.

Soldiers: colonel Cloud Strife, lieutenant Yuna Albhed and her ET dog, Bunkle

Warning: The mission will start soon. And it seems that the colonel guy isn’t focusing on the mission at hand.

Message from ET “carbuncle, not dog, mind you!”, Bunkle. End of transmission

...

As they reached Pluto, Cloud had a lot of things on his mind. The last one was dealing with Jenova. And even beyond that, there was the idea of going out in the cold Pluto to make his soldier’s duty. The most important thing on his mind was to be with Yuna. And to get all soft and lovey-dovey with her. But though Yuna really liked their make out sessions and the fact they were talking together, she was getting slightly nervous from that sudden change. It seemed like too much at the same time. And it was too good for her, really. She knew that something was bound to happen. Something was going to turn wrong along the way, she knew it. They were going to fight against Jenova. And instead of warning her, Cloud seemed more focused on tickling her or helping her fix some part of the spaceship. But they had to get back on their mission and fast. As she got up that morning, she felt the ship landing. The flight had been without a single problem. Everything had been ruled by the automatic pilot. While she was off in dreamland with her new boyfriend. It felt so unreal. As she wake up, she realized she was lying in his arms. Both of them were still fully dressed, since she had asked Cloud that he gave her time. There was a limit about how much she wanted to skip steps. But sleeping with him was so comforting. And he was so cute as he yawned and blinked at her, not entirely sure that this couple thing was real.

His arms were wrapped tightly around her. He was surely getting cramps, but he didn’t care. At least, he never told her that he mind. And she liked to be like this, as close to him as possible. His chest was warm. And his sleepy eyes smiled at her as he met her loving gaze. She tried not to snuggle against his chest like the two other mornings.
“Hi, Cloud.” She whispered.

She couldn’t bring herself to tell him they had landed and that he had to prepare for their mission. It wasn’t her place to say that anyway, he was the soldier, and she was just the engineer who had been stuck in the army because Jecht thought he could use her skills.

“Hi, Yuna.” He whispered back, before to kiss her ear.

For a soldier, he was quite softer than she’d expected. She supposed he was like that for all the love he had lacked in his younger age... Just thinking about it made her so sad for him. She almost thought that she had to give him everything she could, so that it could compensate with all the hurt he had been through his life. But Cloud had clearly told her that the last thing he wanted from her was pity. So instead of compassion, she had accepted to love him.

But she was scared that loving him at all time would destroy her at some point. They were on enemy territory. After holding her for the last few days, Cloud’s hands would take up his gun once more. And she was sure that he would kill to protect her. And it still terrified her.

“Cloud, couldn’t we go back to formal, at least for today? We just landed on Pluto.”

Her eyes were looking anywhere, but at him, and he felt her trying to move away.

It had been easy to get into her arms. But would it be as easy to stay there, with her changing confidence?

“Don’t go thinking I’ll do mistakes because we’re in love. I’m still the same soldier I was the last time we came here.”

She knew that. And it scared her the most. There was violence within him. Within herself. Violence that expressed itself rarely. It was a dark part of his being. One good part that had helped her getting interested in him at first, and interested in his mysterious past. The cold soldier, unbeatable and unmoved. Now she knew the child and the man hiding behind the mask. And she was scared that they could both disappear out there on the battlefield, in the name of duty.

Would they come back afterwards? Would she ever be able to feel entirely good with him, even if she knew that he was a killer? How could she tell him what she was fearing, when she felt so stupid and childish to feel like this?

“Cloud, I... I don’t want you to make anything rash out there. Treat me as a soldier, alright? Don’t get soft on me if I panic or...”

“Easy there, Yuna, don’t go panicking already, okay? I’ve always... tried to be impartial with every of my soldiers. You especially, even if you’re a rookie. I’ll give you orders out there, don’t go thinking that’s gonna change. I won’t mean them to hurt your feelings. But I may not have time to explain them. If I tell you to do something, don’t start arguing up with me.”

“Of course not!”

He chuckled at her reaction as she got up and started pacing across the room, folding her arms and he sat up on the bed.

“Yuna, please... I’m not sure what you’re meaning, but this mission...”

“How can we go in a mission like this, huh, Cloud?! If the enemy realized we’re together, they could use it against us! And if something happened to me, must I fear that you rush to my aid, even
if it mean that you’ll get hurt yourself and that we ruin the mission? I don’t want anything to
happen to you. And I know I still have a lot of training to do...”

He sighed.

“I’d guessed things would be difficult with all this, but... It doesn’t have to be. Yuna, we’re a team,
alright? If you want me to say that as soon as the mission began, you can forget that I love you if it
can help you, I’ll say it.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She protested.

Cloud frowned. He was getting sick of all Yuna’s questions. Why did it have to be so complicated
with her? Why did woman always made things so complicated anyway?

“Even if we weren’t together, I would protect you with my life, Yun’. You’re one of my men. I
never leave a man or a woman behind. So don’t go telling me how to do my job, lieutenant.
Instead, mind on your part of the bargain and be serious with your job. That’s the best way you
may help me here.”

Yuna wasn’t sure if she liked the way he called her lieutenant. It felt different than the way he said
her name. Much harsher. And colder. As the soldier she used to know before that she got closer to
his heart.

“But...”

“Come on Yuna, I don’t wanna get mad at you or order you to stop arguing. So just help me here.
It isn’t any easier for me, to be your boss or to think we’re going to spy on Jenova. There’s every
chance that she spot my presence head on, with the mako in my blood. And putting you in harm’s
way is the last thing I want to do. But we got orders. And since I’m still a soldier and since I don’t
have anything else to do and since this expedition could help other people beside us, I’ll ask you to
forget about my wellbeing from now on. I’ll take care of myself. Just as you make sure you take
care of yourself.”

Yuna understood now what it meant for Cloud, to be a soldier. He had been one since he was just a
teen. And if he killed people, it was to save others first. Because some people couldn’t protect
themselves against everything. Because protecting was his obsession. And because he loved her, he
wouldn’t let her protect him before that he had no choice but to let her. It was his who had to
protect first. He was her colonel. He was a man and was made stronger than her. But at the same
time, she couldn’t help but feel betrayed. He couldn’t trust her back to her? Couldn’t trust that she
could help him out there?

“Alright,” she sighed. “I’ll follow your orders, sir, and I’ll stop to object. I just wanted to tell you
my worries over the matter.”

Cloud winced at the “sir”. She was giving him a taste of his own medicine. And after getting so
close to her, to be put back in his soldier place like this... It almost hurt.

“Yuna...”

“If we don’t stay formal out there, they’ll know what’s on and they’ll use it against us. I can’t have
this happening Cloud. So, I’ll say “sir, yes sir!” if I want to!”

“Alright then. But as soon as this mission is over...!”

“I had told you we shouldn’t have let this happen to us, Cloud!”
“So you’re taking back everything you said, Yuna?”

“No!”

“Then it’s just a play, right? To keep up appearances?”

He looked so confused. He wanted to know if she was mad or not. He was scared that she resented him again. How could he give her the right orders when he thought she hated him?

“Of course, it’s a play. Cloud, I don’t want things to turn wrong. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“But I ain’t...”

“You’re important to me, moron!”

How he hadn’t been able to understand that already was beyond her. She seemed ready to punch him and for an instant, he saw his twin in her. Only Lightning could say things like that and call him a moron. But he sure was stupid to think he had no importance in Yuna’s eyes. Of course, she would be worried. Just like Serah, and Claire. But he was so used to toss around his own wellbeing to look after others.

“Yuna... Oh Yuna, don’t worry like that. I’ll be alright. I got you with me, and I have to get back home to my sisters after this. I’m not just a soldier.”

“Don’t go saying you ain’t important or worth me worrying then!”

*How did she know I was going to say that?* He wondered.

“Alright, Yuna.” He sighed.

“If it’s all cleared up now, what d’you say we got back to our mission?”

She was sick of fighting with him.

They agreed and went to change. After another little fight, they agreed to bring Bunkle with them. If left alone in the ship, who’d know what the dog like alien would do to the spaceship? They needed the thing to get back home once the mission would be over!

Dressed with protective gears and the white overall made to resist every kind of temperature, they headed out in the storm of Pluto’s frozen land. The wind was blowing strongly on them and Yuna almost let go of her gun. Fortunately, the machine gun was tied to her, as Cloud has asked her to do.

There were even a few materias in her weapon, to help her along the way. She wasn’t trained for materia’s manipulation, but Cloud had said she didn’t need any training for it. And his explanations over the handling were clear enough to believe his confidence was not misplaced. But as they started walking, heading for the mako volcano where Jenova’s activities had last been spotted, she wondered.

They had a radar and they were both equipped with massive guns and smaller handguns. They had a few provisions in case they got stuck on the planet for some time. Cloud had a dozen materias in his arsenal and they had flashlights and a set of spare clothes. Though she had frowned, her colonel had insisted. They never knew what could happen out there and couldn’t pretend that everything was going to right because they wanted it that way. But still, was he hiding her some wicked plan
for after the mission completion?

Yuna had to be wrong. How could Cloud have any plan except running back to their spaceship and making sure to fly off this freezing planet once Jenova’s doing was spied and all cleared up for them to make a report to their bosses?

*I hate reckon missions*, she thought.

But Cloud gave her a sly smile, as he looked over his shoulder.

“Don’t fall behind Yuna. Bunkle is already running up ahead.”

The dog was running in the damp snow without any trouble. It reminded her of Nanaki and she smiled too. The electric Carbuncle was so charged with electricity, he couldn’t feel cold right now. She had still brought something to cover him if he seemed hurt or cold at some point. Extra care was the master word here. And though she was happy to be walking beside Cloud, instead of being with some bossy soldier, she had a bad feeling. What if something still happened to one of them? There were only two of them here. No back up could arrive before weeks.

*Why are you so stuck up on the idea that something could happen, huh?*, she wondered to herself.

But after walking for hours, her joints aching from falling down and getting back up, her boots diving deep into the damp snow and her feet burning under the leather, she spotted their target. The base on the mako volcano had turned into a small building covered with metal sheets, clawing onto the mountain as a baby koala to its mother. Or well, a not too cute baby koala. The construction was about ten meters tall, with red spotlights running around the whole ground circling it, to spot any intruder passing by. Guard dogs and ice golems were circulating around the bridge, looking around and making sure no one was getting close. Or inside. Yuna gulped down.

“We’re supposed to get in there unnoticed?” she asked.

Her voice was creaky from her thirst for water and she realized it sounded very frail in the large and cold wastelands where they stood. Cloud looked back at her.

“They never said it was going to be easy, Yuna. But we’ll do it. You’ll see. I still have a few tricks up my sleeve that you don’t know about.”

She sure wished those tricks would be helpful to get them inside and outside of this terrible building where Jenova was messing around with mako and god knew what.

...

Time: 19 027 A.D. 31th December

Location: Lightning’s apartment

Mission: pending

Agent: Noctis Lucis Caelum aka Raven, Lightning Farron and potential future agent Aeris Gainsborough

Warning: the cetra seems unstable somehow.

Message from G.I. ten. End of transmission

...
After the first few days of uneasiness, Aeris and Lightning had managed to become friends. The fact Raine was there helped a great deal. The child made her mother really softer than she used to be and since Squall had warned her that something he wasn’t too proud of had happened between him and the Cetra, Lightning knew what subjects she should evade with the young woman and which subject to bring up. They talked mostly of kids, while Noctis and Aeris exchanged a little over Titan. It seemed that both of them came from there. And even if his home world was mostly banned from conversation at normal time, Noctis seemed ready to forget the bad things from the past to remember the good ones.

Odin would play video games or chess with Noctis the rest of the time. Aeris played a lot with Raine and she cooked with Lightning almost every day. She even taught a few recipes and many ways to make her food tastier. Despite her life spent running all over space from her pursuers, the Cetra was a real housewife miracle! She knew how to handle babies—it seemed like a natural gift—she was an awesome cook and she often woke up the couple by running the vacuum around the place. In fact, her cleaning up were like a way to get all her frustrations off her mind without hurting anyone.

Lightning let her do it, because it wasn’t doing much harm. But when Aeris started dusting off the living room for the fourth time that day, the agent decided it was enough. There wasn’t any dirt left and Noctis had went out to check a few things on his own. Lightning had first wanted to object and go with him, but he was a grown-up man and even if he loved her with all his heart, he couldn’t accept to remain with her holding his hand and helping him with everything. He had to prove himself he was still up to live his life normally. And he wanted to verify a few things, with his bank accounts and all. He had made up his mind the very morning, seeing Lightning rocking Raine in her arms gently.

Because he was now a father, and because the woman he loved was the mother of his only daughter, he had realized he needed to move on the two lost years of his life. And to put the said life back on the right track. He couldn’t keep on squatting Cloud’s apartment. He had a family now, and seeing how Lightning was happy with her little girl, he almost wanted a bigger family already. Though he was still scared. And though they needed to have a real discussion over the matters at hand. Like Storm. And the fact they should really think to move in a new apartment together, Lightning and him. And Noctis had something else on his mind. Something a little more stressing than the rest. But he thought that after all this time, if he waited anymore to make his move, he would regret it. His mother would have been ashamed of his way of acting. He had gotten everything at the wrong time.

He and Lightning were still just boyfriend and girlfriend. And it wasn’t enough. Not when he knew that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with that woman. Not when he was thinking of finding another job, more stable and way less dangerous. So Noctis had gone out, Odin following him as a shadow. The summoned spirit knew of the young man’s plan and had suggested to help him. He said and here the writer is quoting: that his romantic and chivalrous senses could come in handy with the matter at hand.

So Lightning found herself alone with Aeris and Raine. And Aeris, who talked over a lot, but never the real thing was still dusting the living room, while Raine was giggling, playing with the stuffed blue bear her father bought for her.

“There ain’t anything to dust off anymore, Aeris,” Lightning stated calmly.

She hated to see another woman like that. All crossed and lost, like her mother used to be. It brought back a lot of bad memories. And it reminded her of Cloud and Jenova. And the last thing she wanted to think over right now was to think about her twin brother and that dreadful woman
who had used him when he was still just a child. Now, when his brother was surely stepping on Pluto, running after Jenova for the army’s business. He hadn’t told her anything about his mission. He rarely did. But she had managed to get to know what was going on. It was her duty, as a sister. Or so she thought.

Aeris sighed.

“I must be getting on your nerves…” the Cetra thought out loud. “Sorry for…”

“Don’t apologize. Of course you’re getting on my nerves, but I know there’s a reason behind your behaviour. We’re just between woman, Aeris, so why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”

“Nothing is on…”

“There’s no denying it, your hands are shaking while you cook and sometimes, you get yourself hurt because your mind’s somewhere else. You always try to keep yourself busy as if you’re scared to stop and have time to think. You know, Squall often does that when he’s worried.”

Aeris had half a smile at the mention of Squall. And she accepted to give up her denying, put back her broom and duster in their place and went to sit on the couch. Lightning sat down on the floor, next to her daughter, to look after her.

“It’s… hard to say, even if it has happened to me a long time ago.”

“Squall is really worried about you. For what happened to you in the past and for what he did. Though he gave me no detail, I know he’s mad at himself.”

“He’s not to blame. The sole problem here is with me. Have you… heard about what Ancient’s powers really are?”

“Not really. Noctis must know more that I do on the question. All I heard from you was that you were a fugitive and that we were to rescue you because you could help the faction.”

“Until now, I never had other value than the help and knowledge I could bring to other’s organization. The Feds have used me for a long time, before that I managed to escape them. I’m one of the last Ancient, as Jenova. But unlike her, I haven’t been corrupted and the memories of the various planets and the origins of the world and magic are still clearly printed in my mind. I don’t know much about it myself, but other people, sensitive people, can catch glimpse of the knowledge inside my brain. Since he was exposed to radiations while rescuing me, Squall became really sensitive to spiritual energy.”

“…!”

Lightning didn’t know what to say to that. Squall hadn’t warned her about this. None of the doctors had said anything about any change in him. But then again, Squall had always been more sensitive and sensible than most men she knew. So it wasn’t a complete surprise. But still, spiritual energy? It was her first time hearing about it. She could believe something like that existed after everything she had been through in her life recently. Like the summoning of Odin and the song sung by Storm. But still, that Squall became receptive to it?

“For the knowledge to pass on to someone else, I have to be touched directly, skin to skin by the other person. At first, it only working when Squall touched me when I was unconscious or asleep. He really freaked out as it happened the first time and since it was an accident, I didn’t get really mad at him. But over the day, as he start to know me better and as I helped him getting through Rinoa’s death, he’s started to see the knowledge, intertwined with some of my own memories,
more and more. Even when I was awake. And the last glimpse he got was of something I really wished he’d never know about me.”

Lightning held back her breath as she saw Aeris’ eyes darken. She had seen that look on many faces before. It didn’t always mean the same thing, but it never meant good.

“I don’t… When I was kept captive by the Feds, Jenova let Sephiroth be my main guard. And he used me in every way he could.” Aeris whispered, with a trembling voice.

Lightning felt bad suddenly for asking her answers over what had happened. If it was rape, than there wasn’t much that could be said to comfort the young woman. And of course, she couldn’t ask her to accept Squall’s actions towards her without making sure the bad memories from the past were behind her. She knew how hard it was to get over something like this.

“I’m really sorry to hear that. So it was… a glimpse from those terrible memories that Squall saw?”

Aeris nodded.

Lightning looked down at Raine, who was now tackling her bear to the ground and trying to eat his left paw. She shivered at the idea something as repulsing could happen one day to her little girl. She knew that she wouldn’t always be able to protect her. She knew she hadn’t protected her for the very first days of her life and was ashamed from it. Even more ashamed than she was when she woke up naked in that cursed lab, to see Noctis covered with his own blood.

“I don’t know how you’ll see what I’m going to say, but I’ll still say it. I don’t know if you’ve ever have or took the occasion to tell this anyone before. But maybe that after comforting Squall for all that he’s been going through lately, just maybe you too wanted to confide in him. To have the comfort you’ve been denied while you were running from your pursuers. So maybe it’s not only his sensitivity that makes him able to see your knowledge and memories. Maybe are you unconsciously throwing the memories at him, because you need his understanding.”

Aeris looked up, her mouth hanging open, as if she had been hit right in the guts. And Lightning stared down, grabbing her daughter and bringing her to sit on her lap. The baby chuckled and babbled, still holding on his bear and dribbling on its paw.

“Are you trying to say that I’m trying to have him knowing, that I force the knowledge on him so I ain’t alone living with all these… all these memories?”

“Why aren’t you mad at him than? He’s done something to trigger that memory or not?”

“Well, he did, but I… I didn’t mind.” Aeris blushed and tried to defend herself:”But I should have minded, he was trying to use me.”

“Squall would never do that!” Lightning yelled back.

Aeris jumped a little, tears welling up in her eyes.

“I know it. It’s the worse in all of this, I know he meant well and I can tell he likes me. But still, the memories won’t vanish. And the fear linger that once he gets what he want from me…”

“If Squall has interest in you, he’ll never let you down, Aeris. He’s serious over love and he doesn’t mess around with girls. Too many of them have already messed around with his heart. With his mother dead and his adoptive sister gone, he’s been living his life as a ghost. Even if what you’ve been through was hard and that some of your scars won’t heal, he’ll certainly never hurt
you on purpose. And if you give him a chance, he’ll make you happy.”

“But will I make him happy?”

That took Lightning aback. Was this the main question? Was it all about Aeris doubting herself? All this while, it wasn’t even Squall’s fault? Lightning had trouble accepting this reason. She doubted herself on many things, but she had so much self-confidence for certain things that she couldn’t understand other people’s lack of it. The Strife and Farron’s family was a feisty and proud one, sure of herself.

“If you ask yourself the question, than you got your answer.”

“But I’m nothing but trouble!”

Lightning shook her head.

“Squall thinks otherwise. And you’re really sweet and helpful. Why wouldn’t you make him happy, if you stand by his side and give him affection? That’s really all that he needs.”

Aeris looked half reassured and still half confused over what she had to do. But Lightning thought that with some time, the young woman would know what was better for her and that she would accept the future. She looked back at Raine, who was moving less and less, tired up. Her baby fell asleep in her arms.

*I’m talking good for others, but what kind of future do I have for you, Raine? With two spies for parents, you’re as good as an orphan, my poor little girl…* she thought desperately.

She needed a new job. But would the Faction let her leave after all this time?

To be continued
Chapter 31

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part V

Time: 19 027 A.D. 31th december

Location: Earth, Boston

Mission: Finding the best ring and keep it hidden

Agent: Noctis Lucis Caelum

Warning: Odin is following Noctis around and three jewelry have already forbid the knight in armour to walk in...

Message from Noctis’ desperate mind. End of transmission

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“You’ll have to kneel, if you don’t kneel, it won’t mean anything.” Odin was saying.

“That wasn’t what I asked you. The problem isn’t how I stand or kneel next to her. What should I say to ask her? I’ve never… Man, we don’t even got the ring!”

“At least, you know you have the money to buy her a beautiful ring. She’ll be so pleased, sir Noctis.”

“Don’t call me sir Noctis.”

People around were giving them weird looks. And it wasn’t surprising, since Noctis was walking around, arguing with a six feet tall knight doing quite much noise walking down the street. His grey skin and purple eyes looked weird and the fallen prince was surprised that everyone could see him. How come they could even see the summoned spirit?

“Still, I believe you made a really good decision, to ask her hand after all this years. With a daughter already, it’s about time.”

“I know, I should have asked her before. I just couldn’t get the guts to do it. And she was always fleeting from engagement. Now, she seems ready to move in with me, but two years ago, it was a whole different story.”

“I heard you wanted to get a new job?”

“Were you eavesdropping on us, Odin?”

“Look mommy, look, the mister is talking with a real knight! Ain’t that cool?” a little girl asked.

“Don’t point your fingers at people, sweetie. And don’t look at those freaks.”

Odin chuckled and waved at the little girl and Noctis sighed, rolling his eyes. He was already used to be given weird look, back in the time he was living out on the streets. But this was a little over the top.

“I would never spy my own master!”
“Could you stop to yell like that? People are looking at us, you know?”

“I’m sorry, my good sir, but I have to be here and to aid you on your search. You’ll never find the most befitting ring without me. And you’re still totally lost on how to make your demand.”

“I don’t even know if I should talk about it with Storm or not before to ask Lightning.”

“He’s a kid. Kids live with what their parents decide. It’s not in his place to argue with whom you decide to marry.”

“But…”

“It’s great that you take care of your son and mind his opinion. But he’s a spratling, sir.”

“A what?”

“A sprat. Like a little baby, just starting to learn life. You’re a grown man. You can take your own decisions. And you’ve decided to honor my master and asking her to get officially engaged with you, to tie your futures together.”

“You know, I’m starting to have doubts over this. The more you put it in your words, the scarier it sounds.”

“You would go back on your words, Sir Noctis?”

“Oh, give me some air, Odin! I bet you never went to find a ring for a spirit you liked, so how could you understand what I’m going through?”

“For your mention, I’ve known the aches of love. I’ve lost sight of my beloved Ultima centuries ago! But I would have married her if my master from that time hadn’t called me back just one day before the ceremony!”

“Oh…”

“I will be faithful to her memory and honor to this day. And I’ve never eyed a single female spirit with a sparkle of desire since I lost her.”

“You’re a saint then. Or maybe you just haven’t met that many female spirits since then.”

Odin coughed.

“Well, I have to admit, I’ve been really secluded lately…”

Noctis laughed at that, forgetting the people looking at the funny pair they were. He spotted the last jewelry in Boston and headed for it. This time, for the first time, Odin was allowed to enter. Maybe the fact he had complimented the owner with his chivalrous words, -who was a lovely young woman- had helped.

“Welcome gentlemen, welcome to the Kirasagi! Are you looking for something in particular?”

It was Noctis’ turn to cough. Somehow, though he was sure of himself, he was really embarrassed to talk about his new goal. He had never think of asking Lightning’s hand before. Not so seriously. He had never think of asking a woman to become his wife. Never loved someone enough to consider giving her all of his life, vowing solemnly before a crowded room. And he was scared that he could appear… clumsy and helpless.
“This gentleman needs a wedding ring.” Odin claimed with his strong voice.

Noctis had the impression the whole room, filled with glass case, was going to crash down around them. He glared at the spirit, who was simply smiling, proud to be of help.

“Oh, I see! There’s a lucky woman out there.”

“Well… I’ve known her for five years, and I thought it was about time…”

Noctis hated himself for blushing. Was he so nervous? Why did he felt so shy? He had the right to buy a ring and to want to get married. Though it was rare, it was entirely legitimate.

“Have you already asked her?”

Odin looked surprised at that question.

“Without a ring ready? That would be a shame, my lady! A man cannot ask for marriage if he can’t show how ready he is for engagement. The ring is…!”

“Well, I didn’t make my demand already. As he’s saying, I wanted to find the ring first.”

“So then, we’ll check our alliances. Do you wanna choose your own ring right away?”

“But the woman is the one to choose her husband’s ring, isn’t she?” Odin interfered once again.

Noctis felt like ripping down the knight armour and giving him a well earned beating. But he kept his temper.

“Could you keep it down Odin? Lightning is going to get suspicious if we’re out for too long.”

“Is that the lucky fiancée’s name?”

Noctis agreed.

Then he looked at every alliance that was waiting in the biggest glass case of the shop. He hardly gulped down as he saw the prices. But he forced himself to get over it. What were six hundred gils or a thousand of them, when it could make Lightning happy?

“Should you take a diamond, a crystal, or a stone that would fit with her eyes?” Odin asked him.

“I thought you would help me choose.”

“I am! I removed all the other possibility. Oh, and another important question is, silver or gold?”

Noctis wondered. What would Lightning like most? His heart was beating fast. Buying the ring meant so much more than just a ring. He wanted to live the rest of his life with her. With the mother of his daughter. And he wanted to give up the life he had lived so far, to give up the faction, to make sure he would always be there for her. He had wondered many times, what would he do else than being a spy? Being a detective didn’t sound like it paid off. Other than that, all he could see with his curriculum vitae, was a police officer, or a teacher in a fighter school. Somehow, all he could do always seemed dangerous. And leaving the Faction was just as dangerous as working for it. But once it would be done, he’d be free to be a father for his children. And he wanted to protect his family above all else. He was building the family he never had had. He couldn’t lose it as fast as he had gotten it.

His eyes were looking through the aligned rings. Swinging between the prices and the stones, and
the materials. He needed something beautiful, because Lightning was beautiful. He needed something that she would love, because he loved her. Would she love anything coming from him? He knew things couldn’t be this perfect. He wished he could read in her mind. Suggest her something to know which ring to get.

His eyes fell on a green stone. A small emerald. It looked like Lightning’s eyes. It shone bright on its silver ring. Two silver dots circled the round stone. And the ring was large enough for something to be engraved in it. It looked simple. Almost plain. But that was what made it so beautiful. The price was heavy. Around 1300 gils. But his mind was made up.

“That one.” He said.

“A very good choice.” The shop’s owner replied.

He asked for a message to be carved in it, which made the price go even higher. But as he got out, the small box where the ring was waiting for a finger to wear it in his pocket, he felt lighter. One step closer to his new goal. One step closer with putting another smile on Lightning’s face.

“You’ve made a marvelous choice, sir Noctis!”

“Don’t call me that, Odin.”

The spirit seemed to ignore his acid reply and went on:

“Well, all that’s left now is to find where you’ll ask the question to my master.”

*And, most of all, what I’ll say, Noctis thought, desperate.*

He was wondering over the possibility of putting the message in a Chinese cookie. He liked that way of doing things. But Lightning had already said it was cheesy. So how should he asked? And when would the good moment arrive? He couldn’t now, not in Cloud’s apartment, not with Aeris around. So then, when and where, and what to say?!

…

They were woken up in the middle of the night by Raine’s crying. As Lightning was starting to get up, Noctis put a gentle hand on your shoulder.

“I’ll take care of her tonight. Rest up, Claire.”

They exchanged a smile. Lightning had trouble believing she could share such moments with Noctis. She could have kiss him a thank you if Raine’s crying had become insisting. The young father went to his daughter’s bed and gently lifted her in his arms. He was getting more used to handle her, since Lightning was really doing all she could to have him taking care of his daughter himself. Aeris was a good teacher too. It was nice to take his father’s role and to have the chance to be given it. He never remembered having his father lifting him in his arms or telling him a story. Only his mother and the maids took care of him. Before that terrible night of blood when everybody he loved died.

He threw the thoughts away and made sure Raine’s bed was dry. After giving her a new and clean diaper, the baby settled down, cuddling up in her dad’s embrace. He stroked her head, lulling her to sleep. He felt so important. So more important then when he was carrying out one of the Faction’s missions. Raine was counting on him. She was so small, so dependant. He wanted to teach her everything he knew. He wanted to see her walk and run around. He wanted to protect her against everything. She was the flesh of his flesh. She was him, combined with Lightning into a new
being. Love made alive. And she could be so adorable already, he knew she would break hearts when she would grow up. And he wanted to see her growing up. Unlike his father and mother, who had died too soon.

“Sleep tight, Raine.”

As he sneaked back under the blankets, next to Lightning, he felt her moving closer to him, to hold him in her arms.

“To think you had doubts about you being a good dad! I knew you would be the best there is.”

“It’s cause I’m with you, Claire.”

She kissed him on the lips, softly. As they parted, they waited in silence, holding on each other, enjoying their mutual presence. Then Noctis started to wonder over the future again. And he realized he was eager to talk instead of going back to sleep.

“Say Light, we should have more kids. If you’re agree with it…”

“You want more kids?”

She was surprised, but not in a bad way for once.

“Maybe just one. I could get used to it. And I’d like to have one kid the right way, you know. We could move into another apartment, which would be our place. Just you, me and Raine. Just our family.”

Lightning felt tears gathering up in her eyes. Their family. Noctis wanted a family with her. Not because it had been imposed on him by circumstances. He wanted a bigger family with her, a family he could call his own.

“Our family… So many things happened at the same time, I hadn’t realized it yet, but we’re… we’re a family.” She admitted.

“Hey, why are you crying, Light?”

“I’m crying from joy, moron. It… Of course I want a family with you, and more kids! Raine needs brothers and sisters.”

“Wait, I… First we have to find a new job. One that would be as risky.”

“I agree with you on that. But don’t fret right now, Noct. We’ll go one day at a time.”

“Right.”

He was a little angry with himself for not getting the nerve to ask her the other important question he had on his mind. But he guessed that lying in this bed like this wasn’t the best way for it to happen. He wanted his demand to be perfect. So that Lightning could proudly remember it and tell it to Raine when their little girl was older.

“How about we practiced for when we are all settled in our own place, huh?”

“Practice?”

“For Raine’s brothers and sisters.”
Noctis smiled at that. He rolled over Lightning and kissed her a second time, ready to give her all she could ask for.

