Sideways
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/5573833.

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<td>Final Fantasy VII, Compilation of Final Fantasy VII</td>
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<td>Relationship:</td>
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<td>Alternate Universe - Time Travel, parallel dimensions, Time travel with a twist, Fix-It, TW: Blood, Slow Burn, (no really, the clack is gonna be SUPER slow burn.), Angst, PTSD, More Tags to be added as I go, Panic Attacks, Cloud whump, Zack whump, the author just really likes whump okay, Flashbacks, Dissociation, Eating Disorders, Medical Torture, Hojo's A+ parenting, Hurt/Comfort, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, the author also really likes hurt/comfort, these babies need lots of hugging and snuggles, Depression, discussion of canon suicide by puppy</td>
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<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2015-12-29 Updated: 2019-01-31 Chapters: 8/? Words: 93220</td>
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Sideways
by soliloqui

Summary

Witnessing the end of the world, being chosen as Champion and sent back in time to change the past – all these things Cloud could almost have expected. What he did not count on, however, is landing himself in a world where Sephiroth has stayed strangely sane, Shinra are supposedly the good guys, and his younger cadet-self is in a healthy… fivesome?!?

Seems like catching sight of one’s dying once-savior and bringing him along for the ride is enough to throw Gaia’s Timetravel™ off track and turn things a little… sideways.

Notes

So, here it is. The first chapter of that time travel fanfic I’ve been working on for AGES. Special thanks for this chapter goes to Up_sideand_down for encouraging me to be a pirate (Yarrr. Grammar is more like… guidelines, anyway) and FFlove190, who took the time to reblog my idea and add so many thoughts of their own back when it was still in its baby shoes.
Enjoy!
When my time comes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When my time comes

'I dreamed I was missing, you were so scared
But no one would listen 'cause no one else cared'

The last thing he remembers is darkness, and gunshots, and the feel of a dozen bullets in his heart. He briefly remembers his worry for Cloud, flashes of blond spikes against a stormy sky, pouring rain washing him clean of blood and – "I am your living legacy". He remembers the rain slowing to a drizzle, rays of sun breaking through to turn the coldness of creeping death into something warm, and the feeling of peace as a hand reaches out to him – Angeal, old friend – when suddenly he lurches sideways and away and don't-- I was supposed to rest, I was supposed to die a hero, why – this isn't--

He doesn't expect to wake up in a large, comfy bed to blinds drawn over windows and the humming of electricity behind the walls. If he's quite honest with himself, he hasn't expected to wake up at all, except for maybe in the green tranquility of the lifestream.

But here he is, anyway.

There's a pounding behind his temples and his chest aches softly in time with his heartbeat; it's hard to keep his eyes open. If he squints into the blurry shadows of the ceiling just right, he can see flashes of another- is it a memory? But it couldn't be. The rain is familiar, but the rest doesn't fit. Spiky, blond hair and blue blue eyes that are too old, too clear, too all-seeing for the boy who should be barely aware of his surroundings in his Mako induced half-coma. The blood that should have been smeared on the blonde's face absent, in its place a stark sort of desperation, horror and disbelief intermingling, with just the faintest hint of... hope?

He remembers a green light and the familiar warmth of a Curaga washing through him, strong and steady. The constant dripdripdrip of raindrops all around him, the metallic tang of blood on his tongue and that soothing voice, pleading with him to stay, pleading not to leave again.

Cloud... I'd always stay with you, if I had the choice.

But... there were other voices too, now that he thinks about it. In the background. And not the voices of strangers – the kind he has never expected to hear again. Voices that triggered a deep sort of ache in his heart that had nothing to do with the metal bullets being pushed out of his skin by the healing spell.

Zack is ripped out of his musings by an unexpected sound to his left – registered distantly as the deliberate turning of a page – and whirls his head over with a snap. Mako blue eyes glow at him in the dark; legs crossed at the ankles and reclining in an armchair almost lazily, yet still with a certain amount of grace, a dark figure watches him silently.

Well, what do you know...
"...Genesis?!

Despite the book held open in the redhead’s hand, recognized even in the near-dark of the room as a white bound copy of Loveless, Zack knows without a doubt those sharp cyan eyes have been watching him for a while now.

He tries to drag himself up into a sitting position, get his elbows beneath him, take some control, but finds his arms shaking and too weak to hold his weight. With a puff of air, Zack lets himself sink into the cushions again. "What... what's going on?" he mumbles with more than a hint of confusion on his face. His voice is quiet and raspy and updates him on the sore state of his throat.

Genesis stays quiet, regarding him carefully for a moment longer while not giving away any of his thoughts, face a blank mask. Zack uses the time to take in the sight of the other person, of the man he last saw leaned against a beat-up chair over the ruins of Banora, purple apple in hand.

The trademark leather coat is slung carelessly over the side of the armchair, revealing the black Soldier First uniform underneath, sans boots and belt system. Genesis' trusted weapon, Rapier, is leaning against his seat, never far from reach. The other looks relaxed, but Zack knows from experience that a First is never truly off-guard; he doesn't doubt the Crimson Commander could strike, serpent-like, at a split-second's notice.

Zack isn't sure what to expect from him; he thinks their last encounter has put them at a sort-of status quo, but there are too many unknown variables in this, too many things that don't add up yet in his head.

When Genesis finally moves to stand up, Zack narrows his eyes, not liking the feeling of the ex-Soldier looming over him when he is too weak to lift a limb, completely at the other's mercy. But it seems Genesis' only intention is to fetch him the glass of water previously ignored on the bedside table. Still watching his every movement carefully, Genesis sits down on the mattress and, when it becomes clear Zack cannot hold the glass in his shaking hands, bends down to slip an arm below his shoulders in support of his head and lifts the cup to Zack's lips.

The cold water is like a balm on the ravenette's burning throat and he can’t help but remark, once his mouth is free once more, "Well, this feels familiar. Only this time our roles are reversed from that one time I dragged you out of the cave in Banora, huh?"

He can still remember the weight of the redhead when he had him slung over his shoulder; the way lax limbs had to be guided into their resting position by kind hands so the other would not slide down to the ground next to that broken chair. It was the one and only time he has ever touched Genesis in such a gentle manner, in something other than battle or pent-up anger for sly remarks and completely inappropriate quoting of poetry. Zack wonders why that memory has stuck.

"...is that so?" Genesis only murmurs, which really – says nothing at all.

The cup is placed back in the side table with a quiet thunk and then there's the clinking noise of glass from a different direction. Zack notices the other has one hand in his pants' pocket and another on Zack's chest, and before his sluggish mind can find the time to protest, the warm light of a Cure washes over him, easing the soreness he has almost forgotten about during his musings.

"Thanks..." Zack sighs, allowing himself to relax just a little. Sleep is pulling incessantly at his eyelids again. He doesn't know what's going on, but at least it seems as though for the moment, Genesis is not intent on causing him harm. "Where are we, anyway?" he asks distractedly. "I'd thought I was a goner. Was it you that got us out of th- Cloud!!"
The alarm suddenly drives the fog from his mind and forces his torso upwards with a gasp of air. He is immediately restrained by a soft, but firm hand, easing him back into the mattress.

"Where's Cloud? I thought I saw- but it couldn't be... he could barely walk, much less use a Cure in that state. Where is he? Damnit, I should be taking care of him, not lying around like a useless sack of."

"Easy."

The voice, though gentle, carries an edge of authority, which makes buried old Soldier instincts spring forward again. Nevertheless, he fixes the redhead with a decisive stare, determined to get an answer.

"Where is he?"

"He is with the others right now. You needn't worry about him. All you have to do is rest, and recover, Zackary."

There's a thousand more questions burning on the tip of Zack's tongue – *What others? What do you mean, don't worry? The kid's got bloody Mako poisoning. Shiva be damned!! Where are we even?* - but before he can so much as take a breath, he can hear that tinkling sound of glass again, knowing a different materia is being grasped in hand this time, and then there's a Sleep spell flowing through him, pulling him down, down...

His last thought is predictable, yet tinged with undeniable worry and fright.

*Cloud...*

... With a frown creasing his brows, Genesis slowly releases his grip on the Sleep materia, shoulders drooping forward and air leaving his lungs in a sharp sigh.

This is so, so wrong.

The hand still lying on Zack's chest grows lax, until Genesis can no longer feel every individual rib through the thin bandages. They disposed of the tattered black uniform shirt earlier, instead opting to cover the man with the soft sheets on Angeal's bed for now.

Genesis' fingers start traveling of their own volition; trailing over the too-thin arms and pronounced collarbones, ghosting over jutting cheekbones before finally burying themselves in the fine, spiky black hair.

Even with the other man's violet eyes closed, Genesis can without a doubt identify him as Zackary Fair, Gongagan Soldier and trouble-maker extraordinaire.

Only… he isn’t *their* Zack Fair.

He couldn’t be, seeing as Sephiroth has just phoned their two boys and made sure they are still engaged in their mission, scheduled to arrive tomorrow, as planned.

The hair is different, also; slicked back in a way that faintly reminds him of Angeal. This is no 19 year-old in front of him.

So what in Gaia’s name is going on here?!
Frazzled, Genesis drags a hand through his ginger locks, tussling the immaculate bed head.

They had been training, out in the wastes; a mock battle. ‘Beating the shit out of each other’, rather, as Zack – their Zack – likes to call it. It had been raining, Genesis remembers having sniped something at Angeal about getting mud inside his shoes, when they felt an extreme energy spike and went to check it out before the Turks could get their curious noses into the issue.

No matter what they had been expecting, it hadn’t been seeing a hysteric Cloud leaning over a slowly bleeding-out Zackary.

Even now, several hours later, the image won’t leave his inner eye.

They hastily approached, of course; Genesis called out to Cloud and already subconsciously reached for the Cure materia in his bracer. That was when the blonde looked up and they noticed for the first time that something was seriously wrong.

Instead of recognition and relief at receiving aid, Cloud’s eyes widened almost comically in their sockets before the boy – man, rather – jumped up and grabbed a gleaming broadsword from the ground next to them which for all intents and purposes, he shouldn’t have been able to lift, and easily fell into a defensive crouch in front of the prone figure on the ground.

Genesis, Angeal and Sephiroth stumbled to a confused stop, still several yards away from the pair. The blonde didn’t respond to their questioning, only yelling at them with a desperate timbre in his voice to ‘Stay the fuck away’, and just how scared and confused did Cloud have to be to see them as a threat and raise his sword while Zack was right there, losing more blood than Genesis could ever remember seeing him lose before?!

Sephiroth in particular seemed to be the focus of Cloud’s frenziedly moving eyes, more or less glossing over the other two. The silverette too seemed to pick up on that and took a few steps back, lowering Masamune in an attempt to calm down the sword-wielding blonde.

Genesis used the few moments during which Angeal – ever the calm peace-maker – tried to diffuse the situation in that soothing, deep voice of his, like talking to a spooked animal, and regarded Cloud a bit more closely.

He almost second-guessed the other’s identity, then, but it couldn’t have been any other than their blond little cadet.

Only he wasn’t quite so little anymore; he looked older, the eyes especially. And what in heaven’s name was he wearing? The shock of blond hair was the same, which had originally prompted all of them in identifying the other - could he be an older relative of Cloud’s, maybe?

But impossible. These features… Genesis knew them by heart. And the man had reacted to their call of Cloud’s name instinctively, naturally, in a way that wasn’t easy to fake.

By then, Cloud had lowered his sword a little due to Angeal’s careful ministrations, Sephiroth several yards behind them, though Genesis knew without a doubt everything in the silver First strained to run towards the injured Zack. Cloud’s gaze wavered uncertainly between the three of them and the ravenette on the ground, before asking in a rasping voice, ‘You got a Cure on you?’

Genesis immediately nodded and touched his bracer, starting to walk over, glad to finally be doing something productive towards Zack’s survival. He was several feet away, but the wounds looked serious and more blood had flowed from them in the time they had been talking.

Cloud, however, froze again at his approach; tightened the grip on his sword, shook his head, held
out a hand in Genesis’ direction. Confused, he tossed the mastered materia over. It was snatched out of the air expertly.

After one last regretful look in Sephiroth’ direction, Cloud then bent down and started casting the spell that enveloped Zack’s chest in a green, glowing light.

When for Shiva’s sake had Cloud learned to cast materia?! The questions just kept piling up and still left Genesis reeling up to this moment.

After a little while, Angeal approached with a Phoenix Down in hand. Cloud flinched briefly, but then grudgingly allowed the man’s presence. Angeal laid the feather on Zack’s head gently, keeping his hand there after the act.

It didn’t take one so versed in the art of magic as Genesis to see that Cloud was spending much; too much. He was on his fourth cast, gathering more mana for a fifth, and already his hands started shaking in what could only be the beginnings of materia exhaustion.

Unable to watch any longer, Genesis moved forward, kneeling down right when Cloud started listing to the side dangerously and steadying him with a hand to the shoulder. ‘Stop it Cloud, you’re killing yourself!’ he remembers himself yelling anxiously. It was a wonder the blonde had managed that many casts at all; judging from the aura surrounding the spells, they were high-level. Already Zack’s wounds had started closing, small metal bullets falling to the ground next to them. The tinkling noise was drowned out by the pattering of the rain.

Genesis reached for Cloud’s hand holding the materia, aiming to rip it out of his grasp, but the boy tightened his grip stubbornly, already starting a sixth cast. His breath rasped heavily in his throat, quick and jagged.

As soon as the spell had left his fingers, Cloud finally sagged forwards, quickly falling unconscious. Genesis barely had time to catch him gently in his arms and lay him on the side next to Zack.

In the ensuing silence, the three conscious men exchanged worried glances, Sephiroth finally approaching and kneeling down next to them.

Genesis wiped the wet hair from his eyes and checked Cloud’s pulse – alive, but likely bone-deep exhausted. He had done good work on Zack though; the cleansing rain revealed closed skin in most places, enough so that the man could be moved.

After a quick consideration, the three decided to carry the passed-out pair, together with the strange broadsword, to one of their apartments before figuring out what to do – anything to get out of that blasted rain. A few well-placed Confuse spells kept their journey unnoticed by Shinra.

That was two hours ago, and Genesis has yet to get any real answers. If anything, the short conversation just now with Zack has only provided more questions.

Feeling familiar restless irritation well up inside him again, Genesis stands up to seek out his partner in the next room before he can set something on fire.

Angeal is sitting on the edge of the couch, next to an unmoving form featuring a distinctive mop of blond hair. They split up the watch duty between the two of them, seeing as how Cloud reacted so negatively to Sephiroth before; however Angeal, always the mother-hen, has quite frequently looked in on his healing ex-student as well. Genesis sinks down behind him, wrapping his arms around the strong waist and finding solace in the scent of Angeal’s neck with a sigh. It doesn’t take him long to calm down in the close proximity of his long-time childhood friend.
“You heard?”

“Mh-hm. Not helpful. What’s that he was saying about a cave in Banora? Did I miss something?”

“No idea. There are abandoned mines under Banora, I don’t believe I ever told you about them. I used to play there as a kid. Haven’t been in ages, though. I’m not sure how Zack would know about them.”

They lapse into silence again, Genesis settling his chin on Angeal’s shoulder to watch the sleeping blonde with him. The afternoon sun is dimly shining in through the window, the body he is leaning into is warm, and Genesis’ eyes soon start drooping.

After they had reached Angeal’s apartment, Genesis continued healing Zack with a Cure and Potions he and Angeal carefully fed the injured Soldier. They washed and bandaged the wounds before moving their attention to the blonde on the couch. After removing the curious black shirt almost resembling that of a First Class uniform, they found out Cloud really wasn’t as unharmed as he had seemed at first glance.

The sunken eyes and sallow skin stretching tight over protruding ribs and sinewy muscle told a story of famine, lack of sleep and dehydration, and multiple lacerations littered his body, looking fresh and unable to heal due to the mana exhaustion. Genesis couldn’t be quite sure, but they looked like sword wounds. Almost like… but no, he would have needed Sephiroth to definitely identify that, and the silverette had already left by then to contact their Zack and Cloud and make sure they would all remain unbothered by Shinra for the time being.

Genesis healed those wounds too, as much as he could, being the more proficient one in using materia out of him and Angeal; and now, together with the effort of keeping Zack on the side of the living and the Confuse spells he’d cast to get them inside the tower unnoticed after already having spent much during their mock battle that morning, the constant drain on his mana seems to finally be taking effect.

A soft touch to his cheek and a nose nuzzling into the other side of his face rouse him.

“Mh… I’ll take an Ether later. It’ll be fine.”

That thumb on his cheekbone starts a soothing caress, up and down. His eyes almost slip closed again when the blonde on the couch moves.

It’s just a little twitch of muscles, a clenching of eyelids, but it’s enough to alert them to the man’s impending waking. Genesis sits up again, Angeal copying him, and together they watch as Cloud comes to.

His breathing starts picking up a little, and then weary eyes open just a slit and – is that Mako?!

Impossible, and how could he have missed that earlier – but Cloud’s blue eyes definitely shine with a familiar, bright Mako glow; easily on the level of a First Class Soldier.

Genesis keeps the confusion to himself for now, though; instead analyzing every tiny motion the blonde makes. It seems the other isn’t quite there – while his eyes are open and blinking around sluggishly, his mind is still deeply buried beneath waves of exhaustion and dehydration. Genesis does not expect to gain many answers to his questions today.

“We should feed him some water while he’s conscious,” he murmurs to Angeal, who lifts a full glass from the coffee table and together, they work on getting some fluid into the prone boy.
Cloud coughs a little when some water goes down the wrong pipe, once more blinking owlishly. His eyes remain unfocused as he whispers something that half-catches in his throat; Genesis has to strain to hear it even with enhanced senses. “Tifa?” And then, “…Zack?”

The blonde looks so young in that moment, so lost and confused that the resemblance to *their* Cloud is uncanny and makes a cold chill slither down Genesis spine. He cannot doubt his identity any longer; but just *where* did this eerie Cloud-lookalike come from? A long-lost twin? A… clone? None of it is making any sense, but until Genesis knows otherwise, he will treat this version of Cloud as though he were one of their own.

Angeal’s heartstrings must also have been pulled, for he strokes the hair out of Cloud’s clammy forehead where the mana exhaustion has left him slightly feverish. “It’s okay now, Cloud. Go back to sleep.”

It only takes a few more seconds until Cloud is under again.

The two Soldier Firsts exchange equally worried, frustrated glances before resuming their watch.

…

Meanwhile, Cloud drifts.

His mind is awash with a blur of green, jade particles floating around him in a dizzying dance, and for a second there he wonders if he ever even left the Lifestream.

It’s hard to keep track of his limbs, which are feeling so very, very distant – just like his grip on reality. Up and down, left and right, they all blur into one and the same until Cloud is lost completely in the nauseating disorientation.

There’s one constant, however; a burning sensation of need, like an itch he can’t quite scratch – an urge to be somewhere, to do something…

Isn’t he forgetting something?! Some…one?

Cloud wishes the green would stop spinning, so that his thoughts could settle for just a moment and tell him just *what*…

At times he shivers with cold; or is it fever? And at one point there’s something solid and slick against his lips, cool water sloshing inside his mouth and soothing the burning in his throat. A soft hand on his skin, on his forehead, calming words in his ears. Understanding follows in snatches.

“… oud? Are you…”

“I don’t think he…”

“Come on, swallow just a little. I know it’s…”

“-n’t you dare get that apple-sauce on the couch! That’s real leather! I swear…”

Sometimes, a deep voice that makes his insides curl and twist, as though trying to crawl out of his skin, though he does not remember why.

