The Little Guy

by TokiMirage

Summary

The last thing Cloud wants, when given the chance, is to do it all over again. Instead, he chooses the normal life. After all, a Janitor could never save the world. But... well, it all starts with the General's coffee machine.
Chapter 1

The Little Guy

Chapter One:

“WAKE UP YOU SNOT-NOSE SHITS!”

Cloud sprung upright in bed, bashing his head on a bunk bed that hadn’t been there when he’d gone to sleep. Groaning in pain, he fell back onto the stiff bed. This didn’t bother him, as he had grown accustomed to sleeping on the ground over the years, but the combination of a loud booming voice and chattering boys around him raised a few alarms.

Peeling his eyes open, he stared in incomprehension at the sight of a room he could only vaguely remember from half-forgotten dreams of a life before.

“Cadet Strife! Lazy little-“ A large man walked up to where he lay, bewildered on his bunk and threw a letter at his face. It hit his chest and would have bounced onto the floor if not for Cloud’s reflexes. “Your SOLDIER exam results, sleeping beauty,” the man barked. “If you didn’t pass, you’re to pack up your shit and come with me. If you did, a SOLDIER will be by later to pick you up.”

Cloud looked down at the letter in his hand and frowned. SOLDIER exam? Had he fallen through a crack in his cabin floor outside Edge into some dream-world? Confused as all hell, he ripped the corner of the letter and stuck his pinkie in the hole to rip it open the rest of the way. Pulling out the letter enclosed within, his frown deepened further.

Cadet Cloud Strife,

We at Shinra regret to inform you that your SOLDIER exam test results were below the acceptance margin. Enclosed within this letter you will find a pamphlet with details concerning your future career options with Shinra. As this is only your first attempt at the SOLDIER exam, you may test again in six months if you join the regular army and continue your service there. If you decide to leave the company altogether...

Cloud’s eyes glazed over as he stared off into space. Shinra. He was in Shinra? All the evidence pointed to this being the truth. How in Gaia had he gotten here, though? Not to mention over a decade back in time to… before. A time he could barely remember after all that had happened to him during those green-hued flashes of memory.

Swinging his feet over the side of the bunk bed, he glanced around at the mixture of sad, angry, and excited faces of the other cadets. Many a dream had been crushed in this room, but Cloud couldn’t even remember his own. SOLDIER. His memories had never completely straightened out, but he did know that he’d wanted to get into SOLDIER when… before. Had thought he was a SOLDIER when he was functioning off Zack’s mismatched memories.

Now though… he had no idea what to do. Try to join SOLDIER? Become a military dog of Shinra? Leave and go back to Nibelheim, a town he didn’t even remember besides the flickering remnants of scornful laughter, judging eyes, and a feeling of displacement?

Absently, he dug out the small pamphlet enclosed in the jagged edges of the envelope. Scanning its
contents quickly, he frowned at the ‘options’ available to him. Really, there wasn’t much for a
cadet in the company. Either he could go into the regular army and try for the SOLDIER exam
again, he could become a member of the custodial staff, or leave Shinra all together. Hm. Talk
about ‘options’.

Well, to be honest he didn’t want to be anywhere near Hojo’s jurisdiction ever again. The very
memory of green tanks and blades cutting into his flesh was enough to make him shiver in
revulsion and a panic-tinged flash of fear. However, if he left Shinra altogether, he had no other
jobs lined up to bring him an income, or a place to live. Hell, he didn’t even know if he had a bank
account with enough money to get him home.

Absently, he pinched himself to check that this was indeed real. It stung.

Well, shit.

“Hello there!” a pretty women with glossy lipstick and a perfectly arranged hair style greeted him
with a bright smile.

Considering her entire line consisted of disappointed cadets, he didn’t know why she could be so
cheerful. “Hello,” he murmured, pulling out his letter and pamphlet to flash them at the secretary.
“You can probably guess why I’m here.”

She nodded. “So, what would you like to do?”

“Well, I had a few questions first.”

“Of course! I’ll do my best to answer them.”

She really was far too perky, all considered. Cloud shifted his duffel bag on his shoulder. An entire
life he didn’t remember was packed into that sack. “The custodial positions offered to cadets who
failed the SOLDIER exams… are they contract based?”

She blinked. “Contract… Oh! Do you mean if you have to sign on for a minimum amount of three
years or something like that?”

“Yes.” Three years?

“All custodial staff go through a month-long training and probationary period before the company
decides whether they want to hire you. After that month, you sign on for a year at minimum so the
company is guaranteed your employment during that time. Of course, if you fail to meet the
standards set by the company, they reserve the right to let you go.”

Ah, to be a dog of Shinra. A year out of his life was hardly the end of the world, though, and if he
managed to save enough money, he might be able to go back to deliveries again. Sure, he’d have to
watch out for monsters, but with a materia or two, he should be fine. It also wasn’t like he couldn’t
get his young, adolescent body back in shape for the job.

“I see. I also had a question about accommodations. Do custodial staff have the option of
requesting Shinra living arrangements, like some other members of the staff?” As much as he
hated Shinra, if he was going to trap himself working here for at least a year, he might as well get
some perks out of it. The last thing he wanted to do was be forced to find accommodations in the
slums. Living in Midgar wasn’t cheap, after all.
She nodded with a smile, turning her attention to the computer and printing something off. “There are some forms you need to fill out, both for the job and the shared apartment. After you finish, you’ll have to take them to this floor and office. Ask for Becky. She’ll be able to help you from here.” After filling out a sticky note, she stuck it on the printed out forms and handed them over with the same bright smile she’d greeted him with. “Any other questions?”

Cloud tried to offer a small smile in return, but failed miserably. “No, thank you.” Taking the forms instead with a nod of his head, he wandered out of the line and read the sticky note, ignoring the familiar greeting that rang out behind him to the next cadet in line.

5th floor, Office 5C

BECKY

If only his future was as clear and to the point as her crisp writing.

His duffel landed on the floor with a loud thump as he shuffled farther into the room, checking for strategic exits and objects that, in a pinch, could serve as suitable weapons.

A head peaked out from what Cloud assumed was the kitchen area. “Hey! Who are you?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “Your new roommate, apparently.”

“Oh.” The guy relaxed and Cloud noted with a spark of amusement that the adolescent had been holding a knife cautiously behind his back. “So you’re the fourth, eh. Man, we were hoping they’d never assign someone to the last room.” The guy scowled. “You got any skills?”

Cloud frowned slightly. “Skills?”

“You know, cleaning, cooking, organizing shit?”

You knew you had entered a sad existence indeed when ‘materia, hand to hand, or blowing shit up’ weren’t on the ‘skills’ list. “I can cook. Nothing gourmet, and some of it might confuse your city taste buds, but it’s all edible.” His culinary skills had become a mesh of faint Nibelheim tastes, Gongaga flair, and Tifa standardization. Apparently Midgar kids didn’t like Nibelheim food, and neither did Seventh Heaven’s customer base.

The scowl faded a bit into a look of slight disgruntlement. “Alright then. You and Frederick’ll be on a rotating shift, making dinner. Breakfast and lunch are serve-yourself. Dinner’s usually ready around six or seven. Me and Len rotate dishes at the end of the day, we all rotate on bathroom duties, and everyone keeps the damned living space clear. You follow?”

Cloud quirked an eyebrow. “Aye aye, captain.” The resemblance in attitude to one Cid Highwind was actually a little amusing. Just with less cussing.

Captain got a mixed look on his face, like he couldn’t decide whether he liked Cloud’s deference or disliked his ‘attitude’. “Name’s Jeff. You?”

No last names, then. “Cloud.”

A snort. “Seriously?”

The blond shrugged and picked up his bag. “So, which room’s mine?”
“End of the hall on the left.”

Ignoring his roommate after that, he headed down the hall to the indicated room, wondering if he had any furniture or sheets. Upon opening the door, he was pleased to see he didn’t have to go buy anything. He might have actually just slept on the floor in order to avoid the trouble. Unfortunately, aforementioned floor was covered with boxes of shit that wasn’t his.

He could see why they didn’t want another roommate, considering his room had been turned into storage space.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout the mess. I’ll get the guys to move their shit when they get home tonight.”

Cloud turned around with a calmly raised eyebrow, hiding his annoyance at himself for barely catching the adolescent’s presence. His senses were certainly not what they used to be. Perhaps once he got back into shape he’d take a small vacation and drop himself out in the middle of nowhere and try to get his ass back to Midgar in once piece. It’d be good training. By the time he could quit this janitor job he’d be soft.

Pushing back his frustration, he took a deep, calming breath and picked his way through the boxes to his bed. Tossing his duffel down beside it, he flopped onto his back and closed his eyes.

Jeff shifted by the door. “Dinner’ll be done in an hour or two. You’re cookin’ tomorrow.” He left without another word, not bothering to close the door behind him.

Cloud let out a sigh and opened his eyes to stare up at the white ceiling. He wasn’t looking forward to training tomorrow.

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“So, you was a cadet, eh? My son was thinkin’ of joinin’ once he grown up. You got any advice fer him?”

Cloud stared at the rather friendly old man with a blank expression. He was asking the failure who didn’t even remember how he’d failed for advice? “Work hard. Nothing’s ever as easy as it seems.” Maybe something vague would throw his nose off the scent.

The old guy laughed and took a keycard out of his pocket. Swiping it, he opened the door to reveal a room filled to the brim with cleaning supplies with a small table and chair in the corner. “You can eat lunch here if you want, or go somewheres else. We all got our own floors or areas we look after. Fer the next week you’ll be followin’ me around my route until you get the hang of things. After that, you be on yer own. I’m supposed ta come check up on you once in a while ta make sure you be workin’. If there be no problems for a month, you get yer first year contract. Questions?”

Cloud shook his head. It wasn’t exactly rocket science, after all, and he’d had a harder job dealing with all the paperwork of his business. Considering how little time he spent at Seventh Heaven, he’d had a lot of stuff to keep organized and stay ahead of.

“Good! No, first things first. Your cart is yer best friend. You forget anythin’, you have ta come all the way back to the closet. If you make sure things be well stocked, you waste less time.”

And so continued the mind-melting lecture on the art of office grooming. Cloud paid attention as best he could, but to be honest a lot of what Frank talked about was common sense. Don’t walk over the floor you just cleaned, mop backwards. Don’t forget your wet floor signs or you get in trouble when someone slips and breaks an arm. Don’t clean the floors until the end of the day when less people are walking about. Normal shifts end at three or four, so start mopping at five
and you should be out by six. If someone stops you in the hall and demands that you fix the lightbulb flickering in their office, don’t argue, just do it. If someone demands that you get them a coffee, play the dumb card and stare at them until they come to their senses. If that someone happens to be a Turk or the General himself, in the name self-preservation, just do it. You also may be asked to fix a printer, coffee maker, or even a phone. These you must find someone properly trained to fix. Some of the custodians have the training, but most don’t, etc.

It was going to be a long week.

Cloud scrubbed at a particularly stubborn grease stain and wished he had some battery acid. That’d probably lift off enough of the floor to take care of the grease. Scowling, he leaned back on his knees with a grunt and tossed the rag onto the otherwise shiny floor. It was almost six, he was sore from his morning run and workout, and this bloody floor would not cooperate.

If he had a Fire materia…

Well, to be fair he’d probably burn the whole building down. Mostly not on purpose.

Sighing, he snatched up the rag and threw it onto his cart. The grease stain could wait until tomorrow for any more of his attention. He was starving.

Dropping his cart off at his designated closet, he sighed. Thankfully he didn’t have to cook tonight. And there was the issue of finding a good place to practice his sword technique with this new, flabby, human body. He still misjudged his strength at times and almost fell over picking things up that should have been as light as a feather. Not that he missed it enough to actually change his mind about Hojo…

Unlocking the door to the small apartment on the far side of the Shinra complex, Cloud was unprepared for the body that literally tackled him out of the doorway and sent them sprawling into the hallway.

“Spike~! You jerk! Why didn’t you tell me you decided not to go into the regular army? I’ve been looking for your spiky head for two weeks now! Do you realize how many chocolate bars I had to bribe Seph with to get him to hack into the system and find you?”

Cloud, brain spinning in his skull, stared up at the familiar pair of amethyst eyes and spiky black hair.

“Zack?”

He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten. With everything else he’d been trying to accustom himself to, and the absence of any clear memories, he’d completely forgotten about Zack. Were they even friends right now? When had they become friends?

The SOLDIER pulled back and regarded Cloud with a funny expression. “You alright there, Spike? I didn’t hit you that hard, did I?”

Cloud stared for another long, drawn out couple of seconds before snapping out of his daze. “Uh, I’m alright.”

The concerned look was replaced by a happy grin that quickly morphed into a colossal scowl. Or rather, what would have been a scowl if not for the fact that on Zack’s face it looked like a colossal pout. “Why did you leave me, Cloud? Hell, you didn’t even leave a note!”
Cloud’s warped sense of humour inappropriately kicked in then. “Why Zack, I didn’t know you felt that way about our relationship. The next time I break up with you, I’ll be sure to leave a note.”

The SOLDIER gaped.

“Hey! If you guys are gonna be gay out in the hallway, at least have the courtesy to shut the door so I don’t have to listen to it!”

Cloud rolled his eyes and fingered Jeff, who stood in the doorway with an apron covered in spaghetti sauce on his front. “You’re the one wearing the pink, flower-covered apron, ass!”

“It was a present from my mom, pussy!”

“Your mom? You said that was a present from your girlfriend! Man, I knew you were as gay as you say you’re not.”

“W-what? Fuck you! I so do have a girlfriend!”

“Oh really? She hasn’t admitted to you yet that she’s only with you for your money?”

The other guys in the room let out a round of low ‘oooh’s at the low blow.

“That was below the belt, you dick!”

“Yes, I have a dick. I didn’t know you were so fascinated by this fact, Jeff! Unless you’ve been hiding the fact that you’re jealous we all have one and you don’t!”

“You little shit!”

The other guys started howling with laughter at that one. Cloud grinned. He’d totally won that round.

Turning his attention back to Zack, his grin faded a bit at the mix of expressions on the SOLDIER’s face. “I see you’ve made some new friends, Cloud.”

The blond frowned as Zack stood up and brushed himself off, a rather closed expression on his face. Was he really- no. That was impossible. No way Zack was… jealous?

Although, technically Cloud had forgotten he existed for a whole two weeks. Time to nip this in the bud. “Yeah, well, they all failed the SOLDIER exams, too. Didn’t want to tell you I’d just given up on the whole thing.”

Sympathy entered the chaotic emotions in Zack’s eyes. “Hey, if you decided SOLDIER’s not the road for you, that’s one thing, but did you have to up and ditch me?”

Cloud looked down to hide the grief in his eyes rather than the guilt Zack probably suspected him of. Now that the joking was over, the raw wound that had been Zack’s death was aching all the more. “I didn’t…” mean to let you die, Zack. It’s all my fault. “I didn’t think you’d still want to be friends with me.”

His head was grabbed in a surprisingly strong grip until a fist could plant a proper noogie on his head. “You idiot!”

Cloud bore the pain with a teary smile. When Zack finally released him, he quickly wiped his eyes and grinned up at the taller man. “I missed you Zack.” More than you know.
Amethyst eyes sparkled. “Missed you too, Spike. How about you and I go get some real food to eat and catch up, hm? I dunno what your roommate was intending to cook in there, but I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to be alive.”

“I heard that!” Jeff shouted from the kitchen.

Cloud grinned wider than he had in the past decade. “You got it. Just let me get changed out of these clothes, okay?”

“Sure. Don’t take too long, alright? If I have to drag you away from that mirror you aren’t getting dessert!”

Cloud rolled his eyes as Jeff shouted ‘gay’ from the kitchen. “Shut up you dick-wannabe!” he shot back, racing off to his bedroom, already stripping off his shirt.

“Oi!”

Changing quickly into a pair of rather tight and worn jeans that he had almost outgrown, he glanced at himself in the mirror and frowned. To his eye, his body was short, weak, and scrawny as all hell. To the average person, he had a bit of definition and lithe shape. Grumbling under his breath and wishing he had his sword, his First Tsurugi, he slipped on a random, clean-smelling T-shirt and raced back out the door.

Jeff glared at him as he passed the kitchen, but Cloud just ignored it. The guy was obviously sulking because he’d lost the insult match. Len and Frederick were watching TV.

“Why was Jeff allowed near the kitchen, anyway?” Cloud couldn’t help but ask curiously as he slipped into a pair of more comfortable shoes he’d left by the door.

Len grunted while Frederick smirked. “Lost a bet.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow and grabbed his jacket off the rack. “Well, good luck with the food poisoning. I’m off.”

They both grunted and returned their attention to the TV as Cloud shut the door behind him. Zack was still waiting patiently on the other side, his face brightening slightly when he saw Cloud.

“Ready to go?”

The blond nodded.

“..."

“So I told him,” Zack managed to get to between wheezing laughter, “I told him that if he didn’t stop stealing my paperclips, I was going to raid his chocolate stash,” he guffawed some more, “and you should have seen the look on his face, Cloud. Well I mean, as much expression as he gets. I swear he was about a hair away from drawing the Masamune on me.”

Cloud’s eyes, which had been rather bewildered throughout the setup of the tail, widened in disbelief. “You threatened the livelihood of his stash?” From what he’d picked up throughout the rather otherworldly conversation, Sephiroth was neurotic, obsessive, and hoarded chocolate like it was his salvation on Gaia’s green earth.

Zack seemed to think the whole situation was hilarious, and was laughing so hard by this point that the other customers still in the restaurant so late at night were beginning to look as though they wondered if he needed medical help. Perhaps of the mental institution sort. Watching Zack wheeze
into his mostly-eaten dessert, Cloud sipped his tea with an amused smile. “So what did he do? Threaten you with more paperwork?”

Zack’s laughter abruptly died and was replaced by a pout. “Aw, how’d you guess?”

Cloud snorted. “You’re obviously not frightened by the idea of him gutting you with his six-foot long sword, so what else could he possibly have to threaten you with?”

The black-haired SOLDIER sulked. “When’d you get so Seph-smart?”

Cloud snorted. “I’ve always been this smart. You’ve just gotten dumber.”

“Hey!”

Cloud hid his grin behind the rim of his tea cup, going for the ‘serene, unaffected’ look. By the way Zack’s eyes twinkled back at him, he’d probably given himself away.

“You’re lucky you don’t have to suffer his wrath,” Zack said with a half grin before faltering as guilt flitted through his eyes.

Before the SOLDIER could go off about Cloud failing his exam, the blond started complaining about the wrath of one of his co-workers, a conceited little bitch with acrylic nails who always had something to bitch about, whether it was the hair styles of the secretaries she held in contempt or the way Cloud’s hair stuck up in every which way. Everyone else on staff of course knew that she was a total cow and just jealous and had originally applied to be a secretary herself. Apparently, after a week of failure, she had been demoted to paper runner. Then coffee runner. And eventually, janitorial work.

Cloud didn’t know how someone could have failed so badly at running papers or coffee as to be demoted, but she’d pulled it off.

By the end of ‘the broken nail incident’, he had Zack in stitches all over again, having completely forgotten Cloud’s reassignment in light of Cidney O’really. Yes, really.

“So, why did you decide not to go into the regular army, Cloud?”

Or maybe not. The blond took a sip of tea to give him some time to think. “Well… it was sort of a spur of the moment decision really.” It hadn’t taken long to decide really, when faced with his options. “I mean, I failed the exam. Sure, I could take it in six months, but what if I failed again? Did I really want to spend the rest of my life fighting and going to war for Shinra?” He shrugged and picked at the remains of his dessert. The last thing he wanted to do was fight for Shinra, not to mention the whole Hojo thing. “So I started thinking of other options. I mean, with this job I can make some money until I decide what I want to do with my future. I don’t want to go back to Nibelheim, there’s nothing there really. I wouldn’t mind traveling, actually…” He trailed off, thinking of his delivery business. “Maybe I could make a job out of it. Traveling, that is. Start up a delivery service or something.”

Cerulean eyes met amethyst over the table, and Cloud blinked at the inscrutable look on his long-lost friend’s face. “What?” he asked defensively, stabbing his cake. “You think it’s a stupid idea, or what?”

The look on Zack’s face tightened and became pinched, then, to the blond’s surprise, his eyes began to sparkle. No wait, was he… tearing up?

Zack wailed. That was the only way to describe it. “MY SPIKE’S ALL GROWN U~UP!”
Before Cloud could so much as twitch in horror, the SOLDIER had used his enhanced speed to come around the table and catch the blond’s head under his arm to give him another noogie. This time it was much less appreciated. Growling at Zack to let him go, he finally had to reach around and pinch the puppy on the ass, making him yelp and let go.

“Were you trying to suffocate me? I’m not sure what kind of kinks you’re into, but my interests go in another direction.”

Zack stared at him for another long, floundering moment before letting out a bark of laughter. “My chocobo’s got some bite!”

“Your chocobo?” Cloud muttered moodily to himself, not really upset, but just a little embarrassed. He wasn’t used to dealing with such openly affectionate people. Yuffie he could just ignore or step out of the way and watch the show as she fell over, and Tifa was far too reserved to do anything more than give him The Look or a flirty smile.

Thankfully, the over exuberant SOLDIER sat down again and finished off the rest of his dessert with a flourish. “You need to get a PHS now that you have money, Spike. If you vanish off the face of the Planet again, I’ll hunt you down and get a chocobo tracker planted in your ass.”

Cloud snorted. He was pretty sure the Turks didn’t give away advanced tracking chips like candy. “Fine. If you stop rubbing your fist into my head. It hurts and messes up my hair, jerk.”

Zack, typically, ignored the insult and beamed in happiness. “And we need to hang out more often too! What’s your schedule?”

“Thursday to Monday, 10 to 6.” He’d been lucky to get that. Apparently the night staff had to deal with some pretty crazy shit, like the escaping of test subjects and such. To be honest, Cloud wasn’t surprised in the least. He didn’t know half of what Hojo had going on in the basement of the Shinra building.

“Aw, I was hoping you’d have the weekends off too.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “I’ll be sure to send in a request, five years from now when I’m actually able to choose my own schedule.”

Zack stared. “If you’re still here in five years, Spike, I’ll kick you out myself! Even a pizza joint must be better than working here.”

Cloud shrugged. It was steady income, he could take a couple sick days, housing didn’t lower his paycheque an exorbitant amount… besides the occasional grease stain that wouldn’t go away… “It’s not that bad, Zack.”

The SOLDIER didn’t quite look like he believed him.

The probationary month went by without a hitch. Since Frank hadn’t observed any problems on Cloud’s part, he was allowed to sign on for a year contract. At the end of the year, they’d review his file and decide whether or not he was worth ‘long term investment’.

Personally, Cloud couldn’t care less. If he didn’t have enough money saved up by then to at least find a better job, he’d be a sad former-saviour of the Planet indeed.

Zack continued to hound him until he finally got a PHS, claiming that being unable to contact his
chocobo gave him too much undue stress throughout the day. Ever since he caved and got it, Cloud had been receiving random texts throughout the day. Some of them were benign, some were even pointless, and a few of them... alarming.

Like the day Zack had put glue on Sephiroth’s leather chair, claiming that since Sephiroth spent so much time in the office, he obviously liked his chair just a little too much. Not that it had anything to do with the fact that Zack had been hounding the General to get him the same chair for months and Sephiroth still hadn’t caved.

Then there was the time Zack had just sent:

*R.I.P*

*Zack Fair*

*Ate one chocolate bar too many*

When Cloud had run into him later on that night, the ‘tail’ of his hair had been cut off and a few spikes looked shorter than usual.

Whenever the blond questioned Zack’s lack of self-preservation, the SOLDIER First Class just gave him the usual innocent, oblivious look. Cloud didn’t believe it for a second. More than likely, these were Zack’s attempts to make Sephiroth ‘lighten up’.

Not exactly the best approach with a neurotic, obsessive Nibel dragon who hoarded chocolate.

Cloud stopped scrubbing at The Grease Stain and frowned. With weeks of work, he’d only managed to make the stain fade from a dark gray blob to a slightly lighter gray blob. He was beginning to wonder if one of Hojo’s experimental slime monsters had puked on the floor here or something. Or maybe some idiot had waxed over the grease stain instead of trying to wash it off. Maybe it had grown a sentience of its own and buried into the very fibres of the-

“You there. Do you know how to fix a coffee machine?”

Cloud froze. Slowly looked up from The Grease Stain to meet the irritated green eyes of one General Sephiroth. A flicker of panic flared beneath his breast bone before he quelled it with every ounce of self control he’d gained over the years.

“I’m not authorized by Shinra to fix their coffee machines,” he finally answered when he remembered the original question.

“That’s not what I asked. Do you know how to fix a coffee machine?”

Cloud let out a small sigh and dropped his rag in the bucket, pulling off his gloves and putting them on the side of the cart. Shuffling the whole shindig over to the side of the hallway, he grabbed his toolbox and walked towards his past enemy as though he had never killed him three times. “Maybe. I dare say I’m mechanically inclined, but I lean more towards engines than coffee machines.” When Sephiroth just continued to stare at him in irritation, he raised an eyebrow. “I’ll attempt it, but I don’t promise I’ll succeed. So, where is it?”

Instead of saying anything, the General spun on his heel and began to stride down the hall. Letting out a small sigh, he followed after the long set of legs at a jog, just managing to make it into to the elevator before the doors closed in his face.

Keeping Sephiroth in his sights more out of habit than necessity, Cloud occasionally glanced at the
man’s face to reassure himself that there were no signs of insanity before returning his attention to the numbers changing above the doors. They were going up. More than thirty floors.

“Oh how many floors did you look for a janitor before you found me?” he asked curiously, turning his attention to the lack of expression on Sephiroth’s face.

For a long moment, the General said nothing, until finally he met Cloud’s eyes and narrowed his own. “Too many.”

Cloud couldn’t keep the corner of his lips from quirking slightly in amusement at the General’s predicament. The most powerful man on the Planet, the Hero of the Wutai War… defeated by a coffee machine. Too bad Zack wasn’t there to share in the moment. Maybe he’d tell him about it tomorrow when they had their Friday movie night. “Well, I’ll see if I can fix it for you.”

Sephiroth said nothing, merely turning his gaze towards the still-closed doors. Cloud wasn’t surprised. When the elevator ‘dinged’ to indicate their arrival, Cloud blinked at the sight of a rather large reception area with the secretary’s desk, two couches and multiple chairs easily fitting in the room. Not to mention two photocopiers, a kitchen area, and… a coffee machine that was emitting large amounts of smoke.

Cloud stared before cursing a slew of language that would have made Cid proud as he ran over to the coffee maker and unplugged the contraption before it could explode. It let out a few desolate hiccoughs of death before quieting. He was severely tempted to ask Sephiroth what the hell the man had been thinking, leaving a broken coffee machine smoking in his office as he looked for a janitor.

Instead, he turned his ire on the secretary. After all, she’d been sitting there the entire time chewing on gum and staring at her computer screen. “Has the bleach in your hair fried your only remaining brain cell?” he asked the woman, ignoring Sephiroth who stood off to the side with a blank visage and closed posture. She looked up from her papers with a bewildered expression on her face. “It was smoking, you daft woman! Were you waiting for it to set the whole room on fire or for it to explode and send flying bits of shrapnel into that perfectly manicured hair of yours? I daresay it might have knocked some sense into your brain, in spite of the property damage.”

She stared at him in disbelief, mouth opening and closing as she tried to come up with something to say. “No, don’t say anything,” Cloud interrupted before she could begin to speak. “Your incompetence speaks for itself. Go back to your secretarial porn, or whatever it is that has you so entranced you couldn’t unplug a Planet-damned coffee machine.”

Finally, he turned his attention to Sephiroth. “This is probably going to take a while, if you don’t have to replace the machine entirely. Perhaps your secretary could at least get you some coffee for all your trouble.” The last bit he aimed at the blonde. She glared at him and didn’t move from her seat.

“Cynthia.”

She glared one last time at Cloud before standing up and clacking off in her ridiculously high heels. Cloud watched her go with a scornfully raised eyebrow before wandering back over to the coffee machine to assess the damage. Putting his tool box down on the ground, he pulled out the remains of the filter holder and grimaced at the charcoal that used to be coffee grinds. Dumping it in the garbage, he rinsed out the metal funnel-with-a-handle (because honestly who names those things anyway we only care about the coffee) and left it in the sink. Rinsing out the charcoaled coffee grounds that had escaped into the coffee pot, he left it in the sink as well. Now, while tempted to ask Sephiroth if the General had just tried pressing buttons over and over again, he decided that, in
the name of self-preservation, the man couldn’t possibly be that stupid.

But the secretary certainly could be.

Cloud spent the next three hours taking the coffee machine apart to see what was wrong with it before finally discovering that a fuse had blown beyond repair. Commandeering some of the secretary’s paperclips, after holding her OCD-organized pencil jar hostage, he cut them up and melted them down into the right shape on the stove top before jerry-rigging it into the coffee machine and praying to Gaia it worked. Putting the whole thing back together again, he started making a cup of coffee. When it worked normally and stopped when it was supposed to, he grinned broadly and served himself a cup. Loading in the sugar and ignoring the cream, he took a mouthful and had to quickly spit it back into the sink.

“Aw, disgusting! What do they make this out of, fried rat intestines?”

“I believe it may be worse than that,” a smooth voice said behind him. Cloud froze for a moment before whipping his head to the side to see Sephiroth calmly serving himself a cup of coffee. Curiously, he watched as the General filled the remaining third of the cup with cream and dumped in three teaspoons of sugar.

Cloud poured out his cup and rinsed it, unwilling to take another sip of the swill Sephiroth called coffee. Watching the man throw back the battery acid like a veteran, he couldn’t help but admire the Damascus steel lining of his stomach.

“For services rendered.”

Cloud blinked and looked down at what Sephiroth had put on the counter. He raised an eyebrow at the money. “I’m not a whore, sir. Just doing my job.” The secretary nearly had a heart attack behind them. Sephiroth’s expression remained inscrutable. “If it gives you any more trouble, you might want to just buy a new one. If the fuse keeps blowing, it’s probably from either overuse or age. An industrial coffee machine would probably last longer, since they’re built for that kind of stress.” Picking up his toolbox, he waved his hand and wandered off towards the door, shooting the secretary a caustic look as he went. Her returning glare was just as ferocious.

As the door closed behind him, he let out a small, relieved breath of air. There. That wasn’t so bad. You didn’t even have to kill the man.

A small snicker escaped safely into the silence of the elevator.

Sephiroth… defeated by a coffee machine. If only AVALANCHE were here to see it.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy

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Chapter Two:

“He what?”

Cloud grinned and flopped back against the comfortable leather couch of Zack’s apartment. “Yep.” Picking up the remote, he pressed play and fast-forwarded through the credits.

“But how did he even find you of all people?” Zack looked as though he couldn’t decide whether to laugh or frown in confusion.

Cloud shrugged. “Maybe the other custodians sensed him coming and escaped into their closets. I dunno. He went looking for somebody to fix his coffee machine and found me on the 29th floor.”

Zack snorted out a laugh, finally deciding to be amused rather than shocked Cloud had survived the whole ordeal. “Did you manage to fix that thing? I swear it has a life of its own. Whenever I try to get it to make coffee, it attacks me.”

The blond chuckled and stopped fast-forwarding the movie. The screams of the main character abruptly cut into the quiet ambiance of the living room. Zack really loved his horror movies. “The fuse has probably been going for the past little while before it completely blew. I told him it’d probably work for a bit before dying again. Really, he needs a better coffee machine. Not to mention better coffee. What’s that swill you guys drink, dried animal bits? It was disgusting!” Was that a bit of bone peaking out from that sawed off limb? It didn’t quite… look right.

Zack grunted next to him. “I keep telling him it’s poisonous and not to drink it, but he’s stubborn. Me, I just go and get my own coffee for the machine I have in my office. I tried to convert him once, but he said my coffee tastes like water.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “So it’s not strong enough for him then, considering what he’s used to drinking.”

The SOLDIER First Class shrugged and absently chucked some popcorn into his mouth as he tuned into the movie with more interest as the main character barely escaped the killer by knocking over a bookcase. Cloud leaned against the arm rest and contemplated his own dissatisfaction with the coffee the boys back at his apartment bought.

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“What can I get you, sir?”

Cloud put down the knife he’d been eyeing and shrugged. “Just browsing at the moment.”

The man behind the counter grunted something that sounded like ‘window shoppers’, but Cloud ignored it with ease. The last thing he wanted to do was waste his money on low quality wares,
especially when he only had so much money. He was trying to save up for materia and the parts to make Fenrir again, after all.

Deciding the quality wasn’t worth wasting his money on, he walked up to the shop owner. “Do you have anything more practical than the trinkets up front here?”

The shop owner had the gall to appear insulted. “Trinkets? I’ll have you know these are quality-“

“-breaks waiting to happen,” Cloud interrupted. “I’m looking for higher quality steel than this. Can you help me with that or shall I take my business elsewhere?” When it came to weapons, Cloud wouldn’t settle for anything less than quality. Perhaps he was spoiled after wielding First Tsurugi for over a decade, but when you were trusting your life to a piece of equipment, the last thing you wanted was for it to break in the jaws of a Grand Horn.

The weapons dealer scowled. “I doubt you can afford any of my top items,” he said, eyes roving up and down Cloud’s casual T-shirt and jeans.

“I’m not looking for a six foot Damascus steel buster blade, but a dependable dagger or short sword that won’t break the first time I have to defend myself against a monster. Now, can you help me or are you going to continue to waste my time?” Losing patience, Cloud gave the man his coldest glare.

The weapons dealer eyed him up and down again before shrugging and motioning to follow him into the back. As Cloud looked around, the shop owner just silently watched from the doorway. Not needing the man’s ‘expertise’ anyway, Cloud wandered over to the shorter blades and started testing their weight and examining the makes. The quality was certainly higher, but not anywhere near his standards. Picking up a pair of twin short swords, he fell into one of the forms he’d been drilling into his body and scowled at the weight differential. As had become obvious to him over the past few months, his old style of sword play was geared almost entirely towards blades that he’d never have the physical capacity to wield anymore. It drove him mad every time he practiced and modified his forms, but the alternatives were even more undesirable. While on the plus side he was used to making subtle modifications for the different heft and handling of his multiple blades, he’d never actually wielded something so...

Puny. Short. Unimpressive.

Sighing, he put the short swords back in their places and started picking through the collection again. At the end of his search, he caught sight of a rather rusted and beat-up looking blade hidden away behind a rack carrying daggers. Reaching around to pull it out, he frowned and examined the steel.

No, it wasn’t steel at all, he realized upon closer inspection. Scraping some of the ‘rust’ off with a fingernail, he frowned at the consistency. It wasn’t rust at all. Well, at least not entirely. There was probably a mixture of dirt and blood in there too. Examining the edge of the blade, he raised an eyebrow at the lack of chips.

Turning around with a mocking look, he raised the sword with a snort. “Where did you find this little gem?” he asked sarcastically, testing the weight by rather carelessly waving it around. It was lighter than regular steel, which was rather surprising considering its size. While nowhere near the sheer length, width and height of First Tsurugi or even his old Buster Sword, it handled pretty well and followed the subtle twitches of his hand and wrist more easily than some of the other weapons he’d tried thus far.
The weapons dealer grimaced. “Guy traded it in a while back. I tried cleaning it up a bit, used to look worse. Unfortunately I’m not in the restoring business, so nobody else wants to pick up a sub-standard blade. Too light to be real steel, too.” A glint flashed in the guy’s eyes. “You interested?”

Cloud shrugged and made a face at the hilt of the blade. The grip needed to be completely replaced, too. Putting it back where he found it, he turned his attention back to the only pair of short swords that were of half-decent quality, all the while the mysterious blade turning over in the back of his mind. It was worth restoring, of that he had no doubt. Whether it would be worth the money the man would probably try to swindle out of him was another thing entirely. While Cloud was willing to spend the time to see if the blade was useful or not, in its present state he should be able to barter it down to a ridiculously low sum.

If he went about it the right way.

“I think I’ll take these,” he said, showing the man the two short swords. “They’re not exactly what I’m looking for, but they’ll have to do.” Especially since he’d already been to two other stores above plate and their wares hadn’t been any better. With more hunting he might have been able to find something below plate, but he wasn’t going down there without a weapon to start with.

“2000 gil.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. While not only ridiculously over priced, that was probably the realistic worth of one of the Buster blades he’d been eyeing. Not to mention close to the full amount that he’d saved over the last couple months. “2000 for a pair of blades I’ll have to baby to keep from breaking under any serious amount of use? Not a gil over 1000.”

The weapons dealer looked shocked and insulted. “1000 for quality steel in Midgar? 1800 is as low as I’ll go, and you’re lucky getting that.”

Cloud snorted and crossed his arms over his chest, not looking impressed in the least. “Maybe if I were having the blades custom made by a Wutaian sword-smith. Now that is quality steel. 1050.”

“1050? Now you’re insulting my intelligence along with my wares, kid. 1800 is as low as I’ll go.”

“Kid? I daresay I know more about quality wielding material than you do, standing behind this desk all day. Have you ever taken one of those standard carbon steel short swords against the claws of a Grand Horn?” he asked, jerking his thumb at one of the popular blades in the army. “No, I bet you haven’t even been as far as Gongaga. It’d shatter after three strikes if you’re lucky. Hardly a piece of metal that’ll defend anyone’s life. I’ll give you 1200 for the twin swords and that lump of rust you’ve hidden behind everything else. If I’m lucky my friend will actually be able to restore it to some use. If not, I could use a training sword or a blunt object to bash over the heads of thieves in the slums when I go looking for some real steel.”

The weapons salesman looked furious. Cloud just remained calm and unimpressed. It wasn’t like really needed these weapons yet anyway. He could afford to wait and find something of better quality. He just didn’t want to anymore. Practicing forms with the broken end of a broom was one thing, but he hadn’t been without a reliable set of blades since he could remember. The past couple months had been painful for more reasons than one.

“1500 for the twins and 200 for the short sword.”

Cloud rolled his eyes and made to leave the store. There was no way he was paying over 1500 for all three of them. They weren’t even worth that much, in his eyes. “I’ll be sure to tell my SOLDIER First Class friend Lieutenant Zack Fair that you enjoy overcharging your customers for
mediocre weaponry. Thanks for nothing."

“Fine! 1500 for all three!”

Cloud turned on his heel and narrowed his eyes. “1400 for all three and a retractable pocket knife of my own choosing.”

“Fine! You got yourself a deal, you little…” he trailed off, grumbling what Cloud was sure to be a slew of unfavourable words. Going over to the rusted sword in the corner, he pulled it out and placed it on the counter. “Pick out your pocket knife while I package these.”

Ignoring the bad attitude of the salesman, he wandered back into the other room, all the while keeping an eye on the owner in case he tried to pull a fast one and swap out his new purchases for something else. Picking out a halfway decent knife of medium size that would easily fit into a boot or the pocket of his coat, he made his way back to the front of the store and placed it on the counter. Seeing that the swords were indeed still the same blades he had picked out, he waited patiently as the weapons dealer wrapped them in cloth separately before wrapping twine around them to hold them together. After that, he wrapped them all in a long sheet of coarse paper and finished the package with twine.

Cloud, who had been counting out 1400 gil, handed it over to the weapons dealer. The man took it with a begrudging grunt and jerked his head at the pocket knife. “You want that wrapped too?” he asked snidely.

Cloud just raised an eyebrow and shook his head, slipping it into his pocket. “No.” Picking up his package, he walked out of the store without a backwards glance.

Once he was out of sight of the windows of the shop, he couldn’t keep the small, pleased grin off his face. Yeah, a lot had changed over the past few months, but some things never did.

Closing the door behind him with a grunt, Cloud kicked off his shoes and trudged to his room, laden with packages and bags. He’d ended up spending almost all of his savings, though thankfully he didn’t have to worry about contributing to the food jar again for another couple weeks.

“Hey Cloud! Where you been all day? Don’t forget it’s your turn to cook tonight.”

Jeff again. Since he worked really late night shifts as a security guard wherever they needed him, he usually woke up in the afternoon to eat ‘dinner’ for breakfast and then go to work.

“I know. I was just picking up a few things.”

Jeff, who had apparently followed him down the hall to his room, raised an eyebrow at the large pile of stuff Cloud had dumped on his bed. After leaving the weapons dealer, he’d gone to a few other places to pick up some materials for making his own leather harness for all three blades as well as the necessary supplies for the restoration. None of it had come cheap, and he’d had to do quite a bit of haggling with the lady selling leather to afford it.

“That’s a lot of stuff. What did you buy, a small armoury?”

Cloud snorted. Not quite. “It’s just for my hobby. I’ve been thinking of a couple different career choices, so I decided to pick up a few things.” He’d humoured the idea of starting his own weapons shop a few times, but in the end decided against it. Making weapons took a lot of training, and while Cloud was experienced wielding them, it would be easier in the long run to just pick up
his delivery business again. He already knew how to go about it, after all. Well, in a world with Neo-Shinra. It couldn’t be that different from a business perspective.

“Can I see?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. Did he really want Jeff in the know? Not really. It wasn’t any of his business. “Do I ask to see your secret collection of porn? No.”

Jeff frowned, crossing his arms over his chest. “Aw, come on, don’t be like that.”

The blond suppressed a small twitch of annoyance. “If things work out, maybe I’ll show you one day. In the meantime, go watch TV or something.”

The security guard scowled and wandered out of the room. Cloud followed him a few seconds later to get a large bowl from the kitchen, but ended up having to settle for a large stew pot. After filling it with water and grabbing some metal bowls for the cleaning solutions, he trudged back to his room and locked the door behind him. While he didn’t think Jeff would just come barging in from curiosity, he didn’t want to chance it. After all, what cadet dropout bought, maintained, and restored swords?

He really needed to find a safer, larger space to practice in now that he had real weapons. One more incentive to get himself a vehicle, he supposed. Then he could drive out into the land around Midgar and train away from watching eyes. The last thing he needed was someone seeing him practice things he never learned and recognizing it for what it was.

Really suspicious.

Eyeing the stack of parcels on his bed, he started preparing a work space for the restoration. If he was lucky, he’d have it done tonight and still have time tomorrow to put a harness together. Well, unless Zack paid him a surprise visit and dragged him away on his last day off for the week.

Come Thursday, Cloud still hadn’t finished restoring the blade to its proper glory. Not only was he missing a few tools that would have made the process go quicker, Zack ended up kidnapping him for most of Wednesday afternoon and evening after skiving off work. So, when his first work day of the week crept up on him, he was understandably annoyed to be working.

Scrubbing away at The Grease Stain with a bit of steel wool, he was completely unaware that he had company until a throat cleared irritably.

Glancing up from his pet peeve, he froze at the sight of a pair of well-worn but polished leather boots connected to leather pants connected to a loose white dress shirt that didn’t do much to hide the leather straps and protection beneath. If he ripped off the shirt and threw on his jacket, he’d look exactly the same as he had ten or so years ago.

Well, by Cloud’s timeline.

“What can I do you for, General?”

Ah crap. There went his Nibelheim roots getting in the way of perfectly normal conversation.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow the slightest fraction of a hair, but Cloud caught it. “A light in my office has been flickering since yesterday.”
The blond held back his usual brand of wit. “Is it a bulb or one of those long, double light fixtures?”

“The latter.”

Cloud got off his knees and shimmied his shindig over to the wall again, dropping the steel wool in the soapy bucket. Throwing his gloves onto the cleaning supplies, he wandered over to his closet, which thankfully wasn’t that far away. Opening it with his keycard, he grabbed a box containing two of the standard Shinra light bulbs he needed and a ladder. Slipping the necessary screwdriver into his pocket on his way out, he gently nudged the door shut behind him.

Without a word, Sephiroth led the way to what Cloud had learned was the executive’s elevator, the blond following closely behind. It took a bit of creative angling to get the ladder in, but he managed just fine before the doors tried to close on him. Sephiroth didn’t offer any assistance, not that Cloud was surprised.

When they reached the 61st floor, Cloud kept the ladder out of the way so Sephiroth could get off the lift without any impediment. The secretary sneered at him as he walked by, but Cloud ignored her this time, knowing it would piss her off all the more.

Thankfully, Sephiroth had the courtesy to leave the office door open for him as he manoeuvred the ladder through the frame.

Already seeing the problem, he made his way behind the General’s meticulously organized desk and pushed the leather chair that Zack had groused about for hours out of the way. He imagined it would be quite irritating trying to fill out paperwork and having the white reports strobe at your eyeballs for hours on end. Opening the ladder, he checked that the supports were firm before climbing up to the problem fixture and pulling out his handy screwdriver. Taking out all the screws, he caught the plastic before it could fall and disrupt the desk beneath him. Putting it down on the floor so he didn’t accidentally knock it over, he climbed back up and twisted the long cylindrical light bulb until it popped out of place. Poking at the other one, he frowned when it flickered pitifully. No doubt, in a few weeks it’d probably start bothering Sephiroth too and the silver-haired man would come get Cloud again.

Deciding he’d rather just replace both of them while he was there, he popped out the second light bulb and climbed down the ladder to put them on the floor. Taking the new light bulbs up one at a time to prevent accidents, he twisted them in until they were nice and firm and screwed the plastic casing back in place. Putting the dead bulbs in the used box, he slipped the screwdriver back into the voluminous pockets of his Shinra custodian uniform and folded the ladder back up again.

“How’s the coffee machine?” he asked, putting Sephiroth’s chair back in place before making his way to the door.

The General watched him with his usual non-expression. “Fine.”

“Anything else, while I’m here?”

When Sephiroth shook his head, Cloud nodded and made his way out the still-open door.

Well, hopefully Sephiroth wouldn’t have any other office-related emergencies before the month was out.
Cloud grinned as he finished polishing the restored blade he’d been working away at for a whole week now. He’d scrubbed off the grime, replaced the old grip with new leather, sanded off the rust, cleaned the whole thing tip to butt again for good measure, polished it until he could see his face on the side of the blade, and lastly oiled it. Now that it looked like a real blade, it reminded him of the smallest of his fusion swords. Giving it a swing, he admired the way it shone in the light. He still had no idea what metal it was made out of, though oddly enough it held an orange hue that, depending on the light, almost made it look as though it were on fire.

Wrapping the blade in the cloth he’d kept from the weapon’s store, he put it back in its hiding place underneath the frame of his bed where prying eyes wouldn’t find it. His two smaller and thinner swords were there as well. The harness materials now lived in his closet, and he was hoping in the next week or so to have finished designing the holster so he could start cutting the leather.

“She’s your sweet little chocobo, yeah yeah, your sweet little chocobo, mm mmm-”

Cloud snapped his PHS open with a grimace. “Zack, what in the name of all that is green did you do to my ringtone?”

“But Spike, it suits you so well!”

“The next time you pull off a stunt like this I’m going to break into your apartment and replace all your soap with lard.”

“Ha! As if you could break into my apartment. We have security.”

Challenge accepted. “What did you phone for, Zack?” He was totally going to dye all the SOLDIER’s whites pink.

“Well…” Cloud frowned as he noticed for the first time the sound of steel hitting steel and voices in the background. “You see, I was just wondering…”

“Spit it out, Zack.”

“I made a bet with another First Class that I could beat him at sword play. Thing is, he’s really good. Like, no where near Seph because no one’s anywhere near The General, but good enough that I’m actually worried. And I was hoping that you could… you know… help out.”


“I just need another set of eyes, and a friendly face in the crowd. Seph can’t provide either since he’s apparently so busy this week he’s working until eight or nine at night every day.”

The blond hummed thoughtfully. “Why do you think my eyes will be of any use to you?”

“Because you’ve always been obsessed with swords. I know you had a lot of trouble picking up sword fighting, but you’ve noticed things that I forget because…” He trailed off, sounding a little down. “Because Angeal’s not here to remind me.”

He grimaced. Right. He’d forgotten about that. From what he remembered, digging into Shinra’s history years ago and his own mismatched memories as Zack, Angeal had been a Buster sword wielding General of Shinra before defecting along with Genesis. In fact, the Buster that he had inherited from Zack apparently used to be Angeal’s. “I’ll see what I can do,” he found himself agreeing.
“Great! Uh… can you come by right now? The duel’s in a couple days and I’m practicing at the gym.”

Cloud rolled his eyes. “I can’t get into the SOLDIER training facility without you there to let me in, Zack.”

“I’ll meet you at the main door! When can you get here?”

The blond looked forlornly down at the sketches he’d just finished organizing. “Ten minutes.”

“Great! See you soon!”

Cloud closed his PHS and started packing his stuff away again.

Zack, reeking of body odour and covered in sweat, had no qualms with hugging the life out of him when he finally showed up almost fifteen minutes later. “Thanks for coming, Spike!” the First Class greeted cheerfully after Cloud’s nose had been thoroughly desensitized. “While you’re here, you should let me introduce you to some of my friends!”

Letting himself be dragged inside, he quickly found a number of SOLDIERs to be Zack’s friends, as all of them introduced themselves with friendly smiles and plenty of shoulder punching.

For the unenhanced Cloud, this was the more torturous part of the greeting ritual.

“So, you tried out for SOLDIER, huh?” one of the guys who had introduced himself as McAphry asked him as he was separated from Zack.

The blond blinked and focused his attention on the SOLDIER wearing a rather superior smirk. “Yeah.”

“So are you that janitor friend that Zack’s mentioned a couple times? Quite the jump to make, SOLDIER cadet to janitor.”

Cloud raised a cool eyebrow. “Sometimes a future chosen isn’t the future that chooses you,” he countered, quoting an old Wutaian proverb. “Now, if you’ll excuse me,” he said, pushing through the crowd towards Zack.

“I dunno why you’re wasting your time bringing this kid to your sword practice, Zack, but I doubt it’ll make a difference come our duel in three days,” McAphry called across the crowd, getting the attention of most of the other SOLDIERs there.

Zack just grinned good naturedly. “Sometimes you just need that little boost, McAph!” he parried, drawing Cloud off to one of the far mats for a bit of privacy. Once they were out of earshot, he murmured under his breath, “McAphry can be a bit of a jerk, but don’t let him get to you, ‘kay Spike?”

Cloud raised both eyebrows. “‘Don’t let him get to me?’ What’s there to get? He obviously has low confidence in himself if he needs to harass a little cadet drop-out to feel like he has balls.”

Zack laughed and unhooked the buster sword sitting on his back. “Alright, Spike. Next time I’ll know you can take care of him yourself.”

Cloud smirked. “Damn straight. Now stop slacking, slacker!”
Zack grinned. “How much do you remember from watching Angeal train me?”

The blond had to force his smirk to stay in place, lest he drop all expression entirely. He’d watched Angeal train Zack before? Well, he had no recollection of that. “Let’s hope it’s enough!” he said, scratching the back of his head as though he weren’t sure of his own knowledge and technique as a swordsman.

This was going to be harder than he thought.

Watching Zack go through the motions, he realized it was more agonizing than hard. Each free movement reminded him that he could never even lift the Buster sword again, and every time Zack’s form could use a small adjustment, he itched to fix it. Unfortunately, he couldn’t be too knowledgeable or it would be suspicious.

Why had he agreed to this again? Oh yeah, puppy power.

“Watch your feet, Zack. Sometimes they’re too close and your balance isn’t low enough. Other times you’re so wide you can’t get enough momentum when you move.”

He couldn’t take it anymore, the most glaring mistake was killing him.

Zack stopped the form he was running through and frowned down at his feet. “Like this?”

Cloud twitched as he over corrected. Knowing he was going to regret this, he got off the bench and grabbed a wooden practice sword off the wall that was close enough to the buster. Even it was almost too heavy for his slight frame, making him grimace internally. Even with all the working out and running he’d been doing for the past two months, he was still horrendously out of shape.

And he’d never reach his idea of peak fitness.

Without a word, Cloud mimicked Zack’s previous stance. They were close enough in build that the First Class should be able to see it. “Look at my feet.”

Zack looked, expression blank.

“What do you see?”

“Uh, the proper stance?”

Cloud shifted the position of the sword so it was pointing horizontal instead of vertical. “Do you see how well balanced I am here?”

“Yeah.”

Cloud shifted the sword vertical and adjusted his feet an inch and a half.

“Oh. Oooh!” Zack stared at Cloud like he’d grown a second head. “Holy Planet, Cloud, how’d you catch that?”

The blond shrugged and dropped the heavy wooden sword onto his shoulder. “I dunno. It just seemed… obvious.”

Zack’s frown deepened. “You sure you don’t want to be in SOLDIER anymore, Cloud?”

The blond scowled. “We already talked about this, Zack.”
“Well yeah, so you failed your first try, but you obviously know a thing or two about swords and-“

“Zack. That’s hardly the end all and be all of the SOLDIER exam. Maybe my academics weren’t up to par. Maybe I failed the mako test. The fact is, I’m not physically built like you. As much as I want to be able to wield a Buster Sword half as well as you do, I’ll never be able to. And I’ve got other plans for my future, now.” He didn’t know how or why he’d ended up back in time, but after making the decision to quit the army, he’d changed things. Maybe Sephiroth would go crazy again, but why did Cloud have to be the one to go through that hell all over again?

Couldn’t he be selfish for once?

“Aw, Spike, I didn’t mean it that way…” Zack trailed off, looking like he felt like a total heel. “I just… you’ve always had talent, Cloud. Sure, it was unpolished, and your instructors gave you a hard time, but I knew you could make it. I was pulling for you to join me in SOLDIER. I just…” He looked away. “I’m sorry. I was just… looking forward to hanging out with you in the field, working with you, and stuff. I mean, sure I have friends in SOLDIER, but none of them are you, Cloud.”

Well, Zack certainly knew exactly what to say to make him feel like a total ass. How could he tell Zack he was terrified of Hojo? That he’d already been through all this once before and didn’t want to do it all over again?

Fact was, he couldn’t. He’d been trying to avoid thinking about it all together the past couple months, and now Zack was shoving it in his face all over again. His failures. His short comings.

Turning away, he walked back over to the sword rack. “This was a mistake,” he muttered under his breath, turning to walk away from the whole thing.

“Wha- Cloud! You don’t have to- I didn’t mean to-“

Cloud tuned him out and kept walking, knowing his face was as glacially blank as Sephiroth on a good day.

“What’s up, little blond? Zack tell you you’re not good enough for-“

McAphry’s hand landed on his shoulder. Reacting on instinct, he grabbed the wrist with his left hand, stepped back into the body behind him, jammed his right elbow into his armpit, grabbed his shoulder, and shifted his center of gravity down, bringing McAphry’s weight over his shoulder using his hips as a pivot point.

The SOLDIER hit the ground with a thud and a grunt. It echoed in the sudden silence of the gym.

Cloud released his wrist and stepped away. “Don’t touch me,” he growled before walking away, giving himself lots of room so McAphry couldn’t grapple him to the ground and break something.

The door snapped shut behind him, and nobody followed.

The next couple of days were unpleasant, to say the least. Zack had phoned him multiple times, leaving messages of apologies when he didn’t pick up. He’d even come by the apartment a few times when Cloud wasn’t there. The blond had taken to jogging around the track after work for a few hours, then doing some basic workouts that let him take advantage of more space in order to avoid the man, since he knew Zack avoided running like the plague. He much preferred working
on his swordsmanship at the SOLDIER facilities. SOLDIER had an indoor track, anyway.

Ignoring the first drops of what promised to be a long rain storm, he closed his eyes and found his centre. There were no lights around the track, so no one could see him as he held an imaginary First Tsurugi in his hand and started going through the motions. His body’s muscle memory flowed into movements designed for a more powerful form, but at that point Cloud didn’t really care. He just wanted to forget everything.

Finishing the form with a jump and downward slash, he was unprepared for two hands to grasp his wrists just as he was about to finish the strike. Forward momentum arrested, his body went through with the movement and sent him crashing into a solid body, his wrists trapped between them. Snapping his eyes open, he stared in surprise at the faint outline of a white shirt. Craning his head upwards, cerulean eyes met glowing emerald and his heart froze in his chest for moment of shocked suspension before beating twice as fast as before.

Adrenaline flushed through his body as he heaved a shocked breath and tried to calm down his heart beat. “Se- G-General!”

Cloud could see the outline of slit pupils easily due to their absence of light.

“What were you doing?”

“Uh…” The blond’s brain refused to cooperate. “Exercising?”

“You were practicing kata without a sword. Why?”

Okay, he seriously needed to knock the useless gray mass between his ears back into gear. “Uh… it’s calming.” Stick close enough to the truth and maybe Sephiroth would leave it alone.

Instead, green eyes narrowed. “You are agitated?”

Cloud floundered. “W-well, some things have happened and- and- I just wanted to, you know, cool off.” Come on, Cloud, keep it together. He needed to stop thinking about how nice it felt to be standing flush against the man and start thinking about why the hell aforementioned man was standing here in the first place. “Why are you here?” he demanded, forcing himself to take a step back and put some space between them.

Sephiroth released his hands and shifted his weight. That alone set alarm bells off in Cloud’s mind. “My printers broke.”

The blond stared.

Green eyes shifted slightly. Cloud probably wouldn’t have noticed at all in better lighting. Fortunately, in the near total darkness, it was easy to see the way green globes strobed for a fraction of a second before solidifying again.

“I understand that you are off duty. However, there is work that I cannot finish tonight with two broken printers.”

Cloud ran a hand through his hair in bewilderment, coming out of his stunned amazement. “How did both of them manage to break?”

“Cynthia damaged the first one this afternoon. The second failed tonight.”

“Mhmm. And how did you know that I was even here?”
The green lights strobed again. “I noticed you running through my office window an hour and twenty five minutes ago.”

It started to rain full out.

Cloud resisted the urge so smack a hand to his face and close his eyes. His imagination was far too gleefully supplying him with an image of what Sephiroth would look like with a soaking wet white shirt and damp hair clinging to every curve of his back.

Damnit. Stupid arch nemesis looking like a drowned cat coming to him for help with a bloody printer.

“Fine. But since this is off the clock and I’m hungry, you’re buying me dinner!”

Sephiroth stared at him for a long, awkward moment before inclining his head and beginning to walk away.

Cloud surrendered to the urge and smacked his hand to his forehead, wondering how he got himself into these situations.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

So yeah… update. Thanks to all who left such lovely reviews! Some of them were quite entertaining and heart warming. A few were confused as I dropped them in an alternate reality, but most of you have been following along! If there are ways I can clarify things, please point them out to me. Telling me ‘I was confused’ isn’t actually all that useful as I edit and continue to write chapters.

Thanks go again to linggan for inspiration.

And muchos thanks go to Momonster who’s been my sounding board so far during this venture into unknown territory. Love you doll!

Happy reading!
Chapter Three:

Cloud glared at the industrial printer and not for the first time wished he had a lightning materia so he could just flash fry it. The one the secretary had busted he didn’t even know where to start, but the one that had stopped working on Sephiroth… well, it looked like he might have to cannibalize a few parts from the printer with the fried processor in order to get the one suffering technical difficulties back in the race.

Digging in his tool kit, he started taking the sort-of working printer apart to see exactly what parts needed to be replaced. Thankfully, both units were of the same make, year, and series.

Meanwhile, Sephiroth made himself another cup of coffee and stared at him, making the blond feel mighty uncomfortable.

And, as had carried over from the Zack side of things, an uncomfortable Cloud usually shut up to let other people talk or started filling the silence himself. And since Sephiroth was unlikely to say anything he deemed unnecessary, the blond’s motor mouth ran off with a mind of its own. “So, what’s keeping you here so late anyway? Shouldn’t you get off when everyone else does?”

“It’s classified.”

Cloud rolled his eyes. “You’re just saying that because you don’t want to talk to me. Even if you can’t give details, you can always say something vague like ‘there are outstanding reports my useless First Lieutenant keeps failing to deal with that fall to me,’ or ‘Shinra has me doing work that no one else is supposedly able to complete but even a retarded poodle could do just fine,’ or ‘The President keeps getting caught going to the brothel and the Turks apparently aren’t enough to scare those involved into silence.’ Okay, so the last one was a little ridiculous, but—” Cloud cut himself off and pulled his head out from behind the printer. Was that…?

Sephiroth’s lips had quirked upwards slightly as he laughed one of those silent laughs that you can barely hear because they don’t actually make any noise, but you can hear the air going in and out of their lungs with the movement of their diaphragm. Emerald eyes shone over the coffee cup as he took another drink.

“My useless First Lieutenant has left me with reports to deal with on occasion, but never enough to keep me busy for four consecutive nights in a row.”

Cloud grinned and turned his attention back to the printer. “So what’s been eating up all your time?”

There was a moment of contemplative silence. “I believe it would fall under your second category.”

“Well that sucks. The least he could do is give you something to laugh at. Maybe we could find someone with crazy ninja skills to take pictures of him visiting a brothel.” Yuffie came to mind.
“That’d be funny to see on the news.”

“The Turks would bribe or threaten the photographer into silence.”

“Ah, but that’s why you find someone with crazy ninja skills!” Cloud countered with a grin.

“There are few Wutaian refugees who would be willing to risk their livelihood on obtaining a few incriminating photos of President Shinra.”

“I might know a guy who knows a ninja who could be paid to do it.”

“Then I would have to arrest you.”

Cloud rolled his eyes and pulled his head out from behind the printer. “Sephiroth, we are having a hypothetical and totally bogus discussion on how best to get a picture of Shinra screwing a few hookers. Can’t you be a little more constructive in your criticism of my awesome plotting skills?” He raised an eyebrow at the blank look on Sephiroth’s face.

After a long, silent stand off, the General shrugged. “I was merely pointing out the flaws in your plan. I am not an ideal asset in this plot of yours, as I am the General of Shinra.”

“And as the General you have certain responsibilities to the company, blah blah, etc. This is a hypothetical plotting game, Sephiroth. So forget for a moment that you are The General, and I am a lowly Custodian, and put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Surely you’ve done the same thing when trying to anticipate the enemy’s movements during battle?”

“Yes.”

“Well then this should be old school for you. Except remember that the objective of this exercise is to arrive at the most entertaining solution, rather than the most efficient. Understood?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then, how would you go about getting incriminating evidence of Shinra sleeping with a prostitute?”

A moment of contemplative silence. “I would hack into the Turk’s security cameras and record it, as his home is the only location he has elicit affairs.”

Efficient and not nearly as amusing, but at least they’d had progress. “I still think the ninja idea is funnier, but your plan would probably be more successful.”

“Indeed.”

And another long, awkward silence. “So, what about that food?”

“I will provide compensation with which you can buy your dinner.”

Cloud frowned and pulled his head out from behind the printer again. “That’s not what I meant by ‘buy me dinner’.”

The General’s face was expressionless. “I am already behind on my work because of these printers. It would not be wise to spend my time escorting you to a restaurant.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “Well if you’re so worried about efficiency, then why don’t you just order us some take out and get it delivered here? Come on, you must be hungry by now.”
Sephiroth was beginning to look almost annoyed. Cloud couldn’t decide whether this amused him or not. “What would you like for take out then?”

Cloud shrugged and stuck his head behind the printer again. “I dunno. I’ll eat whatever you want to eat. Get something you like.”

The General stood there for a moment longer before leaving and shutting himself in his office. The blond just snorted softly under his breath. Whether Sephiroth was ordering food or had just left because he was sick of talking to Cloud, he didn’t care anymore. He was here on his night off fixing a Planet-damned printer that shouldn’t even have broken in the first place. Stupid secretary should volunteer herself for the firing squad for sheer incompetence.

Giving the demonic neighbouring printer a good kick, he got to work on removing the parts that he thought he needed. Hey, he was a mechanic, not an engineer. If it was hardware, he could probably figure it out. Software? Not a chance.

Thirty minutes later, Sephiroth left the office altogether without saying a word. Cloud didn’t care. He gave the apoplectic printer a harder kick for its trouble and finished attaching the cannibalized duplex unit to the limping printer. Hopefully Sephiroth didn’t get him fired for ‘fixing’ things he wasn’t supposed to be touching.

Ten minutes later, the General came back into the office followed by the smell of something deliciously entrancing. Staring at the food the silver-haired man laid out on the coffee table between the plush couches and chairs, he drooled and gave the printer a final, solid kick.

When it started choking out paperwork, he considered his job done. Wandering over to what smelled like the most heavenly Wutaian to grace his nose, he plopped his tired and aching body down onto the couch perpendicular to Sephiroth’s claimed chair.

Grabbing the container pushed in his direction, he snapped his chopsticks apart and dug in, completely ravenous. Sephiroth ate at a more sedate pace, and occasional turned his eyes towards the blond to stare at him. Cloud chose to ignore this entirely, since food was more important at that moment than making conversation or trying to read the encrypted thoughts that went on behind cat-like eyes.

After finishing off the last of his to-go box, Cloud leaned back in the couch with a happy smile, licking his lips. He hadn’t had good Wutaian in a long time. “What’s the name of the restaurant you got that from?”

“Tsuchi’s Wok.”

“I’ll have to go there sometime.” With a sigh, he pushed himself to his feet and wandered over to the secretary’s garbage just to spite her, dumping all his smelly containers into her small, bagless bin. Served her right. “Thanks for the food. I’ll leave you to your work. Try to get a decent sleep, eh?” Cloud pressed the ‘down’ arrow on the elevator.

“It’s fixed I presume?”

“Yeah. You might want to bring in someone who actually knows what they’re doing though to take a look at the other one. And don’t let the Secretarial Ho touch the only working printer! She can walk her shit down to another office and mess up their equipment.” Cloud doubted Sephiroth would actually follow his muttering, but it was still fun to say it. After all, he was just a custodian. Grease Stains are my game, Sephiroth’s accident-prone office is my bane.
Cloud yawned as he pushed his way through the door to his apartment, kicking his shoes off and closing the door as quietly as he could. Walking through the hallway using more memory than light, he finally found his door and slipped inside.

Turning on the light, he cursed a slew of cusses that would make Cid proud at the sight of Zack reclined on his bed with a triumphant smile.

“Spike! Where you been all night? I was beginning to think you got eaten by one of the science department’s escaped experiments!”

Cloud grunted and started changing out of his clothes. If Zack wanted to be in his room when he was going to bed, he could suffer the show. Ignoring the alarmed noises behind him, he shucked off the last of his clothes and pulled a clean pair of sweatpants from his dresser. Setting his alarm, he turned off the overhead light and got into bed, shoving Zack over without a word.

They both lay there in silence for a long moment before Zack shifted on the bed next to him. “So, why have you been ignoring me?”

Cloud grunted. Because it was easier than talking about it.

“Are you still mad at me?”

The blond snorted, amused. Like anyone could stay mad at Zack for very long.

“Are we good then?”

He hummed agreeably and stretched under the covers. He was going to be sore tomorrow. At the very least, he’d worked out most of his frustration over everything.

“You know, you’re a lot like Seph. Although, his avoidant personality disorder is a lot worse than yours,” he said with humour warming his tone.

Cloud snorted a laugh. Wasn’t that the truth. “Sometimes it’s easier to walk away, and then come back,” he mused, thinking back to all the time’s he’d left on a delivery to ‘run away’ from something or other. He liked to think of it as giving himself time to think and work through things.

Zack hummed, and the silence that stretched between them was more comfortable this time. “You going to come to my match tomorrow?”

Cloud nodded. “You’re going to kick his ass, no matter what you think. And you wanna know why?”


“Because you’re better and you learned from the best. Stay focused on the opponent in front of you and stop looking over your shoulder for something that’s not there. The only mistakes you make in battle are thinking about what’s already done and not living in the moment. Got it?”

The SOLDIER First Class let out a long, slow breath. “When did you grow up, Cloud?” he asked lightly, all the tension having finally left his voice. “I feel like I missed it and now you’re the one giving me advice.”

Cloud snorted. Zack had no idea. “Shut up and go to sleep.”
“Wha-? They’ll think we’re sleeping together if I spend the night!”

“Zack. They already think we’re sleeping together. Though, if sleeping on the floor would make you feel more comfortable, then by all means. Suffer.”

“Hey!”

Cloud looked down at The Former Grease Stain with a feeling of pride that made him want to just sit there and point and laugh while shouting ‘Ahah! You have been defeated!’

Not that he actually did that. Instead he admired the grease-less rough patch that he had made on the floor through stubborn use of steel wool and the strongest cleaners known to man. Sure, now there was a slightly dull patch of tope on the floor almost two feet wide, but no more grease! The next time they waxed the whole building it would be as good as new.

Or close.

Checking the time with his PHS he made a face at the 5:51 staring him stubbornly in the face. A whole nine minutes of work left before he got to see Zack wipe the floor with McAphry.

Sighing, he looked down at The Former Grease Stain and wondered what he could do that wouldn’t take any longer than ten minutes. Grunting, he pushed himself to his feet and started cleaning up and organizing his cart. If it came down to it, he’d just sit in his closet for another five minutes before taking off.

In fact, he was so set on this plan of action that when someone lifted him off his feet and threw him over a shoulder, he was nearly startled enough to squeak. Nearly.

“Hey Spike! I’m kidnapping you early!”

Cloud slapped him on the ass. “Bad boy! You’re supposed to wait until I’m done work, or at least until I put my shindig away!”

The SOLDIER paused for a moment, confused. “Uh… what’s a shindig?”

“That’s what I’ve been calling my cart. ‘Cause it’s a party and a half.”

“Right… So, I’m kidnapping you now?”

“Zack. If you don’t put me down this second I’m going to tattoo your ass with battery acid.”

The SOLDIER abruptly put him down, making the room spin a bit from vertigo. Rolling his eyes, he grabbed his cart and started wheeling it towards his closet. Well, he’d been looking for an excuse to leave a few minutes early.

“So Zack, how was work today?”

His black-haired friend scratched his head with a sheepish grin. “I couldn’t concentrate all that well. Keep thinking of my match. And then Seph got mad at me.”

The blond shook his head with a small smile. “Zack, even under normal circumstances you can’t concentrate that well.”

“Hey!”
Shoving his cart into his closet, he dumped the water down the drain in the corner. “So what kind of sword does this McAphry use, anyway?”

