Summary

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He looked around the room, packed with three cots, four chairs, and more bodies than were probably supposed to fit in it. Cloud was still asleep, snoring slightly, but Zack tried not to worry since he wasn't sporting any bandages. It looked like only he, Tifa, and Sephiroth had been bestowed with those - which wasn't even all that surprising. Tifa's were wrapped around her knuckles, which probably just meant she hadn't had time to pull on her gloves. Zack remembered being nicked by a bullet sometime before things got blurry and dark, so that explained his own badge of honor. And Sephiroth - well, he didn't know what had happened, but a head wrapped in clean linen and an IV line were probably a step up from things. Had he really seen a feathered wing sprouting from Sephiroth's back?

"Anybody know what hell broke loose?" he wondered out loud.

"No!" Yuffie snapped, throwing the magazine she had been pretending to read across the room. It landed against the pale, cream-painted wall with a ruffled splat and slid to the floor. Aerith bent to retrieve it, but wisely didn't offer it back to the girl. "No one's been telling us anything!"

Sephiroth did not look up from his crossword puzzle. "If I'm not mistaken, someone used sleeping powder on the lot of you. No one was seriously injured, so I expect they're simply waiting for it to wear off of everyone so they only have to explain themselves once."

"Sleeping powder?" Zack frowned. "We're college students. Not terrorists." Granted, he and Sephiroth were both ex-military, but still students.

"We were kind of in the middle of a firefight," Tifa said ruefully. "And it's not like we were listening, exactly. I think they just wanted us out of the way."

"And you have to admit, it seems to have worked," Aerith added.

"Okay, so, well, who's 'they'?"

The door opened. Every open eye in the room fastened upon it hungrily.

A wary Leon peered inside - his scarred face craned around the door first, as if unsure of his welcome. When no one spoke, he shoved the rest of the way into the room, still frowning like thunder and playing with his eyepatch strap. "Strife still out?"

Yuffie waved an angry hand. "Please, I could wake him. Just gimme a bucket of ice water."

"Let's try something with less clean-up involved, first," Leon said. "Esuna."

Cloud continued snoring.

"You know," Aerith said, "Cloud's been pulling all-nighters because of finals - "

"Ugh, don't remind me." Leon walked over to Cloud's cot, and that was when Zack noticed that he was barefoot. Then again, the crazy kid had originally torn out of his and Cloud's dorm room on rollerblades. He shook Cloud by the shoulder a little, then sighed. "Oh, whatever. I guess enough
of you are awake. Where do you need me to start?"

Zack almost felt sorry for Leon, what with the way Yuffie, Tifa, and Sephiroth verbally tackled and pinned him like a fly to the wall. But then Leon held up a hand and said, "So my name's not really Leon Loire," and pulled off his eyepatch.

Leon's left eye was whole and undamaged under the patch - the long, tearing scar skipped neatly over the eye. Zack stared; it was one of three scars of varying depth and length that bit across Leon's face. They were from torama claws, it was rumored; Leon had never discussed it with any of them, but he'd introduced himself openly as ex-SeeD.

"You were working undercover," Sephiroth said rather than guessed. Zack always knew he was the smartest of them. "But why would you make yourself more memorable, rather than less?"

Leon blinked at him for a moment, then shrugged. "Maybe I shouldn't have worried so much about being recognized. Look, it's easy enough to add a new scar. It's not so easy to remove one - you can hide it some with makeup, but not that much, and definitely not if you're going to be sharing a room with someone." He glanced at Cloud, then tapped the middle scar, the one that ran right between his eyes. "I already had a scar here. I had to hide it somehow."

Zack was never going to know why none of them had figured it out sooner. "You're Squall Leonhart," he stated simply.

"Technically? I'm Squall Leonhart Loire. I just ... omitted a few parts."

Of course he was. He was the right age, height, build - he hadn't even dyed his hair, though he'd let it grow out. He wasn't wearing the Commander's iconic fur-trimmed black jacket or his inexplicable many belts - but now Zack could recognize the stoic SeeD Commander in Leon's pinched face. He winced a little as it hit him that Squall Leonhart had decided to tear up his own face for a mission. That third slash must have come perilously close to taking out his eye for real.

The truly jarring part, though, was putting that silent, poised young man who had saved the world together with Leon, his best buddy Cloud's roommate, who tended to favor cotton candy pink nail polish, who went rollerblading with Yuffie on weekends, who squabbled with Tifa over the last slice of chocolate cake, and who supposedly harbored a gigantic crush on Professor Valentine. The two personae were so at odds - Zack found himself thinking that Leon must be an incredible actor.

No wonder Yuffie's angry, Zack thought. Leon might have been Cloud's roommate, but he'd spent the most time outside of class with Yuffie; they'd fast become bosom friends and were seldom apart.

Leon sighed. "Yeah. Well. Whatever. I was supposed to be keeping an eye on some of Odine's ex-apprentices, but - it didn't work out too well."

"What, they didn't buy your cover story?" Yuffie sneered.

"I suppose not," Leon said tiredly, "though I don't see why not. Nobody recognized me, so what was one more ex-SeeD university student? There were four others on campus, and only two of us were involved."

Sephiroth snorted. "Hojo is paranoid enough that he wouldn't need a concrete reason to suspect you."