“…will be back later today. ETA is fifteen-hundred. I told them to…”

And a name that startles him out of his drifting enough to pay attention for a few long seconds.
“Zack?”

“What are you doing up? You’ll strain your wounds. I didn’t fix you up just so you could—“

“…Angeal?! Is that… you?”

The voice is close, so close, and yet so very far.

“Zack, what…”


“Zack, I think you should sit down for a second. You’re white as a sheet. Here, let’s just- Zack!”

A rustle of cloth, followed by a soft thump smothered in carpet and elevated breathing, right next to Cloud’s ear. Footsteps approach hastily from the other side of the room.

“Shh, it’s okay Zack. Deep breaths. Let’s get you back to bed, alright? Come on.” Some more rustling, the sound of limbs being maneuvered into position (“Gee, you’re heavy, boy”) before the voice is moving away.

Cloud desperately wants to call out, wants them to stay without knowing why, but his vocal chords won’t cooperate. Before he knows it, he falls back into the dark, and the green.

…”

Cloud…

It has been a while… and yet, no longer than a heartbeat, has it?

Your little heart, is it still beating? For yourself, for all your little friends? …is it still beating for me?

You can deny it all you want, Cloud. You belong to me. You will come to me… in the end.

Come to me… Cloud…

My little……

…PUPPE—

“No!!”
For one brief fraction of a moment, all he sees is green, and the Mako is drenching his clothes again, soaking his tattered cadet uniform, flooding his lungs as a restraining arm is wrapped tight around his neck ready to grip and t-wist—

“Cloud! Cloud, calm. Down!”

His vision is returned to him with a snap and reveals a brightly lit living room, cozy, warm colors blurring before his watering eyes. He gasps, coughs, sputters, not yet quite able to shake the phantom sensation of Mako in his airways; but when a few more seconds pass and his throat slowly clears, a little more of his surroundings turns into focus around him.

The first thing that calls to his attention is the person currently cradling his head in the crook of his arm, kneeling next to the couch Cloud is reclining on. Ginger hair and bright blue eyes fill his vision before his gaze is drawn to the near-empty glass of water in the redhead’s other hand. The rest of the clear water is finishing soaking into the bandages wrapped around his torso and dripping from the dark leather of the couch beneath.

Clear. Not Mako-green.

Cloud exhales the fresh air in his lungs with a huff and drops back into the waiting arm, feeling all his power being sapped away again. Muscles that tensed during his brief bout of panic relax as he sinks deeper into the soft cushions. A voice draws his eyes back to the person holding him steadily.

“You are supposed to drink that, silly, not inhale it.”

The man looks young, and yet like someone who has seen his fair share of life too early. The little crinkles in the corners of his mouth and eyes tell of both laughter and frequent worry, but beneath the exasperated expression he is wearing, those shining blue orbs definitely show a deep compassion.

Something about the man’s appearance tickles Cloud’s memory, but the feeling is distant, like a childhood dream never shared and eventually forgotten.

Cloud apparently stayed silent in his musings for too long, because the ginger emits a sigh and turns to put the wet glass on a coffee table before asking, “Are you with us this time, Cloud?”

The blonde stares at the stranger for a moment, uncomprehending, still a bit sluggish, before asking – “Who the fuck are you?”

He might just as well have slapped the man, for all his expression looks like. Cloud briefly recoils from the hurt expression, almost wishing to take back what he said – the man has been nothing but kind to him, and he did not mean to wound him; though he doubts it was the expletive that did it, so what…?

The redhead composes himself quickly and opens his mouth to reply when there’s a mechanical whirring coming from the direction of the door. The lock clicks, followed by the sound of a door opening, and then several things happen at once.

Cloud starts sitting up and turning around in what is his natural reaction towards unforeseen noises in an unknown environment.

Another man, this one dark-haired and burly, emerges from an adjacent door behind the couch, likely the kitchen, and exclaims, “Seph! I don’t think right now is a good-“

A special area deep inside Cloud’s mind tugs and coils, alerting the core of his very essence to the presence of its puppeteer, calling to his DNA to move, to come closer, to meld become one REUNI
But months upon years have shaped that call into something different, still an urge to get closer, but this time with a sharp weapon at hand; and so in a heartbeat, things slow down before speeding up again to twice the speed as fight-or-flight kicks in.

It takes a fraction of a second for him to spot First Tsurugi leaning against the wall, and Cloud doesn’t even need to think about it – won’t even remember afterwards – but suddenly, the foreign redhead is shoved back, and the sword is firm and cold in his hands, and then swinging towards the man standing in the doorway, a mirage of silver hair and pale skin and those toxic, green eyes.

The General of Shinra is not a legend for nothing and no stranger to attempts on his life, and in a split second, Masamune has materialized in his hand, but Cloud knows the wielder of the seven-foot long katana is at a disadvantage in the close quarters, won’t even have the time to properly lift the sword, and Tsurugi is already mercilessly whistling through the air, intent on bloodshed and slicing through –

_CLANG._

Swords connect and sparks fly from the metal.

A red rapier has intersected Tsurugi’s path in a hasty, but effective defense, its lithe, speedy owner having had the presence of mind to jump forward just in time with his shorter, more agile sword.

What even the redhead could not have foreseen, however, is Cloud’s broadsword suddenly splitting in two and continuing the swing in another hand where its mother could not. The rapier is occupied, and before even the burly man behind can try to tackle Cloud, the detached sword continues its deadly descent on its enemy’s throat before –

It takes every inch of Cloud’s formidable self-control to stop the motion when suddenly, another person storms into the room to stand in front of the silverette.

Cold steel comes to rest a hair’s breadth away from a soft, pudgy cheek, a thin strand of blond fluttering to the ground from where it was cut off.

And as though coming face to face with his own counterpart isn’t enough, a rough but achingly familiar voice takes that moment to announce its presence from behind.

“Cloud?! Hey, you’re not a vegetable!”

…

_tbc_

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics are from "Leave out all the rest" // Linkin Park

I’ll keep the rating at M for now, cause I don’t want to worry about every time I use a swear word or graphic violence; but it might move up still if I feel like adding a lemon or two. That won’t be the focus of this story, however; so don’t count on it. There’s already enough good lemons out there ;)}
Also, this fanfiction is already all planned out. I promise I won’t discontinue and leave y’all hanging somewhere in the middle of it; or that if I do, at the very least I will reveal to you the rest of the plotline.

I know where I’m going with this; all I need is a little time, and motivation. (psst: comments are like cookies, sweet and energizing :) )
What am I leaving (pt.1)

Chapter Summary

(In which hugs are given, showers are had, and PTSD rears its ugly head.)

Chapter Notes

Good lord, this is getting long. This is still all the stuff I originally wanted to put into chapter ONE, thus the same lyrics, and it's still not done - but it was getting so long I split the chapter up. I just had to make a cut here, and I didn't want y'all to have to wait much longer :) I am honestly completely blown away by all the positive response to the first chapter - thank you guys so, SO much. It means one hell of a lot to me, and I was totally not expecting it. All the love is very motivating for me to keep writing :3

(PS: I keep forgetting, but thanks to Kas and Leah for taking a look through this <3)

What am I leaving (pt.1)

‘After my dreaming, I woke with this fear
What am I leaving when I'm done here?’

“Cloud?! Hey, you’re not a vegetable!”

And okay, maybe that isn’t quite the smartest thing to say when you see your best friend locked in combat with a sword wielding Soldier deserter and a silver-haired, homicidal mass-murderer, but Zack literally just came back from the brink of death, saw both his suicidal ex-mentor and now his General resurrected and just got ripped out of magic induced sleep in a foreign bed by the sounds of swords clashing.

Give a guy a break.

Regardless, there’s a reason you don’t distract someone engaged in a battle involving sharp weapons by calling out to them. It’s a goddamn rookie mistake. And Cloud might not be a vegetable anymore, as Zack just so aptly stated, but the exclamation is still enough to prompt the blonde’s gaze into the slightest twitch towards where Zack is standing in the bedroom door, and that moment of hesitation is enough for Angeal ( - whole Angeal, alive Angeal, healthy Angeal; and damn, won’t that be taking some getting used to - ) to tackle Cloud from behind, rip the two sword pieces from his grasp and pin him on the floor, arms locked behind his back.
Zack sees red.

It’s an instinct, second nature; he knows the location of his sword, has seen it standing in the bedroom propped against the wall, and within a moment, the Buster is in his hand, poised against the enemy hurting his friend.

Only… that enemy… is Angeal.

He can’t – can’t lift his sword against his mentor, not again, won’t… but Angeal attacked Cloud, and Cloud must be protected, so what…?

The tip of the Buster hovers uncertainly, as Zack remains unsure whether to raise it towards a mentor he thought he already killed once, towards Genesis, who has switched his sword in favor for a status materia and is fixing Cloud with a frustrated glare, or Sephiroth, who is seeming oddly sane and alive and seems to be protecting a… younger version of Cloud and himself?! What by Odin’s balls is going on?!

Zack draws a ragged breath when Sephiroth takes a step forward, still keeping his form in front of the blond and black-haired younglings in the doorway and calling out his name. “Zack…”

The Bustersword finds its target… “Stay the hell back!”

“Zack, this isn’t-” …before once more swishing around to point towards Angeal.

“Let him go!”

“Zack-“

The sharp tip finds Angeal’s throat, tipping his chin slightly up, and Shiva knows Zack’s trembling hand wants to do nothing but lift the blasted weapon away from this father figure of his past, but he can’t just ignore the way Cloud is still struggling to break free from below the weight of Angeal; the way the blonde’s breath is rasping in his throat in little panicked gasps. His loyalty goes to Cloud first, always will. “Let. Him. Go.” His voice is pleading, but with a hint of steel.

Ice blue eyes meet violet, and after a moment’s hesitation, Angeal nods as much as he can with the sword at his throat before finally releasing Cloud. Zack barely has time to lift the Buster to prevent Cloud from cutting himself on the edge as he jumps up and away with jagged, agitated motions, stumbling backwards until he hits a wall and shoving a little potted flower from its pedestal in the process. Ignoring the splintering noise, the blonde slides towards the next corner, body pressed against the painted concrete. Cloud’s wide, frozen blue eyes never once leave Sephiroth where he is still standing in front of the doorway.

Noticing no immediate threat from the other occupants of the room (though still keeping them in his peripheral, just to be safe), Zack lowers his sword and approaches Cloud slowly. He reaches out a careful hand, but Cloud flinches away like a skittish Chocobo, panting and trembling.

“Cloud? Hey, buddy. It’s okay. I dunno what the hell’s going on here, but we’ll figure it out, alright? Deep breaths. It’s okay now, Cloud.”

He keeps up a steady stream of chatter until finally, Cloud’s eyes first grow unfocused and then settle on his face instead, breathing slowing down just a little. Zack can almost pinpoint the exact moment recognition alights in those blue eyes, and it’s hard to describe exactly, but Zack feels like he’s Cloud’s beacon of light in a stormy sea that a ship finally caught sight of.

“Z…Zack?” The voice is raspy, quiet, but there. Very slowly, tense muscles uncoil. Before the man
in question can use that as his cue to approach, however, Cloud suddenly jerks and doubles over, stumbling into the wall. His hands fly up to cradle his head, fingers digging into temples as though trying to gouge out a sudden headache and then the blonde emits a high-pitched keen that desperately tears at Zack’s heart.

Before he can even think about it, the Bustersword is on the ground and Zack’s arms wrap tightly around Cloud’s newly trembling form, and together he lowers them to the floor.

Pained grunts leave Cloud’s throat between panting breaths. When Zack sees his nails starting to scratch the fragile skin of Cloud’s temples, he covers the hands with his own arms and presses that spiky head closely into his chest, murmuring soothing words into the blond hair and rocking them back and forth gently while his hand rubs small circles into Cloud’s back.

He doesn’t know what’s happening, but his best friend is obviously suffering and Zack is forced to watch it helplessly and he doesn’t like it one bit.

He’s startled when there’s a hand on his own shoulder and chastises himself for the lack of focus (he’s in enemy territory, Get a fucking grip, Soldier!). Angeal is kneeling next to him, not quite daring to touch Cloud, but close enough to make his worry known. “What’s wrong? Does he need a Cure?” Apparently completely willing to ignore the fact Zack was just holding a sharp blade to his throat. Fine by him.

Zack feels the boy (man?! ) in his arms flinch slightly at the voice before pressing his head deeper into Zack’s chest. The ravenette gladly gives what comfort he can and tightens his grip.

“No idea, man. Looks like he’s got a headache, but…” He trails off, not really sure what else to add. He is just as confused as everyone else in this room seems to be.

Eventually, Cloud’s pained noises lessen, and he slumps in Zack’s grip. Zack loosens the arm around the blond head and uses his hand to soothingly trail through the spiky hair. He absently notices the soot and blood lightly streaked through it.

“That better, Cloud?” he asks.

Sluggishly, the man opens his eyes and mumbles, “What year is it?”

And that makes Zack stop short for a second.

… Huh?

“Um…” He glances around before settling on Angeal. “No clue, buddy. Hey Angeal, what year is it?”

His ex-mentor looks at him a little funny, before replying, “0003. What exactly is going on here?”

Well, that would mean… but wait… no way.

He remembers the date on that fateful assignment file for the mission to Nibelheim clearly. Departure date: September 21st, 0002, it had said. Four years in captivity, if Aerith’ last letter could be trusted (and why would it not?), and he hadn’t exactly had a calendar at hand during their time on the run, but it must’ve been close to a year – felt like much longer, actually. Which would put his confrontation with the infantry platoon at… sometime late in 0007.

So… what?
“That can’t be right… I mean, this is gonna sound real stupid, but are you sure? Because last I remember, it was 0006 at the very least.”

Before the crease in Angeal’s brow can translate into a verbal expression of his confusion, Cloud suddenly startles in his arms, exclaiming a single, quivering word.

“Nibelheim!”

What about…?

…Oh.

Right.

Nibelheim mission, 0002. One year before the current year, if it is indeed 0003. So, right now should be three years since Genesis defected; two years since he was forced to kill Angeal; one since Sephiroth burned Nibelheim to the ground, stabbed Cloud through the chest and then fell into the Mako reactor himself.

But one single look through the room reveals to him a very much alive Angeal and Sephiroth, uninjured, baby-faced Cloud and Zack poking their noses out from behind the General, and though he could be wrong, Genesis looks very much at ease in their current Soldier lodgings.

This is all just a very, weird dream.

He subtly pinches himself in the arm, hard.

He’s not dreaming.

What the…

“No… wrong, th’s is… we’r… not far ‘nough…”

“Cloud? Hey, Cloudy-boy?” Zack gently pats Cloud’s cheek, trying to get him to focus one more time before he blacks out. “What is going on?”

At last, the blond in his arms mumbles one final word, though it might as well have been completely gibberish, with how much sense it makes to Zack.

“We t’metrav’led…”

What.

Zack thinks that he’s starting to get really, really tired of thinking that word.

It seems the last bit of strength has finally left Cloud, and his eyes stutter closed, head falling to rest heavily on Zack’s chest again as his body turns completely limp.

For a moment, quiet envelopes the room, everyone staring at the blonde enigma in Zack’s arms.

Then, his gaze catches Angeal’s, and he sees in his eyes that he’s just as much at a loss here as Zack is. Funny, how in a moment of confusion, Zack still looks towards his old mentor for guidance, like an instinct he still hasn’t quite weaned himself off of. But this is one time Angeal can’t help him, and so he gives a sigh before gathering his blond bundle a bit more securely in his arms and standing up. The ravenette in front of him takes a step back to give him room.
“Can we come in now?”

Zack startles a little at the familiar voice coming from the wrong direction – coming from the curious wide-eyed blonde in infantry blues and greens looking around Sephiroth’ shoulder. The silver General, apparently deeming the situation safe enough, steps aside to finally let the two young ones enter the room, and if Zack thought hearing mini-Cloud’s voice was weird, he’s not quite prepared for hearing his own voice coming from the mini-Zack currently poking something on the floor.

“Hey, that’s a cool sword!”

Genesis is quick to chastise. “Don’t touch that with your feet, young man! Would you like other people to stomp all over your sword?”

“But I don’t even have my own sword, Gen!”

“His wounds have started bleeding again”, Angeal remarks with a look at Cloud’s bandages, drawing Zack’s gaze back to him from the tiny squabble.

“Wounds? Where did he get those, anyway?” He’s seen the bandages, of course, but hasn’t really had time to take it in.

Angeal reaches a careful hand out to check the dampness of the white strips of fabric. “Actually, I was hoping you’d be able to tell us, Zack. He was like this when we found him, and we couldn’t excessively use Cure on him due to his mana exhaustion; it would have completely crashed his system with the foreign mana. It will take a while yet until he starts healing on his own.”

“Wait a sec… mana exhaustion? Where’d he get that from? Cloud doesn’t even know how to use materia!”

“I would dare say he does, seeing as it was him who brought you back from the brink of death when you were bleeding out from a dozen bullet wounds,” Genesis pipes in from across the room. “The spells were high-level too, which – granted – is easier with the mastered Cure he was using, but still requires at least a moderate amount of skill.”

“Impossible…” Thoughts spin around Zack’s mind in a dizzying frenzy, each making less sense than the last, and he shakes his head, instinctively falling back into his military training.

First things first.

*Protect allies, gather intelligence.*

He takes some steps towards the couch, Cloud still ensconced safely in his arms, but comes to a stop with still plenty of distance between him and the foreign entities on the other side of the room. He feels and hears Angeal behind him, now propping the Bustersword reverently against the wall, but that’s okay. He has sort-of proven himself a friendly in the past few minutes, and Zack knows enough about combat to have recognized the hold Angeal had Cloud pinned in before as one used for restraining only, while inflicting minimal damage to the target. The bruises forming on Cloud’s bare arms were unavoidable, what with his struggling. Angeal is safe, for now.

(And if some part of that trust stems from a long-buried, but never quite extinguished belief in the mentor of a boisterous fourteen year-old, the belief that this man is good, is safe, could never hurt him – even if he so clearly did – well, Zack doesn’t think he’ll be analyzing that feeling quite yet.)

He fixes Sephiroth, still standing in the general vicinity of the door impassively, almost… awkwardly, with a stare and asks the question that burns brightest on the forefront of his mind.
“What happened last year in Nibelheim?”

Green, slitted eyes meet his, a frown knitting the skin between silver brows, but then the reply comes from a direction Zack wasn’t expecting.

“Hey, if you’re talking about the thing with the goat and the mailman and the, uh… dragon dung, that was totally on Cloud!”

“ZACK! Was not! It was your stupid idea from the beginning, don’t try pushing your failing intellect on me!”

“Was not! And my intellect is working just fine, thank you very much, Mister Strife! ‘sides, …”

Zack’s – old Zack’s – well no, this is starting to get confusing, but he is not gonna start calling himself ‘old’; he was twenty-three last time he checked, for Heaven’s sake! Anyway, his own eyebrows start travelling up his forehead before his eyes narrow with a huff. This is getting him nowhere.

“I mean the mission about the reactor malfunction,” he interrupts. “September 21st, 0002. What happened?”

His gaze locks back on Sephiroth, since he is the one Zack desperately needs an answer from. So far, his old General-turned-mass-murderer has yet to show any inclinations towards insanity or acquisition of world-domination, but then that might just be wishful thinking. Earlier, after Cloud had panicked and then fallen unconscious in Zack’s arms, Zack thought he almost saw a bit of vulnerability and hurt in those jade eyes at the obvious hostility of the blonde towards him.

