Still Standing
by psychicdreams

Summary

As Cloud goes back to ShinRa, Vincent is left behind...with a piece of paper. Will his curiosity get the better of him to find out who Cid Highwind is? And will the five of them ultimately learn that getting rid of Jenova just isn't that easy?
Chapter 1

Vincent Valentine watched the men from ShinRa pack themselves away in the van and drive off. The blond, ‘Cloud Strife’, glanced at him through the rear window, but he turned away. The town of Nibelheim was silent, people completely unaware of what had gone on in the reactor a mere two days ago. He had felt the imminence of what had been told to him, probably more than Sephiroth or Zack Fair. He could feel the truth in Cloud’s words, felt a ringing to his soul, and even the demons inside him calmed somewhat. Probably from some dream he didn’t remember.

He glanced down at the piece of paper that Cloud had pushed into his hand, not really seeing the words. So Lucrecia’s son had survived? Sephiroth Valentine. What an odd name. If Sephiroth was his son. It was entirely possible that it was Hojo’s. His and Lucrecia’s relationship had only been physical one time. Was that one time enough to conceive a child?

The problem was, there were no tests that could be run to prove who’s child Sephiroth was. Both himself and Sephiroth were so completely changed in DNA from any other person that finding any similarities between them was impossible. Neither one of them could really be called ‘human’, in his opinion. Even Zack and Cloud were still ‘human’, despite being mako enhanced. He and Sephiroth were changed so completely that he couldn’t consider them so.

Vincent’s feet had taken control and he found himself staring at the door to the ShinRa Mansion. He’d done what he’d said he’d do; he’d followed Cloud and found out the ‘story’ behind everything. He could go back to sleep with a clear conscience and it wasn’t like there was anything waiting for him. Except…

He lifted the paper up and made himself read the words. ‘Cid Highwind. Rocket Town.’ Cloud had pressed it into his hand just before they’d left. It had been a silent request, to go to the place that had been written. Instead, Vincent had found that the place was superfluous; it was only there so he knew where to find the person. The name Cid Highwind didn’t mean anything to him. Unlike his instinctive knowledge, from a dream probably, of that face that woke him up being ‘Cloud’, nothing came forth at the name Cid Highwind.

He hesitated. Did he really want to go back into the darkness of his dreams? They were endless and cold, omniscient in a way that made him feel oppressed. Chaos was cackling at him, whispering dark words in his mental ears. He couldn’t control any of his four demons except Galian Beast, at least not fully. Galian Beast was completely under his thumb, and a lesser extent and less predictable was Death Gigas. Hellmasker was barely controllable, and Chaos…he remained completely free in his mind and soul, refusing to heel to the higher authority Vincent had, given that it was his body all five of them were inhabiting.

Why don’t you go there? were the whispered words. But coward that you are, you want to play it safe by sleeping. Are you a weakling?

It wasn’t Chaos’ words, though, that prompted him to step away from the front door and head out of town. He wasn’t sure what did it. Maybe it was the worried look on Cloud’s face, how he glanced back time and again as they left when Vincent had said that he wasn’t going to back with them. He didn’t want to have anything more to do with the Turks or ShinRa.

He disappeared into the mountains quickly. As if unsure if he knew where he was going, Cloud had drawn a rough map of how to get to Rocket Town. The quickest way would be going through the caverns and over the mountains, and he didn’t mind if it took him awhile. He was actually enjoying the silence of being by himself as he walked. Just hearing the sounds of life relaxed him.
Though a few monsters waylaid him here and there, it wasn’t something he was particularly concerned about. Quicksilver could handle just about anything of a small to medium proportion. It was old though and because of that, he skirted around such beings as dragons. He’d even found a nest, the sleeping babies obviously waiting for their mother to return with food, which meant the adult would be even worse in a fight. It added a few days’ journey, but that was okay.

Being forced to detour wasn’t so bad, Vincent thought, as he found a broken, battered chest hidden among some rocks. Inside was a Sniper CR, somewhat old but quite usable and a definite jump from Quicksilver. By comparison, the Sniper CR was practically new with how old his trusty Quicksilver was. Sitting down, Vincent spent most of the day repairing and fixing the rifle so it was serviceable. Eying both, he set Quicksilver back into it’s halter on his leg and set about making a makeshift holder for the rifle. He wasn’t about to give up Quicksilver until he’d tested the Sniper CR in actual combat and see how it performed.

Besides, he had sentimental value to Quicksilver.

It took two days for Vincent to navigate himself through the mountain trails, especially since he was also focusing and keeping himself to fights that he was sure he could handle. Chaos and the other demons urged him to not avoid the tough fights that would probably lead to his death, but he figured that was only because they wanted any chance they could get at control of his body so he ignored them. It was gradual at first, the slow changing of hard stone to soft grass and dirt. Greenery quietly beat back the gray of the mountains; trees were more plentiful and reached their branches up to the strong sunlight, as if pleading for more of that life-giving light.

For longer than he cared to remember, Vincent hadn’t seen such sights. In fact, he didn’t even want to know how long he’d been asleep. He did know that it had to have been a long time if Sephiroth, who hadn’t even been born yet when he’d been ‘taken’ by Hojo and nearly killed, was an adult man.

Vincent glanced at the paper. Who was this Cid Highwind? There had to have been a reason that Cloud had told him to seek this person out. Was he a retired scientist that had taken up residence in such a small town as Rocket Town probably was? Unlikely. What could this man he’d never met offer him? And why? Cid Highwind had no idea who he was or that he was even coming. Probably. Had Cloud somehow alerted him before he’d come to Nibelheim? That seemed a little…

With a sigh at all the unanswered questions in his head, Vincent put the piece of paper away and followed the roughly drawn map toward Rocket Town.

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He had the impression of a hastily cobbled together place and now he could see why it was called ‘Rocket’ Town. The huge, old rocket seemed to be the unofficial town center, even though it didn’t seem to be in the actual center of town. Far as he could tell, it was set somewhat off to the back of all the store buildings and homes.

He stopped next to a man staring at the rocket, making sure that his metal arm was hidden underneath his tattered cloak. “Do you know where I could find Cid Highwind?”

“Ah, he’s in that house over there, nearest the one to the rocket.” Vincent glanced in the direction of the pointing finger to a house that seemed more…well-kept than any other. There was a flowerbed in the front of the building that looked well cared for.

Not wanting to go up to the door without at least knowing more than the name of the person he was supposed to find, Vincent asked, “What is he like?”
The old man looked up at him in surprise, as if he didn’t understand how he could possibly not know about Cid Highwind. Maybe the man was the ‘major’ of the town? That seemed unlikely, considering the town was so small it likely didn’t need one. “Why, he’s the captain of the rocket! Would have been the first man in space, had ShinRa not canceled the program before launch.”

So he was a pilot then. Still, that didn’t give him much information. He wanted to prod for more information, but the old man seemed to ignore him and continued on blithely about the space program and the rocket, when Vincent didn’t care and eventually even wandered away, not that the man noticed.

Now he was even more confused why Cloud had told him to come here. Why would he need to talk to, at the very least, a pilot? Vincent could see no reasoning behind it that made any sense. What could either of them offer each other?

Not wanting to feel like he was procrastinating about the meeting, as that seemed cowardly, Vincent headed for the house, being sure not to step on the flowerbeds. Especially seeing as someone had already done so without care, by the footprints. His knock was quiet, as he wasn’t a dramatic person in general, and already there were quite a few stares from the more nosy people in town.

The door yanked open, the wind that the abrupt move generated ruffling the strands of hair around his face for a brief moment. “Who the hell are you? And damn it, woman, where did you put my socks?!”

The man that was busy yelling over his shoulder was scruffy, looking as if he hadn’t shaved in a day or two, with bright blond hair that was paler than Cloud’s. The shade was the same, but the sun had bleached out a bit of color in Cid’s hair than it had Cloud’s. He was a bit shorter than Vincent and oil stained his dirty and somewhat ripped clothing, as if it had been torn and worn to death but was so loved it couldn’t be parted with. Almost too pale blue eyes looked up at him, sparking with life and what it seemed to be a sort of unconscious ‘assertiveness’. A cigarette was stuck in his mouth, unlit as of yet, and another behind his ear. Goggles were hung around his neck with a careless ease.

Vincent disliked him instantly.

Had he not had such control over his expressions, a hold over from his days as a Turk, his lip would have curled in disgust. He had never felt such an instant emotion, from just a mere look, but there was a first time for everything. Cid Highwind, for this obviously couldn’t be anyone else but him even though he prayed he was wrong, was everything that Vincent had never liked. He took no care in his appearance, his language was vulgar, and he seemed very unreliable.

“Well? Are you mute or something? I’ve got things to do, so if you’ve got something to say, say it.”

“…Do you know Cloud Strife?” It took all his willpower to prevent the disdain from appearing in his voice.

“Never heard of him.”

There was an awkward silence as they stared at each other and Vincent wondered what, by the planet, Cloud was expecting him to do here. Cid had no idea who Cloud was, or who he was. And he, in turn, had no real idea of who Cid was. What did Cloud want him to accomplish by sending him here? Seeing Cid practically glaring at him, he was unsure of what to say or do. He could just walk away right now and no one would fault him, but his curiosity over what Cloud had asked him
to do, his dislike of Cid notwithstanding, prompted him to stay and find out. Surely there had to be
a reason he was requested to go here.

“May I come in?”

“Why the fuck should I let you? I don’t even know you’re name! And damn it, Shera, where the
hell are my socks?!”

Cid stormed back into the house, leaving the door open and Vincent heard a voice carry
somewhere from the back. The voice was of a woman, and sounding incredibly calm in the face of
Cid’s apparent rage at having a lack of socks to wear. “They’re on the top of your dresser where I
always put them.”

Deciding to take his opportunity, Vincent stepped into the house and closed the door politely
behind him. The house seemed to be in the midst of a war. One area was perfectly clean and right
across from it seemed to be controlled chaos. If he had to guess, seeing Cid throw a shirt to the
floor out of the corner of his eye from a bedroom, it was probably ‘Shera’ who kept the house
clean and Cid who did the destroying of it.

A glare was blistering in its heat as it was sent Vincent’s way, but he was entirely unruffled by it,
merely staring it down. Cid seemed even more outraged that he’d walked in on his own. It was as
if he expected Vincent to just go around his house and randomly steal or trash it.

Cid came out hopping on one foot a moment later as he tried to pull his socks on and walk at the
same time, having very little success at such an endeavor. “Who—”

Before Cid could ask another swear-filled question, Vincent interrupted. “My name is Vincent
Valentine. Cloud Strife sent me to see you.”

“I don’t know either—”

“Ah, are you a friend of the Captain’s?”

Entirely ignoring the tirade sent her way, a woman came out from the kitchen with a tray in her
hands. She was fairly pretty, with glasses that sat on the bridge of her nose, and her brown hair was
tied in a bun at the back of her head. Her expression was pleasant and she sat down the tray with a
calmness that perfectly countered the chaotic actions of Cid.

“No. I was sent here to meet him.”

“Who—”

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“No. I was sent here to meet him.”

“Oh really. Please do sit down.”

“Well he’s partially correct at any rate,” Vincent thought, thinking of Hellmasker and the demon’s
favored chainsaw. Not quite ‘axe murderer’, but he was hardly a vision to inspire confidence in
peace and prosperity. Sometimes Hellmasker could be incredibly vicious with that chainsaw if he
got control. When he’d first realized how many demons were in him, and he’d accidentally let
Hellmasker have control, Vincent had found himself coming to his own consciousness in the midst
of carnage of several monsters. They had been carved into tiny pieces and he’d been covered with
bits of blood and skin and even what he thought were brains.

He’d quickly gone back to his coffin after that incident.
“Here’s some tea.”

Shera’s words dragged Vincent from his thoughts. It appeared that the hot tea had calmed Cid down remarkably, much to his amazement. Though he still grumbled and curse words still littered his speech, the very bearing and tightness in his shoulders had eased and he was relaxing in his chair, feet propped up on the edge of the table. “Well, since Shera’s all but invited you to live with us, I guess you can stay for some morning tea. Now…who the hell is Cloud Strife and why would he send you to me?”

Vincent pondered how to answer this question. He clearly couldn’t blurt out what Cloud had told him. For one thing, it wasn’t his story to tell, and for another, Cid would likely think him crazy. It would have helped immensely if Cloud had just told him why he was going to see Cid Highwind, but Vincent did acknowledge that if he had, he’d have likely found a way of not going. It was all the fault of his curiosity.

“I’m not sure,” he finally said truthfully. “He merely handed me a piece of paper with your name on it and where to find you. He didn’t explain anything as to why I should seek you out. I had assumed that perhaps you knew him and could explain that to me.”

Cid scratched his stubbled chin and shrugged. “Dunno him. I don’t even know how he knew about me. I’m just some two-bit pilot that was left behind when ShinRa canceled the space program. Even if I’m one hell of a pilot.”

There was a telltale bitterness to Cid’s voice that Vincent recognized in his own feelings. Though he didn’t think he could ever like the crass captain, at least he could sympathize. Somewhat. The silence grew, neither Cid nor himself having any ideas as to where to go next. Again, it was awkward and Vincent was considering excusing himself when Shera broke into the conversation, with less tact than he’d thought she’d have.

“Why don’t you just contact Cloud Strife and ask him? Do you know where he is?”

“I believe he’s back in Midgar by now, with his troop.”

“Troop?” Cid narrowed his eyes. “By troop, you mean…”

“Cloud Strife is a 3rd class SOLDIER in ShinRa. He has a…very close relationship with the General and his second in command.”

There was a bout of cursing from the pilot, most of which Vincent found incomprehensible. It didn’t appear as if he was intending to say anything, other than just spout of foul words to alleviate some frustration or anger or irritation. A definite lack of self-control, Vincent added to the list of things he did not like about Cid.

“What the hell does a SOLDIER 3rd class want with me? Even when the space program was still active, we didn’t have any dealings at all with SOLDIER, or Turks for that matter!”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask him,” Vincent stated mildly and took his first sip of the tea placed in front of him. It wasn’t bad, though it wasn’t something he could call great either. He wasn’t much of a tea person, though he didn’t dislike it.

“Then that’s exactly what I’ll do!”

The silence at the table after that announcement was absolute until Shera stood up. “I’ll pack a few things for you. Even with the Tiny Bronco, it’ll take you awhile to get there.”
Vincent watched, his open mouth hidden by the top of his red jacket. Shera’s equability about the sudden declaration had him absolutely stumped. She didn’t try to persuade him out of it or even give him suggestions. “…Your wife is very supportive…”

“Hell, Shera ain’t my damn wife! I’d never marry her even if we were the last two people on the planet!” At Vincent’s look, Cid shifted in his chair, seeming a bit embarrassed. “On my better days, I’d say she’s an okay gal, but most of the time, I don’t even know what to do with her. Sometimes she gets on my nerves and other times, very occasionally, she’s invaluable. I could never marry her, though. We’d probably end up killing each other.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” Vincent muttered under his breath. “I don’t see how you’re planning—”

“We.”

“…Excuse me?”

“We, pal! You’re coming with me.”

A dread filled Vincent’s stomach. He didn’t want to go back to Midgar. If Hojo ever caught wind of him… Not to mention it would bring back too many memories of his past life. The fact that he’d liked being a Turk. Not that he was vindictive and enjoyed killing people, but more the tiny family that he’d formed amid the members. It had been like an island unto itself at one time and had provided a sanctuary when he needed it. To go back and face all those memories and feelings was an almost impossible task.

“I don’t think—”

“Look! You were the one that came crashing into my house because this guy Cloud Strife told you to. So we’re going to go see him and demand to know what the hell is going on.” Cid dropped his feet to the floor and stood up, stretching every inch of his body to work out all the perceived kinks.

“If you can get past his boyfriend.”

“What?”

Vincent glanced up as Cid turned around a little at his muttering. “Nothing.”

“Shera! Woman, are you done yet?!”

“Just about, Captain.”

This was going to be a very long journey.
Chapter 2

Vincent climbed into the ‘Tiny Bronco’ with a great deal of trepidation. Traveling from Rocket Town to Midgar was a very long journey, for one thing, and for another, this aircraft looked older than himself. Cid naturally swore for its integrity, which only made Vincent doubt the machine’s capabilities even more. The noise it made as it started up made him wince. It reminded him of someone taking two pieces of blunt metal and rubbing them together, creating the worst grating sound that could make rocks sweat blood.

“You do realize there are mountains and oceans between us and Midgar, correct?” Vincent hated having to do so, but had no choice but to practically shout as Cid had the plane start moving for takeoff. It was the only way to be heard over the racket. At a sharp bump, Vincent immediately grabbed at the metal that connected the wings to the metal body of the plane. He wasn’t sure of flight terminology and he didn’t particularly want to know. All he wanted to know was that they wouldn’t crash land.

“Sure,” Cid shouted back. “We’re going over both of those things!”

And he was sure this wreck could do that? Could it actually go that high without them plummeting for a nasty death in the ground? Somehow he doubted it and Cid’s confident manner surprisingly failed to do anything to relieve those doubts. Despite the long journey, he would have rather traveled on foot. It wasn’t that Vincent was afraid or bothered by heights; Chaos had a fondness for flying when he had control, and even when he didn’t, he enjoyed injecting such a feeling of vertigo and flight into his dreams. No, what Vincent had an argument with was being so high in something that he didn’t think was capable of safety past the first five minutes.

Due to the racket the old plane made as they flew, conversation was nonexistent even if Vincent had felt the need to ‘chat’ with Cid. He did seem to be a competent pilot, if he could make the wreck steady like this, but that was the only concession he was likely to get from the former Turk.

Even more surprisingly to Vincent, after the third hour or so, was they were still in the air. He watched as they came to the nearby Nibelheim mountain range and Cid turned their direction left. Despite the noise that threatened to make Vincent deaf, he watched as the ground beneath them change to an inlet that led to the ocean and another twitch on whatever flight control Cid used had them swerving slowly into a gap between two mountainous regions that lay behind the smaller Mount Nibel.

Vincent had just about chalked up the fact that they had gotten through most of the narrow areas of flight through the mountains and were slowly and gradually being overtaken by flat land when there was a slight jerk to the whole plane. His stomach seemed to plummet to his feet and even through the racket, he heard Cid cursing up a storm. This did not seem good to him…

Slowly but steadily smoke radiated from the motor. At first it was just little wisps, something that Vincent might have dismissed were it not for Cid’s shouting. That told him such a thing wasn’t good. Keeping his eye on it to tell them how bad it was getting, he wasn’t reassured to see the little wisps turn into a steady stream and the gray smoke turning a bit blacker every minute or so.

As the plane swerved dangerously out of control, Chaos couldn’t seem to keep quiet. This, in case you hadn’t noticed, is a bad thing. And you are also, in case you hadn’t noticed, not invincible. This thing crashes while you’re in it, you’re going to die.

And you’re saying this out of compassion? he shot back.
Absolutely not. However, if you die, in a manner of speaking, so do I. My spirit is immortal, this is true, but I don’t want to be trapped in a dead body for aeons until it decomposes enough to escape. Supposing you even do decompose.

You wouldn’t say this if you didn’t have a solution. What is it?

Let me have control. I have wings, I’m capable of flight. You are not. Let me save us both.

Vincent was very leery of any deal that Chaos offered. It seemed to be legitimate, something that benefitted them both, which was what made him worry. He had to look for any particular loophole he could find before agreeing; any single option he might not mention that Chaos could tell him he never asked about after something had happened.

On a few conditions first.

Make it quick, mortal. You don’t have much time.

You will not abandon Cid. You will grab him as well and land him safely on the ground and give me back control.

There was a moment of silence and Vincent had a sense of satisfaction that he had found the area of the bargain that Chaos had been banking he wouldn’t. He could almost feel the vague consternation. Annoying. Fine. Keep in mind that I am only agreeing because I don’t wish to end up ‘dead’ as well.

Vincent sent back that it didn’t particularly matter why Chaos was doing what he was, so long as he did it. An agreement brought on by a mutual threat was often how he interacted with those beasts trapped inside of him. Thankfully his mind, honed to thinking in a certain way because of the Turks training, was able to keep up with them. They were not, Chaos included, exactly trained in the art of subtly and espionage.

He let go of the spokes he held and unbuckled the safety belt. In the short time of his conversation with Chaos, Cid had managed to keep the plan from crashing into the mountainside or the water, but they were heading for a downward spiral toward a nearby grassy plateau and two miracles were apparently enough to use up the pilot’s luck in flying.

Taking a deep breath, Vincent crawled from the small second seat in the cockpit and clung onto the side of the plane. Cid, he thought, was yelling at him for something, but the screaming of the motor drowned him out. With his human hand, he reached out and grabbed the pilot’s jacket. It was only as he was tugging that he realized Cid was still strapped in with his safety belt.

Growing annoyed, Vincent let go and switched hands until his human one kept him on the side of the plane and used his sharp, sharp claws to slice through the straps. It seemed to enrage Cid even more, but Vincent paid him no mind and yanked him out of the cockpit. He kicked off from the side of the plane and waited. For a terrifying second, he thought Chaos had deserted him and they were plummeting into their death.

He shouldn’t have doubted Chaos’ desire to ‘live’. Pain from the transformation staggered through him and he felt, first and foremost, wings ripping through the skin and clothes on his back before his whole body seemed to shudder and change. In moments, a fanged grin was thrown at Cid’s shocked expression. Claws had half ripped Cid’s jacket. Being so sharp, there was little left in the grip. Vincent sent warning thoughts at Chaos about breaking the deal and with a grumble, the monster yanked Cid toward him and wrapped an arm around his waist, holding him like an annoyed parent would carrying a disobedient child home.
With a fearsome puff of smoke and scream of metal, the Tiny Bronco had an intimate meeting with the ground. Far as Vincent could tell, nothing had been on the plateau thankfully. Chaos growled a little and lazily did a few circles in the air over it before acceding to Vincent’s pestering to land. He was sure Chaos wouldn’t have ever done so, if it weren’t for Cid. Cid was a full-grown man and not exactly a lightweight. Nor was he exactly quiet. The only thing either could be thankful for was that at least Cid was not struggling in the grip, otherwise Chaos might have dropped and he wouldn’t want to get into a discussion of if it was done on purpose or not.

As soon as they were on the ground, Cid yanked himself from Chaos’ hold. Much to both their amusement, the pilot’s knees gave out on him and he landed with a ‘huff’ onto the ground. Had Vincent been the teasing sort, he could have had endless fun with that, but as it was, he had bigger things to worry about. Unlike their deal, Chaos was putting up a fight about giving in to Vincent’s control.

*Our deal—*

Never specified *when* I had to give back control, only some time after we landed. I’m not as dumb as you seem to think I am, being trapped in this small space that you call a soul for so long.

*Chaos! Don’t make me use force!*

Chaos threw him an internal frown that he couldn’t see, but felt very clearly as it was followed by waves of annoyance. *That would hurt you as well. Your mind would be in agony for the rest of the day.*

*And so would you.* There was silence from Chaos’ end and Vincent threw up some warning mental pressure. *You think I won’t do it?* He hadn’t been living with these demons in him for so long without learning how they thought, worked, and indeed, he wasn’t defenseless against them. They were his enemy, no matter that they came in handy in fighting and certain other situations.

*...I believe you would. Che. If only to spare myself the same agony, you can have your control back.*

Vincent would have heaved a sigh of relief that Chaos gave in to him if it weren’t for the fact that even changing back was painful. His clothes were ripped, though still serviceable, and his back was one massive ache. Dried blood ran down and stuck to his skin, but at least going back to himself wasn’t *quite* as bad as going to Chaos’ form. Even the other three weren’t as bad as him.

*He’s picking up human mannerisms,* Vincent thought to himself, thinking over Chaos’ ‘che’. Never before had he heard the demon say anything remotely like that. After so many dozens of years and internal conversations, he supposed it wouldn’t be impossible for it to unconsciously seep into Chaos’ speech pattern. Vincent didn’t particularly want to admit it, but that would mean the reverse was also true and that some of Chaos’ mannerisms would have affected him as well.

A hard yank on his arm brought the former Turk right back to reality and he realized that Cid had been ‘talking’ to him, albeit it sounded remarkably like yelling to him, for a good minute or two while he’d been conversing with Chaos and then lost in thought. There was a wild look in the pilot’s eyes that he couldn’t begin to fathom, but what shocked Vincent the most was that he wasn’t recoiling in fear. Instead of being three or more feet away from him, maybe cowering, Cid was right in his face and demanding an explanation at the top of his lungs.

Which was giving him a headache. “I will explain, if you stop shouting,” he said, hoping his calmness would be injected into Cid and the man would become a *rational* being for once.
There was no luck on rational, but Cid at least moved back so they weren’t nose to nose. He gave an annoyed sigh and crossed his arms. Rough fingers yanked a cigarette from the band of his goggles and stuffed it in his mouth, though he didn’t go so far as to light it just then. Instead, he chewed on it and Vincent could only guess that meant that Cid had far more that he wanted to say, but was restraining himself.

That actually gave just a bit of a notch of respect for the pilot in his estimation. His impression had told him that Cid had no such concept of restraint and that he could at all, even for however long it took before he broke down was something to at least grudgingly admit was in his favor. “Well?!”

This wasn’t a conversation that he particularly wanted to have with anyone, much less Cid who was, more or less, a total stranger. When he contemplated saying nothing, or perhaps even lying though, Cloud’s face floated in his mind’s eye. Oddly enough, he trusted the teenager. Though his body was young, he could see the age and maturity in the man’s eyes. Not to mention that his story rang startlingly true to Vincent’s instincts…and Cloud had sent Vincent to Cid. That had to mean something.

“I was a former Turk. I was shot by Hojo, taken to his lab. The result of his experiments is what you see.”

Cid waited with a tapping of his foot for a good minute or two until it became clear that was all Vincent was going to say. It was true, everything in a nutshell…and it was all the explanation that he was going to give Cid. He wasn’t about to offer details that horrified even himself.

“Wait, that’s it? That’s all you’re going to fucking say?! What about that creature that—”

“You…You have a really shitty personality, you know that?” Cid snapped, finally hunting around his clothes and multitudes of pockets for a lighter. Finding one, he spent an inordinate amount of time almost beating up the little metal lighter until it decided to heed to the cursing and spout a tiny flame. Apparently it needed more oil, but with what Cid was currently saying, anyone would think that the poor creation was the pilot’s mortal enemy and had killed millions.

“I think it is best we press on if we are to make it to Midgar within the year,” Vincent suggested, withstanding the glare with the same fortitude he did everything: by just not caring. “I believe Costa Del Sol is a week’s walk north of us.”

Cid seemed to want to hit him or step on his foot or something equally childish, or so it appeared to Vincent, but thought better of it. The former Turk didn’t stand physical abuse well after what happened to him and he would have had no problem with giving Cid just a little injury back. His mood wasn’t at its best, as he had had a rotten day from the moment he’d laid eyes on the pilot, and he was rather itching to take it out on something. Perhaps a monster in the area would be stupid enough to attack them.

“And how do you know that, are you fucking psychic now?”

“Of course not. Chaos saw it when he watched the plane crash.”

Vincent actually found Cid’s frustration at his calmness amusing, to be honest. He didn’t particularly understand why. Maybe it was because it was unexpected. No one had ever seemed to care that he was the way he was. Cloud, Sephiroth, and Zack didn’t seem to even think about it. Cid, on the other hand, seemed to take an overwhelming exception to the fact that he was calm and
expressionless, as if it were somehow a personal insult. That, of course, made Vincent wonder if Cid would be childish enough to make it a goal to get beneath his stoicism.

Rather than waiting for Cid or even saying anything, Vincent straightened his cloak to cover the rents that his change had made in his shirt and started north. He would at least like to have gotten somewhere before dark. The pilot shouted something that Vincent chose blithely to ignore and hurried to catch up with the former Turk’s longer stride. When Cid immediately started to chatter, words broken up with tirades and bemoaning for his precious Tiny Bronco, he knew that before long, he would start to question his sanity.
Chapter 3

It was hardly the most ideal trip for Vincent. Cid rarely stopped talking and his bemoaning for his plane was forefront for most of it. After awhile, the pilot started asking him more than yes or no questions, something that was not high on Vincent’s list of favorite things. He didn’t mind talking, so much, so long as who he was talking to was someone he trusted and liked. Cid was not one of those people. If it weren’t for Cloud and some nagging feeling that told him to do what Cloud asked, he would have left the pilot in the middle of nowhere quite happily.

“It’s getting dark,” he commented as they finally reached the edge of the large plateau, a beach no more than a ten minute walk to their left. Vincent would have pressed on until it became pitch black, but he was feeling exceptionally tired after all that had gone on today, the plane crash only being one in a long line of events that had sapped him of energy.

“Your point bein’?”

“We should stop and get some rest. There is no point in exhausting ourselves when we won’t reach Costa Del Sol for several more days.”

“Then I hope ya got a tent in that coat, ‘cause I ain’t got nothin’.”

He gave Cid a look that clearly said he was being obstinate for no good purpose. “You will come to no harm sleeping on the ground under the sky.”

“Yeah, well…you do that.”

He blinked once at the comment. “…What are you planning on doing exactly?”

Cid glanced over his shoulder and shifted. “Gotta go back to the Tiny Bronco.”

“For what purpose?” he asked curiously.

“Gotta go pick somethin’ up.”

The fact that the pilot wasn’t answering his questions piqued his curiosity even more, as so far from what he could tell, he’d been perfectly honest with whatever question Vincent chose to ask. “Pick what up?”

Blue eyes glared at him and Cid spat, “Ain’t nothin’ to do with you, so shut the fuck up! I’ll be back, I ain’t gonna leave, so just stay here.”

Vincent watched as Cid stalked back the way they came. What could he possibly want from the wreck? There could hardly be much left. Pursing his lips, he silently followed the pilot. He had once been a Turk trained for subtlety and on top of that, thanks to Hojo’s machinations, was as silent as the grave as he did so. Cid never knew he was being followed.

It had taken an hour and a half to get from the top of plateau where they’d landed and it would be dark in another hour. Cid wouldn’t be getting much sleep by the time he got back to where Vincent had decided they were to camp for the night. Neither would Vincent at this rate, but his curiosity was a difficult thing to manage against, even after all this time.

The pilot kept glancing around, but it didn’t appear as if he were making sure he wasn’t followed. It wasn’t an unreasonable action; there were dangerous creatures that came out at night, which
wouldn’t be long now. Still, apparently the plateau wasn’t a frequent spot for anything, because there was no hint of anything approaching. Not even a chocobo. Perhaps the sounds of the crash earlier had sufficiently scared away everything enough for the night.

Cid treated the wreckage with care, using gloves that had apparently been in his pocket to protect his hands as he moved piece after piece to the side in his search. At least it was only giving off minimal smoke by now. Given the crash, Vincent had difficulty determining what the pieces were at this point, but they meant something to Cid. He kept himself a good distance away from the pilot so he wasn’t seen. He wasn’t sure why, he honestly didn’t care if he made Cid angry, but perhaps it was a remnant of humanity that Hojo hadn’t managed to sap out of him that acceded to the ‘request’…such as it was.

Cid’s torso all but disappeared in what Vincent assumed was the remains of the cockpit in his search. A moment later there was a sound of success from the pilot and he began tugging on something. Curses followed soon after when whatever it was didn’t heed to his command to come loose. Watching Cid was actually amusing and he could see why perhaps the other man wanted him to stay behind. Some of his positions Cid contorted himself in to get at whatever it was, was hardly dignified or manly in any way. Vincent had to bite his lip gently so he wouldn’t actually snicker aloud and alert the other man to his presence.

The pilot paused for a minute to catch his breath and apparently think up a new strategy while muttering and randomly kicking the cockpit idly. He couldn’t help wondering what it was that was so difficult to get out. It must be awkwardly shaped, or the crash caused the cockpit to be deformed. Cid stalked around the wreckage of the plane several times before bending himself in it again andshoving against something several times. Apparently he had some success in that, since he started to pull up at an angle after a few minutes.

Vincent watched in surprise as something long and thin started to appear and it took a second to realize it was a spear of some kind. Cid, all but straddling the outside of the cockpit, yanked hard when it stopped moving and he assumed that the spear had gotten caught on something again. Another hard yank was apparently enough because it suddenly came loose and Cid, with a shout, fell end over end off the wreckage in surprise of the sudden lack of tension.

Seeing all there was to see, Vincent slunk away as Cid picked himself up and headed back to where they’d stopped.

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Using as much speed as he could get, Vincent had reached the area that he’d decided on for camp long before Cid and he pretended to be asleep. Cid glanced at him cautiously before he settled down on the ground to get what little sleep he could. It didn’t bother Vincent really, that he only had one or two hours sleep; while he still needed it, he needed much less than a normal person thanks to Hojo.