Leon nodded. "We still have to go through his notes, but he was ranting about conspiracy theories the whole time. Regrettably, we did not appreciate the depth of his mania before today." He shifted
slightly, and Zack realized that his body posture was completely unfamiliar, even more alien to Zack than seeing the undamaged left eye. "I am not allowed to discuss details right now - pointless when I don't even know them all myself - but there will be a full debriefing in a week. As civilian casualties, you'll be invited. Zack, will you fill Cloud in whenever he wakes up?"

He nodded automatically, and Leon was out the door.

Before any of the rest of them could react, Yuffie stole the magazine back from Aerith and flung it at the door. It collided with a solid thwack, then slid to the floor.

Aerith got up to give the smaller girl a hug. "I'm sure he wanted to tell you," she said.

"Yeah," Tifa piped up, "I mean, I would've told you. Uh, if only you weren't the worst gossip."

Yuffie's screech of betrayal made Zack wince, but had the benefit of finally waking Cloud.
Chapter 2

It didn't take long to bring Cloud up to speed (the one good thing about his friend being on the silent, stoic side was that his reaction to Leon's identity was merely a grunt and a slightly raised eyebrow, so they were all spared another round of dramatics), so Zack elected to escort him home for a shower. He promised to meet the girls later for dinner, and to return in the morning for Sephiroth's discharge, then made the completely reasonable assumption that the day's excitement was largely over and done with.

Therefore, it was with a certain amount of chagrin, and a great deal more resignation, that he weathered the scene that greeted them when Cloud unlocked his door.

A significant part of Zack had been certain that the SeeD would return to Garden, and thus that they wouldn't see hide nor hair of him until the promised debrief. He definitely did not expect to find him at his desk, in nothing more than a towel, with a spiky-haired blond boy (not Cloud) smearing something onto his back.

The kid shrieked and leaped back, waving both hands and flinging an ointment tube high into the air. "IT'S NOT WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE!"

"What," said Leon.

"WE'RE JUST FRIENDS! I CAME TO BRING HIM GRIEVER AND HE CAN'T REACH THE BURNS ON HIS BACK! PLEASE DON'T DUMP HIM OVER THIS, HE'S ACTUALLY BEGUN TO EMOTE LIKE A REGULAR HUMAN BEING - uh, whoa, wait - SQUIALL, PRETEND YOU DIDN'T HEAR ME SAY THAT!"

"What," said Zack, because he felt that it really bore repeating.

There was a muffled sort of snort nearby, which Zack belatedly realized was coming from Cloud when it was repeated several times. His friend shoved him all the way into the room and hauled the door shut, then leaned back against it so that he could laugh for real.

"I'm going to ignore you now, Zell," Leon ground out, and got up to hunt through the teetering laundry pile for the tube. The kid turned bright red (well, brighter red, to be perfectly honest); his eyes were more or less glued to Leon's backside. Somehow, Zack refrained from pointing this out.

Cloud finally got himself under control long enough to say, "We're not dating, chill."

Zell spun to face them and said, "Dude, you're sharing a room with Squall. He got the nickname Ice Prince before he junctioned Shiva. Are you some kind of saint?"

"He doesn't keep me up when I'm trying to sleep and he brings coffee for both of us if he's going on a caffeine run - I don't need to play tiddlywinks with my roommate to not have a problem with him," Cloud said, rolling his eyes. "Plus, if he doesn't want to talk about himself, I don't need to give him an excuse to do the same."

"Oh holy hell," Zell breathed, "how are you guys not dating? You're perfect for each other."

Leon resurfaced with the ointment and thrust it into Zell's face. "Please shut up and finish so I can get you out of here before I die of embarrassment."

An awkward silence fell while the kid did as requested and Cloud rooted around for acceptably
clean clothing. Zack could only stand it for so long before he had to break it. "So, kiddo - Cloud's mostly straight, you really don't have anything to worry about. You can grope your friend all you want - we're not going to object."

Zell made some kind of high-pitched keening noise that definitely did not qualify as human speech.

"What the fuck," Leon said.

"Mostly straight?" Cloud demanded.

"Nobody's totally straight. Or totally gay, I guess." Zack waved a hand. "Your crush on Aerith was not subtle, buddy."

"We are NOT having this conversation," Leon said, a note of desperation (or possibly hysteria) entering his voice.

"What, it was over years ago. Which, actually, that was kind of a pity. We had a bet on whether you'd be okay with a threesome, and then Tifa snapped you up."

"Zack, Tifa hauled me to a bunch of dances because she was getting tired of punching all the morons who kept trying to feel her up. She gave up because, and I quote, I was too obviously gay to pull off being her boyfriend."

"Huh," Zack mused. "Well, Sephiroth always did complain that my gaydar was completely broken." He made a note to discuss this with Aerith later - perhaps that threesome was still an option.

"Why are you still talking," Leon moaned.

"I'm done," Zell squeaked. He had developed a nervous twitch around his left eye. "Bye, Squall! Bye, Squall's roommate and Squall's roommate's friend!" He bolted for the door.

Cloud gave Zack a light punch on the arm. "That was mean. You check Leon out all the time."

"And I totally own it! There's nothing to be ashamed of. I got eyes and I ain't dead, of course I'm going to look," Zack declared proudly.

"I hate you so, so much," Leon growled, and slapped the towel directly into Zack's face.

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