Zack didn’t rise the Soldier ranks as quickly as he did on his good looks. A very vague theory is starting to take form inside his mind, but too many puzzle pieces are still missing to figure this out.

He has to know.

“There was no reactor malfunction, neither on that day nor any other of the past year. To the best of my knowledge, the reactor in Nibelheim is in perfect working condition.”

There’s nothing but honesty and confusion in those green eyes, and maybe he’s just a good actor, but Zack so desperately wants to believe in Sephiroth. Misses his old friend with all his heart, wishes none of this had ever happened to the silent, awkward young man from then, the man who looked after his troops and tried to hide that adorable little quirk to his lips when he found something particularly amusing and used one whole bottle of scented shampoo in one go.

Zack releases the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding in a large, heavy sigh before nodding and taking that one last step to the couch, sinking down on the edge of it. He carefully lays Cloud’s sleeping form next to him, head propped on the soft armrest for comfort.

And then Genesis is beside him again, bringing with him a large first-aid kit and working on exchanging the bandages silently. He seems to hesitate for a moment, then moves to block Cloud’s wounds from… Sephiroth’s sight? Zack wonders at that for a moment, but files it away for later when his gaze is drawn back to the other occupants of the living room.

Angeal and the… mini-Zack are taking a careful look at a complicated looking sword the likes of which Zack has never seen before; or rather, two parts of a sword, it seems – one is smaller, and they seem to just be figuring out how to attach it to the larger one, creating an almost seamless connection.

Much more interesting, however, are the little Spiky and Sephiroth. The latter is still standing in the
same position, one foot in front of the door, two to the left, gaze fixed unwaveringly on the unconscious Cloud on the couch. Zack’s breath half-catches in his throat. In the dim afternoon light, standing apart from the rest in the large apartment, the usually imposing Soldier looks… incredibly young. And lonely.

It’s not that obvious, the vulnerability in his eyes; most would likely just see the stern image of the First Class General, commander of troops and cold-hearted warrior, carefully cultivated and shaped by Shinra’s PR department. But Zack knew that man, once; had carefully, gratefully wormed his way into his extremely tight circle of trusted comrades and – dare he say – friends, and so he can easily pick up on the tense set of jaw and shoulders, the lowered head (not to protect his throat, but rather to hide behind a curtain of hair), and the way fingers trail over the black leather coat, likely for the calming physical stimulation.

One part of Zack demands he stand up, walk over and give the silverette a very, very tight hug.

Quite another reminds him of a man awash in flames and a gleaming seven-foot katana beating him almost to the point of death before skewering his best friend.

The second part wins by a subtle inch.

Instead, and for this Zack is actually very grateful, the mini-Cloud approaches the frozen warrior, murmuring “Seph” and laying a comforting hand on the man’s shoulder. It’s only when the boy lets his fingers trail down Sephiroth’s arm to entwine them with the other’s hand that Sephiroth’s gaze flickers over to him, and then back and forth, as though trying to make detailed comparisons between the two blondes. Zack sees the tangle of fingers tighten, though he can’t tell who instigates it.

“Why.”

It’s a simple word, not quite a question though clearly meant as one, and directed at Zack.


Sephiroth shakes his head. “Why does he hate me so?”

And again, it is just a simple question, but so very loaded at the same time. Zack can hear the slightest quiver in the man’s voice, confused and hurt, and the urge for that glomp grows stronger.

Angeal and mini-Zack have stopped their discussion of the curious buster-style sword and look over to them, awaiting his answer. Next to him, Genesis’ hands also momentarily stop in their motions.

“Well…” Zack rakes a hand through his hair, pushing it back where some strands have fallen loose.

“Now that’s an even longer story. Though… still more or less the same as the one about Nibelheim, I guess…”

Trailing off, he can see from their confused expressions that he’s getting nowhere, really, so he tries again.

“Look… I don’t really get what’s going on here, and it seems like neither do you, so how about we just make sure Cloud is properly cared for and then we all sit down in a jolly little circle and everyone tells what they know about the situation?”

After a moment of the other five sharing contemplative gazes, he receives nods from almost every direction. Sephiroth however, it seems, won’t be diverted from his own question this easily.

“Zack… what did I do?”
And he can’t quite resist that pleading tone anymore. Slowly rising from his perch on the edge of the couch with a defeated sigh, Zack considers how much to tell him, how much to sugar coat.

Fuck it.

Judging by Sephiroth’ reactions so far, the truth is gonna hurt bad, anyway. Might as well give him a quick résumé of the actions he apparently didn’t commit yet. Zack takes a deep breath.

“To sum it up? You killed his mother, burned his hometown to the ground and stabbed him through the chest with that toothpick of yours.”

…Yep, kicked puppy doesn’t even come close.

Zack distantly recognizes mini-Cloud’s pinched expression as pain, stemming from where Sephiroth has tightened his grip on Cloud’s hand uncomfortably rather than from the news (or maybe a bit of both), and tries to milden the blow before fingers can be broken and regrets be had.

“Though from what it seems like, for whatever reason that hasn’t happened here yet, even though about a year has passed already since when it was supposed to. So hey, let’s all just… try to keep it that way. Alright?”

Sephiroth unconsciously loosens the iron vice around Spiky’s hand, but swallows roughly, vision wavering towards the ground. Something breaks and gives way in Zack’s scarred, but roomy heart.

He takes a step forward, and another, approaching slowly. Mini-Cloud is observing him curiously, but with a bit of wariness. It’s almost cute, the way he seems to want to protect the tall Soldier.

Coming to a stop in front of Sephiroth, but still comfortably outside his personal space, Zack regards his face and asks softly, “Is it okay if I give you a hug? Cause it looks like you really, really need one.”

Finally, Sephiroth lifts his gaze and meets Zack’s. The hurt is still very much present, as is a good amount of confusion towards Zack’s request. But seeing no sign of rejection, the ravenette takes a chance and takes that one last step forward, wrapping his arms carefully around this oddly fragile man.

It is… perhaps the strangest thing Zack has done since waking, and that is saying something.

Never before has he been this physically close to his once-friend, in the whole time before Sephiroth discovered those fateful tomes in the library below the Nibel mansion, and certainly not after. In the close proximity, Zack can feel the rigid stance give way to fine trembles coursing through the man’s frame, and he finds himself surprised by the warmth below the pale skin. This is no cold killer. This is a terribly upset man.

“I… I could never…”

Zack rubs Sephiroth’ back below the curtain of silver hair gently for a little while until he can feel the other finding his composure again and carefully drawing away. He didn’t allow Zack to comfort him for long, but Zack is already quite surprised by the duration of contact he was allowed at all.

Once Zack has drawn away, Genesis is immediately there to tenderly grasp Sephiroth’ other hand in a mirror of what Cloud – the young one – is doing; though Zack can also feel himself being scrutinized closely by the redhead.

“We’ll get this figured out, alright?” Zack promises. “But first, we gotta… go-…” He goes to turn
back around to Cloud, to check where his counterpart has taken over the watch from Genesis, but it seems that was a wrong move to do. Dizziness hits, the room starts spinning in lazy circles around him and he has to grip his chest with a gasp as a burning feeling takes hold. Exhaustion is finally catching up to him.

Zack’s legs buckle below him, and his vision blacks out just as he is about to crumble to the floor in an ungraceful heap. When he comes to again, Angeal’s strong arms around his waist are gently lowering him into a nearby armchair.

“I believe that’s quite enough for you for now. You’re not fully healed yet, Zack; you need to rest.”

Angeal excuses himself to the kitchen to make him tea and Genesis takes over, grabbing a nearby blanket and all but smothering the ravenette in it before Zack can protest. When he sees Zack fingering the black uniform shirt he is dressed in, Genesis supplies, “It’s one of Angeal’s. Your old one was completely beyond repair. You don’t need to wear the bandages anymore, since all the surface wounds are healed, but you still have to take it easy until your body has had time to recuperate from the internal injuries. It was a close call, Zackary.”

In the background, Zack can see Sephiroth and mini-Cloud on the third couch, sitting awfully close together, watching them. Not that he’s not appreciating both his friends having some reciprocal support, but do they really need to do that with their thighs touching…? He feels like he’s missing out on something.

Zack can feel his biceps burning from holding his friend in his arms for so long (and from straining them during a too-long sword fight, but he tries to drown out that particular memory), and his chest still aches softly. Genesis is fussing over him like a worried mother Chocobo from his perch on the armrest, helping Angeal feed him the hot tea when it’s ready, and while Zack strangely enjoys being taken care of like this after so long a time of being the caretaker, he doesn’t understand it one bit.

“Why are you doing this? All of you?”

Angeal gives that trademark frown of his. “What exactly do you mean?”

“Helping me. Us. Taking care of us. I didn’t catch all of that action earlier, but it did seem to me like Cloud was attacking you with that sword of his; and I threatened you all with mine, too. That doesn’t exactly seem inviting to me to start healing someone or serving them tea, right? We could be enemies, for all you know.”

The burly man sets the empty tea cup on the side table before running a comforting hand through Zack’s hair. “No matter where or… when you two are from, you’re both one of us. And we take care of our own.”

Zack is confused by the statement for a moment – is his ex-mentor talking about Soldier as a whole? Shinra? Or just the five of them? But he’s starting to feel toasty warm under the blanket and his thoughts grow sluggish.

Genesis tucks a corner of the downy fabric in again from where it slipped down Zack’s shoulder. Afterwards, his hand lingers, and he adds softly, “No enemy would have noticed that Seph was upset and given him a hug, of all things.”

It’s quiet for a bit, and Zack almost lets himself get lulled to sleep by the rhythmic caress of Genesis’s hand on his shoulder, strange as it feels.

He’s half-startled when that warm hand moves to his cheek, stroking over one of the few very
vulnerable spots on his body, even if only mentally, not physically.

“…where’d you get that scar?” Genesis murmurs with his eyes narrowed.

"Someone’s waiting for you, no?”

Zack freezes, eyes momentarily flickering to the raven-haired Soldier making his way towards the kitchen with the empty tea cup in hand. His mouth drops open, but luckily, he’s saved from having to reply when his counterpart speaks up from his perch on the nearby couch.

“Not to be a mood-killer or anything, but… is he supposed to feel this hot?”

Mini-Zack’s hand is checking Cloud’s temperature on his clammy forehead, and before he can even really think about it, Zack is out of his chair and on the way to look after the blonde. Or would be, anyway, if not for Genesis’ restraining arm around him.

“Let me – I gotta take care of him! Let me go – “

“You, my dear, need to rest. And let us do our job.”

“No, you don’t get it; he’s – I gotta – “

How could he possibly have forgotten about his friend?

Cloud is only on the other couch halfway across the room, but he might as well be a continent away. He struggles weakly, but of all inopportune moments, this is the one his body decides to betray him and forcefully demands its rightful rest by sapping all strength from him.

“He’s got mako poisoning, I can’t even tell if he’s still breathing from over here! Let me go already!”

“Mako poisoning? I am quite positive I would have noticed if he did; and I did check him over quite thoroughly. Mana exhaustion, yes, that he does have from using those high level Cures on you, which also explains the fever. “

“No… no, no NO! You just don’t get it! I’ve been lugging his comatose behind around Gaia for the past friggin year, I need to check if he’s okay, what if he’s got an aneurism or doesn’t wake up again what if he- if he stops breathing in his sleep I gotta- letmegoalready—!!”

He can feel his breath rasping harsh and quick in his throat and why won’t they just let him go, why can’t they see that he needs to be there for Cloud, oh Gods he could be dying why isn’t anybody DOING something?!

“Shhhh… Zack, Zack. It’s alright, but I need you to calm down sweetie, okay?”

Something’s pressing him into a warm, clothed chest and there’s fabric scratching at his chin, but that’s not what needs to be happening right now, can’t they see that?

There’s pressure below his legs and a brief moment of weightlessness, and then he settles again, and a voice comes from the person at his back; but all Zack can think is that Cloud is finally, miraculously there and breathing. Odin yes, when a foreign hand grips his and puts it on the blonde’s wrapped chest, he can feel it lifting and falling, lifting and falling, it’s shallow but there and the soft thumping below his fingertips is statement enough of the heart continuing to pump blood through the feverish body. Through the rushing in his ears Zack can somehow hear the very quiet sound of Cloud’s breaths.
“See, Zack? He’s alright. It’s just a little fever, we’ll give him some fluid and make sure he’ll get lots of rest; once his mana levels have stabilized, we can finish healing his wounds. We’ll get him all fixed up again, I promise.”

Zack sags weakly against the couch, weak with relief, and let’s himself be soothed by the steady rhythm of breath and pulse below his hand. The voice behind him keeps talking in that calm tenor and a hand is stroking through his hair, but that’s alright. His own hands, once having reassured themselves once more that Cloud is indeed still among the living, start carefully trailing over the man’s body.

The bandages wrap around his entire rib cage, and there’s even more on his arms and from what he can see legs, too. Some very light flecks of blood have started spotting the crisp white, but not enough yet that they’ll need to be exchanged. His fingers end up winding through the spiky mess of blonde hair towards the end of his inspection; the strands are longer than he remembers them being. He’ll have to cut them again soon.

“He has cracked a few ribs, but nothing too dreadful. They will heal nicely if they remain bound for a while.”

“He needs a bath.”

He’s so tired. The plush of the couch is pressing nicely into Zack’s torso.

“I need to give him a bath.”

“We’ll give him a bath. You can come with us and make sure we’re doing it right.”

“Boys, don’t you two have a mission report you need to hand in?”

The voice comes from somewhere else, from somewhere that’s not Cloud or the voice behind his back, so he looks up and finally becomes a little aware of his surroundings again.

Angeal is addressing the mini Zack and Cloud, and Zack has to fight the urge to stand up and check over this littler version of Cloud too, see if the little infantryman has eaten enough, if he’s hiding any wounds, if he needs to sleep. He doubts he could muster the energy, anyway.

The two boys nod and make to leave with a last look at the occupied couch, and Zack really must be more beside himself than he thought because he could have sworn he just saw mini-Cloud giving Sephiroth a peck on the lips and Angeal affectionately swatting mini-Zack on the behind.

Weird.

Once they’re gone, Genesis helps him to his feet and Angeal picks up Cloud. He loses sight of Sephiroth on the way to the bathroom and takes a quick moment to feel slightly worried about that.

While Zack is sitting on the closed toilet lid and watching the two Soldier Firsts running a cold bath for the unconscious blonde, he can slowly feel his senses returning to him. The bathroom tiles feel cold beneath his bare feet and wake him up a little. He regains enough of his brain capacity to recognize the need to apologize, but those two only lightly wave him off.

He’s not expecting it, but when Cloud is done, they carefully help Zack out of his clothes as well and put him under the shower to wash up. The hot water feels too nice and he’s too tired to be embarrassed by his nudity. Though he is quite grateful they kept Cloud in sight of him at all times, bundled up in a big towel in Genesis’ arms. He hadn’t even been consciously aware of how much the dried blood on his scalp had started to itch until it was being washed off.
When both are dressed again, Sephiroth meets them in the hallway and announces he’s changed the sheets on the guest bed, so that is where they are headed next.

It feels nothing but natural for Zack to spoon up behind Cloud and put a hand on his chest to check his heartbeat. He’s forgotten how many nights he’s spent in a light doze like this, constantly fearing Cloud might die in his sleep. Now, the blonde’s weight is reassuring against him and blazing hot, telling Zack whatever’s wrong with him, Cloud’s fighting it. Zack still doesn’t know what exactly that is, what exactly happened to his friend while he wasn’t looking, but his thoughts are growing too sluggish to think about it. The Trinity has fed his friend some more water and laid cool cloths on his forehead and elbows, and while he still thinks the caretaking is super weird, he appreciates it.

Maybe he’ll fall asleep and find out this was all just some very, very strange dream and when he wakes up tomorrow, he’ll hunt some breakfast for him and Cloud in the plains around the Gongagan forest and then continue their long trek to Midgar.

There’s a hand stroking the damp hair out of his forehead in a soothing motion and for some reason, it reminds Zack of his dad, who he hasn’t seen in way too long.

“Who are you running from, Zack?”

The deep, rumbling voice is soft, more like the person is talking to themselves, not really expecting an answer. Sleepily, Zack replies anyway.

“Shinra…”

The hand stills on his head.

“…bloody bastards. Won’t go back. We won’t ever go back to the labs… Hojo won’t touch him again.”

He doesn’t know how much time has passed, but eventually, the fingers continue their soothing caress and a different voice speaks up.

“Go to sleep, Zack. We’ll wake you up for dinner later, and then we can talk.”

In a minute, he’s out like a light.

…

tbc in ch2/pt2

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics are again from “Leave out all the rest”// Linkin Park

I’ve already started on part 2 of the second chapter, but right now’s the time where I need to work on a few more details on the plotline to not fall into any holes later, so it might still be a while till I publish that (plus exam time soon T^T)

Meanwhile, question time :D
What kind of cutesie lil' domesticities would you like to see from ASGZC? :3
Clack will be spending quite some time with them, so if there's anything in particular
you'd like to see the bfs do in that time, write it in the comments; I promise to try to get it
in there ^^
What am I leaving (pt.2)

Chapter Summary

*(Dinner-time and explanations.)*

Chapter Notes

Hello, sweet darlings! I’m back =)

First of all: thank you all for the lovely comments. I’ll get to them shortly.

Secondly: I know it’s been a while, but here’s a super long second half of chapter 2 to make up for it ;) No srsly, it’s like, over 20 Word pages. And to think I’d been wanting to put all of this plus the first chapter into ONE chapter... remind me not to make unrealistic plans like that again.

Some parts of this were really tricky for me to write, and I hope it’s not too boring in some places. Things are still moving pretty slow until everyone is all caught up on the action, so I’m using this for some character and relationship development. It’s not really proof-read either, cause I just want to get this chapter out there today, so don’t be surprised if a few small things get changed in the next few days. I constantly feel like I’m missing some important scenes, but if I think about this any more I’ll likely add another 10 pages and I don’t want to keep y’all waiting any longer.

Lastly: Enjoy! =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What am I leaving (pt.2)

“Shinra…”

Genesis whispers, and that just about sums it up.

The weary, black-haired man on the bed has finally fallen asleep, and Angeal can’t help adjusting the covers a little, wrapping them tighter around this stranger who wears his Zack’s face and speaks with his Zack’s voice and apparently has his large warm heart and compassion, too, but yet so clearly *isn’t* his Zack.

“*Hojo*,” he whispers back with a shudder, remembering the scars they noticed on Zack’s body when they helped him shower. They didn’t make much sense to him then, but now, with the knowledge that the man might have spent more time than necessary in laboratories under the hands of one Professor Barnaby Hojo – the white pinpricks in the crooks of his elbows and numerous other marks take on an entirely different meaning.

He’s not the only one haunted at the thought, and Angeal finds himself glad when Genesis, perched
on the other side of the two unconscious boys on the bed, takes a glassy-eyed Sephiroth into his arms without needing to be prompted and pressing a kiss against his lover’s silver hair.

Speaking of scars…

Angeal’s fingers slip from their position in Zack’s unruly hair (still as spiky as he is used to, but more slicked back; rather hedgehog-like) to the faint X on his cheek, tracing it lightly with just the tip of his thumb.

“He was glancing at you when I mentioned it, you know,” Genesis supplies. “And the Buster…”

Angeal nods. “He was talking about it as though it were his own weapon.”

