Second Chances

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Summary

When it turns out everything they went through wasn’t enough to save the planet, Cloud gets the chance to prevent the end of the world - only this time, he knows exactly what he’s doing. Sort of.

Notes

Hey everyone - welcome to my FFVII Time Travel Fix-it Fic. I wanted to be upfront about that off the bat, because I know they’ve been done to death, but they’re my favourite! And with the remake looming, I thought I’d finally try my hand at a FFVII story of my own. Please review, kudos and whatever else :3
Chapter 1

“You’re doing it again.”

Cloud jerked his attention from his now empty bowl to Tifa, who was sitting across from him. He’d totally zoned out. He couldn’t even remember finishing his meal and, based on the bemused twinkle in Tifa’s eyes, she knew it too. Marlene and Denzel were looking at him too, suppressing their giggles.

He had the decency to look sheepish. “Sorry, I know I said I wouldn’t do that anymore.”

Tifa shook her head and stood, reaching across the table to get his dishes. “Why change the habit of a lifetime?” She joked, retreating to the kitchen. Over her shoulder, she said to the kids, “Finish your dinner and do your homework. Then we can talk about the cake that Cloud brought home.”

That had the kids shovelling away at what was left in front of them. A portion of the hearty stew Tifa had prepared for the patrons visiting the bar tonight. Mouth still full and chewing noisily, Marlene hopped off her chair at the table and flung her arms around his neck in thanks, before scurrying off after her caretaker with her dish. As always, Denzel was more subdued, but he had a huge grin on his face.

“Thanks Cloud, you’re the best!”

Cloud gave him a small smile as he too left him at the table, but it dropped off his face quickly when he was left alone. It was true that, since the Geostigma scare a year ago, he’d made a more conscious effort to be present, but he still didn’t feel particularly worthy of any praise from the children he helped to care for.

He sighed, and made his own way into the kitchen, picking up a dishcloth and silently joining Tifa to dry the dishes. After a while of quiet, she spoke quietly. “So, what were you thinking about?”

He gave her a sidelong look to judge her mood. She was still smiling, her eyes on her work. He gave a noncommittal shrug, “Just the job I’ve got in for tomorrow. I think it’s going to take a couple of days to get there and back again.”

She hummed thoughtfully. “Maybe while you’re in the West, you can say hi to Barrett for us. I’m sure Marlene would love to send something his way.”

He thought about the logistics of the extra stop. It wouldn’t be that much effort to go to Corel from Costa del Sol - an extra day or two overall travelling on Fenrir at worst, but nothing was really worse when he got to go out on this beloved motorcycle. And Marlene so rarely got to see her adoptive father these days, he could surely take the time to pass something on between them. “Sure, it’s not a problem.”

She dried her hands and put one on his shoulder. At one point, a casual touch would have had him flinching away, but he’d went to great pains to not reacted to a touch, no matter how little he wanted it. Tifa knew this, and used it sparingly. Only when she wanted to get a point across, or bring him back to the here and now. “Thank you, I’m sure he’ll be happy to see you too.”

Cloud grimaced. “Yeah, if that involves telling me I’m getting fat and that I don’t visit often enough.”
Tifa giggled and took her hand back, gliding past him. “Barrett is Barrett, it wouldn’t be the same if he wasn’t.”

Cloud huffed a little but said nothing more, finishing his work as Tifa went out to the bar to set up for the night.

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Finally tucked away in his room, he switched off the light and striped off his clothes, crawling into his bed. The lights of the city illuminated his room, giving everything an orange tinge. He could hear the odd clinking of glasses as Tifa cleared up downstairs and drunk passers by every so often, but otherwise everything was quiet.

He stared out of the window, his curtains wide open. Most of his view was other buildings, but he could see patches of sky here and there. It was a dark void in his vision, as no stars could be seen from Edge, just like Midgar. The lights of the city, though dull, drowned them out.

He’d always struggled with sleeping, for as far back as his true memory allowed. He couldn’t trust anything he thought he knew from before that day in Nibelheim, unsure what was his memory, or his friends.

Regardless though, most of his nights were spent awake, or in a fitful state of rest. He had thought he had made some progress with coming to terms with his past, as his nightmares had reduced in their frequency and intensity. The reprieve was temporary. The waning of his horror had gave way to another. After, he could never make make sense of the images he saw - they slipped through his fingers like sand - but the emotions left in its wake were enough to prove that whatever it was, it was not good.

As if to compound that, away from the lull of day to day life and the the distractions provided by others, Cloud had the sense of an increasing feeling of wrongness, growing stronger with every passing day.

It wasn’t the kind of feeling that had his hair prickling, or had him searching the shadows for unknown foes. It was just a feeling that something was not right.

“I will never just be a memory.”

Cloud shivered and turned over in his bed, putting the window at his back.

Whenever something seemed remotely out of whack, Cloud couldn’t help but think of him. His words a promise that rung in his ears.

But this didn’t feel like a return of the Great Sephiroth. For one, there hadn’t been any warning before. When Kadaj, Yazoo and Loz had shown up, they’d been as much of a surprise to Cloud as they had been to everyone else.

And the first time... he frowned, the memories of the day Sephiroth went made blurred around the edges, an amalgamation of both his and Zack’s experiences. Well, the only warning had been when Sephiroth started talking about Gods and all the rest. He pushed the memories away as quickly as they’d came, not willing to linger on that time of his life for any longer than necessary.

No, it was safe to say that this feeling was new and entirely unexplained, which made Cloud entirely lost.

Taking a deep breathe, Cloud settled himself into the mattress. None of these thoughts even
remotely helped with this feeling of wrongness and only served to put him on edge.

He closed his eyes and focused on nothing but his breathing, trying to prevent himself from thinking on the matter further. He had an early start in the morning, and Tifa has sent him to rest instead of helping clean up, despite his protests.

As he concentrated on his breathing, in and out, sleep slowly took him. For the first time in months, he dreamt of a field full of yellow and white flowers.

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Getting off the boat in Costa del Sol was just like always. Dock workers shouting and running around, dealing with their new cargo, as Cloud slowly rolled off the ship. He sat on Fenrir as it purred, the engine idling as he pushed himself along the boardwalks.

Strife Delivery Service was made much easier by knowing the head of the World Regenesis Organisation. He could get on and off whatever ship came by, though more often than not he’d wait for a cargo ship. Less civilians to stop and stare at him whenever he moved around outside of his cabin. The dock workers at both ports were used to him quietly slipping through, and were no longer enamoured by his presence, with the exception of new employees on occasion. In fact, he could tell he irritated them some days, as him disembarking sometimes caused a holdup with the cargo, and they had a quota to fill.

Rather than bask in the glory, Cloud had turned his back on the limelight that saving the world (twice at that) had offered, and Reeve Tuesti had respected that wish. Unfortunately, that still didn’t mean he wasn’t recognised. AVALANCHE had caused enough commotion during their travels around the world that people did know them, and people talked. Children were told stories of what almost was, and about the hero that swooped in and saved everyone from certain doom.

Hero.

The only hero he knew had been left in the bluffs outside of Midgar, gunned down by people he had fought alongside once, in a bid to ensure Cloud’s freedom. Zack was the only true hero in this messed up world.

As was his way before any long journey, he’d visited that spot, at the edge of the cliff overlooking the waste land left by ShinRa’s excessive Mako use, where he’d once marked the grave with the Buster Sword.

That now lived in the church, in the desolate Slums of Sector 5. Despite it being in Midgar, it meant that what was left of Zack would be with what was left of Aerith. The little flower garden, now left to grow wild around the pool she had created with Great Gospel, was at odds with such a large and dangerous weapon, but then, so had Aerith been to Zack.

He didn’t really visit the church anymore himself. The miracle of the cure for Geostigma drew people from all around the world to come and pray to the Planet, and it was no longer his quiet safe space.

He didn’t mind too much. Aerith had given up so much for the world, that it felt right for people to give thanks, even if they didn’t realise who to.

He had his lonely cliff.

As he made it on to the main strip, he revved his engine. Fenrir responded to his lightest touch, anyone growling to life as accelerated. His first delivery was to one of his regulars, so he picked his
way expertly through the streets, swerving to avoid absent minded truck drivers and pedestrians. He came to a stop outside of a small store, nestled between some houses. He kicked out his stand and propped the bike up by the curb, gracefully dismounting with well-practised ease.

The bell above the shop door tinkled as he entered, and a voice from the back wafted into the room.

“Just a minute! Steal anything and your dead!”

Cloud smirked and propped his hip against the counter with his arms crossed, eyeing the odd assortment of goods that filled the shop. He’d gotten used to the odd contents, a mix of anything from home decor to discounted electrical items. When the man in question appeared, he was carrying a box full of what looked like heavy ornaments. His salt and pepper beard and hair seemed to meld into one giant, curly mane and his craggy face was contorted with concentration.

He huffed as he placed the box down carefully on the counter and wiped his brow with a filthy cloth. Cloud fought the urge to grimace.

“Well would ya looky here! Wasn’t expecting you for another day.”

Cloud shrugged. “It was ready, so why wait?”

His laugh was booming as Cloud fished a package out of his messenger bag and handed it over, waiting expectantly for his payment. “You’re right there lad! That’s why I use you.”

Cloud took the Gil he was offered and leafed through it, counting as the man began to retreat to the back again. “Hey, you gave me too much.” He said before he could go.

“Ah, keep it.”

Cloud frowned, but said nothing more as ducked quickly out of the store and back into the sunlit streets. He wasn’t in the business of overcharging for what services were worth, but he also wouldn’t argue if someone chose to pay him more. He pulled his PHS out of his pocket and hit speed dial.

After a few rings, someone picked up. “7th Heaven!”

“Hey Tifa.”

“Oh Cloud! You’ve made your delivery already?”

He swung his leg back over his bike, but didn’t turn it on yet. “Yeah, weather was on our side over the ocean so...” He glanced at the clock on his phone screen before putting it back to his ear. “Figure I’ll head straight to Corel now. I should get there just after sundown if I do.”

“Or you could always enjoy the beach and the sun? Get a bit of a tan.”

He deadpanned at the smirk he could hear in her voice. “Right, yeah, we know how well that worked out last time.”

She openly laughed then. “Well, I did tell you to wear sunscreen. You might be enhanced, but you’re pale as a sheet, of course you’d burn!”

He humphed down the phone at her, remembering the ‘family’ holiday they had last year, but he couldn’t stop the corner of his mouth curling up at her laugh. “I’ve learned my lesson.”

Her laugh subsided and she sighed down the line. “Well okay, stay safe.”
“I always do. See ya.”

He snapped the phone closed and tucked it into his pocket, turning the key to his ignition and kicking the bike back into gear. He pulled his bike goggles out of his bag and put them on, ready to tackle his cross country destination. With a delicate flick of his wrist, Fenrir took off, its telltale roar blending into the wind as he picked up speed. Within minutes, he’d broken through the end of the town and into the open land of the Western Continent.

This was his favourite thing about his job. Riding, driving in the country, the wind wiping at his blonde spikes as he pushed his speed higher and higher. It was hard for him to find something that exhilarating.

As he drove on, he could see some Dual Horns lumbering in the distance, heading towards the dirt path that served as a road to Corel. They were a little too close to Costa del Sol for his liking. Hitting a button on the dash, panels on Fenrir sprung open, revealing his weapon. He pulled out the assembled Fusion Sword easily and changed direction and quickly closing the distance between them.

The sound of him approaching alerted the monsters to his presence, but it made no difference as he swung his sword cleaved the first of them in two. The remaining three roared, charging after him as he banked and made a sharp left turn, dirt and rocks spraying as his wheel dug in. The creatures were too slow to change their momentum and Cloud shot a powerful Firaga spell behind him. He pulled his bike into a skid and stopped to watch as the Dial Horn closest to him staggered and dropped to the floor, completely overcome by the inferno. The other two had backed away, shaking away the flames that had covered them. They were weakened, but not ready to give up. With a roar to rival Bahamut, they charged at him with all of their speed. Cloud smirked, there was just enough room. His wheel spun in the dirt as he did a 180 and sped towards them matching their speed.

Letting go of the wheel and letting Fenrir maintain its own balance, he split his word in one quick movement, just in time to slash at both monsters as he whisked between them, his blade splitting them from back to front.

The crash as they too hit the floor was lost to the sound of Fenrir’s engine as he kept going.

Within minutes, the four of them lay in the dirt, ready to join the Lifestream as Cloud continued on.

He took a moment to reassemble his sword and slot it back into its compartment, before retaking the wheel and changing his course back towards Corel. The way looked clear for now.

He’d been riding for maybe an hour when something changed.

It may have started earlier, but it was hard to tell on the bumpy dirt road. It was only when his ear popped that he realised a pressure was settling around him. And that sense of foreboding that had been hanging around like a constant companion increased tenfold. He hit the breaks hard, though Fenrir barely protested, and skidded to a halt.

His weapon was out again within seconds as he scanned the horizon, looking for something, anything, that would trigger his instincts like that. Just like before, there was nothing in sight. He couldn’t hear anything either, but he could feel a minor tremor running beneath him, like the beginnings of a Quake that someone was holding back.

He adjusted his feet around the bike, ready to spring into action should the ground split suddenly.

An exercise in futility, as even his heightened reaction speed couldn’t have gotten him out of the
way. He never could have saw it coming.

One second the area was clear, and the next, the ground beneath him not only crumbled, but a tower of green shot up from beneath his feet, surrounding and covering him. His surprised grunt was lost to the roaring of the what he knew to be the Lifestream as it smothered him. He knew that his feet had left the ground, but he had no idea if he was moving and what direction he was going. He tried to swing around, but his movements were impaired and sluggish in the thick essence, as his skin tingled with the mako burn he’d felt so many times before.

He’d been in the Lifestream in the past, but this was different in so many ways. It felt like it was sucking him in and all of the molecules of his body were being ripped apart.

He hadn’t seen the Lifestream so active since Meterofall.

As the pain continued, he started to feel tendrils of panic, tinged with bitter memories of tanks full of Mako and hunched scientists. What was happening? Why? Was the planet trying to kill him?

He couldn’t tell if it had been minutes or hours, but as suddenly as it came, the stream of Mako he was encased in faded away. He felt the ground beneath his feet, but he dropped to his knees when his legs were unable to hold his weight.

He took deep breathes, fighting back the feeling of nausea as his burning skin slowly faded to a tingle. It took him a moment to register a light floral fragrance. He slowly opened his eyes, not daring to believe it.

Aerith was kneeling in front of him, surrounded by her beautiful flowers, her eyes emerald pools of concern.

He gasped harshly, the noise ragged in his dry throat. Aerith has touched his life from beyond the Lifestream before, spoken to him, and helped him when he needed it most, but since her intervention to cure Geostigma, he had heard nothing from her again.

She and Zack had said goodbye in the only way they could, and he had thought - assumed - they’d moved on and joined the cycle of the Planet.

Maybe this was a hallucination.

“I...I-“ he tried to speak, but the words caught in his throat. He didn’t even know what he wanted to say.

“You know Spike, your jaw is practically on the floor. A lesser man would think you’re into my girl.”

Clouds head snapped around to see a familiar face, smiling down at him.

“Zack!” He choked out, trying to stand and failing miserably.

“Yo!” He grinned, waving a hand while the other was propped on his hip.

“Yo!” He grinned, waving a hand while the other was propped on his hip.

He walked over and slipped a hand under the blondes shoulder, helping him to rise to his feet. Aerith rose to, smiling happily. “I’m so glad you made it. Come on, let’s walk it off.”

Cloud was about to protest as she turned away, worried he would lose her, but Zack’s hand, which had never left his shoulder gently urged him to follow.
He couldn’t help but shoot looks at one or the other. Aerith’s back as her braid swung gently against her favourite pink dress and jacket, and Zack as he watched her from Clouds side, a contented smile on his face.