So he was awake long before the pilot and shook him when the sun started to rise over the horizon. Like he had expected, there was grumbling but oddly enough, no fight over it. Though Cid made it clear verbally that he hated mornings and didn’t want to get up, there was no hesitation as he did so despite his words to the contrary.

Vincent didn’t ask about the spear even though by the look on Cid’s face as he’d picked it up, the pilot had expected him to. Even if he hadn’t followed and seen Cid, he still wouldn’t have asked merely because he wasn’t that interested. At least the morning was quiet, he reflected. In fact, Cid seemed to be asleep with his eyes open as they walked and more than once, Vincent had to pull him to the side so he’d avoid walking into something. A tree, for instance.
“Why do you keep doin’ that?” Cid complained after the tenth time.

“Because if I didn’t and you ran into the tree, you would start to curse and sputter and I would have to listen to that for hours. I’d rather not.”

“Well it shouldn’t have been in my way!”

Vincent *almost* laughed. “I believe the tree was there first,” he deadpanned.

Cid stared at him for such a long time that he finally asked, “What is it?”

“Nothin’. Just didn’t know you could joke, is all.”

“I wasn’t joking.”

“Okay, well, maybe it wasn’t a joke *per se*, but that kind of thing is supposed to be funny when you say it, so…still a joke.”

Vincent shook his head. “I don’t understand you at all.”

“Welcome to the club. Why *are* you the way you are?”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I asked. Why are you so annoyingly stoic and generally no fun and—”

*Enough of that, thank you,* he thought as he interrupted, “Why are you the way you are, cursing as if every day deserved such abuse? You just are, and I just am.” He wasn’t up to explaining in any way, shape, or form the reasons of his personality, even if he could in a way that Cid could understand. He wasn’t about to bare his soul to someone he didn’t trust.

Cid shoved his hands in his pockets and muttered curses under his breath, before commenting, “Ya gotta wonder what that Cloud kid was thinking of when he sent you to see me. Sure I was in ShinRa before, but I was ‘let go’ long before he ever joined, so how does he even know me?”

“I don’t know,” Vincent answered honestly. “Even though he asked it of me, I would not have normally went to see you, but my instincts said to follow his request.” He glanced at Cid out of the corner of his eye and at his skeptical expression. “You’ll understand when you meet him.” Maybe he was taking for granted the fact that Cid would know what he meant; maybe he didn’t have instincts the way that Vincent did, however, that was the only explanation he could give.

“Mebbe,” Cid answered, dropping and stamping out his finished cigarette and bemoaning the fact that he didn’t have any more. “It’d better be worth this trip. A week of walking is a fucking long way and then getting a damn ship to take us to Junon, *then* another week of walking to fucking Midgar!”

“We wouldn’t be walking if your plane had not crashed,” he pointed out, knowing that he was opening a door to a fight, but not wanting such a thing to be ‘left out’.

“Hey! Don’t knock the Tiny Bronco! She got us from Rocket Town almost all the way to Costa Del Sol!”

“Almost being the key word.”

Cid’s arguing only seemed to get worse at every calm rejoinder from Vincent, but at least his voice hadn’t risen so that he was yelling. Why had he chosen to say something like that when he knew
what would come about? Ah well, at least with Cid griping, the pilot wasn’t thinking of other things with which to pass the time that Vincent would likely not like at all.

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“Why is our luck always shit?” Cid groaned, staring at the monster just ahead of them that, so far, hadn’t noticed their presence.

Vincent studied it, trying to place what it was. “I believe that’s a Grangalan. When attacked, after a certain point, it will spawn a small ‘Jr’ version of itself…then that Jr will spawn a third. They aren’t overly difficult opponents and the smaller the version, the less damage it can take before dying, but they are an annoying sort. They are immune to most status effects, such as sleep, darkness, silence and poison, among a few others.”

“You must be bad luck,” Cid complained, ignoring him.

“I would say the opposite,” he replied calmly. “After all, it was your plane that crashed.”

Before the pilot could offer up an outraged response, Vincent hurried forward to take the creature by surprise. He barely succeeded, but he was satisfied when there was a resounding noise of protest as one of his bullets embedded itself into the side of the Grangalan.

“At least fucking wait for backup!” Cid shouted as he was suddenly beside Vincent with his spear ready and waiting. He did a quick jab forward, managing to land a good one in the creature’s eye. It staggered back in a hop for a second before bouncing forward again and opening its mouth. A silver disk appeared and sliced through the air with almost no sound and Vincent barely ducked in time. His hair was fine, but his cloak wasn’t so lucky. Ah well, one more rip wasn’t going to be noticed.

Cid took advantage of the fact that the creature opened its mouth to allow the silver wheel to boomerang back into it and jumped high, bringing his spear down in a resounding crash on the Grangalan. The sound it emitted as the spear scraped over the hard shell made Vincent almost wince, but instead he let out another few shots to jab at the other eye. With something that sounded remarkably like a growl, the mouth opened again and a smaller Grangalan appeared. Once spawned, he watched as the larger keeled over, its shell falling to pieces.

The pilot landed next to him and grunted a little, wiping sweat off his brow. “I can see now why you said they’re annoying.”

“Quite.”

Five minutes later there was nothing left but a few pieces of shell left on the ground. Cursing to his left caught Vincent’s attention and he noted that one of the silver wheels had clipped Cid’s arm and there was a dark red splotch growing on his shirt. He didn’t have any bandages, so… With a slice of his sharp metal claws, he grabbed a piece off his cloak that was barely hanging on anyway. He wasn’t impartial to his red coat, but realistically, they had to use it to stop the bleeding.

Vincent wrapped around Cid’s bleeding arm and ignored the protests. “Shit! You’re going to cut off blood flow!”

“It has to be tight otherwise it won’t stop bleeding.”

“I know that, but damn!”

“Stop complaining,” Vincent told him. “We have still have a ways to go.”
“Slave driver,” Cid complained…likely on purpose.

The former Turk rolled his eyes and set off without another word, leaving the pilot to hurry to catch up.
Chapter 4
Chapter Notes

this story and it's predecessor, Redemption, were written before I knew anything about what happened in Before Crisis and Crisis Core. It's based solely on Final Fantasy VII and Advent Children. I've played Dirge of Cerebrus, but only once and it has absolutely no bearing on anything. So there won't be any mention of Angeal or Genesis or Hollander or anything, sorry about that.

“Thank the fucking planet we’re here!” Cid almost shouted as they could see Costa Del Sol just over a rise nearby.

It had been a hard week and Vincent himself was feeling the effects of it as well. He had gotten used to traveling again on the way to Rocket Town, but having to stop for battles was tiresome and annoying, and he’d had to slice off several lengths of his cape to tie around wounds. The first thing he was going to suggest they do when they got into town was find a materia shop and buy a cure.

The week had been warm, and fairly sunny, but as Vincent led the way toward the town, rainclouds slowly filled the sky. Big, fat dollops appeared, heralded by a cold, wet breeze. Naturally Cid cursed at this development, but Vincent was actually pleased by it. At least the heat from a cloudless sky was cut.

No one was out when they hurried down the main street, which wasn’t surprising. The hour’s walk to the town had turned a drizzle into a thunderstorm. Vincent cast a nervous eye on the sea nearby. It was slowly starting to rage and he hoped nothing would be damaged. That would mean that their trip to Junon would be delayed. If things went well, though, they should only have to spend a day on the ship. Though he did not get seasick, Vincent wasn’t overly fond of boats.

Cid managed to find the hotel while he’d been contemplating the windswept sea and pulled on his arm to get his attention. After all, though shouting might make it over the thunder, what was the point in trying?

It was fairly empty inside and the bartender looked up from reading his magazine to the dripping men that had just burst in. “You two look like drowned rats. If it weren’t raining so hard, I’d say you went for a swim in the ocean.” Being a tourist spot, though, and one for vacation, he leveled Vincent and Cid with an ingratiating smile. “What can I do for you?”

“A room if you please,” Vincent stated.

“Ten gil for a night.”

“Ten?!” Cid argued in outrage.

“Sorry fellas, but I gotta make a living.”

Cid glanced at Vincent briefly, but turned his attention back to his companion after a second when he realized that red eyes hadn’t moved from him. “What the fuck?”

“You have the gil, do you not?”
“Are you fucking telling me yer broke?”

What did Cid expect? That the coffin he’d slept in for thirty years had a bank? Still, the pilot had no way of knowing where Vincent had been, so he kept silent and just stared at him. That was apparently enough to make it clear that he had no money and such a question was a stupid one to ask him.

Cid grumbled the entire time he went hunting viciously through his numerous pockets. “I can’t believe I’m payin’ for you like we’re on a fucking date!” Angrily, he slapped the ten gil on the countertop. “There, a room for us both.”

“Actually, no. That’s for one room. For two separate ones, it would come to twenty gil—”

“Highway fucking robbery!”

“One room will be fine,” Vincent stated, interrupting Cid’s curse filled arguing. “Even if there’s only one bed, there is still the option of someone sleeping on the floor. Are you worried about propriety?”

Leaving Cid sputtering behind him, Vincent took the key from the outstretched hand of the innkeeper. “Do you know of any ship that’s bound for Junon tomorrow?”

The innkeeper scratched his head. “I don’t know. Might be. I’d tell you to ask around, but with this weather, nobody would be outside with half a brain. Likely, you’ll be lookin’ at least a day wait, since most ships leave very early in the morning.”

Vincent sighed. Well, he supposed that was their luck. Nothing could go easy on this journey, after all. “Very well. Thank you.”

Much to his frustration, Vincent had to listen to the complaints over the price of the room from Cid all the way up the stairs. Trying to block it out wasn’t working and he sighed loudly. He truly did not understand why Cloud had sent him to see Cid. They were as opposite as day and night and most of the time, the pilot was always jumping up and down on his last nerve.

“Okay, I got a question for you.”

_Oh great._

“Were you and the kid close?”

Vincent blinked at him. “Cloud and I? No. Frankly, we had just met a few days before I met you.”

“Then why in all the hells would you do what he said to find me?”

That was actually a good question and Vincent was surprised to hear it come from Cid’s mouth. “To be truthful, curiosity. With just a piece of paper with an address and a name, my curiosity was piqued.”

Cid made a ‘hm’ noise deep in his throat and seemed to contemplate the bed with more attention than such a thing would normally warrant. However, Vincent guessed that he probably wasn’t really seeing it, as he appeared deep in thought.

What a shock, I didn’t think he was capable of that, Chaos commented in his mind.

_Didn’t you say you liked him at one point?_ he asked.
I said I’d like to have fun with him. He has such hilarious reaction when I held him in the air and it was just so cute when his knees wouldn’t hold!

In other words, you want to torment him.

Naturally. You’re not any fun to torment anymore.

Thank the planet for that at least.

“Hey!”

It took a minute to recognize that came from Cid and not Chaos. “What?”

“How are we going to get into ShinRa to see this Cloud kid when we get to Midgar?”

Vincent raised his eyebrow. “I assumed, since you suggested this fool venture, that you had already worked out a plan in regards to that.”

Cid shifted his weight from foot to foot, wringing out his sleeves of extra water. “No, not really.”

“Then you’d best figure it out,” he replied, sitting down on the bed.

“Why me?! Aren’t you a Turk?”

“Former Turk and I didn’t come up with this plan.”

“Now you’re arguing semantics!”

“It’s the truth.”

Cid shot him a glare and scratched behind his ear before his sour expression perked up. “What about a PHS? You know his number?”

“No.”

“Then what do you know about this kid?”

Vincent didn’t answer immediately. Cid was right, what did he know about Cloud? He knew what Cloud had told him, that he had somehow come back into the past to route a terrible future, but what did he know about him beyond that? He didn’t really know his personality…and yet it somehow felt as if they’d known each other forever. All he had to do was look into those mature eyes and somehow they could have entire conversations. Was it the feeling behind them? The pain that had not quite faded?

A sudden heavy weight next to him cut into his introspection. Cid had sat down on the bed with a thump and was looking at him in annoyance, but he hadn’t said anything yet. Wishing to forestall any cursing or otherwise, Vincent cleared his throat quietly. “I know that he has just passed his SOLDIER exam and is most likely one of the youngest SOLDIERs in history with the exception of Sephiroth himself.”

Cid waited for a few minutes and prompted with an annoyed, “Well?” when he didn’t say anything more.

“That is all.”

“Yeah right! You said that he was close friends with the General and his Lieutenant! How does a
teenager that just made SOLDIER get to be like that?"

Oh, so he can remember something that happened beyond the past five minutes.

Vincent ignored Chaos’ verbal jibe completely, focusing more on the question that he really hoped Cid would not ask. He wasn’t sure if he should say anything more. The personal relationship that he had observed between the man that might be his son and the young SOLDIER was hardly something that was common knowledge and most likely they would appreciate it being kept quiet. However, Cid could create potential problems if they made their way into Midgar and started advertizing the ‘close’ relationship he had without realizing that tact was needed.

Are you really going to tell him? Trust him with that? That loudmouth? Chaos asked, a tone of incredulity creeping into his voice.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead with his human hand. Cid glared at him and literally poked him in the side with a finger, much to his unpleasant surprise. “You know a lot more than you’re telling me! Out with it already!”

“Much of it is not my story to tell,” he said, attempting to squirm a little further away in case Cid decided to assault him again.

Cid actually seemed to chew on that bit of information before he said, “…I can respect that, I guess, but what can you tell me? Fucking anything? I feel like I’m being led around by the damn nose! It’s fucking frustrating as hell!”

Vincent really didn’t want to say anything, but he also understood what the pilot was feeling. He’d had that frustrating feeling when Cloud and Zack had dragged him from his coffin. He hadn’t had any idea what was going on and Cloud had been on the verge of panic, so he hadn’t gotten any sort of explanation until they were deep in the caves of Nibelheim. He’d wanted to demand answers the way Cid was, but Cloud’s panic had infected him a bit, urging him faster. Besides, no answers could have been heard over the storm anyway.

“I shall leave Cloud to tell you most of the story, but I can tell you one thing…if you understand and realize that it must be kept a secret. You could jeopardize much if you speak of it.”

“I can keep my mouth shut when I need to!”

So he says, Chaos snickered.

“You asked how Cloud Strife is close to the General and his Lieutenant. From what I have been told, he was friends with Lieutenant Zack Fair as a cadet and it is through him that he met General Sephiroth. Currently they are in a relationship which must remain secret and I trust you can see why?”

“Wait, what?! You tellin’ me that this kid is fucking the General?!”

The temperature in the room dropped a degree or two as Vincent’s unnatural red eyes glared fiercely at the pilot. He might not have known them long, but there was something about them that caused Vincent to trust them a bit. He did not appreciate such comments from someone that hadn’t even met them.

Cid’s hand flew up and he shook his head. “Shit, sorry! I didn’t mean for it to come out like that, okay? I’d have the same reaction as you if someone said that about one of my friends.” The pilot rubbed his worn hands over his face and stubble. “I just blurted it out without thinking. So they’re
Vincent turned his gaze away after a minute. Well at least he’d apologized.

*Spoke without thinking, huh? What a shock!*

He growled faintly. *Would you shut up?! I’m getting sick and tired of your running commentary!*  
*Go to sleep and leave me in peace!*

*Now why would I want to do that? This guy is fun. I want to—*

*I know what you want, but you’re not going to get it and I swear, if you don’t stop talking, I’ll—*

*You’ll do what exactly?*

Vincent poured all his mental energy and flung it at Chaos, hearing a slight ‘grunt’ sound from the spirit nestled in his soul. He had poured all his frustration and irritation with the whole situation in general right at him. Silence followed and apparently Chaos had decided his commentary wasn’t worth getting that every time. The ex-Turk was just thankful that none of the other beasts inside him could actually talk to him. They simply weren’t powerful enough, not like Chaos, and he wasn’t entirely sure if they were intelligent enough either. Certainly Galian Beast wasn’t, but as for the other two…

“What was that about?”

He blinked, looking up. “What?”

Cid was watching him, but his face was surprisingly neutral. “You just starin’ off into space and growling. What, you can talk to that thing that caught me when the Tiny Bronco crashed.”

“…His name is Chaos and yes, much to my eternal frustration.”

“You really don’t get along with them, huh?”

Vincent rolled his eyes and looked away, not dignifying that comment with a response.

After a minute, he felt Cid shift beside him, stretching and let out a loud yawn. “Well I don’t know about you, but I’m fucking beat.”

“Then I shall—” he began, attempting to stand, but a hand grabbed his shoulder roughly.

“Fuck that. There may be only one bed and it’s kinda small, but we’ll both fit. You ain’t sleepin’ on the damn floor.”

“…Why not?” he asked, surprised at the insistence.

“Look, you’re in the same boat as I am: you’re probably sore as hell from all that traveling and all that fighting and sleeping out on the cold ground whether it rained or not or whether it was cold or not. I ain’t gonna make anyone sleep on the damn floor when we’ve got a bed.”

“What, exactly, are you suggesting then?”

“Well shit, Vin, we share it! We can sleep back to back or something if it bothers you, but you ain’t sleepin’ on the floor, you understand?”

Vincent really hated that nickname in an instant, but the prospect of a nice bed was a little hard to
turn down…if he even could. Cid had the expression that he was about to dig in his heels for this and it wasn’t worth fighting over. He honestly didn’t care either way.

“Very well,” he sighed.
Chapter 5

There was a heavy weight on his chest and Vincent shifted in his sleep, trying to throw it off. He didn’t want to open his eyes, to get up. It was far too comfortable, if a bit too warm for his tastes. It was only when he attempted to move a little more that the heavy weight on him seemed to make a grunting sound. There was an uncomfortable prickling feeling on his neck and something soft was under his chin. What was that? His eyes cracked open and looked down with a growing sense of dread.

Cid Highwind was currently clamped onto him as if he were the pilot’s pillow. His head was currently buried under Vincent’s chin, as he had suspected, and whenever it moved, Cid’s stubble would brush on what little part of his neck wasn’t covered…and his head would always move.

Vincent reached up to rub his face, but stopped at the last second when he realized which hand he had been about to use. He slowly set his clawed fingers back down and tried to shift, but it was hard. The pilot’s entire weight was focused on his right shoulder and chest, trapping his human arm underneath his body. How the hell had this happened? The last thing he remembered was that they had indeed curled into the bed back to back once Vincent had taken off his coat and boots, but he honestly didn’t remember moving at all, so how the hell had they gotten all tangled up like this? Was it his fault or Cid’s?

…No, somehow it was all going to be Cid’s fault and he was perfectly all right with that.

“Cid.”

No answer.

“Cid,” he repeated, raising his quiet voice a little louder.

The only effect that had was causing the pilot to mumble something and move even closer, jamming himself up against his side. Well, it was better than before because at least his hand was free, if not the rest of his arm. He flexed it to get a bit more blood flowing into it and debated how to proceed. He could shove Cid off roughly, waking him up in likely a very bad mood; he could carefully shake him awake with his clawed hand and probably scare him. There was always the possibility of shouting or waiting for Cid to wake up on his own. Given the bright sunlight streaming in the windows, any ships had probably set sail long before, so there was no hurry.

He shifted his head as much as he could and peered down at the slightly snoring pilot. As his fingers flexed, he brushed them lightly over the base of Cid’s spine by accident. There was the tiniest mumble at that, but otherwise no reaction. Vincent grumbled internally at his current predicament.

It wasn’t as if the position bothered him a great deal. Vincent had never had any hang-ups regarding gender and it wasn’t as if Cid was unattractive. Even that stubble could be, at a stretch, kind of cute. It was just that Cid was so far from his usual type in men. Before everything, before Lucrecia, whenever he’d been with a man, they had been of the slim type and he’d avoided anyone that had a stubble or beard. Nor did he really mind having a man snuggling up against him or on him. It had been a long, long time since he’d had any time of companionship, either mental or physical, even though he wasn’t sure that he should even consider a relationship of any kind with anyone at this point.

It was just…it was Cid. Cid Highwind, who usually smelled strongly of smoke due to his cigarettes
and who could turn the air blue with curse words. It was Cid Highwind who was brash, abrasive, hot-headed, and rude. They couldn’t be more opposite with their personalities. His intense dislike at their first impression had lessened…somewhat…but that didn’t mean he wanted to be his new pillow.

Cid shifting brought him out of his thoughts and he glanced down again at the blonde hair that was surprisingly soft as it tickled his chin. He hadn’t thought Cid would be a cuddler. He’d had absolutely no idea. Even during the week they’d traveled to Costa Del Sol, they often slept far apart, on the other side of a fire if they made one when it became too cold. Given his boisterous personality, the last thing Vincent expected was…this.

When the pilot’s leg accidently hit his, Vincent decided it was time to make a decision. He was not about to lay there when it was looking more and more likely that said leg was very close to just wrapping around one of his.

Carefully, Vincent lifted his clawed hand and lightly gripped the pilot’s shoulder, shaking him. “Highwind. Wake up.”

Cid’s movements after that felt more aware. He watched those pale blue eyes crack open a bit, blinking blearily. “Wha…? Fuck izzit?”

Vincent frowned and once again, very carefully, shook his shoulder to make sure he didn’t decide to go back to sleep. Those eyes were dangerously close to closing… “Get up. Now.”

“You get up. I gotta bed, I’m sleepin’,” he mumbled.

It was the first time that Cid had ever protested getting up. Was he really that tired and sore? Vincent had driven them hard in the week they’d walked to Costa Del Sol, from the break of dawn until the first hour after sunset. Sure the pilot had complained when he woke up, but he hadn’t actually protested and refused. Thinking back on it now, he was probably exhausted and unused to such hard travel. Vincent’s own stamina was highly altered thanks to Hojo, and with being a loner, it hadn’t occurred to him to pay more attention to his companion’s health. A wave of guilt hit him.

Cid seemed surprisingly comfortable and as much as Vincent would have preferred to not have been his pillow, that bit of guilt kept him still. “…Shift just a little,” the ex-Turk murmured softly into his ear as Cid’s eyes started to close. There was no reply, but the pilot did move just a tiny bit, enough that he could get his arm trapped underneath him moving a bit, at least able to bend his elbow. As they settled back and he flexed his wrist again, his mind wandered. He was too awake to sleep. Not even aware of what he was doing, his fingers gently wandered up and down Cid’s spine idly, feeling the strong back through his shirt. As if in response, making Vincent sigh, that rebellious leg of the pilot’s shifted again and wrapped around one of his own.

It was an hour and a half later, when Vincent was really getting antsy to move, that Cid woke up on his own. There was an odd snort, followed by a grunt, and once again those pale blue eyes cracked open. “…The hell?” he muttered as he took in their positions.

A red gaze turned to the pilot. “Are you awake now?”

“…What the hell…”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “When I awoke, we were already like this.” He paused, just a little, for effect. “I didn’t know you were a cuddler.”

Cid sprang away as if he’d scalded him with mako. “The hell!”
Oh thank Gaia, Vincent thought, sitting up and immediately stretching his terribly numb arm and shoulder. He could barely feel it at all. Cid wasn’t a lightweight by any means! “I don’t suppose you know when you started clinging?”

“I wasn’t clinging!” Vincent flashed him an incredulous look, causing Cid to flush just a bit. “I wasn’t! Shit, I don’t normally do that…I don’t think. I mean, I assume I don’t. Been a long fucking time since I was in a bed with someone else, but… Shit, lemme think.”

Gratefully the ex-Turk got to his feet and stretched his entire body. It wasn’t all bad. He was at least on a decent bed when he’d had to play pillow. As Cid remained suspiciously silent behind him, he detoured into the bathroom for a few minutes. When he came out, the pilot was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking highly embarrassed.

“I think…I remember something.”

“Remember what?”

“What happened last night. It’s kind of fuzzy, I wasn’t really awake, but I seem to remember you moving a bit. I think you were having a nightmare.” Vincent stiffened. “I think I remember rolling over to shake you to wake up. You must have shifted on your back, maybe the nightmare was broken or something, and after that…Gaia knows. Shit, I’m such a heavy sleeper so it must have been pretty bad to have at least gotten to my subconscious.”

Of course Vincent had a nightmare that night, when didn’t he?, but the strange thing was that he didn’t really remember waking up. What—

I know.

He winced, something that Cid’s gaze caught. Go away, Chaos.

“What is it?”

You two were so cute, the demon added.

Shut up.

“What is it?” Cid repeated, eyes narrowing when he didn’t get a response.

“…Chaos states that he knows what happened last night.”

Those blonde eyebrows rose into the short hairline. When Vincent didn’t say anything else, he prodded, “Well?”

See? He wants to know.

He does not, stop baiting him. You were probably asleep.

Probably, that’s entirely possible, but I wasn’t. I don’t need sleep like you.

The pilot glared at him and Vincent winced again. “Do you really want to know that badly?”

“Since you’re so damn reluctant, yeah!”

“You do realize that Chaos is a monster. A demon. They lie. You know that, right?”

“The more you stall—”
“All right, all right.” *Tell me.*

Chaos sent him a feeling of a smug smirk and Vincent got a terribly bad feeling in the pit of his stomach. *Thought you’d never ask. I found the whole incident highly amusing. You two really are so funny when you’re asleep. Don’t you humans say that you’re the most honest when you sleep?*

Chaos… he threatened, dangerously close to losing his temper with the beast.

*You were indeed having a nightmare, the same one as usual, which is quite boring by the way. Can’t you have some new dreams?*

*Chaos!*

His demon didn’t seem inclined to hurry at all despite his fraying temper. *Naturally you were flailing in your sleep. Your hand hit his shoulder*—Vincent immediately looked at Cid’s shoulders, but there were no injuries nor tears in his shirt so it must have been with his human hand and not his claws, thank Gaia—and got his attention. *Never seen an unenhanced human move so fast, but he turned almost at the same time as you and I suppose from then on, your shoulder belonged to him. He murmured things like ‘shhh’ and ‘it’s okay’ and other sappy words and you calmed down very quickly without waking. Perhaps the most amusing thing of all was that he wasn’t the only one clinging.* Chaos snickered as a faint flush crept up Vincent’s cheeks, prompting Cid to raise an eyebrow. *You both seemed so comfortable.***

“Well?”

He ignored Cid. *So help me if you’re lying to me, Chaos…*

*What benefit is there to lying when telling the absolute truth is so much more entertaining?*

“Oh! Are you gonna fucking tell me or what?!”

Vincent quietly relayed what Chaos told him, watching as Cid’s face paled only to turn bright red. “The fuck!”

“I warned you. There is a chance that it’s true…but also a chance it’s not. Chaos is a demon and enjoys tormenting others.”

Cid buried his face in his hands briefly. “*Shit… What’d you dream anyway?***

He looked away, deciding to pull on his boots and cloak. The room was getting to be a bit claustrophobic with this conversation. “Of things long past.”

“Well whatever they were must’ve been hell if it was that bad.”

“…It was.”

Cid stood up and without a word went to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. After a minute there was the sound of water running. Vincent waited, thinking, before going over to the pilot’s jacket. He grabbed a few gil and headed downstairs. The innkeeper looked up from a magazine and grinned at him. It made him wonder if perhaps his hair was out of place or something.

“Hey. Lookin’ for breakfast?”

“Yes. How much?”
“For two? Getcha a whole breakfast for five gil.”

Not wanting to argue, Vincent merely slid over the amount necessary and looked unimpressed. Costa Del Sol was definitely not a place to take a vacation, even if it was advertised as a resort town. Anywhere else, breakfast would have come with the exorbitant price of the room.

He brought the tray upstairs without another word and nudged the door open with his foot. Just as he set the tray on the table, the sound of running water ceased. Vincent sat down, just starting in on his eggs when Cid entered the room. He was in the middle of pulling on his shirt and the ex-Turk got a fleeting glimpse of toned muscles before he was dressed again.

“Food!” Blue eyes lit up in pleasure and he made a beeline for the table.

Their breakfast was a mostly silent affair and he could only attribute that to Cid. The pilot, who usually never shut up, was surprisingly quiet. It was only as Vincent was sipping his coffee, his breakfast gone, that he found out why.

“I’ve been thinkin’.”

“…” His eyes flickered to the man to show he was listening.

“We should probably just pretend this morning didn’t happen. Things’re hell enough as it is and we’ve got a long time before we’ll get to Midgar, so…”

“Agreed.”

Cid looked a tad relieved at his response, and a bit grateful. “Good! Now, let’s go find us a ship to Junon!”

There were three ships just returning to the harbor in the late afternoon. By then Vincent was ready to kill someone. It was too hot and listening to Cid’s cursing and Chaos’ snide remarks were wearing on his last nerve. He wasn’t sure if it was because he was so used to silence, or if it was just because there was too much talking in general, but it was giving him a terrible headache. Chaos hadn’t usually been this loud. Sure they’d ‘talked to’ each other before, but for the most part he’d been sleeping and it had been quiet.

Cid was teaching his demons very bad habits.

“Hey! This guy says he’s going to Junon tomorrow!”

Vincent looked skeptically at the boat that Cid was standing next to. It was small and looked a bit…worn. It didn’t inspire any more confidence to him than Cid’s Tiny Bronco had and that had ended in disaster. At this point, he was seriously considering having Chaos just fly them over even if it’d be one damn long flight and he’d rather not be indebted to the creature.

“He’s leaving tomorrow morning at seven, so we have to be ready to go. Vin? You there?”

“First, my name is Vincent, and second, are you sure such a thing is seaworthy?”

“Fine, Vincent. Damn, get rid of that stick up yer ass and yeah, it’s fine. He said he’s made the trip dozens of times.”

Oh joy, he thought, not reassured in the slightest.

“So what are we gonna do for the rest of the day?” the pilot asked, settling his hands behind his
heads as he looked around at the town and the people strolling by.

Vincent spun on his heel and began walking. When he noticed Cid wasn’t following him, he paused and said, “Come.”

“Where we goin’?” He didn’t answer, but instead pushed Cid closer to the materia stall. Apparently he was getting the idea when he sputtered. “Wait—"

“Do you carry Restore?”

“Yes we do,” answered a young girl with a smile.

Pleased, the ex-Turk turned to Cid. “Buy it.”

“What?!”

“Do you believe we will reach Midgar with no other battles? I am proficient in materia, but I lack any and you will likely need healing at some point.”

“Me?! What about you!”

“I can dodge. You apparently can’t. Buy it.”

“Oi! Vincent! That’s almost all I’ve got on me!”

His silence was eloquent: he didn’t care. “It would be beneficial to also have a Heal, but—”

“O-Oi!”

“—as I know you do not have that much, Restore will have to do. It is the bare minimum and an absolute necessity.”

The pilot looked as if he was going to argue some more, but Vincent’s silent stare wore him down after a bit. “Fucking fine!” He dug through his jacket and seemed to struggle with himself against throwing the gil at the ex-Turk before handing it over. “You’re a fucking pain in the ass, you know that?!”

Vincent ignored such a childish statement and took the materia out of Cid’s hand almost instantly and set into his old carbon bangle. He was glad that he had kept that at least, even though originally it had seemed pointless at the time when he was sleeping in his coffin. It was new, had no experience, but if Cid was anything to go by, he was sure that it would be mastered soon enough.

“Shit, I’ve got to get out of this damn heat before I kill you.” Cid stomped past him back into the cool, nearby Inn. Vincent didn’t linger either, but rather than stay in bar area where he would likely be stared at by the other patrons that also entered to escape the heat, he returned to their room.

He spent much of the remaining day pondering this little adventure. He wasn’t entirely sure why he’d even agreed and it was a tad disturbing that he kept going along with Cid’s pace as if it were natural. Sure he and Cid argued, but he’d never refused to do anything. He could have stayed in Rocket Town or went back to Nibelheim regardless of what Cid wanted to do, but his damn curiosity seemed to override his better judgment.

Cid was the one who brought up their dinner and unlike breakfast, the pilot seemed perfectly capable of filling the silence with meaningless chatter. Vincent listened, more out of politeness
than anything else, and sometimes there were a few amusing stories the man told him. They ranged from the people he had met in the bar to past experiences. Shera tended to feature in quite a few and usually all of them had an amusing – to him – outcome. Usually Cid was less than pleased at the end of those stories.

There was an awkward moment as night fell. They shared a glance and then looked at the small bed as one.

“…I will sleep on the floor,” Vincent decided.

“Oh no you don’t!” Cid snapped. “We’ll share this damn bed again and this time we’re going to wake up in the same position we went to bed in! You can’t have a fucking nightmare every night!”

“…I do, actually.”

“Well then now’s time to learn not to! We agreed to forget about this morning and if you sleep on the floor, that’s not considered forgetting about it!”

There was a sort of twisted logic in that statement… “You’re sure you won’t cling again?”

“I ain’t clingin’ to you again, you hear me? Ever! ‘Sides, last time was your fault anyway, with that damn nightmare!”

Against his better judgment, Vincent agreed and slipped off his coat and boots again. This time he waited until Cid got in the bed first before taking the other side. The heat at his back comforted him in a way, and yet made him oddly nervous after this morning. Still, there was little movement on that side of the bed and he eventually relaxed and fell asleep, listening to the quiet snores of the pilot.

