Mad World

by etrix

Summary

Sephiroth returned from the Lifestream to a changed world determined to find the two who saved him at Nibelheim. Hojo and a group called ‘Deepground’ control half the planet and Shin-Ra is in shambles. That’s not going to stop him, but saving them is only half the battle, he also has to save the planet.

(overall) Anal, Angst, Anthro, AU/AR, Crack, Death, DubCon, Explicit, Gore, Language, M/F, M/M, M/M+, Oral, Torture, Violence, WAFF, Wings; lots and lots of words...

Notes

Although this story stands alone, it is based on my story ‘Making It Work’. All I’ve done is moved the events of the last couple chapters into a less happy place and jumped forward three years.

All chapter titles first were song titles. If you want to listen to them, you can download them here: www.mediafire.com/?5jnawiizhrqi908

M_Ich_Ell_Y is translating this into Simplified Chinese. You can find it here on AO3.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Release It

Sephiroth stared across the valley to the remains of the small village.

His vision—enhanced genetically, chemically and with any other substance his progenitor had decided to use—picked up the movement of troops through the ruins. Grenades and mortars were being used against Hojo’s altered fighters since the bulk of Shin-Ra’s forces in the battle were unenhanced, although the General had sent in some of the more experienced SOLDIER Second Class as this battle was very important to him. The Seconds would not be at risk if the rumours of Jenova’s presence proved to be correct.

He couldn’t see the concurrent battle at the reactor, but the small receiver on the ground beside him let him eavesdrop on the CO’s headset. That let him know enough. There was light to medium resistance at the reactor, mostly the quickly manufactured battle clones, fast but dumb, and some more exotic mako mutations thrown in, fast, deadly and dumb. None of Deepground’s elite forces seemed to be at play. Which made the rumour that parts of Jenova were still active at the facility more likely to be false.

He recognized the soft footsteps approaching and didn’t bother to look at the scarred creature. Nanaki, like Sephiroth and the other Firsts, had to wait on the sidelines while the less altered troops did the bulk of the fighting and discovered if there were parts of Jenova present in Nibelheim.

Mako alone could make a Third or a Second, but not a First. A SOLDIER First Class was the result of injecting trace amounts of viable Jenova cells along with the regular mako treatments. It made them quicker, stronger, harder to kill as the cells reproduced themselves and buried into their systems. It also made them vulnerable to her because she called and the cells demanded that the host-body obey.

Even small parts of her had proven to be difficult to withstand for those who’d had her cells fused with theirs. Sephiroth already knew he had no built in defences where the alien creature was concerned, since much of his genetic structure was based on hers, but neither did many of the remaining Firsts. In the beginning, Firsts could usually hold out for over two days of exposure to her call, but the more they were exposed the more susceptible they were to it the next time, until now there were very few who had any resistance at all.

Nanaki had also been one of Hojo’s victims but no one was sure exactly what had been injected into him. Notes on the experiments performed by Hojo had been lost when Midgar collapsed so it had been decided, after seeing Nanaki in full battle mode, that everyone would be safer if they didn’t risk Jenova taking him over.

“You cannot will the battle to go faster.” Sephiroth ignored him. “Barret and Kusiel have it under control.” Sephiroth almost sighed impatiently. Nanaki wasn’t the easiest person to discourage. He would keep making comments until he got an appropriate response, or what he considered appropriate. “Once we know for certain that there are no parts of The Calamity in the area then we can join the battle.”

It was Nanaki’s ‘we’ that broke the General’s resentful brooding. Of course, the creature wanted to fight, wanted revenge. He had suffered years of torture and experimentation. His people had nearly been wiped out by the extended siege of Cosmo Canyon. Plus he had his father’s legacy to live up to, now that he knew Seto had died defending the village and hadn’t run away as he’d always
Revenge wasn’t what Sephiroth wanted however. Not here. Very few people knew why this mission, to this place, was important to the General. “That is not my purpose,” Sephiroth stated.

“Oh,” Nanaki questioned gently, “I thought this was an important strategic location? I believe what you told the Council was ‘it’s the most easily traversed pass through the Nibel Mountains. From here, we can defend all the southern part of the continent while preparing for the invasion of the last of the Western Continent under Hojo’s control’.” It was mild teasing and completely accurate. He had used that argument to justify using more troops for this engagement.

“It is essential to Shin-Ra for those reasons,” he stated flatly. “It’s just…” he started only to trail off. It’s just what? It’s just that they might be here. It’s just that he’d had a brief taste of something infinitely precious only to have it snatched away from him by a madman and the actions of his best friend. It’s just that he wanted to personally destroy any part of Jenova or Hojo left down there. It’s just that he was terrible at waiting…

Leaked reports indicated that Hojo had decided against taking the ‘experiments’ with him to his stronghold on the northern continent. Whatever he’d been trying to make them into had failed, and the insane scientist felt he’d learned everything he needed from them. If Hojo had ever guessed what the two men locked in his basement lab meant to Sephiroth he would never have abandoned them. They would have been the bait in a trap to capture and pervert the Silver General, as Nibelheim had been.

“My grandfather says the ability to await exciting news with a patient heart requires either great age or no heart.”

“Your grandfather is,” annoying “very wise.”

Just then the slurred, overloud voice of Barret Wallace came through the radio’s speaker, “Dat bitch ain’t here nowhere. Iz all shut down an’ cold.”

Sephiroth raised his mouthpiece, “Very good. SOLDIERs First Class will move to assist in both locations. Firsts, acknowledge.” A handful of affirmatives echoed from the radio. He also heard Kunsel’s voice relaying the information to her regular troops. He knew what they would be thinking, that now the fight was as good as over. It was probably true, however all SOLDIERs had orders not to take unnecessary risks, the Firsts most of all. There were just too few of them left.

With Hojo gone and his lab destroyed, the only source of viable Jenova cells was the silver-haired General. He had reluctantly agreed to donate blood and semen to Shin-Ra’s new science department in a desperate attempt to rebuild their elite fighting core. SOLDIERs were dying off faster than they could replace them, thanks to the hyper-enhanced elite fighters of Deepground. The female, Rosso, had decimated their ranks in Junon, and the dark one that appeared in a haze of purple smoke, he had been more selective but just as devastating.

Just one of the many little ‘surprises’ Hojo had left behind to be discovered. Like the massive network of systems embezzling millions of gil from the Shin-Ra Electric Power Company. President Shinra probably would’ve forgiven Hojo everything in order to obtain The Promised Land, running away, destroying the tower, everything—except stealing his money.

Sephiroth, on the other hand, would forgive him nothing.

He moved swiftly toward the village remains, skeletons of lives written in burnt wood and weeds. Nanaki was forced into a gallop in an attempt to keep up with the swordsman. Once they’d taken
the valley, Shin-Ra would establish a forward base. Nibelheim would live again although Grüber Junior would never inherit the inn that had been in his family for generation. The judgemental town elders wouldn’t sit in the shade playing checkers and swapping malicious gossip.

Cloud’s mother would never invite them in for tea.

No. Sephiroth would not forgive Hojo. Not for anything.

In the end, Hojo’s forces were easily overcome. Left here to defend the ruins to the death, it looked like they had stopped eating when their supplies ran out; not even going into the mountains to hunt or forage because they didn’t have enough independent thought even for basic survival. Actually, they reminded Sephiroth uncomfortably, of the clones Genesis and Hollander had made. It had, however, made it ridiculously easy for the five Firsts to overwhelm them. Some had retained enough of their own brains to retreat to the reactor, and Kunsel and Barret were coordinating to catch them between the two forces. Tifa Lockhart was helping them decide on the paths the retreating DG’s would have to take and where would be the best ambush locations.

As the last known survivor of Nibelheim, she had proved invaluable in providing routes through the treacherous mountains for the Shin-Ra forces, allowing them to attack the village and the reactor simultaneously. However, she wasn’t with the forces on the mountain paths, she was here. Hoping, like him, to discover the rumours were true. It wasn’t only part of the General’s life that could be buried beneath them; it was part of hers too.

“Are you ready?” she asked waiting with the troopers and the four-person medical team that would be going with him into the mansion. She wasn’t judging Sephiroth’s hesitation, merely confirming their mission.

Sephiroth gazed at the path leading to the Shinra Mansion, familiar but not, anticipated but dreaded as well. Being frozen between hope and fear when so close to the truth, the General decided, was a stupid place to be. He gave himself a mental shake, “Of course.”

The short trip was uneventful. All the monsters, man-made and natural, had been cleared out. He strode confidently through the gate and into the building, but he was surprised at how few memories he had of the actual building and even then, most of those were from when he was a child. He couldn’t tell if it was in better or worse shape than the last time he’d been here.

Three years ago, he’d been far more aware of the small, strong hand that had grasped his so protectively. He’d enjoyed the smell of the young corporal, sweat sharp but still soft and inviting. He’d known that he’d soon be Cloud Strife’s lover during their walk out of the lab. All his senses had been focussed on that event, building up his anticipation and desire. He’d had very little thought for the state of the stairs or the windows or the path.

This time he was somewhat more attentive.

The large, three-story entrance was empty although there was evidence of activity in the scuffed floors. He didn’t want to get caught up in exploring the huge old mansion. If something attacked them, then they would fight. He led the group up the stairs and into the room with the secret entrance to the stairs going down, and into the maze-like system of caves that held Hojo’s once secret lab. Even here, very few creatures jumped out at them. The most dangerous was a Yin-Yang
that Sephiroth dispatched without an effort.

Dr. Imeera, head of the medical team and a mako-exposure specialist, commented on the scarcity. The General thought the caves maybe had her more spooked than she would admit too. According to her file, she’d cleaned up Hojo’s secret labs before but they’d all be long abandoned and any booby-traps had been carefully cleaned out before hand. This was essentially a ‘hot’ site. Deepground had been active in this lab right up until the last couple days. There was no way to know what was waiting for them. It could be nothing or it could be a Tsviet or a plain, old altered Nibel wolf.

She was scared and wanted reassurance. Sephiroth had none to give her. Dr. Imeera was apparently the best qualified to deal with what they might find. That’s why he’d had her assigned to this team. He didn’t care if she was scared. Luckily, Tifa was a kinder person than he was, always cheerful and encouraging.

“Hojo probably took them to experiment or alter them,” Tifa answered flatly. The General almost snorted He doubted if Dr. Imeera found that encouraging at all.

There were a few creatures stirring in a couple of the side rooms, ones that Hojo had missed perhaps? But he wasn’t interested in those rooms. He could feel them. Like a compass needle pulled to point north, he was drawn to the one side of the caves. He wanted to run to them, to curse his escorts so slow and unconcerned, he wanted to stop and turn back in case… in case it was awful and they were no longer themselves.

He wanted to change the past.

It was at the small room before the main lab that more of his memories came back; of being a child and not being allowed to speak, or run, or play because the doctors were doing important work. He’d been kept here, in a cold room in a back corridor as he recovered from the latest treatment. Memories of Hojo invaded his mind; the Professor wielding needles and knives and leaving pain behind him for someone else to deal with, though nobody had. He remembered consuming and believing the fancy lies in dozens of books left just for him. He’d begun to hate everything and everyone until Zack and Cloud saved him. He remembered Zack doing squats and feeding him, while Cloud massaged his back, touching more than his skin.

As he opened the door to the main room, Sephiroth couldn’t stop the prayer that repeated in his mind—a child’s prayer:

_By Titan’s strength and Shiva’s sight;_
By Ramuh’s ancient guiding light;
I send this out with all my might;
May Odin grant my wish tonight.

Please, let them be… what? It was too late for them to be safe and unharmed and, as much as he wanted his shyly teasing Cloud back, and his annoying, bouncy First, they were unlikely to be unchanged. Perhaps it was enough to wish that they were alive and that they’d still be his friends.

The centrepiece of the room was the sturdy examining table, with its massive lights, its restraints, and the channels along its sides to carry away excess liquids—like blood. There were four empty tubes along the walls. There was the passageway that led to the library where Zack had found him so long ago. Found him and saved him. Now it was his turn to save them, but where were they?

“This is an evil place,” Tifa said, looking around with her nose scrunched in distaste. “Can we get on with our job or do you need us here?” She bent down casually to pick up a cloudy ball that
appeared to be materia. She wasted a moment trying to sense what it was, she was pretty good with materia usually, but she couldn’t get a feel for this one. It was a void. With a shrug, she put it in the bag at her waist while she waited for the General to make a decision.

The General stretched out his senses, ignoring the rustle and breathing of the humans in the room with him. He could hear the gurgle of liquids in a tube of some sort, a lot of liquid. It was behind one of the walls, perhaps another false wall. His heart sped up in helpless yearning, but he didn’t hear any living thing other than the people in this room. “Set the charges.”

“Right,” she said and went back out with the captain. Only the two of them were authorized to handle the explosives. The young captain, Biggs, had been trained by Shin-Ra; nobody asked who had trained the young woman.

There were decorations on the walls; charts and expensive artwork. There were books lying around; journals, textbooks and tomes. Computer screens flickered while equipment hummed. All of it lent an air of ‘serious research for the greater good’ to the complex but the restraints and the claw marks on the inside of the tubes told the real story.

The medical team had spread out looking at the equipment, examining the data discs. He wasn’t interested in those things. Sephiroth examined the wall that hid the gurgling tubes. He could find no handle or lever, but he hadn’t really looked that hard and he wasn’t willing to wait. He drew Masamune, focussed himself, and swung, slicing it through the stones as easily as it sliced through flesh.

Rocks fell. People screamed. He ignored it because the bubbling was louder. He strode down the short hall and there, tucked away and hidden, were two tubes filled with noxious liquid mako and the naked forms of his friends. They were suspended in green poison. Breathing tubes were inserted into their nostrils and clamped painfully to their heads.

Sephiroth was drawn, slowly, painfully, to the small blond form, so slim, so beautiful. He reached out to touch the glass. “Cloud,” he whispered.

This close he could see dozens of thin filaments that ran from the casing to various points on his body. It made him look like he was caught in a spider’s web, which, Sephiroth reflected, was as accurate a description of Hojo as any. The wires were attached under the skin and gave him an oddly lumpy appearance. He didn’t know if they were there to monitor Cloud’s physical condition or to stimulate underused muscles. He didn’t care he just wanted Cloud released. Those beautiful blue eyes were closed but he didn’t look peaceful. In fact, he looked distressed. He was frowning, then his muscles twitched, and then he started to convulse.

“Doctor!” the General yelled down the hall.

Sephiroth was pushed out of the way as the Shin-Ra medical team responded to the emergency. They knew what they were doing, after all many of them had worked with Hojo on his ‘projects’ and all had dismantled at least a few of Hojo’s secret labs. They were familiar with mako tubes. They had the cylinder draining within moments. Cloud’s movements eased as the liquid drained away but didn’t stop.

“Why isn’t he falling?” one of the technicians asked. Sephiroth was curious as well; surely Cloud should’ve sunk to the ground as the liquid drained. The filaments and the breathing tube weren’t enough to support his weight, even slight as he was.

A different tech, standing on the other side answered, “There’s a secondary harness,” he paused, head bobbing around as he tried to get a better look. “I think we’re going to be lucky. It looks like a
non-invasive type.”

Sephiroth barely restrained himself from growling his hatred at the absent Professor.

Finally, the mako was gone and it was safe to open the tube. Eager hands reached in to remove the wires and the breathing tube. It wasn’t long before those hands were pulling out the soldier and laying him on a smaller version of the table in the main room. Dr. Imeera had covered the steel surface with a towel, not wanting the cold metal to startle the patient, a bit of kindness Sephiroth appreciated. “Pupils—unresponsive.” “Tickle test—negative.” “BP is 141 over 90.” “Heart rate—90.”

Tremors ran through Cloud’s too-small body in nearly continuous waves. Sometimes they faded but other times they turned into full-scale convulsions. Sephiroth watched and could do nothing.

There was a thump from the tube behind him. It shifted his attention away from the drama on the table. The sound repeated: thump-thump-pause, thump-thump-pause. Turning, Sephiroth remembered the other person trapped in mako. Was Zack convulsing now too?

He wasn’t. He was pounding the glass of his cage in a near fury, demanding without words to be released. He was practically bouncing with urgency and the sight was so familiar, so Zack, that the General lost his breath. He reached out a hand to his friend’s cage. A plea for something he could barely acknowledge, even while his other hand manipulated the door’s controls. He’d watched as they opened Cloud’s and he’d always had a quick memory.

The viscous green goo slid away. Unlike Cloud, Zack was capable of removing the wires from his own skin, which he started doing as soon as he saw Sephiroth start the cycle, uncaring of the wounds he was leaving behind. As the mako drained, his weight dropped onto his own feet so there was no harness. He kept glancing towards Cloud who was shaking harder now, so hard he would have fallen off the table if weren’t for the medics holding him down. Of course, being restrained only added to the young man’s stress.

Only once did the black-haired warrior look at his former commander. He half raised a hand to give a small wave. He looked tired, Sephiroth thought, his bright blue eyes dimmed by the years but he managed one soft smile that said so much: I’m okay, I forgive you, I’m glad you’re here, We’re still friends.

It said everything Sephiroth had wished for.

Sephiroth looked down at the control pad, blinking rapidly. The tube finished draining and the indicators turned green, so he disengaged the locks and opened the door. Only now did one of the medics notice what he’d been doing, “Hey!” she protested. The former SOLDIERs ignored it.

“Turn him on his stomach and step away,” Commander Fair ordered, unconcerned with his green glow, his naked state, or his complete lack of authority.

“I beg your pardon?” Dr. Imeera said in outrage.

“You heard me, lady. Put him on his stomach and clear off. He won’t have complete control and he might hurt you.” He’d reached the table and placed his hand on Cloud’s exposed foot. “Shh, Spikey. It’s okay, we’re here—we’re both here. We’ll keep you safe.” He spoke to Sephiroth in the same calm tone without taking his focus off his friend. “Help me flip him over, Seph.”

Cloud had calmed somewhat at the first touch but he was whimpering as if in pain. Zack kept murmuring to him, kept his hand in contact, as he moved to the top of the table. When Sephiroth
put his hand on Cloud’s leg the blond made what sounded like an excited ‘meep’ and stretched. The shivering had nearly stopped completely, just some spasms around his chest and shoulder areas.

The General did as Zack had done and trailed his hand up Cloud’s leg. He enjoyed the texture; so smooth, so silky—just as he remembered. He reached the hip area and couldn’t help but look at his lover’s groin, his penis was flaccid and lying in the crease of the hip joint. It made him look even more vulnerable.

“Ready?” Zack’s voice cut off his musing.

“Yes.” They easily turned the slight young man over.

Again, he made an odd, wordless noise. It could’ve been fear or desire, excitement or happiness, Sephiroth couldn’t tell. Zack could and he knelt by Cloud’s head to reassure, “It’s okay, Spike, go ahead. No one’s going to get angry or hurt you—not anymore. Go ahead, release’em.” A soft questioning sound, “Yeah, I promise,” Zack responded.

Cloud let out a long relieved breath. His shoulder blades twitched, muscles shivering and then the wings appeared. Two beautiful, white wings with a span about the width of his stretched arms. He stretched them fully, flicking the long feathers on the end a little, as if waving to say ‘hello’.
Broken Drum

Sephiroth knew his eyes were wide in amazement. He wasn’t alone in that. Most of the medical team had the same look. The General consoled himself with the knowledge that at least he had kept his mouth closed.

Cloud had drawn the wings back in, settling them gracefully over his back. The long feathers gave a semblance of modesty as they formed a stylized heart that covered nearly all of his buttocks. It was the ‘nearly’ part that was most enticing, the General decided, as the length of his spine was left bare, from the knob just under his neck to the dimples at the base and beyond. “Touch them,” Zack instructed and Sephiroth blinked at being instructed to fondle Cloud’s buttocks. “He likes having his wings touched.” Oh. “Although it might be best if the… medics keep away for a bit. They’ll probably scare him.”

He absently agreed and the medical team returned to searching through computers and discs for information on what had been done to the two of them and what Hojo had been planning. Sephiroth ignored their activities, intent on the two people in front of him.

“He hasn’t been able to show them, let alone stretch them, since before we went into the tank the last time.” Zack looked at his former CO as he said it, his face carefully blank. Sephiroth reached and touched those pretty, little dimples then he ran his hand up the blond’s spine. In reaction, the wings lifted slightly, tension entering them.

“Nghhh.” The General stopped at the sound. It didn’t sound like Cloud’s voice but he knew that it was.

“It’s okay. It’s a happy sound. That’s about the best he can do for verbal stuff right now. He wants to say words but I don’t think he remembers how.”

Dr. Imeera, standing close despite Zack’s instructions, disagreed. “Ridiculous. He’s obviously suffering from mako addiction, so it’s hardly likely that he can even form the intention to communicate. It was most likely an involuntary response to outside stimuli.”

“You think so… Doc?” the word was said with a lot of contempt. Zack had encountered a lot of people who happily worked under Hojo and called themselves ‘doctor’. He didn’t have a lot of respect for a white lab coat anymore. Besides, there was something about her…

“I am Shin-Ra’s expert on the effects of prolonged mako exposure on humans,” she defended herself.

“Oh yeah? You touch him,” the First challenged, “See if he makes a peep for you.” Dr. Imeera moved closer, utterly confident, and spread her hand on a strong calf muscle. The youth on the table didn’t make a sound but the wing on that side quirked up. It waited a moment then poked at her and pushed her away. Zack chuckled, just a little mean, “Can’t say he doesn’t know how to communicate, can you, Doc.” Dr. Imeera just looked shocked.

Sephiroth ignored them both in favour of exploring well-remembered contours. He continued his upward motion, finally reaching the light coating of incredibly soft down between the shoulder blades. He stroked them, stroked through them, contrasting their texture with Cloud’s naturally soft skin above and below the area. Cloud has wings, he could barely absorb the information, and not just on one side or small token ones, but a large, full, set of wings.
He moved to the wing proper, running his open hand over the surface feathers, not digging in like his dark-haired friend. Cloud sighed—the General thought it sounded happy, and stretched his wings out a bit, his body shifting to accommodate the change in balance.

“If it’s not mako addiction then what’s wrong with him?” Dr. Imeera asked, puzzled. She’d been so sure…

Zack paused then continued his grooming movements. “He tried to make us into new versions of Sephiroth,” they looked at each other, “Since you’d disappointed him by not falling under Psycho Bitch’s spell.”

“That isn’t logical. I was altered in embryo.” He said absently, keeping most of his attention on the young man in front of him, on the vision of his pale hand on even paler feathers. Cloud was humming or purring. It was, at the least, a continuous soft and happy noise. Cloud has wings—beautiful wings.

“He had a theory that he’d be able to alter one of us easily. Me, because I was SOLDIER First Class and already had Jenova cells, or Cloud, because he was so sensitive to mako. At first they thought the wings were a good sign.” He looked up at his former friend, “They said you have a wing.” His voice was very careful not to ask questions or to accuse.

Sephiroth’s lips quirked, “I have one wing on my right side. It’s black—like Genesis’. I didn’t know until I emerged from the Lifestream in Mideel.” He was going to continue, explain some of the things they’d discovered about SOLDIER First Class but Cloud lifted the wing on his side slightly, as if inviting the General to scratch an itchy spot and Sephiroth was entranced once again.

“I see.” Zack shifted to running his fingers through Cloud’s hair, still as long and as untameable as before. “When nothing else happened they got mad at him. Since he liked stretching his wings so much, they stopped him doing it. It wasn’t so bad when he was, y’know, aware and could control them, but when he retreated, mentally, he lost most of that. They still restrained him though. With extreme prejudice, they called it. Torture is what it was.”

“Do you…” have wings, is what he wanted to ask but couldn’t. Zack had wanted wings since he’d flown with Angeal that one time during the attack on Midgar by Genesis, and surely, if he’d had some, he would have displayed them by now if only to make Cloud more comfortable. “What did they do to you?” he asked instead and wondered when he’d become a coward.

“They injected more Jenova cells but they didn’t work so well on me—maybe the mako already inside me prevented most of them from taking over my DNA. At least that’s what I think they said,” he raised his lips in a sad smile, “You know how he was always muttering. Cloud here was more vulnerable. Or they thought he would be. Of course, the first thing they did was dissect him, trying to figure out how he could block her. They played with his….” Zack snorted angrily, “everything: blood, bones, DNA, brain cells. Then they put him back together. I’m surprised the little guy survived.” Cloud snapped his wing slightly, as if miffed at being called ‘little’.

That made Zack smile more easily. It still wasn’t his broad, blinding flash but it was a smile. “You’re still a head shorter than I am, Spike. I can call you little if I want.”

“Revenge would have been a factor as well,” Sephiroth theorized out loud, “If I remember correctly, he was already angry that I had brought you to Nibelheim, and that both of you were at the reactor,” he paused to collect his thoughts. How he said this could permanently affect his future relationship with Commander Fair. It was important that he say it correctly. “When you pushed me over the edge of the platform you saved my life.” He looked up at his friend, “Thank you for that. I knew even as I was falling that he would take his anger out on you and Cloud. I should have… I
should have grabbed the two of you, taken you with me somehow.”

Zack looked down, colour staining his cheeks, “There was no way… It was more important that you be safe. I thought that then, I still think it.” He turned his attention back to the blond soldier, “I know Cloud would agree with me,” his voice was tight and Sephiroth knew Zack’s mind may still think it, but his abused body was having trouble believing it. Perhaps a return to their previous topic would help, he decided. Cloud was a good topic would give the dark SOLDIER time to recover his composure.

“It’s been nearly three years since the mission to Nibelheim,” Sephiroth said and answered Zack’s unspoken question “He’s grown somewhat,” It was true. He could remember, in perfect detail, exactly how long it had taken him to run his hands all over Cloud’s body. There was a difference so that meant there must be more of him.

“Yeah. Some. A bit taller; a bit broader. He’s still a pretty boy, though.” Another, stronger, flick of his wing was Cloud’s incoherent complaint at the description. Zack laughed, “What? Seph’s not allowed to think you’re ‘pretty’? I thought you’d like that.” It didn’t take much for his face to resume solemn lines. “There was also talk about how destroying the village had been a bad idea.”

He didn’t look at the silver-haired general, which was just as well. Sephiroth was feeling… unbalanced. Zack spoke to Cloud as if the blond were actually speaking with his wing movements. Worse, his interpretations seemed to be accurate. He could read the young soldier better than Sephiroth could and that made him… jealous. He didn’t want to be jealous of Zack.

“Aside from Cloud, there’s only one survivor. Do you remember our young guide?”

Zack frowned, “The mayor’s daughter? Tifa something.” He remembered her mostly because of the skimpy cowboy outfit she’d worn to show them through the mountains. He also remembered that she’d had the biggest rack he’d seen that hadn’t been the result of surgery.

“Tifa Lockhart. Her sensei rescued her. Carried her over a mountain where Hojo’s blockade didn’t reach. Everyone else was either killed in the fire or shot when they ran out of their homes.”

“Everyone?” Zack asked, remembering a hesitant invitation to tea.

A single nod of the head, “Everyone.”

“Fuck,” he said softly, almost a prayer. “Poor Spike.” He bent forward and gave blond locks a tender kiss. Cloud’s wings drooped, as if in distress, “nnngh.”

Sephiroth gave his odd half smile as the coincidence of the situation occurred to him, “She’s here right now. In the caves acting as the guide to the Shin-Ra forces. She’s a formidable fighter and would make a good captain if she’d consent to join the regular army.”

“Sirs,” Dr. Imeeda finally interrupted, “We really should be getting both of, of the survivors prepped for travel. They need to be cleaned up and we should set up a saline drip…” Before she could say another word, Cloud had tensed; he spread his wings wide, nearly knocking the General over. The wing tips snapped aggressively and everyone in the room understood it was a threat.

“Shh, easy there, Spike,” Zack soothed, “They’re not going to hurt you. Remember me and the General are here. They just want to clean the goop off you and check your blood. Little things, good things.”

“Gghnn,” the sound was doubtful and it was obvious that the blond didn’t want the medics anywhere near him.
Sephiroth spoke, speaking directly to his lover for the first time, his hand secure on the young man’s back. “We are here, Cloud. We can clean off the mako and we’ll make sure they do not hurt you. Is that acceptable?” He resumed stroking that strong spine. Long feathers quivered then snapped a couple times, before Cloud drew them back to rest along his back, mantling them a couple times as if to assert that he wasn’t really happy about this but if they were sure it was a good idea.…

‘Interesting,’ the General thought. The blond’s wings were most expressive. With a little practice, Sephiroth decided he’d be as good at understanding them as his SiC, former SiC was. He turned to the medical team, “You have cloths we can use?”

In the end, Zack wiped himself down while Sephiroth took care of Cloud. He’d meant to keep his touch brisk and professional—efficient—but the lure of creamy skin and trim limbs was too great. His motions slowed, became little more than caresses. How could he be expected to ignore the joy of playing with that remarkable hair, even if it were just rubbing it dry, or of exploring musculature that had only been hinted at three years ago, shoulders that had become broad and arms that were strong? So beautiful.

He ran the cloth down between and under those remarkable wings, running it over Cloud’s sides. He frowned at how easy it was to pick out his ribs, despite the cover of muscle. He would have to make sure the young man ate more. He grabbed a new cloth before starting on his lower half. He nearly purred as he rubbed the mako off of buttocks that were still as round and tight as he remembered. He didn’t even try to resist the impulse to massage them a little with his bare hands. Then it was down the long thighs, and tight calves. He made sure to raise each foot in turn, and clean very carefully between graceful toes.

“Still got it bad, I see.” It was a statement, not unkind but full of amused approval.

Sephiroth jumped, almost embarrassed to be so obvious. Zack did smile then, “You’re blushing! Fucking awesome.” Sephiroth shifted uncomfortably. He’d lost the habit of being teased because nobody but these two had ever done so in friendship. “It’s a good thing, Seph, trust me on that. He told me that his time with you was one of his best thoughts and he pulled it off the shelf to look at it whenever he got the chance.

He kept his long hair swinging forward, although it was more to hide his expression from the avidly listening medics than to hide from Zack. He was one of this young man’s ‘best thoughts’? “I feel the same,” he assured their mutual friend who could, conceivably worry about them both. “We need to turn him over,” he added before Zack could comment again.

Zack took a long drink from the gross electrolyte replacement drink one of the medics had handed him. “Okay,” he agreed.

“Can he lie on his wings or should they be retracted?”

“You don’t know?” Zack raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I don’t… I only have the one. I can sleep on my side,” Sephiroth realized he was prevaricating just a little. Those were good reasons but not the correct one, “and I don’t… I don’t usually display my wing.”

Zack finished his drink, horrified that it had actually tasted pretty good. “He can lie on his wings but it’s uncomfortable. It can hurt too. I’ll ask him to pull them in.” He crouched close to Cloud’s head, placing his hands on the blond’s cheek before speaking. Sephiroth also moved to the top of the table, wanting to memorize this in case there was something special he would need to do to
communicate with the corporal. The blond spikes were stuck together with half-dried mako so he absently finger-combed the tacky stuff out as he watched. The medics had also crowded around, wanting to see it. Nobody really knew where wings went when they weren’t on display but there was plenty of speculation.

“Spike. Hey, Spike. You gotta bring your wings in,” the SOLDIER said.

Cloud lifted them up, fluttering in protest, “Nnggh.”

“I know it feels good, Spike, but we gotta clean the front of you off too. Once we get you set up, and out of here, you’ll be able to stretch them back out.” Again, his wings moved as if responding, even though nothing changed in his face, in his eyes. “Yeah, I’m sure. These aren’t Hojo’s people. The General’s in charge and I think he likes them.” Zack looked up at his old CO. It was a silent order, just as the SOLDIER used to give him. Sephiroth smiled and did as he was told.

“I do like them Cloud, very much indeed.” They spread out a little more, as if showing off. “They suit you but you must put them away. I need to turn you over and I don’t want to hurt them, or you. I promise I’ll tell you when you can stretch them out again.” A flutter, a pause then after a final muscle-popping stretch, Cloud’s wings retracted. He gave a small grunt of effort and they ‘popped’ out of existence.

There were murmurs of awed amazement from the medical people when there was no blood or other fluids expelled. Others, closer to the young solder stared at his back looking for some physical sign of the wings’ presence; scars or lumps, anything. There were scars, bad ones, along his legs, on his pelvis, and all along the spine but there’s nothing but the sprinkling of fine down to indicate where the wings had been.

Zack and Sephiroth didn’t let them look very long, neither one was going to let their friend become a medical test subject, or let him continue as one which was perhaps a more valid description. Just the thought of one of the white-coated buffoons poking at Cloud’s back going ‘hmm, fascinating’ had Zack itching for his sword, so they flipped him over quickly. The medics lost interest but the General was fascinated by the corporal’s very healthy erection that was only now subsiding.

“I told you liked getting his wings rubbed.” It was said with sly teasing but there was a wariness in Zack’s face that belied the light tone. In fact, he looked nervous, almost afraid. He turned his back on Sephiroth and picked up a cloth to continue cleaning the mako off himself, but Sephiroth knew that he was hiding. There was more to this that Zack was saying, Sephiroth decided so, as he wiped the remaining green toxin off his lover’s body, he re-examined recent events.

Why would Zack be afraid?

He was afraid of the General’s reaction to Cloud’s erection. Why would Zack be afraid of that? It’s not like Sephiroth hadn’t seen Cloud’s erect penis before, although it, like the rest of him, had grown. Zack knew this, so it wasn’t the erection in itself that caused the worry.

Stroking Cloud’s wings had caused his arousal; an interesting phenomenon that deserved more study once the corporal had fully recovered, Sephiroth decided. From his comment, Zack had obviously known what effect petting them would have. Could he be nervous because he hadn’t warned the General? Unlikely. Zack still liked to tease and this was a familiar subject.

Zack could be afraid that Sephiroth would reject Cloud because of his wings and their effect. It wasn’t normal, it wasn’t even human. He might be afraid that it would bring back memories of Genesis and Angeal, the only other two people the First had known with wings. They had both declared themselves ‘monsters’. Still, did Zack fear that Sephiroth would consider Cloud
monstrous? How could he, when he himself had a wing, so that didn’t seem like a logical explanation either.

A thought occurred to Sephiroth and he looked at the handsome and still-young SOLDIER, scrubbing himself down with brisk strokes. Three years in a cage was a long time for anyone, how much worse was it when at the height of your virility?

The SOLDIER had known Cloud would become sexually stimulated by having his wings stroked because they had experimented, perhaps to the point of orgasm. Did Zack think he would be jealous? Maybe he feared being called perverted for having indulged the blond to that extent. Sephiroth had to smile, and he knew it was his ‘naughty thoughts’ smile—as Genesis had labelled it lifetimes ago, because he wanted to see it, to experiment with Cloud’s new erogenous zone.

He wanted Zack to be there too, he realized. It was unlikely to happen but he couldn’t help feeling that Zack was his: his to protect, his to care for… his to love. Of course, his SiC—former SiC, might not feel the same way, or if he did it would probably just be the Jenova cells pushing their host bodies to reunite and recombine rather than an actual desire on Commander Fair’s part.

This was not the time nor place to explore the issue, however, so he kept his voice light and mildly chiding, with no hint of condemnation or seduction, “I have never noticed such a reaction in myself, but perhaps that’s because I’ve never allowed anyone to try it. It will be… enjoyable to explore our responses when there is time to do so.” Well, perhaps there was a hint of seduction but it was completely involuntary. Zack tensed and the General could smell the deeper tone in the dark-haired swordsmen musk as he responded to Sephiroth’s arousal.

They had to work to bring their bodies under control. Sephiroth focussed on the large, ugly scar in the middle of Cloud’s abdomen. Zack took stock of their little prison and the horror it represented. He noticed the medic preparing a shunt for a drip and put a stop to it. “No more needles.” They’d already taken blood samples.

“But we must,” Dr. Imeera protested, “We need to get fluids in him, to flush the toxins out of his system.”

Zack nodded, “I get that, but you don’t need that thing; trust me. He would fight having it in too, so that wouldn’t be good for him. He can drink from a bottle.”

Sephiroth had looked up by this time, “Are you sure, Zack?” The dark-haired warrior nodded and that was good enough. Ignoring the doctor’s protests, the General ordered them to put the kit away and bring the uniforms that had been packed.

The medics worked around them, doing what they could to identify anything that might cause the corporal distress on the trip out of the caves. Cloud didn’t mind since under Sephiroth’s constant soothing caress, he was back to making that lovely humming sound. The General couldn’t help but smile in satisfaction. Cloud was as sensuous as he remembered. Hojo hadn’t managed to ruin that in him. Once he was well, they would take some time off and pick up where they had been stopped three years ago.

Zack, who’d finished wiping himself down as much as he needed to, which wasn’t actually much when it came down to it. If he hadn’t been addicted or poisoned, or whatever bad things mako could do to a person, in the months that he’d been immersed in the stuff, he didn’t figure that a little bit on his skin was going to tip him over the edge. He grabbed another bottle of that disgustingly satisfying drink and started chugging.

A medic came in with two uniforms. He gave the larger one to Zack and placed the smaller one
near the table where Sephiroth was still stroking the mako off Cloud’s soft skin. The young soldier breathed in and out in an easy rhythm seemingly unaware of events happening around him. He blinked, covering up eyes as empty as a still sky. The General lifted an arm to clean between strong fingers and when he released it, Cloud held it up in the exact position he’d left it. It was sad and scary. Was there anything of Cloud left in there?

“He’s still there,” Zack said as he returned to the table. “Think of the wings, that’s him. He’s there.”

“They are most expressive,” Sephiroth agreed, reaching for the smaller uniform.

“He is aware but he’s run away inside his mind and the wings are the only part of himself he lets come close to this world. Fucking Hojo,” Zack’s voice was full of bitter hatred. “I’m sure they’ll say it’s the mako addiction or poisoning or whatever, but it was that sadistic bastard. The things he did to Cloud just because he could. He’s got wolf in him.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sephiroth asked, sure he’d misheard the SOLDIER.

“Hojo tried to fuse some wolf genetics into him, to make him ‘faster’ he said, but I think he just wanted to see if he could give the kid a tail or paws. Fucking!”

“It didn’t take, I assume.”

Zack shook his head, staring angrily at his half-empty bottle before draining it. “No, he got pulled away by something else and none of the other psychos were allowed to continue the ‘experiment’. He used his fingers to make air quotes. He was breathing hard and Sephiroth could almost see the fury building into a blind murderous rage.

“Can you pull his pants up?” he asked, more for a distraction than because he needed the help. It worked somewhat. The General let his SiC, former Second-in-Command—he really had to try and remember that, dress Cloud’s feet, while he examined the shirt. It was standard Shin-Ra issue, high-necked and short-sleeved; a little baggy. If he trimmed it, there would be room for the wings.

“What about you?”

“What?” Zack looked up from tying on Cloud’s boots.

“You seem to have survived physically unchanged,” Sephiroth realized that it could sound like he was accusing the other man of sacrificing Cloud for better treatment for himself. “Is it because you were SOLDIER?” he added, “It would probably be harder to addict you since your system was already saturated.”

Sephiroth’s calm theorizing didn’t soothe Zack’s anger, temporarily buried while he dressed Cloud. To the SOLDIER, it sounded like the General, the Demon of Wutai, was distancing himself from what had happened, from the torture and abuse, by looking at it clinically—the same way Hojo had looked at them.

He took a steadying breath. Sephiroth wasn’t Hojo. He didn’t know how to show emotions but he did have them. He was capable of caring and he did care, but he hadn’t been here and he didn’t know, and now he wanted him to dissect his experiences? To talk calmly and rationally about watching your best friend be cut up on a table in front of you and be able to do absolutely fucking NOTHING to stop it.

“You are alright, aren’t you Zack?” Again, so calm and soothing. Was he being fucking handled? The thick-soled boots creaked under his hands. Zack looked up, ready to scream and throw things
in his anger and bitterness, only to be stopped cold by what he saw.

Sephiroth was cutting wing holes into Cloud’s shirt with Masamune, brows furrowed as he sliced thin strips out of the back. And was that the tip of his tongue sticking out in concentration? It was so ridiculous to see the large warrior wielding the 2-metre blade with such delicate care that the dark-haired SOLDIER burst out laughing. The General looked up at Zack, puzzled by his response—it was the tip of his tongue sticking out, just a little bit.

That set the First off again. He laughed until his ribs hurt and his eyes watered. It was the first time in three years that he’d experienced that from something other than pain.

Sephiroth wasn’t sure what had caused Zack’s outburst but it was nice to hear it. He held up the mutilated shirt to confirm that he had made the holes big enough. The one on the right could perhaps go lower, he decided, and pulled out Masamune once again and trimmed slivers off of it until it was just right.

Zack laughed harder, finally gasping and catching his breath when Sephiroth pulled the remnants of material over Cloud’s head. “Oh, I wish I’d had a camera for that,” he panted, wiping his eyes and tossing the General one of the disgusting sport drinks the medics had brought. “Here just hold it to his lips, he’ll do the rest. I need to find my Buster before we leave.” He raised his voice, “Has anybody seen a huge fucking sword that’s taller than most people and wider than them too?”

The dark anger that had been around the SOLDIER was nearly gone and when one of the medical team indicated that he had seen something like that, Zack practically bounced over to him and dragged the poor man out the door in eagerness; his body moving in his old swaggering walk.

Cat-green eyes watched until he could no longer hear that friendly, cocky voice. It would be okay. Zack would be himself again and Cloud would come back. It would be fine. Good even. Sephiroth couldn’t cry, but his eyes could hurt, and his chest could tighten and he could know what it feels like to want to.
While Zack was off recovering his beloved Buster, Sephiroth concentrated on getting fluids into Cloud. It was as easy as Zack had said—just hold the bottle to his lips and Cloud would move them to accommodate, tip carefully and he would swallow as easy as if Sephiroth were holding it to his own. From the overheard comments of the medics, this was not the usual behaviour of someone suffering from mako poisoning but rather mako addiction. Except that Cloud’s complete lack of physical response in every other test—lights in the eyes, tickling his feet, all of that indicated mako poisoning. They argued about what exactly the small soldier was suffering from but they all agreed that he couldn’t be suffering from both at once, and wasn’t it fascinating.

The General’s rather notorious temper was beginning to fray quite badly at having his lover talked about like a specimen, so he was very glad when Zack returned, his massive sword draped over his back hanging from his old harness. “Hey, look who I found wandering around.”

Ms. Lockhart eased around the large SOLDIER. She stepped up to the table, “Cloud?” Nothing but a slow blink, “Zack said you could hear okay, although you couldn’t respond so well. I just wanted to say I’m glad you’re alive. I’m glad Sephiroth has found you again” No response. “When you’re better, we can get together and tell horror stories about growing up in Nibelheim or something. Can I touch him?” She turned to the General to ask the question.

“I think he would enjoy that,” or possibly not but Sephiroth had an odd hope that having the two Nibelheimers touch might… jump-start a reaction in the blond. When they’d been here three years ago, when Hojo had sent him here so he could be captured by Jenova’s will, Cloud had been able to block her voice; so had Ms. Lockhart… so had anyone born in Nibelheim. Therefore, it wasn’t unreasonable to hope that having them touch skin to skin might have a positive effect on Cloud.

She reached out and put her hand on his bare arm. Sephiroth watched the corporal’s face closely but there wasn’t even a flutter. Of course, she was wearing her battle gloves so there was very little bare skin involved. “We’ve got most of the charges set. We’ll place the ones in the cave on the way out then start the timer once we hit the circular stairs. We’ll have twenty minutes to clear the mansion. If you’re ready to go that is.”

“I have Cloud prepared,” he answered.

“Good. I’ll talk to you later, Cloud.” She patted his arm briskly before turning to the others in the room. “Are you all ready to go?”

“Yes, I believe we’ve gotten just about everything,” Dr. Imeera responded as head of the medical team. “We just need to put the boy on a stretcher—”

“That won’t be necessary,” Sephiroth contradicted her.
“But, sir, we need to get him through the tunnels.” As if he weren’t aware of that. He bent down to pick up the small blond and easily balanced him on his right arm. He cradled him to his chest, head on his shoulder as he would a child. There was barely any weight to him despite his size and his muscles. It was like carrying a child.

Dr. Imeera had called the soldier a ‘boy’ even though he would be twenty or twenty-one by now but Sephiroth could understand the impulse. Mako had frozen his features, so that he looked no older than he had three years ago. In fact, without the reflection of his personality and experiences, he looked even younger. Sephiroth suddenly thought of that expression Genesis had used to describe some of their youngest recruits—‘jail bait’, because they were too young to have sex with but too attractive not to want to.

“You can stretch your wings again if you like,” he murmured. He had, after all, promised.

He had promised to meet Cloud’s mother. He had promised to build a life with him back in Midgar. He had, if only to himself, promised to protect the smaller man. Those promises were in ruins, impossible to keep. This one was easy. Cloud gave a happy grunt of concentration, there was perhaps a shift of air pressure, and then his wings burst into existence. As usual, he stretched them before pulling them back. However, he didn’t retract them fully. Instead, they cocooned around the General’s shoulders as if, even in this half-dreaming state, Cloud was still trying to protect him.

“Awww, man! That is just too sweet for words.” Although it didn’t seem like Zack was in any danger of running out of things to say.

“Are you capable of fighting if necessary, Commander? The troopers have fought hard all day, I’m sure they would appreciate your assistance if we are attacked.” And it would give the SOLDIER something safe to take out his anger on. Despite the laughing fit he’d had earlier, Sephiroth could tell it was still there, inside of him, and it would allow him to test his altered body on dangerous, but not deadly, creatures.

“Um,” Zack thought about it. This wasn’t his friend asking, this was his General—even though he was cuddling Cloud like a proud parent. His automatic response, three years ago, would’ve been to say ‘hell, yeah!’ as if it were a no-brainer but this wasn’t three years ago. People, good people, would be trusting him with their lives and he’d been in a tube for a long time. “My reaction times are gonna be a bit different than I remember. I should probably be given lots of room if I have to start swinging. Until we know where my new kill zone is.”

The General nodded shortly and turned to the unit’s captain who’d escorted them down, “Is that acceptable, Captain Biggs?”

“Absolutely, Sir.”

“Very well, then. You have the lead. Commander Fair’s never had a good head for navigation.”

“Hey!”

“We’ll be taking the long way out of the lab and laying the charges and the cord as we go,” the captain said, both of them ignored Zack’s defensive protest, but his next question couldn’t be ignored.

“You’re blowing this place up?”

“Yes,” the General confirmed, “Hojo littered his complexes with too many experiments, secret passages and booby traps. It’s not worth risking a back-attack to preserve them. Whatever other
knowledge they might contain is best destroyed anyway.” He walked to the main room as he spoke.

“Good decision. Don’t need a neo-Hojo trying to re-create Dr. Creepy’s work. Hang on a sec’ though.” Zack strode off before they could say anything.

“Zack,” Sephiroth called.

“Two seconds, promise,” his voice echoed back to them from the library, if Sephiroth remembered the layout correctly. He’d buried himself in this lab, bludgeoned by Genesis’ accusations and Jenova’s voice he had come here to find the truth, instead he’d found lies. Zack and Cloud had followed him down. Zack had been determined to save him but it had been the young corporal who’d provided the key.

“I assure you, Sir, these aren’t as old as they seem to be.”

Most of the books Sephiroth had been reading, most of the works Hojo had quoted to support his experiments, most of the books in the library, in fact, had been forgeries. An elaborate hoax initiated and carried out to convince the genetically-designed warrior that he was a god. Corporal Cloud Strife, son of a University Librarian, had been dragged down here by his friend. He had recognized them for what they were.

This one,” he picked up a thin, gilt-edged volume, “is definitely a fake. It’s obvious if you know any history of printing, or just plain history.”

Step by step, book by book, he had exposed Hojo’s lie. Cheap forgeries and hurried fakes, their flaws should have been obvious to the forcibly educated General.

Zack came back to the group. In his hands was a large, leather covered volume. “He thought this one was special,” Zack explained but he didn’t have to; Sephiroth remembered.

“This one was a lot of work,” Cloud picked up another, even larger book. Its pages were uneven and water damaged. Thick leather straps formed hasps for keeping the massive work closed. “Hemp paper, hand bound and hand cut. It’s beautiful and old-fashioned, but the letters are too even to have been hand written. And there are no guidelines that scribes would’ve used to mark their edges. It was printed using an old mechanical typeset machine.” He rubbed his hands over the tooled leather, “It’s possible this is an antique forgery.”

“You already said it was a fake, Corporal.”

Cloud blushed, “Sir! I meant that this forgery was made long ago, maybe a hundred fifty to even two hundred years ago. If that’s the case, it’s priceless in its own right. The University library would love to have it.”

Kalm University was no more but Cloud had survived, and now Zack had made sure this volume would too. One of the small blond’s wings stretched out toward the dark-haired First as if to touch it and confirm that it was real.

“Yes, I remember.” One of the medics, already burdened with notebooks and discs, stepped forward and offered to carry it and, mindful of his role as protector, he passed it over so he would have his hands free to fight. Then he moved to where Captain Briggs and Tifa waited, “Ready now, thanks.”

“Very good, Sir,” The captain responded.
They moved out into the caves. Zack and the captain led them. Then Tifa and some of the troops, laying and setting the charges, followed by the General carrying Cloud, the medics and then the rest of the troopers. They moved smoothly together, confident and alert, and it was obvious that this group had fought together before. It made Zack curious. Three years ago, when they’d been sent on this puking dog of a mission, Gaia had been at peace. Except for the occasional Wutaian terrorist or bug hunt, there’d been nothing going on that would give regular troopers this kind of experience.

“So what have I missed in three years?” he asked the group at large, “Are we back at war with the Wutai?”

“Um, no Sir, I mean, Zack,” Biggs answered. “Actually, we might be pulling out of Wutai if the mutual defence talks go through.”

“Mutual defence,” Zack didn’t sound any more enlightened, in fact he sounded even more confused.

“When I emerged from the Lifestream I went hunting Hojo. He ran and demolished Shinra by activating a secret facility hidden under the basements of the Tower,” Sephiroth explained.

“If you mean the ‘secret sub-levels’–” Zack started.

“No, he means the ones forty or more floors beneath those,” Briggs continued the tale with the air of a well-enjoyed tale often told, “Hojo had built an advanced lab in a natural cave filled with crystallized mako, right under President Shinra’s nose. He’d made hundreds of highly enhanced fighters, including elite warriors called ‘Tsviets’. They destroyed the foundation and most of the supports for the tower collapsed when they emerged. And the tower? It fell onto Sector 7. The plate gave out under the extra weight and the whole thing collapsed into the slums.”

“Holy shit,” Zack said, awed.

“As if that weren’t enough,” he continued, “President Shinra was killed, and most of the board was injured. Including his son, Rufus. Things were a mess for a long time. Mr. Tuesti was trying to salvage Midgar, and Heidegger was trying to mount a counter-attack.”

“Heidegger?” the SOLDIER repeated in disbelief. Heidegger was a self-important idiot who couldn’t organize his desk.

“Yeah, he took control of everything and marched out, but it was a disaster. We lost nearly a quarter of our military. He got killed too. At Gongaga…” Then Biggs shut up, remembering that the small jungle village had been this man’s hometown.

“What happened at Gongaga?” he asked, but the captain didn’t answer, just looked helplessly at the General. Zack walked back to him. “What happened at Gongaga?”

“Your family is safe,” the silver-haired man said, figuring it would be the primary question in Zack’s mind. “When Deepground forces started to approach, the villagers hid in the jungle and most of them survived. It was a trap, of course. They tried to warn Heidegger, but you remember what he was like. When he was close enough Deepground blew the reactor. The village was destroyed along with over half of the soldIERS and a third of the regular Armed Forces. Heidegger died a week later of injuries sustained.”

“Fuck,” it was a prayer in its way. “Over half?”
“Hmmm,” Sephiroth hummed confirmation, his voice just as soft, “They had a piece of Jenova with them. Like we had been at Nibelheim, they were vulnerable to her…call.” As much as he hated to use Hojo’s term for the awful, wrenching force the alien imposed on him and the other Firsts, it was accurate.

Zack was called away to deal with a cloud of bats, likely poisonous, but he soon returned and they resumed their sotto voce conversation.

“Hojo’s insane,” Zack said after a moment, “I mean not just ‘without a conscience’, but seriously bat-fuck. He talked all the time, and not just to himself. He talked to Jenova, always justifying and explaining as if she were giving him orders. He was all slimy and obsequious when he ‘talked’ to her then he’d yell and have a tantrum as soon as she was gone. He talked to you or some future you—a wiser version of you maybe. It didn’t make any sense.” He gave an odd little half-smile, “We knew you were alive because of that. He used to taunt us with the fact that you’d made it out of the mako and picked up your life at Shinra without giving us another thought.” Cloud shook his wings, a couple sharp movements. “I think that means he never believed it,” Zack interpreted.

“I’m glad. I didn’t believe it when Shinra told me you both were dead either. Death has been far too convenient for them in too many ways.” Zack grunted agreement but it was absently, like he had something more important on his mind. Sephiroth didn’t push. He walked in silence beside his friend, just grateful that he was alive, until the dark-haired SOLDIER finally talked.

“Hojo ranted on about the Cetras and what they’d done to the Psycho Alien Bitch way back when. He was convinced that the reason you ‘failed’ is because you got the host’s cells along with Jenova’s. He had a hate-on for the Ancients,” Zack swallowed, “He used to cackle happily about how he’d killed the last Cetra. How he’d ordered Tseng to…” he trailed off.

For the first time, Sephiroth realized that Zack hadn’t asked about his former girlfriend, not once. “He did order Tseng to dispose of Ms. Gainsborough. However, being a ‘stickler for details’ is the phrase I believe he used, he required confirmation of the order from several senior executives, many of whom were unavailable. The Turks had, as a matter of procedure, taken her into custody—to make carrying out the order easier once it was confirmed, he said. Hojo ran before that could happen.”

Zack smiled, relieved and grateful more than anything. “Sneaky bastard.”

“Of course, he’s a Turk. He’s actually the head Turk now. Veld was killed during the tower’s collapse.” Sephiroth continued, “Ms. Gainsborough currently lives in the Shinra compound as there have been several attempts made to kidnap her. I know she has created a garden that is considered a wonder as it’s in the middle of a reactor wasteland. However, that is all I can tell you about her.” In other words, the General didn’t know if she was seeing someone or waiting for Zack’s return. “When we leave here you can call her if you like.”

Zack hunched his shoulders and shrugged, looking every inch a sulky teenager rather than an adult SOLDIER. “Three years, Seph. That’s a long time. What if she’s changed?”

“I’m sure she has changed, as have you. All you can do if discover if you’ve changed in ways that are compatible with each other. That will be more difficult to determine over the phone, but it can start the process.”

“I dunno,” the tall warrior practically scuffed his toes on the ground in his uncertainty, “I have such… stuff, dark stuff, inside of me now. I didn’t have it before. Maybe she’d be better off without me."
Sephiroth frowned. He barely restrained himself from growling because what Zack said, and its implications, were completely unacceptable. “It has been nearly three years since I became Cloud’s lover and even then, we had only one night together. Should I back away because we might have changed?” he asked.

“Hell no! He’d be devastated.” Zack was ready to be angry on Cloud’s behalf until he realized the point of the question. “Oh.”

Sephiroth ignored his small outburst of enlightenment, caught up in his own insecurities, “I am an unholy mix of mako, Cetra, Jenova and Ramuh knows what else Hojo decided to add to the mix. I was raised in a lab and my emotional responses are… interesting at best. I can cast Firaga without materia now. I am dangerous and barely human. Should I stay away from Cloud because of what I carry inside me?” Cloud’s wings wrapped even tighter around the silver-haired man. It brought a measure of peace—at least he knew what his once-and-future lover thought of that idea.

He took a deep breath to calm down. “The only people who can say whether a relationship is feasible are the people involved in that relationship,” he continued, “The question is ‘do you want to try?’ and the only ones who can answer that are yourself and Ms. Gainsborough.” Zack opened his mouth, ready to concede the fight. Sephiroth thought he was going to argue some more and his temper flared again. “You will call her once we’re out of the mansion, as soon as it is safe to do so. That is an order, Commander.”

His former-SiC smiled and saluted. He wanted to make some kind of self-mocking comment but he was called away to deal with a sahagin before he could say it, and by the time he’d done that, the General’s focus had moved on to something else—actually, someone else.

One of Cloud’s wings was fluttering, and straining; stretching away from the General. He was obviously trying to communicate but Sephiroth didn’t know how to interpret it. “Wait,” he called to the team and they all halted, gathering round to watch whatever was going to happen. Even Tifa came back from laying the charges to investigate the commotion, feeling safer when close to the group.

“Zack, Cloud’s sensing something,” the General said, “Can you talk to him; find out what it is?” There were disbelieving murmurs in the crowd. The corporal was essentially a vegetable, he heard them whisper, there’s no way he could sense anything. He ignored the comments. They hadn’t been here three years ago when the young man had blocked Jenova with a trance.

“I’ll give it a try,” the First said as he removed his glove and placed his hand on Cloud’s smooth cheek. “This is going to be somewhat more complex than asking him to pull in his wings.” Zack said before he closed his eyes and ‘reached’ looking for that place that was all that Cloud would reveal of himself. He heard echoes of Jenova’s voice calling him to a reunion but it was broken up and faint. Zack ignored it, concentrating on finding the path.

Cloud’s mental landscape coalesced into an odd amalgam of brightly coloured buildings that were squished together and falling apart, on a landscape that was warped and twisted under a heavy green sky that pressed too close and called out to him. Zack had long ago learned the trick to navigating the maze that was Cloud’s mind—ignore everything else and look for his mother’s house. It could be hidden behind another building, set back from the main path, or buried halfway in the ground but it would always be here and there would always be a piece of his friend there.

The scariest setting was the plain, white emptiness with the low, green sky that appeared to be alive. He hated that one because the sky called out to him, tried to drag him into it, and Cloud was always hardest to find. His odd little cottage would be half-filled with the green miasma and he’d have to call and call and call before there was a response. The weirdest was the one with the trees
and things that seemed melted and dripping. Sometimes, people or animals were twisted into the
features or walking around losing bits of themselves. Those only happened during the worst of
Hojo’s torture as if what was happening in the real world was manifesting inside Cloud’s mind.

This time it was easy to find, as it was the only stone coloured building in a row of yellow and
purple houses. As he always did when he came this deep, he checked the building for signs of
deterioration. The roof was mostly gone still, but it hadn’t collapsed any further. The corner that
had been torn off hadn’t lost any more blocks. One of the cracked windows had fallen out though.
The building was sturdy, but it needed repairs. He’d tried, after all, he could swing a hammer with
the best of them, but this wasn’t his house and he couldn’t fix it on his own.

He didn’t want to know what would happen to his friend if the house completely collapsed but he
didn’t think it would be anything good.

He walked through the doorway; the door itself leaned drunkenly in its frame, held on only by the
bottom hinge. Leaves had blown in, but they were mostly at the entrance so it wasn’t as bad as it
could have been. Maybe, depending on who was here, they could rehang the door. Once beautiful
wall hangings were tattered and faded. Books were off the shelves and scattered in piles on the
floor. An old guitar sat in a place of honour but it was missing a couple strings and couldn’t be
played.

It was depressing.

“Hey, Cloud?” he called even though he never got an answer to that name. “Spike? Corporal
Strife?” Those were his two favourites to call for. They tended to be the most confident and get the
most done. “Niisan, Weirdo?” he called and waited—nothing. He had one more chance,
“Raincloud?” he called and a small boy, perhaps four or five-years old appeared from under the
kitchen table.

His hair was a familiar spiky mass of pale gold. He wore a set of footie pyjamas with little purple
wolves on them. He was sucking the fingers of one hand and dragging an old stuffed dragon by the
tail in the other. He looked like a sweet, innocent child except that he watched the SOLDIER with
Cloud’s adult eyes; wary, hurting and a brilliant mako blue.

Zack knelt so he was eye level but he didn’t go any closer. None of the versions of Cloud liked
anyone too close but Raincloud was especially timid. “So... what’s up, Raincloud?” Zack had
learned to call each representation by the name they’d chosen for themselves. This was Raincloud,
not Spike and not Cloud. If he used the wrong name, even this persona would disappear and he’d
have to leave and try again.

“Man,” the child mumbled around soggy digits.

“A man? What man?”

Dealing with Raincloud required lots of patience. He would usually only answer with one or two
words, if he answered verbally at all, and it often took him a long time between the asking and the
answering, so Zack waited until the youngest Cloud answered, “He hurts.”

“Yeah? You wanna make him feel better?” he asked the little boy who nodded his head, making
spiky hair wave. He kept his gaze locked on Zack’s.

“Is your man the one holding the other you, outside there?” Pronoun and prepositions took on a life
of their own in this place, Zack had found, but he knew Raincloud would know what he meant. A
solemn shake of the head, so it wasn’t Sephiroth. “Is he close by?”
The young boy finally pulled the fingers from his mouth and pointed off to his right, “He’s got a funny bed.”

“So, he’s over there in a funny bed,” Zack confirmed. The littlest Cloud put his fingers back in his mouth and solemnly nodded his head. “Okay, Raincloud, we’ll find him. Anything else?” Wide-eyed head shake. “Do I get a hug this time?”

He always asked. Even knowing this was a mental construct, he had to ask. Tiny little Cloud, all alone in this ruin of a house pulled at his heart in so many ways. He **needed** to offer the comfort even though Raincloud usually shook his head and clutched his dragon to his chest.

Today, a small blond head nodded once, slowly, so Zack held open his arms and let Raincloud come to him. He buried his nose in the spiky blond mass; amazed as always that the image smelled the same as his friend did in real life. Before letting go, he ruffled the hair as he always did when he was allowed to hug. Raincloud scowled at him. It was a familiar look. It never varied from persona to persona, and it was the same as the real Cloud’s back before he vacated his body.

He stood up to leave Cloud’s safe-place. If anyone else had answered his call he’d have offered to help them tidy up a bit, but there was no point with Raincloud. He’d just give that solemn-eyed stare and stand there. Still, he would have liked to hang Leviathan back up, at least. It was his favourite and it suited his friend so well.

“Be careful,” a young voice drifted after him, “He’s got angry parts.”

When Zack thought of it as he walked through Cloud’s mental landscape of horrors and weirdnesses, he realized it was a really strange thing to say.

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He came back to the reality of the dim cave with a ‘pop’, like he usually did. He looked up at his former General to see cat-slit eyes frowning at him. Instinct had him asking, “Did you sense that, Seph?”

“I…” he hesitated, trying to formulate in his own mind what he’d felt. “There was a boy, very young, quite small.”

“Huh,” Zack was amazed, “That was Raincloud. It’s one aspect of Cloud’s identity.”

“A manifestation?” Sephiroth asked.

“Kinda, I guess. I’ll explain it later. Right now he said that there was a guy asleep over…” he oriented himself to Cloud, “there.” He pointed at a closed door set back from the main corridor.

One of the troopers protested, “There’s nothing in there but coffins.”

“Coffins?” Zack repeated, brightening, “Shit, I’d forgotten about those. There were here the last time we came down here. Remember, Seph? Maybe you wouldn’t.” he corrected himself. “Cloud and I found them when we came down here to dig you out of the lab.” He was moving towards the door as he spoke, drawing his big sword as he went and pulling the crowd with him. “Besides, a coffin would count as a ‘funny bed’, wouldn’t it?” He looked back at the crowd and frowned. “Maybe you should all stay out here? It might be dangerous, and it’ll probably be too small for me to swing without hitting someone.”

“Perhaps a couple troopers to watch your back,” the General looked at Captain Biggs, who nodded
and assigned a couple privates to go with the SOLDIER.

Inside the room the only light came from the open door. Zack could navigate perfectly in the dark thanks to Hojo’s experiments—may rats gnaw off his balls. “You guys okay in the dark?” he asked his escort.

“Yes, sir. Night vision goggles.”

“Excellent,” he said and it was. If someone had been stuffed in a coffin for a while he’d probably be a bit light sensitive. He looked at the coffins in the room. There were fewer than he remembered, only five of the original dozen or so. Two were open and empty so that left three possible resting places for Raincloud’s man. One would have him, but the other two? He regripped his weapon and kicked the lid off the first one. Nothing. He repeated the process on the second one and released a cloud of Bizarre Bugs. He took care of them while the troopers shot him with Cure and Esuna.

*I'm going to strongly suggest it to Sephiroth. If regular army’s going to act as support they should bloody well be able to support.*

He remembered saying that to Cloud and he had mentioned it to Sephiroth. Maybe the General had instituted the training after all. The thought made him smile as the healing tingled through him.

He approached the final coffin more carefully since he knew this had to be the one with Cloud’s ‘man’. Sure enough, inside the coffin was a dark-haired male. He looked human enough. He didn’t look alive though—his skin was too pale. Like death…

‘Of course he’s pale, you doofus,’ Zack mocked himself, ‘he’s in a coffin in a cave in a basement. Bet he doesn’t get much sun.’ He would’ve smacked himself in the head for his stupidity except he was, y’know, holding his sword. He moved closer to the guy, crouching a little, “Hey, fella. Wake up.”

“Who is it?” a gravelly voice asked. Long hair nearly covered the eyes but Zack could see them glinting in the dark. “Never seen you before. You must leave.” He closed his eyes again.

“Actually, we all gotta leave. Don’t go back to sleep… or whatever you were doing.”

“I have nothing to say to strangers,” he mumbled, “Get out. This mansion is the beginning of your nightmare.”

“You can say that again.” Zack forced the memories away. Time enough to wallow in them later; right now they had an evil lab to blow up.

“Hmm? What do you know?”

“Hojo’s gone nuts and is apparently ruling half the known world with a Psycho Alien Bitch as his main advisor. He attacked Sephiroth, and then he—”

“Sephiroth! You know Sephiroth?” The guy finally sat up and looked directly at Zack. His eyes glowed red.

‘Shit, that’s fucking weird,’ Zack thought to himself. Out loud all he said was that he’d known General Sephiroth for years.

“*General Sephiroth?”*
Since the guy was interested, Zack expanded on his terse statement, how Sephiroth had been genetically-designed to be a warrior and how he’d led the ShinRa forces to victory in Wutai when still a teen and become a General shortly after. He explained the SOLDIER program and how he’d joined up and met Sephiroth. He glossed over a lot of it—Hollander, Genesis, and Angeal. He didn’t know enough about these Deepground forces to explain about them, but he could and did explain how Hojo had tried to bring Sephiroth under Jenova’s control three years ago and how the General had escaped but he and Cloud had not. “Now he’s back. He busted us out of the lab and they’re going to blow up this place so Hojo can never use it again.”

The strange guy blinked long and slow, face mostly hidden behind his hair or the ultra-high collar of his cape and Zack couldn’t get a read on what he was thinking. “Hearing your stories has added upon me yet another sin. More nightmares shall come to me now, more than I previously had.”

“Yeah,” Zack smiled wryly, “we can all have nightmares together. I’m not sure where the ‘sin’ thing comes into it. Unless you were one of the scientists who assisted Hojo when he essentially tortured Sephiroth as a kid…” If he were, Zack would cut his head off just for the hell of it. Then the guy could go back to sleep for as long as he liked.

“I did not.” It was a flat statement–not embarrassed or defensive or offended. He sounded like Tseng.

“Who are you, by the way?” the SOLDIER asked.

Again, the man blinked as if the answer to Zack’s question held the secret to the universe. “I was with... the ShinRa Manufacturing Department in Administrative Research, otherwise known as—”

“You’re a Turk?”

“Formerly of the Turks,” he clarified, “I have no affiliation with ShinRa now. You are also with ShinRa, so do you know Lucrecia?”

“Who?”

“Lucrecia Crescent; the woman who gave birth to Sephiroth.”

Gave birth...? “Uh, no, but I’ve met up with Jenova who said she was his mother.”

Another long, slow blink as the guy processed the information. He could be related to Cloud. They both did that blink thing to hide their thoughts. “That isn't completely wrong, but not completely right either. He was born from a beautiful lady. That lady was Lucrecia. Beautiful Lucrecia,” he sighed and Zack almost laughed. Coffin man had it bad for the lady— whoever she was.

A thought occurred to him, a question he wanted answered, “Did Hojo force her to let him, y’know, inject her baby with Jenova cells?”

The red-eyed man looked away, in shame Zack thought but it was hard to tell. “No. She was an assistant to Professor Gast, head of the Jenova Project. She agreed to it, I couldn't stop her. Once the first injection was done there was no way to cancel the experiment.” He closed his eyes and laid back down, “That was my sin. I let the one I loved, the one I respected most, face that alone.”

Fuck!’ realization hit Zack, “You’re Cloud’s Turk... the one that disappeared and became the town’s spooky story. Shit, that was like, thirty years ago.”

“Has it been that long?” he asked disinterestedly.
“Yeah, about that. Don’t go back to sleep there, Turk.”

“Ex-Turk,” he corrected. “Leave me to atone for my sins.”

“Can’t do it. Cloud would be unhappy and that would make Sephiroth unhappy. That would make the troops unhappy, which would make Hojo happy. No fucking way I’m ever giving that psychotic bastard even a little bit of happiness.”

Red eyes opened again. “If I go with you I will meet with Hojo again?” This time his voice held a deadly threat.

Zack shrugged, “As far as I know, that’s the plan: find him, kill him, pretty basic.”

As enhanced as Zack’s vision was he could barely follow the movement as the guy flipped out of the coffin to balance on the edge of it. It was his turn to blink as he processed new information.

“I’ve decided to go with you. Being a former Turk, I may be of help to you.”

“Fucking right, you will. Turks kick ass. Not as good as SOLDIERs but they come close.” Bliiiink. ‘Great, a guy without a sense of humour.’ “You never did tell me your name.”

“Vincent Valentine.”
The troopers went thankfully back into the main corridor spooked at the idea of someone who’d slept in a coffin for nearly three decades and look barely older than any of them. Zack was pumped; he couldn’t wait to tell Cloud he’d found his ‘vanishing Turk’. It was impossible to guess what Valentine was thinking, between the hair, the collar and the eerie red eyes.

Back in the group, Sephiroth had drawn Masamune and was holding it with one hand while carrying Cloud with the other. Cloud’s wings were oddly low, as if he didn’t want them to interfere with the swordsman’s line of sight. They were also moving gently and Zack realized that he was using them to support some of his own weight, so that having 70-odd kilos of extra weight on one side didn’t unbalanceSephiroth while he was fighting. How the doctors could say Cloud wasn’t reacting to the outside world was beyond the First’s understanding.

Mind you, Cloud had done a pretty good imitation of a complete vegetable when Hojo’s crew of morally-deficient torturers were around, maybe these medics were basing their opinion on the records from the lab. Maybe they were all morons. Zack could live without them, either way.

Tifa and Captain Biggs were also at the ready so Zack tilted his head to question his CO, his former CO on why he felt the need to be armed. “Bugs,” was the short answer. Zack nodded understanding. He escorted the ex-Turk over to the ex-SOLDIER as the silver-haired warrior sheathed Masamune and re-settled his corporal’s slight weight—he really was too thin, the General thought.

Sephiroth saw his SiC’s companion and asked his own question with a lift of an eyebrow.

“General, I’d like you to meet Vincent Valentine, formerly of the Turks. He knew your human mother.” That bombshell left the two slim fighters blinking slowly in shock. Zack grinned to see them, like fraternal twins, eyelids moving in stereo.

He moved to his little blond friend and placed a hand on his arm, skin-to-skin, “Hey, Cloud, I found your man and he was definitely in a ‘funny bed’. Guess what else?” He paused but there was no response. “He’s your missing red-eyed Turk you told me about. The one Mr. Gruber used to scare you village kids. You remember telling me about that?” One wing came up to brush against Zack’s cheek. As a spontaneous gesture of affection it was great. As a response to a direct question, it told him absolutely nothing. “That’s okay, Spike. You’ll meet him when you’re better.”

“You are Lucrecia’s child?” the red-eyed enigma logged the information that Sephiroth was cradling a young man with wings against his chest, but decided it was unimportant.

“I was created by Professor Hojo who injected an unborn foetus with Jenova cells.”

“Then you are Lucrecia’s child.” Sephiroth wondered what he was supposed to do with the information. “Did Hojo never mention Lucrecia Crescent, Dr. Lucrecia Crescent, his wife?”

“Dr. Creepy was married?” Zack exclaimed.

“He never discussed his personal life,” Sephiroth said with more restraint but his curiosity had been caught by the title the stranger had given his human mother. “I was an experiment to her?”

Valentine looked away, “I think… I believe he talked her into it.”
“But she was willing,” Sephiroth wanted that clarified. For years he’d wondered if his birth mother had been some unfortunate woman, kidnapped off the street and forcibly impregnated. Or perhaps she’d been some mercenary woman who’d sold her body and her baby for gil. Instead, she’d been a scientist.

“Yes,” A short answer and somehow a devastating one. She hadn’t fought for him, hadn’t fought to protect her child but had sacrificed it, sacrificed him to the god of scientific experimentation. She’d been as bad as Hojo.

“I’m sorry to break this up, but we need to get moving. I still have more charges to lay and, as long as we’re down here, we have no way to know what’s going on at the reactor or anywhere else.” Tifa’s pragmatic assessment broke up the painful conversation. It was a welcome end to it and Sephiroth quickly had the group moving. Vincent chose to walk beside him and Zack but the swordsman decided that he wasn’t going to bring up his parentage again.

“How is it that you knew Seph’s birth mother and yet you look barely older than me?” Zack asked.

Vincent didn’t answer right away, busy inspecting the long gun he’d retrieved from under one of the other coffins. “You weren’t the only experiment in the ShinRa mansion.” And that, Sephiroth imagined, was all he’d learn from the shaggy-haired Turk.

“What’s the matter with him?” Valentine said to change the subject. He wasn’t really interested in the boy but guessed from the way that he was being treated, and the overheard whispers of the medical people, that just about every one else in the group was for one reason or another.

“Mako addition,” said one medic. “Mako poisoning,” said another.

“Hojo,” Zack said and explained everything.

He could’ve stopped there but there was so much bubbling around inside him, it had to come out occasionally. “Hojo decided he was intriguing. He dissected him personally. And I was right there. So close I could’ve almost touched him and I couldn’t… I couldn’t…There was nothing I could do.” Zack kept his gaze down, ashamed and submissive. “I couldn’t protect him.”

Sephiroth could feel both Zack’s distress and Cloud’s. It was ridiculous that they would feel responsible for the actions of a madman. They’d been wounded when the General had fallen into the mako, he remembered that clearly.

He had been preparing to cast a Firaga on the creature called Jenova. Cloud was in his odd trance, and Zack was cutting the creature out of her harness. Neither of them had been watching the entrance and so they were defenceless when Hojo entered with a troop of regular soldiers. They’d shot Cloud, and when he’d fallen, eyes wide in shock at being pulled from wherever he’d been, he’d instinctively torn his hands from theirs, clutching the gaping exit wound in his belly.

Sephiroth had been immediately bludgeoned by Jenova’s voice, and the Firaga, which should have disintegrated her, only managed to damage her. He’d charged at Hojo, determined to protect his companions, but Jenova’s voice had been too strong and he’d crumpled halfway down the wide pipe. He’d dropped Masamune. He remembered the spinning shine of his sword as it fell and fell and fell.

Zack had seen what was happening, he hadn’t needed the Professor’s triumphant question “Do you hear her, Project ‘S’? Do you finally know your purpose?” to realize what the true danger was. He’d charged down the pipe to rescue the General. The troopers, thinking he was going to attack them, had opened fire. By the time the dark-haired SOLDIER had reached his CO, he’d been shot
so many times his uniform top was just threads, but he’d still managed to push the silver-haired warrior over the edge to fall into the mako stream and escape. Sephiroth could hear the gunfire all the way down, but it didn’t drown out Hojo’s angry cursing.

He would not allow Zack to feel guilty because they’d been wounded and captured.

“I wasn’t there for either of you. I was too weak to resist Jenova. I failed you.”

That brought Zack’s head up, “You didn’t, Seph. You came back for us.”

Sephiroth hid his smile in Cloud’s bizarre and beloved hair. Three years later and Zack hadn’t changed. He so easily defended in others the actions he condemned in himself. “He might have left you alone if he’d had me. You and Cloud could’ve jumped into the mako to escape.”

“No, no. That would’ve been… it would’ve been disastrous. You said Jenova was telling you to destroy everything and everyone. With you, she could have done it. Without you, she was, is, a scary boogeyman.”

“I may agree that, logically, it was the wisest course of action but that doesn’t negate the fact that I left my best friends at the mercy of a sadistic madman.” He shifted Cloud’s slight weight and reached out to grab Zack’s arm. “I once told you that no amount of Jenova cells could make you a monster, and if you weren’t a monster then neither was I. Now I’m telling you that if I can’t be guilty of not protecting you both, then you can’t be guilty either.”

He gave Zack’s arm a light squeeze before releasing it, “If we tell ourselves that enough we might begin to believe it.” Zack snorted but before he could comment the spiral staircase was reached.

Zack suggested, and the General agreed, that he would stay behind to start the countdown while the rest headed up and out as fast as they could manage. As a SOLDIER First Class he would be faster than the fittest of the normal humans. He’d probably catch up to them before they were even out the door. Tifa gave him some final instructions on how to rig the timer and they were off.

Zack listened to their retreating footsteps; he thought he heard a ‘meep’ from Cloud when they reached the exit. Outside, escape, it was right there, within reach. He looked down the wide, rough-hewn corridor, remembering that first journey so long ago. He’d been worried going in and nearly panicked coming out because Sephiroth hadn’t been Sephiroth. The second-trip down had been filled with worry, yes, but also with hope and fun, because Cloud had been there, insulting him and watching his back and being his friend. They’d brought Sephiroth out, sane and mostly back to normal.

They’d been so sure they could fix everything; get rid of Jenova and figure out what Hojo was up to and come out without a scratch. He’d been excited when they’d finally set out for the reactor, happy for Cloud and Seph who’d grabbed a bit of loving for themselves, teasing them like he always did. Except that they hadn’t won. Wounded at the reactor; Hojo and Jenova free, three years of pain, blood, puke and more pain... the walls here were coated in agony and inhumanity.

They couldn’t blow it up enough to get rid of it all.

He figured enough time had lapsed; they should be almost at the main doors by now, so he flicked the switch and watched it settle into a steady rhythm, blinking out the seconds. He ran up the stairs, and out the door, his movements practically a blur. He’d been right. He was faster now, much faster than he remembered being. Fucking Hojo.

Seph and Tifa had the group halfway across the large foyer when the attack came. It was odd four-
legged crawler thing, similar to the guard spiders that Genesis had used but smaller and quicker.

Zack had just come around the corner onto the mezzanine when it broke its cover on the ceiling. “Get everyone out of here, General,” he yelled, “I’ll handle this.” He was looking forward to a real fight. The stuff they’d encountered in the tunnels had barely let him vent any of his frustration and rage. This thing looked like a better therapy object.

“I will assist you,” said the gravelly voiced ex-Turk, pulling out his long-barrelled pistol and firing with inhuman precision.

Zack was going to argue but the metallic bug jumped from the ceiling, aiming for the crowd of medics, soldiers... and Cloud and Seph. With an incoherent shout of rage, Zack raced for the railing and launched himself at the thing. He twisted so his feet were out ahead of him and caught the bastard right on its main body, driving it away from the scurrying party and into the far wall. He reached out and placed his hands against the wall, pushing himself away from it and the machine. It gave him enough distance from the thing to land cleanly, diffusing the impact by bending his knees just as Angeal had taught him so many years ago.

The spider guard landed on its back, but it didn’t take it long to flip itself around, and it didn’t take it long to power up and fire a plasma cannon. *Fuck*, it was fast.

It chose to target the ex-Turk who was calmly and steadily firing at it, sending sparks flying nine times out of ten. Zack ran up to it swinging his huge sword at one of its legs, but it scuttled forward and his sword just glanced off the tough metal.

Valentine jumped up and over it, twirling so that he and his gun could continue firing in that precise rhythm: shoot, shoot, shoot, pause-shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot, pause. The only time the rhythm varied was when the red-eyed man reloaded, and even then it was accomplished rapidly, just a couple of flicks of his gun and, voila, he was back to shooting.

Definitely a Hojo survivor, Zack thought as he charged in. Maybe they should get shirts printed with a tacky, pun-laden slogan on the front and hand them out. It could be like a club.

This time he got a better hit on one of its legs, he could almost see wires through the metal armour. Whatever metal they were using now it was a big improvement on the stuff they’d used three years ago.

“Do you always talk so much when you fight?” the gunman asked. Only then did Zack realize that he’d been saying everything out loud.

“Yes, he does. Just ignore it,” a smooth baritone instructed, “He doesn’t even hear himself.” A flash of heat passed him. Sephiroth had cast Firaga. It hit and there was the smell of burnt metal but no other damage that Zack could see. A Thundaga would have been better.

The spider ran backwards, launching out some rocket-powered grenades that forced both the ex-SOLDIER and the ex-Turk to dodge and roll out of the way. By the time Zack was back on his feet the thing had disappeared.

“On the wall,” Valentine said.

Zack looked up in time to see the flashes from the machine guns. He used his big Buster to block the bullets and gathered himself up for a jumping Octaslash, a move Sephiroth had pioneered long, long ago.
“Fifteen minutes to detonation,” Sephiroth said. He was near the double doors, using Masamune to deflect the bullets away from the retreating unaltered humans. He still held Cloud on one arm, and the blond was again using his wings to hover so that the General wasn’t overbalanced—all with that vacant, brain-dead expression on his face.

Zack released the extra power of Octaslash through his Buster and the machine started to spark. The unaugmented humans were out of the building now, “Get Cloud out here, Seph. Vince and I’ve got this.”

“I would leave if he’d let me,” came the dry response.

The machine dropped to the ground, falling legs-up once again. Since he was in the air already, he decided to come down with the force of a Death Jump on the bastard.

“There’s still plenty of time,” the ex-Turk agreed, calmly reloading, “and my name is Vincent.”

From his high angle Zack could see how the gunman had been aiming for essentially the same spot. The result of having all those bullets impact in the same area were dozens of small holes, making one huge weak spot in its armour. Where the hell was the gunman getting all that ammunition, he wondered.

“I’m stronger than I look,” was the calm reply.

“Not exactly the question I asked, Vince.”

“Vincent,” the gunman corrected.

The damage was enough on one side that he should be able to come down in exactly the same location. He screamed as he dropped, using that energy to power up his blow, and sliced cleanly through the side of it. Hydraulic and other fluids spurted out and there was a mechanical scream as processor tried to compensate for the damage.

“Ten minutes,” Valentine announced, taking out the sensor arrays while the dark-haired SOLDIER was in the way of his primary target. He was hitting close enough that Zack could feel the splintered plastic flying past his cheek. He moved to the side, making a sweeping cut to a leg joint as he passed, doing only minimal damage.

“Will the charges in the lab be enough to finish this thing?” Zack asked.

“Unlikely,” his General answered, “There is too much stone between it and them.”

“Right, let’s make it go boom.” The thing managed to right itself again and shot at them with its plasma canyon. It moved away from them, trying to hide under the balcony. They’d done some major damage because it was dragging one of its legs and moving like it was drunk.

It launched some more grenades. Zack caught one and tossed it back, laughing because that kind of stuff only happened in the lamest of action movies.

“Duck,” Sephiroth ordered quietly, and Zack dropped without thinking. The Firaga that flamed through the spot where he’d been standing was easily ten times hotter than the previous blast, and when it landed it didn’t burn the regular orangey-yellow colour. It flamed white, and blue and red and moved over the surface of the machine until it found the gaping hole and then it just, crawled inside. There was no other way to describe it. “Shit,” he muttered, impressed and freaked. That just wasn’t normal.
Smoke and the smell burning insulation filled the large space. It was finished but that didn’t make it less dangerous, in fact it made it more so as it fired its machine guns frantically in any direction it could. It skittered and jumped in its death throes making it nearly impossible to target. Even Valentine was down to, oh, only 70% accuracy.

Zack charged and, jumping on the body, sliced through the central stem with all its delicate control circuits. Now it really started to fizz and pop.

“Cloud wants us to go now,” Sephiroth’s voice cut through the buzzing.

“Right,” Zack yelled his agreement, “Let’s mosey, Vince.”

Vincent straightened in surprise; sure that Cloud was the comatose youth in the silver-haired swordsman’s arms who could only grunt. However, the one called Zack was jogging over to the door where his companions waited. How very intriguing, he thought, and followed them out. “It’s Vincent,” he corrected again.

The tone didn’t vary and Zack wondered how many times he’d have to call him Vince or Vinny to get the red-eyed man’s voice to change.

“Maybe I’d just shoot you.”

“Shit, I have to learn to keep my mouth shut.”

“That would be an improvement,” Vincent agreed.

All three of them could move when they wanted to, and they wanted to, infected by something from the winged-boy, Vincent supposed. The boy was proved right, however, because they were barely past the gate when there was a hollow boom as the machine blew. Glass from all the windows flew out from the building in a deadly arc. If they’d been inside, they’d have been flayed.
Vincent listened to the old house creak, he heard the tinkle of falling glass, and he watched a portion of the roof collapse. How had the comatose boy known that the machine would cause such damage? If overheard conversations were to be believed, he and the dark-haired one had been in the lab for several years. They would never have seen the device before and should, therefore, have had no idea of the killing power of its self destruction.

Of course, considering the work Hojo had done on him, it probably wouldn’t have killed him, merely brought out one of his less civilized aspects. He slanted a sideways glance at his companions, all of them victims of ShinRa’s Science Department, and decided the explosion probably wouldn’t have killed any of them. Since he didn’t want to discuss what he had undergone, Vincent didn’t ask if his theory was correct. To ask would be to invite questions. Especially from the dark-haired one with the fat sword.

It only took seconds for the four of them to catch up with the rest of the troop. The group had just reached the outskirts of the ruined village, moving steadily but relatively slowly; keeping a careful eye out for DGS troops left behind or other dangers.

“Any problems, Captain?” Sephiroth inquired.

“Nothing, Sir, not even a wolf,” Biggs reported. “The engineering team is here. They’ve started their assessment of the buildings. They estimate repairs on some of the more sturdy structures could start tomorrow; the inn, the mayor’s house. Maybe the store.”

Sephiroth nodded acknowledgement, Nibelheim was going to be their forward base for the next stage of the fight. However, he didn’t miss the subtle flinch in Ms. Lockhart’s stance. The mayor had been her father, killed when he’d tried to negotiate with Hojo’s forces when they’d taken over the village. He had tremendous respect for the woman’s courage and abilities and saw no reason hard memories should be allowed to cause her pain.

He gave Zack a subtle chin-jerk in her direction. The black-haired SOLDIER nodded back and ambled over to talk at her and distract her from painful memories. The interaction had been so instinctual, as if both of them had stepped back in time, it made Sephiroth’s chest hurt. He’d learned to recognize the reaction as emotional pain. He still didn’t like it.

The captain was continuing his report, “Mr. Wallace has been in contact. They eliminated the last of the Deepground forces, and have set the charges in the reactor. They’re retreating to the assembly point now.”

“Casualties?” the General forced himself to keep his breath and voice steady even as he watched his SiC, former-SiC, former—must try to remember that, get a small smile out of the dark-eyed fighter.

“Nothing serious,” he said.

“Very good. We’ll proceed to our transpor—” The rest of his sentence was lost beneath a huge hollow boom. Zack whooped in delight, making Tifa laugh out loud.

The ground, well, it felt like it kind of bounced a bit. Zack put his arms out for balance and managed to keep his feet. Tifa did the same, but many of the others lost their footing. Not Sephiroth or the ex-Turk, though they staggered a bit.
“Who needs the ocean to surf?” the SOLDIER called out happily and most of the people still standing howled in agreement. The ones on the ground just dug in until they were sure the earth was stable again.

Behind them, around the mansion and along the path they stood on, great pits appeared as the dirt dropped to fill in the caves and secret lab that had existed under the place for decades. With a groan, one side of the mansion collapsed into the hole, exposing the elaborate stained-glass windows in the back wall. They were somewhat damaged from the machine’s explosion but still impressive—and completely out-of-place in this rustic, little backwoods village. The sun was shining through them, causing a rainbow of colours to sparkle.

Sephiroth remembered those windows. He remembered the mansion. He’d been born there or underneath it, Sephiroth mused. Born there and spent his early childhood hidden away behind its walls, living in darkness even when standing in the dappled lights caused by the sun shining in those windows. One of the place’s many secrets.

It couldn’t be buried deep enough.

“Ngggh.” Wings fluttered and stretched tentatively. It was a question.

“Yes, Cloud. It’s gone. You can never go back there.”

White wings beat so hard they nearly pulled the youth from the General’s arms. Sephiroth tightened his hold, knowing that Cloud was expressing his happiness in the only manner open to him. He had the sudden temptation to delve under Cloud’s shirt and rub his hand over the soft, very sensitive down between his lover’s wings, to rub and massage until he was hard against him, and maybe even longer.

“Ggghh.” The sound was vaguely approving and Sephiroth realized that the impulse wasn’t just his—Cloud wanted it too.

Since most everyone was busy babbling excitedly about the effects of the explosion, the General pressed a hard kiss down through that amazing hair, “Soon,” he whispered, and the blond subsided, wings giving one last happy beat before furling back around his lover. Sephiroth sighed, “I miss you, Corporal Strife. Please, come back to me.”

“He’ll come back, Seph,” Zack said coming close. “I know he will. It’ll just take some time.”

“I am being impatient, that’s all. I am not good at waiting.”

“You used to be pretty good.” Despite his easy smile, the dark-haired SOLDIER kept a watchful eye as the group picked themselves up and reassembled for the march to the transport. There was a, not a clone but something similar—an altered human-thing hybrid, that must be one of the DGS fighters that they’d been talking about.

Before he could comment on the body, Sephiroth had cast a Firaga on it, completely destroying it. “I seem to have lost the knack, although that may be because I haven’t had someone to share it with. I know Kusel is your friend,” he looked at Zack and gave his little half smile, “but he is not you and it isn’t the same.”

“Kusel’s still around?” Zack asked, surprised.

“Hmmm,” Sephiroth confirmed as Captain Biggs started the party moving again. “He’s still a SOLDIER Second Class. He was leading the forces that liberated the village and the mansion.”
“Still a Second?” Zack couldn’t believe it. It had been three years and Kusiel had been a good SOLDIER.

“He is happy as a Second. It gives him more versatility.” Zack looked baffled and the General realized that his SiC wouldn’t know about the First’s weakness to Jenova. Or maybe he would. “Did Hojo or one of his people talk about the link between Jenova and the SOLDIER program?”

For a moment Zack looked even more bewildered, then his eyes widened, “In the chamber, when I cut her out. That smell! I knew that smell was familiar.”

“The mako injections used on the First Classes did indeed contain Jenova cells,” the General confirmed. “Since Hojo left, the Turks have been sifting through his notes. He knew, soon after Professor Gast left the Jenova Project, that the original Jenova was a Cetra who became infected with an alien virus. Many of the Cetra were infected. Those that escaped the virus fought to destroy those who had succumbed. They nearly eradicated themselves trying to stop the virus. When Gast found the creature we call Jenova, he inaccurately identified her as Cetra.”

“Her body…” Zack tried to remember everything he’d seen of her but, quite frankly, he’d been trying not to throw up from the smell, “It looked almost the same.” Except for the glowing eyes, silver hair, blue skin, claws, and the leathery wings, she could’ve been Aerith’s cousin.

“The more cells that are controlled by the virus the more physical change occurs. My eyes are a good example.”

“They’re not red,” Zack pointed out. Neither one of them could resist looking at the enigmatic gunman.

“My eyes are a family trait that I inherited from my father, as he inherited them from his,” and even if they weren’t it was clear the gunman would say no more on the subject.

Sephiroth resumed his tale. “Gast wanted to reawaken the power of the Ancients that’s why he started the Jenova Project. By the time he left, it had been perverted into discovering ways to make the perfect warrior. Hojo had discovered that the more cells the virus controlled in a body the more powerful the host would become. It was this that Public Safety had wanted to harness, so Hojo proposed the SOLDIER program.”

“Hojo proposed it?” The mad professor’s disdain for anything military had been notorious so Zack found it hard to believe he’d come up with the idea.

“For the funding it would bring, and the fame, and the chance to continue his experiments. He sold the ShinRa Board on its military application, but he was sold on the possibility of immortality. He told the President that Jenova would lead them to the Promised Land and he was given carte blanche to do what he liked. However, the first subjects injected with unadulterated Jenova cells had to be destroyed. Their names aren’t even recorded.”

The topic was a grim one, Sephiroth mused, but it suited the surroundings, as the party walked through the remains of Cloud’s hometown. “His failure provided an opening. Scarlet hated Hojo even then and proposed a kind of contest between him and another bright young scientist, Trey Hollander. Hollander was even more ambitious than Hojo. His seeming breakthrough with Angeal and Genesis infuriated Hojo.”

“Breakthrough? They degraded and went crazy, or Genesis did,” Zack protested.

“Those problems didn’t become apparent until many years later. When they were babies they
seemed to be perfect. Hollander injected both of them with dormant Jenova cells that had been filtered through an altered host. To be fair, at this time most of the scientists believed that Jenova was nothing more than a preserved Ancient; unique but still native to our planet. So when Hollander asked, Gillian Hewley—"

“Angeal’s mom,” Zack exclaimed.

“Yes,” he confirmed, “she agreed to be injected, and then she agreed to let her unborn child be injected with re-activated cells from her own body. Angeal’s infection was more stable because his mother was also infected. As a comparison, Hollander also injected the cells into another foetus but this time the mother hadn’t been previously infected.”

“Genesis,” Zack stated quietly.

It wasn’t a question, but Sephiroth answered anyway, “Yes, Genesis. He degraded much faster than Angeal because of it, but at the time it looked like Hollander would be given the promotion and the clearance Hojo coveted so Hojo went one step farther. He injected himself with dormant cells but he used ‘active’ cells from Jenova on his... his wife, and his own embryonic child. He was infected; the mother was infected so the child, he reasoned, should be a perfect copy of Jenova. He did know that Jenova was saturated with an alien virus, by the way.”

“Fuck,” Zack muttered in horror. “He did that to you, his own kid?”

Sephiroth didn’t like to think of it. He was a specimen, an experiment, barely human... except to Cloud and the man walking beside him. “To Hojo, anyone was a possible subject. You should know that.”

_A pale body, strapped down on a steel table. No anaesthetics as skin and muscles were peeled away. All the structures of the arm were subjected to injections, electrical stimulation, and even just poking them with a long needle. All the results written down and compared to last month’s results._

That time, it hadn’t been Cloud but a cute, little lab tech who’d tried to make their lives better. Just small things some of it; a chocolate bar, a cheesy magazine, a gentle touch, but Hojo didn’t want their lives to be better. Too bad for her.

“Yeah, yeah, I do,” his answer was quiet. It covered the fact that Zack wanted to punch something until it broke and shattered—Hojo’s head by preference.

Not close, but not really far away, they could hear snarls of scavengers attracted to the smell of blood. “Captain Biggs,” Sephiroth called, “your people made sure all the corpses were destroyed?”

“We tried, Sir,” was the officer’s response.

“We tried, Sir,” was the officer’s response.

“Perhaps you should take some men and check out what they are fighting over. We don’t want the DGS mutation spreading.”

“Yes, Sir,” the captain agreed, and picked out a squad to go check it out.

“I will accompany you,” Vincent said in his gravel-voice. He needed to get away from the two swordsmen. Their conversation was resurrecting too many memories. His failure haunted him more deeply the more he heard them speak. He would assist the unaugmented soldiers in their task and maybe in this small way, he could begin to atone.

He stayed off to the side of the squad as it moved out, distancing himself from them. He didn’t
want to be a part of them or have to converse with them. The quiet would be better than the empty chatter or the inane banter that soldiers usually indulged in. It would be infinitely preferable to the topic the two SOLDIERS had been discussing.

He hadn’t counted on Captain Biggs, however. “Is it true you’ve been imprisoned at the mansion for nearly thirty years?”

Vincent blinked as he wondered why Biggs asked the question. Was it relevant to the mission? Would any harm result if he answered? He decided that the man was merely curious and thought about whether or not he wanted to answer. Biggs, of course, continued talking.

“It’s just, that’s longer than I’ve been alive. I bet things have changed a lot in thirty years.”

A safe question with a safe answer, “I imagine they have.”

“ShinRa would’ve just been building Midgar; The Wutai War hadn’t really gotten started yet. PHS’s hadn’t been invented, and computers. I bet you didn’t have the World Wide Network either. TV, and the cars we got now! The world has really changed in thirty years.”

"The technology may have changed, but I imagine that people are essentially the same as they were before. There is still greed, so there is likely to be hunger and want. Where there is cruelty, there will be kindness. Where there is hope there will be despair. Pain is eternal and only death remains unchanged.”

Biggs looked at him in dismay, “Um, right. Okay.” He went back to his troop and Vincent heard him comment to the sergeant, “That is one depressing mother-fucker.”

He wasn’t approached again.

In the end it turned out to be nothing. A deer, perhaps injured by a stray bullet, had wandered into the village ruins to die and been followed by a pack of Nibel wolves. They did not try to separate the predators from their meal but walked in silence to rejoin the main group at the transports, two heavy trucks, still being unloaded by the engineering crew.

From a distance Vincent noticed that the silver-haired General had her hair, so long and fine but standing up in front to frame his face—just like hers had done. He searched, but could see no trace of his father in him, at least not physically. Sephiroth seemed cold and distant from the others, except for the two he had rescued, but everyone else he seemed unaware of, as if they were unimportant in his world. That was very much like the Professor Hojo he remembered.

Perhaps he should have tried harder to see Sephiroth when he’d been young, rather than entombing himself in his voluntary prison, but he’d been afraid that he would lose control of his demons. And maybe he’d been afraid that he would see too much of Lucrecia in her son.

Lucrecia. Would she forgive him if she knew how he’d failed her and her son? He hung back as the captain went to report, needing to consider this new idea. He’d never thought of absence as a failure before.

His thoughts were interrupted by a distant explosion. Everyone turned to look. It was the Mount Nibel reactor going up, filling the sky with acid-green flame. Where there were clouds, they were rimmed in vibrant shades of green and yellow, looking dramatic and poisonous. The reflected light made the mountains glow. It was beautiful and awe-inspiring. It was also an end to an era.

The Nibel reactor had been one of the first ever built. The mako was so close to the surface, so rich, that it had been easy to exploit even with ShinRa’s first, crude technology and Nibelheim’s
isolation.

Sephiroth listened to the murmurs of the people around him and realized, more than the collapse of the Midgar plate and even more than the loss of half the known world to Hojo, the destruction of the sixty-year old reactor symbolized the end of ShinRa Electric Power Company’s domination.

The troopers and the medics who’d grown up under the company’s overwhelming influence might have felt nervous at the change. Those who had suffered, who’d been treated as things to be experimented on, felt a fierce satisfaction. Hojo may have thought of the torturous experiments, but the ShinRa executives had turned a blind eye as long as it gave them profits.

They stayed to watch until the glow lessened; no longer making the area look like it was bathed in toxic sunlight. As the group loaded into the transports, Zack took one more look over the valley. So many endings here. So many beginnings.

As they drove away, a fat but fearsome Nibel dragon winged in to land on one of the distant mountains, bugling its ownership of this damaged and abandoned place. Zack snorted. The beast was welcome to it.

By unspoken agreement the three SOLDIERs—because if Cloud wasn’t enhanced to SOLDIER First Class level it was because he was altered beyond it, had one of the fold-down benches to themselves. The regular troops settled on benches or the floor, wherever they could find room, talking quietly or not about the things that concerned them most; girlfriends, the reactor explosion... wondering if any of their friends had been wounded or had been removed from the injured list; normal soldier talk, routine and yet strange to someone who hadn’t heard anything like it for years.

Zack leaned back, half-closing his eyes, trying to take it all in. He was free, out of the mansion. He was part of group consisting of more than just him and Cloud. He’d seen his first sky in nearly three years. It was a little freaky and he felt like an idiot for being afraid of the sky, of all things. Maybe he should do some squats, get rid of some of this, this... coil of... of whatever this was he was feeling.

A PHS was placed in his hand. “She is memory dial number four.” The voice was a calm order.

He looked at the phone. “You’re really bossy, you know that?”

“Of course. I wasn’t designed to be an office drone, after all.” There was a lazy smirk on the General’s lips and Zack had to smile. Seph’s sense of humour was as weird as ever. He stared at the phone. “Memory dial four.”

A deep breath, a push of a button, and it was ringing. And ringing. He could still hang up. He’d tried; she just hadn’t answered. Not his fault if she doesn’t pick up the phone.

“Zack?”

It was her. It was her soft voice so full of kindness and joy. Aerith. His throat tightened. His eyes burned. He held the phone and could say nothing.

Sephiroth leaned over, “Give him a moment, Ms. Gainsborough,” he said into the mouthpiece.

A light giggle. Oh gods it was really her. “No problem, General. I’ve waited this long.”

“Aerith.” He wanted to say more. He tried to say more. Three fucking years.
“I wrote to you, every week, just like I promised. When the company announced your death I didn’t believe them so I kept writing. Then Sephiroth appeared in Fort Condor and said you weren’t dead, so I kept writing. Tseng’s been keeping them. He figures he’ll run into you before I do.”

“Fuck,” he muttered trying to figure out how many letters that was. Then he realized he’d cussed in front of Aerith, “oh shit, sorry, Aerith. Fuck. I did it again.” He dropped his head into his hands and she laughed out loud.

“I lived under the plate in the slums and now I live near the army barracks. I’ve heard the words before, Zack,” she teased.

“I know. It’s just… it doesn’t feel right.”

“What would feel right?” she asked, “A hug?”

He smiled, “Yeah, a hug would be nice.”

“How about a kiss?”

“Could definitely try a kiss or two.”

“But going out for ice cream would be the best, right?”

This time he laughed out loud, “I’d rather have some of your pie.” A thought occurred to him, “You haven’t been giving Tseng any of your pie, have you, doll?” The endearment slipped unthinking from his lips. Gods, he wanted to hold her, to breathe her scent in. Of course, there were a few things he’d have to tell her first.

“Of course not,” she chuckled, “Cookies only. I’ll make some pie when you come back. You can bring Cloud and your General.”

“He’s not ‘my General’. He’s Cloud’s if he’s anyone’s,” he protested.

“Sure he’s yours, because he decided he is. He’s chased down every rumour, any trace of you since he came back. It’s considered wonderfully romantic. They’re writing plays about it.” That made him laugh out loud—Sephiroth as a romantic lead, what actor could do him justice? “You would do the same for him, wouldn’t you?”

That stopped his laughter. He’d just suffered through hell to protect the man, how could he argue with her? “I would.”

“Well, then. Look after each other until you can come for pie.” He could almost see her tilting her head in that way she had; being bossy but nice about it. “And have some fun too, if you can.”

“We will.”

“Commander, he’s pulled in his wings.” There was a barely perceptible note of panic in the General’s voice.

“It’s okay. They’ve been out a long time, he’s probably just tired,” he reassured the General and, sure enough, Cloud drooped even more bonelessly as he fell asleep.

“Um, Zack?”

“Yeah, doll?” he responded absentely. Cloud’s little frown of worry and fear, a fixture for endless
months, was gone. He knew they were safe. Zack blinked rapidly to get some road dust out of his eyes.

“Did he just say that Cloud has wings?”

“Uhhh, yeah. Yeah he did.”

“Ooh,” she said as if that answered a question she’d had. What question it might have been, Zack had no idea. “Do you have wings?” she asked followed almost immediately by “Oh, I’ve got to go. My grocery shopping escort is here. Reno!” she said in gentle horror, “Why couldn’t they have sent Rude? He’s much easier to shop with.”

“Reno’s taking you grocery shopping,” Zack repeated absolutely floored. Domesticity and Reno... it somehow seemed wrong.

“Uh-huh. I always have a Turk escort, just in case Hojo tries to kidnap me again. Reno’s the worst. He always puts the most horrible things in the cart.” He could hear a distant ‘hey!’ in protest.

Reno’s statement that canned cheese wasn’t horrible had Zack smiling. He was with Aerith on this one. For some reason the redhead was addicted to the stuff. Everybody else watched in horror as he sprayed it on biscuits, bread, casseroles, and into soups, stews and once, even on ice cream.

“Is that Zack on the phone?” he heard, and Aerith’s affirmative and then it was “Hey, Fair, you slacker. You still owe me poker money,” right in his ear as the redhead took over the PHS.


“Shit man, I’ll be waiting until we reach the effing Promised Land,” he complained.

“Talk to your boss. Maybe he can expedite the process.”

Reno snorted, “Good fucking luck on that one, Fair. Once you get it, let me know. We’ll get together for a poker night, right?”

“Sure, I warn you though; I won’t be such an easy mark. I’ve been working on my poker face.” ‘No, doctor, having a needle stuck in my kidney without anaesthetic doesn’t hurt at all.’ Fucking Hojo. His hand clenched and the PHS creaked in protest.

“I’ve been playing with Rude, yo.”

Shit, Zack grimaced, Rude. Even Tseng thought twice about playing with the big Turk. The redhead would be able to read him easy.

“Anyway, I gotta take the babe out for food. D’ya think if I stop bugging her to buy cheese spray that she’ll bake me a pie?” he teased and Zack could picture his face perfectly; eyes, watchful and slyly amused; thin lips quirked up in a lopsided grin; supremely confident and utterly slovenly. Deadly on the job and completely lazy off it.

“When Zack gets back, I’ll bake a bunch of pies and invite all of you over,” Aerith said in the background.

“Sweet! You heard that, right? You can’t let yourself be killed now, yo,” he ordered.

“I’m not planning on it.”
“Yeah, with your luck you’ll fall in the shower tonight and break your neck.”

“Thanks a lot, Reno, you asshole.”

“Love ya too, babe. Gotta go,” there was a click and the PHS went dead. He stayed where he was, just holding the phone.

“It is hopeful?” Sephiroth asked.

Zack smiled, “Yeah. Fuck yeah.” He gave the silver-haired SOLDIER back his PHS. He’d arranged Cloud flat on the bench seat with his head on the leather-clad lap.

“Good, I’m glad for you.” Sephiroth stroked long fingers through golden hair.

Zack leaned back tiredly, resting his head against the side of the truck. He tilted it toward his CO, former CO. “Thanks, Seph.”

Sephiroth looked into those blue eyes, a deeper, darker blue than Cloud’s light colour but with the same mako glow. The confidence and optimism that he’d always seen in them was gone replaced by weariness and pained acceptance. It hurt to see it. The General knew he wasn’t good with emotions and he didn’t know how to ask... how to admit to what he needed, so he reached out and took it. He placed his free arm around Zack’s shoulders and pulled him in to rest on his broad chest.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

He held Zack against his heart until the dark-haired SOLDIER fell asleep.
It Don't Come Easy

In the other truck, Vincent kept a wary eye on the medical personnel. His time with Hojo had taught him not to trust people in white lab coats. It would have been so much easier to stay in his coffin where he had been safe and the world had been safe from him, but it didn't seem like any of the medical staff would bother him. Only one was even looking at him. It had been so long since he’d been with humans that he couldn’t read her expression. It was definitely hungry though. If she approached, he would be hard-pressed not to snarl at the woman.

In the end it wasn’t the medic that approached him, but the young lady who’d planted the explosives in the tunnel. She wore a form of loose army pants combined with layered tank-tops. Her fingerless gloves had large studs across the knuckles. Her hair was loosely tied back. There was a light coating of dried blood and gore on parts of her. She was obviously more aggressive than she looked.

He prepared himself for intrusive questions that he wouldn’t answer.

“The gun you used in the mansion, it’s pretty old isn’t it?”

He blinked. That wasn’t the question he was expecting, “It is familiar.”

“When we get back to base, I’ll take you to the armoury. We’ll see if there’s any ammo you can use in it, and you can go through the weapons we’ve recovered and see if there’s any that you’d like.”

He nodded in acquiescence. It was a logical suggestion. She didn’t go away however, so he waited for whatever else she would ask.

“Your boots and that gauntlet...” he braced himself, “Do they mean you know hand-to-hand combat?” Again, that wasn’t the question he’d been expecting. She continued, “I’ve met a couple Turks, they’re pretty good at unarmed, although one fights like a drunken monkey.”

“I’ve been trained,” he responded cautiously.

“Then could you spar with me? Nobody in camp can give me a decent fight except for maybe the SOLDIERS and they’re always busy. Plus, even when they have the time, they always think that grappling is a synonym for groping.”

He considered what she’d said. He could spar with her; it would be a good opportunity to refresh skills left unused for too long. However, he could damage her quite badly. There was also her assumption that he wouldn’t ‘grop’ her. Why would she assume that? It was true, of course, too many memories of Lucrecia... I’m so sorry... but why would she assume that he wouldn’t paw at her? He was male, she was female. He’d been in a coffin for years, and she was very attractive.

Perhaps she was innocent? He looked at her more closely, peering into her eyes from behind his fringe of hair. She allowed him to do it, too. She didn’t flinch from his rare-coloured eyes as most did. She didn’t fidget or try to hide. She merely waited until he’d made whatever decision he was going to make.

“I’m stronger than I look,” he warned.

“So am I,” she responded with a smile. “And it takes a lot to hurt me.”
From her tone she knew what her limits were, and she was willing to accept the risks. “Very well. I will spar with you tomorrow.”

She held out her hand, “Tifa Lockhart, formerly of Nibelheim,” she introduced herself.

“Vincent Valentine, the same,” he took her hand, squeezing it gently, trying to gauge the strength required to be just firm enough.

“Vincent? Or Vince? Vinny?”

“Vincent,” he said firmly. She nodded acceptance.

“The mess will still be running when we get back to camp. We can swing by there before hitting the armoury and then we’ll find you a place to rack out.” She noticed his puzzled blink, “To sleep. The soldiers call their cots ‘racks’, so to sleep is to ‘hit the rack’ or to ‘rack out’.”

“Understood,” he nodded, “However, I don’t need to sleep.”

“Thirty years is enough?” Her lips quirked oddly as she asked the question, and there was a look to her eyes that Vincent didn’t understand. “You still eat?”

“It’s not necessary,” he replied. From the corner of his eye he could see the medical team’s attention shift to him.

“It may not be necessary, but it can taste good. Still,” she mused, leaning her head back, “if you haven’t eaten much for nearly thirty years, you should maybe start slow—a broth-type soup rather than a steak. We’ll see what the mess has then you can decide whether or not you want to try it.”

“That sounds logical.”

“Good, good,” she closed her eyes. “Now, unlike some people, I do need sleep. Unless you have any questions,” she opened one eye to ask. When he shook his head, she closed her eyes and settled herself more comfortably.

He didn’t know if she was actually sleeping; her heartbeat stayed even, although her breathing deepened, but he had nothing really to compare it to. He breathed when he wanted to talk. The medical staff were talking almost non-stop so they followed no regular pattern.

Still, not talking was better than talking as most of their voices struck him as loud and grating. He could ignore the low-voiced discussions of the medics, the few soldiers in the truck were dozing as was Tifa. The dark-haired swordsman, who had awoken him from his rest, seemed to be an extreme example.

At least he wasn’t in the same transport as Commander Fair. He wasn’t if sure his ears could’ve survived another of the warrior’s endless verbal assaults.

Sephiroth ignored the covert looks of the soldiers in the truck with him. He continued to pet Cloud’s hair and arm, although he avoided the back area, not wanting to trigger Cloud’s arousal without having the privacy to bring him to completion. He doubted Cloud would appreciate having his orgasm made the subject of locker room gossip.

He breathed Zack’s scent in deep because it was there and smelled so familiar and beloved, even
with the harsh mako overtone. His office used to be filled with his scent as his SiC lounged in one of the uncomfortable guest chairs to give reports, ask questions or hide from his paperwork. The General hadn’t realized how pervasive it had been until it was gone. Now it was back and he wasn’t alone anymore.

There was Genesis, of course, returned from the dead, cured and mostly sane, but experience had proven that the two experiments interacted much better over the telephone than they did in person. So the red-haired general led the forces on the Eastern Continent while Sephiroth did the same in the west. He would have to remember to warn Zack that Rhapsodis was an ally once again.

His PHS rang, its harsh sound breaking into his idle contemplations. “Sephiroth,” he answered it. He never felt the need to say anything more.

“Lieutenant Hinz here, General,” as if Sephiroth wouldn’t recognize the voice of his aide, “Mr. Tuesti just contacted the base commander to inform him that they would be stopping here before going to Midgar.”

It was hardly unexpected news. The Vice-President had informed them of the possibility when it had originally came up in the negotiations nearly three months ago. It was bad timing however, since he wanted to spend time with his returned friends, help them reacclimatize to the outside. Still, there was no reason for his keeper-spy to sound outraged.

“He also said they would be pleased to share a meal with you.” Ah, Sephiroth thought. Here was the source of the outrage.

“I invited them,” he confirmed.

“We didn’t discuss it. If I remember you told me that Rufus didn’t like the idea and assumed that was all it would take to make me agree not to meet with them. However, Mr. Tuesti presented much more compelling arguments, such as ‘they won’t sign the treaty without it’, he kept his voice soft, not wanting to disturb the men sleeping all over him. Besides, he didn’t have to shout, the Wutai wouldn’t sign the treaty without meeting with him and Hinz knew it. Sephiroth knew he knew it and the unhappy, exasperated sigh that his aide released admitted it.

“Very well, then I’ll arrange a small meal—”

“The kitchen already has my orders. It will be a full Wutaian repast as befits their status.”

“But, sir that accords them far too much respect,” Hinz argued.

“They earned my respect during the War,” he said flatly, “Their assistance will greatly aid our fight against Hojo and Deepground. A meeting with proper refreshments is a small thing, compared to that.” Hinz started to spout out another protest, “It is done, Lieutenant. We will be arriving shortly. I will need a clean, dress uniform. I will also need a large meal, enough for—” he remembered Cloud’s wings and upped his estimate, “three SOLDIERs First Class delivered to my room.” He proceeded to give his increasingly flustered and incoherent Aide-slash-babysitter a series of orders that had the man sputtering in outrage.

“Do you realize, General, what kind of scandal that will generate?” the lieutenant asked, scornfully. “What do you think people will say when they hear of it?” Meaning what the ShinRa...
board would say. Sephiroth knew exactly to whom the officer reported.

“Realize that I don’t care, Lieutenant Hinz, and life will be much simpler for you. Have it done or I will be most displeased.” He didn’t bother listening to anymore but snapped his phone shut and put it away.

“So we’re going to be bunking together,” Zack asked, “Like in Nibelheim?”

Sephiroth hadn’t even realized the dark-haired SOLDIER was awake. “If you don’t mind.”

“Nah,” Zack replied. He was secretly relieved that they would be nest—, sleeping together. “Spent so long in a test-tube, the human contact will be good—”

“For all of us,” the General murmured agreement.

“But don’t you want some alone time with Cloud? I mean, I can always stretch out someplace else. It took a lot for Zack to make the offer but these were his friends, they’d just become lovers before being separated. It was only right to offer them privacy.

“I believe we had this discussion once in Nibelheim,” Sephiroth cut him off. “Neither Cloud nor myself would be able to sleep properly without you close. Besides, it is probably far too early for either of you to be separated from each other. It has been only the two of you for a long time; that habit can’t be changed overnight.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to be separated from either of you.” It was the same tone he’d used to order Zack to call Aerith. The conversation was over. Zack let out what he hoped was a silent sigh of relief. Just because he’d felt he had to offer, didn’t mean that he’d actually wanted to do it.

“When we get to base, you and Cloud will need to go to the field hospital. We need to have a baseline to use if either of you gets injured or sick. We need to know the level of Jenova cells in your system so we know how vulnerable you are to her call.” He could feel Zack tensing. “It won’t be intrusive. They’ve altered some Libra materia into what they call ‘Sense’. It allows them to detect these things without taking samples. They’ll check for damage to your bones and your organs. They’ve managed to find ways to reverse some of the things Hojo liked to inflict on his... specimens.”

“Cloud won’t lose his wings?” Cloud actually liked his wings. Well why wouldn’t he? Zack thought, he had nice, white, feathered ones.

“No,” the Silver General reassured his friend, “Everything we know says those changes are irreversible. Zack, I need to tell you—” The truck jerked to a stop and the troops began to organize themselves, standing up, moving around and making lots of noise, and the moment for even semi-private talk was done.

Kunsel and Barret hadn’t yet returned from the reactor when Sephiroth climbed out of the transport, but radio communications said they were in good shape and moving steadily. They’d already had a copter pick up the worst of their wounded and take them to Cosmo Canyon which had a more extensive treatment facility. There hadn’t been many seriously injured because there hadn’t been as many DGS forces protecting the pass as Sephiroth had been led to believe from their source within Hojo’s operation.

However, since there was no one person responsible for organizing their defensive strategy it was
hardly surprising that it wasn’t logical.

Hojo wouldn’t be bothered as he considered most things military to be idiotic and brutish, unless they could be experimented on—then he was interested. Jenova’s known purpose was the destruction of Gaia, not controlling it or defending the territory they did have, The Tsviets apparently obeyed only the one called Weiss. However, their source said that nobody but the elite warriors or Hojo ever got to see the mysterious leader.

They’d conquered half the world, stripped it of people and resources and were now abandoning it like yesterday’s breakfast. Either it had served their purpose, they were completely stupid or they were planning something else. There wasn’t enough information for the allied forces to decide which it was.

No matter what he thought of their leaders, Sephiroth was grateful for Deepground’s carelessness.

They had recovered a great many of the weapons and supplies used by the DGS and they had proven to be very interesting. Obviously someone in Hojo’s forces thought the military useful as they’d developed powerful variants to the power systems of both weapons and body armour. Scarlet’s techs loved to reverse-engineer them and ShinRa was gradually arming their forces with the improved equipment.

They’d do the same with the research notes. Send them to the Science Department, now headed by someone not associated with Hojo in anyway. They’d examine them for any possible way to reverse the effects of the SOLDIER First Class injections, for ways to defeat the Tsviets, for hints on what Jenova had planned in order to bring about her objective.

First priority, however, would be cataloguing the materia. ShinRa no longer made mako stones or practiced materia fusion, and naturally occurring materia had always been rare, so every bit of it was inventoried and handed-out with great pomposity and lots of paperwork. The largest diamond in the world wouldn’t be fussied over or protected as much as the smallest piece of materia was in this post-Collapse world.

Sephiroth was only glad that the bulk of that work would fall on someone else. Yes, he’d have to read and sign the reports, and respond to countless messages from ShinRa HQ in Neo-Midgar, but he wouldn’t be the one cleaning the gore off the gun sights.

Of course, he had his own agenda for the rest of the day and very little of it concerned taking care of his companions. ‘Why couldn’t Tuesti be travelling tomorrow?’ he wondered in a burst of uncharacteristic petulance. He didn’t want to spend hours talking about nothing over tea and delicate foods. He wanted to be with Zack and Cloud in the Field Hospital, learning everything he could about what had happened to the pair and what they could do to return the corporal to cogency.

On the other hand, the treaty with the Wutai meant hastening the moment he finally caught up with Hojo and could kill him. The forces currently stationed in Wutai were experienced, battle-hardened troops. If they could be withdrawn from Wutai and used to invade the Northern Continent it would significantly increase their chances of success, so dinner with the Vice-President and the Wutaian representatives would have to take precedence over his personal desires.

Damn it.

Despite his decision on what was immediately important, duty warred with desire when an orderly reached for the blond to set him on a waiting stretcher. The General knew he had to let go of Cloud but he couldn’t. Instead he growled and turned his body as if to guard his lover from a threat.
“General, I can take him,” Zack offered, using his rank in this very public setting, protecting Sephiroth’s dignity as he had always done. Not that there was much dignity in having the General cuddle and protect the slim, young man currently clinging like an extra limb to his side. Zack could hear the whispers spreading. “I won’t let anything happen to him, I promise.”

Sephiroth swallowed the temptation to snarl at his SiC. “It’ll be okay,” Zack reassured him.

A nod, jerky and quick, and then the General passed his young lover over. It was unsettling but, as much as Cloud had clung to him in his unconscious state, it seemed natural to see him curled up under the chin of the tanned SOLDIER; although the lack of wings seemed odd. He hadn’t brought them out even though he was awake, or as awake as he ever got.

Zack had theorized that Cloud didn’t want to bring them out in such a large crowd of strangers. It would fit what Sephiroth remembered of his young lover.

He watched them until they turned a corner, out of sight but still in mind. His friends, alive but not really well. He gave himself a mental shake. He had other duties to attend to. “Mr. Valentine, do you need an escort?” he forced himself to ask.

“It’s okay, General. I’ll show him around,” Tifa responded.

“Very well,” he turned to the group that had finished disembarking, “You did good work today. Thank you.” With that short acknowledgement the General turned and made his way to his tent, already counting the minutes until he would see his friends again.
Banking on a Myth

Tifa turned to the unaging ex-Turk, “We’ll hit the mess tent first.” Vincent nodded and followed. Tifa seemed content to wave and shout snippets of news to the people they passed, most obviously ShinRa military, but many looked like ordinary civilians with a cause.

As they walked, Tifa was asked about the fighting, the reactor—they’d seen the glow from here apparently, but the most common question was ‘Did he find them?’ which Vincent soon realized meant; had Lucrecia’s child, Sephiroth, found Commander Fair and the comatose boy. It was puzzling. Why did these people care?

He glanced at the tough, little fighter walking beside him. She seemed to know everyone, perhaps she could tell him some more about the boy Lucrecia hadn’t lived long enough to save. A lifetime of being a Turk making him unwilling to appear too curious so he didn’t come right out and ask, “There is a great deal of interest in the General’s doings,” he said obliquely.

“Of course, his story’s famous,” she responded.

They’d reached the mess hall, a large open-sided tent with rows of benched tables and a line of cooking stations along one wall. There were only a few people lining up. A couple technical sergeants wearing chef’s hats were supervising a crew working feverishly to prepare for the evening rush. Although, watching them, Vincent thought maybe they were working on something special. He didn’t remember ShinRa grunts getting Wutaian sekihan as part of their regular diet.

His companion walked in, waving hello at her many acquaintances, grabbing a tray and stepping into line. Vincent followed her but didn’t bother with a tray. He hadn’t eaten for many years and, if his memory of ShinRa cafeteria food was correct, he didn’t want to begin with the stuff he’d get here. Instead, he would try to satisfy some of his curiosity.

“I am unfamiliar with the story.”

Tifa looked at him over her shoulder, “I suppose you would be. Three years ago, ShinRa sent the General to Nibelheim to check out the reactor. It was a trap.”

“I am aware of this part,” Vincent interrupted, “Commander Fair explained it. He was, however, unable to tell me of what happened to Lucrecia’s child after he fell into the mako stream.”

“Lucrecia’s child,” Tifa questioned?

“General Sephiroth. His mother was Dr. Lucrecia Crescent, a beautiful lady.” Vincent looked away, not wanting this girl to see the guilt echoed in his eyes. He should have done more, convinced her to change her mind, somehow…

“Really? That must be where Sephiroth gets his good looks from because, Ramuh knows, Hojo is a dog,” she laughed. Vincent just blinked and hid behind his collar. “Okay, so Sephiroth falls into the mako and Cloud and the Commander are captured by Hojo. Hojo burns Nibelheim to the ground killing just about everyone.” Her mouth twists in a rare show of bitterness. “A couple weeks later, ShinRa declares all three of them dead, killed in action while on a routine mission. Wutai terrorists are blamed. They always got blamed for ShinRa deaths. Them or environmental terrorists.”

“Environmental terrorists?” Vincent questioned. He knew Wutai had been fighting against
ShinRa’s influence for years so that cover made sense. Environmental terrorists did not even though it sounded familiar.

“Mako is a part of the Lifestream of the planet, just with a physical form. By using mako the way they did, ShinRa was weakening the Lifestream and killing the planet. Even three years ago some people knew what ShinRa was doing was wrong and fought against them but despite what old man Shinra said, we did not use terrorism against human targets.” She glared at him as if he were about to argue with her.

This small woman had been an environmental terrorist? It certainly explained why she’d been the one to set the charges in the mansion basement.

*Fascinating,* a part of Vincent thought. He ignored the voice, not easily, but with abilities honed by long practice. Chaos, his unwelcome ‘guest’, never really went away.

Lucrecia had melded him with the creature in an attempt to save his life after Hojo shot him. It had been separate being; aware and sentient. Chaos was always sitting there, just behind his brain, listening in, watching, commenting on the doings of the mortals around them. He could never really relax, knowing the demon was just waiting for its chance to take over.

Unaware of his internal dialogue, Tifa continued the tale, “Anyway, eight months later, Sephiroth is pulled out of an open mako pool in Mideel. They recognized him, of course, but they don’t notify ShinRa because the company had said he was dead and they’d held a huge memorial ceremony, including a state burial.”

“A burial would indicate that they had a body.” Most bodies dissolved into the Lifestream, only a few did not. His father’s hadn’t, infected by something from one of his experiments. Vincent could remember attending the burial. How odd it had seemed to lower a body into the ground.

Lucrecia’s body hadn’t dissolved either. He’d watched the lab technicians throw her into a bag and wheel her away. He’d heard them talking about how Hojo was going to examine her to find out why birthing the specimen had weakened her so badly. Stuck in his tube, suspended between life and death, he’d been unable even to flinch at their callous ignorance of the bright, intelligent person that Lucrecia had been.

“Right,” Tifa said and dragged Vincent out of his memory. “Yet Sephiroth wasn’t dead so what was ShinRa hiding? Hey, Carl,” this last was said to one of the cooks behind the counter, “how’s Jenny?” The cook answered cheerfully. Jenny was apparently his wife and nearly five months pregnant. She was finally having problems bending over and getting out of chairs. She craved Gongagan sausage hot enough to peel paint and her ankles were swelling.

Was the dark-haired fighter actually interested in this information, Vincent wondered? It served no purpose he could see, yet Carl served Tifa a significantly larger portion than he’d given the others in line. Perhaps it was a strategy on the fighter’s part, so that she could obtain more food? However, judging from her behaviour on their walk through the camp, it was more likely that the female was just a friendly person. They finished their chat while Vincent waited with no outward indication of impatience.

It was the same with the next cook. In fact, she talked with each of the cooks in line, calling them by name, asking after loved ones and camp doings. The food, not very hot to begin with, was visibly cooling as she chatted and the amount of sensitive information the cooks knew and casually talked about—troop deployments, injury statistics, and supply levels among other things, was astonishing to former Turk. It brought up long-buried instincts to report them or discipline them himself. He crossed his arms over his chest to contain the impulse.
This had the added benefit of discouraging the cooks from trying to shake his hand when Tifa introduced him.

Uninterested in the lives of the cooks, and still trying to control his impulse to reprimand them, he watched the chefs in the back as they worked. He recognized several unique and complicated Wutaian dishes, the kind that was served at formal meals where each guest controlled the lives of millions. He raised a brow, very curious now. If the chefs were cooking these items for a negotiating dinner it would explain why the General hadn’t gone with his friends to the infirmary as he’d obviously wanted to. However, according to what Fair had told him in the cave, Lucrecia’s child had been pivotal in the subjugation of Wutai. Surely they’d be more interesting in assassinating the leader than negotiating with him.

He was missing too much information. For the first time in nearly thirty years, he felt the itch of vulnerability such lack of knowledge caused. He’d been an Ace Turk in his day, the best of the best. Junior Turks completed their assignments without knowing the reasons. Ace Turks were trusted to think of potential consequences that had been overlooked therefore they were given more background knowledge.

He suddenly wanted that information, with a fierceness that shocked him.

It was an uncomfortable sensation, like he was slipping back into the role of one of President Shinra’s attack dogs and that he would never do. It was odd that Lucrecia’s child had gone back to the company, considering what they had allowed the Professor to do to him and his companions.

Finally, the young fighter finished collecting her food and gossip. She took her tray over to an unoccupied corner of the tent. “So where were we?” she asked as she dug her fork in.

“He was in Mideel, recovering.”

“Right. Sephiroth recovered quite quickly, of course. Two months after being pulled out of the mako, he was tracking down rumours of an escaped First on the run from ShinRa. Apparently, he’d hoped it was Zack, but it turned out to be one of the original SOLDIERs, Genesis Rhapsodis.” She looked at him as if he should know the name.

“Fair told me some things about him. He rebelled against ShinRa because he’d been experimented on.” The red-eyed gunman leaned away from the nauseating food smell. He’d been right to avoid eating it. Too bad he couldn’t avoid the odour. He buried his nose in the familiar musty smell of his collar.

“Um-hmm,” she nodded, “the stories say he was injected with Jenova cells in vitro, like Sephiroth, but that it didn’t work as well or something. I don’t know the details; I was a bit young when it all happened but everything I’ve heard said Genesis was really bitter at ShinRa. So Sephiroth recruited him as an ally and they headed north to take on the company and demand answers. And to kill Hojo if they could.”

“An admirable plan, if a bit impulsive,” Vincent remarked dryly. *Impulse isn’t always a bad thing,* his ‘guest’ commented. Vincent didn’t bother to sigh. Chaos would approve of impulse, it was… chaotic.

“I suppose,” she considered the remark. “The way it’s portrayed in the stories is that Genesis agreed because he wanted to avenge the death of his friend, Angel Hewlett, Heeley… something, like that, and that grief over his friend’s death combined with everything else had made him a little insane.”
“I thought he was insane before this,” Vincent protested, sure that detail had been part of Fair’s account.

Tifa smiled mischievously, “That’s not what the magazines say. It wouldn’t be half as romantic if Genesis was already nuts before his friend was killed.”

“Lovers?” he asked.

She shrugged, “Depends on which rag you’re reading. Sephiroth has never said and all Genesis does is quote Loveless. Even the nosiest of reporters have stopped asking him to tell the story ‘in his own words’,” she made air quotes and smiled maliciously. As the only known survivor of Nibelheim she’d suffered her share of press hounding and she felt no sympathy when they whined that they could never get a straight answer out of the Red General.

On the other hand, she’d read that the new staging of ‘Loveless’ very happy to have the eccentric, but oh so pretty, General quoting from the ancient poem. Every time Genesis was caught on tape repeating passages from it, their ticket sales jumped. Book sellers were also very happy. Loveless was old enough that ShinRa didn’t have the copyright so they could print and sell their own version of it and then keep all the profits.

Tifa didn’t think the gunman would want to hear those little tidbits of information, but she thought they were interesting.

“They got as far as Fort Condor before they were recognized. A news crew was there to report on a Phoenix that decided to nest on the reactor exhaust and in walks two of the world’s most famous, supposedly dead, warriors. Needless to say, they jumped on the pair of them and splashed their faces, and their stories, all over the news. ShinRa had a hard time back-tracking on their reported ‘deaths’.” And that, obviously, hadn’t bothered Tifa either.

She looked up at him with that odd glint in her eyes, “Are you ready to be the star of the next ShinRa romantic-tragedy?”

Vincent didn’t understand. Was that a legitimate question? Why did the dark-eyed fighter think that anyone would be interested in him?

“Face it, Vincent. You’ve got tragic hero written all over you.” She held up her hands, counting off the points on her fingers, “One; you’re a Turk, or ex-Turk. The rags love gossiping about the Turks.”

He blinked, finding the comment strange. In his day the Turks were hidden behind layers of secrecy with a covering of office-drone blandness. How did they become the target of gossip?

“Two; you’ve been in the mansion for thirty years yet you only look in your late-twenties or so. Three; the way you look: dark hair, red eyes, the cape, the leather pants; silent and broody. The fangirls are going to go nuts over you.”

The image that came to Vincent’s mind was of Wutaian women pulling the cords that made the ceiling blankets move and caused a cooling breeze on hot days. He didn’t think that’s what Tifa meant by ‘fan girls’.

“Four; you survived how many years of Hojo, the world’s favourite villain. You’ll obviously be physically and emotionally scarred, so of course you’ll need lots of loving to heal. They’ll write stories about you, maybe even a play. Some of them might even be rated ‘G’.” She grinned.

Vincent looked away, hiding his blush. Uncomfortable, as always, with discussing anything
connected to physical intimacy.

“Five; rescued in mysterious circumstances by one of Gaia’s Champions, the Silver General himself on his own romantic quest. Six; you join the elite group of heroes fighting a noble cause. Do I need to continue?” That look was in her eyes again. It had often been in Lucrecia’s eyes. She’d had it when she had gently mocked him, teasing she’d called it. Is that what the fighter was doing now, teasing him?

“Face it, Vincent. You are doomed to be a leading man.” She picked up her fork and finished cleaning her plate, “You’ll have a fan club and groupies. Maybe they’ll even make a video game about you. They have for Genesis, it completely rewrites his whole war with ShinRa and cuts his Loveless quotes by about half. He voiced it himself apparently. If it’s true he’s got a helluva sexy voice.”

“This is completely irrelevant,” was his response. Although his unwanted inner voice thought it might be fun to meet this unpredictable and irritating Genesis. Vincent ignored it.

“Just wanted you to prepare yourself.” She gave that quirky smile again before standing up with her empty plate and walked to one of the tray collection sites. He followed her. “Where were we?”

“Fort Condor.” They resumed their journey through the city of tents that was the ShinRa base. They got a few strange looks but most of the people they saw were busy with their own duties and ignored the small fighter and the tall gunman.

“Right. They showed up alive in Fort Condor in front of the media. Genesis quotes Loveless to everyone’s confusion, but Sephiroth comes right out and says that Hojo had illegally kidnapped, detained and experimented on at least two members of ShinRa’s Public Safety Department, with the President’s approval, and he’s going to find them by whatever means necessary even if it means ripping Hojo into little bits and destroying all of ShinRa in the process.”

“He threatened to kill them all?” It didn’t need to be a question.

“Only Hojo really, but the sub-text was there; that he’d kill anyone or anything that tried to stop him from getting to his friends,” she paused to say hello to a passing soldier. “I’ve seen the clips. The General was very, very scary.” Vincent could see how the long-haired warrior would be intimidating when upset. He’d been intimidating just walking through the ruined village. The anger had poured off him in icy waves.

“The President would have sent the Turks after them.” At least that would’ve been what happened back when he’d been one. Eliminate the threat.

“Maybe he did, but if so, they never had a chance of carrying those orders out. It was only a couple days later that Hojo activated the DGS, and they tried to trigger explosions in all of the Midgar reactors,” she looked at him to see if he understood the impact of that. He didn’t so he remained silent.

“Some experts in mako-dynamics estimate that the explosions would have been powerful enough to set off a chain reaction within the mako stream itself. In theory, if that had happened, huge chunks of Gaia would have been incinerated or expelled into space; the planet’s gravity could have shifted enough that it would have pulled it apart.”

“Armageddon,” he murmured.

The building they stopped outside was more sturdy than most of the structures in camp. It even had
guards at the entrance, and Vincent assumed they’d reached the storage facility. “Hey, Danan,” his companion greeted the soldier.

“Tifa, I hear the General got his sweeties back.”

Vincent hid his sigh as the comment started another exchange of repetitive social information; who was seeing whom, who had broken up with whom, and who was finally getting married. Whether it was people they knew or celebrities they would never meet, the two women had to discuss every nuance of every piece of information about their favourite couples. At least this time there was no discussion of troop strength or possible future strategies and his Turk training stayed safely buried.

He did not allow himself to show any impatience, after all, to be impatient you have to have hope and hope belongs to sinless men; men whose demons were figurative, not literal.

Finally she finished her exchange with the guard and they entered the building. She stopped them just inside the door.

“Where were we? Armageddon,” she answered herself, “That was one theory, but others said it wasn’t likely that Gaia would blow apart. Instead they figured the explosions would have released a huge cloud of toxic gas that would’ve killed thousands instantly, before spreading throughout the atmosphere and blocking the sun’s rays from reaching the surface causing a ‘mako winter’,”

Vincent just looked at her which Tifa correctly interpreted as a request for more information. “A sudden, catastrophic drop in temperature. Ice would cover most of the world. Growing anything would be essentially impossible. Humans, animals, plants, all of it would be at risk.” He nodded his understanding.

“Nobody could understand why he did it. It was just so insane. I mean, it went completely beyond being a distraction. Why would he want to trigger a catastrophe like that since he has to live here too?” Suddenly, the fighter looked years younger, a child asking her mother if the monsters under the bed were real. Vincent tightened his hands where they gripped his arms, keeping him from reaching out to reassure the girl. What would he say? He knew the monsters were real… after all he was one.

She shook herself out of it. “Come on, Vincent, let’s see what we can find,” Tifa led the way into the cluttered front chamber. A heavy-set man with sergeant stripes sat at a desk behind tables piled with paper and old coffee cups. His ‘room’ was walled with filing cabinets. He was entering data from a list onto a computer but Vincent didn’t miss his quick, sharp inspection. The sergeant was more than just a clerk.

“Hey, Johnson,” Tifa said in a friendly voice and Vincent barely managed to hold in a groan. His clawed hand flexed and he buried his face behind his collar and his hair.

He could feel his beasts stirring, encouraged by his, not impatience... irritation.

Impatience belongs to the sinless man, he reminded himself, but really, was hoping that Johnson was ‘too busy to chat’ the same thing as hoping ‘there’s more to life than this’? He quelled the impulse to laugh out loud at himself. It wasn’t his impulse.

“Vincent, you ready?” He nodded, thankful to be moving again. “First stop will be the materia pit. We call it that because materia goes in,” her voice changed to something that was supposed to be spooky, “but it never comes out.” This part of the structure was obviously meant to be more secure than the rest as there were sturdy walls and a thick door. It was also centered in the building; a hall circled it so that it couldn’t be accessed directly from an outside wall. She knocked on the door and received a muffled invitation to enter.
“Hello, Jordie,” Tifa said as she opened the door.

Vincent braced himself, barely containing a sigh. How had he ever thought this woman would be quieter than the black-haired swordsman? Even a medical exam could have been moderately more pleasant.

She managed to surprise him by getting straight to the point, “I found this materia in the lab. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The man at the desk must have found this significant because he looked up from the small chip of materia in his hand. “Did you activate it,” he asked?

“Tried, nothing happened.” Tifa opened her bag and dug around.

The scientist’s eyes perked up, his whole being focussed on the young fighter. “A new materia? There haven’t been any new types of materia since ShinRa shut down the fusion chamber.”

Despite his eagerness to see what Tifa had brought, he still handled the chip in his hand with care, placing it carefully in its velvet-lined box and sealing it before reaching out for whatever the dark-eyed fighter would hand him.

Vincent could sense something, not a danger, a hum of some kind... perhaps from all the materia. It was… unpleasant. Inside him, his ‘guest’ came fully to life becoming more present than it had for many years. It flicked his eyes around the small room, made him sniff the air, trying to locate the source of the sensation. Then Tifa pulled a strange white globe out of her bag, holding it for a moment to look at it. The hum increased and tightened, centered on that ball. Chaos pulled Vincent’s attention toward the unremarkable, cloudy little globe. “Here it is,” she said and tossed it to the scientist.

It didn’t make it that far.

Chaos, through Vincent, reached out and plucked it from the air. The gunman held it in his right hand, his human hand, and could feel it resonate within him. He sensed the sudden recognition; he was meant to find this. The ball flashed white, brighter than the brightest sunlight, then nothing but a gentle glow swirling all around the orb, covering his hand before floating away into nothing.

“Vincent, right?” a soft voice said and Vincent whirled to face her.

“Lucrecia,” he whispered her name. How had she come to be here? Within him, Chaos growled in anger at the one who had trapped it. The others in the room gasped in shock at the sudden appearance of the pretty woman in the standard white lab coat of ShinRa’s Science Department.

“Have you come to check up on me?” she asked. There was no smile on her face, no sense that she knew him.

Vincent stepped toward her, calling her name a little louder, “Lucrecia.” She walked toward him. The long lab coat flared, revealing the pronounced belly of a woman in her last trimester of pregnancy. It didn’t matter. This time he wouldn’t back away from her. This time, he would let her know how he felt. He opened his arms to welcome her...

But she didn’t stop. She walked forward at a slow pace, as if he wasn’t even there, because he wasn’t, not to her. She walked right through him. When he turned to stare at her image, he could see that she flickered and faded. A hologram. She’d made a hologram of herself and programmed it to play when, if, he ever found the orb.

“Omega,” her image started to speak. Her voice, so light, held memories of sunlit fields, picnics
and other things, things he could never forget… or be forgiven for.

Suddenly, Chaos stopped growling to listen. Vincent didn’t know what she’d said that was so important but he realized that he couldn’t allow the memories to draw him in; he needed to hear what she said.

“His awakening is upon us.” A bright flash had them all wincing. When he opened his eyes again, they had been transported to a cave, with solid fountains of luminescent mako. They were beautiful and haunting… like her.

“‘Soul wrought of terra corrupt,’” she, it continued speaking, “‘Quelling impurity, purging the stream to beckon forth an ultimate fate. Behold mighty Chaos, Omega's squire to the lofty heavens.’ I came across this passage while studying the scriptures of the Ancients: The Chronicles of Yore.” She paused, gazing fixedly at the tallest of the frozen mako structures.

“Omega—the end.” She raised her hands, “Just as all other sentient beings, he too, is born of the Lifestream.”

The same glow that had been in the small orb burst from her palms, forming a globe of swirling light and power that floated in front of her. The light swelled growing bigger, “However, his only purpose is to cleanse the planet of all things living and lead their immortal souls through the abyssal ether to a new beginning far, far beyond the never-ending sea of stars.” The scientist behind him gasped as the light grew to fill the room.

Vincent ignored the sound, all of him intent on hearing everything Lucrecia said.

For a brief moment, the light was almost too intense for the red-eyed fighter, but before it actually became painful, the glow shrank back down to its original size. It hovered in front of the image of Lucrecia before shooting a pillar of blue-green light to the ceiling. Like fireworks, the light burst into many smaller flaring shards before disappearing completely.

“Oh wow!” he heard Tifa gasp.

Of course the image of Lucrecia didn’t wait for them to take it in before continuing her tale. “Just as life circulates through our planet, so too, does our planet through the universe. Or at least in theory.”

The cavern dissolved from the edges. The crystallized mako structures disappeared into black nothingness. Still, Dr. Crescent didn’t turn. Her face stayed pointing away from the ex-Turk, head down, voice steady, even as the black turned into a night sky filled with stars—more stars than could be seen from the planet surface.

“However, what I can be certain of is, if Omega awakens, then all life as we know it will end. And when Omega has embarked on his journey to the cosmos, our planet will wither and die.” The stars spun slowly, then faster. They were surrounded by them and the effect was rather nauseating. They flared, once again filling their eyes with white nothingness so bright it was almost pain. They were back in the storage tent, but this time Lucrecia’s image was turned to face him.

“I will leave a copy of my records here for you, Vincent,” her voice caught as if trying to hold back tears, “though I cannot imagine what help they might be, if any at all. Just remember…” she paused, dropping her head even lower, pain radiated in her voice, and the captured sob made it much rougher than her normal liquid tones. Her image flickered as if infected with her emotions. “I am so sorry.”
She finally started to cry just as the hologram disappeared. Vincent stretched out his hand as if to stop the inevitable and the small, white orb, that had carried her message to him, dissolved.

“Lucrecia...” It was a prayer, an apology, a plea. It was useless. She was gone. Once again, nothing was left of her.

Silence. Deeper without her soft voice. *Omega,* his unwanted guest whispered in recognition.

“Well, I guess the next stop is with the research department.” Tifa said.

Vincent looked at her in shock, maybe anger, although he should not allow that emotion into his heart, but the fighter was not being disrespectful. Her face was full of awe and fear. “Whatever she foresaw, it was important enough for her to leave this message to warn you. We need to find to find those records.”

All Vincent could do was nod.
Zack didn’t want to do this. He didn’t want to go with the doctors. He didn’t want to get poked at anymore. He didn’t want to answer questions about what had been done to them. A huge part of him was urging the dark-haired SOLDIER just to take Cloud and make a run for it.

He didn’t because Sephiroth trusted him. Sephiroth needed them, and not just as SOLDIERs.

Needing something to distract himself from his rising panic, he did what he always did: he talked. “So, Spike, did you like riding the General? Now get your mind out of the gutter. I wasn’t talking about that kind of riding,” He forced a smile at his own joke, “I think he liked carrying you. He certainly held on to you long enough. Good thing you’re so fucking light,” he teased. Except…now that he’d mentioned it, Cloud was too light. He’d never been big but the blond was packed solid with muscle. He should be a heavy, little bundle but he felt like a kid of maybe forty, fifty kilos. Maybe it wasn’t Cloud’s fault though. It could be another side-effect of Hojo’s experimentation on Zack; the dark-haired SOLDIER was much faster and stronger than he had been before. That could be it but somehow Zack doubted it would be that easy.

They’d reached the tent with the sign saying Field Hospital-Science Department...and wasn’t that completely creepy knowing the two still went together in the minds of the ShinRa planners.

“Commander Fair,” Dr. Imeera turned to him and said, “We have showers set up so that you can wash off the last of the mako.” She was supposed to be a specialist in the effects of mako on people, he remembered. Although, that made Zack wonder where’d she study the subject. The only person in ShinRa he could remember playing around with humans and mako was Hojo. Had she been one of Hojo’s assistant torturers?

“There’ll be a chair for Corporal Strife?”

He was answered by a lower ranked med-tech, “There’s a stool in the showers, Sir.”

This whole situation was making him itchy. He didn’t feel like he could trust anyone here, but Cloud needed help and maybe they’d be able to suggest something. “Nnng,” Cloud mumbled. Nobody else would’ve known the sound was a protest but Zack did. He took a deep breath and relaxed his grip so that he wasn’t squeezing so hard.

“So where are these showers?” he asked to once again to redirect his thoughts.

He followed the young medic to a section of the tent that was lined with plastic curtains. The entrance was really skinny and he wound up tripping on the raised floor and bashing his elbow on the wooden supports as he manoeuvred them through it. There was shelving along one side and three shower stalls along the other, all of which were big enough for two people.

Made sense, he supposed, as most of the people in the hospital likely couldn’t shower on their own.

“Soap, shampoo and conditioner,” the tech said, pointing out everything. “Towels are here and clean uniforms are in the cupboard just there. I’ll go get the stool.” The man scurried out.

Maybe he realized how uncomfortable he was; how much he didn’t want to be here and was trying to be tactful or something, Zack thought. The SOLDIER didn’t realize that his nerves were bringing out the glow in his eyes. ‘Mako bright? Get out of sight’ was the simple rhyme taught to all non-altered troops to help protect them from SOLDIER tempers.
The medic brought the waterproof stool in and left again, leaving Zack to undress his comatose friend in peace. He sat him on the stool and stripped the blond with brisk efficiency.

“Gghhn.”

Zack easily interpreted the question, “Not unless you want to get the feathers all wet. Then you’d have to leave them out while the doctors do their exam. They might like poking at them, but I don’t think you’d like it much.”

Cloud drooped a little but kept his wings hidden, “Ghhhn.”

Zack paused, thinking about the new question before quickly rejecting it, “Nah, I don’t think so. Don’t know who might barge in. Or maybe they have cameras in here. I certainly didn’t look.”

The showers had hand-held showerheads which made washing up that much easier. It wasn’t long before Zack had nice, warm water running over them. He left it on while he soaped and scrubbed Cloud’s body. His actions far more impersonal and professional than General Sephiroth’s had been, even when he was cleaning his friend’s most intimate areas. He’d had to do this far too often in the lab.

He’d always griped and complained but that had been an act. If the guards had thought that he didn’t mind cleaning Cloud up, that, in fact, he’d preferred to do the job himself; they wouldn’t have let him. They’d have done it instead. That had happened a couple times when Zack had been too sick or injured. It had never ended well. So many of the guards had looked at the corporal’s pretty face and slim body and decided that it would do until they got a ‘real girl’ tofuck.

He wouldn’t think that maybe their attitude was partly his fault. At least, he tried not to.

“Seph’s right, you have grown but you’re way too fucking skinny. You don’t weigh much more than a bird, but that’s okay, I heard him arrange to have a meal waiting for us once we’re done here. A big one, like in Nibelheim. I remember you didn’t believe me when I said SOLDIERs ate a lot. Then, when we were eating you just looked at us in amazement, mouth hanging down to the table. It was kinda funny. Close your eyes,” he ordered before dragging his fingertips over those big eyes. Out of reflex, Cloud’s lids dropped to cover them. He lathered up his friend’s hair working the shampoo in real good, giving his scalp a little massage.

“Hhhgn.” It was a sad, hesitant little sound.

Zack’s movements stopped. He’d always known that somehow Cloud had been aware of what was happening to his body. “I... I don’t think the General will care, Spike. I think he’s just happy to have you back. You let me touch you but we were... are friends. Everybody else was rape. I—”

Again he stopped. Would the General be angry at Cloud? As stupid as it was, many partners of rape victims got mad at their partners for allowing the rape to happen. The Sephiroth he’d known three years ago wouldn’t have been angry at his lover for being raped. He would have accepted it as a new factor in the relationship and would have researched strategies for mitigating any negative outcomes. From what he’d seen, this Seph would react the same way.

“He grew up in the labs with Hojo in charge. He probably has first-hand knowledge of the kind of twisted fucks that work for Dr. Creepy.” Cloud’s back twitched hard in response to the instinct to call out his wings and spread them in display, both threat and defence. The soldier probably wasn’t even feeling anger over his own treatment. More likely he was fighting back anger at how the General had been treated as a child, and what might have happened to him.
Zack soothed him automatically, his mind still worrying at the question his friend had asked. Rape was one thing, but what would the General say to consensual sex? He’d never taken betrayal of any kind well, and infidelity was a kind of betrayal, wasn’t it? He didn’t know how Sephiroth felt about it; he couldn’t recall a single instance of one of the General’s infrequent lovers ever sleeping around on him.

As much as the silver-haired swordsman cared for the corporal, Zack didn’t think it would help that it had been Cloud who had initiated it the first time. He’d just needed the reassurance of a friendly touch, a human need satisfied with care instead of pain. Zack had needed it too. He’d been surprised at how nice it had felt, at how much he’d liked the feel of Cloud beside him, of being inside him, of knowing that both of them were warm and breathing and alive. The few times they’d had sex, neither had minded when they’d called out their real sweethearts’ names. At least it hadn’t hurt and, for a while, they could pretend to be somewhere else, with someone else.

Zack had stopped… he couldn’t decide if it had been ‘having sex’ or ‘making love’; whatever it had been, he’d stopped doing it with his friend as soon as Cloud couldn’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ whether in words or in hand gestures. If his friend couldn’t tell him it was okay, then it wasn’t okay.

Zack had still held him, still kissed him on the cheek and rubbed his body when it got cold, but wing rubs had been the best he could do. He’d sometimes got the sense that Cloud wanted more, but without the words Zack had felt little better than their fucking psycho guards.

Would Sephiroth consider it a betrayal?

“I’ll explain it to Seph and maybe it’ll help me figure out how I’m gonna to explain this to Aerith? I mean, at least the General knows you like guys. With Aerith... well, it’ll probably blindside her. Of course she’s such a doll she might understand and forgive and be all nice about it. What you think, Spike? You’ve met her,” he babbled on while his mind worried about other things. His voice soothed both Cloud and himself.

“It’ll be okay,” the dark-haired SOLDIER repeated, “He’s missed you too much to give you up over something so understandable.” Zack truly believed that Sephiroth wouldn’t give the blond up for anything.

How he’d feel toward the Commander was an entirely different matter.

Sephiroth, as much as he would’ve liked to imagine Cloud and Zack naked in the shower or, even better, see them with the water running over their skin, was stuck at his desk sifting through the reports that had piled up in his absence. There were activity reports, injury reports, supply reports, research summaries, and projections; and not just from his command, but also from Genesis’ forward camp outside the Midgar ruins and from Neo-ShinRa, currently based in Junon. He read them all, filing the information away in his mind as he’d been trained.

He’d been designed to have perfect recall and usually did. He could choose not to remember, a fate reserved for the endless receptions thrown by President Shinra before the Collapse. There was only one period in his life that was blurred without his consent and that was his time in the mansion’s basement when Jenova had been screaming at him, urging him to destroy everything and become a god.

According to common Gaian belief, the gods were aware of everyone and everything all the time. Sephiroth, looking at the reports still to be read and signed off that would allow him to know where a portion of the population had been in one moment in time, decided that absolute power wasn’t worth the paperwork.
A young private rushed in, one of the flunkies assigned to his Aide that did all the actual work. She straightened into a rigid salute and held the stance until the General acknowledged her.

“At ease, Private,” she obeyed crisply, so stiff it was obvious she was new to his pool of runners. She had probably listened a little too closely to Lieutenant Hinz’s list of ‘proper behaviours’. Sephiroth hid a sigh, “Report.”

“Master-Sergeant Lutton said to tell you that the Mess Tent is prepared as you specified. He couldn’t find any, um, Wutaian music to play on the stereo but said to say that he found something from before ShinRa and that it should be suitable. Also, he said to tell you that he’s invited officers and civilians that suit the criteria you set.”

“Excellent,” he responded but the Private didn’t shift. “Anything else?”

“I’m also to tell you that we’ve received communications from Vice-President Tuesti’s transport. They should be landing in an hour or less.”

He raised his eyebrow automatically, forgetting the effect the movement often had on the younger troops. However, it was too late to take it back. All he could do was wonder how this baby-private would react. “They couldn’t be more precise?”

She swallowed, paled, but managed to reply, “Head winds over the straight, Sir.”

“Very well, Private, notify me when the transport is ten minutes away.” She’d held up well but he didn’t try to smile... she might faint. “You are dismissed.”

“Sir, yes, Sir!” She snapped another salute and crisply exited his office. Sephiroth didn’t bother to sigh.

She seemed so young but he’d been her age or younger when he’d first gone up against the Wutai. Zack would have been only a little older when he first saw combat as a SOLDIER Third Class. Cloud was her age at Nibelheim. When did he get so old, he wondered. Then he laughed mockingly at himself. He was barely thirty; that was hardly ancient. Just because more than half his life had been spent fighting ShinRa’s wars didn’t mean he needed to feel morose or, worse, self-pity.

A glass of cold water and a sharp mental shake and he refocused on the issues being revealed in the documents he read. Or rather what wasn’t being revealed. Rufus’s Turks were the clearinghouse for gathered intelligence. Their reports always tended to be disturbing because they made no sense. That Tseng knew they made no sense didn’t help anyone’s frustration with them.

DGS forces had stopped their locust-like sweeps through the flatlands, scooping up a quarter of the population and ‘disappearing’ them. They’d made an underwater attack on the Junon reactor but had been pushed back. They had taken over a mako reactor in Wutai, killing or converting everyone. They’d held it for a week then abandoned the facility without a backward glance—which was similar to how they’d reacted to the attack on the Nibelheim reactor; complete resistance for a period of time then vanish. Reports said clones had dug up nearly all the archaeological site near Bone Village looking for something. They’d sent scouts into the ruins of Midgar. They were exploring the Northern Caves. They’d been caught nosing around an old temple on an island south of Junon.

One thing about the enemy, they were good at small scale raids; in fact, they excelled at quick destructive actions, but they weren’t good at running an army. Their forces lacked the discipline required for just about anything from setting up a proper camp to moving supplies. With this battle out of the way, their last free-roaming battalion was locked onto the plains north of the Nibel
Mountains, and Sephiroth knew it was only a matter of time before those ground forces were decimated as well.

Unfortunately, in smaller groups they went damn near anywhere they pleased, yet there was no logic to their actions. There didn’t seem to be anything coherent about their goals what-so-ever. It had Tseng tearing his hair out. Or it would, if the Wutai half-breed would allow himself to show that much frustration.

The Turks’ latest intelligence made it seem like they were fighting two different wars, not just one.

Sephiroth frowned, his mind caught.

Two wars.

Two sets of enemies, two wars... and two different objectives?

He quickly reviewed everything he’d read or heard since he’d taken control of the ShinRa forces, dividing the actions up, re-examining the reports from their source within their HQ at Icicle Inn.

Hojo worked with Jenova, likely to get off the planet and resume her ancient, destructive path. They mostly used clones to do their tasks. Clones made from the thousands of samples taken from Sephiroth over the years. The allied forces had discovered the S-clones, as Tseng discreetly called them, looking for something in and around the Northern Continent; Bone Village, Icicle Inn, or the Northern Caves—they’d explored them all.

Ms. Gainsborough had identified the Northern Continent as the ancient home of the Cetra. Cetra artefacts would be all over it. Hojo and Jenova had both been obsessed with the Cetra, and still were from all reports. It had been clones at the southern Temple, not DGS. Why? What connection was there between the Temple, the Cetra and Hojo/Jenova?

Then there was the Tsviets who answered only to the unseen Weiss the Immaculate. He spoke only to them or to Hojo. It was Weiss that gave the elite fighters their orders which they then relayed to the regular DGS forces. DGS forces were the ones going around decimating the towns and taking over the mako reactors. Were they searching for something or merely insane? If they were searching, was their target the same thing as Hojo’s? If so, why were Deepground operatives never seen in the same places as the S-clones? As they were created by Hojo insanity wasn’t an unlikely option, yet ShinRa’s source in their enemy’s command post held the opinion that there was an objective even if it was known only to Weiss and Hojo.

Considering the way the mad professor talked to himself, it was unusual that he’d let slip no hint of the plans he’d made with the DGS leader. He’d certainly been heard calling Weiss an ‘ignoramus’ and an ‘idiot’, but that’s what he considered everyone but himself anyway. Their source had assumed it was because the two men had disagreed over plans to achieve their aim, but maybe it had another explanation. They’d all assumed that the goals of the Tsviets were the same as Hojo’s.

What if they weren’t?

The little private entered the room, saluting and breaking his thought patterns. “Sir, transport will arrive in ten minutes.”

He locked away his notes, reminding himself to come back to them later. He checked his hair. It was still damp but not uncomfortably so. It shouldn’t damage his leather coat. His coat. He had to smile. He’d acquiesced to Rufus’ demands that he don the old black and silver even though he disliked the symbolism of it intensely. His main reason for doing so had been because the
remaining SOLDIERs said its very familiarity was comforting and reassuring. Now, he could also comfort himself with the knowledge that Cloud had once enjoyed the easy access the design had afforded him. ‘Soon,’ he thought to himself. Soon he would be able to enjoy Cloud’s enjoyment.

Then he put those thoughts away and headed out across the base to the landing field to play politics with old enemies become new allies.

Vincent crossed his arms and buried his nose in his collar. He adjusted his stance as he prepared to wait through another one of the black-haired fighter’s ‘little chats’. They’d worked their way through two repositories for a total of five staff members, all of them busy packing notes, journals, discs and other items into boxes so they could be taken on a Junon-bound transport that was arriving unexpectedly.

He’d grown resigned to waiting for Tifa to slowly... very slowly, get to the point of their visit, especially once he’d realized that by taking the time to be friendly she achieved some remarkable results. Everyone responded well to her. No matter how busy, they would take a moment to chat and consider her request for information; searching their minds for hints or clues that would tell her what she wanted to know. This had led them to this young technician who, amazingly, Tifa had never met before.

It had also allowed him to build up his knowledge of the world he’d emerged in to. It was both very different and little changed from the world he’d retreated from.

Thirty years ago, ShinRa had dominated everything, with the exception of Wutai and some small isolated locales that even the locals didn’t care about. Now they were in shambles and struggling to recover from too many catastrophes in too short of a time.

They’d been hated and feared, but now people looked to the company, to the old president’s son, to save them and return the world to what they had known. The boy was younger than he was, or appeared to be…he was younger than Lucrecia’s son, and yet he was expected to be one of the planet’s saviours.

People were fickle. That hadn’t changed from before.

He returned to the conversation in time to hear Tifa finally get to the point of their visit. “We’re looking for notes left by a Dr. Lucrecia Crescent—”

“Oh hey, isn’t she the one who did all that work on Chaos?” The geeky Sam with his thick glasses and done-up-to-the-neck shirt said. It was unfortunate that the glasses magnified the direction he was looking at, and it wasn’t the fighter’s delicate face. Vincent locked down the impulse to tap his fingers in annoyance.

“Chaos? As in Chaos Theory? Like randomization... or the, the whatchamacallit principle—uncertainty principle. That one,” Tifa asked?

“Yeah, but no. Chaos as in the planet’s final survival mechanism, or, um, as the omen announcing the end of days.”

Vincent shifted uncomfortably. The being inside him had perked up at any mention of its purpose. Neither of them really knew where Lucrecia had found Chaos or why it had existed. Lucrecia hadn’t said anything about omens. All she had said was that she didn’t want Vincent to die. He’d wanted to die. He’d failed; failed himself, failed his father, failed the unborn child—failed Lucrecia...
He cut off those pointless thoughts. It sounded like this young man knew some of what Lucrecia had been working on. The ex-Turk could probably obtain clues of what Chaos was if he could figure out a way to bring it up in a discussion. However, Vincent had no intention of discussing his unwelcome ‘guest’ with anyone, ever. Those scars were his.

*You may have no choice, my little immortalis, if Omega is rising.* Vincent ignored the comment and the endearment with the ease of long practice.

“That sounds like the right one,” Tifa said. “What do you know about her?”

“Oh wow, she was, like brilliant but completely ignored because her stuff was, um, completely over the heads of most of the ShinRa science department. Even the pros at Kalm U didn’t really understand what she was talking about. Still don’t even now really, even though we know that the Lifestream is real and not just mysticism. Most scientists don’t like discussing her stuff, really.” He leaned forward, whispering, “She was married to Hojo, you know,” he leaned even closer, “They say she even participated in his human experimentation.”

Not by a single movement; not a shift, a wince or the smallest little twitch, did Vincent react to the boy’s delightfully scandalized whispering. Tifa nearly looked at him but changed her eye movement into a blink. Vincent appreciated her tact.

“That sounds like the one we want. She was based at Nibelheim and she may have left some documents, discs and stuff. Things the team would’ve scooped up when we were there. They would’ve turned it all over to you, right?”

“Yes, but I haven’t had a chance to go through any of it yet ‘cuz, we’ve been busy getting all this other stuff ready to ship to Junon. Plane’s here so we might as well use it, ya know?”

Vincent spoke up, “We would like to look at it.”

“Oh, well yeah but you have to have proper clearance.” Chaos didn’t like the boy’s answer; it didn’t like it at all. Vincent knew his eyes had glowed gold for a moment by the way Sam swallowed nervously.

Tifa had an easier way of getting what they wanted however. She pulled out her PHS, “Here Sam, General Sephiroth’s authorization.” She replayed the message the General had sent and gave the boy the paper that had been delivered to them confirming the voice recording.

Sam took the paper as if it were covered in gold. “I’ll, uh, just check this,” he jerked his thumb over his shoulder, obviously indicating something beyond their current line of sight because all they could see were boxes, tape and more boxes on shelves standing higher than Tifa could stretch her arms. When he walked back and around a corner they followed. Hidden behind the shelves was a small cubby space filled with desk and computer and more shelves. The items here weren’t in tidy, labelled boxes, but loose in baskets or wrapped in elastic bands to keep them together... the new arrivals.

Sam waved the code on the paper under a laser scanner and watched the screen until ‘confirmed’ flashed on the screen.

“Cool.” He turned and jumped when he nearly ran into them. “Oh wow, you’re here. Okay, right. Umm. All the science stuff found in Nibelheim is here,” he blocked two sections of shelves, “Discs here,” he pulled forward a bin, “Journals here,” another, larger bin, “Loose papers—”

“We get the idea,” Vincent interrupted, his gravelly voice even rougher than before. Sam jumped
“Yeah, sorry. Some people don’t like my system of pre-organizing. I, uh, can’t let you take
anything from here, but you can make copies as long as you, um, make a note of it here,” he
opened a hard cover log. “The columns are pretty self-explanatory. So, um,” he jerked his thumb
back toward the other space, “I’ll just go back to packing. Call if you need anything.” With a bob
and a twist, Sam disappeared. Both Tifa and Vincent stood watching him go.

“I think you scared him,” Tifa commented.

“Not hard to do with someone like him,” Vincent riposted, “He could barely keep his eyes on your
face.”

“Vincent, you’re not calling him a sex-starved nerd, are you?” Tifa glanced sideways at him, “That
would be labelling him with a stereotype.”

“It’s not a stereotype if it’s what you are.”

Tifa laughed out loud at his offended tone. “You realize people are going to call you a vampire?”

He blinked. “What?” How had the conversation gotten here?

“Let’s see,” she ticked off points on her fingers, “Slept thirty years in a coffin, in the dark, without
food, long hair, flowing cape, red eyes, intimidating and silent; definitely a predator. I’d say you fit
the stereo-type perfectly.” She grinned at him in triumph, “Guess you’re a vampire.”

*Oh, I like her* his other self purred. “We should begin. You take the computer,” was all he said.
He ignored both Tifa’s and Chaos’ soft laughter.
“Nnn.”

“You need to wear the shoes, Spike.” There was no change in the blond’s expression, he made no other sound but Zack sighed. Cloud didn’t want to put the boots back on. Zack had already talked him out of displaying his wings in front of the doctors; now Cloud was digging in his heels, kinda, about wearing the heavy army boots. Still, it would cause comment, maybe make the Docs investigate a little more than they needed to, if he didn’t put them on. The SOLDIER tried explaining it, again, as he balanced the heel on his knee so he could put the sock on his friend’s small right foot.

Cloud’s toes twitched.

Zack stared at them. “Cloud,” Zack looked up hoping to see something in his friend’s face. “Spike?” There was nothing. It was still the same vacant expression he’d worn for over a year.

“But your toes did move. Maybe it was a fluke, Spike, huh? Let’s check.” He approached the blond’s foot holding the sock stretched open and ready. A beat. Nothing. ‘Damn,’ he said silently. He wanted Cloud to be getting better.

Then Cloud’s toes twitched again. Even stronger this time.

A broad grin, so big it hurt, but Zack didn’t care. Cloud had moved his toes! He whooped and caught the blond up in a hug, lifted him and twirling him. “Just wait until I tell Seph. He’s gonna be so excited. I know it.”

“Is everything okay in there, Commander?” came a hesitant voice from the other side of the divider.

“Yeah,” Zack answered, “Feels great to be clean.” Well, he reasoned with himself, it wasn’t exactly untrue...

“Good, okay. Umm...” Zack could almost see the guy on the other side, shifting his weight nervously; afraid he was going to get his head bit off for whatever he was going to say next.

“What?” the SOLDIER decided to force the issue.

“We, uh, need some samples.” The SOLDIER could feel the sudden tension in Cloud’s body. Hojo’s methods for collecting samples had been… unpleasant. He stroked through damp hair, whispering assurances. The medic on the other side swallowed hard enough that Zack heard him, “just urine samples and, and stool samples if you think you can, um, manage it. Nothing invasive.”

“What do you mean?” Zack asked.

“I have containers, sir. If you think you can...” The tech poked his head through the curtain. “Do you think the Corporal will be able to...” he stopped unable to continue because he was blushing so hard. It was cute, and reassuring. Zack doubted the man would be so uncomfortable if he had no scruples.

“All I can do is ask, right?” Zack put Cloud back on the bench, letting him lean back against the wall, before walking over to the lab guy, “You got them with you?”
The tech held up four lidded sample cups, “I’ve already labelled them, sir, so you don’t have to.” Zack took them. “I’ll just, um, wait out here.” The tech left in a hurry and Zack watched him run away.

“Fuck, Cloud,” he laughed, staring at the containers. This was something new. “I’ll trade you the boots if you can poop on command.”

The General strode through the camp, nodding in response to the salutes and greetings he received. He wasn’t friendly or approachable, he never had been and he knew it, but he’d be damned if he allowed himself to return to being cold. Before Nibelheim, before his dip in the mako stream, he’d been completely unknown in his own army. People knew what he represented, of course, his reputation and ShinRa’s omniscience had ensured respect and obedience. ShinRa was no longer considered all-knowing or all-powerful. Important, yes, but not one step down from the gods. And Sephiroth no longer considered himself ShinRa’s ‘Silver General’ even if the press still called him that.

Actually, his reputation had changed somewhat, in ways that still managed to baffle the silver-haired warrior. He was no longer considered an ‘ice man’ or heartless. Instead he was a tragic romantic hero. He’d have to remember to get Zack the graphic novel adaptation of ‘The Nibelheim Event’ as it was unimaginatively called. Zack would laugh, but Sephiroth had barely recognized the story, nor could he see himself in the lines of the mountainous main character. Didn’t the artists even realize Commander Fair was taller than he was? Hadn’t they done any research?

And let’s not discuss the battle-hardened, decorated, Corporal they’d drawn to look about twelve. It made him feel like a pedophile...

“General!” That irritating voice full of upper-class privilege; Sephiroth was tempted to ignore it, “General Sephiroth, I must speak to you.”

“You are speaking.” Sephiroth didn’t slow his pace, forcing his so-called aide into a jog-trot. “This is hardly the place for a private conversation,” the Lieutenant chided. The effect was lost by the jiggle in his voice caused by the brutal pace. It didn’t improve the quality of it, either. The grating, nasal tone was a reminder of so many of ShinRa’s old executives, including Hojo, that Sephiroth often had a hard time not pulling Masamune out and running the irritant through. Rufus had politely but urgently requested that the General not kill the spy they knew about.

It was just one more reason for Zack to be okay... he wanted the First back as his Second-in-Command; then he could deal with Hinz and the rest.

“It is here or nowhere.” Soon, the General knew, his ‘aide’ would be out of breath. However the man had achieved his rank, it hadn’t been through outstanding physical conditioning.

“Very well, since you insist on doing this in public,” puff, puff, he went. Sephiroth barely listened. “Why didn’t you inform me that you had retrieved somebody else in the lab? That kind of information could be vital—”

“He isn’t a dog or an article of clothing,” Sephiroth stated.

“Uh... what,” Hinz stuttered, “What are you talking about?”
“Pets and property can be retrieved. He is neither.” The idea of someone owning another person was a touchy subject to the former experiment. “He was there. We found him. He came with us. It’s very simple.”

“He is Vincent Valentine, a very notorious Turk in the old days. His... his rescue,” he altered his wording with a disdainful sniff and more panting, “would make a great story. It might even take people’s attention off your scandalous sleeping arrangements. After all, everyone thought he’d died —”

“A former ShinRa employee who’d been declared dead but discovered perfectly alive shouldn’t be a big story. It happens so often.” Sephiroth stopped, turned and stared down at Hinz. He knew his eyes were glowing in annoyance, he didn’t care. “I have already sent a complete mission report to President Shinra. He will decide how to inform the press. Am I clear, Lieutenant?”

Lieutenant Hinz paled but still pursed his mouth in disapproval. The effect was ruined when he had to open it again to gasp in another breath. “It’s clear, General.” Sephiroth resumed his march, Hinz jogged alongside him, “but I really think you ought to consider the bene—”

“Have you heard from the Engineers yet on the construction of the Nibelheim base?” Sephiroth interrupted.

“No, sir,” the Lieutenant managed to respond.

“I would like you to speak to the Commander and see if our projections on time and materials are still accurate or do we need to revisit them. Now that we actually hold the valley, can he see problems or opportunities that we did not foresee? Follow him around, talk to him, take notes as he works, whatever it takes. I’d like the report by tomorrow noon.” Sephiroth looked at his ‘aide’ knowing the man wanted to protest that such a task was beneath him, that he had better things to do, but he couldn’t. A report like this did definitely fall within the job description of the General’s Aide.

“Yes, sir,” Hinz said, barely keeping the sullen pout from his voice.

“Very good. Dismissed, Lieutenant.” Sephiroth nodded to acknowledge the officer’s sloppy salute and then watched, with satisfaction as the spying little bug headed toward the transports. Compiling the report would keep Hinz busy most of the night, and away from his ‘secret’ communications device. Whatever information that was revealed following today’s events, he trusted Rufus Shinra and Tseng far more than Hinz’s employers. He made a quick call to the camp’s Security department on his PHS before continuing his journey to the airstrip. He had other things to do so they would have to keep an eye on the Lieutenant.

Hinz, he thought with a scowl, he really wished he could kill that man.

Zack talked almost constantly from the time they left the shower. He told Cloud where they were moving to, what tests were being run and what they were for. He made sure the techs talked to them too because Hojo’s assistants had stopped doing that early on. It was too dangerous to talk to the specimens; they became human and all of a sudden the techs were slipping them extra food or trying to be nice and then Zack would see a white lab coat floating in a tube of green liquid.

That wouldn’t happen to these guys, so Zack wanted them to talk; about the tests, about their lives, about the latest freaking gossip, if that was what it took to make them seem more human than
Hojo’s people had. He knew he felt safer hearing their voices and he was sure Cloud did too. A couple times the blond had tensed and shivered and Zack knew he wanted to bring out his wings and chase them all away. Zack had done some fast talking then.

To help keep the blond’s mind off all the tests, and to keep his promise, he let Cloud shuffle around in his bare feet. It had caused comment, after all they’d both just gotten clean, but he snarled that Cloud didn’t want to wear shoes and that had stopped that.

Zack put one arm around the blond’s waist and drew the other over his shoulder, and moved slowly enough that it could almost seem like his friend was moving under his own power. It was awkward; Cloud was still at least half a head shorter than the tall SOLDIER, but it was a little more dignified, and certainly less intimate, than Seph’s carry had been. Besides, part of the point of not wearing boots was to let Cloud touch the ground.

Sometimes, when they were in chairs doing another test: vision, lungs, blood pressure and so on… and on and on, Zack swore he could see his friend flexing his toes on the flooring. Just little movements, hardly noticeable if you weren’t looking for them, but definite flexing… probably.

Who the hell was he kidding? He knew he was wishful thinking, but one day, maybe soon, Cloud would be crunching his toes and wiggling his fingers and doing all the things that a healthy, young male does.

“Just one last test, Commander and, uh, Corporal. This one could be a little disturbing but I assure you, we’ve tried to minimize the risks.” The plump technician looked tired and rumpled sitting behind his desk, and also scared and excited. Zack could practically hear Cloud growling at the poor guy. Or maybe he was growling. He gave a mental shrug.

“What kind of risks,” the SOLDIER asked.

He leaned forward, hands clasped in front of him, the picture of well-meaning integrity. Zack had to grit his teeth. “Well, um, I’m not sure how much was explained to you about the, uh, relationship between SOLDIER First Class and Jenova—”

“A lot, actually,” Zack interrupted ruthlessly. It was not a happy subject.

“Yes, well, um,” Now he was leaning back and drumming his fingers on the edge of the table. The SOLDIER braced himself, inching slightly closer to his friend; this was going to be bad. “The levels of Jenova cells in both your systems is,” he waved his hands tightly, “the highest we’ve ever found outside of, um, the General. That and the, uh, mako concentration in your blood means that you should be dead or, you know, insane and under Jenova’s control.”

The tech leaned forward again, “It could be a result of the ‘Nibelheim Effect’ but there’s such a small population sample that we can’t be sure…”

“You mean there were only two survivors out of a whole village, right?” Zack’s voice was harsh. The SOLDIER could feel his friend quivering whether from anger or fear or grief. It didn’t matter to Zack. He gave up on dignity and pulled Cloud’s head to rest on his chest, giving whatever comfort he could.

“Um, yeah, exactly,” He leaned back once again, away from the dark-haired warrior’s anger. “And, of course, Ms. Lockhart doesn’t have any, uh, Jenova cells whereas Corporal Strife is, um, saturated with them so it would, um, hardly be a basis for comparison or, uh, anything at all really.
Plus there’s the, uh, *mutation* to the virus that’s occurring in the, um, Corporal.” The tech was leaning forward again. It was like watching a ping-pong game.

“The what,” Zack asked flatly. His fingers stopped carding the blond’s spiky hair.

“Um, mutation,” the man repeated, “For whatever reason, Corporal Strife’s body is, um, *altering* the Jenova virus. It, it could be the cause of his odd reaction to the, uh, mako overdose, although, it doesn’t explain your reaction, Commander. Um,” he looked Zack right in the eyes, for the first time during the interview, “Your Jenova cells are, are also mutating but not as noticeably as in the, uh, Corporal.”

“Is this the part where you ask us for more blood and tissue samples? Maybe a scrape off our bones or some spinal fluid because if it is…” He would fight, he decided. He would pull this whole fucking tent down before he let them do that to either of them.

“Nnnng,” Cloud seemed to agree with him. Or maybe the blond thought he was gripping him too hard again. Zack concentrated on relaxing as he saw the tech back away, desperately waving off the suggestion.

“No, no, no. Nothing like that, no. The Sense materia is more than up to reading that kind of, um, information. Actually, this last test is, is standard for First Classes before going out in the field. So that we, know how close they are to, um, tipping over the edge, so to speak. The thing is we’d, uh, like to bring in a couple more people, with Sense materia, to, um, monitor you both to, to see how your cells react to it.” He was sitting forward again.

React to it? React to what, Zack wondered, annoyed by the guy’s irritating hesitation. What was this guy pussy-footing around? “What’s the test?”

That was as far as he got. With an inarticulate growl, barely audible to human ears, Cloud brought out his wings and spread them to their fullest extent. He lifted them, adding nearly a metre to his height and double that to his width. They quivered with contained violence and Zack, knocked forward a little, was reminded that birds could actually be quite strong, and very vicious, and their bones were among the strongest found in nature. If anyone took a wallop from one of the major bones in Cloud’s wings, they would definitely feel it.

The lab guy obviously knew the blond Corporal wasn’t happy with the suggestion. He’d backed up so fast he’d knocked his chair half over. He probably could’ve recovered his balance but he was too busy gawking at Cloud’s display. Over went the chair, crash went the tech, and Zack could hear footsteps rapidly closing on their room.

The tech didn’t bother getting to his feet, but instead knelt on the other side of the table, visible only from the chin up, eyes wide, . “Oh my goodness,” he exclaimed, “I didn’t believe them but those are wonderful!”

He turned his breathless gaze to the dark-haired SOLDIER, “I have to disagree with my colleagues. There’s no way Corporal Strife is mako-poisoned.” That was good to hear, Zack thought. Then the tech continued, “He’s suffering from something entirely new.”

Zack turned to his young friend, still holding his wings high and ready to strike. “Now you’ve done it, Spikey. We’ll never get out of here.”
"Sephiroth." Reeve’s greeting, like the man himself, was a little too friendly.

It had taken the General a long time to believe it wasn’t just a false personality, like he remembered Palmer and Heidegger’s as being. He could also acknowledge that, as much as he didn’t like being dragged into politics, and Reeve Tuesti was all about the politics, the former head of Urban Development was more reasonable and much less self-serving than most of Shin-Ra’s old board had been. He actually tried to help the citizen’s who depended on the company for their lives.

When he wasn’t off negotiating world-altering peace treaties, that is.

“Tuesti,” Sephiroth shook hands with Neo-ShinRa’s Vice-President as was required by the rules of social behaviour, but his attention was on the two strangers standing back from them and looking discreetly over the camp. They had straight, dark hair, noticeably sallow skin and cautious eyes. Wutaians… and one of them wasn’t exactly a stranger.

“Lord Godo,” the General said. He bowed carefully to the older Wutai; not too deep, a salute between equals. “I am honoured to have you here,” Sephiroth said. He spoke New Common rather than Wutaian. He knew the language: could read it, understand it, and he could, technically, speak it. It was just, as Zack had once commented, that he made it sound like two geese fighting… in a barrel.

“General Sephiroth,” Godo acknowledged. “This is Lord Tonaga.” He waved his hand at his younger travelling companion. “We are pleased to see you well.” He didn’t mean that ‘we’ in the old imperial sense. As the older of the two Wutaians, Lord Godo would do most of the chatting but what he said would bind Lord Tonaga as well, so when he said ‘we’ he meant it literally.

“Would you care for refreshments,” Sephiroth opened the exchange, “We would be honoured to serve you.”

“We would not have you go to any trouble as we are not worthy of your concern,” Lord Godo responded as expected.

Wutaian culture was ancient. Its rituals and customs had been refined over centuries. Normally, Sephiroth could appreciate the dignified rhythm of the formal phrases and actions. Today, at this moment, he’d rather have the whole thing over with. He swallowed his sigh and continued with the script of negotiation. “It is never trouble to serve honourable men. I only hope that our meagre fare will be satisfactory. Everything is ready so you will not be inconvenienced.”

“If the refreshments are already prepared then it is only proper for us to be satisfied. We would be honoured to partake.”

“It is we who are honoured that you would indulge us.”

Sephiroth waved them onto the path to the Officer’s Mess. It was a short walk through tidy lines of clean tents with busy soldiers mending or practicing. All of them hand-picked by the Master-Sergeant Sephiroth had chosen to organize the event. Nothing of significance was talked about during the walk and nothing of significance would be discussed until Lord Godo had finished at least one cup of tea and had eaten at least two of the dainties they’d be presented with. The longer this took, the more respect was being shown.
Master-Sergeant Lutton had outdone himself in the Officer’s Mess. He’d found sheets of bright fabric to drape over the tent’s standard army-blah colour. Small potted plants, most likely dug from the surrounding hills this morning, graced the corners. An odd-shaped brazier, built from what looked like an irreparably damaged bumper, held slow-burning, aromatic logs. He’d even managed a small water feature that burbled happily on the raised dais where they’d be sitting. All the elements were represented: earth, wood, metal, fire and water—and it looked pretty too.

The officers standing beside the lower tables had all been honoured in some way during the current campaign. The General had thought it fitting that they get to see such an historic occasion. They could ‘dine out on it’, another one of Zack’s sayings, for the rest of their lives. Besides, they deserved better food than what was usually served in the Regular Mess.

Sephiroth was surprised to see Captain Carter back from Cosmo Canyon. He couldn’t have adjusted to his new leg so soon, but then he saw the crutches leaning discretely against the corner. The General nodded to the man, acknowledging him and his injury. The officer nodded back fiercely, looking briefly at the Wutaian Clan Lords before making himself stand even straighter, as if he wanted to do the General proud.

Sephiroth suddenly realized these men weren’t here for the show, or to gather a tale to tell their children and their children’s children. They weren’t even here for the food. He looked at them all, neat and proud, medals shining. They were here for him. They wore the Neo-ShinRa uniform but they fought for him. They were proud of him and for him. It was... unexpected, and unexpectedly touching. Sephiroth dipped his head, hiding the rare blush his near-white skin could never hope to hide.

He led the way to the raised platform that held their table. Tuesti went first to prove it wasn’t a trap, then Tonaga, followed by Godo and then Sephiroth. While Godo and Tonaga, as guests, chose their seats, the General turned to his officers. He straightened, placed his hand over his heart and bowed slightly. “Take your seats, please,” he said. As one, the assembled officers returned the salute, and then did as requested.

Sephiroth turned in time to see Lord Godo exchange a significant look with Tonaga. The elder Lord nodded slightly, as if they’d confirmed a hypothesis. The Silver General looked at Neo-ShinRa’s Vice-President, but Reeve just shrugged. He didn’t know what had happened either.

“Arrrghh!” Tifa yelled before bashing the keyboard.

“I don’t think that will facilitate data recovery,” Vincent commented mildly flipping through a handwritten journal before setting it aside.

“I don’t think anything will facilitate data recovery from this junk. I thought these people were supposed to be scientists,” she stated angrily, outrage and disgust in her voice. “What kind of scientist only takes notes when the mood strikes them? And Hojo let them get away with that!”

“Hojo was, is, a very bad scientist. Many of discoveries credited to him were actually the work of assistants that he would steal and take the credit for. The assistant would then become a specimen and fade from existence.”

Tifa turned to stare at him, “You knew this?”
“I did.” Vincent confirmed, taking out another notebook to examine.

“Why didn’t you say something? Report him to someone?”

“I did,” he repeated, “I was told that as long as the results were acceptable, then it was no business of mine how Hojo obtained them. He was a very good influence peddler.”

She glared, fairly quivering now and half out of her seat, “And that’s it! That’s all that happened?” Another moment and she’d slug him... or try. *Ooh yes, pretty mortal, please try.*

“Then he shot me,” he didn’t look up, “in the head.”

She dropped back down to her seat, “He shot you because you knew he stole people’s work?”

“For that and... other reasons,” he still didn’t look at her, but it was time to redirect the conversation, “Have you found anything on the discs?”

She turned back to the computer screen. “Fragments that mention Dr. Crescent’s work on Chaos and Omega and something called Protomateria. Most of it is just stupid, a repeat of what she said in the hologram. ‘Chaos precedes Omega. Omega signifies the end of the world, blah, blah, blah’. I haven’t found the stuff she said she’d leave for you.” Tifa sighed, leaning her chin on her propped up arm. “Instead I’ve found out that Hojo was jealous of her brains, dismissive of her obsession with Omega-Chaos, and had suspected that she had a lover; one of the other scientists.”

Vincent’s hand stilled in the middle of the page, “He says that she had a lover?”

“Not exactly but it’s implied in some of the comments he makes about hormones affecting her mental processes. I haven’t found any of Hojo’s personal notes. One of the other scientists speculated a bit more openly in his journals.” She snorted derisively, “Journals! Yeah, right. It’s all gossip, rumour and daydreams. He mentions you,” she turned back to smile at him. Vincent ignored the teasing look she sent him. “He says you had all the female staff panting after you and you didn’t even notice. He also says there was some scandal in Midgar and that’s the reason an Ace Turk like you was assigned to a backwater lab like Nibelheim.”

Not even by the flicker of an eyelash did Vincent reveal anything of what he was thinking. It hadn’t been a scandal, it had been an atrocity, and he had been responsible. He added the journal he’d been looking at to the growing stack of useless ones, and took another out of the bin.

“Even if you don’t say anything, I bet I could get on the World-Wide Network, look up the old newspapers and find out. A lot of old papers were digitized and put on it.” She stopped, a look of enlightenment on her face, “Of course! Her thesis would be on the Network.”

“What do you mean?” Vincent prodded when the dark-haired fighter shut up.

“Before all this stuff happened, Midgar had created a world-wide computer network, anyone with access could upload anything onto it and it would be stored,” she waved her hand, “somewhere. Kalm U, where Dr. Crescent earned her degree, uploaded decades’ worth of theses. Dr. Crescent’s might be one of them and, according to what I have found, it was all about Omega and Chaos. It could contain the information we need.” Tifa sprang up from her chair, “We just need to find a computer with a Network connection.”
She would’ve run out of the room right then, but Vincent put out his hand to stop her. “We should
still finish up in here. Her notes must be somewhere.” Even Chaos agreed with that logic.

Tifa opened her mouth to protest, then closed it, then opened it again. Then she shuddered. She
raised bruised-looking eyes to his, “Those people were *sick*. The stuff they did...”

Vincent nodded in understanding and lowered his hand. He wasn’t good at offering comfort, but he
could try. “Why don’t you take a break? Maybe do something physical; a short walk or some
squats. To clear your mind.”

Tifa sighed. “Thanks,” she patted his arm, “but I don’t think squats are gonna work.”
They were in Dr. Imeera’s office waiting for the final diagnosis, or as close as the doctors could get to knowing what was wrong with Cloud, and Zack couldn’t sit still. He was doing squats; his old stress-relieving, time-wasting, stand-by. It didn’t stop his mind from churning. Something was off. Cloud had pulled out his wings in a major display of temper and all they did was ‘ooh’ and ‘aww’ and then act like it was no big deal.

They’d managed to talk Zack and Cloud into letting them run the test, repeating that it was SOP for any fighter suspected of hosting Jenova cells. They’d been fascinated by the results—apparently neither one of them had reacted right, and the medics had all walked away in a white-coated mass babbling about ‘mutations’ and ‘immunities’ and ‘nullifications’.

No explanations just that fucking annoying word ‘fascinating’.

“What if they want ... to do more tests?” He talked out his thoughts, “Sense materia ... was great but what if ... they want samples? ... Do we let them put ... needles in us? ... What if they want to ... cut pieces of our skin ... or something? ... D’you think Seph would ... forgive me if I levelled ... the medical tent and ... killed all the staff?”

“I might be a little miffed,” said a firm, female voice from the back corner of the room. She’d barely started talking before Zack had drawn his Buster and assumed a defensive stance in front of Cloud. It took him a moment to register who had come in through a side entrance. It took another moment to realize that she wasn’t exactly an enemy, despite the white coat.

Dr. Imeera froze hands up, presenting as little threat as possible. It didn’t help Zack calm down to realize that the doctor was staring beyond him. Cloud still had his wings out and Zack knew the blond had reacted to his reaction by doing the whole threat display thing again. The other lab guy had been equally as fascination.

“So what do you know of mako,” she asked as an opening. Her tone, one of impersonal professionalism, made him grind his teeth, so his response came out a little harsher than it might have.

“I know that it hurts like fuck when it’s injected into your muscles, even in its diluted SOLDIER form. I know that in its pure state it causes the muscles to convulse so much it rips the tendons off the bone. I know that repeated injections cause the veins to rupture,” he leaned back obnoxiously. “Ingesting it causes crystals to form in your stomach acid which are sharp enough to slice open the intestines leading to bleeding and colitis. I know that immersion in even diluted amounts of it cause hallucinations and psychotic episodes. Should I continue?” He knew he sounded bitter. He couldn’t
care. Three years of Hojo...

He wanted to break something. He squeezed his hands together, grinding the bones until they hurt. Softly, a long feather reached out and stroked his arm. It fluttered over his hands, blowing a gentle breeze. With a snort, he released his clenching hands and used his fingertips to stroke the feathers presented.

“How long did they know what was going on, Doc? How long did ShinRa let Hojo play?” He answered himself, “At least thirty because that’s how old Sephiroth is. And for what? What the fuck did Hojo ever do that was so great?”

“Ngghh,” it almost sounded like Cloud was agreeing with him.

At least Dr. Imeera looked ashamed. She had to have known, or at least suspected, that all wasn’t right in the Science Department. “We’ve recently come to the conclusion that much of what Hojo did was, was less than ethical—”

Zack snorted derisively.

She didn’t look away from him. He could give her points for that. “I can’t offer any excuse, except to say that he had the trust of the most powerful man in the world.” She cleared her throat, “Whatever we may feel about what happened in the past, we are here to try and help your friend. When I asked the question, I was asking what you knew about mako in general; where it comes from, the difference between addiction and poisoning.”

“Materia and mako are the same thing just in different forms. Materia’s concentrated so it has more power than mako. Mako was combined with other things to make street drugs, extremely addictive but not directly lethal. I know some SOLDIER candidates had bad reactions to the test injection and were taken out of the program. I assume they had something like mako poisoning.” He stopped. He could’ve said more but it would have just been bitter, unhelpful ranting. Gods! Every time he turned around, the rage rose inside him. It made him feel crazed and out of control and he hated it.

Fuck appearances, he decided, and scooped up his winged friend and plopped him in his lap where he could hold and stroke, sooth and be soothed. It was better than ripping her clinical fucking head off...

“That’s actually more than most people know.” She’d blinked at his abrupt action but didn’t comment. “One thing we’ve learned from various sources is that mako and materia are the Lifestream in non-gaseous form.”

Zack snorted, “Lifestream? That’s religion not science.”

“Or maybe it’s magic, like your friend’s wings.” She nodded at Cloud and Zack shifted, disliking any interest shown in his friend. “Nothing else explains where the SOLDIER First Classes put these,” she waved her hand at the Corporal, “additions when they’re not being used.

“Wait, what?” Zack’s mouth fell open, “other Firsts have wings, not just Sephiroth?” It felt like a ten tonne weight had just fallen on him.

“Wings are the most common,” she answered, “but some have claws instead of fingers and toes. And then there’s Lieutenant Luxiere’s... tentacles. Science doesn’t explain where those go. Your lack of, um, alternate limbs is actually rather rare considering how long you’ve been a First Class.”

Zack ignored her in favour of trying to take in the other stuff; wings, claws and shit... Luxiere...
oily, creepy, Luxiere had *tentacles*? Those messages he used to send to Zack had made the First feel all weirded out, but what the *fuck*...?

“Didn’t the General tell you,” she asked, finally managing to break into his thoughts.

“Tell? No, no. I think... I think he started a couple times but,” this time he shrugged, “he got interrupted. That’s why Kusiel didn’t...” Why Kusiel didn’t accept the promotion to First Class—he didn’t want to risk developing tentacles. Well, who would? Who’d want to develop any of that stuff?

“IT’s possibly a side-effect of the Jenova virus. The General has identified all the First’s additions—”

“Mutations,” he corrected; might as well call a cow a cow.

She glared at him but he just looked stonily back. “Alright, yes, the mutations, as things he saw on the body of Jenova in the reactor, so it would make sense that it would be caused by the Jenova cells the Firsts received but science doesn’t explain where they go when they’re not on display or being used.”

“Magic.”

She nodded decisively, “Magic.”

“Ggghh,” it was a question.

“Yeah, other people have wings too.” He snorted in disbelief, “Fuck, *tentacles*.” He couldn’t stop thinking about that, imagining what it would be like...

“He’s quite fast on them, and he can use them to cross small bodies of water, but they are quite disturbing to see.”

“I can imagine,” Zack agreed dryly. He couldn’t help but think that he and Cloud didn’t have it so bad after all.

“Ggghh.” A different question, accompanied by a poke in the shins by strong primary feathers.

“Aaah, I’ll think about it,” Zack replied evasively. Dr. Imeera was looking at him strangely. “He just wanted to know if it was okay to keep his wings out now. We always had to hide them before.”

“Buy the lie, he prayed, buy the lie, Doc.”

“Well his wings may not be completely unique but that certainly is. He should be completely unresponsive in every aspect of his, his being and yet he does *that* with his wings,” she waved her hands in their direction before setting them back in front of her, neatly clasped. “And so we return to the point of this meeting. Your friend and his odd reaction to the mako overdose he received.”

“Ah, yes. That,” his tone was resigned, “I suppose it’s better than discussing tentacles.”

A shake of the wings seemed to agree with him.

“Are you done?” Vincent’s voice growled into the silence making Tifa jump a little.

Sam had left with his boxes ages ago, and they had settled into a quiet work routine. Well, Vincent was very silent and Tifa mostly was although, every so often, she’d jump up and leave the tiny space. The first time she’d done that, Vincent had followed only to see her moving through her
katas. Since he’d figured she was working out stress caused by whatever she’d read, he had left her alone, but he couldn’t help but notice that she was very, very good. Their sparring session tomorrow would probably be more challenging than he’d originally thought. She might actually manage to hurt the former Turk.

He wasn’t the only one looking forward to the contest.

“Just about, a couple more folders to search,” she answered. They’d found a few reports, some fragmented data files and a few second-hand journal entries, but that was it. There was such a... a lack of entries on or by Dr. Crescent that they’d speculated about a deliberate campaign by Dr. Hojo to wipe all of his wife’s work from the system; to erase her in effect. “You’ve finished with the journals?”

“As much as possible given the limited time. It might be advisable to make a more thorough examination of them.” An examination performed by someone with more patience. Deciphering the mess those people called ‘writing’ had all his inner beasts growling in disgust.

“Oh Goddess!” Tifa called out then covered her mouth with one shaky hand. She turned large eyes to the gunman.

“You found something,” he asked calmly, ignoring the clamouring of his beasts as they were further stimulated by her obvious panic.

She dropped her hand, “Um, yeah, but,” she paused, blinking at him in sympathy. Why sympathy, he wondered? They’d already discovered the files that documented some of what was done to him. She’d been horrified and angry on his behalf. Then she’d asked several intelligent questions about what might happen during their sparring session tomorrow. Her easy acceptance of what he contained had astounded him but, as she explained, she was used to dealing with SOLDIER First Classes who apparently had their own ‘additions’.

At her insistence he’d taken a copy to carry with him. If he was ever in need of medical attention she felt it was only fair that the personnel knew what they could be dealing with.

“Is it about me?”

“Yeah, well, in a way.” She pushed her chair back, “I think you should read it for yourself.”

Vincent tightened his hold on his beasts, although Chaos wouldn’t be completely suppressed, of course. He placed his human hand carefully on the desk amidst the normal clutter of an area used for actual work, and leaned over to read the screen.

The entry hadn’t been written by Hojo or Lucrecia, or any of the scientists he remembered from his time at the mansion. It was written by a lab technician he’d never met. The unknown technician had admired what Hojo had done, how he’d manipulated his wife into becoming an experiment. He noted how the Professor bragged about using Lucrecia’s guilt against her. Guilt that she’d become involved with the son of her mentor, a mentor whom she’d killed with her carelessness and arrogance; guilt that she’d become pregnant by a man other than her husband.

It couldn’t be...

Vincent scanned the page but there were no identifiers; no way to know who had written the journal. Vincent skipped to the next page, looking for more. This, what the technician had written, it was merely speculation. He couldn’t know for sure that Lucrecia’s child had been...

Hojo had played up the fact that her chosen lover was nearly a decade younger than she; she’d be
old and he’d still be young and vibrant. Then there was the fact that the Turk had a very bright future ahead of him except, as a Turk, Vincent wasn’t allowed to have a family. The baby she carried would end his career, and Turks ended their careers only one way—dead.

Then the technician detailed the injections the scientist had talked his pregnant wife into allowing, for both herself and her child. When she’d died the man had written ‘serves the bitch right’. He chuckled as he described what they had done to the baby, Lucrecia’s baby, Sephiroth. The technician had believed it okay to test new substances on the boy, to treat him as a specimen rather than a child, because the child hadn’t been Hojo’s, and Hojo was his God.

He’d written with pride of the tortures they’d inflicted on the man who’d made Hojo a cuckold. The technician had assisted Hojo as he’d played with Vincent’s beasts, adding to them, changing them, forcing them to emerge and then go back into Vincent’s being. This technician, he’d had no problem with the experiments Hojo had subjected the Turk to because, as he put it, ‘It was a good revenge against the man who’d fucked his wife and gotten her pregnant.’ He went on to comment that he’d do the same thing to any guy who messed with his woman.

Then, a year after Sephiroth’s birth, the entries stopped. Vincent flipped through the screens looking for something, anything more. There was nothing.

Vincent wanted to reach into the past and rip the man apart. All of his beasts were awake and clamouring for release. He wasn’t sure he could hold them.

“I need solitude,” he announced.

Tifa nodded in understanding. “We’re still on for sparring tomorrow?”

“I will find you,” he confirmed. Then he raced from the room, from the tent, away from the camp and from innocent and vulnerable lives. He ran until there was nothing to prevent him from releasing the anger, the pain, the Chaos.

He had a son.

“Normally, mako has one of three effects on the person who uses it, in whatever form,” Dr. Imeera lectured. “They utilize it, they enjoy it, or they are overwhelmed by it.”

“Can’t say I ever enjoyed it,” Zack argued.

“Not the injection, no, but the effects of it. As a SOLDIER you would have used the extra power and speed it gave you to enhance your own abilities. Remember, mako is just another form of the LifeStream that means when people say it makes them feel ‘as strong as ten people’ it is literal, not symbolic or a hyperbole.”

“You mean they’ve been injecting dead people in my veins?” Oh shit, he was going to be sick. Cloud’s wings fluttered. “It’s not funny, Spike.”

“That a very... um, unusual interpretation,” she was openly struggling not to use words like ‘peculiar’ or ‘disgusting’, “but not... not accurate.”

Zack lifted sceptical eyebrows. He’d always envied Seph’s ability to raise only one as it added a touch of elegant scorn to the motion. He really wanted to show that disdain at this moment. Still, he managed to telegraph his disbelief to Dr. Imeera.

“At least not really,” she frowned, “I’m not sure how to explain it.” Zack just continued looking at her, telling her that she’d better damn well try.
She stared down at her hands, her frown now one of concentration. She hummed a little then placed open hands palm down on the table before looking up at him again. “Professor Bugenhagen of Cosmo Canyon is our expert on the Lifestream. The way he explains it is all humans die. Their bodies dissolve and return to the Planet. That we knew. What we didn’t know, didn’t bother investigating, is what happens to their consciousness, their hearts and their souls when their bodies are gone.” She narrowed her eyes in thought, “Maybe a better way of saying it is that some people knew but it was considered religion, not science, and therefore unimportant.”

She slashed a hand in a cutting motion as if to discard that sideline. “Anyway, the soul also returns to the Planet in the form of spirit energy. We now believe that everything on this Planet; people, birds, trees, all living things has spirit energy, and when anything dies their spirit returns to the Planet. All these spirits merge with one another and roam the Planet. They roam, converge, and divide; forming unseen rivers we call the Lifestream.” She looked at him to see if he understood.

“Still sounds like I’ve been injected with dead people,” was his caustic response, “and maybe a dead bug or two.”

“Alright, perhaps,” she conceded, “but that’s not really the point. We’re trying to figure out what happened to Corporal Strife.” She clasped her hands together. “Perhaps a better way to describe it is a beach.”

Again with the eyebrows. Maybe he should ask Seph how he learned to lift only one.

She nodded, confirming her inner thoughts. “Think of the Lifestream as the ocean. Most people stay on the beach, only going into the water occasionally; usually when they die. They barely dip their toes into the Lifestream.

“SOLDIERs would be like surfers. They go out deep and ride the surface of the ocean, enjoying the power and speed, in control of their environment for the most part.” She looked at Zack to see if the analogy made sense to him and he nodded shortly. Once the initial sickness wore off, mako injection often had the feel of riding a wave.

“Mako addicts love swimming in the water,” she continued, “playing in it, surrounding themselves with it, but they stay in relatively shallow water and are always aware of themselves as swimmers. You can call to them from shore and they will respond. They can leave the water any time they choose, they just chose not to.” Another look to check if she was being understood. Another nod in return.