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Time: 19 028 A.D. 1th january - earth time -
Location: Pluto’s planet
Mission: Infiltrating Jenova’s base while going unnoticed
Soldiers: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed
Warning: The surveillance is tight. Don’t get captured.
Message from doctor Cid. End of transmission

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Yuna and Cloud had climbed up the mountain in silence, their white suits hiding them from the enemies. Their guns were white too and Yuna felt dizzy as they reached the building’s height, her package hanging over her shoulder and banging into her back with every step she took. They had been out walking and climbing for already four hours. And she was all sweaty inside her overalls. Though it was so cold out here. They advanced with their back on the mountains’ snowy walls.

Cloud hadn’t talk to her much. He was focusing on finding a way in. They hadn’t taken many materias with them. Yuna couldn’t use them without first equipping them in her weapons, and she couldn’t use any healing magic. She was just a normal human soldier.

“Let’s keep it discreet. We’ll get inside from the back entrance.” Cloud told her.

She agreed with a brief nod. Her Carbuncle was following them silently. He seemed to understand how serious things were. After getting around the wide building, Cloud broke open the backdoor. For some reasons, the guy knew how to pick locks. Even magnetical and passwords proof locks.

“They make you learn all sorts of things in the army.”

“Oh no, that was Shinra’s Academy. My sis went there and I picked up a few of her tricks.” He retorted to her with a smile, from under his protective mask.

As they stepped in and quickly closed the door behind them, Cloud took care of the few cameras. He plugged a constant film on it, to keep up the pretence no one unusual was walking around.

Yuna took out one of her devices, to get onto the whole surveillance system. She hacked it without trouble –engineering was her forte and pirating came right after it!-. “Say, you could have picked that lock just fine yourself, huh?”

“I still have a few tricks up my sleeves. And it was part of my complementary lessons when I took the formation for back up soldiers.”

“Really?”

They could have laughed, but they both knew it wasn’t the time for jokes. So they quickly removed their white suits, since the building wall’s were pitch black and walking around wearing white would be like asking people to shoot at them. If the cameras couldn’t see them, normal Jenova’s men walking by would still be able to notice. Cloud was wearing his black soldier
uniform, which included black pants filled with pockets where all his arsenal could hide. He had a navy blue and sleeveless jacket over it. Removing the white paint from his gun, he straightened up as Yuna was hiding their suits. She was dressed all in dark herself, black whole shirt over camo pants. She was wearing gloves, just as her colonel, and they could have been easily missed for bandits or mercenaries, dressed up like that, with the supplied ammunitions tied around their chest and waist.

“Let’s be careful on this, Yuna.”

“Yes, sir. Try to keep formal.”

“As you will, sergeant.” He replied.

They had agreed not to argue anymore. It certainly wasn’t the time. After putting back their bags on their shoulders, their guns held ready to fire, they went deeper inside.

Cloud needed to reach a control room, or somewhere where a plan of this base was hiding. He knew he wouldn’t fall right face to face to Jenova. And if he could evade meeting her, he would. Their first objective was to find what was going on in here. Which meant finding a control room or a map was really the best way to get this mission over. But Cloud hadn’t excepted what they discovered.

As they slowly got out of the first corridors, they arrived in a wide hangar, where all kind of supplies, weaponry and armored tanks were kept and stocked. Foods was pilled right next to guns and ammunitions case. In a corner, fresh made materias were waiting in case. It seemed the mako in Pluto was really easy to exploit and to transform. They hid behind the boxes of stock and the few tanks. And walked inside a lab room, where capsules were lined up in dozen. Yuna stared into the window carved in the metallic capsule. The thing were big enough for a grown man to fit in. And she realized with terror that it was exactly the purpose it served. In each capsule, a man or a woman was sleeping, surrounded by blue liquid. Some of them had already started mutating into monsters.

“This is awful,” she sighed, after forcing herself not to yell in fear at the sight.

Cloud didn’t look that much surprised himself. He ignored the capsules, trying to keep his fears from those sorry soldiers manipulated by Jenova locked in the back of his mind. They kept on advancing, being cautious of staying silent. Yuna tripped at some point, but Cloud caught her back, and forced her to hide behind a capsule with him, as they spotted the scientist working around the place. It was a tall and fat man. He was muttering to himself, pacing across the room. And must to his own disgust, Cloud recognized him. Hollander.

It was a miracle that he hadn’t spotted them. Holding down their breaths, both soldiers stood still, waiting behind the capsules, as the scientist walked around. Yuna felt Cloud’s arms tightly wrapped around her. One of his hands was snuggling her left breast. He had caught her by reflex and she could tell he wasn’t doing it on purpose. But she still glared at him. All she had in response was to feel his gloved hand covering her mouth. And as she saw the capsule right in front of them hatching open, she understood why he was trying to keep her quiet and wasn’t concentrated on how he was holding her.

One mutated soldier walked out of his cage, mako dripping from its naked shoulders. Hollander had stopped pacing around.

“Come, number thirteen.” The scientist said.

The thing tried to move, but seemed to burst from the inside as the air reached his skin and he
started to yell, as Yuna and Cloud stood, green and blue blood splashing over them. Normally, the young girl would have yelled at that. It was just too much. But Cloud’s hand was keeping her mouth shut tight.

“What’s with this reaction? Man, now I’m going to have to clean up this mess!” Hollander growled.

Cloud was trying to think properly, as his heart was beating fast in his chest. Jenova was conducting even worst experiments then what she used to do in the past. This was… The creature before them was fighting to breath, gurgling and quickly decaying from her insides. Yuna closed her eyes, trying not to feel the hot liquid that had splashed on her hair and forehead. She was shaking. And Cloud knew that hiding would be safe for much longer.

It’s that moment that Bunkle decided to bark at Hollander. The scientist looked around, astonished.

“What’s that…? How d’you come inside? This must mean…”

The both soldiers made a run for it.

“Intruders! There’s intruders! Guards, everyone, red alarm!”

They burst out of the lab room, freaked out by the decaying monster, Bunkle on their heels. Yuna forced Cloud to let go of her and looked around the room. There was a wide pool. And the air was chilly around here. She couldn’t tell what it could be for. Then, she spotted the boat. Realized that the water in the pool was green.

“Where are we?”

“Inside…” Cloud whispered.

His breath was uneasy and his eyes were wide.

“Inside the volcano. In one mako’s veins.”

“What are you alright?” she asked him, worriedly.

Booth steps running towards him seemed to have Cloud snapping out of it. He grabbed Yuna’s arm and they hid behind a console to take cover. Bunkle seemed panicked and Yuna lost sight of the dog.

“There’s too much mako here. It ain’t normal. No question Jenova would come here. With this, she could raise an invincible army.”

Cloud was shaking just at the thought of the power in this room. The mako pool was almost calling him. His blood was burning up in his veins. His body wanted this mako. Wanted to drown in it.

Focus, man, focus, he thought to himself.

“Cloud?!”

Jenova’s soldiers walked into the room. Cloud got a glimpse of them. They were a dozen. And he knew he couldn’t hide anymore.

“Stay formal, sergeant,” he reminded her.

The last thing he wanted was that Jenova learned that he was here.
And do as I do.” He ordered Yuna. Rolling on his side, he got his head out of his shelter, and his gun. Aimed and fired almost at the same time. She did the same on the other side of the console. Three men fell down. Yuna spotted Bunkle, running between the soldiers’ legs, whining and bumping into them. The poor electric Carbuncle was scared. The mako’s smell seemed to be getting to him.

“Let’s not give them anytime to think.”

Yuna shoot again, ducking back behind the console and rapidly aiming and firing. Before that she knew it, the few soldiers were down. She recharged her gun as Cloud looked around; making sure the area was safe for the moment.

“They know we’re here now. So we’d better get out fast.”

She nodded before to bring one hand to her face as she saw the corpses lying in a pool of blood.

“Where’s Bunkle?”

“I don’t know why I let you bring him with us, that thing got us discovered…”

“We were unlucky that this one capsule hatched in particular. Without Bunkle…!”

“This isn’t the time to argue, sergeant!”

While talking to her, Cloud had barricaded the door and looked for any other exit than the lab. There was one door on the other side of the pool. He turned on the computer still able to work and got through the building’s information. Found a plan and quickly memorized it.

“We should be able to get out if we get across this mako pool.”

“But it’s so cold, swimming would kill us!”

“Of course, we won’t swim!” he retorted.

But then, knock could be heard on the door to the lab. And red alarms were flashing around the place. Cloud looked around for a boat, or a device to call off a bridge that would go over the mako pool. But there was none.

“There’re ripples on the water surface! And bubbles! Bunkle must be in there.” Yuna whispered, panicking even more as she crouched down next to the pool.

“Don’t you even think about diving after that dog…”

But it was too late to warn her. The door to the lab flung open and crashed into Yuna, pushing her into the freezing mako. The soldiers were all out with guns and Cloud realized he hadn’t many choices left. Letting go of his guns, he let his power out. He had to get rid of those guys fast. A wave of brute strength came out from his hands, burning his skin and his gloves. Rays of green light flew from his palms and into the Jenova’s soldiers. Crimson blood splashed around as the living died, all one after another. Cloud stood still an instant, before the corpses. He was becoming an even better killing machine as time passed. And he hated himself so much for that. But there was no time to mourn over it. He dived into the mako after Yuna.

The young woman, her back hurting a lot, her breathe stopped and her whole body shocked by the coldness of the liquid around her, had almost fainted before that she could have drown. But her feet kicked Bunkle by accident, or per chance, and the Carbuncle shocked her with its electricity in
return. That woke her up and she grabbed him, trying to swim up. But her eyes could barely open, and the mako was burning her skin. Its cold bite was eating her all up, she was sinking down, growing heavy, as if she was freezing solid. She held Bunkle against her heart, as to shield him from the cold. Bubbles of precious air were escaping her mouth. And she was certain that she was going to die. It was so dark and cold here!

But then, she felt one hand closing over her right arm. And the strength in this rescuing hand was enough to pull her up. Before that she knew it, her savior had brought her out of the treacherous mako water and she felt the cold air on her wet face. The blood from the dying mutant was off her, but she could still hardly breath, her nose and mouth filled with mako. Her eyelids refused to open and as she held the freezing Bunkle, she wondered, who had saved her. It had to be Cloud. But she couldn’t see him. She couldn’t even feel his touch as he carried her around. She barely heard his harsh breathing as he pulled her out of the mako and opened a door. It shut behind them and between her closed eyelids, she realized that the world had turned back to pitch black.

“Hang on, Yuna. Come on, hang on.” Cloud ordered her, slapping her in the face to wake her up from her cold dizziness. He was shaking from head to toes, but the mako in his own blood had kept him warm. She was freaking cold. If he didn’t do something to warm her up fast, she would die from hypothermia.

“You and your stupid dog!”

Bunkle didn’t even groan in response this time. He was too weak, just as his mistress.

“Cl… cl.. Cloud…” Yuna said, her teeth chattering together.

“I’ll find us some shelter and… Keep talking to me Yuna, until I find some place safe.”

“Can… can’t.” she sighed.

He shook her, dragging her around. The walk away from the mako’s pool room seemed to last forever for the young woman. The cold was running through her veins, her wet clothes clinging to her body, making her feel all heavy and clumsy. She was sure that her legs would break if she’d moved them. It was hard to follow Cloud. He often carried her. She had lost her gun in the water. Her bag was hanging to her frozen shoulder. It bang in her sometimes, barely hurting. She couldn’t feel pain anymore. It was so cold, she was turning senseless.

“Am I… gonna die?” she asked.

“No, Yuna, I won’t let you die!” he retorted.

Cloud barely managed to follow the plan still in his memory and found some really far and really unused area in Jenova’s building. It was a small room, barely wide enough for them both to fit. It wasn’t on every plans, only on the oldest and Cloud could guess that not every soldiers knew about it. In fact, the room was opening on a natural cave formed in the mako volcano. He locked the door, hoping that nobody would come to find them, at least, not until that he’d got Yuna warm enough to let her on her own. Using his material, he made barriers to seal him and Yuna between two walls of thick ice. He made a fire and had Yuna sitting with her back against one of the rock’s wall, while he was rummaging through his bag.

“Keep talking Yuna. Say anything. I’ll warm you up in no time.”

“How… how?”

She had wanted to say more, but her voice seemed to be freezing up too.
As she looked up, she was surprised to see Cloud setting up camp.

“Well... You’ll see how, Yuna.”

She blinked as he removed his shirt.

“Huh… Cloud…”

Does getting her warm had to involve him undressing himself? She would have blush if her blood was still flowing the right way.

“Listen, we’re both wet and we’ll freeze up at this rate. So you’re going to have to forget your shyness for now. I can’t use fire material on you and I don’t have any medical device.”

He quickly removed her damp clothes from her and wrapped her in a towel to dry her up. He had her lying down in the only sleeping bag they have brought. Yuna would have protest and fight against him, because this was way beyond the point she thought they had reached in their relationship. But Cloud wasn’t doing this to get advantage of her. It really wasn’t the time, since they were still in an enemy base.

“I’ll have to start with the main body. If I heat up your arms or legs first, the cold blood will rush to your heart and you’ll have a seizure or worse.”

“Oh… oww…”

She knew he was touching her, but she couldn’t tell where at all. He lied next to her, to exchange his warmth with her, and rubbed her back. Slowly, the numbness left, and she was able to tell where his hands were. He had thrown his burned gloves in a corner of the made up room. As she warmed up, he let her get closer to the fire. She couldn’t prevent him from touching her everywhere. And she realized that she didn’t care. He was chasing away the cold. She was still shivering, her arms unable to move. Bunkle was trembling next to the fire, slowly drying up on his own. The soldier wanted to make sure his partner would get warm enough before to worry about anything else.

Cloud was working fast. He was used to rescue people. Somehow, Yuna wondered if he had done this before. He rubbed her legs and her arms, all in turns, before to wrap both of them in the sleeping bag, so that they could both get back to a normal warm. He had let a single blanket between them, to save her decency. But as she found herself enveloped in his arms, feeling his skin on her naked back, she had to admit, weird thoughts were invading her mind.

“This was really… really necessary?”

Cloud shivered, still stroking her back. His heart was beating terribly fast, and he was just starting to realize what he had done. She was saved, thank goodness! He had barely looked at her shape, focus on bringing back life in her cold body. But still, his body was reacting to this. He had switch clothes for dried ones, thanking his instructors for having taught him to bring a waterproof bag to carry his stuff whatever the mission was.

“I’m sorry if I didn’t show any restraint, but you would have died from hypothermia, Yuna. I couldn’t have that happening just because you’re shy. And it’s not like this was… This wasn’t meant in a perverse way. I had to get you dry and warm.”

“Well, I really feel warm now.”

“Then try to relax. This mission has been going all wrong and I hate feeling you all tensed.”
Yuna’s arms were still firmly standing between them, to keep the cover on her chest and prevent them from getting any closer, or well, more intimate in their closeness.

“Well, aren’t we still on a mission?”

“I don’t feel too well,” he admitted. “If we could stay here, like this…”

“Cloud…”

She felt him shiver, from the cold air in the room. The fire wasn’t enough, they couldn’t get any closer, or they would get burn. And after warming her up, he was turning cold himself. And she realized he wasn’t just shivering from the cold air. His hands were still desperately holding her. Moving across her back, up to her neck, to her hair and her face. Under her breathing nose, as to make sure she was alive.

She pushed him away, as much as she could in the closed sleeping bag.

“Cloud!” she insisted.

But she couldn’t add anything more. She saw the fear in his eyes.

“You still feel so cold, Yuna… One more minute down in that freezing pool, a few more seconds, and I wouldn’t have been able to get you back. How am I supposed to get through any of this alone?”

She softened up at that. He was right. Her mind had been so far, so lost in all her frozen thoughts, she hadn’t entirely realized it. But she had almost died.

“We’re together now. You saved me Cloud.”

She held him close, forgetting about the situation. Then, she yelped, feeling the cold fur of Bunkle, who was trying to join the hug.

“I tell you, your dog is a party killer.”

“What d’you…?!?”

Yuna realized the cover between them had slipped. And suddenly, she remembered that Cloud hadn’t let her that many clothes, because they were all too damp and treacherous to her health. Next thing the soldier knew, a very flushed Yuna was yelling at him, and pushing him away on the cold ground to get dressed properly before to lose all of her warm, getting angry at him for not remaining formal.

As Cloud put on another shirt and rub his own arms, turning his back to Yuna while she got dressed, he couldn’t help himself but to smile. Even after getting so close to dying, she wouldn’t change. There were limits he had no right to cross.

“You could thank me at least.” He observed.

“I’ll thank you once we’ll be flying back to earth.”

“Promise to lock up the dog then.”

“Cloud!”

She could have smacked him. But she realized he was trying to joke, to relieve her from all the
stress they had went through. Her anger fell down.

“Well, I guess, he half helped and half got in the way…” she whispered, looking at Bunkle. “But you’re still the cutest living thing I’ve seen in the world!” she added to reassure the Carbuncle.

Cloud looked to the ceiling, disappointed. Then, he felt Yuna pulling on his collar, and bent down to receive a butterfly kiss on his lips.

“There’ll be more when all this madness is over, alright, colonel?” she asked.

“Sounds good.”

To be continued…
With her head in her hands, Lightning was wondering why everything had had to go so wrong. She had been out for an afternoon, to go see Serah with Raine. After talking a little over it with Noctis, she had realized they had a few things to get straight with their relatives. Since Noctis had no relatives anymore, he didn’t need to do anything, really, but Serah was Lightning’s sister, and she was now an aunt. She got to know before that something happened. At first, Light hadn’t want to go and see her sister, since the shock could do damage to the offspring growing into a baby in Serah’s womb. But at the same time, waiting until that Serah gave birth to her baby was just as wrong. So she took her courage with both hands and went to tell all the truth she had hidden to her sister for the last two years. About her lost and found back child. And about the fact she was back with Noctis.

The whole visit to Serah had been pretty smooth. Serah was shocked and angry at first, but she took it well afterwards. She forced her older sister to swear that she would never hide her something of this importance again. Afterwards, Serah had played with Raine and it seemed they were back to being a real family. But on the other hand, something else was taking place. Noctis was supposed to remain at their place, but he got a call from Stella. The young woman required his presence immediately, as a G.I. and he realized he could use Stella to his advantage, for both quitting the Faction and getting papers for Raine. His little girl needed a social insurance number and a doctor, and a whole check up session with the said doctor. And he knew that trying to explain their situation with government officials wouldn’t go too well. And anyway, he wouldn’t mind seeing Storm. He left, thinking that Lightning had warned Odin to keep an eye on Aeris. After all, they were supposed to protect the Cetra. The young woman was cooking pies in the kitchen, getting herself worked up to forget what was on her mind. She waved at him to see him off and Noctis walked out, unknowing that Lightning thought he would have warned Odin to guard Aeris.

Odin, without orders from his master or from his master’s pretender had gone back to the spiritual words, determined to find his beloved Ultima, riding Yggdrasil all around the spiritual streets. So Aeris found herself alone when the soldiers barged in the apartment. Sephiroth was with them, bearing a false apprehension’s order.

“Yaag sent me.” He whispered with his cold voice. “We need you. If you fight back, we’ll kill everyone living in this building.”

“But I… Haven’t I gave you enough knowledge already?!” she retorted, backing away.

“With time, you got to have heard more from the planets you went on. It’s your first time on Earth, ain’t it, Aeris?”
“Don’t you say my name!” she yelled at him, before to throw her freshly baked pie to his head.

She ran away as the soldiers stood around Sephiroth, shocked by the nerves of this woman. Blueberry cream was running down his burned face, his silver hair stained with the black juice. And his eyes were shooting daggers as he wiped off his face.

“After her, morons! After her, seize her!”

She used her powers to summon plants and flowers, to run away using vines. She slid down the vines, to tumble on the ground. Before that the soldiers got up with her, she had disappeared around a corner of the streets. Sephiroth seriously thought of making his threat comes true, and blowing up the building. But this wouldn’t bring him the Cetra, so he gave up on it. And decided to track the ancient using another method.

“We’ll fight fire with fire.” He said to himself.

When Lightning got back home, the living room’s window was already broken and the floor was covered with plants. Large, magically summoned vines were running from the floor and out by the window, all the way down to the street. People had gathered around the building, wondering what this could mean. And as she looked around the apartment, Light couldn’t find any trace of Aeris. The young woman was gone. Put back on the run.

She got a call from Noctis, telling her to meet him at the Faction’s HQ. There, she understood they were in for it. Aeris had disappeared on their watch. And if they didn’t find her before that the Feds did, things would turn only worse.

Rufus had never looked so mad before. And Lightning held Raine close to her heart. For her family, things had been settled down. But now, her vacations were over.

“What are we gonna do about Raine?”

“You don’t have someone that could babysit her? Leave her with Stella.” Her boss suggested.

“Oh no, I’ll never do that!”

Noctis could understand Lightning’s anger. He was mad at himself too. But he wasn’t sure if he wanted to obey Rufus anymore. Not after all that Stella had told him about the links between the Faction and the Feds. And the rest. Storm was pretty scared of the whole situation. Stella had been told that her son was better to get working soon. And though it was still a kid, Noctis could bet that the boy would be forced to do things he wasn’t ready for. He wanted to get him out of the Faction’s grip. But getting out would be harder than getting in.

“We’re still supposed to be on vacation. And since the Feds are connected with the Faction, I wonder if Sephiroth trying to get his hands on Aeris ain’t just one of your boss’s plans to get rid of agents that mean too much trouble suddenly.” Noctis suggested

“I don’t know what Stella told you, but…” Rufus started, threateningly.

“I’m not taking orders before that we settle a few things, man, that’s all I mean. Storm is my son. Lightning is with me and we got a daughter. I need to think safe. And I want to know that you won’t use Storm in any of your scheme. Him or his mother.”

“You’re asking for a lot…”

“I’m asking for what I deserve. I’ve been in a coma for two years because of your stupid
Rufus had to agree with him on that. But he seemed just as lost as his agents.

“I wish you two could just go and find Aeris before that things get out of hand. It’s true that some of the Feds are working on both sides. Sephiroth is acquainted to our top boss, G.I. one. There’re been internal struggles for some time now. Cause we’re ain’t getting agreed on how we should use the Cetra.”

“So you’re wondering, Rufus? Using someone and wondering how you should use a person, it’s wrong!”

“You should have wondered over it before to give us your CV, you knew we weren’t always the most ethical organization.”

“But still, we thought you were better than the Feds. And now you tell we’ve been working with some of them for all this time?”

“That’s not what I meant…!”

“Rufus can’t explain it all, since he’s just a lower rank G.I.” a small voice interfered. “The Faction is just one side of an internal organization meant to interfere over the criminal and governmental issues. The Feds are the other side from it. Sometimes, we’re working with the same goal. Some other time, we’re on different sides. That’s why the simple agents don’t know that Feds are a part of us.” Storm declared.

Noctis glared at him, not happy to see him involved in such a grown up discussion.

“And you knew, son?”

“Not until recently,” the kid replied.

Lightning looked up at the ceiling. The snobby Storm was back! He hadn’t been cute and lost and confused for too long…

“How come you’re aware of this before that we were warned, huh?”

“Don’t get mad, miss Lightning. My mother told me because she had no other choice. In fact…”

He looked hesitant suddenly.

“I think that she needs help.”

Noctis sighed. He knew that. Stella had tried to explain the situation to him. And he was glad not to be in her shoes…

“Basically, the other general instructors don’t see any use left for Stella, since you’re far stronger than her. So they’re keeping her as their hostage to ask you to do whatever they want, right, Storm?” the young man asked his son.

The kid blinked, tears gathering in his eyes.

“You knew, and still, you didn’t try anything?”

“I learned just recently, son. And I was in a coma until not so long ago, so what did you expect from me, huh?”
“I don’t know.”

“Wait a minute!” Rufus interfered. “Stella’s their hostage?”

“You’re not serious, right?” Light added.

“I just got a call from her,” Noctis retorted. “The very fact that Storm is here is our answer. She accepted to turn herself to them if they let him stay with me. I don’t think that it’s gonna last though. They want both our radiance powers. Stella knew she couldn’t let them have it.”

“But if they hurt mom, how can I stay quiet? How can you be so calm about it, dad?”

“I don’t how I should react. Stella’s my friend, Storm, but I’m not agree with everything she did to get into this situation. In fact, there’s a lot of thing I could reproach her. But there’s no time for that. What are they after, really?”

“They ordered me to destroy March. As a test.” Storm answered.

Lightning felt true rage building up inside her. To ask something so awful from a kid, it was inhuman!

“How many time did they give you? Is someone following you, Storm?”

“I… I don’t know…”

The agents standing around the boys exchanged concerned looks. They were all in big troubles.

“Could you really destroy March anyway?” Rufus asked.

Noctis glared at him and put one hand on his son’s shoulder. The boy was trembling and holding back sobs. He had every reason in the world to do terrible nightmares. He was supposed to still be a baby and evil men had snatched away his mother to force him to use superhuman powers.

“Or course he can’t! Can’t you see he’s crying! He’s just a kid for heaven sake, won’t everyone around here start treating him like one?!”

“I know it’s harsh, Noct, but this isn’t the question right now. We gotta do something about Stella and March. And the Faction’s bosses.”

“I think I’ll skin them alive.” Raven thought out loud.

Storm gripped to his father’s pants, looking scared and pitiful.

“I want mom to be safe.” He whimpered.

Noctis sighed, took the kid in his arms and let him snuggle close as he was turning to Rufus.

“We’re all quitting, now that’s for sure. But first, I want one last mission, boss. You’re giving me the intel and I’ll be executing. Tell me where G.I. one is hiding. We’ll take out both the Factions’ head and the Feds.”

Rufus looked annoyed.

“You know, we’re all going to be killed as traitors at this rate.”

“You want to side with those bastards?”
“Okay, okay, you won. But don’t think they won’t be expecting this. There’s mics everywhere around our quarters. They must already be sending people after all three of you.”

Lightning raised her shoulders.

“They can send whoever they want. We got all the strength we need.”

Then she looked down at Raine, who was sleeping in her arms like an angel. Was she supposed to go greet Serah again and ask her to babysit her brand new niece? Aeris was on the run, Cloud was in outer space, Squall was out on a terrible spying mission, Noctis was stuck with his son and one impossible rescue mission and she was left with the question she had never wanted to face. When she would start building her own family, how could she keep it safe despite all the enemies she had made in her life?

Her phone rang and she carefully took it out.

“Farron talking, who is it?” she answered.

“Hey, Lightning. Your bro asked us to check on you while he’d be gone, so I’m checking.” Barret said in the receiver. “Our squad would be glad to lend a hand if you need any help.”

“You don’t know how I need help right now, man.”

…

Time: unknown

Location: Pluto, Mako volcano

Mission: getting out of Jenova’s hideout

Soldiers and aliens involved: Yuna Albhed, Cloud Strife and Bunkle

Warning: No news for now. Hope everything’s going smoothly.

Message from general Jecht. End of transmission

…

Cloud was thrown to the ground, in Yuna’s cell. Right when they had gotten back up, after warming up each other, they had been found by Jenova’s men. Even if they wanted to fire back, their enemies were too many. Cloud had decided to surrender. After all, he was the only one Jenova should be interested in.

“Cloud! Are you alright?”

Yuna was panicked since they had been captured. She had been kept prisoner for a while and if it hadn’t been for Bunkle, just staying there alone, thinking and imagining whatever would be done on Cloud was enough to drive her mad. She shivered as she saw the wounds on his hands, arms and back. The marks were dark, bruises covered his pale skin and he’d never looked that much weak before. And since he was her only way out, she felt even more scared. How were they supposed to get out of such a situation?

“Please, don’t yell, Yuna.”

His voice was cracking out of his throat. He wasn’t even able to stand or to sit up. He just lay there
at her feet, beaten and tired.

“What have they done to you, Cloud?!” she asked him on a lower tone, kneeling next to him and gently turning him on his back, so that she could see how bad it looked.

His palms were bleeding and he was slightly shaking. He looked on the verge of tears.

“Don’t ask me.”

Yuna felt the hair on the back of her neck rising up at the sense of mako. Pure, overwhelming mako. She realized the feeling was coming from Cloud.

“Cloud, please, I need to know. How am I supposed to help you?”

“I…”

Damn, he hated himself for sounding so scared. But the nightmares from his past were back. He was a helpless boy again. Not a man, nor a soldier, not even a human. He was back being Jenova’s little dog. And he just wanted to hide in Yuna’s arms, to forget the pain, and the mako rushing out of his body, the terrible power burning his blood and hurting his own flesh as he was forced to destroy and kill.

“I’m her monster, all over again.” He finally whispered.

Yuna let him rest his head on her hip, trying to ease his pain and fear by stroking his hair. But then, Jenova’s laugh reached them. The blue ancient walked around the corner and right before their cell. She looked much colder than Shiva. And crueler, if it was possible.

“Oh, poor little Cloud. All curled up over himself, like a puppy. And who are you, girly? What’s this power I sensed, coming from you earlier? Could you be…?”

Cloud felt a new anger rising in his heart. Despite the pain, there was something still clear in his mind. The last thing he wanted to happen now was for Yuna to suffer from this. He raised himself up, grimacing, but digging down in his last reserves of strength to move and look up at Jenova. He managed to kneel, which was already an exploit, considering his whole body had been shocked in Jenova’s terrible machines.

“Leave her out of this.” He growled between clenched teeth.

Sephiroth’s mother smiled creepily.

“Ain’t that sweet Cloud. First you ordered me to leave your sisters alone. Now it’s this girl. Don’t you remember I just have to ask and you’ll kill her for me?”

Yuna remembered what Cloud had said about killing his own parents. She also remembered that he couldn’t have been his fault. A child would never do something like that. And now, Jenova dared to play with the poor guy feelings, if toying with his very life wasn’t enough?

“Cloud would never do that!” Yuna interfered, her voice trembling, but still sounding firm and strong.

“Oh, don’t go tempting me, you… little witch. That’s what you are, right? All this spiritual energy around you. It can’t be anything else. So then Cloud, you like to surround yourself with powerful sorceress, ain’t that right? First me, now Braska’s daughter?”
What is she going on about? Cloud wondered.

“But how, how do you know my father’s name?!”

“Why, cause he’s the one who summoned me to this world in the first place.” Jenova laughed.

Yuna jerked back as the blue woman entered the cell. Cloud remained still, shocked and surprised and quite unable to believe a word from what Jenova had said. Could she have been summoned to their world? No way!

“It’s just one way to put it, you know, kids. Braska was fighting for the utter good, or so he said. I’m quite thankful to him in fact. If I hadn’t met him, I would never have come here to begin with and wouldn’t have met my cute mako soldier.”

Cloud started to understand, slowly. It explained Bunkle at least. Yuna felt her heart skipping a beat. Did this mean that her father had helped ruining her brand new boyfriend’s life? How could it be? Did summoner really existed, or was this crazy alien spewing nonsense just to confuse them?