“Rapier. While I got some training from Angeal, McAphry always looked up to Genesis and his style. Genesis never actually trained him, he didn’t train anybody really, so McAphry imitated his style by watching him train or duel against Sephiroth whenever he could.”

Cloud hummed thoughtfully, putting the bucket and rags away. “It’s surprising how much you can learn from observing someone fight or practice.”

Zack grinned. “Like you learned watching me and Angeal?”

Cloud just smiled, saying nothing, since he didn’t actually remember any of that. “Where are you going to warm up? I assume McAphry will do it in front of everyone to show off, but maybe it’d be best for you if you did it on the track or something.”

The black-haired SOLDIER looked surprised. “What? Why do you say that?”

Resisting the urge to sigh, Cloud bonked Zack on the head instead. “Don’t you know any combat psychology? Half the battle is a warrior’s confidence. ‘Watch not the enemy as observer, but as warrior’,;” Cloud said, loosely translating another Wutaian proverb. When Zack looked even more confused, he sighed. “Basically, don’t watch your opponent as an audience member, being dazzled by his technique and the things that you can’t do. Instead, be the warrior and see how your own abilities can take advantage of your opponent. Take note of things in your style you should avoid. The other side of that is watch your opponent as the warrior when you fight him, instead of watching him before hand. As soon as you lose confidence in your own abilities by being impressed by the opponent in action, you’ve lost the battle. Since you’ve already expressed to me that you’re worried you won’t be able to beat him, the wisest choice you can make right now is to remove yourself from the situation, find your centre, warm up, and walk into that duel with your head held high.”

Zack stared at him for long enough that Cloud began to feel awkward, putting a few more things away to keep his hands occupied. Maybe he should have kept his mouth shut.

“Wow, you kinda sound like Angeal! Where’d you get all this wisdom, Cloud?”

The blond shrugged. “I read. Observe. Remember things.” From a life that apparently no longer existed. He hadn’t spent almost five years of his life in Wutai after the last battle for nothing. Yuffie found his support as the saviour of the Planet useful, and he got to learn more about her culture and styles of combat. There were masters far wiser than him in Wutai. “I’m sure you’ve heard all this stuff before, maybe said in a different way. It’s not like there’s one right way to approach the Art of Battle.”

Zack grabbed him in a tight hug. “You’re so cool, Cloud! You’ll totally be a lady killer once you grow a little taller.” He grinned.

Cloud scowled. He knew he’d mostly finished growing, although he had yet to fill out all the way. “I may be shorter than you but I can still replace your soap with lard.” Or dye his whites pink. Cloud still hadn’t gotten around to that.

The SOLDIER abruptly released him, scratching the back of his head with a nervous laugh. “So, since you’re the guru, what should we do? I was just going to warm up at the gym, since the duel doesn’t start for an hour.”
Cloud snorted. Him, a guru? “Well alright then, come on.” Leaving his closet, he shut the door behind Zack and led the way back to his rooms. Changing into a pair of loose sweatpants and a sleeveless shirt, he dragged the SOLDIER to the place he avoided like the plague.

The track.

Zack grimaced, looking around at the mostly-empty space as they stretched. Since cadets did most of their exercises in the morning except on Saturdays, when they had heavy physical training, there were only a couple people jogging around the circuit.

Once they’d finished their stretches, Cloud started at a light jog and waited for Zack to catch up with a small grin. “You’re lazy, Zack. Endurance is important for any warrior.”

The SOLDIER grunted. “Sword training’s more useful.”

“No, you find it more enjoyable. It’s easy to see improvement when you practice your techniques, but stamina? That comes with time.” Cloud, who had already gone on a run earlier that morning, enjoyed the way the exercise loosened limbs stiffened from bending over the floor and craning his head upright to replace light bulbs.

After they finished the warm up lap, Cloud broke out into a run and grinned as Zack groaned behind him. “You’ve got mako enhancements you pussy! Stop complaining!”

“You wanna see mako enhancements?” Zack shouted, increasing his speed to run far ahead of Cloud before jogging in place so the blond could catch up. “That’s mako enhancement!”

After Cloud caught up with him, he knocked Zack off his feet with a well placed and unexpected kick to the back of the knees. The SOLDIER went down and rolled away from him with an alarmed expression. Cloud just raised an eyebrow. “That’s for being a smartass.”

Zack grinned. “Yes, guru-sensei!”

Oh Planet, he never should have encouraged this.

After they finished a few laps running, Cloud was happy to note that he wasn’t even winded and his early morning and late night training had been paying off. He told Zack to start going through his forms nice and slow before increasing his speed on each repeat. The SOLDIER did as ordered with a grin, while Cloud started doing some strength training in lieu of the kata he actually wanted to practice. It was far too light out for him to be practicing any of the hand to hand he’d learned from Tifa or during his time in Wutai, and sword forms were out of the question with Zack there.

Watching Zack out of the corner of his eyes, he was pleased to note that the SOLDIER was paying far more attention to his footwork now, and had fixed many of the mistakes Cloud had noticed him make a few days previous. Zack did take his technique serious, after all, and had probably continued practicing as Cloud avoided him.

After forty minutes or so, Zack was looking at lot looser and relaxed than Cloud had seen him in a while. “Have you ever meditated before?” he asked curiously when Zack walked up to him where he was sitting crosslegged on the ground.

The SOLDIER made a face. Cloud laughed. “Here, just sit with me for a few minutes, then we’ll take off.”

Zack plopped down next to him and Cloud closed his eyes again, finding his centre with ease after many years of practice. After a minute of waiting, the SOLDIER shifted next to him to lay back
against the grass. The blond didn’t mind. Zack didn’t exactly have a personality predisposed to sitting quiet and thoughtless for long periods of time.

When he sensed some of Zack’s tension release in the quiet of the evening breeze and the warmth of the sun, close to setting, he stood from his seated position. Zack looked up at him. “Balance is the key, Zack. If you are more balanced, calm, and centred than your opponent, you will do well.”

Grabbing the SOLDIER’s outstretched hand, he took a step back, lowered his centre of gravity, and used his momentum to pull the larger man upright with ease.

“Thanks, Spike.”

Cloud smiled, and together they started walking towards the SOLDIER facilities.

McAphry and most of the SOLDIERs off duty were there when they arrived. Cloud watched the bulky man wave around his Rapier to the cheers and jeers of some of his fellow SOLDIERs, a wide grin splitting his face. Seeing him around his friends, he seemed like a pretty nice guy. Unfortunately, Cloud was well aware of what lay beneath humanity at times. When McAphry caught sight of him, a dark look flashed across his mako eyes before he returned his attention to his friends.

Zack was dragged off by a couple other SOLDIERs, leaving Cloud to stand on the side and watch as the friendly and well-liked man received many pats and well-wishes. After a few minutes, he found himself approached by a man wearing a red-brown uniform, a Second Class. He smiled good-naturedly at Cloud and held out his hand.

“I didn’t exactly get to meet you last time, since things were a little hectic. My name’s Kunsel. I’m a friend of Zack’s.”

Upon hearing the name, Cloud took the hand and gave it a firm shake. He knew a bit about the name Kunsel, but had never met the man himself. “Nice to meet you. Name’s Cloud.”

Amusement warmed his dark blue eyes. “Zack calls you Spike, doesn’t he?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “Yes. However, if you start calling me that too there will be consequences.”

He laughed. “Good to know, Cloud. So, who do you think will win tonight?”

The blond shrugged. “The outcome of any battle can never be predicted.”

Kunsel grinned. “Fair enough. But what do you think the chances are that Zack will win? I’m rooting for him myself, but McAphry’s been getting pretty darn good, lately. And cocky because of it.”

Cloud hummed. “Confidence in oneself is necessary, but confidence in the outcome is pride.” Why did all tonight’s questions seem so well countered by Wutaian proverbs?

Kunsel laughed. “Zack was right. You are just a little ball of wisdom.”

“Little?” So he wasn’t completely grown up yet, why did everyone keep calling him short?

“Spike! Get over here and save me from the masses!” Zack called over to him, still surrounded by
a small crowd of SOLDIERs.

“I’m afraid I’ve been summoned,” he said gravely, executing a short bow before making an exit. Kunsel grinned and waved.

“Oh! Alright people! Time to get the show on the road!!!” McAphry called out, swinging his sword a couple times with a grin as the SOLDIERs cleared away from the mats.

Cloud grabbed Zack by the front of his uniform and pulled him down, once again disliking their difference in height. “Balance,” he murmured, before pushing Zack away from the wall and onto the mats. Seeing the SOLDIER barely lose his centre with the abrupt shove, he grinned. Even if Zack didn’t win this was going to be awesome.

It made his fingers twitch and crave the bite of First Tsurugi’s hilt.

Standing off to the side so he had a good view of Zack’s form, he crossed his arms over his chest and watched McAphry with sharp eyes. The other First Class was cocky, to say the least, Rapier swung over his shoulder and swagger indicating he thought he’d already won the battle. Glancing at Zack, he was pleased to see his friend remained calm and focused, far more balanced than he’d been a few days ago. Nowhere near the masters in Wutai, but a marked improvement.

Getting into ready positions, McAphry made a few comments that Cloud ignored in favour of watching Zack’s reaction. Calm, amusement, confidence.

A SOLDIER he didn’t know stepped forward to act as referee. When his hands dropped, McAphry was quick to attack with a full on assault, Rapier crashing against Buster sword as Zack shifted his blade to a defensive position, supporting the weight of its length with his left hand as he used it as a long, rectangular shield. With his new experience in Wutaian martial arts, here Cloud would have slipped his leg into McAphry’s guard and disrupted his balance, but Zack didn’t have that experience. Instead, the black-haired SOLDIER used his physical power to force the Rapier to slide off the side of the blade to the left, arresting the movement at the last moment for a thrust to the torso.

McAphry jumped back with a scowl, obviously having expected an easier win than he was faced with. Shifting his grip, he attacked again, and again, each time Zack blocking his attack and countering it with a solid wall of steel. For Cloud, who was used to battles taking to the skies with Sephiroth as an opponent and summons like the corrupted Bahamut Kadaj called into battle, it was almost… strange to watch. And disappointing, on some level.

Slowly, McAphry started getting frustrated with Zack’s solid defence and well-chosen attacks, his movements getting sloppier and using more physical force instead of his brain. Putting his entire body into another head-on attack, no one there was prepared for the loud snap and flash of metal as the Rapier broke under the weight and force of the Buster Sword.

Cloud reacted on instinct as the blade came spinning right at him. His arms uncrossed and flat hands rose to catch the blade and attempt to direct its force and trajectory into the wall instead of his heart, but instead he found big arms wrapped around his torso and his entire vision had shifted a few degrees to the left.

“Holy shit, Cloud! Are you okay?”

Cloud, who was panting heavily with adrenaline, looked to where the sword had sunk almost all the way into the concrete wall of the building and paled. Unenhanced, there was no way he would have been able to deflect that. Maybe into his shoulder instead of his heart, but it would have been
a terrific wound.

Turning his attention to his saviour, he blanched as silvery hair tickled his face and the arms tightened around him as Zack nearly collided with them. “Cloud! Are you okay?”

The blond nodded shakily. “I’d like to say my life flashed before my eyes, but it was moving a bit quick even for that,” he tried to joke, his voice as unsteady as his legs. For the first time since coming back in time, he hated that he wasn’t enhanced.

Finally, Zack turned his attention to Sephiroth. “Thanks for saving him, Seph! I don’t know what I would have done if this whole duel ended in him hospitalized, or worse.”

“I was nearby,” Sephiroth said with a shrug, letting Cloud go as the blond found his legs again. Standing shakily, the blond turned around to look up into the expressionless features.

“Thanks,” he murmured, letting Zack poke and prod and look him over from head to toe to check that he was alright.

The silver-haired man inclined his head before turning his attention to McAphry. “In real battle, a broken sword equals defeat. Perhaps you would do better to take more care with your blade in battle as well as out.” Without another word, he left the gym, leaving a mix of awed and respectful looks on all the SOLDIERs’ faces.

Cloud himself was still a little too scattered for ‘awed’ or ‘respectful’, but that did little to disrupt the roiling pit of emotions in his stomach. It wasn’t every day your hot arch nemesis saved your life, after all.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

As a little note – someone made mention that they didn’t understand what was Nibel-accent about “What can I do you for.” I may eventually clarify that in the chapter itself, but for now I’ll just explain it to anyone who missed it. The proper grammar is “What can I do for you.” The other way of saying has a slight sexual connotation. “What can I do for you?” (‘A hundred bucks? Free maybe, you hot piece of ass?’) Etc.

:P

I’ve also made a change, and pulled the Sephiroth scene from this chapter and put it into chapter for as part of the Sephiroth Interlude. If you don’t want to know what’s going on in his mind, feel free to skip it. :) 

Happy reading!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy

Chapter Four: A Sephiroth Interlude

The Coffee Machine

Sephiroth’s office was a space the General didn’t allow many to interrupt, let alone occupy. His desk sat facing one of the blank walls disrupted only by a single guest chair placed directly across. To his left was a window that looked out onto Midgar and gave him an expansive view of the track and cadet training in the mornings. At exactly 1600 the bar bisecting the window would create a shadow over his hole punch that indicated the earliest time he could leave the office.

It was a place of order, quiet, and productivity.

Moving another report from the ‘unread’ pile to the ‘read’ pile, Sephiroth tried to ignore the shadow sitting in his peripheral vision. “No.”

“Pleeease?”

Suppressing his irritation after many years of practice, the General signed a request form for more materia bracers. “No.”

“I’ll finish all my paperwork by the end of the day?”

“Those are already part of your duties.”

“Aw, come on Seeeph! He could be dead in a ditch somewhere for all I know! Can’t you make an exception this one time? I need to know what happened to him!”

“No.”

“Argh! I’ll give you a whole box of mixed chocolates! A big one!”

Sephiroth stared Zack down for a long five seconds before turning towards his computer and drawing up the employment records. Ignoring the puppy’s quiet cheering, he drew up the file of one ‘Strife, Cloud’ and quickly scanned through it. “He’s been hired as a custodian. Apartment 237.”

“Thanks Seph!” Zack bounced up from his chair and was out the door before the General could say another word. Irritated, he turned his attention back to his paperwork now that Zack had stopped harassing him every available moment to find his chocobo.

Glancing up at the file still open on his computer, he frowned at the blond’s haircut. It was barely regulation when the cadet had been in the program. Closing the file and turning his attention away from pointless pursuits, he focused on the mission report he’d been going over before Zack had interrupted him.
The Lieutenant had left his guest chair off center.

Sephiroth stared at the coffee machine. It still hadn’t brewed his coffee. It had been over five minutes, and it hadn’t brewed his coffee.

“Cynthia. What did you do to the coffee machine?”

She perked up behind her desk and gave him an alarmed, wide-eyed look. “Nothing, General! I don’t touch your coffee machine.”

Hm. Turning his focus back to the machine, he pulled out the handle to look at the filter. The coffee grounds were barely wet. Great. His coffee machine was broken. Again.

More than a little irritated, he wondered if he could find someone competent in the next ten minutes to fix it. The last time he’d reported it to facilities management, it had taken them a whole day and a half to get someone in to take a look at it – an unacceptable waiting period. That man had been a custodian, had he not? Perhaps the cleaning staff were trained in fixing coffee machines.

His mind flashed back to ridiculous blond hair and he frowned. Zack never ceased talking about the former cadet. In fact, no matter how he varied the degrees of his glares, the Lieutenant was never phased by his ire. Fortunately, when he chose to actually do his work, he got the job done. Competent assistants were difficult to find; one of the few philosophies of Hojo’s that he agreed with.

As a thought took root in his mind, a little ball of vindictive satisfaction uncurled in his stomach. Since Zack was immune to all forms of glares, insults, death threats, intimidation, dehumanization, or harassment, perhaps he could get a little revenge on the blond for being the source of Zack’s fixation. He had had to endure two weeks of oral torment before finally capitulating and taking the bribe of chocolate.

Though, they had been particularly good chocolates bars. Flakey wafers wrapped in black and milk chocolate dipped in nuts…

Going back to his office, he pulled out one of the chocolate bars and brought up the former-cadet’s file on his computer. Today he was working from 10-6 on the 29th floor… Unwrapping the chocolate bar, he left the office in search of a head of spiky blond hair.

It didn’t take him long to find the custodian. Since the 29th floor mostly consisted of a hallway circuit and endless offices, he merely walked the length of the hallway until he found an adolescent kneeling on the ground, his cart nearby, scrubbing at a dark patch on the floor.

“You there. Do you know how to fix a coffee machine?”

The blond froze before slowly turning his head up to look at him. Panic flashed through cerulean eyes for a moment before subsiding and becoming neutral. “I’m not authorized by Shinra to fix their coffee machines,” he finally said, his tone moderately respectful, but not nearly as terrified as Sephiroth had been expecting. Perhaps he didn’t realize he was speaking to the General?

“That’s not what I asked,” Sephiroth said sharply, annoyed this blond was wasting his time. “Do you know how to fix a coffee machine?” He hated repeating himself.

The blond let out a sigh and dropped his rag in the bucket. Taking off his gloves, he moved his cart
to the side of the hallway before grabbing a tool box off of it. “Maybe. I dare say I’m mechanically inclined, but I lean more towards engines than coffee machines,” he said with a touch of humour, his entire posture, which had initially been tense and surprised, now relaxed and easy. Sephiroth stared him down, beginning to lose patience. The blond raised an eyebrow, also infuriatingly unaffected by his demeanour. Had Zack been corrupting the cadets with his attitude problems? “I’ll attempt it,” the blond finally capitulated, “but I don’t promise I’ll succeed. So, where is it?”

Sephiroth spun on his heel and walked down the hallway, irritated that this custodian had already wasted minutes of his valuable time. The blond followed him into the executive’s elevator without a complaint, jogging at times to keep up with the General’s long strides.

“On how many floors did you look for a janitor before you found me?” the blond asked as they reached the 37th floor, breaking the silence.

Sephiroth suppressed another flash of irritation. Perhaps he should have found a different custodian to fix the cursed coffee machine. He gave the blond an icy look. “Too many.” Looking on one floor was one too many. Shinra’s incompetence at times was truly irksome.

“Well, I’ll see if I can fix it for you.”

The custodian had the nerve to smile at him. Whether it was mocking or not, Sephiroth didn’t particularly care, not saying another word and turning his eyes forward to watch the numbers change. If the blond couldn’t fix it he’d find some way to get him fired for wasting his time.

Upon arriving at his office, Sephiroth was alarmed to see the coffee maker was now smoking. Before he could so much as react, the blond beside him let loose an impressive string of curses that Sephiroth had only heard on the few occasions he’d been around sailors. Moving swiftly, the blond made his way over to the cursed coffee machine and unplugged it.

He also flawlessly anticipated Sephiroth’s own ire and started chewing out his secretary for her incompetence. Sephiroth grudgingly admitted that his technique insulting her intelligence was well-executed. When he essentially told her to shut up and return to her “secretarial porn”, Sephiroth was hard-pressed to choke back his vindictive amusement.

“This is probably going to take a while. If you don’t have to replace the machine entirely,” the blond said, shooting an annoyed glance at the secretary. This unfortunate news did little to dull Sephiroth’s overall annoyance at the situation. “Perhaps your secretary could at least get you some coffee for all your trouble,” he said, aiming the last comment at the woman sitting behind her desk looking insulted.

When she didn’t respond, Sephiroth lost patience entirely. “Cynthia.” After giving her a long stare, she obeyed without a word and left the office. Sephiroth didn’t look forward to the drink she’d return with. After the first time she’d failed to make his coffee the way he liked it, he always made it himself.

Seeing that the blond had lost himself in the coffee machine, Sephiroth went to his office to get some more work done. Three long hours and one cup of sub-par coffee from his secretary later, his nose caught the scent of coffee from the reception area. Leaving his office, he watched as the custodian poured himself a cup of coffee and added sugar. Walking towards the blond, he waited in anticipation.

The custodian spat it out into the sink. “Aw, disgusting! What do they make this out of, fried rat intestines?”
Well, that was creative. “I believe it may be worse than that,” he said, smirking slightly when the custodian froze in surprise before turning to look at him with a rather alarmed expression. Sephiroth made his cup of coffee and tested it. While there was a slight burnt flavour to it, it didn’t taste that much different than usual. Unwillingly impressed that the blond had managed to fix the cursed machine at all, he pulled out a few bills and placed them on the counter. “For services rendered.” If he’d had to wait for someone to come, he would have been coffee-less for a day or more, and the last thing he wanted to do was owe a custodian for anything.

The blond stared at him before raising an eyebrow at the money. “I’m not a whore, sir. Just doing my job.”

Cynthia choked behind her desk, and Sephiroth just continued to stare him down. A custodian with honour?

“If it gives you any more trouble, you might want to just buy a new one. If the fuse keeps blowing, it’s probably from either overuse or age. An industrial coffee machine would probably last longer, since they’re built for that kind of stress,” the blond explained before picking up his toolbox and walking to the elevator with a relaxed wave.

Sephiroth stared after him with mixed thoughts.

*The Light Bulb*

Sephiroth scowled as his papers flickered for a moment before quieting. Forcing himself to loosen his grip on his pen lest he break it, he got up from his desk and went to quell his mood with a cup of coffee. Cynthia immediately flinched and started typing away as soon as she caught sight of him out of the corner of her. Perhaps she was viewing her secretarial porn again.

Pushing the memory of a blond custodian away, he went about the time honoured tradition of coffee preparation. Perhaps when he went back into the office, the flickering light will have fixed itself.

Five minutes later, he was back doing reports, except the light overhead was now flickering at an almost consistent rate of 113 beats per minute.

Checking a certain custodian’s schedule, he noted with some irritation that today was one of the blond’s days off. He was tempted to hunt down a different custodian altogether, but resisted. The blond was efficient, didn’t ask questions, and got the job done right. With his recent luck of office equipment, a new custodian would probably succeed in falling on his desk from sheer incompetence. At least the blond appeared to be moderately intelligent.

And there was also the small bit of vindictive pleasure he got from inconveniencing one of Zack’s fixations.

. . . .

The next day Sephiroth put up with the flickering light bulb in his office for all of two hours and twenty-one minutes before his irritation sent him in search of a certain blond. If the custodian wasn’t available… The General would not be pleased.

Coming to a stop in front of the blond, he frowned at the sight of the custodian attempting to remove a very large oil stain from the floor with steel wool. He stood there impatiently, expectantly, for all of three seconds before the blond finally noticed him. Feeling a little smug that his presence made the custodian stiffen so, he watched as the blond’s eyes raked up his body from
“What can I do you for, General?”

Ah, so he did know who he was speaking to. Perhaps he had been enlightened since the last time and had learned a little respect. Sephiroth raised an eyebrow at the strange wording, for the first time taking note of a subtle accent he didn’t recognize. His memory immediately pulled up the blond’s file. Ah, so he was a mountain boy. “A light in my office has been flickering since yesterday,” he said simply, still rather irritated about the inconvenience.

“Is it a bulb or one of those long, double light fixtures?”

“The latter.”

Without another word, the custodian got off his feet and got his cart and equipment out of the way. After divesting himself of his gloves, he walked over what appeared to be a supply closet and collected from it a long box, a ladder, and a screw driver. When blue eyes turned to look at him expectantly, neither afraid of Sephiroth nor amused at the situation, the General started walking towards the executive elevator, knowing the blond would follow behind.

Quiet and efficiently, the custodian manoeuvred the ladder into the elevator without even coming close to hitting the walls or its current occupant. Upon arrival on the right floor, Sephiroth walked towards his office, knowing the blond wouldn’t be far behind. Going in and leaving the door open behind him, he glared at the light that continued to flicker.

Again, without a word, the custodian moved his chair out of the way and got to work fixing the problem without so much as a screw falling and hitting Sephiroth’s immaculately organized desk. And again, when he had expected the blond to make a witty comment or fill the silence, he didn’t. Instead, he was the epitome of efficiency, even going so far as to replace the other light after testing it and finding it faulty as well.

Finishing the job quietly, the custodian folded his ladder and put the long box under one arm before manoeuvring Sephiroth’s chair back into its rightful position. “How’s the coffee machine?” he asked, shattering the silence.

“Fine.”

The blond nodded, expression neutral and missing the fire it had possessed insulting his secretary and finding amusement in his plight. “Anything else, while I’m here?”

Sephiroth shook his head, watching the blond as he calmly walked through the door and let him alone in his well-lit and once-again orderly office.

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The Printer Massacre

As Sephiroth drained his fifth cup of coffee that hour, he let out a small sigh and scrubbed at his tired eyes. He’d been working overtime for the past week, assembling a baseline of reports concerning monster populations that Shinra assets had been sent out to deal with as far back as twenty years ago. Apparently the President couldn’t understand why he was spending so much money sending out resources to deal with problems he didn’t think concerned him, and Sephiroth had been spending the past week of 18-hour work days to pull together a case defending and justifying the expenditure of resources.
To say the least, it was tedious work even he was having trouble keeping straight, memories of reports flashing behind his eyes every time he rested them or went to bed.

Pushing away from his desk, he stood and stretched his stiff body the best he could without taking it to the gym and working it properly. Turning around to look over the lights of Midgar and give his eyes a rest from white legalese, his attention was caught by flickers of movement on the track below. Straining his sharp eyes to see more clearly, he was surprised to realize a very familiar head of blond was running around the track – he checked the time – half an hour after his shift had ended.

Why would a custodian want to keep in shape?

Perhaps it was a habit from cadet training, he dismissed, making himself sit down and return to the bank of reports filed in Shinra’s mainframe he’d been sifting through. A good hour and a half later, he left his office for another cup of coffee and to collect the printed reports when he noticed that the batch he’d just sent, which was more than thirty pages, wasn’t printing.

Putting his dirty coffee cup on the counter, he walked over to the printers, ignoring the one Cynthia had tried to fix that afternoon as it flashed many red lights and error messages on its little screen. Turning his attention to the printer that had been working faithfully for him for the past five hours, he frowned at the small stack of reports that should have been at least five times that size.

Checking the little screen, he frowned at the absence of a paper jam. He’d had to pry more than a few sheets of paper out of the paper death trap that was ‘the jam,’ but this didn’t appear to be the problem. Bending over, he checked that all the slots had enough paper. Things were fine down there. Just in case it was being finicky, he filled them anyway with new sheets of paper. Still nothing.

Irritated and completely at a loss, Sephiroth scrubbed his tired eyes again and frowned. It was almost eight o’clock at night. There would be no-one in the building to fix it, and he couldn’t forward it to another printer for security reasons. Anything that was printed from Sephiroth’s computer went to two machines only, in case someone hacked his computer and tried to send them to a room easier to steal the hard copies from. Since his computer had programming and viruses in place that prevented any copying aside from his weekly download to Shinra’s private backup server, the only way someone could steal information from his computer was to sit in his office and wait for it to print to his own machines.

His own machines which were both apparently out of commission and causing him no little amount of grief. As it was, he’d already had to ask for an extension on this little ‘side project’ of the President’s due to the sheer volume of information he had to organize, on top of his already taxing duties as General assessing threats and assigning SOLDIERs to various missions.

Knowing it was a futile hope, he went back to his office window and looked down onto the dark track field, hoping his custodian was still down there. To his surprise, the blond was still there. Quickly rushing out of the office, he took the executive elevator all the way down to the twentieth floor before being forced to switch elevators. While usually this security measure didn’t bother him, at the moment he had to resist the urge to run down the hall so he didn’t miss the only person who could probably fix his printer before tomorrow afternoon.

Upon arriving at the edge of the track, the tension in his shoulders eased at the sight of a blond-haired figure. He frowned and slowed his walk when he realized that not only had the custodian stopped running, but he was currently going through what was obviously a sword form, sans blade. Curiosity peaked, he wondered why the former-cadet was practicing combat skills he no longer needed to use with his career choice.
Determining that getting his printer fixed was more important at the moment than figuring out the mix of contradictions his custodian presented, he wondered how best to get blond’s attention. Though, a few questions couldn’t hurt or waste that much time….

Deciding to go with the most efficient route, he caught a pair of wrists as they swung downwards in a vertical jump and slash. The action surprised his captive enough that momentum carried him right into Sephiroth’s chest, and would have knocked them both over if not for the General’s impeccable sense of balance. One could hardly wield a 6-foot blade with a poor centre.

“Se- G-General!” the blond nearly squeaked.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow at the stutter. The blond had almost called him by name. “What were you doing?” he demanded, visibly throwing the blond off further. While he doubted the custodian could see him in the evening lighting, his own mako eyes gave him no such difficulty, allowing him to see every flicker of emotion in expressive blue eyes.

“Uh… exercising?”

Sephiroth’s mouth twitched. Such an answer would have been more believable if it hadn’t been turned into a question. “You were practicing kata without a sword. Why?”

“Uh… it’s calming,” the blond answered, still off balance.

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed. “You are agitated?” Had someone else been bothering his custodian? If possible, the former-cadet went even farther off balance. “Well, some things have happened and- and- I just wanted to, you know, cool off.” Something had been bothering the blond. Before Sephiroth could question him further, he was interrupted. “Why are you here?” the blond demanded, taking a step back and suddenly removing his heat from Sephiroth’s body.

The General absently noticed the way his clothing cooled once more in the outside air. Shifting his weight slightly, he wondered if the blond would indeed help him, in spite of the circumstances. “My printers broke.”

Blue eyes stared at him. Their intensity made him break eye contact for a moment before he realised if anyone should be breaking eye contact, it was the custodian. “I understand that you are off duty,” he began in the same tone of voice he used when he needed to tell President Shinra this is how things need to be in one of their infuriating and entirely too long private meetings. “However, there is work that I cannot finish tonight with two broken printers.”

The blond ran a hand through his already messy hair, a mix of emotions flashing over his face too quickly for Sephiroth to interpret. “How did both of them manage to break?”

“Cynthia damaged the first one this afternoon. The second failed tonight.”

“Mhmm. And how did you know that I was even here?”

Did this mean the custodian was considering it? “I noticed you running through my office window an hour and twenty-five minutes ago,” he reported.

It started to rain at that moment, and Sephiroth, who had been in such a hurry he hadn’t noticed the impending shower or its preceding droplets, found himself rather suddenly irritated. Taking a deep breath, he forced the unconstructive emotion away. What he wanted to do was go back to his rooms and sleep. With the way the evening was looking, however, he’d be forced to work past midnight to compensate.
“Fine.” Could he really be…? “But since this is off the clock and I’m hungry, you’re buying me dinner!” the blond demanded, blue eyes burning with a stubborn fire.

Sephiroth thought about it for a moment. Weighed loss of time and work against the small trouble of paying for a meal… Well, he’d meet the blond’s condition. Nodding once, he started walking away. He hated rain-wet hair. It just didn’t dry properly when it didn’t come out of a scorching hot shower after a thorough conditioning.

Sephiroth watched as the custodian fiddled and made faces at the printers, having escaped his office for a moment to get another cup of coffee. As he took his first sip of the warming concoction, the blond finally broke the silence that had been pervading the office all evening.

“So, what’s keeping you here so late anyway? Shouldn’t you get off when everyone else does?”

Sephiroth grimaced down into his coffee mug. “It’s classified.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t want to talk to me. Even if you can’t give details, you can always say something vague like ‘there are outstanding reports my useless First Lieutenant keeps failing to deal with that fall to me,’ or ‘Shinra has me doing work that no one else is supposedly able to complete but even a retarded poodle could do just fine,’ or ‘The President keeps getting caught going to the brothel and the Turks apparently aren’t enough to scare those involved into silence.’ Okay, so the last one was a little ridiculous, but—”

When the blond trailed off, Sephiroth realized that he’d almost started laughing and ceased immediately, taking another sip of coffee. “My useless First Lieutenant has left me with reports to deal with on occasion, but never enough to keep me busy for four consecutive nights in a row,” he explained. Then wondered why he bothered to in the first place. If his functionality was beginning to be affected, maybe he should consider taking a day off from the project to recuperate his wits.

The blond grinned, as though amused by his rather factual statement. “So what’s been eating up all your time?”

Sephiroth wondered how he could put it without breaching confidentiality. “I believe it would fall under your second category.” It was close enough.

“Well that sucks. The least he could do is give you something to laugh at. Maybe we could find someone with crazy ninja skills to take pictures of him visiting a brothel.” Sephiroth raised a dubious eyebrow. “That’d be funny to see on the news.”

“The Turks would bribe or threaten the photographer into silence.” This was a well known fact. Why the blond had failed to consider it proved he was not military material.

“Ah, but that’s why you find someone with crazy ninja skills!”

Sephiroth failed to see how that was logical. “There are few Wutaian refugees who would be willing to risk their livelihood on obtaining a few incriminating photos of President Shinra.”

“I might know a guy who knows a ninja who could be paid to do it.”

This time Sephiroth raised both eyebrows. “Then I would have to arrest you.”

A blond head came out from behind the printer, which he had pulled away from the wall. “Sephiroth, we are having a hypothetical and totally bogus discussion on how best to get a picture
of Shinra screwing a few hookers. Can’t you be a little more constructive in your criticism of my awesome plotting skills?”

Sephiroth stared at him. How had the blond gone from polite silence and “General” to Zack on a sugar rush and “Sephiroth”? The change was so distinct as to tempt him to think they were two different people. At least his First Lieutenant was consistent with his never ending jokes, bad sense of time, irregular work ethic, and constant requests to leave early to go see ‘that cute flower girl of his’.

The blond had raised a questioning eyebrow during his silence. Sephiroth shrugged. “I was merely pointing out the flaws in your plan. I am not an ideal asset in this plot of yours, as I am the General of Shinra.”

The blond interrupted him before he could continue. “And as the General you have certain responsibilities to the company, blah blah, etc. This is a hypothetical plotting game, Sephiroth. So forget for a moment that you are The General, and I am a lowly Custodian, and put yourself in someone else’s shoes. Surely you’ve done the same thing when trying to anticipate the enemy’s movements during war?”

Sephiroth almost opened his mouth to comment on the custodian’s lack of respect before he registered what the blond had said and “Yes” slipped out of his mouth instead. The custodian was making more sense than Zack usually did.

“Well then this should be old school for you. Except remember that the objective of this exercise is to arrive at the most entertaining solution, rather than the most efficient. Understood?”

“Yes,” he said, understanding the concept. As unnecessary and strange as this apparent social activity was. But when he opened his mouth to continue, the blond cut him off again.

“Alright then, how would you go about getting incriminating evidence of Shinra sleeping with a prostitute?”

And now his intelligence and strategic ability was being questioned. How had the conversation led to this? “I would hack into the Turk’s security cameras and record it, as his home is the only location he has elicit affairs.”

“I still think the ninja idea is funnier, but your plan would probably be more successful.”

“Indeed.” Alarmingly enough, it probably would. And while it was well known among the upper Shinra staff that he had illicit affairs with women in his home, Sephiroth probably shouldn’t have let the fact slip to a custodian. Even in a hypothetical strategic undertaking.

“So, what about that food?” the blond asked, interrupting his thoughts.

Sephiroth turned his attention to the problem at hand. “I will provide compensation with which you can buy your dinner,” he said, deciding that was a suitable solution.

But the blond came out from behind the printer again with an unhappy frown. “That’s not what I meant by ‘buy me dinner’.”

Sephiroth stared. Was this one of those sexual propositions that Zack had told him he should engage in more often? “I am already behind on my work because of these printers. It would not be wise to spend my time escorting you to a restaurant.”

The blond raised an eyebrow, though he didn’t appear insulted. Perhaps Sephiroth had interpreted
incorrectly? “Well if you’re so worried about efficiency, then why don’t you just order us some take out and get it delivered here? Come on, you must be hungry by now.”

Sephiroth frowned slightly in thought. While he could ignore his own hunger easily enough, perhaps his efficiency would increase if he ate something. It seemed like a fair compromise. “What would you like for take out then?”

The custodian shrugged and turned his attention back to the printer. “I dunno. I’ll eat whatever you want to eat. Get something you like.”

Sephiroth pondered the dilemma he now faced. If the blond had made a demand, it would have been relatively easy to fulfill. However, now that he had the choice, he ran the risk of displeasing the one who was fixing his printer for him at nine o’clock at night.

Heading into his office where he kept his PHS and the phone number for a good Wutaian take out place Zack had first introduced to him a few months ago, he took his coffee with him. Might as well get some work done while they waited for the delivery.

When Sephiroth got the call from the night shift desk clerk for his delivery, he collected all the gil he’d need and left the office. A glance at the diligently-working custodian showed that he had borrowed a few parts from the printer happily flashing red error messages, and the General couldn’t bring himself to care.

Giving the delivery man a reasonable tip, he made his way back upstairs wishing not for the first time that his office wasn’t on one of the top floors at a ridiculous number 61.

When he arrived back at his office, Sephiroth was amused to see blond chocobo hair pop out from behind the printer at the smell of Wutaian. Blue eyes locked on the food the General carried to the coffee table where they would be able to eat most easily, and with a final kick to the printer, it started spitting out the backlog of reports Sephiroth had been trying to print over an hour ago.

The blond man, for he certainly didn’t carry himself like an awkward adolescent, walked over to the couch and fell onto it much like Zack during one of his self-awarded ‘breaks’. Apparently the couches in the General’s office were more comfortable for sleeping on than Zack’s own.

As Sephiroth carefully opened his own to-go boxes and began to eat with his chopsticks, the blond quickly snapped his own apart and began to dig into the meal with gusto, leading the General to wonder if the blond had eaten anything after work or just jumped straight into his almost two-hour workout.

When Sephiroth was only halfway through his Wutaian, the blond leaned back in his chair with a pleased smile, licking his lips. It looked like the man might have some of the same tastes in food as the General.

“What’s the name of the restaurant you got that from?”

“Tsuchi’s Wok.”

“I’ll have to go there sometime,” the blond said, letting out a sigh and pushing himself to his feet with a stretch. Sephiroth watched him wander over to his secretary’s desk and dump the sticky containers into her small garbage bin. He smirked slightly at the petty revenge. “Thanks for the food. I’ll leave you to your work. Try to get a decent sleep, eh?”
Sephiroth watched as the custodian went over to the elevator and pressed the down button. “It’s fixed I presume?”

“Yeah. You might want to bring in someone who actually knows what they’re doing though to take a look at the other one. And don’t let the Secretarial Ho touch the only working printer! She can walk her shit down to another office and mess up their equipment.”

Sephiroth pondered that for a moment before realizing that the custodian might be joking. Before he could clarify, the elevator door closed and the blond was gone.

Sephiroth looked down at his cold Wutaian and frowned. Packing away the leftovers, he put them in his bar fridge beside the multiple cartons of cream stored within. Picking up the reports that had finished printing during their meal, he went back to his quiet office and closed the door behind him.

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Friday Night Near-Fatalities

Sephiroth stared down into the dregs of his coffee cup with a scowl. His secretary had gone home hours ago, and the only one still left in this Planet-forsaken office on a Friday night was him. Where most of Shinra’s employees were probably out getting inebriated, the only thing their General wanted was nine hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Checking the time, he frowned as the hour hand sat at 7 and the minute hand at 53. Didn’t Zack have a duel of some kind at 2000 hours? Perhaps he should call it a night and go watch the battle. It was a good enough excuse to get him out of the office.

Deciding that his lack of focus wouldn’t allow him to get much more work done anyway, he put away the papers on his desk and stretched. His spine cracked its own complaints. Leaving his office, he stopped by the arm chair closest to him and pulled up the cushion. He’d had to move his supplies since Zack located and raided them last. Pulling out two different chocolate bars, he put the cushion back down and wandered to the elevator, hands deftly unwrapping his first late-night snack.

The trip to the SOLDIER facilities didn’t take long. Sephiroth slipped in without the other SOLDIERS noticing, as their eyes and attention were trained on the duel taking place in front of them. He also recognized a very unique head of hair that he hadn’t expected to be there. Standing near the door, only a few feet away from the custodian, he turned his own attention to the clashing swords in front of him.

Zack, for once, exhibited a stability and balance that his personality usually made him incapable of. The General wondered if it was due to the blond’s presence. Mc Aphry, an up and coming SOLDIER First Class, appeared to also be in good form. The frown on his face, however, indicated an absence of the internal balance Zack had achieved.

Neutral concerning the outcome, Sephiroth watched as Zack kept up a steady pace and Mc Aphry slowly began to tire, becoming more frustrated as the battle continued. Using his anger as a tool, he crashed his rapier against the Buster Sword once again.

Sephiroth saw it before he heard it. Predicting the speed and force of the projectile, it was likely to connect with the custodian before the unenhanced human could do more than flinch, if that.

Moving with speed he usually saved for real battle, he took four steps to the left. To his surprise,
the custodian had already raised his arms as though to defend himself, so the General slipped his right arm around the blond’s shoulders and the left around his waist, shifting them both out of the way.

Green eyes watched the blade as it spun by, burying itself in the wall of the building. Turning his attention to his package, now that the danger had passed, he was unsurprised to feel a slight tremor pass through the body so close to his own. His arms moved with each adrenaline-fuelled, panting breath, and suddenly had to hold a little more weight as the blond’s legs weakened beneath him.

“Holy shit, Cloud! Are you okay?” His First Lieutenant demanded, coming towards them at top speed, a look of concern on his face. McAphry stood behind him, staring down at his broken sword with a dark expression, more concerned with his defeat than the fact that he had almost killed a civilian. Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed.

The blond twisting in his grip to look up at him snapped his attention away from McAphry and to Zack. Tightening his arms around his package, he prepared to dodge the incoming SOLDIER before a collision resulted.

To Zack’s credit, he stopped just in time. “Cloud! Are you okay?”

The custodian nodded shakily. “I’d like to say my life flashed before my eyes, but it was moving a bit quick for even that,” he half-joked, voice as shaky as his body, trembling slightly in his grasp.

Zack’s panicked violet eyes turned to him, expression morphing into one of gratitude. “Thanks for saving him, Seph! I don’t know what I would have done if this whole duel ended in him hospitalized, or worse.”

Sephiroth decided then that it was probably not socially acceptable to point out that the sword would have certainly killed the blond, as he doubted any of the SOLDIERs there carried a Restore materia with them off-duty. “I was nearby,” he said instead, shrugging awkwardly as he released the blond, having felt the man in his grasp stop trembling and find his legs again.

The custodian turned around and looked at him. “Thanks,” he murmured, uncharacteristically subdued in the event of his near-demise. Sephiroth inclined his head in acceptance. Before he had to think of something to say, Zack distracted the blond by checking him over for damages, not unlike a child would look over its stuffed chocobo before deeming it acceptable.

The General turned his attention to the SOLDIER who had unknowingly raised his ire. Lack of care for civilians’ safety was exactly the kind of thing that had a negative affect on Public Relations for the SOLDIER Program. “In real battle, a broken sword equals defeat. Perhaps you would do better to take more care with your blade in battle as well as out.” Turning on his heel, he left the gym, making a mental note to keep an eye on McAphry in the future for signs of emotional instability, as was his job as leader of the SOLDIER Program. Mako was a dangerous and unpredictable substance, after all.

As he headed to his quarters, his mind ran through simulations of predicted injuries and their resulting cause of death for the blond he had saved. Frustrated that his thoughts had strayed again, he pushed the perturbing image of dead blue eyes and hair stained red from his mind.

Chapter End Notes
Oh man, I think Tariray pegged Sephiroth perfectly when she called him, and I quote, “A heart-warmingly adorable douche.” I laughed for a good half a minute when I read that review. And Cloud, a cockney-cutey. :P Made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside.

I’ve decided to condense all the Sephiroth-related scenes into one chapter. Sorry if some of you got confused by the repeat of the coffee machine that used to be in chapter 3.

Mega thanks go to Weather Marmalade for her thorough analysis of the story and characters. As a result, I’ve edited a few things in this chapter.

Music: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsD6uEZsIsU

For some reason this just created a great mood for me when I was writing this chapter. Along with other great guitar music, but this one stood out to me at the ending of the Printer Massacre subsection.

Happy reading!
Chapter Five

The Little Guy

Chapter Five:

Cloud hummed along to a wicked guitar riff as he squeegeed another window and wiped the liquid residue off the bottom of the frame with a rag. He’d finally gotten around to buying some songs for his PHS so he could have something to listen to at work. Since there was no one to see him with music on the weekends or demand he fix something, he didn’t consider it that unprofessional. Shinra ran by skeleton crew on days like these: Security Guards and Janitors Only club, sorry.

Scrubbing at a particularly stubborn bit of brown, he tried to not think about what substance had latched onto the window and hardened into a smear of-

Right. Not thinking about it.

Grabbing a pen off a nearby desk, he used the clip as a scraper and got the worst of it off before putting it back in its mooing coffee mug home.

Served them right for throwing shit at their windows. Bloody monkeys.

Finishing up with that window, he frowned when the window reflected a moving figure behind him. Spinning around in alarm, he stared and then frowned at the sight of Sephiroth…

Raiding the coffee?

Pulling out his earbuds, he dropped his squeegee in the bucket. “Hey General! What are you looking for?”

Sephiroth glanced at him before returning to the cupboards he was looking through. “Coffee.”

“What, have you run out?”

The General gave up his search with a mighty scowl. “Yes.” He turned to Cloud with an inscrutable expression on his face. “Why do all the other offices have different coffee?”

Cloud blinked. “Because they all think it tastes like charcoaled rat intestines, most likely.” To his surprise, the man raised his hand to his face and pressed onto his closed eyes with a thumb and forefinger. The blond frowned. He must be exhausted. “Why are you here on a weekend, anyway?”

Tired green eyes looked at him. “Project for the President.”

“Ah, right. I remember you mentioning that last time. And you’ve run out of coffee, hm… Don’t they have a surplus of those exact kinds of supplies somewhere in this building?”

“I already used the last box.”

Holy caffeine… how much coffee had Sephiroth been drinking? He must be pissing like a race
“And I take it they don’t get a shipment or something until Monday?”

“That is correct.”

Cloud grimaced. “And why can’t you drink the coffee that everyone else drinks?”

“It isn’t strong enough to have an effect on my metabolism.”

Oh right. Mako enhancement. Cloud frowned in thought, eyeing the absolutely miserable General. Well, as miserable as Sephiroth was capable of looking. The blond hadn’t had any problems with the coffee he usually bought, when he was enhanced.

His eyes widened in realization. The coffee he used to buy was a special import from Wutai mixed with a particularly flavourful bean he’d found when going through Cosmo Canyon. Both were known for their high caffeine content. He scratched his chin, frowning in thought. Was it even possible to get them in Midgar?

“I… may have a solution. But I’m not sure I can get the coffee in Midgar. I’d have to look around some.”

Green eyes snapped to him and stared for a long moment. “Could you? I would compensate you.”

Cloud hummed thoughtfully to himself. “Well, I don’t mind looking per se,” he’d in fact been procrastinating doing it himself because he didn’t want to waste five hours in the slums, “but technically I’m at work right now and the imports I’m thinking of aren’t exactly cheap. If you talked to my boss, and front the cash to buy it… I could try to find it for you.”

The General nodded and pulled out his wallet, fishing out a large wad of bills. “What is the name of your superior?”

“Well… Frank trained me, but I don’t actually think he’s the boss custodian, to be honest.” While it was pretty bad of him to think, Frank didn’t seem educated enough to be anyone’s superior.

Sephiroth looked into space for a moment. “Niel O’really. I will contact him and inform him that I have sent you on an errand during your shift. If he gives you any trouble, tell him to contact me.”

Cloud nodded, a little dazed as Sephiroth walked towards him and held out the wad of gil. “Do you own a vehicle?”

“Uh, no. I know how to drive a motorcycle, but technically I don’t have a license. I was planning on taking the train.”

Sephiroth frowned. “That will add a lot of time to your trip. You may take my motorcycle. However, if you crash it, I will have to eviscerate you. Come.”

Cloud’s eyes widened in shock as he left his bucket and squeegee and followed the billowing, silver hair. The General was going to lend him his bike? He must be desperate. Cloud wouldn’t let anyone touch Fenrir if his life depended on it.

They took the elevator down to the basement level and Sephiroth led him through a maze of expensive-looking vehicles before they finally arrived upon a gorgeous, silver and black bike that nearly gave Cloud a hard-on just looking at it.

He shivered. “Man. I would love to get my hands on that engine,” he murmured to himself, running a hand over the beautiful beast admiringly.
The General looked pleased, though still tired. “Here is the key. Ignition,” he pointed, “typical set up for clutch and hand break. Emergency foot break is here, and under no circumstances press the green button. The acceleration would be difficult for even SOLDIERs to handle. The key code for the garage door in and out is 7-4-6-2. Don’t get pulled over by the police.”

Cloud grinned. No way the police would be able to catch him.

Sephiroth opened a compartment below the back part of the seat and pulled out a helmet. When Cloud made a face, green eyes narrowed. “You will wear it.”

The blond sighed. “Well, when you say it like that it’s hard to say no,” he muttered, taking the helmet and putting it on.

Sephiroth handed over the key. “Don’t make me regret this. The last time I leant her to Zack, she came back scratched.”

“He what? I’m definitely dying all his underwear pink for that, damaging a beaut’ like this.” He was surprised Zack was alive. If he’d done that to Fenrir, he would have at least lost an arm.

Swinging himself onto the bike, he put the key in the ignition and checked he had Sephiroth’s money before starting her up. Grinning at the sound of the engine, he walked it backwards and admired the handling. It was well balanced. With the amount of working out he’d been doing, it was easy enough to control her. Not as easy as would have been enhanced, but he shouldn’t have any problems.

“See you soon, hopefully.”

“Wait. In case something happens, you should take my PHS number.”

Cloud blinked before taking it out of his pocket and handing it over. The General pulled out his own PHS and input numbers into both of them. He’d probably taken Cloud’s number as well, in case the blond ran off with his bike or something stupid.

“Drive carefully.”

Cloud grinned, slipping the PHS back into his pocket. “I always drive carefully.” Without another word, he input the code for the doors and floored the throttle. Ducking his head, he cleared the garage door before it had even opened all the way.

Damn it felt good to be on a bike again. Turning out onto the driveway, he frowned at the sight of a security checkpoint. Well, that made sense. Wasn’t any less annoying, though.

“ID please,” the security officer asked, sounding as bored as he looked. Cloud handed it over. The man looked at it dubiously for a moment before shrugging and handing it back, letting him out. Cloud floored the gas and slipped onto the road that he knew would lead to the freeway. Midgar had an area of eclectic shops in Sector 4 that he knew was worth looking at before he tried to go into the slums. Under the Plate wasn’t exactly known for its infrastructure, after all.

The drive only took ten minutes, thankfully, with liberal use of the freeways and weaving through slow-moving traffic. While he wasn’t going fast enough to get a police car after him, he was still going over the speed limit. Taking an exit into a part of town that downgraded to single-lane traffic and numerous, cramped buildings, he kept his eye out for a spices or exotic goods store.

Finally catching sight of one, he parked out front in a not entirely-legal spot just so he could keep
his eye on the bike. The last thing he needed was some idiot hotwiring The General’s bike and making off with it.

Slipping into the smelly store, he made his way straight for the elderly Wutaian lady behind the counter. “I’m looking for two brands of coffee. Hama and Grenada from Cosmo Canyon,” he said in fluent Wutaian.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, assessing him with a new, sharp glint in her eye. “Strong drink will keep you short, little chakuta.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow at what was considered an affectionate insult in the subtleties of Wutaian. It insulted by calling you a foreigner, someone who no matter what they imitated, could never be Wutaian, while also accepting that you had recognized Wutai as worthy of respect and proper learning. The language had many such subtleties that you couldn’t pick up unless you had actually immersed yourself in the culture. “It is not for myself, it is a gift for a friend.” This particular definition of friend could also mean ‘rival.’

She nodded. “Hama is not very common. Few of the homeland will drink it for its strong, unique flavour. You will have to go below Plate to see Shan-tu. I do however have Grenada. It is well liked among the high swill of Midgar.” It took Cloud a moment to realize that the direct translation of ‘high swill’ actually meant the upper class of society.

“I thank you for your assistance,” Cloud said, giving a traditional bow with his right hand fisted and the left open. She gave him another surprised look before executing the traditional shop-keeper to customer version of the bow. “I will take your largest container.”

She nodded and slipped into the back. Cloud glanced out the window to see the bike was still in place and undamaged. She came back a moment later with a large tin and a handful of small bags. “How many?” she asked, holding up the bags.

Cloud thought about how much coffee Sephiroth seemed to consume. “Five.”

Her eyes widened before she nodded and started filling them without a word. It took a good five minutes to shovel the bags full, and by the time she was done the tin was almost empty.

“Could you please tie them wukan?” he asked. It was a style of arranging large packages with twine to carry on your back short distances, a common method of transporting shopping goods in Wutai if you had large amounts that couldn’t be easily stored in a few hand baskets and you didn’t happen to have a back basket.

She nodded and tied them efficiently together in less than a minute. Cloud slipped the stacked packages onto his back. “How much?”

“40 gil.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow and handed over the money. He had no doubt that if he hadn’t spoken to her in Wutaian it would have been double that.

She bowed. “Thank you for your business,” she said, giving the traditional Wutai thanks.

Cloud returned her bow. “Where may I find Shan-tu for some hama?”

“Sector five below Plate. Go down the main street, turn left at the Green Dragon, turn right at a golden star. He hangs blue lanterns outside his door.”
The blond thanked her and left. Seeing a couple shady characters standing to the side eyeing his bike, he shot them a glare before climbing on and turning the ignition. Revving the engine, he shot out of there at speeds that probably would have gotten him in trouble with the police. However, the last thing he wanted was a few gang members following him to ‘relieve’ him of his machine.

He got back on the freeway to take the main entrance into the Sector 5 slums. He had to pay a fee at the gate to go down, but he knew it was far cheaper than what he would have to pay to get out. Making his way down the main road, he was suddenly glad that Sephiroth’s bike made so much noise as the pedestrians swiftly moved out of his way. Following the directions the elder Wutaian lady had given him, he was led into a narrower street system made almost entirely out of Wutaian shops. Stopping in front of the blue lanterns, he parked the bike and went inside the store.

His eyebrows rose at the sight of a collection of Wutaian blades as well as other miscellaneous equipment. It seemed odd that hama would be sold here.

Though, it was considered that only the warriors with the strongest stomachs and taste buds endured hama.

A short, elderly Wutaian man came out from behind a traditional cloth painted with a god of good business fortune. “How can help?” he grumbled, eyeing Cloud up and down.

The blond took off his helmet upon seeing a green, decorated belt wrapped around his waist. He bowed the bow of lesser student to a master. “Greetings master warrior, I have come in search of hama.”

Two furrowed eyebrows rose in surprise, creating even more wrinkles on an old face. “You? Hama? It would melt your weak white stomach upon a sip. What need have you of hama?”

Cloud kept his face neutral. The old geezer was being rather disrespectful, but considering how racist Wutaians could be, at least he hadn’t beaten the blond out of his shop with a broom. “It is for a warrior rival. A gift.”

Gifts were viewed very highly in Wutaian culture, amongst friends and even more highly amongst enemies. There was a whole sub language of insults or respect that could be implied through a choice of gift.

“Ah. Gift.” Without another word, he went into the back and returned with a small bag of hama.

Cloud wondered how much he could push his luck. “I will take ten.”

Two eyebrows rose before the elder grinned roguishly and left. When he came back, it was with a large bamboo barrel. “100 gil.”

Cloud handed over the money, since he needed to ingratiating himself to the elder man before he could start developing a business relationship and haggle the price lower. It was completely different than haggling with other Midgar business owners. If you were looking for a temporary customer-business owner relationship, it wasn’t against the rules to haggle, but if you wanted long term deals and more positive dealings, you had to be patient in cultivating a ‘friendship’ of sorts.

Besides, it wasn’t his money.

Without a word, the old man spun him around and started tying it to his back along with the other coffee packages. After he was done, Cloud gave a respectful bow and left, knowing he was being
insulted by how shallow the returning bow was, but choosing not to care.

When he left the entrance, his eyes narrowed at the sight of three men pawing at Sephiroth’s bike and obviously trying to hotwire it.

“EH! Dirty thieves of a gutter whore! You insult your father’s honour!” Cloud barked angrily, startling the three adolescent men enough that one of them actually tripped taking a step back and fell over.

The guy who had been interrupted trying to get the appropriate panel off the bike glared at him.

“Eh? The white trash can speak! Well this bike is ours now, pale spawn of a horse and a rat. Unless you want to fight for it?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow as the punk pulled out a deadly looking dagger. “Fight? You would spend more time in the dirt than on your feet.”

The guy who had been circling around him on the left came at him with a shout. Cloud stepped out of the way and pushed him with an open hand, using his momentum against him. Stepping towards the bike, he deposited the helmet on the handle bars and spun away from the slash of the dagger, taking the fight away from the bike and farther into the street. Various shop owners and customers stood on the sidelines, watching the fight with blank expressions. Cloud knew that they would never interfere on behalf of a foreigner and paid them little mind.

Using the skills learned from Wutaian masters during his training holiday with Yuffie, he danced around his enemies using his open hands and arms to direct their own force and momentum against them. Aikido had been the only form the Wutaian masters had been willing to teach him upon witnessing the physical force he could use against his opponents during training. Since they didn’t want any accidental deaths, they had picked a style that focused on balance, recovery, and manipulation of your enemy.

Cloud had to admit he enjoyed the amount of throws the styles utilized, sending the street punks flying every time they attacked with hip throws, head throws… The guy that had tried to sneak up on him was the first to go down, as he had obviously little real training. He couldn’t even fall properly, which was deadly in Aikido since each throw depended on the impact of the thrown body to do the most damage.

Catching a wrist outstretched to stab him in the stomach, Cloud stepped out of the way, pulling the arm at the same time he caught the side of the boy’s neck with his hand and spun him around in a head throw that had him rolling five feet into the side of a building. The blade spun away.

Seeing the leader go down and not get back up, the only guy left standing grimaced and backed away.

Cloud took his chance. “The next time you gutter thieves touch what is mine, I will break your hands instead of toss you around.” The version of ‘toss you around’ he used was exactly the same way masters talked about beating the shit out of their students, so it was insulting on more than one level.

Walking over to his bike, he checked that his packages were still undamaged and attached. Catching sight of the master he had bought the hama from, he was surprised to receive a grudgingly respectful nod. Returning it, he slipped his helmet on and tied it, giving the bike a cursory check for damage.
Thankfully, nothing was scratched. They had probably been planning to sell it rather than use it as a ride. Damaged goods didn’t get you as much money, after all.

Slipping the key into the ignition, he took off with thorough abuse of the throttle.

There was a new security guard at the gate when he drove up. Upon seeing his janitor ID and the bike he was riding, he gave Cloud a hard enough time that the blond ended up just calling Sephiroth on his PHS.

Ring. “Why the hell would I return to Shinra – click – if I had stolen The General’s fucking bike, you imbecile?” Speaking into the receiver, he said, “General, could you please tell this security guard he is an imbecile and to let me through the gate already with your damned coffee?” Without waiting for a response, he held the PHS out to the guard. “Here. He wants to talk to you.”

The guard now had a wary expression on his face as he took the device and held it to his ear. “Hello?”

After a few moments, his face had turned so pale it was almost gray. With a shaky “Y-yes, sir, General, sir,” he handed back the PHS and the blond’s ID before opening the gate. “You’re clear, Mr. Strife, sir.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow at the ‘sir’ and shrugged it off as a result of being subjected to Sephiroth in a bad, coffee-deprived mood. “Thanks.” Shoving the ID and PHS in his pocket, he gunned the throttle and made his way towards the garage. Punching in the code from muscle memory, he slid the bike sideways in his irritation at another delay and slid under the barely-open garage door. Manoeuvring the bike upright again, he drove it to its parking spot and kicked out the bike stand. Pulling off the helmet, he put it in the seat-compartment Sephiroth had removed it from and took the keys out of the ignition. He slipped them in his pocket as he headed towards the elevator doors.

Only to stare futilely at the keycard reader for the executive elevator that required an executive’s keycard. Something he did not possess.

But of course Sephiroth’s ride was parked in a parking lot specially for the upper crust of Shinra. How could Cloud expect any less? He was seriously tempted to just hack the keycard reader or start climbing through the ventilation system.

Thankfully, the doors swung open a moment later and Cloud opened his mouth to thank his silver-haired saviour.

Only, it wasn’t Sephiroth at all.

The redhead blinked. “Yo. Whachu doin’ in here, blondie?”

Cloud stared at the familiar red hair and tattooed cheeks. “I was sent on an errand for the desperately coffee-deprived,” he said, walking into the elevator like he did this every day.

The Turk frowned and hit the ‘doors open’ button. “Really. And who sent you on this errand?”

Cloud held up Sephiroth’s bike keys. “The General.”

Now the redhead looked even more dubious. “Oh really.” He hit the ‘doors closed’ button. “Well, then I’m sure you won’t mind me escorting you to the General, then.”
The blond shrugged. “Knock yourself out.” Hitting the button labelled ‘20’, he tried to lean against the wall before realizing that he still had a bunch of packages on his back. Damnit. Reno had thrown him.

They stood in awkward silence for the minute it took the elevator to reach the 20th floor. After that, they left and made their way to the second executive’s elevator. Reno swiped his card to get them into that one, holding out an arm all gentleman-like to Cloud.

The blond ignored the subtle insult and stepped inside. He had to face it. A Shinra custodian outfit was about the least intimidating piece of clothing on the Planet.

When they reached Sephiroth’s floor, the blond walked past the leather furniture peaked his head in the General’s office. He frowned in irritation when he saw that the General wasn’t even there. Pulling out his PHS, he hit redial and put the speaker to his ear.

“Sephiroth, where the hell are you? Do you want your damned coffee or not? I’m in your office and you’re not here. There’s a Turk here who thinks I’m a terrorist, so get your ass up here already.”

When the line was silent, Cloud ran what he’d said through his mind again and nearly swore out loud. Shit. He was totally off his game.

Gritting his teeth, he stubbornly muscled on. “Look, if you’re worried about your bike, she’s fine. Not a scratch. Handled smooth as a hooker from the Gold Saucer.”

Hearing a choked sound, his eyes inexorably swivelled to Reno, who was now watching him with a dropped jaw and eyes so wide there was a ring of white around the iris.

More silence. “Hello? Are you there or did the line drop?”

“*I’m here.*”

“And where in the building are you?”

“*I’m currently getting back on the elevator.*”

“Ah. We must have missed you on the 20th floor.”

“It appears so.”

“Alright then. I guess I’ll see you in a few.” He hung up and pocketed his phone, making his way over to the coffee machine. Might as well get shit organized while they waited. Expertly removing the tightly attached parcels, he placed them on the counter unit and unwrapped the rest of the twine. Opening all the cupboards, he tried to find a suitable container to put the *hama* in. The bamboo wouldn’t be a reliable seal once he opened it, and the last thing anyone needed was stale coffee.

Catching sight of a large, tall square tin, he pulled it out and opened it. The bottom was covered in small chocolates wrapped in silvery foil.

“Ooh, chocolate,” Reno said, apparently having decided to hover over the blond’s shoulder and watch him for suspicious activity. His hand reached in to grab some.

Cloud slapped his wrist. “Don’t touch, unless you want to lose a limb.”
"What? No one’ll notice."

"The last time Zack stole from The Stash he nearly wound up in traction for a week."

The Turk cleared his throat and wisely withdrew. "Must be some crazy secretary."

Cloud didn’t disabuse him of his assumption that it was the psychotic secretary.

Dumping the chocolates into a basket filled with cutlery, he opened the bamboo barrel and dumped its contents into the metal tin. It filled almost all the way, a good fit over all. Thankfully, the Grenada was in convenient paper bags that could be opened and closed with the help of a long piece of metal sheathed in plastic.

At that moment, the elevator opened and the General stepped out.

"Turk," Cloud heard Sephiroth greet Reno. The blond kept his attention on filling a new filter with two thirds Grenada and one third hama, the way he usually mixed it.

"General. I take it ya know this kid?"

Cloud’s eyes narrowed as he slid the filter-holder into the coffee machine.

"Indeed."

"Alright then. I’ll… leave ya to it." From the way Reno said it, he was obviously implying something sexual was going on between them. Sephiroth said nothing, either not catching it or not caring.

Cloud put the rinsed coffee pot in its place and pressed the ‘brew’ button. Reaching into his pocket as he turned around, he pulled out the keys and tossed them at Sephiroth.

The General caught them with ease and a raised eyebrow. "Any problems?"

The blond shrugged. If three wannabe Wutaians could be considered a problem. "Nothing I couldn’t handle." Reaching in his other pocket, he pulled out the remainder of the money, a measly 60 gil, and handed it over as well.

Sephroth raised an eyebrow.

Cloud gestured to the tin and the paper packages. "This is hama, a Wutaian coffee that can melt the lining of your stomach if you’re not careful," he said, putting the lid on the tin and sliding it into the cupboard. "This first batch cost 100 gil, but the next time I visit him I’ll be able to get a better deal, now that he knows my face." And knows a bit more than that. Picking up the paper bag, he said, "This is Grenada. It’s a coffee grown near Cosmo Canyon. It has a really strong, almost repugnant flavour if you’re not used to it or it’s not your taste. I mix a filter two thirds Grenada and one third hama. This is a personal taste of mine, and you can adjust the balance however you like." He put the paper packages next to the tin in the cupboard.

"Why do you mix them?"

Cloud stood up from his crouch and closed all the cupboards. "Hama is extremely bitter and harsh on the taste buds, as well as your stomach. Its sheer caffeine content has been known to give small animals cardiac arrest if consumed in large quantities." He turned around and leaned against the counter, listening to the coffee machine do its thing as he met Sephiroth’s curious, green gaze.

"When you mix it with Grenada, which is also high in caffeine content, the bitter taste is softened
by rich flavour that has a much more pleasant aftertaste than hama. Personally, I find the combination much more appealing than the separate flavours.”

The General nodded thoughtfully and watched the coffee machine with hungry eyes. Cloud suppressed an amused twitch of his lips and turned his attention to finding some clean mugs. Pulling two out, he opened the fridge and pulled out the cream.

“What are you doing?” Sephiroth demanded, catching his wrist before he could pour cream into one of the mugs.

Cloud blinked and looked up at the General. “Look. I know what I’m doing. Just trust me. You won’t need nearly as much cream as you normally do, and if you don’t like the way I prepare it, then you can just add more. No harm, no foul. Okay?”

Green eyes stared at him for a long, assessing moment before the leather-sheathed hand released his wrist and the large man took a step back. Smiling slightly at the acceptance, he returned his attention to the mugs and poured two centimetres of cream into Sephiroth’s mug instead of the usual third of the cup. Grabbing the sugar bowl, he put three teaspoons of sugar into Sephiroth’s, and two into his own.

The coffee was just dripping now, so Cloud pulled out the coffee pot and poured it into each cup, stirring the non-cream one first, then the cream. Picking up Sephiroth’s hot cup by the side, he held it out the General handle-first.

Leather fingers snagged the cup out of his hand before it became too hot, and Cloud picked up his own mug and took a sip, sighing happily at the heavenly flavour. Drinking some more, he opened his eyes and raised an eyebrow at the sight of Sephiroth staring down at the cup with a dubious expression before he took a sip.

And another sip.

Blew on it, took a larger mouthful.

Cloud looked down at his own coffee, which was now half empty. It had tasted just the way he remembered. He looked up expectantly. “Well?”

The General gave him an amused look and smiled slightly. It was the smallest twitch of the corner of his mouth, but in Sephiroth-expressions it totally counted as a smile. “It’s certainly different.”

The blond rolled his eyes and stalked off with his cup. “Whatever. I’m going to go back to my squeegee, then. At least it appreciates my fine tastes and hard work.”

Before he could step away, though, Sephiroth grabbed him by the arm. Looking down at the offending limb, he frowned. “Uh…” He looked up at green eyes. “What?”

The General took another drink. “It’s good.”

Cloud stared at him. “Aaand?”

“I appreciate your fine tastes and hard work?”

The blond sighed. “You know, in the interests of your sex life, you should really ask Zack to coach you on the art of the compliment, because there’s a huge hole in your social education. Fail, man. Just, fail.” Irritated, he pulled his hand out of Sephiroth’s grasp and made his way over to the elevator. You insult the coffee, you insult his tastes, you insult Cloud.
Unfortunately, it appeared that the elevator was at the bottom of it’s rope, which was all Reno’s fault, thank you very much, so he was forced to stand there and feel awkward instead of having the desired, dramatic exit.

And then Sephiroth had to go, grab him by the shoulder, and spin him around with a weird expression on his face. “Why are you angry?”

Cloud schooled his features into one of nonchalance. “I’m not angry.” No, anger didn’t even begin to cover the range of moods he was feeling. And it didn’t help that the motor bike riding and fight had raised his adrenaline and testosterone levels one bit.

“Then why are your pupils dilated and your heart rate accelerated, if you are not prepared for a fight?”

Cloud scowled. “There’s more than one cause of pupil dilation and increased heart rate,” he pointed out irritably.

Sephiroth was very suddenly in his space, nose only an inch away from his own and green eyes drilling into him. “Desire then?” he asked in a low tone.

The blond nearly went into cardiac arrest, eyes widening in shock. “What?!”

The larger man’s head tilted to the side, cascading hair sending a whiff of intoxicating smells into Cloud’s poor, unprepared nose. “Desire. It is another source of dilated pupils and accelerated heart rate.”

Damn the man for sounding as though he were relaying something from a text book. “Really? Well I’m sure there’s something else,” he argued, mind not exactly following his own logic at that moment.

The green eyed man had the gall to smirk slightly. “No. You do not fear me, so it is desire, or anger. So which is it… Cloud?”

The word Cloud echoed over and over again in the blond’s mind, a parody of a caress that a psychotic madman had used to taunt him years and years ago, triggering the memory oh the memory of that moment – “Good to see you… Cloud.” – and the pain – the sword sank into his shoulder with a smirk of sick pleasure – and the fear-

Cloud shoved Sephiroth away from him, dropping the coffee onto the beige carpet without a care as he needed to get away-

Sephiroth fell back, the same surprised expression on his face as when Cloud had killed him, again and again. Stepping backwards and away he fell into the opened elevator and slammed the close button with his fist. It closed before Sephiroth recovered and came after him.