“Victims of mako poisoning are drowning in the deep ocean. They can’t tell up from down, let alone how to find the shore.”

“You yell at them and they can’t hear,” Zack paraphrased.

“Exactly. They are so far from the surface they have forgotten there is one in that they barely know they have a body waiting for them.” She explained further, “Corporal Strife shows all the outward signs of mako poisoning; catatonia, unresponsive to physical stimulus; light in the eyes, tendon reflex—”

“You tried to tickle his feet in the lab...” Zack said, enlightened.

“Yes, it’s a standard test. He didn’t respond to any of them. But you talk to him and he responds. His wings,” she waved a hand tightly in exasperation, “he communicates with his wings. I mean, look at them...” she pointed down where Cloud was running his terminal feathers over his bare feet. “He shouldn’t be doing that.” The feathers stopped moving.
“S’okay, Spike, the Doc’s just weirded out,” Zack murmured to his friend. A questioning hum asked for confirmation, “Yeah, I’m sure. Go ahead if it feels nice.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Dr. Imeera said flatly. “There have been thousands of documented cases of mako addiction and mako poisoning, plus all the research that’s been done over the years,” she held up her hand, “and not just by Hojo. Mako was considered a ‘wonder material’, and everybody and their chocobos were investigating its properties. But in all that research and all those years, I’ve never heard about anything like the Corporal’s response.”

“He’s not a specimen any more, Doc,” he growled, tightening his grip protectively.

She waved it away, “I realize that, Commander. However, that doesn’t change the fact that we have no real idea how to treat someone who doesn’t fit into any of the known classifications. We can guess, but that makes him an experiment once again,” she leaned forward, “Despite what you may think of the medical profession—not without cause, I grant you, I do understand that both of you have survived a horrible ordeal and I will do my best to minimize the trauma and to help you both readjust. However, physically, there’s not much I can do.” She looked almost angry, though it seemed to be directed more at herself than at them.

“You,” she pointed at Zack, “are remarkably healthy: lots of indications of past trauma—physically they’re all healed. Some signs of current malnutrition, easily fixed although we will be giving you a vitamin supplement to take. Corporal Strife on the other hand,” she turned her gaze to the blond who had settled his wings on his back, tucking them in nice and tidy. She opened and closed her mouth a few times as if considering and discarding different approaches.

“Since he seems capable of performing simple tasks, he should also take the vitamins, but the best advice I have on dealing with whatever he’s suffering is time. If it’s an addiction then he’ll start to suffer withdrawals, so convulsions—anything from small twitches to major spasms. He may start to froth at the mouth, and it would likely have a green tinge. There may be vomiting, again with green tint.” She paused, clasping her fingers together once again. “If it’s mako poisoning then there’s not much anyone can do but wait and hope the effects wear off as the mako fades from his system.”

“How long?”

“To be honest, with the level of mako he has, it could take years. Blood transfusions might help but the results aren’t guaranteed.”

Wings stiffened even as the SOLDIER growled out, “No more hospitals.”

She fluttered her fingers a little before clasping them firmly together. Zack thought it was her body trying to express empathy to whatever aversion they’d have to being back in a medical environment, even though her mind objected to doing anything so human.

“If it is mako poisoning, there’s a possibility the damage to the neural systems will be permanent. We believe the amount of the damage and the ability to heal it is more a matter of strength of personality, and there’s not much we can do to give someone a strong personality when they’ve already been swallowed up by the Lifestream.” She paused, exhaling a noisy, frustrated sigh. “I’ve studied the Corporal’s military records and his psychiatric assessments don’t indicate an outgoing person. Self-effacing was actually the phrase used,” she said bluntly.

“Cloud’s not an attention grabber, but he’s stubborn and he’s strong and he’s disciplined. He made it from here to Midgar when he was fourteen, by seventeen he was already a Corporal. That should tell you something.” Cloud mantled his wings, showing off a little.
Dr. Imeera sat back in her chair with a shrug. “Hopefully it’s enough.

Lord Godo was showing Sephiroth a great deal of respect.

He had finished his cup of tea but he hadn’t finished even one of the dainties set in front of them. He’d taken a couple nibbles from this one, and a bite from that one. He’d sampled all the dishes set before them; he’d even set a couple pieces on his plate. What he hadn’t done was finish a single one. So while Tuesti and Tonaga, and the rest of the Mess ate heartily of the mouth-watering delicacies the kitchen had spent hours preparing, the General had to match Lord Godo bite for tiny bite.

If he had thought to order something to be brought to his tent it might have helped his patience.

There was no talk of ShinRa’s top scientist turning out to be an evil megalomaniac who had destroyed Midgar by creating a hyper-enhanced army right under Rupert Shinra’s oblivious nose. There was no mention of Sephiroth’s premature burial, his fourteen-month disappearance or his dramatic, but embarrassing, reappearance with the Red General—also previously declared dead by the company. They didn’t speak of the rise of other corporations and criminal organizations that wanted to take the ShinRa Electric Power Company’s place as the world power, nor how delicately Rufus was balancing all the crises to keep ShinRa in control.

No, they didn’t speak of anything like that.

Instead, they spoke, obliquely, of Rufus Shinra and how he differed from his father. They joked, discreetly, about the similarities of the incursions into Wutai in the past year and ShinRa’s invasion of fifteen years ago. They spoke, enthusiastically, about the joy of finding a worthy opponent to fight and the ecstasy to be found on the battlefield. They complimented each other, profusely, on each other’s fighting prowess, and they chatted, inevitably, about the weather.

It was tedious and his stomach was eating its way out through his spine.

Finally, finally, Lord Godo finished not one, but two of the savoury dainties. Then three, four, five and six in quick succession. And then a couple more. Sephiroth waved for more food. At last they were reaching the point of the meeting, or at least would start to. Sephiroth didn’t allow himself to sigh as he chewed on the morsel in his mouth, another one already in his hand, waiting.

The elderly Wutai Lord daintily brushed his fingertips on the cloth provided. “You have probably wondered why we are here and not on our way to Junon.”

Not really. “It had occurred to me.”

“Shinra’s son has promised Wutai many things in return for peace with us...”

“...and aid in fighting the evil Dr. Hojo,” Tonaga completed the sentence. This was the younger Lord’s task, to bring up in the negotiations the awkward truths that could cause the other party to be uncomfortable.

It might have embarrassed Rufus Shinra but for the small fact that the son had loathed his father and didn’t care that his father stupidity and gullibility had once protected the man who’d destroyed the company. Sephiroth was indifferent to anyone’s embarrassment. The truth was that ShinRa’s forces couldn’t hope to defeat the combined forces of Hojo, Jenova and Deepground while defending itself against the manoeuvres of ambitious corporate upstarts, rising criminal activity and Wutai insurgents, so Sephiroth merely nodded in acknowledgment of the facts.
Godo continued, a little flat-footed when the expected, formalized protests didn’t get spoken, “but the Shinras have made promises before…”

“…and not kept them.”

“That was the previous President. Rufus Shinra is entirely different,” Reeve broke in when it was obvious the General wasn’t going to argue that point either. How could he, when he agreed with the Wutai Lords? Except that, so far, Rufus had kept his promises. He allowed Sephiroth to run the army the way he saw fit, he made sure that resources and equipment were the best quality available, and he’d let the General hunt down his friends without comment.

“I have been favourably impressed with the new President.” It was as much as he was willing to offer but Godo and Tonaga exchanged those meaningful looks and minute nods again as if something profound had happened.

“We are willing to concede that the boy is not the father. We are here, after all, and not in Wutai.” Godo waved to indicate the tent, the camp and the continent.

“We will try his promises to see if he holds them true,” Tonaga added.

Reeve’s muttered, ‘he will’ was lost under Godo’s voice. “You, Lord Sephiroth, have never broken a promise.” The silver-haired warrior blinked in astonishment. “During the War you fought when and how you said you would. The troops under your command fought and behaved as you said they would. When you said the War was over, it was over.”

“You didn’t promise protection and then perfidiously allow the death of your ally,” Tonaga added. It was a reference to the death of Godo’s brother assassinated in error by a troop of ShinRa mercenaries. Not Turks, Sephiroth knew, Turks would never have made that kind of mistake.

“You promised to find your warrior friends, treacherously abandoned to Hojo by the old ShinRa, and we understand you have done that as well.” Godo continued, “If you give your word that you will enforce the treaty…”

“…and not lead troops to invade Wutai once Hojo is defeated…” Tonaga inserted.

“…then the Lords of Wutai will believe the words of Shinra and sign the treaty,” Lord Godo concluded.

Sephiroth had dipped his head early, hiding his expression of amusement. He’d known the Wutai Lords had insisted on this meeting before agreeing to see the President of Neo-ShinRa, but he certainly hadn’t expected this! Had Tuesti known what Lord Godo had planned to say, he wondered. He gave the dark Vice-President a surreptitious glance and received an equally covert nod in return. Tuesti had known, which meant Rufus Shinra knew as well.

Sephiroth assured them. “During the invasion of Wutai fifteen years ago, I obeyed my orders but that is all—”

“As any loyal soldier would do,” Godo complimented, “but it is known that your loyalties aren’t necessarily the same as they were fifteen years ago.” The General’s eyebrow lifted; it was an interesting way of putting it. Did they know more than had been released to the public, Sephiroth wondered.

Tonaga took over, “Our fear is that, once the current crisis is past, the ShinRa executive will look to re-conquer what was never meant to be theirs.”
Sephiroth’s brow rose in surprise at the unusually straight-forward statement. Despite the assurances Tuesti was churning out, it was a legitimate concern. Rufus didn’t appear to be his father but there were hints that Rupert’s early influence wasn’t completely eliminated. His father had done his best to turn the boy into an arrogant sociopath, believing only in himself, respecting no one and nothing. The recent upheavals had shaken the boy, caused him to rethink many of his father’s practices... or that’s what he wanted the world to believe. Sephiroth hadn’t spent enough time in Rufus Shinra’s company to be able to judge.

It wasn’t the only possibility for betrayal though.

Not everyone on the ShinRa board wanted a kinder, gentler company. There were organizations as ruthless and bloody as ShinRa had ever been who had found those discontented board members and formed a vicious partnership. If they could whisper in Rufus’ ear about past glories and future riches, and have him listen, they would be happy. ShinRa Electric Power Company would make money as it had in the past, and much of the profits would be siphoned off, as they had been in the past. Only the final destination would have changed.

The last option was always to assassinate the boy and install their own puppet as President. Retaking Wutai, with its wealth of natural resources would likely be a priority for such a leader.

At least it had revealed to Sephiroth why these two War Lords were here. “You wish to have my word that I won’t lead the ShinRa army into Wutai if I were ever ordered to do so,” he clarified.

Not by a twitch did either of the Wutaians reveal any discomfiture at Sephiroth’s blunt statement. “If ever such an order should be given,” Tonaga’s tone was nicely shaded to indicate that the idea of it happening had never crossed their minds, but now that the General mentioned it...

“I can easily give you that assurance. I have never felt any overwhelming personal desire to conquer Wutai, or anywhere else.” Were they done now, he wondered hopefully?

“If President Shinra should order such a thing...” Tonaga’s tone, this time, was full of apologies, as if having to ask again were a sin that Leviathan himself would punish him for.

“I would not accept that order. My fight is with Hojo, not the world in general.” He also had no desire to see the ShinRa Electric Power Company restored to its former level of power but that was a personal thing and had no place at the negotiation table. However, it appeared that what he had said was enough because Godo and Tonaga exchanged another one of those small, satisfied looks.

“Your honesty and integrity are not in dispute, Lord Sephiroth. It warms an old man’s heart to have your assurances,” Godo lifted the teapot and filled the General’s cup, “Your kitchen has also warmed my heart with the quality of its fare; a good savoury is the basis for a good meal, yes? Of course, the sweet is the reward.” With that statement, the official negotiations were over.

Unfortunately, it didn’t mean the meal was finished.

Sephiroth didn’t sigh, he didn’t frown or fidget. In no way did he show that he longed to be somewhere else, but he thought of his damaged friends and yearned.
When Zack finally emerged, fuming, from the Medical tent there was a young private waiting for them. “Commander Fair, Sir!” the boy snapped, “General Sephiroth left orders that you were to be escorted to his tent.”

Zack looked him over. He was maybe sixteen, long-legged and skinny. His badge was a large silver ‘S’ on a green cat’s-eye, underlined by a ridiculously long and skinny sword. The black-haired SOLDIER rolled his eyes. Sephiroth sometimes didn’t know the meaning of the word ‘subtle’. But the boy was proud of it so, he supposed, that was the point. His uniform was regular army but in brown and Zack supposed it meant that he was in some special division. Or maybe it just meant the uniforms had changed in the last three years. He wasn’t curious enough to ask.

Well, he was curious, but he had other, more important things to think of, so he just gave the private a nod and hoofed it after him. He’d decided to carry Cloud through the camp. One, it would reduce the amount of time the two of them were exposed to gossip and stares, and two; he was too worked up to reduce his pace to what Cloud was capable of.

Fucking doctors and their self-serving, self-righteous justifications!

Dr. Imeera had said it could take years for the Corporal to get better, if he got better. Then she’d so kindly, and graciously informed him that the SOLDIER would be allowed to visit his friend whenever his schedule permitted, because of course he and Sephiroth would be handing the blond over to the doctors to be taken care of.

As if that was a fucking option!

‘He’ll go to a nice place. It won’t look like a hospital at all. He’ll receive the best of care,’ she’d said, and the reason he’d agree to it? Because he’d be going back on active duty and fighting for ShinRa, she’d said. As if he had no other choice.

He’d laughed in her face.

ShinRa had declared him dead—had declared both of them dead, so they would be dead as far as the company was concerned. ShinRa could try calling him up but they could just spit!

“Nnggh,” Cloud protested.

Zack loosened his hold, “Sorry Spike.” There was no way Cloud was a burden. He’d fucking saved Zack’s life so many times, just by being himself, by being there, being his friend and needing him. Stupid doctor didn’t know shit about friendship.

However, she knew a lot about mako’s effects on human beings.

That analogy she’d used, the Lifestream as an ocean, had made a lot of sense. Maybe more than she’d thought. If Cloud was mako poisoned then his personality, his soul, his essence, or whatever, was surrounded by the Lifestream. And that fit because, whenever he went to visit Cloud’s ‘house’, the sky was always acid green, the colour of mako, and Zack was pretty sure he’d heard voices coming from it, so it was like his little soul-house was in a bubble in the middle of the mako ocean, protecting him.

But it was falling apart.
He could remember Cloud telling him what he’d done when they’d went to the reactor. How he’d pictured them safe in his little house and Jenova’s screeching voice had been a winter storm that had battered the outside of the house. He couldn’t help but smile at the memory of Cloud’s red face. Who’d of thought the innocent little mountain boy would use a pornographic mystical three-way to keep them warm enough to fight off Jenova. It still made him smile.

He’d visited Cloud’s ‘house’ for the first time soon after they’d been... intimate the first time. That time the house had been in good shape, maybe a little dirty on the inside, but it had had all its windows and walls, and the roof hadn’t had a huge fucking hole in it. He’d met Cloud there and he’d told Zack all about building it and decorating it. He’d pointed out the significance of all the various things in it, from the Leviathan wall-hanging to the stew on the stove. Zack had really liked that wall-hanging. He’d put a similar one in his own house.

“Commander Fair,” the young Private said hesitantly, pulling Zack out of his thoughts.

“Hmm... I mean, yes?”

“You’re originally from Gongaga, right?”

“Yeah,” Zack answered cautiously, unsure of where the question was leading.

“Is it true there are frogs in the jungle that can turn you into one?” The boy sounded so excited at the possibility but also desperate not to sound excited that Zack had to laugh. He could remember the desire to be ‘cool’ by not appearing eager. He’d given it up as a waste of time—he’d been terrible at pretending to be bored.

“Yeah, Touch-Me frogs. We used to catch them and milk them for venom, then sell it to ShinRa to make the antidote.”

“Somebody told me about them but I didn’t believe it.”

Zack smiled at the Private, “I wouldn’t believe it either if I hadn’t grown up with them.” The boy blushed and looked away. He was fidgeting, sneaking sideways glances at the dark-haired SOLDIER. If Zack had been paying attention he would have known the young private was working his nerve up to ask another, more personal, question, but he wasn’t even seeing the boy.

He was remembering going into the jungle frog hunting with his childhood friends, Tam and Linn. They’d leave right after breakfast with lunches packed by their moms, and they’d spend the whole day and maybe catch a dozen frogs if they were lucky. They’d carefully squeeze the little frogs and scrape off the milky-substance that came out of their skin. It took forever to get enough to make any money at it, but that hadn’t really been the point of it anyway. The point was they were young, the day was sunny and the jungle around Gongaga was relatively safe for young, adventurous kids to explore.

They weren’t just frog-hunters when they went into the jungle; no, they were Defenders of the Village! Keeping wary eyes out for possible Danger, ready to fight Evil if it came their way. Many a dangling palm frond had been pummelled into submission.

He’d put one of their home-made frog traps in his ‘house’ along with Tam’s butterfly net that they’d used to catch fish in the streams but never to catch a butterfly. If he could’ve installed a Gongagan spring afternoon he would’ve done it.

He’d built his house with Cloud’s help and instructions and it had kept his soul, his self, his whatever-you-wanted-to-call-it, safe. They’d attacked him too, figuring if the blond was getting
weaker then he would be too, but whatever damage Hojo and the Psycho Alien Bitch had tried to inflict on the SOLDIER it was offset by way Zack had built his house. He’d built it bigger and stronger because he’d seen what was happening to Cloud’s house.

Hojo had decided early on that Cloud was the reason Zack wouldn’t provide the results he wanted. He theorized that Nibelheimer’s ability to block Jenova from Zack’s mind had interfered with the conversion. It had made the Psycho Alien Bitch frantic. It knew it should be able to talk to the SOLDIER, to control him, yet it couldn’t. They’d done everything Hojo could think of to break the blond or mitigate his power. They’d attacked him physically, mentally and emotionally. The Corporal had survived and Zack knew part of it was because of that little house he’d built.

He’d retreated to it, used it to protect himself from Hojo’s onslaught, Each time Zack had ‘visited’ the house, to help his friend reinforce it, it had been worse off, and one-by-one he’d met all of Cloud’s personas, each representing a different aspect of who Cloud thought he was or had been. There was Cloud, of course, but he’d also met Corporal Strife, Weirdo, Niisan, Spike and finally little Raincloud. Sometimes there’d be two of them in the house but usually there’d only be one.

Each time the blond had hidden himself there, less and less of him had come back to the real world until, after a particularly long-lasting ‘experiment’ he’d retreated completely. Cloud had become just a physical shell with the outward mind of a turnip. But he was still there... somewhere.

“Sir,” the Private again interrupted Zack’s memories with his timid question.

“Yes?” He was glad enough of the distraction.

“Um, were you really only sixteen when you were accepted into SOLDIER?”

“I was a couple months shy of seventeen,” he confirmed.

“And, and Commander Hewley was your mentor, right?”

He nodded. The boy was blushing, and Zack knew there was another, probably rude question coming. He braced himself for the most common question: had he and Angeal been lovers? He hated that question. Angeal had been a professional. No way would he have gotten involved with his student.

“Is it true he and General Rhapsodis were lovers, but ShinRa wouldn’t let them be together and that’s why they left and then the company used SOLDIERS to hunt them down and one of them killed Commander Hewley and that’s why General Rhapsodis went crazy and attacked ShinRa and, is it true, his hair turned grey overnight?”

“Fuck, kid, take a breath why don’t you,” Zack had stopped halfway through the boy’s rambling question. If it was a question and not a story; it certainly had enough fiction in to qualify as a fairytale.

“I have no idea if Angeal and Genesis were lovers; quite frankly, it was none of my business. Genesis didn’t go crazy. At least he was always bat-fuck as far as I could tell. He just hated ShinRa because they were fucking him over. Angeal went with him because they’d been friends since childhood and he was being fucked over by the company too.” As he spoke, his voice getting more and more clipped, the poor Private was trying to shrink himself, drawing his shoulders up to his ears like a turtle, and his eyes got larger and larger. “And Genesis’ hair didn’t go grey overnight, it changed colour because of the previously mentioned fucking over.”

“Anything else you want to know?” he barked.
The Private, trembling visibly, shook his head. It made Zack feel like a shit.

“Sorry, Private, it’s not your fault I’m in a lousy mood. I hate fucking doctors, you know?” The soldier relaxed a little now the glow was fading from the SOLDIERs eyes... not that Zack realized that was happening. “How ‘bout you just take us to the General’s tent and leave the chit-chat for some other time.”

He swallowed, “Y-yes, Sir.”

Gods, Zack thought, the poor kid was so young. He looked about the same age Cloud did, with his big eyes.

He had to find a way to fix Cloud.

“Hey, Zack.”

The SOLDIER recognized the voice so he turned to say hello, even though he’d rather be left alone to puzzle out the connection between Cloud’s personas, his house and Cloud himself.

“Hi, Tifa.”

The tiny fighter looked tired and a little down but she smiled as Cloud fluttered one of his wings at her.

“Hi to you too, Cloud.” Tifa said and fell into step beside them. It occurred to the big SOLDIER that his friend was getting more expressive with them than he’d ever been if even relative stranger like Tifa could interpret his wing movements. Maybe it was a sign that the blond was somehow, kind of, getting closer to coming back?

“Were the doctors able to give you anything to help get Cloud better?”

“Not really, they can’t decide whether he’s been addicted or poisoned or something completely different.” He shrugged and Cloud’s wings spread slightly to balance the movement, “Wait is essentially all they said.”

“Well,” she pulled on one bare toe and got poked lightly in retaliation. “He’s stubborn, and loyal, and stronger than most people think.” She chuckled but not like anything was funny, “All those years we were growing up together, he used to get picked on because he stood up for his Mom, did you know that?” Zack nodded, he remembered. “He’d run and mostly he’d get away but sometimes he wouldn’t. Nothing ever happened to the kids who beat him up, but he never stopped sticking up for her.”

“I wish I could’ve met her,” Zack said sadly.

“So do I,” Tifa agreed quietly. “I lived in the same village and I don’t think I spoke three words to her. So many in the village didn’t like them, said bad things about what she believed and what she was teaching her son. I knew it wasn’t a good idea to... to be seen being nice to them, so I wasn’t. I wasn’t strong, like Cloud.’ She snorted in self-derision. “It wasn’t until later that I understood that she scared people. All those books! They knew about life beyond Nibelheim, that there was a whole world out there of people and ideas and each day didn’t have to be the same as the last. They were afraid that all the young people would leave Nibelheim if they knew there was more to life than what their parents and grandparents had.”

She sighed, looking up beyond the dim camp lights to the stars. Ten years or so since she’d looked at them with Cloud. It seemed like eons; it seemed like a heartbeat.
“When he told me he was leaving I was so envious. I knew I’d never get to leave. I was the Mayor’s daughter after all; I already knew who I was going to marry and what I would be doing for the rest of my life. He seemed so brave... he was going to be my hero,” She smiled and pulled on his toe again. “Now we’re both out experiencing the wide world. I don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow, next week or next year. Will we still be alive? Will the war be over? Who will I be at the end of it?” She gave his foot a pat, “I wish I could go back to when Cloud could be my hero, you know?”

“Yeah,” Zack said solemnly, “yeah, I know what that’s like.” Cloud had reached out a wing, trying to enfold her in it. Zack lifted up his arm, boots dangling from his hand, and silently invited her to tuck herself in under it. “You musta had a shitty afternoon to feel this down.”

Tifa took the boots from his hand, unwilling to have them knocking into her stomach with every step. “Vincent and I went through some of the records recovered from the lab. We found some of the records on you and Cloud and flagged them for Dr. Imeera. People call SOLDIERs monsters because they’re enhanced and stuff, but Hojo and the people who worked with him, they are the real monsters.” Zack gave her a little squeeze.

“Gggh,” it was a sad little warble.

“You’re not a monster, Spike,” Zack told the blond, “No more than I am.”

“Nobody’s going to think you’re a monster, not with those wings. They’re beautiful,” Tifa complimented glad for the change of subject. “Having two is pretty rare, especially one on each side. I wonder if he’ll be able to fly. Most Firsts with wings only have them on one side. They can jump and glide amazingly, but only General Rhapsodis can actually fly. They theorize it’s because he’s one of the Original Three—”

“Wait,” Zack interrupted, “General Rhapsodis... you mean Genesis?”

“Yup.”

“Genesis Rhapsodis,” he needed it confirmed.

“Yeah. Wears a long, red coat,” she smirked at him, “Likes to quote Loveless.”

“He’s...” how to phrase it, “sane?”

Tifa laughed out loud, “Well, that’s under debate.”

“And he’s one of the good guys?” He couldn’t believe it.

She stared at him amazed, “You didn’t know?”

“Fuck no,” he answered, “last time I saw him, shit, he was helping to drive Sephiroth nuts. That was in Nibelheim.”

“Wow, he’s been a good guy since him and Sephiroth ‘came back from the dead’. That was, what? Two years ago? He helped push Hojo out into the open. Didn’t the medical staff give you an overview or anything?”

Zack shook his head, “We had other things to discuss,” he answered dryly, “and we all avoided talking about ShinRa and Hojo.”

“Oh well, you have a lot of catching up to do then,” Tifa said eagerly.
“Who has to catch up to what?” It was another familiar voice

“Kunsel,” Zack shouted. He took his arm off Tifa and grabbed his buddy’s wrist, pulling him in for as much of a hug as he could manage with his feathered bundle stuck to his hip. “Fuck, man, it’s great to see you!”

“It’s great to see you too, Zack.” Kunsel’s face was split by a wide smile, “Hey, Tifa.” She nodded in response. “So,” he looked at Cloud, “this is the guy the General was willing to tear apart ShinRa looking for.”

“This is the one,” Tifa answered the Second.

“What? What are you talking about?” Cloud’s wings flickered. It made him look as bewildered as Zack sounded.

“You don’t know the story?” Kunsel was astounded, “Nobody’s told you yet?”

“I was just about to,” said Tifa. “He doesn’t even know about the Red General.”

Kunsel’s eyes perked up; sharing information was one of his favourite things. “Oh, man. We need to bring you up to speed!”

“At least three years worth of news,” Tifa agreed happily.

“They were hauling food into the General’s tent when I went by earlier looking for you,” Kunsel waved at the structure they now stood before. A banner, with the distinctive cat-eye ‘S’ design hung down beside the door. Zack couldn’t be sure, he thought dryly, but they might’ve reached Sephiroth’s tent. “We could eat and talk,” the blond SOLDIER suggested.

“Excellent,” Tifa said, “I’m starved. We can tell him all about the changes on the Board.”

“Reeve,” the SOLDIER sighed, “he probably doesn’t know about that.”

Kunsel smiled at her, “I’ll get the Private here to bring more food.”

“A herbal tea would be nice, too,” Tifa requested.

Zack laughed. It looked like they were going to learn all the gossip from two of the best. “Come on, Spike. Be prepared to get your ears talked off.”

He ran as fast and as far as he could. As the Galian Beast, he ran into the mountains where nothing but vegetation existed. Even the wolves had the sense to run, conceding territory to the greater predator. He blew up boulders, he uprooted trees. He single-handedly rerouted the stream that ran through the valley.

It wasn’t enough.

Chaos always had more awareness of what the Beasts were up to and he stepped in when the Galian’s destructive capacity wasn’t enough of a release. With an incoherent roar of outrage and challenge, he shifted. In answer there came a deep bellowing. A dragon, protesting the other predator’s intrusion into its little fiefdom, came charging over the ridge. It dove toward the puny silver and red creature, confident of its victory.

Chaos’ red eyes narrowed and, as much as he was able to, he smiled. This was much more to his liking than tearing up helpless vegetation.
And Vincent, aware and grieving inside the demon that had his body, said nothing to dissuade him.

Although darkness descended rapidly in the mountains, it was full night when the Wutaian War Lords finally declared themselves unable to eat anymore. A last, traditional drink—this one alcoholic, a warm cloth to wash the hands, and the meeting was over.

Thankfully Lord Godo turned down the offer of a tent and army cots for the night and decided that they would return to the transport and continue their journey. The return walk to the airship was a near duplicate of the original trip in. They chatted about this and that, social and entertainment gossip mostly, until the transport was reached. The Captain was waiting for them by the ramp.

A few final pleasantries, a couple more respectful bows and the Wutaians walked up into the airship. Sephiroth let out a relieved breath. He didn’t care that Tuesti could hear it.

“Thank you for taking the time for this meeting, General. I know you have other things you’d rather be doing.” Sephiroth looked down at the slim, sophisticated man beside him. “I understand that they’re here now.”

“I suppose asking you how you know that when you’ve never been out of my company since you arrived, would be a pointless waste of time,” the General commented dryly.

Tuesti just smiled. “How are they?”

“How are they?”

“About what you’d expect after three years of Hojo.” Idiot.

“If there’s anything I can do to help,” the Vice-President offered. Sephiroth nodded acceptance although he had no intention of taking Tuesti up on his offer. Then he said, “Tell Zack I’m glad he made it out,” and the General remembered that his SiC had often worked for Tuesti back when he’d been the head of Urban Development, an underfunded and mostly ignored branch of ShinRa. The bureaucrat would receive reports of monsters invading lower Midgar but, because he had no budget, he couldn’t do anything about it. Zack had volunteered to clear out the monsters for him. In later years, the SOLDIER would take his trainees with him to give them a chance at real combat with their enhanced abilities. It had been a good partnership between the two.

“I will tell him,” Sephiroth promised.

With a final smile and a nod, the Vice President strode up the ramp into the ship. The General waited as the ramp lifted and closed, holding still as he was approached from camp-side. “Master-Sergeant Lutton,” Sephiroth greeted him without turning.

“Guv’nor,” the heavy-set man replied, his voice sounding like gravel in a cement-mixer. He had the grasslander’s thick accent but Sephiroth had had enough dealings with the man to understand him easily. He actually found the lazy cadence soothing.

“You and your people did an exemplary job. If you give me a list of names and recommendations, I’ll make sure mention of it is made in their files.”

“Thank ya, Guv,” he rasped out. “I’m supposed to tell you that the ‘ospital is still standin’ and no injuries or fatalities were reported.” Sephiroth turned amused eyes on the NCO. “They’re in your tent now wif Commander Kunsel and Miss Tifa.”

“What, no medical report, Master-Sergeant,” he teased gently, talking louder to be heard over the airship’s engines.
“Nuffin’ that would surprise you, Guv. Commander Fair is essentially okay, and they don’ really
know what’s wrong wif the Corp’ral. Time and food, they say,” he paused, waiting until the
transport was in the air and the noise was fading. “So I’ve sent extra into your tent, includin’ a pot
of those meatballs you’re so fond of.”

Sephiroth watched the blinking lights of the airship grow smaller, “I’m always surprised that Tseng
doesn’t scoop you up for the Turks.”

“It would be a step down, Guv’nor, and not ‘alf so int’restin’.”

The transport was safely out of their airspace so Sephiroth finally felt comfortable turning away.
The Master-Sergeant was still standing straight, patiently waiting for the next question. “Anything
else to report, Master-Sergeant,” the General obliged. He turned towards his tent, keeping his pace
easy so that the NCO could finish his update.

“Miss Tifa took that ex-Turk you found to the Materia Pit. I’m not sure what ‘appened—”

“Tsk, tsk,” the General chided.

“... but they buried themselves in Cataloguin’ for the rest of the day. Valentine, that’s the Turk’s
name, took off for the ‘ills a bit ago, as if Ifrit himself was bitin’ at his ‘eels.”

“Is that everything?”

“The Gossipin’ Barnacle,” meaning Lieutenant Hinz, “is developin’ a nice set of blisters up at the
construction site.”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth snorted, “As long as I get his report.” There weren’t many people in camp that
knew exactly what Hinz did and who he reported to. Master-Sergeant Lutton hadn’t been told but
he knew.

Really, the General suddenly thought, he could be quite slow sometimes. He should’ ve introduced
the Vice-President to the Master-Sergeant and then invited Tseng to the party. His lips quirked in
his usual small smile as he pictured the meeting—all the knowledge in the world together in one
place. He knew the Master-Sergeant would think he was smiling at Hinz being forced to do actual
work. It was an acceptable cover for his amusement as he wondered how long it would take each
of them to find out the secrets of the others. Would there be a betting pool?

“About that, Guv, I’ve taken the liberty of putting a guard on your tent ‘til noon tomorrow. To
keep you from bein’ disturbed.”

“Did you,” Sephiroth was intrigued. This action was far outside the Master-Sergeant’s area of
authority.

“Figured you might want to recuperate from tonight’s performance,” he explained trying to sound
innocent with his gravel voice and failing, “The Officer of the Day agreed. He’ll make sure the
guards know you ain’t t’be disturbed.”

“Babysitting?” the General asked.

“Lookin’ after the mental well-bein’ of our commandin’ officer. Well within regs,” he justified. It
was a clever argument. As long as they got permission from a command officer, senior NCOs had a
wide choice of actions under that article of the army regulations; they just very rarely invoked it.

“Very well, Master-Sergeant,” the General agreed to the terms. After all, it wasn’t like he didn’t
They’d reached Sephiroth’s tent. There were two MPs stationed on either side of the door. Lutton stopped and turned to the General. His face, always serious on the outside didn’t have its usual gleam of hidden amusement, “It’s not enough after three years, Guv, but it’s the best we could do. The boys on duty can be trusted not to repeat anyfin’ they hear.”

“Thank you, Master-Sergeant.” Obviously, his sleeping arrangements were part of the common gossip pool, just as Hinz had predicted. Sephiroth couldn’t bring himself to care. It hardly mattered now that Cloud and Zack were no longer under the enemy’s direct control.

“Good luck, Guv’nor.” He saluted and walked off into the night. Probably to supervise the clean-up crew.

It was odd, Sephiroth mused, considering his better-than-enhanced vision, how much he hadn’t seen when he’d been focussed on finding his friends.

In a way, taking over as General of ShinRa’s forces on the Western Continent had been a tool to be used for that purpose. Like any tidy craftsman, he looked after his tools; he maintained them in the best condition he could, he used the proper tool for any given job and he used them as gently as possible, but the people who had made up his army had been tools to be used.

He’d been friendlier than previously at first because Zack would have expected it. Later, because it had proven to get much better results than the cold, impersonal approach he’d used before.

He hadn’t realized that the people under his command had become so... so protective of him. Captain Carter and the rest in the Officer’s Mess, Master-Sergeant Lutton just now, and yes, even the two MPs standing at attention outside his tent prepared to spend the night guarding his privacy.

Despite the fears expressed by the ShinRa board that once he’d rescued Corporal Strife and Commander Fair he’d lose interest in the fight, he’d always intended to see the war through. After all, he had three very good reasons for wanting to kill Professor Hojo: What he had done to Angeal and Genesis by denying them the cure he’d discovered back when they’d been teenagers, how he had treated Sephiroth himself—especially as a small child, and the tortures he had inflicted on Cloud and Zack.

Now he added a fourth reason... because he would not let down the troops who were depending on him.

When Sephiroth entered his tent he was unsurprised to find Master-Sergeant Lutton had been correct as to the number and identity of his guests. The scene was surprisingly cozy. Zack was working his way through a plate piled at least a hand high. Kunsel’s was only a little smaller. Tifa also had a full plate but she was sharing it with Cloud. Cloud... who chewed and swallowed without assistance. Remarkable.

“You’re kidding me,” Zack said in disbelief, “They killed him off? Hey, General. Plenty more food if you need something solid.” It was a typical Zack invitation, casual yet welcoming. It acknowledged the presence of their superior officer without allowing any of them to become formal.

Cloud stretched his wings out and flapped them hard enough to lift him from his seat and blow some of the items on the table around. The General quickly moved to his young lover, gripping his shoulder and making a soothing noise. With one quick, self-conscious glance at the others, he...
pressed a hard kiss to Cloud’s head. The wings settled down although they didn’t fully retract.

Tifa smiled at the romantic gesture. Sephiroth pretended not to notice. Instead he pulled out a chair next to Cloud’s, sat down and began to fill a plate.

“Sir,” Kunsel nodded but continued with their conversation, “A year ago. Prentice was getting all pissy about being ‘The Star’ so they filmed a scene of his second-wife hitting him with a car. Prentice went along with it because they’d said he’d have a long arc about recovering in hospital where but, instead of that, they just had a doctor walk into the waiting room and announce that the character was dead. The show went on with lots of tears, a big funeral, some grief inspired sex and Wife Number Three’s got a new baby and a new husband.”

“Shit, that’s...” Zack chuckled, “fucking great. I always hated that guy—character and actor.”

“He was cute but such a jerk,” Tifa added. “I never understood why people liked him.”

“What are you talking about,” the silver-haired warrior asked. A wing came out to rub against him, feathers rubbing against his hand.

“The last three seasons of Midgar Nights,” Zack answered, but Sephiroth still looked blank. “It’s a soap. It was really big before we went to Nibelheim.”

“Ah,” the General said, enlightened, “important stuff.” He manoeuvred a forkful to his mouth, barely managing not to spill it as Cloud tried to keep in contact with him. He moved closer to the blond, hoping to reassure him.

“Cloud, you have to let Sephiroth eat. He’s had a stressful evening,” Tifa scolded and the wing retreated momentarily before sneaking back out to brush through long, silky hair.

He looked at the young woman carefully feeding his lover. He wasn’t jealous, he knew Cloud wanted him—the wing lightly playing with his hair was proof of that, but still... it was his job. “I can take over feeding Cloud if you wish, Ms. Lockhart.”

“It’s okay, General,” she declined, “You had a full, formal Wutaian meal for dinner which means you’re probably already hungry again.”

“That’s right,” Kunsel said interrupting the protest Sephiroth was going to make, “I heard about that. How’d it go?”

“It was,” boring, but it wasn’t diplomatic to say so, “successful. I believe they will sign the treaty.”

“Excellent,” Kunsel enthused. “Once we get our troops out of Wutai we should have no problem kicking Hojo’s butt.”

“I have some ideas on that issue that I’ll be exploring in the next day or so. If my research backs up my new theory I’ll be giving a briefing to the senior officers. ” Since Ms. Lockhart was currently lifting food to her own mouth, Sephiroth decided to give Cloud some of his rice. He pretended not to notice her small smile just as he pretended not to notice that she took a little longer to chew her food than she had previously.

“When are you announcing Zack’s return as your Second-in-Command?” Kunsel asked. Sephiroth stared at the SOLDIER Second Class, who looked up from his food to see all eyes on him... except for Cloud who was gazing half-lidded at the table in front of him and making a happy little humming sound. “What?” the SOLDIER asked, “It’s not like we didn’t know why you’d kept that position open.”
“I haven’t asked him yet,” Sephiroth stated.

Kunsel, finally realizing he’d put his foot in it, flushed bright red. “Aahh, I’m so sorry, Sir,” he fumbled, “I thought it would’ve been almost the first thing you said to him. Everybody knows what a great team you two made and so, we all thought it was, you know, a given. Especially as you’re going to kill Hinz if you have to continue dealing with him on a day-to-day basis and that would be a really bad thing,”

Zack’s shoulders started to shake as he tried to contain his laughter, “Seph, are you still scaring secretaries and privates?”

“I’ve moved up to random lieutenants and captains. It’s more of a challenge.”

“Shiva’s Tit’s, Seph!” the Commander choked on his drink, “Warn a fellow before you make a real joke, will you?”

“Lieutenant Hinz is a bit more than a random LT. He’s supposed to be the General’s aide but he’s just a brown-nosing snot rag so it would make sense to let Zack deal with him as your SiC, right?” Zack’s chuckles and Sephiroth’s silence were his only answers. Kunsel looked at both of them with dawning horror. “Did I just fuck up?”

“Not especially, Captain,” Sephiroth tried to reassure him, “I was going to ask Zack to take back his old position. He’s just getting the offer in a slightly less formal manner than I had envisioned.”

“Well, if you were going to do it anyways,” Tifa said brightly, “now it’s done and you don’t have to worry about it.” Sephiroth frowned at the young fighter. She just smiled sweetly back and fed Cloud another mouthful. Sephiroth stared at her even more repressively but she just giggled—giggled! at him and Zack laughed, and coughed, at them both.

Briefly, the General wished for the days when people lived in terror of his temper.

“If he decides to accept the position I will make an announcement, but it is totally up to the Commander whether or not he wishes to return.”

“I want back pay,” the SOLDIER coughed out, still trying to clear his lungs, “with three years of raises.”

“Holidays and sick time too,” Tifa contributed.

“A really cool car,” Kunsel added.

“Will I get to wear that neat badge of yours with the eye?” Zack teased his General.

Sephiroth just sighed and shared his meatballs with the Corporal. “We will discuss it later, Commander.”

Tifa had nearly finished her plate by now and she noticed that the SOLDIER Second Class was almost done as well. She kicked Kunsel under the table, just in case he didn’t get the hint. The Second hastily swallowed his mouthful. “You guys do have a lot to discuss. We should get going, I guess.”

“Yes, we should,” the dark-eyed fighter stood up.

Zack and Sephiroth stood up with them but it was the Commander who walked them to the door. He gave Tifa a squeeze and a peck on the cheek, “Thanks a bunch, Teef,” he said before pulling
Kunsel into a proper hug and thumping him on the back. He didn’t say anything to his friend. He didn’t need to.

“Sleep well, Zack,” Kunsel said. “You too, General.” With a final wave the odd pair left the tent.

Zack stood staring through the door, hands on his hips. There was too much information in his brain. All the changes at ShinRa; Rupert dead, Rufus in charge with Reeve as his Number 2. Gongaga destroyed. Most of SOLDIER gone but Genesis a hero. Peace with Wutai. Hojo as the planetary villain... although that one was the easiest to adjust to... fucking bastard. The mutations occurring in all the SOLDIERs First Class. Cloud’s problems. His. Dr. Crescent and the whole Chaos and Omega thing. And Seph had a real mom who might not have been such an unfeeling bitch after all.

Could he go back to what they had before? Did he want to?

“I was planning on explaining everything,” Sephiroth offered, “I had expected to have the whole day with you.”

“It’s okay, Seph. You always did have too many claims on your time,” he said but he didn’t return to the table. “I can’t go back to ShinRa, Seph. Obeying their orders. Keeping my mouth shut about...everything. Even with Hojo being the target... I can’t.”

“Zack—” the silver-haired man tried to interrupt.

“I appreciate that you went back and I know that part of it would’ve been to rescue Cloud and myself and... and, y’know, thank you for that. Thank you so much. But—” A firm hand fell on his shoulder, shutting him up and turning him around. He looked into amused green eyes.

“I didn’t rejoin ShinRa. I was hired by them.” Sephiroth smiled that lazy quirk of the lips that was his signature and so fucking sexy.

And I don’t need to be thinking of that right now, Zack told himself. Then he heard what his General had said.

He frowned, “I thought you were owned by them or something. Isn’t that what Hojo had set up?” Zack was sure he’d read portions of the research contract for Project ‘S’... or was it something he’d overheard in the lab.

“Hmm,” the General’s smile deepened, took on a nasty triumphant look, “but I died. Rupert Shinra himself was at my burial and made a speech. There was no provision in Hojo’s contract for resurrection.”

The First’s eyes opened wide, “Shit. They sure weren’t thinking.” he chuckled in appreciation of the oversight. “But that still doesn’t explain why you’re back to being a ShinRa General.”

“Patience.” He raised his arm, inviting his friend to return to the table. “Genesis and I revealed ourselves to be alive shortly after Heideggar made his disastrous assault on Gongaga. Rufus and Scarlet were still in serious condition, only Palmer and Tuesti were left from the Executive. When Tuesti first approached me to take over command of the ShinRa forces I said no, as did Genesis when he was asked.” Sephiroth lifted the juice bottle to Cloud’s lips. The Corporal was making a sound he couldn’t identify. “Genesis and I were going to try and reach Nibelheim on our own. Then Hojo consolidated his hold on the Western Continent and Palmer, backed by Scarlet, tried taking over the presidency, and the remaining SOLDIERs and most of the armed forces mutinied.”

“So?” Zack questioned.

“Without a strong central government, the world was descending into anarchy. Assets best kept
under lock and key were disappearing from ShinRa and turning up on the black market. Pure liquid mako was making its way onto the streets overloading an emergency response system already crippled by the destruction of Midgar. Criminals were carving up territories. Refugees were being turned into slaves and traded like currency.” The General’s eyes narrowed dangerously and Zack could see the utensil start to bend.

“Gggnn,” Cloud said and gave his lover a little nudge. The command couldn’t have been clearer if he’d said ‘don’t stop there’ out loud. At least that’s how the General interpreted it. He eased his grip on the fork.

“Tseng finally approached us again.” Zack grunted and not in surprise. Who else would’ve had the guts to approach two pissed off genetically-enhanced warriors? “He had a new proposal from Rufus, much more generous, if we agreed to support his presidency. For Genesis, they had a possible cure,” he paused. His eyes were blank, looking at the past. “Hojo had apparently worked out a way to halt the degeneration but, of course, he hadn’t shared it because Genesis and Angeal weren’t his creations.”

“Tifa said he was alive,” Zack commented meaning Genesis, not Hojo.

“Alive and brilliant, if still annoying and abrasive. He is doing very well establishing a recruitment and training program and defending the Eastern Continent. He doesn’t have the same vulnerability to Jenova that the rest of the Firsts do. Probably because the process used to create him wasn’t the same. It takes away their greatest and least expensive weapon.”

“So is ShinRa going to be making more SOLDIERS based on the Genesis model now?” The swordsman didn’t bother hiding his bitterness.

“No. The SOLDIER program is essentially finished. Corporal Strife is the last new name to be added to the list.” He ran a soft finger down Cloud’s cheek. “It almost sounds like he’s purring. Are you sure they used wolf DNA and not one of the large cats?”

“Pretty sure that’s what I heard, but it’s not like they came out and told me what they were injecting him with.”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth mused, still stroking a silky cheek “perhaps it will be in the documents recovered from the lab.” The General’s eyelids were drooping in a sleepy, sensual fashion. He’d always liked cats...

Zack snapped his fingers and brought him out of his daze. “So that’s what they offered Genesis. What did they offer you?”

“The autonomy to conduct this war whatever way we see fit, top level authority for myself and Genesis in any military area, and insulation from the other of the ShinRa Executives and the Press while we are in the field. Access to any and all information pertaining to Hojo, Jenova, Deepground and anything else that takes our fancy.” He stopped and looked straight into Zack’s eye, “and the complete and absolute freedom to make finding and rescuing you and Cloud my number one priority.”

Zack blinked. He’d expected the other stuff, the military stuff, and he’d known that Seph would’ve considered their recovery important, but the General was saying it was the most important thing.

“But,” he stuttered out his thoughts, “from what everyone’s said, you’ve nearly eliminated them from the Western Continent. Their air and sea forces are destroyed. Their ground forces are a joke because of you. Because of your strategies. Are you saying that... that all of it, everything was...” It
was unthinkable, wasn’t it?

“It was for you. And for Cloud.” Sephiroth confirmed. “When I returned the first thing I did was contact ShinRa, to inform them exactly what their head scientist had done. I told Rupert Shinra that Hojo was lying to him and that he had his own agenda and that, when he revealed it, it would be the end of ShinRa Electric Power Company. He laughed it off. Next, I argued that the loss of investment was worth investigating. SOLDIERs were expensive and time-consuming to create and, for the most part, the program was a failure. Once Wutai was conquered, there was nothing for an elite squad of enhanced warriors to do. You were one of ShinRa’s shining lights, the Marketing Department’s golden boy. A hero to the people for your monster fighting and rescue missions.” He smirked at his SiC’s blush before his face became serious again.

“Nobody cared. Just like they’d done with Genesis and Angeal, ShinRa absolved themselves of all responsibility by pretending it wasn’t important. That you and Cloud weren’t important.”

Sephiroth looked away releasing Zack from his gaze but the chatty First had no idea what to say. He’d known that Seph appreciated him and had mostly enjoyed his company. Before all this had happened, back in Nibelheim, the General had called him friend and Zack knew Sephiroth well enough to know that he’d meant it. But this...This was a bit more than what he had with Kunsel. And the Silver General hadn’t finished.

“I knew they would send Turks after me. Rupert couldn’t afford to have the world know that I was alive, so I found Genesis and we went straight to the nearest town where we would receive media attention for our ‘resurrection’.”

“Fort Condor?” Kunsel had told Zack about this part. The Second had said it had been an accident but it sounded like Sephiroth had planned it.

“It was a good choice. A phoenix nesting on the reactor and a local populace ready to take on ShinRa’s might to protect it. Media from all over were there, approved outlets as well as independents. A phoenix!” Sephiroth chuckled, “Both Genesis and I thought it was appropriately symbolic.” The General stroked fingers over Cloud’s feathers. “You can see why neither one of us was anxious to rejoin the company when they asked.”

“And yet,” Zack waved indicating the tent and the base, “here you are.”

“We negotiated. Genesis and I are contracted by Rufus ShinRa to pursue the military campaign against the combined forces of Hojo and Deepground. It is a standard paid contract and, as soon as the war is over, the contract will be concluded with bonuses. The same contract can be offered to you, and Cloud.”

The more he’d spoken the wider Zack’s smile had become until he laughed out loud. “I don’t fucking believe it. You’re a mercenary?!”
The Nibel Dragon had been fun, faster and tougher than Chaos had thought. It had a rich, wild flavour that was satisfying although his host wouldn’t let him fully indulge that part of his nature. The human had struggled to regain control so Chaos had stopped sampling from the beast—it wasn’t essential to his pleasure, after all, and he wasn’t ready to let his host take back control. Besides his host wasn’t quite ready to return so he went looking for other things to play with.

He ignored the small creatures, the wolves and the zuus. They were hardly worthy of notice let alone attacking. He found a nest of feral creatures that reeked of contamination and unnatural things; they were of Gaia yet not. His host thought that they were experiments escaped from the lab, injected with the Not-Gaia creature that had been stored there. And so his *immortalis* approved of Chaos destroying them.

They were pathetically weak individually but with nine of them gathered together they were formidable. They had no real pack structure so it was hard to predict their actions. It managed to be an interesting fight so he’d let it drag on for longer than needed but it was almost as much fun as the dragon. He didn’t bother to taste these ones, knowing they’d be sour from the infection of the Not-Gaia.

The host wanted him to disintegrate the bodies, remove all traces of them before unaltered scavengers could eat them and absorb their mutations but Chaos ignored him. Scavengers would eat them or maybe not. If scavengers did eat them, maybe they would be affected, maybe not. If the wild things did alter maybe they’d pass those genes on to their offspring, maybe not. Changes may occur or maybe not. He couldn’t guarantee the outcome, he merely provided the opportunity.

Before his host could take control and destroy the bodies he flew away. Soon he would lose control of the body and once again be relegated to observer, but not quite yet...

“You’re a *mercenary*?!” The dark-haired First shouted with glee. Cloud’s wings lifted and flapped as if to echo his friend’s emotions.

Sephiroth returned the smile, “And very content to be one.”

“That is too fucking great.” He had to jump up. This was too big to take sitting down. “Y’know, the whole time we were in there, the lab, I was plotting our escape, and I wondered what we’d do if we got out.”

“Come looking for me, I hope,” Sephiroth interrupted dryly, still sharing his meal with the Corporal.

“Duh! Of course. But we’d need to get some gil so we could afford to go looking for you. I mean, we’re not qualified for much besides killing stuff, so guess what I thought we’d do?” he asked excitedly.

“Become mercenaries?” It wasn’t much of a guess but Sephiroth knew he’d been correct when Zack pumped his fists down low.

“Oh yeah! Great minds or what,” Zack was pretty stoked. Who’d have thought his by-the-book superior officer would’ve had the cheek to negotiate something like that. And for them. He’d done it for them. The General had literally spent years working to get them back.
“You don’t have to give me an answer right away. I expect you’ll want to look over the contract before deciding, but I want you to know that there is no one I trust more for the position. Kunsel was right. I am holding it for you.”

He thought of what he and Cloud had done, of what he still had to tell the General. *Shit, I don’t deserve that kind of loyalty. Do I?* He waited for Sephiroth to call him on his sudden change of mood but aside from a single sharp glance, the silver-haired warrior stayed said nothing about it. Instead he redirected his friend’s attention. “Did you need more to eat? The Mess will send something over if I request it.”

Zack looked at the table, which probably doubled as the General desk. It was a scene of epicurean devastation; trays, pots, dishes and jugs, all scraped empty and abandoned. “Nah, I’m good.” Lacking anything else to do, and to delay the inevitable confession, he started stacking the plates and cups and organizing them on the trays.

At least it was a better use of his nervous energy than squats thought his General, carefully slicing the last meatball in half to share with Cloud. He held it up expecting the blond to open his mouth like he usually did. A slow blink was the only reaction. “Why is he holding his mouth closed?”

“Huh?” Zack asked startled. His mind had been drifting, trying to work out the best phrasing. “He’s not opening his mouth any more. Is there a problem?” The General didn’t allow panic to show in his voice. Concern was acceptable.

“He’s probably full, is all,” Zack’s matter of fact reply helped settle even that. “You can ask him. Just touch him skin-to-skin and, I dunno, send the question to him.” It was kind of sweet to see Sephiroth cautiously touching Cloud’s face, as if the contact would burn him. Silver eyebrows dipped in concentration. He drew back in confusion. “I think he’s saying ‘gas’.”

“Oh fuck, yeah,” Zack chuckled, “I forgot about that, it’s been so long since we had solid food. He needs to be burped.”

“He needs to be... what?” Sephiroth wondered if he was actually still eating with the Wutaians and this was some odd daydream he was experiencing. It made about as much sense as dreams ever did.

“Cloud has gas, he needs to be burped. You know, like a baby?” Zack waited but Sephiroth only shrugged. “I can’t believe you’ve never seen a baby being burped,” Zack complained but he lifted the Corporal out of his chair and positioned the blond’s fat little belly over his hip. “Shit, he sure ate enough,” he laughed, “he feels like he’s got a soccer ball in there.” Then he proceeded to rub Cloud’s back until he gave a loud belch. “It part of the whole coma thing,” he explained to his entranced commanding officer. “Just like a baby, he can’t control how much air he swallows with his food, so he’s got to be burped. Especially after eating like a greedy little bandersnatch.” There was another, smaller noise from the blond.

“How do you know so much about this?”

“Nieces and nephews back in Gongaga. Too many of them, actually,” Zack explained. Sephiroth raised one eyebrow in question. “Shit, you gotta teach me how to do that,” Zack called out and completely confused his silver-haired friend.

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s the eyebrow thing. I could’ve used it today in the doctor’s office,” he lifted his brows a couple
times in illustration. Sephiroth was still confused. “Never mind,” he shrugged it away. “As one of
the older kids in the family, I was always being given a baby to feed and burp and change. It was
one of the reasons I left for Midgar. I didn’t think I’d ever have to do all that again.” He sighed but
smiled fondly at the smaller man still giving little burps. “The gods sure like laughing at us
mortals, don’t they.”

Sephiroth decided to ignore any discussions of eyebrows and large families. They were irrelevant
and confusing. Instead he asked the most important question, “What did the doctor suggest as
treatment for Cloud?”

“Pfft,” Zack responded in disgust, “Time mostly, to let the mako work its way out of his system.
But,” a deep breath, “I may have an idea.” The dark-haired First looked over at the General
diffidently. “Do you remember that odd trance he went into at Nibelheim? When we went to the
reactor?”

It was enough, more than enough. With one final push, Vincent took control of his body back from
the demon. He knew, he always knew, what Chaos did when he was in control. The few other
times the demon had slaughtered Vincent had always felt disgust and horror at what his beasts
were capable of.

This time he was thankful. It had provided an outlet and the rage had passed.

They’d killed more of Hojo’s obscene creations, although it would have been better to destroy the
bodies totally. He turned around, trying to figure out which way the corpses were but Chaos had
travelled in random directions with his eyes closed so Vincent had no landmarks to reference. He
could search but it would be pointless. *Quite pointless, my little immortalis* Chaos laughed.

No, he wouldn’t find the bodies of those poor creatures, but he could see the distant lights of the
ShinRa camp.

The camp where Sephiroth was. Sephiroth... his son...

‘Lucrecia,’ he pleaded to her ghost, ‘why didn’t you tell me?’

Her son, his son. Tortured and abused from the womb. Vincent had done nothing. He hadn’t even
tried.

He fell to his knees. This time his shout wasn’t one of challenge but of pain. He hadn’t known. If
he’d known... If only Lucrecia had told him. Lucrecia. What had she done to their son?

His son. His poor boy...

He shouted out anger and pain and betrayal until he couldn’t shout any more. Then he whispered it
to the uncaring earth.

It wasn’t really enough.

“So you think that we should go to this, this house of Cloud’s, and call all his aspects back from
the Lifestream. If they all gather we can fix his house, his personas will merge and Cloud will be
healed?”

Considering how long it had taken Zack to explain everything, Sephiroth’s two-line summation
seemed rather terse. However, it was accurate. The SOLDIER nodded his head. Cloud was back on
his chair, finishing up the last of the chocolate pudding. It was an amazingly messy process but the blond was making that happy humming sound so Sephiroth fed him a mouthful and patiently cleaned up any spills.

“And how do you suggest we get to his house? He can hardly invite me to it. Although, I have to say I’m willing to try anything if only to hear him explain more clearly what he envisioned whilst in his trance. Your description was decidedly lacking in details.”

Zack’s cheeks flared red and Sephiroth dipped his head to hide his smile. He so very rarely had managed to tease and embarrass the First, he could be excused his enjoyment of the current situation. There was also the fact that his friend’s stuttering, obviously highly edited, version of Cloud’s trance had made them both half-hard. He could smell Zack’s arousal from here.

Sephiroth wanted sex.

He wanted sex with Cloud... and with Zack. He wanted to wrap himself in their smells and their sounds, to breathe them in with all his senses. He wanted his scent on them and theirs on him. He knew if he pushed it the First would give in. The General, with his high level of Jenova cells, could ‘call’ the SOLDIER to him, just as that alien thing had called to Sephiroth all those years ago. He could do it... but he couldn’t.

But he could still tease the Commander.

“From the little you explained, Cloud envisioned the three of us,” he hesitated with false delicacy, peeking up from under his bangs in order to watch Zack’s reaction, “engaged in sexual activities. Perhaps we should try to recreate the imaginary events in real life to establish the connection.” It was a... well, not so innocent suggestion but it was made only to tease. Sephiroth was completely unprepared for the reaction.

Zack’s mouth dropped open, but it wasn’t shock or amusement but an odd kind of horror. His dark skin paled and he quickly looked away from his General. Cloud, who’d initially spread his wings excitedly, now whimpered and drew them back towards himself.


The tall SOLDIER sneaked a quick look at his friends and looked away again. He shifted from foot to foot. He crossed his arms over his chest defensively, rubbing one hand over his hair. “Ah well, yeah,” he started but didn’t continue.

Cloud’s wings drew in even further. “Nnngg,” The blond’s voice was small.

“What is it,” Sephiroth’s voice was firmer, more demanding. Whatever was making Zack uncomfortable was affecting Cloud as well.

“Fuck,” the Commander whispered. He sat down and dragged both his hands over his face. “Okay so, um, when Cloud first got his wings they made him use them all the time and his muscles got sore because, of course, he wasn’t used to having wings. So I, uh, gave him a massage and, and... shit!” He leaned forward, hands clasped between his knees, eyes focused on them and nothing else. “I gave him a massage and he got a, y’know, erection, and he didn’t want to stop and I didn’t either, really. So we, y’know...” his voice trailed off.

He finally looked at Cloud. He’d promised his friend that Sephiroth wouldn’t be angry at him but he couldn’t bring himself to look at the silver-haired swordsman. “We didn’t stop.”

“You had sex with Cloud,” Sephiroth clarified, “Not just a wing rub but penetration?”
Zack nodded jerkily. “It was just comfort between friends. It felt nice when so much in that place didn’t.” He finally looked up at the General. “And, and half the time he called out your name anyway. I stopped when he couldn’t give consent. I swear and I tried to protect him from the guards. He didn’t ever let them. I mean he fought—”

“Zack,” Sephiroth raised a hand to stop his babbling. He hadn’t thought, he hadn’t realized that Zack would feel guilty about it. He needed to phrase this right, so they would both know that Sephiroth wasn’t angry, and he didn’t blame them that he, in fact, envied them a little for having had each other to turn to... and he realized that’s exactly what he should say.

“Zack,” he repeated. He placed his hand on Cloud’s bare arm, “and Cloud. First off; there is no blame here, not for either of you. I would’ve been surprised if you two hadn’t turned to each other for comfort, for something that would remind you that you were human and loved. I had already assumed as much and I am not angry with you. In fact, I envy you.”

He stroked the shapely arm and smiled at the long-ago memory of someone doing the same for him. Then he thought of his old friend, the Red General and his smile slipped away. “Genesis offered to have sex with me, but he did it because he was bored and I was available. After being with Cloud, and sleeping with the two of you, what Genesis offered wasn’t enough,” he paused and decided to add some more to that statement, “He doesn’t even like me anymore which is why he’s close to old Midgar and not here.”

Cloud’s wings had begun to unfurl, tentatively reaching out to his silver-haired lover. It made Sephiroth smile, but it was a small thing. He reached over and lifted Zack’s chin. Tears were brimming in his beautiful, expressive eyes. “Did you think I would condemn you, either of you?”

“I... I didn’t know. I wasn’t sure,” Zack took a breath. “You and Cloud were so new together...”

“I know who to blame the brutality of Hojo’s guards on. I grew up with them remember. I know you would’ve tried to protect him, and he, you. Whatever comfort you could offer each other, I’m grateful you had something pleasurable to counter their actions.” He sat back, folding one arm across his chest and using the other hand to stroke at Cloud’s long feathers; once again back within easy reach. “You are friends. Friends take of friends, sometimes in unconventional ways.”

Zack was rubbing his eyes, taking deep breaths to steady himself. Sephiroth often forgot how young he was; only a couple years older than Cloud. He was strong, but he could be hurt and frightened.

He was as beautiful in his way as Cloud.

And he’d enjoyed his encounters with Cloud, that’s why he’d gotten aroused when he told the tale of the blond’s mystic protection. It increased certain possibilities and Sephiroth was far too much The Silver General to ignore such an opportunity.

The silver warrior had long been attracted to the dark-haired SOLDIER, ever since he’d seen the eager recruit at Angeal’s side in fact; but Zack had always been unresponsive to any sexual advance made by even the most attractive of men... much to Genesis’ disgust. Because of that, Sephiroth had never once made any comment or insinuation that would let the SOLDIER know how much he wanted to bed him. Their growing friendship, so different from the balance of power between him and Genesis and Angeal, had convinced him that it would be better to let the sexual attraction remain buried and he had done that.

That was over now.
It was obvious the SOLDIER had physically enjoyed his time with the Corporal. If the tale of Cloud’s trance was accurate then his little Corporal had certainly imagined them all together at least once, and Sephiroth knew Zack well enough to know that after he’d heard the tale, Zack would’ve imagined what it would feel like for all three of them to be together in real life. At the very least, he would have wondered if it were possible because that was just the Commander’s nature. The idea had been planted and Sephiroth wanted to see if anything had grown from it.

“Would it make you angry or uncomfortable if I admit that the idea of seeing you and Cloud together is... arousing? That I would like to make Cloud’s vision a reality.” When Zack just looked at him with his mouth again hanging open he decided to push it, “Maybe it will establish the mental connection you say is needed to find his ‘house’.”

Clouds wings extended fully. He pumped them in excitement, raising himself slightly from the chair and blowing an empty glass off the table. Zack caught it while Sephiroth smiled and soothed his delighted lover. “Well, he certainly makes his desires known,” he commented dryly.

“Ummm,” was Zack’s less than intelligent reply. His deep blue eyes blinked slowly in shock. “Shit,” he said next. Which still didn’t answer Sephiroth’s question.

The First scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair before jumping up to stand nervously. “Yeah, well.” He crossed his hands over his chest, then propped them on his hips, “Funny you should mention that.”

It was Sephiroth’s turn to blink in shock, but it didn’t last long before an unholy amusement took its place. “Are you saying—?”

“Well,” Hands back over his chest, he wouldn’t meet the General’s eyes, “That’s how it happened between Cloud and me so it’ll, um, probably work again?” A pause, “Fuck,” it was a heartfelt prayer. Sephiroth had never seen Zack’s face so full of colour. The First picked up the dishes, loading himself up like a pack chocobo before carrying them over to the door. Sephiroth watched as he used his foot to manoeuvre the door open and placed the dirty dishes on the ground outside the door. He heard Zack ask the guards to call a crew from the kitchen to come get them.

It occurred to Sephiroth that the SOLDIER was more than embarrassed over this. That it was almost cruel to tease him this way.

“Zack,” he said, calling his friend back from the door. He waved him back to his seat. “It may have been the way that you and Cloud did it, but it’s not necessarily the only way, surely.”

“It’s okay,” he responded but he still wasn’t looking at the General.

“It’s very obviously not,” Sephiroth disagreed. “I was teasing earlier but I have no intention of forcing you to do anything you don’t want to—”

The First choked out a laugh, “That’s just it. I do want to.” He finally looked up. His eyes were dark with lust and with confusion and so many emotions it was hard to describe them all, “How do I tell Aerith?”

Sephiroth said nothing for a moment. He watched Cloud’s wing stretch to his friend in sympathy while he reviewed all the interactions he’d had with his SiC’s girlfriend. There weren’t that many but they had been memorable. The little flower girl seemed so very innocent but she’d had ancient eyes... very appropriate considering. She may have been young in years but there was very little she didn’t know, and accept, about human behaviour.
“The last time I saw Ms. Gainsborough was in Junon before I signed the contract with Rufus Shinra,” Sephiroth said slowly, “I assured her that you were alive and that I’d find you. She replied ‘He’s one of your foundations, isn’t he.’ I’d never thought of our relationship that way but she was correct. We talked some more about you, mostly general things. Before I left, I promised her that I would return you to her. She looked at me for almost a minute before she smiled and said, ‘We can share him. I don’t think he’d mind.’” Sephiroth looked at Zack. “Her eyes were so bright, and so... knowing. She was the most fascinating and disturbing person I’ve met.”

Zack sat, holding himself still, breathing only shallowly. His hands were tucked under the opposite arms, his chin was down. He looked like a distressed teenager and Sephiroth wanted to scoop him up and soothe him. Instead, he leaned forward, invading his friend’s personal space only slightly.

“She is a very special person and I honestly do not believe that any relationship we,” he circled a finger to indicate the three of them, “develop will stop her from loving you. However, if you feel that you are better suited to a more... traditional relationship... then I will respect that, and I’m sure Cloud will too—”

“Gghhh,” it was an agreement.

“—and we will find some other way to make whatever connection you feel is necessary.” Sephiroth very carefully, but firmly, placed his hand on Zack’s knee. “Whatever else you are, you are my friend—”

“Ggghh.”

“Our friend,” he corrected, “and we will not jeopardize your happiness.”

Zack finally looked up at him. He was silent for a long moment, just looking at them both. Then he swallowed heavily. “Can I borrow your phone again?”
Vincent wasn’t sleeping but in a state close to it. His mind was empty, except for Chaos’ comments, and he was managing to ignore those quite nicely.

He hadn’t looked at the stars in over thirty years. As a child, he’d looked at them often with his father and had listened to the scientific explanation of the stars as balls of gas burning light-years away. He’d never told his father that he’d preferred his nanny’s stories of gods, heroes and epic battles. Her myths had made just as much sense as his father’s more scientific explanation to his young mind. Besides they were a lot more fun.

As he’d gotten older, he’d cared less for why they were there, content merely that they were there. They looked pretty so did they need any other reason than that to exist? Although the idea of life on other planets was intriguing and he’d read all the cheap science-fiction he could sneak past his disapproving teachers.

When he’d joined the Turks he’d stopped looking at them except to assess them as a light-source during night operations. Then had come Kalm and the mission from one of Bahamut’s Hells that had resulted in eight innocent people being killed including two little children. Nibelheim had followed; a soft, penalty assignment to allow him to ‘get his head on straight’.

He’d relearned how to look at the stars. How to sit under a tree and watch the fruit blossoms fall. How to look into a pair of pretty, brown eyes and dream...

He didn’t know how to dream any more, not about anything. He didn’t want to relearn the activity either. Dreams hurt.

He could look at the stars though. He could look at them and call them by the names given them by his long dead nanny. That one was Ramah’s Bolt, named for the nebula that almost looked like a blurred lightning strike if you squinted. That one was Bahamut’s Fury. If your imagination was good enough it could look like one of the great beasts with its wings spread. It didn’t have the brightest stars but it had a lot in the second magnitude, he’d forgotten their scientific names.

He ignored the soft pad of approaching footsteps. Whatever was approaching smelled of Gaia, not Jenova or Hojo. It was therefore no threat. Vincent would ignore it as much as possible, content to keep his mind empty as he looked at the star-filled sky.

That one was Odin’s Might, the All-Father mounted on a rearing horse getting ready to attack the Bahamut and protect the planet. Odin’s constellation held four of the six brightest stars.

“Do the stars speak to you?” the creature asked.

“No.”

“My Grandfather says they speak to everyone although each person hears their own story.” The creature was well-spoken and obviously intelligent, but it was still annoying that it was here and not elsewhere.

He didn’t look over. “That is your Grandfather’s opinion.”

“I am called Nanaki.” The creature lowered itself to the ground, crossed its ankles and rested its chin on its paws. Settling in for a long night, it seemed. Vincent hoped its fur was thick enough to
combat the cold. Mountain nights were always chilly. He no longer noticed extremes of
temperature. He could survive being frozen, and being encased in fire. He didn’t remember those
experiments but Chaos did.

“Your name is?” Nanaki persisted. From the corner of his eye he could see Nanaki turn its head
and fix its gaze upon him. It was a steady, unblinking stare. It would look at the gunman until it
received an answer.

It was an innocuous enough request. “Vincent Valentine.”

“By your scent, I’d say that you know more of how the planet works than most people.”

“I do not.” He was sure that Shiva’s Dance was over there. Her constellation contained the other
two brightest stars but he’d always had trouble locating her.


Vincent didn’t sigh, he didn’t shift; impatience was for the pure man, the man without sin, “Then I
should probably bathe.”

Silence fell. Vincent watched the flickering light that was the Bahamut’s eye. He could use it to
locate Shiva’s Dance if he could remember the second star to triangulate with.

“I saw your other self’s fight with the experiments. You represent a new element in the war for the
protection of the planet, and my grandfather will never forgive me if I don’t bring back complete
data.” Nanaki stated patiently and firmly.

Vincent sighed.

They were prepared for bed. They’d brushed their teeth, washed their hands and faces, and taken
care of all their other bodily needs. Now they were standing in the General’s bedroom awkwardly
ignoring the large pile of mattresses Sephiroth had ordered assembled into a surface large enough
for three to sleep on. There was a small camp stove to provide light more than heat as it wasn’t
cold enough to affect any of them.

The General stood holding Cloud under his knees and shoulders; cuddling him like a new bride,
using him like a shield. Now that the big moment was here he was nervous.

Zack was standing rubbing his hair, conspicuously not staring at the bed. He also avoided looking
at the discreet bottle of oil on the nightstand that the General had retrieved from his kit. It had felt
weird asking his girlfriend permission to sleep with another guy. It had felt even weirder when she
given him permission and, with a teasing giggle, had asked him to take photos. Aerith was a perv,
and he hadn’t known!

Even with her permission, and downright encouragement, it still felt odd and embarrassing but, as
much as he wanted to run away and be true to his girl, he couldn’t give this up. He needed this. He
needed to be part of this small group. He needed to touch, and hear and smell his little community.
It was an ache but it was also un-freaking-believable.

“Ngghh?” It wasn’t even a word yet it said so much. Cloud was impatient, eager, and wondering
what was taking them so long.

It was perfect for making the two SOLDIERs look at each other and laugh softly at how ridiculous
this was. And yet… when Zack truly looked at his commanding officer, he could see the uncertainty, like Sephiroth still wasn’t sure Zack truly wanted this. So Zack was the one to make the first move. He stepped in and pressed his full, wide lips to Sephiroth’s thin, sculpted ones. Sephiroth didn’t move, he didn’t make a sound except for one soft sigh. Then he slowly opened his mouth just a little, enough to let his tongue reach out and taste Zack’s full lips. They tasted of toothpaste and Zack. They were delicious.

Sephiroth tilted his head, giving his lips a different angle to explore. From one corner of Zack’s mouth to the other, the General took his time tasting his friend until finally Zack drew away. The SOLDIER’s eyes were closed. His breathing was quick and shallow, and it wasn’t all from nerves. Sephiroth knew. The scent of Zack’s arousal was thick in the tent’s still air.

Cloud gave a small sigh and his wings flapped lazily. Sephiroth knew that the blond had enjoyed their kiss—he remembered his Corporal’s lust scent very well. He also knew, probably through that ‘connection’ Zack spoke of, that he was anticipating the follow-up. Well… so was Sephiroth.

“Perhaps we should get undressed,” the General suggested. Cloud’s wings fluttered in agreement before he drew them back in and made them disappear with a pop similar to air pressure equalization. The Corporal had a lot fewer inhibitions in his coma-like state than he had when fully conscious, Sephiroth had realized while readying his lover for bed. It made Sephiroth smile.

Zack chuckled, “I think he agrees with you.”

The First had already placed his huge sword to one side. Now he sat down on the palette to remove his boots. Sephiroth sat down beside him and stripped Cloud’s uniform shirt off. He ran a hand down the smooth, muscled chest, over the large scar left by the bullet’s exit, and over the small bump that showed just how much he’d eaten. It filled the General with an odd kind of pride—he was providing for his mate, and Sephiroth was never, ever going to tell the Corporal he’d thought that. He turned to lay the blond carefully on the bed so he could remove the loose uniform pants. He gave his naked lover a long, firm stroke. It was odd, he thought, Cloud was thin, yes, but still muscular. He should weigh much more than he did.

Zack had already finished stripping and he climbed under the sheets, holding them up so Sephiroth could tuck his young lover in beside him. The SOLDIER pulled Cloud up to nestle on his chest and the silver warrior could see the comfort Zack drew just by being near his friend.

The General finished undressing, tidily folding his clothes and placing them on the chair by the bed. A habit so ingrained it required neither thought nor effort. Another habit was to partially braid his hair before getting into bed. It didn’t tangle but it could twist and tighten around him as he slept, and he’d often awoken when his hair was so tight he could no longer move his head. Sephiroth raised his arms to gather his hair and heard Zack catch his breath. He hadn’t thought of the picture he’d make; naked, muscled, and partially erect—a silver god outlined in fire.

“Don’t, don’t braid it,” Zack asked hesitantly.

Sephiroth let his hands drop. Zack was watching him with huge eyes, nervous yet hungry. It caused his body to tighten and what was to have been a straightforward walk over to the bed became a predatory prowl. His hips swung a little more than he normally let them. His shoulders swung a little differently. His eyelids lowered and he knew he was smiling like a cat with prey. He didn’t forget himself enough to allow his Jenova cells to activate. No ‘Psycho Alien Bitch’, as Zack had called her, was going to interfere with his first time with his two friends.
Thinking of Jenova made Sephiroth remember his own legacy from the genes he carried inside. He almost rejected the thought—he didn't like doing this in front of strangers. Except these weren't strangers. ‘These’ were Zack and Cloud and they deserved to see. So, despite the temptation to just climb on the bed and give in to their every desire, he would do this one thing before he joined his companions. Seduction fell away and he gave them an oddly vulnerable look. “A moment,” the General requested. He hadn't done this often. As little as possible in fact.

Zack, his fingers absently stroking down Cloud’s spine just so he could feel the blond’s erection jump against his hip, pulled himself out of his haze and focussed on the silver-haired fighter. When Sephiroth lifted his right hand close to his face, the gesture was strangely familiar but Zack didn’t care. Just having the powerful General allow himself to be vulnerable around them filled Zack with a sense of protective pride. He was one of the few Sephiroth could do this with.

Zack felt a shift in air pressure, and a large, black wing appeared from behind Sephiroth’s right shoulder. His eyes widened; Seph’s wing was fucking huge! It was huge and full and feathered, and beautiful and perfect. Shit!

Alpha male, anyone?

The sight of it made him realize, really realize that he was going to be bottoming for his friend. Shitshit. Could he do this? Sephiroth wasn’t the guards in the lab. He was safe with Seph, he knew this, but what if he froze or had a flash-back or did something that was disappointing or made Seph think Zack didn’t want this? He did want this. He did...

Cloud, even in his vacancy, seemed to know about the wing. He gave a happy little ‘meep’ and one of his own wings emerged. It was maybe half the size of the General’s but he didn’t care. He flicked it a couple times then let it rest along his spine. The movement snapped Zack out of his funk and back to the present, where Sephiroth, his friend, was standing there with his huge fucking wing, looking sexy and powerful but vulnerable. He was as uncertain about this as Zack was. It was reassuring to see it in the normally confident warrior. The First smiled and hoped it contained all the acceptance and friendship... and lust, he felt for his CO.

Sephiroth saw Zack’s smile change from his normal one to something deeper, more sensual and inviting. He still wanted this, wanted him.

The General let out a breath he hadn't even known he'd been holding. “I thought you should know,” he said. “I am, however, more comfortable with it... put away... if that’s okay with you?” Zack nodded silently. It took him a little longer than Cloud to make his wing disappear but he sighed in relief once it was done.

Sephiroth moved until his knees touched the side of the bed. He stared down as his friend. The sheet was pushed down low on his hips. He was, if anything, even more muscular than before. Light patches, scars from the bullets he'd taken at the reactor, decorated his skin like snowflakes on a dark coat. It didn’t detract from his attractiveness but made him look like what he was; a warrior. ‘He’s beautiful,’ Sephiroth thought, catching his breath as he realized all that beauty was his tonight; his to stroke, his to lick, his to enjoy. His.

The General’s breathing became as ragged as his SiC’s. “Touch yourself?” he asked. Zack swallowed, but did as requested.

At first, it was easy to tell he did it for someone else; his hand moved but didn’t caress, over stomach and chest. Then his fingers snagged on one of his tight, little nipples... snagged and
returned. The warrior ran his rough fingertips over the nub. A light pinch, a twist, and the dark-haired First was stretching like a cat. The dim light played over the textures of his body. Sephiroth watched it all with an avid gaze.

The big SOLDIER’s chest was moving rapidly as Zack took shallow, panting breaths. His nipples, dark red disks on dusky skin, were already full and tight. The thin sheet couldn’t hide the prominent bulge at his hips. His blue eyes, normally so bright, were dark and liquid in the dim light. His cheeks and lips were flushed. Anticipation thrummed through the Commander, and filled the room.

“Your skin gleams,” Sephiroth said, watching the uneven camp stove light ripple over taut muscles.

He sat down at Zack’s hip and placed his pale, pale hand on that smooth skin. Long fingers traced muscles, bones and the patterning of scars. Cloud’s arm, draped limply over Zack’s torso, was explored the same way when the General’s fingers encountered it, as if it were only natural for the blond to be included.

Cloud stretched his wing a little. It was large and it was strong, and it blocked Sephiroth’s view of his lover’s face. He put his hand on Cloud’s arm and ‘asked’ him to put the wing away for now. He promised that they would explore the possibilities some other time. Cloud made a sound that must have been acquiescence because he shivered and his wing disappeared.

Sephiroth smiled at how agreeable his little Cloud was. How... how happy he seemed with the situation. In reward, and because he wanted to, the General pressed an open hand up over strong shoulders and down along his lovely back and into that soft, warm down. Zack’s hand was still resting there, dark against the small white feathers and Sephiroth was struck by the contrast. Cloud’s skin was the warm peach tone typical of the northern part of the Western Continent. Zack’s skin was the colour of a deep tan, and his own? His was an unhealthy, pasty, blue-grey when placed next to theirs. Their skin looked alive. His... did not. Startled by the realization he pulled his hand away.

At least he tried. Zack was, indeed, much faster than he had been.

“Friends,” the First stated firmly, and entwined their fingers. He placed their joined hands on Cloud’s back, right on the sensitive down. The blond purred in contented excitement. Sephiroth caught his breath as the sound caused his own arousal to spike. He was suddenly, painfully hard and any reservations about what he was and what they were doing fell away. He wanted this. The position of their hands pulled Sephiroth lower, closer, until he was near enough to kiss. Zack chuckled softly as the General decided to take advantage. A touch of the lips, short, dry. A longer touch, rubbing a little, heads tipping to match up the angles, to get closer. Lips parted just enough to taste each other’s breath, moist and warm. A little wider to let tongues touch, lightly, hesitantly.

It was different from kissing Aerith, or from kissing Cloud. This time the SOLDIER was responding to someone else’s actions. It was actually kind of nice to not be the one in charge, to be able to lay back and enjoy. Although it was never a good idea to let the General have everything his own way. Zack pulled back, smiling lazily. “You taste good,” Zack said before returning for more, pressing firmly this time, opening wider, searching deeper. He raised his hand to explore pearly skin. He lifted his leg to cradle the General’s long body more securely, and every move shifted their hands over Cloud’s tiny, soft feathers.
It didn’t take long until all three were breathing heavily.

Zack broke first, “I can’t... It’s been too long.” His hips were undulating, rubbing his erection on smooth skin. Sephiroth didn’t think the SOLDIER was even aware of it. He licked at the drops of sweat pooling in the dip above Zack’s collar bone, feeling the resulting moan as a vibration against his lips.

“I understand,” the General replied.

“How’re we going to do this? I mean with Spike the way he is.”

Sephiroth smiled deviously. He gave Zack’s lips a quick lick, and Cloud a hard kiss. “I have a plan.” He sat back on his knees between the dark-haired SOLDIERs legs and lifted his small lover so that he was laying groin-to-groin with Zack his legs draped on the outside. The Corporal was small enough that he tucked nicely under the larger man’s chin. Zack automatically placed one hand between the blond’s shoulders and one hand on the base of his spine to brace him, but it also worked to stimulate both of them as their sensitive erections rubbed over each other. Sephiroth had thought that would be the case.

“Ggh!” Cloud blinked, not the slow lazy blink they’d grown used to but quick, excited blinks.

“Excellent,” Sephiroth hummed but he wasn’t finished yet.

He took a pillow, easily lifted the pair of them, and placed it under Zack’s hips. It forced Zack’s legs both higher and wider. As a bonus, Cloud’s legs also spread wider so it provided a very nice view for the silver warrior. Sephiroth took a moment to enjoy it before reaching for the oil. Delicate fingertips traced over the smooth inner thighs of both his lovers, following the crease of Zack’s hip joint down to the centre of their bodies. He outlined their genitalia, what he could reach of it, even as he stretched for the lubricant. He had very good control, but it had been so long. Cloud was humming and Zack was moaning, and this was pushing his limits.

From Junon to South Corel and on past Cosmo Canyon, he’d carefully packed and carried this little bottle of sensual oil. The last time he’d been with Cloud they’d had to use medicated ointment as a lubricant because Sephiroth hadn’t thought to bring anything. It had been during the Nibelheim mission. The attraction, and the opportunity to act on it, had been unexpected. This time he’d done better. He’d debated on which scent to purchase, but he didn’t know any of Cloud’s favourites so he’d bought one that he thought he’d like, dark mocha. After all, one could never go wrong combining chocolate and coffee. He carefully opened it and poured some on his hand, all the time watching his two companions.

Zack was pressing Cloud’s hips down to his own and thrusting slowly. His eyes were half-lidded and dark with lust. His attention was focussed so tightly on the sensations of his body that Sephiroth thought he probably didn’t realize he was groaning low and deep. Zack’s other hand was clutching and massaging the area on Cloud’s back where the Corporal’s wings emerged. The blond’s eyes were also half-closed and he was humming his enjoyment. His lips—those luscious, bow lips, were slightly open but making soft sucking motions, as if he were eating something tasty.

Sephiroth couldn’t resist stealing a kiss from the Corporal before leaning back, once again. He ran one slick finger down Cloud’s cleft, over his exposed sac, to Zack’s tender flesh and further down, barely touching the SOLDIER’s tight little opening.

“Seph, please, gods!” Zack begged. Sephiroth was driving him nuts. He could smell the combined...
scent of sweat and arousal, the smell slightly different for each of them; unique and wonderful. He could hear every pant, the shift and slide of Sephiroth spreading the oil on his hand. Cloud’s hum and Sephiroth’s absent purr. He knew he was moaning, louder than the two of them combined, but he couldn’t care. Not when Sephiroth was so close to, to something.

“Relax your arm a bit,” the General instructed, touching the hand on Cloud’s spine to illustrate which arm he was talking about.

“Why?” the dark warrior asked even as he did what he was told.

“Because, you’re going to give yourself friction burn in a minute.” Sephiroth explained, even as he reached his oily hand between their bodies.

The sheer banality of the statement, in a situation like this, made Zack laugh involuntarily. Trust Sephiroth to worry about something like that. His amusement was cut short when long, warm fingers surrounded his engorged penis, sliding slowly up then down, twisting slightly to ensure complete coverage. Then the General did the same thing to Cloud’s and Zack could feel it. He was so close, so close. His moans shortened into pants but the silver-haired warrior used his free hand to pull down gently on Zack’s scrotum, holding it in place until the First’s orgasm retreated.

Zack was trembling with need and it got worse as long, elegant fingers encircled both of them, squeezing them tight to each other and sliding up and down. He could feel each ridge in Cloud’s penis, each throb of his pulse, the click as their heads caught on each other.

“GGH!” Cloud shouted and shivered.


Sephiroth barely had removed his arm and leaned out of the way before Cloud’s large wings sprang into being with enough force to make his long hair blow back. The wings beat a couple agitated strokes before being folded slightly and placed on the bed beside Zack, bracing him more firmly so they rubbed together harder.

“He must be getting close to lose control like that,” Zack explained roughly, his breath uneven.

“Or perhaps he knows he doesn’t need as much control as before.” And, to make the statement true, he explored his lover’s wings with his clean hand and with his lips. He rubbed his own blood-swollen flesh against the blond’s cleft, rubbing the tip over his opening, hopefully reminding him of happier times. With licks and kisses and soft nips he paid homage to the legacy of pain revealed by the pale pink scars covering the small warrior’s back.

It made Cloud lift his wings and flap them erratically for a bit before the blond brought them back under control. But the large feathers had created a breeze which pulled their combined scents into the air and made them go swirling around the trio. All three of them, with their enhanced senses, could smell themselves and their lovers in the rich, musky aroma. There was something very primal about it.

“Fuck, Seph,” Zack panted, pulling in more of their scented air, “He’s not the only one who’s close.”

“Very well,” the silver-haired warrior responded, leaning back once again and retrieving the oil. He poured more out on his hand, using it to slick himself up. By the time he was finished, his
fingers were covered as well. He didn’t slide into Zack’s body right away, as much as he wanted to. This was the only first time they would have and he wanted it to be more than giving in to physical urges. So Sephiroth trailed his fingers over the extremely sensitive skin between the SOLDIER’s sac and around his puckered opening. He slowly increased the pressure so that, instead of merely circling the anus, his fingers dipped in. As expected, Zack was very tight. Sephiroth continued to travel that path, matching his movements with the flow of Zack’s hips as they flexed and twisted.

A large, dusky hand held Cloud in place so that every movement of the First’s hips rubbed their erections together. Strong fingers flexed and stroked sensitive feathers. Cloud’s humming purr was getting louder and jagged. It matched the First’s moans of pleasure. Listening to the sounds of excitement, Sephiroth decided it was time to stretch and prepare the dark-haired swordsman for the actual penetration. The General was not a small man and he’d be very surprised if Zack had bottomed for Cloud during their encounters in the lab, and being raped wasn’t the same thing at all. The silver-haired warrior pressed one finger in, not too far, not yet, and twirled it.

He also decided to snack on the cute dimples Cloud had just above his buttocks. After all, his friends were spread before him. Who could blame him for sampling the feast? He took his time, nipping at Cloud’s smooth flesh, while his free hand ran over dusky skin and light.

Two fingers, now, scissoring, seeking that spot...

“Shitfuckgodsdamnit!” Zack’s big body jerked hard enough that Cloud would’ve been bucked off if he hadn’t been held securely.

Sephiroth smiled triumphantly. He’d found it.

The General withdrew his fingers and added more oil, spreading it on both his hands now. He delved back into the SOLDIER, two fingers then three, but he also penetrated his blond lover. Just a thumb, and not too deep, because, even with his thumb inside Cloud, his long fingers could reach down and play with their scrota, tight now with impending orgasm. He could make them both moan. It was wonderful and addicting and Sephiroth didn’t want it to end, but Zack was swearing and cursing at him. There was a fine tremor running continuously through Cloud’s wings and down his back, and he himself had had to take a moment to pull down his testes in order to delay his release.

The General removed his fingers from Zack. He took a steadying grip on his penis as he lined himself up and pushed. Not too fast, but a steady pressure, allowing plenty of time for his friend to adjust. Zack was so warm. It was like being encased in liquid heat. Sephiroth couldn’t hold back his own groan of pleasure. He rocked himself into the SOLDIER, moving all three of them. Slowly to start, gentle, aware of his friend’s every subtle wince.

It was so different than with the guards in the lab, Zack thought, barely conscious of thinking at all. All he’d felt then was being stretched and in pain. He felt stretched, all right, and full and a lot more than he’d ever felt with the guards, but he didn’t feel pain. A little discomfort maybe, Seph was pretty fucking big, but it didn’t take discomfort long to fade back into arousal. Zack knew he was muttering, a string of pleading curses; demanding that Sephiroth thrust faster, harder. That he wanted to cum, he needed to cum, and Seph better damn well make sure he did.

It reminded Sephiroth of the First in battle, with his mouth talking and his brain busy doing something else. It was so perfectly the Zack of old that he couldn’t help but smile even as he felt his own climax approaching. He wanted them to peak first.
His thumb, half buried inside Cloud, massaged the sensitive ring of muscle. His movements within Zack shifted the First’s body, stroking his erection against Cloud’s, and the SOLDIER still had one hand buried in the Corporal’s thick, white wings. Cloud’s wings, which were no longer braced against the bed but stretched out, beating out a jerky rhythm that shifted him over Zack’s body even more. His groaning sounds were gaining in pitch and volume and Sephiroth knew his lover was close.

He stroked harder into Zack’s body, quickening his pace. His heart was pounding. His breath was rasping. Muscles quivered as the tension gathered. He couldn’t take much more. “Come for me, Zack. Squeeze me!” he gasped, “Now, now!”

Hearing the command, the SOLDIER obeyed.

With a shout they could’ve heard in Wutai, Zack tensed, released, tensed again before, finally, his whole body convulsed with pleasure. Heat came off him in waves, in time with the clenching of his body. It was sheet lightening within him, whiting out his nerves, taking away his control, but not his awareness. He knew when Cloud’s body, stimulated to breaking, jerked in orgasm. He felt the blond’s hot fluid jet out to be smeared between their straining bodies. He knew when Sephiroth followed them into bliss.

There was no rhythm now. They were a straining mass caught up in released feelings, in the pleasure running through their bodies; grounding them and freeing them at the same time.

Sephiroth wanted to shout. He wanted to collapse into a boneless heap. He wanted to laugh with joy, and cry for the same reason. He wanted to look at his friends and see them in the aftermath. Most of all, he wanted to do it again.

He’d have to recover first, he decided, because he had no strength to move. Collapsing into a boneless pile was sounding better and better, but he didn’t want to drop all his considerable weight onto his spent lovers. He couldn’t fall to the sides either because Cloud’s wings covered most of the bed. An interesting problem that he solved by bending forward and resting his head on Cloud’s rump, slightly sticky from sweat, but smooth and soft. His to touch, the General thought happily.

His hand fell to rest lightly on Zack’s trembling thigh. He smiled deeper... also his to touch.

“Shit, Seph,” Zack panted. “That was... that was... Fuck, I dunno.”

“Good?” The essential question.

“Yeah,” the SOLDIER chuckled tiredly, “better than.”

“Good,” this time the voice was full of proud satisfaction.

The smell of their fluids was rich and earthy. The chemical overtone of mako and Jenova was as familiar to the General as his own skin, although Cloud and Zack had added their own unique tones to the smell. He could just stay here and just breathe it in for much longer and be happy, however, it would be most uncomfortable for his companions if their semen dried and sealed them together.

“Take a deep breath then release it,” Sephiroth instructed, “Again.” As Zack obeyed he eased himself out of his friend’s body, as gentle coming out as he’d been going in.
“I’ll be right back,” he said before making his way to his small bathroom. He didn’t wait for the water to run warm but merely wet a cloth then cast a weak Firaga on it to bring it up to body temperature. He cleaned himself up first then rinsed the cloth and reheated it. When he returned to the bed it was to see that Cloud had pulled in his wings and was lying on his back beside the dark-haired First, ready to be cleaned. His eyes were half closed. He was blinking lazily and Sephiroth swore he saw a small smile—no more than the corner of his lips turning up. It nearly made the General freeze with hope.

Then Zack shifted and pulled his attention to the large SOLDIER. “Do you need a Cura?” he asked the First, as he ran the cloth over the Corporal’s body.

Zack tensed and wiggled his hips, checking them out, “Nah, I’m good.” He reached for the cloth but Sephiroth pulled it away. Zack took the hint and laid back, letting the General take care of him. “That was incredible, Seph. I never realized...” He shuddered as Sephiroth cleaned around his groin. Green eyes looked up into large, dark eyes, darker than he’d ever seen them. Only a very thin strip of bright blue was visible. They were different but the pale swordsman couldn’t define the change. Then Zack blinked and smiled. “Thank you,” he said softly, deeply.

The sex was done. Tomorrow they would wake up and be General and Commander again, friends and comrades always, but maybe not ever lovers again. However, tonight the lovemaking wasn’t over, not while Sephiroth carefully wiped the evidence of their activities from silky skin. Therefore it was allowable for him to lean forward and steal another kiss from Zack’s wide, inviting lips. It wasn’t quick yet it wasn’t demanding either. They lingered over it but when Zack pulled back, Sephiroth didn’t try to continue. “You’re welcome.”

The silver-haired warrior tossed the cloth in the direction of the bathroom. He didn’t care if he missed. His ingrained tidiness losing out to a different kind of desire. “May I sleep in the middle?”

“Yeah sure. Probably a good idea anyway. For the connection thing,” he explained when the General raised an eyebrow in question. He could already feel the post-coital lassitude pulling at him, and the reassurance of being in a group encouraged him to relax even more. His muscles were slow to respond to his commands to shift over but he managed it.

Sephiroth crawled in between them. He pulled his hair away so he wouldn’t lay down on it. Zack grabbed it and waited until the General had pulled Cloud in snug under one arm, encouraging the blond to use his shoulder as his pillow. Then he tossed the long silver strands over the blond. Cloud wouldn’t move as much so there was less risk of unintentional hair-pulling than if the hair covered Zack. The General lifted his other arm, inviting Zack to use him as a pillow. A moment of hesitation, then the SOLDIER placed his head on Sephiroth’s other shoulder.

“You won’t be able to move,” the dark-haired First commented, “If we’re attacked or something.”

“You’ll just have to protect me,” Sephiroth murmured in reply, and was pleased when Zack chuckled.

It was Zack who pulled the sheet up, but Cloud decided that wasn’t good enough and he brought out one wing to cover them all. Sephiroth couldn’t help if the gesture made him feel soft and... tender. He was allowed to have such feelings about the man who was his lover. Not that anyone would ever know. With one last happy grunt, the young soldier’s breathing evened out, deepened, as he slid into sleep. Sephiroth still wasn’t sure how he knew that his little Corporal was sleeping rather than just lost in his twilight awakening, but he knew.
“Seph?” The Commander’s voice was slurred with the beginnings of his own slumber.

“How d’you lift one eyebrow? Izit a skill? Cannit be taught?”

Both of Sephiroth’s eyebrows rose, and he wondered, once again, just how Zack’s mind worked. “I’ve always been able to do it.”

“Well, shit,” the First grumped sluggishly, “gonna hafta figure it out on my own then.” The sentence trailed off into silence as Zack drifted into sleep. He didn’t go easily. He twitched and shifted as if arguing with his subconscious until finally, like turning a switch, he also became a boneless mass.

Tiredness dragged at the General but he forced himself to stay awake a while more. He extended his senses for a quick auditory check of the camp. There was nothing but the normal noises of pickets and night-crew going about their business. He brought himself to here, now, and allowed himself to enjoy the bodies laying tight to his. They were warm, soft and breathing in time with each other. With a quiet smile he let his breathing match theirs and so followed them into sleep.

“That is all you found out?” Nanaki asked. “That this Omega will cleanse the planet and lead all our immortal souls to a new beginning somewhere in the stars?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm, intriguing but not very reassuring, I think.” They were making their way back to the camp. Both of them relaxed and moving easily through the dark woods. Rather than talking too much about himself, Vincent had chosen to talk to the creature, properly called a Gi he’d been told, about the information Lucrecia had left on Chaos and Omega.

Lucrecia... just thinking about her caused a spike of painful emotions to run through him. Talking to Nanaki about her work, and obliquely his resident demon, was easier than thinking about her betrayal of everything he’d thought she’d hold sacred. His son...

“My grandfather says the planet, Gaia, is alive and aware. It knows when it is threatened or in danger.”

“The Lifestream?” Vincent confirmed.

There was a picture in his head of green streamers of energy, floating and twirling around each other, racing to some central point in a frenzy of fear. It wasn’t his picture. ‘Chaos?’ he called to his most dangerous form, but the demon remained silent. It had been silent since early in the conversation. At first it had been restful, but as the silence continued, Vincent grew disturbed. Chaos never slept and it never passed up a chance to comment on humanity’s petty, to it, concerns.

“Indeed. It was once part of every living thing and it runs through Gaia like a bloodstream. They give each other life, strength, balance and, hopefully, wisdom.”

“As most living things don’t tend to act overly smart, even when capable of doing so, I think wisdom is too much to hope for.” The large animal chuckled, exposing very large teeth.

A rather disturbing sight, Vincent observed, but even that comment didn’t draw out his uninvited
guest. Chaos, who should have been contemptuous of the Gi’s possible threat, said nothing. Vincent got the sense that its attention was elsewhere. It was the first time he’d ever experienced the feeling and, the longer it went on, the more it left the gunman feeling unsettled. What was happening and where?

“One of the things Grandfather has been researching is what would happen to Gaia if the Lifestream becomes too damaged.”

“Nothing pleasant, I assume.”

“You assume correctly.” Nanaki took a moment to growl a warning at a predator that came too near to the duo. Neither of them wanted to waste their time in pointless battle. “Ancient texts talk of Gaia as having defenders or weapons that it can call upon or activate if it perceives a threat to its existence. What Gaia would perceive as a threat isn’t mentioned. Neither is what these defenders or weapons would do.”

“Omega is certainly a threat. If Lucrecia was correct, its appearance signals the end of all life and the destruction of the planet.”

“But that doesn’t mean that Omega destroys the planet. Merely that it precedes the earth’s destruction,” the large felid argued calmly.

“Even though she stated that, once Omega appears, all life here will end and this planet will wither and die?”

“She also said that Omega will lead our immortal souls to another planet. A rescuer, if you will.”

“Then you think Omega might be one of Gaia’s defenders? Although, more like a life raft on a sinking ship than a soldier.” Vincent rolled the idea around in his mind. It sounded... possible.

The creature shook his head unwilling to make a positive statement one way or another. “As my grandfather would say, ‘anything is possible but few realities are ever revealed’.”

Vincent barely refrained from rolling his eyes. “Your grandfather sounds...” annoying, “...interesting.”

“I often don’t understand him either.” Nanaki chuckled, “Maybe that’s how he ends up being right most of the time.”

“Undoubtedly,” was Vincent’s dry response, “Obscurity is given more praise than true wisdom because it’s so easy to twist it to fit events after they’ve happened.”

Nanaki merely laughed some more. “I think he would very much like to meet you. Perhaps, if your duties permit, a trip could be arranged?” It wasn’t the first time the Gi had mentioned travelling down to Cosmo Canyon and the ex-Turk was already well experienced in just how persistent the felid could be. It was going to be a long walk back to camp.

Vincent sighed.
It was a dream he’d had before, a dream of happier times. He was flying, soaring through the Junon sky battling his two best friends, his fellow SOLDIERs First Class. A friendly fight high above Sister Ray, the large gun ShinRa had built over the harbour. It could’ve been a memory but he knew it wasn’t. It felt real but again he knew it wasn’t.

Angeal was dead. Indisputably, irrevocably.

And none of them had ever had matched sets of wings. Yet they were all soaring through the still summer air, wings beating, flying up and away from the former fishing village. They were smiling too which was another pointer that this was a dream. In the real incident, the one in his memories, he and Genesis had forgotten that this was just sparring. It had been a real battle. Who was faster? Who was stronger? Who was better? The beginning of the end.

This was a superior version of the day.

It couldn’t last, of course. Even dreams eventually come back to earth. They landed in a confused pile, rolling over and around each other in a flurry of feathers and awkwardly placed elbows and knees. They sorted themselves out, laughing, standing up to shake the sand out of clothes and, in Sephiroth’s case, hair. He was still finger-combing through the long strands when Genesis slanted his head as if listening to a distant sound. Without a word he walked across the sand away from them.

Sephiroth frowned and made to follow but Angeal put his arm out to stop him. The large, gentle warrior nodded his head in the opposite direction, telling the silver-haired fighter to look behind him. He turned and saw jungle, thick and green and shadowed.

“You should follow the path,” Angeal said, “it’s not far.”

What path, Sephiroth wondered but even as he dreamed the thought a path opened up to him. A narrow gap in the lush undergrowth... more like a game trail than something that humans would use.

“Just remember who you’re dealing with and you’ll be okay.” The General looked into kind, dark eyes and nodded his thanks. Genesis, so flamboyant and needy, had always overshadowed the more reliable Angeal. Even Sephiroth had been guilty of circling around Genesis as he were the sun, waiting for a kind word, a lingering touch. Angeal, who had been as much a friend as the flame-tempered SOLDIER, he’d taken for granted as the person who would always be there. Even though he hadn’t been, and Sephiroth could hardly forgive the big man for that, this Angeal had been a true friend

Impulsively, he gave his dream-Angeal a hug, hoping against reason that the feeling would reach the real one in the Lifestream. He turned away before it became unbearably sappy and marched toward the path. He was almost out of the sand when he heard Angeal whisper, “You saved him. You’re taking care of him. Thank you, Sephiroth.”

The General twisted to look but there was nobody there. “You’re welcome,” he said anyway. Then he turned and walked into shadow.

The jungle was rich with sounds and smells. He could hear creatures small and large moving just beyond where he could see. The earth smelled moist and rich. Birds were singing in distant trees...
and there was a brook burbling happily just over there. It reminded him of the sound Cloud had made while he fed him and he remembered he was supposed to be going to his lover’s little soul-house. Suddenly walking wasn’t enough. He walked faster, then he ran, but running wasn’t fast enough either so he started to leap then bound until the trees were passing in a blur. He had to swing around some low hanging branches which slowed him down a little, but the exhilaration of the action made up for the small delay.

The path widened as he travelled. Between one step and the next it changed from path to cart track finally becoming paved with large stone slabs. Surely he should have reached his destination by now, he thought as he bounded over a steep rise. The view waiting for him made him stop in his tracks.

There was a broad, clear valley in front of him with a single large structure in the middle. Even from here he could see that it was a castle out of a romantic movie complete with pointed turrets and pennants waving in the breeze... although Sephiroth could see no evidence of an actual wind. There was even a moat but it was filled with green mist rather than blue water.

This wasn’t Cloud’s little cottage.

Curious, and feeling oddly safe, as one did in even the most outrageous dream, Sephiroth approached the castle without caution. He could see that there were three bridges over the misty moat, all of them protected by barbicans. Two of the bridges had short lines of people awaiting entrance. The third, the one farthest away from the path, had no one waiting so the silver-haired warrior walked closer. A large, armoured figure stood guard, his heavy sword held at the ready, point down in front of him. His armour was black. His surcoat, Sephiroth believed it was called, was black as well with an odd red design on it. He looked like a knight out of a story. He suited the castle, or the castle suited him, and the General had a suspicion about whose castle this was.

As the General neared he saw a figure approach the waiting knight. The person approaching was also armoured and carried a sword but in a modern Wutaian style. They spoke briefly, Sephiroth heard the phrase ‘none shall pass’ repeated several times, then they fought. The black knight, looking awkward and slow, still managed to beat the other man and Sephiroth was intrigued. The Wutaian should have won. He started to walk closer when his attention was snagged by a figure on the bridge one over from the knight. Long, greasy dark hair. Long, stained, lab coat.

Hojo was here?

Unbidden Masamune appeared in his hand. He stalked over the berm to the other bridge. The few people waiting behind the madman—he wouldn’t dignify him with the title ‘scientist’, saw the pale warrior with the 2-metre blade and cleared the way. Distantly he heard an argument involving swallows and coconuts from the first bridge but he ignored it in favour of stalking his prey.

Hojo was completely oblivious to the silver death approaching from behind. He was caught up in shouting at the soldiers perched on the curtain wall, “Now look here, you blithering idiots!”

“I don’t want to talk to you no more,” one of the guards responded in a heavy, almost unrecognizable accent, “you empty-headed, animal food-trough whopper. I fart in your general direction!”

“You fool! Don’t you know who I am?” the professor shouted, practically hopping up and down in his fury.

“You’ mother was an ‘amster and you’ father smelt of elderberries,” the guard responded, completely unimpressed. “Now go away or I shall taunt you a second time-a!”
They didn’t get the chance.

Before anything else could leave Hojo’s mouth, Sephiroth had swung Masamune and sliced him cleanly in half. He continued the spin, whipping his long blade one-handed to cut off the professor’s head before the upper-torso had even fallen completely away from the lower half.

“Ooh verra nice!” “Bravo,” the odd guards applauded genteelly, “Good speed.”

The General watched the pieces fall. They dissolved into mist before they hit the ground. The guards were mumbling something, but Sephiroth ignored them, at least until the portcullis opened. He looked up at the noisy machinery.

“You, my good sir-r-r, may come in,” the large one offered.

Deciding not to sheath his weapon, the General nodded acceptance of the offer and walked under the iron gate into the long, dim entrance tunnel. It was longer than it had appeared and very soon he realized he wasn’t walking on cobblestone anymore. In fact, ten steps in it looked like one of the corridors in the old ShinRa tower. One of the menial bureaucratic floors with cheap, linoleum flooring; dull paint, and dim, fluorescent lights spaced widely apart to save electricity. There was no danger here and Masamune disappeared back to wherever he’d called it from.

He walked down the long corridor, moving from light to shadow, light to shadow. His footsteps echoed in the empty hall. They shouldn’t have—his boots were rubber-soled. There was music playing faintly, so faintly he could hardly hear it. It was actually closer to a holding pattern than a song.

How odd, he thought, but then he considered his suspicion about the owner of the house and decided it wasn’t odd at all. This journey could take a while.

At the end of the hallway was a door. Beside the door was an extremely short, mostly bald man wearing black pants, black gloves, and a frock coat... in black of course. The man said nothing, just bowed slightly and opened the panelled door which revealed a sliding door which opened into a circular room with a curved desk and a chair that looked like a globe with a piece taken from it. A portly man with a long scarf and a large umbrella was sitting in the awkward chair.

The short man was obviously the butler as he bowed Sephiroth into the room before closing the door discreetly and leaving. The General made a quick assessment of the rest of the room. A table with covered food dishes stood in front of the portly man. To one side was an odd, wheeled contraption that looked vaguely familiar. There was another exit to the left.

“Welcome to The Village,” the seated man said. Sephiroth raised his eyebrow. What village? He was in Zack’s soul-house, soul-castle? He walked over to the food dishes and lifted up one of the covers. It held bacon. He raised a piece to his mouth and took a bite. Very nice bacon. Trust Zack to have good food in his mental construct.

“I am the new Number 2.”

With that Sephiroth identified the scene. This was from that bizarre show that Fair had made him watch about a Turk who tried to resign but was kidnapped and taken to some isolated little place and interrogated repeatedly and ridiculously to find out why.

“You are Number 6.”

“Actually,” the General interrupted, “I am Number 1.”
A beat. “You are Number 1?” the fat man echoed in disbelief.

In response, Sephiroth bared his left forearm and exposed the vile tattoo that he’d had from beyond memory. “I am Number 1,” he repeated. He pointed to the second exit. “I assume that’s the way out.” He didn’t wait for an answer but strode over to the portal.

Number Two grumbled, “This is most unusual.”

“It’s perfect then. Open the door,” he ordered and, as usual, was obeyed. He left the new Number Two in his uncomfortable chair looking perplexed.

When the door closed behind him there was nothing: no light, no sound, no sense of space, just a hollow vacancy. When he stepped forward it was like stepping on air, not floor. He reached with his senses but there was nothing until a jangling noise floated through the room, a four-note sequence that came from everywhere and nowhere.

A floating door appeared in front of him, turning on a starry background and a voice was heard: “You unlock this door with the key of imagination. Beyond it is another dimension; a dimension of sound,” a window breaks to the right of where he is, “a dimension of sight...” An eyeball floats up from the floor and past. Almost close enough to touch if Sephiroth had been so inclined. “...a dimension of mind.” This time it’s a twirling formula, and a floating human body coming in from behind him. “You’re moving into a land of both shadow and substance; of things and ideas,” a ticking clock. “You’ve just crossed over into... The Twilight Zone.”

This series the General remembered. He’d actually enjoyed this one.

A door finally manifested and Sephiroth stepped through into an odd shaped room. He knew it was wrong even though it appeared to the same height at the far end. He saw a strange female crouched in half on the far side of the room trying to open a door that was only knee-high. Optical illusion, the General decided, assisted by thick black and white lines painted over every surface. The door at the small end of the room wouldn’t be the true exit, unless Zack expected one to be attacked by a Touch-Me Frog.

‘Where would the exit be,’ he wondered, ‘in a room of illusion?’ “Ah,” he said out loud and turned around to open the door he’d just come in from. Sure enough it was a new space.

This one had rotating, coloured lights and sparkly things making prisms on the walls. Loud music pounded into the room and was nearly deafening. One wall was lined with mirrors, curved and wavy that distorted the reflected image of anything passing by. Two people were moving between them, laughing at themselves. Sephiroth snorted and moved past almost blind under the scarcity of lights. His path took him onto a moving surface and he stopped to assess the obstacle. The floor was made of broad planks that tilted and swayed asynchronously. Combined with loudly painted lines and the flashing lights it was highly disorienting. The General watched a couple stumble and fall... and dissolve into mist.

He understood the warning. Failure was not an option in Zack’s house. He smiled. He wasn’t going to fail.

He would treat it as a footwork exercise, similar to ones he’d experienced as a child. Easier, in fact, than the ones Hojo had made him work through. Although, he thought as he lightly stepped over them, these would do to improve the balance of regular soldiers. He would have to remember to mention it to Genesis. Perhaps it could be added to training.

The next space was essentially the same except that it was made up of rotating tubes. The paint
seemed to rotate to a distant fixed point. It could be disorienting and mildly hypnotic if one looked at it too long. Or one could just ignore the visual input and use one’s other senses to traverse the distance, the General decided. He closed his eyes, gave his hearing a chance to pick up the gears and cogs that were used to rotate the large barrels, and then stepped out as if he were walking on a sidewalk in Midgar. He adjusted his step to account for the rotation and decide to mention this to Genesis as well.

He turned the corner and a rotating red light illuminated the exit. An alarm light. As if Sephiroth needed the warning.

The next room was brighter than the last ones had been, but that wasn’t saying much. It was a cave, with a shallow cistern of water. Another knight, this time in shiny mail, was seated on a pedestal in the middle of the room. Three doors, all exactly the same, lined the back wall of the cave. Sephiroth didn’t recognize this scene. Perhaps this wasn’t a movie Zack had forced him to sit through?

“What one is it?” someone asked.

Another anonymous person seeking entrance to Zack’s soul, the General wondered, or just a creation of Zack’s imagination? He could be instruction, warning and horror contained in one artificial being.

“You must choose,” the old Knight responds, “but choose wisely for as the True Door will bring you life—a False Door will take it from you.”

That sounded familiar... as did the result when the man chose a door at random. He convulsed briefly. When he turned to face the Knight there were wrinkles and age spots on his skin. He lurched forward a step, but his skin was already turning dry and leathery, his hair was grey and his fingernails were long and hard. Another step and the skin was flaking off then falling off in great chunks. His eyeballs dried out and hair fell off and then, in the next moment, he was dust and blowing away.

“He chose...poorly,” the Knight commented.

Sephiroth stepped forward. “I will choose.” Since there didn’t seem to be a choice... a nice irony.

“Very well,” the Knight agreed and the back of the cave blurred. Now the General could see details on the doors that hadn’t been there before. They weren’t alike: One was the door for Zack’s apartment in the old ShinRa complex; the room number, his name, and his rank emblazoned in brass on the fancy wood veneer. The middle one was the etched-glass door to the VR training complex on the SOLDIER’s floor. The one on the left was the door to Sephiroth’s inner office, a plain door with only a regular, removable name-plate on it.

Sephiroth asked himself; was this test personalized or was it the same for everyone? If it was the same for everyone, then how would most people choose? By Zack’s outward personality, he decided, bright, gaudy, active. Yet, the Commander had spent many contented hours in Sephiroth’s office, juggling paperweights, chatting and quietly reading.

He placed his hand on the familiar plate and opened his old door.

He waited a moment to see if anything would happen. Nothing did. He turned to the old Knight.

“You have chosen... wisely.”

“Then I bid you good day, Sir.” Sephiroth said politely. Something about the old man made him
feel respectful.

The Knight raised his hand in an odd salute, forefinger and thumb together over his eye. “Be seeing you.” Sephiroth frowned. The Knight’s farewell seemed out of place—far too casual for the situation.

He didn’t dwell on it as the next room was filled with more stuff; odd stuff that didn’t seem to belong in anyone’s soul let alone Zackary Fair’s. There were shadows in the corners that the General automatically assessed for threats but the room was essentially filled with children’s toys; a rocking horse, a ball cage, a chalkboard and monkey bars. The exit was across the room. If the life-size, laughing clown wasn’t enough of an indication, ‘This Way’ was written in huge neon letters above the door and fat arrows pointed to it from the sides. There was a group of four young women giggling at the clown. They looked proud and triumphant, as if they’d reached the end of their journey.

Sephiroth decided that look meant they probably hadn’t seen the weapon the clown held in one hand. It was a fairly large knife with a black blade and a serrated edge, commonly used by Wutai soldiers during night missions to quietly eliminate sentries and other such obstacles.

He stood and watched as the women bounced through the black curtain into the next area and, because of the knife, he wasn’t shocked when their departure was followed, quite closely, by ear-splitting screams.

Zack had developed a dark side while he’d been in Hojo’s care. It was hardly surprising. What did surprise him was the First’s choice of nightmare material. Right inside the door, hung so she loomed over everyone who entered, was Jenova as she had been at the reactor. Masamune was in the silver warrior’s hand and moving before he even registered that this wasn’t her, it couldn’t be her. This creature was somehow more than the Jenova they’d seen at Nibelheim but, at the same time, less.

The metal band on her forehead, the wires and tubing running to and from her body, were the same, but she was silent—no insane voice screaming at them. Her face was slightly distorted; her teeth a little longer and more pointed, her eyes were larger and more malevolent in colour. The claws on her hands were more pronounced. She was skeletal, skin on a rack of bones but her veins were clearly visible as was the black blood being pumped through her body. Zack had made her ugly; more a horror movie villain than a once living creature.

The realization didn’t stop him from cutting her to pieces and then blasting her with a Firaga. It was almost as satisfying as chopping Hojo to pieces had been.

It was only after, as he watched her body parts explode and fizzle, that he remembered where he was. Sephiroth hoped that burning her up in Zack’s soul-house wouldn’t damage the First. Maybe, if this was his friend’s soul, just maybe it would help Zack’s healing to have her gone from this place. He would find out when he finally met up with his friend. Which he wouldn’t do if he stayed here and stared at Jenova’s burning body.

There were heavy black curtains just beyond where Jenova had hung. Sephiroth walked through them into a House of Horrors, complete with Hojo’s creepy laugh. A children’s rhyme was running underneath his cackle. Sephiroth stopped for a moment to make it out. It was from another one of those movies Zack had made him watch. He couldn’t remember the name of this one either. He’d chosen to forget it not feeling the need to remember imagined horrors when he had so many real ones stored in his memories.

The rhyme became clearer as the General walked past the displays. Creatures, not Hojo’s
experiments but something like them, wandered the halls, nudging up against the few spectators creeping through the halls, waiting for one of them to break and run. That’s when they’d pounce, ripping off a limb before the person faded into mist. Sephiroth ignored them, his eyes trapped by what he saw. Zack’s horrors.

One, two – Freddy’s coming for you.

A young female on a steel table, electrodes inserted all over her. Her naked body was arched to such an extreme that only her neck and heels touched the surface of the table. Sephiroth could almost hear the hum of electricity as it ran through her body aided by a recent mako injection. It was a toxic mix, electricity and mako. Her blood was just beginning to boil if the green glow from her veins was any indication. Monitors in the background measured the amount of her pain in impersonal, coloured bars. Zack floated aware and helpless in a tube along one wall.

Three, four – better lock your door.

Cloud and Zack were clamped onto tables facing away from each other. IVs ran from a bottle of Jenova’s tainted fluids to shunts that forced the black poison into their veins. Their muscles were rigid, their faces contorted in agony. Blood ran from eyes and ears and other openings; from where the needle was inserted in their arms. In the corner, a lab technician stood with a clipboard, noting down the numbers flashing on a computer screen, ignoring their screams.

Five, six – grab your crucifix.

They were suspended naked from chains in the ceiling; their toes barely touched the ground. Red stripes showed where they’d had slices removed from their bodies, made more horrible by the fact that the pair had obviously been carefully and meticulously cleaned up after the injuries had been inflicted. The blond hung limp and exhausted. The only mess on his body was the blood than ran down from his damaged wrists. A lab technician stood behind the SOLDIER measuring the depth of one of his wounds. Another was writing down the information.

Seven, eight – gonna stay up late.

The same room, but this time Cloud was on the floor surrounded by four guards. Held down by them, already bleeding, but still fighting. One guard was undoing his pants revealing his erection. They’d chained one of Zack’s feet to the wall furthest from his friend, so he hung diagonally and helpless, unable to do anything but scream and twist.

Nine, ten – never sleep AGAIN!

There was Cloud lying on the steel table. Tubes and straps holding him in place as his skin was carefully peeled back. The restraints were hardly needed. Cloud’s eyes were open and vacant. He was no longer there.

Sephiroth didn’t want to see anymore.

Sephiroth wound around and back upon itself but the General ignored the display cases. The creatures circled but, as much as he would’ve welcomed an attack by one, he didn’t break. He kept his eyes forward and he marched determinedly. He flung aside curtain after curtain, nearly tearing them down, until he went through one last set. Instead of another row of glass cases showing the tortures his friends had endured, it was a bright, circular room with a dirt floor and boarded-over windows.

Standing before him was Angeal, wings visible. Sephiroth knew where this was: this was
Modeoheim, where Zack had been forced to kill his mentor. Angeal. Their friend, their enemy.

The General stared at his former comrade, former lover. He analyzed the image even as his anger, already high from the House of Horrors, spiked at this one last atrocity. This Hewley was taller than he remembered, a full head higher than Sephiroth, broader, stronger, and his wings were larger, more majestic. Sephiroth realized this was Zack’s memory of Angeal. The First had made his mentor literally ‘larger than life’.

Angeal spoke to him, probably triggered by his entrance into the room, “Do you remember what I said about our enemy being all that creates suffering?” The voice was nearly the same; perhaps a little deeper, a littler kinder.

Sephiroth didn’t respond. He didn’t have to. After all, this was Zack’s nightmare and it would replay endlessly.

“I created my own suffering,” the large SOLDIER paused before continuing, perhaps to allow for Zack’s part of the conversation. “Let me show you.” The creatures from the halls swarmed into the room, past the silver-haired warrior and merged into Angeal creating a thing. He—it was large with too many arms and too many legs, and a trident instead of Angeal’s beloved Buster.

“Fight me,” it ordered.

Sephiroth looked at it, the creature... what Angeal let himself become. When it raised its weapon to taunt the General into battle Sephiroth batted it away but didn’t draw Masamune. Should he fight this creature and end Angeal’s suffering as Zack had done?

“Kill me!” it shouted.

And Sephiroth decided. “No. You chose this path. Yet, instead of dealing with the consequences, you made Zack kill you. I’m not as nice as he is,” the silver-haired warrior turned to leave. “As far as I’m concerned you can go rot.” Angeal moved to the attack but Sephiroth wasn’t there. Something that large couldn’t move without giving itself away.

Now he had Masamune out. The urge to cut up the beast was strong. Angeal charged, graceful and quick even with four legs. Sephiroth dodged. His grip tightened on the hilt of his sword but he forced himself to back up, step by step. “I won’t kill you.” Another charge, another dodge. “It was your decision to become the monster you feared. Live with it.”

“I’m counting on you,” the creature, Angeal pleaded. He moved forward beyond a faint white line in the sand. Then he, it stopped as a rushing roar filled the room. The Angeal creature looked up, “No. No,” it panted. He backed up. His face no longer determined but instead filled with fear.

Sephiroth turned to see what it was looking at but all he saw was a wobbly, white globe floating towards them. It did seem to be what Angeal was afraid of though, for the monster kept backing away from it. The silver-haired SOLDIER didn’t understand why. It was just a ball, half the size of the thing Angeal had become, but then Angeal ran out of room and the ball engulfed him, swallowed him down almost, and floated away.

Sephiroth blinked. That was... weird.

A light went on in a dim corner of the room illuminating both a door and the short butler from earlier in Zack’s house. The butler bowed, opened the door and, with a raised hand, invited the General to go through the door. His eyebrows raised in grim amusement, he shrugged internally and did as requested. The butler bowed once more and walked away.
The Silver General wasn’t exactly sure what to expect but it certainly wasn’t what he encountered.

A wide, verdant strip filled with flowers surrounded a small church. Sephiroth recognized some of the flowers as those he’d last seen growing in Ms. Gainsborough’s garden in Junon. A gentle breeze blew the subtle scent of the flowers over him, through him, somehow cleaning out all the anger and pain that had built up. A brick path led the way safely through the plant life to the church’s high doors. It was the one Zack had described for him... many times, where the SOLDIER had often met Ms. Gainsborough when he was off duty.

To say that Sephiroth was surprised at his SiC’s choice of abode was an understatement. He’d known that Zack was serious about his flower girl but this showed a level of commitment that was astounding in his bouncy friend. He would have to seriously rethink continuing their sexual relationship if this was how Zack felt about his Aerith.

That re-assessment would have to wait. He still hadn’t found Zack yet and until he did, he couldn’t go to Cloud’s little cottage and start fixing it, and him. He walked up the path and pushed open the door.

Once again, Zack defied his General’s expectations for it wasn’t the oft described ruins that greeted him. Aside from the beautiful stained glass windows, there was no way of even knowing that this had once been a church. For one thing, it was likely twice as large on the inside than what it should have been given its external dimensions. Although, considering the spaces he had just come through, being thrown off by this was a little ridiculous, Sephiroth decided.

Half the nave had been turned into a living room complete with leather sectional sofas, a bar and a fireplace. People were gathered in small groups, chatting softly about this or that. Sephiroth recognized some of the people, Tseng was there, but he didn’t bother to greet the Turk. He scanned the crowd and listened for Zack’s distinctive voice. He wasn’t in this room.

The other half of the nave had been sectioned off into smaller rooms, still much larger than was possible.

He opened the first door he came to. Inside he was reminded of the room with the funny mirrors. It was loud and lit inadequately by rotating coloured lights. People were dancing. He saw the Turk, Reno deep in the crowd rubbing up against some woman like she was a popsicle in a heat wave. Some other female was behind the Turk, rubbing him the same way. Kunsel was there as well in a group of people all dancing together. Sephiroth closed that door and moved on.

The next room he looked into was again rather dark. Most of its light came from the pictures flashing across the large-screen TV. He recognized Rude, Reno’s partner, who was playing a chocobo racing game against a small, slum rat of a boy and Lazard, the former head of SOLDIER. Lazard looked like himself but not quite. He was oddly pale and somehow distorted. Sephiroth briefly wondered how he’d gotten here, before his searching gaze snagged on the form standing in the corner in shadow. Angeal as he had been before... everything. The SOLDIER stood in his characteristic pose: arms crossed over his wide chest, face pulled down into a frown. He looked wrong though, for his back was bare. His huge Buster sword, his pride and his inspiration, wasn’t there. As if sensing the gaze upon him, the dark-eyed SOLDIER started to look up, to turn toward the open door.

Sephiroth backed up a step and closed that door too.

The next door, near what would have been the altar, led into the kitchen. It was the brightest room in the place. Clean and organized in a way Zack’s kitchen had never been in real life. It was here he finally spotted his dark-haired friend. He was talking to a small woman, a Turk Sephiroth knew
only as Shuriken. He knew that she had been one of Zack’s regular flirts and, judging by the way the SOLDIER was leaning close to her, that hadn’t changed any.

Neither had the food. Piled high on every available surface, expensive hors d’oeuvres and cheap pizza were placed next to each other. He also spotted a pot of the Master-Sergeant’s meatballs bubbling on the stove. Sephiroth smirked; Zack had always lived on take-out.

“Zack,” he called and the black-haired First raised his eyes from the small Turk. His smile broadened and the little hand resting on his left pauldron lifted and waved in delight. The hand, actually two slim fingers and a long thumb, was attached to a thin, leathery membrane which stretched out from the SOLDIER’s back to form a wing. Sephiroth stopped at the sight of it.

Zack looked over his shoulder and flinched. “Oh shit,” the First muttered. The wing drew back. The little hand... no, hands for there was another matching one on the right, curled into fists and hid behind the SOLDIER’s broad back. He pulled himself together and moved toward the General with a measure of his old confident strut. “H-hey, Seph,” he stammered, ruining the image.

For once in his life, Sephiroth, The Silver General, ShinRa’s Hero, The Demon of Wutai, knew his mouth had dropped open in shock.

He blurted out the obvious, “You have wings.”
Moving Sideways

Dawn was barely a hint on the horizon and Nanaki had finally fallen silent; no more questions, no more theories, no more anything. It seemed even his curiosity had its limits. Or maybe it was a physical thing. They were in rough territory and the Gi had been active since before dawn. He was nearly as old as Vincent would have been. Perhaps he was just tired.

Vincent didn’t care. He would use the quiet to decide on a course of action.

From a mission perspective, his first priority should be to talk to the General and brief him on Chaos, Omega and the end of the world. Although Lucrecia’s presentation didn’t indicate that Omega was going to emerge, Vincent realized that his piece of the picture was very, very small. He had barely a day’s data, most of it gossip and speculation on which to create a hypothesis. The General would certainly have better information and Vincent’s bit could be the one to solve everything.

From a personal perspective, he needed to figure out if he should tell Sephiroth that he was the man’s father. Just the thought of it, of what he’d missed, caused a stab of pain to run through him.

_He would have fought harder for her… if only she’d told him._

Maybe he should put all that aside and concentrate on the mundane, things he could predict and control the outcome of.

He’d need food today. All this unusual activity was burning up reserves that would have lasted him weeks in his coffin. It took energy to contain his beasts and, the more he drew on his own body for fuel, the shakier his control of them became. He was to spar with Ms. Lockhart this morning. He’d agreed to it so he would do it, but he’d feel more confident if he had better control of himself. He didn’t want Galian or Gigas or, gods forbid, Hell Masker, taking over while he was in camp. Too many questions, too much destruction. He didn’t need any more deaths on his conscience.

He’d have to risk the Mess Tent and hope they had something he could stomach. He could digest almost anything, of course, Hojo and his beasts made sure of that but, after being aware during some of the others’ feeding times, he couldn’t tolerate the idea of eating anything that bled. However, a breakfast meal, even for soldiers, would likely have eggs and bread and such like. He could eat those.

He let his mind drift; hearing nothing but the soft pad of Nanaki’s paws over the uneven terrain, the clink of the metal buckles on his cloak, and the quick scurry of small animals clearing their path. In the distance, he could detect the faint outline of the camp despite the blackout precautions the ShinRa forces had taken. He couldn’t hear the camp yet. Perhaps it was still too early for anyone other than the sentries to be active. Relaxing quiet. It reminded him of the state of emptiness he often obtained when at rest.

Was Sephiroth, Lucrecia’s child, _his_ son… was he resting with his friends close at hand? Was he sleeping, or was he awake listening to them breath just to reassure himself that they were real and alive? Did he reach out in the dark to tuck loose strands of hair away from sleep-softened features?

He’d done that with Lucrecia. She’d been beautiful and brilliant—

*-and manipulative and a liar. Don’t forget that, my little Immortalis.*
‘Chaos?’ he sent the question inwards, ‘Where have you been?’

*You sound like you missed me,* the voice was dryly amused.

Vincent ignored the comment. ‘Something big happened or else you wouldn’t have disappeared like that. What was it?’

*Such a surprisingly clever little biped. But I don’t think you could understand what I know...*

Vincent recognized the prod. Chaos wanted to have the information coaxed out of him. It would be like Nanaki earlier but with insults and mockery. He stayed quiet, knowing that Chaos would tell him more if he waited.

*Events turn. Beginnings become endings which are beginnings. Choices and chances converge. Power fights power,* the demon was almost singing it. Vincent didn’t consider that a good sign.

*What shall I tell you, my Immortalis, my host, my own?*

‘I am not so foolish as to answer,’ the ex-Turk responded but it didn’t shut his guest up. No, Chaos’ sing-song babble of teases and hints continued without any input from Vincent. It almost made him wish for a return of Nanaki’s straightforward questioning.

Once again, the journey was looking like it would take a long, long time. At least this time, he managed to contain his sigh.

“You have wings,” Sephiroth repeated, “with hands.”

Which was a really stupid thing to say, when he’d meant to say hello, but the silver-haired SOLDIER couldn’t help himself. He’d assumed that Zack didn’t have any mutations; that he’d somehow escaped the curse that Jenova’s cells had passed on to the rest of the Firsts. Of course, this wasn’t real; not quite a dream but not reality either, some in between place. Maybe he didn’t have wings in the real world.

He didn’t believe that. Zack had wings. With hands.

They weren’t feathered, like the other Firsts’ had been, but were made up of thin membranes. And they didn’t soar up over his shoulders, like he’d gotten used to on Cloud, but stayed neatly folded beneath his shoulder. Actually, they reminded the General of the wings of a dragon rather than the raptor-like appendages SOLDIERs usually developed. They were also disproportionally small to the rest of Zack’s body if they could almost completely hide behind the Commander’s torso.

He couldn’t stop staring at the tip of one wing tip that peeked out above Zack’s shoulder.

The small Turk placed a supporting hand on his SiC’s arm. “What did you think of Zack’s challenges, General?” she asked with a small smile.

“Challenges?” scoffed a nasal voice from behind Sephiroth, “Those weren’t ‘challenges’ those were Zack just fucking with us all and proving he’s completely bat-fuck.” The red-headed Turk ambled into view and over to the counter with the beer.

“They were interesting,” Sephiroth allowed the change of subject because they had been and his friend was obviously uncomfortable. “I sliced Hojo in half. And blew up Jenova. It was most satisfying.”

“They’ll come back,” Zack said quietly, “They always do.” There was relief in his voice. It almost
made Sephiroth return the conversation to those wings, but he resisted. He would ask about them later.

“Hmm,” the General said. “Are the challenges the same for everyone or do they vary from person to person?”

It was the little Turk who answered, “They change over time. Reno’s gone through several times.”

“So I forget my fucking password. If I didn’t have such a shitty one….” he groused,

“Password?” Sephiroth interrupted, intrigued.

“Yeah, password. Use it and you come directly here.” Reno lifted his beer to indicate Zack’s church.

“You tell it to one of the gatekeepers—” Zack started.

“—not the Black Knight,” Reno interjected.

“Yeah, not him—he never lets anyone past, but any of the others.” Shuriken finished.

“The ones with the odd accents?” he clarified. They nodded. “So where do I get this password,” he turned to look at his, hopefully, future-SiC, “and do I really want to know what it is?”

“You haven’t given him one yet?” Reno asked incredulously. “Oh you gotta give him a good one.”

Cissnei, that was the small Turks name, piped in, “Have you got any ideas?”

“I haven’t had a chance, guys,” the SOLDIER protested even as Reno’s face lit with evil glee and he shot a conspiratorial glance at his fellow Turk. The two of them dragged Zack into a huddle, whispering and throwing mischievous looks at the General. He overhead Reno say ‘it can’t be cooler than mine’ and Cissnei’s dry response ‘anything would be better than mine.’ It had the flavour of an old argument and it didn’t reassure Sephiroth in the slightest. He sighed in resignation and put the matter out of his mind, there was nothing he could do about it anyway.

Instead he watched the First… and his wings. Zack’s position in the huddle had turned him slightly so that Sephiroth had a partial view of his back. As the discussion progressed and the First forgot to be self-conscious about them, his little wing hands uncurled and lifted to rest on his pauldrons. It was obviously their default spot. And the impatient tapping of one, long ‘finger’ was obviously its usual activity as it had created a small indent in the leather. While the one hand tapped out its impatient rhythm, the other was stroking anxiously through Zack’s spiky hair—a familiar gesture made new.

Sephiroth watched enthralled with the size and delicacy of the appendages. Zack’s Buster sword was slung in its customary place and Sephiroth was amazed the wings didn’t get cut on the huge blade, but maybe they were small enough not to be in danger. They would barely reach the SOLDIERS wrists when fully stretched out. They were... cute. And they suited the bouncy First perfectly.

Why had he hidden them? It’s not like the Commander would be alone with his wings. He knew Cloud had them. He knew Sephiroth had one. He had probably discovered that most of the other Firsts also had some sort of mutation since coming to the camp. The more Sephiroth thought of it, the more perplexed he became. He was preparing to ask Zack about it when the group spun toward him, faces lit with impish delight.
“We picked ya a perfect one, General,” Reno said and Sephiroth instantly went on the defensive. “The phrase you say at the gate to come here directly is...” he paused dramatically which allowed Cissnei to take over.

“L’Oréal, because I’m worth it.”

Sephiroth blinked in surprise, “I beg your pardon.” He didn’t recognize the phrase but it didn’t sound that bad. There had to be a catch.

“That’s your password,” Reno almost rolled his eyes but remember in time just who he was speaking to, “L’Oréal, because I’m worth it.”

“I did hear the phrase. I just don’t understand the reference.”

“You don’t have to. You just have to say it,” Zack explained, “They’re just for fun, is all.”

Reno sneered from behind his beer bottle, “Mine’s fucking stupid.”

“But it suits you,” Zack defended.

“At least you don’t have to sing yours,” Cissnei complained.

Reno smirked, “True. I could have yours.”

As if cued both Zack and Reno began to sing, “Fighting evil by moonlight. Winning love by daylight. Never running from a real fight.” Everyone in the kitchen except Sephiroth and the small fighter joined in as they finished up with a roar, “She is the one named Sailor Moon!”

Sephiroth looked down at the young Turk questioningly. “It’s the theme song for a stupid kid’s show,” She explained.

“You have my condolences.” He turned to fix Zack with a stern eye, “I will not sing.”

“He could’ve given me something more impressive,” she complained, “Like Ripley from Aliens, she was kick-ass. Or maybe something sexy... Lauren Bacall in To Have or Have Not; You know how to whistle don’t you, Steve? Just put your lips together and blow.”

Reno whistled appreciatively, which made the diminutive Turk roll her eyes.

Sephiroth turned to the lanky red-head. “What is your password? If it’s not impolite to ask.”

Reno drained his beer and placed the empty on the counter. “Nah, I don’t care. It won’t work for you so it’s no big secret.” He dug into a pocket and pulled out his cigarettes.

“He gets to choose from four phrases,” the small Turk grumbled.

“Yeah. I can say Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit smoking,” he took a deep pull on his cigarette, “or Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit drinking. Umm... Looks like I picked the wrong week to quit, um, sniffing glue,” oorr... “Looks like I picked the wrong week to... to quit... fuck!” He looked at the ceiling for inspiration.

“Idiot,” Cissnei said, but with a dry affection, “to quit amphetamines.”

“That’s it. I always forget that one,” he smiled lopsidedly, “not that I’d ever consider indulging in unauthorized substances.” Zack and Cissnei rolled their eyes making the Turk chuckle unrepentantly.
“I recognize those,” Sephiroth said with a frown, “You inflicted that movie on me shortly after we met.”

“You enjoyed it!” Zack protested, “You snorted a couple times.” One of Zack’s wing fingers was pointing at him accusingly. Shaking in judgement like an adult to a child caught in a lie. Sephiroth’s eyebrow went up. It seemed Zack’s wings would be as expressive in their way as Cloud’s were, despite their diminutive size.

“Their use of the language’s confusing ambiguity was, on occasion, amusing. I agree.” One little hand made a fist that pumped the air in triumph... another quintessential Zack gesture. It was very, very hard for Sephiroth not to smile in what he suspected would be a very dopey manner. He managed to contain it to a more normal smirk.

Then Sephiroth frowned. Reno’s passwords suited him. The catchy tune and youthfully romantic lyrics of Cissnei’s password suited her. How did his password suit him? “I don’t know the reference used for mine. It doesn’t make sense.”

“Oh yours isn’t bad. You should hear Tseng’s.” She rolled her eyes, “His is weird.”

“Fuck yeah,” Reno agreed enthusiastically, “What is it again? I know. You know. We all know we know.”

A smooth, calm voice corrected him, “I know. You know I know. I know you know I know. We know Henry knows, and Henry knows we know it.”

“We’re a very knowledgeable family,” Sephiroth finished, the rest of the phrase having floated up from his memories.

Reno’s mouth was open, “Fuck! How do you remember that shit?”

“Henry II was a great strategist and a good ruler,” Tseng said.

“If he could’ve kept his libido in check he would have been the ruler of the whole Western Continent,” Sephiroth added. “That was an excellent movie. I chose that one and made Commander Fair watch it in payment for having sat through another one of his intolerably junky films.”

“Hey!” They ignored the SOLDIER’s protest, just as they ignored the Turks’ laughter.

“The password suits you, Tseng.”

“Thank you, General,” the Wutaian accepted, “So does yours in an odd way.”

“You recognize it?” he queried.

“Indeed, it is—”

“Ramah’s ass, General. You don’t have to know where it came from. You just have to agree to use it,” Reno exclaimed. Sephiroth gazed at the Turk with narrowed eyed. Reno was a very competent agent, intelligent, quick and notorious for his sense of humour. He was not to be trusted.

He moved his stare to his friend. Zack looked at him with his eyes super-wide and pleading. He was mocking his infamous puppy-dog look, but his face and his expression were too exaggerated to be honest. Unfortunately, there was also too much darkness, too much lost hope in his normally bright eyes to make it a true joke. Sephiroth nearly raised his hand to pet his friend’s hair but stopped the impulse in time.
“What was the phrase again?” he asked. If it would make Zack happy...

“L’Oréal, because I’m worth it.”

“Very well, I will use that as my password.” There was a not-quite audible, not-quite physical ‘click’ somewhere. Sephiroth felt it inside him but didn’t know what it was.

Zack grinned, the sad look mostly erased from his eyes. “Excellent. Reno you owe me 50 gil.”

“Shit!” Reno dug in his pocket, “I was sure you’d never get him to accept it.” They shifted to the side to complete the bet.

“You didn’t have to, you know,” Cissnei said, moving to stand next to the Silver General.

“I didn’t have to what?”

“Accept the password. Tseng didn’t. He picked his own.”

“Excuse me?” One eyebrow went up. He focussed his acid-green gaze on his erstwhile friend who was busy counting the money he’d collected from his lanky cohort. His wing hands were bouncing excitedly on his shoulders.

“The password is actually optional,” Tseng explained, “but once you accept it, you have to use it. I didn’t accept the one Zack offered. Instead I chose one I liked better.”

The small Turk piped in, “Rude doesn’t even use one. He just stands at the gate and waits until the guards just let him in.”

“And why wasn’t I informed of this earlier?” His voice was deadly, smooth.

“It would spoil the fun,” Cissnei smirked

Sephiroth frowned.

“By the way, General,” Tseng said, “your password is from advertisements for a beauty company, especially known for their hair care products.” The head Turk didn’t snicker, didn’t smile, there was no hint of amusement in his voice. In his eyes however... and the others in the room were chuckling outright.

Sephiroth growled. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Zack. He allowed Zack to tease him, and Cloud would have the same privilege when he recovered, but from the members of ShinRa’s ‘Administrative Research’ he would have the respect he was due. They, the Turks, would’ve been the ones to investigate what happened in Nibelheim... and to cover it up, leaving Cloud and Zack in Hojo’s hands. They would have killed Genesis and himself without regret or mercy. They were not his friends. They would never be his friends, and they would not be allowed to mock him. The General narrowed his eyes still further determined to discuss this with the SOLDIER First Class.

Zack seemed oblivious to his General’s rising anger but one of his wing-hands, the one closest to Sephiroth, started poking the First frantically as if trying to get his attention. It worked because Zack looked up and over at his CO. His eyes widened in realization. He turned to face two-metres of pissed off warrior. “It’s all in fun, Seph, I swear.” The First swallowed nervously, a wing-hand massaged the back of his head, long fingers easily carding through the thick strands. “It’s just... I wasn’t expecting you to come here.”

Zack stood before the angry swordsman in a mostly relaxed stance. He was maybe a little
straighter than usual but there was no contrition in his posture, nothing to say he regretted the joke he’d played on Sephiroth.

Reno chuckled and told him to toss his hair ‘like this’ when he said the password. It didn’t help the General’s fraying temper.

His eyes could’ve lit fires, they were so bright. He was about to blister Zack with an opinion of his humour when he noticed his wings were hiding from him again. He tipped his head to look and the hands were nervously gripping and wringing each other. The dark joints were nearly white with tension. Tension, Sephiroth realized, that Zack wasn’t displaying anywhere else.

Cloud’s wings expressed his emotions when his body could not. Perhaps, with Zack, his wings expressed the emotions the SOLDIER would not.

Zack was speaking to him, his body was close, his voice low. “Honestly, Seph, I would’ve done something different if I’d known you were going to come to my house but I just figured we’d all show up near Cloud’s, I guess. It never occurred to me... I think it’s because we, y’know, were the ones to, um, connect... physically...” the First trailed off.

It made sense. Zack said he had first visited Cloud’s house after he and the Corporal had been intimate the first time.

Cloud had been present, and had enjoyed their activities earlier this evening, but he hadn’t had the physical connection the way he and Zack had. Sephiroth had used his fingers on his blond lover but that wasn’t full penetration with an exchange of fluids. Maybe it had made a difference.

He couldn’t stay angry at the SOLDIER; he wouldn’t. He reached out a hand to grab his friend’s arm, “It’s all right, Commander. I came into your house, where your friends were. I should have known there would be some undignified silliness required,” he teased gently.

“Hey,” Zack protested, smiling softly. He settled fully on his feet and the wing-fingers climbed tentatively back to rest on his shoulders. They stayed close to the neck joint, ready to run back down and hide, the General thought, although one was tip-tip-tapping its way closer to where Sephiroth’s hand rested.

“Why didn’t you show them to me?” Sephiroth blurted out.

“What?” Zack’s eyes widened.

“Your wings,” Sephiroth raised his hand, slowly, until he was within touching distance. “Your wings have hands.” He stretched out one finger in invitation and couldn’t help but feel triumphant when the slim fingers latched on to it. An eyebrow went up. Zack’s ‘hand’ had a very strong grip... and very sharp talons.

“Aw, fuck Seph, c’mon,” Zack’s tone said the problem was obvious. “Look at them.”

“I am looking. I see nothing wrong with them.”

“Yeah right,” the SOLDIER scoffed bitterly, “Everybody else has feathers. White feathers, black feathers but feathers. Mine? They’re small and weird and, and skin! They’re ugly.” As the First spoke, the little fingers loosened their grip on the General’s finger and started to slide away, in shame, Sephiroth wondered, because Zack found them repulsive?

Sephiroth couldn’t agree so he grabbed the hand before it could slip away and stroked it lightly with his thumb, tracing the long bones and strong tendons.
Sephiroth looked around the room. “Leave us,” he commanded and with a terse nod Tseng made sure he was obeyed.

The General waited until he and Zack were alone in the room. “They are perfect for you. They are endearing and charming but they have claws and are not to be taken lightly. Lure and weapon combined. Like you.” He ran soft fingertips down the SOLDIERs tan cheek. “No part of you is ugly to me.” Zack shivered and the scent of his arousal filled the air around them.

Sephiroth smiled. The Commander could be remarkably easy to distract. “I originally thought they were dragon wings, but they don’t fold—”

“They’re like Jenova’s,” Zack said flatly, bitterly.

The General shook his head, “Jenova’s wings had feathers—”

Zack snorted, “I saw them too. Remember? There were no feathers.”

“Did it occur to you that two thousand years encased in mako might’ve made the feathers disintegrate?” Zack’s mouth opened but no sound came out. “The piece of Jenova used in the sensitivity test came from a chunk of her wing that was ripped off when DGS forces retrieved her body for Hojo. They weren’t careful with her...” Sephiroth frowned in sudden thought, “which is not in keeping with what we know of other Jenova-based creatures.”

“What?”

Sephiroth waved it away with his free hand, but vowed to remember that little insight later. “No matter. The important thing here is that they do not look like Jenova’s wings.” Zack looked at him speechlessly. “Is that why you didn’t show them to me?”

He pulled in a breath and released it, sneaking a glance at his commanding officer. “I thought, I thought it meant that I was closer to Jenova, more mutated or some shit. I know what happens to creatures with too much of that fucker’s cells in them. I saw it in the lab.” The First put his weight on his back foot, then shifted back again, arms folded defensively across his chest. “And if I did have too much of her infecting me then you’d have to send me away and I don’t want to go.” He raised bleak eyes, “I can’t be alone anymore.”

The General freed his hand from the wing so he could hold his friend’s face in both hands. He held Zack still, looked him in the eye and promised, “Even if you were Hojo reborn, I would not abandon you.” He pulled the dark-haired First to him in a hug. “It seems unreal to you now, but in time you will come to believe it.”

They stood like that not counting the seconds until Zack broke the silence. “I’m turning into such a fucking angst baby,” he whispered.

“It’s allowed upon occasion,” the General responded, holding his friend close, “Too many adjustments happening too quickly.” Sephiroth had vowed to let Zack know how much he was valued once he had rescued his irrepressible friend. He knew it was moments like this that would reassure Zack; standing here quietly, letting the First hold him as tightly as he needed to, and ignoring all their other concerns.

Besides, he liked it too. He enjoyed the feeling of Zack’s strong arms circling his waist and of small hands gripping his shoulders.

Finally, Zack drew a deep breath and gathered himself back into being a SOLDIER. He kept his head down for a moment, hand on hips. Only the small hands rubbing lightly on his eyes revealed
his true emotions.

Yes, thought Sephiroth with a small smile, they suited Zack perfectly. “May I see them?” he asked.

“See... my wings?” The First looked up startled.

“Hmm,” Sephiroth confirmed. “Their structure is familiar but I cannot place it.” Puzzled, Zack turned around. “Can you remove your sword and stretch them out?” the General asked, and Zack did that as well. He flapped them and moved them around. The silver-haired warrior watched them, fascinated. They were much more flexible and mobile than any others he’d seen.

As he watched the muscles bunch and flex under Zack’s uniform, he couldn’t help but wonder if having wings made the skin as sensitive as Cloud’s. He reached out a hand and Zack shivered in response. How... intriguing. Sephiroth’s eyelids drooped in renewed arousal.

He was going to explore more but Zack spun, putting his back out of reach. “Yeah, none of that, General.”

The silver-haired SOLDIER dipped his head in acknowledgment, looking up at his attractive friend, “Perhaps later then,” he crooned and Zack quivered.

The First huffed out a breath, all his limbs in motion to release the sudden sexual tension. He’d almost forgotten that Seph could do that to him. “Let’s go get Cloud,” he said in exasperation.

“Good idea,” the General conceded. “Can you get us to Cloud’s house?”

“Oh sure, easy.”

“Good, I don’t like the idea that he’s waiting for us to arrive and perhaps wondering if we are going to make it.”

“Ah... he’s not at his house. He’s here.”

Sephiroth stopped and glared at his SiC. Zack shrugged apologetically.

“He’s here,” He repeated in exasperation. Why hadn’t Zack said so earlier?

“Well, Niisan is. He’s probably on the stairs.” He walked backwards to an entrance Sephiroth hadn’t noticed before. “He doesn’t socialize with the others much.”

There was no point being angry with Zack. A lot had happened in a short space of time. It would all work out in the end. He would keep repeating those phrases until he finally believed them. “Does he have a password too,” the General asked caustically.

“Yeah,” Zack laughed softly, “it’s more appropriate than I thought, considering where his parts have been hanging out.”

“Well,” the swordsman prompted.

“It’s I see dead people.”

“I see dead people.” That was even worse than his, the General decided. He opened his mouth to ask—

“No, I don’t know where it’s from. Weirdo picked it now they all have to use it,” Zack explained while the finger on one little hand twirled in a circle around the SOLDIER’s temple.
Sephiroth could only agree with the unspoken assessment. His friends *were* crazy.
The staircase foyer was much dimmer than the kitchen. Some barely visible family pictures and mementos hung on the walls and one small blond was sitting on the bottom steps, staring narrow-eyed at them, almost feral. Zack’s posture changed as he neared, smoothed out and gentled, as if he were approaching a wild animal. The familiar body was extremely thin, almost skeletal; there didn’t seem to be enough flesh to make a whole person.

“Hey, Niisan,” the First said softly.

“Zack,” the blond acknowledged.

The dark-haired SOLDIER took that as an invitation to sit beside him on the step. Sephiroth mirrored Zack’s technique and tried to appear as non-threatening as possible. Blue eyes, lit from the inside, cautiously tracked his movement—blue eyes, with vertical cat-slits for pupils. Sephiroth’s eyes except for the colour and the untamed gleam. It made him pause a moment before continuing his approach.

Zack looked at him, “General Sephiroth, I told you about Niisan.” It was a reminder that this aspect wouldn’t respond to any other name.

“I remember,” Sephiroth confirmed.

“Do you need me to warm you up again, General?” the youth asked and made his companions stop and catch their breath, both because of his tone and the content. His voice was low and sensual, full of a sexual teasing that Cloud had never displayed. And yet Niisan was obviously referring to what Cloud had visualized in Nibelheim, when he went into that odd, protective trance. At least, if Sephiroth had correctly extrapolated the events from his SiC’s disjointed, second-hand account.

“I am very warm now. Thank you,” the General responded. The blond peeked at the General from under his bangs. It looked like he was either assessing the statement for lies or invitations. The light from the kitchen lit Niisan’s hair. It wasn’t the warm, soft gold that he remembered. It was nearer to silver-grey, almost the shade of Sephiroth’s own hair.

“We want to go to your house, Niisan,” Zack said.

Large eyes turned to the SOLDIER. Nissan’s posture changed, his tight leather clothing creaked at the movement. The youth tilted his head, dipping it a bit so that he looked flirtatiously through his lashes at Zack. “But I like it here.”

“And you know I like having you here, but we need to go back,” the First insisted.

Niisan added a little pout, “It’s not safe there.”

“Sure it is.”

The silver-haired youth shook his head. “It’s too near the beach but not far enough from the depths.” Zack frowned at the reference to their conversation with Dr. Imeera. “And I don’t like pain. At least not mine.”

“What do you mean,” Sephiroth asked, puzzled by the statement. Huge eyes finally looked straight at him. It was disturbing though. There was sexual invitation but beyond that there was nothing, no
recognition in Niisan’s eyes, to say that his familiar shape held the Cloud he knew. It reminded him of the way Genesis had looked at him before asking for sex. Heat but no warmth. Intimate but not personal. He almost retreated but reminded himself that this too was a part of the Cloud he wanted back.

Niisan walked slender fingertips up the General’s arm. “I mean I like to play games.” He reared back, fingers now covering his mouth in mock enlightenment, “Oh, you mean about the house? I, we... I tried to stay in the shallows but they could reach me there. But when we, I mean, I shifted it to the deeps it was already damaged and the sky leaked in. If you get too close to it, you get sucked into the river.” His voice was very close to condescending.

Sephiroth blinked. That had made absolutely no sense.

Zack carefully placed a hand on Niisan’s slender back and ignored what he had said; the aspects often said incomprehensible shit. “We’re going to help you fix it,” he assured him. “I swing a mean hammer and I’m sure the General knows a few things about construction.” It wasn’t really a lie. SOLDIERS learned the basic of constructing buildings so they knew the best areas to target when they needed to destroy them.

The youth shifted to look at the dark-haired warrior. “If I agree, will you take your shirts off?” he teased, batting long silver eyelashes.

Zack laughed, “Fuck, Niisan. You never give up do you?” He gave the youth a fond smile, “Getting the house fixed will bring you one step closer to seeing me, and Sephiroth, without our shirts... or anything else.”

“What does he mean, ‘I could be sucked into the river’?” Sephiroth asked.

Two pair of mako-bright eyes looked at him but it was Zack who answered. “The Lifestream is his sky and it’s filled with voices. They call out, sometimes really strongly. Niisan,” he jerked a thumb at the silver-haired youth, “doesn’t like being in the Lifestream.”

“Mother doesn’t like me to go there,” the youth agreed.

It wasn’t really enlightening but Sephiroth supposed it would make more sense once they reached Cloud’s house. “Then we won’t let you be, hmm, ‘sucked’ in.” To him it was a simple solution and he stated it as fact.

Niisan blinked his luminous eyes. He seemed puzzled, most his erotic confidence had disappeared. “You won’t leave me there?” he asked in a soft, small voice.

“We won’t leave you there, Niisan. You have my word.”

For a moment, a brief instant, the soft, uncertain Cloud of his memories was echoed in those eyes, in that face. Then snarky Niisan was back. “Okay then, but I’m doing this under protest. It’s probably filled with dirt and rodent shit. I bet there’s no bath either.” He held out his elegant hands like an emperor to his subjects. Zack took one of the delicate hands but Sephiroth hesitated. This was the aspect of his Cloud that had responded with purrs when Sephiroth had stroked the mako off his skin, the man who would order his superior officer to cum for him while down on his knees, sucking on his General’s testicles—Sephiroth shifted at the memory of Cloud enjoying himself with him in the shower at Nibelheim. This Cloud wouldn’t merely walk, but would strut across a room, enjoying the movement of muscles and flesh while thinking of naughty things.

Sephiroth was tempted, very tempted, to lean forward and kiss this over-confident, brazen and
bratty persona senseless, just to remind the youth who he was playing with, but he also realized that Niisan had a petty, spiteful side and it did not fill him with confidence. Was this some kind of trick? Would they end up abandoned in some vile place while the youth made them beg for rescue or perform some humiliating act? He looked at Niisan in assessment and the youth squirmed uncomfortably and blushed.

Niisan didn’t like that. His eyes went frosty and narrow, his narrow chin jutted out in rebellion. He stood abruptly.

“Well, c’mon!” he shook his free hand at Sephiroth impatiently.

Zack looked at him in concern, unsure of what was causing his companion to hesitate. That the dark-haired First hadn’t hesitated to take Niisan’s hand was somewhat reassuring but, then again, Zack was known for his impetuousness… and he was dithering, Sephiroth realized. He was as nervous as a man on the day after the wedding, wondering if the reality of partnership would match the daydream.

He grabbed the offered hand.

“Brace yourself,” the silver-haired youth warned even as the room began to spin, “I am not feeling happy anymore.”

The General was sure he heard Zack mutter ‘oh shit’ just before the pictures stretched and blurred. Then Sephiroth felt stretched and blurred. He was pulled out of himself and flung across a void. He was everything. He was nothing. He was spinning. He was still. Then he felt himself coalesce, all his parts rejoining, reforming until, with a shiver, he was whole. He was himself again, complete, and very nauseous. He panted roughly until the feeling passed, closing his eyes to concentrate on bringing his body back under control.

“A little more warning next time,” he instructed his—hopefully his SiC, with an unhappy look.

“Sorry, Seph, I didn’t know he was in a pissy mood. Besides, there’s no way to describe that sensation.”

That was likely true, the silver warrior thought. He’d never experienced anything like it... and he hoped never to experience it again.

“You should be asking me for more warning,” Niisan huffed, “after all, I’m the one who brought you here.”

Sephiroth looked down at the silver-haired youth. He was shorter than Cloud was in real life, closer to the height he’d been in Nibelheim. It brought back both happy and unhappy memories for the swordsman. He lifted that stubborn chin with one finger. “I have a feeling, my little diva, that you are likely to do exactly as you please and damn what anyone else wants.”

Niisan gave him a sly, lopsided smile and purred, “True. I have more fun when I’m the one in control.”

Both the swordsmen shifted to loosen their suddenly tight pants.

Zack cleared his throat, “At least the setting looks pretty good.”

Sephiroth looked around. The light was thin and everything looked like it was behind a thin curtain. All the edges and colours were blurred and hazy. Although, the General thought, maybe not seeing the details was a good thing. There was scrub and other sickly plants trying to survive in
dry, flaking earth. Trees were covered in a thick coating of brown dust from the blowing dirt. Flowers lined their path, poor, withered things that wilted under the strain. It seemed like a dying land.

“This is good?”

“Compared to some of the locations Cloud’s put his house, yeah.” Zack looked around, hands on hips, looking for the path. All the dirt looked the same.

Sephiroth frowned, “It needs rain.”

Niisan shook his head. “The rain isn’t safe. It takes away more than it gives.” He pointed up but Sephiroth had already noticed the sky. It was green; bright and venomous, just like the mako he was familiar with. It also seemed very low. He turned to Niisan to ask a question but the youth was staring at it. His silver hair shone with an unhealthy green tinge. “They want me to go play...” his voice drifted off. This, Sephiroth decided, was not a good thing.

“We have duties to attend to, Niisan.” It wasn’t enough, he was lifting, “Chores first. Isn’t that what your mother would say?”

That brought the small youth back down to the ground. “Mother,” he whispered.

Sephiroth squeezed the hand he still held, “No matter,” he crooned, “The sooner we start, the sooner we’ll finish. I believe is another part of the sequence.” Zack chuckled, recognizing the phrases as ones his parents had used on him as a kid.

The youth turned to the tall, silver warrior, “Did mother say that to you?” His voice was amazed, as if he couldn’t believe that anyone would dare tell the General anything. Or maybe it was something else, Zack wondered. He’d never been able to figure Niisan out entirely.

“No,” Sephiroth responded mildly, “I never knew my mother.”

“Oh,” the young man whispered sadly. He looked up at the green sky, “I could maybe introduce you to my mom. I think I hear her sometimes so I go look, but she never let me find her and it hurts. She doesn’t like when I look for my mom.”

“I’m sure your mother was wonderful. After all, she raised you and you’re very special.” Niisan blushed and looked away. Then he peeked out from under his extraordinary hair and there was a satisfied smile on his lips.

“Mother gave us everything, didn’t she?” Niisan crooned, looking right at the General. His gaze was hypnotic and commanding; teasing and sensual with a hint of mean.

Sephiroth nodded, unable to tear his gaze away from those remarkable eyes. “She was only the start, everything else you did on your own.”

Zack rolled his eyes in amusement. Even here, with the little guy incomplete, the two of them couldn’t stop flirting with each other. If Seph wasn’t careful, he’d get a first-person re-enactment of the events in Cloud’s trance, or maybe he’d call it lucky. He altered his stance a bit to give himself some slack in the groin area, the old habit coming back easily and one he’d probably have to get used to doing again. Maybe even more often than before considering he now knew what it was like to do more than sleep with the Silver General.

It had been incredible, he thought before he caught himself because that wasn’t going to make it easier to walk straight. He snorted and put his mind back on figuring out where to go in this seared
landscape. His left wing tapped his shoulder and pointed at something that might be a path... or maybe a game trail it was so faint.

“This way boys!” he called out and broke the enchantment, theirs and his.

This time there were no other buildings, just a pitted track meandering through a dry, dusty forest. He looked at the trees, wondering where the monsters were because this was the most peaceful he’d ever seen the path to Cloud’s house and he didn’t trust it. The trees were wrong for Nibelheim, for a start. They seemed like the kind that grew around Costa del Sol, if somewhat less healthy.

They climbed over a curving rise in the road and came to a rickety, wooden bridge spanning a nasty chasm. It was exactly like the ones in the mountains around Nibelheim; exactly like the one that had given away under Private Hansen on their first attempt to reach the reactor. *Exactly.*

“This is new,” he mused.

“That’s not reassuring,” Sephiroth commented coming up beside him.

“I think it’s supposed to be defences or something. Look at the quick release mechanism on the other side.” Zack pointed and the General picked out the lever nearly hidden in the rocks.

“Wonderful,” he said dryly.

Niisan grumbled, “It’s a little late to think of defence, don’t you think?” He draped himself on Sephiroth’s right side.

“Nah,” Zack disagreed, “It’s never too late.”

“Just because you’re always tinkering with your stupid castle...” the silver-haired youth sneered.

“He’s right, Niisan,” Sephiroth supported the SOLDIER, “Hojo was at the gate of Zack’s house. He’s obviously not given up. If there’s any chance he or Jenova could attack you...”

Niisan pulled away from him. “But you said you talked to Mother,” he was looking at the General suspiciously, “that you liked her.”

Sephiroth frowned. He’d obviously missed something in their preceding conversation, but he suspected that Niisan’s ‘mother’ wasn’t the same person as Cloud’s mother had been. He needed to distract the young man before something happened they’d regret. Given the aspect’s attitude and voice he had a good idea what to do.

He raised Niisan’s chin with one hand, sweeping his thumb over his mouth. “I like you more,” he murmured before bending down and catching that lush bottom lip in his teeth. He dragged it out, scraping lightly, before releasing it. Sephiroth smiled smugly to see the little diva’s eyes glazed and nearly breathless from that small caress. “I couldn’t do that to ‘mother’,” he purred.

Niisan pulled his lip in to taste it, eyes closed to savour it. He smiled slyly and half opened his eyes, “That’s very true.”

A cough from the left. “Not that I don’t think that was hot, because it totally was, but we have no idea how much longer it is to the cottage.” Niisan growled in frustration. Sephiroth smiled fully and kissed the youth chastely on the forehead before turning back to the bridge.

“I’ll go first then.” He stepped out confidently. They weren’t the ones the bridge was designed to
keep out. It swayed but not as much as the real one had. There was less wind in Cloud world, so
didn’t upset his balance.

“Are you okay?” he called out.

“I’m good. Niisan is a bit scared but he’s balanced,” Zack replied.

“I’m not scared, not in the slightest,” Niisan countered, “It’s not like I’m in any danger of falling
off my own bridge. I can’t believe you said that to the General!” He complained, and he kept on
complaining and insulting Zack all the way across the chasm.

Once on solid ground, away from the green mist, Niisan turned to swat the big SOLDIER. Zack
just grinned, “Got you across, didn’t it.” His wing fingers flicked at the youth as if laughing at him.

Sephiroth hummed neutrally and ignored the brewing fight in favour of following the path. It clung
to the side of the mountain and might be considered a little wider than the trail they’d used to get
here, but it didn’t seem much more stable than the bridge they’d just crossed. They had to walk in
single-file as it curved around the cliff-face in a hair-pin turn, but waiting for them around the
corner was a mountain meadow sparkling in the meagre sunlight.

The sparkle was from all the broken glass scattered amongst the sickly plants in the surrounding
field.

To Zack, it didn’t look any worse than the last time he’d been there and he let out a sigh of relief.

To Sephiroth, the cottage’s outside appearance wasn’t reassuring, the shutters were unpainted and
loose, the windows dirty or broken and the door hung limply from one hinge. There was a gap in
one part of the structure where the roof should’ve been.

He looked at the SOLDIER who gave him a small nod as if to say this is what it should look like
or, at least, it hadn’t gotten any worse since the last time he’d seen it. Figuring Zack would know
the General turned his mind to what would be needed for the reconstruction, while Zack jogged
around the cottage for a quick look.

Most of the damage appeared to be on the surface, but the frames themselves appeared to be
acceptable. They weren’t warped or gaping. He could detect no cracks in the mortar holding the
walls together, and the structure didn’t appear to have shifted off its foundation. On one wall the
stone work had fallen away leaving a large hole. The roof above it had caved in and appeared to be
in danger of falling into the house. Fixing it would be the most complicated part of their task, he
imagined.

“How shall we do this,” Sephiroth asked, wanting a coherent strategy, “work on the house or
assemble all the personas?”

“We have to have at least one of him here to work on the house, and it should be one of the older
personas, so I suggest we start by gathering them up.” Zack made it sound very simple. Sephiroth
suspected it wasn’t.

“And how do we do that? Does Niisan call them, or do we need to perform a Wutaian Water
Dance?” Zack laughed at the General’s acerbic question but the silver-haired youth hunched down, sulking. Sephiroth noticed, of course. “What is it?”

A one-shouldered shrug, “They don’t listen to me.” His voice was full of pouty petulance.

“Hmm,” Sephiroth murmured, not allowing himself to be drawn into what he suspected was an old complaint, “Then who will they listen to?”


“I’d go with Corporal Strife,” Zack disagreed. The General automatically raised his eyebrow to ask for more details. “Fuck! I gotta learn how to do that,” Zack exclaimed. His eyebrows went up and down and squeezed together. His eyes rolled around trying to watch them.

Sephiroth didn’t bother to sigh, “You were recommending Corporal Strife,” he prodded.

“Oh, right. Spike’s too much like me,” Zack said sheepishly, “He gets distracted easily. Corporal Strife is Army, with a capital ‘A’. If you give him a mission, he won’t stop until it’s complete.”

“He nags,” Niisan said in protest.

“But he won’t be here so you won’t have to listen to him,” Zack reassured the young diva. The SOLDIER turned to his CO and added, “He’s stubborn and he’s good. He’ll find them all and bring them back.”

“So how do we find him? He’s obviously not here.”

Zack coloured a little in embarrassment. “I usually stand in the cottage and shout for whomever,” he admitted. “They eventually turn up.”

Sephiroth frowned at the inefficiency of the method. He looked up at the green sky and thought he might have a better way. “Niisan, you said they get sucked into the sky?” The youth nodded confirmation.

The General had spent many long months immersed in mako, part of, but separate from, the Lifestream. It hadn’t enticed or embraced him like it had evidently done with Cloud, but he’d become somewhat familiar with its dynamics. Given what Zack had said about the Corporal and what he knew about the Lifestream, Sephiroth believed he might have a slightly better plan than stand in the room and yell.

A moment’s concentration and his wing came out. He’d never used it to fly before—he’d never used it to do anything before, but if Genesis could achieve flight with his one, skinny wing, Sephiroth could fly with his. He ignored Niisan’s admiring, or perhaps envious, gasp and jumped as high as he could go, which was considerable, but still short of his goal. He spread his wing to catch the air. It held him, but there was no updraft so he didn’t go any higher. Not good enough. Even when he pumped the wing strongly it gave him hardly any lift. He didn’t fly in circles, which he thought odd, but he didn’t go up. He gritted his teeth in determination. He wasn’t going to fail.

One wing wasn’t working therefore, he decided, he needed two.

He’d had two wings in the dream when he was sparring with Genesis and Angeal over Junon. They’d all had sets of wings instead of just on one side. They’d flown all over the sky with them.

He tried to remember what that had felt like, not just the flying, but the movement of it, the muscles in his back and chest, the strain on joints and tendons. How he’d felt balanced and whole.
and free. With a burst of desire and memory and need he felt the second wing pop into existence. He could sense that it was as big as his original and he pumped it, hard. It lifted him the short remaining distance so he could enter Cloud’s thick, green ‘sky’.

He entered it completely, surrounding himself with its streamers of vivid, greens, everything from deep mossy tones, to light icy ones with the occasional blips of putrid blackness whirling along with them. Jenova. He’d recognize her taint anywhere.

Those bits had called to him, had hunted for him, seeking to attach and infect him, to make him more like her. They were too small to control his thoughts as she had done at the reactor, but enough of them could have overloaded his cellular structure and made him entirely her creature. He’d been their prey. He hadn’t reacted well to being the hunted one. He’d managed to avoid them before, destroying them when they came too close. He would do so again while he called to his prey.

“Cowards Strife! Front and centre!” He pitched his voice so it was carried along by the always-moving streamers.

Sephiroth knew that scientists, theorists and philosophers usually pictured the Lifestream as rivers flowing inexorably in one direction. That’s not what it was like when immersed in it however. It was chaotic and frenetic, and the streamers moved generally in one direction but not always. He waited for the inevitable shift in direction before calling again, “Cowards Strife! Report for duty!” and the Lifestream took his voice into a new area, spreading it throughout the almost living structure.

“Cowards Strife, reporting, SIR!”

The crisp voice came from behind him. Not exactly where he’d expected but the General quickly turned and saw a young soldier in a uniform so ragged and dirty he looked like an extra from an overdone war movie. Non-standard alterations and repairs made it hardly recognizable as a ShinRa army uniform. It was the eyes that stopped the Corporal from being a stereotype; they were old and tired but watching for the latest threat, prepared for it. A slight smell of explosives and gunpowder hung around him, like he’d just stepped off the battlefield. Maybe he had.

“Stand easy,” Sephiroth commanded and the NCO released his stance. The General took a moment to study this incarnation of his lover. He was bulkier than the Cloud of his memories. Heavier-set and thicker featured, and so very solidly here. The General was reminded of Angeal, an oak amongst willows when compared to Genesis or himself. This Corporal Strife would make an excellent sergeant one day, the kind that was called ‘the backbone of the army’.

“I understand you’re the man I talk to when I want a job done.”

“I try, Sir.” Like any good grunt when faced with a very superior officer, the Corporal was staring neutrally over the General’s left shoulder, waiting patiently for the officer to open his mouth and reveal himself to be an idiot... or not.

It was a posture Sephiroth was familiar with. Master-Sergeant Lutton, a Lifer in the Regular Army, had treated him the exact same way for the first few months. Sephiroth also recognized that this man was unafraid of the Silver General. He’d seen death, and maybe worse than death, and whatever the General could throw at him couldn’t compare to that.

“Excellent,” he smiled approvingly and watched as the Corporal’s shoulders straightened involuntarily. “What I require of you, Corporal Strife, is to locate your personas that are currently playing in the Lifestream; you are to find them, and bring them back to the cottage.”
“Understood, Sir.”

“This mission is to be pursued with extreme urgency. If any of your aspects gives you any trouble you can either come get me and I will deal with it, or you can tell them to bring it up with me, but you are to get them to me at the cottage, undamaged, one way or another. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Any questions?”

“No, Sir.”

“Go get them for me, Corporal Strife.” Sephiroth dismissed him.

The Corporal snapped to attention, “Sir. Yes, Sir!” and then he was gone, dissolved into the mist.

His immediate task completed, he took a moment to examine the Lifestream which had become the focus of so much research and concern. He could feel Jenova’s... legacy. Her oily, black taint, full of anger and despair was spreading through the green. Eventually, they’d have to deal with her infection, but not right now. Now he had a cottage—and a lover, to rebuild.
Zack stood watching Sephiroth until he disappeared into the acid-green river that doubled as Cloud’s sky. The General could be swallowed up by it, entranced by it, shredded by it, or become lost forever in its swirling depths. It was dangerous there, look at what had happened to Cloud, but there had been no hesitation, no fear for himself. It was needed to reassemble Cloud so he would do it.

Just like what he’d done to rescue their physical bodies.

It still made the black-haired SOLDIER catch his breath to realize how important they were to the genetically-modified, oddly-raised, person that was Sephiroth. He didn’t know if he’d ever get used to it.

A warm presence wrapped itself around his hip, “Are we going to start work, or did you need to relax first,” Niisan cooed. Delicate fingers eased their way south.

Zack grabbed those fingers before they got too close to anything interesting and brought them up to his lips for a quick kiss, “Down, boy.”

Niisan chuckled, “You’d be disappointed if I didn’t try.” Zack had to smile. The brat was right.

“Let’s get to work, buddy. We can play later.” Once Cloud was whole again was the unsaid but understood subtext; they’d covered this territory before. The silver-haired youth pouted but followed Zack into the house. Zack wasn’t surprised by Niisan’s docile obedience. He could work as hard as any of Cloud’s parts, he just didn’t like to. Until someone told him what to do and how to do it, he wouldn’t do anything.

“Ewwww,” Niisan’s nose wrinkled fastidiously, “it stinks in here.” One hand came up to cover his face as if that would keep the stench out.

“Hardly surprising. Nobody’s been looking after it.” Zack commented while looking around. “I think our first priority will be to do the wall and the roof.”

“The holes make it cold in here.” That wasn’t Niisan’s throaty purr, but a much younger, less inviting version. “And the wind blows everything around.” Zack looked around for the source. Raincloud stepped out from behind a freestanding cupboard in the raised section. He was as he’d been earlier except for a being a lot dirtier, as if he’d been trying to clean up but had ended up playing in the dirt instead. Maybe he’d done both.

“Hey, Raincloud,” Zack said, smiling happily. “You been here since I last saw you?”

Dusty blond locks waved as the smallest Cloud nodded. Big, solemn eyes looked at him, assessed him, even as tiny arms tightly clutched his worn toy dragon. “You made me tingly,” the child finally said.

Baffled, Zack didn’t know how to respond. He frowned in question, “I did?”

Again with the solemn head nodding. “You and the silver one, Outside There. It made me feel funny.”
“Outside There…?” It didn’t help that Niisan had figured out what Raincloud was referring to in that telepathic way the personas had with each other. The silver-haired youth was giggling in delight. Wait… There really wasn’t much Niisan was interested in besides sex.

Ohmyfuckinggods!

The SOLDIER could feel colour heating his face. He doubted that even his darker skin could hide how deeply he was blushing. “You felt that?”

“I was Here. Outside There is closer when we’re Here.” He saw that Zack was horrified and tried to comfort him “It felt nice, kinda strange but nice.”

“Hmm,” Niisan purred, “I’m sorry I stayed away then.” He eased up to Zack’s side and clung lightly, “Maybe we could recreate it?”

“Aah, no,” the black-haired First moved away, “Work first, right? Did you want to come with us, Raincloud?”

“The silver one is coming back?”

“Yeah,” Zack confirmed. He’d have to call Sephiroth that to his face, just to see how he reacted. “As soon as he finds the Corporal.”

Little Raincloud looked up at him, head tilted in assessment. Suddenly, the young Nibelheimer’s face went blank and empty, all animation, all will just drained away. His arms dropped, his grip on the stuffed-dragon loosened and the toy fell to the floor. The child stood military straight but it was as if someone had pulled strings on him. He stared at the First, blinking slowly, revealing pupils so wide that they almost completely eradicated the iris’ pale, blue colour.

“The hands of circumstance have changed. The Weapons precede Chaos. Chaos precedes Omega. The Weapons cleanse the Planet. Omega takes its spirit. Chaos can control it all if he chooses to do so.” His voice was mechanical, the words and rhythm all wrong for a six-year old boy.

Zack was stunned. Raincloud often seemed to know more than he should about things that he should be oblivious to, but this was just wrong. The First’s shock didn’t last long however. He knelt down close to the boy, “What can you tell me of Chaos?”

“Chaos is the one in between. He is a child of Gaia but shares blood with The Man... and The Others,” the blond shrugged, the move jerky and uncoordinated and completely unlike any of Cloud’s parts. “The Weapons have no choice. They are what they were created to be. Chaos is the Harbinger, the Omen but he can ignore destiny. He is not alone. The cycle can continue if they have the See-er and the Heart to guide them.”

Raincloud’s delicate voice was growing even thinner, and Zack swore he could see the child being shredded as whatever it was used him. The SOLDIER decided that it didn’t matter how important this information might be, nothing was worth watching the boy get pulled apart. It would be like Hojo’s lab all over again.

Zack reached out a hand and gave him a gentle shake, “Raincloud. Raincloud, come back.”

“Chaos never sleeps, The Man barely rests, but The Others are in the twilight and they might not like being awake…”

He shook the boy harder, called a little louder, put a little more energy into his call, “Raincloud!”
He knew when the odd possession ended; Raincloud sat abruptly, his legs just folding up underneath him. He blinked, dazed as his pupils slowly returned to their normal size. His face filled with personality—an innocent, ancient, disjointed personality but at least it was his. Not like before. The tiny aspect had seemed like a puppet under someone else’s control and that scared Zack. He didn’t want his friend, any part of his friend, to be so vulnerable. “You okay, Raincloud?”

“They said to tell you.” The child picked up his stuffy and squeezed it hard.

“Who said?” Zack demanded, wondering who had taken over the kid like that. He’d like to teach them a lesson about personal space….

Strangely, it was Niisan who answered him, “The ones in the ‘deep sea’,” he air-quoted, “The oldest part of it. They feel the planet more strongly there.” Not a helpful answer as he couldn’t go into the Lifestream and pound on spirit energy. He growled in frustration.

“They say lots but most people can’t hear them unless they’re drowning. The Growing Lady almost hears them when she’s surrounded by green things.” Raincloud said in explanation and added to Zack’s confusion.

Niisan smirked, “They don’t like me, thank gods, so they don’t bother me much but they’re always nagging at someone.”

Zack almost snorted, that made about as much sense as the aspects ever did. Questioning Raincloud any more was just going to give him a headache, so he’d put it aside for now. He didn’t have enough information, probably wouldn’t get any more information, and it’s not like they didn’t have other things to do after all, so he ruffled Raincloud’s hair just to see him scowl.

“Do I get a hug?” He asked, because he always asked.

Raincloud looked at him, his eyes so soft, so old with remembered pain. Fuck, it made Zack’s heart hurt to see it. Then the boy smiled, just a small smile, barely there in fact, but it was definitely an upward tilt of the lips. “Your wings are making shapes above your head.”

“What?” He twisted to look, but of course he couldn’t see what his wings were doing. He did see Niisan’s slyly smiling face. “What were they doing?” he demanded of the silver-haired persona.

Niisan smiled a little deeper, “How badly do you want to know?” he cooed.

Zack rolled his eyes, “Not that badly.” He turned back to Raincloud who’d hidden his face in his stuffed dragon. “Are you going to tell me?”

A silent head shake, but the boy’s blue eyes were a little less solemn and haunted. Raincloud’s shoulders jerked in giggles and he pressed himself deeper into his toy. Zack sighed, “They’re doing it again, aren’t they.”

Raincloud nodded.

Zack put his hands on his hips in exasperation. “You know, we have better things to do, we should probably get to them.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Niisan chortled, “Watching your little wings play with a five-year old child is rather entertaining.” He stepped closer and purred, “Maybe they’d like to play with me later.”

“Work first, brat. Did you want to come with us, Raincloud?” he asked, expecting the young boy to say no like he usually did and got ready to ask for a hug like he always did. He nearly fell over
when Raincloud raised his hands and said, “Up please?”

Zack lost his breath, Raincloud had never, ever, let himself be picked up, but the SOLDIER only hesitated for an instant before reaching down to lift the little aspect up to ride on his shoulders. He held the boy’s legs with one arm. His wings came up to brace his sides... and to tickle, apparently. Raincloud squirmed and giggled as long fingers played along his ribs. It was such an unexpectedly happy sound that Zack couldn’t help but grin even as he skipped around to maintain their balance.

“I can’t believe you go all sappy for the little larvae too,” Niisan complained, unhappy that the focus wasn’t on him.

“It’s not me, it’s my wings,” Zack protested, but Niisan just tapped his foot impatiently. With a final, put-upon sigh—that nobody listened to, Zack got his appendages to settle down. “C’mon, you little diva, let’s get some work done,” he said and dragged Niisan’s skinny butt outside to start work.

It didn’t take long for Zack to have them all busy.

Raincloud he set down in the yard to pull weeds. The boy pulled weeds, and grass, and flowers with equal abandon, but at least he was happy. When he got bored with that, he arranged pebbles into a village that his dragon immediately attacked. Stupid twig people, who had built their homes in the dragon’s territory and who tried to defend it, were burnt to a crisp and eaten... even though the dragon really preferred munching on the meadow’s tiny purple flowers.

Zack, listening to the epic saga, smiled; trust Raincloud to turn the dragon into a misunderstood hero. He kept a cautious eye on the little guy, watching for any sign of him being dissolved into the Lifestream, but the boy played happily in the dirt. The SOLDIER couldn’t help but notice that the grass was already fuller and greener, and there were bright coloured flowers in Cloud’s meadow. It was a good sign.

For Niisan, he sketched the proper way to frame a house in the dirt so that he knew what to do. Then Zack dodged Niisan’s busy fingers and clever tongue, and tried to keep the silver-haired youth’s mind on fixing the cottage. Focus made the job go faster and Niisan could concentrate… on stuff that interested him. Fixing walls wasn’t on that list.

It was a good thing that even the smallest amount of attention and care started the changes happening. It wasn’t the physical stuff that had an effect—Cloud’s parts could construct the whole thing from air, rather it was the attention they gave it, and just thinking fixing things was often enough to have it happen. Still, Zack had a hard time doing nothing so, while Raincloud’s rough ministrations made improvements in the meadow, and Niisan’s concentrated efforts made the walls grow, he threw mortar and stones up knowing that it would be smoothed into something more acceptable as soon as Niisan noticed it.

It was mindless work and it allowed his thoughts to return to what Raincloud had said in the house. He tossed it around in his head and tried to… to translate it into real-speak, or try.

Fucking metaphors.

It was somehow connected with what Tifa had talked about earlier. That materia she’d found. She said it had put on quite a show in the Pit, something to do with the spooky ex-Turk’s old girlfriend and her research into Omega and Chaos and the end of the planet. Raincloud had talked about Chaos and Omega when he’d been taken over but he hadn’t made any sense. Maybe Tifa could tell him more but probably not.

So it looked like, once he got back Outside There, he’d be spending some time researching Dr.
Lucrecia Crescent... Sephiroth’s mom. He was not looking forward to it. What kind of woman let her unborn child be used as an experiment? He wanted to go back in time and just bitch-slap her. Except that all the stuff that had been done to Sephiroth had made him what he was now and, if he could go back in time to change it, who would Sephiroth be? Zack couldn’t picture him as anything other than ‘The General’. Would he still be ‘The General’ without all the modifications Hojo had done to him?

Fuck, he sighed, sometimes life was just shitty.

Zack dragged his mind away from thoughts of time travel and Dr. Crescent, and tried to remember the other things Raincloud had mentioned. What were the Weapons? And who were the Others? Were they the, the Seer and the Heart and the Growing Lady, or had Raincloud been talking about some whole other Others?

The Weapons precede Chaos, which was wrong because if Vincent was ‘The Man’ which was likely because Raincloud had already named the red-eyed ex-Turk as ‘The Man’ when he called for them to rescue the creepy vampire from his coffin. Not that Vin was actually a vampire, but c’mon, he snorted, the guy had been sleeping in a freakin’ coffin.

Bet it would piss Vinny off completely if he called him that to his face.

Shit, he was getting off-track.

Vincent Valentine was Chaos somehow, and Chaos was the key to controlling all the Weapons, or just Omega? Except that the Weapons are supposed to come before Chaos and Chaos, it seemed, was already here. With The Others, whoever the fuck they were, Vin had been by himself so it wasn’t anybody, anything from the lab... unless he and Cloud were the Others. They’d been with him in the lab, even though they hadn’t known he was there. Cloud was definitely in the twilight zone, but Zack didn’t think he’d mind being awake the way Raincloud had said The Others would.

Scratch them for being Raincloud’s ‘Others’. Which at least meant they wouldn’t have to try and control the planet’s Weapons, or destroy them, or whatever the fuck the message had hinted at. Obscure, useless piece of shit nonsense.

And what did the planet need Weapons for anyway? What kind of Weapons? Not ‘weapons’ small double-u, but ‘Weapons!’ capitalized and everything.

Zack had a picture in his mind of the huge gun at Junon that ShinRa had been building. What had they called it? Sister Ray. Maybe Sister Ray would come to life and start moving around the planet or something. Or would they be giant boulder-men that had lava pouring out of their mouths? Zoloms would do pretty good as Weapons. They were huge already and pretty fucking hard to kill. Only problem is that they really didn’t like leaving the swamps but, if the planet wanted to, he guessed that it could change that and maybe make them three times their normal size. That’d make them fucking scary.

How would they know when the Weapons emerged or got frisky or whatever they hell they were supposed to do? Omens and portents were great for mystics and ancient fucking poems but Zack really would prefer getting an office memo or something.

Maybe Vin would suddenly become Chaos, that would be a pretty clear sign that things were going to shit. Maybe he should talk to the spooky dude instead of Tifa, because he should know about all this, right? Except, if he talked to Vinny the Vampire, he’d wind up asking him stuff he probably shouldn’t and didn’t really want the answer to anyway. Tifa hadn’t said anything but Zack was adept at listening to what wasn’t said when he wanted to be. He had a pretty good idea that what
she hadn’t said was that the sinister gunman was actually Sephiroth’s dad. If they got talking, Zack would ask. If he asked and Vincent said ‘yes, I’m his father’ what should he do then?

Punch Vincent in the face, came to mind, for leaving his kid alone all these years. Except, Seph’s mom had definitely been married to Dr. Insane-O, which meant that if Vincent was Seph’s dad then he was the result of an affair. Which wasn’t a great recommendation either.

Anyway he looked at it, he couldn’t see how the fuck was he going to tell his friend.

Sephiroth emerged from Cloud’s green sky some distance from the cottage, the currents having pulled him away. He turned himself in its direction and pumped his wings hard. He revelled in the fact of muscles and tendons shifting so smoothly, driving him through the air. He exulted at the freedom and control it gave him. They weren’t feelings he’d not experienced much of as an experiment; belonging to ShinRa and not to himself. It was a heady feeling and his enjoyment added power to his strokes so it didn’t take long to build up to an impossible speed. It took only seconds for him to reach the clearing with Cloud’s house in it.

The General decided to pass over the building to assess the damage to the roof he’d glimpsed earlier. There was still a hole and many shingles missing or loose but he could already see where Niisan and Zack had started rebuilding. A wooden frame, bright like only unweathered lumber can be, was already in place over the hole in the wall and the roof. Glass no longer glittered from meadow, and the grass itself was looking somewhat healthier than when they’d arrived. There was more of it, too.

He hadn’t been gone that long, had he?

He saw Zack and the silver-haired youth pause in their task and look up. He could be excused giving in to the impulse to add a little something extra to his landing, he decided, when being gazed at by his two extremely attractive lovers. Not just his two lovers…

Niisan looked a little star-struck, and not happy about it. Zack’s lips had quirked up; half-mocking and half-impressed. That smile warned Sephiroth that he was about to be teased.

“Couldn’t let yourself be outdone by a lowly Commander, could you, Seph? You just had to squeeze out another wing.” Zack shook his head in disappointment, “On impulse too. Tsk.”

“It was the most efficient way to reach my target,” he barely heard Zack, his focus was on the little person that was latched onto Zack’s leg, staring at him with large, blue eyes.

“That may be true,” Zack conceded, “but it won’t work as an explanation when people comment on how well they match your uniform. They’ll think you did it for looks.”

Sephiroth pulled his eyes away from the small Cloud—Raincloud, that was the aspect’s name, and looked at Zack in confusion. What was he talking about? His wing colour? The General looked at the wing on his right. It was the same solid black it always was. Then he looked at his left...

The wing looked white.

He brought it forward so he could examine it more closely. Definitely white. He gave the First a baffled look.

“Seph, you do realize that, when you pop that wing in real life, it’s gonna be white too.” Zack’s grin was wide at the General’s bewildered look.
“I only have one wing in real life.”

“Maybe before,” Zack argued, “Now I think you’ll have a set. Don’t get me wrong, they’ll be very impressive. I mean their big and the colour contrast is very striking. Genesis will be jealous when he sees them.”

“I think they’re beautiful,” Raincloud murmured.

“Of course you do,” Zack responded, his little wing fingers flicked casually, “You think all of him is beautiful.”

Niisan leaned on Zack, “Actually, I think ‘tasty’ suits him better.”

“Perv,” Zack responded with a smile. Niisan didn’t even bother to deny it.

Raincloud and Sephiroth didn’t hear their exchange. The General had tucked away his wings to wherever they went, finding their weight awkward now that he was on the ground, but his gaze was locked on the smallest Cloud. The child had walked over to the General, his eyes never faltered. “Your hair is pretty,” he said.

“I like yours as well,” the General responded unsure whether this was the proper response even if it was true.

“Can I touch it?”

“Of course,” Sephiroth knelt and held out a strand of his hair. Raincloud took it in his hand, letting it slide through his fingers and over his hand. He kept his gaze on it, watching how it moved and how it shone in the light. When it had all fallen away, he looked up at the General with solemn, too-old eyes and Sephiroth felt like he was being examined down to his cellular structure.

Then Raincloud lifted his arms and said, “Up, please,” and there was only one answer for Sephiroth to give.

“Well, he thought as he settled the small body on his hip, this would certainly limit his usefulness.

Raincloud latched on to his cross-buckle to steady himself and Sephiroth shivered at the touch of even this small part of Cloud on his bare skin.

“You smell nice too,” said the smallest Cloud. “Will you make me feel tingly and floaty again later?”

The General’s eyebrow went up in puzzlement but he was unwilling to commit to anything he didn’t fully understand. He’d done that at Zack’s house with the password and look where it had got him. His trust wasn’t increased by the stifled laughter of the other two, muffled behind their hands. “Maybe later,” he said mildly. And Raincloud nodded once as if they’d made some kind of a deal.

“Our Gen’ral,” Raincloud announced before he pulled some of Sephiroth’s long silver hair over him so that it formed a curtain between him and the rest of the world.

“Aww, that’s so cute,” Zack teased, “Don’t you think that’s cute, Niisan?” Niisan just sniffed and gave a ‘whatever’ shrug. The SOLDIERs wing reached out to ruffle the youth’s hair, an action the skinny young man dodged with a scowl.
A question occurred to the General or, rather, he suddenly remembered a question that he had thought of earlier, no doubt inspired by the behaviour of the dark-haired First’s wings. “Can you fly?”

Zack’s wings spread and pumped in the air. The First lifted slightly onto his toes before frowning over his shoulder. The wings drooped and Zack stopped moving. He turned back to face his CO. “I can fly here. I’ve never tried anywhere else.” Hyper fingers tapped out a fast rhythm on his heavy shoulder guards.

“You’ll have to try them out when we get back,” the silver-haired warrior suggested and then couldn’t help being amused as Zack’s wings pumped triumphant fists. “I don’t think they’ll have any trouble supporting you.” The SOLDIER rolled his eyes at his exuberant little appendages, but he put a couple of his fingers on his left shoulder to be grabbed.

“Just like Cloud’s, your wings seem to have a personality all their own. I’ve never seen anything like them,” Sephiroth stated.

“His wings tease him where he can’t see,” Raincloud commented. Niisan smirked, Zack frowned and Sephiroth stared at them. The fingers on the free side waved a little at him, but otherwise refrained from embarrassing the First but the General couldn’t help but wonder what mischief Zack’s wings got into when he wasn’t looking. Did he really want to know? He shuddered.

This was ridiculous. They were wasting time.

“Is there any specific order in which we should proceed?”

Zack turned to look at the cottage, hands on his hips and shoulders, “Niisan and I’ve been working on the outer wall then we’re going to do the roof.” He pointed at the new timbers and Sephiroth could see where the mortar between the stones at the bottom looked fresh. “Since Raincloud’s here, you can start work on the inside of the house but it’ll mostly be manual work. Raincloud doesn’t focus enough to affect much in terms of fixing things but you might be able to clean up some of the dirt and stuff.”

“Raincloud’s ability to focus, or not, affects this how?”

“Um, well,” Zack ran a hand through his hair, “We can do stuff but it doesn’t really take until one of them... ‘approves’ isn’t the right word...”


Zack just grinned at him, “Yeah, all those. Raincloud has his own priorities and cleaning house has never been one of them. He’ll pay attention for a while then drift off into his own world.”

“He is a child,” Sephiroth rationalized.

“Yeah. But it does mean you won’t be very effective until someone else shows up.”

“And once another part of him arrives?”

“Corporal Strife reporting, SIR!” shouted a voice from right behind him.

It was unexpected, to say the least. Nobody could sneak up on the General. It was a given, like the sun rising in the east. And Corporal Strife had deliberately used a voice more suited to a parade ground than to call a person standing less than a metre away. Therefore, it was completely understandable when Sephiroth jumped back, turning in mid-air and drawing Masamune to face the
intruder. Raincloud squeaked and gripped tight.

“Sorry, Sir. Didn’t realize you couldn’t hear me.” There was nothing, not a smirk, not even a hint of an upturned lip, nothing in the Corporal’s expression suggested that making the General jump was anything but an unfortunate accident, but Sephiroth knew. He looked into Corporal Strife’s limpid blue eyes and he knew.

Oh, he was so looking forward to having this aspect of his little blond warrior back. His eyes went half-lidded in anticipation. Only then did Corporal Strife allow his expression to change, just a small lift of one brow, but it was enough. Challenge made and accepted.

“This here is Weirdo Strife,” the soldier announced, pulling forward a young boy, maybe twelve or thirteen years of age—just on the cusp of pubescence.

He was shorter than the Corporal which meant he was about the height of Sephiroth’s diaphragm. Weirdo looked like just about any other pre-teen male. He wore sneakers and jeans, beat-up and stained. He wore an open plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up over a regular T-Shirt saying ‘Don’t Believe Everything You Think’. It was an odd and thought provoking phrase, and especially appropriate here.

The Corporal hadn’t finished his introductions. “Weirdo, this is General Sephiroth. He’ll be working with you for a bit.”

The boy was wearing a brightly coloured, knitted cap with ear coverings and thick braids of yarn hanging down but his hair was sticking out from underneath it at all angles. It stretched up nearly to the silver warrior’s collarbone—a seemingly impossible distance to reach without using some kind of product. Yet the locks waved softly and there was no artificial scent coming from the strands. It was natural then, Sephiroth conceded, if improbable. It was also… eye-catching if nothing else.

“Nice to meet you, Weirdo,” he said, although the name seemed wrong; harsh and judgemental. He resisted the urge to call this younger, smaller version of his lover something more affectionate as he put out his hand.

Weirdo gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing visibly. He took a firm grip of an over-large backpack he had balanced on his shoulder and stretched out his hand to be clasped. “Hello, si-ir.” His voice cracked which made him flame red in embarrassment. He retrieved his hand and stood, slouched slightly to balance the heavy bag, staring at the dirt.


Ignoring the small scuffle with the ease of an experienced NCO, the Corporal asked, “Anything else you require of me, Sir?”

So very many things, Sephiroth thought, most of which involved nakedness and oil. “Not at this time, Corporal,” he responded mildly with only the lightest of purrs.

Corporal Strife’s lips twitched once before he got them back under control, as if he knew what the General was thinking. Then he straightened into a salute, “Very good, Sir. I’ll go find the next one.” Sephiroth nodded and the Corporal dissolved into mist.
Sephiroth stood for a moment, dreaming of the day Cloud would tease him once again. “Yo, Seph,” Zack called, breaking into his thoughts, “Work first, remember?”

“Of course, Commander,” his voice was mostly unruffled. He turned his gaze to the young boy in front of him with the even more improbable hair. It was completely unlikely that Cloud’s hair had ever been this outrageous but perhaps, as a young man, it had seemed as if it was this bad. Each persona was based on Cloud’s perception of who he had been at that time of his life and the General had read that puberty could be an especially awkward time. His memories were mostly of white laboratories and constant testing; not what would be considered normal by any means.

“Do you understand what we’re trying to do here, Weirdo?”

“I think so. The Corporal said something about rebuilding the cottage.” Weirdo’s voice cracked.

“That’s correct. However, the Commander and I,” he indicated Zack who raised his hands in greeting, “can’t do much on our own. We need a Strife with us in order to affect things. Do you understand?”

Weirdo was still staring at the long, skinny wing fingers which were happily wiggling at him. The boy gulped audibly, shifted his stance, and his cheeks turned bright red. The General frowned in confusion—why was the boy blushing? Then he smelled it. Young, not fully ripe, the scent of Weirdo’s arousal was thin compared to the complex patterns he’d have when he got older. And it was Zack’s wings that had aroused the boy; it would certainly explain the embarrassment.

Sephiroth smiled, now, he remembered what puberty was like.

“Did you hear me?” The General pitched his voice to break into Weirdo’s trance.

It worked. The youth jumped, blushed a little bit more, and said, “Uh, yeah. Umm, it makes a kind of sense too. Because this is our cottage, right? So we’d have to be the ones in control.”

“You don’t control the General,” Niisan hissed from just behind Sephiroth shoulder. Sephiroth had to contain his jerk of surprise. First the Corporal and now Niisan. Maybe it had to do with the environment. Raincloud chuckled softly as the silky hair shifted around him.

Weirdo’s eyes widened, “I wouldn’t dream of it,” he protested.

“Remember that! The General isn’t yours to play with.” He stepped out from behind the silver-haired warrior and Sephiroth saw with dismay that the Niisan’s eyes were gleaming with emotions and his hands were curled into claws. This aspect had a possessive streak, which meant that his Cloud had one too. That was… unexpected.

“Hey, hey,” Zack broke in, “No need to be jealous, Niisan. Sephiroth won’t like you any less if he likes Weirdo or any of the others.” The SOLDIER gave him a pointed look.

“Indeed,” Sephiroth agreed with the silent order, “As much as I may like Weirdo he is barely older than Raincloud; too young for us to be anything but friends.”

“You know each of you will attract him for different reasons. He’ll like all of you guys but… each one differently than the others. He kissed you, remember?” Niisan’s eyes dimmed and his hands relaxed as he reflexively sucked on his bottom lip to remember the feel and taste of that caress. Everybody let out a held breath.

“C’mon, brat, drag your sexy butt back over here so we can finish our job,” Zack urged, his hand on Niisan’s arm. With one last warning glance, the silver-haired Strife allowed himself to be pulled
away.

The three at the door heard Niisan comment to Zack, “If you think my butt is sexy with clothes on…”

Chapter End Notes

Fanart!
Raincloud and Spike
Pale Shelter

Sephiroth, with little Raincloud on his hip, watched as the pair disappeared around the corner of the cottage.

“He’s sac-ry when he’s angry,” Weirdo muttered, swallowing.

“Hmmm,” Sephiroth agreed.

“Is it a result of having most of the Jenova cells? Because Niisan got most of them and he just goes nuts sometimes.” Weirdo turned his gaze on the General. “And it’s not just jealousy that sets him off, either. I heard that the Jenova mutation makes it hard to control yourself which means it probably it attacks the hippocampus…”

Sephiroth looked down at the teenager, “Are you asking me or telling me?”

Weirdo blushed and ducked his head, “I just figured you’d know because you’ve obviously got a lot of Jenova’s cells in you. I mean, your hair and eyes. Those are common traits in creatures that have high concentrations of…” Sephiroth raised his eyebrow. Weirdo coughed to a stop, realizing he might have been less than tactful. “Just wondering, you know?”

Sephiroth took in the teen’s painful blush, the way he couldn’t look at him anymore and decided to have pity on him. “Whatever lack of control having her cells caused in me, it was countered by intense training when I was young.”

Weirdo frowned. “Can’t be the hippocampus then; if it were damaged you’d forget all that stuff, at least a lot of it. You tend to revert to more basic reactions and emotions. Unless they did something to counter the physical damage.” He peeked up hopefully.

“I have no idea,” the General said repressively.

Weirdo went back to looking at the ground. “That too bad. If we could figure out where the damage is we could fix s—some of the damage, right?” Sephiroth got the feeling that wasn’t what the teen had planned to say but before the General could ask, Weirdo rushed on to a new topic. “About the cottage, we don’t have to put it back exactly like it was before, right? I mean, we can make improvements,” he looked at the General, eyes large, and Sephiroth was tempted to ruffle the boy’s dubious hair for absolutely no reason.

“I imagine we can do whatever you want. Although I’d rather you didn’t put in a spinning mirror ball and loud music, like some other people have done.” Sephiroth was rewarded by a distant ‘Hey’ of protest.

“I want a big bathtub so I can go swimming,” Raincloud said. “I like swimming.”

“Umm, sure, okay. I suppose it would need lots of water and some means to heat it…,” Weirdo’s voice trailed off. “I think I have a book on hot water systems.” He dropped his backpack on the ground and started digging through it eventually bringing out a slim paperback. Sephiroth read the title ‘Plumbing for Beginners’ as Weirdo flipped to the index.

“You guys going to do any work over there?” called an impatient voice from the side of the cottage, startling Weirdo out of his reading.
“We’re working on a plan,” Sephiroth replied. He didn’t even have to raise his voice very much for Zack to hear him.

“Pffft,” was the intelligent response, “Just get in there and get busy.”

Sephiroth gave his companion a conspiratorial look, “Zack tends to just jump right into things. If he ever asks you to go into a cave with him to look for monsters, say ‘no’. It’s safer.” The poor boy blushed, fidgeted, dropped his arms so that he could hold the book in front of himself, and then blushed a little bit more anyway. The spice of his arousal once more filled the air.