His chest ached and his eyes stung, as he felt grief for the friends that he’d lost, mixed bizarrely with the elation of finding something precious that was thought be lost forever. Being here with them was so tangible and real that, for a moment he was lost in it, and he almost forgot that he should be asking how, or why.

“Guys,” he spoke quietly after they had ambled through the flowers for while. He grounded himself and stopped Zack from moving forward. Aerith stopped to look over her shoulder knowingly. “Am I dead?”

Zack yelped, his hand leaving Clouds shoulder to wave it the air. “Woah, no nothing like that!”

Cloud frowned and looked around at the white expanse carpeted with flowers that never seemed to end. “Then why am I here?”

He didn’t miss the look the pair shared, nor did he push them.

“Well Spike,” Zack spoke eventually, carding a hand through his hair as his face twisted into a grimace. “That’s a hard one. Rith is probably the best to answer that. But what I can tell you is that, and trust me when I say this, I don’t agree with it, and you don’t have to do it.”

Cryptic, and not all helpful in explaining this particular situation. He looked to Aerith, urging her to pick up where he left off. He could tell she saw the

Aerith sighed, and turned to face the pair fully, nodding once. “I guess I should explain. It was nice… just to spend a bit of time with both of you together, even just for a moment.” She didn’t want to, it was written all over her face.

Silence reigned and Cloud looked between the two of them once again. “It’s okay. Just tell me what’s going on.”

Aerith looked him dead in the eye, her own sparkling suddenly with unshed tears, and Zack moved to wrap a comforting arm around her. “The Planet is dying, Cloud.”

Cloud shook his head. “We know that, Aerith. We’re shutting down the mako reactors and finding alternative fuel sources. We’re trying to help it heal.”

She smiled sadly. “I’m afraid - it’s afraid - that it isn’t enough. The damage it’s sustained is too great. It can barely keep itself from fracturing.” She reached up to play with her braid, pulling it over her shoulder. A nervous tell. “It doesn’t have enough energy. And now it’s considering taking steps to try and remedy that - even if it’s a long shot now.”

Cloud frowned, but Zack spoke before he could say anything. “The Planet is thinking about wiping the earth clean of life and starting again, Cloud.”

He was stunned. Wipe the earth clean?! “It can’t do that-“

Aerith held up a hand to stop him. “It may already be too late for that. So the Goddess has a different idea. One that involves you. We don’t like it, but we agreed that it wouldn’t be fair to you to not give you the choice.”

He didn’t really like the sound of that. “And what is this idea?”
“To tell you would be a great folly on my part.” Cloud swung around as another voice joined their conversation.

Without being told, he knew what he was seeing. The planet’s avatar, the Goddess. Even if the images and statues he had seen did nothing to capture her essence. It was something you knew from just looking.

Her pale face was framed by long golden hair. She wore a gold band around her head, laced with blue, with a teal stone in the centre, and a long flowing white dress over her tall, lithe frame. Her grey eyes glowed just ever so slightly and the light and beauty she radiated struck him dumb, so he could only stare. She was so simple in design, but you could feel the complexity of her existence rolling out of her waves. She smiled gently as she towered over him.

“What We would ask of you is more than We have ever asked of anyone, even the Cetra. You’d need to give up what you know, to try and bring about what could be.”

And just like that, the illusion was broken. Just another person-entity-expecting a sacrifice. Hadn’t he given up enough already? Any awe he had displayed was replaced by a cold aloofness that came with his experience that people take, take, take until you have nothing left to give. “I don’t suppose you’d consider not speaking in riddles and tell it to me straight, would you?”

Despite his own change in demeanour, the Goddess’ smile did not waiver. “You have done much for Us in the past. Your friends, they beg that We not ask any more of you, to let you live in peace, but We’re afraid you’re the only one who could help.”

Frowning, he turned his back on the Goddess, considering her words. He was aware the gesture was rude, but right now he didn’t care. “I’m done with fighting for my life. I’m a simple delivery boy now, raising two kids with my oldest friend.”

“I’m not inclined to agree with you, Cloud Strife.” The Goddess sounded almost indulgent. “You keep your wit and your weapon sharp. We see you. We know you.”

“You don’t know me.” He muttered, staring hard at the flowers around his feet with his arms crossed. “You can’t even tell me what it you want me to do.”

The Avatar hummed, but said nothing else. He could feel the nervous tension emanating from Zack and Aerith.

They’d made their thoughts on the matter clear. But they wouldn’t ask, wouldn’t be a part of it, if there was any other option, surely? He felt his resistance waiver. To be fair, he’d never been approached by a deity to ask for help, and that in itself spoke volumes. If what she said was true, could he- would he- just stand by and watch something terrible happen? No. He may seem uncaring and unapproachable to most, but he was not a coward. Not anymore. “What exactly would happen, if I didn’t do this?”

The sadness that bloomed in his chest almost brought him to his knees as he gasped and pulled a hand to press against his heart, feeling like his chest was caving in. Like the grief he’d felt since he arrived here, but a million times worse. The Goddess projecting on to him. “All life will perish, and you will have to watch it happen until the ground you stand on crumbles and those you love disappear. The Lifestream will be no more and you will be alone, forever.”

He turned sharply on his knees, searching her eyes for any hint of a lie or half-truth, but found none.
“The Planet is weakening and, as it’s Avatar, I come to you on bended knee.” She did as she said to solidify her point, finally no longer smiling. “This is our last chance. If we don’t do this now, we will never be able to again. Cloud Strife, will you once again save Gaia from complete destruction?”

He looked to Zack and Aerith, who’d been surprisingly quiet throughout.

Zack tipped his head to him, his face a stoic mask but his eyes speaking volumes. “Remember Spikey, you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Aerith nodded, looking much the same. “It’s your choice.”

He looked to the Goddess again and muttered, more to himself that to them. “It doesn’t seem like a choice.” When he turned his eyes back to his friends, he stood. “I’ll do it. I can’t just stand by and watch my friends suffer.”

The Goddess smiled at him, though he didn’t see it, and lowered her head, as if in prayer. Zack chose that moment to walk over to him and pull him into a tight embrace, grabbing fist fulls of Cloud’s clothes, as if doing so would keep him there forever. “I’m proud of your Cloud. Take care of yourself, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Cloud couldn’t hold it in anymore. He took the opportunity, and hugged Zack back, harder than he’d ever done in his like.

“Don’t keep him all to yourself.”

He felt Aerith wrap her arms firmly around him too, and he didn’t hesitate to wrap one of his around her, as did Zack. She rested her head on his shoulder and, for just a moment, he felt true peace. Closing his eyes, he held them close.

“You always were the best bodyguard.” She whispered.

Before he could say anything in response, a buzzing began in his head and, try as might, he couldn’t help his twinge of panic. He had no idea what he was letting himself in for.

As he felt his consciousness seem to slip away like leaves in a breeze, he heard Aerith’s final words. Though a whisper, they echoed in his head like she’d hammered them directly into his skull.

“Find us.”

And then everything was black.
He sat up with a harsh sound, grasping at his chest and scrambling from his prone position. He was trying to look around but his vision was blurred as he slipped off the surface he was on and hit another, cold and hard. Where was he?

“Cloud?!”

He backed up against something, heart racing, blinking harshly to try and clear his swimming vision.

“Cloud honey, what’s wrong?!”

He watched the blurry silhouette of someone approach him quickly in the dim room, crouching to come to his level. The voice had brought him up short, his panic freezing as he struggled to recall why he knew it.

“Cloud baby, speak to me?”

With sudden clarity, he knew. The same blue eyes and blonde hair as his own came into focus, concern swimming unabashedly as she looked at him and took his face in her hands.

“M...Mom?” His voice came out a broken whisper as he stared into her eyes, his mind stuttering and flailing with the implications of it all.

“I’m here. What’s wrong?” She moved her hands to his shoulders and firmly peeled him from the wall his was leaning against. She half led, half dragged him to a bed with the covers twisted. His legs were shaking so hard that he could barely stand. When he stumbled on to the bed, he realised it wasn’t just his legs, but his whole body that was racked with tremors.

“Are you...are you real?” He reached out and clutched at her dress unashamedly. He was so confused and disoriented. What had happened? What was happening now? What the hell was happening?!?! His breathing caught in his throat as he took lungfuls of air that didn’t feel like enough. He gasped and sputtered, but never once did he look away from her. His mother. His mother who he hadn’t seen or heard in what felt like a lifetime was kneeling right there, and she felt as real as anything ever had.

His vision was darkening at the edges and his heart was slamming in his chest. He recognised the symptoms - he was having a panic attack.

“Cloud, breathe honey. Was it a nightmare? Do you have a fever?”

She pressed a hand to his forehead and it was so tender and caring that he couldn’t take it any more. “Don’t leave me.” He whispered hoarsely, as what little energy he had drained out of him with his shock.

“I won’t. Tell me what’s wrong!”
His eyes rolled into the back of his head and he passed out in his mother’s arms.

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A clattering of pans roused him from his unconsciousness. His entire body was aching, which wasn’t helped by the lumpy mattress underneath him.

He peeled his eyes open slowly, looking at a ceiling that was unfamiliar, yet so familiar it hurt.

What the actual fuck was going on?

Another clattering drew his gaze to the kitchen across the room and his heart skipped a beat.

There she was again. A sense of alarming deja vu washed over him as he watched her potter around, checking something in the oven as she washed and dried some dishes. She looked over her shoulder as if to check on him for the millionth time, and she cried out, practically throwing the plate back into the sink and splashing bubbles and water everywhere.

“Oh thank the Goddess, you’re awake!” She crossed the room to crouch at his side and check his temperature again. Her comment threw him, and he wondered if the Planet had a sick sense of humour.

She pressed a hand to his forehead yet again, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine, I’m... fine.” He barely recognised his own voice, it was so quiet and small. Was he hallucinating?

She put her hand to her heart, as if to calm its beating. “You gave me quite the scare young man. I had to call out Doctor Hanswald!”

“Doctor Hans...” Goddess, he hadn’t heard that name since he was a child.

“I’m going make you some tea. The doctor thought it might be a 24 hour bug, but your temperature has gone right down.” She left him then, and he almost cried out and grabbed her. Only years of stoicism and practice held him back. Instead, he cast his eyes around the room, seeing everything again and yet, it was like for the first time. The modest little stone building he had called his childhood home.

Not the facsimile that ShinRa had erected in its stead, but his genuine childhood home with the little things here and there that they couldn’t replicate. His mother set about boiling a pot on the stove as he looked around in awe. This had to be some sort of dream, but at the same time he’d never been able to picture his mother’s face with as much clarity as he was seeing now, not since Hojo tore apart his mind all those years ago.

His mothers room was off to one side, the door ajar. The tiny bathroom was next to that, and then there was this room. The kitchen/living area/his bedroom. Modest was likely an understatement to describe the simplicity of this little structure.

He slumped back on the bed, feeling the heavy down underneath him that was necessary in the cold Nibel months, as he tried to make sense of everything.

He was still pondering it when his mother came and lightly touched his leg. “Come to the table.”

As if by instinct he followed his mothers instructions and found a bowl of sugared porridge and cup of tea waiting for him. She took a seat opposite him and watched like a hawk as he sat and
stared at the meal in front of him, like he didn’t know what to do with it.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Cloud?” She looked very worried.

In a bid to reassure her, he picked up his spoon and took a mouthful of the steaming oats, the taste of his childhood playing on his tongue. He swallowed. “I’m okay.”

She didn’t look convinced, but she glanced towards the front door. “I have some coats to deliver, but I really don’t want to leave you like this.”

He cast his eyes over to the garment bags hanging on the coatrack. His mother was a seamstress and dressmaker, and it was her skills with a needle and thread that had kept them off the streets. It didn’t afford them much else, but a home was enough. He remembered being sick as a child, and his mother had often taken the brunt of delayed orders after looking after him. “Go to work, I’m fine. Just a little tired I guess.” Plus, he needed time to think and figure out what was going on, and having her there was the ultimate distraction.

She still looked unsure, but she sighed and got to her feet anyway. “Only if you feel okay, but believe me, mister. You better take it easy. No going out today.” She took a moment to put on her shawl and grab the plastic covered garments as she passed.

He nodded and watched her leave. She shot one last worried look over her shoulder before she closed the door.

He sat and stared at the it for the longest time, his mind sluggishly trying to work through what had just happened in the last 10 minutes. But his stomach rumbling brought him out of his reverie, so he picked up his spoon again. It really had been so long since he’d had sugared porridge. He’d only had a couple of mouthfuls before something on the other side of the table drew his attention.

He stood and reached over the table, frowning when the distance was more than he expected. He went up on his tiptoes and pulled the newspaper over to his place.

He wished he hadn’t. The bold headline splashed across the front page and the date of the paper had him choking loudly on his food, fighting for breathe and his mind reeling.


He fell off his chair as he beat his chest, finally clearing his throat and scrambling for the mirror on the wall. What he saw left him dizzy.

Instead of his more mature and sharper features, he was staring at a younger, softer face, at least a head shorted than usual, and crystalline blue eyes that had not a single ounce of mako-glow about them.

Light headed, he stumbled to the bathroom, fighting to keep his breathe, retching what little he’d eaten back up. He clung to the toilet like an anchor. It couldn’t be... no... there was absolutely no way. He shook his head hard, as if doing so would clear up the cobwebs and make the answers clear, but all it did was give him a headache.

After a while, he returned to the table, mind still reeling as he tried to make sense of the implications of it all. The porridge and tea day forgotten, as he clutched his head in his hands.

By the time his mother returned from her errands, he had come to one conclusion. He had travelled back in time. Goddess, he felt stupid even thinking it but, unless this was some sort of elaborate
dream, it was the only answer he could draw. Based on the paper he was reading, he’d just turned
14. The War in Wutai was in full swing. Cloud dared not read on, in case what he read gave him an
aneurysm.

And by the time he settled into his old bed that night, he’d came to the conclusion of what he
needed to do. The Goddess has asked him to bring about ‘what could be’. That suggested changing
what had been.

Meteor hadn’t happened. Sephiroth hadn’t lost his mind and turned against the world yet. Hojo
hadn’t had him for four years. He had to keep it that way.

How exactly he was supposed to do that was beyond his mental capacity right now, but what he did
know was that he wouldn’t be able to do it from Nibelheim.

This all came down to three thing right? Kill Sephiroth, kill Jenova and kill Hojo.

If his memory served him, it was this December when he had invited Tifa to the water tower to tell
her he was leaving to join SOLDIER. But he couldn’t really wait until then. He couldn’t just sit
around and wait for the Nibelheim incident to happen.

As much as he was tempted to bury his head in the sand and simple enjoy the time he’d been given
back with his mother, he knew it needed to be done. Like he said to the Goddess, he couldn’t sit
back and watch his friends suffer again. He had the opportunity to stop that before it started.

But... he was sure a couple of days to get to grips with everything wouldn’t hurt.

****

The couple of days later, when he woke up like a normal human being (albeit a little dazed at first)
his mother had deemed him fit and set him a list of chores. One of which was to go to the only
store in the town and get some groceries.

He hadn’t thought that stepping out into the streets would be as daunting as it was, but he couldn’t
shake the feeling he was surrounded by ghosts. His home was set a little back from the others,
though not as much as Tifa’s, and not too far from the main square. He looked down the short lane
that lead to her home and sighed. Ideally, he would be able to avoid seeing Tifa, as he was unsure
of how he was going to be able to keep his head if he saw her now. Seeing the teenager her
remembered her to be, as friends, but not close.

This wouldn’t be the Tifa who would charge into the Northern Crater and risk her life. The burning
of Nibelheim and the journey they’d been on together had changed her. He felt a sudden pang of
loneliness, as the realisation that none of his friends would be there for him to lean on when he
faltered.

