The Fifth Act

by Sinnatious

Summary

Cloud has an accident with a Time materia, and finds himself in the middle of the Wastes at the start of the Wutai War. There are people to save... and for that, there are three people who need to die.

Notes

FFVII Time travel fics are almost as ubiquitous as Harry Potter time travel fics - a sub genre unto themselves. I approve of this! Time travel stories are a guilty pleasure of mine. So it was only a matter of time, really, before I caved and attempted to write one of my own. I acknowledge that this is well-trodden ground, but hopefully you can find something unique in this story to enjoy. Aside from the canon relationships, (i.e. Zack and Aeris) it's gen (although I certainly can't unweld goggles from anyone's faces).

This is a repost, so most of the chapters should hopefully be up in a matter of days. There are 38 chapters in all. It contains violence and occasional mild language.
Chapter 1

It was a fluke. An accident. One improbable event leading to another.

Fenrir ground to a halt, the purr of the engine dwindling into silence.

Cloud regarded the zolom with a mixture of caution and disbelief.

It wasn't just unusual – it was suspicious. Midgar zoloms were supposed to stay in the swamplands, not venture out onto the dry, rocky plains surrounding Midgar.

Blue eyes, bright with mako, eyed the monster speculatively. It wasn't deformed at least, but its behaviour was odd – prowling and stealthy, though of course a zolom couldn't be stealthy when it was so far out of its element. Not protecting territory, he soon realised. Hunting.

That explained it. The ecosystems surrounding Midgar were still in a state of flux, even four years after Meteor – the swamplands were of course affected too. It was hungry – evidently hungry enough to venture outside its normal habitat in search of prey.

That was when he noticed how quiet it had become. And how the zolom appeared to be heading his way.

Cloud cursed softly under his breath. How unlucky to be the only thing resembling prey within sight.

His hand hovered over the ignition briefly, and then instead hit the release on the sword compartments. They sprung open with a heavy thunk, and he assembled First Tsurugi in a quick series of practiced motions.

He could probably outrun the zolom on Fenrir, but if it made it so far out of the swamplands on its own, it might make it to Edge, Kalm, or one of the other satellite settlements in the area. Tifa was just going to have to deal with him making it back later than he said. The materia slots on his sword were already fitted, and he patted his pocket to check his Time and Restore were there, ready to be swapped in if things went badly.

The zolom was close, slithering its way towards him, the shifting scrape of its scales across the rocky ground growing harsh in his ears. Cloud took off at a sprint to the west – it wouldn't do for his primary mode of transportation to get trashed in the fight. The monstrosity shifted course, body writhing across the ground with purpose and unmistakeable intention now. The blond readied First Tsurugi as the distance between them closed, braced himself, and sprung.

The next two minutes were a kaleidoscope of metal and teeth and magic and scales and blood. The zolom was large, as big as Bahamut, and its body twisted and turned in unpredictable ways that would have left anyone without a SOLDIER's reflexes crushed. Cloud sidestepped, struck with his sword, and jumped away to put some more distance between himself and the lashing tail. Bright blue eyes widened - the tail whipped the air – the monster shrieked, and he barely brought First Tsurugi around in time to protect himself.

The impact rattled his teeth, and the momentum sent him freewheeling through the air. Instinct
was all that kept him oriented, his knees bending automatically to take the shock as he landed, leaving a trail of billowing dust as he slid to a stop. The zolom, reptilian eyes wild and hungry, dived forward, jowls open in anticipation of a meal. A chance. First Tsurugi rose in the air, preparing for the split-second strike that would decide the monster's fate.

That was the moment it all changed.

Unbeknown to Cloud, the last jarring hit had knocked one of the materia in his hip pocket clear. It arced high in the air, hung for a moment, then began to fall... directly into the path of First Tsurugi.

Cloud was already moving - it was too late to change the angle of the strike. His eyes widened as the materia shattered under the blow. The air seemed to still and the sound grew muted, save for an eerie ringing and delicate tinkle as the small orb exploded into thousands of crystalline fragments.

An accident, a loss, a misstep… and all it should have been. Except Something Was Wrong.

Cloud recoiled, zolom forgotten, as the materia dust began to swirl in the air, sparkling like fireworks as it caught the bright afternoon sun.

Coming closer. *Reaching for him.*

The Ribbon on his arm grew hot. In the reflection of First Tsurugi, he could see his eyes glowing, brighter than they had in months.

Something was tearing, falling, twisting, turning. Then, only darkness.

At some point, Cloud became aware that he was somewhere he wasn't supposed to be. He was not in the comfort of his bed in Kalm, nor did it feel like he was resting on the cot at the church. His arms felt gritty. Sleeping in the open then, but the kiss of sunlight warmed his face, and why hadn't he laid out a sleeping bag instead of passing out on the stony ground? Did he have a concussion?

Consciousness was as slippery as an eel, but the sense of wrongness like a siren's call, coaxing him awake. Danger? But he couldn't hear anything other than the gentle breeze over a rocky wasteland.

Wasn't there supposed to be a monster?

Cloud opened his eyes and sat up in one smooth motion, though the world spun dizzyingly, in a way he hadn't experienced since the curse of Geostigma. He nearly threw up – another sensation he hadn't experienced for a long time – and his muscles ached like... well, like he'd been run over by a zolom.

The disorientation was thankfully short-lived. But when he finally chased the last of the fog from his mind, the blond was disturbed to be no more aware of where he was.

The zolom was gone. Fenrir was gone. The landscape looked familiar, but it didn't quite match his memory of the area. Trying to triangulate his position based on the known landmarks, he should have only been a couple of clicks west of where he'd fought the monster, though how he'd even travelled that short distance without realising it...

He held up an arm to shield his eyes from the glare of the sun. Morning? But the sun had been dipping into the horizon line when he'd come across the monster. He couldn't possibly have been there the whole night. The scent of mako would keep lesser predators away from him, but there was plenty of wildlife in the area more than happy to take a bite out of any human foolish enough to sleep in the open. Apparently that included Midgar zoloms these days.
Abruptly, he pulled out his PHS. No calls – that was odd. Maybe Seventh Heaven had been too busy for Tifa to worry over him? He stared at it for a long moment, fingers ghosting over the buttons, and then slid it back into his pocket.

The ache in his body lingered, but considering the pain it had endured in the past, he shook it off, taking his time in getting to his feet and stretching. He set out towards where he remembered leaving Fenrir, but the horizon lay bare. No sign of the fight, either.

It took only a few minutes of quiet recollection to form a guess of what had occurred. He'd broken a mastered Time materia with First Tsurugi, and something had gone wrong.

Cloud had never personally broken materia before - one generally didn't try to, materia were far too precious - but Barret and Yuffie had accidents before. Maybe not with a mastered Time materia specifically, but the materia they had broken just became useless - a glass bauble that would eventually erode into fragments of crystallised mako. Certainly neither of them had been engulfed in a shower of glowing dust.

Perhaps the materia fragments reacted to the mako in his blood? Aeris might have been able to explain it, or even one of Reeve's scientists in the WRO, but the most he could make was a wild guess. Maybe even First Tsurugi played a part - the sword had been constructed out of the remnants of the Planet's Weapons, after all.

Training and experience kicked in. What were his resources? Ribbon was still tied securely around his arm - he would be protected from any Status materia effects. He rubbed at it distractedly, recalling how it had tightened and burned his arm when the Time materia broke. Maybe Ribbon had something to do with it too.

Gil rattled in his pocket, enough for a few nights room and board at an inn. First Tsurugi was slung in its harness. Some hypers, hi-potions and ethers in a pouch on his thigh, along with several vials of water from the spring at the Church, in case he came across any people still suffering Geostigma. The eight other materia he had on him - All, Neo Bahamut, Barrier, Fire, Lightning, Comet, plus a Restore and Chocobo Lure in his pocket. All of them mastered, making him something of a walking arsenal. He hadn't needed them for a simple delivery, but after Kadaj's troop had stolen most of his stash, he took to keeping them equipped just in case something happened. Something like this.

Fenrir might have been missing, but he could lure a wild chocobo to get him back to civilisation. It had been a while since he'd ridden bareback - or anything less than a black, for that matter - but it would be faster than walking. He rolled the Chocobo Lure materia between his fingers, focusing his thoughts until it grew warm in his palm, then jammed it into a different pocket – one with a zip, this time. That taken care of, he started walking again. Chocobo Lure only worked if there were actually chocobos nearby to lure – there was little point waiting for a ride that might not come.

The Midgar wastes made for a miserable journey on foot, though. While the open, empty expanse let him go full throttle on Fenrir, on foot it was little better than tracking through the Corel desert. There was no shade, very little to look at, and far too many unpleasant memories to keep him company.

Desperate for a distraction – some monsters would be welcome at this point - Cloud took out his PHS as he walked and examined it, still disconcerted by the lack of calls. He'd been sure he'd told Tifa he'd be back by nightfall. And he'd been good at keeping his word lately, too. Sure, he'd stayed out for days and days without word in the past, but…

Maybe she'd finally given up on him. He grunted softly at the thought, and resolutely returned the
PHS to his pocket. Zack used to tease him for his stubbornness, but Tifa had him beaten by a mile. It was a relief she wasn't worrying. He didn't particularly feel like calling up Cid or Reeve to organise transport back from the middle of nowhere, which Tifa would undoubtedly make him do if she knew he was trudging through the wastes alone. As though anything out here could seriously threaten him.

Aside from Midgar zoloms, apparently. But armed to the teeth with materia, there was never any danger of losing that fight. Unless he had. It was hard to tell, when he couldn't remember the end of it.

Brow furrowed in thought, Cloud almost missed the telltale scuffle of talons on rock. He paused, tilting his head, and caught wind of a faint 'Wark?'

Finally. He turned, and the yellow chocobo dogging his footsteps straightened and cocked its head. "Wark!" Feathers the colour of sunshine puffed up as the bird strutted closer. Bold, but it only looked curious.

As soon as it was in reach, Cloud gave the neck a soft pat. The feathers were smooth and soft under his fingers, lacking the coarseness of a wild chocobo. Another minute of careful inspection revealed the band around its claw. Tame. An escapee, or had it thrown its rider?

"I don't have any greens," he murmured. "But will you take me to your owner? Home? Farm?" Edge, Kalm, the Chocobo Farm – any of them would do.

Chocobos were generally quite intelligent creatures, but everybody taught the birds different commands – he was taking a wild stab, hoping he caught at least one key word. It cawed happily, however, and once he was on its back, set out at a decent pace. Cloud sighed and settled in for the ride. Clearly the words meant *something* to it.

He must have wandered further than he thought, because in what seemed like no time at all, they were making their way through farmland, and then only moments later, he found himself in the midst of a small collection of houses – scarcely enough to qualify as a village.

Slightly bewildered, he dismounted the chocobo, patting its beak absentely as it cooed at him. Something struck him as familiar, but Cloud was relatively sure he'd never stepped foot in this place before – surprising, considering how far and wide his delivery service took him, and he figured himself to be within a few hours' travel of Edge.

His arrival did not go unnoticed. A tired-looking woman glanced through her window, then a moment later the door flung open and she hurried through the street to him, nearly tripping over her skirts in her haste. By the time she reached his side her face was flushed and her hair had come loose from its bun, a motley mix of grey and brown strands framing her features.

"Sunshine! Oh, thank Odin!"

Cloud recoiled before remembering the bird at his side. The chocobo in question perked up. "Is he yours?"

She patted the bird with fervour, and it crooned at the attention, eyes half-closing in dumb bliss. "My husband's. I left the stable door open for only a minute this morning but- well, never you mind, I'm just so happy he came to no harm. There've been so many monsters about, I was thinking the *worst*- how did you find him?"

Belatedly, Cloud cancelled the Chocobo Lure still active in his pocket. "I was out in the wastes.
Asked him to take me to his owner." He paused, wondering if it were appropriate to say anything more – there was a good chance his Lure was what caused the bird to bolt the stable to begin with - before settling on, "He's a smart bird."

"He's very well-trained. My husband – well, you know, I don't like to brag, but he used to be a top of the line racer. He loves his chocobos, bought this one from Billy as just a chick and raised him himself. I can't thank you enough for bringing him back, Mr-" She finally turned her attention to him.

"Strife," Cloud murmured.

Her friendly demeanour vanished in an instant, and she recoiled in fear. "SOLDIER…" The words whispered like a curse.

It had been a while since he'd received that reaction. "I'm not. I don't work for ShinRa, either." The words were short and clipped.

She didn't believe him – no one ever did on the first meeting. "But your eyes-"

"I don't like to talk about it." And the matter was closed. Everybody always wanted an explanation, but it was personal, and he was hardly going to tell a complete stranger that he'd spent four years of his life as a laboratory experiment, no matter how guilty he felt over a runaway chocobo.

"Right. Sorry. Excuse me." She withdrew, exuberance at the return of her chocobo drained.

An awkward silence hung in the air, and Cloud felt badly for ruining the mood, but it was nothing new – he ruined the mood wherever he went. He would just find out what he needed to know and be on his way. "Do you know how far it is to Edge from here?" At the woman's blank expression, he reluctantly explained, "I thought I knew where I was, but I must have been wrong. I don't remember a village being here."

Her unease had not abated, but she latched onto the question quickly, no doubt keen to hurry his progress along and escape his presence. "Edge? Edge… I'm not sure. Oh! But my husband has a map – he likes cartography too, you know." She started back towards her house before remembering the chocobo, and wavered for a minute. Evidently deciding him trustworthy enough, she asked, "Would you mind putting Sunshine back in the stable? It's right behind the house, just put him in and make sure the gate's good and properly shut so he can't get out again. I'll get the maps sorted quick smart, Mr Strife."

It was profoundly weird being called 'Mr' by someone older than him, but he'd long resigned himself to people giving him respect he wasn't due. Cloud just nodded wordlessly and steered 'Sunshine' towards the stable behind the house while the nameless woman – was he supposed to ask her name in return, or did she not introduce herself on purpose? – hitched up her skirts and hurried back into the cottage.

The stable was fortunately as easy to find as she'd said, and with his extensive experience in chocobo husbandry, herding the bird into its stall a simple matter. Reflex had him refilling the water trough and scattering some greens on the floor, and he even took a minute with a weathered brush to give the bird a quick groom. He reasoned it was only manners, since he'd ridden the bird there, but once that was taken care of, forced to admit he was dallying. Checking the latch on the stall for the third time wasn't going to make it any more secure.

With Sunshine returned to his rightful place, Cloud found himself in front of the house again, uncomfortably aware of the eyes peering through the other windows across the way, and not sure
what to do. Was he allowed inside? Tifa had given him more than just a few lectures for striding into people's houses uninvited when he had business, and the woman hadn't been very comfortable with him. But he didn't want to stay outside under the stares of the other villagers, either. It made his skin prickle, and brought back memories of a burning town.

Decision made, he knocked once and entered. Thankfully, aside from a nervous glance in his direction – he belatedly realised he was still carrying First Tsurugi - the woman did not appear offended. Her arms were full of books and laminated scrolls, which she haphazardly dumped on the floor. "Won't take long, Mr Strife. I just have to find which one of these blasted – ah, here it is. My husband's bad at organising, you see, I swear he spent half the day looking for his glasses once when they were right on top of his head the whole time, he couldn't find a thing if I weren't here to tidy things up." Cloud nodded, for lack of any other response. She spread the map out on the floor. "So where should I start looking? I'm not familiar with 'Edge'."

He started to move closer to look for himself, but at her flinch, thought better of it and instead asked, "How old is the map?"

"Maybe… three, four years?"

"Midgar, then."

"Midgar? Well, why didn't you just say so? You're not far off at all, only a few hours on a good fast chocobo, my husband-"

He wasn't listening anymore. His eyes had fallen on the folded newspaper on the table. 'SHINRA DECLARES WAR' stretched across the front page in bold letters. An old issue, from the start of the war with Wutai. Another one of those nasty little reminders of the horrors past.

"Mr Strife. Mr Strife!"

With a jerk, he turned his attention back to the woman. "Sorry. I was just-"


Tired of her suspicion, he growled, "I once had plenty to do with ShinRa, but none of it good."

That seemed to finally mollify her, and a tentative smile crept on to her face. "Right, right. ShinRa's full of good promises, but out here, they matter so little." There were hidden meanings behind her words, but apparently now she had established the association to be negative, she was more willing to trust him. She shifted the map so he could see. "So, here we are Mr Strife, and you can just follow this road here all the way to Midgar."

Cloud blinked, slowly taking in the name her finger hovered over. "...This is Kalm?"

She looked surprised, then laughed. "Of course! Didn't you see the sign? It's a little faded, true, I keep telling the Mayor-"

With a sudden sense of dread, Cloud snatched up the newspaper. "How old is this paper?"

Now she just looked confused. "The date's right there, see? Not even a week old – came in the last post."
Abruptly, Cloud turned on his heel and strode out of the house, paper still clutched in his hand.

Outside, he looked around with more careful eyes, glowing blue gaze calculating. Now he knew what struck him as so familiar. This was Kalm, before Meteor had driven people from Midgar and turned the rundown mining village into a bustling town. It was all there. The Inn where he'd relayed his false past. The circle of modest houses. The road unpaved, as he remembered it from his first visit. The distant sunset, turned blood red by pollution. The trail leading to the mythril mines.

Impossible.

Very slowly, Cloud pulled out his PHS again, and dialled Tifa. After an agonisingly long moment of silence, a robotic female voice answered. *This call cannot be connected. Please check the number, and if you persist in having problems, bring your PHS to your nearest ShinRa Communications outlet to be serviced.*

ShinRa still owned and managed the communication grid. Tifa's number didn't exist.

He dialled Vincent next, then Yuffie, then Reno. Reno's was answered by a young woman whose voice he didn't recognise, so he hung up immediately. He almost dialled Reeve, but at the last minute, thought better of it. There was a small chance Reeve's number hadn't changed.

"Mr Strife! Mr Strife, is there a problem?" The woman had come running after him.

He didn't answer her question. "Thanks for your help. I have to go."

"It was no trouble, not after you brought Sunshine back, and if you've got troubles with ShinRa-"

Cloud wasn't listening anymore – already heading east.

He needed to pay a quick visit to the Chocobo Farm.

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Three hours of hard riding later, and there stood the proof. Midgar.

Cloud let the reins slide from his fingers, shocked into stillness at the sight of a whole, un-ruined, pre-Meteor Midgar.

It was true.

He'd gone back in time.

Slowly, he reached back, and nicked his finger across First Tsurugi's outer edge. Blood welled briefly from his fingertip, before the mako regeneration took over and healed it before his eyes, leaving a faint burning sensation behind. Not a twisted dream then, and far too detailed to be a hallucination.

The knowledge didn't hit him as hard as it realistically should have. Maybe he was becoming used to unpleasant surprises. Discovering he'd somehow travelled back in time was far less emotionally challenging than coming to terms with the fact that he'd been unwittingly living a lie, or that Sephiroth just didn't have the good grace to stay dead.

Until he thought that last sentence over, and felt like he might throw up.

Sephiroth was still alive.

Hojo. Jenova.

He sank to his knees, vision blurring.

Oh, Gaia!

He choked, overwhelmed and unable to tear his eyes away from the unspoiled, frighteningly whole visage of the metropolis that was the beginning and end of everything. The rented chocobo let out a wuff, nudging at his arm, but the reins remained dangling in the air as all the worst moments of his life played themselves out before his eyes. Events which now lay before him.


All of it. How many years? Four since meteor. Six since the Lab. Ten since Nibelheim. Ten years of mistakes and failures and struggles!

He didn't know how long he knelt there, fingers clutching at the dirt as he heaved in shallow gasps. An hour, perhaps two, judging by the setting sun, before his emotions started to settle down enough to allow him to think coherently again. At some point, the chocobo had grown bored, and wandered off to take a nap nearby under an outcropping of rock offering a sliver of shade. His hands and knees were dirty from kneeling on the ground. And most importantly, for all practical purposes, Cloud was still stuck in the past.

What was he supposed to do? What could he do?

That was when a new thought occurred to him, one that wiped away the shock and filled him with hope.

The possibility of change.

He knew about Jenova. Knew about the threat to the Planet, the Weapons, everything that would happen. The war in Wutai had barely begun. Maybe he could change that, too.

It wasn't a question of how, or if it were possible. There remained the chance it was all in his head after all - maybe the broken Time materia had driven him back into a mako poisoned delirium. It didn't matter. He had to do it. Not because it was the right thing to do, not even for the possibilities that it represented - simply because he couldn't survive watching everything happen again, real or not. It would break him for good.

Besides, how many sleepless nights had he lain awake, turning everything over in his head? He'd spent years ruminating over the what-ifs, the recriminations. If he hadn't handed over the Black Materia. If he'd been strong enough to save Aeris. If he'd been fast enough to stop the Sector 7 plate falling. If he'd woken up in time to save Zack. If he'd acted sooner, and stopped Nibelheim from burning. If he hadn't been such a failure, time and time and time again.

The people of Edge treated him like a hero, but he was really only a failure who had to clean up his own mistakes.

Cloud stood, brushing the grit from his hands and knees. He checked that First Tsurugi was still secure in its harness, ran his fingers across his materia, and patted his pocket for his PHS and supplies. Everything was in order. He whistled the chocobo, and the bird was back by his side in moments, whuffing happily and shoving its beak under his hand. He gave it a quick pat, swung up
on its back, and then they were away, heading back to Kalm. Away from Midgar.

If he was going to change things, there was a person who needed to die.
Chapter Notes

In retrospect, I wonder if I wrote this purely to have ACC Cloud interact with the Crisis Core cast on some level.

Genesis observed the half-constructed base camp with a critical eye. The shores of the northern part of Wutai were too rocky to mount a sea-based assault, so they were stuck making their way there on foot from the southern peninsula. Which meant they needed a base camp from which to launch their operations. The construction of which proved frustratingly difficult under the Wutai forces' guerrilla tactics.

The losses and injuries incurred on landing hadn't helped matters, leaving the able-bodied personnel stretched thin on patrols while a skeleton crew had, over the past two weeks, struggled to erect what would be ShinRa's base of operations for the conflict. An irritating setback, but there was little point in setting up a base if the Wutai were just going to firebomb it halfway through while their backs were turned. The sneak attacks weren't anything his platoon of Firsts couldn't handle, but losing Seconds and Thirds, not to mention the trooper grunts, to these barbarians was slightly embarrassing.

The seed of rebellion whispered in the back of his mind, however. While he was here fighting ShinRa's dirty war, he wasn't under the watchful gaze of Heidegger or those other suits, those suits that had done this to him. His fingers gripped the leather covering his shoulder – underneath he could feel the pull of bandages, wrapping a wound that would not heal.

If he suffered injuries fighting this war…

He didn't get the opportunity to bring that thought to completion. One of the scouts approached and looked as though he might snap, his salute was so painfully straight and formal. "Commander Rhapsodos, sir! We've received reports of an unidentified man outside of the base, sir!"

"Unidentified man? Explain, Corporal."

"Sir! He was spotted to the west of camp, and we believe by his movements he's avoiding being seen! He's armed with both a Buster-style sword and multiple materia! His uniform looks similar to the SOLDIER First garb, but I checked with the field officer, and there are no blond SOLDIERs deployed, sir!"

Blond? How odd. He couldn't be a native – Genesis had not yet seen a head of hair in Wutai that wasn't as black as night. Could Wutai's government be hiring mercenaries now? He obviously wasn't one of their spies, so famed for their disguises – you never saw a Wutai ninja who did not want to be seen.

The mention of a Buster-style sword piqued his interest too. "Just one man?"
"Yes, sir!"

There was the possibility of a trap, but Wutai had not yet thrown anything at him he couldn't handle. "I'm going out to investigate. Inform the necessary people."

"Sir! Alone, sir?"

"Are you implying that I can't handle one man alone, Corporal?" Genesis drawled.

"Sir! Definitely not, sir! Just wanting to exercise caution!"

He barely resisted the urge to sneer. "Use your common sense. If I need reinforcements, you lot following after me won't do any good at all."

"Sir!" It was to the trooper's credit that he managed to maintain his composure. The whole affair was tiring, however. It might save him from the insubordination of whimpering fans, but the drill sergeants back at ShinRa also made things a terrible bore.

Genesis left the base camp with no entourage and little circumstance. They already had one vicious encounter with Wutai's forces earlier in the day, and the barbarians would be licking their wounds for some time yet before returning for a second bout. Which might be where a mercenary could come into play.

His men were tired from a fortnight of near-constant fighting, with little sleep or shelter from the elements. They were holding up so far, but fatigue was an insidious enemy – it would claim casualties through mistakes and carelessness over time. He didn't need to trouble his troops over a single mercenary. Genesis could handle this one alone.

His hand reached up to touch his shoulder again, before clenching into a fist and dropping back to his side.

It did not take long to find the mysterious blond stranger – he'd barely gone more than ten minutes from camp when his enhanced hearing picked up the thud of boots and jingle of metal nearby. After that, locating a trail was child's play. Genesis scoffed to himself. He'd need to be having words with the scouts later. 'Avoiding being seen'! That was a poor joke. Their mystery man didn't appear to be going to a great deal of trouble to hide – anyone with mako-enhanced sight and a bit of field experience could follow his path with ease.

Five minutes later, his opinion of his scouts dropped further. This alleged mercenary's ridiculous spiky blond hair – who wore such a style, really – stood out like a beacon amidst the leafy green foliage. The corporal might as well have told him to look for a man who resembled a chocobo! And the stranger appeared to be plucking a *thunderbird* of all things. Genesis couldn't imagine such a beast tasting very good, and it made for a ludicrous picture.

For a moment he almost thought his men had found a nomad or hermit, but the sword on his back was of a highly unusual design. And while not quite as large as the inelegant weapon Angeal hauled around, it was doubtlessly too heavy for anyone less than a seasoned fighter. That was not a sword for hunting. His scouts weren't *completely* useless, at least.

Safely concealed in the thick foliage, he considered his options. The man was definitely not native to Wutai, but he could see no evidence of other mercenaries, and the stranger didn't act like a scout. A scout would cover his tracks more carefully, and wouldn't stop to hunt for food. Their enemy had the home ground advantage of local supplies – if anyone were forced to resort to hunting for food, it was going to be ShinRa.
A trap, perhaps. An ambush. The blond looked absorbed enough in his task – Genesis could spare a few minutes checking the perimeter for ninja. He slipped away, making a swift circle of the clearing, ears strained for the telltale thud of heartbeats and whistle of breath. Wutai's spies might have been masters of optical camouflage, but there were ways to detect them other than sight.

Nothing. The area remained clear after the morning's carnage, and his position was secure. The man really was alone. Things just kept growing more interesting.

Only one thing left to do then.

Genesis made no effort to conceal his approach. When a twig cracked under his boot, the blond stood and quickly stashed the plucked carcass to the side, before turning and facing him, hand gripping the hilt of his weapon. Quirking an eyebrow, the SOLDIER left cover and ambled into the clearing.

He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting when he finally looked upon the stranger's face, but it certainly wasn't glowing blue eyes.

Genesis blinked. "You're not SOLDIER."

The blond sighed, hand falling away from his sword. "And you're not Sephiroth."

Surprise found itself swiftly supplanted by annoyance. "I'm so sorry to disappoint," he hissed. "Who are you and what is your business here?"

Ignoring his question, the stranger instead asked, "Where's the General?"

"I am the one in charge here. This is a war zone, you know." Genesis drew his blade and held it out so the tip was pointed at the stranger's chest. Infuriatingly, the spiky-haired stranger didn't look the least bit threatened. Genesis's patience was already worn thin – by his nagging sickness, ShinRa's foolish war, Sephiroth's incessant smugness – and he wasn't in the mood for games. He was in the mood to blow something to smithereens, and then to burn those smithereens to ashes. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't cut you down where you stand."

"You couldn't. Don't waste your time trying." And the blond bastard said it as though it were a throwaway fact.

"You underestimate the powers of a SOLDIER First Class. Shall I put you to the test?"

"I have no interest in you," came the blunt response. "My fight is with Sephiroth."

It was the straw that broke the chocobo's back. Fire burned in his veins, the blazing pain of degradation indistinguishable from the jealousy colouring his vision red. "To hell with Sephiroth! I will be the hero!"

He'd been not an arm's width away from the stranger – with SOLDIER speed, he should have been impaled on his sword within an eye-blink. Yet a crash of metal rang through the clearing, his attack blocked by the massive blade. One-handed, at that.

The mako eyes were not just show, then.

Genesis grit his teeth and swung again. Sparks flew as the blades clashed, and though the SOLDIER First put considerable strength into each of his blows, the blond did not budge. His form was frustratingly solid – just like fighting Angeal, or even Sephiroth.
They danced backwards and forwards for a few moments – a wordless conversation, testing the boundaries and forms of the other. Genesis had been hoping to recognise the style and exploit it, but each opening he drove for closed, each blow met by a heavy sword that sent vibrations running up his arms with every hit.

Several rounds of that, and he knew better than to continue wasting his time trading strikes. The blond had done little to retaliate, and while he remained locked in that defensive position, Genesis could not touch him. He needed to force him into action, to create a weakness.

It was time to take the fight up a notch.

The blond’s eyes widened slightly, and he leapt to the side, narrowly avoiding a burst of electricity. It hit the tree behind him with a deafening snap. The trunk exploded, sending splinters flying through the air, and with a shudder and groan, began to fall.

A flash of yellow and black, the stranger cleaved the tree in two before it could crush him. Naïve - the action left his back exposed. Genesis attacked, heedless of the whirling leaves, but at the last moment, found his strike blocked, and with a twist the blond faced him again.

Genesis grinned openly as those bright blue eyes surveyed him, wary now. Oh yes, he was not an opponent to be taken lightly.

His Fire materia came alive.

The reaction was lightning-quick – Genesis didn't get a chance to fire off the spell, as he was now the one parrying a flurry of attacks. He kept an eye on the materia slotted into his opponent's sword, trying to identify the types, but scarcely had the chance - far too busy keeping the massive blade at bay.

"You're too good to just be a simple mercenary!" he taunted as they locked weapons once more. His shoulder pulsed. "Just tell me what your business is, and maybe I'll let you walk away."

"My business isn't with you. That's all you need to know."

Sephiroth, Sephiroth, Sephiroth. Hojo's crown jewel, ShinRa's much-touted Silver General. Nobody wanted to spar with him, not when there was a stronger opponent to defeat. With a growl, Genesis swept his sword out in a wide arc, throwing the stranger away, buying himself enough time to gather his next spell.

See how he held up under the effects of a Time materia!

"Then you'll be going no further!" he snarled as the spell shot from his fingertips. As expected, since the glowing light didn't look dangerous, the blond didn't dodge… but what was alarming was that he didn't stop, either.

It took everything Genesis had to deflect the sweep of that monstrous blade. Such an uncouth weapon. His eyes widened as a black boot lashed out at his knee. Unorthodox fighting style, too! The heel grazed the fabric of his pants, then the sword swung around again, and the SOLDIER found himself unconsciously retreating.

This was not acceptable! Why hadn't the spell worked? His materia was mastered!

With renewed fervour, he pressed his attack, a crimson whirl dancing across the uneven ground. The blond blocked, evaded, sidestepped, each strike echoing harshly through the trashed forest glen. Somewhere, there would be an opening; a sword so unwieldy always left one…
There! Genesis twisted his angle, and in a flash, drove towards the exposed right shoulder. The battle was his!

 Except, *impossibly*, he met steel once more. And another sword descended towards him, even as his crimson blade remained locked in parry.

With every ounce of enhanced speed he possessed, Genesis threw himself backwards, seeking security in the edge of the tree line. The blond didn't pursue – just regarded him coolly, a weapon gripped in each hand. Not the same broadsword that had hung on his back, not exactly. Something half the size.

His sword *separated*! Genesis cursed faintly under his breath, refusing to acknowledge he was maybe just a little impressed.

Further swordplay would be dangerous – against a lesser opponent, two swords wouldn't bother him in the slightest, but strategically worked against him in this situation. His free hand wandered to his shoulder. It began to throb again during the battle, but mindful of his opponent, he forced his arm down. He couldn't expose weakness here.

The Stop spell hadn't worked. But… "You are certainly the most interesting opponent I've had for a while, but *playtime is over!* I'll show you the true power of SOLDIER!"

The red glow built up in his hands, expanding, brightening, until he slammed them together and it doubled in size. Oh yes, he could see the blond recognised what he was doing, was already moving, but it would be too late-

Pain lanced through his body. Spots flared in his vision, and the spell died in his palms. He staggered.

No, not *now* of all times-!

Those mako-cursed blue orbs widened, and his foe came to an abrupt stop, clipping his sword to his back and catching him in his arms as the SOLDIER fell forward. Genesis wanted to laugh, wanted to curse – any other situation, it would have been the perfect ruse, could have caught the warrior with his guard down, but here he was incapable of doing anything…

The stranger knelt, lowering him to the ground, keeping him propped up with an arm behind his shoulders. He wore a silver earring in his left ear, Genesis noted. A wolf. Oddly fitting. A wolf in chocobo's clothing. "What's the matter with you?" The tone was cold and impersonal – a simple query, as though they were strangers on the street instead of enemies fighting with intent to kill.

"None… of your… concern," he ground out through gritted teeth. Why was it so much worse this time? Normally he could continue fighting through the pain. Angry, he tried to push himself to his feet, away, to regain his dignity, but found himself unable to resist clutching at his shoulder as the pain freshened, a soft cry wrenching from his lips.

The stranger was not easily dissuaded. His black-gloved hands insistently pulled back his red leather coat to access the perceived injury underneath. Genesis waved his arm wildly in an attempt to bat him away – it was *his* secret, not even the other Firsts in his platoon knew – but the blond was stubborn and methodical, pushing his jacket and then shirt off his shoulder and unwrapping the bandages to check the wound with quick, efficient motions that belied previous experience.

Genesis turned his head away, teeth still clenched as the throbbing waves of agony receded into the more familiar dull burn. Stranger or not, he didn't want to see the disgust at the gangrenous flesh, at
the way the veins around the blackening wound were swollen and miscoloured.

The blond surprised him yet again, however. It was not horror that dominated his expression, but instead, realisation.

"Degradation," he murmured. "You're Genesis. I'd forgotten..."

"I don't believe we've met," he snapped waspishly. It was one thing for a complete stranger to know his name - he was famous enough on the streets of Midgar - but to recognise degradation for what it was-!

There was no answer – the blond instead fumbled through his pockets and withdrew a vial, holding it out as though it were more precious than purified mako.

"And what is that?" Despite his position, the SOLDIER First still managed a sneer. "Poison?" The blond head shook. Genesis scoffed. "Then save your pity. This is not something a mere Hi-Potion can heal."

"It's not. This is different." The stranger gestured to his shoulder, suddenly looking awkward. "I don't know for sure if it'll work on that, but..."

It really could be poison, or a sedative, or any other number of harmful substances. He was in enemy territory and the man's motives were still unknown. Only an idiot would accept a drink offered by the enemy.

Yet there was discomfit in his expression – the first sign of weakness or humanity he'd seen from the man so far. On someone so expressionless, it couldn't be faked. Besides, his entire body was already poisoned – he doubted whatever the little vial contained could do any further harm. At this point, he was willing to take the risk, just to stay the pain for even a moment.

Best to get it over with quickly then. He snatched the offered vial, fumbled with the cap, and then downed it in one gulp before he could change his mind. The stranger looked startled. "What?"

"It's... normally you just need to pour it on the affected area. But I guess it doesn't matter."

Great. The chocobo-head could have told him that before he downed the thing in one swig. But before Genesis got the chance to rebuke him for his incredible stupidity, he became distracted by the tingling sensation spreading through his body.

It was like a cure spell, only... more so. It took him a minute to realise that the dull burn, the persistent throb he had learned to live with, was fading. The prickle of knitting flesh held his attention, but it wasn't just his festering wound healing - the purification went deeper. And he hadn't realised how cold his body had become until he felt warmth flowing right to his fingertips. There were moments of brief, blazing pain that had him unintentionally gripping the stranger's arm – still holding him up – but they moved through him like a tide of boiling water, leaving him feeling clean and strangely raw.

"Worse than I thought..." The words sounded as though they were murmured underwater. It was as though it was happening to someone else, even though the pain was so very real, a fiery itch on the inside that he couldn't scratch. And for one moment when Genesis closed his eyes, he could have sworn he'd been striding through a vast, calm lake, and had caught a glimpse of a gentle, stunningly beautiful blonde woman, clad in ornate armour which put even the most lavish of Loveless costumes to shame. And in that moment, he felt peace and tranquillity, emotions so beautiful and fragile he wanted to weep.
The whole process only took a couple of minutes, then slowly the pain receded, and fevered visions were replaced with ordinary darkness. When he opened his eyes again, his shoulder was whole – the skin smooth and unblemished - and Genesis felt the best he had for months.

Expression filled with wonder, he raised his gaze to stare at the stranger, who wore only a look of relief.

"What-"

Anticipating the question, he explained, "It worked. A gift from… the Planet, I guess." Seeing Genesis was fine and able to support his own weight again, the blond stood and retreated – though apparently more intent on getting his own personal space back than returning it to the SOLDIER. "I think… she would have wanted you to have it."

"The gift of the Goddess…" Genesis murmured, fingers still probing at the place where that infernal scratch had haunted him for so long. After a moment, he turned his attention to the – what was he, now? Not an enemy, surely, but he didn't appear to belong to ShinRa, either. "What's your name?"

The question startled the man – it was evident in the way his posture tensed and his eyes widened. Genesis estimated him to be in his mid-twenties, but for just that moment he resembled an uncertain teenager.

The pause before answering lasted far too long, and when the blond finally gave in, it was grudgingly. "…Strife."

"That a stage name?" he drawled, not convinced that he hadn't been given a pseudonym.

"Last name." And he doubted the man was lying, because Genesis could pick actors – he was something of a thespian himself.

"No first names where you come from then, Strife?"

"It's not important."

Genesis supposed he was right. He pulled himself to his feet and made a shallow bow, arms held out to the side disarmingly. "It appears I owe you a debt of gratitude, Strife." There was that discomfort again, and the SOLDIER First was privately pleased he could elicit at least one emotion from the blond enigma. "Though the issue of your presence in this territory remains unresolved."

Another pause, but by now Genesis recognised that one preceded almost everything Strife said, as though he were weighing every word carefully before it left his mouth. "I'm not here to fight with you."

"As you've made crystal clear. But what, pray tell, is your business with Sephiroth?" The name dripped with venom.

Another reaction, though this one was better hidden. "It's personal." A short answer, but its curtness spoke volumes.

Genesis arched an eyebrow. "Personal business."

"Yes."

"With Sephiroth."
The absurdity of the statement wasn't lost on Strife, if his quiet glower was anything to go by.

Genesis shrugged, privately marvelling at the lack of painful tug on his shoulder following the gesture. "In that case Strife, so long as you don't get in my way here, I suppose I can turn a blind eye to your presence for now. But you're wasting your time. Sephiroth is in Midgar. Everyone knows that." This was his war, his chance at glory.

The blond actually looked miffed at the news. Fascinating. "Then I'm done here." And then he had the gall to turn his back on him and walk away.

Genesis was tempted to call the man back, follow him, pester him for more information – because his curiosity, unquenchable beast that it was, had been startled from its long and peaceful rest – but it was unseemly for someone of his character to chase after the stranger like a puppy. That particular honour was reserved for Angeal's bouncy student.

Besides, he doubted this was the last he'd see of Strife. Men like that couldn't hide anywhere on the Planet.

Especially not when people like Genesis were of the mind to draw him out.
Chapter 3

The next time Cloud set up camp, he made sure it was a little further away from ShinRa's base of operations. He didn't particularly want Genesis, and by extension, Genesis's questions, to bother him again, and he didn't want any Wutai ninja prowling around to think him a member of the enemy, either. Months of Yuffie trying to make off with his belongings had him confident that no one could slit his throat in his sleep, but he'd just as soon have nothing disturb his rest at all.

That was one of the disadvantages of going on missions solo - there was nobody to take watch for you. Even enhanced, Cloud could go only a week without sleep, and by the end of that week he wouldn't be of much use to anyone. Which was unfortunate, as he needed to be rested and on his toes, because apparently he'd jumped the gun and arrived in Wutai well before his target.

His stupidity didn't stop there. In a burst of sentimentality, he had cured Genesis! How would curing the commander of the Wutai campaign help in bringing a stop to the war? If anything, he'd just made things worse. And to add to his problems, he now had no idea of when Sephiroth would turn up — if he turned up at all!

Would he be better off waiting here in hope, or heading to Midgar? He really didn't want to travel all the way back there so soon. How long did the Wutai conflict last previously, anyway? He knew once Sephiroth entered the fray in the past, the war came to a swift and brutal end, but had no idea of what preceded that. Everything he heard had been from Zack, who'd only arrived after Genesis's desertion. A desertion which he may have now very well prevented.

He was a failure. Only a couple of weeks in the past, and he was already screwing everything up.

Cloud roasted the salvaged thunderbird carcass with his Fire materia, gloomily contemplating the legendary SOLDIER Commander. The memories of his trooper days were still patchy, true, but he was surprised he could have forgotten the man – he had roughed him up more than once, after all. Yet instead of animosity upon recognition, he had found himself filled with sympathy.

They were a little alike, after all — both used and abandoned by ShinRa, and degradation was so similar to the slow death of Geostigma… and the Genesis he remembered had never done anything so terrible to him personally that he could recall. Cloud wasn't so petty as to hold a grudge when he'd realistically just been a trooper in the wrong place at the wrong time, and those memories weren't terribly clear anyway. It cost nothing to give the man one of the vials of Aeris's water.

Except now he may have doomed Wutai, and had no idea how to tackle his true foe.

Maybe he should kill Genesis? If the Commander died in action, ShinRa would send Sephiroth as they did before.

…No. Genesis shouldn't have to die, not when he'd been given a second chance. He wouldn't desert ShinRa, but he also wouldn't get involved in Deep Ground. And while Cloud might have worsened Wutai's problems, at the very least he'd erased a threat to the planet. In the muddled mess of his consciousness he could recall something of the SOLDIER First planning to bring the world down with him, and while he obviously never came as close as Sephiroth, it would be one less problem he needed to deal with later.
He still didn't know how it all worked, though. The thought was enough to keep him occupied long after his stomach was filled and he settled down to rest for the night. Wasn't he essentially a walking paradox? His very presence changed things – he shouldn't exist. It made his head hurt. And he didn't want to contemplate the possibility of coming across a younger version of himself, either. He would be barely twelve years old. His younger self hadn't even heard of General Sephiroth yet. That newspaper wouldn't turn up for several months.

*Sephiroth*. Cloud's eyes narrowed at the thought of the name, and he rolled onto his side, fingers gripping the hilt of First Tsurugi like a security blanket.

He'd considered his options thoroughly on the long journey to Wutai. The easiest way to change everything was to kill the man responsible for Meteor. And then Hojo, so he couldn't create more clones. And then Jenova, so no other crazy scientists would get the idea to use her cells creatively. The threat to the planet with the draining of mako would still be there, but there were ways he could try and stop that. Aeris was still alive. She would have ideas, and so would Reeve. Except Sephiroth wasn't in Wutai. And now, maybe wouldn't be. But if he wasn't going to kill Genesis, then he couldn't do anything other than wait.

With a sigh, Cloud sat back up, checked his gear, and headed away from the small clearing he'd made camp in. He wasn't going to be getting any sleep on that uneven ground with so many dark thoughts whirling in his head. The time would be better spent training, or doing reconnaissance of the area. Sephiroth *might* still come to Wutai. And when he did, Cloud would be ready.

He wouldn't fail this time. He wouldn't add to his mistakes any longer.

ShinRa's main office was busier than usual – the logistics of running a war, especially one so far away, kept entire departments in overtime. And just because they were running a war didn't mean they could ignore domestic matters, either. With so many Firsts in Wutai, SOLDIER was especially short-handed.

Which made it all the more remarkable that Sephiroth was on *stand-by*.

Stand-by! It wasn't that the Silver General didn't understand the logic behind the order – it made sense they wanted him available for deployment at the drop of a hat. But that was what a PHS was for, and in the meantime he was stuck in his office, unable to take on any meaningful missions. Every request he made to Heidegger's staff – because apparently Heidegger was too busy to even see the General - got turned down flat, and then countered with a suggestion that he oversee the Security Department's training, or put in an appearance to raise the morale of the cadets, or attend a press conference on the progress of the war. All activities that were only *slightly* worse than doing absolutely nothing at all.

He was trying to explain this with what he thought to be exemplary patience to his old friend, and illogically didn't appear to be making much progress.

"You know not every mission necessarily involves exterminating monsters. There's more to being a SOLDIER than just fighting," Angeal pointed out.

"Yes. As you've drummed into my head," he responded wryly. "But you do agree that a SOLDIER First Class is overkill for an infestation of-" Here he checked the dispatch. "-razor weed."

"Razor weed?" Angeal had the nerve to look *amused*. "I imagine it'll flee at just the sight of you. At least it will be quick."
He threw the dispatch back onto the table in disgust. "What is Heidegger thinking? There is supposed to be a war going on."

"Let Genesis worry about that. It's our duty to keep things running smoothly at home."

"By doing useless things."

"You could help out with training the cadets or lower ranks for a change," Angeal suggested. Sephiroth was just frustrated enough to actually consider it, even if he knew the exercise would only involve a bunch of rookies going slack-jawed, stuttering, and generally putting in a more pitiful performance than usual due to nerves.

He was one step away from condemning himself willingly to such a sight when a shrill ring pierced the tranquility of the office. He nodded once to Angeal, who leaned back in his chair to wait out the call, and fetched the phone from its cradle. "Yes?"

"Sephiroth."

"Genesis," he greeted, surprised, though far too trained to show it in his voice. Angeal raised an eyebrow and leaned in again. "Aren't you supposed to be in Wutai?" Regular communications were down – Wutai's first act had been to knock the towers out.

"I am in Wutai," he drawled. "I'm back at base, in the communications tent. They finally got the damn thing working."

Sephiroth frowned. "Is something the matter? The campaign isn't going well?" The reports had them coming out successful from every skirmish so far.

"Oh, the campaign is fine. Do you doubt my abilities?"

"I'm not sure. Is quoting Loveless at the enemy an effective tactic?"

He could hear Genesis scoff, though half of it was swallowed by static and Angeal's chuckle in the background. "You're not the only one capable of being a hero, old friend."

"Then why the call?"

A long silence followed - so long that Sephiroth found himself checking that the connection hadn't died. Eventually, Genesis said, "You should come to Wutai."

It was a startling request, at odds with the news of the campaign going smoothly. "You miss me that much?"

Another scoff. "Hardly."

"Then why?"

The silence stretched even longer this time. Whatever it was, it must have bothered Genesis deeply. "I came across a rogue SOLDIER."

Sephiroth slanted a look at Angeal, who just shrugged. "I don't recall any outstanding deserters." There had been a few on the declaration of war, but you couldn't just quit SOLDIER. They'd been dealt with swiftly and ruthlessly.

"He insists he's not SOLDIER, but I don't know what else he could be."
Interesting. "You fought then?"

"In a manner of speaking." The words were airy and dismissive, implying Genesis had merely played with this mystery SOLDIER, but Sephiroth knew that if his old friend had won easily he would not hesitate to brag. So, the stranger was a match for Genesis.

"Wutai is hiring mystery mercenaries then? That information is better suited for the Turks, you know, not my personal phone line."

"He was asking after you."

Angeal sat at full attention now. Sephiroth frowned, swivelling his chair to the side to avoid the look he was sure to be getting. "Description."

"Dresses in black. Blond hair, the most ridiculous style you've ever seen. Really, it's worse than Angeal's Puppy. And he wears a shoulder guard on his left side only, has a wolf motif going on. Single earring. Rather stylish. You'd probably be jealous."

"Spare me your fashion editorials, please." Sephiroth pinched the bridge of his nose, but the gesture reminded him too much of those bookkeepers in accounting, so he moved to rest his fingers on the table instead. The description didn't ring any bells. "What made you think he was SOLDIER?"

"Mako eyes."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow and glanced back at Angeal, knowing he could hear the conversation easily – not much escaped a First Class's hearing. "A name?"

"Strife."

"That's all?"

"Last name. Isn't that enough for the great General Sephiroth?"

Sephiroth rolled his eyes and turned to his computer, tapping through the commands with one hand. His search came up empty. "There's no one in the personnel database."

"It could be a fake," Angeal suggested.

"It isn't." Genesis sounded certain, but then, Genesis always talked like he was the absolute authority on everything right from the best choice of shoes to the artificial creation of materia.

Sephiroth narrowed his eyes, possibilities whirling through his head. "Is he dangerous?"

"Not to me." Implying that he was to Sephiroth. Interesting.

"I see. And was there anything else?"

A beat. "No." Nothing he cared to share in that case, which only piqued his curiosity further.

"My gratitude for the information, then. Angeal is here – did you want to talk to him?"

"If he's- actually, it appears that will have to wait." Sephiroth could pick up shouting in the background. "Our friends in Wutai have decided to send another welcoming party. Time to go be a hero." Gunfire rattled in the distance, and the line abruptly cut out. Sephiroth stared at the phone for a moment, then returned it to its cradle.
"He'll be fine. He's taken on armies single-handedly in the simulations," Angeal assured him.

"I'm not worried," Sephiroth replied. And indeed, his thoughts were resting on another topic altogether.

It was a credit to their friendship that Angeal sensed this, and he leant back, the office chair squeaking protestingly under the heavyset SOLDIER. "You're going, then?"

"It sounded like a request for assistance to me," he offered.

Angeal smiled ruefully. "You know that isn't going to fly with upper management."

"Then I'll be trusting you to make my excuses."

The other SOLDIER could recognise a lost fight when he saw one, and threw up his arms in defeat. "Fine! We were supposed to send a couple of Seconds to relieve those injured on landing anyway. I'll move the schedule up to tomorrow. At least that way you'll have an excuse."

There were times, Sephiroth reflected, that he didn't appreciate Angeal's friendship enough. He nodded his thanks, and turned his thoughts to what lay ahead.

It was only then he realised he had managed to get through the entire conversation without Genesis once quoting Loveless.

Clearly the stranger had left a strong mark. And that made it all the more interesting.

Angeal was good to his word. At daybreak the next morning, Sephiroth accompanied the first delivery of supplies and relief from ShinRa headquarters; well before Heidegger and the other executives shuffled from their oversized four-poster beds.

The troops he escorted were made of better stuff, bright-eyed and filled with nervous energy. There was an interesting mix - a small collection of infantry from the engineering corps, uniformly bearing an air of quiet unease; a trio of green Thirds barely able to contain their eagerness to see real conflict, though Sephiroth suspected they'd change their tune quickly enough; a handful of Seconds who were mostly just annoyed at the abrupt change in their schedule. At least the Seconds didn't stare at him or wonder aloud what the meaning behind the Silver General's sudden deployment was. The Thirds obviously hadn't yet cottoned on to the fact they weren't the only ones with mako-enhanced hearing.

"-must be something big, maybe we're not doing as well as we thought-"

"-special mission, he's just using this as a ride there, Commander Rhapsodos-"

"-would hate to be the Wutai right now, can you imagine trying to avoid that sword-"

He was half of a mind to silence them, but rookie Thirds tended to have more pent-up energy than was good for them, and if they chose to spend it on pointless gossip he could care less. Sephiroth just crossed his arms and stared out the window, watching the ocean waves rage far beneath them. It took a day and a half to travel to Wutai from Midgar on a direct flight – with only a brief stop at Rocket Town to refuel. He'd slept for most of it so far, knowing there might not be much opportunity once they landed, but now only a couple of hours remained until their arrival.

He spent that time reviewing his conversation with Genesis in his head. The mere fact that his friend had thought to call, in the middle of an invasion no less, simply to tell him about his
encounter spoke volumes. This 'Strife' character sounded like a strong opponent, and yet appeared to have no political affiliation? That, Sephiroth had difficulty believing. A warrior on such a level simply wouldn't be *allowed* to exist outside of someone's influence, ShinRa's or otherwise.

The question then remained – was it ShinRa pulling the strings, or someone else? It occurred to him that rather than drawing him to the island, someone might have desired to draw him away from Midgar. If they thought his absence would make ShinRa headquarters an easier target, however, they would be sorely disappointed. Angeal was still there, along with a particularly promising selection of Seconds. No, there was another purpose to this Strife's actions. One requiring Sephiroth in particular to reveal.

Angeal would tell him he was overanalysing, but he called it strategy. His information was limited – he had to get the most out of the resources available.

It got him out of the damned office, besides.

The co-pilot was making the rounds again. "Sir! We'll be landing soon."

He nodded once. "Thank you, Private." The tension in the cabin jumped a notch as the SOLDIERs used to combat started mentally preparing themselves for a possible sortie, and the rookies suffered another attack of nerves. Sephiroth remained unconcerned. Genesis would keep the forward base camp in one piece – they weren't likely to be fired at upon arrival.

True to his prediction, their landing was smooth and uninterrupted. As commanding officer, Sephiroth disembarked first. A familiar face waited for him on the tarmac.

"*When the war of the beasts brings about the world's end*

_the goddess descends from the sky._"

"Loveless, Prologue. I'm flattered."


"I'm surprised you aren't more upset. I thought you wanted all the glory for yourself," Sephiroth reminded him lightly.

"*Three friends go into battle*  
*One is captured*  
*One flies away*  
*the one that is left becomes a hero*  
*If we were to enact it*  
*would I be the one to play the hero*  
*Or would You?*

"You're welcome to it," Sephiroth said simply. "I'll just complete my business, and if you don't have anything else for me to do, I'll be on my way."

"Oh, I'm sure I can find *some* way to make use of the great General Sephiroth."
His first instinct was to reply with a similarly sarcastic barb, but as he properly looked at his friend, the General found himself oddly bothered.

"Something's different," Sephiroth observed slowly. It was difficult to put his finger on it. The Commander had changed, but not in any immediately obvious way.

Genesis smiled, and that was different too – though it still held that mocking tilt to his lips, the bitterness normally accompanying the gesture was absent. He didn't offer any explanation, however, implying Sephiroth had to figure it out on his own. He held a sense of vigour about him that had been absent since… since that fight in the Training Room. There was more colour to his complexion, and now he was thinking about it, hadn't that shiny auburn hair been a little dull lately? "There's an explanation, I trust?"

"I may share it with you later, if I'm feeling generous," came the lofty reply. "But for now, let's talk somewhere a little more private, shall we?"

Sephiroth followed his friend through the camp, observing the layout approvingly. The tents and buildings were uniform, which would afford some measure of protection against sneak attacks aimed at taking out the commanding officers – something eminently necessary if the scorched tent flaps and torn up earth were anything to go by. Fortunate then Heidegger remained in Midgar – his ostentatious manner of travelling was equivalent to flying a helicopter with a giant target painted on the underbelly.

For all of his flair and grandstanding, the reminder that Genesis fought intelligently was comforting. And if his… liveliness – Sephiroth couldn't think of a better word - were anything to go by, the assignment was doing him a world of good. "How is the War progressing so far?"

"We've made good progress the past two days. The southernmost quarter is under our control now." Genesis waved a trooper out of the way as they headed into the officer's tent. "I'll be leading the main force to occupy the village to the north-east at dawn tomorrow. We'll launch our next wave of attacks from there."

"You're being quite thorough," Sephiroth observed. "Surely it would be quicker to strike at the heart in one decisive blow."

Genesis smirked. "And that is precisely what I intend to do- once the Turks provide evidence that Lord Godo is actually in the capital. In the meantime, it doesn't hurt to lull them into complacency, thinking that we intend to crawl our way to the north. It gives us more time to consolidate our resources too – while we remain victorious so far, we have suffered considerable damage in the process." His grin turned sardonic. "Though I'm sure ShinRa paints it differently."

"They talk as though you are cutting through butter," Sephiroth confirmed.

Genesis scoffed. "Fantasy. Our enemy has the home ground advantage, and I don't believe we've seen their whole hand yet, either. When the Wutai have their backs against the wall, they turn vicious, and they fight dirty."

Amused, Sephiroth commented, "Sounds like someone I know."

"It's effective. Angeal's honour wouldn't last five minutes here."

Another reason why Genesis had been a good choice. Though he doubted appropriateness for the job had ever entered the discussion. Heidegger didn't operate like that. "So, are you going to tell me why I was summoned?"
Genesis draped himself over a chair, throwing his boots up onto the table and crossing his legs leisurely. With a coy smile, he asked, "Summoned you? I did no such thing."

Sephiroth returned his coyness with a dry grin. "Come now. You can't dangle bait like that and expect me to remain in Midgar, can you?"

A lazy shrug. "As you say, then. Though which one is being baited, hmm? Quietly, but surely…"

As he suspected, Genesis lured him to Wutai for the sole purpose of learning more about this 'Strife'. Obviously his old friend didn't think he could solve the mystery of the blond warrior otherwise. Normally, Sephiroth would consider it a trifling distraction they could ill-afford to indulge in the middle of a war, but a rogue warrior of the same calibre as a SOLDIER First was not something they could ignore, not even in the face of possible conspiracy. Such a person, properly utilised, could turn the tide of the conflict.

"Are you going to tell me anything more about this man, then?" Genesis' smirk grew. Sephiroth sighed. "I thought not. At least tell me what you'd have me do, then."

"I'm not sure if you'll be required to do anything. But you won't have to wander far to find him. He's kept pace with us as we've moved north. Normally sets up camp about an hour's walk from the main force. I've instructed the patrols not to bother him."

"And the Wutai?"

"They don't seem to know what to do about him either. One patrol witnessed the end of a skirmish, but it appears our Wutai friends have since decided to pretend he doesn't exist."

"Interesting." It lent more credence to his theory of a third party's interference. He stood. "You said he wanted to see me? It would be bad manners to keep him waiting."

Genesis extended a hand towards the tent flap. "By all means." He made no move to get up, so Sephiroth left the privacy of the officer's tent alone.

The camp bustled with worn-looking infantry as the relief and the fresh supplies that arrived with the General were distributed. No doubt preparations were being made for the next day's mission as well. The disadvantage of large numbers. A small squad of Soldier Firsts could cover triple the ground in half the time, but Genesis was keeping that tactic up his sleeve, apparently. Wise. It was the riskier manoeuvre, as the charging squad couldn't rely on reinforcements if things took a bad turn.

Sephiroth made his way through the busy throng with ease, troopers and SOLDIERs alike stepping aside and saluting at his passage. He nodded once in acknowledgement to the nervous guard posted at the camp exit, before disappearing into the thick forest. He headed due north until he could no longer hear the barked commands and thud of footsteps, then turned his attention to his surroundings, seeking the tell-tale signs of the patrol paths. Picking one at random, he made his way along it. Birds twittered in the trees – a sign he was unlikely to be interrupted by a Wutai ambush.

Genesis told him the stranger always made camp approximately an hour away from the base, but Sephiroth had expected it would take longer than the prescribed time to locate the rogue, simply due to the fact he could be an hour in any direction. Yet he estimated it had only been a forty-two minute walk when he caught sight of a blond head of hair from the corner of his eye.

Genesis was right about the absurd style. It reminded him of a chocobo.
He was slightly unnerved to realise the stranger was waiting for him, though - standing at attention in the centre of a clearing, as if he knew Sephiroth was coming. He slowed his steps so he'd have a little longer to observe the blond before leaving the comparative security of the tree line.

Though he remembered to critique the stranger's fashion sense, Genesis had failed to mention this 'Strife' character carried a Buster-style sword. He understood now why his comrade originally thought Strife one of their own. It wasn't just the mako eyes or the oversized sword – the man's clothing strongly resembled the uniform of a SOLDIER First.

Yet he claimed not to be SOLDIER, and there was no mention of him in their records. A company cover-up? If that were the case, his desire to make contact with Sephiroth and Sephiroth alone could be explained.

He stopped once he was within a respectable distance. If he'd read the situation correctly, there was no need for formalities. "Strife, I presume? I was told-"

Sephiroth never got the chance to complete his sentence. As it was, he barely drew Masamune in time for the blow.
Chapter 4

Cloud didn't wait for Sephiroth to finish talking. You took any opening Sephiroth gave you; you didn't pause, you didn't stop. He'd learnt that the hard way.

His nemesis was here, in Wutai, against all logic, and he didn't intend to waste the chance.

The clash of swords rang like a bell through the clearing. First Tsurugi cut an arc in the air, and Sephiroth retreated with the unnatural grace he'd once admired the man for. Cloud followed, nothing but a blur to the untrained eye as he struck, twisted, and struck again in a dance quickly growing too familiar. Masamune met each blow easily, weaving through the air like a deadly serpent. Sephiroth's form was perfect. There were no holes in his defence.

That was fine. He had more than just swordplay at his disposal this time. His Bolt materia glowed briefly, there was the slightest crackle of warning, and then the air shook with thunder as a torrent of electricity tore towards the Silver General, hungry and lashing and lethal. The worst of it caught on Masumune, but the SOLDIER's body jerked as it absorbed the stray shocks, and his silver hair rose under the power of static charge, giving him the illusion of floating. For one brief second, Cloud's vision filled with a single black wing, but Sephiroth bore no such appendage yet.

"You're quite the rude individual, aren't you, Strife? I came only to talk." Sephiroth shook the electric charge off his sword with a flick of his wrist, grounding the blade in the dirt for a second, then raising it just as swiftly to parry the next attack.

Cloud didn't grace him with a response. He moved mechanically, instincts taking over, breaking apart First Tsurugi, following through with a second swing, forcing Sephiroth to back off, reattaching the blade, hitting with a heavier strike, forever keeping the General from getting his balance. This was one of the hidden strengths of First Tsurugi - the ability to vary the weight and speed of his strikes, to use as many blades as he needed to attack blind spots, to create footholds where none existed without leaving himself open.

Steel rang against steel once more. Muscles straining from the effort, Cloud pushed forward, and then retreated as the angle of Masamune changed, curving towards his neck without breaking the lock. He flipped back, landed on a tree trunk, kicked off, and Sephiroth met him again, green eyes wide as he grunted under the force of the impact.

A familiar ballet. He was already braced when the next sweeping strike landed, boots scraping shallow trails in the dirt as he slid back under the pressure. The trees groaned and began to fall around him, branches and trunks severed cleanly by the katana's long-reaching strike. Then he was retreating, First Tsurugi flashing in the sunlight as he parried a flurry of hits, barely able to keep ahead of the deadly curve of his opponent's blade.

Dirt and leaves billowed in the air, choking, blinding. Cloud jumped between the falling trunks on nothing more than reflex and instinct as Masamune cut a swathe of destruction through the forest. There was a pause, and he retaliated in kind, First Tsurugi slamming into the earth and tearing a rent in the ground beneath Sephiroth's feet. The Silver General leapt in the air, and Cloud jumped to meet him. For ten breathless seconds they were locked in aerial combat, the two appearing as nothing more than a whirlwind of black and silver amidst the falling leaves.
They landed on the ground with a thud, and then Cloud swept aside a fire spell with his sword, the warm kiss of flame still licking at his fingertips as he charged.

Then cursed as he saw the angle of Masamune change, and realised his error.

That one hole in his defence, the one sloppy mistake he kept making. Against anyone else it didn't matter, but against Sephiroth…

A vision flashed before his eyes – himself, impaled on the Masamune, dangling helplessly in the air as his blood trickled down the length of the blade. Taunting words that haunted his nightmares, week after week.

"Do you remember this pain?"

Cloud blinked, and in that split-second, desperately twisted his body sideways. In the same breath, Masamune slid past, and Sephiroth's expression faltered in shock as he found himself overextended and his sword empty of prey.

In that moment, Cloud turned the tables, and rammed the hilt of First Tsurugi into the General's ribcage.

Sephiroth staggered back. It was to his credit that he recovered from his surprise in time to deflect the follow-up strike, but it was all he managed to do.

Adrenaline surged through Cloud's veins. It was different. The motions were the same, but it was too easy. Had Jenova really made Sephiroth that much stronger, that much faster? Or was it just the difference in experience? No longer did the gulf of a generation separate them, he realised. No longer did his opponent lord a decade of experience over him.

The thought was somewhere between amusing and heart-breaking. He was now older than Zack, and almost as old as Sephiroth.

It didn't matter. He'd take whatever advantage he could get.

First Tsurugi crashed into Masamune, and he split the sword again, driving the point of the detached half towards the General's stomach. Sephiroth twisted away, barely avoiding the razor-sharp edge. And so the fight continued.

Genesis paused, listening carefully – though one didn't need enhanced hearing to locate the battle raging to the north. The ground reverberated under his feet as a low rumble filled the air, and the SOLDIER Commander raised a delicate eyebrow. That didn't feel like a Quake spell.

"Stay back," he ordered his squad, and stalked ahead through the trees alone. Really, did Sephiroth have to make such a spectacle? He was advertising their position to the enemy! When he'd sent him off to talk to Strife, this was not exactly what he had in mind.

It was tempting to let his old friend - rival, he absently corrected - lay waste to the countryside and draw the attention of the Wutai army to him, but there was the blond enigma to consider too. The man had made it rather clear that his intention was to fight Sephiroth, and while he detested it when others intervened in his battles, by the sounds of things, it might be prudent to make certain ShinRa's crown jewel didn't get carried away and kill the stranger. Genesis owed the man a debt - a novel experience and emotion, one he wasn't sure he liked, but one he was invested in all the same.

He arrived at the wreckage well in advance of the two fighters, and found himself pausing in mild
consternation at the destruction. What had to be half a square kilometre of forest, flattened, the ground crisscrossed by evergreen trees suddenly reduced to the same status as trampled ferns. Several tree trunks jutted sharply into the air, the cut surface as smooth as glass. Near the centre of the clearing were two deep gouges in the earth, also too sharp to be natural, and all the more frightening for it.

His skin tingled faintly - a sign of materia usage. Sure enough, not a moment later a wave of heat battered him, sending his maroon coat flapping and his eyes smarting. He restrained the urge to blink, zeroing in on the source. Two figures, still fighting at the edge of the clearing.

This wasn't right.

When he first heard the battle, he'd expected to turn up in time to stop Sephiroth's Masamune from piercing the pretty blond's throat. Not to see the silver-haired General being pushed back, outmanoeuvred, and barely keeping up.

More alarming, there wasn't the barest hint of the smug expression his rival normally boasted, even as the air crackled with magic.

Sephiroth was serious. No, more than that. Sephiroth was serious, and he was on the verge of losing.

Genesis tensed as a particularly bone-jarring clash rang through the clearing. Sephiroth stepped back to bear the weight. He didn't even do that against Angeal's Buster Sword!

He weighed his options for only a split second before moving. It was a risky manoeuvre, but the fight could not be allowed to continue. One was his rival – the other, his saviour. Genesis was willing to lose neither.

When Strife struck next, his sword met with red steel. Masamune, pushed to the side by the scabbard. "Enough!"

Angeal would be proud.

Except Strife didn't want to listen. As soon he found his blade blocked, his sword – curse it, he forgot about the sword! – split, and a second blade was in play. It was only thanks to his SOLDIER reflexes and unnatural agility that Genesis managed to angle his rapier in time to catch the second weapon as well.

He nearly missed the third blade, with his sword thoroughly occupied holding back the first two. Sephiroth at least remained alert enough to knock that one aside – how many pieces did that sword break into, anyway? – giving Genesis a chance to push the blond back and break the fight up. This time, Strife didn't try anything, judging him with those bright, calculating blue eyes as he backed away and rejoined the parts of his weapon.

Genesis enunciated his words carefully. "What, pray tell, is the meaning of this?"

Silence from both men. Sephiroth's eyes hadn't left Strife, not even for a moment. Strife returned the stare with equal strength.

Genesis gestured vaguely with his rapier. "You've levelled half the forest, scared the wits out of my men, and no doubt every able-bodied warrior in Wutai is bearing down on this position right now. An explanation is the least you could give me."

Strife's glare only intensified. "Don't interfere."
Pleased by the reaction—any reaction—Genesis bowed slightly as he took a step towards the blond. "Far be it from me to interrupt a duel, but you are attacking an employee of ShinRa, and as the commanding officer of the nearest garrison, it is my obligation to come to his defence."

Those sharp blues became wary. And for one minute, Genesis thought Strife was actually considering the odds of taking them both on at once.

Absurd. Even if he were a match for Sephiroth, nobody could be insane enough to tackle such a battle.

The worst part was, Genesis wasn't sure which side he really wanted to be fighting on.

The shuffle of army fatigues and military-issue boots drew their attention, as the squad he'd ordered to follow at a distance caught up. With enhanced senses, Genesis could hear their exclamations of shock easily. He found himself irritated. He should have ordered them to stay put instead. The ShinRa grapevine was going to go ballistic over this.

In the end, however, their presence proved fortunate, as with the additional reinforcements, Strife finally backed down. He slung his sword into its harness and nodded shortly. "Fine." That one word was brimming with irritation, anger, anxiety... and was that fear? Genesis couldn't tell. The blond warrior was a hard man to read.

"Good. Now if you can both refrain from waving your swords around-" Absently Genesis wondered when he'd started channelling Angeal, but his childhood friend was the only role model he had for handling this situation. Normally, Genesis caused the conflict. "-then we can discuss your business back at base camp like adults."

"No. I have no more business here." Strife's words were short and clipped, and his glare rested on Sephiroth once more. "I'll leave for now."

Sephiroth finally broke his silence. "Running away?"

Those bright blue eyes flared, and Genesis quickly placed himself between the two fighters once again. Strife practically snarled. "Don't get confused, Sephiroth. I'm going to kill you. All you've done is bought time." His gaze rested on Genesis for a moment, and then he abruptly turned on his heel. "I'm leaving."

It did not escape the Commander's notice that Strife's hand lingered on his sword until he was well past the edge of the tree line.

Once he was out of sight and earshot, Genesis turned back around and pinned his friend with a pointed stare. Sephiroth simply quirked an eyebrow in response.

The battle of wills was brief—there were more immediate concerns than Strife's parting statement. Genesis holstered his rapier and signalled to the squad hugging the tree line to about-face. What he said remained true—every active Wutai patrol would be converging on the area, and their current position was strategically unsound. "Let's get back to base, and we can sort out your lovely new mess there."

Cloud didn't sleep that night. He was too angry. Too worried. Too conflicted.

His first opportunity, and he'd already failed.

Cloud hadn't wanted to cut down Genesis to get to Sephiroth, not when he'd saved the man from
degradation only a week before. He was more sympathetic to the SOLDIER's situation now than what he'd been in his trooper days – no longer did he have to imagine what it felt like for ShinRa to use you, abandon you, and hunt you down like a dog.

He might have still managed to get past Genesis and fulfil his objective, but the arrival of a squad of SOLDIERS put that thought to rest. The odds were against him. At that point, even if he could kill Sephiroth, the chances of him dying in the process skyrocketed. And he had to survive – at least until he took care of Jenova and Hojo as well. What happened to him after that didn't matter.

Leaves crunched noisily under his feet, but he didn't care. He was deep within territory still controlled by Wutai, though held no illusions about it remaining so for long, thanks to his idiocy. All he knew was that he wanted to put as much distance between himself and Sephiroth as possible. It tore at him to have the man standing right there, and yet find himself unable to do anything about it.

What choice did he have, though? Unless he killed Genesis first, which, while viable, was not desirable. For now, at least, Sephiroth had been put out of bounds.

If he couldn't kill Sephiroth, then he needed to go to the next step. Jenova.

Would he need Holy to do it? He stretched his memory back to the battle before Meteor. No, Holy was too risky, a last resort - they'd taken care of Jenova using normal methods before the spell had been invoked to stop Meteor. A couple of hits of the strongest fire spell he could muster ought to do it. Reduce her to ash, and then throw the ash into the reactor core.

Having a plan made him feel a bit better, and returned him to his senses enough to become aware of the irregular movements in the undergrowth. He was being followed.

Keeping his stride even – if he stopped, chances were his followers would stop too – Cloud listened carefully to the whoosh of air and crinkle of leaves in his wake. The footfalls were quick and light. Moccasins instead of heavy boots.

Wutai, then. He eyeballed his surroundings, wondering when they'd try to ambush him. The forest in this area was particularly dense, but that didn't matter. He could create a clearing to erase the blind spots if necessary.

After the altercation earlier that day, Cloud was in no mood to wait for his opponent to make the first move. He stopped abruptly and drew First Tsurugi. "I'm in a bad mood right now," he warned. Maybe he shouldn't have let the last lot off the hook.

There was a thud of feet hitting the ground behind him. Then... "I'm the legendary warrior princess! Leave Wutai at once, you filthy invader, or I will defeat you! Hyaaaa!"

What?

Cloud whirled, and came face to face with a very familiar-looking child.

"Die, evildoer!" The girl kicked the air a couple of times.

Yuffie?

Things had just become really weird.

"ShinRa dog!" Seeing that her air kicks hadn't intimidated him, the little black-haired girl rushed him, tiny fists flailing. Reflexively, Cloud held her back with the palm of his hand. Her arms
windmilled, never quite connecting.

"I'm not with ShinRa." The response had become automatic.

"Liar! Villain! Monster!"

The last one stung. "You shouldn't be out here. It's dangerous."

"Ha! Maybe dangerous for the likes of you! A mighty warrior like me is in no danger!"

Great. Yuffie looked about eight, but had all the bravado of her teenaged self, with none of the skill to back it up. What was he supposed to do in this kind of situation? Denzel and Marlene were never like this.

Zack would probably play along, but Cloud wasn't Zack. Couldn't even fake it, anymore. So he sighed, scooped the girl up, and flung her over his shoulder in a regulation carry.

"Oof! Hey! What are you doing? Hey, put me down!"

He ignored the ineffectual pounding on his back and the kicking legs and considered where to go. He couldn't leave Yuffie out here to harass ShinRa's forces. She could get killed, or worse, kidnapped. She'd survived the war last time, but that was before Cloud had messed everything up. What was she doing so far south, anyway? Shouldn't she be safe inside the capital?

There ought to be a shrine nearby, if he recalled his last trip through Wutai correctly. He could leave her there, and the monks would find a way to get her back to safety. Decision made, he started heading in that direction.

"Let me goooo! I'll defeat you! This isn't fair!"

"Quiet," Cloud snapped. "Do you want ShinRa to find us?"

"Ha! I'll defeat the invaders! All of them, with my super-cool moves! You can just sit back and watch and be amazed!"

Cloud rolled his eyes. He should have been happy to see Yuffie, really – she was the first friend he'd come across since being thrown into the past – but somehow, he couldn't summon anything other than annoyance. Time had dulled the memories of how irritating she'd been when she first joined Avalanche. He continued stalking through the forest, picking up the pace so he could get rid of his burden sooner. Teenage Yuffie he could handle – was maybe even a little fond of, when she wasn't trying to rob him blind. Tiny Yuffie, on the other hand…

"Stop jostling so much! Urgh, I'm gonna be sick…"

"Don't you dare throw up on me – these are the only clothes I have," he grumbled.

"Would serve you right," she mumbled.

Ignoring her whinging – she should count herself lucky she'd run into him, instead of some easily-startled trigger-happy trooper – Cloud instead focused his attention on the swish of silk off to his left. "Who's there?"

Then he was leaping to the side, Yuffie's shriek ringing in his ears as he barely dodged a hail of shuriken. Clicking the release on his sword, he pulled the lightest blade free, parrying the dagger driving towards his stomach.
Wutai?

"What's going on? It's dark! I can't see! Ah! Look out! I could have been hurt, you big jerk!"
Yuffie complained, even as Cloud dodged another throwing dagger and fenced one-handed with the agile attacker. Wutai meant unenhanced – no matter how good their blade, Cloud could win with strength alone. One sudden, sharp downward swing, and he knocked the dagger from the fighter's hands. The chipped blade hit the dirt and spun away.

The Wutai warrior retreated, cradling his sword hand. Cloud examined the elaborate headgear and the dragon insignia on armour. A member of the Crimson Elite. He remembered Zack talking about them, how they'd held out for months after Wutai's official surrender. "I won't let you take the Princess!"

Seriously? "You can have her," he retorted, dropping the squirming girl to the ground, then grabbing her by the back of her shirt before she could scamper off. "Keep better track of her next time."

"Let me go! I don't wanna go back! I wanna fight!"

The Crimson Elite wavered, apparently unsure what to make the new development. "You… are returning her?"

Cloud shoved her in the warrior's direction. He caught her by the arm, though his dark-eyed gaze didn't once break away from his opponent. "You might also want to teach her to avoid picking fights with SOLDIERs."

"I would have totally kicked your ass!"

"Princess, language!" The warrior hissed, then turned back to him, eyes alight with realisation. "You are the SOLDIER who fights ShinRa, then."

Cloud shrugged. "If that's what they're calling me." He didn't want to get back into the question of what exactly makes a SOLDIER in the middle of a dark forest with an eight-year-old Treasure Princess listening in.

"My superiors, they would like to talk with you, if you would accompany us."

The clearing dimmed slightly as Cloud narrowed his eyes and the faint mako glow hid beneath his eyelids. "Just because I returned your Princess, doesn't mean I'm going to join your army, if that's what you're thinking of asking."

"Nobody returned me! I wasn't in trouble! I was going to repel the invaders!"

A bright smile split the darkness. "Just talk. All we ask."

Cloud doubted that, but chances were, whomever they wanted him to talk to would be a member of one of the Noble Houses. It was a slim chance, but maybe if they listened to him, he could at least reduce the number of casualties. "Fine."

With both Genesis and Sephiroth in Wutai, the war was as good as lost. The best he could now hope for was to convince Wutai's leaders to surrender, and keep Yuffie safe.
Three squads of Wutai warriors intercepted the SOLDIERs on their trek back to base. The two Firsts took care of them directly – Genesis because he was in a hurry, and Sephiroth because he was still tense from his fight. The skirmishes did at least appear to calm the General some, restoring a shaken confidence in his superiority.

It impressed the troops, besides. Genesis casually flicked back a stray hair, a smirk hovering over his lips as he heard his subordinates murmur in awe behind them.

The camp, at least, remained untouched. As he strode past the perimeter, he ordered another First, "Gather all the rostered personnel and send out patrols. The forest is teeming with Wutai infantry. Clear everything within a five kilometre perimeter."

"Sir!"

As the camp sprung into action, Genesis made a beeline for the privacy of the officers' tent. Two other Firsts were in there, but when Sephiroth entered as well, took their cue and left without being asked.

"So, what did he want?" Genesis prodded as he availed himself of the tent's better-than-average rations. There were advantages to rank, though in the field they were few and far between.

"To kill me, apparently," Sephiroth replied dryly. "I didn't think you disliked me that much, to bring me right to my would-be executioner."

"You're alive, aren't you?" Genesis dismissed, though avoided examining the thought too closely. It was one thing to enjoy watching his rival's feathers get ruffled, but he'd never intended to be potentially responsible for his death. "Why did he want to kill you?"

"He didn't say." Sephiroth accepted the proffered canteen as though it were a wine glass, and drank slowly from it, eyes closed as he relished the refreshment. After drinking his fill, he replaced the cap and set the canteen aside so he could focus his full attention on his fellow officer. "He didn't say anything, in fact. What did he tell you?"

Genesis shrugged, going to no effort to hide his disappointment at the lack of answers. "Only that he had 'personal' business with you."

"I find that hard to believe. Until today, I'd never laid eyes on that man before."

"You couldn't have forgotten him?"

Sephiroth levelled him with a look of incredulity. "His sword separated."

Genesis conceded the point. No matter the other irregularities, that one detail would cement him in any SOLDIER's mind. "You didn't discover anything?"

"I learnt a bit about his fighting style, though I never did succeed in identifying all of his materia. He only used Bolt and Barrier. Both high-level, probably mastered." The sentence hung in the air,
giving the impression that Sephiroth was about to say something else, but the moment passed and the General remained silent.

Genesis sighed. A waste, then. All he'd discovered about his saviour was that he hated Sephiroth for some reason, and that he was an even more accomplished warrior than first thought. "I wonder where he got the treatments," he mused. ShinRa kept the secret to creating SOLDIERs close to their chest, after all.

"I did consider the possibility of a company cover-up. There are rumours the first few attempts at SOLDIER went badly."

"Just rumours, of course," Genesis added sourly.

"Of course."

"In that case, we need only ask Hollander and Hojo." As distasteful as the thought was. He held Hollander in the same regard that a child might a dentist, but Hojo was a special brand of unpleasant.

Sephiroth ran a finger along Masamune's blunt edge, resting horizontally across his lap. "It bothers me, though. If he did have ties to ShinRa, why try to kill me, and not you?"

Genesis grinned like a cat that had not only caught the canary, but was thinking of going after the chocobo next. "Perhaps he was awed by my natural talent and good looks."

The amusement was not shared. "There are too many unknowns. We shouldn't have let him go. It's a breach in protocol."

"Forget protocol. What would you have proposed? He would not have accompanied us willingly, and I don't have half a dozen Firsts to spare restraining him. We're in the middle of a war, in case you've forgotten."

"I can take care of it. I can go find him again, bring him back, so we can question him properly." Sephiroth was beginning to look agitated.

"So I have to take time out of the campaign to bail you out again? I think not."

"Then what do you suggest?" The retort was unusually sharp, but Genesis paid it no mind. He found himself far less resentful of the Silver General now that he too knew the pain of defeat. Oh, he was sure that Sephiroth was making excuses in his head – things like the battle being interrupted, or that he'd not taken things seriously enough from the outset – but the truth remained that for the first time, he had not been wholly certain of victory. No longer did he rest atop a mountain, unreachable to the unwashed masses below.

"As the war sends the world hurtling towards destruction
The prisoner departs with his newfound love
And embarks on a new journey.
He is guided by hope that the gift will bring bliss
And the oath that he swore to his friends."

"Loveless is not a response."

"Only because you lack the appreciation for the many interpretations that can be drawn from its words." Genesis swept from the table, heading to the map of Wutai pinned up on the folded board for strategy meetings. "We are here, and you cannot be called back to the mainland until the next
shipment of supplies arrives."

"If it arrives. Now that we're further inland, the Wutai can cut the supply line."

"If it arrives," Genesis agreed without missing a beat. "Regardless, you're stuck here until then. But considering our navy is currently in full control of the strait, and that the shores on the other side are being heavily patrolled by ShinRa, Strife cannot leave the isle without our knowledge."

"He doesn't need to leave Wutai. There are plenty of places to hide within it," Sephiroth pointed out.

"Precisely." He ran a gloved hand from the north peninsula to the south. "It will be difficult to search for him until the war is settled. But you're overlooking the most important fact."

Sephiroth frowned. "And that would be?"

Genesis let the silence linger for a moment – it was so rare he had the opportunity to one-up the Silver General, and he wanted to savour it. "He has announced that he intends to slay the great General Sephiroth."

The frown deepened.

"Consider – you need not lift a finger, and Strife will eventually come after you."

A heavy silence hung in the air as Sephiroth absorbed this. Eventually, his posture relaxed, and he nodded in agreement, but offered no words.

"It's settled then. In the meantime, you can pull your weight here, and take charge of the rear guard," Genesis offered haughtily.

The intended insult missed its mark, as the edge of Sephiroth's lips quirked. "It's better than being at the office."

Genesis raised an eyebrow. "Even if it gets you killed?"

Sephiroth mirrored his expression. "You really think some lone stranger can kill me?"

The words were as self-assured as always, but Genesis found himself for once lacking an appropriate response. Because he wasn't so sure anymore, and by the light in his rival's eyes, he wasn't so confident, either.

Wutai worked differently to ShinRa – meeting under the cover of darkness, during the early hours of morning when even the birds and crickets had gone silent. The shuttered lanterns and the furtive, urgent whispers told him plenty – he was visiting the losing side. ShinRa splashed their campaign stories and strategies all over their papers and conducted public conferences on the war's progress. Their enemy, on the other hand, no longer had the luxury of propaganda or bravado.

Cloud observed his surroundings with the wary countenance of a warrior who didn't fear death so much as unpleasant surprises. If these Wutai were tricksters like Yuffie, he'd expect a trap, but the Crimson Elite were cut of a different cloth.

"Please wait here with the guards for a moment," the warrior escorting them requested as soon as he finished his hushed conference. "I will inform my captain of your arrival."

The blond stood off to the side, face stony. Yuffie ducked and tried to squirm past him again, but
he yanked her back by the scruff of her shirt. "Meanie!" she pouted.

Cloud rolled his eyes and didn't reply. She'd spent half the walk to the secluded temple alternating between trying to fight with him and trying to escape back into the black forest. She almost got away a few times too, but fortunately the false SOLDIER could see in the dark a lot better than an eight-year-old who was up way past her bedtime.

"Princess, this way," one of half a dozen attendants waved the little girl towards them, glancing at him resentfully.

"I don't want to!" she retorted stubbornly, digging in her heels and clutching at the fabric of his pants.

"You've been trying to get away all night," Cloud pointed out.

"But if I go with them I won't get to fight any bad guys!"

"You're not going to get to fight any bad guys with me, either."

The force of half a dozen attendants and one stern guard was enough to pry the pint-sized not-yet-a-ninja from his leg. "Traitor!" she hollered. "You'll regret this!"

Cloud sighed. She hadn't honestly become attached to him that quickly, had she? She'd change her tune if she knew why he'd agreed to come.

The guards eyed him warily, standing at attention as Cloud folded his arms and leant against a tree trunk, waiting for his escort to return. Strange how easy it was to get used to the suspicious stares again.

The same Crimson Elite who'd brought him there returned after a few minutes. "Thank you for waiting. They will see you now. But if you could leave your sword here, please," he requested.

"The sentries will make sure no harm comes to it."

Cloud tensed at that, and sent a pointed look at the katana still resting on the warrior's hip.

"My apologies. But you understand, given the circumstances…"

Gritting his teeth, he stabbed the blade into the earth. A show of faith, then. As much as he abhorred the idea of being unarmed in a world still containing Sephiroth, he couldn't blame Wutai's nobility for being wary of a trap.

Besides, he still had a mastered Fire materia in his pocket.

The Crimson Elite gave him another smile – the only person he'd come across here yet to do so – and led the way inside. As they crossed the threshold, Cloud found himself surprised by the luxurious surroundings – rich red rugs, golden cribbing around the doors, and walls adorned with magnificently detailed scrolls of dragons painted on very expensive silk. His estimation of the person meeting him shot up in importance. On Wutai's scale, this was the sort of extravagance one would expect from Heideigger, or old man ShinRa himself.

They passed through several doors before coming to a spacious room. The warrior by his side vanished, melting into the shadows with the other guards once again, leaving Cloud standing awkwardly in the entrance.

"Please, take a seat." The request came from a middle-aged man, resting on his knees on an
embroidered cushion yet keeping his posture as straight as an infantryman at attention.

"I'd rather stand," he answered, still eyeing the half a dozen Crimson Elite guards lining the edges of the room. There were also two men wearing robes only slightly less ostentatious than the red and purple livery of the kneeling individual – Cloud quickly surmised he was the leader and the other two were advisors.

"Show no disrespect to Lord Godo!" One of the advisors snapped sharply.

Lord Godo? Yuffie's father? As in the ruler of Wutai?

No wonder they'd asked him to leave his sword behind.

Godo didn't react to his advisor's outburst, and simply offered, "I suggest only so my men may sit too."

Put like that, and with the knowledge he was dealing with Yuffie's father, Cloud found himself willing to be more accommodating. However, he'd never be able to sit comfortably for long in the position Lord Godo held, so instead settled down with his legs crossed. He could be mobile quicker and didn't risk his feet going numb. Some paranoid habits were worth holding on to.

The advisor who'd spoken bristled at what Cloud assumed to be a breach in protocol, but the rest of the room's occupants sat without fuss. Cloud took the time to study the man across from him more thoughtfully.

The way the Yuffie from his time used to talk, Godo Kisaragi was a yellow-bellied pushover who favoured peaceful resolutions and inaction in the face of ShinRa's might. It was that caricature which gave Cloud hope of being able to convince Wutai to surrender prematurely – the belief that if Godo comprehended the certainty of their defeat before the fact, the war need not end as violently as in the past.

Except he saw no evidence of that man before him. Instead, he faced a hardened, prideful Wutai warrior. He was a fighter past his prime, perhaps, but still in excellent shape, and the calluses on his hands suggested he continued to train with weapons regularly.

Not good. The defeat at the hands of ShinRa must have changed the Emperor of Wutai. The Godo before him now still believed in Wutai's superiority, in death before dishonour, in ideals before peace.

Cloud was no politician. This could be a lot harder than he anticipated.

"Given the situation, I will skip the usual formalities," Lord Godo began. His voice was deep and formal, a commanding sort of tone that reminded him of his cadet days. "As my advisor already revealed, I am Godo Kisaragi, Emperor of Wutai."

The silence following that statement stretched, and Cloud realised they were waiting for an introduction in return. "...Strife." He still didn't feel comfortable with giving out his full name, not when it was shared with a child living in blissful ignorance in Nibelheim.

"Lord Strife," he acknowledged, and the advisor opened his mouth as though to speak, before a look from one of the Crimson Elite made him think twice. Cloud was unbothered by it. Yuffie had explained quite a lot about the various titles Wutai conferred on their warrior class during her endless chatter about her homeland. "To begin with, allow me to extend my sincerest gratitude for returning my daughter. She is young, and does not understand the need to abide by the security measures taken to protect her safety. Her minders will be more vigilant in the future."
He had some sympathy for them – keeping Yuffie in one place was like holding onto a handful of electric eels. "Good. The forest is no place for children these days." Whatever they might have thought of ShinRa, SOLDIERs weren't in the practice slaughtering civilians, but in the midst of a chaotic fight anything could happen.

"Such are the times," Godo agreed. He folded his arms into his billowing sleeves and regarded him with a keen eye. "But it has led to a fortuitous meeting. We have been watching your movements carefully for the past two weeks, and your actions have been confusing. You fight our scouts, but do not kill them. You fight ShinRa, but do not kill them, either."

Cloud remained silent.

"What is your purpose?"

The air filled with the swish of silk as his advisors shifted uneasily – whether from his lack of answer or lack of respect was anyone's guess.

"I will be frank. Your skill in battle has impressed us. We would like to gain your aid. Lord Genesis's abilities have gone beyond our predictions, and Lord Sephiroth's arrival has only worsened our position."

The response came swiftly this time. "No."

One could not rule Wutai if they were so easily deterred. "Do not be hasty in answering. What is it that drives you? Honour? Money?" Lord Godo persisted.

"No. Not for anything. I can't win this war for you." Not anymore. "My purpose here was for something larger than Wutai." He knew from their faces they regarded his words as an insult, but he'd frankly stopped caring. His only concern now was reducing the number of casualties.

"Then you are with ShinRa!" One of the guards declared, rising and levelling his pike at him.

"Stand down!" Lord Godo barked. "This man was seen fighting Lord Sephiroth! He is no friend of ShinRa."

One of the advisors murmured something in a low voice – through the thick accent the only word Cloud caught was 'fight', but he could guess the rest of what was said anyway when Godo gave him a sharp look. The advisor wondered if the fight were staged.

He had no way to prove it wasn't, either. They had every right to be suspicious of him.

"What is your purpose in Wutai then?" The other advisor asked. "If we were to assist you with it, perhaps we could strike a deal of mutual benefit."

They couldn't. They'd be slaughtered if they tried. Nobody else could defeat Sephiroth.

"It's private," he replied. "And it's a battle I have to fight on my own."

That, at least, appeared to be something all of the Wutai understood.

"Is there nothing that will make you reconsider?" Lord Godo asked thoughtfully.

Cloud shook his head.

"Very well, then. It is a loss, but we have other means of fighting SOLDIERs." Pride and satisfaction laced Godo's tone, and gave him pause.
Cloud frowned, caught in recollection. "An anti-SOLDIER weapon…?" A memory, unfamiliar to him, slithered past, of a great beast inside a pagoda, plastered with paper charms and carrying a tomahawk as large as a man. "You mean monsters."

Both advisors turned deathly pale. Lord Godo showed his experience with his only reaction being a dip in the set of his mouth. "You know?"

"ShinRa does too. It's not an easy thing to hide." At least, he hoped it wasn't. If he recalled correctly, Zack went in on Turk intel, so there had to be some truth to the statement. "It doesn't matter either way. It won't work."

The tension in the room increased visibly. "And why do you say that?"

"SOLDIERs go on monster exterminating missions all the time. Sephiroth can take down a Nibel dragon easily." Cloud doubted they were familiar with fauna outside of Wutai, but clearly the word 'dragon' resonated with them. The Crimson Elite were beginning to look just as worried as the advisors.

Lord Godo held his gaze for a long moment, as though weighing his character by sight alone. "You do not think we will succeed."

An opening, and he seized it. "No. You can't win this fight, not with both Sephiroth and Genesis here, maybe not even if I helped you. No monster you can throw at them, no platoon of any size, will ever be enough. All you'll do is decimate your forces."

One of the Crimson warriors started to speak, but Lord Godo held up a hand, silencing the restless guards in one motion. "Then what would you suggest?"

This was what he'd come here for. It was a long shot, but he had to try. They were listening, which was already more than he expected. "Strike a deal. If you surrender now, you can still make conditions, and your forces will remain intact for later rebellion."

That sent a ripple through the room - half of surprise, half of indignation. "Yet in the time between, a mako reactor will be built," Godo observed, voice slow and level.

"It won't happen that quickly," Cloud stated. "Reactors take a long time to be built." They didn't look convinced, so he added, "It's not the reason why ShinRa are here anyway."

The ripple became a wave. Godo leaned forward slightly. "Then you know their true intentions?"

Cloud crossed his arms. "ShinRa is being led around the nose by Hojo, searching for 'The Promised Land'."

"And he believes this land to be Wutai?"

"No. But he's afraid you might find it first."

"Can we?" One of the advisors asked.

Cloud shook his head slowly. "It doesn't exist, not in the way Hojo has led ShinRa to believe. This war is pointless."

A gloomy atmosphere descended upon the room, which all the bright livery could do nothing to chase away. "How is it," Lord Godo began, "you know all this, Lord Strife?"
A question he wasn't willing to answer. "I can't tell you anything more. I've probably said too much already."

The Emperor nodded. "Very well." Then... "It is a shame that you refuse to fight with us. No matter their motives, ShinRa has no right to claim these lands as their own."

No, he couldn't be saying... He thought he'd been getting somewhere!

"You're going to keep fighting this war?"

"We have no other choice. We cannot allow ShinRa to sully Wutai's shores. Now that we know even the reason for this conflict is a lie, we have no choice but to fight in order to protect our values."

"But do you really want to gamble your future on ideals like honour and pride?" Cloud asked urgently. Godo couldn't be dismissing his words so easily. Hadn't he already admitted that Genesis and Sephiroth together were too much for his forces to handle?

"With respect, Lord Strife, our cultures are very different. We do not expect you to understand." The advisors looked less convinced, but that meant nothing. He could see it in the man's face. Godo Kisaragi would not be swayed.

It couldn't be. Not only had he failed to stop the War, but he didn't even have the power to do something so simple as reduce the damage? He knew he was no politician, but he'd thought that if he could make them see...

His eyes narrowed. No choice. There was only one option left to help Wutai. Kill Godo himself. One mastered Fire spell could take him out, and leave the temple in enough chaos for him to escape. Never mind that he was Yuffie's father. He didn't mind being cast as the villain if it meant he could salvage something from this whole mess.

Do it now, while their guards were down. One spell. Even if it didn't kill him, Godo would be incapacitated. The advisors were more sympathetic. If they took over-

His fingers slid into his pocket, and grasped at air.

...What?

Carefully, he dug a little deeper. It really wasn't there. In disbelief, Cloud checked his other pocket. Not there either. But he remembered swapping it out from his sword earlier that day, checking that it would be secure in his pocket...

...Yuffie.

"Is something the matter, Lord Strife?" one of the advisors asked.

He should have known. Eight years old didn't automatically mean she wasn't a thieving scamp.

His fingers uncurled. "...Nothing."

The Emperor nodded. "Thank you for your time, then. We have other urgent matters we need to discuss, but if you should change your mind about assisting us, we would remain open to negotiation."

A strangled sound of agreement somehow escaped his throat. Numbly, he rose, and was escorted
by two guards back towards the antechamber.

Who would have thought a child's sticky fingers and love of materia would wind up saving her father's life, and dooming her country?

_Focus_, he reminded himself. It had always been a long shot. The Wutai were proud of their warrior traditions - surrendering went against their very grain, even if it bolstered their chance of success later. He'd done everything he could.

Besides, he had bigger problems than Wutai to worry about. Jenova. Hojo. Sephiroth, eventually. And as horrible as the War had been, the losses paled in comparison to the destruction Meteor wrought on Midgar.

If they were so intent on marching to their death, so be it. Even if the knowledge tore at him, Cloud refused to be drawn into any more pointless battles. He couldn't _afford_ to stop here.

It was time to cut his losses, and move on from Wutai.

...Just as soon as he recovered some missing materia.
Chapter 6

Two months later, and Cloud's not much better at the whole time-travelling thing.

Sephiroth stared out the window, looking down on the sprawling metropolis. He wasn't particularly interested in the view, but found himself watching for blonds, despite acknowledging the futility of the gesture.

He couldn't get it out of his mind. The strange man in Wutai.

None of it made any sense. He claimed he desired to kill him - in itself, not an unusual occurrence, as ShinRa had made many enemies and Sephiroth was the face of the company's military arm – yet not Genesis, who was almost as prominent in the public eye.

Then there was the battle itself. It had been a long time since Sephiroth confronted the possibility of losing a fight, and it left him rattled… but at the same time, thrilled. Not even Genesis and Angeal working together could lay a scratch on him, yet this stranger slipped past his guard time and time again with ease, until it was Sephiroth who was being cornered, Sephiroth who was being pushed.