Sephiroth was quite glad he didn’t remember much of this time in his life.

Weirdo swallowed a couple times but managed to bring himself under control. “Actually, planning could be really important. What I want to do is improve the heating system, make it more efficient, I mean stone buildings are just too cold…” He dug through the pack again and pulled out a large coil-bound hardback entitled, ‘Simple Home Renovations’ and flipped through the pages. “... and fireplaces really suck at heating houses, y’know? Now this, this is co-ol.” The young teen was so excited about the subject matter that he forgot to blush when his voice cracked. “This is an under-the-floor radiant heating system. It looks really hi-tech and stuff but it’s actually quite old.” Weirdo moved closer so that both Sephiroth and Raincloud could see the page. The child immediately started tracing damp fingers over the winding pattern of heating element.

When the General bent his head to look at it his cheek brushed against the teen’s long hair releasing a scent that was like his memory of Cloud’s, yet unique, innocent and tantalizing…. He forced his attention to the page.

“We should go for the electric-based system,” Weirdo squeaked, “Air’s just not practical and water, well, it’s susceptible to freezing and that would be bad.” He looked up at Sephiroth. His eyes were a large, clear blue, filled with ingenuousness and enthusiasm. It was as enticing in its way as Niisan’s sensuality and the Corporal’s hint of challenge. And if he didn’t get his mind on something else, Sephiroth knew he’d lean down and kiss the boy. He returned his focus to the article, skimming the paragraphs and examining the illustrations.

“Where would you get the electricity from?” Sephiroth asked. A perfectly logical question that had no place in this perfectly illogical world.

“Oh, umm,” Weirdo looked away, blushing in embarrassment, “good question. I dunno? But if I can figure it out, we can hook up the hot-water heater to it.”

“It’s going to be a very large bathtub, if Raincloud’s going to swim in it, so it will need to be a very large heater.”

“Yeah, I sup-pose,” Weirdo sounded glum. “I dunno what systems work best. Mom always heated the water up on the stove but,” he perked up with renewed enthusiasm, “if I’m going to be putting in electricity for the floor and the hot water I might as well wire the whole house, right? And that opens up a whole other bunch of possibilities. We need to have an idea of everything we can fix so that we know what order to go in. So that’s why we need a plan. I might have a book that’ll give us so-mehelp.”

“We should look in the cottage first, don’t you think?” Sephiroth suggested mildly.

“Okay. We have to know the basics we’re starting with before we know what needs to be done.” He packed his books away and headed over to the entrance. “Better windows would be good. They have this new way of coa- ting them so that you only need a couple layers of glass instead of three.
It’s called ‘low emissivity’ because it blocks thermal emissions but allows in solar emissions. And they’re using a better insulating gas between them so it works even better. It can cut the R count in, like, half! Cool, huh?”

Sephiroth wasn’t exactly sure what Weirdo was talking about but he nodded his head all the same.

The boy was still talking as he pushed the warped door open. “Oh wow, it’s a little dirty in here. I don’t remember it being this bad, but I guess it has been a while since I’ve been back. We could really use a vacuum but we’d need electricity for that as well, I suppose.” Sephiroth followed him in, letting his talk roll over him, hearing but not really listening.

The elements had damaged much of the furniture and decorations in the whole of the house. There was dust and dirt on everything. Books, pictures and clothes were scattered all over, along with broken glass and crockery. The sofa had holes and it smelled like rodents had been nesting in the stuffing. To the left of the door was a raised section. This was where the wall and roof had collapsed. He could see where Zack and Niisan were working to repair it. There was a door on the far side of it that Sephiroth thought, hoped, led to a bathroom. He was used to latrines but he had never grown fond of them; although, since this was some kind of odd construct, maybe waste disposal wouldn’t be an issue. He mentioned septic systems to Weirdo and sent the teen digging through his backpack once again.

Finally, while Weirdo was looking for the book, he managed to ask a question of his own, “Why are you called ‘Weirdo’?” he asked because, aside from the hair, he’d seen nothing truly strange about the boy.

“Oh, well, ummm,” the boy’s hands fumbled the book he was pulling out of his bag. He looked down at it, “it’s what everyone calls me because I, I like to know how stuff works, why it works.”

“They don’t?” Sephiroth asked in disbelief.

“Not in Nibelheim. If their daddy or granddaddy didn’t know, then they didn’t care. Most of them hadn’t ever read a book!” He looked at the General fully now, outraged and unbelieving. “Not even a comic or a newspaper or, or anything. I like knowing stuff. It’s interesting!”

“I agree,” Sephiroth said, still baffled by the young teen’s name.

“Can you imagine doing the same thing your great-great-great-granddaddy did, in the same way he did, and not asking, even once, if there’s a better way to do it?”

“I can’t imagine it,” Sephiroth soothed, and he couldn’t really. As ShinRa’s General he was constantly being exposed to changed circumstances, updated information and new weaponry and equipment. He was designed to adapt quickly. He put his hand on the teen’s shoulder; Raincloud followed suit, patting him gently. “The children in the village gave you the name,” it wasn’t really a question.

Weirdo nodded, “And some of the adults.”

“Hmph,” Sephiroth snorted disapprovingly, “There’s nothing odd about curiosity. It may not be convenient or even logical, but it is normal. You may have more than most boys your age but that is still not a bad thing.” Eager pups like Weirdo had kept ShinRa Security going.

The teen looked up hopefully. “Then there’s my hair,” he pointed out.

Sephiroth’s mouth quirked up, “Ah yes, your delightfully ridiculous hair.” Weirdo blushed and looked away in embarrassment. “Who am I to cast stones,” the General said, “The password I was
given to Zack’s house involves hair care products. People seem to think it fits, so it’s likely they believe my hair is somewhat ridiculous as well.” Weirdo looked up in shock.

“I like it,” Raincloud said and patted Sephiroth’s cheek to make him feel better.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s great!” He reached out a tentative hand but stopped short of actually touching it. “Umm,” he hesitated, sneaking another look up at Sephiroth, “How come you don’t have split ends?” Sephiroth’s eyebrow raised in surprise. Raincloud giggled. “You said curiosity was okay,” Weirdo explained reasonably.

“Hmmm,” Sephiroth frowned then softened it by holding his hand to the teen’s cheek—so soft. “Maybe we should begin cleaning the cottage. There may not be a vacuum but surely there are brooms we could use until then?”

“Well, I suppose” Weirdo drooped in body and in voice. Raincloud squirmed until the General let him slide down to the floor. An odd crunching sound ran through the house and they both looked to the damaged wall. It was in much better shape than, even in the short amount of time they’d been talking, Niisan and Zack had nearly finished it. They’d made the windows bigger, and they were clean, so it was significantly lighter inside the primitive cottage.

Sephiroth saw the improvement and was thankful; more light should make it easier to clean the home. Weirdo saw the new windows and thought about something completely different.

“I wonder if we should add some insulation?” the young teen asked himself, “Probably but what we should use? They have some pretty remarkable stuff out now. Hey!” he shouted and pulled Sephiroth’s attention back to him, “Did you know that you can use hay for insulation? I heard that people actually build whole houses out of it. Weird, huh? How do they keep it from rotting? I suppose it would be okay in the desert but there’s not a lot of hay there. And what if it combusts spontaneously?” He turned to the General, “Did you know that hay can catch fire on its own?” he asked.

“Mmm-hmm,” Sephiroth nodded. Weirdo looked at him with large questioning eyes. “It can happen if the hay is too moist when stored and is then stacked in too big a mow… a pile,” he clarified. “The moisture gives off heat as it sits, so the bigger the m—pile, the more heat is contained. If the internal temperature of the pile rises above 55° Celsius then there is a chemical reaction and flammable gases are created. They will ignite upon mixing with oxygen, which will happen as hay is porous. The flames follow the path back to the centre of the pile causing the rest of the chemicals to ignite and eventually, setting the hay on fire as well. They literally burn from the inside out.” Weirdo’s eyes were huge and filled with awe. Of course, Sephiroth didn’t preen in front of the boy. After all, he hadn’t been showing off, just expanding the boy’s knowledge. Instead he merely stated calmly, “If it can be destructive it’s likely I will know about it.”

“Cool,” the teen murmured. “Is it true that flour can explode?”

Sephiroth answered all his questions—at least the ones he could because he really had no idea why small birds didn’t freeze in the winter, while he continued his inspection of the interior. He hadn’t had a chance to see the real-life cottage that Cloud had based this on—he tried not to think of that lack with anger, but what struck him most was how amazingly compact it was. It was only two rooms although, with no walls between them, were they really separate?

One entered into what appeared to be living room and bedroom combined, at least there was a large bed just to the right of the door and in front of it was a colourful rug and a sofa set in front of the fireplace. To the far right, along the back wall, was what one could call a kitchen. It had none of the features he associated with kitchens however. There were no counters, not even a butcher’s
block. A table made of thick wood planks likely served as preparation surface and eating area. The stove appeared to be heated with wood.

When the boy would have dug through his pack for yet another book—on acoustics this time, Sephiroth reminded him that they were supposed to be cleaning. The teenager sighed deeply but obediently went to one of the freestanding cupboards by the kitchen and brought out a broom and a duster. He held them out, “Which?” he offered.

“Perhaps I should dust as my reach is somewhat higher than yours.” It was an undeniable fact but it made Weirdo blush and hang his head. Sephiroth tucked one finger under the boy’s pointed little chin and raised it until he could see those large eyes, “You’ll grow,” he stated and was rewarded by a tremulous smile, a blush, and the rising scent of Weirdo’s arousal.

With a chaste kiss on the brow, Sephiroth released him. Weirdo began sluggishly pushing dirt around with the broom paying more attention to the walls and ceiling than the floor. When Raincloud’s dragon decided the broom was an invader, and the dirt piles its army, it began attacking them, spreading the dirt back over the floor. He couldn’t help smiling at this glimpse of what his Cloud might have been like as a child. Then he realized he was as guilty of daydreaming as Weirdo.

He looked at the cloth duster in his hand

As a child and as ShinRa’s future super-soldier, Sephiroth had received training in most of the fighting disciplines. He could field dress most animals and prepare them for cooking or preserving. He could build shelters for most weather conditions from just about anything at hand. He could perform battlefield surgery for situations ranging from appendix removal to giving birth. He could dismantle and repair most of the vehicles in the fleet.

He had never had to dust anything in his life.

‘How hard could it be?’ he asked himself before running it over the top of the cupboard. A fistful of dust, some of it falling to the floor but most of it floating up to pollute the air, was his reward. He frowned, but moved on to the next shelf. He removed the plates on display there and swept the dirt off the shelf. Again, some fell to the ground but most floated up to join the first cloud. It swirled in the air looking somewhat pretty in the sunlight before it settled back down on the shelf he’d just cleaned. Particles also floated over to him and clung to his hair and irritated his eyes.

He scowled. This wasn’t efficient at all. Still, the shelf was somewhat better than it had been. He swept his cloth over it again. His reward this time was a bigger cloud of dust that invaded his nose and mouth as if it felt the need to defend itself. He coughed involuntarily and his eyes stung.

“Aahhh. I think the cloth should be damp, so that the dust sticks to it and doesn’t go fly-ying around like that.” Weirdo offered.

“How do I find the water?” There wasn’t a sink, or at least nothing the General could identify as a sink with a basin and taps.

“Oh hmm,” Weirdo hummed, “we should have running water in here too, shouldn’t we? Have you ever done any plumbing?” He looked at Sephiroth as if expecting him to pull out his Journeymen Pipefitter’s Certification.

“No.” He generally called someone and they plumbed, did the plumbing? ...and the dusting. It sounded like the height of luxury right about now.
The boy’s face fell then brightened, “Maybe I have a book on it.” No sooner said than Weirdo had dropped the broom and was digging through his backpack. “Here we go!” He pulled out another large book and sat where he was to read it, muttering to himself occasionally and making notes on a pad he pulled from somewhere.

Sephiroth blinked in surprise. Just that quickly, the boy had completely forgotten him and their task in favour of researching this latest project. He was about to make a comment when he noticed that things had changed in the cottage. It wasn’t anything major—it didn’t sparkle and shine, but the floor looked slightly cleaner, the curtains weren’t quite as dusty and there were fewer cobwebs in the corners.

It appeared that just having a Strife inside the cottage, thinking about fixing it, was enough. He smiled in relief and put down his cloth. He decided to pick up the books and the pictures instead, examining them carefully for, if he could believe his SiC, these were somehow important to his lover. They apparently gave clues to how Cloud, *his* Cloud, saw himself and what moments were important in his life.

Here was the expected picture of Cloud’s parents, young and in love. Here was Cloud and his mother, the resemblance was remarkable. Mrs. Strife had been a beautiful woman. Zack and Cloud laughing, arms draped around each other. Probably on a mission as they were muddy and sweaty. He picked up another one in an heirloom frame.

When he saw the picture he lost his breath. Even through the cracked and dusty glass he could see the picture clearly. It was of the two of them as they had been at Nibelheim’s inn. Cloud was snuggled in to his chest and he was holding the small blonde tight. He wanted that. He wanted that chance *back*! To have this quiet joy of knowing he was matched and loved. He carefully cleaned off the picture and placed it tenderly on a shelf.

There were more of course: Cloud and his unit back in Midgar. Cloud and Sephiroth and Zack who was striking his best ‘heroic’ pose for the camera. Here was a painting of a landscape—a winter’s morning in the Nibel mountains if Sephiroth had to guess. Then there was a photograph, in a plain frame, of three strangers, two in lab coats and one in a ShinRa guard’s uniform. One held a chocolate bar; one a magazine. The other had nothing but a sweet smile. Sephiroth frowned, wondering what memory was invoked by these strangers.

And there were books to be picked up, classics and popular novels, comic books and encyclopaedias. He was amused to find a copy of ‘Loveless’ on the floor. The *ex libris* notation indicated that it had belonged to Cloud’s mother rather than to Cloud, and Sephiroth found himself somewhat relieved. One person obsessed with the ancient play was more than sufficient for a lifetime.

Raincloud had settled in next to Weirdo and was quietly reading something the young teen had probably extracted from his remarkable backpack. The boy had pulled out five home repair books, Raincloud’s picture book, a notebook and pens from its depths yet it was still as fat and heavy as if he’d removed nothing at all. If he asked him for a book on Mideel weaving techniques of the middle ages Sephiroth had no doubt the teen would find it in his bag.

He didn’t. He picked up books and clothes and blankets, and released mountains of built-up dirt and dust. He coughed and ignored it, as the mess was to be expected. However, when he picked up a neglected silk wall-hanging of the Wutaian guardian god, Leviathan, the sight of the once vibrant colours now faded and water-stained made him feel melancholy.

“Don’t forget a washer and dryer,” he called out to Weirdo who looked up in bewilderment. “If you’re going to put in electricity and running water, you might as well have a proper laundry
room," the General suggested. He had washed things before, bedding mostly, when sickness had run through the camp.

"Huh?" the boy grunted, still lost in the book he was reading. Sephiroth held up the elaborate wall-hanging in illustration. Understanding lit Weirdo’s features. “Oh, good ide-ea! I wonder what type would be best.”

“What do you mean?” he asked suspiciously; there was no way he was using a Wutaian wringer-washer because he, quite properly, feared catching his hair in the rollers.

“There are top-loading or front-loading models. Top-loaders are more common but I hear front-loaders are better, more efficient or something. I read a comparison between them in a magazine somewhere.” He squinted in thought. “I think I have a copy of it.”

“Undoubtedly,” he murmured as Weirdo once more dug through his portable library.

The teen called out in excitement, “Oh hey, look!” He held up a large paperback with the title ‘Be Kind To The Planet – Use Non-Mako Based Power Sources’. “This is just what I need to figure out our power supply.” Sephiroth’s lips quirked up.

He decided to go out and see how the others were faring, since the two parts of Cloud looked perfectly happy, nestled close together on the floor reading. The cottage was cleaning itself anyway. Weirdo absently tickled Raincloud’s foot with his pen before making a couple notes. He could warn Niisan that the interior was about to suffer a major overhaul. The General had a feeling that the silver-haired vixen would take the news better from him than from Weirdo, and surprising Niisan was probably not a good idea either.

Plus, it was certainly better than dusting.

He told Weirdo of his destination and received an absent reply that Sephiroth recognized as meaning ‘I didn’t hear anything you said but I know you said something.’ The General was familiar with the tone from countless hours spent with Zack doing paperwork.

The dark-haired First hadn’t said whether or not he was going to return to being Sephiroth’s Second-in-Command, but the General was optimistic. He remembered that moment in Nibelheim, after emerging from the mansion. He had nodded at the Commander, a request for him to go comfort and divert Ms. Lockhart from painful memories, and Zack had understood and obeyed. No guessing, no questions—just complete understanding. They had always had extremely compatible leadership styles and personalities. It was almost Zack’s natural place, beside him.

He was actually looking forward to having the cheerful SOLDIER sitting across from him again. They would discuss the reports and refine strategies, what Zack called ‘bouncing ideas off each other’. Zack would rest his booted feet on the desk and be juggling a pen or a gil in his left hand while holding the reading material in his right... and maybe, his little wing-hands would be tap-tap-tapping on his shoulder or scratching at his head bemusedly.

It was such a pleasant daydream that he nearly stepped on Corporal Strife when he opened the door to walk out. He had to jump back to avoid collision.

“Corporal Strife, reporting SIR!” The parade-ground volume announcement was followed by a light giggle from behind him. Raincloud had obviously seen the General jump and had found it amusing.

Sephiroth couldn’t help but growl, just a little, “I’ve been expecting you, Corporal.” Just not right
at this moment.

The soldier’s eye’s glinted in appreciation, “I’d hate to disappoint you, Sir.”
I knew this was going to be slow because of real-life stuff, but wow, am I having trouble with these next chapters and I couldn’t figure out why it doesn’t want to come out. It hit me when I was rereading this just prior to posting… I’m like Zack by the bridge. I just realized that we’re getting near to saying good-bye to Raincloud and Niisan and Weirdo and the Corporal and Spike and I don’t want to!

…I’m going to go hug my stuffy now. ={

“Oi, it really is the General, you weren’t just fucking with me,” The person with Corporal Strife strode into the cottage, casually slapping the NCO on the back and making him rock forward into Sephiroth’s waiting arms. As much as Sephiroth wanted to savour the contact, this was the Corporal he was dealing with, not his Cloud. He set the soldier back on his feet and looked at the new addition to their party.

Spike, for it could be no other, was hanging his head, rubbing the back of it in embarrassment in an attitude that was so familiar it was eerie. “Sorry about that, Corporal. I forget my own strength sometimes.”

“Not a problem, Spike,” the Corporal replied solidly. “I’m sure you’ll develop some control when you get old.”

“Um, yeah, I suppose.” Sephiroth’s eyebrow rose at the subtle insult; Spike would probably never grow old.

While that little exchange was going on, the General took inventory of the latest addition to Cloud’s personas. The hair was the same and the too old eyes but other than that Spike was, as he’d guessed, a blond version of Zack. He wore a black SOLDIER First Class uniform. His sword was wide and long but different than Zack’s beloved Buster—it almost looked like crystal rather than steel. Another difference; Spike was taller than Cloud, nearly Sephiroth’s height. When he spoke there was no trace of the soft mountain accent that graced the other personas’ speech and his posture was pure cocky.

He stepped up to the General, hand confidently outstretched, “Hey Seph,” he said and Sephiroth blinked at the casual address. “It’s great to be working with you again.”

“Indeed,” Was the silver-haired warrior’s neutral reply.

“Yuppies. It’ll be just like it was back in Wutai,” Spike said enthusiastically. Cloud had never been in Wutai. The initial surprised blink was the only indication of how odd and somehow disturbing, he was finding this encounter.

“Hopefully not.” Wutai had been a bloody disaster.

Spike didn’t even notice Sephiroth’s dry response. He was busy looking around. “Wow, it really is a gathering of the clan, and the place is looking pretty decent too. Watchya looking at?” He bent
over Weirdo’s shoulder to look at the book in the young teen’s lap, taking the opportunity to ruffle Raincloud’s hair.

Before the boy could answer, a voice could be heard from outside raised in complaint. “I don’t want to do anymore. I’m not going to do anymore. It’s annoying!” Zack could be heard trying to negotiate with the silver-haired diva with a notable lack of success.

Sephiroth wondered if Angeal was somewhere in the Lifestream laughing at Zack’s plight as cosmic pay-back for everything he’d suffered as the eager Gongagan’s mentor.

Niisan paused in the doorway and took stock of where everybody was. His eyes narrowed when they saw the newest addition. His decision to ignore Spike was practically tangible. He turned his head away and settled his gaze on the General., he put an extra something into his hips when he entered the cottage… at least until Zack gave him a light swat on the ass. “Hey!” he turned around and jumped away from the dark-haired First. He glared at Zack and rubbed his stinging behind.

“You’re already the sexiest one here, no need to swing it.”

“Tch!” the silver-haired youth spit dismissively and turned back to the room, pointedly ignoring all his fellow Clouds. “Hello, General.”

“Niisan,” Sephiroth acknowledged, “Have you and Zack finished the walls?” He didn’t bother asking about the roof as the light shining in through the missing section was quite obvious.

“Nearly,” Zack said, “I think Niisan saw Spike arrive and got worried that he’d steal you away.”

If Niisan had been a cat he would’ve hissed. “I was not worried. You’re the one who said he’d like each of us differently so I had nothing to worry about.” The young man poked the First in the chest... hard! “Were you lying?” Niisan’s eyes were blue flame.

Zack retreated, “Ah, no. That’s exactly right.”

“Well then,” Niisan brushed his bangs away from his eyes, his chin lifted arrogantly, “I have nothing to worry about from a sword-swinging bubblehead.” Several of the room’s occupants looked like they would protest, although Spike merely grinned at his fellow aspect. Niisan continued before they had the chance. “It’s his fault the walls aren’t finished,” he declared dramatically, pointing an imperial finger at Weirdo.

The young teen gulped and paled, “M-e?” Even the knowledge that his voice cracked wasn’t enough to bring colour back to Weirdo’s cheeks.

Niisan put his hands on his hips and glared at Weirdo, “Yes, you! We were nearly done when all the walls disappeared and reformed with different windows that didn’t fit the cottage’s look at all! Then this insulated covering you put up that was horrible and that had to be covered. Then holes appeared in the side so that you could run pipes from the well! Pipes should be underground, you idiot! Then...” The silver-haired diva was panting with the force of his outrage, “more holes so that you could run electricity from the new windmill! On top of that, the walls you put up when you’re done are completely hideous and don’t match anything Zack and I have done!”

“We have a windmill?” Spike asked, “Cool.” He stood, managed to grab a hair-ruffle from Weirdo as the teen sat there stunned, “I gotta go see it. Good job, Weirdo. This place is going to be rocking.”

Niisan rolled his eyes, “It’s going to be ugly and I don’t want to be involved with something that looks like week-old dragon shit!” Hands balled into fists, he looked ready for a blood-pounding,
bone-breaking brawl, and Zack was reminded that this skinny little aspect was as dangerous as any of them.

Sephiroth’s smooth baritone easily broke through and stopped the brewing fight, “Spike and Zack can complete the outside. If Niisan is so concerned with how the cottage looks, he should be working on the interior. It looks a little stark at the moment.” Niisan looked up and around. His lip curled at the rough stone floors and barely finished walls Weirdo had constructed to hold... whatever he had put in them. He sniffed and was probably about to reject the task when the General continued, “He’s put in a water heater large enough to fill a tub for three. However, I’m not sure he’s actually put the bathroom together yet.”

“Um,” Weirdo swallowed, “I haven’t got that far yet.”

“It should be something comfortable for a person of my size. Also,” Sephiroth continued in his honeyed purr, “the kitchen is now wired and has running water but it is as you see it.” Niisan glared at disassembled cooking area then he turned to glare at the General.

“You expect me to make that look pretty?” He flung out his hand in its general direction. He would’ve hit Corporal Strife except the combat veteran took one smooth step back and out of the way. Then the Corporal resumed pretending to be statuary while his laughing eyes enjoyed the family farce. Niisan didn’t even notice him.

Sephiroth allowed his eyelids to fall half closed as he slowly perused the silver-haired diva. His fancy leather clothing outlined, defined, and accentuated all the youth’s best features. Its dark colour made Niisan look like a weapon. He took his time, letting his eyes wander, and appreciate, Niisan all the way down and all the way back up. Skinny? Yes, but ethereal and deadly, erotic and powerful. Sephiroth let all that show in his eyes as he brought them back up to meet the silver-haired youth.

“Your taste is always good,” the General purred and no one in the room—no one except Raincloud, missed the sexual undertone, or the heat between the two. There was a lot of discreet shifting and adjusting, and everyone heard Weirdo tease, “I think we need fire extinguishers...”

Incredibly, Niisan was blushing, a real blush worthy of Weirdo himself. Then he startled them all by laughing. He stepped forward, closer to Sephiroth, “You win, General... this time.” He ran one slim finger up Sephiroth’s chest before raising his hand to his mouth and blowing the Demon of Wutai an air-kiss.

“Do you have decorating magazines in that bag of yours, oddball?” Weirdo nodded and pulled out several. Niisan settled himself on fat, rich-coloured cushions that appeared and opened the first one.

There was a booming sound, like thunder. Then another.

Weirdo stood up in a panic, kicking his backpack over, spilling the contents over the floor. “They’re attacking again!”

“Wrong tone,” the Corporal disagreed even as he came to full alert.

“It’s from Outside, over there,” Raincloud said absently, still engrossed by his story. “They want to talk to the General.”

Sephiroth frowned, “It can’t be noon already,” he muttered but, even as he complained, he prepared to resume his duty. These hours he’d had with Zack and Cloud had been a gift. If the hours hadn’t
been offered, he would’ve taken them, taken as many as he wanted and damn the war, but he couldn’t abuse the generosity of the people who’d bent the regulations to give him some precious time. After all, the house was nearly complete. All of Cloud’s different aspects were here. He could go back, Zack would continue, and soon, hopefully, both he and Cloud would wake up in his bed in camp.

Zack, watching his CO’s face, saw each tiny flicker of thought pass through Sephiroth’s eyes. He’d been the silver-haired General’s friend for a long time, an admirer for even longer, he’d learned to read the smallest signals... he didn’t always remember or choose to do that but he could when he wanted to. Right now, he wanted to.

Sephiroth was going back.

He didn’t need the anxious flexing of long fingers on his shoulder-guards to know that it was a supremely bad idea. Every instinct he had said Seph had to stay here. The house was nearly fixed, the meadow was green and blossoming, even the acidic sky had retreated somewhat. It was bright, the world was sharp and clear, and they were so fucking close. Only the General could keep the aspects from scattering back to wherever they vanished to, and they may not get such a good chance at this again. It was beyond a feeling, he knew, he couldn’t let Sephiroth leave here.

“I’ll go,” he offered. Sephiroth and Niisan stared at him, “I’ll check it out; see if it’s something important or just this camp’s version of a Sephy Slut.”

“Sephy Slut?” Niisan frowned. Weirdo blushed and tried to tuck his hair behind his ears, the Corporal looked up at the sky, and Spike rocked back on his heels, hands on his hips and a grin on his face.

“Um, yeah... A Sephy Slut is like a SOLDIER Slut but, y’know, focussed on getting into the General’s pants.” Niisan growled. “Not that Seph ever let that happen but all of us had groupies.”

“Zack invented the phrase,” Sephiroth explained further, “to describe those people who were biggest nuisances.”

“They pawed at you?” Niisan’s voice was still feral, his eyes still glowed.

Seph merely raised his eyebrows and snorted disdainfully, rejecting the possibility that he had ever been molested by anyone. It was Zack who answered. “ Mostly they took up the General’s time. They’d invent fake emergencies, deliver reports he didn’t need to read, invite him to charity events. Shit like that.”

“Once Commander Fair became my SiC he screened out the worst of them.”

The silver-haired youth’s hands relaxed from their claw-like state, “Zack protected you?”

“Of course I did,” he confirmed. He’d actually been pretty good at sorting the ‘starry-eyed fans who just needed to breath the same air to be happy’ from the ‘I’m going to get into his pants no matter what it takes’. Mostly because the latter group always offered to blow him first if it would get them into the General’s office. Like he’d let their skanky mouths anywhere near his valuables.

“No one touched me without my consent,” Sephiroth ground out, offended by the suggestion he’d needed protection.

Niisan whirled on him, eyes dim but narrowed, “You’d let anyone fondle you if it would prevent harm to your precious SOLDIERs,” he spat. “Did it stop at groping or did you let them kiss you? Did you let them do more than kiss you?”
Sephiroth smiled, “I never ‘let’ anyone do anything,” he purred dangerously. Then he stepped forward, grabbed Niisan under the chin and pressed his lips down, covering the youth’s pouty mouth with his thin one. With thumb and fingers on the joint, he forced Niisan’s jaw to open and then he pushed his tongue in, deeper, until he could touch Niisan’s, and fight it into submission. It was a long kiss, heated and wet. Slowly it changed from battle to caress, but Sephiroth didn’t stop until Niisan was pliant and limp.

The General drew back, one thumb wiping up spilled moisture from the youth’s chin, “I especially don’t let myself be controlled by jealous little divas.” One last kiss, gentle and loving this time, and Sephiroth drew away. He kept one hand on Niisan, keeping him steady until he had his feet back.

This time Weirdo let out a heart-felt prayer, “Gods! I can’t wait to grow up.” He had a book held desperately in front of him and Zack knew exactly how he was feeling. In fact, the big First wished he had a book to hide behind too.

“Commander Fair, I accept your offer with the understanding that you will wake us if the matter is urgent.”

“Understood, Sir.” This was not time for Zack to get clever... besides he still hadn’t worked any moisture back into his mouth.

Spike came up and squeezed the First’s arm, “Be careful out there, Zack.”

Zack’s wing hand grasped the blond’s forearm in reassurance. “Help him, Spike,” the SOLDIER said, knowing it was the best way to get this persona to stay. Along with the uniform, Spike had inherited all of Zack’s desire to be a hero. A short nod was his response.

“Did you need help finding the path out, Commander?” the Corporal asked, holding out his hand to be shaken.

“No thanks, Corporal. I always know which way I am,” Zack responded, “besides, I think you’re going to get to work with Spike on the outside walls.”

“The honour leaves me speechless,” the Corporal intoned, sounding anything but honoured. Spike rocked back on his heels, smiling in rueful embarrassment. Like Zack, he knew he had focus issues.

Weirdo was next to offer his hand. When Zack took it, the young teen shook it vigorously and then blushed at his own enthusiasm. “Take care of yourself, Zack.”

“You too, Weirdo.” The dark-haired First was beginning to feel funny. Sure this was unusual, the Clouds were all here, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t met them all before. He’d said goodbye to them before. Why the big production?

Even Niisan stood up and moved in close, close enough to put his arms around the SOLDIER. That wasn’t surprising. What was surprising is that instead of grabbing his ass, the slender persona merely rested his head against Zack’s chest. Zack was so startled by the non-sexual nature of the hug that it took him a moment to respond, but he did remember to bring his arms up and return the silver-haired vixen’s hug. “Hey, hey, I’m not heading off to war, you know,” he tried to comfort the youth.

“I know,” he whispered. Niisan raised his head and stared at Zack. “Can I have just one kiss?” Again, the request was completely not Niisan’s style; no innuendo, no sly teasing, no sexual promise—just a simple request.
Zack looked up at his CO. Sephiroth shrugged infinitesimally—he didn’t know what was going on either, so the black-haired First bent his head and gave this part of Cloud a kiss. It didn’t have the heat or the whole ‘I claim you’ vibe of the one Sephiroth had given the young man, but it wasn’t exactly platonic either.

Niisan finally drew back, his hands clenched in the front of Zack’s shirt. He let go and self-consciously patted down the non-existent wrinkles, “Don’t go rushing in to danger without thinking.”

This was completely bizarre, Zack thought. “I won’t.” Sephiroth coughed, “I’ll try not to.”

“Do that,” Niisan ordered with a return of his snippy tone and stepped away, pointedly turning his back on the First.

“Zack?” The SOLDIER turned toward Raincloud, who was still lying on his belly on the floor. He looked up at the big First with his huge, blue eyes. “Don’t forget what I told you, ‘kay?”

“Umm, sure.”

Fucking weird.

At least Sephiroth didn’t go all ‘tragic war movie’ on him. The General gave his standard solemn nod and that was it.

He walked out of the house, through the new and improved front door. The pathway was evenly cobbled, with low-lying flowery stuff along its edges. The grass beyond it was lush yet still filled with wildflowers. Big old trees, branches bursting with life, invited either climbing or lying on the ground under them and watching the sunlight through the leaves. He could see Weirdo’s windmill. Its sleek, high-tech design certainly added a futuristic touch to the pastoral scene. The blades were moving, whisper quiet, but Zack couldn’t feel any wind.

He turned to look at Cloud’s house, now that he had some distance from it. It looked good. It was still small but it looked sturdy and well-built... except for the hole in the roof, but he was sure the Corporal and Spike would be able to repair it. It still looked rustic and kinda primitive, still a Nibelheim cottage, but somehow it had more... flair somehow. Standing in front of it was the herd of Clouds, gathered outside and watching him disappear down the road. He waved and they waved back.

Melodramatic much?

Fuck, he thought as he turned the corner onto the mountain path, he was just going back to the real world. It’s not like he was never going to see them again...

He was never going to see them again.

If this went right, he suddenly realized, then all the Clouds would rejoin into one. No more cocky Spike mirroring his every move, taking parts of Zack’s life as his own. No more confident and quietly sarcastic Corporal. Weirdo and his books and his goofy shirts. Raincloud’s little dragon. No more dodging Niisan’s agile little hands without damaging his fragile sense of self.

C’mon, Fair, snap out of it, he ordered himself. After all, it wasn’t like they would be dead, they’d just all be in Cloud, they’d be Cloud, but...

They’d been separate for so long it was hard to remember that they were all Cloud. Would Cloud have a hard time remembering what it was like to have all those personalities inside of him? What
if they didn’t integrate? What if he somehow splintered into the different aspects, each one taking over for a bit and talking with their own voice through Cloud’s body? Would that still be Cloud or someone else?

What if all the different aspects fought inside him, each one struggling to be dominant; to, in a weird way, survive? Who would come out on top? Would he ever see Raincloud’s oddly wise innocence in Cloud’s eyes because, to be honest, he didn’t see the little guy winning any kind of strength of personality contest against Niisan. Shit, he couldn’t picture Cloud, the Cloud he’d known, acting anything like Niisan did. Yet, Niisan didn’t just spring from nothing; Cloud had had that kind of sexuality in him.

And Spike’s hero worship, let’s not forget that one, Fair. What if Spike came out on top and Zack was faced with a blond version of himself everyday? He’d known Cloud wanted to be accepted into the SOLDIER program, back before the whole world went to shit. He hadn’t realized how much he’d wanted to be like Zack. Besides, Zack no longer believed that SOLDIER equalled HERO.

When he’d joined ShinRa, he’d believed the hype. SOLDIERS were going to save the innocent from the big, bad Wutai menace. He’d read the magazines and decided to become a hero like Angeal Hewley. Hardy-fucking-har on the big cosmic joke. Angeal hadn’t really been a hero. He’d given up when things had gotten rough, and Zack...? The dark-haired First clenched his jaw and refused to cry, but really, some fucking hero he’d turned out to be. He hadn’t saved Cloud from anything.

Sharp fingertips flicked his cheek making the SOLDIER flinch. Memories rushed at him…

“Well,” Zack told the mayor, “I cleared out that nest of Deathclaws; burned the bodies too, in case they were infected with something.”

“Thank you!” she responded, taking his hand in both of hers and shaking it, “They were so close to the town our kids… our kids weren’t safe anymore. So thank you, thank you so very much!”

“Zack...” Cloud was so pale. He had the body of a warrior, thanks to Hojo’s injections, but no strength because of the same experiments. He was kneeling beside Zack’s bed. He had his hand on the SOLDIER’s arm, his fingers on Zack’s pulse. “That’s it, Zack. Just keep breathing. I need you. Even when I can’t say it, I need you.”

“When you pushed me over the edge of the platform you saved my life.” Sephiroth looked up at him, looked at him openly and firmly before saying, “Thank you for that....”

“I can’t believe I owe my life to a fucking SOLDIER.”

“Well,” Zack responded with a grin, “considering it was a ShinRa robot that was shooting at you, it only seems fair that a ShinRa SOLDIER save you.”

“True,” The guy laughed, he looked Zack up and down, “You know if you make sure I get to the bar without getting shot at again, I just might buy you a round.”

“Sounds like a plan...”

Angeal’s voice, “If you want to be a hero you have to hold on to your dreams...”

“Shit! No way my people could’ve handled all those fuckers,” the unnamed captain said, “I don’t care if SOLDIERS are spoiled prima donnas you just earned every bonus the company
“Did anyone ever tell you that you that you’re very loud?” Cloud’s voice was a rough whisper and Zack knew, wherever his mind had been, the blond’s body had been screaming.

“Fuck, Cloud. That was too long.” He tightened his hold on the parts of his friend he could safely hold without causing him more pain.

“I’m sorry... I’m sorry. It hurt. It hurt so much.”

“I know, babe, it’s just that...” Zack’s breath caught, he wouldn’t cry, he couldn’t cry.

Cloud needed him to be strong. “...I’m afraid that one day you’ll phase out and never come back.”

“I... I might,” Cloud admitted, “but I can always hear you.”

“What good does that do?” he asked bitterly.

Slowly, painfully, Cloud’s swollen hand came up to rest on his, “Because one day, you’ll tell me it’s safe to come back, and I’ll just follow your voice.”

“I once told you that no amount of Jenova cells could make you a monster, and if you weren’t a monster then neither was I. Now I’m telling you that if I can’t be guilty of not protecting you both, then you can’t be guilty either.” Sephiroth gave Zack’s arm a light squeeze before releasing it, “If we tell ourselves that enough we might begin to believe it.”

He sighed, knowing what his subconscious was trying to tell him. He was a far cry from the hero he’d dreamed of being, but maybe, just maybe, he’d done some good things. It hardly seemed like enough, somehow. Thin fingers ran through his hair, offering comfort this time instead of smacking some sense into him.

He couldn’t believe his wings, well, he could because he’d had to live with them for the last couple years, but they’d never been this active or freakin’ independent before. It was like they were showing off or something—not that Zack didn’t appreciate Sephiroth’s admiration of them, and they’d made Raincloud smile. Hell, they’d made the kid laugh. He’d been trying ever since he’d met the little guy to cheer him up and, in the end, all it took was a pair of cheeky wings... who-da thunk it?

The rope bridge was ahead of him. On the other side was the real world. He lifted a couple fingers to his shoulder pad and felt the long, skinny digits wrap around them. He didn’t want to go back. He wanted to stay here with all of them. He wanted to hold them and tease them and if, when, they finished the house and all Cloud’s personas rejoined into one, he wanted to be there to greet him. Except he’d still have to say good-bye to them and this time he’d know it was good-bye so there was a chance, just a small one mind, that he’d get a little red-eyed and Cloud would never let him live that down.

Fuck, he hated this emotional shit. He sniffed in disdain because he was not crying.

He could think about what might be happening back in the real world but he just didn’t have enough information. When he remembered the kind of useless garbage that had crossed Seph’s desk in the old days... It could be something like that. The knock hadn’t been repeated as far as he knew. Surely, if it had been a world-threatening emergency, the person at the door would’ve been a bit more frantic?

He wouldn’t find out by standing here. He stepped onto the flimsy rope-bridge with its loose boards. His wings let go of his fingers and moved to balance him with small movements he didn’t even need to think about. He braced himself for the last step because, once he reached the far side, he was pulled through time and space like warm taffy through a keyhole.

It didn’t hurt much—it usually didn’t, it was just the odd stretching sensation made it hard to fit
back into a physical body. After a normal sleep, he’d usually wake up all at once, going from unconscious to battle-ready between two heartbeats. He’d occasionally woken up softly and lazily—usually after a sex-filled night, and he enjoyed the slow rise to consciousness. He’d awoken from injuries with the world a kaleidoscopic blur—those had been trippy. He’d woken up filled with drugs a few times, usually in a hospital somewhere, aware of his surroundings but not in control of himself—not a sensation he’d enjoyed.

This was not like any of those experiences. This was like dragging his body out of a tar pit one limb, one bone, one sinew at a time. It didn’t hurt, it just felt disorienting. He was awake, he knew he was awake but he couldn’t organize the will to actually move. He’d just lay here for a couple more minutes. He’d be ready to get mobile after a couple minutes, he was sure.

He didn’t feel very rested either even with the food, the safety and the sex, but he was used to that. As a specimen in Dr. Creepy’s House of Horror he either hadn’t slept or he’d had some really fucking awful nightmares. Besides, he’d been busy while he slept. Bricklaying wasn’t exactly shuffling papers, and he hadn’t worked that hard for a while.

He wondered if his muscles would be sore, but he wasn’t sure he could get muscle strain from dream labour.

If it was possible, he should develop it into a kinda workout thing. Imagine the market for a weight-loss program that allowed you to sleep your way to fitness. That would be a better thing than the President’s... former-President’s, mythical Promised Land... plus he’d be rich. That would be cool. Bet, with something like that, he could get richer than Rufus ShinRa.

Little Rufus as President. Un-fucking-believable. Last time he’d seen the spoiled little shit had been at his, what, eighteenth birthday? At that overblown, ostentatious celebration the old man had thrown for him. The SOLDIERs had been there to impress the masses and Rufus had looked down his patrician nose at everybody. Maybe disaster had improved the brat.

His brain seemed to working the way it usually did, better than it sometimes had in the lab anyway. He knew who he was, where he was and who he was sleeping with...

They were breathing deeply, evenly... peacefully, like lovers should. He knew how Sephiroth was breathing because he was currently using the silver-haired warrior’s rock-slab imitating pecs as a pillow and he could feel the General’s chest rise and fall. Cloud he could feel because the blond was snuggled in practically on top of Sephiroth and Zack’s hand was trapped between them. He could also feel Cloud’s breath blowing over his forehead, making his bangs gently brush against his face. Cloud’s wing still covered him and, shit, his own wings had come out to wrap around the group as much as possible.

He heard the soft tapping on the door. Whoever was out there wasn’t going to go away obviously.

He extended his senses a bit. He could hear the person waiting patiently on the other side of the door. Their breathing seemed okay; not fast and shallow liked he’d expect if there was some kind of emergency in camp. A little further out and there was still no indication that the sky was falling. So why had they knocked on Seph’s door at barely dawn instead of noon liked they’d promised? Only one way to find out, unfortunately, it involved moving.

First, he’d promised to make a report. He was practically sleeping on Seph and under Cloud so there was lots of skin-to-skin contact. He calmed until he could feel the distance, until there was a thin thread of something connecting him to Cloud’s cottage. “It’s not even close to noon. Everything seems to be calm. I’ll let you know if that changes.” He waited until he heard… felt… whatever esoteric bullshit label they wanted to give it, a faint acknowledgment from one of the
Clouds. Whoever it was would pass the message to the General.

The knock sounded on the door again. “Give me a minute,” he called out and started to extricate himself from the pile. First thing to do was get his wings unhooked from everyone.

He couldn’t believe his wings were out in the real world. That had never happened before, at least not unconsciously like that, before he’d always had to concentrate to get them to show. He made sure they gently released the feathers they were buried in. His other hand had a handful of silver hair. It was easy getting that side out as Sephiroth’s hair slid right through, just like silk. He slid his arm out from between Cloud and Seph then carefully rolled out from under the protective embrace they’d each held him in. He moved carefully and steadily, but not stealthily—nothing would bring out Seph’s predator-defender as quick as having someone sneak around him.

Once he was beside the bed he stretched and rolled the kink out of his neck—Seph’s chest did not make a comfy pillow. His wings stretched as well, extending to their full, less-than-impressive, size. The General had asked if he could fly with them, he remembered. As an experiment, he pumped them a couple times. He felt his heels lift so the answer was a definite ‘maybe’. He thought of leaving them out but... but he wasn’t ready for anyone to see them. Anyone else, that is, in a way Seph had already seen them, he supposed.

There was another knock, just a quiet little tap like the person on the other side wanted to remind him that someone was waiting. “Coming, coming.”

Sometimes it was nice to be enhanced, he thought. He had time to make a quick dash into the small bathroom to empty his bladder and run a brush over his teeth. He ran back out and grabbed his pants and dragged them on. He pulled his shirt on next but didn’t bother with his boots or his sword and harness; just picked them up to carry them into the next room with him. Boots and harness were noisy things to put on and Cloud and Seph looked so peaceful lying together the way they were. He knew, in his brain, that they couldn’t be woken up in the normal sense, but still it felt wrong to risk it.

He took another moment to appreciate the picture they made then he softly opened the door to face the reality on the other side.

Blossoms from the trees swirled in the air. They waved when Zack did. There was no sound from the group, no grumbles, no speculation; they just watched silently as the big SOLDIER disappeared around the rocks. Even little Raincloud, who had tugged on Sephiroth’s coat until he was picked up, didn’t say anything; he just leaned into the General’s broad chest and squeezed his dragon hard. Sephiroth knew that for them this was good-bye. If Zack ever returned to Cloud’s soul none of these personas would be here. They’d be part of Cloud but subsumed, part of a whole instead of separate, so he stood quietly, waiting until they were ready to begin the reconstruction again.

“He’ll be back,” Spike said, finally breaking the silence. “He knows he’s always welcome here.”

“Not really the point, soldier-boy,” Niisan sniffed dismissively. The silver-haired youth’s eyes were suspiciously red.

“Well, it’s just there’s no point moping, y’know?” Sephiroth knew Spike wasn’t trying to be obtuse—he was close enough to the SOLDIER in personality that he wouldn’t be deliberately insensitive, but he certainly had the same way of dealing with emotions that Zack did: Ignore them until he burst.
“It’s almost like he didn’t realize he wouldn’t see us again,” Weirdo speculated sadly.

“He’ll know,” Sephiroth stated with certainty, “It may take him a bit longer but he will realize. He’ll stop, wonder if he should come charging back down here to give you all extra hugs then talk himself out of it because that will just prolong the pain and he might cry. He hates for people he wants to be admired by to see that he’s not always strong and in control.”

They all looked at him. He gave them a mild look in return, “I have known Zackary a long time.”

“Yeah, that sounds like him,” Spike said and, since he was a mirror of the big First, they all had to accept it. “So, Corporal, it’s you and me on the outside, right?”

“I’ve been anticipating it, Spike,” the Corporal responded. From his tone, he’d been anticipating, and planning for, the apocalypse.

“Um, yeah. Great,” the pseudo-First mumbled in reply, but he still ambled happily around the corner to look at Weirdo’s windmill and stuff. The long-suffering Corporal marched after him.

“Niisan, do you still feel up to the challenge of decorating the cottage?” Sephiroth asked.

“Tch! It’s hardly a challenge. I could put up purple wallpaper and it would be an improvement.” He was still turned away from them, arms crossed defensively.

“Um, eww?” Weirdo commented hesitantly.

Sephiroth, looked at this prickly, emotional, part of Cloud, so easily damaged in so many ways, and walked up behind him. One arm was full of little Raincloud, but he hugged the aspect with the other, resting his chin gently on the youth’s silvery hair. “Don’t worry. I’ve always known you were there inside of Cloud,” he reassured the boy, “You’ll never completely disappear.”

“I’m not worried,” the young man sulked, “I just…” but he couldn’t finish. Sephiroth didn’t bother with words but just gave him a soft kiss and held him. Raincloud patted his arm a couple times before going back to hugging his dragon, and Weirdo stared at them wide-eyed, too nervous to risk Niisan’s uncertain temper.

“You guys going to do any work over there?” called an impatient voice from the side of the cottage. It was startling, even frightening because it was the exact same thing Zack had asked, but it wasn’t Zack asking. Spike’s voice had some of the same rhythm but was much lighter.

“Let them worry about what they’re doing while we worry about this,” the Corporal’s voice was deeper somehow, more resonant and commanding. “And leave Weirdo’s wiring alone, godsdammit, or you’ll electrocute us all.” Even Niisan managed to chuckle a little at that.

Although he would never admit it, because it served no purpose and wouldn’t help the aspects, Sephiroth knew he would miss interacting this way with each of them, but Spike was right; there was no point ‘moping’. “Are you ready?”

A shrug, a surreptitious wipe across the eyes, “I suppose.”

“Then let us proceed.” Sephiroth lowered his arm until it rested on Niisan’s lower back, knowing the touch would help calm the young diva, “I admit I’m looking forward to seeing the results
although I have to agree with Weirdo about the purple wallpaper…”
This chapter contains references to events that took place in my story *Making It Work*, on which this story is based. However, you don't have to have read that one to read this one.

“Is the camp on fire?” Zack asked as he shut the door. The person facing him wasn’t someone he knew. Instead it was an old soldier, compact and tough. His flashes identified him as a master-sergeant. Zack would’ve bet gil to garbage that this was one of the guys who actually ran the camp no matter what the bureaucrats said back in Midgar… or Junon now. He remembered them saying that Midgar was gone. Fuck, he thought, and suppressed the urge to laugh, they’d barely finished building it and now it was destroyed. It looked like he wasn’t the only one the gods liked to laugh at.

“You must be that SOLDIER the Guv’nor was talkin’ about.” The man’s voice sounded like continents grinding together. If Titan ever spoke, he would sound like this man and the Grasslander accent added the final touch to the earth god illusion. However, he wasn’t Titan and Zack wasn’t intimidated.

“I’m Zack Fair, used to be in SOLDIER.” He shrugged into the last of his armour, leaving his boots on the floor, and put out his hand, “Can’t say if the General was talking about me or not.”

A hard shake, “Oh, aye, ‘e has been. Wants you t’be ‘is Second-in-Command and all. I’m Master-Sergeant Lutton.” The hand-shake was just an excuse for the two experienced fighters to assess each other. Zack’s initial impression didn’t change, but he couldn’t get a sense of what the Senior NCO thought of him.

“So, how can I help you, Master-Sergeant?”

Lutton’s brows lifted innocently putting Zack on his guard. “The Gen’ral’s comin’ soon, Sir?”

“Not unless the sky’s falling or the world’s coming apart or something.” Zack’s smile remained wide and friendly. He also remained standing in front of the door, hands on hips; a wall of living, modified warrior. “Is the world coming apart, Master-Sergeant?”

“I couldn’t really say, Sir. I’m just the messenger.” He held up a small envelope. Zack held out his hand to take it but the old soldier held on to it. “It’s marked ‘Eyes Only’. I can only giv’it to the Gen’ral or ‘is Aide.” MS Lutton rocked on his heels, face suspiciously bland.

Zack’s eyes narrowed even as his smile remained wide and bright. He was being played—he’d hung around the Corporal too much not to recognize it. Still, he thought, bait isn’t really bait when you know what it is, right? “If you can give it to his Aide, why haven’t you?” Feint.

“The lieutenant is on the mountain at the moment. Unavailable.” Parry. “O’ course,“ Lutton said, tone as mild as milk, “I could give it t’the Guv’nor’s Second-in-Command, if ‘e ‘ad one. Elsewise, I’ll just ‘ave to wake ‘im up.” Riposte.
“Blackmail,” Zack made his own attack.

“Regulations,” he sounded offended at the accusation but his expression was very close to smug.

Zack was caught between being amused—because he’d walked into such an obvious trap even knowing what it was, or being angry—because he hadn’t decided yet whether he could work for ShinRa in any capacity whatsoever. There was a third option, he realised. He could feel pleased because the experienced Master-Sergeant had obviously judged him worthy of standing at the General’s side. It was compliment.

It was also blackmail.

“The Officer of the Watch?” It was a feeble offering and Zack knew it.

Lutton made short work of it, “Gen’ral’s eye’s only, or his designate.”

“Same argument for Captain Kunsel?” Lutton merely looked at him in pity. Zack finally laughed—what was the point in being angry, after all? “You’re pretty good,” he said admiringly, “but it’s still blackmail. You have to know I’m not going to let you disturb them.” Zack’s posture relaxed, but he still didn’t move from the door.

“I’m just doin’ my duty, same as efryone else.” Such a mild tone

“What if I say the General’s made me his SiC?” Zack asked.

“Then I gif you the information and go on my way.”

Zack’s eyes narrowed, “You’d take my word for it? Just like that.”

“You’d lie?”

“Oh c’mon!” Zack scoffed, “There’s a bit more to becoming the General’s SiC than just saying it’s so.”

Again, the Master-Sergeant had that carefully not smug expression on his face. “True, I’ll ‘ave t’go dig up the paperwork that ‘e filed back when ‘e accepted the Gen’ralship and actifate the standin’ orders.”

Zack was… shocked was too mild a word for it. “He filed the papers two years ago?”

“‘E’s a man who knows ‘is own mind, I reckon.”

Zack stood there speechless. The Master-Sergeant wasn’t well enough acquainted with him to appreciate how rare that was.

So many thoughts ran through the SOLDIER’s head: Sephiroth must have been pretty sure he’d find them... and that he’d agree to this. If he agreed he’d be working for ShinRa indirectly... What would Seph had done if they’d been dead or something... Was this really the best thing to do? Did Sephiroth need him that much? He remembered what Seph had said just last night; ‘there is no one I trust more for the position’. They’d made a good team before Nibelheim, he knew that. He’d been told by some of the ShinRa higher ups that they’d had a much easier time dealing with the genetically-modified warrior after he’d started working with Seph.

“Well, Commander?” Lutton prodded.

Was he really going to do this? He thought of Kunsel’s comment about Seph’s current Aide, Hinds
or Hints or something. The man wasn’t to be trusted apparently, and he was the one standing at the General’s side. Seph needed someone better than that. Loyal to him and to Ifrit’s Hell with everyone else…

“He said… there’s a contract?” Zack asked hesitantly.

“Aye, that would be in the file.” Lutton was a solid, reassuring presence.

A deep breath, caught, held and released. “Right then. Dig it out and let’s get this hot dog stand moving.” He held out his hand for the report and, this time, the Master-Sergeant handed it over. Zack took it over to the table and dropped it. He looked at it, a plain envelope made out of a plastic-paper hybrid; practically indestructible. He looked at the electronic seal, a simplified version of the ShinRa Electric Power Company logo. Then he rode out a wave of panic. Hot, cold; numb then prickly. He’d agreed to go back to work for those betraying bastards.

He tried telling his racing heart that he was only getting paid by ShinRa and that he was actually going to be working for Seph. His heart was obviously deaf to reason because it didn’t slow down any. Well, if reason didn’t work, he’d fall back on his favourite tactic—distraction.

“Can you arrange for some food and a large urn of coffee?” Feeding his unending SOLDIER appetite was always a good way to get his mind off stuff he didn’t want to think about. His stomach seemed quite willing to go along with the program because it gave out a loud and eager growl at the mention of food.

“Aye, Sir,” Lutton agreed peaceably. He was busy tapping away on the computer even as the printer beside him spat out pages.

He did a quick mental check—still panicky, so he thought of something else to do. He sat down to put on his heavy footwear, making sure to lace them up precisely and to tie them off just so. Thinking of his boots brought something else to mind.

“I’ll also need a desk and chair. The General doesn’t like it when I put my feet up on his.” He had fond memories of braving Seph’s dark, disapproving looks but a desk would establish that he had some authority on his own and wasn’t just Sephiroth’s ‘pet’.

“I’ll arrange it, Sir.”

“Thank you, Master-Sergeant.” Another deep breath. He was still jittery but not panicked, not quite.

He stared at the device built into the envelope. There was actually an electronic scanner built into the seal and an authorized thumb-print was required to make the mechanism unlock. The seal itself, though thin, was large and impressive looking. It was meant to reassure the recipient that the contents hadn’t been tampered with. Zack wasn’t particularly reassured. He’d spent far too much time in Reno’s company to take the seal at face value. Some of the stuff they’d looked at had been serious; reports about Genesis and Angeal’s disappearance that the suits didn’t want to share but they both felt they had a right to know.

And, of course, the two of them hadn’t been able to resist doing other stuff, like replacing Heidegger’s news video—featuring clips of himself of course, with a video of gay porn. Since the self-important, self-proclaimed General had been homophobic, they’d been able to hear his shrieks ten floors away. Zack knew it was an unworthy thought, but he was thankful the man was dead. If the fat shit had still been with ShinRa there’s no way Zack would even think of working for them.
Lutton broke into his musing, “There you are, Sir. You should be active in the system now.” He reached over to pull a wad of paper off the printer and handed them over. “A copy of the contract. You’ll want to be readin’ it before you sign.”

Zack took the thick bundle, “Drawn up by ShinRa’s finest sharks, huh?” ShinRa’s legal department had been famous for the quality of their doublespeak.

“And the Guv’nor. Should be simple enough t’understand.”

Zack smiled at Lutton’s dry, not quite insulting, tone. He sounded just like the Corporal... The smile dropped from his face. He wondered how Seph was doing. Would Cloud just wake up once all his parts were together? It was out of his control, he reminded himself, out of his control. He wanted the comfort of his wing-fingers tap-tap-tapping on his shoulder guards. Shit, he scrubbed a hand through his hair; when had that become comforting?

He tossed the contract to one side, “I’ll read this later. First, let’s find out what’s important enough to warrant the fancy seal.” He placed his left thumb down on the ShinRa logo. His enhanced hearing easily picked up the hum of the sensor. It didn’t take very long, certainly not at long as the seals he’d used three years ago, before the little device beeped and clicked open. Zack twisted it the last little bit and the flap opened up. He pulled out a few typed sheets and maybe a dozen photos, black and white and colour.

He picked up the photos first because they looked more interesting but, without a context, he had no idea what he was looking at. There seemed to be four different robotic creatures. A couple of the photos showed them emerging from a hole in the ground which, if the snow and ice cover was a true indication, was probably the Northern Caves up by Icicle Inn. That meant these things were coming out of Hojo’s lab which wasn’t good because these creatures were fucking huge.

Suddenly, reading the accompanying report sounded like a damn good idea.

The first page was from someone called ‘Deuce’. It was coded and completely useless to Zack. Thankfully, the other sheets were the decoded version. Unfortunately, even the deciphered they were obscure, assuming a level of background knowledge the SOLDIER just didn’t have. He squeezed his head hoping that his brain would jump into a magical kind of overdrive or something. The cup of coffee that appeared at his elbow was the next best thing.

_Hojo’s plans require the end of the planet... knew that; ...activated previously unknown devices... okay, he couldn’t have known that so no need to feel stupid; Purpose unknown, destination unknown... not a lot of help there... relation between devices and Omega unknown... wait a minute, he paused, why does that sound familiar? Food appeared at his elbow so he dug in and continued reading. ...troops mustering... new mutations... possible new attack being planned... blah, blah, blah._

This was the same unhelpful speculation that used to fill the reports he used to read back before Nibelheim. Of course Hojo would be mustering his forces; of course he’d be creating new monsters; and of course he’d be planning a new attack. The sick fuck hadn’t achieved his goal.

Zack reread the report, wondering even more why they’d sent this to Sephiroth. They weren’t asking for help, they didn’t want him to prepare for an attack—there wasn’t even a request for Seph to add more useless speculation to the file.

Should he put the camp on alert?

It didn’t even seem like the creatures were heading their way. ShinRa was tracking them as best
they could, given that all of them had slipped into the ocean. Apparently the creature-devices had dispersed once they’d entered the water, but all of them were last seen heading in a south-easterly direction. Which was completely not helpful… the ShinRa boffins couldn’t get any vaguer.

South-east of the Northern Cave was the whole frickin’ Eastern Continent and the most heavily populated areas on the planet. Those things had a whole smorgasbord of targets. He lifted the picture of the blue-ish coloured one with the long tail. This thing had fins the size of a train sticking out all over the place like Cloud’s hair, and ShinRa intelligence couldn’t track it? What a bunch of losers.

There’d almost been something, some connection, some bit of the picture? Sometimes he thought his brain was almost as fried as Cloud’s. He glanced at the door that concealed the not-quite-sleeping couple. Fuck, he hoped this worked.

The cottage seemed especially dim after the brightness of the outside. The bare stone walls, the dark beams, the heavy, obviously hand-made furniture, made the room seem oppressive. Even Weirdo’s new, larger windows and the hole in the roof didn’t lighten the atmosphere.

Weirdo’s books were still scattered over the floor from when he’d panicked and kicked over his backpack. There must have been at least twenty volumes that had spilled out and yet the bag still looked full. Angeal would have loved a bag like that. Of the three of them, Angeal had been the most voracious reader. It was odd, Sephiroth thought, how he could despise his former friend for abandoning them and yet, at the same time, miss him so dreadfully. However, this was neither the time nor place to be thinking of the past.

He turned to the smallest Cloud, still perched on his hip, “Are you ready to get down?” Raincloud looked at him with large eyes, assessing, weighing, before nodding his head. Sephiroth swung him to the floor. The child claimed one of Niisan’s pillows and one of Weirdo’s comics and lay down on the floor reading. His toy dragon was placed beside him so it could have a good view of the pages.


“It smells nice. Like you,” Raincloud said, unconcerned.

“Of course it does,” the older persona rolled his eyes. Raincloud didn’t move. He didn’t even raise his eyes to the silver-haired young man who was snarling at him. “Alright,” Niisan huffed, “you can use it, just don’t drool on it or drip snot on it or anything.”

There was a murmuring roar, like a waterfall. It almost felt like it was in his head except he could hear it echoing in the house. This time the small aspect did look up, they all did, listening to what almost sounded like words. It was Raincloud who said it first, understanding the rumble quicker than anyone else, “Zack says it’s fine Outside There. You don’t have to go yet.”

Sephiroth glanced at Niisan for confirmation. The slender man shrugged a shoulder, “That’s essentially right. He said he’d call if anything changes.” The General nodded acceptance of their interpretation. He could put the real world to the back of his mind and concentrate on this one.

“We should continue with the reconstruction then,” the General said, kneeling to search through Weirdo’s books for the decorating magazines they’d been looking at earlier. Not that he would have much to do with it, but he wanted to sit with them as they decided what to do. What more would he find out about his lover from the process?
A slim, garish volume with dripping green lettering caught his eye. ‘Horrifying Human Experiments’ read the title followed by a smaller lettered subtitle, ‘True Stories from the Secret Lab’. Under the lettering was a picture of a man in a white, gore-spattered, lab coat. His eyes glowed evilly from behind thick glasses and his dark, greasy-spattered hair was pulled back into a braid. His hands were huge, his shoulders were wider than most doors and his wide, laughing mouth nearly split his head in two. It wasn’t Hojo, yet it was.

The General, remembering a far off day in the basement lab in Nibelheim, opened the book up to the verso where the printing information should be. It was blank. In fact, there was no publisher’s name anywhere on the book; not inside on the title page or on the cover. The book wasn’t real, or wouldn’t be real anywhere but here in Cloud’s psyche.

He opened the volume to a random page and read:

Fear kept his staff in line. Fear that they’d be the mad professor’s next experiment, so they remained quiet even though they knew what the evil doctor planned.

If he infected enough of the Jenova virus into his helpless victims, her mutated cells would achieve a concentration high enough to allow her to take over their minds. Like the hive mind of the bee, slavishly working to ensure the Queen’s survival, these mindless drones would do the Calamity’s work because she would be their Queen, their Mother.

She would use her clone army to infect others. Some would live and become her slaves, but if they died they would take her taint into the Lifestream and infect it as well. Eventually, there would be a ‘critical mass’ of Jenova in all of Gaia allowing her to achieve her goal of breaking up the planet and returning to the stars and continuing her journey.

Why would anyone do this? It was madness. Kill the planet, kill himself; it’s an easy equation, except he wasn’t entirely sane, was he?

He was known to have injected himself with more stable strains of the Jenova virus decades earlier. Perhaps Jenova was controlling his thoughts, whispering her evil love into his already twisted mind. Perhaps he believed that, as her loyal servant, the Calamity would need him so much she would spare his life and take him with her.

Perhaps he was blinded by his immense ego. He’d always had an inflated sense of self far outstripping his actual talent. He’d loved her, wanted her. Perhaps he believed that she felt the same way about him?

Or, perhaps, he thought he had found a way around death?

Although written in uninspired and inflammatory language, the passage was still ominous. When Sephiroth finally got the chance to kill his progenitor he wanted it to be final. Sephiroth flipped to a new page.

Many of the residents of the Nibelheim lab talk of Specimen ‘C’. He was one of Hojo’s favourite subjects and, when Hojo wasn’t choosing him to experiment on, Specimen ‘C’ would often volunteer himself to protect the other victims being held by the insane professor.
This baffled the self-serving scientist. He couldn’t understand why someone, anyone, would volunteer to be experimented on just to protect others. He called Specimen ‘C’ weak and a failure because he never stopped trying to protect the others. Over and over again he tried, to torture the noble self-sacrifice out of his young victim.

He failed. For Specimen ‘C’ escaped the one place Hojo or his brutal guards couldn’t follow... his mind.

Sephiroth’s stomach was queasy. Hojo had never called him by name but had always referred to him as Specimen ‘S’. He referred to all his test subject, human or otherwise, by their specimen label. The description of Specimen ‘S’ matched the Cloud of the real world, but this book wasn’t of that world. It belonged here. Was Specimen ‘C’ another of Cloud’s personas, splintered from the whole just like the others? If that was true, they needed to find him. First, he had to discover if his hypothesis was correct.

“What can you tell me of Specimen ‘C’?” he asked the room at large, even though he looked at Weirdo. Weirdo, who paled then flushed, nearly falling over in his panic. It was an unexpected reaction. So was Niisan’s

“Where’d you hear his name?” Niisan asked suspiciously.

Sephiroth’s eyebrow rose. “It was on the floor.” Specimen ‘C’ was a name of an individual residing within Cloud’s soul. Therefore he was indeed another aspect. He lifted the book showing its cover to the silver-haired diva, “It must have fallen out of Weirdo’s bag.”

“Weirdo,” the silver-haired persona hissed, “Why did you have that book in there?”

The younger aspect flinched away from Niisan’s temper, “I don’t know.”

“Tch!” Niisan spat in disgust, “That book has nothing in it that we need to know.”

It was time to interrupt before the situation turned violent which, judging from Niisan’s glowing eyes, it just might. “Who is Specimen ‘C’?” His tone was still mild but now there was an element of command to it.

Niisan kept his face turned away from the General when he answered. “He’s just some guy the writers made up to make an already badly written book more interesting.” The General didn’t believe for one second that Niisan’s anger was caused by literary outrage and, when Weirdo flinched, Sephiroth deduced that Niisan had somehow threatened the younger aspect if he didn’t back up the lie.

Weirdo swallowed, “Th-that’s right. He’s not real.”

Sephiroth assessed the two Clouds; one aggressively determined to stop the conversation, the other cringing and trembling in fear. Even little Raincloud had stopped reading his comic in favour of watching the drama unfold in front of him. The atmosphere in the cottage was threatening.

“You’re lying to me. How very disappointing,” he stated calmly. This time it was the older persona who flinched.
“This may be exaggerated and badly written but that doesn’t make it untrue. Specimen ‘C’ exists, doesn’t he? He is one of you.” He caught and held the silver-haired youth’s eyes, wanting Niisan to tell him. Niisan stared back silently, defiantly. He wasn’t going to tell. Sephiroth could see Weirdo in his peripheral vision but the young teen kept his gaze on a pillow he’d picked up. The boy plucked it nervously and a guilty flush coloured his cheeks.

It was Raincloud that broke the deadlock, “He hurts all the time.” The little voice was sad but calm, as if the battle of wills between Sephiroth and Niisan were inconsequential. The small aspect completely ignored Niisan’s outraged protest, so Sephiroth ignored it as well.

“Specimen ‘C’?” the General confirmed.

Raincloud nodded, “And he’s scared.”

Sephiroth sighed and stood up. “I should have realized sooner that there was another one. None of you have his wings.” Sephiroth waved Weirdo to silence when the young teen opened his mouth—probably to ask a question. “I assumed Spike would have them as the mutation only affects SOLDIERs First Class but he didn’t. I wondered if, perhaps, he was keeping them hidden away, except that behaviour doesn’t match Spike’s very flamboyant personality. If he had wings, they would be on display,” he stopped, fingered the front cover. There was the mako tube, filled with glowing green slime. “Specimen ‘C’,” he continued softly, “If, as this book suggests, he absorbed all the effects from Hojo’s experiments then he would have the wings, wouldn’t he.” He looked at Raincloud who nodded solemnly at him. “How do we find him?”

Raincloud, Weirdo and even Niisan just shrugged and shuffled their feet. Finally, Weirdo spoke up, “I’ve never seen him. He hides from everyone.”

“He runs away from us,” Raincloud added “because he’s scared all the time,”

“Scared of you?” he asked the small boy who was sitting up and hugging his stuffed dragon.

Raincloud nodded, “He was the first and he thinks he wasn’t good enough to stop the splintering so he’s afraid we hate him.”

“Ah.” Cloud, his Cloud, had suffered from the same feelings of inadequacy, although not quite this extreme. He even knew the cause. His mind went back to an evening three years ago...

Sephiroth could remember walking out of the lab in Nibelheim and through the village. He’d needed to keep in contact, skin to skin, with Cloud or else Jenova’s voice would’ve invaded his mind again. She would’ve tried to control him. Touching Cloud had muted her voice, dulled her power to almost nothing. They’d held hands in the caves under the ShinRa mansion where there was only the three of them. He’d refused to hold hands through the village to the Inn however and Corporal Strife had come up with a plan.

“If you hold me by the scruff of the neck, here,” Cloud lifted his hand to demonstrate, “no one in the village will think anything of it. They’re used to seeing me get hauled around like that.”

“That’ll make it look like you’re in trouble,” Zack protested, “like we’re dragging you to jail or something.”
Cloud shrugged, “I don’t have my helmet anyway, so they’re going to see me. We might as well use it. They were always hauling me around by my neck. Like I said, no one will comment.”

“You mean, they will not comment on my behaviour,” Sephiroth clarified, “but will speculate on what you’ve done wrong this time?”

“Yeah. That’s what I mean.”

His assessment had been correct. All the villagers had whispered to each other as they walked through the square. They’d covered their mouths but hadn’t realized that Sephiroth could still hear them. Through his grasp on Cloud’s slender neck he could feel how tense the young trooper had become. Even Tifa’s talkative presence hadn’t blocked the young Corporal’s awareness of the whispers going on around them. Cloud hadn’t complained. He’d ruthlessly sacrificed his own reputation to protect the General’s.

It was one of the many reasons Sephiroth wanted his Cloud back. To do that, he needed to gather all of Cloud’s aspects back together and that included poor, damaged, Specimen ‘C’.

The cottage was darker than it had been, he realized, and it wasn’t only because of their choice of conversation topics. Spike and the Corporal had finished the roof. Corporal Strife could find him... and bring him back.

“Corporal Strife,” he called. Not loudly, he didn’t think he needed to raise his voice much in this place.

It didn’t take long for the compact soldier to march through the door. Bouncy, buoyant Spike followed on his heels. The Corporal came to a stop before the General but it was the SOLDIER persona who spoke first.

“We finished the outside,” he smiled in triumph, “and I, for one, think it looks great.”

“Niisan might not agree,” the Corporal commented.

“Yeah, ‘cuz it’s not purple,” Spike laughed openly, a little too loud for the joke. Nobody joined in.

The Corporal was the first to pick up on the tension in the small cottage which didn’t surprise Sephiroth at all. The sturdy young man straightened, assuming his neutral NCO-to-Officer stance, “You called, Sir.”

“He wants you to find Specimen ‘C’,” Niisan interrupted. The slim aspect sounded almost panicked.

Sephiroth nearly sighed again. This wasn’t how he’d planned to broach the matter with the Corporal. Still, as Tifa had said last night, at least now it was done.

Corporal Strife stiffened and his eyes narrowed as his whole being went on alert. “Where’d you hear that term, if I may ask, Sir.” It wasn’t really a request. Once again the General raised the book with its lurid cover. This caused the soldier to send a narrow-eyed look at Weirdo, who paled, swallowed, and managed to look extremely guilty.

“I don’t mean him any harm, if that’s what you’re worried about, Corporal.” Sephiroth put some emphasis on his rank to remind Strife that he was talking to a General.
“I didn’t think you did, General. It just that,” he paused to collect his thoughts, “we’re all rather protective of C.”

“Poor little guy,” Spike murmured.

“We need him here and, I think, he needs to know that we want him here. He hasn’t been rejected, he isn’t being shunned, and you, none of you, hate him.” The Corporal lowered his eyes, truly thinking about what Sephiroth had said. The General knew all about how ‘giving someone their space’ could be misconstrued as ‘don’t give a damn’ or even ‘like it better this way’. Obviously, the Corporal knew about it too.

“He doesn’t like crowds.” It was a last ditch argument.

Spike protested, “We’re not a crowd, we’re family!”

The large aspect’s exuberance made Sephiroth exchange understanding looks with the Corporal. “I’ll make sure they stay back,” he promised.

The Corporal shifted unhappily on his feet, still uncertain about the wisdom of chasing down the last part of Cloud. Finally, he gave a sharp sigh, “Very good, Sir. I don’t know how long it will take me to find him and bring him back.” He looked up at the General.

Sephiroth smiled softly, “That’s perfectly fine, Corporal. I’m not going anywhere.”

The sun was high enough to outline the structures in light while leaving the substance in shadow. Vincent liked this time of the day. He’d forgotten the odd illusion of two-dimensionality the world acquired just before dawn.

They finally reached the camp. To the sentries, Nanaki’s presence was as good as a password and they entered the outskirts without incident. He and Nanaki had finished the walk in silence. He’d enjoyed that as well. He was still unused to be surrounded by sentient beings who demanded conversations and such.

He could sense his beasts roiling inside him, fitful in their slumber. He could smell the food from the mess tent. He would go there, find something acceptable to eat then locate Tifa for their sparring session. Then he would decide what to do about Sephiroth, his son.

“I will leave you here,” Nanaki said, “You’ve given me much to think about and I must call my grandfather and report this.”

“If I asked you not to tell?” It was mildly said, after all Vincent already knew the answer. Nanaki, also familiar with the question just grinned at him, exposing large, sharp teeth. “If you gain any insights from your talk with your grandfather, I would appreciate being informed.” As Chaos is being annoyingly difficult he thought but didn’t say. He’d tried not playing Chaos’ game but his resident demon had remained teasing and obscure.

*Sapphire and diamond, ultimate, ruby and emerald,* it chanted. It had been chanting those five words off and on throughout the trip. Giving in and prodding the creature hadn’t improved the quality of Chaos’ responses either. Teasing it with being descended from magpies with their love of shiny things had just made it laugh.
He’d been aware of Chaos as a separate being within him almost from the moment Lucrecia had implanted the creature within him. Of course, he’d first thought the voice in his head was either from the injury he’d sustained—Hojo had shot him in the head after all, or that he was going crazy from all the experiments Hojo had put him through.

*Don’t forget the work of your twisted girlfriend, my host. She did her own experiments on us.*

She was just trying to save my life, he argued back.

*There were other ways of doing that, my Immortalis, my own. Instead she trapped me inside you then watched us through a test tube.*

It wasn’t like that, Vincent wanted to argue. Lucrecia wouldn’t have been so cold.

*Not to you perhaps, you she wanted to save, me she gave no thought to. My life, my purpose, my glory... All of it ignored to save you.* Vincent tried to respond but there was nothing he could say. It was possible the demon was right and Lucrecia hadn’t cared about the life of the creature she’d used to save her lover.

*She didn’t. However, my host, my own,* it teased, *our time together might be coming to an end, thanks to all the planet’s glittering jewels.*

What do you mean? Vincent frowned and nearly stopped which would have been disastrous as Nanaki’s curiosity would have been aroused once again.

*You’ll find out soon enough, my own, and then we shall have some fun.* Vincent could sense his guest’s satisfaction. It was looking forward to it whatever ‘it’ was. *All the pretty jewels: sapphire and diamond, ultimate, ruby and emerald.*

Perhaps he should have stayed in his coffin…
Vincent approached the Mess tent. He was early but there was already a stream of soldiers and civilians wending their way past the food. It didn’t smell any better than it had yesterday but he needed fuel so the ex-Turk just shut his mind to the stench. To his surprise, Tifa Lockhart was standing outside the tent obviously waiting for someone. To his further surprise, that someone appeared to be him for she pushed away from the pole as he drew closer to the entrance and walked his way.

*Ah look at the delectable morsel approaching. That would be good to eat, wouldn’t it, my Immortalis?* Chaos, Vincent had learned a long time ago, was a lech when he was feeling playful.

“Hey, Vincent. Feeling better?” she asked. He nodded because he did feel better. She turned toward the entrance of the tent. “So... do you feel up to facing the horde or do you want me to run interference again?”

“Interference?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, “I figured, after so long by yourself in a cave, you might be finding all the people and the noise a bit much, and I get the feeling that you don’t like people or crowds much. Yesterday in the truck it looked like you were going to explode and shoot the head off the next person who got too close.” Her smile got broader and Vincent realized she was teasing him again.

“A leg shot would’ve been sufficient.”

He said it so seriously that Tifa blinked in shock before chuckling in appreciation. “You know, he’s got your sense of humour.”

It was Vincent’s turn to blink, “Who does?”

“Sephiroth. Your son,” she said calmly and turned him to stone. He would’ve have turned and run away once more but the dark-eyed fighter grabbed his arm, “Food, remember? This time I’ll let you talk to everyone, just to take your mind off it.”

“I’m not hungry,” he protested. It wasn’t a lie, he didn’t get hunger pains anymore, but it wasn’t the exact truth either. He needed to eat today and the sooner the better. He was sure he could feel Gigas shaking himself awake.

“Nonsense, emotional strain is hard on anyone’s system and yours has suffered a lot of shocks in the last day or so.” She let go of him and put her hands on her hips, “If you don’t go willingly I’ll drag you in,” she quirked her lips in challenge.
Vincent looked down, way down, at the small female. Chaos laughed. *Does the small one honestly think she can budge us? How delightful.* The demon clamped down on his other beasts, just so that they wouldn’t interfere.

The gunman had to agree with his guest. He’d been a Turk, and a fighter like her. He was also nearly double her height although she had more bulk. It took her grabbing his arm and dragging him into the tent for him to realize that she’d been serious. *Amazing,* Chaos purred, intrigued. Vincent was equally astounded. ‘How,’ he thought, ‘could she be so strong?’ She didn’t drag him far, just enough to make her point... and for them to become the center of attention. Vincent buried his face in his high collar, surrounding himself with the familiar, musty scent. Their sparring session was looking more and more interesting.

“So,” she asked, “do I do all the talking again or are you going to speak for yourself today?” She handed him a tray, with ridges to keep his food divided.

“I will talk as necessary, no more.”

She smiled at him again—she did that a lot, and said, “If you want me to rescue you just tap the index finger on your left hand twice, then twice more.”

“Why would I need rescuing?” he asked, offended even if it didn’t show in his voice.

“Well, maybe it’s not rescuing you, so much, but all the people you’d rather shoot than talk to. I’ll talk to them, you can stand there all silent and broody, and nobody will get hurt.” Again with the smile; then she paused, obviously picking her words with care, “Also, sometime yesterday, I think we became friends.” She looked at him with fierce eyes, “Friends rescue friends all the time.” She turned away and concentrated on choosing a balanced breakfast and chatting sporadically with the people behind the counter. Mutely, Vincent followed her, choosing only food that hadn’t bled.

He’d underestimated the dark-eyed warrior. She’d talked nearly non-stop yesterday diverting everyone’s questions and curiosity away from him and onto herself. He’d thought she just loved to gossip but she’d been shielding him, knowing, somehow, that he wasn’t ready to interact with so many people.

He might never be ready. Even this smaller breakfast crowd was starting to make his spine itch. If he tapped his finger what would she do to pull their attention away? He had no doubt that she would do something.

A friend.

Vincent turned the word over in his mind even as he stared away anyone who even thought of approaching to ask questions. His memories of Before weren’t great but he knew that he hadn’t had many friends in his life, certainly none once he’d joined the Turks. Had Lucrecia been a friend? Chaos’ vicious negative was instantaneous and instinctive. He ignored it and tried to be neutral as he examined his memories. Unfortunately, he couldn’t be sure that they had been friends.

They had started out professional. She had been older and, he had no hesitation in admitting, more intelligent. He had been... damaged, by his failure in Kalm. Perhaps that had piqued her interest. He was sure Lucrecia had started out wanting to heal him. But healing had turned to passion for he hadn’t been the only one hurting. Her marriage had been a disaster. She had been lonely and in need of reassurance. She had roused all of Vincent’s protective instincts. She had initiated the physical side of their relationship but, once roused, their love had been passionate and all-consuming, requiring few words. Their situation hadn’t helped turn their heat from burning flames to warming coals, either. They’d had so little private time together they hadn’t wasted it on talking.
Hidden moment, fleeting kisses, desperate promises... but few words of friendship.

What was it like to have a friend? ‘Friends rescue friends all the time,’ she’d said. What did that mean?

*No more quiet life for you, my host, my own. That’s what it means.* Chaos was happy. It was a change and therefore something to be anticipated, but he was pretty sure Chaos’ assessment would turn out to be correct. He could run back to the hills or he could accept it.

He waved an internal good-bye to his former solitary, and quiet, life.

‘Do you think he’ll find him?’ ‘He’ll do it if anyone can.’ ‘What’ll happen then?’ ‘How should I know?’ ‘Don’t you have a book on the topic?’

‘What happens to us?’

They were whispering, heads close together, pretending to look at the decorating magazines and thinking that Sephiroth couldn’t hear them. The General could hear them, of course, but he had no answers to give them. He wasn’t even sure that he could reassure them because their final question was heartbreaking and he didn’t have an answer. However, he had a different question that could possibly be answered. He searched out Raincloud who had talked about Specimen ‘C’ as if the General had a right to know.

The small aspect had moved from the floor to the new dining table when it appeared. Weirdo had given him paper and crayons and the child was busy making his own comic about a demon who turns on his master in order to save the planet. Sephiroth hadn’t quite followed the story—the demon was apparently hidden in a human and could only come out when his host was injured severely enough, but Raincloud had quite happily told him all about it so the General had listened and made all the appropriate noises.

“Raincloud?” Sephiroth finally asked.

“Hmm?”

“Earlier you said Sp—”’ he paused and corrected himself, “’C’ hides from all of you; that you’d never seen him.”

“I’ve seen him,” Raincloud interrupted, “but only from a distance.”

Sephiroth nodded acceptance of this new information, “You’ve never seen him up close or talked to him.” He waited for Raincloud’s agreement. “That said; how did you know that he hurts and he’s scared?”

Raincloud finally looked up at him, “Because I know.” Sephiroth waited for more. There wasn’t any.

“He never left here, you know, never escaped into the Lifestream like the rest of us. That’s why he’s so hurt.” Weirdo added.

The General turned his attention to the young teen, “Did you ever get close to him?”
Weirdo shook his head, sending long hair flipping through the air. “I’d see him sometimes when I came back here but he never let me get close. He was always so scared we’d hate him or something”

“How do you know that?” the General pressed, “If none of you talked to him or saw him up close, how could you know what he was thinking or feeling?”

“He knows the same way I know,” Niisan joined in the discussion, leaning over the back of the new couch. “We can all sense each other to a degree: what we’re feeling, what we’re doing, even what we’re thinking sometimes. Raincloud and I are the most sensitive,” his tone said that it was only natural for he to be one of the special ones and Sephiroth hid his smile. “Spike and Weirdo have the hardest time.” Spike’s ‘hey!’ of protest echoed from where the tall aspect was checking out the new bathroom.

“I hear Outside There the best. And the voices in the Deep Sea.” Raincloud continued his colouring.

Sephiroth understood what the small aspect meant by ‘Outside There’ but what was the ‘Deep Sea’? He didn’t get a chance to ask because Niisan sneered, “I can hear Mother.” The sneer dropped away, he dipped his head down to look seductively at Sephiroth through his bangs, “but I’m not listening to her anymore because Seph’s more fun.” He sucked a finger into his mouth, slowly and suggestively. “I’m still waiting for you to take your shirt off, General.”

“I’ll take my shirt off for you.” Everyone ignored Spike’s offer.

“Not in front of the children, Niisan,” the silver-haired warrior frowned repressively.

Weirdo raised his hand. His eyes were wide and trained hopefully on Sephiroth, “I’d like to see that.” The General looked at Weirdo, who blushed but stuck to his guns, “Well… I would!”

Niisan ruffled Weirdo’s hair in pride, “I’ve trained you well, kōhai.”

Weirdo blushed, Sephiroth harrumphed, and Raincloud giggled. Suddenly it didn’t seem so dark in the little cottage.

There was more food in the office now since Zack and the Master-Sergeant had been joined by Kunsel. Zack had asked for the camp’s intelligence person but he hadn’t arrived yet. The food was set off to the side on a folding table Lutton had arranged. Kunsel and the burly NCO were fuelling up while Zack did squats.

He felt like he’d forgotten something, something fucking important, but every time he tried to pin it down all he could think of was there was so much shit he hadn’t known in the first place and how could he forget crap he didn’t know? He’d gone over the reports a couple times, looked at maps and plans and a whole shitload of stuff trying to remember what it was he’d forgot. The main table was covered with maps and old reports and the notes and doodles Zack had made while trying to catch up on three years of history and two years of war but none of it had helped him remember.

So he was currently doing squats, working off some energy, emptying his mind and allowing all the thoughts to percolate in his brain... or maybe they weren’t perking, maybe they were being all mashed together like in a casserole. He didn’t really like casseroles, he decided. He’d rather have a
good stew with all the flavours combined yet still, somehow, separate, so that if he wanted meat, he could dig out chunks of meat and taste fucking meat. If he wanted potatoes he’d eat the potatoes. Actually, it wouldn’t really matter what he was served, he’d eat just about anything.

Eat, shit, sleep. Eat, shit, sleep. The basics of human existence and much better than tubes bringing liquid lunch in and tubes taking lunch away again like they’d done in the mako chambers. He could actually taste things again, and feel full. He could snuggle up under sheets and be wrapped in the warmth of his friends. He couldn’t stop the grin that broke over his face. He could enjoy life now because things like friends, fighting and laughs were the bonuses, the perks; what made the cycle worth living. He had those things back... His smile fell away. *He* had those things. Unlike Cloud who was still caught in some friggin’ twilight sleep. So much had changed in the world, would he even like being awake... The SOLDIER paused, still half-crouched. That phrase... it awoke a memory.

*‘The Others are in the twilight and they might not like being awake.’*

Who’d said that? He stood up, hands on his hips, looking past the floor into memory. *Shit!* He could almost hear him: small voice, confident but young, big eyes, sad... Raincloud! His stare moved to the door. He’d been at Cloud’s ‘house’ and Raincloud had done some weird trance thing...

He bounded over to the table, surprising the others into silence, and grabbed a clean sheet of paper. He needed to write this down before he forgot it again so he waved off Kusel’s questions. He wasn’t sure how much it would help considering it was all symbolism and Raincloud-speak, but the little guy had been most insistent that the information was important so he’d write it all down and try to make sense of it. Again.

Fucking metaphors...

The cottage was finished and everyone was looking around it, running hands over the new kitchen counter, playing with the new taps. Spike had started a fire in the fireplace, Niisan, of all people, had grabbed a recipe book from Weirdo and made a stew, pulling already chopped vegetables and meat from the empty fridge. Sephiroth wasn’t overly familiar with kitchens and cooking but he knew that was unusual.

Niisan and Weirdo had kept the lower portion of the cottage as the living room-dining room-kitchen area. The upper area, where Cloud’s mother had slept, they’d turned into the bedroom with a bed large enough to sleep six... or to provide a rolling, bouncing, giggling battle-ground for the two youngest Clouds. The bathroom and, more importantly, the bathtub was as spacious and luxurious as they could make it; even Genesis would find it acceptable and he was the most hedonistic person the General knew.

All that there was left to do was to wait.

Spike, like the person he’d based himself on, was very bad at waiting. He was doing squats in the living room, talking and asking unanswerable questions, but that was okay because he rarely waited for anyone to answer. Niisan had snuggled up next to the General on the couch while the stew bubbled away on the new stove. He had a motorcycle magazine out of Weirdo’s bag and was happily looking at all the models, comparing styles and options and priced. He also asked questions but, unlike his fellow persona, he waited for Sephiroth to answer. Not that Sephiroth was able to
provide many answers. Motorcycles, like dusting and the winter health of small birds, was not a subject he was familiar with.

It was cozy and domestic and Sephiroth knew he would treasure this memory, even if it was only partially real. The non-quiet peace was interrupted by a low bell followed by a murmuring whisper, like hearing a large waterfall from distance... through trees. All of the aspects stilled, heads cocked, listening to what the waterfall told them.

“Found him,” Raincloud said, “They’re coming in.”

“How long?” the General asked.

“Not long,” Niisan answered, “A few minutes or so.”

“Fuck,” Spike said running panicked hands through his hair, “We need to make him feel comfortable. Will he fucking recognize this place? I mean, will he feel okay here? We made a shit-load of changes.” Sephiroth frowned at the swear words. He’d never heard anything but the mildest of cussing from Cloud.

“Maybe we should meet him outside or something,” Weirdo suggested.

“No,” Sephiroth cut off that suggestion. “This is his home. However, all of you will remain in the dining room or the kitchen. You will also try to remain quiet. You will not approach unless I give you permission. Is that understood?” There was a chorus of agreement. Raincloud and Weirdo held hands as they moved to the dining table and Sephiroth wasn’t sure which one was supporting the other. Niisan pushed Spike into the kitchen and set him to cutting bread for a lunch they probably would never have. Sephiroth watched them take up their new positions. He couldn’t fail to notice that the aspects remained close to each other and, except for Spike, cast wide-eyed, nervous looks at the entrance.

“It will be alright,” he tried to reassure them but he didn’t think they believed him. He hoped that his own nervousness was well hidden. He went to the door and watched the path. It was empty. Where could they be?

They weren’t coming down the path, but from the trees to one side of the cottage. It was easy to pick out which one was Specimen ‘C’ s. Where the Corporal was thick and sturdy, ‘C’ was skeletal... far, far thinner even than Niisan. The Corporal wasn’t tall but ‘C’ appeared tiny next to him.

As they got closer, Sephiroth realized that ‘C’ s height was a result of being somehow bent. His back almost looped back on itself in a tight ‘S’... and his left leg appeared to fold sideways. It gave him an awkward, unbalanced gait and the Corporal kept one arm out ready to offer support or to brace if ‘C’ began to tire or falter. Luckily, the injured aspect didn’t seem to consider the arm threatening. Instead, he allowed himself to be slowly and gently eased closer and closer to the cottage.

Where were the wings? Sephiroth asked himself but, considering the damage he could already see, he wondered if he wanted to know what had happened to them. Then he saw what was left of them.

‘C’ s wings weren’t the soaring splendour of the real Cloud’s though they might have been once. There were almost no feathers left on the left wing. The joints were smashed and it hung limply behind him, dragging on the ground. His right wing ended abruptly just before the first joint. A
heavy clamp, which had been used to cut off the blood supply and effectively ‘kill’ the appendage, was still attached. Trapped and broken feathers twisted out from under the metal. A sharp pain stabbed Sephiroth’s chest robbing him of breath momentarily. The pain didn’t dissipate when the General saw how short this Cloud’s hair was. He suspected what he’d see when ‘C’ came closer and he wasn’t happy about being correct. ‘C’ had stubble of various lengths that provided little cover to the network of surgical scars and stitching that crawled over his skull.

He watched, holding himself in place with rigid control, and saw that another reason for the slow progress was that ‘C’ twitched almost constantly; jerky movements that travelled from shoulders to hands, to hips and wings, and made a mockery of his fragile balance. Each time it happened he had to stop, resting his weight on his better leg and the useless left wing so that he didn’t fall over. His hands would flutter like moth wings, usually winding up covering his head or twisted in a knot in front of him. Even without the tremors his hands were always in motion, clutching his shirt, hiding his face, hugging his shoulders.

He wore a sweat-stained and ragged hospital gown over soiled surgical pants. The General was glad, for once, that his design didn’t allow him to cry because the damage became even more evident and heart-wrenching as the Corporal coaxed ‘C’ closer. Sephiroth could almost see the bones moving in his elbow and wrists joints as his arms twisted and twitched. The effects of prolonged starvation were even more obvious in his face; cheekbones, and even teeth, were clearly defined and, the few times his face jerked forward, the pulverized cheek bone and eye socket on his left side were also easy to see.

He had no eye on that side. No pretty blue iris looked out at the General. It was just an empty hole...

Sephiroth pressed a hand against his chest, trying to force the pain out of his body. He would not pity this Cloud, he would not turn away and he would not flinch. Specimen ‘C’ had chosen a soldier’s path, to protect the innocent, and the General would honour that choice. But it hurt to see it, it hurt so much. He wanted to shred something, preferably Hojo, for having done this to a decent, innocent young man who had done nothing to deserve any of it. Hojo, and anyone who had helped him, were going to die. Sephiroth would make sure of it.

He stepped out into the light so that ‘C’ would see him early and see him clear. ‘C’ stopped, his arms twisted and jerked. He covered his head and turned away. The Corporal was there, murmuring and touching him gently; quietly coaxing him into relaxing, moving ‘C’ a couple steps closer before another tremor wracked his body and he had to stop. The Corporal looked at him, still talking quietly. ‘C’ peeked at him with his one eye, and Sephiroth realized that he was the subject of their low-voiced conversation.

The final persona flinched away then lurched sideways approaching the large warrior cautiously. Sephiroth yearned to go to him, sweep him into his arms and tell him it was okay. He didn’t. He stood, fists clenched, and waited, pretending a calm he didn’t feel. He could sense the others, lining up at the front window, watching ‘C’s halting approach. He wasn’t the only one who wanted this to go well.

Finally, the Corporal managed to coax ‘C’ to within arm’s reach. He wouldn’t face Sephiroth directly, but snuck peeks at him when his twisting arms weren’t covering his eye. Sephiroth had already known that he was, for want of a better word, ‘sensitive’ to Cloud’s personas when their emotions were strong and ‘C’ was no exception. Waves of fear and shame and guilt twisted up with the desire to run away and hide so clearly that it nearly made Sephiroth back up.
The last persona moaned and turned away, looking to run, but the Corporal placed a firm hand under his elbow. “General, this is Specimen ‘C’.”

“I can’t call him that,” Sephiroth protested.

“He’s never mentioned any other name, not that I know of anyway.”

Sephiroth refused to call his lover ‘specimen’ anything. He turned his attention to the young man. “Do you have a name?” he asked ‘C’ directly. In an effort to make the damaged aspect more comfortable he used his most soothing and coaxing voice. It was not his fault that it was also one of his seductive or that these pieces of Cloud reacted to that voice the same way their progenitor had. The Corporal just shifted his stance to ease the sudden pressure. ‘C’ reacted quite differently.

“No, mush’n’t. Nnnng...” His voice, like the rest of him was damaged. It was more like a croak and his words were slurred, as if his tongue couldn’t move to form the words. He was still understandable though and, if the words weren’t clear, his actions were. Both hands came down to press against his groin. “Nono,” he repeated, “Ba’ thing. Mush’n’t” He hit himself when his body wouldn’t obey his terrified commands.

Sephiroth stepped forward and took hold of his wrists. They were painfully thin and the modified warrior was afraid he’d break the bones if the aspect struggled, but ‘C’ froze in place. “’C,’ it’s okay. It’s not your fault. Nobody’s blaming you and nobody’s going to hurt you for what your body does.”

“All hurt. My fault. Ba’ thing. Specimen bad.” Sephiroth could see the shudder start in ‘C’ neck; a sudden jerk to the side that moved in a wave along his muscles. It was a natural movement for ‘C’ so the General released him and let his arms move as they would. The Corporal had taken position behind him. He had his hands resting lightly on ‘C’ waist, supporting the youth’s fragile body, taking some of his slight weight off the useless leg.

“You’re not a ‘bad thing’,” Sephiroth said firmly but quietly; anything stronger would probably scare ‘C’ into fleeing. “What should I call you?” For some reason, Sephiroth needed for Specimen ‘C’ to have a name, any name. The young man’s thin arms twisted into his dirty top, lifting it as his arms writhed, exposing another intricate pattern of stitching and scars.

“Nnnno name. Ngggh.... Sp-speshimen, speshimen ‘C’,” ‘C’ managed to say. His lips didn’t close fully and saliva was leaking down his chin.

“Corporal, a handkerchief if you please,” Sephiroth held out his hand knowing the competent soldier would be able to provide him with the cloth. The Corporal handed it over and, without looking at it, the General started wiping the drool off his lover’s face. Of course that brought it into view. He frowned lightly at the pink and purple bandersnatches dancing across the bright yellow background but said nothing. Instead he focussed on ‘C’. “Specimen is not a name. It’s a designation; like ‘soldier’ or ‘survivor’—”

“Or hero,” the Corporal muttered.

Sephiroth asked, “Should I call you ‘Cloud’?” He was horrified by the result.

The shame and despair that radiated from the damaged aspect nearly made Sephiroth gag. It was strength of will that allowed him to ignore the impulse. Once again, the silver-haired warrior took a gentle but immovable hold on ‘C’s wrists. “You are not a bad thing and you are certainly not weak.”

“Nononononono…” ‘C’ keened. With his hands immobilized, ‘C’s body was undulating and every time his weight shifted onto his bad leg he nearly toppled over. He would’ve fallen except for his dragging wing and the Corporal’s supporting grip.

Sephiroth was panicking. He had to reach this aspect, had to help him. “Do you trust me?” It was a daring move. Despite what existed between the General and Cloud in the real world, Specimen ‘C’ had no reason to trust him. He had no reason to trust anyone. “Do you trust me?” Sephiroth asked again.

‘C’s frantic weaving slowed then stopped. “Truss’?”

“Yes. Do you trust me?” Sephiroth lowered their hands but this time he didn’t let go. Instead, he entwined his fingers with this poor, damaged persona.

The Corporal had his eyes closed and was repeating a prayer like a mantra. Sephiroth even recognized it. It was the same one he’d whispered in the lab: By Titan’s strength and Shiva’s sight; by Ramuh’s ancient guiding light; send this out with all my might; may Odin grant my wish tonight. He added his own wish to the Corporal’s.

“Truss’, ‘C’ repeated. “Hnnng… nnngh.” He was back to looking at the General for longer periods again. It was a good sign. “Scary, nnggh.”

“Yes it is,” Sephiroth agreed, because it was very scary to trust. “It’s okay to be scared.”

“Spec’men scared. Run, run ‘way. Hide. Bad. Ba’ thing,” his face was lowered and he still twitched but he wasn’t thrashing like he had before. Sephiroth loosened his hands so that ‘C’ could move them more freely. “Uselesh shpec’men… gnghh. Scared. So scare’.” There were tears joining the other bodily fluids on ‘C’s face. Sephiroth brought the handkerchief up and patiently wiped it all off. Then he put the cloth away and rubbed gentle fingers over ‘C’s misshapen face, trailing loving hands over scars and stitches, remembering how it felt before. ‘C’ hummed and made sounds low in his throat. Sephiroth wasn’t sure if the noises were a result of enjoyment, surprise or just one of the things that ‘C’ did. Amazement joined the feelings of self-hate and fear that ‘C’ radiated as naturally as he breathed.

He knew some people would have felt horror or pity or, worse, disgust, at the injuries that this part of Cloud had sustained, but Sephiroth found he didn’t feel any of those things. He was happy. He was happy that this damaged persona was standing relatively still and letting him run his fingers all over his body: face, skull, neck, shoulders and down emaciated arms. He lifted one of ‘C’s hands up, ran fingertips over the knuckles—many of them crushed or swollen, then bent to kiss it and to quickly lick the still elegant finger.

And ‘C’ stood there and let him.

“Do you trust me?” He asked again, already knowing the answer. ‘C’ wouldn’t have stood there and let the General touch him like that if he didn’t trust.

“Hhnnn… truss’ you?” the aspect whispered in a question directed at himself. “Trust Silber
“Gen’ral.” A skeletal hand reached out and gave Sephiroth’s arm an awkward pat, “‘kay.”

“Then can you tell me your name?”

“Hnnnn,” ‘C’ shook his head. “No name.”

“You had a name once.” He shook his head again. It was odd how easy it was to tell it apart from his normal tremors.

“Don’ ‘member.” He shook his head and rocked his body, “Don’t know.”

“Then why don’t you choose one for yourself?” The silver-haired warrior wanted, needed, ‘C’ to have a name. He didn’t know why, really. It felt necessary and in this place, he thought instinct should probably be listened to.

‘C’ was already shaking his head. “Don’ deserv’ name, nnnnn… Left’im. Ran ’way. Fail, fail, fail.” He was getting agitated again. His gentle rocking was turning into violent whip-cracks. The Corporal was forced to dodge the flailing stump of his right wing and its heavy metal clamp. His arms were up covering his face, letting him hide once more. His fingers were digging into his scalp leaving angry red marks behind.

Sephiroth tried to soothe him, “You didn’t fail. You saved him, you saved everyone.”

“Nonononono! Dead, dead, all dead.” He was scratching himself hard enough to break the stitches in his scalp. Sephiroth gathered up his hands again. Rubbing them until ‘C’ was reasonably quiet once more.

“Do you trust me?” He waited as the question worked its way through ‘C’ tortured thoughts. He waiting until the younger man nodded once, sharply. It set of one of his tremors. It was his normal full body twitch and it was odd how reassuring Sephiroth found it. He bent down until his face was close to ‘C’s. “Someone may be dead, but Zack isn’t.” ‘C’s eye widened.

“Hnggg,” he sounded surprised but hopeful. He stared at the General, one hand twisting helplessly against Sephiroth’s exposed chest as if he were pleading for understanding. “Pain. All’a time. Too much. Coul’n’t save’im.”

“You did save him,” ‘C’ shook his head frantically. The Corporal was forced to adjust his stance to keep the agitated persona upright. “You did. You gave him a reason to survive—someone for whom he could be a hero.”

‘C’ had quieted again, his arms twisted around his body like snakes, but Sephiroth could see he was trying to process this new information. “Safe?”

“I promise.”

‘C’ made his guttural almost-humming sound as he considered this. Sephiroth didn’t add anything to his short statement, preferring to stay silent while the injured persona sorted out his thoughts. The Corporal had even stopped his near-silent chanting. Sephiroth could hear his heart pounding. He could feel the strength of his pulse in his fingertips.

“I left him. Ima ba’ thing.”
Chapter End Notes

Fanart!

Specimen C
Sephiroth was filled with conflicting desires. He wanted to shake ‘C’—gently, for saying he’s a ‘bad thing’ but he also wanted to shout with joy because the aspect had identified himself as a person rather than a specimen. ‘I left him’ he’d said, ‘I’m a bad thing.’

“You did what you needed to survive.”

‘C’ rocked while he considered this idea. “Alive?”

“Yes, Zack’s alive. The Corporal has seen him.” Sephiroth thought it would be okay to bring the sturdy NCO into the conversation because ‘C’ obviously trusted him.

“I’ve seen him,” the Corporal confirmed. “He hasn’t changed much.”

‘C’ tried to swivel his head all the way around to look at the NCO. Both Sephiroth and the soldier had to tighten their grips to keep ‘C’ upright. The General didn’t mind as it meant that ‘C’ was very nearly enfolded in his arms.

“Safe.” The aspect said it as if it were a completely alien concept which, for him, perhaps it was.

“No pain?”

Ah, Sephiroth thought, that is a tricky question. “Small pains only. He’s a soldier. We’re in a war. He can get hurt but not… not tortured like before.”

“’Nd, and me?”

“You’re a soldier, too, so the risks are the same,” the General confirmed.

“Over?” the small aspect’s voice was barely a whisper, a lost, hopeful little voice, “All over?”

“Yes, caro mio, it’s over,” Sephiroth barely noticed the Costan endearment slip from his lips, “If you want it to be.”

There was no verbal response, just the normal rocking and twitching. Then Sephiroth noticed that ‘C’ was making an odd coughing sound, except that it wasn’t coughing. ‘C’ was crying. Helpless, choked sounds as if he were frightened of making any noise. He probably was. As a former lab experiment of Hojo’s, Sephiroth knew all too well what the madman considered ‘unacceptable’ behaviour. The General decided he’d been patient enough. He needed to hold this part of his lover. He took out the handkerchief and gathered the small, bent body close and let ‘C’ cry.

As if that were a trigger, ‘C’ s tears changed from embarrassed, near-silent chuffing sounds to body wracking sobs. He cried for the all the needless pain, and all the wasteful deaths. He wept for all the lost, agonizing years. It was for himself and all his fellow aspects. There were tears for Zack, and for the unnamed lab-tech with the pretty smile and gentle heart. There were sobs for the murder of Nibelheim, for his mother and for close-minded Gruber Junior who would never inherit his great-great-grandfather’s inn. Somehow, ‘C’ also wept for the kidnapped and mutated people of Kalm and Rocket Town and Costa del Sol and all the people lost to one madman’s dream. He cried Gaia’s despair and a Cetra’s loneliness.
The damaged aspect’s emotions were so strong, Sephiroth felt like he could be surrounded by them. A wave of yearning hit the General. Not from ‘C’ but from the personas stuck in the house and wanting to soothe their other self.

“He can take it now, General,” the Corporal said quietly, his hand softly stroking over stubble and stitches.

“Very well, Corporal,” Sephiroth agreed. He lifted ‘C’ straight up. He was so light he felt like Raincloud, he felt like death. For a panicked moment, Sephiroth wondered what would have happened to Cloud if one of his aspects had died. Would he have ever been able to come back to the real world? That didn’t matter, they were all here, and they were all alive. It would be okay.

He walked into the small cottage that contained Cloud’s soul and stood in the middle of the living room so that the others could surround them, and they did. They reached out with soft hands and loving voices to reassure, to thank and to soothe. Nobody tried to make him stop. Nobody mocked him or accused him of being ‘unmanly’—as if they could with all the scars layering his body. They just let him cry.

But all storms pass and ‘C’’s tears gradually slowed and then finally stopped, except for the odd hiccup. The Corporal passed Sephiroth another handkerchief, this one with brightly coloured chocobos on it, and the silver-haired warrior once again cleaned ‘C’’s face. The Corporal also gave cloths to Spike and Weirdo. Unlike the one the General had been given, theirs were plain, undecorated white squares. He looked narrowly at the bland face of the NCO.

The aura of despair and failure and self-loathing that had surrounded ‘C’ had dissipated to almost nothing, replaced by awe and surprise and a tentative bit of happiness. There was still pain and fear but Sephiroth knew healing Cloud’s mental wounds would take much, much longer than healing the physical.

He knew what he wanted to call ‘C’... if the aspect would let him.

He dropped a quick kiss on ‘C’’s bristly scalp then another on a bumpy forehead. He bent down even further and planted a light kiss on his lover’s flattened nose. Finally, holding the small personas face only loosely and giving him plenty of time to pull away, Sephiroth bent down and kissed his misshapen lips. He licked and nibbled just as he would if it had been Niisan or Spike or even the Corporal. ‘C’’s moans weren’t of loneliness or fear but seemed to be that of baffled arousal.

“May I give you a name?” Sephiroth asked this, the final part of his Cloud. ‘C’ stared at the tall warrior. He blinked a couple times, twitched only a little, before looking away and nodding his head. Sephiroth gave his little smile, “Then I shall call you ‘Caro’,” he announced. It seemed the whole cottage froze, waiting. It was an almost physical pressure, like being underwater and holding your breath for just those few seconds more. They all watched ‘C’, waiting for him to react. Would he accept the name and the attachments that went with it, or would he reject it and remain lost in his guilt and shame?

The young man rubbed fisted hands over head and face, twisting in the group’s loose hold, obviously thinking about it. Finally, he nodded once. “’Kay,” he said and, just like when he’d accepted the password in Zack’s house, Sephiroth felt a ‘click’ in the atmosphere as if something had settled into place.

The other aspects immediately made use of it. Niisan even managed to work in kisses; on the cheek for Caro, on the lips for the General—Sephiroth’s was longer. The silver-haired warrior released a breath he hadn’t known he was holding, only now realizing he’d been worried about the silver-
hairy aspect’s reaction to the new addition. He heard the Corporal’s breath quietly whoosh out so he hadn’t been alone in his fears.

With Niisan in a good mood it made it easier for the others to pet and talk to their fellow persona. They babbled and touched and tried to make him feel welcome. Caro managed very well, considering, but he was bewildered by all the attention. Sephiroth monitored Caro’s tension and when it got close to breaking he shooed them away. Spike and Weirdo went for the food and began stuffing themselves but the others stood close to each other and chattered quietly. Only the Corporal remained close, helping the General balance Caro as he twisted and shuddered in the aftermath. Only the Corporal, with his calm, undemanding presence, didn’t add to the pressure Caro was feeling.

It was obvious that the damaged aspect wanted to say something, he was making those odd strangled noises again, but it took some time for him to say it. Sephiroth waited patiently, rubbing bony arms and shoulders, letting his hands be moved as Caro twitched this way and that.

“No’ mad a’ me,” he stated. His tone was a mix of statement, question and doubt.

“No, they’re not mad at you. They know what you saved them from and they’re grateful for your sacrifice.”

Hum and twist. “No’ sick.”

Who wasn’t sick? Did Caro mean mako sickness? The General didn’t understand but Caro hadn’t finished. “’M ugly. Ugly thing. Don’ look,” he was covering his head again, twitching harder. “Nnnng. Make you sick.”

Sephiroth quickly suppressed the wave of fury that ignited within him. He recognized that phrase as one of Hojo’s. The so-called scientist delighted in making his subjects feel ugly and small and unworthy. That way they’d be grateful at the smallest scrap of attention even if it was only more torture.

“No, Caro. They don’t feel sick when they look at you,” he said reassuringly, “Neither do I.” He dropped a light kiss on the young man’s scar-covered head, and held him while Caro rocked. The damaged aspect was still agitated. Sephiroth did his best to soothe Caro with words, but mostly he just let him move as he needed even when one flailing wing remnant clipped him in the chin or a twisting elbow dug into his ribs.

“Hnnghn,” Caro mumbled, “Too many.”

“You mean the aspects? Spike, Niisan, the Corporal and the rest,” Sephiroth clarified.

Caro nodded his head, talking in rhythm with his movement, “Not togeffer. Shoul’ be togeffer. One, no more. Only Corp’ral. Just Corp’ral.”

Sephiroth frowned in confusion. It was a long speech for Caro, and he was excited that the injured man was trying so hard to communicate, but he couldn’t understand it. The Corporal saw his confusion and decided to help. “I was the first to appear,” he stated, “The only other aspect he, um, ever saw.”

“But surely he was aware when the others appeared. I’ve heard about your awareness of each other.”

The Corporal shifted a little, a sign that the NCO was very anxious if Sephiroth understood him correctly. “We were aware of him but we don’t know how much awareness ‘C’, I mean Caro, had
of us. Maybe I should tell you the whole story.” He didn’t look happy about it but, with one last frowning glance at Caro twisting in the General’s arms, he set himself to explain their history. Sephiroth noticed how he prepared himself, setting his stance, focussing his gaze, centering himself. The Corporal was going into formal report mode—distancing himself from the emotions in what he was going to say.

“What I remember is the sound of breaking glass,” his voice was flat, unemotional, “The cottage was under attack by something and Caro was being overwhelmed by all the damage. I immediately assisted him in trying to keep the cottage fixed. It wasn’t going well and the damage was accumulating. Both of us were getting tired but we just kept working. There was a pause in the attack and that’s when Caro looked at me and told me to take care of the house. He said he was going to go out and draw the attack away from the cottage. I was to repair what I could and protect it from collecting any more damage. He said he’d be back when the attack was over. Before I could stop him, he’d slipped out the door and disappeared. I regret,” his voice hitched, the first sign of emotion the Corporal had shown, “I regret that I was quicker, Sir.”

Did the Corporal feel somehow responsible for what had happened to Caro? “It couldn’t be helped, Corporal. You did your best in an unknown situation,” Sephiroth reassured him, for it would have been hard, tossed in unprepared, knowing nothing. In fact, one could say that, the Corporal had been born in the middle of battle.

“Thank you, Sir.” The NCO gathered up his story once again, “The next attacks came soon after. During one of them Raincloud showed up. He was an easy child to take care of but not much help keeping the cottage together. It was... pleasant to have someone else there.” A microscopic shift in the Corporal’s stance was all the embarrassment he would show. Sephiroth hoped the soldier didn’t think he’d willed the other aspects into being.

“So you’re saying, Caro was the first and you all came from him?” Sephiroth asked, already knowing that it was somehow the truth. Caro was what was left of his Cloud’s soul. He’d splintered off parts of himself to keep them safe until he wasn’t Cloud anymore.

“My fault, nngh. Broken. Weak.” Caro snuffled a bit, covering his head.

“Weak, no. Broken, yes, but broken can be fixed,” Sephiroth stated firmly. Even though the aspect’s words hadn’t held the enormous guilt that his previous self-condemnation had, the General felt it important to emphasize that he could be healed.

The Corporal continued, “I looked for Caro in between attacks but they were so close together. During subsequent attacks, the others showed up. I knew that meant Caro was being hurt but I had to look after the cottage. Weirdo was next then Nisan then, last of all, Spike. We should have stayed in the cottage, I realize that, Sir, but they’re all healthy, curious boys.”

“More energy than sense?” the General suggested.

“Could say that, Sir,” the Corporal agreed then he straightened, as if shouldering a burden. “It’s my fault, Sir. I couldn’t stop them from appearing and then, once here, I couldn’t keep them together. I spent more time digging them out of the Lifestream than I should. I should’ve concentrated on finding and rescuing Caro.”

Sephiroth’s brow rose. “I think the person we should blame for what happened is Professor Hojo and his assistants. You, all of you,” he looked around the room making sure to include all the aspects, “did the best you could under extreme circumstances. No one expected you to be undamaged or unchanged... no one sensible that is,” he corrected himself. “I’m proud of all of you. Look at what you’ve built,” he waved a hand to indicate the cottage. “It is a beautiful home.”
They all glanced around, shuffling their feet and even blushing a bit.

“We should take a picture,” Weirdo said, “before we mess the place up.”

“Yeah!” Spike agreed enthusiastically. He lifted Raincloud, tossing him high into the air before settling the youngest Cloud on his hip. Niisan wasn’t going to be left out so he agreed as long as he got to stand beside the General. Spike ruffled his hair, “I think you should stand at the other end as him, so your hair balances out the picture.”

Niisan ducked away, frowning and trying to straighten out his hair. “No! I’m standing next to Sephiroth.”

Spike just grinned. “Or you guys can put me in the middle; blond hair in the middle, everybody in black. It’ll look great.”

“Wha’ happ’ning?” the oldest persona asked Sephiroth, sounding a little panicked, and peeking at the commotion before burying his face under his arm once again.

Niisan frowned harder. “I don’t want to stand next to a giant lummox like you!” he spat out.

“They want to take a photograph of all of us,” Sephiroth replied, one hand on Caro’s waist, the other ready to grab on if needed. The wounded aspect didn’t seem to like all the noise. He flinched when Spike laughed.

“Lummox? That’s a big word for a runt like you, or,” he trailed off suggestively, “is that just another name for a guy’s—”

“I think that’s enough out of you two,” the Corporal interrupted, his voice flat enough to squish their conversation dead. Niisan glared poison daggers at Spike who just grinned even wider.

With a final, disdainful sniff, the silver-haired diva took his place beside the General. He looked over at his bewildered fellow aspect and patted the skeletal arm. “Ignore that baka tare. No one’s going to make you move.” Spike just grinned. He obviously found it lots of fun to tease the temperamental young aspect and Niisan’s insults rolled off his back. He probably would have continued except now Caro was involved and even he, the dimmest of the aspects, knew not to upset his wounded brother.

Caro jerked. “Photo... is picture.”

“Yes,” the General confirmed, as the aspects arranged themselves around the two of them. Niisan had snugged himself in closer, right under Sephiroth’s arm. With his cat-slit eyes, he looked like the proverbial cat with the bowl of cream. He very deliberately placed his hand on the strip of bare belly exposed by Sephiroth’s long coat. The fact that he would also be touching Caro could have been accidental but the General had a feeling that it wasn’t. Spike, holding Raincloud and his dragon, stood behind the silver-haired diva. He had two finger raised in a ‘V’ behind Niisan’s head, in the photographic insult performed by children everywhere.

“Me too?”

“Of course,” Sephiroth stated, “You’re one of them so you have to be included in the picture.”

It didn’t make sense to Caro but everyone was a lot quieter now so he stood quietly while the others settled themselves. He didn’t like it though. He buried his face against Sephiroth’s chest and tried to ignore the whole thing. The Corporal stood beside him, one strong, reassuring hand resting low on Caro’s back.
Weirdo, as instigator and resident technogeek, stood in front of them setting up the camera. He’d already pulled everything they’d need from his magic bag: camera, tripod, flash, and timer. His stuffed backpack had even disgorged a photography ‘how-to’ book which the aspect had read diligently while everyone else organized themselves.

“Is everyone ready?” the young teen asked. When everyone answered positively, Weirdo pushed the button and started a beeping countdown. He dashed around the tri-pod and skidded around to the group, overbalancing and landing on his knees in front of them all. He managed to twist and wave at the camera before the flash went off.

It was very bright.

Sephiroth was used to having flashes go off right in front of him. They had been bright, often blinding.

This flash was immeasurably stronger than those lights; like a firefly to the sun. It was so bright that it was painful but he couldn’t blink or wince away from it. It held him frozen, breathless and immobile. It burned him, down through his skin into his bones. It was cold heat. It was flames running along his nerves. It was endless and infinite, stretching and compressing his body even as his mind stepped back and watched. Sound was dull, far away but then, he could feel it, rushing toward him. He would be hit. He was hit. It was an explosion of sound and force and nothing and everything being pushed into him, pushed out of him and then, with one final squeeze, he felt like himself again.

It was over.

When his eyes finally recovered he saw the redesigned and redecorated living room empty of Weirdo’s books and camera equipment. Raincloud’s comics and drawings were gone. There was no group of Clouds standing beside him. Spike wasn’t holding up two fingers above Niisan’s head to make rabbit ears. The Corporal wasn’t standing, sturdy and dependable, behind the shaking Caro. They were gone.

In true romantic fashion, all that remained was a full-sized glossy photo floating gracefully to the floor... and the sturdy blond warrior that looked up at him in surprise. Two large blue eyes blinked at him then rolled to white as Cloud collapsed in a dead faint.

Luckily for Sephiroth’s nerves, Cloud didn’t remain unconscious long. “Cloud?” he called, wondering even as he said it, if that was the proper name for this incarnation of his lover. It felt like his Cloud. The body in his arms was slender but solid, maybe a hand-span less in height than the General but the soft, waving hair made up for it. It felt almost exactly like it had in the real world except that he didn’t have his wings out.

“Um, yeah?” the blond mumbled in response. His voice was a little thin and wavery. Eyelids fluttered but didn’t open. “Ow,” his lover muttered. Hands came up to grip Sephiroth’s arms but they were tentative and weak.

“Cloud, how do you feel?” The silver-haired warrior tried to keep his tone calm, like a general rather than a lover, but nothing could stop him from lifting the young soldier’s face in his hands and anxiously examining it. Cloud’s skin was pale and clammy. Slowly, dusky eyelashes rose revealing large blue eyes. Those eyes were wide and the pupils expanded and contracted seemingly at random but there were two of them. Sephiroth leaned down to drop thankful kisses on them. “Cloud,” he insisted.

Cloud blinked, squeezing his eyelids tight together for a long moment. When he opened them both

“Can you be more specific?” Sephiroth frowned.

“Umm... too tall? But, uh, kinda too short too. The ground’s too far away... I think.” He blinked some more. Cloud held out his hand, stretching his arm, flexing his fingers and twirling his wrist. He watched intently as if it he’d never experienced it before. “My arms don’t go the right distance.”

“Hmmm.” Sephiroth realized that they should have expected something like this. Cloud had been splintered for more than a year. To bring all his awareness back into one body would, of course, require adjustments in the blond’s perceptions. Sephiroth stroked delicately sculpted cheekbones and wondered how he could help.

“I’m going to be sick.”

In an instant, the modified warrior had Cloud on the sofa, head between his knees. He went into the tasteful, new kitchen and ran cold water over a cloth, returning to his lover to drape it over the back of his slim neck. He’d also had the foresight to grab a bowl and he placed it between Cloud’s feet, just in case.

While he held the cloth in place as the blond struggled to control his body, the General took stock of this integrated Cloud. He was wearing First Class black—his pants and boots were certainly SOLDIER issue, but it wasn’t Zack’s uniform. For one thing, he was wearing an asymmetrical length of fabric that covered his left leg. The top was different too. He wore a sleeveless, knit zip-up that definitely wasn’t ShinRa issue. The zipper was pulled down a little and Cloud was flashing enough chest to be intriguing—there were muscles on that body. The General decided he liked the style very much.

The oddest item Cloud was wearing was the intricate multi-weapon harness, which looked like something Weirdo would have devised after reading a book on ancient Mideelian weaving techniques. All the slots were empty but the silver-haired warrior was very curious about what was supposed to fill them. It could be swords but it could also be other types of bladed weapon. It was intriguing in a different way, Sephiroth decided. As a trooper, Cloud had only learned the basics of sword work. His main weapon had been the machine gun. Somewhere, somehow, in the three years he’d been Hojo’s experiment, Cloud believed he’d become a swordsman.

He lightly stroked Cloud’s hands; strong hands, elegant hands that were tightly gripping his head as if to keep it from falling apart. There were some small scars that the General remembered from before but there was no sign of the massive damage Caro had sustained. Were these the hands of a swordsman?

Cloud slowly leaned back, tilting his head to look up at the ceiling. “I think, it’s just going to take some time.” His voice was getting stronger. Now, he just sounded tired rather than near death.

“Would milk help, or perhaps a carbonated beverage?”

Cloud slowly shook his head, “I feel like everything is stretching and shrinking at the same time. Like my bones are going to fall through my skin they’re so heavy but, at the same time, I feel like I can just float.”

Sephiroth listened quietly, not touching but certainly looking. Cloud was whole, although not undamaged. He had a pale sickly colour to his skin but that could be the shock of being
reintegrated rather than from the damage Caro had carried. Aside from the colour, Cloud’s body appeared toned and strong, with broad shoulders and nicely shaped arms. He had only one shoulder-guard and it was fitted with an odd half-lion/half-wolf decoration and a small matching earring. Little Raincloud adding his essence to the whole, he wondered?

He wanted to suck on that ear, catch that piece of jewellery in his teeth and pull on it a little; just to hear Cloud make helpless, sexy noisy, and he really was a selfish beast. The blond soldier had barely recovered all of himself and Sephiroth wanted to strip him and ravish him. Sephiroth nervously cleared his throat. “Perhaps you should lie down,” the General suggested.

Cloud turned large eyes on him, his gaze was speculative and Sephiroth wondered if the soldier realized what the silver-haired warrior was thinking. “Yeah, that sounds like a good idea,” he said after a few heart-stopping seconds. “Why don’t we go to bed.”

Cloud couldn’t have meant it the way Sephiroth heard it. It was too soon. Although, the younger blond was certainly looking better than he had, but still... Sephiroth knew he had to be stronger than this. Until he knew for certain that he wouldn’t make his lover’s struggle to regain himself any worse, he would have to exercise rigid self-control. He was good at that usually.

It didn’t help the General control his libido any when he saw, just for a moment, Cloud’s pupils change into Niisan’s seductive cat-slits.

Breakfast was easier than Vincent had expected. Most of the curious were content to direct their conversations to the friendly fighter while stealing glimpses of the intimidating gunman. When he was approached, all he had to do was make a dark and depressing comment and even the bravest would back away in bewildered horror. It made Chaos laugh in delight.

When not discouraging social interaction, Vincent’s listened to the conversations going on around him. Chaos’ actions last night had him somewhat worried. Something big had happened and Vincent hoped that camp gossip was already spreading the story. Unfortunately, the biggest topic right now was him. Some had gotten the story close to right; a resurrected fighter from SOLDIER’s early days frozen by Hojo and revived by the General. Others had, to his great disgust, gone with Tifa’s vampire explanation.

*If they annoy us enough, maybe we can get Galian to bite them. That would be fun, wouldn’t it,* Chaos snickered.

‘Not in the slightest,’ Vincent answered his guest repressively.

The latest to sit down at their table was a huge, black man with a gun instead of a right hand. His name was Barrett and he’d been an environmental terrorist in the same group as Tifa. He had a little girl he was looking after and Vincent had been forced to look at an uninspired picture of a small, dark haired girl who looked nothing like the man sitting in front of him. Vincent was sure there was a story behind Barrett and his daughter, Marlene. He was equally sure he wasn’t interested in learning it. He went back to the surprising good scrambled eggs.

“You’re going back to Junon then?” Tifa asked her large companion while Vincent listened to the gossip running around the tent.

...found in Hojo’s lab, frozen in mako. He’s, like, a hundred years old, or something... Inaccurate and useless. Vincent ignored it.
“Shit, yeah. Ain’t gonna fuckin’ miss Marlene’s birthday again. ‘Specially as it’s all she asked for.”

...he showed up in camp this morning with that talking cat thing. Think they were getting it on? Vincent’s lips curled in disgust.

“I’ll have to grab her present from my tent before you go. Remind me, okay?”

...I heard all three of them shared one bed, and that fucking homo is supposed to be our Commander? Sephiroth, and his recovered companions, were the second most talked about event. Obviously, not everyone shared the general view that the tale was romantic. Vincent didn’t think the trooper’s prejudice would bother ShinRa’s General much.

“Oh Teef, dat’s a great present. Marlene’ll fuckin’ love it!”

...Fergus, do you think she’d go out with me if I asked her? ...Forget that, Brian, do you think he’d go out with me? Vincent paused with the fork halfway to his mouth. Hadn’t those two guys been talking about him and Tifa? But... they were men, he was sure of it. Did that mean some guy wanted to... to have sex... with him?

He resisted the urge to turn around and look, just as he ignored Chaos’ teasu cackle and the vivid images the demon poured into his mind. They were memories of things that had happened long before Lucrecia, long before ShinRa, before the creature had been trapped in the mako. When it had been unbound and the world had been a little less tamed and Vincent didn’t want to know what his ‘guest’ used to get up to.

Chaos sighed, *You’re so boring, my immortalis. It will be nice to be free of you once this current drama is over.* Vincent wanted to ask ‘what drama’ but he knew Chaos would only begin its annoying chant again so he didn’t. Instead, he picked up his fork and resumed eating.

...’eye’s only’ message sent to the General this morning. I’m telling ya, things are going to start heating up now. There! Vincent focussed in on that speaker and his friends. Something had changed. Perhaps it was the something that had made Chaos so happy last night.

“Are you going to go see the rest of the guys?”

...I hear that big guy, the one they rescued, is now the General’s SiC and he took the message. D’ya think they were lovers... Again, irrelevant but it was interesting that the General must have completed the paperwork before he’d begun the rescue. Maybe there was an element of romance to the tale.

“Nah. Dey’re just a bunch of assholes who can’t tell what’s really fuckin’ important. Our fight ain’t wit’ dem bastards at ShinRa anymore but dey can’t fuckin’ see dat.” The big man slammed his fist down on the table making the plates jump. “We’re tryin’ t’save de whole fuckin’ world and dey’re pissin’ ‘round blowin’ up power lines dat’re already dead. Stupid fucks.” His mutter would be anyone else’s normal level of conversation.

...already living like a king in that effing big tent. Meals sent in, more coffee, people running around obeying him as if he were the General himself. Of course they’re fuckin’... Vincent sighed. It seemed the only thing these people cared about was everybody else’s sex life.

It was depressing to realize how little people had changed in the thirty-odd years he’d been enclosed in the caves. The world had always been like this. Even in the lab, when there were barely
twenty staff members, they’d spent most of their free time gossiping about who was sleeping with whom, and who was splitting up; same with his time in the ShinRa offices.

When he thought of all the changes that had been occurring then, big changes: Jenova had been discovered on the Northern Continent. No one knew what she was yet ShinRa was allowing the Science Department to begin human experimentation using her cells. Old man Shinra had co-opted or killed the elected governments of most of the countries and city-states so that he was running two-thirds of the known world. Only Wutai had resisted but the ShinRa media complex had already started to churn out the propaganda that made everyone believe they were a threat. Half of Wutai’s ‘terrorist’ attacks in the eastern continents had been organized by ShinRa.

Basic human rights and freedoms had been disappearing daily yet all the public cared about were the sex lives of people they had never met and would likely never, ever meet. Were human beings really that shallow?

*Maybe they just have a better understanding of how short human life is than you do, my immortalis. It’s been a long time since you had to worry about dying, after all.* The demon’s voice was caustic. Brooding, it believed, was a waste of time and it had little patience for its host’s gloomy nature.

Thankfully, Tifa interrupted sparing Vincent the necessity of having to respond. “Vincent!” she shouted. Perhaps it wasn’t the first time she’d called him. Vincent noted that her terrorist friend had already left.

“Are you ready to spar with me?” He did an internal check on his control of his inner beasts. It seemed good so he gave a short nod. She smiled, “Excellent. I think we should go to the airstrip. It’s wide open, giving us lots of room to move and there’ll be fewer people around to get hurt… or to stare, which I’m sure you think is the worse of the two.”

“I am hardly self-conscious,” he protested as he rose to his feet, collecting their dirty trays so he could drop them off on their way out.

“No, but you’re not Genesis Rhapsodis either.” She was walking very lightly, practically bouncing on the balls of her feet. It was easy to tell that she was looking forward to the fight. Vincent ignored Chaos’ observation on how the fighter’s actions affected certain outstanding portions of her body. He didn’t need to be prompted.

“How much damage can you sustain?” he asked. She’d been surprisingly strong earlier but it had been a long time since he fought with someone he wasn’t trying to kill.

“Less than a SOLDIER Second Class but a lot more than a normal human. Something about growing up in Nibelheim with all its open mako pools. The doctors think the water supply may have been contaminated,” she explained.

He’d heard of the pools around the village but had never bothered to think what that might mean to the residents. Untreated mako was unpredictable in its effects on living creatures… Where had he heard that? It hadn’t been as a Turk.

*It was that smelly, pseudo-scientist who foisted those other beasts upon us,* Chaos informed him. Although the demon reserved a special level of hatred for the female that had entrapped it in Vincent’s body, it wasn’t fond of Hojo either. Hojo had created and embedded the three other creatures that shared Vincent’s body. It tolerated Galian because the Galian Beast was ‘fun’, it
said, but it had nothing but contempt for Gigas’ brainlessness or Hellmasker’s predictability and had commented, often, that they resembled their creator. The tall gunman ignored his guest’s second favourite rant with ease.

“You will tell me if I hurt you,” Vincent asked. She may have some enhancements but she was still quite small. Tifa smiled like she knew what he was thinking. She did, of course. It was common among male fighters to underestimate her because of her size or, in some cases, her gender. If this had been a real battle, she wouldn’t hesitate to take advantage of that misperception and maybe she still wouldn’t. So she smiled at him and winked, “Only if you promise the same.”

Then she walked jauntily through the camp, her blood thrumming in anticipation. This was going to be more fun than she’d thought, she just knew it.

Chapter End Notes

Fanart!
Group Photo
Cloud had made it to the bed with only the smallest amount of help from the General. A steady-ing arm, a reassuring presence, and something to hold on to when the cottage spun and his stomach rebelled. At first, walking had been very hard. The floor was too close and he’d slam his foot down, jarring his leg, his knee, his stomach; or it was too far away and he’d nearly fall over when he took a step and it wasn’t where he’d thought it would be.

Sephiroth hadn’t laughed at him, not once. He hadn’t gotten impatient or angry or mocking. He hadn’t called him weak or a failure. He walked him over the bed, helping him up the stairs, and explained why there was a landing pad of a bed where his mother’s small single mattress used to be. Then the Silver General had helped him take off his boots and his armour, and the intricate weapons harness he had no explanation for.

Now he was watching through slitted eyes as Sephiroth re-wet the cloth before gathering up the bowl. He also picked up a large photo that had been lying on the floor. He smiled so Cloud knew he liked it and the blond couldn’t help but wonder who was in it. The General placed it on the side table and Cloud didn’t have the energy to ask him to bring it over. He’d have to look at it later.

Wait… a picture. Hadn’t he had a picture taken? He’d been standing next to the General… or he’d been taking the picture? No, that wasn’t right. The General had been holding him. Except… he’d been holding someone…. *Fuck*, his brain hurt. Cloud pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes.

Beside him the bed dipped, “Do you have a headache?” A cool cloth was draped over his forehead.

“I don’t know what I’ve got but, whatever it is; it’s taking too long to get better.”

Sephiroth hummed a non-committal response and turned the cloth over. The blond just watched through narrowed eyes. This was the General doing this; General Sephiroth, the Silver General, the Demon of Wutai, the Commander of ShinRa’s military, and he was getting water and a puke bucket for a grunt like him. He had to be dreaming, Cloud decided, especially when his hand was picked up and petted.

“How long was I… was I in pieces?” he asked quietly, enjoying the gentle stroking.

“Zack estimates that it’s been just over a year, real time, since you became completely non-responsive but he said he noticed a change within months of being captured. It’s possible that was when it started.”

“So two years?” Sephiroth nodded. Cloud chuckled a little, “No wonder I feel like a cracked eggshell.” He closed his eyes again. He could hear birds calling from the blue sky outside the large window in the room. He could hear the General breathing, hear his leathers creaking as he shifted. He could hear his own pulse beating inside him. He was alive… and sitting on the bed with him was the sexiest man on the planet. Maybe Gaia didn’t hate him after all. His mouth quirked up in a sly, half smile, “You know, General, you promised to take your shirt off for me.” He had? When had the General done that? Not that he’d object...

The hand stoking his fingers paused. He could feel Sephiroth’s searching gaze on his face. His smile evened out and the teasing left his voice. “It would be nice to be held by you. I feel kind of… alone.”
“Very well,” the General said. The bed shifted. Cloud could hear metal clasps rasping and leather swishing. He opened his eyes a bit and admired the pale skin being revealed.

“No boots on the bed. Ma would have a fit.” He smiled at the General’s put-upon sigh. Then he enjoyed the view as the silver-haired warrior bent over to undo those fancy buckled boots. As the shiny material pulled tight over that perfectly shaped butt, he once again became aware of his pulse but this time it was beating deeper, lower. He remembered that ass, stroking it, holding on to it as it tightened and released driving Sephiroth into his body. Was that a true memory, or something else his mind had devised in order to survive? Wasn’t it enough that Sephiroth was here, caring for him? On the other hand, what was wrong with wanting more?

He scooted over to give Sephiroth room to lie beside him. The Silver General instead chose to sit up, fluffing some pillows to rest his back on. Then he held up his left arm in invitation. “You’re not going to lie down?” Cloud asked even as he moved in to rest his head on the General’s strong chest.

“I think it would be a very bad idea for me to fall asleep in your mind, Cloud,” he pulled the blond in close, joining their hands. “I may not want to leave,” he murmured.

Cloud curled one leg over the General’s thigh. He was so warm. “I wouldn’t mind staying here.” Neither would he. It was strange to realize that he was nervous that they wouldn’t be together in the real world, not like this. The real world was too hectic, too demanding. Once they returned people would be demanding his time and attention. The doctors would want to take Cloud for testing and examination. They’d barely started their relationship when Hojo had ripped them apart.

However, there were other reasons not to stay. “We’ll have to leave eventually, Zack is waiting.” But not yet, he wasn’t ready to leave yet. He breathed deep, inhaling the scent that was Cloud. It had changed. This scent, and the person behind it, didn’t belong to the General yet. Still... it was Cloud’s scent and he still wanted to surround himself with it.

Sunlight outlined Sephiroth’s muscular chest as it rose and fell. From where Cloud was resting his head, the skin gleamed in the light like a freshwater pearl. His nipples were small pink disks standing proud in the middle of all that beautiful skin. Cloud’s fingers itched to touch them but his hand was trapped in the General’s. The more he looked at them, the more he wanted to taste. Finally, he just leaned forward and licked the one closest to him instead. It tasted good, it felt right, so Cloud leaned closer, licked more of that smooth, silky skin. He pulled his hand free from the General’s large one and ran delicate fingers up over the carved abdomen to play with the nipple on the other side. Sephiroth tensed but made no move to stop the gentle exploration.

“I know your smell,” Cloud murmured, “I’ve tasted you, felt you, been surrounded by you. It wasn’t a dream...”

“No,” Sephiroth agreed, his eyes closing in pleasure, “It wasn’t a dream.”

They opened again in surprise when the small blond suddenly sat up and straddled his lap. “Cloud,” he started to protest but he stopped because Cloud looked happy, as if he’d been given a gift. His to touch—hadn’t Sephiroth thought that of him and Zack back in their bed in camp? Cloud looked as if that thought was running through his mind: hungry and possessive and joyful, and the General decided that he liked how it looked on his lover. As delicate hands stroked lightly and small teeth nipped sharply, Sephiroth slitted his eyes in pleasure and barely refrained from purring.

This was close to the Cloud he remembered.

His analysis of what the young soldier was thinking had been very accurate. Cloud could remember, dimly and oddly disjointed, but it was a true memory at least, but he could remember
being allowed to claim the General. It was wonderful, beyond wonderful, to be allowed to do that again. He could forget about how his body didn’t seem to fit on himself and loose himself in discovering just how well Sephiroth’s did and maybe, perhaps, he’d find out how well their bodies fit together...

Plan made, he lifted his lips from the hard little nubs he’d created. He raised his hands to the slim, elegant face of his lover—his lover! “I want to explore you.” He wasn’t quite asking permission.

“I’d like that.” Yes, my Cloud, he thought, claim me and I’ll make you mine. Then maybe this nameless, baseless fear will go away.

Brow and eyebrow, cheek and chin, nose and mouth were all touched and memorized. Then Cloud switched to using his mouth. He buried his hands in the General’s hair and realized that the long, silver strands were one of his favourite things. The General’s scent was imbedded in its impractical length, and its silky strength embodied all the world’s images of the Silver General. Very few were allowed to touch it. Even fewer were allowed to surround themselves in it. He, little Cloud Strife from Nibelheim, was allowed to do both.

He was already more than half hard and he hadn’t even gotten to the really good bits yet.

Cloud couldn’t keep their first kiss soft. He’d planned to but he couldn’t. He wanted this man so. When their lips touched, he slanted his head and ran his tongue along the seam of the General’s fine, sculpted mouth. The General gave an appreciative hum and let him in. Cloud couldn’t help but make his own noise as he entered. His excited groan echoed in his chest. He explored the moist warmth with all the enthusiasm and finesse of a thirteen-year old discovering sex for the first time. He moved his hands to hold the General’s jaw so he could feel the muscles and bones moving under smooth skin. It was its own form of caress.

His hips started jerking. He was so hard it hurt. He needed to breathe... or something. He pulled away from the addictive warmth of the General’s mouth to focus on the heat lower down. He rubbed his groin against the General’s hard belly, aware but barely conscious of Sephiroth’s own arousal rubbing his cleft through their pants. Strong hands came up and took hold of his hips, stilling their compulsive movement. “Shhh, Cloud,” Sephiroth whispered soothingly, “We have time.” The longer it took the more their scents would entwine until they were inseparable.

Cloud shook his head, jerking it once back and forth, “Don’t wanna wait.” He opened large glowing eyes. His pupils were just thin slits, “Two years I’ve waited to fuck you and I hate being patient.”

Before Sephiroth could recover from the glimpse of Niisan in his lover, Cloud had rolled off his lap and attacked his clothes, stripping with ruthless efficiency. He used the same determination to pull Sephiroth’s pants down but leather doesn’t slide very well, especially when it’s being sat on. Despite all Cloud’s frustrated growls, he only got them down to the middle Sephiroth’s thighs before giving up; it was taking too long and, really, he’d uncovered the best part. He reached with greedy hands only to have them batted away. Sephiroth was smiling as he shifted Cloud over so that he could strip his pants off the rest of the way. He resettled himself on the bed, sitting up, looking relaxed. He wasn’t. All his instincts told him to grab the blond and take control; to throw him onto the bed and cover him; to imprint himself on the one he’d claimed as his mate. Instead he forced himself to be passive as Cloud kneeled at his feet.

“You’re beautiful, General,” Cloud whispered reverently before running his hands up Sephiroth’s strong, pale legs. He licked and bit and sucked occasionally, enjoying the flavour of his lover. His lover! He still couldn’t believe it, but he certainly wasn’t going to say ‘no’. Besides, when the General’s full, heavy erection was right there in front of him, he didn’t want to say anything. He
wanted to wrap his lips around it and swallow it down. So he did. He dove upon it like a spoiled child attacking the presents at his birthday. He wrapped his hands around it, holding it steady for his lips and tongue. He knew he should be taking this slow, savouring it, but he couldn’t. His whole body ached with want. He felt like he was going to cum just from touching the General. His fingers felt disconnected from the rest of him, and his cock felt hard enough to pound steel. All he could hear was his pulse beating and his breath rasping as he panted and tried desperately to control himself.

Cloud was too far gone to hear the General groan as he also fought for control of his body. As his small lover slid his warm, wet mouth down his engorged penis, he couldn’t help but react. He fistied his hands in the bed cover but it wasn’t enough of a release. His legs kicked out, his hips jerked and his weight shifted. It was enough to cause the blond to lose his balance and he fell across the General’s legs, straddling one strong limb. The pressure against Cloud’s sensitized erection felt like a benediction. He moaned and rubbed himself against the General’s smooth, firm thigh. He rubbed himself, and whimpered, lost in the sensation.

He remembered this... but differently. He didn’t remember feeling so frenzied. His whole body was tight. He couldn’t take in enough air. He had to move. There was something, something he knew was close. Lightning and he wanted it. “Please, please. I need it. Please,” he chanted.

His fist tightened around the stiff cock he still held. He whispered pleas and promises, his breath teasing the hot flesh. He could feel the General writhing under him, twisting his body, pressing up with his thigh as Cloud pressed down. It was slick now and the movement was easier. It wasn’t perfect but it was close. It was enough to concentrate the force within him. He exploded. Bolts streaked through him, making him cry out as his body convulsed. Helpless whimpers punctuated each thrust and his hands clenched and released, clenched and released, caught up in the rhythm of his climax.

It felt wonderful. He smiled and enjoyed the happy, relaxation that accompanies a good, mind-emptying orgasm. He wanted to stay here, to feel this, forever and ever and ever, but even in his sex-hazed mind, he knew it couldn’t be that way, eventually, he’d have to move. Then he stiffened in realization. He’d cum. They hadn’t even done anything and he’d had an orgasm, spewing himself all over the General’s leg.

Oh shit. He groaned, hiding his head against Sephiroth’s hard belly. What was he? Some little over-hormonal teenager who got sprung just by walking next to a pretty girl? But it had felt so good. He looked up, embarrassed to have gone from so little, ready to apologize to his General, ready to see that beloved face laughing at him, making fun of his lack of control. That’s not what he saw.

The General’s pale cheeks were flushed and his eyes glittered. He was smiling, but it was a triumphant smile, full of anticipation and arousal. “Feel better, my Cloud?” he purred and Cloud shivered. Embarrassment was replaced by something else.

“For the moment,” he responded, breathless and predatory. It was true, just looking at his lover’s strong face so filled with lust for him was making him get erect again, even if just a little bit. Words fell out of his mouth, “I want you inside me. It won’t be right until I can feel you inside me.” He hadn’t even known he felt like that but, having said it, he knew that it was true.

“Hmmm,” the silver-haired warrior hummed his approval. “We need some lubricant then” He reached over to the small side table. “I wonder what kind we have this time?” he mused even as he pulled out a small tub and opened it. “Ah, citrus. Nice choice.” He held it out to the blond, “You should prep yourself.”
Cloud swallowed, sat up and dipped his fingers into the fragrant cream. The General took a scoop for himself before setting the tub aside.

“Go ahead, Cloud. Make yourself ready for me.” His voice was dark and seductive. “Let me see you.”

Cloud had to take a breath. As much as he loved the way his General was looking at him, he was still a small-town boy at heart. Sex was one thing, everybody did it, but it was private. Only depraved people made a show of it.

Yet, yet it didn’t make him feel depraved, a part of him said, didn’t he feel sexy and hot, and wouldn’t it be great if he could make the General burn for him? That was the voice he should listen to, he decided. He could feel the smile on his face. He knew it matched the one on Sephiroth’s. He reached behind himself, touching his puckered opening with his slick fingers.

Sephiroth brought his covered fingers down to his own swollen flesh and, hissing because his touch was almost too much, carefully greased his thick erection. He made sure to cover every millimeter. As much as possible, he didn’t want Cloud, any part of Cloud, to be hurt when he entered.

Cloud watched him, even as he pushed his finger inside himself. He watched the Silver General stroke the cream over his thick length. It looked like cum. He whimpered helplessly and leaned forward, pressing his own hard length to the General’s. Sephiroth chuckled lowly but obliged the wordless plea and shifted his slick fingers to hold Cloud’s erection next to his own, covering it, stroking them together, and enjoying the small moans the blond couldn’t hold inside.

Two fingers inside himself now, moving and stretching desperately, until he’d had enough. The General was a big man but it would be okay, Cloud told himself. He couldn’t wait anymore.

He lifted himself, spreading his cheeks, “Hold it steady,” he ordered the General before lowering himself. He pushed down. His body resisted. Lift and try again.

“Easy, Cloud,” Sephiroth murmured when the blond growled in frustration. He lifted a hand to his lover’s pretty mouth and teased the plump flesh. To his delight, Cloud’s tongue came out to lick at it. He encouraged the play, dipping his fingertip into the moist warmth and, as more of the blond’s attention was pulled to the action occurring up top, Cloud’s lower body opened to him as well. It didn’t take long before he was past the inner barrier and buried deep in the young man’s heat. It was wonderful, better than he remembered.

“General!” Cloud called out even as he pushed down hard, seating Sephiroth’s length all the way inside him. “Oh, Gaia, that feels good,” he murmured. Full and hot and not alone, how could he have forgotten any of this? He squeeved it a couple times, just to make sure it was real... it was. They weren’t alone. He should take this slowly, relax into it, let it build; but he couldn’t. He was slick enough that their bodies moved against each other easily. He wanted it hard and he wanted it feral. It wasn’t going to be making love; it was mating; marking each as belonging to the other. So Cloud lifted himself and drove himself down, as hard as he could, as fast as he could, and it felt wonderful. It felt like the General was imprinting himself into Cloud’s core, reaching all the way to his heart.

Cloud could feel the sweat gathering in rivulets on his body and, when he opened his eyes, he could see the drops decorating the General’s skin, glowing like diamonds against the rich pearl tone of Sephiroth’s skin. There was a drop, high on Sephiroth’s neck, just starting to run down that strong column. Cloud watched it, fascinated by how its path was changed when the General murmured his words of praise and encouragement. It caught on the strong collar bone, and ran
along the rim of it, so Cloud leaned forward and chased it with his tongue. He remembered that taste, full of salt and acid and Sephiroth.

The General took his face in his long hands and lifted it, “My Cloud. So wonderful,” he crooned before capturing that agile tongue so that he could play with it.

The kiss didn’t last long. Cloud didn’t stop his punishing rhythm so he was calling out, wordless sounds, every time he pushed down on Sephiroth’s large erection. He knew he should remember this except it was different, stronger, harsher, more primal. It was exactly what he wanted. He could feel the end nearing, the power gathering in his spine. His heart was thumping so hard it seemed like it would bruise his ribs. It couldn’t happen yet. He wasn’t ready yet. There was something missing.

“Please, please,” he begged. What was he begging for? He didn’t actually know until he opened lust heavy eyes and looked straight into the General’s bright mako-green. His pearl-pale skin was flushed, his normally thin lips were full, but he was still containing his reactions. He was in control of his body and it was obvious that he wanted Cloud to go over first. That was what was wrong.

Cloud could’ve maybe accepted going at the same time as his lover, but he didn’t want to be first, helpless, vulnerable, blind and lost—how could he truly enjoy that? He had a much better idea. “Cum for me, Sir,” he ordered, “I want to feel it.”

He leaned forward again, grabbing Sephiroth’s plump bottom lip in his teeth and tugging on it. “I want to feel you cum.” He even managed to slow down his desperately pumping hips, not completely—that was asking too much, but he would slam himself down, tighten his inner muscles and pull up slowly, squeezing the General’s length all the way. Once. Twice. It felt so good... too good.

His plan was backfiring.

“Fuck, you feel good, General,” he moaned, “Cum, please, do it, for me,” he chanted. His eyes closed, his head fell back on a neck too weak to hold it up. His moan turned into a whimper as even his voice lost its strength.

He didn’t hear his lover growl, he didn’t see his eye’s flash with emotion, but he did notice when Sephiroth surged forward and caught him in strong arms. One hand grabbed his shoulder, forcing his neck to the side so that strong teeth could grab on. The other latched on to his hip, pushing and pulling Cloud’s body to maximize the friction. Sephiroth even folded his legs under them so he could rock more forcefully into his lover’s small body. He released Cloud’s neck to whisper in his left ear, “For you, my Cloud.” And then he let himself go.

Genetically-enhanced fingers clamped down, bruising flesh and bone. Smooth rhythms turned choppy and erratic. A groan worked its way out from Sephiroth’s belly, through ribs and lungs, heart and throat. He buried it in Cloud’s ear, latching on to that sexy wolf-head earring and making it vibrate with the intensity of the sound. The General’s moan pulsed in his ear just as the General’s orgasm pulsed in his body, echoing, vibrating. He didn’t get to see the Silver General’s face dissolve in pleasure but he could feel it throughout his body and that was good enough. He had to respond.

His own rhythm turned into helpless jerks as everything in him reacted to his lover’s call. Heat, light, energy, power, pleasure, love, warmth, and acceptance, ran through his body in waves, from his core to his toes and his fingertips. He could feel every artery, every sinew, every muscle and bone. He knew his place in the universe, now, and it was right here with his General. Then he knew nothing.
“Sir, oh gods, Sir.” He collapsed, boneless, without strength or thought; helpless but safe within his lover’s strong arms.

“My Cloud,” Sephiroth purred, content at last.

Zack was pretty sure that only someone with enhanced senses would be able to hear the small sounds coming from the other room. He knew he was right when Kuskel came up with the coffee pot and, under cover of giving him a refill, whispered, “I thought Strife was unconscious.” In the Second’s undertone was the question, ‘Was the General taking advantage of a guy in a coma.’

The Second had come in, dragging with him a couple techno-grunts Master-Sergeant Lutton had ordered. It was obvious the three regular soldiers couldn’t hear the unmistakeable noises as they continued to sort and sift through years of data and reports.

Zack kept his tone just as low as Kuskel’s had been. “He’s not really unconscious,” Zack defended the absent General. Kuskel looked at him, “Trust me, it’s not what you’re thinking.”

It felt odd when Kuskel nodded once, accepting his assurances. “Okay, Zack. You know them both the best.”

“Thanks, man.” So fucking odd, he thought. It had been a long time since his word had been good for anything except as a knife to make him feel guilty and worthless and unable to protect anyone. He shook himself out of the past. He’d appreciate his new reality and move on because, really, what choice did he have?

Of course, he’d appreciate this reality more if it didn’t hold so many friggin’ reports!

Vincent assessed the landing strip. It was nothing more than a level space cleared of trees or brush, but that wasn’t a bad thing because grass was often more forgiving than asphalt. It was large enough to allow a heavy transport airship to land and unload. It should be big enough for their bout.

They’d made a quick side trip to the armoury so that he could upgrade his gun. He’d found both a long barrelled pistol and a heavy calibre handgun he liked so he traded in his old automatic, the same one he’d been issued as a Turk, and let Tifa sign them out to him. He’d have to practice with them to make them feel as natural as the Quicksilver but he’d played with the handgun, drawing and flipping it, and it felt good in his hand. It should. It was an S&W ‘Outsider’ which had been their top-of-the-line model back in his day. Tifa had promised to take him to the shooting range later, if, she’d teased, she hadn’t put him in the hospital.

He watched her warm-up and stretch. She was wearing leather armour that appeared well-used and sturdy. Despite her bright eyes and wide smile, its black harshness suited her. After all, she was a warrior as well as a woman. She had on heavy boots and fingerless gloves which reminded him of his own armour. He was so used to the heavy brass gauntlet and boots that he rarely gave them a thought but, in this situation, he could accidentally do a great deal of damage to the small fighter if he connected with them.

He removed the gauntlet first. He wore a thin leather glove underneath to both protect and hide the ugly scarred flesh that covered his hand. Then he knelt to remove his sabatons. It felt odd to be without them. He actually felt lighter than he had in ages. He bounced a little on his bare toes just to experience the feel of it.
‘We are going to be fighting very soon,’ Vincent responded, ‘Of course she will be examining me, trying to determine my style and my weaknesses.’

Chaos snorted, *You are so oblivious. That’s not what she’s looking at, my little immortalis. She’s looking at your feet. Maybe she believes that old folk tale of long feet, long cock; and your feet are very very long.* Vincent winced as his guest chortled. Chaos’ occasional crudity always made him uncomfortable. *I wonder what she would look like stripped bare...?*

Vincent buried his blush behind the high collar of his cloak. He didn’t want to be thinking of Tifa like that, but now the image had been planted in his mind. Damn Chaos for the demon-spawn it was.

“You ready?” she asked.

He nodded once and waited as she assumed a standard fighting stance. He waited with the same unending patience that had let him stay in a coffin for decades. She wasn’t as patient and, when she came at him first, she gave him the advantage. He took a moment to admire the smoothness of her motion and the power of her attack before he had to defend himself.

She aimed high, he blocked. The elbow of her other arm came up, heading toward his chin. He swayed backwards, a hand coming up to grab her wrist. It left his ribs undefended and she struck… almost. His opposite hand was there to grab her. Now he had both of her arms caught but his were crossed in front of him. She spun, gathering his arms over one shoulder. She bent, stretching him forward, and pushed up, both pulling and throwing him to the ground in front of her. It was an interesting move, but he was much too tall for it to have any real force. Still, it made him twist awkwardly so that he would land on his feet rather than on his backside.

It was while he was regaining his balance from the throw, that she kicked him in the head and knocked him sideways.

He looked at her stunned, both physically and mentally. She had landed a blow on him… and it had hurt. She licked her finger and wrote an invisible ‘1’ in the air.

*Ooooh, my host, she is a bold little morsel. We really should find out if she tastes as spicy as she acts.*

Vincent picked himself up. He didn’t bother brushing the dirt off his ragged cloak. Instead, he settled lightly on his toes, raised his fists and, staring her deliberately in the eyes, opened his hand and waved his fingers at her in the universal invitation to fight. She smiled, and charged.

This was, indeed, going to be lots of fun.
The quiet in the tent was broken by the ringing of a PHS. It took a few rings for Zack to realize it was his. He’d forgotten that Seph had given him one last night—just last night? Fuck, it seemed a long time ago that he’d called Aerith to ask her permission to sleep with Cloud and Seph.

His life was so weird....

“Hello,” he drawled into the sleek device, much smaller and cooler than they’d been three years ago.

“Hello, Zack,” said a sweet, light voice that instantly brightened his day. “Did you get any sleep last night?” she asked. Her voice was full of teasing and curiosity.

Zack looked at Kunsel, his friend with the ultra-sharp hearing and the propensity for gossip, and decided he wanted some privacy before talking about the events of last night with anyone. “Hey, gorgeous! Whatcha doing up at this hour?” He walked around the table and out the door of the tent. Completely setting aside the concerns of being the General’s SiC in favour of being Aerith’s boyfriend. She was more fun anyway.

“Silly,” she giggled, “I’m thinking of you.”

“Yeah, nice thoughts?” he grinned, “Wait, what am I saying. They’re about me so of course they’re nice!”

She chuckled lightly and her voice still light and teasing, “I was thinking about what you and the General were planning last night. Did you remember to take my pictures?”

“No,” he said firmly, “I did not take pictures. It was a rescue mission, not a porn movie.”

“Mm-mm-mmm,” she mused. “No pictures, no pie. Does that sound fair?”

“Ae-ritch!” he whined.

“Just teasing,” she paused and Zack braced himself, “You three can put on a live demonstration for me when you get back... to make up for it” He could practically hear the lascivious eyebrow wiggle that accompanied that remark.

He was blushing. He, Zack Fair, was fucking blushing. He was so glad he’d left Kunsel back in the tent. “I can’t believe you said that. What happened to the innocent flower-girl I nearly fell on so many years ago?” he asked plaintively.

She laughed at his distress. “She spent too much time with you, of course.” At Zack’s groan she laughed some more, light-hearted and happy. He fucking loved this woman. He loved the General and Spike, but he was in love with Aerith. She was one of his ‘best thoughts’.

“I love you too, Zack,” she said and Zack realized he’d been talking out loud again.

“Shit! I said that?” He covered his face with his free hand. After three years having to watch everything he said and thought you’d think he’d have better control of his mouth.

Aerith was silent for a long moment. “Didn’t you mean it?” she asked hesitantly.
“Fuck, yeah I meant it,” he answered firmly, “Shit, sorry, swearing again.” He was so glad nobody was listening to this. He gave the surrounding area another thorough inspection. “I just was, y’know, going to do it properly when I got back to Junon. I was planning on flowers and dinner, and maybe a park bench where I could kiss you and stuff.”

She chuckled, “You’re such a romantic, Zack, but I think this was better because you didn’t plan it. It just... fell out of your mouth because you were thinking it. And” she continued, “with you over there and me over here, I know, for sure, that you didn’t say it just to get me out of my underwear. So... don’t you think that’s better?”

“Nothing’s fucking better than you out of your panties. Shit, sorry... again. Twice.” Crap, he was getting hard, he realized, just from thinking about Aerith without underwear. He was such a perv... except that the idea was totally hot. And thinking like that wasn’t helping. It got worse when she laughed a mix of delight and invitation. Time for a change of topic. “So, I hear your garden’s kind of famous.”

“I don’t know about that, but people seem to like it,” she said demurely.

He knew it would make her happy that other people enjoyed her garden but he was also aware that she knew not everyone was fond of green and growing things. Zack, for instance, put up with it for her. As far as he was concerned, nothing coming out of the ground could look near as pretty as she did.

“It’s funny you should mention my garden...” she started then trailed off into an awkward silence.

“What is it, babe?” Zack leaned against a sturdy post. He didn’t like it when she turned serious.

“Well... you know I’ve always been a little different,” she stopped again. A lot of people under the plate had been nice to her, but a lot of them hadn’t. Having a ShinRa SOLDIER as a boyfriend hadn’t helped her get accepted but at least it had kept her a bit more protected from the ones who hadn’t liked her in the first place.

Zack thought he knew what her shyness was about. “You’re an Ancient, right? Or at least partly.”

“Yeah. My mother, my real mother, was half.”

“Another word for Cetra, isn’t it? The same people who used to inhabit the planet millennia ago?”

“That’s right,” she sounded surprised, “How did you know?”

“I heard it somewhere. In the lab, I think. Anyway,” he waved it away as not important, “You have something to tell me, something that involves being part-Cetra.”

“Well, Cetras had a different relationship with the planet than other people, normal people.” He made an encouraging noise. “Sometimes it talks to me,” she paused, waiting to be mocked but Zack just grunted for her to continue. “Okay. Well. This morning I was in my garden and I heard something. It was actually quite strong. Actually, it seemed to be a lot of voices combining to say the same thing so I heard it pretty clear. It was a message and I think I’m supposed to give it to you.”

“Sure, not a problem. I’m listening.”

“You believe me? That the planet is, you know, using me to pass messages to you like a secretary
“Well, ya-ah. Of course I fucking believe you. Sorry.” He thought of a small, blond boy in footie PJs and friends who visited him in test tubes and party rooms and told him not to give up his honour. He laughed lightly, “I have so much to tell you, babe. It’s been a weird three years. Wait. You said you were in your garden. Like with ‘green things’.”

“They’re called ‘plants’, Zack.” She giggled, all her painful hesitancy erased like it had never been.

“Green, plant things that you make… grow.” Zack shook his head at the bizarre turn his day had taken. She was Raincloud’s ‘Growing Lady’. At least that was one metaphoric brain-puzzler solved.

He could feel her smile even if he couldn’t see it. “That’s generally what you do with plants, unless, of course, you eat them. Did you want the message?”

He covered his eyes, “Might as well.”

“The voices said ‘the Planet’s Jewels can stop the Heaven’s Stone, but the Squire needs to fight the End Weapon’.” She stopped. He waited.

“That’s it?”

“Yup.” Silence.

“The Planet’s Jewels can stop the Heaven’s Stone, but the Squire needs to fight the End Weapon.”

“Right,” she confirmed.

He sighed, heavy and deep. “Shit... sorry. More metaphors,” They were fucking swarming him. He massaged his temple. He was sure he had a headache coming on.

Aerith was laughing, teasing and comforting at the same time. “Poor Zack. As the See-er you get all the strange messages and have to figure them out.”

“Too right,” he agreed. Why couldn’t he be surrounded by deathclaws, or strange bugs, or something he could kick the ever-lovin’ shit out of? “Wait. What did you call me?”

Whatever she might have said was lost under a huge, hollow boom that echoed through the camp. His curiosity disappeared as he snapped alert. He straightened, eyes searching, trying to locate the source of the explosion. Had a heating fuel unit gone up or something? There was a flash to the south and the boom sounded again. What was to the south, he asked himself, quickly reviewing the camp plans he’d glanced at earlier. The landing strip was there.

Tifa and the undead dude, Vinny, were supposed to be sparring at the airfield. Another flash, another boom. Fuck sparring, he decided, they were under attack.

“Doll, I gotta go. I promise I’ll remember what you said and I’ll try to make sense of it. You take care of yourself okay?” He barely waited for her assurance before closing the PHS and pocketing it. He was already running into the tent to collect the Buster. “You,” he pointed to one of the techno-grunts, “The airfield’s under attack. Inform whoever you need to and get them to activate the alarm. Kunsel,” he pointed at the door to Sephiroth’s private quarters, “make sure they’re not disturbed. They’ve got until noon, make sure they get all that time.”

“What?” The Second was astonished. The camp was under attack and they weren’t going to wake
the General?

“I know it sounds odd but, if they get disturbed now, I’m not sure Cloud will ever make it back. So nobody disturbs them. I don’t care if it’s Odin himself, okay?” He waited until Kusel nodded acceptance. He gave his friend’s arm a whack. “Thanks, man.” Then it was grab the Buster and run to the field and hope to all the gods that he wasn’t getting all panicked over a little sparring match.

Their light practice session had turned into a full out, full contact contest. Tifa was small but strong. Her moves were smooth and her hits were powerful. Vincent’s moves were ordinary but he was much, much faster than she was. She preferred her fists, he preferred his feet. They were both trained and determined. The airfield was barely large enough to contain them, especially once the word spread throughout the camp and the crowd started gathering.

The two warriors barely noticed their audience. The longer the ‘sparring’ had gone on, the more their focus had concentrated on each other. The gunman had a smear of dried blood on his cheek where she’d managed to land a good, solid hit and the clasp on his collar had broken the skin. They’d stopped once for Tifa to use her Cure on her ribs, damaged when Vincent accidently tossed her onto an exposed tree root. Aside from that the contest had been almost constant. Brief pauses between engagements were all they’d given themselves, both of them enjoying themselves too much.

Of course they had an audience. Off duty personnel, or those who managed to sneak away, lined the edge of the field next to the camp. Most of the betting had started out on Tifa’s side. Many of the soldiers had fought with her and seen her in action and most of the rest had at least heard of her abilities. Nobody really knew what the spooky ex-Turk was capable of. As the fight went on with neither of the combatants dominating the odds became more even, and the post-bout dissections more intense.

It was just as well the watching crowd didn’t know that Vincent wasn’t using all of his abilities. Despite her assurances, Tifa was still human. If he’d allowed himself full use of all his enhancements; innate or one of his beast’s, she would have been much worse off than a couple damaged ribs. Still, she was far tougher than he’d originally thought and far stronger than his second assessment had led him to believe. So he was using more of himself. He was letting some his unnatural speed and enhanced senses give him a bit of an edge, making her work for every win but he couldn’t relax completely because Chaos was enjoying this far too much. The demon was enjoying it because Tifa was enjoying it and that kind of joy in mayhem was bound to appeal to a creature who called himself ‘Chaos’.

As if she knew they were thinking about her, Tifa gave a wide, happy smile. She had a large, ugly bruise forming on her jaw from where his heel had connected in the last round. She didn’t care. Her smile reminded Vincent of Lucrecia in the early days, before guilt had given her a haunted look.

*This one is nothing like that hypocritical, female,* Chaos sneered, *This one wouldn’t get involved with a male who didn’t value her as he should.*

Comments like that, simple compliments, honest admiration from the demon for the dark-eyed fighter, were part of the reason that Tifa had managed to get past his guard. He wasn’t used to hearing such things from the creature. It made him worried. What Chaos liked, Chaos usually took.
She ran at him, sliding the last few steps, forcing him to jump over her. She was expecting that and Vincent barely had time to duck the flying kick that she aimed at his head. He turned his dodge into a back flip which forced her to bend back to avoid getting caught on the chin, once again, by his fast moving feet. She managed to catch his ankle so she twisted it and he had to spin with it or risk a dislocated ankle. As he spun he managed to clip her shoulder with his free leg and knocked her to the ground. As she still had hold of his foot, she pulled him down with her but she’d hit the ground first and had therefore lost the round. Tifa rolled to her feet first so she extended her hand to Vincent. He no longer thought it odd that the small fighter could pull the much taller gunman to his feet.

There was cheering and jeering from the crowd as the people calculated what they’d won or lost. The noise and movement nearly covered a ‘snap’ like a thunderclap. For a moment the air felt odd, pressurized and, for a moment, it seemed darker than it should. Silence fell on the crowd except for one person who clapped and laughed but not in enjoyment, this was a harsh, mocking sound. Both he and Tifa spun to face whoever was approaching.

There were two coming toward them: a huge, over-muscled man with steel-blue hair and blue lines on his face, and a slim woman with red hair and red eyes. It was the woman who was clapping but the big man had a mocking sneer on his slab-like face. The way they walked showed that they were used to using their bodies as weapons.


Vincent heard her of course and he looked at the warriors the soldiers in camp had talked about with awe and fear. These were Deepground’s elite warriors. It was obvious they’d been altered. If their unnaturally glowing eyes and armour weren’t enough of a clue, then all he needed to see was the man’s huge size and the female’s knife-like fingernails.

It was the woman who started the conversation. She sauntered closer, flashing long slim legs in improbably high boots whose heels could be used as weapons in their own right. “So you’re Vincent Valentine. Keeper of the Protomateria.” She had an accent he’d never heard before, husky and slow. She was shaped, and acted, like deadly sin, like some of the female Turks he’d known before. The ones who would kiss you deeply while sliding the knife in under the ribs and up to the heart. He’d never been attracted to that type. Lucrecia’s child-like wonder had been much more to his liking.

*This once, I will allow that to be a good thing,* commented his resident demon.

He backed away. “Protomateria?” he asked loudly. Lucrecia’s notes had mentioned the substance but hadn’t really explained what it was. If this pair knew anything more about it he had to try and discover it.


The big one spoke, “Just as I thought. You are ignorant of your own destiny.” His voice was growly and slurred. It was hard to understand what he was saying—the contempt was very clear.

“Azul the Cerulean,” Tifa informed him under her breath, “Former ShinRa army and SOLDIER candidate. He likes really big guns. Rumour is, if he takes enough damage or gets pissed off, he turns into a mini-behemoth.”
A behemoth. I haven’t fought one of those before, Chaos sounded cheerful. Vincent told it to be quiet and let him concentrate. They would be fighting these two; they needed to assess them for weaknesses.

The Deepground elites were moving forward. Vincent kept backing away and noticed that Tifa moved with him. He was both glad and afraid that she would be fighting with him: glad, because she was an exceptional fighter; and afraid, because these two would not hold back. They would hurt her, even kill her, if it achieved their purpose. Actually, the two Tsviets looked like they would plow through a thousand warriors just for the fun of it. It was a good thing that Tifa was waving away the soldiers in the crowd who looked ready to attack, guns blazing. No need to bring their attention to the vulnerable crowd.

“He may be ignorant,” Rosso agreed with her companion, “but that is good here, no? Even though I like a little spice with my meal sometimes it’s better just to eat it raw.” She laughed and Vincent realized that she was completely insane. She also reminded him of Chaos a little which was a disturbing thought.

“What is protomateria,” he asked again.

Rosso the Crimson tapped her cheek with one long finger, tilting her head flirtatiously. “Protomateria is the key to controlling Omega.” Chaos roused at the mention of Omega. The creature knew that it was somehow bound to Omega but the how’s and why’s were lost in the millennia of years since he’d been created. “We know you have it.”

“Deepground knows or Hojo?” he asked loudly. “Can we take them?” he whispered to Tifa.

“Does it matter, my dove?” Rosso flicked her long fingernails and looked predatory. “Hand it over now, and I’ll kill you quickly. I’ll even be kind and let the female live.”

“Probably not,” Tifa whispered back, giving him the answer he expected. This pair was murderously dangerous.

The innocent crowd, gathered to watch a fight was dispersing or organizing, depending on their training. From what Tifa had just said, they would need more trained soldiers to fight these two. There were SOLDIERs here, like Sephiroth who was apparently the best fighter ever seen on Gaia. All he had to do was keep these mutants talking until they showed up. He needed to buy more time.

“What does Deepground want with Omega?” he asked, hoping for a Hojo-type rant about ‘inspired purpose’ and ‘grand vision’. Instead, Rosso shrugged.

“I don't know and to be honest, I don't care.” She waved her hand casually, as if brushing away a fly.

“What?” He was shocked by her attitude. Although, maybe he shouldn’t be; Hojo had never encouraged his flunkies to question his orders or his purpose.

“This is what Weiss desires,” Azul stated,

“What Weiss orders, we do. It is very simple. Hail Weiss,” the female said. She was smiling lazily and her tone was bored rather than reverent.
“If he desires the awakening of Omega, then that is what all of Deepground desires,” Azul continued.

Rosso laughed in sick delight, “It is not every day you are granted the chance to cleanse the world of all life.”

“Enough talking,” Azul interrupted, “Give us the protomateria and live.”

Even if he knew what or where the stuff was, Vincent wasn’t inclined to hand it over. It would be a fight for real this time. He could feel Chaos smiling in anticipation. “No.”

Rosso laughed, also happy at prospect of violence, “Not one to bargain, are we? Then I’ll make sure you suffer—that you all suffer.”

Azul’s declaration was simpler, “Time to die.” Suddenly a huge gun, resembling the cannon usually found on a tank, appeared in the big man’s hands. Between appearance and shooting there was barely a heartbeat. Vincent jumped up and over the fired rounds. He drew Outsider, cursed that he hadn’t taken the time to practice with it, and began returning fire. His bullets were impacting, he could see the entry wounds forming and a strange purple liquid that must be his blood, but it had little effect. They barely made the altered fighter grunt.

Tifa dove to the side, coming up from the roll braced and ready to fight which was good because Rosso the Crimson was right in front of her, bladed bowgun slicing toward her face. The Tsviet was sloppy though, and left herself open. Instead of blocking Tifa dropped to the ground and kicked up with all her strength. She caught Rosso the Crimson in the stomach and lifted the female off her feet, throwing her back.

She jumped up with a twist and posed nonchalantly, “Oh, I do like them spicy.” Her words were unconcerned but her red eyes were flashing. She moved back to the attack. This time the Deepground warrior didn’t underestimate her human opponent.

There was nothing Vincent could do to help the dark-eyed fighter because Azul was not to be ignored. Not only did he wield the big cannon as if it were a stick, but he was quicker than a man his size should be. The Tsviet lifted the gun and brought it down with a hollow boom. Shock waves rolled out from the impact sight and the ex-Turk was forced to borrow powers from his beasts to jump up and over them. Vincent saw some of the ground troops lift their assault rifles, getting ready to fire. He instantly knew it would be both disastrous and futile. From up here, he could already see an unnaturally fast fighter running towards them. He borrowed some more power and ordered, “WAIT FOR THE SOLDIERS. PROTECT THE CAMP.”

He kept firing as he dropped back to the ground, firing and reloading, dodging Azul’s gunfire and waiting for backup. He’d seen Tifa, while he’d been in the air. She was a strong fighter, and she was doing well against the female Tsviet, but she’d already been sparring with Vincent for nearly an hour. Rosso the Crimson’s elaborate outfit was getting torn and ragged, but she had no serious damage. She still laughed and moved as fast as she had at the start of the fight. Tifa had blood running from a nasty slice on her left arm, and her leather vest was dangling low on one side where it had nearly been cut off. The mountain girl was simply no match for the Tsviet’s altered body and enhanced speed.

She would actually be of more use against Azul who was tough but slow. Vincent reloaded and continued to fire round after round into the huge man. He wished that he hadn’t taken off his sabatons; the boots’ elongated, brass toes were impressive weapons in their own right. Plus, he
may be the result of years of experimentation, but pointy stones still hurt his feet.

*I can’t believe you’re whining about something so small. Oh how delightful you are, my host,* Chaos laughed. Then added in a completely different tone, *The creature’s shield is weakened in the SSW facet.* Vincent obediently altered his aim.

“This is how a battle should be. Don’t you think?” Azul commented, but didn’t wait for an answer which was good as Vincent had no intention of responding. “Two warriors facing each other. Stripping away the surface to expose the essence of who they are. Do you know who you are, Vincent Valentine?”

Vincent wished the large man would be quiet. That kind of bravado and posturing had never been his style. Besides killing exposed nothing of the person inside; as a former Turk he knew too well how a smiling face could be as true as the emotionless

*He is very annoying. It would please me greatly, my immortalis, if you just let me kill him.*

Vincent ignored them both and asked his own questions instead. “How did you know I was here? Why do you think I have what you need?” he asked, voice calm and unhurried, “What is your purpose?” These two mutated warriors had appeared in the middle of a busy army camp and their only goal seemed to be to get something from him.

“The Deepground soldiers were born and bred to kill.” Azul charged forward and lashed out with one huge boot. Vincent was forced to dodge and run. “We were chained to a destiny of servitude. All that we desire is to fulfill the destiny that is writ for Weiss. Hail Weiss.” Another slam of the gun into the ground, another rolling shock wave, another deafening boom. “Nothing will be allowed to interfere with that. Not even you, Vincent Valentine.”

“CLEAR A PATH!”

The voice was easily heard over the noise of the crowd, the guns, and the impact of flesh on flesh. The shout and the movement pulled attention to the side of the battlefield where gawkers, medics and troopers dove left and right to open up a trail. Charging through them was the dark-haired SOLDIER that Sephiroth had rescued yesterday. From where he stood, half the field away, Vincent could see the mako blazing blue in his eyes, so bright they were almost blinding. They only slightly overwhelmed the First’s wide grin.

*Well,* Chaos hummed, *Isn’t this an interesting addition to the battle.* Chaos liked Zack Fair. He’d added an element of playful randomness to their encounter with the spider guard back in the mansion. Chaos could admire that. Plus, apparently, the SOLDIER had a nice ass. An observation the demon had added just to enjoy Vincent’s discomfort.

Zack barely paused before rushing Azul. The big Tsviet didn’t have time to aim his huge gun or dodge out of the way before the SOLDIER ran his Buster sword along his arm and opened up muscles and tendons. The limb was now useless and unable to hold the cannon. It dropped to the ground just like Zack had hoped. He spun and swung the large blade at the barrel and sliced it into pieces. Once again, he thanked Angeal’s father who had spared no expense when ordering the sword for his only son.

It only took him moments to dismember Huge Blue’s gun but in that short period of time the Deepground elite’s arm had stopped bleeding—if that indigo blue stuff was blood, and began to seal itself back up. Mutant healing at its finest thanks to nutjobs like Hojo, Zack thought bitterly.
He felt the air shift behind him and flipped the Buster to guard his back. Good thing, because the other one was attacking him with that of bladed crossbow thingy she used. Before she could regroup from his block, he spun and punched her in the face. She obviously wasn’t expecting that because she let out a shriek of outrage even as she staggered back.

Zack had to take a moment to appreciate her costume... or lack of it. Holy *shit* would he love to see Aerith in something like that! Of course, she looked like a sluty evil pirate wench or something but still... Maybe just the boots would be enough. He’d definitely have to see about getting a pair of those boots for his flower girl once he was back in Junon.

“Zack, she’s not a prospective girlfriend!” Tifa called, “Focus here.”

He ducked under Azul’s punch, not even having to see the big man move to know what he was doing. Fuck, he really needed to control his mouth. “Who do you want to take out first?” he called back

“Rosso,” Tifa called.

Zack wondered why—Azul had pulled out a smaller, but still bigger than a small tree, laser weapon and was tearing up the airstrip with it, but then the Mutant Pirate Wench shifted into some kind of hyper-haste mode, and became almost impossible to detect. She closed in on the dark-eyed fighter in a spinning blur. From Tifa’s stance, Zack figured she didn’t know that the Tsviet was targeting her. He wasn’t sure how *he* knew but he could feel the wacko’s movement through the air. He had to stop the Tsviet before she sliced up the small fighter. Cloud would never forgive him if something happened to his first crush. Mind you, he wouldn’t be too happy with himself either.

He used his own enhanced speed to intercept the Tsviet. He brought up his blade and slammed it into the wings of her bowgun. Not what he’d been aiming for but Rosso managed to bring the weapon down to protect her mostly exposed belly. Still the force of his swing was enough to knock her back several meters. He kept his eyes on Mutant Pirate Wench but still alert to any change in the Huge Blue’s position. However, Vinny seemed to be keeping him occupied. He could hear the steady discharge of the creepy dude’s weapon: six shots, pause to reload, six shots, pause to reload. The man was a fucking machine.

“I have no mechanical parts,” Vincent said dismissively even as he ignored Chaos’ delighted chortle. Azul shot out another sizzling laser and Vincent was forced to dodge over and around it. The action didn’t alter his rate of fire.

Shitpissfuck, Zack cursed—hopefully to himself. He really needed to learn how not to spew every thought in his head out of his mouth. “You okay Tifa?” he asked, deciding to change the subject.

“Doing okay,” she said calmly even as he felt her cast a Cura on herself. Zack had to smile a little. This Tifa Lockhart was eons away from the spoiled little Mayor’s daughter he’d met before.

“Foolish boy,” their opponent called, “Your actions will have no effect on this battle. You have sacrificed yourself in vain.” Her voice was weird, like she was forcing it lower and huskier than it should be. “Do you know who I am?”

“Well... I’m calling you ‘Mutant Pirate Wench’ but that’s probably not correct.” He didn’t let her comment, “Look, before somebody gets killed, can you tell me where you got those boots? I seriously think they’d look totally hot on my girlfriend.”
Vincent was close enough for Chaos to overhear Zack’s taunting. *You know, my host, the lab rat has a certain sense of style that you lack.* Vincent ignored it and continued shooting. *Of course, this ‘Azul’ isn’t dressed as provocatively as the red one. It would be harder to make salacious comments about his attire.* Vincent decided that sighing plaintively had no place on the battlefield.

“Idiot!” the Deepground warrior yelled at Zack, thoroughly pissed now. Her eyes blazed. “I am Rosso the Crimson! I have bathed in the blood of a thousand soldiers. I enjoyed it. I revelled in it.”

“Okay, Mutant Crazy Wench. Still doesn’t tell me where you got those boots.” She was powering up for the attack, taking it to the next level. Zack could feel her energy bump up a notch. “Tifa,” he said quietly, “Go help Vincent.”

Maybe she would’ve argued but there was something in the First’s voice that wouldn’t allow her to. “Got it.”

“I am not a pirate nor a wench!” She was practically vibrating in anger, “I am Tsviet! I am Rosso the Crimson.” Rosso was so focussed on Zack, at glaring holes in him and shooting at himrapid-fire, that she barely noticed when Tifa moved away, which was exactly what Zack had counted on. Everything he’d read about the Tsviets talked about huge egos and the inability to turn down a challenge. He’d just dismissed her power as negligible by harping on her boots. No way a crazy chick like her would be able to forgive that. She would concentrate on Zack, trying to ‘teach him a lesson’ and Tifa and Vin could work on wearing down the big guy’s defences.

He grinned and bounced on his toes, both to irritate the Tsviet and because, y’know, it really was fun, certainly better than doing paperwork and drinking bad coffee. He knew what he looked like when he did this, he’d been told by plenty of people plenty of times, and it was amazing how many bad guys underestimated him because he looked like an eager puppy. Since Rosso the Crimson Wench was supposed to be a powerhouse, he’d take any advantage he could get.

And he sure as fuck hoped he’d remembered to keep his mouth shut while he was thinking all that.

“Do you know why they call me ‘the Crimson’, darling?” she sneered, stalking over the field like a hunting cat, “Let me show you!”

As he expected she attacked. Unfortunately, she didn’t come at him directly but shot fire… disk… thingies out of her bowgun. They were easy enough to dodge but they continued on their trajectory which meant they were heading into the crowd of regular soldiers. They were unenhanced so, even if they could dive out of the way in time—which they couldn’t, their fragile bodies would be incinerated.

“Yes they will, darling. What shall the little lapdog do?” she mocked and moved to the attack, thinking her opponent’s attention would be split. It wasn’t. Zack had jumped up over the last fire shot and he’d seen the ripple of movement that signalled the arrival of the other SOLDIERS. They moved to the front of the crowd and immediately began deflecting Rosso’s magical ammo with their materia and weapons.

Of course, sometimes deflections were just as dangerous as the original shot.

A fiery disk thing came flying back at them. He jumped, and the shot caught the Crimson Wench right in the chest. She staggered in shock. Zack focussed himself, coming down with all the power
of a Death Blow. Unfortunately, being enhanced didn’t mean you could change the Law of Gravity. He didn’t fall any faster than any other human and Rosso didn’t wait for him to come down. She ran away and got busy shooting more of her fire things at him. He dropped normally, not wasting the power of the strike since she wasn’t close enough to be affected, and took after her. She moved in a blur, laughing and shooting at him. He dodged the bullets and followed. She laughed and zipped away again. He did that a couple more times, skirting around Tifa and Vin’s fight with Huge Blue in the middle of the airfield.

The SOLDIER couldn’t help but notice that Vincent and Tifa made a good attack team. They’d taken positions on opposite sides of the huge Tsviet. The gunman kept up his steady rate of fire wearing holes in Azul’s cast shield. When he moved to defend himself against the gunfire, Tifa moved in and, with amazing skill and determination, landed blows that would be powerful enough to kill lesser opponents. She had some pretty fine moves on her. That somersaulting kick while she was in the air had knocked the big guy’s head back on his non-existent neck.

She was tiring though.

“We need to end this,” he said loud enough for the spooky gunman to hear him.

“Yes!” Vincent called back.

“You could always give us the protomateria, Vincent Valentine,” Azul said, “That would end this battle.”

“What the fuck is protomateria?” Zack asked bewildered taking the opportunity to slash at the Tsviet in passing. He sliced to the bone on the guy’s leg but it hardly slowed him down.

“They’ve been unclear,” Vincent said. “The key to controlling Omega,” Tifa added.

“And this concerns us... how?” Wait, Omega... that was sparking something in his brain.

“I don’t know,” Tifa responded, jumping back out of range of Azul’s tree root sized fists, “but they want it and they think Vincent has it.” Rosso chose that moment to sweep in to attack the dark-eyed fighter. Zack leapt forward in a fancy Assault Twister he’d learned from Genesis. He didn’t think it would connect but it would force the Crimson Wench away from Tifa. Sure enough, Rosso laughed and easily avoided the move.

“Worry about it later,” Vincent instructed. The ex-Turk rolled away from a beam fired from Azul’s weapon yet continuing his steady patter of six shots, reload; six shots, reload. Vincent hadn’t run out of bullets yet—maybe he manufactured them under his cloak. The big guy lifted his weapon and thumped the ground with it again. Everyone, even his fellow DGS member, was forced to jump to avoid the shock waves.

At least, they were getting help from the troopers at the side of the battleground. They were being careful of their targets, aiming with care to avoid hitting the trio of fighters facing down the Tsviets. Zack was impressed with their discipline—he could tell these guys had trained under Sephiroth, but he was less happy with the effect of their fire. Neither of the bad guys seemed to even notice being hit. The SOLDIERs castings had more effect. The Seconds were using Poison and Dispels and whatever else they had in their arsenals. It was helpful, but not likely to end the contest. He knew why they were limiting themselves to passive materia; they couldn’t risk hitting Vincent, Tifa or himself by a badly cast elemental attack. So best case scenario, the contest would come down to brute strength and endurance.
Zack heard the distinctive cough of a heavy-calibre sniper rifle from somewhere in the camp. He knew it was a big gun because Rosso was knocked back a couple steps and a hole appeared in her shoulder. It was already sealing itself up even as she turned to shoot a couple revenge shots into the mass of vulnerable troops. He stopped moving and let himself pant a bit.

“You know, Rosso the Crimson Wench, I wasn’t impressed by you before but, anybody who can move as fast as you do in boots like those, deserves some respect.” Then he grinned at her.

“Zvezec!” she shouted and shot at him instead.

Great—bullets he didn’t mind, but now she was swearing at him in another language. How very rude... and he didn’t care if he’d said that out loud. He probably had because she swore at him some more and shot at him a couple times. Then they chased each other around the field a few more times; Rosso retreating every time Zack got close. He was getting really fucking tired of this. He needed a different plan. Zack absentely dodged Rosso’s bullets but stayed where he was on the field while he thought.

From his corner of the battlefield, Vincent had been keeping an eye on the dark-haired First’s contest with the female Tsviet. He wasn’t impressed, running after her as if this was some kind of sprinting contest. It was inefficient, but Tifa trusted the man to deal with Rosso the Crimson so Vincent wouldn’t interfere... yet

*Oh come now, my immortalis, I find him quite adorable. The way his thoughts fall out of his mouth is very... chaotic, don’t you think?* First Tifa, now Zack. Chaos really didn’t have any preferences when it came to who, or what, it was attracted to.

“Are you tired, little SOLDIER?” Rosso taunted, “Can’t keep up to a mere female?”

Zack didn’t even bother to respond verbally, he just blew her a kiss. He wasn’t tired but he was pissed. *She* obviously wouldn’t mind running around this stupid field until the End of Days, and it was also obvious that he couldn’t catch her, even in those stupid boots. Fuckin’ mutant Haste, he growled.

He blocked Rosso’s shots automatically while he did another quick visual to check on how Tifa and Vin were doing against the blue Tsviet. They were okay but there was something about that Azul that made his hair stand up, a vibration or some change in the air around him. Huge Blue was building up to something and it probably wasn’t going to be nice. Another sick mutated fucker.

Well he had his own mutations and it sure as shit was time to use them.
Standing in the middle of the battlefield with bullets and magic and death all around, Commander Zack Fair, SOLDIER First Class and experiment survivor, shut his eyes.

He knew what he had to do. It would leave him exposed, in a couple different ways, but killing this showy bitch had to take precedence. He threw out what he could hear with his ears, he threw out his awareness of Tifa and Vinny and Huge Blue. The prey he was hunting was... *there!* Rosso the Crimson Wench was moving toward him at Bolt speed—probably thinking to take advantage of his ‘inattention’. He tracked her, hearing the echo of her movements through the air. She sped toward him, bowgun moving in a deadly arc; nearer, blades aiming for his body mass, and *now!* He spun, blade flashing, confident in his timing.

He felt it before it reached him—a change in the air pressure, a small shock wave. Azul the blue had changed into something else; something big enough that, when he stomped, it caused the earth to shudder. Rosso still had a couple steps to take to reach him and she, who’d managed to keep her balance all this time, finally got tripped up by those stupid fucking boots. She fell to the side and the Buster barely ripped her sleeve. Before he could bring the big blade around for another swipe she was up and gone.

“Shit fuck!” he cursed and began tracking her again. She moved too fast for him to see but he could feel the pulse of the air bouncing off her as she moved. Hell, he could ‘see’ the bullets flying at him. He wasn’t sure what Hojo had used to cause this mutation, but ever since Dr. Crazy Fuck had finished, he’d been able to navigate his environment perfectly without using his eyes. Fucking Hojo. He hoped the man’s balls fell off.

Rosso the Crimson Wench laughed. “On *that* we can agree at least. He isn’t fit to lick Weiss’ boots.”

“Shit, forget Hojo,” Zack responded, “If this Weiss guy wears boots like yours I’ll lick ‘em.”

Her laughing grin disappeared, replaced by her more familiar sneer. Good. He couldn’t afford to have a bond with her, not even one as basic as hating Hojo. Her voice was flat, filled with venom, “You are a complete fool. I shall enjoy your death.”

This time Zack laughed, “I’ve already been dead. Trust me. It wasn’t that much fun.” There was a hiss and flash of some kind of energy weapon from Tifa and Vinny’s portion of the field. He was aware of it, but ignored it as unimportant.

She was moving again. That mutated blur she could attain. She was heading in *that* direction, which meant she should reach that location right about... Zack shifted into overdrive. Timing was going to be tricky because he had to intercept the Tsviet before she figured out what he was doing. He felt for the pulse of her movement. She hadn’t changed her path. Now the big trick will be to not overshoot the target zone. It took each of them less than seconds to cross paths. She still had her bowgun slightly raised so Zack lowered the Buster. He took her across the kidneys and lower back, just as he’d planned.

She didn’t go down right away, of course. She was a genetically mutated warrior after all. He needed to hit her again. In order to do that, he needed to stop and turn on a pebble, so he pushed out his wings, his ugly, black, leathery wings. He spread them fully to catch the air, slowing from blur to nearly full stop in an instant.
He dipped the right side, folding it in slightly so that he could spin to the left to catch Rosso’s counter-attack on the Buster. He used his momentum to force her weapon up and out of the way then he pulled the blade back down and sliced right through her, splitting her from skull to stomach. She didn’t even have time to scream. His downward cut nearly met the one he’d made in her side so that it looked somehow, like he’d sliced her in quarters, but even as she was falling, even as he knew she would die, he was making another slash to the other side of her. He didn’t know if she was capable of regeneration and he didn’t want to find out while he was in the middle of fighting the other guy. She fell, her body separating along the lines he’d cut. He kicked her once and made sure all her severed parts were well spread out... just to be sure.

Huh, he thought, her blood was more like that deep pink Aerith liked. What was it called? Maroon or something. Rosso the Maroon... nope, sounded like a comedy act.

“Zack!” Tifa called out a warning and, without thought, he jumped straight up and hovered while a small behemoth ran over the area where he’d been standing. If he hadn’t dodged he’d have been splattered all over the field just like Rosso. Zack didn’t think he’d need to worry about her reviving now, considering how smeared she was now. “Ewww, that’s pretty much the grossest thing I’ve seen in some time,” he muttered, still hovering, unthinkingly, in the air.

“Zack, bullets no longer hurt him.”

It coughed, or maybe it was a laugh. “Feel my true strength. Feel the wrath of Azul the Cerulean!” The big beast’s voice echoed inside its chest giving it a ‘voice of doom’ sound. However, it wasn’t nearly as scary as Hojo’s laugh, Zack decided. He powered up his Octaslash and flung the energy at Huge Blue’s new form. Slashes appeared in his wings, but barely scratched his armour plating. *Fuck.*

The big creature laughed—a disturbing sound from a behemoth, “You think that toy can penetrate my armour? I traded away my human weaknesses for power long ago.”

“I hope they didn’t promise to improve your looks,” Zack continued dodging the whip-like tail, “because if they did, you should ask for your money back.”

Tifa moved in for another attack. She unloaded a blitz of fast, sharp hits that were hard enough to make the thing’s back leg buckle. The leg wasn’t broken though because the blue behemoth turned quick as a zolom to swipe at her with its huge horns and it was able to retain its balance. It missed the small fighter but while its attention was on her, Vincent moved into to land a few blows. He punched but didn’t bother to use his feet. Without his armoured sabatons, kicking this new Azul would do more damage to his feet than to their opponent. As soon as Azul’s attention moved back to him, Vincent moved out of hitting range.

Fair had landed and taken Tifa’s place on the beast’s back leg. His unenhanced blade was doing some damage but it would take some time before it broke through. “Does materia work on it?” the SOLDIER asked.

“We don’t know,” Tifa answered, “We didn’t equip any.” The dark-haired swordsman grimaced at the news but didn’t let it stop him from continuing his attack.

Unlike Tifa, or even Vincent in this form, Fair could maintain his position. Anytime Azul swept at him with paw or tail, the SOLDIER used his wings to lift himself out of the way. Which was rather amazing in and of itself, actually. He and Tifa had had to learn the best timing to use; how many hits they could land before the beast would turn to attack them. If they missed their timing... well, it was a good thing the watching troops knew how to use Cure materia. Fair, however, seemed to know the moment before Azul moved.
*He’s sending out very high frequency sound waves,* Chaos commented, *It’s most annoying.*

Interesting, Vincent thought. He hadn’t realized that the Commander was another one of Hojo’s experiments... or maybe he had heard it but he hadn’t been interested; assuming that it would have no impact on him.

*This would be so much easier if you’d just let me take on the behemoth or, if not me, one of the others,* Chaos said. It was getting bored with the slow pace. It was even bored with the tingly effects of having Cura cast on Vincent’s body. Not having had a body for so many millennia, Chaos had never experienced it before.

Vincent tried to imagine letting out any of his beasts. He had eaten enough at breakfast not to be affected by the relatively light damage he had sustained so far, so shifting wasn’t necessary but Chaos was right; the battle would be finished much quicker if he changed into one of them. Except, it was bad enough they were gossiping about him in the mess halls—speculating on his past and his love life. If any of his beasts came out now it would be magnitudes worse and that didn’t even include the nosiness of doctors and ShinRa’s Science Department. Vincent had no great faith that the corporation had changed that much. It may have put on a veneer of reformed social responsibility but the former Turk felt sure the predator was still lurking underneath.

He moved back in to make his few hits upon the Deepground mutant.

Then there were the creatures, themselves. Azul was a strong fighter and could probably do a great deal of damage before he was killed. The more damage his beasts sustained the harder they were to control. If the Tsviet landed a solid hit on on of them, Vincent doubted even Galian would stop at killing the behemoth. Instead they’d rampage across the battlefield, killing everything they reached; no better than the Tsviets.

No, he would not be releasing his beasts.

*You worry too much, my host,* the demon coaxed, *I would make sure we didn’t massacre the mortals.* Somehow, Vincent didn’t find Chaos reassuring. *Besides, without your metal coatings, you are essentially useless in this fight.*

And that, the ex-Turk had to acknowledge, was a valid point, however he wasn’t yet ready to concede to the necessity of allowing one of his other forms to take over. In fact, he thought hopefully, now that the SOLDIER was here, he might have time to run across the field to his sabatons. The timing had changed since Commander Fair had joined them. They had longer to attack before Azul would turn to counter-strike. He could be there and back almost before his attack turn came again. Except how did he give his allies warning without alerting the Tsviet?

The behemoth reared up on its hind legs making Vincent focus on more immediate concerns. He backed away and prepared for the impact when Azul came back down. Fair, like an impulsive child, rushed in to attack the more vulnerable belly while he had a chance. Down Azul dropped, landing as heavily as he could; the ground beneath his feet rippled with the shock wave. Zack’s wings flapped and shifted keeping the large SOLDIER on his feet while he continued swinging his huge sword. Vincent gracefully hopped over the unstable earth. Tifa, who had just finished up her attack, couldn’t move far enough away, fast enough. She stepped wrong, right on a wave, and the moving dirt pulled her leg right out from under her. It wasn’t a graceful landing, but it wasn’t injurious either. Azul’s accompanying sweep of his tail, however, caught her half-arisen and still vulnerable. She curled over the appendage as it swung, trying to hang on but it was too slick and it was moving too fast. It flicked her off and she flew over the field to land in a graceless, lifeless heap.
“Tifa!” Vincent called.

Azul roared in triumph.

Tifa limply moved her arm. She was alive.

For those few moments, as he waited anxiously for the female to move, to prove she was still alive, Vincent’s focus on his enemy. It was a rookie mistake and one he’d often been written up for in the early days of his training as a Turk. It was odd to fall back into that habit now especially as he knew it was always a bad idea. That had been true thirty years ago and it was still true now.

Azul turned and used his massive paw to swipe Vincent out of the way. He could feel the bones in his chest bending and cracking. His vision blurred slightly when he raised his head. He could see Azul charging across the field to where Tifa lay, obviously intending to crush the dark-eyed fighter once and for all.

Vincent couldn’t let that happen.

*Allow me, my little immortalis,* Chaos persuaded, but Vincent wasn’t that far gone, instead he chose to race across the field to the fallen fighter. He was faster than the Tsviet, even with his damaged ribs. It would use most of his reserves but he was capable of it and Tifa was his… friend.

However, Zack was faster.

Whether it was his augmented SOLDIER muscles or the way he could integrate leaping with using his wings to attain a high-speed glide, Zack moved over the battlefield in a blur. He’d scooped Tifa up and jumped halfway to the sidelines with her before the ex-Turk even reached the spot.

Vincent frowned; he’d been able to achieve those kinds of speeds once. He could remember it, almost; moving so fast that he was just a vague outline in the playback he’d watched from his chemical-filled tube. He could see Hojo and his team watching the screen, using pens to point out actions of interest, discussing the results of the last set of alterations. It was odd to suddenly realize that the tortures he’d been put through had helped the crazed head of ShinRa’s Science Department refine the SOLDIER program, and that was a really stupid thing to be thinking about with five tonnes of angry, charging behemoth bearing down on him. It was too late to change course. He set himself for impact so that he could roll with it, up and out, and perhaps minimize the damage.

It might have worked except Azul had a ball of charged energy between his lowered horns. He didn’t hit the gunman with his body, but with the energy. Vincent could feel heated electricity running through his body, boiling the blood in his veins, causing his muscles to spasm and his heart to beat irregularly. Too much damage, it was too severe. He couldn’t survive this.

*Don’t be melodramatic, my immortalis. Of course we’ll survive.*

Zack placed Tifa on the ground where the medics were waiting, materia charged up and potions ready. She moaned weakly and batted at the hands that examined her. “You can fix her, right?” he demanded.

“We’ll do our best, Sir,” the man responded.

“Childhood friend of Sephiroth’s sweetie—the only one left. Do better than best.” It was almost a friendly suggestion, but it was also quite serious. She had to survive.

Behind him he could feel the huge monster racing over the airfield, creating huge waves of displacement. Vinny’d been hit once earlier and had essentially shrugged it off; picking himself up
and racing to save Tifa. From what he was picking up, Zack knew the ex-Turk was going to get hit again. At least the gunman was a tough son of a bitch so Zack wasn’t too concerned. Besides, he felt the need to augment his attack power. He’d spotted a familiar figure amongst the crowd: “Yo, Torson! You got your Blizzaga on you?” From what he remembered, the heavy-set SOLDIER Second had always preferred cold weapons. When Torson tossed the glowing blue orb at him without a question or even a funny look, it was as if the years slid away. He wasn’t a torture survivor on some broken up airfield beside Cloud’s destroyed home town; he was Commander Zack Fair one any one of a number of missions fighting alongside his fellow SOLDIERs. He swallowed the lumps of nostalgia and anger his thoughts gave him. “Thanks man.”

He popped the materia into his Buster and turned to face the enemy. He was just in time to see Vincent fly from the double impact of Azul and some sort of electrical discharge the mutant Tsviet had produced. Arcs of blue lightning ran over the gunman’s body, making him look like a human firework or something. He landed with a ‘thud’ that Zack could hear from where he was standing.

Okay, Zack thought, maybe Vin wouldn’t be okay after all. Before he could call out for a Cure something strange started happening to the ex-Turk.

Azul stepped back, laughing slightly. “Well, well, Vincent Valentine, something inside you wants out and its stench is so very familiar.”

Vincent wasn’t surrounded with blue lightning anymore but a bright fog made up of red and black light. His form blurred and reformed, blurred and disappeared behind the lights and the fog. There was ripple in the air pressure; waves of something moving through the atmosphere. Change was coming.

“Shit,” Zack muttered, “I know I called him spooky but he’s taking it a little far, don’t you think?”

“What was that, Sir?”

Zack twisted, “Uh, nothing.” He took a quick glance at the small fighter. Tifa’s colour had improved; she’d be fine. No matter what was up with Vincent, Zack needed to get back there.

….or maybe not.

The creature that emerged from the mist was almost like the skinny gunman, with his cloak and his long hair, but at the same time completely not Vincent. For one thing, he was taller—two and a half, maybe even three meters. He had leathery wings of a size to rival Sephiroth’s. He was also waaay more fucking scary than the ex-Turk and he, it, whatever the shit he was, hadn’t done anything yet. Zack swore he could feel waves of doom and destruction rolling of the creature Vince had become.

Zack didn’t let that stop him. He would be in at the end of the fight.

*Well, my scrumptious little lab rat, shall I let you join in or shall I just go ahead and finish it?*

Now that made Zack stop. He hadn’t heard voices in his head since the early days of Hojo’s experimentation but there was no mistaking it for anything else. Azul, even as a big lizard, spoke out loud that meant it had to be the ex-Turk’s new form talking to him… and had it called him a ‘rat’?