His internal clock woke him at six in the morning, but it was not the time that made him groan. Once again there was a blonde head under his chin. Both of Cid’s arms were wrapped around his chest and this time his human arm had shifted to hold the pilot’s shoulders in return. Their legs were hopelessly tangled together. Cid shifted, squirming a little closer and then he felt something a bit hard pressing against his side. In his head, he murmured a soft shit…

“There has got to be a better way,” he muttered under his breath, adding silently to himself, *Or this is gonna be a helluva lot longer journey than I thought…*
“Would you fucking stop that?!”

Vincent blinked, barely managing to keep himself from twitching in surprise as the silence was abruptly broken by Cid’s irate voice. “What?"

“Stop looking like we’re about to drown! The sun’s out and we’re almost halfway there!”

He frowned just a little, looking down at the boat underneath his feet. Despite his misgivings, so far it had proven that it could do more than just sit on the water without sinking. Still, it appeared terribly rickety. Feeling a tad rebuffed, Vincent defended his feelings. “No one would blame me for being concerned. The last method you chose for transportation landed with an explosion on a plateau. Given the appearance of this vessel, I believe I am justified in my unease.”

Cid, much to Vincent’s shock, actually hit his shoulder. It didn’t hurt and it felt light, but force wasn’t necessary. The action was enough to get the pilot’s point across. “I think you like worrying.”

Well…no, he didn’t, but given that not much in his life had ever gone right, it had become something he would call a nervous habit. Movement behind them caught his attention and he glanced over to their ‘captain’, who appeared to be paying them no attention whatsoever. They might as well have been piles of rope for all he cared. He had found himself a place to sit and had propped his feet up on the steering wheel. Vincent hoped that he did so to at least hold it in place and that they weren’t about to crash into something.

“You’re doing it again.”

Before Vincent could respond, there was a surge against the side of the boat before it settled again into calm water. Booted feet hit the ground with a thud as their captain, who appeared to have been dozing, was awake in an instant. Cid, who had somehow acquired a pack of cigarettes before they left, began to idly chew on an unlit one. “The fuck was that?”

Slowly, eyes scanning the area, Vincent pulled Sniper CR from its makeshift holster on his back. “I see nothing.”

“That don’t mean a damn thing, though,” the pilot finished for him. “I really think we should step on it.”

“Think your right.” The voice the captain responded with was a tad shaky, but at least calm, as he turned to his controls. The motor, which had given an unpleasant but ignorable hum for the past five hours, roared to life. The racket was sure to drive whatever it was that had hit them to the surface. If they were really lucky, it was a large but non-hostile creature; if they weren’t, well…

This time the force they were hit with was significantly harder. Vincent dug in his steel-tipped shoes into the deck as his side swelled and Cid shouted, landing on his knees and trying not to slide down the other side until the wave settled.

“How far are we from shore?” the ex-Turk asked, having to raise his voice to compete with the motor, but otherwise kept his emotions tightly controlled. So far they still hadn’t seen what had hit them.

“Shouldn’t be long now—”
The front of the almost tiny ship was thrown up with force of a huge, abrupt wave and the only reason they didn’t capsize end over end was the fact that Vincent managed to just make it in time to throw his entire weight on the bow to prevent it. He was almost thrown off when the tip of the boat landed harshly back in place and immediately set his feet on the deck again instead of on the edge. Out of the corner of his eye, through the water, he thought he caught sight of lightly colored fin.

“Shit! What the fuck was that?!”

He turned sharply to the pilot. Cid was clutching his spear in his hand tightly, his legs spread wide to help keep his balance and his free hand holding onto the edge of the boat. “Did you see it?”

“I saw…somethin’. It’s definitely a fish of some kind and it’s really fucking creepy! It’s also fucking huge with sharp goddamn teeth!”

“How sharp?”

“Razors! It also seemed to have…I dunno…a crest of some kind?”

There was a buzzing noise from the engine as this time it was the stern that was thrown up behind them into the air. There was no way he could get there in time to help balance it, but because of the weighty propulsion system, it managed to land correctly. The waves were buffeting them constantly now, though with not nearly as much force as before.

“Shit, it’s comin’ from the left! Fucking left!” Cid shouted, peering over his side just as a gigantic creature roared from under the surface of the ocean. It had two large fins protruding from its neck and indeed it had a crest went from the back of its neck to cover its back. A long tail that had spikes on its end splashed dangerously. Surprisingly, its multicolored pattern would have been pretty if it wasn’t trying to kill them.

“That’s the fucking bottomswell!” came the panicked voice of their captain as he frantically turned the wheel to avoid getting too close to the creature.

“The fuck is a bottomswell?!” demanded Cid as lifted his spear to defend himself against the creature’s tail as it lashed out.

Vincent couldn’t help containing a shiver of fear down his spine. He’d be all but useless in this fight. The ship was small, the creature was huge and had a great deal of maneuverability in the water, and by no means was what he was standing on conducive to a steady shot. It would have been easier if he’d had an attack materia, be it fire or lightning, but all he had equipped was a brand new Restore.

“Cid, do you have any other materia on you?” he asked, ducking under the bottomswell’s leap over the ship to land in the water on the other side.

“Does it fucking look like it?! I’d have used it by now if I did! Shit, I can’t even get close to the damn thing and at this rate, if it hits the damn boat in just the right way, we’ll fucking capsize!”

“Can you see Junon yet?” Vincent demanded, not liking the only plan he was coming up with.

“Just barely!”

“Then keep going.” He threw Sniper CR at Cid, watching as the man fumbled to catch it. After that came his cloak. He had started to grow a bit fond of it and didn’t want it to tear too much. “I will distract it.”
“Distra—by doing fucking what, exactly?!”

Chaos...

So you need me, huh? Your go-to demon?

Hardly. However, you can fly where the others will drown.

It felt like a smirk was thrown his way. I love it when you need me. It’s fun, considering how much you detest my existence.

Vincent didn’t dignify that with a response. He just grunted as he felt his back distort, skin breaking painfully as wings burst through. The red membranes edges appeared as torn at their edges as his cape. Desperately he tried to hold in his screams as the rest of the transformation took hold. It was always so painful that sometimes he swore that he’d pass out because of it, but he never did. His skin blackened, red and black bone coming to cover most of his face and he felt his consciousness slip into the back as Chaos took control. With a fierce grin, showing dangerously sharp teeth, the creature leapt into the air.

Chaos roared as he heard a surprised shriek of fear from the captain. It was hard to tell whether it was at him or the bottomswell, the creature surging up at that moment at the stern of the ship. With a powerful flap of his wings, Chaos caught the creature head-on, throwing it back into the water and following it down. While he could not breathe underwater, he could hold its breath for a very long time.

The two creatures grappled for a bit and red soon started to stain the water. Chaos’ claws had dug deep rents into the flesh of the bottomswell, but had also taken several wounds from its tail. Vincent, watching from deep within his body, tried to get through to Chaos, who seemed to not even be caring that currently there were razor sharp teeth biting into his shoulder.

You don’t have to kill it! You just have to distract it!

You think I’ll let my opponent live? I can kill it.

Disregarding whether I believe you or not, even if you can, you’ll be so damaged that I’ll die! We’re sharing the same body! Your wounds are my wounds!

What’s the big deal? Chaos countered, raking his claws down the snout of the creature. It let out a sound that was garbled under water and with a surge, Chaos burst from the surface of the ocean to take in a heaving breath of air. Isn’t that what you wanted? To die? The bottomswell followed, leaping into the air and the creature using Vincent’s body drew back his fist and punched it straight on the head, throwing it right back down with a massive splash.

Eventually, but not right now!

Chaos didn’t waste a minute and dove right after it, back into the water. What, you really want to know that badly about that SOLDIER brat and the pilot? About JENOVA?

Does it even matter right now?!

Chaos grunted a bit as that tail, with its sharp row of spikes, managed to bury itself in its side. Growling and ignoring Vincent’s shouting, he yanked it out of his side and raked it with its claws.

They’re far enough away now, Chaos! Follow them!
Even as they argued, Chaos’ movements didn’t seem distracted in the slightest as their battle ranged deep under the ocean and then up above. *I can finish this! I will finish this!*

Damn you, Chaos! We’re losing a ton of blood! You’re having a hard time flying! **Follow them!**

No!

Vincent wasn’t about to take that for an answer. Fear and adrenaline gave him just enough edge and he clawed at Chaos’ consciousness. The distraction proved almost fatal when they were both taken by surprise by a towering wall of water that came up behind them, forcing Chaos under. The bottomswell rammed into him harshly, throwing all its bodyweight, and Vincent really feared they were in for it then as the demon was rammed into a boulder. The demon controlling him couldn’t seem to help gasping in pain, most of the air he was holding in disappearing. He had no more words to tell Chaos and nothing more he could do. If he tried to take control back now, he’d drown.

However, Chaos’ survival instincts proved out in the end and with three huge flaps of his wings, the demon was bursting out of the ocean and flying unsteadily toward the shoreline. For a moment the bottomswell followed before it realized that it couldn’t catch its prey and, with nothing else around, abandoned the hunt.

It didn’t take more than ten minutes to reach Junon in flight and that was a good thing because despite what he said otherwise, Chaos was about to collapse. Only Cid was waiting for him, not even the ship. Had the captain really been so frightened that he’d left immediately? If he did, he didn’t pass Chaos on the way.

“Oi! Oi! Fucking hell!”

Chaos almost dropped like a stone into the shallow water near the shore and Cid didn’t waste any time at all rushing toward him. Despite the awkwardness of the huge wings and dangerous claws, the pilot kept pulling and dragging him out of the water. The pain that he felt at the return transformation was even worse than before because now he could feel each and every terrible wound that was inflicted on him while Chaos had been in control. Damn that demon, not understanding moderation in the slightest! They had to share the same damn body!

“Vincent! Fucking hell, you got a death wish, you damn Turk?!”

“…ex…Turk…” he muttered, coughing up a bit of blood. His arm shook too badly for him to activate the Restore materia, and if he couldn’t do that, he’d probably bleed out at this rate.

“Here, fucking gimme that!” Cid fumbled and yanked on his bangle, getting it off and shoving it on himself. The Cure flowed over him soothingly, giving him relief from both the pain of his wounds and the transformation. Cid cast it twice more until Vincent signaled for him to stop. “The hell you think you were pulling back there, you asshole?!”

“Only choice. Our position was disadvantageous. We couldn’t fight it off, so the next best thing was to stall it.”

Cid grunted at him, letting loose strings of swear words that seemed merely chosen to relieve himself of nervous tension as he threw Vincent’s arm over his shoulder and appeared as if he was determined to drag him where he needed to go. “For all the fact that you say you hate the guy, you sure rely on him a lot.”

At least he realizes my worth, Chaos commented, but his voice was surprisingly weak and tired. Had the fight really drained him that much? Despite the wounds, he’d seemed so ‘energetic’
before.

“He has his uses.”

“Bet he does.” As he dragged Vincent through town, Cid muttered under his breath something about not having an Inn and most of the people were highly suspicious. Given Vincent’s appearance that was not helped by the bloodstains, he didn’t blame them. “Looks like ‘nother night under the sky, pal.”

“That’s fine,” Vincent said wearily. Cures could heal wounds, but not exhaustion and he was barely awake as it was. “…Where is my coat and sniper?”

“Shit, I got ‘em! Look down.”

He did so, frowning just a bit when he noticed that Cid apparently decided he needed his hands free and managed to, somehow, tie his coat around his waist like a huge sash. It also, he noted, was being used to make sure that his sniper and Cid’s spear were strapped securely to his back. “…

“Fuck you. What’d you want me to do with ‘em!!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Ya didn’t have to! Ya have that look on yer face!”

Vincent closed his burgundy eyes and leaned more of his weight on Cid as he felt himself slipping closer to sleep. “I had no ‘look’ on my face.”

“Yah, yah, whatever you say. Now don’t you pass out on me! You’ve gotta hold onto me!”

Something about that struck Vincent as amusing and a faint smile touched his lips before he made a conscious effort to grip the man’s shoulders more tightly with his human hand. He didn’t want to be dropped after all.

“You are the epitome of bad luck,” he muttered.

“You’re the one that gets us into so much damn trouble,” Cid replied, but most of the heat was gone from his voice. “Hey, I think I found a good spot.”

Vincent dredged his eyes open. The small alcove he’d found was in the shadow of a house and didn’t look particularly comfortable, but since he was so close to losing consciousness, it’d have to do. Cid set him down surprisingly gently despite the fact that they both knew his injuries had been healed, and untied his coat from around his waist. Both Sniper CR and his spear fell to the ground, but the pilot paid it no mind as he shoved the coat over top of him. “Last thing I want is for you to catch a damn cold.”

“Don’t know that I can,” he said as his eyes slipped closed, “but thank you.”

That gruff voice followed him into sleep as Cid replied, “Yer welcome.”

-0-0-0-

Note on Chaos: Visually he looks like he does in Dirge of Cerberus just because I like that style, but given how far into the past this is in comparison to that game, I’m writing this story with the belief that he isn’t powerful enough to have the upgraded and epic Death Penalty that he has in DoC.
Also, battles aren't exactly my strong suit, but if I don't write them, I won't get better at them, so...
Chapter 7

There was something both soft and hard underneath his head and Vincent cracked his eyes open. He found himself slumped against Cid, using his shoulder as a pillow. Gently he tried to lift his head, as his neck was protesting loudly at its position, and the light weight in his hair moved a bit. After a minute, Vincent decided to be a bit more hands on and shifted them both until Cid was propped more fully against the building behind them. He hadn’t been kidding when he said he was that much of a heavy sleeper. He kept his groan quiet as he cracked his neck.

It was dark out, the stars twinkling above him, and the town that surrounded the Junon base was quiet. He listened a bit internally, but Chaos didn’t say a word. For the first time in almost two weeks, there was a moment of peace. Vincent stood, pulling on his coat and settling his sniper on his back. Though he glanced back at Cid, he decided that he really needed to stretch his legs and nothing would hurt the pilot in town.

The sky wasn’t as clear as it was in Nibelheim, but it was nowhere near as bad as in Midgar. The air was still fresh and clean, with the smell of the ocean on the breeze and it ruffled his hair just a little. Sighing a little in amused surprise, Vincent couldn’t help but wonder just what was wrong with Cid Highwind’s brain. There had to be something, because he didn’t seem frightened of him in the least, or even concerned. Not of his clawed hand or of Chaos even. He’d shown absolutely no hesitation in pulling him from the water even though he could have been ripped to shreds at any point. Granted, Cid didn’t know about the other three demons Vincent held in check, but somehow, he had a certainty that if Chaos didn’t bother the pilot, likely nothing else about him would.

Was this why Cloud had sent him to Cid? There was so much to the story that he still didn’t know yet, he realized. There hadn’t been a lot of time for questions and the explanation had been brief at best. Sure he had been told that he had helped destroy the insane Sephiroth and saved the world, and it had been implied that there were others with them, but a majority of the details were sketchy. Vincent almost wanted to hit himself at the idea that took so long to occur to him: could Cid have been another of Cloud’s companions? Cloud had never named names, most likely knowing that those names meant nothing to him. Was there something in that future that he had come from that signaled something important regarding Cid Highwind?

Realizing how long he’d been gone, Vincent turned and made his way back to the pilot. He was still sleeping, unaware that the ex-Turk had even left. For a long moment, he studied the gruff and scruffy looking man. In the time they’d been traveling, Cid’s stubble had grown and his appearance seemed more haggard. Thankfully the night was warm so he had no concern about finding blankets. Granted, it wasn’t as warm as Costa Del Sol, but it was enough that sleeping under the stars wasn’t going hurt anyone.

Vincent sat down next to his companion and, as if sensing him, Cid slipped just a little to the side and claimed the ex-Turk’s shoulder as his pillow. This time he couldn’t complain or even mentally gripe, given how he had woken up. It would be hypocritical and really, despite the fact that they argued constantly, Vincent didn’t really dislike Cid nearly as much as he had when they first met. He was vibrant and wild, and his language so coarse as to sometimes make Vincent wince, but there was something about that enthusiasm toward life that kept him from hating the man. He was determined about whatever he set out to do and he was tough in combat. It wasn’t hard to see why he’d be an asset to any team.

As Cid shifted in his sleep, Vincent drew one of his legs up and braced his free, human arm on it.
Best get comfortable until daylight.

“You know, I think we really need to sleep far away from each other,” Cid said with a groan as he stretched.

Vincent, already ready to go as the pilot stumbled to his feet, looked at him. “Why?”

“It just seems like every time I wake up lately, I’m…” There was a long pause, stretching to an uncomfortable silence.

Surprising even himself, Vincent shrugged with a tiny smile that Cid couldn’t see behind the high collar of his coat. “I don’t mind. You could say I’ve gotten used to it.”

“Well I haven’t,” was the staunch reply.

“You’d best do so then. The closer we are to Midgar, the cooler the nights are likely to become again. The best way to stay warm is to sleep close to each other.”

Rather than the vehement denial he had expected, Cid seemed to flush just a little and raked a hand through his pale blonde hair. “Yeah, well, we’ll see if that happens. Hey, have you seen my goggles?”

Now that he mentioned it… “No.”

“Shit, I don’t know when I lost ‘em. Damn it!”

“Are you ready to go?” he asked with a sigh.

For a moment, Cid seemed to get ready to argue with him, but stopped at the last minute. “All right already, hold yer fuckin’ horses.” He grabbed his spear from the ground, braced it on his shoulder, and started to follow when Vincent set off. “So where are we goin’?”

He looked up and pointed to the city above them where most of the base was located on. “We’ll have to steal a helicopter to go over the mountains to get to Midgar. It’s either that, or charter another ship.”

Cid gave him an incredulous look. “If we had to do that, why didn’t we fucking do that from the start and land on the shore near Midgar?! I thought you had some sort of plan!”

“Do you really believe we could convince anyone from Costa Del Sol to change their route to Junon in the middle of the tourist season? The only way to convince them to do that would be to pay them an exorbitant amount of gil, far more than you were carrying. Besides,” Vincent added with a faint smile, “I still trust your somewhat dubious piloting skills over another ship.”

“Dubious piloting skills?!” Cid replied, outraged, and threw a long string of swear words at him defending his ability to fly with the ferocity of a dragon protecting its offspring. “So, fucking genius, how are you planning on getting us up there?!”

That was something Vincent had spent most of the night considering and turned, heading back down to the shore that Chaos had collapsed at. “Since I have no doubt that any identification we might have retained no longer applies, we will have to climb.”

Cid strode along behind him, almost like a yapping puppy, as he spat, “Climb what?!” Vincent
silently pointed at the tower. “Are you fucking kidding me?!”

“Are you trying to go up?” a young voice asked, startling them before Cid could go on another verbal tirade.

A little girl was watching them, almost suspiciously so, but she didn’t seem ready to bolt in the other direction just yet. “Yes,” Vincent answered.

“Why?”

Cid scratched his head, clearly looking for a plausible excuse. “There’s something up there that we need to borrow.”

Much to his surprise, the girl seemed a bit more hostile at that. “You’re friends with ShinRa? Why don’t you just use the elevator?”

“Hell no we ain’t friends with ShinRa!”

“If you’re not friends with ShinRa and borrow their stuff, that’s stealing.” Despite saying this, the girl actually smiled after a minute. “That’s okay then. I’m Priscilla.”

“You’re not fond of ShinRa, I take it,” Vincent murmured.

“No!” She paused. “How are you going to get up there?”

“We’re workin’ on it!” Cid huffed and looked away, back up at the bar of the tower that the ex-Turk had pointed to.

“Mr. Dolphin can help you.” Without waiting for an answer, the girl lifted a whistle she’d been carrying and blew into it hard. Vincent’s eyebrow rose when, after a few minutes, a dolphin did indeed swim closer to the shore.

“Are you kiddin’ me—”

Vincent blinked, his attention drawn from Cid back to the girl as she tugged on his cape. “Here!” She grabbed his flesh hand and pressed the whistle into his glove. “When you’re ready, use it and Mr. Dolphin with help you jump.”

He masterfully hid his skepticism, but Cid, on the other hand, failed miserably at doing so. “Are you serious, kid?”

“Yes!”

Well it couldn’t hurt to try. Vincent leaned down and took off the metal on the tips of his boots, handing them to Cid before he could protest. He whistled experimentally and true to the girl’s words, the dolphin jumped and surprisingly high too. If he could jump while in the air, it wouldn’t take much at all to land on the beam he had originally chosen. He moved forward, but Cid’s hand abruptly grabbed his arm. “You’re not serious!”

“When I land, I will throw down the whistle to you and you just repeat what I did.” He shook off the hand and walked forward until his feet were in the water.

“O-Oi, Vincent—”

The waves lapped at his legs and he blew the whistle. There was a splash near him and he lifted his feet at the last moment, allowing himself to rest on the dolphin’s snout for a breath before they
were in the air. Vincent gathered his weight in his legs and jumped a second time, landing confidently on the beam. Well, that was easy.

“Oi!” As he’d promised, he tossed the whistle back down to Cid, who caught it clumsily. “You’re not serious about this!”

“Just do it.”

“I’m ain’t doing this, Vincent!”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s fucking insane!”

“Do you want to go to Midgar or not?”

Cid didn’t say anything immediately and after what he could only assume was some internal grumbling, he walked into the water where Vincent had stood. “You’d better be damn sure about this! So how do I do this shit?”

“When you blow the whistle, the dolphin will approach. Lift your feet at the last moment and then when it jumps, jump into the air.”

“You know it ain’t gonna be that easy for me!”

“If you complain any further about this, I’ll leave you here.”

Cid gave him an evil eye, clearly unsure whether Vincent was bluffing or not. He shoved his spear into his belt, hoping to steady it there and eyed the steel boot tips. Narrowing his eyes, Vincent said, “If you leave them there or drop them in the water—”

“Yah, yah! Gaia, you’d think they were yer baby or somethin’!”

After several more minutes of fiddling, Cid finally blew the whistle. He was tense as the steel beam that the ex-Turk was standing on and he let out a shout of surprise when the dolphin leapt into the air.

“Jump!” he commanded.

Cid did so, but a second too late. The height of the jump was past, he didn’t jump as well as the ex-Turk had, and they were already heading back down. Vincent dashed forward a bit and reached out, trying to grab him. He missed the man’s arm, but he did manage to grab the spear right under its tip.

“Gah!” The spear slipped almost too smoothly from Cid’s belt and he ended up dropping the whistle in the water below as he grabbed at it. There was a moment of silence as the pilot dangled there before Vincent slowly and methodically started pulling him up. “I told you this was a fuckin’ bad idea!” Cid told him when he was on the bar.

Vincent looked down at Priscilla, who was fishing the whistle from the water. She waved at them before leaving the shore and going back to town, perhaps to her parents. He ignored Cid’s complaints completely and instead slipped his steel toes back on his shoes. “Time to climb.

“Gimme a fuckin’ minute!”

“We’re wasting time.”
Cid threw more invectives at his back, but when the ex-Turk started to climb, the pilot followed him without hesitation. Vincent had an easier time of it than Cid did, but only once did he actually have to reach down to grab him when his foot slipped.

Cautiously he peered around when they reached the top. Much to his everlasting surprise at the one piece of good luck they had been gifted with, they had ended up on the edge of the landing strip for the airport.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Cid muttered as they crouched behind some crates. “Now we just need—”

“He’ll be here in an hour, why aren’t you ready yet?!”

Vincent ducked his head instinctively at the irate voice that suddenly appeared near their hiding place, motioning for Cid to be quiet immediately.

“Sorry, sir! Travis called in sick today, sir, so we’re behind—”

“I don’t care! Do you think it’s an everyday occurrence when the Vice President comes to conduct an on-site inspection?! His helicopter will be here in an hour! Move it!”

Red eyes met pale blue. Well, well. If it was the Vice President’s helicopter, then it would likely be very well maintained. If they could just get their hands on that, then they wouldn’t have to worry about getting to Midgar in one piece. In fact, they could commandeer any landing pad they wanted because who would question the personal I.D. of the Vice President’s transportation?

Cid, for the first time that Vincent recalled, smiled at him. It was almost a smirk, as if he was going to enjoy what they were planning to do far more than he should, in a visceral sense. Before he realized it, Vincent was giving Cid an answering smile back and they both settled against the crates to wait in silence.

The hour seemed to flow by swiftly and they listened to the shouts that grew more and more tense the less time they had. Soon enough, he could hear the sounds of the chopper’s blades approaching from the north. He peered around just as a group of soldiers lined up, awaiting the landing. Pursing his lips, Vincent used the cover of the noise to shift around Cid to the other side of the boxes so they were closer to the back end of the landing pad. It would give them more cover and they’d be closer to the helicopter when it was time to make a mad dash.

The first one to exit was, clearly, a Turk. The dark suit he wore was pressed and the way he carried himself held a great deal of authority. Vincent’s eyes narrowed just a little. His facial features gave him away as Wutaian and he looked around thoroughly before he gestured to someone still in the helicopter. The motor cut out, the blades of the helicopter slowing, and two more Turks exited, both men. The tallest one was bald, wearing dark sunglasses and the last was a short redhead, who grinned cheekily. On their heels came a blast of white. There was a surprisingly young man with bright blonde hair, wearing a suit of white with a long off-white coat and a black vest. He looked around, said something that Vincent couldn’t hear, and began to approach the soldiers.

Here was the tricky part. Did they wait to see if they’d refuel the chopper first and risk losing their chance or take it now? Cid poked his back and nodded meaningfully at the machine as the entire group of people, soldiers and Turks alike started back toward the building. Maintenance workers were slowly starting to file out, clearly intending on servicing the helicopter. He frowned, but Cid’s gesture was right. It was now or never.

So he went first, the pilot on his heels, and dove for the door. There was a cry of alarm from behind them. One of the workers had spotted them and the group whirled. Vincent pulled Quicksilver
from his holster an second faster than the Turks and shot at them. He was too far away to accurately guarantee he’d hit something, but it was enough to scatter them. He wasn’t intending on killing or hurting them anyway; if he’d wanted to do that, he would have used the sniper. It just wasn’t as fast though, not like Quicksilver.

“In!” he shouted at Cid, who didn’t seem to need any encouragement and dove into the helicopter first, ducking his head to hopefully avoid the bullets fired from the soldiers. Vincent followed, still keeping up a barrage to prevent most from approaching. More soldiers were spilling out now, but they weren’t what concerned him. The Turks could cause problems, so he kept his attention mostly on them as he jumped into the chopper. Pursing his lips, he set Quicksilver down and drew Sniper CR. The blades were whirling now; they were close to lift off. Vincent took steady aim, focusing on the blonde as he poked his head out from his cover. He noted the shotgun in his hand that, while deadly at short range, would do little at the distance they were at.

His hands were steady as he squeezed the trigger and the bullet whizzed through the air, embedding itself into the side of the building inches from the man’s head. It distracted the Turks sufficiently and Cid lifted them from the helipad. As they did so and Vincent was about to close the door, his red eyes met another pair of blue eyes for the briefest of seconds. These were the color of ice, completely unlike Cloud’s sapphire and Cid’s azure. In that moment, Vincent was sure that that boy knew he could have killed him and chosen not to. What that meant in the long run, he didn’t know.

He slammed the door to the helicopter shut.
Chapter 8

“Hold on!”

Vincent blinked, drawn out of his idle daze as the helicopter suddenly swerved. His clawed hand reached out, digging the metal into the door to keep from sliding from his spot on the floor. “What is it?”

“What the fuck do you think it is?!” Cid grunted as Vincent looked out the window. He frowned as they reached the edge of the Midgar, so close to their goal, and between them and their destination were none other than five SOLDIERs and some of the regular army. It should have occurred to him that Vice President or one of his Turks would have called ahead to let someone know that his helicopter stolen. Even as he watched, a bulky SOLDIER lifted his hand and the side of the chopper was struck with a Bolt. Given the dent behind, it was definitely a Bolt 3.

His eyes widened when looking over the group clustered near the edge of the plate and without warning, he threw the door open. One of the regular soldiers had a megaphone, ordering them to land and surrender, but Vincent ignored him the same way he ignored Cid demanding to know what he was doing. He easily spotted that flash of silver and caught Sephiroth’s gaze. Green eyes widened just a bit as he realized who was in the helicopter.

Vincent wasn’t sure what he was hoping for, to be honest. The last thing that any of them clearly wanted was to make it known what they had done and admitting acknowledgement that they knew each other would cause problems. At the very least, though, there must be something the great General could do to at least let them live.

His gamble paid off when a sniper had a gun trained at him and Sephiroth said something to cause them to pause. Instead of the shot hitting the ex-Turk, it pinged against the side of the chopper. He turned to Cid when he felt the helicopter shift direction away from the city. “Don’t! We’ll never actually get inside if you do. We can’t scale the walls and we don’t have the key to the doors,” he told him, raising his voice to be heard over the noise.

“Well what the fuck do you suggest then?!” Cid shouted at him.

“Go down!”

“Down?!”

“Nose it down toward the slums, we’ll figure out a way to get onto the plate from there!”

Cid looked away from what was in front of him long enough to send him a heated glare. “I nose this thing down and they’ll have a fucking clear shot at the motor! One hit from a bolt and we’re gonna crash!”

“Make your decision, we’re running out of fuel as it is and if you turn around, they’ll hit the tank!”

“Fucking hell…!” Cid hesitated before yanking the controls and sending them down toward the slums, hoping to at least get close to the area between the plate and the wall.

Vincent pulled out his sniper and aimed a few shots at the feet of the troopers, causing them to scatter briefly. The pilot shouted something and he turned in concern when there was the sound of glass shattering. Cid had managed to duck to avoid the bullet that had broken the windshield, but some of the glass found its mark.
“Cid?!”

“Vincent!”

At the pointing finger, his head snapped back down. Sephiroth had obviously shouted something, but it was too late. The big SOLDIER who had originally used the Bolt 3 at the start had fired another and it hit the blade’s motor with a blast of light. There was a sickening lurch and threw Vincent off balance as the almost steady movement of the chopper was ruined. Frantically, he grabbed the edge of the door to keep himself inside as they started to spin. They were spiraling down now and the only consolation he had was that they had, just barely, managed to get past the wall. With his enhanced hearing, he could actually make out Sephiroth saying something harsh to the SOLDIER. Just over his shoulder, he spotted two blurs approaching. Despite the wild, spinning chopper, he managed to peer through the scope of Sniper CR to see. He had to know if it was heavy artillery…

No, it was none other than the spikes of ShinRa. He saw Cloud’s mouth about to say something, Zack covering it at the last second so he didn’t give something away.

“Vincent! Fucking hell, this was yer idea, tell me you got a damn plan!” Cid yanked away the safety belt and stumbled from the cockpit toward Vincent near the door. “Don’t they fucking keep parachutes in these damn things?!”

The smoke from the motor was obscuring most of his vision now as the helicopter came almost even to the plate. If it weren’t for Chaos and his love of heights, Vincent would have sworn off flying for the rest of his life. Every time he got in one, something went wrong.

Chaos! he internally shouted. There was no answer, but there was no time to wait for it either. The ex-Turk grabbed Cid’s arm and in an almost mimicry of the first crash, he leapt them out, Cid shouting something about parachutes. Whether that meant that the pilot had found one or that he was cursing he hadn’t or there were none, he didn’t know. They were just lucky enough that the thick, dark smoke from the helicopter covered their jump so that no one other than the SOLDIERs could see them.

“Vincent!”

Chaos!

“Oi, Vincent!!”

Chaos! Chaos!

In a terrifying moment, he let his gaze lock with Cid’s, fearful that Chaos was just too deep asleep to respond, but before he could say anything, wings abruptly burst from his back. The pain almost seemed delayed and he bit his lip hard to prevent his painful scream from being heard. Just before the rest of his body changed, he wrapped his arms tightly around Cid. There was no point in jumping if they both didn’t survive.

“Whatever…you…do…” Vincent managed to say, his voice deepening and becoming more demonic, “hold…me…and…do not…let…go…”

His conscious slipped past Chaos’, but the demon didn’t say a single word as they ‘passed’. There seemed to be little awareness in the creature, operating only on instinct. Even as he pressed the thought between them that he had to save Cid, it didn’t seem to register. If it wasn’t for the fact that Cid was clutching him tightly, arms around Chaos’ neck, he would have dropped him when those
clawed hands loosened.

Chaos seemed to have little control over his flying, barely managing to avoid running into steel pillars that supported the plate above. It was as if he was merely gliding, navigating the best way down, but unable to stop. Chaos! he shouted. Chaos!

Whether it was his mental insistence or his mental voice, something prodded Chaos’ consciousness enough that he started to flap his wings once or twice, enough to keep them from plowing into something very solid.