“I’ve always wanted to meet a sorceress. A pure one, unlike Ultimecia. How lucky can we get, stumbling on Cloud and a witch at the same time?”

“I’m not… I’m not a witch,” Yuna retorted, jerking away from Jenova, who was walking up to her.

“You don’t sound all that much convincing. We’ll just have to awaken your power, sweet child, as we did for Cloud!”

“Don’t you lay a finger on…!”

Cloud was shut up by a single motion from Jenova’s hand. Suddenly, Yuna felt it again. The mako in Cloud’s body. She could see it in Jenova’s eyes also. And somewhere else too. She frowned, trying to collect her thoughts and feelings. To forget the fright in her heart. She was a soldier.

Cloud had trained her to stand up at time like these. He needed her help. He had already rescued her and now, it was her turn. She saw Bunkle, standing up behind the cetra, his fangs out and his fur all risen up. She felt something awakening inside her. Knowledge. And power. She raised her arms as Jenova reached out one blue hand to touch her. A blinding light filled the cell and Cloud had to blink a few times before that he could understand what had happened.

The mako had been inside her all this time. It soared like a bird. Ran through Jenova’s arms and down her spin, burning the evil witch. Yuna had no idea what she was doing. It was pure self-defense. Jenova yelled, pushed backward, thrown into the walls. It was too much power, she hadn’t expected it. There was no machinery to control it for her. Cloud blinked once more, this time, from sheer surprise. Blue shots of electricity were running across the room. Jolting out from Yuna’s hands and Bunkle’s fangs. Diving into the cetra, forcing her to show her true face, her true age. She was aging. Suffering and yelling. Cloud had never dream of seeing everyone who had suffered from this evil woman avenged like this. He’d never expected Yuna to have such power. But then again, her green iris had a mako color to it. Less artificial maybe. As Jenova tumbled to the ground and stood still, not even yelling anymore, he realized the thunder was still roaring and the thunder kept on running. He realized Yuna didn’t know how to control any of this. And the jolts started to look for another victim. And he was the only one left in the cell.

“Yuna?”

The bolts ran around, before to reorganize themselves and head in his directions. Cloud tried to get up, to give himself a chance to dodge some of it. He tried to tell himself that Yuna would never
hurt him. But the pain hit him, as real as ever. He crumbled down.

“I don’t want to do this!” the young woman cried out. “How can I stop? How can I control myself? What’s happening to me?”

Cloud wanted to reply, but it hurt just to breathe and to remain conscious. He tried to look up at Yuna. His heart was twitching in his chest. And even though it hurts, he was so glad. At least, he wasn’t hurting her. At least, it wasn’t him losing control.

Yuna tried to move, and finally managed to walk up to Cloud, so that she would get in the way from the bolts. She felt tired and overstressed. She wrapped her arms around him, tears running down her cheeks. The thunder stopped and the lightning died out. Bunkle howled from pain, but Cloud was finally able to breathe in and out.

“Are you… are you still with me Cloud?”

“Man, you sure pack a punch.” He sighed.

“How can you joke around at a moment like this! I could have… I could have killed…!” She started to cry even more.

“Didn’t I tell you before that I was tougher than that, Yuna?”

His voice was a mere whisper. His consciousness was running away.

“But Cloud…!”

“Is Jenova dead?”

“Who cares, try to worry about yourself, okay?”

She asked him, lifting him in her arms as much as she could, still crying, trying to find any new wounds. Her teardrops fell down on his wounds from Jenova’s tortures and they healed up, all by magic.

“Where’s that power coming from, huh?” he asked her, still unable to move on his own.

“I don’t know. I don’t know, but it hurt you, so I hope it will go back from where it came and…”

She held him tight, with his head on her chest. Cloud felt comforted by her worried attitude and her embrace.

“Just give me some time to sleep, Yuna. We’ll get out from here.”

He drifted away for an instant, and Yuna was scared that everything was over. But Jenova wasn’t getting up and she slowly realized that she would certainly never get up again. Then, Bunkle walked up to her and she realized that the electric carbuncle had grown in height and was now big as a Doberman.

“So you were a summon spirit all this time, Bunkle? It was you who helped me just now? And you who decided to hurt Cloud as well, as payback for this Chihuahua thing?”

The green and yellow dog barked in agreement.

“Well, I’m sure your score is settled with him now. So how about you helped me getting him out of here?”
Bunkle seemed to agree as well for that and grabbed Cloud by the collar of his torn shirt. Yuna didn’t believe it was real at first. Anyway, there was still too much to go through before that she could say that they were safe and sound.

…

Time: time unknown

Location: outer space, Antlion Ship

Mission: getting out ASAP

Agent: Squall Leonheart

Warning: It seems our agent has killed Ultimecia, but there’s still something not right.

Message from G.I. Eight. End of transmission

…

As Squall walked out of the room, followed by Ellone, he was met by his latest nightmare. Seifer was waiting on the other side of the door. The blond man was smiling, his arms crossed, his eyes as cold as ever.

“Well, well, you sure took your time, lion boy.”

“Was I expected?” Squall retorted bitterly.

He didn’t know if one day he would get to understand this man. But all the hate that still dwelled in his heart after all that he’d been through seemed to rush out just at the sight of Seifer. And today, Aeris or Rinoa weren’t there to stop him if he tried to kill the guy.

“You think you can board this ship, go unseen all the while, release sacrificial prisoner and usurp my place in the sacrificial ceremony and walk away just like that? Seriously Squall, I thought you were as brilliant as Rinoa said you were.”

“Don’t you dare say her name in front of me!”

“Don’t YOU order me around, lion boy!”

Seifer sure had changed a lot. His cold eyes were looking crazy. As if he thought of himself as something so high no one could even raise their voice against him.

Squall raised his gunblade, removing the safety on the gun part of his weapon.

“You think I wanted her to die?” Seifer added, his voice growing softer, as if he suffered from the loss of Rinoa.

Squall froze at that. He didn’t want to see his rival as another human. He didn’t want to know that someone else had suffered as much as him from Rinoa’s death. He just wanted the guy off his case.

“I think you didn’t save her, when you were the only one who had a chance!” Squall retorted.

Ellone stood behind, hesitating to comment on anything. She hadn’t known much of what had happened around her, except from the operations inside the Antlion. After all, she had been a
prisoner for sometimes. The two men raised their swords, ready to jump at each other throats. No more words needed to be exchanged. So they just rushed forward, yelling out their rage. Ellone covered her eyes with her hands, unable to believe they would still fight like kids. Though now, it was far more dangerous than it was in the past, at the orphanage.

“I’ll make you eat those words!”

“Just try and get me!”

Ellone looked up to the ceiling, desperate. They could be so unrational!

Squall on his side knew there was no other way to get by Seifer. And he didn’t want to let him a chance to slip away after what had happened to Rinoa. After what the Feds had done to her. And after all the suffering Aeris had went through in the hands of Sephiroth, who was just another part of the Feds. As he fought, using his sword both as a shield and as a weapon, he realized Aeris was still on Earth. And though she was supposed to be protected by Lightning and Noctis, he suddenly felt unsure and worried. As if something could have happened. For an instant, he couldn’t see Seifer as he looked in front of him.

In his stead, he saw the young cetra, running away, chased after by men dressed in black. She looked scared. He froze. Felt the burning bite of steel in his flesh. Woke up to realize Seifer’s blade had run right through him. His blood splashed on the floor. But his mind was far away. He knew in his heart that Aeris needed help. And he was going to save her. Even if it meant dying in the process. He raised his gunblade, shoving the tip of its blade right into Seifer’s heart. He pulled the trigger, no hesitation left in him. Blood splattered around the room. He looked through his pockets, for some healing materias.

“Dang it, I’ve forgot to bring one!” he said between his clenched teeth.

“Squall! Seifer!”

Ellone was shocked beyond words. But there was no time to talk.

“I’m blowing up this ship. And we’re getting you back to Earth.” Squall decided.

He torn up his white shirt and bandaged his wound quickly, just to stop the blood flow a little. He could always take care of it later. He didn’t even look to Seifer. The guy had stopped moving and living before to even hit the floor. It felt almost unreal, to think that the so hated man was dead for good. But at this moment, Squall barely cared for anything. He grabbed Ellone’s hand and forced her into following him around the ship. Alarms were flashing everywhere. Soldiers started running, coming down from elevators and hallways.

_We’re both going to die at this rate_, the young girl thought, desperately.

To be continued
Chapter 33

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part VII

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January

Location: Earth, Boston

Mission: rescue Stella despite no one ordered us to do so.

Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum

Message from Storm. End of transmission

A baby was crying. And Lightning was on the verge of tears herself.

“Oh, Noctis, we can’t leave her here! She’s all confused, she needs to stay with people she’s used to!”

Raine didn’t seem too pleased with her new babysitters. She wouldn’t stop to cry even if Barret lowered his voice as much as possible. Tifa took the baby in her arms and managed to calm her down, until that Yuffie come closer, jumping and clapping her hand, amazed by Cloud’s niece.

Noctis was half amused and half annoyed by all of this. The last thing he wanted was to left Raine behind, but if they were truly going to infiltrate the top heads of the Faction, they couldn’t take a baby with them. It would be far too dangerous.

“You can stay here too if you’d prefer Light. I can go with Storm and…”

“Oh no, forget it! I’m coming too!” she retorted.

She wasn’t going to let him rescue Stella alone. First, because she would never let Noctis do such a terrible mission alone and mostly because Stella was involved.

“I know it’s hard leaving her behind, but we’ll be coming back.”

Raine started crying again, as if she didn’t believe her dad entirely. After all, it was going to be a dangerous mission.

“Hey guys, you’re sounding pretty depressing and not all that sure, you should be more concerned about the baby. She can tell how you feel.” Tifa observed.

Storm cleared his throat.

“Time’s running out, dad.” He whispered.

“I don’t get why you’re taking that kiddo with you. He’s not that much older than lil’ Raine.” Barret sighed.

“I know, I must be the worst father ever.” Noctis retorted. “But things are as he said. We don’t have much time. Come on, Light.”
“Be sure to give her milk twice a day and one meal of baby food! She sleeps better on this blanket and…”

“They’ll do alright, Light, come on.” Noctis insisted.

It hurt him to see her all panicked over Raine. It reminded him of his own mom. And he was so scared not to come back and to leave one orphan in the world. He couldn’t do that. He would have to live through this mission and to protect Lightning also, so that his daughter would still have both her parents. He couldn’t live with himself if something happened to Light. And now, he had twice as much reasons as he did before!

“If anything happens, if she get sick, call…”

“We can’t afford to get any calls! We’re off for an infiltration mission, Light!”

He dragged her out, Storm following closely. The young woman didn’t resist, but since it was her first time really parting with her daughter since when her child had been snatched away from her, Noctis could tell she was suffering a whole more than him. He snaked one arm around her shoulders and held her close.

“It will be our last mission as Faction’s agents. We’ll never leave her again.”

“What will we do?”

“I’ll find a new job, as a policeman or a martial art teacher.”

“You make it sound as if it’s easy, but you know it won’t be…”

“Brace yourself, Light, you’re not like yourself at all! If you keep looking down, I’ll take you back and force you to stay with Cloud’s squad’s members. You can’t possibly run a mission in this state of mind.”

She sighed and coiled up to him.

“I feel as if a part of me was missing.”

Storm grabbed Noctis pant, stroking his head against his leg, scared by what he heard. If Lightning felt like that, how did his own mother could be feeling? He still wanted to cry and he had to fight with himself to hold back his powers. He felt the tension in his father. He had finally accepted the fact he was just a kid. And though he could understand many things, he also accepted that his father knew more things to life and could understand and react in better ways then he’d do himself. He trusted him. And he was so glad he still had one parent looking after him.

“You sure we got one chance to save mom?”

“We won’t know until we try, Storm.”

…

As they were driving, Storm fell asleep, sitting on Lightning’s lap. The stress had drive him so tired, he couldn’t wait until that they arrived to the launching site.

“Is he sleeping?” Noctis asked.

“Yeah… I guess worrying about his mom really got to him. Poor lil’ guy.”
“Say, Light, I know you’re not happy about leaving Raine behind.”

“It would be too dangerous to keep her with us. I understand it, but she’s still so small…”

“Yeah, I’m worried too. But at the same time, it’s a relief that I know she won’t be used against us…”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I hadn’t thought of that. I can’t imagine her being stolen from me again.”

Noctis wondered if he had chosen the right subject. He drove in silence for a while, looking often at Lightning and Storm. She was gently ruffling the boy’s hair.

“You don’t know how I wished that he was my son too, so that I could have treated him as a real child. I know it’s a harsh thing to say, but… I can’t help but resent Stella for not protecting him enough.”

Noctis bit his lip not to reply immediately.

He had no idea what he would have done in Stella’s stead.

He knew that if he had been given the choice, Storm wouldn’t have existed in the first place, because it was just madness to get a child to be born in these conditions…

“You know, I’m not willing to save Stella because I like her or something. I’m doing it for Storm.”

“I know, Noctis. I’m not doubting you anymore.” She retorted, smiling at him.

He sighed, relieved.

“Well, now that this is cleared up, there’s another thing… I really don’t know how to say it, but I guess that if I wait any longer, I won’t get the occasion…”

“You know, I don’t like when you talk like that. Lately, every time you hesitated to tell me something, it was because you had some terrible news…”

“Well, there’s nothing terrible about it. I don’t think there is.”

“Noctis…” she warningly said.

She couldn’t let him mess around with her. Not now. She had held up all this time, but she wouldn’t get through everything. She felt so tensed, so ready to break up if he was to say a wrong word. She was scared of leaving her baby behind, worried about her brother out in space, worried about Squall, who was on another mission, worried about Aeris, who was on the run. And instead of trying to help any of them, she was running herself, at the rescue of a woman she already hated because she had dared to stole from her the exclusivity of giving a child to Noctis. She had accepted everything, because his life was already crazy, but…

“It’s not easy for me, Light. I wanted to wait for the right time, but I couldn’t find it.”

Lightning waited, her hands clasped to her legs, Storm’s quiet breathing reaching her through her shirt.

“You know, after all that we’ve been through, I… I’m sure that whatever is coming, I want to face it with you. I want to live with you, as long as I’ll breathe.”
He was barely looking at the road, and Lightning could tell he’d rarely been this nervous about telling her something. She swallowed down as he went on.

“But you gotta take me as I am right now. With weird powers, as the father of Raine… And with my son. Till now, things had been going too fast, we hadn’t the time to sit back and realize what was going on. So tell me now, Light. Will you live with me for the rest of our lives? Will you accept to bear with me for a lifetime? Would you, Claire? Would you marry me?” he managed to stay with a steady voice.

Lighting thought she was hallucinating those words. He looked at her as long as possible, before to gaze back at the road, holding down his breathe. It kept on ringing in her head, as she softly held Storm, as if to remember herself everything Noctis had done, willingly or not, that made her suffer in this life. And everything that made her happy. She remained silence for a while. Noctis didn’t know if he had the right to ask for an answer. He was starting to think that this was the wrong moment to ask her. Then, she ordered him to:

“Park the car. Right now, Noctis, park this car!”

He did as she asked worried that she was going to get mad.

“Get out!” she told him, harshly.

He couldn’t believe her. But he got out of the car. She did the same on the other side, leaving Storm on the seat and closing the door.

“Are you serious?! I mean… do you really mean it? Are you asking me cause you’re thinking about dying out there?”

“Of course not! Lightning, you really think I’m not serious?”

She shook her head. Tears were gathering in her eyes. As if she couldn’t believe. As if she couldn’t accept. His heart broke in his chest at that sight. Why was she crying?

“Say it again.” She asked him.

Noctis face was sheet white, and he walked up to her, grabbing her hands in his, because he couldn’t talk without some support. Why did her ears decide to stop working now? Why couldn’t she just say yes right away?

For an instant, he wondered if he should kneel. But he refused too. He kissed her fingertips instead, to give himself courage. He wanted to be with her, always. So why was he so afraid? And why couldn’t she believe him?

“Marry me, Claire.”

She blinked, her tears rolling down her cheeks. Her face was lighting up though, so she had to be crying from joy, hadn’t she? Wasn’t she? She buried her face in his chest, angry at herself to melt like that, to be so touched by his demand. She couldn’t accept the idea it was happening to her. It felt so unreal. So magic. He wrapped his arms around her, shivering.

“It means so much to me, Noct, you have no idea…”

“Then, say yes.” He suggested her.

“I haven’t said it?”
He chuckled. So she was truly crying from joy. He could tell she was smiling now. Her hands went up, from the middle of his chest to his shoulders, and she leaned onto him, deeply breathing in his scent, as to keep the moment engraved in her memory.

“It’s yes, Noctis. Yes, yes, yes!”

He smiled, feeling his already fixed up heart jumping high and not falling back. Heck, she was agreed. She said yes. He hadn’t asked her for nothing. He was right to do it now. Now he could feel hope. He gently took her face in his hands, forcing her to look up at him.

“I love you, Claire.”

She smiled through her tears, still mad at herself for crying, but unable to hold it back. She couldn’t even talk now. She was so happy to think that he was willing to devote himself to her, to bind himself to her, to yell to the whole wide world that he wanted no one more than her.

“Want to see your ring?” he asked her.

“Kiss me first.”

She really didn’t have to ask.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. unknown time

Location: outer space

Mission: staying in my own little corner as my mistress is fixing Cloud. Don’t know what she’ll do, but she wants to do it in private. Sounds terrible to me!

Soldiers: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed

Message from Bunkle

…

Cloud had every difficulty in the world to wake up. His whole body felt numb and he could barely move. He slowly blinked, to see that he was laying on a bed, in a small room that resembled the spaceship they had used to come to Pluto. As Yuna’s friendly face bent to him, bearing a weak smile, he guessed they were saved. It they weren’t, her eyes wouldn’t have been shining like this.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” she made fun of him.

“Hey, witch,” he retorted, with a sly smile.

“How are you feeling, Cloud?”

“As if a tank had rolled over me twice.” He honestly answered.

Her smile grew wider.

“Well, at least, you’ll have the time to recover now. We’re back on our ship and heading back to Earth.” She declared.

“Cool. I don’t see how you managed to carry me all the way there though…”
“Oh, Bunkle helped. It was the least he could do after shocking you and using me as a catalyst to
do so.”

“Could you repeat that?”

She explained him how Bunkle was a living summoned spirit and how he had channeled his
powers through her, to help her get away from Jenova, and to even his score with Cloud afterwards.

“All this time, he was looking after me, and I had no idea.”

“That Chihuahua carried me?!”

Cloud almost felt insulted, but he guessed that since his life was already crazy, he could buy
Yuna’s story. He tried to raise himself on his elbows, but the strength in his body was struggling to
keep his eyes open. He felt angry at himself for still being so weak. Why was it he couldn’t appear
as a real man before Yuna lately?

“Don’t overwork yourself,” she warned him. “You’ve been through a lot, even if your wounds has
recover, your strength is still frail.”

“I’m not an helpless child…” he tried to defend himself, trying to sit up, only to be pushed back
down on his pillows by the young woman.

Yuna sat next to him, smiling even more than before, and gently started playing with his hair.

“I know that.” She blushed as she hesitated before to add: “I’m pretty well placed to know you’re
a grown man.”

Her hands went down to his face and one of her finger traced over his lips, which made the frozen
feelings over his heart melt in an instant. If the ghost of Shiva lingered somewhere around, she was
gone and he stared at Yuna’s eyes, trying to understand what she meant.

“You’ve been sleeping for two whole days, you know? I was really worried, but since your vitals
were stable, I… I decided you needed to get off all the dirt and blood dried on you from Jenova’s
base. I’m telling you so you know, and since what happened in the ice cave, when you … warmed
me up, I guess… I guess we’re even.”

She said that as she removed her hand from his face and looked away, terribly ashamed and
embarrassed. Cloud felt himself blush, even if he didn’t think he was still minding such things. So
she had…

“You mean you… washed me? From head to toes?”

She nodded briefly.

Another question popped up in his mind, but he kept it to himself. Sometimes, he had the slight
impression two people were fighting inside Yuna’s head; the timid girl and the intrepid woman,
who could do anything.

“Well… If this is some kind of revenge, I guess I have nothing to say. It’s nice to feel clean and
cozy.”

“Ain’t it? And well… Aww, I don’t know what I wanted to say anymore. You don’t resent me for
killing Jenova?”
“Why should I? I hated her. And it was Bunkle’s doing, right?”

“And about… about cleaning you up…”

“Yuna, you’re making this sound pretty much more awkward than it should be. If you were a nurse, you would see nothing wrong in it.”

“But I’m supposed to be your girlfriend.”

“You’re not just supposed to be it, you are my girlfriend!”

“And I almost lost you back there!”

She leaned down to him, wrapping her small arms around his shoulders, starting to shake from her head to her feet. And Cloud remembered what he felt when he had carried her with him, so cold he was scared she would freeze solid. He remembered how it felt to lose someone, and his heart tightened and his throat went dry.

Raising his hands after an extreme effort, he held her to him. Gently made her turn on her side, to be able to face her. He kissed her lips. And she kissed him back, as panic as if he could still die.

“It’s okay, Yuna,” he whispered to her. “I’m pretty tired, but I’m still here.”

She clung to him, tears rolling down her face. He understood she had been holding them during the two days he spent sleeping. Because even though his vitals remained high, nothing was telling her that he would really get better as long as he didn’t wake up. And he wondered what could have happened to her while he was off in dreamland. What could Jenova’s goons have tried on her? Did she got hurt? Was she mistreated when he was being tortured? He hadn’t had the time to ask her. And his heart started beating faster. And faster.

“Did they hurt you while I was away? Did anything happen to you?”

He moved back, to look at her, and started to pull on her clothes, unzipping the front of her overall and undressing her shoulders.

“Cloud, wait, what are you…?!”

“Is there any mark? Did they mark you with a number?”

“What, a number…”

He slid down her overall, to see the top of her hips, and Yuna was thankful to herself for putting a top under her suit. As he saw only cream white skin, he seemed reassured and stopped undressing her before that it get indecent.

“Do you mean, a number like the “seven” tattooed on your ankle?” she asked him.

This answered one of his questions, that she had indeed seen him entirely naked and he flushed a little.

“It’s… it’s how Jenova used to mark her soldiers and her pets.” He said, looking away.

He hated this number engraved on him. It made him feel like a thing. Lightning didn’t know it existed; there was a limit to the things he showed to his twin sister. Tifa had seen it and never asked to know. It was a weird spot for a tattoo, especially for a guy, but it was clear that he wouldn’t explain it. Yuna was a different case. He wouldn’t have been able to see her tainted as
him. Those numbers were like a curse. And as he was starting to mourn seriously, the woman still lying next to him did something that was sure to catch back his attention. She slowly guided his hands to finish removing her overall, revealing her long and bare legs. She forced his fingers to touch her tights and he jumped a little, surprised by her boldness.

“Stop lingering on the past. I’ve been thinking myself. How I should have take care of the present instead of worrying of the past or the future. I regret stopping you on Christmas’ night. And since the ice cave, I’ve been thinking…” she blushed, but kept going. “…that I missed your hands on me. I want to feel you, Cloud. Everywhere.”

Cloud’s mouth hung opened an instant. Next thing he knew, she took it as an invitation and was madly kissing him. He wanted to move, to answer her in every way he could. And though his body reacted just as Yuna wanted it, he felt unable to act. Unable to raise himself and take the lead in their fight, unable to stop her from making him roll on his back, unable to raise his hands high enough to remove her shirt, which she removed herself. And he felt ashamed in his man pride, though a side of him, the side which wanted to be loved, and comforted, and cuddled, and taken care off… this side of him could barely believe that what was happening was true.

Though he felt Yuna’s skin. His eyes saw every color, every mark on her skin, every glint in her eyes. There was a scar on her right arm. Her lips were red and swollen after all the kisses they had exchanged. Her hands were running all over him. Clumsily, but willing to learn how to please him.

“Yuna…”

Cloud wasn’t sure if he wanted to protest or to beg. She got him out of his boxer, revealing the number on his ankle, and his growing desire. She seemed scared at that point and looked back at his face, as he grabbed her waist, rubbing his nails on her hips and down her tights.

“I don’t know if we’re ready for this…”

“I know you’re pretty convincing, for someone who’s unsure…” he retorted, hating himself for not being able to move anymore than that.

Man, he wanted to take her now.

“Get down here to my level. Let’s take this slowly,” he suggested, even if it was the last thing he wanted to do...

She leaned down on him. And they kissed each other, gently, right on the mouth. It was soft and sweet, though Cloud’s hands were keeping her closer than needed, especially in their state of clothing. He unclasped her bra, gently removing it to feel her breasts directly on his chest. Their kisses turned desperate and furious, and what little resistance Yuna had left vanished. She wanted it to happen. Right now, even if Cloud couldn’t give it his all, even if this looked bad and even if her mother used to say that there were things a woman shouldn’t do.

“I… You’re ready?” she said, shivering, her skin burning up, her breath already unsteady from their kissing.

“You’re making fun of me, right? Is it really the time to ask my opinion?”

“But… I feel bad…”

“Well, I’m consenting, so it ain’t a rape, alright?”

Cloud felt so much tension within him right now. What was her problem? Why couldn’t she be true
to herself and start something she was willing to finish? Why couldn’t she just… Then she started, slowly sliding herself over him. Her face, first mixed between lust and desire, was turning into a slight grimace. And slowly, Cloud realized that this was surely her first time. Her fingernails dug in his shoulder blades as she tried to get used to him. It hurt. He knew he was hurting her. And he wanted to get away now, even if pleasure would come. She had no right to put him in such a situation, she was taking advantage of his weakness.

“Yuna, you gotta move…” he hissed.

So she moved. So slowly, it hurt. He tried to follow her, to get his hips working. But thought his wounds were gone, the fatigue from all the mako he had thrown out of his body, it was worse than anemia. And still, he could feel. He could feel everything, as if he had become extra sensorial. She was around him. He wanted to disappear into her. He wanted…

“Faster,” he pleaded.

He hated himself for pleading. Hated her for putting him in such a situation. And he loved her at the same time, so much more than he could ever hate her. Yuna found her own pace and finally managed to feel pleasure herself. She tried to look at Cloud, but he looked so different. So vulnerable. And still, so… manly. He was everything she had. So she was ready to give everything to him in return. Hadn’t he protected her and save her back on Pluto? She tried to move while staying as close to him as possible. She wanted to hide in his arms, but she couldn’t part herself from him. And at the same time, she didn’t want to hurt him. She had no idea how she was supposed to move and where she had found the nerve to do something like that. Cloud’s hands were gripped on her tights, to keep her closer. Her round breasts brushed against his chest. Their breathing was mixing together, as she wondered how long this could last.

Him inside her. Deep inside. She felt him rocking with her. They were one. He was as deep as he could get. She wasn’t just aroused now, she was reaching climax. She jerked up as she finally reached the peak, unable to look at his eyes anymore, lost in foreign bliss. His hands were hurting her legs, holding her so strongly, but she couldn’t feel the pain. She was whole and free. With him. Because it was him.

She yelled his name. Cloud managed to hear her voice through the fog of pleasure. And he groaned as she yelled again, after moaning for countless times.

Time stopped for them, maybe one second. Than, it was over, and they were two again and Yuna almost collapsed over him, totally exerted. Cloud looked for his breathe a moment, with his girlfriend resting with her head on his chest. He wrapped one arm around her. Cause he couldn’t let her leave him now. He just couldn’t.

“I don’t know what got into me. But I don’t regret a thing I did.” She whispered.

She fell asleep with just that. And for the second time, Cloud thought he was one hell of a lucky guy.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January

Location: close to earth, in a escape pod from the Antlion

Mission: crash landing on Earth and get sight of Aeris

Agents: Squall Leonheart
Message from Squall’s mind

…

Squall was sitting on the cold floor of the escape pod. He was still bleeding a lot. His consciousness was slowly fading. But he had to stay focused. Ellone was panicked and he wanted only one thing. To get back on earth and to see Aeris, safe and sound. And Lightning too. To hide in their arms. He had killed Seifer. Though it had done him so much good just a moment ago, when he saw the blond man’s corpse falling on the ground, he was scared now. He had no rival now. He had killed the man who had seen Rinoa during the last days of her life. And it was scary. Almost as scary as feeling lonely. Ellone was trying to mend his wound, using what was left of her powers. She was weak. He felt her own fright, and her panic. And he was sad to bring her in such a state. She owed so much more…

“Alright, it should hold up like this…” she sighed, finishing the bandages she had done with his ripped off white shirt.

She put back his coat on his shoulders and Squall leaned his head to the wall behind him, letting his cheek touch the soft fur. No blood on the fur. A real miracle, after running amongst the firing guns and busting through the pack of soldiers, with Ellone following him closely. He had used his body as a shield for her, desperately determined to have her surviving this nightmare. He had never felt as tired as now. But still, he couldn’t surrender now and lose consciousness. Aeris was waiting for his safe return. Well, or so he wanted to convince himself.

“You heard about Rinoa’s dead, didn’t you, Ellone?”

“Yeah…” his adoptive sister replied, looking away from him.

“It’s been weeks, or so. Mere weeks. I don’t know if it’s even been one whole week. But I already… I have someone else in view. Can you believe it?”

“Coming from you, it’s really surprising, but at the same time, if it’s someone who needs you, maybe is this how things were meant to be.”

If he had been in better shape, he would have gotten angry at her. He simply chuckled, bitterly.

They stood in silence for a moment, both wondering on their own problems. They had shared a lot in the past. But Squall was still bitter at Ellone for abandoning him without a word. And she knew she had no good reason to explain her actions. Then, Squall slowly turned his head to her gazing at her from under his messy locks.

“How many escape pods can you see from the window, Ellone?”

“Dozens, Squall…”

He had asked it many times already. As if he couldn’t believe the prisoners had been able to escape. As if him being saved meant that everyone else would have to die, irremediably.

“We’re closing in on Earth, Squall. We’ll soon be landing.”

“Crash landing is more like it.”

He grimaced as he tried to raise himself up. He was still losing a lot of blood. He couldn’t get up and take the controls. He just wanted to sleep to forget everything that had been happening lately. He wanted to close his eyes and to wake up in a world where there was no hard questions, no
gunblade and no war hungry fool.

“Is there something I can do to ease the landing?” Ellone asked him.

“I don’t think so.”

They both jumped a little as they felt their pod hitting the atmosphere and starting to fall with more and more speed.

“We’re not going to die now? Squall?”

“After living that far. That would be such a waste…”

“Oh, don’t be ironic!”

He let his head fall on his left shoulder, slowly surrendering to his fatigue.

“Hang on tight, Ellone. We’ll be home in a few minutes. Wake me up then…”

To be continued
Chapter 34

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part VIII

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January

Location: Earth, New York

Mission: surviving the crash

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Message from …  End of transmission.