Hitting a random number to get him out – need to get out – he pushed himself up against the corner of the elevator and buried his face in his knees, fingers sunk into his hair as he took deep, calming breaths, reminding himself that Sephiroth wasn’t crazy – yet – and he was just a custodian, no one Sephiroth would want to kill – yet – and Zack was still alive, and…

And he’d totally just freaked out in front of the General for no reason that anyone who wasn’t a time traveling saviour of the Planet would know.
This fic is going to be the death of me. It is currently 0512, and I am tired.

For those who didn’t notice, chapter four is now a conjoined chapter of all Seph POVs written so far. So if you’ve already read the coffee machine bit, just skip over it.

For some reason I can’t comprehend, this is the fifth night in a row I’ve updated this story. Or is that morning, since technically only chapter 3 was updated before 12 am… Uh, too much thinking. Hope you all enjoyed the chapter. It was fun to write. Everything Wutaian was fun to make up, too, so don’t believe a word of bullshit that is pouring out of my fingers. :P

Happy reading, yo
Chapter 6

The Little Guy

Cloud closed the door quietly and slipped out of his shoes, shuffling farther into the living room. Thankfully, it appeared his flatmates were either out having fun or being quiet in their rooms. Making his way into the kitchen, he opened a cupboard and pulled out the hard liquor Len stored in there for when he had parties on Friday nights. Shuffling over to fridge, he grabbed a bottle of juice and some leftover dinner before snagging a glass and a fork and going to his room to lock himself in.

The room was bare. Safe. Familiar and yet not. Walking to the bed, he put the items in his hands down and served himself a drink. He’d replace it for Len later, if the man even noticed the tiny dent in his stash.

Tossing it back like a shot, he poured himself another and stared contemplatively at the red liquid. He’d never been able to actually get drunk as a SOLDIER. Or rather, since he hadn’t been a SOLDIER, as one of Hojo’s enhanced playthings. Taking a gulp and ignoring the cloying taste of the alcohol, he reached under his bed and pulled out the sword he had spent so much time restoring.

It truly was a remarkable blade. Light weight and strong from what he could see, since he hadn’t tested it in battle yet. A good sword for any swordsman.

And it didn’t make him feel any safer anymore. The weight of the Fusion swords on his back had always made him feel comfortable and confident even in the face of hopeless adversity, and now that feeling was nothing more than a useless delusion of a memory that might as well have never happened.

Throwing back the rest of the drink, he poured himself another, noting absently that his stomach and throat were beginning to get that burning sensation from the alcohol. It was different enough from the burn of mako that it didn’t alarm him, but it still brought back flashes of memories that he’d rather stay buried.

Sitting on the bed leaning against the headboard, he pulled the container of spaghetti that no one had wanted to finish towards him. If he was going to puke at the end of this, it might as well be something that wouldn’t be a waste. Chewing a couple bites of the cardboard meal, he sipped at his drink and had a sudden, visceral urge to see Vincent again. Each of them escaping the haunting memory of a woman they had failed to protect.

And he didn’t even have that anymore.

He heard a knock at the front door and ignored it. If one of the guys were here, they’d get it. Cloud didn’t want to talk to anybody. Taking another gulp of his drink, he put the bad spaghetti on the floor before he knocked it off the bed and swung the sword around in a lazy arc. Seeing his lack of
hand coordination, he put it back in its hiding place before something stupid happened.

Still had enough sense left for that, at least. He drained the drink and slammed the glass down onto the table. The annoying knocking had stopped.

He missed Seventh Heaven.

Changing out of his uniform, he slipped into a pair of worn jeans that were getting a little too tight to keep wearing. He needed to go shopping again. Pulling on a sleeveless shirt, he frowned at the suddenly alien clothes. Right. He couldn’t wear the sleeveless turtleneck sweater of SOLDIER. He wasn’t… him anymore. Grunting in frustration, he pulled out his jacket and slipped it on.

Time to do a little forgetting.

The bar Cloud ended up wandering into was similar to Seventh Heaven from an aesthetic standpoint, but completely different in every other way. Instead of being relatively quiet and low-key, music pounded through speakers all around the room and bodies young and older grinded in an ocean of sweat and sex. The blond pushed his way along the side of the crowd in order to get to the bar.

“What can I get you?” the young bartender asked with a friendly smile.

Cloud, who knew he looked younger than the drinking age, frowned slightly. He’d wound up going into this bar because they didn’t ask for ID, but he was still slightly surprised to be served. “I don’t particularly care,” he said, putting five gil on the counter and taking a seat.

The bartender nodded. “Did you want hard alcohol straight or some trimmings with it?”

“As long as it doesn’t taste like total ass, I don’t care.”

Bobby-bartender wandered a little farther down the bar and started mixing something. Cloud used this time to examine the counter top. While drink-stained and a little wet, it thankfully wasn’t sticky.

“Fancy seeing you here,” a voice purred into his ear.

Cloud swivelled his head and came face to face with a certain redhead that had no business being there. “You followin’ me or somethin’?” he drawled sarcastically.

Reno gave him his most innocent look. “What? Why would I do that?”

Snorting, the blond took the drink the bartender placed in front of him and swigged it. Hm. Tasted better than what he’d been having earlier that night. “Because you’re a Turk, or whatever,” he said, hamming up his slur to appear more drunk than he was.

The redhead laughed and took the seat next to him, flagging down the bartender. “Can I get a scotch, please?”

Bobby-bartender nodded and took the five gil Reno put on the counter.

“Reno.”

Cloud frowned and looked away from his drink. “Huh?”
“My name. It’s Reno. What about you, blondie?”

Why was Reno telling him his name? Oh right. Because they technically didn’t know each other. How annoying. “Well, my name certainly isn’t Reno,” he answered with a mocking smile. “And shouldn’t you already know, being the… uh… super mega spy or whatever that y’are? I mean, douche gets in elevator with bags on ‘is back and keys fer a motorbike. Ver’ suspicious material, that.” He nodded sagely to himself and took another sip from his drink.

The Turk laughed next to him. “You know…” He leaned in closer, putting his mouth next to Cloud’s ear. “Your cute accent gets pretty thick when you’re drunk.”

The blond scowled. “Wazat supposed t’ be a come on? Cuz that’d be weird, comin’ fr’m you.”

Reno chuckled in his ear. “Why’s that?”

“Cuz yer…”

“…you.”

“But you don’t even know me, blondie.”

Cloud snorted. Right. He didn’t know the redhead at aaall. “Yer a Turk. That’s all there’s t’ know.” And it was true. When it came down to it at the end of the day, Turk wasn’t something that you just turned off. It was a philosophy. A state of being for the crazy, elite group. It allowed them to do things like drop a sector plate and kill countless people. Or hunt a man in the dark and put a bullet in his forehead.

“You seem to know a lot about Turks to be so judgemental.”

The blond took another sip, waving a hand dismissively. “People hear things. I’m just not so stupid I can’ recognize there be a grain a’ truth in every ‘just sayin’s.”

“Ah, a smart blondie. That’s hot.”

Cloud rolled his eyes and took another drink. “Yer not gonna give up, are ye?”

Reno just grinned.

“Fine.” At least he knew this one enough to know there was probably more to this than just attraction. Better than falling into bed with someone who wanted to tie him up and cut on him. With his luck, that’d be what he’d find. Cloud put his half-finished drink on the counter and raised an eyebrow at Reno’s startled look. “Wha’, all talk no action?” he asked belligerently.

The Turk tossed back the rest of his scotch with a grin and grabbed Cloud’s arm, pulling him out of there. They took the train to a relatively nice neighbourhood in sector 2, to Cloud’s surprise. During the ride, Reno kept him distracted with his hands and mouth, much to the embarrassed anger of a mother who moved to another car with her little girl.

When they finally reached Reno’s apartment, Cloud shoved the grinning man into the room and pinned him against the wall, just barely avoiding the coat rack. As he started biting at the Turk’s neck, he frowned, his instincts telling him that someone was watching them. Pulling away, he looked farther into the room and frowned at the sight of a shadowy figure sitting in one of Reno’s armchairs. “Were you expectin’ comp’ny?” he asked warily, taking a step back to give them both more room.

The redhead tensed before drawing his gun in record time and aiming it at the intruder Cloud was looking at. “Blondie. Get the lights.”
Cloud found the light switch easily enough and flicked them on with a frown. Who would be paying a Turk a late night visit?

“Hello Reno.”

The tension in the room skyrocketed, and Cloud frowned as he examined their intruder. That wasn’t Tseng.

“Pickard. What the fuck are you doing here?”

A big man with brass knuckles came out of the kitchen, while another guy with a gun came out from farther into the living room. The man who sat at the chair well within sight of the front door smiled. “Did you think I wouldn’t find you, Reno? Once a street rat, always a street rat, no matter the Turk suits and new money.” His beady eyes turned to Cloud. “Who’s your blond friend?”

Cloud wished he hadn’t drank so much. He was still steady on his feet due to his training in combat, but things were computing a little slow for him at the moment. Why was this guy in Reno’s apartment, exactly?

“He ain’t got nothin’ to do with it. Hooker. Don’t know shit, won’t say shit, so let ‘im leave.” Reno’s gutter tongue was getting thicker with his agitation.

Pickard smiled. “Anyone who leaves this apartment before I do will be shot in the street, Reno. It’s too late for that. Should have thought more carefully about who you drag into things. Your choices have… consequences.”

Cloud resisted the urge to cuss out loud a slew of language that would make Cid proud. All he’d wanted was a good fuck, and instead he’d apparently found himself between Reno and a hard place – the latter of which was probably a Midgar crime lord. Just his luck. And as a ‘witness’ of this whole shit storm…

“You, the blond. Come here,” Pickard ordered, flicking his fingers in a ‘come hither’ gesture. When Cloud hesitated, his eyes narrowed. “Or would you rather a bullet between your eyes?”

Thug on the left cocked his gun. Cloud frowned at the over dramatic effect even as he started slowly walking closer. The idiot hadn’t had his gun loaded already? Damnit. They totally could have taken him. And if Cloud had been enhanced, this entire chocobo show would have been over in minutes.

He’d certainly landed himself in a precarious position, with a gun on his left and a dangerous man who probably had more weapons concealed on his own person. After all, no one relied solely on a bodyguard. And in addition to that, there was apparently a sniper hidden somewhere outside, probably on a nearby rooftop.

“Give me your PHS, hooker.”

Cloud scowled and pulled it out of his pocket, slowly, gaze flickering between Gun and Pickard. Brass knuckles just stood silently to his right. Reno, behind him, shifted a bit. As he handed over his PHS, he wondered if the redhead felt guilty at all, or would he care if a blond janitor was the unfortunate victim of a crime boss.

Pickard flipped it open and looked through it, his eyebrows rising in surprise at something he found. “You have General Sephiroth’s phone number?” he asked dubiously, looking back and forth between the blond and the PHS in his hand.
Cloud shrugged. “Man has taste.”

The man smirked. “Would he care if you died? I’ve always wanted to find a way to get the General in my pocket.”

He snorted, genuinely amused that the man believed he could ever put Sephiroth under pressure. “General Sephiroth? Care about a hooker? Somehow I doubt that.”

“This is a pretty nice PHS for a lowly hooker.”

“What can I say, I’m high class.”

“If you were, I would know you.”

Oh, well there was a nice hole in his ‘hooker’ identity. Cloud listened as Grunt Gun took a step closer and put a barrel to his head. Watching Pickard instead of his grunt, he waited for the cue to shoot before he moved, stepping to his left and under the shot, for once glad that his height allowed him to so easily slip inside the enemy’s guard. Dark eyes widened as they met his own. Taking a hold of the man’s gun arm, he twisted his body and pulled, the centrifugal force yanking the arm out of its socket with a loud pop and a sharp yell.

“You little fucker!”

Cloud caught the echo of two gun shots even as he stepped into the man’s guard with a solid elbow to the liver. Instead of going down like Cloud expected, the grunt wrapped his left arm around the blond’s neck and choked him. Grabbing onto the arm for leverage, he lowered his centre of gravity to do a hip throw. Unfortunately the much bigger man just lifted him higher off the ground and tightened his hold.

Cloud reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his knife. Stabbing again and again, ignoring the way he couldn’t breathe, he continued his assault until the arm released him enough so he could spin around and plant the blade into his heart.

The grunt went down with a gurgle of blood dripping from his lips.

Spinning around, Cloud caught sight of Brass Knuckles beating into Reno in spite of bleeding from multiple gun shot wounds. Checking first to see that Pickard was dead – which he was, with a bullet in his forehead – Cloud picked up the gun that had fallen onto the floor and walked over to Brass Knuckles.

Aiming it at the back of his head, he blew a hole big enough to put a broom handle through.

Pulling Reno out from under the man’s dead weight, he frowned at the way the Turk’s head lolled to one side. “Reno! Do you have a Restore materia in here anywhere?” he demanded, gently tapping the cheek that was less swollen.

Reno groaned, almost unconscious. “Arm’ry. Hit... panel... TV...”

Cloud ran over the huge screen of the TV in the entertainment unit against the wall. Hitting the TV and the wall around it with his clean hand, he finally found the catch that made the whole thing swing open and reveal a long bunker in the wall. His eyebrows rose, impressed. The entire wall must have been fake, added on to hide this arsenal.

Running to the materia lined up against one wall, he ran his hands over them one by one until he found a Restore. Going back out into the living room, he briefly wondered whether his ability with
materia had been affected by his travel through time.

Pushing it stubbornly out of his mind, he grasped the Restore tight in hand and sank his awareness into it. Casting materia without equipping them properly was difficult as well as dangerous, and he needed his full concentration for it.

To his relief, the materia responded, allowing him to cast a low level Cure spell over and over again until most of the damage was gone. It wasn’t anywhere near mastered, but thankfully he had enough power to pull it off.

Unfortunately, Reno had fallen unconscious before he began.

Glancing at the bodies around them, Cloud frowned and pushed away any fear. There was a sniper outside they had to worry about, not to mention Pickard’s gang would probably be there at any minute because of the noise.

Picking up Reno’s arms, he dragged the redhead away from the front door. Seeing that he was leaving a trail of blood, Cloud swore. Suppressing the pain in his body, he slipped his arms under Reno’s limp form and avoided the pool of blood that had become of Grunt Gun. Putting the redhead down on the floor inside, he checked the area for blood or any obvious signs that they had gone behind the TV.

Seeing that they were in the clear, he moved back over to the bunker and pulled the ‘door’ shut with his entire body weight. As soon as it closed, the light turned off.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the Restore materia and channelled some power into it for a bit of light. It was a gross misuse of a materia, but sometimes you just had to do what you could with what you had. Rifling through Reno’s pockets, he suppressed a cheer when he found the Turk’s PHS. His own was still in the hands of Pickard, he realized absently even as he pulled up Reno’s contacts list and clicked Tseng.

The phone rang three times before it picked up.

“Reno. This had better be good.”

Just at that moment, a loud shout echoed outside the apartment and the door was knocked in. Crouching down behind the large steel door, he checked on Reno. Still unconscious. More shouts from the room. Cloud remained silent, as the bunker obviously wasn’t well soundproofed.

Biting his lip to hold back a curse, he hit buttons randomly.

“Reno. This isn’t funny. I-“

A machine gun started going off as one guy let out a furious yell. Cloud looked up with wide eyes, checking the walls of the bunker for holes.

“Shit,” the Turk muttered before barking, “Reno! Where are you?”

This seriously wasn’t working. Taking a deep, calming breath, Cloud hung up the call and started texting furiously.

Home guns sniper – SEND

Thinking quickly, he tried to figure out how many people were in the other room. He could hear voices shouting. He had no idea how much time they had left before they were discovered. With a
sniper on the roofs, they probably knew their prey hadn’t escaped the building at the very least.

*Come quick. In bunker. Reno unconscious. Status not critical – SEND*

Perhaps it was time Cloud started-

More gun shots at the wall. Abruptly, Cloud stopped channelling all power and the room turned dark except for the little rays of light that shone through the holes.

Crawling over to where he knew the materia were, he quickly took stock of what they had while the machine gun had paused.

*Fire, Fire, Lightning, Ice, Restore, Lightning, Shield*- Yes! Cloud grabbed the Shield and snagged the higher levelled Lightning materia. Crawling back over to Reno, he put the Restore in his pocket and held Shield in his left and Lightning in his right as he crouched over the prone body.

The PHS rang. In the silence, it sounded like a death toll.

*“They’re in the walls!”*

Pouring his power into Shield, he grabbed the PHS that had landed on the ground and hit buttons until it stopped making noise. Not that he could hear it over the noise. Flipping it open, he scowled at the sight of *Tseng* on the ID.

*“Reno, I seriously hope you don’t have any explosives in this bunker that are going to blow up with all the stray bullets bouncing around,”* he muttered, pressing the ‘talk’ button.

*“No, the explosives are in my bed.”*

Cloud stared at him. *“Are you-“* he silenced himself when the barrage of bullets cut off. He mouthed to Reno ‘play dead’, and the Turk nodded.

*“Did we get them?”* one guy asked stupidly. Cloud kept his Shield up in spite of the light it gave off. It was easier to maintain it than cast again. Throwing the PHS at Reno, Cloud tightened his grip on the Lightning materia.

*“Are you using those unequipped?”* Reno whispered under the voices of the gunmen, staring at him as he put the PHS to his ear.

Cloud didn’t know what Reno heard, but the relieved expression was fairly obvious to interpret. Holding up a hand with two fingers raised, Cloud nodded his head. Two minutes until the cavalry arrived. *“Sniper?”* he breathed quietly.

Reno grinned and made a ‘slit throat’ gesture. *“Cissnei’s already here. They’re just waiting on Tseng to move in.”*

Cloud nodded and pressed his lips firmly together.

*“How the hell did they get back there?”* one of the guys was asking. Reno sat up, gingerly touching his chest and looking surprised as he ran a hand over his face. Cloud had healed most of the damage, but a few superficial wounds and soreness probably remained. That was what happened with such a low level materia. The Turk should have been spending more time mastering them if he expected them to be useful.

*“I dunno. Look for a button or a lever or something. Maybe there’s one in the wall.”*
Reno smirked and very, very quietly turned something on the door. He mouthed ‘locked’ to Cloud, and the blond nodded, closing his eyes and focusing on keeping the Power flow into the Shield materia nice and strong. It wasn’t as bad now that the globe wasn’t repelling dozens of bullets, but considering he hadn’t been using materia regularly in this body, it was simply amazing he’d lasted that long. Though, he supposed Power came with the soul, not with a physical body like strength did.

That probably had something to do with it.

Reno tapped him. Cloud opened one eye and saw a held up a finger. One more minute to go, and with the grunts outside pressing on wall panels that wouldn’t move because the door was locked, they should be fine.

Should. Cloud had never been one with much life luck, though he’d won plenty of races at the Gold Saucer because of his chocobos. But that was skill, really, not luck.

Clickclickclickclick-

Cloud opened his eyes and frowned, wondering what Reno was typing into his phone.

And then at that moment, a chainsaw motor started. The blond stared at the wall in disbelief before looking at Reno, who had frozen with a panicked look. “Do you own a fucking chainsaw?” Cloud asked so quickly he barely heard himself speak.

The redhead shook his head.

“Well you might want to grab a weapon and get ready to face the music,” he muttered, tightening his grip on the lightning materia and making it crackle in his hand. The redhead put his PHS away and reached for what looked to be a machine gun. Really, what was the Turk doing with a machine gun in his apartment.

Sliding the huge cartridge into place, he kneeled next to Cloud and aimed the machine gun at the chain saw that was currently cutting through the wall.

And then there were a couple shouts of ‘what the fuck?’ before bodies dropped like flies and the chainsaw fell out of the wall and started chewing into something that sounded a little too close to meat.

Reno’s eyes widened as a yellow gas began to seep through the holes in the walls. Cussing under his breath, he grabbed a mask off the wall and fitted it over his face before doing the same for a confused Cloud.

The blond frowned and looked at Reno questioningly.

“Nerve gas! Unless you wanna be paralysed too, keep that thing on.”

The blond nodded and listened to the quiet of the apartment. Hearing quiet footsteps, and a few soft ‘clears’ as the Turks moved in and checked the apartment, he let out a relieved breath. The Shield flickered and died, leaving Cloud to collapse to the side in exhaustion. Reno caught him with a surprised sound and wrapped his left arm around the blond’s shoulders to keep him steady.

“Reno? We’re clear. You can unlock the door now.”

The redhead grinned. “You got it, boss!” Dropping the machine gun to the side, he opened the complex dead-bolt lock and pushed.
The TV-door swung away and revealed a group of five Turks, all wearing face masks, some of whom Cloud recognized and a few he didn’t.

Reno grinned at Tseng and pulled Cloud to his feet, wrapping an arm around his waist to support him. “This is Cloud, everyone. Don’t pick a fight with him unless you want your ass handed to you.”

Tseng looked down at the blood stains on his hands and clothes before raising an eyebrow. “I can see that. What happened?”

Reno coughed. “Well, it’s a little- whoa!”

Cloud blinked before realizing that he was the reason Reno had interrupted himself, having listed sideways as his vision darkened. “Uh… Reno? I don’ feel so good.” Nausea was curling in his stomach and upsetting his balance now that the threat was finally over and he came down from his adrenaline high.

The redhead quickly moved them through the crowd and put Cloud on the couch, dodging the congealing puddle of blood. The blond collapsed back into the cushions and took slow, steady breaths to stave off passing out. A hand touched his forehead and moved the hair out of his face.

“You alright there, Cloud?”

The blond blinked blearily. “Y’called me a hooker. Asshole.”

Reno, who had taken off his own mask and pulled Cloud’s off gingerly, grinned sheepishly. “Where’s that Restore materia, blondie? I think you mighta been strangled too long.”

“Materia? It’s mine. You can’t have it.”

The redhead laughed. “I think the adrenaline and alcohol have gone to your head, blondie. Those are my materia.”

Cloud tightened his grip on the materia. He didn’t want to give them up. “No they aren’t. I stole ‘em fair an’ square.”

A couple Turks in the room snickered.

“Cloud, give me the Restore.”

“No. D’you have any idea how much I wan’ yer stash? An’ you aren’t even levelin’ them up proper.” He pulled the Restore out of his pocket. “This piece a’ shit saved yer life and it’s barely been used at all. D’you know how many times I had to cas’ Cure on yer broken ass b’fore you’d survive? Fifteen fuckin’ times. Asshole. If the Shield had been in any worse shape than it is, we’d be full a’ bullets righ’ now. What the fuck kinda Turk are you, abusin’ yer resources like this? So I’m keepin’ these materia and ye can suck me dick if ye don’ like it.”

Now the Turks were outright laughing at the look on Reno’s face as the blond spirited the materia away into his clothes with a scowl. The only one not laughing was Tseng, but that man wouldn’t recognize a sense of humour if it punched him in the face.

Reno frowned before a slow, easy smirk spread across his face. “Alright. But for each materia you stole, I get a date. ‘Cause this one ended before it could start.”

Cloud snorted. “Ye better be smoother than a Saucer whore if ye expect me to still ‘ave sex with
y’after a near-death ’sperience like this ‘un here.”

The redhead just grinned wider. “I never disappoint.”

Tseng cleared his throat. “While this conversation has been truly enlightening, there is still business to be done. Reno, report.”

The redhead sat on the arm of the couch next to Cloud. “I went to a bar, brought blondie home, and Pickard was sittin’ in my livin’ room. Piece o’ shit thought he could blackmail me into doin’ somethin’ for him, probably. He threatened blondie’s life, and just as Asshole A was gonna shoot him in the head, he pulled some crazy fast moves and dislocated his arm. I shot Pickard in the forehead, and managed to get a shot into Asshole B, but he was already rushin’ at me and I missed a killin’ shot. He jumped on me and started beatin’ the shit outa me. Next thing I know, blondie puts a bullet in his brain and asks if I got a Restore materia. I was pretty hazy at that point. When I woke up next, we’re in the bunker and I’m feelin’ a hell of a lot better! It was pretty hectic after that, ’cause the phone rang and the backup figured out we were in the walls. Blondie protected us with a Shield spell. Someone found a chainsaw and started sawin’ through the wall, and then you guys dropped the nerve gas and here we are.”

Tseng nodded and turned his attention to Cloud. “How does he have experience with materia?”

Reno grinned. “Blondie’s a lil’ cadet drop-out. Workin’ Janitor at Shinra now. Can we keep ‘im?”

Cloud frowned. What? “I knew ye were stalkin’ me, asshole. I ne’er told ye my name.”

But Tseng didn’t pay him any mind. “You think he’d make the cut?”

Cloud scowled. “Hey! I ne’er said I wanted t’ be a Turk! Fuck you, Reno. You may plan on screwin’ me, but ye ain’t screwin’ my life, too! I got plans that don’ involve this shit.” Pushing himself to his feet, he almost tripped over the dead body of the grunt he’d killed. Catching sight of his knife, still buried in the man’s heart, he bent down and pulled it out with a grimace before moving nauseously away from the body.

The blond girl held out to him a towel and a bucket. “You gonna throw up, blondie? Not every day you see a dead body.”

Cloud frowned. “I’m just used to ‘em meltin’ inta green sparkles faster ‘n this,” he grumbled, taking the towel and wiping the blood off his hands and knife. Vowing to clean the poor thing properly later, he slipped it into his pocket beside the lightning materia. He was really going to walk out of here with three materia. He suppressed a fit of giggles. No way was he drunk enough to giggle.

“I think you’re too drunk to be headin’ home by yourself, blondie. I’ll take you in my car,” Reno said, catching him by the arm and pulling him towards the exit. “You got all you need, Tseng?”

The leader of the Turks nodded. “Yes. We’ll begin the investigation tomorrow morning. Do try to avoid being knifed in your sleep, Reno.”

Cloud turned to the redhead, alarmed. “How many ex-lovers’ve ye pissed off? I’m never crawlin’ in ta bed with ye now!”

Reno pushed him towards the door. “Ignore him. It’s an inside joke.”

“Wha’? So d’ye mean knifed as in someone stuck their dick in yer ass, or knifed as in someone stuck ye like a pig?”
The blond, who had been giggling slightly as they walked by, burst into laughter.

Reno grumbled. “It was a combination of the two.”

Cloud howled in laughter, falling over and making a general drunken nuisance of himself. Hey, he was seriously drunk and high off adrenaline after surviving a life or death situation unenhanced. He had every right to be a little… well.

“Holy shit, what happened?”

Cloud scrubbed his bleary eyes and saw Jeff sitting on the living room couch with a wide eyed expression as he froze with his drink halfway to his mouth. Since the guy was basically nocturnal, the blond shouldn’t have been surprised to see him awake on a Saturday night. Or was it Sunday morning already?

Without a word, he stumbled to the bathroom to strip off his clothes and have a shower. Or, he would have if Zack hadn’t come out of his room then and frozen, staring at him.

“Spike?” the dark-haired SOLDIER whispered, hands raised as though to touch, but didn’t actually make contact. “What happened to you?”

“Why are you here?” Reno asked irritably, having followed along behind Cloud for some reason his tired mind couldn’t seem to produce. He’d started crashing on the ride over and now he just wanted to sleep and forget the world existed for a little while. But first things first… he hated being covered in bodily fluids.

Angry violet eyes turned to Reno. “I could ask you the same thing! Why the hell is Cloud in this condition? What did you do to him, Turk?”

The redhead scowled, and Cloud walked away from both of them through the open bathroom door. Emptying his pockets, he squirreled away the materia in Len’s bathroom magazines to recover after his shower. No way was he letting Reno steal them back.

“I didn’t do anything to him! I found him at the bar and he looked like he wanted a bit of fun, so—”

“A bit of fun?!”

Cloud stripped off his blood-soaked jacket and dropped it on the floor of the shower. The easier to clean it all up later. His T-shirt was quick to follow, along with his pants and underwear. All of them he dropped near the drain before turning on the shower and climbing in. Lukewarm water cascaded onto his hair and body as he stood there, watching pink rivulets create a pattern of blood around his feet.

“He was almost killed?! How did that even happen?!"

“Look, it’s complicated and it’s now official Turk business, so I can’t tell you much.”

“Well at least explain to me why he’s covered in blood!”

“He… defended his own life against a larger adversary, and saved my life. That’s all I can tell you. If he wants to tell you more, that’s up to him. Anyway, I gotta get goin’. Investigation in the mornin’ and stuff. Tell blondie I’ll see him around, eh?”
Cloud finished shampooing his hair and rinsed. Looking down at his hands, he frowned at the sight of blood crusted around his nails. There wasn’t much he’d be able to do about that.

“Cloud?” Zack’s head appeared, as he had apparently pulled back the curtain to let his head peak through. “You okay in there?”

The blond nodded and turned off the water. Pushing back the curtain, he accepted the towel from Zack and dried his hair quickly before tying it around his waist. Grabbing a garbage bag from under the sink, he took his bloody clothes and shoved them inside before tying a knot on the top. He’d have to do laundry, or toss them altogether depending on how bad the stains were.

Grabbing his new materia from the magazine basket, he clutched them to his chest and moved past Zack, out of the room. The uncharacteristically quiet man followed him into his bedroom, where he finished drying off and pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a clean, cotton T-shirt that was so worn it was almost see-through.

The saviour of the Planet came to a stop in front of his bed and stared at it blankly. His cabin had never been this empty and white. The walls and table tops were covered with things he’d collected during his travels and books he’d brought back from Wutai.

“Cloud?” Zack asked softly.

Snapping out of his daze, the man frowned. “Zack?”

The SOLDIER First Class walked closer and tentatively put a hand on Cloud’s shoulder. “You gonna be okay, Spike?”

The former saviour of the Planet blinked and took in his surroundings again. “Oh. Um…” That’s right. His cabin was gone, along with everything else that he remembered.

But he didn’t remember killing two men being so difficult the last time he’d done it. It had been a long time since he’d had another person’s blood on his hands… In Wutai he had been able to rest, and learn. In Edge he’d run his inconsequential little delivery business. On the road he’d enjoyed the smell of a crisp breeze and the menial labour of hunting his own dinner.

Cloud turned his head away from a room overlaid with an image— an existence— that could no longer shelter him and met glowing eyes of amethyst. The man of his memories smiled at him, and at that moment it felt as though a rope had been thrown into the churning waters of Cloud’s existence. Zack was here, he was safe, he didn’t have mako anymore, and Sephiroth wasn’t crazy.

“Will you… stay, Zack?” the blond asked, holding back all the other things he’d never been able to say.

The dark-haired man’s smile dimmed, but caring warmed his eyes and acted like a balm on Cloud’s soul. “Of course.”

... ...

A ray of warmth licked the side of Cloud’s face, slowly drawing him from the comfortable warmth of sleep. Squeezing his eyes more tightly shut, he buried his face deeper into the blankets and his pillow to block the sun.

His pillow shifted and let out a sigh. Cloud froze and snapped awake in an instant. Who…?

The memories of last night returned to him. Running into Reno at the bar, returning to his
apartment, nearly dying at the hands of thugs that would have never been an issue in his past life. Opening his eyes, he turned his head and looked up into the relaxed, sleeping face of one Zack Fair, who had stayed with him and kept the monsters away. For the first time since he had awoken in a time he barely remembered, his sleep had been deep and dreamless.

Smiling, he stared up in wonder at his best friend, his comrade. No matter what happened, one thing was always a constant: Zack had a bigger heart than anyone he had ever known. With Tifa it had always been about knowing what was going on in his head so she could help him, which after all that he’d been through, battling Sephiroth, had been the last thing he wanted to deal with. It had just been so much easier to leave and return for short periods of time to visit.

But with Zack, that underlying expectation had always been absent. Zack would take what Cloud gave, and give what he’d take. And it wasn’t any more complicated than that.

The SOLDIER hummed quietly to himself as he shifted, climbing out of the waters of slumber. Bleary eyes opened and graced Cloud with their unique, glowing depths. Smiling slightly, the blond hummed thoughtfully. “You know… any more of this and you might even be turning gay for me, Zack.”

When the other man spluttered, Cloud laughed. “Just kidding. I know you’re all for Aerith. Still… thanks.”

Zack scratched his cheek with a grin, tightening his arm around Cloud’s back. “I don’t mind sleeping with you at all, Cloud,” he said sleepy. When the blond’s grin widened, he groaned. “Oh, you know what I mean. What can I help it if a handsome guy like me is just too irresistible for even his gay best friend?”

The janitor laughed again, enjoying how warm Zack’s skin felt on his face. Vincent had never been one to cuddle, but his lover in Wutai had spoiled him. The fellow warrior hadn’t wanted a relationship that went deeper than occasional shared pleasure and company, but he’d let the blond stay the night to wake up next to another warm body, and once in a while allowed a repeat of the previous night’s events.

It was in part thanks to Shuo and the people he’d met Wutai that he’d found his balance and achieved a level of peace and harmony in his life that had previously eluded him. While most Wutaians had little money and were forced to be self sufficient, they carried a discipline and acceptance with their given path that permeated the entire culture he had grown to love.

Of course, it hadn’t been as simple living in Wutai when he’d first moved there. At the palace, Yuffie’s word as Empress had been law. So when Cloud had expressed an interest in the martial arts of Wutai to her, she’d ordered masters living in the palace to teach him whatever he wanted to learn. Aikido had been the eventual choice, but only weeks after Cloud began training in the style so completely different than any form of combat he was accustomed to, the master had left for his home village to see to the health of one of his sons.

Cloud had chosen to follow him, wanting a chance to experience Wutai outside of Yuffie’s influence.

It had been quite a shock to be treated with such downright hostility among people who didn’t know who he was. No one would let him rent a room, or sell him food, and he’d been forced to live in the wild outside his master’s village for three months before the villagers were accepting enough of his invasion to sell him supplies.

During that time, he set up camp near a small stream at the bottom of the mountain, over the
months building himself a shelter and setting up a system of living. The first time he approached his master for training, he’d been sent to do chores. After that, he’d spend his mornings completing chores around the dojo while the regular class was instructed. After assisting the master’s wife with making lunch for everyone, he would help clean up the kitchen before, finally, the master would use him as a punching bag in front of the advanced class. Since he was enhanced and didn’t injure easily, he was the perfect mannequin for teaching the more dangerous sides of the art.

For the rest of the afternoon, he would sit on the side of the dojo and observe, occasionally being passed around to the other students to practice on. When the day was over and the students left, Cloud would bow from his knees and thank the master for his tutelage along with everyone else before leaving.

This went on for an entire year before Cloud finally challenged the master for the right to join the dojo as a proper student, as he’d seen other Wutaian do. He hadn’t come close to winning, but the techniques he’d used and his respect for the master’s art had persuaded Feng to finally allow it.

And after that, he had begun to settle into the culture. His skill with Wutaian, which had been elementary during his time with Yuffie, slowly developed into fluency. And with this came a deeper understanding of the unique people and society he had become privy to.

A year into his proper studies under his master, he had met Shuo. Having heard of a blond-haired swordsman who had saved the Planet from General Sephiroth of the War of Wutai, he had challenged Cloud to a duel. When the blond refused, Shuo had settled in town and started harassing the saviour of the Planet for a month straight before Cloud finally conceded and defeated him with his lightest, longest sword.

After that, their relationship slowly evolved into a grudging respect and, eventually, friendship. And then, Shuo had propositioned a sexual relation of convenience, a tradition among some Wutaian warriors.

“What’s with that look, Cloud?” Zack asked, nudging him playfully. “You’ve been staring into space with this dopy expression on your face for the past five minutes.”

The blond snapped out of his more pleasant stroll down memory lane with a wry smile. “Just thinking of what-ifs and would-have-beens.”

Mako eyes shimmered with interest. “Oh really? What kind?”

Cloud shrugged. “Oh, just a dream and a memory,” he said dismissively.

“Dream?” Zack pondered that for a moment. “Hey, since you’re not shooting for SOLDIER anymore, what’s your dream of the future?”

Cloud thought about it. The delivery business was just a back up plan, really, not so much a dream for him anymore. Did he have a dream?

“Balance.” When Zack gave him a weird look, the blond just smiled. “I wouldn’t mind a bit of balance.” He could use some stability in his life these days.

“Balance? Uh, okay.” Sharp eyes watched him carefully. “I hate to be a downer, but how’re you holdin’ up? You were pretty out of it last night.”

Cloud hummed and closed his eyes. “Well, if everyone had a teddy bear like you, the world would be a happier place.”
There was a moment of silence. “Are you mocking me?”

The blond sighed. “I’ll be fine, Zack. Yesterday was just a… really bad day.”

Zack’s arm tightened around him. “What happened?”

Cloud sighed, keeping his eyes closed and enjoying the warmth of the body next to him and the morning sun. “Well, it started out just fine. I was working, and then Sephiroth comes into the office where I’m-“ His eyes widened. “Shit! What time is it? I have to go to work!”

Zack grinned. “Gotcha covered. I phoned you in sick after you zonked out last night.”

The sudden burst of adrenaline ceased. “Oh. Thanks.”

“So what was Seph doing in the office?”

“Oh, he was raiding their coffee supplies. Only, most of the sane population of Shinra doesn’t use the rat poison coffee, apparently, and he’d already used up what was in stock.”

Zack’s eyes widened and he laughed. “What, really? But he was in such a good mood last night! He’s been an absolute bitch all week, so I decided it was time for an intervention when I found him working yesterday. So, I went to drag him out for a movie night. When I was going up in the elevator, for a second there I thought I should take defensive measures, but when I got there he was chipper, Spike. Chipper.”

Cloud raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “What? He can’t he even do ‘happy’.”

“I know! But he was drinking coffee and actually smiled at me. And I only had to spend ten minutes harassing him before he gave in and came with me. Usually it takes at least thirty minutes! So yeah, I’d call that chipper.”

Cloud frowned. “Oh. So he must have liked the coffee then.”

“Huh?”

The blond sighed. “Well… I ended up going and hunting down some special import coffee for him that’s got a lot of caffeine, since apparently his metabolism is too high for the regular stuff. When I made it for him, though, all he said was that it was ‘different’.” Cloud avoided Zack’s eyes. “So I might have been a bit angry, and then freaked out and left.” No reason to explain that the ‘freak out’ was anything more complicated than simply leaving in a fit of anger…

“Oh, it’s you!!” Zack exclaimed, almost sitting up in bed before he flopped back down under Cloud’s weight, remembering himself. The blond tensed in alarm. “You were the guy he was asking about the best way to apologize to?”

Cloud blinked. “Huh?” Apologize?

Zack grinned. “Yeah. He said that he may have offended someone but he didn’t know what kind of gift would be satisfactory. His words, not mine. So I told him most of the time, it’s the thought that counts, not the gift itself, and sometimes just saying ‘sorry’ works the best, so…” He trailed off in thought. “I wonder what he ended up doing.”

Huh. Sephiroth was going to apologize to him? That would be interesting… “Hey wait, if you were out watching a movie with Sephiroth, then why were you here last night?”
The SOLDIER scratched his head sheepishly, messing up his already bad bedhead. “Well, I decided to pop by for a visit to see if you wanted to do something today ‘cause you weren’t answering your PHS, and one of your roommates let me in but didn’t know if you were here, so when I went into your room and found the spaghetti on the floor and booze on your bedside table…” He laughed nervously. “But I know you don’t drink, so I got worried and decided to just stay until I knew you got home safe.” His expression darkened. “What exactly happened last night? When I said you were out of it, I mean, you were out of it, and your hands were covered in blood and so were your clothes.”

Cloud grimaced. Yeah, by the time he’d gotten home, with the adrenaline, booze, and caffeine, he’d crashed pretty hard. Considering his system wasn’t used to alcohol or drinking his favourite blend of hama and Grenada anymore, on top of the events that had ended his evening… well. “I just wanted to get laid,” he muttered into Zack’s chest, annoyed at the injustice of it all.

“What was that? You’re mumbling.”

“I just wanted to get laid! And then Reno had to have some Planet-damned criminal in his room for some reason and the whole situation just went south faster than a Nibel wolf in heat!”

Zack stared. “What?”

The blond grumbled. “What part do you want clarified?”

“You went out to a bar, already drunk, to get laid? Cloud, you’re sixteen. That’s not safe!”

The former SOLDIER scowled. “I can look after myself.”

“That’s not the point! What if you go home with someone who takes advantage of you? Or makes you do things that you’re not comfortable with? Or ties you to their bedposts and has their wicked, evil way with you? For all you know they could be a serial killer, or worse, a Turk!”

Cloud stared at Zack for a long, disbelieving moment, before he just couldn’t take it any longer and burst into laughter. When the puppy’s expression became confused and almost wounded, Cloud curled into a foetal position, gripping his aching diaphragm as mirth shook his entire body. It was just too funny. Here he was, an adult trapped in an adolescent body, and someone with less sexual experience than him was telling him about the dangers of getting picked up at a bar.

Zack poked him. “Cloud, this is serious.” When the blond quieted his laughter to give Zack his attention, he burst into another fit of laughter at the deadly serious expression on the SOLDIER’s face. “You could get- diseases, or hurt, or- do you even know how to use a condom?!”

Cloud just about died, wheezing hysterically he was laughing so hard.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

To linggan, who after hearing my original ideas for this fic declared it ‘light-hearted and sweet’… (points at above chapter) See what I mean? I’m incapable.
To K (), who has left me no way to respond to his/her messages... ;P I spell ‘manoeuvre’ this way because I’m using British spelling, which has a lot of French influences. Same with ‘foetal’. (fetal)

This chapter totally surprised me in its direction, to be honest. I love not planning farther than two steps ahead. It always makes things so interesting to write, since your characters are able to surprise you. Cloud really pulled a fast one on me these past few days. I was going to update this last night, but I was too tired to assess whether the chapter was in a good place. Thanks to Wolfie for telling me it needed a bit more love. :) Because of that, it’s a bit longer than usual.

Happy reads, yo
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WARNING: This story is M for a reason. Not just for violence, but for mature substance. If you are squicked by sexual situations flickering across your computer screen, why are you reading an author with my reputation? But to spell it out for everyone: this chapter will contain MATERIAL OF A SEXUAL NATURE.

The Little Guy

... ...

Chapter Seven:

“And would you change that damned light in the women’s bathroom already? You can’t even see the toilet!”

Cloud nodded with a pleasant smile, trying very hard not to say to her face that women didn’t need vision to take a piss as long as they found the seat eventually. “Of course, madam. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

The brunette crossed her arms over her chest with a scowl. “As a matter of fact, you can go get us some more paper from stock! We’ve run entirely out.”

Blinking his large, blue eyes, he tried not to show any of his vindictive glee. “I’m afraid that’s out of my jurisdiction,” he said, taking a moment to enjoy the indignant look on her angry, make-up caked face before he turned around and walked away, garbage bag still in hand.

Why didn’t Shinra give its employees garbage bins that could last a whole day before needing to be emptied? Maybe then he wouldn’t need to spend an hour three times a day collecting it from every single office on his floor. At least on the weekends he didn’t have to talk to people.

Two days off tomorrow, two days off tomorrow…

“Hey blondie! Fancy seeing you here.”

Cloud ignored the familiar voice behind him and went into the next office, collecting more garbage from bins one foot tall and less than a foot in diameter.

“Aw, come on, don’t ignore me,” Reno whined.

The blond emptied another bin into his bag, ignoring the way the secretaries were watching them curiously from their cubicles. Passing by their little kitchenette, he noticed that the tap was leaking and made a mental note to fix it when he had a chance.

“So… how you hangin’ in there?”

Hearing a trace of concern in the redhead’s voice, he put the empty garbage bin back and turned to him. “I’m fine. Thanks for asking.” And then proceeded to ignore him again.
“Oh come on, what did I do?”

Cloud gave him a look. “You’re harassing me at work. There’s a line, you know.”

Reno grinned. “I like living dangerous.”

The blond snorted and emptied another bin into his bag, ignoring the secretary that glared at him evilly for interrupting her secretarial porn. Cloud blinked as he caught sight of silvery hair on the edge of the file open on her screen.

Did she have a picture of Sephiroth on her desktop?

A hand groped his ass, snapping him out of his musing. He jumped before spinning around and giving Reno a glare. “Do that again and you won’t enjoy the consequences.”

But the redhead just grinned and followed him to the next cubicle.

Knowing he’d only be able to get rid of the Turk if he gave him what he wanted, whatever that was, Cloud grabbed him by his loose, open shirt and dragged him from the room, ignoring the secretaries that watched them go curiously. Dropping the large bag of garbage near his closet, he pushed the Turk inside and pulled the door mostly shut for a semblance of privacy. No way was he locking himself in a room with Reno.

“What do you want?” he demanded, letting go of the Turk’s ruffled suit and crossing his arms over his chest, unimpressed.

Reno pulled a PHS out of his pocket. “Been lookin’ for this?” When Cloud just stared at him, he looked disappointed. “Oh come on, you must want your PHS back, right?”

Cloud shrugged. “They’re not that hard to replace. What price are you going to name for it, is the question.”

The Turk grinned. “See? You’re already thinking like a Turk.” Cloud’s eyes narrowed. “We’d like to offer you a position.”

“Not interested.”

Reno gaped at him. “I haven’t even told you anything yet!”

“Don’t care.”

“You can’t want to be a janitor for the rest of your life,” the redhead mocked incredulously.

The blond shrugged. “No, but there are far safer jobs than that of a Turk. Now, are you going to give me my PHS back or not? I have to return to work.”

When Reno just stared at him, disbelieving, Cloud turned to go. A hand snaked out and grabbed his shoulder. Turning his head to look at the Turk, he narrowed his eyes. “Let go.”

The redhead’s expression was stubborn. “Not until you hear me out.”

“It’s nothing I want to hear.”

“Look! Just listen to what I have to say, and you can have your damned PHS back. I’ll even leave you alone for the rest of the day. Deal?”
Cloud stared him down before shrugging off his shoulder and turning around, arms crossed over his chest expectantly. He waited, not saying a word.

Reno half-grinned. “Well, what were you originally planning on doing in the future?”

The blond shrugged. “Delivery service.” He’d also been contemplating going back to Wutai, but that wasn’t exactly feasible with current Shinra-Wutai relations.

“And why’d you choose that?”

“I like to travel.”

The Turk grinned. “Bet you won’t get to ride in a helicopter over the ocean working a delivery service, though. We get sent all sorts of places to look into mysteries and carry out missions. More places than you’d be able to see from a delivery service.”

Cloud raised an unimpressed eyebrow. “But I would be traveling on someone else’s order, not my own. That doesn’t appeal to me.”

“And a good paycheque doesn’t either?” Reno asked incredulously.

“Money can be made anywhere doing anything.” Cloud had many skills – even if most of them he didn’t want Shinra to know about.

“What about the adventure of a good mission? Figuring out a mystery! Digging up people’s dirty secrets or taking out crime lords taking advantage of people below the Plate?” When Cloud just stared him down with a bored expression, he frowned. “Oh come on Cloud, there’s got to be something that appeals to you. Have you ever had a family? We all look after each other. It’s a close knit group. I’d do anything for them, they’d do anything for me.”

The blond raised an indifferent eyebrow.

Reno floundered. “Come on, man! You’d be a great asset to the team! You kept your cool even when you were drunk and about to get your brains blown out. Few people can attest to that. You could buy all the materia you want, too! Whaddya say?”

“No. Are we done here?”

Reno’s expression darkened slightly as his grin faded. “I’ve been authorized to offer you ten thousand gil to ease the transition from your current job to that of a Turk. Tseng has also been generous enough to allow you company-paid transport back home twice a year, on top of regular vacation time. Don’t you wanna see your mom, man?”

Something in the Turk’s tone just rubbed Cloud the wrong way, and before Reno could so much as react, the blond had pinned him to the wall. After getting over his initial surprise, the redhead just grinned. “From what I hear, Nibelheim’s quite the dangerous place. Lots of monsters like wolves and dragons. Wouldn’t your mom be much safer if we moved her to Midgar? Shinra would, of course, cover all expenses of the move.”

Cloud took a deep, calming breath. “You wouldn’t be threatening my mom, would you, Reno?” he purred dangerously into the Turk’s ear.

“Just statin’ well-known facts,” the redhead murmured confidently, arching slightly into the body holding him in place with a flirty smirk.
"Hm. Those are a lot of bribes to sweeten the pot, Reno. Why are you so desperate to have me, when I don’t want the job?"

"We could always use more Turks. Especially competent ones."

Cloud turned his head and nibbled on Reno’s ear and kissed and nibbled a trail down the Turk’s neck. “It’s too bad we got interrupted the other night. Why was that guy there for you, anyway?” Casually, he brushed their bodies closer together, lining them up just so his hip would nudge against the front of the redhead’s suit pants.

The Turk moaned, tilting his head back for better access. “He… uh, thought he could get one up on me. Extortion.”

The blond hummed and started to rock into the front of Reno’s pants with slow, deliberate movements. “Well I gathered that much from the conversation before a gun was put to my head, but why did he come after you was my question.”

Reno made the sexiest little noise as his breath hitched when Cloud’s hands roamed down his clothed chest. “I-it was personal.”

Cloud slipped the PHS from the lax fingers and stepped away, taking slow deep breaths to help hide his own signs of arousal. Reno’s eyes opened all the way as he realized what the had just happened.

“You totally just used your feminine wiles to get one over on me! You cheat!”

Snorting, the blond put the phone in his inner pocket. “All’s fair when it comes to a Turk. You should know that.”

Reno scowled. “And you say you don’t wanna be one of us.”

“Nope.” Cloud turned to leave.

“Wait,” the redhead demanded, grabbing the custodian’s arm and pulling him close. “I’ll forget about your refusal for now, but what about more enjoyable pursuits?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow. “You want to have sex in a closet while we’re both on the job?”

“Wait,” the redhead demanded, grabbing the custodian’s arm and pulling him close. “I’ll forget about your refusal for now, but what about more enjoyable pursuits?”

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Cloud raised an eyebrow. “You want to have sex in a closet while we’re both on the job?”

Cloud thought about it. “Well fine then. Here are the little rules of our engagement, Reno,” he growled, shoving the redhead against the wall. “When I give you an order, you obey.”

Reno raised an eyebrow with a grin. “Ah, so you’re one of those, hm. Kinky. I agree, if it has to do with sex and it doesn’t conflict with my other orders.”
Blue eyes narrowed. “First order is stop talking.” He unbuckled Reno’s pants and slipped them and his boxers clean off. “I imagine that’ll be pretty difficult for a motor-mouth like you.” He ran a finger from base to tip of the Turk’s hardened flesh, enjoying the small moan the man gave as his head fell back with a thunk against the wall of the closet. “Each time you disobey an order, you will be punished as I see fit. We’ll discuss particulars at a later date, understood?”

“Oh gods, yes,” the Turk moaned.

“First penalty.”

The Turk’s dark blue eyes snapped open in surprise. His mouth opened to complain, but he quickly shut it again and bit his lip to keep himself from speaking. A slow, pleased smile curled Cloud’s lips. “Good, you’re learning.” Sliding the Turk’s shirt and suit jacket up, he took two pink nipples between thumb and forefinger and pinched. When Reno just panted and stared into his eyes, he slowly increased the pressure. Only when the Turk’s eyes lidded and his breathing markedly accelerated did he stop the punishment. Licking the right, he blew gently on it to ease the sting before repeating the same treatment with the other.

“Good,” he murmured in approval when the redhead remained silent, running his hands down the man’s flanks and enjoying the play of muscle beneath pale skin. Satisfied that the redhead had been given ample time and opportunity to back out on their impromptu contract, he claimed panting lips and plundered the willing mouth, wishing he were taller if only to make leverage a hair easier. Kissing the Turk senseless, he rifled through the memory of all the products stored in his closet.

What would make a suitable lube… Ah yes, he had oil. Not that it had been labelled that. Its normal uses included fixing squeaky joints, among other janitorial tasks. However, Cloud knew it was just a stock, naturally produced oil that Shinra had stuck an impressive-sounding label on. He’d used similar oils in Wutai to service his swords when he hadn’t been able to get his hands on high grade mineral oil.

Then there were the more pleasurable applications.

Giving the Turk a quick fondle, he pulled away from the kiss and murmured, “Stay right there,” as he stepped away to grab the bottle he needed.

Snapping off the cap, he poured the liquid onto his fingers and went back to the redhead leaning against the wall, now looking a little nervous.

Cloud rubbed his fingers together. “I don’t know how many times you might have had this done to you, but I’m not fucking you today, so you don’t need to worry about that. And as for it potentially being uncomfortable…” He got right up in the redhead’s face and smirked, chuckling softly. “You needn’t worry about the particulars. I’ve never disappointed.” No, the few one night stands he’d followed home had all been very receiving of his… skills.

Without further ado, he pulled Reno’s knees away from the wall and easily caught his weight. Slipping a finger under and behind, he traced the tight ring of muscle, making sure the outside was nice and slippery before teasing the ring with the tiniest bit of pressure. If you did it just right, you could keep the recipient on that torturous edge of want-don’t-want until finally sexual frustration won out and the mind convinced the body that it didn’t want it, it needed it.

As he worked the outer ring of twitching muscle, he distracted the tense Turk with his mouth on his lips, his neck, and the occasional lick or touch to the hard and leaking member trapped between their bodies. He had to stop once for a bit more oil, but the second time around the redhead didn’t
seem to mind nearly so much, pupils blown with desire and lids half closed over hazy eyes.

Just as Reno’s body finally crossed over that edge and gladly pulled his finger inside, the door swung open and leaked a little more light into the shadowy closet.

Cloud nearly had a heart attack when he saw who it was. Instead, he used his annoyance as a tool to push through his shock, absently noticing the way Reno had tensed around his flesh like a vice. “Hello General, what can I do you for today?” he asked, voice gravelly and dark from a mixture of desire, ire, and the memory of the last time he’d seen the… man.

Reno choked, and Cloud leaned forward to shield the Turk from sight and block the man’s own view of Sephiroth. When they weren’t immediately spitted on a six-foot sword, a ball of tension in Cloud’s gut released. Gently, on its own accord, his finger began to gently circle inside Reno’s body in search of the spot he’d been after this entire time.

The General looked them over briefly before simply saying, “Zack broke my chair.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow, humming in thought as he nailed the redhead’s prostate just so, eliciting a choked moan from the Turk. Sephiroth’s lack of reaction, other than his long pause and blatant staring, intrigued the blond. “I see. Give me ten seconds.” And without further ado or thought towards what might be going through Sephiroth’s head, he dropped to his knees and deep throated Reno in one smooth motion and mercilessly pounded and massaged the Turk’s prostate.

Sephiroth still did nothing.

Taking pleasure in the choked cry above him, he swallowed in time with the release he could feel building in Reno’s body as well as hear. With a broken moan, the Turk’s legs completely failed beneath him, forcing Cloud to hold him up with the arm he’d strategically placed on the redhead’s hips. His orgasm lasted for all of three seconds before the last twitches of his body subsided and Cloud removed his finger and mouth in order to catch him and gently bring him to the ground. Ignoring the taste in his mouth, he deftly pulled up the redhead’s boxers and slipped his softening member inside before doing the same with his pants. Leaning him against the wall, he stood and wished he’d had more time to enjoy the state he’d put Reno in.

Perhaps it hadn’t been wise to not use protection in this case, but Cloud found it hard to believe that a Turk’s health wasn’t monitored closely by the science department. It was unlikely something had slipped by their nets.

Turning to Sephiroth, he raised an eyebrow. “Will a tool box be enough, or shall I bring two types of glue? One to fix the chair and the other to attach Zack to the ceiling?”

Sephiroth, who had not looked away politely during the whole exchange, just as he hadn’t closed the door on them upon discovery like a normal person, watched him with the usual blank expression and slit pupils that had dilated slightly. “A few nails may not be remiss,” he finally said, and Cloud had to resist the urge to grin with all the adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Instead, the blond nodded and gathered everything that he’d need, wondering with fierce curiosity why Sephiroth had said and done nothing about what was obviously an inappropriate use of company space and supplies. When he finished a few seconds later, Reno had come back to his senses enough to stare back and forth between them with wide, dilated eyes.

Cloud stopped in front of Reno before leaving the closet. Sephiroth stepped out of the way to allow him room. “I’m sure you know when I get off and what my PHS number is by now. Perhaps we can continue this later. It’s up to you.” Without waiting for a reaction from the rather stunned man,
he left the closet and closed the door most of the way. Just to give Reno a sliver of light to make himself presentable.

The ride up the executive’s elevator was mostly silent, until finally Sephiroth spoke around the 43rd floor. “It is company policy that I report this break of protocol to your supervisor.”

Cloud stared at the closed elevator doors. All that time, and he focused on protocol?

Somehow, the world seemed a safer place. Now if only Sephiroth had remembered protocol when he’d decided a two-thousand-year-old corpse was his mother before traipsing off in a flame-throwing massacre.

“However… I will overlook it this time. In the future, perhaps you would be more discrete.”

Cloud turned to look up at the General, surprised. Green eyes met his own, the pupils thin slits once more and expression giving nothing away. “You know, you would be absolutely killer at Poker. Have you ever played?”

Sephiroth finally cracked and gave him a bizarre look. Ah, every time he didn’t kill Cloud for not thinking before opening his mouth was just one more ‘hurrah’ for sanity and common sense. “I have heard of it. Zack once tried to teach me to play, but I failed to see the use of such a game on the field. My time was far better spent going over strategies and our fortifications.”

The blond hummed thoughtfully. “Use? Well, from Zack’s perspective I imagine that he was just trying to get you to have fun.” But then, it was understandable that he wouldn’t see it from that perspective. “If you think about it, though, there are more applications than that. I imagine sometimes your men can be nervous or aggressive. Sometimes a social game like Poker is just a good chance for everyone to relax and work off tension without killing things or blowing shit up.”

“I have no need to ‘work off tension’.”

Cloud snorted. “What, ‘cause you’re some Perfect Soldier? Nobody’s perfect, and that’s what makes us…” Well, he was going to say ‘human and not psychotic aliens’, but that probably wasn’t a good idea.

Sephiroth was looking at him expectantly.

“-who we are. Everybody has weaknesses and strengths, so a lot can be accomplished when people work together.”

And now he was sounding like a PR exec for Shinra or something. He suppressed the urge to vomit.

The corner of the General’s lip quirked in amusement. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

Cloud coughed. “Right. Well, anyway, the point is that I’m sure you have tension to work off just like everyone else, and sometimes indulging in an activity that may appear useless can do the most for your soldiers’ moral as well as your mood.”

Sephiroth made a noncommittal sound, but the blond didn’t let it bother him. Some people just wouldn’t let go of the stick up their ass no matter how much you pulled, tugged, and twisted. “You appear to have some understanding of psychology. From my knowledge, you chose not to take that class during your cadet training.”

The elevator dinged and opened as they arrived on the 61st floor. The blond stared. “Have you read
my whole file?” When the General just continued to stare at him expectantly, he frowned. “Well, psychology is basically just common sense, which I have a hefty amount of unlike Zack who managed to break a chair.”

“I heard that, Spike!”

Startled, the custodian looked into the office and raised an eyebrow at the sight of Zack sitting on the couch munching on a chocolate bar. He winced and chanced a glance at Sephiroth’s once again stony expression.

“First Lieutenant Zack Fair. Why are you eating chocolate on my leather furniture?”

The SOLDIER First Class just gave him a wide, doe-eyed look and tossed the rest of it in his mouth. “What chocolate?” he said around his mouthful.

Cloud snorted and walked past them both, glaring at the secretary as was customary. Her returning glare, however, was a little lacklustre compared to usual. Shrugging it off, he went into the General’s office to assess the damaged chair.

His eyes widened in shock at the dismembered chair in front of him.

“Zack!” he shouted. “What the heck did you do to this thing?!”

At that moment, the SOLDIER came bursting into the room at top speed and pulled Cloud with him. “Cloud! Protect me! He’s got a letter opener!”

Sephiroth indeed had a letter opener in his hand, as Masamune currently rested on the wall behind his desk in a bracket. Cloud watched the General warily as the man frowned, looking back and forth between the blond and the brat that had stolen his chocolate as if pondering the best way to get around the obstacle in his path to revenge.

Cloud twitched. “Zack? Who is the enhanced super soldier here and who’s the waif-thin janitor?”

“You’re not that thin, Spike,” the SOLDIER chirped. “I can tell you’ve been workin’ out!”

“While it’s true I’ve put on a bit of muscle, that does not mean I’m suitable as a meat shield! So kindly get out from behind me before I break the rest of the chair on your head!”

Zack released him, watching him warily. Sephiroth’s attention was also now fixed on the blond. Cloud sighed. “Zack, if you’re going to be a distraction and destroy more property, maybe your energies would be better spent doing some work?”

The SOLDIER pouted at him. “I was just acting as moral sup- I mean, stop channelling Seph! You’re supposed to take my side of things!”

“Uh- Perhaps Spike’s right Seph and I’ll just uh, go do that paperwork. Yeah.” Without another word, he took off out of the office as though a flock of rampaging chocobos were after him.

Cloud shook his head and sat on the floor, looking at the chair contemplatively. From the looks of it, it was a clean snap where the top of the leg was supposed to be attached to the seat of the chair.
The bent metal pegs sticking out of the legs might be a problem, though. Getting some pliers, he tried to pull the first one out and grunted at the physical effort it took. Removing all three in the first leg, he repeated the process with the other one before checking that there weren’t any bits of shrapnel sticking out of the seat of the chair.

Looked like that wouldn’t be a problem. Frowning at the quality wood of the chair, he wondered how he could put new metal pegs in it. Sephiroth probably wouldn’t want him to just hammer it together from the outside, and glue alone wouldn’t be enough. Humming thoughtfully, he pulled out the nails that he’d brought with them and eyed the flat ends of them contemplatively.

If Sephiroth had a Fire materia or didn’t mind him using his stove highly inappropriately, he could probably heat the metal and shape it into a point with his hammer.

Looking around for the General, he found him calmly sitting behind his desk doing work. Just then, he realized that he might be disturbing the man by working on it there instead of in the outer office area.

“I hate to bother you, General, but I had a couple questions.”

Sephiroth glanced up from his papers. “Yes?”

“Do you happen to have a Fire materia that I could borrow?”

The General raised an eyebrow before getting up and going over to a metal cabinet that, when unlocked, revealed some materia and maintenance supplies for his sword. He pulled out the red ball and tossed it to Cloud, who caught it easily.

“Thanks. And also… did you want me to leave the room? I’m probably going to be a bit loud, hammering.”

Sephiroth sat back down at his desk without so much as giving him another glance. “You are hardly as disruptive as Zack.”

And that was, apparently, that.

Now, how to hammer them in without dulling the ends he planned on turning into points… He eyed the little holes that were in the middle of the leg. An idea taking form in his mind, he eyed the bottom of the seat with a thoughtful hum.

Yeah, that could work.

Moving so he was kneeling on the ground, he put the leg between his thighs to hold it in place and hammered a nail in about a centimetre away from the corners. Repeating this with the three other nails, he put them in just a bit farther than the previous, bent shrapnel had been poking out. Next, he took the Fire materia and heated the head of the nail until it was orange. Grabbing a long metal file, he flipped it onto its flatter side and put it on the top of his tool box. Grabbing the hammer, he started bending the melted metal into a point by rotating the leg as far as he could as he hammered. Once he was satisfied, he repeated this process with the rest of nails.

Turning the leather chair upside down, Cloud covered the bare square where the leg was supposed to go with carpenter’s glue and lined up the leg. Checking that he had the curvature going in the right direction, he pounded it into place with a few strong hits of his hammer.

The still hot metal cut through the wood easily, making it simple to get the leg in properly. Seeing that he’d lined it up for an almost perfect fit, he called this one a win and started working on the
After he finished fixing the chair, he packed up his stuff and walked up to the desk, placing the materia on an empty bit free of paperwork.

Sephiroth glanced up from his work before opening one of his desk drawers and pulling something out. He put it on the desk in front of Cloud and looked at the blond expectantly.

Cloud stared down at the cylindrical tin, confused. Was this what Zack had been talking about?

When the General said nothing, still watching him expectantly, the blond picked it up and twisted it in his hands. Well, it wasn’t that heavy, but there was definitely something inside. Popping the lid, he found a mixture of coffee and a white, folded square of paper taped to the inside of the lid. Putting the coffee tin down, he peeled the paper square off the lid and frowned when he felt something on the inside. What in the world?

Unfolding the paper all the way, he stared in incomprehension at the metal in his hand and the note on the paper. A pair of keys? Quickly reading through the note, his eyes widened in shock.

*This is a spare key to my motorcycle. You may borrow it on occasion when you have need of a vehicle, I only ask that you inform me first. The second, smaller key will let you into the garage from the ground level.*

There was no salutation, and no signed name. Cloud looked up from the paper and stared at the man watching him with sharp green eyes. “What’s this for?” he couldn’t help but ask, holding up the keys. When Sephiroth frowned, he backtracked. “I mean, I appreciate it certainly, but *why*?”

His bike was his baby. Why would he lend it to Cloud?

Sephiroth looked out the window in thought for a moment before returning his attention to the blond. “I know you have some form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You showed all the signs of it the other night. I wanted to… apologize on my part for triggering an episode.”

Cloud’s lips parted as he stared at the General in surprise, eyes wide. PTSD? *What?*

“When I would like to believe that such things are prevented in the SOLDIER program, I am aware of the lengths cadets will go to when put in stressful circumstances. This does not absolve them of their actions, however.” The General paused, eyes searching the blond’s flabbergasted face. “While it may be too late to change things, I’d like you to know that if you would like to test for SOLDIER again without returning to the program first or joining the regular army, I would make an exception.”

Cloud floundered. “I… Where did- why would you- what made you think—” He cut himself off, trying to wrap his mind around the whole thing, it was so far out of left field.

Sephiroth looked amused. “I have seen your sword practice, although it was without a blade. Zack also noted that during the program you were likely a victim of your peers. I have seen you to be hard working, self-sufficient, resourceful, creative when solving problems, capable with materia, and knowledgeable in psychology relating to this profession. I believe you would do well in SOLDIER, regardless of your past testing history.”

Cloud felt like he was having a heart attack; his chest hurt and it was difficult to breath. One of the few things he could remember from before was how much he had wanted to be in SOLDIER. How much he had wanted to be recognized by a man who had been his idol before more shit than he knew what to do with dropped into his lap. A man who had gone batshit insane, killed almost his
entire town, and then tried to nuke the Planet. And after landing in time when he did, after an exam he couldn’t do anything about and before a chance to go into the regular army, which he had no interest in joining at all, he’d decided to just cut his losses and disappear into the woodwork. He’d done it once, why the hell did he have to do it again, after all. It was unfair. A total pile of shit.

And then Sephiroth had to go and rub in his face that he has a few issues after being stabbed a few too many times (by himself) before offering him a free crack at an exam he wanted to avoid like the plague. Or rather, Plague Hojo. That man deserved to rot in the deepest bowels of hell.

*What the hell?!!*

“You don’t need to give an answer now, just be aware that it is in an option in four months time.”

Cloud panicked. That was the only thing he could say in defence of what next slipped out of his mouth. “The Turks are trying to recruit me.”

Green eyes narrowed and lips thinned and flattened. “And I take it by your wording that you have not yet accepted?”

The blond twitched. He wanted to be a Turk even less than he wanted to be a SOLDIER. Working for Rufus Shinra? He’d rather be hand washing dirty laundry in a nest of Nibel dragons. “No. However, they may… force the issue.”

Sephiroth inclined his head. “Yes. They are known to do that.”

“I may not know what I want to do with my future yet, but I *definitely* don’t want to join the Turks.” Hey, if the General really thought he could do well in SOLDIER, then he’d have a vested interest in keeping Cloud out of the Turks. After all, if he were forced to become a Turk, then he’d never be able to be SOLDIER.

Not that Cloud had decided to take the General up on his offer, but it gave him four more months to figure out something *else*.

“I will speak to Tseng if you intend to take the SOLDIER examination in four months. Otherwise, there is little I can do.”

Cloud grimaced. “I’m… not sure what I want to do yet, General. It’s a lot to think about.”

Sephiroth inclined his head. “Very well then. Dismissed.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow but collected his stuff and left. Sephiroth hadn’t gone all ‘military’ on him before. Maybe it was because of the desk. It did lend a certain flavour to the room.

Wiping sweat off his face with a towel, Cloud took a deep drink from his water bottle and tried to even his breathing. He’d been running for a good hour, but it wasn’t quite dark yet. Usually he’d go for strength training until the track darkened enough that he could practice some real martial arts.

Pulling out his PHS to check the time, he blinked at the sight of two messages. Oh right. He’d forgotten about Reno. Putting the device to his ear, he listened to the messages.

“Hey Spike! Just phoning to let you know I got orders to go take care of AVA- I mean, some guys
Cloud frowned. A mission up north concerning… His eyes widened. AVALANCHE. He couldn’t remember if they’d been active around this time, but apparently they were if Zack was being sent to take care of them. It made him wish for the AVALANCHE that he had been a part of.

His thoughts were interrupted by the next message.

“…Hey, it’s Reno. It’s, ah, 6:30 and you aren’t pickin’ up your PHS. Was thinkin’ you and I could do dinner at around 7:00 or 7:30 if you’re free for that first date. I’m cashin’ in, blondie! So call me back.” – click

Cloud frowned. How in the world did Reno expect him to call him back if- Blue eyes narrowed and he opened the Contacts list in his PHS. He stared.

Bootylicious

Duck and Cover!

I Like Big Swrds

When he tried to ‘edit’ the names, he was promptly informed that the contacts were ‘locked.’ Scowling, he called Bootylicious.

After a few rings, it picked up. “Hey blondie! I take it you got my message?”

“What did you do to my PHS?”

“Just a little creative hacking.” Reno sounded ridiculously pleased with himself. “So, how about that date?”