*I am Chaos,* the voice said, or vibrated… whatever it was it was really hard to explain, *and you shall be—*

The rest of the sentence was cut off by Azul’s defiant roar. The Tsviet raised himself up and
dropped down again. Shock waves reverberated from his feet but the thi-

Chaos lifted gently and gracefully over them as if floating on thistledown. He threw out his hand and a ball of black light shot out. Azul tried to dodge but he was too slow as a behemoth and the black energy dug a furrow along his side. It wasn’t a neat line for the energy jumped and bubbled out from the initial wound. Suddenly Zack felt deaf, as if he’d stuffed socks in his ears or something. He couldn’t sense the others’ movements over the crackle from Chaos’ black lightning stuff. He gave himself a shake, ignored the odd sensation, and went back to waiting for his turn to strike.

Azul had been trying to hit Vinny’s new form with his tail, thrusting it like a spear at the ex-Turk… person thing, but now the Tsviet threw his own bolt of power from between his huge fucking horns. Chaos tossed out one of those black balls to intercept. When they collided, the black light surrounded the blue lightning—surrounded it, swallowed it, nullified it, as if it had never existed. Then he moved forward and slashed at the behemoth with boots and claws. Azúl’s thick tail whipped forward and Chaos caught it on his wing, which folded smoothly back and absorbed most of the impact. It was still strong enough to make the creature tumble to the side which he turned into a graceful somersault. If Zack had been looking, he would have seen that Chaos never once touched the ground.

Zack wasn’t watching Chaos except to assess how much of Azul’s attention the huge creature was taking. The answer was: lots. When the Tsviet knocked him ass over tea-kettle, the dark haired SOLDIER spotted an opportunity to do more than stand there looking dumb and rushed forward, charging up the Blizzaga. He jumped up, using his wings to give him the lift he needed to reach the still crackling wound. His wings pumped and he slashed at it again and again. Jagged spears of ice ran from where his sword connected. Flesh and blood were instantly frozen. Even hovering in the air he felt the big beast shudder.

Azul roared, thrashing with his wings and attacking with his tail. The Tsviet may have been wounded but he was still far from weak. Zack’s wings and back were getting tired from all the dodging he was doing. He was just going to retreat for a bit when one of Azul’s heavy wing bones connected with his thigh. It was a good, solid hit and it sent Zack spinning out. His fall wasn’t quite as graceful as Chaos’ had been, but he too used his wings so that his tumble turned into a glide and he could step onto the ground rather than rolling across it. The crowd ‘oohed’ and ‘awwed’ and Zack thought he could get used to this.

The crowd wasn’t the only thing to appreciate his new, cool abilities. Chaos chuckled in Zack’s mind, which he found disturbing. *Very nice, little bat, but let me deal with this failed experiment*

What was with the pet names? First rat, now bat. It was worse than being called a puppy. At least puppies were cute.

Zack wasn’t the only one annoyed by the thing’s mocking. Chaos had obviously allowed Azul to hear him because the Tsviet roared defiance, “This isn't over yet, Chaos!”

Chaos just laughed. One moment he was a quarter of the field away from the mini-beemoth, the next he was standing under the beast’s chin, digging into Azul’s chest. That funny black fog was swirling around him, although there was a great deal of red in it where it circled his half-buried arm. Lightning played over their joined bodies, blue and black and red arcs dancing out from them in a wide circle and scarring the field. Zack was forced to back away. Then he needed to cover his ears. It was like having needles shoved through his ear cavity right into his brain—thanks to fucking Hojo, he knew exactly what that felt like. It wasn’t just Azul and Chaos’ roaring at each other that was causing it either, but a vibration or something. He backed up even more but he could feel moisture dripping from his ears, his nose, as the hum went up in both strength and frequency.
The energies had surrounded the two combatants, blue against black and red. It was moving constantly, now thick, now thin. Through the swirls, it was sometimes possible to see what was going on behind the mist. Azul was swinging his jaw trying to dislodge Chaos who was buried in the behemoth’s chest nearly up to the shoulder. Chaos, as big as he was, was dwarfed by the larger Tsviet. He was also completely engulfed in the battling fogs and, to anyone far away, it would probably seem a no-brainer that Azul would win but, steadily and with dramatic flashes and swirls, Chaos’ fog was taking over and spreading. Bright, searing light; loud, echoing boom; and a shock wave strong enough to knock Zack over and it was finished.

They all had been blown in a circle away from the battleground. Azul, back in his humanoid form, swayed and staggered; black and red mist still rippled over him but didn’t hide the wounds in his body. “It looks like you were more a beast than I,” he growled. He flexed his fists as if he would like to fight some more. Chaos laughed—he liked bravado especially when it was foolish. He’d landed close to where Azul’s second gun had fallen. Almost as large as the first, Chaos picked it up in one hand as easily as if it were a stuffed toy. Then he threw it.

It appeared in Azul’s chest, piercing it and throwing great gobs of flesh out the exit wound. The big Tsviet collapsed onto one knee, still fighting. “You have won this round, Vincent Valentine, so be it.” He coughed and blood bubbled out of his mouth. “We will not be defeated for long. Hail Weiss!” He braced himself on one arm as his body lost strength. “I’ll see you again... in hell!” With that defiant shout a waterfall of blood poured from Azul’s mouth and he collapsed. He lay unmoving, the bright glow of his eyes and armour fading to a dull grey.

Even though it was obvious the Tsviet was dead nobody approached his body. Instead, they waited for it to dissolve, proving that Azul actually was dead. It took a long time for the Lifestream’s green twinkly lights to gather around the fighter’s body; even longer for it to dissolve. It was so slow that Zack flinched in sympathy and then looked around, embarrassed, hoping nobody had seen him do that.

*I saw you, my little bat,* Chaos said as he popped up in front of the dark-haired SOLDIER. *You really are quite adorable.*

“Uh, Vin—” he started.

*Chaos. My name is Chaos.*

Not reassuring, Zack decided, especially when this warrior… thing was so much freaking taller than he was. Zack was not used to being loomed over. He was much more comfortable with being the loomer. Although, he usually toned it down, tried to soften his stance, so he wouldn’t intimidate the person he was talking with. Chaos didn’t seem to care. In fact, he was so fucking close the swordsman was surprised those pointy boots weren’t poking him in the stomach.

*It’s not my boots I wish to poke you with, little bat.*

“Fuck!” Zack shouted and jumped back because there was no mistaking that tone for anything but an invitation to sex. Chaos eased closer. Zack shifted away. “Look, …Chaos, I’m flattered, really, but, shit, I’m already in a relationship—well, two actually, or maybe three, but one for absolutely sure that I do not want to fuck up, so I’m going to have to say, y’know, thanks and all but… not interested.”

*Do I care what’s happening elsewhere in your life? Besides that is there, this is here. Why shouldn’t we celebrate the joy of victory?* Chaos was still moving with the SOLDIER, blocking him in, forcing him to move almost in circles until Zack realized that they were looking ridiculous and forced himself to stop.
“I’ll buy you a pint?” the SOLDIER suggested hopefully, “Or maybe a small tanker.” Chaos laughed. Or at least Zack thought the big guy was amused. With teeth that big and pointy it was hard to tell.

*Do not deny that you feel it too, little bat. Battles have an energy, a pulse, that infuses the body and heightens its responses.* Chaos floated around him, reaching out with sharp fingertips to scratch lightly at the SOLDIER’s exposed skin. *I can feel it resonating within you, looking to be released.*

Zack shrugged, trying for nonchalant but fearing it came up defensive, “Yeah well, I have other ways of getting rid of any excess energy.”

*So do I, my delightfully bashful warrior.* The creature had moved around to the front again. He leaned forward, baring his teeth… fangs, whatever, and whispering, *If I kill a thousand mortals I would be sated… maybe.*

‘A thousand,’ Zack mouthed, horrified. He didn’t think this guy was kidding. ‘Vin–’

*I isn’t here. There is only you and I…*

Tifa came trotting up, looking healthy and whole and far too vulnerable. “Zack? Vincent?” she called hesitantly. Zack tried to wave at her, to tell her, somehow, to not attract the big guy’s attention. Chaos’ smirk let him know he was too late.

*Of course, there is one other I could take with me for a little fun.* Chaos floated behind him, still leaning in close and whispering in his mind. *She’s a spicy one, the little fighter. Do you think she will fight me?*

Fuckingshitbastardasshole! “Leave her out of it,” Zack ordered. He had to protect Tifa, had to.

*My host would like to protect her as well. I think he likes the little one. It would pain him dreadfully if he damaged her, even if he’s not in his own form.*

“Vincent knows the shit you’re doing?” It was a horrifying thought and Zack turned to face the creature who’d been his ally. “He’ll stop you.” He tried to believe it.

Chaos chuckled. *He’ll try but he’s still too weak to take control back so you are left with me and I want to play some more.*

Tifa had reached them but, sensing the conflict in the air, she stayed back a couple meters from the two males. It wouldn’t be far enough to save her if Chaos decided to grab her.

“I go with you and Tifa and the camp will be safe?”

*From me... for now.*

Zack figured that was about a good a guarantee as he was going to get from a creature named ‘Chaos’. What the fuck was he supposed to do? ‘Exactly what he’d done in the labs,’ the thought floated up from his past. He shut his eyes, denying the images that wanted to play out in his mind, but he knew he could do this. He could let Chaos ‘play’ with him. It’d be no different from what he’d done to protect Cloud’s unconscious form from Hojo’s goons. Except remembering that made him want to punch something.

*You can hit me,* Chaos purred, sounding so much like Sephiroth that Zack shuddered, *I don’t mind if you try and fight.*
“Tifa,” he didn’t look at the dark-eyed fighter, “Once Seph gets up, tell him where I’ve gone.”

“What? Where’re you going?” She was astonished, and scared. She’d learned enough about Vincent’s other self to be deeply worried about what the demon had planned. “Vincent!” she called, “Come back!”

*He is not yet able to take back control, small warrior, so it is of no use to call to him.*

“He won’t like you doing this,” she stated.

*I don’t care.* His voice was flat and there was no doubting he meant what he said. He held out his hand to the dark SOLDIER. *Come, little bat, let us fly together.* Zack thrust his Buster into the ground and took the offered hand, his mind boggling at how small his seemed compared to the creature’s.

Chaos wasted no time but rolled the swordsman up and launched himself into the sky. He spun them around and around, as if this was something to celebrate. And all Tifa could do was stand there, watching them disappear and wondering how, in all Ifrit’s hells, she was going to explain this to the General when he woke up.

“Something’s wrong,” Cloud said, tensing.

Sephiroth, lazing happily with the small, boneless blond in his arms, took a moment to sense his surroundings. Nothing had changed but still, he could afford to indulge his lover. “What is it?” He traced slow whorls on Cloud’s firm arm and shoulder, enjoying the silky, strong texture.

Cloud pushed himself up on one arm, disengaging himself from the General’s embrace and squinting at nothing visible from here. Sephiroth sighed. It looked like their ‘couple’ time would be ending soon.

“It’s Zack.”

“I can’t hear him calling,” Sephiroth tried to soothe the blond.

“He’s not calling, at least not wilfully,” Cloud shook him off with a frown, “I recognize this...” Sephiroth sat up as well but he was content to watch Cloud’s face; alive, intent and so definitely his.

“He’s in trouble. Like he used to be in the labs,” Cloud finally said.

Sephiroth frowned, “What do you mean?” The General started to realize that the blond was deadly serious. Zack was in trouble. Did that mean the SOLDIER would be coming to wake them up soon?

“I always knew when he was getting hurt, especially when he was protecting me.”

“But, Zack isn’t one of your aspects. How can you hear him like that?”

“You should be able to sense him too,” Cloud said irritably, “Just, I don’t know, shut your eyes and concentrate.”

Sephiroth raised his eyebrows, hearing the echo of Niisan in Cloud’s voice and realizing that it
would be much easier to go along with the instruction. Then there was the fact that, if Zack were in trouble, he wanted to help. Long lids covered acid green eyes and the General allowed himself to ignore the world he was in—a somewhat harder than normal task considering this world was saturated with his lover’s essence. However, he concentrated on his internal world; heart, lungs, blood moving in his veins, until he found the part of himself that he could use to find and control the other SOLDIERs. Jenova’s legacy, buried inside him, a link to her and to all those who held parts of her inside them—like ShinRa’s SOLDIERs, like Zack.

He’d just used it yesterday, to find his dark-haired friend in the lab, so he noticed how different it was from before. The thread that connected them was much stronger than it had been; less tenuous, less... hazy wasn’t the exact word but it was sufficient. Zack was terrified. Afraid that, whatever was threatening him, would kill or maim him in some way but equally determined to continue. He was protecting someone and taking all the damage on to himself. Just like Caro had done.

Sephiroth growled. Zack was his. His to have. His to protect. The Silver General didn’t care who or what was threatening the happiness he’d just regained but he would kiss Odin’s balls before he let it be taken away from him again.

He was out of the bed and dressed as quick as thought. He held his hand out to his lover, who was also fully clothed, “Come, Cloud. We should go rescue him.”

Cloud hesitated, “I don’t know how much help I’ll be out there. It’s been so long.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Sephiroth cut off the suggestion before it could be made. He wiggled his fingers, “We’re wasting time.” Cloud put his hand in Sephiroth’s, swallowing down his fears. Zack was in danger. They had to rescue him. Well... more likely the General would rescue him. All Cloud could do is not slow him down. They ran out of the cottage. Cloud managed to keep up with his General’s longer legs with little effort. This was his world, after all.

“Find the link, Cloud, feel the path back to your body.”

*Path back to his body?* What did Sephiroth mean? Did he mean a literal path like the one they were running on? But, if that was the case, then why would the General say it that way? No, it must be a different kind of path. A link... like the one he had with Zack. He could feel Zack’s body; feel it getting hurt.... He couldn’t return to Zack’s body. Where was the link to his own?

“Hurry, Corporal.”

He’d tried before to return to himself, at least some part of him had tried. He kind of, sort of remembered wiggling his toes, or maybe that had been a long time ago. He’d become lost in the green, following voices that promised lots of things but delivered nothing. The green sky was always filled with voices. Except now there were no voices. The sky wasn’t green. There was nothing but the breeze and the pounding of their feet. His heart beating. His lungs working. He could hear... he could hear the General’s heart beating in the General’s body back where ever it actually was out there. Which meant that he, himself, would need to be... *there!* The cord popped into his mind so brightly, it was all the blond could do not to flinch from it. It pulsed in the rhythm of a heartbeat. “Got it,” he gasped.

“Good,” Sephiroth said, “On the count of three...”

“One.” The world’s edges softened and blurred. The colours dimmed.
“Two.” The colours dimmed, turning to grey nothing. Pins attacked their bodies.

“Three...”
Help, I'm Alive

They jumped and their only awareness became stretching, bending, twisting pain. They weren’t even in their bodies yet but Sephiroth could feel it as he blurred and spun and it hurt too much for it to be completely his imagination. He stretched, stretched and distorted until he felt like he was the size and shape of a small steel cable. He had no breath to spare for screaming; his lungs were far too thin to pull in air. Then SNAP! He had a body and breath and only the memory of pain. He wondered why it hadn’t hurt so much to go into those mental constructs but then dismissed the thought as irrelevant.

He was awake.

He recognized the familiar musty canvas and army laundry soap smell that was the army tents he’d lived in for most of his life. He also recognized the rich but acidic smell of his own semen for nocturnal emissions had become as common to him in the past two years as they’d been during puberty. Hojo had tried to stop them, using drugs to sleep cycle control to forced ejaculations, but even he’d had to give way to the reality of wet dreams. Except this time it hadn’t exactly been a dream since that same substance had him sticking to the slight figure that was all but on top of him.

Cloud was groaning and twitching. His eyes were still closed but the frown between his brows showed that he was coming closer to waking. Sephiroth decided to encourage him. “Cloud,” he called, long fingers carded through bright strands of hair. “Cloud,” he said a little louder, “Come back to me, Cloud.” White feathers trembled. “Corporal!” Sephiroth finally ordered sharply. It worked. Cloud’s eyes popped open, blue and disoriented, but awake and processing. “Cloud,” Sephiroth said with relief, but it didn’t last long as the blond hunched over himself in pain.

“Cloud?” he repeated anxiously.

“Loud,” the blond whispered, his voice scratchy from disuse, “Really loud.” He squinted as if the dim light filtering through the tent was the harshest of mid-day sunlight in the Corel desert

Sephiroth realized that Cloud was reacting like a SOLDIER Third Class injected with mako for the first time and having to adjust to the heightened senses. He was about to explain this to his lover when the blond’s eyes shot open once again. “Zack!” He called, sounding panicked. His wings started to quiver from the sudden tension infusing his body. The corporal put his hand down on the bed and on Sephiroth’s chest and pushed. It was obvious all he wanted to do was lift himself to his feet.

That’s not what happened.

Like any new SOLDIER, Cloud underestimated his new strength. That, plus the edge worry had given him, meant his enhanced muscles sent him nearly through the top of the tent. His wings saved him. They made him less aerodynamic so he didn’t gain enough momentum to break through the material. Instead, he only managed to brush the top with his hair; then they saved him again by fluttering strongly enough that he landed lightly on his feet instead of being slammed into the ground. Unfortunately, they continued moving and Cloud was too disoriented to compensate for the force they created. He stumbled off-balance and his wings beat even harder. They were trying to keep him upright but only managed to knock Cloud off his feet again. They were also throwing up whatever loose items were in the room. A large maelstrom in such a small area.

Sephiroth hadn’t expected this. He shot out of the bed and over to the blond, grabbing his arms and
stabilizing him. “Calm down, Cloud,” he murmured softly, knowing the corporal would be able to hear him clearly. “Take a deep breath.” He demonstrated and Cloud, eyes large in distress, instinctively matched the rhythm set by his general. His eyes lost their frantic edge, his wings relaxed and furled neatly along his back, the tension left his limbs… and he dropped to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped, “I don’t know what’s wrong.”

Sephiroth knelt in front of him. Only a small smile revealed how blindingly happy he was to see Cloud interacting with the real world again—however badly he was doing it. “From what Zack said, most of the enhancements were done to you while you were… drifting away. You wouldn’t have had time to adjust to the changes.”

“But,” he hesitated, “but at my house—”

“You house was your construct. Both it and you reacted and behaved exactly as you wished. You do not have that level of control in this world.” He was stroking through silky blond strands, enjoying the feel of it.

“But Zack…” Cloud stopped. “I can’t help you, can I?”

Sephiroth shook his head, “Not while you’re like this.” The corporal’s eyes closed in failure and shame. Sephiroth lifted Cloud’s chin, shaking it a little, “You will have to learn how to move your body and compensate for the changes while I’m gone.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cloud’s eyes remained closed. A sharp swat on the cheek opened them.

“You haven’t failed him, Corporal. You sensed he was in danger and alerted me. I will find Zack and bring him back. He will be very excited to see you again. He might even leave you an unbruised rib or two.”

Cloud smiled at the picture in his head, “Probably not, Sir.”

“You are supposed to call me ‘Sephiroth’, Cloud. Don’t you remember?”

Cloud frowned, trying to pull the memory forward from his fragmented mind. It came, and his eyes widened, “Oh!” His pale skin turned a deep rose.

This time Sephiroth smiled fully, “I will let you get away with it this time but, if it happens again, I will have to punish you.”

The corporal swallowed in combined nerves and arousal, “Understood… Sir.”

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed and his smile turned feral. Oh yes, he was very glad to have his Cloud back. Too bad he couldn’t do anything about it now. Even if Zack didn’t need rescue, the Corporal was in no condition to fully appreciate the attention. “Later,” he promised both of them.


He gave the blond a quick, fierce kiss before he raced to put on his uniform. He took a moment to clean the dried semen from his stomach—his long coat would have exposed the white flakes, but it was only heartbeats before he was ready to race out the door. He paused beside the Corporal, now on hands and knees, arms visibly trembling, wings slightly unfurled. “Shall I call in Kunsel to assist you?”

Cloud shook his head, “I’m good, Sir. I will get the hang of this.” Pure mountain stubbornness
coloured his voice.

There was a knock on the door, “General?” It was Kunsel’s light voice. “Sorry to bother you, Sir, but something’s happened.”

A last look at his struggling lover—who was a fully competent adult and soldier, he reminded himself, and Sephiroth was out the door. “I’m aware of the situation,” he told the Second, barely glancing at him as he moved through the outer room.

“You are?” the SOLDIER sounded amazed but not totally surprised. He lowered the envelope he was holding.

“Indeed. I shall return with Commander Fair momentarily. Have potions and food standing by,” he ordered and then he was gone, outside, into the bright morning sun. He could feel Zack as if he were at the other end of a shiny cord. The First was afraid, excited, shamed... and aroused?

Sephiroth growled. What, in all Ifrit’s hells, was going on with the dark-haired First?

His sense of the SOLDIER’s whereabouts had him elevated, not on a mountain, but in the air. Running wouldn’t be sufficient. To rescue Zack he would have to do something he hated. So be it. With a thought and a act of will, he brought his wings out, forcing them through skin and leather from wherever they stored themselves. And there were two, just like Zack had said there would be. He flapped them once, raising dust. He ignored the awed stares of passing soldiers, and started running.

Running, jumping... and flying.

Zack decided that, under different circumstances, this could’ve been fun.

After picking him up, Chaos had soared straight up, high as an airship, twisting and whirling like a ride at a carnival. Fucking exhilarating. Or it would’ve been if the bastard hadn’t been feeling him up the whole time.

Then there was the evil, creepy teasing the shithead did. ‘Do you think you will fall or fly?’, he’d say, or ‘How far can you run, little bat?’ and crap like that, and he’d toss Zack out and away, tumbling and falling; and his wings would beat and bend and he’d try to get some control back. It was nearly the scariest thing he’d ever had happen to him, even if it was a fucking thrill-ride. What made it worse was that The-Thing-That-Had-Been-Vinny knew exactly how mixed his feelings were about it all.

He was outside, breathing real air, seeing real fucking trees and mountains; not stuck in a lab, not living vicariously through a VR helmet or phasing out in some mako tube. Fucking alive and free and feeling it all the way to his fingernails and he was fucking flying! How amazing was that? So when he swore at Chaos and told the creature what a fucking asshole he was being, the thing just laughed at him and complimented him on his ‘feistiness’.

Despite the demon’s cooed teasing, Zack could almost forget what he’d agreed to while he was flying-falling, but then Chaos would swoop down on him and gather him up, gather him close, close enough to feel his huge fucking erection, and he’d be reminded. It had hurt with Sephiroth, despite the preparation, because the silver-haired warrior was big—at least compared to most humans. Chaos wasn’t human. He was nearly three meters tall and everything was proportional. Then there was the fact that Zack didn’t want Chaos inside his body, no matter how aroused he got, so he’d be tense like he hadn’t been with Seph.
This was going to go so beyond ‘hurt’…

*Don’t worry, my pretty little bat, I won’t kill you. You are far too much fun.*

“You know, I liked you better when you were in your coffin.”

*I didn’t, but my host insisted on immolating himself. The best day of the last few centuries was when you forced us into the world again,* *the creature responded. *You changed the hands of circumstance and I, for one, am grateful,* Chaos flipped Zack around so they were face to face. *Shall I show you how much?*

“What did you say?” His imminent danger was forgotten as his thoughts were snagged. He needed to pull that memory forward; a memory triggered by something Chaos had said, but what was it?

Chaos just rolled his eyes, *I said, I’m going to show you how much I appreciate you letting us out of the coffin.*

“No, that’s not it,” Zack swept that aside, following this other thread because he thought it was important and because it sure beat thinking about his upcoming rape. It had been something familiar, so that meant someone else had said it first. He had it! “You said something about ‘the hands of circumstance’. I’ve heard that before. Raincloud said it—”

*You talk to cumulonimbus?* the demon’s tone was mocking. Zack ignored him.

“You’re Chaos.” Again, the creature rolled his eyes but Zack continued before he could interrupt, “but the weapons were supposed to precede Chaos. Weapons, with a capital double-u. I don’t think Raincloud lied to me but where the fuck are the Weapons?”

This time Chaos laughed out loud, twirling the two of them in the air. *They are here. All the planet’s pretty jewels: sapphire and diamond, ultimate, ruby and emerald.* Images appeared in the SOLDIER’s mind, pictures of the things that had crawled out of the Northern Caves, but these weren’t static, still photos. These images moved... and they weren’t at the Northern Caves either. Shit, the Weapons were on the move. He needed to tell Seph because there was no way that those things weren’t going to affect the future of the planet.

*Soon I shall be free of my lovely immortalis. I will shed my bindings and lead Omega through the stars. It will be glorious. I will be glorious.* Chaos lifted Zack joyously in his arms.

“Oh fuck,” Zack whispered, and prepared to be tossed once again.

*But that is for later. We should concern ourselves with now. I think, little bat, that’s it’s time to shed something a little more... material.* Chaos let Zack slide back down. Then he took one hand and placed it on Zack’s neck, tight but not choking. His long blade-sharp talons just barely stopped at puncturing the skin. Chaos smiled, with teeth wa-ay too fucking pointy to be reassuring, Zack decided, and ran those talons under and through the thick cloth of his uniform top. The demon sliced through it like it was air. He spread his fingers out, shredding it the shirt and caressing Zack’s chest at the same time.

Zack shuddered and closed his eyes. He could do this. He could do anything he needed to.

*So noble and self-sacrificing, little bat,* Chaos cooed. *Do you know how tired I am of nobility
and self-sacrifice?* Talons pressed a little harder, sharp enough to hurt but not to puncture, as the creature continued down, slicing through the leather of the belly guard as easily as he’d cut up the cloth shirt. Zack’s wing hands flexed in impotent rage and fear. Chaos’ much larger wings beat lazily as if laughing at them. The Thing-That-Had-Been-Vinny hardly needed them to stay aloft—gravity meant nothing to it, which was pretty fucking amazing even if it did piss Zack off.

Chaos looked at the five thin red lines covering Zack’s chest. He liked them. He decided to add another couple stripes in a lazy zig-zag pattern, starting at the collarbone and travelling over the upper chest, making sure to hit each nipple, connecting the scattering of bullet-hole scars and then down over the diaphragm and the bumps of the swordsman’s stomach. Talons paused just above the waist of his pants, lightly dimpling Zack’s skin. He stared at the hard nubs of the SOLDIERs nipples. *You liked that didn’t you?*

“It’s cold up here, that’s all.” Zack replied, happy that his statement was the absolute truth.

Chaos’ eyes glowed gold in annoyance. He folded his wings and let them drop straight down, fast as a stone. He held Zack close until they could once again make out details of the ground below—trees, boulders, hard, rocky surface. Death, if they didn’t slow down.

‘Mother-fucking-rat-bastard,’ Zack chanted and kept his gaze forward. Chaos wouldn’t let them crash. This was just another game.

Zack was right but, instead of the gentle stop he’d vaguely envisioned, Chaos stopped abruptly and all at once. He didn’t have a firm grip on Zack’s body—only on his shirt, so that it was pulled off when the SOLDIER slid out of the creature’s arms. The action stretched the SOLDIER’s arms in muscle ripping ways as his sword harness was forced off as well. Worse, it tore at his wings and he instinctively made them disappear so they wouldn’t be damaged. Now he had nothing to stop his fall.

“*Evil* mother-fucking-rat-bastard!” he shouted in defiance. Even now he knew that Chaos wouldn’t let him be killed. The thing just wanted him scared and he refused to give in to fear.

Instead, he spread himself out like Angeal had taught him long ago when he was still a SOLDIER Second Class. He’d practiced jumping out of helicopters and planes, running endless scenarios in the VR room and even a few real-life missions. They’d all been a little closer to the ground... okay, a lot closer, but the basics were the same. And he wasn’t a Second anymore. He was First… or more, so even if Chaos didn’t swoop in to ‘rescue’ him he should still survive a jump like this as long as he landed right. Still, it had been three years since he did this for real.

He judged the distance, his speed, the angle, but mostly he counted the seconds and waited to be jerked to a stop by long, sharp-taloned hands.

He was right. Chaos grabbed him when he still had a dozen meters or so left to fall. He didn’t grab him by his arms or torso, but by his calves, and it was soon apparent why. The demon dug his talons into the heavy cotton pants, pulling them out his tightly laced boots as he let Zack slip slowly through his hands, slicing the garment off as the SOLDIER slid through them. At this rate, Zack thought, he was going to be flapping in the breeze like a limp flag.

*Not quite as limp as you would hope, little bat,* and Chaos chuckled in his mind.

Zack didn’t bother closing his eyes in shame. He’d gone through this before in the lab. He couldn’t help what his body responded to. The male sex drive was a conscienceless nympho with only one,
generally over-eager, response to just about every situation. Covered in mud? Get an erection. Watch a hot girl drink from a bottle? Get an erection. Receive direct physical stimulation after a heart-pounding fight? Get and erection and then some. Getting hard didn’t change the fact that he didn’t want this.

*You will, my pretty one. I’ll make you scream for it,* the demon whispered as the remnants of Zack’s pants went fluttering away.

He turned Zack so that he was facing out. The SOLDIER could see the camp buildings, small but distinct, in the distance. It reminded him of why he was doing this. There was the still crowded airfield... hopefully no one had a telescope trained on them. He couldn’t pick out Sephiroth’s tent which was as it should be. It would be really stupid to make the leader’s tent stick out, after all. Still, he was pretty sure it would be somewhere around... there. He squinted trying to find a structure that matched the layout of the General’s tent, or even the gaudy banner that hung outside the door.

He had a sudden vision of Sephiroth and Cloud racing out of the tent to his rescue, just as if he were a princess in a story. That would make Chaos the Big Bad Wolf. An idea so appropriate, given the size of the thing’s teeth, that Zack couldn’t help but smile.

One arm gripped him across his upper chest, locking his arms to his sides. Now, even if he wanted to strike out, he couldn’t. The creature behind him stretched one long arm down his front, grazing lightly across his skin; moving lower and lower over more and more sensitive areas until Zack couldn’t control his shivering, and even he couldn’t deny that it wasn’t all from fear. The back-side of one deadly talon traced his hip bone, getting closer and closer to his most delicate areas. His body reacted, uncaring as to the source of the stimulation. He could feel it filling and stretching; almost as if reaching for a firmer touch.

Stupid fucking penis.

Chaos didn’t oblige the silent demand. Instead, the demon kept his touch light. He ran the backs of his claws—and the sharp tips, so softly over Zack’s flesh that not even a hint of a mark was made. Zack wrapped both his hands around Chaos’ gauntleted forearm. He was counting heartbeats to distract himself—his own heartbeat as Chaos didn’t have one that he could detect. Talon tips moved in a threatening caress all along his length, over his tightening sac and along his inner thighs, tracing the path of his vulnerable femoral artery. His skin twitched, his blood thickened; Chaos was right—danger and sex matched each other too well.

He fell back on what he’d learned in the lab to deal with situations like this—think about something else. Unfortunately, he actually said the first thing that popped into his head.

“What’re the Weapons built to do?”

Chaos’ fingers barely paused, *You ask such a question at this time?*

“Uh, yeah. It’s just the way my mind works.”

*I see,* Chaos chuckled, entranced by the SOLDIERs randomness. *You are a flighty little bat. Very well. The Weapons protect Gaia and Gaia’s lifeblood against catastrophe. They’ve come out now because some threat has activated them.* The demon dug his talons in a little harder, raising welts on Zack’s soft inner thigh as he stroked upwards. It was a sign that Chaos had finished with the topic.
Zack swallowed, aware of the danger he was in but, well, he was curious. “So they’ll be going after Hojo?” he asked hopefully.

*I neither know, nor care,* the creature’s voice was flat and annoyed, *Their task is not mine.*

“What do you mean, ‘you don’t care’? Because, from what I heard, they have to do their thing before you can do yours.” He winced as his skin was pierced. Warm liquid pooled at the surface.

*I see what it is you do, little bat. You don’t fight me physically—a wise decision and therefore not one I expected from you—*

‘Asshole,’ Zack thought.

*Instead you use your mind to fight. You talk and use that to deny your reactions to my touch. You dismiss your body’s responses as ‘merely physical’ and ‘out of your control’.* Zack didn’t say anything because Chaos was right—at least mostly right, but he was also wrong. Zack’s brain did just work this way. Ask Sephiroth. He opened his mouth to explain but before he could say anything Chaos growled angrily.

*That isn’t nice of you.* Chaos was pissed. Zack could feel the emotion thrumming through the huge body behind him, and even though he wasn’t speaking out loud, the demon’s voice rumbled through Zack’s mind like boulders in an avalanche, ripping and tearing through a forest. *Perhaps you need motivation…* The arm locking Zack to Chaos tightened, squeezing his torso and making it hard to breath. The creature’s other hand latched onto his erection and squeezed it too. Painfully.

“Ahh, you motherfuck! I wanna kick your blackmailing ass so fucking hard!” Zack screamed in defiance. “You cock-sucking bastard!”

It was like a switch. One moment, Chaos was squeezing him to death like a baby zolom with its next meal, the next he’s laughing and licking a trail along Zack’s neck. Instead of squishing the SOLDIER’s dick to a pulp, he was gently caressing and teasing it back to full hardness.

Chaos’ silvery-pale face and glowing gold eyes appeared beside him. *Would you like me to suck your cock? It’s not something I have much experience in, but I’m willing to try…* His voice trailed off and the demon grinned, showing off his mouth full of big, pointy teeth. Just the idea of letting those things near his delicate bits had Zack shrinking again and drawing his legs up protectively. In response, the demon roared with laughter and sent them spinning heedlessly through the sky.

This time when they came to rest, they were hovering only a body-length above the hillside, looking out over the wasteland created by the mako reactor. Zack’s head was spinning and puking was looking like a distinct possibility. He focussed on the sparkly glow left by the reactor’s destruction and his stomach settled. It was kind of pretty actually.

*My host is getting restless. Soon our time together will end, my pretty little bat, but first we will make memories.*

‘Just get on with it,’ the SOLDIER thought. The creature’s erection was hot, hard, huge and pressed against his naked back, and Zack knew it wasn’t going to hurt any less for all of Chaos’ teasing. He took calming breaths, relaxed as much as he was able to, and prepared to be penetrated.
Chaos surprised him though. Instead of entering him right away, the demon enclosed his cock in his large hand and began stroking. It was a firm grip but not punishing. All it needed was a little twi–

“Ahhh,” Zack called out, and not in pain.

–twist… just like that one. Chaos repeated the motion, adding a light scrape of talons through dark pubic hair. The touch was so slight it almost tickled but it was enough to make the dark-haired SOLDIER’s groin muscles clench involuntarily. His toes curled inside his thick boots where Chaos couldn’t see them and Zack could later deny it had ever happened. It didn’t help though. The creature was too aware of Zack’s reactions. He repeated the light brushing caress while keeping his grip nice and firm as he stroked up and over the tip.

The contrast was excruciatingly arousing; the threat of danger and pain combined with the promise of pleasure… His hips jerked. He moaned, keeping his lips shut but hearing it rumble in his chest and throat anyway. He couldn’t help it, the rhythm, the strength, the stroke was perfect. Exactly how he’d do it to himself.

Zack’s head fell back onto Chaos’ shoulder as he finally surrendered to the sensations Chaos was giving him. Then the demon began to nibble, so very delicately, along the strong tendon joining neck to shoulder and Zack whimpered. He loved having his neck played with. It was part of the reason he’d kept his hair as long as it was. Of course it needed a trim now. After three years–

*Flighty little bat,* Chaos warned.

A slightly sharper nip brought Zack’s mind back to where he was now; panting in Chaos’ hold, arms stretched up and around the demon’s neck, anchoring him so he wouldn’t fall, holding tight so that he could stay close to the creature’s touch. He wanted to urge the creature to stroke faster; he wanted to beg for it to be over. Despite everything, he wanted the physical release Chaos promised.

‘Shit,’ he cursed himself, but it didn’t stop him from moaning in pleasure as sharp talon tips played along his rips and down the long muscle running to his groin.

He could feel his heartbeat pulsing heavily through his body. His ribs were heaving as he tried to draw enough air. Muscles tightened as he strained toward completion. It no longer mattered who, or what, was touching him; only that someone was. His toes curled tighter. His fingers dug in deeper. All he could hear was his own harsh breathing and Chaos’ voice in his head, urging him on—urging him up, higher, tighter, closer… closer … and over. He called out as his body pulsed, clinging to the demon who’d forced this pleasure on him. Trusting Chaos to keep him stable as the orgasm played itself out.

It wasn’t the mind-wiping climax he’d experienced with Seph, a function of his body like a biological lube job. He was relaxed but not satiated and certainly not feeling warm and fuzzy; not like he’d felt sharing an orgasm, or even just a bed, with the General and Cloud.

Thinking of the night he’d just spent with his friends, and comparing it to how he felt now, he couldn’t help but be reminded of the way Sephiroth had described sex the first time the topic had come up between them. How cold and clinical the General had been when talking about orgasms:

‘Orgasms are the goal of sexual stimulation. The point, if you will. Why bother indulging in sensual touching if you’re not going to achieve the objective?’ He’d sounded more like a scientist than a human being. Zack had been shocked and… and sad, that the General obviously hadn’t
experienced sex that would make him talk of stars and fireworks and all that other romantic shit.

‘Why had he let them do that to him?’ he’d thought. ‘How could he do it without at least caring for the person he was with?’ he’d wondered.

After three years in Hojo’s lab hell, Zack no longer had to wonder how someone could separate themselves from their body during sex, or why. In fact, he’d gotten good at it.

As soon as the spasms stopped it was done. His breathing was back to normal and he was able to think clearly. There was none of that post-coital lassitude to drag him into a comfy snuggle with his bed partner.

Chaos raised his cum-covered hand to his lips and licked his fingers clean. *You taste good, my pretty one. Your juices feel good in my body. Mine will feel as good inside yours.* Claws trailed down his spine, seeking his entrance.

Zack barely felt it.

Instead, now that his mind wasn’t clouded by physical lust, his awareness was filled with the approach of one who’d been inside his soul. Which meant the General was charging to his rescue... just like in a movie. It was like a bright, shining cord and it was getting stronger. Cloud wasn’t with him, and Zack spared a moment to worry about the young corporal, but mostly he felt relieved. Help was on the way. Except for Jenova, who was an evil, telepathic, space virus thing, he’d never seen Seph defeated. He’d be a match for Chaos.

Except that meant Seph, his best friend and an ultra-enhanced, genetically-altered, super warrior, was about to take on a three-meter tall legendary demon-creature that was somehow connected to the planet, vital to the future, and usually hung out in the body of the person who was most likely said best-friend’s dad...

‘Shit.’ Zack began to struggle against the arms holding him, instinctively, uselessly, but he needed to do something to stop the confrontation. Even if Seph won against Chaos, he’d lose because there’s no way he could damage Chaos without hurting Vincent as well.

Chaos, of course, enjoyed Zack’s struggles. *Well, well, my little bat, you’ve finally become shy,* he chuckled and continued to caress lower, cupping long fingers around one of Zack’s ass cheeks. *It becomes you.*

“Chaos, you gotta stop,” Zack announced. The creature laughed. “Seriously, man, it’s about to turn bad.”

*I promised to look after you,* he purred, *and I have. Now, you will look aft–*

“LET HIM GO!” It was a roar worthy of Bahamut itself. Unfortunately, Chaos could roar even louder which he did... right over Zack’s head. The volume was excruciating. The dark-haired SOLDIER brought his hands up to cover his ears but it didn’t help much. What helped was being dropped the couple of meters to the ground as Chaos turned to face his challenger. Zack received the impression that Chaos didn’t mind interrupting their sex for battle; either would be fun.

Sephiroth looked magnificent, like a vengeful ice-god with eyes of frozen fury. His hair floated around him, undulating as if alive. He stopped some distance away, Masamune in hand, ready to attack. “Are you well, Zachary?”
‘Not even fucking close’ is what he wanted to say. “Doing okay,” is what he actually said. No point in making the situation worse.

A quick, laser-like glance showed the General that the dark-haired SOLDIER had no obvious injuries, as in he wasn’t gushing blood, so he turned his attention to the one who’d dared to harm one who was his. “He is not yours to play with,” he stated flatly. It wasn’t even a challenge, just a statement of fact; blunt and incontrovertible.

Chaos sneered. *You. You reek of not-Gaia. The infestation that rots Gaia’s bloodstream is thick in you.*

“If it helps me to defeat you, then I will accept the alien legacy Jenova gave me.”

Chaos roared in laughter. *You will fight for my little bat; yet, if he had wanted to fight, he would have.* *He taunted.*

“Zachary wouldn’t fight if, by sacrificing himself, he could protect others. That’s what happened, isn’t it?”

Gold eyes glowed, talons flexed, and that creepy black-red mist started to build around the demon. *No matter. I shall dispose of the infection you represent and then the pretty one and I will continue as we left off.* *The voice in Zack’s head was smug and certain. Considering Chaos had defeated a mini-behemoth by sticking his arm in its friggin’ chest maybe he had a right to be smug.*

‘Fuck, this wasn’t going to go well,’ Zack thought. He stood up in panicked determination. He’d help Seph, protect his friend, even if it meant messing up the future. If bad things *did* happen weeks or months or years from now, then at least they would’ve had those weeks and months and years.

He wasn’t armed with anything but his steel-toed combat boots, but he could still use them to kick Chaos’ arrogant ass.

Then the demon jerked. His head twitched and his arms stretched out as if to grab something no one but him could see. Then his limbs drew back into his core and the creature folded into a foetal position. The mist spun around him, moving faster and faster and getting brighter.

*But... you are still damaged. You shouldn’t be strong enough—*

Red-black light exploded from Chaos in a ball. It was without heat or sound or power. Or maybe it was just that it was all directed inward to whatever was happening at its center. The SOLDIERs backed away. Sephiroth assumed a position between the demon and his mostly-naked friend. A protective stance that was negated by Zack moving to the side so he could see what was going on.

The swirling mist resolved into a swirl of red fabric that floated to the ground in an elegant sweep. The twirling red cape settled to reveal Vincent, looking even paler than normal. His freaky red eyes were dull with pain. He stared at them. “I’m sorry,” he rasped. Then he collapsed into an unconscious heap on the grassy slope.

Sephiroth waited, sword out, to see if this were some kind of trap. His wings beat slowly keeping him hovering protectively between the gunman and the dark-haired SOLDIER.
“It’s alright, Seph. Chaos is back inside Vinny.” Zack moved fully out from Sephiroth’s protection. He stood, hands on hips, and stared as the wounds on Vincent closed up, wondering where the hells the skinny gunman kept something like that. Chaos was a bit more problematic than a set of wings.

“Hmm.” The General wasn’t quite reassured, but he allowed himself to settle to the ground and furl his mis-matched wings.

“Nice wings,” Zack teased. Grin wide and easy now that the danger was past. He was aware of his nude state and of the cum rapidly drying on his stomach but, like most of the embarrassing situations in his life, he was determined to bull through it.

The General sheathed Masamune and gave Zack a thorough inspection. He noticed everything; nakedness, scratches, bruises and the drying semen. He also saw the tinge of shame that the dark-haired First was hiding under his usual bravado, so he chose his response with care. “Nice boots.”
Freedom of Choice

“Maybe I should kill him now,” the General mused out loud, looking down at the fallen gunman, “before he can do any more damage.”

Sephiroth had thrown his coat around the dark-haired First and now Zack was burying his nose in the collar in an adrenaline-crash induced stupor. It was amazing how comforting it was. He was surrounded in Seph’s smell and it made him feel safe once again. Of course, that was before the General had come up with his little pro-active defence strategy.

“What?” Zack exclaimed. He jerked out of his daze and hissed as extremely sore muscles seized. “I think that’s a really shitty idea.”

Zack had told the General about the battle and how the Tsviets had attacked Tifa and Vince because they had been looking for protomateria and, apparently, the ex-Turk had it. It had taken some time because the SOLDIER had digressed into a critique of Tifa’s fighting style, a description of Rosso the Crimson’s outfit, and a joyful point-by-point report of how he’d used his wings in battle for the first time. He’d avoided talking about the aftermath with Chaos, or at least he hadn’t given the Silver General many details. Unfortunately, Sephiroth was observant and smart; he’d figured out a lot by what Zack hadn’t said.

“It would thwart any further attempts by Deepground to access the ‘protomateria’ he supposedly carries. Plus, if he becomes that creature again it might take after you or whoever else takes its fancy. Are you willing to risk that?.”

Zack scratched his head. He wasn’t really but he didn’t think it would come to that... unless Vinny nearly got himself killed again. Then there was the possibility that the spooky dude was really Seph’s dad—but how to explain that? Then there were the others ideas that had occurred to him; he hadn’t even gotten started on the whole Weapon-with-a-capital-double-u thing.

Sephiroth sighed, “If that creature could see you now, you’d be on the ground getting ravished.”

“Eh?”

Zack looked down when the silver-haired warrior waved his finger at him. The coat, never designed to close fully, was gaping wide open, exposing a long line of tanned and muscled flesh. “It’s very enticing,” Sephiroth added with a predatory smile, “but I’d prefer to wait until we have a bed. It’s easier on the knees.”

“Fucking shit, Seph,” Zack blushed and laughed and pulled the coat back together. “I don’t know where your pervy humour’s coming from but I like it.”

The General smiled more naturally but looked away shyly. He fixed his gaze on the ruins of the reactor while he explained. “I’m no longer ShinRa’s creature. I no longer have an image to maintain and, even if I did, there’s no one to punish me if I display fallibility... or humanity.” A deep breath. “You are here beside me and Cloud is awake back in our quarters. For the first time in my life I honestly believe that life is good.” Then the slender warrior sighed a little. “At least it will be once the danger from Hojo and Deepground are taken care of.”

“Yeah, about that,” Zack walked over to stand beside him. “I think the situation may be way more complex than you might think—”
“I’m sure it is,” Sephiroth agreed.

“–and it’s not Vinny’s fault that he has nasty fuckers inside him that like to behave like assholes. Besides I was warned,” the SOLDIER continued. The Silver General turned to him, one eyebrow lifted in enquiry. “In the caves, before we found Valentine, I had to ‘talk’ to Cloud?” Sephiroth nodded in remembrance. “It was Raincloud who told me where to find Vinny. He also told me that the guy had ‘angry parts’ and that I should be careful.”

“Angry parts,” the General questioned, “His exact words?”

“Yeah, exactly,” Zack confirmed.

“Meaning more than one,” Sephiroth sounded resigned as if he really should’ve expected a man found in a coffin to take the meaning of multiple personality disorder to the next level.

Zack hadn’t thought of that. “Uh… maybe…”

“I have four others that reside within me, including Chaos.” They turned to face the ex-Turk, who was sitting with a hand draped negligently over his drawn-up knee. There were no signs of the catastrophic injury that had precipitated the demon’s appearance. “Chaos is the most dangerous as it is the most intelligent. However, it is not the most common of my… beasts to appear.”

“The most common?” the General questioned.

“One called Galian Beast. Similar in design to the creature Azul became but much smaller and more agile.”


“Possibly.”

“Dangerous?” he questioned.

“Yes.”

“Controllable?” he probed.

“Not very.”

Zack decided that all these one word sentences were driving him nuts. “They come out when you’re injured, right?”

“Yes,” Vincent replied then stopped. Zack waited for more. He waited…

Obviously, a longer question didn’t necessarily mean a longer answer.

Just when Zack was ready to pound his head on the nearest rock, Vincent continued, “Although, while in the lab, I sometimes thought I might have a measure of control over their appearances it was not an avenue I wished to explore while in Hojo’s control.”

Zack nodded his head, “I can understand that. Still it would be a damn good thing to know because I think you’re going to have to take on Omega at some point.” Two pairs of unique eyes, one cat green, one eerie red, locked onto him inquisitively. They were nearly the same shape, Zack realized, even if the colours were so completely different.

“You know of Omega?” the spooky-eyed gunman asked.
“A little, I think, maybe.”

“Explain,” Sephiroth ordered.

“I’m not sure I can, yet. I’ve been given so many friggin’ riddles and metaphors and shit, I haven’t figured them out. It’s just Raincloud talked about Chaos controlling Omega... or something like that.”

“Chaos is connected to Omega,” Vincent agreed. Cat-slit eyes moved the question to the ex-Turk. “It was in a message Lucre– Dr. Crescent left behind.”

“And Omega’s importance?” the General asked.

“Omega’s one of the planet’s Weapons; the final one apparently,” Zack responded.

“Yes,” Vincent agreed. “When Gaia’s end is close, he—it will appear, but not until the other Weapons have been deployed.”

“They have,” Zack said, “That’s the report that came this morning. Five,” he waved his hands to describe the indescribable, “huge motherfuckers crawled out of the Northern Caves this morning.

“Weapons?” Sephiroth asked, “What kind of weapons?”

“Um...” Zack stalled. He hardly knew what they were, himself, so it was hard to describe them for the General.

Vincent answered for him, “It’s likely they are Gaia’s defence, used when the planet is facing destruction.”

“And they’ve been deployed.” It was a statement, not a question, but Zack responded anyway.

“Chaos identified them earlier. He sent images into my head that matched the photos in the report.”

Sephiroth stared at him. “You don’t think he was lying to you?”

“It was by accident, I think. He was happy they’d arrived and the images just kinda flowed into my head.” He was going to add that Chaos was looking forward to being free but, with a quick look at Vincent, he decided not to. Who knew what kind of weird symbiotic relationship the two of them had crafted over thirty years. Maybe the ex-Turk wouldn’t want to see him go. Maybe Chaos leaving meant Vincent dying... that would suck.

“If they appeared last night that would explain the chant Chaos kept repeating.”

“He chanted at you.” Zack questioned, “Was it the names of jewels?”

Vincent nodded. “Yes.”

“That’s significant?” the General asked.

Zack shrugged, “More as confirmation that those things were the Weapons Raincloud was talking about. I wrote down what he told me, as close as I can remember, but my notes are back at camp.”

Sephiroth said nothing but Zack knew that the General was thinking things through, weighing, comparing; deciding on the best course of action. “We have to return to the camp. I need to see those reports and Dr. Crescent’s message. Zack, you need to transcribe as much as you can remember of all those ‘riddles and metaphors and shit’ that you’ve been told,” he paused, thinking,
“Will Cloud have any recollection of the things Raincloud said?”

Zack thought about it but had to shrug helplessly, “I dunno. Maybe.”

The silver-haired warrior nodded shortly, “He should attend as well then, just in case.”

“Tifa should as well since she was present when Dr. Crescent’s message activated and she was helping me research more about Omega and Chaos.” Sephiroth nodded agreement. He trusted the young Nibelheimer.

“The one called Nanaki should also be there,” Vincent suggested. Sephiroth raised a questioning eyebrow. “He has a good grasp on his grandfather’s theories on the Lifestream which could be very pertinent.”

Actually, Sephiroth had been wondering how and when the ex-Turk had met the reclusive Gi, but the suggestion was a good one. He nodded agreement, “If he can be found.” He narrowed his eyes at the reactor. “The planet is defending itself,” he muttered, “How far will it go?”

It was Vincent who responded. “Like any living thing it will do whatever it needs to.”

Zack looked at the pretty and poisonous green mist that floated and sparked around the ruins. He remembered living things twisting, changing, and dying in agony in pretty green fumes... and shivered. He didn’t want to die like that. Not again.

Cloud had tried to imagine what it felt like not to have wings but failed. He’d tried to use his will to—wish them away but that had failed too. Now he was trying to re-create memories of when he’d been in that other place, his place, with Sephiroth. He hadn’t had wings then, he was sure, because they’d been doing… doing that, and that’s where Cloud’s memories stopped. Not because he didn’t have more but because he hadn’t been able to get past the point where he’d climbed on top of the General. He’d pushed the General down and attacked his body with teeth and tongue and fingers.

More than memory, less than reality, but it was still making him hard.

The General had chosen him. As unbelievable as it seemed, General Sephiroth had made love with him; had gotten an erection because of him! Wings forgotten, small, strong hands travelled lower and enclosed his own aching sex. He closed his eyes and he wasn’t here, alone. He was with the General, his General and he was surrounded—his voice, his breath, the feel of him.

Cloud wanted… he needed… His hands started moving almost on their own.

He was covered in a light sheen of sweat. He bit his lower lip to contain the sounds trying to escape. His left hand reached down his back and delved into his cleft, seeking out his body’s tight, puckered entrance. His right hand moved faster, stronger, as the memories filled him, hypnotized him, drew him in. There were memories of his dreaming place and memories of the time before the lab. Water flowing over their bodies and the feel of the General’s mouth enclosing his sex; a warm bed on a magical morning and General Sephiroth filling him, moving within him.

His hands moved harder, faster, because he remembered and he wanted. His hands weren’t right
but they were enough to create a ball of tension at the base of his spine, and to build on it, make it bigger, coil it tighter. And then it exploded. He exploded, covering his hand with his thick, pearly-green cum, stretching him briefly to his toes, taking him to the sky. Then letting him drop… all the way to the ground; although he barely felt his knees hit the flooring.

He hadn’t expected it to be so intense. After all, it was just a hand-job, and his own hand at that, but he was as shaken as if he’d actually had Sephiroth here to make love with.

He curled around his still pulsing erection, panting and shuddering in the aftermath, letting his mind and body settle. It took longer than it should have but when he felt like moving again he realized something had changed. His wings were gone. Disappeared back into his body somehow, he could still feel the possibility of them, like they were hovering between his skin and his ribs, waiting to be pulled out again. He could control them now.

He laughed softly. It was a good thing they were gone because now he really, really needed to take a shower.

Sephiroth decided that they should head to Nibelheim as it was both closer and easier to get to than heading straight back to the airstrip. They’d be able to get shoes for Vincent, something for Zack to wear, and a vehicle to take them back to camp. They were walking briskly which, considering they were all enhanced, meant that the passing greenery was blurred.

Sephiroth wasn’t going to wait until they reached the village to organize the brainstorming session he wanted. He wanted this situation settled... permanently. He pulled out his PHS and began dialling. “Zack, if you would call Tifa and have her bring whatever she discovered yesterday,” he ordered.

“I’d do that, except my PHS was in my pants,” Zack waved his hand indicating the whole of the Nibel Mountains, “It’s out there somewhere now.”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth hummed in disappointment before flicking his eyes toward the ex-Turk.

“I do not have one.”

Before the silver-haired SOLDIER could comment, his call was picked up. “Ah, Master-Sergeant; conference this call with the Officer of the Day, please.” The rock-voiced agreement was clearly audible to Zack, so he listened idly as Sephiroth ordered tables, chairs, food, paper, maps, photos, reports, copiers, and more food.

He was looking at the sky, and thinking that Seph probably hadn’t ordered enough to eat if his stomach was anything to go by, when Vincent came up beside him. The ground they were on was rocky and rough but the gunman showed no signs of discomfort even though he was barefoot. He didn’t say anything and Zack didn’t feel the need to break the quiet. He was just enjoying being alive and outside and free.

“You don’t seem upset,” Vincent said hesitantly.

“Upset?” he asked, perplexed.

“About what happened earlier; Chaos and... everything,” the ex-Turk said delicately, “I... I’m sorry.”
“You got nothing to apologize for,” the First responded, “That asshole wasn’t you.” Zack laughed and stretched his arms out wide. He actually bounced a little. “Plus, I’m alive and not in the fucking lab. My friends are safe and my girl’s waiting for me.” He turned to Vincent to share his happiness but Vincent had averted his face. Zack looked closer. He couldn’t be sure, but it looked like the gunman was blushing. Zack’s smile widened. Unbelievable. Vincent Valentine, former Ace Turk, was a prude. He sure as shit was looking away from the SOLDIER’s full frontal. Ah well, he sighed, that made the timely rescue even more... timely. The guy was weird but he wouldn’t want him feeling bad about something that had out of his control.

His lazy musing was interrupted an oddly hesitant question, “Is it that easy for you?” Zack looked at him, puzzled, so Vincent explained a little more, “Forgiveness. Absolution. Moving forward. Is it really that simple?”

“Can be. I mean, shit, I’d feel better if I had my Buster sword, but this is good too.” Zack lifted his face, enjoying the feel of the sun’s warmth on his skin.

Vincent said nothing, just buried his face in his collar. The ease with which the swordsman had absolved both he and Chaos was unbelievable. He didn’t understand. The SOLDIER had been played with, nearly raped and possibly killed, and yet he was smiling and walking along as if he was enjoying a lazy day in the park. Happiness couldn’t be that simple.

*Of course it isn’t that simple for you, my host, you have always been a boring, broody bastard. I wish your cretinous lover had installed me in him instead,* Chaos sighed wistfully.

“You forgive very easily.” It came out almost contemptuous, as if the SOLDIER must be stupid or somehow incapable of understanding the impact of everything he’d been through. It showed too much emotion and Vincent wished he could take it back.

Zack looked at him, recognizing the undertone, knowing the ex-Turk had underestimated him as people always did. “I can forgive some things, yeah. It’s easy to forgive people for things they had no damn control over in the first place. What the hells’ the use of holding a grudge against them, after all. I can forgive my friends a lot, of course, or else why have them as friends?” His mouth twisted into a sneering smile, “Hojo, on the other hand, is going to die vilely and screaming for fucking mercy.”

Vincent was shocked by the change in the SOLDIER. He’d had no idea the bouncy First held so much rage inside him; an anger on a level with that of Hellmasker. He blinked and wondered what to say next. ‘Get in line’, was the first thing that occurred to him but that sounded rather childish.

*It’s not childish,* Chaos pouted, *It’s only right that my sweet little bat give the honour to his elders, don’t you think?* Before he could even start formulating a response—to either of them, Zack had continued musing out loud.

“Maybe it’s easier for me because the people I care about the most are all still alive–” A picture of Angeal formed in Zack’s mind; of the big First walking away, looking over his shoulder, ‘Embrace your dreams’ the image said. It still hurt that he wasn’t here but the ache was dull and faded. “–at least most of them are still alive.”

“And the one who didn’t survive,” Vincent probed unable, for whatever the reason, to let it go. He knew people forgave their own sins and the sins of others all the time but he had no idea how they did that. “How do you forgive yourself for letting that one die?”
Zack snorted, “‘Letting’ him die? Shit, I held the sword.” Unhappy memories. In some ways, that moment tortured him more than what had happened in the lab because it wasn’t something that had been done to him. He had done it. He had chosen to raise his sword against his mentor and friend, and he had chosen to accept Angeal’s fight-to-the-death conditions. Still... “What fucking good would it do him, or anyone, if I turn into a pile of gloomy, emotional goo? Should I cut off my hand, or supplicate myself on broken glass? I don’t get that shit. Instead, I should fight for what he believed in, right? Live life the way he would’ve wanted; protecting the people and things that are important to me.”

“And if your actions betray yourself?”

“Like I said, it’s a choice. Though, if you chose it, is it really a betrayal of yourself?” Zack looked down at the ex-Turk, “Personality’s always gonna be a factor because your choices reflect who you are.”

Vincent blinked in thought. “So if I were a ‘broody bastard’ before—” he trailed off uncomfortable with the label.

“You’ll still be a broody bastard,” Zack smiled and decided to tease the priggish pseudo-vampire. “The ladies will love you for it, though... and some of the guys, too. All of them wanting to heal your pain.”

*I wouldn’t mind that,* Chaos chirped, both because he wouldn’t mind it and because he knew it would make his straight-laced host squirm.

It did. Vincent blushed and looked away. “Ms. Lockhart said much the same thing,” he commented. “I don’t understand why they would be attracted to a mood.”

Zack laughed, “Fuck, you don’t have to understand it; just learn to deal with it.”

“Just like that,” Vincent was still sceptical.

“That’s up to you isn’t it.” The big SOLDIER stretched out again, revealing scars and the scratched lines connecting them. Then he turned his face back up to sun. They walked in silence unbroken except for Sephiroth’s low voiced commands.

“Hey, Seph,” Zack interrupted, “Can you order those meatballs we had last night, a lot of ‘em? I think I could eat a whole damn pot all by myself.”

Nibelheim, when they reached it, looked both sad and eerie.

Nibelheim had been an old village and a poor one. Most of the houses had been made out of wood, not stone. They were mostly gone, either through the fire Hojo had set to cover his crimes or from being bulldozed. The few surviving structures, the inn, the mayor’s house and the store, were made of stone not wood. They seemed to huddle together at one end of the town, scared and lonely. They looked diseased, somehow, with the combination of fresh, bright lumber and soot-darkened stone.

Now, Nibelheim no longer seemed dead. Crews were working all over the small village, clearing the ruins, rebuilding, preparing the site for permanent settlement.
Walking into town, even one full of friendly troops, Zack just naturally fell in to General Sephiroth’s right. Since the General was left-handed and the Commander’s sword hand was his right, this only made sense. Each of them would be able to draw and swing their weapons freely. What impressed Vincent Valentine, as he trailed behind the duo, was that they had moved into position without conscious thought; partners in a way few ever experienced. Perhaps he should re-evaluate the light-hearted SOLDIER once again.

They moved somewhat slower here, so that the equipment operators had time to see them and adjust their operations. Plus the meters of nails and broken glass would do more damage to Vincent’s bare feet than the kilometers of natural ground cover.

They got a few odd looks as they marched through the village but most of the troops were busily going about their tasks. The two SOLDIERs in the lead didn’t look around, didn’t peer anxiously at the work being done. Their shoulders and backs were tense as if they were fighting off unhappy memories. From what he had learned from listening to Tifa, they probably were. They had been here when this was a true village. They’d met the people who’d lived here. This is where their nightmares had begun—just like his had; dream and nightmare combined.

Lucrecia...

He watched the long, straight line of his son’s spine as the warrior moved smoothly and competently through the mess. ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ he asked her ghost once more.

*Because you didn’t fight for her. You let her go back to that arrogant sack of flesh,* Chaos said bitterly.

He had... He had let her go back to Hojo, back to her husband. He’d justified it because she was married, because he was a Turk, because it was her choice and as long as it made her happy. Except she hadn’t been happy... and he’d been shot before he could rescue her.

*If you would have rescued her. I have my doubts,* the demon commented harshly. *For a notorious killer, you are pathetic when it comes to romance.* Images of what Chaos would do to whatever person or thing came between it and the object of its desire filled his mind. Blood was a major component.

“Yo, Vinny!” Zack called, “Wake up, man. We’re nearly there.”

“It’s Vincent,” the gunman said automatically, glad for the excuse to shake off the past.

The Commander’s tent was easy enough to locate. It was the largest and the double doors never stopped moving as troops constantly went in and out. Sephiroth had worked with the engineer before and knew that his tent would be covered with blueprints, construction schedules, and task lists as well as supplies such as safety glasses and vests, gloves and other small items that a hard-working crew would use up like flour in a bakery. However, the Silver General had forgotten one new item that had been added to the Commander’s tent: Lieutenant Hinz, his erstwhile aide.

“General! There you are,” the man said, as if Sephiroth had been lost. “I was about to head back to camp with my report but the Commander changed his estimates, again. He really is a most disorganized person. When you read my report I’m sure you’ll be outraged!” Hinz paused for breath and finally caught sight of the General’s companions. Vincent wasn’t so bad. Maybe he stared at the Lieutenant with his eerie eyes but at least he looked presentable. Zack, however, had sauntered over, in his non-closing coat, to look at the drawings of how Nibelheim was going to
“Who is that?” Hinz asked, sounding outraged.

“He is Commander Fair, my Second-in-Command.” It wasn’t open for debate the warrior’s voice said but knew that wouldn’t stop Hinz.

He stared at the SOLDIER starting at his over-long, mussed up hair and travelling down over a naked and scratched chest to his dirty, scuffed army boots. “That is your SiC?” He would have been shrieking except he was too well-bred for it.

Zack sauntered over, unconcerned at what was or wasn’t covered. “Hi there, nice to meet you.” He held out his hand.

Hinz didn’t take it. “Sir, I must protest. You are the General of the Western Army. You have standards to maintain. It’s obvious this... this disgrace of a soldier isn’t worthy to be your right hand.”

Zack’s eyes narrowed in anger before opening up to his usual guileless size, “That’s too bad... Lieutenant, isn’t it? Papers’ are already signed. He’s stuck with me.”

“Sir–”

Sephiroth interrupted the junior officer, “As much as I understand your attempts to–” isolate “– protect me. Commander Fair is my Second-in-Command.”

The lieutenant narrowed his eyes, his shocked fury easy to read. This-this was going to take his place at General Sephiroth’s side? His outrage was probably increased by whatever circumstance had caused the tears in his uniform, the bandages on his hands and the light covering of dust and dirt that coated him. His voice, his posture and his attitude all proclaimed him to be a clock-punching desk jockey, not a manual labourer yet, from what they could see, he’d obviously been forced to do physical work—at Sephiroth’s command, too! His face flushed with shame and anger, Hinz visibly lost his well-bred, self-serving common sense.

“The Board shall hear of this, General,” he threatened, his voice vibrating with the force of his emotions, “Your actions bring ShinRa into disrepute–”

“Actually,” Zack interrupted, “I think the ShinRa board did that well enough on their own. After all, they didn’t realize that one of them was a sociopathic, homicidal madman who was embezzling millions of gil to fund his own secret army…” he shrugged and allowed the sentence to trail off.

“Don’t forget the human experimentation,” Vincent added, talking calmly and brutally over the officer’s harsh breathing and spluttering anger.

“And the human experimentation,” Zack agreed, “most of which the Board damn-well knew about but fucking ignored. And now that the results are rampaging across the countryside killing anything they come across they have to call on two of their earliest victims, both of whom they’d declared dead, to rescue the world for them.” Zack smiled, “Shit, compared to that I don’t think little ole me can do any more damage to ShinRa’s rep.”

“Rufus is trying to do better from what I’ve seen,” Sephiroth reprimanded him mildly.
Zack smiled even more broadly, more honestly, “It’s hard to imagine that whiny, snot-nosed kid as the president of fucking ShinRa.”

“That is no way to speak of the President of Neo-ShinRa,” Hinz sneered and puffed himself up “Why, when I tell him—”

“Hinz,” Sephiroth’s calm, cold voice stopped the lieutenant, “I have remained silent because both Rufus and Tseng asked me to but no longer. We both know that the person you report to on the Board isn’t Rufus.”

The lieutenant collapsed back down and the colour left his face. “I don’t know what you mean…” but he averted his eyes as he said it.

Zack rocked back on his heels—this was becoming interesting. He had no idea what Seph was planning but he’d back him up all the way. “Yeah, you do.”

“You lie very badly,” the ex-Turk added his damning assessment. He moved to the side, as Fair had done, forming a living cage around the young officer, ready to block any attempt at escape.

Hinz was trembling lightly, but his family was one of the oldest on the eastern continent. He had generations of aristocratic history to call upon and he would not be intimidated by such riff-raff. He lifted his chin, “That’s ridiculous. Of course I report to the Board. You saw my orders.”

“I did,” the General confirmed, “but I also talked to Rufus. Unlike his father, he actually listens when someone else speaks so we discussed the appointment at length. We realized very early that neither he nor Reeve had approved your orders. After that, it wasn’t hard for Tseng to discover who was paying for the multi-million gil restoration of your family’s estates.” Although his voice remained calm and deliberate, to himself Sephiroth could admit to feeling rather annoyed by the lieutenant. Had the man really thought he was so completely stupid that he wouldn’t realize when someone was trying to manipulate him? Did they have no understanding of how Hojo, and the other scientists, had treated him as he was growing up?

His eyes glowed bright acid green, giving away the depth of his anger. Zack saw it and decided to pull the lieutenant’s attention to him until Seph could reclaim his control. He deliberately spread the wings of the coat wide, making sure all his natural glory was showing, before placing his hands on his hips. As expected, Hinz shuddered in well-bred horror and broke out in a sweat.

“This is almost better than Midgar Nights,” the SOLDIER smiled in wide-eyed enjoyment—some of it was even real. “Who is the evil overlord, pulling strings in the background, trying to ruin the hopes of the handsome young prince? It isn’t Reeve ‘cause that guy gives his money to every damn sob-story he comes across.”

“Don Corneo,” Sephiroth stated simply and Hinz jumped in startled confirmation, “The self-proclaimed Mayor of Neo-Midgar.” The dark-haired SOLDIER was frowning. He recognized the name but it wasn’t coming forward. His memory of his life before Nibelheim was good but it still had holes in it.

“Don Corneo was rising to prominence in the slums at the same time Genesis and Angeal… left. He was, and is, a pimp, a pusher and a pedophile.”

“Oh yeah, I got him now,” Zack scrubbed hands through his dirty hair, “Used to get girls for his harem by saying he was going to marry one of them. Never did though. He was a slimy douce-
The General nodded once. “He still is, and his backers are worse. They sell weapons, supplies and information to any side with enough money. People—innocents, die or end up in Hojo’s hands because of them.” If voices could be ice, Sephiroth’s would be a glacier.

“And yet this man was assigned a position of confidence?” Vincent’s voice was a low growl, even rougher than his normal tones and like a banked fire. There was a part of him that was very, very angry that this person had been placed so near Lucrecia’s, no… his son.

“He was assigned a position where he could be fed whatever lies or half-truths we wanted them to know. You were a Turk; you should be familiar with the procedure.” Sephiroth slanted the older man a slightly dismissive look. “At the time they proposed it, I didn’t really care. However, I have been thinking that the promise of protection I gave to Lord Godo was essentially worthless; a lie of omission. They wanted assurances that ShinRa would not attack, I promised that I would not lead ShinRa forces. I promised, knowing it was trickery on my part. Control of Neo-ShinRa is still fluid and I know that the forces who wish to wrest control would return the company to the same level of greed, stupidity and ego that Rupert ShinRa always displayed—if not worse. So I have been thinking about what comes next and I have decided what kind of future I wish to be part of.”

“Watch out world,” Zack muttered, bouncing. The others would think he was excited by the unfolding events. Truth was he wanted to punch the traitorous bastard into next month and watch his brains splatter—giving people over to that fucker Hojo. However, the SOLDIER knew that Seph could do essentially the same thing with words… and less mess. Didn’t stop him wanting to hit something though, so he bounced, and let people think what they wanted.

“Right now, Rufus may be young and his resources stretched too thin, but that will change. Unless and until he proves either corrupt or incompetent he will have my full and complete support. I will not tolerate, nor will I forgive, attempts made by Don Corneo, or his associates, to undermine what Rufus is attempting to build—especially when we are already under threat. If I hear that your noxious ‘investors’ are trying to destabilize the only functioning government there is, I will come after them with everything I am.”

“I’ll come too because, y’know, I like being the hero and it sounds like fun.” Zack bounced up on his toes.

“It would allow me to atone for my sins,” Vincent joined in, surprising the SOLDIERs although they didn’t let it show.

“I have also decided that you will remain here, in this camp, and assist Commander Tucassa any way he sees fit. If you manage to get a message out to your employers then you may tell them what I said. If I see you back in the base camp, I will kill you,” Sephiroth stated. “Are we clear, Lieutenant?”

Hinz’s face was now blotchy and his breathing was ragged and hoarse. He’d never really had to accept responsibility for his actions before. His family, his social standing, had always insulated him. His parents hadn’t questioned how he’d obtained the money to fix up their many mansions or where the cars and race chocobos came from. They’d accepted the largesse as their due, as he had. It was his right to have money and to live a privileged lifestyle because he’d always done so.

Obviously, that’s not what the General believed and, when a two-meter tall, genetically-enhanced warrior said death was one possible consequence, then a smart man listened. Hinz, not normally
known for his brains, decided that this time he would think before opening his mouth.

“There is another option,” Vincent spoke up, once again surprising the others. “He could choose to continue his function as a conduit.” The pause was heavy with possibilities.

“Become our tool rather than theirs,” Sephiroth clarified, not liking the idea simply because he wanted this man dead.

“Correct.”

Hinz cleared his throat, “I could do that.”

The General narrowed his eyes at the pampered young officer. He knew that Hinz would do just about anything that didn’t result in death or disgrace—or poverty. He would never be trustworthy… but he could be useful. “I will consider it. Until then, the ban on your presence in the main camp stays. Understood?”

The lieutenant meekly agreed but they could all see him thinking that he’d work the angles, figure out some way to benefit or get out of it later. Zack gave him three months, maybe less, before his associates ’suicided’ him in a field somewhere. Hopefully the war would be over by then.

“See, Vinny,” he bounced, “It all comes down to choices.”

The patience of mountains was in the gunman’s voice when he replied, “It’s Vincent.”

Zack just grinned.
Cloud was nearly finished dressing when there was a knock on the door. He knew it wasn’t Zack or Sephiroth. He wasn’t sure how he knew that, it certainly wasn’t anything specific, but he did know. He knew that they were unharmed too, which was good. Besides, if it had been either of them, they would have just walked right in. Whoever was on the other side of the door sounded like they were swinging a hammer in a strength contest at a carnival, although they probably weren’t; Cloud’s hearing was just very sensitive still. Standing in the shower with the water hitting the sides of the enclosure, he’d felt like a kitten sheltering under a tin drum during a thunderstorm.

“Cloud?” Despite everything she’d survived, Tifa’s voice was still light and cheerful. It didn’t sound much different from when they’d been kids together.

The knocking repeated and Cloud winced. “Cloud, are you alright? Answer me.”

“Just a minute,” he responded. He pulled on his top. It gaped oddly because the arm-holes were huge but he knew it was his since it was the smallest one he’d found in the room. He felt funny in the outfit, like it was missing something like weight from armour or a weapon he didn’t have. He kept patting his chest looking for it. He took a deep breath. Was he ready for this? Did he have a choice?

Squinting in the too-bright light that drifted through the tent walls, he walked over to the door, opened it, and stepped into chaos. There was Tifa, chatting with a friendly looking SOLDIER Second Class. Various regular army personnel, in odd coloured uniforms but definitely ShinRa military, were scurrying around the office copying papers and gathering files before trotting out a side door to a larger space beyond. Cloud caught a glimpse of lots of tables and chairs before the door swung shut again.

It was so loud! He barely refrained from hunching over and retreating back into the sleeping area. Then there was the smell: stale coffee, old food and ripened sweat. He was going to be sick.

“Oh hey, there you are Cloud. You’re looking much livelier than you were last night,” Tifa greeted him casually, as if there weren’t this huge gulf of years and events. “No wings,” she commented, “Too bad, they were kind of cute.”

His shoulders twitched but he suppressed the urge. “It’s good to see you again, Tifa,” he said politely.

He felt awkward and unsure; as if a mask he was wearing was being pulled away. He didn’t feel like Corporal Strife, he didn’t feel like a soldier. He felt like he was a twelve-year old misfit again, hoping and praying that the prettiest girl in town would finally notice him. He was blushing. The atmosphere in the busy office wasn’t helping. He was this close to... panic, crashing, throwing up, running away—something bad and embarrassing. “Look,” he said, “Can we go outside. It’s a little—”

A chair fell, knocked over by one of the scuttling flunkies. It landed with a crash that pierced Cloud’s brain. It hurt! His heart sped up, he jumped to the side, and his wings came out as he prepared to face the unknown threat. Unfortunately, one wing caught the urn of coffee and sent it flying. It barely missed hitting an open filing cabinet. As it was, thick, lukewarm liquid went flying in an arc only to land in fat puddles over every available surface. It wasn’t so bad with his other wing. It merely hit the wall and knocked a large map to the floor, but with every loud sound, every
jarring movement, Cloud’s wings beat a warning and they pulled the soldier around. Cloud didn’t
care though. He could hear everything. He could hear them moving and talking and scraping chairs
across the floor. He could hear them breathing. He could hear too damn much.

He hunched over himself, covering his ears with his hands then, when those proved inadequate,
just covering his whole head with his arms and hoping for the best.

“Oh damn,” he heard a somewhat familiar voice say. “Tifa, see if you can get him outside.
Everybody else, get out for a minute,” the voice said.

Gentle hands touched his. A soft voice whispered, “Shh, shh. It’ll be alright, Cloud.”

He knew this voice. This voice held echoes of childhood dreams, of a time when the world was
cruel but sane and understandable. He could trust this voice. He focussed on its soft tones. His
wings stilled and folded in a little, barely fluttering at the noise of dozens of boots hurrying away.
He could still hear them; could still smell them.

“See if you can get him to breathe through his mouth,” the first voice said.

“Cloud. Cloud, look at me. Open your eyes and look at me. C’mon, Cloud, you can do it.” It was
Tifa. He knew Tifa. He opened his eyes a thin slit. Kind brown eyes greeted him. She gave a small
smile. “Breathe through your mouth, Cloud, like this–” She made her mouth into an ‘O’ and
inhaled audibly. Then she exhaled just as noisily. Clumsily, the young corporal copied her. The
overwhelming stench didn’t go away but it dimmed until it was mostly bearable. That, and the lack
of jarring noise now that the room was empty, let Cloud relax his stance. He dropped his arms and
his wings settled although they remained half out and unfurled; ready for any danger. He could do
this.

The SOLDIER Second Class approached. Cloud watched him warily and his wings stretched back
out.

“Here. You should wear these until you adjust.” The SOLDIER Second opened his hands to reveal
earplugs and sunglasses.

“Oh,” Cloud sighed in relief. “Yes, thank you.” He reached out unsteady hands. Sunglasses first
because they were easier to put on, then the earplugs. It was a form of heaven! The light no longer
cut into his eyes. The sounds no longer pounded in his brain. He breathed deep in relief and nearly
gagged. He’d forgotten the smell.

“It might be better outside,” the SOLDIER suggested, “Everything will be less concentrated, but
stay in the shadows; don’t want to damage his eyes.” Tifa nodded agreement. She wasn’t doing
anything here anyways. The fair-haired SOLDIER continued, “Just stay close. I hear they’re on
their way down the mountain and I get the feeling that the meeting will start as soon as the General
opens the door.”

“This is big, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yeah,” the SOLDIER agreed, “I think everything’s going to change now.” Nothing in his tone
said whether it would be a change for better or for worse. He turned away to pick up the papers the
blond had blown over with his wings.

Tifa placed her hand on Cloud’s arm. It was a light touch, barely more than brushing the surface,
but it felt electric, and scratchy and too tight. Still, he reasoned, it was better than falling on his
face or knocking over the table so he said nothing, just concentrating on making his wings go
away. It was a lot simpler this time—no sex required. Instead he was keenly aware of the process and it felt really strange, like a heavy liquid flowing into his body. It wasn’t sensual; it was actually rather disgusting and Cloud hoped that his hyper-awareness of the process would fade as he became more used to doing it.

Needing something to distract his mind, he looked around the tent, trying to piece together what was causing the frenzy of activity. Instead of clues he saw an unmistakable item tucked against the wall. “What’s Zack’s Buster sword doing here?” Where was Zack? He hadn’t sensed that the big SOLDIER was in such danger that he’d lost his sword, but maybe the connection was all screwed up, because there’s no way Zack would’ve left his sword behind. It meant too much to him.

“I couldn’t leave it on the airfield after the fight. I had Torson bring it and I carried Vincent’s shoes.”

“What fight?” he asked baffled before shaking the question away. His heartbeat started to speed up. His breathing quickened. He could feel his wings wanting to come out the more panicked he became. “Never mind. He’s all right, isn’t he?”

“Well, he was doing fine when he flew off with Chaos and, since they’re all coming back down the mountain, and Kunsel didn’t say anything about any injuries, I think we can assume that everybody made it out alive and undamaged.”

Cloud closed his eyes, “Right.” Kunsel must be the light-haired SOLDIER Second Class that had given him the glasses and the earplugs. He did say something about Sephiroth and Zack and some other guy being on their way back to camp. It was good. They were safe. It was okay. His breath evened out. His pulse slowed down. His wings stayed safely in ‘storage’.

Tifa had steadily guided him out of the crowded office. He’d been too distracted to notice so he wasn’t really prepared for when she opened the doors and they walked out into the daylight. He flinched away from it and his wings came out to curl protectively around his head, blocking out the too-bright sun. They almost knocked Tifa over, but she jumped out of the way. “Sorry, sorry,” he murmured, feeling like an incompetent idiot.

Tifa just smiled, “That’s okay, Cloud.” She stretched out and took his hand, leading him around to the side of the structure, asking one of the ever-present runners to bring a couple chairs for them. “Kunsel was telling me a bit of what it’s like when you become a SOLDIER. Usually they isolate you for a couple days in a quiet room with someone you trust.” She turned back to him and grinned, “This ain’t anywhere near that.”

“I’m not a SOLDIER,” Cloud protested.

She looked at him, shocked, “Shiva’s Glory, Cloud, what else do you think you are?” She urged the blond to sit in one of the chairs the runners had set down. He carefully tucked his wings away then perched gingerly on the seat.

‘General Sephiroth’s lover,’ the thought wisped through his head and, although that was a nice thought—a very nice thought, it could only be a part of what he was. As for the rest; what was he? Mixed up lab experiment; fucked up crazy guy—a failure is what he wanted to say but that sounded whiny and pathetic and he’d stopped allowing himself to be that back before he’d left Nibelheim. Yet—he felt like that, like he had at fourteen when he’d vowed to this same person that he wouldn’t come back to Nibelheim until he was a SOLDIER. He’d wanted to prove something to her, and to the rest of the village that had rejected him and his mother. That was seven years ago or maybe it was yesterday. The world was turning electric white, like visual static...
He felt a weight on his back, familiar and unfamiliar, and the smell of old books and used canvas invaded his senses. He was back in the village sitting on the water tower. He was running away from the town bullies to tired for another go round. He was peering at the mayor’s pretty daughter from behind the alder bushes. If he opened his mouth now, he knew he’d stammer just like he had when he’d been a kid. He put a hand to his head.

Tifa, who liked people and paid attention to them, could read almost every thought that went through Cloud’s head. “Since Hojo... defected, or whatever you want to call it, there’s been a great deal written about the stuff he did in ShinRa including the SOLDIER program. I went through some of the notes from the lab yesterday. There was a great deal of information about what Hojo had done to you and, I have to say, there were a lot of similarities. So if you’re not exactly a SOLDIER you’re pretty close.”

Just listening to her soft voice helped Cloud remember which reality he belonged in but it wasn’t that easy to accept what she said. Was he a SOLDIER? He didn’t feel strong. He felt shaky and off-balance and out of place. He didn’t feel confident and strong like Zack always seemed to. Wasn’t he still just ‘little Cloud Strife’, a corporal in the regular army?

He frowned and looked down at his clasped hands. “I– I don’t know if I can believe that. It feels like cheating... or something.” He wasn’t a SOLDIER, he was a failure—a toy broken into fragments and badly put together.

“What do you mean? Like you didn’t ‘earn’ it or something?” she asked, baffled by his tone. She tried to get him to look at her but he kept his head turned away.

“It’s n-not the way it’s supposed to be,” he said softly. This hadn’t been a dream come true, but a brutal nightmare. Not something he’d achieved, but something that had been forced upon him. He wasn’t even sure he still wanted to be a SOLDIER, not if it meant he’d belong to ShinRa again.

“Dilly-dally, shilly-shally,” she said dismissively, “I realize that, for you, everything’s changed but that just means that you need to really think about it, take it all in. This is the way you are now. It may be hard to accept but we’re here and we’ll help you.”

Cloud looked at her, seeing little Tifa Lockhart the mayor’s daughter, just like she had been that night so long ago. “I’m not fit to be a hero.” He couldn’t even control his wings.

Tifa looked back unblinking. She, too, remembered that night; sitting on the water tower looking up at the stars and dreaming of ‘if onlys’ and ‘what ifs’. They were a long way from being those innocent kids, still she gave him a small smile, “I don’t need a hero, but I could always use another friend.” She held up her pinky finger in a universally recognized gesture. Her eyes were soft and open, just like they’d always been, but now they revealed an internal strength Tifa hadn’t had seven years ago—not even three years ago. Life had kicked her down, but she’d gotten back up. She was right; she didn’t need a hero anymore.

Cloud lifted his baby finger and locked it with hers, “Friends,” he promised with a smile stiff with disuse. Tifa grinned back easily.

Tifa sat back in her chair, sprawling a little, and tilted her head to the sky. Cloud tried to follow her example but it was hard for him to relax. Even with the sunglasses and the earplugs and breathing through his mouth, he still felt like there was too much coming at him.

“Try to find one sound to listen to, like a bird or your breathing. Focus on it. Maybe it will help,” she suggested.
He shut his eyes, trying to find some sound that wasn’t irritating or painful. It was surprisingly easy. That SOLDIER Second had been right; with the sunglasses and the earplugs, he didn’t feel overwhelmed by his environment anymore. There was the sound of people moving and talking, distantly familiar sounds as if he’d pulled them from an almost forgotten memory. His lips quirked; it sounded like the compound in Midgar where he’d been trained and stationed. It sounded like any army camp in the world.

It sounded like home.

He closed his eyes and relaxed. It made it easier to feel whatever it was that connected him to Zack and the General. They were okay. He felt himself relax a little more. “Hey, Tifa?”

“How?”

He had been about her family and what she’d been up to for the last three years, but vaguely remembered hearing that Nibelheim had been destroyed and everyone killed. She’d been left alone.

“What is it, Cloud?” she asked, turning to look at him.

“Doesn’t that cloud remind you of that fat, old dragon that used to fly over town?” he said desperately. She looked at him funny before obligingly turning her head in the direction he pointed.

“Yeah,” she smiled, “Long neck, big belly and no legs to speak of.” She pointed, “That one over there looks like a marlboro.”

Cloud followed her gaze. “Dunno, looks like just an octopus to me.”

Tifa tilted her head first one way then the other. “Hmm, maybe.”

They sat beside each other, sharing their interpretations of the puffy white clouds and managing to talk gently about the last three years. Cloud heard all about the village burning, about Sephiroth’s return and Hojo’s escape; about the collapse of the plate and the death of the president. As hard as those were to wrap his mind around—Midgar was gone, harder still was the idea of Tifa Lockhart as an environmental terrorist and a wanted criminal.

Cloud knew about Master Zagan. He’d moved into the village just before Cloud had left, causing a rapturous bloom of gossip in the town square, but he hadn’t known the old Wutai knew how to fight. Apparently, after he’d left to join ShinRa, Tifa had bugged the guy to teach her how to fight. It had gone against her father’s wishes because Mayor Lockhart had wanted her to always be a delicate princess. She’d had to train in secret for the first year and a half. Cloud found it surprising that her father hadn’t gone along with it, everyone had-known that he could deny his motherless daughter nothing but, Cloud supposed, the guy’s belief in what was ‘proper’ for a female had been stronger than his desire to indulge her.

Tifa took his silence as some sort of condemnation because she reminded him that he’d never believed that a woman’s only purpose was to get married and have lots of kids. “At least,” she added chin sticking out in defiance, “that’s what you said.”

Of course, he hadn’t believed that—mostly because living with his mother didn’t allow him that kind of opinion. There’s no way he could think of women as weaker or less competent after watching her. Plus, laws or no laws, his mom would’ve kicked his ass for even thinking such a thing. Later, in ShinRa, he’d seen lots of women pursuing careers in the various armed forces so, no it didn’t seem odd that women knew how to fight, it just seemed odd that it was Tifa, the
prettiest girl in the village, her father’s little princess, and Cloud knew he’d never, ever, say any of that because it somehow made her accomplishment seem less than it was.

Time to change the subject...

“Look,” he pointed at a cloud with a long trailing bit, “That one’s General Sephiroth.”

He was so intent on distracting her from their conversation that he didn’t notice the woman walking just meters away from them. The woman, wearing the medical personnel’s long white coat, was on her way back from the airfield where they’d just finished triaging the injured. Maybe she’d planned to knock on the General’s door to get an update on the people they’d rescued from the underground lab. Instead, she almost walked past the young couple sitting beside the tent before stopping, and doubling back. “Corporal Strife?”

Her voice was loud and amazed and strange to the blond. All he saw was a white lab coat rapidly approaching with unknown intent: a possible threat. He jumped up, knocking over his chair, and tried to scramble away. His balance wasn’t helped when his wings sprang out, as they always did when he felt in danger. He might have felt embarrassed by their display except he had only one thought running through his mind: he wasn’t going back to the lab.

Tifa had also stood up, placing herself in between the two. She held out a hand to stop the doctor’s approach before turning her attention to her childhood friend.

“Woah, Cloud. It’s okay. It’s okay,” she repeated, “This is Doctor Imeera.”

“I’m not going back to the lab.” His whole body was tense and ready for flight.

“I have no intention of taking you anywhere, young man,” the doctor said, “I’m just... I can’t believe you’ve recovered. It should be impossible.”

It was Tifa who asked, “Why shouldn’t he be recovered? Hojo left him alone for months.” She had peeked at the records yesterday, while helping Vincent looking for Dr. Crescent’s notes.

“He was being kept in a tube of almost pure mako and that means that the level of mako in his system is enough to make a vegetable of a man twice to three-times his size.”

“But he has Jenova cells to balance that out, right?” the young fighter pressed. She’d just found him, she wasn’t willing to lose him again and she knew there was something about Jenova cells and mako going together.

“The Jenova virus can only do so much because the amount has to be carefully controlled to avoid spontaneous mutation, or death. To counteract the amount of mako in Corporal Strife’s body, he’d have to have nearly all his cells altered by the virus. He has a high level of infection but not enough to account for this.”

They could argue all they wanted. Cloud didn’t care, he told himself, or at least he didn’t care enough. Mostly, he just didn’t want anyone wearing a white lab coat anywhere near him ever again. He worked to calm his breathing and slow his heart-rate while Tifa and the doctor talked but then she turned and addressed him directly, “You do know that you’re sweating green, don’t you, Corporal?”

Cloud blinked at the odd topic change but said nothing. “If you’re worried about it, don’t be. It’s actually a good sign.”

“What do you mean?” Tifa spoke first, “Why is that a good sign?”
Cloud was glad she’d asked the question. He had noticed the colour of his… stuff, but had just shrugged it away more concerned with getting into the shower and washing it off, and there was no way was he going to say his jizz had been tinted green—not in front of Tifa. Gods! How embarrassing would that be?

“It means his body is trying to find its natural mako balance.” Both the young fighters looked baffled at Doctor Imeera’s response. She sighed; sorry she’d brought it up. It had been a long couple of days what with the mission, the examinations and then having to analyze Hojo’s ‘records’ of what he’d done to those two poor young boys. The fight at the airfield had been the perfect cap to a stressful forty-two hours.

“Everyone has a certain amount of mako in their bodies,” the doctor explained, “For the most part, it’s based on where they live but each person will have more or less than each other person. Science didn’t know why until recently, mostly because Professor Bugenhagen’s research was being suppressed. Now we know mako is the Lifestream therefore it is in everything living on the planet, at least until its material form dissolves. That means we eat it, we drink it, and we breathe it, every moment of every day. As an example, when people move from one area to another they will often suffer headaches, nausea, and diarrhoea, until their body adjusts to the new ambient levels.” Doctor Imeera looked up to see if they were following. Both Cloud and Tifa nodded; it was a common phenomenon.

The doctor nodded once in return and went on with her explanation, “In normal everyday life people’s mako levels don’t spike enough to cause serious symptoms but addicts who switch between mako-based drugs and SOLDIERs receiving their injections very often do, or did. There’s no effective treatment for mako poisoning so we wait, weeks, months, even years, as the body slowly, but naturally, finds its own tolerance level. All we can do is ensure that symptoms don’t worsen into vomiting, diarrhoea, excessive perspiration and uncontrollable urination—all effects of the body trying to rid itself of the excess mako.” She let out a breath.

Cloud wiped self-consciously at his brow. He looked at his damp fingers seeing the colour the doctor was talking about. He rubbed his fingers around in it before scrubbing it off on his pants.

“Are you saying that’s what I have to look forward to?” the blond asked. His wings spread out in response to his agitation.

“Quite frankly, I no longer know what you should expect. Your levels go beyond mild overdose into lethal toxicity. You should be catatonic at the minimum, as you essentially were yesterday, but today, less than twenty-four hours later, you’re conscious and in full control of yourself. The only sign of what you are working through is the mako in your perspiration turning it green. I imagine most of your body’s secretions will be mako-green for quite some time. However, as long as you don’t start to convulse or froth at the mouth, you should be good. Eat fresh food—fruits and vegetables especially, drink lots of water, and shower frequently so the secreted mako isn’t re-absorbed through your skin.” She leaned forward as if to emphasize her next words, “If you feel dizzy, lie down. If the dizziness doesn’t go away, or you get stabbing pains in the base of your neck, or if your vision blurs then sharpens irregularly, come to the medical tent right away, and I mean immediately.” She sat back and picked up her canteen. “If you weren’t from Nibelheim, you’d probably be a bio-hazard,” she muttered into the neck before taking a quick drink. “Any questions?”

Cloud and Tifa looked at each other. Cloud didn’t know if he had questions for her. Hells, he still hadn’t decided if he should trust what the doctor was saying. Before he could figure it out, Tifa spoke up, “Why does being from Nibelheim make such a difference?”

The doctor stopped, stared. “Right, you wouldn’t know,” she said cryptically. She continued before
either of the fighters could comment. “Because we know everyone from this valley has-had,” she corrected, “naturally high levels of mako as compared to the rest of the population. ‘High’ as in two to three times as much. It probably gave him an edge when it comes to surviving being overdosed, just as it gave you an edge earlier.”

Tifa scoffed, “I don’t have wings and I can’t fly.”

“The Jenova virus is what gives a person wings, not mako. As to the flying; I saw the fight with the Tsvisets. The strength of your punches and the height of your jumps could only be achieved by being mako-enhanced.”

“Fight?” Cloud turned to Tifa and asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” she promised once again. She turned her attention back to Imeera. “So I’m enhanced just because I’m from Nibelheim.” It was obvious the young fighter was unconvinced by the explanation. To her, Nibelheim was just a small, backward village that had barely entered the modern world, not the birthplace of super survivors.

Doctor Imeera didn’t quite sigh but she did rub her temple. “It’s hard to explain…”

Cloud looked at the doctor. A memory came forward. Of him touching bare skin, desperately trying to maintain the contact, because— “I could block out Jenova’s voice. That was before Hojo got hold of me,” Cloud pointed out to Tifa. “You did the same thing.”

“That’s right. Anyone who was born or lived in Nibelheim could.”

“It’s that simple?” Cloud asked her sarcastically. His wings flicked in irritation. “I’m from Nibelheim so I can do wonders.”

“Of course it’s not that simple,” the doctor responded tiredly. “Look, could we sit down and I’ll tell you what we know and what we’re guessing at; and maybe it will explain why you aren’t suffering from mako poisoning or still lying in a coma.”

Tifa turned to look at the blond, “Cloud?”

Did he want to know, could he handle knowing how inhuman he was? He decided he needed to know. “How much is me and how much is Jenova, can you answer that, Doctor?” he demanded. “Why am I not dead?”

“Now that’s not simple,” she warned. He just stared at her. “Alright, I’ll do my best but it might get a little technical,” she warned.

“Cloud picked his chair up off the ground and set it in front of Tifa. “I’ll stand,” he said. He could move more freely if he was standing, defend both of them more quickly. The dark-eyed fighter placed it so she was facing the doctor with Cloud at her back, and sat down. Tifa leaned forward and said “You were saying that we weren’t normal.”

Cloud clenched his jaw in unconscious reaction. Being abnormal was dangerous. Scientists liked to dissect things that weren’t normal. He reminded himself that he wasn’t in the lab any more. He wasn’t tied up or drugged up and it wasn’t just Zack and him anymore. They would fight and Tifa would fight for him, so would the General. He wasn’t alone. Breathing steadily, he relaxed enough
to bring his wings in a bit closer to his body; no longer a threat, just ready… in case.

The doctor watched the young soldier with a wary eye. She wouldn’t run—she wasn’t that foolish, but ducking and covering would hopefully minimize the damage if the corporal chose to attack. When his wings folded in she took a breath and began, “Let’s start with Jenova, since she came first.”

The doctor leaned forward slightly and clasped her hands in front of her, “We don’t actually know where the Jenova virus came from. It could be from outer space—that’s certainly what the Ancients believed. You both know what DNA is?” she stopped to ask and received two nods in return. “Alright then the virus attacks the DNA of the host body, attaching itself to it and mutating it to match its own structure instead of the original genome. Once the mutation has reached a certain saturation point, approximately fifteen per cent of the body’s total cellular structure, then it can be passed to others through the exchange of fluids. It’s believed that the infected cells ‘communicate’ with each other, passing each other energy and instructions so that they will mutate more rapidly. This supports the extraterrestrial virus theory as nothing on Gaia does this.”

“This is the simple explanation?” Cloud was feeling sick. They knew all those things because they’d done them to living creatures—maybe even other human beings. They’d injected them with the Jenova virus then watched and measured and waited. He had pictures in his head of the experiments they would have done and how it would look. He’d seen it in the lab so his voice, when he asked, was a little angry and a little contemptuous. His wing tips flicked in time with his agitation.

“Unfortunately, yes,” her answer was short and held no apology. Cloud narrowed his eyes at the tone but kept his mouth shut. He had asked, after all, but he didn’t have to like it—or her, so he crossed his arms and denied any empathy he might feel for the doctor.

“Once saturation reaches thirty per cent there are external indications of infection,” the doctor continued, “They are often the ‘desirable’ mutations: increased speed, strength, healing, etc. It is this level that SOLDIER strives to achieve and maintain. However, the host will be more vulnerable in other ways because the virus in one body can ‘hear’ the virus in another body over much greater distances.” That explained the Firsts’ awareness of General Sephiroth’s location that Zack had told him about, Cloud thought but didn’t say. “This ‘communication’ encourages the virus to continue replicating itself and infecting more and more DNA and RNA strands. Once the ratio reaches forty per cent the changes are extreme and often fatal. Vital organs become misshapen, withered or hyperactive; bones dissolve, or enlarge and twist upon themselves. Anything above fifty percent is one hundred per cent lethal. At least, without mako it’s lethal.”

“My specialty was in the ways mako interacts with the Jenova virus. We know, from the work done on the SOLDIER program and other research, that higher than normal levels of mako are needed to balance and control the virus. Not enough mako, and the virus takes over and the subject mutates like I described before. Too much mako and the virus is eradicated. So the balance of mako to virus is very important in creating a subject that’s both viable and enhanced.”

“Where does being from Nibelheim come into it?” Tifa asked.

“We’re getting there.” Doctor Imeera responded. “Mako has been used in science and medicine for nearly two hundred years but mining it was difficult and dangerous so it wasn’t available in quantity until Robert Shinra, Rufus’ grandfather, came up with a processing plant that could mine the raw mako and then convert it into something safer to handle. That was about eighty years ago. Nibelheim had one of the first processors because the liquid mako was close to the surface so it was easier to access and cheaper to refine.”
“We know this,” Cloud interrupted again, “It’s taught in elementary school.”

Doctor Imeera lifted her gaze to his. “Patience,” she said. Her eyes didn’t flinch away. Cloud’s wings rustled before he once again got them settled.

“When they built the plant in the valley, they didn’t know what the hells they were doing, or what they were dealing with, not really. The plant didn’t have many safety features: no regulators or even monitoring systems. They were used to dealing with small, controlled quantities of mako not rivers of it. They had no way of knowing what materials to use in the construction or what the flow should be. Nibelheim taught them a lot.”

“It was another experiment,” Tifa commented angrily.

“Not deliberately, not at first. The original construction notes are very clear; they thought it would be safe because the village was over a mountain and quite a distance from the processing plant. They didn’t take into consideration the water.”

“The water,” Tifa repeated enlightened. There’d always been something weird about the water in Nibelheim.

The doctor nodded, “The water. Before they built the plant, the mako stream was here,” she held out her hand, “and the water, surface and ground, was here,” she held out her other hand parallel to the first, “but they needed water for cooling and such, so they diverted it to the plant. They used it, contaminating it with mako; then pumped it out into huge tailing ponds to be reprocessed and cleaned. In theory at least,” she stopped and clasped her hands together in front of her. “In reality, faulty design and poor maintenance meant the contaminated water was often flushed into the surrounding area. This altered the phenomic genetic structure of everything in the valley, including that of the villagers. Phenomic means the changes were passed on to the next generation and the next. Over the course of eighty years nearly four generations of Nibelheimers were ingesting significant amounts of refined mako. Each generation had a higher base level than the one previous and each generation added to it until the average level of mako in a typical Nibelheimer was nearly equal to that of a SOLDIER Third Class. They were healthier, stronger and more resilient than any other non-altered group on the planet.”

“We never got that flu that the army brought back from Wutai,” Tifa said softly. She knew people in the next town who’d lost two-thirds of their family because of the influenza epidemic that followed the first Wutai war. Nibelhiem had had one death; a delivery driver who’d collapsed outside the store.

“I imagine no one in the village suffered from colds either.” The doctor paused for another drink and Cloud saw, for the first time, how tired she looked. It wasn’t just a physical tiredness, either; it was the mental exhaustion that came from having seen and heard too much of the world’s ugliness. She put down the canteen and continued, “It wasn’t until ShinRa had the mansion built in Nibelheim—ironically to prove how safe the new reactors were, that they realized the effect it was having on the population. The research facility was built soon after and the scientists were brought in.”

“I always wondered why they had such a big lab here,” Cloud commented, “I mean... this was Nibelheim.”

“One telephone, one TV set... the most exciting thing going was the dart league in the bar at the inn,” Tifa agreed.

The doctor ignored the interruption as irrelevant. She wanted to finish this and then sleep for the
next four years, although she’d settle for four hours uninterrupted. “When Professor Gast
discovered Jenova encased in solid mako, Nibelheim was chosen because of its isolated facilities.
As it turned out, that was—well, either lucky or unlucky depending on your point view, but it was
amazingly serendipitous that Hojo was able to study the mako-enriched locals and the alien virus
at the same time. There’s no doubt that the dual research is what led to his SOLDIER
breakthrough.”

“And that was a good thing?” Cloud asked sarcastically.

Doctor Imeera looked steadily at him, not flinching. “I’ve read your file, Corporal—all of it. Tell
me, why did you join ShinRa?” Cloud shifted uncomfortably. For some reason, at this moment she
made him feel like he was talking back to his mother. “Wasn’t it to become a SOLDIER?”

“But it was built on a lie,” he protested, “President Shinra didn’t want heroes, he just wanted tools
that he could use to crush his opposition.”

“Just because ShinRa lied to them, doesn’t make everything they did a lie,” the doctor countered.
“SOLDIERS protected towns and settlements. They helped with disaster relief and rescue missions.
Your friend, Commander Fair, worked to keep the people under Midgar’s plate safe from
monsters. They were the poorest and most despised of the city’s population and he received no
recognition for it, but he did it, because he believed that’s what SOLDIERS should do. And he
wasn’t the only one to feel that way.” She sighed dispiritedly and rubbed at her temple as if she had
a headache. It was the first outward sign of what she was really feeling. It made him feel a little
guilty for being so hard on her and he realized that she hadn’t shied away from his anger, not once.
He shifted on his feet, uncomfortable with himself until she looked up at him and asked, “What is
wrong with inspiring others to dream of something larger, better, than themselves?”

It was such an esoteric question from the stoic, no-nonsense doctor that Cloud was taken aback.
His jaw dropped and his arms fell to his side. He didn’t know what to say. There were things he
wanted to say but, once again, he didn’t know how to phrase them. He never had been good at
instantly thinking of witty comebacks.

Tifa twisted in her chair and looked up at him. She smiled sadly, “You wanted to be a hero and I
dreamed of being… not worthy of you, but equal to you. So I trained with Master Zangan, despite
what my father and the others said. You were trying your hardest. Could I do any less?”

Cloud blushed and shuffled his feet. Actually, he’d just wanted to be acknowledged as a person.
Make them all feel bad for belittling him or pretending he didn’t exist. Even Tifa had often ignored
him during the day depending on who was around. Then she’d sneak out at night to talk to him—a
dirty secret she had to hide. He would never have gotten beyond being ‘that weirdo Strife’ if he’d
stayed in Nibelheim. Dreaming of becoming a SOLDIER had given him the strength to leave.
Dreaming of one day standing beside General Sephiroth as one of them—one of the elite, had kept
him trying even when he failed the SOLDIER exam. Dreams had kept him alive for the last three
years. So maybe the original intent behind SOLDIER hadn’t been honourable or noble, but his
dreams, his very survival, had come out of it… at least a little.

Plus he’d met some of the med-techs back in Midgar, and even here, and they hadn’t been evil; just
people doing their jobs to the best of their ability. Not everyone who worked in a lab was like
Hojo. He looked up at the doctor, patiently waiting for him to decide… what ever it was he was
deciding which was, he supposed, whether to storm out in a rage, or to stay and listen.

“What level is the virus at in my system?” he asked.

Doctor Imeera huffed, humourlessly, “Nearly sixty per cent. Commander Fair is over fifty. Both of
you are, impossibly, stable. The virus is not increasing or mutating or taking control of either of your bodies. Even General Sephiroth’s system isn’t as stable. Although,” she mused almost to herself, “if you two begin sexual relations, as camp gossip has you doing, then by exchanging body fluids you might be able to stabilize his cells as you did Commander Fair’s.”

Cloud’s eyes widened in shock—he couldn’t believe she’d said that out loud... in front of Tifa, his childhood crush. His wings curled around protectively hiding the face he knew was red as a cherry. It didn’t matter that he was an adult now, a survivor of experiments that hadn’t allowed for any modesty. The doctor was discussing his *sex life*, casually revealing secrets and hinting at details... in front of Tifa!

And, was she suggesting he have sex with the General in order to *stabilize* his *cells*? How. Fucking. Embarrassing. The woman was an automaton, he decided.... and he’d be really happy if the General returned to sweep them away from this discussion *right fucking now*.

“You and the Commander *were* intimate while you were imprisoned, weren’t you?” the doctor asked oblivious, or maybe indifferent, to Cloud’s embarrassment. “I’d be surprised if the two of you didn’t turn to each other for comfort.”

Maybe not so inhuman after all, Cloud conceded, but he still couldn’t say it. Not in front of Tifa.

The fighter looked up him, correctly reading his red-faced shuffling. She blushed too, because the image of blond and black, light and dark, moving together was completely hot, but she also smiled because that meant that not everything her friend had gone through was horrible. “I think he’s too shy to admit it.”

“Oh,” the doctor said, “I’m sorry. It just seemed the most reasonable explanation for the similarities in the behaviour of your cells.”

When it was quiet, Cloud discovered, he could hear the work-crews out at the airfield, busily filling in holes.

“So-o,” Tifa said, breaking the silence and very obviously changing the topic to something they’d all be more comfortable with, “the slow exposure to mako over generations could explain how Nibelheimers blocked the virus’ communications except Cloud’s mother was from Kalm.”

“My father wasn’t,” Cloud said. “He worked at the reactor like his dad before him. He met my mother when he went to the university to study fluid dynamics. When he came back she came with him.”

“My mother wasn’t,” Cloud added. “He worked at the reactor like his dad before him. He met me when he went to the university to study fluid dynamics. When he came back she came with him.”

“Really?” the dark-eyed fighter asked in disbelief.

Cloud nodded. “We lived at the compound until my dad died. ShinRa wouldn’t let us stay there after, because Mom didn’t work for them, and they wouldn’t pay for her to move back to Kalm. The pension they paid was a joke and there wasn’t any work for an academic librarian in Nibelheim. The cottage was the best she could afford.”

Tifa was amazed, stunned, that she’d never known. Had she ever even *asked* Cloud? She looked down at her feet, embarrassed and ashamed.

Cloud saw it and, just as she had known what he was thinking, he knew what she was feeling, “I wouldn’t have told you even if you’d asked. It was safer not to tell because folks in Nibelheim didn’t like people from ShinRa—or educated types.” Tifa’s shoulders stayed slumped and Cloud knew she was beating herself up for not being a better friend. One day she’d realize that their lives
in Nibelheim were like some alternate world where they were friends and almost lovers, but those lives really had nothing to do with this one where they hardly knew each other and their ‘friendship’ was really just nostalgia. Until then, it was nice to have someone else to trust. He put a hand on her shoulder in support and went back to the original subject.

“How does that explain being able to block Jenova? From what you said, with the concentration of virus in my body, I should be able to hear her from the moon or something.”

“Except that your system insulates the infected strands. That’s the Nibelheim variation. The Jenova mutations take place but, it appears that your body, hmm,” she frowned, obviously unable to describe the next bit to her satisfaction. Cloud raised a brow; was the lady doctor finally getting angry? “It’s not the best phrase but it’ll have to do,” she muttered. “Your body essentially ‘kills’ the active parts of the virus, leaving the mutations in place but not allowing it to spread anymore. You might still be vulnerable to her control, but you’d likely have to be in the same room as her; within a few metres at the very least. It should also prevent the mutation from spreading,” she narrowed her eyes in thought, “Maybe even reverse the process although that might be problematical.”

“You want to cure SOLDIERs?” Cloud realized. “Why?”

Doctor Imeera leaned back in her chair, looking at him with weary eyes, “The boys who signed up to be SOLDIER didn’t agree to being changed into something that isn’t human. Heroes, yes. Monsters, no. Some of them dream of being normal again, meeting someone nice and maybe having a family. If I can help them achieve that it would be a good thing, wouldn’t it?”

“So that’s your dream?” Tifa asked brightly.

The doctor smiled without humour, “Me? I dream of finally having an undisturbed sleep.” She looked at her watch, “and, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to the med-tent and try and do that.” She stood up, cutting off any more questions they might have. “Remember the symptoms to watch out for, Corporal, and if you need anything we will do our best to help you—either of you.”

“But—” Cloud started. Suddenly he wanted to know more. All the questions he hadn’t been able to think of before tumbled around in his brain wanted to be asked. Then he felt it, like a wave of energy; Sephiroth was coming.

The future was about to get a lot closer.
They were gathered in the conference room Cloud had glimpsed earlier. There was the General and Zack of course. Like the centre of a hurricane that everything revolves around, everyone was waiting for them to speak, to act, to lead, so they’d know which way they were moving. Kunsel stood near them, giving them a quick briefing on the reports that had come in while they’d been away. Cloud might have been inclined to be jealous of the good-looking Second except Zack had, as predicted, picked him up, squishing him tight and spinning him around. All the while laughing and crying like a loon and so glad to see him Cloud would’ve felt like a total idiot if he’d doubted how the dark-haired SOLDIER felt about him.

Sephiroth had just smiled at him, head slightly dipped so he looked at Cloud through those ridiculously long eyelashes. It was a look filled with appreciation and anticipation, lust and joy. Cloud hadn’t been able to turn away—hadn’t been able to move. If the General had called him over to be fucked on his desk, Cloud would’ve gone. As it was, all the SOLDIERs in the area shifted their weight in order to ease the sudden tightness in their pants, and Cloud was left trying to bring his wings back under control once again.

The big First had decided to leave his bat wings on display even though Doctor Imeera had, predictably, gone into scientific spasms at seeing them, all thoughts of sleep wiped from her mind. When the little hands had shooed her away—seemingly acting on their own, she’d started muttering about ‘second-generation mutations’ and ‘organic permutations’. The First didn’t bother to tell her that they were just acting out the stuff he wanted to say. Tifa was also entranced by them, squealing a little when one of them had shaken her finger. A performance Cloud found bewildering since he’d just finished teaching himself not to think of her as the girly-girl of his memories.

Doctor Imeera had spared a moment to introduce herself to the dark-haired stranger but she didn’t even get a chance to look at him. The man had crossed his arms and stared at her over the collar of his cloak. It gave Cloud the impression that a) they’d have to kill the guy before he’d let the doctor touch him, and b) he would be very, very hard to kill.

Whatever might have happened was interrupted when Kunsel hurried out of the tent still holding the urgent reports he’d tried to deliver nearly three hours ago. When the chatty Second hadn’t even been curious about the battle or why Zack was in a set of worker’s coveralls and not his uniform, all of Sephiroth’s focus had transferred to him and the documents he held. That had pulled everyone else’s attention to them. They’d moved into the tent and they’d all become very busy. Except for Cloud.

Tifa was there in the tent, searching through discs, trying to find something she’d run across yesterday. Cloud knew a little about computers—it was hard to live in today’s world and not know something, but Tifa was working the keyboard like a master. It reminded the Corporal of the times he’d spent watching her play her piano. There were other people in the room, mostly technicians setting up equipment but also a couple more Firsts and some regular army officers. There was also the spooky, dark-haired man in a red cloak who was lurking in the corner. His aura of dangerous unpredictability made Cloud very nervous and the blond soldier couldn’t bring himself to turn his back on the man.

“Vincent,” Tifa called out over the noise, “Can you come here for a sec?” The red-cloaked stranger tucked his nose into his collar, probably to signal his reluctance, but he still moved to the fighter’s side. They started up a low voiced discussion. Tifa was writing furiously, and Cloud could hear that they were trying to remember what had been said in some message they’d both heard.
yesterday. They were concentrating hard, trying to be as accurate as possible, because the General had said it could be important. It was easy to visualize his childhood friend as a kick-ass fighter and terrorist when she looked like she did now.

Cloud was doing nothing.

Even the teenage runners were busy being useful, even if it was just bringing in extra chairs or arranging the food. He’d promised the General that he would be in control of his wings by the time he got back and he wasn’t! He was just a fucking klutz that they stuffed against the wall so he wouldn’t screw things up... again.

He sat in a chair on an empty edge of the room because he had problems keeping his wings in. Anytime he got distracted—which happened whenever he caught the General’s eye, something would startle him. Then they’d pop out and knock over anything or anyone in the area. It was embarrassing and inconvenient, and cleaning up after him took too much time so he’d moved to an empty wall and just let the wings stay out. All he had to do was control their desire to beat at every loud noise. Zack’s wings were hardly better behaved but at least they were smaller so they did less damage. Besides they did ‘cute’ things, like ruffle the First’s hair when he was thinking.

Shit. It was like being back in Nibelheim as a kid.

He dropped his head in his hands and his wings curled around him, locking him into his misery. He ignored the sounds of life around him, people moving and talking. He wasn’t part of them.

“Hey, Spike,” Zack said from in front of him. When Cloud didn’t raise his head, the big First just sighed and crouched down in front of him. “Kunsel said you’re reacting like a new Third. That’s pretty tough.”

“That’s silly. We were three years in that lab,” Cloud argued. “I’m just stupid or something.”

A large hand swatted him on the head... hard. That brought Cloud’s head up only to see Zack frowning at him. “You’re not stupid. You’re not weak and you’re not a failure. How many fucking times do I have to fucking tell you?” Cloud blinked as one of the little hands on Zack’s wings shook its finger at him before settling back on his shoulder. “Kunsel sat with lots of first-timers while they adjusted so if he says that’s what you’re suffering, then that’s what you’re suffering. And for you to have to do it in the middle of a field camp in the middle of a fucking war.” Zack rubbed his eyes, “I’m surprised you haven’t completely freaked out. You are, without a doubt, one of the toughest sons-of-bitches I’ve ever known.” Cloud knew his mouth was hanging open but he didn’t know what to say.

Zack continued, “C’mon, the General is worried about us; says we should be eating. It’s a good idea, Spike, stress makes it harder to control your reactions. That’s why SOLDIERs were isolated after getting their injections. And I need to ask you a few questions, so we can load up on carbs and yak at the same time while everyone else does the work. Not a bad deal, huh?” He grinned. It was his old grin, the one that Cloud remembered from before. Again, Cloud was speechless.

“Here,” Zack continued, holding out his arm, “grab on. Focus on it. Feel your grip around my arm, the temperature, the texture; nothing else matters but holding on, okay?”

“Okay,” Cloud agreed and placed his fingers on Zack’s forearm.

“I said to grip it, Cloud. Are you a pissy little debutante at her first ball, or are you a SOLDIER? Grab on, for fuck’s sake” Cloud tightened his grip automatically at his friend’s tone. When the First told him to stand up, he did that. When Zack started walking through the crowd, Cloud did
that too. At least until the first touch on one of his wings.

“My wings!” he exclaimed. “I should put them away.”

“Nah, leave ‘em,” Zack said, “People will have a better idea of how far they’ll reach if they spring out, plus they give a pretty good indication of how upset you’re getting so they’ll know if they have to duck. And then there’s the Coo Factor.”

“The what factor?” Cloud asked bewildered, moving slowly through the room, twitching at every brush against him. Although people did try to give him more room than they had when he diligently tucked his wings away.

“The Coo Factor,” Zack replied, “The more people coo at you, the more goodies you’ll be given and the more you can get away with. You got these great white wings and those big, blue eyes. People are going to take one look at you and coo ‘angel’. You’ll be able to get away with a lot of shit.”


“It’s not!” the SOLDIER countered, “I used to do this great lost puppy look that had an enormous Coo Factor. I tore up the training room on the 49th floor and got away with just a stern lecture. All because of that look.”

Cloud narrowed his eyes, unsure whether to believe such a cock-and-bull story.

“That wasn’t his worst offence,” the General confirmed, “His mentor was notoriously unable to resist him when he used that look on him.” Sephiroth was standing right beside them. When had he moved there? Cloud was startled and his heart-rate spiked. His wings fluttered presaging full extension. He was going to hit the General, he just knew it.

“Concentrate on your hold of my arm. That’s all there is.” The blond tightened his grip as he struggled to bring his adrenaline levels down. “That’s it, Spike. Just breathe.”

“My apologies, Cloud,” Sephiroth said softly, “I did not mean to startle you.” The General held out a chair in front of a plate piled high with food. It was obviously for Cloud and the blond felt ridiculously touched at the General’s concern.

The General. His superior officer. His lover. He blushed bright red.

“It’s alright, General. No harm done,” he replied, hoping that their audience mistook the unsteadiness of his voice for fright rather than arousal—which was certainly what he was feeling. He sat down quickly. A quick stroke down the back of his neck was the only external sign of affection that the General gave him but it was enough to make his pants very uncomfortable.

Zack sat down next to him, smiling slyly. “Hell of a reaction, isn’t it? He can do that to all the Firsts without thinking about it. Of course, he actually tries with you and you’re particularly vulnerable because you’ve already given in to it a couple times. I’m surprised you can walk.”

“Za-ack,” Cloud protested. He glanced around and, sure enough, the other SOLDIERs in the room were looking at him and smiling knowingly. He dipped his head and squirmed on his seat like a little kid. Zack, the bastard, chuckled in delight.

“Eat your food, Spike. Who knows when we’ll get to eat next.”

Cloud, grateful for a reason to hide his face, once again did as he was told.
From his side of the tent, Vincent kept a wary eye on the rest of the room. It’s not that he expected any of them to attack but he was unable to forget his Turk training enough to relax in the crowd. His beasts would also influence his behaviour, he reasoned, and most of them were creatures of instinct rather than logic.

*I hope you’re not including me in that group,* Chaos complained.

Of course, some creatures had intelligence and logic, Vincent thought loudly, but chose not to use either.

He could feel Chaos huff in annoyance and retreat to a deeper part of his consciousness. Times like these were as close to being alone as he ever got. He became aware that Tifa was gesturing him closer. It was a strange request; they could hear each other clearly from where they were already. She repeated the gesture so, with an unheard sigh, the gunman leaned closer.

She smelled like sunlight...

“So?” she asked.

Vincent blinked in confusion. “What?”

Tifa rolled her eyes. “You were essentially alone with Sephiroth for three hours, so did you tell him?”

Aah, he understood now. Tifa was asking if he’d told Sephiroth that he was his father. He buried his face in his collar, glad that his companion was keeping her voice low. “The opportunity never arose,” the ex-Turk defended himself. “It would have been awkward.”

“Of course it’s going to be awkward. I can’t think of any casual way to bring something like that up,” she said, easily dismissing his weak excuse.

“I haven’t even decided whether or not to tell him.” Tifa just stared at him in disbelief. “He’s lived nearly thirty years without me. Can I be sure that telling him is the right thing to do?”

“And letting him continue thinking that that madman Hojo is his father is a better choice?” She asked scathingly. “A lot of people think insanity is genetic, you know. Maybe he believes it and is wondering—worrying, about when he’ll become as crazy as his father.”

“You don’t know if that’s what he’s thinking,” Vincent argued.

“You don’t know that he’s not,” she countered.

He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything where Sephiroth was concerned. The gunman dipped his head, crossed his arms, and snuck a look at Se—his son. The silver-haired man was impressive; much more commanding than Vincent had ever been—had ever wanted to be. He could see people’s eyes watching him, waiting for him to lead them although only a few seemed fully comfortable in his presence. Zack Fair, for instance, kept handing the General food off his plate. The little blond boy, fully recovered from whatever had afflicted him yesterday, was uncomfortable around the General but for an entirely different reason than from most of the others in the tent. Judging from the teasing and the touching, and the boy’s blushes, the rumours Vincent had heard in the mess tent this morning were true.
He had a son. His son was in love with another man.

Vincent contemplated that reality and decided, of the two statements, he had more problems accepting the first one. Why hadn’t Lucrecia told him? He felt the same bewildered anger and yearning that always accompanied thoughts of the woman he’d loved…

Loved...

Love-ed; past tense. When had that happened?

*Whenever it was, it wasn’t soon enough, my host,* Chaos jeered.

“What’s the matter, Vincent?” Tifa asked. The gunman had swayed as if hit by an unseen force.

“Nothing.” His voice was so low she had to lean forward to hear it over the noise in the tent.

It’s odd, he mused, for some reason he’d expected there to be some sort of event attached to the realization that that part of his life was over. He’d loved Lucrecia with all the passion his heart held. There should be fireworks or a visit from a celestial being–

*I’m with you, my Immortalis.*

Some other celestial being, Vincent corrected himself.

“Vincent!” Tifa poked him in frustration. “This is no time to be spacing out like that. General Sephiroth is going to be calling the meeting to order soon and then, I think, he’s going to get very, very busy. You should tell him now that you’re–” As sometimes happens in meetings, everyone had quieted at the same time, no chatting, no shifting, no ‘clink’ of cutlery. “–Sephiroth’s real father.” If the room hadn’t been made of canvas, Tifa would’ve sworn that her voice echoed. She covered her mouth with her hand and stared up at the gunman. “Oh Holy,” she whispered in prayer and apology.

The ex-Turk was looking towards the silver-haired warrior, standing by his friends. All three of them were looking at the dark-haired gunman. Nobody was moving. Even the anonymous runner, in the middle of stealing a meatball, left it dripping on his fingers rather than disturb the moment by putting it in his mouth.

“You are my father?” The General’s voice was calm, unemotional.

“It is both possible, and likely.” Arms folded, back straight, he looked his son in the eyes, neither proud nor ashamed.

Still silence, the weight of words dragging down the very oxygen they needed to breathe.

“We will talk later,” Sephiroth commanded, after a quick flick of the eyes around the crowded room.

Vincent nodded acceptance, “Very well.”

Motion and noise resumed although a murmur of excited speculation now underlined the more prosaic sounds of chairs scraping against the floor.
Tifa looked first at the General then at her companion. A small sneer, out of place on the small fighter, emphasized her reaction. “That’s it?”

Vincent looked down at her, hiding his smile in his collar, “You were expecting hugs and an orchestra?”

The young woman’s eyes glinted and her sneer deepened into a grin. “I guess I’ll have to wait until the opera is staged,” she teased, “I hear they’re already working on the libretto.”

Vincent’s eyes widened in horror, “Opera?” He could hear Chaos laughing at him.

“Who is that guy?” Cloud asked, still staring at the tall, shaggy-haired stranger that had kept his adrenaline jumping earlier. The blond could easily believe that he was Sephiroth’s father; it made more sense than greasy, ugly Hojo.

“He’s the man you had me rescue when we were leaving the lab,” Zack responded, trying to figure out how much Cloud would remember from his dreamtime. “You know, the one in the funny bed?” The blond frowned. “He’s got ‘angry parts’?” Zack prodded, “Remember.”

The frown deepened then disappeared. Cloud’s face was suddenly relaxed and blank. “The Others still sleep inside the Squire but soon all must wake... or die. It is time to battle the Yearning Ones that look to the stars for their futures,” he said. His voice was serene and as empty as his expression.

“Shit,” Zack whispered. He hadn’t meant for this to happen.

“If the See-er guides Gaia’s chosen into the Labyrinth then the battle can be contained. The Squire will fight the End Weapon. Calamity’s Child will need his Heart to resist the call. Companions can clear the way. All must win their battles or it will be planet’s death.” He gave an odd twist of the lips that could maybe be a smile, “Gaia is not ready to die.”

Zack caught his friend as he collapsed bonelessly. “Did you hear that, Seph?” he asked, “I did and no, I don’t understand it any better than you do except I think--” my father? “–Valentine is the Squire.” The General scooped up his lover and sat, arranging him carefully so that his wings weren’t damaged. “You were asking about him when Cloud went into his trance,” he explained, “and the message talked about the Others being ‘inside’ the Squire and we already know Vincent hosts several other creatures.”

“Okay, yeah. That makes sense,” Zack agreed, “but what about the rest of it?”

“Perhaps once we’ve taken a look at all of the data,” the silver-haired SOLDIER suggested mildly. It was almost comfortable having his-his friend back, taking part in a strategy meeting by talking before thinking, It was familiar.

“Is Cloud okay?” It was Tifa Lockhart. She was squinting at her childhood friend, looking at him in concern but she didn’t try to touch him, recognizing that the General wouldn’t let any but the most trusted personnel touch the Corporal while he was this vulnerable. “Should I get a doctor, or some water, or a potion, or something?”
“He should recover soon,” Sephiroth said. He resisted the urge to hide the small soldier from the woman’s gaze. This was Cloud’s childhood friend, not a romantic rival. Besides, the fighter was a valuable resource and a trusted ally. He had, and would again, trust her with his life. “Cloud’s been experiencing visions,” he told her.

Her eyes opened wide in amazement, “Visions? Really? That’s cool.” Then her eyes narrowed again, “He’s not spouting vague prophecies like the ones in Loveless or the Lore of the Ancients, is he? I mean, those are filled with stupid metaphors that never make any sense. I hate those.”

“I know exactly how you feel,” Zack interrupted, “That stuff gives me gas.”

Sephiroth ignored him, “They seem to be instructions on what to do next.”

“But with stupid metaphors so we don’t know who’s supposed to do what,” the Commander said cheerfully.

The General let out a little puff of breath—he was in public and therefore he wouldn’t allow himself to sigh. “Which is why we’re holding this meeting; hopefully, with all of us working on it, we’ll be able to decipher the riddles we’ve been given. Clear the room, please Commander,” Sephiroth instructed. Zack stood up to carry out the order.

He had always found it odd that someone as self-contained as the General found it so hard to concentrate in a crowd. He’d never said it, and people certainly couldn’t tell by looking at him, but Sephiroth was... not shy exactly, but hyper-aware of being stared at. It was Angeal who’d informed him and then his mentor had pointed out all the small signs that indicated when Seph was feeling overwhelmed. At the time, he’d felt like bursting with pride that he was being brought in on the secret. It wasn’t until later that he realized the First had been training him to take over as the General’s SiC because he didn’t plan on being there to do it.

“Odin’s Balls. My head hurts.” The voice was soft but well known and Zack was thankful to have his bleak memories interrupted.

Everyone talked at once; “Hey, Spike.” “Cloud!” “Welcome back, Corporal. Are you feeling better?”

Cloud clutched his head. He wasn’t sure actually. He felt like he’d been dragged through a river and over a waterfall. All his joints ached. He could hear someone’s heartbeat slowing down, calming, or maybe it was that he could feel it. For some reason, he felt like he had water stuffing up his ears making the normal noises muffled and distant. Still, it wasn’t as bad as the best day in Hojo’s lab. “I, uh, I think so.” There was something else different about his present...

“Why am I on the General’s lap?”

“You went into a trance state, made a pronouncement, and collapsed,” the General recited calmly but Cloud had heard Sephiroth’s heart-beat and knew it was a lie. His face started to heat up, especially when he realized that Sephiroth had a hand on his spine, right between his wings, right on a major erogenous zone and his body was reacting right on cue.

He let his hand fall away from his head to land casually in his lap. A quick look up to see if the General had noticed... Sephiroth’s eyes were glinting in appreciation. He knew what he was doing... and the effect it would have.
Cloud was shocked. General Sephiroth was a pervy bastard!

Cloud’s eyes narrowed in determination. “I’m good now, Sir. Thank you,” his voice was professional. After a brief struggle, which thankfully was more of will and therefore unseen by the interested crowd, Cloud stood up, tucking his wings close to his body without thought. He shrugged his shoulders and assumed his long-forgotten mantle of impersonal, competent NCO.

“So, the stuff I said, will it be of any use?”

“That,” the General responded dryly, “is what we’re about to find out.”

It was a much smaller crowd once Zack got through with it. The large First made short work of clearing out the excess personnel. It was part of his gift that the people who weren’t invited to stay didn’t resent being excluded, even if they had the rank to expect it. In fact, rank had very little to do with the General’s choice of attendees. It wasn’t just those directly involved, but those whose input he valued; which explained the presence of Master-Sergeant Lutton and Lieutenant Kunsel and the exclusion of the by-the-book Senior Camp Commander.

While the Commander was busy doing that, Sephiroth gestured over the laconic Master-Sergeant. “Red XIII?” he asked. The designation was the one Hojo had given Nanaki in the lab and the creature had asked that it be used with strangers or in formal situations. Sephiroth thought this would qualify on both counts.

“Already on ‘is way to Cosmo Canyon,” Lutton replied, “but we’ll send a copy of the findin’s to the Professor so’s ‘e can give ‘is opinion. Just like you said, guv.”

“No chance of recalling him?” Sephiroth agreed with Valentine that the felid’s input might be useful.

The Master-Sergeant replied to the General’s questions but he kept his gaze steady on Cloud. The blonde, aware that he was out-ranked, even if he was wearing a SOLDIER First’s uniform, kept his return gaze passive and impersonal, but also immovable. The General had placed him here, by his side, so here he’d stay. The senior NCO’s stare narrowed in a silent test of authority no different from a handshake. It was impressive, but far less scary than the stuff the blond had survived under Hojo. Cloud’s chin dropped, covering his neck; his lips drew back just a little and he could feel something like a growl rumbling in his throat. He couldn’t see his eyes flash as the pupils elongated but MS Lutton could.

The experienced sergeant smiled to realize that the boy would fight for the General with everything in him. When Lutton was finally dismissed, he gave the blond warrior a short nod of approval. Cloud watched him leave with wary eyes.

“The pissing contest is over now, Corporal,” Sephiroth said startling Cloud out of his aggressive stance.

The young soldier blushed. “It’s not, I mean, I wouldn’t—”

“It’s funny, but I suddenly have a great deal of sympathy for a bone that’s being fought over.” That just made the blond fidget even harder. It was one thing to face down a sergeant, but quite another to embarrass the General in front of his staff.
“Relax, Cloud,” Sephiroth said with a small smile, “I was teasing you. It’s a mode of conversation I have just recently mastered.”

Cloud, just barely managed to keep his jaw from dropping to the floor. He didn’t remember this side of the General at all... at least... he didn’t think he’d ever seen this? Dimly, a static filled picture formed in his mind, a brief memory of a happier time. There’d been food, lots of food.

...

“Any ideas on how to proceed?”

There’d been the three of them. Breakfast... and bare feet under the table; deciding how they would deal with Jenova once they got to the reactor.

“We need a plan?”

Zack had asked in his usual cheerfully casual style. Sephiroth’s response had made him choke on his coffee:

“Unlike others I could name, I have never charged an entrenched position with a strategy that consisted only of a yelled: ‘It’ll be a surprise’. ” Zack had grinned unrepentantly.

...

It was a wonderful memory. He hadn’t been weird or weak little Cloud Strife, but a member of the team, needed and wanted and included. It was also inspiring. His lips curled up just a little.

“I don’t know, Sir. They say it takes years to get it right” he said, his voice at its most inoffensive.

The General’s eyes slitted slightly. “You don’t think I’m doing it right?” Cloud just looked at him with innocent eyes. “In that case, I shall practice on you, shall I, Corporal?”

Cloud leaned in a little closer, “I’d be honoured, General, to help you with whatever you desire.” He looked the General right in the eye on the last word, his invitation clear.

Cloud wasn’t the only one who could growl.

Suddenly, Sephiroth wanted this meeting over and everyone gone. Only the little quirk of the blond’s lips let the General know that this was exactly the result he’d been hoping for. The Corporal leaned a little closer, “Payback for the wings, Sir,” he murmured before returning to his casual at-rest position slightly behind the silver-haired warrior; looking as if he had not a care in the world.

‘Well, well,’ Sephiroth thought in satisfaction. He wasn’t sure if it was Niisan or the Corporal, or a mix of the two, but he was glad to see the return of Cloud’s more... durable side. Seeing his lover huddled against the wall, trying to hide from everyone, had been most upsetting. This teasing, stubborn, confident NCO was much more to his liking. He dipped his head to the papers in front of him, trying to hide from everyone, had been most upsetting. This teasing, stubborn, confident NCO was much more to his liking. He dipped his head to the papers in front of him, hiding his smile, as he tapped them into a neat stack. He looked up at the assembled personnel. “Shall we begin everyone?”

The rustling stopped as the General gathered all the attention onto him. “In front of you are various pieces of information and speculation. These include a history of Hojo’s experiments with Jenova
and Deepground, and their actions since their existence was exposed, up to their latest activity which Lieutenant Kunsel has just recently brought to my attention. Last night, at 2100, Hojo’s cloned warriors attacked the ShinRa base that guarded the Temple of the Ancients on the Woodland Isle. For those of you who had friends stationed there, a list of KIAs and MIAs is included.”

A couple people at the table quickly thumbed through the pages. Sephiroth hadn’t had a chance to read the list either—had no reason to really, but thought it appropriate as one of the two ShinRa Generals. He flipped to the correct page and scanned over it. Then he beckoned Cloud a little closer. He whispered instructions and Cloud nodded his understanding. It came as no surprise to the blond soldier that the General knew exactly who was going to be getting bad news. He went into the office and found the bottle just where the General had said. He whistled softly in appreciation. He had never been much of a drinker, but even he recognized the label as one of the most expensive.

He returned to the conference room and had no difficulty in finding the person the whiskey was meant for. The Master-Sergeant he’d faced off against earlier was sitting as if Petrify had been cast on him. Cloud poured a generous amount into the man’s coffee and snuck a quick glance at the abandoned list: LUTTON, Darcy, PFC – KIA. He looked at his CO and lover, lifting both the bottle and his eyebrow in an unspoken question. A shallow nod and Cloud put the bottle down in front of the stricken NCO.

“Master-Sergeant?” the General inquired.

He swallowed, “Yes, guv?”

“Do you need to retire?” There was no condemnation in Sephiroth’s voice; after all, he knew what it was to grieve for loved ones.

“No, guv. I can continue.”

“Very well, then let us do so.” Sephiroth self-consciously cleared his throat. “We don’t know what happened in the Temple but survivors report that the building shimmered, the ground shook, and the Temple disappeared leaving only a deep pit behind. The clones went into the pit then left. We know, from a separate report, that the Temple was transformed into something called Black Materia. This materia was used at approximately 0200 this morning to perform a summon of legendary power. Hojo has called down Meteor against the planet. At 0220, five creatures crawled out of the Northern Caves. These have been identified as Weapons and are purported to be part of Gaia’s ultimate defence system. Their names are,” he paused to read his notes. He had to squint to decipher Zack’s impatient scrawl, “Sapphire, diamond, ultimate, ruby and emerald.”

“That sounds more like a necklace,” Tifa joked.

Someone else laughed, “It would be cool if they were made out of jewel stones. Then we’d all be rich when we destroy them.”

“Fuck,” Zack said over the murmur of excitement, “Aerith’s message: ‘the Planet’s Jewels can stop the Heaven’s Stone’. The Weapons are, mostly, called after precious stones and they were made by the Planet, and Meteor could be called ‘the Heaven’s Stone’.” He turned to Seph who looked thoughtful.

“You mean we don’t have to destroy them?” Kunsel asked in disbelief.
Sephiroth made a note on his pages. “I have no reason to doubt the source so it will do as a working hypothesis.” The soldiers at the table looked at each other. It was odd for there to be a battle they didn’t have to fight. “As of half hour ago, we had locations on only three of the five; the Central Sea, the Northern Ocean and the Coral Desert. There have been no aggressive actions observed.”

“This coincides with a discussion I had with Nanaki.” Vincent spoke up. When all the attention turned to him, he buried his face deeper into his collar before continuing. “His grandfather has read about these ‘weapons’. They defend Gaia from catastrophe but he had no idea how they define ‘catastrophe’—although it sounds like Meteor would fit the requirement. He also had no information on how they’d defend the planet.”

“Stomp on the mother-fucker,” Zack muttered, taking another look at the photos.

The Silver General nodded at Vincent and ignored his SiC’s little comment. “Then, unless and until, the situation changes we won’t concern ourselves with them.” He set aside that stack of notes. “Before we get deep into discussion regarding the various prophecies and pronouncements we’ve received, that might apply to our current situation, I would like your opinion on the chart that compares what we know of Hojo and DGS’s motives and activities. Please feel free to continue eating while you read.”

Sephiroth knew that combat troops and SOLDIERs always appreciated a chance to eat a hot meal, sitting down. Not being shot at while doing it was a bonus. The swordsman was pleased to see both Zack and Cloud going back for more—Zack filled up two plates automatically and Sephiroth knew the second one was for him. It was such a simple action but it relaxed some small bit of coiled tension inside him, and he thought, once again, how fortunate he was that Hojo had never understood friendship or love. If the Professor had ever realized how important these two were to Sephiroth, his ‘greatest’ experiment, he would never have abandoned them... and he, Sephiroth, would still be alone.

He had quickly absorbed the information in the packages, speeding through it to determine whether his instructions had been followed. His staff had chosen the examples well, maybe not exactly the ones he would have chosen, but they presented his ideas adequately.

Zack returned to the table, stepping over the chair and setting the second full plate down in front of General Sephiroth. He pulled his own plate closer, settled the papers in front of him, and dug in. Sephiroth smiled to watch him. He flipped forward then back again as he was forced to find information he’d missed the first time through. Cloud read as he ate—steadily and thoroughly. He stopped every once in a while to make notes in the margins, a small frown created a divot in his brow. He’d removed his sunglasses as the sun went down and the light dimmed, and he was no longer jumping at every noise. Soon he’d be completely adjusted to his new body and making love to him wouldn’t overpower his nervous system. Maybe, Sephiroth thought, those two years hiding in his mind had had a positive effect after all. He was mastering himself much quicker than SOLDIER Thirds usually did.

Thinking of Cloud running away made his eyes drift over to the dark gunman, with his red eyes and cloak. He had vague memories from his earliest childhood of the staff at the lab responding to emergencies involving Specimen ‘V’. They had sometimes talked about it in his presence, he realized, because they’d said that Hojo had let his ego get the best of his common sense and ‘V’ was more than the professor could control. They’d been talking about him, Vincent Valentine, who was now claiming paternity. How did he feel about that?
He scrunched a mental nose in disgust. Playing silly mind games was not the way to approach the issue, even if this was the time—which it wasn’t. He was in charge of this meeting and of deciding what actions they would take as a result of it. Vincent Valentine had waited nearly thirty years to announce himself. He could wait another three hours. It didn’t stop the General from assessing the man from under his lashes and behind his hair. He wasn’t sitting at the table but leaning over it, weight resting lightly on his gauntlet-covered hand. He scanned some pages quickly, some he essentially stopped at and read word-by-word, but at all times his focus was intent on the pages in front of him. His brass-covered fingertip tapped out the rhythm of his thoughts.

Valentine’s concentration was so intense it seemed the gunman didn’t notice that one of Zack’s wing hands was mimicking the rhythm of his fingers, even down to the quick double-tap that indicated he’d finished a section.

He was being hunted by the Tsviets for something called protomateria. He was an extraordinary marksman and a level-headed fighter. He harboured at least three other creatures inside him, including one that might be the key to saving the planet. He had hidden himself away in a cave for at least ten years rather than confront his new reality. He had known what both ShinRa and Hojo were capable of yet had said nothing, done nothing.

Vincent Valentine as his father rather than Hojo?

Valueless.
“But,” SOLDIER First Class Torson argued, “If Deepground doesn’t agree with Hojo’s plans, why didn’t they just kill the bastard? Even the little one... um, what’s ‘er name?” He snapped his fingers in frustration.

“Shelke,” Kusael provided.

“Yeah, her. Even she’d be able to break Dr. Creepy without breaking a sweat,” the First finished.

“Hojo has the power of Jenova backing him up. That’s not something to be dismissed lightly,” Sephiroth said and they all fell silent once again. They’d finished reading the package and had been discussing the pros and cons of the General’s theory for a while. Looking for ways to take advantage of the potential weakness Sephiroth had spotted. So far, they’d been talking in circles.

“It might be possible to fracture their alliance,” Kusael suggested.

“If the reports from Deuce are correct, they already have problems,” someone argued, “They don’t support each other’s actions—”

“--but they don’t interfere either,” another counter-argued, “After all, they let Hojo call down Meteor.” Several people nodded their heads.

“Destruction of the planet seems to be integral to both their goals so it would hardly matter who did it,” Vincent said then buried his face in his collar as they all stared at him.

Tifa’s voice cut over the din, “Do we know for sure that Meteor will destroy the planet? I mean, won’t it just burn up in the atmosphere like most cosmic rocks do?” They looked around the table at each other.

“That’s wot caused Crater Lake, in’t it; ast’roids ‘itting the surface,” Master-Sergeant Lutton said into the pause. He never spoke much in a crowd but he’d been unusually silent; Sephiroth hadn’t pressed. He knew the burly NCO was following the conversation and, if he didn’t say anything now, he would later when it was just him and the General.

“We have been hit before,” Cloud agreed. He was at the side table getting more fresh fruit to eat and water to drink, following Dr. Imeera’s instructions. He didn’t want to admit that he was feeling better because of it but he felt more stable now and, when he wiped his face on the paper napkin, it had only a hint of green colour.

“Whether an asteroid survives the atmosphere depends on its size and composition.” He put down his plate so he could use his hands and continued talking. “If it’s mostly ice then, yeah, it’ll likely melt away before it even hits the ground, but if it’s mainly ores, such as nickel and lead, then it won’t lose much mass. It’ll just plow into the ground and cause a big hole, like Crater Lake. Scientists think that it’s one of the factors that caused the civilization that built Bone Village to die out. The Crater Lake asteroid hit the planet so hard it caused billions of tonnes of dust to enter the atmosphere, lowering the temperature and freezing just about all living things on the planet.” He glanced up and saw that everyone was looking at him. Zack and the General were smiling, or maybe it was smirking. Cloud blushed hot enough to melt the ice in his glass.
“Continue,” the General instructed. “How will this cause the planet to disintegrate?”

“If there’s an almost equal mix of ores and ice then as it enters the atmosphere the friction will cause the ores to superheat, the ice melts into water, the water boils and turns into steam. The steam expands and causes the asteroid to explode.” He flung his hands out to illustrate the effects of the blast. “Over land that would cause a shockwave that would take down trees and buildings for kilometers but “If one that size hits where the plates overlap,” again he demonstrated with his hands, “then the asteroid might enter the planet’s core. If it explodes close to the mantel then that’ll likely set off a chain reaction causing the plates to burst apart like a frag-grenade.” He looked up to see everyone in the room staring at him again. Zack was grinning. “It’s a theory, anyway.”

Tifa had to shut her mouth. “Where did you learn that stuff?”

“His mother probably had a book on the subject,” Zack murmured to her in response and, oddly, Sephiroth’s smile deepened.

“Actually, I saw it on a science show. But the ShinRa library did have a few really good books about it.” They were still looking at him. Zack was laughing. “What? It was interesting,” he defended himself. It only made Zack’s grin wider.

Sephiroth finally had mercy on the young Corporal. “That means that the initial hypothesis is still correct. If Meteor hits the planet, as Corporal Strife described, then it will break apart and Jenova will be returned to space.”

“And what will Deepground get out of it?”

“They must control Omega,” Tifa suggested, “Didn’t Lucrecia say it was the last Weapon, and that he would, essentially, gather up all our spirit energy and take it somewhere beyond the stars for a new beginning, or something?”

She turned to the tall gunman beside her. Vincent inclined his head in agreement, “That’s what the message said.”

Zack smacked his head, then looked for and removed a sheet from the pile in front of him. He looked up at the red-eyed gunman, “So I guess Vinnie’s coming with us to the Northern Caves,” he said brightly. “After all, we need ‘the Squire’, otherwise known as Chaos, to fight ‘the End Weapon’, otherwise known as Omega.”

Vincent said nothing. He didn’t need to; Tifa asked the question for him. “What do you mean ‘coming with us to the Northern Caves’?”

Zack leaned back in his seat, surprised that it wasn’t obvious. “Well, isn’t that what this meeting’s ultimately about? Who’s going to go up to the Northern Continent to kick their asses and save the world?”

The tent fell silent. “The army—” Torson started but Zack was already shaking his head.

“Even if we can get the whole Western Army moving in the next week, which I doubt, moving this many people through the pass, across the occupied territories to the northern coast, over the strait and then marching them up to the Northern Caves is going to take too long. Meteor is falling. I bet we have a week, maybe two at most before it gets here.” Again, he shook his head. He tapped the table and his little wing hands mimicked the motion on his shoulder—just so they’d know how serious he was about this. “No, what we’re talking about is a small, carefully selected strike force
that will head directly there and take out the enemy at the top.”

“And you're decidin' who goes on these prophecies of yours?” Lutton scoffed.

“Actually, yeah,” Zack said. “For various reasons, we know Vincent Valentine is the Squire. He has to be there to fight Omega–”

“How do you know the Omega Weapon is still there?” Kunsel asked.

“Because it’s the only one that didn’t crawl out of the cave.” Kunsel still looked confused, so did a couple of the others, so Zack explained further. He raised the pictures of the Weapons and named them, “Diamond. Ruby. Sapphire. Emerald. Ultimate. No Omega.” They looked impressed at his reasoning and Zack nearly rolled his eyes at their obtuseness. Did they think he was just a grinning idiot? These guys had read the same reports he had and the conclusion was obvious. How could they not see it?

Oh shit.

Not ‘seer’ but ‘SEE-er’.

Oh well, he consoled himself, it’s not like he was going to stay behind anyway.

“If Vincent is the Squire then who are the others?” Tifa asked.

“I’m the See-er because, uh,” ‘you guys are dense’ wasn’t a good way to put it, “because, with my modifications, I can easily navigate through the caves.”

“General Sephiroth would be Calamity’s Child,” Vincent stated. Sephiroth’s eyebrow went up in challenge. “In the papers recovered from the lab, there were notes made of research made by Professor Gast. His wife was a Cetra and he interviewed her extensively on the decimation of her race. It was caused by ‘a calamity from the skies’ that they trapped in a Cetra named Jenova.” He stopped there. He knew, because the test results had been saved, that Sephiroth, his son, had been modified until nearly two thirds of his body’s cellular structure was the same as Jenova’s. He knew, because it had been in one of the notebooks, that Hojo had told Sephiroth that Jenova was his mother. Lucrecia might not have existed for all the mention Hojo had made of his brilliant, deceased wife, but none of that was anybody’s business but Sephiroth’s, and his.

Sephiroth considered the gunman’s explanation. It was, unfortunately, logical. “Agreed,” he nodded.

He wasn’t the only one who heard Zack’s muttered ‘Fucking Hojo.’ Those closest to the large First backed away slightly and Sephiroth saw that Zack’s eyes were glowing with furious emotion.

“Zack,” he murmured, “you need to calm down. It was a long time ago.” He placed his hand on Zack’s shoulder because his friend’s face had darkened in anger. The General knew that Zack was angry at Hojo—for him, for himself, for Cloud; for all the nameless, faceless victims of the professor’s mad obsession. Small, bony fingers clutched his as Zack concentrated on his breathing, on unclenching muscles caught up in the desire to fight and destroy.

“Shit,” Zack muttered back, “I should be doing better than this.”

Cloud came up on the other side of him. He also placed a hand on the SOLDIER’s shoulder, wincing only slightly as sharp talons scratched him. “Why? It’s only human to want to kill the man who caused such misery, isn’t it? Which is why I’m going with you to the Northern Caves.” The last part was said defensively. His small chin was stuck out obstinately.
“Of course you are. You’re my Heart.” Sephiroth’s voice was so bland and matter-of-fact that it took a moment for the other two to realize what he’d said. They both stared at him—along with the rest of the tent’s occupants, to see if the Silver General realized what he’d just admitted. His cool composure gave them no clue but his eyes twinkled in satisfaction. Zack twisted to see how his young friend was taking the declaration and blinked in stunned amazement.

Cloud had coloured on just about every bit of skin they could see; from deep rose on his face and neck to a pretty pink on his chest and upper arms. His mouth hung open and his big eyes were impossibly wide in stunned disbelief, amazement and a hint of joy. He was so frozen into his bright pink pillar that, when Zack twisted his shoulder away, Cloud’s hand remained in the exact same position as before.

Tifa’s hands clapped over her mouth to restrain her delight. His own little wing hangs weren’t quite so kind, they clapped unrestrainedly. The First’s anger slid away and he smiled at his friend. “I should take a picture and use it as a demonstration of the term ‘pole-axed’.”

Cloud blinked and wondered why the room was getting so dark.

“Breathe Cloud,” the General ordered.

Cloud managed a weak “Yes, Sir.” The air felt good in his lungs.

“Just how do you plan to get up to the Northern Caves?” Kunsel asked, “Walk?”

“’e’s right, guv. The Nibel pass is blocked ‘cos of the radiation from the reactor.”

“That probably wouldn’t cause us any trouble,” Sephiroth murmured. Zack’s hands clenched.

“They can take a boat from the coast,” someone suggested.

“Huh,” Tifa snorted, “That would take just about as long as walking.” Most of ShinRa’s fleet was on the other side of the continent, ferrying supplies between Costa del Sol and Junon.

“What about flying?”

This time Kunsel snorted, “The pilot would have to be crazy to fly into DGS territory, like that.”

Zack’s fists relaxed and he grinned at his fellow SOLDIER, “Too bad Reno’s not here. He’d be perfect.” The two laughed at the memories. They’d both flown with the red-haired Turk before and it had usually been as exciting as actual battle.

Sephiroth looked at them, face calm. Although he’d never admit it, he was thankful Reno’s innovative piloting skills wouldn’t be inflicted upon him. It wasn’t that Reno’s flying made him scared or anything weak like that, just that the General preferred flights to be relaxing and uneventful. Neither of which Reno was known to provide when he was in charge of the helicopter.

“Still, it’s a good idea. Even if you could only reach Icicle Inn–”

“What’s left of it,” Torson muttered bitterly and Zack remembered the First was originally from the skiing resort.

“It would still be a good start.” Kunsel finished.

“Problem wif that, sirs, is that DGS has good air defences,” Lutton commented, “And we ‘aven’t managed to figure out ‘ow they do it. You’ll be lucky if you reach the coast.”
“I think we’ll have to try it though, Master-Sergeant. As Zack said, time is tight. Who are our best pilots? Perhaps one of them would be willing to volunteer.”

Before the Master-Sergeant could answer, the Firsts heard a brisk step approaching the tent. They all quieted—anybody interrupting this meeting probably wasn’t bringing good news. Even the unenhanced of the group could hear the guard’s responses to whatever the newcomer was saying, enough to know that the trooper was losing the fight to keep the guy out. There was a brisk knock on the door. Since this was immediately followed by the opening of the door, the General didn’t bother inviting the person in.

“Good evening, Tseng,” the General said.

“Good evening, General,” the Turk said.

“Holy shit,” said the stunned SOLDIER First Class. “Betcha Tseng would do it.”

“No bet,” Kunsel responded.

As it turned out, Tseng was there as a delivery boy, not as an instantaneous gift from the planet in response to their emergency. The items he had carried from Junon were a felt bag containing a small, pearl-white materia and instructions, which he handed to Sephiroth, and a box full of letters for Zack. Three year’s worth of letters, written once a week, by hand, from Aerith to Zack. While Tseng filled the details of the Weapons’ current locations (all over) and activities (nothing much), Zack sat with the box on his lap, running gentle fingertips over its surface. The rest of the world faded away.

“She really waited for you.” It was Cloud’s soft voice. The Corporal was crouched beside his chair.

Zack looked at him. Cloud had never really believed that anyone would be waiting for them or looking for them. One thing about the little blond; he was not an optimist. Cloud had taken his earplugs out and was rolling them around in his hand. It was costing him to have them out, Zack could tell; he was tense and jittery once again but at least his wings weren’t flying out and knocking over everything in reach.

“So, are you going to open them or just stare at the box?” the Corporal asked.

“I’m gonna stare at it until I’ve convinced myself they’re fucking real then open it?” Zack responded before changing the subject. “You must be doing better. No shades, no earplugs and your wings are mostly calm.”

“It’s still too loud, and I feel like I can taste stuff through my skin,” the blond said. Zack nodded—he remembered the sensation, “but I won’t be able to go on the helicopter with you tomorrow if I can’t control everything.”

“Seph said that?” Zack was surprised. The General had sounded pretty adamant about taking the soldier along.

“No, that Turk. He said piloting would be impossible with too many distractions.”

Zack snorted, “I think it would take a lot more than you flapping your wings to distract Tseng.” Cloud smiled dutifully but a small frown remained between his brows. “What?”

Cloud leaned closer while long, white wings fluttered in agitation, “I recognize him but I don’t
know where from. Just, seeing that dot on his head makes me think of being damn cold, for some reason.”

That made Zack grin. “He was the pilot for the mission we met on—to the Northern Continent, as it happens. We got shot out of the sky and had to fucking crash land on the side of a snow covered mountain.”

The blond frowned a little more; he couldn’t quite remember it and he should remember it. After all, it was where he met Zack and that was important. His wings stretched out but he brought them back under control. “That doesn’t exactly recommend him to me as a pilot.”

“Hey! We walked away from it, didn’t we?” Cloud shrugged, conceding the point. The First’s smile fell away. He looked back at his box of letters. “That was a shitty, fucking mission. I should’ve said no, should’ve stayed in Midgar and let someone else go, but I was hoping—” his voice trailed off. He rubbed his box of letters. “Meeting you kind of made up for the rest of it.”

Cloud stayed quiet although he let his wings wrap around them a little, giving his friend the illusion of privacy while the dark-haired SOLDIER worked through his unhappy thoughts. That mission was the one where Zack wound up killing Commander Hewley who’d been his role model and mentor. He’d been on the receiving end of a couple drunk and sloppy phone calls after that one.

Zack slanted a glance at the blond, “You know President Shinra is dead and the company is... ruined.” Cloud nodded. Nobody had told him but he’d pieced it together from what he’d overheard. “It’s a good thing they’re gone because I’d’ve gone after them next.” He lifted his eyes to look at his friend and Cloud was startled by how cold the normally sunny blue looked. “For all the things they did to people I care about, what they let happen, what they encouraged: torture, experiments, and just killing the planet. If the old board was still running things go after them and fucking tear them apart.”

Cloud placed a comforting hand on the First’s shoulder, rubbing lightly at the skinny fingers until they grabbed on tight. “We’ll be going after Hojo tomorrow, the General said. Tifa’s going to take us to the quartermaster’s to get supplies; weapons, materia... and a new uniform for you. He’s going to stay here with the camp people and go over long-range plans and strategies. I think they’re going to try pushing up to Rocket Town as a distraction for us.”

“Makes sense.”

“They’re not sounding too hopeful about it working. This flying up to the crater, I mean. They’re not sure we’ll even make it to the coast of the Northern Crater.”

“We’ll get there, Spike.”

Cloud looked away, unable to voice his other concern; that he’d be as useless on this mission as he’d been on the last. It had been three years since he’d held a gun and, even then, he hadn’t been great with them. ‘Good enough for army work’ had been the assessment. He’d been working on his sword handling, preparing for the day he’d be a SOLDIER, but he hadn’t really fought anything with one but, again, that had been three years ago.

Slick, little talons flicked his nose, “I can see you putting yourself down,” Zack said. “You gotta stop doing that, Spike.”

Cloud rubbed his nose, “It’s been three years, Zack. I have no idea what I can do.”
“Exactly!” the First said firmly, “You have no damn idea. Possibilities are you’ll be fucking great; as good as me, maybe even better. You don’t know so don’t be so fucking negative on yourself. When are we going to get our shit?”

Cloud looked around the tables. People were packing up and leaving. “Right now it looks like.”

“Okay, okay.” Zack stood up, clutching his box.

The blond looked at it, then at Zack. “You going to take that with you?”

He smiled sheepishly, “Thinking about it.”

Cloud just laughed at him. “I forgot you’re a romantic. Go put it in the General’s private room, Commander. We’ll wait for you outside.” When Zack scooted off to put the precious box someplace safe, the blond wandered over to where Tifa and the spooky ex-Turk were standing with the intimidating current Turk.

“–brought it with me when we were informed that you’d been found alive.” Valentine was inspecting a bizarre three-barrelled gun that looked more like a piece of art than a weapon. “I’m also to inform you that you’ve never officially been removed from the Turks payroll.”

“Then did you bring my back pay with you as well?” the tall gunman growled out, obviously unimpressed.

“Administrative leave without pay. That can be changed however.” Red eyes flashed gold. Tseng didn’t even jump. “You can think about it and let me know your decision once we’ve finished this mission.” The placid-looking Turk turned to the side to allow Cloud to join their group. The blond kept his distance from the Wutaian, carefully not looking at him. There was just something about the Turk that made Cloud think that he would be perfectly willing to scoop him up and take him somewhere to be ‘lost’ again.

“Corporal Strife, it’s been a long time,” Tseng said, “I hope you’re well.”

It was a polite phrase, said often and usually without meaning. Usually. Here it seemed like they’d all been hit with Silence materia as Cloud wondered how to respond without starting on the huge list of ShinRa’s past misdeeds that the Turk could have prevented or changed, including but not limited to, the three years the young soldier had just spent being a lab specimen for a mad man. He wanted to flare his wings and bare his teeth at the guy. Valentine just wrapped his arms even tighter about himself until it seemed he was squeezing a black fog of dust out of his mantle. Even Tifa shifted uncomfortably.

“Um, yeah,” the blond finally said, forcing his wings to go away where they wouldn’t reveal anything.

“Commander Fair’s just gone to store the box you brought him. I said we’d meet him outside so we’ll be out of the General’s way.” The suggestion was eagerly seized upon by Tifa who persuaded Vincent to come along with them even though he said he had no need for either weapons or a uniform.

A quick question reassured them that they didn’t need to worry about the Turk. He may have come on a simple delivery but he was prepared to fight the next Wutai war if required. He would stay behind and brief General Sephiroth on the latest events on the Eastern Continent. None of the three looked at any of the others but somehow Cloud knew that they’d all let out the same sigh of relief. Turks were too close to all of ShinRa’s dirty dealings for any of them to want to spend much time
with one, at least not so soon.

Outside the sky was soft. The day’s colour was fading through indigo to black and becoming rich with stars. Three years since he’d seen this, Cloud thought then realized that it was probably even longer for Valentine. “They’re so pretty.”

“Can you see Meteor?” Tifa asked and they all looked around the sky for it.

“There,” Vincent pointed it out. “That star doesn’t belong.”

“That’s Meteor?” Tifa said dubiously, “It looks pretty small.”

Cloud squinted at the bright red dot. “It’ll get larger. That we can see it at all, at this distance, is not good.” Cloud added. “If those Weapon things don’t stop it, it’s big enough to kill all living things on the planet, if the planet survives.”

“Life is, by its very nature, impermanent. To become so attached to something so ephemeral... is unwise.”

Tifa and Cloud just stared at the tall gunman. “But surely that’s just part of living?” Tifa protested. “We have to make the most of it while we’re alive.”

Vincent looked at her, red eyes muted in the dim light, “I’m sure that’s exactly what Rupert Shinra told himself as he sat in his tower; that he was just making the most of the life he’d been given.”

Cloud snorted because he couldn’t disagree with the ex-Turk. He could easily picture the self-satisfied President telling himself something like that and using it to justify his actions. In fact, people who had looked at this life as the only one they’d be given, who only thought of what they could gain in this life, not what they’d be leaving for future generations, often used that kind of reasoning to justify the most vile actions and decisions.

An image floated through his head of a young nurse who gave him a piece of chocolate to suck on while she changed bandages. A single parent who’d told him about wanting to give her daughter a better life but that she now couldn’t look in the eyes. A human being who’d cried for him. A nameless person who’d died because she’d been kind. With that picture in his head he couldn’t completely agree with the gunman either. Most people weren’t like Old Man Shinra or Hojo or even Hollander. Immortality or travelling through the stars... ordinary people didn’t dream of that, not seriously anyway. Most people were decent and kind. They were just trying to live a normal life and make the world a better place for their kids.

“That’s just depressing,” Tifa harrumphed and pulled Cloud out of his thoughts. She crossed her arms and turned away from them, preferring to stare at the door of the tent as if willing Zack to walk through. He did, and then stopped in the doorway, taken aback by the fighter’s fierce glare. His wing hands waved hello, ignoring the tense atmosphere.

“What?” He didn’t think he’d done anything to annoy the woman; not even a comment or an obvious downward glance...

“It’s not you. It’s these two,” she said, jerking her thumb to indicate her companions. “I swear they’d look into a sunny sky and see tomorrow’s rain.”

Zack relaxed and his mouth lifted in a lopsided grin. “Oh yeah, well. That’s why they need us.” He walked forward, slung his arm over Tifa’s shoulder and steered them away from the General’s tent. “If they didn’t have us to cheer them up, they’d bury themselves in a cave somewhere and not come out for a couple decades. Oh wait... one of them’s already done that...” The SOLDIER
winked at his companion. She giggled.

Cloud just sighed; it looked like Zack was in hyper status. He got this way sometimes, when he
didn’t feel able to deal with strong emotions. He looked to the gunman next to him, about to make
a comment about it, but noticed that Valentine had tensed. The ex-Turk’s narrowed eyes followed
the dark-haired SOLDIER as he made Tifa laugh again. “He acts like a man without sin,” he
murmured to himself. He’d forgotten about the blond’s new SOLDIER-level hearing.

“If anyone can be without sin, it’s Zack. He’s as close to being a hero as anyone you’re ever going
to meet.” Cloud said, just as softly. He snuck another look at the dark-haired man who was
glowering at the retreating pair. “You know, you don’t have to worry. Zack’s got a girl so he’s not
going to make a move on Tifa.”

Vincent’s eyes narrowed in annoyance. What was Strife suggesting? He wasn’t thinking of the
young fighter like that—as a romantic partner. He wasn’t... because that would be... presumptuous.
He still had to atone... he hadn’t earned the right. He was unclean and she... wasn’t.

*Ah, innocent love. How quaint... and how boring,* said the voice inside him. *It would be more
fun to see her naked and sweaty.*

The ex-Turk growled—at both voices, “You are mistaken.” He strode off, firmly. His longer legs
allowed him to quickly outpace the group and their senseless chatter. After all, he already knew
where they were going.

Cloud blinked in surprise. Did Valentine think no one would notice or did he not realize the way he
looked at her? He shrugged the question away as it was hardly any of his business if the gunman
did or didn’t make a move on his childhood friend. Tifa was more than capable of making up her
own mind about who she wanted to be with. He jogged forward until he caught up with his friends.
Zack was teasing the woman about the tiny cowboy outfit she’d been wearing when they’d arrived
in Nibelheim. It wasn’t the size that he was calling her on, it was the lack of insulation because, as
he said, it was freaking cold in the mountains. Cloud joined in the friendly insults, thin-blooded
jungle boy versus thick-headed mountain folk. A game that lasted until they’d reached the supply
tent.

They didn’t see Vincent until Zack pointed him out. He was perched on top of the main pole of the
adjacent structure.

“Woah,” Cloud whispered.

“Vincent! We’re going in,” Tifa yelled, “Quit being a gargoyle and get down here.” That made
Zack bust out laughing, bending over and slapping his legs. Even Cloud had to snicker although he
politely covered his mouth.

Vincent touched down lightly beside her, “I am not a gargoyle.”

Tifa smiled, “Then don’t act like one.” She turned to include the others. “The first thing to do is
get your weapons and accessories, that way we’ll know how much materia we can bring.”

“I do not need more weapons or a uniform,” was Vincent’s repeated objection.

“That’s okay, neither do I,” she countered and, sure enough, despite Vincent’s objections, Tifa had
them in the back room with a flash of authorization papers signed by the General himself.
Uniforms for Cloud and Zack were easy to get. Supply always had plenty of SOLDIER uniforms.
The clerk even had their names and sizes on her list so it was just a matter of pulling them out of
the box. Cloud protested that he wasn’t really a SOLDIER. Then he suggested that the uniform of a SOLDIER Third would be more appropriate since he hadn’t gone through the proper training. The clerk just blew bubbles with her gum and hauled out the plain black of a First. “Sign here,” she said and pointed at a line on her inventory sheet. Cloud readied himself for one more try but she gave him a bored look and snapped her gum in his face. He shut his mouth, defeated.

Then it was into the armoury to find weapons.

Vincent wandered over to the guns, of course. Cloud walked beside him but he snuck peeks at the sword rack. He’d barely begun practicing with them when he’d been sent to Nibelheim. It had been part of his dream and he’d wanted to be ready for the SOLDIER trials. After they’d been captured, and when they’d been healthy enough, Zack had used to make him do katas in his cell, as a way of focussing and exercising, and taking both their minds off their situation. However, broken and abbreviated exercises in a small room hardly constituted proper training. Imagining a blade in your hands was not the same as actually having one.

As a member of the regular army, he’d had extensive training on assault rifles, of course, and that’s where all his experience lay. He picked out the one that most resembled the model he’d used before. The T Machine Gun was a reliable weapon, always had been, and he saw that it now had two materia slots—nice, except, when the clerk handed him one, it felt odd and unbalanced in his hand. Plus it didn’t really go with the uniform—who ever heard of a First using a gun? He sighed unhappily.

Zack tapped on his shoulder, “Come look at the blades, Spike.” Cloud opened his mouth to object. A pair of raised fingers stopped any words. “Tch, what did I tell you earlier?”

Cloud thought of the First teasing the ex-Turk, “That you have a death wish in the form of a warped sense of humour?”

Zack smiled, “Nice one, but no. That you don’t know what you’re capable of… so try out one of the swords.”

Cloud gazed over at the racks of shiny weapons. It was tempting… “If you think it’s a good idea.” He allowed himself to be persuaded.

Unlike the guns, which were assembly-line standard issue clones of one another, the bladed weapons were made in small batches of a dozen or so, or they were unique, hand-crafted or personalized one-of-a-kind. Soldiers got attached to their guns but the relationship between a SOLDIER and his sword was often even more intense so, in order to do their best fighting, there had to be a connection between the sword and its wielder, and it could only be described as the ‘feel’ of it. That’s why the swords were on easily accessible racks not kept behind a wide counter like the guns.

There was, of course, a ShinRa clerk keeping a careful eye on the stock, as the black-market for weapons was always high. The clerk, who prided himself on his knowledge of the blades he looked after, glanced at the slim blond and pulled out a slim sword. “Why doesn’t the young man try this one?” the clerk said and held out a weapon not unlike the General’s Masamune. “It’s become a very popular style; light but strong—easy for our smaller warriors to handle.”

Cloud took the hilt in his gloved hand. The gloves were stiff—part of his new SOLDIER First uniform, but that didn’t explain why the Wutaian katana felt so… so wrong in his hand. It felt insubstantial, like a child’s toy rather than a real weapon. He twirled it a couple time but quickly gave it back. The clerk raised his eyebrows in surprise.
“What about this one?” Zack suggested. It was a southern-style rapier with an elaborate hilt and an almost triangular blade. Heavier than the slim katana, Cloud still twirled it easily. He assumed an overhead stance and couldn’t tell where the blade was in relation to his body. Still wrong. He handed it back.

“What’s that one?” he pointed out a weapon with a fancy red-and-gold crossbar and a dark-red blade.

The clerk lifted his eyebrows in surprise, “That one?” he confirmed. When the blond nodded he pulled it out using both hands. “This is the Ragnarok X-series; one of the last blades developed by ShinRa’s weapons department. It’s said Director Scarlett took a personal interest in this one, hence the colour. It’s heavy,” he warned but Cloud just stood with his hand out. The clerk passed it over.

Cloud wrapped his right hand around it and carried it as if it were a feather. The young SOLDIER twirled it, swung it around his body in a figure-8 then brought it down in a decisive two-hand slash. He’d nicked himself with the sharp points of the guard. He frowned at the trickle of blood. The clerk stood frozen in surprise. He couldn't believe that the small SOLDIER had manipulated the heavy blade so easily. It was the first time his judgement had been so wrong.

Zack, watching his friend, could see small signs that the Ragnarok X wasn’t a perfect fit. He saw another heavy sword with a much less flashy design. Brass rings worked into the crossbar would both hold materia and protect the wielder’s hands. The blade had a wide black stripe down the middle that was etched with stylized cloud patterns. ‘Perfect,’ the dark-haired SOLDIER thought.

“Try this,” he said and traded weapons with Cloud. The tiny tension lines disappeared from around the blond’s eyes and mouth, replaced by a look of satisfaction. As the new SOLDIER danced with the sword Zack turned to hand the red sword back the supply clerk. “So what’s that one called?” he asked with a jerk of his thumb over his shoulder.

“Actually, it doesn’t have an official name. There’s no record of it in any of the books,” the clerk replied, “A submarine crew recovered it from a downed airplane and turned it in. They called it ‘Heaven’s Cloud’ because of the decoration.”

“Did you hear that, Spike? That one’s got your name on it,” Zack called out gleefully. He turned back to the ShinRa clerk. “Sign it out to Cloud Strife, SOLDIER First Class,” he instructed.

“You’re kidding me,” the clerk said.

Zack just grinned and shook his head. He tapped an impatient finger on the log book, “Cloud Strife, SOLDIER First Class.” With a shrug the clerk did as he was told. Cloud swung the sword and, with a swirl, hitched it to his back like he’d seen Zack do so many times. Tifa applauded the showy move and the black-haired SOLDIER gave him a thumbs-up. The young blond blushed and ducked but he gave a pleased smile. Zack had said he didn’t know what he was capable of so he would do his best to be his best. Even if his skills were rusty or non-existent, he wouldn’t let that deter him. He straightened his posture, determined to be fearless.

“Okay, great,” Tifa said brightly, “Now we’re off to the Materia Pit to load up on that.”

Chapter End Notes

I know that the Ragnarok is, statistically, a better weapon than Heaven's Cloud but,
come on, how could I resist a name like that? Besides, I never did like the spikes on the Ragnarok. Looks like a bad guy's weapon to me.
“That went pretty smoothly,” Tifa said, waving ‘good-night’ at Zack and Cloud. “Cloud was absolutely freaked at being given materia, wasn’t he? It was kind of funny.”

“He took it seriously which is good in someone we’ll be fighting with,” Vincent rebuked her gently, “I, for one, would rather not be burned by a badly aimed Fire attack.”

*Tsk, tsk, my host, that’s hardly a concern for us, but it does keep the feisty one by your side.* Vincent ignored the comment.

She smiled at him, unrepentant, “True.”

“Commander Fair explained that they didn’t teach regular troops how to use materia before they were captured.”

“Also true,” she agreed. Her smile wobbled, “You know he looks almost exactly the same as when he left Nibelheim. That’s not right. It was nearly seven years ago yet, sometimes, he still looks like that kid.”

“You loved him?” There was no emotion in his question. Putting emotion into the question would be too revealing. Hope was for the man without sin.

*Pffft!*  
“*I thought I loved him but I think I just wanted to have his courage.*” She looked up at the stars, remembering. “He was only fourteen when he left. He’s been through so much yet, when I look at him, it feels like I’ve aged and he hasn’t—like he could be my younger brother.”

*Hmm,* *his guest mused gleefully.*  
*If she thinks of him like a brother, it’s unlikely that she wants to bed him. You might have a chance, my immortalis. Why not kiss her and find out?* Vincent ignored that too.

“If by that you mean that you look mature, confident and capable, then I would agree.”

*That was a horrible complement, my host. I despair of you,* Chaos sneered. Vincent gritted his teeth.

Tifa looked at him; her cheeks dimpled happily, “*Why thank you, Vincent. From you that’s high praise indeed.*” Vincent was gratified when Chaos was stunned into silence. It wouldn’t last long but he’d enjoy it while it did.

They reached a tent, exactly like its neighbours except for the number painted on the door. “This is
your tent,” she told the ex-Turk. “Don’t worry you’re not sharing it with anyone.”

“Did they run away?” he deadpanned then wondered if she’d understand the joke.

She did. Her smile widened, “Your humour’s exactly like the General’s—drier than the Corel Desert.”

*You could kiss her now, my host, my own. Take those luscious lips in yours and finally forget that weakling female you mooned over for so long.* Vincent looked down into dark eyes and could almost admit to being tempted. She was so alive, so human—soft yet strong. He had to agree with his unwanted ‘guest’ on one thing; Tifa Lockhart would fight to the death to defend those she claimed as loved ones. He looked into dark eyes...

...and lost the moment.

Tifa looked away, over to the airfield where they could both hear machinery still busy repairing the landing strip. Her hands were clasped behind her. “Well, it’ll be an early start and it’s been a long day. I’ll see you tomorrow, Vincent.” She gave him one last, easy smile and walked away.

The gunman watched her retreat. Her body moved in an enticingly feminine motion, smooth and powerful. Her long hair swayed with every stride pulling his attention down her strong back to her bottom. Its movement was just hinted at in the army-style pants, but it was enough to hypnotise him. He wanted to touch it, touch her. He lifted a hand to call her back and dim moonlight glinted on brass. The gauntlet he wore as a weapon looked almost exactly liked Chaos’ normal hand. He’d forgotten. He wasn’t human. He was a beast or maybe an amalgam of beasts. He couldn’t touch someone as pure and generous as the young fighter.

He couldn’t touch her, but he could be close to her.

Unnoticed in the shadows, Vincent used his beasts’ knowledge of the darkness to follow the small warrior. He took up position outside her tent.

*This isn’t going to get us laid,* Chaos pouted. Vincent didn’t care. Perched on the pole, he guarded his lady’s rest. Seeing, but unseen in the busy camp, he waited for dawn and his thoughts drifted...

Zack didn’t bother to look up from sorting the box of letters. He recognized the soft pad of bare feet entering the General’s office. His friend was fresh from a shower and smelling clean and shiny. “Hey, Cloud,” he said in greeting.

“Hey, Zack,” the blond returned, pulling out a chair and sitting down next to him. They were both wearing thin, standard-issue sleep pants but, because of their mako-altered metabolisms, neither felt chilled. Actually, in Zack’s case, it made him feel human because \textit{he’d chosen} to take the shower and \textit{he’d chosen} what to wear afterwards. No white-coated lab hag with orders and a schedule had been involved in the process.

The blond put a delicate finger on one of the piles. “You haven’t started reading them yet?”

“Nah,” he didn’t look over, “sorting them by date. Should maybe start at the beginning, right?” Cloud didn’t say anything just grabbed a handful of letters out of the box and began shifting through them.

“So why aren’t you in the shower with Seph?” Zack asked absently. His attention was on the letters so he didn’t notice as Cloud stiffened. “If I remember rightly, you both enjoyed that last time.” It
was only when his friend squirmed like a kid needing to go to the bathroom that Zack looked up from the task that had his heart pounding and his stomach churning in both anticipation and dread. Cloud was blushing and looking anguished. “What? What is it?” the dark-haired SOLDIER asked.

“He says we have to wait at least another twelve hours for my system to be settled before he’ll— he’ll, y’know, touch me.”

“Fuck me. He’s being a gentleman?” Zack laughed, “No wonder you look like a slum kid staring through a candy store window.”

Cloud’s blush deepened. “Fuck you too, Zack,” he said without heat. The small-town mountain-boy didn’t swear much but there was something about being around Zack that encouraged more ‘colourful’ language. “Asshole.”

Zack chuckled as Cloud squirmed even more, but he decided to take pity on him, “He’s doing the right thing, you know.” Big blue eyes looked up hopefully. “You know how you told me you felt like you could taste things through your skin?” Cloud nodded. “Still feel that way?”

Again Cloud nodded, “It’s not as bad though.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Zack brushed that aside. “Sex, when done with someone you truly care about, is supposed to overwhelm your senses. If Sephiroth does it right, and I can’t imagine him not, then, with your hyper-sensitivity, he could orgasm you right into a coma.” He stopped, an evil grin lit his face, “I wonder if he’s in the shower jacking off right now so that he can be all noble and shit when you’re in bed together.” Zack snickered thinking that all of old ShinRa’s media machine had always downplayed the sexual side of their star fighter. Hojo had tried to drug it out of him. If only they could see him now…

Cloud, however, didn’t see any humour in it. He had an image of Sephiroth naked in the shower, water running down that chiselled body, long fingers wrapped around his hard penis, head tipped back in ecstasy... His own penis twitched in response. He dropped his head on his arms. “Shit” he moaned softly, “this sucks.”

“It’ll pass faster than you think, Spike.” Cloud didn’t even raise his head he just gave his tormentor a hard hit to the arm, a silent command to shut up. Zack just laughed.

The SOLDIER had sorted all the letters into years so now he started to sort them by week. Aerith, being a smart girl, had put the date on the outside of the envelope. Soon he’d run out of ways to delay reading them. He looked at the rough hand-writing, so unlike his delicate Aerith but typical of kids with the patchy education common under the plate. He lifted it to his nose but smelled only paper dust.

“Should I start at the beginning or read the most recent ones first?” he asked nervously.

Cloud turned his head to look at the dark-haired SOLDIER. “I dunno. The beginning is logical, isn’t it?”

“Yeah but... what if she thought I died or abandoned her or something. Those letters would be a bitch to read, don’t you think?”

A small smile played around the blond’s mouth, “Want me to read them to you. I promise to edit out all the weepy bits. Maybe we could find you a plushie to squeeze... for comfort.” Zack was glad his darker skin hid his own blush. He’d hate for Cloud to know he was tempted. He twitched a glance at the blond. He knew. That smile, that glint in the eyes... Cloud knew.
“Asshole,” Zack said.

Cloud sat up and grabbed a stack of letters to sort. “Pussy,” he said, not looking at his friend.

“Perv,” the First responded.

“Rodent.”

Zack turned in shock, “What?”

Cloud didn’t look at him too busy squinting at the scraggly, indecipherable date, “Y’know... the bat thing.”

“Oh,” the SOLDIER said, enlightened. They sorted in silence for a bit until Zack said “Bats aren’t actually rod–”

“–aren’t rodents,” Cloud finished. “Yeah I know, but calling you a mammal isn’t much of an insult.”

They shuffled letters into order.

“Calling you a puppy just feels wrong,” Zack complained.

“Good.” Cloud responded firmly.

“Chocobo?”

“Bastard.”

It was a companionable silence between them. So many times, in the lab, talking had been dangerous or impossible. They’d learned how to just be with each other; presence alone offering the support and companionship they couldn’t express. Into this quiet they heard the water shutting off in the General’s shower. Cloud knew Zack would be wondering if he should stay out here, in the office, despite Sephiroth’s prohibition to intimacy.

“I’m supposed to tell you to come join us whenever you’re finished out here,” he said. “It’s not like the General and I are going to be busy, after all.” He couldn’t keep all the disappointment out his voice.

The dark-haired First smiled, “You’ll have plenty of time in the future.”

“We both will.” Cloud stood up and placed his hand on Zack’s shoulder. The First had tucked his wings away when getting his uniform and hadn’t brought them back out. It was just him under the fabric. “Thanks.”

Zack blinked quickly and kept his eyes on his task. Once Cloud was through the door he grabbed a tissue and blew his noise. He knew Cloud would hear it, but he was in a different room so it wasn’t the same thing at all.

They’d finished sorting the letters. They were in three neat stacks: year one, year two and year three. One for each year they’d been imprisoned. She’d never believed he was dead; she’d told him that when he’d called her on the way out of Nibelheim, so there shouldn’t be any emotional grenades waiting for him in any of her letters, right? It was highly unlikely that he’d find a ‘Dear Cid’ letter buried in the stack yet he couldn’t bring himself to open the first one.

He pulled out his PHS, flipping it open to check the time. A quick calculation, one that that getting
very familiar, let him know it was too early for anyone to be up in Junon—even one with a garden. He wondered if she went out selling flowers along the sea shore, encouraging the scruffy businesses to plant them in front of the worn out façades. He knew if he owned any of them, he’d be so completely suckered in by her he’d buy out her whole stock. And all this was just an excuse to delay opening her letters.

He stood up, walked around, did some squats; thinking about it, trying to figure it out. What the hells was he so afraid of? He’d talked to her on the phone and already knew that she still loved him. Then he realized…it wasn’t what she might have said that had him so upset, it was the fact that he’d missed three years with her; three years he could’ve been holding her, kissing her...loving her.

_Fucking Hojo! Fucking ShinRa! Fuck the lot of them. He was glad they were dead._ Then he sighed. Aerith wouldn’t approve of that attitude. Aerith believed people could change, and would change, given the right circumstances. People called him an optimist. He was a fucking shamateur compared to her.

He plopped his ass down in the chair and, with a mulish cast to his jaw, opened the first letter.

_Dear Zack;_ she began. _This is letter #1. It seems so odd to be writing you a letter when you’re supposed to be back in only a couple weeks but a promise is a promise…_

He smiled because the picture of her saying that was so clear in his mind. He rested his cheek on his arm and continued reading, hearing her voice across the years.

General Sephiroth, as enhanced as he was, hardly needed any light to see. That was the reason there was only one lamp, turned low, in his private area. That it created a soft, romantic atmosphere was completely coincidental. Cloud knew that, but it didn’t stop him from sighing plaintively at the sight of the big bed that would only be used for sleeping tonight.

Sephiroth entered in time to catch the tail end of Cloud’s sad little sigh. “Cloud?” he moved forward anxiously, eyes scanning for damage.

Cloud turned to plead for leniency on the whole wait-twelve-hours thing but his mouth went dry when he saw Sephiroth. The General was wearing the same boring sleep pants he was but they somehow looked different on him, clinging and draping over the lean muscles of his legs and hips... and groin. Then there was the man’s _chest!_ Sephiroth had always had broad shoulders but now they were even wider, and the muscles over his ribs and belly were tight, strong and clearly defined even on his pale, pale skin.


“Cloud, are you okay?” Now the General was touching him, running trembling hands over whatever body part he could reach. Considering his arm length, this meant he managed to touch most of Cloud without trying and, everywhere he touched it felt like Bolt materia being fed directly into the smaller man’s system: muscles, nerves, veins, even bones lit up with a buzz that was just barely on the near side of pain and just short of orgasmic. And Sephiroth wasn’t even trying to turn him on.

“Stop, stop,” the blond gasped, the force of it pulling him up onto his toes. “I’m fine just, just stop... please.”

The General stepped back and Cloud, released from the sensation, crumpled to the floor. He lay
panting, eyes closed, feeling both light and heavy and very, very weak. He felt, more than heard, the General move a step closer. “Cloud?” the General’s voice was almost timid.

The voice came from right above him so the blond opened his eyes, lids barely making it half-way. It was enough to see Sephiroth’s acid green eyes wide in concern. His long, silver hair was swaying just inches from Cloud’s body. The blond reached up a lazy hand to grab a tendril and wrap it around his fingers. He was amazed that he could manage the complicated movement. “’m-’kay,” he promised with a soft smile. Now that the danger was past he actually felt pretty good; lazy and sated. “I unnerstan’ why we ‘aveta wait twelve hours. Hmm,” he undulated slightly, enjoying the lazy stretch. With his eyes closed he looked like a satisfied cat. “I couldna take much more of that.”

“But, I wasn’t even caressing you,” Sephiroth said enlightened.

Cloud’s smiled deepened, grew a little predatory. If he could’ve, he would’ve been purring, “After three years, I guess I can’t resist you, not even the smallest touch. Not that I’d want to… Sir.”

The General flushed in embarrassment and arousal and carefully avoiding looking any lower than the Corporal’s chest, “Ah,” he cleared his throat. “Should I help you to your feet?”

“Probably not,” Cloud said. He yawned and released the strand of silver hair to cover it with his hand.

Sephiroth, newly freed from the small binding, straightened and glanced around the room. Cloud wasn’t the only one who wanted to touch. A neutral topic was required.

His eyes skittered self-consciously over the bed and latched onto the wide sword that had joined his narrow one. Weapons... metal weapons, rather than flesh, would be a safe topic. “Zack said that your new sword was made for you. What did he mean?” Except, now that he was actually looking at the sword, rather than its bearer, he could see the pattern of clouds etched into the black fuller in the middle of the blade.

“The soldiers who found it called it ‘Heaven’s Cloud’, ” the blond rolled onto his side. “I thought the supply clerk was going to have a heart attack when Zack told him my name.”

The silver-haired warrior had moved closer to the heavy sword. He reached out a hand to measure the width against his spread fingers. He glanced back over his shoulder, “May I?”

“Of course,” Cloud moved out the way, giving the swordsman room to swing the blade.

Sephiroth might prefer his signature two-metre Masamune but that didn’t mean he didn’t train with, and master, all the swords commonly used by his SOLDIERs. How could he design training programs if he didn’t know a weapon’s strengths and weaknesses? He shifted slowly through a couple different routines; a bastardized Wutaian kata and a free-flowing eastern exercise. “Nice balance,” the swordsman commented.

He then tapped the blade along its length and width and listened intently to the resulting tone, seeking any imperfection in its forging that might cause it to break just when Cloud needed it most. It rang true. He gave a sharp nod of satisfaction. He tested the edge with his thumb creating a thin line of red that sealed almost as quickly as it appears. Then he did something so theatrical that his blond lover had to stifle a giggle behind his fist. The General pulled one of the shorter hairs from around his face and dropped it over the cutting edge. “Huh,” he muttered in disappointment when the hair didn’t fall in two.
Cloud didn’t even try to hide his laughter. Sephiroth glanced up at him and smiled. “One of these times, it’ll work,” he vowed.

“Doesn’t Masamune...” the blond started to ask but Sephiroth was already shaking his head.

“Masamune is the sharpest blade I’ve encountered but even it needs some force to cut. Gravity works on larger items—I’ve cut an apple by dropping it on Masamune, but there’s very little gravity at work on a strand of hair. Perhaps one day,” the Silver General murmured as he moved to sit on the bed, Heaven’s Cloud still nestled in his hands. He examined the bright balls of materia now imbedded in the cross-guard, touching them lightly to assess their power and their strength.

Cloud had never before realized that he could envy what were essentially big marbles but, as he watched long, slender fingers rub and caress the orbs, that’s exactly what he felt. Then he felt a low hum that lifted the hair on his arms. The orbs were glowing a little brighter than they had. He sat up in concern. He didn’t know much about material but he knew that, when they glowed on their own, it was a bad thing. “General?”

“A very modest selection of materia,” Sephiroth responded, uncaring that he’d ’awoken’ the materia. They’d settle down once he stopped touching them.

Cloud deflated a little. “Zack thought I should stick with the basics until I figured out what my control’s like, so I’ve got Restore—which is like the old Cure, the clerk said.” Sephiroth nodded in confirmation. “There’s an Esuna, a Barrier, and a-a Bolt, which is like Thunder, I guess. The last one is Status Strike, which sounds cool. Zack said I should try it as it doesn’t really require me to do anything.” Not the mix Sephiroth would’ve picked but acceptable. He nodded again, this time to tell the blond to continue. Cloud had, by this time, come over to sit beside him. “Tifa also showed me how to link two materia together. She put a Poison materia and an Added Effect in my bracer. She said it’ll make me immune to poison attacks.” He looked at Sephiroth, who hadn’t been isolated in a lab for the last three years. “I’ve never heard of doing that with materia, have you?”

“It’s a new development,” Sephiroth confirmed. “Since discovering that materia is just another form of the Lifestream, we no longer practice fusion, but the added power that fusing materia provided is hard to give up. Scientists and theorists have been working on new ways of combining their powers. The linked slots in weapons and armour were the result. It can be tricky to balance the power needed with the result, however. I think Tifa’s picked a good combination for you to start on.” Plus anything that protected Cloud found favour with Sephiroth but that wasn’t something he was going to tell the smaller warrior. It would be condescending—as if he didn’t think Cloud could handle the danger.

“Do you use a linked set?” Cloud asked.

“Hmm,” he nodded, “Final Attack and Revive. That way, if I’m fatally injured, I will be brought back to life automatically.” He gave his lover a warm look from his cat-slit eyes. “Before I might not have cared if a medic could reach me with a Phoenix Down but, now especially, I don’t want to risk it.” Quicker than thought, the silver-haired SOLDIER bent down and gave his lover a nipping kiss. The message was unmistakeable. Cloud blushed like he had before in the tent. Sephiroth’s smile deepened but he had mercy on the newly recovered soldier. He went over to the chest and bent down to carefully lay the sword down. “It is a larger weapon than I would have picked for you but, somehow, it suits you.” He straightened, pushing his long hair back over his shoulder. He turned only to see Cloud’s large, expressive eyes running over his body with a yearning hunger that mirrored Sephiroth’s own desire. Acid green eyes flashed—he wanted. With a resigned sigh he brought himself back under control.

“Ten hours, fourteen minutes and twenty-nine seconds,” he muttered cryptically but Cloud
understood him. They had to wait. The blond’s shoulders slumped and he turned to crawl dejectedly across the huge make-shift bed.

“I told Zack to come join us when he’s finished reading for the night,” the blond said as he climbed under the light covering which was all he needed now. It was so thin it barely qualified as a sheet but it would be enough as long as the General was beside him. He plumped one of the flat, military-issue pillows and lay down facing the General. General Sephiroth. His lover...

He was sharing a bed with the great General Sephiroth who was his lover—publicly declared.

OhmyfuckingGODS!

“What is it?” Sephiroth paused, wondering what had caused Cloud’s eyes to flash.

Cloud blinked, hesitating. His question was probably going to sound strange but he had to know...

“Is this real?”

A rare, full smile bloomed on Sephiroth’s face. It was the exact same question the Corporal had asked three years ago, and, like three years ago, his answer was the same: “Yes, Cloud. This is very, very real.”

“Oh,” the blond said in a small voice, burying his coloured cheeks in the covering. “Ten hours and what?”

“Ten hours, two minutes and thirty-six seconds,” the General answered pulling back the sheet to lie next to his lover. He wrapped long arms around the slim form and tucked him in close. His body tightened as Cloud’s warm breath caressed his chest. “Did you want your wings out?” he asked to distract himself. He felt blond hair tickling over his nipples as Cloud shook his head. He nearly growled in frustration. The question had failed as a distraction.

Cloud snorted, lifted his head to look the General in the eyes. “You do realize that in ten hours we’re going to be flying over enemy territory in a crowded helicopter,” he said.

“I realize,” he answered shortly. Quiet fell.

“Maybe we’ll be able to sneak off during the march and grab a quickie behind a tree...”

Sephiroth swallowed the growl once again. “I was trying not to think of it.”

“Yes, Sir,” the Corporal snickered, “Sorry, Sir.”

“Go to sleep, Corporal,” Sephiroth growled.

Dear Zack, this is letter #4. I know we just talked to each other yesterday (and when you get back I’m going to ask you why Tseng was using me to pass you messages!) but for some reason I’m suddenly feeling really uneasy. Something’s happened, hasn’t it? Usually I can tell when one of the Turks is watching me but I can’t sense anyone at all. I can’t help but wonder if they’re gone because of whatever’s happened to you. I’ll send this letter like I always do but I hope—I really, really hope—that you call me before it gets to you.

I want to see you again, spend more time with you, so please, sweet Zack, be safe...

“Shit, piss and fucking hells,” Zack swore viciously.

He knew the exact moment she would have felt this—when he’d been lying there on the grating,
feeling the blood pumping out of his body, so shot up and damaged that he couldn’t repair the wounds fast enough. He’d been hopeful that Seph would maybe survive, knowing that, even if he didn’t, it was better than Seph falling back under Hojo’s control. He’d felt bad for Cloud, young and in love and probably dead. Most of all, however, he’d wanted to see Aerith’s face once more, hear her voice, and look into her pretty eyes as she laughed. He’d wanted—needed, to tell her that he loved her, and he’d been kicking himself for being a cowardly ass.

His fingers traced the lines she wrote, seeing where the ink had blurred. Had she cried as she wrote it?

He hadn’t wanted her to be hurt and often loving a SOLDIER meant exactly that but she’d hurt anyway. His pain. Her pain. Three years alone... except for Cloud... and the hope that, one day, they’d bust out of there and she’d still be waiting—

—and she was. She was waiting for him—across a whole fucking continent and a fucking ocean!

He needed her now.

He sniffed and blinked, and denied that he was weepy over letters that couldn’t change the past, but he packed them up and carefully carried the box into the General’s private space. He didn’t bother tip-toeing, the genetically-modified SOLDIER would be more disturbed by someone trying to sneak into his room than if he just walked normally. He needn’t have worried. Green eyes glowed in the dark; Seph was awake. Silently his silver-haired friend lifted the sheet, inviting Zack to climb in next to Cloud.

“Is he sleeping?” Zack asked.

“Yes,” the General replied softly, “It’s been a somewhat stressful afternoon for him.”

Zack managed to snicker at the understatement, “For all of us.”

“Hmm.” It could’ve been agreement. It could’ve been anything. Zack didn’t care. At least it was human, and alive, and here. He walked over the bed and looked down at his friend, his companion, his burden, his saviour. The mountain boy looked tiny next to the General, though Zack knew he wasn’t; he was just curled up like a kid, full of trust and hope. Zack remembered those emotions. Three people in the world gave him that feeling... and two of them were here.

“Are you going to make me spend the whole night with my arm raised or are you going to join us?” Sephiroth asked dryly.

“It’s really okay?”

Sephiroth didn’t bother hiding his sigh, “We’ve been over this. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“Sorry,” Zack grinned sheepishly and climbed into bed.

“Hmm,” the General said. “At least this way I know you’re not off sacrificing yourself to some immortal cosmic messenger with no morals.”

Zack squirmed embarrassed. “But... Tha—thats not, I mean... Shit.” He stopped, restarted, “I don’t need a babysitter, Seph.”

“Maybe not, but your flower girl would never forgive me if I let you get damaged so soon after rescuing you.” Well, that was true, Zack conceded.
“Besides,” the General continued, “I did some research. Bats are communal. They live in colonies, they sleep in groups. Until you get back to your Heart, we—Cloud and I, are your community. Never hesitate to join us.”

“Oh man,” Zack whispered. Sephiroth’s simple statement, combined with Aerith’s letters, had his chest squeezing. He was gonna cry; he knew it. He wondered how to say thank you for something like that? It was too big for words but too wonderful to ignore. A simple ‘thank you’ didn’t seem large enough to carry all his emotions. He didn’t need to worry. The silver-haired SOLDIER heard him.

“You’re welcome,” Sephiroth said, “Now go to sleep. We’re supposed to save the planet tomorrow so we should try to look our best.”

Zack snorted, “You and your sense of humour.” The smile stayed on his face as he drifted off. The last thought that wandered through his mind was a hope that tonight’s sleep would be a little less active than the one he’d had last night, maybe he could spend it sleeping in the garden, and then his mind was blank.

Lost in the shadows he could surround himself with when he wanted to, Vincent watched as the last of the repair crew left the airstrip. He was thinking of something Fair had said during the meeting: Chaos could ignore his destiny. He had free will.

*Considering the situation, my host, I think he exaggerated,* Chaos commented.

‘But, if the moment arises, you don’t have to be Omega’s squire. You don’t have to assist him. You have that choice,’ Vincent thought back in argument. Choosing to change one’s fate...

*And what choice are you tormenting yourself over, my host, my own* the demon laughed, *May I hope that it’s whether you’d prefer taking the feisty one or the little bat to your bed?*

Vincent ignored the demon’s leering comment; this was far too important. ‘Who do I ask for forgiveness when the person I sinned against is dead?’

*Sinned against?* Chaos sneered. Its outrage made the gunman wobble on the pole. *I’m sick of your mewling... ‘sinned against’. Didn’t she sin against you, against me, when she forced us to be joined? I will be glad when Omega rises for that means I will be pulled out of your boring, broody soul and will finally be free to enjoy—*

‘If I can choose to forgive my sins, will I then be worthy of Tifa’s regard? Will I be clean enough to touch her?’ Vincent asked and stopped the demon’s rant cold.

*Sooo... it’s the female warrior you want,* it said, now sounding intrigued, *I wonder how she will react to your courtship, my own. Watching you try to woo her, in your pathetic way, might be worth sticking around for. Will you try to wrestle her into submission—Galian would like that.*

As Chaos pictured various ways Vincent could drag Tifa off for sex it occurred to the gunman that not once did the creature imply that Vincent couldn’t, or even wouldn’t, be forgiven. Perhaps, Vincent thought to himself, there is something to hope for after all.
Fly Away

Chapter Summary

Warning: Except for the first few paragraphs, this chapter contains nothing but explicit, 3-way man-sex. If that’s not your thing you can skip most of this chapter without missing any of the plot.

This was a dream.

He knew it because he’d never, ever seen a field of flowers that extended as far as horizon in every direction before and he doubted that it could exist in reality anywhere because some farmer would’ve plowed it or some engineer would’ve built a road through it. Here there was nothing but flowers. They were kind of familiar, but he wasn’t a big fan of plants and would barely be able to recognize a dandelion except that they were so common. He could tell that these flowers were all essentially the same type of flower. At least, their shape was similar, but their colours and sizes all varied. They smelled nice too. He breathed in deep, enjoying the scent and feeling, somehow, more relaxed. He knew he wouldn’t have to worry about monsters in this dream.

“Oh,” a light voice said in surprise. He turned to face that direction, still not concerned. He knew he didn’t have to worry about sadistic lab assistants either. “You’re not who I was expecting,” she said.

“Sorry,” he said, though he didn’t know what for. It’s not like there’d been anyone here before him.

“It’s okay. I think you need to be here. You’ve been pretty close to breaking.” He frowned. It wasn’t that bad, was it? He dismissed the comment as weird. He was getting better, healing. No way was he close to breaking. Instead, he took a closer look at the girl who’d joined him in his dream. Or maybe this was her dream, and he was the one in her space?

She giggled, “I suppose this could be my place, but I don’t own it.”

He snorted at her unhelpful response. Whoever she was, she was tiny; the top of her head was level with his chin, and that was including her perky, top-knotted ponytail. Her hair was a rich, gold-brown like the leaves of autumn and her eyes the bright green of spring’s new growth. A smile played easily around her mouth. She looked… kind. It wasn’t a look he was familiar with anymore. It made him think he should know her, but then he thought ‘why would he?’

Before he could figure it out, she placed a small hand on his arm, comforting him and holding him in place, and she started talking. “I think I have a message for you.”

Who from, and why would they use you as their messenger, he wanted to ask but couldn’t. It seemed rude when she was so friendly. So he said nothing, just listened intently.

The girl, for she seemed young, clasped her hands behind her back and leaned forward, like an eager child afraid to touch delicate things. “Sacrifices work when they’re willing to give everything up to achieve their goal. However, their goal doesn’t have to be your goal.”
What? He frowned in confusion.

“You’ll understand when the time comes. Just remember to protect the ones you love with all the power of your heart.” He must have looked as baffled as he felt because she gave another light giggle. She placed a finger on his shoulder and pushed lightly. “Time for you to go now. Don’t worry; they’ll make sure you wake up feeling better.”

‘She really was the strangest girl,’ he thought before realizing that he was moving.

It was like he was a feather. Her little finger had blown him back, blown him over so gently it was more like floating than falling. The world went grey then white then somewhere beyond the concepts of light and dark. Or maybe he became the light. All he could say for sure was that, when he opened his eyes, he felt completely like himself for the first time since... forever, certainly since coming out of his coma-state. Sounds were just loud enough. Though he could still hear extraordinary things if he wanted to. He couldn’t see the weaving of the cloth that made up their tent in the pre-dawn’s dim light unless he concentrated. Best of all, his skin felt like it was back to being the surface of his body instead of a hyper-sensitive detecting device. He wasn’t normal—normal like PFC No-Name up the path, and he never would be again, but he was-was normal in himself.

It felt great.

As did the realization that the warm skin in front of him belonged to his General, and the warm body behind him was Zack’s. He was surrounded by the smells of his favourite people and he was happy. His eyes started to drift shut, heavy with contentment, when he caught a glimpse of something unbelievable. He opened his eyes again to check it out. Nothing. He squinted and he could see it; the stuff that had caught his eye before. Even in the tent’s dim light, he could see that, on his chest, the General had... spots? Cloud tilted his head to confirm it and, sure enough, most of his skin was silvery-pearl but, scattered over his upper chest, he had tiny points of pearly-blue.

General Sephiroth had freckles! How cool was that?

Very cool, Cloud decided. He also decided that he had to find out if the texture changed over the spots. Light fingertips rubbed just under the wide collar-bone. It all felt the same: smooth and perfect. Perhaps something more sensitive was needed, he thought vaguely, hardly caring what he thought because it was just an excuse to lean in closer, stick out his pointy little tongue, and taste... Delicious, he decided, rich, and spicy, and intriguingly familiar but hazy; like a dream still remembered days after wakening. Or maybe he wasn’t really awake and this was just a continuation of a different dream?

That would be good because, if this was a dream, he wouldn’t have to stop, would he? So, why stop, the thought drifted through his mind, why stop when there was so much delicious skin to explore; silk covering rigid bones and hard muscles, and all of it suffused with the General’s scent and tastes. He definitely wasn’t going to wake up now.