When Zack had first seen Angeal upon waking, the elder was met with disbelief and an assumption about being inside the Lifestream.

The implications are not lost on him. Something has gone very wrong here.

“Let’s wait for the boys to come back from reporting in, and then gather all the info we’ve got so far. Maybe we can figure some of this out,” Angeal suggests after a moment. Wanting to snap Sephiroth out of the dark direction his thoughts have likely turned, he addresses him next, “What’s the brass up to, Seph? Have we been missed yet?”

Green eyes finally meet his from where they’ve been studying the blonde below. “Our absence has been noted, though I believe I was mostly able to smooth it over. The President cares little about how we spend our time, only if we fulfil our duties and remain loyal little pets to him. However, Genesis – you were supposed to have attended a PR meeting today. I informed Lazard we were dealing with a ‘family matter’, but the President will not be appeased as easily.”

‘Family matter’ – a fitting description. Director Lazard is aware of their involvement, and while not always too happy about it, is usually willing to give them a little leeway with it. They are too valuable an asset to upset.

Genesis nods thoughtfully before pressing a sweet little kiss to Sephiroth’s lips and getting up.

“I suppose it is about time I reminded them just why they should be glad of every single minute they are spared of my glorious presence. By the time I’m through with them, they’ll wish I were off dealing with family matters.”

There’s an ominous glint in those spitfire blue eyes, and Angeal watches with pride as the confident diva of a man he fell in love with years ago straightens his uniform shirt, gives him a peck on the cheek and leaves to find that dramatic, flashy coat of his.

Genesis might have been channeling the mama-Chocobo quite a bit during the past hour, but Angeal knows quite well there’s a firestorm of irritation and rage brewing under that pale, freckled skin; especially after what Zack’s last comments implied. The redhead is ready to wreak some havoc.

Angeal almost pities the guys from PR.

After he’s gone, Angeal and Sephiroth get started on dinner, knowing they’ll be able to hear if the other two move in the guest room. He instructs his silver-haired lover on which vegetables to chop and gets started on a roast, since it’s still early enough for one. Angeal’s gaze keeps wandering while he’s seasoning the meat.

He knows Sephiroth has a lot on his mind right now. They all do, but it had seemed like Cloud
particularly singled out Seph back then. The knowledge that the two injured men were suffering under Hojo also isn’t helping matters for now. And when Sephiroth has something on his mind, Angeal knows it will take him a while to work through it in his head, to regard the matter from every possible perspective and come to a temporary conclusion; it’s visible in the way his skin is ever so slightly creased between those silver brows.

That doesn’t mean Angeal can’t give him a little nudge, though.

On the way to grabbing a kitchen towel after washing the seasoning from his fingers, he lays a comfortable hand on the silver General’s waist and remarks, “Don’t blame yourself for things you didn’t do, Sephiroth. Like Zack said, those events apparently haven’t happened here yet, so it’s entirely likely Cloud is transferring his emotions towards another person onto you. For now, let’s just try and figure out what exactly is going on at all.”

Sephiroth gives a non-committal nod, but continues cutting onions in silence. Knowing he’s been heard, Angeal goes to make the filled mushrooms he knows his companion adores.

A while later, when the roast is sizzling in the oven, Zack and Cloud – the young ones – return, both smelling like the body wash Angeal knows Zack to use. Genesis takes a little longer, but eventually, he too saunters through the door as though he owned the place, satisfied smirk in place. After checking in on the two sleeping men in the guest room and exchanging the wet rags on Cloud’s forehead, everyone gathers around the kitchen table.

“First things first,” Angeal takes the lead. “How was your mission? Everything according to plan? Casualties?”

“Nope, sir!” Zack replies with a big grin. Then hastily adds, “Well, not counting that one guy who actually managed to cut himself on the can opener. What a moron. Apart from that, as standard as you can get.”

Cloud nods. “Having three infantrymen come along was completely redundant. We were supposed to be back-up, but Zack could’ve handled those couple Fangs all by his majestic lonesome if he’d wanted to.”

On his spot next to him, Zack claps his hands enthusiastically. “So then, now that that’s out of the way, what’ve we got?” His gaze falls on Sephiroth. “You only gave us the bare gist when you came to pick us up, and this is one seriously freaky situation. Let’s all have a recap of what we know, yea?”

“Yea, why are there two people who look like slightly loony, war-veteran versions of Zack and myself in our home?” Cloud butts in.

Angeal settles back, knowing that the General has been mulling over the matter for a while now and will be able to give the most precise review of what has happened so far. Genesis’ hand slips over to lie comfortably on his thigh from where he’s sitting next to Angeal.

They all listen attentively as Sephiroth connects the tips of his fingers in his ‘thinking pose’ and starts to speak.

“Yesterday, at approximately eleven-hundred, Angeal, Genesis and I became aware of an abnormal energy spike somewhere in the close proximity during our spar in the wastes outside Midgar. When we went to investigate the matter, we happened upon two male individuals upon a cliff-face, one reclining on the ground and the other bent over them. Upon closer inspection, their appearance revealed itself as akin to older versions of Zack and Cloud.
“The Cloud-lookalike – for simplicity to be referred to as Cloud for future reference – appeared to be feeding a potion to the other Zack, yet took up a defensive position using a peculiar broadsword – as seen here – upon noticing our approach. His…” Sephiroth swallowed and looked to the side for a second. “…his hostile reaction seemed to be focused on my person, especially. Once Angeal convinced him to lower his sword, Cloud asked for a Cure materia, which he utilized to heal his companion, using high-level spells. However, he passed out due to mana exhaustion and was transported here with Zack by the three of us.

“The both of them woke at infrequent intervals throughout the past two days, yet were mostly incoherent. I cannot say for sure what exactly happened prior to our arrival at the apartment, but as you have seen, it seems this Cloud harbors a strong resentment and fear for my person and reacted accordingly.”

Gen pipes up from his spot next to Angeal. “He had basically just woken up. I was attempting to get him to drink some water, but he suddenly choked on it like a drowning cat. That’s when you came in, and he simply jumped up, grabbed his sword and rushed at you. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen someone move that fast. Well, apart maybe from myself, or you, Seph. And certainly not a mere few seconds after being unconscious.”

The redhead bites his lip unconsciously, and Angeal sees Cloud halting from where he was about to start to speak, seeing the nonverbal cue from their lover.

“He… didn’t recognize me.”

Cloud gasps. “…what?!!”

“‘Who the fuck are you?’, were his exact words, if I remember correctly.”

“This just keeps getting weirder and weirder, seriously.” Zack rubs a hand through the hair at his neck the way he usually does when he’s agitated, or confused. “Okay, okay… so, two weird guys who kinda look like us randomly appear in the middle of nowhere, one of them almost dying, and rather than being grateful to us for healing them, they start attacking? Great. What else do we know about them?”

While everyone is turning the question over in their heads, Cloud shyly speaks up from his end of the table. “His eyes…” He shudders. “The other Cloud’s, I mean. It’s not just the Mako that’s weird… I dunno how to describe it. They looked so old, and haunted, and like he wasn’t really all there, but at the same time… there was that kind of rage, y’know? It gave me the chills.”

Angeal remembers the heart-stopping fear they all felt when the Cloud-lookalike’s sword came to a halt mere fractions of an inch from their youngest lover’s face. He thinks for a second he couldn’t possibly imagine how that must’ve felt, but then remembers the cold steel of his own Bustersword pressed against the soft skin of his neck and a torn-looking Zack’s hand holding it on the other end, and quickly changes that train of thought.

Their Zack gives Cloud an empathetic fist bump against the shoulder after his comment. “Yea, I know what you mean. That other Zack guy, he had that haunted look too when he thought the other Cloud stopped breathing. He looked so… damn scared.”

“From what I’ve gathered, he seems quite worried about his companion,” Genesis decided to drop in his two cents. “He’s under the impression that Cloud has Mako poisoning, should be incapable of using materia despite the fact that he so clearly did, and was comatose for the better part of a year. He has apparently been taking care of Cloud after escaping a laboratory under the lead of Hojo, yet was surprised about the obvious sword wounds Cloud has somehow suffered.”
Hojo?!” Zack exclaims from across the table, wide eyed. He slaps both palms of his hands on the wood in front of him with a dull ‘thunk’. “…the fuck? You mean… they’re run-away experiments of that crazy mad-man, or something?”

Angeal rubs the scruff across his chin thoughtfully. “It could be possible, for all we know… The problem is, at this point there’s hardly anything we do know, apart from those visible facts we just listed.” He looks to the silverette sitting at the head of the table, hoping the man’s cold, logical way of thinking can shed some light on this situation. “I know you’ve got theories, Seph.”

He nods slowly. “There are several possible explanations which might cover some, but not all of the facts. Theory number one: The two men currently in our bedroom are imposter, sent by an unknown enemy force to infiltrate Shinra or our group specifically in order to gain our trust and gather intel. While we do have made a large amount of enemies throughout our employment as Soldiers, if these two in our bedroom are indeed spies… they are doing a very, horrendously bad job at it. I cannot conjure any reason whatsoever why imposters would feel the need to pose as Zack or Cloud, if they did not attempt to dispose of the originals.”

Crude words, but Angeal can see the tell-tale movement of Sephiroth grabbing Cloud’s hand under the table and likely gripping it tightly.

“Theory number two: These two men are clones, or genetical copies, and have indeed escaped a research facility in which they were being experimented on. It would account for the physical scarring we have observed on their skin, as well as the signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and paranoia. Frankly, I would not put it past Hojo, and he could easily have gained access to your DNA through a routine medical checkup. It does not, however, match some of the comments they have made, leading to a third theory: We are, indeed, housing two injured time travelers in our midst.”

“Whoa, whoa – waaait a second!” Zack exclaimed. “Are you for real?! Time travel’s, like… something I’d expect to see in one of Gen’s fantasy novels,” (‘Oh please, that’s a trope that is so last decade!’), “but we’re talking about real life here, okay?”

“Is… that’s what the other-me was mumbling before he fainted?” Cloud speaks up. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

The blessings of Mako-enhanced hearing, it seems.

Angeal, having been closest at that time, nods. “It was. Ignoring for a second here just how unbelievable the idea sounds – ” He shoots a glance across the table at Zack, who lifts his arms and shoulders in a defensive gesture, swishing his mouth to the side, “ – it would explain most of what we witnessed. The sheer, mind-boggling similarity those two have to you, the fact that they look a little older, have different personalities; how they reacted to our presence so differently than you would have. Why the first thing Cloud asked about was the current year.”

“No, nonono… things still don’t quite add up.” Cloud is ruffling one hand frustratedly through his own hair, messing up the still-drying blond spikes. “He said… the other Zack – he asked something about a mission, one that apparently never happened here.” Soft gaze traveling to Sephiroth, he continues. “One where you… I’m not gonna repeat it. But that was supposed to be a year ago, and it didn’t happen. Even if this Zack and Cloud traveled back in time, and even if they made an impact already on this timeline, it shouldn’t have been able to change what happened last year. It’s impossible.”

Pride swells in Angeal. It’s moments like these that remind him of the fierce intelligence behind those baby blue eyes of the quiet little cadet.
“So, to sum up our ridiculous little fantasy tale,” Gen concludes, “in the year 0002, something happens on a mission to Nibelheim originally concerning a reactor malfunction which causes Sephiroth to kill Cloud’s mother, seriously injure him with Masamune and set Nibelheim aflame. Some, to date unspecified, amount of time later, Cloud and Zack are held as experiments in a lab by Hojo, before breaking out around 0006 and spending about a year on the run, during which Cloud develops Mako poisoning. The adventure somehow ends with Zack being riddled by bullet holes and Cloud receiving sword wounds without Zack’s knowledge, before apparently being sent back in time.

“Only… none of these events have happened so far. Also, judging from their reactions, we can likely assume that Angeal and I are no longer among the living, or at the very least indisposed, where… or when they come from.”

Zack only lifts his hand from his arm where he's crossed them in an incredulous gesture, eyebrows raised, as though to say, ‘See?’

“That… does sound rather like some crazy, made-up story, to be honest,” Cloud admits meekly.

They all sit in silence for a bit.

Sighing, Angeal finally glances at his wrist watch, and leans forward to place his large hands on the table top. “Well, this is getting us nowhere, it seems. We’ll have to ask our two guests if we want to find out any more; for now, at least we are all caught up. And just in time for the roast.”

As if on cue, the little timer starts beeping in the kitchen, and Angeal stands to switch it off before it can wake their visitors.

“Are we all agreed, at least, that these two men likely don’t mean us any harm and that for now, we will treat them with respect and hospitality?”

When his words receive nods all around, concluded by Sephiroth hesitantly inclining his head, he leaves to look after their dinner and start on a quick broth for the injured Cloud.

Afterwards, they all flock into the guest room, where Zack is still wrapped protectively around the prone, blond form, breathing quietly in sleep. Their Zack coos quietly at the sight. The man startles when the first of them sinks down on the mattress, reaching for a sword that’s not there, but he calms quickly when he sees who it is.

“Huh… s’ppose that wasn’t just some weird, fucked-up dream then, huh?” Zack sits up gingerly and rubs the sleep from his eyes. Angeal notices he’s keeping his voice low so as not to wake Cloud, and adjusts his own accordingly after settling on the covers next to Zack’s feet.

“I’m afraid not so.”

It’s a tight fit, but somehow all five of them have found some space to sit next to their two guests on the bed.

“Dinner’s just about ready, Zack; but if you didn’t mind, we would like to get some questions answered first.”

“Sure… um, shoot, I guess.” The ravenette shrugs, but it’s obvious his mind is at least halfway focused on the blond bundle at his side. Cloud seems no longer limp in unconsciousness, having finally slipped into a healing sleep instead; but he his twitching restlessly, eyeballs rolling behind lids in dreams. His fever has not passed yet. Zack keeps up an absentminded caress on the boy’s bare forearm.
Genesis rearranges his legs briefly to gain a more comfortable position between the folds of the bed sheets, before commenting, “I believe now would be a good time for your aforementioned, ‘sitting in a circle and telling each other what we know’ affair.” Meanwhile Cloud – their Cloud, and isn’t this starting to get confusing – settles into Sephiroth’ arms comfortably. Their guest watches the interaction with curious eyes. “It’s not quite a circle, but it should do.”

Older Zack leans against the headboard, but keeps a hand on his companion at all times as though to reassure himself of his presence.

“Well, I don’t quite know where to start. We were on the run, we got caught, I was gunned down by an infantry platoon. Put a good dent into them, though. I’d thought I was a goner. And to think we’d been so close to Midgar, too…” He trails off for a bit, eyes on the soft sleep pants in front of him, before catching himself. “At least I’d managed to keep them distracted from Cloud. I gave him my sword, and told him to stay alive. After that things go fuzzy from the blood loss. I’m pretty sure he left, and that I was dying. But I’m not. I should be dead but I’m not and I don’t get it.” An agitated hand runs through dark tresses.

The motion looks so familiar it causes a sharp, stinging sensation somewhere in Angeal’s gut.

He had already guessed from the shape of the wounds what kind of gun the bullets must have come from, but to hear it confirmed by the respective victim is another thing entirely. Angeal knows very well Shinra as a whole is known for its less than honorable ways, but… to shoot at a single escapee with an entire platoon… He shudders.

He’s glad when Sephiroth picks up the thread of conversation.

“What about Cloud, then? You seemed confused by his injuries, and ability to use materia. Did he not receive those wounds during your flight?”

“That’s where it gets baffling, alright? He was catatonic for a long time and lost tons of weight, but he wasn’t hurt. At least he wasn’t when I last saw him. I mean, I’ll admit I wasn’t incredibly observant anymore in my state, but he was in no condition to protect himself. If someone had gotten to him with a sword, he wouldn’t’ve made it out with just a few wounds. Plus, infantry aren’t known to use that kinda weapon.”

He looks down to the sleeping Cloud below and regards him carefully. “He’s… he looks – different. Older, somehow.” A hand carefully traces the side of the blonde’s face, the edge of his jaw, thoughtfully. “You said he… doesn’t have Mako poisoning, right now?”

Genesis nods.

“That shouldn’t be possible… He was so far gone, there’s no way he’d recover overnight. I should know, I’m the one who took care for him.”

From his spot in Sephiroth’ arms, their Cloud speaks up. “You mentioned something about labs and Hojo. Is that where he got poisoned?”

Watching the ravenette closely as he is, Angeal can almost pinpoint the exact moment Zack freezes, muscles locking up. He’s stopped breathing, too, and those bright blue eyes glaze over, making him look more corpse-like than living.

“Zack?!”

When he doesn’t respond, Angeal is the first to shuffle closer on the bed, past older Cloud’s legs, to grasp Zack’s hands gently in his. He’s careful not to startle him, keeping his movements slow once
he’s reached him, and starts gently massaging the warm hands while calling Zack’s name again to bring him back to the present.

“It’s alright, Zack… you’re safe. Come back to us. You’re safe here.”

It breaks Angeal’s heart how long it takes Zack’s eyes to refocus on him, to suck in a heaving breath and blink the memories from his eyes. From his peripheral, he can see Genesis has moved closer as well in concern.

“…sorry. Yea. They – ” He swallows roughly. “I don’t even really know what they were trying to achieve, to be honest. Sometimes, he – Hojo, he’d mumble something about… clones, and… and ‘Reunion’. S-cells. I think… He was trying to turn us into Sephiroth-clones. Since he couldn’t quite believe his most-prized experiment got one-upped by a weak, unenhanced trooper.”

Zack – the other one – butts in. “Wai-wai-wait. What do you mean, one-upped?! When did Seph ever get beat by a trooper?”

“I – “

“Are you two clones?”

The words from the curious blonde are enough to shut everyone up for a second as they address this more pressing matter.

Zack freezes again, and for a second, Angeal fears he’s caught in another flashback, but then he explodes. “No way… I am not a fucking clone!! I’m my own person, I am Zackary Caleb Fair, born in Gongaga to Theodore and Geneva Fair, and I am not just– some, some fricking… copy of someone else!!”

Before Cloud can lift his hands in apology, quite another blonde seems to be reacting heavily to the words. Next to Angeal’s thigh, elder-Cloud’s legs have started twitching; the man rolls over onto his back to bump against Zack’s thigh at the same time that a soft keening sound escapes chapped, parted lips.

“Cloud? Hey buddy, can you hear me? It’s okay,” Zack tries to reassure, slipping down on the bed to kneel beside the blonde and sliding one hand into his friend’s hair, the other one gently restraining his bucking shoulder.

The keening soon gives way to some desperate grunts and whimpers, tearing at all of their heartstrings. Cloud’s breathing picks up, and his limbs start flailing wildly in response to his fever-induced night terrors. A flying arm clips Zack square on the nose before Angeal grabs the clammy, hot skin and pins him down.

“It’s okay, Spike. I’ve got ya, I’ve got ya. Shh... Come on, Cloud.” The words are meant to be reassuring, but Angeal can hear the frightened, helpless undertones. One of the others – he doesn’t turn to check who – is helping by restraining Cloud’s kicking legs.

Cloud starts mumbling, and the volume of it picks up, though the words remain incoherent through the hyperventilating wheezes. His back arches off the mattress before he suddenly jumps upright, almost bumping heads with Zack who moves out of the way at the last second, and lets out a desperate cry that rasps in his throat.

“Aerith!!”