Pushing that thought to one side, he set off to the store, the beaten track familiar even after years of
not following it. He had only visited him hometown once, in his hunt for Sephiroth, and he had
refused to go back.

The townsfolk he passed gave him sidelong glances and dirty looks as he went. Once upon a time,
he was angry and bitter about his childhood experiences, but now he couldn’t muster more than a
dull feeling of irritation about it all. The accusations, the judging, the uncalled for hate. People
blaming him for Tifa’s fall and her subsequent coma. Back when he was young, it made stubborn
and brattish in an effort to hide his shame, and it felt like the be all and end of all that he couldn’t
do anything to garner their approval. of anger that ignited in him. Now, it was so inconsequential,
that he couldn’t find it in himself to really care. These days, it suited him better for people to avoid him, then the clamouring admiration he felt was undeserved.

He purposefully ignored the ghosts of his past - present - and did what he needed to do. It was the journey home from the store when everything seemed to go wrong. As he walked back down the quiet path, shadows crossed in front of him and he looked up, freezing mid-step.

Three boys stood in front of him, ugly smirks twisting their faces as they looked down at him from their towering height. It took a moment, but he vaguely remembered these three. Tifa’s so-called best friends.

“Well if it isn’t little Cloudy. Fancy seeing you here?” Marlon, if he remembered right, the stocky one at the back of the group piped up. He was the muscle, but pretty dumb Cloud as recalled.

Caxon sniggered from his side, his sly eyes looking Cloud up and down like he was something dirty and foreign, while Wilson, the oldest and by far the smartest stood in front of them, eyes on him like a Nibel wolf assessing its prey. These boys were older than him, and much, much bigger.

“I’ve been looking for you, Strife.” He growled, taking a menacing step forward. “You said to me the day before last that you were going to show me what you got. Then lo and behold, you were nowhere to be found yesterday.”

“Little wimp decided to hide I guess,” Caxon cajoled in a nasally voice that had always grated on Clouds nerves.

The blondes eyes darted to each of them in turn, his mind working furiously. From what he’d pieced together over the last day, he was enhancement-free. That didn’t bode well for him, as he distinctly remembered not coming out on top in any of the fights from his childhood. He knew for a fact that wasn’t Zack.

He considered the ramifications of turning tail and running back into the bustle of town, but he quickly squashed that idea. No one there would care what would befall him if they caught up. No one would help.

Wilson took another step forward and Cloud had to make a snap decision. Right now, the only thing he had over them was experience, and they didn’t know that. Sometimes knowledge was mightier than the sword.

He dropped his bag of goods and slipped into a fighting stance that felt odd and unfamiliar in his younger body.

The boys guffawed at his his display, but only Wilson continued forward. After all, it usually only took one of them to do any damage, and they other two would be foolish to steal their friends glory.

As the taller boy lurched forward, swinging his fist up, Cloud managed to slip to the side and watched as the fist flew past his head. His speed wasn’t what it used to be, but Wilson displayed his intentions like an open book. The had over-swung with nothing to hit stop his momentum and nearly fell forward. He caught himself and turned to face the blonde as Cloud took a quick step back. His teeth were bared and his face was a mottled red.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Without thinking, Cloud quirked a brow and quipped. “Dodging your meaty fist.”

Wilson growled like a pissed off Behemoth and lurched at him again, aiming to grab him by the
shirt. Cloud slipped under his guard this time and brought his fist around, slamming it into the boys belly with all of the force his meagre body weight could muster.

A sharp pain lanced down his wrist and arm, and he grit his teeth against it. It wasn’t surprising. What was though, was the sound of something cracking and all of the air leaving Wilson’s lungs in a harsh puff. He collapsed to his knees, groaning in pain and trying to catch his breath.

Cloud leapt back, barely keeping himself upright as he tripped on his own feet. Marlon and Caxon were rooted to the spot, stunned by what they’d just seen, but it was Caxon who recovered first. He shouted something intelligible and ran at Cloud.

Confident now, he sidestepped him and swung his leg, wiping the boys own out from underneath him and sending him sprawling face-first into the ground.

He was about to turn and face the other when a fist smashed into the side of his face, sending him flying himself. He rolled on the ground and used the movement to get on his hands and knees, the gravel biting at his skin as he skidded a little way. He face throbbed as he spat a mouthful of blood into the dirt. Wilson was lying on his side now, curled in on himself and staring at Cloud like he’d grown another head.

Marlon stomped towards him, all brutishness and no grace and, as he bore down on him, Cloud did the first thing he could think of. He threw himself forwards, between the teenagers legs and kicked a leg up, striking him hard in the groin. A low blow, some would call it, but all’s fair in love and war.

Marlon howled, clutching at himself as he lurched forward into the dirt.

Cloud lay there for a second, panting heavily, his body unused to the motions and strain he’d just put it under, before getting up and grabbing his bag again. With one last look at the boys, he took off down to the lane to his house, ignoring the burning patches on his knees, hands and various other body parts. He wrenched the door to his open, slamming it behind him and leaning against it with a sigh.

That had been extremely unexpected.

He took a second to drop the bag on the table before going to the mirror and examining his face, flexing his hand and arm painfully as he went. There was already a bruise coming up on his jaw, which was bad enough.

To top it off, he could feel the scrapes up his side, on his knees and the palms of his hands, without looking at them. He was going to have to get the loose dirt and gravel out of them and fast, lest he get an infection. There was no Mako to fight it off.

He headed straight for the bathroom and started running the water. It wouldn’t be freezing, but it wouldn’t be warm either, and he didn’t have it in him to do anything about that right now. He found a pair of tweezers in him moms things and set to work picking what he could out of his knees and hands.

He snorted, thinking back to his original childhood when he would have had his mother do this for him, him being too upset and squeamish, and how surprised she would be if she walked in and found him doing it himself.

He slipped into the bath and hissed as the water met his cuts, but that soon passed. Carefully, he washed himself down and watched as the water slowly turned a dirty pink. One of the main reasons
he preferred showers.

He’d heard his mother come in during his ministrations and shouted a greeting, but when there was a knock on the front door, he paused to listen.

“Oh, Mrs Mardock, how can help you?”

“Where is that damned boy of yours, Strife?!”

Cloud swore under his breath and quickly hoisted himself out of the bath to get dressed, listening to the raised voices outside.

“...what he’s done to my sweet Wilson! Two broken ribs! He’s a monster, that boy of yours, Claudia.”

Cloud stepped out of the bathroom and turned the full force of his glare at the gathering at his front door. Wilson looked embarrassed, half hidden behind his witchy looking mother. Her eyes slid over to him as he entered the room. If looks could kill he would drop dead there and then. His own mom was standing there, shocked by the sudden trouble that had came to her door.

Before Mrs Mardock could start her tiara doe again, he spoke quietly. “Maybe if your son hadn’t tried to hit me first this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Cloud!”

“Excuse me!!!!!”

His mother was stunned at his response, but Mrs Mardock looked outraged. “My boy wouldn’t hurt a fly, you lying little creature!”

Cloud took a step forward and he saw Wilson’s face drop, and his monster of a mother seemed to falter. Even Mom seemed to pale. Whatever they could see in his face, it unsettled them all. “I think you need to look a little closer to home, Mrs Mardock. Your son is a bully and got what was coming to him. Now please leave.”

The woman sputtered and choked on her words for a second, before taking her sons shoulder in an iron grip and dragging him out of their property. Claudia watched them leave quietly, before slowly closing the door on their retreating backs.

She pressed a hand against the wood and spoke without turning. “Cloud Strife, that was very rude.”

He scoffed, instantly regretting it when his mother swung around with a face of thunder. He quickly tried to backtrack. “He’s always targeted me, Mom. I just defended myself. And I didn’t appreciate the way she was speak to you either.”

Claudia stared at her son intently for a moment before slowly making her way to the table and taking a seat. Cloud did the same, sensing that it was the right thing to do in this moment. They sat across from each other, and her eyes searched his face. For what, he didn’t know.

“I’m glad that you’re defending yourself,” she spoke quietly, “but you seem... different... lately..”

He cringed inwardly. Of course his mother was going to notice a difference in his nuances and manner, no matter how subtle. Try as he might, he wasn’t the same child that had went to sleep the night before this started.
“You seem so grown up, all of a sudden.” His mother whispered, “It’s hard to believe, I feel like I haven’t notice it happening. Where did my little boy go?”

When her eyes began to tear up he reached across the table to place one of his hands over her own. “I need to get strong Mom, to protect you.” That was at least true, he had always wanted to keep her safe, and had always tried to act more grown up than he was. Given, once upon a time he thought being mouthy and stubborn was what being grown up meant. He knew now that it wasn’t the case.

She gave him a watery smile and reached across the table for his hand. “I’ve always been so proud of you, you know that right?”

He nodded, smiling. It seemed so much easier to do here, with the one woman who would always love him no matter what. He’d never found this level of comfort anywhere else, no matter how hard people tried for him. He’d miss this.

“I want to go and join SOLDIER.”

He’d been wondering how to bring it up to her gently, not remembering how he’d done it the last time round. Now seemed as a good a time as any.

She looked shocked for a moment, but that faded quickly. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, this isn’t exactly new information. You’re always reading about that Sephira or whatever you call him-“

“Sephiroth.” He corrected automatically, voice dropping an octave. The name sounded foreign in his young voice, and it hurt him deeply when his mother said his name so flippantly, unaware of what would come to pass should he come here.

She smiled, unaware of the turmoil she had incited in her son. “Yes, Sephiroth. I always had a feeling it would come to this.”

Her look changed then, to one of deep concern as she squeezed his hand. “You know, you could still protect me here. You don’t have to go and join ShinRa to do that.”

He could understand her reluctance. In her eyes, her 14 year old son had just essentially said he was going to war.

“Maybe I could..” he whispered, the lie tasting bitter on his tongue, “But this is something I need to do.”

“Maybe when you’re 16-“

He shook his head sadly. “I want to go now, Mom. I don’t want to leave you but, I can’t stay here anymore.”

Her face crumpled, no longer able to keep up get strong facade, as she choked back a small sob. “I know darling, I know.”

He couldn’t stand it when the tears began to fall from her eyes in earnest now. He was around the table in seconds, his arms around her in a comforting embrace and she clutched at the fabric of his shirt and cried into his shoulder. His own eyes stung at his mother’s sadness, but he couldn’t give her what she wanted. She might think it was because of the bullying and this hateful town, and he would forever let her think that. But in the end, he was doing this for her. So she could live. So that every single hate filled one of them could.
Two weeks later saw him gathering whatever he could carry and packing it in a battered old suitcase his Mom had kept from when they’d moved into the mountains. She’d written Strife on it in big letters.

His eyes wandered to look out of the window, in the direction he knew the ShinRa mansion stood, hidden by the trees swaying gently in the wind.

The first time he had locked eyes on it, he’d almost had a panic attack, the years he’d spent coming to terms with what had happened to him there flying out of the window in seconds. After all, this was not the same burnt out husk of a mansion he had last laid eyes on. This was the version that still held all of the truth and lies that had finally tipped his enemy over the edge and into his spiral of insanity. The version where he was the subject of inhumane experiments that made him into puppet. The version that still had one of his closest companions lying in a coffin paying penance for his sins.

His brow furrowed in thought. This was not the first time Vincent had crossed his mind since waking up in the past.

A few days into the past, he’d managed to gather the nerve to venture to the mansions gates after dark, giving them a light shake and hearing the chains holding them closed clang.

An adult would have had trouble getting through, but children were forever slipping between the iron poles and venturing into the grounds.

Thankfully, even the bravest of children didn’t get to close, scared off by the howls and growls that could be heard coming from within. Everyone was convinced it was haunted, him included. It was only from his memories that her knew if was in fact monsters that roamed the halls. He ventured up the the mansion doors, but didn’t attempt to open them. Instead, he pressed his ear to the door, listening for what was on the other side. He heard a shuffle and a thump, and then a low growl from somewhere nearby.

There was absolutely no way he would be able to make it to the underground labs as he was now. Not taking into account his lack of Mako treatments, he had no weapons or Materia either. Unless you counted a wooden sword he’d fashioned out of sticks at some point in his life. Not for the first time, he mourned the loss of his Fusion Swords.

While he was pretty sure he could use a hand with what was surely to come, Vincent was not an option right now. He hated the thought that he would be leaving his friend to rot in a coffin, and a horde of lies hidden among research notes.

And then there was the problem of Jenova. He had as much chance of making it up Mount Nibel as he did into the mansion.

The idea that she was so close and yet so unreachable set him on edge. A great start to his misadventure, unable to do anything. All he had was problems and no solutions.

Well, he did have one, but he would rather have done just about anything else. Willingly venturing into the lions den and practically asking to have Mako treatments was not high on his list of things he wanted to do. In fact, it wasn’t on there at all.

A deep feeling of unease settled over him whenever he thought about it, but he brutally squashed it. This may not have exactly been what he’d expected when he had agreed to the Goddesses
request, but it was too late to turn back now. He was the only one who knew what coming.

And he was not naive enough to believe he could do anything about without them.

He pulled his mind back to the task at hand. As it stood, he had already been saving his pocket money towards making the trip, so when Claudia gave him most of the Gil she had been saving, he made a point of only taking what he would need to get him where he needed to go. ShinRa would cater for the rest.

She walked with him to the edge of town, stopping under the wrought iron sign that welcomed you to the town. Memories briefly danced in his eyes. Standing there with the Buster Sword on his back, listening as Sephiroth told him he had no home town, and again standing off to the side with a rifle at his hip, worrying he would be seen. Thankfully, he knew which was real, but that didn’t mean that Zacks memories simple went away.

A truck was idling nearby as a man finished packing up its contents. Mickel Harris, his mother had reminded him. He regularly made trips across the Western Continent, transporting goods and deliveries to more remote areas.

They’d arranged for Cloud to get a ride of out town with him. He’d have to ride in the back with whatever was there, but he didn’t care. At least this one had a roof.

He mother clung to him as she hugged him goodbye and he was once again riddled by guilt at leaving her to deal with this town in her own.

“Write to me every month.” She sniffled as she drew him to arms length and held his face in her hands. “And take care of yourself. Don’t trust strangers.” She placed a kiss on his forehead.

He held his own hands over his mother’s and smiled, indulging in the motherly posturing that once upon a time he would have pushed away for being treat like a child. “I know, I will.”

She took a step back then and was about to speak when a shout from further in town caught their attention.

“Cloud!”

He turned and his eyes widened as he saw Tifa - unmistakably 13 year old Tifa - running towards him, waving her arm in the air. Her blue dress was flapping around her knees in the wind as her shine black shoes clacked in the cobblestones, and her black hair flowed out behind her like a cape.

He’d managed to avoid her so far, worried that his wouldn’t know what to do or say, or that he would panic. True his heart was beating double, and he had to make an extra effort to remember to breathe. It came out shaky as he ignored the urge to run and hide in the van.

His mother gave quirked a brow and him a knowing smile, mistaking his reaction for something else entirely. “Goodbye baby.”

She walked away and smiled at Tifa as they crossed paths. The young girl grinned at her as she passed, and Cloud was relieved that at least someone in town didn’t hate his family.

When she reached him, she stopped and stared up into his eyes earnestly. “Were you really going to leave without saying goodbye?”

“I, uh-“ he scratched the back of his neck not knowing what to say. Once upon a time, he’d convinced her to come out after dark so he could announce his intentions of becoming a hero, but
this time was obviously much, much different. She placed her hands on her hips, pouting, and
Cloud fought the unexpected urge to laugh. Seeing Tifa as she was now and who she would
become was quite the comparison. “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

“Mr Carson said you were going to join SOLDIER. Is that true?”