“Oi! Oi! Vincent! What the fuck are you guys doin’?! Up! Up!”

It felt as if it was straining all of Vincent’s spirit and consciousness as he reached out and tried to guide Chaos. He’d never had to do this before; nothing had ever bothered Chaos before. Always before, he was as aware and intelligent as Vincent himself. Even on the very rare occasions where it was all instinct from Chaos, he wasn’t like this. Not like he was having trouble keeping his consciousness awake. Was this because it was so close to the last time that he had had to call on him? It was barely a day ago that Chaos had fought the bottomswell.

Feeling as if he was moving through sludge, he forced one or two more wingbeats into Chaos’ body. It had never occurred to Vincent that he could ever control his demons from the inside and even in this state, he wasn’t sure it was controlling. It was more like he was standing behind an almost unconscious Chaos and grabbing those arms, moving them himself.

“We’re gonna crash! Vincent!”

The roof of a church was fast approaching and if they did nothing, Cid would smash into it first and probably be severely injured, if not dead. He had no time to wonder how a church had survived down in the slums. With a tired pant, Vincent used what little energy he had to shift his body so that instead, he slammed into it. There was no way that it could hold up against the full force of gravity, momentum, and a demon’s body. They broke through with a crash and his wings wrapped around Cid as his back slammed, and broke, some of the older and weakened beams.

Finally they hit a thick and sturdy one. It arrested the fall, but also hurt the most. Vincent felt Chaos’ consciousness give up and his own coming back into play as they switched places. The pain struck him, causing him to move incautiously and start to topple off. He shoved Cid back up and tried to brace himself for the fall as his body went back to normal.

He shouted as his shoulder was almost pulled out of its socket, but his fall was stopped. Vincent tiredly looked up, seeing Cid clinging onto the beam, one arm wrapped around it as best he could as he laid flat on his stomach. “Don’t…you…let…go,” Cid grunted. “Hold…my fucking…hand…!”

Vincent almost did so until he realized that it was his clawed hand that Cid was gripping so tightly. “If I do…” he muttered in exhaustion, “I’ll cut you.”

“Don’t…give…a fuck!” Those lively blue eyes were glaring at him, daring him to not do what he told him to. “I’ll…never…fucking forgive…you…if you don’t!”

He wasn’t even sure how he was keeping his eyes open at this. This time the transformation had all but wiped out everything he had. His body ached from the crash, but he didn’t think there was anything broken. Normally the change did exhaust him, but never quite to this extent.

“Vincent! I can’t fucking hold you much longer if you don’t help me out!”
“…I’m sorry,” he whispered as he curled his hand around and gripped Cid’s arm. Though he couldn’t feel it, he could see the red as the tips of his claws pierced through the pilot’s jacket and into his skin. To his credit, Cid didn’t seem to give it a single thought or even make a sound of pain. He just kept their eyes locked together, as if by doing so, everything would be all right.

“You’d…better not fall…asleep, you asshole,” Cid warned him.

“No promises,” he replied quietly. “I—”

A surprised shout from beneath him made him look down, breaking their stare. A young girl was standing there, a basket she had dropped at her feet. Her emerald green eyes were the clearest that Vincent had ever seen. “Are you all right?!?” She rushed forward, but there was not much she could do as they dangled so high above her.

“Does it fucking look…like we’re all right?!” Cid spat at her, grunting as because of the blood and sweat, his grip loosened on the smooth metal arm. Vincent slid just a little further down, causing small rents in the pilot’s arm and making him bleed more.

“Cid.”

“What?!”

“I’m letting go.”

“Like hell you are!”

“If I don’t, you’ll be injured further.”

“Then gimme your other damn arm you idiot!”

“That doesn’t solve the problem, Cid. I’ll still be hanging here and eventually take you with me.”

“Shit, shit, shit…” Cid closed his eyes for a minute and Vincent found himself pulled a little higher as the pilot fumbled with something. He looked up just in time to see the base of the spear being thrust at him. “Here! If we both hold onto this, do you think you’ll be low enough to drop without hurting yourself?”

Vincent tiredly looked down at the distance between him and the flowers beneath him. “Yes, I can,” he said after a minute. With his enhancements, even as tired as he was, he could land without causing himself undue damage from that height.

“Then grab it you idiot!”

“What…about you…?”

“I’ll find a way down somehow. Thanks to your idiocy, I’m okay!”

Vincent reached out and grabbed the spear with his flesh hand and gratefully let Cid go with his claws. He didn’t want to hurt him anymore, no matter what the pilot said to him. Cid was coming close to being…a friend at this point and he hated hurting his friends. Slowly he was lowered down farther until Cid was gripping the base of the blade tightly near the tip of the spear. The ex-Turk looked down, noting the girl hovering near in concern, and let go.

Instinct made him curl up just a little, bracing his legs, and he landed on his feet for a few seconds, before he collapsed on his knees. Without any control on his part, Vincent passed out right there in
the middle of the fragrance of flowers.
Vincent’s eyes twitched beneath his lids as he realized that he was awake. For a moment, he lay still as he gathered his wits together. He remembered what had happened as clear as day. In fact, how long had been asleep? What had happened after he passed out? And more importantly...

Chaos? There was no response, so instead, he did something he so very rarely did: he sent all his consciousness into his soul to find Chaos. He had to know what the problem with the demon was. He hoped that it wasn’t something the bottomswell did. He couldn’t imagine anything poisoning him; he sincerely hoped all it was, was that he was just exhausted after the fight and what had happened before was he had all but forced Chaos out when he wasn’t ready. Thinking on it, Vincent realized that he had no real idea of how his demons worked. He’d avoided them whenever he could, to the point that he knew little about them.

He found the presence that was Chaos and prodded him in a nonverbal way. There was the feeling of a ‘grumble’, as someone would do if a person tried to wake them up and they didn’t want to, rolling over in the bed and ignored the interruption. It put some of Vincent’s worries to rest; at least it didn’t appear as if Chaos had disappeared or was otherwise harmed. While he had never known Chaos to be so exhausted, it wasn’t implausible. The fight with the bottomswell was, in essence, the longest time he’d ever allowed Chaos out and that was to fight. Then forcing him out a second time within barely twenty-four hours had likely made that exhaustion worse.

As he left Chaos and the other demons alone, he couldn’t help but reflect that he’d had a twinge of unease at the thought of the demon being gone. They’d been there for what felt like forever and for the longest time, they’d been all he’d ever had to talk to down in the basement of the ShinRa mansion. In some ways, they had kept him sane despite his griping about them and how he’d rather wished they weren’t there to start with. He’d grown used to their presence and he was concerned that he might actually, just a tiny bit, miss them if they were gone.

Not that there was a snowball’s chance in hell that he’d ever tell them that.

Vincent opened his eyes slowly, blinking at the light. The first thing he noticed was that he was looking up at Cid’s scruffy face. The second was that his head was, apparently, in the pilot’s lap. He blinked, wondering if this was some sort of strange dream or joke.

“Man, you really do have nightmares every time you sleep,” Cid commented, a serious look on his face.

“What?”

The pilot scratched the back of his head and looked away, toward the pews. “I mean, I thought you were exaggerating, but I guess you weren’t. First time I saw what you were like when you slept was that time in Junon. You were couldn’t stay still and when I thought you’d start flailing, I had to grab you. Then when you passed out here and we had wrapped you up in a blanket and all, you about tore it to shreds, so I had to grab you then too. Seems to settle you when you’re being touched by somebody, so…”

Could this get any more embarrassing?

“Who is ‘we’?”

“Oh, Aeris. The girl, you remember? She ain’t here right now, but she said she’ll come back. She
had to go home for some stuff, she said.” Vincent was about to sit up when Cid’s voice paused him. “Vincent…”

“What?”

Those sky blue eyes looked at him again. “You’re a fucking reckless idiot, but…thanks.” Logically he understood what Cid was saying and why he was saying it, but Vincent so rarely ever heard the word that he couldn’t help but stare. It seemed to cause a bit of embarrassment for the pilot and he started to babble a bit. “I mean, that’s the second time you’ve saved me and this time it was a lot worse than last. This time you actually got hurt, even if they’re only bruises or whatever. It’s as embarrassing as all hell that both times I’ve been flying you, I crash and you’ve had to save my ass.”

Vincent stared for a long moment before he sat up and smiled a little at Cid. “…It’s fine,” he told him. “You don’t have to thank me for anything.”

“Like hell I don’t. Don’t start with the false modesty.”

“It’s not false modesty. If it weren’t for the demons that I hold inside, you wouldn’t have been in that predicament to start with and there have been several times that you’ve helped me.”

Cid eyed him a bit, as if not convinced that what he did made them even. “If you say so. I never really thought about it. I mean, that it was savin’ you and all. It’s just what you do for friends.”

His eyes widened a bit. “Friends?”

“Yeah, friends. What’d you think we were?”

“Well…traveling companions…?” he ventured.

“At first, yeah, but you can’t hang around a guy like you for two weeks and leave it at that. Person’ll either hate you or you’ll become friends. You’d better think of me as a friend!”

Despite Cid’s words, Vincent could see the serious question in his eyes. It was perhaps the most sincere conversation that they’d ever had in all the time they’d known each other. After a minute, he nodded. “Yes, I think we are…friends…”

“Good!” Cid settled back against the wall he had chosen, the pews of the church to his right. “So…what was the deal with the landing?”

Vincent looked back at him. “You mean Chaos?”

“Yes. You fucking threw me out of the helicopter and then you finally get around to flyin’, we’re always one step short of landing like a rock somewhere or crashing into a support beam.”

He wasn’t sure how to explain it so that Cid could understand. “I don’t…really know. Years ago…it seems like forever…I was experimented on and four demons were embedded into my soul. Chaos is the most powerful and he is…very powerful. When I call him out, as you can probably guess, I have no control over him. I have no control over any of the demons, really. So in order to buy time, and since Chaos can fly, I had him hold off the bottomswell. Never before had Chaos needed to stay around for that long. Neither one of us were used to it, I suppose, and between that and the injuries, I think it exhausted him. When I called on him again earlier, he was sluggish. I didn’t even think he was capable of appearing. Even when he was flying, it was as if he was still mostly asleep. It was all I could do to ‘guide’ him.”
Cid watched him for a minute, causing Vincent to shift in self-consciousness. He hated explaining things, particularly things like this. “So what about now?”

“I don’t know. He seems to be deeply asleep at the moment and will probably stay that way for several days at least.” He paused for a moment as he looked down at his knees. “I didn’t realize just how much I was relying on him recently. I am not surprised he is exhausted.”

“Well…” He looked up as Cid crossed his legs. “When he wakes up, say thanks to him.”

His eyebrow rose, but he nodded after a minute. “Where are we?” he asked, very happy to change the subject.

As Cid explained that they had landed in a church in the Sector 7 slums, he stood and approached the nearby garden. He listened as the man described Aeris Gainsborough and how she tended the flowers, selling them for one gil. “She must have an amazing touch, to grow flowers down here,” he murmured.

“Thank you,” her cheerful voice answered and Vincent looked up.

Aeris, dressed in a pretty blue dress, approached. In her hands she held a picnic basket and the closer she came, the more the smells invaded. Cid’s attention was caught in an instant and he stood up. “Is that food?”

She giggled. “I figured, after everything, you’d both be very hungry.” She set the basket down and opened it, showing an abundance of sandwiches, bottles of water, crackers, and down near the bottom, he swore he saw a pie. As she handed the pilot a plate she had packed away, she asked, “So how did you manage to get through my roof?”

“Oh, that. Vincent can tell you all that shit.”

Vincent glared at him, not appreciate being shoved the responsibility to explain it. Cid’s look was unrepentant and he probably did it as a quasi sort of revenge given that he hadn’t told the pilot what Cloud had told him. In fact, he’d told him very little in the long run. Sighing, he took the plate Aeris had filled up with food with a soft ‘thank you’ and sat down near them.

“About two weeks ago, I…met a SOLDIER named Cloud Strife at Nibelheim. When they left, he told me to go see Cid Highwind. I did as he asked, assuming that the Cid Highwind I was told to meet would be able to tell me why he directed me there—”

“Like hell I know, I didn’t even know the kid!”

Vincent glared at the interruption, but continued. “Since neither of us knew why he sent me, Cid decided it was best to ask the SOLDIER in question. I have no idea if he has a PHS, or what his number might be, so he insisted that we travel to Midgar to find out.”

“You want to see Cloud?”

Cid perked up. “Hey! You know him?”

“Well…yes. He’s Zack’s friend.”

“Zack?”

“My boyfriend.” She smiled happily. “I met Cloud through Zack, when he dragged him and Sephiroth down to meet me. I don’t know his PHS number, but I can always call Zack, if you
Cid grinned and nudged Vincent’s shoulder in triumph. “See, lookit that! Yeah, that’d be great!”

“Then I’ll do that while you eat.” Aeris stood up and went outside the church, likely for better reception.

“So?”

Cid looked up at his question, in the middle of opening a bottle of water. “What?”

“What are you planning on doing once you have met Cloud? Your goal is to ask him why he asked me to meet you. Once you know, what are you planning on doing?”

The pilot leaned back against the side of a pew and thought about it. “Well…dunno. Guess it depends on what he says.”

*What are you going to do when he tells you the story he told me and if it actually turns out that you were part of some group to save the world?* Vincent wanted to ask this question, but kept quiet. That would come later.

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You gonna ask this kid anything?”

“. . . I do have one question that I would like answered.”

Cid leaned forward curiously. “What’s that?”

“I’m sure you’ll find out soon,” Vincent told him as he noticed Aeris returning. Her face was a bit less cheerful and more worried than before. “Is something wrong?” he asked.

“They’ll be coming soon, but it’ll be at night. It’s the only time they can get here and he says please don’t go anywhere.” She hesitated a minute, before continuing. “You have to be careful because the Turks watch me and they probably know you’re here.”

Vincent stiffened. Turks?! Without a moment’s pause, he was on his feet. He had to leave. He didn’t dare meet with the Turks. If they took him in again, Hojo would grab him. As if that wasn’t enough, he was sure they’d want to ‘talk’ with him about the stolen, and now destroyed, helicopter.

“Whoa, whoa, Vincent! Where the hell you goin’?!”

“Leaving. If the Turks are watching this place, that makes it all the more imperative that I leave.”

Cid grabbed him from behind. “What the fuck! You ain’t goin’ anywhere! We’re here to talk to that Cloud kid and like hell we came all this damn way just for you to get itchy feet!”

“Do you not remember stealing the Vice President’s helicopter?”

“Yeah, but just because they’re watching doesn’t mean that they’re gonna bust the door down!”

“Please!” Aeris added, stepping in front of him, blocking his exit out the door. “Cloud, Zack, and Sephiroth will be here in a few hours. Please, can’t you stay? Zack said they really need to talk to you.”
He paused. Talk to him? “Why?”

Her clear emerald eyes looked up into his, as if by that alone she could force him to stay. For a moment, Vincent had a sense of vertigo. It was as if they were bottomless sea of green and if he stared long enough, a door would open in them and he would be able to see into another world. Something...something powerful was deep inside her and the longer he stared, the more he felt his demons stir. Even Chaos seemed to nudge awake, as if drawn by that power. Not in a way that made him feel as if they wanted to harm, but just gravitating toward an amazing sense of energy and intensity.

“What...are you?”

Aeris smiled after a minute. “A girl,” she replied with a gentle smile. When she blinked, it was as if that coiling power she allowed him to see for a brief glimpse, that ‘other world’ of both nothingness and everything, disappeared. She had closed the door.

It was enough, though. Enough to make him stay, to wonder what he had gotten himself into, and maybe Cloud might be able to explain just who this young girl actually was.

-0-0-0-0-

The door opened, the sound seeming much louder in the quiet church. It was dark now, lit only by some lanterns that Aeris had brought from her home. She stood and after a minute, there were three sets of heavy footfalls, causing the floor to creak.

“Zack!”

“Hey, you!” The black-haired SOLDIER he had met wrapped his arms around the girl, kissing her lightly, but his face remained serious and he led her back to Vincent and Cid with an arm around her waist.

Cloud was next, followed closely by Sephiroth. It appeared as if they hadn’t even taken the time to change out of their uniforms and Vincent hoped that they had been stealthy enough to not have drawn the attention of any Turks. He doubted any but Sephiroth could move as quietly as he could, but down in the slums, they stood out. Perhaps it was a good thing that they’d had to come down at night; at least most people would be sleeping by then.

“Vincent! Cid! Are you two all right?! The wreckage of the helicopter was terrible!”

As Cid eyed Cloud, taking in his spiky blonde hair and SOLDIER appearance, Vincent answered, “Fine.”

“I didn’t think I’d see you this soon.”

“He insisted.”

“What?” Cloud turned to Cid, who lit a cigarette.

“I wanted to know what would make a kiddo like you send me an emo vampire.” Cloud stiffened, glancing at Vincent in concern, but the man in question only smiled just a tiny bit. He’d gotten too used to Cid to take offense at something like that.

“You...don’t know? Didn’t Vincent tell you?”

“Vincent? Tell me something? Ha!”
“But…”

Vincent shrugged. “It was not my story to tell and I don’t feel that I have all the facts to start with. I have no idea why you sent me to him.”

“Well…I suppose not. I figured this explanation would take less time since you’d tell him what I told you.”

“Why don’t we all sit down and Cloud can explain start to finish with as much detail as he can remember?” Aeris suggested.

This did not appear to thrill Cloud all that much, but given the stubborn expressions of Cid, Sephiroth, and Zack, he gave in. “Okay, but…I can tell you now that none of you are going to like it and…it’s really hard for me to say, so…but I’ll tell you every little detail if that’s what you guys really want.”

Vincent settled on the floor, Cid sandwiching him between himself and Sephiroth, a place he didn’t really want to be right then. Sephiroth was Lucrecia’s son, someone that it could be possible was his own. He didn’t know for sure, they’d only really spent one night together and there was no way a paternity test would ever be able to compare their DNA given the experimentation, but just the thought that they might be father and son was both unsettling and a tad pleasant. Not for what Sephiroth went through, but the fact that he was alive.

“So to answer your question, Vincent, I sent you to Cid because…well… Cid was part of AVALANCHE and you were friends,” Cloud was saying.

That was it? There was nothing else? “…What?”

Cloud seemed to understand the real question behind it. “It’s kind of hard to explain, but of everyone in the group, you were closest to Cid. Sometimes, just sometimes, whenever I thought of one of you, the other would show up, like you were almost a pair. And whenever we were in battle, it was as if you two were reading each other’s minds. You seemed…actually a bit happy whenever Cid was around and I actually heard him make you laugh once. I thought…no matter what happened or how the future changed, that I should at least point you in the direction of each other. You guys impacted each other’s lives so much and it was for the better, so…”

“…And that’s all?”

Cloud shifted a bit and in the low light, it was almost hard to see that there was the faintest of blushes. “For the most part.”

“Well, what’s the rest?” Cid demanded.

“Look, we’ve got a lot of story to cover, so we can always come back to that,” Zack interrupted, steering the conversation away.

“I have one more question,” Vincent said, before Cloud could get started again. Those sapphire eyes, tinted now with mako at their edges, turned to him again. His gaze shifted to Aeris leaning against her boyfriend.

Cloud answered before he could even form the rest of the words. “This…is a really hard part. Aeris is…she’s an Ancient.”

“A what?” Cid asked in the silence.
As Cloud explained the history of the Ancients, suddenly that moment earlier made sense to Vincent. So what he had been seeing in her eyes was the Lifestream. It had to be, if the Ancients had such a connection to it. Could she touch it at will? Was the Lifestream a constant consciousness? Did it retain the ‘memories’ of that other possible future that Cloud was from and if it did, did she already know? Aeris’ expression was neither shocked, as if she didn’t know, but also it didn’t appear as if she knew everything that the SOLDIER was saying. Perhaps she’d had an inkling of what he was saying so she wasn’t all that surprised, but just didn’t know the details.

Curiously, Vincent turned to see how Sephiroth was processing the full and unfettered story, but his expression was blank. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking, but at least the ex-Turk was reasonably sure that he wasn’t about to go insane right at that very moment and make Cloud’s words truth.

When the story came to a close, all eyes shifted to look at Cid, who didn’t appear as if he knew what to think. He spluttered for a moment, looking at them all, before blurting, “The fuck?! You all insane?! You expect me to believe that shit?!”

Cloud didn’t seem surprised at this reaction. “I can prove it.”

“How?” was the immediate, and suspicious, reply.

“You’ve never met me before, right?”

“No.”

“Because of that, I shouldn’t know anything about you.”

“That won’t work, kid. I was in ShinRa, you could easily find that shit out.”

But Cloud merely smiled, and said, “Just listen.” Cid’s eyes widened the longer he talked, listening to details about Shera, what she looked like; the aborted launch and cancellation of the space program; what his house looked like both inside and out, and how the residents treated him.

“Okay, okay! Enough!” Cid spat, looking a tad shaken. “I get it, I believe you!”

“Good. Now, to the reason that I wanted to talk to you two, since you showed up in Midgar.”

“What, so it wasn’t to explain all that?”

There was a frown on Cloud’s face and he looked very worried. “No, that was all background you needed to know to understand why this is such a problem.” He glanced at Aeris before continuing. “Remember when I told you that Sephiroth recently threw JENOVA’s head into the reactor two weeks ago? Well…I didn’t think about it at the time, I was just so relieved that Sephiroth was okay, but that turned out to be a bad move. Now JENOVA is in the Lifestream, and according to Aeris, it’s not looking good.”

“What can she do in there?” Vincent asked. “Surely the Lifestream is powerful enough to withstand her.”

“Normally, yes,” Aeris said in a subdued voice.

“Remember when I told you about Geostigma?” Cloud continued, before Cid could interrupt. “Well that’s going to be the end result if we don’t stop this and this time around, there won’t be any curing it.”
“What do you mean?”

“Originally the plan was to infect living people so that when they returned to the Lifestream, the Lifestream itself would be infected and the planet would become JENOVA’s new body. We ruined that plan, but she’s already where she needs to be.”

“How exactly are you planning on fixing that then, if she’s already there?” Cid asked out, stubbing out his third cigarette on the floorboards and looking mournfully at the empty pack in his hand.

“There’s not enough of her to infect the Lifestream directly the way it is now, but if she can just spread herself thin enough and put a ‘little here’ and a ‘little there’, dispersing herself, then she’s ready to do more. And with ShinRa…”

Vincent’s eyes widened at the implication. “ShinRa has reactors delving into mako, which is, in essence, the Lifestream itself. By tainting the Lifestream, and therefore mako, whenever it’s used, she has a chance to infect people.”

Cloud’s expression was glum. “Right. Not only just the reactors, but the SOLDIER program is a way of infecting anyone. Does anyone think it’s a good idea to let some of the most powerful people on the planet get infected by JENOVA?” Cloud looked at Sephiroth, who had remained steadfastly silent, before continuing. “Anyone exposed to mako would be at risk and the more people that get infected will get Geostigma. Every time a person dies of Geostigma, they’ll pollute the Lifestream. There are more people than JENOVA, so she’s, in essence, doubling herself. It wouldn’t take long at any rate. The only reason Geostigma was cured last time was because Aeris was in the Lifestream to help and JENOVA hadn’t gotten that far yet.”

“So what exactly are you planning on doing about it?” Cid asked.

“That’s exactly what I would like to know.”

The effect of that new voice from the doorway was as if someone had poured cold water over hot coals. The five of them stood and whirled, hands going to weapons. There were the sounds of several footfalls in the tense silence and into the light entered five people.

“Rufus!” Cloud gasped.
Chapter 10

So this was the Rufus of Cloud’s story. Vincent looked him up and down, unimpressed, then turned most of his attention on the Turks. There were only four, three of which he’d seen when they’d stolen the helicopter, and they surrounded the young man protectively, but that didn’t mean there weren’t more Turks covering the church outside. Very slowly he began to shift his hand to Quicksilver.

“I didn’t expect that when I tracked down the person who stole my helicopter that none other would ShinRa’s general, his lieutenant, and another SOLDIER would be conspiring with them. After all, they have, on the surface, appeared to have committed such terroristic acts,” Rufus stated, his tone as if he were commenting on the weather.

In a move almost too fast to see, Sephiroth had pulled the Masamune from its sheath. His eyes were hard and Vincent really wished, at that very moment, that he could see what was going on in his head. “How long were you there?”

Rufus slowly reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a recorder. With the tap of a button, Cloud’s voice filled the room again. He let it play for a few minutes before stopping it, and it disappeared back into the very same coat pocket. “We saw you walk in.”

The creak of leather following that statement seemed too loud as Sephiroth’s hand tightened on his sword and the Turks started shifting their weight, getting ready to pull their weapons quickly, if need be. Vincent slipped Quicksilver from its holster just as Zack stepped between the two groups.

“Can we not get into a bloodbath in Aeris’ church?” When no one moved, he sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, so what does the playboy of ShinRa want?”

“Do I have such a reputation?” the man asked casually back before taking a few steps forward, away from his guards. Glacial blue eyes turned to Vincent. “First, I’d like to ask a question of the one who stole, and destroyed, my helicopter.”

“It wasn’t our fault it crashed!” Cid defended.

Rufus ignored him. “You had a clear shot. You deliberately missed. Why?”

“I had no intention of killing anyone,” Vincent replied quietly. “You are not my enemy, but neither are you my ally.”

“Who are your allies, Vincent Valentine, former Turk?” He stiffened and Rufus seemed to smirk, just a little, at his reaction. “You didn’t think that there would be a way to find out who you were? Tseng is very well versed in the history of the Turks and despite your changed appearance, you are still recognizable. So I ask again: who are your allies?”

“…They are not you, nor the Turks, nor ShinRa.”

Rufus frowned just a little, as Vincent refused to answer his question. The truth was, Vincent still wasn’t quite sure who his allies actually were, besides Cid. He’d had very little interaction with Sephiroth, Zack, Cloud, and Aeris, but his gut instinct said that they at least wouldn’t turn on him. If he’d had to side with someone at all, it would be them.

“What do you want, Rufus?” Cloud asked, stepping up next to Zack, almost acting as a barrier between Sephiroth and the future heir of the ShinRa Corporation.
He wasn’t really expecting an answer, so Vincent was surprised when Rufus didn’t hesitate in speaking. “Control of my father’s company,” he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, as if that were obvious and he didn’t see the need for the question to be asked. “That isn’t the question you should be asking.”

“You mean to say we should be asking why you’re here in the slums,” Vincent finished for him.

“My, aren’t you a smart one, Valentine.”

When Rufus didn’t say anything further, Cid stomped past Vincent and even Cloud to glare the young man right in the eye. “So? Then what the fuck are you doing down here? You expectin’ me to believe that you give a shit about one helicopter?”

“Of course not. There are dozens more available.” That white-clothed figure glided smoothly past all of them to stand at the edge of the flower patch despite the obvious sound of distress from one of the Turks he had left behind. Vincent glanced over to them, but it was impossible to tell which it had come from. Perhaps it came from the only other Turk he had not seen, a young woman with short blonde hair that appeared to show her anxiousness significantly more than her comrades.

“No, originally I decided to come here because I assumed that perhaps you might be associated with that group called AVALANCHE. Thanks to my father’s continued efforts, he’s managed to put them into disarray. Even if you weren’t, though, I assumed that given your…flamboyant entrance into Midgar that I still might be able to use you to my own ends.” Finally Rufus turned to them, but his relaxed expression had morphed into a serious one. He frowned. “You can imagine my surprise, then, when I arrived just in time to see three SOLDIERs, one of them ShinRa’s pride and joy, entering the church that my Turks had assured me contained the two I was looking for. So I waited, listening.”

There seemed to be a silent conversation going on between Cloud and Rufus before the young man continued. “At first I thought that perhaps the mako injections had caused some mental instability, as the story sounded, frankly, insane. Yet the latter part, particularly about the JENOVA head being thrown into the Lifestream reminded me of a report regarding an incident in Nibelheim. There was very little information in it, almost all of it classified even from me.” His lips pursed together in a thin line. “While I am not entirely certain whether I believe the full account of the story, I just cannot dismiss the possibility in this case.”

“Wait, are you saying you want to help us?” Zack blurted.

Finally that smirk came back and Rufus casually brushed some of his hair back, as if he wasn’t in the middle of hostile negotiations. “No, I am proposing an exchange of strength.”

“You want us to help in your coup and in turn, you’ll give us the necessary resources to stop JENOVA,” Sephiroth stated flatly, lowering his sword a little.

“You must admit that it is a good deal. You need more freedom than my old man is going to give you to respond to this threat and I can give you that. I need the two major factions on my side before I take him down otherwise the company will split itself apart. I already have the Turks full loyalty. All I need now…”

“Is SOLDIER,” Cloud finished.

“Exactly.”

“Is this the feeling the phrase ‘deal with the devil’ is describing?” Cid commented in the ensuing
“Oh, surely I’m not that bad. Even Cloud admits in his story that I am apparently all nice and fuzzy.”

Cloud’s eyes narrowed at the flippant comment. “You may have helped the planet, Rufus, but that was after it was almost destroyed and you recognized what your own company was doing to it. It only took you two near-death experiences before you recognized the wrong your company had done.”

Vincent thought it might actually devolve into violence then, given Rufus’ clearly unhappy expression, before he said something that was remarkably reasonable. “How do you know that I would make it worse? By your account, I was in control of ShinRa for all of a month or so, if that. That is hardly enough time to get things in order and change an entire regime.”

“He is right, you know,” Vincent murmured, prompting surprised looks from everyone around him. “You yourself have proven that a future is not set in stone. Every action has a ripple effect. It is entirely possible that ShinRa could change for the better under his leadership.”

“And what the fuck do you do if it doesn’t, huh?” Cid argued.

“It is not a situation that couldn’t be rectified. Might I point out that SOLDIER contains some of the most powerful people on the planet? Should Sephiroth, Cloud, and Zack feel that ShinRa has become irredeemably corrupt, it would not take much to shake it down to its very foundations physically. Destroy the building, destroy its records, destroy the reactors, and it would take decades or longer to regain the power that was lost. Or kill its leader. I am quite sure they are capable of that as well.”

Rufus’ eyebrow rose at him. “I did not expect to have you defend me.”

“I am not defending you. I am merely pointing out the facts.”

Glacial eyes were considering him before asking, “What will you and your friend do?”

“What?”

There was that sound of distress again as Rufus ambled forward, right into the midst of what could be his enemies. “I understand our SOLDIERs here would get involved. I can understand Ms. Gainsborough, being an Ancient, would be involved. Would you and your companion join in the fight?”

He looked at Cid, who stared right back. The pilot had even less incentive to join in this insane scenario than he did. Vincent’s eyes flicked to Cloud, who didn’t even bother hiding his anxiety at his answer. Was it residual feelings of companionship from that length of time they’d worked together in that alternate future? In fact, was there anything Vincent could even contribute? Wasn’t he too broken after all he’d gone through?

*Why don’t you be honest with yourself for once?*

His eyes widened in surprise. *Chaos?*

*Did you think I was dead?*

*Hardly. I did, however, think you were asleep.*
There was a long stretch of silence before Chaos replied. It’s because your body can’t handle my power in such a short time frame. As you’ve said, we share the same body, but I still bear the brunt of the exhaustion. If you don’t want that to happen again, if you want to be sure to not fail your ‘friends’ again, you’d best work at improving. You have to get stronger in your body and summon me more to push your limits.

Was that how it worked? Why hadn’t he asked Chaos before? Was he that afraid that he was a monster and he couldn’t handle seeing the proof of that? I would rather not rely on you, but I also cannot ignore you either.

“—nt!”

Finally! About time you came to the realization that you actually need me regardless of what you say.

…I didn’t miss the running commentary when you were asleep. It was so blessedly quiet.

“—cent!”

You do realize someone’s talking to you, don’t you? Am I so riveting that you’ve blocked everything else out?

Vincent blinked and realized Chaos was right. Cloud was doing everything but shaking his shoulder, trying to get his attention, and he hadn’t noticed. Before he could say anything, Cid butted in. “Oi, give him a minute. He’s probably just talkin’ with Chaos.”

“Chaos?” someone asked, and he wasn’t sure if it was Rufus or Zack.

“Yeah, one of his demons. I thought he was asleep though.”

“He’s awake now,” Vincent interrupted.

Cid smirked. “Really? Didja tell him?”

Tell me what?

He frowned at his friend. “I haven’t had the time.”

Much like a shark scenting blood in the water, Chaos’ attention was now thoroughly drawn to the pilot. What were you supposed to tell me, hmmm? The voice was somehow both wheedling and smug at the same time. Something about your inability to live without me?

No! “Do you have any idea what you just did, Cid?” he muttered, sending a fierce glare the pilot’s way. Cid merely grinned at him, almost wickedly.

“I can guess.”

I’m waiting.

“Couldn’t that have waited?”