…

The only thing Squall remembered from the crash was the faint cry of terror from Ellone. He wished he could have comforted her the right way, or remind her to put on the security belt tied to the emergency exit of the capsule. But his mind was fleeting with his lost blood. He was barely able to understand his own thoughts. He was angry at himself for being this weak, but he had to admit, he had received quite a blow. It was only normal that he couldn’t resist much more. He needed instant cares and one hell of a transfusion. The shocks from the capsule burying itself half into one of old Brooklyn streets barely stirred his daze.

It’s the silent from the engine and the alarm system that surprised him the most. No more noises. No more yells from Ellone. Did this silence mean she was hurt? He wanted to tell her to run away, because after all the shocks sustained, the capsule was bound to ignite itself, or worse. He glanced at the electronic map on the wall in front of him, that told him they were in the old Brooklyn. He remembered that place. Ellone would survive the radiations without any trouble. As for him, would he be able too? He barely had gained any powers. His only unnatural capacities were to be over sensible about anything and to be able to see Aeris’ past and memories when he touched her.

“We choose the wrong place to land…”

“As if we choose anything that happened to us recently!” Ellone observed.

She was sounding pretty irritated. Not that he’d blame her. He was angry too. Deep beneath the pain and all of the rest…

“Let’s just get out of here before that something worst happen.” He asked her.

She helped him up and out of the capsule and they tumbled down, trying to get away from the small ship which had saved them. The outer pieces of the escape pod were fuming and shattered, having almost melted under the scorching heat from the atmosphere. It had been something else to get through that. But as he’d said, they were both still alive.

“Ellone, you can’t carry me around here. You’ll exhaust yourself and we’ll both be done for. It’s dangerous if you’re tired, with the radiations and the monsters. You should get back to safety. Try to connect the army, or Laguna…”

“You think your father would forgive me if I abandon you out here?”

“You think he’d forgive me if I’m the cause of your doom? I can’t help anyone in the state I’m in.
You’re too weakened to heal me. The best I could do for you was to vanquish Ultimcia and kill Seifer. I can’t do anything more. If I can raise my sword, I’ll use it as a stick to keep me standing.”

“And running away alone will prove to be safer for me, you say? I… I’m sick of being alone, Squall! I can’t stand this. I can’t!”

She let him drop to the ground, shaking with fear and panic and self-derision. She was supposed to be a sorceress, but she was so weak inside. Her nerves had been broken by Ultimcia and Seifer’s teeth. Her powers had been sucked out of her body to kill so many people already, she didn’t believe she was still worth saving. So why then. Why would Squall dare to insist of having her running away to safety when it meant that she would abandon him behind?

“I… I called my friends from the faction. Zell and Quistis should come around to pick you up. You’ll go in first to meet up with them. Warn them I’m here. I’ll be easy to find. But I…” He paused, blinking, feeling the harsh cement under his fingers.

The touch was rough and he wanted something cold and sweet to ease the burning in his muscles and in his brain. As if his mind was crash-landing through the atmosphere, to follow his agonizing body, and the pain felt so damn real... He didn’t care to hold it all together anymore, he just wanted to be left alone to howl on his wounds and weep over his sorry self without his pride shattered.

“Man, I’m too exhausted to argue with you, Ellone, doesn’t it tell you just how bad my state is? You’re not giving up on me, you’re going first to get some help, okay? Now just go, for heaven’s sake.”

Ellone slowly understood that Squall wanted to hide his pain, once more. As if hitting earth brought him back to his old self. The self who couldn’t be weak in front of anyone. She knelled next to him, trying to help him settle himself in a more comfortable way. Her torn dress looked awful and her face was covered with dirt, but she looked like a princess compared to him.

“Hold on, Squall, okay? There are a lot of people out there who need you. I know you’ve suffered a lot lately and I know it’s not just your wounds that hurt you right now. But hold on. Just hold on till we make it back.”

“Just go, Ellone. Please.”

“Say you’ll hold on, Squall.”

He sighed, but not too deeply, because just breathing in and out hurt a great deal.

“Of course I will. Now go.”

She ran away, throwing him one last preoccupied look from over her shoulder and soon, her running footsteps were too far for his ears to hear. And he slouched back, letting his breathe run erratic, letting his head turn and turn, closing his eyes to stop it from turning. He wanted to throw up. His right arm was clutched tightly around his bleeding chest. The blood burned in his veins, the tears burned his eyes too. Breathing burned him all over and still, it seemed it would never hurt enough to compensate the feeling in his heart.

His cold sword lied motionless next to him. And Squall chuckled at the thought, though the bitter laugh turned into coughs and he coughed up blood. Heck, the shock when they hit earth must have reopened his wounds. Otherwise, why would he feel so bad?

He tried to stare back at the sky, sucking in some air as the coughs died down. He knew this was sheer madness. Lying in the middle of a broken street, just as broken and ran down as the buildings
lying around the old Brooklyn.

“I’m not going to die here.” He thought out loud.

But he was so exposed; it would be a miracle if he last until help came. Fortunately, there were no black birds in the sky, flying in circles over him. Though there were black spots under his eyelids. Was this how dying felt? The burning earth in his back, the hard cement reaching him through his torn clothes, as claws trying to mess with his tired body. The radiations were turning tangible, as if the air around him was turning into solid snakes that wanted to strangle him. It burned, god, it burned so much his tears were like crystal waters on his open flesh.

_Bite me all you want, trash me if you have the time. I’m such a mess right now, there ain’t much I can feel_, he thought.

And it wasn’t even a relief at this point. He still felt so much inside, as if the poison was already running in his veins.

Then, as his consciousness was trying to fade to escape all the suffering, he heard a noise in the distance. Footsteps on the hard ground. It wasn’t coming from the direction where Ellone had been running. He briefly opened his eyes. Blinked at the light and the burning radiations in the air. Twisted his neck to see what was coming. He had to screw up his eyes at first. A silhouette was running towards him. It was still really small in the distant. He tried to forget the pain to feel its intentions. Had he been spotted already, from so far?

Then, he believed he saw pink fabric on the running frame. And brown hair, untied, floating in her run.

“It… is it my mind playing tricks on me?”

She was running as she always had in her terrible live. Cause the silhouette belonged to a she. She looked tired and worn out, just as him, but at the same time, just seeing her made him feel so grateful he was still alive at this moment. Cause it really had been pink that he saw and brown hair, loosened from her typical braid.

So she was alright. She was alive, on the run as it seems, but she was here. He tried to raise himself back up, but he couldn’t move a finger. He could just blink and try not to blink too much, so that he wouldn’t lose her picture, running towards him. Because it could still be an illusion, couldn’t it? Wasn’t it, after all, he could well be already dead and loosing it in the space between the mortal world and hell and paradise, could he not?

“Ris.”

She slowed down as she saw the fallen capsule and the shape lying on the ground. She looked uncertain and he tried to let out what little was left of his powers, to make her realize it was him. Because he could feel her now. It wasn’t a dream or an illusion, he could feel her fear in the air; he could almost see what had brought her here. He was so open right now; he could see most every memory from every little thing around him.

“Ris!” he tried to raise his voice.

He couldn’t say her whole name. His voice was as broken as his body. But now, the pain was forgotten and he wanted to laugh though he would cough and it would hurt.

“Is that you Squall?”
She held her side, tired of running, but as she noticed the blood on the ground and his torn shirt, she resumed running. She almost flew to him and her long dress followed her slowly as she dropped to her knees right next to him. He followed the curve of her legs and the curves of her falling skirt, mindlessly. He could get so easily distracted by little facts when she was around him.

“Hey, ‘Ris.”

“What happened to you Squall? What are you doing here, I thought you were…! You know it’s dangerous for you to stay around these grounds.”

She snaked one arm under his neck and gently placed his upper body over her knees, to be able to look at him better. His limbs were light in her arms and he let her move him as she pleased, abandoned like a sleeping boy in his mother’s embrace.

“I could ask you the same thing, Aeris… You’re running as if all of hell’s hounds were after you.”

“Don’t mind it… I’m not pursued anymore. I lost those hounds long ago. What about you Squall… What did you do to yourself, you’re all beaten up…”

He saw tears gathering up in her eyes and all he could do was to force a smile, to reassure her.

“I fought a little more than I could handle, that’s all. I’ve seen worse.”

She could have slapped him, but she was too afraid to hurt him, and she simply shook her head, refusing to look at his darkened face, focusing over his wounded chest. She removed his bandages to check if there was anything she could do and let out a yelp of fear when she saw the damages.

“Who did you fought, Squall? Who… Who’s the monster who did this to you?” she asked him, looking furious now.

And he wanted to hold her in his arms so much as she said that, so much it hurt more not to be able to than to be wounded.

“If I tell you, will you answer my question, or will I have to look into your mind, ‘Ris?”

She seemed hesitant, but there was no time for doubt.

“I’ll heal you first,” she decided, gently hovering her hand above his chest. Her fingers started to gleam with a gentle light, and the pain subsided slowly, till there was only a wide scar left, to join all the scars already there. She looked paler from the exhausting treatment, but Squall didn’t have the strength to object to her help as she started healing the wounds on his face and looked around for any other marks of fighting.

“What happened?” she asked when she was done.

Squall was almost able to sit on his own, but he was still weak from the heavy blood loss and he simple wrapped his arms around her, even if it meant touching her skin with his own. She shivered but didn’t feel him invading her thoughts. He was holding himself back, not to scare her. He couldn’t have her scared now. He couldn’t let himself frighten her even one more time, so he would be careful about his feelings and his needs and his over sensibility.

“I killed Seifer.” He whispered.

“Oh Squall…”
How was it she could tell it had hurt him that much, huh? He didn’t really care anymore that she understood him so well. Just hearing her voice gave him the right to feel how he felt and it was enough. He held her closer, so that he could feel protected by her embrace. And how closer he wanted to get, even though there was no strength left in him.

His voice wasn’t firm, but it wasn’t trembling too much as he went on. “I think I got Ultimecia too, but so much happened…”

“How was it she could tell it had hurt him that much, huh? He didn’t really care anymore that she understood him so well. Just hearing her voice gave him the right to feel how he felt and it was enough. He held her closer, so that he could feel protected by her embrace. And how closer he wanted to get, even though there was no strength left in him.”

“Don’t tell me, please. I don’t think I wanna know.”

“Then you tell me. Who scared you away from Lightning and Noctis’ protection? Why are you here, out in the wild Brooklyn?”

She shivered even more as he asked, because remembering hurt, even if she wanted to laugh from the face Sephiroth had made with the blueberry pie’s pieces dripping down his cold face.

As she thought it, he saw the picture in his own mind, because there was a limit of how much he could hold himself back. He felt a lion roaring in his chest at the idea his poor Aeris was being chased after like a common animal.

“I’ll kill him.”

“What will it solve, Squall?”

“If you don’t let me do it, then, we’ll run away somewhere none of them will be able to reach you.”

“Squall, you’re talking nonsense.” She sighed, pushing him back to look at his eyes.

“Maybe am I, but I don’t care. I love you, Aeris. I won’t let you live like a runaway anymore. I can’t.”

It had slipped out before that he could think about it. His heart drummed terribly fast in his chest as she stared at him, shocked beyond words. If there was still enough blood in his veins, it would be turning his cheeks into a flashy red, but he remained white as a sheet and looked very seriously in her trembling eyes.

“I’m not worth…”

“I don’t deserve anything from you, ‘Ris. I’ve been nothing but trouble and you keep on patching me up even when I do terrible mistakes. I’m… I’m sure of myself when I say I love you. So believe me and accept it. We’re in this together. I won’t let you be alone, unless you really want to be.”

Has she given him some of her own energy to make him feel so sure right now? Was it only the effect of being in her arms that made him able to say all that and keep a straight face? He wanted to cry, because he was so scared that she’d say she’d rather be alone than have him around. Her hands on his freshly healed chest were shaking. He hated himself for scaring her by showing up half dead in front of her, but wasn’t her fear for his wellbeing a proof that there really was something more than just friendship between them? He didn’t want anything to stand between them. All he wanted was her, with him, always. She made him feel secure and strong and he wanted to be even stronger for her.

Give me the chance to be that man, Aeris, he thought. Give me my chance.
She shook her head, looking out for her breath. She cleared her throat, uneasily locking her eyes with his.

“Why would I want to be alone, Squall? You’re the only man who can make me feel safe. When you look at me, I know… that I don’t have to fear you. I’m sorry for what happened to us the other day, if I messed up everything…”

“No, it was my…”

She shut him up by putting her finger on his lips, and it felt so natural that he froze, subjugated. He hadn’t realized there weren’t any radiations in the air anymore. As if the Ancient’s presence drove them all away from their own personal space. He barely cared for it, cause as Aeris removed her fingers from his mouth, she shyly linked her lips with his. He closed his eyes, bringing her closer, taken to heaven. She didn’t resist his embrace this time, welcoming his sheltering arms and the warmth of his body, even if there was dry blood on his coat, even if there was sweat and dirt on his face. She gently laid him down, and took his face between her gentle hands, opening her mouth to his tongue. Their kisses last longer and longer and they only stopped to resume kissing, even if they stood in the middle of one of the most dangerous place, exposed to anyone’s eyes.

They could look if they wanted, because Squall didn’t care. This woman was his and no one else. And she didn’t mind if he had possessive thoughts for her. It only meant she had the right to nurture the same possessive thoughts over him. And when she was kissing him, she felt more alive than she ever did in her whole life.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January
Location: Earth, Boston, space ship shuttle
Mission: rescue Stella despite no one ordered us to do so.
Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum and Storm
Message from S.t.o.r.m. End of transmission.

…

“You’re getting married, master? This is grand! Want me to help you with the organization?” Odin asked.

“Why did you have to show up now!” Lightning choked on her words, unable to believe that summoned spirit had the nerve to interrupt them kissing in the middle of the sidewalk.

Noctis was half smiling, not entirely surprised since he had spent the last few days with Odin and since he had learned one important thing about that guy, he was just as him, totally unpredictable.

“Did you show her the ring, sir?”

“You didn’t really give me enough time, man.” He retorted.

Lightning turned to glare at him.

“So he was in the confidence for this too, before that you get the nerve to ask me?!”

“Hey, there’s nothing to get mad over, Light! This guy’s always checking everything that I do
because he’s so worried about you, so of course, he knew. He just tried to help me getting ready to ask you.”

“But!...”

Lightning wasn’t sure why she felt angry to be the last one knowing that Noctis wanted to marry her. He had asked her, not her brother Cloud, so where was the harm? Since his wake from his coma, Noctis hadn’t have much chance to settle down and see his old friends. Odin had become his friend, so she guessed she should just accept that her own summon spirit was running some stuff behind her back for her own good.

“I don’t know what I’m getting at. Odin, just stop popping out of nowhere and yelling things at me when I’m not ready for it. I didn’t call you and here, you nearly gave me a heart attack!”

The knight in shining armor backed away from his master, pretending to fear her wrath, and Noctis couldn’t help himself but smile again at that. It was starting to feel familiar and it was comforting in itself.

“Let’s get back in the car. Stella won’t wait for us forever. And I don’t want Storm to wake up alone and panic.” He suggested.

Lightning nodded and the three of them got back in the car. Lightning settled the still sleeping Storm on her lap, with his face leaning on her chest and he automatically snuggled to her, burying his face between her breasts. And instead of seeing anything bad about it, she just smiled, looking at Noctis’ son with a tenderness she kept only for those she held really dear to her heart. Noctis noticed every part of it and was delighted.

The woman he loved, she loved his son. He really hoped that after this, they would be able to get all settled together, so that they could rest their shaken hearts and live a normal life, as a real family.

With Raine, Storm, Lightning and me, he thought to himself, grinning as he started the engine.

Then, a thought made him realize things weren’t going to be so easy. If they did save Stella, where would she go and how would she interact with them? He knew that an adoptive family wasn’t always the best thing someone could have. He also knew that his son was already really attached to Stella and that he couldn’t take him away from her. But she had done so many wrong decisions, never mind what reason she had, he couldn’t forgive her.

Do I want her saved or do I want to go to make sure she’ll never come back to haunt us when we’re a family? Am I really this kind a monster, I’d rather have her dead then stirring up troubles between Lightning and me? After all, Stella has never meant nothing but trouble to me, but that doesn’t mean she’s a bad person. When I was at my lowest, she picked me up. But wasn’t only so that I could be a good father for her son? Hadn’t she wished I was dead in that coma so that I never claimed my fatherhood and that she could tell her son I was dead?

He had tried not to think like that before. But now, it was hard to stop his mind. And Odin’s gaze was on him in the rearview, severe and reprobating.

“If you do something with half your heart into it, it will only get half done.” The summoned spirit whispered out loud.

“What did you say,” Lightning asked, taken aback.

“Oh, nothing, just a saying we spirits have often in time of needs. I hope this mission get well
done, master. I hope no regrets are left behind you when you’ll walk back home.”

Lightning and Noctis exchanged a look. And the young man wondered, was his Claire thinking that same thing as him? That they’d be better off without Stella existing? Light had every right to think so. After all, she was the one being plunged into doubts because of that girl who had showed up from nowhere. She was the one who suffered the most, though often, Noctis tried to calm her down by reminding her that they were all in the same boat. He hadn’t ask for any of this. Hadn’t asked for such complications, in his already over complicated life.

I hate it, he thought. I want Storm to be happy. I want to save Stella. But I don’t want any more problems to stir because she’s saved. I want her out of the picture. Does this make me awful? Does that still give me the right to call myself his father? He wondered, looking at Storm.

The small boy as just as lost as him in this wide world. He had the age of a baby. Had been forced to walk on his two feet and to use powers that meant killing people before that he couldn’t even understand the meaning of life. His mother was being taken away from him. And getting this situation put back to right should have been Noctis’ top priority.

Storm isn’t a burden, he thought this time. But I’m surviving this one, so that I can get married to Lightning and get to be a father for both Storm and Raine. I’ll survive and keep them all alive, whatever it’ll take. Even if it means that I have to break myself or Stella along the way. I won’t let her stole anything else from me.

Because after all, the Black Faction general instructors weren’t the only one to blame. She was one of them after all. She had said yes to put Storm into existence. She had been egoist to believe she could be a good enough mother to compensate all the rest of his small, sorrowful life. And for that, even if she was the best mother in the world—which she wasn’t- Noctis hated her more than Lightning ever could. But since Lightning hated her too, he couldn’t say it out loud. Since Storm needed to believe him, he had to be perfect. But it was hard to stare at Odin’s eyes telling him he was still far from perfect.

“‘You don’t have to be perfect out there. But if you’re not willing to do what it takes, something that may never be undone will be done. Keep that in mind, sir. And you too master. Doubting is the worst things you could do.”’

Odin vanished after saying that, and Lightning looked at Noctis, who focused on his driving, pretending he hadn’t heard anything. He was sick with doubts, but he was still going.

“Are you with me in this, Lightning?” he asked her.

“Always.” She replied, without a doubt.

“Then, don’t let me go astray out there.”

She gaze at him, not sure what he meant. Not sure if she was the right one to force him one way or another, when he was so much more powerful than her inside. Her heart was beating fast in her chest and she was scared that it’d wake up Storm.

“I’ll do my best, my love. Just do you what you can.”

Oh my love, my love, tell me I’ll do the right thing, he begged inwardly.

…

Time: unknown
It almost was harder to wake up for Cloud this time. It was a few hours later from what had happened last night or last morning. He felt numb and tired, but also quite good. Yuna’s breathing was gently brushing his chest. God, he hadn’t dreamed this. His nightmare was over. And she was with him. Not that she really had anywhere else to go. But she could have left him behind, to run away. And she was here, now.

He wrapped his arms around her, gently. Her skin was soft under his hands. She smelled good. He wanted to hide his face in her hair, but he was afraid to wake her up by moving too much. His stomach growled. And he wasn’t just hungry for food… He wasn’t sure if it was okay to act like that. He had the impression things had changed too quickly. He wasn’t angry about it, he didn’t feel jealous about his sisters or anyone, since he had what he wanted.

“Don’t go celebrating too soon.” a voice warned him, groaning slightly.

Looking over his shoulder, Cloud spotted a tall green dog, which looked like a grown up version of… Bunkle?

“You’re not angry at me, are you? Not after shocking me back in that cell.”

“I don’t know what you did to my master, but I don’t like how close you are with her right now. Get away from my mistress, you punk!” The dog barked, bolts of thunder running over his back.

Cloud chuckled, not afraid one bit.

“If I stay where I am, you can’t attack me. And you’d better not try anything, cause I have a summon too.”

As he said that, he called out Fenrir, which was much much bigger than the electric Carbuncle.

“There’s a pup in your room, master.” The giant wolf observed, baring his fangs to the electric dog.

Bunkle looked angry, but he ran away with his tail between his legs.

“Will this be enough, master?”

Cloud was surprised to be able to hear Fenrir talk, usually they understood each other without any words. And slowly, the soldier realized that the wolf wasn’t talking at all. But they were so connected, understanding was like hearing a tall and strong voice. It was comforting.

The summon vanished with a smile and Cloud realized he’d been acting like a child whenever it came down to Bunkle. He usually had nothing against animals. But that alien thing seemed to run a competition with him, to see would get Yuna’s attention. It was almost pitiful to think he could consider a dog as a rival. But Cloud couldn’t help himself. He knew he was winning, so why not have fun messing around with the small dog?
Sighing, he looked back at Yuna. She was starting to move slightly, waking up. She blinked as she was met by his smile and his warmth. She was so worn out from her earlier actions that she had trouble thinking well enough to understand why she was there, in such a position.

“Hey there, sleeping beauty.” Cloud greeted her.

She smiled, snuggling closer, still not entirely aware that they were both naked. As the covers shifted a little, she noticed this important fact and looked back up, entirely awake now.

“I… Am I recalling yesterday correctly?”

“I can help you recall it, if you’ve forgotten something.”

He looked quite horny as he cornered her in his arms. She blushed, but was delighted to feel his lips running over her face, down her jaw and her neck. He would surely have gone all the way if his cell hadn’t started to ring. He lifted himself up, surprise and anger fighting together in his mind and face.

“Who could be in a close enough range to call us?”

Yuna shrugged her shoulders, refusing to let him live her. She was still so in need to know he was alive and wasn’t going to abandon her. He fought his way out from her embrace, mumbling that it had to be important.

“Where’s this damn phone?”

Cloud had rolled on his side to look around the bet without getting up. The sheets slid down as he moved and soon, Yuna could stare at his bareness, blushing even after all they’d been through. Groaning as he was searching under his bed, he let out a yell of victory, took out the ringing phone from a bag or something and sat up on the bed, folding his legs.

“Strife speaking,” he answered. “Oh, general. Yeah, we’re coming back. I can’t really tell you when we’ll arrive, I was … out cold for a while. Yuna’s alright, sir. Why are you calling? My.. my sister? Lightning’s going to Mars?!”

Yuna tensed up as she heard the surprise in his voice at the news. What was going on? She knew Serah would always stay on earth, but Lightning was almost in the same line of business as the army. It was a little more complicated, but Cloud never really explained it to her. It was confidential information. And Tifa herself said that the Strife family was pretty messed up, enough so that the twin brother and sister wouldn’t accept to have the same last name.

“…” she wasn’t sure if she should try to remind Cloud she was sitting right next to him or just wait for him to finish his discussion with his general.

So she waited, covering herself in their mutually warmed sheet, still staring at Cloud’s naked body with a mix of amazement and shock.

This man was my man yesterday. He’s my boyfriend. He can make me reach the stars just with his kisses and… Is this love? It is, right? I wouldn’t feel so happy if it wasn’t? With him, I’m whole, and myself, and more than I ever thought I could be. I’m not just telling myself stories. I love him, from head to toes. I love him, she repeated herself, a goofy smile birthing on her lips.

Cloud turned his head around and noticed her staring and the look in her eyes. And he blushed as he understood and had to cough to keep his cool in his discussion with the general. God, he had forgotten how it felt to be in love with someone! And to feel their love emanating from their eyes…
“We’ll stop by Mars, general, I swear, and we’ll see things to right. But I got something important to do right now. Yes, I’m hanging off the phone.”

He threw the blasted thing to the floor, unable to remove his eyes from Yuna.

“You know Cloud, if something really bad is going on, maybe we should hurry and…”

He tackled her to the bed, grinning and shrugged off the matter.

“Lightning’s a big girl. She’ll be mad at me if I burst in on her job. And we still got two weeks before us till we get to Mars.”

“Don’t you think this is kinda… Lazy just to toss the matter away?”

“If I understand well, Lightning is with Noctis. And my twin sister recently got herself a summoned spirit and she has a family of her own now, so I know she won’t be running into danger unprepared. Plus, even if we tried to speed up the trip, we would only end up breaking up the ship, won’t we?”

Being the specialist engineer here, she had to agree with him. He kissed her lips before to went down to her neck another time, his hands gently removing the sheets that were hiding her curves.

“Then there’s no helping it, is it?” she sighed, holding back a moan.

“You didn’t sound so formal about it a moment earlier. You don’t like it when I’m on top?”

“I think it’s the contrary, really,” she blushed.

It was one thing to have him surrendered to her and yesterday was exceptional, since he was tired and worn out. Now, he was in charge and in control and he moved with an assurance that kinda scared her. The way he touched her, she thought she was going mad. She couldn’t tell where his mouth and his hands were but whatever he did, she couldn’t have him stopping.

“If you take me too far, I might not come back,” she whispered, scared that she was right.

“That’s why you have to take me with you, Yuna.” He gently coddled her.

And she understood that even if he was on top, it didn’t mean she wasn’t in control. It was a question of sharing and of getting used to each other. They exchanged swift kisses, getting lost together to forget all the real world worries.

To be continued…
Chapter 35

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part IX

Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown

Location: outer space, closing to March

Mission: infiltrating the headquarters of March’s Black Faction base and rescuing Stella Fleuret, if possible.

Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum and Storm

Message from Rufus Shinra. End of transmission.

…”

“Storm? Wake up, Storm. We’re landing.”

The small boy had been sleeping for the whole travel. Lightning was setting the last arrangement, already dressed in her combat suit, a leather overall that showed her every curves but protected her against enemy’s fire and space pressure. She had refused to put on a mask, braiding her head on the back of her head just to keep them out of the way. She looked as if she was coming straight of some special agent movie, just as Noctis remembered her as his mission partner. He realized that he missed seeing her in a plain dress and everyday clothes. All right, she was exciting as an agent, but he could slack on all the adrenaline and the wounds the missions implied…

Noctis was wearing a similar suit, but in dark silver leather. It fitted with his hair and he looked dashing as ever. He had guns tied to his tights and one sword on his back. He’d been missing his good old weapons… He knew he didn’t really need them anymore, since he could summon swords out of thin air and transmute stuff by his very will. But still, real weapon were reassuring.

“Storm? Come on Storm, wake up!” he gently shook his son.

The boy opened his blue eyes and looked up. For once, he had slept well, which was a miracle in the given situation. Unfortunately, as soon as he wake up, he remembered why he was in a rocket and why he was seeing his father instead of his mother. He jumped to his feet, panicking.

“Are we there yet? You didn’t go save mom without me, did you?”

Noctis shook his head.

“We’re landing. We’re going to save her now. But only after you’ve eaten a bite and I’m sure you’ll stay standing on your feet.”

“I’m all ready, I don’t need food!” the kid protested.

His stomach growled in contradiction, and Lightning simply shoved a plate of army ration in the face of the young boy.

“Eat, get dressed in a protective suit and we’re off.” She said.

Storm blinked. The emotional woman was gone, though he could still see a warm glint in her eyes. Even if she was far from her home planet and all, her mother instinct was clearly there. He
swallowed down his food quickly, sad at the idea his own mother was in still in danger while he was here.

“A protective suit?”

“I had a few friends from the Faction built you a fighting suit. It’s bullet proof around the chest, but it would have been too heavy if you were protected everywhere, so you’d better not take a shot at any other place.”

Storm smirked, raising his eye brows.

“You know I totally don’t need that? I can repel bullets with the radiance.”

“Yeah, well, let’s say I still want you to wear it, to make sure I’ll still have my arrogant son by the end of the day. I know you could lose focus at some point out there.” Noctis retorted, smirking just as arrogantly as the boy.

Lightning let out a deep sigh. The ship shook around them one brief moment before that an artificial voice announced that they had just landed on their target point. March was waiting. And Stella too.

“Please guys, just get on with it. This will not be a walk in the park. I bet they’re waiting for us in front of the door right now…”

Storm felt his stomach churning at the prospect of what could be truly awaiting…

“So this is it, huh?”

His father nodded and patted him on the head.

“Be strong, son. We’re all going to do our best.”

Storm tried to smile, but somehow, his heart wasn’t into it. He had a bad feeling about all of this. As if it was already too late. As if they had taken too much time. It wasn’t as if they could have taken less time than that, it was early morning right after they decided to go out to save Stella, so after all it was already good that they were already on March…

He couldn’t say he was scared. He didn’t have to say it either. Lightning knelt down to give him a crushing hug as they gathered in front of the exit door. As he was held securely in her arms, she whispered to him:

“Whatever happened out there, we’ll be there for you Storm. Both of us.”

And this time, he had the strength to smile. If Lightning was saying it, it had to be true.

“Thanks.” He whispered back.

Tears were gathering in his eyes for some reason and he scowled at the dirt that supposedly got in his eyes as he dried them.

“Let’s go.”

…

As they entered the March space port, both Noctis and Storm felt that something wasn’t right. There were no guards. But there was a welcoming committee. Ten machine gun droids were
waiting and they all aimed at them at the same time. Lightning froze on place, a little shocked. Storm and Noctis were the first to react. As the first bullet ran in the air, they let their radiance take over, covering their closest surroundings with a wide barrier. Lightning was thankful to be with them, since minutes later, the robots were falling into pieces, dismantled by Storm’s power.

The father and son exchanged a smile.

“It’s easier then all your video game, dad.”

“Don’t get too cocky, son, this is only the start of things…”

Lightning looked to the ceiling.

“I’m surrounded by psychos.” She whispered.

And somehow, that made both guys laugh. It was the truth, their life was far from what it should be. Storm’s laugh was bitter. Tears were coming back.

“Let’s hurry. I bet there’s more of those robots coming for us.” Noctis sighed.

They ran to get across the port’s platform and into the March’s base. It was a wide construction, all in wires and steel blocks. It wasn’t tall, but vast, covering almost one entire third of the planet. Stella had to be there. It was Feds territory. And as they had finally learned, the Feds were part of the Faction. In fact, quite a lot of G.I. were Feds…

They barged in from the main entrance, literally tearing the metal open with a giant Radiance made lance. Lightning was a little scared to see the expand of Noctis and Storm’s powers. They were almost invincible. She felt useless as she followed them, and all she could do was try to remember them to be careful.

“You’re too rash. We’re rushing in. They’ll know where to find us, we should…”

“There’s no time to lose,” Storm cut her off. “Mom is here.”