Unbelievable. Strength equal to any First Class, and speed perhaps greater than his own. A worthy opponent. No, more than that, a worthy rival.

"A gil for your thoughts?" Angeal asked.

Sephiroth hadn't heard him come in, and chided himself for his inattention. Over two months of letting this distract him, now. "Merely admiring the scenery."

"So you've finally learned to stop and appreciate the view? I doubt that." Genesis too, sauntering into his private office like he owned the place. Someday soon he might, now that Wutai had surrendered and newspapers were hailing ShinRa's new hero. Never mind that the stories left out how many men they'd lost in the conflict – not just troopers, but SOLDIERs and Turks, too. Genesis might have wrangled a decisive victory out of the campaign, but the company would be feeling the cost for years.

"You're back. The treaty negotiations were so short?"

Genesis claimed a chair and propped his feet up on the desk, which Sephiroth knew to keep clean after having paperwork tossed to the floor on more than one occasion. "Thankfully so. Terribly boring matters, very formal affair, mostly photo opportunities. Saw some Wutai theatre. Interesting set and costume design, but nothing close to the local productions of Loveless. Of course, the finer details may have been lost in translation. Their artists use an odd dialect."

Neither SOLDIER took the bait – ask Genesis about poetry or theatre, and he'd discuss it with you.
for hours, long after your interest had expired, held the funeral, and passed into memory. "What were the terms?"

"You haven't read the papers?" Genesis was more interested in examining his gloves for damage than the conversation at hand. "The standard affairs, when war is ended in an uneven fashion. A 'compromise' in ShinRa's favour. Disarmament, and a garrison stationed there for a time. They'll be allowed to continue self-governance, but taxes will be redirected to ShinRa coffers. And we agreed to delay the construction of a reactor in exchange for four years of free trade - to adjust the populace to the idea of mako power. We have to start with smaller generators and related goods and services."

"The terms aren't bad. If they'd held out any longer, their surrender might have been unconditional," Angeal observed. "Though from what you've told me of the campaign, I'm surprised they surrendered at all."

Sephiroth agreed. He'd been called back to the East Continent before the end of the campaign to settle some saber rattling from Fort Condor, but even in the early stages, it had been a massacre. Yet still the Wutai warriors charged them, death in their eyes. Ridiculous, in his opinion. There was a difference between pride and stupidity.

"Ah, and that is where it becomes interesting," Genesis's grin gained a sly edge. "During the treaty negotiations, Lord Godo did drop one interesting tidbit of information."

Sephiroth could see his self-professed rival watching him carefully out the corner of his eye, even as he pretended to inspect the ceiling. This time, he took the bait. "And what was that?"

"It appears he met with a stranger going by the name 'Strife'. From the way he talked, I'm led to believe that the fact they surrendered at all may have been due to him."

Sephiroth stilled, and Angeal looked between his two friends in confusion. "Strife... you mean that deserter Sephiroth went to Wutai to sort out?"

"We don't know what he is," Sephiroth corrected, leaving the safety of the window to sit at his desk. "He has supposedly never worked for ShinRa, but he's unquestionably a SOLDIER." Genesis went back to fiddling with his gloves. Before returning from Wutai, they'd made an agreement not to mention Strife's death threat to Angeal. Their old friend could be somewhat overprotective, and would no doubt take exception to their plan to wait for the blond enigma to reveal himself again.

Which turned out to be irrelevant, as over two months had passed, and Strife had yet to make a re-appearance.

Sephiroth was impatient for it. Thanks to ShinRa's border patrols, they knew he'd left Wutai at least, but had no idea of where he went after that. He itched for a rematch. What could the mysterious blond be doing that was more important than plotting the death of ShinRa's famed Silver General?

"He's a nobody as far as the system is concerned," Genesis continued, a touch of amusement in his voice.

"I doubt a nobody could hold enough sway with Wutai's leaders to get them to make any sort of compromise. ShinRa didn't just go onto the island fists already swinging, you know," Angeal pointed out.

"If there is one thing the Wutai respect, it is strength," Sephiroth commented mildly. "They would
at least take into account the opinion of a third party, if they believed that third party to be a superior fighter."

"Huh. If he's so incredible, why not fight for them?" One of Angeal's most admirable traits was his simple practicality.

"He is a man of many mysteries, our Strife," Genesis declared lazily.

"I'm getting that impression. Sephiroth has hardly talked about anything else since he got back." Angeal's mouth held an odd twist, as though he wasn't sure whether he was supposed to be pleased or confused. Then he continued on to say what Sephiroth had been thinking for weeks. "And you've changed, Genesis. I barely recognised you when you stepped out of the helicopter. Was it all really thanks to this Strife character?"

"You'll understand when you meet him." Abruptly, Genesis frowned, as though only just remembering something. "...How have you been feeling lately, Angeal?"

The question took Sephiroth by surprise, and he turned to focus his full attention on his old friend. Angeal didn't look any different... although was that a grey hair? Maybe he was stressed and simply not showing it.

Angeal chuckled. "Where did that come from? I've been stuck here training Seconds in ShinRa. I've had it easy compared to you two."

Genesis was not deterred, though. "No aches, no pains, anything weird?"

Frowning now, Angeal rolled his shoulders as though to test, and replied, "Not really. My back's a bit sore from where I pulled it when sparring with Zack, but-"

"Still?" Sephiroth asked. "That was a couple of days ago now."

"Was it? It's not that painful, I only notice when I put strain on that particular muscle." He shrugged. "Maybe I'm getting old."

Genesis flashed him a dark glance, then swept to his feet. "I'm going out for a while."

"Leaving again already? You just got here," Sephiroth pointed out.

"It can't wait. There might not be enough time!" The door slammed shut behind him, leaving the other two SOLDIERs perplexed. Genesis was known for his violent mood swings, but the change was abrupt even for him.

"Any idea what that was about?" Angeal asked, suspicious.

"None," Sephiroth replied, and was surprised to realise the statement was mostly true.

Apparently Strife wasn't the only mystery on hand.

Cloud hadn't returned to Nibelheim since Meteor. Couldn't bear to step foot in the town square and see lifeless actors strolling about a fake set. In his opinion, ShinRa rebuilding the town as though nothing had happened was worse than leaving its charred corpse to rot. Just walking through it made him feel sick. Too many memories. Fire. Sephiroth. His mother. Years and years of endless agony in the basement of ShinRa mansion. Scratching messages on the inside of a glass tube with his fingernails. His hand trembled in recollection. It would take days just to make a single groove.
This Nibelheim, he reminded himself, was not the fake stage ShinRa constructed to cover up its misdeeds. And he needed to go through there – the cliffs on the other side of the reactor were sheer, and dangerous for even a SOLDIER to scale.

Yet his feet were planted to the ground, and refused to move. He didn't like it. Not just the flood of memories he would inevitably have to contend with – he was content to let most of those missing four years stay lost – but also the fact that his mother was up there, and he couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do about her.

He wanted to see her. Many years had passed since he missed her – he was a grown man, after all – but he'd lost her too soon, too violently, not to yearn for the chance to at least look on her face one more time. He couldn't remember what it looked like when she smiled. The only expression he could recall was the twisted fear and agony of her final moments.

No. He was being sentimental. It was foolish. The smart thing to do would be to head up the mountain under the cover of night, go straight to mansion, wake up Vincent, take care of Jenova, and then be out of the village again before the sun rose.

In the end, his indecision wound up taking the choice right out of his hands. The rumble of an approaching motor went unnoticed until it was too late to hide, and then when the brakes squealed, he knew his cover to be completely blown.

"...Strife?" The voice sounded uncertain.

It was one of the men from the nearby village, who made the runs to Nibelheim and carried their excess stock to sell at one of the larger towns in the area. Cloud couldn't remember his name, despite the fact he'd once hitched a ride with this very man when he left home to enlist with ShinRa. His timing must have been phenomenally unlucky – the truck passed this spot only once every few days.

"You gotta be related. You're the spittin' image of that Strife kid," he continued. "You his Dad?"

Cloud's eyebrows rose, and the man laughed, slapping his hand against the rolled-down window. "Just jokin', son! You can't be that old."

Regardless, he latched on to the idea. Now he had a way out – a cover story. "I'm his Uncle."

"True? I never seen you around before. Coming to visit only now?"

"I didn't know they existed before." And the remarkable thing was, to his twelve-year-old self, the lie would be believable. Even now, Cloud didn't know anything about his father. He very well might have an Uncle out there in the world somewhere.

"Well, hop in then! Can't have you going up there on foot. Shiva, can't believe you made it this far."

Cloud had no choice but to accept – anything else would be suspicious. When he opened the passenger door, though, and took First Tsurugi from its harness, the driver recoiled.

"You're SOLDIER!"

This routine again. "I'm not with ShinRa anymore. That was a long time ago."

He recovered fast. "Izzat so? Shame. ShinRa hardly ever sends anyone out here. Thought maybe they were finally going to clear out that nest of dragons."
"I can take care of it anyway. You don't need ShinRa for that." He wouldn't mind doing something so small. Nibel dragons were nothing to sneeze at, but like Sephiroth, it had been a long time since he feared one.

"You can probably get a free night at the inn if you tell the Mayor, then," he chortled. "Though I guess you might be staying with the Strifes."

"They don't know I'm coming." At last, he could tell the truth about something. "I might not even be welcome."

"Well, no way telling what the missus will do, but the kid ought t' be happy as a fat chocobo." It was profoundly strange to hear him refer to what Cloud figured to be his past self, if his past existed anymore.

"Hn." Cloud didn't add anything more. He'd barely stopped to speak to anyone over the past two months – making it to the western continent on little more than a dingy, then having to make his way to Nibelheim mostly on foot, since he'd spent the last of his gil getting his PHS account validated. Picked up a charger too, since his was still trapped in the future with Fenrir and the battery had run out somewhere in Wutai. It took a bit of tinkering to make it work, since the connector didn't fit, and he'd had to get a voltage adaptor as well to avoid frying it - modern PHS models were designed to run much more efficiently than those produced in the energy-opulent days of mako power.

Maybe it had been foolishly optimistic, when he could have spent that gil on travel or more regular accommodation. Nobody was going to call. But he didn't want to be without a functioning PHS. Those numbers might work someday.

The car rumbled to life once more and began its bumpy journey up the slope. "Name's Bradley Ferrey, by the way." There it was. Another inconsequential memory clicked into place. Bradley had always been one of the nicer adults in Nibelheim – maybe because he wasn't actually from there, and so didn't carry the same prejudices as the others. Cloud was just the village runt to him, nothing more, and his mother a single woman living the hard life.

"Cloud," he answered automatically.

"Really? Same as the kid, then."

He mentally cursed. He'd have made a terrible Turk – he wasn't good at lies. *Except when he believed them.* Cloud winced and shook the thought away. "It's a popular name in the family."

"That so? Bradley was my father's name too. Took me years t' ditch the 'junior.'" He chuckled. "Still, might get a bit confusing. You and the kid could be brothers. I ain't never seen a head of spiky blond hair like that anywhere else."

Cloud shrugged, and looked out the window. He was feeling ill, but motion sickness hadn't bothered him for a long time now.

The bumpy mountain road made for a slow journey by truck, though it was still considerably faster than going on foot. Fortunately, Bradley didn't badger him with much conversation, other than the occasional remark about the weather or quip about the local flora and fauna. Cloud feigned impress, sidestepped any questions, and drank in the familiar landscape.

His heart leapt into his throat at the first sign of smoke – flames danced before his eyes – but then he blinked, and only an ordinary white wisp remained. "We're here," Bradley announced
unnecessarily, pulling the truck to a shuddering stop by the village entrance. "I'll go introduce you to the Strifes, first."

Words of protest hovered on the tip of his tongue, but Cloud remembered at the last second he wasn't supposed to know which house his 'relatives' lived in. Instead he nodded mutely, feeling fourteen all over again as he trailed Bradley to his childhood home. A mistake, a waste of time, a dangerous distraction, a risk… he shouldn't be going there, yet his feet carried him onward. He had a cover story now, if a flimsy one - surely it would be okay?

"I won't stick around," Bradley promised as he knocked on the door. "But gotta say, I don't often get t' see long-lost relatives hook up again. Highlight of my week." He peered at him. "You look like you're about to faint. Don't worry. They're nice, if a bit weird."

Cloud nodded faintly, heart racing faster than a Gold Chocobo on a Saucer time trial. He was on the verge of calling the whole thing off and making a break for ShinRa mansion, but then soft footsteps pattered up to the door, the handled turned, and... "Mr Ferrey?"

"Morning, Missus Strife," Bradley greeted, grin stretched wide. "Sorry t' disturb, but on my way here, you won't believe who I picked up a the base of the mountain. Poor fellow looked a bit lost, I think he might belong to you."

The door opened a little further, her eyes flicked to him, widened, and the hand dropped away from the doorknob. "You…?"

Cloud fidgeted. "Hello ma'am," he mumbled. "I think you might have known my brother…?"

The silence stretched, but Cloud couldn't tear his eyes from his mother's face – it took all of his self-control not to sweep the woman into a tight embrace and never let go. She always seemed so sturdy in his memories, so much larger than life, but here now he found himself faced with a frail waif of a woman, worn to the bone. When did he grow taller than her? When did she become so fragile? Was she always like this, and he only noticed now?

Then her face twisted, and the illusion of fragility shattered. "You- You-" The words dripped with hate. "Why are you here?"

…What?

His mouth opened, then closed. His mother's glare was stronger than a mastered silence spell.

"Away! Away with you!" she shrilled. "Do you take me for an idiot? Your family – You people!" She shook, white with rage. "Haven't you done enough?"

Feet rooted to the ground, Cloud couldn't do anything more than stare blankly. Numbness began to creep across his body, an embrace colder than Shiva's hug.

"Missus Strife," Bradley nervously tried to interject on his behalf. "He's come a long way-"

"I don't want to hear it! I know better now!" she snapped. "I won't let you take him! Get out of my sight! Get out! Out!"

Some distant part of him became aware of the curtains shifting across the way as curious eyes looked on, greedily observing the latest drama to enfold the Strife household. Yet Cloud could not move. Could barely think.

That was when she pulled the rifle out from behind the door.
Enhanced reflexes finally kicked in, and First Tsurugi came around, held flat as a shield. The bullet ricocheted off the blade, thudding into the grass nearby.

"Cripes!" Bradley ran for cover, and Cloud backed up a step as another bullet hit the sword. "Why you still standing there man, run!"

He had little choice. First Tsurugi guarding his retreat, Cloud backed away until he left the line of sight of his mother's rifle, bullets peppering the path of his escape.

"And don't you dare show your face here again! Don't you dare!" she shrieked after them, firing the gun once more to drive the point home. The shot hung in the air, a dull ringing in his ears drowning out all hope.

Cloud pressed his lips together, and swallowed the bitterness welling in his throat.

What did he expect? To be greeted with open arms, even as a stranger? He knew nothing about his father's family, but he should have guessed something bad happened. Why else would his mother never talk about it, would continue to stay in Nibelheim even though they were pariahs? But that she'd shot at him…

Gaia, he was never going to get the hang of this time-travelling thing. Couldn't anything go the way he wanted for once? Was he being selfish, seeking that small comfort of talking with his mother again, even as a stranger? What was the point of all this if he couldn't have even that much?

Bradley patted him awkwardly on the shoulder, eyes wide and sweat beading his brow. He looked about as shaky as Cloud felt. "That was a bit of a fright. Why don't we go to the Inn? Have a drink. Mayor will put you up if you take care of the dragons." Not waiting for a response, the driver led the way, no doubt eager to put the water tower between them and the distraught woman with a rifle. Cloud cast one last, longing glance toward his house before following.

There really was no returning home once he left. Destiny seemed determined to make sure of it.

The ruckus had drawn the attention of Mayor Lockhart, and he stood in front of the Inn, face pinched in a frown. "Who are you?" he asked, stance full of aggression.

"This here's Cloud Strife. Long-lost uncle of the little runt. Cloud, Mayor Lockhart," Bradley introduced, still visibly rattled by the encounter. At least he had it together enough to do the talking. Cloud didn't think anything other than a croak could work its way out of his throat currently.

Lockhart gave him a fierce look at the name, and the blond just about resigned himself to spending the night in ShinRa manor, or maybe not bothering to sleep at all. Go with the original plan. Get in, get the job done, and get out again as fast as possible.

Luckily, Bradley wasn't finished yet. "His original plan was t' check in and have a bit of a family reunion, but you might have heard how that went. Good news is, he's tough as a SOLDIER, and offered to take care of the dragon's nest for us."

Lockhart changed his stance quickly, though the dislike didn't disappear from his eyes. "You think you can handle a Nibel dragon?"

A distraction, however unpleasant. *Mayor Lockhart, storming towards him, out for blood, his mother the only thing standing in his way. Sweet, popular Tifa, who stuck her neck out for him once but only made things worse, lying unconscious on the ground. "Nibel dragons aren't a problem." Humans were the only problem. SOLDIERs, specifically. And mothers with guns.*
The Mayor didn't look pleased with his lack of explanation, but even he couldn't miss the heavy sword on his back or the gleaming materia, and to someone so unused to real combat, Cloud figured he looked impressive enough to be given the benefit of the doubt. "I suppose if you clear the nest out for us, I could let you board at the Inn. No longer than a week, though! We're not a charity," he offered grudgingly.

Cloud replied with a flat glance. "I don't intend on staying that long."

Lockhart harrumphed, and in a show of deliberate rudeness, left without another word. Cloud found himself looking for Tifa, but of course she couldn't be spotted anywhere nearby. The children would either be at home eating lunch or up on the mountain trail playing.

"He's just anxious about yer good looks - worried you'll leave a line of bastards behind you," Bradley assured him, slowly gaining his confidence back. "But you ain't the type. Anybody who spoke to you for more than five minutes could tell you that." He pushed open the door to the inn. "Get in here, have some lunch. Don't go fighting Nibel dragons on an empty stomach." And with his head elsewhere, but Cloud appreciated the courier possessed tact enough not to say so directly.

Bradley sorted everything with the inn's management, while the blond sat at the table, thoughts whirling chaotically. The same inn he once patrolled outside of. The same inn General Sephiroth stayed in for only one night before disappearing into the base of ShinRa mansion. The same inn that once burned to the ground.

Memories battered him from every side. Cloud thought his recall of early Nibelheim was mostly intact post-Hojo, but sitting here in the familiar foyer, watching familiar children scamper around the water tower – like he used to, when he'd climb it and hide because no one ever thought to look up - dozens upon dozens of tiny recollections crowded into his consciousness, memories he'd been unaware he'd forgotten until presented with the right trigger to override the perplexing images of Gongaga he'd inherited.

He shivered. Returning to the mansion the first time had been traumatising enough. He sincerely hoped no further horrors lurked, hidden, in his subconscious.

Bradley slid a plate of steaming hot stew under his nose – Nibelheim cuisine, who would have ever thought he could miss it? – and Cloud started, unsure of how long he'd zoned out for.

"Eat up, you'll feel better, promise." Bradley took a seat next to him, apparently having adopted him. Cloud didn't mind – maybe because they both ran a delivery business of sorts, or maybe just because he still felt indebted to him for being so matter-of-fact about a fourteen-year-old hitching a ride out of town with little more than the clothes on his back – but he couldn't help but feel awkward about the trouble.

"You don't have to go to so much effort. You must have other things to do," he murmured.

Bradley shrugged. "Couldn't jus' leave you standing at the bottom of the mountain. 'Sides, no decent man could leave you hangin' after that. Really sorry about how it all went. I was sure- well, can't help it, I guess." He stuck into his stew with gusto, and Cloud followed suit, though more reservedly. "What happened t' get her so riled, anyhow?"

"I don't know." His reply sounded hollow to his ears. Realising he ought to know, he added, "I was just a kid when my brother left home."

Bradley gave him a sympathetic look. "She might come 'round, after the shock's worn off. Normally such a sweet woman, Missus Strife. Real understanding sort."
Cloud knew that, which was why seeing such unbridled anger, such hate on her face, shook him so. She'd shot at him. If he hadn't reacted, the bullet would have torn through his left lung.

_Yazoo and Loz, filled with rage for their fallen brother, the gunshot echoing in his ears, his vision blurring, fading._

It's for the best, he told himself. He wouldn't be able to keep his secret from her. He couldn't get attached, not when he needed to keep moving.

_His mother's face, blackened with soot, contorted by terror, eyes going blank as her life drained away._

Yes, it would be enough just to save her. He didn't need her thanks. All he needed was to protect her when he failed before.

_His mother, the one who raised him, died a long time ago._
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

This was a fun chapter to write. Hopefully you'll like it too.

The nest of dragons was an hour's hike from the village – much too close for anyone's comfort. Nibel dragons normally preferred to nest closer to the peak, past the reactor, and on the eastern side where they could warm themselves in the morning sun – far enough away that you weren't likely to hear their roars, much less stumble across one. Three of them had settled in the cave, apparently – two females, and one horn-headed male. He'd need to take out the bull first.

Cloud navigated carefully across the rocky ground, sticking to the uneven shelves of slate instead of the more inviting concourse of loose pebbles. Experience had taught him early in childhood that a stable surface on Mount Nibel was far more reliable than a gentle gradient. In retrospect, it had been rude – not to mention reckless – of Mayor Lockhart to not even to offer him a guide up the mountain, but luckily, he didn't need one. Hopefully no one thought to question why he already knew the safest path up.

Before he got that far, though, a confrontation with his shadow would be necessary.

The blond hunched his shoulders and tried to lengthen his stride, hoping to leave his follower behind. He could guess at the owner of the clumsy footfalls trailing him, and wasn't looking forward to the conversation. It didn't strike him as a good idea.

It didn't work, of course. The steps just scrambled to keep up. He always was too stubborn for his own good.

He stopped and turned around. "You might as well come out."

A little sheepishly, a head of spiky blond hair poked out from behind a tree.

Cloud met the bright, round blue eyes – no mako glow, no bitterness, just the innocent naïveté of youth – and for one second, expected the universe to end. His younger self, oblivious to the gravity of the moment, blinked owlishly and asked, "Are you SOLDIER?"

He didn't know what he expected. Considering he already altered the timeline by giving Aeris's water to Genesis, what more damage could meeting a younger version of himself do? As far as he was aware, none of his memories had changed to match. "Not exactly. I don't work for ShinRa."

The young boy frowned. "Who do you work for then?"

"Nobody. I work for myself."

The kid looked fascinated. Cloud winced, wondering if he'd always been so easy to read. "Doing what?"
"Bits and pieces. Deliveries." Though he didn't have his business set up here, and couldn't do so without Fenrir. "Fighting monsters. I'm kind of a mercenary."

Those blue eyes widened to the point where they looked as though they might pop out of his skull. "What kind of monsters?"

Brow creasing, Cloud fished about for some examples. "Anything, really. Coeurls, bat-eyes, wolves, thunderbirds, bom-ombs…"

At each name, the boy grew more excited. "Nibel wolves?"

Beginning to feel awkward at the shine in his childish doppelganger's eyes – could things get any weirder than being interrogated by your past self? - Cloud nodded.

"Those are huge! What about dragons?"

"Dragons, too. I'm going to take care of the nest nearby now. Which is why you should go home."

At the mention of home, the reserved, awkward youth returned. Scuffing his shoe on the ground, the younger blond stuttered, "Are… are you…?"

Already knowing the question the boy wanted to ask, Cloud answered, "Yeah. I'm your uncle." The lie felt awkward on his lips all of a sudden, though it rolled off so easily before.

"I've never heard of you before."

"It's new for me too." And for one second, he felt a spike of resentment for the child who still had his mother, his innocence, his hopes and dreams and carefree days – except he knew there were cares, he was still an awkward runt of a kid in a small town at the mercy of bullies, even if those problems seemed so trite in retrospect – and yet here he was, chasing after a fake uncle instead of cherishing what he had, and what Cloud couldn't have, not anymore.

"Why does Ma hate you?" he asked, voice scarcely rising above a whisper. "She wouldn't tell me."

"I don't know either. I think my fath-your dad's family," he corrected mid-word, "must have done something really terrible." He didn't have any real curiosity about it anymore. When his mother died, he resigned himself to never knowing, and the mystery stopped bothering him. It became hard to dwell on the issue when so much of his time was taken up with other psychological crises.

The boy nodded, biting his lip. They matched stares for a long moment. Cloud couldn't make the mental connection – this couldn't be a younger version of himself. It was just some kid that looked like him.

"…Ma's nice. She might come around, y'know, once she knows you're different. You seem like an okay person," came the timid offer.

Shaking his head, Cloud replied, "Don't burden her with it. I won't be here for long. I'll just stay out of her way."

"You're not staying?" As soon as the words left the boy's mouth, he looked away, and Cloud could track the thoughts running through his counterpart's mind. Disappointment, bitterness, the knowledge that things weren't going to change after all. Disgust at himself for daring to hope when he knew better.

Things would get a whole lot worse if he sat around Nibelheim forever, though. "I have things I
need to do. And it will make your mother uncomfortable, the longer I stay."

The silence stretched, but then those clear, blue, *mako-less* eyes sharpened, and that soft chin, still rounded by baby fat, jutted out determinedly. "You're going to fight the dragons now, right? Can I come? Just to watch!"

The request shouldn't have been a surprise, but Cloud was caught offguard all the same. He scrambled for an excuse. "Your mother-" So hard to remember not to call her 'Ma'. "-will be worried." And might shoot at him again if she knew her son followed him out of town. The gunshots didn't have to connect to *hurt*.

"I promise I won't get in the way," the boy whispered, as though someone might overhear.

He wouldn't get in the way, either. Cloud could remember that much about himself. But…

If he knew himself at that age, he'd try and follow anyway, and probably get into trouble for it.

"Fine," he said. "But stay back, and don't do anything I don't tell you to do."

His young counterpart nodded eagerly.

They resumed climbing. The rocky mountain paths hadn't changed a bit. At least this time, he wasn't scrambling along in the dark, driven by rage and grief, smoke in his lungs and his mother's blood still coating his hands. Cloud shivered, and pushed the memory to the back of his mind. These were things he was working to *prevent*.

His pint-sized doppelganger didn't say much on the journey there, though the weight of his innocent blue gaze bore into his back. Fortunately, what questions he did ask were the typical sort you could expect from a young pre-teen boy – 'where did you get those materia', 'what do they do', 'how good are you with a sword?'. Personal matters were taboo. That much hadn't changed.

His enhanced hearing picked up the heavy rumble of a dragon's breath long before the beasts were in sight. He held up a hand for quiet, and listened carefully. Only a little further to the east. They left the path, creeping through the shrubbery as quietly as possible.

There. Just beyond the end of the tree line, a rocky outcropping protruding in front of a granite cave. The rocks within the recess carried a faint glow, and the ones closer to the entrance sparkled like crystals in the sunlight. A sure sign of a mako fountain inside. That wasn't good.

The first female rested near the edge of the outcropping, basking leisurely in the sun. The bull lumbered into view a moment later, raising its head and sniffing the air. Cloud tensed. Nibel dragons weren't known for their keen senses, but if the mako had caused mutations…

The bull lost interest, ambling over to the resting female. The advantage of surprise still rested in his hands.

How best to take them out? The bull was larger than average and might pose a problem, but on the narrow outcropping, it wouldn't be able to move around easily. Speed was more important with dragons than anything else, once you considered First Tsurugi being tough enough to cut through the natural armour - Bahamut's hide made dragon scales look flimsier than Cait Sith's fortunes.

Three blades, he decided, breaking apart the sword, joining the lightest piece with the materia segment. He stabbed the others into the soft earth, swapped the Fire materia for the Restore materia, and ran one last check on his equipment, making extra certain the materia concealed in his pockets were secure. A repeat performance of the zolom fiasco was the last thing he needed.
"Stay here," he whispered to the younger Cloud, and crept from the cover of the trees. The last female must have been resting inside – ideally, he wanted to take care of the first two before they could retreat there. Dragons were easier to deal with from behind, away from their teeth, claws, and fiery breath.

Ducking low to stay out of the line of sight, he stealthily made his way downwind, sword in hand. The bolt spell would take a few seconds to get off – he'd open with that. The shock ought to stun and confuse them while he moved in on the bull from behind with his sword.

Once in position, he concentrated. The green materia slotted into First Tsurugi brightened, then crackled as the air split with a torrent of electricity. The bull and female let out simultaneous shrieks, a mixture of pain and surprise. They lumbered to their feet, disoriented.

Cloud pushed off, enhanced speed bringing him to the bull's flank in the space of a single breath. Slow it down first. First Tsurugi plunged into the thigh, severing the tendon just above its knees, and the dragon let out a guttural snarl as its leg collapsed beneath it. The serpentine neck whipped around, enormous teeth snapping blindly, but Cloud had already leapt to the other side and repeated the process. Lightning split the air once more, the female let out another shriek, the bull turned its attention back that way, and he moved again, running up the dragon's back in half a dozen quick steps. He leapt into the air.

In one swift strike, First Tsurugi split its skull. It never saw him coming.

The body thudded to the ground, head flopping grotesquely against the rock. The female let out a keening cry, and Cloud barely dodged the stream of flame belching from its mouth. The heels of his boots still warm, he dove for the ground, sliding underneath the dragon, First Tsurugi tearing through the tender underbelly, and rolled out of the way before it could collapse and trap him under its weight. A double-handed strike followed, separating the body from the head in one swipe. A quicker, cleaner death than the alternative.

Two down. Just the last female left.

A brief glance confirmed his younger self remained safe and hidden in the trees. Cloud turned towards the cave next. This one he'd need to take head-on, but the females were smaller, and their flame less intense.

A growl rumbled inside the cave as the blond approached. First Tsurugi held at the ready, he peered into the darkness, taking a moment to let his eyes adjust.

The scrape of scales across rock grated against his ears, and the dark mass at the back of the café shifted, coming closer. The thing to catch his attention, however, was the three round, speckled shapes bathed in the warm green light of a natural mako fountain.

Cloud cursed under his breath. A mother… with eggs.

He ducked back outside the cave, wincing at the blast of heat from the gushing wall of flame that followed. As soon as the torrent of fire abated, he swung back around, darted to the left and slashed at the front flank, kicking up embers in his wake. The mother's head swung towards him, teeth snapping at his hair, forcing him back. The strike wound up being a shallow slash that only served to anger the beast.

Cloud dodged, advanced, and retreated, never in any real danger but unable to find a good opening to take the mother out. He flattened himself against the cavern's side to avoid another blast of fire, and the dragon paused, eyes searching the cave when its flame failed to meet its mark.
Mako eyes made it hard to hide in the dark. He ran for the entrance – it was too difficult to dodge the fiery breath in such close quarters, and while he would survive a direct hit, that didn't mean it wouldn't hurt. The dragon lumbered after him, rage enough to draw it away from the eggs. It roared and swiped with its claws, but Cloud saw the strike coming and sidestepped easily. It followed with a snap of its jaws. Left wrong-footed from his previous evasion, the blond raised First Tsurugi.

Shock travelled down his arm, and he slid back a fraction in the soot. A twist of the wrist, and his sword locked the dragon's open maw in place. Slitted eyes focused on him, glittering with wild, animalistic rage. Warmth began to flow from its gullet. It was going to spew fire any moment.

In the space of a second, Cloud snapped off the smaller blade, and plunged it into the mother's throat.

The building heat abated, and smoke began to curl from the dragon's nostrils. Cloud twisted the sword once, and then pulled it from the neck, standing back as the body slumped.

Mission accomplished.

A burning smell lingered in the air, mixing with the tang of mako and the coppery taint of dragon's blood. Just to be sure, he headed into the cave, being careful to stay clear of the fountain. He'd experienced mako poisoning two times too many not to be leery of the stuff.

He cracked the first egg with the hilt of his sword, wrinkling his nose at the foul stench and sticky liquid that oozed from the broken shell. The embryo inside was misshapen, and flecks of mako crystals clung to its skin. A mutation. These dragons would one day grow up to become the monsters even your average SOLDIER would think twice about engaging.

With a small amount of regret, he repeated the action for the other two eggs. They weren't likely to hatch with their mother dead, but one could never tell what might happen with mako involved. Best to nip the problem in the bud.

Outside, his younger counterpart had left his hiding place and poked nervously at the felled bull, body dissolving as it returned to the Lifestream. He scrambled to attention at the sound of Cloud's approach. "That was amazing! You were so fast!" The shyness had vanished in favour of boyish enthusiasm. "And your sword separates! How did you learn to use a sword like that?"

Startled, Cloud didn't manage a response. Fortunately, one wasn't required.

"I didn't think anybody could be so strong outside SOLDIER. How would you rate against a SOLDIER in a fight? Do you think you'd win?"

This question Cloud could answer. "One-on-one? I could take on any SOLDIER ShinRa could throw at me." Hardly an empty boast – at one stage, he'd done so.

"Even a First Class? They're supposed to be super-strong."

"Even a First Class."

"Not the Generals, though," he asserted.

Cloud's lips quirked into a half-hearted smile. "I fought Sephiroth to a draw recently."

The younger blond just about fell over at that. "You're not lying?"

He probably shouldn't have told any kid he'd fought Sephiroth to a draw, even if that child was
himself. That sort of information could cause him trouble. "I think I had the element of surprise. Don't spread it around. They let me walk away that time, but if ShinRa hears about it, they might come after me in a group. I wouldn't do so well then."

His young counterpart nodded solemnly, alleviating his worry. He'd always been the sort to carry secrets to the grave. Thinking about it in retrospect, it was probably the only reason a runt like him ever made corporal in the regular forces. They needed troopers they could send on sensitive missions who wouldn't gossip.

Fishing for a change of subject, Cloud noted, "You sure know a lot about SOLDIER."

He received a quick nod and a small smile in response. "I want to join SOLDIER one day. I'll be strong, and nobody will ever think about messing with me. Like Commander Rhapsodos!"

Genesis? He must have become the new Hero of Wutai then, with Sephiroth taking a backseat. He probably ought to find a newspaper sometime, find out how the war ended, even if he wasn't sure he really wanted to know.

The familiarity of the words sent a chill down his spine, though. The hero might be different, but the result would be the same.

Cloud gathered up the pieces of First Tsurugi, rejoined them, and slung the sword into its harness. "You should stay out of SOLDIER," he warned, voice rough. "It's a den of monsters."

His younger self fell silent at those words, but Cloud didn't look back. If only he'd listened to Zack, if only…

It wouldn't have made a difference. But he'd make a difference now.

"You can be strong without becoming SOLDIER. I'm not SOLDIER, but I still took care of those dragons, right?"

There was no response, but Cloud could almost hear the wheels turning in the boy's head. He doubted it would be enough to dissuade his past self, but at least he'd planted the seed of doubt. "…You sure you won't stay?"

"I really can't. And your mother…" he trailed off, not wanting to think about that, not when fighting the dragons finally succeeded in getting his mind off the topic. "But if you ever leave Nibelheim, you can come look for me in Midgar. I won't be hard to find. Take care your mother in the meantime. She needs you, more than SOLDIER does."

'Stay here, just a little longer,' he thought, 'And I'll change fate for the both of us.'

Zack Fair was not having a good day. Not at all. His simulation session in the training room with his mentor had been rescheduled for an impromptu mission, just for starters. One of Hollander's experiments had broken out of the lab or something – all he knew was that one moment he'd been finishing a peaceful lunch in the SOLDIER cafeteria, and the next the whole building had descended into chaos as weird hybrid monsters ran amok.

"Where're Sephiroth and Genesis?" Zack yelled out to Angeal as he hacked at some gargoyle that might have once been a coeurl.

"Sephiroth's guarding the President and Genesis is clearing out the Science labs!" Angeal called back. He dispatched another monster. "Looks like this floor is clear. We'll- just a minute." He
pulled out his buzzing PHS. "Director Lazard?"

Zack's PHS beeped as well. He flipped it open and read the mission mail. Top-priority. Great, the monsters had made it out of the building and onto the street.

"Zack-

"I got it, I got it," he assured the SOLDIER First. Angeal could be such an old man sometimes. Hefting his broadsword, he dashed out onto the street, almost immediately running into more gargoyles harassing some civilians. He pulled their attention with a low-level fire spell, then set to work with his blade. "Too easy!"

"Don't get cocky!" Angeal warned, taking out some misshapen wolf with nothing more than his fists. The courtyard clear, they headed deeper into Sector 4.

"What the hell was the Science Department thinking, anyway?" Zack complained as he sliced down some weird flying insect... thing. Whatever it was, it was way too big! "Who forgot to lock the door on the specimen cages?"

"Maybe they were let out on purpose." Angeal's comment held an unusually dark tone to it, despite the wry smile on his face.

"Why would anyone want to do that?" Zack growled, and kicked away another mutated wolf. How the heck did it see without eyes?

"You really should pay more attention to politics." Angeal grunted as he knocked aside another monster. "Get out of here!" he shouted towards some cowering civilians. "It's not safe on the streets!"

"In here, miss!" Zack called, holding open one of the bar doors. "Just stay indoors until ShinRa sounds the all-clear. We'll take care of this right away!" The ground shook under their feet. "What the heck was that?"

Angeal's PHS buzzed again. "Angeal here. Yeah? ...This is ridiculous. Where are the rest of the Firsts? ...Uh huh. No, we're out here already. Okay, but I'm writing this up when I get back."

Looking as though he'd just seen what really went into ShinRa's cafeteria specials, he snapped the PHS closed. "Explosion over by the Sector 5 reactor. We're heading there next."

"What the hell is going on? How many of these things are there?" Zack groused.

"Stop whining. Weren't you just complaining about not getting enough real action yesterday?"

"Yeah but-" His rebuttal was cut off when he caught sight of a new monster lumbering into view. "Angeal!"

A marlboro – nasty monsters normally, and this one had to be a good two to three times larger than the norm.

"Change of plan! Zack, you head for the Sector 5 reactor! I'll sort out the marlboro and catch up with you!"

"Gotcha!" He took off at a run, ducking under a flailing tentacle. Even at a distance, it smelt foul. The SOLDIER Second didn't envy his superior officer in the least.

The streets were empty by now, as ShinRa's emergency broadcasts did the trick. Zack made a
beeline for the reactor, unhindered but for the occasional small-fry monster that popped up in his path. They didn't even slow him down. That promotion to First-Class was so his after this!

He squinted, just barely able to make out the faint green tinge to the sky. The Sector 5 reactor lay just ahead, but he didn't see any smoke or evidence of massive explosions.

There was, however, an enormous behemoth lumbering his way. And suddenly he wished he stayed back to fight the marlboro after all. A behemoth! Those things always knocked him flat in simulation!

Then he heard the helicopter. Turks. Which could only mean…

"Crap crap crap!" Zack pivoted mid-stride, but even SOLDIERs couldn't outrun missiles.

It really, really, really wasn't his day.

The missiles struck their target true, and the behemoth disappeared in a flash of light and a booming explosion. The concussion from the blast sent Zack flying – why didn't he drop to the ground? Angeal was going to lecture him until he turned blue in the face.

Air whistled past his ears, and he was falling, falling, and he crossed his arms over his head but damnit it was going to hurt…

The breath jumped from his lungs when his back finally collided with something. Wood splintered and cracked around him, and he crashed through, splinters and dust raining down with him. His journey to earth finally ended with a bone-jarring thud. Everything went dark, until…

"Helloooooo?"

Zack Fair's terrible day got a whole lot better.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

It was only a matter of time until I came to this cliche yet unavoidable moment. I apologise for the predictable twist (being somewhat constrained by the timeline of game events), but it all has a point in the end, promise.

ShinRa mansion.

Cloud took a deep breath, but it did little to settle his nerves.

Desperate moments where he pounded the walls of the mako tank, frantic to escape the poisonous blanket of burning green. Arching back, thrashing, as shocks from the tank's electrodes zapped him, forcing him into submission. The early times, the moments of lucidity when he trembled in Zack's grasp in a cold, dank cell, silently begging for the nightmare to end.

Cloud shook his head, even as fresh images crowded in. He thought he had a handle on this time travelling thing by now, but apparently he hadn't counted on how many old wounds it would open. Every time he saw this place, new memories were unearthed - memories he didn't want and didn't need. This was why he stayed away. Too many of them littered Nibelheim. He'd lose his mind at this rate.

Get in, fetch Vincent, and get out again. Destroy Jenova and leave this cursed place behind. He focused on that goal.

At least he didn't have a small doppelganger shadowing him this time. Cloud left the inn at first light, not wanting to risk Lockhart or any of the town's children following him to the mansion. Crisp morning air chilled his cheeks - a sharp, comforting bite of reality.

The gate was locked, but Cloud simply vaulted over it. His boots crunched in the frosted grass, and he felt for the reassuring weight of First Tsurugi. The front door, fortunately, didn't require a key. And why would it? The upper levels contained few secrets - only dusty dressers, moth-eaten beds, locked doors and scattered laboratory notes that wouldn't mean a thing to anyone not already intimately connected with their horrors.

He spent a few minutes checking all the rooms, just in case - he didn't want to get surprised if the mansion were inhabited during this period. A sickly perfume permeated the air, the scent of a woman who lived there once and whose essence couldn't escape the stuffy confines of the abandoned building. Lucrecia, maybe? Sephiroth grew up here, and if she was his mother…

It didn't matter. He'd confirmed that the only inhabitants of the mansion at this point were monsters and memories. The basement, next.

The sense of dread as he opened the path to the concealed staircase coalesced into a bitter taste in his mouth. Going down here again, willingly, alone and without backup. It had been hard enough
with Tifa and the others at his side.

No need to see the tanks, he bargained. *Stick to the plan.* Wake up Vincent and leave. Hopefully the former Turk would be cooperative and not decide he needed another eight years of sleep.

The basement was as cheery as he remembered – more a dungeon carved out of a cave than a laboratory. Fighting down the bile rising in his throat – Gaia, he could practically *see* the green haze in front of his eyes – he staggered towards the closest door.

"*Feeding time - that's our chance.*"

Sahagins skittered through the shadows, but he didn't intend on paying them any attention so long as they kept their distance.

"*Stay right here buddy, I'll go clear the way.*"

How miserable the last few months of Zack's life must have been, with nothing more than an unresponsive vegetable for company when the whole world was out to get him. How alone. And here he was getting upset over his mother not accepting him because of a poorly-thought out lie, and getting lonely because Tifa and Marlene and Denzel and the friends he'd grown comfortable with were now somewhere he couldn't reach? So much for his born-again strength after Kadaj's Reunion. It turned out you couldn't really *get over* some things – you could only learn to ignore them. Just until fate threw them back in your face.

*Waking up on a cold steel table, gasping for breath as nameless doctors held him down, the pull of a sword wound in the middle of his chest-*

A room full of coffins. Brow drawn in concentration, Cloud struggled to remember which one housed Vincent. Giving up, he instead went and pressed his ear against each of them in turn.

There. A sluggishly beating heart, and a faint draw of breath.

He didn't have keys, but First Tsurugi cut through the rusted lock with little effort. Cloud threw back the heavy lid carelessly, satisfied at the sight of a tattered red cloak and long, black hair.

"Vincent Valentine."

Just like before, it didn't take the man long to gather his wits, despite years of sleep. Several slow, disoriented blinks, and he lurched to a sitting position. His golden gauntlet reached for the coffin lid, but Cloud's wake-up call had torn it from its hinges and it now lay on floor, just beyond his grasp. Vincent stared at it as though betrayed. "Who are you, and why have you disturbed my rest?" His tone was edged with the threat of injury.

"My name is Cloud Strife, and I'm going to kill Hojo."

As expected, Vincent stilled, eyes finally turning to appraise him properly. Good. The hardest part would be getting the former Turk to hear him out. "Hojo?" The crimson gaze became considering as he took in his clothes. "Are you with ShinRa?"

"I used to be."

Comprehension. "You were one of his experiments too."

Cloud nodded. If he read things correctly, about now Vincent would lie back down and say-
"Do what you want, and leave me to my rest. It's no business of mine what ShinRa does anymore."

Right on cue. "Not even when it involves Lucrecia's son?"

Vincent sat up again. "Lucrecia's… son?"

Like holding gysal greens in front of chocobo. Under other circumstances, Cloud might have felt bad for manipulating his comrade's emotions in such a way, but being inside the mansion made him anxious, and the sooner he could get Vincent to move, the sooner they could be on their way. "Sephiroth."

"Sephiroth… And how does this relate to you killing Hojo?" The strategic cogs in the former Turk's brain were grinding to life again after years of disuse, he could see.

"Because before I kill Hojo, I need to destroy Jenova. He injected her cells into Sephiroth."

The news visibly troubled him, despite his reluctance to become involved. "And why do you need my help?" He could read between the lines, could pick up the distrust in those red eyes. What Vincent really wanted to know was 'how do I know this isn't one of Hojo's traps?'

Uncomfortable now, Cloud admitted, "Because I have her cells in me too. Not as many as Sephiroth-" He had S-cells to make up for that. "-But enough that I can't be sure what might happen if I try to destroy her alone." His link with Sephiroth was far stronger than the one with Jenova, but her cells were still the conduit.

A pause. Then he mumbled, "That's why you disturbed me?"

Vincent never had been a morning person. "This is important. I don't have anyone else to back me up." The silence stretched. "…Do you really want to let Hojo do whatever he wants?" he tried.

It didn't strike him as a question that needed consideration, but Vincent sat, deep in thought, as thirty seconds slowly crawled by. Cloud tried to remain still and ignore his growing unease. It only took a few moments without distractions for the memories to start crowding in again. Maybe he should have stuck to the original script he used when he pried Vincent from the basement the first time. At least he knew that way would work.

"My sins are many…" His voice wafted through the silence, dark and wistful.

"Staying asleep in here won't absolve you of them any faster," he interrupted, growing impatient. Was this how Tifa felt whenever he dragged his feet? "Get outside and do something before Lucrecia's son destroys the planet."

Vincent swung himself out of the coffin and landed on the floor silently. "Destroy the planet? Why would Lucrecia's son do such a thing?" His curiosity was waking up. Finally. Vincent out of the coffin was almost as good as Vincent out the door.

Still, this would be difficult to explain. His old comrade would pick up any inconsistency, no matter how tiny, in his story. "Jenova's an alien that once tried to destroy the planet, and would have succeeded if it weren't for the Cetra."

A nod. "I remember some of Lucrecia's research on the matter. It was at odds with Professors Gast and Hojo's initial opinions."

Right, the research. It saved him having to fill him in on everything then and there. "Sephiroth will do so in Jenova's place. I'm going to stop them."
To his surprise, however, the former Turk frowned. "Stop Sephiroth? Hojo and Jenova I can understand, but once they are removed from the picture, why should Lucrecia's son be a threat?"

…That was not part of the plan.

Mind racing furiously, he struggled to recalculate. Cloud thought Vincent would be with him on the matter for sure. But he'd forgotten - this Sephiroth was not yet responsible for any atrocities. Hadn't even burned down a village, much less threatened the entire planet. Something certain for Cloud remained only one of many possibilities to the former Turk.

Waking Vincent may have been a strategic error.

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Sephiroth stood by the window again, watching the courtyard in front of the main entrance.

"Though no oath is shared between the lovers
In their hearts they know they will meet again."

His shoulders tensed. "Genesis."

"Strife is hardly going to go through the front entrance, you know," Genesis commented, throwing his maroon coat carelessly over the back of a chair before straddling it.

"And you formed that opinion on what? His subtlety in Wutai?" Based on that performance, Strife might not only go through the front entrance, but he might do so in a tank.

Genesis made a cutting motion with his hand, sending a significant look towards the door. Ah. Angeal was coming too. No overt mentions of death threats, then.

On cue, the door slid open, and the stocky SOLDIER First entered, arms laden with food containers. "Hey," he greeted, then paused, taking in the layout of the scene. "People-watching again?"

Genesis rolled his eyes. "It's all he does in his spare time these days. Careful, Sephiroth. Angeal and I might beat you next practice session."

The mention of a practice session made him tense, and he saw Angeal stiffen too, but neither of them replied. They hadn't fought since that time Angeal's broadsword broke, and they were faced with a shoulder wound that refused to heal.

Except it obviously had healed at some point. Genesis no longer winced when he shrugged, and the telltale bulge of bandages under his coat was missing. Despite the improvement, they remained reluctant to spar again. Scrapes shouldn't take weeks to heal, not when the average SOLDIER could recover from a bullet wound overnight.

"I might need the practice," he agreed. Genesis and Angeal together were a decent challenge, but his thoughts wandered to the blond stranger again. In Wutai, he'd come across a warrior who could fight him evenly, one-on-one, no handicaps.

How long had it been since he last enjoyed the thrill of battle so much?

"You're obsessed," Angeal observed, dumping his burden on the desk. "Huh. Never thought I'd see the day anybody would get under your skin like that."
"It's no surprise," Genesis drawled. "The great General Sephiroth has never been defeated before."

It was only logical. The man presented a mystery. "We didn't get to conclude our fight," he corrected.

"I don't care who won what. Get over here and eat your take-out," Angeal ordered. "If he's half as amazing as I've heard, we'll know when this Strife character arrives. If he arrives. And if he doesn't, the Turks will find him."

Sephiroth frowned, finally taking a seat at his desk and accepting the pair of cheap chopsticks. "The Turks?" He sent a glance at Genesis, who deliberately avoided returning it. They'd agreed to avoid making a full report on Strife to the company, mentioning him only as an aside in the Wutai mission logs.

"We have a meeting about him with Tseng at the end of the week. You weren't informed?"

"No," Sephiroth stared harder, and Genesis in turn focused on his food more intently. "I wasn't. What's it about?"

"They just want more information, by the sounds of it. There are rumours about some mercenary who managed to fight you to a draw. You didn't think they'd be interested?"

"In a hired third party who withdrew from the war well before its conclusion? No." A lie, and everybody knew it. Sephiroth busied himself with his food, breathing in the tangy aroma appreciatively. Spicy noodles. One could, in fact, become tired of gourmet dinners.

"Why not? You're interested. And anything that catches the attention of ShinRa's star SOLDIER is bound to get the Turks curious."

Genesis cleared his throat, and Angeal threw him an amused glance. "And before I forget, the 'Hero of Wutai' is in on it, too."

Sephiroth still felt uneasy about it, but the matter appeared to be out of his hands. It must have been Genesis's handiwork, and he could only hope he knew what he was doing. "So long as the Turks don't decide to kill him." It would be tragic if the man were to die before they unravelled his mysteries.

"Why would they?" Angeal pointed out, and then grew suspicious at the pause that followed. "Okay, what is it you two aren't telling me about this Strife character?"

"What more can we tell you? We know hardly anything about him," Genesis dismissed casually. Sephiroth spared a moment to allow himself to be mildly impressed by his fellow SOLDIER's acting skills. The endless theatrics were good for something, apparently.

"Oh no. I'm not falling for that. What happened? You don't think I haven't noticed you're keeping secrets? I was going to let it slide, but not if it's something the Turks would want to kill him for." He crossed his arms and pinned them both with a glare, food forgotten.

Sephiroth and Genesis exchanged a laden glance, debating whether or not to cave. It wasn't really a debate – they both knew Angeal wouldn't let them leave until they did, so it really came down to which one would deliver the tale.

Sephiroth could out-stare a basilisk. Battle lost, Genesis stabbed his chopsticks into his rice and scowled. "It may just so happen this Strife character suggested he would return to finish the job."
It took a minute for the words to sink in. Sephiroth counted down in his head. 11, 10, 9, 8…

"He threatened to kill you?" Faster than usual.

"But not Genesis," he added, before Angeal could get carried away. "In fact, he didn't appear to want to fight Genesis at all."

The distraction worked, and Angeal followed the new line of thought instead of focusing on the death threat part. "I thought he fought with Genesis first. On the phone-"

"I will admit that perhaps our altercation was not entirely instigated by him."

Angeal folded his arms and levelled them with his best lecturing face – the same one the Thirds universally quailed at the sight of. "You picked a fight."

"Your food is getting cold," Sephiroth interjected, frowning at the waste. Neither of them appeared to hear him.

"In a manner of speaking. I was within my rights."

Angeal shook his head. "You two. Do you have any idea how many different rules you've broken?"

"We were in the middle of war. The usual ShinRa bureaucracy did not apply," Genesis remarked haughtily.

"So that's why you've been haunting the window? You've been waiting for him to come and kill you?"

"It's the easiest way to find him," Sephiroth pointed out, then paused to chew another mouthful of noodles. Swallowing, he added, "And it's not as though he could succeed. The three of us can take him with minimal casualties."

Angeal threw his hands up in the air. "That's not the point! I leave you two alone for a couple of weeks, you pick up a death threat, from someone can fight Sephiroth to a draw no less, and then want to lure this assassin back to ShinRa headquarters?"

"My Friend, the fates are cruel
There are no dreams, no honour remains.
The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

"Genesis, shut up."

Sephiroth hid a smile. "You'll help us, then?"

"I don't see why I should. What's so special about this Strife?"

"You'll understand. Just wait until you see his sword," Genesis interjected with a lewd grin.

"Genesis, old friend, I thought I told you to shut up."

It took a great deal of back-and-forth – mostly Cloud haphazardly throwing out arguments and Vincent returning each and every one with an assessing stare – before Cloud convinced his former comrade to help take care of Jenova at the very least. They couldn't reach an agreement on
Sephiroth, but the sort of dislike Hojo inspired could bond even the worst of enemies.

A heavy silence hung between them as they approached the reactor. Vincent had been given a lot to mull over, and Cloud was busy fighting down nausea amidst a wash of unpleasant memories. Did normal people get the urge to drop to their knees whenever they remembered something, or did that only apply to people who lost those memories to mako poisoning and genetic information transferral?

"Are you well?"

Cloud pressed a hand to his forehead. His discomfort was so obvious? "Fine."

"Jenova?"

"No. Just this place. Bad memories."

Vincent didn't ask. The former Turk understood the effect of past traumas, thankfully.

The wind whistled through the metal grating outside the reactor entrance, lonely in a sound scape devoid of birdsong or any other signs of life. Most remote mako reactors were unmanned, having been designed to be self-sufficient and insulated from human error. Technicians were called in on a rotational basis to replace parts and perform safety checks, but ShinRa preferred to keep it automated and restrict access as much as possible. Cloud didn't care why, so long as it meant he and Vincent didn't have to worry about being interrupted.

He examined the door critically. Ideally, he would prefer ShinRa to remain unaware of Jenova's destruction for as long as possible, but he needed to break in. Maybe three gouges with his sword, to mimic a dragon's claw?

Before he could draw First Tsurugi, though, Vincent stepped up, golden claw delicately tapping out a combination on the keypad. With a heavy thunk, the door unlocked. "I used to be with the Turks. If memory serves me correctly, this is one of ShinRa's oldest reactors. Fortunately, it appears my code is still active."

Cloud nodded in thanks, and tentatively pushed the door open.

It was dark inside – enough so that even with the faint glow provided by the mako, he fumbled with the breaker to switch on the lights. The bulbs flickered and buzzed angrily to life, roused from sleep after months of disuse.

"There aren't any security cameras?" Vincent asked, voice bouncing unnaturally off the metal walls.

"There are, but ShinRa doesn't have a secure line of communication to them." If they did, there wouldn't have been any need to come investigate the reactor in the first time line. "We'll have to swing by the security post to erase them when we're done."

Vincent's Turk instincts appeased, they headed deeper into the interior. Their steps echoed eerily through the empty facility.

If Nibelheim and the ShinRa Mansion made Cloud's skin crawl, walking through the reactor stole the breath from his lungs. In this place, his destiny had changed in a matter of minutes. In this place, a lowly trooper killed Sephiroth for the first time. In this place, he nearly died... and many times after, wished he did.
"We're just above the core," he murmured, deliberately not looking at the rows of tanks.

Vincent held no such qualms, clearing the condensation from the window of one of the mako tubes and peering inside. "Is this a dumping ground for Hojo's failed experiments?"

Cloud shrugged, keeping his focus on the door at the top of the stairs. "We're failed experiments too, technically."

The former Turk made a small noise of agreement, moving to follow.

There it was. The plain metal door, unremarkable in every way. Any technicians who saw it would probably assume it hid nothing more than an access hatch or wiring. Cloud shivered. "If I start… acting strangely, you know what to do."

Vincent nodded, and laid his flesh hand on his gun. "How do you intend to destroy it?"

He tapped the green materia slotted near the base of First Tsurugi. "A couple of rounds of the strongest fire spell I can manage."

"From the way you spoke, this Jenova sounds quite resilient. Are you sure it will be enough?"

"She's nothing to worry about without a host."

When no further questions came forth, Cloud laid a reverent hand on the door. Here, he'd finally start changing things. The first step in his new journey to save Zack, Aeris, his mother, the planet.

The door shifted under his fingers.

Blinking, he pushed a little harder. With a low groan, the door swung back on its metal hinges.

Unlocked? Hadn't it required special clearance before? Never mind that – hadn't Zack blasted straight through it? Why would he need to, if the door were unlocked?

And now that he thought about it, wasn't the door a little too plain and ordinary? Didn't there use to be some kind of plaque…?

It wasn't until Cloud crossed the threshold that he realised why.

Bright green mako oozed far below. The same rickety walkway hung precariously over thick metal pipes. Everything was an exact replica of his memories, except for the most important detail.

No tank rested on the dais.

Jenova was nowhere to be seen.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Rather talky chapter, this one. Hopefully it does not bore.

Thankfully, Vincent took care of covering their tracks – erasing the security footage, turning off the lights, locking the door behind them, and even going so far as to smother their footprints leading up to the reactor. Cloud wasn't capable of much more than standing guard. It never once occurred to him that Jenova could at any point be somewhere other than Nibelheim. After her discovery in the Northern Crater, hadn't Gast brought her to these desolate mountains? Wasn't this where Lucrecia Crescent performed her experiments, where Sephiroth was born? If Jenova wasn't at the Nibelheim Reactor, then where else could she be?

They stopped on the edge of town, just out of view of the ShinRa mansion.

"What are you going to do now?" Vincent asked.

Cloud shrugged, though there was nothing casual about the jerky motion. "Find Jenova. Find Hojo. One will lead to the other." It had to. Hojo must have moved her temporarily – maybe brought her with him to Midgar, or stored her in some other out-of-the-way reactor. Maybe one of Gast's old laboratories. Only Hojo would know.

"And kill them."

He nodded.

"And Sephiroth?"

Scowling, Cloud turned his attention back to the path. Vincent refused to let it go. He'd never met ShinRa's famous General - hadn't so much as seen a photograph before. Did Lucrecia's child matter so much to him?

Of course he did. Anything of Lucrecia's was sacred. In the original timeline, Vincent had been just as reluctant to accompany them, even with Sephiroth on his wild, world-destroying crusade, and it wasn't until they discovered Lucrecia's cave that he truly committed himself to their quest. A Sephiroth not yet in the midst of planning genocide might as well be Lucrecia herself.

Cloud sometimes thought his relationships were messed up, but Vincent had cornered the market on dysfunctional, and then made a brand name out of unhealthy devotion.

"You're so certain he'll try to destroy the planet."

"He will," Cloud stated. "He thinks Jenova is his mother. He has so many of her cells in him, she may as well be. He'll try to follow in her footsteps. That's the kind of person Sephiroth is."
"And yet, if you destroy Jenova, what risk is there of that happening?"

Cloud clenched his teeth, lest the unfair retorts escape.

Vincent had a point - without Jenova as a catalyst, or Hojo pulling strings in the background, Sephiroth might not have a psychotic break. Just finding a way to keep his heritage a secret would possibly be enough - Jenova couldn't gain a foothold in a host who wasn't at least partially willing. If she could, Cloud never would have been able to lift a sword against her or her 'son'.

'Sephiroth controlled you', a traitorous voice whispered in the back of his mind. 'You nearly killed Aeris, and then stood by and did nothing while she died. You handed over the Black Materia.'

He shook his head to clear those thoughts away. Sephiroth couldn't control him to that extent anymore, not since he regained his proper identity. Caught by surprise, he might slip for a few seconds, but he was not a puppet. He'd fought the call for Reunion in the end. He was nothing like the other clones.

As far as he was concerned, it changed nothing. Removing Hojo and Jenova from the picture might delay matters, but Sephiroth would always be only one breakdown away from destroying the world.

Vincent must have read his expression. "You still intend to kill him then."

Cloud looked away.

"I don't think it's the right way. You cannot punish a man for what he might do."

Except in his life, he'd already done it. But he doubted Vincent would believe his tall time-travelling tale, and frankly speaking, people had enough reasons to doubt his sanity already. He preferred not to load that cart any higher.

"At least promise me you'll take care of Jenova and Hojo first. And that you'll talk to me before making a move against Lucrecia's son."

"I'm sticking to the plan. If I take out Sephiroth first, Hojo will just make another one." Vincent no doubt heard the absence of a promise in his words, but he remained silent behind his collar.

Cloud took the opportunity to ignore those piercing red eyes, focusing instead on what to do next. He wanted out of Nibelheim as fast as possible – he'd walk down the mountain on foot rather than wait for Bradley's next run. Though memories aside, he wasn't looking forward to getting back on the road. Proper meals, proper beds, and proper facilities were easy to get used to. Cloud might be accustomed to roughing it thanks to his days on the run from ShinRa, but that didn't mean he enjoyed sleeping in the wild with one eye open.

Before anything else, though, he needed to ditch Vincent. They'd established a hasty and tenuous alliance as far as Jenova and Hojo were concerned, but it was apparent that when it came to Sephiroth, he could soon find himself on the wrong end of that gun. As much as it hurt to admit it, this Vincent didn't trust him, and so Cloud couldn't trust his former ally, either. And after he'd gone to all that trouble soliciting the former Turk's assistance, too.

How, though? No matter how fast he ran, Vincent would follow. Once the caped marksman made a decision, in his own quiet way he could be more stubborn than a dual horn. He'd stalk the shadows, watching to make sure Cloud didn't step out of line. Would interfere with his plans, slow him down, create obstacles. And if he still charged ahead anyway, shoot him in the back.
They hadn't even left the mountain, and Cloud already felt hunted.

"To Midgar, then," Vincent murmured.

What on the Planet mattered more to Vincent than Lucrecia's legacy?

Inspiration struck him like a bolt of lightning. "Wait. There's something you should know."

Vincent paused, and waited patiently as Cloud wet his lips and gathered his thoughts. If he played this right, he might not only get the quiet marksman out of his hair, but also on to his side. "About Lucrecia – she's not dead, not exactly."

The reaction was immediate – red eyes snapping to his face, and crimson cloak flaring as though it possessed a mind of its own. "Lucrecia is still alive? Where-" His normally velvety tones turned hoarse.

"She tried to kill herself, but Jenova's cells make that difficult. She sealed herself away instead. There's a crystal cave in this mountain range, behind a waterfall. You have to go through a lagoon to get to it." Thinking back on it, Cloud found it hard to believe they'd stumbled across it by chance.

"Suicide? What happened to you?" Vincent murmured, words whisked away by the wind. "Lucrecia…" Blood-red eyes turned his way. "I'm sorry… but…"

"Do what you need to do," Cloud offered softly. "I understand."

"I take it you'll be going ahead, then?"

He nodded. Hopefully Lucrecia would ask Vincent to destroy Sephiroth again, but even if she didn't, it would keep the former Turk out of his way for a while. "Staying here any longer would be… awkward, for me."

"And if I need to contact you?"

He flipped open his PHS and displayed the number. "You can reach me here."

"I don't have a phone."

"Use a public one." Cloud shrugged. "If that doesn't work, you can find me in Midgar, eventually. Or maybe Junon. Hojo has a lab there too I think." Or maybe the Junon lab was Hollander's. He couldn't remember. The Junon mission was one of the hazy ones.

Vincent inspected the PHS momentarily before handing it back. "And if you need to contact me?"

He didn't plan to - not until Sephiroth had been taken care of. "I'll figure something out."

Somehow, it worked out. The most important details taken care of, they shared a nod, and turned and walked in opposite directions. He could only hope Lucrecia's feelings regarding Sephiroth remained the same. It was earlier than last time – a lot earlier. But it had been the only card left to play.

A cold, empty wind whistled across the desolate mountain path, chilling his bare arms. Struck by a brief bout of loneliness and nostalgia, Cloud turned and looked back.

Predictably, his old friend had already vanished.
A shame. Having Vincent along would have been a breath of familiarity he desperately craved, but until the former Turk came around, they were better off going separate ways.

Just another sacrifice to save the world.

"Is everyone here?" Lazard asked mildly.

"Sorry, Genesis is late." Angeal grimaced, and shot a look at his friend sitting across the way. Sephiroth arched an eyebrow. He hadn't known the newly appointed Director of SOLDIER planned on attending either.

On cue, the door crashed open, and the surly, auburn-haired SOLDIER First stalked in, looking as though someone had just dared decry *Loveless* in his presence. Always a possibility, though most SOLDIERs knew better by now.

"So good of you to join us, Genesis," Lazard greeted. Nobody could tell if he were being sarcastic. The Director was a more dangerous man for it.

Genesis threw himself into the chair next to Angeal with a huff, awfully put out considering that as far as the General could tell, it was *his* machinations that resulted in this meeting. "This better not take long. I'm a busy man."

Reading *Loveless* for the thousandth time did not, in Sephiroth's opinion, qualify as 'busy'. "Everyone is present now. Tseng?"

"Thank you, General." The Turk adjusted the sleeves of his suit and carefully set the papers he'd been reviewing on the table. "As most of you should already know, the topic of today's meeting is an unusual individual who recently made himself known to ShinRa. In the folders in front of you is a more detailed briefing, but for the sake of moving matters along, I will summarise.

"During the Wutai conflict, Commander Rhapsodos encountered a man who appeared to be SOLDIER, yet lacked any ShinRa affiliation." The admitted the lack of affiliation made Sephiroth narrow his eyes. So much for his theory of the stranger being one of the science department's secret experiments. "He introduced himself only as 'Strife' – whether or not this is his true name, a code name, or an alias remains to be determined. Commander Rhapsodos reported a short fight with Strife, until the misunderstanding was cleared and he ordered his men to ignore him thereafter, reasoning he was no threat to the camp."

"What made you reach that decision, Commander?" Lazard questioned.

He shrugged, careless in his response. "He only defended himself, and insisted repeatedly he had no intention of fighting me. Two days later, one of our scouts reported that Wutai forces attacked his camp, believing him to be one of us. Proof enough, as far as I was concerned."

Lazard shuffled through the papers in his folder. "And yet, in this briefing the patrols reported he kept pace with you as you moved north. You didn't find that suspicious?" A sharp man, their new Director. Sephiroth studied him quietly from across the table. He supposed he could see the resemblance to the President in there after all – though the comparative leanness of his face and the thin glasses hid it well.

"Of course I found it suspicious. That's why I called in Sephiroth."

"Who then went to Wutai against orders," Lazard remarked, tone so mild nobody could hope to guess his opinion on the action.
"I was on stand-by, but my orders did not confine me to Midgar. I simply used the downtime to assist Genesis in an investigation he didn't have the resources for," he replied in an equally neutral manner.

Tseng cleared his throat. "If I may, investigations of such a nature are normally within the Turks' jurisdiction. In this case, we've decided to let the matter slide, as the man in question does appear to resemble a SOLDIER, and we understand the confusion."

"Duly noted," Sephiroth acknowledged the gentle reprimand. They were within rights to have both him and Genesis court-marshalled, after all - though such an action would have been meaningless, as everybody in the room knew ShinRa would never risk the public relations fiasco.

Tseng continued, "Regardless, General Sephiroth then accompanied the first supply of relief to Wutai. Soon after his arrival, he encountered Strife, and engaged in combat. Drawn by the commotion, Commander Rhapsodos interrupted, and the battle ended without a clear victor. This time, Strife made overt threats to General Sephiroth, yet was allowed to walk away." Sephiroth frowned. So the Turks already knew about the threat, then. Perhaps that was what had Genesis in a foul mood.

"A serious breach in protocol," Lazard observed.

"We were in the middle of a war. As commander of the effort, I made a practical decision. We didn't have the resources to spend on an individual on a personal crusade." Genesis recited the excuse like a cadet bored stiff in materia theory.

"He could have been a terrorist. A particularly dangerous one, if I am to believe the reports he fought General Sephiroth evenly."

"I agree." Angeal spoke up for the first time. "But something about it troubles me. Why threaten Sephiroth, yet avoid fighting Genesis? It doesn't make any sense. He might be ShinRa's enemy, he might not be, but at the very least, he's conflicted."

"General?" Tseng deferred. "Your opinion?"

Sephiroth folded his arms and stared at the table intently. "I believe his argument was with me personally, and not the company as a whole. He has issues with individuals."

"And what issues does he have with you?" Lazard asked.

"I've given the matter some thought, but as of yet, don't have an definite answer. My only conclusion is that I may have killed a loved one in the line of duty."

"And you consider this explanation reason enough to recommend against a follow-up?"

"If I may interrupt, Director," Tseng interjected, "We are getting off track. The Wutai conflict was resolved over two months ago. The intention of this briefing was not to bring up already dismissed matters of protocol breaches." At the collection of curious glances, he added, "You honestly think we Turks didn't hear about it before now?"

Sephiroth inclined his head slightly, conceding the point. The Turks were good.

"So what is the point of this meeting then?" Angeal asked.

Tseng didn't pause a beat before dropping his bombshell. "We want to recruit him. Strife."
The reactions varied dramatically across the board – Genesis pleased, Angeal worried, and Lazard cautious.

Angeal recovered first. "Recruit him! Isn't that a bit risky?"

Lazard nodded, adjusting his glasses as he did so. "I agree with Commander Hewley. We may not have any proof of an agenda, but that doesn't mean there isn't one. We could be letting a spy into our midst. The secrets of SOLDIER are highly sought after by our enemies."

"If I may," Tseng began. "As he appears to already possess mako enhancements, we will not be needing to divulge any of SOLDIER's secrets to him. And if he is within ShinRa's fold, we don't need to worry about him being hired by a competitive faction, and can keep a close eye on him at the same time."

"Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer," Angeal commented, a wry smile on his lips. The Turk nodded. "Precisely."

"I still don't know. What do you think, Genesis?"

"Ripples form on the water's surface
The wandering soul knows no rest."

"Loveless, Act I." Sephiroth was bemused. "You don't believe he'll agree."

"Why would such a man tether himself to ShinRa? He evidently has goals we are unaware of."

"It is up to ShinRa to provide incentive," Tseng reminded them. "And respectfully, we have seen little purpose to his movements since he left Wutai. From what we've discovered, he's been killing monsters for money and appears to have made no political or personal ties."

Genesis slanted him a glance, and Sephiroth looked away. He refused to acknowledge his annoyance at the blond stranger. Threaten to come after him, and then spend months dallying in the countryside, killing monsters?

"Your logic is sound," Lazard agreed, "But I'm uncomfortable with the decision. The SOLDIER program is something the cadets and regular army aspire to. Hiring from outside, instead of going through internal promotion, might cause friction among the ranks."

"Civilians are allowed to take the exam," Tseng countered. "It's simply uncommon, because it's difficult for someone who hasn't spent at least a few months as a cadet to pass."

"So we'll be lying about it, then?" Angeal asked, not looking particularly impressed by the idea either. He and Lazard were both by-the-book types.

"Not at all. We'll run Strife through a basic version of the exam, minus, of course, the mako tolerance test. If he fails, we'll find another solution to the issue. Will that satisfy you, Director?"

Lazard looked doubtful, but didn't push the issue any further. "I suppose. There's been an increase in monster activity in recent months, and we're still short-handed after the losses in Wutai. We can always use more SOLDIERS."

"Very good." Tseng began straightening and tidying his papers – a blatant sign he considered the discussion closed. "We'll induct him as a Third, but if the reports I've read are true, I imagine he'll rise through the ranks quickly."
"You are, of course, assuming he'll agree," Sephiroth pointed out.

Tseng smiled, though it was a paltry little gesture, as though his facial muscles had grown weak from the lack of it. "He'll agree. ShinRa can be very persuasive. Does anyone have any further objections?"

Sephiroth didn't have any – he was eager to solve the mystery. Genesis seemed impatient too.

Angeal, however, grumbled, "Am I the only one still worried about the death threat?"

"Most death threats are made in the heat of a moment. Strife may not intend on following through." Tseng paused. "However, if you don't think you could hold him off in such a situation…"

"It will be fine," Sephiroth dismissed. "Should he… lose his head-" It wouldn't do to inform the others of his certainty that Strife's intentions were not so shallow. "-I will be more than capable of keeping him at bay long enough for reinforcements."

"Then we're decided. The President will be pleased. When he heard news of a warrior of the General's calibre on the loose, he wanted him either destroyed or in our employ. It's a relief not to be signing a death warrant."

Angeal had the good grace to look guilty over his opposition. As SOLDIERs, they were sometimes forced to fight other humans in the line of duty, such as the case in Wutai, but his old friend preferred to simply knock his opponents out when possible. Lazard appeared discomfited also, but then, he'd only been Director of SOLDIER for a short while. Such unpleasantness would still be new to him.

"When can we expect our newest member to arrive?" Genesis asked, foot tapping audibly on the floor, creating a restless beat.

"Our last sighting of him had him two weeks outside Midgar. That's assuming he's still on foot."

"He's come from the Junon Coast on foot?" Angeal blanched.

"He must really want to kill you, Sephiroth," Genesis quipped, only to be greeted with a warning glance. It appeared they'd barely avoided Strife being put on ShinRa's blacklist, and Sephiroth had no desire to see him perish before he could solve the man's mysteries. If nothing else, he at least wanted to be the one to do the deed.

Of course, he was worrying over nothing. The Turks couldn't take Strife out any more than they could him. Though it might be entertaining to see them try. Air strikes, perhaps?

Either way, things looked set to become interesting soon. Once ShinRa had you in their sights, you couldn't escape.

The echo of his beeping PHS rang loudly across the grassy plains.

Cloud froze, and his heart started hammering in his chest. Mail?

His PHS had sat silent since the accident with the Time Materia. Nobody in this period had his number. Nobody except Vincent. But the quiet marksman couldn't possibly need to get in contact again so soon. They'd parted ways barely a fortnight ago. By Vincent standards, that was being positively clingy.
Who else could call him, though? Who else would want to call him? ShinRa? Did somebody notice him poking around the Mansion and Reactor after all? They still owned the communications grid. Who knew what kind of strings they could pull.

Tentatively, he withdrew the PHS, weighing it in his hands as he considered the implications.

Which was worse? If it was Vincent, then something had gone horribly wrong. But if it wasn't Vincent...

Then he heard Tifa's impatient rebuke of 'just pick up already' in the back of his mind, and flipped it open.

The message had gone to the Spam folder. An unlisted number, then. His palms were getting sweaty. He wasn't ready to take on the Turks yet. It would be too hard to accomplish his goals.

Wait... 'Treasure Princess'?

He flicked through the anonymous message, eyes scanning the screen intently, then sighed and slipped his PHS back into his pocket.

How by the Planet did Yuffie get his number?
The chocobo shuffled restlessly underfoot. With a sigh, Cloud dismounted and cancelled the Lure. The bird bolted immediately. Wild chocobos made for nervous mounts, even under his experienced hand.

Midgar loomed on the horizon, the haze of pollution robbing it of definition. Cloud scuffed the dirt with his boot. For many years, Buster Sword marked Zack's grave at this very spot.

Maybe it was a little morbid to make this his stopping point on his return, but the reminder felt good. If all went according to plan, this point on the cliffs would remain nothing more than a boring cliff, indistinguishable among the kilometres of rock surrounding the basin.

Zack hadn't even been able to turn his head in the end, to see the metropolis he'd worked so hard to return to. It took Cloud over a day to drag himself there, head awash with an influx of foreign memories, lugging Buster Sword behind him. It might have taken Zack only hours to make the same journey.

Another sigh, and Cloud began trudging towards the city gates. In the centre of that metropolis lay ShinRa headquarters, and thus Hojo and Sephiroth, and hopefully Jenova too. He still didn't know how to tackle that. Hojo was probably buried deep within the Science Department. Infantry he could handle, but if he had to take on a whole squadron of SOLDIERs, plus the General... He needed to find some way to infiltrate the building. Maybe something similar to the plan Avalanche had adopted when they went to rescue Aeris? It would involve some steep bribes to get the necessary cards and disguise, but he had a little gil to his name now, thanks to a couple of days racing chocobos in the Gold Saucer. It was intended for room and board, but he could probably scrape together enough, and leave the city limits again to kill some monsters if he ran out. Anything to get to Hojo.

Then, once in, a certain head of the Science Department would find his career coming to an abrupt end.

ShinRa wasn't going to know what hit them.

First though, there was a place he needed to see.

Zack looked up at the newly repaired roof. "What do you think? Pretty good, right?"

Aeris tilted her head this way and that, finger on her chin. "Hmmm… it'll do."

"What? It's way better than it was before!"

"The colours don't match."

"It's more interesting that way though, right?"

She giggled. "I guess so."
Zack grinned and flopped onto the ground, stretching out on the hardwood floor. Aeris knelt next to the flowers. "See, I told you I'm pretty handy with a hammer! I used to do all sorts of repairs on the house back in Gongaga. I'll build you a flower wagon next, okay?"

"Midgar full of flowers, wallet full of money?" she quipped.

"You know it!"

She giggled again, tending the flowers quietly while Zack breathed in, taking a break after clambering all over the roof. The air in Midgar smelt foul compared to Gongaga, but inside the church, the fragrance of upturned earth and blooming flowers could almost fool him into thinking he was out in the countryside again, under the open skies and the warm sun.

After a while, you got used to the slums – they had a certain charm of their own, although in his case, the charm was called Aeris. He found himself wandering down to Sector 5 whenever he didn't have a mission these days. Sometimes they'd go to the playground, or make a stop by Wall Market, but Zack liked the quiet moments where they sat around the church like this the best. He could never get tired of watching Aeris tend her flowers.

She paused, gaze going blank for a moment, as though she were listening to something Zack couldn't hear. Aeris did that sometimes. "Oh..." She stood and dusted the soil from the hem of her skirt, looking towards the doors. "Someone interesting is coming."

"Interesting?" Zack asked curiously, still sprawled on the church floor.

"That's right. How do I put it?" She tapped a finger to her chin. "He's a puzzle."

"Hey, who are you talking about? You don't have another boyfriend you've been hiding from me, right?" Zack teased.

She grinned impishly. "Maybe I have a hundred boyfriends."

"You're certainly pretty enough."

Another giggle. "You're sweet. That's why I dumped them all for you."

The door creaked open before Zack could reply. "Hello!" Aeris called out, voice echoing softly in the cavernous space. "I've never seen you around here before. Are you lost?"

The footsteps – heavy, booted – came to an abrupt stop.

"I forgot..." the stranger fumbled, and then quickly corrected, "I didn't think anyone would be here."

Zack laughed, leaping straight to his feet in a practiced move that never failed to impress his girl. At least, when he did it on sturdy ground. "The place is a bit run-down. It probably doesn't help when people come crashing through the ceiling, either."

The stranger started at his voice, and Zack was similarly surprised by his appearance. The words were soft, so he'd expected some lost, nervous merchant. Instead, he faced a warrior. Covered in dust and grime, coiled power, quiet confidence, a sword on his back, and...


She tilted her head at him. "Hmmm? Why?"
The stranger appeared just as shocked. "...Zack?" he croaked.

Since Aeris didn't seem intent on moving, Zack put himself in front of her instead. "How do you know my name?"

He held up his hands in a gesture of innocence, blue eyes wide. "Aren't you a SOLDIER?"

"I am, but I don't recall seeing you before." SOLDIER wasn't that large - after the losses in Wutai, there were maybe seventy across the three classes, and he knew most of them by sight.

"What? It's not- oh. I'm not in SOLDIER. I'm just..." Here the stranger actually looked embarrassed. "I'd heard of you, is all."

Zack wasn't convinced. "Heard of me?"

"...All good things?" The words were slow and uncertain.

"Zack, stop it, you're scaring the poor man," Aeris chided.

"He's dangerous!"

"He's not, silly, we haven't even asked him who he is yet." She stepped out from behind Zack and asked, "What's your name?"

The blond had been staring at them in something of a daze as they argued, and jerked at the question. "Cloud."

"Nice to meet you, Cloud. I'm Aeris, and it looks you already know this big silly Zack."

"I'm not silly! Aeris, you should be more careful!" Zack complained.

"He's right," Cloud added, voice soft but somehow carrying effortlessly across the distance. "You should be careful. What if someone tries to kidnap you?"

Aeris latched on to Zack's arm, giving him a winning smile. "You don't see this big strong SOLDIER I've got here to protect me?"

Zack couldn't help but swell up a little at that, but the look on Cloud's face threw him for a loop. Such a sad, wistful expression…

Okay, so maybe the guy wasn't dangerous after all. It really did seem like he'd just stumbled across the church by chance. "So what are you doing here? Are you new in town? And why are you dressed like SOLDIER?"

It took a long while for the blond to answer – he didn't look like the sort talking came to naturally. "SOLDIER doesn't have exclusive use of black jumpsuits. I've always worn this."

Zack had to give him that. And it wasn't like his uniform was an exact copy – only one shoulder guard, and the one he did sport wasn't regulation. And SOLDIER jumpsuits didn't zip up the front, either. Heck, there were imitation outfits sold for costume parties that were closer. But considering most of the Firsts flouted uniform regulations openly, he could be forgiven for making the assumption, right?

"It's practical," the blond added after a pause, with an air of having gone through the conversation many times already. Thinking on it, he probably had.
"Fine, fine, you're not SOLDIER, even though you dress like one and have mako eyes. You still haven't answered my first question."

Cloud blinked, looking lost for a moment.

"What brings you here?" Aeris prompted.

They waited as the question processed. "...I just arrived in Midgar in today. I was looking for a place to rest for a while. Sorry. The church looked..." He trailed off, and the sentence hung in the air awkwardly.

"It's okay," Aeris assured him, all sunshine. "You can take a break here, so long as you don't hurt the flowers."

Cloud's expression grew relaxed at the sight of the garden. "They're beautiful," he offered.

Her smile widened at the compliment. "See? Midgar can be a nice place. I bet you'll love it here. Do you have family or friends nearby?"

The blond shook his head, tensing again. "No, they're... not around, anymore."

Zack felt a stab of sympathy for the guy. From his uncomfortable manner, it didn't look as though he were the type to have a long list of friends in the first place, and to lose what ties you had... Another case of some washed up mercenary coming to Midgar to make a fresh start, only to arrive here without a gil to his name and discovering the city of dreams to be mostly lies. "Sorry to hear that, man. You have any work lined up?"

He shrugged, gesturing at his eyes. "It'll be hard with these. Most people will think I'm ex-SOLDIER."

"Yeah, about that... you sure you aren't?" He agreed Cloud didn't seem like a bad guy, but Zack couldn't just ignore the mako eyes, or the great big slab of metal on his back.

Aeris elbowed him. "Zack, stop pestering him!"

"Ow, ow, sorry! But aren't you at least a little bit curious?"

Cloud smiled at their antics, though it was a tiny, tentative thing, and the SOLDIER Second Class was immediately beset by the urge to make it grow.

"Hey – oof - you know, ShinRa's pretty much the only work in town," Zack offered as Aeris finished bruising the last of his ribs. "You should apply to the army."

It didn't have the intended effect – the smile vanished as quickly as it came, replaced by the detached, cold mask of an indifferent warrior once more. Something felt familiar about it. Where had he seen that look before?

Oh yeah. General Sephiroth.

"...I'm not really sure if I'm cut out for the army."

Zack wasn't having a bar of that. "Are you kidding? You've got to be a decent fighter. Those materia look mastered." He wanted to ask about those too, but Aeris kept giving him looks.

"I can fight fine," Cloud defended. "It's all the rest of it I don't know about."
Insecurity? On first glance he never would have imagined it from the guy, but then, appearances could be deceiving. "You're worried about fitting in? Don't sweat it so much! If Aeris likes you, you'll do fine!" The pair shared a cheeky grin, and Zack nearly got derailed by how incredibly cute his girlfriend was! He'd landed the best girl on the planet, definitely. "You might even find some people you know! Everybody comes to Midgar these days. Where did you come from?"

"Nibelheim." As soon as the word left his mouth, the blond's eyes sparkled with panic, and Zack figured he must have been embarrassed. But this, at least, he had experience in.

"Nibelheim! That sounds so backwater!"

Put-out, Cloud retorted, "Oh yeah, where did you come from then?"

Zack bounced on the balls of his feet. "Gongaga."

"And that doesn't sound backwater at all."

He laughed, the sound echoing pleasantly off the church interior. "You got me there! Let me guess, there's a reactor nearby and absolutely-"

"Nothing else," they finished in unison.

"Boys," Aeris declared with a fond shake of her head.

Grinning, Zack couldn't even remember when he'd put away his broadsword. It explained everything comfortably. Sometimes kids growing up near rural reactors would pick up a faint mako glow to their eyes, though it normally faded when they got older or moved away. And anybody who dared wander beyond the city limits these days risked encountering some nasty monsters, so the sword and mastered materia weren't such a big deal. Content with these conjured explanations, he relaxed for a few minutes as they traded small town stories, with Aeris occasionally asking the odd question. Cloud took the surprise at her sheltered city view in stride better than the first time Zack had been exposed to it, but then, the guy had a mean poker face. Maybe he was just polite.

There was eventually a brief lull on the conversation, and Aeris looked towards the windows. "It's getting dark. My aunt will be getting worried. I should get back."

She was right – what little natural light made its way under the plate was rapidly disappearing. "I'll walk you," Zack offered. "Oh, but hey, Cloud – just in case you change your mind-" And he certainly would as soon as he saw the lack of any other kind of work in Midgar. "-I've got a solo mission tomorrow morning to go clear out a monster infestation in a Sector 8 warehouse. Why don't you tag along?"

The blond looked stunned at the offer, so the SOLDIER Second barrelled along before he could protest. "I wouldn't mind some backup, and you could get a taste of the sort of work you might wind up doing! I mean, you've got to pass an exam and stuff to get into SOLDIER, but if you're a sword specialist, that's where you'll be aiming for, am I right?"

"I-"

"Great!" Zack gave him a hearty slap on the shoulder. "I'll meet you outside Wall Market at oh-nine-hundred hours, okay?"

"But-" Cloud tried again.
"Don't worry about it," Aeris whispered to him as they walked past. "He's made his mind up. You never stood a chance."
"Rise and shine, sleepyhead."

Cloud frowned, shifting slightly. "...Ma?" he slurred. He hadn't slept so soundly in a long time. Not since…

"Silly! I'm much too young to be your mother."

Not since waking up in the past. Cloud's eyes shot open, and his fingers groped for First Tsurugi. His disorientation ceased once he recognised Aeris, but his stomach started performing feats of SOLDIER-level acrobatics instead.

She waited patiently for him to gather his wits, tucking her skirt underneath her legs as she settled on the pew behind him. "You stayed here last night?"

Cloud didn't answer, but from the tone of her voice, he probably didn't need to. He could have gone to stay at an inn – he had enough gil - but the Church remained unchanged, a small sliver of comfort from the future. The chance to sleep somewhere familiar far outweighed the benefits of actual bedding. The Church was soothing. It had been his sanctuary as Geostigma marched him towards death.

"It's okay, I don't mind," she assured him. "And it gives me a chance to talk to you properly."

Properly? He stared blankly at her, waiting for an explanation.

Shifting to make herself comfortable, she explained, "There are just some things a girl can't talk about when her boyfriend is around, you know?"

Cloud couldn't think of a good response to that, and silently hoped this wasn't going to be another one of those sort of relationship talks Tifa would occasionally dump on him whenever he'd done something particularly reckless. Except he only met Aeris the day before, she surely wasn't about to start on that when they were still mostly strangers? At least, as far as she was concerned.

Not meeting his eyes, she asked, just a little wistfully, "Do you believe people can talk to the Planet?"

"Of course."

The certainty of his reply had her blinking. "It doesn't sound weird to you?"
"Why would it? You're a Cetra, aren't you?"

At those words, she shuffled away from him, looking nervous in his presence for the first time. It suddenly struck Cloud that he faced not the strong, mature Aeris who died for the Planet, but an unsure teenage girl who'd never seen the sky and lived every day under ShinRa's threat. "Nobody's supposed to know that." The words barely registered as a whisper.

Cloud tried to backtrack. "Sorry. I won't tell anyone."

That earned him a tentative - though still unsure - smile, and he found himself overwhelmed all over again at how freely she gave them out. No wonder she and Zack became so close so quickly. No matter how terrible the situation, they somehow always found a way to smile.

Except… Zack met Aeris when he crashed through the roof of her church during Genesis's attack on ShinRa. He cured Genesis in Wutai. How did they meet when the attack never happened?

Maybe they were just meant to be together. Or Zack was a clumsy oaf. The Church was remarkably well situated for falls. If Cloud once managed to fall through the exact same hole Zack did, how hard was it to believe Zack could replicate his own stunt under different circumstances?

"Helloooooo?" Aeris waved a hand in front of his face, and he snapped back to attention. "Are you listening?"

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking away. Aeris, eyes closed, smiling even as the Masamune pierced her chest. "Just… lost in thought."

"Make sure you don't forget the way back," she quipped. Cloud struggled to hide his grimace at that – after all, how could she know he'd forgotten the way before?

He tried to change the course of the conversation. "What did you want to ask?"

"Well, since you already know about what I am… this is going to sound a bit strange… but the Planet doesn't know what to make of you," she confided. "It wants to know if you're Calamity or Weapon."

Cloud blinked. "...Weapon?" He reached to his side, fingers trailing across the hilt of First Tsurugi. Oh. No wonder he gave off a confusing vibe. The Planet could sense both the Jenova cells and the essence of the Weapons around him. "...I'm just a nobody. The Planet doesn't need to worry."

"You're here, aren't you? So you're definitely somebody." Her tone brokered no argument.

His turn to feel uncomfortable. "I'm still figuring everything out myself."

She turned sombre. "And how's that working out for you?"

He turned his gaze away, unable to look into that searching green stare any longer. "Not so well. Everything I've tried has been a failure so far." All these months in the past, and what had he managed to do? The Wutai War had been shorter, but by all accounts just as vicious as the previous. And he hadn't yet killed Sephiroth, Hojo, or Jenova. In that respect, he'd only gathered more obstacles to his goals.

"But you haven't really failed yet, right? If you're still trying."

Still so optimistic. The Aeris he remembered existed even this far back. Dirty Midgar didn't deserve such purity. He didn't deserve such purity. This time, he'd protect it. "Yeah. I'll keep
A gentle hand found its way to his shoulder. "You should be careful, too."

He turned to look at her, and nearly recoiled at how close she'd come, peering at him with those bright, guileless green eyes. "When I look at you," she continued, as though she were addressing a peer instead of a man nine years her senior, "all I see is sadness, and hurt. Like you're about to break."

Cloud's breath caught in his throat. The fingers on his shoulder tightened.

He very nearly spilled everything to her, then and there. Aeris always seemed to know everything, had a solution for every problem – he thought maybe she could tell him how to get back to his own time, how to make everything right.

Except that would be unfair to a teenage girl who still didn't understand everything about her own abilities. Too much to expect. And besides, he'd already set to work on changing the future. Cloud needed to stay and monitor it, to make sure the little changes he made didn't ruin everything.

He always ruined everything.

"You're not alone," she stated.

Except he was alone. His friends, his allies, his hard-won comrades, they were all in a future which might not exist anymore. Even Vincent couldn't be relied on here. He didn't have Zack and Aeris either – they were still strangers, no matter how easily they'd spoken the day before, no matter how candidly they spoke now. Gaia… it had been so easy to slip into old habits when talking to Zack, letting a familiar conversation play out in a different setting. But he'd never bought flowers from this Aeris, never had her help him rescue Tifa from Don Corneo, never spent four years in hell with Zack, never had him give his life to protect their freedom.

Things that wouldn't happen, if he could help it. But their absence made him all the more alone.

None of which he could say to Aeris. "Thank you," tumbled out of his mouth instead. Maybe she could sense the lack of sincerity in his words, because her expression tightened for a moment, and her hand slid from his shoulder, light as a feather.

Then all at once, the sunny smile returned, and she asked, "Aren't you supposed to be meeting Zack soon, Mr Nobody?"

With a jerk, Cloud glanced towards the church windows. The light outside…

"You've got about ten minutes to get to Wall Market," Aeris informed him. "You don't want him to think you've forgotten, do you?"

Right, better to get going before Zack came looking and discovered he'd been sleeping at his girlfriend's church. He didn't want to jeopardise the little trust they'd established the day before. He rose to his feet, paused, and nodded once to Aeris. She smiled encouragingly. "Good luck."

"Thanks." This time, he meant it.

So strange, striding down the aisle, knowing the church would be busy in his absence. For so long, it had been empty, silent, lifeless but for the persevering flora. A furtive glance over his shoulder revealed Aeris already kneeling to tend to her flowers, fingers gently brushing across the delicate petals.
He paused at the door, but the words stuck in his throat.

In the end, he left without saying anything more.

Cloud made his way through the junkyard surrounding the church, taking in his surroundings with bright eyes. The day before he'd been so eager to visit his home away from home – and stupid of him to forget to check first whether or not Aeris was there, never mind his shock at seeing Zack too – that he failed to properly notice his surroundings.

In Cloud's memories, Midgar had become a desolate, twisted place, miserable even in the height of its glory. The slums he walked through now painted a contrasting picture. A lot of these people looked down on their luck, sure, but children scampered about, playing, while their parents chatted by the roadside. As he got closer to Wall Market, food stalls popped up, with proprietors belting out their sales pitches, trying to sell their wares. Wall Market itself bustled with activity, full of traders setting up for the day. Some ShinRa recruitment posters had been defaced, but there was no pervading aura of fear, no sense of gloom.

The downtrodden slums were happier than Edge. ShinRa's iron fist might have been present, but it remained invisible. Hope had not yet been stamped out.

Did so much change in Midgar, in those four years he'd been trapped in Hojo's lab? Or was Cloud the one who changed?

He shrugged off the introspection, searching the crowd, reminding himself to look for a purple jumpsuit instead of a black one. He still wasn't sure about this. Zack's suggestion about working for ShinRa rolled around in his head. He hadn't been able to explain his reluctance to his old friend – how could he tell a Zack who still believed in ShinRa that he feared being spirited away by their Science Department? Sure, it would lead him to Hojo, but little good he'd be able to do, trapped inside a mako tank. He shivered involuntarily at the thought.

There was no getting out of the mission, though. That part he didn't mind - he'd been overjoyed to see his friend again - but Cloud didn't know what to do afterwards. It could be dangerous for Zack to associate with him. When he killed Hojo and Sephiroth, ShinRa would be out for his blood. The last thing he wanted was for Zack and Aeris to get caught up in that.

Maybe he could go on the mission, and then use it as an excuse not to follow through on Zack's suggestion.

Working for ShinRa, though…

He frowned, batting away the grasping fingers of a pickpocket. The child, spooked, scampered away, apparently deciding to search for easier prey. The blond's thoughts remained elsewhere. If he could get around the Science Department problem, working for ShinRa would be an ideal method of infiltration – far less risky than sneaking in through some back door on stolen cards, trying to find a lone scientist in a skyscraper before someone noticed he wasn't supposed to be there.

Except he'd already attacked Sephiroth in Wutai. So much for that idea. He really sucked at thinking things through in advance.

"Cloud! Hey!"

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, and Cloud wondered how on earth he'd managed to get so lost in his thoughts as to completely miss the SOLDIER's approach. "Zack." The word came out in a little gush of air. Seeing his face again, so bright, so carefree, so innocent and happy and healthy-
"You came! Great! I wasn't sure if you actually would."

Cloud shrugged, looking away. He couldn't afford to get sentimental and lose his head simply because a friend he thought he'd lost forever now stood before him.

Although he'd never lost Zack, not really. Not with the memories and personality he'd absorbed, thanks to Project G.

"-So the hounds are supposed to be in the warehouse, but we should probably clear out the mandrakes in the area first, just in case we get swamped."

Cloud dragged his attention back to Zack's briefing as they headed away from Wall Market into the industrial part of the slums. The crowds thinned considerably, and the atmosphere turned gloomy as they moved through the narrow alleyways of corrugated iron. The SOLDIER filled the silence with chatter, mostly related to ShinRa. Cloud tuned most of it out – he knew the ins and outs of ShinRa twice as well as Zack did, having experienced it as a trooper, a SOLDIER, an experiment, and a terrorist. It gave you a unique perspective on company policies.

They started coming across mandrakes long before they reached their destination – tiny little razor weed-like creatures that were always darting underfoot. Cloud stomped on a few of them by accident, and they wriggled pitifully beneath his boots until he put an end to them. Tragically weak little critters, here in Midgar – the mandrakes he remembered came up to his knees, not his ankles. These ones, struggling for sustenance in a deteriorating environment, couldn't do anything more than fire off some low-level spells. If it weren't for the possibility of a child stumbling across a group of them, he'd have been tempted to let them run free.

"Lots of monsters sneaking in, lately," Zack commented, dispatching one trying to scamper away with a quick jab of his broadsword. So strange to see him wield something other than the Buster. "Lots of monsters breaking out, too." The SOLDIER pointed towards a rickety warehouse – a patchwork mixture of rotting wood and rusted steel. Acid rain corroded non-treated surfaces faster, Cloud recalled. A piece of trivia from his Avalanche days. "There's our target. Ready? I'll take point."

The blond made a small sound of agreement in the back of his throat. They approached main entrance – it stood open, a great, dark mouth into the warehouse beyond. Zack shuffled along the side, peering into the black depths, but stacks of empty cargo crates blocked the view of the interior. A perfect nest for monsters.