Up close, Angeal can see the white around Mako-blue irises, eyes blown-wide in terror. But then
Zack is blocking his view by moving to wrap his arms fully around the shuddering blonde and pressing him as close to himself as physically possible. Their foreheads connect in a strangely intimate gesture and Zack’s hand gently forces Cloud’s disoriented gaze to connect with his own.

“Shhh… shhh.”

“Z- Zack?” Cloud’s voice sounds still rough from his earlier scream, but once his eyes focus on his companion, he scrambles to claw at the other’s shirt with weak hands and stutters out words as though the world might end if he didn’t. “I–I’m – sorry. I’m sorry, I’m so s-orry, Zack! I’m sorry…”

The ravenette tries his best to calm the hysterical man in his arms with touch and soft words, and Angeal almost feels as though he were intruding on a private moment. Any interference from his part feels like it would be unwelcome right now. The way Zack’s thumb caresses the skin over Cloud’s cheekbone with the utmost tenderness, how they stare into each other’s eyes, how he mumbles sweet nothings until the man’s breathing evens out again and strokes his shoulder in a practiced manner… it’s obvious Zack cares about him very, very much. In some distant part of his mind, Angeal is glad these two seem to have found each other through their trials.

Eventually, Cloud’s energy seems to run out. His eyes stay on Zack like a drowning man, like Zack might vanish if he dares to look away, but finally they roll into the back of his head and his body falls limp again. Zack carefully lowers his friend back to the mattress.

The sound of someone shifting on the sheets behind him suddenly reminds Angeal again that they’re not alone. Genesis’ hand finds his, and they exchange a wordless glance for a moment.

The occurrence of Cloud’s nightmares is apparently common enough that Zack doesn’t feel the need to comment on it. Instead, something else catches his eyes.

“Huh… how did I miss this before? It – hey. This almost looks like…” His fingers have found a faded, pink ribbon tied around Cloud’s left upper arm and start fiddling with it. “Aerith used to wear one just like that, in her hair. I bought it for her. Why would…”

Next to him, Genesis speaks up. “I tried to get it off earlier in the bath, but that blasted knot wouldn’t open. He must have been wearing it for a while.”

Zack sighs, shoulders slumping. “This is making less and less sense, I swear. I told Cloudy-boy about Aerith, yeah, but he never met her. Not that I’d know. So what’s he apologizing for? It must’a been something bad, the way he reacted. And where did that ribbon come from?!”

In the following quiet, a shy voice is raised. “What if…” Angeal had almost forgotten about their little blond bundle in Sephiroth’ arms during the excitement, but it seems young Cloud has not been idle. “What if he’s… from even further into the future than you?”

“…huh?” Zack lifts curious eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” Cloud looks intimidated by all the attention on him for the slightest moment, but then squares his shoulders and explains his theory. “you look older than our Zack, but then, your Cloud looks even older than you’d be expecting of him. So what if… he’s from even further ahead than you are, where he somehow got pulled into some funny time travel business, and on the way back, he grabbed you along for the ride? It’d explain why he seemed to have a rough idea earlier about what was going on, while you didn’t.”

“Hm. That’s… well, it sounds plausible. But… it still doesn’t explain why things are so different here, though.”
“You know what?” This time it’s the younger Zack jumping into the conversation, spreading his hands. “This is already ridiculous enough, so why not go all out? Maybe you weren’t supposed to be in on the time travel fun ride at all, so the fact that you somehow were made everything go topsy-turvy and you two ended up tumbling into a bloody parallel dimension or some nonsense like that? You know, that theory with the different choices and the universes in the bubbles and stuff like that? Man, this shit sounds crazy enough someone would write a story about it.”

Angeal doesn’t really know what to think of all of this anymore. All of it sounds so… unreal. Time travel? Parallel dimensions?? None of it sounds like anything that would simply happen to him on a normal work day, even at Shinra, yet the proof seems to be sitting (and laying) right in front of him. The elder Zack has a thoughtful frown marring his face, and Angeal can see Genesis’ eyes narrowing skeptically. Sephiroth is staying curiously quiet, mulling things over in his head.

He really just wants to go and water his plants a little, right then. Take care of the simple things in life.

Old-Zack sighs. “What did you get us into here, Spikey; huh?” His fingers have found the sleeping Cloud’s hair again to pet it gently (he seems to be doing that a lot… not that Angeal can’t empathize) when suddenly, a loud rumble sounds from his stomach. Zack blushes.

“Well, looks like we shall have to wait until your darling sleeping beauty here awakes from slumber and regains coherency again before any of our questions will find answers. So let’s eat before the food grows even colder,” Genesis suggests in an onset of sudden pragmatism.

With a bit of shuffling, the group moves back into the living area, Angeal and Zack trailing behind after feeding the unconscious Cloud some more water.

…

Zack is loath to leave his wounded friend lying alone in the bedroom, but the rational part of his mind tells him there’s nothing more he could do by sitting at his bedside other than maybe give some comfort. The healing is something Cloud must do on his own; and he will hear from one room over if the blonde is doing any worse.

Besides, the promise of a good, hearty meal is too enticing to miss out on.

When he steps into the living room, the earlier distant smell of warm, roasted meat and something spicy increases by a hundredfold, causing Zack’s mouth to water. He trails after his younger alter ego and Genesis to help set up the table while Angeal finishes some last preparations on the meal.

Sephiroth and the mini-Cloud stand aside to let them through with the plates, drinks and cutlery, and Zack could’ve sworn he heard Seph asking the blonde in a whisper what the words ‘topsy-turvy’ mean. He has to suppress a snort as Cloud explains, then does a double-take over his shoulder when he sees the silverette giving Cloud a little peck on the lips in thanks.

Um – o…kay. That’s a thing, then.

The old, worn table in a corner of the living room is one he doesn’t remember from the few times he had been allowed to visit Angeal’s apartment in the past. Neither does he recognize the conglomeration of mismatched chairs around it. The Angeal he knew used to eat by himself at a small table in the kitchen, sometimes expanded by two chairs when some certain First Class Soldiers would come over for his cooking. He briefly trails his fingers over the grain in the wood when he sets down the plates.
All the little potted plants dotting the room are familiar, though.

With everyone working together, it doesn’t take long at all until everyone is seated around a full table, filled with a steaming roast, vegetables, mashed potatoes, bread and sauce. Looks like Angeal went all out. Zack’s eyes go a little glassy at the sight of all the food, freely accessible, without having to hunt it first or steal from an inn or stall with the utmost stealth. It’s been… so long.

“Zack?”

Genesis concerned question brings him back to the present.

“Sorry. I… heh, it’s just been a while since I’ve had some actual food like this. I mean… home cooked food. From a kitchen. I almost forgot what it…”

He trails off awkwardly, not sure how to continue. It’s… pathetic, he thinks. How tears are almost stinging behind his eyes just from the simple fact that he has some roast and potatoes on a plate in front of him without the guilty conscience of having had to steal it from someone.

Thankfully, Genesis seems to pick up on his mood and goes to smooth the conversation over fluidly. “Yes, this really does look great, doesn’t it? Thank you Angeal, darling. This must have been some work.” He rubs a graceful hand down Angeal’s arm.

(Has he always been this touchy?)

“Seph helped.”

Zack is grateful for the deflection. He follows Angeal’s smiling gaze to the silver-haired Soldier, and notices he doesn’t have any of the roast on his plate yet. He goes to offer him some, but Sephiroth shakes his head.

“He’s vegetarian,” Cloud provides.

Oh.

“Oh.”

Huh.

Then – “…why?”

“Because Hojo doesn’t like it.”

Zack stares at him wide-eyed, until Sephiroth starts to fidget lightly under his gaze, then looks back at his plate with a quiet, approving smile. Did the old Sephiroth from his world, too, become a vegetarian just to spite Hojo? He can’t remember, and it kinda stings him that he doesn’t know this little fact about his friend. Probably not, though. He had seemed quite dependent on Hojo, back then. He watches the silverette across from him pile more stuffed mushrooms onto his plate.

Fucking rebel Seph, man. You go.

The first bite of meat practically melts on Zack’s tongue. Juicy, sweet, tender… he closes his eyes for a second to fully appreciate the various herbs and spices and never could acquire on their run through the wilderness. The others respectfully let him have his moment, but he’s sure to give his praises to the cook once his mouth is empty once more. He wishes Cloud in the other room could eat this right now.
They keep conversation over dinner mostly lighthearted, knowing that talking about the darker subjects lurking just below the surface of this token peace would only spoil everyone’s appetite. Genesis playfully reminds mini-Zack of that when a comment strays dangerously close to one of those topics. For now, everyone just seems happy to be able to enjoy a meal together.

Somehow, the question comes up about how the present Clouds and Zacks should be distinguished from each other verbally.

“Well… I’ve kinda started calling you and Cloud mini-me and mini-Cloud in my head,” Zack provides. The suggestion is shot down by his counterpart immediately (though mini-Cloud also gives a very cute, pouty frown).

“H-hey! I’m not a goddamn mini! I’m almost as tall as you! I’ve been mentally calling you two ‘the old dudes’ – fits way better!”

“Pff, and that makes you what, ‘the kiddos’?”

“Geezer!”

“Hey, I’m not that old!”

“How old are you, exactly?” asks Seph.


Cloud frowns. “How can you not be sure?”

“Well… I didn’t exactly have a calendar at hand the past year. But I think it was around fall when they caught up to us, going on winter, so I must’ve had a birthday somewhere in between there.”

The mini-Cloud looks pretty upset at those news, and Zack hurries to distract him from it.

“What’s the date, anyway? I mean, apart from the year.”

“September 9th.”

“Ah. Well, anyway. See?” He turns back to his mini-me. “Not a geezer yet.”

“Are too!”

They throw some more ideas back and forth (Zack A and Zack B, cool Zack and weird Zack, hedgehog Zack and duck-butt Zack – the younger one gets a light cuff over the head by Genesis for some of his more ridiculous ideas, though he only keeps snickering), and in the end Angeal decides to intervene with his usual calm and reason. They settle on ‘young Zack/Cloud’ and ‘old Zack/Cloud’ – despite the protests that Zack isn’t that old yet, it’s the easiest to remember and distinguish them by.

Zack realizes with a pang he doesn’t even know how old Cloud is.

They continue eating, and Zack watches the others interact. It seems so fluent; practiced and familiar, every gesture, the way they anticipate when someone will need the salt and hand it over, or offer some more bread before the other can even request it; the easy smiles and conversation. It’s as though they spend a lot of time together as friends. He wonders how that came to be; but then again, he knows Angeal, Genesis and Sephiroth all used to be friends, he was Angeal’s student after all, and… it does quite seem as though young Cloud and Seph have a thing going between them – he’s
seen them being rather touchy-feely with each other on multiple occasions now.

That’s why it really throws him for a loop when Genesis slings his arm comfortably around young Cloud’s shoulders to draw him into a warm embrace and whispers some thing or another into his ear, forehead against temple.

“You guys seem… awfully close,” he remarks, candidly confused and reaching for his glass.

The two freeze, and then he’s met with equal confusion. “Um…” Cloud starts. “Well, d’uh. Why wouldn’t I get hugged by my boyfriend?”

Zack coughs and sputters out the water that just entered his mouth.

“W- … what?!” He coughs some more to get rid of the fluid in his airways. He stares at the pair wide-eyed. “What the actual fuck? Weren’t you just… kissing Sephiroth?”

His gaze wanders between all five of them, who are regarding him with stunned expressions. Hello-oh, is he the only one finding something weird here?!

Then, one after another, surprised realization blooms on their faces. What in Odin’s name is he missing?

Cloud starts asking, “You mean, you aren’t – I mean, you weren’t…?”

“We are all together,” Genesis clears up.

Um.

“…huh?”


When he sees Zack isn’t following, the redhead elaborates. “All five of us are romantically involved. In a relationship. It’s not always easy, but we’ve made it work.” He presses a kiss to Cloud’s temple before lifting his hand from below the table to show that it has tangled with Angeal’s. Next to Zack, his counterpart has leant to the side to give Sephiroth an enthusiastic glomp.

Zack stares.

“Um… Zack?”

Something pokes his shoulder.

“I think we broke him.”

“Nonsense. You can’t break someone like that.”

“Look at him! He’s just staring forlornly into the middle distance. He’s totally broken! Where’s the repair kit? Hey, don’t hit me!”

Zack blinks repeatedly, then clears his throat. “Sorry.” He coughs again. “I just… um. Wasn’t expecting that, I guess.”

“Wait, do you mean you guys weren’t together? Our counterparts, I mean?” Cloud asks.

The mere idea makes a hysterical laugh bubble up in his throat. He suppresses it. “Pf, hell no. I
mean…” Now that he thinks about it, “no clue if there ever was anything between Sephiroth, Angeal and Genesis, but. Angeal was my teacher, man! I’d never be able to think of him that way – no offense,” he directs at the man to his side.

“None taken.”

Young Zack is frowning and crossing his arms. “But, wait… you and Cloud are together, aren’t you?”

“Huh? Me and Spike? Why’d you think that?” He’s met with stunned expressions all round again. “…seriously? Spike’s my buddy, not my boyfriend. There’s a difference.”

The expressions don’t vanish. Seriously, what the heck?! Where did they get that impression? Sure, Cloud was pretty damn handsome with that chiseled, pale face of his, the big, blue eyes and cute blush; with his fluffy hair and stubborn determination and big, steady heart, or his… wait, did he just call Cloud cute?

“You two seemed terribly close, earlier,” Angeal explains. “Are you sure you two aren’t…”

“Like I said, no! He’s my friend, nothing more. He’s gone through some pretty crappy stuff and needs someone to take care of him.” He doesn’t mention how he knows he’s guilty for dragging Cloud into said crappy stuff to begin with. But he is. Oh, and that’s right – “Besides, I have a girlfriend! Had. Sorta.” He sighs and rubs his hand down his neck. “At least I did before that whole mess in Nibelheim. I promised her I’d come home… I knew she was waiting for me.”

The others are taken aback by the admission. Thinking about Aerith is taking Zack’s mind down a darker path, so he is quick to switch the subject.

“But, really? All five of you? I mean, I’m all for more love in the world and shit, but how does that even work?”

And that is how Zack Fair learned that his counterpart was happily involved in a fivesome.

The thought… weirds him out, a little, in the beginning. It’s just so new and strange, he’s never even thought about it being a possibility before. But the other men are patient in explaining it to him. Apparently, Genesis and Angeal had been lovers since before they even left Banora. During the Wutai War, the quiet Silver General was added to the equation, and younger Zack joined about two years ago, though it had taken Angeal a while to concede with his then-students wish (even though everyone else had been more than on board). Cloud was the most recent addition, still relatively new to the relationship. He and Zack had met on a mission and grown very close; it was only a matter of time of him meeting the Trinity, and subsequently worming his curious, sweet way into their lives.

Having so many partners simultaneously had its difficulties, yes, but somehow they always managed to make time for each other in their busy military schedules, and talk about any conflicts and disagreements. Communication was key, they stress.

Younger Zack concludes, “Well – no matter what you say, I definitely happen to have the hots for Cloud.” He stands up and gives the boy in question a large smooch. Zack thinks it’s weird, but at the same time can’t stop looking.

Afterwards, the group moves to the couches; Zack and Angeal trail behind after feeding old Cloud the broth Angeal prepared earlier. The motions of making the unconscious Cloud drink have become second nature to Zack, but after a bit of maneuvering, he notices it’s even easier to do with two people.
Back in the sitting room, Zack moves to take the armchair so that Angeal can go sit with his lovers (that realization is still sinking in), but Genesis and Cloud make space between them on the couch for him and invite him over, so he joins them out of politeness. He melts into the soft cushions with a heartfelt sigh.

“You want a beer, Zack?” Angeal asks from the kitchen.

“Hell yea!”

“I meant old Zack.”

“Sure.”

Young Zack bristles playfully. The frown is kissed off his face with a wink by Angeal when he returns with several bottles in his arms, which he passes out to those that want one. Zack accepts his bottle and the opener curtesy of Genesis gratefully. He doesn’t know if he can even get drunk, what with the enhancements and whatever Hojo did, but the cool liquid feels good against his throat.

“How is your chest doing?” Genesis asks, politely, but with genuine concern behind it.

Zack rubs at his shirt. He’d nearly forgotten about his injury. “A lot better. I hardly even feel it anymore. Guess all that sleep helped a lot.”

Genesis smiles, takes the bottle opener back and hands it across to the other couch’s occupants.

“So-o…” young Zack starts, and Sephiroth, sat next to him, continues.

“Assuming you and Cloud actually are time travelers from a parallel reality, would you mind telling us a little more about where you came from?”

Zack knows they must all be burning with curiosity, judging by the obvious differences between their lives, and so after another gulp of beer, he starts telling his story.

“When I was thirteen, I ran away from home and joined Shinra, and maybe that was my first mistake. But you never know till afterwards, do ya? I was young, I was ambitious, and I had dreams. With fourteen, I was assigned to Angeal as my mentor. By the time I’d reached sixteen, I’d made it to

Second Class – youngest in the history of Shinra, apart from the Holy Trinity, of course.” He laughs. “Angeal had just recommended me for First when everything… went downhill.”

The smile slowly vanishes.

“One month before that, Soldier First Class Genesis Rhapsodos defected from Shinra, taking a large portion of the troops with him. No one knew what he was up to. Angeal and I were assigned his original mission – capturing Fort Tamblin, effectively ending the Wutai War. Director Lazard accompanied us to evaluate my performance. Only, during that mission… Angeal defected as well, to go after Genesis.”

Zack somehow manages to keep his voice clipped and to the point. Just get it over with, like ripping a band aid off. Ignore all the things those memories are bringing to the front; the confusion, the hurt, the disbelief. It’s over, anyway.

“Why?” the redhead to his side asks. Zack turns his head and eyes him silently. So far, Genesis seems to be taking the story well, but his face is hard to read. There’s a glint in his eyes, and a
confused frown between his brows. “Why did my counterpart defect?”

Zack takes a deep breath. He will have to make a choice here. Unless things are entirely different in this world, neither of the Trinity has any idea of their origins, and none of it is pretty. Them finding out in a wrong way was what fucked things up the last time – Genesis through Hollander when his degradation set in, and Sephiroth in that Mako reactor, surrounded by misshapen, failed experiments and his alien mother lurking behind a metal door – so he needs to be sure he does it right this time. He needs…

He needs more time. Time to figure out how to break this to them gently.

After a moment, he decides on, “Because Shinra screwed him over.” (And didn’t it all of them?) “His cells were degrading because of something Shinra did. He… he was dying, I think.”

Genesis leans back on the sofa gingerly, mulling it over.

“Anyway, he teamed up with Professor Hollander, who’d lost the power struggle against Hojo. Apparently, Hollander had promised Genesis to cure his degradation, but really he just saw an opportunity to create an army. He used Genesis’ cells, and later Angeal’s too, to turn the Soldiers Genesis had brought with him into copies of him. Some of them attacked us outside Fort Tamblin – that’s how Sephiroth and I found out that him and Hollander were in league.

“Later, I was sent to Banora together with Tseng to… snoop around, I guess. Figure out what they were up to. We found Genesis in an abandoned factory; he attacked us, Angeal intervened. Seemed like he couldn’t quite decide yet just which side to choose. After they left, Tseng informed me they were going to bomb Banora to cover up all the shit that’s been going on – Shinra’s good at that. I tried to warn Angeal’s mother, but… turned out she’d killed herself.”

No need to mention he’d at first suspected Angeal of being her murderer.

Lifting his head at the man in question, Zack can see a frown marring his ex-mentor’s face, but he’s glad he doesn’t ask for Gilian’s reasons.