“I sense her too. She’s alive.” Noctis added.

“But she’s suffering…”

Lightning felt her jealousy coming back. And she wanted to slap them. She had more than five senses herself, but she couldn’t tell what they were saying. What was going on? Why did her life have to become so paranormal? Weren’t she and Noctis a team? Why was he doing the entire job by himself suddenly? How could she feel so useless, while she was Lightning!

“I know things aren’t looking well, but we can’t just barge in like that.”

“It’s already done, dear. They greeted us with an army of droids. They’re expecting us. I don’t know if it’s a trap or not, but this time, I won’t take my time to give them a chance to surprise us.”

And she could understand what he meant. She shivered at the thought of reliving the nightmare from two years ago. She missed Raine. She wanted to hide in Noctis’ arms. But Storm was running ahead, going up a bundle of stairs and his father was following him closely, so she had no choice but to follow.

Soldiers appeared as they turned a corner, but they shot or slice them, not caring for what was going on here. Their mission was to find Stella and rescue her. Robots and alarm system couldn’t
stop them. Lightning was slowly realizing what kind of monsters the Faction had created. She almost wanted to summon Odin to have someone normal to support her.

“All right, we should find a main computer to check where she is.” Noctis suggested.

“You think they’ll keep in their files? You think they’re that dumb?” Storm objected.

“I think they did it every other time we were looking for something in one of the Feds building. And if the Faction are the Feds, then…”

“You got a point.” Lightning smiled.

Gosh, they could still be normal, somehow… That was a relief.

They kept on walking, going up and down countless stairs, looking for the main computer. Most every room was unlocked, but most every room was also empty and when they weren’t, all they met were more enemy soldiers and agents or robots… There was no material to use, nothing to hack. Every walls were white or grey and they often met a few spots of blood here and there, which got them thinking that the base had seen a few attacks already, if not a rebellion. What had been going on in here?

Lightning could barely breathe the air and Storm was scared to advance anymore, getting the impression they were going to get lost in this awful place… Noctis also felt it in the ghostly ambiance. Everything was empty, vague and cold around them. The only sounds they could hear were coming from the ventilations and their footsteps on the hard steel floor. The air was cold in their lungs.

As they walked into the nth room, Lightning felt a presence that got her lingering a little more than she should have. Noctis looked over his shoulder as he felt she was staying back.

“What are you doing, Light?”

“I think… It’s as if something was calling me.”

“Calling you?” He asked, frowning. “Don’t stray from us, I don’t want us to separate… This base has nothing to do with the one I remember from my last missions here…”

“But it’s still there… This weird feeling.”

Lightning swirled around, to check her surroundings. Storm growled as his father got him by the shoulder, to prevent him from going any further in.

“Lightning, are you…”

Noctis walked closer to the room entrance. He was getting a strange feeling from all this. There was no voice calling, but Lightning’s eyes were glimmering with a green light that he barely ever saw in there. And he knew what it meant. Something was triggering the mutated mako in her blood. That meant danger. The airs on the back of his neck were all jerking up from the smell in the air.

Something was rotten here. And Lightning was turning her back on them, getting away from him. She knew it was dangerous, she knew they should stay together. This could only mean that the calling was strong. And it rarely ever happened to her. Her mako wasn’t pure enough to be triggered by just anything.
“It’s growing closer.” She whispered.

“What’s going on daddy?”

Noctis tried to get out of the room, but he felt a transparent barrier pushing him back. He tried to use his Radiance on it, but for some reason, his powers wouldn’t answer its call.

“Claire, snap out of it, get back here!” he yelled, panic ringing in his voice now.

She turned her head to him, looking strangely calm. Her eyes were so green and so bright, as if a fire had been lighted behind her irises. It was almost blinding to stare at. He saw a shadow coming up from behind her.

“Everything’s okay, Noctis. The voice means no harm. I know her.”

“Well, I don’t! Behind you, Claire!”

Storm felt panic rise in him too. His father never called Lightning “Claire”. It had to mean something. The grown man’s hand could break his shoulder if it was gripping any tighter on him. They were here to save someone, not to lost one more person.

“Who are you talking to, darling? My name’s Lightning.” The young woman smiled.

The green light was now leaking out of her eyes, surrounding her. She didn’t notice the phenomenon, she was oblivious to everything, simply smiling, listening to the “voice” calling her.

“Light, please, listen to me!”

Noctis let go of Storm’s shoulder to use his fists against the barrier standing between him and Lightning. She took another step backwards, the shadows multiplying in her back. Why couldn’t he tear down that stupid barrier? Why was he stuck here as Lightning stood so close to danger, not even noticing the situation she was in.

“Wake up, Lightning!”

She looked to the left, not hearing him anymore. A smile shone on her face. And finally, the voice spoke high enough for Noctis to hear it:

SAY GOODBYE, RAVEN.

He froze as he recognized the voice. There was nothing gentle about it!

“Barthendelus!”

A steel wall fell in front of him, shoving them back, as Barthendelus’ laugh resonated through the room they were standing in. Noctis banged on the new wall, angry at himself for not seeing it coming. It was a trap, of course, it had to be a trap. For both him and Lightning.

They had always wanted to use her. And he sent her right in the tigers’ den. He should have convinced her to stay home. He should have… He should… What was he supposed to do?

“Dammit! Where’s Odin when his master needs him?!” he yelled, throwing one last punch in the wall.

His fist hurt a little afterwards, but it was nothing like the feeling in his heart.
What could they be doing to Lightning right now? How could they get all her suspicion to vanish just like that? Where was their mako’s source? He could almost feel it, he wanted to destroy it just to know she would get back to her senses and try to defend herself. Storm observed his father’s anger for a moment, not sure of what to do or what to say… Then, after using his own Radiance to no avail, he turned to the door on the other side of the room.

“I know this is a harsh thing to say, but shouldn’t we at least try to find mom while we’re still free to move?”

“I’m not abandoning Lightning!” Noctis protested.

“What can you do for her right now? You can’t even reach her, let alone help. It seems this room is entirely Radiance-proof. I can’t summon it and you can’t either. We’re helpless, so why not move to find somewhere we can be of use?”

“I know, but if all the other rooms are also like that, what are we supposed to do?”

“My mom is out there, maybe dying as we speak! I don’t care if I can’t use my Radiance. If I can at least talk them out of…”

Noctis felt his heart twisting in his chest. He wanted to rescue Lightning, but whichever he attacked with his radiance, wall, floor or roof, he couldn’t do anything. He had already tried his gun, and it was hopeless. He looked back one last time, wishing he could see through steel and kill Barthendelus just by looking at him. If glare could kill, the man would have died a hundred times by now.

“You’re right son. Stella also needs us.”

It was killing him to say that. He couldn’t care less of Stella. Lightning was…

*I’ll be coming back for you, Claire. I swear it. We’ll leave together, all three of us,* he thought to himself.

He realized he couldn’t even include Stella in that “us”. He shook his head and walked up to the other door. There was no pressure in the next room, as he tried its radiance, a sword was easily summoned. But if he tried to move it into the previous room, the weapon would simply vanish, as if it never existed. And it was painful.

“Can you still feel her, Storm?”

“You mean, my mom?”

Noctis nodded.

“I think I can. Can’t you?”

“My senses are all thrown off. I’ll need time to sense her again. All I can think about is…”

He could say Lightning name with the impression he was leaving her behind. He had to be mad. There was no other explanation.

“I understand, I’m worried about her too.”

Noctis wondered if he could let Storm go on and go looking for Lightning on his side for one instant. Then he realized that he couldn’t. Leaving the kid was tempting the devil. What if he
stumbled on the corpse of his own mother? What if Stella was dying right now and Storm had to face such a terrible emotion alone? He would go berserk? And who could stop him better than his own father?

Right now, I’m all that he’s got. I mustn’t lost it. I must stay strong. For him and Lightning. And Raine.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January –night currently falling-

Location: Earth, Old Brooklyn

Mission: getting somewhere safe

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Message from Zell Dincht. End of transmission.

…

As the support Ellone was supposed to find arrived, it was to found Squall and Aeris closely cuddled to each other, sleeping on the cement, surrounding by a sweet mist that pushed away all kind of radiations…

“I see he’s totally dying…” Zell sighed, slightly jealous.

“How can they carelessly fall asleep like that, in the middle of old Brooklyn?” Selphie added, baffled.

Careless was a word that never fitted with Squall. But right now, he sure seemed careless.

“I guess this is what you’d called a miracle,” Ellone smiled.

She was happy to see Squall’s face so lighten up, even in his sleep.

“Or well, maybe he just fainted from the exhaustion.” Selphie suggested, hardly holding back her laughter.

She snapped a picture from Squall and Aeris, because she couldn’t wait to mock him with it and it was a too great occasion to miss.

“With a girl in his arms?” Zell added.

“Would you stop staring at that girl and get working?!” Selphie retorted. (After all, Zell was going out with her!) “Our friend still need a good doctor and she could use some refreshing.”

…

When Squall woke up, he was alone in a hospital bed, but he just had to turn his head to see Aeris sleeping on the bed next to his. She looked more peaceful than she’d ever been and it was to believe just a few hours ago, she had been running away from the terrible Sephiroth. He couldn’t wait to tell they were both safe and that she didn’t need to worry about anything anymore. He couldn’t wait to hold her in his arms and kiss her everywhere, but his body was still pretty numb from all the blood loss and he understood he would do better to sleep a little longer. Though right then, he realized something was missing.
Lightning wasn’t home. So she had to be on a mission. But that could mean that she was in danger. He hadn’t had any news from her since he left for the Antlion. That seems like years ago.

He looked around, to see if his phone was lying anywhere close. Nope. So then, he reluctantly closed his eyes and tried to fall back to sleep, and especially to forget all the worries he could still have. But his mind was jammed on it. What could be going on with Lightning? Where was she and where was Noctis? His best friend had gotten back her baby girl, why would she rush into a new mission?

As he wondered in question, he realized he could feel a lot more things when his eyes were closed. He could tell how many people were awake or asleep in the hospital. He could tell the whole heartbreak story of the nurse standing in the farthest corridor of this place. He could even feel Sephiroth shady presence, roaming the streets in search of his precious Cetra.

So then, could he go even farther, to feel things echoing from other countries? He tried to throw his senses as far as possible. It drove him to sleep, but his mind was wide awake, exploring the world. And he found the Faction, in an uproar, because Lightning and Noctis had decided to make a revolution and where gone to rescue Stella with Storm. He understood the feelings easier than any words and saw memories in the mind of unknowing spies comrades. He ventured further, to learn and satisfy his worried mind. Where was Lightning? What was happening to her, to make his heart beating so fast? Aeris was safe next to him, but his friend, his best friend on the other end…

He finally reached her. He could have sworn he was standing right next to her, but he wasn’t. It was just his mind, the ghost of his conscience, that could see what was going on. She was with Barthendelus, that crazy mastermind from the Feds. That fact was, he was from the Faction too. But at this moment, Lightning wasn’t scared. Another voice was soothing her, calming her down. A familiar voice, even for Squall. As he tried to recognize her, he was pushed away by Barthendelus’ inhuman strength.

YOU HAVE NOTHING TO DO HERE, KITTYCAT!

This sounded like a voice he knew alright. The spiritual energy sent his mind flying in the dept on space, lost with only more questions and worries. What would happen to Lightning? How come she was alone, when Noctis should have been looking after her? And now, where was he?

He could see stars, burning in the dark skies. He felt a nice, refreshing wind on his skin. He wasn’t sure if he was naked or not. If he was alive or not. He was so far gone. But then, he bolted from a sudden shock. Electricity coursed in his veins. His eyes opened. He could see through his eyelids, but stars were brighter when you looked at them with eyes wide open. He saw a shape formed within the stars. It grew, slowly, as if it was being born. It was a bird. The biggest bird he had ever seen. And its cry was his cry and its strength was its strength. He could tell as much. He felt its life, rushing in his veins. He wasn’t Squall anymore; he was an entity far bigger than that. He was a star, a shooting star running between galaxies. He was the giant bird, strong enough to live in outer space. He was pure thunder and steel, running through the sky, running away from dead and fear.

WHO ARE YOU? The bird asked

“I’m Squall.” He answered.

I ALREADY KNEW THAT, SOMEHOW. BUT WHAT ARE YOU?

“You should tell me, because I really don’t know.”

IF YOU DON’T KNOW, THEN YOU CAN BECOME SOMETHING ELSE. HOW ABOUT
BEING MY MASTER?

“Why would you want a master?”

RUNNING FREE IN THE COSMOS IS LIKE RUNNING CRAZY. BOUND ME, AND I’LL LOVE TO FLY AGAIN.

“You have your own problems, just as me.”

I THINK WE CAN HELP EACH OTHER.

“Alright. Who are you?” he asked the giant and golden bird.

QUEZACOLTZ

Squall also knew it, right before the bird said it. He understood somehow that he had just met a summoned spirit. As he woke up in his hospital bed once more, he had never felt as strong. But the ghost of worries was still there. Lightning was almost lost and there was no time to reach her!

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. 2th January

Location: Earth, Boston

Mission: getting back asap to the squad’s HQ, cause one baby Raine is hard to handle…

Soldiers: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed

Message from squad’s 8. End of transmission.

…

“So, we’ll be landing in about, five minutes…” Cloud sighed.

He was half happy to get back home and half mad to lost this chance of spending quality time with Yuna. The said girl was doing the last repairs to the ship, Bunkle watching closely over her and barking at Cloud every time the man threw even a stare at his mistress. The summoned spirit was really overprotective and though Cloud was all ready to fight with the green dog, Yuna wanted both guys to get used to accept each other and work as a team. Bunkle had to endure the fact his mistress would often kiss the soldier out of the blue, because they were in love. Cloud had to endure the fact his girlfriend would start to cuddle and play with the dog instead of him whenever the poor thing looked too lonely.

And hell, sometimes, Cloud wished he could have the same puppy eyes that thing had. He needed a lot of cuddling, even if he wanted to play it tough.

“Here’s alpha wolf to gamma, do you copy?” he asked to his comlink.

He needed to warn the army that they were landing. It was a normal procedure. No one else had a right to try and stop them. They were part of the military, and the army was the next strongest organization on the planet right after the Faction.

“Here’s gamma, we can see you alpha wolf. You’ve got clearance to land on the H-596 target. Do you carry any prisoner with you?”
“Negative. Warn general Jecht that we’re coming. I want to make my report as soon as my feet touch the ground.”

“The general is busy right now, it will have to wait. You’ll be greeted by your squad, alpha wolf. Land now. Call again if something’s amiss. Gamma over and out.”

Cloud nodded to himself and manoeuvred the ship into landing on the right spot. He was happy to see his squad members waiting for him. He docked the rocket in the complicated mechanism the army used to make sure the space ship wouldn’t touched directly the earth before to go under heavy search. After all, they could have entered in contact with aliens. And Jenova was the greatest threat humanity could ever fear, right after fearing its own kind...

“Welcome home colonel!” Yuffie shouted happily, jumping in the air.

Vincent was standing really calmly next to her, as stoic as ever, but a slight smile crept on his face. He was also glad to see his colonel doing okay. Cloud had put new clothes on and looked in better shape than he did last time he had meet his squad. His eyes were maybe a little darker than usual from the lack of sleep, but for once, it was a good lack of sleep.

“Hey, spikey, we had a visit from your sister just a few hours ago.”

“Oh right, my sis. She’s really going to march?”

“She should already be there.” Barret added.

He looked annoyed, but it wasn’t by the fact Lightning had left for March. The eight squad knew pretty well that Lightning Farron was just as unbeatable as her brother, so they wouldn’t worry about her.

Yuna stepped off the rocket, followed by her grown Carbuncle. Red barked at the green dog, who simply growled back, while Lucrecia frowned.

“Something happened to Bunkle?”

“Oh, he suddenly decided to grow up, if that’s what you wonder about.” Cloud retorted. “And he’d better stay nice to Nanaki, alright, Bunkie?”

The green dog bare his teeth to the soldier, but a stroke of Yuna’s hand calmed him down.

“We have a lot of explaining to do, but I think this can wait till we’re back in the squad’s barracks, what d’you think?” the young woman suggested.

She was still a little tired from all the hardship faced through the trip. And she needed to sit down after all the extra repairs she’d been doing during the last two days.

“Yeah, well, if we’re going back in, first, I gotta warn you, colonel. Your sister didn’t visit just for fun. She had a little favour to ask. And that got us to learn you had a little niece.”

“Oh… Babysitting, already?” Cloud smiled despite the clear annoyance on Barret’s face.

“Don’t get me wrong man, I’m happy to be of help, but…”

“Army’s headquarters are no place for a child.” Vincent added.

“Oh, but she’s such a cutie, that sweet baby.” Yuffie smiled. “Plus, I think we might need to change the rules over that, or else, I’ll have to take a sabbatical year…”
Valentine looked down at her as she leaned on his side, looking deviously cute.

“What does that mean?” he asked, raising one eyebrow.

She whispered an answer to his ear and Cloud could easily guess by the sudden blush on Vincent’s face that the squad was going to grow up in an unpredictable way. Maybe would he be ask to be a godfather for a little Valentine soon.

“Okay guys, let’s get inside and sort all this out. We all got tons of news, it seems.”

They mostly laughed, though Yuna felt a little bad for the kind of news they had. Jenova was dead. That was a clear fact. And it was a good news. But that fact she indirectly or directly killed the ancient was still scary. Sometimes, she’d wake up at night, with the cries of the blue woman still clear in her mind. At those time, Cloud would hug her close and whisper comforting words to her ear till she would go back to sleep, or Bunkle would snuggled up closer to her, chasing away any doubts. But the fact were still there. Jenova was dead. She said to have been summoned to their world by Braska Alphed, Yuna’s father. This had to be a nightmare, and a lie, nothing else. But despite herself, Yuna doubted. She knew nothing of her father and his doings.

Plus, Jenova had said she was a witch. A sorceress. And after all, she could control an electric Carbuncle, who had proved to be a summoned spirit. Cloud was using Fenrir when needed, but he had mako. She hadn’t receive any mako. So how come she could have a summon? Was her father a summoner? Did she inherit his legacy without even knowing about it?

She shook her head, growing paler as her thoughts were running wild. Being a witch wasn’t something she wished to anyone. Those kind of gifted were chased around as prey by the most influent organization. And slowly, she was beginning to wonder if the army hadn’t accepted her as a soldier because of her hidden potential. Who knew what their many tests could measure? Jecht seemed pretty kin on putting her in danger, by sending her on Pluto. Did the general know something she should have? She remembered that her father had known the man, back in the days.

Cloud looked over his shoulder and gasped as he saw how pale she looked. Even if the whole squad was looking, he wrapped on arm around her, gently asking her if everything was alright. She shook her head a second time, feeling herself flushing as every soldier could see the extra attention she was getting.

“Let’s get back to our barracks. I guess you could use real food and some sleep.”

“I bet meeting with Raine will help you feeling better, Yuna!” Yuffie suggested with enthusiast.

Vincent stood still next to her, still shaken by the “news”…

As Cloud looked back to his squad, he noticed someone was missing. His heart burned in his chest as he realized he had wished she wouldn’t be there waiting. Tifa… He didn’t know how to face her now that he was with someone new. It was easy to resent her as long as he was lonely and she was the one still having fun in her life. Now…

“Where’s Tifa?”

“She’s taking care of Raine. We couldn’t bring the baby out. The bosses don’t even know she’s here.”

*And I bet it’s better that way,* Cloud thought to himself.

How could he report that he was babysitting his niece while being at work? The army had already
called him to ask if he knew why his sister would go to March, and he had no idea why. But he could bet it was something important. Surely something dangerous also. He felt his heart skip a beat. Just one. His breathing grew quicker. It had been a long time since he had felt this way. As if a part of him was in danger. And he couldn’t do anything to help it.

Yuna tensed in his grip, feeling the change in him.

“What’s going on?” she asked him.

“It’s Lightning. She’s in danger.”

To be continued…
Chapter 36

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part X

Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown

Location: March

Mission: infiltrating the headquarters of March’s Black Faction base and rescuing Stella Fleuret, if possible.

Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum and Storm

Warning: It seems our agents have been separated. They no longer work under our orders. The top bosses were in fact working with the Feds all this time and Barthendelus showed up. They could need reinforcement, but the question is, do we have any to sent them?

Message from Rufus Shinra. End of transmission.

...

She was tied to a wall, standing in a translucid pillar that isolated her from the rest of the room. Her chains seemed heavy and her feet didn’t even touch the ground. Her hair was a mess, but she still looked beautiful. There were unknown stars in her eyes. Tears. Countless tears pouring from her dark blue eyes. Noctis shivered as he stood in front of the devices recording the live action going on somewhere else inside of the base. Stella was there. Right there, on that screen. He was still mad at her, but his heart was still torn. To think his poor son had to see his mother in such a shape. It wasn’t fair. He remembered his own mom, lying lifelessly on the floor. And the blood. He hated himself for remembering everything so well.

He shook his head, trying to focus. Storm and him had been separated just as Lightning had been taken away from them a few hours ago. Noctis had tried everything he could to stay close to the kid. But an instant of inattention had been enough. It seemed the rooms from this base could be switched as their owners’ willed them to. They had been lead from trap to trap until he finally reached the commands room. Of course, he wasn’t left alone in the room. He was surrounded by heavily armed men.

_I can’t recall when it was the last time I had one normal day in my life_, he wondered.

“So, Raven, you thought your little rebellion would go unnoticed? You really thought that the very organization you’ve been working for the last six years can’t look after itself on its own and needs correcting?”

“I still believe that you do need a correction,” he acidly retorted to the man standing in front of him.

It was none other than Caius Ballad. The Feds top leader. It also happened to be the founder of Black Faction.

“Well, I’m not here to give you a choice. You can’t use your Radiance in this room. And even if you could, we’ve got your dear Lightning hostages.”

“What are you intending to do with her? And what about Stella?”
“You can forget about Stella. Whatever you do, she’s going to die. As for Lightning, it’s all up to the way you’ll answer my next question.”

With a smirk, Caius raised his hand, as if to order one of his goons. The wall in the back of the commands room turned transparent and Noctis gasped from surprise as he saw Lightning, floating in front of Barthendelus who was conjuring some sort of weird magics. The woman of his dreams had her eyes closed, her pink brown hair floating around her head. She was just as motionless as Stella, but also unconscious.

Anger rising within him, Noctis jumped forward, ready to fight his way through, oblivious to the guns aimed at him. None of them fired anyway, but two tall men with the built of Rude blocked him and contained him, almost breaking both his arms in the process. He squirmed helplessly, and stopped only as he saw that the guns were now aimed at his dear Lightning.

“What are you doing to her!”

“You know mako is getting scarcely rare, don’t you? And her blood has absorbed mako. We’re currently trying to gather up some of her energy. By keeping her here and stealing her modified mako, we could extract a lot of it in a really short time. If we have to kill her, we would only get a little mako, but it’s still better than nothing at all.”

“You monster!”

“Look who’s talking.” Caius snickered. “You’ve came all the way here thinking about destroying us, ain’t I right?”

“Why do you ask me if you already know?”

“I ask because I’m the boss around here. But I don’t have time for idle chitchat. So let me cut to the chase. I have one offer for you, that could save both yours and Lightning’s lives.”

“Whatever it is, I won’t…!”

“Listen, Raven! If you don’t, my men will fire. Or maybe you need to see what I’ll do with your kid first? He’s been running around crying like a baby since he got separated from you. I should grant him the chance to see his mother one last time, shouldn’t I?”

Noctis tried to summon his blades out from thin air. He tried to get his mind around anything in the room that he could crush to ruin this maniac’s plan. But there was nothing to make his power get to work. Nothing that he could do to help his own son. He could only watch the boy walk into the room where Stella was being confined. His heart twisted as he looked everywhere but at the hated screen from where Storm’s yells were coming. He stared at Lightning, still unconscious, still beautiful and still desperately in need of rescue. He couldn’t fail her this time. He couldn’t fail Storm either. But he was surrounded by all those armed man. His real sword and gun had been removed from him as soon as he entered the room. He could still feel the bruises on his whole body, where the metal rods and boots and fists had hit him. He had been surrounded right upon arrival. No chance to look around. Not even a chance to breath in and out.

“Mother!”

Storm’s voice was breaking his heart. It sounded so hurt, so desperate. It reminded him of his own past. He wanted to die right on the spot, so that this nightmare would end. He couldn’t stand helpless once again in front of another tragedy. He couldn’t let the Faction toy with what was left of his family.
“What do you want from me?” he asked.

He sounded defeated, but it was just a mask he kept on. He still had no way out of this, but as soon as an opening would be left, he’d seize it and rescue both Lightning and Storm. As for Stella, he wasn’t too sure of what he could for her. But he was still going to try his best.

“You’re coming to your senses, Raven. You have great powers, thanks to us. We can nullify them here. We can remove them from you and turn you back into a simple human, though the process would certainly kill you. You gave us, unwillingly, but gave us nevertheless another pawn with the same powers as you. Asking anything more could sound wrong with all that said, but we need more cooperation from you and project Storm.”

“How did you call him?”

“Project Storm. That’s what he is, Raven. A mere clone of your mutated organism. A contradiction in this era. We thought it would be easier to manipulate a child. But we were naïve, or so it seems. Or maybe does this kid just take a little too much after his father. I should either break him down or erase him here and now.”

“How can you speak that way of a mere child? He’s just a kid, for heaven’s sake!”

Caius raised an eyebrow, and a red glow came from his chest, as Storm kept on yelling in the wide screen in the center of the room. His small fists hitting the pillar were his mother was kept prisoner was the only noise in the room except from Noctis’ fast breathing for a while.

“There’s no such thing as a kid around the Faction. Storm is only a test subject. He obeyed once and he will obey again. Willing or not.”

“But what’s the point when you can ask me to do your dirty job?” Noctis asked.

One of his worst nightmares was turning into reality. The last thing he wanted was for Storm’s hands to be tainted by the blood of others. The poor kid was already confused enough as things were. If they made him a killer at such a young age, it would destroy him.

“Why would I only ask you when I have two Raven?”

Noctis realized at this point that it meant that he was also a hostage. He hadn’t think about it this way until then and his eyes went back to the screen were Storm was looking even more desperate than before…

…

“Mom! Can’t you hear me, mom? Are you awake? MOM!”

Storm couldn’t think rationally anymore. There was too many thoughts in his head. He was worried about his dad. He was worried about Lightning. He was worried about his mom. And he was also worried about himself. His radiance wasn’t working anywhere anymore in this building. He knew he was trapped. He knew the Faction and the Feds were just messing around with him. His logical mind knew all of that, but he just couldn’t stop to think about it. He couldn’t find a plan, he couldn’t see anything through his tears, why was he crying when he finally reached the place where his mom was being held prisoner?

“Oh Storm.” She sighed. “You shouldn’t have come. It’s all a trap.”

“Mom…”
He managed to see the tears in her own eyes. Trailing down her pale skin. She looked different. He recognized her, but at the same time, her stare felt like the stare of a stranger. Her body looked cold. He shivered. He wanted to hide in her arms and think foolishly that he was safe. But she needed help more than he did. He tried to control his shakings. And then the voice started to speak.

It seemed to come from another world. It had to be inhuman. It was a machine. Its ton resounded through the whole room, reaching Storm deep to its core.

“Welcome S.T.O.R.M. I’m glad to see you’re back.”

He looked around, remembering something that he couldn’t put into words. But it was something he didn’t want to remember. He tried to chase the feeling away, and his tears dried as he looked around, trying to be rational.

“How can I be back? I never came here.”


Storm felt a long shiver running down his spine. He knew what she meant. He remembered that voice. It was the first voice he ever heard in his life. It was from that frightening machine that had him growing up at an accelerated pace. It was the one who taught him everything he knew about sciences and rationality.

“Why are you here? Let my mom go freely, she hasn’t…”

“Now, now, you’re doing it again, S.T.O.R.M. Making inferences is wrong. Why do you keep on calling that pitiful human your mother?”

“Because she is!” he retorted angrily, his voice growing steadier.

“That’s false, dear boy. She never was your mother. It’s a lie your creators asked me to tell you since she was the one who was going to take care of you once I gave you birth.”

Storm felt like throwing up. That sounded so wrong. So cold. He felt so lonely and different when his matrix would put it like that.

“Want an explanation, S.T.O.R.M.? You’re old enough for the truth. And maybe will it help you controlling your pathetic emotional reaction later on to learn that your biological mother isn’t Stella. The Faction used Raven’s mutated cells and mixed them with Lightning Farron’s DNA.”

Storm looked up, shocked to say the least. He looked at Stella, still chained inside of her pillar, as if to see if it was true or not. She sighed deeply.

“Does blood and DNA really matter to us, Storm?” was all the woman asked him.

It was all the answers he needed. So Lightning was, technically speaking, his real mother.

“As you must understand, there was no way the Faction would only create a copy of Raven. They wanted to try and get something even stronger. So why not had the blood of a human who had merged mako into his organism? The real signification for the M in your name stands for Mako and not Magnification.”
“Why did they lie about it? Why did YOU lie, mom?”

As Stella didn’t answer, the machine acted as if the last question had been asked to her.

“My master thinks that there’s a time for every truth. I was programmed to give you a role that would fit in the situation you were given. You had to be persuaded of being Stella’s son, so we told you that you were. Now, the Faction doesn’t need Stella anymore, so they want you to know the truth. Because they have both your true parents prisoners. Ain’t that just marvelous, dear S.T.O.R.M.?”

“Oh, just shut up, matrix. Let my mom go if you don’t need her anymore.”

“But you should know that we can’t do that. She knows too much.”

“Please, don’t…!”

The voice of the machine screeched as it echoed through the room in an uproar.

“Are you begging S.T.O.R.M.? You were never taught to beg. You’re not a weakling. Don’t embarrass me in such a fashion.”

“I don’t care about what you think. Get out of my head! Get away from me! I don’t want to hear you anymore. You’re telling lies, nothing but lies.”

“Would I lie to my cute test subject?! Blasphemy! I, the matrix, would never…”

“Cut it out! Whoever’s putting this on, cut it out!” the small boy pleaded, covering his ears with his hands and curling down over himself. “I’ll do what you want if you release my mom. I’ll do anything!”

“No Storm, please, don’t do anything they’d asked you to. They’re bad people, you know it.”

Storm was on his knees, painfully aware of his helplessness. He had tried to summon anything with his power. A spear, a gun, a blade, any kind of weapon. He had also tried to force the crystal pillar in which Stella was kept prisoner to break under his will, to no avail. His Radiance was utterly locked down. He was a mere child, unarmed and barely dressed in a black suit that protected him from bullets as long as his head wasn’t aimed at. There was no protection for his heart which was quivering in his chest from the hurt and the lies and the fear. Could things get any worse?