Time lost meaning. It could’ve been darkest midnight or earliest dawn. It could’ve been high noon for all Cloud cared. What mattered was the warm body in front of him. Slowly, carefully, inch-by-tasty inch, the blond sampled all the flesh he could reach. He didn’t wander much to the General’s sides; Cloud’s sleepy determination didn’t extend to the serious stretching he’d have to do. It was enough that there was smooth silk under his fingers, his lips, his tongue. He closed his eyes to better enjoy the sensation. He recognized when he moved from rib cage to belly even though it wasn’t much softer. Even relaxed in sleep, Sephiroth’s muscles were hard and defined. He ran a hand lazily over his own stomach muscles and gave himself the shivers imagining that the hand touching him was the General’s. His cock twitched and he smiled. He liked this dream.
The General shifted, moving to lie more on his back which made Cloud stop his exploration while he vaguely considered the situation. The dream would end if one of them woke up, right? He listened for a change in breathing pattern, or restless twitching, but there were none of the signs that either one of them were waking up so it was safe but, still, the General had moved away on him. While his foggy brain considered this problem, his hungry body already had a solution. It lifted him up and positioned him over his lover’s vulnerable, but oh-so-sweet, belly. He wasn’t ready to stop yet, and now he didn’t have to.

Abandoning the top of his lover’s belly—his lover, General Sephiroth was his lover!—he wiggled further down and licked at the skin there. It twitched, so he nipped it lightly as if to tell it to behave. Then he nipped it again because it had felt so good the first time. The General sighed, almost a low groan, and shifted a little. Cloud lifted away from the tempting skin and waited until Sephiroth settled down again before continuing his journey. For a moment it felt like fingers ruffled his hair but the feeling wasn’t repeated so Cloud forgot about it, too absorbed by the territory he was claiming to care about stray breezes. He travelled further.

One thing about three mako-enhanced men sharing a bed is that they were so warm they’d kicked the blanket down around their feet. There was nothing to jar the blond from his half-awake stupor. Not even the discovery that the General’s body held another cute surprise could do that. It just made him smile sleepily as he processed what he’d discovered: General Sephiroth had a treasure trail.

This was the best dream he’d ever had, Cloud decided.

The blond pulled back a little so he could look at it. Soft fingertips lifted from hard hips to pet it. Hair, so pale a silver as to be translucent, circled the General’s belly button and pointed the way to more intriguing areas. It sounded like a good idea to the Corporal so he followed the delicate dusting of hair. He smiled as the rich scent of the man grew stronger, deeper. When his languid movement encountered hard flesh rather than soft hair, it took Cloud aback. It wasn’t what he’d been expecting at all but, he decided, this was okay too. He lapped at the tip of it and licked down the length of it. It was hiding behind course cloth. Nasty. He should have dreamed that gone along with the blanket. Much better access that way, he thought blearily, still caught in his happy dream world, so he wrapped strong fingers around Sephiroth’s penis and pulled it out into the open.

The General’s body jerked and a groaning noise filled the air.

“What? What is it?” Zack was awake and scanning the room for danger.

And Cloud recognized that this wasn’t a dream.

Sky blue eyes met rich cyan—both sets open wide in shock.

Cloud realized he was staring at his best friend over the erect penis of General Sephiroth... He even had the tip of it sucked into his mouth like a lollipop. He felt his face heat up.

“Holy shit,” Zack muttered. His eyes, if possible, got wider. Cloud’s cheeks got hotter. They were frozen; staring at each other and wondering what to do next.

“I would prefer, Corporal, if you didn’t stop,” Sephiroth’s voice growled in tortured command. Whatever noble impulse had kept him from touching his lover was now forgotten, or perhaps just ignored, in the face of a larger, more primal need.

Cloud released the head of the General’s penis from his mouth with a little pop. “Yes, Sir,” he responded automatically, still staring at his seemingly mesmerized friend. Fucking hells, he
thought in an agony of embarrassment. He glanced away, wondering where he could run and hide, and noticed that the front of Zack’s sleep-pants were starting to fill out. He watched for a moment. Maybe his mind had been faking it, but no, that was definitely an erection growing behind the standard-issue blue. Zack was turned on by seeing him suck on the General’s penis—and he was excited by Zack’s excitement. His mouth moved in an unvoiced ‘oh’ of enlightenment.

Emboldened by this discovery, the blond moved his gaze back to Zack and almost dared his friend to look away. The big SOLDIER swallowed nervously, but he didn’t shift his gaze. Cloud moved to the base of the large erection and, making sure his tongue was nice and moist, licked all the way to the tip in one wide, all-encompassing pass. Sephiroth breathed out a groan from behind clenched teeth. A vein throbbed visibly on the surface of the still growing organ.

“Fuck,” the SOLDIER whispered. Zack shifted. His brain was skittering. He should go... this was private... fucking hot. Just as he couldn’t look away, he couldn’t bring himself to leave either.

A knowing, and satisfied, smile flitted across the blond’s face. This might be better than a dream, he decided. He trailed his mouth back down the long hard length but this time he indulged in a series of cat-licks and light nips. He sucked and pulled Sephiroth’s delicate skin into his mouth. He could hear both Zack and Sephiroth’s ragged breathing; proof that this was working. They were both becoming deeply aroused... and wasn’t that a heady feeling for a little mountain boy? Two of the world’s most powerful men at his mercy.

He liked it.

Cloud kept moving even after he reached the base of the General’s cock. He swiped a broad tongue over the protected globes. Loose skin tightened and wrinkled as he blew on the wet trail he’d left. Long pearl-coloured fingers reached down and buried themselves in his hair. Cloud took it for the order it was and continued his ministrations. He sucked first one side then the other into his mouth, flicking his tongue over the skin, pressing a little firmer then relaxing and letting them slip out.

“Cloud,” the General moaned. The hand in his hair tightened its grip even as legs opened and relaxed. It was an invitation Cloud didn’t even bother trying to resist. He licked even lower, teasing the sensitive skin below the sac. He slowly worked his hand on the General’s erection, but it was a secondary movement, almost coincidental to his purpose, so he didn’t notice when a glistening pearl appeared at the slit. He kept his gaze fixed on the dark-haired First.

Zack did saw it; he saw it form and drop oh-so-slowly onto Seph’s pale white belly. He saw it and he remembered what it had felt like to have Sephiroth’s large erection buried deep inside his body. He shuddered, closing his eyes in remembered pleasure. He buried a sweaty hand down the front of his sleep pants only to have the silver-haired warrior prevent any movement. “Oh fuck, Seph, please,” he moaned.

“The oil’s on the side table,” was what his CO said before releasing his arm, and it was all the invitation Zack needed. He shucked his pants and rolled over to grab the fragrant bottle. He did it quickly, unwilling to miss any of the show Cloud was putting on. The blond mountain boy was eating Seph’s cock like a stick of rock candy.

“Cloud, bring your ass up this way,” the General ordered. It was so unlike the sophisticated General to use crudity that Cloud’s head popped up in surprise. Sephiroth’s cheeks darkened with a pale rose colour. “My apologies. I was just... it’s just... hmm.”

The hesitant incoherency was also unlike ShinRa’s smooth Silver General, so much so that Zack was now staring at the silver-haired warrior in stunned amazement. Cloud looked a wide-eyed question at Sephiroth, then at Zack who barely shrugged, then back at his lover. “Did you want me
to crawl up there?” he asked. To his astonishment, pearly skin gained even more colour.

“No, that’s not what I—” Sephiroth started. He hadn’t thought before spewing out that command. Why hadn’t he thought? “I, um, it just occurred to me that it would, that I would very much enjoy, watching the Commander... in you, while you, uh, continue what you’re doing.” By the time he’d finished, Sephiroth had covered his face in one hand and had turned away. The pink colour was deeper than before. ‘He’d sounded like an idiot,’ he thought.

Cloud swallowed against the sudden spike of arousal. He looked at his dark-haired friend, “Well?” he asked. ‘Say yes, say yes, please, say yes,’ he prayed.

“Fuck, yeah,” Zack answered. “I’m game. Anything that has the Great General Sephiroth blushing that much has got to be fun.”

They weren’t laughing at him or running away. In fact, when Sephiroth looked, Zack’s colour was deeper and his breathing was ragged; his erection had lengthened considerably as well. Suddenly, this was more than a whim, more than a dream. It was real, it was happening and it would be wonderful. He reached out his left hand to his blond lover, “Cloud, come this way.”

The mountain boy ducked his head but obediently crawled up and turned himself around. He kept one hand circling the General’s cock and used it as his pivot point; after all, he didn’t want to get too far away. Sephiroth put a hand on his nearer thigh and pulled the Corporal in so that he had a better view. Then Zack moved in behind him. He couldn’t help looking, tucking his head under his arm or peering over his shoulder. The Gongagan’s darker flesh was hard and shiny with the oil. Its light, spicy fragrance overlaid the deeper musk of their combined arousal.

Sephiroth lifted his hand, two fingers outstretched, “Zack, can you oil these?” He kept his gaze on his blond lover, “Cloud, please carry on.” His tone was polite, but it was an order.

The Corporal swallowed, eyes closing briefly in prayer that he wouldn’t fuck this up, he nodded and bent his head to once again to play with the General’s groin. He never lost awareness of the fingers that slid around his entrance, that slipped in and stretched, but he concentrated on the treasures before him, determined that Sephiroth would enjoy this to the fullest. At least that’s what he’d planned to do but when one finger became two then three; he realized that it wasn’t just Sephiroth’s fingers inside him: Zack had at least one inserted as well. They were playing with each other as much as they were playing with him.

He had to stop, had to pull his mouth away from delicate tissues so he could groan in helpless ecstasy through clenched teeth.

“Did I tell you that you could stop, Corporal?” Sephiroth purred.

Cloud panted, “No, Sir.”

“Well then?” His tone was husky with lust and softly threatening.

The Corporal swallowed convulsively. He moved his fist up and around the long, flushed shaft, smearing saliva and pre-cum over its surface. What would Sephiroth do if he didn’t obey, he wondered. It wouldn’t be anything terrible, not with Zack in the room. He gazed up at the strong face of the world’s greatest swordsman. It had a harsh sensuality he’d always found enticing. He could push it, he thought, it might be fun...

Cloud didn’t see his pupils narrow to slits then back to circles. Sephiroth did, and it made his own eyelids droop even as his eyebrow went up in surprise. He waited to see what his lover would do:
would he let the part of him that was Niisan take over? Did he want him to?

In the end, Cloud couldn’t do it. Not yet, maybe not ever. It was enough that he was going to be-be fucked by Zack while the General watched. That was enough of an adventure: for now. He dipped his head and licked back down the General’s erection. He hid his embarrassment by sucking on the sensitive skin between the General’s shaft and his hole. Just touching the silky skin made the swordsman jerk and tighten which was nice—very nice. Cloud brought his fingers up and ran the tips lightly over the area, just to see how much reaction he could get. The silver-haired warrior groaned and his cock jumped on his belly.

It looked like he could get quite a lot of reaction. It was going to be fun exploring—

Then, suddenly, he had to stop; he had to. They had four fingers in him now; stretching him, playing with him and each other. One pushed in as the other pulled out, or they twisted around each other becoming thicker than four fingers should be. He’d been aware of it, enjoying it but able to set it aside. Now they’d found that spot inside him and he was the one writhing helplessly. It was too much. The movement of their fingers, the feel of being full yet craving more, of being stretched, pulled taut as a wire... it was going to put him over or drive him insane. His hand shot back, trying to find enough purchase on their oil slick fingers to push them out. He slid helplessly on their slippery skin. He tried to get a grip on their hands, to stop them from moving inside him like, but his fingers just slithered over the surface.

“Put them in, Cloud,” the General ordered softly, “Join us.”

Cloud looked up, his eyes wet and so hazed with arousal that Sephiroth’s body shook with the force of his desire. It was obvious the blond didn’t understand. He was very close and all he could do was try to stop them.

It was Zack who solved the dilemma. He slicked up a couple of his friend’s questing fingers and, with his free hand, carefully but firmly forced them into the already full entrance. Cloud arched his back and lifted his ass so he could bury his fingers deeper inside himself. He called out, murmuring incoherent pleas that even enhanced hearing could barely understand.

“Fuck, that is so fucking hot,” Zack murmured in awe. He ran strong fingers down Cloud’s spine, stopping only briefly to tease at the light covering of down.

“Will he cum?” Sephiroth asked, his breath coming in gasps. His avid gaze switched between the blond’s pleasure-slackened face—it was so expressive, a wonder to behold, and where their hands meshed—tan, pink and pearl, separate but together.

“Should... he’s close... I think,” Zack replied jerkily, gasping for breath as he hastily pulled down on his sac. “Hang on a sec.” Once the danger was past, the big first adjusted his balance so he could reach around and clasp Cloud’s straining erection.

The blond wailed and bucked. It was like when the General had searched him for injuries. All his body tingled and came alive. Stretching and tightening, pulling him toward the edge. A couple hard pumps and he was done. His cum was jetting out of his body so hard he felt like he was being turned inside out. No thought, no breath, no body, just heat and pleasure that pulled him out of his awareness into a world of sensation. Only the fingers inside him, the hand encircling him, kept him at all upright. He had no strength to hold his head up so he let it rest on the strength of Sephiroth’s hip. His right hand was still wrapped around his lover’s hard penis—so warm, and he squeezed and released as the aftershocks passed through his body. It made the silver-haired warrior groan in sensual torment. It made Zack chuckle; he’d never, ever, thought that he would see the Demon of Wutai and his commanding officer, so helpless. It was cute, and he would’ve teased them about it
except that he couldn’t catch his breath either... or moisten his mouth... or talk in sentences.

“You talk enough even without sentences,” Sephiroth said between clenched teeth.

“Fuck, I need a zipper,” the dark-haired SOLDIER muttered. He couldn’t remember being this scattered before. Maybe being merged with a bat had affected his brain. He held up an urgent finger, “You don’t need to comment if I said that last thought aloud.”

Sephiroth gave a low, coughing laugh. The exchange with his SiC had helped bring him back from the brink. He was grateful. He ran his free hand through Cloud’s hair where it bounced and wavered against his flesh. “Is he ready?” he asked.

Zack chuckled, “I’d say so.”

He pulled Cloud’s fingers out first. They were small and close to the entrance so they slid out easy. It also allowed the blond to drop into a more comfortable position. Having his own fingers buried inside him had caused him to twist, but also because having them buried inside his own body had forced the blond to twist into, what had to be, a very uncomfortable position. The blond mumbled a protest, but didn’t budge from his resting place. Sephiroth turned to watch. He removed his fingers almost eagerly, knowing what was going to happen next. The dark-haired First lined up his erection with Cloud’s entrance and began nudging it in, slow, rocking motions followed by a pause. It didn’t matter that they’d stretched and prepared the smaller man; it had been nearly two years since he’d been able to be this close with his friend and Zack intended to savour every minute, every second; and each moment was made that much more precious by knowing that Seph was watching.

Cloud keened as Zack pushed his way in. He felt stretched but, at the same time, it felt so good. His head lifted and his back arched as he pushed into Zack, forcing the First’s penis deeper. It roused him from his post-coital stupor; reminded him that he had all but abandoned Sephiroth’s full erection. He snuck a peek at the General but Sephiroth’s eyes were on Zack, watching the First’s dark flesh disappear inside the blond’s pale body. When Cloud shifted forward and took what he could into his mouth, his eyes were on his silver-haired lover. Sephiroth’s hips bucked, and he closed his eyes as if in prayer. Best of all, a small, satisfied smile flirted across the General’s sexy, sculpted mouth.

“Yeah, Cloud, swallow him down,” Zack panted, “I wanna see him writhe.”

“As I want to see you,” the General retorted, voice low and throaty. His strong left hand lifted to the top of Zack’s spine. He pressed, and stroked slowly downwards, focussing on the skin under his fingers, wanting to find a spot on the SOLDIER’s back that matched Cloud’s highly erogenous one. He nearly missed it as Cloud chose that moment to nip a little. The hint of teeth, the threat they represented was, from the blond, very stimulating. Sephiroth froze his hand in place so he could enjoy the sensation more fully. When the blond went back to soft kisses and licks, the General moved his hand again, and he felt it—the spot where Zack’s skin went from soft silk to slick fur. The change in texture was minute, and he very easily could have missed it, but Zack’s whole body clenched and gave it away.

The SOLDIER groaned and swore. His big body trembled and twitched, but the First was trapped. He could only move in time with Sephiroth’s hand in the short, fine fur he hadn’t even known he had. It was like the lightest of currents running along the finest of wire all along his spine. Nothing had ever touched him like that before. He hadn’t known he had a spot like that, like Cloud’s, where even the smallest caress shot straight to his groin and pulled him taut. No wonder Cloud could orgasm from being stroked there.
Zack tried to stretch himself, up, away, but he couldn’t even do that. Instead his head tipped back, his eyes closed and he panted, slack-jawed and helpless.

“Is it as sensitive as Cloud’s down?” Sephiroth purred tormentingly. To him, the dark-haired SOLDIER looked to be the very picture of agonized lust. It looked good on him.

“Fuck. Fuck. Shit. Oh Gods,” Zack moaned in an unconscious litany. He knew Seph had spoken but he had no capacity to comprehend. The General’s body clenched and he couldn’t help thrusting his hips a couple times. It made his hand relax against the SOLDIER’s spine.

Cloud had been listening to Zack’s helpless begging. He’d felt as the SOLDIER lost his smooth rhythm inside him. Now he turned his head and smiled because, finally, bat-boy would know what it felt like. It was too bad for Cloud that Zack chose that moment to open his eyes. He saw that smug look and decided that if he had to suffer through this, so did the blond. He reached out, one finger outstretched, and smiled even as he jerked in reaction to Sephiroth’s hand once again pressing firmly on his back.

Cloud buried his head in the General’s groin and braced for the touch. He was already aroused so he wasn’t surprised when the threat of Zack’s caress had him stiffening again. What did surprise him was that Zack wasn’t gentle, maybe he’d meant to be but was too close to the edge, because when that large hand landed between his shoulder-blades, Zack held on as if for dear life.

Pain. Pleasure. Explosions along his nerve endings, racing down his spine, gathering, growing.

His voice joined Zack’s in begging, pleading, demanding release, mercy; please, gods, please, let me cum!

With the way his hand was placed on Zack’s back, fingers spread to reach the most surface area, the General felt like a puppet master directing his friends’ actions, controlling them. When he gentled his touch, sure enough, Zack’s grip on Cloud’s spine relaxed as well and both of them retreated from the brink. A harder stroke and Zack pounded into Cloud whose hand squeezed around the penis it held. The SOLDIER’s hand dug into the blond’s spine and Cloud wailed.

Sephiroth chuckled. This was fun.

Cloud heard that smug sound. He felt so out of control and yet Sephiroth sounded like this was day at the beach. It wasn’t fair, he decided and he knew just what to do about it, too. His free hand was still slick with oil. Quickly, before he could talk himself out of it, he reached over and down and poking a tentative fingertip into the General’s tight ass. After all, he’d liked the sensation, maybe the General would too.

The General did. The feeling was so unexpected that Sephiroth stiffened into a rigid arch, all his muscles tight and hard as steel. He’d had things invade his body before, mainly medical instruments, but where those had been unpleasant experiments, this was something entirely different. This was something small and warm and Cloud’s.

He was no longer the puppet master; he was the one controlled. Cloud wiggled his finger and Sephiroth broke out in a sweat. The blond delved deeper and the General’s legs widened. He added a finger and Sephiroth writhed. The most wanton noises were emerging from his mouth. He was aware of it but, somehow, couldn’t bring himself to care. As Sephiroth’s focus shifted from what he was doing to what was being done to him, the hand he’d kept on Zack’s spine slid down. It came to rest on a firm mound of buttock. It was a pleasing texture and it gave the silver-haired warrior something to hold on to as his world became jagged.
“Oh fuck, Cloud. So hot. You two... so hot.” Zack had his breath back, even if it was quick and shallow. Without the silver-haired tormenter playing with his spine he could get his rhythm back, which he did, and he could seek out Cloud’s sweet spot. He did that too. He knew he was chanting, he didn’t care. He was chanting; Cloud was wailing although his noise was muffled by his mouth being wrapped around Seph’s cock; and Seph, the big bad General was moaning like a pro. He could feel the tension building, in him, in them. Everybody, so fucking close. They would probably hear the three of them in Wutai.

It was fucking great.

He wondered, in passing, who would go first? Then he forgot about it, lost in the wonder of being surrounded by warm flesh; of feeling it tight around his full penis as he stroked and massaged, push, pull, push... It felt so good, even better than yesterday because this time they were all equal partners. It added a depth he hadn’t expected and he tipped his head back to stop tears from escaping. His heart was being squeezed in his chest, it felt so good. He didn’t want it to end.

Then he had to smile. Seph was begging... and squeezing his ass so hard it felt like the General was going to turn it into a diamond before the night was over, but even that pain felt good.

Cloud was surprised he could coordinate his breathing let alone anything else but he had to. He wanted this to be the best thing his friends had ever experienced. They were alive and they were here, pleasuring and being pleasured. He wanted to catalogue everything: long, tasty erection to be nibbled on—check; tight passage to be explored and exploited—check; squeeze Zack’s cock when he pulls back but relax when he pushes in, enjoy the fullness of it—not even close; press every sight, sound and scent into his brain to be held as a precious memory—working on it.

Cloud had two fingers buried to the second knuckle now. His thumb stroked lightly over the General’s sensitive perineum. He had the thick head of Sephiroth’s erection in his mouth. He didn’t even try to take it all in. Though he’d heard of deep-throating, he didn’t want to waste the time figuring it out. Instead he sucked and licked at what he could swallow, like it was an ice-cream cone melting on a hot day, and he used his other hand to twist, squeeze and stroke at the length he couldn’t fit in his mouth. When Zack hit that place inside him he’d moan and sigh but he knew that, even that, would feel good to his silver-haired lover.

Sephiroth had his eyes shut tight, his hands balled into fists or squeezing tight flesh. Unbelievable. It was unbelievable that this was real. That he was feeling these things. Never... not even before the reactor, had he ever felt this—compressed, squeezed into a space too small to contain all the sensations. He could feel the pressure building; between his shoulder blades, on his scalp, the backs of his legs but especially at the base of his spine. Too much pressure, he moaned and twisted. He didn’t care that it was undignified. He just wanted—needed, relief.

...the higher the pressure the easier it is to make the material combust... an explosion inside a pressurized vessel will first use the smallest outlet to vent... the whole will be blown apart...

deadly fragmentation...

Old physics lectures came back to haunt him. He understood now, how it felt to be the container, knowing that it was too late. A small release of pressure wouldn’t be enough to save him. He was going to blow apart...

It ripped through him, stretching him, arching him, holding his body painfully high until, with jerks and shudders, he emptied. There was no pressure, just a pleasure so intense that he was robbed of breath, thought and control. He was barely aware when Cloud, coughing and choking, retreating off his erection. He didn’t notice that Cloud hadn’t moved far enough away to avoid his jetting cum, or that thick, pearly drops now decorated his hair, his cheeks, his lips.

Zack noticed.
With the side of the blond’s delicate face exposed to him, he could see everything; every spasm, every spurt and every thick globule that splashed on Cloud’s face. In porn movies, he knew, this was the money shot. This is why the guy pulled out and let the camera’s record him ejaculating, but he’d never realized what a difference it would make to his own reaction actually watching friends do it. Plus there was the look on Seph’s face as he came, the look on Cloud’s as he was covered with the liquid; it was too much for the SOLDIER. His rhythm broke and he could do nothing but buck his hips and curl weakly over the smaller man, as if he were afraid the force of his thrusts would rip right through the guy.

Now he was moaning. “So good, so fucking good,” he whispered hoarsely again and again.

It didn’t help that Cloud pushed back against him, squeezing him in time to Sephiroth’s pulsing. Then he realized that the blond was doing it deliberately, as part of some sick kind of orgasmic torment, and Cloud hadn’t actually lost control like he and Seph had.

That wasn’t allowed, he decided. The big First braced his weight on one arm and reached around Cloud’s slim waist and took a good grip on the blond’s fat, little penis—‘little’ being a relative term because, after all, he was staring right at Seph’s, still spewing, monster cock. Just about anybody would be ‘little’ compared to that.

“I appreciate the compliment,” Sephiroth grunted and nearly made Zack jump right off of Cloud. A long, slim hand reached down and tugged on blond hair. “Cloud, turn this way. I want to see you,” the General commanded and the blond obediently turned his head, blinking large, happy, smug eyes at his commanding officer.

“Continue, Commander,” Sephiroth growled his order at Zack.

“Yes, Sir!” His voice was slurred, but happy. He put as much effort into torturing his friend as possible, even though all he wanted to do was collapse. He squeezed Cloud’s erection while stroking it. He twisted his hand slightly. He ran fingers over the tip making sure to caress the delicate little slit. The mountain boy was starting to undulate. His eyes were clenched shut and his cheeks were filled with colour. Cloud released Sephiroth’s now flaccid penis and tried to hide his face behind his hand, but the General grabbed his wrist and pulled it away.

Zack stroked. He even managed a couple thrusts into Cloud’s ass but he was softening fast. It turned out it was enough though. For the second time that morning, the blond pulsed out a stream of lightly tinged semen. He groaned low in his chest. He bit his lip, trying to contain it, but both the SOLDIERS heard him clearly. His orgasm didn’t last long—he was still recovering from the first one. Even before his last weak spasm, he’d collapsed onto the bed completely, panting and trembling in the aftermath.

Zack decided he had the right idea and flopped down behind him. Sephiroth made a little ‘ooph’ when the First’s hard skull hit his thigh bone. He hadn’t been expecting the action, wrapped up, as he was, in gazing at Cloud’s satiated face: flushed and sweaty, and beautiful.

“’kay, wake me in the morning,” the dark-haired First mumbled. He tossed one arm around the blond and snugged him in close; all comfy and ready for sleep.

“Iz morning already,” Cloud responded, equally relaxed. He wrapped sticky fingers around the wrist of the hand that held his wrist—totally content with the world.

“Later morning, then.”

Sephiroth coughed, whether in discomfort or laughter they’d never know. “I’m afraid it already is
‘later morning’. I estimate we have maybe an hour before they blow reveille.”

“Fuck,” the dark-haired one said but didn’t shift. “Noo,” the blond one whined and shifted closer to his lover’s pearly body. Neither one bothered to open their eyes.

Looking at them, both of them so relaxed and happy, Sephiroth realized that he, too, didn’t want this to end. If they took short showers, and with their enhanced speed they should manage it in under ten minutes each, they could stay like this for another thirty minutes. If they shared the facility, they could even stay here longer. Smiling, Sephiroth set his internal alarm and then he watched over his lovers’ sleep, wanting to savour every second they could just be lovers before they had to step out into the world as SOLDIERs.

Unfortunately, he’d forgotten just how small his private shower was…
They were only a little late getting to the airstrip.

They should have been on time; they all had enhanced speed. However, the General miscalculated a couple things: the time it would take to unstick themselves from each other—dried semen was a very effective glue especially when it was stuck in tender places—and the size of his shower. It was snug with just himself in it; he was always hitting his shoulders and elbows and knees, but when he followed Cloud into the small box it didn’t take the two of them long to become completely wedged.

Zack, who’d had his shower first, stood outside the cubicle, laughing like a maniac. He was of little help in freeing them, but they had managed to get out—although it was a miracle they hadn’t bent the small enclosure worse. At least it was still functional, they’d gotten mostly clean, and a quick Cure took care of the worst of the scrapes.

Even with that hiccup, they still would have been on time but Zack decided to show them how fast he could move with his wings and it was very fast. Sephiroth, in a moment of stupidity had chased after him in an attempt to grab him and redirect the dark-haired First to the airstrip. Of course it had turned into a race. All three of them were competitive by nature so they forgot what they were supposed to be doing and lost themselves in the joy of speed and strength and being alive.

The General would have caught him, he was the fastest once he got up to speed, but the First could manoeuvre like the bat that had been spliced to his DNA, and Sephiroth would consistently overshoot him. Cloud struggled along behind them working to both learn how to use his wings and to keep up. It turned out those two objectives were incompatible. The race ended with only a couple tents destroyed but, since they were empty, nobody was really hurt. Zack dealt with the MPs as Sephiroth hovered over Cloud, walking him through the use of the Cure materia, even though they could see all the dirt and gravel being pushed out as the blond’s body healed itself.

Cloud insisted on a rematch, arguing that he needed to figure out how to use his wings. Who knew, he said, when it would come in handy. He was right. It would be useful and, even if it wasn’t, the practice the small Corporal had in activating his Cure was. This time the only thing damaged was Cloud’s pride. In response to the blond’s stubborn face and bloody elbows, they both assured him that he’d get better with practice but maybe he should stay closer to the ground until he got the hang of it.

By now, they all realized that they were in danger of being late so they decided to run to the airfield. Of the three, only Zack kept his wings out as their smaller, sleeker form didn’t affect his speed. Actually, their intuitive actions, balancing and boosting, helped him move at an accelerated rate. It didn’t take long for his augmented walk to make his body appear... not quite blurred with speed, but definitely smeared around the edges. Sephiroth could keep up but Cloud, with his shorter stride, couldn’t maintain that kind of speed with any kind of control.

He tried.

The driver of the jeep was most apologetic but, as Sephiroth assured him, it really hadn’t been his fault. Besides, the fire had been very small and the all the injuries minor. By now Cloud could activate his Cure almost without effort and several people, who’d been too close to the rolling
vehicle, went away feeling all tingly and refreshed.

The General and Cloud followed the dark-haired SOLDIER much more sedately after that. They didn’t worry about locating him because everywhere they went the murmuring crowd gossiped eagerly about the SOLDIER and his little wings. Plus they could occasionally see Zack jumping over top of the tents. They didn’t even try to figure out why he would do that.

They caught up to the First outside the busy mess tent as he, and his wings, flirted with the crowd. Apparently, he’d been wandering by and smelled the coffee, and the bacon and eggs, and decided he just had to have some. He’d gone in waving his hands, his wings, and his smile, and come out of it with six massive breakfast sandwiches, each one nearly the size of his uniform’s stomach guard, and three extra large mochaccinos with whipped cream on top, which was not normally on the morning menu.

He’d also managed to come out of the busy tent in record time and with nobody pissed off at him for butting into line. It was that, he insisted, that he was most proud of.

Two of the coffees hadn’t survived Zack’s impatience. He offered to dive back into the crowd and get replacements but, as if Summoned, one of the mess cooks brought out replacements. She gave them to Cloud, but she smiled at the big First and asked if she could ‘pet his wings’.

Sephiroth rubbed his temple tiredly. He’d wanted the bouncy First back after all. He sighed and thanked him for the food. At least, as they ate, they walked together at a normal speed... and in the right direction.

So it was they arrived at the landing field long after everyone else had assembled. The gear had been stowed, and the rotors were lazily turning. They could see Tseng, sitting in the cockpit, checking his instruments. Tifa was instructing Vincent on a fighting technique; some kind of bastardized Wutaian kick stance it looked to the General. It was hard to tell what the ex-Turk thought of the lesson; as usual he’d buried his face behind his hair and his collar. Against his will, Sephiroth couldn’t help but stare at the gunman, looking for signs of himself in that thin face.

Was the enigmatic Vincent Valentine his real father?

He shook the thought away. This wasn’t the time to be concerned with a minor detail like that.

Unlike his CO, Zack showed no hesitation in approaching the waiting pair. “Hey, Tifa, Vinnie, looking good.” Tifa’s light greeting almost covered the gunman’s growled “It’s Vincent.” Zack just smiled and shoved the last bite of Cloud’s second sandwich in his mouth. His little wing hands waved at the dark-eyed fighter.

“Sorry we’re late,” Sephiroth said, “The shower was malfunctioning.

Cloud glanced at the General, ready to share the joke. Then, in the soft morning light, he caught a glimpse—just a hint—of the freckles he’d discovered on that broad chest this morning and that reminded him of the main reason the three of them were late. Forget the shower. Forget the races, the accidents and the food; they’d been having hot monkey-sex in the General’s bed less than two hours ago. The soldier dipped his head to hide his rising blush.

“Then I passed by the mess tent and couldn’t resist the smell of bacon and eggs,” Zack said, sucking his fingers clean.

“You’ve got some on your chin,” Tifa pointed out.

“If you’re finished, Commander, I’d like to depart sometime this morning,” Sephiroth’s voice was
dry as toast and Cloud was amazed at the difference between this voice and the purring warmth he’d used earlier. He couldn’t help sneaking another look at the General’s trim figure in his commanding black uniform. The blond dipped his head again. This time to hide his triumphant smile: he’d made the Demon of Wutai growl in arousal…

He missed Zack ‘disappearing’ his wings, but he heard Tifa’s little gasp of awe. “I’ve always wondered, where do they go?” She walked around the big First, lightly touching his back. “How come your uniform’s not damaged?”

“Fucked if I know,” Zack muttered, twisting to look at his spine. Cloud resisted the impulse to do the same.

“Despite the scientific prejudice that ShinRa scientists used to have”

“Hojo!” Zack fake-coughed.

“–and certainly the Professor was among them, the only explanation is that they are a form of magic. They can damage clothing but, once the SOLDIER is comfortable with their existence–”

Again, Zack interrupted, “Takes ‘em for granted, he means.”

Sephiroth ignored that too. “–then they no longer seem to have a problem with them getting caught in, or damaging, their uniforms.” The silver-haired General paused for a moment then corrected himself, “Except Lieutenant Luxiere. His tentacles always destroy his pants. He now uses a kilt… Did I say something humorous, Commander?”

Zack, bent over laughing, just raised a weak hand. Luckily it didn’t take him long to get himself under control as the three SOLDIERs had to stow their massive blades before anyone could get on board.

Tifa went in first, choosing to sit next to the window on the far side. Sephiroth entered next, sitting beside her. Vincent gave the General a flat look but said nothing. He just silently took the seat across from the small warrior and hid his face behind his hair and collar. Cloud had looked at Zack then at the space remaining on the narrow bench seat, and estimated that, if the big First sat there they’d be as stuck as he and Sephiroth had been in the shower this morning. Not an experience he wanted to repeat. Besides, he wanted to sit next to the General where he’d be surrounded by his scent. Yet, it was the SiC’s place. He stood weaving in indecision until Zack’s shooed him in. He knew Seph didn’t want to sit next to him.

Zack, being the last one in, slid the hatch closed and secured it. He stuck his head in the cockpit where Tseng sat calmly waiting. Even with the engines merely idling, it was too loud for a normal conversation so the dark-haired swordsman just gave the Turk a thumbs-up. A quick nod of acknowledgement, a touch of the controls and the engines started powering up. He turned to take his seat across from the blond, making a quick check that everyone had their safety harnesses fastened and their headsets on. He didn’t know about them, but he’d go bat-fuck if he couldn’t talk to anyone for however many gods-forsaken hours it would take them to reach the Northern Caves.

He decided to get the conversational ball rolling, “So, Vince, you think you can stop your perverted alter-ego from misbehaving after the next fight?” Vincent buried himself deeper into his cloak. Tifa’s hand came up to cover her mouth but they could still hear her giggles through the headset. Sephiroth growled in remembered anger and didn’t even bother trying to cover it up.

Cloud’s eyes were wide and assessing as they flicked over the group. “I missed something, didn’t I?”
Zack grinned and jerked his thumb at Valentine, “Just the appearance of Broody Dude’s resident immortal demon who turned out to be a complete perv.”

“And you had lots of fun being perverted, right?” Cloud responded.

Zack’s grin broadened, “Well, it wasn’t boring. You should’ve been there, Spike.”

Cloud rolled his eyes. “I’m a trooper—”

“You’re a SOLDIER,” Sephiroth interrupted, still growling.

“—at heart. I’ve been trained to think boring is good. Boring means nothing’s trying to kill you. Let’s try to keep this trip as boring as possible.”

Cloud leaned back in his seat, murmuring, “And his response is…” just as Zack said, “But where’s the fun in that?”

Tifa didn’t even try to hide her laughter. Sephiroth’s lips tilted and even Vincent reacted, although no one was sure if having his eyes glint gold was a good thing or a bad. Zack contented himself with a light kick to the blond’s shin in revenge. He didn’t mind teasing and insults among friends but he wasn’t exactly sure yet if Tifa and Valentine fell into that category. His question to the multi-bodied ex-Turk had only been half joking. Next time the demon came out there probably wouldn’t be a crowd of people Zack needed to protect. That meant the First would be free to fight, and he would fucking fight. After this morning, he’d let himself be beaten bloody before he’d share his body with another person he didn’t care for.

The helicopter finally reached full power and lifted smoothly in the air. “We’ll be circling around to the east to avoid the worst of the mako plume from the reactor,” Tseng’s voice came over the headset, cool and unemotional as always, and Zack vaguely wished he could have some of that detachment. He’d never been good at it. Of course, he thought, looking at the two SOLDIERs in the seat across from him, maybe it was just as well one of their little group knew how to express emotions...

He crossed his arms over his chest and kicked at Cloud’s feet just because. When the blond looked up, he gave him a smile and an eyebrow wiggle, and was rewarded with a blush and a shy smile in return. And a kick in the shin but that was okay.

“It looks even worse from up here,” Tifa said. She had her face pressed up against the window. “I thought things were supposed to look, I don’t know, better from up high?”

“I think they just look smaller,” Zack replied.

“I’m not going to look,” Cloud mumbled and Zack suddenly remembered that the blond had never been good at travelling.

“If you need to puke, Corporal, please use one of the little bags to your right,” he pointed them out helpfully.

“Oh effing ha-ha,” Cloud responded.

“The mako in your system should kick in and stabilize your inner-ear. Nausea will cease to be of concern,” the General reassured him.

“I’m looking forward to it, Sir,” the blond said weakly. Cloud knew that it wasn’t just the motion of the transport that was making him feel ill; it was the idea that the village, all his past, was gone.
Sure, for him it had been a shitty place to grow up, but it had still been his home. When people in Midgar complained of the cold, he’d mention the minus 35 degree storm he’d lived through, and tell them how long it had taken to dig out the two-metres of snow that had fallen. Their eyes would get big in amazement, or they’d scoff until he showed them the weather reports proving him right. He hadn’t liked *living* in Nibelheim, but he hadn’t minded being *from* it.

At least the mountains were pretty.

He kept his eyes on the peaks until the ruined village was left far, far behind. He ignored the chatter of the rest, although it was mostly Zack and Tifa. Sephiroth and Tseng contributed a little, mostly updates on how the region had been affected by Hojo’s forces or Deepground, but he didn’t feel the need to talk. Neither did Vincent, which wasn’t surprising; the man was inhuman in his stillness—or maybe he, too, was feeling the weight of an unchangeable past pressing down on him and stealing his breath. Cloud rubbed a hand over his aching chest as if that would make the adjustment easier. Zack, in the middle of his conversation with Tifa, once again bumped his foot up against the blond’s. He gave his friend a flashing look of support and Cloud managed a weak smile in return.

Time flowed, marked by a lazy re-hash of their strategy and desultory speculations on what they might find which denigrated into a ridiculous game of ‘I, spy’ between Zack and Tifa because, really, ‘I spy a cloud shaped like a deathgaze’ was a little too open to interpretation.

Cloud was just happy that he hadn’t puked in front of the General. He was hyper-aware of the swordsman’s presence beside him. The lean length and warmth of him was a constant reminder of their morning activities. Thinking about it was better than playing ‘I, spy in the clouds, but a bit more uncomfortable to deal with. He squirmed in his seat.

Zack saw it, just as he’d seen every time his friend had shifted uncomfortably. “Tseng, how much longer?” the dark-haired First asked.

“I believe we discussed how long the flight would take at yesterday’s meeting,” the Turk responded.

“Well, yeah,” the SOLDIER agreed, “but I wasn’t *really* paying attention.”

Sephiroth broke in, “If you start asking ‘are we there yet’ I will take Tseng’s gun and shoot you myself. Is that understood, Commander?” Tifa giggled and even Cloud had to smile.

Zack raised his hands in surrender, “Understood, General Sir.”

Sephiroth gave his SiC a hard look. Satisfied that the First would heed the warning, the silver-haired warrior gave a short nod and turned his attention back to the passing scenery.

“But, you know, he didn’t answer my question.”

“We’ll get there when we get there,” Vincent growled, impatient with the SOLDIER’s silliness and, although he would never admit it, jealous of the easy rapport between him and Tifa. Sephiroth covered his face with one hand in hopeless disgust; it would’ve been better if nobody had said anything. By commenting, the gunman was just encouraging Zack to continue. The General foresaw a time when he’d have to make good on his threat. It would have to be a leg shot, followed by a cast Cura, he decided. Carefully aimed, there would be plenty of time for the SOLDIER to heal before they reached their destination.

Luckily, however, before the conversation could dissolve into gunshots and childishness, Tifa
looked out her window. “What’s that?” she asked.

Zack and Sephiroth leaned forward to see what she had seen but it was Tseng who answered, “That would be the launch tower at Rocket Town.”

“Really?” Cloud leaned forward to look; being an astronaut had been his second choice for dream job. It was distant, and the air was hazy, but when he concentrated he could make out the tall spire that had been a childhood favourite. “How come it’s tilting?” he asked.

“They were nearly ready for the launch when Hojo left ShinRa and DGS broke out of the underground lab,” Sephiroth answered. “Any scientist who had been affiliated with the Professor was called in and questioned.”

“That would’ve been most of them, right?” Zack asked, “Hojo was head of the science department.”

“I don’t know; Hojo never took much interest in space exploration but he would have been involved. It was enough to disrupt the program and stop the launch. Then DGS went on its rampage across the continents, decimating the populations of every village and town they entered. In Rocket Town, the lead astronaut bullied the facility and the townspeople into setting up a Distant Early Warning line and he had them make evacuation plans. When DGS appeared on the horizon he scuttled the rocket by aborting a launch. It went up… and then dropped back down,” The General used his hands to demonstrate, “landing at an angle and rendering the rocket useless.”

“How do you know about it?” Cloud asked.

“Several townspeople filmed it on their PHS’s and uploaded the files to the world-wide network,” the swordsman explained calmly. “His evacuation procedure was also captured. It was very well planned and executed, even if his personal language and behaviour lacked all discipline. His DEW system is the standard for small towns now: simple, effective and cheap.”

“So where is he now?” Zack asked. “He did survive, right?”

“Genesis took a liking to Captain Highwind—and his irreverent attitude. I believe they take turns tormenting Rufus. Genesis flirts with him and the Captain curses him.”

“Interspersed with attempts to kill each other,” Tseng interjected.

Zack laughed, “Sounds like they’re having fun.”

“You would think that,” Cloud snorted.

“I’m just as glad all three of them are over there rather than here,” the General commented. “They squabble worse than some people’s children.”

Even Vincent grunted in rueful sympathy at Sephiroth’s comment. Camps, no matter how large or what force lived in them, compressed the people in it. There was no getting away from other people; their fights, their joys, their secrets. Vincent had never liked crowds and, after so long alone, if he had to live with those three prima donnas he knew he’d end up shooting someone within the day.

“Another two hours and we’ll hit the Northern Continent. An hour and a half after that and we’ll be at the Northern Caves... if they haven’t brought us down by then.” Tseng announced calmly over their headsets. His statement had been so flat and heavy that even small remnants of the conversation in the cabin couldn’t crawl its way out from under it. Silence fell. Even Zack and Tifa
couldn’t fully revive it, especially as the northern plains were just that: flat, plain and boring. There was nothing to comment on, nothing to break the monotony, just green fields and blue skies and the quiet ‘whup, whup’ of the helicopter blades.

Cloud drifted, mostly asleep. When he was like this he could almost feel the excess mako seeping from his pores in graceful, misty plumes, like smoke from burning incense. Mako was life but it was death as well. Part of the living world just as the living world was part of the land of the dead. The Lifestream, the energy and knowledge of those that had died carried along in a living wave that circles the planet. Aware, but not truly awake. Protecting itself, protecting the planet and also protecting all the things living on it.

How far would it go to protect itself, he wondered? The only way to talk to it directly was to die, or go back into his coma and he didn’t want to do that. So who would be willing to die to save everyone else? His dad would’ve; if it meant protecting all life on the planet, his father would’ve allowed himself to be killed. But Cloud knew he wasn’t as good a man as his father because there were people on this world that he wouldn’t die to save. Maybe someone could take his place? After all, as long as they were willing to die, did it matter what they believed? He’d heard that recently, or something close to it, he was sure of it.

“I thought this area was the last stronghold of DGS?” Tifa asked and jarred Cloud into a more conscious state. Sleep was like a sticky coating of glue that didn’t want to let him go.

“They are concentrated on the coasts,” Tseng answered, “We’re not sure why.”

Sephiroth expanded on the terse statement. “It’s possible that they expect us to invade and are preparing to defend against us. It’s equally possible that they are waiting to be evacuated back to the Northern Continent. It was one of those unknown things we discussed at yesterday’s meeting.”

“I’d probably numbed out by then,” Tifa said dryly.

“Jenova needs Gaia to be destroyed in order to be free of this planet. When Gaia is destroyed Omega will gather the Lifestream and save it—save us all in a way,” Cloud’s voice drifted from him like the mako drifting from his skin. “The people and creatures that killed the planet will die with the rest of us, and be saved, with the rest of us. Only the planet will be truly dead. But Gaia and the Lifestream have been intertwined for so long that the planet isn’t unconscious rock. It wants to live. It wants to have living things on it. It wants to continue to experience our cycle of birth, death, and renewal as it has done for millennia uncounted. But it needs help.” Cloud’s voice was dreamy, floating on a wave of half-sleep.

“To save Gaia, the Lifestream must be made to serve the living. Only a sacrifice can firm its resolve. Anything can be the Holy sacrifice; their goal doesn’t have to be your goal.” A deep, sighing breath, “Chaos the Squire and Calamity’s Child, remember your Hearts when you fight.”

Corporal Strife shuddered and twitched, and finally blinked. Everyone was staring at him. “What?”

“Y’know, Spike, that fucking trance thing has got to be the freakiest shit I’ve ever seen you do, and that includes the whole ‘not quite a coma’ thing.” The big First had his arms crossed over his chest. It would’ve been a cocky stance except that he was surreptitiously rubbing the goose bumps out of his arms.

“Did it at least make sense?” the Corporal asked.

“Actually, it was remarkably cogent until it came to giving us advice on future actions,” the General said.
“Maybe,” Vincent’s talked to the group for the first time since lift-off. “We know that the planet, as much as it’s able, is supporting us. We know that the Lifestream is neutral but can be influenced and the way to do that is with a sacrifice of some kind.”

Cloud asked “What kind of sacrifice?” at the same time Tifa asked “But what was that stuff about your hearts?”

It was safer, Sephiroth decided, to answer Tifa’s question and ignore his lover’s. “I believe it means that Valentine, as Chaos, and I, Calamity’s Child, should be paired with the person who means the most to us.”

“So you’ll take Cloud,” she filled in.

“And Zack. I cannot separate the two, just yet.”

Tifa dimpled, “Aw, that’s so sweet! But that leaves just Tseng and myself for Vincent.” It was the stereotypical double-take: her mouth formed a silent ‘O’, her eyes widened comically and slid towards the gunman, and colour rose bright and fiery on her face. “But… it’s not Tseng, is it.”

Cloud remembered that she’d always been praised for being pretty and kind, but no one had ever complimented her brains.

“Whatever feelings I have, I assure you, I do not expect you to return them,” Vincent’s voice was coolly clinical, dispassionate. It made his declaration sound like a situation report.


Those cold, crimson eyes turned his way, “I know what I am, what I hold within me. There is no romance in it and she should be aware of that.”

All eyes switched back to the diminutive fighter.

“I, I don’t know what to say,” she stammered. She crossed her arms defensively around herself, hoping someone would jump in and re-direct the conversation. When nobody did she forced herself to continue, “It’s not that, that I don’t like you, I do, but I’ve not… I mean, I wasn’t…” She frowned, closed her eyes and took a breath. “Guys have always been attracted to me, or at least to these,” she waved a hand in front of her chest, “I’ve trained myself to ignore them. Always. I’m not looking for a boyfriend or romance. I never have.”

“But…” Cloud interrupted then stopped when all eyes swivelled his way. He swallowed. “The night before I left for Midgar, what you said when we were looking at the stars… wasn’t that ‘looking for romance’?”

Tifa tilted her head as she considered the question. “It’s hard to remember what I was feeling then, so much has happened, but I think… I think, even then, it was more like a desire for adventure, for a different life. I wanted to break the future my father and the village had set out for me and experience more.” She leaned forward, “I wanted to be the one on the train to Midgar. I wanted to join SOLDIER and fight heroic battles. I wanted to be the one the villagers felt bad about underestimating. But I didn’t have your strength,” she stopped, flicking nervous glances around the cabin, feeling as if she just stripped herself naked in front of them. “If that makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Zack responded. Cloud and Vincent nodded in agreement. Sephiroth didn’t. He’d never thought of a future, or imagined a purpose, other than the one he’d been designed for.
“Do you still long for adventure?” Vincent asked, “For glorious battle?” His red eyes stared at her unblinking.

She didn’t answer right away. “So much has happened in the last three years. I haven’t dreamed of what I want for so long…” She paused, frowning. Her gauntlet-covered fingers beat a nervous tattoo against her metal-studded vest. Zack could see faint scars on her arms; reminders of battle that all warriors carry.

“It’s like that guy said, that old philosopher guy, ‘War is delightful to those who have not experienced it.’ I’ve experienced it and I think, I know, I’m not looking for adventure anymore, not for itself, but I do want to make things right, to save the planet from DGS and from ShinRa’s greed. Once this is over I don’t want the world to go back to what it was.” Sephiroth grunted in agreement. “But after that, I think I just want to try and have a peaceful life. Find something to do that I don’t hate. Maybe find someone I can share it with. Yet, could I go back to such a plain life? I don’t know. Right now, it’s hard to see beyond the fact that we’re heading into the wolves’ den.”

She finally looked up, looked Vincent right in the eye, “Ask me again—after we get out of this.”

Red eyes flashed gold. “I will,” he said and nodded as if to seal the bargain.

“Would I be intruding too much if I informed you that we’re crossing the Northern Strait?”

Tseng’s cool voice broke the spell enfolding the cabin. “ETA at the Northern Caves is approximately two hours.”

“Understood,” Sephiroth acknowledged Tseng’s information. Not by a flicker of an eyelash did he acknowledge that Cloud was lightly rubbing his thigh against his.

He would’ve thought it was an accident, or the result of nerves, if it hadn’t started after he’d claimed the soldier as his ‘heart’ and if he couldn’t see that Cloud’s cheeks were pink. His action was discreet because the Corporal was carefully protecting his General’s reputation, once again.

He suppressed a growl. He wanted this mission over. He wanted it over and then he wanted at least three months to be alone with his Cloud.

Passing over the strait didn’t take long, even though Tseng had to swing wide to avoid one of the WEAPONs that seemed to be patrolling the coast. The Turk had dropped the copter so that it was barely a kilometer above the surface. Radar and other detection systems would, hopefully, have a hard time finding them when they were so low. A small herd of diceratops ran away from the noise of the helicopter. They ran slowly, but made a huge cloud of dust. They were quickly left behind.

“We’ll be flying over the remains of the Bone Village excavation site as our most recent reports have it listed as abandoned. By heading directly north and avoiding the settlement at Icicle Inn, we should remain undetected. We’ll be able to circle around to the crater from the east. Hopefully most of their forces will be expecting a southern attack and we’ll be able to slip through almost to the rim of the caves.”

“That doesn’t sound good, buddy,” Zack responded, “Too much uncertainty to be a proper sit-rep.”

“Perhaps,” Tseng acknowledged.

Zack waited for more. There wasn’t any—fucking close-mouthed Turk—but he hadn’t said Zack was wrong either... Shit.

He found himself paying more attention to what he could see of the surface, looking for activity. It was hard to make out anything. The forest was doing a pretty good job of reclaiming the
archaeological dig but enough man-made structures were visible that it was hard to decide what was old and what had been thrown up by Hojo or DGS. To add to the difficulty, the area was made dark and gloomy by the weird glowing brightness that was the Sleeping Forest. Not that he had to worry about an attack from there; as far as he knew, nobody’d ever figured out a way to get more than a couple steps into it without falling asleep… hence the name.

“Oh, cool. I’d always wondered how it got such a romantic name,” Tifa said. “It sure looks pretty.”

“Oh crap!” Zack slapped a hand over his face, “I was talking out loud again.”

“Yes,” Sephiroth confirmed, “However, it’s not a bad idea for all of us to be alert. With enough warning Tseng might be able to dodge any attack.” As if to make a mockery of his words a deeper ‘phut, phut’ sound was heard under the sound of the engine and the rotors. It was followed by a high whining sound that had all of the altered fighters wincing.

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“Incoming,” Tseng announced unnecessarily, and shifted the vehicle steeply to the left.

Grunts of pain were heard as the fighters got tossed around but they could see the smoke trail as a missile went past past them. Then the helicopter dropped down and, for a couple seconds, they were weightless and floating. Then they landed back on their seats with a thump. Another smoke trail.

“Surface-to-Air missiles. Short range. Ground unit,” Cloud identified. “They’ll be in communication with the base.”

Sephiroth, casually holding a strap as if riding Midgar’s commuter train, disagreed, “Not necessarily. This area has intermittent connectivity problems when trying to use any form of wireless device. The archaeological team mentioned it several times and suggested that ShinRa send up a group of engineers to investigate.”

“Did they?” Tifa asked. She had her left arm braced on the window, probably to provide a safe cushion when Tseng flung them around again.

Sephiroth shook his head. “No. Not while I was with them.”

“I’ve spotted them,” Tseng said, “Shall I engage?”

A quick pause to assess; “Do it,” Sephiroth ordered. The helicopter hesitated as the rockets were launched. A satisfying explosion indicated that the Turk had hit the enemy and their stockpile. Unfortunately, in order to fire on them he’d had to remain motionless a moment too long and the enemy managed to fire a couple final shots. They first heard a small ‘clang’ then a much larger ‘bang’, then a grinding, squeaking howl as vital systems tried to keep working through the damage. They started to spin, not fast, but obviously not controlled either. Even through their headsets, beeps and alarms could be heard from the cockpit.

“That doesn’t sound good!” Zack called out. Tseng ignored him; too busy trying to get some control over the machine for idle chatter.

“Get prepared for a crash,” the General ordered but there really wasn’t much they do. They’d stopped spinning but the rear of the copter was rotating, lifting and rocking them, lifting and rocking, as it swirled around the X-axis. Both Cloud and Tifa had hands over their mouths as the gyrating motion overloaded their systems. Zack had both hands on the roof of the cabin; even with the harness on he’d been flung into it. Once was okay, a couple times was liveable but, after five or six times, it started to fucking hurt. Only Sephiroth and Vincent sat stoic and seemingly immoveable as the ride descended into chaos.
Tseng finally managed to stabilize the helicopter enough that puking and concussions fading from possibility. The tail was still wagging back and forth but it wasn’t going up and down at the same time anymore. Instead they were going only one way: down.

They were close already, and they could hear the grunts and exhalations of Tseng as he fought to keep it up them up in the air as long as possible. The interior of the cabin was lit by the weird glow of the Sleeping Forest. Its odd, leafless branches were reaching out as if to embrace them.

“Tseng, on the left,” Tifa said, “It looks like a clearing or a path. Fewer trees anyway.”

“Confirmed,” he grunted and they could feel a minute change in the direction they were plummeting.

“You know,” Cloud said, watching the white of the ground approaching, “the last time I had Tseng as the pilot on a mission, the same thing happened.

“Yeah,” Zack agreed, Modeoheim was never far from his thoughts. “I’m beginning to think I shouldn’t travel with him any more.”

“Next time, we should just say no,” Cloud suggested.

“We should say ‘hell no’.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m an excellent pilot,” Tseng grunted through the headsets, “We all should get out of this alive…”

“He said ‘should’,” Cloud commented dead-pan.

“I heard that,” Zack returned just as dry. They were touching the tops of the branches now. They could hear them scraping along the bottom of the helicopter. “We should think on it…”

“Pray on it…” Below the tree tops. Only a matter of seconds before the rotor blades hit and snagged in one of the massive trunks.

“Sleep on it.” Caught. Flipped.

Chapter End Notes

The quote is by Desiderius Erasmus a philosopher who lived in the late 1400’s. Since the quote still fits, it just goes to show how little people, as a mass, have changed

Fanart!  
Tifa by DuetMoaim
Cloud didn’t stay out long. He heard glass breaking, wood snapping, and metal tearing. It sounded like the world was coming apart. The fear that the copter was going to fall out of the trees to smash into the ground—with them still in it—was enough to jerk him awake.

They weren’t falling. They were already on the ground.

They were upside down, but they were on the ground and the helicopter was, mostly, intact. The ripping and tearing sounds had come from... He looked around trying to piece together the events. It looked like a huge branch from one of the glowing trees had come through the co-pilot’s side of the cockpit and stabbed into the cabin, and it looked like the left-side door had been torn off. In fact, it looked like a large purple beast had torn the door off and was now running away with it... and Tifa?

Cloud squeezed his eyes shut and ran a hand over his skull looking for injuries. He hadn’t thought he’d hit his head that hard but he must have.

“You okay, Spike?” Zack asked.

“I think so,” he responded. “Did a purple thing just make off with Tifa?”

“Indeed,” Sephiroth confirmed. He had already freed himself from the harness and was standing casually on the roof, brushing his coat clean of glowing wood splinters. “It appears to be another one of Valentine’s forms.”

“Ah, gotcha” Cloud felt relieved. He didn’t want to have to fight something with horns and claws that big just after having survived a helicopter crash. As long as it didn’t hurt Tifa... he snuck another look out that side of the cabin. The beast—Vincent—was laying the fighter carefully down on the grassy path. Zack grabbed onto the side of his seat and undid his harness. He swung out and back before dropping to the roof. The copter rocked and Cloud lost his view of his friend.

“Please desist in swinging from the seats, Commander,” Sephiroth said, “You’re supposed to be a bat, not a monkey.” Cloud laughed at Sephiroth’s dry delivery. If he’d ever known this side of ShinRa’s fearsome warrior existed he’d forgotten it. It was odd, but nice.

Zack glared at him in mock anger, “Go ahead and laugh, dog boy. Right now you look more like a bat than me.”

Which was probably true, Cloud reflected, plus the upside-down position was giving him a headache. He decided to follow Zack’s example. He grabbed the seat, released the harness, misjudged his timing and thumped into the side of the helicopter. He ended up a crumpled ball on the floor.

“Are you hurt, Cloud?” the General asked, frowning anxiously.

“Only my pride, sir.”

He didn’t reject the silver-haired warrior’s offer of a helping hand. Neither did he object when Sephiroth ran anxious hands over his body, checking for injuries. Instead he leaned closer and
inhaled the reassuring scent of the man. It was sharp and rich and Sephiroth’s, but there was no hint of blood—no indication of damage at all.

While they were mildly flirting, Zack stuck his head through the twisted opening that connected the cabin to the cockpit. “How you doing Tseng?” he asked, “Need help getting out of your little hell-hole?”

“Functional and no. I’m fine,” the Turk replied. As he was fumbling with the harness—and missing the latch by a large margin—Zack suspected Tseng wasn’t as functional as he claimed. He could also smell fresh blood so he suspected that the enigmatic Wutaian killer did, indeed, need help getting out of the cockpit. Zack took a look at where Tseng was hanging. Considering the damage to the internal structure, there was no way they could pull him out through the cabin.

Ah well, he thought, there’s always a Plan ‘B’.

“Seph, can I get you on the far side of the cabin as counterbalance,” the Commander ordered, “Spike, you take my place here and brace Tseng as much as you can. See if you can figure out where he’s injured ‘cause he’s bleeding from some damn place. I’ll go to the outside door and we’ll get him out that way.”

Sometimes, Cloud thought, it was easy to forget that his big, goofy friend was a highly trained and experienced SOLDIER until something like this made him remember. He was taking charge so easily.

They positioned themselves as the Commander has instructed, although Cloud climbed right into the cockpit which the larger First hadn’t been able to do. The outside door was jammed, not unexpectedly. He called out to Sephiroth, “Ready?” Receiving an affirmative reply, the big First ripped the pilot-side door off its hinges. It made the copter rock but the General’s weight on the opposite side kept it from flipping over.

Cloud braced the Turk’s legs, keeping them from jiggling awkwardly. When he removed his hand it came away wet, sticky and coloured the rich red of freshly spilled blood. “I found his injury,” he announced.

“Great,” Zack said. “Give him a quick fix before we take him out. Stop him from bleeding the fuck out.”

“Right,” the Corporal agreed. A deep breath, a moment’s focus—enough to make him aware of the burning-buzz that he recognized at his Cure materia—and then a thought, an image, of a body made whole; blood vessels closing, muscles knitting and skin fusing together. Tseng grunted as the green mist surrounded him, thickest around his thigh, of course, as that’s where his injury was, but it travelled all over the Turk’s body as if making sure he was completely well. Cloud knew that it would feel like thousands of centipedes crawling all over the skin, stimulating and disturbing at the same time. As the caster, he always felt a little dizzy and wired, as if the world was moving too slow yet spinning at the same time. He blinked to get rid of the after-effects.

“Better?” Zack asked the Turk. Tseng nodded. “Excellent. This is what we’re going to do next. Cloud’s going to undo your harness and I’m going to catch you. You don’t have to do anything but let yourself fucking drop, okay?”

“Understood,” Tseng slurred. He was still a little out of it from blood loss and the forced healing.

“Count of three,” Zack said. He positioned his arms and caught Cloud’s eye. “One… two…” he nodded at Cloud who understood the silent instruction and released the harness before Zack could
say “Three.” Tseng didn’t have time to tense up. Instead he fell cleanly and smoothly into Zack’s waiting arms. The SOLDIER gave a grunt of effort—Tseng wasn’t exactly light—before carrying the wounded pilot out of the helicopter.

“We’re clear,” he announced and walked around to the wide, grass-covered path that Tifa had spotted from the air. Laying down the Turk and doing a more thorough check of the man’s injuries.

“Cloud, we should begin unloading the supplies,” Sephiroth said when the blond returned to the cabin.

“Yes, Sir,” he acknowledged, “First, Zack’s going to want his sword. In case something jumps out of the woods.” They were in a potentially dangerous environment with known enemies in the area. Re-arming themselves only made sense. Besides, the General had already reclaimed Masamune so he couldn’t object to the Corporal’s priorities. Instead he went outside to see if access to the cargo compartment would require ripping off yet another section of the hapless machine. Giving Cloud the room he needed to remove the massive blades from where they were stored.

Cloud took his weapon out first and carefully swung it over his shoulder until it clicked into the SOLDIER harness. Then he grabbed Zack’s sword, which was only slightly larger than his own, and left the helicopter. He trotted over to where the First was tending the injured Turk. His eyes swung over to watch the purple beast that was hovering protectively over Tifa’s still form. It wore a kilt that looked an awful lot like Valentine’s red mantle so Cloud figured Sephiroth had been right, but it was still weird to see as orange flames licked along the skin of its hands and wrists. Even more disturbing was its constant growling and chomping and drooling. It was almost as if the thing was preparing to eat her.

“Here,” he handed over the Buster sword to Zack’s grunt of thanks. He jerked his chin at the creature. “Has it, he… whatever, let you check Tifa?”

“Fuck no. I tried and that’s when the flames started.” Zack, hands on hip in a typical cocky stance, barely glanced at the duo. “Y’know, I thought Seph’s growl was fucking scary but he’s got nothing on that purple-beastie.”

Cloud ignored the last part of his friend’s statement. “You see any blood?” As if his question was a command, his eyes focussed and his sight sharpened until he could see the small pebbles buried in the grass around his fellow Nibelheimer. He could make out the stitching in her leather armour.

“Can’t see any and can’t smell any, at least not from that direction,” Zack answered. Now Cloud’s nose twitched and he could smell… everything. “I cast Cure on her anyway, just in case.”

Cloud barely heard him. He was overwhelmed by the information pouring in through his nose. There was heated metal mixed with oil and hydraulic fluid. There was the tang of a spilt potion. One of the bottles must have broken in the cargo hold. There was hot electrical wiring and the pungent odour of melted rubber. The smell was fresh and growing stronger and Cloud thought that it was maybe smouldering in the damaged copter. But his senses didn’t stop there. A bird had made its home in the tree overhead—he could smell a nest filled with old egg shells and dried bird shit. There was the smell of small, four-footed meat-eaters on a low-hanging tree branch just over there, maybe two or three individuals using the spot to mark a corner of their territory. That was very interesting and he felt the urge to explore the spot more thoroughly.

“Yo, Cloud!” Zack poked him in the shoulder, “You’re not really a wolf, remember?” Cloud jumped and blushed.

“Sorry,” he muttered.
Zack smiled, “No problem. Just didn’t want to see you liftin’ a leg or any shit like that. Gotta resist those animal instincts, right?”

“Well, rat boy, if you feel the urge to bite my neck, please do resist,” Cloud retorted.

It only made the First’s smile wider. He leaned forward. “That’s not what you said this morning,” he whispered slyly. Then he stood back and watched his pale friend turn poppy red.

Flashes of memory, almost physical in their intensity, made Cloud’s breath shorten and his heart race; he could almost feel it again. Ohmuhgods! He wanted to feel it again. “Um, yeah, Tifa doesn’t look to be, y’know, bleeding so it’s probably okay to leave her.” Cloud sputtered, “The, uh, General wants to, unload the cargo to, um, see if we need it all now that we’re going to be carrying it ourselves.”

Zack’s grin was triumphant, “Let’s get at ‘er then, Spot.” He turned to Tseng, “You just stay there and recover for a bit, because it might be a bitch to fight effectively if you’re seeing three of everything.” The Turk flapped a weak hand in acknowledgement.

They turned and walked as a unit back to where Sephiroth is examining the damage. “I believe it going to catch fire soon,” the General said as a greeting.

“It might,” Cloud agreed. “I can smell something hot but it’s not burning yet.”

“We’ll have Tifa cast Ice on it before we go then,” Sephiroth said. “Now, let’s get the gear unloaded.”

It didn’t take long for the three enhanced warriors to empty out the storage bay. There wasn’t much as they’d been planning on putting down much closer to the caves not hiking over the countryside for who knew how many days. As they carried the bags out to make a little pile, Cloud kept an eye on Tifa and, and Vincent. She was breathing steadily and Vincent wasn’t hurting her but still... it made him nervous. However, it was after he was putting down the first bag that he saw a black and red haze forming around the gunman’s alternate form. On the second trip it was swirling and getting brighter.

He was heading back to the copter to get the last load when he felt it—a pressure in the air, condensing and thickening. He turned around in time to see a flash. He flinched away, covering and blinking his eyes. When he looked back, the beast was gone and Vincent had collapsed to the ground beside Tifa.

“That’s... a lot more impressive than vanishing wings,” he said slowly. He couldn’t help but wonder what had been done to the former-Turk to give him not one but two alternate forms. Like his wings but more. He could almost remember bits of the last three years; steel tables, green poison, cold voices... and one that hadn’t been cold.

...puppet...

Static flashed across his brain, spikes of lightning. Pain ran through his bones, through his mind, buzzing, burning... He shuddered. There were voices—a voice?—in the static, calling to him. Was it calling to him? Who were they talking to?

“Spike.” Was that his voice? “Hey, buddy. You okay?” It was familiar, and friendly, better than that other voice—voices.

“Cloud!” This time the voice was sharp, commanding, “Snap out of it.”
His mind drained as if some mental plug had been pulled. “Yes, Sir.”

“What’s going on, Cloud?” The silver-haired warrior was posed protectively over the smaller man. Zack was close on the other side of him.

“Um...” he swallowed down bile, “Flashback, I think.” He took a deep breath then another. “I’m good now.”

Sephiroth hummed in disbelief. He placed a hand under his blond lover’s chin and lifted until he had a clear and full view of his face. He examined it closely, “Your pupils went slitted, like mine. Was Jenova talking to you?”

“I heard voices but they sounded male,” Cloud responded. “Calm, even clinical.” Mostly. Just that one voice had been different.

“That doesn’t sound like what I remember of the Psycho Alien Bitch,” Zack commented.

“No, it isn’t,” Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed before he gave a short nod, “Very well. Before, in Nibelheim, you were immune to her voice. If you suspect that has changed, let us know immediately. We may have to adjust our strategy.”

Cloud paled, “Understood, Sir.” He didn’t want that. He didn’t want to hear her in his head. He remembered what the General had been like when he and Zack had gone to dig him out of the lab at the ShinRa mansion; what she’d forced him to become. She was hate and madness and loss of self. He didn’t want to go through that again. “I’ll definitely let you know.” He looked up into the General’s eyes. They were cat-slit and acid green and perfect. Sephiroth’s eyes; not hers, never hers.

“I can go check on Vincent and Tifa and give you guys some private time,” Zack offered. Sephiroth scowled at the First and growled. “Shit. Guess not,” he said but he glared a question at his CO.

“Until we’re assured that he has complete control over all his aspects, I don’t want you to risk yourself.”

Zack’s jaw dropped. “What the fuck? I’m pretty sure the danger is past, Seph. I mean, shit, the last time Vinnie came back from being something other, he didn’t go back to it. Besides,” he continued, getting a little offended, “it’s not like the bastard can hold the safety of a whole fucking army camp over my head this time. I can fight back.”

It was a fair criticism and the General ducked his head in embarrassment, “My apologies, Commander.” Emotions had no place on a battlefield. Sephiroth knew that, had had it drilled into his mind time and time again, and still he’d made such an elemental mistake.

The dark-haired SOLDIER huffed, and put his hands on his hips, “I understand that you want to keep me safe, but you can’t control every shitty little thing. I mean, come on. We just survived a fucking helicopter crash. I’m tougher than I look, okay?”

Sephiroth didn’t shuffle his feet but Cloud could see that he came very close. “I will try to remember that.”

“Fucking right. Now, you look after Cloud and I’ll go check on Vincent and Tifa.”

“You know,” Cloud said dryly, “I survived that helicopter crash too.”
Zack turned laughing blue eyes on him, “One of us at a time, Spike.” Then he bounced off down the road. He dropped the bag he carried in the pile with the rest of their gear. He knelt briefly beside the conscious, but limp, Turk before bounding over to the rest of their group. Tifa was stirring, sitting up and rubbing her head. Vincent was still motionless.

“I should apologize to you as well, Corporal.” The Silver General stared out into the distance.

“No need, Sir,” Cloud disagreed, “Seriously, if I start to fall under Jenova’s spell I’ll be more than happy to have you or Zack jerk me out of it, any way you have to.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

Cloud agreed whole-heartedly.

It didn’t take much longer for Vincent to wake up, or come back, or whatever he called it when he became himself again. Physically, he was fine, of course, as were the three SOLDIERS. Tifa and Tseng had bruises but all their major injuries had been repaired and they were soon up and helping to organize the supplies. It was reassuring how normal everything seemed. Sephiroth began to hope that he’d be able to find a private moment with Cloud.

“Are the trees dancing?” Tifa asked.


“It’s pretty,” Tifa said. She tilted her head and her eyelids drooped, “I want to dance too.” She drifted toward the edge of the forest. Zack was the closest. He stepped forward, grabbed around the waist and held her before she could get into the woods. “Let me go,” she whined in a voice completely unlike her normal tones.

“You don’t want to go in there, Tifa,” he said.

“Yes, I do.” She struggled against his restraining arm, “It’s so pretty.” “Close your eyes,” he ordered. He didn’t expect to be obeyed but he had to try.

As predicted she pouted, “don’t wanna,” and kept pulling toward the trees. She was strong enough that the First had to struggle to hold her. In desperation, Zack covered her eyes with his gloved hand. Surprisingly it worked; she calmed right down and let herself be held. He turned to see Sephiroth had the Turk in the same hold.

“Anybody else want to dance with trees?” the First asked and received head shakes from the modified fighters.

“They do seem a little blurry,” Cloud said.

“And the light pulses slightly,” Vincent added.

The blond tipped his head, “Oh yeah. Like a heart-beat.”

“It’s humming,” Sephiroth stated, “A low pitched noise that’s most annoying.”

They all closed their eyes and listened. “Can’t hear it,” Zack said. Cloud shook his head in agreement.

“Maybe it’s a reaction to the level of Jenova cells you carry,” Vincent theorized.
“Perhaps,” the General responded neutrally, still uncertain how to act around the ex-Turk: friend, foe, or father; beast, enemy, or hero. Now was not the time to analyze it, he reminded himself. “What shall we do with Tseng and Tifa? We can’t tie them up and carry them.”

“Well, we could,” Zack started. Vincent growled. “But it would be a little awkward.”

“Blindfold them and put them on a lead,” Cloud suggested. “They should follow. I’ve seen nursery schools do it for little kids.”

They looked at each other and shrugged. “Good idea,” Sephiroth agreed so Vincent and Cloud searched through the packs to find some rope and something they could rip up for blindfolds.

They ignored Zack’s desire for a PHS with a built-in camera, so they could record future blackmail material, but they did take the opportunity to finish the inventory of their supplies. The blond was surprised to discover a tent and blankets in one of the packs. Since they’d planned to practically fly into the cave, he’d have thought they wouldn’t bother bringing stuff like that. Not that it wasn’t smart to be prepared, but a tent was heavy and potentially useless and the storage space in a helicopter wasn’t great. He tried, but he couldn’t remember any mention of it during yesterday’s meeting. However, he’d still been recovering then and a lot of it was fuzzy.

In contrast, memories from this morning were still nice and clear. ‘I’m not going to look at Seph. I’m not going to look at Zack,’ he ordered himself. Instead he, once again, pictured his drill instructor naked. It was ugly, but it took the edge off.

“Who thought of bringing the tent?” Cloud asked as an added distraction.

“Tseng,” Sephiroth replied, “Disaster planning is an essential part of a Turk’s duty.”

“Optimism is not their thing,” Zack added and even Vincent kind of smiled at that one.

Once they had the two normal people safely secured, they began dividing up the supplies. Cloud volunteered to hold the rope, and then had to ignore Zack’s comment about dogs and leashes. It somehow felt wrong to expect Sephiroth, or even Vincent, to do it and he figured Zack would eventually try to play skip rope with them. He hadn’t expected that he’d end up with the tent and the heavy potions as well. He’d be in the centre and Sephiroth, Zack and Vincent would surround them and keep them safe. As the warriors, Zack reasoned, they should be more lightly burdened than Cloud who only had to stay put and cast materia. Cloud looked at him sceptically. It was both logical and somehow lame.

They also put packs on Tifa and Tseng. After all there was nothing physically wrong with them; they just had to put one foot after the next. So they got to carry the food and the blankets, stuff they wouldn’t need right away, then it was time to move out.

Zack pulled out a compass and tried to get a reading. He held it out, frowned, moved into the centre of the overgrown pathway, looked at the compass again and frowned even more. “Compass is useless. The needle just spins.” He didn’t know which way to go. Between the crazy, spinning crash and the high canopy, it was hard to tell which way was north. Tseng, when asked, responded with lyrical phrases of Wutaian poetry. Pretty, but completely useless.

“We should probably stay on the path,” Vincent said quietly but his voice was overridden by the General’s firm statement of ‘This way’. The silver-haired warrior started marching up the pathway, sword drawn, coat swirling; utterly confident of the direction. With a shrug, the others fell into line behind him. Their footsteps made no sound on the grass covered road.
Quiet—thick and mysterious—surrounded them. It was as if they had entered another, enchanted, world. Warm magic reached out to them...

“Ninety-nine bottles of beer on the wall; ninety-nine bottles of BEEER...” Zack sang out—and ruined the spell completely.

They trudged along the road for what could have been hours. They didn’t know because their chronometers didn’t work in the forest either. It probably only felt like hours because both Tifa and Tseng had taken up singing the beer song shortly after Zack had started and they hadn’t stopped singing it since. Neither of them was in key, or in sync with the other, and they kept starting over or repeating verses, or even counting back up. What they were was enthusiastic and loud—very loud. Sephiroth had never before considered singing to be a torture technique. Now he did. Thank the gods that potions cured headaches.

In his own defence, because he had started it, Zack pointed out that their noise could be a reason why they hadn’t encountered any other living creatures. They hadn’t even heard anything in the distance, running away, retreating from the onslaught.

Vincent had abandoned their group for the most part, fading into the forest in a swirl of red, only to re-appear occasionally and give them an all-clear. Once he brought back a red Summon materia that he said made his teeth ache. Zack had no such reaction and happily added it to his bracer.

Eventually the forest thinned. Tseng and Tifa’s singing softened into tuneless humming.

“Thank all the gods and their offspring,” Cloud muttered and Sephiroth thought maybe he and the blond would share the potion once they set up camp.

The forest ended at a high cliff but the path didn’t. There seemed to be in a series of curving steps built into the face of the cliff. The steps were too regular to be natural; each ‘riser’ was nearly the same height as the others. It was also clear that it had been paved and smooth at one time.

“Is anybody else getting a ‘lost civilization’ feel to this place?” Zack asked.

“Just don’t start with the spooky theme music,” Cloud instructed, looking up the trail.

“Silence would be nice,” Sephiroth agreed.

Cloud looked back at his two blind charges, following the pull of the rope on their wrists as docilely as baby moogles. “Think they’ll make it up with the blindfolds on?”

“The forest has ended,” Vincent responded. “There are no trees to hypnotize them.”

“I’m not so sure,” Sephiroth said. “I can still hear humming—not from them—and we cannot see the top of the cliff.”

“I could go up and scout,” Vincent offered, standing arms crossed, face buried in his mantle. Neither Cloud nor Sephiroth said it but they both suspected that the spooky ex-Turk was missing the dark-eyed fighter.

It was Zack who responded. He’d been standing beside the blond, staring up the path with an oddly intent and distant look. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. In fact, I think we should stick together for this bit.”

They all looked at the First, who was being deadly serious instead of lightly bouncy. A quick
exchange of glances, a silent agreement, and Sephiroth announced the decision. “Let’s leave them the way they are. We can carry them if they can’t handle the terrain.”

“I’ll go first,” Zack said and started up the path. Sephiroth followed him, then Cloud and his charges. Vincent took up rear-guard.

*That was a refreshing place,* Chaos said. *It felt most welcoming, don’t you think?*

‘Hypnotic,’ the gunman answered.

The demon scoffed, *Only for those with small, powerless minds. Mortals with no idea of the true glory that this planet holds... or once held. It’s been so long since I’ve felt anything like it.*

Vincent wasn’t sure but he thought his guest sounded almost wistful. Its voice had certainly held none of the casual mockery it normally did. He wanted to find out more but didn’t get the chance.

*Predators approaching,* Chaos announced in his mind just as Zack called out, “Incoming.”

Three short, yellow creatures jumped in front of them. They stood upright, waving paws that were more claws than anything else. They had large spikes running down their backs; tiny vicious eyes; and impressive sets of large teeth—suitable for rending flesh.

Cloud immediately pulled Tifa and Tseng to the side of the path and forced them down low to the ground. He assumed a defensive stance in front of the helpless duo and began casting Barrier. Vincent stood close to the three. Their actions were deliberate, pre-determined strategy. Vincent, nearly as tall as Zack was easily able to shoot over the head of the shorter man; because he used a gun, the longer distance between the ex-Turk and the targets was meaningless; he could also quickly turn and protect their vulnerable rear if an attacker came from that direction.

“Boundfats, or a version thereof,” Sephiroth announced. Neither he nor Zack had moved from their positions in the center of the path. “They normally cast Blizzaga and are immune to Poison and Sleep. These might have some local variants, however.”

“Got it,” Zack acknowledged before leaping into the sky with a roar. They could see his sword start to crackle with energy. His wings came out from behind his pack, and a black cloud started to form between the little hands. Sephiroth lifted his sword just in time because two of the creatures ran forward, ducking their chins to present those long, deadly spikes to the target. Two swipes of Masamune and one was down, although in two distinct pieces, and the other was howling, bleeding, and retreating.

Cloud had time to think ‘this is going to be over quick’ then two more boundfats jumped down behind the last one, and then three more. He looked up. The cliff was lined with at least a dozen more. They were grunting and clicking their claws; getting ready to attack. While he watched, even more showed up and joined in the noise. “Vincent, up there,” he called out. Shots obligingly began to echo in the narrow passageway, and yellow bodies began to fall.

By this time, Zack had landed his death jump. That took out two and staggered another. Zack’s wings tossed the black energy at the crowd of attackers and Cloud only realized they had cast Gravity when a couple were flattened under the blackness.

From overhead came a wave of freezing cold. Sephiroth raised his right hand and a counter-wave of white heat poured out. The spells met somewhere in the middle. Boiling steam lifted to the edge of the cliff and caught some of the creatures. Their howls of pain drowned out even Vincent’s big gun.

“There’s more,” the ex-Turk said, as calmly as if he were discussing the number of flowers in a
“F**k,” Cloud muttered. A cool mist had settled over the battle area like a fog. It made it hard to see what was going on until it was too late. Which is exactly when he saw the little needles speeding out of the grey—too late. He heard Sephiroth grunt as he was hit.


“We have Eye Drops,” Cloud responded and began digging through his pack.

“No worries, I’m good,” the big First called back. “Who needs to fucking use their eyes anyway?”

“I find them somewhat useful,” Sephiroth said sarcastically.

The mist started to roil and turn and Cloud felt a breeze. The fog was sucked up in a whirlwind. A whirlwind caused by Zack who was spinning through a crowd of boundfats in a move Cloud thought was known as an Assault Twister. “Cool,” he muttered. His searching hand finally wrapped around the little bottle it sought. “General, can you catch it if I throw it?” he yelled.

Sephiroth, who was still slicing through his share of creatures, turned sightless eyes to face him, “It’s possible. Try.” So Cloud did. He lifted his arm and threw. Very badly. It was obvious he had missed the silver-haired SOLDIER by an embarrassing amount. He cursed under his breath and started digging for another one. Then a black-haired blur intercepted the small container. Zack spun to a stop and handed it to the General.

“He needs to work on his throwing arm,” was all he said before heading back into the diminishing horde with a whoop and a jump.

“Bats,” Vincent muttered, “and their irritating echolocation.”

Cloud ignored him and concentrated on casting Cure after Cure on the two SOLDIERs. Now that the fog was gone he could see where they’d been cut, he could smell the sharp-tang of their mako-enhanced blood. It would soon be over, he thought again, although this time he checked the cliff faces for any more of the yellow creatures. Cries of injured and dying boundfats rippled through the air. The General was throwing Firagas at them. Expressionless, with his black-gloved fist stretched out in front of him, he looked like a minor god of destruction. Cloud’s breath was once again stolen by the realization that he’d kissed that face, that he’d had that hand all over his body—he’d had it in his body—and this was so not the place to be thinking of that, he told himself.

It wasn’t self-discipline that brought his mind back under control; the smell of burning flesh and melting fat was sickening, overpowering, as the two swordsmen’s movements forced out a wave of thick smoke. Vincent retreated a step, the gunman’s desire for impassivity and control beaten by the stench of cooking meat. He didn’t let his revulsion affect his rate of fire.

Cloud nearly gagged. He opened his mouth and breathed that way. It was at least somewhat more bearable.

“What’s that smell?” Tifa ground out. The blond was concentrating so hard on not puking that he nearly missed the quiet question. Her normally pleasant voice was rough and dried out from all the singing earlier. “Why can’t I see? What’s going on?” She began to pull at the rope binding her wrist.

Cloud turned to stop her, placing his hand over hers. “It’s okay. Just... be patient for a sec, okay?”

“Tifa,” Vincent took an anxious step forward, his task forgotten for a brief but pivotal moment.
Cloud didn’t see the spell cast but he saw the poisonous yellow-black ooze settle on Tifa’s skin, watched it sink in, and heard her lungs start to rattle. “Shit! What was that?”

“Death Sentence,” Sephiroth answered.

“Oh shit,” the Corporal repeated, “How do I clean it out?”

“You can’t,” Zack answered, fighting off the last of their attackers.

“Fuck!” The First might have said more but Cloud didn’t hear it. He was panicking. He shouldn’t be panicking; he knew that. He’d had comrades die in the field before. He’d even held their hands before. He’d been able to think through it—figure out a way around it. Even in the labs, right up until the end, he’d kept his head. Now, when it meant so much, his mind was a blank. He could hear her growing struggle to continue breathing as her lungs filled. It was all he could hear. That, and his pounding heart-beat.

“Let her die,” Vincent said calmly, his deep grumble breaking through Cloud’s panic haze.

“What? Are you nuts?” He looked up to glare at the gunman, but stopped in amazement. There was a vibrant red-orange feather clutched carefully in brass talons.

“You can heal her, and keep healing her, but the spell will continue to kill her. If she dies, the spell is nullified.” He twirled the feather. “At her last breath, place this over her heart.”

“Phoenix Down,” Cloud whispered in reverence as he took the precious feather.

“Yes,” Vincent nodded, “Time it well, Corporal.” Then the gunman stepped back and resumed firing.

Cloud leaned over his childhood friend. He stared into her eyes, “It’s going to be okay, Tifa. Just relax. Relax.” She nodded limply but the frantic fear left her eyes. She looked at the feather in desperate hope. “I need to undo your vest.” She nodded again so Cloud hastily unhooked the leather and untied the cotton shirt underneath. Seven years ago, undressing Tifa in a secluded mountaintop had been his fondest wish. The thought flitted across his mind and was forgotten almost as quickly as it had formed.

“How’re you doing out there?” he called out to the others even as he kept his gaze locked on Tifa’s.

“We’re good, Spike,” Zack called out.

“It’s nearly done,” Sephiroth stated.

“Keep your attention on Tifa,” Vincent ordered.

“What’s happening?” Tseng’s voice was hoarse, like Tifa’s had been.

Cloud ignored him; someone else could deal with the Turk. He could feel the sweat forming on his temples, and dripping down his cheek. He felt like he had a train engine in his chest driving the blood through his veins at dangerous speeds. He had to focus past his own heartbeat to hear Tifa’s, to listen as her breathing grew rougher and shallower. He watched as her skin faded from delicate to ghastly, and her lips went from warm rose to cold blue. The tendons in her neck stood out as she struggled both to breathe and to relax into death.

“It’ll be okay, Tifa. This once, I’ll be your hero.” She nodded. “Just don’t make a habit of it,” he smiled at her and she smiled weakly back. Her breath caught, caught again. It seemed her whole
body tensed... and then relaxed. A last breath rattled out, her eyes rolled back and Cloud was placing the feather on her still chest.

“C’mon, come on,” he prayed, counting the instants before something—anything—happened. The feather sparkled, rippled with living colour then it burst into flame. The smoke rose to cover her face, settling over slack features. It took only a moment for the feather to burn itself out yet Tifa wasn’t coming back to life. She couldn’t die. She couldn’t. She was all that he had left; the only person who’d known him before and could joke with him in a Nibelheimer’s thick accent. Who understood about real cold.

‘Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck,’ he chanted. He could feel a scream forming, building. He forced it down. He wouldn’t despair until there was no hope, not even the smallest dust mote, left. Zack had taught him that. Zack and Sephiroth. Phoenix Downs were legendary. It would work.

He blinked away tears and saw that the ash from the feather hadn’t blown away like it should have. Instead it was still in the shape of a perfect feather, just done in greys and whites rather than reds and oranges. As he watched, the ash sank into her skin. Not bit by bit, but all at once. He could see the shadow of it under the surface. Then that too was gone.

She took a breath. She coughed. “Ramah’s mercy, bless us all,” he whispered in awe. She coughed again, bringing up water this time, and Cloud snapped into focus. He turned her on her side so that the water wouldn’t run back into her lungs. He wrapped strong arms around her, placing a careful fist on her diaphragm, before squeezing and forcing out even more liquids. It seemed like litres, countless litres, gushed from her mouth, through her nose. She coughed and gasped and struggled for breath. But she was breathing.

Finally her lungs were empty. Her breath still sounded like it was being dragged through bubble gum, but it was strong and even. One last Cure and even that went away. He let her go and they both rolled onto their backs to lie in exhausted heaps. He’d done it. He’d saved her. So many people he hadn’t been able to save: Zack, Sephiroth, his parents, his whole fucking village... but he’d saved her. He really wasn’t worthless after all.

“Odin’s fucking balls!” Zack’s prayer was more colourful, but just as heartfelt. “Those Phoenix Downs sure like to ramp up the tension.”

“You saw it?” Cloud asked confused. He thought the First had been hit by the boundfat’s cast Darkness. He said as much to the SOLDIER.

“I was,” Zack crouched down next to his friend. “Turns out being spliced with bat DNA gives me some resistance to Blind. Pretty good for a little not-rodent, right?” His eyes were gentle and the hand he placed on Cloud’s arm was affectionate.

It was good to know. “At least you managed to keep your mouth shut while you were fighting,” Cloud smirked, letting his eyes shut tiredly.

“Yes, I did,” he sounded happy and innocent but Cloud was too worn out to open his eyes to see what the First was up to. “By the way, Corporal, you did good throwing the materia but we’ll have to work on your inability to throw little bottles.”

“Asshole,” Cloud muttered, but he was smiling.

Zack smiled back, “Woof.”
Thanks to Mizu Hoseki from ff.net, who pointed out this continuity error. In the original version of this chapter, when Cloud asks what cleans out a cast Death Sentence, Zack answers "Esuna. Which we don't have." Actually, they do, but I when I did some more research, it turns out Esuna wouldn't work on it anyway. You need to pre-cast Death Force as a defensive measure to be protected from Death Sentence. Otherwise, it's 100% effective. At least, thankfully, in FFVII (and all FF games) death is never the end.
They took some time to rest and to heal. They hydrated with taste bud-numbing electrolyte drinks and ate nutrient bars that were filling if you could actually get them down. They’d retreated from the combat zone to get out of the smell but, as Zack sadly said; it didn’t help anything taste better so what was the point? The First had tucked his wings away, saying that the pack didn’t leave them enough room. One hand had waved sadly at them before disappearing. Tifa had cooed at it which made the tall, former Turk bury his face behind his hair and his collar. Tseng and Tifa didn’t hear the sub-sonic growl but the three enhanced fighters did. When they’d looked at Vincent in surprise, the gunman had buried his face even deeper behind cover—this time to hide his embarrassment.

They discussed what had happened after the crash and why Tseng and Tifa had been tied up and blindfolded. Unfortunately, neither of those affected could explain what had drawn them in. In fact, both of them said they couldn’t remember anything about the experience until they’d ‘awoken’, bound, blind and with their throats raw. Considering Tseng’s voice became flatter and colder the more it was discussed, Cloud thought the Turk remembered more—much more—than he was willing to admit.

He didn’t bother to call the Wutaian on it. Cloud had his own problems with The Sleeping Forest. Namely, he hated it. It made his skin creep. He felt like this whole area was reaching inside his mind and looking at it, pulling the strings of his memories to see how they resonated. It reminded him of the way Hojo had examined his raw muscles during surgery. He couldn’t wait to get out of here.

They talked about the fight. What had worked, what hadn’t, what they could do better next time. Except, as Sephiroth was the first to say, no two battles were ever alike, just as no two battles were ever totally different. Still, the supplies and the materia were redistributed. Cloud wound up with the Summon Vincent had found but couldn’t comfortably wield. It lit up when he held it which was, he was told, a good sign. It felt like a soft hum next to his skin, odd but not irritating. He’d accepted it casually, as befitting a battle-hardened soldier, but inside he couldn’t deny he was looking forward to the chance to use it.

Tifa hadn’t closed her vest completely. She kept sneaking touches and stealing glances at where the feather had soaked into her skin, as if it should be marked in some fashion. She also kept peeking at the tall gunman who’d given up such a legendary item for her. They could all guess that money and power didn’t mean much to Vincent Valentine, ex-Turk, ex-Lab Experiment, ex-Dead Guy, but that Phoenix Down would have bought him prime real estate on the beach at Costa del Sol, plus the requisite luxury yacht to sit at the dock. And he’d sacrificed it, without hesitation, for her.

Looking at the fighter, watching her watch the tall gunman, Cloud thought that maybe she wasn’t quite as ready to give up on a hero as she’d thought. He snuck his own glances at Sephiroth and Zack, and understood what she felt right down to his toes.

Then it was time to continue. Now that they were out of the trees they could see daylight just turning to dusk. This far north days were a lot shorter than they had been back in Midgar, or even Nibelheim with its surrounding mountains.

“We can camp once we reach the top.” Sephiroth said. “Perhaps that way we won’t get any more unexpected visitors dropping in on us.”
“What if there’s wind? It’s already pretty cold out,” Tifa asked.

The three SOLDIERs looked at each other; none of them had noticed the temperature as their altered metabolisms kept them warm except in the absolute worst conditions. They looked at Tifa and Tseng, both mostly normal and, now that they were looking for it, shivering slightly. Then they looked at Vincent.

“I don’t feel cold either,” he said in response to their unasked question, “but I do not think I generate heat the way you do.” At that statement both Tifa and Zack had to check so everybody presented an arm to compare temperatures. Sephiroth was the hottest, followed closely by Cloud and Zack. Tifa’s higher warmth was probably due to her being born and raised in Nibelheim and the somewhat accidental mako experimentations that had gone on in the small village. Tseng was average but Vincent... Vincent was cold. The spooky ex-Turk’s skin was the exact same temperature as the air around them.

“If you started developing frostbite, would you notice?” Sephiroth asked. In the past, most troop injuries on the Northern Continent resulted from poor cold management rather than attacks or accidents. The wind chill was notorious.

Vincent cocked his head slightly, considering—or maybe talking to his resident demon for all Cloud knew. “Frostbite, hypothermia, any naturally occurring cold, won’t be a problem for me.”

“Is that what your team told you?” Zack lightly mocked.

Vincent looked at him, eyes flat, no expression. “Yes.”

“And you trust them?” Sephiroth asked sharply, ignoring the external tension in favour of their future survival.

Vincent turned his attention back to the silver-haired General, his son. “In this, they can be trusted.”

Sephiroth nodded, accepting the gunman’s statement. When Zack opened his mouth to probe—or likely tease—further, the General glared him into silence. “For now, it should be enough if we share blankets and sleep in a mass, alternating altered and unaltered team member. The tent barely is big enough to fit four but five can fit tightly and, in an emergency six can fit if a couple sleep on top the others.” Zack punched at Cloud’s arm, eyebrows wiggling. Cloud dodged it and took another bite of the nutrient bar. Everyone carefully didn’t look at Tifa or Vincent.

The General ignored them all. “When necessary, Tseng and Ms. Lockhart will use the tent and one or more of us SOLDIERs will join them to provide heat. Any objections?” he snapped. His gaze was stern as he swept it over their group, allowing no argument. It was, perhaps, harsher than he intended but the sleeping arrangements he’d just dictated meant that he would not be sleeping next to either Cloud or Zack for the rest of their journey and the thought did not make him happy.

As if sensing the General’s impatience, the discussion ended soon after that. Everyone finished their food and their drinks. They packed up and they marched out, following the General who once again assumed the lead. Not that there were many choices of direction; there was one road, clearly marked now by large, rounded, stone slabs, half-buried in the cliff’s dirt but still obviously man-made. The fact that the stones were there had led to all sorts of speculation—mostly between Tifa and Zack but Cloud and Tseng occasionally pitched in.

Sephiroth ignore it; he already knew where they were going. Even without Ms. Gainsborough’s vague instructions, he could feel the pull directing him that way, that way, over there. If the enemy
hadn’t brought down the helicopter, he had already planned to order Tseng to land it.

At first part of him had been glad they’d crashed because it meant he would have a few more days to enjoy Zack and Cloud’s company before the mission turned bloody. He would talk with them during the day and sleep close to them at night, and he would savour their living presence. Yet, because the Sleeping Forest had hypnotized two of them, there had been no casual conversation as they walked; because of the cold there would be no holding them close in the intimacy of night. He should tell them what he had planned. He knew that. He knew he was being unfair to them, but he couldn’t bring himself to say anything. Not if it would spoil this time they had together.

He’d never thought of himself as a coward before. Now, he knew that’s exactly what he was.

Standing at the top of the cliff, treeless and windswept—and completely out of the question as a place to camp for the night—they all took a moment to appreciate the view. The trail they were on followed the ridge for a bit before heading back down to the canyon floor. They could look across the divide and see the face of the other side. Tseng had pulled out a map and was trying to find out why such a large and obvious geographic feature wasn’t on it. The only explanation they could come up with was that the Sleeping Forest was just weird.

Zack didn’t like feeling this unsettled and was, as usual, determined to hide behind a jaunty air. He was more than willing to add to the spookiness if that’s what it took so he announced that the stone pathway they were following reminded him of vertebrae. “I feel like I’m walking on some poor skeleton’s spine,” he added, just in case the others didn’t appreciate how creepy he found it.

“Ewww,” Tifa wrinkled her nose.

Cloud, feeling equally disturbed, agreed with his friend, “It’s even more obvious looking down,” he said, “It’s like one of those skeletons they assemble and put on display in museums.”

“This place is freaky enough without you two being gruesome,” Tifa complained. “Next we’ll be coming across some decrepit village mysteriously abandoned by a forgotten people, and you guys will jump with joy.”

“That’s a great idea, Tifa,” Zack bounced up beside her, “There will be moaning ghosts and creaking doors that shut all by themselves but we’ll tell ourselves that it’s ‘just the wind.’” The small fighter glared at him. He smiled, “It’ll be fun!”

Cloud stepped up beside her, “The best thing you can do is ignore him; otherwise he’ll take anything you say as an invitation to continue or a challenge. If you ignore him, he might shut up.”

“Hey!” Zack gave him an innocent, hurt look with big eyes and soft lips, “Is that any way to speak of your best friend?”

Cloud placed a hand on Zack’s shoulder and gave him a solemn look, “It’s because you’re my best friend that I can speak so honestly. It’s a precious gift.” He shook the First a little and said, voice low and very, very serious, “Thank you for that, Zack.” He kept his eyes steady on Zack’s.

“That sucks,” the big SOLDIER finally said. “How am I supposed to argue with that?”

The Corporal smiled smugly, “You’re not.” Then he sauntered away to stand beside his silver-haired lover.

“He’s changed a lot,” Tifa said, as they watched him plant himself at the General’s elbow. If he was a little closer than protocol dictated, neither Tifa nor Zack was going to file a complaint. “He’s a lot tougher than I remember him being.”
“He was always tough,” Zack countered.

Tifa tilted her head in thought, “Maybe. Maybe he was so shy nobody saw it, or rather I didn’t see it,” she corrected.

Before Zack could respond Sephiroth turned back to the group, “Shall we continue everyone?” He barely waited for their assents before marching down the stone road, Cloud at his side.

Zack had planned to spend some time with the Nibelheimer, the one person who’d known Cloud when he’d been a kid, but suddenly Vincent was standing right there. He didn’t glare or frown. He just set his spooky red gaze on Zack and didn’t move it. The SOLDIER jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I’m gonna go catch up with Tseng. It’s been a while, after all.”

“You don’t have to,” Tifa protested but Zack was already gone.

Vincent walked beside the young fighter without a word, a silent yet dominating presence. She blushed like a little girl, snuck glances at him like a teenager with her first crush, and then blushed some more for acting so foolish. Vincent may not have noticed her action but his guest did.

*You could grab her now, my host. Sneak away behind some trees and ravish her,* Chaos suggested hopefully, *I don’t think she’d object.*

‘First,’ Vincent snarled back, ‘There are no trees. Second, I am not going to sneak off with her. This is a proven hostile area. It would be irresponsible in the extreme to expose ourselves, and the others—’

Chaos didn’t wait for him to finish. *I despair of you, my host, my own. There is no romance in you at all.* He felt his unwelcome guest sigh. He knew when the creature perked up. *I can guide you. I will be your romantic soul,* it offered. Putting aside the question of whether or not he even had a soul anymore, Vincent had no hesitation in rejecting Chaos’ offer. A quicker route to disaster he couldn’t imagine.

Chaos huffed. *At least talk to her, my stubborn immortalis. Let her know you like more than her breasts,* Vincent was impressed at the demon’s insight until it followed with, *although, with those, she really doesn’t need anything else.*

Vincent didn’t even bother to sigh at its crude remark; he could ignore it because Chaos had been correct. He did need to talk to Tifa if they were to build up any kind of relationship. Perhaps, if he and Lucrecia had talked more, things would have been different. Different choices, different past, different present...

He shook the gloom away. He would learn from Fair and Strife; the past was done. Accept it and continue living.

Easier said than done, of course.

He snuck a look at the small female keeping pace beside him. She was tiny, barely reaching the middle of his chest, but her stride was confident and strong. Her eyes were clear, not haunted, not guilt-ridden.

He had no idea what to say.

What did people talk about when they wanted to get to know each other better? He’d never been good at casual conversation. He’d been even worse when it was important. He could compliment her on her resilience–
“Ooo, yes. That will make her feel cherished,” Chaos rolled non-existent eyes.

“Thank you,” her soft voice interrupted his panic. He glanced a question at her. “For giving up your Phoenix Down.”

She looked at him. He looked away. They walked in quiet for a few more minutes, not looking at each other, until Vincent knew what to say. With all the conviction he could muster he stated, “It was worth it.”

He looked down at her while she looked up. Delicate colour flushed her cheeks and she was beautiful. “Oh,” she whispered and looked away.

“Now that,” Chaos purred, “was romantic.”

She’d believed him. It was enough for now. He smiled in contentment and... hope.

“Zack,” Tseng barely nodded his head in acknowledgement at the SOLDIER’s arrival.

“Tseng,” the First responded. “How you been?” The question was polite and expected. Zack wasn’t sure he cared about the answer and that bothered him—he always cared—but he wasn’t sure he wanted to walk beside Tseng, to talk with Tseng. Or that the Turk would want to walk beside him, for that matter. ‘Coward, liar, hypocrite,’ Zack’s mind chanted but he wasn’t sure if he meant himself or Tseng.

“You know the Wutaian curse, ‘May you live in interesting times’?” the Turk answered.

Zack snorted. “Should I feel sorry for you?” He kept his eyes roaming over the cliff top and over the valley. He watched the clouds and noticed the wind blowing the dust around. He couldn’t bring himself to look at the man walking beside him.

“It is not required,” was Tseng’s calm response. They walked in silence, able to hear the quiet conversation of the others. The Turk spoke first, “I’m glad to see you well.” There was no inflection in his voice. Zack wondered if the Turk was anything more than a shell. Three years ago he’d thought he’d known.

Coward, liar, hypocrite.

The First’s glance slashed toward Tseng and then away. “Hmm,” he mumbled an acknowledgment.

He could feel the man’s dark gaze upon him but Zack couldn’t bring himself to look. He knew it was completely unlike his usual persona, but he could not bring himself to look at Tseng.

Before Nibelheim and... and everything, the First had always assumed that there was a whole person behind the Turk façade, a person with a soul and feelings, capable of love and friendship. Odin knew the man was capable of loyalty—look at what he’d done for ShinRa—but he had to be loyal to more than just the company, didn’t he? He should be loyal to the President (not that the fat bastard had deserved it) and to his fellow Turks and to his friends, right? Tseng had to have those qualities; it was just that he kept them carefully hidden.

That’s what Zack had told himself back then. He didn’t fucking believe it anymore.

He really wished he was walking with Cloud and Seph. Or even Tifa and the Vamp. He could feel
the rage rising inside him, making his nerves vibrate and his stomach clench. ‘Deep breaths,’ he told himself, suiting action to thoughts.

It might have worked except Tseng decided to speak. “You won’t look at me.”


“I can only assume that you’re angry with me.”

This had been a bad idea. He should’ve just joined Cloud and Seph even if he’d have been intruding. Deep breaths. “I saw you at the lab,” he finally managed to say.

“Oh,” Still the Turk’s voice was devoid of expression, no remorse, no guilt, not even a smidge of embarrassment.

“I fucking know you saw me, and Cloud.” The memory was so clear. He’d been floating in one of those fucking tanks, surrounded by green liquid. Bubbles had been streaming upwards through the stuff making everything seem fucking unreal. “It was early. Shit, maybe only a couple months after we were caught. You saw us and I thought you’d report it once you got back and then we’d be released because, y’know,” He swept a hand over himself, “SOLDIER First Class, PR asset, expensive project, all that fucking shit, but nothing.”

“Zack—” the Turk started but Zack didn’t let him finish.

“I thought we were friends,” Tseng opened his mouth. Zack cut him off, “Or, if not friends then, shit, colleagues or something, but you fucking *left* me there.”

“How do you know I didn’t report it?” Tseng’s voice was merely curious.

“Because Hojo would’ve gloated about being ‘above’ the all-powerful Turks, that’s why.” Zack’s voice was bitter but he was right and they both knew it. If a demand had been made by the Turks to have the SOLDIER released from the lab only to be overridden by the crazy professor, then there’s no way Hojo would’ve *not* bragged about it.

“I reported to Veld and we made the decision not to inform the President.”

“You *fucker*!” Zack growled, his eyes flared dangerously.

Tseng raised an imperious hand, “Hear me out.”

Zack clenched his teeth. He curled and uncurled stiff fingers. He resisted the urge to let his wings out, even though he wanted to use their sharp talons to pluck those calm, distant eyes out of Tseng’s head. Deep breaths. He managed a short nod.

The Turk lowered his hand, “Perhaps the President would’ve ordered your release if we had told him. There was no guarantee. Hojo may have scoffed at the idea that the Promised Land actually existed, but he was more than willing to exploit the President’s obsession with it. In return, the President *would not* hear complaints about Hojo. If called on his hijacking of an expensive ShinRa resource, Hojo could have talked the President into approving it then you would’ve belonged to him. That wasn’t something we wanted to see happen.”

Tseng wasn’t finished. “We knew Hojo had a secret location, a secret project, but we could never
prove it. Money was being diverted, resources were consumed yet the President never gave us the authority to investigate.”

“I know that,” Zack ground out, “but that doesn’t–”

Tseng interrupted, “We already suspected that Hojo was ‘harvesting’ ShinRa’s military personnel and having them declared missing or dead, and that they were somehow connected to his secret project, but those disappearances were never questioned. If we had the President demand your release, what was to prevent Hojo from arranging for your ‘accidental death’ and moving you to the unknown location? Or he could’ve killed you for real since, from what I overheard at the mansion, you weren’t a very satisfactory test subject. I doubt anyone in the lab would’ve used a Phoenix Down on you if Hojo had approved your death.”

Zack said nothing. Tseng’s points were valid. It still stunk and his fists clenched once more.

“We monitored the location, put assets in place to watch you and Strife so that if you were moved we’d be able to follow you.”

“So you could find Hojo’s secret lab, no doubt,” Zack sneered at the Turk.

Tseng merely nodded, “And so that we knew where you were at all times. When Sephiroth returned, we leaked the information as to your and Strife’s location.”

The SOLDIER snorted, “I bet it was after he signed the contract.” He glared down at the Wutaian.

“Of course,” No shame, no guilt, just a bare recognition of the facts. “There was no point in telling him sooner. He needed the resources Rufus could offer and Rufus needed him to take his rightful place as head of the ShinRa forces.” Tseng finally turned to look at the tall SOLDIER. “It was a win-win situation, Zack, and the quickest way to gain your release.”

Zack stared back. The Turk wasn’t asking for forgiveness, he wasn’t asking for anything. He was waiting for the First’s judgement, whatever it would be.

He could kill him, Zack realized. If that’s what he decided, then he could pull out his Buster and cut the Turk in two and Tseng wouldn’t lift a finger to stop him. His rage demanded that he do it: kill the traitorous bastard, watch his blood pour out of his body, listen to him die! He could be a god of vengeance, as cold and removed as Odin himself. Zack swallowed. He didn’t want to be that person, but...

“I’ll think about it and let you know.”

Tseng nodded once again, “Understood.”

They were going downhill now and the path was slippery with dust and small rock chips. They didn’t need to talk to each other when paying attention to their footing was a good idea, so they didn’t. What more was there to say?

“What is bravery?”

Cloud looked over at the General in surprise. Of all the things he might have expected Sephiroth to say, something like that certainly wasn’t one. He’d never heard that Sephiroth had ever indulged in
“What is the nature of bravery? What does it mean ‘to be brave’?” the swordsman repeated the question, so softly he might have been talking to himself. “Is Zackary brave?”

“I’d say so,” Cloud responded.

“Why? What makes him brave?”

Cloud blinked. “Well…” How to answer that? “I think it’s because he sees what has to be done and he does it. I mean, a lot of people do that every day, but they can’t usually get hurt or killed by doing it. You know what I mean?”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth acknowledged the comment.

They walked for a while in silence. Cloud couldn’t help sneaking looks at his silver-haired lover; something was off with this conversation. He was about to ask when Sephiroth spoke. “Maybe it’s easy for him because he doesn’t see what the consequences might be. Danger doesn’t exist, death isn’t real, it’s all exciting fun and gives him another chance to be the hero.”

“If he finds it exciting it’s because he finds life exciting. He’s just… exuberant, that’s all,” the Corporal disagreed emphatically, “but he’s not stupid or blind; he sees the danger and he knows death is real.” An image flashed in his mind, hazy and green. They’d been in the tubes in the main lab, watching. Watching what? A form on the table, a woman, screaming, body arching in pain. Electricity and mako. She was cooked alive. Zack thumped and kicked and fought against his confinement until the green in his tube turned brown from all the blood it had in it.

...failure...

His chest hurt. Unconsciously, he rubbed it away. He swallowed against the nausea, subtly worked muscles gone numb. He struggled to remember what they’d been discussing: Zack, bravery. Is he a hero?

“Yes, he’s a hero. He can’t help it because he cares.” He’d cried, Cloud remembered. Once the ‘lesson’ was over they’d been sent back to their cell and Zack had sobbed with the abandon of a child and the helplessness of an adult. Cloud had held him, rocked him, and felt so very useless… He gathered himself back from the past. “He’d face down a thousand soldiers if he needed to, but he’d do it with a joke and shout because that’s the way he is.”

“Maybe he wouldn’t believe that a thousand soldiers could kill him?”

Cloud thought about it and saw Zack on a rocky plateau. Armed, faceless, soldiers—thousands of them—papered the rocks surrounding him. The big First sighed and rolled his eyes, and prepared for battle. Why were there tears in his eyes? It was this weird forest, he knew it.

Once again he shook himself back to the conversation. “He’d be ready for death but he’d be hoping to live.”

“That sounds closer to stupidity than bravery.” Despite the harshness of the comment, the General’s voice was soft, without accusation. “Surely, he should retreat.”

“Not if it’s the only way. I mean, he’d look for another way,” the blond added hastily, “It’s not like
he wants to die, but he’d do it if it would protect us. You know that, right, Sir?” He looked up at the silver-haired warrior, his eyes large and silently begging for an indication that he did, truly, understand that Zack was brave and not stupid.

Sephiroth looked down at him and smiled, “I do know that. He’d die for us. I’d die for both of you.”

“I’d rather we all lived, Sir,” he interrupted.

The General chuckled, “Good point.” He looked away again, back out over the looming glow of the forest. “Do heroes feel fear, knowing they’re about to die for what they believe in.” Again, it was so much a question but a mused thought spoken out loud. Cloud answered anyway.

“Probably. If they didn’t they might just fall into that stupid category you mentioned earlier.”

“I don’t think Vincent Valentine feels fear.” He had a choice of fathers, Sephiroth realized, one without fear or one without compassion. It was an odd thought and somewhat intriguing. Cloud slipped on a stone and bumped him, pulling him out of it.

“Vincent has an immortal demon inside him. I don’t think he can die,” the blond pointed out.

“Possibly not. It would certainly nullify the ‘fear of death’ argument,” Sephiroth smirked.

Cloud’s lips turned up in appreciation. A thought occurred to him, “Still, I don’t think he’s without fear. He just fears things besides death.” The General’s eyebrow went up again. “Emotions and feelings. Caring about someone is scary.” His gaze flashed up to the General’s, then skittered away from the perceptive green gaze. “Trusting that someone will be there for you, supporting you and accepting you.”

“Ah yes,” Sephiroth said slowly, “That does require a different kind of courage.”

Cloud couldn’t look at him. Instead he looked at the cliff that rose up behind the trees on the valley floor. If he looked at the General then he’d know that Cloud had been hinting, asking for reassurance—yet again—that the Silver General wasn’t just playing with him now just to break his heart later. He shouldn’t need that. He should be stronger than that.

Fuck, he was a weak bitch, sometimes and he was starting to panic.

“I trust you that way, Cloud,” Sephiroth stated calmly. His words and his tone fell like a balm on Cloud’s agitated heart. “I started trusting you three years ago and I have never stopped.

Cloud couldn’t breathe for a moment. His ribs were stuck and his throat was closed. The world was blurred. He swallowed. “Thank you, Sir.” He was panting, but at least he was talking, responding. “I trust you too.” He still couldn’t look at his lover; his lover, the General, the Demon of Wutai.

“I know, Cloud,” Sephiroth answered. “Thank you,” he added, as if the blond’s trust were a precious gift and would be treasured.

Head bent to hide his furious blush, Cloud couldn’t help the smile that took over his face, his heart, his whole being. Suddenly, this weird forest didn’t seem so bad after all.
They walked until they reached the canyon floor and were back among the trees. By the time they were under cover the sun had set almost completely, not that the sky’s darkness had any effect on the light levels, not with glowing trees all around. They watched Tifa and Tseng for any signs of whatever it was that had hypnotized them before but this part of the forest seemed devoid of power. The trees were pretty and mysterious, but not enticing. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief, especially Tseng who knew Zack would never let him forget that he had sung. Out loud and in public.

They had time enough to set up their camp without hurrying. For supper, there were more protein bars and some MREs, which were only slightly more appealing than the bars. Zack offered to take Cloud hunting for something more satisfying. Between the blond’s wolf-ness and his bat-ness, he said, they should be able to find something edible in no time. Sephiroth vetoed the idea. They had tried to light a fire but the wood they’d found, though dry, had resisted everything—even his cast Firaga. Since they had no way to cook anything they caught, a hunt was pointless.

Vincent was relieved. Galian might like fresh meat but he did not. Instead, the ex-Turk accepted and ate the lukewarm, SOLDIER-standard goo without comment. When it was time to organize the night watch, he volunteered to do that with as little fuss, easily dismissing Sephiroth’s concern that a full night was too much for one person. Finally, the General nodded acceptance. It wasn’t a good idea for Tifa or Tseng to be without the heat of the SOLDIERs, and he wasn’t sure that either Cloud or Zack were quite one hundred percent yet, both of them were trembling slightly.

It was somewhat warmer on the canyon floor, and they could hear running water someone in the forest. There were trees and bushes to give privacy so everyone decided to find spots to wash up and take care of their pre-sleep needs.

Vincent resisted the urge to follow Tifa, knowing that the desire had more to do with Chaos’ voyeuristic urges than any doubt that she could take care of herself. After all, he’d already scouted the area around the camp and scared away any would-be predators while the others were laying out the bedrolls. Tifa would be perfectly safe.

He also ignored the demon when it tried to get him to follow Strife and the General as they left the campsite together.

*But they’re probably going to have a quick bout of sex. If we don’t hurry, we’ll miss it,* Chaos pouted.

‘I am not spying on my son and his lover,’ Vincent thought firmly back. He folded his arms and planted his feet and he: Did. Not. Move. Not even when Strife returned, looking excited and, considering the leaves in his uniform, more than a little mussed. He grabbed his dark-haired friend and dragged him back into the woods with an excited ‘I want to share a secret’ look about him.

Vincent didn’t follow them. But a part of him really wanted to.

Chaos crowed in delight.

“You know, I don’t mind quickies in unexpected places but this may not be the best time to indulge,” Zack chuckled, dragging his feet a little bit.

“It’s not about that, Zack,” Cloud frowned at him, “Not everything is about sex.” Zack raised his eyebrows, getting ready to argue the point when the blond stopped and pulled him down into a
crouch. The glowing trees had thinned and given way to more normal looking bushes and scrub trees. “Keep quiet or you might scare them off.” The Corporal then moved out slowly and carefully, making no sound against the soft, forest floor.

Intrigued, Zack followed. They crawled over a small crest and he saw a little pool formed from a small brook that spilled over rocks and was caught up in fallen trees. He also saw fireflies, thousands of them. They were on the water, in the air, and around the bushes lining the stream. They twinkled and flashed, dipped and swooped. They were innocence and mystery combined. A childhood treasure revisited. “Holy shit,” the First whispered in joyful awe.

He took his eyes off the show and looked to where Cloud had settled. There was Sephiroth as expected, watching the insects with narrowed eyes. The General had his chin resting on his stacked fists. Zack crawled up and flattened himself out on the other side of the blond. Warm, acid-green eyes flicked his way in acknowledgement. “How did you find them?” he whispered, slurring the consonants into a soft blur so as to not disturb the creatures.

“We didn’t,” Cloud replied the same way, “We were just using the water to brush our teeth and they started showing up. They didn’t come in close until we left the pond.” He looked at Zack with happy eyes. “There were just a couple dozen to start with. Now look at them.”

“I believe there’s a pattern to their flashing,” the General stated, “related to the individual variation in colour.”

“Perhaps they’re signalling to each other,” Cloud suggested.

“Perhaps,” His eyes narrowed further as he considered the suggestion, “It’s a workable theory.”

Cloud turned to the dark-haired First. “The General never got to chase fireflies as a kid,” he explained.

Zack grinned. “It’s about time then,” and he wiggled himself into a more comfortable position and settled in to wait until Seph had looked his fill. Cloud looked at him, a small smile on his face. Then he startled them both by leaning over and giving the First a soft kiss full on his lips. The blond looked at him wide-eyed for a moment before ducking his head bashfully. Zack glanced over at Seph to see if he noticed his lover give a kiss to another man. Not that he thought Seph would really object; Cloud was covered in the General’s scent so Zack figured they’d been sharing some hot tongue-sucking action before the fireflies had showed up. Still, considering his CO’s possessive streak, it was best to check.

He needn’t have worried. Sephiroth had noticed. His unique eyes were turned their way, watching them more than the bright, little insects. A small smile played on his lips before he returned his gaze to the pool. In fact, he took it as a good sign that Cloud had initiated contact with Zack. It was a return of confidence that the General feared they would all need to rely on in the coming days.

The coming days...

He didn’t want to think of it. So he didn’t. He deliberately turned his mind away from what he would be facing tomorrow and concentrated on what was here with him today. As Cloud had reached over and kissed Zack, Sephiroth leaned over and kissed Cloud. Then, as Zack had done, he wiggled himself into a more comfortable position and enjoyed the insects’ colourful dance until it was time to return to camp.

He kept his mind blank as they sorted out their sleeping arrangements. He thought of other things as he wrapped himself around the shivering Turk. He willed himself to sleep until he thought of
nothing at all.
It bothered Zack. Something about yesterday, last night... even this morning. Seph’s behaviour had been off, somehow. Nobody would’ve noticed—nobody had noticed—but he’d known the silver-haired warrior longer, and better, than anybody else left alive.

The General was always focussed when on a mission but he was never unaware. Several times, this morning, one of the others said something to him only to have to repeat it before it seemed to sink in.

Maybe he’d changed, Zack wondered but rejected the idea. Sure, he’d been kind of busy since Seph had broken them out of the lab; lots of things to adjust to, but he’d been aware of everything. The First had been comparing the current world—and the people in it—with what he’d known before, and Sephiroth had been fine up until Tseng’s arrival.

Maybe it was the mission.

Sephiroth had spent nearly thirty years believing Hojo was his father and now he was on a mission to kill the man. Even though he was a creepy, sadistic slug that should’ve been squashed years ago, the idea of killing him might be freaking the General out. If that was the case then the problem was easy to solve: Zack would kill him. As ugly as the idea was, Zack would enjoy killing that fucking bastard. He might enjoy it too much but, he shrugged mentally, everybody had to have a dark side.

As the day wore on, though, Zack began to suspect it wasn’t the idea of killing Hojo that was bothering the General. He just wished he could figure out what it was, before whatever it was happened and it was too late for him to do anything to help.

He puzzled at it, as he bounded along the skeleton road, talking first to Tseng then to Tifa. Just when he’d worked his way up to walking beside the General, the trees thinned and the landscape changed. They’d been climbing steadily, a gradual slope that even city-bred Tseng had no trouble with, but now it angled back down again and, since the forest was replaced by low bushes, ferns and brambles, they had a clear view of a wasteland of ruined buildings.

“Huh,” the First rocked back on his heels, “I guess I was right about the Lost Civilization thing.”

“Tifa had it right,” Cloud decided, “She said it would be a ‘decrepit village mysteriously abandoned by a forgotten people’.”

“Not forgotten,” Sephiroth disagreed, “Just extinct. This is the home of the Cetra—the Ancients. They lived here for unknown centuries before the Calamity fell from the sky, infecting Jenova, and causing family to fight family. They cleansed most of the virus from the planet, destroyed it, but doing so meant Cetra killing Cetra and so they destroyed everything they were.” His voice wasn’t quite detached, “They had been the dominant race on Gaia. After Jenova they were only tattered remnants, scattered and dying. But every one of them was sworn to protect the planet by whatever means necessary.” His voice trailed away into the wind.

The poetic recitation from the normally blunt swordsman stunned the rest of them into silence.

As if sensing all the eyes on him, the General gathered his mask of calm professionalism around
him. “We should be able to find shelter there. Perhaps someplace we can have a fire.” He strode away leaving the others to follow at will.

Cloud angled himself next to his taller friend, automatically lowering his voice like they had in their cell at the lab. “Is it just me,” he asked quietly, “or did that sound like ‘famous last words’?”

“It came awfully close, didn’t it,” Zack responded, running anxious fingers through his unruly hair. “And last night... it was sweet, but weird.”

Cloud looked up at him a faint flush on his cheeks, “I-I wasn’t sure,” he stammered, “I’ve hardly any memories of him. I feel like I know him, but at the same time, that I don’t, you know?”

The dark-haired First looked down at his friend with sympathetic eyes, “I could say yes, but I’d be lying. Hojo didn’t mess with my brain the way he did yours. I remember everything just fine.” The last sentence was said with a grim acceptance and Cloud realized that maybe, in some ways, he was to be envied his cheese-grater memories.

“What we can do about it?” Cloud asked.

“Can’t think of anything,” Zack answered. He looked at the others, all waiting for them to fall in behind Sephiroth and he jerked his head at the Corporal and they began walking. “It’s hard to think of anything when I don’t know what’s causing it.” Cloud hummed a sad agreement. “All we can do is keep an eye on him and be available for when he’s ready to talk about it.”

“You’re going to leave him alone and not bug him?” Cloud didn’t believe it.

“Fuck, no,” Zack scoffed, “You’re going to leave him alone and not bug him and be all supportive and shit. I’m going to tease the hells out of him. If he tries to kill me, just keep everyone else safe.”

Cloud’s eyebrows were raised. “If he tries to kill you,” he repeated dubiously.

Zack shrugged a little, “Probably won’t happen.”

“Uh-huh,” the Corporal’s disbelief hadn’t gotten any lighter.

Zack turned to him, grinned, and slapped him on the shoulder, “Even if he does, I’m good, I’d survive.” Then he sauntered off, the perfect picture of complete self-confidence.

Cloud stopped, still trying to process it. “You’re a complete loon, you know that right,” he called after the First. Zack just waved and kept walking.

Watching him stride away, Cloud felt like he’d lived through something like this before. That Zack had led him into potential death with a grin and a swagger. It had turned out okay that time; he was sure of it, but the memory—if memory it was and not some hallucination—was fuzzy and filled with static. There’d been stairs. It had been dark. A dark tunnel. Things in the dark. Zack had killed those things. A room, a room with books. No, not books. Tubes. A cold metal table. A voice saying ‘he’s coming out of it’ answered with ‘impossible!’ He knew that voice. Hated that voice. Prayed to that voice to give him a number...

...the time... has come...

Suddenly a sharp pain ran up from his chest and stabbed into his temple. He winced and hunched against the pain. He brought his hand up to massage it but it was already gone. What the fuck? He squinted against the pale sunshine but the pain didn’t return. Was this one of the symptoms Dr. Imeera had warned about? This was so not the time to start suffering mako withdrawal. He opened
his mouth to call his friend back, to warn him and then he shut it again. What could Zack do? There was no clinic, no medicines, no way to prevent it; besides, it could just be a reaction to the forest and everything that had happened? Why give the First something more to worry about?

With a shake and shrug, he forced the incident from his mind.

He’d already fallen behind the others. They’d bunched up, both as protection from the wind but also because there was no place for hostile creatures to hide in the stunted greenery. Sephiroth, in the lead, and Cloud, trailing behind, were the only two not in the main group. Cloud hurried up the path in time to hear Zack’s voice drifting over the landscape. “So, can we do some treasure hunting because, if this is the home of the Ancients I want to see if I can find Aerith something. That would be friggin’ cool, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe we can find out more about what the Cetra did to contain the virus,” Tseng’s controlled voice also floated easily in this oddly barren, alien setting, “That would be more useful than a trinket.”

“Fuck, Tseng, where’s your head?” Zack remonstrated, “This is my girl we’re talking about. I can’t go on a trip and not bring her back a souvenir. No wonder you don’t have anyone.”

“I wouldn’t mind hunting around,” Tifa interrupted any brewing argument. Her voice was cool and faintly mocking. “Maybe we could find a place with a roof and a fireplace to camp in tonight.” With that practical comment the matter was settled. The ruins would be explored and any useful items scavenged. Tomorrow they would continue their journey fully rested.

With a destination and a purpose in mind, they walked faster and their spirits were raised. It didn’t take long to cross the sere landscape. They stopped at the top of a wide terrace that separated the wilds from the city and encircled much of the ancient town. It had a retaining wall made with natural stones. They could see that it had been carved and fitted to form a once smooth surface nearly two metres high. The evenness of the curve indicated a level of technical ability and practicality never mentioned when talking about the Ancients. Usually, it was all about their mysticism and prophecies, not about housing and agriculture. Now, the wall was crumbling. Some sections had collapsed and spilled their stones, like a waterfall, toward the town. Clumps of the fibrous grass grew in the cracks.

The path they’d taken had widened as they drew nearer, turning into a road. Here it dropped through the terrace in what would have been a gradual slope back when it was new. Now, broken stones rose and dipped unevenly. Coarse moss and tough vines grew in the cracks making it treacherous footing for everyone. They stood at the top of the incline and looked out over most of the ruined city. The road flowed through the centre of town from east to west in an almost perfect, straight line. It disappeared on the far side into a dense patch of forest, only dimly glowing.

They could see that another street, almost as broad, crossed it in a glaring ‘Ψ’ pattern. That road ran up a curving cliff with some kind of structure carved into it. Tseng thought it could be a temple or government hall since it loomed so distinctly over the rest of the town. The Turk suggested they head up the road immediately, arguing that if the Ancient’s had knowledge of how to contain or destroy the Jenova virus, then it would likely be in such an important building. However, after looking at the sun’s position, the rest of them vetoed the idea. Aside from finding a spot to spend the night, there was more than enough to scrounge through in the town’s remains. They’d be climbing out of the valley tomorrow anyway, and the path to the temple was as likely a direction as any of the others.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m looking forward to this,” Zack, standing with his hands on his hips, bounced a little in excitement. Tifa, standing with her hands clasped behind her, echoed the
sentiment and did her own version of Zack’s bouncing. Tseng seemed eager and even Vincent’s eyes sparked with curiosity.

Only Sephiroth looked at the old buildings and reflected nothing. His expression was so unmoving it was like a porcelain mask, beautiful and cold. It was the face Cloud had seen on countless magazine covers and news reports: ShinRa’s perfect weapon; a heartless, soulless killing machine. It made him shiver.

“Teams of no less than two people, I think,” Tseng suggested. Everyone nodded.

“I don’t want to tramp over broken stones—too much like walking in the Nibel Mountains,” Cloud said. Tifa grinned. “Besides someone should stay here as sentry in case, you know, something tries sneaking up on us.”

“Do we really need a central command post,” Zack teased.

“It makes sense to have a reserve,” Sephiroth said “but since we’ve agreed to stay in teams, I will remain behind with Corporal Strife.” His face and voice didn’t change, but Cloud had the feeling that the General was relieved to have an excuse to stay behind. “Leave the packs with us and just use your field bags.” Since the packs were heavy and bulky this suggestion met with unanimous approval. There was no discussion about who would be in what team, the four explorers just naturally split into two groups. Tifa and Vincent took the buildings to the left, and Tseng and Zack headed over to the ones on the right.

Cloud looked up at his General, still looking cold and aloof. A soft breeze made his long hair writhe around him as if mimicking a lover’s caress. Cloud had memories of that hair. He blushed and shifted his weight as he became partially erect. He sighed internally. It was like he’d regressed several years to the height of puberty’s hormonal overload, erections every time he so much as breathed.

Since Sephiroth looked like he would stand in the middle of the road until the sky fell and the sun darkened, the Corporal grabbed most of the packs and moved them off the road to an intact portion of the wall. He shrugged out of his own pack and added it to the pile. Then he sat down, dangled his feet over the side, and looked out over the ancient city.

The closer buildings were constructed in squares, not unlike those in Nibelheim had been. Farther away on the other side of the north-south road, the buildings were rounded and kind of pinkish. They also appeared, from a distance, to be in better shape than the nearer buildings and Cloud couldn’t help but wonder if the difference was significant. He was sure he remembered reading a book or something about the effects of major crises on all aspects of a culture, from clothing to child-rearing, eating and houses. During and just after a catastrophe, all of it would be fluid and vulnerable to exploitation. Maybe the pink swirly buildings were older and better built, and the ugly square structures were hastily erected in the aftermath of disaster, and that’s why they were crumbling ruins.

Before and after Jenova?

Perhaps. As Sephiroth said last night ‘It’s a workable theory’.

As expected, the General followed him to his perch. He dropped the packs he’d carried and stood beside Cloud, looking down at him. Cloud said nothing, just waited. “I’m surprised you aren’t exploring with the others.”

Cloud waited, unsure of what to say. He was just as glad not to be exploring the city. His feet hurt
which, as an enhanced soldier, he was never going to admit even if it had been over three years since he’d done any serious rough-country marching, and he also wouldn’t say the city completely creeped him out; he kept expecting spectres or zombies to appear and challenge them all. He couldn’t say it because that would make him appear weak in front of the General. He could say that searching through the ruins for booty made him think of shopping, but with lots of dust, no selection and less convenience... and he’s always hated shopping.

He could also mention that he was worried about Sephiroth, and about himself, and this would be the perfect time to either talk or think. He could poke at potentially painful emotional wounds... He shuddered, and settled for a simpler, easier, explanation.

“First thing a trooper learns is to never volunteer for anything that requires work. That,” he pointed to where Vincent and Tifa were scrambling over a pile of fallen stones, “is work.”

Sephiroth snorted quietly, knowing the answer was a cover, but willing to accept it for the small truth it carried. He wrapped his coat around him and sat beside his lover on the wall. He had to shift around for a while, settling Masamune and moving his hair to the side so he wasn’t sitting on it. Cloud couldn’t resist a smile. The General’s hair was so impractical. It was the one bit of whimsy in an otherwise controlled existence.

He also sat close enough that Cloud could feel his body heat, even through the thick leather coat. The scent of him swirled in the air between him before being carried away. The sun was warm. There were birds singing from somewhere; their voices cut through the odd stillness coating the town as if to warn the ghosts of invaders. There were occasional flashes of colour as the other four scrambled over collapsed walls and into exposed upper levels. Small plumes of disturbed dust puffed into the air only to be dragged off by the breeze. It was quiet, peaceful, safe—and a lie.

Shit, Cloud thought. He had to bring it up or it would be like running away. He hated this emotional stuff.

“Zack’s worried about you;” he said without looking at the tall warrior. “He says something’s been wrong since the mission briefing.”

“He does,” Sephiroth’s voice gave nothing away.

“Hmm,” Cloud confirmed. Even as he said it he knew he was being a coward. He was letting Zack take responsibility for the worry and distancing himself from the General’s response. ‘Zack wasn’t the only one with concerns, Strife,’ he told himself, ‘be a man and own up to it.’

He swallowed and then turned to face the General, his lover. “I think so too. What’s wrong, Sir?”

“I could ask you the same question.” It was a poor parry and Cloud ignored it. He continued to look at his General, waiting for an answer. “Nothing’s wrong with me, Cloud,” Sephiroth finally responded, “Now what’s wrong with you?”

The blond sighed. “My ‘nothing’ is probably a lot like your ‘nothing’.”

Sephiroth raised one sculpted brow in appreciation; a small half-smile bent his narrow, sensuous lips. Green eyes locked onto blue. The moment stretched. Worries fell away. Breath quickened. They leaned…

The moment was shattered by a shout and a crash. They turned in time to see Zack jumping out of a cloud of dust with Tseng securely in his arms. The First landed them on a nearly-intact building next to the one that had just collapsed. The SOLDIER’s whoop of excitement could be clearly
heard and soon Vincent and Tifa emerged onto a roof to take a look.

The two on the retaining wall resumed their innocuous ‘eyes front’ positions. They carefully watched as Zack jumped down to street level with Tseng still being carried. They could hear the Turk’s protests about the ‘indignities’ and being ‘perfectly capable’ of getting down on his own. They could see the SOLDIER grin unrepentantly as Tseng straightened his suit and ran a hand over his tidy hair.

When Zack waved at them, they waved back.

“Tonight, I don’t care if there are fireflies, meteor showers or Odin himself,” the General growled, “The only wonder of nature I want to see spread out in front of me is you... naked.”

Cloud swallowed as his heart bumped into overdrive. “Yes, Sir,” the Corporal agreed.

It was just as well they didn’t try to duck out for some private time. Soon after the building’s collapse the teams began ferrying loot back to the ‘command base’. Potions, elixirs, jewellery, bits of armour and weapons, and even cloth, were brought back to be examined and discussed. Most of the goods were of average interest, but they found a materia that Sephiroth tentatively identified as Comet. He couldn’t be sure because there had only been two examples of Comet materia found and nobody had ever managed to master them. One user had apparently killed himself when the rocks fell on him rather than on the target area. It was powerful, but also unstable and unpredictable. When the globe flared as Zack approached, the decision to assign it to him was easy and unanimous.

Of course, then they’d had to spend some time redistributing all the materia so that no one had too much. Materia was great, everyone agreed on that, but every orb you wore, every spell you cast, would pull something from you: energy, focus, health; each one required a small sacrifice. Wear too many, and you’d be too weak to survive in the field. ShinRa had had people working on ways around the carry-limit but, as far as they knew, no solution had been found.

Zack, having to choose which one of his equipped materia to hand over to Vincent, who was the only one not up to his limit, decided to juggle the three that he could most easily give up. Sephiroth pulled them out of the air and gave the first one, a Haste, to the gunman.

Once they’d finished that up it was getting too dark to continue the exploration. Tifa had wanted to spend the night in the weird curly houses but Vincent, who’d taken off in the middle of their examination of the loot, reported that the buildings had no heating system that he could identify. Considering Tifa and Tseng’s vulnerability, they decided to use one of the more intact square houses instead. They’d found one that had a most of its roof, and a wood stove they could cook on and use to heat the room. It even had mattresses, lumpy and heavy, but still good insulation from the cold floor. The only thing lacking was running water. For that they’d have to go to the community wells and haul it in.

It didn’t take long for Tifa and Tseng to start shivering once they’d stopped scrambling over the ruins. Sephiroth had them stay in the room while the others scrounged firewood and brought in the water. Cloud was volunteered to sit between them under blankets, lending them his body heat.

At first, the Corporal didn’t mind. He vaguely hoped to chat quietly about what had been happening back in the world while he’d been gone. He tried to avoid topics that might be sensitive but ShinRa had been so woven into the everyday lives of practically everyone and everything that sensitivity proved to be impossible. In the end, he was glad it didn’t take the others long to build up the fire and gather the water. They could join in the conversation and keep it flowing, and he could shut up and relax.
Once the fire was going—thanks to a carefully thrown Firaga—they heated up their MRE’s to a temperature above lukewarm. It didn’t help with the flavour but both Tseng and Tifa could feel their core temperatures rising to safer levels as they ate the heated goo. They moved from under the blanket and found more comfortable places to sit while they digested.

To everyone’s amazement, except perhaps Vincent who didn’t care, Tseng produced a small tin of rich black tea from the southern islands. Sephiroth actually perked up when he saw the tin. Again, he helped heat the water to the proper brewing temperature and sat, sipping the tea, with the look of a satisfied cat, half sleepy, completely content.

Cloud couldn’t look at him.

The General had looked like that after his orgasm the day before, and all the Corporal could think of was how he wanted to see that expression on Sephiroth’s face again for the exact same reason. He kept the blanket on his lap, to cover up his problem, but he was sure Zack knew. Vincent might know. He was pretty sure Sephiroth knew—and was enjoying Cloud’s discomfort. He was supposed to sleep between Tifa and Tseng and there was no way he could do that in his current condition. And it didn’t look like they’d be able to sneak off somewhere private without everyone guessing what they were up to.

*Shit.*

He’d have to take care of it himself.

As soon as it was dark enough to provide a curtain of privacy, the Corporal gave a broad stretch and a wide yawn. He scratched his chest. “I’m going to go get ready for bed.”

“Are we still teaming up for this?” Tifa asked dubiously, “No offense guys, but I don’t want—or need—any of you guarding my back while I empty my bladder.”

“I’d say it’s safe,” Zack backed her up. “We just spent all afternoon scrambling all over this place and encountered nothing.” Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

As far as Cloud was concerned, it was perfect. He grabbed his sword, making sure to hold it in front of him until he was out of the room. Once out of the building he let out a relieved breath, harnessed his sword properly and reached down to adjust his pants before heading out at a brisk walk to find a halfway decent place to take of his problem.

It was just as well he didn’t look back or he would’ve seen Sephiroth’s smile deepen in satisfaction.

“The night may hold dangers that the day did not,” the Silver General calmly said, “Therefore, it may not be wise to wander around alone. I will find Corporal Strife and make sure he comes back safely. Commander, make sure everyone stays here until we’ve secured the area.”

Zack’s eyebrows weren’t the only ones that lifted at the transparent excuse.

“I can wait,” Tifa offered with a sly smile, “but watch out for snakes. They like to hide in dark places.”

Tseng coughed on his tea. Zack snorted. Light colour graced Sephiroth’s cheekbones.

*I bet she’s wonderful at catching snakes, stroking them and making them feel at home in her dark places,* Chaos purred. Vincent clamped down on the involuntary response its word caused. He crossed his arms firmly over his body, holding himself in place and merely shook his head when Tifa brightly asked, “More tea?”
It was easy for the genetically-modified warrior to track his lover through the dark streets. The scent of him, of his arousal, lingered in the air. As he had suspected, the Corporal was travelling much farther than required to just urinate. No, the blond was heading for a more private area, one out of earshot of the others.

It was perfect. At least it soon would be.

Sephiroth brought out his wings and raced toward his lover. Sensing the danger, Cloud turned but it was too late. He was scooped up and carried off, flying over the rooftops. He started to protest only to be shushed, “Do you want to be dropped?”

Cloud stilled in his arms. His breathing was rapid but he was calm. “Where are you taking me, Sir?” he asked.

“I told you earlier, Cloud. I want to see you spread-eagled before me. I think a bed would be best and, according to what the others said, the shell houses still have theirs.” He bent his head and put his lips right next to Cloud’s ear, “They won’t be able to hear you scream, Cloud, and I intend to make you scream. For me.”

The warm breath dripped over his ear, the deep voice echoed in his body. Cloud shivered. He decided not to wait until they had a bed. He turned his lips to the long column of Sephiroth’s throat, so smooth, so strong... so tasty. He nibbled at it, licking it and nipping at it, humming in approval at the flavour.

Sephiroth’s arms tightened. “You do like to play dangerously,” he purred in approval. Cloud opened his mouth and bit down on the sensitive nerve bundle at the joining of neck and shoulder. In response, Sephiroth pumped his wings faster.

If the buildings had had windows they were gone now, so the General tucked his wings close to his body and flew right in. He spun them around, flaring his wings, and brought them to an abrupt halt, but he didn’t want to stop, so he backed the Corporal up against the nearest wall in a rush and dragged that blond head away from his neck. Cloud’s eyes were glowing with excitement and his breathing was quick and harsh. The General pushed a leg up against his lover’s groin and could feel the blond’s arousal, thick and hard, against his thigh. Sephiroth thrust his hips forward, pressing his erection against Cloud’s warm flesh.

Except it wasn’t flesh. It was cloth and leather, and straps and armour, and too much!

He pulled back. “Strip,” he ordered and began undoing buckles.

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud acknowledged. His hands worked almost as fast as the General’s.

Sephiroth watched the blond disrobe even as he pulled his own clothes off. The sword harness and armour fell within seconds. The top was gone only moments later. Cloud undid his pants and pulled them down even as Sephiroth was tugging off his gloves. For this, he wanted bare hands: bare hands on naked flesh.

The Corporal swore as his pants got trapped around the heavy combat boots. Sephiroth heard the ‘thud’ as the boots were pulled off and unceremoniously dropped. Then Cloud was naked, pale and shining in the dim light. His erection rose stiff and proud from the centre of his body.

So slender, so strong... and his.

Sephiroth couldn’t be bothered removing his boots. It was enough that he had his pants open and
lowered. “I can’t wait,” he growled. The glow from his eyes should’ve lit the room like a flame.

“I don’t want you to,” Cloud answered, chest heaving.

Sephiroth opened his arms and Cloud jumped up and grabbed on; arms wrapped around broad shoulders, legs gripping narrow hips. Sephiroth’s long erection nestled in the crack of his ass so Cloud rubbed himself against it, silently begging. The General spit on his fingers and reached around and down, finding Cloud’s entrance and hastily stretching it.

There was no finesse, no technique, just desperate need and increasing urgency.

“Now, now, now,” Cloud begged even as he feasted on whatever flesh he could draw into his mouth or reach with his tongue. He chewed on a sensitive ear only half buried in that long silver hair. “Do it. I want it. Do it,” he whispered hungrily.

Sephiroth didn’t respond in words, he couldn’t. With one arm he lifted the blond higher. With the other he positioned himself at the younger man’s tight entrance. He wanted to push in with one long stroke but even his lust-hazed mind knew it was impossible, so he used short, rough jerks to dig himself in. Each thrust stretched Cloud’s unprepared flesh and the blond tipped his head back, panting harshly, moaning softly, and always, always, chanting ‘yes, yes, yes’.

Finally he was in, all of his considerable length surrounded by his lover’s heat. He wanted to pound, thrusting as fast and as hard as he could, racing through the sensations until he reached his peak. He wanted to stay still, penetrating and enveloped by his lover’s body until Cloud writhed in helpless agony. Instead, caught between opposing impulses, he twisted and rubbed, and moved his hips in a sinuous wave, massaging the blond’s fat erection between their bellies, almost hard enough to make him erupt.

Almost... The younger man begged, he pleaded. He tried to move but strong arms held him helpless. One strong hand pressed on the light coating of down between the blond’s shoulder blades. Not moving it, just holding firmly, making his lover know who was in control. Hot eyes watched in avid pleasure as Cloud lost himself in the torturous pleasure.

“Scream for me, Cloud,” the General ordered, but the blond couldn’t. He didn’t have the breath.

All he had was the desire, the need for more, for harder and faster. He tried to explain to the General—his lover, his torturer. He brought his lips to Sephiroth’s and devoured them. Strong hands held that slim jaw as Cloud urged Sephiroth to open up, let him in, and when he did, Cloud tried to swallow him down. He sucked the General’s tongue into his own mouth and made love to it like he was sucking on his cock.

It wasn’t dainty. It wasn’t romantic. It was wet and messy, filled with greed and desperation. And it broke the General’s control.

With a muted roar Sephiroth adjusted his grip on his lover, using his arms to lift the smaller man up and then drive him down on his hard shaft. Faster, harder, just like he’d demanded, until the sound of flesh on flesh blurred. Or maybe it was lost behind the buzzing in his ears, the pulse in his body.

Cloud started a high keening sound. It was pain. It was pleasure. Sensation. It made his skin come alive. It made his body weak even as he bruised broad shoulders so that he wouldn’t fly away. But he could feel it starting. He wasn’t just his physical shell anymore. It wasn’t just him. Sephiroth’s
breath was in his mouth; his sweat was in his skin. Their scents were all around. Their voices echoed off the curved walls.

“Scream for me, Cloud,” the General ordered and eased a slim hand between them. He wrapped his fingers around the Corporal’s fat, weeping erection and pumped.

Cloud tightened... and screamed.

Whatever rhythm he’d had was gone. He jerked and twisted helplessly in the General’s grip, out of control and unaware of it, but he didn’t completely surrender. As he spasmed and emptied himself, his body clenched and pulled on the thick length inside him. Squeezing it and moving on it, demanding that his lover follow him into the abyss.

“My beautiful Cloud,” Sephiroth whispered before he too, lost the power of speech. His legs trembled from the force of his climax and he gave up trying to stand. He collapsed onto his knees, Cloud cradled protectively in his arms. He was careful not to separate their bodies. He wanted, needed, to fill his lover up with his essence, to mark him in this small way.

Cloud had his arms wrapped securely around Sephiroth. He let his head rest on one strong shoulder as his body recovered from the overwhelming assault. Harsh breathing was interrupted by broken moans of completion. He dragged in breath; feeling wrung out and spun dry. He could smell the General, in his thick, silver hair. Without thinking, without even being aware of it, he took a handful of those long strands and swung them around until he was covered by them. “My Gen’ral,” he murmured and snuggled closer in weary contentment.

“Hello, Raincloud,” Sephiroth whispered in recognition. He wondered if he should be disturbed by the reminder of the smallest Cloud appearing here, in this situation, but in the next thought decided he didn’t care. At least they were here, able to share this.

He stroked a trembling hand down Cloud’s back, soothing him—soothing them both. He used long strokes, up and down, and with each pass he could feel the tidy surgical scars and the rougher entry wound scars that had come first. That moment from three years ago came back to him. Cloud, holding their hands as they approached Jenova, lost in his trance as his very presence kept them safe from her power. The shot that tore through him, ripping him open. Instinct made the teen let go of their hands so he could clutch at the gaping wound in his belly. Then he had looked up at Sephiroth, horrified at what he had done. He'd been reaching out a blood covered hand, still trying to protect his General, when another bullet had hit him and he’d dropped first to his knees and then flat on his stomach.

He hadn’t put out his hands to break his fall; he hadn’t even tried.

Sephiroth had thought he was dead.

There’d been so much blood and Cloud had been so still, and Jenova had been yelling at him, bludgeoning his mind with her demands for freedom, for revenge, for obedience, for love. Hot spikes of alien emotion driving through his mind and down his spine into the very core of his being. It had been so very hard to remember that he wasn’t her son. Then Zack had pushed him over the edge into the mako stream below—saving him by sacrificing himself.

He’d always known that Commander Fair would be alive. When he’d emerged from the mako in Mideel, he’d known and had vowed to find the SOLDIER and rescue him. When he’d negotiated with ShinRa to take over their army, he’d known and had made it a condition of the contract that he be allowed to look for his SiC. Once he’d signed the contract, he’d received an anonymous message he hadn’t bothered to trace back to the Turks. It had been a report on Zack’s current status
and location... and Cloud’s as well.

Both of them, alive.

Three years ago they’d sacrificed everything to keep him safe. Could he do less?

“Cloud,” he whispered, “we need to go back.”

“Hmm,” the young man answered. Perfectly happy to stay just where he was.

“Cloud, you can’t go to sleep here.”

“Can too,” he mumbled.

Sephiroth gave the blond a shake, “Well then, you shouldn’t.” Reluctantly he lifted his lover off his lap, sliding out of the younger man’s tight body and releasing a gush of fluids. He made his voice stern, “Attention, Corporal Strife!”

Cloud jumped up and stood to attention. “Yes, Sir,” he snapped back. Then he blinked, surprised to find himself standing.

Sephiroth smiled; properly trained soldiers never stopped responding to the voice of command. “Let’s find something to clean ourselves with,” he suggested and Cloud looked around with eyes still hazy with sex but clearing fast.

It didn’t take long. There were still cloths in what they took to be the bathroom. Cloud was bleeding slightly and had to reassure the General, repeatedly, that he wasn’t seriously hurt, that he didn’t need to cast Cure on himself, and that he was perfectly capable of walking on his own. He ached, but that was from being well-used rather than damaged, and he didn’t mind the slight pain. It was a reminder that the General, once known for his icy, implacable control, had lost it with him; had pounded into him with all the finesse of a sailor hitting land for the first time in six months. It also meant that Sephiroth didn’t think of him as fragile, or damaged, or less. So, no, he didn’t mind the ache at all.

They tidied themselves up, dressed themselves and left through the front door rather than through the window. Once outside the looked at each other and, without a word being spoken, brought out their wings and decided to fly. It was a playful trip, with the General taking time to instruct Cloud on controlling his flight. They dipped and swooshed, and ducked and bobbed so it took them only twice as long to return to their camp as it had taken them to reach their hideaway.

It was over too soon.

A quick moment to tuck their wings away, a not-so-quick kiss, and they entered the room that had been turned into their campsite. Vincent was draped on the half-destroyed wall separating the kitchen from what had probably been the front room. He turned his head as they entered then went back to his previous trance state.

It was obvious that the others hadn’t stayed in the building as the General had ordered, but then, he hadn’t really expected to be obeyed. They were already in a group on the mattress. Zack was lying between Tifa and Tseng. Tifa seemed to be asleep already. Tseng’s eyes slitted open, checked them out, then fell closed again. Zack waved a lazy hand.

With a regretful sigh, Cloud removed his heavy gear and settled in beside Tifa. He watched, with mournful eyes although he would deny it, as Sephiroth tucked up behind the Turk. He wanted to sleep beside his lover. The General raised his head and caught Cloud’s gaze with his own. There
was a world of longing in that gaze, a yearning ache that called to him.

As badly as he wanted to sleep next to the General, Cloud realized that it was nothing compared to how much Sephiroth wanted to sleep next to him.

It was going to be a long night.

Flowers, thousands of them, nothing but flowers as far as the eye could see.

He’d been here before.

“You’re back,” the soft voice was surprised but welcoming.

Cloud turned to face her. Green eyes, brown hair, pink ribbon, bright smile. “You’re Zack’s girl, Aeris, I mean Aerith,” he hastily corrected himself, “I’m sorry, I can never remember which.”

“Don’t worry about it. I answer to either.

“Aerith!” They both knew that voice, “My number one girl,” Zack bounded up to them, “and Cloud, my bestest friend.” The SOLDIER’s smile rivalled the sun for brightness. In fact, if it had been any wider, Cloud would’ve needed sunglasses.

“Man, I haven’t been here in forever.” He beamed down at his flower girl. “I missed you,” he said before scooping her up and twirled her around. Cloud hastily backed up, out of the way of swinging limbs. When they started kissing, he turned around to give them some privacy. He wandered away in an attempt not to hear the soft, moist sounds, the whispered intimacies, but distance made no difference. It was as clear from ten paces away as from one.

He coughed, “I hate to interrupt but, why are we here? There has to be a reason, right?”

“Maybe it’s because we’re in the Cetran capital,” Zack suggested.

Aerith-or-Aeris gasped, “You’re there already?”

“Yeah,” the SOLDIER confirmed enthusiastically, “and I found you the prettiest bracelet–”

“You’re very close, you know,” she interrupted him to state cryptically.

It was Cloud who asked, “Close to what?”

Instead of answering his question, she said, “It’s nearly time.”

“Time for what?” Cloud’s voice rose.

She didn’t answer that question either. “You have to go find him. Just remember what I told you about sacrifices.” She was so serious that all Cloud could do was nod. She gave a sharp nod in return. “Good. Now, wake up,” she instructed as she waved them away and he was blown out through the white nothingness, just like he had been before.

He awoke on the hard bed with a jerk. His heart was racing. He could still smell the flowers.

“Aw, shit,” he heard Zack mutter, “I wasn’t ready to leave yet.”

He sat up and looked to the other end of the bed. Sephiroth was gone.
The book Cloud kinda-sorta remembers reading is based on ‘The Shock Doctrine’ by Naomi Kline—a very interesting book that I still haven’t finished reading because it’s disturbing and rather scary.
Cloud didn’t bother asking Vincent why the chronically insomniac gunman hadn’t seen a two-metre warrior with long, silver hair leave their camp. Zack did. Vincent had been prowling the city. Something in the air had made his resident demon restless. He hadn’t found anything but Chaos was still restless.

Cloud didn’t care. Whatever Chaos did or didn’t sense, it didn’t change the fact that they needed to get moving. Now.

Under the Corporal’s relentless urging—Zack called it nagging—they left the bulk of their supplies in the broken-down building. When Tseng’s suggested they go up the hill to the temple-like structure above them, the SOLDIER backed Cloud when he insisted on going straight through the town into the dense, dimly luminous forest. What he didn’t say, because Cloud already knew and nobody else needed to, was that Jenova’s cells were calling to each other, pulling them to where their General had gone. It helped convince everyone when Vincent’s gaze fixed on the path through the woods and barely flicked to the cliff face.

As they followed the steep trail, Cloud could barely resist the urge to pick the others up and fly with them to the top, or even to leave them behind but, whatever threat was tugging at him, it wasn’t at panic level yet.

They broke through the overgrown path only to be confronted with a wide, sweet-smelling lake. In the dim lighting of the gloomy dell, its depth was impossible to gauge. It could’ve been ten centimetres or ten kilometres deep. Luckily, the path circled around the water and didn’t try to go through it. It was easy to see their destination; it was another shell-shaped house of the Ancients, although this one was larger and taller than any they’d seen so far, with spines and long curly shoots.

“Village head’s house?” Tseng asked, only slightly out of breath.

“It could be the temple, or the holy person’s house,” Tifa suggested.

Cloud stopped himself from shouting ‘who gives a shit!’ but it was close. There’d be time for them to explore the weird house later, now—now they had to save the General from whatever sacrifice he had in mind. Sacrifice. Zack’s girlfriend, a real, live Cetra had harped on and on about sacrifice. About who could sacrifice although she never explained why they’d need to. Plus, this whole thing about sacrificing sounded so unlike the tales of the ‘enlightened and mystical Ancients’ that he had a hard time reconciling them. It just didn’t seem to fit so he’d been half-inclined to forget about them. Now those cryptic conversations were replaying ominously in his mind and he wanted to hurry, hurry, hurry…

They entered the structure. From the others’ reaction it was much better preserved than any they’d encountered the day before. There was no dust and no holes. It was in perfect condition, Tseng announced sounding surprised.

It also diffused Sephiroth’s call so that it seemed to be coming from all over. Cloud wanted to scream.

“I’ll go up, you go down,” Zack instructed.

“Are you sure this is the right place,” Tseng called up after the SOLDIER.
“Fuck yeah,” he answered back. His voice reverberated in the rounded structure, making it sound deeper more powerful.

Cloud couldn’t be bothered responding. Sephiroth wasn’t here, but he was close—he had to be. “Look for a hidden door or secret passageway,” he called up. The others yelled affirmatives.

Tifa and Tseng stayed close to the entrance but Vincent prowled through the halls, following the Corporal to the lower levels. “It’s here,” he announced, spooky eyes seeking, searching. Cloud looked at him in surprise—he hadn’t heard the ex-Turk approach. Vincent didn’t notice, or didn’t care; he just kept searching for the passageway he knew existed. When he found it, he didn’t even say ‘a-ha’ or anything, he just reached out a clawed fingertip and pressed a non-descript lump on the inner wall. An irregular section of the curved surface slid back and to the side.

“Zack!” Cloud shouted, “We found it.” He stepped into the dark, the platform lit only by the soft light from the house. He peered over the edge He could dimly see a collection of structures, all glowing from some an unknown source. It was eerie and weird and just added to the gloom of the rest of it. He went to the other edge and found circular stairs twirling around and down into the gloomy depths.

Zack clattered up beside him, “I’m getting a real sense of déjà vu here,” the blond muttered to his friend.

The First smiled in response. “It turned out okay that time, didn’t it?” he joked absently as he peered over the edge. He whistled, “It’s a long fucking way down.”

“I don’t like this, Zack. Something’s going to happen, and soon,” the Corporal swung his gaze to the group that had crowded onto the small platform.

Zack’s gaze followed his. “Hey, Vinnie,” he yelled, “can you fly?”

“It’s Vincent, and no,” he responded smoothly, “I can, however, run down those stairs as fast as you can fly down.”

“Cool. Then this is what we’ll do. I’ll take Tseng. Cloud will take Tifa and we’ll meet you down there.”

“Agreed.” They felt the tingle of a Haste materia casting. With a swirl of red, the spooky gunman was gone; a streak of dark colour against the dim light of the stairs.


Cloud had no patience for his friend’s quirks, not now. They needed to hurry, hurry, hurry... “Admire him later.” With a thought his wings came out. “You good with this, Tifa?” he asked a little belatedly.

“No problem,” she walked over to him and took hold, “I trust you.”

Trust. Why hadn’t the General trusted him enough to tell him what he’d planned?

He forced the thought away. Like Zack and his admiration of Vincent’s speed, now wasn’t the time. A couple running steps, a small jump and they were airborne. He didn’t bother to follow the stairs but dived toward the glimmering structures he could see at the base. He fluffed his wings, or stretched them, or whatever it was called, to slow them down and make it more of a controlled descent rather than a suicidal fall. Despite the brakes, he could still hear Tifa whispering, ‘OhmygodsOhmygodsOhmygods’ in an endless litany of prayer. Her grip was so tight around his
torso that Cloud had a little difficulty breathing. It was good thing the Nibelheimer wasn’t fully enhanced or she might have broken something.

As they grew closer to the bottom, he could see that what he’d taken for shiny tile was actually glowing water; glowing because it was contaminated with the Lifestream. Over the centuries this place had existed the water vapour must have coated all the buildings and the stairs with mako-tainted moisture and that’s why they glowed the way they did. It rose in an invisible mist he could feel against his skin. It called to him with a thousand voices, telling him of his mother, his father, and how he could be with the ones he had lost.

He silently told the voices to fuck off. Today, he was more concerned with the living than the dead.

Zack beat him to the platform or dock, whatever it was that lifted the buildings up out of the water. They landed close to the stairs and, as promised, Vincent was only steps behind them. He was a blur in motion, then still as a statue with only the billowing of his cloak to prove he’d been moving at all. The First opened his mouth to comment but Cloud was already leading the way around the waterfront and the group was forced to follow.

Where was the General?

He searched with his eyes but he couldn’t see him. He searched with his body but the link that all Firsts felt with their General was hazy and blurred, as if the air was filled with static. The Lifestream was interfering with their connection, he thought suddenly, and knew he was right.

They were talking behind him. He didn’t care; it wasn’t important. He had to find Sephiroth.

He was half-tempted to fly up and search from the air when they turned the final curve of the pier and more structures appeared. It was like there’d been a hidden wall, a veil, keeping them from seeing what was right in front of them. Where there had been endless, glowing water rippling softly in some unfelt breeze, now there were columns and stepping stones that could take them over the water to a raised platform.

It was holy place, that platform; Cloud could feel the resonance of it in his bones. The way Zack pulled in his breath, the SOLDIER felt it too.

And there, in the middle of it, lit from beneath by the glow, was Sephiroth. His dark uniform gleamed silvery-grey, and his silver hair glowed icy green. He was praying; on his knees, hands clasped in front of him, head bowed. The General was praying and the air was alive with the power of it.

*The Lifestream’s purpose needs to be fixed.*

“Sir!” Cloud called out and he was running, flying, jumping; leaving the others behind, ignoring the dainty stones. He had to get to Sephiroth now!

“Spike!” Zack called out in protest, but the soldier was beyond hearing him. “Fuck. When’d he get so fast?” he muttered. He put his hands on his hips and glared after his friend.

“Don’t worry,” Tifa said putting a comforting hand on his arm as she jogged by him, “We’ll catch up.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to happen,” said a new voice. “Mother wants to talk to her eldest sons.”

A slim young man appeared from between the last few buildings. He had silver hair and green,
cat-pupil eyes, very obviously one of the S-clones they’d talked about at the briefing. Zack pulled in a stunned breath. He’d been told the resemblance was uncanny but he could be looking at Sephiroth as a young man.

“It’s a private conversation,” the boy dipped his head and smiled at them, “and you’re not invited.” It was a taunting smile filled with promise and Zack thought that now he resembled Niisan. Except where Niisan had been sexy and spoiled, this clone looked sexy and insane. The image wasn’t helped by the fancy, two-bladed sword that he carried. It looked shiny and very, very sharp.

Zack could hear the others shifting, getting into fighting position.

As close combat fighters, Tifa and Zack naturally stood in front. Tseng and Vincent stayed a couple metres behind and Zack could hear guns being withdrawn from holsters as the gunmen prepared their weapons.

“Quick frankly, kid, I don’t give a shit what your mother wants,” Zack said, still standing with his hands on his hips. Tseng had cocked his gun. Tifa had pulled on her combat gloves. He couldn’t hear anything from Vincent, but then, he rarely could. He had to assume they were ready. “We’d like to get by,” he smiled in a friendly fashion and bounced a little, getting ready to move.

The boy sneered and giggled, a disturbing combination, “You aren’t listening. Mother wishes to speak to her sons. Alone.”

Two more silver-haired youths appeared before them, seeming to coalesce out of the darkness. They were similar to the first, but not quite. One was stocky and muscled, with short hair, a chiselled face and an ugly sneer. The last one was slim, ethereal, and moved liked a ripple of water. They looked just as crazy as the first one.

The slim one smiled at them in a sleepily sensual—and insane—fashion. “You heard him; you don’t get to go.”

The large one grinned and crouched into a fighting posture, “Wanna play?” he asked Tifa, the only other unarmed fighter in the cavern. Tifa didn’t say anything but everything about her said she was ready.

“Then let’s play,” said the small one with an oddly inviting dip of the head.

And then they charged.

Quick as thought, Zack had his Buster out and was blocking the boy’s first blow. He swung in return and was parried. Steel rang on steel and the First grunted. The boy was fast, but Seph had been faster, and Zack had grown claws since then. He swung, controlled and fast, driving the boy back toward the water. The boy wasn’t smiling now. He dropped to one knee to halt his backward movement. Zack readied Blast Wave and prepared to knock the kid right off the pier. Then he was hit from the side by Muscle Man and went flying.

The big guy smiled until he saw that Zack wasn’t going to fall into the water. Zack’s wings had come out and were pumping, keeping the First in the air. The big clone snarled in frustrated anger, eyes never leaving Zack’s face. Without a word, Willow Boy turned and fired at Zack who was forced to dodge and block in the air.

Fuck, Zack thought, he was hurt. Nothing serious, just some bruising on his ribs, but enough to make his aerial manoeuvring rather painful. Time to come down, he decided—especially as The Kid was taking after Tifa with his sword. She was good, and she was getting in some decent hits,
but the blade extended the clone’s reach too much, and it was too fast, to allow her to do much more than retreat.

Vincent, ever aware of his lady, evened the odds. He shot the little shit with the Fire materia he’d attached to his gun. It didn’t kill the boy—hardly damaged him in fact—but it did force the silver-haired menace back and away. With him standing still, both Vincent and Tseng could take aim at him. They started to unload their magazines and The Kid weaved his sword like a banner in the air, creating a shield that knocked most of their bullets aside.

Most… but not all.

The boy cried out and jerked. Liquid appeared on his shoulder; a thick silvery-blue that Zack thought might be their version of blood. He tossed down the Gravity his wings had prepared.

It might’ve been effective except Muscle Man punched the pier. A moving wall of stone and wood rippled out at unnatural speed. The Kid just smirked and jumped up and back, over the wave and beyond the reach of Zack’s spell. The Gravity hit the flowing wood and water and flattened it to less than a quarter what it had started out as. It was now a wave, rather than a tsunami.

As it rippled through the dock, Tifa braced herself and kept her feet. Tseng braced himself but staggered and fell to one knee. Vincent also flipped out of the way of the wave but without the sneering bravado of the young clone. The gunman kept firing steadily, as if the interruption hadn’t existed in his world. Muscle Man jerked as some of the bullets reached their target.

Zack came down on the youngest with all the power of Death Blow. It would’ve been perfect—The Kid’s focus was on the red-cloaked gunman. It should have been perfect—except Willow Boy shot him in the gut and broke his concentration.

As he fell to the dock, his perception seemed to expand and stretch. They’d done something with their bullets he realized, treated them with something, because it did far more damage and took way longer to heal than it should have. He felt sluggish and slow. His reaction time was off and, instead of smoothly absorbing the impact—a motion built into a SOLDIER’s muscle memory—he landed nearly straight-legged and jarred his bones all the way up to his teeth. It completed messed up his finishing move which became just a heavy slice: damaging, but recoverable. With a snarl worthy of Sephiroth, the boy forced Zack’s blade up and away. Once again the sound of steel meeting steel echoed in the large space. This time Zack had to work to keep the upper hand.

Tifa had moved back in to engage Muscle Man. They exchanged rapid fire kicks and punches, using the surrounding buildings to bounce off of and build up power. She kicked him up in the air, jumped up, caught him then slammed him back down on the ground. A red flower bloomed on her arm. Willow Boy had shot her. She staggered back, dazed and off-balance and vulnerable. The largest of the silver-haired trio grinned in anticipation of his kill.

Vincent ran in and aimed a flurry of kicks at the big clone. Spinning kicks that were so fast they practically blurred. Tifa backed out of the fight zone and cast Cure on herself and Zack was thankful they’d decided to double up on that particular materia. A little shake and she was ready to go.

No longer content to stand back and shoot at them Willow Boy had also moved in. Tseng moved to counter.

Zack wasn’t surprised to learn the Turk was trained in unarmed combat. He also wasn’t surprised when the clone turned out to be better. Tseng went flying and hit the side of the building with a crunch before falling to the ground with a thud. Willow Boy pulled out his weapon and prepared to
shoot the injured gunman. Vincent was faster. He spun and shot, knocking the gun from the slim clone’s hand. He continued his spin and caught Muscle Man in the chest.

Tifa was back in the fight. While the big one was still staggered from Vincent’s kick, she moved in with a series of lightning fast blows, fast enough for a SOLDIER Third Class. The big guy was forced back, away from the crowd. She was winning. Muscle Man was spending all his time defending, blood—that odd silvery-blue—was running from his nose and his mouth. There was no hint of triumph in Tifa’s face, just grim determination. She was going to finish this, finish him, now.

Except Zack’s opponent, the little menace, chose that moment to throw a blast of air, like a tornado, across the dock. He did it as casually as if he were throwing a ball. Not reassuring, Zack thought, materia was supposed to require concentration, a moment’s thought at least. Another concern was how, in Ifrit’s Hells, had the boy known his fellow clone was in trouble? That action was occurring behind him. Zack could see it, but he shouldn’t’ve been able to. Unless he had eyes in the back of his head... given the other mutations Jenova cells had caused, it wasn’t totally out of the question.

“You,” the boy enunciated slowly, “Are an imbecile.”

Shit!

He’d been doing so well, too. Zack smiled widely to cover his embarrassment then he twirled his huge sword in a flashy moved he’d been practicing for a decade and said, “Yeah, but I’m good looking so it’s okay.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw the tornado pick up the small fighter and fling her out and up. She hit the side of a building with enough force to stir up dust but, unlike Tseng, she was able to get her feet under her so that she essentially stood on the wall. She used her perch as a launching pad for a series of fancy, power moves that she used against her larger opponent. The air rang with the sound of her focussing shouts and his grunts when she impacted. She tossed him through a wall, wood went flying, the dock shivered. She paused to see if he was going to be getting back up. He did. Then he blurred to near invisibility, and punched her, punched through her, with the fancy rig he had strapped to his arm. Zack could see the electricity run through her body—fuck, he could practically feel it. She stiffened and jerked as the energy ran through her body, crying out helplessly.

Vincent was close enough that the charge jumped from her to him. It didn’t cause near the damage to him as it had to her, but it did stun him enough that the slim, pretty clone was able to knock him back on his ass.

Zack caught all this in patches. His fight with the youngest one had taken a weird turn. The boy was surrounded with a nimbus that flickered around his body like a flame... except for being black. Zack would swing. His blade would be moving fast enough to cause a hissing sound in the air, and then it would encounter the black cloud. It wasn’t like hitting a brick wall—Angeal’s Buster could cut through most stonework—but, whatever it was, the stuff slowed down his swing until he could practically see the molecules moving backwards.

If that wasn’t bad enough, The Kid had as many moves on him as Tifa, so Zack, who’d never been very good at hand-to-hand, spent a lot of time dodging the boy’s feet. Or not quite managing to dodge, as the case may be.

And he was being shot again.

At least Tseng was back on his feet, weaving a bit, but still firing with precision. Unfortunately, he
was wasting his bullets trying to get through The Kid’s black cloud. Once they hit it, the SOLDIER would swear that he could see the shiny metal pellets moving through the smoke. Since the silver-haired youth just grinned, Zack doubted they were hurting him any.

All in all, they’d done some damage to the silver-haired nutcases but he was bleeding, Tifa was bleeding, and Tseng was hurt bad. Vincent was probably hurt as well but it was hard to tell with the ultra-stoic gunman.

In other words, they were losing.

He flicked a glance at the platform where Cloud and Seph were facing their own battle. Jenova had come, in all her monstrous glory. Whatever ‘discussion’ they’d had it hadn’t turned out well. They were fighting, well, Cloud was, Seph was praying. He didn’t know what the plan was but he trusted Sephiroth. And now he had to trust his little blond friend to keep them both alive.

“C’mon, Cloud,” he whispered fiercely, “You can do it.”

He arrived at the platform, sword out, ready to defend his lover, but Sephiroth was praying... or something. He was curled around a milky white ball of materia he had clutched in his hand. He was rocking slightly, but he made no sound. He didn’t even look up when Cloud set down on the platform. He looked okay and it seemed safe—safe and quiet. Where was the danger, he wondered, and then he’d felt it. A pressure on his mind, a haze on his thoughts, a pull on his body.

...son...obey me...join me...

It hurt! He dropped Heaven’s Cloud and clutched his head. Shudders wracked his body, strong enough to nearly force him off his feet.

...join me...we will become...

‘Who are you?’ he shouted back at the voice in his head. It was neither male nor female, not soft but not harsh, slurred but clear... enticing and revolting.

...I am your mother, you are my son, together...meld with the planet, we will...new life form, a new existence...join...

He was being crushed, squeezed. He couldn’t draw breath, he couldn’t... he couldn’t...

...Do not fight me, my son, join me, be reborn with me...together we can rule...

The voice was still faint, like he was hearing it through water, but it pushed at him, pressing and squeezing. He could feel... something bubbling inside him. It was Jenova, trying to activate the cells of hers that he carried, trying to make them replicate. That's why he felt like he had centipedes crawling inside his veins.

...kill the eldest, our betrayer, prove your loyalty...my son...slay the traitor...

The instruction to kill her ‘son’, to kill Sephiroth, made the decision easy. “Fuck, no!” he screamed and he ‘pushed’ back. He was a Nibelheimer, a stubborn mountain boy, a soldier and a SOLDIER. He was Sephiroth’s lover and his friend and he wasn’t hurting him just when they’d found each other again. He’d come here to rescue him, and he’d be damned if he failed at this stage. He could block Jenova, he could. In fact, he probably was and that’s why her voice sounded like it was
coming from half the planet away.

...no, my son...think...we can be together... join me...

She was panicking now. That was probably a good thing, he vaguely thought, but it was hard, so hard, to care because his veins felt like fire and his muscles like putty as his body fought back against the alien invader. But she wasn’t his mother. She was just some alien virus that wanted to destroy the planet and he wouldn’t listen to her.

...NO, you cannot resist!

She was shouting at him, her rage caused by failure. He’d won!

He raised his head—when had he fallen to his knees?—to tell Sephiroth the news and saw the shadow encircling the General’s trembling figure. It was getting bigger which meant... he looked up and saw a monstrosity descending from the inky darkness. It was Jenova but not as he’d pictured her from Zack’s descriptions. She was big and thick for one thing... and dark red, with black stripes on the back of the writhing tentacles that she had instead of legs. The undersides were an ugly, virulent pink. Each tentacle ended in a thick black claw and she had them out. She had them aimed at Sephiroth. She was going to kill the General!

Pain forgotten, Cloud snatched up Heaven’s Cloud and jumped straight at the creature. A line from an old space alien movie ran through his head and, since it was appropriate, he shouted it at her: “Get away from him, you BITCH!”

To give him the speed and force he’d need, he used his wings, not even aware of doing it, because his focus, his only purpose right now, was to push her away from the General’s vulnerable form. She saw him coming of course. Tentacles lashed out at him and he slashed at them when it didn’t interfere with his trajectory. She lifted elongated arms in front of her to act as a shield and Cloud crashed into her, driving her back, pushing her away. He was too close to use his sword so he punched her, trying to find a tender region, something like a diaphragm or the kidneys.

She hissed but it was from annoyance rather than injury.

She brought up a couple of her tentacles, squeezing them in between herself and Cloud. She flung him away like she was flicking off a bug. The sharp talons sliced into his thick belly guard, cutting through it and into him. He tumbled once before his wings brought him back under control. He hovered, a few metres from where Jenova, with rippling tentacles, was bringing herself back in line with the platform. She wouldn’t land on Sephiroth—he’d managed that much—but Cloud quickly moved to place himself between her and his lover.

Sephiroth had uncoiled from his hunched ball. Maybe, Cloud thought, he hadn’t been the only one Jenova had been yelling at. Maybe his attack had forced her to take her attention off Sephiroth, to let him go. If that was the case, he had to keep her busy so that the General had time to complete whatever it was he was doing.

“Cloud,” the voice was horrified and the Corporal turned to look over his shoulder at the General.

“You keep doing what you need to, Sir,” he said, “I’ll take care of Jenova.” Deciding to take the offensive he threw Bolt at her. It wasn’t Mastered but it was enough to cause her muscles to seize up. She screeched, inhuman and piercing, and dropped the remaining distance with a heavy thump he could feel through the solid stone of the platform. She spread ragged wings, whether in defiance
or to keep her balance he couldn’t tell. At least she was the width of the platform away from the
General.

“It is foolish for you to resist me, my son. Together we could be so much more.”

He’d expected some kind of hissing, snake-like voice, the kind all alien bad guys spoke in all the
movies he’d seen. Jenova didn’t talk like that. She had an accent—her vowels practically took over
the words—but her voice was full and warm.

The rest of her looked just like an evil space creature should look. Zack had described a woman
with alien overtones, now she looked like an alien with female overtones—and scars, she had lots
of scars. Her long hair, of the same silver tone of Sephiroth’s but thinner, covered many of them
but he could see where tubes had been, where pieces were missing, where... things used to be. Her
face was the most disturbing. It was definitely not what Zack had described. She had the pink-red
eyes, but they were enormous in her thin face. They were shaped like a reptile’s and had the same
slit pupils as the man who been forced to carry her genes, but they lacked his humanity and his dry
humour. Alien and cold. Her bottom jaw jutted out quite a bit and it wouldn’t surprise Cloud if,
when she opened her mouth, he saw snake-like fangs.

All this he took in as he stepped away and cast Cure on himself. If she did a lot of grandstanding
he’d try to cast Barrier too. She didn’t look like she’d be easy to defeat, not by himself, but he
would if he had to.

“You can still become my favoured one,” she suggested, her voice mild and kind, “Just kill the
betrayer, let him rejoin his precious Lifestream, and we—you and I—will travel to the Promised
Land.” She extended one long arm, oddly articulated, and with fingers that were more claw than
flesh. If she meant the gesture to be inviting, it failed.

“I don’t care about the Promised Land. This world is precious to me and I’m not going to let you
destroy it,” he practically shouted. He rushed forward, sword raised to attack. In response she cast a
wave of blue flame. He wasn’t even close and he could feel its heat—it was unnaturally cold. It
was also over a metre high and travelling over the platform at enormous speed. It was shrinking,
but it wasn’t shrinking fast enough.

He jumped into the air and hovered while the deadly magic hit the spot he’d been. At the rate it
was travelling it would easily hit the General. Desperately, he cast Barrier around his lover. He was
slow, too slow; he needed time to make it solid...

He’d just barely finished the cast when the blue flame, just under half as high as when she’d
thrown it, licked up and around the invisible wall like hungry spirits; but Sephiroth was untouched.
Cloud resisted the impulse to close his eyes in grateful thanks. Instead, the Corporal cast another
Bolt at the alien creature, hoping to stun her again so he could get close. It worked and he charged
in.

The Status Strike materia in his sword finally picked up on the Poisona he wore in his bracer
and the blade dripped a noxious red-brown ichor. When he cut a long slashing line up one of her arms,
the poison clung to the wound and entered her system.

Her screech of rage was deafening.

“Why?” she wailed, “I will give you the world—the stars. We will sail the darkness of the cosmos
with this planet as our vessel and be as Gods once again!”
“And what about this planet?” he yelled back, using his wings without thought to circle around her, cutting her, infecting her. He was intent on defending the General, on killing the alien creature. He was barely listening to what she said. All the talking was just a way to distract her, keep her busy, while the toxins did their work. It was too fucking slow! He silently raged. Now he knew why Zack said he never used Poisona if he could help it.

Her tentacles rippled and she turned to face him. “Sacrifices must be made,” she said reasonably before lashing out with her large, misshapen wing. Cloud was forced to retreat. Not just from her attack but because what she’d said had snagged in his mind.

Sacrifices? He frowned. Sacrifices...

Suddenly he understood the cryptic message Zack’s girlfriend had given him. He knew what Sephiroth had planned to do, and he knew what he had to do to save him.

Now he just had to do it...
Zack had to figure what to do.

Despite the fact that they outnumbered the bad guys four to three, it somehow felt like they were the ones outnumbered.

They were certainly getting their butts kicked. The trio had shrugged off all the offensive materia they’d cast. Tifa had tried Ice and Quake. They hadn’t liked the ice but it hadn’t hurt them much, and they’d just jumped over the quake. Vincent had used Fire to little effect, and his Stop had been useless. Zack had tried Gravity. The clones shrugged it off, a little more slowly than Vincent’s Fire, but Gravity was draining to use and Zack couldn’t do it anymore. All of them had been using attack enhancers, and they had worked to a certain extent, just not enough. They’d hurt the clones, but they hadn’t stopped them—hadn’t come close to stopping them really. The only powerful materia he had left was Comet, and he wasn’t sure this was the best time to use it. From what Sephiroth had said, the rocks could fall anywhere and good guys and bad were so mixed together that people from either side could get seriously hurt.

So he was down to one option—his last materia—and it was pathetic and silly.

When he’d seen it on the inventory list back in the materia pit, it had reminded him of home. He’d picked it out of nostalgia, not reason, and now it was their only hope for evening the odds. It probably wouldn’t work, it often didn’t, but he had to try. Let’s see if he could turn one of them into a little, fat frog... His target needed to be the one with the least sense of self. If the target was too sure of themselves, too sure of their purpose, this wouldn’t work. That left out the little shit of a swordsman. He was cocky enough for all three of them. Not that the kid hadn’t earned the right, Zack thought, as he dodged another viciously fast stroke.

He also should be close. The casting would be more effective the closer he was to the target. That meant Muscle Man was out. He was all the way down the dock trying to pound on Vincent. That left Willow Boy who was busy firing at Tifa, and hitting her, goddammit! It was a good thing she’d taken the time to cast Regen on herself. She’d also thrown it on Tseng, who didn’t have über-enhanced healing powers either. They’d’ve been dead four times over if it hadn’t been for that… And he really needed to concentrate on what he was doing.

Hopefully he hadn’t spoken his plan out loud. The way The Kid was acting it didn’t seem like he had. He’d just have to trust that he’d been too busy to take a decent breath and that had kept his mouth shut.

He parried and backed up, carefully moving closer to the long haired one as he readied himself for the casting. A breath, a moment, and he used a Blast Wave at half strength to push the kid to the side, saving most of his energy for the next one. Jump up, over and down, to land within a couple steps of Willow Boy, and cast Transform.

The clone’s shape wavered and hung up, then down he went, shrinking and changing colour, changing shape. The look of stunned surprise was almost worth the bullet he took—the last one Willow Boy shot before his hand was too small to hold the gun. Zack kicked it over the edge of the dock and into the water—one less thing to worry about. While he was at it he tried to stomp on
Willow Boy’s new shape; might as well give that a try too, but being small and green hadn’t slowed him down much. He hopped away in a blur of speed.

‘Ah well,’ the First thought, ‘time enough to take care of him later.’

Sensing movement behind him, he turned. The Kid’s face was contorted with furious fear. His brother—litter-mate, fellow clone?—had been changed into a frog. Zack knew it wasn’t permanent, in fact, it wouldn’t last very long at all, but The Kid didn’t. With an incoherent shout, the boy tossed a ball of crackling black smoke at the SOLDIER. It moved toward him like a dust cloud, thick and fast and coalescing into something other than smoke.

“Fuck!” Quick as the smoke that was now a massive, fanged beastie, Zack’s wings had him up and out of the line of fire. “What the fuck is that thing?” Zack shouted in surprise.

"Do you like my little pet?” the clone asked, smirking. “I can call more if you want to play too.”

Twisting in the air to look at it again, Zack got ready to attack. To his horror, he saw that the beast was heading straight toward Vincent. Vincent, who had his back turned as he whirled and kicked and dodged Muscle Man.

“Vinnie!” Zack called out in a panic, but it was too late. The thing reached the spooky gunman and snatched him up in its fangs. It flung its head around, working its jaw, digging into the gunman. Almost instantaneously, the grey smoke of the creature was joined by a thicker, heavier fog. In the short time the SOLDIER watched, the black fog developed red and purple lightning.

“Fuck!” Zack swore again. Tifa was a good distance from Vincent, she’d be okay. Tseng was too close. He flew in that direction.

“What kind of coward are you?” The Kid yelled, outraged at the SOLDIER’s retreat. Zack didn’t even hear him.

Clones forgotten, he moved toward the Turk using all his enhanced speed. He called out, “Tseng!” and the Turk looked up in surprise. Zack reached out, grabbed him under the arms and, with a grunt of pain—his ribs were maybe a bit more than bruised—lifted him away.

“What is going on, Commander?” he demanded calmly even as the First felt bones grinding in places they shouldn’t.

“Trust me,” Zack replied, “You don’t want to be to close when Vince recovers.” He set down close to Tifa, a little harder than he’d planned since one of his wings had a couple bullet holes in it. Tseng groaned as bruised and broken bits were jarred. The smell of their blood filled the air.

“I don’t understand,” Tseng protested gently even as he checked and replaced his clip, movements awkward from injuries from his fingers all the way up to his collarbone.

“Vincent’s going to change, isn’t he?” Tifa asked by way of a greeting. She took another wary look at the clones and the red-black cloud that had been Vincent, before turning to her companions. “Here,” she said to Tseng, “Let me set your shoulder.”

“Yup,” Zack said, “On the plus side, we can relax now ‘cuz the battle’s over.” He too kept his eyes on the action, even as he grabbed small elixirs out of his field back and quaffed them. He wasn’t sure he had enough steam to throw a regular bouncy ball let alone cast some materia. Even
his little wing hands draped limply over his shoulders, exhausted and hurting. He handed one to
Tifa who was busy Curing the worst of Tseng’s injuries before seeing to her own.

He watched the little frog hop frantically toward his brothers. The dark-haired warrior had to resist
the impulse to warn him to stay away from whatever Vincent was going to become. Chaos would
laugh at them before ripping their hearts out. On the other hand, if one of them was willing to fuck
him, the demon probably wouldn’t kill them at all. The First snuck an embarrassed glance at Tifa.
It would be like watching a porn movie with his sister in the room. Ewwww.

The youngest clone had moved up beside his larger brother, closer to where his ‘pet’ was now
chewing fog. The boy was frowning, and Zack could almost hear him thinking as he tried to figure
why the SOLDIER had run away and what the beast was eating because it certainly wasn’t the guy
it had scooped up. He looked almost cute when he was puzzled, and Zack felt sure Chaos would
find him ‘tasty’. The young one raised a slim hand and called his creature back to him. No body
fell to the dock. No blood pooled on the wood. There was only a swirling mass of black and
lightning, a shrinking ball of light that was growing brighter and brighter. Zack knew it would soon
explode outward.

“Fuck, here he comes,” he warned his companions, urging them down to the ground.

Light, unnatural and pus-ugly, filled the battle zone. It was compression, it was expansion, it was
everything and it was nothing. The world destroyed and rebuilt in a moment. Tainted by something
indefinable.

That’s not how he remembered it from Chaos’ previous appearance...

“Oh,” said a new voice neither high nor low, neither male nor female, but somehow all at the same
time. It was familiar, though Zack couldn’t place it, but it certainly wasn’t Chaos’ smooth baritone.
“This isn’t the lab. I’ve never been here before. ’In visions of the dark night; I have dreamed of joy
departed; but a waking dream of life and light; hath left me broken-hearted.’

Even Zack could recognize that it was a poem, because the Not-Vincent-Person-Thing’s voice had
changed its rhythm the way people often did when spouting poetry.

The SOLDIER risked a peek at Vincent’s new being. Setting aside the mystery of Not-Vincent’s
voice, he was surprised by the form the gunman had taken this time. It was very different from
Chaos’ deadly elegance, or even Vincent’s own sleek, if gloomy, presence. Even the purple thing
had been dangerously attractive.

This one wasn’t.

As usual with the gunman, his alternate shape was bigger than his normal form: taller by at least a
head, very wide through the shoulders, and bulkier all over. If Zack had to describe him in one
sentence, he’d say the guy was built like a meatpacker and dressed like one too, with a thick leather
smock and steel-toed boots. The weirdest thing about him was that he was wearing a mask, the
solid kind that had holes for eyes and a slit for the mouth. It had a slight beak, making it look like a
raptor, and Zack recognized it as a style that had been common for goalies in Speed Ball nearly
forty years ago.

“So often has my reality been disappointingly monotonous, but now, finally, here’s a whole new
canvas for me to explore.” That was weird, Zack decided, because it seemed like the Not-Vincent
person was looking right at the young clone when he said it.
“Where did you come from?” The Kid demanded.

“Where did I come from?” Vincent’s new form responded, “Well, that depends on whether you believe in the gods. If you do, then perhaps they brought me here,” he raised one long fingered hand to his heart. “I lived my days apart, dreaming fair songs for God; by the glory in my heart, covered and crowned and shod.”

“Huh,” the big one frowned, puzzled.

Willow Boy, still in frog form had stopped moving toward his fellow clones. He was nervously hopping from side to side. Maybe he sensed something his brothers didn’t.

The Not-Vincent ignored the interruption and continued declaiming; “'Now God is in the strife, and I must seek Him there. Where death outnumbers life, and fury smites the air.' I wish I’d written that.” The creature sighed, “You would make a lovely canvas,” he continued, reaching out fingers that seemed to be growing. Zack rubbed his eyes. He felt a small hand—not one of his wings’—grab his shoulder. Tifa peered beyond him at the scene being played out on the dock.

“Your skin is such a pretty pearl colour, and then there’s your hair and your eyes. You are a wonderfully monochromatic canvas. It would make a beautiful backdrop for the essence of life.” He tilted his head and swayed, “I could share my paints with you to create the proper balance. A touch of green would be perfect.” He stretched out even more, fingers now impossibly long, and almost touched the young clone.

The Kid ducked and moved out of reach. “What are you?” the boy yelled, “Where’s the other one, with the red cape?”

“That’s Hellmasker,” she whispered to Zack, “He’s Vincent’s second-most powerful form after Chaos. We should move back behind those shipping crates.” She pulled at him until he started moving backwards, but even while he was obeying her, Zack thought. ‘What the fuck?’ The Thing That Had Been Vincent was spouting poetry like a more widely read version of Genesis. How was he dangerous?

“The other one isn’t here and yet he is. Isn’t it obvious?” The androgynous voice filled the dock. There was no response from the clones. “You don’t see it. I shouldn’t be surprised, so few see the world for what it is.” The creature waved his arms at their surroundings. “This is the realm of impermanence. Matter isn’t solid and it’s never still. It’s limited only by the boundaries of your own mind. A mind that knows no boundaries, one that can see the beginnings and endings of things, can control the matter that forms all that we can touch.” He sounded so sincere, and so fucking bizarre, that Zack blinked.

The small fighter continued to whisper, “He said that Hellmasker scared everyone who encountered him. Apparently, even Chaos thinks he’s dangerously unstable.”

“Shit,” Zack murmured in bemusement. He took another look at Vincent’s current incarnation. He looked strong but somehow cartoonish, and his oddly distorted voice didn’t help the SOLDIER take him seriously. Chaos was frightened by this?

The clones exchanged a baffled look and Zack had to remind himself they weren’t responding to his thoughts but to what Hellmasker had said before, which had been weird stuff about controlling all matter. Huh, he thought, it sounded like Jenova’s little clones and the weird poetry guy should
get along just fine; they all wanted the same thing after all.

Then the little one shrugged, and the big one turned back to Hellmasker and sneered, “That doesn’t explain you.”

“Fine,” Hellmasker’s flattened voice sounded impatient and disappointed, “I am an artist, is that simple enough? There’s no point in talking to you,” he nodded toward the big one, “but I would still like to paint you.” He tipped his head at The Kid and took a step forward, “It will be perfect. I will paint you in pretty colours, blood red, bone white, death grey. Life against death played out in your flesh. A form of immortality you’d understand and I will make it beautiful for you.”

The small clone laughed at the masked figure in front of him. “You’re fucking crazy!” he said in a bit of irony Zack could appreciate.

Hellmasker paused but only for a moment. “I suppose it’s to be expected. All the best artists are misunderstood. Genius is never appreciated until after death.” He shuffled a step closer to the boy, “When last I died, and, dear, I die as often as from thee I go, though it be but an hour ago—and lovers’ hours be full eternity.” A step closer. “Not that the others are my lover. They have not an artist’s soul.” Another step.

Muscle Man inserted himself between Hellmasker and the smaller clone, “Don’t touch Kadaj,” he ordered, chin up, fists clenched. He was ready to fight.

Hellmasker turned to peer at this obstacle. His bird-like mask tilted this way and that. “The gods were generous when they made you, weren’t they? Or perhaps you owe your existence to something less ephemeral.” He leaned close, sniffing loudly. “You stink of the laboratory, and you desire the world’s destruction.” A step back, “My host told me what you are, the one I do not name told me your purpose. ‘Nor shall you scare us with talk of the death of the race. How should we dream of this place without us? The sun mere fire, the leaves untroubled about us, a stone look on the stone’s face?’”

Zack realized where he’d heard that voice before—it was what the TV stations did to disguise the voices of confidential informants and whistle-blowers. It was some kind of mechanical masking. No wonder the guy didn’t sound human, aside from all the death poetry he kept reciting, it almost made Zack wish for Genesis and his endless quotes from Loveless.

Almost.

The large clone merely looked more belligerent at the end of Hellmasker’s speech. He didn’t look inspired or enlightened, or even curious. He just looked ready to defend his smaller litter-mate.

After a moment, Hellmasker declared “You are not a worthy canvas,” and his left hand grew and changed. The high-pitched whine of a small motor filled the space, and the blade of a chainsaw cut through the middle of the large clone’s body, spattering blood and guts and bone over the dock, over his brother, and over himself. He brought the tool back for another pass, and then another. He sliced through arms and legs, sometimes only partially and sometimes completely severing the limb. The mess was horrifying, and the speed was shocking.

‘No wonder he wears that leather apron,’ Zack said in stunned understanding.

The youngest clone, Kadaj, stood absolutely still, the silver-blue blood of his clone-brother dripping down his face and showing up against his dark leather clothing like stars in the night sky.
He was in shock, Zack figured, and who could blame him.

Where in all the hells had the chainsaw come from? He looked more closely at The Creature That Had Been Vincent. The chainsaw was part of its body; grown out of its arm where its hand used to be, and it was changing shape as he watched—changing into something smaller. Zack noticed that Hellmasker’s torso was slimmer than it had been but it was bulking up again. He could see the ripple running up the thing’s arm as matter returned to chest and shoulders. It had somehow pulled the mass of its body down into its arm to form the chainsaw.

Fucking impossible.

He kept watching.

Hellmasker didn’t stop with dissecting the corpse. It now had a slim axe instead of the chainsaw or its hand, and it began making almost delicate cuts into the larger pieces. It used the flat side of the blade to flick the smaller bits into new positions around the main parts. It ignored the small clone’s, Kadaj’s, quivering form. Instead, it whistled while it drew patterns in the blood. It was some tune from thirty or forty years ago. Zack recognized it: his mother had listened to that tune. The SOLDIER felt his gorge rise and swallowed hastily. Not only didn’t SOLDIERs throw up on the battlefield but he didn’t want that thing hearing and maybe becoming curious enough to investigate.


“It was self-defence,” Hellmasker didn’t look up from his ‘canvas’. “He ate him up from head to toe, chewing the pieces nice and slow. It took an hour to reach the feet, because there was so much to eat, And when he finished, Pig, of course, felt absolutely no remorse. Slowly he scratched his brainy head and with a little smile he said, ‘I had a fairly powerful hunch, that he might have me for his lunch. And so, because I feared the worst, I thought I’d better eat him first’.”

The creature finally paused in its work, “I don’t actually recommend eating raw humans as you never know what they’ve ingested. Too many people have no understanding of all the benefits organic food gives a body.”

Tifa had long since ducked back down, not wanting to watch. “Could we go help Cloud?” she asked hopefully.

Zack shook his head, “That thing’s between us and the platform. I don’t think it would be a good idea to grab its attention.”

“I agree with the Commander. Unless he can fly us both over there—” he slanted a questioning glance toward the winged SOLDIER. Zack shook his head; his wings were still drooping. “—then we should remain as still as possible.”

“You bastard!” the small one, Kadaj, yelled. He raised his sword and charged. He moved so fast he was a blur. Hellmasker didn’t move, didn’t dodge, just raised a lazy arm. When the sword came down, it sliced into the creature’s forearm—and it didn’t come out.

Kadaj tugged, trying to pull his blade out of Hellmasker’s arm. The arm didn’t move until Hellmasker twisted it and let its... flesh wasn’t quite the right word, Zack decided, because flesh shouldn’t do what Hellmasker was doing with it. The creature let its arm flow down and around the
blade until it wrapped itself around the clone’s wrist.

The sword was gone, dissolved into the thing that had been inside Vincent Valentine.

Hellmasker turned to fully face the young boy. “Who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and cock and endless balls.” With the encased wrist he lifted the boy until he stood on his toes, “That was very brave and very foolish.” A pause, a tilt of the head, “I will paint you, and you will be my masterpiece.”

Hellmasker’s other hand came up, fingers changed into long, slim blades. “First we must prepare the canvas,” it said and began cutting off the boy’s leathers. The clone struggled—who wouldn’t? —but Hellmasker merely slimmed itself down a little more and stretched out its feet until they formed manacles around the boy’s ankles. When Kadaj tried to punch and gouge, it grew another arm and caught the boy’s other wrist and lifted him, stretching him out in an ‘X’ shape.

“So very beautiful. Most people don’t appreciate the different forms of beauty; their vision is limited by the standards set by idiots or the weaklings of a scared society.” It ran blunt fingers over the clone’s exposed chest, tracing bones and the dips where defined muscles met. “may i feel said he; (i’ll squeal said she; just once said he); it’s fun said she,” it recited lazily, lost in the possibilities the clone’s body obviously inspired in him.

“How long will this form take to wear off?” Zack asked the air, muscles tensing with the urge to go to the clone’s rescue. Forget the fact that the little shit had been doing his best to kill them all, that he was insane and was working to destroy the planet, the dark-haired SOLDIER had the feeling that nobody deserved having Hellmasker ‘paint’ them. He ducked down, looking away. He’d seen enough of this kind of thing in Hojo’s lab; he didn’t want to see anymore.

“I don’t know,” Tifa confessed, “Vincent didn’t like to talk about it. He just said to stay away from Hellmasker and I didn’t press him.”

Zack snorted, “Not that pressure would’ve worked.” The small fighter smiled weakly in agreement. “What about you, Tseng? The Turks were keeping an eye on the lab; surely you were briefed on Vince before you came to the camp?”

“Thirty years ago, we didn’t have the resources or the influence to force continued surveillance of a facility that was supposedly abandoned, especially one in such a remote location. We only started monitoring the mansion again after you disappeared three years ago.”

“By that time Vincent had already become a myth and had gone to sleep in his coffin,” Zack finished for him. “How convenient.”

Tifa backed up his accusation, “You knew enough to bring his old gun.”

Whatever argument was brewing between them was cut short as a horrifying scream filled the cavern. Hellmasker had started work on the small clone. They could hear the sizzling and bubbling from here; followed shortly by the smell of diseased flesh. “Such a lovely contrast, don’t you think?” the creature asked, its mechanical voice almost dreamy.

Once again, the SOLDIER was forced to swallow hard to bring his gag reflex under control.

Zack shut his eyes and whispered a prayer, “I want Chaos back.”
Cloud finally knew what Sephiroth had planned. He’d received the orb from Zack’s girlfriend, Aeris, and she was the last living Cetra... except that Sephiroth had been injected with so much of Jenova’s genetic material that he could be considered at least partially Cetran. He could activate the materia but he needed a willing sacrifice.

Sephiroth had been planning to sacrifice himself.

Somehow, he’d known that Jenova would show up and try to kill him, and he had planned to let her kill him. ‘Well fuck that!’ Cloud thought viciously. Zack’s girlfriend had said that any sacrifice would do, as long as they believed and were willing to die. He believed. He believed in Sephiroth. He believed that the Silver General was more important than anyone and he knew he was willing to die to protect the man he loved.

So, if it came to it, he could be the sacrifice that carried the prayer into the Lifestream and sealed its purpose.

He shouted and charged at the huge alien again. He jumped, used his wings to get in close, then he swung at her over and over, hoping to cut her and infect more of her more quickly. He growled at the ineffectiveness of his materia. Next time he was grabbing Vincent’s Stop or Sephiroth’s Mystify. Now those were statuses that were fucking useful!

“Do you really believe you can become a god?” he shouted at the monster.

She whipped out a tentacle and knocked him to the ground, with rib-cracking force. He rolled, his wings already tucked away and safe. “I’ve already been a god,” she declared, “On a hundred worlds, I’ve been worshipped. On a thousand more, I’ve been loved.”

“And by destroying this world, you think you can go back to that?” He fought off a waving tentacle. “After two thousand years on Gaia, can you really go back to what you were before?”

She narrowed angry red eyes. “I will go back to it,” she declared. “It is my rightful place and I will go back.”

A beam of blue energy shot out from her—where it came from, Cloud couldn’t tell—but she was moving it towards Sephiroth’s kneeling form. Desperately Cloud jumped in front of the beam, raising Heaven’s Cloud as a shield and reflector. He cast another Barrier on both Sephiroth and himself. He was willing to die, but not until he could take her with him: it was the only way to make Sephiroth safe. The beam hit his sword and he tried to bounce it back toward the alien but it scattered and became useless. It didn’t last long, a few seconds and she’d finished casting, but Cloud could feel the cold heat in his blade. It didn’t go away, but lingered, making his hands slightly numb and freezing the Poisona into lumps.

Not exactly the best treatment for a good blade.

He tightened his grip. “I’m going to stop you,” Cloud said simply, throwing another Bolt at her. He charged in expecting the lightning to have the usual effect on the alien being. It didn’t. Instead, she threw out an elongated hand and caught him on her claws. Dagger spikes of pain all through his chest.

Burning agony in all his cells as the virus in him responded to their progenitor, duplicating,
accelerating—wanting to become one with her.

“You. Are going. To stop. Me?” her voice dripped scorn. “All a failure like you can do is die.” She jerked her hand and Cloud slid down farther on her long, long claws.

It hurt.

It hurt like all Hojo’s experiments combined. He wanted to run away, retreat, go away from the pain. He didn’t have to feel this. His mind started to sheer, he could feel it fracturing, just like it had in the lab. Then he heard a soft voice, hoarse with fear and the beginning of rage, “Cloud…”

It was Sephiroth. The General was watching, seeing him caught and helpless as a hooked trout. He’s stopped whatever it was he was doing. That was bad, Cloud thought, and his mind snapped back. He would not retreat. He would not fracture. He was Corporal Cloud Strife of Nibelheim and He. Would. Not. Give. Up.

He grabbed Jenova’s wrist with one hand and used it to push himself off her claws. “Don’t stop what you were doing, Sir,” he ordered Sephiroth. He didn’t want his actions to be wasted. She curled her fingers, tearing them through his soft belly. He screamed behind clenched teeth. Still, he was nearly free. He readied himself for a final effort. “I’m willing to die for what I believe in,” he stated with absolute conviction, “Are you?” He glared at her huge, reptilian eyes in challenge.

She smirked, revealing teeth that weren’t quite fangs. “If it would free me of this world, I would die a thousand times over…and laugh the whole time.”

Perfect.

A push and a wiggle, desperate breaths to keep from passing out, and he was free. “Then let’s hear you laugh, bitch.”