“I think you need to relax a little more. From the sound of it, Chaos likes to have fun and you need more fun. Stop being so emo all the time!”

For a moment, even Chaos was silent and then Vincent was all but swamped with the feeling of
smug superiority. I do so love this little pet of yours.

Shut. Up. He is not my pet!

I will, if you tell me. At least for a little bit.

Fine! Fine! Cid wanted me to say thank you for saving his life both from the bottomswell and from the helicopter. You happy now?

Smugness was replaced by a sense of stunned silence. …Thank me?

Yes. He says thanks. “He’s stunned into silence, are you happy now?” Cid just grinned as Vincent completely ignored both a surprisingly silent Chaos and a smirking pilot, turning back to Rufus. “Your answer: yes, I would, on one condition.”

To his credit, Rufus only missed one beat before he was back on track. “What condition?”

“Hojo. Let me kill him.”

“I think you’d have to wait in line, Vincent,” Zack commented, but while his tone was easy-going, there was a serious look on his face. “Seph’s first, I’m second.”

Well he had to admit that Sephiroth did have a greater claim, considering what was done to him even before he was born. “Very well. So long as Hojo dies, I will help.”

Rufus appeared to consider it and Vincent knew why he didn’t answer right away. Despite the man’s revolting personality, he was one of the best scientists they had. If the SOLDIER program was going to continue, they’d need someone equally as brilliant, though hopefully not as twisted. Finding someone like that would take time. Rufus eyed him and then Sephiroth before he finally shrugged. “While he is a detestable yet brilliant man, if that’s what it takes, then fine. There are other scientists out there.”

All eyes turned to Cid. He looked back at them fearlessly. “What, you wanna know what I’d do?”

“That is the idea,” Rufus said dryly. “Of course, if you don’t agree, you’ll be the only one and I’m not sure if it would be wise to let you live. Can’t have any of my father’s men catch you and torture out all this information, after all.”

“Shit, I’d like to see you try to kill me!” Cid made no move to grab his nearby spear, though, so it appeared mostly for talk. “I dunno why you even gotta ask. If Vincent’s in, so am I.”

“You’re really that close?”

Cid grinned in that unrepentant but entirely charismatic way he had. It wasn’t a smirk, it was an actual smile, and Vincent blinked as suddenly a rough and muscular arm was thrown around his shoulder. Cid was shorter than him, so it caused him to lean over a little due to the unexpected motion. “Just what you do for friends, right? He needs me.”

Between him and Chaos, I think I’ll go mad, Vincent thought to himself, but he had to secretly admit that he was glad anyway.
Chapter 11

“Sir…”

Rufus knew what was coming even before anything was said. He was honestly surprised it had taken this long to get around to it. “Yes, Tseng?” he replied calmly. Their eyes met in the rearview mirror and he could see the disapproval in the dark gaze.

“Was any of that a wise idea?”

He didn’t say anything immediately, mostly because he had the same misgivings that his Turks had. Reno, who was currently smashed against his right side in the back seat, had had a hard time keeping his voice down and he’d not shut up during the entire drive down to the Sector 7 slums. Rude, on Rufus’ left as they acted like a buffer zone, didn’t have to say anything. His disapproving silence was quite clear.

“Possibly not,” he acknowledged.

“Are you really going to let Hojo die?” Elena asked after a minute from her position in the front passenger seat. As always, she sounded nervous when she spoke to him.

Rufus grimaced just a little. “I’d rather not, truth be told. As I said, he is an exceptionally gifted scientist even if he lacks morals of any kind and finding a replacement will not be easy. I’m not even sure if there is someone that is up to his caliber.”

“Then why did you agree, sir?”

“Should I say no and lose the cooperation of those I need to complete my goals?” He shifted a little, uncomfortable being trapped between Rude and Reno, but there was little room to move to. “Besides, I have no doubt that Hojo has a limited life expectancy even if I didn’t agree, so it’s best to wholeheartedly embrace it and gain trust than to ignore it. And is this really necessary, Tseng?”

Tseng gave him a look, just a glance, in the rearview mirror again and while no expression crossed his face, Rufus couldn’t help but think that his current seating arrangements were on purpose. He wouldn’t put it past the Wutaian to pull some passive-aggressive revenge for doing something that he considered monumentally risky. “What are you referring to, sir?”

“Why am I sitting between Reno and Rude like this? The windows are bulletproof.”

Was that the ghost of a smirk, or his eyes playing tricks on him? Must be his eyes because Tseng never smirked. “The windows may be bulletproof, but if someone wanted to, they could attempt to crash into the car with another vehicle. If that happens, then it would be Reno or Rude injured or killed instead of you. Preferably Reno.”

“Hey!” the redhead protested, but there was a curl of his lip that said he wasn’t really angry or annoyed at the slight tease. Even Rude snorted a little in amusement.

“You know, I can always have you killed,” he muttered, crossing his arms.

“Of course, sir,” was the calm reply, not seeming at all bothered because he knew that Rufus wouldn’t do that no matter how he might threaten. “It would be an honor to die at your order. However, that does not change the fact that you did something very reckless by going to the slums to confront Valentine and Highwind, not to mention entering when Sephiroth, Strife, and Fair were
“Might I point out that all of you were there with me the entire time?” he argued with a frown.

“Only because I insisted on it when you said you were going. Just bringing Reno with you would not be enough, not in that kind of situation.” Rufus watched as, just a little, Tseng’s hands tightened on the steering wheel. “On top of that, despite the fact that there were four of us there, you left our protection to walk right into their midst. At the distance between us, and with so many there, had they decided to attack, you would be dead right now.”

“I knew they wouldn’t.”

“What made you so sure, sir?”

His gaze turned to Elena at her hesitant question. “Because they’re not idiots, particularly Sephiroth. If their story is true, and at this point I have little reason to doubt it, they can’t do what they want to do without me. Not only can I allow greater freedom for them, I can help them in other ways. I’m sure there will be situations in the future when something other than brute force will be required.”

“You mean the Turks?”

“Exactly. Without me on their side, the Turks will do absolutely nothing to help, but worse than that is that without siding with me, every Turk is actually a potential threat. Anything overheard or seen being reported to people who shouldn’t hear about it. He knew that it was in his best interests to become allies.” Rufus tapped his chin as he thought. “There is also the matter of Cloud Strife.”

“You mean about their relationship?” Reno asked, shifting his hips and bracing his elbow against the closed window of the door. This had the effect of pressing his thigh against Rufus’ and he shot him an unhappy look. It was hot enough back there with the two of them as it was without adding to it, particularly since Tseng had forbidden them from lowering the windows even a little. More passive-aggressive revenge?

“Yes. Sephiroth is lucky that it was Tseng who noticed and brought the video footage to me instead of my father. Even to keep him happy, he won’t allow that sort of thing. He relented to Sephiroth’s threatening over Zack Fair’s ‘liberties’, but do you honestly see him accepting Sephiroth having a lover? That would mean allowing someone an even greater amount of influence over the dear General. He’d either have Strife disposed of or, perhaps worse, give him to Hojo. Sephiroth is smart enough to know that, by now, after all this time, someone had to have noticed all the security cameras and that someone is keeping that secret. Then there is also the matter of that fantastical tale of his.”

Rufus smirked at his Turks, still feeling pleased over the outcome of the discussion in the church. “I find it hard to believe that Strife’s information regarding myself in this alternate future didn’t play a part. Several near-death experiences or not,” There was a faint hitch in the smooth ride of the car, just a twitch, showed what Tseng’s thoughts about that were, “my actions in this supposed crisis clearly show that I am far less heartless than my father.”

“You really thought all that through, huh?” Reno commented lazily.

“Of course,” Rufus replied, a tad annoyed that Reno assumed he was going down there without a plan. “I had intended to at least bring up the video evidence of their relationship to convince Sephiroth to ally with me at some point, but it was a pleasant surprise instead to see him in the slums instead. I have a lot of information that would be of a great detriment to him if he became my
enemy.”

“What made you think he just wouldn’t kill you if you’re that much ahead?”

“Because, Reno, I allowed him to have a weakness of mine. I’m just as much at risk to him since I know that all he would have to do is go to my father and state that I am conspiring against him, and I will be killed. By allowing this amount of control in return, it makes it seem as if we are equal.”

“Damn am I glad that I’m on your side.”

He laughed at Reno’s almost-awed statement. “Yes, you should be.”

They pulled into the parking lot reserved for high ranking officials and Rufus sighed when Rude exited, allowing the cool breeze to flow into the cramped car. The taller, silent man helped him out despite the fact that he didn’t really need it. It was just something that they did, these Turks, helping him when he didn’t really need it. They were a tight-knit group, even though they had to take great pains to not seem so when it could get back to his father. Anything that could be considered a weakness the old man would exploit, and Rufus didn’t want to give him any advantage. The last thing he wanted was to lose one of these Turks, particularly Tseng, to a war between father and son.

“One of these days, I’m gonna live in that building,” Reno commented, gesturing to the expensive and high tech building that housed the most important people, including himself and the General.

“If you want to live there, then you should work on your ass-kissing,” Rufus told him with a smirk.

“Yes, sir! Right away, sir!” Reno replied with a grin and dropped down on one knee, seeming to eye Rufus’ ass. Before anyone could say anything, Rufus had definitely not meant it like that, Rude bopped him on the head lightly with a fist and yanked him back up. Trust Reno to take a joke too far.

“You know, Reno,” Rufus commented, trying to suppress a laugh, “sometimes I wonder how you managed to live this long.”

The red-haired Turk laughed. “You and the rest world! Night, Boss!”

He waved at them in dismissal, turning to head inside the building when he noticed that Tseng had yet to leave. “Something else, Tseng?”

Those beautiful features were marred with a frown. “Yes there is, but I would rather not speak of it in an open area like this, sir.”

Rufus shrugged and allowed the Turk to follow him all the way up to the highest floor. Only Sephiroth’s quarters rivaled his own, or so he was told. He’d never actually been in the General’s rooms. Inside was a marvel of technology, kept clean thanks to a maid service. There was a fully stocked bar, soft carpeting, a luscious bedroom, and a lot more that would make most people drool at. One of his favorite places to be was the expansive balcony.

It was just as he was shrugging off his white coat that strong hands grabbed him and all but threw him against the wall. “Tseng?” he asked, taken by surprise but not afraid.

“Permission to speak freely, sir.” It was not exactly a question or a request, Rufus noted, looking down at the grip Tseng had on him.

“Fine, say your peace.”
“Sir, that was the most ridiculous thing you have *ever* done.” Tseng’s voice was angry, fervent, and low. The Wutaian never yelled; he never had to. The intensity there was more than enough to get his point across. “Once the situation changed, once you saw the General and his SOLDIERS enter, you should have reevaluated your plan. Going into that church jeopardized not only your goals, but your very life!”

Rufus knew that this was nowhere near over, so he merely stood there without struggling, staring into those dark eyes as the Wutaian continued. It was so easy for him to get lost in that gaze and that hadn’t changed over the years that he’d known the Turk, as far back as when Tseng had just joined and he’d been a child. Thinking back on it now, he could remember that just around the time he’d turned fifteen, things had changed between them. There’d always a silent understanding regarding their mutual attraction that had, at first, been entirely physical. They had never dared touch casually too much because neither wanted to tempt the control it took to reign in those feelings.

“Do you understand, sir?” Tseng finished in a murmur, leaning in closer as if he couldn’t help but be drawn like a moth to a flame.

To be honest, Rufus couldn’t really reply when those lips were inches from his own. That stalemate, the unstated understanding of *why* they could not touch, had been broken all those months ago. He didn’t honestly remember what he had said to set the Turk off, but whatever it was must have been bad because in an instant, he had found himself being thrown into a supply closet and pinned. Even then, he hadn’t felt fear as a gloved hand had dove into his pants. The touch had been expert, enough that he’d not had that powerful an orgasm for such a long while.

And it only happened once. He wasn’t sure if it was because they had been caught near the end by the startled, sapphire eyes of Cloud Strife, or if Tseng realized he’d lost control and was determined to not do it again. In the end, it didn’t matter, Rufus decided as suddenly they were so close they were breathing each other’s air. Once they had touched in that way, it was impossible to go back to the way it was.

“Tseng,” he murmured, reaching up and grabbing that tie.

“Yes, sir?”

“You’d better fucking kiss me right now or I swear to Gaia—”

He never got to finish that sentence because his order was followed through. It was barely controlled, as if Tseng was doing everything he could to prevent the passion from exploding and yet it wasn’t enough. Well, he couldn’t have that! Rufus stepped forward, making Tseng step back, and he threw out his foot to unbalance the Turk. They landed harshly on the floor and the blue-eyed man claimed that lap as his own. “What do you think you’re doing?” he asked, almost conversationally.

“What—”

“Who said you could hold back?”

“Sir, we really shouldn’t—”

This time it was Rufus who shut Tseng up. When his tongue tempted the Wutaian’s, Tseng’s hands grabbed his hips in a death grip. Damn the man had some incredible control. As Rufus’ hands ran along those arms and chest, he could feel the muscles coiled, as if it was doing everything he could to not dominate him. There was something about knowing this, about knowing that Tseng was
nowhere near as subservient as people thought he was, that turned Rufus on. He knew very well that the Wutaian, despite being a Turk, came to heel only because he wanted to. He had a stubborn streak, and an even larger pride. He knew, right at that moment, that if he took Tseng as his lover, they would be equals outside of work.

Oddly enough, he was all right with that. Rufus respected Tseng more than anyone else he’d ever met. There was power inside him, both physical and mental. He was shrewd, unbelievably smart, and loyal. What Sephiroth was for SOLDIER, Tseng was for the Turks. Tseng neither bowed nor scraped to him like other people, but nor was he disrespectful either.

“Sir,” Tseng gasped at the end of the kiss, eyes half-lidded with desire.

“Yes?” he murmured, pressing their hips together.

The effect the action had was not something he expected. Instead of groaning and the situation progressing, Tseng almost threw him off and stood. He fixed his tie and seemed as if nothing had happened, but Rufus could see his fingers were shaking. “Tseng?”

“No, sir.”

“What?” he stuttered, a little stunned that he was being denied. No one had ever told him no before in this situation, particularly when it was very clear that the desire was mutual.

“It’s too risky right now. When you become president, then—”

“Are you fucking serious?” Rufus demanded bluntly, blaming Reno for having a very bad influence on his language.

“Yes, I am. I will not put you further at risk just to satisfy our physical desires. We’ve waited this long, we can wait a little longer.

So Tseng was aware of all that was unsaid. “If you think I’m waiting until I’m president, you’re dead wrong. I’ll get you in bed long before then.”

Rufus blinked when Tseng turned to him and a smirk touched those stoic lips. So Tseng did know how to smirk, the bastard! “I’m looking forward to your seduction then. Let’s see if you succeed. Good night, sir.”

The vice-president could only sit there on the floor and as the door closed behind an infuriating Turk.
Chapter 12

The presence at Sephiroth’s back was keeping him calm as he led the way to Rufus’ apartment. According to the vice-president, thanks to Reno and Elena, they had rigged the cameras so no one would notice their destination. It wasn’t that it bothered him to be working with Rufus, really; he had never given a thought to the man one way or another. To him, he had always been just the younger version of his father and the way he’d seen it, the company would run the same as before no matter who was in charge. Now he wasn’t so sure.

“Is something bothering you?”

He looked behind him at Cloud. His blue eyes were serious, and a tad concerned. “Nothing more or less than usual.”

“Can you hear JENOVA?”

Sephiroth tilted his head, listening. “I’m not entirely sure what it is that I’m supposed to be hearing.”

Cloud pursed his lips together, as if trying to decide whether he should say anything more. “For me, it always sounded kind of like a constant whisper near my ear. Sometimes it would sound really loud, mostly when I was around you to make it stronger, and sometimes it would be really weak.”

“I hear nothing new, but it’s possible that I’ve ‘heard’ her ‘voice’ all along, since I was a child, and just learned to tune it out,” Sephiroth hypothesized.

“I don’t know whether that makes me feel better or worse.”

He stopped walking for a moment before turning around to look his boyfriend right in the eye. “Cloud, are you concerned that I will go insane? Is that why you seem so worried lately even now?”

Part of him was a bit glad that Cloud seemed to be seriously thinking about his question rather than blurt out an abrupt denial. “…A little, but mostly what I’m worried about is just…you.”

He frowned, not sure what that meant. He was ShinRa’s general and the greatest SOLDIER to ever live. That wasn’t an inflated ego, it was mere fact. There wasn’t a lot that could harm him enough that he was concerned about his life. “What do you mean?”

“I’m worried about what will happen to you with JENOVA in the Lifestream. I’m worried about whether you’re immune to Geostigma or not.” There was a sad sort of twist to his lips. “That is a lot of pain that I’d rather you not be in. I’m worried about whether the president will notice that we’re planning a coup, and what Hojo will do to you the next time you go to the lab.”

“…You worry a lot,” Sephiroth stated after a minute, a little stunned.

Surprisingly, Cloud laughed. “Yeah I do, and those are only the worries I have about you. It’s always been one of flaws.” Before Sephiroth could say anything, he added, “I don’t worry about you because you might go insane; I worry about you because I care.”

That was one thing that Zack had spent a lot of time with him trying to get him to understand and Sephiroth was grateful for it. For the longest time, he had always understood worrying about him
because he was an asset to the company, or a wonderful and expensive specimen. “Thank you then, for caring, even though your worry is unnecessary. I’ll be fine.”

The elevator took its time to the top floor, but he wasn’t in a hurry. Rufus could wait and it wouldn’t hurt the arrogant younger ShinRa to learn patience. Or at least, he assumed Rufus was impatient; up until this point, his contact with the third most powerful man in ShinRa had been limited.

“It seems like something you’d tell Zack.”

“What?” He thought back to the end of their conversation a few minutes ago. “Oh. That’s because I said that to him once.”

“Really? What happened?”

“It was right after the war with Wutai. I was given orders to find a small pocket of resistance fighters and deal with them. The intelligence reports indicated that there were no more than six, so I decided that sending a regiment was unnecessary and went myself. I didn’t mention to Zack that I was going, as I was under the mistaken impression that once he’d been made my lieutenant that he would actually work and read the paperwork given to him. When I returned three days after I left, he was angry and yelled at me for leaving without telling anyone. I pointed out that he had the exact same paperwork I did and that everyone who had read it knew that I left.”

Sephiroth smiled just a little, remembering it. “But he didn’t calm down as I expected he would after finding that out. Instead, he continued to yell at me for what I had done and when I asked him why, he said that he was worried about me. I had heard such comments before, but they were always regarding my position and what I could do. When I told him that it had already been impressed upon me to be careful so that I didn’t affect ShinRa negatively, he hit me.”

Cloud’s eyes widened. “He what?!”

“He hit me. I must admit that I was stunned. I wasn’t expecting it in the slightest, and Zack then proceeded to tell me that I was an idiot and that I had best ‘listen up’. After an hour listening to him, I thought he was done. I should have known better, though. This was Zack. He followed me everywhere for the next three days, the exact time that I’d been gone, and wouldn’t stop talking about it. I do not doubt that if I hadn’t finally grasped the difference between his worry and ShinRa’s, I would still be listening to it years later.”

There was an odd sound and he turned just as Cloud started laughing. It was amazing to see such a beautiful expression on his young face. There was no trace of sadness at all and right at that moment, he almost couldn’t forgive himself if it was because of his actions that put the sadness there. “That sounds like Zack!”

The dinging of the elevator signaled they’d reached their destination and he led the way to the first door on the left side of the hallway. Their voices were loud and clear, thanks to his enhanced hearing and even as he opened the door, he had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach at what he was going to find.

“Sir, I must insist.”

“Stop being so stubborn!”

Rufus looked up at their entrance, glaring at the poor timing. Sephiroth’s gaze shifted to look at the Turk he was currently pressing against, the bar at Tseng’s back the only thing keeping them off the
floor, by the look of it. There was a flush to both of their cheeks and Tseng’s shirt was halfway open.

“I think we came at a bad time,” Cloud muttered.

“You don’t say,” Rufus replied sarcastically.

Attention momentarily distracted, the Turk slipped out of the blonde’s hands and fixed his shirt. “Your timing is perfect, as always, General.”

Deciding it would be best to just ignore what he’d seen, Sephiroth sat down at the chair the Turk indicated. There were four glasses on the table and from the smell, it was whiskey. “I’m assuming you already have most of your plans in place?”

Rufus bonelessly sank into his seat. “I’ve been planning this for years, I just never had the opportunity to put them into action.”

“I don’t understand why you needed SOLDIER before you did this coup,” Cloud stated. “So long as you had the Turks behind you, you could do it, couldn’t you? They’re the really dangerous ones to your plans.”

The vice-president ran his thumb against the edge of his cup as he answered, “You underestimate the SOLDIER program. The Turks would be a problem if they weren’t my allies, but there are still twice as many SOLDIERs as Turks. You’re also not taking into account the regular army, which has three times the amount of both SOLDIERs and Turks. Do you know how many people apply for the SOLDIER program each year? Hundreds and the majority of them go right into the army.”

“And Heidegger is in control of that,” Sephiroth finished for him.

“Heidegger is firmly in my old man’s pocket. I can’t threaten him to ally with me, and the things that would be bribes for him make me ill. If this gets into an all out internal war, the Turks and SOLDIERs, as good as they are, will eventually be whittled down through sheer numbers. It is far better to cut him off the same as my father. As for Scarlett, so long as she has a budget for her weapons division and enough income to keep up her ‘lifestyle’, she won’t care who’s in charge.”

“Who are you planning on replacing Heidegger with?”

Rufus’ eyes flickered to Sephiroth before shifting over to Cloud pointedly. The blonde squeaked. “Me?!”

“I haven’t decided on who yet, but I’m considering either Strife or Fair. Which would you prefer?” he added flippantly.

Sephiroth frowned at the smirk. “Fair, actually.”

“Oh really? Hoping to put Strife in the lieutenant’s position to have him closer to you?”

He glared. “No. Strife is competent and worthy of the position, as I don’t doubt his experience, I feel Fair is better placed in Heidegger’s position. He is a gregarious person, easily gets along with others, and most of those in ShinRa know who he is. He is already firmly established and would take the best care of the troops.” Sephiroth smiled just a little. “There is a reason that he is my lieutenant, after all.”

Rufus turned to Strife. “And you?”
“What about me?”

“What would you take his lieutenant’s position?”

Cloud leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I would, but I’d rather wait until I have been made SOLDIER 1st before then. I’m going to assume that doing this coup will not leave me anonymous and I’d rather have the respect of the rest of the SOLDIERS for working my way up than it appearing as if I used my connections to get such a rank.”

“True, but you can’t do much about it if I put you there myself regardless. It’s hard to refuse the president.” Cloud glared at him, but Rufus only smirked at him in response.

“What about the president?” Cloud asked.

“What about him?”

“How is the takeover going to happen? Is he—”

Rufus frowned, though not at them. “I have everything necessary for a hostile takeover on paper, and with the backing of SOLDIER and the Turks, I’ll be president.”

“What about these plans haven’t you said?” Sephiroth pointed out when Rufus didn’t say anything further. “What exactly are you going to do to prevent him from retaliating?”

“There is already a plan in place for that,” Tseng said, the first time he’d spoken since they sat down.

Sephiroth nodded after a minute, Cloud’s eyes widening at the implication. “You’re going to kill him?!”

“He’s too dangerous to be allowed to live. You think he doesn’t have a hold over half the employees in this building?” Rufus argued. “A payment here, there, and then suddenly my coffee is poisoned. What about some sympathizers in his ranks that attempt to turn the divisions against me until there is a mutiny? I can’t be paranoid every moment of every day of betrayal. If he’s dead, he won’t be contacting anyone to help him and I can rest assured that even if those that work here don’t like me, they won’t be attempting to murder me.”

“You…honestly…have no feelings for him, do you?” Cloud muttered.

“Oh, no, I do have feelings for him. They are, however, of disgust. I have never known love from my father and feel no love for him. You are not the only one that has lost precious things because of him.”

It was such a resolute statement, said with such conviction, that Sephiroth wondered just who it was that the president had killed to cause such a reaction. Tseng glanced at his boss and he knew that whatever had happened to Rufus, the Turk knew about it. Whatever it was, it was enough to cause a deep and unbridgeable chasm between father and son.

They spent the next hour hashing out the particulars before Rufus dismissed them. Tseng stayed behind and he met the Turk’s eyes. There seemed to be just a hint of amusement around the lines of his mouth, as if he knew something that Rufus didn’t…or he found teasing enjoyment of something that the vice-president did.

“Cloud,” he began when the door closed behind them and he led them back to the elevator, “will you stay the night?”
Cloud almost stumbled and suddenly Sephiroth could inwardly agree with that sense of amusement Tseng had. Seeing Cloud flush red was actually, surprisingly, cute. It was the first time in his life that he thought that something, anything, was ‘cute’, but it was true. He could practically read his mind through his eyes, all the thoughts that he was thinking coming through.

“You sure…you don’t mind?”

“Would I offer, if I minded?”

“Then…I’d like to stay.”

He pressed one floor down on the elevator and led the way to his apartment. He didn’t quite dare make Cloud a spare keycard to his place, not until he was of a more advantageous position, but he kept the thought in mind. Cloud still wasn’t used to coming over, still fidgeted by the doorway for a minute before entering the room. “Can I borrow some clothes for the night?”

“You can,” he replied in a deep, calm voice that hid his internal laughter.

Cloud entered his bedroom, his cheeks still red, as Sephiroth began to braid his hair. He gave the boy enough time to get dressed before he followed. His feet paused of their own accord as they spotted Cloud in his bed and the pair of pants sitting on the top of the dresser. When their eyes met, Cloud almost pouted. “The pants wouldn’t fit.”

Sephiroth couldn’t hold it in. He chuckled, but didn’t say anything. Cloud would *never* fit his clothes and he knew that his lover had a bit of a sore spot when it came to his height. He shrugged out of his leathers and pulled on the soft cotton pants that Cloud had pulled out before sliding into bed, wrapping his arms around the smaller man.

“Um…Sephiroth?”

“Yes?” he murmured, trying to keep the most unerotic things in his mind.

“Are we…”

“Soon,” he replied with certainty, because he was sure that soon, he wouldn’t be able to restrain himself for much longer. He spent the next hour wondering if that sigh Cloud gave was relief or disappointment.
Chapter 13

Rufus threw open the door to the president’s office and it slammed against the wall with a resounding crash. His father jumped as the silence in the room was shattered by the noise. Tiny eyes almost lost in the folds of his fat face glared at him. “What do you want, Rufus?!”

He smirked and entered as if the office were his own, holding two folders in his hand. “Me? Nothing anymore, as I have everything I want in my own hands. Now, if you could go…”

The old man blinked. “What the hell are you talking about?!”

“You haven’t gotten the memo yet?” Rufus faked being surprised.

“What memo?!”

“You’re fired.”

“What?! You can’t fire me!”

The blue-eyed man threw the two folders on the desk and chubby, awkward fingers yanked them open. They were overflowing with paperwork that ranged from dirty pictures, bribes, and other illegal activities to Rufus’ shares in the company. “The hell is this?!”

“I have everything now. Everything in this company belongs to me, according to every sheet of that paperwork, which are only copies, by the way. I don’t trust you enough to show you the originals.”

“You really think anyone is going to believe this? No one is going to follow a whelp like you.”

“Then let’s ask, shall we? Tseng!”

Those muddy brown eyes widened when the Turk entered, followed by none other than General Sephiroth. He wore his trademark uniform, the leather creaking at every step, and almost towered over everyone there. It felt that way even if Tseng was close to the man’s height.

“Would the Turks follow my orders?” Rufus asked casually, leaning against the side of the desk.

Tseng’s voice was resolute and calm. “The Turks would follow your orders to hell itself, President Rufus.”

His sky blue gaze turned to Sephiroth. “Would SOLDIER follow my orders?”

For a moment, Sephiroth didn’t answer and Rufus had a dizzying sense of fear that despite all they’d talked about, he was going to be hung out to dry. That feeling turned into smug elation at his father’s face when Sephiroth actually spoke.

“SOLDIER will follow a regime led by Rufus ShinRa,” the silver-haired man said in a business sort of tone.

Rufus leaned forward to stare right into the frightened eyes of his father. “I have the Turks and SOLDIER on my side. What do you have?”

“I have the entire army!”
This part was a gamble and he had to hope that his father was so out of touch he’d believe him when he said it. “And over eighty percent of those in the army are rejected candidates and wash outs from SOLDIER. They idolize the program and its precious General. Do you really think, can you really say with confidence, that they’ll follow you when that program and its General are against you?” Rufus’ gamble worked because the man seemed to shrink a little in his chair. “Now, since I currently own the company…” He raised his voice. “Reno, Rude, come clear my new chair.”

The two Turks sauntered in and grabbed an arm, bodily dragging his stunned father to his feet. The action woke him from his shocked stupor and he began shouting at every step they took. He could hear Reno complain about the noise, but he had no time for a witty comment. “Is Elena in place?” he asked Tseng.

“Yes, sir. She will shadow him until she finds out where he’ll be tonight.”

“Are you ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

Rufus turned to the computer on the desk and sent out the memo he had prepared for the entire company for this moment. With another click, the laser printer whirled to life and he snatched the page out as soon as it was done, holding it out for Sephiroth. “Here.”

That devastatingly cool silver eyebrow arched. “What do I need this for?”

“For the army. Hand it to someone you know we can trust to post this where they can see it. I don’t want any doubts if I can help it.”

Eventually a gloved hand took the paper. “I’ll tell Zack. If anyone knows where to put it so that it’ll be seen, it’s him.”

“Good,” Rufus replied, a tad distracted as he started the long and arduous process of changing all the passwords in the system so his father couldn’t log in anymore.

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“That didn’t take nearly as long as I expected,” Zack commented, leaning back into the sofa and even putting his booted feet up on the coffee table. “And who would expect that the new president would let us use his new mansion as the base of operations!”

Cloud grinned a little at Zack’s obvious appreciation of the expansive building. Rufus had decided if they were going to talk business, it was going to be in comfort. He had never been there before, never known the place existed. The three-story mansion was set nearby ShinRa’s headquarters, but far enough away that it would be undisturbed and was the most expensive thing he’d ever seen, even including the mansion in Costa Del Sol.

Aeris seemed to enjoy looking around and by the time she sat down next to Zack, curling up against his side, she had found tons of old pictures stashed away and even a few small toys. It was an odd thing for the old president to have bought, but then he’d seen some of the weirdest things at the Honey Bee in the slums. Vincent and Cid were the ones that were uneasy the most. Rufus had insisted the two stay in the mansion rather than the church. Vincent was especially twitchy, as if he expected a knife in the back at any moment. Cloud figured that it was probably because Rufus didn’t want to keep going into the slums if he wanted to talk to the two.

Sephiroth was the only one that didn’t seem to care, or appear impressed. He had claimed a chair
the moment they’d showed up and hadn’t moved since. In fact, Cloud noticed as he leaned forward a little, the great General was currently napping with his head resting on a gloved fist. No one had made any attempt at being quiet, Zack was as loud as usual, but either Sephiroth wasn’t really asleep or he could sleep no matter what he heard.

“Why don’t you sit down, Spike?”

Cloud blinked and pointedly looked around. Every seat, short of the coffee table, was taken. He raised his eyebrow in an almost sardonic fashion, silently asking his best friend where he should sit. Of course he should have known better.

“Oh, yeah. Don’t worry, I’ll get you a seat.” Zack stood and walked past Cloud, not seeming to care that everyone’s eyes followed him in curiosity. Zack seemed to have no reverence whatsoever that they were in the president’s home or that he was covered in dirt and grime from a mission.

The blonde had half turned to look when he felt an arm around his waist. Cloud eeped in surprise as he was lifted, and then set down almost immediately onto something warm. “Zack!” he gasped in outrage just as a muscular arm wrapped around his waist from behind. “Sephiroth was sleeping!”

“Sleeping?” Zack replied, sounding incredulous. “Seph doesn’t sleep, he waits.”

The sigh at his neck as Sephiroth shifted was warm on his neck. “I wasn’t asleep, I was merely resting. As if I could sleep with Zack bursting with energy like this.”

Cloud looked over his shoulder at his boyfriend, but it didn’t appear as if he was startled from sleep at all. “But you don’t rest enough as it is!”

Those chiseled lips smiled at him just a little. “What is the term that Zack uses with you a lot?”

“Worrywart?” said lieutenant suggested.

“Yes. You are not bothering me and we have no idea when Rufus will be here. Get comfortable and ignore Zack’s provocations.”

“As if it’s that easy.” Cloud muttered, but did as he was told.

It took an hour of waiting before Rufus finally showed up with his four Turks in tow and by that time, he had almost completely curled up in his boyfriend’s lap. A blonde eyebrow rose at them and Cloud blushed a little, but when Sephiroth’s arm tightened around his waist just a tiny bit, he knew not to move.