“Then why d’you got involved with them, mom? I want you to be safe and…”

“There’s no where safe and you may never trust a Faction’s…”

Stella was cut short by a sudden pain in her back as the white lights from the ceiling turned red. Storm raised his head, feeling in his whole body that the threat was being applied.

“Are you really willing to become our fateful soldier, S.T.O.R.M.?” the mechanical voice asked.

“Whatever they say, you have to refuse Storm!” Stella pleaded, tensing in her chains.

The first drop of blood hit the floor inside the pillar, but Storm heard it as if its sound had been amplified a thousand times.

“You have to tell me now. Make your decision S.T.O.R.M. If you hesitate, it will be too late
for her.”

Stella shook her head, encouraging her fake son to refuse. His little heart was beating like a drum in his chest.

“I… I’ll do it.” He said.

He wasn’t sure who he was addressing too. He felt so scared. He wished his dad was there. He would have known what to say. He would have known what to do.

“Not convincing enough.”

A sword ran through Stella’s body, right from her back through her guts. The blood spread from the wound as she hung lowlier in her chains.

“Mom! How could you…! Mom!” Storm yelled as he got back up and hit the crystal pillar once again, feeling his heart exploding from the pain.

It had to be false. It had to be a big lie, he couldn’t accept it otherwise.

…

Lightning was lost in a dream. It wasn’t a scary dream, but it wasn’t a nice one either. It felt lonely and cold. But the voice was still there. She tried to recognize it. And slowly, her mind was filled with light. She felt a little weak, but she understood why. She also understood who it was that had been talking to her.

“The goddess?” she thought out loud.

Her voice was a mere whisper, so low nobody heard it.

“You were chosen, Lightning, to erase the evil in this world. You’ve already met the few champions I had chosen to help you in your task. I couldn’t reach your mind before and talking to you now is putting you in great danger. Please survive, Claire Farron. Please wake up, my dear child, and reduce to dust those who are bringing chaos into my world.”

Lightning opened her eyes, suddenly awakening to the outside world. She felt her energy being sucked out of her body. But she suddenly felt something else. A knowledge only her brother had managed to get. Suddenly, she could sense the mako inside of her. And she could taste her own power. The energy already out from her body turned into thunderbolts and killed Barthendelus on the spot.

“What the…”

Caius turned around, surprised and as he let his guard down, Noctis finally felt an opening. He had been trying again and again to use his powers and this time, suddenly, the Radiance worked. He blew up every weapons aiming at Lightning –knocking unconscious every guy holding the aforementioned weapons- and broke most of the machinery in the room, sending it right onto Caius to crush the guy under the material’s weight. He then literally blew the room where his fiancée was standing and ran up to her.

“Are you okay, Light?”

She could barely stand on her on, but bolt of energy were still running in the air around her.
"Noctis? Where… Where are we? Where’s Storm?"

Braving the savage electricity, Noctis managed to get to Lightning and hugged her tightly in his arms, preventing her from collapsing to the floor.

"Oh Claire, you gave me such a scare."

She felt him trembling and understood something was wrong as he kissed her forehead. He would never do that in the middle of a mission unless he was really shaken.

"I’m sorry, darling. I…”

"Mooooooom!"

Storm’s yell coming from the screen felt so heart breaking that they both dropped dead silent. Lightning tried to look up, but Noctis held closer to him, forcing her to bury his head into his chest, preventing her to look anywhere at all.

"I don’t want you to see this.” He whispered. “It’s all my fault…”

She’d never felt him shake like this. He seemed just as traumatized as Storm. And though she could bet what had happened, her mind was still too foggy for her not to ask:

“What have they done?”

“They killed her.”

...

"Your creators said I could let you see her now.” The machine said.

The pillar vanished and the chains were unlocked, letting Stella fall to the ground. Her legs folded under her weight and Storm stood in shock for one instant, before to be crushed to the floor under the weight of his false mother. He didn’t move or made a noise at first, too lost and confused to react.

"Storm…” Stella whimpered.

“Mom, don’t… don’t talk, don’t try to move, you’re only going to hurt yourself more. If we…”

“You know I don’t have much time, Storm. I’m really sorry to put you through this.”

She tried to move, so that she would be able to see his face, but her body was still sore from the chains and all.

“I love you Storm, please, don’t ever doubt it.”

“I love you too, mom, so please, don’t go.”

He knew that was unrational. He hated her for making him feel this way. He hated the matrix for killing her. He felt like hating the whole wide world.

“Oh Storm, you’re the dearest thing I have in this world. I wish I could have been a good mom…”

“Don’t say that!”
Despite the pain and agony she felt, she managed to wrap her arms around him. Storm felt her blood on his clothes. His overall was already getting wet because of it and the taste of metal in his mouth was almost just as bad as the smell in the air.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart…” she exhaled on last breath as she apologized and then, she fell silent.

He felt her weighing down on him entirely, almost crushing him to the floor. He was breathing so fast, he was surely hyperventilating, that’s why he couldn’t hear her heartbeat anymore. The pool coming out from her wound was forming a pool on the floor. He could feel it in his hair. He was going to drown in it!

“Mom!” he cried out!

“She’s not your mom,” the matrix said with her cold voice.

He shrieked in response, his heart broken beyond mending, his soul wounded beyond healing, his rage expanding beyond any boundaries. The body of Stella was thrown to the ceiling as he realized he could use his powers at new. The noise of her bones breaking at the harsh collision made him yell even more, like a wounded animal. And Noctis remembered his son’s nightmare and how he’d yelled and broke everything in his room the other night. And now, it was becoming a reality.

Storm couldn’t see through his tears. His throat hurt from yelling so strongly, but he kept on, raising his arms in the air, furiously looking for the place where the hated matrix could be hidden. He pointed one hand to the wall on his left and the wall simply turned to dust. He point to the right and the wall was also disintegrated. His eyes were bright red and a silver glow surrounded his body.

“Give her back! Bring her back! If you don’t, I’ll … I’ll kill you!” he shouted in a roar that was far from human.

Lightning felt the floor shaking under her feet and tightened her grip onto Noctis. She felt so weak. Barthendelus was dead, alright. Stella was dead too and Storm was running amok!

“We have to do something, Noctis. We can’t…”

“But how can I face him after saying I would rescue his mother, now that she’s… How could I let him go through the very same thing as me.”

Seeing Storm losing his mother only reminded Noctis of his own personal loss. And he felt as if he had been taken years in the past.

“Noctis, please, you have to stay focused! Your son needs you! And I need you too.” She reminded him. She slightly pinched his arm just to make sure he would really snap out of his reminiscing.

“Ouch! Okay, you’re right, Light. I’ll… I think I got a way to do this…”

He eyed the wide screen once again, focusing on Storm who was destructing everything around him at a terrible pace. The chance that he hadn’t killed anyone already was pretty slim, but still, he’d better be stopped now, before that any harm got done.

Suddenly, a globe of light surrounded the small boy, separating him from the outside world.

“What the…! My radiance! Give me back my radiance! Isn’t mommy enough for you monsters?”

Being unable to destroy anything anymore and having his radiance locked once again seemed to
bring him back to reality. Storm looked around him and realized the devastation he had caused. He made the mistake of looking at his mom’s corpse, which was now covered with blood and dirt and twisted in weird ways, after being sent full speed to the ceiling and having fallen back to the floor.

“Is it my fault, mom?”

Lightning felt her own heart breaking down at the sight of the boy.

Noctis had let go of her and was now looking through the files, searching for a map that would indicate him clearly where the poor boy was. Something stirred inside the rubble of materials that had been pushed over Caius. In fact, it was Caius, who was still quite alive, despite Noctis’ efforts.

“You, you think you can just crush me with a some…”

Lightning stabbed him with her sword before that he could end his sentence, still barely standing up, but having all the strength she needed to kill that awful man who directed the Faction and the Feds.

If it was him who had planned all her past misery without even caring about the damage he caused, she couldn’t care less about his dead. She walked up to Noctis and leaned on to him.

“Did you find where he was?”

“Yes. Let’s go and get him home.”

She nodded. But she couldn’t forget about the words of the goddess, saying she was supposed to erase the evil in this world. How could one single human, never mind all the freaking power he was given, could do that? The goddess had mentioned champions she had already meet. Was she referring to Noctis? And maybe even Storm? No, Lightning thought. The kid has already faced enough hardship. Maybe Cloud and Squall could be involved as well. After all, stopping the Feds and the Faction would take a lot more than just killing the head ordering the arms and legs.

...

Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown

Location: down on Earth, Boston

Mission: ending the Cetra’s chase to prevent Aeris from suffering anymore

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Warning: Our agent has gotten closely involved with the cetra. We don’t know if he’l let her cooperate with her. But at this moment, the internal fights within the Black Faction is taking too much of our time and personnel. We can’t do anything about it...

Message from G.I. five. End of transmission.

...

Squall was the second to wake up this morning. Aeris was sitting up by the window’s side, her eyes lost in the sky. Just by opening his eyes and seeing her, Squall could tell she had been doing nightmares all night long. He breathed in and he could almost see the pictures from her nightmares. Sephiroth. He fell the same confusion as her for an instant, before that he was able to close his extra sensitivity to the feelings around. Her bed was filled with sorrow. The air was tensed in the
room. And the fragile hope of their brief embrace from yesterday seems like a forgotten promise that could be crushed by the future.

“Are you still peeking in my mind?” she asked, not looking at him.

“Good morning to you too.” He retorted with a smirk.

“Squall, you know I hate when you do that.”

He got up and went to sit by her side and wrapped his arms around her. She immediately leaned into him and he was quite happy to feel her so comfortable next to him.

“I was able to control it yesterday. It just seems hard to do it this early in the morning. Give me time, and I’ll be perfect at not looking in your heart and mind. But you shouldn’t cry out what you feel either.”

“I’ll do my best.” She said.

Then she looked up at him, raising one hand to caress his cheek.

“Squall, I can’t believe we’re talking as if that was normal.”

“Well, I sure hope you don’t think I’m an alien or something.” He joked.

“Why would I think that? And anyway, I’m an alien myself.”

“You look perfectly fine to me. Unless you say you’re hiding some tentacles or anything out of ordinary under your clothes.”

She didn’t laugh, but she didn’t look away either.

“When did you become so carefree, mister gloomy?”

“What’s with the nickname? I’m not…!”

“You sure were gloomy during the first days we spent together…”

“Guess I’ll have to amend for that.”

He gently kissed the back of her neck, but that got her to tense up in his arms. He had reached the limit.

“Aeris, I didn’t mean… You know I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I know, Squall. But I don’t think I’m ready now. Aren’t you feeling a little tired still? You just got back from this awful mission.”

“You healed me, Ris.”

She blushed and looked straight outside the window, hoping he wouldn’t notice the reaction she had when he would call her “Ris”.

“Stop being so cute, Squall.”

“Why should I stop?”

“It’s not like you to be so… open about everything.”
“I’m not open at all right now. I’m messing around to forget all that happened to us lately. I thought things were cleared up between us. I love you, Ris, and you said you also loved me.”

“Things aren’t that simple.” She sighed, putting her hands on his arms.

“They don’t have to be complicated either.” He said, brushing his face against her hair.

She could feel his breathing in her neck. It was warm. She felt so well in his arms. So protected. She wanted to turn around and kiss him. But then, she felt something different.

“What’s this?”

“What’s what?”

“There’s something new about you. Like a… new strength that wasn’t there yesterday.” She said, looking up at him.

He looked confused and then, his face darkened a bit as if he understood something. It didn’t look to be anything good.

“I… Don’t laugh at me if I tell you about it, okay?”

“Why would I laugh?”

“I had a dream last night. I met a giant thunder birds, or something like it. Its name Quezacoltz. It said that it would help me. And I think he kinda became my summon spirit.”

“Okay…”

“I know it sounds crazy, especially coming from me, but… With that hyper sensibility I got myself, I seem to be able to travel far distance when I’m unconscious. I don’t if I travel through time, space or memory or if it’s just my mind playing trick on me. Maybe the drugs the doc game me were too strong or something, but I… I’m sure it was real.”

Aeris turned around in his arms, raising one hand to touch his chest.

“Quezacoltz huh? I know that name. I met that giant bird once. He’s a good spirit. But if he’s come to you, than that means there will be more hardships for you.”

“Guess that can’t be helped. After all, I still got to beat Sephiroth to make sure he won’t ever come after you again.”

Aeris’ face turned white as a ghost. Squall bit his lips, regretting he mentioned the albino’s name in front of her.

“You don’t have to be scared, Ris. I’m back for good, and I’ll protect you from now on.” He tried to encourage her as she hid her face against his chest.

She felt so small and vulnerable in his arms. So alive. He was glad simply to be with her.

“I don’t want to be a burden to you,” she mumbled, forcing herself not to cry.

“You will never be, Aeris.”

“Oh Squall. Don’t talk to me like this. I don’t owe this. I’m a cetra, all I mean is trouble…”
“That’s what they got you to think.”

He held tightly against his heart. And at this moment, when she heard just a flicker in his voice, she realized he was acting so nice because he needed her to hug him back and not to ever let go.

To be continued…
Chapter 37

Episode 3 – White maiden –Part XI

Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown

Location: March

Mission: leaving the March’s base after retrieving Storm

Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum and Storm

Warning: Agent Stella is dead. Storm is now totally unstable. What will happen to the Faction since it has no more leader? How did I even learn anything about this?

Message from a really confused Rufus Shinra. End of transmission.

…

As soon as they got close enough to the room where Storm was, Lightning felt her heart sinking to the bottom of her chest. Hearing his painful sobs was too much to bear. She stood back, looking even paler than before.

“I think that I’ll let you handle this one and stay back here.” She suggested.

Noctis understood right away. She had also lost her parents and it was certainly as hard for her as it was for him.

“Be careful, okay?” he softly asked of her.

She nodded in agreement and Noctis hurried inside the room where Storm stood, still trapped in that weird sphere his own father had summoned to block his powers.

“Who’s doing this?! Why are you all trying to nullify my radiance, when it’s the only thing that I have left? Why, let me out!”

The small boy sounded beyond desperation and Noctis started to run. Hearing his footsteps, Storm turned around, his red eyes shining with defiance and fear, his silver hair covered with the blood of his mom. The poor kid was lost beyond salvation, utterly defeated, but his rage was still burning strongly in his heart. He wouldn’t let anyone hurt him any further. He wouldn’t let anyone come near him, if at least he could still hide behind his radiance.

And then, he slowly recognized the man who had stepped in the room.

“It’s… Is it you, dad?” he asked, having trouble to mutter the word “dad” after seeing his mother, well fake mother, dying right in front of his eyes.

“Of course, it’s me, son. I’m sorry for restraining you like this, but I was scared you were going to hurt yourself.” Noctis said, his voice sounding really loud in the empty room.

Storm’s eyes filled up with new hot tears and his lips quivered as he tried to fight the devastating realization that this man he still barely knew was all he had left in the world.

“Mom’s… I couldn’t do anything…” he whimpered, shaking his head as if it could revert back
time and undo the terrible event that was obscuring his life.

Noctis walked up to him, making an inhuman effort to stay strong and not to let his own fears show in his face. Storm needed all the support he could get. The young man also did his best not to look in Stella’s direction, since her corpse was still lying on the ground, with her dismantled joints and bones giving her a grotesque pause. He still saw her from the corner of his eyes, and noticed the blood and the sword propping out of her back.

The stench in the air was unbearable and he knew it just too well. It was the mix of cold sweat, blood and fried metal. A hazardous combination that triggered so many terrible memories in his mind.

He swiftly entered the sphere where Storm was standing as a prisoner, still stuttering nonsense and mostly talking about his mother.

“I know how you feel, Storm. I know there’s nothing I can do to fix this. I’m sorry for forcing you to live such an ordeal.”

The boy was on his knees, shaking from head to toes, and his father kneeled before him, gathering the child in his strong arms.

“She’s dead.” Storm whispered through his held back sobs. “She’s really…”

He still couldn’t accept it, even if all the proofs he needed had been shoved right into his face. If there had been any chance to save her after that the matrix stabbed her, he had certainly finished her off by sending her flying to hit the ceiling. But how could he endure the feeling of her heavy body over him? And all her blood, in which he was drenching…

“Was it my fault, dad? Did I kill her?” he asked in a voice that was shaking enough to break Noctis’ heart.

“Of course not! You did your best, Storm! We all did everything that we could, but…”

He held the boy as close as possible, looking for words that didn’t exist. He just wanted to cry himself, and as Storm’s sobs grew wider and his tears started running as rivers across his cheeks, there was no more words in his mind. All he could do was to hold the boy.

“I’m here, son.”

*It’s not much, but I’m here now, and I won’t let you live anything like that ever again, I promise,* he thought.

The kid grabbed onto his father’s overall, yelling out his pain as he felt himself being held. Why wasn’t it his mom holding him?

“It’s my fault. I… If I didn’t exist, mom… well, Stella would never have been in this situation. If only I… I wanna die! Bwaahahahahaaaa!” Storm cried.

Noctis sat down and brought the boy closer to have him sitting on his lap, shaking his head vigorously.

“Don’t say such nonsense, Storm. You’d think Stella wants you to give up now? You have all your life to live. And you still got me. And Lightning, and Raine.”

“I’m just a hindrance to you all. If it wasn’t for me… you and Light wouldn’t have come here.
You both suffered so much already and…”

“How dare you say that?! I’m your father, Storm! You’re a part of my life, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Storm coiled up, scared as he heard his father yelling at him, but he seemed to be comforted by his last declaration and hugged to him even more, crying louder.

There was so much pain in those sobs and hiccups; Noctis wasn’t sure where he’d find the strength not to cry like a baby himself. Or maybe did he cry. But never minding the tears on his black overall and the strain on his back for remaining too long in the same position, he stayed and held up his son. Because the kid was his son, and because they had gone through the very same horror.

They stayed silent a long moment, Storm crying his heart out and Noctis stroking his back and ruffling his hair. It seemed to last hours till finally, the boy was able to sniff back his tears and eased his grip over his father. Raising his round head to face Noctis with puffy eyes, he asked:

“Are we safe now?”

“Yes we are.” His father retorted with a weak smile.

As Storm tried to look around, as if to make sure this was true, and since he was still slightly trembling, Noctis forced the boy into another hug, pushing his face into his chest. He didn’t want him to look at Stella in the state she was in.

“I’m scared.” The boy said.

He’d never admit anything like that in any other circumstances and Noctis was kinda taken aback by this confession. There was no more secret between them. Storm trusted him.

“I know, but it’s okay Storm. I’m here.”

He was ready to insist a lot over that part. At least, even if Stella was dead, Storm still had his father. It wasn’t as awful as what Noctis had had to face in the past.

“Dad?”

“Hmmm?”

“I really really love you, you know? So you won’t go, huh?”

“I won’t leave you, little guy. I’m tougher than I look.”

Storm could have cried more if he had any tears left. He felt very small and worn out. His abuse in using the Radiance right after his mother had died and the emotional strain from this experience were both taking their tolls. He lost consciousness, with his small arms around Noctis’ neck.

“I’m really sorry Storm…” Noctis whispered. “…that I couldn’t do anything more. I should have seen this coming. I should have…”

“Even if he could hear you, telling him this now wouldn’t do any good, Noctis, you know it. What’s done is done.”

Lightning’s voice was really cold as she said that, but as he turned around and looked at her, he could see tears in her eyes. He got up and walked up to her, so that he could give her a warm hug. They were careful of not crushing Storm between them and both realized just how shaken they
“What are we gonna do now?” Lightning asked him.

Noctis looked over his shoulder at Stella’s corpse.

“We’re burning this place down. Giving her some proper burial. And then, we’re going home.”

“I can’t help but think that this mess still isn’t over.”

“I know, I got the same feeling. But we’ll sort this out, you and me.”

She nodded as he used his power to set fire to the floor around Stella’s body. They were finally going to get out of this place!

…

As they left, Storm didn’t wake up from his slumber. He was defeated and deeply hurt and sleep seemed to be the only way that he could escape this harsh world which had taken his mother away… Noctis was just as shocked as the boy, because he had the terrible impression of having failed both the kid and Lightning. The aforementioned woman barely said a world. She still had to understand everything that they’d just been through. At some point, while she was looking at the stars and space through the window, Noctis cleared his throat. He was cleaning up his blades, to keep his mind off things. Like the memories of his own parents’ death.

“Is something wrong?” Lightning asked.

“Everything.” He retorted, forcing a smile.

But it was no joke. And he knew it wasn’t time for him to break down. He couldn’t. Lightning was close to the edge herself. She was clearly missing Raine. And Cloud. And above all, she needed peace of mind. But that was something that he couldn’t give her either.

“I don’t know if you noticed it, but Storm was told that… I don’t know how to say this. But I think you might be happier in some way if I tell you.”

“Then why is it hard to tell me?”

“Well, you’re gonna be mad too.”

She frowned at him, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Noctis, stop walking around the bush and spit it out.”

“Storm has mako too, or well, the matrix said he had. It’s almost unbelievable, since Odin never spotted it, and…”

“What are you getting at, Noctis?”

Lightning was clearly not amused by this news. And she wouldn’t understand unless he put it in clearer words.

“How would Storm have mako in his blood? I never had any myself. And Stella couldn’t use mako to defend herself. She had no magical powers at all. Storm has the Radiance. But he has more than just that.”
His girlfriend shook her head, refusing to understand. But he needed her to realize before that Storm woke up. The boy certainly didn’t need another person’s crisis.

“What proof did we have that Stella was Storm’s mother? They could have used anyone’s cells, they almost cloned him directly from me, right?”

“Noctis…”

“They used your cells. You’re his real mother, Lightning, biologically speaking. They told him so as they killed Stella. I don’t know what they were looking after. Maybe they thought that psychologically breaking him down would make it possible for them to manipulate him. But it failed. Because he knew you and I.”

“Wait, they used my… Wasn’t Raine’s kidnapping enough?!?”

She looked ready to go mad, but tears started running down her cheeks as she got up and swiftly sat back down. She was so sick of everything going on.

“Tell me it’s all a lie.”

“Claire…” He got up and sat beside her, to hold her in his arms. “Don’t you realize what this mean? Alright, both of our children were stolen from us, but we got them back now. But they’re our children in every possible way.”

Lightning blinked. She thought this was pretty too farfetched, even for Noctis. But something within her was happy, though the confusion and grief hurt a great deal.

“There was never any betrayal between us, even while people played in our back.”

She hung onto him, tightly gripping to his shirt. It was hard since it was such a fitting suit, but he didn’t mind.

“I don’t think I’m ready to be Storm’s mother, Noctis. Not with knowing what he did to his last mom.”

The young spy was surprised. He hadn’t thought about that, but he looked down at her and saw that she was smiling through her tear. Whatever she said, she was still up for a fight. And she would fight, even if things were hard.

“I have to stop crying all the time. I’m getting too emotional. Let us wish I’m not pregnant right now.”

“Why, would it be wrong?” he asked.

“I already have Raine to look after and I’ll need all the time I can get for Storm, with what he’s been through today.”

“That’s why I’m here now.” He reminded her.

And as they held on, they were glad none of them were gone. But Lightning had one last fear in the back of her heart. Except from Storm and from her family. The voice had said she had been chosen to fight the real evil of this world. Caius couldn’t be the only one that implied. The job still had to be done. And she wasn’t sure if they were really up for more fight against such opponents. She couldn’t wait to get back on earth and to reach something looking like a normal life…
Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown

Location: Earth, Washington D.C.: HQ of the American branch of the army

Mission: babysitting Raine till Lightning comes back from March without the boss noticing that the baby is there…

Soldiers: Cloud Strife and Yuna Albhed and the rest of the Squad’s 8 crew

Warning: the baby refuse to sleep and whine like a police car’s siren. Hard to explain this to the superiors…

Message from Barret Wallace. End of transmission.

The small infant was whining loudly as her uncle entered the squad’s quarters. Tifa had changed her diapers and tried everything she knew about kid to calm her down, but nothing seemed to be working.

“Cloud, you’re back?”

He nodded, unable to speak as he saw his former girlfriend holding up his baby niece in her arm. It felt weird. As if she totally belonged there, but Raine was crying, and Yuna was sighing in his back. She was tired. The trip back home was quite fun and they spend lot of quality time, but he should have let her rest a little more. He should have tried to rest more himself.

“Hi, Tifa.”

Her name sounded too soft in his mouth. He wanted to forget the plans they once had made, about having a family together. He belonged to Yuna now. No one else. He walked up to Tifa, forcing a smile.

“Having trouble with Raine?” he joked.

“She’s been crying for hours. I know she’s tiring herself, but I can’t seem to find something to calm her down.”

Cloud reached out one hand to stroke the baby’s head. A green bolt of lightning run between his fingers and the baby yelled, throwing her arms back. Cloud jumped a few steps back, shocked, to say the least.

“What are you trying to do, Cloud?!”

“That wasn’t me…!” he swore.

Yuna sat down, lifting one hand to her forehead.

“This is your niece, Lightning’s baby, right?” she asked.

Cloud nodded, exchanging a brief glance with Tifa, before to look at the baby, who was still crying and then he looked back to Yuna.

“Doesn’t that mean that she has mako in her blood?”
The Soldier immediately understood. Of course. What else could it be if Tifa had tried anything? The young woman was a good nurse and knew how to treat children, so, it had to be something out of the ordinary. And Lightning and Noctis’ child couldn’t be ordinary. He felt the mako surging in his blood, burning his veins.

“I see now. She must be hurting a lot. Here, give her to me, Tifa.”

The young woman hesitated, but only for a second, before to let him take the infant in his arm. A few sparks ran between the uncle and the niece, and at first, it seems the mako was ready to cover them from head to toe. Cloud focused on the child and the baby stopped crying, looking at him right back in the eyes. She had his sister’s eyes. Green blue makoish. But greener than his eyes. He felt Raine’s power. Small, but ready to soar. The child was panicked. Nothing had been normal lately in her life. The little comfort she had with her parents was gone. Her parents were gone. And she was really sensitive to them, even if they were lightyears away.

“It’s okay, Raine. They’re coming back. Don’t let the mako burn you. Let it sleep for now.”

The bolt of blue and green thunder slowed down, before to die down and Raine yawned, fresh tears coming out from her eyes. Tired of crying, tired of worrying. The poor thing had no way to express herself, she could only live through all that terrible stuff.

“Hang on, sweetie. Uncle Cloud is here. And the rain is gone.”

That was totally cheesy, but Cloud didn’t care. And more than everything, the baby didn’t care. She needed a warm, familiar voice that would soothe her. And his did. She fell asleep.

“I don’t know how you do that, but next time I have trouble with a mako infused baby, I’m calling you right away,” Yuffie joked.

The young colonel realized only then that his whole squall was in the room. Smiling at him. Barret looked ready to make some comment but he held it back. Vincent wasn’t annoyed, but he wasn’t amused either. He seemed to only be able to hear the word baby that Yuffie had just said. The poor man really wasn’t prepared for parenthood.

“Hey guys, this isn’t a show, this is a private family reunion,” he retorted, blushing for no good reason at all.

“Well, you’re a good uncle, Cloud. The best this girl could have.” Nanaki observed wisely.

“And if we ever need a babysitter, we’ll know who to call, right Vinnie?”

Vincent looked so pale that for a moment, the others thought he was ready to faint. Yuna got up and offered the guy her seat, which he accepted gratefully.

“Come on, Vincent, it’s gonna be alright.”

The pale man shook his head softly, but the silence that followed meant that everyone was better leaving him off the hook.

“Well, it’s been some times, everyone,” Cloud sighed. “What’s up?”

As if to answer his question, the door of the room was swiftly opened by Tidus, who was followed by his father, general Jecht himself.

“It seems there was unidentified mako activity around here, soldiers.” Tidus said, frowning at the
They frowned right back at him, even if everyone in the room knew what was that unidentified mako activity. Cloud hadn’t any time to hide Raine, he just stood still, with the baby in his arms. He felt stupid.

Jecht smiled at the sight.

“This kid has something familiar about her look, colonel Strife. Do you have some good news for us, soldier? Retiring to live in the countryside with your hidden family?”

“That’s my niece, general. My sister needed assistance, so she left her with the squad. I just arrived and…”

“Oh, so the girl has mako too, that’s why…” Jecht understood.

Cloud’s face immediately turned cold and harsh and his arms held the baby possessively, as if his general could try to steal it away from him.

“Don’t get me wrong, colonel. I was just asking. We need to know what can cause such an activity. Mako is quite unstable. But it seems you have it all under control.”

Tidus was exchanging glances with Yuna, who tried to avoid his gaze as much as possible. Cloud noticed it, though he didn’t really care. He knew Yuna wouldn’t dump him for some kid like that over tanned guy.

“Thank you, general.”

“I also wanted to let you know that we’ll be needing your report over your last mission in the next hour. I hope to see you and my sweet little pie in my office by then.”

Tidus looked to the ceiling as Jecht walked out, laughing with his strong voice. He waited until his father was out of ear sight.

“Forget my ol’ man, he’s always been a moron.”

He left with that, before that any member of the squad could agree with him. Yuna was pink from being called Jecht’s sweet little pie. Was that a cool nickname or something? It sounded awful, and as if she was… a whore or something.

And since she had had some hot quality time with Cloud on their way back to earth, she couldn’t help herself but blushed even more, feeling rather embarrassed.

Cloud, on the other hand, was more worried about the…

“Report? Dammit! Tifa, you take care of Raine.”

He ran to his room.

“Yuffie, what have you done to this place?”

The young ninja made a face, before to whine:

“How did you know it was me?”

“Who else would look around the room for my materias and scattering ‘em all over the place?” he
Yuffie blushed and Vincent muffled something to himself. Yuna went to Tifa’s side, kinda reassured. Nothing here had changed. This squad’s barracks was still the cheerful place she remembered. How good it was to be back on earth!

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. day unknown
Location: earth, just out from the hospital, Boston’s streets
Mission: finding and stopping Sephiroth
Agents: Squall Leonheart and Aeris Gainsborough
Warning: the albino has learned about his mother’s death and is desperately trying to remain sane. Find and halt him before he lose it and cause something like that movie called Last Order…
Message from Reno. End of transmission.

…

“Squall, I don’t like this.” Aeris whispered, walking as close to him as possible.

“I don’t like it either, but it’s the only way we have to make him come out of his hiding place. And I’ll make sure nothing will happen to you, I promise.”

He wrapped one arm around her shoulders to comfort her and also to reassure him.

They were planning on luring Sephiroth in a trap to dissuade him of ever coming after Aeris again. But that meant they needed bait. And who could do a better bait than Aeris herself?

“I don’t want to force you to keep on running around for the rest of your life. We’ll get rid of the problem now.”