He nodded, not having a clue who Mr Carson was. She hummed quietly, looking down at her
shoes and scuffing at the floor with one. “If you make it, will you be in the newspapers?”

Deja vu hit him like a brick to the face. Trust Tifa to be consistent.

“I - erm - maybe.”

“Okay.” She looked up then, eyes burning. “Make me a promise, Cloud Strife. If you get really
famous and I’m ever in a bind, you’ll come and save me, all right?” She took Clouds quiet shock as
a cue to go on. “If I’m ever in trouble, my hero will come and rescue me. I want to experience that
at least once.”

Cloud swallowed hard around the lump in this throat and nodded, not trusting his voice. If he had it
his way, the only bind Tifa would suffer through was which scarf to wear this winter.

“Hey kid, you comin’ or what?” The truck driver was leaning on his vehicle, eyeing the pair with a
frown.

Tifa smiled wide and laughed. She turned and started running back into town, looking over her
shoulder and shouting. “Bye Cloud!”

He couldn’t help the small smile that turned the corners of his mouth up as he hefted the case
towards the van. The man went to help him load it, but his eyes widened as he stepped back and
watched this scrawny little teenager lift it in himself, like he’d done it a million times before. The
blonde looked up at the man before hopping in himself. “Thanks for the ride.”

He settled in for the long haul between crates and burlap sacks, eager to use the coming days to
plan his next move. He needed to make a start on what he’d come here to do. And there was no
time like the present. Or past. Or...whatever.

Chapter End Notes

He I can’t for the life of me remember who coined the name Claudia for Clouds Mom,
but ever since I saw it, it really stuck. So if you’re out there, thank you!

Also, thank you so so much to those who have bookmarked, gave kudos and
commented on the first chapter. It really does mean a lot to me.

I’ve also had a couple of people point out any errors I’ve made, which is super helpful.
I write on my phone and iPad as I just have to find time when I can. I do my best to
pick any mistakes up, but I do miss some and I don’t use a beta reader
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ultimately the drive to Costa del Sol was long, and rather uncomfortable.

He had no seat to sit on and the bumps in the road had him bouncing around all over at first, making him wish more than ever that he had Fenrir. It was much quicker and more comfortable than this rickety old truck. To top things off, he was suffering from something he’d long thought was a thing of the past.

Motion sickness.

Given, it wasn’t as bad as it once was, he expected part of it was mind over matter, but the telltale churning of his stomach was enough to make the whole journey more miserable.

Their trip was to practically take them on a tour of the Western Continent. They stopped outside of Cosmo Canyon so Mr Harris could take a break, but when he’d made a move to head in, he’d been rebuked at the entrance.

“Don’t bother kid, they’re pretty suspicious of outsiders. They won’t let you in.” Mr Harris had said, from his position of leaning on the trucks hood.

That was frustrating. He’d considered name dropping Bugenhagen or Nanaki to try and get past the guard, but thought better of it. He didn’t know how we would explain his knowledge of them away. Besides, Nanaki was still young for his species, and he didn’t even know if he was in there. He could only hope he hadn’t already been captured by Hojo as a specimen. He’d never thought to ask how long the lion-like creature had been in the scientists ‘care’ and was kicking himself for it now.

So far that had made 3 for 3 on old friends he couldn’t rely on.

Once they were back on the road, he spent much of his time planning his course of action once he reached Midgar, and that kept him busy until they reached Gongaga.

It was a bustling little village these days, and yet another reminder of what was at stake. He didn’t recall stopping here on his first trip, and after that he had only ever seen its ruin. It really wasn’t that much bigger than Nibelheim, as he’d expected, but the locals seemed friendly enough. Despite that, Cloud had went straight to the inn, where he remained for the rest of the night.

He didn’t want to risk running into Zack’s parents. They wouldn’t know him of course, but he distinctly remembered when they visited during his journey with AVALANCHE. They hadn’t even know Zack was... No. He did not want to see them.

He had briefly considered buying a weapon and slaying some monsters for some extra Gil and practice, but he had reminded himself that he was but a shadow of his former self and that endeavour would likely see him killed.

Other than that, they only stopped a couple of times a day to pee or stretch their legs, so when they were pulling into the town of Corel, Cloud nearly cried out with relief. The end was in sight. The driver was just as unsociable as Cloud himself, and didn’t speak much other than to holler something or another about the time.
He had a book he’d bought to keep him busy, but there was only so much reading he could take, and trying to read the small words while swaying with the truck did nothing to help his perpetual state of nausea.

It was dark outside now, but even without his enhanced eyesight he could see the dull light around the area where the Corel Reactor was already under construction. It was in its early stages right now, barely more than a skeleton of beams.

He wondered if he would run into Barrett, or maybe even Dyne, while he was here. Of all of his past ghosts, Barrett would likely be the easiest to handle. The gruff man grated on him and they butted heads constantly, but it was comforting to know he was likely still very much the same. Maybe just not as damaged.

It was also quite the sobering thought that Marlene would not have even been born yet.

They made their way into the inn, Cloud going first and getting a room. The Innkeeper looked a bit disconcerted at a 14 year old asking for a room like he did it every day, but didn’t do anything to stop him, and before long he was under the hot spray of a shower. As he washed his long hair, he ran his fingers through it and wondered if he should leave it, or cut it short at the back like he had done in his own time.

SOLDIER didn’t have a problem with hair but, if he remembered rightly, it had to stay within your regulation helmet in the regular army. They didn’t want any defining or distinguishing features showing on their troopers and Cloud bristled at the thought. One of the many mind games ShinRa played. Remove individuality, regulate autonomy. Shaking his head, he turned his thoughts to another direction and continued washing his hair.

He didn’t need any extra help to fester about ShinRa, he would surely do enough of that when he was there.

It was noon by the time they reached Costa del Sol the next day. That had been an interesting ride, as Cloud had been able to specifically recognise the area where he’d been sucked into the Lifestream and brought into this fresh hell.

Costa del Sol was as busy as it ever was, seeing as though it was THE tourist destination AND close to the newly built Golden Saucer. Sun, sea, sand and spending. It was also ShinRa’s key connection to the Western Continent so, as the war was at its peak, their troops and vehicles were everywhere too. It was an odd feeling to be able to walk around them freely again, without being the target of their ire and guns. He was a nobody to them.

That being said, he still felt uneasy as he picked his way though town, unable to shake the feeling of being surrounded by enemies. When he made it to the port, he went straight to the Dockmaster to get a ride.

As luck would have it, a civilian cruiseliner was here and had a few spare rooms. It was leaving after the last ShinRa boat of the day, so he had a while to wait while, but he’d survive in his own for a couple of hours. “The war means they get priority, ya know!”

He bought the cheapest ticket he could, conscious that his Gil was going to have to last, and set about killing time before he could board.

He sat on his suitcase and watched the general comings and goings of the troops on the other boardwalk. The sun was warm on his back as he basked in it, figuring it may well be a while before he felt it again. Even on the nicest summer days, it was never really sunny in Midgar. The smog
from the city drowned it out, even above the plate. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, filling his lungs with salt air and ignoring the calls and shouts across the way. When an odd hush fell upon the docks, he opened his eyes but he couldn’t see anything or note. People were still milling around doing what they needed to, but they were a lot more subdued.

Curious, he frowned and stood up, but his short stature didn’t lend any help whatsoever. Not concerned with how odd he would look, he quickly hopped up onto the suitcase to take a better look.

How he sorely wished he hadn’t. Of all the people he knew he would see in this time, this was the one he wanted to be most prepared for.

In reality, he was definitely the least.

Seeing Sephiroth in the papers, the poster child for ShinRa and the war effort, was disconcerting and thoroughly mind blowing, but it was a whole different ball game than seeing him in the flesh. Even from across the docks there was no mistaking that sheet of silver hair flowing gently in the wind.

Clouds heart stopped and his breath caught in his throat as instinct had him reaching to his back for a sword that wasn’t there. He clamped down on the freezing panic that swelled like a wave across his body and sucked in a harsh breath.

Sephiroth was just as tall as ever, but his features showed he was younger than Clouds last image of him, the planes of his face seeming softer. Now that he thought about it, the man couldn’t be any older than 18 right now. Be that as it may, he still moved with a certain air of grace and a confident stride that belied his age and experiences.

Cloud couldn’t take his eyes off the man who once upon a time had been his idol and the reason that he wanted to follow his dream to join SOLDIER. It was shocking to this this was who had been his idol. Before insanity and instability corrupted and twisted him into someone else entirely.

Sephiroth turned to look over his shoulder and it was only then that he realised who he was with. Angeal Hewley and Genesis Rhapsodos were mere steps behind him on the boardwalk. Genesis had a somewhat bitter twist to his smile as he walked with his arms crossed but Angeal, who Sephiroth was speaking with now, appeared light and easy.

The troopers gave them a wide bearth, their helmets doing like to hide their obvious glances at the three.

Maybe if Cloud hadn’t been looking at everyone else, he might have been more prepared to lock eyes with Sephiroth.

Mako green. Slitted pupils. A haunting laugh and a smirk that spoke of superiority and madness. A sword piercing Aerith’s chest like a knife through butter. As quickly as the images came, the passed in favour of another. His heart rate quickened and he felt the blood drain from his face.

And then it was over. Sephiroth had locked eyes with him for all of a second, and then carried on as if nothing had happened.

Clouds breath was coming in out in harsh pants as he watched the trio continue down the boardwalk.

The eye contact was so insignificant and in the passing that he doubted Sephiroth even paid him any mind, more likely he was looking through him, not at him. And yet it shaken Cloud to his very
He shakily climbed off his suitcase and sat down. This whole experience was by far the most bizarre thing he had ever done.

He’d be lucky if he came out of all of this with his own mental faculties intact and only mild PTSD.

As his heart rate began to slow, his thoughts wandered back to Genesis and Angeal. He had forgotten they’d even existed. In all fairness, he had very little to do with them originally, Genesis especially.

He’d had a run in with Angeal in Modeohiem when he was a trooper, but otherwise anything else he knew was from Zack. Zack’s recollections of Angeal were endearing to say the least, but strongly at odds with Cloud’s personal experience. He knew a little of what had happened to the pair of frost classes, but only from brief conversations with the Turks and from what was left of ShinRas research.

They could be problematic in what he needed to do.

As soon as the three First Class SOLDIERs were aboard the ShinRa ship, their boardwalk went back to shouting and organised chaos, their reverence over, as they finished their preparations to launch. Cloud went back to sitting and waiting, but the tension he’d felt upon seeing Sephiroth had yet to evaporate. No doubt he’d feel this way until the ship left the harbour.

When the ShinRa troops stopped loading and started boarding, the Dockmaster on his own boardwalk hollered, stating they were able to start boarding the cruiseliner.

He fought through the crowd to get on the boat as quickly as he could and find his room in steerage. For all it was basic and bare, he didn’t care. If everything went to plan, this would likely be his last chance in peaceful isolation for a long time.

He dumped his case by the door and flopped onto the bed, glad that at least on this leg of the journey he had a mattress to rest on, rather than the cold iron of a truck.

And if he was really lucky, the boat would just sink and he’d be off the hook. He smirked at his own macabre thoughts. Of course that wouldn’t happen. He was never that lucky...

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Coming into port at Junon and seeing the beginnings of the Sister Ray under construction was a harrowing image. Knowing exactly what it was for, and what it could do, was giving him an uncomfortable tingle up his spine, despite it being years from completion.

The security at the dock was on high alert as well. He wondered if the Wutai had ever made it this far across the world to do anything to cause any damage, but he doubted it. They had enough trouble defending their own land, never mind disrupting ShinRa here.

Disembarking from the ship was a quick and efficient business, the complete opposite of his experience in Costa del Sol, and he was in the city proper within 30 minutes. One thing he couldn’t remember though... how to get to Midgar without a Chocobo... or his own mode of transportation in general.

He wandered some of the streets for a while, before swallowing his pride and approaching a lonely Trooper that was standing guard by a street corner. He couldn’t help the suspicion and trepidation
he felt when approaching one without a weapon, and had to grit his teeth to stop himself from throwing a punch when he turned to look at him, the three red lights in his helmet glowing menacingly.

“Can you tell me how to get to Midgar?”

The Trooper looked him up and down, lingering on his suitcase. “You an army hopeful?”

Cloud shrugged, uncomfortable with the scrutiny but not daring to look away.

The Trooper laughed and smiled at him, totally throwing Cloud for six. “Glad to know we have more new recruits! You take a left at this corner and...”

By the time Cloud was on train and had found a place to stand, he was mentally drained from being so consistently on edge. Guards regularly worked their way up and down the train in pairs, checking out the passengers as they went. Probably trying to prevent unsavoury characters from using it to get into Midgar. AVALANCHE (the first iteration anyway) were causing a stir already.

He was surrounded by a range of people. Some were obviously just commuters, likely they’d been on a day trip, but he also wasn’t the only young boy who seemed to be making the trip to join the military. Only years of experience had him noticing the small packs with what little belongings they could bring, and the nervous looks as they watched the guards pass. He knew an army wannabe when he saw one. He’d been one once.

He rested his head against the cool glass of the window he was next to, watching the dark walls of the underground tunnel zoom by.

He was going to have to get used to this. There was no way he could beat Sephiroth in a fight right now, and he wasn’t willing to allow things to get to Nibelheim so he could be enhanced. No, he had to get into SOLDIER and do it ‘the old fashioned way’. That meant being at ShinRa. Working for ShinRa.

God, he hated it.

He was wandering into enemy territory, not that they knew they were his enemy. Yet. His original time in ShinRa wasn’t the most pleasant to begin with, but he had so many other issues to war with now. He was going to have to see Hojo again, and he wasn’t sure he’d be able to hold himself back if he did. Every single bad thing that had happened in his life could be tied back to that bastard. Those 4 years especially, and Zack...

As the train exited the tunnel, Cloud got his first full view of Midgar in years, back in all its former, monstrous glory. Everything had a green tinge to it and he felt like he could see the smog that was desecrating the land, though admittedly that was probably just his imagination.

The other passengers on the train started to become restless as they pulled up to the first stop in the city. Cloud took a deep breathe and let it out slowly.

‘Welcome to the jungle.’

Chapter End Notes

So far I’ve been updating weekly, but I think that’s going to change (as much as I wish
At this point, I kind of have the key plot points in my head, but it’s the transitioning between them that I struggle with. I don’t want to rush this story, but I also don’t want to drag it out more than is necessary. If at any point I’m going to little or too much of something (description, speech, procrastinating etc) please, please, PLEASE, let me know so I can work on it. Otherwise, I’ll see you next time!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Okay, I am so sorry that I’ve taken so long to post this chapter. I have no excuse other than to say I was a bit stumped on how to move onto the next but without it being just awful.

To new readers, welcome to my story!

To those who’ve been here before, I have some news I’ve been back through and edited all 3 of the first chapters, as I felt like they still needed work, and I’d missed some important points in my excitement to post. They’re not necessarily crucial to the story so you don’t NEED to go back and read them, but wanted to let you know in case you wanted to :) 

“Next.”

Cloud stepped forward nervously, his palms clammy. His first task from getting off the train was heading to the recruitment office. The lions den. It wasn’t like he wanted to throw himself so quickly into his misery, but there wasn’t much else he could do if he wanted a roof over his head tonight. The office itself was small and dingy, attached to the civilian side of the army barracks. There was no windows, and the fluorescent lighting cast a harsh glare across its contents. There were also no seats. Just a small desk occupied by a grizzled looking man with a salt and pepper beard. There had already been a small queue before him when he’d entered, so he had joined it. After around 20 minutes of waiting, flexing his hands to use some of his nervous energy, it was his turn to move forward.

“Next.”

Cloud stepped up to the front when he was called, trying not to let his tension show.