“Is everyone comfortable?” Rufus asked sarcastically, noting the group that had taken over his living room. He glared a little at them all when there was no ready place for him to sit.

“Yeah, thanks,” Cid replied with a grin, clearly knowing it was not meant seriously, but willing to goad the new president regardless.

Rufus’ attention turned to Cid and his sky blue eyes were glaring. Cid seemed to have no intention of moving, but Vincent pulled him out his chair to squeeze into the small loveseat next to him. When the pilot looked as if he were about to argue, likely with a lot of swear words, Vincent muttered something under his breath that even Cloud couldn’t hear. Cid settled down with only a few grumbles.

After a minute, the new president threw a smug smirk at Cid as if he’d somehow won an argument
and happily plopped down in the recently vacated seat, throwing several folders on the coffee table as he did so. Tseng and Rude put still more down, but when none of the newcomers paid it attention, Cloud figured those documents weren’t meant for them.

“First, before we get started on how you all are planning on saving the world, I have some things to clear up after my takeover two days ago,” Rufus began. “As you know, Heidegger has been fired and in his place, as General of the Army, I’m appointing Zack Fair, as per General Sephiroth’s glowing recommendation.”

For once, Zack seemed to be at a complete loss for words. His violet eyes swung to stare at Sephiroth, who merely looked back silently. “A-Are you serious, Rufus?”

“I suppose, given everything, that it’s too much to hope that you would refer to me as President ShinRa.” The young blonde man sighed. “And yes, I’m serious. Not that I’m giving you much choice, but do you accept?”

“W-Well…yeah, I guess, but…are you sure you want a member of SOLDIER as the General? Wouldn’t that seem too much like merging divisions?”

“At this point, I don’t have a choice. There are only two qualified and available people to take the position. You’ve worked with General Sephiroth for a long time and have enough experience to handle it. If you’re really opposed to the idea, just take it long enough for me to find someone else.”

“No, I’ll take it, just… I just hope I live up to expectations.”

Rufus seemed to dismiss his concerns with the wave of his hand. “You’ll be fine, I’m sure. Now, I’m going to appoint Strife as Fair’s replacement in SOLDIER.”

Cloud’s head snapped up from where it had been resting against Sephiroth’s shoulder. “What?!

Rufus, I told you that I wanted to wait until I’d become SOLDIER 1st on my own before taking the position!”

“As I told Fair, I don’t have the luxury of waiting, and that means, neither do you.”

“I refuse!”

“You don’t have a choice. I’m appointing you.”

“I said I’m going to wait!”

“Strife—”

“ShinRa.” Sephiroth’s voice was cold and implacable, the first time he’d spoken in little over an hour. “Enough. The position will remain open when, and only when, Cloud attains 1st ranking.” 

Seeing Rufus’ stubborn stare, unwilling to give in, the silver-haired man added, “Do not test me on this, ShinRa. You will lose. He may be unable to say no to an appointment by the president, but I can refuse the appointment for him officially. Don’t make me go that route.”

There was a long moment of Rufus’ silent rebellion before he grudgingly stated, “Fine. I’ll withhold my official statement…for now. However, Strife, I expect you to make 1st ranking within the year or I’m appointing you whether you like it or not, the General refusing bedamned.”

Well that left him eight months. He didn’t think that Rufus would be stupid enough to deliberately
make an enemy of Sephiroth, but he definitely didn’t want to call his bluff either if he didn’t have to. Who knew, maybe he’d make the ranking by the time they saved the planet? Or maybe he’d still be a 3rd ranking grunt…

The new president leaned back in his chair. “Now that that’s out of the way, what are you geniuses going to do about JENOVA?”

Almost everyone looked at Cloud, as if he had answers, but this time, he had none for them. He had averted the future that he’d come from and it was a very different detour. He hadn’t the slightest clue on what to do and despite having been stuck in it a lot, he knew little about the Lifestream. Yet he really hated telling them he didn’t know since it was him that had dragged everyone into this to start with. “Well…”

“I’ve been talking with the Lifestream and they have a suggestion,” Aeris said, stepping into the void of silence after Cloud’s word. “It said that there’s a materia called Holy that will protect the planet from any threat. If we can find that, that could help save the planet right?”

“Yeah, but it’s materia,” Zack argued. “Can it do anything about an internal threat to the Lifestream? It’s not like we can actually go into that. We’d die of mako poisoning.”

“If the Lifestream is telling the Ancient about this materia, then it must be effective in some way,” Rufus murmured absently.

“Her name is Aeris.”

Blue eyes met violet and Rufus told Zack, “I know Ms. Gainsborough’s name, but I chose to use her title for a reason: she is an Ancient and she knows more about the Lifestream than any of us together will ever know. If she says it will help because the Lifestream told her so, then I am inclined to agree.”

“Great idea and all, but did the Lifestream tell ya where to get it?” Cid interrupted. “Doesn’t do us much good if we can’t go pick it up.”

“…Cloud? Is something wrong? You’re pale.”

Cloud blinked, realizing that Vincent had been staring at him when he’d been staring at the wall. “Yes, I’m fine,” he said, wincing when he realized that his voice sounded a tad weaker than he’d hoped. The moment Holy had been mentioned, all he could think about was the black materia and Sephiroth killing Aeris. “I know where Holy is.”

“You do?” Reno said in the silence, sounding highly skeptical.

“It’s in—”


“Yes. Did…no one remember…when I told you?”

There was some shifting and Cid muttered, “Come on, ya told us a helluva lot that day, I can’t be expected to remember all of it at a moment’s notice!”

Aeris giggled and it broke the thick tension that had built as everyone recalled Cloud’s recollection of the last time the Forgotten Capital had been mentioned. He could feel Sephiroth’s hand pressing against his back, a firm reminder of where he was and that that had not happened, and that his boyfriend had no intention of letting that happen.
“I think that should be my next mission, Seph,” Zack said, dropping his feet onto the floor. “I’ll go there, grab it, and be back in a week.”

“You can’t just go in and grab it,” Cloud told him, sitting a bit straighter. He rather wished, at that moment when he was trying to be a bit commanding, that he wasn’t still sitting in Sephiroth’s lap, but the General showed no indication that he was going to let go. “Aeris has to pray to the Lifestream to get it.”

“So I’ll escort her.”

“Do you not remember that I appointed you General of the Army? You can’t just leave because I haven’t officially stated it,” Rufus said, voice not sounding at all apologetic. “And you’ll forgive me for saying so, but neither is General Sephiroth leaving ShinRa either.” Cloud glared at the president icily, but was summarily ignored. “Call it caution if you will, but that’s not everything. General Sephiroth is the head of SOLDIER. I’m assuming that you’d like to keep this mission even vaguely secret, and sending the greatest General that we have to escort Ms. Gainsborough to The Forgotten Capital is not subtle.”

“Like hell she’s going there by herself!” Zack spat, standing up.

“Did I say she should go by herself? I just say that neither you nor Sephiroth should be going with her. My Turks aren’t going either, I need them here to help clean up ShinRa of my father’s cronies, but that doesn’t leave her alone. After all, Strife, Valentine, and Highwind have nothing better to do than escort her. If that is not enough, might I remind you that Strife also has more ‘friends’ of his: Yuffie Kisaragi, Barrett Wallace, and Tifa Lockheart. I have it on very good authority that his other friend, Red XIII or Nanaki if you will, is not in the labs as of yet. I’m afraid I must decline lending you Reeve Tuesti, however. I need him here.”

The whole group…together again? The thought almost boggled his mind a little. To be able to see them all again would be great, but did he really want to bring them into something like this? It had dominated all their lives so much before he’d changed things. Did he have the right to bring them back in again?

Aeris touched his shoulder and smiled at him gently when their eyes met. “All we have to do is ask. If they say no, then they say no. No one’s forcing them to do anything.”

Rufus stood up, catching everyone’s attention. “This sounds like a decent plan. Strife, Valentine, and Highwind will escort Ms. Gainsborough to her destination, picking up any ‘strays’ along the way as they see fit. General Fair and General Sephiroth will remain here. You will not recognize ShinRa by the time you return. Now if you don’t mind…you’re dirtying up my home,” he added, giving a pointed look at Zack. “I’d suggest saying your goodbyes tonight, as you’ll be leaving first thing in the morning and you will likely be gone for at least a month.”

Rufus smiled at them, completely ignoring many dismayed looks at that announcement.

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Yes, I'm breaking them up for the time being. We're reaching the middle of the story and things are going to get faster from here on out, but there will still be fluffy moments :)}
“Are you all right?”

Sephiroth turned from closing his door at Cloud’s question. “I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You’re staying here. The way Rufus said it…”

“I understand his caution.” Seeing Cloud’s skeptical expression, the silver-haired man explained, “I feel fine, but that does not mean something couldn’t happen to me during this trip. Secondly, there appears to be a few places that seem of great significance in your story: Nibelheim and The Forgotten Capital, being two of them. I would rather avoid them, in case my presence triggers something unwanted. It doesn’t bother me that I’ve been ordered to stay behind. Also, ShinRa had a point: sending the General to a deserted place like that is the very opposite of subtle. I would rather not tip off any human agents JENOVA has.”

“You mean someone like Hojo.”

“Yes, but with all the experimentation going on, there could be quite a few more out there.” He shed his customary leather and changed into soft pants and a shirt, noting that Cloud was blushing and looking elsewhere during the entire time. Sephiroth had no sense of body consciousness, so he had thought nothing of changing in front of his lover.

“More importantly, I don’t want you distracted by me in any way. I want to make sure that you come back safe to me, which is why I’m going to insist that you detour to speak to your friends and ask them to join you. You are a capable fighter, and I assume Highwind and Valentine are as well, but there is little information about where you’re going and three fighters can still be overwhelmed.”

“Is it really right for me to do that?”

Sephiroth blinked. “What?”

Cloud paced like a caged animal around his bedroom. “Sephiroth, what happened before…to me… it consumed everyone’s lives. Is it really right that I ask them to do that again? Everyone was changed after it, even Yuffie. She tried to hide it, but there was something different in her eyes by the end of it. Midgar was destroyed and so many people died when it happened. There was a lot of trouble for everyone fitting in again because suddenly everyone seemed to know that we had ‘saved the world’. We had difficulty coping. The only way I could was by running away.”

“Running away?”

Cloud’s blue eyes were haunted when he looked over at him. “I couldn’t bear to be around people after everything, and so I ran away. I ran away from the people that admired me and thought me a hero, and I ran away from my friends when I should have been helping them. After everything that happened and everyone viewed me as some kind of a hero, I think I began to understand a little what you’ve gone through since Wutai.”

Sephiroth blinked. “What I went through?” he asked, mystified.

“ShinRa billed you as a hero, Sephiroth. Everyone who ever came to ShinRa had a hero worship for you, even me originally. I don’t understand how you could live under the strain of everyone’s expectations.”
“I tried not to think about it,” Sephiroth told him honestly to the unasked question in the air. “I’ve never liked it, but since there was nothing I could do about it, I ignored it to the best of my ability.”

“At least you didn’t run away like I did.”

“Don’t mistake me, Cloud. I am not as impervious or as strong as you think I am. Had I the chance to, I would have run as well.” Sephiroth sighed, wandering to the window that overlooked the compound below. “There is nothing that I hated more than this place. The war with Wutai was futile and bloody. We won…but the reason for that success meant nothing. The only reason the war existed in the first place was because it was the only piece of land that Rufus’ father did not control. Like a child, he played with war simply because it did not belong to him, not because he wanted it.

“I was barely more than a child when I was sent to the battlefield. When the war ended, I wanted nothing more than to run. I actually considered it seriously, you know.”

“You did?”

“Yes. It was on the way back to ShinRa, my return for the first time in years. We were going over land, by truck, and I knew that this was the best time to do it if I was ever going to. Zack even encouraged me to, telling me that he’d run with me. We’d go to Gongaga, he said, and from there, anywhere we wanted.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Sephiroth couldn’t answer for a long moment. Why hadn’t he? He could have. In the confusion after the war, he had a better chance of disappearing because he wasn’t as well known then as he was now. “I was afraid.”

“Afraid?” Cloud’s eyes were wide, as if the concept of Sephiroth fearing something were impossible. “Of what?”

“You mean of ‘of who’. Back then, there was only one thing I feared and that was Hojo. Even at eight years old, I could have broken him in half, but because I’d been helpless against him since I was born, I felt that he would always be stronger than me. It’s a psychological effect, Cloud. Hojo might be physically fragile, but he can and will dominate anyone in will or mind. It was so easy for him to twist my thoughts as a child, making me believe that I needed him and I would be weak without him. It didn’t take more than one or two punishments when I disobeyed to embed into my mind that while I could rebel against anyone I wanted, I dared not rebel against him. To this day, I have never experienced pain or punishment that equaled that of what Hojo did to me when I disobeyed him.”

Cloud touched his arm, almost cautiously, before reaching out and hugging him. “You have no idea how hard it’s been ever since I came back to resist shoving First Tsuguri through his chest.”

“Cloud?”

“Yes?”

“I would rather not have our last conversation before your absence be about Hojo. Instead…” Sephiroth lifted that chin up and kissed lips he’d already memorized so long ago. It was getting harder and harder to control himself, to will patience in his loins, but damned if he was going to rush it.

“Sephiroth…can we…?”
Looking at that slightly-dazed expression on Cloud’s face, he was hard pressed to say no. “Not tonight, Cloud, but I won’t leave you wanting.”

Cloud glared a little at him. “Why not?”

It was the first time Cloud had ever asked why. Sephiroth had always assumed he’d understood. “You’re too young. Before you became a SOLDIER and took mako injections, it was because had I done so, I couldn’t guarantee I wouldn’t hurt you. Now, you’re only fifteen. To take advantage of you—”

“You’re not taking advantage of me if I want it too!”

“Cloud…” He sighed and sat down on the edge of his bed. His lover watched him do so and he couldn’t help but secretly think that yes, the man really did look like an annoyed chocobo.

“Sephiroth, I may not look like it, but I’m not as young as what I appear to be!”

“That’s just it, Cloud. You may be in your twenties mentally, but do you really realize that the body you’re in is only fifteen? There’s a disconnect there, and I know there is because I feel it as well. I’m in my late twenties, but I feel as if I’m in my forties.”

“Can’t you trust me to know my own mind, Sephiroth?”

“It isn’t a matter of trust, Cloud—”

“Then you’re going to have to give me a damn good reason. My age isn’t one of them.”

Sephiroth rubbed his forehead. He had to admit that he was doing a poor job of explaining the reason he was waiting. Cloud’s age played a big part in it, but that wasn’t everything. How could he explain that he was afraid he was going to ruin it? He had never been in a relationship before, but he had had occasion to overhear others’ horror stories about what happened if sex happened before the ‘right time’ occurred. He still didn’t know what that ‘right time’ was and for someone whose whole life revolved around little details such as that, not knowing was causing him a great deal of anxiety.

“At least wait until you’re sixteen.”

“No.”

“Cloud…” he growled.

“Sephiroth, I’ve waited for over a year already. Am I just not attractive to you?”

He blinked repeatedly, stunned that such an idiotic statement would ever come from his lover’s mouth. “I have heard some very stupid things in my life, usually from Fair, but that must be one of the worst. How can such a thought even enter your mind?”

Cloud glared at him. “What am I supposed to think when you won’t even let me touch you back, much less progress to sex?!”

“I let you touch me—”

“Barely! Most of the time it’s you who’s…” Cloud blushed, but squared his shoulders and soldiered on. “You’re always the one doing everything and you always tell me I don’t have to touch you, but when you say that, you really mean don’t touch you.”
Sephiroth sighed a little. “That’s because I don’t trust myself.”

“What?”

“I may be the General of SOLDIER, people say someone with strength of will to be envied, but I am still a man, Cloud. The more you touch me, the harder it is to hold back. I’m afraid of losing that control and being unable to stop when you tell me to.”

Cloud didn’t say anything for a moment and Sephiroth watched as he strode forward. He gulped when the young man straddled his hips. “Fine. I’ll wait until I’m sixteen, no more, but you have to let me touch you no matter what and trust that I can stop you if I don’t want something.”

Sephiroth gave him a downright disbelieving look. “Cloud, strong as you may be, in your alternate future, it took you years to be able to kill me. Do you really think you’d be able to do anything now?”

“I didn’t say kill, I said stop. I may not be able to beat you right now, but what you don’t understand is that I don’t have to. If I’m really fighting you enough, you’d have to fight back and that would clear your head. You’d be able to control yourself.”

“You put too much faith in me, I think. I didn’t seem to have that much control of will in your future.”

Cloud smiled brilliantly at him, leaning Sephiroth back until he felt the bed cushioning him as he laid down. “I don’t think so. I think you’re stronger against it than you give yourself credit for. Just giving you a head’s up seems to have helped wonders with JENOVA. Giving you a head’s up when you’re going too far in bed should be easy, right?” This time it was a confident Cloud that kissed him, dragging the act out until Sephiroth yearned to just rid the boy of his clothes completely and have his way with him.

“Do we have a deal?”

Sephiroth growled, but answered, “Agreed.”

“Good…because tonight is my first night where I get to touch you however I want, so you just lay there.”

His silver eyebrow rose as he watched start to divest himself of his uniform while attempting to not actually get up from the General’s lap. Not only was this causing a devastating reaction in his groin just by seeing that body revealed little by little, but the squirming against his hips was final nail in the coffin. He was erect in minutes, pressing between Cloud’s legs, and the only material between their skin was soon only his pair of soft sweatpants and shirt. Soon Sephiroth’s shirt was discarded, thrown to the side and it landed on his beside lamp, dimming the bright light it gave off.

He heard Cloud murmur his name against his neck as those seductive lips purred against his pulse, kissing further and further down his chest as his hands pushed his pants lower on his hips to his legs. “Cloud…” he muttered warningly, getting a very good idea of where the boy was going.

“You said I can do anything I want.”

“I never said you could do that,” Sephiroth argued. He hadn’t let Cloud once get close to his groin with his mouth for a very specific reason: he had seen had his lover reacted when he did it and he didn’t think he could withstand the pleasure without breaking. That, and he was concerned about Cloud attempting to swallow his release. Sephiroth was half-mako, a third JENOVA, and the final third possibly human. It infected every part of his body. Every part. He had not had anyone
swallow his before like he did to Cloud and he wasn’t sure what that would do in the long run.

“Sephiroth?”

He realized he’d tensed up because of his thoughts. “Cloud, there are reasons I didn’t let you do
this before. I don’t know how…’mako-active’ my release is. If you were to swallow it—”

Cloud wasn’t looking concerned though. “I’m already mako-enhanced, Sephiroth. I’ve had my
injections, so a little bit from you isn’t going to harm me any. It’s not anywhere near like undiluted
mako.”

“Cloud!” he tried to protest again, but by then the blonde boy was between his legs and licking. He
gasped loudly as that tongue slowly and languidly started to play with him and it took all of
Sephiroth’s will to sit back up again. He looked down at the boy kneeling on the floor next to the
bed, between his legs, and it was almost his undoing. There was no little teasing smirk on Cloud’s
face as he clearly won their argument; all he saw was a determination to make Sephiroth feel good
and it sent warmth spreading through his heart down to his loins.

His fingers gently threaded itself through Cloud’s spiky hair, scratching lightly at the nape of his
neck. It seemed to encourage the boy because cautiously he was pulled into that wet heat. He
groaned, not caring at all that he couldn’t fit entirely inside. Maybe with practice, but right then, he
was already losing his mind as it was. He needed to keep what scraps were left.

Sephiroth hissed a little at an accidental nip and Cloud pulled back immediately. “Sorry, Seph—”

“It’s okay, continue.”

“But—”

“It takes practice. Even I made a few mistakes.”

“…You did?” Cloud clearly spent time combing his memory. “Oh, that? That didn’t hurt…I
thought you did that on purpose.”

“I’m very used to controlling my strength because of my enhancement. It wouldn’t take much for
me to break Zack’s arm even as much as he has. That was all that saved you from a nasty injury.”
He attempted to smile reassuringly, even though he wasn’t used to it and wasn’t sure if he
succeeded. “So you can continue. I have materia nearby, but it would take more than an accidental
nip to hurt me.”

For a minute, Cloud seemed unconvinced and Sephiroth close to begging. He was so needy and
that mouth had felt so good. Then, even more cautiously, the blonde took him in again. The
movements were gentle and slow as Cloud experimented and though it went against his nature,
Sephiroth let his groans be heard so that his lover would know what felt good and what didn’t. He
was a quick learner, though, and before a few minutes had passed, he had mapped out almost all of
the General’s sensitive spots.

“Cloud,” he panted, very lightly pulling that head closer as the pleasure built. It was only when
there was a whimper, feeling the sound as vibrations along his length, that he realized he wasn’t
the only one aroused. “You’re hard, Cloud. Let me—”

“No,” Cloud pulled away quickly to say. “Not yet.” There was something in Cloud’s eyes and
Sephiroth used the hand still in his hair to pull him up a bit to kiss him fiercely. A second whimper
sounded and Sephiroth felt those smaller hands gripping his wrists tightly. His tongue plunged into
that hot mouth, taking out his desire to bury himself in his lover’s body there instead of elsewhere.
“S-Sephiroth,” Cloud moaned when he pulled away. “D-Don’t do that, I’m trying to stick to our deal…”

“Sorry,” Sephiroth replied, not sounding the least bit apologetic.

Cloud leaned in, kissing down his chest again and he was all but vibrating in anticipation. Was this how his lover felt when he did it to him? It was amazing, beyond words. He shifted his foot, rubbing it against Cloud’s erection, and it spurred the boy on. Suddenly his tongue and mouth were sucking harder, dragging him faster to the brink. Out of fear of what he would do, Sephiroth pulled his hands away from Cloud’s head and instead dug his fingers into the bed. His hands curled into fists when he felt Cloud’s grip on his hips, putting in more enthusiastic effort when Sephiroth was too lost in pleasure to distract him with his foot.

“Cloud!” he moaned. “You need…to pull…away now…”

But Cloud didn’t. Instead he increased his movements and Sephiroth was unable to prevent his explosive climax right into that wet mouth. Cloud tried to swallow it, but he ended up coughing from the pressure. “I told you to let go,” Sephiroth murmured, wiping away some of his release that had dripped down his chin.

“I didn’t want to,” his lover replied, not protesting at all as the General gathered him up in his arms to stretch him out in the bed.

“It’s your turn,” Sephiroth told him. Just watching him, he could see Cloud shivering in lust and when his hand slid down his back to his behind, those legs widened immediately.

“Please…please…”

“You don’t have to beg, Cloud,” he murmured, but he couldn’t deny hearing him do so was causing all kinds of smug feelings to his ego. Was he really that attractive, that good, that Cloud would beg to have him even if it wasn’t sex? Beg to have anything that Sephiroth was willing to give him?

“Seph—!”

Two fingers sliding in, slick with lotion, cut off Cloud’s voice. He took his time, even though he knew exactly where to touch. When the young man started squirming, he brushed over that area and Cloud howled in pleasure. Only in Sephiroth’s rooms could Cloud be as loud as he wanted, because they were sound proofed. Originally Sephiroth had demanded that they were so that they could contain any sounds of explosions from practicing with materia, but they definitely had other uses as well.

He kissed his way down Cloud’s heaving chest, understanding why the boy took his time. This would be the last time they’d see each other for awhile and he wanted to have a good memory to hold on to in his lover’s absence. Sephiroth spent an inordinate amount of time teasing that trembling stomach before pulling Cloud into his mouth, to the back of his throat. There was a desperate, choked sound as he did so when he pushed his fingers hard against that sensitive spot.

“S-Sephiroth! Not…not at the same time…!”

He chuckled just a little, the vibrations causing Cloud to squirm and thrust his hips. He took his time, lavishing attention, and the shivering intensified. Over the past year of doing this, Sephiroth had learned the fine skill of driving the pleasure higher without bringing climax. The last time he’d done this so well, when Cloud had been reacting like this, he’d been unable to resist the urge to just
sit back and stare at the image his lover has made on his bed.

“I need…! I need…! Please, Sephiroth…!”

Sephiroth loved that Cloud was a talker in bed, even if it was a surprise. The Cloud he knew was usually so quiet, that hearing him speak so often was like a rare treat…and one that only he knew about. No one else would ever find out, because he’d make sure Cloud would love him forever. He wasn’t sure how right now, but he’d do it. He couldn’t imagine life without the blonde now.

When he added in his third finger, Cloud arched his hips with a loud shout, but didn’t come. There was a desperate whimper, slim fingers diving into his silver hair. “Sephiroth…!”

“Hm?”

“I love your hair…”

Sephiroth pulled away, looked at Cloud, and laughed. It was such a random thing to say that he couldn’t help it. “Thank you,” he murmured, watching as those blue eyes became even more desperate, staring at his mouth in need. He let his lover stew in lust before he leaned down and swallowed him again. Those hands were tugging at his head and hair with every finger and tongue movement.

“Sephiroth! Sephiroth, please…! Put it in, put it in!”

Begging again… Showing mercy, Sephiroth stepped up his pace. His fingers became less teasing and more thrusting, his tongue finding the most sensitive spots on his lover. Cloud was shouting now, unable to form words, but that was all right. Sephiroth could tell when he was that close, so when the orgasm hit his lover, he was prepared. He swallowed it all and gently let the softening length slip out of his mouth. As Cloud panted, he stroked one last time with his fingers before pulling out. “Are you all right?”

Cloud nodded. Sephiroth fixed his pants before getting out of bed. His lover made a sound of protest, clearly not liking that idea, but the General ignored it. He went into the bathroom and came back out with a wet cloth, wiping down the sweat on Cloud’s body even though it wasn’t really needed as he’d swallowed his release. He paid special attention to the blonde’s face, making sure that was clean from earlier, before crawling back in bed.

Immediately Cloud snuggled against him as he pulled the sheets over them. “I don’t want to leave you,” the blonde muttered.

Sephiroth smiled a little at the head on his chest. “I don’t want you to leave either.”

“I mean ever. I hate leaving your apartment every morning, sometimes even at night. I’m not—”

“In time,” he replied, cutting off Cloud before he went into a sleepy rant. “With Rufus in charge, things will be better.” Or so he hoped. “And when you achieve 1st ranking, then you’ll move in with me. I don’t dare let you before then, otherwise it’ll create the same problem that Rufus appointing you as a new SOLDIER 3rd would.”

“…I feel more motivated to become SOLDIER 1st for that than for being your lieutenant.”

“As it should be,” he laughed a little. Cloud was looking very sleepy by this point, so Sephiroth nudged him a little. “One more thing before you sleep.”
“Mm?”

Sephiroth leaned in and put his lips right next to Cloud’s ear. “It’s my turn to say it: I love you.”

The look of shock and burgeoning joy made it all worth saying it.
Chapter 15

Despite being early to the rendezvous, Cloud still wasn’t the first one there. He’d left before Sephiroth, the General still sleeping even though he hated to do that. There was just something about his friends seeing him walk together with Sephiroth that was embarrassing. While he knew they were aware he was in a relationship, he’d rather not bring the physical side of it all to their attention.

Vincent, Cid, Zack and Aeris were already there. “Up early, Zack?” he teased.

“Well, I had to go get Aeris, so…”

When his best friend trailed off, Cloud finally noticed they were looking at him oddly. “What?”

Cid smirked. “Looks like you had a good night.”

“Huh?”

“He means this, yo,” Reno said, abruptly appearing behind him and poking his neck. “That’s one big hickey!”

Cloud all but jumped into the air, so startled by the Turk, and clapped his hand on his neck with his cheeks burning. “Reno!”

The redhead was all but combusting, he was grinning so big. “So what was it like, havin’ the General’s big magnum?”

“Reno—”

Before he could finish, there was a long, thin blade resting right under the Turk’s chin. Silence descended as eyes swiveled to their silver-haired man, followed by Rufus and the three other Turks.

“Reno, it’s far too early in the morning for your antics,” the new president stated, rubbing eyes that looked as if he had bruises under them. When had Rufus slept? Had he spent the whole night up?

“Seph, chill,” Zack said, putting one hand over Sephiroth’s that was clenching on the hilt. “Reno’s teasing Cloud. Get used to it. You’d only hit me if I did that, so that’s what you do with him. You don’t pull a sword on him.”

Sephiroth’s eyes swung to his former lieutenant and then back. Swiftly the sword was put away, but before Reno could do more than breathe a sigh of relief, the General punched the top of the Turk’s head, knocking him to the ground.

“Ow, fuck, what the hell?!” Reno spat, spitting out dirt as he sat up.

“Seph, you need to hold back, he’s not mako enhanced.”

“It appears as if I still have much to learn,” was the deadpan reply. However it was the way Sephiroth said it that caused laughter from Cid, Aeris, and Zack. The great General knew exactly that he should have held back, but deliberately didn’t and perhaps it was the effect of being around Zack that the comment was so flippant. With a swish of hair, Sephiroth turned his attention away from Reno, who was being helped up by Rude. Cloud’s eyes met his lover’s, who immediately
came over and kissed him fiercely in front of everyone.

“How cute,” Zack teased. Cloud blushed brightly as he was let go and Sephiroth rolled his eyes at his friend.

“That’s enough of that, it’s far too early in the morning for any of this,” Rufus spat, clearly not in his usual temper.

“Geez, man, you got a stick up yer ass or somethin’?” Cid spat, dropping the butt of a finished cigarette onto the ground and stamping it out with his heel. “When was the last time you slept?”

“Two days ago, thank you. As soon as you have left, I’m going to sleep.” He waved a hand at Tseng, who was speaking on the phone to someone. A moment later, two trucks thundered up. “It’ll be a tight, but I’m sure a few of you won’t mind improvising.”

They peered into the back of the truck where they would be riding, built in benches for transport on the sides. The Turks were already heading for another vehicle and climbing in. It was clearly meant for small strike teams of three or four people, not six.

“Hey! There ain’t enough room for all of us back here to sit! Who gets to sit with the Turks?”

“I’m sure you’ll all fit,” Rufus replied. “If not, I’m sure Valentine would make a lovely seat for your ass, Highwind.”

As the pilot spluttered a protest, almost unable to form words entirely at the comment, the president took his seat in the cab of the truck.

“Hell if I’m sittin’ in Vincent’s lap!”

“He’s just saying it to rile you,” Cloud told him as he got in. Sephiroth followed, Zack next. The black-haired man gestured to Aeris, who was helped up by Vincent, and she sat in his lap. “There, that should be enough room for the two of you.”

Cid grumbled, but when the former Turk was looking threateningly at him, as if he was going to throw him in if he didn’t move soon, the pilot climbed in. It wasn’t as bad as they’d feared. The only tricky part was trying to arrange their weapons. Zack’s buster sword, Cloud’s First Tsuguri, and Sephiroth’s Masamune were big swords and needed room. They also had to figure out where to put Cid’s spear and Aeris’ newly acquired staff. Only Vincent didn’t have a problem.

“Guess bein’ president isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Apparently not,” Aeris replied to the pilot’s comment. “Poor thing, two days without sleep is a long time.”

“He was probably exaggerating a little.”

“I don’t know, Rufus isn’t known to exaggerate,” Zack mused, one hand idly pressing against the small of Aeris’ back. “He looked ready to pass out any minute. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s already asleep.”

“It’d serve him right if did and had to sleep on one of his Turks’ laps!”

“I don’t think he’d mind too much about that.”

Cloud had cough violently at Sephiroth’s dead serious comment to avoid bursting out laughing.
The other four were looking at him as if he was insane, but he just couldn’t help it. He hadn’t expected that to come from his lover, of all people!

The trip to wherever they were going took a few hours, but when he stepped out into the bright daylight, they’d reached Junon. Were they going to get what he thought they were?

“Aw, man, it feels like we were just here…”

“That’s because we were two weeks ago,” Vincent replied.

As Cid and Vincent bickered, if you could call it that, Cloud watched as Tseng opened the door to the passenger side of the truck’s cab and had to catch Rufus before he fell to the ground. “Sir? Sir, please wake up, we’re here. Sir?”

“Don’t worry, I got it!” Reno said, with an obscene amount of glee.

“Reno…”

But the redhead ignored the warning tone of his supervisor and immediately pinched Rufus’ nose and covered his mouth. There was silence as both Cloud and Tseng waited for the inevitable blow-up. It didn’t take long. Within less than a minute, the new president was thrashing and Tseng was having a hard time keeping hold of him so he didn’t land head-first onto the ground.

“Reno!”

Reno, who had let go immediately at the start of the fit, grinned. “Yeah, boss?”

“If you ever, I mean fucking ever, do that again—!”

“You’ll stick a grenade up my ass?”

“That’s the nice scenario, Reno! That’s what I’ll do if I’m feeling slightly forgiving!”