Cloud frowned and checked the time. 7:20. He had been twitching to get laid all day, but was feeling much more level headed and focused after his run. Plus there was the little violation of his PHS. “After certain liberties you’ve taken, I’m not sure I’m all that free tonight. I usually work out.”

Reno hummed into the phone. “Work out? I can provide that. You ever tried to have sex in a shower with no good handholds? And it’s got dual heads. Holding my weight up for a good hour should tire up those arms, legs, and abs of yours, hm?”

Cloud found his lower regions give a twitch of interest. “That would be a work out.” He thought about it. He had forgotten to eat after work again, and he was getting pretty hungry now that he thought about it. Water only did so much. “You’re paying for dinner,” he finally agreed. “And I want you to take us somewhere private where we can discuss the particulars of this arrangement.”

Reno whistled. “Somehow I get the feeling you’ve done this before, blondie. Or been on the other end of it. Do I ever get to play?”

Chuckling, Cloud shook his head in amusement. “I don’t actually physically enjoy being penetrated. I’ve done it multiple times, and I can put up with it, but it’s not enjoyable for me. So no.”
“Ah. You’re one of those. That’s too bad, I’ve always liked switching it up every now and again.”

“Reno. How about you pick me up and we discuss this is more detail? When and where shall I meet you?”

“Look towards the gate. You see the red car?”

Cloud frowned and glanced over, indeed catching sight of a red car. Great. Reno was watching him now. He’d probably been hacking the blond’s files too while Cloud ran. He’d have to stop practicing sword technique and Aikido until Reno’s nose was thrown off his scent. Damnit. An annoying inconvenience, to say the least.

“I don’t suppose you picked up some clothes for me to wear too, did you, since I’m all sweaty right now?”

“I guessed your size.”

Cloud’s eyebrows rose at Reno’s balls. “I see. I’ll be right over.” Shutting the PHS without waiting for a response, he collected his towel and jacket off the grass on his way of the track.

“Good evening, sirs. Do you have a reservation?”

Reno grinned. “Under Reno.”

Cloud looked around the rather nice restaurant with a curious expression as they were led to a room and booth in the back. Absently, he wondered if Reno had already booked them a private booth or if he’d made the call in the few minutes it had taken Cloud to get to his car.

“What can I get you to drink?”

Humming thoughtfully to himself, Cloud glanced over the drinks menu. “Can I get a water and some iced tea?”

“Certainly, sir. And yourself?” he asked, turning to Reno.

The redhead was looking at Cloud with a funny expression, eyebrow raised. “What, no alcohol at all?”

Cloud shrugged. “I don’t drink.” He paused. Oh wait, that wasn’t exactly true anymore was it…

Reno snorted. “Then what was last night?”

The blond started looking over the appetizers. “A bad day that ended even worse. Thanks for that, by the way,” he said wryly.

Reno grumbled “wasn’t my fault” and turned to the host. “I’ll get a glass of your House red.”

“They’ll be along shortly,” he said before leaving and closing the sliding door behind him.

Cloud eyed the shell-fished stuffed mushroom caps. It’d been a while since he had those. And he was feeling in serious need of a steak. He didn’t eat out very often, unless Zack dragged him out on one of his ‘friend-dates.’
“You know what you want?” Reno asked.

The tone in his voice prompted Cloud to look up and meet smoky blue eyes half lidded over the table. The blond smirked. “I always know what I want,” he said, looking at where Reno’s crotch would be below the table before dragging his eyes up.

A pink tongue licked fuckable lips, drawing his eyes down to the redhead’s mouth and making his mind draw up all the possible things that mouth could do for him.

“Shall we order first, or did you want to start now?” he asked, setting his menu aside.

Thankfully, the waiter came at that moment with their drinks. “Do you gentlemen know what you’d like to order?”

Cloud smiled at him politely. “I’ll take the mushroom caps for an appetizer and 7 ounce steak. Mixed vegetables for a side, and rice. Medium rare.”

“Very good. And you, sir?” the waiter asked Reno, not writing anything down.

“I’ll get the same as him, minus the mushroom caps,” the Turk said uncaringly, having not even looked at the menu. The waiter took their menus with a smile and left the booth, shutting it behind him.

Reno took a sip of his wine. “So what’s this you were talkin’ about on the PHS?”

“Hm?” Cloud sipped his iced water.

“You said ‘arrangement.’ What exactly are you lookin’ to get out of this?” Reno asked, a little more guarded now than when he was flirting.

“That’s exactly what we’re here to discuss. I need to know what you are and aren’t comfortable with. It’s just the way I do things with casual partners.”

The redhead relaxed a bit. “Okay, so, what d’you need to know?”

“Have you tested clean?” When Reno nodded, he continued with the question he was more interested in knowing. “What level of play are you comfortable with?”

Reno stared at him. “Uh… I ain’t a masochist, but I don’t mind a bit of pain here and there. In moderation.” Cloud nodded and made a ‘go on’ gesture. “I don’t really like bein’ tied up with somethin’ I can’t get out of if I need to. It’s more a safety thing, bein’ a Turk, than anythin’. I also like switchin’ positions, but you already said you’re not up for that. Uh… what else…”

“Toys? Blindfold?”

“Yes to the first, no to the second.”

“You seemed amiable to taking orders before. Are you comfortable with that?”

“Yeah. But, no humiliatin’ stuff, like ‘lick my boots’. Don’t appeal to me.”

Cloud nodded, taking a drink from his iced tea. “Have you ever done a scene before?”

The redhead grinned. “Well, once someone told me to beat on them.” At Cloud’s dark look, his grin faded and he coughed. “But, uh, other than that, no.”
This was beginning to remind Cloud of the first time he and Vincent had engaged in a ‘regular’ casual relationship. They’d had sex a few times before the older man had admitted that his tastes ran a bit darker and unusual than Cloud had experience with. It had been interesting learning the etiquette of that type of relationship. “First thing you should know is a scene is all about trust and having fun. If one of these things isn’t happening, then you need to tell me. This goes above and beyond all other ‘rules’ that I set in the bedroom. I don’t take pleasure in running with something that makes you uncomfortable.”

The redhead nodded. “Sounds like common sense to me.”

Cloud smiled. “Yeah, a lot of the things we’ll go over seem like common sense, but there are people out there whose motto is to take what they want and screw the other guy.”

“Sound like dicks.”

Cloud laughed.

Dinner went well after that, with Reno asking him the occasional question about one of Cloud’s own questions, fishing for clues about his history. The blond kept it vague and gave no names. When Reno started playing footsie, the blond used every ounce of his well earned self control to keep his face completely without reaction, knowing it would frustrate the redhead to no end.

And boy did it ever.

Reno slammed him into the door of his new apartment with a growl, grinding against him and kissing him in between mutterings like “unaffected asshole” and “been hard as a rock for the past hour you dick.”

Cloud let him work out a bit of his frustration, hunting down Reno’s key and opening the door so they could tumble through. Spinning them around, he held Reno against the wall and kicked the door shut, turning the dead bolt swiftly. “So, how about that shower? This pretty suit you bought me doesn’t change the fact that I stink.”

Reno pulled him down the hall into a bathroom far larger than Cloud’s own. The shower was big, with two shower heads as promised. Cloud stripped haphazardly out of his suit, watching the redhead as he did the same. “Do you have water resistant lube?”

Reno grinned. “Already in the shower. Some mornings water just isn’t enough.”

Cloud chuckled and kicked off his shoes and pants, moving quickly to pin the still half-clothed Turk to the wall. Running his hands down the nicely toned body, he bent his head to nibble and suck at a nipple, pleased when Reno moaned happily and lifted a hand to run through blond spikes.

“Rule number two: you can touch the hair, but no pulling or trying to direct my head in anyway.”

The redhead nodded hazily as Cloud deftly relieved him of his pants and ran two hands up the back of his legs from knees to a tight ass. “What was rule one? Orders?”

“Yes,” Cloud breathed against those oh so fuckable lips before silencing him with more enjoyable pursuits than talking. Fucking that motor mouth with his tongue, he swallowed every moan and groan the redhead made as he dragged the redhead’s ass towards him and grinded their hard, hot flesh together.

Abruptly remembering their original goal was to clean up, he slowly manoeuvred the redhead towards the shower and removed one hand from a perfectly shaped ass cheek to get the water
running. Distracting Reno by running his hands up the man’s back and massaging tense muscles, he grinded his hips in a slow, circular motion as he waited for the water to warm up.

Reno pulled his mouth away with a gasp, panting for air as he rolled his head back, searching for air. Cloud used this chance to check the temperature of the water before moving them into the shower and pinning Reno against the wall again, biting, nibbling, and kissing his neck even as he worked massaging fingers down the Turk’s arching spine.

Damnit, but he just wanted to fuck Reno nice and hard, then take the time to make him fall apart properly on the bed later. He needed to take the edge off.

He glanced at the floor of the shower and grinned when he realized it was just long enough. “Reno,” he murmured into the man’s ear, “We’re moving to the floor.”

“Wha-?”

Not giving Reno much time to think about it, he grabbed the tube of lube off one of the soap-ledges and pulled the redhead down on top of him, turning him around so Reno’s ass was to his face. “Have you prepared yourself at all today?” he asked, as Reno seemed to get the idea and licked the length of Cloud’s leaking hardness.

“Mmm. Cleaned and prepped, captain,” Reno drawled before silencing himself on the blond’s erection.

Cloud ran a pleased hand down the redhead’s spine before shifting both the man’s knees forward so he didn’t have to crane his head quite as far upwards. He liked a considerate partner. Teasing a twitching ring of flesh with the tip of his tongue, he got to work with the lube, stretching Reno and teasing his prostate in accordance with how well he was giving Cloud head.

Reno was very good at head. Taking the tip of the other man’s cock into his mouth, he wrapped his fingers around the base and attacked the bundle of nerves until Reno was crying out from a thwarted orgasm.

Grinning, he sat up and caught Reno before he could go ass over teakettle, manoeuvring his body until they were both upright, Reno face first against the wall while Cloud held him up and slowly, painstakingly worked his aching erection inside with shallow jabs and rotating hips. The redhead groaned, face buried in his forearms as Cloud lifted him higher off the ground and started pounding into him with every bit of muscle and stamina he had gained over the past two months of obsessive training in his free time.

He didn’t last nearly as long as he could have, had he exerted a little more control over himself, but he couldn’t bring himself to care as he wrapped a fist around the panting redhead’s bouncing cock and started jerking on the poor, sensitive flesh. Holding himself back with every ounce of control he possessed, he waited until Reno exploded with a shout and came against the shower wall. The blond let out a low grunt as muscles clenching around finally brought him to that moment of blank, world encompassing pleasure as his own orgasm rushed through him and channelled all that tension and sexual frustration into the willing body in his arms.

Reno collapsed bonelessly against him, panting as Cloud milked the last of his release and held him upright with trembling, satisfied muscles. Letting his softening member slip out of Reno’s body, he cleaned them up quickly with a handful of body wash before walking the sleepy, satisfied redhead out of the shower. Grabbing a towel, he towelled them both off before pulling Reno into the bedroom and manoeuvring him under the sheets.
Climbing in beside him, he wrapped an arm around Reno’s stomach and started tracing the lines of his shapely abdomen. “How long until you’re ready for another go?” he asked huskily into the man’s ear, gently pressing his already-hardening cock against the line of Reno’s ass.

The redhead craned his head around with an incredulous look. “Already? What the hell kinda crazy recovery time you got, blondie?”

Cloud just grinned and fondled Reno’s own member which was twitching its interest pitifully. “It’s been a while.”

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

And so, Cloud finally got laid.

For those of you who want to know… I’m not planning on loading this story full of Cloud/Reno. This might be their only screen time period. However, this sort of ‘test ride’ for you all shows you how Cloud operates, and I’ll be revealing more things about his ‘history’ as the fic progresses. Let me know how many of you like/don’t like the C/R sex anyway, just so I know for future chapters.

I was listening to this and I thought of Reno. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59btS-Y4f6E When you listen to all its subtleties, think about Reno’s history as a character (if you’re a Reno fan then you will know all the juicy shiznit that that could be ;P) The music will make you wonder stuff you’ve never wondered before. Like, has Reno ever been dumped? I dunno about you lot, but I wouldn’t mind finding out…

Happy reads, yo
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Little Guy

\[\ldots\ldots\]

Chapter Eight: A Sephiroth Interlude

Coffee Crisis

Sephiroth slammed the door of the last cupboard for the fourth time, staring down at the empty box that sat on the countertop.

Barren.

He was out of coffee. The impossible had happened, and he was out of coffee. The last box he’d found in storage sat on the counter, bereft, and the next shipment wasn’t going to be in until Monday. Zack had harassed him the previous night until he was dragged away to watch a movie, and as soon as he’d passed out, Sephiroth had headed back to the office and gone back to work. He had been awake for the past thirty hours and twenty-four minutes, and now he had run out of the only substance keeping him functional at this point.

Leaving his office, he started working his way systematically through all the offices except the Turks and the President himself, looking for more.

Zack was using a different brand.

Secretaries apparently liked cappuccino and instant coffee better.

The heads of the department had elaborate machines that produced more not coffee than real coffee.

Finally his search brought him to the 29th floor where a certain blond was washing windows while humming under his breath. Sephiroth didn’t find the sound unpleasant, but even that office didn’t have the right coffee.

“Hey General! What are you looking for?”

Sephiroth looked around the empty cupboards one last time with a frown. “Coffee.”

“What, have you run out?”

Why was he being asked such redundant questions? Scowling, he turned away from the cupboard to stare the blond down. “Yes.” Perhaps the custodian had all the answers. “Why do all the other offices have different coffee?”

The man stared at him for a moment. “Because they all think it tastes like charcoaled rat intestines, most likely.”

Sephiroth closed his burning eyes and tried to rub some of the sleep out of them. If he didn’t get his
hands on more coffee soon, he wasn’t going to finish the President’s project on time, even with the extension.

“Why are you here on a weekend anyway?”

The General leaned against the counter and let out a very quiet sigh. The custodian wasn’t close enough to notice. “Project for the President.” It was quickly becoming the bane of his existence and sanity.

Blue eyes lit up with recognition. “Ah, right. I remember you mentioning that last time. And you’ve run out of coffee, hm… Don’t they have a surplus of those exact kinds of supplies somewhere in this building?”

Perhaps the custodian wasn’t full of answers if he was asking the obvious questions. “I already used the last box,” he said irritably.

“And I take it they don’t get a shipment or something until Monday?”

Again with the obvious observations. “That is correct.”

“And why can’t you drink the coffee that everyone else drinks?”

Finally a moderately intelligent question. “It isn’t strong enough to have an effect on my metabolism.” While the average SOLDIER could get by with just drinking three cups instead of one, Sephiroth’s case was far worse.

The blond appeared thoughtful. Sephiroth didn’t know what was going through his head, but after a moment his eyes widened in some sort of brilliant epiphany. Or perhaps he’d just connected the dots to mako. The man had failed the SOLDIER program after all. When the custodian scratched his chin in thought, Sephiroth’s flickering hope snuffed itself.

“I… may have a solution. But I’m not sure I can get the coffee in Midgar. I’d have to look around some.”

Sephiroth stared at him, a coal of hope igniting once more. “Could you? I would compensate you.” At that point, he would have assassinated the President himself to get more coffee.

“Well, I don’t mind looking per se, but technically I’m at work right now and the imports I’m thinking of aren’t exactly cheap. If you talked to my boss, and front the cash to go buy it… I could try to find it for you.”

Sephiroth was already reaching in his pocket at the word ‘cash’ and pulled out all the loose bills he had. He always kept a moderate amount of money on hand in case he needed it. Coffee… “What is the name of your superior?”

“Well… Frank trained me, but I don't actually think he’s the boss custodian, to be honest.”

Sephiroth quickly scanned through his memory, flipping through images of staff profiles and the chains of command in the public sector. Finally, he snapped to the profile of a man who looked as though he enjoyed his job too much. “Niel O’really. I will contact him and inform him that I have sent you on an errand during your shift. If he gives you any trouble, tell him to contact me.” He’d send the email as soon as he got back to his office.

The blond nodded, watching him with slightly wide eyes as he held out the gil he’d pulled from his wallet. “Do you own a vehicle?” he demanded, mind already going through the logistics of the
mission and best allotment of resources and time. The public transit system was far too inefficient and prone to having problems.

“Uh, no. I know how to drive a motorcycle, but technically I don’t have a license. I was planning on taking the train.”

Sephiroth frowned in thought. Did the small town of Nibelheim not require licenses to drive? It was the only place the blond could have learned how to ride. “That will add a lot of time to your trip,” he said simply, having dismissed the train immediately. “You may take my motorcycle. However, if you crash it, I will have to eviscerate you.” It was a risk to potentially sacrifice his machine in the line of duty, but sometimes risks had to be taken. “Come.”

Sephiroth tapped his pen against the surface of his desk, staring out the window and wondering how he was going to pull this project together in less than a week. Looking at his timeline, he had only just finished going through the first ten years of the time frame, and he was well aware of the fact that there would be more reports to read and sort through the closer he got to the present.

His mind shifted to his fatigue, which led to the unforgiveable lack of coffee, which led him to a certain blond out getting him coffee, which led him to the memory of the blond’s reaction to his bike. It had bordered on obsession, the look in the man’s eyes when he’d caressed the machine. He had said he was a mechanic before. Perhaps the bike he used to ride he’d owned himself and worked on?

He’d also gotten the blond’s number. It was a tactical error for any leader to send a man on a mission without being able to contact him, after all. Although, it would certainly be-

“Waiting for some loooove, Waiting for the man to steal my~”

Sephiroth cut off the ring tone with an annoyed scowl. When had Zack gotten his hands on his PHS?

“-had stolen the General’s fucking bike, you imbecile?” Sephiroth blinked fatigued eyes as his slowed brain tried to process why a certain blond had called him an imbecile. “General, could you please tell this security guard he is an imbecile and to let me through the gate already with your damned coffee?”

A pause.

“Hello?”

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed. His coffee was here and a security guard had the gall to slow its return? “You will let custodian Strife through the gate immediately or I will hunt you down and fire you for incompetence and gross lack of common sense, soldier, before making sure you are never hired by Shinra or anyone else every again. Understood?”

“Y-yes, sir, General, sir,” the shaky voice said into the receiver, sounding suitably cowed. He heard him say “You’re clear, Mr. Strife, sir” before the line was cut.

Sephiroth closed the PHS and put it back in his pocket, dropping his pen and making his way out into the main office. Checking the coffee pot, he rinsed it and threw out the old, used filter. After checking that he had everything he needed, he paced the room and wondered how long it could possibly take to get from the basement to the 61st floor. His mind rattled numbers off at him –
thirty seconds to park, twenty-five seconds to the elevator, two minutes and ten seconds to the 20th floor, three and a half minutes to the next elevator, four minutes and thirty seconds to the 61st floor, five minutes to brew – as he counted down the seconds and dug a much-needed chocolate bar out of his stash.

One minute into the countdown, he realized he had forgotten to give the custodian a way to get into the executive elevator. Annoyed at himself for forgetting this, and knowing service in the basement was atrocious, he left his office and hit the button for the 20th floor.

He got all the way down to the basement without running into the blond. Looking around the garage, his lips tightened as he caught sight of his bike, but no blond.

“Waiting for loooove, Waiting for a man to~”

He flipped the PHS open.

“Sephiroth, where the hell are you? Do you want your damned coffee or not? I’m in your office and you’re not here. There’s a Turk here who thinks I’m a terrorist, so get your ass up here already.”

Sephiroth cursed in his head and hit the up button for the elevator. Smacking the button for the 20th floor, he wondered at the odds of a Turk being in the garage at the same time as the blond on a Saturday afternoon.

“Look, if you’re worried about your bike, she’s fine. Not a scratch. Handled smooth as a hooker from the Gold Saucer.”

Hearing that, Sephiroth froze before running the entire conversation back over again now that he was focusing on what the blond was saying instead of his irritation at missing them on his way down. Hooker from the Gold Saucer? ‘Get your ass up here?’ Even Zack didn’t dare to order him around like that.

Although, Zack wouldn’t have been able to solve his coffee problem, either. Why the blond had known about coffee imports of all things intrigued him. Not only had he pulled apart the coffee maker and fixed it, but he apparently had enough knowledge of Midgar and its suppliers to locate, purchase, and retrieve imported coffee for him in less than an hour.

“Hello? Are you there or did the line drop?”

“I’m here.”

“And where in the building are you?” The blond demanded, his no-nonsense tone reminding Sephiroth of his commanding officers before he had risen through the ranks.

The elevator dinged, and Sephiroth used his unnatural speed to get to the next one in the shortest amount of time. “Getting back on the elevator.”

“Ah. We must have missed you on the 20th floor.”

Deductive reasoning, too. “It appears so.” While it had irritated him at the time, the blond’s questions concerning his hunt for coffee had been rather efficient and to the point. Not to mention it had resulted in coffee.

“Alright then. I guess I’ll see you in a few.” The blond hung up, dismissing him easily. Sephiroth
stared at the PHS for a moment before putting it away and watching the little red numbers that climbed steadily, but far too slowly.

Finally, the elevator reached the 61st floor and Sephiroth exited to see Reno of the Turks standing there and a rather tense blond standing in front of the coffee machine, his entire focus aimed at the filter he was currently filling.

“Turk.” The General stared him down, feeling a burst of vindictive pleasure when the redhead shifted nervously.

“General. I take it ya know this kid?”

Sephiroth was impressed that his voice showed little sign of stress. Then again, this was a Turk. “Indeed.”

“Alright then. I’ll… leave ya to it.”

Sephiroth ignored the leer Reno gave him before eyeing the blond’s back a little more thoroughly than was necessary. The General stared him down until the Turk hurried up, leaving the room with a small grin.

Pleased that the blond was already brewing his coffee, he caught the keys that were tossed to him and raised an eyebrow. “Any problems?” The speed at which the task had been completed said otherwise, but Sephiroth was used to asking for a report.

The blond shrugged. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

So something had happened. Before Sephiroth could ask him for clarification, the blond shoved a wad of gil in his face. Taking it, he counted the bills and was surprised to see so little returned. How much had he given the blond in the first place?

Without being asked, the custodian broke into a detailed report. “This is hama, a Wutaian coffee that can melt the lining of your stomach if you’re not careful.” After showing it to the General for a moment of inspection, he deftly put it away. “This first batch cost 100 gil, but the next time I visit him I’ll be able to get a better deal, now that he knows my face.”

Sephiroth wondered how the blond knew the finer details of shopping customs in Wutai.

“This is Grenada. It’s a coffee grown near Cosmo Canyon. It has a really strong, almost repugnant flavour if you’re not used to it or it’s not to your taste. I mix a filter two thirds Grenada and one third hama. This is a personal taste of mine, and you can adjust the balance however you like.”

Sephiroth watched him put the remaining packages away and wondered. How had the blond happened across these two rare types of coffee? He’d obviously been drinking them for a while, if he knew his own preference, and yet he had not tried to find the products before during his three years in Midgar. That implied that he had drank it before he came to the SOLDIER program, but since when did a small mountain village get specialty coffees? “Why do you mix them?” he asked curiously, having never known anyone to do that with coffee before.

“Hama is extremely bitter and harsh on the taste buds, as well as your stomach. Its sheer caffeine content has been known to give small animals cardiac arrest if consumed in large quantities. When you mix it with Grenada, which is also high in caffeine content, the bitter taste is softened by rich flavour that has a much more pleasant aftertaste than hama. Personally, I find the combination more appealing than the separate flavours.”
Sephiroth nodded, eager to try this new coffee that apparently didn’t bother the blond’s palate nearly as much as Shinra’s… fried rat intestines, was it? Watching the coffee slowly count down, second by second, he was pulled from his thoughts by the blond going to the fridge and pulling out the cream. When he was about to pour the cream into one of the mugs on the counter, Sephiroth caught his arm in alarm.

“What are you doing?”

“Look. I know what I'm doing. Just trust me. You won’t need nearly as much cream as you normally do, and if you don’t like it the way I prepare it, then you can just add more. No harm, no foul. Okay?”

Sephiroth weighed his choices. Cynthia had never failed to make his coffee the wrong way, but the custodian had proven himself to be remarkably competent and observant of Sephiroth’s preferences. Perhaps he could anticipate this as well. Releasing the blond’s wrist, he took a step back and watched as the blond poured in less than half the amount of cream he usually did, as well as three teaspoons of sugar.

How had he known Sephiroth liked three teaspoons of sugar? The only time the General had prepared coffee in front of him was after the coffee machine was fixed. If the blond was observant enough to remember a coffee preference three weeks after the fact, what else did he remember on a day to day basis?

The coffee was just dripping now, and Sephiroth was pleased to see that the custodian didn’t care enough for the last dregs to wait those thirty-six seconds either. After the blond finished pouring and stirring, Sephiroth quickly snatched the cup held out to him and held it in front of him, letting the fragrance drift up to his face and permeate his nose. While completely unfamiliar, it had an undeniably more appealing smell than the coffee he had become accustomed to over the years by sheer necessity.

Cautiously, he took a sip. Let the unique flavour roll over his tongue before swallowing. Finding the temperature still too hot for an accurate testing, he blew on it and took another sip. Then a mouthful. It was certainly flavourful. So strong as to almost be repugnant, just as the blond had said. He’d never had anything like it before.

“Well?” the custodian asked with a frown.

Sephiroth smiled slightly in amusement as the liquid dropped into his empty stomach and warmed him slightly. “It’s certainly different.”

The blond, who had finished half his cup while the General was testing the new brew, rolled his eyes and moved to walk past him to the elevator. “Whatever. I’m going to go back to my squeegee, then. At least it appreciates my fine tastes and hard work.”

Sephiroth’s brain kicked into overdrive as he tried to figure out what he had said to piss the blond off. Snatching the custodian’s arm, he took another drink of coffee to get his sleep-deprived processes back up to speed. Had ‘different’ not been acceptable? “It’s good.”

But the blond just continued to stare at him. “Aaand?”

‘Good’ wasn’t acceptable either? He ran over the conversation for the third time. “I appreciate your fine tastes and hard work?”

But the blond just sighed and gave him the same look his First Lieutenant did when Sephiroth had
said or done something to make him go quiet, and Sephiroth was well aware of the fact by now that when Zack went quiet, he was one of three things: extremely angry, hurt, or depressed. “You know, in the interests of your sex life, you should really ask Zack to coach you on the art of the compliment, because there’s a huge hole in your social education. Fail, man. Just, fail.”

He pulled himself out of Sephiroth’s grasp and went over to the elevator, pounding the ‘down’ button with his thumb. The General watched him go, trying to figure out what he had done wrong. Apparently he had failed to make the correct compliment, or it was his execution of the compliment. But why this reaction? He almost appeared… insulted.

Grabbing the man by the shoulder, he pulled him around so he could get a better look at the man’s irked expression. “Why are you angry?” It was time he ceased making assumptions and got to the bottom of this misunderstanding. The man had located him a coffee replacement.

But then the blond’s expression deadened, anger wiped away like a stain on the Masamune. All traces of emotion in the lines of his face and his eyes vanished into a blank slate. All Sephiroth could see now was a slight dilation in his pupils and the increased rise of his chest with each breath. He looked like a SOLDIER preparing himself for battle.

“I’m not angry.”

“Then why are your pupils dilated and your heart rate accelerated, if you are not prepared for a fight?” Verbal or otherwise, Sephiroth was now curious to know.

The blond scowled, and the eyes that looked at Sephiroth were not warm and light hearted cerulean, but hard chips of ice. The General couldn’t figure out what had elicited such a strong reaction. “There’s more than one cause of pupil dilation and increased heart rate,” he snapped, voice quiet but deadly. The overall effect of his shift in behaviour peaked Sephiroth’s interest as he leaned in, examining the defensive man more thoroughly.

“Desire then?” he hazarded a guess. If he was wrong, the man would get even more angry. If he was right, then maybe it would explain the sudden, mercurial shift in behaviour. If he saw Sephiroth as a sexual interest, and the General had failed to compliment his accomplishments sufficiently, he might be insulted.

The blond’s reaction derailed all his expectations. Blue eyes widened, pupils dilated further with a surge of adrenaline, and his entire form stiffened with what was either desire, or fear. Sephiroth didn’t have enough data to decide. The idea that the blond found him attractive, however, was strangely fascinating, given his absolute lack of the usual symptoms of facial flushing, stuttering, idiocy, leers, or terribly executed flirting.

“What?”

“Desire. It is another source of dilated pupils and accelerated heart rate,” he stated factually, watching the blond closely for his reaction to prove or disprove his hypothesis.

“Really? Well I’m sure there’s something else,” the man griped, his usual stubbornness and lack of fear in Sephiroth’s presence shining through.

Sephiroth smirked slightly. “No. You do not fear me, so it is desire, or anger.” He brought his face a bit closer to the blond, eyes locked on expressive cerulean depths. “So which is it… Cloud?” he murmured in a deep, resonant tone, using the man’s name for the first time in the hopes of eliciting a reaction.
It was a reaction alright.

The flush of emotion that had darkened the skin of his face drained as blue eyes glazed and looked through him as a mixture of pain and fear raced across his eyes.

The blond shoved him, and it was only Sephiroth’s surprise that made him step back as the smaller man scrambled away from him as though he had drawn Masamune with the intention of gutting him. The General let him go, bewildered at the sudden, triggered shift in behaviour. The elevator doors shut on the terrified eyes of an animal fleeing for its life.

Sephiroth frowned, staring at the doors in deep thought before warmth on his legs drew his attention downward to the remains of the blond’s coffee spilled on his legs and the beige carpet of his office. That…

Had not been expected.

Sephiroth packed up the last of the reports he’d been going through before sitting back in his chair and staring ponderously at the empty cup of coffee sitting on his desk. The events that had transpired earlier that afternoon had been gestating in the back of his mind for the past few hours before he had decided he was too distracted and decided it was time to call it a night.

As he hadn’t slept in 36 hours, and he’d been drinking coffee at the rate he usually did, his brain had been jumping between five completely different trains of thought simultaneously for the past two hours on a caffeine high that could have driven a lesser man insane. Considering he usually drank one cup an hour, it had added a new consideration to the Strife Quandary.

If one cup of coffee per hour for three hours had unbalanced him enough that he had to stop working lest he risk making more grievous errors, then what had half a cup of coffee done to Strife in the span of a few minutes? Even taking into consideration the fact that most caffeine was absorbed through the digestive track, which took time, some was still absorbed orally if in high enough concentrations. Which the coffee was.

Spinning his chair to the angled extension of the side of his desk that housed his computer, he searched the scientific portion of the database for caffeine in the ‘drug’ subheading. A few files and papers appeared in a list, so he went through them all until he had a much better understanding of the drug’s affects and, more importantly, the symptoms of an overdose.

Leaning back in his chair, he absorbed and sifted through the information he’d read. Strife had had many of the signs. His breathing had been unsteady and irregular. His heart had likely been palpitating, resulting in a flushed face. Pupils dilation could easily been explained by an increase in adrenaline. And then something had set him off and pushed him into… an episode.

Taking a bite out of his chocolate bar, he ran the memories through his head again, taking special care to observe and categorize facial expressions, word choice, and posture.

After running the scenario with a few different possibilities in mind, he eventually settled on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Unfortunately, when taking into account Strife’s record and the bits Zack had ranted to him over the past year, he was brought to a rather perturbing conclusion.

Either Cloud had suffered trauma in his home town, or at Shinra itself in the SOLDIER program, of a violent or sexual nature. With the evidence he had gathered thus far, it could be a mixture of the two. With the trigger in the office, he was inclined to lean towards sexual. While Sephiroth
himself had been curious and acted to incite a reaction from the blond, he had unintentionally fallen into a pattern that had provoked what was likely a flashback.

Before he could contemplate the details of such a flashback, Zack came bursting into his office.

“SEPH!” The man threw himself into Sephiroth’s guest chair. “You and I are leaving right now! You’ve been locking yourself in this office for too long, you need a break! Some time to unwind. Maybe a drink or two and a massage from a hot young lady. You’ve got all this money you don’t spend that you could put towards some much needed leisure time. And maybe if you got a secretary who can do more than file and organize crap and forward phone calls, you wouldn’t be stuck here so late working on that project for Shinra anyway! Have I mentioned she doesn’t like me? I mean, how can she not like me? Only an evil concubine could look past my good looks and charming personality and still find me unlikeable. Hell, Spike likes me and he’s never been a ball of sunshine. Though, ever since he failed that SOLDIER exam he’s been a bit… brighter and darker if that makes any sense. Less moody. He’s usually pretty happy, joking and giving as good as he gets, but sometimes he gets this look in his eye… Makes me wonder if ever told me all that happened in the SOLDIER program. Maybe it’s best he quit. But anyway, you should be more like him! He at least relaxes once in a while, or works out his stress with physical exercise. When was the last time you worked out, Seph? A year ago? All I see you doing is paperwork, paperwork, and more paperwork these days. You don’t even spar with me anymore, which is really uncool you know! I always improve the fastest when you’re there to knock me on my ass and point out my faults. I might have lost that duel against McAphry if he hadn’t been so angry and bitchy lately. So what do you say to watching a movie? We can get some nice Wutaian since I bet you haven’t eaten anything all day, and-

“Zack.”

The puppy blinked huge eyes at him and looked so close to heart break at being told ‘no’ that Sephiroth was tempted to do it just to see the look on his face. Coincidentally, however, he had decided to leave the office anyway, and he might as well watch a movie while he waited for the caffeine to wear off so he could pass out and get ten hours sleep. “Quit your rambling and order the Wutaian.”

The SOLDIER First Class stared at him with his jaw dropped for a good five seconds before he jumped up with a cheer and pulled out his PHS, running out of the room in his excitement and ordering them enough food to feed five SOLDIERS.

It was going to be a long night.

\[\ldots\ldots\]

Warning: Puppy at Play

“Don’t worry Seph, it’ll be fine. Just bring him up here, do your thing, and it’ll be great! I’ll even be here for moral support. Whatever you did to him can’t have been any worse than what happened later that night,” Zack said with a grimace.

The General’s interest was peaked. “What happened later Saturday night?”

“Well… I didn’t get many details. Apparently he had to kill two guys to protect himself and his… date for the night.” Sephiroth’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the venom in Zack’s voice on the word ‘date.’ “Dammed Turk got him into that position in the first place.” Turk? Strife had been going on a date with a Turk? “That guy totally had plans to take advantage of Spike! He’s a sexual deviant! Have you heard the things people say about him in the secretarial pools? He’s left
countless women high and dry after a night of passion, and ignored their existence the next day! He’s a total manwhore!”

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. That didn’t quite follow his hypothesis of sexual trauma. Though it did line up with his initial hypothesis of sexual frustration. “Did he have intentions of engaging in sexual relations with this man?”

“Yes! And when I asked him about it, he just laughed at me! Laughed! I had valid concerns! Guy like Reno could be a walking death trap for sexually transmitted diseases! Not to mention a threat to Cloud’s virtue!”

An image of a redheaded Turk flashed behind Sephiroth’s eyes, followed by a quick description of his areas of expertise within the Turks. Technically he should never have been able to see the file, but he’d hacked it from one of the secretary’s computers downstairs at four in the morning on a Sunday night once when he’d decided to take a break during another all-nighter. It was true he was also well known for his sexual promiscuity.

The fact that Strife had attracted the Turk and intended to go home with him was either a good, or a bad sign, and Sephiroth didn’t have enough Intel to accurately hypothesize which.

Perhaps it was time for another hack into the Turk’s files. Somehow he doubted Tseng would tell him anything.

“So, are you going to go get him to apologize like we talked about last night, or what? Ooh, what did you end up deciding on for a gift?” Zack asked again, playing with one of Sephiroth’s paperweights as he sat in the guest chair. When the General said nothing, sorting through his paperwork, his First Lieutenant sighed, leaned back in the chair and started bouncing.

CRA-CRACK.

Sephiroth glanced up sharply to see Zack tumble backwards over the chair with a yelp as the hind legs gave out under his weight and broke off the base of the chair, which was apparently a week spot in its structural design. Definitely not built for a puppy to play on.

Running a hand over his face, he mentally started drawing up a requisition form for a new chair.

“Hey! Now you have an excuse to go get him and bring him up here!” the SOLDIER called from the floor, feet still dangling in the air.

Sephiroth walked halfway down the hallway on the 29th floor, glancing quickly in the offices as he passed them by for any signs of blond hair. Finally, he found himself frowning at the sight of a large bag filled with garbage, left carelessly next to the wall and the closet that held the custodian’s supplies. As annoyed as he was with Zack for breaking his chair – intentionally or not – he had to admit that it was a convenient excuse.

Seeing the door was partially open, he deduced that the custodian was fetching some supply or other. Pulling it open the rest of the way, he froze at the sight of what lay beyond, eyes cataloguing the scene without his permission. Noting the way Strife had pinned the Turk, Reno, to the wall and currently had the redhead staring at the ceiling with a dazed expression. Observed how the blond’s center of gravity was lower, and his right hand hooked under the Turk’s body, undoubtedly with his fingers up the other man’s ass.
He stared in surprise at the provocative sight as his mind put all the pieces together into the full image that it was, a look of wanton lust on the Turk’s face and the controlled, powerful, dominating, and pleased expression on Strife’s face.

Just as his wildly calculating mind pieced the whole scene together, blue eyes drifted towards him and met his own. First, his expression shifted into absolute shock at the sight of him. What Sephiroth expected to devolve into fear or embarrassment at their current predicament, however, shifted into that blank look the blond had adopted while on the defensive the other night, except this time molten heat and emotions too tumultuous for Sephiroth to decipher churned beneath. With a recovery time reminiscent of a soldier prepared for anything, the blond finally spoke.

“Hello General, what can I do you for today?” His accent came through thicker, and his voice, which was usually smooth and perfectly controlled, rumbled gravelly in his chest. Sexual desire had dilated his pupils, but unlike two days previous when he had been mostly blank and defensive, every line of his body screamed with controlled tension, defiance, and mettle that the General had not been faced with since Genesis.

The Turk choked then, and Sephiroth noted his horror at their discovery by himself for a moment before the blond defensively shifted their bodies to better shield the other man from sight. The General noted the action and mentally filed it away. Was he that protective of everyone, was he sexually territorial, or did he possess within that carefree and laid back persona the edge of a blade much like Zack himself?

Zack, however, was not nearly as frustratingly complicated. Once Sephiroth had noted his behaviours and deduced effective methods of managing him, Zack had become easy to ignore and work with. His patterns were reliable. Unlike the man who stood before him with his finger up the ass of a Turk, living proof contradicting Sephiroth’s hypothesis of past sexual trauma.

“Zack broke my chair,” he reported simply, sharp eyes watching as the man raised an eyebrow, hummed in thought, and proceeded to continue his business with the redhead at his mercy.

When the blond gave him a daring look, making the Turk let loose a surprised sound of pleasure, Sephiroth wondered if this was a challenge of some kind. His knowledge of psychology from endless hours of training under Hojo’s ‘loving’ hands gave him no insights on the sexual implications. The look in his eyes, while convoluted and difficult to decipher, also contained little of the hostility that he had been expecting in light of recent events.

“I see. Give me ten seconds.” His gravelly voice had cleared again, though it remained dark and commanding, as though he were the one used to giving orders.

And now the man was servicing the Turk right in front of him. Again the man was making him modify and second guess his conclusions, for he didn’t seem to care at all that Sephiroth was there, watching. He had completely dismissed the General’s presence. Where he had been so insulted by an insinuation of sexual desire before, now he blatantly displayed his own sexual experience by taking the Turk into his throat and ripping an orgasm from him in five seconds.

He also displayed an unusual amount of consideration as he gently lowered the collapsing redhead to the ground and dressed him once more.

The blond’s attention turned to Sephiroth once more as he stood and gave the General a level look, eyebrow raised. “Will a tool box be enough, or shall I bring two types of glue? One to fix the chair and the other to attach Zack to the ceiling?”

Sephiroth felt Strife’s rather abrupt shift of behaviour reflected in his own jarred thought processes.
All signs of aggression had gone, and his indifference to Sephiroth’s presence shifted into the more familiar relaxed and joking persona that the General had become accustomed to.

As a commanding officer charged with the control, safety, and health of an army of SOLDIERS prone to exhibit signs of aggression and mental instability due to their enhancements and regular mako injections, this inconsistency in character and behaviour was almost alarming.

“A few nails may not be remiss,” he said as a new train of thought spiralled off, producing a network of possibilities, consequences, and circumstantial evidence that supported or opposed the new conundrum.

Strife proceeded to efficiently gather the necessary materials while the Turk recovered on the floor of the closet. Now that his body was out of the way, Sephiroth caught sight of what had obviously been used as lubrication. Ignoring the Turk’s wide-eyed confusion and alarm as he looked back and forth between Sephiroth and Strife, the General turned his eyes to the blond who had finished gathering a toolbox and a box of nails.

Strife paused at the Turk’s feet. “I’m sure you know when I get off and what my PHS number is by now. Perhaps we can continue this later. It’s up to you.”

It appeared as though Strife’s confidence in handling the Turk did not come from stupidity. If he suspected the redhead capable of hacking his personal information, he was neither blind nor stupid. Sephiroth failed to see cause for Zack’s earlier irrational concern for the blond’s sexual virtue, as the blond had exhibited a skill that could not have come from anything but experience.

A lot of it.

Sephiroth was aware that sexual relations often occurred in the cadet barracks, but… he didn’t believed stolen moments of pleasure sufficient to produce one such as Strife.

They traveled in silence to the executive’s elevator, where Sephiroth turned his recent circumstances over and over again in his head until he had more questions than answers.

“It is company policy that I report this break of protocol to your supervisor;” he finally said, after having briefly reviewed the rules concerning fraternization in his memory. It was his obligation to do so. However, the General’s own concern lay not with his own exposure to Strife’s sexual conquests, as he had gathered a huge amount of information in that short period of time, but rather with the possibility of another employee of Shinra stumbling upon the same thing.

There was also the matter of his conduct towards the blond two days previous. His lack of professionalism had resulted in an episode of PTSD in a man who Sephiroth was beginning to suspect suffered from some level of mental instability.

“However… I will overlook it this time. In the future, perhaps you would be more discrete.”

The blond met his eyes with a look of surprise, apparently once more at ease in his presence. “You know, you would be absolutely killer at Poker. Have you ever played?”

How the man had made that Zack-esque leap of logic was beyond Sephiroth’s ken. He gave the blond a confused look. “I have heard of it. Zack once tried to teach me to play, but I failed to see the use of such a game on the field. My time was far better spent going over strategies and our fortifications.”

Strife appeared thoughtful. “Use? Well, from Zack’s perspective I imagine that he was just trying to get you to have fun. If you think about it, though, there are more applications than that. I
imagine sometimes your men can be nervous or aggressive. Sometimes a social game like Poker is just a good chance for everyone to relax and work off tension without killing things or blowing shit up.”

Sephiroth was once again struck by Strife’s insight. “I have no need to ‘work off tension’,” he said dismissively. He was entirely capable of keeping his emotions and stress levels balanced.

But the blond snorted in disagreement. “What, ‘cause you’re some Perfect Soldier? Nobody’s perfect, and that’s what makes us…” He paused in thought. “-who we are. Everybody has weaknesses and strengths, so a lot can be accomplished when people work together.”

It had been noted in Strife’s file that the cadet had been rather antisocial, stubborn, and a bit of a loner. Another conflicting piece of information.

When Strife made a face at his own words, Sephiroth smirked slightly in amusement. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

The blond coughed. “Right. Well, anyway, the point is that I’m sure you have tension to work off just like everyone else, and sometimes indulging in an activity that may appear useless can do the most for your soldier’s moral as well as your mood.”

Again he was making observations that would have been understandable from Zack, but less so from himself. Another inconsistency between his file and reality. “You appear to have some understanding of psychology. From my knowledge, you chose not to take that class during your cadet training.”

Strife stared at him as they finally reached the 61st floor. “Have you read my whole file?” Sephiroth just watched his reaction. Slight surprise, but nothing else of note. “Well, psychology is basically just common sense, which I have a hefty amount of unlike Zack who managed to break a chair.”

“I heard that, Spike!”

Sephiroth watched with some amusement at the blond’s startled expression. That amusement disappeared into the deadly silence of his own mind as he caught sight of what was in the puppy’s mouth. “First Lieutenant Zack Fair. Why are you eating chocolate on my leather furniture?” My chocolate went unsaid.

The following moments moved at a blur of speed only SOLDIERS were capable of as Sephiroth tried to grab the miscreant for daring to touch his chocolate. His stores had already suffered unacceptable losses after all the late nights he’d been working on that project for Shinra, and he hadn’t been able to stock up again yet. He had hit the bottom of the barrel and Zack dared?

Finally they ended up in Sephiroth’s office after he swiped a letter opener off Cynthia’s desk in lieu of Masamune. He had suffered Zack’s indiscretion with his supplies for long enough. The thief needed a reminder of-

An obstacle had appeared in his way. Classification: civilian. He hesitated, looking back and forth between the civilian and his sworn enemy. How could he dissuade the chocolate thief if he could get at him?

They were talking. Sephiroth measured projected paths and the environment available to him to entrap the thief. While his sword was only seven feet away, the exit to the room was right behind him. In the time it would take to get his weapon, the thief would have run out of the room with his
hostage.

The civilian was looking far more agitated now, and Sephiroth frowned slightly as a commanding tone exited the smaller body. “-muscle, that does not mean I’m suitable as a meat shield! So kindly get out from behind me before I break the rest of the chair on your head!”

To his surprise, Zack released his captive and watched the unexpected threat with a wary expression. Sephiroth turned his attention to the blond who had cowed his First Lieutenant with such ease.

“Zack, if you’re going to be a distraction and destroy more property, maybe your energies would be better spent doing some work?”

Sephiroth was impressed with his execution. No-nonsense, commanding…

The puppy pouted at him. “I was just acting as moral sup- I mean, stop channelling Seph! You’re supposed to take my side of things!”

…and it was actually working? Zack looked sufficiently cowed, whereas when Sephiroth demanded the same things, he grinned with a nervous laugh and changed the subject.

The blond rolled his eyes and gave the chair a caustic look, as though it had done him some personal injustice. “Did you break this thing on purpose or something? Or did you trip and your head broke off the back legs? No wait. Let me guess. You were leaning back on the legs and just happened to drop your entire weight on the chair.”

Sephiroth stared. How had he figured that out? The General added another point under ‘deductive reasoning skills’ to his mental list of the Strife Quandary.

“Uh- Perhaps Spike’s right Seph and I’ll just uh, go do that paperwork. Yeah.”

Sephiroth watched him take off with no little amount of incredulity. When he turned his attention back to the blond, he was wrapped up in examining the chair still knocked over on the floor. Realizing that he had missed his chance to get back at Zack, he let out a small, annoyed huff and went back to his desk. Might as well get some work done.

Sephiroth settled in his chair and put the letter opener still in his hand in his desk. He’d return it to Cynthia’s desk later.

“I hate to bother you, General, but I had a couple questions.”

Sephiroth glanced up from the form he’d been reading for a second, confirming that it was indeed the blond. “Yes?”

“Do you happen to have a Fire materia that I could borrow?”

He raised an eyebrow. A Fire materia? What in the world did he need that for? Interested to see, he went over to his weapons cabinet and unlocked it. Taking the Fire materia out, he tossed it at the custodian, noticing with approval that his hand eye coordination allowed him to catch it without a blink.

“Thanks. And also… did you want me to leave the room? I’m probably going to be a bit loud, hammering.”

Sephiroth thought about it for a second, the majority of his mind already back on the papers in
front of him. “You are hardly as disruptive as Zack.” He doubted the blond could be loud enough and talk for long enough to actually distract him.

A few minutes later, a red glow flared through the room, making Sephiroth look up from his papers to see that not only was Strife using the materia without equipping it, but he had the control necessary to keep it at the proper temperature for metalsmithing.

*How?*

Sephiroth watched out of the corner of his eye as Strife calmly started to beat one of the nail heads into a point on his improvised anvil. His expression showed no signs of difficulty or fatigue, merely concentration as he worked on his task.

What in Planet had Strife done to fail his SOLDIER exam?

Turning to his computer, he quickly drew up the cadet file for Cloud Strife again. He’d already read through it before, but he hadn’t bothered to go into exam details. Pulling up the report for the exam, he stared in incomprehension at the list of dismal marks before him. Strife had struggled in many of his academic courses. Upon closer examination of attached pre-Shinra records, he discovered that before becoming a cadet, he hadn’t actually gone to a proper school. He’d done a few years as a young child in the Nibelheim public school before he’d stopped. There were no reasons cited, and five years later he had applied for the SOLDIER program. His hand-to-hand instructor had nothing good to say about him, and his sword instructor had a better review, though it was still lack lustre in its delivery. His materia scores were less than average.

Sephiroth glanced at the blond calmly sitting on the floor, working on the last nail in the first leg.

How was that even possible? Had the instructor been purposely lowering his marks? Had Strife not been applying himself? If he’d had a change of heart that eventually ended in him dropping out of the army altogether, how long had it been going on for? Did this substantiate any of his hypotheses? Without speaking to the instructors themselves, he would likely never know, and as it was it was highly unlikely that they would remember the below average and highly unimpressive – *on paper* – country bumpkin.

Sephiroth had witnessed the blond’s ability with a sword himself. His reaction times were fast as well, proven by the way he had moved to defend himself from McPhry’s broken sword. Not to mention his control with a materia was on par with the best – Sephiroth was one of the few in the SOLDIER program who could use a materia unequipped, let alone regulate power usage like Strife was.

He stared down at the papers on his desk in thought, mind mentally organizing and what he knew into three lists that he attached to his internal file of the blond. First was his lacklustre cadet information summarized, then his pros and cons as a recruit.

His mind focused on the more pertinent information. His hand to hand had thrown a SOLDIER. His sword play was obviously above average. Had a strong and stubborn personality, and had proven himself to be rather resourceful and sensible.

On the other side of things, he had proven to be somewhat unstable. While it seemed he had recovered from his ‘episode’ without any lingering affects, his propensity for erratic behaviour was alarming. Something had set him off that night and shattered those protective walls.

And Sephiroth wanted to know. Wanted to know why this man had had marks bad enough to fail his SOLDIER exam. Wanted to know the source of his paradoxical unstable stability.
He’d decided.

Sephiroth closed the files open on his computer and went back to his work, mind settled and clearer than it had been for a while now that he had a plan formulated and ready to execute. A few minutes later, a Fire materia was placed gently on his desk, and he looked up from his work to see Cloud looking at him expectantly, the fixed chair upright behind him.

Without a word, he reached into his drawer and pulled out the gift that he had decided on after speaking with Zack on the matter. He wasn’t accustomed to apologies.

Placing the tin on the front of his desk next to the Fire materia, he watched the blond expectantly. He didn’t disappoint, eventually taking the gift hesitantly and looking it over. When he removed the lid, his expression showed a hint of surprise, but not much else, as he had fallen behind his walls once more.

Or perhaps it was the persona that was pulled away.

Sephiroth, his mind running over the new possibilities, watched attentively as Cloud unwrapped his secondary gift and read the message within with a puzzled expression on his face that quickly unfolded into sheer disbelief. Blue eyes looked up to meet his own.

“What’s this for?”

Sephiroth frowned at the tone of the man’s voice. Had he miscalculated?

“I mean, I appreciate it certainly, but why?”

The General looked out his window for a moment as he formulated the best way to express his apology and the decision he’d come to. Multiple lines of thought snapping together into one unified whole, he turned his gaze back to the confused man before him. “I know you have some form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. You showed all the signs of it the other night. I wanted to… apologize on my part for triggering an episode.” The blond’s expression slackened, mouth opening in surprise as his he stared at Sephiroth with dazed eyes. “While I would like to believe that such things are prevented in the SOLDIER program, I am aware of the lengths cadets will go to when put in stressful circumstances. This does not absolve them of their actions, however.” He paused. He still had no conclusive evidence on the nature of how Strife had developed PTSD, but he used a suitably vague and mostly likely accurate supposition. It was criminal that someone displaying his talent and so many of the characteristics desired in SOLDIER had somehow failed or lost the drive to continue. “While it may be too late to change things, I’d like you to know that if you would like to test for SOLDIER again without returning to the program first or joining the regular army, I would make an exception.”

The blond’s mouth opened a few times before he found his voice. “I… Where did- why would you- what made you think-”

Sephiroth watched in some amusement as the blonds thoughts went tumbling out of his head in his bafflement. “I have seen your sword practice, although it was without a blade. Zack also noted that during the program you were likely a victim of your peers.” Sephiroth had in fact gathered most of his Intel in regards to the blond’s ‘situation’ from pieces of memory and long-winded rants Zack had subjected him to over the months. “I have seen you to be hard working, self-sufficient, resourceful, creative when solving problems, capable with materia, and knowledgeable in psychology relating to this profession. I believe you would do well in SOLDIER, regardless of your past testing history.”
When Strife continued to stare at him in disbelief, not saying anything, the General continued. “You don’t need to give an answer now, just be aware that it is in an option in four months time.”

“The Turks are trying to recruit me,” he blurted out, surprising Sephiroth as new possibilities ran through his mind. He pressed his lips together in displeasure. Tseng.

“And I take it by your wording that you have not yet accepted?”

Strife twitched, a grimace twisted his face. “No. However, they may… force the issue.”

“Yes, they are known to do that.”

“I may not know what I want to do with my future yet, but I definitely don’t want to join the Turks.”

That made Sephiroth’s relax a bit. He absolutely despised when the Turks got the pick from his recruits. Especially when they stole the good ones. “I will speak to Tseng if you intend to take the SOLDIER examination in four months. Otherwise, there is little I can do.”

The blond grimaced. “I’m… not sure what I want to do yet, General. It’s a lot to think about.”

It wasn’t an outright refusal, so he had gotten better than Zack in that regard. “Very well then. Dismissed.”

Strife raised an eyebrow but gathered his things and left nonetheless without a word. Sephiroth watched him go with a contemplative expression. Would he choose to join SOLDIER or continue to waste himself as a custodian for Shinra Company?

It was hard to say.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

Mwaha! Phase One is almost complete. Soon, we’ll be on to Phaaase Twooo~

This chapter was at times fun and a half to write, and irritating and a half to work out. I hope the over all effect was satisfying, enlightening, and enjoyable to read. I always finish Sephiroth POVs second guessing myself, because he’s such a complicated ASSHOLE! Thanks for nothing Seph! You’ve nearly given me grey hair!

I also realize that I’m making Reno rather unlikable. As much as I love Reno-centric fics, however, his rather complex character will lend itself to some… complicated stuff in the future. I appreciate everyone giving me their C/R opinions!

OMFG I have to rec this to all of you. This fic is HIGHLARIOUS. Found it on Momonster’s favs list, and I was in fits laughing for the whole thing. :D http://www.fanfiction.net/s/5063674/1/Unconventional The ending was all kinds of sugar coated goo (cough) but the beginning is hilarious!!
Also, if any of you by chance read this again, I have a suggested a couple songs for your reading entertainment. :)

First Scene: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkILUsJmL8Q (Choir’s first lyrics you hear are in Latin, and I’ve sung in Latin and I can’t pick out a single bloody consonant, so I assigned the following lyrics to the first ‘verse’: Coffee, goddamnit, goddamnit, shame on you, coffee, goddamnit, goddamnit, shame on you, Sephiroth! Sephiroth!)

Second scene (Cue: The Phone Call): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50QLQWhTDW8 (Aaand repeat when Seph misses him on the elevator. Poor guy)

Happy reads, yo
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy

Chapter Nine:

Cloud woke feeling incredibly groggy, disoriented, and nauseous. Rolling out of bed, he frowned when he didn’t recognize the room he was in. What the…? His memory of the previous night was foggy.

Blue eyes narrowed as he put two and two together. He remembered Reno in the closet, and Sephiroth afterwards, but not much past his run the night before.

He cursed under his breath. Never trust a Turk. He’d gotten his ass into this situation going home with the only familiar guy in the bar because he’d thought he could handle him. Then he’d almost gotten killed and found himself owing the guy a few dates.

Just great.

Making his way over to what appeared to be the ‘facilities’, he emptied his stomach into the ceramic bowl before resting his tired body against the wall and thinking. He wasn’t wearing his own clothes. He wasn’t in Reno’s apartment, because there weren’t any doors or windows that he could see. Likely the seals were so tight, he wouldn’t know the exit until a Turk wandered in with his breakfast.

That was, if they decided to feed him. Asshole Reno. The guy may have promised to not ask him about being a Turk for a week, but apparently ‘kidnapping’ didn’t fall under that rule.

At least they had given him a cell with a bed, sink, and toilet. Pulling himself to his feet, he stumbled over to the sink and rinsed out his mouth out before taking a few mouthfuls and swallowing. When his stomach settled, apparently happy with what it had retched, he drank a bit more. From the nausea and grogginess, he’d probably been dosed with some sort of tranquilizer, likely in his sleep if he hadn’t seen it coming.

His memories would either come back or not, so Cloud didn’t let himself worry about it as he drank some more water before heading over to the bed and crawling back under the covers. Laying on his back with his arms above the blanket, he closed his eyes and slowly lowered himself into a deeply meditative state while his body recovered. He doubted he’d be able to sleep for the foreseeable future, so this was a suitable alternative. He’d sense someone coming before they were in range of him.

Some hours later, Cloud heard a door open and immediately sat up in bed, eyeing the unfamiliar Turk that entered cautiously.

“Get up.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow but stood up, far more steady on his feet now that his body had recovered from the shock to his system. The Turk then grabbed him by the arm with the intention of leading
Cloud broke his grip, snapped his arm, and threw him bodily into the sink before bolting out of the room like a chocobo running from an army of Midgar Zoloms. Reno and Rude were outside the door. Cloud pilfered the redhead’s night stick before he could react, nailing the Turk with it on the back of his neck as revenge. Reno dropped like a stone, but Rude landed on him in the next moment, his entire weight bearing down on Cloud as he tried to grapple him into a lock.

Shit. Cloud tried to get out of the hold without much luck, considering their difference in body mass. Once you got an Aikido master pinned on the ground, he wasn’t much use anymore unfortunately.

But Cloud had a night stick. Turning up the power to full, he tagged Rude on the ass and clenched his jaw when some of the voltage got him too. When he was sure the bigger man was sufficiently stunned, he twisted out from under his body and looked around for an exit.

Where the hell was he? This didn’t look like any of the Turk offices in the Shinra building. Picking the hallway that had the least amount of noise coming from it, he took off at a full out run, very glad that he’d been doing consistent endurance training for the past two months. He could run at a full sprint for an hour if he needed to.

Finally getting to the end of the hallway, he pushed himself through the door and stared at the sight before him. Where the hell was he? The décor was enough to make him gag with how much money it must have cost, and the marble floors were so shiny he could see his face in them.

Alarmed voices behind him. Shit. They knew he’d gotten out then. Running for the stairs, he swore when he saw a man running up them towards him. Running towards the side stairs, he jumped on the banister and ran down it, jumping off the end of it and hitting the ground at a roll that spun smoothly back into a full out sprint. More alarmed voices now. Cloud glanced around him to see more bodyguards running from doorways around the huge hall. He needed to find an exit. And fast.

The first suit caught him halfway across the giant dance floor. Cloud pulled out all the stops, easily slipping around him and directing the man’s own momentum to send him flying into two of his counterparts. The second came at him from the right, reaching for him with both arms. Cloud grabbed his wrists and directed his arms away before shifting the man’s weight into a throw that took out the grunts sneaking up on him from the left.

Breaking into another run, he grunted as a sharp pain nearly took out his leg. Shit. He’d been shot. Breaking into a chaotic, turning pattern, he danced across the floor, using every ounce of self control he possessed to keep his leg functioning at full capacity.

Just as he made it to the double doors, they swung open to reveal Tseng in all of his glory. Cloud didn’t let himself think or pause.

The taller man burst into action as they collided in a series of fast attacks. Cloud waited until the right moment when he had led Tseng to run at him in an attack before abruptly switching styles from Tifa’s more fists-on approach to the hands-on approach of Aikido.

Unfortunately, Tseng grabbed him before he could execute the full throw and both of them nearly went down. Cloud broke himself from the Wutaian’s grasp and stepped back, eyes narrowed in assessment.
Why wasn’t he surprised Tseng had faced Aikido before. Perhaps he even had training it in himself. Shit.

“That’s a very interesting style there, Mr. Strife. Where did you learn it?”

Cloud said nothing, staring him down.

Tseng smirked. “That’s a very nice expression on your face, Mr. Strife. Reno said you were quite the spectacle to witness, but I hadn’t quite believed it until I saw it myself.” He his head slightly to the left. “Do you like what you see, sir?”

Cloud stiffened and followed the Wutaian’s glance to none other than Rufus Shinra, Vice President and son of the current President of Shinra.

Rufus smirked. “I do. He will be a wonderful addition to the Turks.”

Alarm made the blond stiffen for a moment before he forced his body to relax. He couldn’t be tense as a rock if he expected to be able to move with any level of freedom. “I have no intention of becoming a member of the Turks,” he bit out, mood darkening more by the minute. “And I don’t appreciate being kidnapped.”

But the other blond just continued to smirk. “Your mind will change soon enough.”

Something hit Cloud in the back of the head, and darkness swallowed him whole.

Cloud came to in a cell that didn’t even attempt to hide the fact that it was a cell, like the last one had. It was a somewhat large room with one chair in the middle bolted to the floor, and he was currently chained to it at the wrists and ankles.

If he had been enhanced, he could have stood up and ripped the damned chair right out of the floor.

Looking around the room, he noted the security cameras and the two guards standing at attention at the door. They didn’t even twitch or show any signs that they had noticed him awake, though the sunglasses over their eyes probably didn’t help. What was it with grunts wearing sunglasses to look cool? In bad lighting you couldn’t see shit, and if a bomb blew up in your face the last thing you were worried about was spots in your vision.

Cloud closed his eyes and bowed his head. Now was no time to freak out. They were trying to make him unbalanced by leaving him here and tying him down in what was obviously an interrogation room. He needed to regain his centre and balance if he was going to figure a way out of this situation.

The door opened, and Cloud kept his head down. A pair of shiny Turk shoes walked up to him before standing there, waiting.

Let them wait. He wasn’t cracking first.

“I know you’re awake,” Tseng’s smooth voice echoed slightly in the room.

Cloud didn’t respond. He expected to get punched across the face, but the Turk merely took hold of his chin with a hand and pulled his head up.

“Being stubborn isn’t going to get you anywhere;” Tseng stated matter-of-factly.
The blond raised an eyebrow. “I was under the assumption that being stubborn had got me in this cell. So in that, you’re wrong.”

Amusement flashed across the man’s face. “I do not wish this to become violent. However, I am willing to give you one more chance to join the Turks here, and now.”

Cloud just stared him down. “Why is all this so important to you? Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

Tseng released his chin, but ran a hand down his neck to his collarbone. Cloud didn’t twitch. He knew the Turk was just trying to unsettle him, make him uncomfortable, make his mind race with all the possible things that could be done to him. Standard interrogation tactic, though one of the more subtle ones.

So. Mind games it was then.

“You’re far too useful to leave rotting in a janitorial position. The army’s loss, in this case, is our gain.”

“And how do you expect me to do the job if I don’t want to be a Turk to begin with?”

Tseng just smiled. “I’m sure you can find some… incentive. How’s your mother doing? I hear she’s having difficulty paying for her medical bills.”

Cloud’s insides froze. Medical bills? He wracked his memory. He couldn’t remember anything about medical bills. Well, he couldn’t remember much about her period. From her phone number to her address.

Guilt curdled his stomach. He’d completely forgotten about her. She’d been so far outside his psyche for so long that he’d forgotten she existed.

It was hard to miss a person you didn’t remember, after all. Sure, he knew that his entire village had been burned to the ground, but the only person from there he remembered was Tifa. She’d helped him recover a few memories of his time before over the years, as well as sort out the mass of memories that had led him to believe he was Zack, but all the ones that had come back had been related to her.

Not his ‘mother’.

He considered his words carefully. Was he already supposed to know about this? Had she kept it secret from him and Tseng was hoping to get a reaction out of him? How did he get more information without making it obvious that he didn’t remember a damn thing?

Thankfully, the stony expression he had adopted upon waking up in the interrogation room served him well, as his lack of reaction was what made Tseng speak again.

“She was diagnosed a year ago, wasn’t she? It’s unfortunate that you didn’t make it into SOLDIER, as I imagine you would have been making more money there. Perhaps even enough to put her in a better hospital. A hospital capable of taking care of her needs.”

Cloud stared up into the man’s confident face, mind swimming at the ramifications.

He needed time to absorb this. Closing his eyes, he let his head drop again.
“I’ll give you a few hours to think it over, Cloud.”

He hated that Tseng had the gall to use his first name.

Ignoring the feet that he heard walking away, the blond focused himself inward, shifting through memories and trying to come to a decision concerning his current situation. How could he get Tseng to let him go, or if that failed, how could he escape? After escaping the hallway and finding himself in that ballroom, not to mention Rufus’s presence, it seemed logical to assume that he was in one of the Vice President’s safe houses or homes. Unfortunately, from what he’d seen, he couldn’t recall having been here before.

And that made things more difficult. If he had some idea of the structure of the building, or the floor plan, then he could have figured out some escape routes. As it was, however, he’d be forced to fly by the seat of his pants.

And no one was coming to rescue him. AVALANCHE didn’t even know he existed, Zack was away on a mission up north, and Sephiroth…

Well, what was the likelihood that the General would notice before he wound up dead in a ditch somewhere?

Perhaps… if he caved… he could escape later…

His lips tightened in displeasure, immediately dismissing the idea. He wouldn’t be able to escape the Turks, not with his lacking connections and Shinra’s current power over the Planet. He’d be a rat running around in a maze until a sniper put him out of his misery.

Even if he escaped from Tseng now, the man would track him down. Maybe not before he got to Sephiroth, however. The General had said that if he agreed to test for SOLDIER again, that he would ‘speak’ to Tseng.

Sephiroth was probably the only one who could defy the Turks and get away with it, after all. As loath as Cloud was to run to him for ‘safety’, his options were limited.

And if he couldn’t escape, then he had to figure out some way to convince Tseng to let him go. Maybe if he told the Turk about the SOLDIER offer…?

It was worth a shot.

Decision made, he settled back to wait, using the time given to him to meditate.

When the door opened once more, he was ready for whatever the Turk threw at him. If he’d survived Hojo, he could survive this.

“Heave you decided to join the Turks, then?”

It wasn’t Tseng. Cloud opened his eyes and raised his head, staring at the man he had never seen before. “Who are you?” he demanded, looking back and forth between him and Tseng, who stood by the door with a blank expression, watching the proceedings.

The older man came forward, a piece of brown hair swinging into his vision that he didn’t seem to mind. His eyes were warm, but the lines on his face created a stern visage. This and his manner screamed leader.

“My name is Veld. I am the head of the Turks.” He smiled a friendly smile, eyes not even scanning
over the chains that held Cloud in place. Despite his apparent congeniality, there was an overall edge to the man that couldn’t be ignored. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Cloud Strife. I’ve heard many interesting things.”

Cloud stared him down, not reacting.

Veld looked at Tseng with a questioningly raised eyebrow. “He seems rather quiet, Tseng. From what Reno said, he was quite the chatterbox with the General.” His eyes sparkled as they turned back to Cloud. “Do we intimidate you, Cloud?”

Still, he said nothing. He understood enough psychology to recognize what the man was trying to do, and he wasn’t falling for it.

“Well this is disappointing, Tseng. I thought you had already gone over the particulars with him?”

“I did, sir. He has been very resistant.”

Veld hummed thoughtfully, running a finger and thumb along the line of hair on his jaw. “Well this is no good.”

Cloud glanced back and forth between them. The game was beginning to annoy him. Should he present his case?

“I had thought you would see sense, Cloud. Why do you continue to fight this?”

Cloud made a calculated risk. “The only question you’ve asked me thus far is whether or not you intimidate me. I had thought you would see otherwise, Turk. Perhaps I misjudged your observation skills.”

Veld’s eyes lit up as he broke into a laugh. “There! That’s the spirit Reno was talking about. I’m glad to see you haven’t broken so easily, Cloud. I was very impressed viewing the footage of your escape. You have a lot of promise.”

The Turk still hadn’t asked the question, and it was beginning to bother him. Enough with the games already.

“So tell me, Cloud, where did you learn Aikido? Tseng says that your understanding of the style was beyond just a novice, and I find this very interesting. Where could you have learned Wutaian arts?”

There was that glint in his eyes again. Cloud said nothing, going with the easiest response. Lying would make it easier for them to entrap him, and that was the last thing he wanted. They were Turks. They would have already searched his history, not to mention they knew more about his time in Nibelheim than he did. He couldn’t have lied even if he wanted to.

“Are you a Wutai spy then?”

Cloud raised an unimpressed eyebrow. Wutai spy? He had blond hair and blue eyes. He came from a mountain hovel in the middle of nowhere.

Veld chuckled. “We had a report of a mysterious blond on a distinct motorcycle that beat up some Wutaian in the slums and apparently knew Wutaian. Are you this individual?”

Shit. How had they- No Wutaian would have reported that. It must have been one of the Turk’s informants. He’d been careless, yelling at them in Wutaian out in the open like that. He’d just been
so pissed off that they were trying to steal Sephiroth’s bike.

“I’m not sure if you were aware of this yet, but your friend Zack died last night during the assault.”

Cloud’s eyes snapped to Tseng, who had spoken in Wutaian. They were lying. There was no way Zack had died. He carefully kept any expression off his face and looked back to Veld. He was the more dangerous one, with his genial smile and deadly underpinnings.

“Perhaps you can answer this then… Why does the General keeping asking you to fix things for him?”

Cloud said nothing again, and Veld was beginning to look a little annoyed. The blond watched as the head of the Turks let out a breath before walking straight out of the room.

Tseng stayed behind. When the Turk walked up to him and punched him across the face, Cloud let his head move with the blow but wasn’t particularly surprised. He merely turned his head to face Tseng again and stared him down. The Turk punched him on the other side of the face.