“Name?”

“Cloud Strife.” His voice cracked and he cleared his throat, more than a little embarrassed.

“Age and place of birth.”

“14, Nibelheim.”

“Backwater boy huh? Don’t get many from your neck of the woods here. Where do you want to be kid?”

“SOLDIER.”

His laugh was a loud bark as scribbling on the form. “You and everyone else. Don’t be too disappointed when you end up with the army. Go down that hall and fill these out. Someone will be by to collect them and tell you what to do.”

Cloud huffed but did as he was told, looking over the form as he went. Basic health and personal
information. It was stuck to a clipboard with a pen tied to it, so he started scribbling as soon as he put his case down, trying to recall what he could from so long ago.

To even have a hope of joining SOLDIER, he’d need to get through the bootcamp. It served no real purpose, other than to try and push candidates to their limit and test their resilience and determination. If you impressed them, you were put into the SOLDIER program. Anyone else was shipped off to the army. Once he was in the programme, it was just a matter of improving until they gave you the treatment or kicked you out. That in itself didn’t concern him though. It was the treatment itself that lent him the most anxiety.

In his past, someone somewhere had declared that he was incapable of withstanding the enhancements and the method of gaining them. It was rumoured that you needed to be both mentally and physically strong. He certainly hadn’t been so physically weak to warrant a rejection, so he had come to the conclusion, eventually, that it was his mentality that sold him down the river.

He’d later found that to be false. What had actually transpired was that he had no natural defence to the mako and/or the Jenova cells that they used in the treatment, and that had put a sudden halt to his dreams.

For all of his bravado and arrogance as a teenager, Cloud’s confidence in himself was abysmal at best. His failure to save Tifa from falling from the bridge on Mt. Nibel and his isolation throughout his childhood had effected his ability to work cohesively with others, so he didn’t find what they’d fed him had to believe. Now, he was a different person to the teenager who had came before him. He still had issues, but they were not the same.

To be fair to someone somewhere though, they’d technically been right. Both Hojo’s experiments on him in Nibelhiem and his dip into the Lifestream directly had led to toxicosis and acute mako poisoning. Had it not been for Zack and Tifa he may not have survived. That being said though, he wasn’t sure how different Hojo’s experiments had been from the SOLDIER treatment, so would he have had the same reaction? In the end, it was all conjecture, so he couldn’t say for sure.

Alternatively, he could just be his own brand of insanity, doing the same things yet expecting different results.

He leaned against a wall in the waiting room, attending to his forms.

A man in a Lieutenants uniform eventually came to the motley crew of boys sitting in the waiting area, some on chairs and some on the floor.

When he’d stood there for a moment and the crowd did nothing but watch him, he scowled. “What do you think you’re all doing?! Get to attention.”

The others, shocked and intimidated, scrambled to get up and stand up straight, not that all of them knew what standing to attention entailed. More calmly then the others, Cloud drew himself away from the wall and straightened out, arms stiff to his sides. He tried not to look like he’d done this before, while at the same time not looking like he was clueless. He needed to impress after all.

“Arms down. Why are you saluting, this isn’t the Navy! Straighten that back.” The man didn’t look like he expected too much already. “I’m Lieutenant Martins and I’ll be your CO for the duration of your time in boot camp. I get the pleasure of making your dreams come true, or smashing them to tiny pieces, and trust me, this is not going to be an easy ride. I expect nothing but the best and if I don’t get it, then you’re gone. So get it together and follow me.”
Without waiting he turned on his heel and strode purposefully down the hall he came from, leading them deeper into the barracks. Cloud stooped to grab his case and follow him as the others did the same, their shoes squeaking on the linoleum floors. That speech had been a little unnecessarily dramatic and he had a feeling that this was the lieutenants way getting respect from the off. The other boys may have been effected, but Cloud simply found it mildly annoying.

“These are your quarters - 4 to a room. You’re not to leave the base on week days, but weekends are your own. Get settled in and collect your fatigues today, because we start first thing tomorrow. You four, in that room. You and you,” he pointed to Cloud and another boy. He had dark skin and hair, and was at least a head taller and a couple of years older than him. He was the definition of the blondes polar opposite. “You’re in there. Now get.”

He let the other go ahead of him, not keen on entering a room to an unknown quantity with someone he didn’t know at his back as well.

The room was empty as it turned out, but not unlived in. Two bunks on one side were rumpled, as if hastily made, and some personal effects where scattered around them. The two on the other side looked untouched.

The other kid looked down on Cloud, scrutinising him. “I think I’d better take the top bunk, unless ya have something against that.”

Surprised, Cloud glanced at him and nodded wordlessly.

“I’m Darrell by the way. Darrell Weber.”

“Cloud Strife.” Cloud replied automatically, sinking slowly on the bed as Darrell started unpacking his bag, claiming one of the empty cubbies with his belongings. He watched the boy carefully as he tried to measure him up.

Darrell glanced up and gave him a lopsided grin. “So what brings you here Cloud Strife?”

The blonde frowned, thinking it was obvious. “I want to join SOLDIER.”

Darrell laughed loudly and sat back on his haunches. “Well no shit. That’s why we’re all here ain’t it? I meant what brings you to SOLDIER? You must have really wanted to come all this way.”

Clouds frown melted into a look of confusion. He couldn’t know, could he? “What...”

“The accent. You’re a country bumpkin, or am I wrong?”

The accent? He’d lost his Nibel accent years ago - but then, that had been before. Had he really not noticed? He couldn’t help the flush creeping up his neck.

Darrell stood to his full height again as Cloud scowled. “Hey, I didn’t say it was a bad thing.” Finished with his things, he hoisted himself roughly on to his bed, the metal frame protesting at the abuse. “So, are you gonna answer my question?”

Cloud bent to start unpacking his own things to hide his lack of having an actual answer prepared. From past experience, no one ever really cared to ask. After a moment, he cleared his throat, making a conscious effort to hide his embarrassing inflections. “Dunno, guess I want to protect my friends and family.” That was true enough, wasn’t it? Why he was doing all of this?

Darrell whistled. “That’s pretty deep. I just wanted to get out of the slums and the best way to do
that is to get drafted. My ‘rents aren’t thrilled but, hey, maybe one day I’ll get them up here too.”

Cloud remembered vividly the derelict environment that was Midgards underbelly. He’d had flashes of it through the train windows on his way here, but he didn’t need those images to remember the conditions. And it had just as many unsavoury characters and places as there was plate side. He didn’t blame the kid for wanting to get out. Not knowing what else to say, and not really interested in drawing out the conversation, he let the silence ring out for a while. Darrell seemed comfortable enough to do the same, lounging around and already making himself at home while Cloud was packing his meagre possessions into his own cubby.

Eventually though, a noise out in the corridor caught their attention. It sounded like a stampede was coming their way - laughing and whooping accompanied by the sounds of boots hitting the ground as they got closer. Cloud straightened and moved back to his bed as Darrell propped himself up on his elbows, knowing that any moment now their door would open and their two roommates would appear. Clouds muscles tensed and habit had him reaching for a sword on his back that wasn’t there. Darrell caught the movement from the corner of his eye, but he made no comment on it.

The blonde was too absorbed in his paranoia and distant memories to notice, and those had him half expecting a group of ShinRa troops to barge in and start shooting.

In actual fact, the door burst open and two boys in the middle of rough housing fell through, laughing and hitting the floor with a heavy thud.

Cloud and Darrell, the former still tensed to spring into action, watched as the two seemingly didn’t notice them and continued to wrestle, yelping and whooping as the they struggled to top the other. It wasn’t until another boy stuck his head in the room that they were finally noticed, and he sent a kick at the tangle of limbs. “Looks like you two have some roomies.”

They stopped their squirming and looked up at the two newcomers, before launching to their feet and looking sheepish.

“Hey, didn’t know we were getting some fresh meat.”

“Yeah, we maybe would have made a more sophisticated entrance. First impressions and all that.”

Clouds muscles relaxed one by one, his instincts crawling to the back of his mind in the absence of any danger. The guy on the left wore his fatigues but they were rumpled and untucked in places, his short dark blonde hair sticking messily in all directions. The guy on the right wasn’t in a much better state, but his hair was a light brown and cropped in a buzz cut, so at least he had that going for him. These guy couldn’t be any older that 15 either.

“So what are your names?”

When a semi-awkward silence made it obvious that Cloud wasn’t going to answer, Darrell stepped in. “I’m Darrell, this guy is Cloud. He doesn’t seem to be much of a talker.”

The boy on the left hummed. “Well I’m Stefan, this is Marcus.”

“Yeah, we’ve been here for three days. The other guys that bunked here left pretty much straight way - couldn’t take the slog.”

“Or the extra curricular activities. It was the water boarding that finished off Matthews.”

Finished, the pair stared at Cloud and Darrell. Cloud looked at them incredulously, knowing full well they were talking out of their asses. Darrell, to his credit, kept a straight face, but you could
see in his eyes that he was trying to work out if they were joking or not.

“Wow, not the reaction I was expecting...” Marcus scratched the back of his head, chuckling.

“But at least we know who the most guillable out of the two of you.” Stefan chimed in, smirking pointedly at Darrell and waggling a finger in his direction.

In response, Darrell scoffed and flopped backwards in his bunk. “Whatever, I knew you were messing.”

Cloud checked out of the conversation, climbing into his bunk to scan over some of the pamphlets that he’d found in his cubby. The three boys continued to banter between them, poking fun at him sometimes and trying to draw him into the conversation, but he studiously ignored them. It was unbelievably rude, but he didn’t come here to make friends.

Fail to prepare and prepare to fail, as the saying went. He needed to remember exactly what he was getting himself in to. His memory of bootcamp was fuzzy to say the least.

*****

Cloud flopped on to his mattress with grim satisfaction. He was lucky he’d even made it there without collapsing in a heep. Darrell groaned loudly as he dragged himself up onto his bunk, and the blonde was suddenly very glad that he’d let him take that bed when they arrived.

Being a Cadet in Bootcamp was it’s own special brand of torture. He desperately tried to think about anything other than his burning muscles, but the full body ache demanded his attention. He forgot how much he could hurt.

Every day, you reported in for breakfast at 6am, which was generic slop masquerading as porridge, after a cold shower. By 7am, you were out on the track field doing laps as a warm up. The drills that followed were long and gruelling and, by lunch time, there was often one more cadet who was packing their bag and leaving.

Afternoons were just as intense, but on Mondays Wednesdays and Fridays, they had a reprieve (depending on your perspective) as instead they would have a seminars on ShinRa policy, Code of Conduct and basic combat and Materia theory.

ShinRa liked to do things quickly - you only tended to be in bootcamp for 4-5 weeks, depending on recruitment, but they were also very picky. Sorting the wheat from the chaff so to speak. If you did well enough, you went into the full SOLDIER programme.

If you didn’t... well you were shipped off to the Army to be a grunt. Sure you could re-apply after a year of military service, but he wasn’t sure how. He’d never done it himself.

Tonight, to finish up, they’d had to run around the track again for more time than he cared to remember, but this time with weighted backpacks.

Stefan and Marcus finally dragged themselves through the door, dead on their feet.

“How the fuck did you get here so fast? I had to stop for breath every few steps.” Marcus moaned melodramatically, throwing himself on to his own bunk much harder than necessary.

Darrell chuckled. “The quicker you get here, the sooner you get to lie down and not move for 10 hours.”
“The man has a point,” Stefan chimed in. He gave up at the finish and chose instead to sink to the floor by the door, leaning against the wall for support. “Is it the weekend yet?”

“One more day to go.” Marcus answered, his voice muffled by the covers he was face down on. “What are we doing?”

The three chattered and Cloud turned his attention back to his aches and pains.

“Are you coming this weekend?”

When the question was met with silence, he glanced up and saw that Marcus had peeled his face off the bed and was looking directly at him.

“No.” His response was automatic, but the voice of Darrell in the bed above him echoing it made him frown at the underside of the mattress above him.

His head popped over the edge. “You’re so predictable.”

“Yeah, you said that last week too. Keep turning us down and we might stop asking!”

Cloud turned his head to look at Stefan, “That’s what I was banking on.”

He wasn’t prepared for the flash of hurt that crossed the boys face, or the twinge of guilt he felt when it did.

“Hey, uncalled for.” Marcus chimed back in. “We’re just trying to be nice guys. Believe it or not, you need friends in a shithole like this. There’s no need to be such a dick.”

Cloud stared at him silently for a while, his expression cool and not for a single second betraying his thoughts.

Over the last week or so, he’d started to get a handle on the kind of people his roommates were. Darrell was quite laidback, not taking things too seriously. Stefan was full of charm and could talk to anyone about anything, Marcus...well he seemed quite reserved at first, but was slowly showing his true self. As shown by his outburst. Marcus wasn’t one to rock the boar, so he had caught the blonde by surprise. He’d also unwittingly made a valid point, that had a more profound effect than he could have expected.

Despite Cloud’s lonesome upbringing in Nibelheim, life had shown him time and time again that it had always been his friends that had seen him through his worst moments, and helped him up at the other side.

Right now, he was alone in his mission. He didn’t know if and when he was going to see Zack and Aerith, and what part they were going to play in this version of events. These guys may not be tough SOLDIERs or Ancients with a connection to the Planet, but going things alone certainly hadn’t played out well for him in the past.

And he forgotten, in his hate for ShinRa and his experience with fighting AGAINST it, that not everyone that worked for the company was inherently bad.

Yes, there were certainly a lot of them. Greedy leaders and manipulative executives were abound. But a lot of the companies employees were just normal people who needed a job. Who were just like HIM when he’d first came to Midgar. He’d fought to remain aloof and distant, but anyone could see that these three weren’t bad people.
They may not be able to help him when it came down to it, but surely it couldn’t hurt to be friendly to the people who were to him.

He’d been silent so long, staring into Marcus’s eyes that the other was starting to look uncomfortable, like something he saw there was making him worry.

The blonde sighed and broke eye contact. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Stefan gasped mockingly from the other side of the room, clutching at his chest and effectively breaking the tension that had been bu. “Strife, apologising?! Well I never!”

Cloud scoffed, laying back down to fold his arms behind his head and close his eyes. “Don’t get used to it.”

The three of them laughed, and Stefan finally started to crawl across the floor to his bunk.

“So are you coming?” Darrell asked from above, obviously aiming it at Cloud.

“I suppose so.”

*****

“How about we go to a titty bar?”

Stefan’s suggestion was met with three blank stares. He looked indignant. “What? I don’t see you lot giving a better suggestion.”

It was Saturday afternoon and the four of them were sat at a corner café on Loveless Avenue, trying to decide what to do for the day. Cloud had spent the morning in the gym, only to be found by the others once they eventually rolled out of bed at 11am. Stuck between Marcus and Stefan’s guilt trips and wanting to prove Darrell wrong, he had begrudgingly allowed the three of them to lead him into the streets Midgar, much to their delight.

Cloud has refrained from offering any suggestions in general, as he would have personally preferred to spend his time in solitude, and he had no idea what Midgar had to offer these days. The others were just plain stumped about how to fill in their weekend.

“As if we’d get in anyway,” Marcus observed, pausing to take a sip of his sugar riddled ice slushy. “Darrell might, at a push but there’s no way Cloud would.”

Stefan shot a dirty look at Cloud’s drink of choice. “Maybe if they spoke to you they’d change their mind. I’ve never met kid who drinks black coffee and likes to get up at 5:30 in the morning before. I swear you’re 14 going on 40.”

Cloud frowned, glancing down at his cup. He hadn’t thought about it. Typical teenagers didn’t usually drink coffee did they? Then again, he was a mountain boy. For all anyone knew, it may not be unusual. Who would really care enough about what he liked to drink anyway?

“It’s just a drink...”