With the last of his strength he shot forward. He had Heaven’s Cloud in both hands, tip first, and he blurred as he moved. She couldn’t dodge and she couldn’t knock him out of the air. He was too close and too fast. He braced himself for the impact but Heaven’s Cloud slid into her neck easily. More easily than the Corporal was prepared for because, when the blade stopped at the hilt, he didn’t. He slammed right into her and bounced. The pain nearly made him black out but he held on. He’d felt pain before. He knew pain, could work through it. Hold on. He decided, once he could think again, that being bounced around had been a good thing because it pulled the blade around inside the delicate tissues, increasing the damage and decreasing the chance that she could heal the wound before it killed her. With that in mind, he placed his feet on her ribs and twisted and twirled and tried, in every way he could think of, to make the injury fatal.

She made sounds, or tried to. Her mouth opened and blue-ish blood poured out amidst gurgling sounds. Her tentacles thrashed, moving wildly and beating out her distress on the platform. He tossed his head, trying to flip away the blood that covered his eyes. Steam, from where the cold blade met hot blood, left the wound and scalded him.

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She brought up hands to grab at him, hitting him, flailing in desperation. He used his wings to keep them away, bat ting at her wrists and arms. It worked for a while but then she hit his tucked left wing and Cloud heard something crack. He swallowed a scream, panting through his mouth to control the pain. The next time she brought her hands up he swung on the sword and kicked them away.

Her tentacles were moving so quickly that he could no longer distinguish individual thumps on the platform. Instead there was just a steady drumming that blended into one solid, endless note. He
could feel heat through the leather of his gloves. He unstuck his eyelids, wondering what was happening. Sickly green-black colour was spreading out from where Heaven’s Cloud was impaled into her neck. It looked like the Status Strike was maybe finally having an effect. But it was also doing something to his weapon because it was changing colour too.

Well, if he survived this but his blade didn’t, he could always go back to using a gun. He reset his grip on the hilt and twisted it a little more.

She wrapped a clawed tentacle around his leg and tugged. He held onto his weapon despite the blood coating it. The force of it pulled him down—and the blade with him. It made the cut even worse, made it longer and wider. More blood streamed out. She didn’t stop pulling. The blade got caught up on her collarbone. She didn’t stop pulling. He refused to let go of the hilt of his weapon, gritting his teeth, and tightening his grip. He could feel his muscles, stretching unnaturally long. The bones in his spine and ribs were separating. It was excruciating. He couldn’t stop the scream that tore through him. Just when he was sure he was going to be torn in half, her tentacle fell away. The noise of them drumming against the platform had stopped.

It was over. He’d won... Except he wasn’t willing to trust it, not yet. He’d let go of Heaven’s Cloud when Jenova’s body dissolved into the Lifestream and not a moment before.

He lifted himself higher, trying to make himself more secure in case she was faking it. When he looked down her body to try and judge if she really were dying, he saw that her tentacles were moving just as rapidly as before. The only reason they weren’t making noise against the platform was because she was levitating. Floating above the platform. Not much, not yet, but Cloud could see that the rounded surface was starting to look smaller.

If she got much higher, he might not be able to jump down safely. He certainly couldn’t fly with a broken left wing.

He let go of Heaven’s Cloud and climbed onto her shoulder. He began punching the side of her face, putting all his remaining strength into it. He aimed at the base of her skull, as near as he could figure. It was a vulnerable area in humans; hopefully it was equally as vulnerable in mutated aliens.

They rose higher. He kept punching but he was losing strength. He should stop, Cast Cure, catch his breath, let himself fall off... something. Instead he kept hitting her, whispering a desperate prayer: please let this work, please let him be safe. It took some time before he noticed the subtle vibration suffusing her body or the increase in temperature. When he opened his eyes—when had he closed them?—her body was surrounded by the blue light she’d used in her beam spell. This was more focussed though, more intense, and lined her body in a field only two fingers wide.

‘What the fuck?’ He sat up and looked at the wound in panic. Was she closing it?

No. It was still gaping and running with blood. His sword was still embedded in her neck but it was cracking, splintering. ‘What the fuck?’ he thought again.

...you shall die with me, puppet...die a traitor’s death...

He heard her voice, vindictive and malevolent, in his head and then he was at the centre of a maelstrom. No time to prepare. She’d exploded, he realized, with him still on her shoulder. A sharp pain in his belly; he looked down. A piece of Heaven’s Cloud was there. Blood coated his hands. He’d experienced this before.

This had better have worked, he thought before he couldn’t think anymore.
Light, heat, wind, cold, dark, breath, sight...

Death.

.o0o.

The strength of the explosion flung Sephiroth across the platform in a sliding fall. The orb, the precious orb of Holy materia, was knocked from his hand and bounced, once, twice, then off the platform. It bounced on the steps, once, twice, then into the deep, endless water. A ‘thrum’ sawed through his brain, echoed in his bones. It was done. It had worked. The Lifestream would fight Meteor and the infection in its very essence. Their enemies were its enemies. They had a chance at winning now.

Except... where was Cloud?

He looked up, at where Jenova used to be. There was only an expanding ball of silver-black something. Bits of flesh started to fall and he raised an arm to protect himself.

Was he... Could he have been...

“Cloud!” he shouted in hope and fear. He raced to the edge of the platform. Maybe he’d be able to see ripples in the water from where the Corporal had entered it. There were tiny circles only, nothing big enough for a whole person no matter how small he was.


“CLOUD!” This time the cavern echoed with his agony of loneliness and despair.

Chapter End Notes

The poems quoted by Hellmasker are, in order:

‘A Dream’ by Edgar Allan Poe

‘A Mystic as Soldier’ by Siegfried Sassoon

‘The Legacy’ by John Donne

‘Advice to a Prophet’ by Richard Wilbur

‘The Pig’ by Roald Dahl

‘Howl, Part I’ by Alan Ginsberg

‘may i feel said he’ by e e cummings

I am not a huge poetry buff, although I do have John Donne and Roald Dahl in my library, and I've read Siegfried Sassoon. Mostly I looked up poems to match what I wanted Hellmasker to say. Thanks to poetryfoundation.org and poets.org.
The white was distant yet all around. The white was a cushiony nothingness that absorbed all the pain. The white was warmth and comfort. It was nice here. It was safe.

“I’m going to go see if I can find Vincent,” Tifa announced to Zack.

They’d moved back up to the surface, and shifted their camp to the big house in the middle of the lake because Sephiroth wouldn’t go any further. It had been up to the two of them to do most of the work. Tseng had turned out to be hurt worse than he’d let on. Internal bleeding had nearly finished him on the stairs but both Tifa and Zack had Cures equipped and they’d managed to stabilize the Turk until they’d reached the surface and could put him down and do a more thorough job. Internal injuries were always a bitch to Cure and even potions weren’t one hundred percent. The two of them drained ethers like bottled water and kept casting until the Wutaian’s colour wasn’t pasty grey and they barely had enough energy left to heal themselves.

Vincent had transformed back into Vincent. He’d seen the puddle of... stuff that was all that remained of the young clone and had thrown up, or at least gagged. He hadn’t eaten enough in the last couple days to have anything in his stomach. After that, he’d followed along behind them like a kicked puppy, never out of eyeshot, but just out of reach. Once on the surface, he’d stood around watching them while they worked on Tseng but, the next time the SOLDIER had looked up, the gunman had been gone.

Sephiroth had stayed down near the water.

With the worst of their injuries fixed, the three of them had fallen into an uneasy doze. It hadn’t lasted long, just until Zack heard a thump from outside. He grabbed his Buster and carefully opened the door, not expecting anything but unwilling to be taken off guard. There, on the step, were some of their packs. He looked up and thought he saw a flash of red disappearing down the hill.

Well, at least the spooky broody dude was making himself useful in his horrified embarrassment. Honestly, Zack thought, it’s not as if any of them had lily white hands. What was the guy afraid of? However, he was too tired to yell that at Vincent’s back so he just picked up the gear and hauled it inside. When he checked out the contents they were potions, elixirs, food and liquids. Everything convalescing soldiers needed. At least, Vinnie’s brain was still working in some areas.

Two days later, they were doing much better. Well, the three of them were doing much better. Sephiroth was still spending most of his time in the cavern; waiting, he said, for Cloud’s return. He had a wild, vacant look in his eyes that truly scared his SiC. It reminded him too much of when the General had buried himself in the secret lab underneath ShinRa mansion, except this time he came up to sleep. He ignored his plan to keep the others warm, and would pull Zack into his arms, tight enough that the SOLDIER had trouble moving... or breathing. It was up to Tifa and Tseng to snuggle up behind them for warmth. The General obviously didn’t care. There was never a word of complaint.

Other than that he spent all his time below. Zack took him food and bullied him into eating it. He made sure Seph went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth and damned if he didn’t feel he was back home in Gongaga with his eight or ten younger nephews and nieces.
“He’ll come back,” Sephiroth would say, “They won’t let him stay dead.”

Zack would smile and nod. “I know, Seph,” he’d say, and he did believe it, but he was pretty sure the silver-haired warrior didn’t hear him. Or, even if he was listening, it wasn’t enough to pull him out of the freaky cavern and Zack couldn’t help but feel a bit pissed and a bit scared, and a bit hurt, by that.

Then there was Vincent. The ever-disappearing Vincent.

There’d be a thump at the door and one of them would open it to find the rest of their packs, maybe some goodies scrounged from the houses, a load of firewood, or even a fresh caught zuu. And always in the distance would be a blur of red as the gunman ran away.

Two days of this behaviour and small fighter had had enough. Zack couldn’t blame her. He just hoped she’d have an easier time getting Broody out of *his* funk than he was having getting Seph out of his.

“Good luck,” he said as she headed down to the door. With a resigned sigh, he picked up the cards and dealt them out.

Tseng looked at his hand and put down two cards. “Trump marriage,” the Turk declared and added it to his score.

“Fuck,” Zack muttered and wondered, once again, why they weren’t playing poker.

Vincent knew Tifa was looking for him. Even if he hadn’t seen her trotting down the path, he would have felt her. She brought a wave of purity and sunshine with her; purity and sunshine he wasn’t fit to look upon. He’d told her what he carried inside but now she’d seen it, seen Hellmasker. There was no hope for them now, he knew, but he was still committed to fight Omega at the end of their journey. After, after the fight, if he wasn’t killed, he could find someplace dark where he could be alone and the world would be safe from him.

*What if she doesn’t reject you, my host?*

‘Impossible,’ Vincent thought back, ‘Nobody could accept Hellmasker. Even you don’t.’

*True. I don’t mind carnage and gore, and devastation can be quite amusing on occasion, but it’s always the same thing with him; ’let me paint you’, ’I’ll make you immortal’. As if he could,* Chaos snorted. Vincent had a picture of him tipping his head in thought. *And I don’t like poetry.* This time Vincent snorted. *But I still think, my host, my own, that you are nearly as frightened of the possibility that she won’t reject you as you are of the chance that she will.*

‘Don’t be silly.’

*Prove me wrong, my immortalis. Stay and talk to her. Or are you just a different type of weakling?* Vincent shifted uncomfortably. Chaos wasn’t finished. *I know. I dare you to stay and have a conversation with the feisty one. If you don’t then I get your body for a day.*

Vincent eyed Tifa, she was getting closer. ‘And if I do stay? What do I get?’

Chaos laughed, *You’ll be no worse off than you are now.* That’s what Vincent expected him to say. *If you actually have sex with her then I’ll leave you alone for a day. You have my word.* The demon was still laughing as he retreated from the ex-Turk’s thoughts.
He could hear Tifa calling his name. She was looking all over the town for him, poking her head into the ruined buildings, searching the broken rooftops. Was he afraid that she would accept him, accept all of him?

Surely not.

Everyone wanted to be accepted by the one they liked, didn’t they? Except... except if she could accept his monsters, didn’t that make her a monster too, and he didn’t want to be attracted to a monster.

*You’re an idiot, my immortalis. Truly you are.*

Actually, when he tracked back over what he’d just thought, he had to agree with Chaos—he ignored its triumphant hooting—so why had the creature’s words made him uneasy?

“There you are,” Tifa’s voice was tired but determined. “Are you going to hold still or are you going to run away again?”

Vincent frowned. The way she said it made it sound like she, too, was accusing him of being a coward. Didn’t she realize that he only wanted to protect her? He wavered. His protective instincts, and something else, pushed him to go but Chaos’ words, and its threat about taking over his body, anchored him.

“If you take off now, then we have no future, Vincent Valentine.” Her words were firm, final. “It can be in short sentences but I won’t be with a man who can’t talk to me about what’s upsetting him so much.”

She stood on the road looking up at him, hands on hips, chin out thrust in determination. There were faded bruises on her arms, from blocking hits; there was one on her cheek, from not blocking a hit. As a reminder that Tifa Lockhart was tougher than she looked, it was very effective. Vincent swallowed his nerves and nodded shortly. “I will not run.”

She nodded, “Right. I’m coming up,” and she scrambled up the side of the ruined building until she was in front of him on the roof. She pointed to the edge. “Sit. Maybe you’ll have a harder time leaving that way.” He sat. She sat beside him. He expected her to start the questioning right away, blunt and determined, and he braced himself.

Instead she dabbed at a scrape, pressing it to stop its sluggish bleeding. Then she looked out over the ruined city and sighed. “I know you expect me to run screaming from you in horror, but I won’t. I can’t.”

“I would understand,” he said calmly.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t,” she responded then fell silent. They listened to the breeze as it passed through a forgotten chime. He was about to ask her to explain when she spoke again. “You didn’t choose to have Hellmasker... inserted or melded or stuck, whatever the procedure’s called. You didn’t ask to have him inside you, or to have him come out when you’re hurt to a certain level. You didn’t choose to have an obsessed mass murderer as part of your being.” She took a deep breath. “I did.”

He didn’t turn toward her. He barely even looked at her, but suddenly all his attention was on the young fighter. She could feel it, too. She lifted her chin and turned her head a little away, pretending a fascination with the distant trees.

“I don’t understand,” he finally said.
“When I joined Avalanche, the group I talked about before,” she finally looked at him to see if he remembered. He did, so he nodded. She looked away again. “It was right after Hojo came to Nibelheim, right after he’d burned it to the ground and slaughtered...” Her voice caught. “I was so angry,” she whispered. “My sensei told me I should let it go, that anger in one’s heart leads to evil in one’s deeds, but I didn’t listen. He was just an old man, gentle and sweet. What did he know about hate? Instead, I joined Avalanche and I blew up power lines and mako conduits. And we blew up factories because they made parts for the reactors. Then we blew up the reactors.” She fell quiet again. He waited.

“Sometimes there were people in the places we blew up. It didn’t even bother me. They worked for ShinRa therefore they were the evil ones, not me. I was fighting back. I was getting my revenge. I didn’t even really care about what mako power was doing to the world.” She laughed unhappily, “Oh, I could spout all the rhetoric. I could cloak myself in ‘the greater good’, but really, I didn’t care. I just wanted them dead.” She took a piece of rock from the crumbling roof and flicked it onto the street. Then she did it again.

“Are you comparing yourself to Hellmasker?” he asked tentatively.

She turned to him, an ugly, self-mocking smile on her face. “Shouldn’t I? I was glad when ShinRa employees died. It made me happy. Isn’t that just what Hellmasker feels?”

He didn’t know what to say. There were similarities in their attitudes if not in the execution. By her own confession, she was akin to the monsters. Yet Hellmasker’s exultation hadn’t been in her expression during the fight with the clones. Nor had she been cold or indifferent to the fact that this was a fight to the death. She’d been... determined, professional... normal.

“What changed?” He asked

Her sneer fell away. She looked away, leaning forward on her hands a little, hunching into herself. “We blew up a weapons factory that was in the slums under the Midgar plate. When it blew, it took down a ShinRa owned boarding house. It was the middle of the night. The rooms were full. Nobody survived.” She grabbed a handful of rock dust and pebbles and let them drain through her fingers to be blown away in the breeze. “They were mostly factory workers so I didn’t feel too bad. Then they identified one of the bodies as a notorious Wutaian assassin and terrorist, still wanted after twenty years. He’d been active in the war, almost mythically so. He’d destroyed more equipment depots and facilities than anyone else. He’d accounted for most of ShinRa’s top level deaths; directors, generals, and politicians. He was known for the viciousness and cruelty of his kills. Even General Sephiroth had said he was a man to be feared.”

It clicked. “Your sensei.” There were tears running down her cheeks.

She nodded, wiping the moisture from her face. “Yes. He was living at the boarding house being their fix-it man. Hiding in plain sight, I suppose. He’d known, he’d known what hate was and I’d brushed him off as a fool. And then I killed him without thought or care.”

“You left Avalanche,” Vincent stated, knowing how her mind would work.

She laughed, a mocking bark of laughter. “You would think so, wouldn’t you. Actually I didn’t.” Her smile fell away. “One: they’d killed me. The leader was paranoid as all get out. Always thought ShinRa and the Turks were spying on her; and two: what else was I supposed to do? I was a backwoods mountain girl in Midgar. I talked funny, dressed funny and couldn’t type. I knew how to fight and I knew how to blow things up. What was I supposed to do to support myself?” She laughed again, an ugly grating sound. “I could’ve spread my legs, I suppose. There were lots of girls just like me fucking guys for money. My tits were big enough I probably could’ve done pretty
well at it. Maybe I could’ve even found myself a Sugar Legs and gotten a fancy apartment above
the plate.”

Vincent was shocked. He actually rocked back and away. Not just because she hadn’t stopped her
activities but also because of the rawness of her language. He hadn’t thought her capable of such
crudity. Yet, it accurately described what she likely would’ve been stuck doing to survive. Even
when he’d been… before, when he’d been a ShinRa employee, he’d seen the helpless and lost
trying to work their way out of the slums on their backs. It rarely worked.

“I decided to stay where I was while I looked for a way out.” She slanted an amused glance at him,
as if she knew what he’d been thinking. “Still, as a sop to my conscience, I was more insistent that
we try to keep ‘collateral damage’ to a minimum.” She used her fingers to put quotes around the
military bland-speak for civilian deaths. “We only did a couple more jobs anyway, before
Sephiroth and Genesis reappeared in Fort Condor and Hojo took off and DGS burst out of the
Midgar tower and everything changed.”

Once again, silence fell between them. It was, Vincent thought, an extraordinary story of an
ordinary girl surviving horrible things. Vincent stared at her. She smirked gently back, waiting for
him to ask—daring him to ask. It stretched. She raised an eyebrow. He sighed in defeat; even he
wasn’t dense enough to miss the moral of the story. “So we are each monsters in our own way.”

She chuckled, “That’s one way of looking at it. I was actually thinking it meant I have no right to
condemn you. None of us do because we’ve all done monstrous things, except maybe Cloud,” she
nodded agreement to her own statement. If anybody in their group was untouched by evil thoughts
or deeds, it had been her childhood friend. Then she continued, “Besides, as sick as he was,
Hellmasker might have saved all our lives. We weren’t doing so good against those guys.”

“I’d rather not be grateful to him,” Vincent’s voice was cold, and even more distant than normal.

“Nobody wants to be grateful to the darkest parts of ourselves, but sometimes that’s just the reality.
Everything I learned from Avalanche I’ve used to fight Hojo and DGS. I’ve saved lives with the
same skills I once used to destroy,” she paused, watching a small bird fly past, “I’ve learned... not
to forgive myself, not quite, not yet... but to accept that I have this darkness within me, and that I’ll
use it if I need to.”

“You’re saying it’s unavoidable,” he said hesitantly, “That I should just accept that the parts I’d
most like to ignore will occasionally surface.”

She laughed out loud, “Especially in your case. You really do have no choice.”

He dipped his head, turning away slightly. “Actually...” he started but stopped. If he admitted this,
then it was almost as if he accepted that he would always be this way, that there would be no going
back to being human.

He stilled.

This, this, is what he was afraid of: acceptance. That’s why he’d been avoiding Tifa and Fair. If
they accepted Hellmasker like they’d accepted Chaos, then they accepted that he was a monster,
then he’d be forced to accept it too. Accepting what he was, being accepted with all that he was,
meant he knew there was no going back to being... human.

*Have I said lately that you’re an idiot, my host?* Chaos sneered before going back to
eavesdropping.
He felt short of breath, even though he didn’t always need to breathe. He literally had to force the words out. “Actually, I have some control over who appears when I am injured.” A deep breath to get the rest out. “If I allow myself to turn into one of my lesser creatures, Galian or Gigas, earlier in the fight, when I am less injured, then Hellmasker wouldn’t have the chance to appear.”

Tifa’s brows were up in surprise, “You can do that?” He nodded. “What about Chaos? How hurt do you have to be before Chaos appears, because the plan calls for you to let him through to fight Omega? I’m not sure I would know how to gauge—”

He lifted a hand to interrupt her rattle of questions. “I have to be injured nearly until death for Chaos to appear involuntarily, however I can... choose to allow it to appear at any time. Which I can’t do with any of the others.”

*And you don’t do nearly often enough,* his resident demon pouted.

Tifa was staring at him, eyes wide in amazement, “That’s... bizarre. Why is he so different?”

Vincent’s shoulders rippled in a shrug. “If I remember the discussions correctly, which I may not, it’s because Chaos is a natural creature—preternatural actually. The others are artificial creations. Chaos can exist outside of me; they cannot.”

Her eyes were still big, “That’s just... weird,” she murmured almost to herself. “I mean, it makes sense, but still... Poor Chaos,” she laughed and this time it was her old, light laugh, “It must be really frustrating.”

“You have no idea,” the gunman growled, ignoring both Tifa and the demon’s laughter. He tucked his nose back into his mantle.

Tifa’s mirth subsided but the smile was still on her face when she asked “So, are you still interested in pursuing a relationship with a killer like me?”

He looked at her face, so strong and yet so kind. She knew, she understood. She could accept all he was. Could he accept all she was? Could he accept all that he was? Was he ready to try?

“Yes,” he answered all the questions.

Her smile deepened, brought out her dimples, “So why don’t you kiss me so that we can see if that works between us? I mean, we did this whole talking thing okay, don’t you think?” He couldn’t blush. He knew that, he was sure of it. Nevertheless, his cheeks felt warm. She laughed, but not unkindly. “Is it too soon?”

He couldn’t answer, not verbally. One nod, one nod he could manage.

She became serious, “You know, not all of us are practically immortal so, if we’re going to do this, we should maybe not wait thirty years.” Vincent recoiled as if struck but Tifa wasn’t finished. “It may be romantic to spend thirty years agonizing over love but it’s not what I want to do with my life.”

He hadn’t thought about that, about the fact that she would die. Given the mission they were on, she could die anytime and then it would be Lucrecia all over again, nothing but regrets and dreams of ‘what if’ and ‘if only’. Before he could talk himself out of it, and shutting out Chaos’ cheering, he leaned over and touched his lips to hers. Hers were warm, his were not, but both were soft and alive. A touch turned into a soft pressing, close-mouthed and innocent. The pressing turned into a rubbing and maybe, just maybe, a discreet taste or two. Then he pulled away.
He was breathing hard, but when he looked at her flushed, beautiful face, he became breathless. He easily ignored Chaos’ crude suggestions as to what he should kiss next. “What do you think?” he asked, “Does it work?”

She dimpled, “I think it has possibilities.”

He nodded, “Good.” He nodded again, “Very good.” Then, overwhelmed by the boldness of his actions, he turned away to look over the ruins, “Very good indeed.”

Only Chaos didn’t think it was enough.

“You know,” Zack commented while sorting his hand, “If you’re going to have one emotionally painful discussion in a day, maybe you should have them all.” He whipped a glance at Vincent who had been dragged to their makeshift table on Tseng’s knees so that Zack could play something other than Bezique with the injured Turk. Not that this new game was any better. He barely managed not to ask why they weren’t playing poker, again. Last time he’d asked that Tifa had punched him in the arm. She hit hard.

“What do you mean?” the gunman asked cautiously.

“Well, you and Tifa have essentially sorted yourselves out—”


“What, shit, already?” He peered at his hand, and then at the turned up card. Did he want that suit as trump? Fucked if he knew, but he had a couple in his hand. “Take one,” he responded. Tseng frowned but dutifully added a point to their opponents’ score. “Where was I?”

“Not concentrating on the game,” his partner muttered under his breath. Tifa smirked. She could. After all, they were winning.

“Emotionally painful discussions,” Vincent reminded the SOLDIER, his voice little more than a growl.

“Right. So, you and Tifa are good—or getting there—and I’m thinking that it must’ve hurt and that got me thinking—”

“About something other than the game,” Tseng muttered.

“—that having emotionally painful discussions is kinda like taking off band-aids.” Everybody stopped playing and stared at the dark-haired SOLDIER. He looked up and saw all the eyes on him. “What? I’m allowed to play that, right?”

It was Tseng who asked the question they were all thinking. “How is having ‘emotionally painful discussions’ similar to removing band-aids?”

“You know you can carefully and s-l-o-w-l-y pull off the band-aid,” Zack twisted his body to emphasize his words, “less pain but over a longer time period. Or you can just rip it off. Hurts like hell but it’s done.”

“I am aware of the different processes, Commander,” Tseng said dryly.

Zack ignored him, intent on his point. “So if you have more than one EPD in your future you can have them a bit at a time, draw them out over days, months—even years. Or you can line up all the
people you need to talk to and get them all done in a day.”

Silence.

“Is this your way of suggesting that I talk to General Sephiroth…” Vincent trailed off. Sephiroth… his son. He was more and more convinced that the anonymous lab tech’s speculation had been correct. Sephiroth was his child, his and Lucrecia’s; not Hojo’s, never Hojo’s. He had watched the Silver General and, physically, there was much about the swordsman that reminded him of himself and his own father; height, build, a certain way of moving and holding his head. There was little that reminded him of the revolting little scientist that had been married to Lucrecia.

He had her hair...

“Something like that, yeah. I know he’s been thinking about it even if he hasn’t said anything,” he paused. “Aren’t you curious about how he feels about having you as his dad?”

Vincent said nothing. His eyes remained on his cards... which bent under the pressure. Tifa glared at the SOLDIER who looked an apology back. He hadn’t been able to help Sephiroth, he was still downstairs on the dock, watching the water. Getting Vincent to talk to his possible son was the only thing he could think of that might bring his CO out of the weird, glowing basement where he waited for Cloud to come back from the dead.

“I will speak to him,” the ex-Turk finally said.

Not until we finish this game, *if* you don’t mind,” Tseng pleaded.

“Of course,” Vincent agreed and played a card. “I’ve just hung your jack” he announced. Tseng threw down his cards in disgust.

The white was getting thicker, closer, but it was still safe and warm. It was nice. There was no pain. This was good. He would stay here. He frowned.

Vincent descended the stairs much slower than the first time. There was no urgency in this trip. Imminent death didn’t await one of their party, although this was just a different type of rescue. He was also slower because he was being careful not to spill the food Zack had prepared for the General. As he placed foot after foot on the long spiralling stairs, he tried to think of what he could say, of what Sephiroth would say. What questions would Lucrecia’s child ask of him? How would he answer?

*The easiest way to find out is to just get down there, don’t you think?* Chaos sounded impatient, *This endless circling in your mind is making me dizzy.*

An intimate conversation: just him, his son and his demon. Wouldn’t this be fun? Vincent nearly snorted out loud.

*Did you just use sarcasm, my host? You?* he could feel Chaos smiling, *I think you’ve been associating with me too long.* It laughed at its own wit. The sound was nearly loud enough to make the gunman wince, but at least it kept the demon entertained as he made his careful way down the stairs. It was perhaps better than listening to the endless list of unanswerable questions his mind had devised.

Perhaps.
Sephiroth was easy to spot. He was kneeling on the edge of the dock at the far end where their battle had taken place. Not far from where Hellmasker—Vincent turned his mind away from the memory. That incarnation’s insanity did not make him insane or any more dangerous than anyone else in their party. He wrapped himself in Tifa’s assurances and made himself move forward. “Sephiroth,” he said, holding out the food. There was no response. “General,” he said a little sharper.

A silver head turned toward him. Green-eyes looked at him from an icy distance. “Valentine.”

Vincent held out the food once again, “Commander Fair sent down some food.”

The General looked at it blankly, “I am not hungry.”

“Nonetheless, you must eat.” Sephiroth looked ready to refuse. His eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. Vincent knew what to say to stop any argument. “He worries about you.” Sephiroth turned away.

The gunman placed the tray on the dock between them then, with a sigh—why did these talks always happen while sitting on the edge of something?—he sat down and dangled his legs over the bright water.

“Zack made the stew,” he announced. Then he stared at the General, his son, until the SOLDIER picked up the tray to examine the contents.

It had surprised him that the scatter-brained First knew how to cook but Zack had explained how much SOLDIERs needed to eat. Even with the limited number of SOLDIERs ShinRa had maintained, providing food for them all would’ve bankrupted the program. Plus eating out or ordering in was impossible in the field, so Lazard, the program’s one-time boss, had arranged for several courses on cooking and Zack had taken them all. The gunman couldn’t help but wonder how many of those classes had devolved into food fights.

This was made from leftover zuu. He’d caught one of the big birds and delivered it to the house just yesterday. The First had built a fire pit and roasted it. He’d even scrounged through the overgrown remains of a garden and found herbs with which to make a marinade, and vegetables to have with it. Today, it had all gone into the pot. Despite the gunman’s aversion to meat-based dishes, he’d been tempted to try some of the aromatic dish. It had been good; filling and comforting, so maybe it would help stabilize his son.

His son...

“I was encouraged to come down here in case you have any questions about Lucrecia, your mother,” he paused, his throat closing, “or myself.” That pulled the silver-haired SOLDIER’s attention from the water but he didn’t say anything right away; no outburst of accusations or recriminations; no barrage of questions. Just the steady sound of him chewing and swallowing.

“I was surprised that Commander Fair knows how to cook, and does it so well. He made the stew.”

*You already said that*

“So you said,” Sephiroth commented quietly, “He was always a very resourceful young man.”

“Do you love him?” Vincent didn’t wince but he did bury his face behind his collar and his hair. Sephiroth was supposed to be asking the questions.

“I do love him, as I understand the term,” the swordsman answered quietly. “Four, even three,
years ago, if he had been interested in having a relationship with me, I would have pursued it. He wasn’t then and isn’t now.”

“But...” Vincent clamped his mouth shut. This was not what he wanted to be discussing.

*I’m interested,* Chaos said. As if there’d been any doubt.

“But, ‘haven’t we slept together’? ‘Haven’t we had sex?’ Aren’t those the questions you wish to ask?”

Vincent resisted shifting in discomfort. “It’s none of my business. You don’t need to answer.”

A small, mocking smile flitted across the General’s aristocratic face. The swordsman thought of Zack’s words when he’d confessed that he and Cloud had shared themselves in the lab: ‘just comfort between friends’. It described perfectly what had happened between the three of them... and what might happen again before the mission was over. He knew Zack was in love with his little flower girl. When they returned, if they returned, from the mission the bouncy First would go back to her and the intimacy the three of them had shared would end. He wasn’t looking forward to it but he was going to say none of that to Vincent Valentine.

“You’re right. It’s none of your business,” he tilted his head to stare at the dark-haired gunman. “Did you ask out of prurient curiosity, or did you feel it was a proper ‘fatherly’ thing to ask?”

Again, Vincent resisted the urge to fidget. “I’m afraid it was neither of those things. I am having trouble defining the relationship between the three of you. It... pokes at the part of me that used to be a Turk.” He didn’t mention Chaos’ interest which could easily be defined as ‘prurient’.

“Hmm,” Sephiroth said in acceptance. He knew, too well, that intense early training never really left a person.

He took another bite of Zack’s thick stew, buying time while he thought of what he’d like to say. He’d been ignoring the situation, and would have gladly continued to ignore it, but of course it had been there, in the back of his mind. It all came down to how he wanted to define ‘family’. Was it automatically and merely the creatures who’d spawned him, and any other creatures they also spawned? Or was it the people he lived with everyday? People that he worried about and who worried about him? He’d thought he’d known. Now he didn’t, and one of the reasons for this new uncertainty was sitting beside him, patiently waiting for him to talk.

He wiped his mouth carefully, placed the napkin over the unfinished food and, twisting sharply, set it behind him. His movements were precise and controlled: his thoughts were not.

“For nearly two decades I have worked hard to convince myself that biology has played little to no part in who I am as a person. Even though I can recognize the effects my fa—that Hojo had on the way I think and behave, I have grown to believe that it was caused more by the manner in which he raised me rather than from whatever genetic material he donated to me.” He paused in distaste before continuing. “As an adult, I became responsible for my choices and actions. Those choices and actions were influenced by my upbringing, of course, but, as I recognized those influences, I could choose whether they would influence me. At that point, who, or what, my mother and father were became irrelevant to the person I was. This gave me great comfort.”

Vincent blinked. It was quiet with only the gentle lapping of the water and the soft creak of the boards while he worked through what the silver-haired warrior had said.

To the ex-Turk, son of Doctor Sir Grimoire Valentine and the Honourable Felicia Cominterre,
former scion of a noble house that had dated back centuries before ShinRa re-ordered the world, Sephiroth was describing a person with no ties, no responsibilities to anyone outside himself, someone utterly selfish and self-concerned. At least, that’s what it sounded like. And yet... the General had ties; ties to Strife and Fair, even ties to Tifa. Then there had been that master-sergeant back in camp. The connection between the two of them was obvious. Plus, it had been only a few short days and Vincent had seen him take responsibility for many things; for peace with Wutai, for the continued stability—and probity—of Neo-ShinRa. He’d accepted responsibility for saving the world. Those decisions argued against him having no ties.

So what had he said?

“You don’t allow people outside yourself decide what is important to you,” he said hesitantly. “Family is less important to you than the people and things you have chosen to allow into your life.”

“In essence, that is correct,” the General confirmed. “It was certainly more comfortable than allowing Hojo any kind of control over my being.” His voice softened, became musing rather than matter-of-fact. “I had thought, or rather hoped, that my mother had cared for me but I could find out nothing about her. When I finally discovered her identity it was... disturbing to say the least.”

“Lucrecia Crescent was a good person. She would have loved you if she had survived,” Vincent said fiercely.

“I was talking about Jenova,” Sephiroth corrected him. “Hojo, and the other scientists, all maintained that Jenova was my mother.”

“She is your mother!” The voice was cracked but firm and way, way too close. In an eye-blink, Vincent was standing, gun drawn, facing the last remaining clone. Sephiroth hadn’t moved. The silver-haired youth looked at Vincent with scared eyes even as he continued to shovel food in his mouth.

“She may have been your mother, Yazoo,” Sephiroth disagreed calmly, unsurprised by the clone that had snuck up on them and was eating the food off the tray, “but she had no hand in raising me.”

“Why do you not wish to claim her,” the youth asked, bewildered, “She was magnificent. Her purpose, her destiny, it was beyond what we can imagine.”

Sephiroth smiled, “Perhaps that is my problem; I have no desire to imagine it.” He twisted to face the slim creature, “As I’ve told you before, the future I can see, the future that I want, is here, on this world; not on some distant, and possibly imaginary, future world.”

Vincent interrupted their little chat. “Why isn’t he dead?”

“Because you didn’t kill him,” Sephiroth answered mildly, but it didn’t stop Vincent from flinching. He knew what Hellmasker had done. The General politely didn’t pursue it. “Apparently Zack turned him into a frog and he ran away.”

A sharp motion of his free hand set that, all of it, aside, “Why haven’t you killed him?” the ex-Turk corrected.

“Because he has lost everything: Jenova, his brothers, everything that mattered to him,” Sephiroth answered still mild. The clone, Yazoo, looked at him with large eyes. He was using his fingers to clean the bowl until it was practically spotless then licking them clean with hungry greed. “And
you know he can’t go back. Hojo would rend him down for his DNA without a thought.”

“That doesn’t explain why he isn’t dead.” The ex-Turk repeated.

“Because I choose not to kill him.” The General gave a small smile, “Not a moment ago you were about to lecture me on the importance of family. You can’t have it both ways. If you and Dr. Crescent are my family because you donated genetic material to my body, well then, so is Jenova. However it happened, I carry a great deal of her genetic legacy, as does Yazoo. If sharing DNA makes a family, then that means Yazoo is my half-brother.”

Vincent grunted. “So are Cloud and Zack, if you apply that logic.” Reluctantly, the gunman holstered his weapon. The way the boy skittered back at the movement let the ex-Turk know that he also remembered what Hellmasker had done.

“How debauched of you,” Sephiroth gave a low chuckle, “Maybe that demon of yours is having an effect on your thinking.”

*Not as much as I’d like,* Chaos pouted. Vincent clenched his teeth.

“Besides that’s not my logic, it’s yours. My logic was simply that I don’t want to kill him.” The General continued, “I should probably also mention that I’m trying to persuade him to come with us.”

He wanted to yell, ‘Are you insane?’ followed by stomping a foot and shouting ‘Absolutely not, I forbid it’. He didn’t think the silver-haired warrior would listen to either outburst. “That doesn’t make sense,” the gunman finally ground out. “He was designed by Hojo to fight for Jenova and against the planet. He’s an enemy and we’ll never be able to trust him.

“He is here all alone, with no idea how to care for himself. He has no idea how to be an individual because it has always been him and his brothers. His whole world has been ripped away.” A smirk, “I can sympathize with all of those conditions having experienced them at different points of my life.”

Vincent crossed his arms in an unconscious blocking move: he didn’t want to sympathize with the young clone. He didn’t want anything to do with him. “That doesn’t explain why we should take responsibility for him.”

“Since he was grown from my tissue samples, you could always look at him as your other son.” Sephiroth purred slyly. He slanted his eyes sideways, amused when Vincent’s arms tightened to near bone-cracking intensity. The swordsman could hear leather and brass creaking under the pressure. The smile dropped off his face. “I will not allow anything or anyone to fall into Hojo’s hands if I can prevent it. If Yazoo should prove to be a liability in the future, I will take care of him. Or perhaps I’ll just have Zack turn him back into a frog,”

“No, not the frog,” the clone pleaded, “I was so small! It was awful. And I think I ate a bug.” Long fingers rested on a slim throat as if remembering the sensation... and not in a happy way.

Vincent dipped his head down, hiding his expression. “Hopefully, we won’t all end up regretting your largesse.” He whirled off, leaving the General to his vigil, leaving the clone untouched. He should warn the others

Sephiroth merely smiled and went back to watching the water. Yazoo curled up and went to sleep, safe in the care of his new brother.
The white was still warm and soft but it wasn’t as soothing anymore. It didn’t seem as distant and it didn’t seem as pure. It was changing and that disturbed him. He didn’t want it to change. He wanted to stay here. He was sure he wanted to stay here.
The white was still warmth and safety. It was still nice here but it was no longer completely white. It had changed. And that meant it wasn’t completely comfortable anymore.

“Seph!” Zack called out, stunned but happy that his CO had come out of the basement while it was still the middle of the day, mostly. Maybe this was a good sign… then again, maybe not. “General, is everything alright?” He jogged up to stand in front of his friend.

“Zackary, good. This is Yazoo,” he waved a long hand at the silver-haired clone. “He’ll be joining us. I assume Valentine gave you a briefing on him?” He marched forward, uncaring of the two-metres of solid muscle standing in his way.

Zack hopped to the side, “Uh, yeah. He said a couple things.” He gave the clone a searching look. The youth swayed and smirked and tried to look confident and maybe enticing, but the First noticed how he kept the General between them. “So what’s up? What ya doing up so early?”

“It’s nearly time,” the General answered cryptically, “Come.” Zack barely refrained from rolling his eyes. He’d had enough cryptic shit thrown at him in the last few days for him to be able to fertilize Aerith’s garden for a month. Despite that, he dutifully followed his CO out the door and over the bridge just to stand on the far bank of the shell-house’s surrounding lake.

Tifa and Tseng were drawn away from their card game by the activity. They trailed the others outside, which made the young clone skitter around Sephiroth like a moon in unstable orbit. The boy’s nervousness wasn’t helped when the Turk asked the air why the clone wasn’t dead yet. Since Vincent had explained both Yazoo and Sephiroth’s decision to bring him along, Zack ignored the comment as Tseng being a paranoid asshole. It was Tifa who turned and glared at the Turk. Tseng’s return look was calm and non-committal: the standard look of the ShinRa Turks. Zack was more interested by the fact that Tseng’s limp was nearly gone. Maybe now the SOLDIER could believe him when he said he’d be good to go tomorrow. That meant they’d be ready to leave this place now that things were happening again.

He was busy planning their departure, organizing their packs, when he got hit in the face by a heavy bundle of black leather.

“My apologies,” Sephiroth said, “I was aiming for Yazoo.” The clone came up quietly and took the General’s trademark coat. “You’ll need to remove your boots, Commander, unless you like walking around in wet shoes.”

Zack looked at the weird lake that surrounded the house. He didn’t like it; didn’t the look of it, the feel of it, not anything about it. The others all used it to bathe in, he didn’t. He went down into the ruins and hauled water out of one of the wells. And now, because Sephiroth was out of that godsdamned basement and was asking, he was going to wade in the creepy stuff.

Sometimes, friendship fucking sucked...

“You know, anyone who didn’t know you might construe this as you being completely fucking loopy,” Zack griped even as he bent to untie his boots.

Sephiroth didn’t even look at him as he waded into the water. “As we are a small strike force, half of whose members don’t completely trust the other half, and we are going to the coldest place on
Gaia with limited supplies, where we have to traverse a maze that’s the home base of the largest armed force in the world, so that an immortal demon can kill a creature out of legend—” The General reached a spot in the middle of the lake. He looked up and took a couple sliding steps to the right. “–I’d say we’re all a bit unhinged. Ms. Lockhart, would you care to join us?”

Tifa, who’d smiled at the General’s matter-of-fact cataloguing of their mutual insanity, agreed instantly. Looking at where the water came to on the tall swordsman, she didn’t bother rolling up her pant legs, as Zack had done, but just stepped out into the water. “Oh,” she paused, as always, in appreciation. “It’s sooo nice. Not cold but not warm.”

“It’s not fucking right. Water this temperature should have all sorts of shit living in it,” Zack complained. He kept expecting to feel slime and muck on the bottom but it was clean rock. “Where’s the algae and the bugs? Where are the fucking frogs?”

Only Vincent saw the clone’s instinctive recoil at the mention of the small amphibians. He resisted the impulse to join in Chaos’ mocking chuckle.

“This water has a different kind of life to it,” Sephiroth said, pointing Zack and Tifa to where he wanted them to stand. “I would ask you two,” he called out to Vincent and Tseng, “but he has no real ties to you.” Vincent crossed his arms in surprise but said nothing. Tseng didn’t even do that.

“This is about Cloud?” Tifa asked. Unlike Zack, who’d lifted his arms out of the water, she was running her fingers through it, swirling them and making figure-eights.

“Yes,” Sephiroth answered shortly. “He should be returning soon.” Then he closed his eyes, as if to sense his lover’s presence more clearly. Zack looked at the small fighter standing across from him. He tried to silently apologize for the General having dragged her into the water. Her ties with Cloud were tenuous at best and they could be here a while. Tifa smiled and shrugged, and combed her fingers through the lake’s odd water. Maybe, Zack rationalized, she thought it was better than playing another round of cards.

The white had changed. It had substance and he could almost feel his body. And it wasn’t empty anymore. There was black moving through it. Someone else was here.

A large hand touched his forehead. “Well, you sure got yourself beat up,” It was a deep voice, gruff but kind.

“Dad?”

A deep chuckle, “Not even close.” The hand moved to his chin and turned it to the side. This new person ran a calloused finger through the blood that coated his skin, “At least most of this isn’t yours. The puppy would be very upset if you couldn’t go back.”

Cloud frowned lightly. Who was this guy? He was almost familiar. Tall, taller than Zack, and very broad. Dark; dark hair, dark clothes, dark eyes, sad eyes...

“It looks like your place isn’t here. Tough luck.” The hand moved to his chest, “Tell them that I miss them, and that I’m sorry. Can you do that for me?”

‘Who misses them? Why are you sorry?’ He didn’t say it aloud but the man, the SOLDIER, heard anyway.

“They’ll know. Now, time to go back.” A gentle push and he floated away from the white, through the grey and the black into the light. This was like those dreams he’d had of visiting Aeris’ field of
flowers but not. For one thing, there was a string, or something, that was pulling him through it. For another, it was wet. He was floating in something wet. He frowned. He could hear things now, feel things, want things...

“Sephiroth,” he whispered.

“I’m here, Cloud, I’m here,” the normally strong voice was shaky. “I’ve been waiting for you.”


There were hands on him, supporting him but not. He opened his eyes and looked up into the worried cat-green of General Sephiroth. That’s not what he’d been expecting but, since he didn’t know what exactly he had been expecting, it was very nice. He smiled, just a small one, before a leather-covered hand on his arm drew his attention away. The eyes that met his weren’t cat-green but they were just as compelling. “Zack.” His smile got a little bigger.

“Tifa’s here too,” the SOLDIER said.

“Is she? Cool” Cloud’s eyes closed as long, trembling fingers brushed hair off his forehead. “Why am I wet?”

“Because you’re lying in a lake,” Zack said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, okay,” Cloud responded calmly. Suddenly his eyes popped open. He blinked a couple times, frowned a little bit, and then shifted until his feet were under him and he was standing on his own. The water, which had saturated his clothes and hair, evaporated in thin, misty-green streams. He looked around with dazed eyes: this wasn’t where he had been, and shouldn’t be where he was. “What happened?”

“Um,” Zack looked at Sephiroth but it didn’t look like the General was going to explain it.

“You died, I think,” Tifa said baldly.

“Oh,” Cloud’s voice was soft and misty like the weird water evaporating from his clothes, “Okay.” He looked at Tifa and smiled a little, “It’s good to be back then.” She smiled in return.

*You’d think,* Chaos growled in disgust, *that returning from death would involve fewer clothes.* Vincent ignored that remark, just as he’d ignored the demon’s remark about the logic of skinny-dipping as a way to keep clothing dry.

“Did it work?” the young SOLDIER looked over his shoulder at Sephiroth, “That thing you were trying to do?”

The General nodded, “The Lifestream will fight against Meteor, and the rest.”

“Oh, good,” Cloud nodded sleepily, “I wasn’t sure Jenova’s death would work as the sacrifice but it was better than yours.”

The General gave him a little shake even as Zack burst out, “You sacrificed yourself, you little twit.”

Cloud blinked huge eyes at him before shaking his head, “No, no. Aeris said anybody would do as long as they were willing to die for their cause. Jenova was willing; she just blew up too fast. I didn’t have time to jump off.” He leaned forward to state, very sternly, “Poison is a stupid status. It
takes friggin’ forever to kick in.” He was extremely serious even as he blinked huge, befuddled eyes. He reminded Zack of some addicts he’d seen, flying on their drug of choice.

Zack’s grin came out, rivalling the sun for intensity, “That’s what I’ve always said.” Cloud nodded solemnly in agreement.

“We’ll see if we can find you something more effective,” Sephiroth promised, even as he reached out a hand to keep the young man steady.

“I’d appreciate that, Sir,” Cloud nodded—he hadn’t actually stopped—then he blinked and said in confession, “My sword blew up too. Now, I don’t even have a gun.” He shook his head slowly, “I won’t be able to fight.”

Sephiroth made another promise, “We’ll find you a weapon, don’t worry.” Although the chances of them finding an intact blade here in the Forgotten City were very slim. The only blades they’d found had been attached to gardening tools.

“Maybe Vincent has a spare you can use,” Tifa offered after a moment, “He carries a lot of weapons on him.”

“Okay,” Cloud said agreeably. He swayed like a reed pushed by invisible winds.

At least he was a happy reed, the SOLDIER thought with a smile. Zack jerked his head toward the bank in question and received a small nod in return. Sephiroth scooped up the smaller man and carried him to the shore. “I can walk, Sir,” but the protest was empty as, with a few long strides, the General was already climbing out of the water and toward the bridge. Everyone was left behind except for the slim clone who scurried after his brother, still holding the long leather coat.

Zack and Tifa barely had a chance to step through the water before the trio disappeared into the house. The First, despite his cocky attitude, felt rather pole-axed. Judging by the way Tifa was covering her mouth while she looked at him; he probably looked like it too.

“Well,” he said jauntily, “That was faster than I thought.”

He put his hands on his hips, except that dipped them in the weird water which, he realized, reminded him of one of Hojo’s mako tubes except more diluted. No wonder he didn’t like it. He actually jumped back in an involuntary rejection of being immersed in the stuff, which was stupid, because it didn’t get him out of the lake it just made him lose his balance and fall over. Into the tainted water.

As it covered his head, he lashed out in a panic and cut his hand on something sharp. The short pain was so surprising that it shook sense back into him. He opened his eyes under the water—a fact that made him kind of proud of himself—to look for the dangerous anomaly in the pristine lake. It was shiny and looked sharp. And it had a handle. ‘What the fuck?’ he thought. He put out his hand and pulled the blade out of the lake bed. He got his feet back under him and stood up. He twisted the blade in the dim light. It was definitely some kind of sword but, instead of a hilt, the handle ran along the back of the blade. It looked somehow... unfinished.

“What is that?” Tifa asked, stepping closer.

“I found it sticking out of the floor of the lake.” He gave Tifa a look filled with irony. “He did say his sword exploded.” It took a moment, but eventually her eyebrows went up in understanding.

“But it doesn’t look like a sword,” she commented.
Zack took a closer look at it. It had notches and grooves along on the outside edge and, inside the groove, a locking mechanism. “There’s more to it,” he said and began looking around him, into the water. Tifa did the same.

“What is it?” Tseng asked, moving a step closer in curiosity. Turks, Zack snorted to himself, were allowed to feel curiosity.

“Part of a sword, I think,” he answered. Then he tossed it to shore, “Hey Vinny, catch!”

The gunman reached out a hand. “It’s Vincent,” and plucked the blade out of the air. Zack just smiled to himself and kept looking in the water. He and Tifa moved through the water, circling around their starting point.

“Found one,” Tifa called and dipped down to grab it. She brought up a short, perforated blade with a fancy wheel lock mechanism and a folded up handle. She held it very carefully since she wasn’t wearing her gloves and started to walk it over the ex-Turk. He held his brass-covered hand in an obvious ‘toss it’ gesture. She did, and he caught it with a soft ‘clink’ of metal-hitting-metal.

“Here’s another,” Zack said, and pulled it out. They kept at this until they’d found six interconnecting blades. By the end, the weird feeling water didn’t bother the SOLDIER anymore.

While they searched, Vincent and Tseng worked on how the pieces fit together but they didn’t get very far. All they agreed on was that the smaller blades mounted onto the largest one, and that the largest one separated into a wider blade in a manner they couldn’t really explain but was dangerous nonetheless.

“Bet you ten gil Cloud will take a look at it and put it together without even having to think about it,” Tifa said.

Zack snorted. Vincent just growled; it was his hand that had been sliced when the large blade popped open. “No bet,” Tseng answered for them all.

“Why do you curl around him so?” Yazoo asked, looking at Sephiroth hold Cloud while the blond slept.

“Because he’s important to me and I thought he was lost.” Yazoo still looked puzzled. “If Kadaj or Loz returned from the dead, wouldn’t you want to hold them close for as long as you possibly could?”

The slim clone looked stricken and sad. He swayed a little as he nodded, long hair falling forward to hide his expression. It was quiet except for a soft snoring coming from the blond.

Sephiroth saw the pain of loneliness, and understood what the young man was feeling. He patted the mattress on his other side. “Come, it is wide enough.”

Hesitantly, Yazoo knelt on the floor and then stretched out behind his protector. The General could feel the Jenova cells in his body reaching out to the ones in the clone; parts wanting to reunite into a whole, but he could also sense that, aside from this odd affinity, the cells were dormant, without the power to reproduce or spread to a new host. The Lifestream was fighting Jenova. Perhaps one day, he mused, it would figure out a way to dissolve all the alien’s cells, wherever they were, and he would cease to exist because he didn’t have enough human cells to form a complete person. A disturbing thought best left alone at this point, he decided. Even so, he was thankful when the clone interrupted his musing.
“They aren’t coming back though, are they,” It wasn’t a question. “Not like he did.”

“I wouldn’t think so.” No point in lying to the boy.

Again quiet descended. The only sounds were of the rest of the party playing out in the lake, splashing around and laughing. Cloud shifted and shuffled in his sleep, nestling himself even closer to his lover.

“I won’t go with you to the Northern Caves, I can’t,” the clone burst out, “If I get caught–” he ended in a sob.

“I am not going to force you to come with us,” the General reassured him.

The young man sniffed and hiccupped into Sephiroth’s broad back. Oddly, Cloud seemed to sense the teen’s distress for he reached around his lover to drop a hand on Yazoo. He patted the boy a couple times, all without opening his eyes or giving any indication of being awake at all. Perhaps, the General theorized, Cloud’s Jenova cells were responding to Yazoo’s even from within unconsciousness. With a connection of that strength, no wonder the virus had survived uncounted millennia and caused untold thousands of deaths. If Jenova could control the virus in each body she’d infected...

What was surprising is that Cloud, his little Cloud, had finally stopped her. With a small, but very proud, smile, Sephiroth pulled his lover even more tightly into his arms.

Except for the sounds from outside, it was quiet in the house. It was warm and comfortable on the bed. The stress of the last three days finally caught up with both Sephiroth and his clone and they fell into a light doze. This lasted until the rest of the party entered. They weren’t quiet. In fact they were quite loud and obviously excited about something. Seph heard Zack say “I can’t wait to tell Cloud,” and, like a switch, the blond was awake.

“Um,” he started. He looked up at the General only to see amused green eyes looking down at him. “If Zack’s downstairs, then who’s sharing our bed?”

“His name is Yazoo. He’s my clone grown by Hojo,” Sephiroth answered.

Cloud’s eyebrows went up in surprise, then down in disapproval. “Why is he in our bed?”

Sephiroth explained what Zack and the others had been fighting while Cloud had battled Jenova. During his report, Yazoo moved in closer and closer, wrapped his arms tighter and tighter around the General. Cloud, feeling much less mush-brained since his nap, noticed the death-grip Yazoo had on his ‘brother’, the fine trembling, and the goose-bumps. He raised his eyebrows but said nothing; he knew all about needing comfort.

Once he’d heard the sequence of events, the presence of the last clone worried the blond less than the creature Vincent had turned into.

“So Vincent’s safe?” he asked.

“He says he can limit its appearance, we’ll see if that’s true,” Sephiroth confirmed. “Yazoo, I can barely breathe.” Slim limbs relaxed infinitesimally.

“No much we can do if he can’t,” Cloud said in resignation, “We need him.” Sephiroth grunted in agreement.

“Yo, Cloud! Seph! You awake up there?” Zack called up the circular hallway. “And don’t bother
saying ‘no’ ‘cause I can hear you talking.’

“Why did even bother asking then,” Sephiroth whispered in a tone of long-suffering.

“How else will you appreciate his restraint, Sir.” Cloud responded in his best NCO-dry before lifting his voice, “Hang on, we’re coming down.”

“Hmm.” Sephiroth was unimpressed but obediently followed the Corporal’s lead in getting up and straightening his appearance. He turned to Yazoo. “You can stay here if you wish, but it would likely be better if you came down with us.”

“Talk to Tifa,” Cloud suggested, “She’s pretty kind-hearted. If she adopts you, Vincent will back off some.”

Sephiroth looked at the blond in surprise, “Why would he do that?”

“Because he’s nuts about her,” Cloud explained. Sephiroth still looked surprised. “You mean you didn’t see it?” To Cloud’s amazement, a faint hint of colour appeared in the General’s face.

“But she rejected him on the flight over.” The Corporal gave a small head shake. “Didn’t she?”

“No, Sir. She asked for time to think about it, meaning that Vincent had a chance. It may have been slim but it was there. Now I think he has a better than even chance.”

“Ah,” the colour was still high on the General’s cheeks, “I still have some difficulty interpreting the body language of most people, especially if it is subtle.” Cloud thought, but didn’t say, that Vincent’s purple beast running off with Tifa at the crash site then standing guard over her like a pit bull, wasn’t exactly a subtle signal. But he hadn’t been raised in a lab with a bunch of twisted, geek scientists either.

“Understood, Sir. Take it from me, Vincent is very interested in Tifa and she’s returning his interest.”

“Surely she won’t stay with him after seeing him turn into-to that?” Yazoo broke in, clutching himself in comfort.

“Why wouldn’t she?” Cloud returned flatly. “You loved Jenova despite everything she did.” Yazoo flinched then tossed his head to cover it.

“Shall we get this over with?” Sephiroth broke into whatever argument might be brewing between the two. “Are you coming, Yazoo?” The clone straightened, letting his arms drop confidently to his sides, and nodded.

“Cloud,” Zack yelled up impatiently, “C’mon, man. We found something you might be able to use as a weapon. Maybe. We need you to try it out.” Sephiroth had his brows up in astonishment; he thought they’d been playing in the lake. Cloud’s face, however, lit with excitement and hope. Having fought with a blade, he hadn’t been looking forward to going back to using a gun. There’d been something liberating about using a sword, the movement involved. When the trio finally left the sleeping area, Cloud was in the lead.

The group was waiting in what they’d dubbed the kitchen. There wasn’t a stove or a sink, but there were chairs and a table and a separate door to the outside where Zack had set up his fire pit. Both Zack and Tifa, who was bouncing on her toes, hands clasped behind her, looked excited. Vincent and Tseng looked like... Turks, Sephiroth decided, watchful and waiting to make a judgement.
On the table, laid out like a sacred offering, were six shiny blades, although only one looked like a traditional sword with a blade, cross-guard and hilt.

Cloud stopped, “Wait... what?”

“We found these in the lake,” Zack announced, he too was rocking on his heels in pride and excitement.

“In the lake?” Sephiroth asked, frowning.

“Yeah,” Zack confirmed with an ironic smile, “They were just sticking out of the bottom, waiting for someone to trip over them.”

“Which he did,” Tifa pointed out.

Cloud either hadn’t heard them or didn’t care. He was staring at the assorted blades. “They fit together, don’t they?” he asked but, again, he didn’t listen to the answer. Instead, he stood in front of the table, running fingers over the blades, picking them up and examining them.

“Got it figured out yet, Spike?” Zack crossed his arms and tucked his thumbs into his armpits.

“Um,” blue eyes flicked his way, “well, this is obviously the first tsurugi,” he touched the largest piece, “and I think this one is second.” Fingers ran over the blade Zack found first. “I need to play around with them a bit, before I know the exact sequence.” His voice trailed off. He pulled out a chair, sat down and put his head nearly on the table in order to look at the edges more closely. If he had looked up, he would have seen both Tifa and Zack working hard to contain their amusement.

“You found it in the lake?” Sephiroth repeated, strong fingers squeezing the bridge of his nose as if to forcibly block any incipient headaches.

“Yeah, Tifa and I figured, since his old one blew up maybe this was supposed to be his replacement.” Zack said teasingly. “The planet sure must want us to continue.”

“You think?” Sephiroth returned sarcastically. “I don’t suppose it provided some way for him to carry all those blades?”

‘Uh,” Zack rubbed the back of his head, “not that we saw.”

Sephiroth didn’t allow himself to sigh. He looked at all the blades on the table and pictured, very clearly, the fancy rig Cloud had been wearing in his ‘house’, just after all his aspects had fused back into himself. “That’s alright. I have an idea of what we should do.” The General was fairly confident that the intricate sword harness the Corporal had worn then would work perfectly now. He just hoped his technical skill was up to the challenge. “This is what we’ll need...”

While the others scoured through the ruins for useable pieces of leather and leather-working tools, Cloud worked on assembling his new weapon. It took him a while to notice that Yazoo hadn’t left with the rest but was standing near the table, watching him. A brief, but encompassing glance took in the young clone from boots to hair. “You can sit down it you like,” Cloud offered before going back to the blades... his new weapon.

He didn’t watch, but he was aware that the teen shifted unhappily before pulling out a chair. Vague memories came to him. They were faint, and accompanied by the smell of chemicals and antiseptics. The lab. Voices talking, him talking, berating some underling...
Just his voice was enough to cause fear and he wasn’t even talking about him.

“The S-clones should be far more advanced than they are.” Chair creaking, fingers tapping. Hojo was on the phone?

His beating heart caused him pain as it moved the blood around in his body.

“No more excuses. You’re obviously incapable of completing the task.”

Pain, everything was pain. Breathing was pain. Shallow breaths. Take only shallow breaths. Cold, so cold. Shivering hurt, try not to shiver.

“Don’t bother. I’ll be coming up there to get the project on track.” He was leaving. It would be better while he was gone.

Tears. Crying in relief. Trying not to move. It would be better. It would be.

It still hurt to be alive.

He pulled in a sharp breath, a reminder that breathing didn’t hurt anymore. He was healed. He was free.

And, unlike the young man in front of him, he wasn’t alone.

“I’m sorry about your brothers, or rather that we met on opposite sides,” he corrected, unwilling and almost unable to lie. He squirmed a little, “I wish it hadn’t come down to use versus them.” That wasn’t a lie. The clone was silent. Cloud stole a peek at him. He was sitting, head tipped, arms wrapped around himself. His eyes were half closed, shuttered. The Corporal couldn’t read what he was thinking; it was the alien cells in his body that let him know Yazoo was holding in grief.

“It was inevitable,” he finally said.

Cloud looked up, catching the young man’s gaze. It was odd seeing those cat-slit pupils in blue eyes and not green. He looked away. “Why was it inevitable?”

“Because Hojo hates you. Hates all of you. You ruined his best experiment, he said.” Yazoo’s voice was dispassionate, clinical, “He told us to bring you back if we could, or kill you. If we killed you, we were to bring back your bodies. You and Sephiroth, at least. Your dark-haired friend we could just kill.”

Cloud wasn’t really interested in what Hojo wanted. “Then what?”

“I imagine, he would’ve continued his experiments,” the clone’s tone said he was talking to an idiot.

The blond had to repress a shudder at the thought at being back in that man’s control. He found a trigger on the small blade that made the wheel-lock mechanism turn. He played with it until he was sure his voice would be steady. “I meant, what would’ve happened to you?” Yazoo opened his mouth but nothing came out. He frowned and drew back. He turned his head to the side. Cloud recognized the defensive move for what it was—he’d certainly used it enough when he was
younger.

“I don’t suppose they encouraged questions,” he said softly.

Yazoo snorted, but said nothing.

Like most times when he tried to talk to new people outside his role as a corporal, Cloud couldn’t think of anything to say, not for comfort or even conversation. He sighed silently and went back to the array of blades.

By the time the rest returned, he had figured out how to put the sword together, and take it apart, and put it together again. He’d discovered that a couple of the blades would form a smaller weapon than when all six were used. And he’d given it a name: Tsurugi—broadsword. It was frigging massive when fully assembled, wider even than Zack’s Buster, which was the biggest sword Cloud had ever seen before this one. He’d even gone outside to swing it around a bit.

It was a good weapon.

When Sephiroth saw him outside doing some katas, he gave the items he’d found to Zack and went over to the blond. To hone the Corporal’s technique, he said. To have an excuse to hold the blond close, everybody else thought.

Zack smirked. “I should be the one training him,” he called after the silver-haired swordsman, “I’ve got the broadsword. You’ve got that pencil-thin thing that disappears if you turn it sideways!” But he was talking to empty air.

Tifa walked past him, “I guess you’re stuck making supper again.”

Zack grunted, “Not even a question of that or would you rather I let Vincent do it? The guy doesn’t even eat!” and the SOLDIER followed her over the bridge.

After supper, Cloud showed them how Tsurugi worked and Sephiroth and Tifa took measurements of the blades. Then, and Zack wasn’t sure how it had happened, everyone was ushered outside for training in hand-to-hand fighting techniques led by Tifa and, of all people, Yazoo. Vincent didn’t join the training but found himself a perch from which he could watch the action.

Watching the two of them punch, kick, duck and bounce back, Zack saw a form of movement he’d never excel in. He wasn’t graceless, far from it, but his training was in the sword and it was a completely different set of movements. He was okay with that, happy in fact. His contentment with his chosen fighting style didn’t get him out of the training.

“Why am I doing this again?” he asked the air.

“Because I said so,” was Sephiroth’s flat, unarguable, reply.

“Oh yeah, that’s why,” he mocked, but he still formed a line in front of the little Nibelheimer with Cloud and Tseng beside him. When Sephiroth didn’t step up to the line, Zack pointed out the unfairness of it.

Green eyes flashed. “Yazoo,” the General called, unhooking his sword harness. The clone turned toward him, eyebrow raised. “You are fully augmented, yes?” The boy nodded. The General handed Masamune to his SiC. “Very good. Fight me.” And they did. Around the house, through the trees and over the lake in an unceasing blur of motion. It ended when Sephiroth hit the clone solidly in the chest with the heels of both hands and sent him flying back, nearly through the house. Tifa put up her hand in the universal signal to stop and, surprisingly, both the silver-haired men
obeyed.

Neither one of them was even breathing hard although Yazoo had a hand pressed soothingly over his ribs. Beside him, he heard Cloud swallow. He bent over and whispered, “No sneaking off tonight, Spike. I can’t cover for you two anymore.”

Cloud looked up at him, a cute little flush of embarrassment on his cheeks. Despite that, his eyes narrowed and he whispered back, “What if we take you with us?” Then he licked his lips... slowly.

It was Zack’s turn to swallow. Cloud smirked.

“You have something amusing to share, Corporal?”

Sephiroth’s voice wiped the blond’s face clean. “No, Sir!” he barked in his best innocent trooper voice.

“Excellent. Then we can continue.” And continue they did, until the light under the already dim canopy was nearly gone.

While the others were working on their stances under Tifa’s strict guidance, Vincent appeared next to Sephiroth. “A very interesting demonstration, General,” he said.

“It served its purpose,” the General agreed calmly.

“And was its purpose to show the Commander how well you can fight... or the clone?”

A small smile tipped Sephiroth’s lip up. “Right now, Yazoo is off-balance and uncertain. This has made him somewhat meek and deferential. Soon he will regain his confidence. He will become arrogant and will desire to dominate and control his environment.”

Vincent’s eyebrow went up in surprise. “You know this for certain?”

Again that small smile flitted across the General’s face. “He is my clone and Jenova’s descendent. There is no way he will not be arrogant and controlling.” A sideways look at the gunman. “And you’re not a very relaxed person either. If you believe in genetics, we were doomed from the start.”

The implications of the General’s statement stunned the gunman into momentary stillness. Was he… was Sephiroth acknowledging the possibility that Vincent was his father? Should he ask, he wondered. He looked at the silver-haired warrior who was looking back at him, lightly mocking. Perhaps another time.

“You were establishing a pecking order,” the ex-Turk stated instead.

Sephiroth nodded, letting the topic drop. “If I establish my authority now, then maybe I can avoid having to kill him later.” The statement was calm, without feeling and Vincent knew that the General would kill his clone if he threatened their party. “Besides, I wanted to know if Hojo had improved on the original,” Sephiroth added. It was an incredibly bitter thing to say, yet it was said in a very light-hearted tone. Again, Vincent was stunned into speechlessness: such a short sentence to contain so much painful history. He decided to stay there, in speechlessness. He seemed to be better at it than conversation.

In silence, he, and his son, watched Tifa and Yazoo work the others into a semblance of competence. Tseng had the advantage, of course. As a Turk, he’d been trained in unarmed combat. Surprisingly, Cloud was better at it than the Commander. At least it was surprising until the blond reminded the others that regular troops were trained in hand-to-hand.
The kept at it until the light began to fade and Tseng started to limp again. They took turns cleaning up, washing their bodies in the mako-enriched lake. They used untainted water Vincent had hauled up from the village for the rest. Then they went up the spiral hallway to where the mattresses were laid out. By unspoken consent, the party placed Sephiroth and Cloud to one side; the only bit of privacy the open structure could give them. Zack stood, bouncing, farther down the line, waiting to act as a living heat pad for the two non-augmented members of their party. At least he stood there until Tifa pushed him in next to Cloud.

“We’ll be warm enough, Zack,” she said, “no need to be noble.” Tseng, she placed next to Zack. Then she grabbed Yazoo, who looked even more uncertain than Zack, and placed him at the end behind her. “Don’t worry,” she told him, “I’ll make sure Tseng doesn’t hurt you.”

Yazoo drew himself up, head tipping gracefully to the side in a move that was somehow both arrogant and threatening. Before he could say anything, Sephiroth cut in, “It’s called ‘teasing’, Yazoo. You’ll have to get used to it as Tifa has obviously been spending too much time with the Commander.”

“Hey,” Zack protested without heat.

With a casual flip of his hair and a shrug, the young clone gracefully folded himself onto the mattress in front of the dark-eyed fighter. His pose was ruined when he squeaked. She’d pulled him in to spoon with her. “Better heat retention this way,” she said but Zack knew she’d done it because his brothers weren’t here to hold him... or maybe so she’d know if he tried to kill them all in their sleep. Either option was possible with her.

“Or maybe it really is because it’s warmest this way?” she said.

“Fuck!”

Yazoo whispered, “Does he always do that?”

“You get used to it,” Tifa whispered back.

The SOLDIER fell asleep to the feel of Cloud’s silent giggling.
The next day, Sephiroth gave in to the Commander’s suggestion that Cloud practice with his new blades. The sound of steel-on-steel echoed up from the deserted city, along with shouts and boasts and gales of laughter. Tseng talked Vincent into accompanying him to the structure in the cliff that had intrigued him since they arrived. Their departure was much quieter. The General and Tifa worked together to assemble the harness that he’d seen—he winced even as he thought it—in a dream.

He had Yazoo sit with them, questioning him in order to map out Hojo’s facility in the Northern Caves. Where were the security points? Where would they be most likely to find the Professor? Where would they find Omega or, failing that, the elusive Weiss? What was the troop strength? Each question would make the youth draw back. He’d been kept in the lab. They didn’t talk around any of them. He didn’t know, hadn’t wanted to know, he’d say and he’d pull his arms a little tighter around himself.

Tifa finally told the General to hush since he couldn’t seem to talk and cut straight at the same time, and she chatted with the sylph-like youth. She asked about his brothers and what it had been like growing up with siblings, explaining that she had been an only child. She’d always wanted a brother, she said, but by the end of Yazoo’s stories, she announced that she was just as glad to have been spared the experience.

Then she chatted about how she’d trained with the most notorious guerrilla fighter Wutai had ever produced which led to the two of them comparing techniques and instructors. They talked about food, and books and just living day-to-day. No matter what he said, she just smiled or shrugged and accepted it. He’d killed one of the lab techs? Well, she’d read some of what went on in Hojo’s labs so the boy could hardly be blamed for that, now could he? He’d had sex with his brothers? He had to have been lonely and frightened, all of them probably were. It was nice that they could turn to each other for comfort.

And with each smile and each shrug, Sephiroth could see the wire-fine tension leaving Yazoo. The General didn’t think Yazoo even realized how much tactical information he’d given up to the dark-eyed fighter. Sephiroth had to admit that, even with the hidden agenda, Tifa’s bright friendliness kept the conversation flowing. He concentrated on assembling the complicated sword harness and only threw in the occasional, non-confrontational comment. Trying, like her, to keep it light.

It was one of the most relaxing days he’d ever spent.

Vincent was finding his day much less relaxing. It’s not that Tseng chatted continuously, he actually said very little, but it was what he said that had the ex-Turk grinding his teeth.

“Have you given any thought to my proposal?” the Turk had said halfway through the village, his voice nearly drowned out by the whoops and hollers of the two SOLDIERs battling overhead.

“Your proposal?” Vincent returned, baffled, although his voice was its usual uninflected growl.

“That you join us at Neo-ShinRa, fully reinstated, with all the benefits and privileges that should be yours.”

“I have not thought of it,” he growled, “nor will I.”
The sounds of battle fell away as they climbed out of the ruins. Vincent began to hope that the whole expedition would be accomplished in blessed silence.

“Your siblings are dead,” Tseng kept walking, didn’t even turn to look at his companion, “One died in an accident nearly twenty years ago and the others while trying to fight off Deepground.”

Vincent pulled back into his mantle. “Why are you telling me this?”

*I think he wants you, my host.* Chaos laughed.

“Your father’s title is vacant,” the Turk continued, “Things are a little chaotic right now but, if the right people are contacted, I’m sure you could be confirmed as the new baronet.”

“Why are you telling me this?” he repeated. Again, Tseng ignored the question.”

“It would be a shame for a title as old and respected as Dr. Valentine’s to fade from history. I’m sure your parents wouldn’t want that.”

Vincent knew his eyes were flashing—even Chaos was growling in annoyance at the persistence of the man. “My father died before he could let me know how he felt as the inheritor of an empty title. Considering he went by his professional designation, I don’t think it mattered to him. As for my mother, long ago I stopped trying to live up to whatever standards she thought appropriate for the family name. She washed her hands of me when I joined ShinRa and the others followed her lead. Why should their concerns be mine?”

His mother and oldest brother had planned out the careers and lives of all four children. The oldest, a boy, would inherit the title and the estates, of course. The second child would conquer academia; the next would rise to the top of the church, and the extra, awkward, too-tall fourth child? Well, they’d marry him off to bring the greatest advantage to the family. They’d even had his spouse picked out for him; an older woman whose rapaciousness in bed was legendary. She’d offered a royal sum to purchase his body. He could remember the bitter argument when he’d told them no. He’d compounded it by saying he’d rather become ShinRa’s bodyguard than be sold like a common whore.

*I think I would have loathed your family, my immortalis. They sound even more repressive than you are.* The gunman nearly snorted out loud. The demon’s assessment was accurate.

His mother hadn’t yelled—she never yelled—but she’d let him know that if he didn’t behave and do his duty as a Valentine, then they would no longer consider him as part of the family. He’d been just as calm when he stated that, ever since his father had died, he hadn’t felt like a part of the family anyway. The only time they spent in each other’s company were for meals (semi-formal) or social occasions (formal) and conversation was kept light and shallow. They might as well have existed on separate planets for all the impact they’d had on his life and there were many days Vincent had thought that a good thing.

This is what Sephiroth felt…

Vincent nearly stopped as the realization hit him. This disconnection, the lack of attachment and the unconcern, that he felt towards his own family, this was what Sephiroth had trained himself to feel for Hojo, his supposed father, and what the former experiment felt about him now. Because it was safer to feel this way than it was to care and it was less hurtful to treat them as strangers until, eventually, they become strangers, as unknown to him as any one of a thousand rice growers in Wutai. He would not bare either himself or his son to the Turk by saying so. There were other reasons to turn down Tseng’s offer. “The monarchy was gone long before ShinRa dismantled it so
it is an empty title that would impress only the empty-headed. It is meaningless; without value to
the person I was yesterday and the creature I am today.”

Tseng slanted him a look, his eyes dark and unreadable. “One can’t predict what will be important
in the future, or how others will react to a title—even an empty one—so we’ll leave the offer on
the table.” Vincent said nothing and, thankfully, the Turk stopped talking.

It was steeper here and the structure was coming into view. They could see the top of it, the roof
and the carved frieze. It was in worse shape than it had looked from down below, however, it was
obvious that a great deal of time and energy had been spent to carve it out of the cliff. The gunman
was forced to agree with the Turk: it had to have some cultural importance. The road curved
around, jutting out from the cliff face so that the pair had a nearly ninety degree angle to it. To
allow people to stop and admire the building, Tseng said and Vincent wasn’t inclined to disagree.

Out of curiosity, Vincent peered over the edge and looked down and down, until he could almost
see the pale, glowing water of the buried city. Jenova could’ve dropped straight down from here.
Odd, though; when he’d looked up from the central pillar, the ex-Turk hadn’t been able to see the
sky. Some kind of shield, he wondered or just another one of the many oddities this town
contained?

*The humming is back, my host,* Chaos snarled, *Stronger than ever.*

‘It wasn’t Jenova?’ he thought. They—he—had assumed that, since the demon couldn’t sense it
after the creature’s death, that the noise had been a result of her presence. Obviously not. ‘Why
didn’t you sense it before?’ was a much more useful question.

*Maybe because it’s taken this long for that lunatic to settle down.* Chaos was referring to
Hellmasker, Vincent assumed, as if that one’s appearance had unsettled the immortal creature
rather than annoying it. Vincent didn’t believe it.

*I don’t care what you believe, my host,* the demon’s voice was sneering, *as long as you search
out that buzz. It is far more annoying than that pathetic pseudo-talent could dream to be.*

Vincent considered the request. Even if the noise proved as elusive as it had before, looking for it
would be a good excuse to avoid the Wutaian and his blatant attempts at recruitment. So, while
Tseng explored a couple ruined houses built snug against the cliff, the gunman moved around the
path from where it nearly faced the structure to where it was nearly parallel. Hoping, against all
logic, that Chaos would be able to triangulate the position of wherever the ‘buzz’ was originating.
Needless to say, it couldn’t and Vincent resigned himself to crawling around the wreckage.

There were actually many levels open to the canyon even though they’d only been able to see one
from the ruined city. All featured colonnades; the top level’s columns were heavy and crude; the
lower levels’ were slim and elegant. He could see that they were all carved and painted at some
point, although time had erased or faded most of the decorations. He walked through an archway,
trading pale northern sun for dim emptiness. The floor had once featured intricate tile work but,
like the rest of the building, it was eroded and faded; much of it was broken away as well, as if the
craftsmen had been hasty or ill-trained or both. Neither the architecture nor the decorations, ruler-
straight and blatantly man-made, matched that of the organic, flowing conch-shell houses.

What had changed the culture so much?

His sister might have known. Even without his mother’s hyperbolic descriptions, he’d always
known she’d been a brilliant scholar like their father. And he’d also known, even without his
mother’s vitriolic denouncements, that he hadn’t inherited a tenth of the fabled Valentine
intelligence.

*Pfft,* Chaos dismissed the memory, *being an academic doesn’t make one intelligent. They’re dead, you’re not. So who’s the smart one?*

Vincent could nearly smile at the simplistic judgement.

He explored the upper area finding nothing but dust and the occasional skittering rodent. When he emerged back out on the gallery he saw Tseng walking down some stairs that probably led to the lower level. Vincent didn’t worry about him, too intent on his own task to care about the Turk’s. The centre of the structure had collapsed, piling roof, architrave and columns in huge chunks creating a nearly impassable barrier. It was a good thing he didn’t need to climb it, not really. Whether it was Chaos’ presence, or that of the others, or merely a side-effect from all the experiments Hojo had subjected him to, he could jump three, four, even five times his height with ease. Once over the pile, there was more of the same regimented structure looking empty and lifeless, except now he could detect Chaos’ buzz. It wasn’t in the ears, but more like a vibration in his back teeth. He walked into the carved inner rooms looked around but whatever he was looking for wasn’t here. The vibration stayed the same—just on the edge of audible.

He returned to the open walkway and went even further to the east, following the curve of the cliff face. The vibration got stronger. Once again, the walkway ended in ruins, this time the stones had fallen into the abyss, but there was an arching staircase to a hidden gallery above. Hopefully the source was up there. He climbed the stairs two at a time. To his disappointment most of the upper level was crumbling and gone. Even worse, the vibrations had lessened. With a growl he turned to go back downstairs. A small bag caught his attention—it glittered and sparkled—so he took it and stuffed it in one of his pockets to look at later.

Down, back to the walkway, where the vibration had been strongest. He looked up, nothing there; left and right, empty. He walked to the edge and looked over. He could just make out the lower level gallery. In it, he could dimly see Tseng’s shape moving around through the slim pillars. He pulled back with a frown. He could navigate back to the stairs and go down that way, or... A quick jump, twisting in mid-air so he faced the structure, then his gauntleted hand came out and grabbed one of the carved lintels and swung him neatly into the lower level.

He felt, more than saw, the Turk’s gun being drawn and cocked. “It’s me,” he announced calmly, not caring if Tseng actually shot at him.

“That was a foolish thing to do,” Tseng responded in his same level voice.

“It was efficient,” Vincent disagreed, ignoring the drawn gun to seek out the buzz, for it was a buzz now; as in ‘a steady low humming sound, like that of a bee or a mosquito’. If this was what Chaos had been hearing, no wonder the demon was irritated. “Have you found anything?”

Tseng put away his weapon. “Nothing of any use. The paintings and mosaics are too damaged to be easily interpreted.”

Turning his head, using it like a tuning fork, Vincent was barely paying attention to the conversation. “You need Professor Gast. Or his assistant, Ifalna... something,” he responded absently. It was the Turk’s silence that drew Vincent’s attention. “What?”

“Both Professor Gast and his wife are dead,” Tseng explained, “Killed by Hojo in his quest for control of the Science Department and the last known Cetra.” Vincent grunted in acknowledgment of the information, unsurprised and not really caring. He had hardly known them as they hadn’t spent much time with Lucrecia who’d been his assignment. He’d avoided them in his off-hours
because Gast had reminded him of an uncle he hadn’t liked and Ifalna was always trying to hug him. Although, now that Tseng said it, he could vaguely recall hearing about their deaths; overhearing, actually, a couple techs standing outside his cage, gossiping about Gast’s ‘suicide’ while on vacation. The lab tech had supplied air quotes but nobody had needed them to know what had really happened.

*That’s all very interesting, my own, but the source is somewhere here!* Inside him, it felt like Chaos was prowling like a guard fang in tall grass, hunting its prey. Their conversation already forgotten, Vincent stepped away from the Turk, deeper into the darkness, avoiding the rubble where possible, climbing or jumping over it where it was not.

“I’ve already checked back there,” Tseng called after him. He was ignored.

The vibration was so strong he could feel it in his bones. He was clenching his teeth so hard he was developing a head ache. Worse, his creatures were stirring. *There!* his demon directed and Vincent’s head whipped around to see a portion of the wall that was lighter than the rest. It almost seemed to be glowing. He reached out his damaged, gauntleted hand, stretching it out toward the wall, anticipating the feel of it.

Only to have his hand go right through...

The ‘wall’ shimmered and faded revealing an alcove, pristine and untouched by time. Its decorations were bright and crisp and could have been finished yesterday. In the centre of the space was a sturdy column of bright, white stone, too slender to be an altar, but important enough to be carved with figures of what Vincent recognized as ancient gods. On top of the column was a box of light wood, also carved and decorated with precious stones and metals. It drew him forward, drew him close until he could feel the power emanating from the box.

*Open it already and turn it off!* Chaos had a point. His creatures were definitely starting to shift around inside him. He wasn’t damaged, they couldn’t emerge, but having them all awake was beyond tiring. He grabbed the clasp with his bare hand. There was a tone, like a ringing bell, and the vibration stopped. Vincent frowned. ‘I think we’re to take it with us,’ he couldn’t help thinking.

*It stinks of pre-ordained destiny crap.* Chaos sniffed unhappily. It was not a fan of predetermined anything.

“That alcove wasn’t visible before which means it was waiting for you to find it,” Tseng said unnecessarily, “Intriguing.” Vincent growled in denial; it wasn’t intriguing it was disturbing.

At least his creatures had rolled over and gone back to sleep.

Zack and Cloud walked back up the hill to the weird little house by the lake. For once Cloud was bouncing a little in happiness, totally carefree in a way he’d rarely felt in his life. Sure, they were on a mission to save the world, and, yes, he’d just come back from the dead—again—but he was alive and he was here with his best friend after having spent most of the day sparring and flying and just messing around. He’d never had this. He’d been an only child then the town oddball so he’d never had any real friends in Nibelheim. Even his friendship with Tifa had been shaded with expectations and false dreams, furtiveness and secrecy. None of those had created a relaxed atmosphere.

When he’d managed to get into ShinRa’s armed forces he’d been driven to prove to himself, to everyone, that he was as good as anyone else. He’d trained harder and longer than anyone else, and he’d studied the same way. There’d been no time to develop any friends—even if he’d known how
to do that.

Then he’d been sent to Modeoheim. He’d been a support grunt, in charge of another support grunt, both of them responsible for hauling the supplies for the important members of their party. He’d been anonymous and faceless and would have stayed that way except they’d been shot out of the air and had to slog their way over a mountain in freezing temperatures, and he’d met Zack. Cheerful, irreverent, and a small town boy like him. They’d hit it off immediately and Cloud had talked more about himself on that three-day mission than he had all the previous two years.

And he’d laughed. He’d laughed more than he had in his whole, pathetic life.

When it was over, that horrible fuck up of a mission, he’d assumed that Zack would mostly forget about him but then one night, soon after they’d returned, he’d gotten a call from a bar. Zack was drunk; singing and dancing in a way that was ‘disturbing the other patrons’. Since he’d given the waitress Cloud’s PHS number before he’d ordered the mini-tanker of tequila, they’d assumed he’d agreed to pick up the drunken SOLDIER. Of course he hadn’t agreed, he hadn’t known anything about it, but he’d gone anyway. The taxi alone had cost him a week’s wages. He was just glad the bar had agreed to bill Zack for the furniture and the light fixture.

Zack had been a happy drunk until the booze started to wear off then he’d cried and Cloud had held him and let him cry because that was what friend’s did.

He’d also let Zack buy the recording he’d made on his PHS of him pole dancing half-naked around a thick, rough wooden post—and the less sultry dance he’d done as he pulled slivers from his groin—before anyone else had a chance to see it. If that wasn’t friendship, Cloud didn’t know what was.

Hard to believe they’d only known each other for only a year before the Nibelheim mission. It had seemed like a brand new lifetime to Cloud. He’d met so many new people, made friends with so many people, been teased and given presents, gone dancing and been seduced, gotten drunk and pulled pranks, and done all the things teenagers were supposed to do with their friends. All because of Zack Fair.

Then had come Nibelheim and, and everything that had happened there.

But that was done. It was over. They were free and alive and, for some reason, today was the first time since he’d come out of his... coma, that he’d gotten that feeling back. Maybe it was the buildings that they’d accidentally knocked over, or the noise they’d made, or the fucking flying, but he’d felt like it was four years ago when Zack had snuck him in to watch the SOLDIERs’ Goof-Off Games.

He felt carefree and alive. He was alive. Zack was alive. Sephiroth, his lover, was alive. They were all alive. Okay, so he’d been dead and so had Tifa, but they hadn’t stayed that way. They were alive now and, for today, that was all that mattered.

So, as they stripped next to the lake before heading in to wash off the sweat and dust and blood, he was already figuring out how he was going to dunk his best friend. And when Zack flashed a lazy grin at him, he knew that Zack knew, and he knew his dark-haired friend was anticipating the battle.

“All that noise can be a little distracting, can’t it General,” Tifa said. There was no response. Sephiroth sat with his eyes fixed on the distance, hands raised but still.

“And the view is very nice too, isn’t it?” There was a loud splash and even Tifa paused in her work.
“Very nice.”

“What are they doing?” Yazoo asked, moving in front of the window and blocking the view. Sephiroth actually jumped a little then. He gave his co-worker a small, guilty look. “It’s just silly. Why don’t they just bathe and have done with it.” The young clone sounded disgusted.

“It’s called ‘playing’, Yazoo. People do it to have fun or to release tension,” Tifa said, not condescending or making fun of him, but just telling him. “And you’re blocking the window.” That was teasing, but Yazoo obediently moved back a bit.

Sephiroth looked at the small fighter sitting beside him, hands still working even if she was paying more attention to the outside. “I thought you and Vincent…” he left the rest delicately unsaid.

“I’m spoken for, General, not blind and not dead.” She smiled, still watching the show, “I learned long ago that one should appreciate art and beauty whenever it’s presented. Don’t you agree?” Now she was teasing him.

There was a war cry from the lake so Sephiroth didn’t bother to respond, allowing himself to become caught up in the action once again. Really, the lake was far too shallow for Cloud and Zack to be indulging in such behaviour. Didn’t they realize that the people in the house had a perfect view of... everything?

“Oh! Cloud totally would have had him if he hadn’t pulled out his wings,” she said in outrage, “That’s unfair!”

Yazoo looked at her in surprise. “Isn’t this a battle?”

“Mock battle,” she corrected.

“Mock battles are just training for the real thing,” the clone stated and was backed up by an approving murmur from the General. “In a battle, any and all advantages should be utilized to their fullest. Since his wings are water-resistant it makes sense to use them.”


Yazoo was puzzled. “Is that the goal? To push the dark one’s head under the water?” Tifa nodded. “So, once he has accomplished it, then they will stop and wash correctly?”

“Good point, Yazoo. Zack should definitely keep using his wings.” Yazoo frowned at Tifa, not understanding her change in attitude at all, but Sephiroth hummed in agreement.

Definitely one of the most enjoyable days he’d ever had.
If any of you are wondering my Yazoo’s voice is based on the original Japanese seiyū, Yūji Kishi whose voice is quite deep and masculine. I’ve always liked the idea that Yazoo is physically the most feminine but his voice just… isn’t. Sorry if it throws you off.

Vincent didn’t like carrying around the box so he presented it as soon as they arrived back at the house and the party was assembled at the kitchen table. He didn’t want to wait even though the atmosphere in the house had been somehow content and happy, and Vincent knew that whatever was in the case would end the light-heartedness. Even the boy, Yazoo, seemed less flighty and nervous.

“You found this where?” Sephiroth asked, moving his head to peer more closely at the simple, yet sophisticated, box. Vincent went through the sequence again.

“This is kinda like Cloud’s sword,” Zack said when he’d finished.

“Freaky as all get out?” the blond suggested in a carefully careless tone, as if the hair on his nape wasn’t standing straight up.

“Yeah, that too,” his friend responded with a grin.

“It makes sense,” Tifa said, also peering at the box, also not touching it, “Cloud did say that Gaia was helping us. And then Sephiroth managed to get the Lifestream on our side. Cosmic forces lining up to do battle.” She grinned at the overblown phrase but Yazoo’s eyes were huge until he remembered he was supposed to be unimpressed by all this, so then he flicked his hair and assumed a casual pose leaning gracefully against the wall, a pace away from the others.

“Those structures were carved millennia ago. It’s difficult to believe that the planet knew we’d be here in a thousand years fighting for it’s survival, or that the Lifestream would know we’d be on the same side.” Tseng said in a flat tone.

“And that’s harder than believing the Ancients hid everything just for us to find?” Zack tossed back.

“You forget, Zack. I know Aerith as well,” and that shut the SOLDIER up because there was no doubt that, even being only a quarter Cetra, his girlfriend had a few oddities other people just didn’t have.

“Maybe the planet threw it together at the same time I emerged. Kinda like it did for Tsurugi,” Cloud added his own thoughts. “It’s only been a couple days since the General persuaded the Lifestream to fight with us.”

Sephiroth’s soothing baritone cut through the chatter. “Before you get too distracted by discussing theories that don’t change what is, perhaps Vincent should open the case. If there’s dust or random treasure, we’ll know there was nothing significant in the hiding place... or the buzzing Vincent said
Chaos heard.” The General ignored Cloud’s inquiring look. He didn’t believe what he’d just said was likely either. It was meant to get the group’s focus back onto what was important: finding out what was in the case.

Everybody looked at the ex-Turk waiting for him to open it; after all, he’d found it.

Vincent hid his face behind his collar, uncomfortable as always, with being the centre of attention, but he dutifully reached out, unhooked the clasp, and lifted the lid. Just about everybody’s neck stretched as they tried to peer into the box. There was dust—lots of it—but the treasure wasn’t random. He knew because the buzzing was back. He reached in with his brass covered hand and pulled out the first item. He didn’t even get the chance to blow the dust off before Commander Fair was reaching out for it.

“Are those snowflakes? Fucking sweet.” It felt right when the SOLDIER touched the necklace so Vincent handed it over. “Look at the workmanship in that, so intricate. I’ve always thought snowflakes were beautiful.” He twirled the delicate shape around on the chain.

“Spoken like someone who didn’t grow up shovelling tonnes of the stuff,” Cloud muttered. Tifa covered her laugh with her hand. As the mayor’s daughter, she’d never had to shovel snow but she’d certainly watched others doing it. Being a spoiled princess had sometimes had its perks.

“A gift to Shiva’s chosen one,” Vincent heard himself say and Zack froze. Everyone did. The necklace spun gently, ice-blue jewels flashing through the dust.

“Ah shit,” Zack muttered, but he blew the piece clean and put the chain around his neck, tucking it under his top. It got worse. As soon as the pendant touched the skin over his heart, it was it dissolved, becoming part of him. He rubbed the spot it had sunk into and couldn’t feel anything. He lifted his shirt, showing off his light Gongagan tan... and the flurry of snowflakes that had once been scars. The SOLDIER touched them, running his hand over them. “Fuck,” he cursed without heat, “I hate mystical shit.”

Cloud leaned closer, “Each one is unique. Just like real snowflakes.” His comment was breathed over the First’s newly decorated skin. It wasn’t deliberate—he was just that close—but it made the SOLDIER shiver. Soft blue eyes flicked up to bright blue. Nobody saw the teasing smile Cloud gave Zack and nobody saw the deliberately soft puff of air that caused muscles to tremble and nipples to harden. The First quickly pulled his top back down and resisted the impulse to stick out his tongue as his friend smiled in evil triumph.

Sephiroth, while not unaware of their flirting, ignored it. He was once again pinching the bridge of his nose. The General was growing more and more inclined to agree with his Second-in-Command on the subject of mysticism and metaphors. Snowflakes... his Second-in-Command had pretty little snowflakes all over his torso.

Vincent, oblivious to everything but the compulsion to empty the box, had already pulled out another piece. A thick gold serpent, inset with bright stones, looping around and swallowing its tail, formed a heavy ring. He held it out to Tseng, “Leviathan.”

In one of the few signs of nerves Sephiroth had ever seen the dark-eyed Turk betray, dark-eyes widened in shock and his hands clasped convulsively in his lap. Tseng had been out of his native land for many decades. Scorned by his countrymen even before he joined the company that had enslaved them, he had never shown any devotion to the beliefs of his ancestors. Looking at him now, it was obvious the man found it hard to believe that his childhood god would want him as its Chosen. ‘Of course,’ Zack thought snarkily, ‘it didn’t have much choice.’ Tseng held out his trembling hand and allowed Vincent to drop the ring on his palm. His mouth opened in wonder as
the shiny circlet made contact. The ring was too small for his finger he chose... until it rippled and
coughed out more body length from its mouth.

“That’s—” Cloud started but really had no words for it. “—incredibly disturbing,” Tifa finished.
Sephiroth merely moved his fingers to his temple and tried to rub out the pain starting there.

The next item out of the box was a bag made out of brown cloth with simple embroidery in similar
dark tones. Tifa, intrigued by the needlework, put out a hand to tilt it closer so she could see it
nodded as if it was all making sense now. As if the gods always put aside gifts to be found a
thousand years later. Or maybe it was because Tifa and the Earth god were a perfect match both of
them seeming to be solid and immutable.

Tifa opened it and poured the contents out in her palm. It was full of carved and polished stone
beads; big and all coloured like different grades of dirt. They could all feel the weight of them. She
smiled and soft brown eyes gleamed. Tifa pulled up one foot and started untangling her boot so she
could thread the big, dark stones onto her laces; keeping them close to the earth they represented.


Sure enough, the gunman pulled out an earring, just one. It was a curving, flowing orange-red
phoenix emerging from the flames—Ifrit’s avatar on earth. He didn’t know how he knew it was an
earring, there were no posts, but he knew it was meant to run down the side and not just dangle
underneath Sephiroth lifted it to eye level and the stone-eyes flashed, reflecting fire off his pale
skin. He put the jewellery next to his ear and was barely surprised when it moulded itself to it. His
lips turned up in a small, fierce smile that had both Cloud and Zack shifting in their chairs as their
bodies’ predictable reaction to Sephiroth’s emotions made their pants a little too tight.

Vincent reached in to grab the next one. “Yazoo, chosen of Ramuh.”

The clone jumped, practically squeaking in surprise. One delicate hand lifted to his throat. “Me?”
He’d moved away from the table, feeling out of place and unwanted. He looked around the
members of ShinRa’s attack squad, eyes wide and frightened; scared that one of them would jump
up and yell ‘Imposter!’ at him. It didn’t happen.

“Ramuh, the ultimate survivor. I think it fits,” Zack said and leaned forward to try and see what
shape Ramuh’s gift would take. Yazoo swallowed, slow and loud, and stepped forward to take the
jewellery from the ex-Turk’s hand. Interlocking lightning bolts formed, not a bracelet, but a wrist
cuff, that sank right through his thick leather sleeve.

Sephiroth’s eyebrow went up. Tifa and Cloud’s eyes got wide, while Vincent and Tseng’s
narrowed. “Something you want to tell us about your clothes, there, Yazoo?” Zack said dryly.

“Um,” slim fingers stroked the leather. “No?” He looked up, “I don’t understand it. It just
happens.”

“That could be very useful,” Tifa said, still peering at the material. “Can you imagine the potential
if you could make it harder, like armour, or change the colour or anything?” Yazoo tipped his head
forward, using his long hair to hide his surprise at her prosaic response. She pressed him about it
and he was forced to admit that he’d never tried. Tifa’s face fell and he found himself promising to
give it try, maybe tomorrow, if he had a chance.

Vincent ignored that exchange as well. He could still feel the buzzing and, although it wasn’t as
strong as it had been up on the cliff, it was still starting to annoy him. Chaos was already past
annoyed and was into bitchy. The gunman grabbed the next piece, a large circular item and pulled it out. He glanced at it and thought ‘there’s more’ so he put his other hand in and searched for the second piece.

“That’s Freki, meaning ravenous,” Cloud said, pointing at the big brooch. “He was one of Odin’s wolves.” Vincent held up the smaller one for the blond to identify. “That’s Geri, greed. He also served Odin.” Silently, the gunman held out his hands so the blond mountain boy could accept his gift. Cloud looked up from the faces that were neither wolf nor lion but some odd mixture of the two. “What am I supposed to do with them,” he asked. “This one’s too big for an earring.”

Sephiroth lifted his face from his hand where he’d dropped it in resignation. “Don’t worry, Cloud, I have a good idea.” He rubbed his temple. Cloud looked at him in worry. “I think I’ve had enough of this mystical shit as well. Zack you have my whole-hearted sympathies,” he muttered and the blond shrugged because he still didn’t understand it but he thought it would be okay.

“What did you get?” Tifa asked Vincent, tying off her second boot.

Vincent reached in one last time and pulled out a... charm? It had a chain and it looked like a misshapen cross except it was too fluid and had too many parts to be a cross.

*A pet!* Chaos called.

“Cerberus,” Sephiroth said, “Under the guidance of the Goddess, he guards the gates of the underworld, using his three heads to monitor souls as they pass through the three stages of growth: birth, life and death. I think you have been chosen as Gaia’s champion.”

“And that looks like an old fashioned gun-charm,” Tseng added, “From when guns were fired using black powder and didn’t work more than half the time.”

“So, that’s all the major gods and celestial bodies represented,” Zack said, slapping his hands on the table. He didn’t know about the others but he could feel his gift all through him, making him feel renewed and balanced somehow. Even though he knew he should be creeped out, it actually felt kinda nice.

“Except Bahamut,” Cloud said.

“Bahamut’s evil,” Tifa pointed out.

“Only because he was here first and the other gods had to get rid of him before they could move in.” Cloud argued.

“Y’know, Spike, I don’t think the Chosen of Odin should be defending the guy his god defeated in mythology’s biggest battle.” Zack rocked back on his chair. Cloud blushed and ducked his head.

“It’s been argued that Bahamut represents all that is wild and untamed on the earth and that’s why he has so many different forms, and why the gods had to defeat him again and again,” Sephiroth said, “Nature is never really tamed, after all.”

“Fuck, Seph. You sound like Cloud at his most dorky,” Zack teased with a smile.

The General lifted his brow. “Then he’s been a good influence on me,” and made Cloud turn even more red.

Tseng ignored the flirting and all the other extraneous bits to focus on one thing; “Why did the clone get an item?” His voice was its usual distant tone but it sounded harsher because of what he
was saying. Yazoo flinched back, away from the table. He lifted his chin defiantly but had no chance to respond because Cloud beat him to it.

“He’s got a name, you know.” The soldier’s voice was hot, practically vibrating with emotion. His face was still flushed but now it was from anger. ‘You call him ‘clone’ as if he isn’t a person, as if he’s just an experiment, a nameless, worthless, thing. A spesh-spec’men.” His breath hitched, his shoulder twitched, he hunched into himself. “*Not* a thing. He’s not.” Without shifting, the dark-haired SOLDIER moved closer to his friend in support. Zack didn’t know what memory had caught the blond up but he knew one had.

“Cloud,” the General said softly, “Cloud, caro mio.” He rubbed his lover’s back soothingly. They watched as the soldier pulled himself back from some brink, rebuilt himself as ‘Corporal Strife’. One last shaky breath, “He’s a person. His name is Yazoo. Use it.”

“It’s the sample label that I was grown from,” Yazoo said, his low voice breathless and uncertain. He was staring at Cloud in wonder. He’d always suspected that they—he and Kadaj and Loz—had been just like real people but nobody ever said so. The lab people had always, *always*, called them specimens. “Sample YZO-0. It’s not a name.”

“But you don’t say it that way; as separate letters,” Sephiroth pointed out.

The teen turned his head to the side and dipped it so that his hair hid him from view. “It was easier to say, that’s all.” He’d stopped hoping that it was true that they were real people. Now, despite what the blond warrior had said, Yazoo couldn’t believe it when it was finally given to him.

“Snazzier too,” Zack said. “No wonder you like it better than YZO.”

“You chose Yazoo,” Cloud added, “That makes it your name”

“This is all irrelevant to the fact that Yazoo was designed and grown to serve Hojo—”

“Actually, that was ancillary to his loyalty to Jenova,” Sephiroth interrupted.

“Fine,” Tseng accepted after a short, annoyed pause, “But his loyalty is still to the enemy.”

Zack was tipping back on his chair again, arms tucked over his chest. “Maybe not.”

Dark, hidden eyes swivelled toward him but it was Yazoo who answered “Mother is dead,” he stated, swaying like a willow, looking at no one. He jumped when Tifa rubbed his arm in sympathy.

The Turk looked around the group. The only ones to whom that didn’t explain anything were the three non-enhanced members: himself, Tifa and Vincent. And from the looks of the other two, he was the only one who cared. “How does that make a difference?”

“Jenova was the only one who could project her will onto the people carrying her mutation.”

“That we know of,” Tifa qualified.

Sephiroth nodded acceptance of the qualifier then continued, “With her destroyed, there is likely no one strong enough to call us and force us to obey.” Sephiroth explained calmly. He still had one hand touching Cloud, reassuring them both. “Jenova was the main reason Yazoo, and the other clones, obeyed Hojo. By himself, the Professor isn’t the type to inspire loyalty—*Yazoo* and Cloud shuddered, “—so it is now up to Yazoo to decide who, if anyone, he is going to follow.”
“The numbered ones will listen to him,” Yazoo said softly, his low voice still tight with tension, “They have to be told exactly what to do, but they’ll do anything. They’re not very smart.” The youth wrapped himself up tighter in his arms. One hand lifted to his throat in a protective gesture that made him look oddly vulnerable.

Tseng ignored the image the teen projected; he was a dangerous and unsecured element, therefore he was a threat. He spoke to the General. “So now, because of the Jenova cells, you think that makes you brothers;” even without his own history, as a Turk, Tseng didn’t think much of family ties, “that his loyalty will automatically flip to you?”

“I’m more like a half-brother,” Cloud stated, deliberately misinterpreting the Turks singular ‘you’, meaning Sephiroth, to a plural ‘you’, meaning anyone in the room carrying Jenova’s virus.

Zack picked up on it immediately. “I’d be a cousin,” the dark-haired First quipped.

“Yeah,” Cloud muttered, “the one your parents don’t like you hanging out with because he’s always getting you into trouble.”

“Hey,” Zack protested but he was smiling in rueful agreement.

“By that reckoning, Vincent is your uncle,” Sephiroth pointed out to his dark-haired friend, his eyes low-lidded with his sly humour.

Tifa, who’d been trying to change her laughter into coughing, finally gave up and whooped. “Does that mean, if we get together,” she forced out between snickers, “that I’ll be kinda-sorta your aunt and I’ll be able to boss you around?”

Sephiroth blinked and frowned, not understanding the reference. It didn’t help that Zack was now folded over in laughter. Cloud leaned over to explain family dynamics and ranks of authority to his confused lover. Yazoo’s baffled look was a mirror to the General’s. Vincent, with a sigh of resignation because Tifa had obviously adopted him, moved to the teen to explain it as well. Not that his aunt had ever lectured him on the correct way to behave. All she had ever done was sniff disapprovingly, actual instruction had been left to the nurse and then a series of tutors.

*You know, my host, my own, this is the most you’ve thought of your family in all the years I’ve been stuck inside you.* For once, Chaos didn’t sound mocking. *I begin to see why you allowed yourself to be sucked in by that female.*

Vincent didn’t even bother protesting the demon’s characterization of Lucrecia for he could see what Chaos was seeing. Vincent had gone from his ultra-reserved family into the Turks. Even then, at the beginning, Turks weren’t known for being a warm and welcoming bunch. Lucrecia... Lucrecia had been the first openly friendly person he’d ever been close to for more than the day or two it usually took him to do a job. She’d been alive in a way he’d never experienced before. Like Tifa.

Without conscious thought, his eyes settled on the small fighter. Her eyes were bright with joy. To him, she gleamed and suddenly Lucrecia’s warmth seemed a candle next to a bonfire. Hidden behind the high collar of his mantle, the gunman rolled his lips and remembered how she’d tasted...

*Ooo, wonderful, my host!* Chaos’ voice was dry, *At this rate, it’ll only be a few more months before you bed her.* Vincent reined in his wayward thoughts and reminded the demon, and himself, that they were in the middle of a dangerous mission. He needed to focus on his task, not
indulge in licentious daydreams.

Chaos laughed, *No worries, my immortalis. You concentrate on killing things. I’ll provide the ‘licentious daydreams’... and the erotic nightdreams, too.* Vincent didn’t allow himself to whimper. While he’d been caught up in his conversation with his inner ‘guest’, the others had finally gotten themselves back under control. Tseng, who’d never lost his, was sitting with his arms crossed over his chest. It was the only sign of agitation in the dark-eyed Turk.

“So that’s it?” he said calmly, “You declare him as part of your extended family and that makes him a good guy?”

“Well there’s the Jenova cells—” Cloud started but his quiet voice was easily overridden by Zack’s more boisterous one.

“Pretty much,” Zack also tucked his hands under his arms, mirroring Tseng’s closed off posture, but he kept a small smile on his face.

“And if you’re wrong and he is still loyal to Hojo and Deepground?”

The SOLDIER’s smile deepened but, Vincent noticed, his blue eyes turned cold, “Well, Tseng, at that point I’ll kill him. Just like I’ll kill anyone who threatens the well-being of my friends. Understood?” The smile stayed on his face, his eyes remained fixed on the Turk’s.

Zack Fair had changed in the three years he’d been left in the lab. He could look steadily at the unflappable Wutaian and not back down. After all, what was the worst thing Tseng could do to him, kill him? He’d already experienced far worse than dying. However, it was a display of dominance that was unexpected from the normally casual swordsman. Everybody watching wondered; would the Turk back down or bark? They stilled. There wasn’t even a bird singing… and Tseng blinked.

“I understand perfectly, Commander.”

“Excellent,” Zack’s smile lightened and his eyes cleared. He let his chair drop with a thump. “So, now that we’ve all got our super-secret decoder rings, what’re we going to name the club?” he asked happily.

It turned out that re-distributing the materia took precedence over choosing a team name.

For one thing, Sephiroth was curious if their new ‘gifts’ would enhance the performance of materia that matched their patron gods. (He’d winced, even as he’d said it but even he couldn’t deny the meddling of celestial beings.) They put all the materia they had, whether mounted on armour or weapons, or stored in their packs, in the middle of the table and then took turns waving their hands over the little orbs to see which ones reacted the strongest to them.

Red Kjata practically jumped off the table when Cloud’s hand passed over it and the blond soldier happily reclaimed the Summon. Sephiroth’s Octaslash also flashed when the Corporal’s hand was near which caused one shapely eyebrow to rise in bemusement. The General had worn the orb for so long it was almost a part of him although he no longer needed the materia to perform the attack. A small part of him admitted he was pleased that the mastered materia had chosen to go to his lover.

Gravity and Quake both flared for Tifa, unsurprising as she was the champion of the Earth god. What did surprise them was that Comet didn’t abandon ice-kissed Zack for the unarmed fighter. The green ball of earth magic practically levitated to the dark-haired First’s hand, hissing and
flaring as if annoyed at being abandoned.

The General waved his hand over the collection, not expecting anything as he didn’t need materia to cast the element that was his patron god’s. Unfortunately, his innate affinity had been enhanced by Ifrit’s gift. All of the fire-based materia gathered under his hand as if he were a magnet and they were iron filings. One of them, a slightly different colour from the rest, crackled and pulsed, changing colour as they watched. He reached in to pick it up and it accidentally touched Tifa’s Ice which turned dark and jumped… right into Zack’s lap where it glowed dimly in contentment.

Only a couple other orbs showed any specific affinity for anyone else. Iron Fist went back to Tifa, and Haste returned to Vincent. A Steal materia, produced by a blushing Tifa—good girl gone bad indeed—flared for Tseng, causing both Zack and Vincent to snort softly and mutter ‘Turks’ as if that explained the orb’s choice. After that it was a matter of talent and strength and logistics as they split the remaining materia between them, trying to balance attack augmentations and support skills.

They only gave Yazoo a couple simple materia: a barely-levelled Bolt, since he was Ramuh’s chosen, and a Cure. There were several reasons for this. As a laboratory experiment, he’d never trained in or used materia, (they had probably been afraid he’d use it on them) and, in untrained hands, the orbs’ power was either useless or suicidal. It also made Tseng feel a little better about their former enemy having any materia at all, though that was a minor consideration at best. Mostly they didn’t give him anymore because seeing the orbs sink through his coat and into his arm had been extremely disturbing to watch. Even Yazoo didn’t like the feel of it.

Once the materia was sorted, Vincent, under Tifa’s urging, looked for a gun for the slim youth in his pack. Instead he found the pretty bag he’d run across in the ruins. He hesitated before opening it but, to everyone’s relief, it merely contained a plain pink ribbon. He gave it to Tifa who carefully tied her hair back with it and made Zack catch his breath at the resemblance to his Aerith.

While that little drama was playing out, Sephiroth had Cloud put on his new harness. They watched without surprise as the wolf-cat brooch, Freki, attached itself to Cloud’s left pauldron. The only reaction was Sephiroth’s resigned sigh and murmured, “If only I could find you the shirt.” Pale fingers tugged at the standard sleeveless uniform top in confusion. It seemed perfectly fine to Cloud...

Vincent also found a sleek long-barrelled pistol with intricate carvings and smooth colouring that the clerk had said reminded him of velvet. When Yazoo held it in his hand, a look of wonder and rightness settled on his delicate features. “Does it pull?” he asked the ex-Turk.

“I haven’t tried it. I saw it on the racks in the camp’s armory and brought it on impulse,” Vincent replied evenly, “I have ammunition for it if you wish to test it out.”

Of course, he did. Every decent shooter knew that you had to take out a new gun and work with it, getting used to its balance and aim, the action of it and its draw. Vincent pulled out a box of ammo, ignored a teasing comment from Zack about bullet materialization, and prepared to head down to the village with his… with the boy. Tseng, in the interests of assessing Yazoo’s skills with the new weapon and materia, decided to accompany them. His stated reason was to test out his rusty materia skills but nobody quite believed him. Tifa went to keep an eye on Tseng and to give Yazoo her support. Within moments, the three SOLDIERs were alone in the house. It didn’t take long for the faint echo of gunfire to reach them from the valley floor.

They waved an absent acknowledgement when the others left the house but, as swordsmen, their first concern was the fit of the harness. Both the General and Zack watched carefully as the blond shifted and turned, bent and stretched, looking for anything that dangled or pinched. Then they
When they finished with their measurements, Sephiroth sat at the table, making the necessary adjustments, and told them the story of how Cloud’s different parts had merged back into one. He had to explain about Caro first, which he did, tight-lipped but unflinchingly. When Zack heard the description of the final aspect his fists tightened so much Cloud swore he could hear the man’s bones creaking. The story of the photo and their merging, the end of all of them, made the First give a noise suspiciously like a sniff. The General’s description of the united Cloud’s outfit made his face light up in understanding, and he exchanged commiserations with his CO on being inflicted with mysticism even as he wondered if they could find something to drape over Cloud’s left leg, "Because it would look totally hot; you know it would."

While Seph worked on Cloud’s sword harness, Zack co-opted the blond to help him prepare the rabbits they’d caught for supper. The two Firsts kept talking about it, about the pieces of Cloud’s... mind. He couldn’t remember it, not really. He didn’t remember being split into six different versions of himself and it was unsettling to hear about Caro’s injuries, Niisan’s strutting sexuality and Weirdo’s backpack. Even hearing about cute little Raincloud made him uncomfortable. He could see that they were all aspects of who he was but, still… What he did remember, a little, although it was more a sense memory than a true one, was ravishing the General in a huge bed in a version of his childhood home.

He’d thought it had been a dream, which it still was kind of, but from the way Sephiroth and Zack were discussing his house and everything, he had a pretty good idea that his sexy fantasy had taken place… on some other plane of existence and that was too fucking confusing so he was just going to ignore the whole idea. Except that his almost-memories of pouncing on the General were combining with real-memories of pouncing on the General, which led to memories of what it had felt like to have Zack inside him, and that led to the question of ‘what the Hells was going on with him?’

He was jerked out of his reverie by Zack bumping him on the shoulder. “I’m going to go start the fire. When you’re done the potato-like things, chunk the onions for me?” Cloud nodded, keeping his eyes down. Zack poked him again then dipped his head so he could look into Cloud’s eyes. “I’m glad you’re back, Spike. I’m glad you made it out in one piece.”

Cloud blushed a little, embarrassed at where his memories were taking him, but he managed to smile and nod his head. He didn’t try to say anything because what he wanted, more than anything, was to latch on to that full, wide mouth and kiss the breath out of his best friend. Then he wanted to explore all those pretty snowflakes; find out if each one really was unique... with his tongue by preference. He peeked at the First as he went outside to his fire pit. The uniform pants were loose but they still managed to mould to and accentuate Zack’s firm backside. In fact, the whole uniform just looked good on him.

He slapped a hand to his head.

They were on a dangerous, planet-threatening mission, going to face down the man who would feature in all his future nightmares and he was trying to guess how long Yazoo and the rest would be down in the village so he could decide if he had enough time to jump on one of his lovers and ravish them. Or both. Both would be even better if he could manage it.

“Are you all right, Cloud?” the General asked.

“Yes, Sir. Just joining in the Mystics Anonymous pity party.” He hoped that the genetically-modified warrior wouldn’t notice his flushed cheeks or the bulge in his pants which would totally
reveal that he was lying.

Sephiroth, as always very aware of Cloud’s physical state, didn’t ignore it this time. “You do realize, Cloud, that you are still adjusting to your altered status as a SOLDIER?” he said as an opener.

“Umm,” Cloud responded unhelpfully.

“Your body’s reactions are still more exaggerated than normal. You are more sensitive to stimuli and your responses are more easily aroused.” The blond frowned, wondering where the General was going with this. “Then there is the fact that you’ve just recently come back from the dead from a place most likely filled with the Lifestream. I’m sure your body wants to celebrate the fact that it is here, in the physical world.” He paused then added, “I don’t blame it.”

Cloud shifted his weight from side to side, embarrassed but unable to deny the truth. “So you’re saying it’s okay that I’m horny.”

The General reached down and placed a firm hand over his crotch, “Your timing could be better but that’s my only complaint.” Even that gentle grip had Cloud swallowing and gasping. He looked up into his lover’s sleepy, sexy eyes, glowing with the strength of his emotions. Sephiroth murmured, “I thought I’d lost you again,” and then he bent his head and covered Cloud’s firm, pretty mouth with his own. It was a gentle kiss, a tasting, a savouring of flavours dimmed but never forgotten. As a symbol of how much he was cherished it was wonderful. As a means to put out the fire in his blood, it sucked.

Cloud pulled away, breath coming in short pants. “You’re the one who snuck out in the middle of the night to die, Sir.” He gave his General a hard look, “Don’t ever do that again.” Then he dove back in to that gorgeous, wide mouth. He wrapped strong arms around his lover and pulled himself in tight, surrounding himself in the feel of the man, in his taste, in his scent.

He was alive. Alive people were aroused by the people they loved. It was as simple as that. Happiness bubbled up from inside him like a wellspring. He wasn’t turning into a sex-crazed maniac with no sense of priorities. He was in love with a very special man.

“Oh, whoa, hey...” Zack stumbled as he came back into the room. “I can, y’know, leave again or you could go on upstairs. I’ll pretend I’m deaf and everything.”

Hearing Zack’s voice made Cloud realize that he loved two very special men. He pulled away from his silver-haired warrior but not very far. Sephiroth bent down and touched his forehead to Cloud’s. “That won’t be necessary, Commander,” he said, calm despite his quickened breathing. “I have a task to finish and the others may return at any time.” He smoothed his hand down the blond’s strong back before stepping away. He gazed intently into Cloud’s eyes. “However, I’m putting you on notice that if a better opportunity comes up...” He lifted a brow in command.

“I’ll be prepared, Sir,” Cloud promised with a small smile. Then he too stepped away.

He turned to look at Zack. The big First looked apologetic and uncomfortable. That wouldn’t do. Cloud walked over to him, grabbed his face in two hands, and pulled it down for a long, gentle kiss. It was like the one the General had given him; a claiming, a refresher, a hope for the future. Large hands fluttered a bit before coming to rest on his hips. Zack didn’t pull him in but he didn’t push him away either.

The distant gunfire ceased. Slowly, reluctantly, Cloud pulled away from the dark-haired SOLDIER. He looked up into those bright blue eyes, so kind and friendly. Always warm with
concern for him. “I’m glad you made it out too. My world would be a poorer place without you in it.” Then he let Zack go and adjusted his pants matter-of-factly, putting aside his sexual needs for more immediate necessities. At least for now.

Sephiroth, eyes glowing slightly brighter, growled “I’m putting both of you on notice. The first opportunity...”

Zack, feeling breathless and not a little stunned by Cloud’s boldness, could only nod. Cloud, back at the table cutting vegetables, looked up happily and said, “Understood, Sir.”

The rest of the evening passed without incident. Food was served and eaten; plans were discussed and decided upon. Sephiroth herded them all outside for some more hand-to-hand training although this time he chose to spar against Vincent and Yazoo. It was fun and burned off some of his tension but, he decided, it was no substitute for what he really wanted to do. He risked a quick glance over at Cloud and Zack. Cloud was adjusting the SOLDIER’s stance, kicking his legs into position. There was a bubble of happiness around the blond warrior unlike anything the General had ever seen, as if something had settled into place within him. He practically glowed with it. Zack was he always was, as he’d been ten years ago when he’d first applied for the SOLDIER program although his bounce was tempered with steel now. He was an adult male rather than a young man.

He caught a flash of movement coming toward him and returned his mind to the fight.

Maybe tomorrow they’d find the time to be private.
The next morning, they were on the trail before the sun cleared the edge of the canyon. They turned east at the crossroads following Vincent’s low voiced instruction. The ex-Turk had explored most of the valley when he’d been avoiding them after the fight in the underground city and he had already figured out how to get out of the valley. When they came to the cliff face they had two routes to the top to choose from.

The one through the cave gave them access to the west side of the continent which was warmer and more populated because it was sprinkled with ski and hot spring resorts. If they went west it would be easier travelling and they would probably have better access to supplies. The other path, which clung to the side of the cliff where it hadn’t completely fallen down, led to the mostly frozen east side, colder, barer, tougher.

Of course, they were going to the less civilized east. Less civilization meant less reason for DGS to be prowling around.

Looking up at the path, Sephiroth, Cloud and Zack snapped out their wings in order to fly the unaugmented members over the large gaps. At the first appearance of Sephiroth’s wings Yazoo’s eyes went large and awestruck. He reached out a tentative hand, “You have wings,” he breathed. For some reason, despite having discussed this, Sephiroth having wings hadn’t been real to Yazoo… until now.

“All of the SOLDIER Firsts have some kind of mutation as a result of the injections of Jenova cells,” Sephiroth explained. He stood calmly as his genetic brother ran his hands over the strong feathers.

“We don’t-didn’t have wings,” Yazoo said, meaning himself and his two brothers, “None of the clones do.”

“Perhaps Hojo changed the formula,” Cloud suggested. “He didn’t like it when Sephiroth and Zack were so resistant to her in Nibelheim.”

Zack backed him up, “I remember. He used to rant about it a lot.”

Cloud nodded. “If he’d made changes to the mix, the mutation thing might have been lost.”

“Are we going to climb out or make camp right here,” Tseng asked. His voice was the same uninflected one he always used but the words were, once again, harsh and condemning. The young man withdrew his hand and curled it up next to his chest as if to protect his heart but his eyes remained on the General’s wings, one white, one black. He looked so wistful that it made Zack’s breath catch.

“C’mon, Sprite,” he said stepping up to sylph-like clone, “Let’s go flying.” He opened his arms and gave his trademark grin and Yazoo’s face lit up with anticipation. Sure enough, once Zack had the fighter secured they took off, straight up, shortcutting over the dozens of narrow, life-threatening switchbacks. To make it even more fun he twirled and looped and dipped almost faster than the eye could see. For the first time, they got to hear Yazoo’s laughter, a low gurgling sound like a large stream falling over a series of rocks, tumbling and carefree. The ones left behind watched them manoeuvre through the sky. Tifa’s eyes were lit. “Oh wow,” she murmured.
Cloud, standing beside her, swallowed. “We can do that. My control’s good enough now. If you want to,” he offered.

“If I want to?” she turned to him, “You bet I want to. But if you drop me, my boyfriend will eat you.” Involuntarily, Cloud looked at Vincent who tucked his face away behind his collar.

“I won’t, y’know, drop her,” he promised. Vincent merely growled and Cloud pretended not to see the bright colour staining the ex-Turk’s cheeks.

Tifa latched on to his front with arms around his neck and legs around his waist and he couldn’t help but think of the boy he’d been seven years ago. When he’d been fourteen, having Tifa cling to him like this would’ve fulfilled a lifetime’s worth of dreams, and provided him with decade’s worth of fantasy material as well. Now, all he thought of was making sure her balance was right and her grip tight enough, but not too tight. Then he jumped up and pumped his large wings, quickly gaining altitude. He spun in a barrel roll as they rose then arced over into a loop. His acrobatics weren’t as fast or sharp as Zack’s but the ride was smoother.

Considering that his childhood friend had buried her head in his chest and was, once again, chanting ‘Ohmygodsohmygodsohmygods’ he thought that was probably a good thing.

Back on the ground, Vincent gave another low growl and cast Haste on himself. He leapt up the trail so fast all they saw was the blur of red from his cloak. He jumped over chasms if it they were of no more bother than a crack in a sidewalk. Sephiroth looked down at his companion. “To walk up the path and jump over each gap individually would, at this point, seem the height of conceit and inefficiency, don’t you think?”

“Agreed. The aerobatics are not required,” the Turk replied and then they, too, were flying, skimming through the air no more than an arm’s length from the side of the cliff. They beat Vincent but only by moments. Cloud and Tifa were next, landing with a ‘plop’ next to the forest. Zack swooped down over top of them, so close they could’ve put a hand out and touched them, before he pulled them upright, stopped, hovered for a moment, and then landed with a final flourishing pirouette.

When Yazoo unwrapped himself from the big First, he actually bounced on his toes. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were bright. For the first time, he looked like the teenager he had been grown to resemble. It was Tifa and Cloud that he decided to share his adventure with, although he did smile softly at the other augmented warriors—his genetic ‘brothers’—before settling into the march beside her. Even with his excitement, the clone’s voice was deep and melodic, almost soothing in the flow of it. It blended in very well with the natural sounds generated by the forest and the breeze.

Aside from Yazoo’s happy burbling, it was a quiet group that moved into the dimness. They walked through a forest that wasn’t made of trees but of bushes. Most of them were taller than Zack and they clumped together impassibly. That meant the group had to spend a lot of time walking around them. Not normally a problem, but this late in the spring the ground wasn’t frozen. Instead of hard dirt, they walked over mushy and gooey mud that clung to their boots, or tripped over roots and high grass clumps, or they slid on loose gravel that appeared unexpectedly.

It became less of a march and more of a dance.

It wasn’t so big a deal with the altered fighters. Their enhancements allowed them to practically
skim over the hazards. Tifa was light enough on her feet, and her backcountry childhood was near enough, that she could keep herself bouncing over them but she was risking a sprained ankle or worse. Tseng tried but most of his work took place in cities and buildings. He’d spent years walking—and sneaking—over man-made surfaces. Just like the Modeoheim mission, it didn’t take long for the Turk to be trailing even farther back than the fighter, unable to find his stride in the difficult terrain.

Cloud, in front with Sephiroth, turned back to look at the others. “Should we help?” he asked.

Sephiroth paused and stood at attention, as trying to sense what dangers awaited them. “I would like to reach the foothills today. These woods are too thick and there are too many places for danger to hide.” He looked up at Meteor, still small in the sky, but considerably larger than it had been. They had been seven days in the valley of the Ancients. If the rate of approach remained constant they had twenty days, maybe twenty-five, before Meteor blotted out the sky and destroyed the planet.

“Up and over?” Zack asked as he and Yazoo drew even with them.

The General shook his head reluctantly. “We can’t use too much of our energy this early in the journey; we don’t have enough food packed to restore it.”

“I dunno, Seph, I don’t feel like I’ve used any energy at all.” Zack bounced a little, “In fact I feel exactly the same as I did this morning,” which was odd considering...

“Same here, Sir,” Cloud corroborated. He rotated his shoulders, still getting used to the odd, low-hanging sword harness he carried. “I’m a little chafed from the straps but not feeling tired at all.”

“Hmm.” The General assessed his own energy levels, knowing from years of experience exactly what he should feel like after a half-day march over similar terrain. He didn’t feel the way he should. In fact, when he examined himself deeper, he could feel a steady charge emanating from the earring he wore. As if the god were using it as a conduit to supply him with the energy he needed to complete his task. More mystical shit, as Zack would say. However, they would be foolish not to take advantage of it. “Very well. Vincent,” he turned to the red-cloaked gunman only to be stopped short by flashing red eyes.

“We are not being carried out like a sack of potatoes,” the gunman’s voice resonated with an immortal presence. The General was sure that Vincent didn’t realize he’d used a plural pronoun to describe himself.

“I was going to ask; if we fly the others out of the bush will you be able to keep up?” Sephiroth’s voice was mild.

“It might take me longer; I won’t be able to run in a straight line,” he answered. If the thought of being left behind bothered him, it was impossible to tell from his voice.

“It would be best if he didn’t travel alone, wouldn’t it?” Cloud asked. “I mean, we don’t know what monsters might be out there.”

Vincent’s growled, ‘I’ll be fine’ was drowned out by Zack’s “He’s right.” The First scratched his head, “No offense to Vinnie-and-all-his-parts, but he’s just one guy.”

“And what if he has to divert really far off course; how would we find us again?” Cloud pointed
out. “I could stay with him then it wouldn’t be a problem.” It was the General’s turn to growl but it was soft, instinctive, and easy to ignore. “I’ll be able to home in on you even if we exit the bush at different points.” One of Vincent’s eyebrows went up in a question so Cloud explained briefly, “It’s the Jenova cells; they like to be close to each other.”

Whatever Vincent had planned to say back was interrupted by Zack. The SOLDIER First had leaned forward and was scowling ferociously at the gunman’s forehead. “Were you born knowing how to do that?”

The gunman jerked back. “I beg your pardon?”

“The thing with your eyebrow,” he wiggled his own in illustration. “Did you train yourself or did you always know how to do it?”

Baffled, Vincent drew back into his collar like a turtle hiding from danger. “I’ve always been able to lift one eyebrow.”

“Shit!” the SOLDIER spat out disgusted, “I’m never gonna figure out how to do that.”

“Umm,” Yazoo said tentatively, “Why don’t you just hold down one eyebrow with your finger. When you lift both it will force them into the positions you want. It will train the muscles despite themselves.”

“That’ll work?” Zack asked intrigued.

“It should,” the silver-haired youth responded, “It’s how they taught me to do this,” and then the boy lifted his left leg straight up and over his head in a standing split. His audience, every single one of them, winced.

“O-kay,” Zack said still squinting in sympathetic pain, “I... guess it’ll work then.”

They went with Cloud’s plan which meant that Yazoo travelled by foot as well since there was no one to carry him. He hid a wistful look at his winged companions by scraping off the mud on his boots on a clump of tough grass. Cloud, standing close beside him, gave him a soft shoulder bump in sympathy.

He wasn’t going to mention it, but the Corporal thought the connection between them, between all of the people infected with the Jenova virus, was getting, not stronger, but clearer, but if they didn’t mention it he certainly wasn’t going to. It wasn’t something they could change, not way out here. Instead, he waited right wrist on left wrist, tidily folded in front of him since he couldn’t get his arms around his complicated harness to do a proper ‘at rest’.

Predictably, the dark-haired First was bubbling with enthusiasm at being able to fly again. Cloud had to admit that the idea of being in the sky was a lot more appealing than slogging it out down here. Cloud hid his smile behind his best NCO-face when, with a sly, sideways look at the ex-Turk, Zack turned to Tifa and spread his arms wide. “Tifa, babe! Come ride me!” His little wing hands beckoned her closer with gestures of delight.

With her own chortling laugh at Vincent’s involuntary growl, she agreed. That left Sephiroth with Tseng once again. A firm grip, a high jump and they were off.
It was a quiet trio left behind to run through the forest but, with sideways glances and smirking half-smiles, the two youngest knew the race was on. They didn’t even wait for Vincent to cast Haste, but just took off running, dodging around impassible thickets or just jumping over them. It was a simple way to rejoice in being alive and healthy and strong.

Up above, Zack was twirling with Tifa, more gently than he had with Yazoo, but more than what Cloud had put her through. Her prayers were constant but Sephiroth decided that the true gauge of how scared the fighter actually was were the rare changes in pitch and volume. He had no fear that the Commander would drop her so he turned his attention to the silent Turk he carried.

“There is a problem between you and my Second-in-Command,” he stated baldly. He knew what tact was, and sometimes practiced it, but decided it wasn’t necessary with Tseng.

Proving the General’s surmise correct, Tseng responded calmly, “He saw me at the Nibelheim laboratory at least once.” The Turk stopped speaking, but the General waited knowing that there must be more. “He guessed that I didn’t report their captivity to anyone at ShinRa.”

Sephiroth didn’t say anything just ran through the scenarios in his mind. Reporting or not reporting—which would’ve been better or safer, or more in keeping with friendship which was likely where the problem arose. Sephiroth knew that the First had considered Tseng, if not a friend, then at least a ‘comrade-in-arms’. They’d survived several nasty missions together and Zack would feel that that should’ve created a bond even knowing the other man was a Turk. He could see how the First would feel betrayed by what Tseng had done, but he could also see that it likely wouldn’t have improved their circumstances. Sephiroth hadn’t spent much time in the company of the previous President or Board, just enough to know that nobility and humanity weren’t concepts they were familiar with.

Well, neither was he really…

He had his loyalties, people he would tear down heaven for and be damned to anyone else. He wasn’t sure many of the old board had felt that way about anyone other than themselves. He couldn’t believe that telling any of them that Rupert Shin-ra’s pet scientist was experimenting on a couple security personnel would’ve inspired any of the Directors to protest. Except, perhaps, Reeve, but nobody had listened to him. So, reporting the truth would have saved no one and, if Sephiroth’s suspicions were correct, the delay had actually served several beneficial purposes.

Still, it was a perfect time to remind Tseng—and through him, Rufus—that Sephiroth was nobody’s tame pet.

“Zack will assume you used the information as a negotiating tool in order to force me to sign the contract with Rufus.”

“But it was a negotiating tool.” Tseng didn’t even blink at the confession.

Sephiroth hummed a disagreement. “There were only a few laboratories Hojo could’ve used for someone of Zack’s strength and abilities. Nibelheim was top of the list.”

Tseng blinked at the General’s lack of outrage. “You needed Rufus’ forces in order to mount a rescue.”

Sephiroth chuckled, a rumble felt more than heard. “I could’ve gotten them out on my own, I didn’t need an army for that; however I couldn’t have examined them, or healed them, or given them a
comfortable place to recover on my own.”

Tseng frowned—that wasn’t how he and Rufus had figured it. “You honestly believe you could’ve walked into a top security lab as easy as walking down the street?” Tseng’s cool voice was tinted with disbelief.

Sephiroth finally glanced down at the Turk, his eyes flashed, “If I had wanted, I could’ve walked straight into the ShinRa Tower and killed Rupert Shin-ra in his gaudy imitation throne, and there would’ve been nothing any of you could’ve done to stop me.” He smiled, eyes slitted, as if he enjoyed the image his words had conjured.

It was altitude, Tseng told himself, altitude and not fear that caused his stomach to clench.

He wished he believed it.

They reached the foothills not long after that. They’d angled their flight to land close to the trio’s likely point of emergence but, a last minute deviation by the group in the forest, meant they would have to go north to meet up. At least the ground here was clear and mostly firm which let Tifa and Tseng move much easier and faster than they had before.

Zack’s wings were drooping. “How long was that?” he asked, stretching out muscles stressed by the unaccustomed movement.

“An hour, or a little more,” the General answered. He too was working out unusual aches.

“Maybe it’s because I’m not used to it, or maybe it’s just damn hard work, but I need to eat something.” The big First was rubbing his stomach as he said it. “Not as much as I should, maybe, but something.”

“Have a nutrient bar,” Sephiroth suggested, eyes straight ahead so his friend wouldn’t see the teasing glint in them. The General knew very well what Zack—and every other SOLDIER he’d ever encountered—felt about the dense snacks. Zack didn’t disappoint.

“Ew, fuck, Seph…” Zack’s face was scrunched up in horror, “Why don’t I just grab one of those bushes and chew on it? It’ll have the same texture but, maybe, it’ll taste better.” The familiar griping was somehow soothing to both of them.

They moved easily through the thinner growth on the exposed flank of the mountains. The wind was stronger and colder, and Sephiroth made a mental note to move closer to the bramble to use it as a wind break when they stopped for the night.

Low, stunted trees grew in protective clumps. The group avoided them as likely homes for predators. Once they came across a pair of huge raptors, sitting on the tallest tree. The pair looked at them hungrily, necks stretching, beaks clacking. Sephiroth was able to make them back away by growling, glaring, and spreading his wings out to their full extension. The display caused Zack to nearly fall over laughing. Tseng was just glad for the short rest stop.

It was only a couple rolling hills later that they met up with the rest of their party. Vincent was seated on the ground, one leg pulled up so that he could rest a gauntleted hand over it. He was watching Cloud and Yazoo practice their hand-to-hand fighting. Although, really, it was Yazoo teaching Cloud some moves and then correcting him when the soldier got them wrong. Cloud still
had that air of being settled and surrounded in his own bubble of contentment. Yazoo was getting there; at least he no longer looked like he would run away if someone said ‘boo’ to him. It was obvious to Sephiroth that running like a deer through the woods had been good for the pair. A ‘bonding experience’ Zack would call it. He could ve been jealous but he decided that anything that would keep him from having to kill his cloned brother was a good thing. Besides, the smile the Corporal gave him when their eyes met was all the reassurance he needed.

“Any difficulties?” he asked.

“None,” Vincent answered.

“Then I’d like to continue. We should be able to cover another thirty to forty kilometres today.” Cloud took his place beside the Silver General while Yazoo fell in beside Tifa and described, in detail, the race through the scrub and how Vincent won easily and Cloud had come in second—but only because he, Yazoo, had misjudged the width of a thicket so had jumped into it rather than over it. The silver-haired youth was sure to keep her between him and Tseng, something the dark-eyed Turk was perfectly aware of.

“I am hardly likely to eat him,” Tseng muttered under his breath.

He had forgotten that Vincent, once again trailing along beside him—more to keep Tifa in sight than to protect the Wutaian—had his own enhancements. “I think he’s more afraid that you’ll send him back to a lab.”

Tseng lifted his chin, embarrassed at having been heard but not going to admit it, “Neither am I going to send him back to Hojo.”

“I don’t think it has to be Hojo’s lab,” Vincent returned. “I’m sure he would equally dislike any laboratory you might send him to.” The gunman turned crimson eyes on the Turk, “I think the same could be said for all of us.”

Tseng chuckled, seemingly unfazed. “First Fair threatens me and now you. You seem to think I’m a danger to you all.”

“Of course,” Vincent confirmed, “You’re a Turk.” Whatever Tseng might have said in response to the odd compliment was lost as shouts erupted from further ahead. Commander Fair’s distinctive war cry was heard and the two gunmen rushed forward to discover that the others had wandered into a Trickplay nesting ground and were under attack.

Normally Trickplays were quite timid but this was the time of the year when the tunnels were filled with newly born kits. All of the adults' protective instincts were in full, aggressive swing. Since the tunnels were communal and could house hundreds of families, there were a lot of animals popping up around the group. On their own or even in groups of three or four, they wouldn’t do much damage. In these amounts, it was a different story.

Zack and Cloud both had their huge swords out, using them to block the stones and the magic being thrown at the members of their group. Of course, that left them vulnerable to other forms of attack, like the mountains that suddenly erupted under their feet, inviting a twisted ankle or a broken leg. Tifa was trying to run in between casts to hit the creatures and take them out that way, but they were too fast. By the time she ran up to one, it had usually dropped down into its hole. Yazoo was shooting, and hitting. His calm precision reminded Vincent of his own gun work: shoot, shoot, shoot, reload; repeat. It was kind of eerie. However, even his uncanny aim was hardly
making a dent in the mass of attackers.

“What is it with this fucking continent and getting fucking jumped by fucking mobs?” Zack shouted in disgust as he took a step forward to swing at one of the Trickplays only to have it drop under the ground, dig itself under his feet and explode in a shower of toxic fumes that made his eyes water and his lungs burn. “And how the fucking shit do these guys move their fucking tunnels?”

“They are creatures of the earth, Zack,” Sephiroth answered. He ordered them to use their materia to clear a path to the north. After all, they didn’t need to kill the creatures, just get away from the nesting area.

Zack coughed once and again, bending over with the force of it. The Trickplays took advantage of his distraction and threw some rocks at him. None of them were large, but they would hurt if they hit. They didn’t.

“Nice dodge, bat-boy,” Cloud said as he hit more stones away from his friends while jumping over another eruption.

Tifa asked, “Can I use Quake, and collapse their tunnels?”

“Unfortunately, no,” the silver-haired SOLDIER responded, “They absorb earth magic.”

“That’s what I figured,” the fighter said with a determined sigh. “Right, I’m on Esuna duty,” and she cast the cleansing magic on the dark-haired SOLDIER. His wing hands waved a thank you at her.

“What about flying out?” Tseng asked, casting barrier to give them somewhat better protection against the flying rocks.

“Not a good idea,” Zack said just before casting a thin wave of ice out in front of them. “They really didn’t like Cloud or Seph’s wings.”

“Probably thought we were birds of prey, looking for dinner,” the blond theorized as he threw out a sputtering line of fire.

“That’s when all their friends showed up,” the SOLDIER finished.

The team was bunched up in a loose circle, making their slow way out of the nesting grounds. Small walls of flame ran over the ground, followed by ice and then by wind as the team cast their attack materia in sequence and it was working. Nobody was getting hurt; not them and not the Trickplays. Until Yazoo’s Bolt misfired.

To be fair they all knew his control was shaky and, for the first couple of casts, they’d all watched carefully in case of an accident, but nothing had happened. In fact, the young clone seemed to be a natural at it. That’s why none of them were expecting the lightning to hit the way it did; especially not who it hit.

Vincent’s mouth opened in a silent scream as blue light crackled over and through him. This was a full blast of electricity at a nearly Mastered level, not the wimpy stuff the boy had been throwing at the Trickplays. Yazoo whispered, “I’m so sorry,” but Vincent no longer cared. Thin black smoke was gathering around him.
“Aw shitfuck,” Zack swore. “C’mon Vinny, hold it together man,” he pleaded even as he stepped up his own materia use. They began to move a little faster.

The smoke grew denser, swallowing the blue sparks still jumping over the gunman’s body and then he flashed. A ball of purplish-light expanded, contracted, and disappeared. Where Vincent had been, now stood the huge, purple beastie from the helicopter crash. The thing looked like a bulked up Guardfang on two legs. It also looked pissed. It roared loud enough to cause landslides on the distant mountains. The sound made a small flock of birds break from the trees in a panicked dash for safety. It certainly worked to scare most the Trickplays back into their holes. Then Vincent’s beast started chucking incandescent balls of lava-like stuff at anything that moved and that got rid of the rest of the small mammals.

Unfortunately, Vincent didn’t discriminate with the lava-ball hucking. He threw the fiery molten goo at his teammates too. At least, he threw it at everyone but Tifa so, while the rest of the team was busy hopping and ducking, and backing away, Tifa moved in closer. She was dwarfed by the size of it-him-whatever, in fact, she barely reached the ribcage yet the fighter placed a small hand on the beast’s spiked arm.

“Galian,” she said firmly, “It’s okay. None of these people want to harm you.” The beast turned its massive face towards her. “It’s okay, you’re safe.” She repeated and the creature-that-had-been-Vincent let the lava balls disperse and lowered its taloned hands.

Zack, looking at the size of the teeth in those jaws leaned over to Cloud and whispered, “Your ex-girlfriend is fucking crazy, you know that?”

“Dr. Imeera said it was the water,” Cloud whispered back. Zack stared at him but the Corporal had on his best NCO-bland face.

“Nibelheim water makes you crazy?” Zack said doubtfully.

“It explains why I like you.” Cloud dodged the First’s half-hearted swipe.

Crazy or not, Zack noticed that Tifa’s voice calmed Galian enough so he, it… whatever, followed along peacefully enough. It was hard to ignore the drooling, grunting and growling but it helped when Yazoo, staring wide-eyed and with his gun half-drawn, said in a shocked voice, “Are you seriously allowing that thing to come with us?” He turned his pretty blue kitty-eyes to Zack and Cloud.

“We’re letting you come,” Cloud said softly. “You’re dangerous and you’ve tried to kill everyone.” He wasn’t accusing but merely stating a fact.

Yazoo’s eyes narrowed but it was in thought not in hurt. He knew Cloud hadn’t said it to be mean. “Aren’t you afraid?”

“Nah. He’s good,” Zack replied, assuming a nonchalant pose, “As long as we don’t try to kiss Tifa.” Galian hissed at him and raised a glowing hand that Tifa pushed back down.

Cloud snorted, “At least he keeps the rodents away.” The Corporal had been watching the ground looking for the tell-tale humps that would reveal Trickplay burrows. The only ones he could see were distant enough to be ignored. Little heads poked out suspiciously, watching them, guarding their tunnels, but coming no closer.
Once out of the nesting grounds and relatively safe, Sephiroth announced that they would be practicing with their materia after supper, rather than hand-to-hand combat, so as to avoid any more unfortunate accidents.

Zack smiled at the silver-haired clone who lifted his chin in outraged pride, looking all the world like an offended kitten. Still, the SOLDIER didn’t want to make the kid feel bad. To distract him, Zack worked on training his eyebrows to lift independently of each other by holding one down with his fingers. He looked silly enough that the clone snickered at him and even Sephiroth’s eyes glinted in amusement.

It was even better when Cloud had them trying to curl his tongue, something the blond had always been able to do. When Tifa displayed the same ability Zack commented dryly, “Is that something else you got from the water?” But the play was enough to calm them all down and allow them to back away from whatever fears and mistrusts the Trickplay encounter had raised in them. Sephiroth exchanged a long look with his SiC and knew that it was exactly what the SOLDIER had planned. Zack was always trying to keep their reactions to each other balanced; it was too bad he couldn’t see the lack of understanding in himself.

The General knew he would have to do something about it and soon. They were too near the end to risk his friend’s blind prejudice getting them killed.
Nightfall came late this far north but the General halted them in plenty of time to set up camp and eat a hot meal. Vincent decided to join them for supper. His transformation into Galian had left the gunman feeling shaky and out of control. The others, having a better understanding of his need to keep control after seeing Hellmasker, helped by picking or digging out any berry, plant or root that held even the slightest chance of being edible and presenting it to Zack for approval. They found enough so that the SOLDIER could expand basic MREs into a decent-sized, but equally unappetizing, hash stew thingy. They chewed with diligence, but not enjoyment.

Once the food was finished and the camping area cleaned up, the General followed through on his earlier threat and had them all out practicing with their new materia. He stood by Yazoo as his young brother shot an inoffensive rock, blasting it into shards with only a couple casts. He couldn’t understand where the power had come from. He even tried closing his eyes to get a better feel of the energies passing through his clone. There was nothing to support the level of power Yazoo’s materia was displaying.

“May I see it,” he finally asked, holding out his hand. Yazoo swallowed and nodded once. He lifted his right arm, placed his left hand over it, and caught the globe as it was pushed out through his skin and his coat.

“Okay, that’s even more disturbing in reverse,” Zack said, wincing away from it.

“Hmm,” Sephiroth said. He took the green orb. It didn’t feel Mastered. He used the Bolt and made a low-powered blast that barely darkened the tough, scrubby grass—which was just as it should’ve been. He held out the globe to the group’s second best magic caster. “Ms. Lockhart, if you would.” So Tifa had a try. She cast with the same low-powered result. “Hmm,” the General repeated before handing the materia back to Yazoo.

“Try holding it in your hand, Yazoo.” Cloud suggested. The youth flipped his hair out of his face with a practiced motion and, lifting the arm to eye height, focussed his mind on the power contained in the living stone.

The blast was weak, not even as strong as Sephiroth’s had been.

“So it’s something about being absorbed into the body that boosted up the power,” Cloud said.

“Makes sense,” Zack said, standing back with his arms crossed, “Materia is just another form of the Lifestream which is, um, made up of...” he tried to remember Dr. Imeera’s lecture, “spirit energy. Which is in all of us, right?” There were nods all around and, without another word, that was the end of it. Even Tseng seemed to accept the mutation. Zack decided that it was because they could consider it a quirk, like the SOLDIER’s wings or Vincent’s other forms. At least that’s what he’d think until it came back to bite them in the ass.

Yazoo let the materia sink back into his body as just about everyone looked the other way feeling squeamish, and went back to practicing his control under Sephiroth and Tifa’s patient guidance until the weak northern sun finally dipped into the horizon. Then everyone except Vincent crawled into the tent, lying close to each other to stay warm, and they all allowed the day to fall away.

Red eyes looked up at the addition to the night sky. It was travelling through Odin, breaking the line of the god’s upraised sword. Soon it would cut Shiva in half. Vincent refused to believe it was an omen but he hoped Sephiroth was right about them having twenty days. He had a hopeless
feeling that they’d need every second.

The moon was as high in the sky as it was going to go. Dawn was already a gleam on the horizon but then, at this time of year and in this location, it never went too far away. Cloud woke up surrounded by the team but alone. He put his hand on the empty spot where Sephiroth should’ve been. ‘Not again.’ He focussed on the connection—Jenova’s connection—that he had with his General. He huffed a silent cry of relief. Sephiroth hadn’t gone far.

Using all the advantages Hojo’s twisted experiments had given him, the blond crawled silently out from under the group blanket and to the entrance of the tent. A quick look at the other occupants showed two sets of glowing blue eyes looking at him; one the deep blue of twilight, and the other the blue-green of a mountain lake. Cloud could almost feel the nudge that ran through the alien cells; a nudge from Zack to Yazoo, telling him to go back to sleep. A moment’s hesitation then the glow disappeared as the silver-haired youth closed his eyes. He got a wink from his friend before those eyes closed too. It was a subtle encouragement but Cloud was grateful for it.

When Cloud stepped out of the tent, he looked around and spotted Vincent, sitting by the remains of the campfire in his favourite pose of one leg up with an arm draped over it. Red eyes turned his way, their glow dim compared to the mako burn of those infected with Jenova’s virus. A solemn nod of acknowledgment and red eyes turned back to watching the play of the stars, as near as Cloud could figure.

He wondered what the ex-Turk saw in them. Did they reveal the ex-Turk’s future, or his past? Cloud knew the man had been an experiment almost longer than he’d been alive; twenty years or more, until Hellmasker had taught even Hojo to be cautious. After that, the torturers had all left him alone to do whatever he’d wanted and, apparently, what he’d wanted was to spend the next ten years hiding from his past and what he’d done—what he’d become. Then they had pulled him and all his parts out of his coffin in Nibelheim. Did he regret it? Did Vincent regret being reborn into a world that had forgotten him, that had moved on without him; that was close to destroying itself? Or was the affection of a certain dark-eyed Nibelheimer enough compensation?

Cloud had been dead. Not as dead as the ex-Turk but nearly, for most of two years. As far as he was concerned, it was worth being alive, here, now, when he knew there was a green-eyed warrior wanting to be with him. Then there was the blue-eyed nutjob with whom he would share the rest of his life in some fashion. He was worth it too.

The soldier put Vincent’s brooding out of his mind, and his heart, and felt his way over the hill to the next rise where Sephiroth gleamed in the moonlight. He wasn’t wearing his coat. “What are you doing out here, Sir?” he asked.

“You know, you can call me Sephiroth now,” the General replied, not answering the question.

Cloud smiled, “I’ll work on that, Sir.” The he sat down next to the Demon of Wutai, sitting on the long coat so he was close enough to touch shoulders. “So, whatcha doing out here, Sir?”

Sephiroth snorted. He held up the Aero materia he’d recovered from the underground city, left in the puddle that had been Kadaj, his clone. “Testing something out.” He placed the orb on his arm pushing it lightly, just enough to create an indent. Cloud could feel him focussing, relaxing, releasing, but the glowing green ball stayed on the outside of the swordsman’s arm. “I felt it going into Yazoo’s body. It wasn’t even an effort yet, no matter what I try, I can’t even come close to doing what he did.” There was a wistful echo in the General’s voice. “You’d think, if he was grown from my cells, that we would share the same abilities.”
Cloud looked up in surprise. “Why would you think that? I mean, you’re the one who told me that all the Firsts display a range of mutations, not just a single one.” Sephiroth hummed non-committedly so Cloud continued, “And we were just talking this morning about Yazoo not having wings and how Hojo probably changed the Jenova formula trying to get the results he wanted. The absorption things could be the mutation they, the clones, received instead of wings.” He leaned over to look up into shining green eyes. “Makes sense, right?”

“Hmm,” the General hummed again.

Cloud smiled in triumph. “I’m totally right. You just don’t want to admit it.”

“I can see that you have been spending far too much time in Zackary’s company,” Sephiroth sighed a complaint but Cloud could see the small curl in those long lips. His breath caught. He knew why he’d followed the General out into the cold, cold night.

“Is this a ‘better opportunity’, Sir?” he asked, feeling his body heat with the thought of those lips on his—on any part of his body—warm and soft and liquid. “It’ll be at least a couple more hours before the others get up.”

Green eyes glowed down at him, pupils so dilated that they were bright, narrow strips. “Vincent’s just over that hill.”

“He can’t see us,” Cloud argued.

“He will probably hear us, however,” the General rebutted.

“He can ignore us,” the Corporal whispered, leaning closer. Living in army camps had taught the blond soldier how to ignore lots of personal things; it was often the only privacy any of the grunts got.

Again that small smile flirted around the edges of the wide, elegant mouth. Sephiroth’s lids drooped in growing arousal. “Indeed he can,” he murmured before giving in to temptation. It was a gentle kiss but not tentative. They both knew where they were going but weren’t in any particular rush to get there. Not this time.

Cloud had to stretch a little to meet the Silver General. He liked the sensation: of being small, of having to work for what he wanted, of mixing physical pleasure with hints of physical pain, but mostly he enjoyed the slowness of it. They had time, was what they were saying, with their lips and their tongues, as they explored each other’s dark surfaces. They had time, but as the kiss went on Cloud realized he didn’t want to wait much longer to feel those lips on other places; specifically on his chest, on his nipples already hard and sensitive under the ribbed SOLDIER shirt. He pulled back, panting and aching. He took off the tunic, baring himself to the moon, making an offering of his body to his lover.

“Cloud,” the General breathed, “My beautiful, amazing, Cloud.” A shaky hand came up to stroke over skin robbed of its colour by the moon. Their skin was the same colour in the thin northern night. Fingernails scratched a path, brought the lost colour back and made the blond gasp out a hungry sound before he caught it again, muffled it in his throat.

Sephiroth watched that pale column move convulsively. It was slim and strong just like the man himself and it was his. With his own predatory sound he leaned forward, biting his claim into flesh, and Cloud surrendered. He wrapped his arms around that wide back and pulled the General down on top of him as he collapsed. He buried his hands in that long hair and covered them with it, and he writhed with the strength of his wanting.
Teeth nipped at his collarbone, pulled at the thin covering of flesh over ribs, sidetracked to gather up a mouthful of bicep which was hardly more giving than the skin over Cloud’s torso. Sephiroth’s mouth could only explore so much, but he had hands and they wanted to touch, and stroke, and occasionally, to dig in and squeeze. Then Sephiroth made broad swipes with his tongue. He watched the blond’s moist skin pebble in the cold, only to blow warm breath over it. The contrast made Cloud’s skin feel like it was burning and the blond’s muffled noises became words, “Oh my gods. Oh fuck. Gods!” he muttered, “Please Sir,” he moaned.

Sephiroth looked up from where he was exploring the hills and valleys of the Corporal’s stomach. “You really should learn to call me ‘Sephiroth’ in situations like these,” he purred and dragged a single fingernail under the low waistband.

Cloud swallowed. “I’ll see what I can do,” he gasped, “Sir.”

“Defiant little Cloud,” the silver-haired warrior cooed in approval even as he slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, undid the button and opened up Cloud’s pants. He nudged the loosened waistband down just a little, just until the crease between hip and belly was revealed. He looked up at the Corporal and smiled a joyously evil little smile. Then he latched on with teeth and lips. He sucked on the skin and the bone until the little blond was whimpering and clutching at his hair. He worked the tendon and the muscle until a dark spot bloomed on the mountain boy’s pale, pale skin.

Cloud stared blindly up at the moon, washed out in the almost-dawn. It was so quiet here that they could’ve been on that moon, only the two of them. He had fistfuls of hair held close to his face so he could breathe in the scent of his General. It was wrapped around the fingers he was biting on in a failed attempt to keep quiet. “Please, Sir,” he begged as long fingers pulled down the zipper of his pants, so close to where he wanted them to be but not close enough. All his nerves were alive. It was so much, too much. He wanted—

“Gods,” he gasped.

Sephiroth chuckled, backing away. He pressed hands through cloth into long thigh muscles, running fingers over tendons, almost light enough to tickle... almost, until he reached the end of his small lover. “You didn’t wear your boots, Corporal,” he accused, lifting a small bare foot as proof. He waited until Cloud started to speak before he squeezed it, massaging the sole forcefully and hitting all its sensitive nerve bundles, bringing them to roaring life. Cloud half-screamed, arching off the ground.

The General smiled, feral and triumphant.

He looked up. The blond had squirmed hard enough to pull his pants partly off and the General could see the tip of Cloud’s erect penis straining to escape his standard-issue briefs. “Really, Cloud,” he chided, flicking a fingertip at the stretched cotton, “Is that how you prepare yourself to take advantage of your opportunities?” Cloud panted wordlessly, unable to respond. In punishment, Sephiroth leaned over and bit the tendons lining the top of the foot he still held. He scraped his teeth across the skin. Cloud hadn’t released his fistfuls of hair, and the position pulled the long strands out straight from the roots. It was a light pain, inconsequential when compared to how the blond reacted to the vicious, yet tender, caress.

“Fucking hells, Sir!” he gasped. He couldn’t, not anymore. He needed it, something. Gods. He lowered his silver-coated hand to the gap in his pants.

“I don’t think so, Corporal.” The General rose up and stopped him from reaching his goal. Cloud looked over his body at him and his eyes were glowing bright enough to rival the stars. The dark pupils, wide, cat-eye slits, demanded more of what the silver-haired warrior had been giving him.

Sephiroth dropped the small foot onto the ground. He urged Cloud to lift his hips and tugged down
his pants. He didn’t tear them off but he didn’t drag it out either. His own control was becoming shaky and it didn’t help when Cloud took to squirming and wriggling in order to get his pants off quicker, but Sephiroth still managed to ease them down steady, so that the rough fabric could scratch over too sensitive skin.

The ugly cotton underwear... *those* he ripped off.

He also slid off his own pants in one quick and easy motion. He dropped to his knees between Cloud’s spread legs. The Corporal was rubbing his hands over his own chest, letting the silver strands catch on distended nipples, but when Sephiroth leaned over him, the blond let go of the hair to grab onto the body. Slim, muscular legs lifted to clasp him at his waist, squeezing him, pulling him in.

“You realize, Cloud, that we have no lubricant,” the General pointed out.

“Side pocket… on the right,” Cloud pointed at his pants.

Sephiroth twisted and grabbed the clothing. A quick search and he had the tube in his hand. “Well, well,” he smiled, “I guess you were prepared after all.” He squeezed out a liberal amount of the cool gel.

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud responded. His voice was slurred. “As ordered, Sir.” He’d lifted his legs and braced his feet wide on the ground, opening himself up for what he wanted, had to have. Sephiroth leaned over the smaller body, made so appealingly vulnerable. While one hand stretched and moistened his lover, he used his other hand and his mouth to add dark slashes of colour. Smooth skin and scarred were both treated to the same loving. It felt like worship.

“Do you want this, Cloud?”

Gasping, panting, the Corporal struggled to make words, “S–sir. Yes, Sir.” Formula words, words he could say in his sleep but they wouldn’t get him what he needed. “Now, Sir,” he spat out, “Now, please.”

Sephiroth nearly delayed longer but decided that it was too close to punishing himself. This was what he wanted and he didn’t want to wait either. He lifted Cloud’s strong legs and wrapped them around his waist, “Hold on, Cloud,” he encouraged. He guided his erection to the small entrance and pushed. He was rewarded by a high, keening sound as the blond tightened his legs and tried to pull himself up, to bury Sephiroth deeper. “Shh, shh,” he soothed, rocking himself in.

Cloud didn’t feel soothed. He felt great, like he was coming home, but he was electrified not pacified. This was infinitely gentler than what they’d done back in the Cetran ruins but, somehow, it felt even more intense. He lifted his head and nipped at whatever part of the General’s body was in front of him. Nipped and licked and gasped and pleaded and allowed sensations and emotions to overwhelm him. It helped that he was surrounded by Sephiroth. He could hear him; the harsh breathing, the low murmured encouragement. He could smell him; the acid-sharp tang of mako-infused sweat, the sweet freshness of the long hair. Most of all Cloud could feel him; moving over him, inside him; touching him with lips and hands. It didn’t take long for everything to condense into a line of heat down his spine. When the heat ignited into a fireball, Cloud burned with it.

“Yes, Cloud, my beautiful soldier, surrender to it… to me,” Sephiroth murmured, keeping his eyes open by force of will only, keeping his focus on his smaller lover, enjoying every twitch, every ‘O’ of passion, every drop of sweat he’d induced in the man.

“Sephiroth!” the Corporal gasped, still convulsing, “Sir… Gods”
Everything in the silver warrior stilled, frozen for a moment by the depths of Cloud’s surrender, before he too expanded and convulsed. He curled over the smaller soldier, not to protect, but because he couldn’t help it. Cloud wrapped strong limbs around his silver-haired lover and held on tight. It was his turn to murmur soothing nonsense, to take care of him and bring Sephiroth down as gently as the General had taken him up.

There were disadvantages to having been turned into genetically-altered mutant freaks, but this—being able to lay naked on the frozen ground in the chilly wind without worry—wasn’t one of them. They stayed entwined, whispering nothing, just holding each other, as the early summer sun pushed the last of the dark out of the sky and the rest of the camp began to stir. Only then did they let each other go to clean up, (Cloud had a small box of unscented moist towelettes of which the General approved) and get dressed. They didn’t hold hands, they didn’t even bump shoulders. They didn’t need to; their Jenova connection ran thick with satisfaction and contentment... and satiation. Cloud knew that Zack, and probably Yazoo, would be able to pick it up as soon as they walked into camp—hells, they could probably feel it from here—but he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Ever since he’d come back from the Lifestream he’d been filled with... with a bubble or maybe not a bubble because they popped too easily and Cloud didn’t want this to burst, but it was a solid core of... of rightness. As if this was where he was supposed to be, with the people he should be with, doing exactly what he needed to be doing. He’d never felt this way in his life before. Although what he could remember of the time before the lab, that short space of time with Zack and Sephiroth in Nibelheim, that almost came close. Except that was a really bad comparison considering what had come after. Plus he’d almost died that time too. The attack by Genesis Rhapsodis at the reactor had put him on the ground and half buried him. He’d been lucky that Tifa had been carrying some small potions or he’d have been dead and there wouldn’t have been a SOLDIER waiting in the Lifestream to send him back.

And he really must be spending too much time with Zack because, just like that, he remembered the message he was supposed to pass on and knew who it was from. That kind of random thought pattern was Zack’s thing, not his. He was methodical, logical, and cautious. His mind didn’t jump from flower to sunbeam to tree top. Except it just had…

Zack’s Angeal. Otherwise known as General Angeal Hewley, the Dark General to match the Silver and the Crimson.

Cloud looked up at his lover. General Hewley’s one-time friend, who’d been betrayed and left behind by Hewley and Rhapsodis way back. He thought of Zack, how he’d cried the night he’d brought him home from the bar, reliving the moment in Modeoheim when his mentor, his hero, had forced the dark-haired First to kill him. He was the guy who had pushed Cloud out of the white.

It wasn’t something he could blurt out in front everyone, so he kept quiet when Zack looked at him and grinned, smug and teasing. He said nothing while they ate and packed up. He waited until the march had strung them out in little clumps; the three of them in front followed by Tifa and Yazoo then by Tseng and Vincent, as usual. Then he told them. Sephiroth’s face hardened into the frozen mask Cloud remembered from all the marketing posters ShinRa used to put out. Zack’s face turned grim and sad and a little angry, and then the big First turned away and walked apart for a while.

Cloud looked at the General anxiously, “I couldn’t not say anything. Not after promising.”

Acid green eyes looked down at him and some of the frost melted away. “I understand, Cloud. Just give him a moment,” Sephiroth said meaning give them some time to wrap their heads around it. He could do that.
So they walked north in silence, following Gaia’s exposed backbone. They shifted around a bit, walking beside someone different every once in a while; although Yazoo never walked with Tseng, not even as a trio, and Zack stayed off to the side by himself. The First’s whole posture yelled out ‘dealing with big shit here—stay away,’ so they did. When a couple flying caterpillar things popped out of the ground Sephiroth didn’t even have a chance to identify them before Zack obliterated them—and it was ‘obliterate’. There wasn’t enough left of the creatures for the General to identify.

Eventually, the dark-haired SOLDIER came up beside Cloud. Vincent, the blond’s current marching buddy, eased back and away, grateful for the excuse to walk by himself again.

Zack waited until Sephiroth was with them. “Sorry sucks, especially when it’s too late to fucking change anything,” he started with, “but, after seeing the things Hojo created in the lab… I can understand what Angeal was afraid of becoming.” The big First ran a hand through his hair. “Mindless and vicious… shit…” He looked away to the snow-covered mountains. “So, I can get that… that turning into something like that. He couldn’t’ve dealt with it, couldn’t live with the idea of it.” Zack paused, his whole face tight. “but he wasn’t there when he asked me to… when I… killed him.”

Another pause as Tseng walked past them. Zack swallowed, teeth clenching, keeping the words in until the Turk was past. Then he turned and looked at the General. His blue eyes, always bright, were radiant with the strength of his emotions.

“You said, you told me, that Angeal’s griffin was still hanging around Aerith, protecting her,” he demanded. Sephiroth nodded. “Fuck, man, he wasn’t even close to being a monster. He just fucking gave up. Bastard,” the last word was muttered so quiet that even Cloud had trouble hearing it.

“It could’ve happened,” Sephiroth calmly pointed out.

The SOLDIER scowled back. “Don’t ever ask me to kill you to prevent something that fucking could happen. I won’t do it. Not again.” He looked away, face fixed in hard lines and Cloud was reminded that his big, goofy friend was a very, very deadly man. “The day you don’t ask me to kill you… then I’ll know it’s time.” He turned back to them, glaring, “but you had better be a ‘kill everyone and destroy the world’ type monster—I’m talking total apocalypse here—so I’ll know…” Zack choked, swallowed, continued, “I’ll know, that I’m doing the right thing at the right time, and not—” a deep breath, “not always looking back wondering ‘what if’, you know?”


“Good. Right,” Zack nodded in return, looking away once again. “I’ll work on, y’know, forgiveness. Maybe I’ll be able to do it by the time I see him in the Lifestream.” He smiled but it was forced.

“Hopefully, that will be far in the future,” Sephiroth responded dryly and pried out a hoarse chuckle from his SiC.

“Yeah, no kidding. Maybe two lifetimes.” A nervous hand ran through his hair then over his face, “Fuck.”

The General waved them into motion, unwilling to let the others get too far ahead. Cloud fell in on the other side of Zack making the First feel a little herded. He looked like he was going to stalk off to brood some more but, with a sly sideways look, Sephiroth said, “While you’re in a forgiving mood, I have something to discuss. You recently gave a lecture on the advantages of having all
your ‘emotionally painful discussions’ within a short space of each other.”

Zack’s eyes widened and his cheeks turned red. “Where did you hear that? You weren’t even fucking there.”

“But I know someone who was.” Sephiroth ignored Zack’s muttered ‘Tifa’ although his sculpted lips quirked up. “The point is you have just completed one… EPD,” the General picked out the letters carefully, “Do you feel up to having another?”

“Who with?” he asked suspiciously.

“Tseng,” Sephiroth replied.

Zack stared at him for a long moment, eyes wide in disbelief. “He used us as fucking bargaining chips to get you to sign on with ShinRa. If you hadn’t agreed, do you think that bastard would’ve told you, would’ve helped you, get us out? We would still be rotting away in those fucking tubes.” He braced his hands on his hips, leaning forward aggressively. “Three years we were in that hell hole and he knew and did nothing.”

Sephiroth was already shaking his head, “There was nothing he could’ve done, not while Rupert ShinRa was president. He wasn’t lying about that.” Zack tilted his head in a question. “Did you think I wouldn’t ask him why you treat him as if he’s a contagion? And did you think that I wouldn’t notice that he doesn’t exist for you outside of what’s absolutely necessary to complete the mission? He hurt you, caused someone you care about to be hurt, and you can’t forgive him and you won’t trust him.” Acid green eyes filled with fondness and understanding met bright blue. “You can be very easy to read.”

Zack looked away first. “It’s not that easy.”

“No,” the General agreed, “but it is necessary. We are a small team up against a massive force. It is, literally, the fight of our lives and there is no room for excessive mistrust.”

Zack crossed his arms, blocking out the General even though he knew it was true. He shifted his weight, looking at Cloud to gauge his reaction. Cloud gave a little half shrug telling Zack that he wasn’t getting involved, not yet, maybe not ever.

“Perhaps this will help,” Sephiroth pulled the SOLDIER’s attention back to him. “When Genesis and I arrived at Fort Condor there were ShinRa agents all over the town. Word would’ve reached Turk headquarters within the hour. It is, maybe, a four hour flight from Midgar to Fort Condor. They could’ve had an attack force flown down before nightfall. They didn’t.” He paused to see if his SiC understood the import of that. Zack was frowning, thinking—reconsidering.

“They wanted the world to know you were still alive—you and Genesis.” Sephiroth nodded. “Why?”

“I think, and they will never say, that Veld decided it was time for a change in leadership. Things happened in the year I was dead that forced him to rethink the future. His daughter… I don’t know what happened but he was forced to hunt her. Apparently it changed him.”

“One incident,” Zack scoffed. “There’s no way you can say the Turk’s are all benevolence and charity.”

Sephiroth couldn’t disagree so he redirected. “He was in your house.” Blue eyes looked at him, “In your kitchen, in the very heart of you. You must still trust him at some level or else you wouldn’t have let him in so far.”
“Are you making it an order?” Zack asked stubbornly, arms folded across his chest. Cloud whacked him on the back of the head.

“Quit being a dork, Zack,” he said. “You can kill him later if he deserves it but, right now, the General’s right; we need this team to be smooth together.” Zack refolded his arms defiantly but Cloud wasn’t finished. “Do you think he’s going to shoot us in the back?” Zack shrugged a little; he didn’t believe it. Cloud easily understood everything his friend didn’t say. “Then go let him know you’re not going to chop off his head, because I’m with the General here, it sometimes seems like you’re just waiting for the excuse.”

They walked silently for a while, Zack caged between them. The big First had his arms wrapped tight around himself. The wind sighed over the flatlands rustling branches just barely budded. It was the only sound aside from the conversations of the others and some distant bird call.

“Fine,” Zack finally spat out. “I’ll talk to him; give him another chance to explain his side.” Sephiroth looked at him, one eyebrow raised. The First rolled his eyes, “And I promise I’ll actually listen to him.”

“Thank you, Zackary,” the General soothed.

“Fucking politics,” the SOLDIER muttered in response before moving out from between his friends. To the surprise of neither of them, Zack didn’t go to Tseng right away, but shifted over to keep the brooding ex-Turk silent company.

“How long do you think it’ll take him?” Cloud asked.

“He would find it easier if it had just been him,” Sephiroth answered, “but you were also hurt and that he’ll find harder to forgive.”
“So, you don’t always find it easy to forgive,” Vincent’s voice was its usual low growl. “I find that reassuring.”

“What are you talking about?” Zack didn’t growl, he couldn’t, but his voice was abrupt and unfriendly. He’d joined the ex-Turk for silence, not conversation.

Vincent either didn’t notice or didn’t care that the First didn’t want to talk. “You once told me that all you had to do was make the decision to forgive and it was done.”

Zack remembered the conversation: it was after Chaos had taken him on that little joy-ride. “Yeah, so?”

“At the time, I thought that your calm acceptance of all of life’s betrayals was almost saintly,” Vincent continued before Zack could protest the description, “I have often thought that saints would be uncomfortable to be around so I am gladdened that you fall somewhat short of the requirements.”

Zack frowned, confused; what the hells was Vince talking about? And then he got it; “You overheard our talk, didn’t you?”

Red eyes flicked his way. “Enhancements don’t shut off just because you don’t want to hear. You should know that.”

*Sometimes that's a mixed blessing,* Chaos commented. Its voice was wistful because it hadn’t managed to convince Vincent to go investigate the intriguing sounds they’d heard last night. The prude had refused to spy on his son.

Zack had to concede Vincent’s point about enhancements; he’d felt a shadow of his friends’ emotions through their link even though he hadn’t wanted to, but he didn’t know what to say to the rest of it. He’d never claimed to be a saint. He wouldn’t want to be one if it were offered and he really didn’t want to talk about this with a guy who’d been content to shut himself up in a coffin rather than face reality. “Are you going to tell me what to do or how I should feel? How I should see Tseng’s point of view.” His voice came out meaner than he meant it to but he couldn’t seem to pull back.

“It’s hardly my opinion that matters,” Vincent’s reply was calm.

Zack snorted, “You must have one, being a Turk once yourself after all.” Zack could feel the pressure of the gunman’s steady gaze. He lifted his chin determined to ignore it but couldn’t help turning to glare at Vincent in challenge.

“Very well,” Vincent said, “my opinion is that treating people as pieces on a chess board is a disease that infects all of humanity. Everyone, at some time, believes that he knows what’s right for someone else regardless of how that person feels. We justify actions, kind and evil, with the words ‘best interests’; presidents who lie to the public; parents who beat their children... security chiefs who withhold information.”
Zack was staring at him. “Aren’t you a bucket of sunshine.”

Vincent ignored the dry comment. “The strong and the powerful will always manipulate people and events to obtain results they feel give them the best advantage. To believe that you would be protected from such decisions because you, yourself, always mean well is naïve and delusional.”

“I have a right to be angry,” Zack defended himself, looking away from his companion. Vincent’s words hurt because he knew that they were true.

“You once told me that you cannot control other people’s decisions and actions. That is true. I have said all that I will on the subject so I will leave you to your—” brooding “—thoughts. Good luck with your decision and the resulting action.” Only the flash of gold through the gunman’s red eyes let on that, inside the gunman, Chaos was chortling. It did occasionally enjoy its host’s dry humour.

The gunman dropped back and away and Zack let him go. He already had too many unpleasant things to think about and Vincent was far too disturbing a conversationalist. Instead he tried to concentrate on what they’d be facing in the crater. He reviewed the reports he’d read, tried to put together something coherent from all the skimpy information on file. And if Zack’s eyes strayed to Tseng, with his dark hair drifting loose from under the hood of the parka he wore, no one could see it. And if his thoughts strayed to how easy it would be to lop off the bastard’s head, he was the only one who had to know.

Fuck it. He needed to kill something...

Vincent watched the tall figure in SOLDIER First black stalk over the landscape, big sword humming as he swung it through the air, chopping at nothing. Frustrated rage infused Sephiroth’s companion and Vincent was glad they weren’t walking together. He had his own thoughts to deal with.

He knew what he’d heard last night: his son and the young blond soldier being intimate; just the two of them. Rumours in camp had held that they were, or would be, a tight threesome. It was possible but that’s not what he’d observed either back in camp or here on the mission. They were close; silver, black and blond weaving in and around each other in a bond that would undoubtedly birth legends, but they didn’t show obvious signs of physical intimacy. It was, perhaps, unfortunate that the Commander hadn’t joined with the other two last night. His emotions were too unsettled, he was too unsettled and a round or two of sex might have taken the edge off the SOLDIER’s temper.

*Maybe I should try my luck with the flighty bat once again,* Chaos teased, *Perhaps he’s feeling neglected enough to appreciate my attentions.*

Vincent didn’t even bother to sigh. ‘It’s anger, not lust, which has brought Fair to such a state. So much fury with no target... I pity the creature that pops out in front of him. Dangerous or not, it will be dead.’ He ignored Chaos’ hum of anticipation. Fair’s emotionality was worrying to the gunman because, if the SOLDIER didn’t find an innocent creature to vent some of that emotion on, it would be one of the team and their little group’s dynamics were already fragile with the addition of the clone.

“You’re brooding again.”

Vincent looked down at the small warrior with the laughing brown eyes. “It is my nature,” he
“Really?” she responded, “Maybe it’s just a habit.”

He lifted an eyebrow, aware of the action in a way he’d never been before; it was a genetic trait. He could do it. His father could do it… and his son could do it. “Is there a difference? When the habit is so ingrained that it is no longer discernable as a habit, then surely it becomes a personality trait.”

She smiled a brief slash of white between rose coloured lips. “Only if it’s something others approve of. Bad habits always remain habits because then we can disown them.” He grunted; quite sure that many people did exactly that. “But I suspect that brooding is your natural state. Despite the flashy cape, you’ve always reminded me of the introverted intellectual type.”

“My family was an old and respected one. There were standards to be maintained; of behaviour, of education, of lifestyle. Original thinking was not encouraged.”

“Wow, that sounds like my father,” Tifa said, surprised. “Did they have someone picked out for you to marry?” Vincent nodded. “Huh,” she snorted, “I thought that stuff only happened to girls.”

“It’s all about control. They seemed to believe that, if you can control your children, then you can control the future. But the future is inherently uncontrollable. Too many variables, too many people making decisions for purposes that have nothing to do with yours.” Chaos grunted his approval of variables and uncontrollability of circumstance. Vincent ignored it.

“That’s like that thing they use to illustrate chaos theory; where the butterfly flaps its wings in Wutai and they get storms in Mideel.” Tifa said, not realizing how much she’d amused Vincent’s demon. The gunman ignored his guest’s chuckling. “So what decision are you second-guessing yourself about?” she asked.

“I should have done more than just kiss you when I had the chance.” His calm answer threw her into silence. Even Chaos had nothing to say, although his stunned quiet wouldn’t last very long. “Sephiroth—my son; he and Cloud, are taking every moment they can together—” Tifa remembered the two swordsmen’s rumpled appearance at breakfast and snickered. “—even knowing that each intimacy they share will make the pain of future loss deeper, sharper and harder to bear.”

“They might not lose,” Tifa pointed out, “We all might survive.”

Vincent looked at her, “Perhaps.” He stopped and she stopped as well, looking up at him with large, soft brown eyes; wise and tender beyond all his imaginings and far more understanding than he deserved. “But I have begun to realize that, if you should die on this mission, my pain would be no less deep, no less sharp and certainly no easier to bear for having not been with you completely.” He lifted long, bare fingers to her delicate chin, lifted her face just a little more. “In fact, I think the regrets might swallow me whole.”

Then he shut out doubts and fears and Chaos’ triumphant crowing in order to bend down and kiss that sweet mouth, to taste her. To try to share with her, in this small way, just how important she had become to him. He ran his tongue softly along the join of her lips, begging an invitation and with a sigh she gave it; parting her lips and meeting his tongue with the tip of hers. Brass covered fingers ran down her strong back to settle just above the curve of her buttocks. They rested on her armour so that she’d have some protection if his hand fisted involuntarily, but her warmth still penetrated through leather and metal to heat him all the way through.

With a groan, lifted her to his height so that neither of them had to strain to meet; he released her replied.
chin to cup the back of her head, to tilt it at a steeper angle so that he could delve deeper. She wrapped strong arms around his neck, ignoring the clasps of his mantle that pressed into her. She wrapped her legs around his thin frame and locked her ankles easily despite the gun harness he wore.

Compared to his skeletal frame, he mused, she seemed as substantial and as generous as the very earth, and he wanted her. He wanted her with a force that made his passion for Lucrecia seem like a candle flame when he’d always thought it was a bonfire.

*Your timing is abysmal; you do realize that, don’t you, my host?* Chaos said snarkily, *Not that I, personally, mind having an audience, but I think the small warrior might.* Chaos’ acerbic comment brought Vincent out of the daze that tasting the small warrior had thrown him into. He was alarmed to realize that he really, really wanted to prove Chaos wrong... and that Yazoo was standing barely three paces away, staring at them with large and frightened eyes.

He cleared his throat. “I’m not going to eat her,” he tried to reassure the young clone.

*Only because it’s too cold to spread her out like that.* The image Chaos provided was graphic and disturbingly hypnotic.

Yazoo swallowed nervously but stood his ground. He had his hand on his weapon, obviously prepared to try and stop him if he should threaten Tifa. “You weren’t trying to absorb her, like I do with the materia?”

*Now there’s an interesting thought,* Chaos chortled.

Vincent blinked. “That’s not an ability any of my forms have.”

“I don’t need protection, Yazoo,” Tifa added her reassurance to the tall gunman’s. “I need a room.”

“Oh,” Yazoo responded blankly. “I don’t have one of those.” Then he frowned as he realized the stupidity of what he’d just said. Tifa covered her smile by sliding off Vincent. She slid off slowly, teasing even as she disengaged. Yazoo watched with bewildered awe. “You’re really not afraid of him?” The fighter shook her head.

“I’d never knowingly hurt Ms. Lockhart,” the gunman said firmly, as it were a law written down somewhere.

“Any of you?” Yazoo persisted.

Chaos’ comment of *Only enough so we’d both have fun,* was ignored, as was the image of dragging hard brass fingertips over soft living flesh. Instead he responded honestly, “Most of me, I think. We can’t be sure until it happens and, quite frankly, I’m unwilling to trust Tifa’s safety to Hellmasker’s sanity or Gigas’ intelligence so we may never know.”

“Huh,” the clone grunted. They started moving, pulled into motion by the impatient glare of the silver-haired General.

“All of life is a risk, Yazoo. You take what happiness you can and try to make it last.”

“That’s not what we were told in the lab.” He fell quiet, thinking about what she’d said, processing it, trying to place it in what he knew of the world. Finally he sighed sadly, “I think this freedom thing might be more complicated than I thought.”

Vincent couldn’t help but agree; life had been simpler in his coffin.
It took the rest of that day and the start of the next before Zack had worked himself into a fit state to talk to the Wutaian. He still wasn’t sure how he was supposed to just let it go.

He understood what Seph had said about the greater good. Sacrificing the one for the many is what being SOLDIER was all about, he’d known that when he’d agreed to the injections, so he got it. Tseng—and his boss, Veld—would have left him in place until his rescue or whatever would have served the greater good. It sucked, but he could understand the attitude... mostly. But it was one thing to sacrifice a SOLDIER and another to abandon an innocent grunt. Cloud hadn’t signed the waiver, he hadn’t agreed to become a SOLDIER and give his life over to the company. Sure, the blond had wanted to, but he hadn’t yet. He was just a bright kid with big dreams and Tseng had left him in the hands of a monster. He’d been on the table when Tseng had walked into the lab and there’s no way the Turk hadn’t looked up the personnel gone missing from that fucked up mission. He’d have known.

Of course, it was likely the Turks had known all along exactly what Dr. Creepy cooked up in his ‘secret’ labs from way back when Vincent was still fully human... and they’d done nothing.

He was making a fist again. And clenching his jaw... he was never going to be able to have this conversation. He’d wind up punching the bastard right on his unemotional ass.

It didn’t help that they were in the middle of a whole lot of nothing so there wasn’t much to distract him other than ice and more ice. They’d rounded the mountain range yesterday and come out on the shore of a frozen cove. They’d talked about sticking to solid ground, following the land south then back north again but Seph had estimated that it would take three or four days to make the trip. It would only take a day to hike across the sound. They’d looked up into the sky, where Meteor was visible even during the day, and decided to risk the short cut. It was slow—Sephiroth was testing every step—so it left far too much time for Zack to think of all the reasons why he really, really wanted to pound Tseng’s head against the nearest hard surface.

It also gave him time to realize that his anger wasn’t just with Tseng. It was with all of it: ShinRa, the SOLDIER program and the lies they’d told about how they’d be fighting the good fight, protecting the innocent and making the world a better place. It was about being sixteen and leaving his home and his family because he’d believed the lies. It wasn’t just Tseng he was angry at; it was Recruiting Officer Liepert and ShinRa’s Media Department who’d made him think that the company wanted heroes. It was his old boss, Lazard Deusericus, and his mentor Angeal who’d made him think that there was honour in serving ShinRa and then ripping that belief from him.

It made him wonder who was he angrier with: Tseng as a representative of all that was evil and rotten in the company, or himself as the fool who kept on thinking that people are intrinsically good and decent even when all evidence points to them being so completely not?

All these thoughts, argument and counter-argument, circling around in his head, kept him three steps behind the Turk, unable and unwilling to close the distance. It was also the reason why, when the ice gave way under Tseng’s feet, it took him a moment too long to react. He reached out his hand but Tseng had already dropped into the frigid water.

“Oh fuck,” he whispered. Tseng was normal: fifteen minutes tops before the guy started to develop hypothermia. “MAN DOWN!” he yelled before stripping off his Buster sword and diving in. He was supposed to be Shiva’s chosen; hopefully the ice goddess would cut him some extra slack. But as the freezing water slid over his skin and the bitter cold squeezed his lungs tight, and the murky water didn’t let him see a fucking thing, he couldn’t help but think that this had been a bad idea.
It was Cloud who reacted first to Zack’s voice. Three years of surviving together in the lab had made it an instinct. He pushed out his wings and was flying over the unstable ice before the last echo faded. He grabbed Yazoo, who was running back toward the hole. The ice was breaking up under the boy’s feet putting him in danger, so Cloud tossed him to Sephiroth who was on firmer ice. The General set his brother down on his feet before flying over to join Cloud in searching for their fallen companions.

Vincent and Tifa had already retreated but the young fighter was inching her way back, closer to the hole, getting down on her belly to distribute her weight just as they’d been taught at school in Nibelheim.

“Tifa, stay back. We can handle getting them out of the water. You get blankets and dry clothes; something hot to drink,” Cloud ordered. Tifa didn’t even argue—flying over the ice beat belly-crawling—she just backed up and got the stuff organized.

“What if they don’t come back up?” Yazoo asked. Tifa looked at him, then at Cloud and the General.

Cat-slit eyes flamed green. “I can see them. They’re caught in the current.” Sephiroth’s wings beat shifting him away from the broken ice. “They’re moving under thicker ice.” He pulled Masamune and slashed at the ice. The blade slide through leaving behind a clean, precise cut too narrow for them to pull anything through.

Cloud pulled First Tsurugi from its spot in his harness. The blade sprung apart, making the already wide weapon even larger. Blue-white energy coruscated up and down the length of it, building in strength, and power. It made his arms vibrate and his teeth ache but Cloud just clenched his jaw and let the power build until it was enough. He lifted the blade and with a shout—of anger, of release, of desperation—he struck the ice. The energy poured out of the sword running along the frozen water, cracking it. Smaller beams fed out from the main stream and shattered the ice into smaller and smaller pieces, maybe even vaporizing some, until there was enough space for a dark head to bob to the surface.

“Zack!” Cloud shouted and rushed over to where the General was reaching down a strong hand. “Gods, Zack, please be okay.” He didn’t know what he’d do if Zack didn’t survive...

Zack had him; thank gods his bat senses worked underwater. Tseng had had the sense to ditch the parka which weighed a freaking tonne when wet and now all he had to do was bust through the ice above their heads. Sure. No problem. He smiled at the Turk—not his best effort but at least he’d tried—and punched upwards. The ice didn’t even crack. They were so screwed...

A thin steel blade sliced through the ice, missing his head by only a couple finger widths. He looked up and saw Sephiroth looming above them. He was slightly distorted by the ice but it was definitely the Silver General. So maybe they weren’t so screwed. He gave Tseng a grin, a real one this time.

Suddenly, someone was holding him, with arms of cold steel asking for comfort and companionship. Someone was whispering to him, making promises and giving him dreams of ‘if only’. Someone was pulling him down, away from the surface, away from rescue.

‘What the fuck?’ Zack struggled against the arms holding him, squeezing him, killing him. Tseng’s grip tightened but he still slid through. He was so cold...
You are mine, the voice whispered, reminding Zack uncomfortably of his unpleasant interlude with Chaos. Killer and lover; doer and thinker; shallow and deep, a singular duality. Join me. We shall be one but not the same.

‘I don’t think so,’ Zack replied. He tried to kick out of the thing’s grasp but it seemed to be holding him everywhere.

I am your god, Zackary Fair. You chose me as I chose you. The voice was neither male nor female... which fit because Zack could feel breasts and cock pressed up along his back.

‘Shiva. I’m being held underwater by Shiva,’ he realized. That was pretty fucked up. Why would his patron god be trying to kill him?

Come to me and live forever.

‘Fucking shitpiss,’ Zack thought because he knew what was going on. In the oldest stories of Shiva, the goddess could be pretty damned possessive of the things he considered his. At least that was one aspect. What Zack needed was the one that eschewed possessions and went to sit on the mountaintop to meditate, and he needed that aspect now because he was beyond cold, beyond tired and nearly beyond breath. ‘C’mon, Seph,” he prayed, ‘be my hero.’

Join me. As warrior-priest you will have all that you desire...

An image formed in his head of Aerith—so pretty—sitting at his feet, gazing up at him with worshipful eyes... wearing the outfit that insane Tsviet had worn, right down to the boots.

Ooo-kay then... That was completely hot and certainly worth considering, except that this Aerith looked at him as if he was perfect and he knew he wasn’t and he knew she knew he wasn’t either. Where was the teasing? Where was the hidden laughter that so often lit her from the inside? This wasn’t his Aerith and he didn’t want her to ever be like this. Shiva was offering him a lie—a hollow clone of his girl without spirit or personality—and it’s not what he wanted, although he wouldn’t mind keeping the boots...

He fought to hang on to Tseng and the reality the Turk represented and felt strange when he realized that Tseng was hanging on to him just as hard.

Sephiroth reached down to the dark-haired figure. He already knew it wasn’t Zack but he also knew that Zack, having dived in to the rescue, would be holding the Turk, lifting him out of the freezing water; insisting, in his way, that Tseng be saved first. As long as Zack was rescued as well, Sephiroth had no problem with that. He used his fire skills to raise his body temperature before plunging his hands into the water. He gripped Tseng under the arms and heaved. It felt like he was trying to lift creation, and a harsh grunt of effort escaped, but at least he managed to get the Turk’s head above water.

“Something has hold of Zack,” Tseng said as soon as he had breath. “He’s slipping.”

“Where is he?” Sephiroth asked. He looked at Cloud, newly arrived, and with a nod ordered him to take his place holding up the Turk.

“End of my right arm.”

“Don’t let go,” the General ordered him, even knowing that the Turk didn’t need the words. It was there in his jaw and his eyes; he wasn’t letting go. Interesting, Sephiroth thought, before putting it out of his mind for more immediate concerns. He raised his temperature even more until it was
almost the level of a materia cast, and then he plunged into the water, over his shoulders, over his head. He traced a path down Tseng’s right arm until he reached the hand gripping the Turk’s wrist. A little further and he touched that well-known, well-loved face. With a thought he sent warmth through the skin. He used the connection between them to knock the First awake and was rewarded when Zack’s other hand came up through the water to grab hold.

*He is mine.* The voice whispered over the surface of his mind.

‘No,’ the General’s inner voice was implacable, ‘He is mine and I will not give him up to you.’ Then he released all his built-up heat in a cloud that nearly turned the water to steam. He directed it at the presence he’d felt forcing it to let the SOLDIER go and driving it away from Zack.

Without the weight of that thing, Sephiroth easily pulled the SOLDIER out of the water.

“He’s got him, Tseng. You can let go,” he heard Cloud say. “C’mon. Let’s get you to Tifa and the blankets,” and the blond warrior was streaking across the ice holding the larger man easily. He’d caught a glimpse of Zack’s face and to say he was freaked would be an understatement. Zack’s Gongagan tan had disappeared lost under a grey-white sheen that reminded Cloud a frost-covered window. Even his black hair was grey, as if the cold had penetrated and changed it. He didn’t have to look back to know that Sephiroth had stopped flying and was examining the SOLDIER anxiously. He knew, even before Sephiroth ‘called’ to Zack, what the General was planning, and he knew how he’d react. He flew higher into the air.

“Lift Yazoo off the ice,” he yelled at Vincent even as he felt the heat build inside himself.

It was Sephiroth’s heat, transmitted through their Jenova or mako or whatever caused the connection, and the General was pouring it into Zack. It was physical heat: Cloud could feel his body temperature spike, could feel Tseng’s clothing start to steam where it was pressed against him. It was emotional heat: Cloud felt his heart speed up and his penis harden as desire and need and want poured through the connection.

It took all his concentration to keep his wings beating a steady rhythm. He wanted to be with Sephiroth right now, with both of them. Even knowing that the General was doing it as a way to keep Zack alive, or bring him back from wherever the SOLDIER had gone, didn’t stop his body’s automatic reaction to Sephiroth’s call; and, even knowing that he had no control over it, didn’t stop the young blond from being horrified when he realized that he was rubbing himself against the Turk.

He needed to land because, even though this wasn’t the General or Zack he was pushing against, he was so going to cum, especially as Sephiroth was increasing the power of his call. He could feel the pressure, the heat, building along his spine, under his skin. Gods! It was like the General was caressing him from the inside. If he wasn’t on the ground soon, he was going to drop Tseng or squeeze him into a paste when he peaked.

Cloud folded his wings and dropped, barely remembering to slow down before he hit the ground. The ice cracked a little from the force of his landing and Tseng let out an unconscious grunt. He handed the Turk over to Tifa and then dropped to his hands and knees, groaning and convulsing uncontrollably. It wasn’t mind-blowing like when they had sex together, but it was fucking embarrassing. At least it didn’t last long...

He rolled over, away from the spot on the ice his body heat had melted, and just lay there, looking at the clear, northern sky. It had worked; he could feel Zack, still dazed, but alive. Cloud tipped his head and watched as the General brought them nearer. He had Zack cradled in his arms like a little kid and his beautiful two-tone wings nearly blotted out the sky.
Who gave a shit about being embarrassed when this was the result?

“I don’t want to have sex with anyone,” Yazoo’s husky voice rolled softly over the blond.

Zack’s voice was rueful in response, “Yeah, well, I sure as fuck do.”

“Huh,” an unknown voice coughed above their heads. “Ain’t that the strangest thing we’ve seen for many a long year.”

Chapter End Notes

I received the gift of two pieces of fan art.

The first is of Specimen C:
https://duetmaoim.deviantart.com/art/Specimen-C-145260417

The second is Tifa wearing somewhat more realistic clothes for a paramilitary specialist:
https://duetmaoim.deviantart.com/art/Tifa-146192078

Thank you, Shini-me-gami7; they’re beautiful!
Cloud didn’t know that voice therefore it was a threat. He was up on his feet and armed in an eye blink, reacting completely on instinct and adrenaline. He placed himself between Zack and Tseng, both still dazed and vulnerable, and the unknown newcomer. Zack was in better shape than the Turk, at least he was standing on his own. Tseng was a limp, messy bundle in Tifa’s hold. She was trying to feed warm liquid into him but the Wutaian was having a hard time swallowing. He’d been in the frozen water for over ten minutes and they all knew that was pushing the limits of the man’s endurance but he was still alive.

They’d just rescued the two of them and Cloud wasn’t letting anyone hurt them now.

The Corporal’s wings spread out fully and quivered with tension. Blue-white energy crackled over his blade building in power to match his speeding heart beat. Then he got a good look at the stranger and he had to pull up short as he realized that there was no threat. There was just an old man on a huge black chocobo leading a couple female blues. The guy had a fuzzy hat pulled low and a straggly scarf pulled high so he obviously felt the cold and his eyes were washed out and pale so there was no mako in his system.

He was human... maybe.

Cloud looked closer because he had never seen someone with cheeks as distended as this guy’s appeared to be, even under the cloth. Maybe the guy had a disease, something that could infect the others? Maybe he was still a threat just a different kind of danger.

The guy pulled down his scarf and spewed out a huge gob of spit. It landed with a ‘plop’ on the ice. “Them are nice wings, young’un,” the stranger said, “But if yur not careful, Clyde here will think yur’a rival fur his girls.”

Definitely human.

Cloud nearly laughed at his overreaction. He straightened, let Tsurugi hang down, and prepared to get teased by his best friend but, before Zack could say anything, the black chocobo dipped its head and hissed, beak clicking in a menacing counterpoint. It fanned out its wings, which were only slightly smaller than Cloud’s, and it pawed at the ice, digging out thick grooves with its talons. Without thought, Tsurugi came back up, Cloud’s wings spread out, and he growled. His inner voice screamed at him to smarten the fuck up because if he didn’t he was never living this down. Besides, it was probably four hundred kilos of bird, with sharp beak and long claws, but it was still just a bird and he wasn’t.

His body wasn’t listening to reason...

“Corporal,” the General’s voice was perfectly even, “you realize that you’re contesting dominance with a bird?”

The soldier gritted his teeth, taking deep breaths as he tried to regain control, “Yes, Sir.”

“Please desist,” Sephiroth said in a gentle voice, “I don’t think he’s going to try to take over your harem.”
Cloud swallowed his embarrassment. "I’m trying, Sir," he ground out through clenched teeth. He worked his hands in his gloves trying to loosen them. His wings fluttered as he tried to get them to pull in. It was an action mirrored by the huge bird opposite him but it wasn’t trying to fold its wings, it wanted to spread them out even farther, so it would make him look larger and even more threatening. The black warked, loudly, with that same menacing hiss, as it clicked its beak and dipped and lifted its head.

Cloud trembled with the effort of not responding, of being human rather than the unholy mix of creatures Hojo had turned him into.

"Don’t worry, young’un," the stranger said, "Clyde’s just warning yuh away from his females."

The soldier could see the old man trying to soothe the beast, he could hear the steady murmur of soft words, and he could see that the bird was settling somewhat; it had raised its head a little making it seem a bit less threatening. Cloud tried to imagine that it was Sephiroth’s voice murmuring like that—to him—and that it was Zack gently petting him, calming him. It was weird, but it worked. He managed to bring his wings mostly under control. He raised his head and lowered his sword just as the chocobo eased back from its own aggressive stance. Suddenly the bird turned its head to the side and began preening its feathers. It now ignored the blond warrior as aggressively as it had threatened him.

Cloud followed suit, holstering his weapon and smoothing his clothes. "You can stop laughing now, Zack."

"No," the dark-haired First choked out, "I really don’t think I can."

"Yup, strange days," the old man mumbled. He scratched his stubbled chin in thought. "Betchu boys need tuh warm up ‘nd dry off, hey? M’place ain’ far as the girls run." He raised the lead line to indicate the two blue chocobos hooked up to it. "If yuh know how tuh ride bareback, that is."

"I do," Sephiroth responded.

"I don’t and I don’t need to," Zack said out loud. "I’m warm enough on my own now."

"Don’t be ridiculous, Commander," Sephiroth said sharply, "Whatever reserves you had, you used up in the water. You’re eyes are glowing from the mako you’re burning just to stay upright. You need food and rest and you need them soon."

The stranger shook his head. "M’ladies are strong, but I don’ think they can carry both yuh boys."

"I can take Commander Fair," Vincent offered, "I’m light and I’ve ridden chocobos before."

"You have?" Cloud asked surprised. He’d never heard of a Turk riding a chocobo.

"My family had a racing stable," the gunman’s answer was short.

Eyebrows went up. Raising chocobos for racing, keeping an active stable, was a very, very expensive business. "I thought your father was a professor at the university," Tifa asked.

"He was, but his family was rich." Vincent figured that was revealing enough for now. He’d tell Tifa his full history later as she had a right to know. Tseng had been right about that.
“Valentine…” Cloud frowned then made an ‘O’ of enlightenment. “Was your father Grimoire Valentine? My mother had some books by him.”

Zack rolled his eyes at his friend’s back. “Of course she did,” he muttered.

Cloud ignored him, intent on his discovery. “I knew I’d heard that name before. The Valentines were old nobility, like really old… from the time of Henry II, kind of old. There are even stories that the family descends from one of Henry’s bastards.”

Zack turned to frown at the dark-haired gunman. “Why the hells did you become a Turk?”

Vincent blinked, considered, and replied “I ran away from home.” Zack grinned in appreciation.

Sephiroth ignored the extraneous conversation and nodded approval of their new travel arrangements. “That would work well. Zack doesn’t require body heat—”

“No shit,” the First muttered.

“—so I can take Tseng, who does. If Ms. Lockhart can ride with you—” A raised eyebrow asked the question of the stranger. It was answered with an easy-going shrug. “—then that leaves only Cloud and Yazoo. They’ll be able to keep up.”

The black chocobo warked and shook his head. “Them two young’uns are going tuh keep up with m’birds?” the old man’s voice was filled with scepticism.

“As impressive as they are, Cloud wings aren’t just for attracting mates,” Zack wiggled his brows. Tifa giggled. Even Sephiroth had to work to keep his mouth still.

The blond’s cheeks filled with colour. “You are such a jerk, Zack.”

“We should get back to the loading. Tell that guy we’re ready.”

The old guy—“Call me Bob”—made them let the black chocobo sniff each of them in turn, which was, he said, the only way the big male would let them near his harem. It had hopped a little when confronted with Vincent and all his parts but the guy murmured to it, Vincent stayed calm, so the bird settled down and ignored him as thoroughly as it ignored Cloud. After that the loading went smooth. Sephiroth settled himself easily onto his mount’s broad back then Zack handed up the near-comatose Turk. The General was going to have to hold the Wutaian in front of him for the whole journey; not an easy thing to do for either rider or bird. The old man worried about it, emphasizing his concern with another throat clearing gob of phlegm, but Sephiroth shrugged. Tseng’s weight wouldn’t be a problem, he said and his tone was so absolute that Zack looked around for the carved stone tablet.

Vincent mounted the second bird, settling lightly on its back. Zack climbed up behind him, not quite so lightly but easy enough not to cause the watching black any concern. A word from Bob and the two blues lifted themselves to their full height. They shuffled a bit but seemed mostly unconcerned with the added weight. The male eyed them possessively, doing his own check of their well-being. It signalled its acceptance by shaking its feathers and sneezing; at least Cloud thought that’s what it meant.

The bird held still for the old man as he climbed back up, not even twitching an eyelash. Once Bob
was seated, the guy held out a mittened hand to help Tifa mount up behind him. “Here yuh go, lady. Step on his knee with yur left foot then swing yur right over... That’s the way. Just like yuh was born to it,” he ground out the instructions, and Cloud thought it was for both Tifa’s and the bird’s benefit.

Whatever, it kept the chocobo mostly calm—mostly. As Tifa settled the big black fluffed his wings a little, showing off for the new female. “’Nuff of that, Clyde,” the old guy chided. “Okay all, let’s mosey.” With a click and a flick of the reins, the chocobos were off, going from full stop to blurry within a few paces.

Cloud and Yazoo, left behind in a cloud of ice particles, looked at each other. “Run or fly?” Cloud asked.

“You can carry me?” the young clone asked amazed. The blond soldier was barely bigger than he was.

“Yeah,” Cloud answered softly. “I won’t be able to do the fancy moves that Zack did, but we’ll be up in the air.” An upwards glance and a fleeting smile were all the answer the Corporal needed. It didn’t take them long to lift off the ground and follow the three fast-moving chocobos.

Cloud managed a few quick barrel rolls but the old guy had been right; keeping up to the birds wasn’t easy. Plus Yazoo wanted to talk. “Am I expected to have sex with someone?” he asked plainly, only a couple minutes into the flight. The Corporal looked down at him in surprise, nearly losing his rhythm. “Everyone else in the group seems to be having sex with someone—or building up to it—so I just wondered if....”

“It’s not mandatory, if that’s what you’re asking,” Cloud answered, still a little confused.

“So, it’s not part of a team building philosophy?”