They stared each other down. Tseng pulled out a knife and stabbed him in the leg.

Cloud couldn’t keep the grimace of pain off his face as the blade was twisted, but he said nothing, not even when the Turk dragged it up and cut even farther into the muscle of his leg.

When the Turk made to go for the other leg, Cloud bit out, “Wait.”

Tseng paused and raised an eyebrow expectantly.

The blond licked his lips, keeping his breathing as even as possible in spite of the burning pain in his leg. “Sephiroth offered me a chance to take the SOLDIER exam again. I’d rather be SOLDIER.”

The Turk raised an eyebrow. “And why would Sephiroth do that? Your last test results were abysmal.”

Cloud glared. “Why don’t you call and ask him?”

Tseng chuckled. “What would be the point of that? We don’t want SOLDIER to have you.”

Blue eyes narrowed. So, they didn’t care then. Well, that made things both easier and more difficult. With the way things were going, they might knife him until he died. Or they might knife him until he was close to death and then Cure him and do it all over again.

He was beginning to feel a bit woozy from blood loss. He weighed his options. He really didn’t want to become a Turk. As soon as he got caught in that death trap, he’d never escape.

Hope began to dwindle as he deadened himself inside. Might as well prepare himself for the inevitable.

But instead Tseng stepped away from him and walked out of the room.

Cloud stared after him, uncomprehending, leg burning and aching with each beat of his heart.

A moment later, Veld and Tseng walked back in, Veld holding a green ball in his hand. A moment later, a Cure had been cast and the materia slipped away again.
Veld reached into his suit and pulled out a syringe. Cloud blanched and stared at it, noting the mako glow to the greenish liquid. The head of the Turks raised an eyebrow at him as he pulled out the cap and tapped it, making sure any air bubbles had reached the top before squirting a bit of the liquid out to make sure. “What, you don’t like needles?”

Cloud’s vision swam for a moment from a mix of the bloodloss and his nausea. He hated needles. Needles reminded him of Hojo. Hojo reminded him of mako tanks and fire burning through his entire body.

Before he could so much as say a word, the needle was jabbed into his shoulder and injected. Cloud flinched and gasped at the familiar burning sensation. “What… what did you drug me with?”

Veld smiled genially, patting Cloud’s cheek. “Just a little truth serum to smooth things along.”

“But…” Cloud’s mind swam. “Mako…” Mako. There was mako, all around him. He could see the green glow and he moaned, straining against the restraints as he tried to breath. He needed out, he needed to get out.

Veld frowned as the blond man they had captured moaned and pulled against his restraints before abruptly collapsing forward, the only thing holding him upright the arms chained behind his back.

He traded a look with Tseng and raised an eyebrow in silent communication, holding up the empty syringe. The taller man shrugged slightly, expression bewildered. Frowning, the head of the Turks returned his attention to Strife and brought a hand forward to raise the man’s head.

He didn’t expect his hand to be bitten.

Pulling it back with a loud curse, he nursed his abused digits and eyed the red teeth marks that now marred his skin. What the hell? Grabbing the man’s hair, he yanked back his lolling head and stared in incomprehension at the sight of glazed, glowing blue eyes.

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The glow was almost nonexistent, but for a Turk who worked with SOLDIERs on a regular basis, it was easily noticed.

The most glaring issue there was that the blond was not a SOLDIER, and the mako-laced truth serum shouldn’t have had this kind of effect. The traces of mako were close to non-existent, and all the mixture did was enhance the effects of the truth serum itself. It shouldn’t have made the blond’s eyes glow.

“Tseng?” he questioned, snapping his fingers in front of the non-responsive and dilated eyes of the man they had decided to recruit.

Before the man could respond, the nearly-catatonic blond murmured something.

“You… will be my… living… legacy…”

The blank face dissolved into one of horror and sadness as he bent his head back and let out a cry of agony, tears falling from his eyes. Veld stared as the blond who had been completely stoic and
unbendable before broke down before their eyes, the sound echoing eerily in the room as it dissolved into a glassy, dead eyes in an even blanker face than before.

Abruptly, lucidity shifted behind those eyes as they looked down from the ceiling and focused on him. Not his face, but chest. What was he seeing with those dead eyes? Veld hadn’t been expecting this when he’d dosed the man with truth serum.

“Turks…” slipped from slack lips as the blond stared at them.

“You know, I always thought that your suits were the most hideous blue on the planet. What happened to a normal black? Or dark blue? Far more menacing than the popsicle sticks you guys look like now.” A good-natured grin.

Veld stared at the abrupt shift, trying to reconcile the easy grin and bright eyes with the glassy-eyed doll that had been sitting there a moment before.

“I beg your pardon?” slipped from his mouth without his permission.

The blond just laughed and tilted his head to the side, that same, eerie grin on his face. “Oh come on, don’t tell me you’ve never thought about it, Turk-dude! Black would be so much more… mysterious. Intimidating. Professional. This blue shit makes you look like a bunch of girls! SOLDIER blue is much more intimidating. We got dark colours, distinguished colours, manly colours.”

Veld stared at the blond for a long moment before looking at Tseng. His second in command seemed to be as lost as he was at the recent turn of behaviour. Without a word, Veld motioned for Tseng to stay for a moment while he went outside and talked to Reno.

The redhead was standing guard outside, a bored look on his face.

“Reno.”

The younger Turk barely twitched at the sight of him, nodding his head in acknowledgement and shifting his posture to an even more relaxed slouch.

“Has Strife every shown signs of mental instability?”

The redhead’s slate-coloured eyes widened. “Huh? What do you mean?”

Veld fingered his moustache in thought. “You described him as having attitude, but also maturity and control when you went out to dinner with him. With Sephiroth he acted rather belligerent. However, when we began to question him, he was completely shut down, and now he’s had another shift after we dosed him with truth serum. He’s almost a completely different person. It doesn’t look like an allergic reaction, but… I’ve never seen anything like this. Do any drugs below plate cause this kind of… instability?”

Reno’s expression darkened in thought. “Not that I know of. I mean, they can make you go crazy because of withdrawal and shit, or hallucinate, but not the kind you’re talkin’ about.”

Veld hummed thoughtfully before motioning for the redhead to follow him back in.

“-know I’ve always wondered what’s with the dot on your forehead. Why that colour? Why right smack in the middle? Does it have to do with some kind of Wutaian voodoo that if you don’t have a dot on your forehead you don’t go to the afterlife? Or is it more like a sign of status? Oh wait, you were kicked out of Wutai or something weren’t you. Daaamn. Does that mean it’s a sign of
awesomeness or is it some kind of super mark of shame? Hm?”

Veld shut the door behind him and closed his eyes at the sound of the blond’s voice, almost unrecognizable from before. This blond was beginning to sound like more trouble than he was worth.

Turning around, he noted Reno’s bizarre expression and walked forward.

“We have questions for you, and you’re going to answer them.”

The blond tilted his head to the side and gave him a confused expression. “Uh, why wouldn’t I? Shoot away, Turk-dude. Though, do you think you could tell me why I’m tied up? I don’t remember breaking any of your equipment… recently… Look, the chair was a mistake alright?! I didn’t mean to, honest!”

Veld just stared.

“I’m not here about a chair.”

The expression twisted with worry faded into a blank, blinking visage before brightening again. “Oh! Okay, good then. So, whaddya wanna know, Turk-dude? I’m afraid I don’t share the numbers of the ladies I woo, so you’ll have to just do the leg work yourself.” The blond winked at him with a grin.

Veld glanced at Reno and gave him a ‘see what I mean?’ expression. The redhead looked like he’d just been hit over the head with a brick.

“I want to know if you’re a Wutai spy.”


Veld didn’t answer the question. “Can you speak Wutaian?”

The man gave him a funny look before spacing out in thought. “Uh… I think I remember a few things. Like… hello. And… don’t eat my balls. Wait, no that can’t be right…”

Veld’s Wutaian wasn’t nearly as good as Tseng’s, but by the way he’d snorted at that last phrase, the Head Turk must have heard correctly. The blond’s accent was also positively atrocious.

Well, that answered some of their concerns. “Very well. And why do you refuse to join the Turks?”

The expression the blond shot him implied that not only did he think Veld was retarded, he didn’t know whether to laugh or punch him. “Turk?! I’m SOLDIER man, to the bone! I’d never make good Turk material. Why the hell you askin’ that, anyway? Seems like a dumb question to me.”
Veld frowned. “SOLDIER?”

The blond raised an eyebrow. “Uh, yeah? Hence the awesome, you know. And the glowy eyes.”

Now Veld was beginning to become convinced he didn’t want this man in his Turks. What kind of psychotic break led a man to think he was a SOLDIER? “Prove you’re a SOLDIER then. Break out of those chains.”

The blond gave him a funny look. “Well, I was just tryin’ to be polite, but if you insist…” He pulled against the restraints, a funny look crossing his face when they didn’t break. “Huh. You guys are real serious, aren’t ya.” He shrugged and leaned back in the chair, apparently finding a bit of dirt on the ground particularly interesting.

Veld shared a look with Tseng before turning his attention to Reno. “Can you try to snap him out of this?”

The redhead shook himself and put on his usual grin as he stepped forward. “Hey hotstuff. I had a question about our arrangement.”

The blond blinked at him before frowning. “Arrangement? I’m pretty sure we’ve never made an arrangement of any kind.”

Reno’s grin just widened. “Sure we did. Don’t you remember me blowing you last night? Said it was some of the best head you’ve ever had.”

And Veld watched as the imperturbable blond blushed beet red and spluttered, blue eyes widening comically. He floundered for a good thirty seconds before choking and staring. “I’m pretty sure I would have remembered that. Did you date rape me or something?! Is this some kind of joke? Whatever it is you think I did, I’m sorry! Okay? So can you stop playing games and let me go?”

Reno turned and gave Veld another ‘what the fuck?’ look. The head of the Turks just shrugged. “Uh, look Blondie. The things you and I did the other night were completely consensual. You made sure of that.”

Blue eyes still continued to look alarmed. “I’m pretty sure I would have remembered turning gay overnight! This isn’t funny… any…” He looked back and forth between the deadly serious faces of the Turks in the room with him. His joking, light expression abruptly changed into one of pure seriousness. “Why am I here? This isn’t funny.”

Veld frowned. “You’re here because we have observed many inconsistencies concerning your records and your behaviour and skills over the past few weeks. We were going to offer you a place in the Turks…” But now we’re pretty sure you’re psychotic, or you have MPD.

The blond’s frown deepened. “Huh. And why would you do something like that?”

Veld had to suppress his amused and annoyed emotions so they wouldn’t show on his face. “Now? I have no idea.”

Zack watched the Turks leave with a frown. Why in the world would Turks want to recruit him? Nothing was making sense. Not to mention the thin chains they’d restrained him with. Who in their right mind put a SOLDIER in regular handcuffs and chains? He’d been expecting titanium, metal sleeves to hold his arms together, not this crap.
Not to mention that when he’d tested them the first time and made a face, they’d actually believed he hadn’t used his full strength.

Zack may be careless, energetic, and friendly, but he’d never been stupid.

He needed to blow this joint and find Seph. If anyone could help, it was the General.

After he’d waited a good thirty minutes and the Turks hadn’t come back in, he decided it was time to make his move. If they’d just stepped out for a short chat, they would have come back already. They were either reporting to their superior or trying to decide what they’d do next, so they probably wouldn’t still be standing out in the hallway.

Focusing the mako strength flowing through his veins, Zack snapped the handcuffs holding wrists together and got to work on the chains around his legs. Finally, he just got irritated with how stubborn they were being and pulled the steel chair out of the concrete it was bolted into. After that it was a simple enough matter of just walking out of his binds like one stepped out of dirty laundry.

Knowing that the door was made entirely of metal and he wouldn’t be able to kick it in, he stared ponderously at the chair and then the doorknob.

Perhaps it was time for a Sephironian trick. Walking up to the door, he knocked three times like the Turks had.

Aw drat, was this not going to work?

Just as he prepared to go back and grab the chair, the door opened. Zack slipped under the Turk’s outstretched arm and nailed him straight in the nuts.

The second Turk in the hallway pointed his gun, but Zack was too fast for him. With a grin, he bounced at the surprised man and got past his defences with a burst of mako-induced speed. After knocking out the second guy, he scratched his head and looked down both sides of the hallway.

With a shrug, he took off at his fastest run, enjoying the way his body seemed to buzz with energy. Just before he hit the door, he tried to slow down and noticed with some alarm that he didn’t even have shoes on. Pinwheeling to try and slow down, he caught himself on the frame of the door with a jarring thud. Giving his head a shake to clear the whiplash, he slipped out the door and glanced around.

Hmm… Large room. Ballroom, it looked like. Actually… He frowned. It looked a hell of a lot like the ballroom he’d been forced to go to for the annual Shinra… party…

His eyes widened in disbelief. He was in one of Shinra’s mansions?? Damn. Slipping off to the side, to a hidden door that he remembered from way back when he’d tested the security, he entered into the Servants Domain.

Because that’s what it was, really. No rich boys deigned to brave these tiny halls.

He made his way down the hallway and looked around curiously as the cramped space opened into what was obviously a laundry room. Piles of clothing gathered under chutes in the ceiling, and off to the side was a shelving unit with folded clothes on it. Looking down at his thin and quite obvious prison clothes, he wandered over to the shelves and pulled down what appeared to be a duplicate of maid outfits.

In fact, they were all maid outfits.
Zack scratched the back of his head. Looks like he’d have to bite this bullet!

It wasn’t the first time he’d cross dressed. No, Aerith was to blame for that… He shuddered at the memory of being dragged to girls night at a gay bar as ‘punishment’ for missing a date with her.

Pulling the dress on, he shoved a pair of socks into the chest area and tightened the bow around his waist to hide his more boxy frame. Pulling the stockings up over his hair-smattered legs, he slipped into a pair of shoes he guessed would fit decent. Nothing he wanted to be scaling walls with, but a SOLDIER had to do what a SOLDIER had to do.

Running a hand through his rather distinct, spiky hair with a frown, he looked around for any kind of maid-like head covering. Spying something on a nearby shelf, he brightened and grabbed it, pulling the cap on his head, shoving loose strands of hair inside, and tightening the dark blue strings that would hold it in place.

Looking down at himself, he hummed appreciatively. He pulled off navy blue good.

Picking the pile of prison clothes off the floor, he shoved them into a pile of what was most likely Shinra’s dirty underwear.

Eeew...

Now, to get out of here…

“You there!”

Zack kept walking as if he hadn’t heard, hoping whoever it was wasn’t talking to him.

A hand grabbed him and spun him around. He blinked wide-eyed at the woman standing there, looking quite imposing and generally pissed about life.

“What are you doing wandering around here when we have dinner to serve, hm? Laundry can wait until later tonight!”

Zack grinned sheepishly and did his best to look blushingly bashful. “I-I’m sorry! I’m just so—turned around today.” Giving the lady his best puppy dog eyes, he did his best to look sad and pitiful.

The lady’s expression softened. “Hm… Are you new, girl? I hadn’t realized Master Shinra had found another one.”

Zack’s eyes widened for a moment as he processed that. Oh right. He’d heard about Rufus banging the staff and occasionally hiring a pretty thing to keep her within… groping distance. Focusing on his embarrassment, he let the heat rush to his cheeks and bashfully looked down at the floor.

“Look. I understand you’re nervous, but you can’t hide back here forever. Did Agatha give you to someone to train?”

Zack chewed his lip and played with the edge of his skirt, hoping his pitiful display would incite her to throw him a bone.

Mission Escape the Hen House: Start

A hand snagged his chin and pulled his head up. He stared at the hard lines of the woman’s face with some amount of trepidation. Her eyes had softened, however, as they traveled over his face.
“You’re a cute one. Where did he find you?”

Zack’s mind drew a blank. He had no idea why he was here. Though, if that redheaded Turk was telling the truth, apparently he’d been… His face flushed red. He’d never been with a man. Didn’t want to be with a man. Still thought the Turk was messing with him.

Her eyes flashed knowingly. “One of his trysts, then. Did he just promise you a job or more?”

Zack shifted nervously. Well, didn’t really have an answer for that either.

Apparently women had some sort of unspoken secret language, though, because she just nodded knowingly and let him go. “Come. We’ve still dinner to serve. You can clean away the used plates, or something. You ever cleaned dishes before?”

Zack nodded energetically with a smile. He knew how to do that! There were usually backdoors near kitchens, too, so they could take the trash out. Perfect escape route.

She led him down another long hallway into a room that had the SOLDIER freezing in trepidation. The panic of the people rushing about was quite… well, it didn’t do much for his already jangled nerves. The lady dragged him over to the sink and got him to work drying dishes and stacking him on the counter for someone else to put away.

Zack used the moments he could spare his attention to assess the room and note the exits. When he saw one of the busboys take the trash out the far left door, he grinned slightly to himself and put another plate on the counter.

Mission Escape the Hen House: Exit Located

“You!”

Zack blinked as he was abruptly grabbed by the shoulder and dragged over by one of the cooks. He stared up at the man with trepidation as he was put in front of the food.

“You’re taking these out. The busboy’s already cleared the Master Shinra’s plates, but the usual server’s run off to the bathroom again. Bloody hormones. What are you doing staring at me, cotton-for-brains?! Get going!” the cook snapped irritably, motioning Zack out the door.

This…

Was not looking good.

Grabbing the plates in a daze, he absently noticed they were the exact same dish. Well, at least he didn’t have to tell what went where.

Going towards the door the cook at pointed to, he tentatively stuck his head out and sighed in relief when he noticed the long table was currently set for two people. When he walked the rest of the way into the room, he froze at the sight of the Turks at the exits to the room.

Come on Zack, act natural…

Making his way quickly over to the table, he placed one of the plates before the fatter and older President Shinra, eeping when his ass was pinched quite unnecessarily. Quickly making his way over to the Vice President’s seat, he placed the other plate before him and quickly sketched a bow before turning to leave.
“Wait.”

Zack froze and hesitantly turned back around, keeping his head low and his stance as demure and proper as he could.

“Come here.”

Zack walked closer to the Vice President and tried not to twitch suspiciously.

“Closer.”

Zack was standing just next to his chair now. A hand reached out and pulled up his chin. Zack blinked at him and hoped to the Goddess that the man didn’t recognize him.

Smug lips pulled into a wider smirk. “You’re cute. You shouldn’t be so nervous. I don’t... bite.”

“Rufus. If you could please keep such things outside of the dining hall?”

Annoyance flashed in the blond’s eyes as he glanced at his father. Probably because the President was such a hypocritical asshole. How dare he pinch this fine, masculine ass!

“You may go,” the Vice President said quietly, and Zack sketched another hasty bow before beating his retreat, careful not to meet the eyes of the Turks in the room.

Just as he was heading through the servant’s side door, Zack caught sight of Tseng coming through the main entrance to the hall with a stormy expression on his face.

Shit!

Slipping through the door, he went to the closest trash bin that looked moderately full and pulled it out, tying it and taking it out the door he’d seen the busboy go earlier. The cooks and dishwashers in the room barely gave him a passing glance.

The burst of fresh air was quite welcome. He stood there for a moment, taking stock of his surroundings and mentally comparing it to the mental map he had of the mansion.

They were in the back corner, and the only thing between him and freedom was a ridiculously tall wall, cameras, and security guards with machine guns.

Piece of cake.

Tossing the garbage into the bin on his way by, he ripped the white apron off and stuffed it down his front. Leave no evidence, make yourself less visible. Infiltration 101.

Reaching the edge of the building, he stayed close to the ground and watched the guard for a short while. If he could get up on the wall, it would be easy to use his feminine wiles and knock the guy out.

Not one for thinking much once he got the basic outline of a plan, Zack used every ounce of his mako-induced speed and raced towards the corner of the wall. Jumping from one side to the other, he got to the top of the wall and landed right at the feet of the security guard.

“Hey cutie,” he said with a grin before punching the guy in the face and catching his body before it hit the ground too hard. Grinning to himself, he eyed the other side of the wall and jumped over when he caught sight of the street.
That was the upside of in-town mansions. They were *in town*. Once you got out of the courtyard, and across the street, you were basically scot free.

Landing quietly on the ground, he streaked across the street and into a nearby alleyway. He didn’t stop to wait and see if he’d avoided suspicion, he just kept booting it for the one person he knew could get him out of this mess.

Never was he so glad Seph was sick of already living at the company enough to have a house in a residential area. Now it was merely a matter of getting from sector five to sector two.

Zack kept running in spite of the looming exhaustion he could feel in his body. He was slowing down, too. Had they drugged him? Maybe he hadn’t eaten in a few days. That was known to knock out a SOLDIER’s energy like a freight train. Something about mako making the body burn more food.

Zack had never bothered to pay attention to the particulars, he just knew he had to eat a lot.

At least he had quite a bit of stamina, he noted to himself with some confusion. He’d never been big on doing endurance training, but his body was still going pretty strong in spite of the fact that his speed had slowed to that of a normal man instead of the SOLDIER First Class he was.

Slipping onto the train platform, he momentarily panicked when he realized that he had no money on him.

Shit!

Looking around at the semi-busy evening crowd, he frowned and chewed his lip, trying to figure out how he was going to get to Seph’s now.

“Excuse me, miss, are you lost?”

Zack spun around and stared up hopefully at the man who’d approached him from behind. “…I’m afraid I lost my wallet, and I’m trying to get home.” He bowed his head and tried to ham up the genuine dejection he was feeling right now.

The man held a few gil out to him and Zack bounced upright with a bright grin. “Thank you so much!!” he said, glad that his voice was coming out rather higher than he was used to. Must be the stress.

Kind brown eyes smiled at him as they both got on the train together. “You coming from work?”

Zack nodded and smiled, glancing out the window as the train got moving. With the route he was on, he should be near Seph’s house in around ten or twenty minutes. Then all this crazy would be over.

Feeling an abrupt wave of fatigue, he let himself collapse into one of the seats and leaned his head back against the glass window behind him. The tall man with kind eyes was watching him, he noticed, and absently wondered why.

“Where do you work?”

Zack glanced down and noticed that his skirts had been pushed up when he sat. Blushing in embarrassment at the manly leg he’d almost flashed, he sat up a bit and shifted the fabric until he was more presentable. “U-uh… catering.” Well, technically he’d worked it for a few minutes. That
counted, right?

The man nodded. “I take it that’s a uniform? It looks rather nice on you. Brings out your eyes.”

Alarm bells started ringing in Zack’s head. He smiled brightly. “Really? Thanks! My boyfriend thinks so too!”

The man looked disappointed, slouching slightly where he stood nearby, holding onto the bar attached to the ceiling. Brown eyes moved up to his face and his smile faded slightly, but lost none of its kindness. “Well your boyfriend obviously knows what he’s talking about, then. You’ve been working the job for long?”

Zack’s smile became slightly more genuine. Well, at least there were still decent people in the world! “Just started tonight, actually. I was really nervous.” He went to scratch the back of his head and stopped when he realized that his hair was still hidden by the convenient maid’s cap. He laughed nervously.

The man nodded. “Yes. A new job can be quite frightening.” The train came to a stop and he offered Zack another smile. “Well, this is my stop. It was nice meeting you, miss. I hope you find your wallet.”

Zack smiled brightly and waved. “Thanks, mister! You’re a real life saver!”

The man waved back even as the doors closed, watching the train continue on to the next stop. Zack watched him until he was out of sight, then turned his attention to the other people in the car. There were quite a few considering it was probably around late dinner time, if the lighting as he’d run through Midgar had been any indication. Zack examined the route map on the wall of the car and double checked that he was heading in the right direction. Five more stops to go.

The next ten minutes passed rather quickly, with people going in and out of the car with each stop. When it was Zack’s, he hopped out of his seat and winced when his feet protested unhappily. While the maid’s shoes had good grip probably originally intended for not slipping on the floor rather than climbing walls, they were by no stretch of the imagination comfortable.

Zack walked briskly the rest of the way to Sephiroth’s pad, knowing that it would be rather unusual for someone in his clothing to be running somewhere like the hounds of Costa del Sol were at his ankles. Besides, if he hadn’t lost the Turks at this point, he was screwed anyway since they’d probably be on the roofs with tranq guns.

Letting out a relieved sigh, Zack hopped over the gate to prevent that terrible squeak Seph had never fixed on purpose. Paranoid bastard. Walking up the meticulously trimmed yard with the rock garden inspired by Wutaian culture, he let out a slow, tired breath. Almost there.

Skipping over the stair that was supposed to creak, he started pounding on the door of the rather small and unassuming house before him. It only took around twenty seconds for the General to swing the door open with an irritated look, and Zack pushed past him into the house.

“Do you have any idea the kind of night I’ve had? Or has it been a day? Or days? I can’t even remember anymore.” Ripping the maid’s cap off his head, he headed straight for the living room and collapsed down onto Seph’s comfortable leather couch. He let out an explosive sigh.

Boots walked up to the couch, and Zack could feel Sephiroth’s eyes drilling into him. “What, no concern for your friend at all?” He yawned and curled up on his side. “Mmm I need new clothes and I think yours are probably gonna be too long in the legs. You’re too damned tall, Seph.”
A hand touched his forehead, and Zack opened his eyes with surprise. “Huh?”

Green eyes were watching him with an intensity he wasn’t used to. “You do not appear to be ill. And why are you in a maid’s uniform?”

Zack let out a tired sigh. “You wouldn’t believe the night I’ve had,” he said dejectedly, giving the General his best pout.

But Seph just continued to stare at him with a very funny expression. “Strife, how do you know where I live?”

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

You would not believe what I’ve been suffering with this chapter. The fic tried to go all serious and emo on me, and I was fighting with myself tooth and nail, because that’s the last thing I want!! T-T But I found a balance with my escape plan, which I hope you all enjoyed. The original plan was too… unworkable in the end. And this was entertaining to write. The torture, which I was actually looking forward to writing, killed the fic for me a while there. Probs because I’m used to this thing being so light hearted.

I hope you all like the slaved-over product! Lots of shit hitting fans in this boy’s future. Mwahahaha!

I know a lot of you have questions about ‘wtf just happened there’, but all will be explained in the future. Feel free to shoot questions just in case there’s stuff that doesn’t occur to me, but there is a Mastah Plan. No fear :)

Happy sleeps, yo
Chapter 10

The Little Guy

Chapter Ten:

Secretarial Strife

Sephiroth let loose a small sigh as he leaned against the wall of the executive elevator. Another night of substandard sleep and too much work for one person to handle. Closing his eyes, he let his tired mind run over the project he had to present to the President in less than a week, on Monday. It was Tuesday already, wasn’t it…?

The elevator paused on the Turk floor and Sephiroth withheld a grimace at the sight of Tseng. The man walked through the doors, inclining his head to the General in greeting.

“Hello, Sephiroth. How are you this morning?”

He hated when Turks tried to talk to him. They always had ulterior motives.

The General resisted the urge to unsheathe his sword in the tiny space. “Fine. You?”

The Turk grinned. “Good.”

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic good mood. “What’s the good news?”

Tseng smirked slightly. “Oh, just got our hands on a potential security breach last night. Might have a new Turk soon, too.”

Sephiroth nodded and closed his eyes again, counting the floors they went by until they hit the 61st. The only people with offices higher than his own were the directors and the President, so he gave Tseng a small nod of his head before making his way into his office.

He paused at the sight of his secretary.

Immediately, his eyes catalogued the plethora of used tissues soaked with bodily fluids, empty candy wrappers, and a cup of coffee that smelled distinctly of his-own, brand-new, specially-for-him coffee.

Green eyes narrowed.

Was that alcohol he smelled?

“Good morning, General,” she sniffled around another tissue, blowing her nose and dabbing at the black lines on her face. She typed something into the computer before bursting into sobs.

Sephiroth inched around the secretary’s desk and counted the suspiciously familiar candy wrappers. All of his cupboard stash. Decimated.
He slammed his office door behind him and stood there for a long moment, head bowed, hair falling in front of his face. His hand twitched with the urge to draw Masamune. Instead, he forced himself to put the sword on its stand behind his desk and get to work.

**Beep**

Sephiroth pressed the flashing red button on his desk.


Bringing his thumb and forefinger, he waited for clarification.

And waited.

“Cynthia,” he barked. “Who is it?”

He hadn’t even had his coffee yet. He did not have the patience for this- this- secretarial crisis she seemed to be undergoing at the moment.

“Z-Zack F-Fair, s-sir!”

With an annoyed grunt, he picked up the phone. “Fair. This had better be important.”

“Aw, Seph, you haven’t had your morning coffee yet, have you? I was just calling to let you know that things are going pretty good over here! Landed safe and sound, there’s some good Intel, too. I think this’ll be a quick and easy demolition.”

“Then finish it quickly and return to your paperwork. Did you think I wouldn’t notice the stack you hid under your desk before you left?”

“Ahah... ha... So, Seph! Found any cute girls lately? Cute boys? You really should do something about that, you know. Getting frustrated doesn’t make work any easier!”

Sephiroth let out a quiet sigh and shuffled through the papers on his desk, wondering what he should get started with that morning. Whenever Zack started going on about his lack of romantic inclinations, his interest waned. He’d engaged in sexual encounters when he first went into puberty, under Hojo’s watchful eye, but it had never been something he enjoyed doing.

Whether it was with women, or the few times Hojo had brought him a man.

“If you have nothing else of import to report, I suggest you get back to work, Lieutenant.” He finally said, losing his patience with the blathering of his subordinate and hanging up the phone.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to mentally block the sounds of sobbing and sniffing coming from the adjacent room.

Sometimes he hated mako-enhanced senses.

“A-a-and I j-just don’t – sob – know what t-to do, Jenny! He- he left me for a- a- a-fucking slut!”

Sephiroth heard a crack and looked down at his hand, which had snapped his pen in half. Tossing it in the garbage with an irritable scowl, he left his office to wash his hand off in the sink, doing his best to ignore the way his secretary was curled up around the phone not even looking at her desk and pretending to do work like she had been for her entire shift yesterday.
He made more noise around the coffee machine and let out a sigh of relief when she quickly and not-so-stealthily said goodbye to the other person on the line and hung up.

“Cynthia. I sent requisition forms for materia a few weeks ago. I want a status report.”

“Y-yes, sir.”

On top of all the other things he had floating in the back of his mind, the last thing he wanted to be doing was worrying about having enough materia for his SOLDIERs when they went on missions. With the increase of his men this past exam and the decline in fatalities, he’d been running out of supplies faster than the company was providing.

It was vexing.

Finishing the final touches to his half-full cup of coffee, he went back to his office to get more work done.

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Sephiroth eyed the pile of slightly damp and shiny requisition forms in front of him. Not only had she cried on them, he knew that little bit of sheen on the bottom left corner was snot.

1. On his paperwork.

He heard the smash of glass and closed his eyes, taking a nice, slow breath. That was the third of his mugs she’d broken. He was going to have to go by more. He was going to have to go to a shopping centre and buy more, since at this point he doubted she could navigate herself through a doorway without smacking into it.

Not to mention the emails she had accidentally been sending him. He hadn’t realized that she was such a high ranking member of Silver Elite.

Then there were the… pictures.

Pictures of Zack and he, modified to look as though they were…

He grimaced and looked down at his empty coffee cup. He’d been rationing his intake carefully to find the best balance for his work day, and he had to admit that it was far more effective at keeping him awake and lucid than the brew he usually drank. And it did taste… better.

Thirty four minutes and twenty seven seconds until his next cup.

Pushing himself out of his chair, his mind was only on one thing.

Seeing that Cynthia was engaged with whatever was on her computer, Sephiroth quickly snuck a chocolate bar out of his hiding spot.

Only, there wasn’t any there.

He pulled the seat of the chair up all the way and stared down in disbelief at the blank, empty black of nothingness.

No chocolate.

He went straight to the cupboard and pulled open all the doors, looking for the chocolate he’d
stashed in here too.

Gone. All gone. His entire stash. Just…

Gone

“Cynthia. Did you touch the chocolate?”

“Hm?” she murmured listlessly, rubbing at her eyes and drinking more of his coffee. If he had cared about anything other than the chocolate no longer stored where he’d put it, he might have cared about the way her pupils were blown, her eyes were red, and so were the corners of her nose.

But he didn’t.

“Where is the chocolate?”

She stared at him blankly. “Chocolate? You mean… the chocolate Zack’s been hiding in your office, sir? I… took care of it. He’s always coming in here and bothering you, so I-“

“What do you mean ‘took care of it.’ Explain yourself.”

Now she looked frightened. Well, she should be frightened.

He was pissed.

“Well… I… ate it?”

He stared. On top of eating the trifles he’d stored in the cupboards, she’d pilfered the rest of his stash?

“You’re fired.”

Her eyes widened even more as she sniffled. “W-what? W-why?”

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed.

“You have failed to perform sufficiently over the past two days, you have excreted bodily fluids on my paperwork, you have used company time and money to make personal phone calls, you have been eating and drinking my supplies, and you have been coming to work after having snorted opiates and imbibed alcohol.” She opened her mouth, her eyes wide. “I can smell it on you, so don’t try to deny it. Get out.”

She burst into tears, grabbed her purse, and ran out of the office.

“Leave your security card with the front desk,” he barked after her before the doors could close. She just cried louder.

As the elevator took her farther and farther away from him sensitive ears, he let out a long, content sigh. Finally, some peace and quiet. He knew better than to hope for excellence from the average Shinra employee. Hopefully the next secretary sent to him would be moderately competent.

Like a certain blond custodian.

Chocobo Crazy
Sephiroth sighed as he slipped onto his bike and started the engine, taking a moment to let the sound rumble through his ears and body, wiping everything clean. He’d decided he needed a night off, after suffering his secretary’s break down. Hopefully Shinra will have found him a replacement by tomorrow and he could get on with his work and the President’s annoying assignment.

Reaching into the pocket of his coat, he pulled out an elastic band and started braiding his hair over his left shoulder. He despised wearing his helmet, and putting his hair under his coat had always been uncomfortable, so he’d had to settle with the lesser of evils when he’d first gotten the bike.

Kicking up the stand, he sped off towards the garage door and punched in the passcode without looking. Ducking under the door, he breezed by the guard who let him through without bothering to check his ID. His bike and hair were rather distinct, after all, and any Shinra employee could recognize his face.

Speeding along the freeway, he took the long way home to get some air and enjoy the wind in his hair. If he had the time, he would have left Midgar altogether for a trip into the surrounding desert, but he really just wanted to eat some food, listen to some music, and go to bed.

Pulling up the drive way of his small home, he parked the motorcycle in the garage and went inside to the kitchen. Pulling the fridge open, he frowned at the sight of so little food. He had to go shopping again.

He hated shopping.

He would have hired someone to do it for him if he didn’t have to worry about getting poisoned.

Not everyone liked Shinra’s Silver General, after all.

Slipping out of his coat, he dumped it on the back of one of the kitchen chairs and took some wilting vegetables out of the fridge. Pulling out some rice for a stir fry, he wondered how much of the vegetables he could salvage.

Twenty minutes later found him eating at the kitchen table, quiet music playing in the living room and a Wutaian book of poetry next to his plate. He ate quickly but carefully, unwilling to damage one of the books he’d brought back from Wutai. He’d never had the same appreciation of literature as Genesis, but Wutaian had always been more engaging and interesting for him to read and try to decode due to the multiple meanings of each character and the history of the development of the language itself. In addition to that, works from different time periods had different insinuations and implications depending on usage.

He was just taking a sip of tea and walking into the living room when a fist started banging on his front door. He frowned. He hadn’t heard the steps or the gate squeak. Carefully putting his book and tea down on the coffee table, he walked towards the door, checking quickly that his short sword was still nicely hidden on the bookshelf.

Opening the door, he stared mutely at the… woman who pushed past him into the room.

“Do you have any idea the kind of night I’ve had? Or has it been a day? Or days? I can’t even remember anymore.”

The voice was distinctly masculine, and Sephiroth caught sight of a mess of blond spikes as the maid pulled her hat off her- his head. The man-in-a-dress walked straight to his couch and fell down onto it with a groan and a sigh.
Sephiroth followed him and stared down at him, wondering how in the world the custodian knew where he lived. Had Zack let it slip for some reason? From his understanding, the two were rather close friends. Perhaps he had come here in lieu of Fair, since his Lieutenant was no longer in town?

“What, no concern for your friend at all?” the blond asked, yawning and curling up on his couch like he belonged there. His comfort in Sephiroth’s presence and home threw the man. The custodian hummed, nuzzling his face into one of the pillows on his couch. “I need new clothes and I think yours are probably gonna be too long in the legs. You’re too damned tall, Seph.”

The liberties this man was taking were beginning to annoy him. Only Zack could get away with calling him that. In spite of his annoyance, however, he couldn’t help but be a bit concerned. The blond looked as though he had run a marathon, his hair and face sweaty, cheeks flushed but skin pale with the evening chill. He placed a hand to the man’s forehead, to test if his recent behaviour was due to some sort of fever.

“Huh?” Sleepy blue eyes looked at him, but otherwise didn’t appeared to be concerned with his touch in the slightest. This intrigued Sephiroth. When last the General had invaded the blond’s space and touched him, his presence had been thoroughly rejected.

“You do not appear to be ill. And why are you in a maid’s uniform?” he couldn’t help but ask, eyeing the rather feminine form before him. If he hadn’t known better, he would have automatically assumed the blond was a woman.

But the blond just let out a tired sigh, looking absolutely exhausted as he looked up at Sephiroth as though the General was the answer to all his problems. “You wouldn’t believe the night I’ve had,” he said with dejection, his pout reminding Sephiroth of Zack begging for chocolate.

But while the rather eerily familiar pout could be explained by close contact, he still couldn’t fathom why Zack would have told Strife where he lived. Or why he could smell a faint tang of blood and mako.

“Strife, how do you know where I live?”

The other questions could come later.

The blond froze and stared at him for a long moment before he blinked and started to stare off into space, eyes cloudy and face slack.

Sephiroth frowned. That was certainly not the reaction he was expecting. Snapping his fingers in front of blue eyes, his frowned deepened when the blond remained unresponsive.

And then his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out on Sephiroth’s couch.

The General raised a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, trying to stave off the headache.

Perhaps Zack was right when he said ‘sometimes you just have a shitty week.’

Sitting down on the coffee table, he picked up his tea and started to sip at it, book of poetry puzzles forgotten in lieu of the man before him. What had caused him to pass out? Exhaustion? And why could Sephiroth smell blood and mako on him?

And why was he dressed in a maid outfit?
Sighing, he put down his cup and walked to his bedroom in search of some clothes that would fit. Hm… Zack had forgotten some clothes at his place over the months of movie nights. Perhaps those articles would be more suitable in size.

Pulling them out of the bag in his closet, he shook out the wrinkles and examined them critically. He’d washed them, but they’d been in the closet for so long they smelled a bit funny. Shrugging, he walked back to the living room and started stripping the blond.

After he’d finished, and the abominable maid outfit was put in the trash, he stared at sleeping face of his guest. Frowned slightly when he caught sight of a slight discolouration on his face. Pulling the blond’s head closer to him and into the light coming from the kitchen, he frowned at what was the beginning of a bruise forming on the man’s cheek. Running his finger over the damage, he noted the slight swelling and purpling hue.

He hadn’t noticed before, as the blond had been quite flushed, but now it was fairly obvious he’d been punched in the face, likely within the past few hours.

His mind flashed back to what the blond had said upon arriving at his apartment. What exactly had happened in the past two days since he’d seen this man? His critical eyes easily picked up how chapped his lips were, a clear sign of dehydration, and the smell of blood was now rather alarming than confusing.

But the blond had no wounds. The smell was probably heaviest on his right thigh, almost as though he’d been wounded and then healed with a localized Cure spell. But then, his entire body stank of mako traces. Almost as though he had…

Sweat it out.

Running a finger along the man’s collar bone, he brought the lingering moisture to his nose and sniffed.

Yes, a rather low concentration, but mako nonetheless. Had the blond been doing recreational drugs? Sephiroth was aware that some more recent drug concoctions could include mako, but there was no way that a custodian could afford that kind of addiction. Even a hit would have cost a fortune.

Mako in the bloodstream… In addition to his already unstable personality, and his sudden loss of consciousness, it was rather alarming.

There was no way this was as simple as he’d first assumed.

Making the decision, he pulled out his PHS and called the number he usually painstakingly avoided at all costs.

Click. “Hurry up, I’m busy.”

“Professor Hojo.”

“Ah, Sephiroth. You called me? This is a truly rare occasion.”

“Yes. There are extenuating circumstances.”

A scoff. “What have you gotten yourself into, then?”

“There is a man at my home. He passed out after abnormal behaviour, and he’s sweating mako.”
“Oh dear. Sephiroth, what did I tell you about unprotected sex with someone who is not enhanced?”

The General felt a flash of annoyance at the scientist’s assumption, but suppressed it. “We did not engage in sexual activities. He is… an acquaintance. Before he could explain what had happened to him tonight, he fell unconscious. I am concerned because in addition to the mako, I smell traces of blood. He may have been injured recently.”

“Hmm… Is he rather pale?”

“Yes.”

“And I suppose you’d like me to help, then.”

“I would appreciate if you discover what is wrong with him and aid in his recovery.”

A laugh. “Ah, but no favour comes free, Sephiroth.” He hummed thoughtfully, and Sephiroth wanted nothing more than to punch him in the face. “You will come for an additional battery of tests this month, on top of your usual appointment. Of your own free will, with absolutely no complaints.”

Sephiroth grimaced, since there was no one there to see it. “Very well. However, the usual rules apply.”

“Yes, yes. No damaging the General or impeding his work, etc, etc.”

“And it must wait until a week from today. I have a project that must be completed, and your… tests would interfere with my efficiency.”

“Yes, yes, you’re all about efficiency.” The scientist sounded too smug about the whole thing. “Bring him by, then. I’m in my usual lab. I’ll have a station set up for him upon your arrival.”

“Thank you,” Sephiroth forced himself to say before hanging up, knowing that if he stayed on the line Hojo would use the opportunity to harass him further.

Scowling, he shoved his PHS back in his pocket and pulled his coat off the chair in the kitchen, slipping into it with practiced ease. His hair, which hadn’t bothered to unbraid yet, he tossed over his shoulder before reaching down for the blond on his couch and lifting him into his arms.

Riding to Shinra was going to be awkward, to say the least.

, , , ,

Sephiroth brought the bike to a stop in his usual parking spot, pushing the curious and knowing look the guard at the gate had given him out of his mind. Turning off the engine, he kicked out the stand and gently leaned the bike over until it was balanced. The blond, who had begun to slide off with the movement, he caught in his arms before picking him up and carrying him over to the elevator. Instead of pressing the usual floor, he swiped his card on the reader on the inside and punched in a short code.

With a jerk, the elevator began to descend into the basement of Shinra, an area few visited, let alone knew of. SOLDIER being the exception.

Hojo was one of the only ones qualified for the mako enhancement procedures, after all. While one of his assistants could administer the mako, the quantity of the injected substance was all worked
out by Hojo in advance in relation to sensitivity, absorption rate, resistance, and body weight.

The elevator came to a stop on one of the lower basement levels, and Sephiroth took a steadying breath before he walked through the doors into a well-lit hallway. Making his way to the end of the hall, he slipped into Hojo’s main laboratory.

The scent of blood, mako, bodily fluids, and disinfectant hit his nose hard and would have made him sneeze if he hadn’t long since learned to control his enhanced senses.

“Ah, there you are. I was beginning to wonder if you’d driven off the side of the road,” the scientist muttered moodily, gesturing impatiently at the table as he busied himself with his machinery.

Sephiroth warily set down the blond’s still-unconscious body on the metal table, uncomfortably aware of the fact that something had probably been dissected and left to die on it that week, if not within the day.

Hojo waved him away and pulled back Strife’s eyelids, flashing his penlight into each pupil to watch dilation. “Hmm… well, he’s not concussed.” He pulled up the blond’s shirt and swabbed his belly button before also swabbing under his arm. “Sephiroth, you know how to check his blood pressure and take blood, yes? Take care of that for me while I test for mako.”

And without another word, the scientist walked over to another part of the lab.

Sephiroth did as instructed, having been taught both procedures by Hojo when he was quite young. The scientist had insisted on turning anything he possibly could into a lesson, and Sephiroth’s memory had never let him forget.

Hojo was back just as he finished taking blood, an interested expression on his face.

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed slightly. An interested Hojo was never a good thing.

“Blood pressure?”

“76/42.”

“Hm. Sweat contains traces of mako. I’ll have to do a full work up to see what he’s been drugged with.” The scientist grimaced. “It’ll take a while to do the tests, and then compare the results to known chemical compositions in the database for a match. How long ago did he fall unconscious?”

“Thirty-eight minutes.”

The scientist hummed and collected the blood. “You said he showed signs of abnormal behaviour? Hook him up to an IV and the EEG while I do the blood work.”

Sephiroth once again did as asked, with both efficiency and care. Still, Strife showed no signs of waking.

After his tasks were taken care of, he pulled up a chair and sat down, knowing he was in for a bit of a wait.

What he wasn’t expecting was four Turks to come waltzing into Hojo’s lab like they owned the place. Narrowing his eyes, he brought himself to his full height and crossed his arms over his chest. He wasn’t going for his sword yet, but he had no compunctions drawing it if a… demonstration was required.
“Sephiroth,” Veld greeted neutrally, his eyes skimming over the form on the table before returning to sharp, green eyes. “You have something of ours.”

The General raised an eyebrow and stared down the Turk without moving from his place in front of Strife’s body.

Brown eyes narrowed at him slightly. “Step aside,” he demanded, voice sharp and cool.

“No,” Sephiroth stared the Turk down, expression cool as ice and as unmoving as a glacier. “You will explain to me how this janitor came to me in his present condition,” he ordered, words crisp and demanding. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Hojo watching from the doorway of the blood work lab.

Brown eyes deadened and turned to a professional, polished stone. “I’m afraid that that’s Turk business.”

Sephiroth looked over each of the Turks in turn and paused when Tseng met his eyes. Their recent conversation came back to mind, and his brain immediately made the connection with Strife’s voiced concerns concerning the Turks. “Is he a spy or are you trying to recruit him?” he demanded simply.

None of the Turks showed a visible reaction, their training much too thorough for that, but Sephiroth could easily hear their heart rates rise and their breathing pick up pace slightly. His eyes narrowed when they refused to say a word.

“Well you can’t take him until you’ve explained the situation. I’ve offered this man an opportunity to try out for SOLDIER once more, having witnessed abilities and traits that would be well-suited to my program.” The stress he put on ‘my’ was slight, but he knew the more experienced Turks would pick it up easily enough. He met Veld’s eyes flatly.

“And why do you care for one lowly janitor, Sephiroth?”

The General just raised an eyebrow. “I’d ask you the same.”

They stared each other down. “He’s our jurisdiction. We’ve taken him into custody, and you are interfering in a Turk investigation, Sephiroth.”

The silver-haired man just snorted, unimpressed with Veld’s grand standing. They both knew who could kill the other in less than a second flat. “I could care less whose jurisdiction he’s apparently under. You will explain, or you will leave.” He smirked slightly, glancing at the Professor. “This isn’t your domain, and you hold very little authority here.”

Hojo came out at that moment, the interested expression on his face from earlier having spread into a full out gleam in his eyes. “I’m afraid Sephiroth is right, boys. Currently he’s under my care as a medical professional, and you can hardly remove him from my custody in such a state. What did you dose him with? I’d rather not waste my time with a battery of unnecessary tests if the answer lies with you.”

Veld glanced at Hojo for a moment before eyeing the body lying on the table. “Truth serum 46-A. His reaction was… unexpected.”

“Hm? Do explain.”

Veld was silent. Hojo’s smile only widened further as he eyed the Turk like one of his specimens—that is, imagining what he could do to make it scream as he ‘played’ to his heart’s content.
The Turk held out longer than Sephiroth had originally given him credit for. “Upon injection of the standard dosage for an adolescent of his body size, he reacted violently, screaming at some stimulus we were not privy to. Afterwards, he fell into a dazed, almost comatose state before abruptly snapping to lucidity again. Only… he wasn’t the same person we’d been questioning earlier, nor was he behaving the same as a Turk had previously observed. He also failed to remember events that had taken place only days prior, and seemed to think he was heterosexual when we have confirmed the opposite.” He paused, eyes flickering to Sephiroth and the blond before returning to Hojo’s interested visage. “He also displayed signs of SOLDIER treatments. Such as the glowing eyes and inhuman strength.”

Hojo clapped, startling some of the Turks and Sephiroth himself, though the latter didn’t show it. The grin on his face now was truly a sight. “Oooh! Truly interesting, truly interesting. Glowing eyes and strength… how did he display this strength? To what extent? And to what degree were the eyes glowing?”

The Turks behind Veld shifted slightly under Hojo’s obvious… enthusiasm.

“The glow was faint, almost unnoticeable. As for strength… he broke a pair of steel handcuffs and ripped a metal chair off the floor. It was… bolted down.”

Hojo hummed thoughtfully to himself, going over to Strife and pulling back his eyelid again. “Fascinating. What an… interesting specimen.”

The blond sat up like a shot, eyes open and dilated as he reached for Hojo’s neck to snap it faster than the Turks could move.

Fortunately for the scientist, Sephiroth was faster. He caught the blond’s arms and barked at Hojo to move away as he restrained the flailing, homicidal blond.

A foot kicked him in the face, but Sephiroth merely jumped onto the table in answer and straddled him, hooking his heels into the bottom of the table to lock his hips in place over the blond’s legs. His hands pinned Strife’s wrists next to his shoulders to prevent him from headbutting him in the face. In spite of his restraints, the blond continued to thrash and pull and resist in terror, straining his muscles and ligaments.

“Sephiroth, shall I get a tranquilizer?”

The General grunted as a particularly strong thrust against his hips rubbed against his crotch. The automatic bodily reaction to harden was inconvenient, if not embarrassing given the circumstances. “If we knock him out, we’ll have no idea of his mental state,” he said simply, bending closer to Cloud to look in his terrified blue eyes.

“Strife. You need to calm down.”

The blond just keened, his terror increasing with the sound of Sephiroth’s voice. The General frowned and pondered the best way to bring him back to his senses.

“Any suggestions?” he asked the room, annoyed.

No body said anything for a moment until the redheaded Turk muttered something under his breath to the bald Turk. “Maybe a kiss’d bring sleeping psycho out of his crazy.”

Sephiroth considered his options. Words had done nothing. Why not give it a try? The blond had come across as a rather sexual man. Perhaps some familiarity would snap him out of it.
So without further ado, Sephiroth used his speed and strength to manoeuvre his mouth onto the blond’s, open in a scream. For a moment, the man continued to thrash underneath him, but eventually he froze, mouth slackening as Sephiroth pushed his way inside and used his tongue in a way he hadn’t needed to for quite some years.

Floating... he was floating in a green place... it reminded him of- what did it remind him of? He couldn’t...

Burning...

He fell... He remembered falling. Falling into something green, something warm, some-

No... the green burned, ripped at his insides and lit him on fire and-

Peace. A profound... quiet. But... shadows in the water-

Tanks. He remembered the green tanks, and...

A white light. Warmth, shifting, changing-

Green green green and... there was another, and such pain oh the pain as knives cut and water burned and his body ripped and tore and-

“Fascinating. What an... interesting specimen.”

The voice cut through the dark and he remembered oh he remembered the pain and knives and the green tanks of burning mako and all because of-

HOJO!

He sprung upright, diving for the neck of the man who had caused him such pain, such agony, the deaths of so many and the curdling of the Planet and all that was good and-

Strong hands caught him and pulled him away as a familiar voice barked out words he couldn’t understand but he knew that voice and the pain it had- and the fire the fire burned- a rock meteor flying down from the sky and-

He screamed and thrashed, but he couldn’t pull away from the stronger man, his strength had been stolen, taken from him and left him powerless and weak before the killer of worlds- He heard Hojo’s voice again and he needed he needed to kill him and rend him and rip apart his soul until there was nothing-

The voice of terrors spoke again, but he thrashed and tried to get away, get at Hojo and kill him and run away from silver hair and green eyes and flame and- but he couldn’t move pinned completely unable to kill- run- kill- scream-

Something covered his mouth, trying to silence him. He screamed louder and tried to bite, but the hard contact softened and warmed and moulded to him, his lips and his body until the warmth was chasing away the dark place and covering him and protecting him and shielding him from the bright white lights and fire and grounded him taking him away from the floating place of pain and warmth and confusion-

A wet and slick heat slipped inside his mouth and he let it draw him in, tangling with his tongue
and licking at his hard palate as though it could eat him from the inside, and god he was sucking on his tongue and thrusting into his mouth in such a sexual way and- He gasped and arched into the body holding him down, grinding their hips and hardening lengths together aggressively as he pulled that tongue into his mouth and sucked it down as though it were his cock and he could swallow him whole and- he pushed back, tilting his head for a better angle and bit those petal soft lips as they tried to withdraw.

He strained against his bonds to take the upper hand, but the man upon him didn’t budge an inch and he growled as his head was forced back and that body began to finally respond as he undulated against it, the mouth that before had drawn him in now forcing him back and plundering and holding him down and-

Cloud ripped his head away with a gasp and a low growl. “I don’t care how hot you look in leather, asshole, but I don’t do bottom. So either roll us the fuck over, or get off.” The scent of leather and expensive sword oil and a distinct scent of vanilla were permeating his nose and driving him crazy with lust as he turned his head to look at the man who had been so wonderfully tongue fucking him just a moment earlier.

Green, slit eyes met his own. Cloud stared, reality jarring him slightly like Fenrir bucking him after hitting a nasty pothole. He tumbled ass over teakettle as he stared into green eyes with pupils blown with desire and an inner fire burning in them that he had never seen before in memories of icy green shards and a cruel smirk.

Blue eyes raked over Sephiroth’s flushed visage, noting the slight panting of his breaths and a faint hue of colour in high cheeks as silver lashes fluttered over those green orbs that were slowly filling with confusion, surprise, and heat.

“Welcome back, Blondie! Lookin’ hot as ever.”

Cloud turned his head to the left and caught sight of Reno. Memories came rushing back with a vengeance, and his mouth opened as rage ripped and- “RENO! You fuckin’ dragon-raping gutter whore of an ASSWIPE!! When I get free from this motherfucker I’m gonna shove toothpicks up yer ass ‘til yer shittin’ gray matter!” He strained against the larger man holding him down. “Lemme at ‘im!”

The Turks stared at him dumbfounded expressions and Reno hid behind Rude with a cross between a grimace and a sheepish grin. “Hey! I had orders, man!”

“Doesn’t change the fact that I’m going to feed you to a Nibel Dragon for your- for your- ARG!!” He bucked against Sephiroth’s iron grip.

“Shall I get a tranquilizer now, Sephiroth? Or are you enjoying this?”

Cloud’s head whipped around to the right and he caught sight of Hojo. “Come any where near me with a fuckin’ needle and you’ll be shittin’ shrapnel and mako for weeks!”

Hojo just raised an eyebrow and continued to grin, those slimy eyes watching him and Sephiroth with a glint that made Cloud’s hair crawl.

“Strife. Calm down,” Sephiroth ordered, pressing down with his body to emphasize the fact that Cloud wasn’t going anywhere.

The hard, warm body almost distracted him for a moment, but the blond forced himself to take a deep breath and calm his fury at the whole situation he’d fallen into. He needed a clear head if he
was going to fix this. How the fuck had he gotten into Hojo’s lab? What had happened after he remembered a knife. Tseng stabbed him in the thigh, ignored Cloud’s insistence that Sephiroth would take him in SOLDIER, and then there was-

A syringe. Truth serum. Laced with mako. He remembered that, but…

He couldn’t remember anything after that.

“-ife. Strife, Cloud.”

The blond snapped out of his daze of memory and focused on the man still pinning him to the steel table he’d found himself lying on. “Huh?” he grunted intelligently.


Memories drawn to the surface after having been buried beneath mako-induced fog for years crashed to the surface. “Sir! Engaged Turk Reno in a sexual encounter on Monday night, after which I woke in Turk custody for the purpose of interrogation and possible recruitment. During the interrogation I was questioned concerning the trip I made to the slums to purchase your coffee, General, as they suspect me of being a Wutaian spy or plant. When I refused to cooperate they turned to physical torture. Shortly after, Turk Veld injected me with a mako-laced truth serum.”

Sephiroth was looking down at him expectantly. “And?”

“That’s all I remember, General.”

Green eyes narrowed. “You do not remember coming to my home?”

Cloud stared. “I know where you live?” He cast a line out into the memories and pulled back a quaint looking house with a large yard and a nice rock garden out front. “Huh. I know where you live.”

The General hummed thoughtfully before sliding off Cloud with inhuman grace and turning all of that intense attention on Veld. “You said that after you injected Strife with TS 46-A he screamed and seemed to become a new person? In what way.”

The Turks looked amongst themselves. Reno caught Veld’s eyebrow and raised an eyebrow. The Head of the Turks nodded and the redhead stepped forward. “He… well, he kinda reminded me of Zack. Wouldn’t stop talking, straight as a ruler, friendly… not to mention his surge of unnatural strength.”

Cloud felt his insides freeze. Oh shit.

“The strength is easily explained away by the mako traces in the truth serum,” Hojo interjected, arms crossed thoughtfully over his chest as he eyed Cloud like he would a piece of meat. “Some subjects known to respond positively have received sudden bursts of strength after injection. I could do tests to verify, but it’s likely his mind is sensitive and his body responsive. This isn’t all that uncommon. Some subjects have been known to show mental instability or behave with sudden, explained violence.”

Sephiroth’s expression was hard. “Will this prevent him from becoming a SOLDIER?” he demanded.

Hojo blinked before frowning in thought. “Shall I run the tests, then?”
“Yes.”

Cloud stared. “Wait a—”

“If you can’t become SOLDIER, Strife, then I have no jurisdiction over you and the Turks will do with you what they will,” he said simply, his arms crossed and his expression back to its usual blank lines. It was such a shocking difference when Cloud compared it to the heated, aroused expression the General had been wearing only a few minutes ago.

The memory made Cloud harden slightly in his pants.

“You do not have any jurisdiction over him right now, General,” Veld countered with an annoyed expression.

Sephiroth snorted. “You have no proof that he is a Wutai spy. I have seen no evidence of it, besides his unique taste for hama and Grenada.”

“We know he speaks Wutaian, General. Where did he learn that? There’s not a single person in Nibelheim who speaks it. We already checked.”

Ah shit.

Sephiroth scoffed, eyes hard as shards of ice. “And yet if you’re questioning the records of his own birth and childhood, shouldn’t you be questioning your source for that little piece of Intel? For all you know, the whole town could be a falsified little ghost town.”

That struck a little too close to home, if the tense lines of the Turks’ faces were any indication.

“Our Intel is good, General,” the Head Turk snapped.

Sephiroth raised a derisive eyebrow. “You’re shooting at ghosts and you know it, Veld, otherwise you would have presented a proper case by now. You have no real evidence, merely circumstantial word-of-mouth and odd happenstance.”

Cloud’s attention was pulled away from the argument happening in front of him by a softly cleared throat. When Cloud caught sight of Hojo standing a little ways away with an annoyed, expectant look on his face, he jumped off the table and backed away. “Shall we, gentleman?” he asked in that obnoxious, nasal voice of his.

“Strife. Do I have to hold you down or will you comply?”

Cloud glared at Sephiroth but slowly caved to his demands, inching his way back over to the metal table. He hated Hojo. He hated this whole situation. But if he couldn’t be a SOLDIER, he was Turk Turkey for Dinner. Hojo stuck the syringe filled with a tiny bit of mako into his arm as soon as he sat down on the metal. He hissed at the burning sensation that flooded through him.

In that moment of suspension when the mako spread through him, the memories raced back to him and drowned him under their onslaught and overpowering—

Arms wrapped themselves around his waist, holding him up, and he realized he’d fallen off a metal table. He blinked up at Sephiroth, completely bewildered.

“Seph! What’s up?” He looked around and spotted Hojo. “Hey, it’s the Professor! What am I doing in the labs?” He looked between Sephiroth and Hojo, confused.
A throat cleared. Zack turned around and blinked at the sight of- “Turk-dude!” Moving at SOLDIER speeds, he hid behind Sephiroth’s bulk. “Seph! These guys tried to anal probe me! Hide me!”

The redhead snickered for a couple seconds before bursting into laughter. “You hear that Veld? You’ve been kicked out of the closet now!”

Dot-man wacked the redhead over the head with an exasperated sigh.

Sephiroth grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and dragged him out from behind him. Zack gave him his best pout at baring his soft underside to the wolves. His pal just continued to stare at him.

Zack wrinkled his nose. “Why you lookin’ at me like that, Seph?”

“…Lieutenant?”

He bounced. “Yup?”

But Sephiroth just continued to stare at him like he’d never seen him before, and then the creepy Professor came up to him and started prodding him. “Hey! Why are you poking me with the penlight of doom?”

Hojo’s eyes widened. “Fascinating. He seems to be able to mimic speech patterns in addition to knowing behavioural ones.”

Now Zack was starting to get weirded out.

Green eyes narrowed. “Strife?”


“No, you are Strife.”

Zack laughed. “Ah, that’s funny, Seph. I’m a five foot little chocobo, mhmm.”

“No, you are.”

“Uh, no, I’m not.”

“Are.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

The Turks just stared.

Sephiroth let out a frustrated sound and grabbed the metal table, standing it upright and shoving Zack’s face in it. “See? Blond hair. Blue eyes. Strife.”

Zack tilted his head at his reflection. “Are you sniffing toner packages from the printers again, Seph? I see a gorgeous, black-haired, purple-eyed, masculine ass right there.” He winked at his reflection.

Sephiroth scowled, annoyed. Zack shrunk and pouted, wilting as he looked around at the way everyone kept staring at him.
“How’d he snap out of it last time, General?”

The silver-haired man frowned. “I said his name and he passed out.”

Hojo hummed thoughtfully. “Perhaps it requires some physical exertion? His body might sweat the mako out again. The amount I injected wasn’t anywhere near a SOLDIER injection, so his body should be able to flush it out rather easily.”

Zack stumbled as he felt his energy level begin to drop. “Uh, Seph? The world looks all… spinning and spinny…”

.
.
.

Sephiroth caught Strife before he could hit the ground and gently set him on the table that he had righted once again. Hojo hovered over the blond’s body and began to run tests with machines that Sephiroth had seen him use many times before, but had never learned how to operate himself. The EEG was reattached, and the Professor checked it occasionally for a change in the reading.

The time it took Hojo to run the tests unfortunately gave Sephiroth time to think. Specifically about the events that had happened not very long ago, on the metal table that Strife currently lay on. Events that left him feeling slightly uncomfortable and tight in his pants.

He hadn’t been expecting that, when he’d kissed the blond. Usually it was wet, and neither pleasant nor unpleasant. It just… was kissing.

But then the man had started to… and it had almost felt like… and the way he’d started rubbing himself against Sephiroth had nearly shocked him into letting go, but he’d pushed through and to his surprise, he…

Hadn’t minded it.

Usually his partners were so tied up in the fact that he was The General. Or they were terrified. Or they wanted him to fuck them until they were raw. Or they wanted to fuck him until he was raw (which was impossible, he’d discovered). And none of these things had appealed to him, ever.

But the blond hadn’t known who he was, and the way he’d forced a response out of Sephiroth, almost like a challenge…

Why did the man keep-

“Interesting.”

Sephroth’s attention snapped to the present. “What?”

Hojo shot him an annoyed glance. Sephiroth didn’t so much as twitch. “Well, he won’t have any problems if he joins SOLDIER. His body is abnormally sensitive to mako, but his absorption rate is normal. I’d say his mental imbalance is a result of mako, rather than an allergic reaction to TS 46-A. You will likely have to place him under the watch of another SOLDIER during his injections, due to the bout of violence coming out of his hallucination, but other than that things appear normal.”

Sephiroth let a small relieved breath so small even the Turks wouldn’t have picked it up. “Very well.” He turned his attention to Veld and raised an eyebrow. If the Turk tried to claim jurisdiction again…
The Head Turk scowled. “This does not deal with the other matter at hand. He is still under suspicion of being a Wutai spy.”

Sephiroth resisted the urge to bash the Turk’s head into a wall. His mind efficiently raced through a list of viable options. “I will take him under personal surveillance, then,” he finally snapped, the idea taking form in his mind as he recalled all of the blond’s useful character traits. “I require a new secretary. He will make a suitable replacement until he passes the SOLDIER exams.”

Veld’s eyes widened in surprise. “Are you sure that’s wise, General? As your secretary, he would be made aware of classified information.”

The General snorted. “Any information that is truly classified never touches my secretary’s desk, as you well know. If any problems arise, I trust you will leave me to deal with them.”

He made it a statement of fact, not a question.

Veld’s eyes flashed, but he nodded the slightest bit before turning around and leading his group of Turks away. Sephiroth watched him go.

Ever since their conception the Turks had recruited and turned people towards their cause. Why they did it, Sephiroth had no idea. While some had been eventually turned to their side, their way of thinking, it was a far more difficult route than simply finding someone already interested, regardless of their apparent ‘ability.’

And if Cloud hadn’t eventually caved, he would have been disposed of just as easily as the Turks carried out their regular jobs. It would have been an egregious waste of talent and competence.

“I’ve finished the tests I require. Shall I wake him up myself, or would you like the honours?” Hojo asked, bored as he picked away at his machines.

Sephiroth eyed the blond contemplatively. It would be best to discover if his violence was the exception or the rule.

He shook the blond’s shoulder. Blue eyes snapped open, and when they landed on him Strife was off the table and across the lab in a period of time that any unenhanced human could be proud of.

“Sephiroth!” he shouted angrily, expression screwed up in a mixture of horror, pain, and desperation.

The rule, then. Appearing before the blond in a burst of speed, he calmly pinned the blond to the wall until those glassy eyes focused clearly and looked away from him, embarrassed.

“We seem to be finding ourselves in compromising positions quite often now, General.” Blue eyes turned back to his own and pierced him with their clarity of colour and sheer obscurity of meaning. When the blond looked at him, he didn’t see what everyone else saw, nor did he see what Zack saw, instead there was this strange tension and... something he couldn’t identify.

He hummed noncommittally, annoyed with the questions he still didn’t have answers to, and frowned slightly when he noticed his own increase in respiration and the slightest tightening in his pants.

“Indeed.”
OMG! I totally had a fangurl moment halfway through writing this when Reno, in the back of my head, makes the dumbest possible suggestion of life!! That little bastard never ceases to surprise me. XD That’s why I keep him around. It was so ridiculous I just had to run with it and commit it to the page. (Reno: What? Rutting on a steel table’s hot shit, man. Now, if only Blondie were screaming as Sephiroth pounded into his ass instead, that’d be smoking hot shit.)

I actually had this written a few days ago, but I needed to edit it and I’m at band camp right now. Face hurts! Hope it was worth the wait. Sorry about the evil cliffhanger. I usually try to avoid them with this piece…

CUT SCENE: ‘prove it’s Zack.’ This is an alternate scene that I wrote and ended up cutting. I’m sharing it with you for it’s entertainment value.

“…Lieutenant?”

He bounced. “Yup?”

But Sephiroth just continued to stare at him like he’d never seen him before, and then the creepy Professor came up to him and started prodding him. “Hey! Why are you poking me with the penlight of doom?”

Hojo’s eyes widened. “Fascinating. He seems to be able to mimic speech patterns in addition to knowing behavioural ones.”

Now Zack was starting to get weirded out.

“Zack. Pink bunny slippers.”

Everyone looked at the General in surprise and confusion, but Zack just blushed to his roots and coughed into his fist. “A-ah, pink bunny what?”

“I know you did it.”

“Did what, Sephy?”

Oh no. It was The Look. The Look of Doom. The Look that he got when all else in the world began to crumble around his ears.

“It wasn’t my fault I swear! Genesis made me do it! He told me if I didn’t he was going to replace all of Angeal’s underwear with pink lingerie and blame in on me, okay?! I’m innocent!!” He pulled out the Puppy Dog Eyes 2.0

Sephiroth was now staring at him with a look akin to shock, on the General’s face. Zack twitched nervously. The General pulled out his PHS and called a number.

“I know about the pink bunny slippers.”

Zack blinked. What? Who was he talking to?
Sephiroth waited. Then his eyes widened. “Lingerie, you say?” He nodded and muttered a dismissal, hanging up the PHS.

Green eyes narrowed. “Strife?”


“No, you are Strife.”

Zack laughed. “Ah, that’s funny, Seph. I’m a five foot little chocobo, mhmm.”

“No, you are.”

“Uh, no, I’m not.”

“Are.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

The Turks just stared.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Little Guy

Chapter Eleven:

“Wait a minute, what?”

Sephiroth continued to stare at him, expression as blank as paper. “I have requisitioned you as my new secretary. You’ll begin in the morning, so dress yourself in something more presentable than the custodial clothing you usually wear.”

Cloud just continued to stare, sitting on the metal table as Hojo flitted about him taking blood and muttering under his breath. The man’s proximity alone was enough to make him twitchy, which didn’t help his current predicament understanding exactly what had happened to him while he was ‘unconscious’.

“How…” He couldn’t put it into words. How had he gotten from a Turk torture cell to here? Not to mention his mind was spinning under an assault of memories that weren’t his own. When AVALANCHE had found him all those years ago, he’d been messed up from Zack’s death and their little trip after falling into the lifestream, but the memories of Zack’s that had burned themselves into his mind had never been so clear before. Instead they had been foggy images, thoughts, voices he had never met himself but knew somehow. Now it was as though a barrier had been torn down and then patched up with bits of cardboard and tape. He kept remembering things in detail that he knew he’d never experienced himself, like lessons with a man, a First Class called Angeal who had taught Zack everything he knew about honour and the sword. And yet for some reason the memory of what had happened to that man was still muddied and indistinct.

What the hell had happened to him?