Zack took a deep breath, and then slipped inside. Cloud waited, counting in his head, then followed suit. No monsters, yet, but the skitter of claws echoed eerily in the cavernous space. The presence of intruders had not gone unnoticed.

"Hey," the SOLDIER said in a low voice, turning serious for a moment. "Don't take this as disrespect or anything, but if you find yourself getting in too deep, just let me know and we'll retreat, okay? This isn't a high-priority mission. I can always come back and finish it later."

"I might not be SOLDIER, but I can handle hounds easily," Cloud assured him.

"Good to know. Okay, then let's get this show on the road!" Zack bounded into the darkness.

Cloud drew First Tsurugi, stepping lightly through the dusty corridors between the empty crates, always a careful ten paces behind Zack. The SOLDIER didn't exercise the same sort of caution, stopping frequently to poke at the damaged containers, looking for abandoned goodies. His efforts didn't go entirely unrewarded – he found a couple of forgotten potions, and some odd trinkets that
didn't look like much of anything.

"Raw material," he explained off-hand when he noticed the blond's curious expression. "You never know what might be useful in materia fusion. And I can sell whatever I don't use. SOLDIERS get paid pretty well, but ShinRa can be a bit stingy on the provisions sometimes, you know? So they let us keep anything extra we find on our missions. If you're lucky, sometimes you can even score materia out in the sticks. How I got my Barrier materia." He held aloft a faintly glowing ball with pride. "This baby's almost mastered."

His monologue got cut short by a growl. Falling silent, both fighters dropped into stance – and not a moment too soon. A monster leapt from the shadows, eyes wild, tongue lolling, teeth snapping. They'd found their first blood hound.

Zack sidestepped neatly, swinging his broadsword down. The monster twisted away, but the blade opened a nasty gash on its front calf. It limped towards him, but Cloud didn't pay attention to what happened next, as another flash of red came running, snarling, at them. One strike with First Tsurugi felled the creature. The body left behind a crimson smear as it slid along the concrete. Another bark, from behind this time. Zack had his hands full, so Cloud turned to take care of this one, moving to protect the SOLDIER's flank.

Working with Zack came easily. Almost too easily. Cloud could only guess that all the time spent wandering around in an unwittingly stolen identity helped there. Zack's memories never wore off, not completely - he had just learned how to push his own personality to the foreground.

Not everyone in Avalanche liked the change, but they learnt to deal.

The blood hounds came faster. Zack killed the second one, but another took its place. Cloud fended off two at once. A swift kick pushed back one set of snapping jaws, dripping with saliva, just long enough to take care of the larger beast. A grunt, a snarl, a whoosh of steel, a yelp, and another carcass hit the floor.

"On your left," Cloud warned.

"Already got it!" A whirling strike slit the monster's throat, then Zack turned back around to fend off another heading for Cloud's back. "Ha, you weren't kidding when you said you can fight! Maybe I should leave them all to you!"

"It's your mission," Cloud retorted good-naturedly. "They're regrouping."

The nearest ones were shying away, circling. In the opening leading to the next clearing among the crates, feral eyes caught the light, shining in the shadows. At least another four.

"Let's not give them the chance. Go for it!" Zack yelled, tearing into the fray with the confidence only a SOLDIER could muster. He rolled aside to avoid a charging hound, leaving it to Cloud while he waded into the gathering pack.

"Zack!" Cloud groaned, and ran after him. Did he want to get mobbed?

"You know, my mentor has a sword a bit like yours," Zack commented. "A little less complicated, but one mean slab of metal, except-" He paused, grunting as he struck the top of a hound's head with the flat of his blade, then spearing its neck while it was stunned. ":-except he never uses it, you know? Some line about use damaging the blade. Fights with his fists or broadsword instead. I don't get it. Why lug that huge thing around if he's never going to use it? Just slows him down."

"Maybe it has a sentimental value," Cloud replied, picking up the pace a little, diving and striking
before the monsters could react. Two more yelps, and two more bodies hit the concrete.

"In that case, he shouldn't bring it along! Leave at home on display or something! The thing's heavy! I mean, yeah, not for a SOLDIER, but don't you get tired? Even taking off a broadsword like this one is a relief at the end of the day!" Completely negating his own point, he spun the sword in a victory pose with one hand before splitting the skull of another blood hound. Cloud rolled his eyes.

Between the two of them, the assault didn't last long. One last strike, one last thud, and the warehouse fell silent again. "Man, that was a good run! There must be…" The SOLDIER counted quickly. "At least two dozen! Nice work!"

Cloud looked away, awkward at the compliment. Why was it that even when he was older than Zack, he still felt like the kid?

"They fight in packs, so that should have been most of them, but we better check around to be sure." Bouncing on the balls of his feet, Zack took off again. Cloud followed at a more sedate pace, quietly amused at his old friend's boundless energy. He used to put it down to SOLDIER enhancements, but now suspected it lay entirely in his personality.

Gaia, he'd missed him. It took seeing him again to realise how much.

"So what do you think?" he called back. "You handle yourself pretty well against monsters! Think you'd want to do it full time? That's most of what SOLDIER does these days, you know. Unless there's something like the Wutai War, but it's not like there's much chance of anything like that again anytime soon."

Cloud didn't reply. His voice couldn't be trusted right then.

"Heck, you're as good as any of the Thirds, easy. As for me, I'm gonna make First for sure any day now. I would have already if it weren't for the Turks blowing me clear off the highway! I mean, sure, air support is great, but look out for the guy on the ground! Tseng apologised later and all, but sometimes with that guy, I dunno- wait, did you hear that?"

Listening carefully, Cloud nodded. A soft, rumbling grunt. They weren't done yet.

"I think it's over there," Zack whispered, pointing towards the eastern end of the warehouse. He swung up on top of one of the crates, nearly put his foot through it, and sheepishly climbed back down. "Guess we'll have to head there the slow way."

Cloud was content to follow along, ears strained for movement. The breathing echoed in the cavernous space, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact location. It was starting to get difficult to see, too. They probably should have tracked down a light switch, even if it risked spooking the monsters. Enhanced eyesight could only compensate so much, and the little natural light filtering through the cracks and holes in the roof wasn't strong enough to pierce the shadows.

When he caught up, Zack stood in the middle of a clearing of crates, scratching the back of his head. "Huh, I could have sworn-"

"Watch out!" Cloud warned. Not a second later, the crate behind Zack exploded into splinters, the air filled with dust, and the ground shook with an angry roar. From the darkness, a lumbering silhouette charged towards them.

"A grand horn?" Zack yelped, barely throwing himself aside in time to avoid being crushed. "What's something like that doing in the slums?"
The monster – easily ten times their size – barely paused, completely unbothered by its first miss. It turned, scuffed a hoof as thick as a tree trunk, and lowered its massive horn. Zack dove for the ground, but he misjudged the creature's reach. The side of the horn slammed into his back, throwing him forward.

The SOLDIER gasped, broadsword clattering from his hand. He scrabbled for materia, but already the monster was bearing down on him again. "Crap!"

Steel rang against bone, and the grand horn chuffed angrily, stopped mid-charge by the flat of a sword.

"What are you doing?" Cloud demanded angrily, bracing himself against the beast. His feet slid back an inch as the monster tried to push forward, but he strained his arms and First Tsurugi held.

Zack stared at him, eyes wide. "How the hell-?"

The dots finally connected.

"As for me, I'm gonna make First for sure any day now."

Purple jumpsuit instead of black. Broadsword instead of Buster.

This Zack wasn't yet a First Class.

Cloud cursed under his breath. "Get out of the way!" he ordered. "I can't hold it back forever!"

"Right!" Zack scrambled along the ground, one hand cradling his ribs. Seeing its original target escaping, the grand horn let out a rumble of dissatisfaction. To both fighters' alarm, it found new strength, swinging its head and pushing forward.

The crate crumpled under Cloud's body as he slammed into it, adding to the dust and splinters already flying through the air. Something shattered against his hip, but his fingers curled persistently around the hilt of First Tsurugi. Wooden crates were nothing. Sephiroth threw buildings at him.


The grand horn backed away, shaking the wood chips from its head. Cloud dropped to the floor with a wince. Bruises and grazes that would heal in minutes.

Unimportant. Zack was worried.

He hefted First Tsurugi, and attacked.

The monster let out a bleat of surprise to see the puny human it thought crushed on his feet again so quickly. Then surprise quickly turned to a squeal of pain as a sword cleaved neatly through the massive horn that was its namesake. The deadly bone flew into another crate. It shuddered under the weight of the impact.

Cloud let out a heavy breath, sword extended. He was faintly aware of a trickle of blood running down his forehead, matched by the one on the leg of his pants. The grand horn shook its head from side to side, backing away, annoyed at the flashes of light as Zack tried to distract it with an array of spells.

Nothing less than a mastered materia could hope to do any damage, but the distraction paid off,
and gave him a few seconds of needed space. Cloud braced, bent his knees, and *leapt*. His feet thudded onto the monster's back, but before it could buck him off, he plunged First Tsurugi in to its hilt, right between the shoulder blades.

The next groan sounded painfully wet. With some effort, Cloud wrenched his sword free, and jumped to the ground. The grand horn followed, its bulk crashing to the side with a reverberant thump. Its piteous grumble was cut short by the blade in its throat.

The dust settled, the adrenaline rush wore off, and Zack stared at him as though he'd sprouted wings.

Uneasily, Cloud checked. Hojo had spent a lot of time on him – spontaneous sprouting of wings remained an uncomfortable possibility.

"Cloud, that was so awesome!"

No wings. He could walk safely among humanity another day.

"You took out that grand horn like it was nothing! I've only ever fought those in simulation, and it takes me *hours*! You were holding back on me earlier – I had no idea you were that strong! Shoo-in for SOLDIER for *sure*. Heck, I bet you could win a fight against a *First Class* with moves like that!"

Cloud shrugged it off. The Zack in his memories had always been generous with compliments, but they only served to make him more self-conscious now. He didn't deserve such praise, not from the person he'd failed so terribly. "You okay?" he asked instead, tone brusque to cover his nervousness.

"What, this?" Zack patted his side. "Just a bruise, what I get for not paying attention. Angeal would chew me out if he'd seen that. I owe you one. I might have wound up in the infirmary if I'd come here on my own." He slapped him on the shoulder. "I should be asking about you! That was some hit you took. I was worried I had a Cloud pancake on my hands."

"I'm fine," he dismissed, wiping the thin trail of blood from his forehead. Mako-enhanced healing had already taken care of it. Stupid of him to get caught off-balance like that. A grand horn was no big deal, not after dragons or Bahamut or *Sephiroth*.

Zack grinned like all of his holidays had come at once. "Great! So you're going to come work for ShinRa, right? You *have* to after a display like that! We'll be work buddies! Us country kids have to stick together. It'll be fun!"

Cloud had forgotten what it was like to trust in ShinRa's promises. It hurt, to see how strongly Zack had believed in the company before Nibelheim. How much worse did the betrayal feel for someone who thought he'd been doing good?

"…Cloud? You've got a kind of weird look on your face." Zack poked at his cheek.

He shrugged the gesture aside. He couldn't. He couldn't be tempted to try – it would surely lead to his ruin. There had to be another way. Old dreams of making it into SOLDIER were trash now. Too risky. For both him and Zack.

"You're better off forgetting about me," he said, voice as cold as he could make it. "I tried to tell you yesterday – but ShinRa and I… it wouldn't work out. I'll find some other work in Midgar. It'll be better for everyone."

"What? But-"
Cloud hefted First Tsurugi over his shoulder. "Thanks for inviting me along today. It was fun."

"Wait, Cloud!"

He didn't turn back.

For the first time, he thought he maybe understood a bit of what Zack was thinking, when he left him behind on the Midgar cliffs.
Chapter 12

This chapter is mostly verbal chess with Tseng.

Genesis slammed his palms against the desk, the strike of leather against wood snapping harshly in his ears. "He's already here? Then why haven't you found him yet?"

"We didn't think he'd arrived yet. We weren't able to catch him at any of the gates as we intended," Tseng replied calmly. "Luckily, an informant on the ground spotted a man matching his description in Sector 7." And later, in Sector 5. Always in the slums. That could work in ShinRa's favour. People frequenting the slums were typically in want of money.

"So you know he's here now, then. What's taking so long? Sephiroth is wearing a hole in carpet, you know!"

The General wasn't the only one wearing a hole in his carpet, but pointing that out wouldn't make Tseng's life any easier.

"We have people on the job," he replied instead, and hoped his attempt at soothing didn't get misconstrued for condescension. It was always a fine line with the poetic Commander. "But he's proven elusive so far. Midgar is a big place, and there are only so many Turks available."

"The man has hair like a chocobo and an enormous sword on his back! How hard can he be to find?"

"There are over forty thousand people living in the Sector 7 slums alone," Tseng explained patiently. "We can watch the main roads, but we can't check every inn and alleyway for travellers. As you say, however, our man stands out in a crowd, so it's only--" His PHS buzzed in his pocket, cutting him off. "Excuse me, this may be important."

"Tseng?"

"Is there a problem?" Cissnei had been scheduled for guard duty in Sector 5. They'd been neglecting it for the past couple of weeks, dedicating the resources instead to tracking down Strife. He struggled to hide his concern. Maybe he shouldn't have borrowed people from guard duty after all, but he'd thought it would be safe when she was with Zack.

"I found the guy you were talking about at yesterday's briefing."

That was unexpected. He watched Genesis from the corner of his eyes – the Commander had stilled at the words, and was now poised like a serpent ready to strike. Once again, Tseng cursed SOLDIER hearing. "How?"

"Routine check in the usual place on the way to my shift. Thought he was a vagrant at first, was
An alarming development. Just a coincidence? "No, I'll head over there myself. Keep your
distance, and let me know if there are any changes."

"Roger." The line went dead, and Tseng slipped the PHS back into his pocket.

He spent a moment gathering the necessary papers, conscious of the First's sharp blue eyes
following his every move. Without preamble, he explained, "You might not have to wait much
longer. It appears our man has been spotted. I'll be heading there now to make contact." Fortunate
he'd awoken early to get a head start on his gathering paperwork. The idea of this stranger turning
up so close to a person of such importance unsettled him.

"I'll accompany you," Genesis declared immediately.

"Respectfully, Commander, this isn't your jurisdiction," Tseng cut in. "That's why you brought the
matter to the Turks in the first place, wasn't it?"

Genesis folded his arms and fixed him with a steely glare. "Hmph. I didn't expect people of
your expertise to take so long in this matter, or I might have just sought him out myself."

"I have no doubt in your abilities, Commander, but please let me take it from here. Negotiations
will not be helped by the presence of additional parties."

No matter his standing in the company or his involvement in the present mission, Tseng knew that
he held the power of command in this instance. He could also see that the SOLDIER First Class
was by no means unaware of the political game he was playing, and knew when to stage a retreat.
"...Then if you'll let me know, as soon as he's agreed." The words were bitten out, drenched in
forced politeness. "That is, of course, assuming you can arrange even that."

Tseng didn't take offence – to the frustration of the Turks forced to deal with him, Genesis was
something of an actor, and the man would only ever show the reaction he wanted them to see – in
this case, displeasure and petty barbs designed to propel them into faster action out of pride. The
only counterattack Tseng had was to refuse to rise to the bait. "What's your rush?" he asked, for he
couldn't think of many things able to incite the First to use that sort of tactic.

Genesis scowled, and the room felt like it darkened. "It's nothing. I'd simply very much appreciate
it."

A lie - one Genesis hadn't even tried to hide. But then, they were working for ShinRa. There were
occasions when lies were safer for everyone involved.

Tseng adjusted his cuffs, and didn't call him on it.

Even Turks disappeared, sometimes.

Something in the atmosphere had changed. Cloud's brows furrowed, and his fingers tightened
automatically around First Tsurugi, propped against his shoulder. The steel radiated a cold air that
reached his palms even through the padded grip and gloves.

There again. Sounds, unfamiliar. Dangerously close. Should he continue feigning sleep, to catch
the intruder by surprise?

"I don't believe it! You really are sleeping here!"
Cloud opened his eyes and groaned. "Zack."

"The one and only!"

Cloud closed his eyes again and let his head bounce back against the stone. "What are you doing here?"

"Aeris told me you'd been sleeping in the church," came the smug reply. "You didn't think I was just going to give up, did you?"

Figured. He'd been avoiding Sector 5 during the day so he wouldn't run into either of them, spending the time trying to see what contacts he could rustle up in Sector 7 instead. That part of the plan wasn't going very well - without someone like Tifa to vouch for him, people assumed him SOLDIER and loyal to ShinRa no matter his protests. He'd been naïve. After spending almost all of his gil on bribes, he had nothing to show for it but a handful of low level of pass cards, half of which were probably duds. "And you got up this early to catch me?"

"I couldn't let sleeping beauty waste away in here all day, right?"

Cloud frowned, checking the ambient lighting. Telling the time below plate always proved a challenge, but he guessed he'd slept late. He'd forgotten to eat yesterday – his body must have been trying to compensate for lack of energy intake with rest.

So now he had a stubborn SOLDIER Second Class to deal with. "-I mean, Shiva, Cloud, how bad can ShinRa be? It's gotta be better than sleeping on the street!"

He'd take the street over a mako tank any day. Cloud just shifted a little and looked away.

The Second Class made himself comfortable on the ground next to him and continued talking, apparently completely unbothered by how loud his voice sounded in the quiet atmosphere. Zack never had been very good at reading the mood – would make his own mood, instead. "You remind me of something I heard some of the Firsts talking about after Wutai. They would set up to ambush a camp, right, but when they stormed the place, the Wutai were up and fighting in seconds! Nobody could believe it – it takes a couple of minutes to put on your shoes, get outfitted, you know – they figured they'd at least get them out there barefoot and unprepared! But it didn't make a difference. You know why? It turned out the Wutai would sit up with their swords propped against their shoulders like some kind of security blanket! One loud noise, and bang, they were ready to fight! Hey-" Zack's gaze turned calculating. "You're not-"

Cloud glared and hunched his shoulders. "Do I look like I'm from Wutai to you?"

"Those guys are masters of disguise!" Zack protested. "We found a spy who looked like a kid, and another one running around as hot dame!"

"They can't have been that good at disguises if you found them out."

"No way, you should have seen them! Totally convincing."

"I'm not from Wutai, Zack."

"Yeah, I guess not. You're a bit too conspicuous to be a disguise." Cloud punched him in the arm. "Ow, hey! It's not a bad thing!"

He chuckled, but then nearly choked on the sound in his throat.
What was he doing? Joking around with Zack, when he was planning on killing two of the highest-ranking members in ShinRa? He forgot himself so easily. This was why he'd been stealing only a couple of hours sleep in the church a night, doing his best to avoid the SOLDIER and his girlfriend! Anybody associated with him would eventually be in danger!

What else could he really do, though? Cloud couldn't tell him to just go away. Even if he managed to force the words past his lips, Zack wouldn't listen anyway. He'd already proven that much by coming to search him out like this.

"You know," Zack rambled on, completely unaware of his internal conflict, "Aeris calls you 'Mr Nobody'."

"Hn."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it?"

Zack shrugged. "It's kind of sad, isn't it? To be a nobody. Normally, you'd want to be a hero, right?"

Cloud looked away, mood thoroughly soured. "I could never be a hero." The word itself made his skin itch. People kept slapping him with that label, after Meteor and then again with Kadaj's Reunion, but he never deserved it.

"Why's that?"

Heroes didn't let their closest friends die. Cloud remained silent.

"Well, I'm gonna be a SOLDIER First Class. I'm gonna be a hero," Zack announced. "With that strength, I can protect anything. My honour, my dreams, everyone I meet!"

A traitorous thought stole through his mind – that in the end, Zack had only been able to protect one person, and it cost his life.

In Cloud's opinion, it hadn't been a fair trade.

"I'm sure you will," he murmured instead, and hoped his bitterness didn't show in his voice.

Zack turned earnest. "Why don't you reconsider, Cloud? SOLDIER could use a guy like you. It has to be better than sleeping in the church, right? SOLDIERS get private rooms, three square meals a day, and when you get to First Class you can turn down missions you don't like! In ShinRa, you can make a difference. What are you going to do out here?"

"Why do you care so much?" Cloud grumbled. They were strangers, here. They had a short conversation when he first arrived and then hunted some monsters together. Hardly attachment enough for Zack to have reason to seek him out so persistently.

"Hell, I don't know." He grinned. "It's weird, but I guess I kind of feel like we're a bit similar?" His gut lurched. "And Aeris likes you. She's a good judge of character. And you totally had my back on that mission! I might have been in for some serious hurt if you weren't there."

"I didn't do anything special."

"Are you kidding me? You handled that like a pro. It's just…" He ruffled his black spikes, grimacing a bit. The hairstyle resembled the one he remembered, but the bangs were different –
made him look softer, younger. When had Zack changed his hair again? "I don't get it. I just can't understand why someone who can fight like you would drift around the slums sleeping in churches when you could be out there, making a difference."

He couldn't take any more – couldn't listen to another word praising ShinRa from Zack's lips. Not after everything they'd done to him. Cloud rose to his feet, and slung First Tsurugi into its harness. "You should stop worrying about me. I'll only bring you trouble."

Zack leapt to his feet to follow after him. "Hey, don't be like that, I just want to understand-"

"I have my reasons for not wanting to join ShinRa," he snapped, patience wearing thin.

A new voice echoed through the church. "I'd be curious to hear those reasons, if you wouldn't mind sharing."

Cloud came up short, hand already on First Tsurugi, ready for action. At the sight of the black suit standing in the church doorway, he started warming up the materia.

"Tseng!" Zack slid gracefully between them, so smoothly Cloud couldn't believe it to be an accident. "What are you doing here? Come to apologise for blowing me off the highway again?"

"We've been over that already." A faint note of amusement tinged the Turk's voice. Cloud didn't relax. "Actually, I'm here to talk to your friend today."

Definitely not good news. Cloud started mapping out escape routes. He'd prefer not to kill Tseng if he could help it. It was a little early to be on the Turk hit list.

Zack turned wary. "Hey, you're not going to, uh-"

"We're interested in recruiting him," Tseng explained.

Zack pumped the air. "Yes!"

Cloud stared at Zack, betrayed. He'd been sold out?

Seeing his dismay, the SOLDIER Second quickly backtracked, waving his hands frantically. "Wait, I didn't tell anyone how awesome you were, I swear! I mean, it's great that they've found out on their own – hey, how did you guys find out?"

"Your reputation precedes you," Tseng explained, addressing Cloud directly. "I'm Tseng, from the Turks. You might have heard of us. We're responsible for scouting potential SOLDIER candidates."

That was the public line, anyway. He let his hand fall from First Tsurugi. Of course ShinRa were already aware of him. Why hadn't he realised? He might never have actually been in SOLDIER, but there was no hiding the glow of mako in his eyes. The process to create a SOLDIER was supposed to be a ShinRa company secret. Most people could guess at the involvement of mako, but only idiots would risk poisoning to try and replicate the process for themselves. And then he'd been stupid enough to pick a fight with Sephiroth. Didn't he ever think anything through? No wonder Tifa constantly despaired over him. "So I've been scouted?"

"As I said, you've earned quite a reputation already. There's a café nearby where we can talk in privacy over brunch, if you can spare me some of your time. My treat," Tseng offered.

His stomach growled at the thought of food, but Cloud didn't budge. "You already heard. I don't
want to work for ShinRa."

"But-" Zack started to interject.

"But won't you allow me at least the chance to try and change your mind? Possibly you're not aware of the full scope of benefits ShinRa can offer its employees. And if your protests are ideological in nature, we'd like the opportunity to hear about them. Feedback from the community allows ShinRa to grow in positive directions." A flawless quotation of the company line, and from the look on his face, Tseng knew it. It didn't matter. Cloud could read between the lines. Turks didn't take no for an answer. If he didn't at least hear Tseng out, there'd be trouble. Especially since he'd been found at the Church. Another detail he'd forgotten - Aeris was under surveillance. He must have been lucky to escape notice this long.

"I'll listen to what you have to say, but I doubt you'll change my mind," he conceded. Strategic retreat. Lose the battle, win the war.

"He's stubborn," Zack informed Tseng. "I've been bugging him to join ShinRa for days." He said days as though he meant years.

His only response was a bland "I can imagine how that went." For a second, Cloud saw a bit of the human side of Tseng, and remembered the Turk's habit of cracking dry jokes with a perfectly straight face. Tseng changed surprisingly little over the years. Amazing how someone could witness Meteor and emerge on the other side exactly the same as before.

"So, brunch, yeah? Let's get going! You must be hungry, hey Cloud? You don't look like you've eaten since you got here. How a skinny thing like you carries around a sword like that-"

"Lieutenant, I thought you had a mission today? Your drop-off is leaving in approximately-" Here Tseng checked his watch. "Forty-five minutes?"

Zack's mouth dropped open. "You have my schedule memorised?"

"Zack, the mission," Tseng prompted.

"Right, right." He glanced anxiously between the train station, Cloud, and Tseng. Cloud had the weird feeling he didn't want to leave them unsupervised. "Aww, but I want to-"

"Leave it to me. I'm sure if you've been telling him about ShinRa, I won't have a hard time convincing him to work with the company," Tseng assured him. Cloud crossed his arms, glaring at the floor. Things were starting to get messy, but he had no choice but to go along with it.

Cloud didn't like not having control of his own destiny. It reminded him too much of-

Zack seemed to weigh Tseng up, then nodded. "If you say so. Keep an open mind, okay Cloud?" He slapped him on the back, hesitated as though he wanted to say something else, and then took his leave with a jaunty wave. "Don't let me down, Tseng!"

The Turk smiled, and once the SOLDIER was gone, invited, "Follow me. It's not far."

He trailed Tseng out of the church in a dark silence. The slums were only just beginning to stir – businesses tended to open later below-plate, particularly in the areas where the nightlife thrived. The few people up and about gave the two men a wide berth – a SOLDIER and Turk walking side-by-side usually meant trouble.

"How did you come across Zack Fair?" Tseng asked.
Cloud examined the statement for a hidden agenda, but couldn't find anything other than open curiosity. "I stopped in at the church when I first came to Midgar. He and his girlfriend were inside." Best not to mention Aeris by name. Bad enough they were probably already implicated as acquaintances.

"You're a religious man?"

"What?" The angle caught him by surprise. "No. I just wanted a quiet place out of the way to stop for a while." Realising how his intentions could be misconstrued, he belatedly added, "Midgar's a bit... overwhelming, after travelling." The last thing he wanted was for the Turks to think he wanted to hide. Even if he did.

"I understand. Sometimes our recruits from the country take a while to adjust to the crowds."

Tseng was being warm, friendly, and conversational. It only served to make Cloud more anxious. He didn't mind Tseng so much - after Meteor, the Turks and Avalanche had reached a sort of understanding, and would even give their patronage to the bar on occasion - but the very nature of the job made him suspicious.

They stopped outside a moody little café. A couple of shingles were missing from the roof and the paint on the windows frames was peeling, but the interior looked clean and modern. Tseng fit right in with his perfectly pressed suit – Cloud suddenly felt conscious of his dust-caked shoulder guard and crumpled clothes. He hadn't laundered or showered since the Gold Saucer. For most places in the slums, it didn't matter. "Here we are." The Turk signalled the owner, who didn't so much as look at them as look through them. It made Cloud feel only marginally better. "I reserved a table for two, up the back, please."

The waiter led them to an alcove in the rear, directly underneath a lazily whirring ceiling fan and concealed by a generous collection of plastic plants. Cloud's eyes tracked the fan's blades for a moment. He hadn't seen an electric fan in motion since Meteor. Electricity became too expensive after the reactors shut down – Reeve predicted it would take fifteen years for the alternative energy sources to catch up to the levels of power mako had provided.

The waiter came for their order, and he chose black tea and plain toast. "You don't need to hold back," Tseng offered. "I, for one, always take advantage when the company's footing the bill." He ordered the deluxe breakfast, complete with coffee.

"I'd prefer to get straight to the point." Cloud didn't want to be there. Maybe he hadn't eaten for a day or so, but the whole affair destroyed his appetite.

"Of course. As I've already stated, we're interested in offering you a position at ShinRa. Specifically, we think you'd make an excellent addition to our SOLDIER program. I have some leaflets, if you're interested."

"I already know about the SOLDIER program. I can't go through with it." He pointed at his eyes. "More mako won't be doing me any favours."

"Considering the circumstances, we'd be willing to initiate you directly into SOLDIER. There's only a small exam you'd be required to pass, but from your exploits in Wutai, I don't believe you'll have any problems with it." Their food arrived, and they paused a moment to take a few bites. Tseng ate slowly, talking between mouthfuls. He recognised this tactic, too – Reno used it all the time at the bar, dragging out his meal to force people to stay and talk to him longer. No doubt the real reason Tseng ordered the deluxe breakfast. Life as a Turk must be complicated. "We're giving you quite an opportunity - SOLDIER is highly regarded, and difficult to get in to. Hundreds apply
every year, and less than twenty make the cut. They're well paid, and in the higher classes, the working hours are flexible and the benefits generous. ShinRa will take care of all of your needs."

Cloud chewed on his dry toast. His expression didn't change in the slightest.

Tseng sipped his coffee, before returning it to the saucer to cool some more. "I'm sure you've heard all of this from Zack already. However, in your particular case, ShinRa is willing to offer extra incentive. More money, specific working conditions – anything is negotiable."

"I don't get it. You said yourself – you get hundreds of eager applicants every year. Why hire from outside the company?" Cloud stated flatly. His toast grew cold on his plate, half-eaten. He didn't want it anymore.

"You seem like an intelligent individual, Strife. So I'm sure you understand that ShinRa is concerned about a man of your talents going to work for a competitor. It is in our interests," the emphasis on the word spoke volumes, "that you come to work for us. We are willing to be accommodating to make this happen."

Cloud stared at the table as Tseng patiently waited for a response. It was all too confusing – ShinRa bending over backwards to hire him. Alarm bells were ringing in the back of his mind. He'd thought about working for ShinRa simply as a way to get to Hojo, but he had two very good reasons not to. The first being fear of the Science Department, and the other being the small matter of him attacking their precious General in Wutai. Did Sephiroth and Genesis not know about this? Why would ShinRa be trying to hire him after he'd threatened to kill their star employee?

Science Department first. "This is just some ploy to get me into your labs, isn't it?"

Tseng didn't miss a beat. "Why would you think that?"

"Isn't SOLDIER just one big human experiment?" Cloud asked. This time, he didn't bother hiding the bitterness in his voice.

"Not at all. ShinRa is always on the look out for talented individuals such as yourself. Why would we hire someone and then take risks by experimenting on them?" He spread his hands in a disarming manner, though Cloud knew better than to believe Tseng would ever truly leave himself open. "Though I will not lie to you. We are extremely interested in who it was that gave you your mako treatments."

"No treatments," he murmured. "Mako poisoning. Severe case. I recovered." Not entirely a lie, either. That Hojo inflicted the first round of mako poisoning was beside the point.

"I see. Then you would not be adverse to our scientists-"

"I won't be a guinea pig," he interrupted again.

"I wasn't suggesting that. But I trust you won't object to a standard physical?"

Cloud frowned. "That would be one of my conditions," he said. "No physical. No blood tests. No doctors or scientists of any kind."

If his request surprised Tseng, the Turk didn't show it. "If you feel so strongly about it, I'm sure that could be arranged."

"And I want to be able to refuse missions. I'll hunt down all the monsters you want, but I'm not going to go around taking out ShinRa's political enemies."
"We already extend that privilege to Firsts. If you pass the exam, you'll be inducted as a Third, but it will be a small matter to make that exception for you."

Unbelievable. The proposal sounded genuine.

"Can I take it that you're changing your mind? Is there anything else?"

Did he really have a choice? If Tseng kept up his end of the bargain and he could fly under the radar of the Science Department, then this was the best opportunity he could get at infiltrating ShinRa.

Except it was too easy. ShinRa wasn't supposed to come to him. "It's just – I don't get it. You must know I threatened Sephiroth."

Tseng nodded. Apparently he'd also forgotten his food – already the wisps of rising steam had petered out, and the meat grew greasy on his plate. "We are aware of the incident in Wutai, yes. And that's where we come in with a condition of our own. Obviously, we would prefer it if you didn't try to kill fellow employees."

"And you're willing to just take my word on that."

"General Sephiroth is capable of taking care of himself. But ideally, we'd like the opportunity to make amendments. Has the General wronged you in the past? ShinRa has a wide variety of compensation packages you might not be aware of."

Leather creaked as Cloud's hands tightened to fists. "There is nothing," he seethed, "that ShinRa could do to make it better." An entire village. His mother. Aeris, Zack, his hopes and dreams and four years of his life. How could they possibly make reparations? All the money in the world couldn't fix the damage. There were some memories he'd never recover, and others he'd never be able to erase. Rufus had known better than to offer.

"I'm sorry," Tseng apologised. "But if you could at least tell us-"

"I won't kill him," he interrupted. "But don't ask me anything more than that. I'll do it. I'll sign up with ShinRa, if you can keep those three conditions." He wouldn't kill Sephiroth while working for ShinRa – but once he destroyed Hojo and Jenova, his contract would be void anyway. If he were lucky, they might even send Sephiroth to get rid of him.

"Excellent. I'll draw up the paperwork immediately. We should be able to have you take the test as early as tomorrow. Is there any way I can contact you?"

Cloud fished out his PHS and displayed the number. Tseng made a note of it. "I don't think I've seen that model before," he observed.

Because it didn't exist yet. Cloud shrugged. He couldn't be bothered making up excuses for every little discrepancy, not when in such a sour mood.

"That's everything for now, then. Given your circumstances, we can provide lodging for you at an inn above-plate tonight." He slipped a business card and a train ticket across the table. By now, the blond couldn't even bring himself to be surprised at the evidence of the Turk's assumption of success. "Tomorrow night we can provide you a room in the SOLDIER barracks."

"If I pass the test," Cloud reminded him, voice dull. He'd failed before, after all.

"I have every confidence in your success."
He made a non-committal grunt in response. Tseng might not look so pleased about it if the Turk knew what Cloud considered success.

That was when the realisation hit him.

He was going to be working for ShinRa again.

Somewhere, in a different time, on a different world, Rufus would be laughing at him.
Chapter 13

"Excellent Strife, we'll be stopping the simulation now," an unfamiliar voice crackled over the speaker. The air shimmered, and the grassy hills dissolved into cold, grey steel. Cloud stood at ease, not even out of breath.

After a moment, the side entrance whooshed open, and Tseng and another man – the voice on the speaker, he guessed – entered. Cloud studied the newcomer thoughtfully. Rufus? No, too old for the time, complexion slightly darker, and Rufus never wore glasses.

"Strife, I'd like you to meet Lazard. He's the new Director of SOLDIER operations."

"I wonder how long it will take before I can drop the 'new'," Lazard commented wryly, extending his hand.

Cloud looked at it blankly, before realising he was supposed to shake it. He did so gingerly – the last time he shook Cid's hand, he had nearly broken the pilot's fingers. Though it was really Cid's fault for making bad taste jokes about cross-dressing at that exact moment. "I have the job, then?"

"Almost," Lazard replied. "You completed all three mission sims flawlessly, but I'm curious – what did you think of the simulator?"

He considered his answer carefully. "...It's realistic, but it doesn't replicate fighting conditions in the field well."

"How so?"

He scuffed his boot against the floor. "The terrain is smooth and even, and the weather controlled. I've fought some of those monsters before. They're a lot harder to kill when you're fighting on mud, or sand is stinging in your eyes, or you're being blown off course by high-speed winds." He flexed his hands. "And cutting through the real thing is different, too. The resistance is all in your mind, so your cuts always work the way you expect them to." Sword fighting was the one topic Cloud could talk about at length.

His answer appeared to please Lazard. "Yes, there are drawbacks. It's more cost-effective than field training, but there really is no substitute for the real thing. So as one last test, we'd like to see you in action against another SOLDIER. The objective will be to disarm your opponent."

Cloud frowned. "Disarm how? A SOLDIER without a sword or materia is still dangerous."

That took Lazard back a step. "To the unenhanced, certainly. But consider a fight between two civilians of equal strength. The fighting would normally stop when one possesses a weapon, and the other finds himself without, wouldn't it? The same would be true of two SOLDIERs."

Cloud thought that over, and agreed. Simple enough, then.

Tseng slipped out the door, and returned with a SOLDIER dressed in a dark purple uniform, face partially hidden by the regulation helmet most SOLDIERs shunned. Second Class. This test wasn't simply a formality, then - otherwise they would have used a Third. "Kunesl, this is Strife, the
"Hey," he greeted. He sounded friendly enough. No point getting on the bad side of his future co-workers. "Wow, you guys weren't kidding. Are you sure I'm not being tested by an undercover First here?"

"Strife's induction to SOLDIER is a bit backwards," Tseng explained. "We had to adjust the exam accordingly. You're the last test."

"Sure thing. Don't worry, I'll play nice." Those words were directed at Cloud. "Everyone deserves a fair chance at getting in."

"Materia is allowed, though please exercise some restraint," Lazard requested. "The training room is tough, but quakes and summons – well, I'm sure you can use your good judgement."

They both nodded their assent, and Tseng and Lazard retreated back to the observation room.

Kunsel did a couple of squats. "Are we ready to rumble then?"

Cloud drew First Tsurugi and inclined his head, giving the SOLDIER Second the benefit of the first strike. Kunsel grinned. "You're pretty confident, aren't you?"

"It seemed like good manners," Cloud replied. Flashes of this man cropped up in his memories, even though he knew he'd never met him before. Which meant he was one of Zack's old friends.

"Your loss, underestimating a Second Class!" Cleverly, Kunsel hadn't gone for his weapon. Using the advantage of a first strike, he'd spent the time firing up an ice spell.

The atmosphere crackled, rapidly cooling. Cloud held out his hand. An eye-blink later, a mid-level fire spell blossomed, roared, and intercepted the shards of ice before they could fall. The air hissed. Mist billowed through the training room. Cloud drew his sword.

"Damn, you're fast!" Kunsel rocked back on his heels as the clash of steel lingered in their ears. Broadsword, like Zack, though his was lighter and shorter. The knowledge appeared before him like magic. They'd been training buddies. Best not to get lost in Zack's memories, not when Kunsel was angling around, trying to get inside his guard. Their swords tangled and scraped, each of them going for the hilt, trying to break each other's grip. The SOLDIER Second danced back, but Cloud met him every step of the way, cutting off his escape, striking hard and fast with every blow.

Not bad. He had textbook form. His moves were economical, but his footwork was a little slow. Cloud parried a slash, saw an opening, and drove forward, but stopped his strike at the last second.

Kunsel's face turned white. Cloud had pulled back from what would have been a killing blow – a blow Sephiroth could have blocked, but no one else. The SOLDIER threw himself backwards, desperate to put some distance between them. He fumbled for his materia. Lightning crackled through the air. Moments before it hit, Cloud called on Barrier. A translucent wall shimmered before him. The spell sputtered into harmless sparks.

They traded blows, Kunsel struggling to keep his feet under the relentless assault. Cloud considered several methods of tripping him up – if he brought a second blade into play the battle would be over almost immediately. No, a single sword would be more than enough. Blue eyes calculating, he stepped back on his opponent's frantic parry. Kunsel cursed as he overextended. A sharp tap on his fingers with the hilt of First Tsurugi, and the SOLDIER's sword clattered to the floor.
Sword taken care of. Cloud ducked in, moved around his opponent one smooth motion, caught the fist aiming for his face, and popped out the ice and lightning materia equipped to the SOLDIER's bracer.

"Yield!" Kunsel called out, just before Cloud could kick his knees out from under him and drop him to the floor. The blond released the captured fist and stepped away, giving the Second Class room to organise himself. After a moment, the entrance hissed open again, and Tseng and Lazard returned.

"Are you alright, Sergeant?" the Turk asked.

Kunsel nodded, gasping. "Just… give me a minute to catch my breath. I wasn't expecting a sprint match."

Cloud returned the stolen materia, which Kunsel accepted with a breathy 'thanks'. He himself wasn't tired at all. Had he really been moving that quickly? He'd tried to stick to a reasonable speed, and assumed Kunsel had been doing the same, since he kept up with him pretty well. Pushing his opponent to exhaustion hadn't been his intention. Maybe fighting Sephiroth for so long had warped his understanding of the limits of the average SOLDIER.

"So, Sergeant Kunsel, what are your thoughts?" Lazard asked.

"Sign him up," Kunsel advised, hands on his knees and still catching his breath. "It's like fighting a First. You'd be mad to let him get away. Plus, he's going to be giving me materia lessons."

Cloud frowned. "Materia lessons?"

"You have to teach me how you cast that fast." He flashed him a tired grin. "I thought I had the drop on you with that first spell, but you cast that fire so quick it didn't matter!"

Cloud shrugged and looked away, feeling awkward. He'd never thought about it, but Avalanche had tracked down some pretty rare materia when they'd been preparing to take on Sephiroth. Cloud trained to cast faster because he knew how quick Sephiroth was, knew that any one of them could only distract him for a few seconds at a time. Any materia they couldn't get to a decent warm up speed simply didn't get brought to the fight.

"He's quick with a sword, too. You swing that thing around like it weighs nothing more than a rapier."

"I agree." Lazard regarded him thoughtfully. "I'll be honest, Strife, I had my reservations over hiring someone outside the usual internal process, but you've proven yourself a man of talent. Welcome to SOLDIER."

Kunsel slapped him on the back. "Congrats! Looking forward to working with you!" His grin widened. "And can I just say I'm relieved you're going to be on our side?"

Cloud nodded at both them. "Thanks."

Things became something of a whirlwind after that. Tseng added his well-wishes then vanished somewhere, and Lazard stepped him through dozens of contracts, all of which Cloud's paranoia had him reading twice to make sure he didn't miss any fine print. He got a tour of the facilities, a request to report to the Briefing Room first thing the next morning, and a long list of contraband items, most of which he recognised as drugs and foods that reacted poorly with mako.
Eventually, all of the paperwork and orientation had been sorted. Kunsel showed him to the barracks and wouldn't leave until Cloud had promised to give him some materia tips later. Promise extracted, the door finally closed behind him, and Cloud Strife, newly minted SOLDIER Third Class, could inspect his new home.

He suspected ShinRa had given him Second Class quarters instead of Third, but he wasn't about to complain. It wasn't spacious, but there was a desk and a bed and a cupboard – already holding military-issue pyjamas and two Third Class uniforms - and a private bathroom. No window, and for a second claustrophobia clawed at his throat, but he fought it down with the reminder that the bunks on the Highwind were half the size. The only difference was the location.

No window meant extra privacy, but it also reduced his escape routes. Cloud tapped on the wall experimentally. Chipboard and insulation. Should the worst happen, he could always tear straight through the wall to get out. And there was always the air vent.

So. He'd finally made it into ShinRa headquarters. What next?

For now, he figured he might as well settle in - he'd have to figure out some way to cross paths with Hojo later. Preferably without ever having to step foot in a lab or infirmary. He'd play it by ear for a while. Keep his eyes open for opportunities and make plans as he went.

Considering Cloud didn't possess anything not already on his person, he didn't need to unpack. Instead, he started feeling his way around the room, checking for microphones and hidden cameras. The paperwork might have been in order, but he still expected ShinRa to spy on him. Shiva, they'd be stupid not to.

He jerked at the harsh knocking on his door. A visitor already? He hadn't been in his room for more than five minutes.

Should he answer? Maybe it was Zack. Or Kunsel or Lazard forgot something. So much for a chance at some time alone. With a sigh, he opened the door.

He hadn't expected to see a red leather coat.

"Genesis?"

"Strife."

The man looked good. Healthy. And for some reason, delighted.

"Welcome to ShinRa," he greeted airily, breezing into the room and apparently not bothered by the close quarters at all. "Here to kill Sephiroth?"

He glowered at the reminder. "Apparently ShinRa looks down on that sort of thing from their employees."

"He'll be elated to hear that. What made you decide to work for ShinRa?"

Cloud had prepared for this conversation. "They offered me a good deal."

"And you took it?"

"It was better than the alternative."

Genesis made an amused sound in his throat, but didn't follow the line of inquisition any further.
Instead, lyrical poetry fell from his lips.
" My Friend, your desire
Is the bringer of life, the gift of the goddess. "

Cloud folded his arms. "What's that supposed to mean?" He'd read Loveless – everybody in Midgar had, you couldn't escape it – but the exact definition of the 'gift of the goddess' varied from play to play.

"That… potion, or whatever it was you gave me, back in Wutai. Do you have any more?" His voice dipped, words laced with urgency.

The request surprised him. "One vial wasn't enough?" That dosage had been more than enough to cure even the worst cases of Geostigma, but maybe degradation worked differently.

"It's not for me," he corrected, hushed. He leaned out to the open hallway, checking for eavesdroppers, then confided, "A friend. Angeal."

It took a minute for the name to register. Angeal… Angeal… Zack's mentor, black hair, Buster sword, white wing. Gaia, how could he have forgotten? He'd met Zack on the mission where Angeal died, his own student forced to slay him. Cloud suddenly felt ill.

"Degradation. Sure, I still had another two-" His voice faltered as his fingers found the pouch hanging off his hip, though. It didn't feel right.

With dread, he removed the pouch and shook the contents onto the bed.

Glass. Nothing but shards of glass. His ethers, potions, hypers, remedies… and Aeris's water. Smashed, gone, as though they never existed. How had he not noticed?

"No… when I fought the grand horn…" he whispered, fingering through the mess of debris. When he hit the crate. It must have happened then.

He chanced a glance at Genesis. The man stared at the shattered remains on the bedspread as though unable to comprehend their meaning.

"Angeal…" Abruptly, Genesis whirled and grasped him by the shoulders. "What was it? Where did you get it?"

Cloud shook his head. "It's not, there's not any-"

"Someone must have made it!" His fingers curled, digging painfully into the blond's arms.

Cloud wrenched away. "I can't get any more! The person who made it – she's gone!" How else to explain it?

Genesis stared at him as though struck.

The blond shifted awkwardly in place. He felt terrible, but what could he really do? He didn't know how Great Gospel worked, or what exactly it was that made the wellspring at the church so special it could cure even Geostigma, the disease which not even the strongest potions or spells or remedies could soothe.

This could cause problems, though. Genesis might be cured, but Angeal would continue to degrade. What would happen? Would Angeal desert ShinRa? Cloud searched desperately through the fragments of Zack's memories for some clue. Angeal had been the more rational of the two
deserters, and in the end, sacrificed himself. He probably wouldn't try to destroy the world. That was something. But what would he do? Would he stay with ShinRa quietly until the end? Would he disappear into the Science Department and never emerge? Would he run off and live out the remainder of his days as a hermit in seclusion?

Or perhaps more importantly, how would Genesis react to his friend's condition?

"There – there might be a way to cure it, still," he offered, hesitant. "I know someone – they didn't create the water, but if I explain it, maybe…"

"Bring me to them!" Genesis implored.

Cloud shook his head. "I can't. They're in hiding, last I heard." It was sort of the truth. "And it might not even be possible. It's just a slim chance." A slim chance Aeris might be able to recreate her miracle. He didn't want to ask – the poor girl had been spooked enough that he knew of her Cetra heritage – but surely she wouldn't mind trying if it would save Zack the pain of losing his mentor?

If nothing else, he might buy some time. Having Genesis and Angeal around would maintain the status quo. Hollander would stay at ShinRa, hopefully limiting Hojo's power. The chaos Genesis spawned that led to their eventual deployment to Nibelheim would be delayed.

Cloud knew he had many months yet, but sometimes it felt like days.

Genesis didn't look happy about it, but asked, "How long?"

"I don't know for sure. I'll have to get in contact first. It might take a while. How long does he have?"

"Perhaps you should tell me. You seem awfully well informed on degradation. I was under the impression I was the only person Hollander had told." The desperation had disappeared, to be replaced with curiosity and cold cunning.

The silence stretched while Cloud considered the best explanation for that. How many holes did he leave in his performances? This was Turk work. What would Vincent say?

Vincent wouldn't say anything at all. That was why they were friends, back in his timeline. Cloud liked the philosophy, and turned his attention to cleaning the glass up off the bedspread.

Eventually, Genesis gave up on the topic, crossing his arms and leaning against the wall as though they were friends catching up, as opposed to strangers who'd met only twice before. "Have you seen Sephiroth yet?"

"I was only hired today." He went searching for a bin, and located one in the ensuite. The glass tinkled musically against the plastic.

"He'll come later." The words were spoken with authority.

"And do what?" If ShinRa's intention had been to lure him into the building so Sephiroth could confront him on home turf, they were being naïve. The skyscraper would be destroyed in the process.

"Talk, I presume. He's curious about you."

Cloud made plans to hide for the rest of the day.
"If you want to avoid him, he hardly ever visits the Training Room," Genesis commented, bright blue mako eyes fixed unnervingly on the blond.

Surprised, Cloud examined the SOLDIER in return, but the First only lifted his chin slightly, matching his gaze without reservation.

Slowly, he asked, "Why tell me that?" Genesis didn't strike him as the sort to help others out of kindness.

He shrugged. "You're the most interesting thing to happen around here in a long while, Strife. It amuses me to see Sephiroth's feathers ruffled. He looks like a great big cranky silver bird."

That was all? It struck him as the sort of thing Zack would do. Then again, in all of his memories Genesis had been bitter and viciously angry over his fate – he never had the opportunity to witness the man the magazines called a 'warrior poet', possessing a sharp and clever wit. He'd always assumed them to be flowery trash. "Thanks."

Genesis made a sort of mocking bow, then hesitated, as though indecisive over his next words. Cloud swept the last of the crystalline fragments from his bedspread in the silence.

Eventually, he murmured, "It is the least I can offer in return."

Cloud's hand stilled over the bin, particles of glass glittering on his fingers.

Stiffly, Genesis turned and made to leave the room. "He is guided by hope that the gift will bring bliss And the oath that he swore to his friends."

Gratitude. Genesis was thanking him, in his own oblique way.

The realisation stole the breath from his lungs. All along in his crusade, he'd been prepared to face persecution, prepared to have ShinRa chase him down like a rabid dog once more if it meant he could guarantee the safety of the right people, but never did he once expect anyone to thank him for his efforts.

He couldn't leave it hanging like that. "Wait!"

Genesis paused, turning back slightly, framed by the bright hallway lights.

Cloud's intention had been to say something along the lines of 'it was nothing' or 'it's the only difference I've made so far', but the words wouldn't come unstuck from his throat. As the silence stretched and Genesis raised a curious eyebrow, he eventually blurted, "Why doesn't Sephiroth ever visit the Training Room?"

The SOLDIER's blossoming smile possessed a decidedly grim twist. "Interesting question. It's because of his relationship with the head of the science department – and let's just say, the science department has been known to requisition the facilities every now and again."

Jackpot.
Chapter 14

Stalking the Training Room didn't have the good fortune of putting Cloud within striking distance of Hojo, but then, he didn't expect results on the first day. He was willing to wait – he might have known from past experience where the Science Department was, but he didn't want to risk walking any further into the dragon's den. Better for Hojo to come to him. Besides, watching his fellow Third Class SOLDIERs train – how strange to be able to honestly think that of himself after so long – gave him time to plan everything out in his head. It wasn't an elegant or foolproof plan by any means, but he didn't have Vincent's sleight of hand to back him up. Or any backup at all for that matter.

After going through all of his options, he decided his best bet was threatening the information out of Hojo. Not that Hojo would tell him, but the scientist liked to brag. Under pressure, he might give him a clue, and with his foreknowledge that would probably be enough. If it wasn't, Cloud simply had to kill Hojo, and then make his intentions to destroy Jenova clear. ShinRa would get nervous, and wonder what their head scientist might have spilled before he died. They'd move her. Maybe even to the Nibelheim reactor. But Cloud would be watching, and then he would strike. No one short of Sephiroth would be security enough, and they wouldn't want to risk exposing their precious General to the truth of his origins – that had been entirely Hojo's machination. ShinRa had no interest in doing anything to upset the star of their SOLDIER program.

Jenova would burn, and then ShinRa would send Sephiroth to kill him. And Cloud's work would be done.

He was still turning this plan over in his head the next morning as he headed towards the Briefing Room. This way, it might take a while to cross paths with Hojo, but it helped him reduce the chances of a Sephiroth encounter in the meantime.

It didn't, however, help him avoid Zack, who found him immediately after returning from his mission and had dragged him out to celebrate his new job like it was a personal victory.

The frosted glass door to the Briefing Room opened with a barely audible whoosh. Another example of ShinRa being fancy when an ordinary door would have worked just as well.

Lazard sat inside, at the far end of the glass table. A SOLDIER First leaned against the wall. Cloud's gaze immediately darted to the familiar Buster Sword on his back. His memories scrambled to catch up.

The SOLDIER sized him up from across the room. "You must be Strife. Angeal Hewley. I prefer to go by Angeal."

Cloud nodded in greeting. There weren't any visible signs of degradation – no wing, no unhealthy pallor, no white hair. A good sign – he still had time.

"Good morning, Strife, I hope you're ready for your first day as a SOLDIER Third Class. Angeal will be accompanying you on missions while you settle in. He's there to provide backup if you get caught in a tight spot, but please treat him as though he's merely an observer," Lazard explained. "It's standard procedure with all new SOLDIERs. Later you may be called on to do solo missions,
perform backup for a squad of MPs, or to accompany Turks or fellow SOLDIERs on their duties. Of course, as per your contract, you have the right to turn any of these missions down."

Cloud remained impassive. He knew all of this already.

"You found your uniform, I see," Lazard observed. He sounded approving. "It fits well?"

He shrugged, and adjusted the coarse blue jumpsuit self-consciously. Cloud had changed into the uniform mostly because his clothes were in dire need of proper laundering, as he'd worn nothing else for the past couple of months and they hadn't been washed since he stopped in at the Gold Saucer. He kept his shoulder guard, though - the standard ShinRa ones were designed for the stockier, more traditional SOLDIER body type - those with thick, bulging upper arm muscles, exactly like the First Class standing before him.

"Good. And in case you were concerned about regulations, you don't need to worry yourself over bracers or other equipment," the Director continued. "There are a variety of fighting styles within SOLDIER, and a certain amount of customisation is to be expected. Some people feel better with the extra head protection of a helmet, and others complain it limits their field of vision. And of course, we encourage SOLDIERs to improve upon their equipment independently, as we can only accommodate so many specialities."

"Are you sure that's not corporate-talk for 'There's no budget for your fancy armour, get it yourself?'" Angeal asked in good humour.

Lazard smiled, but neither confirmed nor denied the statement. Cloud found himself wondering what might have happened if Lazard inherited the company instead of Rufus. He reminded him of Reeve - a little cooler, more polished, but possessing the same quiet manner of navigating the shark infested waters of management, trying to do some good while staying out of the bloodbath.

Not missing a beat, the Director smoothly continued, "So, Strife, how were your accommodations? Any complaints?"

"No sir," he responded quietly. "It's much better than anything I'm used to."

"Yes, I suppose it would be," he murmured, then turned to business, nodding at the dispatch orders on the desk. "We have a routine local mission to start you off, if you don't have any objections. A construction site in the second quadrant of Sector 4 has been overtaken by a small flock of ahrimans. Construction cannot continue until the threat has been removed."

"Another one? Out in the sticks I understand, but you've been sending people out in all of the Sectors almost daily," Angeal commented.

"Yes, these monster infestations are becoming a problem." For a moment, the smooth and neutral expression fell away, revealing lines of worry and stress. "That's why your assistance will be very much appreciated."

Cloud picked up the dispatch and scanned it quickly. Simple enough. It would probably take longer to get there than to complete the mission itself. Realising that Lazard was waiting for a response, he said, "I'll do it."

"Excellent. If you don't have any further questions, I won't hold you up any longer. I'll see you gentlemen again later."

They left the Briefing Room and headed for the elevator. Cloud hit the button for the lowest floor.
"He likes you," Angeal remarked.

Shifting uncomfortably, Cloud replied, "I haven't done anything to deserve it."

The SOLDIER First laughed. "I think once he heard you were living on the streets despite your skill, any protests he had vanished. The Director values hard working people. He's climbed to his position from the very bottom rung of the company."

That explained why his demeanour skewed so differently from the rest of ShinRa's upper management. Although… "He looks so much like Rufus, I assumed…"

"We don't talk about that in the office," Angeal corrected him lightly.

An illegitimate son, then. That would be a powerful influence on the Director's perceptions. How would it feel to fight all the way to the seat of Director, while watching his younger half-brother be practically gifted with the vice-presidency?

"So, why did you decide to come work for ShinRa? Genesis didn't think you would."

A fair question, but Cloud was already getting tired of it. "I wasn't keen, but Tseng didn't give me many choices."

"How so?"

Cloud stared at the floor to avoid making eye contact. "I could either negotiate a contract, or spend my time in Midgar dodging bullets."

"I doubt it would have come to that." Though his voice lacked conviction.

"He's a Turk," was the blond's response, as though it explained everything. It sort of did.

Angeal raised an eyebrow. "And that was enough to put you off trying to kill Sephiroth?"

Cloud stared harder at the floor. Did everybody know about that? He'd been banking on the hope that ShinRa would want to keep any near-successful attempts on their invincible general's life silent.

At his lack of response, Angeal turned serious. "Why are you so driven? Most people would consider an attempt on Sephiroth's life to be suicide."

"I'm not most people," he replied shortly.

"So I hear. Then what is it you're fighting for?"

Cloud didn't feel comfortable answering that, not when talking to a dead man walking. "Is it important?"

"It's the most important thing about being a SOLDIER."

Cloud shrugged, somehow sure that his absence of an answer would disappoint Zack's mentor. He knew the 'right' answers, the mantra Angeal had drilled into Zack's head, but they weren't his reasons. He'd never made SOLDIER. "Why do you fight?"

"For honour," was the prompt response. "And for my pride as a SOLDIER."

How much did that honour and pride matter when you learnt you were dying because a mega
corporation had used you as an experiment?

"I see you also carry a Buster-style sword. For me, this sword is handed down through my family, a symbol of our honour, our hopes and our pride and our dreams. One day, well..." He chuckled, and turned his attention back to Cloud. "I'd like to know your reasons for carrying that blade. I've been curious about the man who could make those two stubborn idiots change so much."

"I'm nothing special," Cloud murmured. "Just a nobody with a chip on his shoulder."

The ding as the elevator doors opened finally put an end to the awkward conversation, and they turned their focus onto making their way through Sector 4. Walking around freely in the daylight above-plate was a novel experience, as Avalanche had operated exclusively out of the slums, and during his days as a trooper Cloud hadn't made it out much. The streets were wide, clean, and modern, with glossy signs advertising places of business and tidy penthouses hidden on every block.

Walking among the civilians above-plate carried a different atmosphere too. It took him a while to figure out the cause. People still stared – their uniforms and weapons gave them away - but their expressions weren't fearful, or cautious, or full of hate and mistrust. Instead, they were greeted with expressions of awe, envy, and in Angeal's case, almost worship. He seemed to be a hit with the older women especially.

Enhanced hearing allowed him to pick up the nearest conversations without much difficulty, and they made his ears burn. Fortunately, most of the talk centred on Angeal, but there were more than a few speculative murmurings about a 'new Third Class'. To think he used to be one of those fans, drinking in every little bit of gossip about Sephiroth and SOLDIER!

Fortunately, the crowds thinned as they headed into the area of Sector 4 still under development. Midgar was still growing, would continue growing for years yet, until Meteor put an abrupt stop to that.

Meteor wouldn't happen, he reminded himself. He wouldn't let it.

A sizeable area around the construction site had been roped off to prevent civilian encounters. Cloud and Angeal jumped over the flimsy barricade – it served as a warning, more than any sort of security – and headed for the site.

The ahrimans were visible well before they reached their destination – rotund, scaly beasts, hanging from the scaffolding like oversized bats. The building itself hadn't progressed past the initial frame, providing only a skeletal structure and half a roof that made it ideal shelter for the flying monsters.

Cloud surveyed the scene critically, and then popped out his Bolt and All materia from First Tsurugi, swapping them around until they were linked. In this instance, the ahrimans had chosen their nest poorly.

He held aloft his sword, concentrating on the most powerful bolt spell he could muster. The monsters began to stir, sensing the activity of magic in the air. A few unfurled their wings to take flight.

Too slow. With a deafening crack, thick, wildly arcing bolts of lighting ruptured from the materia, zapping through the air towards their targets. The air filled with animalistic shrieks as each bolt split, bent and sizzled its way through the scaffolding.
None of them could escape. The first one thudded to the ground like a rock. The others followed in quick succession, dropping like seedpods released from a tree. The smell of sizzling flesh curled in his nostrils, and after thirty seconds or so, the construction site fell silent.

Done. He turned back to his observer.

Angeal stared at him as though he were a monster. Cloud checked. Still no wings. Frowning, he asked, "Is there a problem?"

Shaking himself, the First replied, "No problem. Good work. Let's head back."

What was that about? Cloud cast another glance back at the pile of bodies as they headed away from the construction site. "They're not returning to the Lifestream yet."

"You know about the Lifestream?" Angeal asked. "...Well, don't worry about it. It takes a bit longer in Midgar than most other places. You did it clean, with no collateral damage – if they're still there in the morning, the construction crew can handle it."

Mildly disturbed by yet another example of how ShinRa's mako extraction affected the cycle, Cloud followed along in silence.

Back at ShinRa, Lazard had been stunned by their fast return; initially assuming they hadn't left yet. He shuffled through his desk and found another mission for them – by the Sector 6 gates this time – and Cloud completed that just as quickly, dispatching a nest of mandragoras in a short order. It wasn't particularly challenging, but then, they were probably giving him the easy missions, considering he was technically supposed to be a rookie Third.

When they returned again, Angeal stopped him from requesting a third mission. "It's your first day. Take it easy," he advised.

Cloud frowned. "I'm not tired."

The First chuckled. "I can see that, but I've got things to do too. Why don't you take the chance to settle in, do some training, get to know your fellow SOLDIERs?"

Put like that, Cloud figured he ought to drop by the Training Room to check for Hojo. And he would need to slip below plate sometime to talk to Aeris in private, to see if she could think of a way to cure Angeal. "When do I report in next?"

"Did the company give you a PHS yet?"

He shook his head, and pulled out his. "I already have one."

"May I borrow it for a second?" Cloud tossed him the phone, and Angeal turned it over in his hands for a moment.

"I heard you were living in the slums. How did someone in your position afford a model like this?" Suspicion coloured his tones.

"I used to run a delivery service. I needed a good PHS," he answered simply.

"Delivery service, huh?" Angeal flipped the phone open alongside his own, fumbling with the buttons. Side-by-side, his model did look surprisingly small and slick. He hadn't thought PHS
technology had jumped that drastically over the time span. "Why did you stop?"

"My bike got trashed by a Midgar zolom." Or at least, it probably would have been, if he hadn't been catapulted into the past.

Angeal raised an eyebrow. "Ouch. And you're still alive?"

Cloud shrugged, avoiding eye contact. To say anything more would be getting too deep into the lie.

"Lucky for us, I guess." He fiddled with the phone a bit longer, then tossed it back. Cloud caught it one-handed. "I sent your number to Lazard – check your PHS for mail before you go to sleep tonight, he'll either give you a time to check-in at the Briefing Room or a mission directly."

He nodded to show he understood, slipping the PHS back into the safety of his pocket. For a moment, he regarded the SOLDIER in front of him. No obvious signs of degradation at all.

Genesis had raged against his fate. Angeal had gone as quietly as possible. Both were failed experiments, thrown away by ShinRa. Just like him.

"I'm tired of fighting, but I can't seem to stop," Cloud murmured.

It took the SOLDIER First Class a moment before recollection dawned on his face. "My question earlier?"

Cloud didn't answer – hadn't intended to speak aloud in the first place. "Sorry. See you later." He slipped from the room, the door hissing shut behind him.

Angeal continued staring at it long after he left, a thoughtful frown on his face.

By his third day of working for ShinRa – a thought that still made his head spin – Zack had figured out that he could normally find Cloud in the vicinity of the Training Room. And because Zack knew, Kunsel knew, and before Cloud knew, he found himself giving the pair of Seconds materia training.

Never mind they both technically outranked him.

"That's an incredible barrier," Kunsel observed, even as he lobbed another ice spell at the dummy. Only a few shards and a bit of icy air actually hit the target, protected as it was by a shimmering wall of magic. The dummy would have been destroyed in only a couple of spells otherwise. "It's taken, what, twenty spells now? And it doesn't look like it's weakened at all."

Cloud made a non-committal noise in response.

Lightning struck the barrier, sputtering into harmless sparks. Zack only had a Cure on him, so he'd borrowed some of Cloud's materia. "This is amazing! Mastered materia really is something else." He frowned. "Can't cast as fast as you yet, though."

"It takes practice and familiarity. That's why it's better to use a materia you mastered yourself," Cloud explained. It felt strange, teaching others things he'd come to take for granted.

Kunsel grinned. "Lucky for us, we can take some shortcuts thanks to your experience. I think I've cut down my casting time by a third already. Hey Zack, maybe I'll beat you to First!"

Zack laughed. "You're going to have to work hard to keep up! Cloud's going to be giving me sparring practice later!"
Cloud didn't recall agreeing to any such thing.

"No fair, Zack! That's double dipping! You've already got Commander Hewley for a mentor."
Kunsel threw another ice spell at the dummy. A light dusting of frost peppered the front this time. The barrier would need renewing soon.

"You're just too slow, Kunsel!" Zack retorted. His next bolt spell shattered the barrier. Cloud motioned for them to stop, and quickly recast it.

The other Second didn't react to the jibe, turning his attention back to their reluctant tutor. "I've been wondering, Cloud – is that a Barrier or a Wall materia you're using?"

It was an odd question, "Barrier. The spell is Wall."

"Huh. I didn't know you could cast different spells with mastered materia. I just thought the level changed."

Cloud held out his hand for Kunsel's materia, and the Second handed it over without a thought. He rolled it in his palm for a minute, getting a feel for what sort of magic potential it had. Only mid-level Ice, but the glow indicated the materia was close to being mastered. Oddly enough, he couldn't get a feel for a lower level spell either. Frowning, he asked, "Where did you get this materia?"

"ShinRa-issue. You get one materia of your choice every time you're promoted a Class."

It made sense then. He returned it, and removed his Restore. "Manufactured materia. This one was formed naturally. Try and feel the difference."

Kunsel took the mastered materia, and repeated Cloud's gesture. Surprise registered on his face – or at least, as much of his face that was visible underneath the helmet. "Huh. So you found all these in the wild?"

Cloud nodded, returning the Restore to his sword. "Mako fountains are a good place to find them. Mines, caves. Sometimes people have them as heirlooms, too."

"You must get around a lot. I don't think I've ever come across any naturally formed materia."
Kunsel inspected the materia slotted into First Tsurugi with renewed interest. "I've never seen this one."

"All. Lets me target all visible enemies with one spell." If he recalled correctly, ShinRa had never been able to manufacture it, which made the price of it so high. They had however managed to create some high level materia with area affects. He didn't know how. Just because he was an expert on using materia, didn't mean he knew anything else about them.

Zack joined in, poking out one of the materia near the base and rolling the cold green ball in his hands. "What's this?" He held it out towards the dummy experimentally.

Cloud snatched it from his fingers, leaving the Second blinking in confusion. He let out a shaky breath. You just didn't use Comet in a built-up area. "Not this one."

Returning his focus to the dummy, Kunsel commented, "Zack never paid attention in theory classes. He must have missed the lecture about materia safety."

The Zack in his memories hadn't been that much of a slouch with materia, but then, it was easier if you received all of your materia already labelled. Cloud had learned everything about materia the
hard way. That meant finding a great big empty field somewhere and testing any green materia they were unfamiliar with.

"Sorry!" Zack didn't sound sorry at all. "But seriously, what is it?"

"Comet."

Another ice spell dissolved against the barrier, and Kunsel let out a low whistle. "That's some serious firepower. You planning on taking on an army any time soon?"

Cloud very deliberately placed the materia into his pocket. "It's easy to get mobbed by monsters when you're travelling alone in the wastes."

Kunsel shook his head. "No way you should be a Third. Even Seconds don't go travelling off the main paths without some backup these days. Monsters have been going mad lately."

"I know!" Zack exclaimed. "Seems like every other day I'm outside the city limits, clearing out monsters. Some of them have even been making it into the slums! It's full time job just keeping Midgar safe, never mind anywhere else."

"I heard the weapons department's developing some stronger bots to take care of it," the other Second added. Kunsel, Cloud quickly discovered, was an accomplished gossip. He could quote all the company rumours, could tell you about anybody worth knowing in ShinRa, and always knew the big news before it came out. If it weren't for the way he fought, Cloud would have pegged him as a Turk in disguise.

"No way man," Zack dismissed. "I got a mission last month to go destroy a bunch that ran out of control. They're supposed to take care of the simple jobs for us, but all they do is make more work!"

Kunsel grinned. "Soon we won't have to hunt monsters anymore, we'll just have to go take out Scarlett's broken machines."

Cloud smothered a laugh, but Zack heard anyway, and pulled a face at him.

The door to Training Room chose that moment to hiss open.

The laugh caught in his throat.

He knew who it was without even turning around.

"Strife. I've been looking for you. So this is where you've been hiding."

His entire body tensed, fingers tightening around the hilt of First Tsurugi.

Meeting Sephiroth had been inevitable, but Cloud had hoped his hiding place would give him at least a few more days to get used to walking among the ghosts of the past. He still felt a little edgy after passing his old drill sergeant in the hallway, and the man had saluted him.

Sephiroth glided into the room, Kunsel and Zack snapping out a quick salute. He took in the scene in a long, deliberately slow glance. "Materia practice?"

"Sir! Strife was good enough to agree to tutor us!"

"At ease, SOLDIERS." Cloud turned around, not wanting to see the face that had taken away his most precious things, but unwilling to leave his back open to the General any longer. Unnervingly,
the cat-like green gaze was fixed solely on him. "I'm not here on official business."

"Then why are you here?" Cloud asked coolly.

"You need to ask?" Sephiroth drawled. "Have you already forgotten your parting words from the last time we met?"

His fingers itched to draw his sword, but he had to remember the plan, and not let his emotions carry him away again. Only it was more difficult to do than he expected. His mortal enemy stood right before him. It fought his every instinct to stay his hand. "It's against my contract."

"Then why come to ShinRa?" Sephiroth pressed, stepping deeper into the Training Room. The blond barely resisted the urge to step back, acutely aware of the wide-eyed audience of a pair of Seconds.

Cloud didn't answer the question, instead squaring his shoulders and asking, "Why are you here?" Sephiroth seemed to be spoiling for a fight, but that couldn't be right – he would know as well as Cloud did that any such fighting would result in excessive collateral damage.

"To find out why, of course," came the matter-of-fact reply. "We did not have the chance to discuss matters properly last time we met."

Rage – potent and irrational – bubbled within him. Discuss? "I have nothing to say to you." To reduce the lives he took, the havoc he wreaked, the threat to the planet he posed, down to a discussion?

A tiny, traitorous voice within him whispered that of course Sephiroth couldn't know how insulting his words were, not when he hadn't done these things yet, but he ruthlessly squashed it.

"Oh? So you have no reason to fight, then." The silence stretched between them, before Sephiroth suggested, "Shall I provide you with one?"

The veiled threat worked. Cloud could feel the mako in his eyes flaring at the burst of adrenaline as his self-control snapped. "I won't let you!" First Tsurugi flashed through the air, meeting the glowing steel of Masamune with a bone-jarring ring. Pleasure coloured his opponent's gaze, and Sephiroth stepped forward, pushing off with an easy strength. His sword left a trail of sparks as its tip grazed the reinforced steel of the Training Room floor.

Zack and Kunsel were rooted to the spot on the other side of the room, mouths agape. Dangerous. "Allow me the pleasure of taking it away." Cloud threw the strongest Wall spell he could manage over them, whirling back around barely in time to catch Masamune's next strike. The floor shuddered under his feet.

"Tell me, Strife," Sephiroth taunted, "Where did you find this strength? The strength of a SOLDIER First Class."

"I'm not about to tell you!" The words slipped so easily from his mouth, a mockery of a battle not yet past.

They exchanged a frantic flurry of blows, the clashes echoing eerily against the metal walls. He saw an opening, dove for it, but Sephiroth twisted away with an easy grace, as though he expected it. Cloud jerked his head to the side, barely avoiding Masamune's stab, and threw himself backwards, out of range before the sword could strike down.
"Hey, stop it!"

Zack's voice rang through the Training Room, and for a second Cloud expected to see a glimpse of the Lifestream, his friend offering hope when it seemed helpless. Instead, Zack faced Sephiroth, weapon partly drawn, heedless of the sword hovering a hands' width away from his neck. Cloud almost dashed towards him, but the grip on his shoulder and a glimpse of a helmet – Kusel – stopped him just in time.

*The plan.* What was he *doing?* He couldn't kill Sephiroth yet. Not until he'd taken care of Hojo and Jenova. He'd promised Vincent that much, at least.

For one moment, the room was poised on a knife's edge, tension spilling over, ready to break into battle again with the wrong twitch of a muscle.

The moment passed, and Cloud pulled himself together, forcing the bloodstained memories to the back of his mind, where they belonged. He lowered his sword, and with one last resentful look at Sephiroth, stormed from the Training Room.

"Running away again?" Sephiroth taunted.

"Hey, come on, sir," Zack protested. He said something else, but by then the door had hissed shut behind him and Cloud walked out of earshot, his fingers clutching at fabric of his uniform.

Sometimes he imagined he could still feel the pull of Masamune in his chest.

This was going to be a lot harder than he thought.
"It's been a week since Strife has joined ShinRa Incorporated," Tseng began. "Thank you all for making time today for this personnel review."

A snort from Genesis's direction informed everybody of the Commander's opinion of that particular turn of phrase. Tseng remained professional, leafing through his binder, observing each member of the room carefully. Sephiroth tapped the side of his elbow, the only sign of his impatience. Angeal folded his arms.

Lazard broke the silence. "Where should we begin?"

To the Turk's surprise, Sephiroth was the first to speak up. "I ran into him-" Tseng knew that was a lie, he'd reviewed the Training Room security feed. "-and he didn't try to kill me on sight."

"Of course not," Lazard replied. "He signed a contract to that effect."

"I'm surprised he agreed to it," Genesis mused, as though speaking to himself.

Angeal shrugged. "Tseng was right. He must have changed his mind." The stocky First looked troubled by something, though. Tseng made a mental note to follow that up later.

As for Sephiroth, his expression indicated that he didn't think Strife had changed his mind at all. After witnessing the footage of their encounter in the Training Room, Tseng found himself inclined to agree. He was holding himself in, a taut string ready to snap at the slightest pluck. Which made it all the more confusing that he had agreed to work for ShinRa in the end. He had to have known that such an action would directly contravene his desires. The Turk didn't truly believe his recruitment talk had been that convincing. What was he playing at?

It was Tseng's job to find out.

"That matter aside, upon signing him up I have discovered he has an aversion to scientists and doctors," Tseng stated. "He claims he suffered mako poisoning, and that may be true, but his reluctance to submit to even a standard physical suggests he may have been experimented upon in the past." Genesis glared at the table. Understandable. The Turks had an unofficial awareness of Project G. "Unverified, but in the meantime it's a small detail we can add to his psychological profile. Has anyone come across anything suspicious?"

Angeal shifted in his seat, looking indecisive. When everyone turned their attention to him, he sighed, and admitted, "I had a look through his PHS contact list. It was… disturbing."

"Disturbing?" Tseng asked.

"Here, I wrote down all the names I could remember." Angeal pushed a notebook across the table to him. The Turk picked it up and scanned it, eyebrows raised. This was interesting.
"Go on, then," Genesis prompted, curiosity obviously piqued.

"Tifa, Barrett, Cid, Vincent, Yuffie, Shelke, Reeve…" His voice trailed off dubiously.

"Reeve? As in Tuesti? Head of Urban Development?" Sephiroth asked.

"Yuffie is of interest, as well," Tseng murmured. "These are only first names, so it may be coincidence, but Lord Godo has a daughter named Yuffie." A contact made in Wutai? The Princess was just a child, though. She wouldn't be of any use in a conspiracy, save ransom.

"You're missing the most important part," Angeal interrupted. "You're on there, Tseng."

"As are two other Turks," he agreed. His own name didn't bother him – he'd left contact information with Strife when he'd hired him - but the presence of Reno and Rude on the list could not be so easily explained away. "And also a 'ShinRa', but without seeing the number itself, I can't be sure if that applies to an individual or the company. Were these all the names, Angeal?"

"Not even half," he admitted with a grimace. "I couldn't look too long without him getting suspicious."

"I'm surprised you even thought to do something so underhanded," Genesis remarked.

Angeal shrugged. "It was kind of by accident. I wasn't familiar with the model, and when I saw the first couple of names, well…" He gestured at the notebook. "Maybe it doesn't mean anything. Used to run a delivery service apparently. They could just be clients."

"A delivery service?" Lazard sounded mildly impressed, and Tseng recalled the Director's admiration for entrepreneurs. It appeared that his reservations about Strife had been stripped away in the past week. Unexpected, considering he'd originally been the strongest opponent to his recruitment.

The Turk filed the mention of a delivery service away in the back of his mind to investigate – though such one-man operations were notoriously difficult to track. "I'll have to take a closer look at his PHS at some point." He slipped the list of names into his pocket. "On to other matters. Angeal, you've been observing him on his missions, correct? What other impressions do you have to share?"

The bulky First folded his arms. "I say promote him to Second Class."

"So soon?"

"You already know he's on the same level as a First - you wouldn't have gone to so much effort to hire him otherwise."

"Superior fighting skills do not alone a Second make. There are a number of talented Thirds who haven't been promoted simply because they are prone to causing collateral damage, or because they lack discipline," Lazard pointed out.

"Strife's not that reckless. You've spoken with him, Lazard, you know that. I've only tagged along on half of his missions, but he completes them in record time with zero fuss. He cleared out over three dozen Death Gazes from a bunker in less than half an hour, and he looked bored by it. Stop wasting his time on grunt work."

Lazard spent a moment considering that, then relented. "A compromise. I move him on to Second Class missions, and if he's still keeping up after a week of those, I'll promote him."
Tseng nodded his agreement. Strife's position in the company meant little to the Turks - they were mostly interested in keeping him on the payroll and solving his mysteries. The President only cared that he was loyal and wouldn't harm ShinRa. Aside from one incident with Sephiroth, Strife had been a model SOLDIER so far. The matter of the contacts in his phone alarmed him, but he'd learnt that conspiracy did not necessarily lurk in every corner of the company. Sometimes, there really were ordinary explanations.

"Unless anyone has something further to add, we'll keep this short and adjourn here. I know you all have busy schedules. If anything else of concern comes up, please contact me immediately."

Lazard left first – no doubt anxious to tackle his not-inconsiderable pile of paperwork before the board meeting that afternoon. Angeal and Genesis headed out into the brightly lit hallway, a heavy silence between them.

"And General Sephiroth," Tseng's voice echoed through the meeting room, just before the silver-haired man reached the doorway. "In the future, the company would prefer it if you were not to provoke Strife. He's doing his best to hold up his end of the contract, but we'd like to avoid testing him on it."

Sephiroth paused, and the Turk braced himself for a retort, but the SOLDIER just inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement, and disappeared from the room in a swish of black leather.

Tseng let out a breath, and hoped the General would take his warning to heart. Strife presented a mystery that you naturally wanted to pick at, but he wished he would leave it to the Turks. Investigations like these had to be done with finesse - otherwise they had a tendency to explode in your face. And in the case of a powderkeg like Strife, possibly take out half the company in the process.

He didn't get paid nearly enough for this.

Cloud grew suspicious at the lack of fallout from his altercation with Sephiroth, but as the days passed and nothing happened, slowly began to relax. As much as he could relax when surrounded by the ghosts of the past, anyway.

"See? I told you it wouldn't be a problem. Neither Zack or I reported it, and why would the General?" Kussel assured him, tossing him a drink from the vending machine. Cloud caught it and cracked it open, sipping the fizzy soda slowly.

Kussel seemed to have adopted him as a mentor of sorts, which made for an interesting experience. Cloud hadn't really trained anybody before, and he didn't think he was very good at it, but the Second kept turning up and cajoling him into practice sessions - first materia, and after witnessing his brief skirmish with Sephiroth, swords as well.

Seeking a change in subject, Cloud noted, "You never seem to go on any missions." He wrapped his hands around the chilled can, frowning at the condensation soaking into his fingertips. Maybe he ought to swap out the uniform gloves for his usual black ones.

"Only about every third or fourth day," Kussel agreed. "And I usually get local ones, too. The Director put me onto organising exams and supervising cadet classes." He shrugged.

That explained why the Second always seemed to be around in the afternoons. "You don't mind?" The work would be easy, but it also meant his chances of becoming a First Class were distant at best.
As if reading his mind, he replied, "Not everyone can become a First Class, you know. It's only for the best of the best."

Cloud didn't really agree with that. He spent a moment gathering his thoughts, then murmured, "I think you have what it takes. You're good with materia." And he fought intelligently, which set him apart from the majority of the Second and Third Class SOLDIERs.

Kunsel grinned. "Hearing you say that gets my hopes up. I'm going to keep working at it. Think you'll still be willing to help me out when you're in Second Class?"

"You say it like it's a given."

The Second chugged the last of his drink, and pegged it towards the bin across the way. It crumpled on impact and rattled into the trash along with a collection of similarly crushed cans. "Zack and I have a bet running. He says you'll be promoted by the end of the week – I gave you two."

"Isn't that a little soon to get promoted to Second Class?" Cloud wondered. He'd only been a Third for a little less than two weeks.

"Normally, I'd say yes. But no one will resent you for it," Kunsel assured him. "Word's gotten around that you're good. Everyone knows you're doing missions off the Second Class roster already."

Cloud frowned. "Everyone?"

Kunsel jerked his head in Zack's direction. The bouncy black-haired SOLDIER was waving his arms in the air enthusiastically as he talked to a fellow Second - Luxiere, probably, but the helmet made it hard to tell for sure. Cloud didn't have a very good memory for names and faces. "Oh. Right."

They settled into comfortable silence while Cloud lingered over his drink. He didn't have any missions for the rest of the day, and Hojo hadn't set up shop in the Training Room when he checked earlier, so there wasn't any rush to go anywhere. Hanging out with Kunsel passed the time easily. Aside from a couple of hazy recollections in Zack's memories, Cloud never knew him before, so their interactions were blissfully free of emotional baggage.

Zack eventually noticed them and bounded over. "Cloud! Kunsel! What are you guys doing here?"

"Just finished another materia session. Check it out." Kunsel held aloft his Ice materia, now mastered. Cloud made a mental note to find him a new one to start on – a natural one, this time. He could remember a place in the slums that sold them, though it did poor business because most people didn't know the difference between manufactured and naturally formed materia.

"What? You guys were training without me?" Zack affected a look of mock hurt.

"Zack!" A familiar voice echoed down the hall. Angeal. "If you've got time for chit-chat, you've got time for training!"

Zack winced as his mentor joined them. "I was going to go training! We were just going to have a spar, right guys?" His expression seemed a little desperate.

"Hey, you've already got a mentor Zack, quit hogging mine," Kunsel jibed.

"Strife, are you stealing my student?" Angeal asked in good humour.
"No sir," he replied quickly. "You should go to your training, Zack."

"But Cloooollllouuud!" Zack whined, drawing the word out. "You have no idea! Angeal's evil!"

"Wait – you're Cloud?" Angeal interrupted.

Taken aback, Cloud just nodded.

"It's his first name," Kunsel offered.

Angeal shook his head in wonder. "He's been going on and on about some guy called Cloud for weeks. I didn't realise it was you."

Rightly so – he'd been avoiding using his full name, on the very slim chance somebody stumbled across his 'nephew' in Nibelheim and thought something odd. The story he'd used on Bradley wouldn't hold up under inspection. No helping it, though, not when he'd given Zack his first name without thought.

"That reminds me, we've got a long distance mission tomorrow – helicopter's leaving at 0800 hours. Check your mail for the details." Angeal informed him. Cloud nodded to show he understood, and Angeal cuffed Zack across the back of his head as he tried to sneak away. "Come on, idiot, you're not getting off that easy."

Cloud watched them go, a little confused. "Did Zack do something wrong?" He thought Zack liked training. He certainly bugged the two of them enough about it.

Kunsel chuckled. "Nah. He always tries to wriggle out of practice. If it weren't for Angeal, his training would be nothing but squats."

Genesis, Angeal and Sephiroth had a long-standing tradition that at the end of the week, providing nobody was away on a mission, they would gather in Sephiroth's office as twilight fell and indulge in some social drinks. The alcohol did very little, of course – mako burned it away with the same efficiency it reserved for most poisons – but it served as a chance to catch up. Lately, its purpose had shifted mostly to discussing the unusual new SOLDIER in their midst.

"I found out something interesting today," Angeal began. It must have been good, as he took his time pouring a drink, drawing out the suspense.

It worked. Sephiroth found himself leaning forward in his seat, and Genesis went to no effort to disguise his interest. "Oh?"

"His full name. Cloud Strife."

There was a pause as the words sunk in, then Genesis snorted. "Cloud? His name is Cloud?"

"Cloud Strife," Sephiroth mused, testing the words on his tongue. "I wonder why he went to such effort to hide his first name."

"I already checked the personnel databases – there's no match for 'Cloud' either, so it's not that." Angeal shrugged. "I passed it along to Tseng, but he probably already knows, since apparently almost everyone else in SOLDIER calls him Cloud thanks to Zack."

"Infinite in mystery is the gift of the goddess."

"Yeah, well, I don't enjoy mysteries like you two seem to."
Sephiroth didn't enjoy mysteries at all, actually – which was why he was so determined to unravel Cloud's. Yes, the name suited him, he decided. Cloud Strife. Like an uncontrollable tempest, a force of destruction which you couldn't predict and if you tried to grab it, would just slip through your fingers.

"I'm surprised you still feel that way. You've been shadowing him for two weeks now," the General commented, and found himself annoyed. He hadn't seen that spiky blond head of hair since the aborted skirmish in the training room. After waiting so long for his rival's arrival, only to be told that they couldn't fight – a great disappointment.

"Maybe I've been working with him for the past two weeks, but it hardly makes a difference. He's just as bad at expressing himself as you are," Angeal dismissed. "Doesn't talk unless prompted, and smiles even less."

"He seems to get along fine with your student," Sephiroth observed, ignoring the slight. "The Second Class - Zack Fair."

Angeal chuckled. "That's different. Zack could talk the scales off a dragon."

Genesis sniggered. "Is the great General Sephiroth feeling jealous?"

Sephiroth frowned, and refused to answer. Sometimes Genesis hit a little too close to the mark, and he'd do anything to avoid letting his old friend know that.

Was it so wrong, though? The three were friends, but sometimes Sephiroth felt as though he had nothing else beyond his work. Angeal had that Second he'd adopted, and Genesis had Loveless. What did Sephiroth have?

He thought he'd finally found it in the enigmatic stranger. No – he knew he found it. Something about Cloud awakened some long-dormant instinct in him. He wanted to fight him, wanted to tug at his strings – he wanted a rival.

Only apparently his rival didn't want to play ball.

In a rare moment of empathy, Sephiroth realised this must be what Genesis felt like all the time.

"What did you think about Tseng's theories?" Angeal asked. His tone was conversational, but forced. Something must have bothered him about it.

"The experiment one?" Sephiroth asked. "...It's plausible. We considered it from the beginning. There are people out there desperate to discover the secret of SOLDIER. Desperate enough to experiment on humans."

"Does it change anything?" Genesis asked.

"I guess it doesn't matter," Angeal admitted. "If the experience put him off doctors altogether, he's not likely to be holding onto any dangerous loyalties."

"Then you're not curious?" Genesis probed, kicking his heels back and lounging in his chair, edge of his maroon coat brushing the ground.

"Of course I'm curious, but if it's not relevant and he doesn't want to talk about it, I'm not going to press it." Angeal poured himself another drink. "No matter how interesting it is."

"So boring," Genesis scoffed, rolling the stem of a wine glass between his fingers. "And yet you've
got the best mission at the moment."

"It's not all that exciting. I haven't had to lift a finger. And I still haven't seen what's so remarkable about his sword."

"He must not have had a reason to use it yet," Sephiroth mused. Come to think of it, the dual swords only came into play later in the fight. He took another sip of wine and relished the warm burn in the back of his throat.

"Challenge him to a duel, Angeal," Genesis suggested. "Then you'll see."

He shook his head with a wry smile. "I think you two have that covered well enough already, thanks."

Sephiroth allowed himself a brief chuckle, and poured himself another drink. Pleasant though the taste might be, sometimes he wished the alcohol would have more of an effect.

"Are you alright, Sephiroth?" Genesis asked suddenly. "You look tired."

The question caught Sephiroth off guard – not because it wasn't true, but because such concern and observation from Genesis was unusual. Although for some reason he'd been worrying over Angeal like a mother chocobo for the past few weeks. A very cranky mother chocobo that would peck your eyes out if you didn't adhere to its unpredictable self-care regime. The General hoped this wasn't a sign of the habit being extended to him, too. "I haven't been sleeping well. It's nothing to worry about."

"Insomnia?" Angeal asked.

"Just dreams," he replied curtly, not wanting to discuss it further. If he were being entirely honest, he would have called them nightmares.

"Ripples form on the water's surface
The wandering soul knows no rest."

"Loveless, Act I. Thank you for trying to put me to sleep anyway."

The usual lecture on literary appreciation did not come. Instead, Genesis merely waved a lazy hand. "I wouldn't like tiredness to be your excuse when you lose, next time we spar."

"Your concern is overwhelming."

It made him think, though. Perhaps he'd been approaching things from the wrong angle. His rivalry with Genesis – or rather, Genesis's rivalry with him – had been born out of their longstanding friendship. Perhaps he needed to befriend Cloud before he could be a rival. At the very least, he wasn't willing to continue just staying away as Tseng had suggested.

How to befriend a man who clearly hated him, however, remained a mystery. Such issues had not been covered anywhere in his training.

Sephiroth grimaced, swishing the wine in his glass to cover the expression.

The first step, he supposed, would be getting through a conversation without Cloud trying to kill him.

Zack loved his life. He was dating the girl of his dreams, had great friends, and was going to be
promoted to First Class any day now. How could he not be, when he was receiving personal instruction from two of the most badass SOLDIERs in the program?

"You're an idiot," Kunsel told him. "And stop trying to steal other people's mentors."

"I saw him first," Zack declared.

"How's that? I met him at his exam."

Zack grinned, enjoying having the upper hand on his buddy for once. "Promise you won't tell?"

"Stop being so dramatic and just spill already."

"I met him in the slums, when he first came to Midgar."

"When you were visiting your girlfriend?"

"Yeah!"

"So?" Kunsel retorted. "He hadn't even joined SOLDIER yet."

"But get this! I was trying to get him to sign up, you know, since he was sleeping on the streets and stuff and didn't have a job, so I got him to come along with me on that monster cleanup mission, right? He did great, it was just like fighting alongside you or any of the other SOLDIERs. But then a grand horn turned up."

If Kunsel were surprised, his helmet prevented anyone from knowing it. "Wow."

"Yeah. Caught me completely off-balance. If Cloud wasn't there, I would have been gored."

"So he saved your ass, huh?"

"You bet! You should have seen it. He stopped a grand horn, with just the flat of his blade!"

"That's not really surprising," Kunsel remarked.

"You're kidding! That would be tough even for a First Class!"

"But isn't Cloud the guy who fought Sephiroth to a draw in Wutai?"

Zack's eyes bugged out comically. "What?"

Kunsel shook his head fondly. "How can you not know about it? It's been all the gossip in SOLDIER for months. You were there when Sephiroth came looking for him last week."

"But that could have been anything!" Thinking about it, though, it suddenly made a lot of sense. Far out. Maybe his assumption about Cloud being some unlucky country bumpkin hadn't been so accurate after all. Although he'd implied he'd lost all of his friends, hadn't he? Maybe ShinRa stuffed up somewhere, on some mission Sephiroth had been on. Hard to imagine the General stuffing up a mission, but then, the ShinRa public relations machine could cover up anything. Poor guy.

"Whatever, man. Have you finished your training with Angeal for the day?"

"Yeah." His arms throbbed at the reminder, apparently excited by the attention. Stupid arms.
"You want to go hit the Goblin Bar? They've got cheap drinks tonight."

"Hey, I'm spoken for now. I can't go cruising for pretty girls with you anymore," Zack reminded him, then felt bad at rubbing his good fortune in Kunset's face, so amended, "I'll come for the drinks, though. Hey, let's invite Cloud!"

"Weren't you listening before? He's got a mission tomorrow morning."

Zack paused, scratching his head. "Oh, right. Guess we'd better let him rest then. He always looks so tired, you know?"

"Probably because of your endless nagging."

"Hey! You're the one who keeps hitting him up for training!"

"Which you tag along on, even though you complain about Angeal's training."

"You've never been through one of Angeal's sessions, okay? It's fine when it's just sims, but once we start the drills…" Zack groaned. Kunset grinned and punched him in the shoulder. "I've heard it all before. Admit it, you're a training maniac."

"Gotta be, if I'm gonna make First." He pointed an accusing finger at his fellow SOLDIER. "Don't roll your eyes! I'm serious."

"I'm wearing a helmet, Zack."

"I can tell."

Kunset seemed amused. "Sure you can. Come on, let's get going."

"Sure, sure, I'm coming." His thoughts strayed back to the mysterious blond, however. He knew straight away that Cloud was something else, but… "Did he really fight the General to a draw?"

"You saw them in the Training Room, didn't you?"

"Yeah, but that was pretty short." It looked like it was getting serious before they stepped in, though. Cloud had a sort of wild look to his eyes. And he'd cast that Wall on them too. Like he was afraid they'd get hurt.

"Who knows how it would have gone if they'd kept going," Kunset said with a shrug. "If it bugs you so much, ask him yourself." Kunset, at least, appeared to believe the rumour. Which meant it was probably true.

Too many mysteries. Aeris's 'Mr Nobody' just kept turning up more surprises. "Man, what kind of guy is Cloud, anyway? Too unreal."
Chapter 16

Cloud shot up out of the bed, rolling into a crouch. Where-

Angeal blinked. "Something the matter, Strife?"

He took a deep breath, and forced himself to relax. Nibelheim was not burning. There was no Masamune sticking through his chest. When he looked in the mirror, Sephiroth's cruel, twisted visage would not be staring back at him.

Angeal was still looking at him with a strange expression on his face. He straightened and stared the First Class in the eye. "What are you doing here?" He didn't feel comfortable sleeping in this building as it was - the idea that someone with the right clearance could barge in at any time...

"Our departure time changed - we're leaving in half an hour. I'm here to wake you up. I knocked, but you didn't answer." He paused, then asked lightly, "Nightmare?"

Cloud turned away under the guise of gathering his things. "It's nothing."

Angeal didn't look like he believed him, but didn't press the issue. "I'll wait in the hallway."

As soon as he was gone, Cloud took a deep breath, shaking the last images of the dream from his mind. Things had been rough since Nibelheim, with old wounds torn open, and walking the halls of ShinRa didn't help. His subconscious had taken to tormenting him almost daily, to the point where he became tempted to sneak out and sleep at the church again. But the nightmares weren't anything new – only their frequency. They'd likely abate once he adjusted to the situation. With a sigh, he shrugged into his Third Class uniform, casting a longing look at his black pants. As much as he preferred his own clothes, the uniform helped him blend in. At least they weren't that different, even though the turtleneck felt constricting after so long.

It only took a few minutes to get dressed and gather his things. When he opened the door, Angeal gave him a short wave from his spot against the wall. "That was fast. I guess the spikes are natural, huh?"

Cloud shrugged, running a hand through them self-consciously.

"Zack takes about half an hour to get his hair right in the morning. I thought you might be the same." He clapped his hands together. "Alright then. We're going by helicopter, so if we get an early start, we might be able to make it back the same day."

"Where are we going?"

"Banora."

Banora?

The name stirred something in his memory, but he couldn't recall ever stopping there before. There weren't many places within a day's travel of Midgar he hadn't been with his delivery service.

Banora.
The crater.

The village Genesis had emptied, and then ShinRa had wiped off the face of the map.

Unlike Nibelheim, they hadn't rebuilt it.

"I grew up there," Angeal made idle conversation as they headed for the helipad. "Genesis – you met him in Wutai – did too. If the mission is finished quickly enough, I'll take a few minutes out to visit home, if you don't mind."

Cloud shrugged, but watched the First carefully out the corner of his eyes. Visiting home? Could it be related to degradation?

Maybe not. He couldn't be jumping at shadows all the time regarding Angeal. When he'd gone to Nibelheim – the first, the last true Nibelheim - he'd stopped in to see his mother, hadn't he? His throat tightened at the memory.

The elevator opened to the helipad. Cold, sharp winds buffeted them, the height dizzying. From the top of ShinRa Headquarters, the Plate, all of Midgar, everything looked so insignificant. It almost made him understand how they could entertain the idea of dropping the Sector 7 Plate, just to crush Avalanche. Almost.

Angeal didn't spare a glance for the view – no doubt he'd seen it many times before. Instead, he approached the black helicopter, and Cloud forcefully dragged his attention to it, surprised to realise he recognised the pilot. "Tseng."

"Strife, Commander Hewley," he greeted, tied-back hair and perfectly pressed suit somehow remaining unruffled despite the breeze.

"Stop it, Tseng, Angeal's fine." He turned to Cloud. "He's our pilot today."

Cloud gave Tseng a dubious look. As patchy as his memory might be, he remembered him crashing the helicopter at Modeoheim clearly. The Turk misinterpreted his stare, and explained, "All Turks are trained to pilot a variety of transport. It's part of our duty in protecting the President."