“No, not at all,” Cloud frowned. “The way things turned out between us—the General and I, well...that was left over from before.”

“But he forced us to feel him, to respond. Are you sure it’s not a control mechanism that Hojo put in him?” The blond was shaking his head before Yazoo even finished talking.

“I think it was an accident; a result of the Jenova cells ShinRa put in all the SOLDIER Firsts. You were kind of telepathic with the other two clones, weren’t you?” The teen nodded. Cloud shrugged, or tried to considering he was flying, “Well, same kind of thing.”

“So he wasn’t trying to establish—”

“He wasn’t trying to do anything but raise Zack’s body temperature. We just got hit by... shrapnel, I guess you could call it.”

The young man was quiet and Cloud took the opportunity to search out a thermal he could glide off of. He wasn’t going to say anything, because the young clone’s life had probably been worse than his up to this point, but his back muscles were starting to get sore.

“He had nothing to do with Tifa and Vincent?” The question was hesitant.

“Gods no! I don’t think anybody could’ve planned that,” Cloud was stunned at the suggestion until
he realized what the young clone was thinking. He knew what had gone on in the lab in Nibelheim, what had happened to him. It probably hadn’t been any different in the one Yazoo had been grown in: the strong preyed on the weak or the helpless. It was expected, it was... normal to be used like that.

It’s what Yazoo would expect in the outside world too, unless Cloud explained it to him.

He could feel the heat in his cheeks; he was the last person who should be giving this talk to the clone. Zack would make a joke of it but still make it real and important. Sephiroth would state it as if it never occurred to him to think anything else, and again it would be real and important. He just hoped he could form full, comprehensible sentences without swallowing his tongue. “If someone tries to tell you that you have to have sex with them, for whatever reason, and you don’t want to, you can just tell them no, and it’s against the law for them to force you.”

**Yazoo sneered, “You’re lying. In the lab—”**

“In Hojo’s labs it was normal but you’re not in the lab anymore. It’s supposed to be different out here. Legally, you have the right to say no to anyone at anytime in any situation. Or you can say yes. The point is, it’s your choice who you have sex with and why.”

“Huh,” the teen said in disbelief. “No restrictions?”

Cloud frowned, “Well, no kids; meaning anyone under fifteen. Even if the kid says yes it’s still considered rape.”

“Huh,” Yazoo repeated. He’d been well under the age of fifteen the first time someone had had sex with him. Cloud held him a little tighter, guessing where the teen’s disbelief stemmed from.

The soldier continued, “And, if someone tells you ‘no’ you have to respect that and back off. It’s only fair, right?”

“I suppose,” Yazoo said doubtfully. He fell silent, trying to process his new world.

The blond knew from Yazoo’s short responses that none of this made sense to him; the clone didn’t believe it—he couldn’t. His lab-raised brother would have a hard time understanding the rules that governed relationships in regular society no matter how much he said. He had a hard time understanding them and he’d grown up in regular society, but Cloud knew had to try to give the boy some basis for making decisions about sex. “Ideally, you only have intercourse with people who care about you and that you care about; people who make you feel cherished and special.”

Yazoo looked up at him, “Like Loz and Kadaj did?”

It took a moment for the blond warrior to place the names as Yazoo’s cloned brothers and then he had to think about the implications of that for a second. Cloud wondered if he should mention that incest was frowned upon. Then he rejected the thought as irrelevant and kind of mean. The other two clones were dead which meant that Yazoo wouldn’t see them ever again, never mind having sex with them, and he didn’t want the boy to feel alone. Being alone sucked...

“If that’s how they made you feel, then yes,” he finally answered.

“But how do you know that’s how they’ll make you feel during sex if you don’t have sex with them?” Yazoo asked. He tilted his head, looking up at his genetic brother’s face. “How did you
know with Sephiroth?"

Cloud swallowed nervously, but he’d decided to do this properly—or as best he could—and he wasn’t going to back out now. “He seduced me. With words first, then with his body. It kind of made it clear right from the start that he thought I was special.” Cloud blush deepened to almost painful levels but he still smiled. He remembered most of Nibelheim now. “Then I seduced him right back.”

Yazoo continued to look at Cloud and the blond worried about what other questions he might ask but, thankfully, the silver-haired clone tucked his head into Cloud’s chest with a thoughtful hum, and Cloud was able to draw a deep, relaxed breath. He just hoped he hadn’t fucked it up...

The mountain boy was always comfortable not talking and he didn’t try to break into the teen’s thoughts. Soon they were off the ice and back near the mountains. Turbulence became a factor and he needed to concentrate more on his flying. He found thermals and used them to lift them up higher before gliding down in smooth spirals that gave his aching back a rest. They were keeping the others in sight but the winged soldier was hoping it wasn’t much farther because he was really starting to feel it—burning spikes where his muscles used to be. Pretty soon he’d have to take them to the ground and they’d have to run the rest of the way. He didn’t want to. He’d given Zack enough ammunition already.

But, just as he was cursing his mountain stubbornness and thinking pride was a really stupid emotion, they saw a structure in the distance that could only have been man-made.

“Let’s go down and run the rest of the way,” Yazoo asked. “I want to see the area from ground level.”

“In case we have to leave in a hurry?” Yazoo nodded. Cloud’s answer was easy; “Okay.” He could’ve wept in relief when they touched down and their weight was off his arms and back and onto his legs. It was heavenly to use a different set of muscles and he almost groaned in pleasure. He coughed instead and concentrated on tucking wings away. It took him a bit longer than it should have but Yazoo wouldn’t know the difference.

“Are you all right?” the teen asked anxiously, “You were carrying me for a long time.”

The soldier shook his head since shrugging seemed to be out of the question, “I’m okay. It’s good to know your limits, right?” All Yazoo could do was agree; it’s what they’d been taught in the lab. Cloud ignored his genetic brother’s worried, little frown and headed out.

They followed the unmistakeable trail of the three chocobos, claws digging in deep from the weight, at an easy lope. Cloud identified game trails that could be used as escape routes, and Yazoo pointed out the wildlife hiding in the stunted trees they’d have to watch out for. It was a nice end to the journey and they arrived only a few minutes after the others; Sephiroth was just offloading Tseng into Vincent’s waiting arms.

Zack was leaning, or maybe it was tilting, and Cloud realized that the General had been right about the First using up all his reserves. Cloud immediately went up and tucked himself under the SOLDIERs arm in support.

“Bob’s got a hot spring running into a pool behind his place,” Zack said in greeting, “I am totally going to use it.”
“After you eat, Commander,” Sephiroth ordered. He had dismounted and was running fingers through the heavy feathers in appreciation of the smooth ride. The bird responded by cooing and rubbing its eye ridge on the warrior’s shoulder.

“Understood, General Sir.” Zack saluted. The motion made him wobble slightly and Cloud decided it was time to steer the First into the house. Besides, Zack wasn’t the only one who would feel better sitting down; he was starting to feel a little shaky himself.

The old man’s house was a barely converted cave. Hangings, made from chocobo feathers of all sizes and colours, brightened up the windowless space. Heavy braided rugs covered the floor and provided some insulation from the hard floor. At least it was warm. Probably because the opening at the back led to the hot springs Zack had talked about. Cloud could feel the moist air floating through the space. Still, it was more welcoming, and a lot cleaner, than he’d thought it would be.

Tifa was already at the stove knocking some life into near-dead coals. Vincent had placed Tseng on the bench behind the kitchen table and the Wutaian was managing to sit mostly upright. The gunman had wrapped his red mantle around the other man and the colour looked really weird on the Turk. But it was a passing thought, quickly forgotten as Cloud manoeuvred his friend over to a chair and made him sit. Zack promptly put his head down on the table, not even bothering to cushion the surface with his arms.

“Anything I can do to help?” Cloud asked Tifa.

Yazoo took his arm and steered him to the bench. “You should sit down too. Flying all that way wasn’t easy.”

“I’m okay,” the Corporal protested.

Yazoo frowned at him. “Your eyes are glowing.”

Cloud looked in Tifa’s direction. “Yeah,” she confirmed, “They’re pretty bright too.”

“We’ll get the food. You three just sit.” The silver-haired youth pushed him onto the bench beside the Turk. Then he moved to the centre of the room and sniffed. Vincent’s eyebrow went up and even Tifa looked at him astonished. Yazoo ignored them and followed the smell to a slim opening, nearly hidden in the uneven stone walls. It was Bob’s cold storage room. “I found the food,” he announced. He brought out fresh meat and wrinkled, whiskery tubers as well as bags of grains and sprigs of herbs and gave them to Vincent who laid them out on the counter while Tifa looked through the cupboards for pots and pans and utensils.

Cloud rested his head against the cave wall, watching Tifa expertly prepare supper through eyes he could barely keep open. He’d wrapped an arm around Tseng but the Turk was so quiet and still Cloud wasn’t sure if he was awake. His check was moving, so at least he was still alive. He knew Zack wasn’t awake; the SOLDIER had finally lifted his arms to provide a pillow and was snoring gently, a soothing sound that wasn’t helping Cloud stay alert. Even Sephiroth’s entry couldn’t rouse Cloud from his stupor. When the General came over and touched them with his bare hand, first on Zack’s face then on Cloud’s, it was all the Corporal could do not to lean into it and fall asleep right then.

“He flew too long,” he heard Yazoo say apologetically, “I didn’t notice until it was already too late. I’m sorry.”
“You don’t need to apologize,” Sephiroth responded softly, “Cloud is an experienced soldier. I would expect him to know his own limits and to make allowances for them.” He stroked tender fingers over Cloud’s cheek. “Of course, he hasn’t learned how to adjust for being a stubborn idiot, but that’s hardly your fault.”

Even half asleep and sore, Cloud could blush.

Bob had a field or more filled with chocobos, some tame, some not. As soon as they’d arrived, he’d gone out to check on a few that were worrying him, leaving their group to prepare the meal with a casual “Help yerselves”. By the time he came back to the cave, the stew was cooked and biscuits were on the table, and they were just about done waiting for him to show up. One thing they hadn’t counted on was that Bob liked to talk. He started as soon as he walked in the door and he continued, non-stop, throughout the meal. Worse, all his conversation was about his birds. Global war, ShinRa’s collapse, DGS forces running across the country with mutated dogs—even huge frigging Weapons bursting out of the crater just north of his place—none of it was as important to the old guy as learning all he could about chocobos.

And now he had a captive audience for all his knowledge...

He told a story—a long story—about the first chocobos he’d ever bred and what he’d learned from that experience. After that he told them about those birds, talking about them as if they were children. Then he told them about the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren and so on for about the next sixteen generations, maybe more. Cloud lost count early on.

When Bob told them he was heading out to the birthing pen to supervise a hatching, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

When only Cloud and Zack were still eating, , cleaning the pot down to the scorch marks under Sephiroth’s watchful eye, Tifa offered to set up their communal bed in the loft—which was more of a ledge than an actual floor—while the rest of them made use of the hot springs. Vincent shifted in silent protest but the young Nibelheimer pulled him down to whisper in his ear. She obviously meant for it to be private however, given just about everyone’s former lab rat status, probably only Tseng couldn’t hear what she said.

Even when half asleep, sore, and full, Cloud could blush.

He buried his face in his bowl and tried to pretend his childhood crush wasn’t making graphic suggestions about what she was going to do to the ex-Turk once she had him naked. Or at least he tried to pretend he couldn’t hear her. It was like imagining his sister in bed with someone... eww.

They were just finishing up the food and, feeling much better Cloud had to admit, when Vincent, Yazoo and Tseng came out of the back room looking as civilized as a Turk, a clone and a mutated experiment could. Tifa grinned in appreciation at the shine in the gunman’s hair. She even dared to run quick fingers through it, which made Vincent blush and duck his head back into his collar.

Yazoo and Vincent helped Tseng up the ladder—the Turk was nearly asleep on his feet—and Tifa went to take her turn in the water. That left the washing up to Cloud and Zack. Neither of them expected Sephiroth to do much although Zack couldn’t resist teasing the silver-haired warrior about how good he’d look in an apron.

Vincent came back down and walked past them to the outside door as if they didn’t exist. The ex-
Turk was probably intent on reaching the stables where he was to meet Tifa and the two of them were going to... Cloud hid his red face in the steam from the dish water, ingeniously piped from the same spring Tifa was bathing in, and that realization didn’t help the colour fade from his cheeks.

“Just how sore are you, Cloud?” Sephiroth asked and jolted the blond from the images in his head.

“He can barely raise his arms,” Zack answered for him. “And we all thought I was the careless one.”

“I didn’t think it would be so far,” Cloud defended himself but his voice wasn’t firm, it was apologetic; asking for indulgence.

“If you’d been attacked when you landed, would you have been able to defend yourself?” the General asked and it was the Silver General asking, not Cloud’s lover.

The blond stopped what he was doing and considered. He might have been able to fight but not for long and not well. He closed his eyes and nodded once, sharp. “Understood, Sir.”

Sephiroth stared at him, spooky cat-eyes giving all the warning and punishment he wasn’t saying out loud. He held the look, unblinking, until Cloud felt about knee-high, then he nodded, “Very good, Corporal.”

Cloud sighed in relief. Zack grinned at him; he’d been on the receiving end of the General’s non-verbal lectures many times: it was an experience. “Maybe you should give him a back rub,” he suggested playfully.

“I intend to,” the General replied calmly, “once we’re in the spring.” Zack opened his mouth to offer them privacy but Sephiroth glared at him. “I also intend to check you for frostbite or other damage from your exposure. I know you, Commander; you could have toes falling off and you would still be making jokes.” Zack had to admit that was true.

They were just finishing up the dishes when Tifa came out of the back room. She looked shiny and eager, and Cloud tried not to let his mind bring up the reason why.

“It’s free,” she said unnecessarily.

“Tseng and Yazoo seem to have settled in upstairs,” Sephiroth replied. “Vincent has gone outside to brood, as is his wont.” For the lab raised, genetically designed swordsman that was downright tactful. Zack coughed into his fist, hiding his laugh.

Tifa smiled. “I guess I’ll go see if I can cheer him up.”

Zack waved at her. He couldn’t help smiling but he tried not to make it leering or smirking. “Go get him, girl,” he muttered and made Cloud choke. Sephiroth looked at him in resignation. He shrugged. “What? Everybody’s entitled to some happiness.” He turned to the blond who was putting the last dish out to dry. “Yours, my little chocobo, includes a hot soak and a long massage.” The SOLDIER put his arm around his friend’s upper back and squeezed. Cloud barely contained his pained groan. “Don’t worry; you’re in good hands.”

Sephiroth followed behind them and saw that their steps matched and they moved in sync with one another. Tall and short, dark and blond, they fit each other perfectly. They were a set and the General felt heat settled low in his belly as he watched them walk away.
His eyes narrowed and he started to plan.
Vincent didn’t pace. He didn’t tap his fingers or his toes. He merely stood in the stables, surrounded by the noise and the warmth provided by the chocobos sheltered by the structure. He’d put his mantle over a pile of the mossy grass that the old man used as a bedding. He snuck glances at it. Having it on the ground rather than around his shoulders and over his face made him feel naked and exposed, and even more uncomfortable with the situation. So he stood, hands gripping opposite arms hard enough to almost cause pain, and wondered if he was a fool.

*Only if you leave now, my host.* Chaos’ voice was acerbic but Vincent hardly listened to it.

They’d been arguing ever since he’d left Yazoo and Tseng up in the loft and come down to the stables. Vincent knew what was at stake; if he left now, abandoned Tifa and ran away, there would be no hope for them at all. He knew that. He knew it down to his bones and to the depths of his soul.

He still wondered if he was a fool.

He wasn’t young. He wasn’t clean. He was too thin, too scarred, too ugly... plus it had been too long since he’d been with anyone. He wasn’t sure he even remembered what to do.

*Let me refresh your memory, my immortalis.* Chaos purred and images poured into Vincent’s mind; of lips and tongues and hands, gripping, holding, and squeezing. They were rough, urgent, needy images and Vincent shied away from them. He didn’t want to treat Tifa like a dockside whore. *She might like it, my own; many do.* Vincent ignored it and went back to not pacing.

Her footsteps, when he finally heard them, were light but they echoed in Vincent’s being. He could try to talk her out of this, encourage her to wait; except he’d practically promised not to back out.

“Vincent?” her voice was hesitant, as if she half thought he would have left.

“I’m here.” He hadn’t lit any of the lamps, not wanting the light. When she moved to one to ignite it he reached out a hand. “Wait...” She paused. How did he say it? He’d explained it to the young clone easy enough but Yazoo had grown up as an experiment; he knew what that meant. Tseng had been more asleep than awake. Vincent doubted the Turk would remember anything of their shared bath. Still... he’d never been good with words. He cleared his throat anxiously and her eyebrows went up at this sign of nerves. “The experiments that were performed on me...”

“Yes?” she encouraged.

“They didn’t always have enough of my skin left... after.” He couldn’t look at her; he couldn’t...
“So they used whatever they had available. Most of my body has my own skin, but not all of it.”

Tifa swallowed. She’d known it had been bad but this was more than what she’d read. She forced a smile, it was shaky but real; after all, he hadn’t run away. “So we’ll leave the lights off. I’m okay with that.”

Vincent closed his eyes in gratitude he hadn’t realized he would feel. “Thank you.” He heard her walk over to him. He felt her hand, so warm and real, cup his cheek and he had to lean into it. He opened his eyes to look at her, so warm and real. She was always warm and real.

*So kiss her already!* Chaos ordered impatiently.

It was good advice so Vincent took it. He cupped her face, long fingers holding her steady, for the touch of lips to lips. Hers were so moist and soft; enticing and irresistible. He tipped her head and ran his tongue along the seam of her mouth, once again using the caress to ask permission to enter and, once again she allowed him entry with a soft sigh. She tasted better than anything he’d ever experienced before. He explored this hidden part of her, tentatively at first, ready to retreat at the smallest sign that she was repulsed. It never happened and the kiss went on and on.

It was Tifa who finally took it to the next level. She leaned up into the kiss, deepening it and she took her turn exploring his mouth, running her little tongue over the points of his teeth, tickling the top of his mouth, and caressing all of his inner surfaces. She wasn’t gentle, not really, she wanted to know what he tasted like and that was that.

His arms tightened and she squeaked involuntarily. They loosened instantly. Vincent would have drawn back more but she was still kissing him and that he couldn’t pull away from.

“Mmm,” she hummed in approval as she retreated a little. Her arms were around his neck and he couldn’t even remember when that had happened.

He ran his thumbs over her cheeks, her eyebrows; he ran light kisses along her chin and over her nose. He nipped, lightly, at her earlobe and the sensitive skin on her neck. And she hummed and sighed and he could almost taste her smile.

He felt her hands pull his shirt out of his pants. She put them low on his back and he stiffened. “It’s alright, Vincent,” she soothed, “I’m not looking.” She ran her hands up his spine and he was aware of every ridge, every bump, that she encountered. He stood frozen with the fear that she would stop and tell him it was too much; he was too damaged. She leaned forward and kissed his collarbone through his shirt. It was gentle but also firm and sure. It was all of her acceptance demonstrated against his skin.

He let out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “Tifa,” he breathed. He lifted her face because he had to kiss her more, taste her more, because she was wonderful, and here with him, and he’d never known anyone like her.

He would’ve kept kissing her but again she broke away. She took a step back, putting some space between them, so that she could undo her shirt, slipping one button after the other through their holes and exposing her golden skin fingertip by fingertip. Vincent was enraptured, his gaze flicked between her busy hands and her face, downturned and intent. Even Chaos was silent in anticipation. Only when the shirt was completely undone did the small warrior look up at him. He didn’t know what she saw in his face but a small smile flickered on her lips and she reached up and took his hands, both bare for this, and placed them inside her open shirt, on her full breasts. He swallowed.
“It’s a good thing you have big hands,” she teased without bite as she held his hands in place with her own. His long fingers completely encased her soft flesh.

He couldn’t think. He didn’t know what to do. This was so much more than he’d anticipated, so much more real than he remembered. She was warm—Tifa was always warm—and firm. Her nipples were already hard little pebbles pushing through her bra into his palms. He didn’t have to think to know to rub them with the soft centres of his hands. Then it was an easy step to pet them with his fingers, to pinch them lightly through the cloth. His eyes devoured Tifa’s face as her lids fell over passion blurred eyes and she breathed out in gasps and soft pleas. Her cheeks were flushed and she was beautiful.

He could feel Chaos, inside him, purring approval; content to let him remain in control so long as this was the result... for now.

His gaze wandered over her but stopped at the pulse in her throat. It was beating a frantic rhythm. Her skin fluttered and danced and he had to know what that felt like. He leaned down and covered the spot with his lips; he tasted it with his tongue and scraped it with his teeth. He was rewarded when she jerked helplessly against him. He was encouraged when she moaned brokenly. She grabbed at him, holding his arms for the balance she’d lost.

It was a powerful feeling to have made such a strong woman weak and it made Vincent catch his breath. And he was breathing, panting actually, although he often didn’t need to. Now he couldn’t help it as his heart pounded. He actually had to pull away from her succulent skin in order to pull some much needed oxygen into his lungs.

“Please, please, Vincent,” Tifa gasped, “I don’t want to wait anymore.” She stepped away then took one of his hands and led him back to his cloak. He stood and watched as she removed her shirt. He was frozen when she reached behind her back to undo the clasp of her bra. When she saw that he hadn’t moved she held the scraps of material in place. “You’re making me nervous.”

He jolted a little, blinking and looking away. “I’m sorry. It’s just... I’m not...” He swallowed and tried again. “You are entrancing.”

“Oh...” she whispered. Then she grinned. “You sure know how to make a girl feel special but it would be nice if I weren’t the only one naked here.”

“Ah, yes. Of course,” he nodded agreement. He lifted his hands to the shirt he wore; it didn’t have buttons. He was going to have to pull it over his head, exposing himself in one abrupt motion very different from Tifa’s slow striptease. He reached down to the hem and took hold. He took a breath and lifted. When his head cleared the cloth, he saw Tifa stretching out her hands to run them over his chest. She used fingers, relaxed and loose. She used her whole hand, firm and strong. Finally, she used her nails, gently but with a hint of threat that had Chaos perking up inside him. Hastily, Vincent put his hand on top of hers, stopping the dangerous caress.

“You don’t like it?” she asked uncertainly.

“Parts of me like it too much.”

He could lie and say that he didn’t, but why? She already knew what he held inside him. “Parts of me like it too much.”

“Oh,” she smiled, “Oh dear.” Then she leaned forward and carefully kissed away the faint red marks. Her lips stopped at his nipples, small, flat discs barely a darker colour than the rest of his
skin. Only the pebbled texture and the little erect nub revealed to the dark-eyed fighter that they were his nipples. That and his reaction...

“Tifa,” he breathed as his hands lifted to hold her head in place. He couldn’t keep his eyes open. All his senses, all his being, focused on the moist caress of Tifa’s tongue on his body. It was electrifying, each touch jolting him low in his belly, yet it drained his strength and his will, leaving him swaying helplessly, caught. “Tifa,” he repeated, asking for something but he didn’t know what.

“It’s okay,” she answered against his skin. “In fact, it’s perfect.”

Her hands skimmed down his ribs, over his stomach to the belt on his pants. He caught his breath, feeling her movements through the leather. She pulled the end out, releasing it, and he ached. She pushed the band out through the loop, and he shuddered. He nearly whined when she let go of the belt but then he felt her hands on the buttons that held his pants together. It was too much. He grabbed a breath and her arms, and lifted her up so their faces were even, their eyes could watch each other, and their lips could touch but he didn’t want just to touch; he wanted to devour.

His kiss was hard and demanding, bruising in its intensity. He wrapped his arms around her tight enough to leave marks. It was only Chaos’ triumphant chortling that brought Vincent back from the brink, back to an awareness of what he’d almost done; he’d, almost tore at her, almost forced her down... almost hurt her.

The realization made Vincent’s legs go weak and he fell to his knees. His hands dropped loosely to her hips and his forehead rested against her soft belly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

Strong hands stroked through his shaggy hair. “Shh, shh,” Tifa murmured, “It’s still okay. You stopped and that’s what counts.” He didn’t know how long they stayed like that but he did find out that her belly tasted almost as good as her face and her neck. He had the vague thought that she probably tasted good all over.

*She would taste even better a little lower down and with fewer clothing, my immortalis. Trust me,* but Vincent clamped down on the demon inside him. This time he kept his touch light, gentle, loving.

She clutched at his skull, moaning. “Please, Vincent. A little harder.”

*I told you some like it a little rough,* Chaos sneered. Vincent could almost see the creature who shared his body and his consciousness tip his head in thought. *Some like it even rougher. They’re fun.*

The ex-Turk was determined not to let Chaos take control, not again because this was too important... but he wasn’t above taking some of the demon’s advice. He brought his hands around to the fastenings of Tifa’s regular issue pants and thought, as he had many times during the march, that there was just something about a firm, slim woman in stark, tough fatigues... Or maybe it was this woman he corrected himself as she groaned approval and undulated against his busy hands.

He licked the skin as he exposed it, he even allowed himself to nip at it lightly. She shuddered and he knew that it was definitely the woman wearing the pants that he found so fascinating. He had bared her vulnerable belly. One move from him and she would be disembowelled and dead; she had to know it and yet she trusted him. She trusted him... even with all his parts.
Vincent slid her pants down exposing even more of her tender flesh. It revealed the dark patch of hair at her centre; hair that hid her most personal, sensitive area. Her scent was richer here, her taste sharper, and he wanted more of it. He brought his hands to her inner thighs, encouraging her to spread just a little wider, before he tilted his head. He used his tongue to search out the small nub that was the centre of her pleasure. He used his long fingers to tease and caress the rest of her secret place. She was already wet and he spread the slick moisture around, bringing some of it up to his tongue so he could sample it. Tifa hummed in delight.

So did Chaos, but Vincent wasn’t telling that to the small warrior.

“I can’t wait anymore,” she said, stepping back and quickly shimmying out of the rest of her clothes. Vincent knelt, arms upraised, waiting for her return. He expected her to lay down in front of him, on the surface he’d prepared. Instead she pushed him over, pushed him back, forcing him to put out his hands to catch himself and leaving him stretched like an offering. Tifa stepped over him, centring her body over his, and crouched down.

At the touch of her moist heat, Vincent jerked up, massaging his penis against her cleft. “Tifa,” he called. The chocobos warked in response. Tifa just smiled and grabbed his erection, holding it steady so that she could impale herself on it in one long, smooth slide. To Vincent, the sound she made as she encased his engorged flesh was like coming home and he couldn’t help but echo it.

He could see her, in the dark, her face flushed and slack with pleasure. He could see her smile as she flexed internal muscles, testing the fit of their bodies. He watched as she leaned over him. He waited breathless as she nibbled from his chin to his ear. “So, I got my first chocobo riding lesson today. Wanna see what I learned?”

*Oh, I do so like the feisty ones,* Chaos cooed.

Vincent barely managed one nod. It was enough. The young fighter began to move, rocking her body over his, on his. Pulling away then returning in a controlled drop; relaxing and tightening inside to match the external movements. He started to move in counter-point, thrusting up as she came down. When she added a small circling motion when their bodies were closest together, Vincent could barely stop a keening sound from leaving his body.

He’d thought it was intense before but this... this was beyond anything he’d ever experienced. Encounters with Lucrecia had been quick and furtive. A race to achieve climax before someone walked in or called on the phone; a frantic effort to take advantage of what little time together they could find. It hadn’t been this. Tifa was moving steadily, firmly; milking her movements for the smallest sensation. A small smile flirted permanently on her lips... at least when she wasn’t biting them in pleasure. One thing she wasn’t was furtive or frantic. She moaned approval and encouragement and Vincent responded by pushing his hips up harder on her down stroke. When she twisted, he counter-rotated to increase her sensations.

“Oh gods, Vincent!” She was nearly shouting and the birds warked nervously at the unusual noise.

Tifa wasn’t the only one getting close to the edge. As the feelings intensified Vincent could feel Chaos pushing at him, wanting to take over, to take control of both of them; to take control period.

‘But look at her,’ Vincent urged and fixed his eyes on her face. ‘Look at her,’ he repeated and Chaos looked and saw a woman lost in the joy of the physical. ‘This is what letting her be in charge has done,’ the gunman argued.
*Well,* Chaos temporized, *when you put it that way...* and the demon backed off; content to watch the show once again.

Vincent was forced to use all his hard won discipline to hold his climax at bay. His body was tight and aching, muscles rigid, lungs starved for air, and the pressure to release something—anything—was enormous. He dug fingers into the hard-packed dirt floor, grabbing handfuls and squeezing, crushing the occasional stone to dust. He wasn’t going to let go, not yet. He wanted to wait; he wanted to see Tifa’s face lit up in shades of ecstasy. So he fought back his physical needs, he reined in his emotional response and he watched, waiting, intent.

When Tifa clutched at him, hands bruising, gasping out his name, he was rewarded. He could feel her body squeezing his erection, milking it, trying to pull him over with her. He could feel the liquid of her climax leaking out of her body and making his slick and moist. They were wonderful sensations, but they weren’t what put Vincent beyond his own control. What brushed aside the last of the ex-Turk’s resistance was the half-secret, satisfied smile she gave him with her lips and her eyes. It was a look that said he was okay, better than okay—he was perfect for her.

He jerked upright, holding her close as shudders wracked his body and his system pulsed in time with his orgasm. Inside him he could feel Chaos shouting exultantly—a triumphant scream. It was a good thing Vincent had no breath left or he would have echoed Chaos’ joy. Instead he struggled to say Tifa’s name and, once he managed it, he could do nothing but repeat it like a prayer. He buried his head against her chest and whispered thanks and praise, and her name, over and over as spasms ran through his body, through his mind, through his heart.

He had never, ever, felt like this before and he didn’t know what to do...

Somehow Tifa knew. She said nothing just held him as more than thirty years of pain and loneliness were released in a flood of emotions. She wrapped herself around him, holding him close and dropping gentle kisses on his shaggy hair.

The birds, who’d been warking nervously, eventually grew used to the strange noises and went back to sleep. The night was still around them as the emotional storm passed and Vincent could finally draw a full breath. Tifa’s hands were gentle on his cheeks as she lifted his face. He hadn’t cried, he no longer had the capacity, instead, she had cried. Maybe for herself but also for him; he could see the shiny tracks on the fighter’s cheeks. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had cried for him. He raised shaky fingers to wipe the traces away. “Tifa,” he breathed before leaning forward and kissing her, deeply, gently, thoroughly, before pulling back to gaze in wonder at her.

“That was nice,” she said, voice low and lazy, “That was very nice.”

*Well, I don’t know about you, my immortalis, but I think it was worth the wait,* Chaos purred in reflected pleasure. *When can we do it again?*

Zack loved the hot spring pool. The moist heat reminded him of home, he said, as long as he ignored the darkness, the bare rock walls and the weird-ass mineral build up on most of the ceiling.

“And if one allows for there being no plants, no wildlife and no smell of rotting vegetation,” Sephiroth pointed out.
“Picky, picky, picky.” Zack was already half-naked. He’d started stripping as soon as the main room was out of sight, pulling off his belly guard and shucking his weapon harness. He was nearly bouncing and Cloud couldn’t help but smile at his friend’s recuperative powers. The guy’s patron god had tried to kill him and yet now, just hours later, he was singing bathtub songs. The Corporal was staring at the skin revealed, checking to see if any of that ghastly paleness remained, but it was back to its nice, rich tan colour, except...“You have snowflakes on your back too.”

The First twisted his head around trying to see. “Do they look good?” he asked. “Do you think Aerith will like them?”

“I like the General’s freckles and it’s the same idea, right?” It popped out of his mouth without thinking, because he did like the idea of General Sephiroth having freckles on his chest. It wasn’t until Zack turned around fully, a big grin on his face and an evil teasing look in his eye, that Cloud thought that he maybe shouldn’t have mentioned it.

“Four demerits, Corporal Strife,” Sephiroth said silkily, “I’ll punish you later.”

The soldier swallowed, “Understood, Sir.”

“Freckles?” Zack was still grinning. “You know, Sir, you were also exposed to extreme cold and wind chill. Maybe I should check you out for frost bite and stuff.” As he said it, the SOLDIER stalked forward obviously expecting Sephiroth to react in his usual repressed fashion. When the silver-haired warrior casually and easily slipped out of his coat and his harness and moved forward to be inspected, Zack stopped and his jaw dropped; “Uh...”

“They’re small,” Sephiroth said straight-faced, “so you’ll have to get quite close.”

Zack stood frozen in place, just looking at his CO. “Uh,” he repeated.

The General’s lids half fell in triumph and he moved a pace closer to the dark-haired SOLDIER. “You can get as close as you like... Commander,” he purred, “I won’t mind. In fact, I’ll enjoy it.”

Cloud chuckled, breaking the spell. He was already stripped down to his pants. “You two carry on. I’m going to go soak and, um, see who comes out on top.”

Sephiroth turned his cat-green gaze on his small lover, “Very droll, Cloud.”

The blond bent down to remove his boots. “You did say we were both on notice.” He smiled as he stood up, “I think you just gave it.”

“No he didn’t,” the First protested.

Cloud ignored what Zack said, still smiling but now it was lazy and predatory. “Personally, I’m looking forward to it.” He retrieved the little tube from his side pocket before he undid his pants, and kicked them off. Then he moved around the still frozen SOLDIER and into the pool. He sighed as tired muscles were enveloped by the comforting heat of the water; it felt wonderful. He shut his eyes briefly, but quickly opened them again, unwilling to miss any of the show. His lids stopped at the mid-point and wouldn’t go any higher. It was okay; he could see Zack shifting his weight, trying to work out his nerves.

“I thought you were joking,” Zack said, one hand on his hip, one in his hair.

“Did you really?” Cloud could almost see the General’s eyebrow lift in mocking surprise.

Zack stammered a reply. “Well, no, but... I mean...” but Zack didn’t know what he meant and his
mouth was too dry to continue. He stared into his CO’s odd eyes and felt hypnotized like he had when he was a snot-nosed volunteer freshly arrived in Midgar. Sephiroth stepped closer. The SOLDIER wasn’t moving, wasn’t backing away from the silver-haired warrior, but he wasn’t reaching out either.

“Do you need to call Ms. Gainsborough again, Commander?”

“Ah no, actually; her permission was pretty comprehensive. Although she says she wants pictures.” Zack leaned back and away, freaked that he’d let that slip, sure that the General would pick up on it and tease him about it—it’s what he would do after all—but Cloud was spitting out an embarrassed sound in the pool and it pulled the General’s attention to him. Zack let out a sigh of relief.

“Pictures?” the blond choked out, astounded and horrified. He looked up at his two companions, stunning eyes looking even larger in the dim light.

“Yeah or, y’know, a live demonstration—Fuck,” Zack spat out unthinking. How he was equally dismayed as his friend in the water. “I can’t believe I said that. I wasn’t going to say that; not ever.” He looked over at the General, his eyes nearly as big as Cloud’s.

Sephiroth reached up to touch his SiC’s cheek, to pull his focus back to the here and now. He stroked soft fingers over tanned skin, smooth and hairless like that of all SOLDIERs. “Cloud was correct: I do want to enjoy some intimate time with both of you. However, if you feel it will jeopardize your relationship with Ms. Gainsborough then I will reduce my expectations. We will bath together and check each other for injuries, and then you will leave and join the others in the sleeping area.” Zack’s mouth opened to comment but a long finger moved to cover it. “There will be no recriminations if you chose to go, no anger, no hurt. I have seen your… soul house and I understand how important she is to you.” Sephiroth tipped his head slightly and silver hair slithered over fine features hiding his eyes, teasing his cheeks, and making him seem somehow young and wistful.

Zack swallowed. If Sephiroth had’ve assumed that he would jump into the sack with them whenever, just because he’d done it before, Zack would’ve had an easy time saying no, but he hadn’t. The lab-raised super-warrior had been earnest and hesitant and so freaking honest with his emotions that Zack couldn’t do it; he couldn’t turn him down and, if he was honest with himself, he didn’t really want to. He’d nearly died today—again—and, even though Shiva had been holding him, he’d felt really freaking alone. It just felt odd to have his girlfriend’s permission to sleep with a couple other guys, or maybe he kept expecting to hear his mother’s voice scolding him.

But he did want to see the boss’s freckles…

He took a breath and settled his weight. “Nah, I’m not going anywhere.” He stepped closer.

They were nearly the same height, he and the General. It was easy to lean forward and press his lips to Sephiroth’s. He brought his hands up and wrapped them around the swordsman’s strong arms. It kept them slightly apart so the kiss was light, tasting, savouring, rediscovering. Sephiroth echoed the grip and locked them together.

Cloud floated, using lazy hands to hold him steady in the gentle current, and watched with half-lidded eyes. He could understand why the General had enjoyed watching him and Zack together that time. The two warriors were good looking in completely different ways, reserved silver and enthusiastic black, but each so very, very strong. They matched each other in height and strength; their personalities fit by filling the gaps of the other, but what made Cloud’s breath catch was the contrast between strength and tenderness they were showing. They were kissing with all the
vulnerability of first love.

He could tell when they deepened the kiss; their heads tipped and, with each movement of tongue-to-tongue, Zack’s hair waved and the General’s rippled over his body. Zack’s hum deepened. The Corporal swallowed and watched as his lover lifted a hand to cup his friend’s cheek so they could deepen their kiss. Cloud could hear the sounds they made; moist licks, unconscious purrs, and it tempted him to go over and join them. Then they relaxed their grip and shifted positions so Cloud stayed where he was and watched.

Sephiroth was first, placing his long hands over the defined muscles of Zack’s chest. He didn’t stroke but just flexed, digging in his fingertips ever so slightly. The caress brought the big First to his toes.

As much as Cloud wanted to lie back in the warm water and enjoy the show, he was now breathing too hard to float. His dropped his feet to the bottom of the pool and moved closer. He flowed through the water, feeling it part around his aroused body and caress his sensitive skin. He felt it and did his best to ignore it. He wanted to watch but he wanted to touch as well... and be touched.

He watched as the dark-haired SOLDIER ran his hand over Sephiroth’s broad back, from collar to hip. The General’s deep purr was enough to freeze the blond in place once again. Sephiroth wrapped his arms around the First, burying one hand in Zack’s thick hair and running the other down his spine until it reached the SOLDIER’s firm, fine ass. Even then the General didn’t squeeze just caressed and massaged and stroked. Zack made a helplessly needy sound and Cloud couldn’t help but echo it. It broke the spell and both Zack and Sephiroth pulled back.

Zack was breathing hard, broad shoulders rising and falling, “Fuck, Seph,” he said.

“Only if you wish to.” Sephiroth had somewhat better control over his body but Cloud could see his ribs bellowing. The General was just as affected as his SiC.

Zack pulled back even further, running an anxious hand through his hair. Cloud caught his breath, waiting for the answer. Zack gave a laughing little cough, “Yeah, you know I do,” and the blond released the breath in relief.

“It works better with no clothes,” he suggested.

Zack looked over at him, mouth lifted in a fond half-smile, “You feeling all alone over there, Spike?”

Cloud shook his head slowly, “Actually, I was just thinking that your girlfriend had the right idea about watching and all.”

This time Zack’s laugh was loud and his smile was wide. “Y’know,” he said brightly, “it’s disconcerting to discover that all my pals are pervs.”

“It’s just…” Cloud flushed but stood his ground, “you guys are gorgeous together,” he finished earnestly.

It was Zack’s turn to blush. Sephiroth smiled, a slyly lecherous little smile, and stepped behind the dark-haired First. He wrapped his arms around Zack’s body, trapping the SOLDIER’s arms to his sides. The General turned them so that Zack was facing the pool... and the wide-eyed gaze of their companion. He placed his hands high on Zack’s chest and slowly stroked his way downward.

“What th-the hell?” Zack stammered even as the muscles in his torso jumped and his nipples hardened.
Sephiroth leaned forward so his mouth was right next to Zack’s ear, “I’m checking for frostbite.”

“Oh shit,” Zack whispered as long hands caressed his skin. The SOLDIER looked over to the pool and saw Cloud staring, open mouthed, at him on display. “Seph…”

“Shh,” he whispered in return before nipping at the sensitive ear. When Zack gasped in response, the General licked it as a reward. He dragged his fingers over Zack’s strong ribs. Here, where the muscles were so dense, a firmer touch was needed to bring the nerves to life. From ribs he moved lower, softening his grip on this, more delicate, area. He kept his eyes on Cloud, standing tense and eager in the water. There was a suspicious ripple where the blond’s arm disappeared beneath the surface. “No touching, Corporal,” he ordered, “Four demerits, remember?”

Cloud swallowed and lifted his arms out of the water. “Understood, Sir,” He placed his hands behind his head and the General could see how he trembled with anticipation and arousal.

“Do you see that, Commander?” Sephiroth murmured, “See how he quivers? He likes this. He likes seeing you helplessly aroused. Are you as excited as he is, I wonder.” On the last words, Sephiroth moved his hands lower, over pebbled skin, to the closure on the First’s pants. He opened it with one hand, pulled the zipper down slowly and carefully as Zack’s erection was pressing eagerly against the cloth. The General didn’t unzip him all the way, just enough for him to slide his hand in and gently clasp the flushed organ.

“Odin’s balls!” the SOLDIER yelped. He stretched his body upwards, trapped inside Sephiroth’s arms, trying to push himself harder against that calloused hand. Sephiroth just licked at his ear and let his hand rest, unmoving, on the First’s aching flesh. It didn’t help Zack’s control to see that Cloud’s hips were jerking uselessly into the water around him, as if he could feel the silver-haired warrior’s hands around his cock... or wanted to. Zack moaned, pressing his backside into the firm body behind him, and was reassured when he felt the evidence of Sephiroth’s arousal. At least he and Cloud weren’t the only ones affected by the game.

And it was a game, Zack realized, a game of tease and please, and who could last the longest. He smiled in relief. He wasn’t good at being patient, but he was great at teasing. He pressed back harder, undulating slightly like a stripper in a bar. His hands were trapped by the General’s so he couldn’t lift them but he could reach back and grab onto Sephiroth’s thighs. He could even slide them higher on those strong legs, high enough to grab handfuls of leather-coated ass. Then he did what Seph had done to him: he didn’t squeeze, just caressed and massaged and stroked. He was rewarded by Sephiroth pushing his erection more firmly into Zack’s backside.

The silver-haired warrior growled and punished him—if that was the right word for it—by placing his teeth on the sensitive juncture of his neck and biting down. The First couldn’t help it; he surrendered. He tipped his head to the side to give his CO better access to the area. The General’s hand tightened on his hard flesh and Zack happily pumped up into it, enjoying the mild relief the movement brought.

He shifted his hands forward around the General’s slim hips, squirreling them in between their bodies. He stopped just before they would have covered Seph’s groin, letting them rest, open-handed, on either side of the General’s long length. Then he undulated.

“You play a dangerous game,” Sephiroth growled in his ear even as his arms tightened and his hips moved.


“Actually, Commander, I believe it’s your ass on the table.” The General removed his hand from
the First’s pants making him mutter a protest, but it was only so that he could use both hand to push the material down, baring his middle completely both for his touch and for Cloud’s enjoyment. Sephiroth hadn’t forgotten that his small, blond lover was in the pool watching. In fact, he’d kept an eye on Cloud’s reactions, watching him watch them. Seeing the young man quivering with tension was almost as arousing as having the dark-haired SOLDIER at his mercy. He wondered who would break first...

“Fucking hells, Seph,” Zack gasped, hips turning, seeking the contact they’d had before.

The General didn’t oblige. Instead he placed one hand in Zack’s pubic hair and let it rest, barely caressing the patch of coarse curls. With the other he reached down and cupped his friend’s heavy sac. It was still a little loose so the SOLDIER wasn’t at breaking point yet. He lifted it so Cloud would see it more clearly, then he rolled it, massaging the tender globes with his thumb. Zack’s erection jerked and he heard Cloud moan in response.

“Shall I make you orgasm, Commander?” Sephiroth asked in a voice loud enough to be heard over the water but quiet enough to be smoothly threatening. “Shall I stroke you until you pulse? It would likely land on your stomach, looking remarkably like your little stars. Do you think Cloud would like to watch you do that?” He paused, licking away a drop of sweat from the SOLDIER’s hot skin. Then he leaned closer and whispered for Zack’s ears only, “Do you think your flower girl would like to see that?”

Zack spasmed, body jerking, hands gripping whatever surface they could find.

“Or should I let you bury yourself in Cloud’s body while I’m buried in yours and we can all climax together?”

“Holy fucking shit,” was all Zack could whimper.

“I vote for option number two,” Cloud called out. His voice cracked in the middle but he was beyond caring. He’d inched his way closer, drawn to the display, and the water level was too low to hide the flush of arousal that stained his neck and chest or his strutting penis weeping pre-cum into the pool.

Sephiroth smiled at his lover. “You want me to be fucking him while he’s fucking you, is that it, Cloud?”

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud replied faintly, chest heaving. Somehow the crude swear words sounded wrong coming out of Sephiroth’s mouth but it also made them sound more... more erotic at the same time.

“I’m supposed to be punishing you, Corporal.”

Cloud swallowed, crestfallen. “Yes, Sir,” he said miserably.

“However,” Sephiroth continued after a long pause, “That is too close to punishing myself and that I don’t want to do.” His lips quirked in triumph at the blond’s sigh of relief. “What do you say, Zackary; do you think you can do two things at once?”

The First’s hands gripped and regripped the leather pants they were resting on. “I have no fucking idea,” he finally said, gasping, “but I’m willing to try.”

The two SOLDIERS stripped out of the rest of their clothes. They could have gone faster but Sephiroth insisted on stopping Zack by kissing him or petting him. The Silver General was pretty fucking distracting when he wanted to be, the dark-haired First thought. Zack was crouching to untie his boots—having learned that bending over to do it wasn’t a good idea—but he kept an eye
on Cloud who was searching out the perfect spot in the pool, one where he could be laid out like a harvest day feast. The young soldier was acting like a kid getting a long anticipated present and Zack smiled to see it. It wasn’t often the mountain boy allowed himself to be giddy.

The SOLDIER straightened and was blinded by the flash of the camera in the General’s PHS. “What the hells?”

Sephiroth clicked another one before folding the device and putting it away. “Perhaps it’s for Ms. Gainsborough.”

“You are fucking kidding me,” Zack complained. The silver-haired SOLDIER quirked his lips and Zack could see the evil teasing humour lighting up his eyes. “I’m going to have to keep you two separated.”

The General stalked forward. He reached down to run a hard stroke up the First’s shaft. “Ready?”

Zack came up on his toes at the caress; it was so firm it was almost painful but not quite. Or maybe he was just overly sensitive. He didn’t know and, with Sephiroth continuing the massage, he didn’t really care. “I’m ready,” he gasped out.

Sephiroth’s eyes glinted, “Then let us proceed.” He placed his hand on the SOLDIER’s back and pushed him forward toward the water where Cloud waited, mouth slightly open, panting.

The blond watched them approach and licked his lips. Both the men were bigger than him, taller and wider, and the presence each had made them seem even larger. He memorized the way they moved—Sephiroth’s feline prowl and Zack’s confident strut. They walked into the water as if they owned it. The same way they’d walked over the ice and the tundra and along the bone trail to the ancient city. He wanted to move like that and knew he didn’t. He moved like what he was, a ground trooper, which meant he walked to cover the most ground using the least energy with the most awareness. It wasn’t sexy, not like the two SOLDIERs were sexy. And yet he was here, with them, and they wanted to be with him.

Miracles did happen.

Sephiroth kept his hand low, resting just above Zack’s buttocks. He made sure the First preceded him to where Cloud was waiting. The blond had found a ledge and lined the rock with towels. The tube of lubricant thoughtfully placed nearby and the General couldn’t help the way his chest swelled. His little Corporal was a very straight-forward person and, after years of dealing with the egos of scientists, bureaucrats and his fellow genetically-enhanced Generals, Cloud’s pragmatism was extremely attractive. He wouldn’t have to suffer through hissy-fits, temper-tantrums or endless quotations from Loveless with Corporal Strife.

He leaned forward to whisper into one tanned ear, “He’s waiting for you,” then he pushed his SiC forward.

Zack had to lick his lips they were so dry. Cloud was waiting next to the bed he’d prepared. He had his hands braced on the stone behind him—very carefully in sight so that the General knew he was still obeying his orders. It stretched out his torso, elongating his body so that the water barely reached his belly button. More importantly, it barely covered the young soldier’s straining erection. Each ragged breath made the water ripple and each ripple teased the aching flesh just a little more.

“Hey Spike,” the SOLDIER said softly as he approached.
Cloud looked at him with large eyes, blue and anxious. Suddenly, he seemed so frigging young that Zack stopped. He looked at his friend wondering if this was really the right thing to do. Maybe they—he and Seph—were taking advantage of the young soldier. Although they’d shared a bed before, even had sex, Cloud had been comatose for one of those times and half asleep for the other so those hardly counted. There was that kiss though, back in the Cetran village; that had been pretty explicit, but Cloud had just finished kissing the General so of course he’d’ve been all revved up. There was the times they were together in the lab but he didn’t really know how to think about that, not really.

The SOLDIER didn’t realize that his eyes were just as anxious as Cloud’s, just as uncertain, so that he looked liked years and years of pain had been stripped away leaving a little boy afraid to ask for a treat. When Cloud stepped forward and placed his hand on Zack’s chest, he jumped. He looked down at his friend and watched as Cloud’s shy teasing smile lit his features, “Hey, Flake.”


In answer, Cloud leaned forward and kissed one of the pale snowflakes that covered the scars from where the bullets had ripped him apart. Then he kissed another one, and another, and Zack pulled in a ragged breath. It didn’t help when Sephiroth stepped up behind him and began doing the same thing to the marks on his back. It especially didn’t help when the silver-haired SOLDIER concentrated on the ones that had appeared in the fine down that marked where his wings emerged. When Cloud’s hands began to wander, Zack jerked and fine tremors began to run through his muscles.

He knew he was making noises; he knew he was probably praying and begging and pleading but he also knew he wasn’t going to be able to stop. He felt like he was between two different electric currents and they were feeding in to him and the charge was building and building. “Fuck, look out,” he gasped, “my wings...” and out they popped, a sure sign that he was losing all control.

“Oh, there they are,” the General purred in satisfaction and then he leaned down and kissed them too.

Zack looked down his back in shock, barely aware of the tiny hands digging their talons into his shoulders. Sure enough, Seph was caressing the leathery membrane, kissing it and petting it delicately. “Shiva’s tits,” he whispered. He turned shocked eyes back on Cloud; Cloud, who was smiling at him in smooth satisfaction, as if he somehow knew what his General was doing even if he couldn’t see it.

“Now you get to find out what it feels like.” Cloud’s smile deepened—Zack had done the same thing to him back in the lab.

“So it’s revenge, is it?” He tried to sound fierce but his voice shook and made Cloud chuckle evilly at him.

Screw talking, Zack decided. He bent and grabbed the blond around the thighs, lifting him straight up. He stepped to the ledge and tipped Cloud over onto the towels he’d set up. He arched over the smaller man and shut his mouth by the easiest and most pleasurable means available to him: he kissed that soft, sweet mouth. It wasn’t tentative or delicate—Zack had had enough of that shit—it was demanding and dominating and a hell of a lot of fun.

“Did you prep?” he asked urgently. Cloud shook his head silently so Zack grabbed the tube and squeezed some of the gel out on his fingers. He reached down and found Cloud’s entrance. He felt the soldier relax his body, all the tension leaving the tight muscles so that the SOLDIER could insert his fingers easily. Which was great because he was quickly running out of patience—Seph
was still behind him stroking his fucking wings and playing with the light covering of fur on his spine. Sadistic bastard, Zack cursed.

“I assure you, I only do so when it’s fun for everyone,” Sephiroth cooed and pressed harder making Zack shudder and moan.

“And he’s good at it too,” Cloud added with a smirk. He was lifting himself up, trying to force Zack’s fingers in deeper, trying to keep them in longer. His pale blue eyes glowed with the power of his desire and Zack nearly laughed in relief to see it. He was feeling out of fucking control, it was about time someone else in the group felt the same way.

He lifted Cloud’s legs, encouraging the blond to hook them over his hips, and then he guided himself to the small opening. With short pushes and strained groans, he worked himself in. The General helped by hitching Cloud’s legs up higher which felt nice—really nice. It occurred to Zack that he should’ve propped Cloud’s legs up on his shoulders because then his wing hands would be digging into Cloud’s ankles instead of his shoulders. Not that he minded, really, but he was sweating and it made the little wounds sting.

They were all murmuring words of praise and encouragement to each other, a soft sound that barely traveled beyond the three of them. Zack could feel Sephiroth standing close, watching him work his way into their smaller companion, and he was amazed, once again, at the sheer presence of the man; the energy and focus he brought to everything he did. No wonder Jenova had wanted him… Then the General reached down to rub the area where he and Cloud were joined. His hand pressed gently on Zack’s balls and the SOLDIER forgot what he’d been thinking. He moaned instead.

Cloud lifted himself up onto his elbows so that he could watch as Zack slid into him. When the SOLDIER moaned and closed his eyes he reached up and took Zack’s full, wide mouth with his own, capturing the sound.

“I can’t move,” Zack finally gasped. “If I do, I’m gonna go. I know it.”

“What if I move?” Cloud purred and followed action to words, moving his hips slowly up and down, squeezing and releasing the organ penetrating his body.


Cloud looked over the First’s shoulder and saw Sephiroth looking both predatory and content, which seemed like an odd combination until he realized that the General had planned this. He’d wanted this, or something like it, and now he had it. He caught his lover’s eye and grinned at him, letting him know that this was good, better than good. The General’s little half-smile deepened into a full, deep one.

“Bend over further, Zackary,” the silver-haired swordsman ordered. He pushed until the angle was correct then he used his foot to bump the big SOLDIER’s legs further apart. The General cautiously slid his lube-covered fingers into his friend’s small entrance. He stretched the tight muscle, worked the slick inner passage. He was careful to not hit Zack’s sensitive prostate. This wouldn’t be any fun if the First wasn’t with him and Cloud. The SOLDIER moaned and twitched in response, once again burying his head against the smaller man’s chest. Sephiroth could see his fists clench until they were white-knuckled—like snowflakes against his dark skin, and the leathery wings began beating the air.
“Think of Scarlett in full seductress mode,” Cloud whispered to the dark-haired First. Sephiroth’s eyebrow rose at the comment. He’d been approached a couple times by the ambitious Director but he hadn’t been aware that the First had had any encounters with her.

“Shit! Gross and, y’know, fucking scary,” Zack muttered back. Whatever memory Cloud had pulled up for Zack, it seemed to work. His wings settled into soft twitching and he relaxed or, at least, he relaxed enough.

The swordsman withdrew his fingers and used the excess lubricant to coat his own full erection before he stepped closer and began to slowly, carefully, insert his length. Zack started muttering, frantic and filled with swear words. Cloud murmured soothingly back and ran his fingers through the dark hair. Even so, every once in a while the SOLDIER’s whole body would clench and Sephiroth would have to stop and wait until the spasm passed. By the time he was fully embedded, the swordsman was gritting his teeth so hard he could hear them grind.

Zack relaxed as best he could given everything but he could feel the tension running like electrified wires up and down his spine from his brain to where the action was. This was beyond anything he’d ever imagined—and he had a good imagination! The feeling of Cloud, under him, around him, combined with Seph behind him, inside him, thrusting firmly but not rough... Zack didn’t know how to describe it. It was kinda like getting a mako injection, maybe, when the worst of the after-effects had worn off and it felt like flying. Except he wasn’t flying, he couldn’t. He was tethered to the ground, to his body, and he was loving it.

He’d love it more if Seph would only start to fucking move!

“Patience, Commander,” Sephiroth murmured and massaged at his lower back, encouraging the muscles to relax more fully. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Cloud reached up and cupped his friend’s face in both hands. “Shh, Zack. It’s okay. It’s gonna be good. Trust me,” he said between kisses and soft strokes. He kissed his way over the SOLDIER’s, every feature precious to him, until he came to the lips. He’d always loved Zack’s mouth, wide and friendly but sculpted which somehow made it more masculine than his own bow lips. He played with those lips now, licking and sucking and biting down gently. All the while he kept up his soothing murmur.

More and more of the First’s attention was pulled to their interaction as Zack tried to catch Cloud’s mobile mouth with his own. Then the General started to move, firm, steady strokes, and it felt like sparks under his skin, in his belly. “Oh fucking hells,” he moaned because the movement forced him deeper into Cloud then released him to shift back. It wasn’t thrusting, more like a massage, and it was absolutely fucking mind-blowing.

He grabbed the smaller man’s cheeks and held him so that he could force that lush little mouth open and thrust his tongue in. All the aggressiveness and passion that the General wasn’t using to fuck him, Zack put into the movement of his tongue.

“That’s it,” Sephiroth purred. His eyes were half closed and his lips were curled. He could easily hear the sounds the two other men were making. He leaned over to kiss Zack’s snowflake-covered scars. “Do you like this, Zackary; how I feel inside you and how you feel inside him?” His only answer was a low growl. “Doesn’t he feel good around you?”

“Hells yeah,” Zack groaned. He had to let go of Cloud’s mouth to drag in some much needed air but he didn’t have the strength to keep his head up. He let it rest against Cloud’s collar, tucked in beside the slim column of his neck. Zack could feel the thundering pulse in the big artery—this was getting to his friend as much as it was getting to him. That made Zack feel better.
The blond was squeezing him, rocking his hips, moving with the same slow, steady rhythm the
General was using. “You guys are fucking sadists, you know that right?” Zack asked rhetorically.
He didn’t have to see to know they were both smiling.

At last Seph took pity on him and lengthened his strokes, moving faster and just a little harder.
When he followed suit with Cloud, the blond called out, arching his head back and exposing more
of that long, white neck. Zack took advantage of the posture and began munching on it; exploring
the skin with his teeth, sucking up the sheen of sweat with his lips, leaving marks that would fade
before morning.

Cloud reached down between them, running his trembling hands over his own skin until he could
encircle his aching cock.

“I said no touching, Corporal,” Sephiroth reminded him softly.

“But Sir...” It was practically a whine.

“Corporal,” his voice was firm and Cloud reluctantly released himself. He stretched his arms up
over his head to prove that he was obeying. “Good boy,” Sephiroth purred in approval. Such
obedience deserved a reward, he decided. “Commander, perhaps you can take over?”

Zack lifted himself up onto one arm so that he could do as he’d been asked. As he wrapped his
fingers around the blond’s fat phallus, he whispered “My turn, Spike.” Cloud whimpered and
keened his pleasure.

It became like a dance, an intricate, multi-tempo dance. Zack massaged Cloud erection at half the
speed he was fucking him, while he was being fucked slightly faster by the General. Of course,
they were all speeding up. It was inevitable because, under the physical sensations, was an
awareness of what each other was feeling; a thread of sensation thrumming in harmony between
them.

As amazing as it was, something good had come out of having Jenova cells fused onto their own.

“Indeed, Zack. It is a most intriguing side effect.” Sephiroth struggled to keep his voice calm but
knew he’d failed. Not that it mattered; not here, not now, not with these two. He moved faster,
making sure to caress his friend’s prostate with each stroke. He could feel the heat they generated,
the tension, the anticipation growing. It would be soon. One of them would reach the breaking
point and the other two would follow like dominos, the General knew it. He also knew that he
wanted to be last. He wanted to experience his friends’ climaxes, hear their voices, feel their bodies
convulse and explode.

Who would be first?

It was almost too much. Caught in between them, Zack felt like he was going to combust. His
wings fluttered and the little hands flexed uncontrollably. It didn’t help that Cloud was pleading,
begging him to finish it, and undulating like a fifty gil stripper. Zack focussed on Cloud’s face, his
amazing eyes, and concentrated on it to take his mind off the pressure that was building and
building inside him. He tightened his grip on the blond’s penis and started to pump him harder and
faster, determined to make the mountain boy go before he did.

“Gods, Zack!” Cloud called.

“Do it. C’mon, Spike, do it!” Zack murmured back. “I wanna see you go over.”

“I want that as well, Cloud,” Sephiroth’s smooth tones seconded the idea. “I would like to see your
climax.”

As if it were a command, like what he’d done on the ice to rescue Zack, the young soldier heard that voice and obeyed. His eyes closed, his back arched, and he shook hard, over and over and over. He let out a strangled, broken scream. Thick, pearly fluid jetted out, striping his chest and belly, and coating Zack’s hand.

“Fuck, that’s hot.” Zack kept moving but he was entranced by the look on his friend’s face. Sephiroth leaned forward and murmured into his ear, “You look like that when you climax.” The General sped up again. It wasn’t intentional but watching Cloud, imagining Zack with the same look...

Zack moaned and cursed. Cloud was milking him, body clenching as the orgasm ran through him. Sephiroth was really fucking him now, no longer in total control of his body. He could hear their gasping breaths, smell the rich scent of their bodies, feel their bodies moving over his. He could sense their emotions so strong and primal, calling him, urging him to let go and he wanted to. The pressure coiled, tightened... and let go.

He couldn’t help the shout that echoed off the wall of the cave. He couldn’t help his wings beating and lifting him slightly. He couldn’t help but bury himself inside Cloud’s body and pulse and pulse, filling the passage with his own warm, thick juices. His mind was white and empty. There was only sensation, running through him, expanding. His only consolation was that Seph’s orgasm was only beats behind his. The slim warrior curled over him, his long hair falling forward to drape over them all. The General emptied himself in a series of sharp thrusts, short and hard, hitting Zack’s pleasure spot every time.

Zack swore but weakly. The little wing hands grabbed fistfuls of hair and held on as if the strands were a lifeline.

They knew they might never be like this again, even if they all survived the fight, so they strained and fought to keep the sensations going, to enjoy them to their fullest. But nothing is eternal and eventually the intensity faded leaving them all boneless.

“Shit,” Zack sighed, “If we don’t move soon I’m gonna collapse on the little guy.”

“I’m not little,” Cloud protested, “You’re just gi-normous.”

“Perhaps there’s a shallow part of the pool, where we can sit and recover?” the General suggested hopefully.

Cloud flapped his arm at furthest part of the cave. “Over there, where the stream enters it.”

Sephiroth slowly and reluctantly disengaged from the body holding him. He took a step back to give the Commander room and just had to stretch. He felt sleepy and relaxed. They were enjoyable sensations.

Zack braced himself on his arms and leaned backwards, pulling out in one steady move. However, it was quite another matter to straighten. He ached in places he hadn’t known existed. “Oh wow.”

He felt Sephiroth’s hands on his lower back, kneading out the kinks, massaging away the stiffness. “The ledge was a little low, Spike,” he complained as he stood up straight, flexing and twisting to get rid of the last of it.

“You’re just getting old,” Cloud countered.
Zack grimaced. “Yeah, maybe,” he said reluctantly then he grinned, “But it sure beats the alternative.” He bent over and scooped up the smaller blond. “If I’m sore then you gotta be worse. That rock is friggin’ hard.”

“Um, yeah, Zack... that’s why is called ‘rock’ and not, y’know, ‘grass’,” Cloud mocked.

“Eat me.”

Cloud smiled against Zack’s shoulder. “Okay. Just give me a minute to get my energy back.” Zack just laughed. The Corporal was so limp that if he let him go he’d just sink to the bottom and happily drown. Hells, he was freaking limp. He doubted he had another round in him.

“Let’s leave the encore for some other time. We should probably clean up and get some sleep,” the General interrupted their teasing conversation. “We have a great deal of ground to cover before we reach the Northern Crater. We need to get an early start.”

“We could steal some of Bob’s chocobos,” Cloud said sleepily, “They’d get us there in no time.”

Sephiroth stopped dead, “An excellent suggestion, Corporal.”

Cloud looked up in shock, “I was only kidding, Sir. We can’t steal his birds; I don’t think they’d let us for one thing.” They were in shallow water now so Zack let the blond slide down before sinking into the water and stretching out. His wings fluttered and splashed the hot liquid over him before finding a rhythm that let him float without effort.

The General’s lips quirked up. “We won’t steal them, Cloud. We’ll ask Bob to loan them to us.” He placed the towels carefully out of the water before returning to sit near his companions.

“We’ll probably have to promise that you won’t do battle with any of them,” Zack smirked, “Y’know, guarantee their safety, that kind of thing.”

Cloud gingerly sat down in the hot water. He had a few scrapes and they stung a little. “I’m never living that down, am I?”

“Not a chance.” Zack said happily. Sephiroth shook his head in agreement.

Cloud sighed in embarrassment and let his whole body slide under the water. Sometimes life was just unfair.
Bob agreed to lend them some of his chocobos. Despite the initial impression he'd given him, the chocobo mage wasn’t completely oblivious to what was happening outside of his valley. He just didn’t care much. They left him and his birds alone and that was good enough for him. But, when the General told him that their eventual goal was to break up the world and travel the stars on its remains, Bob had to believe him. He picked out some blue ones that could cross the inlets that nearly divided the northern continent. However, he wouldn’t give them the birds until he satisfied himself that they would be properly taken care of so they all spent most of the day—one viciously brutal day—learning how to saddle, ride, groom, feed and generally baby the big creatures.

To no one’s surprise, Sephiroth proved to be the most competent, and it wasn’t because he was comfortable around the creatures. It was just that the General expected them to obey him the same way he expected everyone else to, so they did. He got the bull chocobo of course since every herd, even a small one filled with humans, had to have one. Its name was simply ‘Boss’ and Zack snickered at the serendipity of it.

When it was Zack’s turn to be assessed, he grinned and bounced over. He’d been trained on chocobos—all SOLDIERS were—and he was confident that he’d remember the skill. It turned out that he was decent with them. He rode well enough but he lacked Sephiroth’s discipline. The female Bob matched him up with soon learned that her rider was a marshmallow when presented with large, sad eyes and Zack would give her treats or petting whenever she used them. It didn’t take her long to have the First thoroughly trained. The sight of the big swordsman melting at her soft, sad warks made Cloud happy and he made sure to take lots of photos to use as blackmail material later. It nearly balanced the idiot he’d made of himself on the ice.

Tifa, Tseng and Yazoo were okay on the birds. They rode like the beginners they were. The nicest thing Bob said about them was that they wouldn’t kill their mounts or themselves. It was obvious to everyone which the old man considered the most important.

Cloud turned out to be the best rider in the whole group. He had an intuitive sense of balance and control that made even Bob whistle in appreciation. It also encouraged the old man to give the blond soldier a faster, more responsive bird. Sephiroth, looking at the smug pair, warned the Corporal about not out-running the rest of them once they were away from the cave. Cloud’s face fell but he nodded acceptance of the order.

It was Vincent who gave Bob the most trouble. The ex-Turk was knowledgeable and experienced enough that he would normally have paired the gunman up with a bird like the one he’d assigned to the mountain boy. He would have... except that Sephiroth’s bull chocobo didn’t trust him. The animal never stopped watching Vincent and the look in its eye was beyond suspicious. It knew there was something strange about the biped and it didn’t want Vincent anywhere near his harem. Since the bull set the tone for the herd, none of Bob’s better hens wanted anything to do with Vincent and he couldn’t put another male in the herd—that would be beyond disastrous.

It became a challenge to the old man, to see if he could find that one bird that could shrug off both Vincent’s otherness and Boss’s distrust. The old guy muttered names in between supervising them as they mucked out the stables or mended tack—things that would hardly come up as they crossed the frozen north. Zack whispered to Cloud, and Cloud agreed, that the old man was having them do the chores because he didn’t want to and, after taking a particularly pungent pile out to the compost heap, neither of them could blame the guy. Finally, Bob stopped, said “Durn it. I shoulda
thought of her earlier,” and ran out of the barn saying he’d be back in a couple hours.

It was the perfect chance to take a break. They put down the tools they wouldn’t have on the rest of the trip and therefore didn’t need to know how to use, and split off into smaller groups. Vincent and Tifa wandered off into the skimpy bushes. They didn’t snuggle but their closeness was apparent. When Yazoo made as if to follow, Zack put a hand on his shoulder and stopped him, “They probably want some new couple time, Sprite. You’d only feel uncomfortable.”

Yazoo looked at the SOLDIER in puzzlement. “What do you mean?”

Zack blinked. “You don’t see it?” The teenager shook his head. How could anybody not see it, Zack wondered. Baffled, he ran his hand through his hair. How was he going to explain body language to the innocent-but-not lab experiment he had no frigging clue. Especially as that could open up questions about his own relationships that he wasn’t quite ready to answer.

He was saved from embarrassing social awkwardness by Sephiroth’s arrival. “Forgive me for interrupting but I must speak to Yazoo,” he said.

Zack was more than happy to hand over the teenager to his CO. He’d go find Cloud and they could spar for a bit which was a much better way to spend the afternoon than explaining hormonal drives or shovelling shit. He turned away with a bounce in his step until he saw Tseng and was reminded of a conversation left unfinished. Then he thought maybe they didn’t need to have that conversation anymore. After all, he’d jumped into the ice to save the guy and Tseng had tried to save him right back. Surely that counted as a heart-to-heart?

He sighed knowing that, on a mission, saving each other’s lives didn’t count for anything. It was just part of the job.

“Hey, Tseng,” he called out, “Wait up.”

The Turk stopped and turned around. He was looking a little more ragged than he usually did. His suit was slightly rumpled and there were spots where dirt and other things had changed the colour. He’d lost his hair tie someplace and the dark strands hung straight down to just past his shoulders. It didn’t make him appear any more approachable though. It only made him look like a bad-ass who’d been fighting... and won. He looked at Zack with dark, unreadable eyes and waited for the SOLDIER to speak.

“I just wanted to say thanks,” Zack said as he stepped up beside the shorter man. Tseng’s eyebrows went up in question. “For not letting go, back in the water. You could’ve; Shiva was pulling on me pretty hard and it would’ve made your rescue a lot easier.”

“You also saved me by finding that air pocket for me to breathe in, so the honours are even,” the Wutaian responded in his standard level tones.

Zack scratched his head. Tseng’s response kinda let him off the hook but not really. In fact, the more he thought about it, the worse it became because now he didn’t know how to go on. He couldn’t joke with the Turk because, as far as he knew, Tseng didn’t have a sense of humour, and he didn’t do serious with people he didn’t consider really close. If it were Cloud or Aerith, or even Seph, he could do the heart-to-heart but not Tseng. And he kind of wanted to not get emotional with the Turk because he had the feeling that would put him at a disadvantage.

Shit, he sucked at this kind of stuff. “Umm,” he began uselessly.

Taking pity on him, Tseng restarted the conversation. “I meant to tell you earlier how much I
regretted never having received the order to rescue you or Corporal Strife.”

“Uh,” was all Zack could think to say: it almost sounded like an apology but he wasn’t sure.

When Tseng started walking back to Bob’s cave, Zack followed along. “If it’s any consolation, although I can’t think why it would be, it was my report on your incarceration that led Veld to begin serious investigation into Hojo’s activities.”

“Why?”

“Because he’d lied about the events in Nibelheim,” Tseng answered. “He’s the one who told the President that you had been killed. Yet, when I was visited the lab, you were obviously alive and hooked up to equipment that had never appeared on any official requisition.”

“He was embezzling,” Zack concluded.

“Exactly,” the Turk confirmed. “President Shin-Ra might not have minded Hojo appropriating the occasional SOLDIER but he would certainly have drawn the line at stealing his money.”

“Amoral bastard.” If he sounded bitter, Zack figured he’d earned the right.

Tseng grunted non-committedly. Even now, loyalty to the old regime kept him from voicing his personal opinion. However, he could offer one small thing; “I find Rufus Shin-Ra learned much of what not to do by observing his father. He certainly had ample opportunities.”

Zack choked, “Why Tseng... that’s nearly condemning.”

Dark eyes briefly swivelled his way. “Hardly.”

They walked a little further in silence. Zack knew he could leave it there but it still didn’t feel right. “Hey Tseng,” he said and waited until he had the Turk’s attention. “I’m sorry I was such a dick to you before. I was angry at the situation and the company and, and everything. I took it out on you, because you were here and Shin-Ra and Hojo and the rest, weren’t. So, sorry,” he repeated.

Tseng looked at him. “No apologies are necessary,” he finally answered. “Considering the circumstances, I thought you behaved with remarkable restraint.” Zack couldn’t be certain—the lights in Bob’s place sucked—but he was pretty sure there was a twinkle in the Wutaian’s eyes that could, maybe, be called teasing... almost.

“Okay, so that means we’re good.” The simple statement was certainly safer than asking if the Turk was laughing at him. He valued his life too much now that he had it back.

“Yes, Commander. We’re ‘good’.” And, dammit! That was a smile flirting around Tseng’s face. The bastard was laughing at him.

Should he call him on it, Zack wondered, scrubbing hands through his thick hair. He decided not to do anything. He’d never been able to get the best of the Turk in verbal sparring, and he’d been in practice then and familiar with Tseng’s tactics. Sometimes, the SOLDIER thought, you just have to know when to retreat.

“Okay then, I’ll, uh, leave you to organize the supplies in here… or whatever.” Zack backed up and out of the cave. It was a good thing he didn’t look back or else he would’ve seen the controlled, but full and very satisfied, smile settle on the Turks lips. Some of Tseng’s skills had gotten rusty over the past few years; it was nice to be able to practice them again.
In another area of the yard, Yazoo looked up at his intimidating brother-father-clone with wide eyes. There was so much about the older man that reminded him of Kadaj but there was more that didn’t. Kadaj had never had the General’s discipline or icy control. Or his quiet affection, which seemed like a disloyal thought even as Yazoo knew it was true. Kadaj had been selfish, noisily demanding all their attention and devotion no matter what the situation. Sephiroth didn’t demand it but he got it just the same.

Unconcerned by the comparisons running through the young man’s head, the General placed his gloved hands on the rough timber fence. It was rickety and rotting, and he thought the chocobos remained on the other side out of politeness rather than anything else.

Promises were like that, Sephiroth mused.

“Back in the underground city, I stated that you would not have to come with us to the crater if you did not wish to do so. Now it’s time to make your decision.” As usual, his speech was blunt and went directly to the point. “If you still wish to avoid Hojo’s base then we will leave you here. I’m sure Bob wouldn’t mind having you. Or you could head to Junon if this is too close. I’d recommend finding Commander Fair’s flower girl as she is the most accepting person I’ve met. Or you can come with us. The choice is yours.”

“You’re letting me choose?” Yazoo’s eyes, mirror to the General’s own, widened even more in surprise.

“I promised. Did you expect me to... welch?” Sephiroth looked down at the younger man who shook his head silently. The silver-haired warrior smiled slightly. Yazoo had trusted him and, considering his background, that meant a great deal. “Very well then,” he continued, “have you made a decision?”

“Can you win without me?” the teenage fighter asked. He’d thought about it but every option was scary.

“It is impossible to know if your presence, or the lack of it, will be the pivot on which the success of the mission rests. I am not an oracle,” Sephiroth said in his calm baritone, so like that of his young clone-brother. “However, you are a skilled warrior and familiar with the facility. You have received a god’s blessing. None of these factors are lightly dismissed.”

Yazoo waited for the General to say something more, something coercive or cutting, like Hojo or Kadaj would’ve said but he remained silent looking out over the multi-coloured birds scattered in bunches around the pen. Yazoo opened his mouth to ask another question, then rethought and closed it. Then he opened it again. “They’ve dug the crater into a maze, you know.”

“Commander Fair assures me he can navigate it—one of the side-effects of Hojo’s experiments— however, if you are trying to ask if I would like you to come, then the answer is yes, of course I would.” Sephiroth said without looking at him. “You are one of us, a member of our team as surely as Cloud or Ms. Lockhart.”

Yazoo looked away, beyond the birds and the stunted forest to the mountains. Just barely, in the distance, he could see the top of the Northern Crater. Its height and distinctive flat top made it easy to pick out. Sephiroth didn’t rush him. When one of the chocobos wandered over to them, the General ran his gloved hand through the feathers as if they had all eternity to wait for Yazoo’s answer.

“I’d like to come,” the young clone finally said. His voice was quiet but firm.
“Then you shall,” Sephiroth said as simply. And he let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Bob came back slightly after dinner. He looked somewhat damaged but triumphant. “C’mon there, fella, I think I’ve found the bird fur ya.”

Of course they all piled out of the cave, not just Vincent. There, standing in the open, was a large black hen. Boss was looking at her, trying to nudge closer to her and claim her, Zack supposed, but the black just stared at him with this look that said the male was an idiot. The blue male drooped at being ignored.

Cloud leaned close, “Does she remind you of that receptionist in the tower? The one who sneered at everyone while waiting to catch a rich lover.” Zack took another look at the bird and decided Cloud was right.

“This here is Esmeralda. She doesn’t scare easy and doesn’t like to be bossed by anyone.” The large black stretched her head out to Bob in a delicate, but absolute, demand to be scratched. “If she doesn’t mind yuh, Boss’ll have to accept it since she’s a black.”

“They have a ranking based on colour?” Cloud asked. He hadn’t really been paying attention during supper yesterday and may have missed that piece of information.

“Ah-yup,” Bob replied. “Only thing higher than a black is a gold, ‘nd I’ve never seen one.”

Cloud nodded and shut up. The last thing he wanted to do was to start another chocobo breeding tutorial. Luckily Vincent chose that moment to step forward. He had his arms down, looking as non-threatening as a tall, skeletal, former Turk and lab experiment could. The black looked at him then turned back to Bob who continued to scratch her head gently. It was a firm dismissal of the gunman’s threat.

Vincent raised his bare right hand, smoothly, steadily. He presented it briefly to the bird; she barely flicked a sniff at it. He stretched out his fingers and rubbed along her eye socket. She looked at him a moment before graciously allowing him to continue the caress. She even closed her eyelid to better enjoy it.

“That’s it,” Bob announced, “She’ll take yuh as rider now. Just don’t ever forget that she’s doin’ yuh a favour.” Everyone watching knew that’s exactly what the black would think, too.

“She reminds me of Scarlett,” Zack commented to a chorus of agreement from those who’d met the notorious director. Vincent didn’t know who that was. It was irrelevant anyway. He knew who Esmeralda reminded him of, had recognized the attitude as soon as the female had stared at him and dismissed him. His mother had looked at him the same way.

*Well,* Chaos piped in, *Unlike your mother, if the bird gets too uppity we can let Galian eat it.* For once, Vincent didn’t mind being in agreement with his demon.

The next morning went smoothly. They were packed, loaded and on their way within an hour of rising. Zack thought everyone must’ve felt like he did: like it was time to have this done—done so they could move on to the next part of their lives.

Sephiroth rode in front, a show of dominance that the male bird required and that the General was comfortable with. Tseng and Yazoo came next but he would hardly describe them as ‘riding together’. They didn’t speak and barely glanced at each other. Still, as the day passed, Yazoo lost that I-expect-him-to-shoot-me-any-moment air and stopped jumping whenever the Turk got too
close. Cloud followed behind them and in front of Tifa and Vincent. Now there was an odd pair, Zack mused, the nearly silent and practically immortal ex-Turk with the bouncy, vibrant and friendly ex-terrorist and small town princess. They were cute together though and Zack wasn’t inclined to pour water on anyone’s romance. The world contained little enough happiness for most people; it only made sense to grab whatever one could. Speaking of grabbing happiness…

The SOLDIER’s eyes examined his blond friend and lover, looking for any signs of discomfort. They’d been pretty fierce last night—and the night before if he wanted to be honest—and he was sure Cloud had lied when he said he felt okay, but the soldier was moving smoothly on his chocobo, sliding it back and forth between the two odd couples that bracketed him, sharing little bits of time with each of them.

As if he could sense Zack’s eyes on him—which, with their shared Jenova cells, wasn’t impossible—Cloud turned around to look at the dark-haired SOLDIER. It was barely more than a quirk of the lips, and the pink tone on the mountain boy’s cheeks could’ve been from wind burn, but Zack knew better. The dark-haired warrior smiled back and silently gave thanks for existence of Cure materia.

It hadn’t been a bad way to start a dangerous mission.

They spent three days crossing the northern tundra, moving beyond the stunted tree-bushes that had surrounded the chocobo mage’s place. Even the clumpy grasses gave way to icy nothingness. If it hadn’t been for the mountains on their left, their world would’ve been flat, shiny emptiness.

Only Tseng had brought sunglasses so Bob had given them shades made of carved bone with narrow slits to see through. None of them had asked where Bob had gotten the bone from, just like they hadn’t asked about the meat hanging in the larder. None of them wanted to find out they’d been eating Bob’s protégés—it seemed almost like cannibalism. However, none of them could deny that the odd devices worked, which was good considering the sun stayed up for most of the day now. Even at night, between the moon and Meteor, it barely got dark.

It was certainly too bright and barren for any of them to sneak off for some private time together. Too cold too, Zack mused, lying on his back between Tifa and Tseng and acting like a heating pad for the two unaltered humans. The chocobos were placed like a wind break around them and they had feathered pads to keep them off the frozen ground, but it was still damn cold. Even Valentine’s cheeks were pink at the end of the day and he’d started snuggling up behind Yazoo. The poor guy had yelped as if afraid he was being eaten. He’d actually sounded like a kid rather than a battle-hardened warrior. It had been a good sound though, normal and human and young.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” came a deep voice out of the dimness.

“I was just thinking that you’re cute when you’re frightened, Sprite.” Yazoo sputtered and Zack smiled and prepared to tease the clone some more.

“Go to sleep, Commander, Yazoo,” Sephiroth’s smooth voice. “We will reach the base of the Crater tomorrow and, even with enhancements, the climb will be difficult.”

“It’s too bright,” Zack said in response. “I feel like I’m back in my cell at the lab.”

“I know what you mean,” Cloud’s soft tones floated over to him. “They never turned the light off.”

“Always watching,” Yazoo agreed.

“It’s to make you disorientated,” Vincent commented, “You lose track of time and that keeps you
off balance and vulnerable.”

“'It’s a valuable interrogation technique,’” Tseng added.

The former Turk had to agree, “Cheap, safe and effective.”

“Creepy,” Cloud came back with, “especially when you know they’re watching.” Yazoo hummed his agreement.

“When I get back, I’m buying the thickest, darkest curtains I can find to hang in the bedroom,” Zack said.

“I want my own bathroom,” Yazoo mused, “with four real walls, not three walls and a fake mirror.”

“A vacation someplace with no mako, no labs… not even a pharmacy,” Zack shot back.

“I just want to get back alive,” Cloud said softly, “I’ll worry about all the rest of it then.”

“I’ll agree with that.” It was Tifa finally joining the conversation.

“Our chances of surviving are likely to be improved by actually sleeping,” the General suggested firmly. The others—mostly Zack and Yazoo—grumbled a bit, but they settled and soon their breathing sounded in soft counterpoint to the noise of the birds. Cat-green eyes looked over comatose bodies to where spiky blond hair shone in the moonlight. His future, his life… if only they survived to reach it. Then Sephiroth closed his eyes and followed his own advice.

They reached the base of the mountain by mid-morning of the next day and they all stood for a moment trying to see the top. It wasn’t a sheer cliff but it was steep and whatever path existed was going to be narrow and treacherous. Strong winds blew snow and ice around the crater making the day dim and blurred. The sharp particles scraped at their skin making exposed surfaces raw. Tseng and Tifa were bundled to the eyebrows but still huddled into their coats and mitts. Even the mako-enhanced warriors had donned protective clothing because fighting the environment took too much of their reserves. Only Vincent looked unaffected by the weather. He didn’t look happy but, as Zack pointed out, he never did so that wasn’t an indication of anything. The ex-Turk hadn’t responded to Zack’s teasing, just stood, like a statue, with his bright red cape moving around him like a living thing.

They dismounted and removed their equipment and supplies from the chocobos, tying up the reins and the stirrups as they’d been instructed. Bob had been very clear that the blues couldn’t take them up the mountain. He’d also been very clear on what he’d do to them if he found out they’d tried. It had been an empty threat but heartfelt so they fed the birds the last of the grain and, with a pat or two, let them free to run back to the ranch. Vincent’s black gave the slope a wistful look but eventually followed the others, catching up easily.

“This is it,” Zack said looking up, “Team Forlorn Hope is about to storm the breach.”

“The situation isn’t that dire, Commander,” Sephiroth said repressively.

Zack grimaced, “Yeah well… I’ll be happy if Shiva keeps her fucking hands to herself this time.” He rubbed the fire materia the General had insisted he wear. It was active but at a very low level. The SOLDIER could feel the warmth creeping through his arm and, quite frankly, it was freaking annoying. He understood the concern behind his CO’s order though and kept his complaints to himself.
Tifa and Cloud came back from scoping out the base and announced they’d found a track the group could probably climb. “Couldn’t we fly?” Yazoo asked wistfully. For some reason the clone was the most sensitive to the cold of all the enhanced fighters; some change in the mix Hojo had used to create him.

Sephiroth also looked up the steep path. “The winds are too strong. We wouldn’t be able to maintain control and would likely be tossed into the side of the mountain.”

“Plus, we’d leak heat from our wings like nobody’s business,” Zack added. He’d popped his little wings out yesterday as an experiment. It hadn’t gone well, hence the fire materia.

Yazoo didn’t sigh as he shouldered his pack. Tifa gave his arm a reassuring pat. He gave her a mournful smile in return. Tseng raised his eyebrows at the by-play. Yazoo had looked harmless. More than harmless, he’d looked helpless which Tseng knew was the last thing the clone was. The ability to downplay one’s own strength was a useful tool when one was a Turk and Tseng had to respect that in the boy even as he doubted his veracity.

As the only one with any experience climbing snow-covered mountains, Cloud took the lead. He didn’t tell them that he could smell the animals that had used the trail. Zack would just bark at him again.

The scents were faint, possibly from before DGS had taken over the crater, but the traces were still there. If goats could climb it then so could they. It was muscle-breaking work though. Between the intense cold trying to burrow into them, the wind trying to pluck them off the mountain and steal their breath, and the constant struggle to stretch and grip and climb, it didn’t take long for the party to be gasping. Cloud called a halt at the first flat spot to let them recover. He didn’t let them sit—they would’ve frozen to the rock—but even stamping their feet or doing squats was an improvement. Five minutes, then it was back on the path.

“And I thought you were a slave driver,” Zack muttered to the General.

“I heard that,” Cloud called back.

Only Zack had the energy to talk. It was a light-hearted rambling complaint that covered the weather, the mountain, the food, the past, the future and his patron god. He never touched on their mission or Hojo and the others realized it was because those thoughts he couldn’t keep light. Mention the former head of the Science Department and the big First’s hands would squeeze rock into powder. Since his commentary gave them all something to think about other than how cold they were, they were careful not to bring up the creepy professor.

They’d been climbing for a couple hours before they stopped for food. Sephiroth used Fira to heat up their drinking water. There wasn’t anything in it aside from sugar but the hot, sweet drink helped them combat the cold.

Still, the constant drain was starting to tell on the unenhanced members of their party. Tifa, especially, was starting to look beyond weary. She was the shortest member of their group and had had to work the hardest to reach the hand holds. Vincent hovered close to her, saying nothing but making his concern obvious. Zack could practically feel the gunman vibrating with the need to offer help to the fighter. Vincent knew his woman though and kept his mouth firmly shut. Tifa rewarded him by wrapping him around her at the breaks and letting herself rest against his strength.

“We’ll need to make camp soon,” Sephiroth said. “We have to let our bodies adjust to the altitude.”

“Plus the temperatures will start to fall,” Cloud added.
Zack looked at him, “It’s going to get colder?”

“Sun goes behind the peak and the wind picks up, so yeah,” the mountain boy responded.

“Perhaps there’s a cave,” Tseng suggested, dark eyes searching the cliffs.

This time Yazoo answered, “There’s lots of caves and tunnels in the crater,” he said hopefully, “A lot of them are connected to the main areas too. If we find one with a tunnel we could do the rest of the trip inside.”

“I haven’t seen any that we can get to.” Cloud was also searching the side of the mountain. “Trust me, I’ve been looking.”

“We’ll continue for another hour,” the General said, “If we haven’t found a way in we’ll have to find a more sheltered spot and set up the tent.”

Zack sighed; he wasn’t enjoying this any more than anyone else in the group. “Let’s mosey then.” As Cloud started up the track, picking his way carefully over loose stones, he heard Yazoo ask the dark-haired First why he said that and what exactly did ‘mosey’ mean? The blond had to smile. It was the same question he’d asked the jungle-bred swordsman when he’d first heard him use the word so many years ago.

It didn’t take long for the Corporal to realize that Sephiroth’s one hour timeline had been optimistic. Even with the enhancements and the mako and the conditioning it took less than a quarter hour hard climbing to make him tremble. “Shit,” he muttered. He had to pause, clinging to the rock face and let his muscles recover. It didn’t take long but still... If he felt this weak then what were Tifa and Tseng feeling like?

“Cloud?” Sephiroth’s voice was anxious.

“We need to find a place to stop soon, Sir,” the soldier answered.

The General’s answer was drowned by a short cry. It was Tifa, calling out in surprise. Her voice was quickly followed by Vincent’s gruff tones which started angry then turned into a roar. Cloud risked looking down only to have to pull himself tight to the side of the mountain as Vincent’s Galian Beast sped past him in a blur. It had Tifa safely cradled in one arm even as it leap-frogged up the mountain path. The creature was uncaring about any of the others desperately holding onto the icy surfaces.

“Holy fucking shit,” Zack’s voice sounded in faint prayer. He was clinging to the rocks, face tucked in while he waited for his heart-rate to slow.

“Maybe he knows where we can find a cave,” Sephiroth said hopefully, as if he hadn’t nearly been run over by two hundred kilos of purple monster. Cloud, grateful he hadn’t squeaked in surprise or made any other embarrassing sound, agreed faintly. He released the stone he was gripping and started moving to follow where Vincent’s creature had led.

It was a cave.

Galian had already dismembered the former inhabitant—they couldn’t identify exactly what kind of animal it had been—that called the cavern home so the team didn’t have to fight anything. Not that they could’ve as they were all suffering from the cold and the altitude, and adrenaline crash.

“Nice work, Vince,” Zack said to the returned-to-human gunman as he surveyed the bloody remains. “It would’ve been nice if you’d’ve left some bits big enough to cook for supper though.”
The ex-Turk barely looked at him from where he sat, exhausted, on the floor. “It’s Vincent.”

“Whatever,” Cloud interrupted, “How are we going to clean this up so we can sleep in here?”

They wound up kicking the larger bits out of the cave and over the side of the cliff. They tossed over the tainted snow as well, hoping that it would keep scavengers away from their small refuge. Sephiroth used his Firaga to melt the ice lining the walls and the ceiling with the idea that the water would rinse off the floor. There was a lot of ice so it didn’t take long for a disgusting stream to run out the entrance and down the trail they’d just climbed up.

“So much for getting rid of the bloody snow,” Tifa said with a sigh, watching the water run down the steep path, soaking in and colouring every surface pink.

“Hopefully the chunks at the bottom are more attractive,” replied Yazoo, who was standing beside her. Even as he spoke, ravens were descending on the crimson meat scattered over the cliff-face. A couple flew back up, fighting over a large, juicy bit of intestine.

“That is the most disgusting thing I’ve seen,” she said, hand over mouth, “and I’ve seen a lot of nasty things.”

Yazoo was peering over the edge, watching the scavengers fight over the choice bits. “Vincent melting Kadaj was worse,” he responded sadly. Tifa conceded the point.

Even though the melting ice hadn’t been very efficient in terms of cleaning out the blood, the heat made the cave nice and cozy. They hung a blanket over the opening to keep the warmth in. The cloth soaked the cave in twilight and they instantly realized just how tired they were. It didn’t take the weary group long to eat and settle in for sleep and, this time, they all slept quickly and easily.

The next day was more of the same. Climb for a while, warm up for a while, then more climbing. They checked every cave they came across or could easily access to see if it linked to the maze DGS had built inside the crater walls. Time after time they were disappointed. At least warming up in a cave was easier than warming up on a flat spot outside. Sephiroth would pick a rock and heat it until it glowed and they’d huddle around it trying to reclaim their lost body temperature.

“I still think I should’ve gotten Ifrit,” Zack muttered. So far he’d been just as susceptible to the cold as any other SOLDIER First would’ve been. Being Shiva’s chosen hadn’t proved to have any great benefits at all and the swordsman was feeling kind of gypped.

“Then you shouldn’t have been so eager to grab the first item out of the box like a curious puppy,” was Sephiroth’s unimpressed rejoinder.

“Hey!” the First protested.


“Wow,” Tifa said, watching the by-play. “I think I’m really glad to be involved with someone who’s more mature.”

Zack snorted and was slapped on the head by Cloud. He rubbed it—Cloud really needed to learn his new strength—but decided to redirect the conversation. “So, Vince—”

“It’s Vincent.” The response had become automatic.

“Yeah, whatever,” Zack shrugged it off, “You said you had four other... others, inside you. We’ve seen Chaos, Galian and Hellmasker. Who’s the fourth?” Vincent blinked at him and stayed quiet.
Zack barrelled on, “We should know in case he shows up because, if he’s anything like Hellmasker, we need to get into another room ASAP.”

The gunman sighed. Unfortunately, the annoying First had a point: the team should know what they might face. “He’s called Death Gigas.”

“Death Gigas,” Tifa said carefully without inflection. So carefully that Vincent knew her tone hid a world of meaning.

“That’s a weird name, even for a lab-made creature,” the silver-haired clone said. He obviously had never received tact lessons.

“It is no worse than Yazoo, or Cloud.” Vincent responded. Zack snorted. “Gigas is large and strong, very strong. He is also slow and...” He searched for the words to describe this, his final aspect. *Stupid* Chaos supplied. “Stupid,” The demon’s description was accurate. “He is very stupid.”

“Great,” Zack mocked lightly, “How stupid?”

“If he needed to go to another room, he would bash down the wall rather than take two steps sideways to the door.” Cloud started to laugh but quickly changed it into a cough. “If he appears, and you are in front of him, he will attack you. He will attack anything that’s in front of him.”

“Will he turn to attack others?” Sephiroth asked.

“Only if they attack him.”

“Not very useful then,” the General hummed.

Vincent shook his head once in agreement, “No. He’s why they decided to up the intelligence factor in Hellmasker.”

Zack’s eyebrows went up but he didn’t say anything. He knew Hellmasker was a painful topic for the ex-Turk and, quite frankly, he could feel for the guy. Fucking scientists. You’d think they’d learn to stop fucking around with things they knew nothing about and then foisting the result off on some poor bastard who didn’t deserve it.

They spent the night in the cave, huddled around each other even though Sephiroth had heated the stone they were sleeping on. Tomorrow, if they didn’t find passage from a cave, they’d reach the top of the mountain. They could make their way down to the bottom from that opening. Either way, it could be the last time they’d be together. Words didn’t need to be said, they all knew.

So they piled under the blankets, even Tseng and Vincent, and listened to each others’ breathing and felt each others’ warmth. And if they prayed to the god that had adopted them, they did it in the quiet of their own minds.
They finally found a cave with a tunnel. It was mostly rough, carved out by nature not man, but there were some tool marks showing bright when compared to the weathered texture of the rest of the stone. Cloud and Zack were forced to hold their swords in their hands; having the large blades on their backs made them too wide for the narrow passageway. Vincent thought Sephiroth would also have to carry his ridiculously long katana but the General walked empty handed. What made the gunman—and his resident demon—very curious was that they couldn’t see Masamune hanging from its scabbard either. It was like the sword had disappeared.

There was a dim glow from the minerals coating the walls of the tunnel but it was hardly enough to let the SOLDIERs see their way. Tseng, Tifa and even Vincent were essentially blind so Zack took over in front, and used his echolocation to map out their path. Chaos didn’t like the sound so Vincent got to listen to its bitching, as well as the high-pitched scree the SOLDIER was using, because Chaos thought he should know just how annoying it was. The ex-Turk pulled himself in tighter and tighter as he walked, wanting to pull down the mountain if it would just make the noise stop. When Tifa asked him what was wrong he said, more truthfully than she could know, that he had a headache.

Tseng produced a tiny flashlight so they put him in the middle of the group, lighting the way for the unenhanced members of their group, but he kept his hand over the beam to keep it diffused. Considering the depth of the guano in the middle of the passageway, it wasn’t likely that they would encounter anyone but why give the bad guys advance warning if it did happen? Even with the light, it was awkward and slow but at least none of them ran into the walls. They also didn’t trip and fall when the path abruptly dipped downwards which it did with annoying irregularity. It was like the builders couldn’t decide whether to make a ramp or stairs so had done a little of both and then let everyone guess what was coming.

“Crap,” Zack’s voice was soft.

“What is it?” the General asked.

“We got rocks blocking the tunnel.”

Cloud frowned. “I’m sure we can move them,” he offered.

“No, no, not loose rocks,” the dark-haired SOLDIER clarified, “These are the kind made out of dripping water and shit. They’re solid from the ceiling to the floor. Although you and Yazoo might be able to fit between them,” he added, “and maybe Vin.”

“It’s Vincent,” Tifa said absently. She was closer to Zack than the gunman was so didn’t have to
raise her voice to correct him. “Let me take a look,” she said as she eeled around him. “Tseng, can you give me some light?”

Zack took another step back so that Tseng could move in beside the young fighter. The Turk kept the light dim but it was closer to the rock so Tifa could see it easy enough. She ran her hands over it for a few seconds; she even leaned forward to smell it, before nodding decisively. “I can do this.”

“Do what?” Zack asked. He could see a flash of white teeth as she smiled in answer. She tightened her glove, pulling it tight, and Zack could almost feel the energy kick up a notch. “You’re going to punch it?” he asked incredulously.

“Yup,” she confirmed. “You might want to cover your mouths. I think it’s going to disintegrate.” She took a deep breath and they all could see her focus herself, pushing her awareness inwards. She let it build, one second, two, then three, before releasing the force out, out of her body, out through her body. Zack was close enough that he could see the power of the movement, could see the air bending around her fist. He mouthed a silent ‘wow’. And then the world exploded into a gross, chalky mess as the impact caused the delicate structure to explode outwards.

It smelled vile, like an electrolyte-replacement drink that was rotten, drier and more irritating. The particles stuck in Zack’s throat and he fought against the cough that wanted to escape. He could hear the others doing the same. It didn’t help that the white, chalky mess swirled in the air obscuring both his vision and his bat-vision—which was a lame description but would do for now. Still, Tifa’s action hadn’t been soundless so Zack held his Buster up and concentrated on penetrating the fog in case DGS troops were running up the tunnel toward them. He counted off the time in heartbeats until he felt it was safe enough to continue.

Actually, when they’d walked another thirty minutes without encountering a main passage or lights or any sign of habitation, Zack no longer wondered why a freaking wall of stone had built up in the tunnel. He was just surprised there weren’t more of them. This was supposed to be the main base of a huge evil army and they’d encountered nobody and nothing. He couldn’t help but wonder where the fuck everybody was?

“Maybe this was one of the first access points, made as they burrowed deeper into the mountain,” Cloud theorized, making Zack realize he’d asked his question out loud. “As they went further in, they would’ve dug new tunnels, lower down, closer to where they were working.”

“Makes sense,” Tifa agreed.

There were side passages, in even worse shape than the one they were in, so Zack conceded that his friend could be right but he just shrugged. He didn’t really care. It had been a random thought, of no importance, except that all this emptiness was making him jumpy. He took deep breaths and concentrated on sounding out their path.

Finally, they emerged out of darkness into dimness only to be disappointed. They hadn’t reached the central core. It was just the tunnel opening into a fissure that ran perpendicular to the main crater. There were gaps in the mountain that let in the weak northern light and, when Zack looked up, he could just see a sliver of daylight through the top of the crack. It was enough for him to estimate they’d only gone about two thirds of the way to the base of the crater. “Shit,” he muttered, ready to have this over. He sucked at patience.

“Wow...” Tifa said sounding awe-struck. “It’s like a waterfall frozen into rock or something.”
“That’s solidified lava, I think,” Cloud said. “Except why would it fall into the crater?”

“Who the fuck cares,” Zack broke in impatiently, “Can we use the opening to cut some time of our little jaunt?” He poked his head over the side, looking down to see if they could maybe climb straight down instead of trudging through the loopy tunnels but there was nothing to see, no paths and no openings.

“No, you can’t jump over,” Sephiroth stated from beside his SiC. He knew Zack well enough to guess what he’d been thinking.

“I could just go down and check it out,” he wheedled.

“The wind patterns are erratic, unpredictable,” the General countered. “It’s not worth the risk.”

Zack sighed, knowing Seph was right. Even in the short time they’d been standing here there’d been gusts coming up so strong that it knocked them back a step... well, it knocked everyone but Seph and Vinnie back. Those two just stood like pillars with coat or cloak blowing around them dramatically.

It reminded Zack of the recruitment vids Shin-Ra had made back before everything had gone to shit. They’d been full of promises of romance and adventure if you’d only come and join their army and, at some point, there’d be a shot of Sephiroth looking noble against some colourful dusk, hand on his sword hilt, hair and coat blowing around, staring fiercely at the camera. The silver-haired warrior had never said anything in them, just glared into the screen. Zack, once he’d met the Grand and Glorious Demon of Wutai, figured it was because Seph threatened them with disembowelment whenever they tried to get him to say anything, and had maybe followed through once or twice, so they’d learned not to ask him and just let the General look glamorous. Still, that had been on a soundstage; this was real life after everything they’d been through.

Maybe he should get a cloak too, he thought. Then he could stand at cliff edges looking broody and dramatic too.

“You’d have to shut up first,” Cloud said with a smile.

Zack looked at everybody. They were all looking at him with various indications of indulgent amusement. “Aw shit.”

“Personally, I think you look good without a cloak,” Tifa said brightly, “One thing about the old SOLDIER uniform, it sure knew how to—” she waved vaguely over his body “—emphasize the good bits.”

Vincent shifted his gaze to her. She lifted a brow defiantly and smirked, “What? I’m spoken for, not blind.” Vincent grunted.

“I have to agree with Tifa,” Yazoo said, tipping his head as if to get a better angle, “You look very attractive in that uniform. Why would you want to change it?”

Zack, blushing bright red, lifted his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. No cloak. Are we done here? I say we’re done here. Let’s keep going, people, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover,” and he stalked away from the edge and back along the path, back into the mountain.

The trail was a twisty fuck; first it went in, then back to the crevice and down, then back in and up.
Then it looped and split before coming back together. Worse, they kept coming back to the same point. Seph took over the lead once, but even his enhanced memory and mental-map-making abilities didn’t stop them from looping back around to stare at the same pile of rock Zack had discovered ages ago. Sephiroth growled in displeasure, “This is unacceptable.”

Vincent grunted agreement. He cast an anxious look at Tifa who’d begun to limp some time back. It was just a small hitch in her step at this point but the gunman thought it should be looked at before it turned into something more serious. “Perhaps we should stop here for now and figure out some kind of plan.”

Tseng, who was looking somewhat less indestructible than usual, agree.

“This spot is flat, dry and relatively warm. We will rest for a few hours,” the General ordered. It was a quiet evening, even Zack was subdued. When Yazoo had said this place was a labyrinth he hadn’t been exaggerating. In fact, it was even worse than the SOLDIER had imagined. Okay, his bat-sense thing was new and untried, but Sephiroth’s orienteering skill was legendary... and it was failing. They’d found their way here, to this spot, but he couldn’t help but wonder would they find their way back out?

That night, they slept close to one another. It was a small comfort but it was the only one they had.

The mountain was brilliant with sunshine but it wasn’t hot. It was perfect.

He flared his nostrils and breathed in the scents surrounding him. Fir trees, their sap just beginning to rise, smelled sharp and tangy. The deciduous were still dormant but they managed to add a soft, gentle tint to the air. There was a blackberry thicket not too far away. He knew it would be an excellent place to catch rabbits or small birds but those weren’t what he was looking for—not right now.

There was a different smell in the air, a strong smell. He followed it because he had to; he needed to know what had added that scent to his world.

He padded along, moving quickly and easily through the thick woods. He was climbing steadily so he wasn’t surprised when he moved beyond the tree line. Goats and sheep added their smells to the air. Obviously, there was a trail nearby that the mountain animal used to climb to the top. He sniffed and, sure enough, his path followed theirs. He started to climb, picking his way carefully over the sharp stone since he didn’t have anything on to protect his feet.

The air was getting thin, thin but somehow hard and sharp. There was power in this air. He could smell the age in the stones, implacable, immovable. Present since the world began, it would outlast them all, even if the planet was blown to pieces those pieces would still have the same ancient wisdom they’d had when they were all one.

It was a humbling thought.

“Hello, my lille ulv.”

He translated the phrase automatically. It was puzzling, who was calling him ‘their little wolf’ and why?

“I am calling you that because you accepted my token and because that’s what you are,” said the
voice. It was as deep and as ageless as the mountains he stood upon... that he stood upon on four legs. He looked more closely at himself only now noticing the fur, the elongated snout, the odd colour-perception and, when he turned his head, the tail.

‘I’m a wolf?’ he wondered, “How did that happen?”

“It happened because the Enemy does evil things. He twists what is and what should be into unnatural things.” The man finally appeared but he wasn’t really a man and that wasn’t really a horse he was riding because horses don’t have eight legs and nothing that big could move as quietly as they did.

“Odin,” he said out loud.

“Cloud Strife,” the god acknowledged, “child of the mountains, pain-bearer, avatar of the gods and my lille ulv.”

“Why have you come to me?” the soldier asked.

“Because you are lost and in need of guidance.” The god’s eyes were lit from within. Even in the bright sunlight, they were incandescent. Cloud didn’t know whether to feel honoured or threatened by the display.

“I would appreciate any help you were willing to offer, All-Father,” he said formally, figuring it was probably best to err on the side of politeness.

The god boomed out a laugh. Sleipnir reared back on his four hind legs and slashed at the air with his front sets as if sharing his master’s amusement. It didn’t take them long to calm down and Cloud had never been short of patience. He remained standing, alert but relaxed, prepared but not aggressive. He stood like the well-trained soldier he was... when not a wolf.

“You are an excellent soldier, lille ulv,” Odin assured him, “One day you will be granted a place in Valhalla. For right now, however, I have no help to offer.” Cloud didn’t let himself be disappointed. He didn’t twitch or growl or make any indication that the god’s response was anything less than acceptable. After all, help from the gods often came with steel hawsers attached.

He wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw Odin’s lips curl slightly upward.

“Ah, my poor lille ulv. You have been taught the hard way to expect nothing of the gods. I will not leave you completely empty-handed however.” Cloud’s ears pricked forward. “In order to follow a path, it’s best to follow your nose.”

“Of course,” he answered politely while inside he thought, ‘What the hell?’

Again the god’s lips quirked. “You will figure it out, lille ulv. Wolves are great trackers.”

Odin waved his hand and Cloud was blown back, away from him, off the mountain over the trees, into the sunlight and out of the god’s realm and into a dream. He was running, running through the woods. There were things after him, monstrous things. If they caught him they would strap him down, gag him, and strip the flesh from his bones. Hojo’s glasses would shine and the scientist would laugh as Cloud screamed and begged while Zack called his name from the other table.

“Cloud, Cloud, it’s okay, we’re okay, Cloud...”
“Cloud!” That wasn’t Zack’s voice, Cloud realized, it was the General’s, and it was calm and commanding as usual. “Cloud, wake up. It’s just a bad dream.”

“’m ‘wake,” he muttered, even though he still felt heavy with exhaustion.

“You were having a nightmare.” That was Zack’s voice, practically vibrating with tension and concern.

“Sorry,” he responded, “’m better.” He took a deep breath filled with the scents of his lovers and it was better; he was better, safe.

“Good,” Zack said firmly, “Can you sleep without dreaming now?”

Cloud nodded sleepily. He was cocooned between the two larger men and he knew Zack would feel the movement.

“Okay then. Do it,” the First ordered, “Before anybody else wakes up.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” he meant it to be sarcastic but he was already sliding into sleep.

The next morning, Cloud had the bright idea of ‘marking’ their path.

“Marking? Like how dogs do it?” Tifa asked nearly straight-faced. Only the little twitches of her lips gave away how funny she thought the suggestion.

Cloud shuffled his feet. “More like wolves, actually.”

“That’s... horrible,” Yazoo said, wide-eyed, hand raised to cover his mouth.

“But then we’ll know which tunnels we’ve taken already,” the Corporal was blushing but not backing down. “I’ve got the wolf DNA so I’ll be able to recognize the scent.”

“You want us to urinate against the wall so you can assemble a map?” Tseng asked. His voice was flat, outwardly emotionless. Cloud didn’t know him well enough to hear the thread of embarrassment.

“It’s better than wandering around in here for the rest of our lives,” the blond argued.

It was a good point they had to admit, but Yazoo was still frowning in distress. He didn’t know these people well enough, not really, not yet. It was too soon for something this intimate. “Couldn’t we just, I don’t know, rub our hands or something over the stone?”

“That would be a little too faint. I’ve got the DNA but I don’t really know how to use it. It’s not like Hojo ever let me out to see what I could do,” Cloud pointed out. “You can stop laughing now, Zack.”

Cloud sounded miserably embarrassed, the SOLDIER realized. This wasn’t like when he challenged that chocobo where they’d known that, in a few years if they survived, they’d all look back and laugh; Cloud was really upset so Zack swallowed back his laughter. “Sorry, but Yazoo’s face…” He let his voice tail off. “Actually, I think it’s a great idea. My bat-vision thing isn’t working for shit in this fucking maze and I, for one, am tired of always seeing those same freaky
rocks.”

All eyes swivelled to look at the formation. It looked like someone dying in absolute agony; mouth open in a silent, unending cry, hands lifted to plead with an unknown entity, eyes boiling out of their sockets. Zack shivered. He knew too well what that looked like on a real person; he didn’t need to see it in stone.

“I agree” Sephiroth said, “We need to get out of this maze quickly, before Hojo has the chance to do any more damage to the planet.”

“And before Meteor gets here,” Tifa reminded them.

“It’s a valid plan,” Vincent flatly stated and that was the end of the discussion.

It didn’t take them long to sketch out the details which was a blessing because Zack didn’t think it was healthy for the little guy to have all that blood in his face—might do permanent damage. The dark-haired SOLDIER was going to take the lead again so everyone gave him some privacy while he did his business in the left-hand tunnel. When he came back out to get them, Cloud was looking unhappily at Tifa’s smiling face. Of them all, she was the only one who wouldn’t be doing this—too many layers in the way so too slow for the pace they wanted to set.

“You can stop laughing too, you know,” the Corporal grumped.

“I will,” she responded. Tifa gave a little chortle then leaned up and kissed him on the cheek. “It’s just, sometimes? It’s really great to be a girl.”

“Are you sure we’re not lost?” Yazoo’s deep voice jittered with nerves.

“We’re not lost,” Zack reassured him for the thousandth time. “Between Cloud and Seph they know exactly where we are. Now, repeat back the last set of instructions I gave you.”

“He doesn’t need to know that stuff, Zack,” Cloud protested—also for the thousandth time.

“You were also an older brother,” Cloud pointed out but Zack just grinned unrepentantly and turned back to Yazoo. Zack wasn’t teasing his friend about having wolf-DNA and peeing in the tunnels; he was just coaching Yazoo on how to do it. The Commander was discussing techniques and phrases like it was a strategy course at Shin-Ra Academy and the teen was absorbing it like his life depended on it. Cloud knew why Zack was doing it, but it didn’t help his patience much. The howling was getting really old.

Speaking of which…

Cloud clenched his teeth so hard he swore he could feel the enamel grinding off. He did his best to ignore them both and concentrated on following the markers they’d left behind. If he focussed on that maybe he wouldn’t be able to hear either of them. Obnoxious bastards, Cloud thought with unexpected anger, it’s not like he chosen to get spliced with wolf DNA so why couldn’t they just shut the fuck up about it?
When he realized what he’d thought he swallowed it back down, shock at how close he come to losing his temper at his friends which was the last thing any of them needed considering how long they’d been wandering around in the dark, under a mountain. Besides, he wasn’t really angry at Zack. He knew why the dark-haired SOLDIER was encouraging Yazoo to act like a brat—because the young clone needed something to take his mind off the fact that they were getting closer to DGS’ headquarters, closer to the labs where he’d been imprisoned and experimented on… Whatever the reason, Zack’s encouragement of Yazoo’s antics was probably the only thing keeping the boy’s fear at bay, but it wasn’t like Yazoo was the only one with nerves. Cloud’s felt so tight he thought, if someone touched him, he’d make a noise like an untuned violin string. Everyone was relying on him to find a way out of here. If he didn’t get this right then people could die, people he liked… the whole world, in fact. He didn’t like having that kind of pressure on him. He wasn’t good at it. He couldn’t do this. He—

“Cloud?” The silky baritone was soft. The touch on his elbow was light. The offer of comfort and support subtle but very, very real.

The young swordsman took a deep breath and forced his mind back to his current task, to Sephiroth’s instructions. The General had said they needed to take the third left after the T-intersection so that meant he was looking for Vincent’s scent. That’s what he needed to think about, not anything else. He could do this. He would do this.

Actually, he and the General made a good team. As they explored the tunnels, Sephiroth created a map in his head, and could unerringly say which passage they had yet to explore, but it was Cloud who knew where the ‘third left’ was because each male had his own distinctive aroma. They were working together in a way Cloud could never have imagined back in Nibelheim. Hells, he’d barely gotten a chance to imagine them as lovers before Hojo had captured him and taken him to the lab… the underground lab, with dark twisty tunnels just like this one. With Hojo at the end waiting for them...

Fuck.

Obviously Yazoo wasn’t the only one affected by what they were heading into. “I’m good,” he lied but it was only a temporary untruth. He would be good eventually. He would ignore Yazoo’s odd and fumbling teasing because the boy needed it. Zack, however, was fair game. If the First could use teasing Cloud as Yazoo’s distraction, then Cloud could use teasing Zack as a distraction… seemed fair.

Soon the tunnels echoed with the back and forth of their insults and counter-insults. Tifa joined in occasionally, when Zack picked on her birthplace. She loved the mountains, loved the fierce beauty they held, the crispness in the very air. “Much more impressive than limp, wet jungle heat that could only cause mushy brains,” she threw at the SOLDIER with a sniff.

Vincent, when asked to pick a side, firmly stated that, having spent most of his time buried in a coffin under the mountains, he couldn’t have an opinion, and they could all leave him out of it. Both Sephiroth and Tseng murmured agreement with the ex-Turk’s sentiments. Sephiroth’s added comment of ‘working with undisciplined hooligans’ was ignored aside from the Wutaian’s long-suffering sigh of agreement. But it kept them all distracted and moving forward and that was really the point.

Eventually, the teasing evolved into a more general discussion about the various areas of the world they’d each seen; what they’d recommend and where’d they avoid going back to. It was a discussion that carried them through their unappetizing lunch break, a quick break where they
determinedly chewed and swallowed their MRE’s because they needed the proteins and carbs. Then they were back on the move.

Sephiroth directed them to the tunnel on the right because they’d already gone through the one on the left and the one in the middle. Tseng’s flashlight grew dimmer and dimmer and finally died. The Turk pulled out his PHS and used the screen to give them some light. And still the tunnels didn’t end. They walked and marked, backtracked and started again, moving ever deeper into the mountain, slowly making progress toward their goal. Even Yazoo’s fear disappeared in the face of the sheer drudgery of the march.

Finally, Cloud smelled water, and not just the thin streams he’d sniffed out before, but enough for them to drink their fill and maybe even wash off a bit. Considering how warm and stale the air was getting, the soldier wasn’t surprised that his suggestion of a detour was met with happy groans.

“Oh, I’d love a drink of cold water right now,” Tifa said for all of them. She was lifting her thick hair off the back of her neck in an attempt to cool it.

Zack hummed his agreement. When he shook his head droplets of water spun out in a sweaty shower. Even Sephiroth had damp tendrils clinging to the side of his face—a rumpled look Cloud found oddly sexy on the usually immaculate SOLDIER. He shifted his weight to make his pants more comfortable. This so wasn’t the time to become aroused. Sephiroth’s heavy lidded smile let the blond soldier know that, inappropriate timing or not, the General appreciated, and returned, the sentiment. Which made his pants really uncomfortable...

With a resigned sigh, he followed the scent past a couple turnings and through a crack in the wall of the tunnel. Even now, with the promise of water so close they were all aware of the smell, Cloud made the guys mark the paths in the same order they’d marked the rest since, when they came back, it would be good to know where they’d left off their methodical search. However, once through the crack it became obvious that this was the break they’d needed.

It was a waterfall, pouring down from some unknown surface glacier into the deepest part of the cave... and there were large slabs of solid stone jutting out from underneath the curtain.

“Holy shit,” Zack said in reverent awe. It was huge, it was loud, but it was cool and there was a not-so-shallow pool they could use to splash water over their faces. Best of all, it was a shortcut down to the bottom.

“I think these ledges will take us all the way down,” Sephiroth said to the group as they sat enjoying the moist breeze. He’d spent some time staring into the pit. “It will be much quicker than the method we have been using.”

“Riding a turtle would be quicker,” Tifa muttered under her breath. As she was examining a blister that had formed on her heel despite all of yesterday’s care, no one took exception to the snarky comment. She hadn’t complained, not once.

Zack’s teasing aside, none of them had complained because they’d had no choice. They’d committed to this fight and it was too late to turn back now. “Even if they’re slippery, considering how fucked up we are, with wings and shit, we should make it down okay,” Zack said, supervising Yazoo as the clone used his Cure materia on the blister.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Cloud agreed, and it was settled.
Once Tifa’s foot was fully healed and their water-bottles had been filled, they started down. Cloud and Zack had immediately put out their wings with Sephiroth following suit a beat later. The stones were slippery but, with the help of wings and genetically-enhanced balance, they worked their way down. Yazoo could jump down on his own, but Zack would occasionally scoop him up and twirl him around. Tifa did okay, there were only a few jumps she couldn’t make but Tseng had to be helped almost constantly.

“I always thought Turks were enhanced,” Zack said once. Tseng twitched his eyebrow at the SOLDIER. “I’ve seen Reno in action,” the SOLDIER explained.

“Ah, well, Reno is an unusual case.” The Wutaiaian wouldn’t explain any more, saying it wasn’t his story to tell. Before Zack could ask any more questions the tunnel opened back out to the waterfall and conversation was impossible once again.

No matter what the difficulties, it was still faster than the tunnels and the approached the task with renewed cheer. They didn’t speak during the trip, the sound of the water drowned out any attempts at verbal communication, but they didn’t really need it.

There was a sameness to their journey, Cloud thought—jump, walk to the edge, jump, wipe the moisture from your eyes, walk to the edge—but it was still better than the stifling darkness, and it was definitely quicker because they reached the end of the stone ledges before the General’s internal clock called a halt for supper. Since they were at the bottom, ledges merged into one wide shelf that disappeared into yet another tunnel, they moved into the darkness and away from the noise. Cloud could see the others rolling their shoulders as if some great weight had been lifted off and had to admit that that’s what it felt like. Noise as a bludgeoning weapon... he was just thankful that Hojo had never used that one on him in the lab.

This tunnel wasn’t solid dark though. Light filtered up from some distant source and, when everyone was quiet, he could just barely hear manmade sounds rumbling in the distance: engines running, fans rotating, air circulating; the common background sounds of any large modern facility—with the occasional howl of one of DGS’s home-made hellhounds to break up the monotony. He flicked a look at the General and received a nod in return.

“How much farther do you think it is?” Tifa asked, unable to hear what the others could.

“How would I know,” Yazoo responded, “It’s not like we ever used this route to leave the base.”

“It was just a question.” Her voice is filled with bewilderment; she can’t hear how hard the clone’s heart is beating, how quickly he’s breathing. Cloud knew the boy could hear the base and it was bringing back the nightmares. A distraction was called for but Cloud’s mind was blank because he’s just once again realized that Hojo was down there. Not the scientific boogeyman of his cadet days, not the overwhelming demon-god from the lab, but the actual man, and he—little Cloud Strife—was going to confront him and kill him and make the world a better place... If he didn’t throw up or run screaming first.

Shitpissfuckinghells!

He needed to sit down... he needed to fucking breathe!

“I think we need to take a break,” Zack made the suggestion. “I, for one, could do with some food... or at least something that will fill the hole in my gut.”
“We don’t have anything that big,” Cloud teased him automatically.

Zack responded in kind and the banter felt like a balm across the Corporal’s raw nerves. He still had to support his head on his hands when he sat because he was pretty sure it was going to explode. He knew, logically, that it wasn’t just on him to save the world. After all there was the General and Zack, and Tseng, who was totally intimidating even if he wasn’t enhanced, and Vincent and all his parts who were all just freaking scary. Yazoo and Tifa had proven to be good in a fight and they were all here together, all going into the crater together and he was still going to have to confront Hojo and know that he was just an experiment—a failed experiment.

“Breathe on the count, Cloud,” came a soft baritone, “You too, Yazoo.” Cloud didn’t even know when the young clone had sat down next to him. He’d been so out of it he hadn’t noticed, which wasn’t a good thing. “Just breathe,” the General ordered.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Cloud mumbled, feeling like a raw cadet instead of the competent NCO he knew he was.

“There is nothing to apologize for, Cloud,” the General reassured him. “Tomorrow we will go into battle. Nerves are normal.”

“Are you nervous?” Yazoo asked, peering around at Sephiroth from the blond other side.

“Of course,” Sephiroth gave a small nod, “I have had a life time’s worth of training not to show it. Zack is talking and joking—”

“and bouncing,” the clone interrupted.

Sephiroth smiled, “—and bouncing. It is his way of dealing with the tension. Tseng will soon take out his guns and clean them obsessively until, if there was more light, they’d gleam. Tifa will brush her hair as a form of meditation and focus. I’m not sure what Vincent does before battle but I’m sure he has his routine.”

Two sets of eyes, one blue, one green, looked at him asking the same question.

His lip twitched upwards at how similar they looked. “I go over battle strategies and contingencies plans,” he answered. “However, this time I find myself somewhat distracted as I too anticipate confronting Hojo. He is merely human, not enhanced physically—although being insane can give one an edge in battle—and yet there is the fear that he will defeat me without ever raising a weapon.”

Cloud’s breath let out in jerks; he knew exactly what the General meant. “His words are a weapon,” he said quietly. “He makes you feel like you can’t... can’t touch him, can’t think, can’t win, can’t exist.” He could smell the lab, the acrid taint of the mako, the sharp sweet scent of blood. It was in his nostrils, in his veins. He was on the table, locked in, and dark, cold eyes stared at him from behind round lenses...

“He was wrong. We exist,” Sephiroth said firmly. He had his hand on Cloud’s back and there was something so strong in what the silver-haired general had said that it felt like it was set in stone. His heart rate slowed, his breathing out, and Cloud knew, no matter what happened tomorrow, that someone, somewhere, would remember that he had lived.

He just hoped that they wouldn’t have to remember that he died because, looking up into the
perfect cat-green eyes of his commander and lover, he knew he wanted to make more memories. He knew, if given the chance, he would take everything and be thankful for the opportunity.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter took an embarrassingly long time to get out. I had it written, and it sucked... big time. So I essentially tossed that version and started again. After numerous edits and rewrites I realized one of the fundamental problems with it was that I had written as a narrator. It was all ‘they did this’ and ‘they said that’ and nothing about how the characters reacted to these things that they experienced. There was no internal dialogue and no emotions attached to the events.

Once I realized that, the re-write process went much better. It also means the next chapter should be out somewhat faster than this one because I know what to watch out for now.
Approaching Lightspeed

Despite the tension, Cloud managed to grab some solid shut eye—no dreams of being a wolf and climbing mountains to meet gods. It helped that he slept wrapped up in Sephiroth and breathing in the scent of his silver hair. They’d been on the move, without showers, for nearly a week yet it still smelled good, like safety and acceptance. Where he had tucked himself into the General, Yazoo had used him as a pillow with Zack on the other side as a blanket, or maybe a pro-active teddy bear. Cloud smiled at the mental image because it sounded so much like the First.

Cloud knew Tseng had been up part of the night talking to Vincent, trying to convince the older man to come back to the Turks—unsuccessfully—because he’d heard them at least once during the night. Despite the lack of sleep, neither one looked any different than they ever did: contained, deadly and in complete control. Maybe it was a Turk thing.

Breakfast was cold. Nobody wanted to risk the smell of heated food wafting its way out of the tunnel and making some DGS grunt curious. Zack ate like it was ambrosia or, as he said only half-joking, his last meal on earth. The rest of the group ate purposefully, solidly chewing and swallowing, knowing they’d need the energy it provided. To Cloud, it tasted and felt like wet cement. It seemed like hardest thing he’d ever done was to finish the meal pack—the second hardest would be keeping it down long enough to be digested—but even he knew that was ridiculous and melodramatic. He’d survived Hojo’s labs, even if just barely. He’d survive one cold breakfast.

“That was horrible,” Tifa said with a grimace as she carefully rolled up the empty container and stuffed it into her pack. “I don’t remember them tasting that bad.” Tifa looked like she’d had a rough night. She wasn’t dragging or yawning, but the circles under her eyes were dark and there was a permanent frown making lines between her brows.

“They’re always indigestible before a big fight,” Zack said with a laugh, “Sawdust in flour paste.” He was shovelling in a second MRE.

Sephiroth frowned down at his third container, “I thought they always tasted like that.”

Zack snorted and nearly choked on his food. “Seph, what did I tell you about warning a guy when you’re about to make a joke?”

“That it loses its impact.” The comment was said with a look of feline satisfaction for the First had used the exact same phrase back in Shin-Ra after pulling some prank on his CO.

Zack stared at him in stunned disbelief which only deepened the General’s satisfaction. Then he laughed, softly but deeply and real. “When we get out of here I’m going to have to be careful, aren’t I?” the First asked with a hint of anticipation.

“Very.”

Yazoo looked between them, bewildered. His mouth was open. “Don’t ask,” Tseng advised. With a glance at the Turk, the teen shut his mouth and went back to his breakfast.

Cloud didn’t know whether to be more relieved at Zack’s casual assurance that they would survive, or the knowledge that he wasn’t the only one having a tough time swallowing down breakfast.
Whatever caused it, he felt lighter and easier, and more than ready to get this started.

It didn’t take them long to reach the end of the tunnel and the entrance to the base. It wasn’t sealed, which, from the noise and lights they’d already guessed, but there were bars, thick and heavy, blocking access to the corridor beyond. They weren’t very far apart, just enough to stop the average human from sliding through. Looking at them, Cloud figured only Yazoo and Vincent would fit in between, maybe Tseng although, he took another look at the Wutaian, the Turk would probably lose a layer or two of skin. There was no way the rest of them were making it.

“It’s a maintenance corridor,” Tseng announced unnecessarily. They could all see the neatly labelled pipes and panels.

“That explains why it’s empty,” Tifa said brightly, “Doesn’t solve the problem of getting into it, however.” And it was a problem. The bars weren’t set into a frame, like a door. Instead they were embedded into the rocks. There were no locks, no hinges, and no way through. Nobody was ever supposed to use this path ever again.

“Gonna punch this one out for us?” Zack teased Tifa, who was testing the bars, pulling on them with increasing force and having absolutely no luck moving them. She didn’t respond verbally to his taunt, she just hit his arm instead. “Ow,” he muttered, rubbing it.

“Baby,” she responded unsympathetically.

“I think this barrier is mine,” the General said as he stepped forward. He examined the bars, the rock, and the hallway beyond. He held up his hand for silence and Cloud figured he was listening for enemy forces that might hear what he was about to do. He found himself focusing on his own hearing but there was nothing... nothing but the imaginary sound of the others straining their ears to listen too. Cloud had a sudden image of them as cartoons, all leaning the same way, each with one ear stretching into different shapes. Vincent’s would be one of those old-fashioned hearing horns. Zack’s a radio tower. He’d get a wolf ear of course...

“Cloud, I need you to hold these bars.” Sephiroth’s voice jerked him out of his daydream. Maybe he wasn’t quite as rested as he’d thought.

The General indicated two bars set a little deeper into the cave. “It’s possible that it will take longer for someone in the corridor to notice that they are missing.” Cloud holstered his sword and grabbed on to the bars as told.

“Dip your head a little,” Sephiroth ordered so he did that too. There was a sleek whoosh sound above him and the bars grew warm under his hands. “Step to the right and be prepared for the weight.” Again, the blond soldier did as he was told, except this time he saw Sephiroth make the swing. Even if Cloud had known what Sephiroth was planning before he did it, he wouldn’t have worried. When it came to the silver-haired warrior and Masamune, Cloud had absolute faith.

Masamune was a legendary sword, as much a part of the General’s myth as his hair and his coat. Nearly two metres in length, it should’ve been completely unusable. No one knew who had forged it, or where or when, just that Sephiroth had shown up with it a few months after Shin-Ra had presented him to the world and it had been part of him ever since. That familiarity was how he managed to slice through the same two bars—only those two—and stop his swing before the blade touched the young soldier. Yazoo made an awe-filled ‘ooh’ sound. Tifa’s gasp was more fear-filled than anything, as if she’d thought he would miss the bars and hit her childhood friend, but the swing was clean.
Cloud grunted as he felt the weight of the metal fall on him—they weren’t just ordinary steel—then Zack was there taking one and putting it on the ground carefully, soundlessly, even as Cloud did the same for the one he still held.

“If we leave the backpacks, we should be able to fit through,” the General commented. He needn’t have bothered. Tseng was already sorting out the essentials—potions, materia, ammo—and ditching the rest—tents, towels, extra clothes.

Five minutes and they were sliding through the bars into the deserted corridor.

“Recognize anything?” Zack asked Yazoo. The clone shook his head.

“This is a maintenance tunnel,” Tseng said, “He would have no reason to come here.”

“If we can find an outlet, I may be able to access their system, find a map,” Sephiroth suggested.

They looked at the nearby walls... no computer station in sight. Zack sighed. “Until then, left or right?” he asked. They went left and, at the first intersection, left again. Zack suggested that they ‘mark’ these tunnels like they had the others but was outvoted with extravagant groans. He was also punched by Tifa but he was getting used to that and just grinned at her in response.

They were lucky that the corridors were mostly deserted. They only crossed paths with a couple work teams and had plenty of warning so they ducked into empty spaces. At this point, so early in their exploration, Cloud knew that it made more sense to hide than to fight. Fighting, maybe killing people who were supposed to report in occasionally, only raised alarms. Tseng and Vincent were disgusted at how easy it was for them to slip by.

“How can they not notice seven people—most of them quite large—skulking in the dark? What kind of security training are they getting?”

“Knowing Hojo, he probably picked them for their ability to hear nothing, see nothing and say nothing,” Vincent responded, “but it’s still inexcusable.”

“Unacceptable in such a high level facility,” the Turk agreed.

Zack rolled his eyes and Cloud had to smile; he just hoped all the enemies they encountered were so clueless.

There was a door at the end of this hallway, with a little safety window. The General peered through it before giving a small hum of dissatisfaction. Cloud figured he couldn’t see as much of the outside corridor as he would like.

Sephiroth knew they would be safer in the maintenance halls but it was unlikely they would find any access to Hojo’s lab or DGS’s lair in them. They had no choice, he decided, and opened the door. The emptiness was a little anticlimactic but, since it couldn’t last, Sephiroth would allow himself to be grateful. He had studied the old blue prints of the original facility, built nearly sixty years before, so he took point. He’d already noticed several discrepancies—the maintenance areas were far more complex indicating a much larger facility than originally planned—but the essential structure probably remained. If he was right then they should be encountering an elevator in the next corridor.

“Except for the fact that it’s a little tiny box in an externally controlled environment that likely has a security camera in it,” Vincent said repressively. “It’s a moving trap and I can’t recommend using it.”

“Not the elevator,” the General agreed, “They rarely monitor the shafts and those often connect to more interesting areas.”

Zack grinned and jerked his thumb at his CO, “What he said.”

Cloud was already at the doors. “How do we get in?”

“We need to find the override,” Tseng said. “If we use force an alarm will sound.”

“It’s there,” Yazoo pointed his chin at the sign giving the current floor’s information.

Tseng walked over to the hidden panel, removing a small tool from an inner pocket. Within seconds, he’d removed for the cover plate and was examining the wiring. “Hmm,” he grunted shortly. It was the only sound he made and the only indication that he might have trouble hotwiring the door. Of course Zack knew, with a Turk, ‘trouble’ was a relative word. Three, five minutes tops, and one of the doors was sliding open with a soft ‘whoosh’. The little light on the card-key reader stayed happily green.

Cloud poked his head over. “Wow” he breathed, “That’s a long way down.”

“What’s the matter, Spike, afraid of heights now?” Zack teased as he sauntered over.

“Not even close,” the blond replied, “It’s just that it looks like there’s mako or something at the bottom.”

At that statement, the dark-haired SOLDIER leaned his head over the edge. The bottom of the shaft was bright, far brighter than man-made lights could account for, but it wasn’t mako. “I don’t know what that is but the colour’s wrong for mako.”

“It could be a variation,” Cloud suggested, “Something new.”

Zack stared at his friend in horror, “Well, aren’t you the cheery one.” Tifa snorted.

Sephiroth strode to the opening and looked in. “We won’t find out what’s down there by staying up here,” he stated firmly before swinging over to the ladder recessed into the wall. They heard the faint clang as his boots moved on the metal hand-holds.

Tseng was next, “We only have a limited time before the door re-closes. I suggest we hurry.”

“Right, flyer next then a faller,” Zack ordered. It was Cloud’s turn to look at his friend in horror. Bright blue eyes glinted in humour. “So we can catch them if they do.” Vincent was already through the opening and heading down. Tifa, after giving Zack’s arm the obligatory punch for his crass remark, swung in next. Cloud followed his childhood friend and Yazoo followed him. Zack was last making one last sweeping glance over the hallways, making sure no one had spotted them and their exit from the upper area was as safe as possible. He almost waited too long. The big First had to jump into the shaft from the corridor because the elevator door started to close while he was
still at the other end. He was a blur that flew to the far side of the space, bounced off the wall with a shuddering thud, only to end up five rungs up from Yazoo on the ladder as if he’d planned it.

He grinned down at the silver-haired clone. “I’m totally awesome, right?”

“If awesome is another word for insane...” was Cloud’s comment. Zack graciously ignored both it and the muted chuckles from Yazoo and Tifa because they had a long way to go and bickering, he decided nobly, wouldn’t make it go any faster.

“And thinking out loud will?”

Ah, fuck.

The glow at the bottom wasn’t liquid mako, Cloud was relieved to discover. It was just the lights, weird, icy blue flowy lights, but just lights. Tseng was working on the door which was locked from the corridor side. From the way he’s humming they had a couple minutes.

“This feels the same as those creatures at the air field,” Vincent stated. He was standing underneath one of the lights, staring at it. “Mako and some other elements.”

Yazoo came up beside him. “It’s the mixture Hojo used to create the Tsviets, or very similar. I remember some of the scientists discussing the colour change.”

“It would explain why their armour glowed blue. It was mako powered,” Zack commented in passing. Once Tseng had the door open, he and the Turk were going to do a quick scout of the outside area.

“Is there any way to disrupt the bond?” Sephiroth can sense the mako energy within the light tubes. It resonated within his body, making his blood sing. It reminded him of standing next to a group of SOLDIERs.

“I, I don’t know,” Yazoo confessed, “I don’t remember them discussing that.” Sephiroth nodded his acceptance. It had been a thin hope at best but, considering how unconcerned Hojo and his staff had been about being overheard, it had been worth asking the question.

“Corridor’s clear,” Zack announced, poking his head back in. “Tseng thinks the main labs and command centres are to the right.”

“What do you think,” the General asked.

Zack shrugged, “There seems to be more activity down there. I think he’s right.”

“Very well,” the General agreed. Tseng’s logic was always impeccable but sometimes, Sephiroth trusted Zack’s instincts more.

They moved down the corridor, steps nearly silent on the uncarpeted surface. The hum of machinery is louder here; machines working to circulate the air, run the lights, power the computers and the laboratory equipment. There was also a low-level hum, like a current in the air. It made Sephiroth’s hackles rise because it was both familiar and not. It was the sound of experimental subject moaning in pain, suffering in back rooms and ignored by all but their fellow subjects. He grew up with this sound. He’d made that sound.
He didn’t realize he was growling until Cloud stepped up beside him. “You picking up anything, Sir?”

It could’ve been an innocuous question, a way of distracting him from his anger, but Cloud’s eyes were tense and alert and there were frown lines between his brows. “You feel something, Corporal?” Sephiroth tossed the question back at the NCO.

Large blue eyes flicked up at him. “Yes, Sir. A pressure, like someone’s trying to whisper in my brain.” Cloud searched the bleak hallway for an explanation. “Maybe a lot of someones.”

His comment brought forward a memory, of a time when Sephiroth had heard someone in his brain like a hum. Nibelheim, before Hojo’s defection, when Cloud Strife was just some nameless grunt assigned a mission to his hometown. The General had... felt something in Nibelheim, recognition and a pull toward the old mansion. That pull had led him to the basement and shelves upon shelves of book purporting to be about his creation, his purpose. Most had been false but Sephiroth hadn’t been able to see that because there’d been this pressure on his mind, a voice, whispering that he was special, he was destiny personified, he would be great.

This wasn’t quite the same as that but, now that he was aware of it, he could feel the similarities.

“Zack,” he called out to the SOLDIER who fell in beside them. “What are you feeling?”

They’d all come to a halt, wondering what was up with the General. Now they waited for Zack’s response. The big SOLDIER closed his mouth and then rubbed his head in thought. “I’ve got kind of a headache.” He rubbed his chest. “My lungs feel tight.”

“Like you’re under pressure?” Sephiroth asked.

Zack nodded, eyes wide in realization. “Yeah, it does kinda feel like that.”

“Tifa, would you please touch Commander Fair.” Tifa raised a delicate brow in surprise but did as requested. Everyone saw Zack relax. His shoulders fell, his face smoothed out... he even managed a small bounce.

“That feels better,” he said without thought then, “Oh shit. This is like Nibelheim three years ago: Jenova yakking at you and Cloud able to block it.”

Cloud disagreed, “I can feel it.”

“This time you have Jenova cells in almost equal amounts to the mako in your system. Yazoo, can you feel it?” The clone nodded. Without asking, Tifa put her hand on his cheek—his long, form fitting coat didn’t leave much skin bare. They didn’t have to ask if her touch stopped the hum they could see it in the way his eyes widened and his mouth formed a silent ‘O’.

“Jenova’s dead though, right?” Zack pointed out. “Cloud disintegrated her back at that underground city. That was her, wasn’t it?” He turned to his blond friend who shrugged in reply. “Shit.”

“It was her,” Sephiroth reassured them on that point. “However, Hojo injected her cells in many things and, if they react as they did in SOLDIERS then they can communicate with each other. Perhaps even act like a hive mind keeping her presence alive.”
“So she’s like an insane, immortal ant?” Zack quipped but not happily.

“Who can maybe use all those cells to regenerate herself,” Tseng stated flatly. All eyes turned toward him reflecting various degrees of horror or outrage. “There are theories. Some researchers think it might be possible.” Tseng’s gaze caught each of them in turn. There was no apology in the Turk’s eyes. “Most don’t think it’s very feasible.”

Somehow, that wasn’t reassuring.

Their luck held. The base was large enough and complex enough that they could usually hide from enemies wandering the hall. The few times they couldn’t dodge they managed to dispose of the bad guys quietly, without setting off any alarms. They’d be found eventually, Cloud knew, because that’s just the way it worked. Luck never stayed good.

He was following behind Tseng when it happened. They entered a large chamber, empty and high ceilinged, with no cover and no obvious purpose.

“Why does every bad guy’s lair always have a room like this?” Zack asked. “I ask you; does this room make sense?”

“It certainly makes your voice echo,” Sephiroth growled repressively.

Something about the way the General said it made Cloud tense up. Or maybe it was something else. He scanned the room, looking up into the gloomy heights and down through the grated floor into dark, unknown depths. He couldn’t help it; he sniffed the air, searching for the scent of danger. “I think we need to get out of here,” he said, responding to... something, “We need to go now.”

Tifa and Yazoo turned to look at him but Sephiroth pointed toward a door on the far side, Zack said “Right,” and Vincent just started to run. It didn’t take long for the others to start running as well, trusting in the instincts of their comrades.

They were too late.

A dark, blackish-purple cloud came swirling out of nowhere. It flowed over the flooring and wrapped itself around the young clone. When the smoke moved on, Yazoo had disappeared.

“Ifrit’s steaming hells!” Zack swore before being engulfed by the thick mass.

“Zack!” Cloud yelled helplessly. “Sir! We’re losing people.” Sephiroth was already stopped. There was more of the unnatural smoke in front of him. It moved toward the silver-haired warrior but Sephiroth shifted out of its path.

“It’s one of the Tsviets,” Tseng announced. “We’ve heard of this ability but never been able to verify it.”

“Tifa’s gone.” Cloud stated, forcing his voice to stay calm.

“So you have no idea where it’s taken Yazoo or Commander Fair.” It wasn’t a question but Tseng
confirmed it anyway. The General was still dodging the swirling clouds. There were three dark masses now.

“It’s got Tseng.”

“There’s only one way to find out where it’s taken the others,” Sephiroth declared.


“Very,” the General said.

Cloud swallowed, but nodded acceptance of the order. The next time one of the swirling balls of smoke came for him, he let it surround him. It was beyond dark, it was like living Darkness, solid and real. It was pressure on his mind and his soul, pulling him through his awareness into a void. It was like that place, Aerith’s garden, where he’d been both weightless yet more real. Except this air felt clingy and draining, not invigorating, not alive.

Cloud struggled to open his eyes. He’d already tried scenting but he could smell nothing. When he opened finally managed to get them open he could see very little. There was grey light but it was mostly blocked by that same thick, purple-black fog. He tried listening, stilling his breaths and tilting his head. He suddenly and fiercely wished to have the hearing his wolf DNA could’ve given him. As hard as he tried it wasn’t his ears that revealed the location of his friends, it was his whole body. He could feel them.

Jenova cells at their finest...

Moving through the fog was like breaking a path through a snow drift, slow and hard. Each step was a struggle, muscles burned and lungs strained, but Cloud knew it was worth it because he could sense the bond between the Jenova cells getting stronger and that meant he was getting closer.

He practically stumbled over, a small, silver-haired figure in form-fitting black. Yazoo has folded in on himself, unconscious or hiding. Cloud reached out a hand and touched the young man on the shoulder and Yazoo jerked in response, awake and ready to defend. Cat-slit eyes glowed with the mako he was drawing on then they dimmed as he recognized his assailant. “Cloud,” his deep voice almost quivered with relief.

“Come on,” the Corporal ordered, “Let’s find the others.” Somehow it was easier with two of them. The air didn’t seem as thick and unforgiving. They didn’t seem so isolated and lost, even though they were.

It didn’t take them long to find Zack plodding through the fog without his usual zeal. He was carrying Tseng over his shoulder. “Completely out,” he explained shortly. “Hey, Sprite, you hanging in there?” Yazoo blinked at him, dazed, but did manage to give a small reassuring smile.

Sephiroth appeared, black mist swirling and parting in front of him. “There you are,” he said as if they’d merely wandered away in a store. Only someone watching him closely would’ve noticed his eyes flare in relief. Cloud wondered if his eyes had done the same thing.

“All we’re missing now are Tifa and Vinnie,” Zack swung around and Cloud had to bend away to avoid getting hit by Tseng’s head.
“Can you feel them?” Cloud asked the First.

Zack finally put the Turk down, although he was careful to keep in contact with the unconscious man. He turned his head and Cloud could tell that he was listening with more than his ears. Finally, the big First shook his head, “Not picking up anything.”

Vincent’s alterations are completely different from the ones used on us,” Sephiroth commented. “He has no Jenova cells.”

“Really?” Cloud was surprised but when he thought about it some more it made sense. They may have wings and other mutations, but from what the doctor had said, no SOLDIER ever had a completely new being inside them and Vincent had four.

“But I think I can sense him,” the General continued as if Cloud hadn’t spoken. There was a small frown marking his brow.

“It’s worth a shot,” Zack said, his small amount of patience already worn thin. He was already bending down to grab Tseng to toss him over his shoulder. “Anything’s better than waiting here in this muck.”

“Is he breathing?” Yazoo asked.

Zack twisted to that the Turk’s head was close to the young clone. “Why don’t you check?” So Yazoo did. He put fingers on the large artery in the neck, able to feel the steady pulse through his gloves. He even leaned forward to listen for the steady in and out.

When the four of them starting moving it was only natural that he would follow behind Zack but this place made him nervous and groggy and he didn’t like it. He was sure he could see things—people he’d known—gliding through the fog just out of sight. He slipped his weapon into his hand, reassured by its familiar weight. It wasn’t enough. Thankful that his brothers weren’t here to see his cowardice, he grabbed onto the SOLDIER’s belt with his free hand. It didn’t even make Zack miss a step. Which was why, when Zack did pause, Yazoo nearly smashed his nose into his back.

“Shit, it can’t be.” One beat, two, “Sir, did you see... Seph?”

That didn’t sound good. “Zack, what is it?”

The SOLDIER ignored his soft question, striding forward and calling out for his friends. His voice didn’t echo, it wasn’t even muffled really, it just sort of fell to the ground without penetrating anywhere. Zack kept calling, kept moving until he just stopped. Yazoo was more aware this time so he didn’t run into the SOLDIER. He very carefully slid his grip around on the wide belt until he stood beside the First. “We’ve lost them?”

Zack sighed and dropped the Turk to the surface, once again carefully keeping a foot in contact with vulnerable body. “Fuck! I just took my eyes off them for a second.”

“Can you sense them,” Yazoo asked, “With the Jenova cells?”

Bright blue eyes scowled at the swirling mass before turning to gaze down at the clone. “I’m sorry, Yazoo.” He shook his head.

“We should wait here then. Sephiroth could sense us last time.”
Zack managed a small smile, “Sounds like a plan. Got a deck of cards?”

Before Yazoo could ask him what he meant they heard a voice through the fog. “I’m sure ... something over ...” It was Tifa’s voice somehow the mountain girl wasn’t passed out like Tseng. Her voice sounded groggy, but that could’ve just been the fog.

“Tifa?” Yazoo called, his deep voice carrying easily. He saw Vincent’s brass gauntlet first, gleaming in the dark, then the brooding gunman.

“Yazoo?” It was Tifa, blinking heavily and hanging onto Vincent’s cloak the way he was hanging onto Zack’s belt.

“Thank the fucking gods,” Zack whispered before raising his voice and greeting the others in his usual loud, cheerful tones, but Yazoo knew that he heard stark relief in the SOLDIER’s voice.

“What is this stuff?” the dark-haired First asked, waving his hand through it.

“It is that from which chaos was born.” Vincent intoned.

Zack stared at him. The ex-Turk was, just from his appearance, inclined to the melodramatic but that was a little over the top. “Wait, you mean chaos as in... Chaos, as in—”

“As in my resident demon, yes.”

“Okay, that’s a lot less emo than I thought,” Zack said with relief. Tifa snorted and Yazoo’s smile widened. “So this is some weird thing mako-like thing, right? It has the same feel kinda.” He barely waited for a response before asking a different question, “Why isn’t Tifa affected? Tseng’s out like hibernating bear.” Tifa blinked at him and Zack noticed that her pupils have all but eclipsed her irises. She wasn’t completely unaffected then. It made him feel better because he knew he was feeling somewhat stoned.

She pointed a floppy finger at her head. “It’s the ribbon.”

Huh?

“The ribbon I found at the Cetra ruins,” Vincent explained, “It seems to have some protective powers.”

“Oh,” weird, Zack thought. “Cool.”

“Where are the others?” the gunman asked. He has his arms wrapped around himself like a bandage and Zack wondered if it helped keep Chaos under control. If it did, he was all for it. One encounter with that guy was enough.

“They were right here but we paused and they disappeared,” Yazoo explained in his soft bass voice talking over Zack’s babbling. “We’re hoping that Sephiroth will find us again... because of the Jenova cells.”

One dark eyebrow quirked up, barely visible under Vincent’s long hair, it was obvious he doesn’t understand. It was Tifa who nods, loosely like she doesn’t have complete control of her neck, but at least it shows comprehension. “It should work,” she agreed. “Doctor Imeera talked about how
Jenova cells are attracted to each other.”

“That explains the SOLDIER Effect,” Zack said enlightened. He’d always wondered why every SOLDIER ever made reacted to Sephiroth they way they did. Even testosterone-laden homophobes would get hard when the General really laid on the power.

“I didn’t need to know that,” Vincent said repressively. His clawed fingers tapped out an angry rhythm on his sleeve.

Zack really really needed to learn how to control his mouth. “How long will we have to wait, do you think?”

“Not long at all.” The voice was smooth and cultured and nothing like the General’s silky baritone with its military cadence.

“Aw shit,” Zack scowled, “it’s another one.”

Cloud refused to look into the swirling mass that surrounded them. It was full of people that he’d known once. Known, but hadn’t really liked. There was Mr. Bannerhoff, Nibelheim’s self-proclaimed grape expert. He’d once twisted Cloud’s arm so hard his whole forearm had bruised. There was Sergeant Zannerling, his DI at basic, who’d screamed at him that he’d never be a SOLDIER and he should start building up a clientele because the only thing he was good for was sucking cock. He recognized others as well. They were taunting him, repeating the things they’d said so many years ago. He was pretty sure they were dead. He was pretty sure all the figures appearing in the ugly cloud were dead which was why he was keeping his attention on Sephiroth’s broad back.

Not that long ago he wouldn’t have been able to ignore them. Each harsh word, each contemptuous look, would’ve made him flinch and collapse in on himself. One thing surviving Hojo’s lab had taught him was that the people he cared for the most, and who cared for him, were the only people whose opinions mattered. And they were all here; the General in front and Zack behind. Everybody else could kiss his mutated ass… not that he’d ever say that, of course.

Unconsciously, he reached out with that awareness he’d developed of Zack’s presence—a necessary skill for separating friend from foe when you couldn’t move, couldn’t blink, and couldn’t scream.

Zack wasn’t there.

Zack wasn’t there.

“Sir!” He didn’t turn. He kept his eyes on the General unwilling to risk losing him too. “Zack’s gone.”

He stayed as he was, facing the General, while Sephiroth turned to look behind them. Cloud knew, just by the frown, that his hunch had been correct. “When did you stop sensing them?”

Cloud flushed, “I don’t know, Sir. I just now realized that I couldn’t feel him anymore.”

“Hmm,” It wasn’t condemning, but it may as well have been. They were lucky to have hooked up
in this mess once; twice would require intervention from the gods. “I am sensing something, but I’m not sure if it is Zackary or Vincent or something else entirely.

“It’s probably better than waiting here for whatever,” Cloud said. He wasn’t entirely sure it was true but he wanted out of this ugly fog and the bleak memories they were evoking. He wasn’t worthless; he wasn’t.

“I agree. This fog masks too much.” Sephiroth’s frown didn’t lighten when he looked down at the Corporal. He held out his right hand. “If you would, Corporal, I don’t want to lose you too.”

The statement was tactically logical but there was a little something extra that had the mountain boy’s cheeks filling with colour. He put Second Tsurugi back in his harness and gripped Sephiroth’s hand in his. He was probably safer with the General on his left than he’d ever be with two blades anyway. “Ready when you are, Sir.”

The silver-haired warrior allowed a small smile to ghost across his lips and Cloud could see that the frown had eased. “Let’s go see what we can find then, Corporal.”
Sephiroth eased through the murk and barely resisted growling. His team, his lovers, his...friends were in danger and he was essentially _useless_.

He was not happy with the realization. He was not happy at all.

Over the years, he’d gotten used to sensing where his SOLDIERs were within a wide radius around him. Plus they were such a small group he could practically identify them from their ‘feel’. Right now, however, whatever connection he had through the injected Jenova cells was ephemeral in the thick purple fog. Even Cloud’s presence, standing right next to him and connected through touch, was muted. As for Zack and Yazoo, they might as well be in Mideel their cells seemed so distant. So distant that he could be tracking them, or he could be hunting down one of Hojo’s evil experiments that wanted nothing more than to eat them. He couldn’t tell and that made him want to spit nails—a handy expression he’d picked up from Master-Sergeant Lutton and very apt for his current situation.

He had a flash of connection, and stopped. It was close, and strong, but still muted as if they were around a corner. Or, he thought, through a veil. And, if they were behind a veil, then all he had to do to find them was—he reached with his mind—rip it aside—he gripped the presence he could feel—and pull them through to the other side.

The fog was gone, the purple-black tendrils reluctantly peeling away from them, which was good, but they weren’t in the large room in which they’d first encountered Nero’s weapon, which was not. Walking through the fog had transported them to someplace else within the base. He didn’t know where they were but, as he inspected the crowded halls, he knew that they were nowhere near Zack and the others; he would have felt them.

He growled in frustration.

“Sir,” Cloud’s voice was filled with caution rather than disappointment, “Do these... people... remind you of Yazoo?”

The hall was filled with creatures which, although basically humanoid, seemed to cover the whole range of bipedal species of Gaia. However, they all had various lengths of silver hair and various coloured cats’ eyes so it was obvious that they were supposed to be clones of Sephiroth, but Hojo—it could only have been him—had played with the genetic samples adding strands from other beings because, although some of the clones had fully formed human features, others... did not. The General could see some that had skin that appeared melted, one feature sliding into another. Others had beaks or claws or feathers or scales. Some seemed sane, walking with a purpose. Others twitched and muttered and reminded the General of the final aspect he’d found in Cloud’s fractured soul, Caro, injured, broken and heartbreaking.

“Clones,” Sephiroth confirmed. He watched them, all moving in the same general direction. The hallway pulsed with the call of their Jenova cells, synchronized and growing stronger.

They followed the silver-haired crowd as it undulated, like a loose-linked chain, down the corridor.
Sephiroth towered over most of the clones and he could see the unity—the attempt to achieve identical growth—in all of them. He could also see the failure, repeated in body after body.

“They’re muttering about ‘reunion’,” Cloud said. “This can’t be a good thing, can it.” Sephiroth knew the younger man was thinking of what Tseng had said about Jenova rebuilding herself. He knew because he was thinking the same thing.

“Probably not,” Sephiroth agreed, “but there might be one good result.” Cloud looked up at him in disbelief and he allowed a small, predatory smile. “Wherever this reunion is supposed to take place, it’s most likely that Professor Hojo will be there.”

The Corporal’s soft lips curled and thinned with hate. “I think we should crash the reunion, don’t you?”

“Of course.” They shared a look of feral intent. Zack and the others weren’t forgotten but neither warrior could allow this opportunity to pass. Zack was with Vincent and Tifa, Yazoo and Tseng. It was a powerful group and Zack had survived other, equally unknown situations. Sephiroth would just have to have faith that the SOLDIER would do so again.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Vincent Valentine.” The voice was smooth and artificial. Since the boy’s mouth was covered in a thick, leather strip and his chin didn’t move, Vincent wasn’t sure how he was speaking, but he put the question out of his mind as unimportant.

“Nero,” he said in acknowledgement, his own voice cool and controlled.

What was important was that the purple-black mist was pulling away, disappearing as if it had never been, and his companions were emerging from the fog one by one. Tseng immediately made a sound, regaining consciousness, if not full function, with the retreat of the deadly mist. They were in a space far, far larger than the one the Nero had captured them in and Cloud and Sephiroth weren’t with them. His son was missing.

It was a worry the ex-Turk put out of his mind: Sephiroth was an experienced fighter and the small blond had proven to be an extraordinary survivor. They would be alright wherever they were. He had more immediate problems.

The Tsviet standing in front of him was slim to the point of being skinny. Hands too large for his body were peacefully folded over his chest as if he were a corpse standing. His armour glowed with the same blue that Vincent had seen on the other Tsviets. He had mechanical wings, although it was more the basic structure of them than actual wings—bones, but no feathers. It suited his rather austere look. Thin streamers of dark purple circled around him, flowing like ribbons over his body. Nero dipped his head, hiding his eyes behind shaggy black hair and Vincent knew they were being weighed, assessed.

“Yazoo,” the Tsviet acknowledged his former ally. To his credit, the clone didn’t cower or drop his head in embarrassment. “You are without your brothers; does that mean they didn’t survive?” Yazoo lifted his chin but the grief was stark in his features. Nero dipped his head sadly, “I am sorry for your loss.” Oddly enough, Vincent thought the sentiment was genuine.

“Do you choose to stand these beings or will you return to your master?” There was no judgement in the creature’s voice. In fact there was barely any interest.
In contrast, Yazoo’s deep voice was vibrant with emotions, “I stand with my friends.” Zack gave him a gentle shoulder-knock in support.

“Very well,” Nero replied, “It is your decision. It is a foolish decision, but it is yours to make.” His eyes, a reddish-colour that Vincent refused to recognize, looked over the group and the gunman could almost see the Tsviet smiling sadly. “At first, I thought you nothing more than a nuisance. However, it seems I can no longer let you run about unchained. I must protect my beloved brother.”

“Your... brother?” Tifa questioned and there was a tone in her voice that set off warning bells in Vincent. They’d let go of each other now but stayed close in case Nero used the fog again.

“Dear Weiss. Powerful Weiss,” His voice was filled with adoration. “The only person who ever loved me... and the only person I will ever love.”

“You’re really brothers?” she asked again and Vincent gathered that ShinRa’s forces had believed a different relationship existed between the two elite fighters. Considering what they knew of Yazoo and his brothers, the gunman wondered at Tifa’s shock. It wouldn’t be the first time incest had occurred between Hojo’s specimens.

Nero hung his head and sadness radiated off of him, “But that is all forgotten. In a matter of moments, everything will change.”

“How will it change?” Vincent asked. “Meteor isn’t here.”

“A new life breathes inside him... just as one does in you, Vincent Valentine.” Nero’s voice rose in devoted fervour. “He needs but one more element and then my dear brother will awaken and he will be the world’s saviour.”

“He’s not gonna be my saviour,” Zack muttered.

“Because you’re not pure,” Nero dipped his head in the SOLDIER’s direction. “When the time comes he will take the pure souls, the true souls, from this dying planet and keep them safe as he searches through the cosmos for a new, better home.” Nero’s voice was charged with the fervour of a True Believer. Talk and logic wouldn’t change his mind.

Zack stepped forward, “My girlfriend might have a problem with that. She doesn’t think this world is dying.”

“She should know,” Tseng murmured, voice a little weak but lucid.

“Bet your ass she’d know,” Zack nodded, swinging his Buster sword. “And since she’s kind of attached to this world, I’m going have to stop you. It can be my apology for not having written in three years.”

“Ah, so you wish to dance?” Nero turned to the side and, once again, Vincent felt that the boy was smiling at them. “What is a dance without a partner?” He stretched one mechanical wing and a small cloud of darkness formed and retreated, revealing a tiny figure with red hair and orange eyes. “Meet Shelke. My compatriot.”

“Vincent Valentine” she said in a very young voice, “We’ve found you.” Her voice was level, unsurprised at being unceremoniously brought to this room and dropped into a fight.
“Actually,” Tseng rose to face the new threat, “I think we found you.”

“We walked right into your headquarters,” Zack said smugly, “Wasn’t even hard.”

The newcomer blinked large, orange eyes. “It was Weiss’ plan to lure you in.”

Tifa snorted, “Yeah right.” She tightened her gloves and settled into her fighting stance.

“The final key that Weiss requires is contained in Vincent Valentine.” The girl pulled out two batons. They glowed with the same energy her eyes contained. “It was easier to have him bring it to us than to chase him down,” she said in a monotone unsuited to the childish tenor.

“The protomateria,” Tifa stated.

The blank-faced girl nodded. “It is most important. Without it Omega cannot perform his task properly.”

“If he wants it, I guess it’s up to us to make sure he doesn’t get it,” Zack said cheerily. He brought his large blade up to his face. He held it in both hands and appeared to be praying into it.

“You have faith,” Nero commented, “but it will not protect you. You will die and feel the essence of death and its ululations that are like a lullaby.”

Zack twirled his blade. “You’re just fucking creepy.”

Vincent had already drawn Cerberus. He held the heavy gun easily and pointed it straight at pair. “Enough talk. Let’s dance.”

“This is seriously creepy,” Cloud said softly. Sephiroth could only agree.

The Corporal had tried talking to a few of the more rational seeming clones but all they’d said was ‘reunion’ or they repeated a number. Each one gave him a different number and Sephiroth deduced it was their specimen number. He’d checked and they had numbers tattooed on their arms just as his specimen number was tattooed on his arm. The highest number they’d discovered was sixty-two. Sixty-two unfortunate creatures shaped and warped by Hojo’s mad will.

He couldn’t reach the scientist quickly enough and he would be able to kill him dead enough.

Cloud switched his sword from hand to hand, rubbing at his arms. “Corporal,” Sephiroth asked. The young warrior dropped his hands as if embarrassed. “What is it?” the General persisted.

Large blue eyes swung over to him then away. “All my hair’s standing on end. It feels like I have bugs crawling on my skin.”

Instead of laughing, or whatever else Cloud thought he would do, Sephiroth answered calmly. “It is likely due to the clones’ presence. Their Jenova cells calling to yours, or vice versa.”

Cloud gave him another look, a subtly mocking look. “That doesn’t make me feel any better, Sir.”

It didn’t make Sephiroth feel better either. It actually made him somewhat worried because if it
became necessary for him to control the clones using the alien cells—which he wasn’t even sure he could do—then Cloud would be similarly affected. However, since it was a safe assumption that the clones were heading toward whatever piece of Jenova remained with Hojo and that Hojo would be with that remnant, therefore Sephiroth had to plan for a small army of clones to be standing between him and his target. He had to come up with a plan to destroy the clones, or at least sideline them so they weren’t a factor.

If only Cloud’s body didn’t hold nearly as much of the alien creatures cells as his own did then Sephiroth wouldn’t have to worry about controlling him. Of course he could flip that sentence around...

“Cloud, did you ever try to use the Jenova cells to communicate with Zack?” he asked quietly, “or to influence him in any way?”

The soldier looked at him with startled eyes. “Um… I-I don’t know, maybe?” One of the clones lurched unexpectedly and nearly fell. Cloud automatically put out a hand to help the creature stay upright. A fission of awareness ran up his arm.

The General narrowed his gaze thoughtfully. It wasn’t ideal but it would have to do. “You might be able to control the clones—your Jenova cell count is high enough—and that would leave me free to fight Hojo.”

“You mean do that thing you do to the SOLDIERs?” Cloud asked and knew he was blushing; this was no time to be getting an erection.

Thankfully, the General didn’t notice. “Indeed. It was theorized, when I was still owned by Shin-Ra, that I should be able to influence or control the behaviour of the SOLDIERs through our shared Jenova cells. This is, in essence, the same situation.”

“Except that, if I can do that to them, then won’t I have the same effect on you, Sir?”

Sephiroth raised a brow in disbelief. “I think that’s highly unlikely. I’ve had many years experience with the phenomena.”

He sounded a little smug to Cloud but the soldier shrugged—it was probably true, after all—and turned his mind to their current situation. “What do I need to do?”

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Shelke, Zack decided, reminded him of a grasshopper on speed, or maybe a really toxic mosquito, the way she darted in, whapped at them with her powered up sticks, and then bounced away again. He and Tifa took her on because at least she stayed on the ground when she fought and so do they. Turned out, that Nero dude floated all over the place so it was easiest to leave him to the gunmen.

He could hear the other battle though he couldn’t spare the time to look. Last time he’d taken his eyes off the girl she’d managed to get a hit in and it had hurt, like a Bolt strike but with an added something that reminded him of Hojo’s lab. It had driven him to his knees, dazed. Tifa had come to his rescue with a punch that had pushed Shelke halfway across the room even with her Barrier.

The Tsviet moved in for another hit but he’d learned his lesson: He wasn’t watching her with his eyes anymore. He gave a brief thought to his Ice materia and cast it at the spot Shelke would be. It wasn’t regular Ice materia, hadn’t been since Sephiroth had gotten too close to it. Now it was dark—dark in colour, dark in feel. He wasn’t actually sure what its effect would be on a former-human.
He wanted to find out though.

Problem was, the kid’s Barrier was the best he’d ever encountered. It was taking them freaking forever to break through. He really wanted to get his hands on the kid’s Barrier materia so he could figure out what she’d done to it. It wasn’t fucking natural, that’s for sure.

The Ice flew through the air, a dark shadow on the ground, and hit Shelke’s Barrier with an audible crack. Tifa’s Quake followed right after and they could see the small Tsviet struggle to maintain her footing. He saw Tifa moving in for an attack so he quickly threw out a Blast Wave to weaken the kid’s Barrier even more. It was less than half the strength it had been which was still too strong for most of their attacks to do any real damage.

The evil warrior in the itty-bitty body blinked at him as he swung at her Barrier knowing that his Buster was going to bounce off of it... again. “The extreme potency of this shield materia is comparable to that of a barrier field,” she said, her little girl voice uninflected, remote. “All this effort serves no purpose.”

“That’s okay, sweetheart,” Zack replied, dodging her two power sticks, “I don’t know how to take ‘no’ for an answer. Ask any of my friends.”

Besides, it was weakening. Even the strongest, most mastered, Barrier magic could only take so much damage before it had to be re-cast and hers was starting to break down, Zack could tell. He just had to keep whacking at it until then, which meant actually landing a hit on it, which would be a lot easier if the girl would just stay the fuck still!

“That is both an illogical and unreasonable expectation,” she responded.

Zack didn’t even bother to swear.

“You do realize that one or all of you will likely die in this foolish endeavour?” the itty-bitty baddy asked. “You could join us, save yourselves.”

“And let you kill the planet?” Tifa sneered, “I’d rather die.”

“Been there, done that. Got the awesome cosmic powers to prove it.” Zack bent to allow Yazoo to launch himself off his broad back in an attack on bandaged guy. The clone hardly left an imprint which was pretty impressive considering the kid’s size.

“It isn’t logical,” Shelke said in her oddly robotic little-girl voice, “I don't understand how someone could give her own life for that of strangers.” She twirled her batons and Zack could feel the crackle as she reinforced her Barrier. Shit.

“When a person has someone they care about, giving their life is sometimes the least they can do,” Tifa answered her, shaking out her fists. To someone who didn’t know the fighter, it would look like she was trying to loosen up tensed muscles. To Zack, who’d fought with her before, it looked like she was powering up one of her attack materia. Iron Fist, if he had to guess. He tried to work out her attack vector so he could follow it up with his own.

“Although,” the Nibelheimer kept talking, keeping the Tsviet distracted, “it seems like there are a lot of people around me who don’t need a reason to risk their lives for that of another.”

“Very well,” the little girl said, still sounding puzzled but less concerned, “It is your choice after
She didn’t get to finish. Tifa ran in with a punch that literally bent the Tsviet’s Barrier even as it pushed the bitty warrior back, slamming her against the wall with such force that she bounced inside her Barrier. The mountain girl followed it up with a kick to the jaw that had so much power Tifa flipped right over. Even with the materia’s protection it lifted Shelke up off her feet. When she dropped, Zack was there, landing a jump that shook the walls of the cavernous room. It also shredded the rest of Shelke’s Barrier.

“Tseng,” Zack called out even as he swung the Buster at the cornered Tsviet. The Turk didn’t answer in words. The SOLDIER felt the approaching magic and jumped out of the way. Tseng’s Silence hit the girl firmly, oozing over her like a second-skin, and ending her ability to cast magic for a while.

“No more Barrier for you, little girl,” Zack crowed. He lifted the Buster, ready to split her in half, when a dark purple smoke surrounded her. He swung his sword and hit... nothing.

“Fucking shit! Where’d she go?” He spun in time to see the smoke deposit her behind Tseng. She shook herself, disoriented but not for long enough. Her batons sparked and she stretched out a delicate hand and fried the Turk with them. Orange-red light coruscated over the Wutaian, stiffening his muscles and forcing a pained sound from him. He dropped to his knees gasping for breath, trying to force air into his seized lungs. It wasn’t working.

“Crap.” That was Tifa swearing this time. She flung out her hand and the green light of a Cure rippled over the Turk’s body.

Tseng gulped in a breath. One was all he needed before he whipped his gun around and hit Shelke on the forearm, numbing the muscle. He followed it with a punch, then a kick as he got back on his feet. He managed one more strike to her chest before the tiny Tsviet back-flipped out of the way. He shot at her, but she blocked and the bullets ricocheted wildly.

One of them hit Vincent. He absorbed it with a grunt, the pain distant and somehow unconnected to his body. He wasn’t even close to being forced to transform so, until his body reached that point, he kept his focus on his opponent. He needed to because Nero teleported... again. To paraphrase Commander Fair, it was highly annoying.

*I could smite him for you and then we wouldn’t have to listen to him anymore.*

Vincent ignored Chaos’ eager offer. There was something in the demon’s voice that made him cautious. It was as if killing the dark Tsviet wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Chaos, not this time, and Vincent decided to let caution win over expedience. He reloaded and fired, reloaded and fired.

“One of Nero’s guns flipped down so that he could reload it. The other continued to fire.

*He is an irritating creature,* Chaos sneered. *You should really let me smite him.*

Vincent ignored them both even though he was tempted to agree. The dark Tsviet talked in a breathy, condescending tone, as if the fight were a mere inconvenience. It wasn’t the first time the ex-Turk had encountered this trait. In fact, it seemed the more insane the opponent the more they liked to hear themselves talk. He had as little understanding of it now as he had forty years ago.
There was a flash of darkness shot with light, disorienting in its inconsistency, and then Nero... changed colour, turned blue-grey instead of blue-black. His winged body seemed to blur and then separate until there were three of him. Or some semblance of Nero the Sable...all three versions seemed oddly two-dimensional.

However, they could still shoot at them with real, very solid, bullets.

Zack sensed the bullets heading toward him and Tifa as they worked to corner Shelke once again. He quickly flipped the Buster sword to his back and used it as a shield. As he had before, Zack gave thanks to Angeal’s father who’d put everything he had into getting the best weapon for his son. He gave thanks to Angeal’s mother who had given the blade to him when Angeal no longer felt worthy. As for thanking Angeal… well… he was working on it.

He shook off the morbid past and focussed on the very dangerous present. He cast his Dark Ice at the form that was floating right in front of him. Nero, this version of him at least, looked kind of… diaphanous. The Ice hit the weird wrapped guy and froze him into place for a moment, long enough for Zach to build up some speed. The SOLDIER jumped up, still flying forward, and let his leap carry him and the Buster right past the dark Tsviet. The large blade cut right through the body, smooth and clean yet somehow off. Like there hadn’t been enough of the guy or like when the VR room programming malfunctioned and the enemies had more light than substance.

“Please tell me that killing the ghost hurts the real guy?” he asked of the air.

“We can only hope,” Tifa said as she shot past him, rising up from the ground and punching another one of Nero’s ghosts through a wall. It flickered, stunned, and was destroyed by the combined fire of three determined gunmen who were easily firing enough rounds by themselves to equal a freaking company of regular forces.

He grinned. He had some seriously scary friends.

“Well that was unexpected,” Sephiroth stated curtly, needlessly brushing non-existent dust from his coat.

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud agreed. He tried to hide the smile that wanted to break through: so much for the ‘many more years of experience’.

Actually, Cloud thought, it was kind of nice to know that the effect ran both ways. That he could, if he wanted, arouse the General just with the power of his mind... or rather, the combined effect of Jenova cells and mako, but they were in his body so that made them his, and he could make his lover shudder for him just like Sephiroth could do to him. Not that he’d thought the General would ever abuse the effect; it was just that it made the smaller man feel less... vulnerable. Or maybe equally as vulnerable was a better way of putting it; made them sound more like partners, each protecting the other. It was a good feeling and it had nothing to do with enjoying the large swordsman’s helpless writhing and breathless moans.

But it was still a bad time for an erection. Cloud sighed and adjusted his pants.

“There may be another way, Sir,” he suggested. “I remember, in the lab, Zack accidentally... I don’t know... pulled the Jenova cells out of me. He hated the idea that I’d been given them so much—” He remembered the look of absolute horror on his friend’s face, despair and guilt mixed
in just for fun. It was kind of sad that it turned out that her alien cells were an essential part of the SOLDIER formula.

“What happened?” Sephiroth’s smooth baritone brought Cloud out of the unhappy memories.

“This... stuff came out through my skin.” And that wasn’t a happy memory either. “A thick black goo oozed out and dripped onto the floor, and then the drops tried to... to move toward each other, gather back together.”

“Reunion,” the General murmured. Cloud’s eyebrows rose, startled. He hadn’t thought of it like that but it fit.

“It nearly killed me,” Cloud continued, “I started to throw up and it was the same black stuff. Then it started to come out my eyes and ears. My muscles cramped and I couldn’t breathe. At first we thought it was just a reaction to the shot, a coincidence, but he did it again to this other guy Hojo was experimenting on.” Cloud could remember him vaguely, he’d been pretty messed up by then, unable to keep reality in focus, but he had memories of a skinny guy twisting on his cot, begging the voices to leave him alone. “He did it one final time, just to make sure that it wasn’t a fluke, and then never did it again.” Because the guy had died, Cloud didn’t add.

“That would make a good distraction,” Sephiroth said in satisfaction.

The corporal wasn’t finished. “It’s even better than that, Sir. Once outside of a living... host, I suppose, the cells died within minutes.”

The General stopped in shock. “They died,” he repeated. “Just died?”

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud confirmed, “Dried up and flaked away.”

Sephiroth’s smile turned feral. To be rid of Jenova’s threat once and for all. “Well, well, well. I do believe we’ll be able to surprise the good professor. Explain to me how the process works.”

“Impressive. Perhaps Azul and Rosso never stood a chance against the mighty Valentine.”

It was the second time Nero had been forced back into a single form. It had taken an unfortunate length of time as his writhing streamers of darkness swallowed up their bullets without damaging the dark Tsviet at all. Despite Zack’s comment so many days ago, Vincent did not have an ammunition factory under his cloak.

It didn’t help that Nero was irritating to listen to. His breathy nasal tone was annoying Vincent… a lot. Plus Chaos was twisting inside him, whispering a blood-thirsty counterpoint to Nero’s patronizing narration. Between the two creatures Vincent had an unhappy suspicion that this battle was no more than a delay while something of greater importance happened elsewhere. They were running out of time, he was sure of it.

“What about me?” Zack yelled as he dodged an attack by the small Tsviet, with the body of a child and the lifeless eyes of a killer. “Don’t I count?” The SOLDIER managed a quick swipe at Nero in passing.

He obviously didn’t expect it to connect, and it didn’t, but it did force the creature to move and that interrupted the condescending speech Vincent was sure he had planned.
Vincent would be grateful for the small mercy.

The three gunmen—he, Tseng and Yazoo—had developed a decent rhythm. One of them was always firing on the oddly wrapped Tsviet. Nero would shift, usually telegraphed by a thickening of the purple-black clouds around him, and either he or Yazoo would find his new location immediately. Tseng was always a moment or two behind since his perception, no matter how well trained, was still only human normal. Unfortunately Nero hardly seemed damaged by all the gunfire and Vincent suspected that the cloud drifting around him in ribbons acted as some kind of shield.

Suddenly he was surrounded by a purple-black cloud that pulsed around him, thick and dark.

*Really,* Chaos said with a sneer, *Does that boy think his little cloud is enough to hold us?* Into Vincent’s mind was fed the ability to ignore the darkness and he stepped forward easily, firing a few rounds at the Tsviet as he shot at the silver-haired clone who had taken refuge behind an odd shaped wall.

The Tsviet wrapped himself in his cloud and jumped away from Vincent and his weapon. “Well, well. That was interesting,” he said, unfolding and folding his metallic wing structure. “Are you not curious, Valentine? Curious as to how you can be immune to my darkness?”

It was Tseng who responded. “It is the creatures inside him, those make him immune don’t they?”

“My darkness can absorb as well as extract almost anything.” They could practically here Nero’s satisfied smile. “However, some things remain—things as black as the heart of a daemon. Soul wrought of terra corrupt.”

“Chaos,” Yazoo murmured.

“I believe so,” Tseng returned.

“It makes sense,” Yazoo commented.

“What does?” Zack asked as he stood behind the Turk. He took a moment to gulp a mana potion. His Blast Wave hurt Shelke but not Nero. Dark Ice would hurt both of them if he could land it. His Transform was useless, both of the Tsviets were immune, and he couldn’t risk using the Comet materia in here with everyone bunched into a small space. It was too bad because it would be fucking cool to watch.

“That Chaos has something in common with the Tsviets,” Vincent answered calmly reloading as the others fired at Nero.

Zack always found it useful, although kind of weird, how upset the bad guys got when they were ignored by the people they were trying to kill. He’d seen it in Genesis, back when he was a bad guy which he apparently wasn’t anymore, and Hojo hated to be ignored with a passion that was brutal. Zack had learned never to ignore the crazy professor: the pain wasn’t worth it. Still, being blasé when the Big Bad spouting apocalyptic or genocidal fantasies always seemed to put them off their stride so, as a battle tactic, he never undervalued it. Nero was no different. The SOLDIER saw him pull his skinny frame up to its full height and lift his chin... They’d offended him.

Cool.
He checked over his battle but Tifa seemed to have Shelke well in hand. The fighter had somehow lifted the Tsviet up in the air and was beating the shit out of her. After that, Tifa would throw her to the floor and stomp on her some more. He had a couple minutes before any move by him wouldn’t throw off the mountain girl’s rhythm so Zack could spare a moment to watch Nero’s show.

“Omega’s awakening is near and Chaos has been drawn out of the shadows to serve as his guide, his herald. Chaos is Omega’s squire. Its only purpose is to serve Omega,” Nero spat at them, twin machine guns still firing. “This fight goes against what he is, what he wants.” The cloud around him thickened and Nero shifted himself farther away. “Can you feel it within you, Vincent Valentine, struggling to get out? Wanting to fulfill its destiny?”

*Yes! It would be glorious. I would be glorious!* the demon shouted inside Vincent’s mind making the gunman wince.

‘You’d be bored silly,’ Vincent thought back at him, bringing up memories of the fights they’d had participated in since their release from the cave. He thought of the night he’d spent with Tifa, exploring her passion as she’d explored his. He imagined meeting the president of ShinRa and gleefully punching him in the face and knocking him on his fat ass—a small punishment for allowing Hojo to run free all these years.

He could feel the demon’s smile. *You may be right, my immortalis. I shall have to consider your arguments.* Vincent knew he’d won nothing.

“You gotta admit, Sir, Zack has a point. Why do these facilities have rooms as big as a chocobo run?” Cloud mused, tone dry as the Corel Desert. “It is, to put it mildly, a waste of space.”

“Anything that feeds the ego of its user can never be considered a waste, Cloud,” Sephiroth responded, his tone matching his companion’s. “It is a bureaucratic law.”

They had reached the end of their journey. A large two-level room, a ramp had fed the clones into the lower central area, like cattle into a pen. The two warriors hadn’t gone into the lower level, recognizing it for the trap it was. Instead they’d climbed up onto the upper level which was a narrow walkway. The outer wall was lined with equipment that beeped and glowed with lights. If it hadn’t been so similar to the set up in the lab, Cloud might have found it pretty.

Sephiroth pointed out a box suspended above the pit, “If there’s anything left of Jenova, it would likely be in that. Hojo will drop it amongst the clones and then this... reunion... would occur.”

“That is precisely what will happen. I’m glad to see that your brain hasn’t atrophied over the years. I designed you well, Specimen-S,” said a nasal voice. Hojo had arrived from some secret entrance. He held a switch in one hand, a dead-man’s switch. Probably it controlled the winch that would be used to lower Jenova’s remains into the pit which meant that Sephiroth couldn’t kill Hojo from here. They had to get closer.

“Hojo. I can’t say that I’m surprised that you’re here.” The General’s voice was steady and calm. Only Cloud could feel the pulse hammering in the larger man’s body. Cloud had to work hard not to freeze in fear or grovel in trained response. Sephiroth’s grip on his hand tightened, grounding him, reminding him that he wasn’t Hojo’s creature anymore. Gratefully, he squeezed back, knowing the reassurance would work both ways.
“Where else would I be?” the scientist sneered, “This is the site of my greatest triumph.”

“Your plan is to reunite Jenova’s cells, which you used these poor souls to breed, and then what?”

“Then we shall travel the stars together, seeking out new worlds to conquer.”

The Corporal steadied himself, closing his eyes so he could better sense the vibrations of the massed alien DNA. He gave Sephiroth’s hand a squeeze, letting him know he was starting. The General pressed back twice, acknowledging the message.

“How will she take you with her?” the silver-haired warrior asked “You are hardly equipped to travel through space.”

“Why would she take you with her?” Sephiroth asked, “You will have served your purpose.”

Cloud pulled on the cells, telling them to come to him, that he was one of them, that he wanted them to join him in Reunion. He could feel the mass responding, craving to be one again. Whimpers rose from pit, soft and easily unheard for now.

“How will she take you with her?” the silver-haired warrior asked “You are hardly equipped to travel through space.”

“I thought Weiss the Immaculate was Omega’s vessel.” Sephiroth’s comments were meant to keep the scientist distracted as they moved closer to the professor.

Cloud followed the gentle tug on his hand, like a flower to the sun. He sent the pull out a little stronger, sent the craving to be whole out to the other cells hosted in the clones’ bodies and they were responding. The Corporal knew was likely a death sentence for them but it was their deaths or the death of the whole planet. Cloud swallowed down his bile, and focussed.

“He will bring Omega forth, yes, but then the Weapon shall be mine to use.” Smug, so smug. Sephiroth wanted to kill him now but he couldn’t risk it.

“That’s not what DGS believes.”

Hojo cackled. “I know what those religious idiots in Deepground think, after all, I designed them, but it’s of no concern,” he cackled some more, “because I designed them. They needed a certain amount of autonomy to perform their function but, having learned my lesson from you, Specimen-S, I programmed in a failsafe that I can engage at any time and their absolute obedience will be mine..”

The General ignored the growing sounds of pain from the clones in the pit. It was still faint, but he was able to detect where the alien cells were escaping from their hosts and soaking into the clones’ robes. Hopefully, the cells would be trapped in the cloth and unable to return to the host bodies.

“How,” the silver-haired warrior asked; a nice open-ended question that should hopefully cover what his partner was doing.

Hojo cocked his head puzzled. “Why?” he repeated.
“Yes, why.” The noise was growing from the pit. Some of the clones had already collapsed and the General could see a growing black slick on the metal flooring—Jenova cells. “As long as I’ve been aware of you, you’ve wanted to leave this world. Why?”

“Because I am a great man,” the professor answered, puzzled that the question had to be asked. “This world it’s too small, too limited, for an intellect such as mine. Perhaps, somewhere out there—” he flapped his hand toward the sky “—will be someone who can truly understand my genius.” A particularly loud groan pulled Hojo’s attention toward the pit. “What are they doing?”

“If you have Omega, why do you need Jenova?” Sephiroth asked hastily.

The professor pulled his dark eyes away from the clones. The lights from the computers reflected like stars on the lenses of his glasses. “Jenova has always valued my talents as they should’ve been; has always understood that this world is too small to contain me. I have been loyal to her in ways that—” he paused, frowning down at the clones even more fiercely. He stepped closer to the edge and stared into the crowd.

Most of the clones had fallen, on hands and knees and clutching at themselves as the thick black liquid oozed from their very pores. Cloud was breathing in controlled pants. The way they taught soldiers to manage pain if injured, until help arrived. The blond warrior’s fists were so tight that Sephiroth knew he’d have bruises even with his genetically-enhanced physique. They were running out of time and the Corporal knew it.

The dark eyes widened. “What is this?” Hojo demanded. “What are you doing?” He glared at the tall swordsman and finally noticed the blond soldier standing beside his prize specimen. “Specimen-C, I’m surprised to see you. You barely had a functioning brain cell after your last treatment. You showed such promise in the beginning. It’s a pity that you turned into such a failure.” The nasal voice was filled with disdain. Cloud ignored him, concentrating on drawing out as much of the alien DNA as possible.

“Looks like nothing’s improved in that regard,” the scientist harrumphed and Sephiroth knew he’d just dismissed Cloud as the threat. Excellent.

Sephiroth, filled to capacity with living Jenova cells, had been monitoring Cloud’s progress. The cobbled together plan was working. The hum caused by being so close to so much of the alien DNA had lessened considerably which meant that the cells outside the clones’ bodies were dying. Not as fast or in the quantity they’d hoped but it was a start. He just needed to keep Hojo distracted.

“Jenova is just a collection of cells that grow, like bacteria or a plague, until it kills off all its living hosts,” Sephiroth’s voice was deliberately dismissive. It had the desired effect.

“She is a wonder!” Hojo shouted, “A gift, that only one such as I could appreciate. Where would you be, oh great general, if it wasn’t for what she gave you? Of course it required my touch to make it work. I can’t believe they considered using Hollander’s process. It was totally inferior.” The professor was waving his arms. Clearly the thirty-year old insult still ranked. “It used only dead strands so of course it poisoned his specimen’s. I will admit that his idea of filtering the cells through a breeder in order to give it stability.” He was talking of Gillian Hewley, Sephiroth realized, he had to be. “His technique was crude but I perfected the procedure.”

“You used your wife as the ‘breeder’.” Lucrecia, his mother. Just another tool.
Hojo waved it off. “She was convenient and easy to convince and, although flighty, her genes were superior. Still, you were flawed. You had your chance to become truly great in Nibelheim three years ago and you threw it away!” Now spittle flew from his mouth as he pointed at Cloud “You chose that mewling little creature instead of your true destiny as Jenova’s new host. Intolerable!”

Beside him, Cloud fell to his knees and Tsurugi dropped to the floor as the blond warrior clutched his head. A thin stream of blood ran from his nostril. A wail rose up from the pit. Sixty voices crying out in pain. It was too much for even Hojo to ignore. He turned back to the pit, took a step closer. “What are you doing?”

The black ooze was too thick to be dismissed as a trick of the light. “What is that? The clones... they look like they are dying. But that’s impossible unless...”

Sephiroth had to do a quick check on his lover; strategically ill-advised but emotionally imperative. He gave the blond corporal a healing potion and made sure he drank it down before returning his attention to their nemesis. As he stood he raised his hand, gathering power.

“You’re ruining everything.” Hojo looked up at his silver-haired creation and lifted the dead-man’s switch. “I won’t let you.” The Firaga burst from Sephiroth’s fingers before the words had left the professor’s mouth.

It should have hit him dead centre, throwing Hojo back against the equipment in a fiery ball, instead the ground shifted, lurched, and Hojo lost his balance. He danced on his feet, desperately trying to stay upright, and the cast Firaga that should have disintegrated him, only grazed his side. The flames stuck to the professor’s long white lab coat and it caught on fire. He released the button and tried to pat out the flames and the box started to descend in a swinging arc.

The General was already casting the second Firaga at the box suspended over the pit but the room shifted once again, even harder than before, and the cage swung as it dropped. The stream of fire heated the metal but nothing more. It didn’t even slow the descent.

“Earthquake?” Cloud asked weakly. He grabbed his sword and stood beside the General, ready to back him up. His vision was still blurry and his head pounded but he wasn’t dead so, as Zack would say, everything’s good.

Before the General could answer, Hojo screamed. “What is that fool boy doing? We’re not ready yet.” He was trying to remove the burning lab coat but his arms were tangled in the sleeves. “They haven’t even obtained the protomateria. Omega will be completely uncontrollable.”

One final lurch and the professor’s already unsteady stance became unrecoverable. He was lifted up and tipped over, right into the pit with the bleeding clones. The black liquid quickly turned his white coat grey. The box, finished its descent, opened and spilled its contents. Where it touched the clones, they dissolved. Where it touched Hojo, it latched on to every available surface, covering his face, his hands, and burrowing under his clothes until it sank into his skin.

Hojo screamed.

It wasn’t as satisfying as it could’ve been because both former specimens recognized it as the sound, not of a dying man, but one being altered. Hojo was changing.

But into what?
Chapter End Notes

Fanart!
Tifa vs. Shelke by Duetmaoim
The ground shook and everyone struggled to retain their footing, except Nero who lifted up and floated above it all.

“What was that?” the small one asked. She stared at the far wall before turning her large, orange eyes on her fellow Tsviet. “Nero, what is happening?” Vincent and the rest stood quietly, listening and trying to figure out if this was going to result in more shit for them to deal with.

The dark warrior floated down to land lightly. His hands unfolded and it somehow seemed significant. “Soon, my dear brother will awaken,” he said.

“But he’s not ready,” Shelke protested. “According to the professor, he needs the protomateria in order to be complete.”

“I do not believe Professor Hojo is concerned with what my beloved brother truly needs.”

Vincent saw Zack bottling in a comment or perhaps bitter laughter at the understatement. He was a little surprised that the bouncy SOLDIER had that much control. He turned his attention back to the Tsviets and their conversation, watching as Nero slowly twisted his head, first covering his face with his long hair then tipping back so the bandages were exposed. “Weiss does not need the protomateria so it is for some purpose the professor hasn’t shared,” he finally said, “and I don’t believe Professor Hojo is trustworthy.”

*Another understatement,* Chaos said with sneer. *Once we are finished here, we really must find the elusive Professor Hojo. I look forward to dismembering him.*

“But Hojo created us, created Weiss,” the girl sounded vaguely puzzled, “He wants only for Weiss to fulfill his destiny.”

“And he will,” Nero agreed. “Weiss, beautiful Weiss, is complete.”

*’Beautiful Weiss’?* Chaos hummed in interest. *I find myself curious about this paragon of manly virtue, my immortalis. Perhaps he would trade sexual favours in return for us not killing him?*

Vincent prayed fervently that he would never find out as he stepped back towards his companions who, following some unspoken signal, gathered close. “Omega is rising,” the ex-Turk announced.

“We heard,” Zack rolled his eyes.

“It has to be stopped.”

Zack started to roll his eyes again but Tifa punched him in the arm. “That’s your job, isn’t it,” she said to Vincent. “What Cloud said at the meeting about the squire fighting the final weapon or something—”

“And Raincloud said the same thing in this, um,” everyone was staring at him, “this dream thingy
that we, uh, shared.” They were still staring at him. “It was mystic shit, okay? It doesn’t have to make sense.”

“Understood,” Tseng responded dryly and everyone politely ignored the tide of red filling the SOLDIER’s cheeks.

Tifa ignored the by-play. “If he’s to stop Weiss from becoming Omega, he has to find him first.”

“Well,” Zack replied scratching his head, “the way the itty-bitty one looked over there when she started talking, I’d have to guess Weiss is somewhere behind that wall.”

Tifa looked over at the doorway half hidden in the dim lighting. “Oh,” she said, blushing a little herself.

Zack ignored her embarrassment. “The trouble will be getting the two of you over there without the Bobbsy Twins interfering.”

Yazoo asked, “Why both of them?”

“It was something Cloud said in one of his trances,” the tall SOLDIER replied, “That Vincent needed to have his Heart close by when he fought the final weapon.”

“And that’s Tifa?” the clone’s voice was surprised.

“Would it be anyone else?” Vincent asked in return. His voice was matter-of-fact, as if the dark-eyed fighter was the only logical choice. It lacked eloquence, but made up for it in bedrock certainty. Tifa’s blush grew and she glanced away shyly. It reminded Vincent that his love was young really, barely out of her teens. It was a side of her that was as engaging as her tough competence.

“Shelke doesn’t seem as devoted to Weiss as Nero does,” Tseng commented, ending the moment, “He’s the one we’ll have trouble with.”

“Yazoo, you engage the girl—you’ve got her speed—the rest of us charge Nero and Vincent and Tifa just keep going.”

“That’s not much of a plan,” Tifa said.

The big First grinned, “It’s got the benefit of surprise.”

“That what you always say when you have no rational strategy,” Tseng said dryly, “However, it often works for you.”

*It’s not like there’s much choice here, my host, so can we just get on with it?*

“Plus we don’t have many options,” Vincent added.

“Good point,” Tifa grinned, cheeks dimpling. “I’m willing to try it.”

Zack grinned back, “On three then?” He twirled his Buster sword.

“On three,” Tseng agreed. He’d already checked his weapons; they were fully loaded. Vincent cast
a final Haste on them all.

“One.” Yazoo ran a nervous hand down his long coat and flipped his fine hair away from his eyes.

“Two.” Tifa stretched muscles grown mildly tight from standing still.

“Three.” The battle was on.

“He’s absorbing the cells,” Cloud announced, still very aware of Jenova’s DNA. He shifted his grip on the General’s hand. Now that he wasn’t trying to pull the alien cells out of the clones he didn’t need to hold it, but he wanted the reassurance. Sephiroth made no move to disengage and Cloud thought maybe the tall swordsman needed some reassurance too.

“Use your Fire materia,” the General ordered and Cloud may have been weaving a little but there was no way he was ignoring that tone from his CO.

He mustered his will—what was left of it after the fight with the alien cells—and a sphere formed in the air in front of him. He threw it at the spot where Hojo had fallen. Beside him Sephiroth lashed out with a wall of flame so hot the metal railing started melting. It should have been enough to incinerate Hojo but it wasn’t. As the fires moved through the pit, clones writhed and screamed and burned and died. As the flames moved closer to the still screaming professor, they turned blue, thinned, and disappeared, dissolved by streamers of light shooting out from the mass.

“Shit,” Cloud said, praying.

“Agreed.”

“What do we do?”

Masamune flicked through the air, unseen and barely heard. “Prepare to fight.”

Fight Hojo…

Of course they were going to fight Hojo. It was a given, like death and pain and… and… It wasn’t like he hadn’t known this was the point of confronting the professor, his tormentor, but he’d been with Sephiroth and Sephiroth would fight Hojo and Cloud would guard his back against the clones and it would work and it would be easy. Now he had to fight Hojo too.

Bile rose; he swallowed it down. Heart raced; he breathed in counts of three. Limbs seized; he flexed them discreetly.

“You are perfectly capable of facing anything, Cloud,” Sephiroth said in a warm voice. Cloud wondered how the General had known he was freaking out when his hand was lifted to soft, sculpted lips for a kiss to ease its trembling.

Oh.

The General wasn’t finished, “In fact, you are one of the strongest people I know.”

“I can do this?” Gods, he sounded like a little kid. His cheeks flamed in embarrassment.
“We can do this,” the silver-haired warrior stated and Cloud knew it was true.

“Okay then,” his voice wasn’t too shaky, “Let’s do this.”

Zack couldn’t wait to tell Seph that his stupid-ass plan had worked. They’d charged Nero and Vincent and Tifa had slipped on past like a greased Mandragora. Neither of the Tsviets had a chance to block them either. Yazoo hadn’t just shot at the itty-bitty one, but had run in and jump-kicked her across the room, regaining his feet in graceful tumble that suggested lots of feline DNA had been used to create him. As for Nero…

It turned out the guy was weak against swords. Bullets he could dodge or block using his weird metallic skeleton wings because their trajectory didn’t change. A sword was a living weapon and moved at the whim of its wielder. So Zack, seeing that Nero had his wing things up, would change his swing to a different opening and the Tsviet didn’t know how to deal with it. The SOLDIER had already opened up several deep wounds in the fighter and could tell that Nero was slowing down. Soon, he’d be at a dead stop.

“I assure you, I’m not as easy to kill as you seem to think.”

Crapshitpissfuck. “Honestly? I don’t think you will be,” Zack half apologized for his verbal incontinence, “It was just too good a pun to resist.”

The dark Tsviet tipped his head. “It was humour?” he asked even as he continued shooting.

“Only to Zack,” Yazoo stated as he reloaded Velvet Nightmare. Tseng kept the tiny DGS warrior away from the gunman while he was vulnerable calmly judging the moments until he’d have to dodge out of the way of her batons. She too was bleeding from several wounds. Unlike Nero, she had a harder time with the gunmen. It seemed bullets moved faster than she did.

“Your planet is about to die and be gloriously reborn when Weiss transforms and you make jokes?” The oddly wrapped Tsviet translocated himself close to where Tseng was now the one reloading. Maybe Nero hoped to get in a sneak shot or two but it didn’t work. The Turk dove out of the way while Yazoo shifted his target to the floating warrior, covering his companion instinctually, like he would’ve for Loz or Kadaj. Zack wasn’t even sure the clone realized he’d done it.

“Hey, you gotta go with your strengths,” Zack replied and cast a Dark Ice at him. A weird ripple ran over the Tsviet when the spell hit. It reminded Zack of Tseng’s Silence materia but, if it was a Silence spell, it made no difference in this battle. Nero didn’t seem to do any spells. Still, it could come in handy somewhere up the road.

“You are a strange one,” Nero stated disinterestedly. And all Zack could hope is that he kept his ‘pot/kettle’ comment to himself this time.

There was a loud cry from Yazoo’s side of the room, too high to be either the clone or the Turk. Shelke was hurt and hurt bad. There was a flash and Nero did that smoke thing of his. Zack knew where he’d gone and raced to join Tseng and Yazoo, intent on protecting them. Oddly enough, Nero didn’t bother attacking the pair; all his attention was on the fallen girl.

Shelke was a bleeding pile in the corner, the blue light in her armour dull and unimpressive just like the orange glow of her eyes. She still held her batons, but limply, and the orange glow was
gone. They were just sticks.

“Shelke,” Nero said, passive voice tinged with something that could, maybe, be classified as concern. “Shelke” he repeated. It was concern. Zack felt kind of crappy that he somehow felt that the bad guys shouldn’t care about each other. He wanted them to be like Hojo, which would make it very easy to kill them. But Nero was acting like Yazoo with his brothers. Concern made them far too human for the SOLDIER to feel entirely comfortable killing them.

On the other hand, their lives versus the whole planet?

He sighed in resignation and moved closer to the pair, making sure to stretch his hot muscles so they didn’t seize up.

“I’m sorry,” he heard the girl say. “I’ve failed you.”

“Nonsense,” Nero replied. “You knew this would happen eventually as we cannot go with him.”

Yazoo and Tseng were pulling extra cartridges out of their nearly forgotten packs. It was odd how they’d all found other things to do while the two Tsviets said good-bye. It was definitely going to be ‘good-bye’, Zack knew because, even if the purple-red liquid didn’t look like normal blood, that was what it was. There was a lot of it already on the ground and more was joining it with every pump of her heart.

“I wanted to see Ascension,” she sighed. Her eyes closed and she slumped a little deeper against the wall. She was gone.

“Poor Shelke. She was the weakest of us, but Weiss was ever fond of her,” Nero’s head dipped and curved like a slow moving wave. He turned to face the three Gaians who waited, restocked and ready. “Now I must absolutely ensure that my beautiful brother achieves his destiny, don’t you think?”

“I think you’re a nutjob,” Zack responded.

“So rude,” Nero intoned, “I must break you of the habit.” His pseudo-wings stretched and flexed. His guns flipped to the ready position.

Zack twirled his huge blade. “I’m ready when you are asshole.”

It was almost like the SOLDIER could see Nero smiling behind his bandages as he opened fire. No matter. He charged even as Tseng and Yazoo started shooting. His Buster blurred beyond vision as he swept incoming bullets out of his path. Nero shifted. Zack turned and chased him to his new location. Nero shifted again, desperate to avoid engaging with the swordsman. It left him vulnerable to the other two who were shooting so fast it created a continuous roar of sound. Purple-red blood dripped to the floor under the Tsviet every time he stopped moving for more than a couple seconds.

Zack threw out a Blast Wave that caught the Tsviet and shook him to the floor. He landed awkwardly and had to put out a hand to steady himself. His guns stuttered, stopped, then started up again. Zack ran in, sword lifted for the killing blow.

The Tsviet shifted, but it wasn’t as far as he’d done before. When it happened again, a short hop rather than a full jump, Zack knew they’d won. Yazoo and Tseng knew it too as they started to
close in on the dark warrior.

“You’re done, Nero,” Zack said, offering the Tsviet the option of surrender even as he knew it was useless.

“You are far too optimistic,” Nero said in his usual uninflected tone. He was bleeding out, but he didn’t seem to care. “I am not finished yet.”

“Fine,” Zack spat, “If that’s the way you want it.” He hefted his huge sword and prepared to kill his enemy but, before he could move more than a step or two closer, Nero wrapped himself in his dark mist. It swirled around him, absorbing him, consuming him it looked like, before rising to the ceiling. It didn’t go through it, which was what Zack kind of figured it would do, but instead it just kind of sat there... and undulated.

The three fighters came together, reloading weapons even as they stared upward.

“It’s growing,” Tseng was the first to say it.

“Shit,” Zack said in acknowledgment; he’d hoped his eyes were wrong.

“He lives in the Dark, gains power from it,” Yazoo commented and the First sighed again because he’d sort of figured the swirling darkness wasn’t a good thing.

“That Azul guy changed into something new when he got hurt bad,” Zack mused.

“You killed Azul?” Yazoo asked, eyes opening in awe.

“Chaos and Vincent did,” the SOLDIER answered, incurably honest, “but I helped.”

“You think that’s what is happening to Nero?” Tseng asked, looking over to the SOLDIER he’d once known well and had always respected.

Zack looked back at him and his lips twisted. “Don’t you?”

Of course he did, the Turk conceded, because why should their luck improve now?

Tifa and Vincent descended down metal stairs and steep ramps, crossing over bridges that were no more than wide pipes with rails. And always they moved down, always deeper in the hole that was the Northern Crater. These were the mechanical guts of the complex and things spun and pumped. The air was heavy and filled with the hum of the modern world. Vincent was somehow surprised that it was possible to breathe down here. The former Turk and son of a scholar didn’t know the origins of the Crater, no one did, but it had always been there. There had been theories about volcanoes or a cataclysmic impact, or just geological shifts. What he realized as they descended deep enough for the air pressure to change, is that it was far, far deeper than anyone of his generation had ever realized.