“Hey, you do you little man.” Cloud practically growled at Darrell, but the other pointedly ignored it and carried on. “There’s not much to do around here when you have no money. We could go to
the park?”

Marcus scoffed, “And do what, make Daisy chains?”

“Maybe you could make one for the waitress you were drooling over.”

He went violently red from the neck up. “I wasn’t drooling.”

“Sure you weren’t.” Stefan smirked and nudged him with his elbow. “You just had to scrape your jaw off the floor instead.”

Having had enough with his quick temper, Marcus shot him a look and punched him in the arm as hard as he could. In response, Stefan reached out but ended up grabbing thin air as Marcus shot to his feet and dashed away from the café. The blonde swore loudly and shot up himself, knocking his chair flying as he chased after his friend.

Cloud and Darrell were left sitting there, receiving dirty looks from other patrons who’s attention had been caught by the commotion. Darrell signed and got up, righting the chair that Stefan had left in his wake and looked at Cloud. “I guess we better go find them before they kill each other.”

He hummed and picked up his cup, draining it of it’s dark liquid. As they walked away, Darrell pulled a face. “Seriously though, how do you drink that stuff?”

*****

“Have you heard about Genesis Rhapsodos?” A recruit whispered to his friend as Cloud passed. He didn’t stop to listen, but he was on his way to the mess hall to have that very conversation himself. He’d been hearing that statement all morning, and wanted to know if his roommates had heard anything more. He’d been tense, having a feeling he already knew what had happened.

He spotted Marcus and Darrell the moment he walked in and made a beeline towards them. He sat down abruptly and didn’t bother to say hello, shocking the two of them, before he leaned forward and spoke quietly. “What do you know about Genesis Rhapsodos?”

Marcus shrugged, spooning some potato into his mouth. Darrell on the other hand was more helpful. “We’ve heard something’s going on, but we’re not sure what.” He murmured. “Stefan is doing some recon.”

Stefan had a definite knack of finding out what he wanted to know without seeming so obvious. If he kept going on the track he was, he’d make a great Turk. With a pang, a fleeting thought of Vincent flashed briefly in his mind, before he wrestled it back.

“So where is he?”

Darrell gave him a funny look. “I didn’t take you for a gossip.”

Cloud frowned. “I’m not... I just think something bad has happened and I want to know what.”

“You’re right about that.” Stefan sighed as he slid onto the seat beside Cloud with his tray, looking disturbed.

“What’s up?” Marcus asked. Cloud just stared at him intently, his stomach doing flip flops at the
implications. He wished he was wrong.

“They’re saying that Genesis has deserted ShinRa, and convinced a load of 2nd and 3rd Classes to go with him.”

The silence that reigned over the table was palpable. Marcus and Darrell were shocked, but Cloud felt nothing but a sense of dread.

This... was the first event in a long line of circumstances that lead to Nibelheim. And he’d done nothing to stop it.

He tried to temper his own rage at himself. What could he really have done between waking up in the past and now, that would have prevented Genesis from deserting. For gods sake, he didn’t even know what the trigger was to make Genesis leave, his memories of everything that happened before he originally came to ShinRa were vague at best.

“So, what does that mean?” Marcus asked quietly.

Stefan, unusually serious, stared at his tray. “It means that a First Class SOLDIER is now an enemy of ShinRa, and he has his own small, enhanced army.”

They sat in silence for a while, each milling over their own thoughts on the matter. This was bad news for everyone, one way or another. Not only was ShinRa already at war with the nation of Wutai, they now had to contend with a monster of their own creation.

Eventually, Darrell looked at him. “Are you not going to get any lunch?”

Cloud shook his head weakly, eyes fixed on the table. “I’m not hungry.”

His appetite had raced away with his thoughts, as he truly worried about what he had to do. And how the hell he was supposed to accomplish it.

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Cloud ran around the track, sweat pouring down his face as he hoisted the weighted pack back onto his shoulders when it slid down. It was a Saturday, but news of Genesis going MIA had spurred him to action.

He had to get stronger.

Mako enhancements were just that, enhancements. They worked off what you already had and amplified it, whether that was ability, strength or speed. The better physical condition he was in when he received the treatment, the better he would be after.

It was for that reason that he could be found putting in extra work, despite his already limited rest time and abused body.

And it was also for that reason that his three bunkmates were sat in the dust, lazing around at the tracks edge.

For all of his flaws and his unsociable attitude, Marcus, Stefan and Darrell had stuck around. He had forgotten what it was like to make - dare he say it - friends, in normal circumstances. Too
many times he had forged friendships at the heart of a conflict. He was often seen as abrupt and
difficult to approach by new faces, and his habitual stoicness did nothing to alleviate that, but he
had found, with their perseverance, he was becoming more comfortable. They were used to his
brooding silence and were content to carry conversations between themselves until he deigned to
join them.

He finished his lap and made his way over to the boys. He dumped his pack unceremoniously on
the ground and picked up his water bottle, chugging half of it in one go. He dared not sit down,
because if he did he might not get back up.

“Having fun out there?”

He shrugged in response, screwing the cap back on. “You don’t have to hang around.”

Marcus huffed, drawing lines in the dust in front of him with his finger. “Nothing better to do.”

“You could join me.”

That had the boy looking up at him with an incredulous look. “Yeah. Right. I’m not a masochist.”

The blonde smirked, but didn’t say anymore, electing instead to stretch his back with a satisfying
pop.

“So, only a week left to go until this fresh hell is over.” Stefan sighed, breaking the brief silence.

Darrell laughed. “You think the SOLDIER programme is going to be easier?”

Stefan shared a look with Marcus and shrugged.

Darrell looked confused, but Cloud frowned, picking up what they weren’t saying aloud. “You
don’t think you’ll get in.”

Marcus leant back, resting on his elbow. “Well, when you look at the other guys we’re up against,
I’d say our chances are slim at best.” He jerked his head over at Darrell. “You two might be doing
okay. But I’m prepared to be booted off.”

“Me too.” Stefan chimed in, seemingly unfazed.

Darrell shot him a look. “You’ll end up with the Turks. Mark my words.”

Stefan scoffed but he didn’t dispute it. More than once Cloud had had the same thought. He
reminded him of Reno, in a way.

Mini break over, Cloud picked up his backpack and hefted it back over his shoulders. He
readjusted and set back off on the track at a trot.

“Try not to break a leg, teachers pet!”

Cloud smirked, but chose not to dignify it with a response.

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“Just don’t talk to anyone unless I do and we’ll be fine.”

Marcus and Stefan were understandably nervous as they made their way off the train and into the Slums of sector 2. It was their first foray into Midgar’s dark underbelly, and Cloud didn’t think they were really prepared for what they were seeing. It was something you got used to over time.

Darrell had convinced the boys to come down with him to meet his parents and, although Cloud was exhausted from all of the extra work he’d put in yesterday, he’d been inclined to come.

As Stefan and Marcus’s wide eyes nervously darted around their immediate vicinity, his couldn’t help but keep wandering in the direction of Sector 5. He still hadn’t been to see Aerith yet, and part of him was sorely tempted to leave the boys and make his way their right this second. Much like he’d felt many times over the past four weeks.

What stopped him, was his own cowardice. He wasn’t sure he could face it if she of all people didn’t remember him. After everything they had been through together, after watching her die, and everything she’d done for him from the other side, and after that last meeting before his world had been irrevocably turned upside down. He just couldn’t face it. And the thought of dragging her into this when she deserved to live happily sat bitterly in his throat.

He’d go if and when it felt right.

He dragged his attention back to his friends as they picked their way through the rough paths lined with rubbish and shrapnel, distracting himself from the pull of his former friend.

“How could you live here?” Stefan whispered, as if worried he’d be overheard by the wrong ears, which was always a very real risk.

Darrell shrugged, seeming nonchalant about it all, but Cloud’s trained eyes picked up on the stiffness of his shoulders and his clenched jaw. “Didn’t have a choice.”

He obviously hated it. Who wouldn’t? He didn’t say anything, letting Darrell play his charade of being unbothered.

The teen led them to a shanty with a rudimentary door. He grinned over his shoulder at them before he pushed it open.

“Mom, pop, I’m home!”

There was a patter of light feet and a small dark form lunged from seemingly nowhere to throw their arms around his middle.

The air left him in a whoosh as a young boy with the same eyes and mouth grinned up at him with unadulterated joy. H

“Damon!” Darrell coughed, patting the boy of the back. “Easy man.”

He motioned for the three of them to follow him in, just as a man and woman hurried from a small doorway across the room. The woman cried out, running across the room to throw her arms around her son as his father approached with a now familiar grin on his face.

The family resemblance was striking, even in the semi-darkness.

His mother wore a long dress, patched in places where it had worn through, and her hair was pulled into a tight bun. His father, on the other hand, was still in what Cloud assumed was his work gear.
His skin was lightened by patches of dust and his hefty boots belied his trade, he likely did clean up or construction work.

“My boy!” His mother cried out laughing, before pulling away. Her mood did a complete one 180 as she held him at arms length, a head shorter than him but a whole lot more intimidating as she gave him a look that only a mother could. “I told you to visit. Why has it taken so long?”

“Four weeks mom, it’s been barely any time at all! These are my friends.”

Darrel took the time to introduce them one by one, as the three of them stood somewhat awkwardly off to the side.

Marcus, feeling more comfortable now that he was inside, smiled shyly. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr and Mrs Weber.”

“Oh! Don’t Mr and Mrs us, sweetness. Mom and Pop will do just fine. Come in, come in. Goddess knows you could someone to look after you, working for that ShinRa.”

They allowed her to lead them into a small kitchen, taken up by a large table with 4 mismatched chairs. It was basic, a stove and a sink, no refrigeration in sight, but it wasn’t unusual in a shanty such as this. The fact that they even had a stove was wonder enough. She ushered them to sit, and set about making a large pot of tea as Darrell and the boys told them about their time in bootcamp so far.

“They’re working you boys good aren’t they.” Pop frowned, crossing his arms over his chest as he leant against the wall.

“No more that what you do when the work is there.” Darrell gave him a pointed look.

Cloud accepted the the cup he was offered with a quiet thank you.

For all Darrell’s family situation was far from perfect, much like everyone else’s, Cloud always found it just a little heartwarming that positivity could still shine through the murk and smog. He had always kept a reasonable distance from others and focused his mind on other things to keep from feeling any sort of grief for others circumstances, he had enough of his own problems without adding someone elses. But these were good people, who had raised a good son. He knew if he were to express his sorrow for them, it would be unwelcome. They knew what they did and didn’t have and didn’t need him to feel sorry for them. But as he sipped his tea and observed their family unit and dynamic, he made a mental note to himself. The better future he was striving for was just as much for them as it was for anyone.

“We have our last test next week.” Darrell pipped up, breaking Clouds line of thought.

“Yeah, one more hoorah and then we get lumped with our assignments.”

Mom began bustling around the kitchen. “Well if that’s the case, I better make you boys a hearty home cooked meal then. Feed you up ready.”

“There’s really no need, Mrs Weber.~”

“Mom.” She corrected him shortly. “And nonsense. I’m gonna make it and you’re gonna eat it, got it?”

After that declaration, no one dared to argue.
Today was the day. The physical exam.

All 41 of the cadets currently running through the SOLDIER program were lined up into 4 groups, standing in the Midgar wastes about a mile away from the city.

Cloud hadn’t even realised that there was so many of them at this point. There had only been around 15 of them the last time he’d done this.

There was a constant mist of rain falling on their heads that already had them soaked to the bone as they waited to start. An assault course of sorts had been set up for them to run as part of their ‘final’ test for entering into SOLDIER.

They’d sat a written test the day before, and both would count towards the decision of whether or not to promote someone, on top of their performance throughout the last four weeks, and the results of their medical.

As they’d exited their exam, they all came face to face with some of ShinRa scientists, as they graced the barracks with their presence. Cloud had stopped in his tracks, his whole body tensing up when he laid eyes on them.

A quick scan of the crowd showed him that Hojo was not among them, far be it below him to come down and test his future victims himself. That in itself calmed his nerves somewhat, but he still wasn’t happy about it being sprung on him so suddenly.

His friends has found his behaviour odd, but accepted the explanation that he didn’t like doctors. He’d recovered and stood in line as they were each called behind a series of curtains for an quick assessment and a blood draw. He found some solace that he was in his own turf, away from the labs, and surrounded by people who would notice if something went ary.

That being said, Hojo’s interest in him extended only to his feat of strength against Sephiroth in the Nibelheim reactor. He had no reason to believe that he was on any more interest now, genetically speaking, than he had been the first time around.

The flip side of that, however, was that this specific part of everything was what had stopped him from being put into SOLDIER from the get go. He’d spent some time thinking about how to get around it, but he’d come up empty. Shy of swapping his sample out for someone else’s, he had no ideas. And that was Turk work, not his forte.

Back on the field, Cloud stood in the second row, waiting for the lieutenant to signal the first group to set off. There was nothing more he could do on that front, so he just had to show he was capable now, and pray to the Planet that they knew what they were doing by sending him back.

It was a brutal and muddy assault. After a gunshot into the air, the first set of cadets - Marcus
included - went off with bursts of speed, sprinting to the first hurdle - a rope net they had to climb to the top and jump off. After 15 minutes, a second gunshot had Cloud surging forward.

While most people tried to get as far as they could in the quickest time possible, Cloud hung back, steady in his pace as he made it to the rope. People were already halfway up the net as he began his climb.

A boot to the face was what greeted him at his halfway point, and he blinked heavily as he clung on. His nose hurt, but it wasn’t broken at least. He wasn’t sure whether the boy above him had slipped, or done it on purpose, but he kept going anyway. It didn’t matter.

He steadily made his way across the course, people from his group slowly falling behind him as they burned themselves out in the beginning, just as he’d expected. He’d made an effort to conserve his energy, saving for a final push at the end instead. It wasn’t a race, but a bad time could reflect a bad score and strong finish always looked better than a strong start.

He leapt over a pit, ignoring the boys that hadn’t made it over and were trying to climb out, and began to climb a rope up to a platform.

Yet again, halfway up, his rope began to sway wildly and his grip slipped a little, his hands burning.

Below, a boy was staring up at him, the same one that had hit him in the face, his eyes alight with malice. He held the rope in his hand, and he was swinging it as he grinned. “Hurry up Strife!”

Cloud growled, unsure what he’d done to make this boy start sabotaging his trial. He’d seen him around, and heard sly comments from him on occasion, but he’d never actually spoken to him before. He’d written him off as just another teenage idiot and chose to ignore him.

He could see Darrell behind them. He’d obviously noticed what was going on by the scowl on his face, but he was too far away to do anything to help, and Stefan was further back still.

He looked up at the platform. He could just try to make it up. Or he could do something about this asshole.

Making a snap decision, he let go of the rope and dropped in a controlled fall. The boy stepped back, shocked, as Cloud managed to land nimbly on the balls of his feet. Not missing a beat, Cloud swung his foot out and kicked, sending the other stumbling backwards. With a shriek, he fell into the pit, followed by an ‘oof’ from the guys he had landed on. Not loosing any more time, he leapt back onto the rope and continued his ascent.

The rest of the course went smoothly, or as smoothly as it could all things considered. Cloud put on a burst of speed right at the end as he vaulted over some fences and sprinted for the finish line.

Right as he crossed the line, something unexpected barged him from the side and he was sent sprawling into the mud face first.

A hush fell upon the crowd of boys as he peeled himself from the floor and pulled himself to his knees.

He looked around at the boy that stood over him with his arms crossed. “I saw what you did to Collins.”

Cloud continued to stare at him, his face a mask of impassiveness, but he felt a smidge of annoyance spark within him that had him clenching his fists. “And?” He spat petulantly.
“Well I didn’t like it.” The boy took a step forward, obviously meaning for it to be menacing.