“You’ll have to be more specific, Strife. I cannot read your mind,” Sephiroth said with a faint smirk, eyes lightening with a flicker of amusement.

Cloud brought his hands up to his face and scrubbed at his tired eyes, mind sorting through his most recent memories. He remembered waking from a nightmare of green, seeing Hojo… trying to kill the scientist… Then Sephiroth… well, as much as he hated to admit it, that was one fucking hot kiss. The mixture of the warmth, leather, sword oil, the strength in his tall frame… Then Reno, that little shit. When he got his hands on him next the rat was going to find himself in some agonizing positions involving rope and needles. Lots of needles.

And then he remembered… It was bizarre. When Sephiroth had demanded he report in that tone, it was like a different part of his brain had just suddenly snapped to attention and responded, and things were so blurred now he couldn’t tell where he began and Zack ended anymore. Had that been him? Had it been the remnants of Zack’s memories influencing him? It had to have been. He’d never been real military, in spite of the fact that he had apparently been a Shinra Trooper before he fell into Hojo’s hands. How come the mako had made him revert to some sort of ‘Zack
personality’ that he didn’t even remember, and yet his own memories still remained a mystery after all these years?

Fuck. He didn’t even know how much Sephiroth knew, now. Had he given something important away? The Turks apparently thought he was some sort of Wutaian spy, and even though the General had poked multiple holes in their logic, he had no doubt he’d be watched closely. If he didn’t pass the SOLDIER exam in less than four months, he could probably kiss his ass goodbye. He’d be Turk food.

“How am I your secretary?” he asked, running a hand through his hair when Hojo finally stopped drawing his blood and buggered off to a corner of his lab for a bit.

Sephiroth tilted his head slightly, watching Cloud with an intensity that made the blond twitch. “It seemed the simplest solution to both our problems.”

Cloud resisted the urge to rip out his hair. “But what about Cynthia?”

Green eyes flickered to the side and his face pinched slightly with tension and annoyance. “She suffered a breakdown and was no longer fit to work.”


The General raised a silver eyebrow slightly. “I was not aware that you cared. Were you friends then?”

A snort. “She was a bitch, and useless. Of course we weren’t friends. But why, after all these years did you fire her? Why not sooner? Why not later?”

Crossing his arms across his chest, Sephiroth scowled. “She was coming to work impaired by drugs. I gave her two days to pull it together, but then she… ate. All. Of. My. Chocolate. And she was drinking my coffee.”

Cloud stared in disbelief at the man for a long, drawn out moment before he snickered. Then grinned. Then started laughing his ass off as he doubled over and nearly fell off the examination table. It was just too funny. Zack had totally been right when he’d called Sephiroth a Chocolate Tyrant.

“What is so amusing?”

Wiping away a tear, Cloud pulled himself back onto the table properly and tried to suppress his snickers. “You fired her because she ate your stash. What’s not funny about that?”

The General scowled. “Nothing is funny about that.”

The blond snorted. “Maybe to you. Suck it up, princess, and go buy yourself some more damned chocolate. I’m sure you’ve just been waiting for an excuse to splurge your ridiculous paycheque in a specialty chocolate store or something. As for your coffee…” Cloud tapped his chin thoughtfully. He remembered his own experience drinking that coffee. When he’d bought it for Sephiroth and prepared it, it hadn’t occurred to him that he was unenhanced at the time. Nor had it occurred to him that since this body of his had never consumed it before, his system wasn’t used to the chemical cocktail. While Sephiroth had apologized for giving Cloud a flashback, he now realized that it probably hadn’t helped that the coffee had unbalanced his brain chemistry, so the thought of Cynthia drinking it regularly… The mixture of opiates and caffeine had probably done wonders for her bipolarity.
“And you decided that I would be a suitable replacement?” he asked incredulously. Sephiroth
nodded. “Why the hell would you think that? I’ve never been a secretary in my whole life.”

The General gave him a look. Cloud wasn’t that versed in what it meant, but a little voice in the
back of his head that sounded too close to Zack for comfort was telling him that it was that
constipated look Sephiroth got on his face when he was trying to figure out a particularly stubborn
puzzle.

It didn’t put him at ease.

“You are competent and not entirely stupid. I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out,” Sephiroth said
simply, giving a small, unconcerned shrug.

Cloud gaped.

Cloud stared at the store before him with no little amount of trepidation. He had to do it. He didn’t
want to, but he had no choice. No other would do. It had come to this.

He shuddered and stepped through the doorway with a grimace, waiting for something to fall on
his head or the world to collapse or Sephiroth to go crazy and blow up the block.

“Hello, sir! How can I help you today?”

Shit, no! He was being accosted already!! His eyes flickered around, looking for defensible
positions. “I was just… uh… well, you see, I’ve gotten a new job, and I need to look…
presentable.”

Distraction!

The enemy tilted his head to the side with a thoughtful hum, eyeing him up and down as though he
were a piece of meat or a prized chocobo at a show. “I’m sure we can find something suitable for
you, if you’ll come this way?”

Gah! Damnit! Cloud pasted a smile on his face and inched to the side. “Well, I was just planning
on grabbing something and going, if you know what I mean.”

The attendant’s eyes widened in horror at the very thought. “What? I can hardly let you walk out of
here with something that doesn’t fit or do you justice, sir. Please, come this way, it won’t take
long. We at Tarren & Ling guarantee that every customer leave satisfied and looking their best.
Please,” he said, motioning Cloud farther into the death trap with a bright smile and an extended
arm.

Too late. He was doomed.

Inching farther into the store, he noted all the exits as he saw them through the racks of men’s
clothing. The attendant pulled seemingly random pieces of clothing off the racks as they went,
humming happily under his breath. Before Cloud could ask if he was on drugs or not, he found
himself shoved into a changing room with a pair of pants and a blue shirt.

“If you’ll just try these on first. I’m assuming you need a proper work wardrobe for at least five
days? We do our best at Tarren & Ling to pick the clothing that best suits both our customers and
their budget,” he chirped with a bright smile.
Cloud closed the curtain in his face. How much money did he have on him again? “I have 500 gil. That’s it,” he called out through the curtain.

“Very good, sir. Do you require full suits or are dress shirts, pants, and shoes suitable?”

Cloud shuddered at the very thought of wearing a suit. “Shirts, pants, and a pair of shoes should be fine.” He looked down at the clothes already in his hands and grimaced.

This was going to be the worst hour of his life.

“ ‘That shirt brings out the blue in your eyes,’ ” Cloud mocked under his breath as he left the store an hour and a half later, 500 gil poorer. “ ‘Oh no, you simply can’t wear that shade of gray, it dulls the colour of your hair.’ ‘The cut of those pants really brings out the tone in your legs. Do you work out?’ ‘You should wear black more often, it really brings out your masculine side.’ Fucking psychotic little devil-worshiper, how dare he ask for my PHS number and stare at my ass for over an hour.”

A Midgar passerby stared at him for a moment before quickly looking away and hurrying his pace.

Cloud’s mighty scowl deepened as he paid for his train ticket back to Shinra with the meagre funds he had left until his next paycheque. He wouldn’t be able to pay for much beyond the essentials this week. Or maybe even the next. Not to mention he still had no idea how he was going to get a vacation to go home and see his mother, who according to the Turks was ill with something. Perhaps he should hack into the system and see if his file listed his mother’s contact number for emergencies. They usually did that, didn’t they?

He blinked and paused in front of the train. Wait. He could ask Sephiroth now, couldn’t he? The General surely had access to his file. How else had he known that Cloud had changed jobs when Zack had hounded him about it what seemed like ages ago.

Though, he’d have to be clever about how to get the General to look it up in the first place. Maybe he could claim that he’d forgotten the long distance extension that he needed to phone from Midgar? That was reasonable, right?

“Hey, are you going to get in or not? You’re holding up the line.”

Cloud turned around to look at the man standing behind him and raised an eyebrow. “I’m moving,” he muttered before going inside and sitting down on one of the seats, putting his bag of clothes on the floor between his feet.

The guy who had spoken stared at him, sitting down directly across from him. “Do you have a sister?”

Cloud looked up from the bag he’d been staring accusingly at and frowned. “What?”

The man laughed, adjusting the cuffs of his suit nervously. “Well, you remind me of this girl I met the other night, wearing a maid’s uniform. She told me she’d just recently started working, and you look almost identical except that… well, you’re a man. Is she your sister?”

The blond stared. An image flashed across his mind, the face of a kind man and a similar gesture of nervousness. Familiarity screamed at him.

The man looked concerned. “I leant her some money for the train, but I wasn’t sure if she got
home safe. I hope she’s alright and she found her wallet?”

Memories flooded his mind of a train ride and a dress and shoes that had made his feet ache after so much running in them. Well, that explained why his feet hurt so much today. “Uh… Yeah, she… got back safe.”

Safe enough. Sephiroth safe, even. He didn’t know why the General was now showing enough interest in him to not only cover his ass with the Turks, but also offer him another crack at SOLDIER. A crack that he didn’t want, and was now forced to do if he didn’t want to end up doped up in another interrogation room.

The man smiled, and he looked different in Cloud’s eyes now than he had in his memory. In the memory he had been all kindness and warmth, soft tones of voice. Now he was just another man in a train with stress lines around his eyes and a nervous twitch. He recognized that the looks the man had sent his way had been anything but innocent, in spite of the fact that he’d backed off once he realized ‘Cloud’ had a ‘boyfriend.’

At least the Zack part of his mind wasn’t so naïve that he’d gone home with the guy. That would have been a disaster of, well, disastrous proportions.

“That’s a relief,” the man said, eyeing Cloud in a way that had the blond’s spine straightening in wariness. “Have you been in Midgar for long?” Cloud frowned slightly. The man quickly continued, “I mean, you have a slight accent that your sister doesn’t, and I figured maybe you’re from farther away.”

Cloud crossed his arms over his chest and gave the man a cool, assessing look. “Yes, I’m not from Midgar.”

The train came to a stop and a loud crowd of people entered their car. The man got up from his seat and moved to sit next to Cloud with a smile. “Where are you from?” he asked, looking at Cloud with those eyes of his.

Blue eyes narrowed. “None of your business.”

The man looked taken aback. “Oh.” He shifted in his seat, fiddling with the cuffs of his suit again. “Well, what would you rather talk about?” he asked with a smile, already farther in Cloud’s space than the blond wanted. “I see you went shopping at Tarren & Ling. Looking for a new uniform for your own job?”

Cloud stared him down, taking in the interested look on the man’s face, coupled with his close proximity and the way a leg touched his own. Was this man coming on to him as well? “Look,” he said, firming his tone and his expression. “You look like a fairly successful man, with your expensive clothes, watch, and that band of gold on your ring finger. Leave me alone.”

The man looked taken aback, but Cloud could see the glint of anger curdling behind his eyes. “W-what? I never meant-“ He put his hand on Cloud’s leg, and the blond pulled out his dagger and poked it into the cloth and flesh separating it from the man’s liver. Brown eyes widened, and the hand on his leg tensed in alarm.

Cloud smirked and applied a hair more pressure, cutting a hole through the fabric. “I have no interest in fucking you. I’m not sure if it’s just pretty young things that you go looking for, but I’d advise you to curb your tastes in the direction of the wife you’re happily married to and leave me and my… sister, out of it.”
The train attendant announced the arrival of his stop and he grabbed his bag, easily slipping the knife back into his pocket with none the wiser except for the man staring at him with wide, surprised eyes.

“I wasn’t trying to-“

Cloud didn’t let the flicker of guilt affect him as he stared the man down. He’d rather trust his – and Zack’s – instincts than let logic try to butt its way into this one. “Goodbye,” he said simply, walking out of the train and keeping his eyes on the man as he did so. He didn’t relax until the train closed and started speeding away once more.

Sometimes it was just better to be safer than sorry. The last thing he wanted to be concerned with at this venture was a stalker. No one in Midgar was that friendly.

“You’re late.”

Cloud looked up from his new desk and raised an eyebrow at the General standing so imperiously above him. He’d gone with the blue shirt and black dress pants today, having changed quickly in his rooms before coming in to work.

“Yeah, well, you didn’t tell me when I had to start yesterday before Hojo booted us out of his lab and you took off. All you said was to get something decent to wear, so I that’s what I did.” He picked at his new dress shirt and raised an eyebrow.

The man placed a hand on his desk and leaned towards him, a long arm reaching around to the back of him before grabbing something and giving a sharp tug. He pulled his arm away but didn’t remove himself from Cloud’s space, eyeing the tag that Cloud had apparently forgotten to take off his new shirt.

He raised an eyebrow, the ends of his hair curling on the surface of the desk. The little Zack voice in the back of his mind labelled it a ‘you are amusing because of your stupidity’ expression before it disappeared once more. “I see. I require the records of the SOLDIER missions regarding monster extermination for the last five years, excluding the last seven months. They have yet to be copied to the online database.”

Cloud stared. “And where the hell do you expect me to find those?”

Green eyes narrowed in annoyance at his disrespect. He had to admit the memories he had of Zack were far better at reading the General’s bewildering array of expressions than Cloud was. “In the records room. The ID you found on your desk this morning will give you access. It’s located on the 33rd floor.”

Cloud really didn’t get Shinra’s bizarre floor plan. “Don’t get all pissy with me. You’re the one who wanted me as a secretary, and no one’s been here to train me yet, either. You can’t expect me to pull this shit out of my ass. Give me a break. I’d rather be washing floors again.”

“It is too late for that, you’ve already been transferred out of that department,” the General said simply, and Cloud stared at him. “I will have someone sent up to train you, if you are so incapable of figuring it out on your own.”

How did the man manage to be so insulting without even a twitch or change in the inflection of his voice?
Sephiroth walked back to his office. “The flashing red button on your desk is the intercom. Next time, press it so I don’t have to get up to give you orders.”

The door closed behind him with a snap.

Cloud stared at his desk and resisted the urge to stab the ‘intercom’ with his knife, which he’d cleverly hid at the small of his back.

It was going to be a fucking long day.

“And this is how you get onto the Shinra database. It’s pretty easy once you get used to it.”

Cloud wanted to bash his head against the nearest wall as the blond bimbo continued.

“Of course, I don’t see why the great Sephiroth has hired you to be his secretary. You have no credentials whatsoever. Did you sleep your way into this company?”

Cloud resisted the urge to run her through with his dagger.

“Oh, and this is the way the filing system in the records room works. But don’t worry, you’ll never need to actually go there. I swear they keep that room just to bury all the paperwork they don’t want to deal with.”

Well obviously she wasn’t as secretarial as she thought she was if she’d never had to visit ‘the records room’ before.

“Did you know the woman before you has worked for this company for thirteen years? She was supposedly the best secretary Shinra had to offer the poor General. She’s started as a flunky in the Urban Development department before becoming his secretary. We all know that her father is the head of general staff at Shinra, though, and he probably talked her way into her cushy little seat with a smile. Not all of us have had it so easy. Not like you, magically getting the job with not even one iota of training. Do you even know how to file properly?”

Cloud repeated the mantra ‘I will not kill infantile secretarial hoes’ under his breath as he pasted a smile on his face and shook his head.

“You don’t even know that much? It’s alphabetical according to area of relevance, of course!”

And she went on, and on, and on about the art of the paper trail and the best way to fill out a form for requesting more office supplies because they were always running out of those, and-

If he didn’t kill her by the end of the day, he was taking himself out for celebratory drinks.

A few hours later he found himself freed from the secretarial ho and accosted by an impatient Sephiroth demanding that he bring him those files immediately after making him a ‘damned cup of coffee’.

Cloud almost spat in it, but that would be insulting to the coffee.

And so he found himself knocking on Sephiroth’s door before impatiently letting himself in.

He stared at the war-zone with wide eyes. “What the hell? Did a bomb go off in here?”
Sephiroth looked up from the maze of neatly piled paper and held his hand out for the coffee. Cloud navigated his way through the very obvious ‘path’ through the room and deposited the coffee in Sephiroth’s hands. The General sipped it and let out a content sigh.

Cloud eyed the man with a frown, for the first time noticing the slight shadows under green eyes and the way his hands clenched repeatedly around the coffee cup. “Is this that project for the President you were talking about a while ago?”

Sephiroth opened his eyes and gave him a ‘what are you doing still here’ look. “Yes. And I need those files.”

Cloud hummed thoughtfully before nodding and leaving the office, careful not to knock over any paperwork.

Poor bastard.

“Do you know the proper protocol for removing files from the records room?”

Cloud stared at the woman glaring at him from behind her desk. “No.”

She rolled her eyes and scoffed. “Everything is filed in triplicate. If there is only one file left, you cannot take it from the room. All files must be registered under your name with a reason cited from a staff member of high enough clearance for the files in question.”

Cloud crossed his arms over his chest and glared at the condescending tone in her voice. Bitch. “I’ve come on behalf of The General, Sephiroth, to retrieve files concerning SOLDIER missions for the extermination of monsters for the past five years, excluding the last seven months, for his esteemed viewing pleasure.”

When her eyes widened and a doe-eyed look crossed her face, he knew he’d found another fangirl.

Thankfully, with her suddenly useful self helping him retrieve what he needed, he now had a cart full of boxes filled with files. She asked him to mention her speedy help to the General, and he smiled and nodded, fully intending to ignore her existence once he was free of this cesspool of paperwork.

Swiping his card in the reader next to the elevator, he pressed the ‘up’ button and prepared himself for the wait. To his surprise and fortune, he only had to wait a few seconds before the doors opened.

To his misfortune, Reno was in the elevator.

“Oh come on, you can’t expect to ignore me forever you know.”

Cloud stared resolutely forward.

“It was orders, Blondie!” the redhead whined unhappily.

Cloud wondered if the elevator was going slow on purpose or if it was just him.

Reno moved closer and leaned forward until his face was right in Cloud’s line of vision. “Cloud.
I’m sorry.”

The blond raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, his face otherwise blank as a canvas.

“Look, what do I have to do, take you out to dinner? Buy you flowers? Kill your ex-boyfriend? What?”

Cloud said nothing.

“I want to see you again,” the redhead said softly, slate eyes soulful with just the right amount of guilt and kicked-puppy. “Talk to me, Cloud.”

Cloud stared him down for a long moment before breaking his silence. “There will be no ‘again’, Reno. You made sure of that.”

The Turk frowned. “Why can’t you get past this? It was orders, Cloud. Look, do I have to promise not to do it again? Sephiroth’s laid his claim on you, and the Turks aren’t going to do anything, so why can’t I see you?”

Cloud stared him down, eyes narrowed and cold. “You betrayed me once, and nothing you can say, promise, or do will change that fact. I don’t sleep with people I don’t trust.”

Reno scowled. “Then why did you sleep with me the first time?”

Cloud couldn’t tell him that he’d known him in a life that no longer existed. That he’d eventually turn into a decent man in a strange love triangle between Rude and Tseng. Couldn’t tell him that he’d admitted to Cloud one night, drunk at Seventh Heaven, that he’d never wanted to kill all those people when he’d dropped the plate. But it had been orders.

That familiarity was no longer enough for Cloud to feel justified in explaining away an arrangement with this man, let alone feel comfortable doing so.

“You reminded me of someone and something that is long gone,” he said simply, frankly, saying everything and nothing at the same time.

The Turk’s eyes darkened but glinted with interest. “Who?”

Cloud gave him a look. “He’s long gone and we never fucked. Why don’t you turn your attentions to your partner, or your boss? Surely a relationship with another Turk is easier than a civilian who doesn’t understand that ‘orders’ bullshit.”

Reno looked shocked. “Rude?! Tseng?! You’re kidding right? They’re both straighter than this fucking building!”

Cloud smirked. “This building is bent at the tip. So why not give it a shot? I’m sure you could turn either of them gay with enough work.”

The redhead gaped at him just as the doors opened, having arrived at the 61st floor. Cloud patted Reno on the shoulder and gave him a grave expression. “I’m sure they won’t kill you and hide the body. You’re too good at giving head.”

He left the elevator with a smirk.
Cloud’s intercom flashed red, and the blond pressed the button with a suppressed groan. What the hell did the devil want now?

“Strife. Come to my office.”

He groaned and didn’t bother answering. Instead, he just got up and walked over to the door, pushing it open with a scowl. The maze of paperwork had gotten messier, and the clipboard Sephiroth was writing things down on even thicker.

The General himself currently sat at his desk, staring down at aforementioned clipboard with a very dark expression on his face. Almost murderous, even.

And a little voice in his head told him that Sephiroth had almost reached his limit.

“You asked for me?” he finally said when it seemed like the silver-haired man wasn’t going to say anything.

Sephiroth looked up from the paperwork and gave him a weary look. “I… need your help.”

Cloud stared in surprise. “I thought this was confidential whatsit that I’m not supposed to know anything about?”

The General grunted. “Fuck the President.” Cloud’s eyes widened. “You don’t need to know anything about the why as long as you can read reports and write up statistics. Can you count, then?” he asked snidely.

Cloud bristled. “I can count up to ten,” he said sarcastically, “is that enough for your statistics?”

Green eyes narrowed. He gave Cloud one of his dirtiest looks before jerking his head at a stack of papers. “Start with that pile.” He pulled a sheet off his clipboard and Cloud manoeuvred his way through the stacks to grab it when it was held out to him. “That is the format. Think you can handle it?”

The blond raised an eyebrow. “However will I manage. My brain will melt out from between my ears,” he said flatly, handing the sheet back and grabbing a blank piece of paper to start writing on.

Time to get cracking.

He picked up the folder on top of the stack.

“No, the other one.”

His eyes narrowed and he put it down, reaching for another folder.

“Are you blind? The tall one.”

His eyebrow twitched. Sephiroth in a bad mood was a real dick. No wonder he tried to blow up the Planet.

He finally found the right pile and started reading through them, shacking himself up in a small hole of paperwork near the wall. He managed to get through a handful of reports before his office phone rang.

Manoeuvring his way out of the maze of brain-killing ordnance, he snagged the phone on its sixth and final ring. “Hello, General Sephiroth’s office.”
“Hey Cynthia babe- wait. Who is this?”

Cloud frowned. Was that…? “The General’s new secretary.”

“…Spiky?”

Cloud let out a small sigh. “Hi, Zack.”

“HAHAHA! Cynthia got fired? Bout damned time! I’ve been telling him to get rid of her for ages, but nooo his last secretary was even more useless and the one before that smelled funny and the one before that wouldn’t stop hitting on him of course and the one before that was too gay for even Sephiroth to put up with and. “

“Zack.”

“Huh? What was that Spiky?”

“What are you calling for?”

“Oh. Well, I wanted to see if Seph is still alive, you know, since he’s been drowning himself in work for the past forever instead of drowning himself in a bottle like I’ve been trying to get him to do because seriously, drinking yourself to death is better than working yourself to death and he does that waayy too much already so I figured, you know, a healthier vice might just be what the doctored ordered. So, how is he?”

Cloud actually removed the phone from his ear for a moment and stared at it as though it could give him some insight into the inner workings of Zack logic.

“Well…” he thought about it for a second. “He’s still drowning. But, he’s asked for my help now, which I’m not so sure is a good or bad thing.”

“What? He’s asked you for HELP? The General asked you to help him with his work? Sephy actually asked for help?!? ”

Cloud stared at his blank computer screen. “Why can’t you get over this?”

“B-because it’s- that- how- this NEVER happens! He’s the biggest perfectionist I’ve ever met and a work-a-holic and no matter how many time’s I’ve told him to stop working or let me help him with anything he’s always like ‘Lieutenant, I am more than capable of handling this small inconvenience. Lieutenant, you would leave my papers covered in doodles and stick men playing tricks with dogs. Lieutenant, if you ask me one more time I will tell all the secretaries that I’ve turned you gay. I’m sure they’d love to start your own fan club.’”

Cloud couldn’t help himself, he burst out laughing just imagining the expression on Sephiroth’s face of utter seriousness.

“This is nothing to laugh at, Spiky! I mean it! Stop being so- so- mean!”

Cloud snorted and pounded at the top of his desk. “I can’t believe he said that to you! That’s hilarious! Wait a minute, he’s gay? I thought he was like, anti-sexual or something. Monosexual? Asexual? How do you call someone so uninterested in sex that giving someone else a blowjob right in front of them doesn’t even get a blink? Has he ever been laid?”

But wait. There had been that one kiss… nah, that was totally calculated to break Cloud out of his
psychosis. That didn’t even count.

“You do realize that you might as well have called him asexual to his face? He can hear everything you say. And- wait a minute- you were giving someone HEAD??”

Cloud raised an eyebrow, even though Zack couldn’t see him, and chose to ignore the last question. “He probably heard everything you said, too.”

“Nah. I asked him one time. He said he couldn’t hear what I said on the phone and stop trying to distract me and answer the question!”

The blond snorted. When he’d been as enhanced as Sephiroth, he had heard the transvestite four houses down entertaining. And entertaining as in, having an hour dinner of boring conversation followed by four hours of beating her company’s corporate ass with floggers, paddles, you name it, she’d done it. And that basement suite had had sound proofing.

“You’re totally full of shit, Zack. It would have been a tactical error on his part to admit that he can hear every single thing you say into that receiver. He’s not that stupid.”

“…”

Cloud grinned. “What, you thought he didn’t hear any of that? The difference between you and me is, I don’t give a shit. If he were insulted by my existence, he either woulda fired me or knifed me by now. You… he probably likes to watch you squirm.”

Zack spluttered on the other end of the line, and Cloud grinned, imagining the look on his face.

“Spiky! When did you become so- so-mean?”

“So I grew a pair. You already asked that question. Anyway, Sephiroth can handle this shit the President’s throwing at him, I have no doubt of that. If he starts having a psychotic break down I’ll just break out the emergency kit.”

“…the what? You have Sephiroth Emergency Kit?”

“Yep.”

“What’s in it?”

“Now, that would be telling.” In truth, Cloud had just had the brains to go buy some chocolate bars from a vending machine a few dozen floors down. Since Cynthia had eaten all of Sephiroth’s chocolate, he knew it was his first line of defence if things got ugly. Too much coffee at this point, and he’d probably go psychotic.

He hoped Sephiroth was rationing that shit…

“No, don’t tell me you’re going to give Sephiroth HEAD?!?”

Cloud snorted coffee out of his nose and coughed. “What?! What gave you that idea?”

“Well, he needs to get laid and how do I know your emergency kit isn’t full of condoms, huh?! You need to be more careful Spiky! There are so many old and ugly men out there that could take advantage of your adorable, cute little-“

“Strife,” Sephiroth’s voice barked, surprising Cloud into flinching and nearly falling out of his chair as he dropped the phone. “Tell Zack to stop wasting time with questions concerning my
sexuality. And I am neither old nor ugly. In addition, Strife, I have no qualms with drawing a knife on you. And if there is chocolate in that emergency kit, you will surrender it at once.”

Cloud stared at the Silver General’s closed door with trepidation for a long moment. “I think we’re officially busted, Zack. Hurry up and report before I hang up on you.”

Zack grumbled. “Fine. Things are looking good over here. I’ll be heading back in a few days, I think. Just got a couple things to clean up. And Seph! If you’re this cranky when I get back then I’m taking drastic measures!”

Click.

Cloud listened to the dial tone for a moment before shaking his head and getting back to work.

Cloud banged his head against the wall to keep himself awake. In reality, he was kind of hoping it would knock him out so he wouldn’t have to suffer this agony anymore.

“Do you think we could just assassinate the President? I think that would take less effort at this point,” he grumbled, scrubbing at his eyes.

Sephiroth grunted. “I already contemplated that. Multiple times. I now have 62 feasible plans of action to complete the mission without reprisal.”

Cloud pulled his hands away from his face and blinked. “Why the fuck aren’t we implementing them, then?”

The General was still scowling. He’d been scowling for the past few hours, actually. He’d scowled his way through multiple pots of coffee, Cloud’s entire emergency kit, the remaining contents of all of Shinra’s vending machines, and a veritable feast of Wutaian take out.

“Because. I’m not allowed to.”

Cloud snorted. Didn’t stop him when he’d gone psychotic. Although, perhaps this was a good sign that proved he was still sane. “I’m totally going to slip laxatives into his morning coffee every day for a week.”

Sephiroth snorted in amusement, but didn’t chastise him. Cloud took that as a good sign. “So, I figure if we keep going until tomorrow morning, oh wait, it’s already tomorrow morning. I figure if we keep going until tonight, we should get this thing done. With no distractions, no sleep… we’d probably go crazy. What’s your take on things?”

Sephiroth flipped another page. “I never want to read another report in my life,” he muttered, almost slurring.

Cloud frowned in concern. “You alright there, Seph? You’re sounding pretty out of it.”

The General looked up and raised an eyebrow over glowing green eyes. His pupils were pretty dilated. That was bad, right? “You don’t sound much better yourself, Strife.”

Cloud’s frown deepened. “What’s with this ‘Strife’ crap, anyway?”

“Hm?”

The General was paying too much attention to the file. His eyes weren’t moving, though. Cloud
pulled it out of his hands and gently slapped his cheek. “Wakey wakey. Why you keep callin’ me Strife this, Strife that. Reminds me of…” he wracked his memory. “I dunno what it reminds me of right now, but you’ve called me Cloud b’fore. So whasup with the Strifeness?”

Sephiroth stared at him. “I believe you are impaired, Strife. Perhaps it’s time you got some sleep. The couch is quite comfortable, or so Zack continues to tell me.”

“I need sleep? I need sleep? When was the last time you slept, huh? You’re not a tank, y’know. Why don’t you call us in sick or something and we lock down the office for the day, sleep, and order more Wutaian take out. But let’s not stay here, mk? I wanna real bed tonight.” His hand, which had been patting the General’s cheek, began to gently caress the man’s surprisingly soft and warm skin. He wasn’t getting a fever, was he? Or did Sephiroth just have a naturally higher temperature than other people? When Cloud had been enhanced, he’d run a bit hot too.

Sephiroth was staring at him with glowing, gorgeous green eyes. “You are impaired, Strife.”

The blond grunted. “So’re you. Been starin’ at that report for th’ past fifteen minutes, not gettin’ nowhere.” Sephiroth had really nice skin. And his eyes…

A long-fingered hand came up and grasped his own, gently pulling it away from the General’s face. “I… perhaps you are right. Can you get back to your room?”

Cloud blinked. “Uh…” Where did he live again? Seventh Heaven… no, the General was here. He lived in number… number…

Sephiroth abruptly stood up, somehow manoeuvring them so he could wrap an arm around Cloud’s waist. “Alright.” He picked up the phone and dialled a single number. It rang a few times before voice mail picked up. “Lazard. This is Sephiroth. I have been awake for several days working to complete a project for the President. As I am not fit to work tomorrow… ah, today, that is, I am taking a sick day. I don’t want my sleep interrupted except for emergencies. You can use your judgement for anything else.” He hung up without another word and led Cloud through the maze of paperwork.

The blond blinked as Sephiroth masterfully manoeuvred them through the door. “Uh, I can walk you know.”

The General raised an eyebrow and abruptly let go. “Very well. Walk.”

Cloud glared at the condescending look on the General’s face and made his way towards the elevator. When the world abruptly tilted sideways, he groaned and prepared himself to hit the ground.

Steady arms wrapped themselves around him. “Yes. I can see you can walk.”

Cloud scowled at the floor and grumbled. “What’re y’gon do, walk me to ma room?”

The General snorted and punched the ‘down’ button on the elevator. “I don’t know where you’re roaming, and somehow I doubt you do right now either. I do however know the location of my own residence.”

Cloud hummed.

The bike ride to Sephiroth’s place was pretty wicked, to say the least. Enhanced reflexes, an engine
fit to race, and a severe desire to get some Planet-damned sleep turned what should have been a fifteen minute ride home into a five-minute adrenaline rush and a half.

Sephiroth turned off the engine and kicked out the stand, gently settling the bike in his garage like he’d probably done a million times before. Cloud blearily blinked his eyes when the warm back he was pressed against shifted and a hand nudged him.

“Hm?”

Green eyes glowed in the dim morning light. “We’re here.”

“Hm.” Cloud closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against a warm back. “Don’ wan’ move.”

A breathy chuckle. “Wouldn’t you rather be in a bed?”

The blond perked up a bit at the word ‘bed’. “Oh. Um…” It was a tough decision.

Thankfully, Sephiroth made it for him and just pulled his arms from around the taller man’s waist before picking him up and carrying him through the door. The world spun, and Cloud groaned. He’d drunk too much of that coffee. His brain felt like Tifa’s homemade stew churning around in his head.

That shit gave Barret indigestion.

A hand gently tapped his cheek, and Cloud blinked blearily up at a boringly white ceiling. When had he lost his clothes?

“Did y’take off ma clothes?” he slurred.

Silver hair tickled his face as the man leaned over him and pulled up the covers. “Your dignity is in tact, Strife.”

“Where y’goin’?”

“Couch.”

The blond snorted. “Fuck that.” He grabbed a handful of silver hair and pulled the pajama-clad General closer. “I’m not makin’ y’sleep on yer own damn couch. Get in here. S’a king sized bed. Lots a’ room.”

“That would be inappropriate.”

Cloud scowled and tugged on the man’s silver hair. “You. In. Now. I ain’t gon’ let go, and y’ain’t gon’ break ma hand. So suck it up princess an’ get in.”

A throaty chuckle. “I don’t believe anyone has had the courage to call me a princess before. Let alone twice.” The covers shifted and a warm body moved into bed next to him. Cloud let Sephiroth settle before he murmured happily and shifted closer to his new heater and wrapped an arm around his waist, letting his head rest on a toned shoulder.

The warm muscles tensed. “What are you doing, Strife?”

“Mmm… warm.” He shifted closer and let out a content sigh. His mind had long since stopped working, but if there was one thing he knew, it was that he liked sleeping with warm things. And the silken hair brushing his cheek was a nice plus. “Gnite.”
He might have heard Sephiroth murmur a soft ‘goodnight’ back.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

And thus, the beginning of Phase Two! Mwahaha!

So, my day ended pretty shitty and I owe $24 in library fines. Fucking course reserves and librarians going on supper break. I needed Cloud to cheer me up so this is why I updated, basically. I got work up to my eyeballs but I didn’t feel like doing any of it tonight. Hopefully tomorrow will be a little more productive…

Anyway, I’ve gotten some mixed reviews and confusion floating around, so I figured I’d clear up a few things. First of all – in regards to the whole ‘Zack’ thing, I’d like to remind the dissidents that this is fanfiction. Which by the very definition of the word means I’m taking canon material and messing with it. So I don’t particularly care if I follow canon in regards to characters, story, plot, backstory, or what-have-you. For those of you wondering exactly what went down in Cloud’s head, I can only hope that this chapter and future updates clear things up for you as I skooch along. And I don’t mean to imply by this message that I have received a lot of flak from people, it’s actually quite the opposite, but I figured I’d set the record straight for those who chose not to provide ways for me to contact them.

On a more positive note, BAND CAMP ROCKED! :D So thanks to everybody who sent their well-wishes my way, I had a blast! School’s started now, so I’m not sure how often I’ll continue to update. I’ve also been meaning to work on my other stories, so no promises. Thanks to everyone who’s read and reviewed! Your support is what keeps writers like me going.

Happy reads, yo!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy


Chapter Twelve:

Cloud was dragged miserably out from under the fog of sleep by a bursting bladder and a distinct freezing in his lower extremities. Prying his eyes open, he looked down at himself and found that all the covers on the bed had apparently been kicked off of him.

Navigating himself into the hall, he stumbled into the bathroom and quickly relieved himself. He frowned down at his boxers as he pulled them back up. Usually he slept in pants or nothing at all. That was odd.

Too tired to care, he washed his hands quickly and stumbled back down the hall, not noticing the fact that the bathroom was on the wrong side.

Shuffling back into the bedroom, he shut the door behind him and flopped onto the bed with a grunt, reaching for the blankets. He had to tug at them quite insistently before the cocoon of cushions opened and suddenly swallowed him whole. He eeped in surprise as he found himself pulled into a pair of strong arms, and a leg threw itself over his knees.

Suddenly much more awake that he’d been a moment before, he tried to remember the who he’d apparently slept with the previous night. Had he gotten shit-faced or something?

Foggy memory of a too long night filled with paperwork returned to his tired brain, and he froze as he realized exactly who was currently wrapping around him.

He absently fingered a lock of long, silky hair and flinched when the body pressed up against his back shifted, and warm breath ghosted along the back of his neck, tickling his hair and scalp. He couldn’t help but close his eyes and pant softly at the pleasant sensation.

His neck was far too sensitive for his own good.

He had no idea Sephiroth was such a cuddler. With the way he’d probably grown up and his job, Cloud would have thought he’d sleep on his back like the dead.

But then, he’d never thought Sephiroth could be a chocolate and coffee addict either. He wondered if Hojo knew about that, and if it would piss him off if he did know. Cloud’s lips curled in amusement at the image of Hojo raging against Sephiroth for not being perfectly free of vices, and the General drawing his sword to threaten him with one hand, the other protectively holding a chocolate cake out of reach.

“Mmm…”

Cloud tensed slightly. Was Sephiroth waking up? But no, the General just rubbed his face against the back of Cloud’s head before relaxing again and puffing warm breath against the shell of the blond’s ear.
Unfortunately, with his shifting, Cloud was now distinctly aware of a hard bit of flesh pressing against the back of his thighs, just barely brushing against his balls through the fabric of his boxers. It was official. He was in hell.

“Right hand maaaan~ Right hand maaaan~”

Cloud frowned. That wasn’t his PHS.

“When you need things done, ask your right hand man~”

Sephiroth reached over him and snatched the annoying device off the bedside table with a grumble, flipping it open and grunting, “Zack, what the fuck?” into the receiver. Cloud froze solid as Sephiroth’s body rubbed against his own with every movement.

“Seph! Shit, are you still asleep? I thought I told you I was coming in this afternoon. Have you been overworking yourself again?”

Cloud could hear every word since Sephiroth had flopped himself over his body, one hand cradling the phone and the other keeping him blearily balanced and upright.


“You okay, Seph? Usually you aren’t this slow.”

“I may have… pushed the limit,” he said slowly, eyes slowly trailing over to Cloud, who he was currently smothering with blankets and his hot body. What, even if he had destroyed the planet it didn’t change the fact that he was hot enough to melt glaciers. The green eyes glazed over in incomprehension as they met his own.

“Well, as long as you didn’t fall into bed with a hooker!” Zack cracked up laughing.

Sephiroth and Cloud stared at each other. “I did not.”

“Oh, good. Lazard told me you were taking a sick day. It’s too bad, ’cause I brought pizza. Have you seen Cloud, by chance? I came to drop off my report, and he wasn’t here either.”

Sephiroth continued to stare at Cloud. “Sick leave. Worked late.”

“Seph! You need to take it easy on that little guy. He’s not enhanced like us. Be careful with my Spike, okay?” Sephiroth opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. “Well, I’ll see you tomorrow then. Sorry for waking you!” -Click-

Sephiroth stared at his PHS for a moment before flicking it shut and dropping it on the nightstand with a groan. He collapsed on top of Cloud with a grunt, eyes closed and silvery hair spilling about him.

Cloud did not ‘eep’ in surprise. He grunted in complaint and shoved Sephiroth ineffectually. “Can’t breath,” he wheezed under the 300 pounds of muscle and mako enhancement.

Sephiroth shifted about until he was lying half on top of Cloud, and half off, his head pillowed on the blond’s chest and his right arm and leg wrapping around the smaller man like a squid. He settled there with a sigh, gently rubbing his cheek on Cloud’s chest a few times until he found the most comfortable spot.

And then he went and fell asleep.
Cloud stared down at Sephiroth, disbelieving, as the General of the Shinra Army passed out on top of him. This was the man who, as Zack had once told Cloud, stayed awake for seven days straight in Wutai because he couldn’t trust the rest of his SOLDIERs to keep them alive through the night during the worst of the war. This was the man who was so paranoid, he kept stock piles of chocolate hidden in his office in case the company’s vending machines ran out. The wannabe destroyer of worlds...

All the usual wrinkles of stress and annoyance had smoothed from his expression like melting butter. The little frown between his eyebrows had completely disappeared, leaving his face looking youthful, relaxed... innocent.

Cloud swallowed and raised the hand not smushed under Sephiroth’s weight to a smooth, pale cheek. He didn’t touch, just hovered for a moment, wanting to so badly sink his hand into this man’s hair and his teeth into his neck until he went lax and surrendered his entire being. Cloud wanted to own him...

And it scared him. He’d never felt such an intense desire to utterly possess someone... and he’d never suspected he could feel it for Sephiroth. Logically, he knew he couldn’t control this man. Couldn’t make those strong knees bend and that stubborn neck bow under the weight of Cloud’s hand, but he wanted it, more than he had with any of his past flings.

He wanted to massage away all that tension until Sephiroth was an oiled masterpiece under his hand, sighing and leaning into every touch. Wanted to listen to the little sounds he’d make, the little hitches in breath, as he wrapped his tongue around the man’s shaft. Wanted to watch him come undone under his hand. Wanted to put him back together afterwards with gentle caresses, murmured words, and sweet kisses along that delicious line of throat.

Suppressing a quiet groan, he pulled his hand away from the tempting visage of his once worst-enemy and forced it to remain silent at his side.

Hopefully thinking of Barret in drag would help him get rid of his... little problem.

....

Sephiroth woke completely rested, warm, and bonelessly relaxed. He’d never been this comfortable in his own bed. In fact, he rather hated sleeping in it. It was hard, big, and always empty.

The breathing of another reached his ears, and he froze, immediately clawing his way out of the warm cocoon of sleep to face the imminent threat.

Green eyes snapped towards the source of the sound, and silver brows frowned in confusion at the sight of blond hair and the familiar face of his secretary in the relaxed state of sleep. A quick assessment of his surroundings had him almost balking in shock, completely mortified to find himself laying on top of the smaller man, his head on a warm, firm chest and their legs intertwined. He could feel a hardness against the tightening muscles of his abdomen, and his own answering hardness against a smooth, warm leg.

What should he do? He’d never been in this situation before. The occasional men he’d slept with he had asked to leave after their coupling. He couldn’t sleep with another body so close that he couldn’t trust. At least, not this deeply. He shouldn’t have been able to fall asleep with another person in his bed at all, no matter how tired he’d been.

He wracked his memory for the answer to the dilemma. Cloud hadn’t been coherent enough to get
home, or even tell Sephiroth the address, so the General had decided it would be just easier to bring the small man back his own home.

What had possessed him to remove Cloud’s clothing, besides his boxers, and climb into bed with him stark naked?

Sephiroth closed his eyes and relaxed a bit when his secretary’s breathing pattern remained steady. It must have been the new coffee. He still wasn’t accustomed to managing the appropriate dosage. It was the only explanation for his… lack of professionalism.

The coffee didn’t explain why he didn’t want to move, however.

Sephiroth let out an annoyed sigh and settled his cheek back on Cloud’s chest. He was too comfortable to move. He’d never been too comfortable to move before. Hojo had always said that the body was merely a vessel for the consciousness, and that all those physical things he craved during his childhood, like touch, sweets, a comfortable bed – they were all unnecessary.

Sephiroth opened his eyes sleepily and stared at the little of Cloud’s chest he could see from this vantage point. He’d slept with some attractive men before, and his bodily response in the morning was not uncommon, but it usually faded after he awoke without him having to attend to it.

Which begged the question of why it had yet to fade.

The memory of pinning Cloud to one of Hojo’s medical tables surfaced in his mind with a strength that left him breathless. That kiss had pulled him asunder like nothing he had ever experienced. A fire had kindled inside him in that moment, and now he found the coals fanned and ready for more wood.

He… wanted Cloud.

He was reluctant to admit it, even to himself. It was highly unprofessional for the General to be attracted to his secretary of all people, but no matter how much he tried to push the thought aside, the warmth and comfort he’d woken to find himself cocooned in wouldn’t let him. He’d never experienced this kind of weakness before, and he had no idea how to proceed.

Cloud shifted beneath him, and Sephiroth tensed in anticipation. Should he move? Should he pretend nothing had happened? Should he-

A hand sank into his hair, and Sephiroth froze for a second before melting as nails gently scratched along his scalp. The hand was gentle and warm as it alternated between scratching and combing motions. Sephiroth let his eyes fall shut and hummed in pleasure. No one had ever touched his hair like this. Genesis used to pull on it when it grew out during the Wutai war and he hadn’t bothered to cut it. Since his defection, however, no one else had dared.

Genesis’s tugging had never felt this good.

The hand froze suddenly, as did the gentle rise and fall of his pillow, and Sephiroth groaned in disappointment, pushing into that hand. When it continued its ministrations, he let out a small sigh and rubbed a cheek against warm skin.

Cloud was awake.

Sephiroth’s eyes flew open, and he looked up in surprise. Cloud stared down at him, blue eyes heavy with sleep and… something else. Heat. The same look he’d had when Sephiroth had caught him servicing that Turk in the closet.
Green eyes flickered down to trace the line of that mouth. It must be quite talented to finish the Turk so quickly. He wondered what it would feel like on his own flesh.

The hand in his hair paused for a moment before moving to the back of his head and gripping. The tug made Sephiroth take a small, shocked breath, the sensation delicious. He stared into Cloud’s heated eyes and watched as they drew closer. Green eyes flickered back to that mouth as a pink tongue tantalizingly moistened chapped lips. Within moments, he found them inches from his own, forcing him to look up into burning blue eyes asking questions he didn’t understand.

Just as he opened his mouth to speak, though he knew not what he would say, Cloud closed the final distance between them with a tug of silver hair. Sephiroth sucked in another small breath of surprise before he found his head tilted and warm lips on his own. It wasn’t anything like the hot, demanding, consuming kiss that they had shared in Hojo’s lab. It was soft, gentle, and Sephiroth found himself wanting more, so he pushed and tried to deepen the kiss, only for Cloud to yank sharply on his hair and make a warning sound deep in his chest.

Sephiroth’s mouth fell lax as the hand tugging his hair tightened almost to the point of discomfort, and it surprised him how much he liked it.

The world suddenly swung on its axis, and Sephiroth grunted in surprise as he found himself expertly flipped and pinned to the mattress, a hot mouth beginning to deepen against his own with tongue and teeth. A lithe knee spread his legs to press against the hardness growing there, and Sephiroth gasped at the heat that raced up his spine and spread to each tingling fingertip.

A mouth latched on to the side of his neck, just under his ear, and Sephiroth let out low moan, fire sizzling through his veins like no sex he’d ever had before. As Cloud kissed, bit, and licked his way up and down Sephiroth’s neck, the General found his hips rocking upwards into the smaller man’s leg, desperate for more contact until finally the rough friction coupled with a possessive bite of teeth on his taut neck sent him over the edge with a moan and a powerful, gut-wrenching pull of pleasure.

Gasping quietly into the soft blond locks tickling his nose, Sephiroth blinked hazily up at the ceiling. Soon, the insistent mouth left his raw neck and reached his lips, slowing from frenzy to a lazy massage of lip and tongue until Sephiroth felt warm, loose, and relaxed.

Cloud pulled away, sitting back on his haunches to rake his eyes appreciatively down the spent General’s form. “Gorgeous,” he murmured to himself, so softly Sephiroth only just caught it with his advanced hearing.

Slowly coming back to his senses, he reached for the blonde’s own flesh to reciprocate, but instead he found his hand caught in a gentle but firm grip. “That’s not necessary.”

Sephiroth stared up at him blearily, completely befuddled. “You don’t want me to…?” Wasn’t it considered impolite to not take care of one’s partner during sex?

Cloud laughed, his lighter voice like a the purr of a cat with the way it caressed Sephiroth’s ears. “Oh, it’s not a matter of want,” he murmured, leaning close to claim Sephiroth’s lips in another kiss. “I just don’t want you to do it from some sense of owing me something. I’m happy to take care of you. And when you want this from me, you can have it.”

Sephiroth continued to stare in bewilderment as the blond gave his silver strands a tug with an affectionate smile before he rolled off the bed and padded towards the bathroom.

What had just happened?
Cloud put his hands on the edge of the counter and stared hard into the mirror. His image swam before his eyes for a moment before settling into familiar clarity. He was still a scrawny-assed, unenhanced, former-janitor, presently-secretary, and seriously-pissed-at-the-Turks-right-now Cloud Strife.

So what the fuck had that been just now?

Staring into dull blue eyes in the mirror, he tried to suppress the shaking in his arms. He’d just… with Sephiroth. And he’d loved it because oh god, the man was so responsive. It was like no one had ever touched him that way before, that roughly, and Cloud just wanted to tie him up and bite him until he came from fingers alone in his-

Cloud sank his teeth into his lip and bit, hard, trying to get himself to focus.

He’d just had sex with Sephiroth. Sort of.

What the hell did he do now?

Was Sephiroth interested in something more long term? Did he just want a fling? Had it been merely a spur of the moment thing? Was he going to cut off Cloud’s balls now?

Cloud took a slow, deep, quiet breath and held it. It was hard to forget the debauched look of the man, spilled across his stomach and the sheets and even Cloud himself. With a slightly shaking hand, he wiped the come off his leg and stomach with a curious fascination.

It held a faint green tinge to it. Mako. Cloud quickly washed the rest of it off with a damp towel. The last two times he’d been dosed with mako in this time, he’d blacked out. He didn’t need that happening again from a little semen.

A knock sounded on the door. Cloud jumped and swallowed before forcing himself to calm down. His hand reached towards the door and opened it before his brain had a moment to catch up, and Cloud stared up at the tall, beautiful form of the being who had featured in most of his adult-life nightmares.

The almost hesitant look aimed at him sparked all Cloud’s natural instincts. “Yes?” he asked, leaning against the counter and keeping his eyes on Sephiroth’s difficult-to-read expressions. He was glad in this moment that he’d had so many of Vincent’s moods to read. The past experience certainly made this easier, if not simple.

Sephiroth’s eyes trailed down his form with a muted heat and clinical efficiency. “I apologize, I forgot to mention that my semen carries a high concentration of mako. It is dangerous for the unenhanced, as I’m sure you’re now aware. We should use a condom next time.”

Cloud felt his heart nearly stop in his chest at the last words. Sephiroth wanted there to be a next time? It hadn’t just been the morning wood? He frowned and stared up into those intense green eyes, but the General’s expression for once gave nothing away.

Cloud stepped forward and grabbed Sephiroth by a handful of silver hair. He pulled down.

Sephiroth’s hand wrapped around his own, halting him.

Cloud immediately released the hair and slipped his hand free. He slid through the doorway and into the bedroom. “Bathroom’s all yours,” he muttered, looking for his clothes and seeing them
piled in the corner by the dresser. The suit was rumpled beyond saving. He’d have to take it to the dry cleaner’s, but it would be enough to get him home in the meantime.

After he’d finished dressing, he turned around to see Sephiroth standing there, a blank expression on his face.

Feeling he owed the man some sort of explanation, he ran a hand through his hair with a small sigh. “Look, Sephiroth. I’m not sure you know what really having sex with me would mean. You’re a dominant personality, and I’m a top. Hell, I’m a Dom, if you know what that means. We’d clash in bed. I find anal intercourse uncomfortable, so eventually I would be the one screwing you into the mattress, and not the other way around. Something tells me you haven’t had any experience on the bottom, hm?” When the green eyes flickered away for a moment, he had his answer. “I’m also damned possessive and demanding, in and out of bed. I’m not sure you want to deal with that in a… relationship, or if we made an ‘arrangement’ of sorts.” Sephiroth was staring at Cloud again with that blank expression. It made it difficult to gauge how far to take this conversation.

“Are you going to fire me, now?” he asked, trying to joke around. It came out a bit stiff.

“No,” Sephiroth said immediately, still staring at Cloud like he was some strange, exotic animal. Like he didn’t quite know what to do with him. And to be honest, Cloud was feeling the same way.

“Oh, good, then. I’ll just… get out of your hair. Enjoy the rest of your day off,” he said quickly, making his way towards the door. Sephiroth didn’t stop him. He swallowed the sudden knot in his throat and forced himself out the front door.

He could really use a run.

Sephiroth watched Cloud leave, and he couldn’t do anything to stop it. Didn’t know what to do. Didn’t know what he wanted, or what Cloud was offering. He knew he’d liked what they’d done only moments earlier. He’d fucked countless men, but it had just been to take care of the burn. They’d prep themselves, and he’d fuck them. Sometimes they’d give him a blow job. But with Cloud… it had just been different. The hair tugging and the biting had just… done him in. He didn’t know why, but he’d liked it, and now it seemed so far away and unattainable, walking out the door with Cloud as he stood motionless. Watching. Unsure.

For a long time, he just stood there. Tried to come to grips with things. Tried to think of what he could have said to make Cloud stay.

The whole situation was completely foreign to him. What did one do to ensure a second encounter? Whenever he’d had sex, he’d never brought them to his home, and he’d never seen them a second time. He hadn’t seen a reason for it. They’d come to him with heat in their eyes, fiddling nervously with hair, and he’d just… done it. They’d rolled over for him. There had been no words, no question, just the sex, and then he’d left. Every time.

Sephiroth wandered into the bathroom and turned the water on to scalding hot. Climbing into the shower, he sat on the stone floor and watched the rivulets spin down into the drain.

For the first time in a long while, he didn’t know what to do.

Cloud closed the door behind him with a sigh. Thankfully, no one was home. He was supposed to
be on dinner duty yesterday, but with Sephiroth putting him to work on that project of his…

If Cloud ever had to read another damned monster report, it would be a hundred years too soon.

Padding quietly to his bedroom, he stripped off his suit and put it on its rightful hanger to be taken to the dry cleaner’s later that afternoon. Dressing quickly in his most comfortable track pants and sleeveless shirt, he tried not to think about the very interesting night- er, morning, he’d had. He needed to go for a run. If he just worked himself into the ground, he knew he’d be able to forget how that hard body had felt under-

Cloud chewed on his lip and wandered into the kitchen. Food. Yes. That was something he could take care of.

Opening the fridge, he took a quick perusal of his ingredients. Someone really needed to do the shopping. He pulled out any vegetables and meat that could be salvaged, and threw the rest in the trash. It didn’t take him long to chop it all up and dump it in the slow-cooker. Hopefully the guys would take it for the apology it was. Throwing in some spice and seasoning, he set it on medium so it would be ready by dinner.

With that finished, he went into his room and picked up all the things he’d need for a nice, long-

Ding…. Ding…. Dingdingdingdingdingd-

Cloud groaned and just barely resisted the urge to smack his head against the wall and put himself out of his misery.

“I know you’re in there, Cloud! Open up!”

Dumping his duffel bag next to the couch, he stalked up to the door and swung it open. “What?” he snapped.

Zack seemed to droop. “I didn’t wake you, did I? It’s already four in the afternoon.”

Cloud pinched the bridge of his nose to ward off the incoming headache. “No, you didn’t wake me. Come in.” He wandered into the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of water. What he really wanted was a Tifa Special, but he didn’t have enough booze to make one of those.

“I heard you had the day off. I thought we could hang out!”

Cloud finished swallowing. “Not today, Zack. I need to go for a run and work out.”

Zack just grinned. “Perfect! I’ve been meaning to work off some extra energy. Come on, I’ll take you to the SOLDIER gyms after a run around the track. We’ve got the best facilities. We could even spar! Seph said you’ve been practicing sword forms. I can give you some pointers!”

Cloud opened his mouth to protest, but it was already too late. Zack had grabbed his bag and his arm and was dragging him out the door with a happy bounce.

No one could save him now.

Cloud finished his stretches with one last exhalation before bouncing to his feet. As nervous as he should have been, he was really itching for a fight. It had been far too long since he’d had the chance to spar with someone, and he needed to get used to dealing with the limitations of his body
in its current state.

Seeing that Zack was warming up with the Buster, Cloud sent him a caustic look. “If you intend to spar me with that behemoth, you can think again, Zack Fair! You’re not destroying my weapons with that thing in a spar!” He knew exactly how strong and heavy that blade was – he’d used it himself. It would make his crappy short swords shatter in a few blows, and he wasn’t willing to risk the untested blade he’d restored on it.

Zack scratched the back of his head sheepishly as he watched Cloud put on his harnesses and some leather armour he’d picked up on a shopping trip. It wasn’t nearly enough to stop a blade or keep him from bruising, but it would protect his skin when he had to roll, or if he got tossed across the ground.

It was times like these he missed his enhancements.

Although, if Sephiroth got his way it looked like he’d be signing up for the SOLDIER program again in less than four months. If this was the Planet manoeuvring him into saving the world all over again, he was not impressed.

“I’ll use a training sword. How about that?”

Cloud nodded and drew his twin blades from his harness with the shick of steel slid from its sheath. Moving into an open area, he closed his eyes and took a centring breath. Slipping into a free form stance, he started gliding through the motions. All his extra training had been paying off. He couldn’t move nearly as fast as he used to, but he wasn’t constantly fighting the muscle memory for a larger, more powerful body anymore either. He’d even been able to engage in pretend, free-style spars with a ghost opponent, his mind playing out old battles against old opponents.

Slipping one of the twin blades back into its sheath, he pulled out the nameless steel blade he’d restored and tried a few of the more complicated manoeuvres he could manage in this body. Pleased with the smooth, limber movements of his body, he ended the kata with a swift, killing blow.

Hands clapped. Cloud turned his attention to the observing SOLDIER and frowned at the unfamiliar face.

“Hey, nice job, kid. You training with Zack for the SOLDIER program?”

In a manner of speaking. Cloud didn’t say anything, merely sheathed his blades and turned to watch Zack finishing his warm ups.

The SOLDIER didn’t seem to catch on. “So, how long have you been training for?”

Cloud glanced at him, annoyed. “A lifetime,” he finally said, when it looked like the guy wasn’t going to go away.

The guy laughed. “Zack keeps you pretty tied up, then?”

Cloud froze and turned his full attention on the SOLDIER. No, he hadn’t heard that wrong. There was an undercurrent of interest in the man’s voice, posture, and glowing mako eyes. Not only that, but he kept looking back and forth between Zack and Cloud.

“No, he doesn’t.” Those glowing eyes snapped to him, raking up and down his form with now obvious interest. “I’m afraid I’m the kind of guy who likes tying the knots. Zack couldn’t sit still long enough if he tried.”
The man looked so taken aback and surprised that Cloud smirked and advanced on him slightly, pleased when the SOLDIER took a step back. “I’d suggest you try to find another victim to tie up.”

Before the SOLDIER could do more than gape, Zack skipped over with a wide grin. “C’mon, Spiky! Time to get this show on the road!”

Cloud nodded and drew one of his twin blades while walking out onto the matts. “Restrain that SOLDIER strength of yours, will you? Or your buying me damascus steel with your next paycheque.” Zack laughed. “And if you break any of my limbs, I’m never helping you out again.” Here the Puppy gaped, dismayed, and Cloud took full advantage of the opening to rush Zack.

The SOLDIER blinked and stepped around Cloud’s wide attack. His movement hid the grin that spread across Cloud’s face as he dropped his blade, grabbed Zack’s arm, lowered his centre of weight, and threw the SOLDIER onto the ground with a thud.

Zack grunted and stared up at the ceiling, dazed. “What the-”

Cloud picked up his dropped blade and drew his nameless steel sword. “Better grab your training sword, Zack,” he said, jerking his head towards where the sword had spun off with his throw.

With SOLDIER speed, Zack got up, grabbed the sword, and stood across from him, ready to battle.

Cloud tilted his head. “Cheater,” he murmured, slipping into a defensive position and waiting for Zack to make the first move.

The overgrown puppy grinned and charged Cloud straight on.

The blond let loose a small puff of air, not even a sigh, before turning his body into the attack and deflecting the sword, and Zack, off to the left. A conveniently placed foot caught Zack’s own and sent the SOLDIER flying again with a trip.

“Oh come on, Zack. Take this seriously,” Cloud demanded, scowling in disappointment. He knew Zack was better than this. With his SOLDIER strength and speed he would have easily creamed Cloud, but even without it his reflexes should be better than this. He was going easy on Cloud, and the past-future-whatever-hero of the world didn’t appreciate it.

Zack got to his feet with a sheepish scratch of his head before turning very strikingly serious. Cloud met his assessing gaze with a level-headed stubbornness and confidence that only came from years of experience fighting many different kinds of warriors.

It helped that he knew Zack’s style in and out, of course, and he’d had decades to build upon it with his multi-sword style.

Zack’s next attack was precise and cautious, and Cloud deflected it off to the side with a flick of his wrist and the employment of some more aikido technique. He’d never imagined the style could be so useful to him, as it used the attacker’s energy, strength, and speed against them. As a warrior accustomed to changing his style with every blade and enemy, it came naturally to him to incorporate it into this battle.

Cloud continued to dance around Zack, drawing him into his rhythm. The surprise and annoyance that slowly grew on the SOLDIER’s face was worth being dragged out here today, and Cloud grinned with enjoyment as the battle progressed and he continued to run circles around his old friend. He was so enjoying himself, high on adrenaline and finally starting to feel like himself again, that he almost missed the whistle of a fourth blade passing through the air.
Reacting on instinct, Cloud flipped his nameless blade behind him to catch the sword at his back without bothering to look. Capitulating on the shocked look on Zack’s face, he slipped inside the larger man’s guard and slammed him in the stomach with the butt of his twin sword. Zack wheezed, completely unsuspecting of the attack, and backed away a few steps. Cloud used the force exerted on the sword in his left hand to propel himself off to the side, neatly avoiding the fall of the swing and taking a moment to assess the new enemy.

Silver hair gave it away before the black leather jacket, and Cloud’s eyebrows rose in surprise at the sight of the man and his ridiculously long sword. He should have been crushed under that attack. The General must have moderated his strength.

“May I step in, Zack?”

The other First Class wheezed some more and waved an arm, already walking over to the benches by the wall to catch his breath. Regardless of the physical strength of a SOLDIER, if you didn’t tighten your abdominal muscles in anticipation of that kind of blow, your organs still took all the force of the hit.

Sephiroth held his sword at the ready, and Cloud was already calculating the advantages and disadvantages of ten different styles of combat with each of his blades. Making a split second decision, he sheathed his larger sword again and drew the second twin blade. The silver haired General raised an eyebrow but didn’t comment.

Cloud barely had time to react when Sephiroth finally moved. Most SOLDIERs would have sprinted to the side to try to catch Sephiroth off guard. Cloud knew better than that. Trained from decades of combat, he stood his ground, put his right foot forward, and reversed his grip on his right hand blade so it rested against his forearm. Sephiroth was left handed, after all, and predictably his six foot monster came down at Cloud with deadly precision.

The blond shifted his centre of gravity and stepped forward to the left. With such a large reach, Sephiroth wouldn’t be accustomed to close quarters combat, and Cloud fully intended to take advantage. At the same time he stepped, his right arm was already at the ready.

When the attack hit, it was almost a blur to his eyes. The blade hit, ground against Cloud’s sword even though he’d deflected at an angle. The kinetic energy made the sword slide to the right, and Cloud’s extra push was just enough to throw Sephiroth’s balance. He stepped right into the halo of the man’s hair and slid the back of his blade along Sephiroth’s neck. He ignored the hand that encircled his throat, and they both froze and locked gazes.

Cloud felt as though a switch had been hit. All the adrenaline funneling through his blood stream abruptly turned into a burning pit of desire, and it was only sheer strength of will that kept him from dropping that sword and wrapping his hand in that hair and yanking Sephiroth down for a searing kiss.

“Holy shit, Cloud.”

The blond jumped, and Sephiroth’s grip around his neck tightening was the only sign that he had been just as lost in Cloud as the blond had been in him. In unison, the two of them turned to the right to look at Zack, who was staring at them along with every other SOLDIER in the room.

Cloud felt a brief surge of panic before he pushed it away. Why did he have to hide? What grand secret was there? What did it matter? Sephiroth would have him in the SOLDIER program and the Turks would have him become one of them. It wasn’t like he’d had a better plan than becoming a delivery boy again.
So what did it matter if they’d seen?

“You never told me you were so kickass with a sword! If I’d known, I’d had you double wielding the first time you tried out for SOLDIER. Maybe you would have passed.”

A scattering of murmurs crested among the group, and Cloud wanted to smack Zack over the head with the side of Nameless to knock some subtlety into him.

Oh, who was he kidding. Zack wouldn’t know subtlety if it dyed his underwear pink, braided his hair, and dumped him in a brothel below plate. Even if Sephiroth had obviously been holding back his strength in this duel, he was sure Zack would crow of his technique to anyone who would listen.

The grip on his neck was tightening, so Cloud slowly removed the blade from Sephiroth’s neck, making sure to telegraph his every move. The General pulled away just as slowly, almost caressing his neck with leather gloves smoothed from years of use. In almost choreographed unison, they sheathed their blades and turned towards the SOLDIERs.

“Please welcome our newest member, Third Class SOLDIER Cloud Strife. As you can see, there was a mistake during his testing that I am now rectifying. He will be serving as my assistant and secretary, both in Shinra and in the field, so I expect you all to show him the proper respect. Understood?”

“YES, SIR!” the group thundered, staring at their General with loyalty, pride, and a bit of jealousy shining in every one of their mako eyes. Zack was grinning so broadly it looked as though his face might crack in half.

Cloud stared at the General with a mixture of shock and suppressed terror.

Hojo. He was going to be SOLDIER… which meant Hojo. He couldn’t escape the fucker, no matter what he did. He was going to have to make it absolutely mandatory that Zack be there with him for every moment of his enhancement, else he feared he might turn into a WEAPON of mass destruction on a psychotic rampage.

A huge hand clapped Cloud on the shoulder and nearly brought him to his knees from the sheer force of it. The blond turned his head to see Zack smiling down at him proudly, nearly bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“Celebratory drinks down at Marly’s!!” he called out, and a huge woop went up among the SOLDIERs. Zack could gather up a party for just about any occasion. “You’re coming too, Sephiroth!” Cloud glanced at the silver-haired man to not only not see the expected look of annoyance, but to see him staring at Cloud with an indecipherable expression.

Now that he wasn’t fighting for his life, Cloud finally noticed the blown pupils of those unique blue-green eyes. That was not just his imagination.

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-
You all can thank esama for melting my brain with Ultima and pulling this update out of me with the Ultimate Power of Sephiroth Kneeling. (hearts in eyes) If you haven’t read that story, you need to do so. RIGHT. NOW. Kneel before the Ultima!

Also, I have a new poll on my profile, concerning more works from yours truly. If you have a few seconds, please check it out. :)
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy

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Chapter Thirteen:

The party was a blur. After Cloud knocked back a few of Tifa’s old favourites, everything had faded into a haze of colour, shadow, sweat, and the tang of alcohol. It was the only thing he could to do keep himself from running away. Stealing a bike and getting out of Midgar. Dyeing his hair and vanishing off the face of the Planet.

Damn Sephiroth. Cloud wouldn’t be surprised if the bastard had had it all planned. Zack asking him for a duel had just sped things along. That, or Cloud’s show of skill had tipped whatever scale Sephiroth had been sitting on.

And now he had to deal with Hojo. Fucking Hojo. It would take every ounce of self-control not to crush that abomination’s windpipe during Cloud’s first mako infusion. Cloud needed a plan. Desperately.

Maybe he could ask for a different scientist to do his injections… no, that would never fly. That would spike Hojo’s interest, too. The fucker had always had a hard on for things he wasn’t allowed to have.

Maybe he could get Sephiroth to go with him and keep an eye on him? Not let Hojo disappear him?

Fuck fuck fuck fuck-


Cloud glared. He’d never been a happy drunk. “Fuck off, Zack.”

The puppy pouted. “Aah, don’ be so meeeean. Whasser problem?”

“If you need to know, I don’t like mako. Or scientists. Especially Hojo.” Cloud was happy to note that his words came out pretty clear. He was buzzed enough to take the edge off, but not nearly as sloshed as Zack, who was throwing back SOLDIER Sinkers like water.

Glancing around, he frowned at the lack of silver hair. “Where’d Sephiroth go?”

“Ah, ‘e usually takes off early,” Zack grumped, staring into his empty glass with a confused sadness.

Cloud slipped off his stool. “Then I’m not sticking around.” He slipped into the crowd before Zack could squawk and drag him back.

The trip back to the dorms wasn’t bad. He got felt up once by another drunk dude thinking he was a chick, and vindictively sprained his wrist for the trouble. Stumbling into his shared apartment with
The blond grunted and wandered past the kitchen towards his room. He knew he should eat something, but he didn’t feel like braving the kitchen to get some of the dinner he’d slow-cooked.

“Ah, sorry guys. He’s not terribly social. Look like you’ve had a rough night, Cloud! Getting drunk with that friend of yours?”

Cloud grunted again and shut the bedroom door behind him. Zack hadn’t let him change before dragging him off to the bar, so he was still dressed to the nines for battle. Well, as to the nines he could be without his old, better gear.

He needed to fix that. He should be getting better money working for Sephiroth. Especially if he was also now a SOLDIER Third-Class.

Stripping down, he set his alarm and flopped into bed. He had work tomorrow. He was lucky Sephiroth had let him get away with a recovery day.

“Cloud, I need those papers five minutes ago.”

Five minutes frantic searching and photocopying later... Delivered.

“Cloud. Coffee.”

Three minutes to make one extra strong cup of coffee… Delivered.

“Cloud. Those papers.”

“I put them on your desk ten minutes ago while you were signing five pages a second. Some situational awareness, General!”

“...Noted.”

“Uh, Cloud? I think the photocopier is smoking.”

Cloud looked up from the stack of paperwork he was organizing to see that yes, Zack was lazing on their couch again, and yes, the photocopier that Cynthia had killed was indeed smoking.

Pulling out a materia, he iced it and went back to his work.

“HOLY FUCK!”

Sephiroth burst into the room to see Zack climbing the wall with surprise, Cloud glaring at the paperwork in front of him, and one of the photocopiers frozen.

He glared at Zack. “No materia indoors, Soldier.” And promptly went back into his office.

Zack glared balefully at Cloud, who continued to work, ignoring him completely. “Thanks for that, Spike,” he said sarcastically. Well, as sarcastically as the puppy could manage, so it sounded more sulky.