“A few months later, I was promoted to Soldier First Class. But, I guess I felt sort of cheated… I’d gained my dream, but lost my mentor in the process. Angeal and Genesis had both been declared MIA by that time, and Seph and I were on orders to dispose of them if the chance presented itself. They were enemies to Shinra.” He takes a sip from his bottle, knowing the next part of the story would be hard. “I ran into Angeal again shortly after that, in Mako reactor five. While Sephiroth confronted Genesis, I was running after Hollander, but Angeal intervened and allowed him to escape. Turned out… Angeal had sprouted a wing, the same as Genesis. Due to something in his genes, from what Shinra did to them.”

“Wings?” young Zack questions. “You mean, like… angel’s wings?”

Zack barks a surprised, sharp laugh that burns in his throat. “That’s what I said. But…” He shakes his head, looking to the side. “He only saw himself as a monster. ’ Angels dream of one thing – to be human ’ ,” he quotes quietly.

He has to gather himself for a moment before he continues.

“Through the following fight, I fell down into the slums and met Aerith – probably the only good thing to happen to me that year. Well, and meeting Cloud, of course,” he adds with a smile. It soon vanishes. “Though maybe the kid would have been better off never knowing me.

“He was assigned to my mission to Modeoheim, a cute, curious little trooper of fourteen. Backwater
expert, like me. On that mission, I ran into Genesis again. We fought, and he fell into the depth of a Mako reactor."

"If this world seeks my destruction... it goes with me."

"I’d thought he was done for. Turns out later he used that nifty little wing of his to run off again, though."

Zack steels himself. The next part... the next part. Yea.

He can do this.

"I chased Hollander into an abandoned bath house. There, Angeal was waiting for me."

"Zack, do you remember what I said?"

He can do this.

"He..."

"About our enemy being all that creates suffering?"

"He..."

His hands clench white-knuckled around the bottle.

Wings and scales and a large, gaping mouth full of razor spikes, ready to grip and maul and stepstespliuide don’t let that trident get you don’t stop to think, don’t feel when your sword pierces that thick armor--

"I created my own suffering."

A gasp leaves his lips. He can’t fucking breathe, he can’t – hides his face behind his hand, somewhere across he knows Angeal is watching, is judging, and he knows, fucking has to know what Zack has done, that he’s housing his own murderer – and hell, the guilt is chewing him up from inside like a living thing; he should’ve tried harder, should’ve, there had to have been a way, if only –

"Protect your honor, always!"

He can’t do this.

"Zack, Zack!"

Arms around him, warm and comforting, he doesn’t deserve them; and Angeal kneeling on the floor in front of him. Disoriented, for a second he expects to see a pure, white wing sprouting from that shoulder, but it’s not; he’s on the couch, on a couch in a different dimension drinking beer with his old friends’ counterparts and recounting the story of his life.

Genesis has him wrapped in an embrace, Angeal’s hands are on his knee and younger Cloud’s fingers soothing down his back. For a second, he just wants to turn into the redhead’s chest and cry his heart out, the way he did back then with Aerith’ arms around his neck, but he knows if he breaks down now he’ll never be able to pull himself back together.

Get a grip, Soldier.
His throat feels dry and he takes another gulp of beer. It’s grown warm in his hands.

“He gave me his sword before he d-died.” Zack is proud of himself for almost getting it out without a stumble. “Told me to protect my honor.” He gives a little laugh; it sounds watery to his ears. “Always the lecturer, to the very end.”

Zack takes a deep breath and leans back, gently dislodging Genesis arms. He gives him a grateful smile, but can’t hold anyone’s gaze for long. Angeal removes his hands, but doesn’t return to the armchair, instead opting to sit back cross-legged on the carpet.

Time to get this over with.

He talks about how he became a Soldier commander, the return of the Genesis clones that informed them of Genesis’ survival, Lazard’s betrayal, building flower wagons with Aerith. Then comes Nibelheim.

He can feel his rapt audience is eager to hear about this mission, already knowing that it was some life-changing event for Sephiroth; for all of them.

“Sephiroth, Cloud, another trooper and I were sent to Nibelheim to fix a reactor malfunction. It was simple to repair, but… that day, in the reactor… everything went to hell when Seph found out the truth about Jenova.”

“Jenova?” The Silver General is leaning forward, attention focused solely on Zack. “My mother?”

"Mother… let’s take back the planet together."

“What do you know about her?” Zack asks.

Sephiroth tilts his head. “Only her name, and that she died after my birth.” Exactly the same as in the old world, then. “Who is she, Zack?”

Zack chews on his lower lip, thinking. *Stall for time, do this right.*

“Look, I – I know you want to know about her, and why she’s so important. The same way you two,” he indicates Genesis and Angeal, “likely want to know what it is Shinra did to your counterparts to make them defect. But, the thing is…” His voice grows quiet. “Last time, you all found out in the worst way possible, and it caused you to go off the deep end. I’m not even sure how much of the things the other yous were told was the truth and how much was a lie. I need to get my facts straight first. And… if Cloud really is from further ahead in the future than me, he might know some more. Please… just gimme some time, okay?”

"Am I… a human being?"

Zack lifts his puppy eyes to the three men in question. They don’t look happy with it, exchanging glances with each other in silent communication, but in the end, they nod.

“Okay, Zack,” Angeal says. “We trust you. But we won’t wait forever until we start searching for our own answers.”

Trust.

He’ll do his best not to break it.

“Afterwards, Sephiroth locked himself in the Nibel mansion for an entire week, looking through
Hojo’s research. He emerged on the seventh day, but… he wasn’t the same man I knew anymore. He set Nibelheim on fire and killed most of the townspeople, among them Cloud’s mother and the mayor, and continued on to the reactor. When I caught up to him, we fought; I lost. Cloud came after us, he took up my sword, and took on Sephiroth by himself. He was hurt bad, but somehow… he did it. It must’ve been pure power of will, but after Sephiroth had skewered him with Masamune, Cloud used his grip on the sword to throw him into the Mako reactor, where he died.” He moves on quickly, just wanting to bring the narration to an end.

“Hojo showed up after that; he was furious that someone had managed to defeat his most glorious of creations. We were both too weak to fight him when he took us into the labs under the mansion with him. That day, I lost both my freedom and one of my best friends… if Sephiroth could be called that.” Zack’s brows pull together. “Before, he had often pushed missions to do with his rogue friends on me. I was mad at him for it, that he’d make me deal with it, until I found out he believed in me… believed I’d be able to bring them back. I failed with both Genesis and Angeal, and that day, I failed him, too.

“Hojo injected us with S-cell to try to turn us into Sephiroth-clones, but after a while he deemed us failed experiments and left us in the Mako pods. After four years, I managed to break us out, and the rest you know.”

Zack’s voice has gone dry by the end of his story, so he finishes his beer in two large swallows. The others are quiet while they try to digest everything they heard. Finally, Angeal rises from his perch on the floor and stands before Zack, taking his hands in his own.

“I’m sure you did everything in your power to save them, Zack.”

Angeal’s eyes are warm and honest, and it’ll be a while before Zack will be able to forgive himself, but the words make something deep inside him unclench just a little. His fingers are squeezed and released, before Angeal sits back in the armchair opposite him. Next, it’s Genesis who speaks up.

“You have mentioned the untimely ends of both Angeal and Sephiroth, but what about my alter ego? Did he die, too?”

Zack leans back on the couch to better be able to regard the redhead next to him. “Actually… no. I ran into him while we were on the run. He managed to cure his degradation, but what became of him afterwards, I don’t know.”

Genesis nods and falls into silence.

"This is… unreal," young Cloud breathes.

A look around tells Zack that everyone seems to need some time to chew on this; Sephiroth especially. The pinched expression on his face makes Zack want to give him another hug, tell him it’s okay and that he didn’t do any of these things, but he thinks it’s too early yet. Besides, younger Zack already seems to have picked up on the man’s distress and is running his fingers through the long silver hair soothingly.

Eventually, they call it a night and head to bed.

Over the next few days, Cloud remains mostly unconscious and is busy mending, but Zack feels his own strength returning more with every day and uses it to get to know his hosts a little better.

That morning, he’s up early, falling back into his sleep rhythm of ‘don’t lie around defenseless in the wilderness during daylight’. When he pads into the living room, he stumbles upon Angeal taking
care of his plants, and after a moment joins him quietly. The work is oddly soothing, the feel of fleshy succulents and wispy ferns under his hands, and Angeal doesn’t seem to mind the company. A new routine is born.

Whenever he walks past the windows and sees Midgar stretched out below him, Zack feels a tug somewhere behind his stomach. He’s really here, he’s back in Midgar, he made it, and he’s in the heart of Shinra behind metal walls with Hojo running somewhere around the tower doing his dirty business unimpeded. He wants nothing more than to find him, to rip him apart for what he did to the both of them... but he can't. Not yet. He needs patience.

Zack banishes the disconcerting thoughts from his mind by watching his new friends interact. It’s the small things, Zack notices, that really show him how much they all care about each other if he just pays enough attention. To be honest, when he first found out about their fiveway relationship, he’d been expecting everyone being overly lovey-dovey with each other all the time, not to speak of the weird sex scenes he’s had in mind at the idea. But it’s really more casual, and a lot more subtle than that. Maybe they’re downplaying it a bit for his sake, but he doesn’t think so.

It’s in the way Genesis scratches Sephiroth’ scalp over the back of the couch when he comes over in the morning to get rid of the achiness, how young Zack immediately covers Cloud in a blanket when he shivers in his thin shirt because the cadet uniform is in the wash, how Sephiroth looks Angeal in the eyes when the elder is telling him about his day even though eye contact would make him uncomfortable with anyone outside their little group, or the way little Cloud tangles his feet with Genesis’ under the dinner table. Or how even small arguments and bouts of grumpiness aren’t that big of a deal – they happen, they pass, they apologize. The end.

Meanwhile, Cloud slowly starts getting better. The fever hasn’t broken yet, but at the very least lowered. He has more bouts of consciousness, if not coherency, in which they manage to feed him some slightly more solid food, like thick broth or porridge. Cloud’s mana levels slowly start stabilizing, to the point where they can actually heal Cloud’s slowly mending wounds with a Cure.

Angeal and Zack talk a little about how malnourished Cloud is and how rather thin Zack is, too. Zack tells him about how they mostly lived off the local wildlife and whatever he could scavenge from the towns that would be easy for Cloud to eat. He had to steal, since they didn’t have any money and had to lie low. Not very honorable, but he did what he had to for them to stay alive. He gets lost in a memory for a bit, and when Angeal questions him about it, he asks his mentor if he really never did steal from Genesis’ parents’ apple trees as a kid.

Angeal replies, “I never stole from my friend’s tree. But that does not mean I did not steal from it before he was my friend,” with a wink. When his mentor mentions how Zack really has taken the ‘honor’ thing to heart Zack agrees, but when he can feel Angeal trying to steer the conversation into the direction of his own death, he blocks off again. He’s not ready for this yet.

Despite the fact they are now housing two stranded time travelers, the Soldiers and cadet do have busy schedules and Zack rarely sees them all together anymore, though they try to have at least one person check in on the two regularly. During the times no one apart from the sleeping Cloud is around to keep Zack company, he leans up against the headboard on the bed and looks up info on the laptop he borrowed from younger Zack (when the latter mentioned he only used it for playing minesweeper, anyway, he got a stern scolding from his former mentor).

Zack takes stock of the differences between his new and old world, and seems the most baffled by a certain red-haired Commander. Where the Genesis he knew was bitter, prideful and self-centered, this one seems to be the complete opposite. Sure, the fiery personality and frequent bursts of temper are similar, as is the occasional inclination for the melodramatic, but he can also be incredibly
observant, sweet and caring; a true mother-chocobo. After Angeal, he is the one helping him take care of Cloud the most.

Sephiroth used to help as well, until one afternoon… he catches Cloud during one of his infrequent bouts of wakefulness, and Cloud completely freaks. The encounter ends with soup all over the bedsheets, a trembling blonde and an upset General.

He keeps his distance after that, and Zack can feel it putting a strain on their relationship.

Apart from that, Zack really had been thinking that Cloud was starting to do better. That’s why, when one night he suddenly wakes up in an empty bed to the sounds of glass shattering, he’s not prepared at all for the sight that greets him.

Catatonic Cloud, that he has learned how to handle.

Dissociating Cloud, sitting curled up in a corner of the kitchen behind a mess of blood-stained glass and water and staring at nothing – Yea. Not so much.

He is distantly aware of Angeal and Genesis storming into the kitchen from the other bedroom, taking in the situation, and with almost routine practice fetching a dark blue hand-massage ball from… somewhere, then stepping around the shards on the floor and talking quietly to the blonde, using the ball against his hands as a stimulus to slowly bring him back to the present.

However much he wants to, Zack can’t bring his feet to move. There’s static buzzing behind his ears.

It’s like a punch to the chest, that reminder that, really, Zack has no way of knowing anymore what kind of things his friend has gone through, what kind of horrors he has seen after he passed his sword onto his friend and left the Mako-poisoned boy in the middle of nowhere to fend for himself.

He knows nothing.

Cloud…

What happened to you?

---

tbc

Chapter End Notes

The ending feels super rushed to me, but I just need this chapter gone already so I can focus on all the cosplays I need to finish (Genesis and AC!Cloud, for example T^T). Apologies.

So, this chapter was pretty Zack-centric. I hope no one minds, and that I… sorta got his voice right?? I dunno, I’ve been staring at this too long already. Please tell me what you think, and if there’s any discontinuities. I keep trying my best, but it’s just tricky to hold all the details of such a large plot in mind at once. Next chapter will be mostly canon!Cloud’s PoV =)
Credits:
- Memoriesofrain and Lanturn: the bfs cooking together (there’ll be more of that still, I think; no worries)
- WingedBirdy: Zack choking on something when finding out about the fivesome
- Janna: morningly head massages and not making a big deal out of disagreements/grumpiness
- I remember reading about Seph being a vegetarian to spite Hojo and Hojo's first name being Barnaby in two fanfics, but I don’t know anymore which ones. Sorry!
Thank you all for your ideas, I’ll be using some more the following chapters :3
If I forgot anyone else, please step on my toes!
And your voice was all I heard

Chapter Summary

(what kind of tea is hard to swallow? reality.)

Chapter Notes

My life needs to learn to flippin' CHILL. On the plus side: I'll be at Akon 27 in Dallas, TX with some of my favorite nerds, ACTUALLY cosplaying the actual ot5 and doing an 18+ yaoi panel. Like, hell yea. (that is – I think we’re still looking for a Zack. Anyone?) So, if you’re there and see us, don’t be shy, come say hi~

In my tardiness defense, this chapter is twice as long as the Bachelor thesis I wrote simultaneously to it. You’re welcome.

(I actually had to go back to the last chapter and change the date Zack mentioned to ‘September 9th’. This is what happens when you try to wing a time travel fanfic. Advice: Don’t.)

(The next chapter most definitely won’t be up before July, when I’m back from my trip to Texas. If anyone is able to recite the story blindly in their sleep by then from rereading it constantly – ye be warned. Your blood is not on my hands.)

(un-beta’d, looking for volunteers. I bet there’s still continuity errors in there, but I just can’t be bothered anymore T^T)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

And your voice was all I heard

‘I remember black skies
The lightning all around me
I remembered each flash
As time began to blur

And your voice was all I heard’

Tell me

Cloud.

Is this the pain you felt before
Little puppet.
-- what you cherish most...

Give me the PLEASURE of taking it

A
W
A
Y
.
.
.

My sweet Cloud. Who's nothing but a clone

listen
to me.

Listen to your master.

[[I am NOT a--]]

One step.

That's right.

[[Don't. PLEASE.]]

Don't make me...]

Now one more. Raise your sword.

Shh... It'll be over soon.
"Just one swing is all it takes. Take one swing, and make her head roll."

[[NO.]]

Don’t you want to make me happy, puppet?

[[Aer--]]

Kill her.

KILL THE ANCIENT.

[[...erith.]]

Aerith.

“AERITH !!!”

The rest is lost in shining, purple eyes and a feel like drowning.

...

The apartment lies quiet.

Faintly, in the distance, a bustling city and early trains wake slowly in the fog, but in here, the peace prevails a little longer. Soft, turquoise light falls through the windows, painting angular shapes on the couch and coffee table. The fridge hums.

It’s Angeal’s favorite time of day.

The early hours of the morning is when he can gather his thoughts, and allow sleep to slowly lift from his mind while moving around the living room and tending to his plants.

He is used to being up before everyone else, and while he will always enjoy his partners’ presence, he finds the silence soothing. Sometimes, Sephiroth will join him, sitting in the plush armchair and sipping at a glass of water, companionable. They don’t speak; there’s no need to.

Today, however, someone else seems to be seeking the tranquility around him.

“Hey, old man. Fancy seeing you here.”

He grants the other ravenette a crooked smile, before his gaze falls to the bare feet padding softly over cold wood where the carpet doesn’t reach.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t show you where the sock drawer is yet. You can borrow some for now, so you don’t catch a – ” Angeal shakes his head with a little self-deprecating chuckle before apologizing again. “What am I saying? You’re a grown boy. You don’t need me looking after you like that anymore.”

He turns back to the fuchsia on the windowsill in front of him to check the soil’s moistness, but keeps half an eye on Zack. The boy – man, he has to remind himself – has carefully started wiping the thin layer of dust off the leaves of an aloe vera.
“Sometimes having someone look after you a little doesn’t feel too bad,” Zack admits gingerly.

The meek tone of voice makes Angeal look over again, and he frowns at seeing those proud shoulders slumped. Yesterday, when Zack had shown his curious, younger counterpart a few sword kata, Angeal had been taken aback by the easy authority and natural, gentle command in Zack’s posture and voice. It hadn’t been a far stretch then, strangely enough, to imagine him at the front of an army, leading his troops into battle; or giving speeches to green cadets.

Now, it seems the morning mood has washed the fight out of him, leaving behind a hollow, thoughtful young man.

Angeal aches to walk over and gather his ex-mentee into his arms, but he isn’t sure how such an action would be received. Before he can raise his voice, Zack speaks up again.

“I remember how you were yelling at me that one mission to Icicle, when I’d jumped straight out of the shower and, half-dressed, ran outside after some guy stealing our chocobos. You were so mad when you saw that my hair had frozen right solid,” he laughs. Then catches himself. “Well… I mean, I guess that… I dunno if – ”

The First is quick to reassure him. “Yes, I remember as well. You were only a fresh Third back then, and caught a cold two days after. You kept insisting the two events were entirely unrelated.”

Zack graces him with another smile, seemingly happy to find some small things remaining the same between their two strange worlds.

They fall into reminiscence together, chat about their early years as mentor and mentee at Shinra. Angeal makes sure to keep the conversation light-hearted and steer clear of any memories that might diverge between the two of them, so as not to upset the other. But then he just can’t help himself. It’s a low move, one that pokes and prods at the place inside Angeal that he has long since started to associate with his honor; however, something has been churning in his mind over and over ever since Zack mentioned it the other day.

He moves over to a little potted palm tree, set in its special place between a cactus and a dark green fern, and starts clipping the brown leaves off with the tips of his fingers.

“This one I got from my mother, Gillian.”

Angeal looks over to Zack out of the corner of his eye to gauge his reaction at those words, in time to see his expression morph from relaxed to cold, dry comprehension and a slight flinch. Zack turns away defeatedly.

“Please don’t,” he mumbles.