Cloud continued to stare him down as that annoyance grew into anger. He was done with dealing with bullies and arrogant kids, he’d been done with that for a long time. In his previous life, he’d not been able to defend himself, but he could now.

He pulled himself to his feet and turned to face his aggressor, who in turn scowled. All he could see was the echoes of the kids in Nibelheim laughing, the adults sneering, the cadets who’d pushed him around. He took a step forward.

Before he could do or say anything else, a tall shape stepped up and blocked his field of vision, flanked by two others. He blinked, and found Darrell, Marcus and Stefan all standing in front of him.

“Yes, I saw what Collins did to Cloud too. I didn’t like that.” Darrell spoke up.

“And I didn’t like what you just did.” Stefan chimed in. “Funny that, isn’t it.”

Marcus stayed silent, but Cloud could see from his profile that he was tensed up.

“Hey, Collins didn’t do anything-“

Darrell scoffed. “Come off it, Brett. We’re not blind or stupid. You got a problem with our friend, then you’ve got a problem with us too.”

“That’s enough.”

A lot of the boys around them jumped at the booming sound of Lieutenant Martins voice, breaking up the crowd that had started to form.

The man strode forward, taking in the scene before him. Cloud covered in a ridiculous amount of mud, even after what they’d been through, and the standoff between the four others.

“I saw some questionable things happening on that field today. Unacceptable things. Some things that I think require some time in the military to stamp out of you.” He eyes wandered the crowd, lingering on Cloud. He froze up. Had he just messed up his own chance at getting into SOLDIER?

“Brett.”

The boy that had shoved Cloud stood to attention. “Yes sir?”

“When we get back, you can report to my office so we can discuss your future in SOLDIER.” The look of horror on the boys face was almost comical. “I’ll let you pass that message on to Collins, Daniels and Bruce. Now, everybody back to the trucks.”

Whispers broke out among the crowd as they moved towards the transport vehicles. No one had actually been kicked out of the program like that so far, and Cloud felt a swell of relief that he hadn’t been one of them.

“Dude, I didn’t know what you were going to do.” Darrell mumbled, nudging Cloud as they walked. “Had to step in before you got yourself in trouble.”

Cloud shrugged, glancing at Brett as he miserably made his way across the wastes with crowd, eyes on the ground. “Maybe I would have, maybe I wouldn’t have.”

“Well, let’s not try to find out in future, yeah? You can’t just go around picking fights.” Stefan said
with a smirk.

Cloud scoffed. “I didn’t exactly start it.” What he didn’t say, was that he had intended to finish it.

He was a little shaken by his irrationality. For the most part, he grown into a rather level headed individual, but he’d let his emotions about his past experiences get the better of him. Yes he’d sworn to himself many, many moons ago that he would not let himself be that bullied boy again, but that didn’t mean he had to lash out at someone for something so stupid either. He’d have to keep a better check on himself in the future.

He blamed it on the confusion of being a teenager with hormones, with adult experiences and a broken mind. Goddamn.

He hopped up into the truck, trailing mud as he made his way to the back to sit down. He looked down at his fatigues with a crinkled nose, as the wet mud stained almost every inch of him.

The first stop for him when he got back to Midgar, a shower, swiftly followed by the barracks laundry services.

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“What’s going on over there?” Marcus asked as they walked across the training ground, taking a short cut to the mess hall for breakfast.

“Weren’t they giving us our assignments today?” Stefan asked, not waiting for a response before making a beeline to the building crowd by the bulletin board.

Of course.

Today was the day they were going to announce who had scored where and whether they’d be promoted to the SOLDIER program, and who would enter the army. He hadn’t remembered that they would just post it out on the bulletin board though... he had hoped that, even if he got through, he would get a chance to grieve in private.

Cloud trailed behind his friends and stopped, not wanting to get caught in the swell of the crowd that were pushing and shoving to get to the front.

Darrell, being a giant, forged on through and cut a path for their bunk mates. “Move over, coming through.”

He lost sight of Stefan and Marcus but he could see Darrells head sticking out of the crowd well enough.

“Ah man, I thought I nailed it.”

“You can always try again.”

“Has anyone ever got in when they reapply?”

“Woooo, I passed!”

“Barely.”
“It’s still a pass, ain’t it?”

They were just some of the statements and yelling that were floating around him as some broke away from the crowd looking either ecstatic or dejected.

“Cloud!” He spotted Darrell looking at him with a grin splitting his face. “You smashed it man! Top marks!”

A lot of eyes were suddenly on him. He glared daggers at Darrell who just laughed and turned away.

“Who is that kid?”

“Cloud Strife, Stefan and Marcus’s roomie.”

“How the hell did that scrawny guy get top marks and I didn’t even pass? I beat him in the relay.…”

“This is bullshit.”

Cloud frowned but didn’t comment as the general sentiment of the crowd shifted in direction. This was not attention that he wanted, nor needed right now. He didn’t want to stand out from the majority, just be on the right end of the bell curve. He’d taken full advantage of the opportunity to improve his physique and physical fitness, almost to the point of injury over the last four and a half weeks, and with the theory exam, he’d answered the questions as honestly as he could. He certainly hadn’t expected to come out top of the class.

He inwardly kicked himself for not thinking it through though. He’d had to put the work in, but how was he supposed to know where to draw the line? He wanted to be a good candidate, not a damned prodigy. He didn’t want any special attention. The more value he showed to ShinRa, the more he would be watched, and the more he was watched, the harder it would be to cripple the company.

And then, the other aspect of it all came rushing to him. He’d passed the medical assessment... someone, somewhere, thought he was capable of being a SOLDIER. Had something changed? He looked down at his hands as he held them in front of him, clenching and opening slowly. What though...?

Darrell forced his way back out of the crowd, ignoring people’s muttering about Cloud and his own rude gesture. He flung one arm around Cloud’s shoulders, pulling him out of thoughts, and used the other to ruffle his spikes as he began to lead him away. “Who’d have thought five weeks ago that this little twerp was a genius and physical god?”

Stefan stepped out of sea people, closely followed by Marcus, and sniffed indignantly. “I had a feeling. It’s always the quiet ones you have to watch.”

“No you didn’t Stefan. It’s just as much a surprise to you as it is to us.” Marcus nudged him in the ribs in jest.

“How did you all do?” Cloud asked, desperate to deflect the attention away from himself.

Darrell grinned, drawing himself up to his full height. “I got through. My scores weren’t as good as yours, but good enough.”

He turned to Marcus and Stefan and felt his heart sink. The two of them didn’t look like they had good news.
Despite that, Marcus didn’t look too down about it. “Didn’t get through.”

Stefan shook his head. “Me neither.”

Darrell frowned, looking between them. “So that means-”

“Yep, we’ll be off to the army, just as we expected.” Marcus finished for him. “But you can tell us if it’s worth applying again.”

Stefan smirked at Cloud then. “At least we’ll know that we have SOLDIER extraordinaire Strife and his trusty sidekick to protect us lowly grunts in battle.”

Cloud blushed and became acutely aware that Darrell still had his arm around him when the taller of the two jostled him in his indignation, before man-handling him towards the mess hall again.

He shrugged the arm off and shoved his hands in his fatigues pockets, his shoulders and back hunched.

“Looks like ChocoBoy is embarrassed.” Marcus snickered from his far left.

“No I’m not.” Cloud snapped before he could stop himself.

Stefan laughed. “He’s got some peck after all!”

Having had enough, and particularly cowed by the Chocobo jokes, Cloud reached up and hit the other blonde around the back of the head, huffed, and stormed off ahead.

The three had frozen, watching the young teen as he went with eyes wide. After a moment, Darrell grinned before taking off after him. “Claws too.”
There wasn’t much fanfare with the promotion into the SOLDIER program.

The following Sunday, after packing up their meagre belongings, they were escorted to the SOLDIER residential block by a sole Second Class. He’d explained where to report to the next morning, and that was that - he left.

The other guys were all hanging around the common area, chatting happily amongst themselves about their achievement. Not feeling in the mood to take part, Cloud bid a quiet farewell to Darrell and made his way over to his own room. He was greeting by a room number and a plastic name card bearing his last name on the door.

Grimacing at it, he pushed the door open and stepped inside, quickly locking it behind him with the key hanging on the inside.

Thankful that he now had an element of privacy in his life, he took a moment to take in his new home. It was terribly small, but to Cloud is was like heaven after living and sleeping in a single room with 3 other boys for over a month, especially since one of them snored like a Hippogriff with a head cold.

He had three rooms - a small living area and kitchenette, a private bathroom and a bedroom. The mattress was lumpy, and the bathroom was cramped, but he didn’t care.

In the small wardrobe, he found his new uniform - light blue, the colour for Third Class. He stood and stared at it for the longest time, the thought that he had made it into SOLDIER, finally sinking in. He’d never worn this colour uniform.

Zack had dressed him in a First Class getup when they’d escaped the labs in Nibelheim, and Cloud had allowed himself to believe he belonged in it for the longest time.

He was torn between the traumatic memories this simple find had unearthed, and a small sense of relief. For the first time, and after everything he had been through, he was finally going to wearing this uniform, and it be his.

Along with these changes, his schedule was completely different. As probationary SOLDIER Third Class until they received the Mako treatment, they were in a purgatory of sorts. They would be assigned missions and tasks appropriate to their skill, but they still had contact time with trainers and seminars to attend.

He would be trained in Swordplay, Close Quarters Combat and Practical Materia Application, to name a few.

Cloud didn’t really need training in swordplay and Materia when it came to theory and know-how, all things considered, but he could definitely use the practice time to get to grips with his current physical situation. AKA his teenage body, as opposed to being a fully grown, mako enhanced adult.

The trainers would be members so SOLDIER, and he could help the twinge of dread mixed with excitement that particular fact enticed.
While Sephiroth would no doubt think teaching the next generation was below his station, he knew that this meant there was a chance he’d meet Zack.

He wandered around, checking out his amenities and putting his things away, before sitting down on his couch. As of tomorrow, he’d officially begin his duty as a SOLDIER, and he would be one step closer to his goal. He let his head fall back on the rest and he closed his eyes.

He might as well take some time to relax, while he had the chance.

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Three days after his promotion, Cloud was sat in the ShinRa employees canteen for lunch, which was a whole lot better than what they got in the bootcamp one. He’d just finished a particularly boring lecture on strategic deployment of garrisons overseas. Darrell was out on a mission in the slums clearing out monsters, so he was sat alone, eyes wandering the canteen with only a vague interest.

“Hey Fair! Come sit with us.”

Clouds head shot up, the shout catching his attention like nothing else could. His eyes widening as he saw a black haired figure bounding across the room to a table full of SOLDIER Seconds. The hair was shorter, spiking up and back in every direction, the face younger and unscarred, but those eyes and that grin hadn’t changed despite everything he’d seen and done. He was looking at a 15 year old Zack.

Where seeing his Mom for the first time had thrown him into a fit of panic and confusion, seeing Zack stunned him to silence, frozen and shell shocked.

“How’d that mission go, Zack?”

The raven haired teen, sat back in his seat, arm slung over the back in an easy and carefree display. “Piece of cake. The troopers didn’t even need to use their guns.”

“Good, they probably would have missed anyway.” A couple of people around the table snickered at the jab.

Zack didn’t miss a beat. “Their aims still probably better than yours.” The grin never left his face, softening the blow of his rebuke.

Cloud paid little attention to what was said at the table, his attention solely on Zack. He searched his face, and felt the ache of badly wanting to reach out and touch something, to make sure it was real.

“Hey Fair,” the boy sitting next to him said, nudging him with his elbow and jerking his head. “Looks like you have an admirer.”

It took a second for Cloud understand, too late, that the boy was referring to him. By that time, the whole table was turned to look at him with smirks on their faces, as he was still staring at Zack, no doubt looking starstruck in their eyes. He closed his mouth, which had been hanging slightly agape, with a snap and suddenly stood up, his chair scraping loudly on the floor. He fastened his eyes resolutely to his tray as a blush crept up his neck to cover his face.

He was so embarrassed. He hadn’t felt like this since he was, well... a teenager. Was this... was he really...? Fucking hormones.
He had to pass by the table to get out, so he made a point of looking straight ahead, all the while wishing the ground would open up and swallow him whole. He heard the boys laugh as he hurried by and Zack mumbling, “Not cool you guys.”

He jammed his tray into the stand by door, not bothering to clear it, and was out of the room in a flash.

As he walked down the corridor, he took a deep breath. Great, now Zack was going think he was a fucking weirdo. This was even worse than their meeting the first time around, when he was suffering from motion sickness in the helicopter.

He was so busy festering about his embarrassing actions that he missed the heavy footsteps until it was too late.

“Hey, slow down man!” Zack jogged up beside him, changing gracefully into a walk as he caught up with the blonde.

Clouds breathe hitched in his throat as his steps faltered. Not only did he have to deal with his astounding embarrassment, he had no idea what to say.

Zack, already a head taller than him, peered down to look under Clouds bangs. “You okay? You should just ignore those guys. They can be real douches, but we’re not all like that!”

Cloud nodded, not trusting his voice. But that had never stopped Zack before, why would it now?

“So are you new? I’ve never seen you around before.”

He swallowed heavily, but his reply still came out as a croak. “Yeah.”

“Thought so. I know most people in the program, and you sure do stand out with that hair.”

Cloud couldn’t help the automatic huff of indignation at the mention of his untameable mane. They came to a break in the hallway and, desperate to get away and gather his thoughts, he swung right and started down the hallway. As an afterthought, he mumbled, “Gotta go.”

Zack stopped as the blonde shot off, hands shoved in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. “Yeah, see you around!” He called at his retreating back.

He stood and watched the him walk away before he disappeared around the corner. There was something about that kid. He’d seen ogling and fan-worship before, all you had to do was be in the same room full of newbies and a first class to see that. He’d also seen the dreamy stares of a person who was infatuated. That had not been either of those.

It left him curious. The blonde felt vaguely familiar, and he was looking at him like something precious he’d lost but unexpectedly found. All of that, and yet he didn’t recognise him at all. And he didn’t even ask for the kids name...! He sighed inwardly as his own lack of foresight.

“What are you standing there like that for?”

Zack jumped, spinning around and finding Kusiel standing behind him with a hand propped on his hip. His mouth, the only part of his face visible under his SOLDIER helmet, was quirked you into a smirk.

“Why are you such a creeper?” Zack retorted, waving his arms in the air for effect.
“You’re the one who was spaced out.” Kunsel replied, lightly shoving him towards the hallway on the left. “Come on, you have a session with Angeal to go to.”

“How the hell do you always know that?”

“I make a point of knowing things.”

The pair wandered down the hallway, and Zack pushed his thoughts about the blonde to the back of his mind. For now.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short one but it seems like a good place to stop.

And much love to everyone who’s taken a moment to read this story, and especially to those who’ve stopped to give kudos, leave a comment and bookmark it :D
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Merry Christmas everyone! I haven’t been very good at replying to reviews recently as I’ve been super busy, but I’ll try to get better!

Finally, after two weeks of sitting around and being talked at, Cloud stared at the little green orb in his hand.

He knew without being told that it was a fire Materia, what with the soft warmth it left in his palm being a giveaway. His experience told him that it was nowhere near mastered, and it was not a natural Materia, meaning it had been made in the labs and was weaker than anything he had used in a while.

Just another example of ShinRa bastardising gifts given by the Planet.

All of the trainees stood in a line on one of the outdoor training grounds, facing a row of targets. The aim of the game was to eventually set it on fire, but as the instructor said, it would likely be a while before anyone would manage that. First, they would focus on producing a spark of flame and then go from there.

The instructor, who was a Second Class who’s name he couldn’t remember, seemed pretty clued up on the subject, which was good. His instructions were sound, in Clouds opinion, but he had no need for them.