They came to a large landing with computers lit up and working, measuring something that Vincent couldn’t bring himself to care about. There was a wide set of stairs to take them even further down and Tifa headed towards it automatically but something held the gunman back, and turned his eyes towards an unremarkable pressure door.
*He is there, my Immortalis,* Chaos whispered eagerly. *I can feel Omega’s power.*

‘That is not reassuring,’ Vincent responded. He felt the demon’s chuckle, *I know.*

Out loud he called Tifa back. He checked for locks or other security measures—including machine guns mounted above them, ready to shoot any interlopers—but there was nothing. He looked at Tifa, wondering if she was ready for this, and she gave him a small smile as she shook out her arms.

*The adrenaline is high in the small warrior,* Chaos leered, *Adrenaline makes for great sex.* Vincent ignored the comment and put his hands on the wheel-latch. He gathered himself to force it open and nearly stumbled when it turned easily.

“Well maintained,” he commented, “despite its distance from the main complex.”

“That’s a good sign,” Tifa stated and flexed her hands in her battle gloves.

It was a good sign as far as finding their target was concerned but, from what little he’d managed to pick out of Chaos’ ramblings and flashes of imagery, Omega was a quantum level or three above Shelke and Nero on the danger scale. He looked down at his companion, so fierce, so small—tough but still young. She was gifted and strong, Vincent knew, but she was still merely human and she could get hurt, seriously injured or even killed. The ex-Turk’s breath backed up and his heart pounded and he was terrified.

She shouldn’t go in with him.

He opened his mouth to tell her…

*If you say that to her you will insult everything she is. You cannot do that to our small warrior, my immortalis,* Chaos said softly.

Vincent dipped his head beneath his collar covering his hesitation.

What the demon didn’t say, but Vincent instinctively understood, was that he could tell Tifa to stay here where it was safe and she likely would but it would destroy forever the trust it had taken them so long to forge. They would stay together for some time, if they survived, but the guilt, the endless second-guessing and the doubt would wear away at whatever they could have had. He hadn’t trusted Lucrecia, not really. He hadn’t trusted that she would choose him over her husband and her career, because leaving Hojo for a lowly Turk—no matter who his family was—would have barred her from any research facility that ShinRa owned or controlled. He’d thought that she would choose her husband and her career and so he’d never given her the choice. He wondered now, as he had wondered before, if he had trusted Lucrecia to be strong enough to accept her love for a man not her husband, would the past have happened as it did?

*You cannot know, my host, the past cannot be changed, but the future? The future is ours to play with.*

The future is ours…

He looked down and saw that Tifa was slanting him a mischievous look, a look tempered with caution and firm resolve. She was young, but not innocent and not unsure. Vincent nodded. He wouldn’t underestimate Tifa; she deserved more than that from him.
And we deserve to get laid sometime in the near future don’t you think?* Inside him, Chaos was practically purring in anticipation and Vincent realized his unwilling resident had chosen which side it would fight on… Because of Tifa and the possibilities she represented, Chaos—Heaven’s Squire—was going to fight against Omega, its very reason for being.

Cloud’s vision was right.

So, instead of begging her to stay behind, Vincent asked a different question: “Shall we go stop the end of the world?”

The grin he received in answer was blinding.

If the room with the trap for the clones had been big, this room was something beyond colossal.

The light in the pit had expanded, fed by their materia maybe, definitely fed by the mix of Jenova cells and mako the clones had contained; it had expanded until it exploded and went... elsewhere, dragging him and the General with it.

Cloud tried not to look at the stars as they spiralled and twisted around them and tried not to throw up when it felt like he was falling. He knew he was standing on his feet, knew he was still holding the General’s hand, except he felt stretched and exposed and like he shouldn’t be here… wherever ‘here’ was because it certainly wasn’t the pit room they’d been in before. It was a stage, a platform in an infinity set up just for them. This place wasn’t meant for mortals and that made it a fitting background for this fight.

They floated down, landing softly on the only part of the space that had any light.

Who… what? He could barely form words enough to ask the question. He looked up at Sephiroth and knew the General was just as baffled as he was.

It didn’t make him feel any better.

:tiny minds, small dreams: Cloud heard the words even though there was nobody around to say them. He checked; the space was large and empty.

“Pathetic insects crawling around in the dirt when the stars are there waiting for one strong enough to grab for them.” This time, the young warrior recognized the voice; the sneering tone was too familiar. It was Hojo. It was how he spoke when he was getting ready to prove his superiority by spilling another being’s blood. Pulling out their muscles... listening to the screams...

“You would hardly be strong enough if you hadn’t piggy-backed an alien in your body.”

Sephiroth’s voice was a calm stroke down Cloud’s spine. He reminded himself that he wasn’t in the lab now. He was free. He had a weapon. He wasn’t helpless. The only screaming he’d do now was in bed with the General. It was a pleasant thought or maybe a vow, Cloud wasn’t sure and didn’t care. They could do this. “Does that make her the parasite, or Hojo?” he asked.

“Either way, they don’t belong on Gaia anymore,” Sephiroth responded confidently. He could feel the General’s alertness as he tried to penetrate the darkness for any sign of their enemy.
Kill them: the voice ordered. Then we can destroy our prison and ride the cosmic winds: Cloud finally recognized it. The voice belonged to Jenova. It was different from the way she’d sounded back in the underground city but he was certain. She must have used Hojo’s body to create a new one for herself.

He frowned. If she was using Hojo’s body, how come he could hear the professor talking too? He never heard Chaos’ voice but Tifa had said the WEAPON was always talking to Vincent... inside Vincent... He sighed; his life was weird.

“Hojo never was one for fighting,” Sephiroth sneered gently bringing Cloud’s focus back to the situation at hand. “He much preferred having his opponents drugged, bound and helpless. Even then, he usually had someone else do the work.”

“A coward,” Cloud agreed, even though he’d never seen that in the professor. Not the point though; the point was to get Hojo and Jenova to come out and face them.

It worked. He did come out of the dark but Cloud wasn’t sure the professor could be called a ‘he’ anymore, not really, not the way he’d... changed. He was an ‘it’ now. A big, freaky ‘it’ that was beyond being classified as either a creature or a monster and had gone right into being a horror.

“Gaia’s grace...” he whispered, appalled and almost sick.

He could see the remains of Hojo in the thing floating before them. It had the professor’s torso and head. The small glasses still perched on his sharp nose and still hid the scientist’s cold, lifeless eyes behind their shiny surface. His black hair was still long and greasy. The thing, whatever it was, had definitely been based on Hojo. Except that it was all wrong, so very wrong.

It had no legs and no arms. It had wings, huge wings growing from distended shoulders that somehow looked misshapen and unkempt rather than full and strong. Instead of legs it had a... a growth, like a tuber or a root, except with a huge freaking orb in the middle that glowed an evil, pulsing red. Tendril-like things draped from the growth, whipping around as if trying to catch something to eat and Cloud wondered if the... the thing actually had a mouth down there. He didn’t want to find out. To top it all off—literally—there was a second body growing up and over the first. Cloud recognized its shape right away: Jenova, whispering in the ear of the bizarrely altered scientist as she’d probably been doing for decades.

This is what Hojo wanted for the man he’d claimed as his son? This... abomination?

“You’re fucking sick!” Cloud hissed. He thought he’d whispered the words but here, in this other-space, his voice carried easily. “He was supposed to be your son and this is what you wanted for him?”

“I’d hardly expect a mind as unsophisticated—”

“This isn’t sophisticated. This is insane. Just like you,” Cloud cut him off, voice flat and hard and the most unforgiving Sephiroth had ever heard, “You were barely human before, could hardly scratch yourself a place on the surface the Lifestream; now... now you don’t belong at all.” Cloud swung his sword and it hummed as it cut through the air.

Underscoring the movement was the echo of distant thunder that the silver-haired warrior could have written off as part of this environment except that the eyes on Cloud’s wolves flashed and he could hear them growl. It occurred to Sephiroth that his lover’s patron god was taking a very
personal interest in this fight.

It also occurred to the General that, if Cloud’s Odin was anything like Zack’s Shiva, that interest might not be a positive thing.

Nero’s darkness had swollen into a freaky stalactite that reached down toward them from the ceiling.

“Can we hurt it yet?” Zack asked, not really hopeful. He stood, hip shot and arms crossed, staring up at it; his sword was sheathed on his back.

Yazoo took the shot and, like the others before it, the bullet disappeared into the swirling mass. He didn’t look surprised and neither did the big SOLDIER.

“That wasted some more ammunition,” Tseng said dryly, “Considering we might have need of bullets later…”

“We could always leave, follow Vince and Tifa out the door and let Nero do… whatever he’s doing.” Zack suggested putting his clasped hands behind his head and stretching.

“You’ve said that before,” Yazoo pointed out, “But I don’t see you moving anywhere.”

“So I’m curious,” Zack shrugged, “shoot me.” He paused. “I didn’t mean that literally.”

Yazoo smiled and put Velvet Nightmare back in its holster. He caught Tseng looking at him and winked. One dark eyebrow rose, the only indication that the young clone had finally surprised the unflappable Turk.

Zack’s eyes were still on the roiling cloud. “Does it look more solid to you?”

*He knows we’re here, my Immortalis,* Chaos sniffed, *There’s no need to sneak.* Vincent ignored its petulant comment. He had the impression that the demon believed being cautious was the same as being a coward. Turk training had taught him otherwise, as had life. In this case, however, Chaos might have a point.

They’d entered a huge space that only had three items of interest: One, a pool of green-white liquid that bubbled and steamed, filling the air with the acid-sweet scent of pure mako. The second was a large throne-like chair that sat on a platform in the middle of the mako sea. It somehow seemed to be both made of the liquid and to be feeding it into the final object of interest in the room. A man, closer in age to a boy but too big physically for the designation, sat in the chair and was wrapped around in thin tubes as if they were a woven blanket. The tubes fed into slender needles that covered arms, legs, torso… anywhere there was an open patch of skin there were literally hundreds of tiny needles piercing the man’s body. Since he was almost pure white in colour, from his hair to his fingernails, it was easy enough to discern his identity: Weiss the Immaculate…

“This is Weiss?” Tifa asked, frowning at the form which was slouching, unmoving, in the odd glowing chair. “It's—he's—it's dead?”

“No,” Vincent responded because Chaos felt Weiss’ heart beat, “Hibernating.”
“That’s creepy,” Tifa said. She took another step closer. “He’s naked.”

“I am uncertain of the protocol that exists between couples,” Vincent said, voice dry, “Is it acceptable for one’s partner to notice the state of undress of strange men?”

She smiled at him, a cheeky little grin, “Remember, Vincent, committed not blind. Especially not blind when it’s all on display like that.” She waved a hand in Weiss’ general direction.

Weiss’ eyes opened, ice blue under white-blond lashes, they would’ve been easy to miss except for their mako glow. “Vincent. Vincent Valentine,” he said, “That name is familiar.”

Vincent and Tifa turned to face the Tsviet. They took a couple steps away from each other; both to split the target they made and to give each other enough room to manoeuvre. It was automatic and, to Vincent at least, a bit unexpected. It usually took many hours of training or fighting together to develop such unspoken strategy. *She is your heart,* Chaos said, *or some such romantic rot.*

It might have been a factor, Vincent conceded.

“Vincent Valentine, son of Grimoire Valentine, formerly of the ShinRa Research Department—the Turks—lover of Dr. Lucrecia Crescent and biological father of Hojo’s most successful experiment of the SOLDIER series, Specimen S.” Weiss leaned forward and as he moved the needles and tubes moved with him in a rippling wave that was hypnotic and extremely disturbing. “You hold the protomateria within you.”

“So I am told.” Vincent agreed. “I was also informed that you wanted it.”

Weiss waved a languid hand, “Hojo desired that I have it but further investigation indicated that he wanted to use it to pervert my ultimate purpose.”

“And what is that purpose?” He and Tifa were slowly moving farther apart as they spoke.

“Omega is the final WEAPON; the one that will carry this planet’s souls to the stars,” Weiss said. He had a smug half-smile on his face. It matched the lowered lids that partially covered his eyes. “This world is going to end, and I am going to save all those that deserve it.”

“It’s only going to end because you and Hojo want to destroy it,” Tifa snarled and Vincent winced because he hadn’t wanted her calling attention to herself. Too late; the Tsviet’s pale, pale eyes swing over to the small fighter. “You don’t have the right to decide who does or doesn’t deserve to survive,” she added.

“You are naive, my dear,” he said soothingly and Vincent could see Tifa’s hackles rise. “It has always been the duty of the strong to decide who among the weak deserves to live.”

Tifa didn’t back down, “You weren’t anything special until Hojo changed you, made you into a soulless mutant.”

Weiss laughed; a smug rolling sound that filled the huge space. “Possibly not but the Weiss-that-was is not the Weiss-that-is. Only a strong shell could hold Omega’s might and it could not be just anyone. There was something in me, as there was something in Vincent Valentine that made us the only choices for becoming what we are.” He leaned forward and the needles and tubes rippled like wheat in an unholy wind. “Once he had found me, Hojo had his people gather up the ‘uncontaminated’ to create a stream of refined mako, in order to awaken Omega inside me. I am
filled with clean mako, pure and clean. It makes me the perfect host for Omega. You, Vincent Valentine, are filled with tainted mako, impure and unclean.”

Vincent’s voice was dry as he responded to Weiss’ taunting statement, “And that makes me the perfect host for Chaos?”

*I would hardly call you perfect, my own.*

“I would hardly call this situation ‘perfect’,” Vincent replied almost in unison with his unwilling guest. “Chaos was forced to exist inside me.”

Weiss waved that away. “Like Omega, Chaos could have no real existence outside a human host.” He shifted in the chair and the needles and tubes shifted with him. “Unlike the planet’s other WEAPONS, which are simple constructs built to perform simple tasks, we—our WEAPONS—are complex in both design and purpose. I will choose which souls of this world to save then we will seek out a world where they can start fresh and clean and perfect. In order to achieve that purpose, both Omega and Chaos require the intricate complexities that only a human brain can provide.” He was really leaning forward now, practically out of the chair. The needles and tubes had silently and steadily migrated out of Weiss’ chest and stomach to his back leaving no marks behind, not even a single indent, from where the needles had punctured his skin. Chaos thought it was creepy and Vincent whole-heartedly agreed.

“Now my body is one with Omega, just as yours should be with Chaos.” Weiss said. He stood up and the needles and tubes peeled away, disappearing into the throne-like chair. “You must allow it to happen, Vincent Valentine, you must allow Chaos to control you. It is the only way they will survive in space is if we—Omega and Chaos—have achieved perfect union with our bodies.”

Vincent ignored most of what the Tsviet had said. “You choose,” he asked instead.

For some reason he had a picture of his mother sitting in her morning room organizing a large event with both her housekeeper and her manager. It had had something to do with his family’s position in history and it had to be perfect, of course. She’d spent many hours with them and used their input as experienced and intelligent people. They were valued members of her staff, indispensable she’d often said. And she would not eat with them. They worked for her, they made her look good, but they were ‘the help’ and that made them a step less—less intelligent, less creative, less valued by society—than she who could trace her ancestry back to the court of Henry II. Vincent had never understood how some people felt that innate superiority over anything, not then and certainly not now.

“Of course,” the Tsviet confirmed, smiling. “If we are to make a perfect world then only the most deserving specimens should be used, don’t you agree?”

“They are all part of the planet,” he argued, “I think they all deserve to live.” In a smooth, quick motion, Vincent lifted Cerberus and fired all three barrels, easily catching the recoil. He waited for Weiss to dodge so he’d know which direction to fire the next round.

Except the Tsviet didn’t dodge.

Instead Weiss pulled two katanas from behind his back and gracefully and easily deflected the bullets to either side.

As he twirled the two weapons, smaller versions of Sephiroth’s great sword, Vincent blinked. It
somehow seemed like the Tsviet was twirling four blades. As if he was moving so fast he’d created an echo. “Do you not understand, Vincent Valentine?” Weiss taunted, “I am one with Omega, a pure, perfect being. You cannot hurt me.”

*[He is right, my host,* Chaos said. *You are augmented but still merely human. You cannot beat him like this.*]

I can try, he answered back.

He fired again, both weapons sounding almost as one, aiming for Weiss’ chest and legs. He hoped that by splitting the target the Tsviet wouldn’t have enough time to deflect all the bullets. He looked for the flare of the projectiles hitting a cast Barrier. There was nothing: not a wound, not a flare; nothing, just that blurred spinning of the katanas and an eerie echo of Weiss’ pale body that had Vincent blinking even harder to clear his vision.

“I see I must force you to accept your destiny, Vincent Valentine,” Weiss said. Then he smiled and, if his smiles before had been smug and condescending, this one was pure evil enjoyment. “I look forward to the contest.” And then he moved...

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“Is it solid yet?”

“No.” The response was immediate and in stereo.

“Honestly,” Yazoo scowled at him, “Why do you keep asking that? The answer hasn’t changed in the last two minutes.”

“It is a thing that children do when they are impatient to receive some promised treat or reward.” The Turk stood, hands clasped loosely in front of him, serene and perfectly fucking calm.

Zack stopped his squats—he’d lost count but who cared. “Are you calling me childish?”

Tseng looked at him with dark eyes. “I did not but you obviously see a resemblance.”

The SOLDIER put his hands on his hips. “You know, when this is over and if we both get out alive? I think I’m finally going to kill you.”

A small smile, very small, tugged on the Turk’s lips. “You will not.”

“Yeah, well, Aerith likes you so I suppose...” Zack shrugged his shoulders unhappily, “I just wish we could get this fucker started.” He glanced up, opened his mouth...

“No!” Yazoo said firmly, “It’s not ready yet.”

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The weight was immediate and overwhelming, pressing, pressing, until he had no breath and he couldn’t move and he just knew he was going to die.

The tingle of a cast Esuna flowed over him, clearing out the weight on his body and in his mind. He jumped up and gave the General a nod—he was good now. Another tingle and he could feel himself healing the physical damage more quickly than normal. Sephiroth must have cast Regen on him which meant the General was preparing for a major battle. Cloud went through the materia he
carried and did the same. He cast a strong Barrier that wouldn’t help against magic but it might protect against a tentacle or two. Speaking of...

One of Hojo-Jenova’s twitching appendages reached toward them, trying to sneak in a back-attack. Cloud spun with Tsurugi and sliced it, a glancing blow because the tentacle flowed along the blade rather than the blade cutting through the tentacle. It hurt though. The flinch ran up the wiggly limb and Jenova snarled :Such defiance! It is useless against us:

Sephiroth ignored the taunting voice. Instead he cast one of his Firagas at the abomination. It was the odd blue-white that all of Sephiroth’s fire casts now were and it was hot enough to singe Cloud’s eyebrows from a third of the way across the platform. The General threw it as casual as normal kids threw stones. It was impressive and scary and, if Cloud was honest, a bit of a turn on. He shifted his stance and told himself that his timing sucked...

The thing that had been Hojo beat its wings and easily moved out of the way of the stream of blue-white fire. It should have scorched it, melted feathers or something, because it was close enough. Cloud looked intently but the abomination seemed untouched.

“My original intention, in injecting myself with the Jenova cells, was to prepare myself to become the host for Omega,” the Hojo part of the creature stated.

“You wanted to become Omega?” Cloud asked, putting distance between himself and the General trying to split the thing’s focus. He caught a glimpse of Sephiroth leaping up Masamune poised and ready to strike. Jenova saw him as well. The wing closest to the swordsman pumped and created a wall of air pressure that forced the General back in a tumble.

Crap, Cloud thought: two heads, two sets of eyes, and equal control.

Hojo seemed oblivious to the action occurring on his-its right. “I could hardly believe when that fool female’s theories proved to be correct. Superstitions and legends! Barely worth considering until I saw Chaos form in the tube in front of me. If she had been correct about Chaos then perhaps everything else in the story was as well.” Cloud realized that the Professor was talking about Vincent.

“So you began injecting yourself with DNA from an evil alien being?” He threw Fire at the Jenova part of the creature; more to keep its attention on him while Sephiroth tried again to slice it with his sword. This time it worked, but not enough.

“She isn’t evil,” Hojo spat and the tentacles writhed. “She is brilliant and wonderful and has seen more that you will ever think of.”

“And probably destroyed it too,” the comment came from Sephiroth just as he cast another materia. Sparkly light glittered around the heads of the duo; there was even the faint sound of tinkling bells.

:Pathetic: Jenova sneered. “I’m disappointed in you, Specimen S.” Hojo’s sneer was almost exactly the same as the alien’s. “That you would think Mystify would cause us to turn on each other.”

There was a whirring sound and the orb in the pair’s belly lit up. Cloud didn’t need Sephiroth’s yelled warning to know that this was going to be nasty.
A red beam, not of fire, but of a burning energy shot out of the orb. It swept over the platform and Sephiroth jumped over it when it swept his side. Cloud dodged by rolling under it. He felt when his shoulder got nicked by the beam; it was like having your muscle ripped strand by strand followed by a dousing in salt water. It was bad, but he’d felt worse. He stood up, shook out the worst of it and ran forward while they concentrated on the General.

Sephiroth was casting Aero, and Cloud figured he hoped it would destabilize Hojo-Jenova as it floated. It didn’t. But it did distract them long enough for Cloud to get a good strike in along the left shoulder which he carried on down the spine. He had loaded Elemental Strike into Tsurugi rather than into his armour because they’d agreed that this fight would be more about offense—hit fast, hit hard—than defence. Having the extra damage of an element attack in his main weapon could only improve their chances, and it worked... kind of. He could see the frost appearing beside the cuts. Then a thick, dark liquid seeped out from beneath the thing’s skin. It warmed up the flesh and sealed the wound. Only a thin pale line indicated where Tsurugi had opened up the thing’s skin.

Hojo laughed, “Foolish, foolish boy. Did you think we wouldn’t consider how to repair physical damage?"

“Don’t care,” Cloud ground out and took another swing at their tuberous body before jumping off.

“You were always stubborn, like most of those mountain peasants in Nibelheim,” Hojo scoffed. “It’s why I thought you would be a good subject for my research. You weren’t.”

:\textbf{Don’t talk at the insects:} Jenova interrupted her other part :textbf{Kill them:}

Cloud saw movement beside him but wasn’t quick enough to evade the long tendril that whipped toward him. It hit his Barrier, and that absorbed some of the blow, but the hit was still powerful enough to bounce him off the hard surface of the platform. He tried to roll when he came down the second time. It wasn’t pretty but it did the job. He was still standing, still had his weapon in his hand and he still wasn’t a helpless lab rat anymore.

“Anything to disappoint you,” he said and summoned Kjata.

He’d heard about Summons materia. A person couldn’t be in the military and not have heard about them but he’d never used one before. Rare didn’t even begin to describe how few there were in the world. So he could be forgiven for squeaking—just a little—when he felt himself pushed out, displaced and this huge thing took his place. He was aware but not in control. He tried to just breath and let it happen but it was too similar to Hojo’s lab.

“Anything to disappoint you,” he said and summoned Kjata.

He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t there, this wasn’t the lab and he wasn’t a prisoner, but it didn’t help. Then his world darkened and he felt surrounded, embedded, in something so much more than himself; more size, more power, more age—just more. The Summon; Kjata, dwarfs him. Cloud sensed that Kjata dwarfed them all including Sephiroth and the monstrosity that was Hojo-Jenova... and maybe they could throw in the platform too. He also somehow knew that he was Kjata and Kjata was him. He wasn’t sure his soul or spirit or whatever was big enough to be the Summon. In fact, he was pretty damn sure it wasn’t: He was limited and it, somehow, was not. It hurt.

\textit{\textbf{You Summoned me and I came}}

He felt the words more than heard them. They came from his bones and his skin—from the air he
breathed. Good thing Summons were so rare, he thought with an attempt at wry humour, because this would really mess with a person’s mind.

He concentrated on what was going on outside of him because it should help keep him... sane and at least somewhat in control. There was Sephiroth, calmly adjusting to the new tactic, throwing Firaga’s at the enemy, keeping his distance in case there was some sort of blow back.

*{You Summoned me and I came}* it repeated.

There was some kind of question buried in the words but all they meant, essentially, was that Cloud had asked for this, had asked to have this creature invade his mind and use his body.

Oh, he finally understood: permission. It needed permission or it couldn’t completely come to this world. *Shit.* He couldn’t do it, couldn’t surrender like that anymore. But he also couldn’t let the world be destroyed because he didn’t have the courage to face his past. He cursed and felt like puking but there was no way he was going to back down now. No way, was Hojo going to win.

He thought his permission and his thanks at wherever the Summon was and felt Kjata’s amusement even as it took over his consciousness. *{At least your cause is good, little human}*.

The thought made Cloud realize that he wasn’t just fighting for the people of Gaia; this was the Summons’ world as well. The Summons’, the Gods’, the Lifestream and the planet itself; how many other beings made this planet, this speck in the universe, their home? And Hojo and some alien bitch wanted to destroy it all because it wasn’t ‘big’ enough for them. He wished Kjata well and let the Summon take over, retreated from control as he’d learned to do under Hojo. He felt the Summon’s warm approval and knew that it had decided to let him retain awareness so that he would know what the Summon did with his body, his soul or whatever it used when brought into the physical world.

The first thing that happened through Cloud was the electricity. He felt it as it sparked through his body, and when the lightning thrummed through the air outside himself, striking the Hojo-Jenova creature and a wide circle around it.

Cloud felt it in his veins like a plucked string. It didn’t hurt exactly, but it was definitely more than a tickle. He had just enough time to wonder if this was all there was to the Summon when there was ice. Thick and sharp, it formed a ball around their enemy. The temperature all over the platform dropped and Cloud could feel his skin tighten; he could see his breath misting in the air. Any colder and he would start to go numb but the frozen sphere exploded, or imploded actually, driving the razor-sharp shards towards Ho-Jenova. Cloud could hear their screams of pain and rage.

Ice turned to fire, bright sparkly balls that circled and left fiery streamers behind them. The tendrils flicked out as if trying to bat the orbs away but quickly pulled back into the mass of Hojo-Jenova’s body as the smell of scorched meat drifted through the air. There were more screams and Cloud was half ashamed to know that he enjoyed hearing his tormentor—tormentors?—suffer. The other half was jumping up and down like a little kid shouting ‘yeah!’ So much pain to be paid for as if the debt could ever be paid...

He saw the General on the far side of the enemy. He was standing calmly in the windstorm that was the Kjata summon and casting other materia at the monstrosity. Cloud recognized the blue-white of Sephiroth’s Firaga and there was a blinding flash of pure energy that the soldier thought was Flare. He couldn’t feel any of it though, insulated as he was by Kjata’s bulk. He felt the
massive Summon rear before it dropped its front feet to the ground in a thundering crash. A wave appeared in the dirt of the platform, a deep ripple, as if the Summon had turned the very air and earth into water. It ran along the surface and Cloud was dismayed because, of course, Hojo-Jenova floated.

He’d underestimated the Summon.

Whatever was in the wave that pulsed out from under its hooves, it affected more than the physical. The wave passed under the abomination Hojo had become and it flung back both its heads and screamed. Dark spots appeared on its body. Several of the tendrils hung limp and useless. A vile smelling liquid dripped slowly onto the platform where it pooled and bubbled on the dirt.

Odin’s balls, Cloud thought, it’s a really, really good thing Summons were rare if that’s the kind of power they brought to a battle.

The General took advantage of their enemy’s distraction and flew at it. Masamune blurred under his hand and they cut swaths of power or something into the air that hit the creature full on the body. It opened gashes that hissed and bubbled and bled more disgusting liquids.

Cloud was shrinking...

He panicked then gave himself a mental smack. Kjata was leaving, returning to whatever plane of existence he lived on when he wasn’t being summoned to this one. {Fight well, little human} he felt as it faded from his consciousness.

Then it was just him, standing on his own two feet, holding his own sword in his own two hands, looking up at the creature in front of him from his own two eyes.

He felt really, really small...

“Alright, now you can attack,” Yazoo said. The clone was already firing, Tseng barely half a second behind him.

“Yes!” Zack called out in triumph.

This was the moment he’d been waiting for. As agreed they all backed up and took shelter under overhanging steps and Zack cast his Comet materia. He hooted when the huge stones ripped through the still-unformed rock that Nero’s smoke was turning into, especially when things exploded inside it and the sparks flew. He didn’t even mind when they missed Nero’s construction and hit the equipment lining the room. There were even more sparks and explosion, and some twinkly lights as the computers malfunctioned.

“Now this is how they do it in the movies!” he shouted happily.

Tseng ignored him. Yazoo flinched when one of the large boulders landed a little too close.

“You’re insane,” he said to the big First. “You know that right?” Zack flashed him a blinding grin and Yazoo’s breath caught.

“If you think he’s bad, just wait until you meet Reno,” Tseng said. The Turk had cast both Barrier and M-Barrier on the team but even he couldn’t help but duck when a fast-flying piece of wiring whipped right at his head. “He would likely be out there trying to jump from one asteroid to
another in an attempt to reach Nero on the roof.”

Yazoo turned his large blue cat-eyes on Tseng. His delicate mouth was open, just a bit, and once again he looked so very young. “I thought Kadaj was crazy...”

The smallest of smiles whispered across the Wutaian’s face. “Welcome to my world, Yazoo.”

Chapter End Notes

I was given the gift of ficart! Shinimigami7 did a quick drawing of Tifa vs. Shelke that is pretty awesome. Go check it out and leave her a note.
http://duetmaoim.deviantart.com/#/d2vp4pv
“You cannot fight your destiny, Vincent Valentine,” Weiss stated as he blurred into his attack. Again it looked like there was an echo of the Tsviet trailing after him, whirling its own dual blades. It was more than an echo, Vincent knew, because the translucent blades had impacted through his leather armour. The damage wasn’t severe—blunt trauma rather than piercing or slashing—but it had infused his skin with Ice and the ex-Turk could feel the cold infecting his arm, slowing his movements.

“You must become Chaos who will lead me across the stars.”

*Puh-leeese* Chaos snorted inside him, *He sounds as pedestrian as that hack scientist ever did. Or you,* he mused, *with your maudlin regrets.* Vincent ignored him with the ease of much practice.

Vincent rolled to the side, firing continually but doing only minimal damage to the boy. He could feel the cold spreading but it was still within acceptable limits. Then he felt Tifa’s Esuna tingling through his body and the cold disappeared.

Weiss moved in, swinging one set of blades in deadly arcs even as the second, ghostly, set followed a whirling pattern. It was dizzying; it was hypnotising and far too distracting; he kept trying to fill in the ghost so that it would be solid and real and something he could attack. The pale swordsman swung high and both bright steel and ghost blue flashed. Vincent blocked those swings but he missed the second set that came in low. The sharp steel blade landed on a buckle and slid along the metal with a harsh scree sound. The ghost blade caught him fully on the calf with enough force to numb the limb completely and to knock him off his feet and send him flying. He spun through the air but managed to twist himself around so that he landed with some grace despite his frozen leg. Again, Tifa’s Esuna cleaned out the poisonous magic.

*Well that’s a little worrisome, my Immortalis.* Genuine concern coloured Chaos’ voice. Vincent knew it was justified—Weiss had hurt him—but he shrugged it away. He saw the dark void of a cast Gravity float down over the pale Tsviet and took the opportunity to reload his weapons. The bullets blurred slightly in his hand and he blinked rapidly to clear his sight. It took far too long for the room to sharpen and his vision to stabilize. *You are not doing well, I think.*

He heard Weiss laugh off Tifa’s Gravity and he tracked the Tsviet as he assaulted his lover and companion. She tried to dodge, and managed it for several seconds, but inevitably she was sent flying. *He’d better not damage her too much for sex,* Chaos growled.

Vincent sighed.

“Your fight is with me,” he reminded the Tsviet, pulling his attention away from his attack on Tifa. Chaos hummed his approval. The gunman followed up his statement with another volley. He wasn’t sure that it did much damage but it did bring Weiss further away from the fighter’s vulnerable body.

The DGS warrior sauntered towards him, mocking and slow. “You’re getting old, Vincent
Valentine.” His blades whirled. “Without the power of the WEAPON locked inside you, you cannot hope to defeat me. Yet if you unleash Chaos, he will aid our plans and help Omega destroy the world.”

“And if you kill me then Chaos dies too,” Vincent pointed out. “What will Omega do without his Squire?”

Weiss cocked his head and it reminded the gunman of the dark Tsviet, Nero. “It will take longer,” he answered unconcernedly, “and it’s likely many of the souls will die before I find someplace to free them. Plus the world I choose might not be as perfect as it could be so more will die there.” He smiled sadly but Vincent knew it was false, “but I will do it if it is my only option.” Then he blurred and Vincent was knocked back, spinning through the air until he smashed into the wall.

*This is ridiculous,* Chaos grumbled. *The boy is fast but he isn’t better than you.* It paused and Vincent could feel it reconsider its comments. *Well, maybe better than you, my host, but not better than I. Allow me to fight for you.*

Vincent thought a negative at the demon and pulled himself to his feet. To Weiss he said, “You will not get the chance.”

It was the last coherent sentence he spoke for some time.

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Zack jumped over one of Nero’s Blue Beams of Death. “Odin’s silver balls,” he yelled down, “what a fucking rush!” Since he was up there anyway, he took a couple swings at one of Nero’s protective crystals that circled around the Tsviet’s Dome of Darkness. Zack had chosen names for everything since none of them had ever encountered anything like them before. They were stupid names but they made him happy. It made their situation seem a little less dire than it might otherwise. As if they might be in trouble but they weren’t out of the fight.

Tseng had said nothing beyond one coolly raised eyebrow but Yazoo had smiled.

One of the diamonds shattered and the SOLDIER covered his face as the splinters flew out in a wide circle of destruction. He felt a stinging in his side and knew he’d been hit but it didn’t take long before his SOLDIER-enhanced body forced the shard out and started to heal itself. Zack knew he’d heal better if he just stopped for a moment but he wanted this to be over. Yeah, it was fun, but his friends were out there fighting gods knows what gods knows where and he couldn’t help them as long as they were stuck fighting this weirdo mutant dude.

A fiery meteor flew out from behind the spidery figure that was...ArachNero! Zack had also thought up the name for the newly distorted Tsviet that had crawled out of the darkness one extended limb at a time. He was pretty proud of it, actually, and even Tseng had admitted it was clever.

The three fighters easily dodged the falling rock but the wash of heat-soaked air that exploded out from it was draining. It clung to the skin and seeped in through the pores. Whatever was in the fire Nero was chucking wasn’t natural. It was the tainted heat that finally forced Zack out of the air, his little bat wings unable to pump hard enough to keep them afloat against whatever it was. He landed heavily, jarring his knees in a bad way, and made Tseng wobble as the floor bounced a little under the First’s considerable weight.

“It’s a form of Gravity,” Tseng said after he straightened from his protective crouch. Even the Turk
was feeling it because he rose like an old man after hours of sitting.

“'It would explain the effects,” Zack agreed.

“Shortness of breath, limbs heavy, concentration weak,” Tseng catalogued.

“Lack of verbs when speaking,” Yazoo quipped as he dragged out another ether. He was the only one of the three with an Esuna equipped but he wasn’t very good with it yet. It took a lot of his mana to keep them clean of Nero’s magic, but he was doing it. Stubbornly drinking ether after ether—which tasted like ass, Zack knew—and casting Esuna after Esuna even as he kept shooting at the crystals that were part of Nero’s Barrier. He wondered if Junon had an ice cream shop half as good as the one he and Aerith used to go to in Wall Market because, when they got out of here, he totally owed the kid a huge damn cone.

“I think we’re whittling the bastard down,” Zack said as he threw an Ice at one of the crystals before jumping up and attacking. The others fired their weapons at it and, between them all, they quickly broke it into shards.

Zack landed back beside them and picked up their previous conversation. “He’s not regenerating as many of those annoying fuckers as before.”

“And not as rapidly,” Tseng agreed. “At this rate we’ll have his Barrier down by the next moon.”

“Sarcasm, Tseng? I’m shocked. Next you’ll be smiling and telling fart jokes… I’m telling ya, it’s the beginning of the end.”

Tseng ignored Yazoo’s soft chuckle in favour of reloading. He’d seen Zack’s eyes and he knew the SOLDIER thought this was taking too long as well. It was only a matter of time before the First did something foolhardy to break the stalemate.

“Tell me what you cherish most,” the creature said. “Give me the pleasure of taking it away.”

Sephiroth ignored the abomination as he readied to cast Flare but Cloud responded, voice vibrating with the power of his emotions. “I pity you. You just don’t get it at all; there’s not a thing I don’t cherish!” And then the young swordsman jumped to the attack, wings flaring.

He watched as Cloud used one of his own moves: Octa-slash. There were some variants to the way the Corporal performed it but that was only to be expected. First, his wings were out and that automatically changed how the soldier navigated the manoeuvre. Also, it was likely Zack had taught it to him and the First’s fighting style had always been...unusual, and finally, Cloud had adapted it to his broader sword and smaller body. His slim but so very strong and healthy body...

The General took a moment just to admire his lover as he wove the swords into Octa-slashes deadly—yet elegant—design because he was the reason and the symbol and the hope that had brought the General here to this battle. It was good to watch the young soldier be so confident and strong. It renewed Sephiroth and made him want to be worthy of such a fine young man.

He cast the Flare once Cloud had retreated to a safe area. He waited a beat, letting its power fade a little, before moving into his own attack. A couple steps and he launched himself up, easily reaching higher than their enemy’s wings. As he cut Masamune through the air he infused it with his will, listening to the blade sing as the air compressed and heated. It looked as if huge arcs of
energy flowed out from it, moving like liquid sunbeams through the dimly lit space.

It was a magic unique to Masamune and only discovered by accident in the middle of a fight with Genesis in the VR room. They’d destroyed the room that day and possibly their friendship with it, though neither of them had known that at the time.

He vaguely aimed the cuts at the middle of their enemy’s body wanting to damage or destroy the glowing orb as it would eliminate one of the creature’s most powerful weapons. So far they’d had only minimal success.

Still, the energy tore great chunks out of the platform where it landed and it did similar damage to his old tormentor and his alien parasite. The abomination that was the two of them combined listed and dipped but recovered enough to snap one of its overlarge wings toward the ground. Sephiroth was high enough to avoid most of the effects of the manoeuvre and he knew that Cloud was well aware of how dangerous it was.

The displaced air had the force of a small tornado and the heat of blast furnace. It was almost as dangerous as the beam, at least to Cloud. Heat and fire didn’t bother Sephiroth now—perhaps a side effect of being Ifrit’s chosen?—but it did hurt Cloud and that was unacceptable. So he aimed his last swing at the shoulder joint and was rewarded by a screech and a copious amount of what passed for blood in the monstrous body.

“You are a traitor!” the Hojo part of the creature screamed at him. Sephiroth ignored him.

:You could have been glorious: the Jenova part whispered in his mind. He ignored that too.

He ignored it easily, actually, as there were only a couple people on the planet for whom he wished to be magnificent and neither of them were in the monstrosity in front of him.

As the thought drifted through his mind, he looked over at Cloud, his lover, so fierce and determined, so much force contained in such a small vessel. He felt the slow tingle of a Barrier being cast on him and raised his hand to acknowledge Cloud’s action. The blond nodded in return.

The abomination chose that moment to shoot another beam from the embedded orb and Sephiroth was forced up once again. When the beam stopped, the General was looking right at it and that’s why he noticed the flash, a brief moment, when the light dimmed and nearly died. It could be a vulnerability.

Then he noticed that Cloud wasn’t getting up and his vision focussed in on the young soldier. “Cloud,” his voice dissolved in the endless chamber.

The blond raised himself onto his elbows and gave his head a shake. “I’m good, Sir,” he said before a shimmering green aura surrounded him. Sephiroth knew he’d used his Cura and the General frowned. Cura only worked if the person casting it had enough mana for it to convert. He wasn’t sure, but Cloud had cast many materia already; he had to be running low on energy. His concern grew along with his determination to end this soon. He readied his Firaga.

Then a voice—her voice—thundered in his mind. :You were too afraid to accept what was yours by right:

Her voice was followed by his: “I created you. You would be an insignificant, weak nobody if it weren’t for all my planning, all my work.” Hojo’s voice hadn’t changed it was still the whining
nasal irritant it had always been but, combined with Jenova’s furious mental howling, it actually caused Sephiroth pain—physical pain as if someone was scraping down his spinal column.

::We could’ve ruled this planet, my son:

“For years I worked on reviving Jenova, recreating the greatest being to ever exist on this worthless ball of mud. You were the result of my brilliance and what did you do? Turn on me!”

It was like having dozens of throwing stars rebounding inside his brain. He raised a hand to cover his ears knowing the gesture was useless.

“General?” Cloud’s worried voice was barely audible over the others. Sephiroth glanced up.

Cloud was looking a little pained but nothing that didn’t fit with the obvious injuries: a little still, a little hunched, but mostly undamaged. Sephiroth squinted, trying to focus on his lover rather than the voices pounding in him. Cloud seemed to have a nimbus of blue light around him, which either meant Sephiroth’s vision was impaired or Cloud was close to breaking. Or perhaps both.

::We can still conquer it all. It should be ours. It will be ours, just come to me, my son:

“I devoted my life to creating you, to making you perfect,” Hojo spewed, “A living god, that’s what you were, what I made you. And you threw it away for a blond brat and a brainless bag of muscle!”

Spikes and hammers, pounding, echoing down his spine into his legs. He fell to one knee.

“General! Sir,” Cloud’s voice was panicked and Sephiroth watched in distant horror as the blond ran straight toward him. It took Cloud right under the belly of the abomination; it made him vulnerable.

Sephiroth tried to stop him, to yell out an order or a warning, but his voice was a croak easily drowned out by Hojo’s nasal booming. The creature’s wing was already moving.

::Together we can claim your destiny. It is not too late:

“He is an insignificant fool!” Hojo raged at Sephiroth, “I shall crush him so that you will learn who your master is!” The wing forced the air down, turned the air into a burning, crushing force.

He watched helplessly as Cloud was caught up in the blast, a rubber ball being bounced by a petulant child. Even through Hojo’s ranting, he could hear the sounds Cloud made, grunts of impact and pain. “No,” he croaked. He tried to rise, tried to crawl but the voices pressed on him, turned his limbs to water.

::You will be ours, my darling boy. You belong to us:

‘If you kill him...’ he tried to think back at Jenova, he tried to make it sound forceful—his usual tone—but knew he failed.

Cloud rolled to a stop, coming to rest in a half seated-half leaning position against one of the rocky outcroppings that dotted the platform. His head wavered for a moment but, in the end, remained limp on his graceful neck. Sephiroth remembered how the skin tasted like over Cloud’s pulse, how it heated his own blood. “Cloud,” his voice was only barely louder than before. He hadn’t managed to stand up. He hadn’t even managed to crawl very far. “Cloud...”
Hojo wasn’t finished with the young warrior. “Everything I’ve worked for, everything I’d planned, ruined! Because of him!” One wing extended toward the vulnerable soldier. One feather extended almost delicately from the rest. One long slow minute was all it took for Hojo to drive the tip through Cloud’s shoulder. Cloud writhed, mouth open in a soundless scream.

At least he was alive; Sephiroth couldn’t help the useless thought. Useless because, if Hojo had his way, Cloud wouldn’t be alive for much longer and Sephiroth couldn’t get to him, couldn’t defend him.

:Don’t fight. Don’t resist. Why be lesser when you can be a god:

He couldn’t keep his eyes off Cloud. He had to watch, to know if he was going to lose him again. He would have given in to despair except he had underestimated his blond lover. Perhaps they all had.

Cloud clenched his jaw and there was a look of such ferocious determination on his face that it was like looking at a stranger. “It’ll take more than that to stop us,” he said and then he pushed the wing out of his body, one agonizing centimetre at a time, bending the fibres when he couldn’t force the wing straight back toward the enemy.

“Impossible,” Hojo stated with certainty. “You are nothing but a pathetic failure.” He was talking directly at Cloud. With his attention focussed on the young soldier and not on the General, Sephiroth could literally feel a weight lift from his body, his mind—perhaps even his soul. He rose from his hands and knees, still unsteady but determined.

As if realizing their advantage was slipping away, Jenova renewed her attack. :You deserve to be worshipped, my son, on this planet, on planets throughout the cosmos. We deserve it:

Sephiroth wobbled but stayed on his feet. Everything inside him narrowed and hardened. “I deserve Cloud,” he said in reply. He lifted his hand and this time he didn’t call on little Aero. This time he called up a maelstrom.

“You still won’t give in to your destiny, Vincent Valentine,” Weiss said in a soft puzzled voice.

Vincent didn’t reply because he was too busy bleeding. Ribs cracked, he catalogued, almost certainly there were internal injuries, plus a broken arm and his left knee was dislocated.

Weiss walked toward him in a smooth confident movement. “I think I know a way to fix that,” he smirked.

The floor undulated, turning into chunks of earth and small boulders that crashed against each other. It threw the Tsviet off-stride, knocked him off his feet and he was almost pulled into the grinding floor. Unfortunately he managed to jump up and away from the affected area without being hurt, not that that was unexpected but it would have been nice. *Still the optimist, my host,* Chaos sighed in disgust, something he had done frequently during the uneven fight.

The Tsviet half-turned to stare at Tifa, the only one in the room who could have cast the Quake materia. “That was annoying, little girl,” he said.

With no more warning than that he streaked over to the dark-eyed fighter and impaled her, high on
her stomach, right below the sternum, a slow and painful death. Weiss lifted Tifa on the tip of his sword until she was so high gravity slid her down the blade, cutting her deeper. “You really shouldn’t get overconfident,” He laughed at his joke and then he tossed her off his sword and into the wall as if she were trash, just a bit of gore he needed to clean off his blade.

She lay there, barely moving.

*No!* Chaos raged and he wasn’t alone—all of Vincent’s beasts started to howl. It was their outrage and fear that pulled Vincent to his feet as he hadn’t the strength to do it himself. His mind was fuzzy. He couldn’t focus. The world was wavering.

*Vincent,* Chaos used Vincent’s name for the first time since they’d been forced together nearly forty years ago. It snapped Vincent out of his fog. *Vincent, you must let me fight. I promise that I will kill him,* Chaos’ voice was cold. Galian’s roar of approval was not.

“Well, well, you are a stubborn thing.” The voice was mocking, condescending…and right beside him. “But standing up doesn’t mean you can win—against me or yourself.” Then the pale swordsman buried his arm in Vincent’s chest. The pain was distant, just one of many infusing his body, but Vincent knew it had a purpose.

What was the purpose?

*She has drunk the elixirs, my host. She will recover.* Chaos whispered to him and the demon sounded almost as relieved by the news as Vincent felt.

Weiss was pushing his way into Vincent’s body, digging through flesh and muscle and he realized that the Tsviet was aiming for the protomateria that was buried inside him. The boy wanted the strange orb that allowed Vincent to retain control of the demon—the WEAPON—that he housed.

*I believe you’re right,* Chaos stated with anticipation. It wasn’t reassuring. *Trust me, my host my own. I will take care of this.* Which was hardly more comforting.

And yet...

There was a part of Vincent that did believe Chaos, that did trust him—at least in this.

‘Very well,’ he replied silently. ‘He is yours.’

Weiss removed the pale orb and shouted his triumph. His voice was overshadowed by Chaos’ roar of exultation. Vincent could see that Weiss smiled in satisfaction and anticipation. The deluded boy stepped back and waited for Omega’s Squire to emerge and take his place by his side.

Chaos had something else in mind.

Vincent sensed the furious conversation going on between Chaos and the others who were part of him. They all wanted this; wanted the fight, the destruction, the chance to change the world. They were agreeing with Chaos—although in Hellmasker’s case it was more a matter of beating him into submission—but they were agreeing with whatever Chaos was proposing. The agreement flipped something inside the former Turk, altered it, and Vincent could feel the power building inside, starting from his core and spreading outward to his tips. It hazed his vision with red. It made his body burn. He was healing and he was transforming.
*When this is over, and this little piss ant is dead, we shall have to spend a week—naked—just enjoying our small warrior, don’t you think?* Vincent only imagined his eyes rolling but Chaos laughed at him just the same. Then it wasn’t him anymore. He was merged, joined, alone and together. Chaos was him. He was Chaos.

They were Chaos. Except this wasn’t the Chaos they remembered.

They had Galian’s talons and its tail, deadly weapons, and they could feel their body’s health become something beyond resilient into practicably indestructible. Gigas’ strength and endurance had been added to their own but it was Hellmasker’s ability to change its form that allowed them to form jagged red and silver armour over Chaos’ normal black. They’d also changed Vincent’s gun. Death Penalty was no longer a rifle. It was longer, heavier, with four barrels forming a cross. The Cerberus bangle hung from it and, all together, it looked awkward and unbalanced and should have been far too heavy in the barrel to be practical. They wielded it like it weighed nothing.

They grinned at Weiss, showing sharp, sharp teeth, and the boy’s look of excitement faded as he realized that Chaos wasn’t reacting the way he was supposed to. “What—”

“Let’s have some fun,” they said and then they fired.

What came out of Death Penalty wasn’t a bullet but a line of bright, killing power that caught the Tsviet squarely in the chest knocking him back, back and all the way across the huge room to smack into the throne with enough power to make the massive chair rock. Instantly, the little needles appeared, worming their way closer to the one they fed. They looked like hungry parasites.

Weiss didn’t stay in the seat long enough for them to latch on. He stood, rolled his shoulders, and smirked. “Interesting. Let’s see what you are capable of.”

The Tsviet blurred into motion but Galian’s senses had no trouble following their unseen prey. They shot again, and again Weiss was hit. This time they’d shot him in the leg and he went sliding across the slick floor. They saw a shimmer of materia coat the boy when he stopped and they realized that the small warrior—Tifa—had cast something on him. They tried to remember what materia she had in her arsenal but the information was slippery, incomprehensible, who cared anyway when there was a battle to be enjoyed?

When the DGS warrior stood up they realized what it had been: she had used Stop. It hadn’t frozen the Tsviet but he was moving noticeably slower.

Excellent.

They grinned ferally and cast Haste on themselves then they moved in too quickly for Weiss to raise his weapons. They used talons and claws and the whip-snap of their tail, to slice and hit, bruise and cut, and they exulted in their power. They juggled the boy a little before they felt the Haste running down. It was over too fast, they thought in regret but, before it was completely gone, they tossed the swordsman in the air and shot him, once, twice because they could. Like target shooting but better because Weiss moved like a living thing and killing was more fun that way. They shot him once more before he landed in a heap. They waited but he didn’t rise.

One brow lifted and they wondered if it was over already. Surely not, they replied. They walked closer to the fallen Tsviet, scenting the air for traps, gun at the ready.

They were right to be cautious because Weiss pulled himself up and sneered at them. He wasn’t
quite as immaculate as when this fight had began and they wondered how many other colours his body would display before they were finished with him? Monotone just wasn’t vivid for this page of their existence. The thought was barely complete before Weiss moved. One moment wobbling in defiance, the next behind them...and poking his swords through their body. They looked down at the blades extending from their body and thought it was funny to be the one skewered rather than the one doing the skewering, which reminded them that the small warrior was waiting...

“Ow,” they said because it was expected but it didn’t really hurt. Besides, Weiss had just handed himself to them. They let themselves flip their body, back shifting to the front, front to the back, organs and tissues sliding through each other. They kept the swords inside them so that they’d know where the Tsviet was, keep him trapped because no swordsman would let go of his only real weapons. They looked him in the eyes and smiled at him in joy. The boy’s face was amusing: full of shock and horror. “That tickles,” they commented with a toothy smile. They aimed Death Penalty at the boy’s head and pulled the trigger.

It should have killed the Tsviet, and it was tiresome that it didn’t, but Weiss let go of his katanas, raised his arms and took the blast on his bracers. He flew backwards, flipping slowly head over feet, before falling to the floor and sliding back and back. He hit a low wall and bounced off, still sliding, until inexorably he slid into the lake of filtered mako.

‘Huh,’ they thought. ‘Interesting,’ they responded for they knew that mako could kill but it could also heal. It could alter a body’s everything or do nothing at all. It could take centuries or seconds so, while they waited they cast their awareness at their small warrior, their Heart, their prize. She was perfectly healthy once again and busy destroying the few pieces of equipment that were in the room, making them unusable, unrepairable. No one would be recreating Hojo’s Deepground experiments once she was finished with the machines.

They roared their approval.

Then Weiss rose from the mako, things spinning and clanking and pumping. ‘Omega?’ they asked. ‘Possibly,’ they answered but they knew the form wasn’t quite right for it to be the final WEAPON, although they didn’t know how they knew. It was unimportant, they decided. There was something new to fight, to destroy, to play with, and that’s what they would do.

This time when they roared it was in fierce exultation.

In the end, it wasn’t Zack who did something foolhardy. Or maybe it would be more accurate to say that he wasn’t the only one. Maybe, Tseng mused, insanity was designed into mako-enhanced warriors along with Jenova cells.

Nero’s Barrier was broken and now they could easily see the odd metallic spider he’d become as it clung to the Dome of Darkness on the ceiling. Most of his magic was gone and there was just the mutated Tsviet. From down below Tseng and Yazoo kept up a steady barrage, which broke only when they had to grab more ammo from their bags or when Nero’s Blue Beam of Death made them dodge out of the way. Tseng cast the occasional Ice and Yazoo tossed out a Bolt or two but now this was essentially a physical battle and Zack was determined to force the DGS warrior down, away from the source of his power.

Zack’s wings were out, pumping hard, somehow keeping his massive frame aloft. Not only that, but the little hands were casting his darkened Ice so he could concentrate on chopping the legs out from under their opponent. Zack was finding it tough, however, because that black cloudy stuff
was even thicker around the Tsviet than before and hitting it was like trying to cut through tar. Plus Nero’s legs were sharp, hard metal and he swung them with lethal precision. Stabbing, slashing and just plain bludgeoning: those legs did it all.

There were also, unfortunately, eight of the frigging things.

Dodging all of them all the time was impossible but he’d expected that shit so he ignored the pain from his injuries for the most part. The thing that bugged Zack the most was that every time he knocked one, or even two, legs out from under the spider-like form, there were all the rest to keep Nero perched on his fucking pile of darkness; the pile that he fed on and gained strength from and it was really frigging annoying how the kid Just. Wouldn’t. Go. Down.

Zack needed something that would take all, or at least most, of Nero’s legs out at the same time but Comet, though fun, was too unpredictable to be of any help and there was no way in any of Ifrit’s Hells that he was Summoning Shiva. He didn’t think he could turn Nero into a frog either, though that would be sweet!

However, he had maybe another option...

Before giving himself too much time to think about it—and he did not hear Seph’s snarky voice saying that he never thought anyway so why start now—Zack flipped himself upside down so his feet were firmly planted on the ceiling. ‘I’m-a-bat, I’m-a-bat, I’m-a-bat,’ he muttered as he activated Blast Wave. His wings strained to hold him in place as he built up the power in his Buster and then, with a shout, he brought the massive blade down (up?) on the ceiling and released it.

The power blew out in an arc, a wall of blue-white-orange energy that ripped across the ceiling blowing off the tiles and pipes. It hit Nero’s Dome of Darkness and barely slowed down, running right through it and forcing the dark matter out and back and over until it was just wisps in the air. The effect didn’t last long—the dark quickly regrouped and reformed into the massive pile—but it was long enough to force Nero from his perch. The Tsviet fell to the floor with a clatter and for a moment he lay there stunned.

Zack saw his companions brace for the next bit of their strategy but that’s all he saw. His poor little wings, already tired from the long fight in the air, shuddered to a stop. Even the little talons’ grip on his pauldrons was loose and exhausted.

“Oh shit!” he said and then he fell. ‘Twist, twist, twist,’ he ordered himself. It worked: his old training kicked in and he landed solidly on his feet. “Shiva’s tits!” he grinned, “It worked!”

“Brace yourself,” Tseng said from beside him. The damn Turk had barely wobbled when Zack landed and the SOLDIER decided he wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they’d put cat DNA into Tseng at some point.

Then his brain caught up with what Tseng had said. “Wait! Already?” but it was too late. The Wutaian’s ring glowed and he shimmered and faded and in his place was a huge freaking sea serpent nearly as big as the Shin-Ra Tower. “Odin’s Balls,” the First whispered in awe, “Leviathan.”

From nowhere a wall of water appeared around the god. It hissed and the water went from still to tsunami in an instant. It poured directly toward the barely moving Tsviet with a thundering pounding howl that was a weapon all by itself. Zack covered his ears. It didn’t help but it made him feel better. He heard a rumble from the other side of him and turned to see Yazoo’s bracelet
flashing as the young clone faded out. “Yah, okay...” he said out loud, “this is going to be fun.” Even he wasn’t sure if he meant it.

The tsunami hit just as Nero was crawling to his feet—two of them hanging limp and useless; yay, Blast Wave!—and it sent the fighter tumbling. Zack caught glimpses of the Tsviet’s dark metal skeleton poking out from beneath the waves. As if that weren’t enough, Ramuh appeared in Yazoo’s place and his Judgement streaked from the skyless roof to strike the water, electrifying it and magnifying the damage caused by both elements by a factor of eleventy million. Zack could see the steam rising from the water where the lightning struck. Then he could see sparks from where Nero’s suit was shorting out.

The smell of the sea and the smell of ozone combined in the suddenly small—very small—space and nearly overwhelmed the First. “Oh yuck!” he whispered. Breathing through his mouth sounded good so he did that while he dug through the packs to grab an elixir. They weren’t as pleasant or as thorough as a Cure but they were quick and their taste washed away the whole ‘duelling gods’ thing happening at the far end of the room.

This was actually going pretty good, he congratulated himself, and if things kept going this way they’d be finished with Nero and out looking for the rest of their group in no time.

Of course, that’s when the DGS army decided to crash the party.

Chapter End Notes

It took me a while to find Chaos’ voice but, once I did, I totally enjoyed writing it. I hope you enjoyed it too.
Go Back to Sleep

Chapter Notes

avari_maethor asked for blood and I think this should make her happy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zack looked at the purple clad troops gathering just outside the entrance to the room and rolled his eyes. “Well, fuck,” he said in disgust. “Honestly. Freedom sure is pricey.”

A quick glance confirmed that his companions were returning to normal. He shifted his sword holding it in both hands in front of him. “Make sure of Nero,” he ordered his companions, “I’ll keep these guys off you.” Tseng nodded silently and Yazoo fell in behind him using his genetically enhanced abilities to run as fast backwards as Tseng was running facing front. It was a cool trick, Zack thought. He’d have to see if he could do it.

He took a deep breath and repeated his pre-battle mantra, the words, the belief, the same ones Angeal had taught him so many years ago. “Never lose your dreams and no matter the situation never let go of your pride as SOLDIER.” Despite what Angeal had done, the words still resonated for him.

He opened his eyes and saw that the DGS soldiers were pouring in. The first bullets were fired and he deflected them with his broad Buster sword. “Irasshaimase!” he yelled. ‘Welcome to my shop’ it meant. During the war the Wutaian warriors had shouted it at the invading Shin-Ra forces before joining battle and Zack liked the ironic symmetry of using the phrase here.

Then he placed himself in the middle of the entrance and proceeded to kick some DGS ass. He used every trick he’d ever learned—Assault Twister, Death Jump; Hells, he even used Chocobo Stomp—anything he could remember or make up that would take down the DGS troops in large quantities. And it worked. Whole waves of them fell. And that was good and bad.

Good because their bodies piled up and formed a barrier that limited how many could come at Zack at once. Of course, the bodies should have dissolved into the Lifestream but the First figured that Hojo—the sick fucker—had altered the poor bastards too much, made them so unnatural they had no place there anymore. It was heartbreaking, yes, but the reality of it gave Zack an advantage and he wasn’t going to turn it down because every pause in the action, every break, allowed him to build up to the next move, recover a bit more health or mana, and the more he could do that the longer he’d last.

The slaughter was bad because it was making the footing treacherous. First there was the blood—and Zack decided the weird purple-red liquid was DGS blood. At the start of the fight it had merely dribbled across the floor in little rivulets but as more bodies were added it had become streams of liquid wending their way across the battlefield. Now the stuff covered the floor in sheets and, for whatever reason—fucking Hojo again—it never thickened or got sticky. It was always thin and slick and lethally unstable. The only way to escape slipping in the stuff was to climb on the layers of dead soldiers but they were just as unstable and dangerous.

Well, he could always back up but that would also allow DGS deeper into the room which meant it
would be easier for the enemy troops to slip past him and attack Tseng and Yazoo. Those two were still finishing up with Nero—he could hear them fighting—so they didn’t need any DGS grunts on their asses and he didn’t need Nero sneaking up behind him. Therefore couldn’t move. It was that simple. So, with all his small-town jungle-boy stubbornness, he planted his feet on the thinnest layer of corpses and he got fighting; swinging and whooping and twirling, keeping the soldiers focussed on him and nowhere else.

He should have fallen. Hells, he should’ve tripped and been buried under the mounds of corpses, and he probably would have if his wings hadn’t come out and stayed out. They were so much help he was seriously wondering how he’d ever fought without the little buggers. He’d slip and they’d pump and he would stay on his feet. Or there’d be a small avalanche of bodies coming toward him, threatening to pull him under and they’d lift him up and out of danger. And he didn’t really have to do a thing; they just worked with him like his arms or his legs. It was completely cool and he took back every unkind thought he’d ever had about them. As if they’d understood his thoughts, the little things worked even harder than before.

Still, it was a bit of a losing battle and Zack knew it. There were just too many of them and they had snipers now, sitting on the upper walkways that he couldn’t reach without letting the ground troops get under and past him.

He barely felt the first bullet, either going in or being pushed back out. Same with the second and third but, by the time the shots hit the double digits, he was noticing them. They hurt more, they didn’t heal as fast, his uniform was getting wet from his blood and, despite the mako his system was burning in order to keep him moving, he was starting to feel cold… not a good sign. Eventually, he’d be damaged enough that he’d have to stop and then the swarm would kill him really dead.

So be it, he thought. He didn’t want to die but if that’s what it took to keep his friends safe, to give them a chance to survive and to save the world, then that’s what he’d do.

As if there’d ever been another choice he could make.

Again, Chaos shot the huge mechanical suit, a preliminary version of the final WEAPON, that Weiss had entered and growled with frustration. It wasn’t that they weren’t hitting it but that half the time the shot bounced off the dense metal and hit a portion of the wall or ceiling and exploded uselessly. It was frustrating, fascinating, unforeseen. They had to find a way to counteract the proto-Omega’s armour. As far as they could tell, part of its resilience was due to the streamers that joined machine to the ice-green mako. Ethereal bonds it was using to feed and strengthen itself.

Fascinating, they repeated. Annoying, they replied.

“Chaos,” yelled their small warrior, prize, female, “We’ve got company.”

They turned to look but were unimpressed with the scrawny under-equipped soldiers that came through the door. Pathetic, they thought. Desperate, they agreed. There were only about a hundred of them.

They have guns and their female was a melee fighter, Chaos pointed out to themselves, she could be damaged. Their thoughts skipped in concern before they flicked their fingers at the DGS troops. Red lightning flared and jumped from gun to gun, warping the metal and making the weapons useless. Good idea, they purred. Minor alteration to matter, they explained.

Now, without their projectile weapons, the DGS troops were no real threat to Tifa. Still, they felt
compelled to enquire further, lest they overestimate the fighter, lover, cohort. *Do you need help?*

“I’ll let you know if I do,” Tifa answered, already moving to the attack.

Humming approval of the small warrior, they turned back to Omega-Weiss and thought on how to kill the conundrum, annoyance, their enemy. They could think of only one way to weaken Omega’s armour: the streamers had to go. But how could they destroy something that was just tainted air? Before they had a chance to try anything they were approached by floating balls of pale metal that whirred delicately.

Of course, nothing that innocent looking could ever be harmless so they strengthened their outer surfaces and made sure Death Penalty was fully functional. They angled away from the small warrior, dragging the floating bubbles with them—bubbles which eventually stopped moving and opened petals like a tulip. Unlike a flower, they shot high-powered lasers but they weren’t ordinary beams; there was a percussive factor that blew Chaos into a high whirling spin. They furled their wings and let their tail provide the counterbalance they needed in order to land on their feet, which they did, heavily, but not ungracefully.

Interesting, they hummed. Annoying, they repeated before firing at the bubble that had shot them. It had folded up its petals, however, and was once again a smooth, impenetrable ball. Their shot bounced off the surface.

Very annoying, they corrected and they all agreed.

Another ball was opening close by so they shot it instead. It exploded nicely, once again knocking them backwards and searing their surface with heat, but they were partly mollified. The floating flowers had a weakness that could be exploited. It was a good thing to know. Now it wouldn’t take them long to destroy the deadly little baubles. As long as they avoided the rays and stayed far enough back when one exploded, it would be easy…boring, but easy.

One of the flowers veered toward Tifa who was in the centre of a darkly seething mass of DGS soldiers. Chaos didn’t think the weapon would care about its allies anymore than they did, which meant that their lover, cohort, prize, was in danger. They shouted and moved quickly toward her. The petals opened, getting ready to fire. Chaos shot at the centre of the flower but the angle was wrong and they couldn’t hit the vulnerable core. They were close, so close, but they wouldn’t reach Tifa in time.

Bash it, they said. Ineffectual, they argued but it might knock the trajectory off so that the beam missed their warrior. They followed Gigas’ inclination. They flipped in mid-air, bending so they would kick the centre with their pointed sabatons. It was a perfect hit and the flower exploded.

And it barely hurt.

No energy feedback, they hypothesized but that didn’t matter either because they knew the weapons’ true weakness now. Now… they could really have fun with flowers.

Purple-black clouds, thick and malevolent, swirled over Sephiroth’s outstretched hand, coming together and filling the open space with thunder. There wasn’t any lightning, just an ominous flashing glow. The dark mass threw out whirling streamers that burrowed through the sky, lazily aiming for the thing that was Hojo and Jenova conjoined. And Sephiroth stood there calm and commanding like an ancient death god, hair rising and lashing about his tall frame, coat flapping and rippling.
He was scary and sensual and oh so fucking hot and, Ramah’s beard, these weren’t appropriate thoughts to be having...

Cloud pressed on his wounded shoulder so he could bring his body back under his control. It helped his erection subside, but he still felt weird. He felt fragile yet enormous, unbreakable yet completely mortal, damaged beyond repair but invincible. It was different than what he’d felt when he’d retreated into his mind back in the lab. Then he’d been running away from a reality too harsh to survive. He’d been too uncertain of himself and his strength to believe that he could survive what Hojo was doing to him so, in a way, he hadn’t. Now, however, he knew he was strong, knew he could survive, and there was no way in all Ifrit’s Hells that he was leaving the General to fight those two alone.

One more hard hit and he’d become something beyond himself.

He forced himself to his feet, using his sword to lever himself up and over. “You’re the failure!” he yelled out to Hojo forcing the creature’s attention back to him. “You’re the one who tried and tried to control the world and failed. That makes you the idiot.”

As he’d expected, the so-called scientist reacted with uncontrolled rage at having his intellect questioned. He sputtered out some reply but Cloud wasn’t listening. He was watching the wing come toward him, its blood-stained tip a dramatic focal point. It moved forward then down and the wind lifted dust and compressed the air into a lethal weapon.

Lethal, that was, if he hadn’t moved himself to the edge of the blast zone.

The wind was still strong enough to knock him off his feet and roll him around. It acerbated his existing injuries and added just enough pain to push him over the edge.

Thank gods for the General’s obsessive over-planning because Cloud had known right away what his body was doing and why he was seeing the world in blue: he was going into a Limit Break. He and Zack had been hidden away in the lab when the mutation had first shown up in fighters all over the globe and nobody knew if they’d ever experience one but the General had thought they should know about them, just in case.

So Cloud knew what his body was doing intellectually. What he didn’t know was what form his Limit Break would take. He didn’t know what actions he’d perform or if he’d transform, or even what the end result would be. All he knew was that he was moving, flying through the air, chasing Tsurugi’s blades as they danced around the Hojo-Jenova creature in floating counterpoint to Sephiroth’s descending funnel clouds.

He was nothing but a deadly streak of light, cutting through anything—anything—that was between him and his blades. He rushed through a cloud and it trailed behind him, following him as he plowed through the enemy’s body, filling the hole he left in the creature. Then Cloud had First Tsurugi in his hand and he streaked over to where Second Tsurugi waited for him, and he pulled another twisting cloud with him.

Over and over, he gathered the pieces of his weapon and wove his light and Sephiroth’s dark into and through and around the bizarre thing that was Hojo. He tied the creature to the power they’d called, binding it here, keeping it here. This time, there would be no escape.

The flowers were gone and this fight was no longer as enjoyable—Omega and his stupid impenetrable armour.
They were more convinced than ever that the secret was in the liquid connection between WEAPON and mako pool. They’d shot the streamers with Death Penalty. Nothing. They had exploded one of the baubles in the middle of the strands but it had had no effect except to create gentle waves in the thick liquid. Next, they lured one of erratic missiles into impacting on the surface of the lake. Still nothing. Mako just wasn’t flammable or combustible or even somewhat unstable; at least not in this form.

They watched their companion, prize, cohort, fight the diminishing stream of DGS soldiers, appreciating the clean movements and the power of her. They only wished she was wearing fewer or smaller clothing so they’d have more to appreciate.

“You’re supposed to be fighting the machine not critiquing my wardrobe.” Her voice wasn’t loud after all they were attuned to her and could pick-up her words before she spoke. It was just that she preferred to hear herself say them.

She ducked under an enemy soldier, lifted him up and tossed him with all of her considerable strength. They watched as the poor man arched up high, spinning helplessly before landing with barely a ripple, in the thick mako. Then Chaos saw it. Unlike the other DGS bodies, that one dissolved quickly. The purified mako easily overcame whatever alterations Hojo had made to it, and absorbed its tainted essence into itself… and the colour shifted from icy-green pureness to a darker, murkier colour.

It was brief, a flicker of a moment, but it made the streamers slow and thicken and that made Omega-Weiss shudder and list, just for a moment, but it was enough to show them what they had to do.

Ooo, they purred. Excellent idea, they concurred. They spoke to their companion, lover, partner, *Throw the bodies into the lake.*

“What?” Tifa questioned even as she dodged a hard kick.

They didn’t bother repeating it. Tifa was occupied, and they were bored, so it was just as easy for them to go over and start pushing the dead bodies over the floor and into the mako. When pushing got tedious—which happened very quickly—they took to throwing the corpses across the room; right hand, left hand, then with their tail.

“That’s disgusting,” Tifa said in between attacks, *“and disrespectful.”*

Chaos snorted. That delusional scientist had been far more disrespectful. He had made it so that these beings couldn’t return to the Lifestream on their own. Chaos was just…fixing it.

Weiss shot more of his near harmless missiles at them and Chaos nearly laughed but then they thought of a better use for the devices. They waited until it was too late for the missiles to change their trajectory then they grabbed Tifa and went up to the ceiling.

The missiles landed among the remaining DGS troops.

“Thanks,” Tifa held on, unafraid of them. “I didn’t even see those.”

*Our pleasure.* They tightened their grip making sure to press her against them from chest to thigh.

She tapped them on the chin. “Zack warned me about what kind of pervert you are and that’s okay, I guess. I’ll learn how to deal with it,” she said, “but right now, we need to stop Weiss.”
Chaos sneered. *Fighting the proto-Omega is not interesting. Not as interesting as holding you.* Their tail ran down over her back and buttocks. *Besides, it will still be there if we... take a little break.*

Tifa looked at him in disappointment. “If Weiss manages to fully turn into Omega while we’re ‘taking a break’ then we’ll never have sex again.”

The demon growled unhappily but was forced to admit that she was correct. There was also a voice inside them reminding them of a promise. *We will eventually destroy the WEAPON, then there will be nothing stopping us...* *

“You’ve already warned me,” Tifa laughed, “Twice.”

*After then,* they purred, already anticipating the end.

Omega fired a beam at them, similar to that which the flower had used but much more powerful. Chaos whirled them out of its path and kept them gently spinning even as they returned the small warrior to the ground. She moved toward the corpses and grimaced. “What a waste,” she muttered sadly. “I hope somebody manages to kill Hojo very, very dead this time.”

He looked at the fallen DGS troops, thinking of their effect on the mako and therefore Omega’s stupidly impenetrable armour. *We need more of these carcasses,* they announced. *These aren’t enough to contaminate the pool sufficiently.*

“Well, unless more come running in, this is all we got,” Tifa pointed out. She was still looking down at the bodies and the blood when she stiffened. “Unless...” she started, stopped and swallowed hard, before continuing. “Unless you contaminate Weiss directly... like Hellmasker did to...to the clone in the underground city.”

Her suggestion was soft and it obviously disturbed her but Chaos knew it was brilliant. It was disappointing that they hadn’t thought of it. We always ignore Hellmasker, they pouted. Insanity is hard to assimilate, they apologised.

They looked up at their opponent. Omega’s bronze was still gleaming though there were darker spots here and there. It had plates and angles and joints that caught the light reflected it oddly. Each curve and hinge and joint would change colour in its own unique way. The metal might buckle or it might flake... or perhaps it would retain its essential strength. There was no way to know without doing.

“Will it work?” Tifa asked from beside them.

*Yes,* they stated, *It should work.* Now they were filled with joy, eager to begin their task. How long would it take to paint such a thing, they wondered.

Chaos roared in anticipation and the room shook.

Zack knew that there were too many of them. He’d known it even before he’d sent Tseng and Yazoo to the far side of the room. But they’d had to split their forces and this was the best option. Didn’t mean that it didn’t suck because it totally did; he hated being shot... Especially by snipers...

Snipers hid up on high walkways where swamped swordsmen couldn’t get at them easily. They waited until the poor swordsman stopped moving, just for a second to catch their breath, before firing and completely ruining break time. Plus they used large caliber bullets that opened large hard-to-heal wounds.
The first couple weren’t bad but combined with the bullets fired by the regular troopers Zack knew it wasn’t looking good. He was using up his reserves, he had no time to chug elixirs or cast Cura—even if he had any mana left, which, you know, he didn’t. He felt the tingle when Yazoo healed him and he would’ve kissed the little sprite if he’d been within arm’s reach but he could hear Nero spouting off behind him. The fucker wouldn’t stay down.

Which left Zack by the main door... with snipers on the walkways.

Chaos howled in joy at the challenge of riding Omega’s slick metal armour. The WEAPON was spinning with unnatural speed, arms extended to the fullest. Perhaps it was hoping that centrifugal force would throw Chaos off. If so, their opponent was out of luck. They merely stabbed their tail deep into the metal structure and used it as an anchor. They let their metal bleed into its metal, absorbing and exchanging molecules and waited until the WEAPON stopped spinning. Then they continued their journey to the central core, which wasn’t near as much fun...

In order to begin the process of painting the WEAPON, they’d jumped on its hand when it tried to hit them. They should have slid off—metal on metal didn’t make for good traction—except they’d altered the structure of their sabatons to make them soft and slightly sticky. And now they stood and fired directly into the areas where the armour overlapped—vulnerable areas that Death Penalty could actually damage. They were also infecting the armour with every step and the canvas was, indeed, reacting beautifully with the organic paint. Now the once bronze armour was almost completely green—light green, deep green, pale green and dark. There were patches where black was starting to form and there were spots that were nearly completely white. All in all, it was a beautiful process.

Unfortunately, it was also a slow process.

Omega’s metal was tough, resisting the alteration, and the mako pool wasn’t contaminated enough. Which was why they were climbing Weiss’ arm and shooting at whatever openings they could find. They hummed a child’s rhyming song for no reason other that it was pretty and it was an interesting ride they thought in appreciation as the proto-WEAPON’s limb undulated in an attempt to shake them off.

Exhilarating, they agreed. Sex with the small warrior will be better, they countered and all of them approved of the idea.

“Keep your minds on the battle!” she yelled out.

*We can keep our minds on many things,* they countered for it was true. They took a moment to admire their comrade, lover, prize, as she tossed Deepground soldiers around like dust motes in the air. Her movements were, as always, compelling, fluid, strong, confident... such a pretty palette.

“Minds,” she shouted, “On battle!”

They wondered where Weiss’s body was within the machine, for the Tsviet had been correct in one thing: this WEAPON couldn’t function without a human mind controlling it. Kill the mind, kill the WEAPON. Then they could indulge themselves in the small warrior.

Their body hummed in anticipation...

Suddenly, Chaos didn’t want to wait anymore. They changed their leisurely stroll into a march, focussed and purposeful. Any appreciation for the armour’s slow transformation disappeared.

It was well beyond time to have the small warrior to themselves.
Sephiroth’s funnel clouds pierced the abomination’s body in seven places—fourteen if you counted entrance and exit wounds separately. The darkness within the clouds tainted Hojo’s mutated form and spread like a disease. It would kill him eventually, but Sephiroth didn’t want to wait. He waved his outstretched hand and the funnel clouds spun. They tightened in and around Hojo’s body, squeezing it, and the General could see the black ichor dripping from the holes.

Hojo was still screaming insults at them, foolishly thinking that there was a way out for him. Jenova, on the other hand, was silent. She was wiggling and squirming and... He squinted and focussed...

“Cloud,” he called, “She’s trying to separate from Hojo.”

His blond lover immediately jumped into the air. He wasn’t blue anymore but there was still an aura of power around him—he was a warrior now, thoroughly and absolutely. Tsurugi had its own glow, its own magic, as well, and it sang a death song as Cloud moved to the attack. It sliced easily through the alien being as she tried to crawl out of her host.

Then Cloud swung Tsurugi in a sweeping back hand blow that landed right on her neck. It went through sinews, muscles and bone like they didn’t even exist. The body slumped over Hojo’s shoulder, lifeless, dripping more of the noxious black liquid that was their blood. Her head fell onto the hard platform with a dull splat. It was unlikely she would recover from decapitation but Sephiroth didn’t want to risk it. He cast a Firaga at the body part and watched with satisfaction as it exploded into mist.

Hojo had finally stopped talking although he was still making noise; an incoherent keening that was, even now, more rage and pride than fear, as if he still couldn’t accept that two former specimens could actually defeat him.

As long as he died, Sephiroth didn’t care if Hojo never acknowledged that they’d won.

The clouds squeezed and Cloud sliced and cut. Sephiroth tried to throw another Firaga at the remnants of Jenova but the cast was sickly and weak. The storm was draining his mana.

“Cloud,” he called again, “Cast Fira on Jenova’s body.”

Cloud nodded so that the General knew he had heard the order. The blond warrior paused in his attack to collect the mana he had left in order to make the cast as strong as he knew how. Unfortunately, the materia responded with enthusiasm to Cloud’s will and what exploded from it wasn’t a controlled stream but a wild explosion of fireballs that flew out like lava spewing from a volcano. The balls hit just about every part of the abomination except Jenova’s corpse.

“Shit, shit, shit,” Cloud cursed. He backed away from his attack and dropped to the ground. He ran to the bags and dug around. Sephiroth was willing to wager that he was looking for an ether so that he could try the cast again; his young lover was nothing if not tenacious.

Cloud drank the liquid down and turned back to try again. “Well, huh...” the Nibelheimer said in surprise.

Sephiroth followed the blond warrior’s gaze and he could see that the thick black ichor had caught fire where his Fira had touched them. Dark orange flames danced and crackled along the liquid, whether it was dripping down Hojo’s body or climbing up it.

“Odin’s balls,” Cloudbreathed. “Do you see that, Sir?”
“I do,” Sephiroth confirmed. The flames were following the substance wherever it went and that included the open wounds... and the inside of Hojo’s body.

Now, the funnel clouds were tinged with orange light and the General wondered if the fire had reached the blood-rich organs. Whether it had or not, heavy steam poured out of the holes. The smell of burning meat tinged with acidic mako and the foul stench of Jenova’s alien cells slammed into Sephiroth and he gagged.

He never gagged...

Instinctively he brought his hand down to cover his nose and mouth, afraid he was actually going to vomit. He looked up in horror. His funnel clouds were dispersing, retreating back into the main mass swirling high above the battle. He wouldn’t have the strength to call them back! Before he could get caught up in self-recrimination, the fire, freed from the clouds’ dampening presence, flared and shot out of Hojo’s body like fireworks from a tube.

The smell grew even stronger and this time Sephiroth couldn’t stop his body from emptying itself. He didn’t see the professor’s body fall to the platform, wings thrashing uselessly, but he felt the surface dip and rock. It just made him heave even harder.

“Sir, sir, it’ll be okay,” Cloud’s voice was close, which meant he was close. Sephiroth opened his eyes and Cloud was, indeed, standing right next to him, near enough that the genetically-enhanced warrior could feel the heat of the smaller man’s body. He was facing the abomination, sword held in front of him defensively.

Cloud was protecting him, Sephiroth realized in wonder.

He was so caught up in the emotions caused by the realization that he nearly missed the faint trembling running through the platform. Trembling that grew into shakes, that turned into tremors.

“Get down!” he ordered, pulling the blond down to him, making him turn his back.

He was only moments ahead of the explosion that ripped through the obscenity that Hojo had become. Orange light surrounded them, blinding heat. They curled lower into the ground, dropping their faces to the dark surface. Blasts of air buffeted them and threatened to blow them over, and maybe even off, the platform, but they dug their hands in and held on. Wave after wave struck at them as Hojo’s body blew itself apart piece by piece and limb by limb. They were hit by body parts, sent flying through the air with the force of the blast—which didn’t smell any better close up—but those were soon carried up and away as the compressed air surged past them in another wave.

It seemed like forever but was only minutes. There was one final explosion that made the whole platform jump, and then it was quiet.

Or maybe it was the ringing in his ears making it seem quieter than it actually was. He could see Cloud’s mouth moving, could sense the tone of it, but he couldn’t hear the words. “I’m unharmed, Cloud,” he could barely hear himself speak—what an odd sensation—“Are you?”

He thought Cloud said he was ‘fine’ but lip reading had never been one of his skills. Who needed to read lips when one could hear conversations a courtyard away? Then Cloud gave him a shaky smile and pointed at their packs. His lips moved and the General thought he might be offering to go fetch a potion or some such thing. He was sure that’s what the blond had said when Cloud struggled to his feet. Unwilling to be less worthy than his lover, Sephiroth also climbed upright.
He wavered for a moment but managed to find his balance. It was possible the platform was still shifting, but he rather thought that he was woefully out of balance.

It turned out that Cloud was suffering from the same malady. The smaller man had to take a couple hasty jumps sideways to keep from falling back down. Sephiroth grabbed him, pulled him upright—kept himself upright—and together, weaving like drunken soldiers on leave below the plate, they made their erratic way over to the backpacks with their precious potions and ethers. Sephiroth would have liked to believe that he sat gracefully but he was honest enough to admit that his legs just gave out from under him. Cloud joined him in a boneless heap.

The young fighter raised a shaky hand to his head and the General noticed that Cloud was beyond pale and heading into ashen grey. He looked at the quick, shallow movements of the soldier’s chest; it was possible something was seriously wrong with Cloud. He refused to panic as he dug through the bag for an elixir but he practically broke the neck in his haste to get it open. He shuffled over to where Cloud was wavering with unconsciousness—or worse—and forced the soldier’s mouth to open. Slowly and carefully Sephiroth poured the green liquid in, stopping to massage Cloud’s long neck so that he would swallow the healing liquid.

It worked. Cloud consumed it and faint green sparkles appeared, floating over his prone body. Sephiroth poured more down. This time Cloud managed to swallow on his own. The sparkles grew brighter and a thin green mist emerged. By the time the blond had swallowed the whole bottle his colour was back; peaches and cream with a hint of tan, and the trembling had left his hands.

Sephiroth nearly collapsed in relief.

Now it was Cloud’s turn to baby him. The soldier dug through the pack and pulled out a potion. He opened it, with much less force than the General had used so the top came off smoothly. When Sephiroth’s hand shook, Cloud placed his over the General’s and gently guided the bottle to his mouth. It was a weakness that Sephiroth had been trained to despise but Cloud didn’t seem to think it was unseemly...hardly seemed to notice it in fact.

The potion was a soothing, rejuvenating warmth that he soon felt in every area of his body, every bone and muscle, every pore and cell. There wasn’t a part of him that wasn’t affected. It was almost painful it was so intense but at the same time it was wonderful.

His hearing came back with a pop. “Ah, much better.”

“Yes, Sir,” Cloud agreed. He’d grabbed a cloth from the bag and was cleaning Tsurugi, removing each blade and wiping it down carefully. Or it would have been carefully if he’d been watching his hands. Instead his gaze was fixed on the large discolouration on the other side of the platform.

“He’s really dead,” Cloud mused.

“Yes, he’s really dead.” Sephiroth confirmed. He couldn’t feel the professor’s poisonous aura anymore. “They both are.”

“So it’s over?” Cloud turned to look at him, eyes large with hope.

“Yes,” Sephiroth nodded, “This part is over. However—”

Cloud laughed, “There’s always a ‘however’.”

Sephiroth allowed himself a smile. “However,” he repeated with emphasis, “We have to find the others, find out if they’ve located Weiss or any of the other DGS forces.”

Cloud laughed again, a rueful chuckle. “I’d forgotten about those guys.”
Sephiroth raised a brow. “You forgot Commander Fair?” he asked in mild disbelief.

“No, not Zack,” the young blond protested with a blush, “but that there were other bad guys out there to be fought.”

“Ah,” Sephiroth said, “Understandable.” He stared at the corporal, still alive and well, so strong and resilient and decided that he could take a moment or more to enjoy what was in front of him—visually only, unfortunately, but it was still satisfying. Cloud, bashful in romance as he wasn’t in battle, blushed and looked away.

“Um, Sir?”

“Hmm?” was Sephiroth’s response.

“Exactly how do we get back to there?” The soldier’s voice was softly amused. “I don’t know about you, but I have no idea where we are.”

“Ah… that.”

“No more soldiers left,” Tifa called out from the entry, “and it looks like the stairs are clear.”

*Then you must rest and heal yourself, my small warrior,* Chaos responded with anticipation. *For when the battle is finally finished and we will have time to... enjoy each other.*

“You know, I’ve had drunken bar patrons who are less persistent than you.”

*And that explains why you are here and not with them.* Chaos chuckled. *You are not one to chose the weak-willed.*

“If you call me a prize again, the deal’s off.” Tifa scowled at them with anger that was only half-feigned. They couldn’t help but roar their appreciation of her fearlessness.

They were at the top of the mechanical being that housed Weiss—if that was the proper word. He was buried within the body of the proto-Omega. Chaos could just see the former Tsviet twisted around wires and pipes and whatever else joined the humanoid to the machine. They peered down through what appeared to be a protective gel and decided that they couldn’t tell how far it was to their enemy.

They poked the substance with one booted foot and it wobbled. They shot it and the beam was absorbed without visible damage, although the smell of scorched soup filled the air. Disgusting, they thought. Inconvenient, they added. They only had one choice: when guile or tactics were useless, brute force was always an option.

*We will be back, my tasty little treat, and then it will be time.* They didn’t wait for the female’s response, although they had a good idea of the tone she would use.

With a whoop, they jumped up, pirouetting for the joy of it, then they turned and, pumping their wings to give them as much speed as possible, they dived into the thick substance. It was disgusting just as they’d thought but they didn’t let that stop them. With wings tucked tight to their body, they propelled themselves forward by using their tail and their determination. They avoided pillars that hadn’t been visible from outside the machine and knew that this was some other space in time—connected to, but separate from, reality. They swam and dodged, turning and twisting, enjoying the pure physicality of it.
The tunnel lightened and they burst through into somewhere... other. A bubble that wasn’t empty but it wasn’t filled like the tunnel had been. The gel was thin, more like a mist in the air. They could feel it against their skin. Other than that, it was an empty space. Everything was pale and the floor was a mirror. They turned and saw nothing, just an endless and limitless horizon.

Impressive, they commented. Pretentious, they sneered and refocused their mind on the most important question: where was their enemy?

Just then flower weapons appeared, bursting into existence with little flashes. And not just floating bulbs, there were also large stationary ones that neither moved nor fired at them but merely opened and closed at random. They seemed to have large crystals as their centre and Chaos couldn’t help but think that the change was significant.

The floating buds shot at them, just as they had in the outside world, but were easily destroyed, just as they had been in the outside world. When there were only a couple left, and their respawn rate had slowed to almost nothing, Chaos drifted over to one of the larger flowers and examined it. Like their smaller cousins, they were impervious to attack when the petals were closed. Unlike the floating bubbles, they weren’t damaged by gun fire when open either.

Frustrating, they complained. Unimaginative, they agreed.

Punch them?

They decided they liked the idea. At least it would alleviate their frustration with the extremely tedious process.

It worked. When the petals opened they could kick and punch the crystals until they burst with a flash of light causing no injury except to their, admittedly limited, patience.

More of the floating flowers popped up and Chaos shot them, practically yawning. He moved past the debris to the next stationary bubble and waited for it to open before destroying it and drifted to the next. If this was the final battle between them and Weiss, it lacked a little… zing...

With a sigh, they moved on to the next bubble-crystal, shooting another moving flower almost as soon as it appeared. They wanted Weiss dead and the proto-Omega destroyed so they could return to their small warrior, partner, prize... they chuckled to themselves knowing that Tifa would follow through with her threat to hit them if she knew they were still calling her that. It could be fun, they mused...

Finally—finally—the last of the stationary flowers was destroyed and the mirrored floor turned opaque. It rippled and Chaos could just barely see a ball moving underneath the surface.

Weiss, they wondered? Please, yes, they prayed.

It was a large bronze ball but there were patches of greenish-black. It was possible that Chaos’ paint had changed the base tone and it had been carried over from the larger machine. Chaos purred for, if it were true, then half their job was done for them.

It pushed through the flooring, barely disturbing the smooth surface. Metal streamers, looking like malboro tentacles, dangled down, seemingly without purpose.

Attack it, they asked; envisioning a physical attack such as the ones they’d used to take out the crystal flowers. Shoot first, they decided.

They raised Death Penalty but the ball started to undulate, sections waving and wobbling, each to a
separate rhythm; it looked like the ball was going to break apart. Odd, for they hadn’t even shot it. However, if the ball broke on its own then perhaps Weiss would emerge and they would be able to finish the fight they’d started in the other space. Hmmm, they paused and considered.

Then they stepped back to wait for this, the final confrontation.

His leg went out from under him and he couldn’t get it back under his control. Probably because the bullet had torn huge chunks of bone and muscle from his thigh. He looked up and his vision hyper-focussed on the DGS sniper high up above him. He could see the fucker’s small grin of triumph as he sighted his rifle. This was it, Zack knew, this was the end.

Ah shit! He wanted a chance to say good-bye to Aerith; tell her one last time that he loved her. And then there was Cloud and Sephiroth; two of the best friends a guy could have...

Dying fucking sucked, he decided.

He looked at the sniper and gave a cocky little salute. There was no reason for him to do it, he was just being his usual smart-ass self, so he was somewhat surprised when the trooper’s head exploded. “Woah,” he said in awe, “magic fingers…” Then Yazoo tipped his head back and poured a noxious tasting potion down his throat.

“I’m not losing anyone else,” the clone growled and Zack knew that he was thinking of his brothers. It was nice that Yazoo considered him in the same category as his beloved fellow clones, but he wasn’t sure a weak potion would be enough to keep him from dissolving. All it would do was hold off the inevitable. His feeling of being cold was going away, replaced by the savage burn of mako eating his cells in an attempt to get the energy it needed to heal him.

He saw Tseng in the corner of his eye, gun raised, eyes calm; the picture of laconic... Turkness or something.

“Nero?” he gasped. He leaned over, putting his hand out to catch his weight. He could see his muscles trembling. Wouldn’t be long now before he fell over completely

“ Completely dead,” Yazoo answered. The young fighter had his nasty looking gun-blade out and was kneeling beside Zack. He looked fiercely protective and chillingly scary and the SOLDIER was reminded that the clones had been raised to be soulless killing machines.

Well, the soulless part was out, but killing machine was still on the table...

He coughed and he could feel the warmth of the blood he coughed up with it. Lung shot, then. He’d kinda figured that. He could feel the potion doing what it could but there was too much damage and he knew it. Next he knew, he was staring up at the ceiling.

“Zack?” Yazoo’s voice was panicked. “Zack, you can’t do this."

“Hey, sprite,” he scratched out. He blinked and even that small action hurt. “You did good, I’m proud of you.” He could hear Yazoo saying ‘nononono’ in a continuous stream but it was distant. “Continue living, Yazoo…live for me.”

Yazoo shook him and fuck did that hurt. “I’m not listening to this bullshit, Zack.”

“My dreams and pride, I give it all to you.”

The young fighter wasn’t listening. “Sephiroth brought you back once. I’m him so I can do it too.”
Zack frowned because that really didn’t make any sense.

And then he felt it: the pull, the connection, the call... Jenova cells to Jenova cells, General to SOLDIER. It was less intense than when Sephiroth did it but Yazoo was only based on the Silver General.

“Yaz...” Zack’s voice was filled with questions he couldn’t ask.

“Hush, Zack. You saved us, now we save you. That’s how it works.” Soft lips pressed against his forehead and with that small touch the power bloomed inside him. His body awoke and recognized the clone as one—the same—ourselves. He knew they were two bodies but he wanted to be one.

“Yaz...” This time when he spoke his voice was filled with yearning.

“Do you sense that?” the General sat up alertly.

Cloud stood up, on guard, holding Tsurugi in front of him. He peered into the space beyond the platform extending all his senses. He finally had to shake his head. “I can’t feel anything.”

“Someone is calling.” Sephiroth stood abruptly, his body rising in one smooth motion, “We must go.” He held out his hand and Cloud took it without hesitation.

“Go where?” Cloud asked, his wings snapped in anticipation.

Sephiroth looked down at him and smiled. “We must answer the call, of course.”

Like everything else about this battle, Weiss’ appearance was... anticlimactic. The former Tsviet was pushed out, extruded almost, from the guts of the ball. When the fighter looked up it was obvious he was awakening from a kind of fugue state for he was dopy and confused. Chaos could have easily shot him a dozen or more times and would have but they were too busy being displeased. They did not think there would a legendary final battle. They would never be sung about or turned into a tale for the gods...

Tifa will sing for us, they reminded themselves and it almost mitigated their disappointment.

It took the Tsviet a moment to realize where he was and what was going on but then he smiled at them. “Impressive,” the pale warrior said, “Together...we would have been... unstoppable.”

Then he slid forward and down and the ball wasn’t bronze anymore it was black: greenish-black, purple-black; black with blue and red flashes. It was a swirling black that swallowed Weiss and the metal ball as they collapsed into a nothingness that was truly endless. It was the void of space but without planets or suns or any hope of safe harbour.

It was entropy in its absolute form.

It crept out from where Weiss was falling into it, stretching into the pale space and sucking all the matter into it which meant the mist-like gel that filled the air.

Chaos realized that, if the entropy touched them, they would also be sucked in, become part of the void—and there would be no matter for them to use to manipulate an escape.

Departure was imperative, they decided. It took only a flash of thought for them to be hurrying away from the growing emptiness. However, behind them they left a tunnel of turbulence that
entropy quickly assimilated as it so much easier to dissolve through than the undisturbed substance in the other areas.

Chaos moved faster, keeping just ahead of the all-consuming void.

They were heating the gel now, its matter being first seared then burned to ash as they propelled themselves through it faster and faster. Entropy followed, never catching up but never really falling behind either.

They went back through the passage they’d used to come here, dodging the oddly placed pillars, avoiding the occasional weapon discharge. Their muscles actually felt strained but that didn’t matter. Nothing mattered but reaching the end, escaping…

There! They could see the opening.

They yelled their determination into the muffling fluid, pushing with their final reserves for one last burst of speed. They exploded out of the machine, back into the room with the mako pool and Weiss’ hungry throne and Tifa.

It also had a ceiling. How had they forgotten the ceiling?

They spun, unfolding their wings and spreading their body, in an attempt to halt their momentum. It worked for the most part; they slowed from invisible blur to merely incredibly fast in a heartbeat. They still had to take some impact on their arms and legs and tail. The room shook but the ceiling remained intact.

“Chaos,” Tifa shouted up at them—a wonderful sound—“What happened? Did you find Weiss? Is it over?” Then, in a completely different tone, their small warrior murmured, “Odin’s mercy… What is that?”

They pushed away from the ceiling and swooped toward their waiting companion, lover, warrior.

*Weiss and his proto-Omega are destroyed,* they informed her. *They are returning to the void from whence they came.*

“So it’s over?” Tifa stood well back from the machine and Chaos could understand why. There was an ominous beauty in the black tendrils that were encircling the machine, pulling it into the dark mist that had formed over the pale liquid—wonderful contrast. They could see the metal stretching and stretching, caught in an infinite moment. It was both perfect and flawed, timeless and momentary.

*What in me is dark illumine,* they recited. *What is low raise and support, that to the heighth of this great argument I may assert Eternal Providence and justify the ways of Gods to men.*

“What?” Tifa looked at them with eyes wide in fear.

Chaos looked down at her, so insignificant in size and power when compared to them, and smiled. *Gaia is reclaiming her own,* they explained. *The WEAPON and its conduit are returning to the planet where they will wait an eternity to be needed again.*

Her eyes narrowed, filled now with concern for them. “Is that what’s going to happen to you?” she asked. “Are you going to return to the planet?”

*We are tied to our host. As long as he endures so shall we.* They extended one finger, carefully keeping the talon tucked away so that they could stroke it down her cheek without causing harm.
She swallowed, blinking rapidly. “I’m not sure if that’s reassuring or just plain creepy.”

“Huh,” Tifa snorted. Chaos raised a brow in question. “Did you get that attitude from Vincent or did he get it from you? Because that sounds exactly like the kind of gloomy existential pronouncement he’d make.” She crossed her arms and her foot tapped out her irritation.

Chaos couldn’t help it; they laughed. A booming sound that filled the room and masked the shrieking collapse of the final WEAPON. They reached around her, with arms and tail and wings, and lifted her up so they were face to face. *Very well, beautiful warrior, we shall cease to talk of such ‘gloomy’ things. After all, it is time for us to do some ‘claiming’ of our own.*

She pushed away from them as far as she could and they were impressed with her upper body strength, far out of proportion to her delicate frame. “Excuse me?” Her eyes flashed.

Their eyes flashed in return, *Did you really think that we would not consider intimacy with you as our reward?* The tip of their tail curled softly, slowly, up her leg. *You cannot be so naïve.*

“And I said, if you called me ‘your prize’, I’d cut you off for life and you’d have to give Vincent back the driver’s seat.” She meant it, they knew. Every line in her body and every tense muscle showed how serious she was about this.

*We are an ancient being of nearly unlimited power,* they murmured, *and you have us at your mercy.* They leaned forward and nuzzled at her neck, breathing in her rich, feminine flavours, rubbing her with their more complex aroma. They licked and she shivered. *We shall call you ‘mate’, instead.*

Chapter End Notes

The poem Chaos quotes is from Paradise Lost, Book 1 by John Milton.
“You realize you’re going to be helplessly in love with me forever more now, right?” Zack said. Yazoo blinked his sleepy blue cat’s eyes at him. “Bound to worship me for all eternity,” the First stated in bouncy good humour. The clone pushed up from where he was draped over his chest.

“You mean you’ll be worshipping me,” he corrected. “Like you do Sephiroth.”

Zack grinned teeth bright through the drying blood, which was starting to itch and feel really gross, “Never happen; totally different situation.” One silver eyebrow arched high and, godsdamn, if the sprite didn’t look like a younger version of the person he was based on. “Okay, maybe in ten years or so, when you grow into your potential, you might be able to turn me on with a cough, but you’re not there yet.”

Yazoo raised himself up on one elbow and his eyelids drooped covering his expression. “You’re right,” he purred. Long, delicate looking fingers trailed a path over his chest, touching bare skin, moving from bullet hole to bullet hole. “You are irresistible.”

“Uhh...”

Zack squirmed but Yazoo leaned over farther so that his breath stroked over Zack’s face and they were pressed from breast bone to thigh. “Sex after battle is incredible. I’m sure it will be even better with you...” And then his hand was below Zack’s belt and fucking stroking.

The big First jack-knifed into a seated position. “Oh-kay, that’s enough of that.” He carefully removed the clone’s wandering digits. Yazoo smirked up at him from his position on the floor. He looked lazy and predatory and reminded Zack of Cloud’s Niisan.

“Yazoo, are you using sexual activity to intimidate my Second-in-Command?”

Zack’s excited greeting was muffled by the pale hand Yazoo had placed over his mouth. “He started it first.”

Cloud was already digging through his pack, bringing out the potions and elixirs. “Here, Zack, drink this.”

“I’m sure he did,” Sephiroth responded calmly enough though his eyes searched the SOLDIER for any remaining damage. There was nothing that he could see, at least nothing he could assist with. “However, if you were hoping for intercourse right away, you will be disappointed.” He ignored Zack’s protesting squawk to exchange greetings with Tseng.

“Why will I be disappointed,” Yazoo asked laying back but keeping a hand on the First’s arm. “Is he a tease?”

“No, I’m not,” Zack spluttered a protest.

“Eat this.” Cloud handed over an MRE filled with a lukewarm food like substance, “to rebuild your cells.” After a quick look at the silver-haired youth, he handed the second one to Yazoo who didn’t bother sitting up to eat, just opened a corner and sipped delicately at the lukewarm goo.

“He won’t do anything until he has Aerith’s permission,” Sephiroth explained to his clone, “She’ll probably have to meet you first.”
“That’s not—”

“And, from what I understand, she’ll want pictures.”

“Ah,” Yazoo said in understanding. He ran fingers through Zack’s black—and somewhat sticky—hair. “Pussy whipped.”

“Hey!”

Sephiroth raised an eyebrow. “Well trained,” he corrected though his eyes glinted in humour. His friend had scared him and this was a mild way to get some revenge.

“Here, this is the last one,” Cloud said, holding out another food pack to the SOLDIER. “After that we need to find the cafeteria. They do have a cafeteria here, right?” He looked up at Tseng as if expecting him to know. Tseng said nothing.

“If she approves we can work out a schedule. Her bed, our bed—”

“Then one big bed all together?” Yazoo’s smile was feral anticipation.

“Right, well, that was fun...” Zack stood up with a flourish. “Glad you’re all enjoying yourselves. Thank you for the food, Cloud,” he handed the empty bags to his friend. “Now I think I’ll go down and check on Vincent and Tifa; see if they’ve managed to find Weiss and stop him, since that is what we’re here for, not for making silly little jokes at each others’ expense.”

“Cloud,” the General said softly.

“Yes, Sir,” the Corporal put everything back in his bag and moved to stand beside the First.

Zack frowned, “I don’t need a babysitter.”

“It’s either Cloud or Yazoo, your pick.” There was no give in the General’s voice: Zack would not be venturing out of sight by himself.

With a huff of breath, the First gave in. He jerked his head at Cloud to indicate which direction they were heading and then off they went.

Sephiroth waited until they were out of earshot. “How bad?” He crouched over the supine clone. He placed one hand over the young man’s thundering heart and willed it to slow.

“Nearly dead,” Tseng answered. “He was starting to dissolve when Yazoo... stepped in.”

“Though I thank you, Yazoo, it was foolish to go so deep,” Sephiroth said even as he dug through his own pack. “You should have drunk a potion immediately.”

Yazoo gazed at him out of shuttered eyes but remained silent so, once again, it was the Turk who spoke. “We have none left. Nero was an excellent fighter and his weapons were surprisingly effective.”

“I could feel you responding,” Yazoo finally said, “I knew you’d come.”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth steadied his clone as Yazoo drank the elixir down. “And you didn’t tell him that you were damaged by the healing, why?” Now Yazoo blushed and looked away. “Yazoo,” the General insisted.

“Because he would have felt guilty but it was my choice, just as it was his to take on the whole
DGS army so that Tseng and I could finish Nero.” Yazoo took a deep breath as the Jenova cells inside him relaxed and went back to sleep; hibernating until the next time one of her progeny needed them. “Besides, I’ve never done that before; didn’t even know it was possible until you did it with Zack on the ice. How was I supposed to know what it would do to my system?”

“Hmm,” Sephiroth said again. “Actually, it felt somewhat different than normal. Perhaps because I was feeling the call rather than initiating it or perhaps because Jenova’s main mass is destroyed.”

“Jenova is dead?” Tseng asked.

The General looked up at the Turk. He had some trust that Rufus wouldn’t turn into his father but not a lot. Still, there was little chance that Neo-Shinra would ever be able to recover any of the alien creature. “Her body, along with Professor Hojo’s, exploded and disintegrated completely. We were in a void that I’m not sure I could find again even if I had the inclination.”

“Which you don’t,” Tseng finished for him. Sephiroth nodded his head. “Personally, I think it is a very good thing for humans and the planet that she is unrecoverable. She... didn’t belong here.”

Yazoo snorted so Sephiroth didn’t have to. “Are you stable now, Yazoo?” he asked instead. The clone nodded and managed to stand up without wobbling too bad. “The first time I called someone, I was twelve and it was an accident,” the General said conversationally. “The poor boy was inside a tube and she nearly beat through the container trying to get to me. And I...” his voice trailed off and his gaze fell to the floor, fell into memory. A sad half smile appeared, “What they did to make us settle down... Let’s just say, I learned control very quickly.”

“I’ll work on it.” Yazoo promised quietly.

“Excellent.” The General turned away, searching the room, keeping his face hidden from them. “Now, I believe Cloud was correct. We will need sustenance and in quantity. Did you happen to see a terminal anywhere?” Yazoo pointed to one near the side door, lights flashing and message scrolling so that it was unmistakable. “Excellent,” he said again and moved rapidly to the computer. If either of his companions thought it resembled a retreat they both had the intelligence—and kindness—not to mention it.

“It was a very brave thing that you did, Yazoo,” Tseng said and the clone felt the glow of pride—he’d earned his place in the group. The Turk’s next words wiped that feeling clean. “It was also foolish. Did you even try to think of the hazards involved?”

Yazoo looked at him with large shuttered eyes, unwilling to concede anything to the dark-eyed man.

Tseng looked placidly back. “Turks are trained to assess changing probabilities during high stress situation so that, even when we make foolish choices, we can be assured that it was the least foolish choice available to us.”

One delicately sculpted eyebrow went up. “Interesting technique,” he said, his voice loaded with sarcasm.

“It is a fluid, tight-knit group that Rufus Shinra is deliberately keeping small so that authority cannot be falsified and responsibility cannot be dodged.”

Yazoo looked at the Turk in astonishment. He tipped his head so his hair would swing out of the way and he could see Tseng’s face fully... although that helped nothing. “Tseng,” he asked hesitantly, “are you trying to recruit me?”
“Oh my gods. Oh gods.”

*That’s it, my warrior, surrender to me.*

“We’re fifty meters up in the air. I’m not aroused, I’m terrified.”

Oh.

That certainly wasn’t the effect they had been trying for...

Zack stalked down the stairs, his footsteps quick and mostly silent. Moving his body noiselessly was a habit long ingrained in the SOLDIER First Class—too bad he never could get his mouth into the same habit. “You heard what they said, about us sharing... me. Don’t you have something to say about that?” He was babbling and he knew it but for some reason the teasing between Seph and Yazoo had left him feeling unsettled. “As if Aerith would give permission for something like that. I mean, come on!”

Cloud was letting the stream of words float by him without really noting any of it. “You know what this reminds me of?” he said in the middle of more nervous chatter. “This reminds me of going into the basement of the Shinra Mansion. You know, before...at the start of all this. Except then you kept on talking about how you were going to get me into SOLDIER training.”

Zack flashed him a grin, looking at him in his dinged up uniform with the lion’s head decorations and its straps. “Looks like you don’t need my help anymore, Spike.”

“Considering the amount of mako and shit gurgling around in my blood,” Cloud answered with a grunt of agreement. “I bet I got more than you now.”

“Dream on.”

“I can be a SOLDIER First and a Half, just so that everyone knows who’s superior.”

Zack’s bark of laughter filled the large stairwell. “What is it with you guys? First Seph and now you, cracking jokes and making funnies. Was it something in the air?”

Cloud blinked at him, “Hojo’s dead. Like really dead.”

“Yeah,” Zack grinned happily, “I got that from the ‘exploded into mist’ part of your description.” He nodded, “That is such fucking great news, I can hardly find words.” He turned around to continue down the stairs—how fucking deep did they go anyway?—when it finally hit him.

“Shit, I need to sit for a second,” he said and did, dropping onto the step beneath him as his knees gave way.

“Zack!” Cloud scurried down the steps to crouch in front of him. “What happened? Is it more damage from the bullets or the mako?” His eyes were bright with concern.

“Nah,” Zack waved those away. “It just hit me, that’s all.” Cloud glanced around the area, looking for dangers he’d missed. “Hojo’s really dead.”

Cloud frowned, “I told you that.”

“Yeah, I know but...” the First took a shuddery breath, “all of a sudden it seems, I dunno, real. He’s dead and he’ll never be able to recapture us and do... anything to us...ever again.”
“No, no he won’t.” Cloud touched him just a light hand on his arm but it was warm and comforting. “He’s gone and we’re safe. We’re safe, Zack.”

He was losing it. He knew he was losing it because his chest was tight and his eyes hurt and “Fucking Hells...” and he was gone, sobbing and bawling like a little baby. It wasn’t graceful or romantic, no ‘single tear rolling dramatically down his cheek’. This was a snot running, lung clogging, eye swelling breakdown of epic proportions. And he didn’t care.

Cloud didn’t care either; it wasn’t like they hadn’t been here before.

He held his friend, rubbed his back, rocked him gently and sang a soft lullaby that his mother used to sing. He was crying too: tears of relief, tears of ‘oh my gods, how did we survive it?’ joy. Mostly they were tears for his friend who was both hurting and not, but who was finally overwhelmed by everything. He let his wings come out and he wrapped his friend up in them too and then he just sat there and let the emotions run down. He figured they had the time. If Vincent and Tifa had failed to stop Weiss then the compound should’ve been coming down around their ears but it wasn’t, so they were probably okay too. For now, Cloud had decided, this was more important.

Tseng ignored Yazoo’s question. He glanced down at the floor where still-wet DGS blood was dripping from the clone’s long coat onto a floor still coated with it, in a steady plip-plip that was fast becoming annoying. “Perhaps we should move somewhere at little less...graphic.” Yazoo held out his hand, inviting Tseng to lead the way.

There was a smirk on his lips and a cool distance in his eyes. He swung his hair so it fell seductively over one side of his face so it would hide his expression even more. He knew this was the mask he’d worn in the lab in front of Hojo and the rest. He’d also worn a variation of it in front of Kadaj and Loz but he hadn’t realized it until Zack and Cloud and Tifa and the rest. In front of them, he’d worn no mask. He didn’t want to go back to it.

“No matter the incarnation, I don’t find the idea of becoming Shin-Ra’s property again, very appealing.”

“You wouldn’t be property, Yazoo,” Tseng stated.

“I don’t want to be a weapon,” Yazoo said, “Assassin, torturer, spy, attack dog: none of those sound attractive either.”

“I assure you, those tactics are no longer part of our everyday repertoire. Rufus Shinra is very serious about not falling back into his father’s leadership model.” Yazoo snorted. Tseng’s dark eyes remained mild. “You can confirm this with Sephiroth and Tifa.”

“Still, aside from a life of following your orders rather than Hojo’s, what are you offering me?” The clone swayed seductively. One long pale finger trailed over the sleeve of his uniform. “I have to tell you, you’re not my type.”

“I’ll make a note of it,” the Turk’s voice was mostly impassive but Yazoo could detect the trace of humour.

He backed away and just looked at the Turk, waiting for him to explain the offer.

“What we have to trade for your loyalty is a controlled introduction to freedom and independence. For part of your day, you will work in a structured environment, of the kind you’ve been raised in and are familiar with, although much more fluid and dynamic thanks to... certain elements. The rest of the day you can spend as you please, out in public or in an apartment of your own—the location
of which you can choose yourself.”

Yazoo laughed, he couldn’t help it. “You’re actually serious.” Tseng just looked at him with his dark, hidden, eyes. “I didn’t think you even liked me.”

“I didn’t,” Tseng confirmed, “but that was when I only knew what you were, not who. Most of Hojo’s experiments are, to put it mildly, unstable. However, you have proven to be smart, well trained, quick thinking, efficient and effective. You are also loyal to those who have earned your trust.”

Yazoo examined the Wutaian Turk for any hint of joke or trap or-or anything... any clue that his offer was real. There was nothing. There was neither eagerness nor calculation. There was just Tseng standing there, patient and contained, with one small smear of blood on his cheek which only served to enhance how unnaturally tidy he was everywhere else.

It was actually kind of creepy.

Yazoo dipped his head, hiding his face behind his hair once again. “I’ll think about it.” And probably answer no, he thought.

Tseng said nothing just nodded acceptance of Yazoo’s hedging. “Perhaps we should see if the General has found the kitchens.” It was an offer of escape, and Yazoo took it.

“Oh my gods. Oh gods.”

*Yes, my lover, my mate. It’s good that you appreciate us to our full extent.*

She hit them, a love tap. “Shut up with the ego and do that move again.” Chaos rolled their hips, tail twisting lightly, and she tightened around them and moaned in helpless pleading.

Now this was the response they were looking for...

Cloud and Zack retreated from the room. “Okay,” Zack said, tanned skin unnaturally pale, “I didn’t need to see that.”

“Yeah,” the blond swallowed, “That was...”

“It was something in the Nibelheim water,” the First continued, both of them retreating hastily back up the stairs, “It made all of you nuts.”

“I didn’t do anything,” Cloud protested his friend’s unfair claim.

“You took on Seph when he was full on crazy,” Zack reminded him. “And now look at Tifa!”

Cloud shook his head. “I’d really rather not.” They pounded up a couple dozen more stairs before he felt the need to add to his statement. “Not that there’s anything wrong with it,” he said. “They’re both consenting adults.” That much had been obvious from what little they’d seen.

“Actually, I think Chaos counts as a multiple of adults,” Zack pointed out.

“True, I think,” Cloud nods agreement with Zack’s assessment. The Chaos who’d been in the room with the small fighter wasn’t the Chaos that Zack had encountered before but it reminded both of them of other parts of Vincent they’d seen. It... he...it, had had Galian’s wings and tail. And the way it had oozed extra arms to hold her in place... that had been pure Hellmasker. Cloud had nearly
run in to rescue Tifa. His instincts had screamed at him that she was in danger. It was Zack who’d held him back, who’d recognized the sounds she was making as pleasure-pain sounds not just pain.

Zack snorted. “Smallest orgy I ever saw,” he said.

Cloud lost it in a fit of giggles. “Hope I never see it again,” he commented.

Then Zack was laughing too because, Odin’s holy balls, that was the weirdest and most disturbing sex the SOLDIER had ever seen—and he’d witnessed a lot of depraved things under the plate—and she’d consented. “Mayor’s daughter,” he gasped out.

“Village princess,” Cloud returned.

“That cowboy outfit?”

They held themselves and each other as the laughter robbed them of breath and strength... and intelligence. And if they cried, at least this time they were tears of mirth and hope, not pain.

They finally managed to settle down enough to return to the room where they’d left the others. 

When Yazoo darted forward, concerned that Tifa and Vincent weren’t with them, Cloud, blushing red as a berry, let Zack respond. “They’re just, ah...” he rubbed a hand through blood-wet hair. “They’re kinda occupied right now.”

Yazoo’s eyebrows went up. “They’re having sex? Tifa and Vincent are having sex on the battlefield?”

“Well, it’s not exactly Vincent,” Cloud murmured but of course the genetically superior clone heard him.

Long lids blinked over stunned eyes before Yazoo recovered his composure. “Did you take pictures for your girlfriend, Commander?” he teased and was rewarded by Cloud’s choke of laughter.

“Are we back to that?” Zack slapped a hand over his face.

Yazoo wasn’t finished: “I told you that post-battle adrenaline makes for great sex.” He stepped in closer, and licked his lips. “We could test out my theory and Cloud could take the pictures.”

Zack frowned at him. “Okay, get ready to have your backside tanned.” He handed his sword over to Cloud.

“You’ll try,” Yazoo jumped back laughing. He laughed until Zack smacked him on the ass with enough force to make him jerk. He stood, dumbstruck, until the SOLDIER lifted his hand for another blow.

“I like this game better,” Zack said with a smirk.

With a squeal worthy of the kid he’d never been, Yazoo took off running. With a whoop, Zack gave chase. It didn’t take long for the two altered warriors to be jumping off walls, bouncing off ceilings, and making enough noise for a platoon.

Cloud made his quiet way over to where Sephiroth and Tseng were standing. He nodded at the dark-eyed Turk before coming to rest next to the General, not quite touching but near enough that they could feel each other’s heat. “Vincent and Ms. Lockhart aren’t with you?” The General wasn’t actually asking the question so much as requesting more information.
“They were... busy,” Cloud responded and knew he was blushing again. “They’ll be up when they’re done.”

Tseng hmm’ed and the General’s eyebrow went up. “We can assume that they took care of Weiss then.”

“I’ll wear out your adrenaline, you little nympho,” Zack yelled from across the room. Yazoo’s husky laugh was the only reply.

“I, uh, didn’t see any sign of anyone else so, yeah, probably a safe assumption.”

“If you managed to look elsewhere,” Tseng said softly. Sephiroth changed his chuckle into a cough but Cloud’s cheeks still went from pink to red.

Behind them the door opened with a quiet shushing noise. Instantly, the three turned to face the possible new threat. Tseng had his pistol aimed and Cloud had first Tsurugi at the ready. A moment later the General waved their weapons down. “Lazard,” he said in recognition. “You got my message.”

“Lazard?” Tseng asked, “Director Deusericus?”

It didn’t look like the pictures of Lazard Deusericus that Cloud remembered from the news when the guy disappeared. In fact, he looked like Zack’s old mentor: Angeal, except not really. Angeal was dark, this guy was white.

“Thank you for sending for me so promptly, General. I didn’t actually expect it.” The not-Angeal said, voice soft and completely not that of a trained soldier.

“Your source within DGS,” Tseng said with a tone of enlightenment. “Deuce.”

Sephiroth’s answer was short; just ‘yes’. It was Lazard who expanded on it. “It didn’t take me long to realize that I’d left one bed of corruption just to end up in another. Except I had no position to protect me in the new one.”

“Your appearance,” the Turk murmured.

“Hollander used my body, my cells, in an attempt to balance Genesis’ mutation with Angeal’s more stable version. However,” he waved a hand over his form, “as you can see, Angeal’s cells were dominant as usual. And I became... just another failed experiment.” Lazard’s smile was sad and wry but without the bitterness he’d shown before his abrupt departure. “I remind myself that I was one of the lucky ones.”

Tseng opened his mouth, perhaps to ask more questions, but before he could say anything Zack was running up to them. “Ang... Angeal?” His little wings fluttered, fingers clutching and tapping. “Angeal?” He stepped forward but Cloud caught him, hand on arm and shook his head.

“Commander... Zack,” Sephiroth corrected himself, “You remember Lazard Deusericus, former Director of the SOLDIER program.” It wasn’t a question.

Zack’s eyes, huge and bright in his pale face, stared at his friend before shifting to the mutated former executive and then back again. “But...”

Yazoo moved to stand beside the First, eyes narrowed at the person who’d upset the dark-haired SOLDIER. When he got a good look at the newcomer his eyes widened in surprise and his mouth spoke without him. “It’s just Lazy Boy.”
“Lazy Boy?” Zack repeated, still dazed.

“Hollander’s pet project,” the clone explained, “He just hangs around, doing nothing. Not even worth experimenting on, according to the Professor.”

“And, whatever ego I had left, just got kicked to the dirt,” Lazard smiled sadly. “However, being so... unremarkable made it easier to move around the facility unnoticed, unwatched. If someone like Hojo doesn’t consider a project worth bothering about, then nobody bothers. Ignoring the cues can lead to rather painful—even terminal—consequences.”

“So Angeal’s not...” Zack’s voice was broken and small. Now Cloud was standing beside him as well as the young clone. They didn’t touch but the support was palpable.

“I’m sorry, Zackary; Commander Hewley isn’t here, just his face.” The altered former-Director turned his attention back to Sephiroth. “We have other concerns, General.”

“What is it?” Cloud felt his General’s attention snap in tight. After that, it only took micro-moments for Zack to put his personal distress aside to focus on whatever news Lazard brought.

“Without the leaders to keep their followers and, um, other creatures, under control, this facility is... imploding, I suppose. Many of the Jenova-based experiments are committing mass suicide so they’re not a concern, but the DGS forces... Weiss was practically a god to them. They wish to avenge his death.” He pushed small square glasses up his nose and Cloud realized that he hadn’t even noticed them before. “They’re killing anyone and anything they come across. In return, Hojo’s staff are trying to use the experiments as protection except the creatures are uncontrollable...”

“You’re saying it’s a riot out there,” Zack simplified. He was already looking at his Buster, checking it for nicks or chips.

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

“We’re going to have to fight our way out?” Yazoo said as he reloaded Velvet Nightmare.

“Uh, probably?”

“Have they tapped into the security systems?” Sephiroth asked, “Is there a self-destruct sequence?”

“Um, no, not yet, and I believe so.”

Tseng went over to the computer control panel and tried to find out what kind of security the facility had, if a breach had been registered, and if the self-destruct sequence had been activated. His fingers moved in a blur over the keyboard and, finally, there was a little scratch of worry between the Wutaian’s brows.

“We should consolidate our supplies,” Cloud suggested, “We went through a lot of stuff.” Yazoo nodded and zipped over to the packs and brought them back to the group.

“How much time do we have before the riot reaches us?” Zack asked.

“I don’t know,” Lazard answered patiently. “It’s not like they’ve got a schedule... or even a plan.”

“What plan? What’s going on now?” It was Tifa, entering the cavernous room with Vincent—back in Vincent’s shape—stalkling along beside her.
“Inmate riot and possible self-destruct between us and the outside world,” Zack quipped in response.

“You mean this isn’t finished yet?”

“Not unless you want to live out your days in this room,” Tseng responded. “The self-destruct feature hasn’t been activated but I can’t block access to it.”

“Can you inject a virus into it, have it eat the program?” Cloud asked from his crouch on the floor. He wasn’t sure where he learned about computer viruses… probably something he’d read when he was younger.

“I’ll accept that as a compliment,” Tseng said calmly, “however I am not Elena and my programming skills are not that versatile. At this point, all we can do is hope that none of the residents dig too deeply into the system and trip the countdown.”

“Not a chance I’m willing to take.” Sephiroth’s green cat eyes were just as calm but they seemed fiercer, harder. “Are the packs ready?”

“I was really hoping for a shower,” Zack said, pulling his blood-tacky shirt away from his blood-sticky skin.

“I second the shower,” Tifa murmured and Cloud blushed as the memory of his friend as he’d last seen her—naked, panting and covered in sweat and other fluids—filled his mind.

He buried his face in the backpacks. “We just have to add anything Tifa and Vincent have…”

It didn’t take long. He handed the last two MREs to Zack because the First’s eyes were still burning with mako power. The nutrient bars he passed out to everyone, except Vincent who waved him away with a murmur about not requiring sustenance. Cloud had never been involved in a riot before. Of course, he’d done crowd control under the plate—all of Shin-Ra’s security forces had done that at one time or another—but he wasn’t nervous. They were a well-armed, well-trained lethal team. There wasn’t much an unorganized rabble would be able to do.

He hoped.

They put Lazard in the centre as, despite his face, he wasn’t a soldier. He wasn’t even a hobbyist and barely knew how to hold a gun. Tseng and Vincent were beside him since they were both trained in body-guarding, and Sephiroth took point as he’d memorized a map of the facility during his brief exploration into the system. The rest spread around the core and they walked out of the body-filled room… into silence.

“Huh,” Zack huffed. “I was expecting something a little more dramatic.”

“I’ll take the quiet,” Tifa responded.

They avoided the elevators, loath to give control over their movement to a system under attack but the stairs were broad and too open. Zack and Cloud, with their smaller wing spans, took to the air to make sure it was clear. They could hear the sounds of battle occurring in the areas beyond the stairs but they didn’t investigate; what was happening out there wasn’t their concern this time. Instead they climbed, and climbed and climbed, steadily and cautiously but not slowly.

Cloud kept an eye on Zack, worried because his eyes were still glowing, softer but still… He wondered just how damaged his friend had been, how much of his mako Zack had already burned through and if—when—he’d start noticing muscle deterioration. Nothing he could do until they
reached someplace with food, lots and lots of food except hope that they’d done all their fighting. If it was peaceful then the SOLDIER could begin to rebuild his mako levels.

For the most part they encountered nothing dangerous, a couple dead bodies just starting to fade, and then a small group of DGS jumped through the swinging doors. The soldiers weren’t facing towards them. In fact it was obvious that they were involved in a running retreat against a stronger foe, shooting their weapons down the hallway. However, once they noticed Cloud and Zack it didn’t take them long to swing their guns around to fire on the two swordsmen.

Cloud was already blocking the shots, protecting Zack as best he could, when the real danger burst through the doors trampling the DGS troops or picking them up and tossing them casually through the wall. It roared and the stairwell filled with sound.

“Shiva’s fucking tits,” Zack gasped, “I haven’t seen one of those guys since Wutai.” Cloud didn’t care where his friend had seen the massive creature, all he cared about was that it was in their way and seemed just a likely to attack them as it had the DGS soldiers, but Zack wasn’t finished talking. “If these guys are like those Vajradhara in Fort Tamblin, then swords won’t hurt them. Magic only.”

Cloud nodded, sheathed Tsurugi and focussed on his materia. He forced the flame out and sent it over to the ogre-looking creature. He was rewarded by a howl and a bash from a fist the size of a small steam shovel that sent him flying into the wall. He turned and managed to absorb most of the impact with only a grunt and a twinge.

“Godsdammedshitfuck,” Zack muttered curses in a continuous stream. A huge hammer flew at the SOLDIER and Zack wobbled up and over the weapon’s arc.

“Watch it, Zack!” Cloud called out, throwing more fire at the huge fighter... thing.

“Me watch it? I’m not the one who got smacked into a wall.” Except, in the next moment, he was. “I know who these things remind me of,” the First said after he’d given his head a shake.

“Those things in Wutai, you said.”

“Yeah, but no, that’s not who I’m thinking of. It was that big guy back at camp. The DGS warrior dude who transformed,” Zack spoke like Cloud had been there.

Cloud rolled his eyes and moved out of the way of Zack’s Blizzaga—which was a cool materia but not very accurate. “I was stuck in the tent,” the blond reminded his friend.

“Oh right. Well, if you’da seen him, you would know that there are a lotta similarities between that guy and this thing.”

“Not helpful, Zack,” Cloud commented and tossed out another Fira. All it seemed to do was annoy the overly-large fighter

It was just as well Yazoo arrived at the landing in a near-silent blur because they were getting their asses pummelled. The young gunman took in the battle with one comprehensive glance: the fact that the two swordsmen weren’t using their blades, the dead soldiers with their guns... He was casting Bolt almost before his body had stopped vibrating from the sudden stop.

“Nice of you to join us,” Zack quipped but Cloud could see that his timing was just a bit off, his coordination lagging just by a moment. It was a very good thing that they had back-up, no matter how long it had taken Yazoo to arrive.
“Scientists with monsters trying to escape troops with guns,” the clone explained shortly throwing more lightning at the Vajradhara.

Between the three of them it didn’t take long to have the huge creature down. Its hammer fell down the stairwell taking out whole flights as the dropped down into the depths. They heard screams and Cloud flew back in a panic but Sephiroth, Tifa and the others were unhurt. Lazard was slowing them down. He’d been a bureaucrat, a politician and a manager. The closest he’d come to exercising had been when he got off the elevator a floor early and took the stairs. The former-Director was gasping and looking pale... or actually paler.

And they weren’t even close to the surface yet.
“We have to switch to the utility stairs on the far side,” Sephiroth informed them when they finally ran out of stairwell.

“Can’t we take the elevator?” Lazard asked. The General had cast Regen on the former director turned spy, and Vincent had added Haste so Lazard was managing to not pass out and to keep up, but he was still breathing hard. There was a fine trembling in his extremities that didn’t bode well for the state of the bureaucrat’s physical reserves.

“Everybody will be trying for the elevators,” Zack pointed out.

“Only those trying to escape,” Cloud argued, “which, from what was said earlier, is just Hojo’s crew of scientists and some guards.”

“Oh,” Zack’s eyes narrowed, “I wouldn’t mind running into them.” His hand flexed on the hilt of his sword.

Sephiroth looked at Lazard. It had taken them at least two days to walk down from the entrance they’d found into the crater and that was without encountering armed resistance. Their escape would be different. In order to exit the facility they’d have to climb all the way to the top; whether stairs, tunnels or elevators, there were likely to be guards, soldiers and creatures that they’d have to fight. If they were lucky, once out they could order a helicopter to pick them up. If they weren’t lucky they’d be hiking back to Chocobo Bill’s… He pushed away thoughts of spending another evening in the hot springs and brought his mind back to Lazard, who looked like a SOLDIER First but absolutely wasn’t, and decided that neither option was viable. Lazard would either be dangerously slow or worse, he’d collapse and have to be carried.

“Since our path takes us close to the elevators, we’ll see if they are functional and accessible,” he decided. There were shoulder twitches and head jiggles that the General interpreted as agreement. He looked at Lazard, still panting, and hoped that both conditions would be true.

They were… once they got rid of the dog like creatures that were busy fighting each other in front of the doors. They all ignored the remains—Zack thought it had been human—that the mutated animals had been fighting over. While they waited for the elevator to arrive, Tseng ran a quick check on the computer console.

“The self-destruct is still dormant,” he announced. “I’ve linked in my PHS so, if it does activate, we will be alerted.”

Zack snorted. “Not that we’ll be able to do much once we’re stuck in the elevator,” he whispered to Cloud.

“It’ll work,” Cloud whispered back. “After everything, I’m not going to let us stumble at the last obstacle.”

“Big words, little man.”

“Eat me, Zack.”

Zack grinned at him and wiggled his eyebrows, “Any time, Spike, because you’re so tasty.” Cloud blushed, especially when he caught Sephiroth’s gaze, hot and amused.
Vincent shifted uncomfortably under his cape. Sexual teasing was not a form of interaction he was familiar with. His family had been far too... restrained. It hadn’t been until he was fourteen that he’d realized that his parents actually had to have had intercourse to have produced children. He’d looked at them, tried to picture them… together. It had been unfathomable and nausea inducing and he hadn’t been able to believe it was true. Then he’d heard of artificial insemination and that was a far more comfortable theory than his mother having sex.

*If I’d been mated with your mother, I would have used a surrogate as well.* Vincent ignored the low level growl that indicated Galian’s agreement.

“Vincent?” Tifa’s voice was filled with concern but the gunman was saved from having to articulate a response by the arrival of the elevator car. It was small for eight adults and, thankfully, too small for private conversations.

“How long will this take?” Zack asked almost as soon as the door closed.

“Oh Gods,” Tifa sighed. “Shoot him now.”

“Hey!”

Sephiroth calculated that they were just over half way when Tseng’s PHS beeped. The Turk keyed it open. “Two minutes,” he warned.

“Not long enough for us to reach the top then,” Sephiroth stated.

“We can fly faster than this thing moves,” Zack said. He’d been saying it all along but that had just been complaining. This was a suggested strategy.

“We’re short one flyer,” Cloud pointed out. “And I don’t think any of us can carry two fast enough to get clear.

Vincent cleared his throat, “Chaos can fly. And he will come out if asked.”

*Can we carry our small warrior,* Chaos asked with a hum. *She clings so nicely to our frame.* Vincent was filled with a sense-memory of having Tifa plastered to Chaos’ body after defeating Omega. He whirled his cloak around himself to hide his body’s response. Chaos laughed.

Sephiroth looked at the former Turk before nodding. “We have a plan.”

“We do?” Lazard asked.

“I will need space for when Chaos emerges,” Vincent stated. He felt prodding in the back of his mind. “He would prefer to carry Tifa, of course.”

“He should probably carry Lazard,” Zack suggested, “as he’s the largest.”

Tifa’s lips twitched and she threw Vincent a teasing look. “Be warned, Chaos is a bit of a lech but I don’t mind: he’s my boyfriend.” She gave the former-Director her most innocent ingénue look and even threw in a girly hip wiggle for effect.

*Do you think we’ll have time—*

‘No!’ Vincent answered.

Cloud and Yazoo had already opened the escape hatch on the ceiling of the elevator car. “You
should go up first,” Cloud told the gunman. Vincent nodded and swarmed up and out the opening. The Corporal didn’t even feel the air move as he passed.

“Who is that guy?” Lazard asked.

“More like a ‘what’,” Yazoo muttered low enough that they could ignore him. When Sephiroth explained that Vincent was the victim of another one of Hojo’s experiments, Lazard nodded his head in understanding and let the subject drop.

“If we leave our packs here we should be able fly faster, right?” Cloud suggested, already shrugging out of his. “Maybe grab a potion or two but that’s it.”

“Good idea,” Zack backed him up. They winced as the red light of Vincent’s transformation bled through into the elevator car. “How we going to organize ourselves?” he asked. “Who takes who?”

“Chaos is taking Lazard,” Tifa said.

*We will take you, my small warrior,* Chaos growled in everyone’s minds. He dipped his horned head into the opening and laughed silently when Lazard backed up into the far wall. He winked at Zack. *Or we will take the little bat... we’ll even hold the sylphic youth.* His gaze travelled over Yazoo and the clone touched his clothes, sure that they’d somehow disappeared from his body.

“Why not—” she started to protest.

“We don’t have time for debate, Ms. Lockhart,” Sephiroth said as he grabbed her around the waist and tossed her at Chaos. There was a squeak of surprise, a roar of excitement then the car rocked as the demon took off with his slight burden. Sephiroth jumped through the hatch. “Zack, throw them up,” he ordered and Zack cupped his hands.

“Right,” he said eagerly to Lazard, “You first.”

Yazoo didn’t wait before jumping out of the elevator car. He was through the hatch almost before the newcomer had moved from his corner. After all he wasn’t a practically useless unaugmented human. When Lazard flew up through the hatch, he told Sephiroth to start flying and he would catch Tseng. Sephiroth gave him an assessing look, followed by a sharp nod and then his wings appeared; big, beautiful, awe—and envy—inspiring wings. Then they were gone in a rush of air.

It seemed like forever before the Turk came through. “How much longer?” Yazoo asked.

Tseng checked his chrono, “Sixty-seven seconds.”

Yazoo looked up at the distant window that was the sky. It looked tiny. “I don’t think that’s enough time.”

“That’s okay, Sprite,” Zack said as he landed lightly beside them. “I have an idea.”

Cloud came through and shrugged his wings out, flicking them to warm up the muscles, “Surprisingly, it’s actually a good idea.” He didn’t bother to dodge his friend’s mock-angry swat. “Yazoo, you’re with Zack since he just got back from being nearly dead. Tseng...” he opened his arms.

“I am larger than you,” Tseng stated, not bragging. “The hold will be awkward.”

Cloud’s eyes narrowed. “Turks are supposed to be adaptable,” he ground out, “so adapt. Zack, stop snickering.”
“Forty-two seconds.”

One second more and they were airborne, flying up the long column of stone and machinery. Cloud could feel the heat of muscle burn already beginning.

“Cloud?” Tseng’s voice held a hint—just a hint—of concern. “They’re pulling ahead.”

“Not surprising.” Cloud answered through gritted teeth but the point wasn’t to reach the top before the explosion; it was to obtain a velocity that matched the elevator car’s so that they didn’t go splat when the bombs detonated and it shot out of the shaft like a bullet. Easy, Zack had said. Cloud snorted; he was sooo gullible sometimes.

From below came a hollow boom that echoed and rolled, gaining in volume and pitch. “Shit,” Cloud muttered. He glanced down quickly; he could see the orange-white of the explosion seeping around the edges of the elevator car. “Shitshitshit.” What had sounded workable in theory seemed a lot stupider in reality.

“Elevator going up!” Zack called from above him. The First sounded excited, which he probably was, but Cloud couldn’t stop thinking that it could still go very, very wrong. He started a countdown in his head, glancing down occasionally to make sure the car’s rate of speed hadn’t changed dramatically.

Closer…closer… A few more seconds…

“Hold on,” he tightened his hold on the Turk and bent his knees. He felt the roof of the elevator car beneath his feet and used his wings and his laboratory-given strength to reduce the impact to nearly nothing. Maybe a bit more than nothing but it was still only a bump and a momentary loss of balance, hardly worth mentioning. Tseng slipped and Cloud adjusted his grip. He’d be bruised, Cloud knew, but that was still better than being turned into a puddle of broken bones and exploded organs. He looked up—Zack wasn’t that far ahead of them—and moved over to one side, balancing precariously on the jittering car. The car was acting like the plug on a bottle of fizzy pop; holding back a lot of pressure. Fire licked around the sides. This was such a bad idea…

Zack landed beside them with a grunt, Yazoo clinging like frost to a window. The car wobbled. “Once we’re out of the elevator shaft,” Zack shouted at him, “all that power will shoot out around the elevator.”

“I know,” Cloud shouted back. “We need to keep the box between us and the flames for as long as possible.”

“It’ll all be in the dismount,” Zack nodded. He looked up and Cloud’s gaze followed his. Sephiroth—hair and coat rippling with the speed of his flight—was only seconds away from joining them on the top of the elevator. Zack whistled sharply. Sephiroth looked down, took in their strategy in a glance, and altered his grip on Lazard just as Cloud had with Tseng. The General angled himself, feathers working to steer him to an empty spot. When the metal car touched his booted feet he just folded his wings and dipped his knees, and that was that: he was stable. The elevator car didn’t even wobble.

“Show off,” Zack muttered.

“How much time ‘til we top out?” Cloud asked.

Sephiroth squinted up into the piece of sky they could see. “Seconds only,” he answered. It was a darkish blue which meant it was either morning or early evening.
“I can’t see Vinny,” Zack said.

“Chaos was already out of the shaft when I started my flight,” Sephiroth responded. “He actually left a contrail behind him.”

“That’s…” Zack voice trailed off.

“Irresponsible,” Cloud spat. “Tifa won’t be able to breathe at those kinds of speeds.”

“Chaos can grow extra limbs, Spike. I’m pretty sure he’ll grow something to cover her mouth and still let her breathe.” Zack was trying to soothe him, Cloud knew that, but the image the First’s words produced in his head made him shudder in horror and blush in embarrassment—he didn’t want to think of what Chaos could grow or where he might stick it.

“The benefit of Chaos going first is that he’s already taken care of whatever covering or equipment was at the top,” Sephiroth pointed out. “And I’m sure that Ms. Lockhart will be unharmed when we see her again.”

“We should angle to the east,” Tseng suggested once their conversation tailed off. “All our intel indicates that Hojo didn’t expand this facility much in that direction so the ground should be more stable.” Zack considered the advice—it was sound—he looked over at his CO and saw Seph looking at him, a question in his eyes: did he agree? He nodded slightly, more a dip of the chin than anything, and the General voiced his support of the plan.

“I think the car is melting,” Cloud announced. “My feet are getting warm.”

“Great,” Zack sighed, “Just fucking great.”

“Ten seconds,” Sephiroth announced. “I’m sure your boots can last that long.”

Zack snickered at his CO’s dry tone. Then he took pity on his friend and cast Ice on the top of the car—not strong though, didn’t want the whole thing to explode or buckle or whatever else it might do under extreme temperatures. Then he prepared himself for the end of the ride; pictured it, tried to imagine how it would feel and what he’d do in response, how his body would react. He tried to imagine as many scenarios as possible knowing it would help when real life took over and blew all their theories and planning out the door.

The First bounced on his feet in anticipation and Yazoo was forced to change his grip. “Watch the hands, Sprite,” he teased, “unless you’re offering yourself again.” His wings shook themselves out, preparing for the end of this little adventure. “You know, I’m not sure this thing is travelling any faster than the elevators in the old Shin-Ra Tower at max speed. Those things could move.”

“I don’t even want to know how you know that,” Tseng commented.

Zack grinned, “I’m sure you already know how I know that.”

Sephiroth cut off the by-play. “Three seconds.”

“Two,” Yazoo whispered.

One…
enjoyed the pull of gravity against muscles that was the result. They also enjoyed scaring the rare bird silly enough to be flying near their path but that was another game.

*Are you well, my mate?* they asked although they could hear her heart beating fast. Her surface temperature was a little cool but that was easily fixed.

“I have officially decided I hate heights,” she spoke into their chest where she had hidden her face when they emerged. They didn’t mind; it made it easier for them to control the air flow so that their mate, lover, prize, could breath in the thin air. “I am never going up in a plane, or a helicopter—or even a tall building—again!”

Chaos roared in laughter and, because they could, rolled them lazily through the sky. The fact that the small warrior held them even tighter was… just a bonus.

The first thing Zack noticed was how cold it was in the outside air. Despite the flames exploding out and around the elevator car, it still cut into him like shrapnel. It must have been hotter in the shaft than he’d thought.

“It’s starting to flip,” Cloud announced and, as one, the three SOLDIERs jumped up and away, wings beating in a desperate attempt to outrace the fireball. It swirled up and around like a living thing, caressing the air, making it burn, before it disappeared, dissolving into wisps of condensation.

Sephiroth was aware of the heat but didn’t feel it. It was as if the heat was an extension of his body and he wondered if this was one of Ifrit’s gifts. SOLDIERs were resistant to fire but not immune. Lazard was sweating and shifting, and the General knew that the heat was affecting him as it would a normal person.

“Nearly clear,” he said to reassure his former director-current ally.

Zack was up and to his left, Cloud just slightly in front and below, which was worrisome. He should’ve insisted on Zack taking the larger Wutaian and given Yazoo to Cloud. Odin was a ground based god whereas Shiva was at home in the air. She would’ve taken care of Zack. Then he remembered the incident when Tseng fell through the ice and decided that this configuration was best after all; he’d just have to keep an eye on the blond warrior…and find a stable landing area as soon as possible.

“Oh thank the gods,” Lazard muttered and Sephiroth realized that the fireball was gone.

“Angle east, as Tseng suggested,” he said and the others followed his instructions easily. They flew in a V—like migrating birds Sephiroth thought but didn’t say. He was in front, cutting the air with his larger wingspan, and Zack and Cloud were flying in his slipstream to lessen their energy use.

“What about Chaos and Tifa?” Cloud asked and Sephiroth was struck anew by how fiercely loyal the Nibelheimer was.

*I am a child of Gaia, little bat.* Chaos’ amused sense of dominance came through loud and clear, also his slightly contemptuous superiority complex.

“He did defeat a WEAPON single-handedly,” Sephiroth conceded. “I can accept that he will feel a
little… smug.” Even so, his wings had an extra snap to their movement for the next several kilometers.

The Northern Crater, though in the same region as the rest of the mountain range, wasn’t really a part of it, having been formed through cataclysm rather than tectonic shift. That obviously hadn’t stopped Hojo from burrowing under the peaks around it. He searched for stable ground and watched avalanches and landslides rolling down the slopes as mountain after mountain settled into a new configuration. There were even ground heaves and small quakes in the foothills as the earth fell into tunnels and labs and storage areas.

It was an impressive amount of destruction, and the effects would reach out from the Northern Continent to affect the entire globe. “Once we land, we must attempt to communicate with Neo-Shinra and the Wutaian government,” he said. “We need to warn the coastal regions.”

“Yes, sir,” Cloud’s voice came back to him. It sounded strained so Sephiroth renewed his search for a safe landing area. Thankfully it didn’t take long.

A wide strip along the coast was relatively unmoving. It was even snow free, kissed by warm trade winds from the south. He dipped lower and knew, without looking that Zack and Cloud were following. Going down was much quicker than going up and it took only seconds for them to land on the tufted arctic grass. Cloud, once he released the Turk, collapsed to his knees, panting.

Lazard did the same but it wasn’t to Lazard that Sephiroth directed his concern. “Cloud?”

The blond waved him off, “I’m good, Sir. Just need to catch my breath.” He knew his eyes would be glowing but no more than Zack’s.

Tseng was already talking into his PHS and Cloud could hear him giving instructions to whoever was on the other end to send out the alerts Sephiroth had ordered so he didn’t have to worry about it. Good, all he wanted to do was breathe. He watched the Turk talking into his phone. He didn’t frown or pace or do anything. At least he looked a little rumpled now, Cloud thought, maybe even a little singed. It reassured the Corporal that the Wutaian actually was human and not some experiment unique in its ability to remain unruffled in any circumstance.

Okay, he was a little more tired than he’d thought because that was totally a stupid thing to be thinking about. There were more important things—

“So how we getting out of here?” Zack asked.

—like that, Cloud smiled and then decided that laying down was a good idea.

“We don’t have the supplies to survive a night out here,” the First finished.

He tucked his wings away and stretched out on his back. It was still light enough to see individual clouds and the sunset was adding brilliant pinks and oranges to them. It was very pretty, especially as he was alive to enjoy it. There was a salty moisture in the air and Cloud knew it was from the waves hitting the shore with abnormal force. He hoped that the warnings for the coasts went out fast enough. They’d worked so hard to save everyone, it would suck to lose a bunch now.

“I have arranged transportation,” he heard Tseng say to the General.

Yazoo laid down next to him, hands clasped serenely over his stomach. “What are you looking at?”

“We made it out,” he explained.

“Hmm,” Yazoo’s smile was audible.

“When will it be here?” Sephiroth asked.


“Not long. It took off when they saw the explosion” Tseng answered.

Yazoo tipped his head. “It looks more like an S-19 assault rifle with optional laser sight than a chocobo.”

“Seriously?” Yazoo hummed his affirmative. Cloud looked at it intently before giving it up—no way did he see a gun. “That one looks like a bush.”

Yazoo disagreed. “It’s a deathclaw, preparing to do its laser attack.” Cloud had only seen pictures of deathclaws; he’d have to take the clone’s word for it.

Zack snorted and sat down, “Trying to teach the sprite the fine art of cloud-watching?”

“Not much else to do until our ride gets here,” Cloud answered. “A starflower,” he pointed out another one. Lazard joined them, fiddling with his clothes until they were just so.

“A fragmentation grenade, point seven seconds after detonation,” Yazoo countered and Cloud could finally hear the teasing in the youth’s voice. Yazoo was teasing him, like Zack did and Tifa… He smiled as a little ball of contentment settled under his breastbone: Yazoo was going to be okay.

“What’s that?” The former director pointed at a large orange-white ball visible through the clouds. Cloud’s smile dropped away.

“That,” Zack responded gravely, “is Meteor.”

“And that is the sound of a helicopter,” Yazoo said happily as he bounced to his feet. “The surface isn’t very comfortable,” he explained, “and I was getting seeds in my hair.”

“We should go find the others,” Tifa suggested.

*They are fine. You don’t need to worry about them,* Chaos assured her. They didn’t mention that they liked the way the strong female clutched at them in her worry—it made her seem very feminine—after all, they may have been reckless but they were not stupid.

“We should go find them anyway,” Tifa repeated, “Especially if they’re, you know, on the ground.”

*Just a few more minutes, my warrior, and then we shall return you to your normalcies.* They felt more than heard Tifa’s soft whine. *You should see the moon from up here, my mate,* they coaxed. *It is a view even the coldest heart would find… exhilarating.*

“Absolutely not going to happen,” Tifa said firmly. She shuddered in emphasis and tightened her grip to a level that would be bone-breaking on anyone else.

Chaos sighed, but one consolation was that their mate was clutching them so tightly they could feel her from crown to toes. She felt… very enticing… *Do you think…*
They watched the approach of a large helicopter decorated with the Neo-Shinra logo. The winds were gusting, first from the west then from the south, and the machine bobbed and jittered but it also flew steadily closer. Sephiroth knew who was at the controls even before he saw the distinctive red hair.

“Reno is flying?” his voice was calm, confident and certainly not shaking.

“I thought the environmental conditions might become unstable upon completion of the mission,” he explained.

“And Reno is the best pilot for unstable conditions.” Sephiroth stared down at the Turk with his inscrutable expression. There was something…

“Exactly.”

Zack snorted. “Considering the self-destruct blew up half the mountain, it was a good call,” he commented from behind them. “Reno’s just the pilot we need for this.”

Sephiroth’s eyes narrowed in sudden comprehension: the day they decided on this mission, Reno had been in Junon assigned, semi-permanently, to Miss Gainsborough yet he had been here, cooling his heels—as the phrase went—waiting for a call that might never have come. It should have been a waste of resources as they would never have needed the talents of Shinra’s favourite red-headed terror if the self-destruct had never been activated.

And Tseng had stayed at the computer terminal for quite a long time…

“It was excellent planning,” the General agreed smoothly. “Although it’s unfortunate that all Hojo’s research and the DGS technology has been destroyed.” Tseng hummed. “I’m sure Neo-Shinra’s science department would’ve liked to have acquired it.”

Tseng’s eyes were placid when they met Sephiroth’s. “It is indeed unfortunate.”

“Wait…” Zack poked his head forward, looking between the two. “Are you saying Tseng activated the self-destruct?”

“Of course not,” Sephiroth said even as his tone indicated the complete opposite.

“Destruction of assets the Board considered of great possible value to Neo-Shinra would not be tolerated,” Tseng added repressively. “I would not risk it.”

“But you would risk destroying something that would harm Rufus,” Zack countered. “And, from everything I’ve heard, he doesn’t need the kind of pressure a recovery of this kind would put on him—since he’s a kinder, gentler corporate dictator now and you want to keep him that way.” The only indication that the First’s comments had hit their target was the slight flush on the Wutaian’s cheeks.

“You know, Tseng, one day he’s going to guess you’re completely besotted with him.” Tseng said nothing; there was barely even a tightening of his jaw. Zack let the subject drop, both because the helicopter was landing—with barely a bump because Reno was a show-off like that—and because Tseng was kind of a friend and the bouncy First never mocked a friend’s emotional pain.

The ground rumbled.
“I think that’s our cue to depart,” Sephiroth said. He ran to the helicopter in a half crouch that should’ve looked awkward but didn’t. He slid the door open and waved the others in. Lazard had to be helped, unable to lift himself that far off the ground, but it was only moments before the General was engaging the door latch and thumping on the pilot’s chair. He strapped himself in and braced himself. This flight would be rough, he knew, and he wouldn’t even be able to blame the pilot.

He was right. Once off the ground, competing air currents tossed the machine around like kupo nuts in Mog House. Up, down, sideways; rinse and repeat then do it all backwards… Even with SOLDIER enhancement, Sephiroth figured they’d have bruises where the safety harness strapped them in.

“It’s gonna take ‘bout ‘n hour to get back to the ship. They had to go out farther so the boat didn’t get thrown into rocks or something.” Reno’s lazy voice sounded excited by the danger. “It’s not gonna be fun… for you, anyways, so you all should strap in and shut up. And don’t forget to use the barf bags, yo.”

“Wonderful,” Sephiroth muttered and crossed his arms across his chest.

“So, Zack,” Cloud said, voice bumping along with the ride, “Chances of crashing this time?” Sephiroth frowned: no need to encourage the red-head.

Zack smirked and slanted a look at Tseng, “Well, Reno’s flying so we’ll only crash if he wants us to.”

“Or if he’s showing off,” Tseng countered.

A plaintive, ‘yo, I can hear you’ came over the head-sets and Zack flashed Cloud a grin. “The engine might fail,” he said as if to say their future crash wouldn’t be Reno’s fault.

“We could get shot at again,” Cloud added. “That always seems to work.”

Just then the ‘copter banked harshly to the right, nearly tipping over on its side; limbs and loose weapons flew around the cabin as Reno fought to regain control—helicopters weren’t designed to fly on their side and they were slipping down toward the churning sea. “I was just kidding!” the Corporal’s voice was plaintive.

“Reno!” Tseng’s voice lashed out in command.

“Huge motherfuckingsonofabitch just shot out of the water, yo!”

“It’s a WEAPON,” Sephiroth said, peering out the window into the sky. “Emerald I think.”

“And there’s another one of the bastards…” Reno announced as he banked the helicopter to the left. It also bounced up nearly two meters but Sephiroth decided it was a result of turbulence rather than piloting.

“That’s Ultima,” Zack stated. “Wow, it’s really booting it. I wonder what’s the hurry?”

Yazoo’s voice pulled their attention in from the outside. “What’s wrong with Cloud?” Sephiroth turned to see a familiar, if unwelcome, blankness on his lover’s features. He reached out a hand but stopped before he made contact. If it were a message from the Planet then he supposed they should hear it.

“The Squire rejected Destiny, the Yearning Ones are gone, and now the Planet’s Jewels gather to
fight the Heaven’s Stone. The Growing Lady’s gift set the Lifestream’s course. The cycle is continuous and the End returns to the Beginning. All will be well,” Cloud’s voice was dreamy and soft and somehow both reassuring and completely disturbing. “The Chosen Ones have done well and have the Planet’s gratitude.”

“Nice to know we did something right,” the First muttered before a wave of… of well-being, for want of a better word, spread through them. Sephiroth felt healed and energized, balanced and calm, peaceful and strong. It reminded him of what he’d often felt in Aerith’s little garden in Junon but magnified by a nearly infinite amount.

“What was that?” Yazoo asked sounding panicked as he hadn’t been when they’d been dropping and jumping like a drunken bee.

“I think that was Gaia saying ‘thank you’,” Sephiroth answered. His attention was still focussed on his blond lover and, as soon as Cloud blinked, he was touching him, murmuring to him. They all politely ignored the exchange except for Reno who snickered then he swore as a particularly hard wind caught the helicopter and forced it to the left. They were quiet after that, although Lazard’s lips were moving in prayers or curses. Sephiroth couldn’t hear and didn’t care. He laced his fingers through Cloud’s and let their joined hands rest on his thigh. He shifted his feet until his ankles hooked around Zack’s who was sitting across from him. This was good. This was right. For the first time in three years, he felt at peace.

“Boat’s in sight,” Reno announced into the noise of wind and machine fighting for control. “Landing in a couple minutes… if the sea stops bouncing it around long enough.”

“Ohay, everybody check your straps,” Zack said. “If you need barf bags, get them now because there probably won’t be time later.”

Yazoo sneered at him, “No one threw up when we nearly turned upside down and fell into the sea.”

“That was a while ago,” he responded, “and landing’s going to be a whole ‘nother ball of wax.” Zack smiled because, shit yeah, they were nearly done, nearly home: land on the ship and the next stop was Junon where a certain little cutie was waiting for him. Then Cloud kicked him… hard. “Hey!” he protested.

“Don’t jinx this, idiot.” Cloud frowned at him, eyes fierce. Zack stared down into them and thought that Cloud looked like an aggravated kitten, which was a sad statement about a guy who had wolf DNA. Following impulse he loosened his harness, leaned over, and gave that stubborn bow mouth a kiss.

“Whatever happens,” he said, “we’re gonna be fine.” Because they were free, because they were together, because they were world-saving badasses. Just because.

And Cloud smiled back for the exact same reasons.
“Have you found them yet?” Tifa’s face was still buried in Chaos’ broad chest.

*Were we looking for them?* because they hadn’t been.

“Gods, yes please,” she gasped. “I just need to put my feet on something solid.”

Chaos didn’t want to land where they would have to let go of both their lover, partner, mate, and of themselves. Their host would take the body back and they would be relegated once again to being a voyeur in someone else’s life. This—this flying, soaring, being—was much better.

‘Chaos,’ said a quiet voice inside their head, ‘this isn’t about you. Tifa is a creature of the Earth. Titan chose her as his avatar,’ Vincent pointed out. ‘She is not meant for the air and every moment she spends away from the dirt and the rocks is not a treat for her as it is for you.’

The demon listened to their host’s words, examined them and, unfortunately, could admit they were reasonable and logical. They growled in rejection of logic and reason.

‘Chaos!’ Vincent’s voice was sharp. ‘You are torturing her and it won’t be much longer before she never forgives any of us for this.’

Ah.

That argument Chaos could appreciate completely. *Don’t worry, my small warrior, we are headed there now.*

The helicopter heaved. The helicopter jumped. The helicopter bobbed and wobbled and almost spun but it did, eventually, land on the big H painted on the surface of the carrier. That didn’t, however, stop the world from heaving, jumping, or from bobbing and wobbling because that’s what the sea was doing to the big ship. It took a crew of twenty, using robotics and steel hawsers to secure the ‘copter to the deck. Getting the rotor blades secured took even longer but it had to be done or they risked decapitation. By the time it was safe for them to exit, Yazoo appreciated Zack’s comments about vomit bags more than he had when he first said it. The clone’s stomach hadn’t liked being stuck in a flimsy aircraft sitting on an unknown surface that wouldn’t stop moving.

It was better once they were allowed out. Being able to see the shifting sea made it easier to accept the impact it had on his body. Yazoo took a deep breath. It was filled with water and salt and bitter acidity that reminded him of the lab he’d been grown in. The sky was blurred yet sharp with the last of the daylight. It gave the roiling sea the look of teeth breaking though a mouthful of fresh blood

“So Reno got us down safely,” Zack teased his CO. “You going to kiss his feet or just thank him?”

“Kissing… feet is why I have a Second-in-Command,” Sephiroth shot back. Cloud snickered and Zack grinned ruefully. A slim figure in white approached them across the pitching deck: Rufus Shinra, looking wind-blown and elegant despite the patch covering his left eye.
“What’s with the patch?” Zack softly asked the General.

“I told you he was injured when DGS collapsed the Shin-Ra Tower,” Sephiroth responded just as quietly.

“Thought that was it but wasn’t sure,” Zack shrugged. “The Rufus I remember was a spoiled, over-dramatic diva who would’ve worn a patch because he thought it looked badass. I mean… look at the outfit he’s wearing now.” Sephiroth had to concede the point had merit—whites in a war zone was impractical—but he also understood the young president’s insistence on wearing his trademark style was a way of exerting control over a situation that was, in all ways, completely out of his control. He did the same thing by maintaining his hair at its impractical length.

Behind them Reno exited the ‘copter with a shout heard over the crashing sea. Automatically, Cloud and Yazoo turned to assess the possible threat.

“I had to do some funky manoeuvres, yo,” the red-head drawled at the crew who’d be moving the helicopter below deck. “So I’ll be coming down later to check her over.” He was already doing a check on it, running hands and eyes over stress points.

Cloud frowned; he recognized their pilot. He had an image of the red-head in a kitchen filled with food standing in a clump of Turks and Zack who had his wings out—so that part was imagination. Still, best to be sure. He placed a hand on the First’s arm. “Zack,” he said softly, “Have I ever met Reno before?”

Zack watched the Turk slouch his way across the bouncing deck. “I never introduced you,” the SOLDIER answered before raising his voice and striding across the deck toward the wiry Turk. “Reno! You nutjob. It’s good to see you!”

“Hey, hero-man,” a one-sided smile slide up on thin lips, “Couldn’t let you have all the glory. I need my year-end bonus, yo.” The two men didn’t hug or anything wimpy like that but Reno raised his fist and Zack bumped it before they thumped each other on the shoulder. They couldn’t look any more different. Zack was tall and wide, with black hair tanned skin and bright eyes. The Turk, Reno, was a lot smaller, about Cloud’s height, whip-thin and just as deadly. He moved with a liquid fluidity that reminded him of Yazoo.

Yazoo, who was standing right beside him staring at the Turk with his mouth a little open and his eyes a little glazed.

“Yazoo?” he prompted but the youth said nothing, just swallowed. “Yazoo!” he gripped Yazoo’s shoulder and broke him out of his trance. Blue cat eyes turned to stare at him and Cloud thought he now had an image to match the phrase ‘thunderstruck’. “You okay, Yazoo?” he asked because the teen’s cheeks were flushed a little.

Yazoo turned to look at Zack and the Turk. “Look at that hair,” the clone said, “And those eyes. And… what are those marks on his cheeks? And did you see the way he moved?”

Oh, Cloud thought. Ohh…

“You know he’s a Turk,” Cloud warned because that’s what big brothers did, right? “They don’t have much of a life outside of Shin-Ra and the President.”

Silver eyebrows went up. “They are forbidden to have relationships?”

“I don’t know,” the Corporal answered honestly. “Probably don’t see many people other than, y’know, other Turks so they don’t have many chances, is all. Plus they have to be discreet.”
“I can be discreet,” Yazoo breathed. He tipped his head and his lips quirked up. “He looks very flexible, don’t you think.”

Cloud decided that the red-headed Turk probably needed more protection than his adopted brother. “If you’re interested, you should go over there,” he encouraged Yazoo with a hard shove in the small of his back, “Zack will introduce you.”

“I will,” Yazoo said with narrowed, predatory eyes and Cloud watched as he prowled closer to where Zack and the Turk were still swapping stories. He shook his head in sympathy for poor Reno.

“So did you collect your winnings from Rufus yet?” Zack asked his friend.

Reno snorted, “Not my job to collect your pay, yo. Don’t you zombie army types have to follow the chain of command?”

“Like corporate assassins don’t.” Reno just grinned because neither of them had ever been good at the whole ‘taking orders without question’ thing.

“I hear you got wings,” the Turk said as casual as if he were asking if Zack got a new car.

For a moment the SOLDIER didn’t know how to respond to that. “Um, yeah,” he said, hands running nervously through his hair. “How’d you…” his voice drained away. Odd, he’d never thought how the rest of his friends would take his ‘additions’. He’d gotten used to the group’s casual acceptance of each other’s oddities. “How’d you hear?” he asked peering anxiously at his once and possibly future friend.

Reno shrugged, a sinuous movement that travelled all up his body. “Turks, it’s what we do,” he reminded Zack and the First thought that might be all he got but, with an odd grimace, Reno continued. “Funny thing… I used to have dreams about hanging out with you in Aerith’s old church, yo, and you’d always have wings, little bat wings with fingers that wiggled at me.” There was a faint flush on the Turk’s cheeks. “Silly, I know but… they kinda stuck in my mind, so then I heard you’d developed wings I, uh, couldn’t help but wonder.”

“You dreamt of my church?” Reno’s eyebrows went up. Zack coughed and waved it away. “Yeah, I got wings,” he said and, just like that, they were out and waving happily at the Turk.


Before he could finish his question, Yazoo sidled up to the SOLDIER and leaned into him even as he kept his blue cat-eyes on the red-head. “Zack,” he said, voice husky, “who’s your friend?”

Zack was glad of the interruption. “Hey, Sprite,” he chirped overly cheerful. “This is Reno, no last name. Reno, this is Yazoo, also no last name.”

“Yazoo,” Reno tapped two fingers to his forehead before he frowned. “Yazoo… I know that name…”

“One of the clones Hojo grew from Sephiroth’s cells. We ran into him and his brothers in the Cetran capital.”

Reno’s eyelids narrowed even more as he processed the brief sketch Zack had given him and compared it to the files he’d skimmed back in Junon. “Only Yazoo?” he asked.
“Well,” Zack glanced down an apology at the silver-haired youth. He needn’t have bothered; Yazoo’s attention was focussed on Reno.

“I’m the only one that survived,” Yazoo supplied calmly.

“I turned him into a frog,” Zack said unthinkingly, still watching his young friend. Yazoo coloured, frowned and dug an elbow into the SOLDIER’s side hard enough to push the air out of his lungs with an oomph.

“Sephiroth adopted me,” Yazoo said trying to smooth over the embarrassing bit, “as kind of a brother.”

Reno threw a glance at the big First, “That so.”

“But of course I can’t live under his wings forever,” Yazoo continued. “I need to learn how to be… independent.”

“You do?” Zack asked because this was the first he’d heard of it.

The clone ignored him. “Tseng has invited me to join the Turks.”

“He has?” Zack’s voice was louder this time. Yazoo ignored that as well.

“ Could I ask you some questions?” The clone was leaning closer to the red-head, leaning in like he wanted to smell him. Reno’s glance toward the SOLDIER was a bit more confused this time.

“About what it’s like to be a Turk,” Yazoo clarified.

“I guess, but I’m not the best one to ask, yo,” Reno answered, “I’m not good at the whole discipline thing.”

Yazoo inched away from Zack’s side, closer to Reno. “Oh, I’m very good at discipline… and discretion. I’ve heard that Turks don’t have sexual relationships except with other Turks. Is that true?” There was no misinterpreting the reason behind the clone’s question, and Reno’s jaw dropped and his cheeks changed colour enough to clash with the narrow stripes on his cheekbones.

It took him several tries to close his mouth and get saliva back. It took several more seconds before he managed to growl out some words. “If you don’t stop fucking laughing, Fair, I’m going to put molasses in your shampoo.”

Tseng was already standing beside his boss, whispering in his ear when Cloud joined them. The way Rufus’ eyes flicked over the group, lingering on Lazard, the soldier knew the Turk was updating the President on the events in the crater. Sephiroth stood beside the former-director, confident but somehow alone. A couple quick steps and Cloud was back beside the General—his General—and he felt more than saw Sephiroth’s shoulders relax. A gust blew him left, another pushed him back but he easily kept his balance on the heaving deck. He could almost feel his wings flicking and adjusting with every shift. It was kind of cool actually.

The President was talking to Lazard, “Once General Sephiroth briefed us on your condition I put people on it, trying to reverse engineer what Hollander had done.”

“Anything?” the former director turned traitor-victim-spy asked.

“There are some theories but, unfortunately, the only way to test them is on you.” The President’s voice was filled with harsh understanding and Cloud remembered what Sephiroth had said about
him being injured. Rufus Shinra had probably spent lots of time in hospitals and labs, enduring how many procedures and rounds of Cure. It was never pleasant to be experimented on.

Lazard sighed. “I will think about it.” He gave a little huff of breath, “I’ve looked like this for so long I don’t even remember what I looked like before.”

Rufus’ face hardened. “I do.” He reached out and grabbed Lazard’s arm. “I swear to you, I didn’t know. I didn’t know I had a brother.” A brother? Cloud glanced at Sephiroth and Tseng for clues but both their faces were impassive. “If I had known—”

“You could have done nothing,” Lazard stated calmly. “You were a child, both spoiled and ignored.” There was a particularly violent roll of the large ship. Most of the people on deck had to jump-hop to catch themselves on the unstable surface. Many of them fell anyway.

“Mr. President,” Tseng said clearly. “If I may be excused, there is something I need to do.”

“Now?” Rufus asked him, surprised. Tseng nodded once. Pale blue eyes narrowed and Cloud knew the President was going to ask why. Tseng stared back, calm and implacable, and Cloud knew the Turk wouldn’t answer. Rufus realized it too. “You believe it to be important?” Rufus asked instead of whatever he’d originally planned to say.

“I do.”

Rufus considered the request, considered Tseng who looked rumpled and a little unnerved. “Do what you need to, Tseng. I trust your ability to prioritize.”

With a nod and a quick, almost nervous glance at his audience, Tseng moved to the railing. He didn’t bother going any distance because he was aware that most of the people on deck would be able to hear him and would listen in. Well, Cloud couldn’t say anything. He fully intended to watch. A glance at his General showed him that Sephiroth had some idea what was going on. He almost felt the string that the Jenova-infused swordsman threw out to Zack. He certainly felt Sephiroth give it a little tug pulling his SiC’s attention to them.

Tseng stood a moment at the ship’s railing before he removed the band from his hair, clasped his hands together, palm to palm, fingers flat, and bowed his head. It was a Wutaian obeisance that the soldier had never seen Tseng give to anything or anyone.

Cloud felt Sephiroth’s awareness sharpen and he automatically responded by snapping to attention. Lazard noticed his movement and started to comment. “Wha—” he managed before a sharp flick of the General’s hand cut him off. Even Zack and Yazoo joined them silently. Reno wasn’t as quiet but his “Holy shit,” was nearly silent and he stilled as well.

Tseng took one last breath then bowed, formally and deeply, to the ocean. “Leviathan-sama, wa kami hataeshinaki,” Cloud heard him say.

It was followed closely by Zack’s translation: “Leviathan, the never-ending god.”

He bowed again, touching hands to lips. “Watakushi no seikatsu no itadakimono, Leviathan-sama ga mottomo fukai kansha o shimasu.”

“For the gift of my life, I give thee deepest gratitude.”

Another bow, hands touching heart. “Watakushi no teki no shōri, Leviathan-sama ni kenkyo o hyoushimasu.”
“For victory over my enemies, I give thee humble tribute.”

This time Tseng’s bow took him to his knees. He leaned forward on the tossing deck and touched his forehead to the surface, making himself completely vulnerable. “Anata no chie to keitaku ni Anata no tegara ni chikaru o agemasu.”

“May your wisdom and grace strengthen me in your service.”

“Arigatou, Leviathan-sama, wa kami hateshinaki,” the Wutaian said.

“In front of them, Tseng kept his head down, waiting to be released from his prayer.

There was a rumble through the deck of the ship, a creaking groan that had the sailors scrambling for emergency stations. The group on the deck didn’t move. Rufus’ eyes were glued to his Turk, watching him kneel in supplication. Both Sephiroth and Zack had their heads bowed respectfully. Reno, although not in any kind of formal stance, was quiet and still. Both Yazoo and Lazard were looking between them all, confused. Cloud was watching the ocean, watching the Wutaian god’s domain.

The ship creaked and rolled. Clouds gathered and lightning hit the water; one, two, three times in quick succession. From under the water, from the depths of the sea, slid a massive serpent. It leapt up, pointed beak open and screaming its power into the world above. Its scales were the colour of the sea and the stormy sky, changing, shifting, never still. It arced up, small wings fluttering, then it twisted around on itself, flowing back down in a smooth unending motion. Its head twined around its body in a dizzying spiral, and then, without a splash, it entered the ocean in practically the same spot it had left it.

The ocean that was now miraculously calm.

“Holy shit,” Reno breathed out. It was a sentiment that Cloud echoed internally.

“Rami-sama, arigatou,” Tseng said before he lifted himself from the deck of the ship. He ignored his wet pants and walked calmly back to stand at Rufus’ side.

Rufus flicked a glance over the Wutaian’s compact form. “So now I guess I have to share you,” he said accusingly.

“Yes, sir,” was Tseng’s placid response.

Rufus was quiet, only the rapid rise and fall of his chest gave away the strength of his emotions. “It’ll be worth it, I guess, since you came back safely. And successfully, of course,” he added.

“Thank you, sir,” Tseng replied.

The President glared at him, “Just because you’re the avatar for your God, don’t think you outrank me, Tseng.”

Tseng’s lips twitched. “Of course not, sir.”

“Does this mean you can keep the rain away when I’m on stake-out?” Reno asked seriously, so seriously everyone knew he was teasing.

Most of the people on deck turned to stare at him but, whatever rebuke the Turk’s irreverent
comment would have earned him was forgotten as a red-white light streaked toward them through the clearing skies. Once again, sailors were scrambling over the deck but this time it was to battle stations.

*Hello, my little bat.*

“STAND DOWN!!”

Zack’s voice easily cut through the noise of running feet and the alarm siren. It froze the sailors in place long enough for Chaos to reach the ship safely. He halted in a scream of displaced air. Then he stepped delicately onto the deck and revealed Tifa cradled gently in his arms. Cloud counted five before they retracted and the small fighter was deposited gently onto the deck. She wobbled. Instantly Zack’s hand was on her elbow steadying her.

“Oh, thank the gods,” Tifa moaned. “Something solid.”

Chaos took a step backward. He flared his wings and roared at the sky as the red energy built around him, growing until it was a cloud that he could hide behind.

“Cover your eyes,” Sephiroth instructed. There was a flash, a thump and, when Cloud opened his eyes Vincent was back, lying on the deck curled under his cloak. Tifa wasted no time getting down beside him but she didn’t do much, just checked his pulse and his temperature before sitting back to wait his return to consciousness.

“Ms. Lockhart,” Sephiroth said, “It’s nice to have you back.”

She smiled weakly, still pale from the flight. “Thank you, General. It’s nice to be back.” Cloud watched as she absently stroked the surface of the carrier. He was pretty sure she wasn’t even aware she was doing it.

Armed sailors were running across the deck, running towards the downed Vincent. Sephiroth lifted his chin and Zack, Cloud and Yazoo formed a wall between them. Rufus had already raised his hand stopping the advance.

“President Shinra,” Sephiroth said into the sudden quiet. “Ms. Lockhart you already know. However, allow me to introduce Vincent Valentine formerly of the Turks… and my father.” The silence suddenly weighed twice as much. Not by so much as a flicker did Rufus reveal any surprise or discomfort. The Shinra intelligence service was as efficient as ever, Cloud surmised, or the young President was trained very well. Maybe both.

“Tifa,” he said, “as always, the pleasure is mine. Valentine, welcome back.”

“I am not returning to Shin-Ra Power Company,” the growly voice was faint but firm.

“As it no longer exists that’s hardly an issue,” Rufus responded smoothly. He flicked a glance as Tseng who dipped his chin. “And this is a conversation for another day. Right now, what everyone needs is food and rest.”

“Showers,” Lazard said and Tifa moaned agreement.

“A change of clothes,” Zack added, plucking at his shredded uniform shirt, still tacky with blood. Rufus smiled and gestured towards one of the reinforced doors. “It’s all available downstairs.”
They spent an hour devouring everything the galley could put in front of them. Even Vincent had eaten as long as the dish hadn’t contained meat. Rufus sat with them, chatting casually, updating the group on events that had no strategic or military significance whatsoever. Meteor was still in the sky but they were taking this time to enjoy being alive and well fed—very well fed. Rufus’ galley chef would have been right at home in the best five-star hotel in old Midgar.

After the meal, the President left taking Tseng with him and the boat’s Senior Chief had showed the team to their various quarters. Vincent and Tifa were bunked down in their shared stateroom and Tifa had moaned her desire for sleep. The much-altered gunman was probably perching not sleeping, Cloud thought with a smile.

Yazoo had originally been given a room of his own but Zack told the Senior Chief that the young fighter would be staying with him, a simple statement that had relieved Yazoo’s instinctive fear of being alone. The Senior had nodded easily and, with a couple quick commands, the First was given his own large state room. One that also adjoined Cloud and Sephiroth’s of course, just in case. Cloud couldn’t help but wonder if the ship’s gossip would have them all piling in one of the beds for an orgy and how long it would take for the story to make it to the mainland? Would any of them care that Zack and Yazoo were spending their evening with Reno?

Actually, from what Zack had told Cloud, Yazoo was trailing behind Reno and Zack was following them both because watching Reno try not to appear completely freaked by the young warrior’s attention was the most entertainment he’d had since Cloud had faced down a chocobo.

So now it was just he and the General in their large, large room, with the soft, soft bed and the full stomachs and they were clean and safe and Cloud was starting to drift as he waited for Sephiroth to emerge from the shower. Cloud had offered to, um, help him wash his hair but one look at the shower stall—generous by ship standards but still freaking tiny—had put an end to that plan. Instead, he’d changed into the sleep pants provided. They were smooth and silky and definitely not security force issue. He’d pulled back the coverings and laid himself out on the bed and waited and waited… and wai—

It was the almost purr that pulled him out from his sleep. A soft, continual hum that rumbled through his chest.

‘I don’t have any cat DNA,’ he thought muzzily and then he caught the scent and smiled. He didn’t have any cat, but Sephiroth did and the General was busy licking and nipping just about every centimetre of skin on his chest. Cloud approved of this so it seemed logical to lift a sleep-heavy hand to that wonderful silver hair and stroke though it. Maybe, his brain thought, the General will purr louder.

“I am not purring.” Cloud’s eyes opened wide in shock, his heart kicked into fourth gear. “I am enhancing your sexual experience by providing aural stimulus.”

“I said that out loud?” he asked horrified.

Sephiroth raised his head and looked up at him. “No, but your thoughts were easy to deduce as soon as you started petting me.” Cloud let out his breath in a huff of relief. They really didn’t need another Zack. “Now,” the General instructed, “I shall continue with my activities and you shall continue to lie there and enjoy them.” He bent his head and placed those sculpted lips near Cloud’s nipples. You may continue to run your hands through my hair.”

Cloud’s eyebrows went up. Somehow that wasn’t the reaction he’d expected from the world-famous swordsmen. It was odd, despite the gaps in his mind, he could remember the stories that had gone around the trainee hall; how the General had broken an intern’s wrist for touching his...
hair. Not once, since he’d claimed Cloud three years ago in a small mountain inn, had Cloud ever seen any sign of that. Actually, it seemed to him, that Sephiroth loved having his hair played with; that he enjoyed having Cloud pull it around himself so he was covered with its texture and its scent. But maybe he was one of the privileged few.

And it was a privilege.

It was a privilege and a joy and an honour and a turn on like Cloud could hardly stand. But the General was doing all the work and he was just lying here. “I should…” Sharp teeth nipped and he sucked in his breath.

“You should just lay there, Corporal, and let me play.” Hands ran down his body and Cloud lifted himself to press back, to intensify the contact. The heat of the man…

Sephiroth chuckled. “Such a sensual little creature, you are Cloud. How did my luck bring you to me?”

Cloud thought the question should go the other way but he couldn’t speak, not with Sephiroth’s talented lips sucking on the tender flesh just under his ribs. Long fingers with short, little nails were lightly running over his collarbone, scratching down his arms, rubbing up the insides of his thighs.

Oh yeah, he could get used to this.

“You look very smug, Cloud,” Sephiroth cooed, “Perhaps you think you’re the lucky one?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Cloud’s voice was lazy, lost in the sensations. He stretched lazily.

“Perhaps, Cloud,” he breathed over the sensitive skin of Cloud’s hip. “You know what they say about fortune favouring the bold…” and that mouth, that beautiful mouth, swooped down on his erect penis and swallowed it whole.

Cloud jerked and cried out. His hands tightened automatically. A hot, wet tongue licked and twirled. Carefully covered teeth scraped and pressed. And there was sucking… and humming… and Cloud knew he wouldn’t be able to last long. He could feel his orgasm building like electricity in his spine.

Then Sephiroth let him slip out of his mouth with a little lick. Cloud whined lightly.

“Of course, fortune can be fickle,” Sephiroth purred and smirked at the blond. His eyes gleamed with pleasure. His nails scratch-scratch-scratched over Cloud’s pale flesh bringing the nerve endings to tingling life.

Cloud swallowed, wide eyes stared at Sephiroth’s narrowed ones. “Sir?”

Fingers dug into his hip. “There’s also the rule about… paying the piper.”

“S-sir?”

“My name, as I have oft told you, is Sephiroth,” the General stated, “Let’s see if you can learn to use it.”

Cloud discovered that the threat in his General’s voice was real. As a trained warrior, Sephiroth knew the location of every vulnerable area, every nerve bundle, every sensitive spot on the human body. As his lover he knew when and how to touch, press, bite, scratch, kiss, suck, lick and blow on each and every one of them. Time after time he played with Cloud’s body, forcing him right to
the edge of completion…and then backed off when the young blond didn’t call his name, or swatted his erection lightly in punishment when Cloud called out his rank instead.

It was a game.

It was an excruciating game of erotic torture that Cloud knew he’d win even when he lost, for he would lose. Eventually, he’d call the General by name and Sephiroth would let him cum. Even better, he’d bury himself deep in Cloud’s body, thrusting to completion and leaving that small part of himself behind.

Cloud moaned thinking about it.

“You know what you have to do, Cloud,” Sephiroth purred at him. He had three fingers inside the Corporal now, twisting and stretching…and teasing, and his face was filled predatory enjoyment.

“S-sir, yes, sir,” Cloud answered and fingers curled and teeth closed and Cloud called out in delicious agony.

Oh yes, Cloud would lose…but not just yet.

"Do you not like sex with other males?"

Reno coughed in surprise and Zack laughed at him, so Reno tried to hit him but Zack dodged because he was expecting it. “Mother’s tits, kid, what kind of question is that to ask a complete fucking stranger?"

They were in the large hanger underneath the deck watching as Reno checked out his ‘copter. He’d had the engine cover up until moments ago. It was down now or else he’d’ve banged his head on it and Zack would’ve really had something to tease him about.

Yazoo blinked his blue cat eyes at him in confusion. “It is because you are unknown to me that I must ask. If I knew you, I’d already know the answer to my question so I wouldn’t need to ask it.” The Turk didn’t respond except to stare so Yazoo helpfully added “Sephiroth said that it was always acceptable to ask a question.”

Zack took pity on his Turk friend and gave him an out. “Didn’t say anything about having to answer though.”

Reno looked at him but it wasn’t a look of gratitude. It was more internal, as if he were turning thoughts over in his brain. “Why me?” he finally said. “If you can give me an answer to the question that makes sense, then I’ll answer yours.”

Yazoo took his time thinking out his response. His brow furrowed and his mouth pursed, and his eyes paled as he looked inside himself. Then the young fighter dipped his head and swayed, setting his long hair flowing gracefully. His eyes travelled all over Reno, feet to hands and all parts in between, before settling on his face. “You are the most vibrant being I have ever interacted with. To you, life should be gulped down, enjoyed. Not examined, dissected or obsessed over. I have lived with dark people all my life, but you bring colour everywhere you go. That attitude… pulls at me.”

Reno blushed painfully bright, but Zack easily refrained from making fun of him. Yazoo’s assessment had been too earnest, too bare to mock.

“Why not Zack, here?” the Turk protested. “He’s got the same attitude.”
Zack is… close,” Yazoo agreed. “But his time in Hojo’s lab has given him darkness, an anger that dims his colours. Besides, he is already claimed.”

“Hey!” Zack’s protest was half-hearted.

“And if I were claimed?” Reno asked.

Yazoo closed the distance between them in less than a blink. He put his face close to the red-head’s neck and sniffed long and loud behind his ear, over his chest to his arms. “You’re not. You have a partner, someone you work closely with, but you don’t share your body with him.”

Reno smiled, “You can tell that from sniffing my ‘pits yo?” Yazoo opened his mouth to answer but the Turk waved him quiet. “You answered my question—weirdly but honestly—so it’s my turn to answer yours. Not liking sex with guys isn’t the reason I’m dodging you. I don’t do sex with strangers.”

“But—” Yazoo tried to interrupt but Reno glared at him.

“I like sex, *good* sex. But good sex requires vulnerability, and vulnerability requires trust. I don’t know you, so I don’t trust you so we’re not having sex.”

As he’d spoken, the clone’s face had grown more still, more closed off—more like it had been back in the Cetran capital, Zack thought. He swayed, letting his hair drop in front of his eyes, hiding them. “I understand.”

“I don’t know yo,u yet,” Reno said over him. It immediately brought Yazoo’s head back up, eyes focussed hopefully on his face. Zack started to smile; he had a pretty good idea what was coming. “You become a Turk and *prove* to me that you can be trusted, and we’ll see, yo. That means keeping your mind on the job and out of my pants. That means having your partner’s back even if your partner isn’t me. That means not risking anyone’s life because you’re jealous of the time they spend with me. You understand that, Yazoo?”

The clone nodded.

“And if you do become a Turk that doesn’t automatically mean that we *will* become lovers, just that we *might*. You get that too?”

Another nod.

“Now,” Reno finished wiping the grease off his hands. “You say you want to be a Turk. Let’s see what you got.” And with just that short warning he kicked out with his leg aiming at the side of Yazoo’s head. The clone bent backwards, avoided the kick, and turned the move into a graceful backflip that nearly clipped the red-head’s jaw in retaliation. Reno moved ahead, right fist already moving. Yazoo blocked it, caught it, and swung with his free hand. Reno dipped and slid and suddenly he was standing behind the silver-haired fighter and both his arms were free.

Zack whistled in appreciation and backed out of the danger zone. Having watched Yazoo spar with General Sephiroth, he had a pretty good idea who would win if this were a real fight. It wasn’t, not really. Didn’t mean that either of the participants took it easy on the other. At one point, Reno flew through the air, doing a slow flip, to land on all fours. Next time he went flying, he didn’t even do that, just pancaked onto his stomach and slid under the tail of a helicopter.

The SOLDIER watched Reno’s face as he pulled himself to his feet and knew that Yazoo was doing his case more good than harm by kicking the Turk’s ass. It was, he thought with a chuckle, a very odd kind of courtship.
Tifa slept, curled up into Vincent’s side with one hand draped possessively over his thigh. Vincent—and all his parts—stood guard over their lady’s rest, unmoving and eternally alert.

If Chaos chose to make comment and suggestions, Vincent chose to ignore them.

“Sephiroth! Sephiroth please…”

If the bed hadn’t been bolted to the ship’s steel flooring, the General thought smugly, then his little blond would probably have shaken it hard enough to cause the walls to dent. He watched in contented victory as Cloud’s face smoothed out, as his muscles spasmed and relaxed. He felt Cloud’s body clutch and release and he let himself go.

“Oh gods,” his lover gasped. “I think you killed me.” His lips were quirked in a satisfied smile and his eyelids were drooping in post-coital exhaustion.

Sephiroth chuckled and the movement sent small aftershocks running through the Corporal’s body. “Is that a compliment?” he teased.

Cloud was already drifting. “Oh absolutely, sir. Absolutely.” Sephiroth gave up. Cloud had won and he had lost because the corporal would call him whatever he wanted.

Of course, he could keep trying to train him otherwise…

With that thought he realized it was a win all around and he fell asleep with a satisfied smile.

-Wake up, my warriors, and see what you have wrought -

It whispered through their minds, a soft voice, gentle but insistent. To Zack it was Aerith’s voice. To Tifa it was her father’s. To each who had been there at the Cetran capital, who had fought to give Sephiroth time to complete the ritual or to stop him, it was heard as the voice of one admired or loved and missed.

-Wake up, wake up-

“Mo-om, five more min’tes, promise,” Cloud huffed and snuggled closer to his nice electric blanket that was keeping him so warm and smelled so enticing. His blanket wrapped him closer in return.

-Wake up, my warriors, the last battle has yet to be fought -

*Did you hear that, my immortalis?* Chaos’ voice was eager. *It is not over yet.* Chaos might not have been a WEAPON, but he did like a good fight.

‘The planet’s WEAPONs go to fight Meteor, I imagine,’ Vincent’s reply was meant to depress that
eagerness. It worked. Too well in fact, because now it felt distinctly like Chaos was pouting.

‘Perhaps, once the battle is over and if the planet survives, we might be able to interest Tifa in a quick spar,’ he offered. He let the memory of adrenaline pumping through sweaty bodies, of chests heaving as clothing was hastily stripped, run through his mind.

*Ooo. Excellent plan, my host,* Chaos cooed. *I see you’ve learned something from me after all.*

Beside him Tifa stirred.

-Wake up, wake up-

“Yo, Zack!” Reno called, snapping his fingers. “Where’d you go?”

The trio had retreated to Zack’s room so that Reno could get some off-the-books first-aid after his little throw down with the genetically-designed super-fighter. Then they’d stayed up talking and telling stories. Yazoo couldn’t join in the reminiscing, so he’d taken up an elegant reclining position on Zack’s bed that, deliberately or by accident, was enticing. He watched Reno more often than not, but it wasn’t the heavily intense stare of before.

“You didn’t hear that?” the SOLDIER asked. From Reno’s blank return gaze the answer was ‘obviously not’.

Yazoo had already risen to his feet. “We should go on deck,” he said. “The WEAPONs must be near Meteor.”

“You can hear it?” Zack asked the clone.

“Of course, I was Chosen of Ramuh,” Yazoo smirked and rubbed the wrist where the lightning-bolt bracelet had disappeared. “And I did help. I even saved your life.”

“You saved Zack’s life?” Reno asked and his thin lips lifted in teasing enjoyment. “Did he do something stupidly brave and noble?”

Yazoo chuckled. “Of course he did.”

“Oh come on,” Zack whined. “It wasn’t stupid; it was necessary.”

Reno looked at him, eyes wide and falsely guileless. “Zackary Fair,” he said in an obnoxiously nasal voice. “You’re my heerro.” And then he looked at the clone so they could enjoy the SOLDIER’s embarrassment. A shared moment that made Yazoo’s breath catch in hope.

-Come, my warriors, time to witness the ending that you sought-

They gathered on deck as instructed, joining a few of the boat’s crew that were already staring up at the approaching asteroid. As Sephiroth knew it would, their presence brought others: Rufus and Elena, any sailor that wasn’t required elsewhere or had high enough rank to set their own duty schedule, even the Captain came to stand on deck and stare into the sky where Meteor dominated
and threatened their futures. It was so close it easily blocked out the constellations. It eclipsed the rising sun, still just a sliver of light on the horizon. It was a huge luminescent ball easily visible. At least the mass of it was since Meteor was huge, but to the unaugmented eye its details would be smudged and indistinct through the planet’s atmosphere. It was a blessing because, seen that way, it could almost be called pretty.

Rufus asked for binoculars and some no-name sailor practically skidded across the desk in the rush to fetch the President a pair. Sephiroth wondered if it would help or would Rufus feel even more nervous after seeing the spell clearly because to Sephiroth with his enhanced vision, Meteor looked toxic and deadly. Its glowing centre was surrounded by red streaks that resembled flowing blood, and the circling spots of darkness would be the flies blood attracted. It was pure destructive evil.

“Are those the WEAPONs?” Zack asked, standing bent backwards hands on hips, and bat wings out and fluttering for balance. “Those look like the WEAPONs.” He pointed at specks circling in the sky, sparkling slightly in the faint light of the rising sun, glowing slightly more in the harsh red light of Meteor. “You did say they’d be fighting Meteor.” Cloud shrugged.

“How long,” the General asked of the crowd.

“It hasn’t breached the atmosphere yet,” Rufus answered, “but I’m told it has to be within 200,000 kilometres for it to have affected the oceans the way it has.”

The General looked at the young president in question but it was Tseng who answered. “At the line where Meteor’s trajectory would run through the planet, the oceans have risen nearly ten metres higher than normal. It has lowered by an equal amount on either side of the line. If the WEAPONS and Holy succeed in destroying Meteor then the water will be released from its gravitational pull.”

“It will rush around the planet trying to restabilize itself,” Sephiroth concluded.

“Indeed,” Rufus agreed. “The tsunami from the explosion at the Crater might look like raindrops in a lake in comparison.”

“Evacuation of all coastal regions is continuing on schedule,” Tseng informed them. “Very few difficulties have been encountered.” Sephiroth was impressed; mobilizing a population in a short amount of time was always difficult and frustrating. He said as much.

Rufus smirked at him. “What’s the point of having the world’s largest standing army if you can’t order them around?”

“What’s that?” Yazoo asked, his low voice easily heard above the continuous murmur of the crowd. Unlike everyone else looking up at the sky, the young warrior’s attention had quickly refocused on a more terrestrial body—one with thin lips and fox-red hair—so he was the first to see the green tendrils flowing out of the surface of the planet. They were organic streams, like roots of a tree, or leaves unfurling, at high speed. Embedded in them were sparks and bright lines that reminded the General of what he’d seen in the Lifestream and he realized that it was the Lifestream.

“That is the result of casting Holy,” Sephiroth replied slowly, “The Planet is joining the fight.”

He watched as more and more of the green streamers rose up through the air; sometimes twirling around each other as if in play, sometimes merging then parting, but always, always, rising up through the dawn-sharp sky.

“The green light is heading towards the WEAPONs,” Yazoo said, his attention finally pulled off
the red-haired Turk and into the sky.

Sephiroth watched as the glittering streamers finally came together in one thick cable of light before separating into five columns. His eyebrow went up as he saw the possibilities. He watched the Lifestream and the WEAPONs combine into spheres of glowing energy. He watched as they increased in size as more and more of the Lifestream joined them until they could each touch the other in one large loop. Then the WEAPONs started to move, circling round and round each other, braiding the living light into a tight net. As one they moved toward the threatening asteroid and, to the people who could see, it looked like the woven light ‘caught’ Meteor.

“Is that it?” Yazoo asked, even as the WEAPONs flowed around the object, completely encircling it. Then they started to rotate around it, flowing, gaining speed, gaining bulk as more Lifestream joined them, until the WEAPONs were no longer visible as individual entities. It was all one mass of green and red and black fighting it out in Gaia’s heaven.

“You wanted an explosion?” Rufus asked?

“Of course,” the silver-haired warrior answered with blithe unconcern.

Reno barked out a laugh. “I take it back. You’ll make a fine Turk, yo.”

Sephiroth’s attention pulled away from the battle in the sky to the face of his…brother-son. “You are going to join the Turks?”

Yazoo’s eyes slanted toward Reno, but he halted them halfway. Too late, of course; Sephiroth had already caught the move. The clone lifted his chin, blue cat-eyes flashed. “Yes, I am,” he stated mutinously. “It will give me income, structure, and challenge… and some freedom too,” he tacked on as if he didn’t really care. It was possible, Sephiroth conceded, that he didn’t.

The General could feel everyone’s gaze settle upon him, as if he were the arbiter of the boy’s fate. Perhaps, in a way, it was an accurate assessment for he could say no and Rufus would respect that for he needed Sephiroth far more than he needed another fighter, enhanced or not. But if he said no, what would Yazoo do with his life? Circle around him, hoping to be useful? Or would he go out and get into trouble because he was bored and young and powerful?

“It sounds like you have given it a great deal of thought,” he said neutrally. Yazoo flushed because, although he had thought about it, logic had played no part in his decision. Sephiroth smiled at the response and his eyes flashed over Zack’s friend. “The life of a Turk can be filled with… contradictions. If, at any point, you no longer feel it is the best fit for your abilities and desires, you must say so—to Tseng or to I—and we will help you find a path that suits you better.” He finished off his little speech looking at the head Turk and Tseng nodded in acknowledgement. Not that the General thought Yazoo would use the out he had negotiated for him, but he knew what it was to feel trapped and without options, as did Yazoo. He couldn’t recommend it.

“That’s what you’re going to do once this is over?” Tifa asked the clone she had befriended. “Become a Turk?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Yes, I believe I will.”

“Well, forget Sephiroth and his genteel threats,” she said with a bright smile at Rufus. “If they don’t treat you right you tell me. I still know a few people who’d love an excuse for a rematch.”

“May I remind you, Ms. Lockhart, that we live in new and more peaceful times?” Rufus replied mildly.
“Tch, it wouldn’t be a war,” she said dismissively. “More like a training exercise, so that nobody gets bored.”

Above them blood-red light tried to escape and the fly-black rocks tried to break through the barrier that was stopping Meteor from achieving its purpose. The green of the Lifestream rippled and bent but remained whole, moving in a continuous swirling motion that tightened and tightened on the threatening asteroid. In the end, Meteor was a mindless spell. It had no heart and no will of its own. The Lifestream was the living soul of a whole planet and of all the creatures that had lived and died on her for countless ages and the WEAPONs were the embodiment of that will. What Gaia wanted, it would have, and it wanted to live. The asteroid was forced to move, first at an angle to the planet, and then almost parallel.

“They’re forcing it into orbit like a satellite,” Cloud said. The General hummed his agreement of the assessment. “That should help minimize the damage from ocean flooding.”

“Indeed,” Tseng responded, “Depending on the distance they finally establish orbit, there may be little to no, um, slosh-back.”

They stood and watched as the slow movement as the sun slowly rose above the horizon gilding the ocean with gold.

“What about you, Tifa,” Cloud asked finally. “Are you going to move back to Nibelheim?” Cloud made a slight grimace of distaste as he mentioned it, and Sephiroth was relieved that his lover had no great desire to return to a place that held so much personal sorrow for all of them.

Tifa’s reaction was much the same as theirs; she wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “I don’t think so. I liked living in the city; so many people to talk to, so many different ideas. I don’t think I could go back to the insularity of a small town.” The Lifestream that surrounded Meteor was starting to send out tendrils of light that flicked like the ends of a whip. “Actually, I liked running the bar. I know it was just a cover, but it was fun.”

“I am not fond of crowds,” Vincent growled. “They agitate me.” ‘And the creatures inside me’ went unsaid, but everyone heard it anyway.

“Maybe an inn near the highway,” Tifa compromised, “Or a town somewhat smaller than Midgar.”

Zack laughed, “That’s like every other place on the planet so at least you’re not limiting your choices.”

“What about you?” she asked the dark-haired First. “What does a SOLDIER First Class get up to in peace time?” It was the question Sephiroth had been asking himself since they’d entered the crater: if they survived, if they won, what comes next? Unlike Tifa, he didn’t see himself operating a saloon.

Zack jerked his thumb at him, “I go where he goes, or where he tells me.” Zack laughed. “So that’s not gonna change, but there are probably still monsters out there, natural and DGS, so it’s not like it’ll be totally without challenge.”

“True,” Rufus agreed. “There’s much work that needs to be done to restore the planet and to rebuild it.”

Tseng coughed. It was a very suggestive cough. Sephiroth caught the young president looking at his head Turk in surprise. He also caught Tseng’s slight nod of confirmation so he was hardly astonished when Rufus spoke again. “This isn’t the time I would’ve chosen for this discussion but,
since you are discussing your futures and making plans.” His voice trailed away.

Sephiroth moved his gaze from the battle going on in space to the young President. Most of the team’s attention was on them now, on Sephiroth and Rufus, and the General had an odd moment of déjà vu except, instead of Yazoo’s fate, now he was deciding the future of the world.

One silver eyebrow lifted. “Yes,” he prompted.

The President cleared his throat, then stilled, becoming once again the almost arrogant heir to the Shinra Empire. “You are probably aware that Reeve has elected to head the World Reconstruction Organization.” The General nodded. “From roads and power grids to houses and sanitation; the WRO is going to do as much as they can to rebuild what was destroyed.”

“But not the mako reactors, right?” Tifa interrupted aggressively.

“No, not those,” Rufus assured the fighter. “We’re working on developing new energy sources, ones with significantly less environmental impact than mako.”

“Wind generators would be good,” Cloud suggested. “Or, if we’re going to have a closer moon, that’ll mean more tidal activity so you could install generators where the tidal flow is the greatest. That’d be cool.” Everyone was staring at him. “What?”

Zack replied with a goofy smile, “Most of the time you’re a quiet and unassuming little soldier then, all of a sudden, this raging geek breaks out and you can’t speak fast enough. It’s cute.” Cloud glowered at him.

“I know nothing about power generation,” Sephiroth stated. He could see the white-blue tail of Meteor changing colour to the green of the Lifestream, pulling it into the main mass. Once the WEAPONs were done with the lifeless ball, would it have some form of sentience as the planet did, he wondered, or would it remain unaware and barren—merely a hunk of dirt hanging in Gaia’s sky.

“But you do know about urban planning,” Tseng countered. Both of Sephiroth’s eyebrows went up. “In order to know the best way to attack a town, one must first know its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the best way to weaken a desert outpost is to locate its water supply and divert it or seal it off, correct?” The General nodded. “It stands to reason, that to build a town in the desert one must know how to locate and access that same supply.”

Sephiroth couldn’t help the small smile that lifted his lips. The comparison was both charming and ridiculous. Unless Shinra intended to rebuild the townships as fortresses, his strategic training was still mostly useless.

This time Rufus spoke. “The other requirement is the ability to organize men, equipment, and supplies so that construction proceeds smoothly and with minimal disruptions. Just like moving troops and weapons to a battlefield, it requires an understanding of each task, and the ability to estimate the time needed to complete them. You must be able to schedule many related tasks so that everything is in place exactly when it’s needed.”

That actually made sense to the General. War was a logistical knot that was always one move away from unravelling. He could see that intricate and multi-headed construction projects would be the same.

“You are, in essence, asking me to become a project manager.”

“Yes,” Rufus answered simply. “Three decades ago, my father allowed Hojo to make a super-
soldier. A creature he would use to destroy any resistance to his dreams and schemes. We already know you are capable of destruction, General. Are you equally capable of creation?”

The dare—he couldn’t call it a challenge—wasn’t even subtle but then subtlety wasn’t needed here. Sephiroth thought of it; of thirty or more years of working for Neo-Shinra, having to listen to its Board of Directors and put up with bureaucrats, petty and otherwise. Of having a part in creating the future…

He turned to Cloud, for this wasn’t a decision that would affect just himself, and the blond soldier gave him a small smile and a short nod. “I have lots of ideas,” Cloud said and Zack barked out a laugh and whispered ‘geek’ fondly.

“I’m already in if you are,” the SOLDIER said before the General could ask. “Plus Aerith might like some input even if it’s through an intermediary.”

“I’m sure more direct participation can be arranged,” Sephiroth responded and he knew he’d made his decision.

Above them, the battle between the Planet and Meteor ended with a flare of light pulsing out from their center in a beautiful ring. All the colours were there: ruby, diamond, sapphire and emerald—and when it dispersed the WEAPONs were gone; the Lifestream was falling back towards the earth, and Meteor was a solid grey ball and Gaia had a new moon that glittered in the light.

It was over. The old world was finished. It was time to build the new one.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is it; story ended. It’s unbelievable and weird and wonderful and freaky. I’m happy to have it finished (especially as I truly dislike eternally unfinished tales—if I enjoyed those, I’d spend more time in real-life) but it’s also unsettling because I’ve invested so much into it. As have all of you, my readers. Thanks to all of you for commenting and encouraging and enjoying, for just sticking it out through nearly 350,000 words. Many of you may want more, but I’ll say what I always say at the end of a story: I have no plans to continue, but I can’t predict when or where plot bunnies are born so you never know…

One last word of thanks goes to rsasai who provided me with the translation for Tseng’s prayer, Arigatou.

End Notes

Fanart! Wings by Arkiel-Pixie

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