"Right." At least he didn't get motion-sick anymore, and if he'd survived a helicopter crash as a lowly trooper, it probably wouldn't kill him now. "What sort of business would the Turks have in a small town like Banora, though?" He worded his question casually, but it probably wouldn't work. Cloud didn't really do small talk.

"ShinRa has a warehouse in the area containing some sensitive research," was all Tseng would say. "A routine errand. I should be back at the helicopter before you've finished your mission."

He nodded, because how else could he respond? He brushed past Tseng, boarded the helicopter, and a few minutes later the engine roared to life, killing all hope of further conversation.

Midgar rolled away behind them in a matter of minutes, until it was nothing more than an unsightly smudge on the blue horizon. Cloud watched the wastes scroll by beneath him, giving way to rolling green hills. The landscape really didn't look that different to his time, this high up. If he ignored Angeal's presence by his side, he could pretend the past few months were nothing more than a vivid hallucination.

He still couldn't be entirely sure it wasn't, but either way, he was stuck in it.
It didn't take long to get to their destination by helicopter – about an hour and a half, though Cloud didn't keep close tabs on the time. He had plenty to occupy his thoughts, and would brood the whole day away under any other circumstances.

Banora soon appeared before his eyes, and he had the odd sensation of seeing it before, even though he knew he hadn't. Another Zack memory, then, though this one was fuzzy so Zack must not have spent much time admiring the scenery. The helicopter set down on an empty field on the outskirts of the village, long grass waving chaotically in the gusting wind. Cloud hopped out even before the rotors wound down, gaze sweeping the countryside, looking for evidence of the griffon tycoons that had been sighted in the orchards.

"The village is over there," Angeal indicated. "But your targets have mostly been seen in the east."

Cloud nodded to show he heard. Tycoons were aggressive – all he'd need to do was wander around until he got deep enough into their territory, and they'd attack. At least, all of the griffons he'd fought before had been like that. Monsters didn't seem quite as vicious these days. Mako pollution hadn't driven them all wild yet.

"I'll leave you gentlemen here," Tseng said, closing up the sleek black helicopter behind him and locking it, as though there were someone out here in the sticks who could fly it, let alone steal it. "Departure time is 1500 hours. If you're going to be later, call." Then he strode off among the trees. Cloud could glimpse a grey structure in the distance – probably ShinRa's warehouse.

He took a deep breath, trying to identify all the unusual scents in Banora. The crisp, clean air, coloured only faintly with the tang of helicopter fuel, was a welcome change after the past few weeks in Midgar's choking haze. His attention was drawn to the fruit on the trees, and he wandered over, inspecting it. Griffons were typically omnivorous – had the fruit been what lured them so close to town?

"Dumapples," Angeal provided, and twisted one from a branch in a practiced motion, throwing it to Cloud. He caught it and turned it over in his hands. Pale skin, with a slightly lavender hue. After a moment's reflection, he realised he recognised it – Tifa had a dusty bottle of wine on the top shelf in the bar that bore this image. It remained corked, because apparently the right occasion – or perhaps a heavy enough wallet – hadn't turned up to use it yet. The fruit was a luxury item in his time – to see acres upon acres of it sprawling across the countryside, completely unguarded, left him off-balance. Just when he thought he had the hang of the past and future thing, something small like this would upset his equilibrium again.

It felt a little bit too much like when he slowly came to realise he wasn't exactly who he claimed to be. Constantly stumbling across reminders of his lies, breaking down misconceptions, discovering things he thought to be truths to be fanciful fabrications.

The helicopter ride had given him too much time for thought. Cloud latched onto the mission. "I'll try to finish this quickly. So you can visit your family," he murmured.

Angeal waved a hand dismissively. "Don't rush yourself on my account. Just concentrate on doing it properly."

Cloud nodded, and strode off into the orchard, making sure to make plenty of noise as he went, snapping twigs underfoot and letting his gloves drag through the leaves. He could hear Angeal following, much more quietly, at a distance.

It felt good to be out in the countryside, away from Midgar, where things grew and there weren't so many blatant signs of the Planet wasting away. The lack of gawking crowds was a bonus too –
whenever the Commander accompanied him on any Midgar missions, they inevitably gathered onlookers. And even though he'd only been at it for a couple of weeks, he'd started to notice the same few girls loitering in the area whenever he went out to complete solo missions, too. He didn't like being the focus of any attention - had been hoping that so long as he wasn't a First, he could fly under the radar.

He couldn't really complain about it, though - once upon time, he'd been one of those fans who drank in every little piece of information he heard about the General, and it wasn't like he didn't already know about the various SOLDIER fan clubs. Even Zack got a fan club when he became a First. He didn't think he deserved a fan club, not when he'd been a Third for less than two weeks, but he supposed some of Angeal's fans must have noticed that their idol was supervising him. Didn't make it any less awkward.

The sound of a cracking twig – not one of his – reached his ears. Cloud knew better than to pause, but his senses came alert as he dragged his attention back to the task at hand. He slowed his pace a little, and kept his eyes focused in the opposite direction to the shuffling movement in the undergrowth. He had something’s attention, tycoon or not.

He let his fingers rest on the hilt of his sword as he continued on, searching for a clearing in the trees. The birdsong died off, leaving the rustling wind as his only company. Cloud quickened his pace. His enhanced hearing could pick up the shuffle and breath of monsters all around now.

Something wasn't right.

In one swift move, Cloud re-linked his Bolt and All materia. Barely a second later, five black griffons dropped from the trees around him.

All at once? Tycoons weren't that smart.

"Strife!"

The warning didn't even register. A storm of electricity lashed out from his sword, stunning the flock of monsters. Not enough to kill them, not when he'd fired off the spell so quickly. First Tsurugi came down, cleaving the closest one in half. Two others had already recovered, growling as they advanced. He wouldn't be fast enough. He pressed the release, breaking the sword in two. The first blade speared one tycoon in the throat – the second missed by a hair's width as the creature leapt backwards, screeching. The others were back on their feet. Three against one. Fair odds.

He dodged a swipe of a claw, crouching low and stabbing the monster in the chest. No time to pull the blade out – he left it behind and continued on with the second half. He broke the sword in two again, fending off one tycoon while slashing at the other. The keening battle cry died in a gurgle. He whipped the short blade free, rejoined it with the primary, and charged at the remaining monster.

Blood spattered the grass, and the orchard was peaceful again.

Cloud spent a moment breathing deeply, letting the adrenaline wear off – even expecting the ambush, he'd been surprised to find the monsters working in tandem, and wound up wrong-footed because of it. Grimacing, he retrieved the remaining piece of his sword from the body of the third tycoon and reattached it to the others.

He stared down at the corpse as it slowly dissolved into wisps of green light, returning to the Lifestream. It didn't look exactly like a tycoon, under closer examination. The fur and feathers
were too dark, mostly grey and black. It still bore all the hallmarks of a griffon-type monster, but
the proportions were off, too – tail too long and whip-like, a build that looked too stocky to fly, and
oversized white wings with an odd dent in them.

The eyes hadn't been glowing, though. Which meant mako wasn't the cause of the mutation.

"You okay?" Cloud jumped at the voice, and Angeal held up his hands disarmingly. "Whoa, easy
there."

"Sorry," Cloud murmured, turning his attention back to the dissolving remains. Escaped
experiments, maybe? But all the way out here?

"I was ready to jump in," Angeal confessed, "But it looks like you handled it."

Right. He'd forgotten the First had his back.

"That was an interesting trick," he continued. "Most SOLDIERs would spend a couple of hours
tracking."

Cloud frowned, and slung his sword back into its harness. "Griffons are territorial and aggressive.
It's quicker to lure them to you."

Angeal chuckled. "I have to say, you sure know your monsters. Learn a bit on your delivery
service, did you?"

He shrugged, looking away. "It just happens, when you spend a lot of time on the road." He nearly
aired his suspicions about the monsters, but the words died on his tongue. It wasn't safe to question
ShinRa, not when walking this tightrope he'd set himself upon.

"That sword is something else, though. I can see why Genesis and Sephiroth were so impressed.
Looking at it now, you wouldn't think it can separate." Angeal circled him, appraising First Tsurugi
with interest. Cloud didn't comment, and the First turned back towards the village. "Well, we've
got a couple of hours to spare before Tseng wants us back at the helicopter. I'm going to stop by
home. Did you want to come?"

Cloud shook his head. He liked Angeal well enough, but for all his politeness, he couldn't help but
feel as though he made the First uneasy. In that respect, Angeal was the most sensible out of all of
them. "I'll look around here a little longer, in case there are any other monsters."

"You work too hard." But he sounded approving. "Okay, enjoy the scenery then. See you back at
the helicopter."

Cloud was already slipping through the trees – this time, as silently as a wraith.

"This call cannot be connected. Please check the number, and if you persist in having problems,
bring your PHS to your nearest ShinRa Communications outlet to be serviced."

Disturbed, Tseng hung up. 'Tifa' was disconnected too. Skipping past Angeal's, Zack's, and
Kunsel's names, next on the list was a 'Barrett'.

He dialled again, tapping his finger against the laptop resting on his knees. He sat in a long-unused
office in ShinRa's warehouse. Thankfully, due to Professor Hollander's current use of the facilities,
he had access to both the network and a power supply.
Of course, he hadn't originally intended to sit and investigate the contents of Strife's PHS then and there, but to his distress found that the models weren't compatible – it must have been made by a third party manufacturer, a point worth investigating in itself - so he couldn't copy over everything for decrypting later as planned. Given the tools on hand, he was left with the rather inelegant solution of copying the visible data down by hand and cold-calling each contact from his own PHS.

To his surprise, the call rang through. After a number of rings, someone finally picked up. "Barrett Wallace here. Who's callin'?"

Briefly taken aback by the loud and brash baritone, Tseng was slow to reply. "Sorry to bother you Mr Wallace. I'm calling on behalf of Cloud Strife-

"Who?"

"Cloud Strife," he repeated.

"Ain't never heard of him! Sure you got the right guy?"

Tseng's fingers danced over his laptop, calling up files. Barrett Wallace, resident of Corel. He was as blue collar as they came, and had a squeaky-clean history regarding ShinRa, with only a few business dealings on behalf of the Corel railroad. There was no tension in his response, no hesitation - if the man didn't have an immediate recollection of Cloud Strife, then it had probably been an impersonal transaction. The rumoured delivery service, then.

"I'm not sure. Have you ever used a private delivery service?"

"What kind of question is that? Course I have!" A beat. "...Are you one of them... whaddya call it... hawker-types? Cause I ain't interested in whatever shit you're sellin'!"

"I'm not trying to sell you anything, Mr Wallace," Tseng assured him. "But can you tell me if you recall the name of any of your previous delivery services?"

"The name? You crazy? We've gone through half a dozen of the bastards!"

This man would be of no use to him. No shadows lurked here. "I'm sorry to bother you then, Mr Wallace. Thank you for your time." He hung up before any further response could arrive.

Next name. Cid.

Another ring. A woman answered. Unexpected. "Good morning. I was wondering if I could speak to Cid?"

She shuffled off with a meek agreement, and Tseng heard cursing in the distance. A moment later, the rustle of the phone being picked up. "Who the hell is it?" A heavy country twang coloured his accent.

"May I ask who it is I'm talking to?"

"You called me, dumbass!"

"I just wish to confirm I have the right person."

"Who else is it gonna be? That damn bitch came and got me, didn't she? You call Cid Highwind's phone, you're gonna get Cid Highwind!"
"Cid Highwind?" The astronaut from space program? He was one of their best pilots, stationed out at Rocket Town while ShinRa No.26 was being constructed, if he recalled correctly.

"What are you, stupid or somethin’?"

"I apologise." Tseng recovered from his shock with a professional speed – embarrassed to have slipped in the first place. "I'm calling on behalf of Cloud Strife – do you know him?"

"Are you shitting me? Are you wasting my time on some damn prank call? You damn kids think you can pull one over my eyes-"

"It's a simple question," he prodded.

"Course I don't know 'im! What the hell kinda name is Cloud Strife anyway? Stop wasting my time! I'm a busy man." With a string of profanities and a shout of 'SHERA!', the line went dead.

Surprising, but not particularly illuminating. Tseng made a note, and dialled Reno next.

It connected to a woman – questioning revealed her to be a secretary on one of the lower floors of the ShinRa building. The number must have been reassigned then. He'd have to ask Reno about it later. The redhead had a habit of stealing other people's PHSes and giving out wrong numbers.

ShinRa. He crosschecked the number through the company contacts database first, but it didn't come up as a match with any of the current departments. He dialled.

"This call cannot be connected. Please check the number, and if you persist in having problems, bring your PHS to your nearest ShinRa Communications outlet to be serviced."

Another dead end, then. Definitely unusual. ShinRa didn't typically change any of its contact numbers.

Rude next. He knew it was Rude's number on first glance, but dialled anyway. He could afford to talk – he was on Sector 5 guard duty at the moment.

"Hello?" came the deep, clipped tones.

"It's Tseng," he greeted. "Did you know that Cloud Strife has your PHS number?"

"The new SOLDIER?" Rude clarified.

"That's right."

"...No."

"Can you think of any way he might have acquired it?"

"No."

"Not even through a courier service?"

"No."

Mysterious. "I see. Let me know if you remember anything, or can think of an explanation."

"Maybe... Reno?"
Reno sufficed as an explanation sometimes. "I'll ask him later. Thank you."

"No problem." Rude hung up.

Tseng took a breath, closed his eyes, centred his focus, and dialled again. Shelke.

"This call cannot be connected. Please check the number, and if you persist in having problems-"

Shalua.

"This call cannot be connected. Please check the number, and if-"

Nanaki.

"This call cannot be connected. Please check."

Reeve.

A ring tone at last. It was picked up almost immediately. "Reeve Tuesti, Head of Urban Development, ShinRa Incorporated speaking."

So it was Tuesti. Interesting. "Hello Reeve."

"Tseng!" No surprise the man could recognise him by his voice alone. Reeve Tuesti was something of a genius – the sort the Turks made use of frequently. Unfortunately he was also afflicted with a rather crippling sense of social responsibility that made him unpopular in the higher ranks of the company. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'm investigating the connections of a SOLDIER named Cloud Strife. Have you heard of him?"

"The one who's always fighting with General Sephiroth? Through the company grapevine only, I'm afraid."

"What about before he arrived at ShinRa?"

"Before?" Reeve sounded bewildered. "Until recently, I hadn't heard the name before in my life."

Curioser and curioser. Was the PHS stolen? But then, the account was current and active, and even if it were stolen the old contact information would still be valid. And who could he possibly have stolen it from who would have both Cid Highwind, Reeve Tuesti and Rude's numbers? Never mind Barrett Wallace, who had nothing to do with any of the above. "I see. Thank you, Reeve."

"Anytime."

Tseng dialled again. Vincent.

"This call cannot be connected."

Yuffie.

"This call."

He cut the call off, disappointed. Yuffie had been one of the names he was most curious about, and potentially an excellent way of figuring out what Strife had been doing in Wutai in the first place, but it turned out to only be another dead end.
That was the last name on the contact list.

A disturbing picture. Over half of the numbers he'd dialled didn't connect at all. The ones that did connect led the people who claimed to have no association with Cloud Strife at all.

Idly, he flicked through the menus. Not much in the way of mail, either – it looked as though the PHS had been set to auto-delete old messages to prevent the inbox filling up. There were several short notes, mostly from Zack and Kuskel planning training sessions or sharing gossip. The usual company notices. Mission dispatches. The sort of thing you found on any SOLDIER's PHS.

The spam folder, on the other hand, was unusually full. Tseng checked there next.

'Treasure Princess?'

With a shake of his head, the Turk closed the PHS. Hang around the slums long enough, and you were bound to wind up on the mailing list of at least one adult establishment.

He would continue investigating – a call to the telecommunications department might prove useful – but Tseng began to suspect this was an exercise in futility. Without last names, they'd be stuck cold-calling potentially dozens of matches who shared a first name – a task he didn't really have the manpower to spare for.

It struck him as a rather depressing state of affairs, though. A PHS filled with numbers leading nowhere. How very sad.

His wanderings around the dumapple orchards brought no further drama, and Cloud found himself back at the helicopter with time to spare. He made no move to go see the village proper. Walking around a place he thought to be destroyed gave him the same sort of creepy feeling as visiting Nibelheim.

He got that feeling a lot, these days.

Tseng was already there when he arrived. "Strife." His fished through his pockets for a moment. "You left your PHS in the helicopter. It's a good thing we didn't need to contact you." The sleek black device rested in his palm.

Cloud's hand reflexively searched out his pockets, but the PHS wasn't present. How did it fall out? "Thanks." He needed to be more careful with it – it was technology from the future, after all, and the last thing he needed was attention for his PHS of all things.

"Your mission went well, I take?"

"Yeah." Cloud didn't elaborate. Thinking about it, a Turk visiting Banora at the same time as the appearance of unusual monsters made for a suspicious coincidence.

Angeal displayed excellent timing in returning then, the sound of his heavy boots thumping through the undergrowth heralding his arrival long before he entered the clearing. "Everyone's here already?"

"We weren't waiting long," Tseng assured him. "Ready to go?"

"All done. Start her up," Angeal confirmed, swinging into the helicopter. Cloud crawled in after him. "Find any more monsters?"
He shook his head, watching the First out the corner of his eyes. "Did you have a nice visit with your family?"

Angeal's smile looked a little forced. "The conversation was a bit awkward, but nothing beats homemade dumapple pie."

"Sorry to hear that," he murmured, even as he wondered how any relationship with the SOLDIER First could be strained. He wasn't friendly on the same scale as Zack, but still warm and personable. More importantly, he was so straight-laced and responsible it was hard to imagine him getting into an argument with anyone.

A memory of a woman swam before his eyes, but the details of the conversation were hard to grasp on to. Zack had met her, just before Banora had been wiped off the map. Cloud's gaze dropped to the floor, embarrassed by the unintentional breach into his superior's privacy.

"She was just cranky that I don't visit often enough and asked lots of intrusive questions. You know how it is." He paused. "Or do you? Have any family living outside of Midgar?"

"There was only my mother, and she died a long time ago," Cloud replied, voice flat. He didn't count any 'family' he had in this new world. Couldn't even bear to think of it.

"Oh. I'm sorry to have brought it up, then." An uncomfortable silence lingered in the helicopter, broken only by the gentle breeze outside and the clicking of switches from the cockpit. "Tseng, what's taking so long?" Angeal called up to the front.

"Sorry. Just checking the gauges." The rotors roared to life – a convenient excuse not to talk any further.

Cloud resumed staring at the countryside, and stubbornly ignored Angeal's contemplative gaze.
Chapter 17

Remarkably, Tseng managed to also pilot the helicopter back to ShinRa without crashing, forcing Cloud to reassess his long-standing opinion of the Turk's aviation skills. They headed down in the same elevator, with Tseng stepping off to a dark hallway several floors earlier.

Filling in the paperwork for the mission only took a couple of minutes. Cloud rolled his shoulders as he signed out of the database, wondering if there was any point in stopping by the Training Room. Probably not. If Hojo had requisitioned the facilities, he would have vacated it by this time of day.

"Strife," Angeal called, just before he could head off to the barracks. He jerked his head towards the executive elevator. "Come on, Lazard wants us to report in to his office."

Cloud frowned at the change of routine. "Was there a problem with the reports?" He couldn't think of any other reason Lazard might summon them to his office, especially right at the end of the day. Through the tall windows edging the common area, a sea of lights from bars and clubs and apartment complexes had begun to twinkle to life.

Angeal didn't seem worried, though, so it couldn't have been anything too serious. "I think he just wants to talk in person." He held the button to call the elevator, and after a short wait, the door opened with a hiss and a clunk.

Nevertheless, paranoia clung to him like a wet cloak as they rode the elevator to the Director's office. Had he done something wrong? Seen something he shouldn't have? Did Lazard realise he'd sent him on a mission too sensitive to be trusted to someone whose loyalties to ShinRa were so suspect?

"Strife. Strife!"

Cloud jerked, turning his gaze to the First standing by the open elevator door. He looked amused. "Morning. Did you have a nice dream?"

Embarrassed, he ducked past Angeal, heading to Lazard's office. Sure enough, even though the sun had long sunk below the horizon, the Director sat behind his desk. "Director Lazard?"

He glanced up, glasses briefly blinding as they caught the fluorescent light. "Strife! And Angeal. I've been expecting you. Come in."

He shuffled through the truly impressive pile of papers on his desk, before apparently finding the right ones and handing them over. At Angeal's prompt, Cloud took the bundle and scanned the topmost paper quickly, eyes widening as he did so. "This is-

"Your promotion to Second Class," Lazard agreed. "The paperwork went through when you completed today's mission."

"You've set a new record," Angeal pointed out.

Cloud frowned, not really comfortable with making any more waves than he already had.
"It's unorthodox," Lazard granted. "But as Angeal pointed out, it was a waste of resources to keep you in Third Class. The last few missions you've done would normally be assigned to a Second Class, and you completed them just as easily as you did the others."

"Congratulations," Angeal offered, grinning broadly.

Cloud shuffled his feet awkwardly, not certain where to look. Getting into SOLDIER itself had been a bit of trip, but realistically, he was only here looking for an opportunity to take out Hojo and Jenova. Under such circumstances, he had a hard time feeling excited about his promotion, and struggled to find the appropriate response. "I, uh… Thanks?"

How tragic, to realise the dream after he'd lost it.

Angeal and Lazard shared a short laugh at his confusion, blissfully unaware of the dark turn of his thoughts. The Director regarded him warmly. "It's a little sudden, true, but you probably should have been inducted directly into Second Class. Normally this would be a more formal affair, but I didn't think you'd appreciate it while you were still settling in to ShinRa."

Definitely not. "This is fine, really. I'm…" he spent a moment searching for the right adjective. "…honoured." Uncomfortable. Ashamed. "Does this change anything?"

"You've already been doing mission assignments we normally reserve for Second Class SOLDIERs, so not much will change on that front," Lazard explained. "You should stop by the Equipment Room when you leave to pick up your new uniforms, and you get to choose a new materia if you want. Otherwise, continue as you have been doing."

"One new thing - you won't need anyone to monitor your missions anymore," Angeal informed him. "I have to say, I'll miss it. You were an easy rookie to watch out for."

Cloud finally managed a small smile, slightly embarrassed by the praise.

The Director's gaze lingered on him thoughtfully for several moments, and he made as though to speak, but then his cold blue eyes flicked to Angeal and he appeared to change his mind. "I understand you've been working with SOLDIER Second Class Kunsel a lot since your arrival," he continued after an awkward beat. "He'll be able to fill you in on anything I've missed. And of course, feel free to come see me if you have any problems." He cast an apprehensive glance at the precarious tower of paperwork on his desk. "Though if you do, maybe you should call ahead."

"Should we leave you to it, Director?" Angeal asked.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Lazard admitted, "Yes, I should be getting back to it. Thank you for coming to see me in person. I thought it would be better than delivering your promotion over the phone."

Angeal chuckled. "Sounds like you need an assistant." He clapped Cloud on the back. "Come on, let's not take up any more of the Director's time."

Cloud nodded farewell to the Director, following the stocky First back out into the hallway. As soon as they were out of earshot, Angeal observed, "You didn't seem so excited in there."

Shrugging, Cloud confessed, "I hadn't really thought about getting promoted." Kunsel had warned him, but he never really believed it.

"No? You're an odd one. Most guys who get into SOLDIER think of nothing other than making it to First Class. You don't have any career goals or long term plans?"
"Long term plans?" he echoed.

What *would* he do once the threats to the planet were neutralised? He'd never even considered *his* future. He'd been so busy outrunning ShinRa, then fighting Sephiroth and Jenova, then helping the rebuilding efforts in Edge, the Deep Ground fiasco, Kadaj's Reunion... He'd barely gone a year without some emergency requiring his attention. His delivery service was just a simple way to keep busy and earn gil. He'd been too busy stuck in the present... and when not stuck in the present, he was trapped in the past.

Turning his eyes to the ground while they waited for the elevator, he murmured, "No... no plans."

"Didn't think past killing Sephiroth?"

Cloud flinched. Angeal sighed.

"...Sorry, that was unfair. I'm just trying to understand." The elevator arrived. It was empty. They entered and the door hissed shut.

Cloud watched the numbers tick down, painfully slowly, to the floor connecting to the SOLDIER barracks.

"Listen, Strife, I don't mean to pry, but if you've got problems, you should talk to somebody. If not me, then Zack, or Kunsel, or Lazard. ShinRa even have counsellors available."

"I'm not crazy," he muttered. "Why promote me to Second Class if you're worried about it?"

Questions in regards to his sanity still left him defensive.

"It's not that, it's just-" Angeal shook his head, as though to chase out nagging thoughts. "Sorry. Genesis must be rubbing off on me. He's been like an angry mother chocobo lately." He offered a reassuring smile. "You looked really rattled when I woke you up this morning. It bothered me, is all. But you're right – none of my business." The elevator slowed to a stop and pinged open. "Go get some sleep. Can't have our newest Second Class looking like he's dead on his feet."

"I can go on less than this," he mumbled.

"Sure you can." Angeal rolled his eyes in a gesture that felt vaguely reminiscent of Zack. Considering the similarity in hairstyles, it left him unsettled. Maybe in some ways Zack had become a living legacy, too. What did that make him? A legacy of a legacy? "Celebrate your promotion and sleep in for a change. There aren't any urgent missions scheduled. I don't want to see you in the Briefing Room before 1200 hours."

Cloud nodded, and escaped from the elevator before Angeal could ask him any more awkward questions. He took a deep breath, and headed for the residential wing. Between the First's intrusive – though well-meaning – queries, the unusual monsters, and then this whole promotion he didn't know how to feel about... even if he didn't intend to sleep, the idea of locking himself in his room for the rest of the day held a lot of appeal.

So of course right when his nerves were on edge, right when he wanted nothing more than to go unbothered, did the very last person he wanted to see show up.

"Cloud."

He bristled at the name. Nobody else spoke it in quite the same way. "Don't call me that."

"Why not? It is your name, isn't it, *Cloud?*"
He wanted to throttle Zack for spreading his first name around, even if he knew it was his own fault for slipping up in the first place. Sephiroth used his name like a weapon - he'd forgotten how the man could layer so much meaning and so much derision into the word, in a far more subtle fashion than the bullies in Nibelheim ever managed.

"You have no right to use it," he replied stiffly, turning around to face his opponent properly. Sephiroth could so rarely be found walking the halls of the residential floors that he'd grown lax, and had forgotten to keep track of the General's movements. "What do you want?"

"To congratulate you on your promotion."

"News travels fast."

"I was informed earlier."

Cloud glared. "What are you playing at?"

Sephiroth sighed. The gesture looked out of place on the General. "It occurs to me that as a Second Class, you and I may be called upon to work together in the future." He spoke slowly, as though talking to a particularly restless child.

"Lazard would know better than to assign us to the same mission."

"Regardless, unexpected circumstances can occur where we have no choice," Sephiroth stressed. "Do you really think we can continue with this animosity forever?"

Yes. Yes he did. Right up until he killed him.

Cloud didn't say that aloud.

"Seeing as you won't tell me what heinous crime I committed, I cannot make amends." Sephiroth folded his arms. "So you leave me no choice but to seek you out until you are willing to tolerate my presence."

Impossible. "You want to be friends?"

"That's up to you, Cloud."

His head spun from the very notion. He'd once idolised Sephiroth, once dreamed of the man acknowledging his existence, of becoming friends… and what a fool he'd been. He wasn't stupid enough to fall into that trap again. Zack had been friends of a sort with Sephiroth, and it hadn't slowed the General down in the Nibelheim reactor at all.

"I'll never be buddies with you. Don't waste your time."

"Why are you so afraid of trying?"

"I'm not. Don't put words into my mouth."

"You're running away. Are you so worried that I'll find out the reason why you harbour such hate? Or are you afraid of discovering that your hate is based on a lie, and that your existence has become meaningless?"

The words hit far too close to home. "I have nothing to hide from you," he lied through gritted teeth.
"If that were true, you wouldn't be so defensive over a simple conversation, would you?" Sephiroth challenged.

He had a point, but Cloud refused to acknowledge it. "Why do you want to talk so badly anyway?"

"…I'm curious about your sword."

"My sword," Cloud repeated dubiously, still unsettled by the very notion of having a civil conversation with Sephiroth. It set his nerves on edge - every 'conversation' they'd had in the past had left him conflicted, confused, and feeling like a puppet dancing on strings, just as he so often insinuated.

"It's... unusual." Sephiroth appeared to be choosing his words carefully. "Where did you get it?"

His reflex was to refuse to answer, but he also didn't want to prove Sephiroth right. And the topic was safe enough. "It's custom-made. My own design."

The General looked vaguely impressed. "And what made you choose such an unconventional design?"

The idea came from his more advanced sword manoeuvres, when he realised he could move faster than even Sephiroth if he wasn't weighed down by a sword in-between strikes. And given the variety of blades he'd tried out during his time in Avalanche, he wanted to find a way to maintain that versatility, without having to find somewhere to store an arsenal of weapons. Yet he didn't want to reveal either skill to his enemy - that trick might be needed when the time came to fight again. "It's a long story."

For a moment, it looked as though Sephiroth wanted to pursue the line of questioning anyway, but almost visibly pulled himself back. Cloud's fingers twitched, but he managed to avoid reaching for First Tsurugi. It helped that this Sephiroth reminded him more of the cold, aloof General who accompanied them to Nibelheim, rather than the callous, sadistic madman who taunted him as he destroyed everything Cloud held dear. "What is it made of?"

Another question he couldn't answer. First Tsurugi had been forged out of the remains of the Weapons. Instead, he brought out something he'd always wanted to ask in the past. If he was going to be forced to converse with the General, he might as well satisfy some old curiosities. "What about Masamune?"

"Damascus Steel. Forged in Wutai, well before relations with ShinRa went bad." He partially drew the sword, which had Cloud reaching for First Tsurugi again, but he merely angled the blade, letting the hallway lights dance off it. "I favoured the katana, but as time passed, found the average blade too light, and its reach too short."

Cloud knew all about Masamune's reach - well in excess of even the Buster Sword. His fingers gripped the front of his uniform again.

Sephiroth observed the gesture with a curious eye. "Were you injured on your mission?"

"I'm fine," he replied, voice dull. "Just tired."

"It was a difficult mission?"

"No, just a long day. If that's all you wanted to talk about, I'm going back to my room now." He couldn't be sure how much longer he could hold on to his self-control. Sephiroth might be trying to make an attempt at civility, but it instead resembled a romp through a dragon's nest.
Thankfully, the General didn't object to his abrupt departure. The few SOLDIERs nearby relaxed at the lack of fallout, and returned their attention to other matters. Cloud continued past without acknowledging them, heading down the hallway that would lead to the sanctuary of his quarters.

Absurd. Friends. With Sephiroth.

He'd sooner die.

"Lazard." No response. Tseng sighed. He should have given this case to another one of his Turks – it was proving far too time consuming. "Director Lazard!"

The executive jerked awake, rocking back in his chair. He hurriedly adjusted his glasses, blinking the sleep from his eyes, but the hasty reorientation did not fix his mussed blond hair or the red lines on his face. "Tseng?"

"Fell asleep at the office again?" he asked. Heidegger had never worked this hard, he noted. Then again, Heidegger had an entourage of sycophants who did all of his work for him.

"End of month reports," he explained, voice slightly slurred from tiredness. "I must have crashed as soon as I finished them. I'll go home to get some sleep as soon as I've sent out today's missions."

Tseng nodded. "Strife's paperwork went through yesterday?"

"Yes. He's officially Second Class now."

"We have a formal request that you limit the number of solo missions you send him on. He doesn't need any more supervision from Angeal, but we'd feel better if at least another SOLDIER or Turk were present on any missions that take him outside of Midgar, or into any sensitive areas."

It took a minute for Lazard to catch up – behind his hazy gaze Tseng could almost see the wheels in his brain slowly chugging to life. "You're still suspicious?"

"Just a precaution. Apparently he encountered Sephiroth last night without coming to blows, but two weeks is not long enough to make a judgement."

Lazard rubbed his forehead, eyes closed against the glare of bright morning sunlight creeping across his desk. "Of course. Don't worry, I'll try and find missions that are either neutral or require multiple personnel. Did you find out anything else I should know?"

"I checked his PHS."

"And?" Lazard prompted.

Tseng shook his head. "It's confusing. He does have my number, and Rude's, and Reeve Tuesti's. Also Cid Highwind's – he's part of the space program. Reno's, however, connects to one of the secretaries on the lower floors. Most of the others don't call anywhere at all."

"Is that bad?"

"You don't think a PHS with mostly disconnected numbers is suspicious? Especially when it looks brand new?" Tseng asked dryly.

Lazard thought on that. "I suppose not. What does it mean?"

Tseng paused, letting the question hang in the air for a long moment, before replying, "I spoke to
the telecommunications department. The most common cause for disconnected numbers is the death of the account holder."

A heavy silence filled the office, pooling into the corners, seeming to mute everything beyond the walls.

"...Do you suppose it's related to why he tried to kill Sephiroth?"

"We still haven't found any connection there," Tseng reminded him. "But it's one of many probabilities. Strife appears to... have very few people left in the world. Regardless, this still doesn't explain some of the numbers he does have. I'm favouring caution in this instance."

"I understand." Lazard sighed, shifting through his mission updates. "Naturally, it is in my interest to cooperate fully with the Turks on this matter. Though honestly, I hope such cooperation won't be required for much longer."

"We all hope for that outcome, Director," Tseng assured him. "But it's the Turks' job to always be ready for the worst."

"Hm," Lazard agreed distractedly, brow creasing as he glanced over a mission request. "That's odd."

"Director?" Tseng asked.

He shook his head briefly, and offered a small smile. "Sorry. I was just distracted – a mission request from a small town called Nibelheim was cancelled. I suppose the locals must have found a solution to the dragons themselves." His lip twitched. "If only all mission requests could be resolved so easily."

"Indeed. You seem quite busy, Director. I won't keep you any longer," Tseng excused himself.

Something about Nibelheim itched at the back of his memory, but then Tseng's PHS trilled, derailing his train of thought.

Investigating suspicious SOLDIERs was only a small part of a Turk's job, after all.

Genesis palmed open the door to the Training Room. As he entered, Cloud turned his head sharply, expression severe enough to give the SOLDIER First pause.

"Expecting someone?" he drawled.

Cloud relaxed, though the tension didn't completely leave his shoulders. It never did. "No, you just surprised me."

A lie, but an unimportant one. "So, Strife," he began, and then paused. "Or would you prefer Cloud?"

"Whichever."

Genesis considered for a moment, then nodded to himself. "Cloud it is." He'd thought the name absurd on first hearing; far too soft and whimsical for such a hardened warrior, but it had a sort of poetry to it.

Besides, if Sephiroth was going to use first names with the blond, so would he.
"I heard Sephiroth tried making conversation yesterday."

Cloud groaned. "Is nothing secret in this company?"


Cloud crossed his arms and looked away. Genesis didn't let it even slow him down. "And congratulations on making Second Class. Though it's no surprise."

The newly minted Second didn't seem particularly enthralled with his promotion. The usual signs of pride and excitement were conspicuously absent. Then again, Cloud Strife never seemed particularly excited about anything. "What do you want?"

"Is it a crime to make simple conversation with a fellow SOLDIER?" For some reason, that earned him a glare. Genesis smiled. The blond always provided an entertaining reaction. Taking pity on him – for he owed the SOLDIER an incredible debt, a notion he still grappled with daily – he said, "I wanted to know if there had been any progress on the other matter."

Cloud tensed. "I haven't forgotten about it. I just haven't been able to get into contact yet." He shifted awkwardly, and continued in a softer voice, "Don't get your hopes up too much. I don't even know how to explain it that well to them. It might be impossible."

It took a great deal of self-restraint for Genesis to remain calm. He refused to accept any other outcome. Would not even allow himself to entertain the possibility that Angeal might suffer a fate he had escaped. "Have you even tried?" he hissed, stepping in close. "Or have you become so enamoured by your success in ShinRa that you seek battlefield promotions from your betters falling before you?"

A flicker of emotion passed over the blond's face, and Genesis almost recoiled when he recognised it to be hurt. "Don't presume to know me," Cloud snapped, voice colder than the frigid air of Modeoheim.

Regret. He hadn't intended to lash out. This man had saved him. The thought was never far from Genesis's mind. His brush with mortality left an indelible mark, made all the more acute by the knowledge that Cloud had shared a truly priceless cure with him, not even moments after they had crossed swords.

Genesis retreated a little, giving the SOLDIER back the space he'd unconsciously invaded. He took a deep breath. "My apologies. Angeal is a very dear friend to me. I'm just concerned you might not grasp the situation." That perhaps because Angeal looked healthy, Cloud thought there wasn't any hurry. "You don't appear to share the same urgency."

"Rushing won't help him any. It'll just make bad things happen faster," Cloud muttered to his feet.

An impasse. He couldn't push matters here, couldn't risk a temper tantrum, no matter how badly he wanted to draw his rapier and force the blond to act now. Never mind that Cloud would hardly be intimidated by the gesture - it would just be counterproductive. And he would never again draw his sword on Cloud. Never.

So he did what he always did when he needed peace. He quoted Loveless.

"My Friend, the fates are cruel
There are no dreams, no honour remains.
The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."
My Soul corrupted by vengeance,  
Hath endured torment,  
To find the end of the journey in my own salvation.  
And Your eternal slumber.

Now what I want most...  
is the 'Gift of the Goddess'... "

The words rolled lyrically from his tongue. He knew them by heart – had recited them a thousand times in a hundred different ways. It worked, and calmed his temper. He needed to trust that Cloud would keep to his word. He should be able to have that much faith in the man who saved him.

For his part, Cloud didn't appear at all confused by his left-fielded recital. "You really like that play, don't you?"

"It is the pinnacle our culture's literary achievements, even incomplete. No, perhaps especially because it is incomplete." At the lack of recognition from the Second, he informed him, "The fifth act is lost, you know."

"That's why the ending is always different?"

Genesis waved a hand airily. "There's plenty of disagreement in both popular and academic circles as to the correct conclusion, along with no shortage of imitations claiming to be the 'true' ending. Of course, they're all proven to be frauds in the end. But maybe that is the appeal. If you can have one, wouldn't you want a different ending?" His words appeared to strike some chord with Cloud, so he pressed the conversation onward. "An ending of your choice?"

"You can choose which ending you want?" he murmured, eyes glazed in contemplation.

"Nothing to limit you but your own imagination. Perhaps the play was even designed this way – open-ended, so that the audience might select the outcome they most strongly desired." One of many theories, but with the author of Loveless long dead, they would remain just that – theories. Genesis privately relished the opportunity to discuss this matter with a new ear – his friends had long tired of the topic. "Tell me, Cloud – how would you end it?"

The blond mulled it over for a minute, brow tight with thought, before answering slowly and carefully, as though every word weighed heavily on his lips. "The monster dies, and the three friends fulfil their oath. The lovers meet again, as promised."

Genesis snorted. "How… unexpectedly naïve." After such careful consideration, he hadn't expected such a cliché response.

Cloud didn't appear offended. "How would you end it, then?"

He tapped a finger to his chin, mostly for dramatic effect. "Once, I had been fond of the world falling into destruction at the hands of the hero. A classic tragedy, the likes of which most modern re-enactments shy away from." He let the words hang in the air for extra impact, before continuing, "Another one of my favourites was for the world to avoid destruction, but the three friends break their oath. The lovers are torn apart, their lives cut short mere moments before they could meet again."

"…You really like the tragedies."

"I do," Genesis agreed. "But lately…" He swept a hand out, to encompass an imaginary audience. "I find myself thinking."
Cloud raised an eyebrow, waiting out his theatrics with a patience his friends had long abandoned. Genesis couldn't help but smile, and drew his hand in close, hovering over his heart, and lowered his voice to a stage whisper.

"Lately, I find myself thinking that perhaps that the naïve ending the masses so adore… just maybe… has a certain charm of its own."
Chapter 18

Cloud stepped off the train onto an empty platform, barely resisting the urge to wrinkle his nose at the smell. Even above-plate, Midgar didn't carry a particularly pleasant odour, but the slums were an all-out assault on a SOLDIER's senses. Unwashed bodies, stagnant water, industrial waste, and underneath it all laid a pervading stench of mako that made his stomach roil and left a metallic taste on his tongue.

Ignoring the foul odour – he would get used to it quickly enough – he headed into Sector 5, walking a well-worn path in his memory. Genesis's visits to 'check up' on his progress had the intended effect of moving his conversation with Aeris up the priority list – Cloud had waited for the first day he knew Zack would be away on a mission, then slipped from headquarters to go below-Plate.

Few people paid any attention to him, having become used to the sight of the blond around the slums during the first week he'd arrived in Midgar. Most still gave him a wide berth, though – even if he'd gone to the trouble of changing into his own clothes for this excursion, the resemblance to a SOLDIER uniform had them erring on the side of caution.

As he made his way to the church, he found himself hoping that Aeris wouldn't be there, and he'd have an excuse to put it off a little longer. While he truly wanted to help Angeal – the SOLDIER didn't deserve what happened to him – he also didn't want to impose such a request on an innocent teenage girl. What if she couldn't do it? He didn't know exactly how her Cetra powers worked. They were burdening her with the weight of a person's survival. In another time, she'd already given her life to save the Planet. Cloud couldn't ask anything more.

Yet as he pushed open the heavy wooden doors of the church, knew he would.

There she was – kneeling at the edge of the flowers, checking the soil, and plucking the occasional one through careful selection to add to her basket. At the sound of the doors opening, she looked up, and her face broke into a radiant smile.

"What brings you here, Mr Nobody?" she called out, voice echoing sweetly off the walls.

Cloud shuffled in place awkwardly, staring at everything except the girl in front of him.

"Don't stand all the way over there, silly. It's hard to talk. Come here. I won't bite." She patted the space next to her, and Cloud felt his feet move forward of their own accord. He could never refuse her. Not even a simple request.

"I'm glad you came back to visit," she said as he sat next to her, arms wrapped around the knees folded against his chest. "Zack told me you made it into ShinRa, and you were 'kicking ass'." She made little notation signs with her fingers. "But he only sees what he wants to see, sometimes. How are you liking it?"

He shrugged, letting his fingers drift across the delicate flower petals. He instinctively checked the dampness of the soil – he'd taken over caring for the flowers after Aeris died, though they never did as well as they'd done under her hand. "It's okay."
"You look tired," she observed, solemn. "Are you doing too much?"

He shook his head. "Not enough."

She clucked her tongue. "So busy worrying about everybody else, you won't worry about yourself."

Cloud didn't really have a response for that.

"Maybe I can help?" she suggested. "That's why you're here, isn't it?"

"Does the Planet let you read minds?" It sounded sarcastic, but the blond meant it as a genuine query. He never had the chance to ask before. Aeris could talk to strangers and pinpoint their woes in a matter of seconds. It bordered on magic.

She giggled. "That would be nice. Then I could solve all of your mysteries, Mr Nobody."

Guiltily, he admitted, "Well, you're right. There is something you can help with, maybe." Hastily, he added, "You can refuse, if you don't feel comfortable-"

"You'll have to tell me what it is first, won't you?" she prodded.

Cloud sighed. "Yeah."

So he explained Geostigma, degradation, and the spring's water that cured it as best he could, trying to use general terms she'd understand without giving away his situation, and mentioning that it was for Zack's mentor who she'd probably heard about, knowing Zack, but that he didn't want either of them to know about it. She listened attentively, nodding thoughtfully every now and again, and looking sympathetic at all the right places.

"And you think a Cetra can make this happen again?" she summarised.

He nodded. "I'm sorry I can't explain it better," he mumbled. "I didn't want to ask you, but…"

"But you don't know who else to ask?" She laid a gentle hand on his arm.

"Don't put yourself to any trouble. I just thought, maybe if you talked to the Planet…" He placed his hand over hers, disquieted by how fragile it felt.

"Careful," she whispered. "My boyfriend might get jealous."

Blushing, Cloud snatched his hand away and blustered, "It's not- I'm not-" Gaia, she was far too young now for him to even think-!

She giggled. "Silly. Zack would play along."

"I… I'm not Zack." The words sounded raw and broken, and he wished he could take them back, but she just patted his shoulder.

"You're fine as you are, Mr Nobody," she assured him. "I'll do what I can to help. I don't know if I can do much of anything… but we won't know until we try, right?"

Unbidden, he felt the corners of his mouth turn up slightly. "Yeah."

She clapped her hands. "You can smile! I thought I'd imagined it!"
Alarmed, his face reverted to a blank expression. She shook her head and poked his cheeks, and Cloud suddenly felt five again. "Don't stop, silly! You've got a lovely smile. You should use it lots and lots."

"I… don't have a lot to smile about right now," he apologised.

"Then you'll just have to make some reasons to smile," she told him, as though it were as simple as that.

He knew better than to argue with Aeris, and ducked his head. They sat there quietly for a couple of minutes before he murmured, "…I should get going. I promised Kunsel I'd train with him later today." And he needed to make his daily stop by the Training Room to check for mad scientists.

"Okay. How should I let you know if I figure things out?"

Cloud blinked. He hadn't thought of that. "I have a PHS…" But no pen to write down his number with. "Um… maybe send a message through Zack?" he suggested.

"Like a code?" Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

"If you want," he agreed awkwardly.

"Okay!" she sang. "I'll talk to you again soon, Mr Nobody."

Cloud was confused. "Um, what's the code?" he ventured.

She placed a finger against her lips. "You'll know it when you hear it!"

*That* didn't exactly fill him with confidence. Shaking his head, he got to his feet, pausing and regarding the flower girl for a moment. "It's… Thank you," he decided. "It really means a lot…"

"Silly," she chided. "If I'd known about it, I would have done something even if you hadn't asked. And you're looking out for Zack, too, aren't you? That's reason enough."

What could he really say to that? Nothing. Aeris was right, as always. Even as a teenager, she was the wise one.

"Now, shoo," she waved him away. "I know you SOLDIER-types are always busy. Go get some rest, and don't worry for a while. Let someone else worry *for* you for a change."

So he retreated, pausing at the door to look back. She gave him another little wave, and he managed another brief smile, then slipped outside.

He made it barely ten steps before Tseng appeared from the shadows.

To his embarrassment, it took him a minute to realise he should be alarmed by the Turk's presence. He'd become used to Tseng in the future, and while the occasions for their meetings had never been pleasant, it had been a long, long time since he'd considered the man a threat.

The delay in reaction probably saved his plans, as it let him respond normally. "Tseng," he greeted.

"Strife." The Turk fell into step beside him, while the blond's thoughts raced ahead at break-neck speed. How could he have forgotten about ShinRa watching the last surviving Ancient? Did he hear anything? Probably not - they'd spoken quietly, and Aeris wouldn't have let him talk about such sensitive issues if she knew someone could be listening in.
"It's a surprise to see you in this area," Tseng commented.

"We met here," he reminded him.

"True. But you were a vagrant, then. Why are you here now?" Tseng's tone was mild, but Cloud could read between the lines. What he really wanted to know was: 'What business do you have with the Ancient?'

"I wanted to see the flowers again," he replied. Then, just to cement his lack of connection in the Turk's mind, he asked, "Are you watching the Church? Is there something special about it? Aside from the flowers, I mean." A trick learnt from watching Reno at the bar. The best way to deflect attention was to direct your questions to the wrong place.

Tseng stared at him for a long moment, as though measuring him up. Cloud met his gaze steadily. Eventually, he replied, "That's classified information."

Looked like he was safe for now, if only just. "Oh." He cast a glance back at the building, bitter at the realisation that he probably wouldn't be able to see the flowers again for a while. "So I shouldn't come here anymore?"

"We'd prefer not. There are people of interest we're watching in the area, who might get spooked at the presence of a SOLDIER. They're used to Zack - his relationship with Aeris is well-known in the slums." It wasn't even a lie, but Tseng had worded it so smoothly Cloud had to wonder how many other secrets the man hid in plain sight.

"I understand," he murmured. "I'll stay away from now on." Aeris could reach him through Zack if she had any breakthroughs in calling up the water – hopefully she'd only try to contact him when she had something substantial. Still, he held back a sigh at the knowledge that he wouldn't be able to sneak off to sleep at the church if he got desperate. Another comfort denied. "Anything else I should know? I don't want to cause problems."

Tseng gave him an odd look, and then shook his head. "No… that's all. Thank you for your cooperation." He hesitated. "If… matters clear up, then we'll let you know that it's safe to come back."

Cloud knew what he really meant was 'If we decide we can trust you, then we'll let you near the Ancient', but simply nodded in acceptance. After all, he didn't want them to think he had any particular attachment to Aeris. Better they think he had some nostalgic attachment to the church itself.

"I should continue with work," Tseng said, "I'll let you get back to whatever you were doing."

Cloud raised his hand once in farewell, and resolutely didn't look back. That could have very easily been a disaster, and he could only hope he looked calmer than he felt. How much longer could he keep walking this tightrope without messing up?

Running a hand through his spikes, he changed direction, making a beeline for Wall Market. He might as well get some errands out of the way to take his mind off things.

Sephirhth awoke with a jerk.

Another nightmare. He threw back the covers and made for the bathroom, shuddering. The phantom pain would pass, he knew. Imagined trauma lingered only a few seconds after waking.
What kept bringing them on? Such disturbing dreams. A burning town. Being strapped to an icy operating table, unable to avoid the descending scalpel. Drowning in mako. Angeal's student, bleeding to death on a cliff in the rain. Skewered by a doppelganger, again and again and again, and yet he continued to drag himself to his feet, heedless of the blood spattering the ground.

He splashed some water into his face and felt refreshed, the after-effects of the nightmare fading away. He took his time moving through his morning routine, but when he finished, the sun had only just begun to peek over the horizon. Sighing, he left his quarters and headed for the elevator. He briefly entertained the notion of stalking Cloud's room several floors down – the Second would surely still be asleep – but dismissed the thought almost immediately. As enjoyable as it was to ruffle the blond's feathers, annoying him first thing in the morning would only damage the tenuous truce they'd established. He'd seek him out later in the day.

It was early still – any movement in the building relegated mostly to the tired guard patrols finishing their shifts and the janitorial services cleaning up the previous day's messes. Thus Sephiroth was surprised to come across a familiar face by the coffee machine. "Angeal?"

"Sephiroth!" He glanced up from his cup of steaming black coffee. "You're up early."

"So are you."

He chuckled. "I'm always up early. Gives me a chance to finish my reports in peace."

Not a bad strategy. Sephiroth's own paperwork wouldn't be so backlogged if meetings and questions and phone-calls didn't interrupt him every five minutes.

"Still, it's unusual for you," Angeal continued, offering him a cup of coffee. "Here, take it. You don't look like you've been sleeping well."

"I haven't," Sephiroth agreed, accepting the drink and nursing it in his hands. "No matter. I can function on less."

Angeal shook his head ruefully. "Are you sure you and Strife aren't long lost siblings?"

"Why do you ask?"

"He feeds me the same line every time I see him stumbling around this time of day with bags under his eyes."

Another interesting tidbit about their mystery SOLDIER, and Sephiroth filed it away with all the others. He would figure the man out yet. They spent a moment sipping coffee in companionable silence, and the General fished about for some menial conversation about something other than Cloud Strife. He didn't want to look obsessed, after all.

"I heard you went to see Hollander recently," he mentioned.

Angeal grimaced. "You did, huh?"

"Is anything wrong?"

"Just some tests. Genesis keeps asking after my health - I thought I'd go get some done to shut him up."

Sephiroth observed his old friend carefully. "Is that really all it is?"
"Please, one mother chocobo is enough. He's away in his lab processing the results, I'll get an appointment when he comes back, and you'll see that everything is fine then."

He didn't sound so sure, but Sephiroth didn't call him on it. Something didn't feel right. People were keeping secrets again. Like Genesis and his strange injury, and equally strange recovery.

He never thought _Angeal_ would hide something from him, though. Or was he simply searching for shadows where none existed? The nightmares may have left him more on edge than he thought.

They finished their coffee in awkward silence, and parted ways soon after.

The Training Room remained empty. Cloud glowered at the floor.

He knew Genesis's words hadn't been misleading, because Kunsel and Zack had confirmed them. And he knew that the chances of Hojo turning up on the SOLDIER floor in the relatively short time period he'd been in ShinRa weren't high. But how long could he wait?

It left him uneasy. He was being – what was the word Tifa always used? – passive, again. Just sitting and waiting for the opportunity to come along. What if it never did? How long could he continue stalking this space? Shouldn't he be more proactive?

Was he afraid?

A little. He'd be a fool not to be. If something went wrong, he could mess up everything worse than before. It was too much responsibility for someone who had failed so many times in the past. Maybe he would have been better off just hiding in the remote wilderness of Wutai until everything had been settled.

Dilly-dally, shilly-shally.

Cloud sighed, and dug out his PHS. Nearly midday, and still no mission mail. He'd better go see Lazard to find out what the hold-up was.

"Cloud!" a familiar voice called as he left the Training Room. "You're back early."

Kunsel. "I haven't left yet."

That flummoxed the other Second, so Cloud took the opportunity to toss a Fire materia at him. He caught it with a perplexed expression.

"Forgot to give that to you yesterday. Between that and the materia you already have, you've got most monsters covered. There aren't many that are resistant to fire, ice _and_ lightning."

"It's natural," he murmured. "No way, Cloud, I can't accept this. It must have cost a fortune!"

He waved a hand dismissively, continuing on down the hallway. "It's low level. You'll have to put in a lot of work to master it." And he didn't have much else to spend his gil on at ShinRa. They paid him well, but aside from hoarding money for his future as a fugitive, he didn't need gil for anything else.

He slipped into the elevator before Kunsel could stutter out either a thanks or another protest, tapping his foot lightly on the short journey to the Director's office and ignoring the office runners eying him with a mixture of awe and nervousness. Thanks to Sephiroth taking a personal interest in him, he'd apparently developed something of a reputation around the office.
Fortunately, Lazard was at his desk when he arrived. "Director," Cloud greeted.

"Strife! On your own, are you? Excellent timing. Please, come in. I've been wanting to talk to you," he invited cordially.

Perturbed by the reaction, Cloud shut the door behind him and moved in front of the desk, conscious of the Director's steely blue eyes on him. No chairs, he noted. Even as the head of the WRO, Reeve always had plenty of spare chairs in his office. "What about?"

"Nothing to be concerned over. Have you adjusted to life in Second Class yet?"

Cloud shrugged. "It's not any different to Third."

"I'm glad to hear it."

He eyed the Director warily. "...That's not what you really want to ask, is it?" He hadn't missed Lazard's question about him being alone. What could he want to say while other ears weren't around?

The Director steepled his fingers, leaning back in his chair. The fluorescent lights cast a sharp shadow over his eyes. It made his resemblance to Rufus ShinRa stand out even more. "You certainly aren't the naive type, are you, Strife?"

Cloud shrugged again.

"My mother had a saying about people in the slums. 'Cynics aren't born - they're made'." Lazard studied him at length, as though waiting for a reaction. "It makes me wonder what you've experienced in life to make you turn out the way you did."

"...Nothing special," he muttered. He couldn't exactly tell anyone about his life experiences without sounding crazy, or worse, bringing the Science Department down on his head.

Lazard made a small sound of amusement in the back of his throat - a sort of half-cough all executives seemed to share. "I suppose it's not really important, in the grand scheme of things. We all have our secrets." Something oddly dark stole across the Director's countenance at those words.

Cloud didn't know what to make of it, and he was getting impatient. He hadn't come here to deal with corporate double-talk. Lazard must have noticed, as he sat forward again and said, "I'll get to the point, Strife. What do you think of ShinRa?"

"...What do you mean?" Apprehension set in. Had he messed up anywhere? Had Lazard seen through his plans?

"I thought perhaps we might share a similar perspective, given your contract." He paused a beat, and when Cloud didn't reply, expounded, "There's something very wrong with this company, wouldn't you agree?"

Dangerous, dangerous territory. "I don't really pay attention to company politics."

"A diplomatic answer. But you don't need to worry. I don't intend to report anything you say to the Turks, if that's what you're concerned about."

Cloud remained silent. He was suddenly struck by the sensation that there was something important about Lazard he'd forgotten. He grasped at the glimpses nestled in Zack's memories, but couldn't make sense of it. Lazard had disappeared at some point, he knew that much, but that in
itself was unremarkable in ShinRa. There must have been more to it.

"Is this something to do with the Planet?" he stalled. "I didn't expect you to be an environmentalist."

Lazard answered him with a wry smile. "You'd be right. I'm afraid I'm not a superstitious man."

Cloud was tempted to point out that the Lifestream was hardly a superstition, but he remembered enough about public ignorance in this time to keep his mouth shut. ShinRa was already wary enough of him without being labelled an Avalanche sympathiser. "So what do you want, then?"

"I'm proposing an alliance, Strife. To correct the wrongs that have been wrought. Together, we may be able to achieve far more than what we could alone."

An alliance?

For a moment, he seriously considered it. Lazard was on the Board of Directors. He would have access to Hojo, at the very least - could possibly even help him find information on Jenova.

But no. Cloud wouldn't fall for that. It was beginning to come back to him. He couldn't remember clearly, but he remembered enough. He'd had a lifetime of being used, after all - by ShinRa, by Sephiroth, it didn't matter who the puppetmaster was. He could see it play out already. Lazard forever dangling the promise of Hojo's head in front of him, just as he once lured Genesis with talk of cures, and stoked the fires of the Commander's lust for revenge. He would never deliver, though. The Director was far too clever to actually give his pawns what they wanted - after all, once they had it, they wouldn't have any reason to continue putting their necks on the line.

Cloud wasn't so naive as to trust Lazard. Not with the future he had to prevent. He could trust himself to win a swordfight, but this kind of subterfuge and politics...

"...I don't think our goals are exactly the same, Director."

It was all he needed to say.

Lazard's expression, though outwardly changing very little, definitely cooled. "I see." The silence stretched, taut with tension. "My apologies, Strife. It was presumptuous of me to indulge in such talk. You've only been at the company for a short while - it's far too early to be talking about your personal vision statement. Feel free to consult with me on the matter after you've given it some more thought."

Cloud paused, briefly thrown by the sudden shift in conversation and corporate lingo. Oh. Plausible deniability. He hadn't realised exactly how vaguely worded Lazard's statements had been until then.

Not that it was necessary. ShinRa would trust Lazard's word far more than they would ever trust his.

He could live with that, though. It was one more person he'd have to keep an eye on, but this way Lazard wouldn't be able to do anything to get in his way when the time came. He couldn't quite shake the feeling that he'd just dodged a bullet, but that was an altogether too common feeling these days.

All business again, Lazard continued, "I'm sorry, you originally came up for something else, didn't you? How can I help you?"
That was right. He'd almost forgotten. "I haven't received a mission yet today." He glanced pointedly at the clock.

"Yes. You're on stand-by today," Lazard agreed.

Confused, Cloud asked, "Stand-by?"

The Director nodded curtly, turning his attention to the stack of papers on his desk. "Strife, did you know you've been filling at least one mission, sometimes two or three, every day since you started working here?"

Cloud stared at him blankly. He knew that. So what?

"You haven't even taken off a weekend. Some of those low-priority solo missions were allocated to you on the understanding that you would tackle them at your leisure. Of course, you've done them all immediately, so the system has been routing you the next mission on your list automatically, which you also complete immediately. As such, you're well over quota."

"...And that's a problem?" Cloud asked, still not seeing the issue.

"Human Resources has regulations in place to prevent overextension of SOLDIERs. Since the work you do is dangerous by nature, it's expected that downtime is taken between missions for recreation, training, and recuperation if necessary. I know you've also been providing mentorship for some of your fellow SOLDIERs, so your workload is even higher than represented by the numbers."

"I don't consider that work."

Lazard still wasn't meeting his eyes, but otherwise continued as though they hadn't been discussing sedition mere moments before. "Perhaps not, but there's a very good reason why these regulations exist. If we allow our SOLDIERs to become overtired, then they're prone to making mistakes out in the field, and in our line of work that can be fatal. There's also psychological health to be considered too – if a SOLDIER happens to suffer a breakdown from stress, they could cause a considerable amount of damage."

They could wipe out an entire town, in fact. It didn't appear ShinRa's rules had stopped that from happening. The thought brought a scowl to his face. "I thought you were short on manpower," Cloud argued. He wanted out of the building, at least for a little while. Sephiroth would be on the prowl later, looking for another 'chat', he could sense it. After the nightmares he'd suffered last night, he wasn't in the mood.

"You're not receiving any missions until you've had at least a full day's downtime," Lazard stated firmly. "I'm pleased you're so enthusiastic, but there are procedures to be followed. And we're expecting you to limit missions to no more than four days in a row in the future."

Unbelievable. ShinRa had these kinds of workplace health and safety regulations in place? He found it morbidly hilarious considering the rest of the company's ethics.

"Fine," he agreed tonelessly. "Thanks for your time."

He stalked out of the office, childishy wishing to slam the door, but his hand remained still at his side. One thing that pierced through the patchwork memories of his ShinRa days was the impossibility of arguing with the company's bureaucracy. Besides, what did he expect? He'd just turned down Lazard's offer flat. He didn't regret it, but it also meant he couldn't be expecting any rule-bending favours from the man any time soon.
A whole day off. Tseng made it so that he couldn't visit the Church, and Cloud didn't really like the idea of being gawked at above-Plate. He could go back to baby-sitting the Training Room, but he'd spent hours doing that today already. What did he used to do on his days off from ShinRa? He couldn't remember. Those kinds of details were the ones he never reclaimed – the right triggers for them simply didn't exist.

He was rescued by the buzz of his PHS. A message. He flipped it open, quickly scanning the contents.

Yuffie was teasing him about her treasure hunting again. Cloud fought back a sigh. How did a girl not yet even ten years old continually give her minders the slip and roam so freely across the continents? More importantly, how on earth had she survived until 16 the first time around?

At least it gave him something to do. He hit the button for the garage floor, and struggled to curb his impatience. His talk with Lazard had set his already frayed nerves on edge. He wasn't sure how much longer he could deal with this.

Hojo had better turn up soon, or Cloud might be tempted to just level with the whole building with Comet and be done with it.
Chapter 19

The door to his office crashed open. "Genesis," Angeal greeted, as though he'd entered with a polite knock instead of a deafening bang.

"What's the occasion?" he drawled.

"I need you out here. Strife and Sephiroth are fighting again."

Genesis rolled his eyes, taking his boots from the desk and snatching up his rapier in one smooth motion. "Why must we always handle this?"

"You think anyone else is going to step in-between those two when they're going at it?" Angeal replied with humour. "Stop complaining and hurry up before they destroy something."

He followed his friend out into the hallway. There was no need to show the way – one only had to follow the path of white-faced SOLDIERs.

As they arrived, Genesis took in the scene in less than half a second. There were several shallow gouges in the ceiling and wall – Sephiroth's work, no doubt, as Cloud's sword left thicker trails. A couch had been overturned, and a water cooler split open. No signs of materia entering the fray yet. In the centre of the common area, Strife and Sephiroth circled each other, swords flashing under the fluorescent lights. A handful of gawkers watched, dumbstruck at the high-speed spectacle, while the smarter ones made a stealthy escape.

Others, like Angeal's over-enthusiastic Puppy, risked their lives in trying to step in.

Genesis intercepted him quickly, snatching the Time materia from Zack's fingers moments before the spell could reach completion. "Don't!"

"What? But they'll-"

"It'll just give Strife an unfair advantage," Angeal explained. For some reason, status spells slid off Cloud like water, which mollified Genesis only slightly over his loss in Wutai. He was the materia specialist of the three, and that his greatest strength was compromised when fighting the blond SOLDIER left him at a frustrating disadvantage. "Stay back, we'll handle this."

Angeal leapt in, his Buster Sword catching the Masamune in its path, while Genesis darted behind Cloud and hooked his arms in a practiced move. He'd learnt the hard way that crossing swords was not enough to halt the blond - he'd just split his strange weapon as many times as necessary to get past. "Easy there, Chocobo."

The SOLDIER struggled in his grip for a moment before finally growing still. Genesis knew better than to release him straight away, however, waiting instead until Angeal convinced Sephiroth to back off. The slightest hint of threat from his opponent could set Cloud off again – good instincts, but troublesome when you were trying to get someone to calm the hell down.

Sephiroth lowered Masamune, and Cloud demanded, "Let me go."
"Only if you're not going to pick another fight with the great General Sephiroth," Genesis replied, only half-mocking.

He felt the blond stiffen in his grasp. "He started it." The words were raw and full of hurt, and Genesis caught brief flash of confusion and regret steal across Sephiroth's face before his neutral visage settled into place once more. The usual, then. Sephiroth had once again unwittingly tread across some painful part of Cloud's mysterious past.

They couldn't entirely fault Cloud, however – not when it was Sephiroth who so persistently sought him out to 'soothe relations'. While charismatic, the General did not possess a high level of social understanding, and his lack of tact and insensitivity could on occasion make even thoughtless clouts like Heidegger wince. "You know, these little misunderstandings wouldn't happen if you would tell us why every third thing Sephiroth says is so upsetting," he drawled, finally releasing the blond.

"He called me a puppet," Cloud snarled.

A puppet?

Genesis considered that. Cloud didn't appear to have any ambition, any hobbies, or even seem to enjoy fighting all that much. He didn't complain about missions ever, no matter how difficult or boring. He got along comfortably with Kunsel and Zack, but appeared scarcely aware that anyone else in SOLDIER existed.

In short, he was exactly the sort of employee ShinRa craved. A stunningly powerful automaton who didn't quibble over his paycheck, would work himself to death if asked, and almost never engaged in unnecessary frivolities. The only one who ever managed to faze him was Sephiroth. He could now very well envisage the conversation that led to the General making the taunt.

Then Sephiroth just had to make it worse. "But you work for ShinRa, don't you?"

That bright, icy blue gaze burned, and Genesis almost recoiled at the intensity of the expression on the SOLDIER's face.

That was a new one. Self-loathing.

Before he could react, say something, anything, Cloud stalked away without another word.

"Cloud! Hey wait, Cloud!" the Puppy called out, running after him.

An uneasy silence settled over the SOLDIERs remaining.

"C'mon, Cloud. What's the deal with you and the General? Maybe it's something I can help with," Zack wheedled. It had been two days since the latest 'Sephiroth encounter', and the dark mood surrounding his friend still hadn't lifted, so Zack had decided to find out what the problem was. He wasn't getting very far, but he couldn't just give up! What kind of SOLDIER would he be then?

Cloud sighed. "Just forget about it already, Zack."

"But you were really worked up! I thought you guys were friends now."

"We're not friends."

He held up his hands in a gesture of peace at the aggressive note in Cloud's voice. "But he wants to
"Give it a rest, Zack," Kunsel interjected.

"Aww, come on, you're curious too!" He flopped down next to them on the bleachers lining the sides of the gym. The facilities were mostly empty, aside from a couple of Thirds down the other end, running through sword drills. Zack watched them with detached interest. They were pretty sloppy. The standards must be dropping. Or maybe he'd gotten better! Yeah, that must be it.

"Sure I am, but I know when to drop it."

"But I don't get it. It's a kind of lame insult to get worked up over, right? I mean, 'puppet'? What does that even mean, really?" Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Cloud tense, and quickly backtracked. "-Although it was a pretty jerky thing to say. I'm surprised he'd risk it. You know, since you guys have been getting on better. As in, you don't fight every time you meet anymore."

"Only every second time," Kunsel agreed.

"Yeah! I mean – hey, Kunsel, that's not helping!"

Kunsel grinned. He knew it. His long-time SOLDIER buddy was ganging up on him with Cloud! Zack idly wondered if he should recruit Luxiere to even the stakes again, but before he could carry that thought to completion, their fellow Second Class sighed and muttered, "I said forget about it. I shouldn't have let it get to me. It's just…" He trailed off uncomfortably. Zack mustered his patience and waited. The blond could take a while to gather his thoughts sometimes. "…I was used, once. And that person would say things like that, and…" The sentence died under a vigilant silence.

Vague, but also the most the mysterious recruit had ever shared with them. Zack placed a hand on Cloud's shoulder and made him look him in the eye. "Hey, Cloud, you know, I've been meaning to ask for a while, but are you running from any kind of trouble? I mean, when you first turned up in the slums, I kind of thought…"

He was met with a flat stare. "I'm not from Wutai, Zack."

Kunsel guffawed. The gravity of the moment had been broken. "Seriously, Zack? Wutai?"

"Hey, we were having a big problem with spies at the time!"

"But they can't exactly make their eyes glow."

"It was only a random thought! It wasn't like I tried to arrest him or anything!" They were getting way off topic. "And I wasn't talking about that anyway! I know you're not from Wutai!"

Cloud shook his head, an almost invisible smile dancing on the corner of his lips. "Don't worry about it. It's not something that can affect me here. I was just being… sensitive." He shrugged it off, and stood to leave. "I'm heading out on a mission."

"Be careful!" Kunsel called after him.

Zack watched him go with a thoughtful tilt to his head. He didn't find out everything he wanted, but Cloud looked a little happier. The guy never really relaxed, but Zack figured if they could downgrade him from 'ready to level the building with Comet' to plain old 'weight of the world on his shoulders', they weren't doing too badly. Guys packing materia like that should never be so edgy. Never.
A towel hit him in the back of the head. "Stop staring, doofus. He's already paranoid enough."

Zack shook his head. "I dunno, man. What do you think about it?"

"Cloud's past?"

"Yeah."

Kunsel paused as he unscrewed the cap on a bottle of water, looked as though he was about to say something, then shrugged. "I think it's none of our business."

"Come on. You've got nothing? Not even a rumour?" Zack prodded. His buddy always knew everything there was to know about their colleagues, even back when they were cadets.

"Nothing," Kunsel confirmed. Then, in a lower voice, "And that's what worries me."

It would be wrong to say Strife had adapted to life at ShinRa – it was more that ShinRa had adapted to him. The SOLDIERs had learned when to steer clear of him, the fanclubs had formed, and a trio of green Thirds had even taken to using the Training Room an awful lot in hopes of catching his notice and getting some free pointers. Gossip regularly filled the halls regarding the mysterious Second Class, and Angeal knew of at least three betting pools among the ranks as to when Lazard would finally promote him to First Class. Too many people had borne witness to his and Sephiroth's aborted duels now.

Still, something about that last scuffle had changed the status quo. Angeal couldn't put his finger on it, but there was definitely more tension in the air.

He and Genesis had questioned their friend extensively about the conversation, and while it hadn't been nice of Sephiroth to taunt Strife that way, by no means was it a particularly vicious insult. Similar remarks were thrown around casually enough about the lackeys in middle management. That Strife had reacted so violently to it – well, Strife reacted strangely to odd things, sometimes.

As interesting as Strife made life at the company, however, they still had to do missions, go to meetings, and fill in more paperwork than strictly necessary. Lazard was supposed to cut down on this sort of thing, but it sometimes seemed like he only increased the load.

Angeal knocked three times on the office door, but didn't receive a reply. Poking his head in, he found it empty, and cursed. Not here either. He'd already checked his quarters and with the Director. The gym next, then.

Yet the gym also bore no sign of his quarry – just the usual smattering of off-duty SOLDIERs from various classes, working out and sparring on the mats. It had been a little sparse since the Wutai War – due both to the thinning of the ranks, and a newfound lack of motivation. Nobody spoke – the only sounds were of exercise, grunts, and whirring treadmills.

Except in the cases of certain Seconds who persisted in failing to read the mood. "Hey, Angeal!"

"Zack," he greeted warmly. "Getting in some extra training?"

"Yeah. I'm still set on making First!" He pumped his fist in the air a few times.

"It's good you're keeping at it. Determination and persistence are valuable qualities in a SOLDIER. But can you tell me what matters the most?"
"Honour," Zack replied promptly. "And to never forget the pride of being a SOLDIER." He delivered the last few words in a singsong voice, having gone through the exchange plenty of times before.

Perhaps he had rehashed the point with his student a few too many times, but Angeal didn't appreciate the mantra being mocked. "That's good, but a SOLDIER has a lot of responsibility. Honour and pride aren't things you can just be tested on, Zack. If you don't treat it seriously, you'll never make First Class."

He sobered up immediately, and saluted. "Yes sir!"

Angeal shook his head with a wry smile. "Now, I didn't come here to lecture you. I was wondering if you've seen Sephiroth today?"

"The General?" Zack tilted his head to the side, wearing a thoughtful frown. "Sorry, don't think I have. Is it important?"

"Just some paperwork that needs his signature before it can go through Lazard." Angeal knew if he were to just put it on the General's desk, it could take days to make it to its final destination.

"Well, if you're looking for Sephiroth, try asking Cloud," Zack suggested. "He always knows."

Ifrit, they'd better not be in the middle of starting another fight. They'd only just finished replastering the common area from the last one. "And where can I find Strife?"

"He was hanging out in the Equipment Room before. He's probably still there."

An unusual place to 'hang out', unless he was waiting for a mission dispatch, but Angeal had long given up analysing the man's every movement. Better to leave that sort of thing to the Turks. He thanked Zack and headed to the Equipment Room.

Sure enough, Zack's information led him right to the mysterious Second Class. "Strife. I'm looking for Sephiroth. Have you seen him?"

Strife stared at him for a moment, as though taking an unusually long time to register the question, and then replied, "He's in the Training Room."

Angeal paused. The Training Room? What would Sephiroth be doing there? He normally steered clear of it to minimise his chances of a Hojo encounter. "Are you sure? You're not just making it up to get rid of me faster?" he asked with a grin.

Strife spared him an annoyed glance. "Go see for yourself. He's been there all morning."

Angeal shrugged. "If you say so." Normally Strife haunted the Training Room, presumably because Sephiroth never went there, so he could be right. Might explain why he was brooding in the Equipment Room instead.

Fortunately, when the entrance to the Training Room whooshed open, Angeal finally caught sight of the wayward General. He was pacing back and forth down the far end of the observation area. "Sephiroth!"

His friend halted his restless march and frowned. "How does everyone keep finding me? I thought here, at least, I could get some peace."

Angeal chuckled. "Hiding, were you? All I did was ask Strife."
"That's what the last five people said," he all but growled.

He waved the papers in his hand. "Sorry, but I need your signature."

Practically snarling, Sephiroth snatched the papers from his hands, scanned them in a matter of moments, and signed in a messy scrawl against the control console before thrusting them back into Angeal's arms.

He tidied up the papers, and asked, "What has you in such a rotten mood anyway?"

Sephiroth waved an arm vaguely in an attempt to sidestep the question. Angeal didn't back off. He could guess – only one thing occupied his friend's attention these days. "It's Strife, isn't it?"

His only answer came by way of a sharp green glare. Right on the money, then.

Angeal sighed. "What have you done to upset him now?"

"Not a thing."

"Really." He doubted that.

"I couldn't have. I do believe he's avoiding me. I haven't seen him for days," Sephiroth explained shortly. 'Days' no doubt meaning since last they crossed swords.

"He really is good at avoiding you, then." SOLDIER wasn't that large – it took an uncanny run of luck to miss running into an acquaintance in the halls for that long. Evading someone actively looking for you was damn near impossible, but somehow Strife had done it. At least now he knew the source of Sephiroth's bother. "Why do you want to see him so badly?"

"I…" Sephiroth stopped short, cleared his throat, and for a moment Angeal thought the sentence would remain forever unfinished. Not so. "…I wanted to apologise."

Angeal could do nothing but stare for what felt like a hundred years. Finally, the cogs in his brain resumed turning, and he grumbled, "Very funny."

"I'm serious."

He couldn't be. Sephiroth didn't apologise, simply because he never believed himself to be wrong. They had come to accept it, though it sometimes caused problems when Genesis got stubborn about apologies too, and then the conflict would drag out until a comfortable amount of time had passed and normal relations could be resumed without acknowledging any misstep. "You're going to apologise to Strife?"

Sephiroth shrugged, looking the most helpless as Angeal had ever seen him. "I don't understand why, but my last comment appeared to upset him considerably. I had intended to elicit a response – not cause pain."

Angeal shook his head. "I've never seen you try so hard to get along with somebody before. Why now?"

"Cloud is different."

"We all know that. But what do you want? Just to be friends?" Sephiroth didn't simply reach out to people. It had taken he and Genesis a good couple of years to wear their way into their friend's trust.
"It's necessary, if we wish to spar."

"Is that what this is about? You want to fight him?"

"Is that so wrong?" Sephiroth asked. "I exist to fight. Fighting Cloud forces me to new levels, pushes me to improve." Belatedly, he added, "I don't mean offence to you or Genesis. You're both still challenging opponents."

Angeal dismissed the concern, even as he mused on this new revelation. "I'm sure Genesis will get cranky if he hears, but I get it. Neither of us can keep up with your speed anymore, but Strife can still match you in swordplay." Genesis preferred materia, and Angeal preferred his fists. While they were both adept with a sword, neither could really test Sephiroth with his chosen weapon. In a materia-free battle, there never existed a question of who would win. Even Genesis would acknowledge that.

No wonder Sephiroth was so obsessed. After elevating his swordplay to such absurd levels and mastering a blade few could even consider wielding, he'd eventually run out of interesting opponents, and the joy he derived from battle began to wane. He wanted a rival, a purpose to all his training and fighting, and no matter how hard Genesis tried to rise to that position, he'd never managed. No one had. Sephiroth stood alone at the top of the world.

Until Cloud Strife appeared from nowhere.

Angeal couldn't recall his friend ever wanting something so badly before, so found himself compelled to try and find a way to help. "Then set up a spar. A proper one," he suggested. "You don't have to be buddies for that. Heck, it might let Strife blow off some steam and get over whatever bugs him so badly about you, and you get a good fight out of it." He had some suspicions he'd kept to himself about Strife, too. This could be a good chance to test them out in a controlled environment.

"Tseng won't allow it. Not so long as Cloud remains under investigation."

Angeal considered that. "We could do it unofficially. Go out onto the wastes, away from ShinRa and without any witnesses or risk of collateral damage."

"…There is still the matter of Cloud's death threat." But Sephiroth was beginning to warm up the idea, he could tell.

"He's got that contract Lazard is so fond of," Angeal pointed out. "And he hasn't tried to kill you in your sleep yet. If he forgets himself in battle, Genesis and I can step in, like we always do." Genesis would agree to help, probably, if he framed it to sound like it would help them both. He was just as fascinated with Strife as Sephiroth, although their admiration definitely lay along different fault lines. Something had passed between the blond and his old friend, something that Genesis refused to disclose.

Sephiroth almost looked convinced, but then his brow furrowed once more. "Except Cloud would never agree."

Angeal slapped him on the shoulder. "My friend, you just leave that to me."

After all, Strife would forget to be angry with them the instant Sephiroth came into the picture.

And as Zack often demonstrated, sometimes it was easier to ask for forgiveness than permission.
"Strife!" Cloud paused as he left the Briefing Room. Angeal came down the hallway towards him, followed closely by Genesis.

One look at their faces, and he was suddenly struck by a terrible feeling that his afternoon plans of haunting the Training Room were about to change.

"What is it?"

"You finished your missions for the day?"

"Yes," he answered guardedly. "But-"

They didn't give him a chance to finish. "In that case, come with us." Then Genesis had a hand on his shoulder and Angeal flanked him from the other side and Cloud found himself being steered towards the elevator.

"Where to?" He gave in to the gentle pressure, mostly out of confusion.

"It's a surprise," Genesis declared.

"It's not a Loveless play, is it?" He'd been treated to more than a few impromptu recitals during his time at ShinRa.

"At this time of day? Don't be absurd. Just be patient and you'll see."

Ominous words. But then, he'd become used to Zack dragging him around at his whim, so he followed along quietly as Angeal jammed the button for the parking garages. His stomach lurched as the elevator dropped.

"How far are we going?" ShinRa didn't usually sign out vehicles for anything less than either the top brass or a journey more than half a day's march from Midgar. Thinking on it, though, Angeal and Genesis probably counted as top brass.

"It won't take long," was Genesis's non-answer. The elevator dinged open, and the two SOLDIERs corralled him towards one of the sleek black vans. "We should be back before dark. Probably."

Which could mean as far as Kalm, in a van.

Wait. The van.

He stopped short. "Why is Sephiroth in there?"

Genesis stared at him as though he'd sprouted tentacles. "How the hell do you know that? Can you smell him?"

"Genesis!" Angeal warned. "You'll give it away!"

Too late – Cloud already knew. Paranoia gripped him. Had ShinRa cottoned on to his plans? Were
they going to spirit him out into the wastes and finally do away with him?

"He's going to bolt! Plan B!"

Just as he turned to flee, Genesis caught his shoulder, Angeal quickly manoeuvring to block his escape. His hand reached for his sword, but Angeal caught his wrist, and tugged the blade free of its harness before he could. "Genesis!"

The slender First enveloped him in a bear hug from behind, pinning his arms to his sides, while the black-haired Commander retreated with First Tsurugi in hand. Cloud snarled, kicking out wildly, but his captor tugged him back before his boots could connect with anything. "Angeal, change of plan, you're going to have to drive!"

"Got it!"

"Sephiroth, the door!"

The van door rolled open, and Cloud panicked. Genesis swore under his breath as his struggles grew violent, and tightened his grasp to the point where Cloud started to have trouble breathing. Still he wrenched from side to side, trying to throw the taller SOLDIER off, but Genesis had plenty of experience by now in restraining him so that he couldn't get the leverage to break free. For the first time in a long while, he cursed his average height. It had been years since brute strength alone hadn't been enough.

"A little help here!" Genesis grunted as the van engine roared to life.

Sephiroth grabbed his kicking ankles, his grip crushing. Between the two of them, they hauled him into the back of the van, the door slammed shut, and it lurched forward, heading for the exit tunnel Cloud faintly remembered from his mental blueprint of ShinRa headquarters.

With the leverage provided by Genesis at his back, his kicked again, trying to dislodge Sephiroth's hands from his legs. A wave of magic washed over him, leaving his skin tingling and Ribbon warm. "Sleep doesn't work either?" Genesis complained.

"This is ridiculous," Sephiroth scoffed, released his ankles, and then Cloud abruptly stilled, terrifyingly aware of the edge of cold steel hovering just above his throat.

"Sephiroth!" Genesis hissed.

"He refuses to calm down," he said by explanation. Cloud didn't dare breathe, chin tilted towards the ceiling and eyes darting about, looking for something, anything, he could use as a weapon. "He's going to make us crash."

"And you think holding him at sword-point will make him calm down?" Genesis snarled, but Cloud didn't make a sound, keeping his breathing shallow and steady, even as he inwardly cursed his weakness.

"What the hell is going on back there?" Angeal yelled from the front.

"I advise you to drive carefully, Angeal," Sephiroth purred. "We wouldn't want my sword to slip due to any unexpected bumps."

"And then you wonder why Cloud attacks you at every opportunity," Genesis snapped, "When your solution to every difficulty is to hold it at sword point. How typically Third Class of you."
"Sephiroth, this van isn't big enough for that thing! Put it away!" Angeal ordered from the front.

Genesis pulled Cloud even further back, his grip so tight the Second Class felt his ribs might crack. He developed a sudden appreciation for Nanaki's grumbling over Yuffie's sometimes overenthusiastic hugs.

They remained at an impasse for a long moment, Cloud's shallow breaths echoing harshly in the interior, before Sephiroth lowered Masamune and reclined in his seat, sword held flat across his knees. "It was just a little joke."

"You have a bad sense of humour," Genesis growled. He still didn't release Cloud from his stranglehold, and the blond shifted in place uncomfortably.

"Let me go," he murmured.

Genesis hummed low in his throat. "I don't know. Are you capable of sitting quietly?"

"We're already moving, aren't we?" The van had picked up speed once Angeal saw Masamune removed from the picture.

Sephiroth regarded him with a wry smirk. "With you, Cloud, I sometimes wonder if you wouldn't throw yourself from a moving vehicle to get away from me."

Cloud had been considering just that. He glowered, even as his heart jumped in his chest. Sephiroth couldn't read his mind, he couldn't. The best he could make were clever guesses. Yet still the paranoia clung to him. *Moments when he nearly broke down, asking for a number, clamouring for Reunion. The weight of black materia resting in his palm.*

"You have his sword up there, Angeal?" Genesis asked.

"Right here!" Cloud couldn't see well enough to make sure, but the reassurance that First Tsurugi was still in the vicinity, even if not immediately in reach, went some distance in calming the adrenaline rush in his veins.

"In that case…" The death grip pinning his arms to his sides loosened. Cloud shifted onto the seat next to Genesis, rubbing his neck self-consciously, and very deliberately avoiding looking at Sephiroth. His palms itched, throbbing in time with the phantom pain in his chest.

"I figure you're not likely to jump out of the van if it means leaving your sword behind," Genesis explained airily, though nobody asked.

"Are you going to tell me what this is all about yet?" Cloud grumbled. While he had plenty of experience with Sephiroth skewering him quite casually, thinking rationally, he doubted Genesis and Angeal would be so relaxed if they had anything truly dire planned.

"I wanted to apologise," Sephiroth said.

He finally raised his gaze to risk looking the General in the eyes. His face was the most neutral Cloud could remember it being, and for one moment, he could almost hear the echo of a question, asking him about his hometown.

*No.* He couldn't start thinking like that. His fingers curled into fists on his knees. *This is your idea of an apology?*
"Not at all. This is simply the first time I've had you as a captive audience long enough to offer one," Sephiroth stated plainly. "While I do not understand, my last comment appeared to cause you distress. It was not my intention."

Cloud could only stare at him, unable to comprehend the notion of Sephiroth saying sorry. Sephiroth, who took pleasure in destroying anything he cherished. Sephiroth, who taunted him for his weakness every time they met.

"I'm not a puppet," he mumbled, mostly to himself.

Genesis sighed. "As I keep saying, this would all go so much more smoothly if you would simply tell us what your problem with Sephiroth is, you know." He paused, and added, "Aside from him being a smug, insensitive jerk."

Cloud glowered at his feet. He could never explain. They'd just react the same as Vincent. They didn't know Sephiroth the way he did. They didn't know what he could become.

He envied them for it.

"I'm sure Cloud will share his thoughts with us eventually," Sephiroth remarked, still cradling Masamune in his lap. "I am willing to be patient."

"That's a lie. You're the most anxious to know of all of us," Genesis scoffed. "Angeal, how long until we get there?"

"Are you kidding me? We only just got onto the highway!"

"Now who is the impatient one?" Sephiroth asked.

The trio bantered back and forth for several minutes while Cloud remained silent, watching the exchange through narrowed eyes. These men had been legends in his youth, and to see them talk about trivial matters in the same manner as the boys in his troop used to… it left him with a weird feeling. He hunched in on himself, wishing for at least a window so he could occupy his attention with the scenery instead. How could they talk normally like that, when Sephiroth had been holding him at sword-point mere moments before?

It must have been a common scenario. And somehow that didn't tip ShinRa off to how dangerous their star SOLDIER was?

Although Cloud had to begrudgingly admit that he'd pointed First Tsurugi at the Turks that way before… and Rufus… and sometimes the odd rowdy bar patron… and Barrett, that one time he'd been firing his gun arm off for no reason at all. But everybody knew he wouldn't kill anyone in cold blood. Sephiroth, on the other hand, had made sport of it.

Eventually, the conversation died off, and Genesis took out a beaten leather-bound book and began reciting Loveless.

"When the war of the beasts brings about the world's end,
The goddess descends from the sky
Wings of light and dark spread afar,
She guides us to bliss, her gift everlasting…"

Cloud let the familiar words roll over him, backed by the steady rumble of road noise. Idly, he noted that this was the longest amount of time he'd managed to stay in Sephiroth's presence since he found himself in the past.
Probably the longest time he'd endured Sephiroth's presence since that ill-fated mission to Nibelheim, actually.

Gaia, he hated travelling by car. It wasn't even the memory of motion sickness anymore – it just gave him too much time to think.

"... My Soul corrupted by vengeance,
Hath endured torment,
To find the end of the journey in my own salvation.
And Your eternal slumber..."

"Here should be far enough," Angeal interrupted. The van lurched to a halt, and the engine rumbled into silence.

"What a relief," Sephiroth drawled. "If we reached the fifth act, we may have been forced into a discussion."

Genesis tossed his head in a practiced act of disregard. "I wonder, Sephiroth, what ending you would choose."

"I wonder," Sephiroth echoed, then opened the door, flooding the van with harsh light.

Cloud squinted against the glare. They were in the wastes. Not that far from Midgar – still close enough that they couldn't see the far edges of the city walls. He hurried out, anxious to get into the open where he could manoeuvre more freely.

Angeal hauled First Tsurugi from the front of the van with him, bereft of materia, and handed it over. "I left the materia on the passenger seat," he explained. "Swords only. Odin knows you two do enough damage just with those."

Uncomprehending, he grasped the proffered hilt. "What...?"

Experimentally, Sephiroth swished Masamune in the air a few times, catching the sunlight with the tip. Satisfied, he lowered it to his side, not brandished, but at the ready none-the-less. "Let us begin."

Were they really suggesting what he thought they were? "I signed a contract..." he began haltingly.

Genesis rolled his eyes. "We're here to fight, not kill."

"Out here, you two can swing swords at each other for as long as you want. You know how to spar, Strife. Sephiroth wants a good challenge, and you get a chance to work out your frustrations," Angeal explained.

"A challenge?" He didn't get it. What a pointless reason to fight. He'd stopped caring about that sort of thing when Nibelheim burned and his dreams went with it.

He stopped caring about a lot of things after Nibelheim.

"You want to fight, don't you?" Genesis asked bluntly.

Cloud frowned. "Not really." Wanting to kill Sephiroth before he could commit atrocities and fighting the man were two separate issues in his mind. Fighting was only a means to an end.

Angeal rolled his eyes and gave him a little push. "Just do it as a personal favour then. But
remember – no killing!"

Miffed, he raised First Tsurugi into a guard. Sephiroth brandished Masamune in turn, and Genesis and Angeal retreated a safe distance.

A spar, huh? He supposed he could use the practice.

The air shivered with the ringing clash of swords. Masamune swung in a wide arc, Strife ducked, struck back, and Sephiroth practically floated away. They flew across the barren wastes, kicking up dust and leaving gouged earth in their wake.

"Do you think we'll be able to react quickly enough if it turns deadly?" Angeal asked, watching the swords flashing with interest. Strife had switched to two blades again. Must be nice to be ambidextrous.

"Nothing short of a beheading will kill either of them fast enough. I brought a FullCure." Genesis held aloft the materia as proof.

Angeal grunted in acknowledgement, attention fixed on the battle. They covered an impressive amount of distance as they dodged and parried – he felt tired just watching.

They observed in silence for a little longer. "His movements are becoming more fluid. Strife's, I mean."

"He's stopped being afraid," Genesis noted. "Whenever he fought before, his movements were jerky and desperate."

"Confidence can make a big difference," Angeal agreed. "People do amazing things when they overcome their fear and stop thinking." Not that Strife needed to be any more amazing. The blond struck down against Sephiroth's block. His friend didn't budge an inch, but the sound of the impact made his teeth hurt. They sprang apart again.

Strife's movements were definitely growing more natural – his attention didn't dart all over the place, and he retreated less often. One opening kept appearing, though – his unprotected shoulder. He normally covered it too quickly for Sephiroth to take advantage, but its repeated appearance made Angeal wonder. A flaw in his fighting style, or something else? Why did Strife only ever wear the one shoulder guard? His suspicions were beginning to buzz again in the back of his brain.

He rolled his neck, checking the position of the sun crawling across the sky. They'd been at it for nearly an hour already. Didn't look like the ruckus had drawn anyone's attention, thankfully – Midgar's walls in the distance remained empty of visible observers, and no helicopters wheeled through the vast open blue. The few monsters native to the wastes were staying well clear.

"This doesn't look good," Genesis said suddenly.

Angeal refocused. He'd missed something – let his attention waver as the spar progressed safely and the two fighters remained evenly matched. Only they weren't anymore. Sephiroth crashed to the ground, landing off-balance. Strife followed, striking down. Masamune parried, but the force of the blow rung in their ears. The tip of the katana gouged into the dirt, knocked askew.

In that instant, Sephiroth was left wide open.

His feet pounded across the ground before his thoughts had the chance to catch up. "Genesis! Intervention!"
He could hear his friend, fumbling with his materia, following several steps behind. Ifrit, why did they have to be so far away? Deep down, he hadn't really believed Strife could beat Sephiroth. So he'd let himself grow lax, when he should have kept pace and stayed closer to the fight!

It all happened in a matter of seconds. Strife's sword flashed in the afternoon sunlight. Sephiroth stepped back, trying to recover his balance. Genesis cursed. And Angeal put on a burst of speed, desperately throwing himself between them, sword raised high to catch First Tsurugi's blow. "Stop!"

Pain blossomed in his side.

Strife stared at him, bright blue eyes wide. Angeal dropped to a knee. The Buster-style sword lowered in the edge of his vision, silvery surface clean of blood. Then what had-?

"Angeal." Sephiroth whispered from behind.

He understood then. Strife had done what they never expected, and pulled back from what would have been a deadly strike.

Sephiroth hadn't believed he would, and swung blindly to save his own life.

"Angeal!" Genesis caught up.

"Just a scratch," he announced, pushing himself to his feet, arm pressed hard against his bleeding side. "Nothing to worry about." Not entirely a lie - it was just a flesh wound, but why wasn't the mako taking care of it? His entire body felt like it was burning. He forced a chuckle. "We have to stop ending spars this way."

Genesis and Strife exchanged a significant glance, some silent communication passing between them in that instant, before Strife shook his head. His friend's face darkened, and he turned to him, FullCure brandished. "At least let me heal it. You're bleeding."

"Don't-" Too late. The green wash of curative magic flowed over him. The bleeding slowed, but didn't stop. "-waste your energy. I'll just wrap it in the van. Mako will take care of the rest." Except the usual tingling he felt around his scratches and bruises remained curiously absent. He straightened, and started walking to the van parked some distance away, being careful to resist the urge to limp to ease the tug on his side. "It's getting late. We should start heading back."

"Angeal, I-" Sephiroth began.

"Save it!" He called back. "Accidents happen." It was his fault for getting hurt – for losing track of the match, then panicking and getting in the way. He'd known the risks when he set the spar up, but had still been careless. With forced cheer that would have made even Zack the Puppy proud, he remarked, "That fight was really something! Better not let the higher-ups get a wind of it, or you might get stuck doing exhibition matches for the rest of your careers." Unfortunately, the effort at humour fell flat, as Sephiroth and Genesis remained still, the flapping of their leather coats in the dry wind his only response.

The stalemate broke. "I'll drive." Strife glided past him like a purple wraith. For a second, they'd almost forgotten he was still there.

Sephiroth and Genesis fell into step behind him, neither commenting on his slow gait back to their transport. Strife had retrieved his materia and settled into the driver's seat by the time they got there. The engine roared to life as the trio clambered into the back, and was already moving by the time Sephiroth slammed the door closed.
Angeal settled in for the long, silent ride back, and did his best to ignore his friends' concerned stares.
Cloud strode down the white hallways, resolutely ignoring the phantom sensation of mako soaking into his skin. It was the infirmary, not a lab, and he'd spent plenty of time here as a cadet. Nothing to worry about. Visiting Angeal outweighed any mental discomfort. He needed to stop freaking out over every little thing, or he really would become as crazy as everyone thought.

They'd made it back to Midgar before dark, and Angeal had still been bleeding. Even though he'd known it was pointless, Cloud had added the efforts of his mastered Restore to Genesis's FullCure, but two casts with the bright green materia had only managed to seal the blood flow. He hadn't said anything about it, but two casts were normally enough to bring any of his allies back from the brink of death.

Unmistakeable degradation.

He and Aeris were running out of time.

A quick stop in at the nurse's desk gave him the right room number, before being politely informed that the patient was in the middle of consultation right now, but he could wait in the visitor's lounge right across the hall. He remembered this, too. In the infirmary, it didn't matter if you were the General yourself – you did what the nurses told you to do, no questions or arguments.

He wished the nurses had at least warned him about the other visitor, though. He must have been tired – his wits weren't with him, and he hadn't noticed until too late.

"Sephiroth."

The General glanced up. He leant against the wall, arms folded, with Masamune propped up against the couch two paces away. "Cloud."

The blond very nearly turned on his heel then, but after a brief internal struggle, chose his own spot further along the wall. "Angeal?"

"Genesis is with him, and will be out to let us know his progress soon. I assume he was the one to let you know?"

"Zack. He's leaving for a week-long mission." And wanted Cloud to check up on Angeal for him in his stead. He couldn't say no to Zack. Besides, he hadn't expected Angeal to wind up in the infirmary only a day after their return. Though it was the sensible decision, especially if the SOLDIER remained ignorant of the true nature of his condition.
They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

Cloud stared at the General from the corner of his eyes, a cold numbness settling in.

Three months back under ShinRa's wing, and he was no closer to finding the whereabouts of Jenova. He was running out of time – the foundations for Project Deep Ground would be starting soon, and Nanaki could be kidnapped from Cosmo Canyon at any point. Both problems better nipped in the bud. Yet Hojo remained elusive, buried in the bowels of the Science Department.

The General was here now, within reach. He'd been allowing the Sephiroth matter to slide in order to keep a clear shot at Jenova and Hojo, but as time marched on, the idea held more and more merit.

That, and Cloud really wanted to kill him. Apparently three times was not revenge enough.

So why had he stopped?

Sephiroth turned his head to challenge his stare. "Is there a problem?"

Cloud just looked away.