Cloud sighed. “Don’t you have work you should be doing, Zack, as Sephiroth’s second in
command? Don’t think I’m going to pick up your fuckin’ slack because I’m already picking up Sephiroth’s.”

“I heard that, Strife.”

“It’s fuckin’ true, General, and don’t you give me sass!”

“...Noted.”

Zack was staring at him with a gob-smacked expression. “You whipped Sephiroth?”

Cloud gave him his darkest ‘get-your-stupid-lazy-ass-off-my-couch-and-go-do-some-fucking-work’ glare, and Zack rocketed off the couch and headed to the elevator.

“Cloud. I’m out of staples.”

Cloud groaned and grabbed his stapler from his desk. Opening the door to Sephiroth’s office, he threw it at the SOLDIER’s head without checking to see if it connected with a hand or a face.

They’d been busting ass finalizing that stupid, mother fucking project for the President, and Cloud was about ready to blow a blood vessel. He’d done all he could to help Sephiroth with things, and now it was up to the General to organize all the data into a cohesive summary report before getting it delivered to the President, who was a few floors below them. The fat tub of lard used to have this penthouse office to himself, but a few too many assassination attempts had had him rotating to the same floor as the Turks for safety. Now any poor bastard that got it in his head that the President would be an easy mark would face six feet of steel.

Meanwhile, Cloud had been catching up on some loose ends Cynthia had left to rot due to her terrible understanding of numbers. Technically, these things were Heidegger’s job, but Lazard had ended up giving it to Cynthia in the hope that a few long standing questions about budget would be cleared up.

Considering they were due two weeks ago, it only emphasized her incompetence in Cloud’s eyes. He was still being surprised by shit that he needed to get taken care of simply due to the fact that Cynthia left no useful records behind.

Cloud frowned as he squinted at the numbers, never more appreciative of the fact that he’d run a business or two himself in the past/future/whatever. Something wasn’t adding up right.

“Cloud. Please deliver the report to the President.”

Argh! He’d almost had it figured out. Pushing back from the desk, he ignored the way his chair smacked into the wall and made his way to Sephiroth’s office. The General had already moved on to something else, but had left his giant report in the Out box. “Please organize the data we collected into boxes and have them shipped to the archive for later reference,” the silver-haired man ordered without looking up from his paperwork.

Cloud grunted in acknowledgement and grabbed the report, walking quickly back out the door. The faster he got this delivered, the faster he could get back to the numbers.

The ride down to the Turk floor was painfully boring, and the numbers kept circling around in Cloud’s brain, distracting him so much he nearly walked into Rude upon getting out of the elevator.

The dark man raised an eyebrow. Cloud lifted the report. “Delivery to the President from General
Sephiroth.”

“I’ll escort you myself, Mr. Strife.”

Cloud’s eyebrow twitched in irritation at the sound of Tseng’s smooth, dulcet tones. If he ever got a chance, he’d be shoving Reno’s night stick up that man’s ass and turning it up to the max. The anger that burned inside him at the Turk’s brazen need to know everything, to the point of kidnapping and interrogating him, was almost too much to restrain. Taking a few slow, deep breaths, he calmed down the bubbling in his chest until it was but a simmer. Never completely going away, but not at the point of boiling over anymore.

“Lead the way, dot-man,” he muttered under his breath.

A sharp look cut his way, but Cloud merely raised an irritable eyebrow as the Turk stood there, watching him. “Do I look like I’m made of time? I got shit to do. Let’s get a move on,” Cloud grunted.

Tseng raised a delicate eyebrow. “My apologize, Mr. Strife.” An amused, disdainful smile twisted his lips. “I’ll be sure not to keep a Third Class SOLDIER waiting again in the future.”

Cloud barely held himself back from another snide comment. The day Tseng got himself permanently removed from the list of annoyances that haunted him through multiple timelines would be the day pigs flew. It was bound never to happen solely because it would make Cloud happy.

“Follow me,” the Turk called out as he walked down the hall towards the president’s office. Or rather, the private, president-only elevator to the president’s stuffy, gaudy, horrible office.

Cloud worked on auto-pilot during the whole procedure, doing his best not to remember the rolls of opulent flesh that hung out of President Shinra’s suit. The man was lower than Don Corneo scum on the bottom of Cloud’s shoe, as far as the former AVALANCHE leader was concerned.

One day, he would kill that man. Or watch. With popcorn.

Just as the short meeting was wrapping up, something struck Cloud. It was half an idea. Less than half an idea, actually. But watching Shinra wave his gold-ring-laden fingers around with that pomp and circumstance got the gears in his brain churning. Greed. Shinra, and therefore certain Shinra employees were known for their Greed. Hojo and his science projects. Scarlet and her weapons. Heidegger.

Heidegger. Head of Public Safety (aka the Military that kept the Public under control.) The big, greedy man in control of the Military while Sephiroth reigned over the elite SOLDIER.

He wouldn’t say something was pinging his memory, but his intuition, his gut was screaming at him when he remembered the strange numbers his mind had been chewing over during the walk to deliver the President’s report. He’d seen a number of inconsistencies in the purchase and distribution of supplies. Toilet paper didn’t cost that much, no matter where you were buying it from.

He needed to get in front of his computer.

Rather than wait for Tseng to escort him to the elevator, Cloud grunted at the Turk that he could see himself out and took off at a jog. The other Turks in the office gave him funny looks, but he honestly didn’t care.
He had something he needed to do.

Cloud couldn’t believe it, but it was staring him right in the face. No doubt about it. He’d stayed until midnight to confirm his suspicions, and now that he had the evidence, he didn’t know what to do with it. It wasn’t his company. Did he really care that Heidegger was embezzling money? But then, that was money that could be going to fixing up the slums. Or that could be embezzled by someone else to their own selfish gains.

Cloud ran his hands through his hair with a frustrated groan. What to do, what to do…

Well, he certainly wasn’t going to leave all this here for someone to find and/or burn. He’d just have to stay in the office until Sephiroth arrived the next morning.

With a groan of exhaustion, he wandered over to the kitchenette and dug in the back for the rations he’d stored in there after the last time they’d run themselves into the ground. It was hard to believe they’d only finished that report a few days ago. It hadn’t taken Sephiroth very long to compile it into a report. Cloud hated to give him more data to compile into another report, but it was better to bring this to light than let it fester, right?

That’s what he told himself, at least, as he munched on half a ration bar before passing out on the couch.

“-oud. Wake up, Cloud.”

The blond opened blurry eyes to see Sephiroth standing over him, long silver tresses falling around his face in silken waves. The man’s face startled him for a moment before his lizard brain registered the small smile and the sanity in clear, green eyes.

“-phiroth,” his voice cracked. “I have something. Have something for you. Sorry. Didn’t want to give you more work, but I have something.”

The General’s green eyes twinkled as he held out a cup of coffee. “It should be the way you like it,” Sephiroth murmured as Cloud sat upright and took the sacred offering of caffeination. “I’m sure it can wait until you’ve woken up.”

Cloud opened his mouth to say no, but stopped himself, and blinked. “I guess so.” He took a big gulp of his coffee, ignoring how hot it was. He needed to wake up his brain.

The two sat in comfortable silence, Sephiroth in the chair with one leg uncharacteristically thrown over the arm. Maybe Cloud’s befuddled state had something to do with it. Maybe not. Either way, it drew Cloud’s unfortunate eye and mind to the long line of leg, the swell of muscles, and the bulging cloth at the apex of those fine specimens.

Goddamnit he needed to get laid. He just wanted to put his hands on the man. Touch him all over. Tie him down to that chair and hold him by the hair while those smooth limps wrapped around his cock and-

Cloud stared mournfully down at where his cup of coffee hid his blatant morning wood from Sephiroth’s eyes. Shit. Show the show and drink the drink, or suffer more agonizing minutes of sleepy uselessness.
Fuck it. Sephiroth had seen him blow a man, what was a little morning stiffy?

Cloud threw back the rest of his coffee with a happy groan and put the cup down on the coffee table. That should help. Now he just needed to head to the bathroom to take care of a little-

A hand on his hip stopped him.

Cloud stopped and looked down at Sephiroth. The coffee was finally starting to kick in, but not enough for this to make sense. “What?” he demanded.

Green eyes flickered to the hard flesh that was little less than two feet away from Sephiroth’s face. “I… want. I do want it.”

Cloud stared uncomprehendingly. “Uh… the report? Can it wait until I’ve had a chance to take a piss?”

Sephiroth’s fingers twitched where they remained attached to his hips. Slowly, hesitantly, he slid his fingers closer to Cloud’s groin. “This. Please?”

Cloud’s brain stalled a good three times before that finally registered, and when it did, his engine flooded under the sudden influx of gas. Holy shit did Sephiroth really want to… “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

The General’s eyes narrowed. “You said you only top. I am willing to try the bottom. As for demanding, I am accustomed to following orders. You call yourself possessive? I do not share either. So yes, I want this. If at any point I do not like something, I will say so.”

Cloud’s lips parted and his eyes fell shut without his accord for a moment so he could gather his wits about him. “And if I said I wanted you on your knees, hands locked behind your back, doing your damnedest to please me as I fucked your mouth, what would you say?”

Sephiroth dropped to his knees, hands behind his back. His eyes had dilated, his lips falling open slightly with a panted breath as the apex of his pants pulled sharply at the flesh tucked inside.

Cloud reached a hand out and grabbed Sephiroth by the hair again. He waited a moment, making eye contact before slowly, deliberately pulling the man towards him. When Sephiroth immediately surrendered to his hand, he pulled harder until Sephiroth had crawled on his knees right up to Cloud’s feet.

Keeping his grip of the silky soft strands, Cloud raised an eyebrow. “Go on.”

Sephiroth raised his hands to Cloud’s fly and the blond tutted. “What did I say?”

The man looked confused for a second before his brow pulled into a frown. His hands slowly, hesitantly, locked behind his back.

“Good. Continue.”

Sephiroth’s lips pressed together for a moment before he moved forward to take Cloud’s front button into his teeth. With dexterity that belied what was undoubtedly inexperience, Sephiroth undid the button and zipper in short order before using his teeth to pull Cloud’s pants down. His breath came in short pants now, the hot air brushing against Cloud’s erection through the now bare fabric of his boxers.

Cloud hissed when teeth grazed his hip on the road to pulling down his boxers. His erection sprung
free, white pre-come glistening at the tip. Cloud sank his hand into silvery hair and guided Sephiroth’s mouth closer. He stopped his hand just shy of putting Sephiroth’s mouth on him.

Without prompting, Sephiroth swallowed Cloud down, eliciting a hiss from the blond. Warm, velvety heat. Sephiroth must have done this before because there wasn’t even the slightest scrape of teeth as the General worked him with tongue and lips. Slowly, the man became emboldened and sank deeper and deeper until lips touched the base of Cloud’s cock.

The blond tightened his grip on silvery strands when he realized Sephiroth didn’t have a gag reflux and slowly started fucking the man’s mouth. When Sephiroth didn’t seem uncomfortable with that, he increased the pace until he was pounding the General’s mouth. Sephiroth moaned around him, and a quick glance down sideways revealed that leather pants had probably become uncomfortably tight. Adrenaline raced through Cloud’s blood at the thrill of having Sephiroth blow him off. The man that in a past life had run him through with a sword. The man Cloud had run through with a sword.

Now all Cloud could think about was swords of another nature sinking into hot flesh. Specifically, his dick pounding in and out of Sephiroth’s ass.

*Planet* he wanted that.

*Patience,* he told himself as Sephiroth’s mouth brought him closer and closer to the edge. Finally, with a groan, he spilled into the man’s mouth. Sephiroth swallowed him down greedily, and Cloud hissed as he became too sensitive and had to pull eager lips off of him. Green eyes glowed up at him, pupils blown wide, lips glistening with saliva and Cloud’s cum.

Cloud’s control snapped.

“Turn around.” When Sephiroth stared at him for a moment, dazed, Cloud’s patience wore thin. “Now,” he barked. “Stay on your knees, elbows on the seat of the chair.” Impatiently, he pushed the coffee table out of the way with a foot as he tucked himself back into his pants and zipped them back up.

Sephiroth finally turned around, and Cloud had half a mind to punish him for the delay. He didn’t want to scare the man off too soon, however, so he settled for roughly pulling leather pants down to Sephiroth’s knees. Silken hair fell all over the black leather chair as Sephiroth turned his head to look.

Cloud gave him a devious smirk before pulling two white ass cheeks apart and licking a stripe from perineum up to Sephiroth’s lower back. The man gasped. As Cloud licked and teased and nibbled at the clenching ring of muscle and flesh, he felt Sephiroth begin to tremble under his hands. Keeping his grip firm on the man’s hips and ass, he teasingly pressed his tongue the tiniest bit inside and grinned when Sephiroth’s head collapsed onto arms folded on the leather seat with a groan.

As soon as Cloud’s hands wrapped around Sephiroth’s cock, the SOLDIER went off with a loud moan. Cloud cupped his other hand to catch the mess, pressing his tongue in and out of the man’s clenching hole teasingly through his climax. Just as he finished milking the last of it, he kissed Sephiroth’s sweat-glistening cheek. “Stay here,” he murmured, knowing Sephiroth would hear him as he went to the sink to rinse the mako-laced semen down the sink and to grab a clean cloth and wet it with warm water.

Gently, he wiped the man down, front and back, before throwing the cloth to the side. He carefully pulled leather pants back up, feeling Sephiroth’s legs still trembling under his touch. With a quiet
murmur, he got Sephiroth to crawl over to the couch and lay on it so Cloud could sit with a silken head in his lap. Sephiroth twisted with a grunt so he could lay on his side, head facing Cloud’s stomach, arms and long legs all bent and curling in towards him.

Cloud swallowed down a sudden lump in his throat as he watched Sephiroth’s breathing finally calm. He ran his fingers through long strands of silver hair, enjoying the texture against his skin. When glowing green eyes opened languidly to look up at him, he smiled slightly. “You performed beautifully,” he murmured. “But when I give orders during sex, I expect them to be followed promptly and to the letter. Will that be a problem again?”

“No, sir,” Sephiroth slurred contentedly for a moment before looking startled at himself.

Cloud chuckled. “Perfect,” he said, running a hand up and down the man’s back once before returning to those long silky strands. “Now, I believe I had something I needed to tell you before you… distracted me.” He still had to take a piss, but he’d forgotten about it during all the activities. “Would you like to wait a bit longer and stay like this?”

Sephiroth groaned and rubbed his face against Cloud’s thighs. “I have something I need to inform you of, as well,” he muttered, hot breath puffing against Cloud’s pants. “I should get up before I fall asleep.”

“Alright. Well, I’m going to make that run to the bathroom while you get sorted, okay?” Cloud lifted Sephiroth’s head and replaced his lap with one of the throw cushions on the couch so he could dash to the bathroom.

After he’d finished, he found Sephiroth sitting upright on the couch with a fresh cup of coffee in hand. Cloud picked up his cold cup and drained it dry before walking over to the coffee machine for more.

“So, I found-”

“I need to inform-”

They both stopped talking at the same time. Cloud snickered. “You go ahead,” he said, pouring the coffee.

“I need to inform you of your first scheduled mako injection. It’s been set for this afternoon. Usually the science division gives us more notice than that, but you are rather behind the current batch of fresh soldiers. I assume they want you caught up as soon as possible.”

Cloud grimaced. “Can you be there for it?”

Sephiroth frowned. “They were planning to sedate you, given your unusual reaction to the mako.”

All the hairs on the back of Cloud’s neck shot up. “I’m… not really comfortable with that. Could we avoid that if Zack came with me to monitor me?”

Sephiroth’s head tilted to the side in thought. “I suppose that is a possibility, provided the Lieutenant doesn’t have any missions scheduled for today.”

Cloud pulled out his PHS and called Zack. The SOLDIER First Class picked up on the second ring.

“Hey Cloud! What’s up?”
“I need your help with something. It’s important. Are you busy this afternoon?”

“This afternoon? Uh… well, there’s some paperwork I’ve been meaning to do, but I can put that off a little while longer. What d’ya need my help with?”

“I have mako injections, and typically I get… weird. I need you there, otherwise they’re going to sedate me. And I’m not comfortable with that.” Cloud didn’t know if Zack could hear the tension in his voice, but usually the SOLDIER was more intuitive than people gave him credit for.

“Sure thing Spiky! I’ll save you from the evil Shinra scientists. What time do you need me there?”

Cloud looked at Sephiroth.

“13h00.”

“One o’clock this afternoon. You’d better be there, okay?”

“You can count on me, Spiky!” -click-

“Well, that’s that sorted out,” Cloud muttered, slipping his PHS back into his pocket. He stirred the cream into his coffee and made his way back to the leather chair, noticing as he did so that Sephiroth had moved the coffee table back into place. He couldn’t help but feel just a little smug at the knowledge that he’d blown Sephiroth’s mind so thoroughly only minutes prior.

“What is it you needed to tell me, Cloud?” Sephiroth’s smooth voice pulled Cloud out of his thoughts.

The blond blinked down into his coffee and took a sip to help organize his thoughts. “I found a bunch of inconsistencies in the books. It looks like Heidegger has been embezzling money from the company for years now. I don’t know what he’s been doing with it, since my hacking abilities leave a lot to be desired, but he’s mostly been doing it through SOLDIER supplies. Some ‘missing’ supplies that were never actually purchased. Or certain supplies have been recorded as costing usually twice as much as they should. I checked with the records of the companies we’ve been buying from. Our own records are doctored, and theirs aren’t. I haven’t had time to account for everything, but it looks to add up to upwards of 2,000,000 Gil.”

Sephiroth placed his coffee cup down on the table with a bang, hands clenching into fists in his lap. His hair fell across his face, shadowing it from the light.

Cloud felt adrenaline zip through his body like lightning. The killing intent seeping into the room had him on edge. He hadn’t expected the General to get this angry. Yes, it was shitty that Heidegger was stealing from the company, but Sephiroth… seemed to be taking it personally.

“Stealing from the SOLDIER budget and leaving my SOLDIERS bereft of needed supplies…” the General muttered, fists clenching in his lap.

Cloud swallowed nervously. “I pulled some solid evidence together for you, Sephiroth. I just need you to do your, uh, report-composing thing to make sense of it all. I don’t think killing him is the solution?”

Sephiroth was silent for a long moment before he took a deep, deep breath, and let it slowly out of his nose. He continued this breathing pattern for a few minutes before raising his head and unclenching his fists. “You’re right, Cloud. I will leave the company to eviscerate him. Shinra does not tolerate theft.”
They spent the next few hours working together to organize all the information Cloud had gathered into a coherent report. They ordered wutaian for brunch, and before Cloud knew it Sephiroth was sending him off for his first mako injection.

He’d completely forgotten about it.

He went straight to Zack’s office one floor below and found the First Class SOLDIER folding paper cranes at his desk. Zack looked startled when Cloud just burst through the door, but soon the crane was forgotten in favour of giving the blond a giant hug.

“Spiky! You came to visit me!”

Cloud grimaced as his ribs creaked. “Did you forget your promise already?”

Zack blinked. “Oh wow, is it already that time? I was, uh, really distracted by work.”

Cloud snorted. “Uh huh. Because paper cranes are such important work.”

Zack used his SOLDIER speed to put the crane in his drawer. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Spiky.”

“Uh huh. Let’s go before I lose my nerve, okay?” he started walking out of the office.

Zack quickly caught up. “What’s this? Nervous, Cloudy-bear?”

Cloud gave him a dirty look. “Don’t call me that.”


This was going to be painful. In more ways than one.

The trip down to the science department was shorter than he would have liked. Cloud clenched his fists as a white coat, not Hojo, led him over to a bed and strapped him down with SOLDIER enhanced restraints. Zack teasingly asked if Cloud would like to hold his hand, and Cloud grabbed it before the First Class could retract his offer.

Zack stopped teasing him when Cloud nearly broke his hand when the IV was inserted into his hand. They hadn’t even brought out the mako yet, and he felt like he couldn’t get enough breath into his chest.


Numb cold seeped through his arm. While Cloud hadn’t even been paying attention, the white coat had injected a syringe of sedative into his arm. He’d been so close to panicking he had completely forgotten to-

“Cloud, calm down. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.” A hand tightened around his own.

“See? I’m right here.”

“He should calm down in a few minutes, once the sedative has a chance to take effect. He might even sleep through the whole procedure,” the white coat murmured to Zack as she prepared the mako injection. “Must have a fear of needles. I have a ‘sedate’ order in his medical files written by
Hojo himself.

The beeping that Cloud hadn’t even noticed in the background picked up, alarming the white coat and Zack both. Hojo. He was in a lab. He was in Hojo’s lab again. But he couldn’t move. He was tied down, and slow. He felt so… fuzzy.

“Cloud, you need to calm down, okay? Otherwise the pretty nurse might give you more of the happy drugs.”

Zack? Zack was here? And he was helping the nurse? No, he was holding Cloud’s hand. Cloud stared down at their hands, tightly gripping each other. Zack. He was here. “Are you okay, Zack?”

Blue eyes blinked at him. “I’m just fine, Cloud. I’d be better if you would breathe. Can you breathe for me? Nice and slow?”

“Where are we?”

Zack frowned. “We’re in the Science Department of Shinra.”

“We’re not back in that basement?”


“I can’t give him any more sedative,” the white coat murmured softly to Zack as Cloud tried to breathe. “If I do, I won’t be able to see the warning signs of mako poisoning. It’s not safe to give him any more.”

Zack nodded but kept his eyes on Cloud. “Breathe in,” he breathed slowly, “Breathe out,” he breathed out slowly. Cloud synced his breath with Zack and felt himself slowly, slowly, calming down. Zack had never been here with him in the labs. They’d been treated separately, and Zack had never not been tied up. Zack wasn’t a prisoner, so Cloud wasn’t a prisoner, right? Except, why was he tied down?

“Will you help me escape, Zack?” Cloud asked quietly.

Zack smiled brightly. “Just as soon as you’re finished here.”

A prick in his left arm. Cloud went to look over, but Zack grabbed his chin and pulled his head back. “Look at me, Cloud.” Fire raced through his veins, and Cloud gasped. “Breathe with me, okay Cloud?” They breathed together, eyes locked, and Cloud did his best not to look, just like Zack told him to. Zack was here. Zack was safe. Zack was alive. Cloud was safe.

Green fire…

Cloud was here with Zack.

Zack gripped his hand. “I’ve got you, Cloud.”

Zack pulled him into a hug. “I’ve got you, Cloud. We’ll get out of this, together.”

“Breathe with me, Cloud. Focus on me.” Zack’s eyes shone the bluest of blues.

“You… will be… my living… legacy,” Zack’s blue eyes slowly slipped shut. The edges of Cloud’s vision shone with green light as his grip tightened on the hilt of a sword. Cloud collapsed forward, crying. He couldn’t remember why he was crying. He knew this… Zack. He would be Zack’s… he
The body disintegrated into green light under his hands and head. Cloud gasped as the sparks flowed through his chest and head. Memories and feelings filled head and chest to bursting, and green blanked out his vision for a moment.

He would be… Zack… He would be Zack.


Zack blinked those luminescent blue eyes at him. “Cloud? Are you in there?”

Zack, no… Cloud. Zack had called him Cloud. Cloud blinked green lights out of his eyes in order to focus more clearly on Zack’s face. Zack was alive. Zack was touching his cheek. “Zack?” he choked.

The SOLDIER grinned brightly. “You’re back with us, eh Cloudy? Had me worried for a while there. You drifted off.”

Cloud stared. “I thought… I remembered… you died.”

Zack looked startled for a second before he started laughing. “No no, Cloud. That was just a hallucination. Some SOLDIERS get them when they have mako treatments.”

Cloud frowned. “SOLDIER? I’m… in SOLDIER?”

Zack grinned. “Yup! Cloud Strife, SOLDIER Third Class.”

“Third…” That didn’t sound right. He’d thought he was First, but Zack had just told him… Cloud must have been wrong. He was a Third.

“Well, now that he’s out of the worst of it, you’ll probably be able to take him home soon,” a lady in a white coat said from Cloud’s left. Cloud frowned at the sight of her, but she wasn’t… Hojo. She wasn’t Hojo, which was strange. He’d only ever gotten mako from Hojo… right?

He felt raw. Sensitive. He wasn’t on a cold table like he remembered, but he pushed aside the sensation with familiarity. It wasn’t as bad as he remembered, so it was easy to ignore the minor annoyance. His wrists and ankles hurt a bit, but even as he noticed the nurse was removing the restraints. The IV was long gone. He hadn’t noticed it go. There was no sign of mako, either, as the nurse wheeled her cart of supplies away.

“You can take him home to rest as soon as he can stand and walk,” she called over her shoulder. “Feel free to stay here for a few hours if he needs to. I don’t have anyone else booked to use these beds, since the other Third Class SOLDIERS aren’t scheduled for their second injection for another week, and the Second Class had theirs last week.”

Cloud watched her go, still feeling a little slow from the sedative. He didn’t remember much of the whole procedure. “Did I say anything embarrassing while I was out of it?” he asked.

Zack laughed. “Well for a while there you thought you were me. It was quite interesting to argue with myself.”

Cloud palmed his face with a groan.
“But don’t worry, Spiky. You didn’t say anything too embarrassing… besides singing an ode to Sephiroth’s ass, which apparently, is fucking amazing…”

Cloud covered his face with his other hand too. “Goddamnit. If you ever bring that up in public, I will kill you. With your own sword.”

“C’mon, buddy. Let’s see if you can stand,” Zack said, distracting him.

Cloud slipped his feet over the edge of the bed, feeling progressively more himself as time went by. “What time is it?”

“Oh…” Zack flipped out his PHS to check the time. “17h00. Just about time for dinner. I’m starved!”

Cloud’s own stomach grumbled. “We had some leftover wutaian in our office upstairs. Want to see if Sephiroth’s eaten it yet?”

“Hell yeah! Let’s go!”

Zack helped Cloud up to test his balance, but surprisingly the blond was okay to walk. He felt… great, actually. Like he could go run a marathon once his foggy head cleared up a bit. Cloud leaned on Zack for a few steps before testing his own balance and finding it good enough to make their way upstairs.

The elevator wait was killer. Cloud wanted to jump up and down, but at the same time he wanted to sleep, so he kept going from bouncing on the balls of his feet to leaning against the wall in exhaustion. He was looking forward to the day ending.

They found Sephiroth laying down on the leather couch, a cloth over his forehead and a chocolate bar sticking out of his mouth. Zack and Cloud traded concerned looks before heading over to the General.

“You alright, Seph? You look tired.”

“Headache. Body aches. Got Heidegger fired and locked up in prison. Now I’ve got his paperwork to deal with, too, until they find someone to replace him. Asshole.”

Cloud’s eyebrows rose in surprise. It wasn’t often that Sephiroth didn’t speak in perfect grammar and swore. “Want me to make you some coffee?” he asked, already heading over to the coffee machine to get himself something to clear the last fog of the sedative.

Sephiroth groaned. “Please.”

Cloud grabbed a fresh cloth from under the sink and ran the tap to get the water as cold as he could. While the tap ran, he mixed the grinds and put them in the filter for brewing. He started the machine before soaking the cloth, squeezing out the excess water, and walking it over to Sephiroth. He changed the cloth without a word, taking the used one back to the sink and hanging it off the faucet for later use.

When he looked at Zack, he found the First Class watching him with an odd look on his face. Cloud raised an eyebrow before digging in the fridge for the leftover wutaian and splitting it onto three different plates. Knowing Sephiroth, the man hadn’t eaten since they ordered the food this morning.

He threw the first plate in the microwave and checked the coffee. It was almost done brewing. He
got out two cups and looked to Zack. “You want any? Packs a punch.”

Zack laughed. “Sure. I’ll try some of this infamous Sephiroth Blend.”

Cloud laughed and took the plate out once it dinged. He handed it to Zack. “Take that to Sephiroth.”

Zack pouted. “What? He gets to eat first?”

“He’s got a headache and hasn’t eaten in six hours, so yes. He gets to eat first.”

Zack grumbled but did as he was told. Cloud put the next plate in the microwave and pressed quickstart before grabbing the coffee pot and starting to pour out servings. He made Zack’s slightly less sweet than Sephiroth’s, but just as creamy.

He finished handing out the coffee just as the microwave dinged. He pulled out his plate and put the last one in. “That’s your in there now, Zack. I need to sit down before I vomit.”

Sephiroth peeked an eye open to look Cloud over. “You look fine.”

Cloud picked up Sephiroth’s legs so he could sit down. He put the legs back on his lap and rested his plate on top of them. Zack could sit in the chair. “I forgot to tell her not to sedate me, but it wasn’t so bad with Zack there. He… made it bearable.”

Sephiroth closed his eyes again, feeding himself a few nibbles of wutaian with his eyes closed. “Mmm. That’s good.”

Cloud sipped his coffee before putting it down on the arm of the couch. Zack grabbed his food from the microwave as it dinged and sat down in the leftover chair. He watched them with a weird look on his face.

“You still feel like you’re going to throw up?” Zack asked curiously.

Cloud shook his head. “No, but I don’t think I’m going to get up again for a while longer.” He took another bite of wutaian.

“So…” Zack began awkwardly after he’d shovelled some food down. “You got Heidegger fired. Who’s going to replace him.”

Sephiroth groaned. “Fucked if I know,” he grunted. Zack’s eyebrows skyrocketed upward. “With Genesis AWOL and Angeal dead, there isn’t exactly a large pool of people to promote to head of Public Safety. Unless they decide to promote someone from the regular military again. I thought of Lazard for a moment, but I doubt they’d let a civilian lead the Public Safety department. Which is stupid. I think he’s the most qualified at this point. He may not know the inner workings of the department, but he’s been handling his job as union executive for SOLDIER very well. He looks at the bigger picture, organizes and assigns missions, forwards intelligence and manpower… He may not have the field experience, but he has the knowledge. He’s definitely smarter than Heidegger.”

Zack hummed thoughtfully. “But then, if Lazard took Heidegger’s job, who would do his job.”

Sephiroth’s eyes peered at Zack from under long lashes. “Cloud could do it.”

Zack spit his coffee out onto the table. “WHAT?”

“The job of the union executive is to oversee management of SOLDIER and make suggestions
where necessary and plan missions according to Shinra’s mandate and agenda in response to intelligence collected by the Turks. He’d be wasted doing Cynthia’s job full time. Not only did he figure out what Heidegger was doing, he collected all the evidence necessary for me to present to the president and Turks to get him fired. The bookkeeping and organization necessary to accomplish that feat is exactly what Lazard does. It’s wishful thinking on my part, however.” Sephiroth sighed.

Zack gaped at Cloud. “Spiky… where the hell did you learn all that?”

Cloud shrugged. “Here and there. Mom taught me about managing a household and finances when I was growing up, since they didn’t teach that in school. She went to university in Junon, I think, before she moved up to Nibelheim to retire. She wanted me to go to school, too, before I got it in my head to become a SOLDIER instead. She… wasn’t too happy about that.”

Cloud blinked. He… hadn’t realized he remembered that. Had the mako messed with his memories again? Now that he thought back, he could remember more bits and pieces from before his time at Hojo’s mercy. He’d also always been good at the bookkeeping parts of his Strife Delivery Service. At the time he’d thought it was because it wasn’t that hard to run a business, but maybe he’d known how to all along? Usually when people lost their memories, they didn’t lose their skills too. Bookkeeping was a skill he’d long ago mastered. Maybe now he just… knew why.

He was getting a headache just thinking about this.

Sephiroth jerked suddenly, spilling halfway onto the floor and throwing up all over the carpet. Zack jumped up with wide, alarmed eyes. Cloud moved his wutaian before it ended up all over the floor with Sephiroth’s. The man had barely had two bites. What was wrong with him?

Zack moved the coffee table out of the way and kneeled on the floor next to Sephiroth. “Hey buddy, how are you feeling? You didn’t get mako injections recently, did you?”

Sephiroth shook his head and groaned, leaning back and collapsing back onto the couch. He looked pale. Like, deathly pale. His green eyes were still glowing, too, brighter than normal. Cloud ran a comforting hand up and down the man’s leg while Zack checked his forehead and hissed.

“He’s burning up. He’s never been sick like this before, except when he’s had a really bad session with Hojo. Shit.”

“No-ojo,” Sephiroth slurred. “No… Hojo… please.”

Zack’s worried blue eyes met Cloud’s. What the hell were they supposed to do now?

Chapter End Notes

- Toki Mirage -

First off, it seems I was remiss in my last update in forgetting to mention that esama’s “Sideways Strange” was actually the ORIGINAL inspiration for this story. So, double whammy there. Thanks to all of you who recommended it to me, but I have unfortunately already popped that cherry. (wipes a way a tear with a delicate sniff)
I’d also like to thank all you for sticking with me. I’m not exactly the most reliable writer out there. Got lots of life and work that keep getting in the way of things. Plus my original novel.

I hope y’all liked the update. Sorry if there’s spelling mistakes or stupid errors.

Happy reading! :)
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Little Guy

Chapter Fourteen:

Sephiroth didn't look good. Cloud changed the cold compress on his forehead for the fourth time in ten minutes. He was burning up, and every minute he got worse, the more Zack and he began to panic. Sephiroth had said no Hojo, but…

"Sephiroth? Would you be okay seeing another medical professional?" Cloud asked softly, since Sephiroth's hearing had become sensitized.

"This isn't normal, buddy," Zack said, brow pinched with concern.

"No," Sephiroth chewed out between clenched teeth.

Cloud scrubbed a hand through his hair. What to do? Maybe a materia would help? Silently, he left the room and snuck into Sephiroth's office. The General didn't always keep his equipment in here, but most days he brought it here if he didn't have it on his person.

Nothing in the desk. Or the drawer. Maybe the vault? Cloud opened it with a quick few spins of the dial. Sephiroth had never actually \textit{told} him the combination, but Cloud had caught sight of the odd number here and there to be able to put the whole thing together. It wasn't a very long combination.

It clicked open, and Cloud grinned at the materia hidden inside. Perfect. He sorted through the green magic materia until he found Heal. If it was a poison, he'd be able to deal with it.

Closing the safe, he rushed back into the room and gestured for Zack to get out of the way. The Lieutenant's mouth fell open. "Wha-?" was all he got out before Cloud had put his hand on Sephiroth's forehead and reached into the materia for a for the most powerful spell it was capable of. Sephiroth glowed green.

Zack and Cloud both watched with anticipation for… anything. "Do you feel any better, Seph?"

When the General shook his head, forehead still pinched and sweat starting to drip down his cheek and neck, Cloud grimaced. "Well, shit. I don't know what else to try. We'll have to just do our best to keep his fever down, I guess."

Zack grumbled under his breath. "Well, it doesn't look anything like Genesis, at least. So that's not it. It looks like the flu to me, but Sephiroth never \textit{gets} the flu. I remember one time in the Wutai war these rats were let loose in one of our camps and half the infantry and even some of the SOLDIER got sick as dogs. Half of the unenhanced died, and a handful of the enhanced themselves wasted away until they nearly died. Some even had to retire, their bodies couldn't recover from it. But Sephiroth? Most of us may have gotten a little dizzy and sniffly before getting better, but Sephiroth was a tank. It didn't touch him at all."
Cloud's frown deepened. After he'd been enhanced in Hojo's labs, he'd never gotten sick either, until the stigma. Aeris's water had cleared that up, but he'd been prone to super bugs. Marlene's flu had been awful, but it hadn't hit him nearly as bad as it had hit the poor girl. She'd been hospitalized and put on a drip she'd lost so much fluids. That had been awful. The way he figured it, his immune system must have taken a hit after the stigma. Mild colds hadn't touched him, but he'd caught the occasional super bug going around.

So while he knew it was strange for Sephiroth to be sick, he also knew it wasn't _impossible_ for someone with his kind of enhancements to pick up a bug. It was just extremely rare.

"Hey Zack, can you go get a bucket of ice from the cafeteria? We're going to need more than a cold compress, and I don't think we should move him."

The SOLDIER jumped up and ran out to the elevator like Bahamut itself was on his ass. Cloud got up to run the cloth under cold water again, so he could change it with the warm one on Sephiroth's forehead.

He just wished he knew if this had happened _before._


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Sephiroth got worse before he got better. Cloud and Zack stayed vigil over his beside (or was it couch-side?) until one in the morning when his fever finally broke. Both SOLDIERS breathed easier knowing that the worst of it seemed to be over. Sephiroth's temperature slowly returned closer to normal through the night, until he woke up at six am with a bleary expression in his eyes.

Zack had long since passed out on the chair, looking very uncomfortable. Cloud had stayed up all night, since his sleep cycle was already thrown off and he was used to weird hours, having worked directly under Sephiroth for weeks now. When bleary green eyes met his, Cloud smiled and ran a hand through his hair.

"Hey sleepy head. Feeling better?" His voice cracked, but Cloud ignored it in favour of assessing Sephiroth's condition.

Green eyes blinked languidly at him, mako green shine the same as usual. Cloud frowned when he noticed the man's pupils seemed to be abnormally dilated. Gently pulling at Sephiroth's upper eyelid, he looked carefully into the glowing eyes.

They were still round. Cloud got up and dug around in his desk for the tiny emergency flashlight that Cynthia had left behind in her wake. He held Sephiroth's eye open again and flashed the light directly into it.

The pupil contracted. He pulled the flashlight away, put it back, watched the contraction again. And again.

And then it finally clicked.

_Sephiroth's pupil was round._

His mouth fell open in shock, and he flashed the light a couple more times until Sephiroth's seeming unlimited patience snapped. The General stole the flashlight with a scowl and chucked it across the room. "Quit it," he grumbled. "Put your hand back in my hair."

Cloud lips twitched into an amused smile and did as he was told. Pushy. "How do you feel?"
Sephiroth seemed to give that serious thought for a long moment before he frowned. "Tired. Better. Good?" His frown deepened.

Cloud raised an eyebrow. "Why do you look so confused by that? You just had a nasty flu, of course you'd feel good now by comparison."

Sephiroth shook his head. "No. Low grade headache is gone." When Cloud just looked baffled, the General sighed. "I have had a never ending headache that sometimes turns into migraines for years now. Caffeine and chocolate have been getting me through the day. I thought it was just stress but... it's gone." Sephiroth actually smiled. It was small, but it was a real smile.

"Now that... is weird," Zack put his two cents in from where he was sprawled. Cloud didn't know when he'd woken up. Sleepy blue eyes were watching them from under long lashes. Cloud wouldn't have noticed he was awake if he hadn't said something. "But awesome. Weird, but awesome." His eyes rested on Cloud's hand in Sephiroth's hair, but he didn't say anything.

Sephiroth grunted sleepily and closed his eyes. "Thanks for not taking me to Hojo," he murmured, leaning into Cloud's roaming fingers.

The SOLDIER Third Class smiled. "No problem. I wouldn't trust a rat to that man's tender mercies." He shivered, ever thankful that his mako injection had been overseen by another scientist. Fuck he hated Hojo.

"How would you know how bad he is, Cloud?" Zack threw out there, eyes fully open now and staring Cloud down. "You've never had a treatment from him. I had one, and man, one was enough."

Cloud shuddered. "He gives me the creeps. Like, major creeps. I can feel his eyes dissecting me when he looked at me after the whole Turk incident."

Zack shivered himself. "Now that's an accurate way of putting it- wait! What Turk incident?"

Cloud blinked. "Uh... I never told you?" he said shiftily, looking at the wall instead of Zack's scandalized face.

"Sephiroth! What Turk incident?!"


Cloud massaged his scalp. Sephiroth let out a content little sigh. "So... I might have been kidnapped by the Turks because they thought I was a wutai spy or something." Zack's face was so incredulous Cloud had to laugh. "Yeah, I know, right? I'm blond. First issue with that. Anyway, then they wanted to recruit me. And I was not down with that. So I ran away, but not before I got injected with a truth serum with mako in it, and let's just say I get really... weird when it comes to mako."

Zack snorted. "Weird? That's one way of putting it. Having a conversation with myself is really creepy, you know? Specially when you seemed to know shit I don't remember telling you. Wanna explain that too, Spiky?"

Cloud coughed. "Anyway, I ended up escaping, but the memories are a little fuzzy. Again, I thought I was you. So, I cross dressed and ended up on Sephiroth's door step. He took me to Hojo when I passed out, they did some tests to figure out what was wrong with me, the Turks showed up, Sephiroth told them to fuck off, Hojo told them to fuck off, and then the next thing I know after passing out again is that Sephiroth had requisitioned me to be his secretary. Aaand that's how I
became a secretary."

Zack stared. "That still doesn't explain how you know about the pink panty incident."

Cloud coughed. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he lied between his teeth.

"No one knows about that. And I made you tell me to 'prove' that you weren't actually me, but then you knew about it. So explain that Spiky. I've been ignoring a lot of things that just don't add up with you, but your mako injections took the cake. I just didn't know how to bring that up. I mean, how do you bring that up?" Zack looked like he was about to hyperventilate.


Cloud raised an eyebrow at Zack's diva moment. "Zack. Calm down. You got trashed one night and told me a whole bunch of things you didn't want anyone to ever know."

Zack shook his head. "No. Nuh uh. I've never been that drunk with you around."

Cloud gave him a patronizing look. "Zack. You wouldn't remember it since you were trashed. I mean, you even went on and on about how great Angeal's ass looked in those pants-"

Zack squawked so loud he sounded like a chocobo.

"-and how you never really liked Genesis since he was such a dick to you all the time, but really you're too nice to actually admit that unless you're trashed-"

"Lies! Lies! All of it!"

"-which you were, by the way. I mean, how else would I know about the pink panty incident?"

Cloud raised an eyebrow. "If you want Sephiroth to know about it, too, then please do continue. I can spill your beans all morning."

Zack's mouth opened and closed like a fish. "You-! You! Jerk! That's Jerkish behaviour right there!"

Cloud grinned. No, just Turkish. "Let it go, Zack, or forever hold your peace."

"Fine! Fine. Just- stop talking." Zack ran his hands through his hair and moaned at the unfairness of life, but Cloud just started tuning him out. That was a close one.

Cloud turned his attention back to Sephiroth, who looked like he'd fallen back asleep despite the argument. That, or he was pretending to be asleep. Exhausted out of his mind, Cloud climbed on top of Sephiroth fully intending to get some shut eye. "Don't wake me up until it's afternoon," he grunted before tucking his face into the crook of Sephiroth's neck and passing out.

"General! I need to speak with you immediately!"

Cloud and Sephiroth both startled awake in time for Lazard to run into the room with a panicked expression on his face. He froze when he saw them laying together on the couch. Zack had gone at some point, probably to finish his late paperwork, so there was no one else there to witness the truly priceless expression on the man's face.

Cloud climbed off the General and went straight for the coffee machine. A quick glance at the clock showed it was 9 o'clock in the evening. What the hell was Lazard still doing at the office at
this time?

"Well? Speak quickly, Lazard," Sephiroth grunted, sitting up on the couch and giving the man his full attention.

Lazard's eyes flickered between Cloud and the General. "Right. I have important Intel for you. The Turks have passed down a tip that Genesis may have been in Nibelheim. I thought you may want to look into it personally. If you move out tonight, you'll be there by morning."

Cloud's fist clenched. Nibelheim. Was this it? He'd only had one injection. But- the original mission had been looking into a malfunctioning reactor. As far as he knew, there hadn't been anything about Genesis- But then how would he know? He'd been a foot soldier at the time. He hadn't been privy to many of the details. Those that he remembered were quite useless.

But… they had moved out in the morning, not in the evening…

"Thank you, Lazard. I hate to leave you here with the current look of things, but I need to deal with this immediately."

The blond nodded. "Of course. That's why I came as quickly as possible." Lazard turned to Cloud, who had almost finished the coffee that they would definitely be needing more of before the evening was out. "I have yet to have a chance to speak with you about Heidegger, and now we don't have any time." He walked straight to Cloud and held out his hand. "Good work. I don't know how you figured all this out, but I'm extremely impressed. I look forward to working with you in the future."

Cloud shook the hand and inclined his head. "Thank you. I was just doing what I could."

Lazard grinned. "Then your 'just what I could' is a standard all Shinra employees should strive to match. I've already arranged transport large enough for a small SOLDIER task force, but you'll have to get them all organized and supplied for this mission. I'm afraid I have too many other immediate problems left by Heidegger to do this for you like I normally would."

Cloud shook his head. "That's fine. I know you're busy. Sephiroth and I should be able to manage. Thank you for getting us transport on such short notice."

Lazard shrugged. "Just part of my job. One of my jobs." He let out a sigh. "All the best to you on your mission, Strife."

"Thank you." When Lazard quickly ran out of the office, Cloud turned back to their coffee and started pouring it into two cups with his left hand while his right hand pulled his PHS out of his pocket. He speed-dialed Zack after a quick glance at Sephiroth, who was looking a little out-of-sort now that Lazard was out of the room and he didn't have to put up a front.

"Hellooo~ Have a good sleep, Spiky? You and I need to have a chat about when you and Seph got all."

"Not now, Zack." Cloud interrupted, slipping back into old patterns. "We have a situation. Genesis sighting in Nibelheim. Get a task force of our best SOLDIERs together to leave ASAP. Lazard has already arranged transport. I don't know where the supplies for missions are, so I'm delegating that to you. Bring all the gear we'll need for emergency survival in subzero temperatures. The Nibel Mountains are freezing year-round and we need to prepare for everything. Include rock- and ice-climbing gear. Fire materia. Heal materia in case we run into Nibel Dragons. Rations for a week. Our warmest sleeping bags may not cut it, so make sure everyone brings their winter gear"
regardless of how the cold effects their stubborn SOLDIER asses. I will not have anyone freezing their balls and limbs off because they underestimated the mountains I grew up in. Bring anything else you think might be useful, but we'll need to be able to carry it on our backs. Bringing troops to lug shit around will only slow us down and Nibelheim doesn't have any pack animals that can navigate the mountain. You got all that?"

"Aye aye, Spiky. You're good at this! And I got a good memory, so I got all that. I'll go grab the guys and pick up the stuff and we'll meet you in the hanger in less than an hour. Anything else?"

Cloud shook his head. "No, that should be all. I'll bring the coffee and chocolate."

"Hahaha! Good idea. -Click-

Cloud closed the PHS and put it in his pocket so he could pick up the two cups of coffee now containing cream and sugar. He'd always been pretty good at multitasking. It came with dual-wielding, he supposed.

Sephiroth was sitting hunched over on the couch, elbows on his knees and head in his hands. His hair spilled onto the table and floor in a cascade of silver. Cloud put the coffee in front of him and sat down next to him. Taking a sip from his own cup, he sank his fingers into the hairs at the base of the man's skull and began to massage his scalp. Sephiroth shuddered and leaned into his touch.

"You okay?" Cloud asked softly. The man had been extremely ill less than twelve hours ago and now he had to get his shit together for a mission to chase down one of his old friends. Life had not been kind to Sephiroth as of late.

Sephiroth scrubbed at his eyes before sitting upright. He looked exhausted. Cloud grimaced. "Look, why don't you head down to the transport and get some sleep? I'll get everything organized on this end with Zack's help. We've got this. How long of a trip is it to Nibelheim? Eight hours by airship?" He was guestimating based on the Highwind's time.

"Depends on the ship. Between six and ten," Sephiroth muttered, sipping at his coffee. If he was going to go back to sleep, he probably wasn't going to drink very much of it. Just enough to get him to the ship. "Won't be any rooms with beds, though."

"Hmm. You'll have to sleep buckled in, then. Pick up some ear plugs on your way over there and one of those sleep masks. I know you don't want your men to see you like this, but if you're already there and sleeping with that on your face, it'll be easy for Zack and I to say you've been working yourself too hard lately and just need some sleep. Most of us will be sleeping during the trip, anyway."

Dazed green eyes met Cloud's own blue. "Okay." He started to get up and would have stumbled sideways if Cloud hadn't been there to brace him. Okay, this wasn't looking good at all.

"Sephiroth? Are you sure you're going to be okay for this mission? You're only going to have six to ten hours to sleep and recover your strength before we move out."

Sephiroth grit his teeth with a grimace. "Have to. May not get another chance like this. Turk Intel is more reliable than civilian."

Cloud frowned. He dug into his pocket and pulled out the Heal materia that was still in there. He cast the most powerful spell he could and was relieved when a bit of colour returned to Sephiroth's extremely-pale face. "You need to eat something," he muttered to himself. After establishing that Sephiroth could stand on his own, he wandered over to the mini fridge and pulled out some of the
fruit he kept in there for himself. Shoving two apples in Sephiroth's hands, he pointed in the direction of the elevator. "Eat these, get a sleep mask and ear plugs, and go to the transport. We'll be along shortly. Can you get there on your own or do you need help? Answer me honestly, SOLDIER."

Sephiroth gave him an irritated look, but Cloud kept his face stony and unmoving. The General took a few steps around the coffee table and seemed to do a quick self-assessment. "The spell helped. I should be fine to get to the transport."

"And how do you feel otherwise? Any nausea, fatigue, headaches, or body aches?"

Sephiroth grunted. "My whole body aches. No headache or nausea. Fatigue… is not as bad as Wutai."

Cloud frowned. "I don't know what kind of measurement Wutai is supposed to be. Explain that more clearly."

"In Wutai I had to stay awake for three days straight without sleep as the enemy kept up their assault and our SOLDIERs were slowly being taken down by a sickness. I had to cover the entire base with the help of a handful of other SOLDIERs who were either beginning to recover or hadn't been hit with the worst of the virus yet. I slept for 48 hours after we won that battle."

Cloud swore. "Planet. How close to Wutai do you feel, then?"

Sephiroth ran a hand through his hair. "Like it's been two days of Wutai without enough sleep afterwards."

"That's pretty bad. I'm taking you down to the transport. Let's get going. Where can we get you earplugs and a mask?"

"My office. To door, to the back."

Cloud ran quickly to the office to get them. He grabbed Sephiroth's sheathed sword on the way out. "Zack's grabbing our winter gear. Any materia you want out of the safe?"

"All of them. There's a utility belt - put them in there."

Cloud did so quickly. "Anything else?" When Sephiroth shook his head, he put his hand on the small of a broad back and led the bleary-eyed man towards the elevator.

If they were lucky, they'd never have to go to the mansion or the reactor. Hopefully he'd be able to keep Sephiroth away from both. He'd do his best to lead their team around the mountain in a merry chase as far away from JENOVA as possible.

The dim lighting of the air ship painted metal and SOLDIER uniforms starkly contrasting shades of bloody red and black shadow. Sephiroth's hair almost glowed pink in the light to the right of him while Zack slouched on his other side, snoring softly with his head lolling back against the hard seating of the transport.

They'd managed to get everything together for the mission by 2300 hrs. Zack had had some trouble finding everyone he wanted for the mission since some were out at the bar, drinking. Waiting for two of the SOLDIERs to be located and dragged out of the bar had slowed things down for sure, but Zack had been adamant that they come along. They both would have time to sleep off the
alcohol, after all, so once they'd picked up their weapons and materia, Zack had sent them to the ship to sleep along with Sephiroth. The rest of his team had had to pack up the supplies for the mission.

Cloud ended up having to go down in person to make sure they had everything, including winter gear for Sephiroth and himself. Of course, he'd only joined them once he'd run to his room to get his swords. All three, for this mission. Once he'd gone down to help Zack and they'd finally got everything together and double and triple checked, it had almost been two hours since Lazard came bursting into the office.

And now, he couldn't sleep. Memories assaulted him every time he closed his eyes. Both Zack's and his own. Memories of growing up in Nibelheim that he'd thought he'd forgotten. Getting bullied by the local boys. Stabbing Sephiroth through the stomach with his own sword. Green mako tanks. Zack's eyes as the life faded from them. His mom cooking in the kitchen. The Shinra mansion-

A hand rested itself on his right leg. Cloud flinched and glanced to the right. Sure enough, glowing green eyes regarded him calmly. He looked tired, but not nearly as dazed as he'd been when Cloud had strapped him in and ordered him to get some sleep.

"Can't sleep?" Sephiroth murmured softly.

Cloud shook his head and looked down at the floor. Old nightmares. Memories.

The hand on his knee tightened for a moment before beginning to rub slightly up and down his leg. It was a slight movement, but... soothing. Cloud reached over and grabbed a few strands of silver hair, on a whim. The silky soft texture under his fingertips grounded him. In the memories, he'd never had a hold over this man. Well... only in his dreams.

He fell asleep like that. Sephiroth's hand on his knee, and his silky hair grasped gently between his fingers.

-. -.

"-rest of the crew. We'll be departing shortly. The captain's informed me we're ten minutes out."

Cloud blinked blearily and grimaced at the bright light now inside the transport. Zack and Sephiroth were both gone from beside him. A quick look around revealed Sephiroth to be near the cockpit, speaking with the pilot, while Zack went through the SOLDIERs one by one and jostled awake those who hadn't already joined the land of the living. Cloud gave himself a moment to settle back into reality, taking stock of the SOLDIERs in the transport with him, the names he remembered and those he didn't.

Zack's hand clapped him on the shoulder, and Cloud drew his attention upward. "Wake up, Cloudy boy. You get any sleep last night?"

The blond grunted. "Some."

Zack made a face. "Mr. Grumpypants, aren'tcha. Well, Sephiroth isn't doing much better. He's got his bitchface on."

"I heard that, Lieutenant," the General grunted, having come back from the cockpit to rejoin the SOLDIERs. Zack grinned up at him cheekily. Cloud took the moment to assess Sephiroth's health. He certainly looked better than yesterday. The pupils of his eyes remained round, which threw Cloud off every time he looked. His skin wasn't quite as deathly pale as it had been, but he still
looked tired around the edges of the eyes.

Cloud unbuckled himself and stood up, giving Zack a gentle shove to get some more personal space. Looking up at Sephiroth, he raised an eyebrow. "On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being without chocolate and 10 being Wutai, how do you feel?"

Zack gave him a funny look, but Cloud ignored it, attention solely on Sephiroth. The General's eyes flickered to the other SOLDIERS in the transport, some of them which were pretending not to watch and others who weren't quite awake enough yet to be paying any kind of attention. Cloud raised his other eyebrow and gave the man a meaningful look. *Don't lie to me,* he hoped his eyes said.

Sephiroth let out an annoyed puff of air. "Four."

Cloud nodded. "Well that's an improvement, then. You start feeling shitty again, you come straight to Zack or me. Got it? Last thing we need is the General down for the count when we could have done something about it. No macho bullshit, understand?" Sephiroth narrowed his eyes in irritation, but inclined his head in acquiescence all the same. "Good. Did Lazard email you a report with the Intel?"

Sephiroth nodded. "Yes. The sighting was reported near the Shinra Mansion. We can set up camp in the building."

"Nope." Sephiroth's mouth remained open for a moment, startled. "At one point that place might have been inhabitable, but not anymore. Some of the windows are broken and some monsters have taken up residence. Not to mention it's absolutely filthy."

Sephiroth frowned. "How do you know this?"

Cloud shrugged one shoulder. "Some of the kids used to dare each other into going inside. It was kind of a right of passage. Most made it out fine, but one kid nearly got mauled. Since then the community has pretty much declared it a no-go zone. The Inn only has a handful a rooms, too, since we don't get visitors very often. If they're not already occupied, we'll still have to share rooms." Since they had a party of eight SOLDIERS total, they'd either have to pair off or split three ways depending on the rooms the innkeeper had available. "If our transport isn't sticking around, then I'd say we'd be better off carrying all our gear on our backs. If we see Genesis and he runs, we're going to have to follow at a moment's notice." Cloud came out of his thoughts to see that all the SOLDIERS were watching him attentively.

Sephiroth tapped his chin thoughtfully. "It is unlikely that he will be in the town proper, unless he's getting supplies. We're still landing at the mansion, but it's not far from the town. We'll split into two teams. Zack, take three men with you to check the town. Be quick about it. I'll take Cloud and the remaining two SOLDIERS to check the mansion for Genesis. If he's not there, we're going to move on to the surrounding area, then the reactor. Understood?" He got nods all around. "Any questions or concerns?" When no one spoke up, he inclined his head once. "You all know exactly how dangerous Genesis can be. If you find him, immediately call for back up from the other group. Distract him. Hold him off until I can bring him into custody. The last thing we need is to lose men on a retrieval mission."

Zack picked his team and divvied up the packs among them so each group got one of the two tents. As the leader of the team, a First Class SOLDIER, and the carrier of a Buster sword, he didn't end up carrying a pack himself. Cloud was slightly jealous as he put on his own heavy backpack. One of the other SOLDIERS on his team took a few of the heavier items to lighten the load, considering he'd only had one injection, but it was still troublesome to carry.
Better prepared than dead. He'd have to just keep telling himself that.

The Shinra mansion was just as he remembered it. Old, ugly, filthy, and filled with monsters they had to clear out in their search for Genesis. Cloud knew of the facilities below the mansion, but didn't mention it, and was more than slightly relieved that he was able to keep Sephiroth's nose out of any of the books lying around and focused on the mission.

Genesis.

He couldn't remember why they'd been back in his first life. He'd been a trooper back then, but the details were fuzzy. There was something in this mansion that Sephiroth wasn't supposed to find, he knew. He wasn't sure what it was, but it had led Sephiroth to the reactor, and *that*… had not ended well.

Unfortunately, Cloud had never had very good luck, and just as they were about to clear out of the mansion and call it a lost cause, the biggest SOLDIER on their team, Jared, fell straight through the floor.

"SHIT!"

Sephiroth and Cloud immediately turned around in time to see his head disappear into the hole. With speed that Cloud couldn't match, the General was at the hole and calling out to Jared to see if he was alright. Cloud grabbed the flashlight he'd been carrying around the mansion and shone the light into the hole.

"I'm okay!" Jared called up. He held a hand up to his face to keep the light out of his eyes. "Turn that shit off! I can see just fine with the glow of my eyes. You're blinding me, blondie!"

Cloud turned off the flashlight and frowned. He could see a faint green glow. Shit.

"Everything okay in there?" Maurice crackled on the radio.

Cloud depressed the button on his chest with a scowl. "Jared just fell through the floor. We're going to have to pull him out-
"I see stairs, I think! Holy shit. General! There's a whole lab down here or some shit. There must be another way in, or out."

Before Cloud could say anything, Sephiroth jumped into the hole. Fuck. Groaning to himself, he tapped the radio again. "We're going down the hole. Radio if something comes up, Maurice."

"You got it, shortstack."

Cloud was beginning to find this SOLDIER obsession with nicknaming him irritating. After adjusting the pack on his back, he lowered himself down into the hole, then dropped.

The ground came up quick. He lost his balance on the landing and had to fall forward to catch himself with his hands. The pack threw everything off. Looking up, he froze for a moment at the sight tables, glowing mako tanks, and computer consoles.

He knew this place at a visceral level. He knew it more intimately than he'd ever wanted to. This was the lab in which Hojo tortured all his specimens.
"This… is familiar," Sephiroth muttered to himself, wandering over to the wall and hitting a switch. Dim, flickering lights came on and brought the white room into sharp relief. For a second, Cloud saw blood and mako all over the floor before the memory faded before his eyes and showed the room to be eerily clean.

Sephiroth wandered over to a computer station and started the boot up procedures. Cloud snapped himself out of it with a shake of his head and strode over to the General.

"Sephiroth. We have other priorities at the moment. Genesis, remember?"

The General gave him a frustrated look. "This will only take a moment."

Cloud grit his teeth. "Whatever they were doing down here is going to be extensive, General, and probably above all our clearance levels. Step away from the computer so we can do what we came here to do."

Sephiroth shook his head. "No. I know this place."

Jared wandered over from where he'd been inspecting a saw that Cloud suddenly remembered being used to cut him open. He clenched his hands into fists and tried not to throw up. "Sephiroth."

Something must have come through in his tone because the SOLDIER focused glowing green eyes on him with a frown. "We need to move on. Now."

Sephiroth looked so conflicted, Cloud almost felt sorry for him. "But I could get answers. These are on a closed network. There could be information about me that I couldn't find hacking Hojo's servers at Shinra."

Cloud didn't know how he could express the gravity of how badly Sephiroth needed not to be here and still sound normal. He didn't know how to put to words that Sephiroth had gone psychotic and burned his hometown down the last time they had been here. He didn't know what to do, and his hand just acted without his permission and grabbed Sephiroth by the hair.

"We're on a mission, SOLDIER," he barked, feeling very far away from the whole situation. "The mission is locate Genesis, not look up your unknown origins. Focus. On. Your. Mission." With each gritted out word, he pulled Sephiroth's head back a fraction farther until the man couldn't look at the screen that was asking for a password.

Sephiroth's eyes glared into Cloud's own. When Jared shifted behind them, however, his eyes snapped to the other SOLDIER and fury twisted his expression. With lightning fast speed, he threw Cloud away from him.

Cloud never even heard the sound of shattering glass before he was covered in mako. It burst out from the point of impact and drenched him in seconds. Cloud sank to the floor, stunned. His vision greyed out for a moment, a high pitched ringing was all he could hear, and then he saw Sephiroth. The Calamity stood across from him, a stunned expression on his face, one hand held out towards him.

Cloud quickly disentangled his arms from the thing holding him down and reached over his shoulder for his sword. An unfamiliar handle met his grip and he drew it from its sheath. A quick glance down didn't make it look any more familiar, so he dismissed it and focused on the problem at hand. He was in close quarters with Sephiroth. He needed to get away.

Terror almost clogged his throat as he looked around and saw the room of his past torture. With the familiarity of the room, however, came the knowledge of the way out.
Putting on a burst of speed, he ran for the hallway that led to Vincent's old room and the exit. Voices shouted behind him, but he paid them no attention. Sephiroth and an unknown SOLDIER were not good odds. He needed to find his team. How had they gotten separated?

A hand grabbed his wrist, and Cloud swung the feather light blade with all his might. Sephiroth - where was his sword - grabbed his other wrist to keep the blade from cutting off his head. Cloud struggled against him, but the Calamity was too strong for him. He screamed for the only one strong enough to help against Sephiroth. "VINCENT!"

Sephiroth tightened his grip on Cloud's sword-arm until he was forced to release the blade. It dropped with a clatter. A voice was shouting at him, "Cloud! You're hallucinating! Calm down!" but it made no sense, so he fought.

"VINCENT! VINCENT! VINCENT!"

A red blur hit them both like a ton of bricks. Sephiroth flew backwards down the hallway and Cloud found himself on the floor, surrounded by a tattered red Cloak. He grabbed his sword and used Vincent's utility belt to pull himself upright.

"Am I ever glad to see you," he said with a wry grin, looking up into blood-red eyes.

Vincent looked down at him with a puzzled expression.

"Quick, we need to get out of here. I don't know how, but Sephiroth's stronger. I can't fight him. I need your help, Vincent."

"I don't know who you are," Sephiroth was saying as he stood up and gripped the handle of Masamune, which could barely fit in the tight hallway. "But that there is my SOLDIER, Cloud Strife, and he has a particularly bad reaction to mako. He got doused with a whole tube of it. He's hallucinating right now. We need to get him to calm down until the effects wear off."

Vincent glanced down at Cloud and frowned. "I don't see any mako."

Sephiroth frowned and took a step forward. Cloud immediately stepped back and took a defensive position. "He- He just was. Seconds ago, he was completely covered."

Vincent's eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

The SOLDIER behind Sephiroth was staring at Cloud with wide eyes and shaking his head emphatically. "No! We're not! We can show you the tube, right back there, Cloud's backpack is still in it. It's all over the floor. I don't know why he's not glowing like a glow stick anymore, but I swear! He was covered in the stuff like, a minute ago."

Vincent glanced back and forth between them. "How did you know my name?" he asked.

Cloud stared at him incredulously. "How did- Are you serious? We've been on the same team for years."

Vincent tilted his head. "And yet I didn't know your name until that man called you Cloud Strife."

Cloud started panicking. Nothing made sense anymore. Vincent didn't know him?

Sephiroth moved. Cloud flinched and glued his eyes to the Calamity, but he merely reached up to tap a radio attached to his jacket and speak into it.
"Zack. We have a bit of a situation over here. Cloud's been exposed to mako."

Cloud could hear the voice that answered crystal clear.

"What? How the heck did that happen, Seph? Do you need me to come over?"

"I think that may be wise. The amount of mako he was exposed to… his hallucination may last for much longer than the last time I was with him. He seems to think I'm hostile. He won't let me get any closer, and now a stranger is here and defending him."

"I'll be right there. We were almost done here, anyhow. Just try to keep him calm until I get there. Spiky! If you can hear me, just calm down, okay? Sephiroth isn't going to hurt you! And if he's being a cranky bastard, remember, you're the one with all the chocolate!"

Zack… that was Zack's voice, no doubt about it. His mannerisms. Though, what was this about chocolate?

Sephiroth's eyes narrowed. "Jared. Get Cloud's bag. Get the chocolate."

Jared shot Sephiroth a look. "Seriously?"

"Now, SOLDIER."

"Yes, sir!"

Cloud's frown deepened in confusion and frustration. Why wasn't Sephiroth trying to kill him? What the hell was going on around here? Why did Vincent say he didn't know him? Why had he heard Zack's voice through the radio? He didn't understand anything anymore.

"Well, well, look what we have here."

Cloud craned his head around and saw a white-haired man with a red jacket and sword sheathed at his hip.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked grudgingly, drawing one of the twin blades at his hips and leveling it at him cautiously.

The man grinned. "The name's Genesis."

Chapter End Notes

-Toki Mirage-

Okay yeah, that took forever. Sorry everyone! I hope you enjoyed the chapter and that it wasn't too confusing. I started rereading it a few months ago to brush up, but never got around to finishing the chapter. If there are any consistency problems, just let me know and I'll fix 'em.

Cheers!
Chapter 15

The Little Guy

Chapter Fifteen:

"Genesis." Sephiroth's eyes had glued themselves to the red-clad figure. Cloud nearly got whiplash glancing back and forth between the two SOLDIERs First Class.

"Sephiroth. Long time no see. I see you're here looking for answers too, hm?"

Green eyes narrowed. "Looking for you, actually."

Red brows rose in surprise. "Really? Well, I must have gotten slack in my old age, letting someone see me…" The smirk was at odds with his words.

"You drew me here, on purpose. What is your scheme, Genesis?" Sephiroth asked, angry. But it wasn't a familiar anger. No, this one was very… human. And so were his eyes.

Cloud clenched his fists on his swords. There was something very wrong here if Vincent didn't remember his name, Zack was alive, and Sephiroth wasn't psychotic.

"Ah, ruining the fun already, Seph? You were always such a bore." Genesis sneered.

"And you were always a pain in my ass. So answer the question," Sephiroth snapped, short of temper. Cloud's hands slowly relaxed around his swords as he dismissed Sephiroth as a threat - for the moment - and focused on Genesis.

Genesis, whose hair tips were white and who looked as pale as Vincent. Stress lines worried at what should have been a young, twenty-something-year-old face. Cloud didn't know much about this SOLDIER besides the fact that he and Sephiroth were the same age, but Genesis did not look healthy.

Cloud wracked through his memories for a suitable answer.

Geostigma?

No, he didn't have any signs of black bruising anywhere on his skin. That couldn't be it. He was aging quickly, though. And… something pinged at the back of Cloud's mind. A memory. He couldn't quite-

He flipped through the files quickly, trying to find the one he needed. Too many people were dying, he needed to figure this out. There had to be something here in Hojo's files. Anything.

A flash of white hair. Cloud paused, shifting papers and files aside until he saw it. With a quick glance, three words popped: Angeal, MIA, and Degredation. The various photos paper-clipped to the documents were very telling, but none of them in much detail. Hojo obviously had not had his hands on Angeal and had only gotten these photos from afar. They showed black hair slowly whitening and a young, strong face aging and tiring.
Subject appears to be aging…. wounds have lost their ability to heal quickly…. body has begun breaking down, degrading, with each month that passes…. J cells injected after birth…. immune system is failing…. breaking down on a cellular level as the human body begins to fight the J cells…. failing…. dying…. dead within the year…. Degradation.

Dying. This man had been dying over the course of a year, and Hojo had only been interested in cataloguing his slow, steady demise. Cloud wished pain upon that sick bastard, not only for what he'd done to Cloud and Zack, but for what he hadn't done for someone who had needed medical help. Someone who was dying due to the cellular tampering of fucking scientists.

Cloud blinked rapidly as the vision faded and he returned to the present to find his arms dropped and a strong arm wrapped around his waist, keeping him upright. He blearily glanced up and saw Vincent watching him with a raised eyebrow.

"-see what I mean? He's hallucinating. He's not reacting well to the mako." Ah, damn. It hadn't all been a dream. That was definitely Sephiroth's voice.

"While all of this is quite entertaining, Sephiroth, I believe we were in the middle of discussing something," Genesis growled. "Will you give me your blood, or not?"

Cloud frowned. "Why would you want his blood?" he interrupted, steadying himself on his feet again with Vincent's help.

Genesis glared at him. "It is none of your-"

"He says these special cells in my blood will help cure him," Sephiroth answered calmly, but Cloud could hear the underlying tones of uncertainty in his voice. He wondered when he had gained that ability.

Cloud laughed. He couldn't help it. He started laughing and he couldn't seem to stop. It was only when Genesis shouted an angry "Enough!" that he could bring himself back under control with a twisted grin. "You think JENOVA cells are going to help you? Are you mad? JENOVA cells are what is making your body fall apart in the first place. More of them is just going to kill you faster. In a few months' time your hair will be more than streaked with white. Degradation can't be solved with JENOVA."

Genesis was staring at Cloud with a stunned expression. "How do you know any of this? Sephiroth is stable! Who's to say that his blood won't-"

"FOOL!" Cloud barked, and Genesis took a step back in surprise. "Sephiroth was injected with JENOVA cells when he was an embryo. You were injected just before birth. He would never have been born if his body weren't stable, whereas something threw the delicate balance in your body out of whack and now it's falling apart. More JENOVA cells won't fix you. Your body's immune system is failing, trying to fight off the infection of the JENOVA Virus."