“Yes, sir!” Reno made a mock salute as Tseng righted Rufus and then helped him down. He straightened his white suit, attempted to rub his mouth as if to make sure it was free of any drool, and stalked over to where Cloud and the others were watching with interest.

“Elena! Is it ready yet?!”

Elena jumped at the sharp tone and nodded. “Y-Yes, sir!”

“Then bring it out!”

There was the sound of commotion at the nearby base and they turned to watch. Cloud wasn’t surprised to see none other than the Highwind lifting off and slowly making its way toward them. Cid was all but squealing in a manly way.

“My baby!”

“…Yes, Highwind, it’s your ‘baby’,” Rufus muttered.

“I’ve missed you so much, sweetheart!” Cid shouted at the sky, waving his arms. “I’ve got so much stuff to do, you won’t even recognize yourself!”

“…That’s what I’m afraid of.”
“Don’t worry, Rufus,” Cloud told him with a smirk. “You won’t recognize it, but when the Highwind becomes the Sierra, it’ll be even better.”

“And even less likely I’ll ever see it again. Highwind, keep in mind that’s ShinRa property.”

“Fuck that shit! She’s mine, I built her! And if I’m savin’ the world, I want her as my reward!”

“Highwind—“

“Argue about it later,” Zack said, patting an angry Cid on the shoulder just as the Highwind set down near them on the outskirts of Junon.

“She’s fully staffed and are already instructed to follow Strife’s commands,” Rufus explained, rubbing his forehead as if to massage a headache away. “I’m going to assume that even with Highwind,” The president cast an eye at the pilot, “the airship Highwind, that your little trip is going to take a month or so.”

Cloud nodded soberly at Rufus’ glance. “It’s going to take time to find the others. I don’t even know where Yuffie is right now. She could be wandering the forests were we originally met her, or she could be in Wutai for all I know. I think Barrett’s probably still in North Corel, and Nanaki could be in Cosmo Canyon. I don’t really know too much about what he liked to do, really, if he’s not.”

“Are you really sure you need ‘em?” Zack asked, crossing his arms. “You said that JENOVA is in the Lifestream, so it’s not like she has a body. Isn’t that why she took over Sephiroth?”

“Hojo still made mutations,” Cloud reminded him. “Besides…I’m not sure what else JENOVA can do in the Lifestream. She could summon things to the world of the living from there, who knows. Hell, what the Lifestream did to my head when I fell right into it was crazy enough.”

“What about Summons?” Sephiroth asked, looking specifically at Aeris. “Or materia in general? Materia is condensed crystal from the Lifestream. If she’s in there, can she interfere with it?”

Aeris looked hesitant. “I don’t know. Now that you mention it, I didn’t think about that. I don’t think the Lifestream would have mentioned Holy if it wouldn’t work, but maybe it’s best to keep at least summoning to a minimum. Just in case.”

“Now that you’ve worked all that out, it’s time for you to get going,” Rufus interrupted and Cloud wasn’t sure the man even realized that the only reason he was still on his feet was because Tseng was bracing him. His pale blue eyes were glassy and he could only imagine what it took to remain conscious.

“We’re goin’, we’re goin’! Geez!” Cid stuck a cigarette in his mouth and jogged over to the airship, disappearing inside with something that Cloud could only describe as a giggle of glee. Vincent gave Cloud a meaningful look, something between an amused resignation and ‘why did you curse me like this’ expression.

“I’m gonna tell you to be safe, but I don’t think you need me to say that when you’ve got Cloud with you,” Zack was telling Aeris as Vincent followed sedately after his friend.

“I’ll be fine, really. I can see you worrying.”

“Me? Worry?”

“Yes, you.” Aeris poked him lightly in the chest, smiled softly, and kissed him. “I’ll be fine. When
we come back, we’ll have Holy and some new friends.”

“I like new friends,” Zack quipped, but in the shadow of his playful grin was concern.

Aeris glanced at Cloud and then went on ahead. Cloud started to follow and then realized that Sephiroth and Zack had kept pace with him, walking him away from Rufus and the Turks. He stopped, waiting for whatever they had to say.

“Cloud.” Zack’s face was serious and Cloud feared that he was going to have to suffer through a talk about Aeris’ safety. It wasn’t that he found it annoying, but that he was already well aware of what happened the last time that they had gone to the Forgotten Capital and it weighed just as heavily on his mind as it did his best friend’s.

“Yeah?”

“I know you’ll do everything you can for Aeris,” Cloud blinked. This wasn’t what he was expecting to hear. “So I want you to remember to look out for yourself too. You have bad memories of that place and that’s gonna put you on edge the closer you get. Don’t get too worried about everyone else’s safety and forget about yours.”

“O-Of course. I know that.”

“Do you?” Zack pressed. “Because you haven’t apparently heard yourself when you talk about that future of yours. It’s enough to make a grown man cry, Cloud. Seriously, I want to know something: before you came back here, how many times did you think about suicide?”

“Suicide?!” Cloud sputtered. “I didn’t! At least…at least when I was out of the tank in Nibelheim. I had a moment there or two, but I never thought of it otherwise!”

“That’s good at least, but don’t let yourself get wrapped up in memories.”

“I get it, Zack, I get it! Stop hammering it in!”

“This is what he gets like when he’s worried,” Sephiroth said when Cloud’s temper was beginning to fray. “He’s only concerned about you.”

Feeling a tad bit of guilt for snapping, Cloud nodded.

“Keep a careful eye out, Cloud,” the General continued. “The Forgotten Capital didn’t just see one battle in your story. That group of three brothers was also drawn to it. Something could be lurking, something more than the usual monsters. Return immediately when you’ve acquired Holy, and as soon as you’re in range, call our PHS.”

“Yes, sir!” Cloud saluted instinctively, earning a tiny smile from Sephiroth. Squaring his shoulders, he turned and headed up the ramp into the Highwind. Crewmen were running around and by the panicked looks on their faces, Cid had gotten to them already. He headed up to the control center and peered out the window down at Sephiroth and Cloud. Already they were turning away, deep in conversation. Rufus and the Turks were back at their truck and climbing in. His blue eyes took it all in, hoping against hope that nothing bad would happen in his absence.

-0-0-0-0-

“Tseng, did you get the files I asked for?”

“Yes, sir.”
Tseng handed over a stack of folders as Rufus’ personal car headed back home to his apartment. They’d left the standard issue truck back at ShinRa’s headquarters. He’d shared little words with Sephiroth or Zack, except to say that he’d make the announcement of Zack’s promotion tomorrow.

Reno, driving the car, glanced in the rearview mirror at them. “You look terrible, boss.”

“Thank you,” he replied sarcastically as he balanced the folders against one of his crossed legs while he skimmed through them. “Tseng, I’m assuming you looked these through already?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Any that could replace Hojo with any decency?”

“You gonna do it that soon?”

He glanced up briefly at Reno’s question. “I’d rather not test Sephiroth and Valentine’s loyalty too much. Valentine’s condition was clearly stated, but I’m sure such an agreement would have to have been made with Sephiroth regardless of Valentine. If it’s not done by the time they return, it’s entirely possible Valentine will desert in the best case scenario. Worst case, he’ll kill Hojo himself before I’m ready and then become an enemy. I’d rather not have that happen, particularly since I’m sure Cloud and his group will side with Valentine. Almost all of them have some personal history with that detestable man. It’s not worth putting it off.” Rufus sighed. “It’s such a pity that Gast is dead.”

“We don’t know that for certain,” Rude commented from the front seat.

Rufus raised an eyebrow. “You think that Strife’s story is incorrect?”

“I’m thinking that he had no guarantee that Gast is dead. It’s possible he survived.”

“I would think that Hojo would finish the job.”

“Ifalna survived and we don’t have a body.”

“Do you think it’s worth looking into, sir?” Tseng asked.

Rufus looked over at the Turk sitting next to him and then out the window. They’d left Elena to spy on Scarlett, just to be safe. While she may be green, she was very good at her job and the woman would be on the lookout for her. It made this conversation easier without her around since he just didn’t know her that well and wasn’t quite comfortable with her yet. He didn’t question her loyalty, not after hearing Cloud’s story and knowing that she was still with him when he was weak, but Rufus had learned to be cautious despite all that.

“Sir?”

To have Hojo’s predecessor back would be the ideal situation. Gast was a proven scientist, familiar with the work that ShinRa had been doing, and had unassailable moral values. Valentine and Sephiroth would never quibble Hojo’s replacement if it was Gast. Rufus was under no illusions that whoever he picked would be carefully scrutinized by the entire crew he was forced to work with and they could cause a lot of problems if they weren’t happy. All the same, Rufus wasn’t about to end the SOLDIER program and he needed a good scientist to continue the work.

“Sir?” Tseng’s voice was insistent, there was even a touch on his arm. “We’re here.”

Rufus got out of the car, trying not to wobble. Was he really so damn tired that it was affecting his
balance? He closed the car door, but paused near Reno’s open window. “Look into Gast, just to be sure. At least find his body as proof he’s dead. If he’s alive, he shouldn’t be that old. It’s probably a wild good chase and will just waste time, but I’d rather not leave anything to chance.”

“You got it, boss. Don’t pass out on the way to your place.”

“Of course not.” Rufus straightened his clothes and headed toward the door to the building, only to realize that Tseng was, once again, following. He sighed as he headed in. As he pressed the elevator button, he noted no one was currently around, so he said, “Tseng, while I’m flattered you like my company so well and that now that I’m president, you have no reason to refuse my attentions, I’m far too tired for anything of the sort tonight.”

“I’m well aware of that, sir, but might I add that I have known you for years now? You have an almost obsession compulsion when it comes to work and I’d rather make sure that you sleep.”

“As you wish,” he spat, stalking into the elevator. Tseng serenely followed and appeared unaffected by the black glare he was giving him.

As it turned out, Tseng never had to worry about him not going to bed because by the time the elevator had reached Rufus’ floor, the president was already asleep.
Chapter 16

With the Highwind, it didn’t take that long to get where they were going. Reluctantly Cloud had settled on going to North Corel first, as that was the place he was reasonably sure Barrett would be. Vincent watched the young SOLDIER and thought it was glaringly obvious that he was avoiding Nibelheim and Tifa Lockhart. Of everyone that had worked with Cloud in his future, it was the martial artist that he seemed most reluctant to contact. Why didn’t he, though? Now he truly was in SOLDIER, so his hesitance made little sense to the former Turk.

*If you stare any harder at his back, you’ll burn a hole in it. Or are you attempting to move in on Sephiroth’s property?*

*Cloud is hardly property, Chaos, and no, I am not thinking any such thing. I have no interest in Cloud at all in that sense.*

*Then who do you have an interest in?*

*No one.*

*Now that I don’t believe for a minute.*

Vincent tuned out the demon’s verbal musings, noting that Cid was chewing on the butt of his cigarette while he gripped the controls. Aeris was speaking in what he assumed was a soothing tone to Cloud. It was obvious by his face that he was stressed and uncomfortable, perhaps by his memories. That was something Vincent did understand. Memories were perhaps the hardest things in the world to deal with or avoid.

“When are we going to be in North Corel?”

“Don’t get your panties in a knot, SOLDIER boy! We’ll get there when we fucking get there. We just started this shit five hours ago! And if this turns into a ‘Are we there yet’ thing, I will throw you overboard, you hear me?!”

“I’m not a kid!”

“You look like it!”

“I do not!”

“Look in a mirror!”

Aeris’ laughter interrupted the back and forth and even Vincent had to smile just a little in amusement. Cid could sometimes be as childish as he accused Cloud of looking, but it broke up the monotony and at least kept Cloud from fretting himself to pieces.

“And you! Stop brooding!”

It took a minute for Vincent to recognize that it was him Cid was glaring at. He turned his red eyes away after a minute, focusing on the bright blue sky instead, ignoring the pilot with the same panache that he ignored Chaos. The trip honestly wasn’t that long and though the former Turk didn’t really engage in any conversation with the other three, he listened intently. Their arrival at North Corel caused a stir, particularly since there was nowhere to land the huge airship.
“How are we supposed to get down there?” Aeris wondered. “Should we turn back, land, and walk the rest of the way?”

“How do that? Hey, SOLDIER boy! Jump down there!” Cid shouted.

“Are you kidding? What do you think would happen if I did that at this height?!”

“Fine, you pansy! Vincent’d do it at this height!”

Vincent blinked, surprised that he was drawn in this conversation. “What?” he said, at the same time as Cloud.

“Yeah, Vincent had Chaos fly us around a lot, didn’t matter from what height. Got us safe from the Tiny Bronco crashing.”

“I did that out of necessity, not desire,” Vincent clarified at Aeris and Cloud’s staring. “Had it not been an emergency, I would not have done it, and I will not jump from this height either.”

“Ya know, Vincent, you’ve got the most useful thing of all and you never use it,” the pilot grumbled as he lowered the Highwind slowly toward the ground to hover over the small mining town.

“Excuse me?”

“Chaos, man! He can fly! How great is that!”

*I’m really beginning to wish I was in him*, Chaos commented.

*So do I. You two are perfect for each other.*

*Aw, are you jealous?*

Vincent decided not to lower himself to answer to *that* stupid comment by the demon. “Cid, what do the signs say regarding animals being kept and bred by people?”

Cid blinked, nonplussed. “Um… ‘Do not feed the animals’?”

“Exactly. There is a new sign you need to remember.”

“What is that?”

“Do not pamper the demons.”

There was a long, stunned silence at that dry statement before Cid burst out laughing, followed by Aeris. Even Cloud was having a hard time stifling his amusement. Cid landed on his ass, letting go of the controls because he just couldn’t keep standing. “That’s the funniest thing I’ve ever heard come outta yer mouth!”

“It was not meant to be humorous.”

“That’s exactly why it’s so damn funny!”

It took five more minutes before they got the pilot calmed down enough to settle the Highwind. They ended up lowering a ladder to the ground and Cloud climbed down. Vincent watched, curious to know what he’d tell this Barrett Wallace. They’d deliberately been left behind and he wondered why. Was the story that personal, or did he need time on his own to decide how to tell the man?
His eyes narrowed a little, squinting through the sunlight, as Cloud stopped almost in the center of
the town and a bear of a man with dark skin and a gun grafted on his arm came out to meet him.

“How long do you think this is going to take?” Aeris asked, standing next to him as they looked out
the window at the two.

“As long as it takes,” he replied, internally keeping the thought that however long it took Cloud to
convince him that he was telling the truth first. After a few more minutes of conversation, they
disappeared inside a house.

“I’m rather glad that we’re not on the ground, now that I think about it,” Aeris said. “ShinRa’s logo
is on the side of the Highwind, isn’t it? They don’t look too happy to see that.”

Vincent looked back down at the center of town where a few people had gathered to stare at the
airship and there didn’t appear to be a single happy or neutral face. “I’m not surprised. ShinRa put
mining towns like this out of business. To my knowledge, there were several more towns besides
North Corel, but after ShinRa, only this one continued to survive.”

“They all became ghost towns… That’s sad.”

“It’s what ShinRa does,” Cid growled. “They take dreams and they crush ‘em. I don’t know about
Rufus, but I don’t expect that it’ll be any different with him in charge than his old man. Come from
the same tree, don’t they?”

“You don’t know that,” the flower girl defended. “He could!”

“Didn’t seem like he changed ShinRa’s ways in that story of Cloud’s, did he?”

“But he gained the company under duress. He didn’t have a lot of time. According to Cloud, he
worked hard after everything was settled, so give him a chance.”

“Wish I had your optimism.”

Their conversation was broken up when they noticed Cloud leaving the building, followed by the
big man and he had a bag over his shoulder. “It appears as if he will be coming with us,” Vincent
stated.

Cloud kept walking as Barrett was stopped by the others of the town who clearly had questions.
There were a few gestures as the man explained before following after the SOLDIER despite their
obvious protests.

“We’ll be heading to Wutai next,” Cloud told them as he stepped in from the ladder. “If we can’t
find Yuffie there, then we’ll try that forest.”

“You really think we can wait around for days lookin’ fer her?” Cid asked, leaning on the controls
of the Highwind and lighting a cigarette.

“If we can’t find her after a day or two of looking, then we’ll head to Nibelheim and then…to the
Forgotten City.” It was even more obvious on Cloud’s reluctance to go, but he seemed resolved
regardless.

“This better be what you say it is,” came a grunting deep voice. A sack was thrown onto the deck
and the dark, burly man hauled himself up.

“I promise you, it is. Rufus is in control of ShinRa now and he’s not as bad as his father. If we can
get rid of JENOVA, we’ll save the planet for good. Now, Barrett, this is Aeris, Vincent, and Cid.”

Barrett looked at them, eyes lingering on Vincent’s appearance, and said, “Well if it’s for savin’ the planet, I’m in, so long as ShinRa doesn’t fuck it up.”

“Then we’re agreed. Cid—”

“To Wutai, I get it, I get it. And new guy! Don’t mess with anything, you’ll break it!”

*Isn’t this going to be fun.*

*Please…don’t sound so gleeful,* Vincent muttered as he heard Barrett and Cid start arguing.
“I have new respect for you.”

Sephiroth looked up as Zack dropped down in a chair in his office. He was about to argue regarding the boots propped up on the corner of his desk when he noticed just how tired his friend looked. His eyebrow rose when he watched the man rub his eyes in a way that Sephiroth had done a million times. “As opposed to the no respect you gave me before?”

“Hah hah, Seph. Very funny. My first full day as the new General and I’m going to die. How do you handle all this?”

He shrugged. “I was created for it.”

“Oh you were not! You were just…modified by Hojo against your consent.”

“It amounts to the same thing.”

Zack frowned. “Oh, by the way, speaking of the creature born out of the depths of hell, I spoke with Reno. Apparently, according to him, Rufus has lost his marbles and is searching for Gast.”

Sephiroth straightened. “He’s dead.”

“Is he? Rufus doesn’t seem to think so and he’s not about to stop the SOLDIER program. He needs someone to replace Hojo with. However they’ve got no real information to go on. They want Hojo’s notes.”

There was a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach at where this conversation was going. “You are telling me this…why?”

His friend was looking distinctly angrier. “Next time you go for labs, he wants you to go through Hojo’s paperwork and find anything relating to what might have happened to Gast.”

“Does he believe I will be in any condition to do so? I have put off Hojo for so long that he is going to make it particularly…thorough.”

“I don’t know what the hell he’s thinking, Seph, but I was supposed to pass the message on, as if I don’t have enough to do now that I’m in charge of the army and if I hear one more ‘General Fair, sir’, I think I’ll be sick.”

“You were the one that accepted the promotion.”

“Trust me, I’m beginning to hate myself for it too.”

“You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Zack complained.

Sephiroth bent his attention back to his task, hiding his amused smirk. An hour later, he was standing outside the doors to the place he hated the most. It took more effort than he wanted to admit to for Sephiroth to step through the doors to the labs. The scientist, hunched over a keyboard, looked up with his beady eyes. “So you’ve finally shown up, have you? I have spent more time than I care to say petitioning our new leader for your presence.”
“I’ve been busy,” he said with complete truth. It had been horribly busy since the Nibelheim incident and that had only increased with Rufus’ coup. There was a lot of changing going on in the administration. There was both a mass exodus of people and a mass hiring as the young ShinRa pulled in people he could trust and got rid of those that he couldn’t. With Zack’s promotion to General, there was paperwork to fill out on top of paperwork. It didn’t help that Zack really didn’t know what he was doing and often came to ask. If he’d done his actual work when Sephiroth had given it to him, he would already know.

It was as Hojo was standing and walking over to him that Sephiroth’s keen gaze caught sight of something red in an observation room above them. So Reno was using him as a decoy? Well, he supposed he wasn’t surprised; it was what he would expect of a Turk and indeed, it was a good plan. He just rather wished it didn’t involve him.

“Strip, Sephiroth, you know how this works.”

With a heavy sigh, he began to pull off his leather armor. Hojo’s eyes were looking particularly darkly gleeful as the pauldrons landed on a chair nearby. Just as he was taking off his coat, an alarm went off somewhere deep in the labs.

“What now?!” the man irately demanded just as a Bagnadrana came roaring around the corner. His eyes widened and he dodged to the right just as it crashed into the table he’d been standing next to. “How the hell did it get loose?!” Hojo screeched, having gotten out the way much less elegantly and landed in a pile of papers, chairs, and overturned metal table. With a fierce shriek, the Bagnadrana crashed into the half open door that led to the rest of ShinRa and forced itself through, its six legs moving like mad.

Once again there was that flash of red in the observation room. Reno paused, their eyes met, and then with an unrepentant grin followed by a salute with a folder, the Turk was gone. It took a minute for him to realize that it must have been Reno have let the creature out of its cage deliberately. Looking around, the lab was completely unusable and even if it hadn’t, with the Bagnadrana out in the rest of the building, he had the perfect excuse to leave.

Perhaps there was something good about the Turks after all.

“Where are you going?!” Hojo demanded as he snatched up his pauldrons and gloves.

“I have to clean up your mess,” Sephiroth told him, finding an absurd amount of satisfaction saying that to the stunned scientist’s face.

“Capture it alive!” he heard thrown at his back.

It didn’t take much to catch up to the creature. Some army regulars had managed to pin it down near the stairs with gunfire. The corridor was too confining to use Masamune even if he’d had it with him, but that was fine. It had been a long time since he’d done anything by hand. “Keep firing!” he ordered as he rushed past them. There was a pause, as if they weren’t sure to obey given that he’d be in their line of fire, but with his status, at least, they continued.

By that point, he’d been so fast that he was behind the Bagnadrana and protected by its bulk. It tried to swerve its head around to bite at him, but he grabbed its mouth and kept it shut with one hand. A single leap, he was on its back and wrapping his other hand around it. With barely any effort, he snapped its neck.

The body slumped beneath him and he felt even more satisfaction as he heard Hojo hurriedly shuffling down the hall screaming, “My specimen! I told you not to kill it! I still needed it!”
“It was unavoidable,” he said calmly, pulling his gloves back and making sure the pauldrons were firmly set now that he had time. He’d all but just thrown them on. He stepped off the body and headed down the stairs.

“Where are you going?! You’re not done yet!”

Sephiroth paused and looked at Hojo. “Is your lab in any condition anything?”

Hojo opened his mouth and then closed it with an angry clack when he couldn’t deny it. “Next time I tell you to come to the lab, you come!”

“If I can spare the time,” he said and headed off, trying not to laugh to himself.

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Sephiroth was in such a good mood, he didn’t even mind when Zack, followed by Reno, burst into his office three hours later. His white eyebrow rose at the two together and Zack’s horribly large grin. His former lieutenant all but sat on his desk, he leaned over so much. “So!”

“Yes?”

“I hear something interesting happened at the lab today. It just so happened, by coincidence I hear, that one of Hojo’s captured beasties got loose. Right, Reno?”

“So I’ve heard. I haven’t been down to the labs in ages. A lot of damage then?”

They were doing an admiral job of trying to appear nonchalant and uninvolved, but their satisfied and gleeful grins were giving it away badly. Reno looked like the cat that ate the proverbial bird and his face all but screamed ‘I did it!’ “Yes, it was quite extensive,” he said, deciding to play along just because he was in such a pleasant mood.

“How bad then?”

“Enough that I do not foresee them doing anything for the next several weeks,” he replied, leaning back in his chair.

“Stop looking so pleased, you’ll give it away,” Reno hissed.

His second eyebrow rose. “Then you have not looked into a mirror apparently, Turk, because you might as well be gloating verbally.”

Reno grinned at him. “Ah damn. Have to work on my poker face. But seriously, did you expect me to leave you like that? We’re buddies now.”

“…Where do you get this thought from?”

“You helpin’ the boss of course!”

Sephiroth shared a glance with a smiling Zack and decided not to mention that it was more because they both had things they could give to each other, and therefore was not much in the way of ‘helping’. It wasn’t worth it and besides, if today was any indication, the Turks could become even more useful so long as they viewed him as ‘helping’ Rufus ShinRa. “Yes, well, since I did not have to be subjected to Hojo’s experimentations today, I will continue my work.”

“Oh no, Seph, today is special on account of that. We’re going drinking!”
“No,” he said flatly.

“Come on, Seph,” Zack wheedled and even sat on the arm of his chair. “It’s just for today and we can’t drink to Hojo’s misfortune?”

“Yeah, Seph.” He glared so fiercely at Reno for shortening his name that the Turk gulped a little. “Y-Yeah, General Sephiroth, relax a little.”

“I have work, Zack.”

“Seeep, lemme drink with you. I have to take my mind off Aeris’ absence.”

He’d been trying to ignore Cloud’s absence and he’d been doing a poor but vaguely successful attempt until Zack had brought it up. He leveled his friend with a dirty glare, knowing that he was being manipulated, but at least with Zack, his manipulations were always done for Sephiroth’s supposed well-being. He failed to see how being drunk could accomplish that, but he’d trusted Zack before.

“…If you insist.”

“Good. Reno’s coming.”

“…Must he?”

“I must!” Reno answered with an evil grin. “Fair said he wasn’t sure you could even get drunk and we must test this!”

Sephiroth sighed. He really missed Cloud.
“Are you deliberately avoiding Nibelheim?” Aeris asked him.

Cloud turned to look at her as the Highwind began to descend outside Wutai. Halfway there he’d forgotten to Cosmo Canyon and had all but been ready to yank the controls out of Cid’s hand to turn around and go back when Nanaki had found them. Bugenhagen had sent him ahead deliberately, and Cloud would really like that little trick of his. Maybe Bugenhagen had seen something through his machines?

“Maybe a little,” he answered honestly. “Nibelheim was always…at the center of everything bad that ever seemed to happen, to me and to the world.”

“So it’s not because of Tifa?”

“Well…” Cloud couldn’t lie to Aeris’ clear gaze and he sighed. “That could be part of it too. I’d told her when I was a kid that I liked her. Not in so many words, but it was pretty clear. Then we’d ended up coming back a lot earlier than I was expecting, after I began dating Sephiroth, and there she was and… She’ll never be more than a friend to me so I don’t know what to say to her that regard. Then there’s the fact that she was there in the reactor when we’d followed Sephiroth and I didn’t even stop to see if she was all right, just ran ahead to find him. It’s…going to be awkward.”

“Maybe, but she’s your friend, isn’t she? Give her some credit,” Aeris suggested.

“I give her a lot of credit, she’s a great friend, but—”

“Are you going to stand there all day?” Cid’s irate voice interrupted.

Cloud turned, spotting Cid, Vincent, Barrett, and Nanaki waiting for them impatiently. “Are you… all coming?” he asked, a little stunned.

“Course. Did you think you were going to make us stay behind?” Cid asked, clearly annoyed.

“I think descending en masse on Wutai is probably not the best idea. Aeris and Vincent will go with me.”

“Are you telling me I’m stuck here yet again, and with these two?!”

“Yes,” Cloud told Cid and stepped out onto the plains of Wutai. “Vincent knows the area and is a good tracker. We’ll be back soon, promise.”

“I am not—”

He never found out what Cid was going to say because Nanaki had pressed the button to shut the door behind them. “Do you think she’ll be here?” Aeris asked as they made their way into town. Most of the inhabitants gave them a wide berth and here and there, he could still see the effects of the war that lingered, hard feelings not yet eased.

“Hope so, because I’d rather not tramp through that forest for days on end.”

“How are you planning on convincing her?”

Cloud didn’t respond to Vincent’s question at first, thinking about it. Getting Barrett to agree wasn’t that difficult, actually. It had involved ShinRa and he was all about that. Nanaki had been
sent ahead already even if he hadn’t known anything, and the others had just kind of fallen in place. The only reason they’d had Yuffie was because they’d beaten her and had to catch her a second time once she’d stolen all their materia. Of all of them, she’d had the least reason to join their team and she was hugely materialistic. Perhaps he could appeal to her in that regard? Promise that she would get the materia she wanted if she helped?

Part of him wasn’t entirely certain why he was getting the team together, really, but some gut feeling told him that it was necessary. Besides, it never hurt to be prepared. “Let’s try her house,” he suggested, deciding that he didn’t really know what to say.

Godo Kisaragi opened the door himself, seeming to be in the middle of dressing for combat. “What is it?” His gaze narrowed at seeing the green ringing Cloud’s eyes. “What does SOLDIER want here?”

“We’re looking for your daughter, Yuffie,” he said politely, knowing that it was best not to antagonize the man more than necessary.

“She’s not here.”

“Where is she?” Seeing the rebellious look, Cloud bit his lip. “Please, we need her.”

“What does SOLDIER want with her?”

“It’s not SOLDIER, it’s us. It’s… well, it’s a long story and there’s really not a lot of time—”

“Neither do I, so you’re out of luck.” Godo finished tying his sash and stepped out, shoving past them and heading out of town to the mountains.

“Where are you going?”

“None of your business.”

Cloud narrowed his eyes, something feeling off. Godo had far too much to do in town, why was he leaving? The last time they’d been there and Yuffie had been captured— Oh that couldn’t be it, could it? Was she in the mountains again? The Turks wouldn’t have grabbed her, not like before, but if she got lost or injured? He’d been noticing that certain types of incidents happened regardless of what he’d done even if there were twists. Was that fate?

“Yuffie’s gone isn’t she?” he asked, catching up to Godo. “In the mountains?”

“This isn’t any of your business, SOLDIER boy.”

“Look, we’re just trying to help, I promise. If I tell you what I know while we search, will you let us help?”

Godo looked at him from the corner of his eye and grunted in grudging acceptance. So Cloud began his tale, heavily edited down for time and details. The Wutai man listened silently with a blank expression as they headed deeper into the confusing mountain passes. The longer he spoke, the more Cloud began to wonder if Godo believed him. Surely there would be some response if he did? Maybe Godo had a sense that he was telling the truth like whatever had touched Bugenhagen?

“That’s quite a story,” he said when Cloud finished.

“It’s true,” Aeris said from behind them, her and Vincent having followed quietly.
“So you say, but you’ve offered no proof.”

“What sort of proof do you want?”

“The burden of proof is yours,” Godo stated flatly.

Cloud was about to argue, but Vincent’s soft voice pierced like a knife. “He has no need to convince you, only your daughter. You do not own her, she can choose to come of her own accord.”

Godo growled, but by his silence, it was clear he acknowledged that fact. This wasn’t how he liked to leave situations, but Vincent was right. That didn’t stop him from trying anyway as they wound their way around paths that didn’t even look like paths. It wasn’t too bad for him, coming from Nibelheim with its own winding mountains, but Aeris was having a hard time of it and both he and Vincent often had to help her.

So much for coming back soon, he thought as hours went by with not a single sign of Yuffie. “What is she doing out here anyway?”

“We…had an argument,” Godo admitted.

“About what?”

“Someone had approached me about a possible arranged marriage. It is an old custom, one that’s not often used nowadays, but it isn’t unknown either. I hadn’t really considered it seriously, but Yuffie apparently thought I did and stormed out.”

“That sounds like her,” he said with a sigh.

A few rocks tumbled from above them, little pebbles really, and Godo immediately picked up his pace, almost outright running as they made their way up, even being forced to climb at some points. Neither Cloud nor Vincent was out of breath, but Aeris looked about dead on her feet and even Godo was winded. “Yuffie!”

The young girl turned in surprise at the sound of her father’s voice. She was dressed in what he remembered, that green shirt, shorts that should be illegally short, and that heavy white gauntlet that went all the way up her arm. Her weapon was bloodied and she stood over the lifeless body of an Edgehead, completely unharmed. He frowned, as he distinctly remembered they were usually found only in the grasslands of Wutai. What was one doing so deep in the mountains?

“Dad? What are you doing here?”

“It’s been hours, Yuffie! Come home!”

She glared at him, clearly still not over their argument earlier. “Who says?! I’m not coming home —”

“How many times do I have to tell you, I wasn’t seriously—”

Cloud cleared his throat before it could degenerate into a shouting match. When Yuffie noticed his eyes, she shifted into a battle stance. “ShinRa!”

“Wait! Wait, don’t! I just want to talk to you. Please, hear me out!” He looked to Godo for help, but the man was silent, neither helping nor hindering.
“I don’t care what ShinRa has to say!”

“Even if I say it’s for the fate of the planet?”

Yuffie paused, still crouched as if she were about to sprint toward them. “What?”

So Cloud told his story again, less edited this time because he really needed her to believe him. That same sense of urgency had gripped him again, an internal sensor inside his brain that he’d learned to listen to over time. It had helped him in a number of tight scrapes over the years and it didn’t pay not to listen to it.

“That…is the stupidest story I’ve ever heard,” she told him flatly when he finished. “Do you think I’m as crazy as you are?”

Well…that failed, so Cloud went to his backup plan. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a red Summon materia. “How about this then: you come with us and I’ll give this to you.”

She looked at, her eyes clearly gleaming at the idea. “What is it? Some random Chocobo Summoning? Going to have to do better—”

“Knights of the Round. It’s still new, not mastered at all, but—”

“I’ll take it!” Cloud had to yank it in the air as she leapt for it to keep it out of her grip.