Squall headed for the Feds building. It was the most obvious place to hide, and he was ready to put his hand in the fire and bet that Sephiroth really was there. He couldn’t have expected the sight he met a few hours later…

…

The cetra barely noticed Aeris, who was sitting on a chair in an old waiting room from the disaffected hospital. Squall was hidden in the shadows, close enough to keep guard on his protégée. Sephiroth was totally unaware. He looked weak and crossed. His eyes were void of life. His hair didn’t shine. His hands didn’t wear any gloves and his coat hung to his form, showing that he was thinner than usual. Aeris noticed every changes and felt terrible for hating him just one instant. It wasn’t possible for her to forgive everything this man had done to her, but since Squall was close and protecting her, right now, she could forgive, somehow.

“Sephiroth?” she asked.

Her voice was a mere whisper, but that made him jump and turn around. His eyes got rounder as he noticed her. But no predator’s smile grew on his lips. No sparkle in his eyes. He was merely recognizing her.
“What are you doing here, lady Rhis?” He asked, sounding like the ghost of himself.

“I can now go where I want to.” She retorted.

“Good for you, cethra.”

He sounded bitter and diminished but he forced himself to stand as tall as he could and he walked up to her. As he stopped in front of her, his hand moved faster than she’d expected it to. He slapped her in the face, throwing her off her chair. Squall was there to block the next slap a second later, but Aeris was still kneeling on the floor, tears gathering in his eyes. She couldn’t understand what was going on. She was closed off to Sephiroth’s feelings, fearing to be recalled of the torments he’d put her through in the past.

“I knew you would be there, guard dog. But there’s really no point in completing any more missions. The Faction is going down. The first great instructor is dead. And so is Jenova.”

Squall understood what that meant, but he wasn’t here on a mission.

“I’m here to exact judgment from you, you bastard!”

“Huh… I think I was already punished enough with my mother’s death.”

Aeris was stroking her throbbing cheek as she looked at him with disbelief.

“I don’t think any punishment would be enough.”

Sephiroth stood back, materializing his masamune in front of him as Squall shielded Aeris with his body, standing right in front of her.

“Maybe you’re right. I have crossed every line. But she never minded it, you know. She may regret it now…”

Aeris felt a pain that was far from all she could remember from the terrible times when Sephiroth had forced her and ravaged her body. She coiled up over herself, trying to block his words away from her mind. But guilt was still vivid in her wounds. And it hurt like salt in a bleeding cut.

Squall interrupted Sephiroth’s words with a jolt of thunder. He did it without thinking. He wasn’t carrying any materia now. But Quezacoatl was roaring in his blood. And he welcomed it. He needed to kill that bastard. And to make him suffer as much as possible along the way. He regretted bringing Aeris with him now. He would have to amend for that too. To amend for letting that albinos slap her even once.

“I don’t want to hear the sick excuses you created to calm down your own conscience.”

“Good. Cause I don’t have any excuses. I don’t need any. I was acting along my mother’s will. I was supposed to break that Ancient in every possible way. And I failed at it. Now you can use her power. It’s a good think Jenova can’t see me anymore.”

“Don’t you care about anything else?”

Sephiroth’s eyes were injected with blood and looked dull, even if his words sounded as if they were though through and through. He was doing all he could to hurt Aeris again. And Squall couldn’t spare him even one more insult toward his girl. He let go of the thunder. Let it ran across the tall man’s body. Let it burn down his coat and have it melt over his skin so that his yells of agony could finally be heard. Sephiroth threw his masamune at him, aiming for the throat. Squall
blocked the attack. The electricity ran over the steel, to reach Sephiroth’s arms. Aeris closed her eyes. She couldn’t talk; her throat was way too tight. But she wanted it to stop. And Squall was ready to stop it all. He fired his gunblade, and the bullets dived in the ancient’s flesh. Sephiroth was pushed against the wall. He groaned and spit some blood, but he barely raised his sword. He had no strength left in him. He was dying, which felt quite impressive when you think that Sephiroth had once been judged as the perfect Soldier.

“You know, guard dog… you can praise yourself for killing… me. But I’m not…! I’m not the original Sephiroth.” He breathed hard, coughing slightly. “The real one was already death before you were born. One of my clones will surely come back to hunt… you down. To hunt lady Rhis. If the Feds still want her… I…”

He collapsed to the ground with that, leaving a trail of blood on the wall behind him. Squall stood still for a minute, glaring at the fresh corpse. He hated that man. Hated the Faction and the Feds for ever creating something like this thing. He retracted his gunblade and turned around. Aeris had fainted and was lying motionless on the ground. He sighed, biting his lips. This was far too much for her. The poor girl was certainly traumatized once more. As if all she’d already been through wasn’t enough... He walked up to her and kneeled before to gather her resting form in his arms.

“It’s over now, Ris. They can make all the threats they want, but it’s really over.”

If the first G.I. was dead, no one in the faction could ask to use the cetra. No one would be left a chance to ask for her knowledge with him around. He felt a pang of anguish as he whined in her sleep and as he saw her nightmare. He could almost feel her pain through his own body. And how he wanted to push it away.

“No don’t…!” she pleaded.

And he could see everything. Sephiroth was still alive in her mind. He would always be alive. His hands would never stop hurting her. Squall held her, his anger failing to dissipate his own guilt. He wanted to erase the bad memories. But all he had was brute strength. All he knew was how to care and how to love. Mending was something far more complicated. He could fix engines and mechanics. But heart… That was something else. His own heart was still heavily scarred and he wasn’t sure if any fixing was possible for him. So what about her?

“I won’t, Aeris. I swear, I’ll never act as he did.”

But he still wanted her. Maybe even more than before. He wanted to make her his and his only, so that the very fact Sephiroth ever touched her would be unbelievable. But how could he do it without hurting her? How could he even think about it, knowing what had happened? Her nightmares changed. Sephiroth vanished. And suddenly, for the first time, he saw himself in her mind. They were holding hands, walking across the streets. He was staring at her, with sparkles in his eyes and she was blushing. And she was singing and he was praising her. And life was at its shall. All in her mind. Then, but then only, did he knew that everything would be alright. Things would come in time. She would accept him entirely, in time.

“I love you, Squall.”

Words weren’t always enough, but for now, they meant the world to Squall. He left with a smile. And he forgot the very murder he had just done. Aeris didn’t care about this side of him, so he didn’t care either. At least, not for now…

To be continued
Chapter 38

Episode 3 – White maiden – Part XII

Time: 19 028 A.D. 20th February

Location: Earth, Boston, Lightning’s apartment.

Mission: starting to live again?

Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum and Storm (plus their awesome and only servant, the great Odin and his mount!)

Warning: Sir Noctis was greatly shocked by his last mission. My master also looks quite out of it. Storm has been sleeping ever since they came back. I’ve been ordered to stay quiet. I’ll try to take as little place as I can, even though I want to know if sir Noctis succeeded in his demand towards my dear master. Isn’t there some reason to celebrate now that they’re free from the Faction?

Message from Odin. End of transmission.

…

“I’m so glad to hear your voice Cloud… You have no idea. Me? I’m going pretty well. I swear it, Cloud. What about you? How was that mission? I know, I know, confidential info…”

Lightning rolled her eyes, absentmindedly looking at Noctis who was trying to cook with Odin’s help. It seemed both men had different views about la haute cuisine…

“Say, would you mind taking care of Raine for me a little more? We’re all mentally exhausted and Storm could still be pretty unstable. No, no need to worry about me, just worry about Raine. It’s your niece after all and you need to get used to it. I heard that Serah was going to have a little girl too!”

She had gone over her last emails and that news had been the best one since she returned home.

“What about Storm? … Yes, he’ll be staying permanently with us. But I’ll get my own place, this is your…”

Noctis yelled as he burned his fingers and decided he had enough of this farce. He willed the food to turn into a finished meal and Odin sighed as he was forced to dressing the table. It was the task the summoned spirit disliked the most around a kitchen. He was a knight, for heaven sake, couldn’t he be asked to do anything more knightly? Lightning paused, as Cloud’s voice was muffled by noise on his side.

“Oh, I can hear them in the background. Congratulate Yuffie for me then. I’ll call you again as soon as things get calmer. Sure you don’t mind babysitting Raine? You’re really sure, Cloud? Okay then… I love you. And take care. Bye.”

She hung up, with the strange impression that she was forgetting something. She hadn’t even told her brother that Noctis had asked her to marry him. But then again, she had other things to worry about. She still felt terribly weak and as she looked at the food that Noctis had summoned for her, her stomach churned in protest. But she was hungry and eating would help her in feeling better. At least, it would give her some strength. She frowned as she got up and lost balance. She had to grab
“Are you okay, Light?” Noctis asked, spotting her weakness almost instantly.

She could have sworn he had been ignoring her during her call, but he was clumsy in his cooking especially because all his attention was on her.

“I’m fine… I’m just tired.”

“Come on, then, let’s eat and…”

As she heard the word, she felt her stomach revolting and she had to run to the washroom before to turn the living room into a mess.

“Hey, I swear the food isn’t that bad even if I wasn’t the one to make it, master!” Odin pleaded.

Noctis care more about Lightning’s safety and went to her side, to look after her. She was ashamed that he could see her like that, but her body was reacting without her consent. She had been like this for all their travel in space. It had took them a little more days then the first travel. Storm had barely ever woken up and hadn’t spoken a word. Noctis almost had to force him to eat and the boy was like a ghost, his blue eyes always looking down, when they weren’t filling with tears.

Lightning had tried to help her boyfriend with the kid, and with his own demons, but Noctis had refused to let his pain out, thinking it would fade eventually. Tears were the enemies of men. They made them look weak. He knew it was all false, but there wasn’t much thing for him to be proud lately. Keeping a straight face was almost the only pride he had and he was willing to keep it. He had to stand strong. He wasn’t going to break again.

“You should really get a good check up. You’ve been sick for a whole week now.”

She shook her head.

“I don’t really need a doctor to tell me what’s going on here. We’ve been careless, haven’t we?”

It was Noctis’ turn to frown.

“Careless about what, Claire?”

She looked at him with tears in her eyes and he kneeled in front of her, worried that she would tell him something awful.

“I’m just turning so emotional, Noctis. I know what it means. It happened to me once. When I was pregnant with Raine.”

It took time for the news to turn clear in Noctis’ mind. Recognition turned his expression into a bright smile. No threat was on the way this time. They were a family. An expanding family at that!

“Why are you crying, Light? That’s wonderful!” he declared, laughing.

“Yes… I guess it is, but are we ready for this?”

“I think we have time to get ready, now? We’re not working for the Faction anymore. I’m calling Rufus to tell him we’re retiring. If anything wrong pops up, I’ll get things right, trust me, Light. I won’t let anything tear us apart now. We’ve been through too much.”

“Don’t stay stuff like that. You’ll sound like Snow.”
“Hey, now that’s some real insult! Can’t a guy be serious about something without being point out as silly?!”

“He’ll be your brother-in-law soon, you know?”

“I’m more worried about having Cloud Strife as my brother,” he chuckled. “Can you get up, Light.”

She nodded and he helped her up.

“All you need is rest and most of all, I want you to eat. Feel up for it?”

She blinked but nodded shyly, forcing a smile through her tears. Maybe was she simply facing some emotional breakdown after all the crazy stuff they had gone through.

“I think I need to get checked by a doctor before that we decide that this is official.” She said, stroking her flat belly with one hand.

Noctis nodded.

“You still need to eat.”

“Alright, Noct.”

The food left was cold when Storm woke up. He crawled in the living room, refusing to stand up on his feet. Noctis immediately spotted him and walked up to him. The boy halted, looking up, before to sit in front of his dad.

“How are you today, Storm?”

Storm looked at his father, barely blinking and refusing to talk. He had become quite silent lately. Noctis hated that. He was doing all he could to stay patient, but to see Storm regressing like that was getting on his nerves. He wanted to see the kid smiling and to hear his laughs, even if it was only for his own sake.

“Oh, Storm, I know it’s hard.”

Storm grabbed on his pants, his mouth closed shut. Bending down, Noctis ruffled his hair, trying to comfort him.

“Stand up, son. I know you can.”

Storm looked clueless.

“Come on, give me your hands.”

It took time for the boy to raise his small hands. Noctis lift him till he was on his feet and instantly; the child folded his legs, refusing to stand.

“Please Storm, stop playing that game.”

Shaking his head, the boy let out a small yell. His voice seemed gone from all the yells he had made. Noctis wrapped the little boy in a warm hug.

“It hurts to see you like this Storm. And I know you understand me. Stella wouldn’t want you to act like that. Be yourself.”
Storm shook in his arms. He was terrified by himself. He could kill people and thought Noctis was telling him over and over how he hadn’t, he was persuaded that his false mother had died because of him. Lightning had tried to comfort him, but he was afraid to see her. If she was his real mom, he had betrayed her and failed her with his terrible attitude. He couldn’t really resent himself for it, everyone had been lying to him over everything. But then again, how could he trust anyone now?

“Dad…”

That was his first word since weeks. Noctis felt his heart breaking down a little more. He had let this happened. He had let the faction destroy his poor son. And the pieces were so shattered, he had no idea how to fix him. And it reminded him, who had never been fixed but had lived nevertheless, pretending, fighting against the whole world and himself. He sighed as he held the boy closer to him.

“Storm, please, don’t ever stop to talk again. You scared me…”

“I’m sorry…”

“There’s no need to be. I know this has been terrible for you.”

“I see her each time I close my eyes.” Storm whispered.

“I know. It’s the same for me.”

Being honest seemed to be the only thing Noctis could do. And suddenly, he felt another embrace wrapping around him and Storm. Frail arms, inhabited by a strong will. How he knew that will. It was Lightning.

“Stop pretending as if you’re the only one who can understand what happened. I’ve been there too. You can also rely on me, you know.”

Storm looked up to her, for the first time. He was still scared beyond words. But Lightning’s eyes were firm and just as honest as his father’s words.

“I’m really ashamed.” The boy whispered.

“Why’s that?” Noctis asked.

“I hate her now. Not all the time, but she lied and I hate…!”

He couldn’t say Stella’s name. He couldn’t even start thinking over the Faction. But both adults understood what the boy meant. It was harsh to learn your own mother had lied on the fact that she was your mother, only for her own selfishness. Storm was too brilliant for his own age, and he could understand what had brought her to decide to agree to all of this, somehow. He thought he could understand. But at the same time, it was impossible to accept it.

“It’s okay, son.”

And Lightning nodded and stroked his hair. Slowly, for the first time, Storm accepted to slip out of his father’s hug to hide in her arms. He didn’t cry but his body was shaking from every limb. To think he still had a mother, after all he had done. To think he had a real sister, to the very last gene.

“I want a real name.” he pleaded. “From my real parents.”

Noctis bit his lips as he stared at Lightning, excepting her reaction. She simply smiled, stroking his,
well her... their son's back.

"We'll give you one, my little boy. There won't be any lies anymore. You're my little darling."

She exchanged one look with Noctis. As if to ask, any ideas?

"Shawn. If you like it, I think it could suit you."

"Oh no, he's too brilliant for such a name!"

"Hey, it was my best friend name!"

"Precisely!" Lightning retorted. "That guy wasn't always that bright."

That got Storm to laugh.

"I don't care about the name; he said when he calmed down. As long as you choose it. As long as I belong here."

Lightning gave him a quick kiss on the head.

"We'll have to think carefully. You know, you have a little brother on the way, Odin was pretty certain of it."

"That summoned spirit knows all kind of things..."

The said spirit appeared next to them, as if he had been there the whole time, watching over them from behind the walls. He was smiling under his helm.

"How about a knight's name? Siegfried would be good. Or Yvain? Oh wait, I know, Percival!"

"You can't be serious!" Storm complained. "I can't have something that silly as a...!"

"I thought you didn't mind the name we'd choose?"

"But I will mind if he's the one to choose it. I mean, come on, it's a freaking summoned spirit!"

Noctis hold back a laugh.

"How do you think you're talking young man?"

Storm looked down as his father reprimanded him. That was a first. But Lightning gave him another kiss on the cheek, still wondering over a name.

"Could it be Frey? Or Logan? Maybe Locke would fit you? Hmmm..."

She started playing with his silver locks and he laughed. Noctis felt really relieved to see them acting like that. It felt as if everything was over. He missed Raine. He couldn't wait to have her with them now that Storm was a little more himself.

"Don't forget that he will have Caelum as a last name. We can't choose just anything."

"Something latin then?"

"Oh no!" Storm protested.

"Frey Caelum? Percival Caelum?"
“How about Andrew?”

“And how about Julius? Or Marc-Anthony?”

“The more you suggest stuff, the more Storm sounds better for him.” Noctis observed.

“Maybe you’re right, dad…”

At this point, it didn’t really matter. All that counted was that they were a family. Lightning decided that she would go see Cloud to get Raine back before that night arrived. Her brother could come back too, but the apartment would feel kinda crowded. Though she wouldn’t mind having him around again. She wondered how he was doing right now.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D.

Location: Earth

Mission: babysitting Raine

Soldiers: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed

Warning: everything looks normal. But Yuna could have a visit that she didn’t expect.

Message from Bunkle, who just learn how to type on a computer. Bunkle likes the internet… He’ll go look around for more on it. End of transmission.

…

“Bunkle, don’t play with her like that, you’re gonna hurt her!” Cloud pleaded, trying to catch the dog.

Raine was lying on his back, giggling and grabbing on its green fur as the alien was walking around the living room. Yuna had suggested to take Cloud back to her home with his niece, so that they could relax away from his squad. He had welcomed the idea, but Bunkle was still trying to prove that he could do everything better than the soldier.

“She likes me!” Bunkle retorted.

As soon as he had seen Raine playing with mako thunder, the alien dog had decided that he wouldn’t resent her for being from the same family as Cloud Strife. She had shocked the dog by accident, and since it was an electric Carbuncle, the animal hadn’t mind at all. But Cloud did mind. He had to help Raine in learning how to keep her mako restrained and the dog was encouraging her at using it. At such a young age, she hadn’t the resistance to face such strength. She would only hurt herself if she kept on summoning the mako in her veins. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes look feverish, though she was smiling.

“Well, she’s just a child and doesn’t know what’s best for her. She can’t use mako like that. She’s gonna hurt herself!”

“Please Bunkle, listen to Cloud. Raine is just a baby.”

The dog accepted to obey and let the uncle take his niece back in his arms. The child smiled and giggled happily. She still looked tired, but that was only normal. A baby of her age, with all the terrible stuff she had to endure, had to develop great endurance, but still, adaptation was something
demanding.

“You’ll see your mom soon, Raine. I’m glad you like it around Yuna. She could be your aunt someday.”

Yuna blushed at that thought. Cloud was a little older than she was and may have more plans for the future. She was still a mere student pursuing her dream of becoming a top engineer. But as she looked at him, holding his baby niece, she felt that she could accept a simple normal life with him. As long as she would have a right to work on her machinery once a day, or twice. Anyway, he had brought them both on his motorcycle. As worried as he could be about Raine, he couldn’t accept the idea that there was an age limit to get on a bike.

“Is that some kind of proposal?” Yuna asked.

Cloud looked up, taken aback. He hadn’t meant for her to hear it, though he didn’t entirely mind. He just didn’t know what to say.

“I can’t say I would mind living with you for the rest of my life. But I know you don’t want things to go too fast and we’ve already burned a few steps, so… We’ll try to be a couple in normal life for some more months. I still need to adapt to the idea and to get the army to accept it. In space, with a near death experience close, it’s something else.”

Yuna was half wounded in her pride at that, but she had to admit that she would never have become bold enough to pull something like what she had done with Cloud on the day he’d woken up. Fortunately, he never thought anything wrong about it. He respected her and loved her to a point she had never thought a man could. And right now, if he had asked for her hand, she would have said yes without hesitation. But she had to admit waiting was way more clever. They needed to calm down, to rest properly. She couldn’t wait to receive her first flowers from him and to experience their first official rendezvous as a couple.

“You’re so mature about it, it’s almost scary Cloud.”

“I don’t want to give you the impression I’m afraid about engagement, Yuna, but I’m thinking of you too. If you get sick of me…”

“I won’t get sick of you!”

“Easy to say now. We’ve been living together for a few weeks, as two love birds and I didn’t mind that at all. But we had nothing to worry about.”

“Except our return to Earth, and I had to keep the shuttle in good shape.”

He smiled and walked up to her, holding Raine with one arm and hugging Yuna with the other. He kissed her face and went down her neck, tickling her with his nose.

“I love you, Yuna. It’s just not the time for an engagement. Lightning is settling down with her Noctis, Serah is pregnant. I can’t put them through any stress. And to be frank, I’m terribly scared that what we have may not last. I know I should let you study and I’m afraid I could hinder you right now. I dragged you in the army more than you wanted. I stained your beautiful hands, I…” he paused, looking at Raine, before to continue. “I hurt you a great deal and you almost die twice because of me.”

“And you saved me, and you protected me as much as you could.”

“I had to do more. I want to give you more, but I’m not sure if you were honest about what you
really want. You used to say you hadn’t time for love, remember?”

“Well, I have time for you. Alright, my studies were delayed from all those missions, but I will be able to get back to my classes soon. I should get my diploma in two years if things go well. Then, I will have to get into a big company that would accept my project for the greatest airship ever made.”

“If you need contacts, I can help.”

“We’re going to squeeze Raine at this rate.” She reminded him.

He let go of her with a regretful smile. Yuna looked around for a place where they could let the baby girl sleep. Her apartment wasn’t exactly made for a child. Then, her phone rang. She ran to answer it, happy to find something to do. She was kinda shocked when she recognized the voice on the other line.

“Mom?! Wait, you’re coming here? No, no, it’s not a bad timing. I know, I wasn’t around home lately, I just came back. If I’m busy? No, of course you can come. What?! What did Rikku told you about that blond guy? Well…”

She looked at Cloud, who looked back questioningly. Did she want him to leave? Because he could if she wanted to. Yuna raised one hand and made a sign that meant he had to stay where he was, as if she had read his mind.

“Actually, he’s going to be with me, that will be a good chance for you to meet him. He’s my boyfriend.”

Cloud sighed. Now it was going to be official. That meant that Jecht had every chance in the world to learn about it. Who knew if the army hadn’t taped Yuna’s line to make sure she wouldn’t let out any military secret?

“Alright, we’ll be waiting for you. Be careful on the road, right? See you then! Bye bye!”

Yuna hung up, blinking as if she still couldn’t believe it.

“Your mother is coming?”

“She should be here in a few minutes. She was just around the block and she decided to check if I was alright suddenly. That’s pretty…”

She hesitated, looking around the room, as if it was hiding the word she was looking for.

“…nice?” Cloud guessed.

Yuna shook her head.

“Of course it is, but why would she do that? I haven’t seen her during the whole last year. She was busy with her life and I was busy with my studies, and she had found some clues about where my dad could be, so she went looking, though it’s pointless.”

“You resent her for waiting after him all this time, is that it?” Cloud asked.

Yuna shook her head a second time.

“I don’t know… I don’t know what to think about her. I don’t know what to think about her coming here. I don’t even know if I should try to make this place look good. Rikku has wrecked
everything with her husband. You know that she stayed here for three whole weeks with her
Seymour? She sent me messages. I checked them just a moment ago. About how that poor guy
was…”

Yuna looked so angry at the said guy that Cloud declared he didn’t want to hear it. At least, not
with a small Raine still wide awake around.

“I hope she won’t get any idea from the fact Raine is here.”

“Well, we can’t let a child of this age alone, so we’ll have to explain the truth. My mom will
understand and find you even more wonderful. Get ready to hear about weddings now.”

“It’s that bad?” he asked playfully.

Yuna smiled at his carelessness.

“I’m her only daughter after all.”

He frowned at that.

“Don’t you think she’ll be mad at me then, for taking you away from her, or something?”

“You’re way too dashing for her to get mad at you. If anything’s certain, she’ll try to steal you
from me.”

“There’s no fear on that side. If I was fish, I’d say I’m totally hooked.”

Yuna blushed, unsure of what she should think of that comparison. But the doorbell rung and she
had no time left to reflect over her mother’s visit. It was going to happen. All she needed to do now
was to hope that everything would go well.

…

Time: 19 028 A.D. around february
Location: earth, Boston, Squall’s apartment
Mission: retrieving Aeris’ confidence since
Agents: Squall Leonheart
Warning: The Faction is slowly being reorganized since the death of its top GI, Caius Ballad.
Sephiroth’s and Jenova’s death had thrown the Feds in utter chaos. Things are looking bad on the
outside. Our only hope is that no new threat shows up.

Message from a still really confused Rufus Shinra. End of transmission.

…

It had been a month and a half since Squall had killed Sephiroth. Aeris had been really closed off
on herself lately, and the young man had accepted it. They would still talk at least once a day and
she would sit close to him on the couch and they would even hold hands. But sometimes at night,
she would wake up screaming and he would run to her side, hoping to comfort her, only to be
pushed away, because the fact he was a man scared her just as much as the nightmares from the
past. Squall tried being patient. That was something he was really good at, so he didn’t entirely
mind. But even his patience had limits. One night, he wrapped his arms around her as they were
sitting on the couch and dared to kiss her. And she answered to him, desperately, giving him all the hope he needed to guess he could take them to the next step.

Rinoa was still fresh in his mind, and somewhere deep inside, Squall had the impression of betraying her, so he decided to show more patience. Maybe the fact that Aeris yelped with fear as he tried to slip one hand under her shirt helped a bit. He could kiss her and hold her, as long as he was gentle and not over demanding. And still, he could read her mind and see that she craved him, despite all of her fears. Sometimes, she would imagine what could happen if she didn’t stop him. And Squall was ashamed to be able to see her phantasms. It was a little too exciting even for someone as patient as him.

He decided to make up a plan. First, he bought flowers. It wasn’t entirely to serve his final goal, but more to get the ancient girl to smile. And that part worked. He took her out and her smiled stayed on and they even danced around a few nightclub. He bought the top of the building’s block, so that she could start growing a garden. He accompanied her to many stores, so that she could get herself all the dresses she could want. And slowly, Squall realized all the little attentions he showed around her weren’t about his plan.

Her smile was making his heart jump in his chest. Holding her hand was enough to make his cheeks warm at first and he never really got accustom to have her touching him. It felt so intimate every time, even if it was only a tap on the shoulder or her hand in his hair. He tried not to peek in her head. Not to read her feelings as their skin would brush when they cooked dinner together. But his senses were able to see, as clearly as his eyes saw the glint of lust in her eyes, and how ashamed she looked whenever that glint came.

Somehow, Squall realized he had pictured Aeris as a pure, naïve woman. She was like a flower. Like his mother. Like everything he’d ever wanted. But she could be so daringly pretty sometimes. He did all he could not to think it, but sometimes, he could swear that she was teasing him. Dressing herself in all those dresses. That short skirt she wore every Friday, which showed her legs so much. Bending down absentmindedly, showing more curves than she should. Forgetting her clothes in her, well, in his room and walking out of the shower wearing only a towel. He liked seeing her like that. He wanted to see more. To see everything. To touch and to smell and to taste and to…

He buried his head in his pillow. He didn’t remember ever wanting Rinoa like that. It wasn’t forbidden in the same way at the time. There was no risk in rushing her, she was as passionate as he could get. And she was so more outgoing than he could be. But Aeris. Aeris was like a puzzle. Her mood could change easily. She would get happy for small, simple stuff, and would get sad for even simpler things. And how he wanted to make her happy in every possible way. He dreamed that he could. He often doubted himself. He thought he was a creep for thinking so much about it. But it was important to think before to act, even if it meant that he’d never act in the end. Squall groaned. Aeris was in the shower right now, humming gently.

He would have joined her if he dared. And he felt pretty daring tonight. Hadn’t he been charming enough? Of course, he was scared about the whole question of Sephiroth. They had barely talked about it and he was sure Aeris would feel better if she talked about it. Girls always felt better when they talked. But he was the killer in that case. And he was scared that she could resent him for that. He had put her through more suffering. He wasn’t sure anymore if Sephiroth’s death was the right thing to have happening around her. So with all that in mind, how could he approach her with a straight face?

He had no idea that his answer would come this night. The humming in the bathroom was interrupted by a sudden yell and he jumped on his feet. Could Aeris have been attacked? The
windows were closed, he knew the only door to enter the apartment was locked and no one could have gotten to the washroom with him around. So what could it be? He walked up to the bathroom’s door, biting his lips as he wonder if he should just barge in.

“Aeris, are you alright?” he called out.

She was the one to barge out of the room, with a towel wrapped around her shaking form.

“He was here,” she said. “In the glass, I saw his face. His eyes.”

Squall didn’t have to ask who she was referring to. His arms immediately flew around her, to hold her to his heart, but she pushed his hands away.

“I can’t stop seeing him. I feel him. I washed my skin as much as I can, but I still feel his hands.”

Her exposed skin was red were she had washed too hard. He realized that her back was worse at the spot of the number shaped scar. He tried to calm her down, but her hands grabbed on his shirt, pulling him down to her. She wasn’t crying, but she was close to tear and Squall had no idea how to quiet this crisis.

“I don’t know how to make him leave. Was it really the good one that you killed Squall? Is there more of him left in this world? Won’t they come for me? Why am I thinking like that? Why would there be more than one of them? Why can’t I be content that he’s dead? Why does his ghost hunt me like that? Drive him away, Squall! Drive him away, for heaven’s sake, before I go crazy for real…”

She sounded desperate and Squall could understand. He tried to get a hold of her, moving as gently as possible, but she wouldn’t let go of his shirt, pulling on the fabric as if it was some evil creature.

“Get it off,” she asked, surprising him even more.

“What?”

“The shirt. Get it off. I need to feel you. I need to share the visions before that they consume me. I don’t know if it’s right, I don’t know what I’m doing anymore… Just get it off, please!”

He obeyed, hardly gulping down. He wasn’t sure what she wanted to show him. Wasn’t sure if he had the nerves to see it. She wrapped her arms around him, her naked shoulders coming in contact with his bare skin. She was shaking even more now. Since it felt alright to do so, Squall held her in his arms. He never had been in such an intimate contact with her. And the visions came, claiming all of his senses, almost knocking him off. He saw the chains on her wrists. He felt her pain, as if it was him living the memories. She cried, and he held her closer, closing his eyes to shut away the visions. But they came back anyway.

He backed away, though he didn’t let her go, and his back hit the wall. Just as her back was hitting the floor in her mind. And the grunts. And the moans. And the pain. Squall wished for a second that it could stop. It was too much information. He couldn’t erase something like that. Nothing could. He felt so enraged, he wanted to kill Sephiroth another time. And then, he saw that the man would cry sometimes in Aeris’ shoulder, when she was lying unconscious beneath him. He realized that Aeris was even more pained because she couldn’t see her own torturer as someone purely evil. She couldn’t explain his actions. But she saw his own pain as he inflicted pain on her. And she remembered, even if sometimes he had laughed at her, and slashed through her broken heart, and bite and…

The sickening pictures were going so fast, Squall couldn’t see anything clearly anymore. All that he
knew was that he had to hold on Aeris. He held her as firmly as he could, because somehow, he
was certain that she would vanish if he let her go even for a second. And she held on him so
tightly, it was hard to breathe. Or was that Sephiroth crushing him as he’d been crushing her?
Squall hated himself for his sensitive powers. But as the visions died down and as he came back to
himself, to a body that wasn’t in pain, he felt lighter. Now at least, he knew what had been going
through her head for the last month. He realized he was shaking. And she was crying, making
herself as small as possible in his lap.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He didn’t answer immediately. He couldn’t trust his voice right now. The pictures were still too
vivid in his mind. Her hands shyly slipped through his hair, as she tried to comfort him somehow
from all she had shown him.