He knew the answer. He'd stopped because the spar yesterday had changed things. Now he knew without a doubt that he could defeat this Sephiroth. This was the Sephiroth who rolled his eyes at Loveless quotes, who spent half his day doing paperwork, who left Masamune on the other side of the room when in the company of friends. Cloud had taken him down three times now, and all of those Sephiroths had been stronger than this one. He would have won that fight in the wastes if he hadn't stopped. And he'd been holding back, too.

This Sephiroth, however, had friends. First Class SOLDIER friends, as well as the entire ShinRa army behind him. Cloud knew he could outrun ShinRa - he'd done so before, after all - but the memory made his skin itch. He needed to be careful. This was why he'd retreated in Wutai. Friends were dangerous. They came for revenge. Kadaj's 'brothers' were a good reminder of that. His hand rubbed at his chest, seeking a scar for a bullet wound that wasn't there.

Aeris cheated.

"Something similar happened in the past," Sephiroth spoke up suddenly, breaking his chain of thought. "Before we met in Wutai. Genesis suffered an injury that refused to heal."

He knew this story, but asked anyway. "What happened?"

That eerie green gaze, partially obscured by silver hair, turned on him. "I thought perhaps you could shed some light on that. He left for war, and returned in perfect health."

In the face of his superhuman strength, it was easy to forget that Sephiroth was also known for his sharp intellect. Sidestepping the question, he commented, "I'm surprised Lazard put him in charge of the campaign in that state."

"It was Heidegger then. And Heidegger didn't know." Sephiroth didn't sound very approving. Then, in a lower voice, "Hopefully Angeal is more sensible."

Cloud nodded his agreement, and turned his attention away again, stomach churning.

Sephiroth was worried for his friend. Felt guilty for what happened. Feared losing him. It was all there, plain to see if you just looked.
He hated it. He hated it because it made Sephiroth seem human, reminded him of his moments of doubt before the Northern Crater when he realised they were hunting the fragmented remains of a great man gone insane. When he'd ruminated that the real Sephiroth had died in Nibelheim's Reactor, and the monster they fought was nothing more than a shadow.

He'd grown to pity him, in the end. Just a little.

"Hey," he said. Sephiroth raised an eyebrow, waiting. "Angeal's tough – he'll be okay. But next time you want a spar, just ask. I don't want to go through this every time you want to blow off some steam."

The General's lips quirked in a barely suppressed smirk. "You'll have to forgive them. Genesis in particular has a gift for the dramatic."

"There's an understatement," he muttered.

Sephiroth chuckled – a warm sound from deep in his throat. "Tired of Loveless already? I've been enduring recitals for years."

Cloud shrugged. "I don't mind it much." The thought sparked a memory from the day before. Something he genuinely wanted to know. "Hey…The fifth act – how do you think it should end?"

Sephiroth tilted his head, eyes narrowed and silver hair swishing with the movement. "Don't tell me we're going to have to deal with a second Loveless fanatic?"

"…Forget it, then," he grumbled.

What difference would the answer make? If Sephiroth wanted the happy ending, would that change what he needed to do?

The General didn't appear willing to let it go so easily, though. "What about you, Cloud? What ending do you desire?" The words were drawn out, almost taunting. He couldn't hear any malice in them, however. It might have made him feel better if he could.

"You expect me to tell you, when you won't answer yourself?"

"It bothers you? That I won't tell you?" Sephiroth sounded genuinely curious.

"It's not even. It gives you an unfair advantage," Cloud muttered, and crossed his arms against his chest, the coarse purple fabric of his Second Class uniform tickling his forearms. He wished he were wearing his own clothes again, just for this encounter. The reminder of the difference in class between himself and Sephiroth rankled him for no logical reason. They'd never been equals – why did he care about it so much now?

"I'm not a Puppet."

The General, for his part, just looked amused. "Something so small? How on earth could I use that against you?"

Cloud could think of a number of ways, but then, he'd spent the first half of his life enduring taunting from bullies in Nibelheim. "Just forget it," he repeated, starting to feel embarrassed. "I don't really care anyway."

Sephiroth considered him briefly, but as he opened his mouth to respond, they were interrupted by a breathless, "General Sephiroth!" A cadet scurried up to them and snapped out a jittery salute,
nearly knocking his helmet off in the process. "Sorry to disturb you, sir, but the President is requesting your presence! Something about a dedication, sir!"

The low growl Sephiroth nurtured in his throat would have better belonged to a coeurl. "I had forgotten." Cloud's confusion must have shown, as the General explained, "Another publicity luncheon for the President. Genesis wriggled out of it somehow." He placed a hand against his forehead, as though checking for a headache he expected to have, but of course SOLDIERs didn't get headaches so easily. "Very well, cadet. Please inform whoever sent you that I'm on my way."

The cadet snapped out another salute and a squeaky 'sir!' and scuttled away. Cloud stared after him. Had he ever acted like that?

…Probably.

Retrieving Masamune, Sephiroth cast a regretful look towards the still-closed door to Angeal's room. "It's a waste of my time. I would prefer to be here."

Cloud nodded in agreement. "…Glad I don't have to deal with that." He'd been invited to more than a couple of WRO functions in his time, but never saw the point of them. Not being under the WRO's direct employ made it easy to refuse.

Sephiroth paused. "If… you could call me, when you hear… I would appreciate it. Genesis has my number."

Surprised by the request, Cloud asked, "Wouldn't it be easier to get Genesis to call you himself?"

Another pause. Then, with some effort, the General admitted, "Considering that it was my mistake in the first place… I would feel more comfortable, hearing from you. Can you do that for me?"

He wanted to say no – *should* have said no, should have re-established that distance between them. Instead, he found himself nodding. Sephiroth had more right to be worried about Angeal than he did.

Promise secured, the General strode from the infirmary.

Cloud felt sick.

What was going on? He was being *nice*. He shouldn't be nice to Sephiroth, not even for a moment. Not when he was planning on killing him. Just because he didn't plan on killing him *right now* didn't make it okay.

This was just to make things easier, he tried to reason. He couldn't endure the stress of looking for Hojo on top of the stress of avoiding Sephiroth. If he could get along with the Turks after everything they'd done – *who could forget Sector 7 and Seventh Heaven and all those innocent people* - then he could put things aside with the General, just until Hojo and Jenova had been taken care of.

They wouldn't be friends, but he could handle being co-workers. He could greet him in the hallways and spar with him when asked and give him a call to let him know how things went with Angeal. They didn't need to make small talk - neither of them were conversationalists.


Morbidly, it occurred to him that this time he'd finally be the traitor Sephiroth always accused him
of being.

Genesis ran a critical eye over his friend. Angeal insisted that he was fine, and that a couple of potions had taken care of it where the materia hadn't, but he knew better. His experienced eyes picked out the bulge of bandages under his uniform, but since Angeal had never commented on his shoulder, he didn't remark on his wound either. The bandages would hold it. He knew that firsthand.

He did, however, ask, "Have you seen Hollander yet?" Hollander would recognise this symptom of degradation for what it was immediately. Things had the potential to become complicated then. He'd been hoping Cloud could come through with the cure before they reached that point.

Angeal signed the last of the paperwork the nurse had presented him with and hopped off the white bed. "He's out of town, visiting some remote lab to run some tests at the moment. I'll talk to him when he gets back."

Genesis frowned, but his friend merely slapped a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Stop worrying. I already told you it was nothing. I only came here as a precaution."

He didn't have the heart to tell Angeal that he made a terrible liar. "If you say so." Turning on his heel, jacket flaring out from the jerkiness of the movement, he threw open the door and strode into the deserted hallway.

Then had to revise that statement. Not entirely deserted. A certain spiky-haired blond waited in the enclove across the way, arms folded and apparently doing his anti-social best to secede that little corner of space from the rest of the world.

"Strife? What are you doing here?" Angeal asked, visibly surprised by the Second Class's presence.

"Promised Zack and Sephiroth I'd let them know how you were." He scanned Angeal with the same efficiency Genesis had, and his eyes lingered on the hidden bulge of bandages just as long.

"You shouldn't have wasted your time. As you can see, I'm perfectly fine."

Cloud shrugged, turning his cold blue gaze to Genesis instead. "Sephiroth said to get his number off you?"

It looked like Angeal's plan had worked after all, if the two of them had managed to get through an unsupervised conversation without bloodshed. "And exactly where is the great General Sephiroth?" he asked, fumbling with his PHS as he mailed the number to Cloud.

"Had some luncheon with the President he couldn't get out of. He was waiting here earlier." The blond directed the last part to Angeal.

"Aren't you supposed to be going to something like that too, Genesis?" Angeal pointed out.

He snapped his PHS closed with a flourish. "Trying to get rid of me so soon?" The long-suffering sigh he received in response had little effect. Pushing his hair out of his eyes – thrice be damned that stylist, they never got the length right – he declared, "The President is a buffoon. What relevance is there in having military personnel attending a dedication to some plumbing venture?"

"But I thought you liked going to those kinds of functions. Networking, and all that," Angeal replied. Injured or not, his dry sense of humour had emerged unscathed.
"I don't care to network with that parade of useless people. I will attend the appropriate events. ShinRa's public relations department should learn to apply their resources properly. Sephiroth should have refused too, but I suppose he lacked the wit to see the entire folly for what it was."

"You could have helped him out," Angeal scolded, though the reprimand bore no weight with the smile on his lips. He would smile – Public Relations only ever sent him to schools or orientations or ribbon-cutting ceremonies attended by old ladies. Delightful ten-minute handshake affairs, rather than the dragging hours and hours of poorly-composed and even more poorly-delivered speeches his fellows were forced to sit through.

Sometimes Genesis almost regretted the additional fame he'd earned from his masterfully executed – if he did say so himself – campaign in Wutai.

Almost.

"I'll go call Sephiroth and let him know you're okay then." Cloud's soft voice barely carried over the distance to them. With no further ceremony, he pushed off from the wall and left.

Angeal blinked. "That was abrupt."

"He doesn't like doctors," Genesis reminded him, watching the blond until he disappeared around the corner. "I imagine that extends to infirmaries." Then, fixing his friend with a displeased glare, he added, "You should be more appreciative. Sephiroth doesn't like the infirmary either, and they both came here because they were worried about you." And he was too, but still his friend had the audacity to just shrug his shoulders and lie to him, insisting they were concerned over nothing.

Angeal rolled his eyes. "I can't believe that you of all people are lecturing me about appreciation."

Genesis sniffed, nose upturned in the air. "When those two make even the slightest attempt at displaying social tact and understanding, we should encourage them." Cloud's stop by the infirmary reassured him some, too. It meant the Second Class was taking the matter of Angeal's degradation seriously. Though he'd already explained that he'd done everything he could, and now they needed to wait.

Unfortunately, Genesis's personnel file had never once listed patience as one of his strengths.

"It's a good sign, though," Angeal commented, thoughtful. "I think he might be warming up to us."

"Maybe we should start dragging him along to end of week drinks," Genesis mocked, and then paused at the expression on his friend's face. "...Oh no. You're serious. I intend to have that office one day, you know. I'd like it in one piece."

"I think it would be good for him," Angeal justified. "After all, doesn't it worry you sometimes?"

"Doesn't what worry me?"

"Strife. I mean," Angeal's tone dropped, quiet enough that only a SOLDIER with enhanced hearing had any hope of eavesdropping. "-don't you think it's a bit odd? He turned up in the slums, doesn't appear to own anything other than the sword and materia on his back, and from what little he's told us, doesn't have any surviving friends and family. He doesn't have any ambition, doesn't have any hobbies, doesn't seem to care about anything other than fighting Sephiroth."

Genesis frowned. "So what are you getting at?" None of this was news.

"I've been thinking about it a lot since his reaction to his promotion. Neither the Turks nor
Sephhiroth can find any concrete reason for revenge. He's been here a while now, but all they have is speculation. If even the Turks can't find it, does it really exist?"

"But there must be a reason. Why else would he want to kill Sephiroth?"

"Does he really want to kill Sephiroth, though?" Angeal speculated. "Or do you think maybe, just maybe, he wants Sephiroth to kill him?"

Genesis opened his mouth to respond, and then closed it again.

Could Angeal really be suggesting what he thought? He'd never once considered Cloud to have such a problem. The man was moody, certainly, but suicidal?

"I tried to ask him about it once, right after he got promoted. I didn't get a very good reaction," Angeal continued, staring down the hallway thoughtfully.

"That was over two months ago," Genesis pointed out.

"These things don't just go away, you know." He shrugged. "I mentioned it to Tseng, and he thought the idea had some merit. We've been holding off on promoting him to First Class because of it."

"Why? Surely the responsibilities of being a First Class would be a good thing in that case."

"Tseng was worried if he found himself in a situation where he was outclassed, he might use it as a… I guess you could say, opportunity. He's a passive type. He probably wouldn't take his own life, but if he happened to find himself in a situation where he could get killed…"

Genesis mulled that over. Admittedly, his friend knew more about these matters than he – the Second and Third classes who had emotional problems normally went to Angeal, who then in turn either talked them through it or sent them to the counsellors' offices – but he still couldn't make the logic work. "Then we don't have anything to worry about. I doubt there's anything on the Continent that can kill him. And if he really wanted to die, he's had plenty of opportunities while fighting Sephiroth."

"But why does he want to kill Sephiroth then? He stopped, yesterday. I doubt it was the contract that did it." Angeal shook his head, a little sadly. "If he wants to go out in a blaze of glory, though, doesn't it make sense? He's strong enough that nobody but Sephiroth has a hope of killing him in battle. And if he starts to think that even Sephiroth can't kill him… well, it wouldn't hurt to give him a few more reasons to stick around would it? It's such a waste." The last part he muttered under his breath.

Genesis remained unconvinced, but had to admit that the more he thought on it, the more plausible it seemed. Cloud had given away a priceless cure to an enemy without a thought – as though he didn't believe he would ever have any use for it. He strode through life like a machine, disaffected by anything other than Sephiroth.

That expression flashed before his eyes again. Self-loathing.

Cloud looked out for his comrades, certainly. Would accommodate Angeal's bouncy Puppy, went out of his way to help that other Second with his training, and came into the infirmary to check on Angeal even though it made him visibly uncomfortable. Never once, however, had Genesis seen any sign of the man worrying about himself, even though he'd noticed the dark rings under his eyes some mornings, and even though the man worked the mission roster so hard that Lazard had to tell him to take a break.
Could Angeal be right? Was Cloud actually suicidal?

Angeal shrugged. "Anyway, it can't hurt, right? One more for end of week drinks. A bit more socialising could help him, same way it did Sephiroth." He rolled his shoulders briefly. "But enough of that. Let's get out of here. Here I came for a quick patch-up, and got a crowd of visitors. I'd hate to think how you'd all react if I got seriously hurt."

Genesis frowned, still caught up in his ruminations. "Let's not put it to the test."

It still didn't sit right with him. Cloud's actions, however illogical on the surface, were not the actions of a man seeking eternal slumber. Though tempered somewhat over the past two months, his animosity towards Sephiroth had been frighteningly real. Angeal had never witnessed the battle in Wutai. Cloud had sized the situation up in one glance, and made a tactical retreat.

Suicidal warriors did not make tactical retreats. Wutai had taught him that much. Angeal didn't have the ruthlessness to understand. He was a different kind of SOLDIER.

What was the purpose of the tactical retreat, though? Why sign up with ShinRa, and then avoid killing Sephiroth? The same question that bothered him from the very beginning remained unanswered. Where was the meaning, the goal Cloud was working towards?

It was the missing link, the key to the mystery, he felt sure of it. But in the same breath, Genesis was not so sure he would like the answer.
"Sephiroth! General Sephiroth!" a vaguely familiar voice called out from down the hallway.

A single silver eyebrow twitched – did the fool have to draw the attention of everyone on the floor to him? - but he paused and waited anyway.

Breathless, the black-haired Second Class caught up to him. "You should train more if a short run like that is enough to wear you out," the General remarked.

"What? Oh, actually I just came from training with Angeal," Zack explained, looking embarrassed.

"I see. And what was it you wanted to know?"

"Umm." For a second, it almost looked as though the man forgot. Lucky for him, his eyes lit up with recollection before Sephiroth could grow impatient and continue on his way. "Oh yeah, that was it! You know where Cloud is, sir? He's not in the Training Room, and I owe him some gil," Zack asked sheepishly.

"He's in the gym," Sephiroth replied.

"Of course! I should have known. Thanks General!" Zack threw him a jaunty wave and continued jogging down the corridor.

Sephiroth paused outside his office. Strife was in the gym? How did he know that? He hadn't seen the blond since yesterday.

Pushing the matter out of his mind as unimportant, he entered the office, relishing the newfound silence as the door clicked shut behind him. Steps measured and pensive, he bypassed the desk and headed for the window, looking out on the view of the sprawling metropolis.

His fingertips rested on the cool glass, and he pressed his forehead against it as well. Scheduled for an inspection in Junon in four days – he'd miss their end of week drinks. Not a huge matter, but a disappointment. He'd come to look forward to it lately.

Cloud had recently joined their weekly ritual in his office, though the General suspected it involved a great deal of cajoling from his two friends. It turned out the blond knew a little bit about bartending - said a friend used to own a bar, and refused to extrapolate - and could mix a variety of beverages, which added a new dimension of interest to their little get-together. Genesis then invariably tried to charm conversation from the newcomer, but the only topics he ever had much success in were Loveless and motorbikes.

"I'd never pick you for a motor head," Angeal had commented, after a lengthy discussion on customisation and the sort of suspension required to handle that kind of weight. "You never seem to like travelling." For some reason, he had looked relieved at the revelation.

Cloud had shifted uncomfortably. "I used to get motion-sick when I was younger. Now, I just don't like enclosed spaces." The last part was delivered in a soft voice, audible only thanks to enhanced hearing.
There had been an awkward silence, before Genesis asked, "What sort of bike did you have?"

Cloud simply shrugged and looked away. "It was a custom one-of-a-kind. Doesn't matter. It's gone forever."

Angeal's expression took on a worried twist again, and the subject had been dropped faster than an unstable materia.

For now, anyway. Sephiroth had studied up on motorcycles in an effort to better understand his rival, but now he was going to miss their next meeting for some asinine inspection in Junon that any ranking officer with enough authority could do. Granted, they were short on ranking officers after their losses in Wutai, so he couldn't complain too strenuously. Honestly, Heidegger had been a terrible resource manager - the mess the new Director inherited made a ShinRa cafeteria breakfast look good.

In light of that, he supposed he could handle missing a week. Strife might not even come – he'd only turned up three out of four times so far, and the awkwardness of the previous evening might take a while to wear off. Nothing to worry about, though. Angeal's idea for the spar had proven a good one, though he found it difficult to take much joy in it when it ended in his friend being injured.

His fingers slid from the glass, and he turned his attention back to the desk and its not-yet-unmanageable stack of paperwork. He hung Masamune on its stand, took a seat on the high-backed leather chair, and began to sort through the folders, mind elsewhere as his body performed the routine task.

He felt a definite sense of camaraderie with Cloud, now, and it pleased him greatly. He hadn't asked for another spar yet, but now that he knew he could ask, didn't feel the urgency. And he enjoyed the man's quiet company. Cloud would still tense up when he first caught sight of him, and sometimes at certain points of the conversation, but otherwise things remained civil. No doubt the enigmatic Second Class, having felt the thrill of battle with an opponent on the same level, had warmed up to the idea of a rivalry. As he knew he would.

Yes, Sephiroth was pleased. Things appeared to be going well. Even his unusual nightmares were abating. If it weren't for Angeal's persisting injury....

He pushed the thought from his mind, even though he knew the guilt would creep back again later. His friend insisted that it was fine, and he shouldn't concern himself over the accident. Hypocritical though it was - Angeal might not have said much about it, but it had been obvious to anyone with eyes how he'd been tearing himself up over their previous sparring accident, and that was unquestionably Genesis's own fault for trying to force spells past swords at close-range.

He contemplation was broken by a plain, lonely beep from his PHS. Grateful for the distraction, he flipped the device opened, thumbing automatically to the new message. Another department head posting from Lazard.

'SOLDIER members, I thank you for your daily hard work. We have suffered greatly these past few months, and I appreciate your continued dedication, even though I know your hearts remain heavy from loss. But as we continue to recover from the hidden costs of victory, I am encouraged by examples of newfound camaraderie within our ranks. Truly, these troubled times are easier navigated when we can rely on each other.'

Sephiroth's lips quirked as he read the mail. Despite his overwhelming workload, somehow Lazard still found time to send out these newsletters. Admirable sentiment, if naive.
Still, he personally hadn't lost anyone in the Wutai War, so he deleted the message with little thought and returned to his paperwork.

Only two people mattered to him – Genesis and Angeal. Now, that number had expanded by one. Cloud Strife.

The door to the Training Room whooshed open, and Tseng couldn't quite stop the falter in his step when confronted with a pair of blazing blue Mako eyes.

As quickly as the gaze fixed on him did it dart away, and the Turk could breath easy again. "Good afternoon, Strife."

"Tseng," came the toneless reply. "What do you want?"

"I was hoping you could spare some time to talk?"

"What about?"

Instead of answering, he turned to watch the trio of blue-clad SOLDIERs locked in simulation next door. Thirds. They weren't likely to overhear anything while the Training Room was running, but the simulation could end at any time. "Perhaps we should go somewhere more private."

Shrugging, the Second Class followed the Turk out the room. Tseng led them to the elevator, where he pushed the button for a floor several stories below.

A taut silence stretched between them, broken only by the click of the numbers counting down in the elevator. The door pinged and whooshed open, and Tseng stepped out into a dark corridor, feeling along the wall for a moment in search of a light switch. Cloud followed, though his steps were slow and cautious.

"Urban Development used to be on this floor," he explained as the fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed to life, revealing cracked plaster and a thin layer of dust coating the hallway. "But it's a small team now, so they've been moved to a different area. This floor isn't being used at the moment – we'll have privacy here." He headed to the right, checking several doors before selecting an empty office that had escaped the worst of the filth and still possessed two working chairs. Nevertheless, a sharp, musty smell clambered into his nostrils and swiftly made itself at home in his sinuses. Apparently janitorial services had been neglecting the floor in the absence of its use. He couldn't blame them.

"Please, take a seat." The chair creaked dangerously as Tseng sunk into it, and he rethought his advice, but Strife must have been lighter than he looked - the other seat held his weight without complaint.

"What's this about?" The soft voice, so at odds with the unfriendly countenance and fighter's physique, barely carried over the short distance.

"I apologise for the subterfuge, but I thought you might prefer to keep this discussion quiet." Tseng laced his fingers together, leaned back, and considered the best way to broach the subject. "It has been brought to my attention that perhaps, when we hired you, we may have overlooked some... personal issues."

Strife tensed, hands clenching around the plastic armrests of his seat. A telling response.

"We'll get to that in the moment. The first order of business we need to discuss is the matter of your
contacts." Tseng watched for an incriminating reaction. Most people gave themselves away on the moment of accusation.

Nothing. Only confusion. "Contacts?"

"I am aware that in your PHS you possess the numbers of several unrelated ShinRa personnel, all of whom claim to have never met you personally. I'm here to enquire why that is the case."

There it was at last. Alarm, swiftly followed by indignation, before being buried back under the usual indifference. You might not notice if you blinked, but Strife was the emotional sort. It stood to reason – an unemotional man would not have been driven to brandish his sword against the General so readily. Tseng admitted that he hid it better than most, but once aware, the Turk could catch those brief windows into his thoughts, those unguarded moments.

"You looked in my PHS."

No denial, then. Strife was unexpectedly cagey. He understood the Turks in a way few did. "Yes."

He frowned, though looked more displeased with himself than anybody else. "The mission to Banora, at the helicopter." His fingers traced over the pocket where Tseng knew he kept the device. "I didn't... you used Steal materia," he realised.

"That's right."

He folded his arms. "...So?"

Not the reaction he'd prepared for. "I'm mostly concerned how it was you acquired Rude and Reeve Tuesti's numbers. Cid Highwind's, also. And what, precisely, you intend to do with them."

"Do with them?" Tseng didn't answer, waiting patiently for an explanation to be offered. Sometimes silence was the best interrogation technique. It made people nervous, and encouraged hasty responses.

Unfortunately, he underestimated Strife's ability to ride out a silence. Once the pause had stretched far past the point of awkwardness and started gunning for boredom, Tseng extrapolated, "For what reason would you call any of them?"

"...No reason."

"Then why do you have their numbers?" His efforts at investigating the matter himself had fallen flat – this was his last ditch attempt at shedding some light on the issue, by questioning the source. Not a tactic the Turks liked to resort to – it showed too much of their hand – but Tseng had been left with no choice.

Strife's eyes cleared suddenly, as though in recollection. "...Zack."

"Zack?"

The SOLDIER gestured vaguely. "When I was in the slums. He entered a heap of numbers in my PHS. I guess he thought he was helping." A beat. "...I thought I deleted them all. Must have missed some."

Tseng found himself almost disappointed. While emotively, that explanation did not satisfy him, logically it explained matters rather well. Zack was the sort of SOLDIER who made friends with every person he met, and frequently did missions for other departments within ShinRa. Turks
and Urban Development included. He was a trusted SOLDIER, with the highest clearance of any Second Class - higher than even a number of Firsts. It was the only reason why Tseng allowed his relationship with Aeris to persist, and the major reason why he was their SOLDIER of choice when a Turk needed accompaniment on a sensitive mission.

Still, that didn't explain everything. "And what about Barrett Wallace?"

A long silence. Then, "A customer. For my delivery service."

"I see. I'd never heard of it before. What was the name?"

"It wasn't really a company. Just me and Fenrir."

"Fenrir?"

"My bike. We only took small jobs."

Extracting answers from Strife was like wringing blood from a stone. Fortunately, Tseng was a patient man, and could settle for pulling out the information a sentence at a time. "And what about the rest of the numbers?"

"…The rest?" Strife's voice barely touched the corners of the room.

"A great number of the names in your PHS were for numbers that were disconnected."

"Oh." Another flicker. Discomfort. Grief. "…They're…" Strife spoke slowly, as though listening to a conversation very far away. Tseng waited patiently, having become used to the blond's careful manner of speech by now. "…not around… anymore."

As he suspected, then. This next part would need to be handled with care.

He deliberately softened his voice. "If I may ask, where are they now?"

A careful shrug, and an averted glance. "I don't like to talk about it."

His posture shifted, just slightly, to allow him quicker access to his gun. "…Did you kill them?"

Strife's gaze snapped back to his face. "What? No! You think I- No! I would never…" His words trailed off, but his reaction had been instinctive. Answer enough for him.

"…I see. I apologise for having to ask. But this brings me to my next matter." Tseng studied the man across from him, doing his professional best to keep his posture and expression as unthreatening as possible. They were now approaching issues rarely in the jurisdiction of the Turks, but the SOLDIER in front of him was a special case. "Over the past couple of months, several people have noted you possess an unsettling lack of ambition and… self-destructive tendencies." He paused, letting that sink in for a moment. "Given the circumstances we met in, and the information you've shared today… I suppose I'm not incorrect in guessing that you've experienced some past trauma."

No answer. Strife simply stared at him, face as blank as the plaster-dust covered walls of the room. He recognised the expression, now – he'd seen it on men who'd been pushed to the point of breaking, and locked all their emotions away inside.

"It is our concern-" Convenient that word 'our', it could mean almost anyone. "--that if these issues continue unaddressed, you may at some point do something… irreparable."
The blankness gave way momentarily to bewilderment, before the usual air of disinterest settled back over the mako-bright eyes.

"I'm sorry if this makes you uncomfortable," he reiterated. Diplomacy might pad Strife's tolerance for the discussion. "If you can assure me that you'll talk about it with one of your friends – Zack, Kunsel, Commander Rhapsodos, or even General Sephiroth."

"We're not friends," Strife interrupted.

Tseng raised an eyebrow. "Am I to believe then that you still intend him harm?"

"No… It's… we're only co-workers. Just because we're not fighting in the halls anymore doesn't mean we're friends."

Interesting logic. Did he really not understand? "You've conversed with him regularly over the past couple of weeks. Commander Hewley mentioned to me that you've begun joining them for drinks. And Commander Rhapsodos informed me that you have his PHS number. Perhaps you don't consider Sephiroth a friend, but I assure you, by the General's standards you would certainly qualify," Tseng stated. The man acknowledged very few people outside of a work context. Sephiroth could boast thousands of admirers, and yet willingly tolerated the company of only a few.

Strife fell into a troubled silence. The implications appeared to bother him. An unintended distraction from the topic at hand. "I'm pleased that you've managed to put your issues with Sephiroth aside, but if you won't discuss these matters with him or one of the other SOLDIERs, then I must insist we talk through it here." He was butchering the script the counsellor had given him, but Tseng didn't believe the man in front of him required coddling.

Brow furrowed, Strife asked, "What matters?"

Denial? Tseng didn't have the time to play those games. "We've found no motivation for you to kill Sephiroth. And so in light of the rest of your circumstances, we are forced to conclude that your goal has never been to kill the General, but instead to force an outcome that would only result in your death."

It took a moment for that to sink in, and the instant it did, Strife's chair crashed to ground behind him. "You think I'm suicidal?" His voice remained cold and quiet, but he might as well have been shouting.

At the sharp, burning anger suddenly present in those normally docile blue eyes, Tseng found himself no longer so confident about the tranquilisers he'd loaded into his pistol. Reportedly a dosage high enough to take out a standard First Class, but could Strife be considered at all standard? "You would not be the first person to act in such a manner," he explained, voice low and placating. "There have been many people in the past who have attempted to assassinate the General, as an honourable sort of ending. By the platoon, in Wutai. I will, however, grant that you are the first to have had even the slightest hope of succeeding, which is why I was reluctant to bring this up before now."

"I'm not crazy!" The vehemence of his words had Tseng's fingers flexing, but he kept his hands above the table, away from the comforting grip of his gun.

"I wasn't suggesting you were. Depression is a different matter."

The SOLDIER began to pace back and forth, heavy boots scattering small clouds of dust with each
step. He ran a hand through his blond spikes. "You think I'm suicidal," he repeated.

No point in honey-coating the truth. "Yes."

Strife swore, but after a moment, his eyes took on a haunted look. He continued pacing, muttering to himself, though all Tseng picked up was, 'legacy' and 'stigma' and a bits and pieces of other words.

Then, without warning, he halted in the middle of the room. When he turned to Tseng again, the neutral expression had settled back over his face once more. "That's stupid. I don't have any reason to commit suicide."

Tseng heard the lie in those words, so simply asked, "But do you have a reason to live?"

A crushing silence filled the space between them. Finally, Strife admitted, in a voice so low it barely stirred the air, "Maybe… at one time, I thought about it. But there are things I need to do. I'm not going to just go… kill myself."

"Or wait for death to come to you?" Tseng prodded.

Strife flushed. "That either." He rubbed at his arm for a moment, but the gesture looked unconscious.

"And I can trust your word on this?"

Beginning to look annoyed, the blond admitted, "I've nearly died a lot of times. That I'm still here should speak for itself." The words sounded strangely bitter, but Tseng leaned back, and considered his work done. Continuing the informal interrogation at this point would be counter-productive.

"In that case, thank you for having this little chat with me. It's set my mind at ease." He fished about in his chest pocket for a moment, and then slid a small white card across the table. "Though please, in the future, don't hesitate to visit one of our SOLDIER counsellors. There are many SOLDIERs struggling after the Wutai conflict, so ShinRa has gone to pains to hire the best of the best."

Strife glanced at the card disdainfully and didn't take it. "So we're done here?"

"Yes."

The reply had barely left his mouth before Strife disappeared through the door.

Allowing himself a small smile, Tseng swung around on his creaky chair, and patted the gun hidden in his jacket fondly. Apparently, Strife hadn't even been entirely aware of his own issues. But the manner in which he reacted answered all of the Turk's concerns. While the SOLDIER's self-preservation instinct might have looked like a pale, paltry little thing on the surface, it appeared that it was instead a massive, deadly killer, lurking in the shadows with its fangs bared. The blond seemingly had some powerful reason to live – a reason strong enough to be offended at the idea of suicide.

So long as he retained that, Tseng needn't be concerned. More importantly, so long as the status quo was maintained, and no further stress placed itself upon the man, he didn't believe Strife's issues would result in such a negative outcome. And in the meantime, life at ShinRa could help him. It already appeared to be - where before the blond had nothing, he now had new friends to replace the ones he claimed to have lost. New numbers in his PHS that weren't disconnected. New duties and goals to distract him from his demons, whatever they were.
ShinRa had neutered many a threat with nothing more than a steady paycheck and a comfortable routine.

Things still didn't add up to his satisfaction – he held several suppositions as to Strife's origins that could further complicate already snarled office politics - but there wasn't any point in continuing further investigation and surveillance. And if his guesses were correct, the President might prefer for the Turks to maintain an air of deliberate ignorance in this case. He would claim the matter as 'no longer a threat' and cite a lack of resources as an excuse to forestall any further surveillance or investigation. It wasn't even a lie. There were rumblings of rebellion in the slums, and brewing troubles out in the Corel Desert. Concrete matters he couldn't afford to ignore in favour of one man's secrets.

Tseng stood from his chair once a reasonable amount of time had passed and headed to the elevator. The SOLDIER had bolted, predictably, probably mortified by the whole affair.

His ride arrived after some time with a soft ding. Crowded – it was always crowded on the lower levels - but the small band of accountants returning from lunch practically melded with the walls in order to make room for the Turk.

The elevator emptied by the time he reached the executive floor where Lazard's office resided. Though just as silent as the old Urban Development floor, this level carried a different atmosphere. Every sound was muted and flat, cushioned by the thick carpets and curving walls. Though outwardly no more luxurious than many of the lower levels, one could almost smell the gil sleeping behind every door.

As the Turk continued to the end of the hallway, the reverent silence shattered under the twist of a doorknob and the rumble of a husky voice. Moments later, the edge of a white lab coat and a head of scruffy, curly brown hair appeared in view.

Tseng paused and stepped aside, making way for the portly, bearded scientist. "Professor Hollander," he greeted cordially. The man had been scarce around the premises of late. A risky tactic, due to the politics inside the Science Department taking a particularly vicious turn since Hojo's promotion to Department Head. Or perhaps he sought to save face by hiding in one of the outpost labs until the heat from the mass specimen escape had died down.

Hollander blinked owlishly at him from behind a thick set of glasses that distorted his eyes, making them appear even more watery and tired. "Oh, um, hello!" The Turk knew he didn't recognise him, even though they'd spoken a number of times before. All scientists were the same - unless you were relevant to a project, you might as well not exist.

"Tseng, come in!" Lazard called from inside, voice partially muffled by the half-open door.

The Turk slid past the scientist like an eel, and Hollander in turn waddled out into the hallway like a fat ahriman.

"I wasn't aware you knew Professor Hollander," Tseng observed mildly as the door clicked shut behind him.

"He just returned from the countryside," Lazard replied, equally casual.

"Do you speak with him often?" Dark eyes watched the Director closely, noting the miniscule tightening in his facial muscles. Lazard was a hard man to read – similar to Strife in a great many respects - but Tseng was learning.
The Director tapped his desk, gaze roaming over a small spread of documents. "Occasionally. He has a professional investment in some of our most valuable SOLDIERs, so I try to make time to assist him where possible."

Interesting, but Tseng didn't pursue the line of query. Project G struck him as a topic best left well alone.

"What was it you wanted, Tseng?" Lazard asked, turning his attention forward and folding his hands in his lap.

"That matter we spoke about last time."

"Oh?" The Director raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow. "Good news?"

"Yes. I've just finished speaking with Strife, and I'm here to confirm that I'm officially withdrawing the Turks' opposition to promoting him to First Class."

Angeal stared into space, features set in stone as he listened to Hollander's prognosis.

He'd had a bad feeling about it - the same bad feeling that had lingered until the scratch on Genesis's shoulder had healed. His friend got better. For some reason, he wouldn't.

"Something reawakened his body's restorative abilities," Hollander explained. "It's still a new area of study in bioscience - we don't know what signals the cells to repair themselves, or continue reproduction. We do know that mako normally accelerates this process. But what's happened with you is that those signals are growing weaker, and in some cases, turning off." Hollander peered at the computer screen in front of him, rectangles of light reflecting brightly off his glasses. "It's what's causing the slow recovery of injuries you'd normally recover from overnight, and why cure materia isn't taking properly. Premature aging will kick in as the cell production process degrades - the copies will grow poorer over time, and this will normally introduce mutations."

He understood maybe only half of what Hollander was mumbling about, but he got the gist - the cells that made up his body were quitting on him, and it had something to do with mako. "Can't we reproduce whatever turned it back on for Genesis?" Angeal suggested.

"I don't know what caused the reversal in Genesis. I spent weeks going over the data! It went deeper than just repairing the mutated cells. The mako itself-" Hollander shook his head. "It shouldn't be possible!"

A sick, churning feeling started to stir in his stomach, and the weeks-old wound in his side began to burn, as if the mere act of thinking about it could set his nerves on fire. "Then what can we do, Hollander?"

Stumped, the scientist stared at the screen for one long moment, fingers flat against the desk and shoulders slumped in what looked terrifyingly like defeat.

The black-haired First could barely stand it. Angeal and Hollander went back a long way, and while the SOLDIER had met other scientists working for ShinRa who were quicker-witted, the Professor had always been smart and methodical and given enough time, he could solve any problem. Maybe he lacked the same flair as some of the others, the same flashes of random innovation that left laymen scratching their heads, but his methods were tried and true. That they would fail him in his hour of need…

"What about Sephiroth?" he asked, a little desperately. "He doesn't have this, right?"
"Hojo used a different process for Sephiroth," Hollander mumbled, still staring blankly at the test results. "The base is different. Even if we could find some way to replicate it, to stop your system from rejecting it would-"

He stopped abruptly and swung around in his chair. Angeal could practically see the light flick on inside his head. "That new SOLDIER - Strife I think it is. His enhancements are on par with Sephiroth's, I hear?"

Uneasy at the sudden turn in conversation, Angeal answered, "His skills are, at any rate."

Hollander made a sound that was something between a 'harrumph' and a thoughtful hum. He turned back to his computer, clicking through several windows rapidly. "Yes… yes… maybe the secret could lie in there, if there's a method outside of ShinRa…" Nodding decisively, chin wobbling slightly at the motion, the scientist declared, "That man could be the key. I need to examine him. Samples, vitals, the works."

Unbelievable. Could Strife hold the secret to letting him live?

The hope perished quickly, however. "He doesn't like doctors."

Hollander frowned, bushy eyebrows bunching together in a manner that made him look ridiculous rather than stern. "All I need to do is run some tests. Can't you arrange something?"

He doubted it. Just because he hadn't drawn a sword on Sephiroth lately didn't mean that Strife had suddenly mellowed out. Call it a hunch, but Angeal suspected any request for Hollander to run even the most innocuous of tests would have that incredible sword at his throat. Maybe if he explained his situation to Strife… but Angeal didn't want anyone to know. How would his friends react to the news? Genesis at the very least was bound to do something stupid.

"It's not a maybe," Hollander told him. "As things are now, you're going to die."

Angeal took a deep breath. It didn't help. He took another.

He didn't have a choice. It had worked before, hadn't it? Forgiveness and permission.
"Cloud!"

Cloud paused at the greeting, and waited for the familiar Second Class to catch up. "Kunsel."

"Congrats, man! I haven't seen you since I heard the news." He slapped the blond on the back, face stretched in a cheek-hurting grin.

The sides of his lips twitched in the faintest of smiles. "Zack and I were sent with a squad to the Corel Desert, we just got back today."

"So I heard! Tracking some weird monster, right? Turn out to be anything dangerous?"

"A king behemoth." Cloud shrugged, fingers fiddling with his earring just for something to do. "Unusual place for one, but not exactly a new species."

"King behemoth, huh? Impressive. Good thing they had a First Class along, right?" He elbowed him in the ribs.

Stepping aside, Cloud remarked dryly, "Careful, you're starting to channel Zack."

Kunsel laughed, and then promptly started doing some squats. "I'll make First Class next, you just wait!"

"Now it's just getting creepy."

Straightening, the Second rubbed the back of his neck. "Too much?" His amusement didn't fade. "It's been quiet without you two around. But I have to say, that uniform suits you best."

Cloud adjusted his collar self-consciously. It did feel good to be back in his own clothes – these fit in a way his SOLDIER uniforms never quite managed, and people had stopped giving his non-regulation shoulder guard weird looks all the time. First-Class SOLDIERS barely ever stuck to the standard black jumpsuit. Genesis wore that long red coat over his, and the only part Sephiroth had bothered to integrate from his uniform was the pants.

"It took you longer than I guessed, to be honest," Kunsel continued. "We had all sorts of betting pools set up. Damn, Luxiere's going to clean me out."

"I thought…" Cloud began haltingly.

"What?" Curiosity coloured the Second's voice.

It was a stupid insecurity. "...I don't know. That maybe you'd be mad. I've been here less time than you, but already made First Class."

Kunsel smiled, but that meant nothing. Not for the first time, Cloud wished he could see his eyes, but the shiny silver visor only reflected his own glowing gaze back at him. "I nearly didn't make SOLDIER, you know," he confided. " Barely got through on the psych test. They say they want smart candidates, but it's guys like Zack who have the instincts and jump into a fight without
"Yeah," Cloud murmured in agreement. He used to have a similar problem - probably just one of the many reasons he didn't make the cut into SOLDIER. Still did, sometimes, but at some point he'd moved past it. Maybe due to part of Zack's personality lingering, or maybe it had just been trained out of him through his ordeals. Either way, he could imagine himself being a lot like Kunsel if he'd made SOLDIER the normal way. "But Sephiroth and Genesis aren't like that."

Sephiroth especially could wage psychological warfare like no other. And though Genesis's temper often drove him to irrationality, when he kept a cool head his tactics would even impress a Turk.

Kunsel grinned. "Those guys are on a whole other level, though. They practically need a new category just for them. They say the General's a genius."

He knew. Not just from the memories of him poring over nigh-incomprehensible texts in a basement library, but in the casual way the man could glance at a document for five seconds and recite it flawlessly, and the way he could argue complex materia theory with Genesis and sound almost bored by it.

Reluctantly, he admitted Tseng had a point. How many people got to see that side of Sephiroth?

"Anyhow," Kunsel continued with a lazy wave of his arm. "I can't really be jealous. Because if a guy like you can make it – well, it gives hope to a guy like me."

Instantly reproachful, Cloud turned his eyes on his fellow SOLDIER, practically willing the helmet to burn away under his glare. Kunsel ducked his head. "Yeah, I know. We already had this conversation. But you're a good role model." Embarrassed, he rubbed the back of his neck again. "It's a bit weird saying that to someone I outranked not that long ago," he laughed.

Quiet, Cloud turned his gaze back to floor. "I'm no role model." The conversation with Tseng haunted him.

He still felt morbidly embarrassed over the whole ordeal. To begin with, he'd been terrified that Tseng had figured out his secrets. Then there'd been horror at the Turk's actual conclusion, followed soon after by the sickening suspicion that he might be a little bit right. Was it Geostigma all over again, when he'd resigned himself to dying instead of fighting to survive?

At that realisation, he'd almost been crushed by guilt. Zack had charged him with the task of surviving, hadn't he? Had thrown the last of his hopes and dreams away to secure their freedom and spare the life of his half-comatose friend. What kind of living legacy would he be, if he threw all that away for no good reason?

It didn't matter, though. Even though he'd lost a couple of nights sleep brooding over Tseng's words, they were just that – words. At the eleventh hour he would drag himself to his feet and fight. No matter how much he might want to give up, some part of him always insisted on surviving. He had to survive, to make sure Meteor and Nibelheim and Sector 7 and Zack and Aeris and all those disasters didn't happen.

An awkward silence hung between them – Cloud lost in thought, and Kunsel uncertain how to react to the suddenly dark mood. Rather than argue, the Second eventually shattered the heavy air by prodding, "So what was it like, ordering Zack around?"

Cloud shook his head. "With him, I doubt it would make a difference even if I were Rufus ShinRa."

thinking, they're the ones who do the best. Guys like me tend to over-analyse things and act too late."
"Yeah, Zack probably wouldn't listen even if you were the President himself," Kunsel agreed with a chuckle. "He's a good friend, though."

Cloud made a sound of agreement, thoughts still wandering. He'd often wondered in the past if Zack would be friends with the person he became. They'd definitely been friends during his ShinRa days - he had Zack's PHS number, they'd grab a bite to eat if they came across each other off-duty, and the SOLDIER First would occasionally crash his bunk to drag him out for some extra training - but it was such a sporadic thing, he'd always doubted Zack treasured it as much as he did. Of course, going through Nibelheim and the hell after that... Cloud and Aeris were the only friends he had left by that point. Tseng and Cissnei, and even the other SOLDIERs, couldn't be trusted anymore.

"*Just kidding. We're friends, right?*

It didn't change the question. What would a Zack who hadn't gone through that think of the present him?

Apparently more or less the same thing, although the dynamic had changed. For example, Cloud *could* order him around. Not that it would make any difference, but he could do it.

"Clooooooud? Cloud!"

With a blink, he turned his attention back to the Second standing next to him, hands on his hips. Kunsel shook his head with a grin. "You keep spacing out on me today. Am I that boring?"

Giving him a flat look, Cloud pointed out, "You haven't started reciting *Loveless* yet. You're still okay."

"Price you pay, hanging around Commander Rhapsodos," was Kunsel's witty rejoinder. He stretched, yawning. "Going to take some time out?"

"Hn. Lazard hasn't given me any new missions yet." Awkwardly, he offered, "Did you want another materia session?" He figured he'd feel a little less weird about 'training' Kunsel now that he was First Class. Gaia, that thought still felt odd after so long. First Class. For real. He'd been wearing fake pearls around his neck for so long, he couldn't treasure the real ones properly.

Grimacing, Kunsel replied, "I can't. I've had to take over the classes of another one of the Seconds. He was part of General Sephiroth's retinue for the Junon inspection."

"So?" Classes held by SOLDIERs were normally in the mornings – drill sergeants took over in the afternoons.

"So I'm on chaperone duty for a training camp out in the marshes."

Cloud remembered those training camps. He'd actually enjoyed them – being a country kid, it had been one of the few times he could hold an advantage over his spoiled city peers. "Good luck. And watch out for the hornets. They're poisonous, and as big as your hand."

Another wince. "Zack's been telling you the stories too, huh?"

"They're not stories. I've seen them."

"Great, now I'm *really* looking forward to this," he groaned. "I guess I should get going. See you in a couple of days!"
Cloud raised his hand in farewell as the Second walked away, and considered where to go next. An empty afternoon, no Zack or Kuskel around… back to his Training Room vigil. Who knew, today might be the day Hojo finally turned up. It had to be soon. Although realistically, he'd been telling himself this for a couple of weeks now. It was just easier to focus on missions and training instead of making any moves to upset the delicate equilibrium he'd established.

Still, his step was light as he walked the now-familiar corridors to the Training Room. He had time yet. He felt relaxed – the most relaxed he'd felt in a long time. It probably had something to do with Sephiroth being so far away. He couldn't feel the eerie sense of connection constantly lurking in the back of his mind, fuelling his paranoia.

That distraction was the only excuse he could offer for his lapse of vigilance.

He swiped the card that opened the door to the Training Room. It beeped, and opened with its usual distinctive whoosh. The wasteful display of technology didn't even faze him anymore as he stepped inside.

Cloud didn't make it past the doorway. As soon as he crossed the threshold, stars exploded in his vision, pain blossoming at the base of his skull.

What-?

Stumbling forward, he fumbled for his sword, but the world spun and colour smeared before his eyes as he struggled to remain upright. He caught a flash of a white shirt – no, a lab coat – and his breath caught in his throat.

Hojo? But-

A flash of black from the corner of his eyes. Fast. Haste? He tried to duck – which way was up and which was forward? - and the blow glanced off the side of his head. He staggered sideways, and tried to grab the hilt of First Tsurugi again, but a fierce grip closed around his wrist. Panicked, Cloud struggled to drag enough concentration together to shoot off a spell. Fire. Heat blossomed somewhere to his right – or was it left? There was yelling, now. He hadn't aimed, but just long enough to get free, draw his sword-

Another blow, right on that same throbbing spot at the base of his skull. His knees hit the cold metal floor, darkness clouding his vision. Finally he managed to lift his sword from its harness, swinging wildly. He could hear someone swearing, but it sounded like they were underwater. A smashing hit nearly crushed his fingers, but he held on to the hilt stubbornly, refusing to drop his last line of defence. If he could just shake it off, get his head clear-

His eyes rolled wildly, trying to focus. His ears strained to pick up movement. There, behind-

Too slow to avoid the fourth hit.

Cloud crumpled to the floor.

Hearing returned first. A ticking clock, somewhere in the next room. The shuffle of papers. A rhythmic, soothing beep, backed by the soft whir of computer fans.

It was the most terrifying sound in the world.

His limbs were numb, as heavy as sandbags and about as responsive. Cloud didn't force them. Sedatives at work, almost certainly. They didn't do much to help the dull ache in his head, throbbing in sync with the heart rate monitor. Whoever took him out hit hard enough to crack the skull of a dual horn.

Smell returned next. The sharp, clean tang of antiseptic tingled the air. And when he breathed in,
he could detect just a trace of something else – an odd mix of rotten eggs and earth and acid. *Mako.*

The beeping became frantic, and the machine let out a shrill warning.

"He's awake!"

He'd been given away. Cloud's eyes shot open and rolled frantically from side to side, trying to take everything in during the few seconds he'd have before Hojo turned up. White walls. Steel table. Arms and legs strapped down. No mako tanks – this wasn't Nibelheim. It didn't help. He was in a *lab.*

His breath came in short, sharp gasps – he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. "Hey. Hey! Strife! Calm down! No one's going to hurt you!"

That voice again. Baritone, city accent, no-nonsense. He recognised it.

"Angeal?" he croaked, rolling his head to the side. Black hair, thick arms, Buster sword on his back. How had he missed him? He pulled against the restraints, feeling the coarse straps rub uncomfortably against his skin. His gloves were missing.

"Sorry about this. But I was worried you might freak out when you woke up," Angeal apologised. He *did* sound genuinely contrite.

Closing his eyes and taking another deep breath, Cloud requested, "Undo these for me." Just the infirmary, then? But why would Angeal be worried he'd freak out? And why was he restrained?

"If you promise to sit quietly and cooperate."

Wary now, Cloud eyed the other First and asked, "...What happened?"

Angeal wouldn't meet his eyes. "I wouldn't have done it if I thought I could convince you to come along peacefully. I really am sorry."

Relief washed away under a rising tide of dread. "...What do you want?" His fingers slowly curled into fists.

"Hollander says you might be able to help."

Hollander?

Summoned by his name, the portly scientist stuck his head in from the doorway. "I'll just be another second!" He disappeared again, returning a moment later wheeling a small metal tray table lined with syringes and test tubes. It rattled noisily along the tiled floor. For an instant, the portly man was replaced with a stooped form, long dark hair tied back in a lank ponytail, glasses almost hanging off the end of a hooked nose.

The heart rate monitor began to speed up again.

"*Calm down,*" Angeal chided, then to Hollander, "Do you really need all that?"

"Probably not *all* of it," he admitted. "But I'll need a decent sample of blood. And then there'll be the bone marrow, and the tissue samples."

"Let me go!" Cloud demanded, unable to shake the waver from his voice. "This isn't in my contract!"
"Don't be so selfish, boy. You could hold the key to reversing degradation!" Hollander berated, even as he sorted through the syringes.

The words barely registered. All Cloud could see was the light glinting off the sharp metal tips of the needles. Needles, which had at one point scarred his arms so badly he had to wear gloves – more to hide the evidence of his torture at the hands of Hojo from himself than from anyone else. He began to thrash in place, arms straining against his bonds.

"Strife, stop it, you'll-"

The restraint on his right arm ripped. Leather. Hojo used metal.

Wildly, he threw a punch. Angeal caught his wrist, and pinned it back to the cold metal table. He tore his other one free, but the black-haired First caught that one too. Clenching his fists and jerking his arms, Cloud fought to break his vice-like hold. Too heavy, too large, but damn if he wasn't going fight with all he had!

"Hollander, do something! He's going mad! I can't hold him down much longer!" Angeal yelled.

"I've got the sedative – just keep him still!"

"Let me go!" Cloud snarled. He wrenched in place, trying to throw the SOLDIER off. Wild eyes tracked the professor's hands as he tried to shy away from the syringe. The needle pierced the tender flesh of his elbow. Slowly, his struggles grew weaker, and drowsiness began to kick in. His words dropped to a slurred whisper. "…Let me go…"

As consciousness began to slip away from him, he found his head rolling to the side, searching for a second person who wasn't there.

"Zack…"

Darkness fell, and nobody answered.
The monitor beeped. And beeped. And beeped.

With a sigh, Angeal turned the page, though he admitted he'd probably stopped reading about ten pages back. Literature was more Genesis's thing. Strife remained still and unresponsive on the table. He wished they'd thought to put him on a mattress, at least. That metal had to be cold in the air conditioning. Good thing the blond was unconscious.

The monitor beeped.

He felt incredibly guilty over the whole ordeal, but they didn't have a choice. Strife had been a tough bastard to lay flat, even with the element of surprise and the effects of a Haste spell on hand. There weren't many SOLDIERs who could stay conscious after a blow like that, let-alone maintain enough presence of mind to use materia in that situation. That it took Angeal, a specialist in hand-to-hand combat, four hits to get him unconscious was something of a blow to his pride.

Then the blond had gone and broken the restraints.

Angeal frowned to himself, fingers stilling on the corner of the page and paper crinkling under his touch. He'd expected a bad reaction, sure, but thought that once Strife calmed down enough to listen, he would be more cooperative. What he hadn't expected was the animalistic fear in those blue eyes upon awakening.

One look at that expression, and he knew there would be no reasoning, and no cooperation. It wasn't the mild phobia of doctors he'd imagined it to be — they were working with primal terror. Nothing could be done about it. The kindest thing they could do was sedate the SOLDIER through the worst of it.

The monitor beeped.

Still, Angeal was beginning to suspect that he wouldn't be able to ask forgiveness after all. He'd messed up. Badly. Heck, he couldn't even figure out how they could let Strife go without risk of bodily injury. Maybe dump him back in his quarters still drugged, and then take off to the West Continent before he woke up. Or the Underwater Reactor near Junon. Or that rocket going to space.

A clatter of activity near the doorway preceded Hollander's entrance. He blinked slowly at the sight of Angeal, then resumed his bustle. "Good, you're still here."

"I only left to get a couple of hours sleep last night, and ducked out this morning to take care of some things," he replied, watching as Hollander flitted about room like a very large, round needlebird. "Did something happen?"

In his distraction, it took the professor a moment to answer. "Hm? Oh, yes. It was absolutely unexpected. Absolutely!" He peered about for a moment, then pointed a sausage-like finger at an unused syringe near Angeal's elbow. "Hand me that, would you?"

He complied, and Hollander started filling it with a pale blue liquid. "The sedative should be
wearing off around now. Based on my findings, I had to readjust my initial predictions." He rubbed a spot on Strife's arm and slid the needle into the vein.

"What's that?" Angeal asked. "I thought we were done with the tests." This was all taking too long for his liking already.

"Just a numbing agent. Should hamper his reflexes and motor-control." Hollander tossed a ration bottle – cold field soup, by the looks of it – into his hands. "I don't have an IV arranged yet, and he needs to eat."

Right. It had been twenty-four hours, and while SOLDIERs could go for some time without food, that didn't mean it was healthy to. Angeal didn't want to know how Hollander had taken care of the bathroom problem, either. They'd replaced the restraints, but unless they kept him at least partially drugged, he'd probably just rip through them again.

A finger twitched against the table. Their blond-haired blue-eyed demon was waking up.

The heart rate monitor sped up. Not the adrenaline-fuelled frenzy of the day before, but enough to know Strife was conscious. Sure enough, not a moment later Angeal found himself looking into a pair of bleary glowing eyes.

"Morning. You hungry?" He held up the bottle of soup. Not bothering to wait for a response, he cracked the lid and took a sip, wrinkling his nose. ShinRa field rations never tasted great, but at least it was still fresh. "It's not exactly fine cuisine, but it'll have to do."

Strife hardly paid any attention to him, frowning instead as he tried to flex his fingers, but the joints would only twitch in response.

"Sorry about that. Hollander applied a mild paralysis agent." He'd prefer it if they could use materia, but Strife had that damn resistance to contend with. "Can't have you ripping out the restraints and going crazy again. You might hurt yourself." And anyone within reach. Angeal didn't mind if it was just him, but he didn't want to be responsible whoever the SOLDIER took out on the way to the exit.

Those bright blue eyes fixed on him, but Strife remained silent. Compared to his frantic entreaties the first time he'd woken up, it was honestly a little eerie. Maybe the sedative hadn't completely worn off yet.

With a sigh, Angeal stood up, placing a hand under the blond head and tilting it up. "You must be hungry. Drink up." He put the bottle to Strife's dry and cracked lips – they hadn't thought to give him any water either. Thankfully, the SOLDIER didn't fight him, parting them slightly so Angeal could slowly pour the soup down his throat. He grimaced as he swallowed, but drank down at least half the bottle before closing his mouth in a firm line and refusing to accept any more.

The First doubted the words would be worth much, but he needed to at least try. "I really am sorry about this. I couldn't think of another way. But don't worry, you'll be out of here soon enough and able to kick my ass for it all you want."

"What are you saying? We can't possibly let him go!" Hollander interrupted.

Strife jerked at the voice, apparently unaware of the scientist's presence in the room. His heart rate spiked again, but returned to a more normal pace a moment later. Angeal actually felt a bit proud of him for it.

As for Hollander… "Why not? You've got your samples, don't you?"
Sputtering, the scientist complained, "But I didn't expect results like this! I need more time! This is such an incredible discovery, you won't believe it!"

"What are you talking about?"

"No," Strife whispered – the first sound he'd uttered since waking. "Don't-

Gesturing towards the man strapped to the table, Hollander explained, "The ability to transfer active foreign cells into a fully-grown specimen, and have the enhancements take without rejection-"

"Shut up!" The demand was urgent this time, voice cracking under the tension.

"Get to the point, Hollander," Angeal prodded.

Hollander gathered himself importantly, as though he were about to deliver an announcement to the board of executives instead of a lone, dying SOLDIER First Class. "He has S-cells. And in no small number." At Angeal's blank expression, he expounded, "He's a Sephiroth clone."

In disbelief, Angeal turned to stare at the trapped blond. He didn't look like Sephiroth. But the abilities… "You're a clone?"

"I'm not a clone. I'm Cloud Strife!" The mako glow in his eyes blazed in his anger. "And I am not a puppet!" Even with the drugs coursing through his system, the restraints creaked under pressure.

Hurriedly, Hollander began preparing another syringe of sedative. Angeal couldn't do anything more than stare at Strife numbly.

"I'm not a copy!" he repeated, a little desperately now. "I never joined the Reunion! I'm not like the others!" His eyes were growing wild, disoriented. He was flipping out again.

Hollander jabbed the needle into the exposed elbow. Blue eyes rolled to the side, and focused on Angeal.

"You can't tell him," Strife blurted, fingers flexing as though trying to reach out to him. "He can't know! If he learns the truth… if he learns… Reunion will…" His eyelids began to droop shut, speech growing slurred. "He can't find her, if he finds her…"

Strife fell unconscious again. Hollander had given him enough sedatives to knock out a behemoth.

"Others?" Angeal murmured to himself. Was he to believe that Hojo had been cloning Sephiroth?

It sounded exactly like the sort of thing the Science Department might do, though. The same Science Department he now relied on to save his life. The irony stung. It was their fault he was in this situation to begin with.

Hollander wiped the sweat from his brow, letting out a breath of relief. "That was dangerous."

Angeal stared at the sleeping face, noting the lines of stress around the eyes. They'd spent all that time searching for the reason Strife hated Sephiroth so much, but never could they have imagined something like this. What was it like to know you were a clone? No wonder he'd wanted to kill Sephiroth. What better way to prove himself better than the original? Maybe it had simply been a chase of self-identity all along, rather than a self-destructive impulse as they thought.

For all the questions it answered though, Angeal had gained a hundred more.
"We can't keep him in Midgar," Hollander continued, busying around the lab. "I haven't been able to determine the exact nature of the phenomenon, but there's an unusual resonance between the cells."

"Meaning…?"

"There's a possibility General Sephiroth might experience a sympathetic reaction when he returns. It could manifest itself in any number of ways. Communication might be possible. It could be as simple as a sense of awareness, or maybe no effect at all. Can't take the chance." The scientist unplugged the computer terminal, loading the heavy system box into his bag. The whirr of cooling fans died, leaving only the repetitive beep of the heart monitor for background noise.

"Wait a minute, Sephiroth isn't due back for another two days at least!" Angeal protested. "Why do we have to keep him that long?"

The scientist stopped his scurrying long enough to blink owlishly at the SOLDIER, apparently perplexed at the question being asked at all. "What do you mean? Of course we can't let him go yet! I'm definitely going to need more samples to test my hypotheses. And it's not just the cells I need to study, but also what other factors in the body prevented rejection! None of you SOLDIERs were made in a day!"

Angeal felt his stomach sink. What had he agreed to? "How much longer?"

"Can't say for sure. We'll move him first and then see. I have a hidden lab - it has the equipment I'll need."

Hollander's eyes shone with excitement, and Angeal was beginning to feel uneasy about the direction this whole affair was heading.

He didn't have a choice but to go along with it, though. Hosting S-cells, Strife could very well hold the secret to saving his life.

In the background, the monitor beeped.

Sephiroth stormed through the halls like a thundercloud, if a thundercloud had legs, carried a katana taller than most men, and could actively plan to murder the next person to ask an idiotic question. Orderlies dove out of his path, guards stepped aside with unusually textbook-perfect salutes, and the half-full elevator emptied at one displeased glance.

He'd arrived back from Junon at the crack of dawn, having flown through the night, and was then expected to attend all of the meetings that had been delayed during his absence, even though over half of them were at best only tangentially related to SOLDIER and could have been easily handled by Lazard alone. Now all he wanted to do was to return to his office for some peace and quiet and maybe something to drink.

Luck was not on his side. No sooner than the door opened to the SOLDIER floor did one of the Second Class SOLDIERs pounce. Quickly, he ran through a mental database of the lower classes.

Round jaw, alto voice, wiry build… Luxiere, his memories supplied after a bit of coaxing, though he couldn't recall the SOLDIER's rank. "General, sir! Welcome back. I'm sorry to bother you, but you wouldn't happen to know where Cloud is, would you?"

The mention of Cloud distracted him enough to forestall the scathing remark balanced on the tip of his tongue. Sephiroth paused and thought on it. "...No, I have no idea." Why did that realisation bother him so much? "Perhaps he's out on a mission?"
"Oh. I thought for sure you…” The Second's shoulder slumped. "Sorry to bother you, sir."

Sephiroth nodded, face drawn in a frown as he continued to his office at a more reserved pace.

"Sephiroth! General Sephiroth!" Another voice hollered from behind him.

His hand snapped towards Masamune's hilt, until he recognised the voice as belonging to Angeal's energetic student. Zack Fair.

He turned around, but his hand didn't leave the blade.

Waving frantically – as though somehow Sephiroth could miss him in the spacious, empty corridor – Zack bounded up to him breathlessly. "Sir! You're finally back! Do you know where Cloud is?"

This again? "I have no idea. He is likely on a mission." Sephiroth found his temper short.

Zack tugged on his black tufts with both hands. "But he isn't! And I haven't been able to find him anywhere the past three days! I thought for sure you would know, but-"

"How could I possibly know, Zack?" the General interrupted, patience running as thin as Masamune's edge. "I only returned from Junon this morning."

"Well, I dunno – the two of you have some weird radar going." Slumping, Zack complained, "You were my last hope! And I can't find Angeal either! I'm so boooored!" Seeming to remember his audience at the last moment, the Second laughed nervously. "So, um, I'll go… do some training! Can never do too many squats! See you, General!" Zack hotfooted away.

Sighing, Sephiroth continued on to his office, beginning to keenly anticipate sitting down with a quiet cup of tea. He knew better by then, though, and wasn't even slightly surprised upon opening his door to find Genesis in his office, with his red coat thrown over his chair, and steadily wearing a groove in his carpet. "Surely you can pace in your own office, Genesis," he greeted wryly.

"Sephiroth!" He whirled on the spot, poised like a striking serpent. "Where have you been all day? You were supposed to return this morning!"

"I've been stuck in meetings," he growled, propping Masamune by the side of the desk, and ungraciously tossing the red leather coat desecrating his chair to the floor. The lack of complaint from Genesis disconcerted him enough to finally give his friend his full attention. The auburn-haired man's face was lined with worry, and he wore faint bruises under his eyes from lack of sleep. "What's the matter?"

"Cloud's missing."

"So I hear. Has anyone checked to make sure he's not on a mission?" Sephiroth asked.

"He isn't. I checked the database. None of his new mission requests have been accepted." Genesis sank into the guest chair, hands clasped between his knees. "I can't get in contact with Angeal, either."

"Angeal?" Recalling that Zack had said something similar, Sephiroth swiftly withdrew his PHS, dialling the familiar number.

"You're wasting your time. He's not answering. I haven't seen him for three days. It's been nearly five since anyone's seen Cloud." He sounded haunted.
As Genesis said, the PHS rang out. Sephiroth frowned, and dialled Cloud's number next. Same result. "Do you think he went to look for Cloud?"

"Angeal? I doubt it. No one thought Cloud was missing then."

Hearing more of the story, Sephiroth found himself growing concerned. Angeal had been secretive lately. "Perhaps we should check with Lazard as well, just to be sure. Even if Cloud is not on a mission, it's possible that Angeal is." Two of his friends going out of contact without warning in such a short span of time? Working at ShinRa, one tended to become wary of such coincidences.

He didn't miss the way Genesis's gaze slid away, either. His friend was hiding something too.

That made three for three.

At least Cloud was honest about it.

Reality danced at the edges of his consciousness – little snapshots he fought to grab, clawing his way from the unreality of endless sleep.

"-desertion, if this takes much longer-"

Darkness. Dreams.

"The finding of a lifetime, this mako percentage would poison a person twice the-"

Dreams. Darkness.

"-all this really necessary? I thought you just wanted to-"

Everything sounded so far away.

A trilling ring. Zack, calling? No, that couldn't be right. The dead couldn't call. Tifa? That couldn't be right, either. His arms were heavy, though. For some reason, he couldn't move them to pick up his PHS.

For a moment, painful light.

"-calling a lot. They'll be on to us, soon."

"Don't worry, I spoke to Lazard."

"But if they come looking, surely it won't take long before they think of-"

Angeal and Hollander. He shut his eyes quickly, but too late – he'd been seen. "He's waking up again."

A pinprick of pain in the crook of his elbow. "I'm going to have to adjust the dosages again soon. Body is developing resistance faster than I-"

The words trailed off into indistinct murmurs. Next time he needed to remember to keep his eyes closed. Ribbon could protect him from status materia, but it could do little about drugs continually pumped into his veins. Only mako could help there.

Next time, he reminded himself sluggishly, with what little lucidity fought its way through the haze of fatigue. Then... Where's Zack? Did he...
He couldn't carry the thought to completion.

Cloud slept.
"Angeal put in for indefinite leave?" Genesis demanded, slamming his hands down on the desk.

Lazard remained implacable in front of the fiery First. "He said he didn't expect to be gone for more than a couple of months, but we agreed to leave the dates open-ended in case he required longer."

"What could take so long?" Sephiroth asked.

"It's a confidential matter," Lazard replied, glaring across the top of his glasses. The Thirds thought it made him look threatening. Genesis thought it made him look like a cranky librarian. "I'm not at liberty to disclose it. You'll have to ask Angeal directly."

Sephiroth shook his head in wonder. "He said nothing to us. Not even a warning."

Genesis curled his hands into fists, quietly seething. He knew it. Hollander must have told him about the degradation. But why did Angeal take leave? He needed to be here, where Genesis could keep an eye on him, and where he'd be close at hand if Cloud managed to acquire his miracle cure!

Except that Cloud had gone missing too. Sephiroth was right. It couldn't be a coincidence.

"What about Cloud?" he demanded. "Nobody has seen him for days, and you said yourself that he is not on a mission!"

Lazard's expression flickered – for just a moment, but a moment both SOLDIERs caught. "I'm unaware of Strife's situation. Considering the heavy mission load he took upon himself these past few months, he's entitled to take a break."

"You know as well as I do that Cloud would not simply take a break," Genesis hissed. "He wouldn't even take a day off if you didn't tell-"

A heavy hand on his shoulder brought him to a stop. Sephiroth stepped up smoothly beside him. "You'll understand, Director, that we've grown concerned for our comrade. Cloud has only been a First Class for a very short time, but perhaps he attracted some trouble. I trust this matter has been brought to the Turk's attention?"

Genesis had to hand it to Lazard – he didn't even blink under the subtle force of Sephiroth's questioning. "Not yet. I'm quite confident that he is safe and well, and there isn't any proof that First Class Strife is actually missing."

"How long does someone have to be missing before-"

Sephiroth cut him off again before Genesis could continue on his entirely justified tirade. "I understand your position, Director. Certainly, we wouldn't want to compromise any sensitive missions. If possible, please keep us informed on the situation."

"I'll do that," Lazard replied politely, returning his attention to the paper on the desk in front of him. A distraction, of course – Genesis could see from where he stood that the document had
already been signed. "Was that all, gentlemen?"

Before Genesis could complain, Sephiroth steered him by the shoulder to the door. "That's all, Director. Thank you for your time."

With Sephiroth practically shoving him out the door, Genesis nearly tripped over the purple and black blur doing squats outside the door. "Angeal's Puppy?" he asked, unable to keep the incredulity from his voice. Who did squats in the hallway outside an executive's office?

"Zack," Sephiroth greeted. "What are you doing here?"

" Came to ask about Cloud and Angeal again," Zack explained, craning his neck to see around them into Lazard's office.

Genesis slammed the door shut behind him. "Don't waste your time," he snarled. "Lazard won't help you there."

"You've already tried, huh?" he guessed, scratching the back of his neck.

"Apparently Angeal is on indefinite leave," Sephiroth replied, already striding away from the office. Genesis followed, beckoning the clueless Second along – honestly, did the boy think it safe to hold the coming conversation right outside Lazard's door?

"And Cloud?" Zack asked, scampering along behind them.

Sephiroth merely frowned in response.

"Huh. Maybe it's a classified mission?" Zack wondered.

"Maybe that's where Angeal's gone, but they wouldn't assign Cloud to anything like that," Sephiroth pointed out. He pressed the elevator button once, very deliberately. The plastic creaked under the pressure – the only outward sign of his frustration.

"Haven't you noticed?" Genesis asked dryly. "Cloud only ever gets monster exterminations or escort duty. The Turks might have taken him off surveillance, but they don't trust him enough to give him anything with high-level clearance."

The elevator arrived. As though summoned by the mention, Tseng stepped out, and raised an eyebrow at the three SOLDIERs gathered there. "This is an unusual sight." Dark eyes flitted across each of them in turn, but Genesis kept his expression casual, allowing only a hint of irritation to show. Turks might be masters at reading body language, but actors were their perfect foil.

Of course, while he considered himself a thespian, the same could not be said for his current company.

"Hey, Tseng!" Zack bounded forward, but Genesis grabbed him by the collar of his jumpsuit and hauled him into the elevator with them.

"Excuse us, Tseng, we're looking after this one in Angeal's absence," Sephiroth said.

The closing elevator door cut the Turk from view before he could respond. Genesis relaxed and dropped the squirming Second. "What was that for?" he whined. Angeal had been right on the money – the exact personality of a puppy.

"You were going to ask Tseng about Cloud, weren't you? Idiot," he berated. "And for that matter!"
Genesis wheeled on his old friend. "What was all that about in there? 'Certainly, we wouldn't want to compromise any sensitive missions'?

Sephiroth folded his arms, staring pensively at the floor. "I just had a thought, as to why Lazard might not have alerted the Turks."

Genesis stilled, a sensation like Shiva's finger running down his spine. "You don't think-"

"That ShinRa might have orchestrated his disappearance? Perhaps." The elevator dinged, and they stepped off onto the SOLDIER floor, trading the hushed hallways of moneyed executives for the sleek displays of technological prowess. Sephiroth gestured in the direction of the Equipment Room. "Or that maybe something spooked Cloud, and he took off. Angeal could have been assigned a covert mission to bring him back, or…" He let that sentence dangle in the air.

Impossible. Angeal wouldn't do that! Less than a month ago he'd been worried about Cloud being suicidal. He wouldn't just turn around and assassinate him!

Zack appeared to agree. "No way, sir! I can't believe that. Angeal would never-"

"Even if Cloud betrayed the company?" Sephiroth interrupted. "Tell me, Zack, what would you do if you were ordered to take out a traitor, and the traitor happened to be your friend?"

The Second worried his lip between his teeth, head hung low. "I…"

Scoffing, Genesis didn't allow him to finish. "We're leaping to conclusions. If Angeal were on a mission, he wouldn't put in for indefinite leave." Genesis could explain away the leave part, but he didn't want to tell anyone else about degradation if he could help it. "And if Cloud really did wind up on the blacklist, ShinRa would have already listed him as 'missing in action' or 'deceased' or some other transparent lie."

"I suppose…" Sephiroth granted. "But it won't matter in the end. If Cloud remains missing without word much longer, he'll be listed as a deserter."

"What?" Zack squawked. "But the war's over, right? We don't need those rules anymore!"

"Did you think ShinRa was going to rewrite our contracts just because we won?" Sephiroth remarked.

"But that's really bad! Does Cloud know? He could be in trouble, but instead of a rescue, people will be hunting him down!"

The Puppy had a point. Genesis shooed them into a deserted corner and beckoned the other two SOLDIERs close. "Listen," he whispered. "There are three of us. We should look for Cloud and Angeal ourselves."

"How-" Zack began to say, but Genesis held up a gloved hand to forestall the question.

"The three of us are the most familiar with Cloud and Angeal. We have the best chance of tracking them down. Anyone who went looking would have to question us first anyhow."

Sephiroth's lips twisted into the barest semblance of a smirk. "And so long as the company continues to have no official line on Cloud's disappearance, there's absolutely nothing wrong with us looking on our own."

Genesis nodded. "Exactly."
"Kunsel will help too!" Zack chipped in. "He's been training with Cloud since he got here."

"Good, that makes four," Genesis agreed. "If we play the mission roster, two First Class and two Second Class SOLDIERs should to be able to cover a lot of ground."

Sephiroth nodded, thoughtful. "Perhaps we should start by following Angeal's trail. I'm still convinced that finding one will lead to the other."

"There are enough of us that we can follow all trails," Genesis snapped, a little more waspishly than he intended. Sephiroth raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment on it.

He didn't want to contemplate that scenario. Wouldn't. Even suffering from degradation, surely Angeal would never be pushed to do something so dishonourable.

Yet still, Genesis found himself troubled by the thought. Concerned. Suspicious. And most of all, worried that he'd soon be forced to make a difficult choice. Not between Sephiroth and Cloud, as he'd feared, but one much more painful.

Where did his loyalties lie? With his oldest friend, or the man who saved him from certain death?

A breath in, a breath out. Repeat, slowly and carefully. Over and over again.

Cloud had strained his ears for the better part of half an hour, waiting for a moment when he might be left alone. Just a minute. That was all he needed. They didn't know he was awake yet – he'd bade his time, keeping his breathing even and calm, waiting for the last of the drugs to recede from his system. Gaia, he'd been lucky as it was he hadn't given himself away upon first waking. His thoughts were a muddled mess for the initial few minutes of consciousness – a whirlwind of confusion as he alternately worried about Zack, and then the kids, and then his friends in Avalanche… Keeping his timeline straight was already hard enough when fully conscious.

Heavy footsteps thudded around the lab, drowning out the gentle thrum of machines and rhythmic beeping of various monitors. A chair creaked. Cloud nearly groaned. Just leave!

He couldn't contain his start when the quiet shattered under the wail of a PHS ring tone. "They're persistent, I'll give them that," a familiar voice cursed. Cloud relaxed again. Angeal. Angeal never administered the drugs.

Hollander would be by soon enough, though. Should he risk trying to break out while Angeal was in the room? The black-haired SOLDIER beat him in the strength stakes, but Cloud was faster. He only needed to get out of the restraints. His fingers twitched of their own volition.

A careless mistake. Angeal swore. "Awake again already?"

Busted.

Cloud abandoned the pretence of sleep and opened his eyes, pinning his fellow SOLDIER First with a flat stare. "Who keeps calling?" he rasped.

Angeal frowned. "Maybe I should be asking how long you've been awake."

Cloud rolled his gaze back towards the ceiling. Angeal sighed, and a moment later he could hear a cap being unscrewed, and a bottle held to his lips. "You sound thirsty."

Terribly. He hadn't realised how thirsty until he'd tried to speak. The liquid soaked into his parched
throat, smoothing the rough edges and chasing away the lingering mental fog. He swallowed mouthful after mouthful, until Angeal lifted the water away.

The black-haired First re-capped the bottle with a pensive expression. "You're not panicking like you did the other times," he observed.

Cloud's gaze remained fixed on the ceiling. It helped. All labs looked similar, but this one was painfully bright - the whiteness of a hospital. Hojo's lab had been white too, but a faint green tinge coloured every surface. Mako vapours stained everything in the lab, eventually. The only source of true white had been Hojo's new lab coats, and even they were soon spattered red and green.

"He can't cure you," Cloud declared without preamble. "He's just using you. He's only interested in stealing Hojo's work."

The chair creaked again. He didn't turn his head to see Angeal's expression. "You already know?" The words barely rose above a murmur. "About degradation?"

Cloud nodded. "That's why I'm here, isn't it? But it won't work. S-cells can't fix it. And Jenova…" He shuddered. "Jenova will just make it worse."

"Hollander thinks it will work."

"All Hollander cares about is S-cells," Cloud retorted, turning his head at last to glare at his captor. Angeal couldn't possibly be that naïve!

The SOLDIER didn't appear bothered by his glare – if anything, Cloud could only see pity in his gaze. It made his skin itch. "About that – what he said. Is it true? Are you a clone?"

The restraints creaked as he jerked, trying to rise reflexively. "I'm not!" Taking a breath to calm himself, Cloud repeated, "I'm not. I'm Cloud Strife. Just because I've got a bunch of S-cells in me doesn't make me a copy. I'm my own person." He needed to say it, to remind himself. He hadn't fought so long to claim his true identity back only to surrender it to Sephiroth again. "I'm not a puppet."

"So that's why the puppet thing upset you so much," Angeal guessed. "Can the original influence the copy?"

"I'm not a copy!" Cloud growled. Why wouldn't he listen?

"Sorry. I didn't mean…" Angeal fumbled for words. "You don't look anything like him. It's obvious you're not a clone. Not even family."

Cloud winced. Yazoo, Kadaj, Loz. "We're waiting, big brother."

"Am I wrong?" Angeal sounded genuinely curious. "I heard Sephiroth's mother was dead…"

"We're not related." His voice sounded dull and unconvincing even to his own ears. "It's… Does it make a difference? The point is, S-cells can't help you. Hollander's lying to you."

"And you expect me to just take you on your word?" Angeal shook his head. "I'm sorry about all this, Strife, especially after hearing that, but I can't let you go until Hollander verifies what you're saying. He's already taking a lot of risks to help me solve this problem."

Of course Angeal would trust Hollander's word over his - the scientist had given the dying SOLDIER all of the promises he'd wanted to hear, whereas Cloud had just been shown to be lying
from the start. But there had to be something - "Wait. Remember the griffons," Cloud urged. In one of his more lucid moments, he'd finally remembered what they reminded him of. "They were his experiments. He's using you to experiment on monsters, not find a cure! As far as he's concerned, you're a failed experiment, not a human!"

"What are you talking about? That was months ago."

"Hollander already knew about degradation then! He knew because Genesis had it!"

He saw Angeal still, saw the flicker of doubt pass over the SOLDIER's face. "You're right. But then why did the tests take so..." The words trailed off, and Cloud waited, holding his breath. Was he finally going to listen? Maybe, just maybe, he could still get out of this without having to fight the other First Class.

The Commander shook his head, even though his eyes showed his unease. "How do you know about all this?"

Backed into a corner again. "Genesis told me. In Wutai," he hedged.

Angeal didn't yet look convinced, but it seemed like he was getting through. "...I'm going to talk to Hollander. You wait here. He'll want to know you're awake anyway." He stood to leave.

Forget that. No way on the Planet was Cloud going to just lie there and wait for that damned scientist to put him under again! Zack had died for his freedom once! He would never let anyone take it away again!

As soon as Angeal had stepped through the door, he ripped out of the arm restraints. The monitor let out a piteous whine as it flat-lined, its sensors torn free. Unexpected – no way would the SOLDIER miss that. Adrenaline surging, he reached down to free his ankles as well. The door crashed open as Angeal came running back in at the noise. "Hey!"

 Couldn't stop, had to take out Angeal while he still had the element of surprise. But moving felt like trying to swim through the Lifestream – his limbs were so heavy, and so slow! He'd barely swung himself off the table by the time the Commander darted back to his side.

"Idiot, I said to wait! Don't make this any harder than it already is!" Angeal rebuked, reaching out to grab him by the shoulders.

Cloud's legs turned to jelly when he tried to stand.

Neither of them expected that – Angeal found himself grasping at air, and the blond blinked in surprise as his legs folded beneath him. He wasn't about to let the chance slip by, though. Cloud swung his arm around with all his strength, striking the back of the SOLDIER's knees. His balance thrown and feet swept out under him, Angeal toppled backwards, and cracked his head against the desk.

His body went limp, and thudded to the floor.

Cloud froze. The room remained still and silent. Cautiously, he reached out and pushed the unconscious SOLDIER over. Angeal's head lollled, eyes closed and mouth partially open. No blood, no broken bones. Just unconscious. Degradation might leave him woozy longer than normal, but he'd be back up on his feet soon enough.

Lucky break for him. Angeal wasn't dead – past that, Cloud frankly didn't care anymore. He just wanted out. Clutching his aching arm – Gaia, the back of Angeal's knees were made of rock – he
pushed himself to his feet, wavered for a moment, then took a tentative step.

This time, his legs held. Letting out a shaky breath, Cloud hurried to the exit, growing more confident with each stride. It must have just been the lingering after effects of the drugs and days of inaction.

The door creaked open, leading to a concrete hallway, lit by a lone, bare light bulb. Some kind of bunker? The air lacked the dank, stagnant odour of the underground, though. A ShinRa warehouse?

The hallway split into a T-junction, and Cloud listened for a moment, straining to hear past the thudding of his own heart. He could pick up some kind of commotion from the left – muffled voices, raised high in agitation - so headed right. He couldn't risk coming across anyone else right now, not when he still felt sluggish and didn't have his sword or materia.

Where was he? He needed to get outside, but what then? Did Hollander kidnap him in secret, or with ShinRa's blessing?

He frowned, grasping at a snippet of a memory. He thought he could remember them talking. Something to do with Lazard...

Lazard at the very least knew, if he didn't have a direct hand in it. The Director had been uneasy with him ever since that encounter in his office, Cloud recalled. He had been far less enthused about promoting him to First Class than he'd been to Second. It didn't take a big stretch of the imagination to think that he'd leapt at the chance to quietly shuffle him out of the picture.

Screw this. He was done with ShinRa. He should have known the company wouldn't take his contract any more seriously than he'd planned to. And it had been a stupid idea to begin with - to think Hojo would just wander into his path, and he could kill him without any collateral damage. He was getting out, and then doing what he should have done in the first place - storming the science department until he had Hojo's head on a pike.

The hallway he'd been creeping down soon opened into a larger area. The roof stretched several stories above his head, chains dangling from the ceiling, and the shadows of enormous crates casting across narrow corridors of concrete paths. A warehouse after all. But more importantly, he caught a whiff a familiar scent. Something living.

A couple of steps more, and the stench became overpowering. It smelt like a chocobo barn that hadn't been mucked out for weeks. Blood and fur and faeces and stinking animal breath.

A shadow shifted on his right. Cloud whirled, fingers reaching for a sword that wasn't there. The shadow simply settled, though, and as his eyes adjusted, he realised in horror that what he thought were crates, were actually cages.

A beady black eye stared at him from inside the nearest pen. Rustling and guttural snarls spread like a wave as the trapped beasts became aware of his presence.

Monsters. The entire warehouse was full of monsters.

Holding his breath, Cloud inched into the concrete alleyway between the cages. Specimens. All shades of black and silver, some bearing an eerily human face in the pattern of their furs or feathers. So he'd been right about the tycoons. Hollander had been experimenting with the transference abilities of Project G, instead of looking for a cure like he'd promised.

No surprise. The more things changed, the more they stayed the same. The only difference was,
instead of Genesis kidnapping *Hollander* to research a cure, Angeal abducted people for him.

His nose pinched in disgust as he slipped past the cages, mako-bright eyes drawing the hungry gazes of the beasts within. Several of the larger ones threw their bodies against the bars, rattling the locks, and Cloud's pace quickened. His fingers itched for the hilt of his sword, some materia, *anything*, but he didn't dare risk returning to the lab to search for it. His eyes tracked the ceiling, looking for some clue, some light, *any* sign to reveal the exit.

Then he paused, and sniffed. Buried underneath the stench of too many monsters in a cramped space, a familiar scent tantalised his overburdened olfactory senses. Fresh grass, tangy citrus, a fragrant, flowery perfume…

Following his nose, the sweet scent grew stronger. He recognised it now. Dumapples.

*Banora*. He was in Banora!

Of course. The strange tycoons had been found nearby. And this was Angeal's and Genesis's hometown – *naturally* this would be where Hollander hid his laboratory!

Eager now, Cloud hurried towards the exit, dashing towards the source of country air.

In his haste to escape, he failed to notice the creaking metal, or the low, mechanical whir from the shadows. The caged monsters hushed, one by one, and only when the warehouse had grown completely silent did the SOLDIER pause.

The whirr became a scream, and a giant fell from the ceiling.

Cloud scrambled back, inches from being crushed by the hulking metal construct. The concrete cracked under each of the six steel prongs that acted as feet, and his ears rang from the shriek of servos. A massive gatling gun swivelled around, like the head of a blind snake seeking prey. Amidst a chorus of sharp, snapping clicks, the motors purred to life.

Throwing himself to the side, the blond barely avoided the shower of bullets. He rolled to his feet, steps peppered by high-calibre rounds exploding at his heels, ears ringing from concussive blasts. Shards of flying concrete ripped at his clothes, his fingers, his cheek. Cursing, Cloud dived behind one of the cages.

He should have known his escape was too easy. Hollander would never leave the security up to Angeal alone. How could he get past *this* without his sword or materia?

The metal bars on the cage he was hiding behind groaned. The two front legs of the machine had converted into a pair of blunt pincers, and were currently wrenching the gate open with brute force. Where the hell did Hollander get a guard like this? Scarlett's machines couldn't do anything other than stomp around and waste ammo!

No time to think. He dashed out from cover, jumping to the top of the nearest cage in one bound. Optical receptors swerved to track the sudden movement, and the machine abandoned its current task, bringing the gatling gun around again. The half-wrecked cage crumpled under one of the metal prongs, and Cloud winced at the shriek of agony from the trapped creature.

Great, now he was sympathising with *monsters*.

The motor chugged as the gun spun, warming up to fire. Cloud leapt, boots thudding onto the rusted metal casing of the machine's back. He slammed his fist into the nearest leg. The machine lurched sideways, thrown off-balance by the warped joint. "Argh!" Cloud didn't have time to avoid
the wild sweep of the pincer-arm. It slammed into his side like a truck, throwing him clear like a rag doll.

He hit the ground and rolled, arms cradling his head as he crashed into one of the cages, bars bending under the impact. Coughing, he struggled to push himself back to his feet, wincing at the sight of his bloody, bruising hand. The machine limped towards him, servos gyrating wildly to compensate for the jammed leg. Cloud nearly bit his tongue when one of the pincers slammed down on top of him, flattening him on the floor, its cold mechanical grip crushing his shoulders.

Frantic, he kicked blindly; trying to hit a joint, get some leverage, anything. He couldn't be crushed and left to die here! He still needed to kill Hojo, destroy Jenova, stop Sephiroth, save his mother and Aeris and Zack and Nibelheim-

His foot smashed into one of the other legs, and the motor suddenly stalled. The hydraulics gasped, and the straining servos purred to a halt. Cloud stared, dumbfounded, and still pinned to the ground by a pincer five times as heavy as First Tsurugi. His wild kick had done it? The machine had broken down, just like that?

Then, there were footsteps. Slow, casual scuffs of leather dress shoes approaching on shattered concrete.

"Finally caught you."

Cloud froze the instant he heard that reedy, nasal tone.

He would never forget that voice. No matter how many holes there were in his memory from that time, no matter how many years passed, he could never, ever, forget it.

*Hojo.*
Genesis had never liked the look of the ShinRa warehouse outside Banora. His hometown – tranquil, green, sleepy Banora – was supposed to be nothing but dumapple trees and stately wooden houses. The giant grey warehouse, tucked between the rolling hills, served as nothing more than a painful eyesore.

Now it had become sinister. This was the first time he'd returned 'home' since contracting and then being cured of degradation, and the sight left a surprisingly bad taste in his mouth.

They skirted the edges of town, observing Angeal's house from a distance. Having made no progress in a week of searching for Strife, they'd been forced to turn their attention to their other wayward colleague instead. They'd seen no sign of their friend in Banora yet, and Genesis was ready to call it a day and return to Midgar, but Sephiroth insisted on being thorough.

"Angeal will be fine," Genesis hissed. "He's put in for leave. It's Cloud we have to be worried about. Two weeks are already up – he'll be officially listed as a deserter!"

"But we don't even know where to begin with Cloud. We do know where to start with Angeal," Sephiroth countered. "And Lazard hasn't sent out a notice yet."

Grumbling, Genesis followed in the General's wake as they circled the modest dwelling. "We're still wasting our time. He obviously isn't here." At least, the red-haired Commander hoped he wasn't. He certainly wanted to find his friend again and haul him back to ShinRa where he could keep an eye on him, but none of the scenarios in which Angeal might be prompted to visit Banora were good ones.

Not that Sephiroth knew that. "We don't know for sure. We should ask around town. Speak to people directly instead of relying simply on observation."

"You can." Genesis crossed his arms. "I'll be fine right where I am, thank you very much."

"Don't be childish. Don't you want to find Angeal?" Sephiroth scolded.

"Of course I do."

"Then why are you being difficult?"

Genesis fidgeted and scowled.

"This is your hometown, isn't it?" A trace of wistfulness laced the General's tone.

Right, Sephiroth didn't remember his childhood. Perhaps a mercy, knowing what he did now. His friend would be spared the pain of the knowledge that he was nothing more than an experiment - that they all were. Genesis didn't think he would be able to maintain his composure if he were to walk through this town now, if he were to meet his so-called 'parents' who'd sired him for no reason other than to create a super-soldier, whose selfish experimentation before his birth had so very nearly condemned him to an early death.
They had played with his life, long before he possessed any sort of awareness or means to defend himself. That he had been ignorant of it until recently did not make their sins any lighter. In Midgar he could safely ignore it and pretend it didn't happen. Here, it was more difficult to contain the resentment.

How must Angeal feel in this situation? He held such pride in his family, in that sword that had been passed down through the generations. The betrayal would be so much sharper.

To Sephiroth, all he said was, "It's my hometown, but that doesn't mean I'm fond of it."

"You don't even want to see your family?"

Genesis took a deep breath, and managed what he felt to be an extraordinarily calm, "No. I do not."

Sephiroth gave him a puzzled glance – no doubt recalling the many childhood anecdotes he and Angeal had shared over the years. Strange how a little context could colour those happy memories black. Where once they brought comfort and nostalgia, the mere thought of them now left Genesis feeling oddly discomfited. How did they not see it, even as children? Why hadn't they thought anything amiss with the doctor's visits or special tutoring? None of the other children went through it. It was the whole reason why he and Angeal had become friends in the first place!

The silence between them stretched, and then Sephiroth nodded, apparently coming to some sort of – probably inaccurate - conclusion. "Very well. You keep watch here in case, and I'll go asking around town."

"Fine," Genesis grumbled. He supposed he could handle hiding in the bushes, if it meant he didn't have to walk through the streets and greet people like nothing had changed. Just because he'd escaped death, didn't mean Angeal would. If his friend died because of this whole fiasco, Banora would burn.

He pulled out his leather-bound copy of Loveless to pass the time as Sephiroth played detective, keeping an ear out for any sign of movement from Angeal's old home. The beautiful words and familiar story went a long way towards soothing his agitation. He didn't tire of the poem.

"My Soul corrupted by vengeance,
Hath endured torment,
To find the end of the journey in my own salvation.
And Your eternal slumber," he murmured, tracing over the words in his mind, again and again and again.

There were so many interpretations to be explored. So many endings to contemplate.

Genesis had wanted the tragic ending. Cloud wanted the perfect ending. Sephiroth wouldn't share his answer.

Which ending did Angeal want, now that he knew the truth?

A sharp knock on the door of the house jolted Genesis from his reflection. Sephiroth had almost finished the rounds, apparently, if he'd finally reached the Hewleys' place. After a moment, the door opened, and the General spoke briefly before disappearing inside. Angeal's mother Gillian, by the looks of it. Partly his mother too, apparently. He felt uncomfortable at the knowledge. He'd been fond of Mrs Hewley as a child. She'd always offered such wonderful baked treats, and was full of kind and gentle words, and never scolded them when he and Angeal tracked mud inside the house. Yet she'd been instrumental in the whole miserable affair.
He didn't hate Banora completely, but knowing what Angeal was going through… it was confusing, and he avoided contemplating it too deeply.

Bored now, and anxious to occupy his attention with anything other than his conflicting feelings towards his hometown, Genesis kept a lazy eye on the house for any sign of movement. No raised voices, so Angeal wasn't hiding inside.

None of this would be necessary if either Cloud or Angeal would just answer their PHSes. Even worse, there was the question of why they didn't answer - whether it was because they didn't want to talk, or if it was because they couldn't.

Genesis couldn't decide which reason he preferred.

He plucked a blade of grass from the ground and shredded it with his fingers. Then frowned at the mess on his gloves, and brushed it away.

He stared at the dumapple hanging over his head. Probably another two weeks before it would be ready for picking. The skin was still a sickly shade of white.

He checked his hair in the reflection of his rapier, and freed a stray leaf from the auburn strands.

Finally there was movement. Genesis snapped to attention as Sephiroth left the dwelling, and made a quick series of hand gestures that could be misconstrued as the SOLDIER fiddling with his sword harness. Message received, the Commander backed away and circled around to the east. They were going to meet back by the truck.

The General, not needing to be subversive, made it there first. Genesis wrinkled his nose as he left the cover of the trees to join him. "You smell like dumapple pie," he groused.

"If you wanted a piece, you should have come inside. Angeal's… mother-" The word hung awkwardly on Sephiroth's lips. "-asked after you."

"No need. I was having a fabulous time crouching in the bushes. You could have lingered for seconds," he snapped.

Sephiroth, annoyingly, either didn't register his sarcasm, or chose to ignore it. "I found out something of interest. Angeal has been seen in town, though not for the past couple of days. His mother said he's been spending most of his time over at the warehouse."

That ugly ShinRa warehouse. Knowing what he knew now…

Labs. So he'd been right. Angeal was here because of degradation.

Sephiroth paused and looked back – Genesis had failed to notice him walking away. "Aren't you coming?"

"After you," he retorted with a mock bow, hopefully covering up his moment of hesitation.

It was a short journey to the warehouse from the edges of town – at a run, it would only take a minute, and at their cautious gait, took only five. Soon they stood before a featureless grey block, fenced in with barbed wire.

"The gate must be on the far side," Sephiroth surmised.

"Are you suggesting we go through the front door? I thought you were a SOLDIER," Genesis
mocked, and before the General could reply, drew his rapier and sliced through the wire in one sharp sweep.

"Admit it – you're just too lazy to walk around," the General chided, but pushed back the fencing and followed Genesis inside anyhow.

Somehow, the grass within the borders of the fence looked duller, even though it should have received just as much sunlight and water as the rest of Banora's fields. The large bunker doors stood ajar, a dark mouth to the interior. Yet nobody stood guard.

Eerie. "Something isn't right."

Sephiroth drew Masamune. "I agree. We should proceed with caution."

They crept towards the entrance now, but within a few steps of the building, halted. "Urgh." Genesis held a hand over his nose, but could not entirely block out the overwhelming stench.

Sephiroth continued forward, surveying the dark warehouse with a critical eye. "There was a battle here."

Hurrying to catch up, Genesis joined him at the entrance, mentally cataloguing the sight before him.

Cement, spiderwebbed with cracks. Twisted metal cages, the bars curling towards the ceiling like grey, broken fingers. The still silhouette of an enormous, hulking war machine, crouched awkwardly on a damaged leg. No doubt the cause of the rest of the carnage.

And what a sight it was. Endless cages, sometimes stacked two or three times high. White feathers and tufts of grey fur littered the ground. Black pools of dried blood formed puddles around the cages – some still containing the corpses of monsters.

He'd wager all of them were dead – shot, almost certainly. Some of the bodies had dissipated into the lifestream, but other lingered unnaturally, almost as though they'd been rejected by the Planet.

"Specimens," Sephiroth noted. "I wonder why they were slaughtered."

A very good question. But after discovering first-hand how ShinRa's Science Department treated human life, not so surprising. "It doesn't matter. We should find Angeal."

Sephiroth didn't let it go. "Were they dangerous? Or perhaps there was a virus," he speculated.