“Figured you would, but you only get it after we get back on the Highwind.”

“Then let’s get going!” Despite saying that, Yuffie kept circling him and he had to give it to the taller Vincent to hold onto because she seemed to have no compunction about crawling over him to get what she wanted and he didn’t want to hurt her, so he couldn’t get her off. She paused at seeing the materia in that metal claw and pouted at seeing whatever look was in Vincent’s eyes. Without a word, she jumped off Cloud’s back and seemed to dance down the side of the mountain. “Come on, slowpokes! Let’s get moving!”

Despite his sigh, Cloud did smile. He’d missed his friends.

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I’m planning on doing one more Seph chapter, then moving things along toward the end.
Chapter 19

Sephiroth frowned as he watched the trainees from a balcony. It was a simple training exercise with materia and it was going wildly out of control. Either the Fire spells, even a level one, were excessively powerful…or they wouldn’t even work correctly. “Stop,” he ordered, drawing attention to himself for the first time. If simple elemental materia was reacting that badly, he didn’t even want to think about Summons or anything else. Was this her influence? “Materia training is suspended until further notice.”

“Yes, sir!” the SOLDIER 2nd barked, dismissing the recruits, whose eyes couldn’t seem to come unglued from the great General.

Said General spared them no attention, stalking out of the training hall. He had heard from Cloud about two weeks ago, that they had picked up the final ‘member’ of their group, Tifa. His lover had sounded stressed and concerned, but not upset. Whatever it was that had caused that reaction was not unmanageable. They had been heading to the Forgotten City last they had spoken and despite his many attempts, he couldn’t get through as of nine days ago. Sephiroth wasn’t willing to admit he tried at least once a day, but the result was always the same.

He was heading back to his office when Rufus’ voice lanced out at him. The young man was irate, stalking past everyone and glaring them away if they dared stand in his way. “General! With me!”

An eyebrow rose as he spotted Zack behind him. His friend merely shrugged, the action telling him without words that he had no idea what was going on either. However, given that Rufus was technically his superior and he had nothing else to do but paperwork, he followed as ordered.

“What’s going on, Rufus?” Zack asked, keeping a calm voice.

“Why does everyone crash my helicopters?!” was spat back at him, not so much an answer, but more talking to himself. As angry as he seemed, though, when Sephiroth got a better look at him, it was clear that it was less rage and more concern that was prompting his behavior.

They took a company car to the edge of the plate and Sephiroth found brief amusement at Zack’s unnerved expression and how he clutched anything he could at the erratic driving of their President. If they crashed, likely the only person that would be hurt would be Rufus himself, but it didn’t stop the humor of his friend’s expression when he tried to suggest for the tenth time that perhaps it would be best if he drove.

There was indeed a crash and several of the residents of the plate had tried to get close to the wreck. There had been a fire, clearly, but it was mostly all smoke. Sephiroth gestured the two to remain behind as he stepped into the wreckage, having no concern for himself. Even if he was injured, it wouldn’t be enough to kill him. It had been a fairly large helicopter from the look of it, and the pilot section was absolutely demolished, looking like a crumpled accordion. The back, however wasn’t as badly damaged and as he drew closer to it, he could see a shimmering glow, mostly transparent.

“That’s…a Shield,” Zack commented, having ignored his orders and entered into the wreckage with him. “But…it shouldn’t be like that. It’s like it's...an orb, but it should just be around the person who cast it.”

“Magic has been unpredictable,” Sephiroth told him, knocking lightly on the orb. “If it works, it’s either too powerful, or in this case warps, or it doesn’t work at all. I’ve forbidden all training
exercises with it until we can sort out this whole situation with JENOVA.”

“Are there any survivors?!” Rufus demanded.

“Don’t know yet,” Zack answered.

Sephiroth withdrew Masamune and lightly poked at the orb, but it didn’t seem to have an effect. He sliced, it was nothing. Testing, he brought the hilt down hard on top of it and he thought that he saw a faint ripple. Perhaps cumulative damage? It was then that he heard it. “Someone inside is alive.”

“What?”

“I can hear them…but it’s very, very faint. The shield has become, despite its appearance, very solid. I doubt even air is getting through.”

“Then we’ve got to get them out of there!”

Sephiroth didn’t even think Zack’s comment was worth a response, given that it was obvious that was the case. “Do you have your Buster Sword? It seems more susceptible to blunt force.”

“It’s in the car.” Zack almost didn’t finish the statement before was gone, then back in seemingly the blink of an eye. Sephiroth stepped back, slicing some of the overhanging steel so that they weren’t in the way of one of Zack’s massive swings.

The Buster Sword slammed down and just by looking at his friend’s arms, he could tell that he had used all his strength, something that Zack only did with Sephiroth when they were sparring because the General could take it whereas not much else could. As massive crack appeared, the shimmering lessening at the area around it, and Zack took another mighty swing at it. That broke it and suddenly the voice that he could barely hear on the edge of his hearing was loud and clear.

“Is that…fresh air?”

“Reno?!” Zack demanded as they shoved wreckage aside to reach the Turk, his partner, and an older gentleman that had clearly passed out.

“Zack! Sephiroth! Oh fucking thank the planet!”

“What happened? Who’s he?”

“This is Professor Gast, that longshot of Boss’. We were coming back, no real issues, when suddenly something hit the motor. After that, it was less ‘descend’ and more ‘freefall’. Rude had the Shield materia and I thought, ‘what the hell, maybe using it, Gast would survive the crash, but then it was like…that. It was great because when we crashed, we were fine, but then we couldn’t get out and air wasn’t coming in. Gast passed out.”

“He needs to be taken to the medbay, then.” Zack picked up the old man that Sephiroth had only heard about when his enhanced hearing caught the lab assistants talking when Hojo wasn’t around. He’d never really cared too much, or thought about it, before now, only knowing that he was Hojo’s predecessor.

His eyes narrowed. Did that mean Rufus was planning on continuing the SOLDIER program? Wasn’t that the reason they were in this mess? Sephiroth stepped out of the wreckage last, Reno wheezing for air that sounded more like he was doing it for effect and that he was fine. “ShinRa.”
“In the car,” Rufus interrupted. He was fidgeting he was so stressed, but the six of them managed, just barely, to fit in the car. Sephiroth took sat across from Rufus in the back as Rude took the driver’s seat, coughing once or twice, and Reno next to him. Zack had little choice, but to prop up the scientist next to Sephiroth or have him in his lap and he didn’t seem keen on that. The general made no twitch as the unconscious older man slumped against him.

“You are planning on continuing the SOLDIER program.”

“Yes.” The word was almost thrown at him, defiant.

“I think it is abundantly clear that the reason we have this problem is because of that program.”

“We’re not going to be using JENOVA anymore, and no, we don’t have any more samples. The head you destroyed in Nibelheim was it.”

“Why do you even need the program?” Zack asked. “The planet belongs to ShinRa. You still have the regular army.”

Rufus didn’t answer for a long moment. “The main reason is that we know nothing about the process. Hojo kept all his notes and information to himself, they’re not even on the central database. I don’t know how SOLDIERs are created, much less the problems. It has to be more than just injecting a person with mako and I doubt even Sephiroth knows the details we’d need. Gast can reverse engineer.” The young man shifted, his suit gray that day instead of his usual white.

“I’m not stopping the program entirely, and there may be more SOLDIERs in years to come, but for right now, if I’m going to kill Hojo, I need a replacement for him to at least maintain the health of the ones already here. Nobody has ever tested what happens when the regular mako injections just stop. It could be withdrawal symptoms, or it could kill them. I don’t know. For sure, JENOVA is done with.”

“It…makes sense, Sephiroth,” Zack said cautiously, seeing the General’s blank expression. “Nobody ever asked how it worked because we all knew that Hojo would never tell us. Wouldn’t you like to know what he did to you?”

The truth was…Sephiroth wasn’t sure. Did he really want to know all the things that had been done to him? He knew the end result, that he was near indestructible, but did he really want confirmation in what ways he was a monster? He already knew that he wasn’t human. There didn’t need to be more of him.

Before he could answer in some way, though he had no real answer to Zack’s question, Reno’s voice interrupted. “Uh…guys…I think…we’ve got a problem.”

Rufus and Sephiroth immediately lowered the windows to get a good look, just as an explosion rocked the building in front of them. ShinRa…was burning. It was on fire…but it wasn’t material gone out of control.

“Gunfire!” Zack spat, his hearing almost as good as Sephiroth’s. “What the fuck?!”

Sephiroth’s hand had just grabbed the door handle to get out, as he could run to where he needed to be when Reno’s panicked voice screamed, “Rude, turn!” just as a missile hit the car.
Chapter 20

“The hell is going on?!” Barrett demanded as they looked down at Midgar. Fire was everywhere, but perhaps the worst was the plate. The slums, despite some heavy damage, were contained and protected, but nothing was helping the plate, particularly since just looking at it, it was clear that that was where the problems were coming from. “I don’t know,” Cloud said with a frown and turned to Cid. “Land the Highwind! We’re going to find out!”

“Better be a free space not to scratch her!” Cid argued, but he followed Cloud’s orders without pause. Cloud looked at Aeris who seemed torn between worry and an almost unnatural calm. Ever since she’d picked up Holy, she had changed. Was she somehow connected to the lifestream with it? They hadn’t used any materia since he had left ShinRa, too concerned about the after-effects and the possible instability.

Cloud jumped out first, barely waiting for the ship to land before he was in the thick of it. There were a few drones that he took out quickly that ran from a falling building, but they were little to nothing. A single swipe took care of them and he turned, running toward ShinRa.

“Cloud!” Tifa shouted from behind him, but he couldn’t stop. He had to know what was going on in there. Why was ShinRa exploding?! There was clear evidence of gunfire and missiles, but he was spotting odd corpses all over the ground of things that he once, at one point, might have recognized, but had been mutated beyond all recognition.

One he did recognize, despite its mutations: a behemoth. With gunfire pouring in from behind thanks to Vincent, he jumped and used First Tsuguri use Climhazzard. As the blade beam hit the creature, it made it roar in pain, slowing him just enough to allow his friends to finally catch up. Cid’s spear landed right in its arm, and Tifa used it as a springboard to reach its head to level some deadly kicks.

Before the battle could really get under way, the buster sword landed right through the creature’s neck. Zack came with it and all but pinned the behemoth to the floor. Cloud’s eyes widened at the rough condition of his best friend. He was bleeding and his uniform torn, and he looked exhausted. “Zack?!”

“Spike, you’re back,” the black haired man said, but it held none of the enthusiasm or energy that he was known for. “Been waiting for you. Seph’s been all but out of his mind. Well…until two days ago, anyway.”

“What happened?!”

Zack yanked out the sword and jumped down. He headed right to Aeris and kissed her deeply, something she returned with relief, before he turned and lea them into the ShinRa building, running despite his obvious injuries. “Fucking Hojo. He abruptly let out all his mutations that ‘failed’ on us. I think he was plotting this damn coup for years, but sped up the plan when Rufus took over. Rufus was going to cut his budget, and more importantly, replace him.”

“Replace him?! Wasn’t he going to shut the program down?!” Cloud demanded.

“Like it or not, Cloud, we don’t know what the hell Hojo did to us or whether abruptly removing mako injections will cause us to just keel over one day. We needed someone to look at his notes to at least maintain the SOLDIERs we already have.” As they entered into the building, there was a rush of four mutants, but they didn’t last that long.
“Mutants didn’t destroy those buildings,” Vincent pointed out as they stopped near the unworking elevators to give Zack a minute to breathe.

“No, those were missiles. Sonuvabitch has allies. He apparently got his own ‘goon’ squad from either bribing or convincing a few SOLDIERs and grunts from the army and the Turks. We’d had no idea there were people ever loyal to Hojo and I really don’t want to know what he did to get them on his side.”

“This doesn’t sound like something that’d be all that difficult for ya idiots to handle,” Barrett grunted.

“No. We had the numbers, among other things, but Hojo… He’s been apparently injecting himself with JENOVA cells since they found it. Sephiroth has been battling him for two days. Every fucking time Seph’s got him on his heels, he pulls out a fucking miracle. Between his little monster friends and his different forms, it’s…difficult. I’ve been there with him, but when we spotted the Highwind, I came rushing to check on you.”

It was like a twisted nightmare of the fight he’d had with Hojo before he’d decided he was going to fix what went wrong. Back then, despite the status materia he’d been using, it hadn’t been big of a problem, not like fighting Sephiroth. Somehow, he’d thought everything would be new after they’d gotten rid of JENOVA’s head, completely off book, so he hadn’t honestly given a thought to anything he’d gone through coming back.

Zack shifted and began to head to the stairs. “I’ve got to get back up there.”

“I’m coming!” Cloud snapped and turned to his friends. “Vincent, Cid. With me. Everyone else, make sure nothing follows after us. Aeris.” The eyes that had followed her boyfriend looked at him, a determination in their depths that made him both relieved and highly concerned about her. “What do you need to do with Holy?”

“I can’t do it here. I need to be in the Northern Crater.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say that before?!” Cid demanded.

“Nevermind that,” Cloud spat, struggling to keep himself from just bolting after Zack, to help Sephiroth. “Cid, you’re going to have to take her there.”

“What?! Fuck that!”

“Cid! You don’t take her there, this won’t mean a damn thing!”

Cid looked at Cloud rebelliously before he growled. “Fine!” He spun on his heel, about to head for the door…before he turned back. He stalked back to Vincent, who’s beautifully shaped eyebrow rose up in curiosity. They stared at each other for a minute before Cid yanked down the high collar, pulled the taller man down a little, and kissed him fiercely. Cloud’s eyes went wide with shock, both at the action, and the very undignified squeak from Vincent. “So help me, if you’re dead by the time I get back, I’ll fucking kill you!” the pilot hissed at the former Turk and stalked out of ShinRa, a slightly smiling Aeris following him.

“What was that about?” Yuffie asked, her lips touched with unholy glee.

“Later,” Cloud told her. “Yuffie, you’ll come with me. Everyone else, make sure nothing gets through you.”

Tifa nodded and clenched her fists, taking charge almost instantly as Cloud hurried up the stairs.
Chapter 21

The stairs seemed to go on forever and Cloud took two to three at a time if he could. Vincent had no trouble keeping up with the fierce, enhanced pace, but Yuffie did. Surprisingly he didn’t hear much complaints from her, but he just couldn’t wait. So he paused and as she rounded a corner, he wrapped an arm around her waist and carried her piggyback. As he took the last few flights of stairs, he thought that perhaps the little ninja was enjoying this too much, if her sudden comments and calls of ‘hurry up, move faster’ were any indication.

“Sephiroth!” he shouted as he reached floor 64. Everything on the floor was blown out. Anything higher than that hadn’t stood a chance. Zack was already there, fending off a few monsters, but his eyes were drawn immediately to Sephiroth, who had Masamune buried in Hojo’s chest. The General didn’t even twitch at his call as he shrugged off Yuffie. One of his shoulder guards was missing and was that an actual tear in his coat?

“Not…good enough,” Hojo told him with a laugh, spitting out blood.

“You’re out of tricks,” Sephiroth spat.

“You…think so? I…don’t.”

Hojo’s skin rippled and his hand gripped the blade without regard to the damage it was doing to him. Cloud’s eyes widened as that hand became a long tentacle-like affair and that slid past the blade and to Sephiroth’s wrists. Sephiroth jerked back, taking the sword with it and lopping off half of it…but it just regrew. His body shifted until rather than the spindly hunched over man, there was a muscular colored torso and his balding hair disappeared entirely, replaced with a golden dome. There were no hands and as he watched, he realized that that tentacle didn’t come from his arm. It separated and disappeared to the creature’s back, at the base of his neck. Legs merged together into one mass at his waist going down, getting slimmer as they turned into a point. The skin was pale gray, with stripes of blue on his arms and legs, yellow occasionally breaking up the blue.

“What is that?!” Zack demanded.

“…We called it Lifeform Hojo,” Cloud said after a minute, as the scientist’s body finished mutating entirely. “I…was never sure if it was something that he did on purpose or just a reaction to the damage. This is all JENOVA.”

“That thing is disgusting!” Yuffie said with an exaggerated shudder. “How’d you get rid of it?”

“Well…mostly with the counterattack materia, which we don’t have even if it was working. We were always being hit with statuses when we fought him and even a ribbon wouldn’t help.”

Sephiroth’s eyes remained glued to the creature that seemed to just be waiting for them. It made no move and just hovered there, as if enjoying their reactions. “Did you succeed in your mission?”

“Aeris has Holy and she’s going to the northern crater now.”

“Then we’ll buy as much time for her as possible. This is going to be a long battle, so pace yourself.”

Zack hefted his buster sword onto his shoulder, his usually cheerful face dead serious. “…Then let’s go to it then.”
“You sure about this?” Cid asked doubtfully, watching the Ancient on the bridge and really wishing he’d put his foot down to stay in Midgar. He kept the memory of the hilarious expression on Vincent’s face when he’d kissed him. Truth be told, that had been more spur of the moment than anything. He hadn’t really thought about what he was doing before he did it. Sure he’d been thinking about a way to bring up the conversation, but he was not a subtle man and that had seemed like the best idea at the time.

“Yes. That’s where JENOVA landed. It’s where she’s most powerful.”

“You know that…how?”

“The planet told me, through Holy.”

Cid nodded, though he didn’t really understand. He wasn’t sure anyone could besides Aeris and maybe Cloud. He was pushing Highwind to its limits to get here there but it be at least a day. “…Think they’ll be okay?”

“I…don’t know,” Aeris said, the words coming out uneasily, as if she didn’t want to admit it. “I didn’t want to leave…but Holy can’t help there. It’s like putting a bandage on someone, but the problem is something internal. I have to be able to touch the lifestream with Holy.”

“Couldn’t we have gone to Mideel for that?”

“We could…but it would take a lot longer to cleanse her because she’d still have a concentration up here where she was found.”

“This shit makes my head hurt,” he muttered, if only to hide his concern. Normally a talkative man, Cid couldn’t find a thing to say and he didn’t sleep the night, instead remaining steadfastly at the wheel as his crew slept in shifts. Even Aeris didn’t sleep, instead sitting on the bridge with him in silence and rolled Holy between her hands idly. It was like she didn’t realize she was doing it.

It became progressively colder as they headed further and further north, leaving ice on the glass of the Highwind. Cid relied more on the radar than visibility to see where he was going, with a little help from Aeris if he went too far west or east. By the time they’d reached the crater, there was a blizzard lashing at them. “I don’t know where I can land,” he grunted, struggling to maintain both their course and the altitude.

“Throw down the rope ladder, I’ll climb down.”

“You’re not going alone!” Cid spat. “You!” One of his crew squeaked, but ran up immediately. “Hold this. Don’t let the Highwind go anywhere, you hear me?!”

“Yes, sir!”

Cid strapped his spear to his back and went down the ladder first, clinging on fiercely as the wind buffeted them. What he wouldn’t give to use the metal ladder, but it didn’t go down far enough. As he reached the bottom rung, he jumped down, landing in a clump of snow. He struggled to stand, brushing himself off as Aeris’ yelling voice managed to overpower the storm. “Catch!”

Catch? Catch what? He looked up, having pulled his goggles down to protect his eyes, and they widened at seeing a blur of pink heading toward him. Frantically he held out his arms and caught her…but the momentum pushed them right back into the snow.
“Thanks!” she told him cheerfully and got off him, and to her feet, leaving him mentally cursing the air blue. “This way!”

He followed her, stumbling and eventually using his spear as a walking stick. They paused at the sides of the crater and Aeris shifted her staff, trying to dig it into the ice, but it just bounced back. “Outta the way!” he spat and shifted, bringing the tip of the spear into contact with the ice as hard as he could, embedding the metal as far as it could go and as high. Given the situation, he had no propriety and gripped Aeris’ rear, shoving her up until her hands could reach the spear. She pulled herself up until she was sitting on it then dangerous shifted to her feet. He hovered beneath her, ready to catch her if she over balanced.

“Pull me up!” he yelled at her.

“Go to Mideel!” she replied, arms stretched to the limit to reach the lip of the crater.

“What the fuck are you on about?!”

“This…leads directly…into the lifestream!” she grunted, managing to get purchase and trying to haul herself up, toes slipping and pressing against the icy wall. “I won’t…come out…here! If I… make it…I’ll come out…at Mideel!”

“What do you mean ‘if’?!”

“No guarantee…I’ll survive,” she shouted down as she managed to get her torso on the lip.

“The fuck?! Why didn’t you say that before?!”

“Doesn’t…matter. I have…to do this anyway!” Before Cid could move, to get on the spear, Aeris disappeared into the crater head first and he heard a surprised shout before nothing.

“Aeris! Aeris! Fucking idiot!” He was determined to follow, but the ice began to glow and shake a little. There was a greenish glow over the top of it and he stepped back instinctively before steeling his spine and jumping up, grabbing the spear and getting up, balancing himself on the hilt. Following her example, Cid grabbed the lip of the crater and pulled himself up, but when he tried to follow her, he found something stopping him. It was invisible, but no matter how he kicked at it, it wouldn’t budge. He even walked to the very center and it was like he was floating over the crater. No matter how he tried to get the spear loose at the side and not fall over, it was stuck too far.

“Stupid…idiot!” he spat before jumping back into the snow and running as best he could toward the Highwind. He had to get to Mideel…and call Cloud.

-Zack grunted in pain as he rushed in front of an unconscious Yuffie, hands gripping a piece of metal that was now piercing his side. He dropped to one knee, blood soaking his left leg, but before the creature that had been Hojo could finish him off, First Tsuguri slammed in front, blocking another thrown metal spike. Cloud was panting heavily and unable to reach him, so he’d broken the cardinal rule about his weapon and thrown it.

Even Sephiroth seemed to be growing tired. They’d managed, barely, to whittle down Hojo so he’d used most of his magic, but his combos were still deadly. “You…okay, Zack?” he muttered. They’d run out of potions hours ago.

“Yeah,” he grunted, yanking out the metal spear with a yell of pain. “Be…fine.”
Vincent was already moving forward, drawing his gun, when there was a green glow. It was like a tendril at first beneath their feet and then it expanded quickly. Zack shifted in surprise, eyes going wide as his wound sealed up. “Did they make it to the crater?” he asked, standing up slowly.

“Maybe,” Cloud commented, watching as Hojo seemed to struggle with the glow, attempting to draw away, but it was everywhere.

Sephiroth seized the chance and rushed forward. The Masamune lifted and sliced down, lopping off Hojo’s head. It landed with a thump on the ground, followed by the body. Sephiroth nudged it, even kicked the head and it hit against the wall…but remained dead.

“Didja win?”

He turned, seeing a worn Reno leaning against the doorway. He and the Turks looked even worse than them, and Tseng was carrying an unconscious and injured Rufus. “I…think so.” His PHS ringing in the silence left behind was like a shot and he jumped a little before answering it. “Cid? I can barely hear you, you’re breaking up. How far are you from the crater? How’s Aeris? What happened?” His eyes went wide. “What do you mean she jumped into the crater?!?”

“What?!” Zack was on his feet and rushing over and Cloud had to duck and dodge to keep hold of his cell phone that his friend kept trying to grab.

“Mideel?! You’re headed there, right?! Stop cursing at me, we’ll be there as soon as possible!” He hung up and shoved his phone in his pocket.

“There’s one surviving helicopter left,” Elena said helpfully, rubbing some of the dirt and grime off her face and trying to fruitlessly to fix her hair. “It’s downstairs, flew in from Junon just an hour ago. We were going to use it—”

Cloud shoved them out of the way as he ran downstairs, but even he wasn’t as fast as Zack. Sephiroth watched them go before just leaping off the top of the building and jamming Masamune into the wall, making his own elevator down. He was already waiting for them at the helicopter.

“Who here can fly it?” he asked, jumping in. That was not one of his talents.

In answer, Sephiroth chose the pilot’s seat. “There’s enough room for three.”

Zack and Cloud were already in. “You coming Vincent?” he asked, spotting Tifa nursing an injured Barrett with Nanaki guarding them from the few remaining mutated creatures. Just as the former Turk nodded and stepped in, his eyes met Tifa’s. She stood up, clearly ready to head over, but Sephiroth had already begun to take off.

“How long till we get there?!” Zack demanded, leaning over Sephiroth’s shoulder from behind.

“Approximately three hours. Sit down.”

“God, I hope she’s okay,” Zack whispered and even from where Cloud sat, he could see the tension in the man’s hand as he gripped his friend’s shoulder.

“…She will be,” Cloud reassured, though he had no way of knowing. Zack seemed to buy his reassurances though, perhaps because of his knowledge. Maybe he let himself believe it, maybe he actually did. It was impossible to tell. The rest of the ride was accomplished in silence.

They reached Mideel about an hour after Cid and Zack jumped out of the helicopter before Sephiroth had landed it, rushing over to the pool of the lifestream. “Aeris?!?”
Sephiroth was quick to head over as soon as he’d landed, hands keeping his former second in command from just jumping in. “We can do nothing but wait.”

“Let go, Seph!”

“You can’t help her right now. We have to wait.”

“How can you be so fucking calm?! What if it was Cloud in there?!”

Sephiroth’s calm expression twitched at that and his hands tightened on Zack’s shoulders. “You’ll poison yourself if you go in. There’s nothing you can do.”

“Fuck you, Seph—”

“Would you both shut up?!” Cid spat. “You’re giving me a fucking headache!”

Cloud hurried up. “Is she here yet?” he asked, though his enhanced hearing already knew the answer to that.

“No,” the pilot told her fiercely, chewing on the end of his cigarette…only for Vincent to yank it viciously. “What the fuck is that about?!”

“I don’t kiss smokers,” Vincent told him flatly. “You will quit.”

“The hell?!”

“No sex until you do.”

“Wait, sex?!” Vincent didn’t answer, instead staring at the pool of lifestream, despite Cid’s demand for an explanation.

It was another hour before the still pool began to churn a little. Zack, who hadn’t even sat down, stiffened. “Aeris?” he called, gripping Sephiroth’s wrist like a vice. He was almost vibrating in place, eyes straining to see something.

“Right here, Zack,” her sweet voice said. Cloud watched in awe as a blob of lifestream shot up…only to turn into Aeris, walking forward as if in a bubble. The lifestream didn’t hurt her if it touched her at all. “JENOVA is gone. I knew you were here, but I had to make sure there was nothing left of her.”

Zack ran forward and wrapped his arms around his girlfriend and kissed her deeply. She giggled and returned the kiss as he almost crushed her against his chest in relief. For the first time, Cloud saw tears slide down his friend’s cheeks. “Thank the Planet you’re all right!”

“Not just me. Everyone’s all right. She’s gone and the planet can heal.”

It…was really over then? Cloud looked at the pool and then over at his friends. It was over. He’d…succeeded. It wasn’t a bittersweet victory like before. It was a glowing, sweet victory that he’d managed to save…everyone. He’d hadn’t had to lose anyone, not Aeris…and not Sephiroth.

He blinked as he felt a gloved hand touch his face gently. His eyes met that of his lover’s. “Are you all right?”

This time he could answer truthfully the question he hated to hear before. “Yes.” He touched the hand holding his cheek. “Yes, I am.”
“Okay, let’s go back…because I need sleep in the worst way,” Zack announced, lifting Aeris and having her sit on his arm. She laughed at him and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Right after I eat.”

“I don’t think there is enough food on the plate left for you to actually eat your fill,” Sephiroth told him with that dry sense of humor.

Listening to them banter as everyone headed slowly back to the Highwind, Cloud…smiled.
“So…what are you going to do?”

Vincent turned around and looked at Cid. Despite their words from a week before, neither had done anything since then. He wasn’t entirely sure what Cid meant by the kiss and he struggled internally with the knowledge that he had no right to be happy. “What do you mean?”

“Well…it’s over now. Where ya gonna go?”

“I…don’t know. I might return—”

“Good,” Cid interrupted. “Then we’ll go back home.”

His eyebrow rose devastatingly high. “We?”

“Course. Where’d you think we would go?” His silence was eloquent and Cid looked at him in surprise. “What, you don’t want to go there?”

“I don’t see—”

“Well, we’re datin’ now.”

“…We are?”

“What’d you think that kiss meant?!?”

Vincent grew serious. “Cid Highwind. I did not think you were serious. Knowing that you are, I will say this once: no.” At Cid’s rebellious look, he cut him off before he could go into rant mode. “I cannot possibly find all the words to explain how ill-conceived a relationship would be between the two of us. We argue constantly, for one—”

“If you weren’t so stubborn and just listen to me, we wouldn’t!”

“That is exactly my point. It won’t work, Cid. In the long run—”

Cid yanked him down again and kissed him deeply, and Vincent really had to break the pilot of this whole manhandling thing. “I don’t care about the long run! I care about now and I’m gonna fight for you!” He sighed, but Cid’s hands on his collar wouldn’t let him move. “Don’t care about that girl from before either! You can’t live in the past, Vincent and if it takes teachin’ ya with my body every night, I’ll make you live in the present!”

A faint smile tugged at Vincent’s lips, seeing the answering stubbornness in the pilot’s eyes and the fact that he’d say something even that amazingly stupid and funny. Well…what else did he have to lose? “I am not convinced…but I’ll give you time to do so.”

“Good. Now get on that ship. I’ve seen enough of Midgar to last me a lifetime right now.”

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Rufus watched the Highwind take off from his hospital room and turned his attention away to the Wutaian that stood next to his bedside. Though he wouldn’t say it, despite the drugs he was still in pain and he leaned back against the raised bed, rubbing at the bandages on his chest. He had been amazed that everyone had survived the car wreck and he thanked Rude’s driving that the missile
had hit the pavement right behind the car. It had sent them sailing through the air and crash landing…but Rude and Reno had protected him with their bodies and of course Sephiroth and Zack were fine. They’d even managed to protect Gast.

“How are they?”

“Rude has the most severe injuries, but he is stable and recovering. Reno has been…tending to him all this time when he hasn’t been in here with you.” Rufus almost laughed at the thought of Reno trying to help and was probably just driving the nurses crazy. “Gast is alive and fairly uninjured. He should make a full recovery, at least from the car wreck. He was severely injured and almost died when Hojo attacked him years ago. His road to recovery after that was long and difficult and he is lucky he is alive and can walk, albeit more like a shuffle.”

“Very well,” he said and sighed, only to blink when there was a sudden weight on the side of his bed. “Tseng?”

“I must admit, at least you’ve had some sleep the last week.”

“I was drugged.”

“If that is what it took…” There was a moment’s pause before the Turk leaned in and kissed his lips softly. “You are being released in the afternoon. Now that you are president…”

“You have no right to refuse,” he muttered with a smirk, and tugged him forward by his hair just a little. “So you will obey?”

Tseng bowed his head in mock subservience. “I will tend to your every whim and put your body into such ecstasy that you will be lost to pleasured madness.”

“Well then…looking forward to it,” he said as those lips kissed the back of his hand.

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“What are you thinking about?” Sephiroth asked him from the bed. Cloud looked over his shoulder from the window at the naked man that looked akin to a god. Their deal was to wait until he was sixteen, but there was something smoldering in the eyes of the man looking at him. He wondered if tonight that deal would be null and void.

“Just that…I didn’t think…it would end up this way. Saving the world and no one died. I didn’t have to hold Aeris’ lifeless body. I didn’t have to watch Zack die from a body that wouldn’t move. I didn’t have to kill you.”

There was a long moment of quiet before Sephiroth finally asked something he had expected him to a long time ago. “What changed it? Your future didn’t come to pass, so what was it that you did to change it?”

Cloud left the window and the night outside, sliding into the bed in front of the chiseled man that was his lover. “I don’t know. Maybe it was a bunch of little things. I didn’t do anything hugely different, other than….”

A silver eyebrow rose and Sephiroth’s deep voice prompted, “Other than?”

A faint blush touched his cheeks. “Well, I’d always…loved you I think, even back then, but we never…had a chance. You’d never seen me except once or twice.”
“Are you saying that ‘love’ saved the world?”

“I’m not that sentimental, Sephiroth,” he said to the skeptical man. “I don’t think it’s entirely due to the fact that we…started dating. Like I said, it’s a lot of little things that add up over time. Like ripples in a pond, one little thing changes something else and a little thing there and then there…”

A strong hand eased into his blonde hair and they kissed softly before he was wrapped up in equally strong arms. “I’m so happy that I could almost cry. Now Zack and Aeris can be happy. You can be happy. Now everyone can be happy. I guess, with Edge, we were starting on our way to recovery, the world I mean, but it wasn’t going fast. Now we’ve got a head’s start.”

“You forgot someone.”

He tilted his head in confusion. “Who?”

“You can be happy.”

Cloud smiled softly and tugged the big man over top of him. “…Yeah, I can, can’t I?”

After that, their deal didn’t last the night.

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