At the guilty tone of voice, Angeal has to suppress a flinch himself. His subconscious was right – as always; he shouldn’t be pushing Zack about something he is clearly still unable to talk about. The mystery of his parallel’s mother’s suicide will have to wait some more. As will all the matters buried alongside it.

“I’m sorry,” he concedes, and means it. Instead, he lets his rough fingers trail over the fern on his right in an attempt to save the conversation. “This one, Sephiroth brought home from Wutai a few years ago. He gave me some prepared speech about how, going by the exact variety of flora I had in my living room at the time, this one would be a perfectly logical addition due to its botanical properties et cetera et cetera…”
Angeal laughs and strokes the leaves tenderly.

“The way he talked about the little thing, I was pretty sure he’d rather keep the plant himself since he’d fallen head over heels for it, but he likely didn’t trust himself to keep his precious baby alive. I wish he wouldn’t doubt himself like that, but I agreed to take care of it. Seph says ‘hello’ to his child every now and then; it grows those gorgeous, white little blossoms at the end of winter.”

Talking so much without break feels against his nature, but it’s worth it. Zack has sidled ever closer to Angeal’s side while he was telling his story and has finally come to rest a mere few inches away from him, to have a better look at the plant in question.

Hearing the older man taper off, Zack’s gaze wanders to the third pot on the bureau, featuring a bulbous, grey and brown cactus. He jerks his chin in its direction while asking Angeal the question with his curious eyes.

“Haha, yes. This one’s from Genesis. To remind me that I can be a real prick, he says.”

Zack snorts with laughter. His shoulder bumps against Angeal’s strong biceps, and Angeal uses the opportunity to budge a little closer. He finds himself glad when the younger doesn’t move away, instead choosing to lean against his side. He could easily raise his arm and tug Zack into a hug, but doesn’t.

It’s up to Zack to set the pace.

“Yea… sounds like him alright,” the man says, and traces a gentle fingertip down Sephiroth’s fern.

‘Cloud… Cloud, my precious boy… it is time.’

'...Mum?'

'Shh…'

When Cloud was a little child, there used to be an old man living in the village, right at the very edge of it in a wooden, creaky little shack. It probably hadn’t been his real name, but everyone simply called the man ‘Old Joe’, and everyone knew that he had more than a couple loose screws. He earned his living as a handy-man, but most of his time was spent tinkering with some machine or another in his little shack.

One of those gadgets was a broken radio.

Cloud thought Old Joe was a pretty okay guy. He’d never voluntarily approach him, because Old Joe had a few gaps in his teeth that made his speech pretty unintelligible, and when he got into one of his raving lectures about gods-know-what, spittle would fly from his mouth and Cloud could well do without getting rained on. But apart from the mayor, nobody in town owned a television, and during the milder summer months, Cloud would often find himself lying in the shade of Old Joe’s old shack, well out of sight, chewing on a blade of grass and listening to the sounds of the radio through the tilted window while the elder was working inside the house.

The young, impressionable blonde would eagerly snatch up every bit of news he could about the outside world, news that fueled his naïve ambitions and wormed their way into his vivid daydreams. Newscasters, songs, commercials, even the odd weather forecast for this place called ‘Icicle Inn’ which Joe’s radio was somehow occasionally able to pick up, Cloud loved all of it; but he especially loved when there were reports about Soldier and Shinra. Especially… when they were about his
hero, General Sephiroth, the Silver Demon of Wutai.

Cloud would get completely engrossed in one of those reports, body unconsciously leaning closer to the window, blond spikes almost poking over the ledge, when suddenly-


The goddamn static came up, garbling the charismatic newscaster’s eager voice.

Cloud learned to hate the sound of static.

Little did he know back then, that hate... hate, was such a mild word.

...Wings, and cells, and suicides and lethal showdowns in a bath house, none of these are things he can quite grasp yet; so Genesis tries to focus on the simpler matters.

Zackary, as they’ve come to call him – after the man complained for the umpteenth time about not being ‘old, damnit!’; though working for Shinra, at twenty-three you might as well be ancient –

Either way, Zackary Fair is one paranoid little donut.

Not like Genesis would ever be caught dead announcing a statement of such an utter lack of eloquence and finesse, but the phrase can’t help but spring into his mind when watching the younger man. (And is he really younger? They are both twenty-three now, and Genesis has an early birthday, but with wonky time travel business you can never be too sure.)

It’s subtle, not really noticeable unless you’ve spent some long and intimate time with his non-traumatized, bubbly younger counterpart. But Genesis knows enough about PTSD to recognize its signs when it is jumping into his face with a sombrero hat and dainty little cocktail umbrella between its teeth.

Zackary talks and laughs and jokes, yes. He soaks up information like a sponge, latches onto all the little differences he finds. His curious eyes watch the way he and the others interact; he snickers when Angeal complains about young Zack’s feet on the couch table like an enraged housewife and snorts when young Cloud and Genesis have a blast destroying the laughable plot of a cheap action flick (“ Seriously?! Did he just rip his undershirt by flexing his muscles? Oh puh-lease.” “How is he not dead yet?!?” “Do the bad guys’ guns ever hit?”).

But that doesn’t mean Genesis misses the way Zackary sometimes gets lost inside his own mind. How he keeps his back to the walls, and watches possible exits. How he flinches when someone moves too fast, unexpectedly, or when Angeal accidentally bangs some pots and pans against one another in the kitchen. These sharp noises frighten him especially, even if Zackary does his damnedest to cover it up with an easy, cold smile; a mask Genesis has only witnessed on the weariest of Soldiers.

And then, when the day has drawn to an end and Zackary curls up around Cloud as though someone might snatch the blonde away in the dark, he falls into an uneasy, nightmare-riddled sleep that is interrupted by the quietest of noises.

The habits of a scarred man.

Genesis feels the strong urge both to wrap Zackary into his protective arms and never let go, and to incinerate every single man and woman who ever dared lay a finger on him in a harmful way. An
endeavor perhaps a little hard to carry out simultaneously, but he can learn to multitask.

Now, however, if Zackary is one paranoid little donut, Genesis is not quite sure what that makes Cloud. A wary little cinnamon roll-turned-world-weary time traveler? The kid far surpasses any kind of ridiculous confectionary PTSD-scale Genesis can come up with in his head.

From what he’s seen, the blonde is off far worse than Zackary, and that is saying something. During his infrequent bouts of waking, it has become clear that elder Cloud is trapped in a world entirely of his own, that he has seen things so grotesque that his mind has retreated from reality to protect itself, exacerbated by the fever raging due to exhaustion and prolonged dehydration. Though if the frequent twitching and mumbling is any indication, the non-reality Cloud is facing in his sleep isn’t any better.

Which brings Genesis back to the problem at hand.

He can feel muscles spasming under his hand from where he is checking Cloud’s Mana levels once again, laid out asleep next to Genesis on the soft mattress. Enough of the energy has returned to the man’s body so that Genesis has been able to supplement the healing process with his own Mana without causing lasting damage. The bandages are gone, fractured ribs mended back together and slash wounds reduced to mere stripes of red on pale skin. It is only a matter of time before the fever breaks, as well.

The visible evidence is gone, but years as a Soldier have granted Genesis a near photographic memory. At this moment in time, that’s more a curse than a blessing, because it puts him in an uncomfortable position.

Angeal would not have recognized, he knows.

All of them spent time in Wutai, but of the two, Genesis spent more time killing alongside Sephiroth. Angeal had the trustworthy face, the serene attitude; Shinra used him for peace negotiations. Genesis, on the other hand, was a weapon; same as their silver haired lover. They’d strategized together, fought together, and added to the pile of bodies, together. Genesis had become incredibly familiar with the kinds of marks Masamune left on skin as she slashed her way through the enemies.

Which was why, when the redhead spotted the bruise in the shape of Masamune’s tsuba – two overlapping rectangles, creating a distinctive corner – near a too-clean, too-precise slash wound on Cloud’s arm, Genesis wished he could just pretend never to have seen.

At first, he told himself he couldn’t be sure, that he was lacking intel. Then, after Zackary had told his story and they had all adjourned for the day, all Genesis could think about were the fine trembles coursing through the frame of the silver-haired angel wrapped inside his arms, in Sephiroth’ apartment, and how he would move heaven and hell to ensure nothing could hurt this precious being anymore.

Call him dainty, call him impatient, arrogant and brash, but by Odin, Genesis Rhapsodos protects the things he holds dear.

Maybe when Cloud wakes up again, they will find out that Sephiroth’ counterpart wasn’t as dead as Zackary had suspected him to be; but until they know anything definite, Genesis vows to make sure Sephiroth won’t have to worry about more than he already does.

. . .

Grating, and crawling, scuttling up his spine into his skull like tiny little flesh-eating centipedes, krik-krik-krik-krik, alternated by a high pitched whine. The white noise announces the presence of a
larger predator. Just beyond the oscillating squeak of metal against bone, gnashing gravel and the hum of birds awaits… him.

The nightmare.

Cloud knows, the higher the frequency, the closer he is.

[kkkccrrrt-vvt-rrrrrrr-ee eeehhhhhhhhhh------]

Like a breath against his ear, below his skin; the sharp hiss of a sword leaving its sheath with nary the whisper of a sound. The hair at his neck stands on end when he hears that voice, smooth and deep like dripping honey; sweet flattery while Cloud can feel phantom hands wrapping around his throat in a caressing, choking hold.

A collar could not have made him feel more like property.

‘That’s right. This is where you belong… Cloud.’

The fingers loosen to ease themselves across a collarbone, swipe softly over chalky skin and descend downwards, tips barely touching and yet sure to leave a light scrape of fingernails against his chest.

[Vrrrrrrr-kk-rrrrrr/rr// wheeeeee-ooohhhrrccffk&kkrrr--------]

‘Give yourself to me, Cloud. Mind, body and soul… can you not see? They are already mine.’

[Ttkkkkrrrrrrr~rr// wheeeeee--eee----]

The hand slips lower, tightens its possessive hold over his waist, and-

[whheeeecEEEEEEEHHHHHH------]

“CLOUD!”

The static takes a moment to fade into the hum of the emergency backup generator Barret set up a few weeks ago, meant to support the radio equipment and medical devices, for when a Potion wasn’t enough.

A brief moment of confusion turns the presence around him into that of one trustworthy and sparks recognition of the worried, brown eyes in a haggard face above.

“Tifa…”

The hand rejecting the offered water, so very undeserved by him, is pure reflex by now.

“Cloud, I…”

A slight squeeze of the hand righting his shoulder conveys gratitude where his eyes cannot, but in the same motion the tired blonde rises to his feet in a rustle of coarse black cloth. He can’t take the looks. He’s a coward, and he knows it.

Half a step –

“…Mideel fell, Cloud.”

What little had been rebuilt after drowning in the green of the lifestream, anyway. Not that it matters.
Without further word, Cloud exits the makeshift tent and scans the desert. Nothing to see for miles and miles, and that’s with the enhanced Mako-eyes of a stolen identity. If they’re lucky, they won’t see another attack until dusk, when the air will start cooling down and the hot earth keep them warm a little longer. Fighting’s not so bad, then. As pleasurable as it’s ever gonna be.

Even recognizing it as a bad idea, Cloud sheathes his sword and moves away from camp, away from the relative safety and the wheee-ouuu of Barret’s radio and Yuffie poking her curious nose out of a tent flap. What he needs is space.

The crunch of dead, dry rock under his worn combat boots is soothing, somehow. When he closes his eyes, Cloud can almost wish himself back to a time where he was travelling the planet with the same rag-tag group of loveable nutcases that are accompanying him once again. Or even further back, to when he was a naïve, ever trying-and-failing little trooper, trailing through the wilderness.

Trailing after a certain dark-haired First.

The memory of stunning and kind, violet eyes makes a gasp leave his lips and brings him to his knees. The world spins lazily in front of him.

He doesn’t…

“Cloud.”

Doesn’t deserve.

“Buddy?”

Doesn’t deserve to be here, in place of someone so much more worthy, so much more… everything.

Distantly, he recognizes the familiar signs of rising dehydration – he shouldn’t have come out here. It doesn’t matter.

“You with us, kiddo?”

If he concentrates just right, Cloud can almost feel an arm around his shoulders, and it’s ridiculous, but he could swear he can recognize the exact shape of the biceps supporting his neck, of the tendons stretching around firm, strong muscles and the gentle hand against his skin. Recognize that smell of the shirt his nose is pressed against.

“Hey… can you open your eyes for me?”

It must be a very tenacious hallucination, for even when Cloud’s heavy lids slowly flicker open, the fata morgana persists. Colors blur for a moment before a violet-blue gaze captures his from above tan, sculpted cheekbones.

“There we go.”

“Z…”

All his throat is able to produce is a gravelly, dry rasp. In moments, a cool glass is being pressed against his lips.

“Think you can drink some more, Spike? You really need it.”

Reflex, again, the way Cloud turns his head to the side to avoid wasting the precious liquid. Others are in much more need of it than him.
“No? Come on, Cloud. We really need to get some water into you, okay? You’re still running a pretty high fever, there. Trust me, the water’s gonna feel real good.”

He finds it hard to think through all the cotton. Most of the words rush straight over Cloud’s head, and darkness is beginning to creep in again at the edges. He furrows his brow. Not yet.

Ignoring the cup hovering in front of his face, the blonde raises one shaky arm to touch fingers against a smooth chin. For being an illusion, the jawbone feels surprisingly solid. Cloud finds himself desperately wanting for the illusion not to fade, not to flow back into the lifestream, like they always do.

“But…” he finally manages. “I let you die.”

And isn’t that the story of his life.

Finally, the Zack-apparition puts the glass to the side and dedicates all of his attention to the prone figure in his arms. “No, Cloud.” He can feel his face being cradled in a careful hand, and retaliates by letting his own fingertips trail over the weathered skin, over a firm jaw and warm, narrow lips. He can feel them move. “You saved me, don’t you remember? You brought me back. I owe you, boy. I owe you big time.”

Cloud decides this is a good dream; so very rare and different from the usual, where his mind is met with the scornful image of a dark-haired God, righteous in his fury at Cloud for having failed him, for being too gods-damned weak.

He doesn’t want the dream to fade, but his body isn’t asking him for his opinion. Powerless, he watches his hand fall back to his side, at the same time that the dark and the green call him back into their midst. Zack-not-Zack seems to find something in his face and strokes Cloud’s brow bone soothingly.

“Shh… go back to sleep. I’ll be here when you wake up again, promise.”

And then he’s falling.

…”

“I know, I know I keep asking, but Cloud, are you absolutely sure about this?”

He huffs. “Zack.”

“Yes, yes, I know. But listen. You don’t have to do this, alright? Not if it’s just to feel equal to us. You already are, okay? You so are.”

Cloud is nervous.

He – will he have to start referring to himself as ‘younger Cloud’, now? The thought is strange, outlandish. Like the fact that he is no longer the only Cloud Strife on this planet. Like the fact that, according to a man from a parallel universe, he might have become an orphan and undergone four years of medical torture had things worked out differently. He doesn’t have the brain capacity to think about this, now.

Cloud is nervous, but does his damn best not to show it.

“Look, Zack; for the last time: I’m not just doing this to get on you guys’ level.” Not entirely, anyway. “Becoming a Soldier… it’s my dream, okay? It’s what I left home for as a kid, it’s what I
want to do. To become stronger. To show that I’m not just a nobody, a face in the crowd. I’m so
tired of being an army grunt.”

He kicks his feet restlessly against the underside of the bleachers they’re sitting on. This close to the
exam, the training court is deserted. The cadets have all fled into the libraries to do some last minute
cramming for the written tests, while the rest of the infantry is on patrol in Midgar or on assignments
all over the globe.

Across the top of his textbook, Cloud can see Zack biting his lip.

“At least being a nobody gives you protection,” he mumbles. “I just… I don’t know, man. Seph,
Gen and Geal do their best to shield me from it, but Shinra’s got more than a few skeletons in their
broom closets. And once you’ve got their spotlight on you, you can’t take it back like that.”

Finally, Cloud sighs and puts his study material away to fix his boyfriend with a stare. He feels
familiar irritation bubble up inside him for a moment, but seeing the true concern inside Zack’s eyes,
he forces the sensation back down into his stomach and grasps Zack’s fidgety hand instead.

“Zack… I’m seventeen. You can’t protect me forever. Cut me some slack, okay? I can take care of
myself. I know Shinra’s not all that clean, shining glory they try to feed us on the news, but I can
handle it. Okay?” he says with the firmest voice he can muster. Though knowing himself, there’s
probably a stupid tuft of hair sticking out at an odd angle again, destroying the image of the tough,
confident trooper.

The ravenette grasps his hand tighter with a sigh and a nod, eyes gentling.

“Okay.” He doesn’t seem happy about it, if the swish of his mouth to the side is any indication, but
he’ll just have to learn to deal with it.

Cloud uses the momentary lull in conversation to let his eyes rove over the empty court towards the
building holding his doom in the shape of sixteen sheets of question-filled paper. That heavy feeling
settles in his tummy once again.

“Besides, I need to pass both exams first. Let’s leave the decisions for when they’re relevant, yea?”

Cloud stands up, ready to pack his bag and face the music, but is suddenly pulled between Zack’s
legs by the hand still clasping his. The low level of the bleacher Zack is sitting on puts him at an
awkward height where Zack has to crane his neck to see him, but the Second doesn’t seem to mind.
Hands settle comfortably on his hips and Cloud does a quick check behind himself to make sure no
one’s there to witness.

“What do you gain when you fuse a Poison and a Power Attack materia?”

“Poison Blade.”

“Define ‘lateral spread’.”

“A technique used to place the mean point of impact of two or more units one hundred meters apart
on a line perpendicular to the gun-target line.”

“What do you do when you don’t know the answer to a question?”

“Doodle a unicorn with pink glitter gel pen and twiddle my jolly thumbs.” Cloud rolls his eyes.

“You got your gel pen?”
“Gen made extra sure.”

“…Cloud, you’re ready. You got this babe, okay? Piece of cake.”

The blonde takes a deep breath.

“Damn straight.”

“You’re not straight.”

“Shut up.”

Zack stands up to give him a smooch on the lips. “Go and kick ass, Choco-boy! I can’t wait to grab me some piece of fresh Third Class butt, yo!”

He gets a punch on the arm in return. “Don’t call me that stupid nickname! And by Bahamut, stop saying ‘yo’. You’re starting to sound like Reno!”

Cloud grabs his bag and with a chuckle leaves a scandalized Zack on the bleachers to stare after him, feeling just a little lighter.

. . .

The next time he dreams (/wakes/floats) again, he’s greeted by a different presence, one mostly unfamiliar. It takes him a moment to realize he’s being cradled from behind, back against chest and strong, lean arms wrapped around his waist. There’s a hint of perfume in the air.

His slight movement jolts the stranger.

“Cloud? Are you awake, sweetheart?” His mother was the last person to ever call him that, and that has been a while.

The person at his back maneuvers a little, and then a sharp, softly freckled face peers over Cloud’s shoulder. After a moment, Cloud faintly recognizes the redhead. In a distant thought he finds the man exotically handsome, with his tousled ginger locks, angular cheekbones and kindly glowing teal eyes, but that is neither here nor there.

“You were being fairly rambunctious in your sleep; I suspected you might be more comfortable like this.” After a pause, he adds with a smirk, “Quite naturally I was right, and really, you must be feeling rather honored, no? Not many people can say they have had the privilege of using yours truly as a body pillow. And I mean the real thing, not those gross abominations of fake merchandise Shinra doesn’t think I know they are selling.”