"If it were a virus, they wouldn't have left this mess here with the door open." Genesis breezed past, impatient to leave behind the unpleasant odours and grotesque sight.

"If Angeal has been coming here..." the General continued as he followed along, but Genesis paid him no mind as they left the warehouse and entered a maze of corridors.

"Haven't you noticed?" he snapped. "There's nothing alive here." The entire place reeked of death, and their voices bounced eerily down the deserted hallways. He slammed open a door. An empty office, filled with dusty filing cabinets. Continuing on, he swung open another door. This room was cleaner – a cot made up with blankets, and a worn leather bag sitting on the end of the bed. It looked familiar. Hollander's. So he was here after all.

"What happened?" Sephiroth mused, still stuck on the mystery as though he hadn't heard his friend's replies at all. "Was it-"
Genesis froze when the door to the next room crashed open. "Sephiroth! Look at this."

Against the wall rested a familiar sword.

Sephiroth reached his side in moments, and frowned. "That's Cloud's sword."

"And his materia," Genesis breathed, running up to the precious stockpile on the floor. Next to it sat a sleek black PHS. When he flipped it open, the low battery warning flashed at him. "His PHS, too."

This meant…

Damn him to hell, this meant that Sephiroth's theory about Angeal and Cloud's disappearances being linked turned out to be correct after all.

"Cloud would never leave his sword behind willingly." Sephiroth's tone was grave.

No. And that the materia on the ground outnumbered the available slots on his sword meant somebody had gone through his pockets, too.

Genesis was beginning to get a bad feeling. "Cloud hates labs."

"Yes," Sephiroth murmured in agreement. "…We should keep looking. He might still be here."

Yet door after door turned up no sign of the blond. The end of one hallway opened into a sight that made Genesis's gut clench, however. A white room, clearly ransacked. It wasn't the overturned trolley or gutted computer that caught his notice, though – it was the sight of a cold, steel table with strips of leather dangling from the sides like useless tassels.

Sephiroth picked up one of them somewhat gingerly. "These were ripped. Only a SOLDIER…"

Minerva, he hoped it had been Angeal and not Cloud. The blond might be strong, but he still wouldn't be able to rip through those thick leather restraints without significant motivation.

Logic said otherwise, of course. Angeal had been seen coming and going from the warehouse. One would think he wouldn't be doing that right after ripping out of restraints.

A distant clatter caught his attention, and Genesis jerked, ears straining. "Did you hear that?"

Sephiroth dropped the torn restraint. "It came from the end room."

They dashed out. A lonely lightbulb swung in the air, pushed by a faint breeze.

Feet pounding down the hallway, they continued on to the source of the noise. Sephiroth drew Masamune and kicked open the door… then came to an abrupt stop.

Running at almost full-speed, it took all of Genesis's enhanced reflexes to brake in time. "Don't just stop in the middle of-" The words died on his lips.

Hollander sat on a chair against the wall, arms dangling by his side. His bushy hair quivered, stirred by the faint breeze from the shattered window behind him. His head was slumped, thick glasses almost sliding off his nose.

His lab coat, stained red by blood.

Two jagged, round holes pierced his torso. It didn't take a Turk to figure out what happened.
Bullets, fired at close range. The scent of gunpowder lingered faintly in the air, almost buried under the cloying metallic smell of half-dried blood.

Genesis could scarcely believe it. Hollander. He held no love for the man – the portly scientist being the primary source of his and Angeal's suffering – but he'd still known him his whole life. The notion that he was now gone, forever…

Sephiroth removed a glove and stepped closer, pressing two fingers against the man's neck. "Dead," he confirmed.

"How long?" he wondered. Strife's sword. The broken restraints. Angeal seen going to and from the warehouse. Hollander, shot dead in his own laboratory. It didn't paint a promising picture.

"It can't have been more than a day, or his body would have returned to the Lifestream," Sephiroth pointed out.

"Perhaps whoever…" Genesis trailed off, hairs on the back of his neck rising. Someone was watching them.

A whoosh of air blasted their backs. They whirled as one, swords drawn, but the doorway they'd entered through remained empty.

"Just a breeze?" Sephiroth speculated.

A lone, white feather drifted into Genesis's line of sight. He snatched it from the air. Feathers, here?

He glanced up, and everything he thought he knew tilted upside-down.

"Angeal!"

There, high in the rafters, perched his oldest friend.

Sephiroth followed his line of sight. "…Angeal?"

And from his back sprouted a massive white wing, as long as he was tall.

"So you found me." He had the gall to sound somewhere between amused and resigned.

"That's all your have to say for yourself?" Genesis snapped. "You vanish without a word, Cloud goes missing, you don't answer your PHS, and now you've… you're…" He gesticulated wildly. He couldn't say it. Was too horrified by the sight.

Hollander never told him degradation could result in that. Gaia, what were they now? Did this make them monsters?

Sephiroth, perturbed, but too professional to voice it, gestured towards Hollander's prone body with Masamune. "Did you do this, then?"

"What if I did?"

An uncharacteristically cagey response from their old friend. Sephiroth took it in stride. "It's not exactly honourable behaviour."

"Honour, huh?" He somehow managed to look pensive, crossing his arms as he dangled above their heads on a support beam, wing fluttering lightly for balance. "I find myself wondering where the
honour in this world has gone. These days, I see nothing but monsters."

Genesis couldn't be deceived – Angeal had never been a good liar. "Don't play us for fools. Who really killed him? You wouldn't use a gun to do it." Wouldn't do it at all. Angeal had motive to keep Hollander alive – motive much, much stronger than revenge for his current state.

"Does it matter? He's of no use to anyone, now."

"What's going on, Angeal?" Sephiroth asked. "What's happened to you? And where's Cloud?"

A tense silence stretched between them, before Angeal sighed, and admitted, "Honestly, I don't know. When I woke up, he was gone."

"So you were the cause of Cloud's disappearance then," the General deduced, a dangerous edge to his words.

"I didn't want to, but there was no choice. Because of the degradation… I was desperate." He shook his head. "I don't get it, Genesis. How did you get better?" His wing stretched to its full span, revealing a second, stunted wing nestled just beneath it. Several more feathers floated to the floor. "Did you get one of these too, in Wutai?"

Sephiroth turned to stare at him, but Genesis ignored him, gazed fixed solely on his oldest friend. "It never got that far," he murmured.

"I see. And you never saw fit to tell us."

"It wasn't your business then!" he snapped.

"Not our business? Not our business that you were dying?" Angeal accused.

"Dying?" Sephiroth echoed, looking alarmed.

His fists clenched, leather creaking over his knuckles. "It was private."

"Then you understand why I went on leave, then."

Put like that, he did understand, but didn't want to admit it. Not when he'd spent two weeks cursing his PHS and came back to this wretched little town to find his friend only to discover this. "But that fails to explain Cloud. What happened to him?"

"I said I don't know," Angeal countered calmly – too calmly, for someone with a wing coming out of his back. Always the pragmatic one. He addressed Sephiroth next. "If what Hollander said is true, you're the best bet for finding him. Although I guess there's a range issue…" He trailed off, sending the General a contemplative glance, then shook his head. "I have trouble believing it, honestly. He doesn't look anything like you."

"What do you mean?" Genesis couldn't even take delight in Sephiroth being confused, because he fared no better.

Angeal just shook his head once more. "Sorry. He asked me not to tell." He looked terribly old all of a sudden. "After everything- I can at least do that much for him… We had him all wrong. I never should have-" He cut himself off, and instead continued, "You should find him. Lazard won't list him as a deserter. Hollander made sure of it."

At least they had that much. "And what about you?"
Angeal gave him a weary smile, stood up on the support beam, and took off through the open skylight in a blast of air.

"Angeal! Wait!" Genesis rushed to the shattered window behind Hollander, heedless of the broken glass. He couldn't leave yet! "You need to know! For degradation, there's a c-

His voice caught in his throat at the sight of his friend with his large, white wing extended. Rising into the sky. Leaving them.

*Three friends go into battle. One is captured, one flies away...*

Glass tinkled behind him. "Genesis." Sephiroth looked grim. "What is all this about 'degradation'?"
Much to Sephiroth's displeasure, Genesis made him wait for an explanation until they were back in Midgar, and then until Zack could join them as well. Angeal's student deserved to know, and he didn't want to go through what was going to be an incredibly unpleasant conversation more than once.

They had gathered in Angeal's office, figuring that since it was in disuse, no one was likely to eavesdrop or interrupt. Zack bounded to his seat and threw himself into it like it was a couch instead of an office chair. "Should we wait for Kusel? 'Cause he's out on a mission right now, but he's supposed to get back tonight."

"No. This is more about Angeal than it is about Cloud," Genesis cut in. The bouncy Second should consider himself privileged Angeal counted him in his circle of closest confidants. Genesis, on the other hand, preferred to keep the rank and file behind velvet ropes, where they could admire but not infringe on his personal life.

Sephiroth folded his arms as though to say, 'We're all here now, and you can't avoid the topic any longer'.

Genesis took a deep breath. Sugarcoating would make no difference. "Angeal is dying."

Silence. Sephiroth remained unperturbed – he would have already guessed, from their discussion in Banora. Zack, it appeared, was having difficulty processing the notion, and stared at him with wide eyes.

Finally, the General suggested, "Perhaps you should start at the beginning, Genesis."

He glared. "This is my story to tell," he grumbled, but he supposed there was no getting out of it. With the recent developments, it might get dangerous, and he couldn't risk his allies operating with incomplete information. "Fine. Sephiroth will recall that I received a shallow cut during a spar several weeks before I was dispatched to Wutai."

He gripped his shoulder, almost expecting the unending ache to still be present. "A small matter for a SOLDIER First Class, normally. Except the wound did not heal."

"How did it happen?" Zack asked. He looked serious for the first time Genesis could remember. Good to know that Angeal's Puppy could be more than a class clown.

"There was no unusual materia involved, if that's what you're thinking," Genesis informed him. "It was an ordinary injury in every way. When it failed to mend on its own, I sought out Hollander." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"And his prognosis?" Sephiroth prompted.

"Wings stripped away, the end is nigh
Such is... the fate of a monster."

"I don't recognise that verse. Loveless?"
His eyes snapped open and fixed on the Silver General. "It's because of the enhancements. It's a disease. You cease to heal, you begin to age, you… mutate." He could not keep the twist of distaste from his expression. "Though I did not originally know what Hollander meant by that. I suppose now we do." He shook his head. "Monsters making monsters."

"Angeal's wing," Sephiroth nodded, then turned to explain to Zack, "Angeal also suffered an injury recently that refused to heal. And now, the illness has progressed to a state where he's grown a white wing."

"A… wing? Like an angel?" Zack's voice quavered with disbelief. Genesis didn't blame him. Poor little Second, discovering the dark nature of their twisted world this way.

"I'm not sure if he'd appreciate the comparison, but it's an accurate description," Sephiroth agreed. "It appears that this may be the reason why he's vanished on indefinite leave and isn't answering his PHS."

"But…" Zack ran a hand through his hair. "I don't think I'm getting all of this, but you're saying he's going to die because of it? We have to help him! With this- this-"

"It's called degradation. It's a result of the process of creating a SOLDIER," Genesis provided.

"Wait, you mean all of the SOLDIERs are going to eventually get this? Don't mess with me!" Zack all but growled.

With a sideways glance at the General, Genesis replied, "No. Angeal and I went through a... different method. SOLDIERs made the normal way." Was there truly normal about SOLDIER? "-should be fine."

Sephiroth's frown deepened. "A different method?"

Genesis didn't want to walk down this path. He could already see the wheels in Sephiroth's head turning as he contemplated the implications of his own enhancements. "Hollander worked with us as children. It was a trial method. We received the enhancements prior to birth. Of course, we were never made aware. It only came to light under these developments."

"That's messed up. ShinRa experimented on you guys as kids?" Zack shook his head. "Not cool."

Sephiroth crossed his arms and pinned him with a sharp gaze. "You've neglected to explain how you recovered from this 'degradation'."

Trust the great General Sephiroth to pick up on that small detail.

"Hey, yeah!" Zack agreed. "You said you had it too! Why did you get better?"

Gritting his teeth, he admitted, "Cloud."

"Cloud?"

It was supposed to stay his secret. Would have remained so, if they'd found a cure earlier and the blond hadn't vanished. "He had a cure."

Zack bolted upright in his seat. "Then Angeal can-"

Genesis shook his head, fingers curling into fists. "He didn't have any more. He had someone trying to replicate it, but I don't know who."
"And you trusted him?" Sephiroth asked.

"He saved my life!" Genesis snapped. "In my position, wouldn't you?"

His two comrades fell silent.

He cut the air with his hand, and snarled, "And now he's missing too! With Hollander dead, he's our last chance to save Angeal!"

"Hollander's dead?" Zack repeated, stunned. Neither of them paid him any attention.

"Calm yourself," Sephiroth ordered. "There is still hope. We need only find Cloud."

"And how do you propose we do that?" Genesis snapped. "We don't even know whether he's alive or not at this stage. He wouldn't leave his sword and materia behind!"

"You forget what Angeal said."

Genesis paused, rewinding the exchange through his head. He'd been so startled by the sight of the wing he'd barely paid attention to anything else. "'You're the best bet for finding him'," he murmured. "What does that mean?"

"Wait, Cloud was there too?" Zack interjected.

"I believe Hollander and Angeal thought they could find a cure by studying him," Sephiroth explained. "After all, his enhancements are on-par, yet he does not suffer the same affliction. Though, for that matter, neither do I." He held Genesis's gaze for a long moment. "I'm disappointed neither of you thought to share this with me. I might have been of some help."

Genesis looked away. How could he explain it? The burning jealousy, the fear that had gripped him, the shame at his weakness, the disgust at his gangrenous flesh. To show such an ugly side to the ever-so-perfect Sephiroth…

"What I don't get, is why Cloud didn't tell them if he had a cure all along," Zack mused, folding his arms and staring at the table in contemplation.

"It is difficult as always to guess what drives him," Sephiroth remarked. "Perhaps he is protecting someone. And we also cannot forget his dislike of scientists. No doubt he considered it a hostile situation, and treated it as such."

"That doesn't matter," Genesis interrupted. "What matters is finding him now. Since Angeal has flown off, One flies away. "Without giving us any useful information, we have to figure out who killed Hollander and where Cloud is ourselves."

"Which brings us back to the previous point," Sephiroth agreed. "Angeal seems to think I possess some means of finding Cloud."

"Don't you?" Zack asked. "I mean, everyone in SOLDIER knows, sir."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"You know! Everyone knows that if you want to find one, you ask the other."

"…That's why everyone ambushed me asking about Cloud when I came back from Junon?"

"Yeah! You were the last port of call. Though that didn't work either." Zack deflated. "Seriously,
how do you do it? Luxiere figured there was some kind of trick to it."

"There's no…” Sephiroth faltered. "…Except that time. I knew he was in the gym, but I hadn't seen him all day."

"Yeah, see? Cloud can do it too. Honestly, sir, nobody ever knows where you are, but Cloud would be right every single time."

Genesis recalled that time he and Angeal had abducted Cloud for that spar. He'd known Sephiroth was hidden in the van, even though there had been nothing to give his presence away. "How?"

Sephiroth shook his head. "I honestly don't know. The thought simply popped into my head. Rather like having an extra sense. I could just know where he was."

"Okay, kind of weird, but I'll roll with that," Zack announced. "So… what, can you just concentrate or something?"

Frowning, the General replied, "No. There was a certain sort of… feeling, that time. I remember being surprised at its absence when you first asked me after the Junon inspection." He cupped his forehead, shielding his eyes, in a gesture Genesis recognised him using whenever the matter of his forgotten childhood arose. "Perhaps it does require a level of proximity… but I still don't see how such a thing should be possible."

Genesis couldn't either. Why Sephiroth? What was so special about him that could help him pinpoint Cloud so easily? What connection did they have that he wasn't privy to? "So it's essentially useless, then, isn't it?" he sneered. "Unless you want to cover the entire Continent, hoping for some unexplainable sixth Cloud-sense to kick in."

The intended insult missed its mark, as Sephiroth replied, "Unless we can figure out what Angeal meant, we might not have any other choice."

"Are you serious, sir? Because that would take forever," Zack commented. "Um, not that it's a bad thing you want to try, but it's not very efficient."

"Of course I'm not serious, Zack. As Genesis so eloquently pointed out, that would be an exercise in futility. But it's a clue."

"Oh. Then what does it mean?"

"That, I do not yet know." He folded his arms. "And for it to be of any use could depend entirely on what happened while Angeal was unconscious, and who killed Hollander."

Zack nodded. "What are the scenarios? Assuming Cloud is alive." His voice hitched briefly on the last sentence, but like a good SOLDIER he didn't let it stop him.

Sephiroth held aloft four fingers. "Firstly, that when Cloud escaped, he killed Hollander. He didn't have his sword, and may have resorted to a gun instead. In this case, we can assume he's on the run and hiding from ShinRa. Second, Angeal killed Hollander to let Cloud escape and is covering for him." Genesis opened his mouth to argue, but Sephiroth stayed his protests with a sharp look. "I know you disagree, Genesis, but Angeal is clearly not acting normally. We can't rely on our experiences to guess what he might be thinking."

"That wouldn't be so bad, though, right? Angeal might stop us from finding Cloud, but that means he'd be in contact, and maybe he could get the cure?" Zack asked.
Genesis considered that. It was a desirable scenario, but he thought it the most unlikely one. No matter how degradation might have changed Angeal, he doubted his old friend could suddenly lie convincingly enough to fool him. Even if his honour had become warped, such ingrained honesty couldn't be unlearned overnight.

"It could cause problems with ShinRa if they found out about Hollander, but we've already taken the steps to cover those tracks, providing, of course, that ShinRa is not already aware." Sephiroth's brow dipped in a frown. "That brings us to the third possible scenario. ShinRa is involved. We know that Lazard, at the very least, was aware of Hollander's actions prior to his death. If there is internal treachery afoot, Cloud could either be in custody or fleeing custody. That's the most dangerous scenario, as it means the Turks are involved, and the company would likely consider Cloud and Angeal traitors."

Zack shook his head in disbelief, but Genesis growled under his breath. He wouldn't put it past upper management to leave his friends to rot. He might have decided to stay with ShinRa after being cured, but any illusions he held about the company had long been shattered.

"And the last scenario?" Genesis prompted, a touch snidely. He already knew, but his sense of theatre demanded it.

"...That a third party is involved, and ShinRa isn't talking about it. Possibly one of the remaining rebel factions from Wutai, or one of the other anti-ShinRa groups."

The three SOLDIERs fell silent.

When Genesis had made his suggestion originally, he'd been confident they would succeed. The very best and the brightest ShinRa had to offer – the great General himself, two of the most promising Seconds, not to mention the mastermind who'd won the Wutai war – how could they fail? Yet now, a sense of foreboding had settled over him.

Finding Cloud somewhere in the vast wide world would be difficult enough normally – there were plenty of parts of the map with a great deal of nothing on them. Trying to find Cloud if ShinRa or some other force were actively hiding him, however… it made the task seem nearly insurmountable.

"My Friend, the fates are cruel
There are no dreams, no honour remains.
The arrow has left the bow of the goddess," Genesis murmured to himself.

"Loveless, fourth act," Sephiroth answered, to his surprise. His mako-green eyes glittered with intent. "Appropriate. In a world without honour, we're left only with monsters."

"Sir?" Zack asked, confused.

Sephiroth raised Masamune, and let the dim lighting play off the edge of the blade. "Fortunate, then, that SOLDIER specialises in such things."

The same off-white ceiling. The same stench of mako. The same tanks.

The same nightmare.
"So you're finally awake." That hated, hated voice grated against his ears. Hojo loomed over him, shoulders bent as though he'd been staring in his face for hours, waiting for the slightest flicker of movement.

With Hojo, such actions were not out of the question.

"It's a… pleasure, to finally meet you. I've been curious about you for some time. That anybody should be able to challenge my greatest creation, especially someone from outside ShinRa… Very interesting."

Cloud kept his gaze fixed on the ceiling, and focused on breathing. He couldn't panic, couldn't show him how scared he was right then. The scientist could use his fear, twist it and wield it against him.

Hojo's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to ask where you are?"

His shoulders tensed, but he managed to stay composed. "I already know where we are." He'd killed this man, once. He shouldn't be so terrified. He should be over this. He'd moved on.

Who was he kidding? You never got over being a human experiment. You just learned to forget about it, until an accident with a Time materia shoved it back in your face.

"Interesting. This lab has been abandoned for some time – took quite a few days to get it into working order again, in fact." Hojo's stare felt like roaches crawling across his skin. "It lends more credence to my theory."

"Good for you."

The scientist adjusted his glasses, as though to see him better. Those dark, beady eyes – fiercely intelligent, but Cloud could see the underlying madness now – regarded him with curiosity. "Certainly an interesting specimen." The word itself sent tremors running down his spine. "I should thank you, really," the scientist continued, tone almost conversational. "I'd been waiting for an opportunity to take out my predecessor once and for all. Yes, the circumstances turned out rather favourably in the end."

"What did you do?" Cloud demanded. "Is Angeal-"

Hojo scoffed. "I have no interest in that man's failures. You, on the other hand, proved quite the fascinating puzzle. Oh yes. One surprise after another." A reedy chuckle. "Tell me, SOLDIER First Class Strife, did you come to ShinRa out of familial loyalty?"

"I'm not related to Sephiroth. You should know that," he spat.

Hojo blinked, and Cloud felt a brief surge of victory at stymieing the doctor. It didn't last - his face then relaxed into a leering grin. "You poor, silly boy… you really don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

"I ran some DNA tests against my database. Of course, your genetic information had become warped – marvellous work, truly marvellous – but imagine my surprise when I found a second match!"

A second match?

Hojo chuckled. "I shouldn't have been so surprised – you had the right colouring, after all, and the
ShinRa family is quite large.”

Cloud choked. The scientist wasn't suggesting…

His disbelief did not go unnoticed. With relish, Hojo continued, "You think the President grew the company entirely on his own? No, something of ShinRa's scope requires connections, and ones far firmer than merely business ties. Why else would a teenager be serving as the vice-president? And you don't believe Scarlett became head of the Weapons Department purely due to wiles, do you?"

The chuckle turned into a wheezing, coughing laugh.

Cloud could do nothing more than stare, horror mounting.

"Oh, but don't go thinking this makes you special. The President's bastards are a different matter. Director Lazard is hardly the only one running around."

No… it couldn't…

"Do you take me for an idiot? Your family – You people!" His mother shook, white with rage.

Hojo continued talking as he puttered around the lab, selecting various apparatus with deliberate care and placing them onto a metal tray. "He isn't much to look at now, you understand, but ten, fifteen years ago… yes, the President was quite a strapping young man back in the day. Money, power, good looks… plenty of young unemployed women thought a ShinRa bastard would offer riches and security. Weren't they disappointed."

The bindings rattled. "Don't talk about my mother that way," he hissed.

Hojo just sent him a disinterested glance, as though he'd forgotten he had an audience. "Of course, that was merely a point of curiosity. In the greater scheme, it hardly matters at all."

Hardly mattered? All this time, Rufus ShinRa had been his half-brother. What had his mother thought, when he announced he wanted to join the company that had ruined her life? He'd thought she'd been reluctant to let him leave home, not that it was ShinRa she objected to.

How? How had it happened? Why would the President have ever come to…

Sephiroth grew up in ShinRa mansion.

At some point after the remnants' attack on Edge, he'd stopped hating ShinRa so much. Now, the anger and resentment came rushing back full strength, as intense as it had been the moment the Sector 7 plate fell.

"Amusing though it is, the real question, of course, wasn't your parentage at all." Cloud tensed, having almost forgotten that he was trapped in a lab with his worst nightmare, and that now was not the time to be ruminating on his twisted heritage. "That idiot Hollander was blind to the true discovery. So jealous was he over S-cells, he didn't once stop to consider the greater implications."

Hojo laughed to himself. "Of course, he wasn't aware that I've made no Sephiroth clones… yet."

Cloud held his breath. Hojo couldn't have… it wasn't possible, how, with just that one clue…?

"Tell me, SOLDIER." Hojo's glasses glinted eerily under the flickering fluorescent lights. "Was Project JENOVA a success?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The words escaped him in a breathless rush.
Hojo's grin widened. "You are a poor liar, Specimen."

No, he refused to believe it, refused to accept that the only person to have figured out his secret was Hojo of all people. He glared, as though the force of his stare alone might burn the scientist away.

Unaffected, Hojo picked up a clipboard and leafed through his notes. "Of course, I didn't arrive at this conclusion by mere fantasy. ShinRa's Science Department deals with a wide variety of topics. Trans-dimensional summoning spaces, magic without materia… There's even Project P, dedicated to the 'untapped potential of the human brain'." He settled on a page, running a bony finger down it. "And across my desk have arrived several rather intriguing essays regarding the principles of Time materia in relation to time travel."

Cloud nearly bit through his tongue. "This is quite a lucky breakthrough. There have been theories regarding this phenomenon for years, but when testing it, we could never collect any concrete evidence of our success. Tell me - your very presence changes everything, but have your memories altered to match?" Hojo tapped the pen to his clipboard. "I suppose you could be insignificant enough to have made no difference so far."

No, he hadn't made much of a difference. Hardly any difference at all. Except...

"I want to join SOLDIER one day. I'll be strong, and nobody will ever think about messing with me. Like Commander Rhapsodos!"

His expression must have given him away, as Hojo peered at him, fascinated. "I see... you did manage to have an affect on something, at least. What minor detail have you managed to change in your time here, SOLDIER?"

"As if I'd tell you!" he spat.

Hojo frowned. He rummaged through his tray of tools for a moment, selected a scalpel with deliberate care, and then in one swift, precise motion, stabbed it through the back of the blond's hand.

The pain didn't register immediately – instead flaring as Hojo yanked the scalpel back out. Cloud winced, but didn't make a sound, even as blood trickled between his fingers.

"Do you remember this pain?"

Hojo's little games didn't hurt as much as Sephiroth's. He wouldn't give the scientist the pleasure of rattling him.

"It's in your interest to cooperate, SOLDIER." The scientist watched the blood pool under his hand with mild interest, before the mako kicked in and slowly began to knit the wound closed.

"Advanced regeneration. Higher than average mako percentage," he observed, then fingered the pale white line intersecting his eyebrow. Cloud flinched away from the contact. "It's always frustrated me that we are not able to perfectly replicate the effects of a Regen spell in SOLDIERs. Cure materia leaves no scars, but mako only greatly increases the body's natural healing rates. More in line with a Haste spell, really."

He made a quick mark on his clipboard, and returned to the original topic. "No matter – it's irrelevant to the question at hand. The important part is that your memories have remained intact, despite changes you've inflicted on your environment. This confirms my hypothesis."
"Hypothesis?" The question escaped his lips without thought. His palm itched as the blood clotted.

Thankfully, Hojo was distracted enough by his discovery to indulge him. "It was postulated that in sending objects to the past, we alter the timeline, and as a result a new timeline is formed, one separate from our own. Your existence is proof of this. None of the experiments yielded results because each subject sent back created a new world!"

Cloud felt ill, and for once it had nothing to do with Hojo.

That meant then that he wasn't undoing the future, but that he'd actually left behind a world that would continue on without him? He'd never worried about it, because he thought he would be changing the world so that it wouldn't matter! Had Tifa tried to call him when he didn't return after the delivery? Did his friends go into the wastes to find an injured zolom and an abandoned Fenrir?

"Then send me back!" he demanded.

Hojo just regarded him over his glasses as one might a misbehaving puppy. "Foolish boy. That's simply not possible. Moving forwards in time will only shift you along this timeline. Moving backwards will just create a world anew."

Cloud struggled against the restraints, but they weren't like the ones Hollander used. Hojo obviously knew a thing or two about restraining First Class SOLDIERS. Of course he did. He held Zack for four years, didn't he?

His efforts went ignored as Hojo began pacing. "But now that the theory has been proven and human travel is possible, we can at last begin to explore a new possibility - going forward! Properly harnessed, practical applications would be enormous. Imagine, when storming an enemy base, if half of your army appeared at their back, after moving into position the day before! During a shortage of beds at medical facilities, patients could simply jump forward to a time when the resources were available!"

"As if you care about any of that," Cloud spat.

Hojo chuckled darkly. "Imagine, then, if it were stable enough for a scientist to jump forward in time, to see if his experiments were a success. And should they fail, jump back in time as many times as necessary to try again."

He was talking about Jenova. "Do it then," Cloud challenged. Hojo could jump to the future, and Cloud would use the time to make certain he failed.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not about to haphazardly test unproven technology on myself. First, we need to create the apparatus to interface with the Time materia to send things forward. And it will be necessary to document the effects of time travel on the human body." Hojo gave him a wide, demented smile. "That is where you will come in, SOLDIER, as the only known survivor of this procedure."

His mouth turned dry. He knew what to expect when waking up in this lab, but hearing it said aloud made it real. "I'm a SOLDIER First Class. You can't just steal me away and hope no one will notice."

A feeble threat, and he knew it. Zack had been a First when Hojo locked them up after Nibelheim. He was probably already reported as dead.

"Steal you, Specimen?" Hojo laughed. "But you were already mine, were you not? I'm just continuing the experiment!"
Cloud snarled, rattling his restraints once more. "I killed you!" He jerked back as a jolt of electricity arced along his spine, setting his nerves on fire and sending his muscles into spasms. His eyes rolled, seeking the source.

"An interesting story. I'll have you relay it to me later," Hojo remarked, and flicked the switch on the gurney back off. "Nobody will be coming to look for you, Specimen. The President doesn't care about his bastards, and I was careful to wait until you'd been missing long enough to be listed as a deserter." His dark eyes glittered with cruelty. "Cloud Strife is no longer on the company payroll."
The short brunette Turk stood in front of the door, arms crossed and expression unusually stern.

"Hey Cissnei!" Zack greeted, scratching the back of his head nervously. "I thought you were still debriefing the rebel."

"I have enough for now. We'll bring him back to Midgar with us and do a full interrogation there." Then she gave him that Turk look - that 'I already know what you're doing but I'm a scary Turk so I'm going to make you admit it' look. "The mission's over, Zack. Where are you going?"

"I'm just going out to do a bit of scouting for monsters before we leave, clear the path and all that." He kept his tone light, but it probably didn't do much good. He wasn't a bad liar, but it took better acting skills than he possessed to fools the Turks.

"Without backup? There might still be rebels around. They're not going to stop just because we have their leader."

"I'll be able move faster without having to worry about you guys. It's secure here, and I'm just going for a look around. I'll be right back." Cissnei probably knew he didn't intend to just run a patrol - she was too smart for that – but he couldn't back down, not on this.

"...Zack, this isn't about the monsters again, is it?"

He clenched his fists. "This mission went too smoothly, Cissnei, and you know it too."

"But the monsters explained that," she pointed out.

"Then why did the monsters only attack the Wutai rebels, huh?" he challenged, dropping the light-hearted attitude.

"I don't know - maybe we're just lucky."

"It wasn't luck. Those monsters were-" He cut himself off. He liked Cissnei, he really did, but he also couldn't forget that she was a Turk, and a damn good one, no matter how sweet and soft she looked on the outside. Genesis and Sephiroth wanted to keep everything with Cloud and Angeal as quiet as possible. Kunsel thought it was smart, too. That meant no trusting the Turks. "I just need to check it out for peace of mind, okay?"

"Please Zack," she said, "Just... stay here. Let it go."

"Let it-" Wait. "Do you know something?" Why had he forgotten that? It was the Turks – they probably had some idea of what was going on already!

"Officially, I don't know anything," she said.

"And unofficially?"

She didn't answer - instead placing a hand on his arm. Her voice turned soft and urgent. "I don't want you to get mixed up in any of this Zack. The Turks can't interfere. I can't help you."
Zack didn't back down. Angeal was sick and running away and Cloud was who-knows-where, probably in trouble because Shiva knew the blond was a magnet for it. He had to check it out - he'd go crazy otherwise. "Don't get in my way, Cissnei. This is important to me."

A standoff. Should he force his way past? He didn't really want to hurt her, but if she pulled out that shuriken, he might not have a choice.

Her face pinched, and she dropped her eyes to stare the floor. In one slow, deliberate movement, she stepped away from the door.

Was she...? "Cissnei?"

"Go," she whispered. "Go do what you have to do. Just... be ready."

Zack didn't stick around long enough for either of them to get the chance to change their minds.

He ran through the rain-soaked marshes in the late afternoon light, foliage blurring around him, hand on his broadsword and senses sharpened for the slightest hint of abnormal movement. If he could just find another monster, find some proof...

Everything was falling apart around him, ever since Cloud and Angeal went missing. It had been weeks, now, and what had he been able to do? Nothing. Hadn't been able to find either his mentor or his friend. Not exactly a great start to becoming a First Class and a hero.

He still didn't feel like he understood everything, but considering Cloud was involved, that wasn't so surprising. How many people went from being a nobody in the slums to a First Class SOLDIER in a matter of months? There was a story there, one the blond had refused to share no matter how much Zack wheedled him, and it looked like it had caught up with him.

All the while, Zack stood on the sidelines, unable to do anything. It frustrated the hell out of him. So what if he was only Second Class? He was still a SOLDIER.

Why hadn't Angeal or Cloud trusted him? Weren't they friends? Okay, in Cloud's case, he could maybe understand – he had some unresolved issues, and he was the sort of guy who would try and handle it all alone. But how many times had Angeal pulled him out of a pinch? Shouldn't he get the chance to return the favour?

"Dammit, Angeal," he muttered under his breath.

His train of thought was abruptly derailed by the sound of crunching leaves. Zack stilled, ears strained. The heavy thud of footsteps, and cracking twigs underfoot. Definitely not Wutai warriors.

Was it the monster? "Hey, wait up!" He hollered, drawing his broadsword and storming off the path into the undergrowth, mud squelching under his feet as he followed the crash of branches. It sounded big. The tree cover was thick around here – probably the reason the rebels had picked it. A flash of movement. There!

Zack charged into the clearing, sword brandished. "You're not getting away!"

Only SOLDIER reflexes saved him from certain death – he ducked the instant he saw that great big blur heading for his eyes. An enormous axe crashed through three trees, severing the trunks and filling the air with splinters and leaves. Zack felt the top of his head. Yes, he was pretty sure his hair was a little shorter.

"You don't look like the monster I'm after," he declared, pointing the tip of his broadsword at the
beast.

It was vaguely humanoid – an enormous, hulking ogre, with skin the colour of bruises and plastered with foreign-looking charms. Lank, grimy hair hung limply over its shoulders, and globs of saliva dripped from its bare gums. Its beady eyes, dwarfed by the rest of its enormous body, were ringed with a faint glow, not unlike a SOLDIER's.

The most striking feature was, of course, the massive tomahawk it wielded. It made Angeal's Buster Sword look like a kitchen knife.

Zack had heard about these things in the reports from Wutai. The SOLDIER-killers.

This was probably why Tseng always lectured him about looking before leaping.

It must have gone wild with the loss of its keepers. No problem, though. He could handle this. "Hey, ugly!" he taunted.

It probably didn't understand words, but it reacted to his voice quick enough. Zack darted to the side as the tomahawk came crashing down. Sure enough, it planted itself in the muddy ground. The monster grunted with effort, tugged it free of the soft clay with a thick squelch, then roared at the bite of a broadsword in its side. Zack slid back, barely evading the wild swing that followed.

Dangerous. The rain-slick terrain made it tough to keep his footing.

He needed to be careful. It might be a slow brute, but just one hit and he'd be done for. He circled around slowly, and the monster turned with him, breath heavy and rasping from exertion. Maybe he could tire it out?

Probably not. Materia?

Zack slipped his left hand into his pocket. He'd just brought Fire and Cure with him, since his bracer could only equip two materia. Quickly, he jammed them into the slots, dodged another blow, and concentrated on a fire spell. Right for the eyes!

Fireballs burst from his hands and curved towards the big brute's face. It roared, swatting at the flames, while Zack slipped and slid across the ground to get behind the monster. A dash forward, and the roar became a guttural snarl of pain as he plunged his broadsword deep into its spine.

The ogre groaned, stumbled, and at last crashed to the muddy ground. Zack didn't take any chances – as soon as it was down, he leapt onto its shoulders and jammed his sword hilt-deep into its neck.

Finally, the big brute fell silent. Zack flicked the worst of the blood off his blade and spun it over his head in a victory pose. "Yeah! You might look tough, but you're no match for a SOLDIER!"

Then he heard more crashing through the undergrowth behind him. Zack whirled, just in time to see an enormous tomahawk bearing down upon him.

There was another one? "Shit!" He raised his broadsword reflexively to block.

His sword never stood a chance. It knocked the strike askew, but lost most of the blade in the process. His feet slipped out from under him, his back thudded against the ground, and Zack was left holding less than a third of his weapon.

Not good.

He fumbled frantically for the materia. He needed to be fast, quicker than Cloud on the draw, he
only had seconds-

Then the ogre stopped dead in its tracks, head cut clean from its neck.

Zack watched in abject astonishment as the body fell to its knees, and collapsed into the muck alongside its fellow.


"Angeal?" Zack gasped.

He hadn't really understood why Genesis and Sephiroth had been so rattled over the wing at first. Seeing it with his own eyes, though, Zack started to comprehend the enormity of what had happened to his mentor. It wasn't natural. Humans couldn't just sprout wings. Especially not just on one side!

It was a nice wing, though. Bright white feathers. Like an angel's.

He had a hundred things to say right at that moment, but for some reason he blurted, "I thought you never used that thing."

Angeal gave him a wan grin. "You're a little more important than my sword."

Zack rubbed the back of his neck, even as his thoughts raced ahead. "I-", he began, halted, then tried again, "You're-" No, not the right place to start either. "This mission. Was it you? You know, helping?"

Angeal didn't answer – simply raised Buster sword, examining the blade in a fashion Zack had seen him do a hundred times before. A quick shake removed most of the blood clinging to the metal. "Still working on making First Class, Zack?"

"Hell yeah!" The reply came on reflex, now.

"And you remember the most important duties of a SOLDIER?"

"To always uphold your honour, your pride, and your dreams," he responded solemnly.

Angeal seemed to consider his words, before nodding decisively. "Good." He gave him another grin – and Zack realised for the first time that it looked so sad, so tired, nothing like the usual confident and easy-going smile his mentor usually shared with him – then flapped his wing, sending gusts of air over the clearing as he rose into the sky. "My dreams - I'm entrusting them to you."

He was leaving already? But he'd just found him! He had so many things he needed to say! "Hey, wait!" Frantic, Zack scrambled after him. "Angeal! Come back! You have to listen! Listen to me! You've gotta come back to ShinRa! There's a cure! Cloud's got a-"

Nothing. He'd already flown away. Too slow. He'd lost him.

Zack slowed to a walk, lips pressed in a thin line as he searched the twilight expanse for any sign of his missing mentor. He swore under his breath. He had him, Angeal was right there! He should have said something about the cure first, to make sure he stayed! He'd been looking for a chance, but when he finally got one, he completely blew it.
How was he going to explain this to Genesis and Sephiroth?

Then, as he turned back towards camp, he spied a glint of silver through the trees. His breath caught in his throat, and Zack went crashing through the undergrowth again, heedless of the wet leaves whipping at his face and the mud sucking at his boots. He broke through the tree line to a new clearing, and stared, unable to comprehend the sight facing him.

There, in the centre of the clearing, stabbed into the soft ground... Buster Sword.

When Cloud next woke, he wasn't strapped to a table anymore. He was splayed out on a cold metal floor in a dark room, with the only source of light provided by the faint glow of mako from his own eyes.

Pushing himself into a sitting position, he felt around in the darkness as his sight adjusted – as much as it could adjust in the oppressive black. It was a cage, the sides slightly longer than he was tall, with bars so thick it took both hands to wrap around them. He tried his strength against them anyway, but they didn't budge. Going by feel, he found a bucket in the corner, presumably to relieve himself with. Next to it, he discovered a half-full plastic jug of water, but no food. Hojo never had been very good at remembering to feed his projects.

Maybe on purpose. Specimens weak from hunger would have a more difficult time escaping.

Flexing his hand, there was no pain, so he guessed he'd been out at least long enough for the latest scalpel wounds to fully heal. His fingers trembled, and he frowned at them, trying to quell the quivering. During his periods of consciousness, Hojo had interrogated him about the future endlessly, pumping more volts into his body than a mastered Bolt spell. Cloud hadn't talked, but couldn't shake the concern that the scientist had been able to glean something from his reactions to some of the questions.

He should have been freaking out, but apparently he'd already worked the worst of it out of his system during his initial imprisonment by Hollander. He was still scared – he'd be stupid not to be – but for now, could think clearly and rationally and not lose his train of thought to hopeless, unspoken entreaties. He intended to make the most of it – this was the first time in what must have been weeks where he wasn't either drug-addled or in the throes of panic.

So he'd finally found Hojo. Not that he could do anything about it. Cloud grimaced. All of that planning, endless waiting, being so careful, and he'd wound up in the worst-case scenario anyway. Hojo, Jenova and Sephiroth, all still alive, while he was trapped in the mad scientist's clutches.

He'd discovered answers to some things that had been bothering him about his accident with the Time materia, but wished he hadn't. Gaia, he'd really left behind his world, and couldn't get back? What would Tifa and his friends think?

No, that didn't matter. He couldn't do anything about that, and it didn't change what he needed to do here. He still had a chance to save Zack, Aeris, his mother... and so many others.

He studiously avoided thinking about his parentage. He'd heard some of the words his mother had been called around town behind her back – had occasionally got into fights with kids far bigger than him because of it - but to think of her with Rupert ShinRa...

That didn't matter, either. He hadn't known before, and knowing didn't make any difference now. All it did was affirm everything he thought about that wretched company and its morally corrupt President. His fists clenched. All those times Rufus had looked down on him... had Rufus known?
And Lazard, did Lazard know?

Probably not. Hojo had never mentioned it in his original timeline, probably satisfied by his personnel file and not bothering to look further. And if Rufus had known back in his world, he would have almost certainly tried to use it as leverage to get Cloud to work for him. And the Director… Lazard would have said something, back when he'd tried to recruit him to his cause. Cloud hadn't spoken to the man much since then, but his opinions on matters of family were well known. He probably would have sympathised, for all the lack of good it did him. Hojo had already laid it bare. Such flimsy familial relations wouldn't help him at all.

Cloud sat there in the dark for what must have been hours, spending more time not thinking about things than making any real progress on a plan of escape. He still couldn't clearly recall how they'd done it last time. Something about feeding time? Zack got them out, he knew that much. When it had been quiet, and no one noticed they were gone until they left the mansion.

The silence shattered under the heavy *thunk* of a turning lock. Cloud winced at the sudden burst of brightness as the lights flickered to life.

Hojo entered the room along with two assistants, wheeling four contraptions with him. Without even a glance towards the captured SOLDIER, he began setting them up, each one an arm's length away from the corners of the cage. "Careful! The readings must be accurate, or we'll have wasted our time!" he scolded one of the younger scientists.

Cloud took the opportunity while they were setting up to inspect his new prison in better light. It was remarkably plain – grey walls, white floor, locked off by a solid iron door. The cage rested in the centre. He could see through a viewing window into another room, not unlike how the Training Room at ShinRa was set up. Neither his nor Zack's memories held a place like this in the mansion, but then, Vincent had told him that the basement was much larger than it first appeared, with no end of hidden rooms or interlinking tunnels. Hojo did like to burrow underground, hiding the true extent of his operations from the surface.

He turned his attention to the structure Hojo was setting up next. On closer inspection, each one held a mastered Time Materia, hooked up to a variety of devices he didn't recognise.

Dread began to curl in his stomach. This couldn't possibly be good for him.

Hojo inspected several gauges, before finally appearing satisfied. The scientists filed out of the room without a word, and soon appeared in the adjacent viewing area, lined up and monitoring hidden machines with rapt attention.

Cloud couldn't do anything more than stand in the centre of the cage, uneasily eyeing the network of Time materia.

An intercom crackled to life, and the dull, calculating tones of one of the assistants burst from the speaker. "Begin recording. Initiating test. Power levels rising – forty percent… sixty percent…"

A sharp whine rose in his ears. The lights flickered. Colours smeared before his eyes.

Then Cloud stumbled, gasping. It felt like he'd been punched in the stomach and head simultaneously. By Barrett. With his gun arm.

"Thirty-three seconds. An error of ten percent. Subject appears disoriented but otherwise normal."

What?
"Adjusting the calibrations. Next test to begin in five, four, three-"

Already?

Cloud braced. The second time, it felt less like being punched and more like belly flopping into the ocean. His skin stung for a brief moment and his insides lurched. He blinked rapidly and steadied himself with a hand on the bars. What was Hojo doing?

"Thirty-two seconds. Subject appears normal."

"Better." Hojo's thin tones barely picked up in the background. "Recalibrate again. Once we've reached an error margin of less than two percent, we can move to the next level."

He was gifted with a brief pause to regain his balance and breath. "Adjusting the calibrations. Next test to begin in five, four, three-"

This time, he felt marginally winded, but not nearly as off-kilter as the previous times. Cloud glared at the scientists though the window. They jolted, and returned their attention to the monitoring equipment.

"Error of half a percent. Subject appears normal."

"Very good. Move on to the next stage."

There was a longer wait this time, as the scientists moved about the viewing room, tweaking dials and double-checking their notes. Hojo peered over their shoulders and adjusted one gauge with a dirty look. Cloud flexed his arms, chasing away the ache from the first two jolts.

Had Hojo done it already? Could he really…?

"Calibrations complete. Next test to begin in five, four, three-"

The whine rose to a wail.

It was as though a light bulb exploded. Everything turned white, then black, Ribbon burned, and then suddenly Cloud slammed into the ground, entire body numb. His head pounded, his joints throbbed, and it felt like all of his energy had been drained.

The intercom screeched in his ears. "One minute and twelve seconds! Error of twenty percent! Subject has collapsed!"

Distantly, he heard a slam, then the slap of leather shoes approaching the cage. He forced his eyes open, struggling to make anything out from the smear of white and grey.

A thump, and suddenly, a familiar silhouette leaned over him. Cold, clammy hands grasped his jaw, turning his head from side to side. A bright torch shone into his eyes, burning to the back of skull.

"Interesting. The jump appears to exert great strain on the body." Hojo made several notes, even as he pressed an icy stethoscope to Cloud's chest. "Heart rate irregular, but quickly steadying. May induce cardiac arrest in non-SOLDIERs. Potential cause of death for test subjects M through R."

Cloud groaned, willing his hand to reach up and grasp the scientist by the throat. "Professor, the subject is still conscious-"

"Quiet! I know what I'm doing," Hojo interrupted, taking his vitals with brisk efficiency. "Above average body temperature, also returning to normal. Specimen is cognizant of its surroundings, but
motor functions are temporarily impaired. It could be due to the field instability, or the length of
jump."

He'd barely managed to raise his arm off the ground when Hojo retreated, and the cage door
slammed shut behind him again.

"Prepare a set of remote sensors - we'll implant them after today's session. I want real-time readouts
of the specimen's biometrics. For now, we'll fine-tune the voltage."

For a moment, there was quiet, as the scientist returned to the viewing room. Cloud's vision began
to clear, and the throbbing in his head receded to nothing more than an annoyance. Mako
enhancements made for quick recoveries, but not quick enough to take advantage, apparently. He
clenched his fists in frustration, and pushed himself back to his feet. Next time, he promised
himself. There would be another chance. He had to believe it.

Then the intercom crackled to life again.

"Adjusting the calibrations. Next test to begin in five, four-"

A chill of fear ran down his spine.

Sephiroth awoke with a jolt.

At once he pushed back the sheets and headed for the bathroom, bare feet ghosting over the tiles
without a whisper of noise. A sheen of sweat pricked his forehead, plastering the silver strands of
hair to his skin. A drop rolled down his neck, and continued the journey down his bare back as he
viciously twisted the water on.

The nightmares had returned, though different now. Incoherent flashes, laced with pain.
Threatening, vaguely familiar silhouettes, looming over him. Trapped. Caged. Helpless to escape.
And yet unable to clearly identify the assailant that left him gasping for breath on the floor.

He remembered similar nightmares from his teenage years, when he first entered the SOLDIER
program. Back then he had dismissed them – dreams were meaningless distractions from his goals.
Why return now, though? And so visceral, so much more vivid than those blurry shadows of a
decade prior.

He felt more exhausted now than before he'd gone to sleep.

A splash of cold water over his face refreshed him sufficiently to begin preparing for the day,
though once more he'd awoken with the sun scarcely peeking over the horizon. He dressed
leisurely before leaving his quarters and heading to the elevator.

No Angeal would be there to greet him at the coffee machine, he recalled moodily as the doors
opened with a soft ding. No chance of running across a surly blond SOLDIER in the halls, either.

As he waited for the elevator to arrive, he considered what to try next. Genesis and Zack were
focusing on looking for their dying friend – though there was little point until they acquired the
cure – leaving Sephiroth to attempt to leverage the mysterious connection that Angeal and the rest
of SOLDIER seemed to think he and Cloud shared.

It had not been particularly productive. To begin with, he'd stared at maps for hours, to see if any
particular location would jump out at him, hoping for a similar flash of inspiration as that time he'd
known Strife was in the gym. When that failed, he'd then created a walking route to cover all of
Midgar, based on the radius of ShinRa's headquarters. Possibly the range of his mysterious sense extended further, but anecdotal evidence from Zack had only covered that distance. Unfortunately, that too had not yet been fruitful. Wherever Strife was, it wasn't Midgar.

He'd even tried traditional meditation from Wutai, with mixed results. Some sessions he'd been left with the impression that Cloud was definitely alive, but very far away. Others, he didn't pick up a hint of the blond's presence at all. As though for hours at a time, Cloud Strife ceased to exist on the planet.

With such insubstantial and wildly varying results, he couldn't be sure how much of it might be that extrasensory perception he supposedly possessed - the logic behind which still baffled him - and how much might be wishful thinking.

In short, it had now been weeks without progress. He was no closer to divining the meaning behind his apparent sixth Cloud-sense, and in the meantime, his old reliable friend was dying from a disease that the missing blond may have hidden the cure for.

The silence was broken by the soft ding of the elevator bell and whoosh of the opening doors. It was empty, the hour still too early for even the over-achievers to be up and at the office. Sephiroth stepped inside, the sound of the doors hissing shut behind him uncomfortably loud in the morning stillness.

Things couldn't, in his opinion, get much worse. Even Genesis had become subdued of late, gloomily staring into the distance when once he would have quoted *Loveless* as though the poem contained all the answers they would ever need.

Perhaps for the best. Sephiroth still hadn't entirely forgiven him for hiding such a monumental matter. But differences of opinion and trust aside, Genesis was the last one left out of those who mattered to him – so long as his mood didn't interfere with his work, he would endure it.

The elevator carried him swiftly to his floor. The lights in the hallway were not yet lit when he disembarked – he flicked them on with a careful gesture, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the sudden brightness before proceeding.

As he approached his office, his gait slowed. Beyond the door, the low murmur of voices became audible. When he concentrated, he realised he recognised them, but that couldn't be right. It was far too early in the day for either Zack or Genesis to be awake.

He hesitated briefly at the threshold, but realistically, it was his office, and they would not be in there at this ridiculously early hour if they did not wish to speak to him.

The door opened with a soft click, and at once the voices inside stopped. He pushed it inward and observed, "It's rather early for you two to be-

The words died in his throat.

Zack had been facing the window. As Sephiroth entered, he turned, and the golden light of the rising sun glinted off the edge of a familiar sword resting on his back.

"About time you got here," Genesis greeted snippily, as though he were expected to be in his office at the crack of dawn.

"What's happened?" He kept his voice soft and even, for Zack had a ragged look about him, his normally bright and open eyes dull and tired. Thinking on it, he hadn't seen the black-haired Second for a number of days. There had been no news, no reason for them to meet.
"Sorry, sir," Zack said, and he sounded even more weary than Sephiroth felt. "I tried to tell him, to catch him, but."

"Start at the beginning," he interrupted, and carefully closed the door behind him. He suspected this would be a conversation best kept clear of prying ears.

"Right," Zack ruffled the spikes on the back of his head. "I've been out routing Wutai rebels in the marshes all week, to stop them hooking up with some terrorist group that's supposed to be stationed out there." He closed his eyes, as though to better recall the details. "Things were going well to begin with. Suspiciously well."

"How so?" Sephiroth prodded. Genesis busied himself picking scraps of lint from his uniform. No doubt he'd already heard the tale.

"Just – it was too easy. Wutai ninja are tough, and I didn't have much in the way of backup – only Cissnei and some troopers. They're meant to be master strategists, but they never managed to get organised enough to mob us, or even separate me from the others to make it an easier fight. Then we found tracks. There were monsters in the area."

"The monsters were responsible, then?" Sephiroth could not yet see how this could lead up to Zack coming into possession of Angeal's sword.

"That's what we thought to begin with. But then I found one of them, and…" His voice faltered. "They weren't ordinary monsters. They…" He gestured vaguely. "The colouring was different. And in the feathers… I could have sworn it was Angeal's face."

Absurd. "Are you certain you weren't just seeing things?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but I know what I saw, sir." Zack shuddered. "It threw me off. I got Cissnei and the troopers to a secure location, then ran off on my own, looking for clues." At Sephiroth's stern look, he shrugged helplessly. "I know, sir. But Cissnei told me to 'do what I had to do', and I was-"

Genesis cut him off. "Get to the point."

"Right. Um… I guess that part's not important anyway." Sephiroth felt a twinge of pity for the flustered Second, clearly still reeling from recent events. "Anyhow, it was stupid. I went chasing after what I thought was the monster, but it turned out it was one of those 'anti-SOLDIER weapons' from the War. It was running free without a keeper. I did okay to begin with, but then a second one ambushed me." He grimaced. "It caught me by surprise. I tried to block it, but my sword broke."

"I fought some of those beasts in Wutai," Genesis informed him. "Never make the mistake of trying to block – only dodge. We lost four First Class SOLDIERs to them, and at least a dozen Seconds."

It was to Zack's credit that he'd only lost a sword, then. "How did you escape?"

"That's it, you see. Angeal came in right then, and took it out before it could kill me."

The only sound in the office was the quiet rumble of the air conditioner.

"Are you saying," Sephiroth began in a low voice, "that Angeal was watching over your mission?"

"…Yeah."
"And you didn't confront him?"

"I tried!" Zack's hand reached up to clutch the hilt of the Buster Sword. "But as soon as he'd done it, all he said was that he was entrusting his dreams to me. And then he just… took off." His eyes took on a haunted look. "He flew away, and—"

"One flies away," Genesis murmured.

"-and I chased after him, but he was flying – how was I supposed to keep up? And then, when I went back… there was the Buster." Zack's shoulders drooped. "I shouted after him, about the cure, asked him to come back, but—"

"You did well, Zack," Sephiroth said. "Angeal can be… stubborn, in his own way."

Zack nodded. "I know, sir. I finished the mission, and got back this morning. And Genesis was—"

He gestured at the First.

That was a good point. "Zack has told his story – care to share why you're up at this hour of morning, Genesis?"

Genesis scowled. "Second Class Zack Fair isn't the only one to have received a visitor in the night." And with none of his usual flair for the dramatic, placed a single, white dumapple on the desk.

The fruit rested there, innocently unaware of the gravity of its meaning.

"You spoke with him?"

"Of course not. You think I would have let him escape, too?" Though his words were acerbic, his tone lacked venom. "I awoke to an open window and this on my bedside table."

Sephiroth picked up the dumapple, and held it delicately between his fingers. Such a distinct, pleasant fragrance… "The meaning?"

Genesis folded his arms. "Angeal came from a poor family. I, on the other hand, was the mayor's son." He gazed off into the distance, as he normally did when reciting poetry or stories. Always with the love of the dramatic. "The children would make sport out of stealing the fruit from the trees. Yet, even though the best dumapples grew on a tree on our property, Angeal never once stole from it."

Silence. Then Zack scratched his head. "I don't get it."

Genesis scoffed. "You wouldn't."

"But… isn't it more like he's… saying goodbye?"

Carefully, Sephiroth replaced the dumapple on the table. "No… I think there is still hope for Angeal. While we must remain open to the possibility, I don't truly believe he killed Hollander. And if he continues to look out for you, Zack, and cares enough to leave you a message, Genesis… then he has not yet become a monster."

The sword for Zack. A dumapple for Genesis.

Nothing for him?

Sephiroth strode to the windows, to stare down at the plaza, as was his recent habit. Still mostly
deserted, with only a few sleepy souls dragging their feet to the entrance.

Except…

On the tiny ledge outside his office, at the foot of his wall-to-ceiling windows, rested a white feather.

Sephiroth stared at it. It was stuck in a groove, clinging on in the morning dew even as the breeze tugged at it, trying to blow it away.

So that was it. Of course he didn't receive anything. Sephiroth needed no symbol to value what he'd been given. The true inheritance was intangible. Trusting his dreams to Zack. Trusting his pride to Genesis. And to Sephiroth…

"It's a mark of trust," Sephiroth said. "He's relying on us to find Cloud, and to fix things, because he doesn't think he's able to anymore."

The room fell silent. Zack adjusted the weight of the Buster Sword on his back – no doubt unused to the additional weight. It was a heavy burden he'd been given indeed.

Genesis folded his arms. "And the one that is left becomes a hero."
Three hours.
Two days.
A week.

Cloud stumbled into the bars of the cage, gasping for breath. His vision swam, and he closed his eyes for a moment, waiting for his equilibrium to re-establish.

"Error of point two percent," the emotionless voice crackled through the speakers. "Subject is conscious, and appears normal."

"We're ready to move to the next stage, then." Hojo's unmistakable tones came from the background. "Are the numbers prepared?"

"Yes Professor."

"Set it up now then."

The viewing room fluttered with activity as the scientists moved into action, making adjustments, checking and double-checking every step. Two entered the room to fiddle with the materia stands, and then retreated to safety once more. Cloud watched, silent and resigned. He wouldn't get a break yet. He never got a break anymore. Not even a few hours to sleep…

Caged. Trapped. Unable to do anything other than just stand there as Hojo yanked him through time, discovering the limits of his new toy.

"Power levels rising. Seventy percent... eighty percent... ninety percent..."

His vision began to blur, but when he blinked, everything gained a sense of hyper-reality. The edges of the bars seemed unusually defined – tiny details his eyes would normally skip over stood out in sharp relief. His skin tingled with energy. Something about the sensation felt familiar, yet alien at the same time.

Every breath seemed painfully slow. His gaze darted to the observation window. Most of the scientists were monitoring their screens, shoulders and necks hunched in their concentration, with only a few having glanced up to watch the moment of the jump. Except Hojo. Hojo always stared directly at him, eyes half-lidded, cold, calculating, expecting.

He wasn't blinking.

Nobody was. They didn't even look like they were breathing.

Then, all at once, everything sped up. Cloud squeezed his eyes shut, dizzied by the shift as the scientists all suddenly moved as one, freed from their stasis. A fuzz of garbled words spilled from the speakers, the assistants all trying to talk over each other in their confusion.

Not a moment later, the door slammed open, and Hojo himself entered the chamber, dogged by a
nervous underling, and headed straight for the nearest stand. He removed the materia, inspected it, then returned it to its slot and began checking the wires and adjusting the gauges, muttering angrily to himself all the while.

"A compressed Haste spell effect… power must have fallen short… a mistake in the equation…” Cloud watched him with steely blue eyes, waiting for him to step within arm's reach of the cage. He never did, of course. Hojo knew to keep anything and everything far enough away. He rubbed at the new scar on his chest self-consciously. The scientist had even gone so far as to implant sensors directly in to him, so he didn't have to take any more chances checking his vitals. If anything, this Hojo was even more paranoid than the one he remembered. But he would make a mistake, eventually. He always did.

It must have been a failed jump, if Hojo took the risk to come in to check over the equipment personally. That hadn't happened for a while.

It never made a difference. They simply fiddled with the numbers, and then it started all over again. He didn't know why. Surely they had enough data to stop with the tests by now. What more did they hope to learn?

"Increase the power output by six percent," Hojo decided. The assistant jumped to it, eyeing the caged SOLDIER nervously. Cloud watched him with a dull expression. Having read some of the reports strewn about the mansion in his own time, he already knew the futility of trying to gain sympathy from the Professor's underlings. The most sympathetic of the lot had ranted his life woes to them while they floated in mako, unable to respond, or in his case, even comprehend.

And people thought he was crazy.

Eventually, Hojo was satisfied, and the pair left the chamber again, the lonely clang of the door echoing like a tolling bell.

"Restart the procedure cold," Hojo ordered as he reappeared in view on the other side of the glass.


It had become a familiar process by now. The ear-splitting whine, the smearing colours, Ribbon burning, the breath knocked from his lungs-

Cloud choked, squeezing his eyes shut as he slammed into the cold, gritty floor. His head throbbed, but he clung to consciousness with the stubbornness of an adamantoise.

Then, something different.

A faint sound of surprise.

"Professor! Subject has re-appeared prematurely! Seven percent error! Code red! Security alert!"

Warning lights washed his vision crimson. Cloud blinked, trying to make sense of the blurry shapes taking form in front of him. One of them an indistinct white and black shape that seemed oddly familiar… And next to him, bars. But not in front of him, where he expected them to be.

"Guards!" That reedy, nasal tone ordered. "Restrain the specimen!"

Somehow, he was outside of the cage.
He was outside of the cage, and *Hojo was there with him.*

This was his chance.

He moved entirely on instinct. Cloud lurched to his feet in an instant, even as the white blob of the lab coat rushed to the solid grey of the iron doors. In one swift move, he caught the scientist by the neck and slammed him against the wall.

His vision caught up at that moment – came into sharp definition as he took in the dark, terrified eyes and cracked glasses, knocked askew. He could see the sweat beading on Hojo's brow, the way his thin, pale lips stretched as he gasped for air.

"Where is Jenova?" he growled. He could feel the scientist's pulse race beneath his fingers.

"The gas-" Hojo wheezed.

Cloud tightened his grip. "*Where is she?*

Hojo gurgled. Distantly, he became aware of a faint hissing, but his attention remained firmly fixed on the scientist clawing at his arm, turning white in the face. *Finally,* he had Hojo squirming in his grasp. A little more pressure, a twist of the wrist, and he could break his neck and-

His vision was starting to blur again. Cloud frowned, and wavered on his feet. Only then did he register the sickly sweet scent filling his nostrils.

*The gas.*

The door slammed open, and guards wearing masks and carrying syringes rushed in. Cloud snarled and slammed the professor against the wall again, willing his fingers to clench, but the strength was beginning to flee his body, numbness creeping in from his fingertips and toes. His grip slackened, and Hojo began to wheeze.

No, he had Hojo *right here-*

Heavy hands tried to wrench him away, to free the professor, but Cloud dug his heels in, refusing to budge. He focused, tightening his hold through strength of will alone, until Hojo's eyes began to widen, and instead of white he began to turn blue.

Then he jerked as a sharp, blindingly powerful jolt zapped through his body. Hojo dropped to the ground, gasping, dragged away by the masked troopers. Cloud threw a blind punch and staggered after the escaping scientist, but the gas was catching up with him, and he stumbled and fell, fingers still twitching from the bite of the electro rod.

"*He's down! Get the Professor out of here!*"

The guards held him down, and the white of scientist's lab coat disappeared through the door. No, he had to get Hojo, get *out!* Cloud surged to his feet, throwing one startled trooper clear across the room.

"*The hell-?*"

"*He's back up!*"

"*Get the rod!*"

"*I already zapped him at full strength!*"
Another jolt arched along his spine, setting his nerves on fire and leaving his fingertips tingling. It was enough to make him stumble, then the guards were piling upon him, forcing him back to the ground, boots pressing on his forearms and back and head, voicing echoing eerily in their masks. It was too late – he'd breathed too much gas in when he'd been distracted with Hojo. Sluggishly, consciousness receded, and tense muscles relaxed against his will.

Failure. Hojo, right in his grasp… and he hadn't managed to kill him. Hadn't even managed to find out anything about Jenova. He might have ruined everything.

The opportunity, lost. Should have snapped Hojo's neck immediately. Would a broken neck be enough, though? Had Hojo injected himself with Jenova cells yet?

He couldn't hold on to the thought – it slipped away like smoke. Distantly, he could feel himself being dragged – could feel the grit of the floor being replaced with the cold steel of the cage, hear the resounding slam of the barred doors. Then, the footsteps walking away, the dying hiss as the gas stopped, the lights flicking off, and Hojo's hoarse complaints crackling faintly across the speakers.

At last, sleep. Even if only for a precious few hours…

Leather creaked as Sephiroth clenched his fists. It had been a satisfying dream, for a moment – his hand wrapped around Hojo's throat, watching his face pale and fear colour that dark gaze instead of cold calculation and analysis. But it had all ended too quickly, and dissolved once more into confusing, nonsensical hallucinations, of burning villages and seas of mako and distant gunfire.

They'd become infrequent, of late – it had been over a fortnight since the last one. They never failed to wake him early, however, rattled, disoriented, and more tired than before he went to sleep.

"Sephiroth!" Genesis's sharp pronouncement tore his attention away from the window – he'd been staring at the ragged feather still caught on the window's edge, lost in thought. An unforgivable lapse of attention. There had been too many of those, of late.

"Glad you could make it, Zack," he greeted smoothly, avoiding acknowledging his distraction. Truthfully, he had no recollection of the Second Class arriving.

Zack gave a short wave, but Genesis would not be deterred, studying him intently. "You look tired." Accusation lay nested in his words.

"It's not degradation," Sephiroth assured him for what felt like the hundredth time. It very well may have been. "You yourself implied that I was made differently."

Genesis's gaze slid away at that. Sephiroth couldn't bring himself to feel pleased at the small victory, for the matter was one he did not feel had been answered satisfactorily. "What is it, then?"

"Just nightmares." Rather than allow his fellow officer the chance to pursue that line of query, Sephiroth took a seat behind his desk, and turned his attention back to the younger SOLDIER. The other two remained standing, even though there were chairs available. Too much nervous energy to sit still, perhaps. "It's been a while since we've been able to meet like this. Has there been any progress?"

Glumly, Zack shook his head. "I haven't seen or heard anything from Angeal since then." The Buster Sword still rested on his back - the cold, steel behemoth in the room that nobody wanted to acknowledge directly. Sephiroth thought it suited him, though. He wore the sword like he'd carried it always, and not merely as a symbol like Angeal had. The General never saw the point of such a
magnificent weapon being treated as an ornament.

"And the search for Cloud?"

"Nothing. The Turks aren't talking either. I tried Cissnei and Tseng. They know something, but they're not budging." He kept his expression neutral and professional, but Sephiroth could hear the depression in his voice. He'd never considered Zack to be naïve by any stretch of the imagination – he was a favourite of the Turks as a SOLDIER escort, after all - but this whole affair had not been a kind introduction to the darker side of ShinRa, the side that would happily stab its most loyal employees in the back in the name of profit.

"Genesis?" Sephiroth tried.

The Commander folded his arms. "I have a project I'm still working on, but I should think that the great General Sephiroth, with his mysterious special connection, would have had more success."

"Jealousy is not very becoming of you in this situation, Genesis," Sephiroth drawled. Genesis's cheeks reddened, and his eyes sharpened. A tad cruel of him, but the redhead was the not the only one frustrated by their lack of progress and looking for a chance to lash out. "I'll take that to mean you've had no luck either. And in response – no, I've not been able to gather any clues, despite Angeal's cryptic lead. But then, I have only been able to cover ground within a day's travel of Midgar, so if there's a range issue as suggested, its usefulness is limited."

Zack's shoulders slumped, and Genesis looked away. Truthfully, as SOLDIERs, they didn't have a lot of experience in investigative work of this sort – it was better suited to the Turks. They may have had the smarts, but not the time nor resources. It didn't help that Lazard, for whatever reason, did not seem to want them to find Strife. He hadn't listed him as a deserter yet, against all logic and regulation, but at least if he had then someone would have been dispatched to find him and dispose of him. Instead, he did his best to keep them far too busy to search properly, so that days and weeks slipped through their fingers without any progress, and even cold trails faded to nothing.

It didn't make any sense. It was as though he didn't want them to have any contact with Cloud at all. What was he so desperate to hide? They already knew that he'd been cooperating with Hollander and lying to them about Cloud, after all, even if none of them had spoken of it openly.

"Any word from Sergeant Kunsel?" Sephiroth asked. "We haven't heard anything from him for some time."

"Kunsel left a couple of days ago on a mission heading over to the West Continent, escorting some precious cargo or something. He's scheduled a couple of weeks leave after he's done, so he can have a look around there," Zack reported. "The only concrete thing we know about Cloud is that he came from Nibelheim originally. It doesn't sound like he has any ties there anymore, but Kunsel thought it was worth checking out."

"Nibelheim?" Genesis asked.

"It's a small town on the West Continent," Sephiroth provided. "Access is difficult due to the mountain ranges. I believe there's a reactor there."

Zack nodded. "We're lucky a mission came up to the area at all. There aren't many requests from that part of the West Continent, except some dragon one that panned." He grinned. "When the new one came up, Kunsel nabbed it straight away. That guy's always the first to know."

Sephiroth would have liked the opportunity to go himself, but realistically, ShinRa would never
agree to send him on something that only required a single Second Class. "We're fortunate then, that he could get in before another SOLDIER claimed the mission."

Zack shrugged. "I'm pretty sure anyone would have swapped if we asked. A lot of the guys have been asking what the deal is, since he's been missing so long. Some of the lower ranks look up to him, you know, for, um-" He sent an apologetic glance at Sephiroth. ".-for giving you hell, sir."

Sephiroth felt his lips twitch, but suppressed the smile. Oh, he knew very well – adored as he might be by the lower ranks and civilians, those within SOLDIER didn't always hold him on the same pedestal. It hadn't escaped his awareness that his fellow SOLDIERs had become more congenial with him since Cloud's arrival. Up to and including Genesis.

"Not that he notices, of course. And Aeris had some strange message for him, too," Zack grumbled. "She wanted to tell him that the secret to keeping flowers healthy was getting the right water – weird, right? I don't think Cloud's exactly into gardening. But when I asked what it was for all she'd tell me was that it's 'nobody's business'."

"Aeris?" Genesis inquired.

"My girlfriend," Zack declared proudly.

The Commander rolled his eyes. "Then spare us the details. We're not here to discuss your love life."

"I was just pointing out that we're not the only ones worried!" Zack defended.

"Are you suggesting we bring others into the search?" Sephiroth asked with a frown.

"Well, not exactly, but we're not getting very far! If Kunsel can't find anything on the West Continent, we're going to be out of leads. More people might help – a few extra eyes and ears on the street can go a long way."

"Absolutely not," Genesis snapped. "The only reason the Turks and Lazard have let us continue looking all this time is because we've kept it quiet and low-profile. Hollander was murdered, and nobody has said anything about it. There are inter-department politics at work, and if SOLDIER becomes involved as a unit, the stalemate will break and Cloud and Angeal will be in danger." He rattled off his angry analysis as though he was delivering a field briefing to a room full of idiot cadets.

"But it's been-"

"I know how long it's been," Genesis interrupted, mood visibly soured by the reminder.

Sephiroth nodded gravely. "While I agree more people would help, Genesis is correct. This is a sensitive company matter, and there are risks in going public. The Turks have displayed unusual restraint in the matter – I do not intend to test their good faith." Or risk having them order they stop the search. Though he'd begun to suspect they only allowed it to continue because they were certain the four of them wouldn't find anything. He didn't share that suspicion with his companions.

He didn't voice his other concern, either – that his fellow SOLDIERs could 'disappear' if the company began to question their loyalty. He doubted ShinRa would move against him, or even Genesis after the Wutai campaign, but the two Second Classes helping out were vulnerable. Until they could discover the full story behind Cloud's disappearance and the company's silence on it, it would be wise to tread cautiously. Angeal would not look very kindly on his friends letting his student get into that sort of danger. Sephiroth intended to welcome him back without that sort of
unpleasantness.

Zack folded his arms. "I get that. But… I just don't like sitting here doing nothing. It's been so long, and we don't even know how much time Angeal has left! And ever since that mission with Cissnei, all Lazard's been giving me is busywork around Midgar."

They didn't want to take chances, with Zack toting that Buster Sword around on his back. Probably flagged as a risk to the company. Normally something that would cross his desk, but he was being kept out of the loop. Tseng had been avoiding him, too. A bad sign.

The more time passed, the more he suspected the worst-case scenario.

"Take a day and check Banora again, then," Sephiroth suggested. He and Genesis had already been back twice to comb over the town and warehouse for clues, but Zack knew Angeal differently – he might pick up on something they'd missed. If nothing else, it would soothe the Second's restlessness.

Zack nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I think I will." He squared his shoulders and ran a hand through his hair. He'd changed the style – more slicked back, more spiky – reminiscent of how Angeal wore his. Like a promise. Zack's symbol, less cumbersome than the heavy sword he carried on his back. "I'd better get going then. I'm running a training exercise with the security forces this afternoon. I'll be in touch." He headed out the door.

Neither Genesis nor Sephiroth spoke until he was gone.

"He'd already be a First Class if it weren't for this mess," Genesis observed after a respectable silence.

"Lazard may promote him anyway, in an effort to consolidate his loyalty. The papers have already passed my desk."


"Nothing at all like giving you command of the mission to Wutai," Sephiroth remarked dryly. He earned a dark glare for that, but point made, continued, "Zack has earned the promotion fairly. He works hard, and his mission record is flawless."

Genesis hummed briefly in vague disapproval, but didn't argue the point further. Sephiroth was thankful. It was difficult enough to deal with Zack's increasing restlessness – Genesis picking fights on top of that would have been a Drain spell on what little patience he had remaining.

The General turned his attention to the documents still littering his desk, and set about re-ordering them for later perusal. Yet his guest lingered.

"Was there something else?" Sephiroth inquired.

"Your nightmares," Genesis declared abruptly.

He frowned, and leant back from the desk again. "I already told you-"

"Not that," Genesis interrupted, impatient. He waved a hand vaguely, in an impression lacking care. "I merely wanted to know what they were about."

For all his casualness, it was an unusual inquiry. Their friendship was not a sentimental one – as
much as Genesis willingly shared the vivid imagery of his own dreams and the potential interpretations of, treating the fruits of his subconscious as though they were poems in their own right, he rarely asked such private details from his fellows. Sephiroth steepled his fingers and regarded the Commander across the desk. "They are confusing, for the most part. There are a number of recurrent themes, however – a burning town, for one. Drowning in mako in another. Why do you ask?"

"I find it suspicious, is all. That suddenly your nightmares started when Cloud came to ShinRa."

His piece apparently said, Genesis turned on his heel and strode for the door. "I have a mission now. Call me if there's any progress." Then he was gone in a flash of red and black leather.

Sephiroth remained in his chair, shocked to stillness at the revelation, and astounded he hadn't noticed it himself. It was true. His nightmares had only started with Cloud's arrival.

Could it be a coincidence? Impossible. He'd grown wary of the term of late. Perhaps then, the sight of Cloud had sparked some long repressed memory. From his forgotten childhood?

That could be it. He'd been focusing on his career at ShinRa for the source of Cloud's animosity, but had completely forgotten that his past stretched back further. His brow furrowed. A significant oversight, and he felt foolish for not considering it sooner.

He couldn't imagine what he might have done as a child to earn the sort of hatred shown in Wutai, though.

There was one other possibility. The mysterious link that Angeal had alluded to, and the unnatural ability Zack had pointed out to him.

Could the dreams be some sort of subconscious connection with the blond?

And if the dreams were messages from Cloud…

Sephiroth stared at his hand, and frowned.
Cloud heaved in a gasping breath, struggling to stay conscious.

"One week and two days," Hojo observed from the safety of the observation window. "Specimen did not reappear within the exact same coordinates as he did in the shorter jumps. This is in keeping with the pattern developed in the previous five-day jump. Given the logical fallacies in maintaining one's relative position in space when considering planet rotation and orbit, the mechanics of the jump must be closely related to those of Exit materia. Drift can be accounted for by the gradual shifts in the mako currents within the asthenosphere."

Jump after jump after jump. Hojo was eating away, bit by bit, the precious time he had left before Nibelheim. And worse, he couldn't be certain how far off a Nibelheim event might be. The timeline might have changed with Genesis's cure.

Cloud pushed himself to his feet once he had his breath back. Based on the activity in the next room, they'd be doing another jump almost immediately. They didn't usually stop unless they made some discovery they needed to analyse, or something went wrong. He preferred to be standing for the jump. Just in case another opportunity presented itself. He'd appeared outside the cage twice more, both on longer jumps, and while in neither case had he been in any condition to act on it in time, he needed those openings. So far, it had been the only chance he'd seen of escape.

They'd enlarged the cage after the last incident, though – not by a lot, but apparently it was enough to accommodate for that margin of error. Cloud didn't understand the details, and didn't care. They would be careless eventually. Zack waited four years, but it had happened. He simply needed to be ready to seize the moment when it came.

"Calibrations complete. Next test to begin in five, four, three..."

A sharp whine – familiar now – rose in the room. Ribbon began to warm. He closed his eyes, but his vision snapped white anyway.

Despite his best efforts, Cloud choked and stumbled. Only this time, hands caught him before he could hit the bars. Through the ringing in his ears, he heard a shocked exclamation, but couldn't make out the words.

The words weren't important. He didn't think – simply reacted. Cloud threw himself forward, barrelling his shoulder into the chest of the person who'd grabbed him. No co-ordination yet, get them off-balance first. They stumbled back, but held their feet. Not enough. Cloud hooked his leg around, trying to trip them up, but they jumped over it. Too slow? Growing desperate, he threw a wild punch.

It was caught. And held.

No trooper, no scientist. That took the strength of another SOLDIER.

"-Cloud? Is that really you?"

At last, the world started to come into focus again.
The same cage, in the same depressing room. Scientists still visible through the window, already setting up for the next jump. Everything remained the same, except that all of sudden, a SOLDIER Second Class shared his cell.

"Hey, you're not looking so good," the newcomer murmured, finally releasing his fist.

Cloud let it drop to his side, and felt his horror mount as he at last registered the familiar voice.

"Kunsel?"

Genesis sat on the bleachers at the edge of the gym, watching Sephiroth finish running his sword katas, long bored of the study. He'd seen the General run these flashy routines many times, but saw little point to them these days – never once had they been used in actual battle. He'd long concluded that it must have been like Zack doing squats, or Angeal fawning over Buster Sword. Mindless activities they could perform while thinking of something else. Genesis, on the other hand, had no need of such physical distractions, perfectly capable of sitting still when in need of quiet contemplation.

Zack fiddled with his PHS nearby. The gym was empty, save them – it was the end of the week, and most SOLDIERs who lived on premises had retreated to pursue relaxation and social endeavours. Once upon a time, he, Sephiroth and Angeal – and for a brief period, Cloud too – would have met for drinks in the General's office. Now they haunted an empty gym, where they could brainstorm without eavesdroppers or interruption.

Not that brainstorming appeared to be doing them any good. It annoyed him that Sephiroth had been given all the tools to find Cloud. Genesis wasn't exactly jealous, but he didn't think it fair. He owed such a great debt to their missing colleague, yet was once more relegated to the sidelines by ShinRa's favourite SOLDIER.

It didn't bother him as much as it might have before Wutai, but that was a far cry from liking it.

Zack grumbled and slipped his PHS back into his pocket. "Must be out of range, still."

"Sergeant Kunsel?" Genesis guessed.

"Yeah. Haven't heard from him since he left for the West Continent. Service is kind of spotty over there."

Genesis frowned, but didn't comment further. Unless the oh-so-mighty Sephiroth started living up to his genius reputation, Kunsel's investigation stood as their last lead of any real substance. They could only hope he was taking so long because he'd found something to follow up, and not because he'd found nothing, but kept looking out of stubbornness.

Sephiroth continued whirling and slashing at air, brow furrowed in a near ever-present frown. The Training Room would have been more satisfying for him, no doubt, but the Training Room had a security feed the Turks could access. The Turks were being particularly neutral regarding their efforts, but that could change at any moment. Better they not reveal any progress.

Especially since the General had gone curiously silent on the matter of his connection with the blond after their last discussion - a response that made the Commander more than a little suspicious.

It didn't look as though Sephiroth was going to finish anytime soon, so Genesis took a page from Zack's book and removed a shiny black PHS from his pocket, flipped it open, and began thumbing
through the contents for what must have been the fiftieth time now.

"Hey, isn't that Cloud's PHS?" Zack asked, craning his neck to see.

"I have it for safe-keeping. And thought it might provide some clues." It hadn't, aside from the fact that Cloud had a very unusual contact list – far more unsettling than Angeal's initial reports on it so many months ago had led them to believe. Most of the numbers returned a disconnected message. If Kuskel's efforts failed, Genesis's next plan was to trek out to Corel to meet Barrett Wallace, and then to Rocket Town to talk to Cid Highwind. Both claimed to have never met Cloud Strife, but he wondered if they would change their minds with a rapier at their throats.

"Clues?"

"The names inside. Not to mention the phone itself."

"What's weird about the phone?"

"I haven't found a store in Midgar that carries this model yet." Which had been problematic when it came to recharging it after the battery died, soon after they'd reclaimed it in Banora. It had taken him literally weeks to visit every store in the city, even the ones in the slums, searching for a compatible charger. None of them had recognised the model – couldn't even tell him the brand – and eventually, he'd resorted to coercing a lackey in engineering to jury-rig him something with the right voltage and connection.

"Weird. In all of Midgar? It must be a custom job or a designer model or something." At those words, Zack's eyes lit up in realisation. "Then-"

Genesis nodded. "Precisely. If I can find out where it came from, it may give us a new lead." How embarrassed Sephiroth would be then, if even with his mysterious connection, his old rival made the most progress.

At that moment, the PHS trilled.

Zack jumped, and Genesis nearly dropped it in his surprise, staring at the ringing device as though it were some kind of new, mysterious species of razor weed. Cloud never got calls - and the only mail he received was absurd spam from some company called 'Treasure Princess', which had become ever more urgent in its frequency of late.

"Aren't you going to answer?" Zack prodded after the third ring.

Genesis glanced at the number. It wasn't one of those in Cloud's contact list.

He picked up. Silence.

Bad connection? "Hello?"

More silence. Then... "Is this Cloud Strife's number?" The voice was smooth and deep, possessing the same sort of timbre he associated with Sephiroth.

"It is," he confirmed. "I'm minding his PHS for him. You are...?"

For a moment, he didn't expect a response. Then, "...Vincent." No last name? The pause before answering made him think it had been omitted on purpose. But then, thinking on it, he could recall seeing the name on the contact list, just not attached to this number. "I'm an acquaintance of Cloud's."


"Genesis Rhapsodos," Genesis introduced himself in turn, mostly to see what the reaction would be. His name had become instantly recognisable, thanks to the press on the Wutai War.

He was not disappointed. "Commander Rhapsodos. You are close to General Sephiroth. Then Cloud has infiltrated your inner circle." He sounded thoughtful. "You should warn Sephiroth he's in danger - Cloud intends to kill him."

"Oh, we already know about that," Genesis declared breezily. "He's tried it a few times already."

Another pause, then... "I shouldn't be surprised. I take it he was unsuccessful."

"Sephiroth's just fine, if that's what you're asking." This conversation became more interesting by the sentence.

"Where is Cloud? Can I speak to him?"

"Unfortunately, he's not here right now," Genesis drawled. Idly, he noted that Sephiroth had stopped his katas to come listen in. Zack also made absolutely no secret of the fact he was eavesdropping.

"Will he be back soon? I have important information on... some progress in an important matter. For something he wanted done as soon as possible."

Genesis paused. Could it possibly be-? "Do you have the cure?" he snapped.

"...I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"The cure! For degradation! Are you the person Cloud was waiting on?" Genesis demanded.

"...You must have the wrong person. I'm calling about something that had been... misplaced."

Genesis's shoulders sagged, before he remembered his audience and straightened once more. It would have been too good to be true, if Angeal's cure had fallen into their laps like that. But it didn't make the disappointment sting any less.

Regardless, they had a new contact to interrogate about Cloud. Given the scarcity of information on the blond, they couldn't let him get away so quickly. "I see. My apologies for the misunderstanding. We've been waiting for word on it for so long – I thought perhaps..." Genesis stalled.

Zack tilted his head at him in question and made some random gestures that might as well have been a chocobo's mating dance for all the meaning they held. Sephiroth fared slightly better, using a quick series of field hand signals, which normally meant to draw enemy fire, locate the wounded, and report ally positions, but in this context he figured ordered him to break cover and ask Vincent if he knew anything outright.

"I understand," Vincent was saying. "When would be a good time to call back?" A rather casual way to avoid offering his own number to return the call.

Genesis considered for a moment, and decided they didn't have anything to lose. "Actually, I should confess that I haven't been entirely forthcoming with you. Cloud is currently missing. We've been trying to find him for some time now, but we're not altogether sure he even wants to be found."

Silence.
He could certainly imagine Vincent being a friend of Cloud's. They were both excellent at avoiding sharing more information than absolutely necessary and maintaining awkward silences long past the point where most people would assume the connection broken.

Then, abruptly, "It isn't safe to have this conversation on the phone. I'll look into it, and be in contact in person soon." The line went dead.

Genesis closed the PHS. "Delightful fellow."

"He thinks Cloud's PHS is tapped?" Sephiroth asked with a frown.

"More likely he was calling from a public phone. ShinRa does monitor those from time to time. And it wouldn't surprise me if the Turks had put out a notice to trace anything that called Cloud's PHS." It made Vincent a paranoid bastard, but if he were a friend of Cloud's, he almost expected it.

Speaking of paranoid bastards. "Do you think he could be a threat?" Sephiroth mused.

Genesis flashed the General a mocking smile. "Hardly. His very first thought was to warn me that you were in danger from Cloud. Rather late, but it's the thought that counts, surely?"

Sephiroth didn't look particularly amused, and Zack was trying – and failing – to stifle laughter.

It troubled him, however. What news could Cloud have been waiting on other than the cure for Angeal?

"Where did you come from? I'm not just imagining this, am I?" Kunsel asked.

Cloud didn't get the chance to answer before Hojo gave the order to start the next jump.

"Begin recording. Initial test for the transportation of multiple subjects within the same materia field. Power levels rising. Seventy percent... eighty percent..."

He slammed into the ground again, but forced the fog from his brain and peered through bleary eyes, seeking the other occupant to the cage, still not convinced he hadn't imagined it.

"Ten minutes and three seconds. Error level, less than one percent." The speakers crackled, as impersonal and uncaring as always. "The gauges recorded an unusual energy spike moments prior to the jump, and the second specimen's biometrics have left the safe zone."

The purple jumpsuit and standard-issue helmet were still there. He reached out, and tentatively prodded the prone form. The fabric gave way under his prodding. Not a hallucination.

Cloud sat up and pushed his fellow SOLDIER over. It had only been a short jump, but Kunsel was in a bad way – the visible portion of his face had turned paper-white, he could hear his heart racing, and his hands were badly shaking.

He thumped him once on the chest. "Breathe," he urged.

With a jerk, Kunsel choked, then rolled onto his side, coughing and wheezing. His face flushed with colour.

Distantly, Cloud could hear Hojo's murmuring, picked up in the background by the microphone. "Interesting. The disparity in the results could only be explained that way. Mako levels appear to be a primary factor in both inducing and surviving a successful jump." A pause, then, "No. I'll need
to revise the equation with the new data first. Lock it down for now."

"What is this? What just happened?" Kunsel croaked.

"Hojo's using Time materia to jump things into the future," Cloud explained in a whisper. "Just focus on breathing. You'll feel better soon."

Kunsel did just that. Cloud sat quietly, watching the scientists scurry about through the observation window like needlebirds building a nest. At least the glass wasn't mirrored, so he wasn't surprised when the lights flickered out, plunging the room into absolute darkness.

"What's going on?" He felt Kunsel move next to him, struggling to rise into a sitting position. Cloud grasped him by the arm and hauled him up.

"It looks like they've gone for now. They've got some new results to go over." He'd figured out something of the logic behind the experiments. Hojo appeared to be fine-tuning the amount of energy he needed to pump into the materia to make a stable jump, but apparently any number of variables - from the length of the jump, and now the number of people involved - could influence it, so occasionally he'd get a break whenever the scientist found anything unexpected he wanted to analyse. Normally when the lights went out, he could be guaranteed at least a few hours respite.

"Is it safe to talk?"

"Yeah. I tested it out. There aren't any microphones on this side, just cameras. Hojo doesn't care what his specimens have to say." He couldn't keep the bitterness out of his words. More likely, it was that the scientist didn't want his thought process interrupted by shouted threats or agonised screaming.

"Infrared?"

Cloud paused, and Kunsel added, "The cameras."

"Oh. Yeah." He didn't know for sure if these ones were, but based on experience, Hojo wouldn't turn off the lights otherwise.

"So much for that plan of escape," he muttered. His voice sounded steadier now, but hadn't quite lost its breathiness yet. The jump had really knocked him around. "And I guess there's no chance of rescue from within ShinRa, if the head of the Science Department is running things. They always get the lion's share of the budget, you know. Always wondered what they spent it on."

Cloud made a small sound of agreement.

"Do you think the President knows that we're here?"

"Probably. He gives Hojo whatever he wants."

"Yeah, that's what I heard, too." Kunsel cleared his throat, and asked, "Anything to eat? I must have been in here for about two days before you suddenly turned up."

"No." Cloud's stomach grumbled at the reminder. He'd woken up to find ration bars next to the water three or four times, but had no way of measuring how long ago the last batch was. In his perspective, it might have only been a couple of days, but due the jumps it had to be longer. With trepidation, he murmured, "...How long have I been gone?"

"You don't know?"
How could he? He'd tried to keep track, but spending so much time sedated, and then the jumps on top of that…

"Cloud, you've been missing for nearly five months."

He froze.

Five months? Already?

Cloud knew that with the experiments Hojo had been eating away far more time than what he could keep track of, but he'd been guessing something in the realm of a month, two on the outside. It felt like forever, but he'd been sure…

*Five months.*

His head spun, and he squeezed his eyes shut. *Gaia,* it was happening again.

"Four years? Don't mess with me!"

"Cloud? Hey, you with me, man?" Kunsel's voice took on a worried note.

He shook his head, chasing out a memory he knew to be one of Zack's. "Sorry. It's just-" The words caught in his throat. How much longer did he have? "Just… give me a minute."

"Sure." After an awkward pause, Kunsel ventured, "Are you sure you're okay? You weren't looking so great when you appeared out of nowhere." He sounded as though he'd finally returned to normal strength, but it still alarmed him that the Second Class had handled a comparatively short and stable jump so poorly.

"It was just the jump. I'm used to it. Takes a minute or so to shake it off," he muttered. Too much to take in. Things were moving too fast, and the situation now… "How did you wind up in here?"

Kunsel wasn't supposed to be here. Out of everybody he'd dealt with, he had the least to do with the horrors of his original timeline.

"It's kind of a long story."

Cloud shrugged a shoulder. Kunsel laughed. The walls seemed to absorb the sound, muting it, as though it were unwelcome. "You're right. I guess we're not exactly going anywhere." He shifted, trying to get into a more comfortable position. "Zack and I have been looking for you ever since you disappeared. The Commander and General, too. It's been tricky, trying to make progress between missions without upsetting anyone. And we hardly knew where to begin. All Zack could remember was that you said you originally came from Nibelheim." He heard the Second scratch the back of his neck – as he always did when embarrassed. A bad habit he'd picked up from Zack, probably - or maybe the other way round. "Would have been here sooner, but it's hard to get missions over to the West Continent - they normally give them to SOLDIERS stationed at Junon. But eventually I got lucky. The Science Department wanted a SOLDIER escort for some highly classified research they were transporting to the Nibelheim reactor."

In the darkness, he could barely see Kunsel's silhouette slouch in place. "I'd planned on completing the mission then looking around the area. But as soon as I'd finished the escort to the Reactor… Guess I'm still a long way from First Class, if a Turk can take me out."

The Turks. Seemed like they hadn't changed much in this timeline. "Which one?"

"Tseng. At least I wasn't taken out by a rookie." He chuckled mirthlessly. "Weirdest thing, though.
Right after he got me, he said something strange. 'We're lucky it was you.' But then, I guess he's friends with Zack, and wouldn't want to fight him. The whole mission must have been bait. "He grumbled something uncomplimentary about ShinRa personnel policies under his breath.

Bait? It would be just like Hojo to order a mission for the sole purpose of getting another SOLDIER to run his experiments on. But somehow, something bothered him about the timing. If he guessed right, Kusel's mission would have come up only a week or so after he'd given Hojo his scare.

Escorting highly classified research? To the Nibelheim reactor?

"Jenova," he breathed.

He finally knew where she was.
Chapter 31

He might have known where Jenova was now, but trapped as they were, he still couldn't do anything about it. It was even worse than when he'd been at ShinRa, knowing that his worst enemy lurked under the same roof, yet having to restrain himself for the sake of the plan.

Although, he had more immediate concerns at the moment.

Cloud bit his lip, watching with concern as Kunsel continued retching, as he had been for the past five minutes. Only the third jump, and the Second Class looked worse than Cloud felt after a dozen of them in succession.

He didn't pay any attention to the scientists observing from the other room, aside from noting that it looked like they were going to follow their new pattern of leaving them be to analyse the results again. Hojo's voice held an excited note Cloud had learned to dread. It meant the scientist had ideas.

A few minutes later, the room plunged into darkness, confirming his suspicions. He let out a breath of relief. Just as well. No matter what Hojo might have planned for them later, Kunsel needed the time to recover.

"You okay?" he asked.

Kunsel groaned and rolled over. "Feels like I was run over by a herd of behemoths." Nevertheless, he pushed himself into a sitting position and took off his helmet. The cell grew a little brighter briefly, as Kunsel's eyes added their glow to his, but as soon as he'd splashed some water on his face from the pitcher, the helmet went back on like a security blanket. "Sorry about the vomit." He gestured vaguely towards where he'd been sick earlier.

"Don't worry about it."

"Maybe if they come to clean it up-"

Cloud dismissed the idea before the Second could get his hopes up. Disappointment would only break him faster. "They'll gas the room to knock us out first."

"You're kidding. Isn't that kind of extreme?" Even with his voice still weak, the incredulity came through loud and clear.

"I caused some trouble before. They're not taking chances anymore." He flexed his hands. Hojo had been right there, in his grasp-

"I guess the Professor knows better than anyone what a SOLDIER is capable of," Kunsel grumbled. "Unlucky for us."

"Hn," Cloud agreed, preoccupied with his comrade's lingering discomfort. If he listened carefully, he could still hear the Second's heart racing as though he'd sprinted halfway around Midgar. It wasn't a good sign, but he couldn't do anything about it.
He slid around so they sat back to back, giving Kunsel something more forgiving than bars to lean against. Consumed with their thoughts, neither of them spoke for some time.

Eventually, Kunsel let out a heavy sigh. "Hey Cloud?"

"What?"

"You're from the future, aren't you."

He announced it, just like that. Not even a question.

Cloud remained silent. No response he could think up seemed adequate.

"Guess that answers that."

"...How?" he murmured.

"Did I guess? Well, it's not exactly the first thing that springs to mind when you're trying to figure someone out," Kunsel admitted. "But this stuff with the Time materia, and your whole vendetta with the General..." He felt the Second shrug at his back. "You don't have any records, or history. I snooped around a bit when you first turned up. It was downright weird. Then some of the things you'd say... I don't know if you've noticed, but sometimes you talk about Rufus ShinRa as though he's the President. It never made any sense, but if materia is capable of throwing you forward in time, then..."

Kunsel was smart. Nobody gave him enough credit. Of course he connected the dots, the very instant he discovered the nature of these experiments.

"You're right," he confessed. Then, after a brief pause, added, "It was an accident. Broke a Time Materia."

"Time-travelling by accident? Scientists dream about that stuff, and you just trip over it? Sometimes I can't figure out if you're incredibly lucky or incredibly unlucky."

Cloud ducked his head.

The Second sighed. "So why didn't you ever say anything?" A beat, then he chuckled. It sounded faintly strained. "Sorry. Stupid question. Probably wouldn't have believed you before this-whatever this is." He shook his head. "This is all so insane."

Silence. Cloud didn't really know what to say next, and it didn't sound like Kunsel knew, either.

It didn't last. Eventually, Kunsel broke the stalemate and said, "You sounded so sure when you said ShinRa would let this happen. Is that why? Has it happened before?" His voice grew rough.

The question didn't need an answer. They'd already gone through several variations of this conversation.

"What the hell happens next, then? Come on, Cloud. Talk to me here."

"Next?" he echoed, and frowned, though Kunsel wouldn't have been able to see it. "I guess... if I don't get out..." His words trailed off in hopelessness. He couldn't predict what might happen from here. Would Sephiroth still come to Nibelheim and discover the truth of his heritage? Probably. Hojo would make certain Reunion happened, if Cloud didn't find a way to stop it.

"...Was it bad? The future?"
Inwardly, he warred with himself. Should he tell? How much could he tell?

Was there any point in hiding it? By the tone of his voice, Kunsel had probably figured a lot of it out already.

"It's kind of a long story," he murmured.

Kunsel shrugged a shoulder, in mockery of his earlier response. Cloud tried to smile, and couldn't quite manage it.

"...After the materia broke, I suddenly found myself in the wastes, around the start of the Wutai War." He hung his head, staring blankly into the inky darkness. "Thought I could make a difference. Make it better. But I couldn't even stop that."