Genesis's eyes were wild. "And how would you know any of this?! Hollander said that it was because mako had seeped into the wound. JENOVA cells will-"

Cloud snorted. "Ha. No wonder Hojo took his position. And the reason I know is because I spent months upon months pouring over Hojo's fucking notes trying to find a cure for Geostigma, which is a similar condition."

Genesis frowned. "What is Geostigma? It's similar? Is there a cure for it?"
Cloud nodded. "Yes, there's a cure for Geostigma. It's…" He frowned, rubbing at his forehead which was beginning to hurt. "It's…" his vision dimmed, glowed green, then went black.

Cloud woke up with a splitting migraine. "Oh sweet- my head. Anyone catch the number on that bus? I think I need to press charges," he moaned, trying to open his eyes and instead clenching them shut against the dim light.

"Spike! How are you doing, bud? You really had us worried." There was Zack, being the regular mother Chocobo that he was. Predictable.

"I can't see you right now, Zack, but could you do me a favour and pass me some water?"

A hand propped up his head and slowly, carefully, tilted the water into his mouth, giving him time to swallow. "Your bedside manner's improved, Zack," Cloud joked in between drinks.

"No, Zack's bedside manner is still atrocious," a silken voice spoke right above his head.

Cloud forced his eyes open to see beautiful green eyes and long, silky silver hair. He blinked sleepily. "Oh. It's you." He reached up and grabbed Sephiroth's hair, pulling him down into a kiss. When the SOLDIER only went halfway, eyes slightly wide around the edges, Cloud buried deep and drew up the energy to meet him halfway. Lazily, he plundered Sephiroth's mouth until he was satisfied, then collapsed back down onto the couch.

The room was deathly silent. Cloud peaked open an eye to see Zack, a man with white-streaked hair, Jared, and- Vincent? He shot upright like a bullet, nearly bonking heads with a stunned Sephiroth on the way up. "Vincent? Is that really you? You're awake!" He looked around quickly, realizing that they were in the Shinra mansion. They must have cleared out the monsters, otherwise this living room wouldn't be serviceable. He didn't remember any of that. In fact, the last thing he remembered was… walking through snow on the way to the mansion.

"What happened?" Cloud asked, looking around in confusion.

Sephiroth's hair shadowed his eyes as he spoke. "You were exposed to a large amount of refined mako."

Cloud frowned, zeroing in on Sephiroth's guilty expression. He gently tugged on lock of silver hair. "How did that happen?" he asked quietly, pushing himself into a sitting position.

"You… told me to focus on the mission instead of Hojo's files. I didn't listen, so you insisted. And I… overreacted."

"He shoved you into a mako tank so hard it broke and spilled all over you, according to Jarod," Zack said, arms crossed with a serious expression pinching his usually relaxed face. "And we all know what happens with you and mako," Zack said, whirling a finger at his temple. Cloud ran a hand through his hair with a groan. "What happened?"

"Well… from what Jarod told me," Zack said, shooting everyone but Jarod an irritated glare, "You went crazy, thinking Sephiroth was out to get you, and then shouted for this Vincent fellow who, hello, woke up and joined the party - and I still have not gotten an answer from you buddy on what you're doing in this basement don't think I've forgotten - and you apparently knew him and asked for his help. Then Genesis over here showed up and crashed the party, and then this is the part I was there for when you started talking shit about JENOVA cells and Degre-something and Geosta-
whatsits and honestly Cloud I don't even know how you seemed to know all this stuff even if you were hallucinating the whole time. Care to explain any of that?" Genesis cleared his throat and shot Zack a sharp look. "Oh, and Genesis here with the stick up his ass has made it very clear that the only reason he's even here is because you know the cure for the Geosta-whatsits and you better start talking blah blah or he'll tear you a new asshole blah blah blah. Happy?" Zack snarked at the red-haired man.

Cloud blinked, then blinked again. Then he brought both hands to his temples and started rubbing in slow, therapeutic circles. How the fuck?

"I would like to know how you knew my name," Vincent rumbled mutely into the building pressure of the room.

Cloud sighed and closed his eyes. How to deal with this clusterfuck. Should he tell the truth? A variation thereof? Nothing else that he could think of would explain the sheer amount of shit that had just clusterbombed on him.

"It's complicated, it-" He got distracted by the sight of Sephiroth, still kneeling by the couch, hair shadowing his eyes and mouth tight. "Sephiroth, lay down and chill out okay? You look like you're about to explode and you've had a stressful day." He reached into his weapon's pouch and pulled out a chocolate bar. "Here, eat this."

Sephiroth wordlessly took the chocolate and threw himself onto the couch, putting his head in Cloud's lap without a word and peeling the wrapping with a constipated look on his face. Cloud absently ran a hand through silver locks, purposely acting oblivious to the mixed looks of disbelief (Genesis), amusement (Vincent), I-don't-know-what-to-think (Jared), and I-totally-saw-that-coming (Zack).

"Alright. Where to start…" Well, he'd already blown the cat out of the bag. He was too lazy to try to come up with a cover story that could possibly cover every single way he'd fucked up during the time he couldn't remember. In for a Gil, in for a JENOVA. "Vincent. I know your name just like I know that you're a Turk who got a little too friendly with Lucrecia, Sephiroth's mother, and Hojo shot you and experimented on you. When he abandoned you in that coffin like the rest of his experiments in the mansion, you decided to atone for your sins by sleeping for the rest of eternity. I would advise against returning to that coffin before you have a nice long chat with Lucrecia's spirit, which is tied up in a mako cave somewhere off the coast of Costa del Sol." He couldn't exactly see Vincent's mouth, but by the slight whites around his eyes he would bet ten Gil the man's jaw had dropped.

Cloud looked around the room for his next victim. This was kind of fun. "Still want the answer, Genesis, or do you think I'm a crazy person?"

The SOLDIER didn't look particularly impressed. "Not going to predict my past? That's fine. I'd rather hear more about JENOVA, and how you know that her cells or Sephiroth's won't help me."

"JENOVA, JENOVA… It all comes down to that alien parasite in the end, doesn't it?" Cloud muttered under his breath. It seemed he'd never be able to escape her.

"Jenova… is my mother," Sephiroth muttered.

Cloud shook his head and rubbed Sephiroth's scalp. "No, Seph. She's not. Your mother was Lucrecia. I'll take you and Vincent to meet her spirit in that mako cave. Hojo fudged your birth certificate to make her disappear, just like he made Vincent disappear. He wanted all the credit for your birth, when in reality it was the science of Professor Gast and Lucrecia that actually got the
JENOVA project off the ground. Hojo just keeps killing or discrediting his competition because he's a slimy fucker."

Sephiroth crumpled the chocolate wrapper into a ball. "He's my father," he growled bitterly.

Cloud coughed. "Yeah, about that… Hojo's name may be on your certificate, but there were doubts as to whether he is indeed your father. You see, Lucretia, in spite of marrying Hojo, had a little thing with one of the Turks on security detail…” Cloud looked right at Vincent.

Red eyes stared at him for a long moment before turning to Sephiroth, who had craned his head to look at him, green eyes wide.

"As touching as this potential family reunion may be, you haven't answered my question," Genesis growled irritably.

"Yes. Right. JENOVA. Alien parasite, plague unto the Planet, Calamity to the Ancients… need I go on? Her cells are the reason you're degrading. She won't fix you. You'd probably mutate tentacles for legs or something nasty," Cloud muttered, shuddering at the thought of some of the monsters JENOVA's cells had mutated in his past. Not pretty.

"And Sephiroth? Why can't I use his cells to cure me? What about this cure you mentioned?"

Cloud sighed. "His cells would only destabilize you further. As for the cure, it hasn't been created yet."

Genesis stared at him. "What do you mean, yet."

"You mean you haven't figured it out yet?" Cloud tilted his head and raised an eyebrow.

"So what, you're psychic?"

Sephiroth snorted. "That doesn't explain how he can speak Wutaian fluently. Doesn't explain his unusual skill with a sword. Doesn't explain how he knows how to fix so many things. His file is wrong in every sense of the word."

Cloud smiled. "Ah, you noticed all that?"

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "You weren't trying particularly hard to blend in, Cloud. In addition, your hallucinations were particularly strange. How in the world can you imitate Zack so well?"

Cloud frowned. "That's… complicated, and I don't fully understand it myself." When Sephiroth raised an eyebrow, he sighed and ran his free hand through his own hair. "It's… you gotta know some of my history to really get that one. Uh… so, when I was a Trooper-

"You've never been a Trooper," Zack interrupted, confused.

Cloud gave him a meaningful look. "Exactly. To your memory, I've never been a Trooper. Now, when I was a Trooper, there was a mission to Nibelheim. Something about the reactor having a malfunction. To summarize, things went south really fast and Sephiroth went psycho. Like, trying to bring about the end of the world, psychotic. Burning Nibelheim to the ground, psycho."

Sephiroth's eyes widened. "He read something in this fucking mansion that threw him off the deep end. I dunno, maybe he was hearing voices-

"Voices?" Genesis interrupted, a pinched expression on his face.
Cloud looked down at Sephiroth. "You're not hearing any voices in your head right now by chance, are you?"

Sephiroth blinked up at him and shook his head.

"Good. Let's keep it that way. Anyway, after Sephiroth burnt Nibelheim to the ground, he ended up almost killing me and Zack. Hojo found us and moved us to that Planet-forsaken lab that we fell into, and the next four years he tortured us and experimented to his heart's desire until I got mako poisoning. Let me tell you, that shit fucks with your head. It's why my memories still have holes in them. I can't even remember my mother's own name, you know? And it's been years." He sighed, reaching into his bag to pull out another chocolate bar. He broke this one in half and gave some to Sephiroth while the rest of it he nibbled away at. "Anyway, Zack got shot full of holes and died in my arms. I had so many holes in my head at that point that I didn't even know my own name. When he died, though, something happened… I don't know if was the mako poisoning or the experiments, but Zack's memories filled in the holes, so… for a long time I thought I was Zack."

Zack stared at Cloud with equal parts shock and horror. "That's how you know about the pink panty incident. I never got drunk, you have my memories?!"

Cloud let his head fall back against the couch. "You just won't let that go, will you. Yes, Zack, that's how I know all your dirty secrets."

"Stop interrupting, Lieutenant," Sephiroth ordered around the chocolate bar in his mouth.

"Where was I…" Cloud mused, ignoring Zack's silent dancing freakout.

"What about JENOVA? And Geostigma?" Genesis asked, expression dead serious as he leaned forward in his seat, elbows on knees.

"JENOVA. Right. Well, it took us years to finally kill her and all the Sephiroth clones she kept bringing back from the dead. By then, it was too late. Well, maybe Sephiroth's first death was already too late." Cloud massaged Seph's scalp to calm the tension he could feel building in him. "Her cells poisoned the lifestream, and when Holy used the lifestream to protect the Planet from Meteor, it tipped the scales. The Planet couldn't fight off the sickness. It started infecting living people and became known as Geostigma. I searched everywhere for a cure, and I failed. It was the Planet and an Ancient in the lifestream that produced the cure, in the end, in the form of a well of water."

Genesis stared blankly down at the floor of the mansion.

"That doesn't explain your fluency in Wutaian and your knowledge of their culture," Sephiroth murmured, staring at the last bit of his chocolate bar with a complicated expression.

Cloud nodded. "I needed a vacation after everything that happened in Midgar, so I left. Went as far away as I could and spent almost a decade there. Then one morning I woke up in Shinra, with a SOLDIER rejection letter in my hand and no clue how I got there."

"So you time travelled," Genesis asked, hand grasping his chin in thought.

Cloud shrugged. "It's the only thing I can think of, though I don't know why, or how it happened."

Genesis stared at him incredulously. "I don't suppose it has anything to do with saving Sephiroth's life and a town of innocent people that burned, then?"

Cloud sighed. "I don't know. At first I was content to just stay away from Hojo and start making
some money. I didn't want to go into the Troopers again. Then Sephiroth kept popping up while I was doing my Janitorial duties and asking me to solve his problems. Sephiroth's the reason I'm here, right now, doing what I'm doing."

Genesis snorted. In a few seconds it turned into full guffaws. "Only Sephiroth can manage to find a time traveling Janitor and weasel him into his employ, completely unawares!"

Sephiroth chucked the rest of his chocolate bar in his mouth and said nothing, but his eyes had glued themselves to Cloud's face with an eerie intensity. "What's in the computers downstairs, Cloud?"

The blond sighed. "You really don't want to learn these things from Hojo's twisted notes, Sephiroth. Can you wait until you have a chance to talk to Lucrecia, your mother, about it?"

"But what if I, too, am a monster?"

Cloud looked down at Sephiroth with a sad expression. "You're not a monster. None of the SOLDIERs are. It's actions that shape you, not some twisted scientist, do you understand me?"

"But I have JENOVA's cells, and she's a monster, if what you've said is true."

"No," Cloud interrupted firmly, when it looked like Sephiroth was going to go on. "You're not a monster. You're a human being born from a human womb who was infected with a virus. You're not JENOVA. The only way you'd ever be a monster is if you became a psychotic mass murderer or let voices in your head tell you what to do. Got it?"

Sephiroth nodded and relaxed under Cloud's gently massaging hand. His eyes slid shut and he let out a sigh.

"What are these voices that you keep going on about?" Genesis interrupted, his brow still pinched in a frown.

Cloud sighed. "They're more like whispers, really. Whenever we got too close to a large collection of JENOVA cells, I always started to hear them. The only time I heard one voice clearly was when that Sephiroth tried to turn me into a puppet. There were also a few clones that could hear JENOVA's voice, or as they called her, Mother."

Genesis's eyes widened as his face flushed of what little colour it had. "And what did you do to stop the voices?"

Cloud's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Destroyed the source." He looked Genesis over, cataloguing the wet boots, clenched fists, tightness around his eyes, and his unhealthy pallor. "Genesis, are you hearing voices?"

Everyone in the room stilled before turning their heads to eye Genesis warily. The ex-SOLDIER stared right at Cloud, expression shuttered except for a muscle in his jaw that wouldn't stop twitching. Sephiroth moved to get up, but Cloud gripped his hair gently and pulled him back down. He didn't want Genesis to make a break for it, if that were the case. Best not to startle him.

When Genesis didn't say anything, Cloud tilted his head to the side. "You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by telling me, you realize. Unless it's your intention to become a mindless JENOVA-driven puppet intent on bringing the world to ruin?"

Genesis leaned back in his seat. "Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess. We seek it thus, and take to the sky. Ripples form on the water's surface. The wandering soul knows no rest."

Cloud frowned, pondering the words. "You think JENOVA is a Goddess?" He snorted. "You really couldn't be farther from the truth. She is a parasite. She rode the last planet she killed into our atmosphere thousands of years ago and if it hadn't been for the Cetra, none of us would be alive today. She'll kill everyone on this planet if given half the chance, because that's what she does. It's her reason for existing."

Genesis's brow twisted in confusion, frustration, and probably a little fear. "What am I supposed to do? I can't just stop looking for a cure because you said it doesn't exist yet."

"We destroy JENOVA." All eyes in the room turned to look at Sephiroth in surprise. He raised an eyebrow at their surprised expressions. "That's one thing we can do, until we can find the cure. If she's an alien entity bent on destruction of this planet, then it is our responsibility as SOLDIER to take her out."

Those glowing green eyes turned to Cloud. "She's nearby, isn't she? If Genesis is hearing her voice, then we should leave him here with a guard while we destroy her. If it's her cells that are making you degrade, then closer contact with her is certainly not going to help you."

Genesis swore. "I hate sitting idly by, doing nothing!"

Cloud hummed thoughtfully. "Well, to be honest I think it's best that only people without JENOVA cells go to destroy her. So even though you're not hearing voices, Sephiroth, it's best if you stay here, while Zack and I go light her up like a torch." He reached into his bag and pulled out the materia he'd stolen from Reno.

"I will stay here," Vincent said quietly. He and Sephiroth traded meaningful looks.

Cloud nodded and stood up. "Right. Let's get this party started."

Sephiroth followed him towards the door as he and Zack prepared to head up to the reactor. Once they were out of the eyes of the others, he wrapped his arms around Cloud and pulled him into a hug. "Be safe, Cloud."

Cloud hugged back before grabbing Sephiroth by the hair and slowly bringing him down to his knees. Once there, he pressed a kiss to the man's forehead before forcefully plundering his mouth. He battled Sephiroth's tongue into submission before pulling away reluctantly, leaving the man's lips swollen and red. He'd much rather be doing Sephiroth right now than killing JENOVA. "Stay here, okay? No matter what you hear or see. She can't get you again Sephiroth. Never again," he growled possessively, wrapping his arms around the man and pulling him in for another tight embrace. "You're mine, you hear?"

Sephiroth hummed and murmured a soft acquiescence. Cloud reluctantly pulled away and helped the General to his feet once more.

Zack, who had been waiting with his back turned to them, threw a look over his shoulder. "You lovebirds done yet?"

Cloud snorted. "Like you wouldn't be the same if the positions were reversed, you sap."

Zack shrugged with one shoulder, grinning. "Lead the way, Spiky."

With one last glance at Sephiroth, Cloud took off at a fast jog for the reactor, Zack following close behind.
The run to the reactor went by in a blur. Cloud was so focused on every possible contingency plan that he could come up with in case things went sour that he didn't remember most of it. Zack's uncharacteristic silence didn't help. Cloud kept feeling like he'd forgotten something important, or something bad was going to happen.

With his luck...

There were no soldiers upon entering the reactor. Not even a guard. It set Cloud on edge right away. Why would Hojo store one of his most important test subjects in an unguarded facility? Or was that the idea? No personnel meant nobody found anything they weren't supposed to. It also made the reactor look worthless and unimportant.

*Just deal with one thing at a time,* he thought to himself as they walked through the dark reactor and approached the door that led to JENOVA's containment chamber. It opened with a hiss, and there floated JENOVA in all her alien, mutated glory.

"Guard the door, Zack," Cloud ordered, eyes glued to the parasite in front of him.

"You got it, Cloud." The sound of the Buster sword unsheathed and swinging through the air comforted Cloud as he walked forward, fire materia equipped and ready.

The magic that surged to his fingertips when he activated the materia, however, was not what he expected. "ZACK! GET CLEAR!" he shouted as he reigned in the magic, trying to condense the massive Firaga into something that wouldn't set off the mako below or kill Zack in the blast. He heard shouting, but couldn't focus on the words as he forced the spell to bend to his will and melt JENOVA and her chamber into molten slag.

Cloud had a moment of relief when he confirmed with his own eyes the eradication of the calamity before the ground collapsed beneath him. He had no time to react. There was nothing to grab hold of. Just before mako green swallowed him whole, his only thought was for Sephiroth.

"CLOUD!" Zack shouted as the concussive force of the blast collided with him. He hadn't had time to get clear. He'd hesitated. Hadn't followed Cloud's order. It got him a face full of fire and the sight of the entire floor over the reactor collapsing after most of the structure disintegrated with the heat of the blast.

There was nothing he could do. He wasn't fast enough. Was too far away. There was nothing to throw Cloud. Nothing he could grab onto to save his friend. He could only stand there and watch Cloud's body flail before he fell into the reactor.

Zack collapsed to his knees in the doorway, staring down into the green mass as pieces of the platform dangled from the edge. He waited for some sign of his friend, but there was nothing.

His PHS rang in the eerie silence. Zack picked it up on autopilot, but couldn't bring himself to speak.

"We heard an explosion. Is everything okay? Is it finished?" Sephiroth's tinny voice came through the speaker.

Zack swallowed, but still couldn't seem to be able to say anything.

"Zack? Hello? Answer me, SOLDIER."
"He... He fell."

Zack heard cussing from the other end of the line, but things still weren't quite clicking. "He... He melted it. It was too much. Too powerful. It melted the whole thing... And he fell."

"Zack, can you confirm that JENOVA is destroyed?"

"There's nothing left. All melted. The... The containment. The scaffolding under it. I couldn't... I couldn't stop it. I couldn't... Couldn't save him." The ground went blurry grey and green, and it took Zack a second to realize that he was crying. Hot tears scorched down his cheeks as he held the PHS with numb fingers.

"I'm coming, Zack. Don't do anything stupid, do you understand? Stay exactly where you are, don't move, and I'll be there soon. Understood?"

Zack managed to sob out a "Yes, sir" before he closed the phone, put it back in his pocket, and then slammed his fists onto the steel floor with an angry shout. Why? Why did this happen?

CLOUD!

Sephiroth watched Cloud's back as he disappeared into the trees around the mansion. Long after the blond had vanished from all his senses, he stood out there in the cold, arms crossed over his chest and a pensive frown twisting his brow.

He smelted Vincent before he saw or heard him. It was obvious that he was a Turk, through and through. Regular SOLDIERs never bothered to train to that level of stealth. Well, besides Sephiroth, that is. Since the Wutai war, he'd kept up the skills he'd acquired in the field through habit rather than necessity.

"What was my mother like?" It slipped out before Sephiroth could stop it, not that he truly wanted to. He wanted answers. He'd always wanted to know about his parents, and he didn't need a paternity test to see that he and Vincent had eerily similar features. Their height was the same. Nose. Shape of the eyes. Hair identical in every way except colour.

It made the hair on his body stand on end to think that not two hours ago he'd thought Hojo was his father. The sadistic fuck who'd told him an alien parasite was his mother. An alien parasite that in another time had apparently driven him to almost destroy the world. By the pain in Cloud's eyes, there had no doubt been many fatalities. He was The General, and in another life he'd gone insane and killed hundreds of people.

"She was bright..." Vincent began, haltingly. "So smart... And her smile lit up the room. I. Never had to talk much. She loved to share. I could just listen. She... hated Hojo. They worked together a lot under the guidance of Professor Gast. But when Gast died in an unfortunate accident, it was Hojo who the president chose to replace him on the project, despite Lucrecia's greater experience and leadership. She never stopped resenting him for it."

Sephiroth nodded. "I can understand hating Hojo. But... Why did she participate in the experiment?"

Vincent shrugged. "She was a scientist. She wasn't the same as Hojo. She felt really guilty about doing it at all, but I suspect that Hojo played a big part in convincing her when he found out she was pregnant. If she had said no, the outcome may have been the same."

Sephiroth nodded and didn't ask anymore questions. He'd had enough world shattering information for one day. "Will you stick around?" he asked instead. "In case I have more questions?"
Vincent hummed thoughtfully. "If that is what you want. I... am afraid I don't know how to be a father... I don't know much about families."

Sephiroth snorted. "That makes two of us. We'll be on even footing."

Vincent hummed again thoughtfully. They stood there for a while longer in the cold before Sephiroth got sick of the waiting and wandered back inside. Maybe Cloud had left behind some coffee and chocolate rations in his backpack. He could use the help.

Genesis stood in the corner and stared at Sephiroth as the General dug through the bags Cloud had packed for them in search of his prize. He found it shortly and ordered Jared to boil some water while he munched on a chocolate bar. Cloud had only brought sugar packets for the coffee, but that was still better than Sephiroth had gotten used to drinking it in the field.

"Are you still drinking that Shinra swill for coffee?" Genesis mocked from his corner, watching Sephiroth like a hawk.

Sephiroth hummed. "No. Cloud found me a blend of a coffee from Wutai and some other bean. I forgot the names. He's the one who picks up more when we run out, so I've just left it to him. Would you like to try some, Genesis?"

The redhead raised an eyebrow. "If it can put a smile on your face, then I would love to sample it."

Sephiroth nodded and went through the motions of pouring some of the coffee grounds into the reusable, portable metal filter he'd set on top of the metal traveling mug. It, along with the coffee ground bag and sugar packets, were all designed to fit snugly inside the mug to save space. He wished Shinra had been smart about some of their other inventions. Particularly their weapons. It still shocked him when some of Scarlet's particularly useless, awful inventions made it off the drawing board and into reality.

"So what makes the blond different than all the other people who have wanted to date you? What makes him special?" Genesis asked after a long moment of silence.

Sephiroth paused in his preparation of the coffee for a second before he continued to pour the boiled water over his grounds. Jared froze where he'd been putting some of his own coffee into his own filter, looking between the two Generals nervously.

"I fail to see how it's any business of yours," Sephiroth rebutted him, annoyed at the implied insult to Cloud.

"It is my business when I tried to set you up with men and women for a whole year before you finally told me you weren't interested in anybody. So what is it? What makes him different?"

Jared poured some hot water in his mug to percolate before high tailing it out of the room. Vincent eased himself farther into the shadows but didn't leave. Sephiroth could hear Jared talk to Maurice and offer to join him on patrol.

"I don't know. He's... different."

Genesis scoffed. "Mhmm. How did you two meet?"

"I was looking for someone to fix my coffee machine. He fixed the shorted fuse with a paper clip and my office's portable stove top."

He could feel Genesis's eyes boring incredulously into the side of his head. Sephiroth removed the
filter and added five packets of sugar. A quick stir was all he needed before he drank half the mug. His throat scalded, but Sephiroth didn't care. He knew it would heal in a manner of minutes.

"You're kidding. A paper clip."

"Yes, a paper clip. He also fixed that light for me that drove me crazy when it flickered. And got one of the photocopiers to work when Cynthia broke both, one of them beyond repair. He is very competent. I often wondered what he was doing, working as a janitor for Shinra. When Cynthia began to use on the job, I fired her and hired Cloud in her place. Within a few weeks he sniffed out Heidegger siphoning money off expense forms and shorting my SOLDIER's supplies."

Genesis stared. "Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess.' Not only did he solve or get rid of all the things that drive you crazy, but he fully supports your caffeine and chocolate addiction. It must be love."

Sephiroth looked up from his coffee in surprise. "You think so?"

The redhead stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head and quirking his lips in a soft, fond smile. "Definitely. The way he looks after you? The hair fondling?kissing in public? You'd have to be blind not to see it." Suddenly, Genesis grinned. "What's he like in bed? I bet he's a firecracker. The way he manhandles you? It's obvious who's on top."

Sephiroth glared. "So what? From what I understand, you bottomed for all your numerous lovers."

Genesis grinned. "That's a little different, Seph. I'm what you call the kind who bottoms from the top." He barked out a laugh. "I just never would have pegged as the type who liked getting pegged." His eyes shone with humour.

Sephiroth rolled his eyes at the awful pun. "For someone who reads poetry, surely you can do better than that."

"No, sex jokes are always supposed to be humorously distasteful."

Sephiroth opened his mouth to reprimand him, but stopped when a loud boom echoed across the mountain to those with advanced hearing and Genesis abruptly collapsed. Vincent caught him, quick and quiet as a shadow. Without a sound of exertion, he lifted the man, set his rapier against the wall, and lay him down on the couch that had long since been vacated.

While Vincent did that, Sephiroth pulled out his PHS and called Cloud's number. It went straight to the answering machine. Cursing, he called Zack's number instead and held his breath as it rang.

When it finally answered, he waited for Zack to speak and only heard hitched breathing.

Sephiroth braced himself. "We heard an explosion. Is everything okay? Is it finished?" When he only heard Zack swallow, he frowned, worried. It was uncharacteristic for Zack to not have words. "Zack? Hello? Answer me, SOLDIER."

"He... He fell." Sephiroth cursed. He didn't like the sound of that. "He... He melted it. It was too much. Too powerful. It melted the whole thing... And he fell."

"Zack, can you confirm that JENOVA is destroyed?"

"There's nothing left. All melted. The... The containment. The scaffolding under it. I couldn't... I couldn't stop it. I couldn't... Couldn't save him."
Oh please no. Please no, not Cloud. Please let them be safe, by the Planet. "We're coming, Zack. Don't do anything stupid, do you understand? Stay exactly where you are, don't move, and I'll be there soon. Understood?"

Sephiroth barely heard the sobbed out agreement through the tiny speaker. A high pitched ringing sound filled his ears, but he shook his head to clear it. He couldn't afford to be compromised. He needed to get up there and help. He grabbed his sword from where it lay against the wall before turning to Vincent. "I'm going to follow their trail up the mountain. Please keep an eye on Genesis and call me when he wakes up?"

Vincent nodded. "I don't have a PHS."

"My SOLDIERs have my number. Borrow theirs. I have to go." Without another word, he took off at full speed in the direction he'd seen Cloud and Zack leave.

The trip up the mountain passed in a blur. It didn't take him long to realize that the trail led to the mako reactor, so he abandoned the trail to sprint and jump straight up the mountainside. Within minutes of leaving the mansion he burst through the front door and followed the puddles of water on the floor farther into the reactor.

He heard Zack's heaving sobs not long after. Within moments he found the SOLDIER kneeling on the floor in front of a doorway to nothing. After a closer look, he realized what it used to be. "Used to be" being the key words. The only bits still hanging off the walls of the reactor were melted and torn metal, piping, and electrical wires. The dread that had been building in his throat sank like a rock into his stomach.

"He fell..." Zack's voice echoed in his head, over and over and over again.

Agony choked Sephiroth, and he found himself leaning against the wall before collapsing to the ground as his knees gave way. He'd never felt something like this before in his entire life. This pain. It felt as though someone had taken a dull blade, carved out his insides, chopped them up, and then stuffed them back in before sewing the mess shut inside him. It burned...

"Cloud?" he whispered.

"He fell in," Zack rasped back, eyes dull and red with tears. Belatedly, Sephiroth realized his own eyes burned even as tears refused to form. "Something went wrong with the spell. It was too powerful. Firaga. I wouldn't have been able to do what he did, controlling and focusing and condensing it like that. Even then we barely had any warning before it exploded in his face. I didn't see his front when he went down. I don't know if the fire... JENOVA disintegrated. The scaffolding must have melted along with her. And Cloud fell."

Sephiroth forced himself to push away the agony, to lock it away in a corner so he could think clearly and assess the situation. He knew the design of mako reactors. It was one of the many things he'd familiarized himself with over the years in spite of neither Hojo nor anyone else requiring him to know it. He'd always liked to be prepared.

With a grunt, he pushed himself to his feet and looked around the room to orient himself. The Nibelheim reactor was one of the oldest. It had also been one of the tetchiest when they had first got it running. As a result, they had built numerous failsafes into the design while they worked out the kinks.

Seeing the panel of dials he was looking for, he stalked towards them and pulled the emergency shut-down protocol lever. With a sharp whine, the low pitched rumble that existed in all reactors
abruptly came to a stop. As a SOLDIER, he always hated reactors. Too much noise. The mako conversion process wasn't noisy to normal humans, but the high pitched whine of electrical current in large quantities never ceased to irritate him.

Once all sound had died and he was sure nothing would be damaged, he pulled the farthest lever to the right. A low rushing sound filled the room as the unrefined mako drained from its primary tank into the secondary for storage. The system was designed to filter any and all contaminants from the unrefined mako.

He walked back to the mako tank, listening as the pitch of the rushing mako fell as the tank emptied. There was no guarantee, but...

Sephiroth knew he had to try. By his estimate, Cloud had to have been down there for at maximum five minutes. That couldn't be long enough for his biological matter to disintegrate into the unrefined mako. If they were lucky...

Sephiroth forced down the rock that lodged in his throat and focused on the mission.

After what felt like an eon later but was only a few minutes, they began to see bits of scaffolding emerge from the pool of green liquid. Sephiroth waited until he spotted the dark shadow of a body before jumping down into the reactor. Zack shouted in surprise but didn't follow, thankfully, showing some sense for once. Sephiroth ignored the mako that hissed against his leather boots. He could buy new boots.

As the last of the mako drained, Sephiroth looked over Cloud's still form. His clothes had melted into nothing. Only his swords, materia, and zippers remained in tact. The PHS had melted into a ball of green and grey metal and plastic.

Despite this, however, his skin remained completely unblemished. His hair the same buttery yellow it had always been. If Sephiroth hadn't known better, he would have thought the blond were merely sleeping. But he did know better. With trepidation, he crouched down and placed two fingertips against the pulse point of Cloud's neck, and waited.

Even with all his senses trained on Cloud's still form, he couldn't sense any sign of life. No breathing. No heart beat. No gurgling of his stomach. No... He frowned. That was strange. Nothing. Even dead bodies made more noise with their decomposition than Cloud did.

Moving with instinct, Sephiroth pulled his Cure from his pocket and cast Restore, multiple times. The materia had no effect. His frown deepened. Even the tissues of dead bodies would respond to a cure when cast. There were more bacteria in the human body than one could fathom. The magic itself was being disrupted.

"Damnit, Cloud," Sephiroth hissed, clenching his fists in frustration. He didn't know what to do. He knew something was wrong, something wasn't normal. Cloud wasn't dead, but he wasn't alive either. Collapsing onto the ground next to the still body, his chest caved in on him, and his stomach followed, until he found himself curled in half, unable to release the muscles from their seize. His eyes burned again, but no tears fell. He tried to scream, but he couldn't make a sound. He tried to speak, and he couldn't speak. His hands shook as they felt for Cloud. His hands gripped strong shoulders, and he found himself collapsing forward onto the other man, unable to get a breath as his chest tightened to the point of agony. He couldn't breathe. His fists clenched on broad shoulders as he tried and failed to take in a breath. He couldn't... He didn't... Why...

Black spots dotted his vision, and his hands seized with desperation as he tried to breathe-
Something slammed into him like a freight train, and Sephiroth wheezed as the air stuck in his lungs blew out of his body like air out of a paper bag. He took in a gasping, pained breath as he tried to get his bearings. He would have fallen, limp, to the ground if it weren't for the hand that had him pinned.

Hand.

Sephiroth forced his spotty eyes to follow the hand back to its source and stared in shock at the sight of white. Pure, inhuman white. Glowing.

White eyes glowing at him from a familiar face haloed by spiky blond hair.

-Toki Mirage-

Yes! I finished before midnight! I have met my self-appointed goal, Tumblr followers. I'm so proud of myself. It was really hard on Wednesday and Thursday. I spent hours trying to figure out what to do with the second half of this chapter when it just hit me on this bus this afternoon. Looove my new iPad. It's made writing so much easier to take with me everywhere. Way better than paper copies and my heavy laptop.

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter and don't hate me too much for the cliffhanger! I just couldn't bear to end the chapter with nothing going wrong. It's just not my style.

Happy reading!
Chapter Sixteen

The Little Guy

Sephiroth tried to breath, but his chest had seized again and refused to move. White eyes seared into him for what felt like forever before a blond head leaned towards him and sniffed.

Sniffed?

Suddenly, a glowing hand came up to hover in front of his forehead, and Sephiroth's body sucked in a shocked lungful of air at the current of power that jolted his entire body like an electric shock. His chest heaved with gasping breaths as the hand on his throat finally loosened enough for him to breath.

The hand released him, and Sephiroth slid down the wall of the mako reactor to collapse on the ground as shaky limbs refused to keep him upright. Wide green eyes remained fixed on Cloud's pale northern skin and the inhuman eyes that glowed in his sockets.

"Cloud?" Sephiroth had to try a few times before the word came out clearly, but the other man didn't respond. Slowly, Sephiroth forced himself to his feet by using the wall for support. "Cloud? Can you hear me?" No reaction. Hesitantly, Sephiroth placed a hand on Cloud's shoulder, but again, no reaction.

"-can't go down there!"

Sephiroth looked up just in time to see Genesis fall into the mako tank, white wings trailing from his back and eyes shot through with green.

Cloud pulled a giant sword from thin air and swung it through the space Genesis used to be. It split the walls of the mako tank with ease, and wisely Genesis retreated into the air. Cloud followed him with a powerful surge of his legs, moving with a speed that Sephiroth was hard pressed to follow.

Genesis didn't stand a chance. Cloud caught his ankle and threw him down into the pit before he could fly away. When he raised his sword to cut Genesis in half, Sephiroth moved without thought to catch Cloud's hands and stop his sword.

He expected to be pushed aside, but Cloud paused instead. When Genesis moved to escape, Cloud planted a foot down on the man's chest and ignored the frenzied clawing at his leg. Wounds inflicted healed before a drop of blood could spill.

Cloud looked back and forth between Genesis and Sephiroth with a blank expression before suddenly, the giant sword melted into a flurry of green sparks. Gentle hands pushed Sephiroth aside before Cloud fell to the ground to straddle Genesis. His right hand replaced his foot, holding Genesis pinned to the ground with an eerie strength, while his left slowly came to hover above Genesis's head.
Genesis screamed like a wild animal was ripping apart his guts and eating him alive, and Sephiroth couldn't move with the war that fought inside him. He couldn't attack Cloud, but he couldn't continue to watch Genesis suffer either.

His indecision saved him from making a decision when, after what felt like aeons of screaming, Genesis finally went limp and collapsed to the ground with a dazed expression. Slowly, his wings began to disintegrate into green sparks, and colour slowly bled back into his hair and face until finally, he lay there prostrate and staring up at Cloud with infinite wonder as green leached from his eyes.

"Infinite in mystery is the gift of the Goddess," he murmured under his breath before his eyes rolled up in his head and he passed out.

Cloud stood from his crouch and looked up and sniffed at the air again. Without warning, he jumped straight up to the top of the shaft. Sephiroth followed him instinctually.

He found Zack pinned against the wall, reddened eyes wide with shock as Cloud held a hand to his forehead just as he had with Genesis. Zack jolted with surprise before slowly collapsing to the ground in a twitching heap as Cloud let him go.

"Cloud?" Sephiroth tried again, placing a hand on Cloud's shoulder. The man turned to him with that same eerily blank expression and bore into him with that inhuman gaze. "Cloud… please…" Sephiroth bowed his head and tried to breath. Had the mako driven Cloud crazy? He'd only been under for five minutes, but unrefined mako… What had it turned him into?

Slowly, a hand came up to Sephiroth's face. For a moment, he worried that Cloud would zap him again with that strange energy, but instead his fingers slowly sank into silvery strands and tightened.

Sephiroth's knees went weak. With a painful *thud*, he collapsed to the hard steel floor at Cloud's feet. "Cloud?" he murmured hopefully.

The glowing power of Cloud's eyes slowly began to fade as he pulled Sephiroth's hair to tilt the General's head back and bare his vulnerable throat.

"Cloud?" Sephiroth whispered, eyes fixed on the searing ring of blue that began to crawl its way through the white until Cloud's true eyes stared down at him blankly. They glowed such azure blue… it had to be mako poisoning. And what about Cloud's hallucinations? Would he try to kill Sephiroth again?

"I… know… you…" Cloud said slowly, as though each word were a trial.

Sephiroth nodded. "Yes, Cloud." His mouth remained open to speak, but his voice died in his throat when the hand tightened again on his hair and his eyes closed to the sudden pleasure-pain.

"Mine."

Hot lips scorched his own as Cloud claimed and plundered and fucked into his mouth with a slow, steady, smooth assuredness that would have had Sephiroth's knees wobbling if he weren't already prostrate on the ground. He didn't know how long they stayed like that, but suddenly Cloud's mouth withdrew and Sephiroth couldn't stop the whine that clawed its way through his throat at its sudden departure.

"Sephiroth."
Sephiroth opened foggy eyes to find glowing blue watching him carefully. The paralyzed blankness had been replaced by Cloud's usual blank look. His lips pressed slightly into a line, the corners tight and drawn down slightly, while a pensive frown furrowed his brow so slightly very few would have noticed.

"Why am I naked?"

Sephiroth blinked and glanced at Cloud's bare, toned chest before swallowing down the sudden lust that raced through him. "You fell." Sephiroth coughed to clear the roughness from his throat. "Into the mako."

Understanding flashed through Cloud's eyes as he glanced over towards the mess that he'd made of the mako reactor. "JENOVA is gone?" He frowned and tilted his head to the side, a faraway look in his eyes. "No. Not all gone. Just… most of it." He closed his eyes and frowned. "What…" He shook his head and scowled. "Stop yammering for fuck's sake. Why can't you ever give me a break?" He let out a loud sigh and scraped a hand through his hair. "Yeah, yeah. I'll deal with it soon. You've waited this long, you can wait a few more days. I'm not traipsing my lily white ass across the continent."

Alarm raced through Sephiroth at the sight of Cloud speaking to the air as though someone were there.

"Cloud? Are you hearing voices?"

Cloud glanced down at him and relaxed the grip he had on Sephiroth's hair before slowly massaging the General's scalp. "It's not what you think, Seph. It's just the planet acting like a child. Not JENOVA. Falling into that tank may have scrambled me a bit, but I'm still me… Mostly. It's… complicated." He frowned and raked a hand through his hair again. "Come on. We've got shit to do so I can stop this incessant yammering, and I'm going to need clothes for…" He paused, head tilting to the side. "Wait, seriously?"

Abruptly, green sparkles coalesced out of the air around Cloud before forming into an odd mix of SOLDIER, not-SOLDIER clothing. One black pauldron with a silver wolf protected his left shoulder above a pink ribbon tied to his bicep while a number of blades filled a complicated harness on his back. His vest had been unzipped a bit at the top, and it did little to hide his strong chest and tight torso while his baggy black pants and heavy boots hid everything else away.

Sephiroth eyed the leather fabric that hung from a strap at his left hip to the ground, but didn't cover any other part of his body. "What's that for?"

Cloud, who had been busy running hands all over himself and his swords to make sure they were there, looked up with a small frown of confusion. "What's what for?"

Sephiroth pointed to the useless-looking swath of leather. "That." He eyed the buckle and leather harness that held it in place. "Doesn't it get in the way?"

Cloud blinked. "That's your question? Really?" He shook his head. "I somehow manage to materialize clothing out of thin air, and you focus on the one stylish and useless part of my outfit. Tifa got it for me when the half-trench coat went into fashion around Edge. With my swords, I couldn't exactly wear it, so she had it custom-made to attach to the harness. I was a gift, in spite of its uselessness." When he crossed his arms over his chest, Sephiroth couldn't help but stare at his biceps. His build had changed slightly since he fell in the mako tank. He wasn't any taller than before, but through the glowing of his skin it had been impossible to miss the sudden muscle tone and increase in mass. "What about your trench coat? Doesn't it get in your way when you fight?
Wouldn't that make it rather useless as well?"

Sephiroth smirked. "My trench coat is intimidating to my enemies, so it is not useless. And no, it doesn't get in the way at all when I fight, whereas I find it hard to believe that that thing doesn't occasionally get caught between your legs."

Cloud stared at him for a long moment. "Ha. Ha. Asshole. You're totally trolling me. I didn't think you'd have it in you." He shook his head and grabbed Sephiroth by the hair again. Without a word, he kissed and bit and licked into the General's mouth until the man was gasping for air and more contact. With a vindictive surge of pleasure, Cloud stepped in between Sephiroth's kneeling legs and rubbed his shin against the length hardening beneath baggy pants. The moan that ripped from Sephiroth's chest pleased him enough to forgive the commentary on his wardrobe.

"Uh, guys? Get a room?"

Cloud flipped Zack the finger without looking up from Sephiroth's reddened lips. "Why don't you go check on Genesis in the tank and I'll come get you when we're done." Cloud had nothing but bad memories of this place, and now was as good a time as any to change that.

"Ugh. Fine. But you so owe me, Strife."

Cloud ignored him.

Once the footsteps had completely disappeared, Cloud started working on Sephiroth's belt. "Did you bring any lube?" he breathed into the man's mouth as he got the first buckle undone.

Sephiroth shivered. "I… didn't think."

Cloud's head tilted to the side and his eyes glowed bright like lights for a moment. "You can't be… seriously? What the hell did you make me into, you… you… ugh."

"Cloud?" Sephiroth frowned as the blond's eyes refocused on him.

"Sorry. Just, the Planet. Apparently I'm not… well. It's complicated. Let's talk about it later."

Without another word, he spun Sephiroth around and pushed him down onto his hands and knees. He ripped down Sephiroth's pants, pulled white cheeks apart, and speared his tight hole with his tongue. The General shouted in surprise before slowly devolving into quiet groans and heaving, gasping breaths.

Cloud focused on opening him up and getting as much of his no-longer-normal saliva into him as possible. He ignored the green sparks it gave off and ignored the Planet's impatient mental pushing at the edges of his consciousness. I'm having a moment here. Leave me alone or I'll sink myself to the bottom of the ocean and you can figure out a way to save yourself without me.

The Planet curled up in a mental ball and sulked, and Cloud took the opportunity to return his entire focus to the much more pleasant experience of opening Sephiroth up for his cock. Once he'd gotten enough slick into the gorgeous, keening beauty that was Sephiroth, he opened his pants and pulled himself free. He grabbed Sephiroth's hair and pulled him upright and into a hot, spine-searing kiss while his other hand guided his cock into that tight ass.

Sephiroth sighed into his mouth and melted in his arms once he'd sank hilt deep. Cloud used his new strength to manhandle the man into position for the best angle and deepest penetration. Knees firmly planted on the ground, he leaned back towards his heels and brought Sephiroth's torso with him. Two hands grabbed long, muscular thighs right above the back of his knees and lifted Sephiroth off his cock with an easy, inhuman strength. Holding Sephiroth suspended in the air over
his cock, he slowly fucked into him with the power of his quads and legs.

Sephiroth's head fell listlessly back in a spill of silvery locks. His mouth opened but whatever sound he would have let loose choked in his throat and stalled in his chest. Cloud watched what he could see of that slack expression from this angle as he nailed Sephiroth's prostate over, and over. He could see green sparks with each thrust, and it took him a moment to realize that he was actually seeing green sparks with each thrust, and Cloud paused and stared around at the crazy that had become of his life.

Sephiroth scrabbled at his arms. "Cloud," he gasped, demanded, begged all in one panted breath of a word, and Cloud's brain recorded that gasp of his name, overwriting permanently all the taunting memories from his past-that-would-never be. The sound echoed in his mind and lit a fire in his belly, and Cloud pulled out and manhandled Sephiroth onto his back in a spill of silver hair so he could watch the man's expression as Cloud broke him apart.

Sephiroth wheezed as Cloud slammed back into him, and long, tight legs wrapped around Cloud's hips and back to keep them connected as Cloud moved faster than any human had business moving. His skin took on a golden glow and the green sparks increased in their density around them to the point where they blocked off sight of the reactor entirely.

"I can't- I can't- Cloud, please-"

Cloud ignored Sephiroth's plea and slammed into his prostrate harder. "You'll come without my hand on you, or not at all," Cloud grunted out into Sephiroth's ear before biting at his neck. So close, almost- He groaned his release into Sephiroth's neck, and the silver-haired General's entire body seized in a silent rictus of pleasure as he came between them. It took Cloud a few seconds to realize that Sephiroth himself was literally glowing with pleasure. He watched in worry as the energy slowly faded from white skin and Sephiroth collapsed in a boneless heap against the hard floor.

"Seph?" Cloud reached up and cupped Sephiroth's cheek. Glowing green eyes rolled behind half-lidded eyelids before finally managing to focus on him.

"C-Clou…" he slurred and blinked slowly before his mouth twisted into the dopiest smile Cloud had ever seen on his face. It made him look terrifyingly young. "Clou…d. Cloud." His smile widened into a full on grin.

Cloud blinked and held a hand to Sephiroth's forehead. His temperature appeared to be normal. "You okay?"

"I'm… great." Sephiroth nuzzled into his hand with a contented purr. "That… was awesome."

Cloud stared. 'Awesome?' Since when did Sephiroth say awesome? "Are you sure you're okay? You're a little… loopy."


Cloud's mouth fell open. "Better than chocolate?" That was a high compliment, coming from Sephiroth.

"Oh yeah. I feel… loose. It's weird. But awesome."

He sounds totally high. Thanks, Planet, I can't even have normal sex now. My cock literally has supernatural powers. "Sorry. I think… things are a little weird since I fell into the mako. Maybe it's better if we hold off on-"
Sephiroth moved faster than Cloud could react and knocked him right off his heels and onto his back. "No. Stop talking. We're good. I'm good. You're good. Well, you're a little glowy and I think you fucked magic into me, but I don't care because that felt better than chocolate so you're not allowed to take it away from me. So. Stop talking and let me have my afterglow." He rubbed his face against Cloud's chest, ignoring the occasional cold scrape of zipper, and instead tried to get as close as possible.

Cloud said nothing for a moment and started gently carding his fingers through Sephiroth's hair as he tried to figure out what to do next. *Keep moving forward. Figure out weird shit later.* "Can we talk about Shinra?"

Sephiroth grunted and grumbled. "What about Shinra?"

"Well, the Planet in my head isn't going to shut up after I wipe out the rest of JENOVA. Next she's going to start bitching about the mako reactors sucking the blood out of her, and I don't think I could put up with such torturous whining for the rest of my life, so… we should figure out what we're going to do about that."

Sephiroth sighed. "Ugh. That sounds too hard to think about right now."

Cloud kissed his silver crowned head. "Sorry."

"Let's get back to the mansion. More minds, more problem solving."

Cloud cleaned them up efficiently and had to help Sephiroth get vertical again. When the General stumbled trying to do something as simple as walking, Cloud couldn't suppress the pleased grin as he wrapped an arm around Sephiroth's waist and helped him walk back towards the reactor tank.

"Zack! Is Genesis awake yet?"

"Uh…"

Genesis was jumping up and out of the reactor a moment later with the smuggest expression on his face that Cloud had ever seen. "Yeah, thanks to you two." His eyes skated to Sephiroth and his lips spread in a shit-eating grin. "Sephiroth! I don't think I've ever seen you so mellow. Blondie's good for you."

Zack jumped up just in time to see Sephiroth's dopy smile as he said, "Yeah, Cloud's pretty awesome."

Zack covered his face with both hands. "Oh. My. God. I am traumatized for life. I will never look at you two the same ever again."

"Get over it, Zack."

,. , , .

"So, what's the plan?"

Cloud sighed and leaned back against the wall with both arms crossed. "Well, the first order of business is getting rid of the JENOVA remnants. That means all the monsters exposed to JENOVA that have mutated need to be wiped out, and all the SOLDIERs need to have the JENOVA cells purged from their systems."

"Is that what you did to me?" Genesis asked from where he perched on the arm of the couch. Zack
had flung himself across the length of it the moment they returned from the reactor, leaving no room for anyone else. Vincent stood quietly in the shadows of a corner and watched the proceedings with thinly-veiled curiosity.

"Pretty much. From what I remember when I was… well, you were a bit of a harder fix than Zack, for example."

"What was with the glowing?" Zack complained from the couch as he pinched the bridge of his nose to stave off a headache.

Cloud sighed. "It's a little confusing, communing with the Planet, but from what I've been able to grasp, I'm… well, her hands and feet. I'm supposed to do the things that she can't do, but that the WEAPONs are too big and destructive to pull off."

Genesis's eyes glowed with satisfaction. "There is no hate, only joy / For you are beloved by the goddess / Hero of the dawn, healer of worlds. You're the Avatar of the Goddess."

Cloud blinked. "Uh… I… guess that's one way of putting it."

"And after JENOVA is completely gone, what's next?" Genesis asked eagerly, and the change from his behaviour when compared to before threw Cloud off.

"Well… the reactors are a problem. If they aren't all shut down in… another five to ten years, the planet will never recover and eventually births will slow before stopping completely. Already, Midgar is a dead zone. Nothing grows there naturally."

Sephiroth worried at his lower lip with a frown. "That will be problematic. The President makes a lot of money off the reactors. He will refuse to shut them down. He also has an unhealthy obsession with something I've heard him call the 'Promised Land.'"

"We could join AVALANCHE and blow up the reactors?" Genesis suggested.

Cloud frowned. "That was messy, last time. The chance of casualties is too high, plus the exposure to mako will create an unprecedented number of poisonings. The medical facilities won't be prepared to deal with the influx." He sighed. "It's too bad we couldn't just run the company ourselves. There are people in Cosmo Canyon that have been researching and implementing solar and wind power for years. Not that Shinra would ever hire them to build him a farm of windmills or solar panels." He scrubbed a hand through his hair.

Sephiroth cleared his throat. "So you're saying, if you had the power, you'd be able to fix the mako problem by the deadline without casualties?"

Zack opened his eyes and stared at Sephiroth with a disbelieving, horrified look. "I know that tone of voice. That is the bad tone of voice. What are you thinking, Sephiroth? Share with the class before you make a very bad decision. Like taking on an entire encampment in Wutai by yourself, you idiot."

Sephiroth raised a cool eyebrow. "If you'll remember correctly, my decision saved a lot of SOLDIERs lives with very little impact on our resources."

"Yeah, and you nearly got yourself killed, you idiot."

Cloud planted a hand on the back of Sephiroth's neck, drawing the silver-haired man's attention to him. "What are you thinking, Seph?"
Sephiroth looked at Cloud with a very calm, serious expression. "We take over the company, as you said." When Cloud stared at him in disbelief, he continued, "If our objective is get rid of the mako reactor technology, then it would be imperative to remove the President and his family from positions of power. Neither the father nor the son would ever agree to completely tear down the foundations of their company and wealth, regardless of the credibility of our source. Their first priority is money, and solar and wind powered technology must be more expensive or difficult to manage if they haven't already sunk their fingers into it."

"What about Palmer and Scarlet? They're both in the President's pocket. Neither of them would bow down without a fight, and a lot of Scarlet's research and technology relies on mako. You're talking about taking control of the company that runs the world. It's not going to be as simple as removing the President and his son from power," Genesis interrupted. "Not to mention Hojo. And the SOLDIERs with their mako injections."

"SOLDIER wouldn't be much of an issue, actually. The amount of mako used for injections is tiny compared to what the cities eat up for electricity," Cloud interrupted. "Hojo would also be a problem, I agree. Especially since JENOVA has been the linch pin of his entire career. While Gast may have discovered her, Hojo obsessed over her."

Silence filled the room.

"I would happily kill Hojo, if it were necessary," Vincent cut in, gold claw clenching at his side. "He's responsible for… all this," he gestured to his entire body.

Genesis sighed. "If we're talking murder, then the list would be long. Hojo, Scarlet, Palmer, the President, Rufus… the Turks would get in our way. So might as well add them to the list. The SOLDIERs would follow Sephiroth, like all those deserters followed me when I left. SOLDIER are loyal to their commanders, not the company. But still, that's a lot of dead people, all to take over one company."

Cloud sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "Why do you think I decided to be a Janitor instead of deal with this fucking shit? This situation is mind-boggling to fix."

"But you are very good at fixing things," Sephiroth murmured, looking at Cloud pointedly. At the blond's incredulous look, he raised an eyebrow. "My coffee maker. My printer. Cynthia's incompetence. Heidegger's embezzling. You've kicked up more dirt in Shinra in the short time you've been at Shinra as my secretary than has been kicked up in the past ten years. If anyone could fix it, it'd be you. We just need to pave the way for you." He looked at Genesis meaningfully, and the redhead nodded.

"He'd make a good President."

The ground fell out from beneath Cloud. "No. No. No no nonono I am NOT becoming the President of Shinra!"

Genesis grinned and raised his hand in the air. "All in favour of President Strife, raise your hand."

Sephiroth and Vincent immediately raised their hands, and Zack groaned from his place on the couch. "Oh my fucking god you're all crazy bastards," the SOLDIER bitched before raising his own hand.

"I guess it's official, then. Now, just to clarify, are we taking over before or after we wipe out the JENOVA problem?"
Sephiroth hummed thoughtfully. "There are ups and downs to both propositions. With control of SHINRA, it would be easy to order all the SOLDIERs back to purify the JENOVA from them. Otherwise we would be hunting them down all over the globe and potentially fighting the company at the same time, especially if they hear we've defected. However, if we deal with JENOVA first, then Cloud can focus his entire attention on fixing the problems in the company. It would be rather a lot to do everything at once."

"You're crazy," Cloud complained from where he'd started sulking against the wall. "You're all fucking crazy. Making me President. I don't WANT to be President!"

"You'll be the first President elected by the Generals of Shinra. Get over it," Genesis shut down his complaints with a smirk. "It's hard being a Hero."

"I hate you."

Cloud watched with slowly growing horror as Genesis and Sephiroth began to talk through the logistics of the plan they'd decided on - taking over SHINRA first - with Vincent occasionally interjecting with Turk-like thoughts and suggestions.

I can't believe this is my life.

They got the Nibelheim reactor up and running again before they left, so the remote town wouldn't be without electricity until windmills were built in the area. Sephiroth was the one to remember the need of it, Cloud was ashamed to admit, since the generators in the reactor would only last for a few weeks before the lack of mako conversion would result in a black out in town.

And they want me to run a company, Cloud silently bitched to himself as they loaded into the air transport that Zack had called for the night before. Jared and Maurice, who had thankfully both missed the glowing and impending takeover conversation, sat by and made conversation with the now recovered Genesis. Sephiroth sat between Cloud and Zack, nearly bouncing with energy in spite of staying up all night with Genesis and Vincent planning the details of their coup. Cloud had a feeling that it had something to do with the glowing and green sparks from when they had sex, but he didn't exactly want to have that conversation with anyone right now. It was hard enough talking to the Planet about it and figuring out what exactly he was now.

The short of it, he had gotten out of the Planet, was that he was exactly what Genesis had called him. An Avatar. The hands, feet, and mouth of the Planet. The long of it was far more complicated than that. Cloud could now summon his clothes and sword out of the ether, like Sephiroth had in the future with the masamune, because he was apparently now something like a materia. To keep him alive when he'd fallen in the tank and to make it easier for the Planet to get what she wanted, the bitch had infused his entire body with mako until he was saturated. He didn't bleed anymore. He'd checked. It was very fucked up to slice your arm open and see it heal almost instantly with a few green sparkles.

Hell, he didn't even know if he could eat anymore. Why the fuck is this my life?

"Cloud?"

The blond looked up from the floor of the air transport and met Sephiroth's concerned gaze. "Yes?"

"Are you doing okay?"

Cloud just stared at him before turning to look back down at the floor.
Sephiroth reached an arm around his shoulders and pulled him in tight. "Get some sleep. You'll feel better."

"Not tired."

"Then rest your eyes."

Cloud closed his eyes with a sigh and let his head fall back against Sephiroth's arm.

He woke to the air transport hitting the ground and the other SOLDIERs cheering at their safe arrival home. The Turks met them upon leaving the plane, and Cloud couldn't help but tense up at the sight of Veld and Tseng.

"General. I heard you were successful in bringing Genesis back. I thought I'd congratulate you in person," Veld said with an overly polite smile.

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "That was very thoughtful of you. I have some information to report to the President, if you could please set up a meeting."

Veld's eyebrows rose in surprise. "What information would that be?"

"Genesis intends to recall all the SOLDIERs that deserted with him, after making a formal apology to the President. He would like to take responsibility for their actions so that they will not be punished upon their return. I'm sure the President will be happy to hear that we will no longer be so short-staffed."

"Of course. Would you like a chance to eat first or shall I set up the meeting immediately?"

"Immediately. Thank you."

Veld nodded and walked away with his PHS held to his ear. Tseng remained behind, obviously to keep an eye on Genesis and not even trying to be subtle about it. Zack left with the other SOLDIERs to get cleaned up and write their reports. Cloud kept away the unease creeping up on him by checking his email and catching up on all the things he'd missed while they'd been away. *Fuck. During all their planning nobody talked about who is going to replace the department heads. Guess that'll be my job. Better start reading.*

With a goal in mind, Cloud started perusing the company's employee records using Sephiroth's authorization codes, which he'd used without the General's knowledge to suss out Heidegger's embezzling. No one had caught him at it yet, so he hadn't bothered asking for higher security clearances.

Apparently, one of his Planet Avatar upgrades included ridiculous, inhuman speed-reading, and Cloud had to admit that even though he'd been totally fucked over by recent events, he at least had some tools that would discourage him from killing himself to escape the tedious agony.

By the time they reached the main meeting room, Cloud had more or less disappeared into the woodwork with his intense readings and had a few prospective department heads in mind to replace Scarlet and Palmer until someone more suitable could be hired or he dismantled the departments entirely and restructured them from the bottom up. The more readings he did and the more reports he hacked from his phone, the more he realized exactly how uselessly fucked up Shinra Company was.

Cloud didn't pay any attention as Genesis sucked up to the President and blamed his degrading condition for the temporary lapse in sanity that had pushed him to leave the company in search of a cure. Halfway through the meeting, however, something unexpected threw a wrench in the works.
and drew Cloud's eyes away from his PHS screen.

Hojo burst into the room with a scowl. His eyes fixed on Genesis with disbelief. "How did you get rid of the degradation? It was impossible to cure," he demanded with furious eyes.

Genesis looked to Sephiroth. The silver-haired General nodded. Without a word to Hojo, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a frog, which he then placed on the meeting room table before casting the Toad spell. Vincent appeared in his black and red glory.

Hojo's eyes widened in shock. "You!"

"Hello Professor." Without another word, Vincent shot him between the eyes.

Cloud watched with some satisfaction as Hojo's head exploded in a shower of blood and brain matter. The President blubbered in his seat in shock before Sephiroth swiftly removed his head from his shoulders. The four of them turned to look at Veld and Tseng with blank expressions.

"V-Vincent?" Veld had gone absolutely white as he stared at his past partner.

Vincent gracefully jumped off the meeting room table without so much as a whisper of noise. "Veld. It's… been a while."

Veld looked back and forth between Hojo, Vincent, and the President's slack body. "What's going on, Vincent?"

Vincent watched Veld carefully. "Hojo shot me and experimented on me. The President likely approved of it. He's always thought of his employees as tools rather than people."

Cloud moved quickly and pulled Tseng's hand out of his pocket to take his PHS. He deleted the message that Tseng had been in the process of sending to an RS. He quickly checked the previous messages to see if any other SOS's had gotten out before returning to the conversation thread with Rufus Shinra.

"Where is Rufus right now?" Cloud asked curiously as he stared down Tseng.

"Do you intend to kill him?"

Cloud hummed. "Not my call."

Tseng looked to Sephiroth, and the General sat on the table's surface with a casual air. "Rufus's continued survival depends on his answers to the questions we have for him. Tell him to come up here to negotiate with us, or we will hunt him down and kill him without giving him the chance to argue for his life."

Cloud gave the Turk a meaningful look before holding up the PHS. "What should I type to him?"

Tseng looked impassively between Sephiroth and Cloud. "Please type, 'Rufus, the dog is down. Please come to the main meeting room. Code Green-Alpha-Nine.'"

Cloud typed the message in less than a second with his new speed and sent it before pocketing the PHS. He pulled out his own PHS and returned to his research without a word.

The tense silence that followed would have been excruciating had Cloud not been surfing Shinra's files with a clear goal in mind to keep his attention away from the events taking place inside the room. By the time Rufus arrived, Genesis had also taken a seat on the table next to Sephiroth and
had started filing his nails.

Cloud put his PHS away to watch the proceedings carefully. While he didn't know Rufus, he hoped he'd be able to tell whether the man would be willing to play ball with them or not. Rufus had been a slippery fuck no matter his age.

"General. This is a surprise," Rufus said coolly as he stepped farther into the room. The door closed behind him with a click, and the heir to Shinra Company sat down at the meeting table with aplomb.

He never ceased to piss Cloud off.

"Shinra. Your options are quite simple. You will hand over control and ownership of Shinra Company to Cloud Strife here, or I'm going to do to you what I did to your father."

Rufus glanced at his father's corpse before turning back to Sephiroth. "May I ask what incited this rebellion against my father and his company?"

Sephiroth's expression didn't so much as flicker. "No, you may not. You will draw up the paperwork, or I will kill you. If you choose the first option, then you will have two more choices. To retire or work for Shinra."

Rufus glanced at Tseng and Veld, the latter of which stood next to Vincent and seemed to be carrying on a conversation through Turk sign language. "If I chose to work rather than retire, what job would you give me?"

"Cloud?"

Cloud flipped open his PHS and drew up Rufus's file, more for show than for any true need to double check information. "I haven't decided yet. All he seems to be good for is knowing all the President's dirty secrets, blah blah Promised Land - by the way, that's where you go when you DIE you idiots it's not an actual physical place - blah blah Neo Midgar oops cancelling that project - blah blah apparently has no actual technical skills besides moonlighting as a Turk on weekends. It's not an impressive resume for our future direction. Might be better if you use your inheritance to buy the Golden Saucer. You'd make money over there while also managing to stay out of our way."

Cloud looked up from his PHS to see that Rufus had a very interesting expression on his face. "But then, you'd never actually back down and go away, would you? No, you grew up thinking that you have a right to the whole world. You own it, and you can do whatever you want with it to get what you want. Isn't that right?"

Sephiroth watched Rufus carefully before he sighed. "I see. That's too bad. I'd hoped I'd be wrong in this case."

Before Sephiroth could move, Tseng had already shot his gun.

Unfortunately for Tseng, Cloud was very fast.

Cloud dropped the bullet onto the floor in front of Tseng and took the gun from his suddenly nerveless fingers. With a small grunt of effort, he bent the gun in half before dropping it onto the floor.

"Why are you doing this, Sephiroth? Why can't we come to an agreement? A compromise?" Rufus demanded from where he still sat in his seat.

Sephiroth drew his sword. "We'll manage without the paperwork, I'm sure. It was all a farce to get
you in this room." His head tilted to the side. "Shinra Company trained their General well. 'Eliminate all targets in the way of your Objectives, SOLDIER.'” Without another word, he swung his sword.

Cloud watched Tseng and Veld as Rufus's head parted from his shoulders. Tseng looked horrified and pained, while Veld had manoeuvred closer to Vincent after apparently finishing his conversation. He didn't look happy. In fact, he looked the angriest Cloud had ever seen him, but the anger wasn't directed at Cloud or Sephiroth, or even Genesis. It had all been directed at Rufus. At the President. At the Company that had tortured and experimented on his partner for years.

So, friends and partners are more important to some Turks than bosses. Good to know.

"Cloud. Hack the President's access codes. If we can't manage the physical paperwork, then we'll just have to fake the digital."

"Of course."

It had all been part of the plan, after all.

It took them two weeks to complete their takeover of Shinra Company. Both Scarlet and Palmer had fled the building, having been deemed the lesser of threats to be hunted down or ignored depending on the circumstance. There was only so much that a small group could manage with the time and resources at their disposal, so Sephiroth had prioritized with his amazing, prioritizing brain.

Cloud still couldn't believe he was President.

I mean... What. The. FUCK.

At times he felt like his life had been highjacked and strapped to a psychotic chocobo. It didn't help that now he had WAY more problems to deal with than just "Destroy JENOVA. Save the Planet." No, on top of managing all the bullshit paperwork that Shinra generated just by EXISTING, he had to spend his evenings purging JENOVA from each batch of SOLDIER that Sephiroth sent his way in that eerie, annoying, frustratingly organized way of his.

Why couldn't Sephiroth run the company? He would have done such a better job compared to Cloud.

"No, I'm serious. I'm President Strife of the Former Shinra Company- Look, it's a working name. We've had a lot on our hands over here- Yes, I was serious about the windmills. Do you think I have fucking time to shoot air out of my ass jerking you around? How much fucking money do I have to offer you before you'll send a goddamned set of blueprints to my Head of Urban Development? — Yes, we're aiming to shut down the mako reactors. DUH. I'd like to still be living on this planet in forty years instead of asphyxiating in open space when it turns into a chunk of useless space rock— Gaia theory blah blah I've already heard it all, that's why I'm onboard with the damned windmills. —Look, I'm sending you an air transport. Please get on it with all your best and brightest and some goddamned plans for windmills before I hack it from your systems and don't give you credit for inventing it— Yes. For Fuck Sakes." Cloud hung up.

"Bad day?"

Cloud groaned and buried his head in his arms as Sephiroth snuck behind him and started massaging the back of his neck. "This is why I wanted to stay a janitor. I could be scrubbing stains
from underneath twenty years of wax right now, and instead I'm fighting Shinra's horrible fucking reputation trying to GET SOME SHIT DONE AROUND HERE. FUCK. What do you have on AVALANCHE?"

"They're a slippery lot. We followed some of your suggestions, but they still saw us coming from a mile away and made a break for it. At this rate, I think we're just going to have to keep them busy until all the mako reactors are shut down and they'll have no more reason for existing."

"That's not going to work, and you know it. There's always some fucker with a vendetta and an evil secret plan waiting to fuck everything up."

Sephiroth kissed the back of his neck. "You focus on the long term solution. We'll put out the fires. That's our job."

"I wish your job was to suck my cock all day. It would make this job endurable."

"Your wish is my command."

And that's how Cloud found himself sitting in the deceased President Shinra's office chair with a head of silver hair pooled between his legs when Tseng burst inside to inform him of another AVALANCHE attack and Sephiroth - the troll - didn't even bother to stop while Tseng gave his report.

- Toki Mirage -

Aaaand that's maybe a wrap? I mean, it could go both ways. I could write another chapter tying all the ends together in a pretty bow, or I could leave you all to do that in your heads. I hate that I tortured you all for so long without closure. It took me so long to get in the mood and headspace to finish this chapter. I knew I'd do it, eventually, I just didn't think it would take me so bloody long. So I'm sorry for that. Let me know if you want an epilogue or not? With me, it's hard to say that another story arc won't explode out of it if I try to write more. I'd hate to leave everyone hanging if it takes me five years to finish this story again, if you know what I mean. The possibilities are always endless. I'm bad at finishing things. I'm working on it. I'm also a little rusty on the FanFic writing since I've been doing more Original lately. Let me know how I did with this one? Thanks guys! You are all super awesome for sticking with my ADD ass for this long! I hope you enjoyed the story as much as I did, once I finally figured out how to write this bloody chapter. It was a hoot. :)

P.S. For those who are interested: My novel is coming along well. I'm on like, the 7th version of it I think. If we count the first version of Bloody Skies being the first version. It is now nothing AT ALL like Bloody Skies. It's like BS mutated into an alien specimen, was eaten by a demon, and then spat out as fertilizer for a brand new patch of daisies. I'm at 50k for word count, and I think I'll be the closest I've ever been to a viable novel once I finish it. It's planned as the first in a series of 4ish, and I won't decide whether to try to publish it myself through Amazon like Kryptaria or try to sell it to a publishing house until I actually have an edited manuscript. Yay for 2016 goals. As for a life update, I have work! Work relating to my degrees! Yay! Holy crap! I did it! Lots of hard work, paid off, equals Very Happy Me. I will try to finish more of my FFNET projects as time/focus/inspiration permit. Thanks for reading.

Please **drop by the archive and comment** to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!