He observed his peers, each displaying varying methods of trying to conjure the magic. One boy was holding the orb reverently in both hands, as if praying, while the boy next to him was straining so hard, his eyes glued to his Materia, that a vein was popping out of his temple. Cloud thought he guy was likely to shit himself before he conjured a flame, and he almost snorted at the thought.

“Remember, Materia uses your energy and converts it into the magic it holds. It doesn’t take it. You give it. Focus on feeding your energy into it.” The instructor was behind them, making his way up and down the row and examining the cadets efforts.

Cloud turned his attention back to his own Materia. He just needed to make a little spark, not a fireball. He couldn’t remember ever trying to limit the strength of his magic, it wasn’t exactly one put into practice in life or death situations, but it shouldn’t be too hard.

He pushed a little energy into it, focusing on coaxing it, rather than putting his all into his channeling.

The orb began to heat up and Cloud saw it glow a little brighter within it as the object stirred to life. He’d never really took the time to observe one in action, or slowly cast. It was like a the light inside it seemed to spin and twist. He just needed a spark, just the smallest - FUCK.

He felt the magic surge within it - there was too much energy. Cloud threw his hand out automatically, the fireball arching forward with a roar and engulfing his target, along with the ones on each side.
Cries of shock rang out across the grounds at the unexpected explosion, as people spun around trying to figure out where it had come from. The people closest to him had leapt away, as if scared he would explode, and take them along with him.

Cloud stood, arm still outstretched, with his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open. What the fuck... he’d only wanted a small spark... not to blow half of the targets away. He stared in disbelief at the burning target. He barely even felt the dip in his energy, where he should already feel the sagging that Materia wielding caused to the inexperienced.

He pulled his arm back, observing the Materia with interest. Where his body was untrained and weak, had his power for magic came back with him? In hindsight, it wasn’t all that far fetched to think so.

“What the hell man! You almost set me on fire!”

“That was awesome!”

Cloud ignored the other cadets and turned his head to look at his instructor, seeing he was just as shocked as the rest of them. Not knowing what else to do, he drew himself up straight as a board, his arms by his side, the Materia still held loosely in his hand. “Sorry Sir.”

The instructor finally looked at him, eyes wide with surprise. “It’s... it’s alright.” He glanced back at the target. “Do you think... you could do that again?”

By the end of the session, his instructor was referring him to join seminars in advanced Materia usage instead of attending his classes.

‘For fuck sake.’

***

“Hey! You again!”

Cloud swung around in shock, his grip tightening around the hilt of his wooden sword. Zack stood before him, his hands propped on his hips and an easy grin on his face.

He had been waiting for when he would see the teen again, refusing to be caught unprepared again. He let the sword dangle by his side and made a conscious effort to keep a straight face. “Hey.”

“Who’d have thought we’d run into each other like this, huh?”

Cloud blanched. He had, actually, but he wasn’t going to say that.

“I’m doing the training today. Evans had to pull out - last minute mission - so I said I’d cover for him, you know.”

Around him, the other guys were staring in disbelief at the casual exchange he was having with a Second Class SOLDIER.

Cloud nodded, but didn’t say a word.

Zack’s grin widened. “You don’t talk much do ya?”
Cloud shrugged, “Force of habit.”

The dark haired teen laughed, before addressing the room. “Right everyone! I’ve got you ladies aaaaaaaaaall day, so saddle up and let’s mosey. Pair up!

Darrell, who had been utterly silent up until now, sidled up to Cloud. “Since when did you know Fair?”

Cloud shrugged again, it seemed he was doing a lot of that lately. “I don’t.”

Darrell gave him an incredulous look. “Yeah, sure.”

“Get in your stances and go wild for now, gentlemen! I’ll be coming around and offering some tips as we go. Once we’ve warmed up, I’ll teach you a couple of moves.

Cloud looked at his wooden practice sword in disdain. It was far too light for his taste, what with wood weighing less than metal, his but it wasn’t like he hadn’t used a short sword before. The Fusion Sword was versatile, and so was he.

He sunk down, one foot sliding forward and the both back, leaving his legs wide and balancing his weight equally. Both hands gripped the hilt of his sword, pointing it up and forward. His right hand was doing most of the work, and his left held the sword looser. The plus side of light swords was you could wield them one handed when needed, so he was prepared to defend barehanded if he needed to.

Darrell did the same, but he was favouring his back foot. “Let’s go Chocoboy.”

Cloud smirked, before he dashed forward.

He got what he was looking for. Darrell, in his surprise, swung wildly and tripped over his own feet trying to get away, landing hard on his ass with an ‘ooof’.

“What the hell man!” He yelled.

Cloud couldn’t help himself, he burst out laughing at Darrells face, and the other boys’ look turned sheepish as the blonde offered him a hand up.

“You caught me by surprise,” Darrell chuckled, accepting the help. “But you won’t do it again.”

“We’ll see.”

Zack walked around the room, observing pairs here and there. There was a couple of guys who he stopped to help, showing them where to grip the hilt for the best control over the sword, and correcting someone’s feet placement to keep their balance better, but overall the bunch weren’t bad, just beginners.

He himself had been here not all that long ago. And look at him now, Second Class, mentored by a First Class. It just went to show that country boys could make it in the big city, if you put the work in. His eyes kept floating over to the blonde, Strife, someone had called him. He was currently swatting at his partners sword, not giving the boy an opening to swing back.

His feet were firmly planted, but you could tell he was ready to move at a moments notice. Overall, Zack couldn’t find a single fault in his technique, which was quite unusual. The stance itself was also very familiar, but he couldn’t place it. His partner needed some work, but he too showed promise.
From the corner of his eye, he saw the blonde stop as the other swapped the sword between hands, shaking his wrists put. The blonde pointed and approached, showing him something that Zack couldn’t see. As he moved away, the other teen readjusted his grip, before it was his turn to do on the offensive.

Was he giving the kid tips?

Zack moved onto the next pair. He couldn’t just stand around and watch them all day.

***

Cloud walked along the quiet corridor, towel and water bottle in hand.

He had some free time, so he wanted to take advantage of another perk of making it into the programme.

The SOLDIER gym.

The electric door swooshed open as he approached, and before him sprawled an excessive amount of equipment, some of which looked so complex at first glance that he didn’t even know where to start.

There were a couple of other SOLDIERS in the room, but they barely glanced at him before they returned to their workouts.

Cloud made his way over to the treadmill, intent on warming up with a run. As he started out, walking at first, he took the opportunity to look over some of the machines in more detail. He’d never really been in a gym before - he’d never had reason to, monster fighting was enough usually.

It wouldn’t hurt to start now though. Let’s face it, he had nothing better he could be doing with most of the day until he got his enhancements and could do more missions.

After working up a bit of a sweat on the treadmill, he tried his luck on some of the less complicated machines.

After about half an hour, the electric door to the gym swished open quietly behind him. He didn’t look around, too busy concentrating on controlling his row pulls.

“Hey Strife!”

And then it all went to shit with two words. In his shock, he let go of the handles and the weights dropped suddenly, clattering against the rest plate. He swung around on the stool, seeing Zack walk over with a sheepish grin, scratching the back of his head. He was wearing a grey tank top and sweats, a towel gripped loosely in his other hand. “Sorry dude, probably shouldn’t surprise someone who’s lifting weights.”

Cloud let out a puff of air, his heart hammering. “There’s no probably about it, you definitely shouldn’t.”

“Heh,” Zack moved to lean on the machine. “I don’t see many cadets in here to be honest - its good you’re putting in the extra work, but don’t forget to take some downtime too, ya know?”
“Sure.”

Zack looked around, throwing a quick wave at the others across the room. “That was some good work in training the other day, by the way. I heard you’ve been put into Advanced Materia too - you’ll be a shoe-in for Second Class for sure.”

Surprise flitted across Cloud’s face, as a light dusting of red covered his cheeks. “How...?”

“A little birdy told me.” His eyebrows wiggled. “There’s only one Strife on the roster.”

He was a little stunned that Zack had taken the time to look into him, but it was also a little worrisome. If Zack was taking notice, then who else was? “Thanks... I guess.”

“Awwww, don’t be embarrassed.” He bent down, getting right in Cloud’s face. The blonde leaned back, eyes wide. “Between you and me, a lot of the guys have a lot of work to do before they get their enhancements. Take it as a compliment.”

Cloud shimmied backwards off the stool to regain some of his personal space. “Thanks. You’re a good teacher Fair.”

Zack scoffed and crossed his arms, “Call me Zack. And I didn’t really get a chance to teach you anything yet. Tell you what, those swordplay classes are gonna be a waste for you. How about you and me spar instead?”

Cloud was shocked into silence. Sparing with Zack? Was that really a good idea? It was a nice thought, his past memories urging him to take the opportunity to spend time with his old friend, but they were at war with his current objective. He didn’t want to stand out too much and he had already made waves with his ‘natural affinity’ with Materia. “I don’t know, I’m sure the classes will teach me plenty and you must have missions and stuff.”

“Meh,” Zack waved a hand as if to bat away his objections. “It’ll be a change of pace. Plus, I’ve got my own mentor, so consider this me paying it forward. You’ll just have to mentor someone of your own one day.”

He winked with the last statement, and Cloud could only blink back, not knowing what to say.

“I’ll take that as a yes. Give me your PHS number and I’ll do the rest.” He held out his hand expectantly, until Cloud dropped his PHS into the waiting palm.

A minute later, after a few clicks, he handed it back over. “There, all done. You hanging around? I can show you how some of these machines work, they’re a pain but can be good.”

Cloud was stunned. Zack really wanted to hang around with him? He’d thought it was a fluke that they had ever became friends in the first place, and he’d imagined he would have to put some work in to get to know the guy this time around, but here he was. An open book, practically handing his friendship over on a silver platter.

Despite his inner monologue, he nodded. He did need a hand with them after all. “Thanks.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Thanks to so much to my reviews and kudos! I’m starting to catch up on my pre-written stuff since I’ve been busy over the festive period, so I better put my writing hat on again!

Stefan stood in the elevator, his foot tapping nervously. He had received a summons from the Department of Administrative Research, AKA the Turks.

When he’d first seen the email come through on his PHS, he’d thought it was joke. Everyone would make comments about him being Turk material, but he’d never actually considered that he really was.

At least, he hoped that’s what this was about. Everyone knew that the Turks were one who ‘dealt’ with things. What those things were was often a well guarded secret, but there was no smoke without fire. It would be just his luck that he was on his way to being ‘dealt with’, not that he’d done anything to deserve that from what he’d desperate tried to recall.

The elevator pinged for a final time on floor 54, before the doors swung open with a quiet swish. He stepped out and was greeted by a man in a dark suit standing off to the side.

Straight away, Stefan could tell he was Wutanian in origin, the slant of his eyes and the olive tone of his skin in stark contrast to most people who lived on this side of the world.

His long black hair was sleek and pulled back into a low ponytail, and he had a tilak in the middle of his forehead.

The man gave a small smile, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Stefan Addison, I presume?”

His accent was Migarian, not a hint of his heritage to be heard. “Yes, that’s me.”

The man nodded slightly and held out a hand. “I’m Tseng, Deputy Head for the Department of Administrative Research.”

Stefan took the offered hand and shook it, inwardly cringing about his sweaty palms. Tseng’s countenance betrayed nothing. He made no comment, though Stefan was sure he could sense his nervousness, and instead invited him to follow.

They made their way down a couple of corridors, before they reached what appeared to be a board room. Inside, his could see a man with shaggy brown hair and a distinct scar running from his cheek to his jaw line, disappearing into his short cut beard.

He recognised the man instantly, though he’d never seen him in person before. Director Verdot of the Department of Admiration, also known as Veld. If he’d been nervous before, it was nothing compared to now.

He felt a bead of sweat forming on his lip as Tseng ushered him into the room and stepped in before the door closed behind then. He choose to remain standing there as Stefan was urged to sit
He teen inconspicuously rubbed his clammy hands on fatigues, though he doubted either man missed the gesture.

The Director’s eyes followed his every move. “Good afternoon, Private Addison. Thank you for joining us on such short notice.”

“It was no problem, Sir.”

He steepled his hands in front of him and rested his chin on them lightly, his brown eyes staring piercingly into Stefan’s. “Do you know why you’re here?”

He looked a fair age, maybe mid to late thirties, but Stefan could tell how dangerous he was. You didn’t get to be the Head of the Turks without a keen mind and a silver tongue, never mind the ability to survive in this sketchy profession by force if necessary.

Stefan shook his head in answer, choosing to remain silent for now.

“I see.” Veld sat back, resting on the arms of his chair and crossing his legs. “We’d like to formally invite you to join our department.”

It seemed he didn’t want to beat around the bush, but Stefan honestly didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know if this was a good thing after all - once a Turk, always a Turk, and everyone and their dog knew that they did ShinRa’s dirty work. His eyes darted to door, where Tseng stood. Guarding it, maybe?

He became acutely aware of the possibility that this wasn’t a choice at all. It wasn’t every day that they took on someone new, and maybe there was a reason you never heard of people turning the position down.

“Thank you, it’s an honour but... I’m not sure I’m cut out for this line of work.” He stomach was flip-flopping as he spoke, but he had a feeling that honesty was the best policy here. He was impressed that he had kept his voice so even.

“Is that so?” Veld spoke quietly, never once looking away from him. “I’m inclined to disagree. We know what to look for in our candidates, that’s why we don’t take on many new employees, and we haven’t been wrong yet. I am very sure that you’re what we’re looking for.”

Could this man read minds?! Stefan felt infinitely uncomfortable. “I’m sorry, Director Verdot.” He used his full name for effect, hoping he would sound more sure of himself than he was in that moment. “It’s all quite a shock and very unexpected. I’d like to take a little time to think about it, if that’s okay.”

The older man regarded him for a moment. “Of course, however I do need an answer soon. Let’s meet again on Monday to discuss it further - the benefits of the job are rather... lucrative.”

The teen managed a smile, but it was strained to say the least. He stood, and the Director offered him a firm handshake.

As he approached the door, Tseng took a step to the side and gave a small bow. The first Wutanian gesture he’d seen yet.

Tseng watched him walk down the corridor a little ways, before he stepped out of the threshold, letting the door close once again.
“Take a seat, Tseng.”

He moved across the room silent as a ghost, and sank into the chair that Stefan had previously occupied, crossing his legs and resting his hands in his lap. “Do you think he’ll accept?”

Veld hummed, eyes roving over the papers he had in front of him. “I meant what I said, we’ve not been wrong yet. He’ll accept.”

Tseng nodded in acknowledgment. Veld’s instincts were second to none - if he thought there was nothing to be concerned with, then he wouldn’t be concerned. Instead, he broached another matter. “He may be able to provide some intel on a person of interest.”

“Oh? And who is that?”

“SOLDIER Third Class Cloud Strife.” From within his suit, he withdrew a folded Manila envelope. He pulled out some documents, laying them on the table and pushing them towards his superior for perusal. “He shows exceptional talent. While not the the strongest amongst his peers, he seems to be shoulders above the rest in terms of knowledge and technique. We considered the option of recruiting him but... we were knocked back.”

“I see.” He scanned the papers quickly. “And you would like to keep an eye on him.”

Tseng said with a nod. “I’m... curious about his unavailability. They were not very fourth-coming. In fact, I think word ‘stonewalled’ is more accurate.”

Veld’s sharp gaze met his, and Tseng knew he understood what he meant. No one stonewalled the Turks, because it was them who were paid to DO the stonewalling. Information that the Turks were not privy to was rare, if not non-existent.

His eyes returned to the papers. “It’s possible that they just want to keep him for themselves. He makes an excellent candidate for SOLDIER after all.”

“It wasn’t SOLDIER who said no.”

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