He never expected to have this conversation with Kunsel of all people. Never planned on having it at all, but figured that if he ever wound up being found out, it would be by Zack, through virtue of persistence, or Sephiroth, through virtue of his uncanny ability to guess his thought processes. Or even Genesis, who was probably the only one fanciful enough to consider the notion of time travel seriously.

"You tried to stop the Wutai War?" The Second sounded disbelieving.

Rightly so. Cloud had experienced the futility of that effort first hand, after all.

"...I tried, but the Wutai War wasn't what I was really worried about," he said softly.

He could feel Kunsel nodding. "Sephiroth, right?"

Cloud let out a long breath.

"What happened?"

He spent a moment collecting his thoughts. Where could someone really begin, when talking about Sephiroth and all he'd done? "...Sephiroth isn't like the other SOLDIERS. He's... he was made differently. The enhancements started even before he was born. With cells from a alien organism called Jenova." He paused, then added, "I think she's what you transported to the reactor."

Cloud drew his legs to his chest. The mako glow from his eyes coloured the outline of his knees a faint blue. "When he found out the truth of his origins, he started to hate ShinRa. And then after a while... he started to hate everything."

Kunsel remained respectfully silent.

"He burned down my village." His voice sounded dead even to his own ears. "Zack and I killed him then, but... he was a monster. He kept coming back. He went insane. He killed President ShinRa. He killed..." His breath hitched, and he changed tact. "...He tried to destroy the Planet. He nearly succeeded. In my time, Midgar's nothing but a ruin."

The silence grew thick enough to choke on.

"After he burned down my village, I joined an anti-ShinRa group. We fought back." He closed his eyes, voices echoing in his ears.

"ShinRa's finished."

"Meteor's gonna fall in about... seven more days."
"This is our last battle. Our target is the Northern Caves. Our enemy is... Sephiroth!"

"This is definitely not good! He's way outta our league!"

"...Isn't the rest up to the Planet?"

He took a deep, shuddering breath. "We won in the end. But so many people died."

They sat there in the darkness for a long time, neither saying anything. Cloud felt strange. It had been a relief to say it, really, and not having to worry about being accused of insanity. But it always brought up bad memories.

Nothing but bad memories, in this place. And Hojo kept creating new ones.

"So what happened to Zack?"

Cloud tensed. How-?

"Sometimes you give him this look... like he'd gone away to war, and you never expected to see him again, or something. I could never figure it out. Thought maybe he resembled someone you lost. But that's not quite right, is it?"

He'd been worried about Tseng or Sephiroth or even Zack discovering his secrets, and all the while Kusel had noticed that much?

Shouldn't have been so surprised. The man really was a master of gossip. He always hung out in the hallways, watching people. You learned a lot, doing that.

"...He died." He swallowed, and continued in a strained voice, "We were on the run, after ShinRa betrayed us to hide what Sephiroth had done. A platoon gunned him down in the wastes."

"The price of freedom sure is steep."

"The hell?" Kunsel jerked at that. "Why didn't you do something?"

Cloud clenched his fists. "I was weak! I was just a trooper then. I failed the SOLDIER exam!"

"Then how-"

"I didn't exactly lie about the mako poisoning. When Zack- I was practically comatose. I was useless." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I couldn't do anything, and he..."

"Damn," Kunsel swore, and slumped again. "Sorry. I didn't mean-" He let out a shaky breath. "I never would have guessed, you know. You rose to First Class so quickly, I thought... well, you know. Shouldn't have assumed."

"I was weak," Cloud repeated in a mumble. "But I should have-"

"What about the Commanders?" Kunsel interrupted. "Angeal and Genesis?" The accusation was implied. Where were they? Why didn't they do anything to stop it?

"Angeal died. Genesis betrayed ShinRa before Sephiroth went insane. I'm not sure what happened to him in the end." He held some vague memory of Zack fighting him, and knew he'd become involved in Deep Ground, but nobody had seen any sign of him during or after the Omega incident.

"How long do we have until that happens?"
Cloud shifted. "Genesis probably won't betray ShinRa anymore. I think I changed that much. As for Angeal... I don't know. Depends on how quickly his illness progresses this time." If he didn't go rampaging around the countryside with his friend, he'd probably last longer. He held some notion that Genesis had managed to cling on for a couple of years before being cured.

"That's something, then." The Second was taking it all rather well, considering. But then, SOLDIERS were trained to run with whatever surprises their duties threw at them. He could recognise mission-mode when he heard it by now. "So, what was your plan? There had to be more to it than 'kill Sephiroth' if you joined ShinRa after all that."

Cloud nodded, though Kusel wouldn't have been able to see the gesture. "If I only kill Sephiroth, Hojo will just clone him again, and he'll keep coming back. And if I don't destroy Jenova, there's a risk some other scientist will pick up where Hojo left off."

"So it has to be those three, then," Kusel murmured, thoughtful. "The General would be hard to take down, though. I mean, I've seen you two fight before, but if it was to the death-"

"I'd win," Cloud said, firm.

"You're so sure? They say not even Angeal and Genesis together can beat him."

"I've stopped him before. I know what it takes." And those Sephiroths had been stronger.

"If you say so." He sighed. "I feel kinda bad, though. Are you sure you really have to? The General's been turning Midgar upside-down looking for you and Angeal. Would probably be stalking the rest of the Continent too if the higher-ups would give him the chance."

He didn't want to think about it. Tseng's words haunted him. Just because he didn't consider Sephiroth a friend...

"You ignorant traitor."

"I guess we should find some way to take care of Hojo and this 'Jenova' first, though, right?"

Cloud froze. Did he hear that right?

"It's all pretty crazy, I have to admit. But I don't think you're lying." In a softer voice, Kusel added, "I don't see the point in defending the company if it's going to wind up in Midgar being destroyed. And Zack's a real idiot. It'll probably take both of us to make sure he doesn't get himself killed."

His voice had deserted him. What could he say to that? Even Vincent hadn't agreed to help him so easily.

"You shouldn't," he eventually muttered. "Don't- It's got nothing to do with you. There's no need to get involved."

"I'm already involved."

Cloud just kept shaking his head.

"What is it then? What happens to me? Do I get killed too? Or become a monster?" The words were uncharacteristically sharp for the usually calm SOLDIER.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "I never met you in my original timeline." Didn't know how to help his friend. Didn't even know if he would need help.
As quickly as Kunsel's annoyance came, it fled, and he slouched. "Oh," he said. Then, "I guess that's kind of a relief. I was worried for a moment that maybe you'd only become friends with me and agreed to teach me all that stuff about materia because of some history you were trying to change."

Cloud's gut twisted. "No. It was... just a good break." What else could he really say to all of that? It had been such a relief to have a friend in this time without baggage – whether they were aware of the baggage or not. He didn't have to constantly worry about Kunsel betraying ShinRa or hauling him off to the Science Department or getting killed by Sephiroth.

Yet in the end, his actions had resulted in an innocent person being dragged into his whole mess. If he'd never befriended Kunsel, the Second never would have taken the mission to Nibelheim to look for him. Would never have been captured by the Turks and brought into the lab.

His guilt grew until it felt like a lead weight in stomach.

Most of Hojo's specimens died under his experimentation. Those that lived often weren't much better off.

How could he help, though? He didn't understand why the jumps affected him differently. Unless...

Struck with a thought, his fingers drifted across the Ribbon tied around his arm. It still felt faintly warm.

Could Ribbon be the difference? He remembered it practically burning on some jumps – normally the ones that left Hojo berating his underlings and cancelling the rest of the experiments for the day so he could 'fix the numbers' or 'recalibrate the equipment'.

His indecision lasted only a moment – the same resolve that had driven him when he led Avalanche to the Northern Crater took hold, and in one swift gesture, he pulled Ribbon from his arm.

"Here," he said, reaching back to grab one of Kunsel's hands, and shoving the thin piece of fabric into it. "Put that on. On your leg or something. Somewhere Hojo won't see it."

The Second fumbled with it in the darkness. "What is it? It's fabric, but it's weird. Sort of feels a bit like materia."

"It might help, with the jumps." He rubbed his bare arm self-consciously. He'd been wearing it for so long he felt naked without it.

The rustling of cloth paused. "Hey, Cloud, are you sure..." He sounded uncertain.

Kunsel was sharp. Artefacts that were resistant to the effects of materia were beyond rare and often priceless. He knew without being told what Cloud was offering. "I'll be fine. I've been through worse." His voice came out gruffer than he would have liked.

"But..."

"Take care of it," he interrupted. "I want it back when we get out."

The promise worked. Kunsel didn't protest any further.

This time, he was the SOLDIER First Class. He'd do Zack's legacy proud, and protect his friends,
"Tseng. Welcome back to Headquarters," Cissnei greeted.

Tseng stepped out of the helicopter and smoothed the wrinkles from his suit. "Any problems while I was gone?"

"Formal request from SOLDIER for a meeting with the leader of the Turks," she reported. "It came in two days ago. We've been stalling."

Tseng nodded. He'd expected it, though perhaps not so soon after Sergeant Kunsel failed to report back in at the end of his scheduled leave. At times like this, he really didn't enjoy his job. The Turks dealt with unpleasant business as a matter of course, but some missions challenged his admittedly thin moral fibre more than others. Especially missions concerning the Science Department.

He didn't know the details of Hojo's new project, and that concerned him. Compared to Hollander, the new head of the Science Department guarded his research jealously, hiding it even from the Turks. Especially from the Turks. His most precious projects were for the President's ears only.

Tseng normally wouldn't question it – direct orders from the President were to be followed swiftly and without fail, after all. But his concern lay in what Hojo might hide from the President. No other department escaped scrutiny quite as thoroughly as the Science Department. Even Scarlet got audited occasionally. But never Hojo.

"Tseng?" Cissnei prodded.

"I'm sorry, I was lost in thought." The situation was delicate. Very delicate. Hojo held the sway of power with the President, but Sephiroth and Genesis combined could destroy ShinRa, a fact that few among upper management seemed to appreciate. To make matters worse, Sephiroth and Genesis were rather fond of Cloud, whose worth to the Science Department apparently outweighed the not inconsiderable risk involved in holding him against his will.

Quite frankly, Tseng had his hands full in simply preventing the problem from escalating to a civil war.

"Should I set up an appointment?"

"No need. I have a feeling they'll want to hear from me immediately." They headed towards the waiting elevator. It closed with a soft whoosh, and the air grew suddenly still, even though the doors still whistled under the buffeting winds.

"Where to?" Cissnei asked.

A request from SOLDIER. That meant he had a choice. Deal with Lazard or Sephiroth.

"The Director's office," he instructed. Cissnei pressed the button for him.

Lazard was safer. He had leverage against the Director of SOLDIER. Not leverage he could use, unfortunately, without deposing the Director from his office, but he anticipated the bluff would be enough. They needed Lazard leading SOLDIER. Currently, he was the only thing keeping Sephiroth and Genesis's private investigation in check.

He also couldn't forget the matter of Zack and Kunsel.
A shame that the mission to Nibelheim had slipped through the cracks. Lazard wouldn't have been aware of the mission's relation to the missing SOLDIER, and the Turks had been too slow to intercept it – Sergeant Kusiel had snapped it up before they could act. They'd underestimated the Second Class's information network. He could have made a decent Turk.

Ideally, a completely unrelated Second or Third Class SOLDIER would have taken the mission. As it stood, they'd been lucky Kusiel snatched it instead of Zack. That could have complicated things further. Tseng liked Zack. And more importantly, the cheerful Second Class had stronger connections with the three top-ranking SOLDIERS. Including the wildcard currently on 'leave'.

Kusiel bought time. Time he desperately needed for investigation. Zack would have robbed him of it.

Not that he had forever. Zack had a perfectly functional brain, even though anybody who'd spent any time around the SOLDIER knew that he preferred to use Kusiel's.

The elevator dinged. "Good luck," Cissnei offered.

Tseng stepped out into the carpeted hallway, and inclined his head in response. Right now, he could certainly use a good dose of Cissnei's uncanny luck.

He knocked twice on the executive's door.

"It's open," came the response.

Then again, he didn't need luck for this part. Lazard had been clever, but he didn't have resources anymore. By now, he had to be aware that his link to the Science Department had vanished. He was also being forced to work around his most valuable SOLDIERS. And in the breast pocket of his suit, Tseng held some curious reports from accounting that didn't quite match up…

"Director," he greeted sombrely. "Before we begin, I have some terrible news."

Something was different. The sounds and sensations weren't the same. He couldn't feel the cool metal of the cage beneath him, couldn't hear the low rumble of air flowing from the ducts, and the light burning through his eyelids was completely wrong.

Cloud struggled to drag himself to consciousness. His body didn't want to cooperate – his limbs were leaden, and his senses felt as though they'd been clogged with cotton. Sedatives at work. They must have gassed the cell again. He couldn't remember falling asleep.

Even through the drug-addled haze, though, he felt as though he recognised this place. The way the sound of his own breath bounced back to his ears, the cloying humidity, the stench of mako as strong as the inside of a reactor.

Cloud opened his eyes, and was filled with horror.

It was the lab again, the one hidden behind the accursed library. With its grey table adorned with metal restraints, its mako-stained tiles, its concave ceiling lit by the harsh light from a naked bulb. His own private hell.

That wasn't the disturbing part. It was the view of it. Everything blurred, the lines bending as though viewed through a lens. A view he knew far too well.

*The mako tanks.*
Frantic, he glanced to the right. For a moment, the sight of the purple uniform and silver helmet disoriented him. Kunsel, not Zack. The Second was slumped against the wall of the tank, still unconscious.

A blurry figure in a white lab coat passed in front of him, image distorting in the curve of the glass. The sounds were faintly stifled and nearly buried under the echo of his breath.

Gasping as the tank filled, thrashing, beating on the glass walls, begging for a release that would never come. Zack yelling abuse from the next tank over, the overpowering stench burning in his nostrils, the poisonous green filling his mouth and his lungs-

"No, you imbecile! It needs to be the diluted compound! The temperature is too low – crystallisation would set in immediately!"

A muffled response.

"Three hours to begin with, and if there's a measurable difference in the jump readings we'll proceed with longer treatments." Hojo returned to the front of the tanks, peering through the glass at him. "Ah, it appears Specimen C is awake. Hurry it up, then, you fools. We're losing precious time!"

Precious time.

Cloud shivered, and the burning green began to pool around his feet.
Back in the cage.

Back in the tanks.

Back in the cage.

It never ended.

Cloud hugged his arms to his chest, struggling to suppress the shivering. The cell felt a lot colder and unforgiving in sodden clothes. At this stage, though, he figured they should be glad Hojo let them keep any clothes at all.

"Power levels rising. Sixty percent... seventy percent... eighty percent..."

The whine in his ears turned to a shriek. A flash of white, and Cloud stumbled, bracing himself against the bars, breath coming in harsh rasps that rattled his lungs. With shaky legs, he slid down to rest on the floor. Without Ribbon, the wave of nausea and aching that normally accompanied a jump turned into a sensation not unlike being hit by a truck.

"Twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes. Error of less than two percent."

Kunsel slumped down next to him. He looked a bit green, but it was hard to tell if that were from the time jump or the mako still clinging to his skin. Hojo had his assistants hose the tanks with water before they took them out for the next round of tests, but it was a matter of protocol at best—the green still settled inside their boots, nestled between the folds of their uniform, and lingered underneath their nails. It didn't strike him as particularly hygienic or sterile, and he wondered if this was part of the reason why Hojo's specimens had such an abysmal survival rate. "Cloud?"

"It's fine," he muttered, and knew better than to ask why there were three Kunsels spinning in his vision. "Give me a minute."

Faintly, he could hear Hojo's mutterings fade in and out as he paced back and forth in front of the microphone. "The increase in mako levels appears to have assisted the other specimen... possibly at higher percentages the effects plateau and become negligible... accumulation of time stress... could be related to the exhaustion reported by the repetitive use of Exit materia..."

"Hey," Kunsel said in a weak voice, "It's that ribbon you gave me, isn't it? Take it back. You're a wreck."

He shook his head. "It'll be more effective for you," he lied. "Besides, I'm already feeling better." He didn't risk trying to stand up, though. And his head felt like it had been stuffed with dirt. But better that Kunsel benefit from Ribbon's protection. It was only fair. The Second Class had nothing to do with any of this.

Besides, a selfish part of him was grateful not to be stuck in this hell alone, for that silent support. But even with Ribbon, Kunsel wasn't doing so great. He was a SOLDIER, at least, so he kept a cool head and didn't dissolve into hysterics, and could take a lot more physical punishment than
the average human being. That didn't mean Hojo's experiments weren't taking their toll.

Cloud did what he could, whenever they were outside the dreaded mako tanks. Talked to him in a quiet voice, the way Zack used to in his place, to keep him in the present and responsive. Told him about the Ancients, Jenova, Reunion, the Lifestream, how the Planet was dying in detail. He skirted around his personal experiences, especially those involving Hojo and his confusion over Zack's memories, but relayed the story of how he'd first come to this timeline, and what had happened with Angeal and Hollander. Made sure he remembered to drink water whenever possible. Woke him up when he slept too long, always gripped by the fear that he might slip into a coma.

It was a grim insight into how Zack must have felt when they were imprisoned those four long years.

Cloud avoided thinking too deeply about it. Kunsel was a lot tougher - and a good couple of years older - than he'd been when he first fell into Hojo's clutches. He'd last longer. He was probably even handling the mako soaks better than Cloud was, at this point.

It didn't change the fact that this new angle of Hojo's experimentation could ruin everything. He needed to act soon, or the opportunity would be lost forever.

"I'll get us out of here this time, Zack," he whispered.

The PHS clutched in his hand began to creak, plastic squealing under the growing pressure.

"You've got to be kidding me," Zack growled. "This is some kind of sick, messed-up joke, right? Right?"

Neither Genesis nor Sephiroth said a word.

The letters on the screen glowed steady and bright, as though mocking him.

'...And lastly, an official notification in the change of status of the following personnel: Zack Fair, SOLDIER Second Class – promoted to SOLDIER First Class. Kunsel, SOLDIER Second Class - killed in action.'

The company notices, cold and impersonal, listed the death of one of his closest friends as a footnote.

"Bullshit."

If Angeal died from degradation, would he be reduced to this? A careless afterthought in the newsletter, with no mention of the part they played in his death?

Zack clenched his fists. "I'm going."

Sephiroth moved first, blocking the door before he could leave. "Don't be a fool."

"It can't be a coincidence. He goes on a mission looking for Cloud, drops out of contact, and then we get this?" He shook his PHS at the General.

He might as well have been arguing with a statue. "That doesn't mean you should rush off to the West Continent without a plan," came the stony reply.

"If we wait too long, it might be too late to act!"
"You won't be of any use to anybody if you are put in detention, or worse, killed," Sephiroth cut in.

"I'm a First Class now! You can't stop me!" snapped Zack.

"Being First Class means you can turn down missions, not that you have the right to flout the chain of command," the General all but growled.

His retort rested on the tip of his tongue, but Genesis gripped his arm hard enough to bruise. Confused, he glanced at the red-haired Commander, and was met with a steel blue glare and a very slight shake of the head.

He must have inherited some of Cissnei's luck, because a Third Class chose that moment to knock on the door. "Enter," Sephiroth called.

"Sorry to interrupt, General, Commander, Lieutenant," the Third Class nodded to each of the Firsts in turn. "General, the Director needs you in the Briefing Room. It won't take long."

Sephiroth sent him a look that promised they weren't finished with the discussion. "Wait here. And Genesis, make sure he stays too."

Genesis gave a mocking sort of half-bow, still not releasing his arm.

Neither of them spoke until the General and the Third Class had left the room. As soon as enough time has passed for them to be a respectable distance away, Zack scowled and turned on his fellow SOLDIER. "What was that about?"

"Are you a complete idiot?" Genesis hissed.

"Don't you start on that too, I know I'm right!" Zack was not in the mood for people to be insulting his intelligence. He knew he acted without thinking sometimes, but that didn't mean he was stupid. It just meant he spent way too much time hanging around geniuses with freakishly good memories. Like Sephiroth and Genesis and Kunsel. Shiva, that last name hurt. "Besides, you agree with me!" he argued.

Genesis's grip tightened. "I do, but listen to me. The problem here isn't so much the Turks as it is Sephiroth."

"What are you talking about? He wants to find them too, doesn't he?"

"Precisely. But have you even stopped to consider what might happen if ShinRa is the one responsible?" Genesis's gaze bore into him, as though trying to create understanding through the force of his stare alone.

"Huh?"

"Must I repeat myself? They've been indulging us so far, but let us pretend for a moment that ShinRa decides we're no longer acting in the company's best interests, and orders us to stop looking for Cloud and Angeal. What would you do?"

Zack hesitated, then admitted, "In this case… I don't think I would. Stop, I mean." Even if it meant being accused of treason.

Genesis nodded as though he'd expected as much. "Truthfully, neither would I. But what do you suppose Sephiroth would do?"
Zack's eyes widened. "You don't mean-"

Genesis's grim expression was all the answer he needed.

He hadn't considered that. And if they kept looking against orders, ShinRa might decide to do something about it.

"But, I mean, surely there'd be a point when he'd just say no, right?" Zack asked, uneasy at the thought. "Or at least exercise his right to refuse missions?"

Genesis huffed, crossing his arms. "I should think that if something were to upset him enough, then he would. ShinRa is generally careful not to push it. But do you really want to take that chance, Zack Fair?"

Zack recalled Sephiroth asking him what he would do, if ShinRa ordered him to kill a friend turned traitor. At the time it left him upset, but he hadn't ever believed it could really happen. He'd worried about ShinRa asking him to kill Cloud or Angeal, but never thought of the possibility that Sephiroth could be ordered to kill him.

That would really, really suck.

"He's that loyal to ShinRa?" Zack considered himself loyal to the company, but if they ever decided to change Angeal's status from 'on leave' to 'deserted', he wasn't sure if he'd able to kill his mentor. He looked the other way more often than he was comfortable with, but if it came to affect him personally...

Genesis shrugged. "I would say more that it's never occurred to him to be anything else. ShinRa is all he knows."

That was kind of sad. And suddenly, the General's ongoing cautiousness in their search for Cloud and Angeal made sense. Navigating through the grey areas and loopholes he certainly had no problem with, but uneasily, Zack began to wonder if Sephiroth had been so insistent on not rocking the boat for fear of confronting that exact scenario. Where his friends might become ShinRa's enemies.

He was trying to protect them, in a twisted, oblique sort of way. And maybe protect himself, too.

Genesis nodded. "It appears you finally get it."

"This is bad," he admitted.

Worse than bad. If the news about Kunsel was anything to go by, then their time might already be up.

It was supposed to be a happy occasion. As happy as it could get with Angeal's sickness and Cloud's disappearance hanging over their heads. He was going to surprise Kunsel with his promotion to First Class. Figured he'd just rock up in the uniform, see how long it took his buddy to notice. He anticipated the Second Class already knowing, probably bragging that he'd heard about it before Zack did.

Now, not only were Cloud and Angeal still missing, but Kunsel had been reported as dead, and they couldn't even trust Sephiroth with their backs.

And, dammit, he still wanted to throw all caution to the wind and race to the West Continent as fast as possible.
He was about to say as much, when Genesis held up a hand for silence. A moment later, the door opened again, and Sephiroth returned, the same frown still drawing his thin silver brows together.

"Any problems?" asked Genesis, expression bored. With new eyes, Zack noticed that the Commander's hand rested idly on his sword, despite the innocence of the query.

Angeal had always told him his friend was a good actor, but Zack hadn't comprehended how good until that moment.

"Just a routine matter," Sephiroth replied distractedly, then refocused. "Where were we?"

"I believe you were lecturing our rookie First Class Zack Fair on the perils of his impulsiveness."

Zack folded his arms. "I can't believe you really think we should just sit back and do nothing."

The frown deepened. "I suggested no such thing. But the whole situation bothers me. Think about it."

"What's there to think about?" Zack complained.

"It doesn't add up. Why would the Turks have allowed Sergeant Kusel to take the mission? Lazard has been diligent about keeping us busy and as close to Midgar as possible. I had assumed that was to prevent us from searching."

Zack pondered that, but Genesis replied first. "You suspect a trap?"

"If not one of ShinRa's own devising, then someone else's." Sephiroth folded his arms. "I'll request a report from the Turks – as one of my men has died-" Zack's stomach did a flip on the word. "-they'll have no choice but to comply."

"And then?" he challenged.

"And then we find a way to go to the West Continent, legitimately," Sephiroth said firmly, with a significant glance at Genesis.

"What?" The red-haired Commander drawled. "Are you comparing me to our rookie First Class?"

"You're just as prone to heroics," Sephiroth remarked.

"Hey!" Zack protested. "Nothing wrong with being a hero!"

Neither of them acknowledged his offence. "Just be patient until I can find something that will keep the Turks off our backs." Sephiroth pinned them both with a sharp green glare – the same stare he reserved for ordering around unruly troops.

Genesis scoffed, but didn't argue. He glanced at Zack out of the corner of his eyes, but his gaze darted away again just as quickly.

The General didn't appear to be finished, though. "And Zack, you received a new materia as part of your promotion to First Class, didn't you?"

He nodded, holding up his new bracer. "Thundara." He'd done well practicing with Cloud's mastered Bolt materia, so figured he should get his own.

The General nodded. "Good. Focus on training it up as quickly as you can. And restock your potions and ethers if you're running low. We'll need to be prepared to act on a moment's notice."
"Got it," he agreed, and while he felt a bit better at the idea of preparing for action, it didn't go very far in dampening his urge to act immediately. Intellectually, he knew this was his only choice right now – if he didn't want to wind up in a cell or in exile where he couldn't help anybody - but a larger part of him chafed at the restrictions. Restrictions he'd thought he finally left behind with his promotion.

He stared at the materia locked in his bracer. SOLDIER First Class. He'd finally made it, but something about it felt cheap now.

He recalled the pride swelling in his heart as Lazard delivered the news, only two days before. The congratulations of his fellow SOLDIERs. The renewed determination to find Cloud and Angeal so he could share his achievement with them. The satisfaction of attaining his goal, and the warm fulfilment of his dream as he put on the black uniform.

Then the official announcement of his promotion had come in the same company notices as the news of his friend's death.

He couldn't help but feel as though he had been bribed.

Green.

Thick, endless, burning green.

It seemed like he'd never left it. Or would never leave again.

Through half-lidded eyes, he watched the white blob of the lab coat moving about the room. His body felt both impossibly light and enormously heavy as it floated in the thick liquid.

Detached consciousness. He recognised the symptoms now, well enough to fight them. He also knew that eventually that resistance would erode. Already the events of the past were overlapping with the present, to the point where he sometimes struggled to distinguish what was real and what was merely nightmares.

The lab coat moved towards the exit, not even pausing by the tanks. It disappeared. Cloud waited. It might have been a minute. It might have been twenty. Submerged in mako, it became hard to tell – it distorted his sense of time, like riding a drug high. Had a lot of the same side effects, too. Memory loss. Hallucinations. Impaired judgement.

Enough time had passed to be sure the assistant wouldn't be back immediately, at any rate. No way of being exactly sure when they would return, but he'd have to take a chance. Kusel wouldn't last long enough for him to memorise the patterns, the way Zack had.

His gaze drifted to the second tube, where the limp form of a SOLDIER Second Class floated. Possibly unconscious. Hard to tell with the helmet.

He turned his attention back to the glass before him. In a daze, he reached out, caressing the smooth surface, fingers ghosting across the place he expected letters to be. Shapes painstakingly carved with nothing more than his fingernails.

'We have to get out of here.'

It was glass, but so thick it might as well have been concrete.
As a trooper, wounded with Masamune, weakened from experiments, addled by mako, he'd pounded on the walls desperately, anxious to escape. He'd never so much as cracked the transparent barrier.

This time, he was a SOLDIER First Class. Stronger than Zack had been, injured from his battle with Sephiroth. Stronger than his memories.

What was the point of trying to change anything, if he couldn't manage this much?

Barely thinking, Cloud pulled back his arm, and smashed his fist into the glass in front of him.

It splintered. He drew back, and did it again.

It shattered.

Mako gushed from the tank, half-dragging the blond out with it. The sharp edges of broken glass tore at his uniform, but he ignored them, pulling himself free and stumbling away.

Out. He was out.

Not much time. Operating almost entirely on automatic, he hurried to the other tank, splashing through the mako slowly disappearing down the drainpipe nestled in the tiles. He fumbled with the controls, until he finally found the emergency release. More mako sloshed over his boots, dumping Kunsel on the floor in its hasty rush from the cylinder. Cloud dragged him to his feet as the Second hacked and coughed, spitting out glowing green mouthfuls of poison. "Cloud?"

"We're escaping," was all he said. No sign of his or Kunsel's weapons, but they could make do.

"Can you stand?"

"I think so." Kunsel pushed himself to feet, still dripping with mako. Shaky, but he could walk. They were already doing better.

Cloud headed to the exit, cracking it open to peer out. No sign of any guards or scientists in the next room. Hojo worried more about moving them to and from the Time materia chamber – he probably hadn't bothered stationing anyone to keep watch while they were in the tanks.

There would still be sahagins, though. Neither of them had anything to ward the monsters away with, and without weapons, the creatures would be bold. They couldn't risk the commotion a fight might draw, either.

"We're going to run for it," he murmured. "Follow me. I know the way."

Kunsel nodded. They slipped through into the next room.

The cursed library. For a moment, Cloud's vision wavered as he watched the ghost of Sephiroth standing by the shelves, poring over file after file with glazed green eyes.

"Cloud?"

The apparition vanished, and only books remained.

"Just memories," he muttered, and headed for the exit, resolutely not stopping to look at the papers scattered on the desk or the tomes stacked on the shelves.

The cavern looked clear as well. Silently, they ventured into the darkness, Cloud able to navigate their way with ease. He'd trekked this dim path through his dreams so many times. Their pace was
more of a jog, neither of them able to move any faster without tripping over their own feet, still dizzy and sluggish from the mako. The quiet clicking of claws on rock echoed from the shadows. One sahagin ventured near, hissing, but Cloud lashed out with a well-placed kick, and it skittered back into the gloom, temporarily cowed. They didn't wait around to see if it would get its courage back.

Kunsel stumbled behind him. Cloud dropped back and caught his shoulder before he could fall. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I don't know why-"

"Don't worry about it," he interrupted, slinging the Second's arm around his neck and hauling him along at a slightly slower pace.

"Don't worry about it. We'll take it slow, okay?"

They were almost at the stairs when he heard footsteps.

Cloud tensed, and shuffled them into one of the shadowy recesses in the cavern wall. Scientists? Guards?

Too far away to ambush and knock out. He waited with bated breath. The stairs were right there, but if they went now, they might be spotted. They still had to make it through the mansion, out of the grounds, then away from Nibelheim. ShinRa probably wouldn't send troops into town to catch them, at risk of alarming the locals, but there weren't many paths off the mountain. The bigger a head start they had, the greater the chance of getting away. Maybe they wouldn't stop to check. Maybe they wouldn't notice.

Odin, it really was troopers. The pair of voices barely reached across the distance. "It's just mako, one of the canisters must have been leaking."

"No way, look here." A pause, and a shuffle of feet. "See? Looks like blood mixed in."

The other trooper swore. "It leads to the lab."

Blood?

"Cloud, your hand-!" Kunsel whispered.

Blankly, he looked down at his fist. It was bleeding liberally, with shards of glass poking out between the knuckles. Bruised and swollen to the point of deformity.

From when he punched out of the tank, he realised belatedly. He hadn't even felt it. Couldn't feel anything, really. His clothes were still sodden with mako, cold and clinging to his skin, but the sensation felt filtered, as though it were happening to someone else.

Adrenaline rush. It wouldn't last. He'd take advantage for as long as it held out.

He tugged out the largest shards and tossed them aside – they were getting in the way of the mako closing up the wound. It wasn't that much worse than when he'd tried to punch that security mech bare-knuckled. "We're going for it," he muttered, and before Kunsel had a chance to respond, propelled them up the stairs.

They were halfway up when the alarm started to sound – a distant, shrilling wail that tore at their ears and smothered any hope of listening for pursuers. Cloud practically dragged Kunsel up the last
few steps with him, and fumbled in the darkness until he found the edge of the exit. No time to search for the mechanism to unlock it – he threw all of the SOLDIER-enhanced strength he could muster at it, and managed to shove the door open a hand's width. Kunsel joined him, and the heavy stone entrance slowly ground open.

They spilled out into the musty bedroom, the alarm fading to a muted ringing behind them.

"Where-?" Kunsel looked around in confusion.

"Come on," Cloud ordered, and brushed past him. He fumbled with the doorknob with his good hand, gave up, and settled for kicking it open. The hinges squealed in protest.

The mansion bore more signs of life than he remembered. He didn't bother pausing to inspect the scattered research papers or check the closets for better clothes – even if their mako-soaked gear was doing them more harm than good at this point. He headed down the second-floor hallway, throwing a glance over his shoulder every few steps to make sure Kunsel was keeping up.

As soon as they stepped out onto the landing, they nearly barrelled into a trooper. Cloud kneed him in the gut and smashed his helmet into the wall. The ShinRa guard collapsed to the ground in a boneless heap before he had the chance to make a sound.

Kunsel stooped to grab the dagger in his belt, and was in the process of collecting ammo for the gun when Cloud tugged him along. "Leave it – we don't have time." More were coming from the other side of the mansion, summoned by the alarm. One gun low on ammo wouldn't make a difference.

They hurried down the stairs. Footsteps and shouted orders thundered behind them. They burst through the front door. Mid-afternoon sunlight kissed his face, along with fresh, clean air, for the first time in months. And just ahead, the gates-

There was a flurry of bangs. Cloud faltered when he felt something sharp pierce his neck. Reflexively, he reached up to tug it out, even as he distantly registered a ping of metal from Kunsel's helmet.

He stared at the object in his hand, numb with disbelief.

A tranquilliser dart.

His bruised and bloody hand chose that moment to start throbbing.

"Cloud?" Kunsel paused when he realised his fellow escapee had fallen behind, and then swore when he saw what the blond held.

Kunsel had been lucky – the darts had bounced straight off his helmet. That stupid damn helmet he always, always wore.

It was a split second decision. He could already feel the sedative working through his system, dulling his reflexes and senses. They wouldn't both make it. He had a minute, maybe two. Kunsel couldn't drag him like Zack had, once upon a time. Looked like he could barely drag himself.

Their eyes met across the distance – though Cloud couldn't see through the helmet, he could read Kunsel's thoughts all the same.

"Go," he said. "Get out of here."
Kunsel hesitated. "I can't-

"Don't be stupid." The guards were catching up. "I'll buy you time." His limbs were starting to feel heavy.

The moment stretched. For an instant he was afraid Kunsel was going to refuse, to be noble and insist on escaping together, but the Second was smarter than that. He nodded, turned on his heel, and dashed past the gate.

Immediately, three troopers rushed to follow, but Cloud leapt in front of them. Snatched one by the arm, swinging him around and throwing him back into the others. Kicked the second in the kneecaps, and he folded with a yowl and a painful crunch. Grabbed the third by the helmet and slammed his head into the ground.

The remaining dozen wavered, the red glow of their visors dulled by the mid-afternoon light. An army of three-eyed monsters.

Three of them fired another round of darts. Two missed, and Cloud slapped the last one out of the air.

He didn't have long, but he'd make every second count.

"Embrace your dreams, and whatever happens, protect your honour – as SOLDIER!"

"Come and get it!" he snarled.

Zack would be proud.
Kunsel stumbled blindly along the rocky mountain trail, heartbeat thudding in his ears so loud he started to get paranoid someone else might hear it. No pursuers yet, but it wouldn't last. He needed some kind of cover or shelter; ride out the night to get his strength back. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this exhausted. Not since he'd made it to SOLDIER, at least.

He clenched his fists and pressed on. Reminded himself that he could still take out a couple of troopers, if necessary. Hojo had a handful of staff at the mansion, maybe even a Turk if he was unlucky, but he wouldn't want to risk sending them all out after one escaped specimen. Reinforcements would take at least twelve hours to arrive, and that was assuming they came in on helicopter instead of truck. He calculated out the remaining possible formations in his head. The terrain would make it tough, but he could escape that net. If he made it a little further without getting detected, he had a real chance.

Where to go after, though? Cloud was still back at the mansion. He needed help, but his options were severely limited. Couldn't go to ShinRa – he'd be killed, or more likely, tossed right back into the lab where he'd be as good as dead anyway. How had Cloud lasted so long before?

Maybe if he contacted Zack directly. He wasn't too sure about the General or Commander, but Zack would try to help.

No, couldn't do that either. The Turks would be notified he'd escaped – they'd be watching his friends and contacts. No chance he'd endanger Zack, not after hearing Cloud's story. That lovable moron had probably made First Class by now. There had been a good chance of it happening while he was away. Which meant at any time here on in…

Best not to think about that right now.

Except Kunsel was the guy who never stopped thinking about things. He couldn't help it. People were always overlooking details staring them in the face, things they would easily uncover if they stopped and considered, and maybe asked a couple of obvious questions. He felt sure there was something important he was missing.

Not enough information. It felt crippling. He needed a PHS. His PHS, preferably, but the Turks probably had that, too.

Stumbling drunkenly, he eventually came to a rest beside a boulder, bracing himself while he caught his breath. Where the hell was he going? He needed to focus, gather his runaway thoughts, but it felt like trying to herd cactuars into an office cubicle.
"Damn, what's wrong with me?" he muttered. Hazy vision, loss of balance, muscle weakness, difficulty focusing?

Ifrit, he knew these symptoms. Classic signs of a budding mako addiction. He grimaced as the path blurred in front of him. Wasn't a severe case, but in his current condition, he still ran the risk of slipping into a coma from the shock. He'd barely scraped past the mako tolerance tests when applying for SOLDIER. Looked like it was coming back to haunt him.

Had to keep moving. He lurched away from the rock and continued along the path, hoping to skirt the edges of town.

Nearby, a wolf howled.

Kunsel stilled, and swore under his breath.

He'd looked into Nibelheim when Zack first mentioned it as Cloud's hometown. Like most remote towns with reactors, it didn't have much else of note. No exports of any financial significance. Far too remote and inhospitable to be a tourist spot. It was a subsistence economy, with the only outside funding coming from ShinRa. A lot like Banora, really.

The one thing it was known for was the vicious wildlife. Specifically, Nibel dragons and Nibel wolves.

This was not his lucky day.

Kunsel fumbled for the dagger he'd liberated from the guard. Materia would be better, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He took stance, senses as alert as he could get them through his mental haze.

He didn't have to wait long – mere moments later a lithe grey shape came loping down the mountainside towards him. He faintly registered shuffling and growling in the undergrowth on either side of him. A small hunting party by the sound of it, but in his state, even one wolf would give him trouble.

The beast slowed as it approached, snarling and circling him warily, his fighting stance combined with the scent of mako probably making it think twice. It was a magnificent brute – thick grey coat, wide shoulders, and a set of jaws large enough wrap around his head whole.

The moment stretched as the pair faced off. Kunsel remained peripherally aware of another two wolves emerging from the brush nearby, but kept his eyes firmly fixed on the one facing him.

Then suddenly, movement.

The wolf on the left leapt towards him, snarling. He turned and slashed, but it twisted aside at the last moment. The blade tore a shallow cut on its right flank, and the snarl became a yelp.

The growling rose in pitch. Blood had been drawn. The two other wolves were on him in an instant, a whirl of grey fur and snapping jaws. Kunsel fought as best he could, hacking and jabbing at anything that came close enough, never getting anything more than a shallow cut for his efforts and barely keeping them at bay. Desperately, he spun in place, lashing out with his foot. His boot connected, and with a crunch of bone, finally knocked one of the wolves away.

Too little, too late. "Damn it!" Teeth sank into his left arm, and the wolf hung off it stubbornly, growling and dragging him towards the ground. Dangerous. The shoulder guards and helmet made it tough for them to get at his neck, but once he hit the dirt it would be over. The first one he'd slashed was already coming back for another go.
Too slow. Too busy thinking his strategy through instead of just reacting.

The wolf growled, teeth stained red from the blood pouring down his arm.

Kunsel shoved the dagger into its throat.

The jaw suddenly slackened, and the monster fell away, blade still embedded in its neck. The bite wound it left behind looked ugly, crimson bubbling from the puncture wounds. He ignored it. There were more immediate problems.

He wavered on his feet. Just two left. And the one he'd kicked earlier was limping.

"C'mon, I might not be First Class, but I can handle this much, right?" he muttered.

Hand-to-hand wasn't one of his strengths, but Cloud hadn't gotten him out of that place only for him to get taken down by a pack of monsters!

They ran at him again, eyes wild and slobber flying. Kunsel leaned to the side, dodging the first one, and barrelled into the second with his shoulder. They rolled in a tangle, and somewhere in the melee, he managed to wrap his arm around its neck.

Nibel wolves were strong. But a desperate SOLDIER was stronger.

The neck cracked. The wolf went limp.

He shoved the body aside and lurched to his feet, head spinning. Not good. Still one remaining – the big one that first came running down the mountain at him. And to make matters worse, the adrenaline had started wearing off, and his injured left arm was flaring with agony after that last tussle. He probably couldn't use it anymore.

He managed a weak grin. "Heh. Is this as far as a Second Class can go?"

The wolf snarled. Kunsel grit his teeth, and braced himself.

The attack never came. All of a sudden, a blur of white and black blocked his vision. The wolf yelped once. There was a prolonged shuffle of feathers and a crunch of bone, and then finally the black blur moved away.

He blinked. The wolf had changed. Its fur had darkened, its tail turned serpent-like, and most confusing of all, it now bore a pair of majestic white wings.

Kunsel spent a moment staring in disbelief, then stumbled and dropped to his knees.

Someone spoke. "Hey. Are you okay?"

He retched, spitting out a mouthful of bile and mako. A warm grip caught his shoulder.

"Hang in there, SOLDIER." The voice sounded far away, like it was underwater.

How was it they hadn't drowned in the mako, anyway? He and Cloud had been submerged for hours at a time, possibly even days. Maybe it was the same reason why SOLDIERs could hold their breath for so long. Civilians would normally suffocate after three minutes – SOLDIERs could go for twenty.

Damn, his thoughts were drifting again. This must've been how Zack felt all the time.
The hand shook him, dragging his attention back. "Where's Cloud? Was he with you?"

"I couldn't... I have to get help, get him out," he rasped to himself. Blearily, he tried to focus on the speaker. Big, black shape. He couldn't make out the details, but his gaze was drawn to the white blur stretched out behind him. Some kind of wing? An angel?

"Hallucinations," he mumbled, closing his eyes. "Must have a worse case than I thought."

"That's a new one. Nobody's called me a hallucination before."

Kunsel didn't reply. Even if your hallucinations talked to you, you were still okay so long as you didn't talk back.

He had a weird feeling he'd forgotten something big, though. Something important... but the thought slipped through his fingers like smoke. Great. Forgetfulness setting in too.

Distantly, he heard footsteps. A single set. He tensed, but it didn't sound like a monster, or even heavy enough for a trooper.

"Hey-" he started to say, but then realised the presence at his side had vanished. Just a dream?

Kunsel frowned at the white feathers scattered across the ground.

With a heavy groan, he dropped and rolled over on to his back. His arm blazed with pain, the skin around the bite tingling as mako worked on healing the wounds.

Lying down probably wasn't a good idea right now, but his body didn't want to cooperate anymore. How was he supposed to get off the mountain like this? And he really needed to look into those footsteps. Did the fight with the wolves attract someone's attention?

With the last of his strength, he craned to his head to see who was approaching. Huh, a chocobo?

Too small for the distance. Running, now. Had to be human. No red lights from a trooper helmet. Just blond spiky hair.

"...Cloud?" he slurred.

The little blue-and-blond blob stooped over him. Saying something.

A kid, he soon realised, managing to focus enough to make out his features. Too short to be Cloud. Hair was spikier, too. Must have been a local.

Didn't Cloud say he grew up in Nibelheim?

"...know my name?"

He peered at the kid with renewed interest. Without the mako eyes and the deadpan expression, he reminded him a little bit of the new Vice President. If he wore glasses and slicked down the spikes, he could have passed as a mini-Director, too.

Huh. He'd have to look into that.

"Mister?"

The kid said something else, but Kunsel was already drifting away.
The naked light bulb buzzed and flickered, casting an eerie light on the mako-stained tiles. Nearby, a lonely monitor beeped, and beeped, and beeped.

"I appear to have underestimated you, Specimen C."

Cloud stared at the ceiling, refusing to meet Hojo's assessing gaze. He'd woken up here, bound to the cold table, with the scientist pacing by his side. The mako and the glass from the broken tank had already been cleared away, and his hand, though still aching fiercely, appeared to have more than halfway healed.

"Not even the Chaos Project in its fully transformed state could break out of this tank design. Quite impressive," he commented, patting his knee in a parody of affection. "You truly are one of my creations."

"That's funny. I remember being called a failure," he remarked coldly.

"Is that so? In that case, I must say I'm rather embarrassed at the lack of scientific sense my future self must have displayed." He adjusted his glasses. "And you even managed to incapacitate twelve of the guards before the sedative could take hold." At last he started to sound annoyed.

In the remaining seconds before the tranquilliser had finally won its battle, Cloud had done a lot of damage, breaking noses and ribs and arms without care or discrimination. He might have even killed a couple of guards. At this stage, he honestly didn't care. Zack had slain hundreds of ShinRa troops throughout the course of their escape. During his days in Avalanche, Cloud had probably killed just as many. That was the price of freedom, these days.

At least Kunsel made it away.

Hojo peered at him, oily black strands of hair slipping free from his ponytail to hang over his shoulders. "Hmph. Don't be feeling pleased just because one of you escaped. He's an inferior specimen. I doubt he made it far in his state. You won't be lonely for long, Specimen C."

Cloud inwardly seethed, but didn't comment. Kunsel hadn't looked great, true, but if he hadn't been caught yet, he must have made it, and he had every intention of following. Hojo would slip up eventually – at some point he would get called away to Midgar and trust an assistant to deal with them instead, and the assistant would eventually grow lax and overconfident, and then he could break out again. As many times as it took.

"Of course, this has interrupted the multiple-subject transferral testing." Hojo scowled, and cast a glance at the empty tanks. "And temporarily delayed the mako factor testing as well. A shame. We won't be able to resume until either the other specimen is recaptured, or the new batch of mako has finished processing." His glasses had slipped down his nose again, and he pushed them back up with a bony, crooked finger. "But what to do with you in the meantime, Specimen C? What to do."

His skin crawled as Hojo leaned over him, staring him up and down as one might inspect a prize chocobo. "You are a unique specimen. In progressing the technology to leverage the hidden potential of Time materia, I have not had much opportunity to properly investigate your genetic makeup beyond the presence of S-cells. Your case is rather fascinating. I have of course experimented in the past, but introducing active alien matter to an already developed organism has only ever resulted in runaway mutation, eventually resulting in death." His eyes narrowed. "How did I solve the conundrum of rejection? Perhaps it lies in your mako enhancements – I haven't seen a specimen survive with these levels since Sephiroth." He prodded his healing hand. Cloud flinched, and closed it into a fist.
"Don't touch me," he hissed.

Hojo indulged him with a thin-lipped smile. "Your battle with Sephiroth in Wutai has become quite famous, you know, even though the company never mentioned it in any official capacity. I wonder… could you truly defeat him, Specimen C? My greatest work?" He chuckled to himself. "Though if you were to defeat him, that would then logically make you my greatest work. Yes, I do wonder…”

Cloud's stomach churned at the reverence in Hojo's voice. It was a tone the scientist normally reserved for talking about Jenova.

At the height of his identity crisis, he'd yearned for such acknowledgement. Begged for it.

"Professor… please give me a number… Please, Professor…”

Now, the very memory made him sick. How incredibly wrong he'd been. How terribly misguided.

He now knew, with chilling certainty, that being one of Hojo's failures was a far kinder fate than being a success.

Zack disembarked from the train with hunched shoulders and a heavy heart.

Three weeks. Three weeks since he'd received his promotion. Three weeks since the notice of Kuskel's death had been posted.

Three weeks, and they hadn't been able to do a thing.

Lazard had been blocking them at every turn. Now, none of them could so much as get out of Midgar, much less all the way to the West Continent. It was absurd. Three of the highest-ranking SOLDIERS, stuck to internal duties and the occasional low-level monster hunt in the area? As far as he was concerned, that was proof something was up.

Not that he didn't understand the General's viewpoint. Going against the Turks – against Tseng, and Cissnei, and Reno and Rude – wasn't something he was eager to do. He'd worked with them enough to know how ruthless they could be. Nowhere in the world would be safe. And, as Sephiroth already pointed out, they wouldn't be able to help anyone from inside a cell. But he was going insane, just sitting around waiting for something to give! Genesis was noticeably antsy as well – though he preached patience and caution, he was downright terrible at it. Worse than Zack, even.

Which was why he had come to the slums to visit Aeris. She always seemed to have the answers, and when she didn't, she still never failed to make him feel better.

Forcing his shoulders up and his eyes forward, Zack headed off towards the church. The people nearby didn't pay as much mind to him anymore, having become used to the sight of him in the area. For his part, the SOLDIER First had learned not to stare either, depressing as the place could be. Sometimes it seemed like everything in the slums came in various shades of brown. To the right, brown. To the front, brown. To the left… blond?

Zack's head whipped around faster than Don Corneo's eyes at the Honeybee Inn.

He wasn't imagining it. No way to mistake that spiky blond hair!

"Cloud?"
To his surprise, the person jerked, whirling around to look at him. A pair of bright, blue, mako-less eyes took in his uniform in one glance, and grew as wide as dinner plates.

Then he bolted.

"Hey!" Zack called out, dashing after him. "Oof, sorry miss, excuse me, coming through-" He fumbled his way out of the crowd and took chase.

The blond was spry and agile, but he didn't have a hope of matching the speed of a SOLDIER. He didn't get more than two blocks before Zack snagged the back of his shirt. "Gotcha!"

Then the little hellion kicked him in the shins.

"Ow, what was that for!"

"Help!" the kid hollered.

"Hey, I just want to-" Zack barely got to finish the sentence before having to dive to the side, dragging the boy with him. "Watch out!" A gust of air from flapping wings whooshed overhead. Monsters? He pushed the kid behind him and drew his Buster Sword. "Don't worry, I got this!"

To his shock, though, the blond dashed from his side over to the monster. "Run, he's SOLDIER!"

Zack felt his grip on the Buster Sword weaken as he stopped to properly look at their mystery attacker. "Wait – I've seen that kind of monster before." The chimera-like appearance. The black fur. The crooked white wings.

The kid was already edging away, trying to urge the monster with him, but the beast regarded the SOLDIER for a moment, then tossed its head and sat on its haunches.

It was so surreal.

Zack lowered his sword, and approached the chimera. Before he could reach it, though, he suddenly found himself staring down at a pair of angry blue eyes. "Don't hurt him! He didn't do anything to you!"

The kid was scared, Zack observed. Terrified. And yet, still glaring at him.

"I'm not going to!" he protested. "I was just going to pet him, see?" He reached around and ruffled the fur just behind the monster's ears. It titled its head slightly at the action, showing off more of its neck and chest as it did so.

There it was. He hadn't imagined it before. A pattern in the fur that looked eerily like Angeal's face.

Zack withdrew carefully. "More importantly… Cloud, did you shrink?" He looked, what, barely fourteen? Not exactly a child like he'd first thought – must have been short for his age.

"How do you know my name?" The blond asked suspiciously.

"You're kidding. It is you? Did someone cast Mini?" But then, why would Cloud not remember him? "And then Confuse? Was it a marlboro? Those things are vicious." He paused. "Hey, no mako eyes though. And I thought you were immune to status materia!"

Finally, a bit of the fear and suspicion receded, to be replaced with cautious hope. "Could it be, maybe, you know my uncle?" he ventured.
Zack's mouth dropped open.

Cloud Strife, *an uncle*?

"Oh man, I can't believe this! You look so much like him! What brings you to Midgar?" His brain worked furiously behind the scenes. Another clue to Cloud's situation?

Hesitation. Then, with visible reluctance, he confessed, "I'm looking for him. My uncle, I mean."

Zack's shoulders sagged. So much for that hope. "You don't know where he is either, huh?"

His only reply was a confused expression. Great. If the kid had come all the way to Midgar, Zack really didn't want to be the one to break the news, but he had a right to know. "Your uncle's been missing for a while now. I've been looking for him too, but I haven't had much luck. For a second I thought you were him – that's why I chased you. Sorry if I scared you."

He felt even worse watching the whole range of emotions play out across the guy's face. Shock, disappointment, worry, panic, before finally settling on something close to despair.

"Don't worry," he tried to reassure him. "Your uncle's tough. No matter how bad a situation he's got himself into, he'll probably be okay." Even if he didn't really believe his own assurances anymore, he couldn't bear to leave the kid looking so heartbroken. "We'll find him. The General himself is looking into it!" That didn't appear to lift the blond's spirits much, so next he tried, "What did you come to find your uncle for? I know I'm not family, but maybe I can still help! I owe him one, you know."

There was a pause – the awkward sort where you could see the other party wavering between a variety of responses in their head, trying to gauge the safest one. Zack rode it out like a pro. *This Cloud didn't have a bar* on his uncle's uncomfortable silences.

Eventually, the blond asked, "Do you promise to keep it a secret?"

Zack thumped his chest. "Cross my heart! On my honour as a SOLDIER!" The kid still looked unsure, so he prodded him by asking, "What's the problem?"

More hesitation. Then finally, "Maybe it would be better if I showed you."

Zack shrugged. "Sure. I probably do better with that kind of explanation anyhow. Where are we going?"

"This way." Cloud Junior headed in the opposite direction to the train station. Zack followed at an easy pace. He kept an eye on the Angeal-like chimera, which followed them for a few steps before taking off to glide above the rooftops.

"What's with the monster?" He already had his suspicions, but it couldn't hurt to ask.

The blond glanced up towards where the silhouette of the chimera soared overhead, barely discernable against the grey underside of the plate. "It's kind of a guard dog."

"A guard dog." Zack repeated, dubious.

"It's not mine. It's a stray that just kind of… helps out. I found it with…" He trailed off, seemingly lost as how to proceed.

The topic appeared to be making the kid nervous, so he quickly changed the subject. "I guess this
is your first time to Midgar, huh?" Zack asked with a grin.

Cloud jerked. "How did you know?"

The kid was too tense. "I can tell. You're a country boy!"

He flushed. So easy to tease! Zack laughed. "Hey, don't be embarrassed! I'm a country boy too, you know. How else would I know?"

"Oh yeah? Where did you come from?"

"Gongaga."

A muffled cough. "Hey, don't laugh!"

"Sorry." The brat didn't sound sorry at all.

"Ha! As though you're any better off. What about you?"

"Nibelheim."

Zack fell silent.

He shouldn't have needed to ask. It made sense that Cloud's nephew would come from Nibelheim too. But just the name of the place… it gave him a bad feeling now.

"What's wrong?"

He shook himself, and flashed a bright smile. "Sorry, got distracted." Only then did he realise they'd reached the boundaries of Sector 5. "We're going through Sector 6?"

"Yeah. I'm staying at a hotel there."

At a hotel? In Sector 6? "Is it safe?" he asked. "You know, on your own?" He got a frown for that, so swiftly amended, "I mean, even troopers move in squads in the slums."

Cloud glanced up at the sky in response. "Oh, right, the 'guard dog'," Zack conceded. The shock of being dive-bombed by a chimera would be enough to drive off almost any group of thugs.

The newly-minted First hadn't visited Sector 6 much before, though it didn't look that different to the Sector 5 slums. It had the same overpowering stink, too, underlaid with the taint of mako. For once, he wasn't the only one wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Bet you're missing the country air now, huh?" Zack commented. "Don't let the locals see you making faces. Nothing makes a tourist stand out more."

"You're doing it too," the kid pointed out.

"Hey, I'm a SOLDIER! Our noses are a lot more sensitive, I'll have you know."

The blond went quiet again at that. Strangest things made him clam up. Definitely Cloud's nephew.

Zack filled the silence by chatting aimlessly about inane Midgar trivia, trying to get his companion to loosen up. It helped, but it seemed the closer and closer they got to their destination, the more and more nervous the kid became. Second-guessing himself? Or did a trap lie in wait?

He doubted it, but he checked he had his PHS handy to call for backup. Just in case.
They had to stop a few times for the kid to get his bearings, but eventually they arrived at a modest four-story building. "This is it."

The hotel wasn't that bad, really, considering the location. No broken windows or bullet holes in the doors, and hardly any rust to speak of. Relatively tidy, too – rubbish had a way of accumulating below plate. In gutters, under eaves, anywhere people didn't walk. Nobody had anywhere else to throw it.

Cloud's nephew hesitated at the entrance, however.

"What's the matter?" Zack asked.

He bit his lip, staring up at him with wide blue eyes. "Can I really trust you?"

Seemed like he was the super-cautious type. "You said your name is Cloud too, right? Same as your uncle?" The blond nodded. "I don't think I introduced myself properly. Zack Fair, SOLDIER First Class. And Cloud, you can trust me. I swear it."

The kid still looked uncertain, so for good measure, he added, "You know, I'm kind of trusting you here too. For all I know you could be leading me here just to knock me out and rob me blind."


Zack put his hands on his hips, looking him up and down suspiciously. "I don't know. You might look innocent, all dressed up like a civilian, but I can't forget who you're related to. I'll be walking along, not worried at all, and BAM, you'll pull out a Neo Bahamut summon and it'll eat my sword!"

It was at that point the blond appeared to cotton on to the fact that he was being teased. He scowled. "Eat that big thing? It would even give a summon indigestion."

Zack laughed and grabbed Cloud in a headlock, ruffling his hair. Oh, he liked this kid. He looked all timid and nervous, but when the chips were down he talked back, even though he was only a civilian and Zack was a SOLDIER First Class. "Don't make fun of the sword!"

Cloud smiled – a soft, cautious kind of grin, and when he saw it Zack was struck by an overpowering sense of familiarity. "We should get inside."

The interior was dark and musty. Cloud picked up the key from the front desk - the clerk didn't even bat an eye at the sight of a kid accompanied by a SOLDIER - and led the way up a dim, narrow staircase, stained with spilt coffee and smelling of cigarettes. Zack winced as the steps creaked under his weight, but they held, and besides, if he could survive being blown off the expressway into a church roof, a measly little fall through a half-rotten staircase wouldn't kill him.

They climbed all the way to the top floor, and headed to the room down the very end. It took some manoeuvring with the bent and dented handle, but eventually the blond managed to get the lock undone, and then had to put his shoulder into it to unstick the door from the frame. Zack stood back, waiting patiently, even though he could have probably done it lot quicker. The kid looked like the fiercely independent type. Probably came from a poor family. He seemed pretty comfortable in the slums for a country boy.

All of those thoughts fled the instant Zack saw what was in the room.

"Holy shit."
He rushed to the prone figure on the bed, scarcely believing his eyes.

"Kunsel?"
Zack rubbed his eyes. No dream, no mistake. It was definitely Kunsel. Still dressed in his purple Second Class uniform and damn standard-issue helmet.

"Kunsel. Kunsel! Hey, wake up man!" The Second didn't respond, head lolling on the pillow as he shook him. He was pale as a ghost, the visible part of his face drawn and haggard, even in sleep.

Cloud's nephew shifted awkwardly off to the side, and quietly explained, "He's sick. I was going to bring him to a hospital, but he said something about hiding from ShinRa. And so I thought, since it seemed like he knew my uncle-"

"Whoa whoa whoa – what? Start at the beginning." Zack's head spun. He'd spent the past three weeks seesawing between anger, impatience, and grief. He hadn't expected to see Kunsel ever again. Yet here he was, laid out on a threadbare hotel bed in the slums. Unresponsive, maybe, but alive. He was having a hard time processing much beyond that right at the moment.

"I- I found him on the mountain trail," the blond stuttered. "He said my name, then passed out. I was confused at first, but then I thought maybe he knew my uncle." He fidgeted. "Mr Ferrey says we look alike."

Zack stared. "Just a bit." The resemblance was uncanny, aside from the age difference and the lack of mako glow in his eyes. "So then what?"

"I dragged him back to my house." Cloud's voice barely clambered above a whisper, as though he were imparting a deadly secret. "Ma didn't want to deal with ShinRa, so I decided to take him to the next town myself. Nibelheim doesn't have a doctor."

"Right. So why did you wind up all the way here then? He said something?"

"Y-yeah." He swallowed. "He woke up a couple of times, but hardly anything he said made any sense before he drifted out of it again. One time, though, he grabbed my arm and said, 'Don't let ShinRa find me.' He shuffled in place, staring at the ground as though it were the most fascinating sight in the world. 'It sounded really serious. I didn't know what to do. Then I remembered my uncle in Midgar. I thought maybe - if they were friends - that maybe he could help him."

"So then you brought him all the way to Midgar. Without getting seen by ShinRa," Zack repeated in disbelief.

Looking confused, the blond nodded. "Mr Ferrey drove us out of Nibelheim and bought us a coach ticket to the nearest port." He worried his lower lip between his teeth. "I would have made it sooner, but I used up most of my savings on the boat trip. We had to hitch hike the rest of the way. I, um, kind of told people he was my sick brother, and he thought he was a SOLDIER so we let him dress up like one." He looked embarrassed. "You don't think he'll be mad? That I told people he was crazy? I didn't have any clothes big enough to change him in to, and I thought the helmet might help hide his face, if anyone was looking for him."

Zack would have laughed, if it weren't so deadly serious. "It's not a bad story. I'm sure he'll forgive you. You did good." He scratched his head. A truck rumbled past outside, and the stink of exhaust
wafted in through the open window. "But, um, you know I'm part of ShinRa, right?"

The blond began to look agitated. "You said I could trust you!"

"Whoa! You can! I promised, remember? And this guy's a friend of mine too. I was just pointing it out!"

The kid looked away, blushing slightly. "I know it wasn't smart. Especially since he-" He nodded at Kusel's sleeping form. "-wanted to hide from ShinRa. But I didn't know what else to do. I made it to Midgar, but I didn't even know where to start looking for my uncle, and then you turned up and-"


The blond stopped short, heaving in gulps of air, on the brink of hyperventilation. "Sorry, I just-"

Zack laughed, and grabbed him in a headlock. "Don't be so harsh on yourself! You're amazing, you know that? You must be absolutely insane to pull all that off!"

The blond stumbled, squawking out a muffled and indignant, "Hey!"

Zack ruffled his spikes. "Seriously, you did good, I owe you one. No, wait, I owe you way more than that. You're entitled to free lunches from me for the rest of your life. This is huge!"

The kid eventually managed to duck out of his hold. "What-"

He didn't even get the chance to give voice to his confusion, as Zack guffawed and pointed. "Look at your hair! I made it even worse! I'm definitely calling you Spike from now on!"

The blond raised a hand to graze the tips of his hair, looking lost and swept away by it all. Zack was on a roll, though – the shock was wearing off now he had more of the story, and his thoughts were racing ahead at top speed. By the sounds of it, the kid must have found Kusel a week or so after ShinRa posted news of his 'death'. The Second Class had booked a substantial amount of leave, but considering he was found in Nibelheim, his starting point, he'd probably been taken out either during or immediately after his mission. ShinRa must have wanted any trails to go cold before posting the news, so hadn't announced anything until Kusel was overdue back – at which point SOLDIER had requested a meeting with the Turks on the situation. Lazard and Sephiroth might have had different reasons for being concerned, but it amounted to the same result – after some dallying, the company reported him as dead so no one would look for him.

They obviously didn't count on Cloud having resourceful family members in the area. "Okay, Spike, you've got him this far, but we still need to get him some medical assistance, and then once he wakes up- Wait! I gotta call Genesis! He needs to hear about this!" He already had his PHS out, tapping away at the keypad. "Probably shouldn't mention this to the General, though, I guess. Not yet, anyway. You don't mind if I tell him to come here?"

Rendered wide-eyed and mute, Cloud only shook his head.

"Great!" He snapped the PHS shut, practically bubbling with excitement. Kusel was alive. Not in great shape by the looks of it, but alive, and he probably knew what was happening with Cloud, too! ShinRa had really dropped the ball on this one, reporting him as dead! No wonder the Turks had been in such a tizz lately.

Cloud timidly interrupted, "When you said Genesis… did you mean Commander Rhapsodos?"
"Well, yeah. Do you know anyone else by that name running around?" He grinned. "Ahh, I get it. Are you fan?"

The kid turned bright red. Jackpot.

"Hey, don't be embarrassed! I joined his fan club, see? Angeal's and Sephiroth's too, actually." Zack flipped open his PHS, scrolling through his mail. "Though it was originally kind of to tease Angeal – that's my mentor – about it." He held the screen up to show him, casting a faint blue glow across the dim room.

Cloud went slightly bug-eyed at the long list of messages. "They have fan clubs?"

"Yeah! Oh, I guess you wouldn't have heard, coming from the country. It's a big thing here! I'll help you join up later if you want." Zack snapped the PHS shut and slipped it back into his pocket again. "So what's your angle, then?"

The blond ducked his head. "I wanted to join SOLDIER," he admitted.

Past tense? "You don't want to anymore?" He looked about the same age Zack had been when he first signed up.

"I'm not sure. My uncle…" He glanced out the window, avoiding his eyes.

It made sense then. When their mystery swordsman first turned up in the slums, he'd been dead-set against ShinRa, and if the kid were looking for approval, joining up wouldn't have earned him any points. "I get it. You really look up to your uncle, huh? I can understand, he's a pretty amazing guy! Not many people can fight Sephiroth to a draw." Zack scratched his head. More like nobody, if he were going to be honest about it.

The kid's shoulder slumped. "I actually… don't know him very well."

Zack tilted his head. "How's that?" In small towns, it was almost impossible not to know people, especially if they were family.

"I've only met him once," he mumbled.

Zack blinked. "What?"

No response.

"You've only met him once?" he repeated.

A tiny nod.

"When was this?"

"Just after the end of the Wutai War." He managed a small smile and added, a trifle proudly, "He took out three Nibel dragons when he came to visit."

Zack scratched his head in thought. "I guess that explains why that other mission was cancelled." Wait. Something didn't add up. "So he didn't grow up in Nibelheim?"

"No. That was the first time he came. He said he didn't know about me and Ma before." He shifted in place, turning his gaze to look nervously out the window. He did that a lot. "As soon as Ma saw him, she tried to shoot him. She doesn't like my father's family, or something. I don't really know what it's all about. I think maybe she was worried he'd come to take me away."
This was all getting very, very weird.

Cloud – the adult one – might have lied about his hometown, but Zack couldn’t figure out why. It had seemed like an automatic response at the time – one he’d been embarrassed about. And according to Angeal, he also said he didn’t have any family left, yet here was a nephew. "So how does this relate to you no longer being sure if you want to apply for SOLDIER?" If they’d only met once, would that really be enough to put the kid off his dreams? It would be a shame. He was a bit of a runt, and if he took his uncle as an example he’d never be particularly tall, but Zack thought he had the guts for it. Dreams, honour, pride – those were the parts that made a true SOLDIER.

"He told me I shouldn't. Because…” Cloud's voice trailed off into a featureless mumble.

"What was that? C'mon, stop whispering, no one's going to hear,” he prompted.

Cloud hesitated, took a deep breath, and then finished in a rush, "Because SOLDIER is a den of a monsters."

Zack flinched.

Genesis's words came back to haunt him. Monsters making monsters.

"Sorry," the blond hastily corrected. "I didn't mean-"

"It's cool, it's cool." The First Class waved it off. "Your uncle said it, not you. But do you really believe that?"

"I don't know. He seemed pretty serious."

"He's always serious. Don't pay that much attention to it." Zack thrust a thumb at his chest. "I'm not a monster, and neither is Genesis, right?" His thoughts wandered to Angeal and his wing again, but he ruthlessly pushed his doubts aside. That was just a technicality. Genetic makeup shouldn't decide what does and doesn't make a monster.

"I guess…"

"Right. And you know, he probably changed his mind! He wasn't really keen on SOLDIER when I first met him, but then he joined up. And he's not a monster either," Zack declared.

A light entered those sky blue eyes at that. "He joined SOLDIER?"

"And made it straight to the top! Fastest rise through the ranks since Sephiroth," the First bragged on his behalf.

The blond didn't reply, but gained a considering look, so Zack didn't push it further. He didn't like people thinking of SOLDIER as monsters, and knowing that Cloud had thought that about them at any point, especially considering everything that had happened since, really hurt. Aeris had been like that too, when she first heard he was SOLDIER. Even if Spike here didn't wind up deciding to follow through on his dream to join ShinRa, he didn't want to see those eyes look at him with fear.

Without anything further to say on the topic, they fell into an awkward silence – Zack too busy trying to sort everything through in his head to figure out what to ask next. Cloud kept glancing outside, even though the view only led to the street, and there wasn't enough natural light in the slums to really justify having a window in the first place. The room itself was rather dark, despite it still being afternoon, and the SOLDIER was about to set himself to tracking down the light switch when the blond suddenly spoke up again.
"Someone's here." His voice wavered.

The words had barely left his mouth when they heard footsteps coming down the hall. The sudden knock on the door echoed through the room like a gunshot.

The kid immediately tensed, backing away from the door to hover by the bed. "Don't worry, I got this," Zack assured him. He drew Angeal's Buster Sword – he still had problems thinking of it as 'his' – and approached the door. It didn't look like there was a peephole, so he set his foot back far enough to catch it if it swung open, and opened it a crack.

A rather impatient-looking First Class SOLDIER dressed in a red leather coat stood in the hallway.

"Oh. Don't worry, it's Genesis!" Zack called over his shoulder, then opened the door fully, giving it a tug when it caught on the loose carpet. "That was fast!"

Genesis breezed past him into the room as though he owned the place. "What, did you think I was going to take the train?" His nose wrinkled as he took in the décor.

Zack craned his neck to see out the window. Sure enough, one of ShinRa's black vans was parked outside. Must have been what the kid worried. Looked kind of shady, now that he thought about it.

Genesis's inspection came to an abrupt stop. "Cloud?"

The poor guy looked about ready to faint.

"Gee, Commander, I kind of thought you might have noticed the SOLDIER on the bed who's supposed to be dead first," Zack commented.

"While that is a surprise in itself, you did ask me to bring a SOLDIER first aid kit. You mentioned nothing of blond doppelgangers. Or did someone cast Mini?"


Genesis hummed at that, then sent him a sharp look. "And Sephiroth?"

"I haven't told him about this yet." He felt uneasy at leaving the General out, but when he'd heard that Kunsel was hiding from ShinRa, didn't want to take the chance.

The Commander nodded his approval, and declared, "First things first!" He strode over to the bed and picked up Kunsel's limp wrist, spending a moment checking his pulse. He then pushed back the helmet's visor and lifted one of his eyelids with brusque efficiency.

Cloud hovered nervously by the bedside, and finally found his voice. "Do you know what's wrong with him?"

Genesis spared him a glance, and let the visor fall back in place. "Mako addiction. He's been overdosed. Zack, look in the first aid kit I brought. There should be some booster shots in there."

Zack fished through the kit and eventually found half a dozen syringes filled with glowing green mako. The Commander took one, and began rubbing the crook of the unconscious SOLDIER's elbow, searching for a vein.

"If he's been overdosed, doesn't that, um, make him worse?" Cloud asked.
"He's not suffering poisoning. His system has likely shut down from the shock of abruptly cutting off the supply. The quickest way to recover is by controlled administering of smaller doses to help his body adjust." Genesis grimaced. "It comes with a risk, though. Too much, and it can push a SOLDIER from addicted - from which there is hope of recovery - to poisoned, from which there is none."

The blond looked down worriedly at Kunsel. Zack felt for him. He'd clearly put a lot of effort into keeping the SOLDIER alive. "Isn't there another way?"

Genesis inserted the needle and depressed the plunger, frowning as he watched the glowing green drain away. "The alternative is waiting it out, but that could leave him effectively comatose for weeks. Some extreme cases can take months. We don't have that kind of time. He has information we need."

The Commander never had been known for his empathy. Zack rested a hand on the kid's shoulder and reassured him, "He'll be okay. You said he woke up and managed to speak a couple of times – that means he only has a mild case." To Genesis, he asked, "How long do you think it'll take?"

The auburn-haired man shrugged, carelessly tossing aside the used syringe once he was done. "I'm a SOLDIER, not a medic. We'll probably start getting some improvement within a day or so, but it could be a week or more before he's back at full capacity."

"Can we hide him that long?"

Genesis didn't get the chance to answer, as Cloud suddenly asked, "Isn't that General Sephiroth?" He was staring out of the window again.

The two SOLDIERS followed his gaze, but all Zack caught was a flash of silver before Genesis suddenly grabbed him by the neck of his uniform and dragged him to the floor. "Get down!"

Cloud crouched with them, and the three of them huddled next to the bed. Zack tried to peer over the edge of the windowsill, but Genesis tugged him back to the ground. "What's he doing here?" he hissed.

"You weren't followed, were you?" Zack whispered.

"He wasn't even in the building when I left! He's supposed to be on a mission right now!"

"Do you think he saw us?" Cloud murmured. His hands were shaking, though he was doing his best to cover it.

He was scared, Zack suddenly realised. Probably had been the entire time he'd been in Midgar. That was why he kept fidgeting and glancing out of the window, and why he'd bolted when he first saw him. He'd been hiding it well, but seeing Kunsel like this and hearing everything that had happened, the First found it amazing he could still put up a brave face. The kid had come halfway across the world by himself, lugging an unconscious SOLDIER, uncomfortably aware that he couldn't trust ShinRa, and chasing an uncle he'd only met once. He must have had nerves made of Damascus steel.

"Don't worry," Zack assured him. "We can handle it."

Why was the General in the slums, though? He couldn't be here for Kunsel, surely?

But what else could he be here for?
Genesis half-rose, stealing another glance out of the window. "He's gone," he murmured.

The words had barely left his mouth when there were two polite knocks on the door.

The three of them exchanged a worried glance. Genesis jerked his head towards the door, but Zack refused to budge. "Why don't you get it? Scared?" he whispered.

The taunt worked. Genesis bristled at the implication. "Nonsense. I can handle the great General Sephiroth." Sarcasm dripping from his words, he stood and strode to answer, running a finger along his rapier until it glowed red.


Sephiroth faltered when he caught sight of small blond. "Cloud?"

"Before you ask, no, nobody cast Mini," Zack interrupted.

"Of course not. Cloud is immune to status materia," he said. His gaze slid to Kusel next, and his expression flickered.

Zack gripped the Buster Sword and stepped in front of the bed. The room was too small to swing it around, but the same was true for Masamune.

"What are you doing here?" Genesis demanded.

"I might ask the same of you," came the smooth reply, the General apparently having recollected himself from his initial surprise. "As for me, I received a mission from Lazard to track down a dangerous escaped specimen seen in the area."

Zack tensed, glancing at Kusel's prone form out the corner of his eyes. It couldn't be.

He wanted to believe in the General, but Luxiere was always reminding him that Sephiroth didn't care about his subordinates. Would he really-?

Genesis narrowed his eyes. "I see. So that's how it is."

Sephiroth frowned. "It appears so."

The tension mounted. Zack's palms felt sweaty around Buster's grip. If it came to it, could they really hold off Sephiroth? Cloud had done it. And if the General's heart really wasn't in it…

Who was he kidding? They might all be First Class, but Cloud and Sephiroth were on a whole other level. He and Genesis wouldn't be able to win – and certainly not while protecting Kusel and Cloud's nephew.

Wait. Cloud's nephew… who had come to Midgar with…

There was only one course of action left open to him. He wanted to believe in the General, so he would. Simple as that.

Zack lowered his sword. "Hold on a minute! Before anybody starts thinking about killing anyone else – Spike, do you think you can call your guard dog in here?"

The blond jerked at the sudden shift of attention on to him. "I can try, but like I said, it's not really mine…"
"Then do it," Zack requested, keeping Buster lowered but his gaze firmly fastened on the room's two other occupants. Cloud nodded and nervously stepped over to the window.

Sephiroth fixed him with a scrutinising stare. "What are you planning, Zack?"

"Just trust me on this one." Zack turned half an eye on Cloud, who was practically hanging out of the window, neck craned to look up at the Plate. He waved frantically, as though trying to flag down a taxi three streets away.

"Watch out-!" Genesis turned into a blur as he raced across the room and dragged the blond from the window, mere moments before a bundle of black fur and white feathers dove into the hotel room.

"Wait!" he cried, as Sephiroth raised Masamune to strike the monster down. "It's not dangerous!"

The chimera fluffed its wings and settled onto its haunches, head held high and chest puffed out proudly like the most noble of griffons. Sephiroth raised an eyebrow as the beast stared down the length of his sword, completely nonchalant in the face of danger. Zack could barely contain the laughter threatening to escape at the sight.

"What is the meaning of this?" Genesis stared at the creature, visibly perturbed. "It looks as though-"

"You remember those monsters I told you about on my mission where I got this sword?" Zack jerked a thumb at the Buster resting on his back. "This is what they looked like." He felt vindicated. It hadn't been his imagination – here was the proof! "So, Sephiroth, any chance this was the 'dangerous specimen' you were ordered to track down?"

At last the General lowered Masamune. His expression didn't outwardly change, but Zack was sure he could see a hint of relief in those glowing green eyes. "I have no reason to think otherwise."

"And as you can see, it's been completely domesticated, and is not a threat to anyone anymore." He could have sworn the chimera snorted at him for that, but he diplomatically ignored it. "Mission complete."

Genesis still hadn't put away his sword. At Zack's glare, he scoffed, and finally the red glow faded from his rapier. "I'm surprised you had the mental acuity to make the connection, Zack Fair," he grumbled. If Zack didn't know better, he'd think the Commander had been itching for a fight. Actually, knowing Genesis, that was probably exactly the case. "You said yourself – ShinRa wouldn't risk doing something that upsetting. And besides, how could they know Kunsel is here? I only found out a few minutes before I called you," Zack reasoned.

"And you didn't think to inform me?" Sephiroth asked coolly.

The black-haired SOLDIER winced. He was in for it now. "Sorry. But you know what this means, right, General? Spike here found Kunsel in Nibelheim. Hiding from ShinRa," he stressed. An abbreviated version of what happened, but they didn't have time to go into the particulars. "We're harbouring a fugitive, now. You know how ShinRa will react!"

"Don't mistake me for a fool." Sephiroth gave him a glare hard enough to cut diamonds. "I understand perfectly. You believed that I would report this to ShinRa like a loyal dog, no better than the Turks. Do you think me a monster?"

"No!" Zack cut in. "$\text{Nobody}'s a monster. We just didn't want to put you in that kind of position,
okay? That's all!"

"Hmph. I suppose you expect me to thank you for your consideration."

"You should," Genesis drawled. "You say you understand, Sephiroth, but do you really? There's no going back, now that you know about this. We can't tiptoe through holes in ShinRa's code of conduct any longer. What secrets do you suppose this SOLDIER knows? How far will the company be willing to go to protect them?"

"Genesis-" Zack tried to interrupt, but the Commander cut him off, holding up a gloved hand for silence.

"He needs to be certain, SOLDIER First Class Zack Fair. For my Friend, the fates are cruel. There are no dreams, no honour remains. The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

"This is hardly an appropriate time to be quoting Loveless," Sephiroth remarked. "As for your concern, I was willing to remain loyal until I had verifiable proof of ShinRa's hand in this. There are a great many things in this room yet to be explained-" He sent a brief glance at Cloud. "-but the fact that SOLDIER Second Class Sergeant Kunsel is here alive, despite being declared dead, is all that I need."

Zack tactfully didn't point out that Sephiroth hadn't lowered his sword until he'd been presented with the Angeal-like chimera as an alternative explanation. He was glad that he hadn't been wrong about the General, but didn't like acknowledging the fact that Sephiroth had hesitated. "Then-?"

The General frowned, measuring each of them in turn, as though gauging their individual worth. Probably figuring everything out in his head without having to ask a thing.

Finally, he seemed to reach a decision. "…We're going to Nibelheim."

It was what Zack wanted to hear, but not what he expected. "Hey, what happened to 'we have to stay put and avoid fighting with the Turks'"

"That is no longer an option."

"Oh, I get it, when I want to go it's too risky, but when you want to go it's perfectly okay."

The chimera ruffled its wings as though in agreement.

Sephiroth crossed his arms. "Would you prefer to stay behind?"

"No, sir! Sounds great, sir!" Zack blurted.

"We can requisition a plane – if we leave Midgar by dark, we can make it to the West Continent by the end of tomorrow. Then we'll simply need to get to Nibelheim. If we can find ground transport, that should only be another few hours," Genesis mused. "However…"

"Normally we'd have two weeks before we'd be listed as deserters," Sephiroth agreed. "But in our case ShinRa's reaction would be much more immediate. Our problem changes. We need to get the Turks to hold off on notifying the company of our actions long enough for us to get to Nibelheim."

"Did you say 'Nibelheim'?"] A fourth voice intruded on the conversation.

Cloud let out a squeak of surprise, and the three SOLDIERs whirled as one to the source.

Crouched in the window frame the kid had opened to call for the chimera, perched a man swathed
"Who are you?" Zack demanded, subtly shifting in front of bed to guard Kunsel. Genesis had taken position in front of Cloud's nephew, leaving Sephiroth free to deal with the intruder. He catalogued everything in the space of a heartbeat. Long, flowing black hair hung over his shoulders, held back from his face by a strip of fabric the same colour as his cloak and eyes. He couldn't see any weapons, but one of his arms was encased in a golden gauntlet, tipped with razor-sharp claws.

Not SOLDIER, but not quite human, either.

"My apologies if I startled you." The stranger didn't hop so much as float to the ground. "I've been waiting for an opportunity to rendezvous. However, the vehicle outside has a tracker on it, so I won't be staying long."

He was talking to Genesis, Zack realised. The Commander lowered his sword, recognition dawning on his face. "That voice… You're Vincent, aren't you?"

"Correct."

"That mystery guy who called Cloud's PHS?" Zack recalled. "Well, damn. Who else is going to turn up?" The tiny, dingy hotel room was getting more than a little crowded with four SOLDIERs, a chimera, a civilian and a… whatever Vincent was.

Vincent didn't acknowledge his words beyond a slight tilt of the head. He stared at the SOLDIER stretched out on the bed. "Something happened."

"Yeah. He went to look for Cloud in Nibelhiem. Spike here found him like this in the area, and brought him to Midgar," Zack summarised. He was starting to get tired of repeating himself. It might have been easier if he'd just called everyone at once after all.

"Nibelheim..." Vincent murmured. "Then it is Hojo's doing."

"What?" Zack spluttered. "How do you-"

"Hojo has a secret lab in the area," came the serene reply. "It cannot be a coincidence."

"And you know this how?" Genesis cut in.

"I spent a lot of time there." Zack shivered at the implication. It didn't appear to be lost on the others either, if their disturbed expressions were anything to go by.

He'd bandied the thought about plenty of times in the dead of the night, even before he learned about what had happened to Genesis and Angeal. The Science Department. There were plenty of rumours. Kunsel had informed him on some of the particularly morbid ones when Cloud first went missing. He'd thought they were urban legends, but now, a sick sense of worry churned in his gut.

Shiva, and Cloud hated doctors.

Vincent's eerie red gaze fixed on each of them in turn, resting longest on the General. "...You are Lucrecia's son."

Sephiroth frowned. "My mother's name is Jenova."

"Is that what Hojo told you?" Vincent glided past him into the room, stopping to stare down at the blond boy.
"How would you know?" Though outwardly the General appeared disinterested, those in the room who knew him could see the thirst in his eyes.

"I was the Turk assigned to guard your mother."

Genesis frowned. "But that would make you... almost certainly over fifty."

"Wait, you were a Turk?" Zack exclaimed.

"Valentine," Sephiroth suddenly declared. "You're Vincent Valentine, aren't you?"

"Vincent Valentine?" Genesis echoed.

Vincent didn't deny it. "You've heard of me?"

"Only read of you. All reports mentioning your existence are highly classified."

Zack couldn't follow, but it sounded big. Something was flying right over his head. And Cloud's nephew, standing forgotten in the corner, looked even more lost. "So, what does that mean?"

Sephiroth's smile turned positively feral.

"It means the Turks will no longer be a problem."
Sephiroth eyed the spiky-haired blond across from him with some concern. The boy's face had taken on a sickly sheen, and the General did not relish the prospect of spending the next few hours with a puddle of vomit at his feet. The hold already carried a strange smell, apparently having been used to deliver sylkis greens to the Gold Saucer on its previous run.

They weren't using the biggest or fastest of ShinRa's airships by any means. The engine drone was accompanied by a worrying rattle, and spots on the hull's interior had begun to rust. The craft had been designed to ferry cargo, not people, but there was just enough room in the hold to fit them and a few crates of engine parts comfortably.

They were being flown over to the West Continent by a pilot who'd been paid a substantial sum to not mention the presence of additional cargo on his invoice. While this meant they could travel quickly and without attracting attention that might tip off anyone at their destination, it required a certain sacrifice of comfort. They were arranged in a cramped circle, substituting the packing crates for chairs. Cloud's nephew sat hunched and miserable across from him, with Zack patting the boy's back on one side and Angeal's chimera curled up sleeping on the other. Genesis perched on a slightly taller crate next to him, no doubt forgoing the comfort of his feet being able to reach the ground for the perceived height advantage. Completing their entourage was Vincent, who had chosen to haunt a shadowy corner a short distance away – close enough that he could engage in conversation if necessary, but far enough to discourage it.

They'd been forced to leave Kunsel behind in the care of Zack's girlfriend. It had been a risk, as apparently she was under Turk surveillance, but lugging a sick SOLDIER across continents was not conducive to a speedy recovery. They would simply need to trust Tseng at his word, at this point.

The airship lurched briefly in a bout of turbulence. The boy let out a piteous groan.

"Hang in there, Spike. Is the medicine helping?" Zack leaned down to get a better look at his queasy features. "Wow, you've really got it bad. How did you manage to get Kunsel all the way to Midgar if you could barely take care of yourself?"

"Didn't have a choice," was the mumbled reply.

Zack laughed – the sound far too loud and merry for the gravity of their current situation. "I guess not! No wonder you looked so upset when we said we were going back to Nibelheim straight away! You could have stayed with Kunsel and Aeris, you know."

He received a stubborn shake of the head in response.

Sephiroth figured there would be no better opportunity to ask, now that they were on their way and had time to kill. "I've been curious as to the details of how that all came about, actually. Especially him." He inclined his head towards the sleeping chimera.

"I too have been waiting for a more thorough explanation," Genesis added.

Zack scratched the back of his neck. "Oh yeah, we kind of didn't get a chance to explain everything
"properly, did we?" The First sent a sidelong glance at the miserable blond. "Don't worry, Spike, you just concentrate on not throwing up. I got this," he reassured him.

"Spike?" Genesis raised an eyebrow. It was blatantly obvious he'd been dying to ask for a while now.

"Nickname! Cause of the hair! It's confusing otherwise."

"Get on with it, Zack," Sephiroth interrupted.

"Right! So, I was heading into the slums to visit Aeris…"

Sephiroth listened impassively as Zack recounted the child's story, coaxing the occasional comment or confirmation from the Cloud look-alike as he went. The tale he wove on the child's behalf grew ever more unbelievable with each sentence. By the time the cheerful SOLDIER had finished his rather extended report, there were a great many questions they needed to address.

Considering the company, he put the first query to the boy.

"How old are you, Strife?" He found himself uncomfortable using the youth's first name. In his mind, it had been reserved for his rival, and he was hardly going to resort to nicknames to keep things straight.

The child managed to pull himself into a sitting position. "F-fourteen, sir!"

"You don't need to call him sir! You're not in the military!" Zack chided.

The blond looked up to the First with wide blue eyes. "But then what do I call him?" The very idea of being so casual to use his given name appeared to horrify the child.

Sephiroth, however, was still stuck on the notion that a fourteen-year-old boy had come from the West Continent all by himself. Lugging a sick SOLDIER while avoiding ShinRa, at that. No wonder Zack had been so shocked at the child's motion sickness.

"There is a flaw in your story," Genesis suddenly declared.

"What?" Zack squawked. "Spike, did I forget something?"

"It's not something you forgot," Genesis interrupted. "But it's about his family in Nibelheim."

"Oh, yeah. Cloud said he grew up in Nibelheim, but Spike here never saw him until after the Wutai War," Zack agreed. "I can't figure it out. Maybe he lied?"

"Not that." Genesis sounded irritated. "I was referring specifically to the part when he first arrived."

"You mean, when Ma shot at him?" the boy asked.

Genesis nodded curtly. " Doesn't anyone else find that unusual? They both use the name Strife, correct?"

"It's my mother's maiden name," the blond agreed.

"You said your uncle told you that there must have been issues with your father's family. But if you
carry the same last name, doesn't that mean he's your mother's brother, not your father's?"

Sephiroth frowned. That was indeed a glaring contradiction. "I don't think he lied about it, either. He reacts to the name quickly enough. That is an ingrained reflex not easily learned."

"You're probably right," Zack admitted. "What do you think, Spike?"

"He... he never actually told me his name," the teen mumbled to his feet. "I only heard it from Mr Ferrey later."

Genesis smirked. "That certainly sounds like our Cloud Strife."

Sephiroth agreed. "Precious about his name even with family members. Assuming, of course, that they truly are family." The inconsistencies were beginning to bother him immensely.

"What else could they be? They look so much alike! They're practically identical," Zack declared.

"Not really," Genesis sniffed.

Sephiroth studied the youth, and found himself in agreement. The resemblance was unusually strong, even for relatives, but he couldn't imagine ever confusing one for the other. Never mind the lack of glowing eyes or the age difference - this Cloud wore his expression openly, eyes alight and soft smile at the ready, even when hunched over his knees trying not to throw up. He was eager to please, a little shy and awkward – self-esteem issues, perhaps - and as Zack had proven, show him the slightest hint of approval or friendliness and you had his immediate trust. Their Cloud couldn't be more different - even on the rare occasions he smiled, his eyes remained guarded, and his posture was always so stiff, as though the he carried a weight far heavier than a mere sword on his shoulders.

They both had a backbone made of adamantite, though, and a stubborn streak as wide as the Northern Crater. Maybe that too was a family trait.

"There is little we can do to shed light on that matter until we find Cloud himself," Sephiroth reasoned. It felt like they were getting closer to solving the mystery of Cloud Strife, yet the final piece eluded them, the one that fit everything together. "However, there is another point of curiosity we need to discuss."

Zack looked bewildered. "What?"

Genesis rolled his eyes. "He's talking about the chimera."

"You said you found it sitting with Sergeant Kunsel when you arrived, and that it followed you out of Nibelheim all the way to Midgar?" Sephiroth prompted.

The boy looked up from his knees to nod. He didn't appear to be up to extrapolating any further at the moment.

"I am curious as to how the creature came to be," Genesis commented.

"The slaughtered specimens we saw in the lab in Banora were similar," Sephiroth reminded him. "Clearly a method for transformation exists. However, I never anticipated it could go so far as to influence a beast's consciousness, to the point of domestication." It made no sense - there would have been no need to cage the specimens in the warehouse under those circumstances. Yet this chimera had been nothing but docile.
"Hollander almost certainly made those monsters, but they were all destroyed without exception. For this one to exist, it must have been made after Hollander died, which means this is Angeal's work directly. Perhaps that is the source of the difference," Genesis hypothesised.

It seemed logical then that Angeal had dispatched this creature to protect the boy and Sergeant Kuskel on their journey across the continents. Sephiroth folded his arms pensively. "What I don't understand is if Angeal was there and aware of what was going on, why didn't he help out directly? Why only work through proxies?" Genesis looked worried, he noted. "You know something."

The Commander clutched his shoulder. A new nervous habit – he wondered how long he should leave it before informing his friend of his new tell. "Degradation. The pain can strike you suddenly, crippling you at the most inopportune moments. You become weak, you stop trusting your body to act the way you expect it to, and you start to fear even the smallest of injuries."

Genesis painted a chilling image, but Sephiroth understood. Their old friend was playing it safe, then. Taking what small actions he felt sure he could complete. A copy would be, in his eyes, more reliable.

Angeal always had been the most cautious one.

"Or it could just be that he needed to stay in Nibelheim to look for Cloud," Zack pointed out. Sephiroth sent him a flat stare, and he became defensive. "What?"

"It doesn't sound as though Nibelheim is that large," Genesis scoffed. "Smaller than even Banora, by all reports. Surely, in the time since he bequeathed you that Buster Sword, Angeal would have been able to inspect the place in its entirety several times over."

For the first time since boarding the airship, Vincent's smooth baritone split the silence. Zack and Cloud jumped – both apparently having forgotten he was there. "Nibelheim itself is small, but if you don't know where to look for it, the way into Hojo's laboratory is almost impossible to find. The entrance is well camouflaged, and only able to be opened by a hidden mechanism."

Genesis raised his eyebrows. "The good Professor is certainly paranoid."

If even half of what he suspected was true, Hojo had excellent cause to be. The case of Vincent Valentine alone was enough to get the Turks offside. Everybody knew Hojo had the President's favour, but how much longer would that last with the Turks actively ferreting out his every lie? "It is fortunate, then, that we have a guide with us."

His words were met with a long, grave silence. Sephiroth stared Vincent down, confused by his apparent reluctance. "Was I wrong to presume that of you?"

Eventually, Vincent murmured, "There are many secrets in that place better left buried. Secrets you may be happier not knowing." The hold had fallen deathly quiet – even the child held in his groaning, as though scared to draw attention to himself. "However, you must choose your own path. I cannot choose it for you."

Sephiroth arched an eyebrow. "Choose?" he echoed.

Vincent didn't explain. "Cloud does not believe in you," was all he would say. "However, I have faith in the son of Lucrecia."

Cryptic words, but Sephiroth found them oddly ominous. Lucrecia again. He wanted to ask the former Turk more, but could not bring himself to do so with an audience. What did it mean? He
needed to know, but a part of him was reluctant to find out.

Everything he thought he knew and could trust had been slowly collapsing around him, ever since Angeal and Cloud first disappeared. Hollander's murder. The news of degradation and human experiments. Months of the company pretending two of its top SOLDIERs no longer existed. All that time searching, always aware that Angeal's health could be dwindling by the day, always conscious of the Turks and Lazard looking over his shoulder. The growing certainty that the company he served was the culprit. Then he'd discovered the Second Class in a hotel in the slums. A SOLDIER who had been reported as dead. Irrefutable proof of a ShinRa cover up.

His fingers flexed. Then Vincent's declaration that Hojo was involved had been the last piece of concrete evidence he'd needed to convince himself that his dreams were more than dreams. That it hadn't been his hand choking the Professor, as satisfying a fantasy it might have been. That all this time, Cloud – one of the few people he counted as a friend – had been trapped by the Science Department, leaving Angeal to wither away.

An ugly feeling had begun to grow in him. A dark, potent rage, that the company he'd served for as long as he could remember would betray him so thoroughly.

No, more than mere rage. Hatred.

The foundation of his every belief in himself and the world had been shaken, giving way to sick, twisted suspicions about his own forgotten childhood. Jenova was not his mother? Instead, it was some woman named Lucrecia he'd never even heard of?

Then who was Jenova?

The truck rumbled to a stop outside the town gates. Genesis stepped down from the back, dusted off the hem of his long red jacket, and reached back to collect First Tsurugi, grimacing under the weight. He would never understand the appeal of such a heavy weapon, even if it separated.

Sephiroth moved to stand by the gates with an odd expression of his face. Zack was busy helping the grey-faced child down from the truck, so Genesis sauntered over to join the General. It had been two and a half days of solid travelling, but they'd finally arrived at Nibelheim. According to Cloud's nephew, that was actually an achievement.

Now that they'd arrived, though, he found himself unimpressed. When he'd first heard the descriptions of Nibelheim, he'd pictured a more mountainous version of Banora, but he couldn't have been more wrong.

Banora was quiet. Nibelheim was desolate. The doors and windows of the houses were shut tight against the cold breezes rolling off the peak, and though the curtains twitched, nobody came out to greet them. The sheer surrounding cliffs left half the buildings in near-permanent shadow. What little vegetation framed the village was gnarled and withered, poking out between crevasses of dark grey rock.

It felt like a ghost town, only everybody forgot to leave.

Sephiroth had yet to move. "Is something bothering you?" Genesis drawled. Could he be having second thoughts? ShinRa's famous General had looked unusually pensive throughout the journey, after all. Vincent's cryptic warning had only fed his growing concern.

Not that he was concerned for Sephiroth, of course – merely the side effects they would suffer should he begin behaving as unpredictably as Angeal.
"This place… it seems familiar," he murmured. "Yet I cannot recall ever being here before."

"Given what Vincent said about Lucrecia, and that Hojo has his lab here, there is a good chance this is your hometown," Genesis remarked. "Though I suppose you would not remember it consciously."

Sephiroth considered that for a moment, green eyes sweeping critically across each building in turn.

"…I feel no attachment to it whatsoever."

With that cold pronouncement, Sephiroth began walking purposefully towards the inn. "We should move quickly. Our arrival is not likely to go unnoticed for long."

Genesis threw a glance back to the rest of their rag-tag crew. Cloud's nephew appeared to be pulling himself together now they were no longer moving, though Zack still hovered around him, as though expecting him to collapse at any moment. Their driver had locked up the truck and was making a beeline for one of the houses. The chimera took a running leap into the air and soared over the village, wheeling out of sight a moment later.


The Commander scoffed. "I thought you 'believed in him'."

"I do. But caution would be prudent."

Genesis eyed him. "And what precisely am I looking out for? Do you care to share what it is you know, Vincent Valentine?"

The former Turk breezed past without replying.

How mysterious.