“Why?”

“I shouldn’t have imposed these visions on you…”

He shook his head, but he wasn’t agreed with her.

“You didn’t have to bear this alone.”

“But…”

He shut her with two fingers on her lips. And she didn’t push his hand away.

“I just don’t know if I can have you forget something like that.”

Her tears dripped down her cheeks and he wiped them away.

“I don’t wanna talk about it. I shouldn’t have…”

“It’s okay.”

It was a lie, but he felt that somehow, sharing her terrible past had helped her feeling better about it.
She wasn’t alone anymore and though it had hurt him at the same time, Squall could now truly
understand her.

“He’s really gone now, right?” she asked, looking down to his chest.

It was covered with goosebumps and she shivered herself.

“He’s gone and he’ll never come back.” He assured her.

She looked up, hearing his voice breaking down at the end of his sentence. Squall had the terrible
impression that Sephiroth was a little part of him now.

“Don’t think that please. You’ll never be like him.” She whispered.

He smiled faintly.

“I don’t know how to act with you, Aeris.”

“Call me Ris, please.

“Ris…”
She seemed a little calmer than and her smile was brighter.

“We’re going to get cold if we stay like this. And you need to rest.”

He gently put her back on her feet and led her to the room.

“Squall…”

Her voice sounded hesitant and he knew what she thought.

“I don’t have my mind on anything of the sort. I think you should sleep. And I’d like to do the same.”

“You’ll stay with me?”

“Only if you want me to.”

She accepted and it was the first time that they slept together that night. But she held his hand as she fell asleep, apologizing again. And in the morning, he was woken up by her kiss on his cheek and dared to reply with his mouth on her own. Only then did Squall understand that she was finally on the path of healing. And even if he was quite sure he would still have a few nightmares from this harsh sharing of visions, he understood that it was the greatest way he could accept her and help her.

“If I ever scare you, you must tell me, Aeris,” he warned her as he held her close the next night.

“If I hurt you, you have to be frank too.”

“You’ll never hurt me, unless you get hurt yourself.”

“Then I have nothing to fear, since you’re here to protect me.”

To be continued…
Chapter 39

Episode 3 – White maiden –Part XIII

Time: 19 028 A.D. 21th march

Location: Earth, Boston, Squall’s apartment.

Mission: still pending

Agents: Squall Leonheart

Warning: Aeris is slowly changing. She’s acting particularly strange today. What is Squall supposed to do now?

Message from Squall’s subconscious. End of transmission.

…

Squall was coming back from the Faction’s quarters. Rufus had remodeled the company. Every general instructor had been removed except from him. He was now the president of their group. He had let the choice to his agent, to free themselves of the Faction, while half of them were staying to destroy what was left from the Feds. Squall had decided to stay for the moment, so that he would be able to learn all the truth over Rinoa’s life with Seifer. And her mission to destroy the Feds from the inside. He intended to complete it in her stead. But he had more basic worries for the moment.

Rinoa was still a ghost in his heart, but Aeris had taken all the remaining space in his life. He woke up with her every morning and the very idea of losing her was almost driving him mad, but the fact he could admit it in front of her helped getting through everyday life. He was ready to wait for her to be ready to step to the other level. He wasn’t ready to see her flirting openly with him though.

That night, when he came back home, he was greeted by a home cooked dinner. Aeris was dressed in her new favorite dress, a green gem gown that showed each of her curves, with a shawl that wrapped around her shoulders and gently brought decency to her attire. It floated behind her as she moved, making her look like an angel. Her skirt was opened on both sides, letting her legs exposed to the eye at each movement. Her eyes were playful and her smile was honest. Candles were on the table. Lusty angel…

She wanted it to happen tonight. Squall was shocked to say the least, but he went along with her game. They talked and flirted, as young adults would. The dinner seemed to take way too long, but they still enjoyed every minute of it. Laughing and exchanging glances from over the table. Their hands brushed and fingers intertwined at some point. He felt like taking her out to dance, but they stayed home.

“I feel as if this is all wrong, somehow.” She admitted, blushing slightly as they sat together across the living room’s futon.

“Why would it be?”

“I’m really teasing you tonight… I’m scared that if I let you down along the way...”

“Trust me, Ris. I won’t give you any reason to back away.”

But as he said that, he feared that she could reject him. That would be his end. But if she needed
tenderness, he had it. And if she was ready for passion, he’d give it his all. His hands were on her waist. She was playing with his locks. An instant, he wondered if he was betraying Rinoa. Than Aeris kissed him and he forget the rest of the world. He let her take control, wanting her to build up some confidence. It felt incredibly right. He seized her, stroking her back, holding her arms, her hands, and her face. He wanted to bury himself inside her. Her shawl was the first thing to fall. Soon, Squall was on his back, with the woman of his dreams in his arms. And she had to be dreaming too, because she’d never been that bold before in her life. She felt out of control. She wanted to show him how much she was ready to give to thank him for everything. She wanted to please him.

And she wanted him to erase her last bad memories. So that the pain would disappear and that her life could be with him and only him. She felt his hands on her naked back. His fingers send shivers down her spine. Good shivers. As they broke their kiss, she heard him whispering her name. And sweet words came, just as sweet as his hands could be. They rolled on their sides to face each other, burning from excitement. His eyes were fragile and open. And she had never felt that vulnerable in her whole life. Sephiroth had once touched her everywhere, seen her naked and all, but he had never been able to reach his soul, like Squall could. He hadn’t liked her or wanted her like Squall did.

Squall felt desperate to prove himself to her, to be worthy. He needed her. Not only physically, but also her presence, her smile. She saw the emptiness in his heart that only she could fill. The fears that he hid with all his strength. It wasn’t entirely right, how badly he needed her in his life. But she was happy. And when they rolled another time and he ended up on top of her, she wasn’t scared. It was Squall and she just couldn’t fear him, even if he was a man.

But then he looked at her, and he’d never looked that serious in front of her before.

“You’re really sure, Ris? If I hurt you…”

“I’m used to it.”

He shook his head.

“That’s not what you should say.”

“No matter how good you are, I know it’ll hurt at first. I wanna get through it. So that I get used to you. You earned me.”

“Aeris, please… You’re making me feel awful.”

“Don’t… Just feel me and help me feel.”

He realized she was shaking and gently covered her with light kisses, which meant how important she was to him. She kissed him back, holding onto him and they let their senses take over, just wanting to forget the outside world that had pained them. He let himself wide open, grateful that none of her memories were rushing into his mind. All he had in response to his touch was her shivering skin and her gentle whines. They went slowly, but they didn’t stop. In the morning, the sun found them lost in each other embrace. The phone rang at some point and Squall thought about breaking the damn thing, but then the receiver was on and he could hear Lightning’s voice.

“Hi Squall. I wanted to invite you to my wedding. It will be taking place in a few months. Aeris should come to, if she wants. We’ll be glad to have all of our friends with us. So call me back, okay?”
He smiled as he held Aeris closer to him. Things were looking up for everyone.

“Squall, what was that?”

“Just the phone. How are you feeling, Ris?”

“Good. Pretty worn out, but it feels good. I don’t think I could ever get up again.”

He chuckled at that, feeling her hands running along his neck.

“Do you know that I love you, Ris?”

“I sure do.”

...

Time: 19 028 A.D. 21th february
Location: Earth, Boston, Yuna’s place.
Mission: receiving Yuna’s mother without losing face
Soldiers: Cloud Strife, Yuna Albhed
Warning: Raine could let her think the wrong thing about Cloud. Important thing to mention to her, we’re babysitting here!

Message from Cloud and Yuna’s mind. End of transmission.
...

“Yuna, it’s been so long!”

“I’m so happy to see you mom!”

“And is that the young man you were talking about on the phone, Cloud I presume? Is that a code name?” she teased him.

Cloud had half a smile and shook his head.

“My parents had a weird taste when it came to names.”

He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to shake her hand or just to nod at her in recognition. Yuna’s mother was gorgeous and really dignified. She looked gentle and her eyes were filled with love. There was an inner sadness to her look, though. She had been betrayed once.

“It sounds good. I wish I had heard more of you, but Yuna has been hard to reach lately.”

Yuna and Cloud exchanged a shy glance. The man felt slightly guilty about that. After all, it was because she was out on a mission on Pluto with him that she couldn’t keep up with her family.

“She’s been working pretty hard lately.” Cloud said.

“Rikku told me about it. But let’s not stand around here like strangers.”

She grabbed her daughter by her arm and dragged her to the living room, so that they would sit on the couch. It was then that she saw Raine, sleeping on Bunkle’s green fur.
“Oh… Has it been that long since we last talked, Yuna?!”

“Don’t get us wrong here, mom, it’s Raine, Cloud’s niece. We’re babysitting her for his sister.”

“Really?” the woman asked.

“She has pink hair. Do I look that girly?!” Cloud protested

Both women started to laugh. Soon, Yuna’s mother was convinced that Raine was simply a cute baby that had nothing to do with her daughter. Her eyes were nothing as blue as Cloud’s and beside, Yuna hadn’t known him long enough to have a child of this age.

“She’s adorable. Your sister has to be proud.”

“She certainly is. But enough about me…”

“Why are you coming here, mom? You rarely come by just to visit.” Yuna observed.

The elder woman nodded, before to raise her shoulders.

“I’ve got good news for you, Yuna. It’s about your father.”

Cloud instantly moved to put one hand on his girlfriend’s shoulder, so that she would feel his support.

“He’s back home. He’s pretty ill, but he should get better soon. He’s been asking you to come and see him. I knew you wouldn’t believe me if I didn’t come to tell you directly, so here I am. Cloud can also come. I’m sure Braska would be happy to see that you now have a tough man to look out for you.”

Yuna was taken aback. She could have fallen to the ground if it hadn’t been for Cloud standing next to her. He held her up, wondering if this could be a trap.

“I know you were really angry at him, but don’t you think you have what it takes in your heart to forgive him now?”

Cloud felt Yuna tensing up in his arms. He held her closer, afraid that she could blow up. But then she looked up to him, as if his eyes could give her an answer. And he realized that the very fact she accepted him meant she had all it took to forgive. He had done far worse than all her father ever could have done. And somehow, she still had enough heart to love him.

“Would you come with me, Cloud?”

“Only if you want to.” He answered, hugging her gently.

She smiled.

“I do.” Was all she answered.

…”

Time: 19 028 A.D. 21th april

Location: Earth, Boston, Lightning’s apartment.

Mission: starting to live again…?
Agents: Lightning Farron, Noctis Lucis Caelum, Raine and Storm (plus their awesome and only servant, the great Odin and his mount!)

Warning: Things have changed a lot. We don’t really have stuffs to declare to anyone anymore. The Faction is still on, but slowly closing down. Can hardly wait for everything to be truly over. And to see my master coming back to her normal self. She’s asking for anything at any time now that she’s pregnant. I’m a knight for heaven sake, not some errand boy! Ahem. Sorry for that…

Message from Odin. End of transmission.

…

“Noctis!”

There was no answer at first. Lightning chewed on her lips, angrily scanning the room. Dirty piece of clothing were lying on the floor. None belonged to her. A portable was buried under the mess on Noctis’ desk. Files were scattered over it, with old discs and even a few portable consoles. She had found a gun hidden in their wardrobe, and his whole set of blades was kept under their bed. Noctis had started finding his things here and there and had brought them back since he was officially living with her.

She didn’t mind everything, but sometimes, especially now, she was annoyed. Her home was invaded by chaos and she liked order. Plus, a gun lying around the same apartment where a toddler like their small Raine lived was highly dangerous. Storm had started acting like a kid, while keeping his brilliant knowledge over everything. He had slightly regressed on some things and Lightning was still working to get him entirely toiled-trained so that he wouldn’t wet his bed at night. But she still had to tame the father about a thing or two. Like putting more order in his stuff.

Noctis was working hard as a part time detective. He worked mostly with Boston’s police, but his cases were never as life threatening as any mission the Faction would give them. She was thinking about becoming a teacher, in the army or something. Cloud had said a few posts were always vacant and that the new recruits needed some real drill instructor. Lightning guessed she could try it, once her baby would be born and that her whole family would be settled. She was expecting a baby boy. She was four month pregnant and it was starting to show. She was getting married in less than a week. And her whole apartment was a mess!

“Noctis! Storm! Odin!” she called out.

The summoned spirit appeared immediately, quickly followed by Storm.

“What is it master?”

“Where’s your father!” Lightning asked, ignoring the spirit to look at the silver haired boy.

The child hid behind Odin’s armored leg. He had grown really timid lately in front of her. The fact she was getting angry more easily than ever didn’t help.

“He’s working on something in his office. He won’t be back before another hour. You asked us twice this morning.” The boy sighed.

“Can I help you with something, master?” Odin eagerly added.

“As a matter of fact, you can. This room needs some cleaning.”

Odin looked astonished for an instant.
“I’ll go check on Raine, you were supposed to look after her, weren’t you,” she said with a smirk. She left like that, leaving both guys to wonder if they would survive the five next months.

“I wonder if my computerized mother had the same highs and downs.” Storm observed.

“Sir Storm, you’re almost just as confusing as my master…”

“It’s called hormonal disorder. And it’s going to drive me mad before you, Odin. I wish I had any reason to get away from here like dad. School almost sounds good, though it would be boring…”

“Why don’t you help me cleaning?”

“I’ll go make sure that my room’s alright before. She could decide to have a look. And somehow, my father rubbed off on me on that side…”

Odin was left alone in the chaotic mess Noctis called his “organized disorder”.

“Oh dear… I miss Ultima more than ever right now…”

…An hour later or so…

“I’m home!” Noctis said cheerfully as he walked in. He was tired from his day of work, but it was a good fatigue. He had solved a case, had been paid for two investigations and had finally discussed every last stupid detail around his bills and stuff. Having people waiting for him at home made all the work even more worthwhile. It was for them that he worked hard, for them that he was giving up on his ancient life to live normally. He was still a little paranoid on the side, but it was slowly getting better. Raine was the first to come, walking on her own two legs, her small arms raised up.

“Papa, papa’s home!!” she excitedly said.

He kneeled in front of his little girl to give her a tight hug and a few kisses on her forehead, which got her to giggle happily and to squirm in his grasp.

“Stop it, papa, it tickles” she laughed.

Noctis had never hoped to have this kind of life. He still doubted some time that he owed it. But Raine erase every doubt he could ever have. As he stepped further in his apartment, he was greeted with Lightning’s glare.

“Hi there, darling. What’s up with the look on your face? Odin’s done something wrong? It’s Storm?”

Lightning shook her head.

“It’s your doing, Noctis. I had my summon spirit cleaning behind your mess for the last week. This can’t go on any longer.”

He gave her a weak smile, getting up while keeping Raine in his arms.

“We shouldn’t argue around the kids,” he suggested.

“Don’t try to use them to hide from your responsibilities. You got to do something about that attitude of yours.”
“What?! Come on, I’ve been working all day and…”

“I can’t walk around my own room without stepping on some of your things. Don’t you believe that this is wrong! You’re driving me so mad that even Storm is starting to fear me!”

Raine’s face turned really pale as she heard her mother’s voice raising. She seemed close to tears and Noctis cuddled her, kissing her cheek and cheering her on.

“Mom’s alright. She’s just on edge.”

“Mama’s scary like that.” The small girl sighed before to hide her face against her father’s neck.

Lightning glared at him even more. As she grew up, Raine seemed to prefer her “papa” over her mother. Maybe was it because Cloud had often taken care of her and Squall had also been babysitting. Aeris and Yuna had been there, but it took a man’s voice to soothe her when she had nightmares had night. And the lord knew how much nightmares the poor girl had. She remembered, in the back of her mind, the experiment ran on her. She was scared of being rejected, especially by her mother. It was like an inner fear, which she couldn’t shake off. Instead of looking for comfort with her mom, she would run to her father. She had often seen him taking care of Storm. She was also kinda scared that her elder brother could steal one of her parents from her. It was hard for both kids. Raine still didn’t understand everything and Noctis sure didn’t know how to explain things to her.

“You’re making me the enemy again, Noct. Why do you always do that?!”

Now it was Lightning who was on the verge of tears. Odin, who had just walked into the room, raised his eyes to the ceiling.

“What are you doing, Sir Noctis? Master needs…”

“We don’t need you to tell us what I need,” the young woman interfered violently.

Raine coiled up in her father’s arms, really scared now.

“Claire, please, try to calm down. We’ll talk this over. Come on Raine, it’s alright.”

“Mama’s in pain.” The little girl squealed.

“She’s not, she’s crying, but that’s…”

Noctis realized he had trouble explaining it. He hadn’t faced pregnant women often in his life. He wondered if he really did something that terrible to owe all this suffering now. Not that it wasn’t anything like his life before. But controlling a berserk Lightning while handling Storm, Raine and Odin wasn’t an easy task. He was doing his best to please all of them. He was content with each of their smiles. He loved them. They were his family and everything that he had. But there were some days where things got harder and harder.

“It’s okay dad.” A new voice said.

It was Storm. The boy was tugging on his pants to get his attention. Noctis felt an instant wave of pride in his heart. The boy had maybe grown timid somehow, but he was still able to hold his ground. If he could stand up to Lightning, he was ready to stand against anything.
“Hey there, son.” The detective said, shuffling the boy’s hair.

“Hi dad. Leave Raine with me. Go talk with mom.”

It was rare to hear Storm referring to Lightning as his mom. He still felt pretty unsure of himself in that sector of his life. But he would dare to say it every now and then. It felt reassuring. Even refreshing.

“Is it alright with you, Raine? You’ll go play with your brother for a while.”

Okay…”

The little girl didn’t sound too sure, but she knew better than to go against her father’s will. She obediently followed Storm to his room, where he would certainly try to teach her something about science. Noctis wasn’t sure what she could learn from those lessons at her age, but he knew that she liked to listen to her brother.

As the kids walked out, Odin followed their example, and that left the young couple alone in their living room. Lightning wasn’t exactly sure why she was angry again, but she knew that she still was really angry at Noctis. He was always leaving her alone and his stuff was turning her small world into utter chaos. All she wanted was peace and quiet.

“Okay…” Noctis ran one hand through his hair, wondering how he was supposed to end this crisis, since everyone in the house seemed to think it was his fault and that he had the solution. “Tell me what’s wrong, Lightning.”

“I don’t know… Everything feels wrong. The Faction is over. I haven’t had a mission or a job to call my own for the last three months. I’ve been surrounding myself with baby stuff and Serah had the sweetest baby boy as if it was nothing a week ago. I have two kids already, but I’ve never been pregnant this long before. I feel like barricading myself just to make sure nothing happens and…”

It all came so quickly that Noctis wasn’t sure if he heard right. But suddenly, he understood that this wasn’t just some hormonal disorder. His Lightning had been through too many ordeals. Now she needed comfort. She needed to get through the next five months with the thought that she would be able to carry her child till its birth. She shook from fear at the idea of losing the life that was lying in her womb.

“Oh Claire, you can lock yourself up. It wouldn’t be healthy and we have our wedding in four days.”

“Maybe it’s exactly why I’m so scared! What if something happened?”

He walked up to her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, bringing her into a warm hug.

“Nothing will happen. I’ll be there with my Radiance, and Storm will too, and there will be Cloud and his whole Squad. You got mako power, radiance and even Squall to back you up if it’s not enough. If anyone can get through us, then there won’t be anywhere safe in this world.”

“Does our child really have to live in this world? I’ve traumatized our poor Raine by leaving her in these scientists’ hands for years and Storm… I still have trouble accepting the truth. I’m not fit to be a mother, all I can do is fight and now that I can’t even do that…”

“Claire, would you listen to yourself? We’ve rid this world of many evils so that our kids could live happily. It wasn’t everything that went right along the way, but we still did all we could. Raine is able to talk, to walk and to smile. She even laugh. She has mako in her blood and she does
nightmares at night. Every child does nightmares. She loves us more than everything in the world. She needs us. It means both you and me, Lightning, don’t go forgetting that. You can’t give up now.”

She shook her head, pushing on his chest with her hands, as if to tell him that he didn’t understood anything.

“I’m not giving up. I’m just scared of what my life is looking like. I’m happy to have a family, don’t misunderstand me. But I’ve always been alone, only looking after myself, and suddenly, I’ve got two boys and a girl looking after me for advice. I never was a good sister to begin with, how can I be a good mom?!”

“You’re the best mom I’ve ever seen. You’re beautiful, you’re strong, you cook well, you’ll fight for your kids… You can put up with a guy like me, while I’m certainly the oldest kid around the place. There’s nothing wrong with being scared sometimes. Don’t keep it to yourself. Here, come on, we’ll sit down. You’re way too stressed out. It’s stuff like that that could hurt the baby.”

She started to cry at that and he sighed, guiding her to their couch.

“I love you, Light. I can’t give you everything you should have. I don’t have a house, we don’t even have a car yet… But I love you with all my heart. I know you’ll always do what’s best. Raine and Storm love you more than you could ever imagine. They must be worried sick about you right now.”

“I know… I just can’t help it. If I was to lose this baby right now… I’m way too nervous about this pregnancy to even think about this wedding. All I can think about is how messy I feel inside and how everything around me looks messy.”

Noctis wondered if things were looking that bad around the place because of him. Of course, he had tried making breakfast with Odin. Lightning had insisted that he refrained as much as possible from using his Radiant power to call out food out of nowhere. She often slept in, since she was pregnant, so he was feeding the kids before that he left for work. It may sound stupid, but he took his father’s role pretty seriously and he was giving it his all, even if it meant that he left a dozen cauldrons in the sink as he left for his work.

The kitchen was a mess, but the breakfast was perfect when he had left. Of course, he let a few things lying around his room, but he had the intention of cleaning things soon. Like after the wedding. And maybe once their baby would be born. He had to put order through his things, and it was one harsh process. Suddenly, he realized something, Lightning had said that Odin had cleaned his mess behind him.

“Has Odin touched to my stuff, Light? Do you seriously let him go through my things?! If anyone tries to order my files, there’s no way I can find what I need before hours. You know how he is, he always classify stuff in their chronological order. I don’t need chronological order; who would need that anyway?!”

Lightning pinched her lips. This was going to be a hard afternoon.

…

It had been hard to get Noctis to calm down about his files all set up in chronological order. It was even harder to convince Lightning that he would start making some effort to turn things in less of a mess. It had been even harder to get every things set for their wedding.
They had to take a rocket to get on the airship where they would celebrate the ceremony. Squall was supposed to be Noctis’ witness while Cloud would walk Lightning to the altar. Serah, Yuna and Aeris would be their three bridesmaids. Storm was the ring’s carrier and Raine would set flowers, coming right before her aunt Serah. Except for the participants, the people assisting would be Cloud’s squad, since they were good friends with Lightning. Noctis hadn’t many people he wanted to invite, except for a few guys from the old Faction, like Rude, Reno and Ignis, his only childhood friend who was still alive.

Lightning replaced her crown of flower and her veil for the nth time.

“Nervous?” Cloud asked.

Serah and her twin were the only one permitted to stay close to her during the last preparations.

“You bet. I don’t feel like myself. Ain’t it just too much? Maybe I should just grab Noctis and make a run for it.”

“There are barely twenty people in this church. And there are not many places to run to on Cid’s airship.”

Lightning sighed.

“I guess you’re right. I just wish this would get over. I really miss Raine…”

“I sure miss my little Hope too, but Snow said the boy would be alright.” Serah observed.

“He’s a really considerate father, I don’t think you have to worry, sis.”

Serah smiled confidently. She then arranged her older sister’s veil, making sure it was falling in the best way possible. The dress was following her upper curves, while gently hiding her belly in a light skirt. She wore white glass shoes, that were way more comfortable than what they looked like. A pure white necklace was running around her neck, with green pearls intertwined in it, that brought out her eyes. Black lines ran over her white dress, making her look more stylish than dignified. But then again, Lightning never wanted a typical wedding. She was surprised to be getting married, period.

Cloud heard music in the background and presented his arm to his sister.

“It’s time, Light.”

He was wearing a white tuxedo over a blue navy shirt. His hair had been placed by Serah’s caring hands, which managed to get his spikes to stand down for this day. His eyes were fragile.

“It’s me who’s getting married, not you brother.”

“I know… Guess I’m nervous too. I’m letting my other half bond herself to another guy. Feels kinda freaky.”

“It’s the way you say it that’s freaky, I’ll tell you!”

Serah smiled at their behavior. There were things that never changed.

“Please, behave yourself Cloud. Snow and I could get married next year, you know.”

“I hope that by then, our brother will have good news for us. We’ve been working hard at expanding this family, don’t you think so Serah?”
“It’d be a shame if the Strife’s name was to go down in history.”

He turned a slight shade of red.

“Yuna’s still working hard on her grades, you both know it.”

“Sounds more like you’d rather not grow up too quickly.”

He looked away, blushing even more.

“I can be a brother and an uncle, but I’m not sure if I’m ready to really be a father. It’s hard just to see you having kids and all. And I still have a full time job, unlike some of you. Plus, I’ve been going out with Yuna for only a few months.”

“I guess that seeing you with a nice young girl that loves you should be enough for us right now.” sighed Serah.

...

Noctis was pacing back and forth in his black tuxedo. He felt lost and unsure. Odin would be acting as their clerk to celebrate their union. Squall cleared his throat as the few guests were walking into the cathedral they had built on the airship especially for this occasion.

“Chill out. Everything will be alright.”

“I know. But I can’t help but feel terribly anxious about this. Lightning is going to be late, if she doesn’t run away on me.”

“She’d never do that. She’s considering this as her most important mission. And she’s probably just as anxious as you.”

Squall was right, of course. The whole ceremony went as peacefully and wonderfully as anyone could have expected it to go. The first to walk in was Raine, closely followed by Storm. The girl was smiling and Noctis immediately felt easier as he saw his daughter walking down the aisle. The thought that he could guide her down that aisle in fifteen years or so was far from his mind. At the moment, all he could think of was Lightning. And the life he was going to build with her and the rest of their family. Storm looked terribly serious, but he still exchanged a smile with his father.

*We’re half way there*, Noctis thought.

Then, the bridesmaid walked in. First it was Aeris and Yuna. Serah came after them, to be closer to her older sister. The three young women were dress in light pink dresses that made them look like little fairies. None were daring, but the cuts and skirt were made differently for each of them, leaving it to their fantasies. Lightning came afterward, with Cloud holding her arm. The veil was barely hiding her face. She wasn’t entirely smiling, she was still too nervous for that. But she was happy, Noctis could see it. Her eyes were filled with stars and her stomach was full of butterflies. She wondered if her baby could feel it. She slowly walked down the aisle, following the gentle music carried in the air. It was Shera who played it, with her husband Cid Highwind standing next to her.

Everything felt right, from the colors on the wall to the sound of Lightning’s steps on the floor. Cloud left her in front of Noctis, winking at his new brother-in-law. Odin gently went on to the officials questions.

“Do you, sir Noctis Lucis Caelum, take this woman, my dear master, Lightning Claire Farron, as
your dear and only mate? Are you ready to cherish and love her for the rest of your life, albeit till death do you part?”

Noctis blinked at the phrasing the summoned spirit had chosen, but he nodded before to whisper.

“I do.”

“Then repeat after me. …”

Noctis cut him off before that he could start with his speech. He had written vows of his own and he wanted to tell them to Lightning.

“Claire, my love, with this ring,” and he slipped the ring on her finger as he went on: “I show the world my vow to stay by your side, through the good and the bad times. With these hands,” and he held on her shoulders to support his words, his blue eyes trembling slightly from the emotion. “With these hands, I’ll protect you from harm for as long as I breathe. With this heart,” and he grabbed one of her hand to put it right over the spot where his heart was madly beating “I’ll love you every day, without asking for anything in return. I shall be yours and yours only, and I’ll always be honored to call you my wife.”

Lightning felt tears of joy in her eyes. She hadn’t expected such a touching vow coming from him. Odin simply nodded, totally charmed by the way his master’s fiancé was acting. It felt really noble and dignified. The spirit waited a moment, to give the two people to exchange a long gaze. They didn’t want to forget this moment in their life.

“Do you, Claire Farron, accept to take this man, Noctis Lucis Caelum, as your dear and only mate? Do you vow to cherish and love him for the rest of your life, albeit till death do you part?”

Lightning felt her throat tightening at the realization that this wasn’t a dream. She was getting married. She was wearing the dress, the veil, as in her childish dreams. She had two children already and a baby. She was an aunt now and her whole family and her most cherished friends were assembled here, right around her, to celebrate her new found happiness. She never thought she deserved this. But there she had it. It was only two words away from her. She felt her soul rising inside her body, as if she was lift from the ground, from this airship in the sky, to reach paradise instantly. Noctis’ hands were holding her own hands tightly. His eyes were all she could see. He looked vulnerable, but just as happy as her. She looked over her shoulder, to gaze at Raine, and Storm, and Squall and Cloud and Serah and all the others.

Squall gave her an encouraging nod, while Cloud simply motioned toward Noctis, as if to warn her not to make him wait for too long. Serah was clasping her hands nervously.

And behind all of them, a goddess was floating in the air, smiling widely at her children.

It’s okay, Claire. There will be no threat before a few years. You’ve earned a time of peace. You may enjoy your life with your family. You power will run in your children’s blood. They’ll be with you to fight against the evil still lurking in this world. You don’t have to worry about it now. I’ll always be around, making sure that there will be no more heartbreak. Trust me, Light. Trust your friends. And over all, trust Noctis. He was made for you.

Lightning was surprised, but she barely jumped as the white apparition vanished from the room. She heard whispers around the place and realized everything was waiting for her answer. Odin cleared his throat.

“Hum, master, do you need me to repeat the question?”
“No, Odin. I’m ready to spend my whole life with you, Noctis, be it in hardships or day to day matters. I have my heart and my soul for you and I’ll be yours and only yours till there’s no life left in my body. I love you and I always will. I trust you so I can vow now.”

“So you do take him as your husband?” Odin insisted, wanting things to be rightly done.

Lightning smiled as she felt Noctis removing her veil, a frail smile on his face. He was still a child over so many things, she felt as if he was looking at her for the first time.

“Yes, I do.”

Her voice had never been as cheerful before in her life. And her eyes had never shined more than on that day. But they kept on shining on every day, even if things would get hard. Noctis would always be around the corner. And Storm, and Raine, and all of her friends.

She couldn’t ask for anything more.

…The end…

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