By the time they all trickled into the Inn, Sephiroth had arranged for rooms. Genesis carefully placed Cloud's belongings in the corner, and Zack did squats by the door. Cloud's nephew stood awkwardly next to him.

"Okay, so we're off to the lab now, right?" Zack asked. "Oh but… Spike, you should go tell your mother you're back. I bet she's worried."

The light of challenge entered the boy's eyes. "I want to help find my uncle too."

"It's probably going to be dangerous." Zack's diplomatic way of saying 'you'll get in the way', Genesis noted.

"But-"

Zack threw him a glance, and murmured in a voice low enough for the child not to hear, "You tell him."

Puzzled, Genesis asked, "Why?" He had no experience with children. There was a reason why ShinRa didn't give him any training duties.

"Just do it."

Genesis shrugged. He was impatient to get going. "We're moving on to private ShinRa property –
civilians aren't allowed. Go home and maintain an air of normalcy," he cut in. "That's an order. We'll be back with your uncle soon enough."

All further protests died on the boy's lips, and he nodded quickly.

That was easy. "Let's not waste any more time. I'd rather not give any curious townspeople the chance to gather before we leave." As an afterthought, he added to the boy, "And don't tell anyone where we've gone. If we're not back by nightfall, write a letter explaining everything that's happened and give it to the chimera."

The child nodded again, and scrambled out the door. As the front door to the Inn slammed shut, he raised an eyebrow at Zack. "What was so difficult about that?"

The black-haired First merely grinned as though enjoying a private joke, and ambled towards the exit. "Nothing. Just worked better than I thought."

"I think you have a fan," Sephiroth murmured.

Genesis swept his hair out of his eyes, in a practiced move he normally reserved for publicity shoots. "Just proof the boy responds to leadership when he sees it."

"Although, are you sure it's safe to-?" Zack began to worry as soon as they were outside.

"Considering what he's accomplished so far, I'm sure he'll be fine on his own. And he has the chimera," Genesis dismissed. He searched the sky for a moment. Was Angeal here, in this town? It had been so very long since he'd last seen his friend. How far had the degradation progressed?

He could only pray they weren't too late. For either Angeal, or Cloud.

Sephiroth was already heading for the northern exit. The village was still mostly clear of onlookers, fortunately. He spied the man who had driven them there talking with who he assumed was the town's mayor – he had that self-important look about him that reminded Genesis bitterly of his own father. They hadn't bothered to extrapolate beyond 'confidential ShinRa business', hopefully that would keep the townspeople at bay for a while. They could speculate all they wanted, so long as they didn't interfere.

They left behind the main circle of houses, heading further up the peak along a rocky slope. Sephiroth appeared completely uninterested in their surroundings, walking with focused intent and purpose. Genesis narrowed his eyes. Vincent, their supposed guide, was trailing at the back of the group, but had yet to speak up. "Do you know where you're going?"

His gaze turned distant. "He's here."

It took a moment for the meaning to sink in. The sixth sense Zack had alluded to. Genesis wasn't sure whether to feel thrilled at the confirmation of Cloud's presence, or annoyed that Sephiroth could tell when he couldn't.

He settled on smugness. "And you thought I was being overly optimistic in bringing his sword and materia."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. "You could have just as easily left them in Midgar."

"If I'd been held captive, my first thought would certainly be getting my sword back," he flippantly replied.
"You have a point." He frowned. "Something's different, though. It seems stronger. I was never so conscious of it before."

"Maybe because you know to look, now," Zack pointed out. His tone was easy-going and casual, but his eyes were bright and sharp, primed for action at a moment's notice.

"I imagine Cloud will be thrilled," Genesis drawled. "Has it never occurred to you that this was precisely how he could avoid you even when you were looking for him?"

He never received a response, as at that moment, a gloomy mansion loomed into view, killing all further conversation. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the sight.

The town had been desolate. The mansion carried a far more menacing vibe. It was hidden behind wrought iron gates, with uneven grass licking at the cracked paint and towering cliffs surrounding it on three sides. Genesis found himself searching for gargoyles, though aside from the trimmings on the tresses, the building was stark and grey. The dated architecture gave it an impression of a hunched, sleeping monster, with the grimy windows its many eyes, and the heavy wooden doors its dark maw.

Sephiroth sliced cleanly through the lock, and the gates creaked open. The front doors themselves hadn't been secured – and why would they be, if everything secret and valuable had been hidden away in the lower levels.

The interior did not paint a more inviting picture than the exterior. The corners were full of cobwebs and dust, and the entire place smelt of old paper and mothballs, with a hint of a sickly perfume layered underneath. The foyer was large and empty, leading off to a number of closed wooden doors. A wide, split staircase reached for the second level, overlooked by tall, arching windows, too filthy to let in any light.

The banisters, the light fittings, and the few pieces of furniture visible were all antiques – and in bad shape, at that. It reeked of old money gone bad. A wealthy family, perhaps, driven from their ancestral home by ShinRa, which then fell into disrepair through years of disuse. Certainly the central building's architecture predated the President's time. Probably built upon, burrowed under and extended, ever since the Reactor was first built upon Nibel's peak.

Sephiroth paused, gaze slightly unfocused as he took in their surroundings.

"Where to now, oh great leader?" Genesis prodded.

"Below." He frowned. "It's familiar, but I'm not sure where…"

Fortunately, Vincent swept forward at this point and wordlessly led the way upstairs. Zack shivered, taking up the rear. "Something really creepy about this place."

Genesis ran a finger along the banister, and checked his glove for dust. "It has rather obviously been abandoned for some time, but it bears signs of recent use." He eyed several rust-coloured patches on the timber with distaste. It looked like dried blood.

They bypassed several doors to reach one of the side rooms. Vincent headed straight for the bookcase opposite, lifting one of the tomes. There was a click, and a part of the stone wall in the corner of the room rumbled and scraped open, revealing a stairwell.

"That's… kind of cool," Zack stage-whispered.

Genesis slapped him upside the back of his head. "Hurry along, Zack Fair. You can admire the
They descended the dark and dank staircase to what could only be described as a dungeon. Carved out of earth and rock, with heavy steel and wooden doors spaced irregularly along the jagged walls. Water dripped from exposed pipes in the ceiling, creating fetid puddles on the ground, their mouldy, fishy smell soaking into his senses until Genesis could almost taste it. The skitter of claws echoed in the darkness, dancing around the pockets of dim yellow light cast by weakly glowing bulbs.

"I haven't seen any guards yet," Zack murmured.

"Watch our backs, they might come from behind," Genesis reminded him sharply. He gripped the hilt of his rapier, ready to fight at a moment's notice. The lack of security was beginning to make him nervous. Was Hojo that confident nobody would find him here? Or were they simply short-handed?

Sephiroth and Vincent led the way to a door on the far end of the yawning, underground corridor. It revealed an office, with floor-to-ceiling shelves lined with books and journals, and a desk carpeted in scattered papers. The comparatively modern and well-kept surroundings were jarring after walking through the rest of the mansion.

"There's a lab just beyond," Vincent murmured, producing an impressive gun from within the folds of his crimson cloak. "On your guard." He searched out another hidden mechanism, and one of the bookshelves shifted, revealing another concealed door.

Genesis could hear a muffled voice through it, but had scarcely a moment to discern its owner before Sephiroth threw the door open and strode inside.

It was a lab, as Vincent had said, but it sent chills down his spine as no other laboratory did. Like Hollander's, it proudly displayed a metal operating table, but this one was stained with fresh blood and glowing mako, and adorned with metal restraints thick enough to manacle a behemoth. Restraints that could only be designed to hold a SOLDIER.

Two ShinRa troopers stood in the corner, looking lost and terrified at the sight of General Sephiroth bursting in on them. A scientist had dropped a folder of papers in his surprise. Hojo, on the other hand, simply frowned at them as though they'd crashed a board meeting unannounced. "This is a surprise. General Sephiroth." His eyes flicked over Genesis briefly. "And one of Hollander's failures, as well. Come to admire my greatest work?" He cackled to himself.

Genesis bristled at the insult, but found his attention quickly diverted by the enormous cylindrical tank sitting against the wall. Its twin was missing, with only the base and the pipes still present, but the one remaining glowed a steady green. Mako.

"What-?" Zack gasped.

Inside floated their missing SOLDIER First Class, Cloud Strife.

Realisation struck. This was what happened to Sergeant Kusiel.

Genesis lashed out without thought. The spell on his rapier let the tip cut through the container without resistance. The tank held for half a second, then the glass exploded outward, mako gushing over their shoes, drenching those closest with glowing green.

He caught Cloud before he could hit the floor. The blond hacked and coughed in his grasp, spitting...
out mouthfuls of mako. After a moment, his glazed blue eyes opened, tiny green crystals still clinging to his lashes. "Zack?" he slurred.

Genesis felt his eyebrow twitch. "Hardly. I'll thank you not to mistake me for Angeal's excitable Puppy."

His eyes widened, but still didn't quite focus properly. "Genesis. But-" His features settled back into confusion. He turned his head sluggishly, then nearly staggered at the sight of the General. "Sephiroth."

The man in question frowned, as visibly displeased with the state they'd found the blond in as Genesis. "Cloud. Any injuries?"

The blond didn't appear to register the question. "You're not supposed to be here," he rasped, wild-eyed.

"Don't concern yourself over it," Sephiroth dismissed. "I could care less what ShinRa wants at this point in time."

Cloud just shook his head, something desperate but not quite all there in the gesture. "Zack?" he gasped again.

"Right here, Cloud," Zack answered. He grabbed the SOLDIER's other arm, hefting his half-limp form between them, but keeping Buster Sword raised and at the ready with his right hand. The guards still didn't dare twitch.

"Interesting reaction," Hojo muttered to himself. "A significant event changed on the timeline, perhaps?"

"Professor." Sephiroth drew out the word as though he were identifying monster remains scraped from the bottom of his boots. "Do you care to explain the meaning of this?"

Hojo, for his part, didn't appear to feel threatened at all. "Care to explain the meaning? I doubt any of you could grasp the magnitude of what I've accomplished here. Or perhaps you could, Sephiroth." His dark eyes glittered with fascination. "I must admit, I didn't anticipate seeing you here, but it's an opportunity. Yes, an opportunity… a new angle to the Project, why didn't I see it before…a reunion!"

Cloud stirred, mumbling beneath his breath. The mere act of staying conscious appeared to be consuming most of the SOLDIER's strength – he sagged heavily in Genesis's grip, his eyes half-lidded, mouth working as though trying to speak.

"I'm not referring to your experiments," Sephiroth responded coolly. His words were as professional and restrained as always, but there was a raw edge, a darkness to his tone that Genesis had not heard before. "I am more curious as to how you plan to justify the incarceration of two of my SOLDIERS."

"Two of your SOLDIERS? Nonsense." Hojo's faced stretched into an oily smile. "I'm not sure what you're trying to insinuate, but everything was conducted above board. There's only one specimen here, and he was already a deserter when I picked him up. As the head of the Science Department, it's within my rights to incarcerate him, and I'll think you'll find the President is in agreement." He adjusted his glasses, giving them a bored stare. "I order that you return him immediately. I don't have time for any of this." The scientist made to step towards Cloud, but the edge of Masamune held to his throat stopped him cold. He sent the General an irritated glance. "What are you doing? I
Genesis bared his teeth in a grin. "But I'm afraid you're operating under some false information, Professor. Cloud Strife was never listed as a deserter."

"And I'm finding myself lacking the motivation to follow ShinRa's orders lately," Sephiroth added ominously.

For the first time, Hojo began to look nervous. "The Turks-"

"The Turks are not your allies any longer," a fourth voice slid into the conversation.

It appeared Vincent had finally decided to reveal himself. Genesis was beginning to appreciate his gift for the dramatic. Especially the way it made Hojo pale and his features distort grotesquely.

"You," the Professor all but snarled. "When did you- Guards!"

They jerked to attention at the order, but Genesis sent them a sharp glare and ordered, "Stand down."

They threw away their weapons as though they were on fire. Hojo was a scientist. SOLDIER was military. As far as these troops were concerned, Genesis and Sephiroth outranked everyone but the President himself.

"I'm afraid your experiments here are at an end, Professor," Sephiroth declared coldly.

"No," he muttered. "At the most vital phase… My greatest work!" Hands shaking and eyes wild, he reached into his lab coat and pulled free a pistol. "You can't interfere!"

"He's got a gun!" Zack shouted.

Genesis swore under his breath. He'd gone mad! And with Cloud weighing him down, he couldn't move fast enough! "Somebody stop him!"

The pistol shook as it wavered between them, Hojo's voice rising to a feverish pitch. "To go beyond the powers of science… Let me see it! Jenova's Reunio-"

It all happened in the space of an eyeblink. Cloud lurched from his grasp, arm stretched out towards the scientist. Sephiroth raised Masamune. Hojo, panicked, squeezed the trigger.

The air split with two bangs.

One bullet struck Cloud in the shoulder.

The other pierced Hojo between the eyes.

Vincent stood behind them, tendrils of smoke curling from the barrel of his gun. "For Lucrecia," he murmured.

Cloud stumbled – Genesis caught him before he could collapse. The scientist's body fell to the floor, carried backwards by the shot's momentum. Crimson sprayed out in an ugly splatter across the walls and floor, and Hojo's unseeing black gaze remained fixed on the ceiling. He'd died instantly.

It was too quick and merciful for Genesis's taste.
"Cloud?" Zack asked, anxious.

Genesis fumbled for his Full Cure. The blond sagged limply in his grip – the last shock had finally driven him to unconsciousness. It was a clean wound, at least – the bullet had passed straight through without hitting any bones, and the materia staunched the bleeding swiftly. "He'll recover. Hojo didn't hit anything vital." It might have killed a civilian, but SOLDIERs bounced back from worse wounds regularly enough.

He would live, but the Commander had never felt so much a failure as at that moment. He hadn't even been able to protect Cloud from a wild shot made by a mad scientist. His life could have slipped away so easily, taking Angeal's with it, and leaving his debt forever unpaid.

"Genesis." Sephiroth gained his attention, and flicked his gaze towards the remaining witnesses.

He'd forgotten. The lab assistant and the two guards were still standing there, living statues with their mouths hanging open in abject shock and horror.

Genesis snapped three quick spells their way. After a moment they too folded to the ground, unconscious.

"Sleep?" Sephiroth asked.

"What, would you prefer I kill them?" he grumbled. "Because I certainly wouldn't mind."

"I kind of think killing Hojo will have us in plenty of trouble with ShinRa already," Zack volunteered.

Genesis thought quickly. "This is the official report: Hojo was killed when one of his experiments escaped and attacked him. The SOLDIERs on the scene gained control of the situation, but the professor died instantly and could not be revived."

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. The Commander shrugged in response. "It carries a grain of truth."

"I'll go check the rest of the mansion for staff," Vincent murmured, and seemed to fade from the room.

"Don't kill anyone else if you can help it!" Zack called after him.

"The President isn't going to care about some troopers and scientists, if he was willing to authorise Hojo experimenting on SOLDIERs," Sephiroth reminded him.

"Doesn't mean we should stoop to that level."

"You can worry about that later – we have more important things to deal with for now," Genesis interrupted. Somewhat reluctantly, he relinquished Cloud to Zack's care. "For starters, Cloud needs to get back to the Inn to be treated." Mako was stilling dripping from his hair, and though his Full Cure had taken care of the worst of the damage, the bullet wound needed to be wrapped and left undisturbed to finish healing. The blond would recover faster if he were clean, warm, and resting somewhere comfortable. The sooner they could get him out of this accursed building, the better.

Zack nodded. "Got it. I'll leave things here to you two, then." He hurried out of the lab, unconscious blond in tow, looking relieved to be leaving the place behind.

Genesis waited until he was out of earshot before folding his arms and regarding his fellow officer critically. "Are you alright?"
"I'm not sure what you mean. I'm not the one Hojo shot. I even managed to escape the mako shower." Sephiroth gestured vaguely towards the poisonous green puddle beneath their boots.

"I thought perhaps it might have been shocking for you." His eyes flicked to Hojo's corpse, blood still pooling beneath his head.

"...You already know my feelings on Hojo. I assure you, the only part of his abrupt passing I mourn is the loss of opportunity to do it myself."

Cold, but given his own rather complex feelings on his past, Genesis could empathise. Sephiroth didn't even have the memories of childhood to tie him to the man.

It only took a few minutes to drag the sleeping guards and scientist upstairs and lock them in one of the bedrooms. Destroying the remaining evidence didn't take long either – judicious use of fire materia disposed of Hojo's body far faster than the Lifestream would, and the remaining mako from the broken tank gurgled down the drainpipe through the floor quickly enough. Speaking of mako... Genesis wrinkled his nose at the state of his gloves and coat. A thin green film clung to them from the soaking he'd received when he smashed the tank. "I'm returning to the Inn to clean up." He wanted to check on Cloud for himself, too – and search the area for Angeal now that they had a hope of acquiring the cure again. "What about you?"

"I think I shall stay here and go through some of the late Professor's files," Sephiroth said, wandering into the adjoining library. "There may be some helpful information here as to what's been going on."

"You could just wake up the scientist and interrogate him," he pointed out.

"I know the way Hojo worked. He never trusted his assistants with the most sensitive data. Anything he can tell us will only be one small piece of the puzzle."

Genesis paused. "Then perhaps you should return to the Inn, first." The General claimed he hadn't been affected by Hojo's death, but there was certainly something off about him. There had been ever since Vincent told him his mother's name wasn't Jenova, in fact.

"I doubt I'll be much use playing nursemaid with both you and Zack looking after Cloud," Sephiroth replied, visibly distracted. "And I can keep an eye on the laboratory to catch anyone who might come by."

It was sound logic, so Genesis reluctantly withdrew. He himself was eager to escape back to the Inn now that their mission had been accomplished. Even with Hojo dead, the mansion gave him an ill feeling, as though ghosts were whispering in his ears and the dead were running fingers along his spine. "Until later, then."

Sephiroth didn't respond, green eyes bright as they roamed the library shelves.
There was something comfortingly familiar about this - floating on the edge of consciousness, with Zack's constant stream of chatter murmuring in his ears. Except it felt too comfortable, too warm, too dry, too still. Weren't they supposed to moving, hiding from distant drone of helicopters, sleeping on the cold damp ground?

"-Any luck tracking down Angeal?"

"None." A pause, the sound of running water, then the shuffle of footsteps.

"Where are you going?"

"Out again. I only returned to see how Cloud was faring."

Cloud. He was Cloud. He latched onto the knowledge fiercely, uncertain why it was important he cling to it, but knowing that it was.

"Hey, take a break, would you? There's not much point to finding Angeal before we get the cure anyway." His voice dropped. "And I'm getting worried about Sephiroth. He hasn't come out of the library yet."

A curse. "Still?"

"Vincent looked in on him earlier, but he couldn't get a response."

Sephiroth. A sense of anxiety rose in him at the name. Something... he needed to do something...

He couldn't translate the sense of urgency into movement, and consciousness slipped from his grasp once more. He wasn't sure how much time had passed when he next drifted close enough to awareness to comprehend what the voices next to him were saying, but the light in the room had changed. He tensed, wary of a threat.

"Is it mako addiction?" A deep, familiar baritone. Cloud relaxed at the sound of it. Vincent. Not the lab. Vincent would never let him wake up in one. The lab? His memories were muddled, but he picked through them, constructing a disjointed picture. That was right, he'd been in a lab. Not for the first time. This time had been different.

"Genesis thinks its mostly fatigue. The bullet wound's completely healed. We still don't really know what went on in there, either. Hojo must have been doing something."

"Sephiroth hasn't found anything yet?"

"If he has, we can't get it from him. Genesis was going to go over later, maybe he'll have more luck."

Panic. A groan fought its way from his lips.

"What? Cloud? Hey, you awake, buddy?"
The awareness was short-lived - he never managed to answer.

Hours passed. Maybe days. He had some vague recollection of being helped to the bathroom once or twice, and liquid being coaxed down his throat, but not much else permeated the haze of exhaustion. No way of measuring, no trust in his instincts – all he knew was that time had disappeared in what felt like an eye-blink. A part of him – a distant part, so quiet and ineffectual under the fatigue pinning his limbs – fretted at the sensation, worried over a threat he couldn't collect his thoughts enough to name. All he could do was cling to the knowledge that he was Cloud, and sleep, his dreams tortured by an endless sea of mako-green and disembodied whispers.

When he next floated towards consciousness, Zack wasn't there. He felt a brief spike of panic, but was calmed by a smooth voice, murmuring by his bedside.

"… the fates are cruel
There are no dreams, no honour remains.
The arrow has left the bow of the goddess."

My Soul corrupted by vengeance,  
Hath endured torment,  
To find the end of the journey in my own salvation.  
And Your eternal slumber.

Now what I want most...  
is the 'Gift of the Goddess'…"

The steady rhythm of words was comforting, and soon lulled him back into a deep slumber.

More time passed. Time he couldn't afford, but gathering the determination to force himself awake was like trying to scoop up flan jelly with his fingers.

Until one voice pierced through the murmuring nonsense, clear as a bell.

Wake up.

Abruptly, he became aware that the room had gone quiet. Zack's cheerful chatter, Genesis's lyrical recitation, Vincent's murmured questions – all were absent.

You need to wake up now. You're needed.

It felt like his eyelids had been glued shut, but with some effort, Cloud managed to pry them open. The room was lit a rosy red by the late afternoon light. The chair next to his bed was empty. Unusual.

The difference was alarming enough to fully rouse him. He pushed himself up, blinking as the world spun, fighting down a bout of light-headedness as he took in his surroundings properly.

He knew this place. The inn at Nibelheim. How long had he been sleeping? What had happened? He never came to Nibelheim, not since they'd first discovered the farce ShinRa had set up to hide the truth. His brow furrowed. Although, didn't he stay here more recently? To fight some dragons… and then the lab. Kunsel. Hojo.

Hojo was dead. Cloud almost felt giddy as the knowledge hit him. Hojo was dead. It must have been Vincent. Vincent had shot him right between the eyes. He'd blacked out soon after, but he'd seen that much – seen the Professor's eyes turn blank, seen the blood splatter across the wall, felt the thrill of relief knowing that finally, finally something had changed.
He remembered. His thoughts were still a jumbled mess, but he remembered – he'd travelled to the past, and Hojo was dead. This was Nibelheim, before it burned down, and Hojo was dead. His mother was still alive, Jenova was in the Reactor, Hojo was dead, and Sephiroth…

He could sense him. Moving up the mountain. Pressure began to grow in his head, a dull headache that throbbed behind his eyes.

Hojo was dead, but Sephiroth was here, in Nibelheim.

Cloud pushed back the covers and pulled himself from the bed in a daze. He was wearing a standard SOLDIER First Class uniform, but it felt about a size too large – probably a spare of Zack's. His boots were sitting next to the bed, though – they looked freshly cleaned, so he tugged them on and stood. His legs wobbled as they took his weight, and he stumbled a few steps, struggling for balance. He still felt sluggish, like his mind wasn't properly connected to his body.

He found his shoulder guard on the nightstand, and fumbled with the clasps as he put it on. First Tsurugi rested in the corner, half hidden by the long afternoon shadows. His materia sat in a tidy arrangement next to it. He left the Chocobo Lure, equipping the rest into the empty slots with quick, practiced movements he could perform in his sleep. Then he hefted the sword onto his shoulder and lurched from the room.

The Reactor. He needed to go to the Reactor. The threat to the Planet. Finish it, end it. His feet plodded forward, almost of their own volition.

It felt strange. Oddly familiar. Like Aeris's gentle touch on his thoughts, or Zack's invisible hand, guiding a sword he didn't know how to use.

It was the Planet, he realised blearily. The Planet itself was reaching out to him. It needed his help. To save her before it all happened again.

Cloud gripped his sword, and made for Mount Nibel.

The sun began to dip into the horizon, painting the sky a myriad of hues. The temperature dropped with it, cold air rolling in from the shadowed side of the mountain. The chilly breeze stung his cheeks, and its icy fingers ruffled his feathers. Angeal ignored it – used to Nibel's weather after the past month and a half scouring the peak. He glided somewhat lazily above the mountain path, confident that Genesis had returned to town, and that the glare from the sunset was sufficiently brilliant for anyone else to dismiss his silhouette as a trick of the oncoming twilight.

He found himself at a loss of what to do next. Strife had been rescued, his nephew safely delivered home, and the Second Class SOLDIER was recovering in Midgar. Zack had made First Class – the sight of the black uniform had sent a swell of pride through him – and didn't need a mentor to watch his back anymore.

Lazard had been in contact, but with Hollander's death it seemed as though whatever plans he'd been brewing lay dormant, and he was more concerned with keeping himself alive and out of trouble now. The Turks must have collared him. He should have known there was more to it when Lazard had been so complicit with Hollander's scheme – the scientist must have promised him an army. He probably ought to find some way to warn Sephiroth about it, just in case the Director came up with anything else now that avenue had been closed to him.

For the moment though, he supposed all he could do was keep an eye on the group. In his current state he wasn't able to do much, but a sentry in the sky couldn't hurt. For just a little longer, he'd
watch over them from a distance.

As though summoned by the thought, a glint of silver caught his eye on the mountain below. He wheeled closer, eyeing the figure making his way up the rocky path with curiosity. Sephiroth?

He hadn't seen the General since the group had first arrived in Nibelheim. Zack and Genesis had been up the mountain several times, looking for him apparently, but he'd made sure to steer clear. He was a coward – too afraid to face their horror or their pity when they saw what he'd become. Zack's expression when he'd given him the Buster Sword had left a bitter taste lingering in his mouth for days – how much worse would it be now?

Sephiroth's gaze never wandered towards the sky, though, so Angeal drifted on the wind currents, keeping a lazy eye on his progress up the mountain. What was he doing?

Perhaps going to check on the Reactor. There were none of the usual monsters in the area to worry about, so he let the General be, gliding back down towards the village. A large part of him detested the mismatched white wings protruding from his back and all they represented, but he couldn't deny that he appreciated the ability to have a bird's eye view of the landscape. He frowned at the plume of smoke beginning to rise from where the ShinRa mansion lay nestled in the steep mountainside. That was unusual.

Before he could go any closer to investigate, though, he noticed another familiar figure heading up the path. This one with spiky blond hair. The boy? No, he was wearing a SOLDIER First Class uniform. Strife?

The man walked slowly but steadily up the mountain, sword hefted on his shoulder instead of slung in its harness as it normally was. Angeal watched in concern. Physically, there didn't seem to be much problem, but why would Strife suddenly go walking up the mountain by himself after being bedridden for a week? No, something wasn't right.

He wavered for a moment, but concern won out. Besides, the guilt of what he'd inadvertently put the blond through in his initial panic over degradation ate at him every day. Angeal owed the man an apology and an explanation at the very least, whether he chose to accept it or not.

The air rushed past as he dove towards the ground, and landed lightly on a boulder a short ways ahead of him. "Strife!"

The SOLDIER stopped at the sound of his voice, but Angeal had the feeling that he didn't see him so much as see through him. "Angeal."

"You're back up on your feet." Up close, Strife still looked too pale for his liking, but thankfully in better shape than the Second Class he'd helped out a few weeks ago.

Strife stared at him for a long moment. "Your degradation's gotten worse." He sounded distant, as though he were talking to himself.

"Don't worry about it. I've come to terms with it." His hopes of recovery had died when he'd seen Hollander's corpse. More importantly, the neutrality of the blond's response deeply disturbed him. Shouldn't he be angry with him? "Where are you going?"

His expression abruptly hardened, and his knuckles tightened around the hilt of First Tsurugi. "Don't get in my way."

"Get in your- Wait." Angeal's eyes narrowed. What was Strife doing that he'd possibly want to
interfere with? He'd scoured this mountain top to bottom over the past few weeks – there was nothing up here but bomb-ombs, wolves, and the Reactor.

The Reactor, which Sephiroth had headed towards not that long ago.

"Sephiroth," Angeal cursed, the realisation striking him like a blow. "Strife, you can't possibly still – after he rescued you-!"

The blond's only response was to lift First Tsurugi from his shoulder.

It was then that he knew. Strife was deadly serious.

Angeal's hand grasped at air. Only too late did he realise he no longer carried Buster Sword on his back.

Zack hurried back to the Inn, arms laden with food from the general store. He didn't like leaving Cloud alone for too long, but the blond had been showing signs of waking up, and he wanted to have some warm soup ready when he did. He'd been sleeping for nearly five days now, and while they'd been pouring water and soup down his throat whenever he was aware enough to swallow, he was really hoping that this time he'd wake up enough to feed himself.

Then he'd have to track down Genesis and make sure he ate, too. He'd probably get Spike to do that. Whenever the kid wasn't at the Inn watching over his Uncle, he was shadowing the Commander, who tolerated it with uncharacteristic patience. Possibly because the boy was related to Cloud, or more likely because he was a local who could guide him around the mountain while he looked for Angeal. With the blond rescued, the officer had thrown himself into the task of solving the mystery of the chimera, convinced their other missing friend was in the area. Zack had swapped out and taken over searching from him a couple of times – mostly to make sure he took a break – but getting him to sleep and eat properly was becoming a trial.

Sephiroth wasn't much better – still holed up in the library. Genesis had displayed a remarkable talent for hypocrisy in spending some time coercing the General into eating at least once a day, but nobody, not even Vincent, had been able to pry him from the mansion.

Five days. Five long, boring days, and Zack was beginning to wonder if everyone was going mad.

Which was why he was really hoping Cloud would wake up today. If anybody could drag Sephiroth from the mansion, it would be Cloud, and Genesis would almost definitely calm down too once everyone else started acting normally again. Then they could finally make a start on getting back to Midgar. He didn't know what would happen after that – whether the Turks would come through, or if President would declare them traitors and force them on the run, or if the company would just cover it all up and pretend nothing ever happened.

He didn't care, either. He just wanted to see Aeris again. He missed her already.

Zack thanked his lucky stars nobody greeted him at the foyer of the Inn, and hotfooted it upstairs before that could change. He bounded inside, dumping the food on the table with a flourish. "I'm back! You hungry, Cloud?"

He hadn't expected an answer, but then, he also hadn't expected an empty room. It was silent as a grave, and the bed the blond had occupied not that long ago was conspicuously vacant.

"Cloud?" he called out, reaching for his sword. "You here, buddy?" A tendril of worry and panic threaded its way into his heart, but he stamped it out before it could take hold. Cloud's sword and
materia were missing, as were his boots and shoulder guard. That could only mean he'd woken up – if someone had snuck in and carted him off in his sleep, they wouldn't have bothered with his shoes and weapon.

Something was off, though. For starters, Cloud hadn't put on his sword harness – it still sat by the window where it had been left to dry, buckles glinting in the rosy light of the sunset. That implied he'd been in a rush. He should hurry up and find him. He could be disoriented – he might have panicked and made a run for it.

Zack flipped open his PHS to call Genesis, waiting impatiently for it to turn on. He'd been leaving it off to save the battery, since reception in the area was spotty at best and the only mail he'd received since leaving Midgar had been fanclub updates.

As soon as it turned on, his PHS beeped. Message backlog. He skipped past even more fanclub updates – maybe he shouldn't have joined all of them - then stopped on Luxiere's name. The Second was wondering if they'd promote Zack to Commander if Angeal stayed on leave much longer. Zack deleted it. Then after that… Unknown number? It looked like it had been sent yesterday. He clicked through.

'Zack, it's Kuskel,' the text read. Kuskel was finally awake! Zack let out a whoop and grinned, eagerly reading on. 'I haven't been able to get through to you, but Aeris told me you guys went to Nibelheim to rescue Cloud. Listen, no matter what, don't let Sephiroth go to the Reactor. You've got to get him out of there NOW. I'll explain later, just get the hell out of there Zack!'

That was… not exactly what he expected. Was there something dangerous inside the Reactor? Hard to imagine something that could take out the General, though. And why would it be dangerous to Sephiroth specifically?

Kuskel wasn't the sort to mess around with something like this, though. Zack quickly dialled Genesis's number as he headed back outside, praying the signal would hold.

He raised the PHS to his ear as he walked, listening to the tone ring and ring and ring, and happened to glance towards the sunset. Sunsets in Nibelheim came early, painting the clouds a vivid mix of orange and pink while casting the town into an early twilight shadow. The contrast of dark purple shade with the still-bright sky created an unsettling effect.

…Was that smoke in the distance?

The call rang out, and his PHS sat silent, awaiting his next move.

The smoke worried him – a thick black smear against the rose-coloured clouds, nothing like the usual white wisps curling from the town's chimneys. A quick glance around confirmed none of the locals seemed to have noticed it yet. For lack of any other clues, Zack flipped his PHS shut and headed towards it at a jog.

It didn't take long for the fire to come into view. He gaped. It was the mansion! The mansion was burning!

What happened? Massive tongues of flame licked the sky, bursting from the windows, angry flicks of red and orange blending with the sunset. "Shit! Sephiroth!" Was the General still inside? He barrelled through the gates, ready to storm through the flames if necessary. He was SOLDIER – he could probably last about a minute inside – would it be enough to get to the basement?

No time to be indecisive. Zack took a deep breath, held it, then crashed through the front doors.
His eyes teared up immediately in the smoke, and he squinted, struggling to see through the heat haze. "Sephiroth!" he choked out, running towards the stairs. He couldn't hear any response – just the groaning of wood and the blaze roaring in his ears. It felt like he'd walked straight down a dragon's gullet. Nothing but fire, everywhere he turned. As though Ifrit himself had awoken and unleashed hell upon the mansion.

He ran up the stairs – one shattered under his foot, more flames reaching up from it, blazing hot fingers grasping at his ankles. He jumped up to the next one, swearing, then swearing again when he realised he'd forgotten to hold his breath. Fire under the stairs? That meant the whole place could collapse any minute! Frantic now, he raced up to the second landing, jumping clear across part of the floor that had fallen away.

The doorway to the bedroom was wreathed in flame. Zack paused, the searing heat enough to make him hesitate. Grimacing, he braced himself, and prepared to dive through. The General could be in trouble down there!

He never got the chance. Before he could move, there was a sudden blast of freezing cold air on his face, and the doorway was showered with ice from the other side. A silhouette tore through the flames towards him, grabbed him by the arm, and dragged him back the way he'd come. "Are you an idiot, Zack Fair?" it wheezed.

Zack coughed, blinking smoke and ash out of his eyes. "Genesis?"

The floor began collapsing under their feet – they leapt and rolled as the staircase crashed into a pile of charred, burning wood, with only the banisters still connecting it to the second level. Genesis was up again in moments, grabbing one of Zack's suspenders and hauling the SOLDIER after him, throwing out Blizzaga after Blizzaga to keep the encroaching flames at bay. A support beam fell from the ceiling, but a quick slash of the Commander's rapier knocked it away.

Then all of a sudden they were out in the yard again, the cool air a balm on his face and the overpowering roar in his ears lowering to steady rumble. Zack winced as part of the roof tumbled in behind them, then wheeled on Genesis. "What's going on? Why's the mansion on fire? Where's Sephiroth?"

"I have no idea. He's not inside, at any rate." He looked even more irritable than normal - the tips of his hair were singed, and his red leather coat was streaked with soot. Snarling, he shot a Blizzara at a shrub on the edge of the property that had caught alight. The flames sputtered and died, and the leaves turned brittle with frost. "He can't have gone far, then."

"What about the troopers and scientists?" As far as he knew, they'd been locked in the East Wing so nobody ran off and reported Hojo's death before they were ready.

Genesis's silence was all the answer he needed.

"Then what about Cloud? Have you seen him?" Zack urged.

"What do you mean? Are you saying he finally woke up?"

"I don't know! All I know is that I left to get some food and when I came back he wasn't there! His sword and most of his materia are missing too!"

The Commander frowned, and another Blizzara at a shrub on the edge of the property that had caught alight. The flames sputtered and died, and the leaves turned brittle with frost. "He can't have gone far, then."
"What about Vincent? And Spike?"

"I sent the child home before coming here. As for Vincent, who can say?" He blasted the edge of the creeping fire with ice again, keeping it contained to the mansion. "The man comes and goes as he pleases," he huffed.

Zack bit his lip. Damn. What to do first? Go look for Sephiroth, or look for Cloud?

Maybe he should head towards the Reactor, to make sure Sephiroth wasn't there. And if he did find the General, he could ask him to use his weird extra sense to find Cloud! Decision made, he nodded and ran back through the gate. "I'm going to make sure Sephiroth's not at the Reactor!"

Genesis paused in his casting to send him an odd look. "What about Cloud? And the fire?" he called.

"I'll leave them to you! I don't have time to explain! Kunsel woke up and I got a message from him – it sounds serious!"

He ran off before Genesis had the chance to reply, quickly leaving the burning mansion behind. He didn't know the way to the Reactor, but Cloud's nephew had shown him a few paths when they'd gone Angeal-hunting – he could figure out the rest from there. He took off at a jog, glowing blue eyes raking the landscape for a glimpse of the General. There weren't exactly a lot of places to hide in Nibelheim – he had to be somewhere!

The further he went, though, the more unsettled he became. It was quiet on the mountain – too quiet. It freaked him out, especially after storming through a raging inferno mere minutes before. Weren't there normally birds or something? He remembered hearing some intermittent wildlife calls in the distance when he'd last come this far out, but this time only the cold wind and thudding of his boots kept him company.

Zack lightened his step, fingertips resting softly on the hilt of Angeal's Buster Sword. In Gongaga, silence meant something bad was in the area. Hard to imagine what might spook bom-ombs, dragons, and wolves, though. Certainly nothing so pedestrian as a little fire.

The thought had come too soon. A sudden flutter of wings had the SOLDIER whirling, sword drawn. Instead of an attack, though, he was nearly bowled over by a familiar blur of black fur and white feathers landing just in front of him. "Ack, don't surprise me like that!"

The chimera tossed its head, thrusting out its chest proudly and stretching its wings. Zack grinned, relieved he wasn't going to have to waste time dealing with Mount Nibel's sometimes-tricky wildlife after all. "Where have you been hiding? Haven't seen you since we got here!" And he'd looked, too. "I think Spike missed you."

It ran around him in a circle, then loped off, heading further up the mountainside.

"Hey, wait up!" Zack ran after it, scrabbling over the loose rocks and barely keeping the whip-like tail in sight as the chimera bounded ahead of him. Whenever he thought he'd lost sight of it, it would stop, perch on a boulder, and wait with an oddly familiar air of patience. Then as soon as he came into view, it would run off again. He had the weird feeling it was leading him somewhere.

As far as he could tell, they were still heading in the right direction, so Zack was happy to go along with it. Until he turned a bend in the path and saw the body sprawled out on the ground, and he realised what exactly the chimera had led him to.

"Angeal?" Zack yelped.
It was unmistakeably Angeal, but as he'd never seen him before. His hair had turned a mottled grey, and deep wrinkles were beginning to line his face.

He'd aged thirty years in six months.

The change was startling, but that wasn't what alarmed him the most. It was the bleeding wound stretched across his chest.

The SOLDIER rushed over to his mentor, dragging a glove off with his teeth and frantically checking for a pulse. He breathed a sigh of relief when it fluttered against his fingertips. Alive, but barely. The wound was shallow, thankfully. Now that he was closer, he could see burns on Angeal's arms, and his wing sat at a weird angle, a chunk of feathers missing. It looked like it might be broken. Who could have done this?

A chill passed over him. It couldn't be Sephiroth, surely. The General had been plagued with guilt over Angeal's injury – he wouldn't just turn around and do this, not after they'd worked so hard to find both him and Cloud for the cure!

What to do now? Zack cursed. Angeal needed help, but he hadn't stopped to bring any materia with him – and would Cure even work on his mentor, with the degradation and all?

"It appears I am too late," a smooth voice intruded on the silence, followed shortly by a red-cloaked man leaping down from a boulder and landing softly – too softly – near them.

"Vincent?" Zack jumped, and very nearly cut his own hand off in his frantic fumble to grab Buster Sword. "You've got to stop doing that!"

The former Turk didn't make any motion that could be construed as either greeting or acknowledgement, his eerie red gaze fixed on Angeal's prone form. "Who is that?"

"Angeal. My mentor. And what do you mean, too late?"

"Jenova," was Vincent's simple reply. "I had not thought Sephiroth would know where to find her."

"Wait, that lady you said wasn't really Sephiroth's mother?" Zack's head spun. He didn't like this kind of intrigue piled upon intrigue. Things were already too complicated for his taste.

"Jenova is hidden in the Reactor. Hojo moved her here recently – that was why I called Cloud in the first place."

His mouth turned dry. Then the reason Kusel had warned him not to let Sephiroth near the Reactor…

"We had planned to destroy her," Vincent continued after a beat. "I'd intended to go with Cloud once he woke up, but apparently I should not have waited." His voice was heavy with self-reproach.

"What will she do?" Zack asked in a low voice.

"...I am led to believe that it is not Jenova directly we need to fear. It's the influence she exerts on those who possess her cells."

Zack looked down at Angeal's battered form. He still didn't know everything that was going on, but he'd heard enough. "Then we can't waste any more time." He glanced at the chimera, still patiently sitting on its haunches next to them. "Can you protect Angeal? We'll be back for him soon." He
hoped. But realistically, if he was going to have to go up against Sephiroth…

The chimera ruffled its wings.

Enough of a response for him. Zack gripped the hilt of Buster Sword and stood. "Let's go."

It was like no time had passed at all since that day. The cold steel walls of the Reactor. Sephiroth standing on the stairs, Masamune glinting in the artificial light. And resting at the top of the dais just beyond… Jenova.

"Sephiroth!"

The General didn't turn at his arrival. "Cloud. I knew you'd come."

Cloud tightened his grip on First Tsurugi.

"I'm glad. I wanted to tell you about it. The ending I've decided upon."

"What ending is that?" The words were heavy with tension. Cloud was poised for battle, but Sephiroth stood with a casual air, unworried by his presence. Arrogant. Self-assured. The General's back was wide open, as it had been so many years ago. Cloud wasn't considered a threat. If anything, the man seemed pleased by his presence.

"Shall I show you? The story of a goddess, a monster, and a hero."

"That's no Goddess," he snarled. "That is the monster."

"Then Cloud… what does that make you and I?" Sephiroth turned to him then, the glow of his green eyes unnaturally bright in the dim light of the Reactor. "I know, now. Everything. I read all about it. About Jenova… and about you."

For a moment he was confused, until he remembered - Hojo. The lab. He would have kept notes on the time jump experiments, the same as he'd done with the Jenova Project. All Sephiroth had to do was read them, and he could put two and two together, just like Kuskel had.

"That child… he's no nephew of yours, is he? He's much more closely related than that."

His blood ran cold – when had the General met his younger self? - but it didn't matter. It didn't matter if Sephiroth knew. So long as everything ended here.

"Tell me, Cloud… what did I do in your future to make you hate me so? What changed that boy so drastically to become you?"

He'd had enough. "I don't have anything to say to you," he snapped. "I've come to make good on my word. Your journey ends here, Sephiroth!"

He dashed forward. Masamune flashed, and the clash of steel echoed through the Reactor. He pressed his weight against the block, forcing the General to step back. He'd caught him off-guard, and left him wrong-footed to take the blow.

Sephiroth paused. "Cloud… your eyes."

Stop him. Kill him.

His determination sharpened, and his Bolt materia flared to life. The General leapt back, breaking
the lock before the lightning could race along his sword.

"Cloud!"

Cloud didn't listen and refused to stop. No room for hesitation, no room for doubts. He dashed forward and struck, and struck again, each blow using all of his mako-enhanced strength and speed. Sephiroth struggled to keep up, Masamune cutting hasty arcs in the air as he fought off each attack.

No holding back. No sparring. No retreat.

Hojo was dead. Now it was Sephiroth's turn.
The air shivered with the shriek of tearing steel as First Tsurugi cleaved through the railing. Sephiroth dashed to the left and swung at his unprotected flank. Cloud separated his sword and caught the blow, then pulled the second blade free to sweep at the General's head. He jumped clear, settling atop one of the specimen tanks with unnatural grace. A single silver hair floated to the floor.

"You truly believe you can kill me?" His words were mocking, but his gaze was sharp and assessing. "I don't think you have it in you, Cloud. If you did, you would have taken your chance in the Midgar Wastes."

"I've killed you before," he snarled, leaping after him. They danced across the top of the pods, trading strikes. A wild swing left a three-metre long gash in the wall.

"So I am to be punished for crimes I have yet to commit. I thought you were a SOLDIER, not a Turk." Sephiroth deflected his attacks with ease, carving a wide radius with long, sweeping arcs of his blade.

Cloud didn't respond. This Sephiroth would never get the chance to threaten the Planet. It wasn't a risk he was willing to take.

He slashed, met air, then whirled and slashed again. His opponent blocked each strike, but was forced to step back on the last. "You've become stronger since we last sparred." His eyes were narrowed. Suspicious. Accusatory.

"You've just become weaker," he snapped, and drove his sword at his foe's heart. Sephiroth turned to the side at the last second, sparks flying from Masamune as their blades scraped.

His mistake. Cloud lashed out with his foot, catching him in the stomach with a satisfying thud. The General stumbled back, clutching his ribs, and hastily threw out a Firaga to regroup. A Barrier shimmered into existence before the blond with scarcely a thought. The blazing inferno passed over him like a warm breeze.

The fire hadn't even cleared before Cloud retaliated in kind. The walls shuddered with thunder as a torrent of lightning lashed through the chamber. At the last minute his target ducked – the spell missed him by a hand's width and splashed across the ceiling instead. Glass shattered in staccato bursts as a string of light bulbs exploded, raining them with tiny shards. The Reactor plunged into darkness, lit only by the dull green glow of mako from the core.

Sight didn't matter. He could sense Sephiroth clearly – could fight him with his eyes closed. He rushed forward, but the General whirled away at the last moment, taking cover behind one of the
specimen tanks.

Of course. He'd forgotten his awareness of Sephiroth was a two-edged sword. His opponent could fight in the dark just as competently.

Cloud leapt clear over the tank, and swore under his breath when the point of his blade cleaved into the floor, empty of prey. Sephiroth had rolled to the side at the last moment, and now backed up the stairs to put some distance between them. "Running away?" he growled, tugging First Tsurugi free. "Hypocrite."

"Liar," Sephiroth retorted, drawing the word out. "You lied to all of us, Cloud. Every single day."

The emergency lights flickered to life at that moment, bringing a dull illumination back to the chamber. In that instant of distraction, Cloud rushed up the stairs with a shout and barrelled into the General, pushing him through the doorway and off the platform connecting to Jenova. He fell, as Zack once had, silver hair and black leather coat folding around him as he plunged to the lower levels.

Sephiroth wouldn't fall far – the angle was wrong, and the service platforms would catch him. Cloud dove after him. He might be a liar. He might be a traitor. But he would change everything.

His opponent twisted midair and landed softly on a wide metal beam. He raised Masamune barely in time to catch First Tsurugi. The resonating clang echoed off the Reactor walls, and the beam creaked and groaned under the stress of the impact.

For ten breathless seconds, they teetered in place, suspended above the core. Cloud pushed all of his weight down upon his sword, but with a burst of strength and a twist of his arm, Sephiroth threw him clear. He landed on the wall, knees bent to take the impact, then sprung off it again, breaking First Tsurugi in two to brandish a weapon in each hand.

His foe deflected the first two strikes. The third sliced through the arm of his coat.

With a hiss, the General stepped back, driving him away with a wide swing. Cloud backed off, eyes sharp, the drum of his heartbeat quivering in his fingertips. The gash was already closing – Sephiroth always had been abnormally fast with regeneration – but it showed who was in control.

"Things will be different, this time," he promised. This time it was for real.

Sephiroth simply tilted his head at him, considering. "...You're not the Cloud Strife I know."

Fury filled him, sharp and cold, as dozens upon dozens of taunts about his identity, his desires, his hopes and pride and dreams echoed in his ears. "You've never known me!"

Sensing he was outmatched in his current position, Sephiroth jumped to meet his next strike. They leapt from wall to wall, rebounding off pipes and pillars, clashing midair in a blurred flurry of blows. Masamune flashed under the artificial lights, edge tinted green by the ambient glow of mako. Cloud caught every slash with ease, knew every move and every counter.

When they landed before Jenova's platform once more, it was Sephiroth who was out of breath and faltering under the weight of his sword. His black leather coat sported several new rips. A drop of blood splashed onto the floor.

No mercy.

He drove the General back under a hail of fire and lightning – away from Jenova, into the tank
chamber where they'd begun. At some point, he became peripherally aware that others had entered the Reactor. The awareness lingered for only a moment – a fuzz coloured his thoughts, his vision tunnelled, and it felt like static was flickering across his skin.

Nothing else mattered. His only focus was Sephiroth.

This time, he wouldn't fail. For the Planet.

Zack gaped at the unbelievable scene before him. "What's Cloud doing here?" He'd been unconscious only hours ago, and now he was here fighting the General?

Vincent appeared at his shoulder. He looked grim. More grim than usual, that was.

"Cloud! What's going on?" Zack shouted, drawing Buster Sword and ready to join the fray if necessary.

The blond showed no sign of even registering his voice. He was attacking with his sword separated in two, whirling and slashing almost faster than the eye could track.

With no response from that quarter, Zack figured he'd try the other party. "Sephiroth?"

"I'm rather busy right now, Zack," he answered, voice straining with effort as he deflected another blow. Zack stared. He'd never heard the General sound like that. Not even during his and Cloud's impromptu duels back at ShinRa. He looked a mess, too – his uniform sporting several smooth tears, and a line of blood staining his chest from a wound already healed.

This wasn't right. This wasn't right at all. He'd come here prepared to fight, but Sephiroth didn't sound like he was a threat – if anything Cloud was the one acting weird. "We've got to stop them."

"I don't think we can," Vincent murmured.

They had to try something. "Cloud! I thought you'd given up with the whole trying to kill Sephiroth thing! Weren't you guys getting along?" he called out. That was over six months ago, admittedly. But surely the rescue counted for something too!

No response. Not even a flicker. Just the clash and clatter of swords. He felt a pit in his stomach. This was really, really bad. 'Somebody-was-going-to-die' kind of bad.

"It's Jenova." Vincent's voice barely carried over the sounds of battle.

"Sephiroth's crazy not-mother? How?"

"Cloud told me he has her cells too. We were worried about this happening." He closed his eyes for a moment as though in silent prayer, then raised his gun and pointed it at the blond's back, his aim wavering as he tracked his movement.

Zack yelped and pushed the barrel to the side. "Put that down! You are way too eager to shoot people!"

Vincent stared at him. "Then what do you suggest we do?"

He had to think fast. "I don't know, there's got to be some other way to– hey! Didn't you say you guys were going to destroy her? Won't that work? It doesn't make a difference if it's Cloud or Sephiroth, right?"
Vincent didn't reply. Zack took that as a yes. He glanced around, frantically searching for whatever could identify as 'Jenova'. Not much nearby that he could see except those weird pods filled with mako.

"Sephiroth! We've got to take out Jenova! Once she's gone, he should go back to normal!" Zack yelled over the clanging of swords. Cloud still didn't react as though he'd heard a word.

Luckily, Sephiroth didn't appear to need any explanation beyond that. He broke their lock and sped up the steps towards the doorway, silver hair streaming behind him. A blazing Firaga cut him off. Zack's eyes smarted at the heat. "Sephiroth!"

He shouldn't have worried – the General came through unbothered by the fire, but it gave Cloud the opening he needed to somersault overhead, striking at his opponent's neck. Sephiroth ducked, but was driven away by a barrage of lightning-fast follow-up attacks.

"I don't think he's going to let me near," he remarked. Somehow, he managed to sound bemused despite his situation.

Okay then. He knew Jenova was through the doorway, now. Enough information for him. "Then keep him busy, we'll take care of it!"

Sephiroth didn't give any outward acknowledgement, but immediately went on the defensive. Zack rested on the balls of his feet, eyes sharp, waiting for an opening. The room they were fighting in wasn't that large – though a couple more hits to the back wall might change that – but gradually, the General allowed himself to be driven into the right corner.

The stairs were clear! Zack took the opening and dashed up the steps. In less than three seconds he reached the top, darted through the doorway, skidded to a stop, and stared.

Across from him was a raised platform, connected by thick pipes wide enough for a grown man to stand on. On the platform rested a mako tube, not unlike the one they'd rescued Cloud from five days before. But wrapped around it in protection was something he never expected to see outside one of those occult conspiracy shows - an iron mask and breastplate of a woman, arranged like some sort of technological idol and adorned with wings of tubing and metal.

"No way… This is Jenova?" Zack was stunned, and found himself reluctant to approach. It radiated an intangible menace that made him feel strangely nauseous.

The sudden crack of gunshots from the other room spurred him into action. Whatever it was, it needed to be destroyed – one look could tell him that much. Demolition first, questions later. He lifted Buster Sword from his back.

"Zack!"

Sephiroth's warning almost came too late. It was pure instinct that had Zack whirl around and catch the blade driving towards him. He slid back half a step under the force the strike. "What the-Cloud?"

It was the first glimpse he'd caught up close since the blond had awoken. His eyes. They'd changed. They were supposed to be bright blue, not a vivid green with a slitted pupil.

It was the most terrifying sight Zack had seen in all his time as a SOLDIER.

"What did they do to you?" he whispered.
Then Cloud pushed forward, and Zack had to slide to the side or go for a tumble off the edge. "Whoa, come on, Cloud, it's me!" he begged. "Snap out of it!"

He could see the General coming to help, but a stream of lightning cut off his approach, and then Zack was too busy dodging and blocking to keep track any further. *Shiva,* he was strong! Cloud was a slight sort of guy, and the shortest out of the lot of them, but he was matching *Angeal's* kind of force! And he was *fast.* Zack barely held his feet as he parried frantically.

The whole exchange lasted only a matter of seconds. Then with one mighty swing, Cloud sent him flying through the doorway into the previous room.

Wind whistled in his ears as he sailed through the air. He spared a moment, curiously devoid of panic, to remember this was what the fall to Aeris's Church had felt like.

Then Zack choked as his back slammed into one of the pods, the metal crumpling beneath him. Buster Sword clattered from his grasp, and his vision flashed white.

Sheer determination was all that kept him conscious. He couldn't afford to pass out here! But it didn't matter. His body wouldn't obey him. He couldn't even move when Cloud's feet slammed on either side of him and silver steel filled his vision.

Damn. This was it.

Pretty lousy end for a hero. He didn't even have time to say something cool before he went.

Mentally, he apologised to Aeris, and braced himself.

Then for some odd reason, Zack suddenly thought he could smell flowers.

Cloud froze, sword poised over his friend's neck. It was as though time itself had stopped, despite the fact that the hum of the Reactor droned on, and Zack continued to draw breath. After a moment, the black-haired SOLDIER cracked open an eye, looking confused. Neither Sephiroth nor Vincent dared move.

"Cloud?" he wheezed.

*He's in the way.*

No, he couldn't be. It was *Zack.* Why was his sword pointed at Zack?

*A sacrifice for the Planet.*

Stubbornly, Cloud shook his head. Zack watched him with wide eyes.

There had to be a different way. Zack could *never* be a threat to the Planet. This wasn't right. He was forgetting something. Something important. What was he *doing?*

A new voice wafted into his thoughts. *'Have you finally woken up?'*

He'd heard that voice many times before. But that couldn't be right.

"Aeris? How-" She was still alive. She *had* to be alive!

Zack tensed at the familiar name.
'Don't be scared. I've become a lot stronger since we last met.'

His head spun. The roar in his ears grew louder.

Save the Planet. The call was insistent, unrelenting. Why would Aeris disagree with the Planet?

She didn't answer. Somehow, he had the impression she was humming. Then- 'You said you were a nobody.'

"A nobody?" he murmured.

'You're not WEAPON or Calamity, right? You're just a nobody. Can a nobody talk to the Planet?'

A chill ran down his spine.

It was true. He'd never spoken with the Planet. Aeris could call him through the Lifestream, could reach out and speak to him through the materia he carried and the mako in his blood, but the Planet itself? He wasn't like Nanaki. He wasn't a Cetra, either.

Then whose voice was intruding on his thoughts?

Save the Planet. Destroy them. Destroy ShinRa and the humans who hurt us. It rose in volume, drowning out everything else. Aeris was gone – her presence overpowered and chased away as quickly as it had arrived. But the difference between her comforting touch to this pressure on his mind – he recognised it now. He recognised the way his head felt gripped by a vise, the way electricity seemed to prickle across his skin, the way thinking felt like trying to watch a television with bad reception.

"Jenova," he rasped.

With a monumental effort, he pulled away from Zack. His friend didn't move. Probably couldn't.

They're traitors. See how they treated you. Treated us.

"Shut up," he growled, squeezing his eyes shut. "I'm not a monster, like him." He stumbled up the stairs. Vincent and Sephiroth followed, keeping a wary distance. He barely noticed.

Your father? Kills the Planet, hurt your mother, abandoned you. I would never abandon my son.

The words coiled like a wire around his heart. He staggered up to the dais. "I already have a mother." He was going to save her. Change everything for her, and his friends.

These people aren't your friends. That woman is not your mother. She already has a son.

Half in rage, half in panic, he tore away the metal faceplate. Rust-coloured fluid flew through the air as though in slow motion, the metallic screeching as the pipes ripped free grating across his ears.

Then he was there, face to face with her. Nothing but the glass of her tube separating them. Her glowing cat's eyes open, glazed, lifeless, but somehow still seeing straight into his soul.

We're the same. You don't belong, like me.

He trembled.

This isn't your planet. You don't owe them anything.
She was clever. Able to find and exploit weaknesses and desires he didn't even know he had. How could he have forgotten-

You want to destroy Sephiroth, she reminded him.

He did. Very badly.

I'll help you, she whispered. Images and knowledge flashed before his eyes. The connection. Enough to halt Sephiroth in his tracks for just a minute, to finish the deed. You are the strongest. You can change everything.

His fingers tightened around his sword.

Then Sephiroth appeared out of what seemed to be nowhere. "Allow me to spare you the indecision," he declared, and smashed Masamune through the glass.

The tank shattered with a deafening crash, shards of it tearing at his arms and legs. Cloud ducked behind First Tsurugi as putrid, discoloured mako splashed over his boots and debris scattered around them. After what felt like an eternity, he chanced a glance over the top of his blade.

Jenova was unprotected – laid bare to the elements, and all the more sickly a sight for it. Sephiroth moved into stance, unmarked by the broken glass or draining mako. "No more hiding behind puppets," he drawled, raising Masamune to deliver the final strike-

Then stopped.

The moment held. The tip of his sword wavered before Jenova, as though he wished to cut, but couldn't. His brow tightened in effort and concentration, confusion in his eyes as his arms moved backwards even as he tried to push them forward.

A cruel parody of the scene of Aeris's murder.

The silence shattered under a sharp bang, and a bullet whizzed past his ear to strike Jenova in the forehead. Vincent, Cloud distantly noted. It didn't make a difference. Jenova didn't have a brain anymore, nor a mind in the traditional sense. It was only cells in a certain amount of concentration, passing information, exerting their influence.

Kill him. Do it now.

A chance.

"By the Goddess!" A new voice suddenly intruded. "All you want to do is destroy that thing, correct? Are you or are you not SOLDIERS?"

Genesis?

Suddenly, a burst of heat rushed past them. The Firaga exploded in Jenova's face, throwing him and Sephiroth to the wall. Cloud staggered to his feet, watching in shock as the angry flames rose to the ceiling.

The auburn-haired Commander stood in the doorway, streaked with soot and looking incredibly put out. With a vicious sweep of his hand, he cast another Firaga, and then another. Each blast sent out a blazing hot shockwave of air that tousled his hair and burned his eyes.

Cloud seized as an unearthly scream tore at this thoughts. He gasped and dropped to the ground,
fingers clutching his head as the pain and fury and betrayal clawed at his heart. It went on and on, drowning out everything else, like red-hot needles in his skull, building and grating and ripping then… silence.

His head felt clearer. Lighter. As though a headache he'd carried for weeks suddenly went away.

Slowly, he turned his gaze to the tube that once housed Jenova.

Nothing but molten slag.

Genesis adjusted his gloves. "Honestly. I'm not sure what I missed, but it wasn't even a moving target."

Sephiroth stared at the remains, apparently in as much shock as Cloud. Of course – he would have felt the backlash of Jenova's fury as well. "The Goddess is cruel, to create such a trial," he murmured.

She was gone. Jenova was gone. No missing head, no neck, no lingering appendages for remnants to steal. No more Reunion.

And Cloud hadn't done a thing. Had been reduced to a puppet, once again. He felt ill. It had been up to everyone else to destroy her. Zack was in the next room, badly hurt because of him. Zack, who he'd sworn to protect. And then also, on the way here, Angeal...

He felt hollow – the empty puppet Sephiroth always accused him of being. He was having difficulty processing everything that had just happened. Frantically, he tried to organise his thoughts. The plan. What was the plan? What was it he needed to do now? What was next?

Hojo was dead. Jenova was destroyed.

His hands shook. He clenched them into fists.

"Someone will need to tend to Zack," Vincent's low baritone murmured in the background.

Zack dragged himself to the doorway, face slightly pale and hand pressed against his ribs, but otherwise whole. "Don't worry about me! I'll hold up for now. Genesis threw a cure at me on his way through. More importantly, we need to do something about Angeal."

"Angeal?" Genesis's voice was sharp.

"You didn't see him on your way up here? I guess you might have taken a different path. He's hurt, bad."

There was just one last person who had to die, if he wanted to save everyone. If he wanted to be sure.

No, that wasn't quite right. Two.

"I fetched the boy to guide me. He's outside. We went across the bridge, since time seemed to be of the essence."

"There's a bridge? Damn, that would have been way faster."

Cloud slowly stood, steadying himself against the wall.

"What about you Sephiroth? Injuries?" Genesis took charge.
The General gave a slow shake of his head. "Nothing serious."

He adjusted his grip on First Tsurugi.

"Good. Then does anyone mind explaining what precisely is going on here?"

They wouldn't understand. But Kuskel knew everything. He'd explain it. Make certain things went right.

"Even I'm not entirely sure…" Zack trailed off, glancing in his direction. "Cloud?"

One last task he had to complete.

With a war cry, he charged the General.

"Sephiroth!" Genesis shouted.

Sephiroth whirled, unprepared. Vincent cocked his gun and fired. A bullet struck him in the leg – a moment later, another grazed his arm. Cloud ignored it, pressing ahead, bearing down on his target with single-minded determination.

Masamune flashed – a wild, desperate attack to force him off course.

Except Cloud didn't even try to block it.

The thin steel speared his side but he still didn't stop, pushing himself forward. He gripped the blade with his left hand – felt it cut into his palm, the blood spill over his fingers, the metal grate against his rib cage. He choked on his breath, and tasted copper. He'd punctured a lung.

"Cloud!" Zack screamed. It sounded like he was shouting from underwater.

Every step was agony, but he grit his teeth and kept moving.

This was how it was supposed to be.

Sephiroth stared at him, an expression flitting across his face the blond had seen only three times before.

Wide-eyed shock, coupled with genuine human fear.

There was a flash of light out the corner of his eyes. Cloud felt the tingle of charging materia in the air, but it was already too late.

With his remaining strength, he raised First Tsurugi for the final strike.
This chapter is really long, longest yet by far, which normally says to me that I haven't been brutal enough with my editing machete yet, but I guess it's good to go out with a nice big serving? And god knows I can agonise over endings way too much.

So, yes. This is it. I hope you've enjoyed reading my somewhat self-indulgent time travel story. I hope the ending satisfies - even though I know there's always going to be some people who wanted it to turn out differently. But if you'll forgive me a moment of pretentiousness, the great nature of fandom (and certain poems), is the freedom to go create a new interpretation when you didn't get the one you wanted!

Thank you for reading.

Cloud slowly became aware of the low murmur of voices nearby. It was confusing. Who was talking? Was this the Lifestream? It didn't feel like the Lifestream – he should know, he'd gone swimming through it more than once. He frowned, fingers twitching, and a low groan built in his throat. Everything hurt.

The voices suddenly hushed. There was movement, then - "He's waking up!"

"I'll go get the others." Footsteps thudded past.

Cloud forced his eyes open, and immediately wished he hadn't. He shut them again with a hiss.


Cautiously, he cracked open an eyelid. The light didn't burn straight to the back of his skull this time. He rolled his head to the side towards the voice. It was Genesis, sitting on the bed next to his with his arms crossed, looking very displeased.

"What…?" he whispered, throat scratchy and raw. The Inn at Nibelheim? What happened to the Reactor? And wasn't he supposed to be dead? Aeris couldn't have possibly interfered this time!

"You," Genesis declared, "Have a lot of explaining to do."

Zack bounded back into the room. "Angeal's still sleeping, but the others will be here in a minute." He plopped down on the chair next to Cloud's bed. "Morning, sunshine, how are you feeling?"

He felt, rather appropriately, like he'd been run through by Sephiroth. And shot by Vincent. "How…?"

Zack fidgeted, looking away. "You wouldn't stop. Genesis had to cast a Sleep spell on you at the last minute."
"I didn't expect it to have any effect, honestly," the Commander grumbled. "It was reflex."

Cloud gingerly raised a hand to touch his bare arm. He'd forgotten. He'd given Kunsel Ribbon. Was that why Jenova had so much stronger an effect on him? No, not entirely. He couldn't blame Ribbon's absence.

"Zack," he whispered, stomach churning at the memory. "In the Reactor, I-"

Zack grinned and rolled his shoulders. "I'm fine, see? Don't worry about it! You weren't yourself. And besides, you stopped when it counted, right?"

"Not all of us were so lucky," a new voice drawled from the doorway.

Cloud knew who it was without even looking – would have known even if he hadn't said anything. "Sephiroth." His fingers clutched the blankets, and he struggled to sit up, gasping with the effort.

"Whoa, take it easy!" Zack helped him rest against the headboard. "We couldn't heal you up all the way. Genesis nearly passed out trying to save you."

"It wasn't the healing that was the problem," the Commander huffed. "It was all the ice and fire and sleep spells before that."

"Your fault, for using materia like it was the end of the world," Sephiroth drawled.

Cloud tactfully didn't point out that it very nearly could have been the end of the world.

"I could handle it now," Genesis grumbled.

Sephiroth sent him a stern look as he entered the room to stand with them. The lucid part of him – the part that wasn't in frantic denial – noticed that he was careful to keep his distance. "No more materia. Not for another twelve hours at least. We're out of ethers, and I don't need all of us bedridden."

That made Cloud pay closer attention to his fellow SOLDIERS. Genesis had a slightly ashen look to his complexion – the sort that came from materia exhaustion specifically. Zack looked rather worn too. Sephiroth didn't seem quite as tired, but looking closely, Cloud could see the edge of white bandages peeking out from underneath his coat. And he was missing his left shoulder pauldron, too.

Sephiroth's lips quirked, apparently having noticed his inspection. "You were already mid-swing when Genesis knocked you out, so I did not escape entirely unscathed. Do you care to try again?"

Cloud shot him a glare. "Don't push your luck," he growled. He wished dearly for First Tsurugi, but a furtive look around the room revealed it sitting in the far corner, well out of reach, with Vincent carefully situated between them. Cloud hadn't even seen Vincent arrive.

"Relax," Sephiroth ordered. "I'm not eager to continue our fight just yet. And you're in no state to even try."

"I'd rather you didn't continue it at all," Genesis commented irritably. "I can only cast FullCure so many times in one day."

"I'm afraid that's up to Cloud."

The other SOLDIERS turned their focus on him. He looked away, teeth clenched. Truthfully, if it
weren't for his injuries, he might have been out of bed and attacking already, weapon or not.

"Come on, Cloud," Zack begged. "The future sounded really bad, but it went differently this time! Sephiroth's still sane and everything!"

His head whipped back around as he stared at his fellow SOLDIER with wide eyes. "You know?"

Cloud suddenly wished he'd just jumped into the Reactor core. See them try and revive him then. This was not a conversation he wanted to have right now. Or ever.

"I told them," Sephiroth confirmed. "Though it was up to Sergeant Kunsel to fill us in on the particulars."

"Kunsel?" He hadn't noticed his arrival, either – the SOLDIER Second had been loitering by the doorway, quietly watching proceedings. At his attention, he waved. He still looked pale, and resting more of his weight against the doorknob than strictly necessary, but it was good to see the Second Class in one piece and coherent. He'd been worried after Hojo's dire predictions. "What happened to you?"

"Made it out thanks to you, but mako addiction got the better of me. I was out of it for a while, but I came around in Midgar a few days ago under the care of Zack's lovely girlfriend." Zack grinned at the mention of Aeris. "I was hoping I could make it back before anything happened, but I only got here a few hours ago." He sighed, scratching the back of his neck. "If I'd been just a bit faster… well, as it was, I had to call in a lot of favours to make it here this quick."

Cloud felt a wave of relief, followed quickly by dread. "What did you tell them?"


"Things you should have told us from the beginning." Vincent's deep voice cleaved through the conversation for the first time.

Cloud glowered at the bedsheets. "You wouldn't have believed me." He wouldn't have taken the risk, either, at what Sephiroth or Genesis or one of the others might have done with the knowledge. If there were a materia capable of erasing people's memories, he would have given his sword arm for it right then.

"We should have guessed, regardless," Genesis grumbled. "Your PHS was a complete giveaway."

"Who would have thought time travel, though?" Zack protested. "There was always another explanation. We just couldn't make it all fit together! Like how he got the treatments, or what happened to his friends and family." He paused. Cloud didn't like the look of brewing excitement on his face. "Wait… that thing with Spike's Ma… Spike's you!"

He sounded entirely too gleeful. Cloud glared at him. "Don't you dare tell them!"

"Aww, but Cloud-!"

Genesis looked absurdly pleased by the revelation for some reason. He probably didn't want to know.

"Leave the kid alone, Zack," Kunsel warned. "Apparently I owe him big. Besides, what are they supposed to do if they know? And who wants to hear about all the horrible things that could be waiting for them in the future?"
Zack pouted. "Yeah, okay, I see your point. But jeez, Cloud, isn't it kind of tough? I mean, that's your Ma."

"I know, Zack." He fought to keep his voice level. "But she's alive this time. That's all that matters." He'd come to terms with his mother's death, and no matter how Jenova had torn at old wounds that wouldn't change.

"Ah yes. Sergeant Kuskel mentioned the burning village. It explains why you hate Sephiroth so much, at least," Genesis mused.

"It justifies nothing," Sephiroth dismissed. "I deserve the benefit of the doubt. I have not even laid eyes upon Ms Strife, much less had the opportunity to murder her."

"But you weren't exactly putting up a good front for sanity, you know, burning down the mansion like that," Zack pointed out. "No wonder Cloud jumped to conclusions." He paused. "Why did you burn down the mansion?"

"I wanted to destroy the research," was the simple reply. "It was disgusting and needed to be purged from this planet."

"But what about the scientists and guards?" Zack asked cautiously.

Sephiroth didn't appear bothered by the question. "I let them go and made it clear I never wanted to see them ever again before I started the fire." At Genesis's and Zack's uncomfortable silence, he raised an eyebrow. "Did you think I had killed them?"

"What were we supposed to think?" Zack defended. "The place was a furnace!"

Cloud was still reeling from the revelation that the mansion had been destroyed. He'd thought about it plenty of times – after they'd liberated Vincent back in his original timeline, he'd toyed with his Fire materia for a good ten minutes before leaving to follow the others. Something always stopped him. It was like the opposite of a holy place, something so steeped in his personal history, something so magnificently terrible about it that he never really believed it could be destroyed.

"The building was old. It burned well." Sephiroth looked rather satisfied at the memory.

"Then you went to the Reactor," he murmured, still trying to reconstruct everything that had happened. "Just like last time."

"Apparently. But you didn't even stop to ask what my intentions were," Sephiroth replied.

"I didn't need to. You said yourself – you were going to show me the ending," he snapped, fists clenching in the blanket.

"And was that a problem? I thought it rather poetic."

"You would," Genesis scoffed, then turned to Cloud. "This man has no understanding of Literature. Do you know what he told me? That he intended to slay the Goddess. And then he proceeds to accuse me of having a hero complex and ego problems."

"Are you denying it?" Sephiroth sounded amused.

"You know," Zack interjected, "I don't know that much about Loveless, but I always thought the Goddess was the girl. You know, the one left behind, waiting for the hero."
"That's the version playing in Sector 4 at the moment," Kunsel agreed.

It was as though the world had turned upside down. He'd misunderstood from the very beginning – blinded by the events gone past. All along, Sephiroth had done a better job fighting Jenova than he had? Had intended on destroying her from the very beginning?

And for some reason, instead of focusing on that, they were discussing Loveless?

"You have all entirely misinterpreted it," Genesis declared. "You're forgetting the most important element. The 'Gift of the Goddess'. An all-consuming destruction, or an all-healing salvation." He glanced at Cloud from the corner of his eyes. "The conclusion depends entirely upon that, and that alone."

A heavy silence hung over them at those words. Sephiroth looked thoughtful. Zack looked confused. And who knew what Kunsel or Vincent were feeling.

Then Sephiroth dismissed, "An ill-defined concept. In Cloud's eyes, my destruction would be a form of salvation."

Cloud flushed. He'd been thinking along those exact lines.

"That said," the General continued, "I never imagined you to be so committed to the 'salvation' of the planet that you would so eagerly sacrifice yourself."

He stilled. "It was necessary," he ground out, silently hoping they'd leave it at that. Let them think that was all it was. A desperate charge in which he risked everything to take out his opponent.

He'd never been so lucky, though. "I don't believe that's correct," Vincent spoke up, voice barely loud enough to stir the air but able to command the attention of everyone in the room none-the-less. "You were capable of blocking or dodging that attack. You could have struck again before any of us had the chance to react." His crimson gaze lingered on him, cold and assessing. "So then the question is, why didn't you?"

The silence following that question grew choking.

"Cloud?" Kunsel sounded worried.

He took a deep breath. It rattled uncomfortably in his chest, and the pain in his side freshened at the movement. "Because," he said, "That was the way it had to be."

It took a long moment for his statement to sink in.

"I don't believe it," Genesis eventually murmured. "Angeal was right. You are suicidal."

Zack leapt to his feet. "Cloud! You can't be serious! A murder-suicide?"

"It was the only way to be sure it never happened again," he repeated, not looking up from the bedspread. He desperately wanted to crawl under the covers and hide.

Zack shook his head. "No way. I don't get it! Jenova was destroyed, right? Even if you thought Sephiroth could still be a risk, why try to kill yourself?"

How could he explain it? They would never understand.

In that split second, he'd wondered what he'd do after he killed Sephiroth.
His first thought had been to destroy ShinRa. Destroy the company that had drained the Planet, dropped the Plate on Sector 7, and made Sephiroth possible in the first place. Destroy the man who left his mother in Nibelheim to die.

Except… once he'd been freed of Jenova's influence, he'd realised how familiar that line of thinking was.

*When he found out the truth of his origins...*

...The first thing Sephiroth had done when he'd returned from the Lifestream was assassinate President ShinRa.

*He started to hate ShinRa.*

Revenge on ShinRa hadn't been enough. He turned his resentful eyes towards the Planet, and constructed fanciful notions that it was to be destroyed and made anew – that it was his *birthright*.

*Then after a while, he started to hate everything.*

He'd felt sick to the core. How sure could he be that in exacting revenge on ShinRa, in saving the Planet, that he wouldn't create a calamity just as bad? That he wouldn't become something worse than Sephiroth?

Even now, he wasn't sure if he trusted himself with that kind of power. Jenova had been able to control him *so easily*. All it had taken was that one hook of bitter resentment that he couldn't have the same friends or family in *this* world, coupled with that simmering anger at the discovery of his heritage, and Jenova had been able to wheedle her way in, more thoroughly even than when he'd been little more than a blank slate, desperately searching for the truth of his identity.

Just because Jenova was gone didn't mean the bitterness had gone away. How much would it take? How close was he to the edge?

If he became the next Sephiroth, would anybody be able to stop him?

Sephiroth appeared to sense his line of thinking. He crossed his arms and fixed him with a steely green glare. "I'll make you a deal, Cloud. You promise to kill me should I go insane, and I'll do the same for you."

The words snapped him out of his introspection, and he glowered at the General. "You can't. I can beat you."

"Then I will simply have to elicit help," he replied, with a raised eyebrow towards the rest of the room's occupants.

Zack crossed his arms. "Hey! We didn't go to all that effort to save you just to kill you later!" He leant in, expression earnest. "But you know, we wouldn't let you do anything bad. If Genesis and Vincent and Kunschel and me worked together, we could tackle either of you, no problem!"

…That was true, wasn't it? In the Northern Crater, Avalanche had been with him. For that particular version of Sephiroth – the strongest one – he hadn't fought alone.

It was overwhelming. He'd dismissed them all, subconsciously – they weren't *his* friends, from *his* timeline. They were people he had to *save*, not people to rely on. He'd been so stuck on the absence of Tifa and Avalanche, on Vincent's distrust, on all the sacrifices he had to make and secrets he had to keep that he'd failed to notice the new allies around him. Which now apparently
"I don't understand," he murmured. "How did it all change? I didn't do anything in the end."

He hadn't killed Hojo. Hadn't killed Jenova. Hadn't stopped the Wutai War. Hadn't even managed to kill Sephiroth. Hadn't done a single thing he'd set out to when he decided to change the future.

"You cured me," Genesis reminded him primly. "Apparently otherwise I would have left ShinRa."

"I must confess that it may have had an impact on my own conduct," Sephiroth acknowledged. "When you and Angeal went missing, I might not have handled the company's treachery as well without Genesis on hand."

The Commander smirked, and tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ear. "So the great General Sephiroth does care."

"I merely meant that your obsession with Loveless was sufficiently amusing to distract me."

That was the difference?

Impossible. All that time, all those failures, all that struggling… and he'd already changed fate with that one, thoughtless act of compassion? That one stab of sympathy he felt for a fellow test subject in Wutai?

He gasped, folding in on himself. Genesis and Zack were by his side in an instant. "Cloud, what's wrong? Did you reopen your wounds?" His friend – alive, whole, and untouched by Hojo – patted his back gingerly.

"Do you need another FullCure? Vincent may be able to cast it," Genesis offered.

He shook his head. The pain from his half-healed wounds didn't even register. The room at the Inn suddenly felt overcrowded. Five SOLDIERs and a former Turk. None of whom would have been there otherwise.

Dare he believe? Dare he trust?

"That was it?" he repeated hoarsely. "Just because Genesis didn't leave ShinRa, you didn't go crazy?"

Sephiroth frowned. "Perhaps not entirely." He inclined his head towards Vincent. "Were I not aware of a human mother, also, I might not have been so inclined to use reason."

Such small changes.

He gave Sephiroth a dubious look. "You really don't have any notions of godhood? No 'right to the Planet'?" he pressed.

"Why would he?" Zack asked. "He's as human as the rest of us."

Sephiroth, however, met his gaze evenly. He knew what Cloud was talking about. "I won't deny that in the library... even in the Reactor, the thought crossed my mind." He cast a glance towards Genesis. "More than Gods... We were monsters."

Genesis gripped his shoulder.

He folded his arms. "But you know, Cloud, at that last moment, when you were speared with my
sword and I truly thought the end had come... I have never felt so human before in my life." He frowned, almost talking to himself. "I truly believed I would die. In that instant, I felt mortal for the very first time."

He'd seen the look before, he recalled. The first time in the Reactor, when Cloud had thrown him into the core. Then in the Northern Crater, when they faced off amidst the whirling Lifestream. In the ruins of Midgar, for just a moment, when Cloud had struck with Omnislash.

It was good enough. That public admission, more than anything else, convinced him.

There was still a chance. Something else might set Sephiroth off. But now... Cloud thought, for the first time, it might be worth the risk.

And with everyone else around... maybe he could take a risk on himself, too.

That evening found Cloud walking down the hallway in the Inn towards the other room, hand pressed against the wall for some extra support. Mako worked quickly - it would probably take another few days to completely heal his injuries without the aid of materia, but he could at least stand and walk short distances without reopening the bullet wound in his leg or the hole Masamune had left in his side.

It had been a stressful afternoon, filled with endless questions about the 'future' and repeated demands for promises that he wouldn't kill either himself or Sephiroth the minute their backs were turned. Finally, however, he had a chance to slip out of the room. Kunsel had gone to visit the Strife household to offer his thanks, and Sephiroth had gone to talk to the Mayor about the mansion.

He paused in the corridor. "You were right. You don't need to worry. I won't try to kill him again."

Vincent stepped into view behind him, seeming to melt from the shadows. "It isn't only Sephiroth I'm concerned about."

"I'm not going to kill myself, either. I never wanted to die."

"Yet you still intended to."

"Would you prefer I locked myself in a coffin for thirty years?" He turned to face the former Turk directly. "What would you have done, if you lost control to Chaos?" It was an answer he already knew, but one of the many things he'd never share.

"...It appears you knew me quite well in your future."

Cloud sighed, and continued slowly down the hallway. "Yeah."

Vincent didn't have a response. Cloud hadn't expected one.

"Where are you going now?"

"Just to the next room." He didn't extrapolate beyond that. Vincent shadowed him, somehow making the unnaturally sedate pace seem perfectly normal.

He paused outside the entrance, staring down at the line of warm light peeking out from underneath the door. He could hear voices on the other side. Zack and Genesis, probably. "Hey. You should take Sephiroth to go see his real mother."
"You think it wise?"

Cloud shrugged. It couldn't hurt. Just a little more insurance. Anything to keep Sephiroth firmly grounded on the side of humanity. "He never found out the whole truth in my time," he murmured. A lot like him in that respect.

Vincent inclined his head, and Cloud twisted the handle.

The room was a perfect mirror image of the one he'd come from – three beds lined up against the wall, a sink in one corner, and old, faded paintings hanging on the walls. The warm light from the lamps shaded everything an off orange that gave him a headache, instead of creating the 'cosy' feel the owner had been after. Genesis and Zack were sitting by the bedside next to the far wall, and looked up as he entered.

"Hey!" Zack greeted.

Genesis frowned. "You're not supposed to be up and about yet." He rolled a materia between his fingers. "Don't make me cast Sleep on you again."

Cloud really needed to get Ribbon back from Kuscel soon. Genesis was enjoying his newfound vulnerability to status materia far too much.

He moved over to stand near the bed. Angeal looked up at him tiredly – propped against the headboard. He didn't look well, and was swathed in bandages. "Strife." His gaze wandered towards Vincent next, and took on a wary expression.

Zack hastily introduced, "Vincent, this is my mentor, Angeal. Angeal, this is Vincent. He's an ex-Turk." Apparently figuring it would earn character points, he added, "He killed Hojo."

Vincent made no motion that could be construed as a greeting, but Angeal relaxed and nodded all the same.

"How is he?" Cloud asked Genesis in a low voice. Not that it mattered. In a room full of SOLDIERS, everyone could hear him easily.

The auburn-haired Commander pressed his lips together in a thin line, casting a glance at his bedridden friend. "With degradation, there is little materia can do."

"Don't worry about me. I've come to terms with it," Angeal said tiredly, eyes closed as his head rested against the pillow tucked behind him.

Genesis scowled. "Come to terms with it? Given up, you mean!"

"You can't give up, Angeal. There's meant to be a cure, right?" Zack threw him a desperate glance.

Genesis must have told them. Cloud remained impassive. Aeris should be safe from ShinRa now that Hojo was gone, but he'd rather not take chances. Instead, he muttered, "I wanted to say sorry."

Angeal shook his head. "Genesis and Zack explained it. You weren't yourself. I thought something was off when I confronted you." He broke into a wry grin. "I deserved it, anyway."

"Angeal!" Zack began to protest, but his teacher held up a hand for silence.

"Genesis, Zack, could we have a moment?"

Genesis looked reluctant to leave them without a chaperone. Understandable. It had been Cloud
who'd put Angeal into his current condition in the first place. The wounds weren't life threatening for a normal SOLDIER, but with such an advanced state of degradation, they could become a real problem.

"I don't have my sword, if that's what you're worried about," Cloud offered.

Genesis glared at him, then back at Angeal. "I can see that perfectly well."

"He just doesn't like being left out," Zack confided, then winced as Genesis gripped him by the back of his neck like a misbehaving puppy. "Ow! Genesis!"

"Call us when you're done," he huffed, and dragged Zack from the room with him. After a moment, Vincent drifted out as well.

"And no listening at the door!" Angeal called out after them.

Cloud sat down on the bed next to Angeal's, gaze focused somewhere on the opposite wall.

"Now that you're awake, they're focusing all their worry on me." He shifted in place with a slight grimace. "I wouldn't mind too much if you were to pass out in the hallway when you're done," he joked.

Cloud stared at him. "You're not angry?"

The grey-haired Commander sighed. "I should be the one asking that question."

A minute dragged by in uncomfortable silence. Honestly, after dealing with Hojo, Cloud had entirely forgotten about Hollander and his initial abduction. In fact, compared to the past few months, his time in Banora seemed like a holiday in Costa de Sol. Eventually, he shrugged. He probably didn't have it in him to forgive Angeal, but he could ignore it. He'd managed to declare a truce with the Turks, after all, and they dropped the Plate on Sector 7.

"I didn't tell them. About your S-cells, I mean," Angeal said.

"It doesn't matter," he muttered. "Sephiroth knows now."

"I guess he does." A beat. "So, time travel, huh?"

Cloud shrugged again.

Angeal stared at him thoughtfully for a long moment. It was strange seeing the man like this – old, tired, hair grey, face wrinkled, and confined to a bed. He didn't look like one of ShinRa's top SOLDIERs. If it weren't for the subtly glowing eyes or the white feathers poking out from under the sheets, he could have been mistaken for somebody's grandfather.

"You've probably been given quite the interrogation already, but can I ask just one more question?"

He nodded.

Angeal looked off into the distance – through a window that showed only the inky darkness of Nibelheim's night. "I've been thinking about it a lot lately, as you'd probably guess. My legacy. What I should do." He touched the bandages wrapped around his chest with a rueful smile. "I know my body well enough to know I don't have a lot of time left. I don't think Genesis and Zack understand how little." He sighed, and turned back to him. "I guess I'm just beating around the bush. Strife… is this how I die?"
He knew it would only be a matter of time before somebody asked him that question.

Cloud looked down at his hand. Before Kunsel had left earlier, he'd quietly pressed a vial of clear liquid into his grasp. 'From Aeris', he'd mouthed.

"No," he said shortly. "This isn't how you die."

It was the small actions that made the biggest differences.

Wordlessly, he thrust the vial out at Angeal. He stared at it blankly, until comprehension dawned on him. "But… you've been in confinement the past six months!"

"Don't ask questions I won't answer." He stood and headed to the door. Angeal would probably want the privacy.

"Strife!"

He paused, fingers resting on the handle.


"It's really nothing," he murmured. "I'm not even the one you should be thanking."

"I think you're selling yourself short. Maybe you didn't kill Hojo or Jenova, from what I hear, but if it weren't for you, neither would have anyone else." He gave him a considering look. "…You've been fighting alone for a long time, haven't you? All by yourself."

Almost anyone who looked at Angeal would see nothing but brawn, but he was shrewd in his own way. He understood people, the same way Zack and Aeris did.

"…Yeah. But not anymore."

Things progressed quickly after Angeal had been cured. Tseng had done his job well - careful revealing of misdirected funds to the Science Department, Hojo's role in Hollander's murder, and the professor's lies about the 'Promised Land' had angered the President enough to avoid too much of a fuss when he found out about Hojo's death. He was a savvy businessman, even as he grew older - he was not so stupid as to risk the desertion of all of his top SOLDIERs, especially when the damage had already been done. Thus several days after the incident at the Reactor, Lazard had called and politely asked when they would be back so he could organise the mission roster. Not long after that, the Turks flew in on helicopter to pick over the burnt out remains of the mansion, a new, unfamiliar doctor was promoted to head of the Science Department, Kunsel's 'death' was explained away as part of a classified mission, and the whole affair was quietly swept under the rug, with the proviso that so long as they pretended nothing had changed, ShinRa was willing to pretend too.

Elaborate cover-ups, Cloud reflected bitterly, were ShinRa's true speciality.

Now, two weeks later, he walked through the Sector 5 slums, eyes carefully directed at the ground. His latest stint in the mako tanks still had them glowing as bright as one of the SOLDIERs from Deep Ground – it would be a while before his system adjusted and they reverted to their normal luminescence.

It felt strange to be back in Midgar. Trapped in Hojo's lab, he'd almost resigned himself to losing another four years. And to fly back in an airship, instead of going by foot, bike, boat, or whatever
ride they managed to hitch – that had been strange, too. It had taken Zack months to drag them back to Midgar, hunted by ShinRa. The possibility of taking an airship back and returning to work for the company was not a thought he'd ever entertained.

Cloud hadn't really wanted to return - it had been bad enough working for the company again the first time. Kunsel and Vincent had been reluctant, too. But the others had argued persuasively that it would be easier to change ShinRa from the inside instead of running amok blowing up Reactors.

It was just awkward, working at ShinRa now that he knew. He wasn't sure how to react around Lazard or Rufus or the President anymore. He'd considered using his relation to exert some influence on the company, but Cloud wasn't cut out for that kind of politics. He'd prefer if nobody knew of the link at all - it would make things easier on his younger self in the long run, too.

His life was far too complicated. He missed having normal problems.

There was the church. Still a fixture in the slums, scarcely changed, no matter what time he wound up in. Cloud slowed his pace, approaching with a quiet reverence, footsteps growing softer so as not to disturb the peace. He stopped outside and took a deep breath. Even out here, he could smell them. The flowers.

He needed to see her with his own eyes. To make sure it wasn't his imagination. To make sure she was still alive.

He pushed open the heavy doors. The hinges squeaked loudly, announcing his arrival. And there she was, wearing her white sundress, pink ribbon in her hair, kneeling among the white and yellow flowers.

Not just the flowers, he realised after a moment. A small pond, too. Only a quarter of the size of the one he remembered, but the sight still sent shivers of familiarity down his spine. Odd – now he was getting for nostalgic for things he remembered from the future instead of the past.

"Mr Nobody!" Aeris greeted, voice echoing sweetly off the stone walls. "I was hoping you'd come visit."

He headed down the aisle towards her, stopping a short distance away. She didn't wait for him to say anything – probably knew he wouldn't. He'd be content to stand and stare at the scene all day. "Zack came here as soon as you got back from Nibelheim," she said. "I was really happy for him. I'm glad his teacher's okay."

"Thanks to you," he murmured.

"Not just me. Everyone worked together." She clasped her hands in her lap and searched him with bright green eyes. "And what about you, Mr Nobody? Are you okay now?"

He looked off to the side, not able to meet her eyes. "...I don't know. Maybe."

She gave him a considering look at that, but didn't press.

Cloud shifted awkwardly in place. He'd come to see her, but now that he was here, didn't know what to say. "...That was your voice I heard, wasn't it? In the Reactor."

She nodded. "It was just a minute," she confided. "For just one minute, I could tap into the Lifestream. I learned, when trying to summon the water."

*I've become a lot stronger since we last met.*
"Does that mean you can hear it, now?" he asked. "The cries of the Planet?" He recalled Nanaki talking about it when the WEAPONs first rose. That was one concern always lingering in the back of his mind – that even though the most immediate threat of Jenova and Meteor might have been eliminated, that also meant the longer-term threat wouldn't be neutralised.

She hummed a little, and told him, "You shouldn't worry so much. The Planet's stronger than you think." She selected a flower and carefully broke the stem, adding it to the growing pile next to her.

He remembered enormous tendrils of Lifestream bursting from the surface, streaming through the sky, rising to meet Meteor. "Yeah. I guess it is."

"So why such a sad face?" she prodded.

He shook his head. "How can you not be scared? Knowing what I did."

She tilted her head to the side. "What do you mean?"

"I… I nearly killed him," he confessed. "Zack. And not just him. I could have become Jenova's vessel." The words tumbled out of his mouth. "If it weren't for you-"

She turned sombre. "All I did was give you a nudge. I couldn't have done anything, if you decided not to listen."

"But how did you- I'm not a Cetra."

"Silly." She gave him a soft smile. "Just because you can't hear the Planet, doesn't mean the Planet can't hear you. You were calling to her with all your might."


"It was really nothing," she promised. "I'm just glad you're still with us. Zack would have missed you. I would have, too."

The sentiment left him off-balance. Odin, did everybody know what he'd done?

"Don't worry. Zack didn't tell me." She plucked another flower, arranging it in a tidy bundle with the others.

That wasn't much of a relief, considering. "I thought you couldn't read minds," he accused.

"Of course I can't. But I can tell what you're thinking anyway. It's written all over your face."

And his friends always complained he wasn't expressive.

"You're not thinking of disappearing, though, are you?" she asked softly.

Cloud hunched his shoulders. "I tried, actually. But I barely made it out of Midgar before Genesis and Sephiroth appeared to drag me back." He scowled. Now that he'd learned how to use their connection, Sephiroth had been putting S-cells to good use in tracking him down. Probably had him on some kind of suicide watch still.

"Good," she said. "I don't blame you for what happened, and neither does Zack. It's what you do with your future that counts." She gathered up the flowers and brought them over to a quaint-looking wagon. At his curious look, she beamed. "Do you like my flower wagon? Zack made it for me."
He noticed two others in the corner of the church – one looked like it would fall apart in a slight breeze, and the other reminded him of one of Scarlet's machines. This one had delicate trimming, was painted white, and had large, ornamental wheels. Third time lucky, he guessed. "It's nice." What happened to the basket, though? Was this another change? "You know, you could even sell them above Plate, now. You don't have to hide from ShinRa anymore. Hojo's gone."

The brightness of her smile left him off-balance. "I hadn't thought of that. It would be wonderful if everybody could enjoy them."

"And Zack promised to show you the sky sometime, right? You can go with him, now."

Her eyes widened at that, and she turned to look at him in surprise. "He told you?"

Embarrassed, Cloud didn't answer. But Aeris looked so pleased at the thought, he didn't think she needed one.

Zack would keep his promise this time. It still seemed unreal to him. Abruptly, he let out a huff of a laugh and sat on the nearest pew.

"Something funny, Mr Nobody?" Aeris teased gently.

Cloud rubbed his neck. "Not really. I just…" He didn't know how to explain it. "I never thought everything would turn out so well." Everything kept going wrong – getting the ending he wanted had seemed impossible at times.

"I think you did, or you wouldn't have worked so hard. You just have to start believing in it."

They were strangers in this time, but she still knew him so well. "You're right, again," he admitted.

She gave him a cheeky grin. "Of course I am. You think too much, Mr Nobody. Where would you be without me and Zack to take care of you?"

The words should have stung – because he had lost them both once, so violently – but now they filled him with comfort. Because they were going to be around now, weren't they? Younger than he was this time, and their relationship was different, but they were still here.

He'd finally grown comfortable with the idea that he could start a new life here in place of his old one. Of course, that didn't mean he wouldn't continue to do small things to improve the lives of his former friends. He could do something about the incident in Corel that led to Barrett losing his arm and Marlene losing her parents. Make sure Nanaki stayed safe in Cosmo Canyon. Help Cid get into space. Support Reeve with his plans, try to find some way to prevent Rufus becoming so ruthless, and make sure Shalua and Shelke didn't run afoul of Deep Ground or Avalanche.

He also had to keep an eye on his 'nephew', who'd signed up to cadet training despite the uncertain future of the SOLDIER program. Why, he didn't know. Cloud officially didn't understand himself anymore. The timeline had apparently diverged too much.

"I think I'm in trouble if I need a pair of teenagers looking out for me," was all he said.

Aeris giggled. "So, what happens next?" she asked brightly.

"Next?" He stared at the flowers, their petals quivering faintly in the breeze wafting in through the half-open door. "I don't know." It was strange not to know, now. But it was a relief, too. It meant things really had begun to change. He stood, and started to head for the door. There were still things left to do. "Isn't the rest up to the Planet?"
EPILOGUE

Cloud was heading to the Equipment Room when he was practically accosted by a blur of red in the hallway. "Genesis?"

"Where have you been?" he demanded.

He shrugged out of his grip. "Just visiting a friend in the slums."

The Commander eyed him suspiciously, but seeing as he'd returned in one piece, seemed to forgive him. Angeal followed him up the hallway, and rolled his eyes behind his friend's back. He was back to his normal self, though there were a few more wrinkles lining his face than before, and some grey streaks still lingering in his hair.

He tossed a small device at him – Cloud caught it on reflex, and stared at it in confusion. "My PHS?" He'd wondered what had happened to it, but assumed it had been lost for good. "Where's it been?"

"Reeve Tuesti," Genesis explained. "You need to help the Planet, correct? Future technology seems a good way to start. I brought it to him to reverse-engineer."

"Without asking me first?" he grumbled, mostly for the sake of it.

"I figured you didn't need it," he dismissed. "Aside from that one call from Vincent, the only other messages you received were spam. You may want to look into blocking that."

Cloud's eyes widened, and he flipped open his PHS, frantically paging through message after message, each one worse than the last. "You haven't been answering it?"

Genesis looked puzzled. "Of course not. It was obviously a hoax. It grew increasingly absurd. Escaping from a flock of death gazes into a behemoth's den? Getting lost in the wastes and winding up at Modeoheim? Who would believe that?"

He reached the most recent message, swore, and snapped the PHS shut. "Tell Lazard I'm going to be gone for a couple of days. I have to go rescue someone in the Northern Crater."

"The Northern Crater?" Angeal raised his eyebrows. "How on earth did anybody wind up there?" The alive part went unspoken.

Cloud threw his hands up in the air and headed for the elevator. "I wish I knew."

Forget saving Zack, or Aeris, or Genesis, or Angeal. Keeping Yuffie alive was quickly becoming his most difficult mission. And he still didn't know how she'd gotten his PHS number in this timeline.

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