Cloud blinks.

“Not quite there yet, huh? That is quite alright, darling. Try to sleep a little more.”

He is settled back against his living pillow and then the stranger falls silent once more. Curious, but Cloud decides to roll with it for now. The position is rather snug, and sleep (/reality?) tugs at his mind once more.

He’d almost have drifted off again completely, if it hadn’t been for the sound of a door softly opening. Nothing unusual, as the voices around him have come and gone irregularly for a while now but never meant any harm. Trapped in that narrow space between waking and sleep, defenses completely down, it takes Cloud just a moment too long to realize –
The static – the goddamn static is back, which means that he –

Cloud has to get away, has to, before – Damn him for being too late! Cloud’s flailing hand connects with something hard and the next thing he knows is hot, hot(!) scalding burning on his skin, he’s too late should have fled while he had the chance –

His eyes open but it’s all a blur anyway, and somewhere inside that blur must be jade, slitted cat eyes, looking for their prey, and it makes him angry. There’re voices, incoherent, yelling all around him but he can’t focus on that, or the fact that he’s the one yelling while other voices try to comfort, try to soothe.

A thump, and the floor drops out from under his body (or was it the other way ‘round?) and something tangles around his frame, trapping him.

His breath rasps in his lungs, quick and shallow, and all Cloud can think of is the way his head is trying to split apart. A sob is ripped from his throat.

"Stop..." The words garble in his mouth.

And then it all fades to black.

. . .

Damage control.

The word never sounded so urgent, bitter-sweet and useless to Angeal.

Zackary has rushed straight past him to gently disentangle the shaking older Cloud from his blanket prison on the floor. Genesis, somehow having escaped the hot soup fountain, is kneeling next to them, but there’s an odd, pinched expression on his face. Angeal suspects it has to do with the same six-word-phrase that’s still echoing around his own head, but for now ignores it in favor of going after Sephiroth, who is almost out the door by the time he catches up to his large strides.

Wordlessly, gently, he steers him towards the bathroom instead by an arm around the waist and helps the silent First wash the sticky soup from his hands.

Sephiroth lets him, which by itself is a small miracle that Angeal does not take for granted, but neither does Seph look him in the eye. His gaze remains fixed on the green towel hooks while Angeal carefully inspects those long, pale fingers. The burns will be healed within minutes, but sadly, the same can’t be said for other damage. Angeal dries the hands with a fluffy towel, but doesn’t let go yet. It’s silly, but Angeal wishes he could channel all the love and heart-ache he feels for the being in front of him through that bit of skin contact.

“I should go,” Sephiroth mutters in a low voice and tries to pull away.

“You should stay.”

With the Silver General, it can be a fragile balance between leaving him his space and making sure he feels loved, but this time Angeal hopes he’s doing the right thing by leading his lover over to the
couch in the living room and sitting next to him.

He can’t really tell how much time passes as he listens to the sound of sheets being changed and weight shifted, Sephiroth’ warm thigh against his own the only solid contact he thinks the man will allow at this moment. His lover’s stare is directed into the middle distance, silent, and he barely twitches when Zackary and Gen step into the room.

“He’s conked out again,” Zackary announces and ruffles a helpless hand through his hair in that familiar gesture of insecurity.

For a moment, the time traveler just stands there, in the entrance to the hallway, before letting his hands drop wearily to his sides.

“I don’t… man. Did you…. did you hear the same thing? I don’t even…”

Angeal shares his bafflement. Their blond enigma seems to be digging up questions in a pace way faster than they can hope to find answers to them.

‘Why can’t you ever stay dead?’

Stay dead.

What by Odin’s beard does that even mean?!

“How…”

The word is spoken so quietly, so hesitant, it takes him a moment to realize it was uttered not by Zackary but by – Genesis. Hesitant and Genesis are two things that usually do not go together, and Angeal finds himself listening confusedly.

“How sure are you… that he was really dead? Back then?”

Zackary scratches his head and leans against the doorframe. “Honestly? He was thrown into the depth of a Mako reactor after being run through by the Buster. I’d say pretty dead. Deader than dead.”

What’s even more surprising than the hesitancy is when Genesis starts to fidget. The tiny motions of his fists, curling and uncurling, a light distribution of weight from one foot to the other, are signs Angeal has seldom been witness to.

Same goes for the lack of meeting anyone’s eyes in the room, tellingly enough least of all Sephiroth.’ Angeal can feel the man’s thigh tense against his at the next words.

“I think you might be wrong.”

“…Gen?” Angeal prompts after a moment of silence.

The redhead finally lifts his gaze from the floor and crosses his arms in front of his chest, falling into a defensive posture before Angeal can even understand what he is protecting himself against.

“Cloud bore the marks of Masamune. Fresh marks.”

It drops like a bomb filled with silence and electricity. That very silence is then broken by the sound of cracking bones stemming from a clenched fist.

“And you failed to mention that at an earlier occasion… why?” Sephiroth bites out from between his
teeth, voice going deadly quiet. It’s not a good sign.

Suddenly Angeal can understand the crossed arms, barrier against a long foreseen attack. “I couldn’t be entirely sure!” Gen explodes. “It could have been something else, there was no evidence or reason as to why Cloud should have even been touched by her at all! Besides, that was about the last thing y- any of us needed to hear about, with everything else going on!”

Before Angeal can react, Sephiroth has stood up, expression hidden behind a silver waterfall, and vacates the room.

Genesis lets his arms drop with a huff before moving to go after their fugitive lover, but Angeal finally regains control of his limbs and stands up to intercept him with a hand against the chest.

“…give him some time, Gen.”

Despite his recent ire, Angeal can see the shards of helplessness in his friend’s eyes. It’s clear he never meant for this to get so out of hand – he meant well, but it backfired. Spectacularly.

Angeal turns to Zackary instead who is looking into the living room forlornly, though it’s clear the worn, grey armchair isn’t really what he’s seeing.

“Not dead… what the hell,” he murmurs.

The burly First finds himself agreeing with the sentiment.

Genesis waits exactly 28 seconds before he’s running after Sephiroth.

A quick check tells him he’s not in his apartment, but then again Genesis wasn’t expecting him to. He corners him on the roof a minute later, where the Silver General always goes to think; perhaps because having the vastness of the smoggy city stretched out below him feels less like the cage they both know Shinra to be.

Sephiroth is a black silhouette against the darkening green backdrop of Midgar, the setting sun framing his outline with some last fading rays of jade and a strong breeze whipping silver tresses around his face. Even from where he has just stepped out of the door a couple yards away Genesis can see the tense bowstring of his spine, rigid, hands clenched around the railing.

He treads closer, waiting for his presence to be acknowledged. When that tactic fails after a few minutes, Genesis finally calls out. “You know why I did it.”

Even over the sounds of the wind, Genesis can hear the steel of the bannister creaking in protest.

“Do I, now.” The reply is flat, and more than anything the redhead wishes Sephiroth would just turn around, not just over the petty old urge of being acknowledged by his rival but rather so he can better read the man’s face, find a way past that impenetrable fortress to fix this.

He tries with a challenge. “Well what do you think? About why I kept that piece of information from you?”

Sephiroth’s head bows lower.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know. Perhaps because I can’t be trusted with sensitive information? Because you believe my oh-so-fragile mind incapable of handling the fact that my alter-ego is apparently an
undead psychopath? Because I simply didn’t need to know?!”

The silverette’s quiet voice rises in volume until he is very much screaming the words into the wind, and without thinking it triggers Genesis’ own legendary temper.

“You ridiculous, infuriating man! I was trying. To. PROTECT YOU! How can you not get that through your thick skull?!”

Finally, Sephiroth turns around to face him. He is a picture of wrath and fury, all leather glory and harsh lines, and a lesser man would have cowered before him. Genesis takes a step forward.

“Protect me? Do I look like I need protection? Look at me. I am a Soldier First Class General, strongest warrior and deadliest killing machine Shinra has to offer. I am very much capable of protecting myself, so long as people stop keeping vital information from me!”

They’ve both steadily moved closer to the point where Genesis can see the angry flecks of silver in Sephiroth’ green eyes. He takes an irritated breath. “Damn you, I couldn’t be sure! The last thing you need is hearing some half-proven fabrications of the truth. All I saw were some too-clean slash wounds and some bruises – “

“STOP ACTING LIKE MY FATHER.”

The words are like a punch in the chest, make the breath leave his lungs, and only belatedly does Genesis realize the other has pushed past him to head towards the elevator at a brisk pace.

Stunned, it takes him a moment to rush after him, and snags his shoulder just before Sephiroth can reach the door. They grapple with each other for a second before Genesis manages to pin his lover’s hands against the wall next to his face, and that alone tells him about the turmoil that must be going on inside that silver head.

Sephiroth struggles against his hold a moment longer before seemingly giving up, slumping against the wall and breathing heavily. The curtain of hair hides his expression from the world, from Genesis.

He gentles his grip and forces himself not to look at the floor – it’s what he used to do as a kid right before he lied. He’s not lying this time.

“I’m sorry.”

When Sephiroth stays silent, Genesis takes a moment to regard the man under his hands carefully. Only the pointed chin and aquiline nose are visible, and Genesis can see his jaw working silently, throat tight and tense. His father – of course. How could he have been so blind? He should have realized who else regularly kept things from him ‘for his own good’.

And yet, looking at him, Genesis is reminded of a much younger boy, face disturbed and eyes hollowed after his so-called ‘father’ showed him the detailed dissection of his latest experiment from a front row seat, after he was casually told the mountain lion he just defeated barehanded in a test of strength had three little cubs that were left to starve out in the wilderness, after he was given a book listing the 100 most painful ways to kill a man ‘for light reading’.

Need-to-know is such a fine line, he thinks.

The redhead leans forward until his forehead touches Sephiroth’ temple, arms lowering. He keeps his touch soft when his hands grip the other’s shoulders instead and gives a small sigh.
The ragged whisper is loud against his ear. “You don’t know what’s best for me.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeats, quietly, and nuzzles into the side of his lover’s face.

He can feel Sephiroth’ muscles relax against him, bit by bit, and hears his arms drop down to his sides. The man finally slumps against him wearily.

“Would you do it again?”

Genesis draws back enough to cradle that perfect, chiseled, vulnerable face between his hands, finally able to meet his lover’s eyes. Soft hair tickles his fingers. He sighs again and tilts his head.

“No.” His thumbs start stroking over the pale cheekbones of their own accord. “You’re right, you’ve had enough people withholding information from you throughout your life, I won’t be another one.” He smiles wryly. “I just wish you were able to see yourself the way I see you, sometimes. You are one of the most precious treasures in my life, angel. I can’t bear to see this hurting you so.”

He draws Sephiroth into a tight, warm hug that shields them both from the heavy wind.

“No more keeping secrets.”

Face buried in silver hair, he can’t see Sephiroth biting his lip guiltily.

. . .

Cloud can feel himself becoming more and more aware of his surroundings, slowly; how he is fed warm broth, helped to the bathroom, how there’s usually some presence or another at his side watching over him.

Sometimes, he still believes the heat got to him in the desert or that he’s lying in his bed in Seventh Heaven and that it’s Tifa taking care of him.

Other times the low hum of Mako reactors reminds him of Shinra and the labs. It is in such a confused half-stupor that Cloud stumbles out of bed. He ignores the other person lying on the mattress with him, looking for water – water. He’s parched.

He staggers through the dark until he feels the cold steel of a sink underneath his fingertips. Water. He needs – they starved them again, the buzz of the generators is pressing around his brain like cotton, like the wool under his tongue. Cloud grabs a cup from the dish rack and holds it under the faucet, turns the knob with a shaky hand. The shadows spin around him, or maybe he’s just wobbling on his feet.

And then, just as he raises the glass to his lips to drink desperately – it’s the stench. Acidic, burning, like lightning on his tongue and he flings the glass away as hard as he can to shatter against the floor. The faucet is still running, bubbling and green all around him dripping over the edge of the counter down his throat, filling his lungs. He can’t – can’t breathe, they’re trying to poison him, throw him back inside the tanks. Cloud backs away, hardly feeling the shards slicing through the soles of his feet.

He’s back, they’ve put him back in the tank and the damn Mako is all around him, blurs his vision, invades every pore of his being like it’s a living thing. It’s just a matter of time before the liquid reaches his brain and makes him sluggish, bendable to their will.

It’s a while after the blonde has given up the fight that he becomes aware of tiny pinpricks against his
palms, voices calling through the thick glass of the tank. An even longer time before he realizes there is no tank, but before he can find the energy to rejoice and focus on the bright kitchen light, Cloud goes adrift again.

He dreams of speeding trucks and the color yellow, feels something break and when he wakes again, he’s lying on a bed with two different Zacks sitting next to him, talking quietly. The younger one is closer, and Cloud absentmindedly reaches out a hand to trail through the cropped bangs.

“I almost forgot you used to wear your hair like this.” He pauses, then adds, “I like it better long.”

Talking to Zackary, he decides, is almost like having the big brother he always wanted – only on a whole new level of weirdness, sorta.

It’s impossible to deny the similarities in their appearance, the thick, untamable mane of black hair, the tanned skin telling of their Gongagan decent, even if Zackary’s is still quite a bit paler and more riddled with scars than his from the four years of living in an underground prison-slash-laboratory, and boy doesn’t he want to go there (both literally and metaphorically speaking).

It’s just… too damn weird to think of the other as himself, though, even if he pretty much is. Two Zack Fairs? Isn’t the world a bit too small for that much craziness?

However, after getting over the oddness of the whole time travel business, all Zack can think about is that this is just… so. Cool.

Sure, he doesn’t like the fact that shit hit the fan a thousand times over in the other world as much as the next guy, or that half of his group apparently turned into murderers while leaving the other half traumatized or dead – no one would be happy to hear about that.

But hello- oh. Is he the only one seeing the chance in all this?

Yes, things are different here, but Zackary (and maybe the other Cloud too) seem to have some information on how to keep those events from their own timeline from happening here. They are living in a fucked-up enough world as it is, and this is presenting them with a golden opportunity to actually change something.

Besides, Zack can’t get over how absolutely kickass future-him is. Zackary showed him some new sword stances the other day, and damn if that didn’t make him feel like he still has so much to learn. The way the man moved, even if still slightly out of shape from his recent injury – so fluid and graceful, powerful, not a single motion unnecessary.

Kinda made him feel rather unqualified in helping Cloudy-boy with his training that morning, but at least Zack can rest assured that the little Chocobo is still a far pace away from him. Of course, Cloud passed his theoretical exam with flying colors though, so now all that is left is the physical. Sometimes all Zack feels like doing during their spars is poking that adorable, concentrated frown on his face and kissing him silly.

Focus, Zack.

Where were we? Oh.

“For real?! You mean, the inability of chicken-flavored MREs to actually taste like chicken is a transdimensional attribute? Wow. Color me impressed.”
“Yea. You’d think with how high a budget the science unit got, they’d be able to produce actual chicken-flavored MREs after two decades of the Soldier program running, but nope. No sir.”

Zackary runs a hand through his hair and sighs, relaxing back against the bedspread.

They fall into a leisurely conversation about Shinra in general and Soldier in particular. It’s funny, all the little gestures they seem to share, figures of speech, the things they find funny. It makes Zack feel strangely comfortable and homey, like he’s talking to an old friend that he shared half his life with; and in a way, he did.

He’s startled after a while by a soft touch against his hair, which reminds him they are not the only two occupants of the bed. Whoops.

“I like it better long.”

Zack’s about to launch into a lecture on the advantages and sex-appeal of short hair when he realizes the tone of voice the words were said in. No longer slurred, unintelligible, fighting against demons inside the blonde’s head; but actually concerning reality this time.

“Cloud?” It seems he’s not the only one to notice. Zackary leans past him to check Cloud’s forehead and regard him excitedly. “Your fever’s dropped a lot. Are you actually with us this time, pal?”

The man in question gives a low sigh and closes his eyes for a moment, like he’s enjoying the touch too much to dislodge it. When he opens them again, he lifts his weary gaze to Zackary and asks quietly, “This is not a dream, then?”

Zackary pats his cheek before pulling back his hand. “Nope! At least not as far as I know. How’re you feeling? You’re looking a bit better. Gave us a bit of a scare yesterday.”

Cloud’s eyes, while awake and aware, still move a bit sluggishly, like it takes his brain time to catch up. Zack wonders if he’ll ever be able to look at this man and not be reminded of his own little Chocobo currently out and about on patrol. His breath catches a little when older Cloud gingerly sits up on the mattress and fixes him with a stare.

“Hey there.” Zack swallows nervously. He wishes the blonde would stop looking at him like that, like he somehow holds the answers to the secrets of the universe. Maybe, in some strange way, to him he does.

Finally, Cloud turns to the side to grab a glass and pitcher of water from the bedside table. Zackary helps him straighten his shaky hands while he drinks and carefully sets the glassware away again afterwards.

“So, um…” The older Zack seems to be fishing for words when Cloud remains quiet. “…time travel, huh?”

Very subtle. Zack has to suppress a snort.

Cloud gathers his thoughts with another deep breath, eyes fixed on the bedsheets. “…seems like it.”

Another bout of silence.

*Oh, come on. This is like pulling teeth.*

“Well then, seems like you know a bit more than Zackary does. Mind sharing?”
Again, that deep, soul-reading stare is fixed on him, but then Cloud rubs a hand across his temple. “He’s here,” he mumbles and regards his friend with an urgent look, as though to say, ‘Why aren’t you doing anything? Why are we still sitting here?’. “He’s here, Zack.”

Zackary sucks his bottom lip between his teeth, looking a little torn. “I know, Cloud. But, listen… It’s okay. This Sephiroth is different, alright?”

Cloud however already seems about ready to climb off the bed and leave the room. Both Zacks are quick to put their hands on him in restraint.

“We have to stop him, Zack! He can’t – ”

“Listen, Cloud! This one didn’t go bat-shit crazy, things are a little different here, lemme explain – ”

Cloud doesn’t listen, instead trying to worm his way out of their arms weakly.

“No, no… the year, it’s all wrong, why did she – she sent us to the wrong…” he shakes his head. “We’re too late – ”

“Nibelheim never happened!”

Finally, the words seem to get through to the blonde. Older Zack makes Cloud meet his gaze with a firm hand around the base of his neck.

“Trust me, okay?” He seems to be searching for something in the other’s eyes and apparently finds it when Cloud’s slight tremors die down and he grows still, one foot still hanging off the mattress. “Let me explain,” he repeats. “From the looks of it, we’re in some parallel dimension or something like that. Things are completely different here. It’s one year post-Nibelheim, only Nibelheim never happened, alright? Everyone’s alive here, Genesis and Angeal never left Shinra, Seph didn’t go crazy. And you’re still a jolly little trooper here, as far as I’ve seen.”

Cloud shakes his head in denial. “That’s not possible. Why would she have… why are we here, Zack?”

“I don’t know.” Zackary drops his hand once he’s sure Cloud won’t try to bail again. “We figured I might not have been supposed to come along and it threw things… off, but we honestly just don’t know.” He considers his friend with warm eyes. “But let’s take this as a chance to keep the bad stuff from happening, okay?”

Zack watches as Cloud seems to ponder the new information. Then, he looks between the two of them before settling on older-him.

“I see you already made some friends?”

Zackary gives a relieved chuckle. “Yeah. Zack ’n me, we’re best buds. Wanna make some friends, too? Come on, let’s go meet the others.” He stands up and Zack follows his example.

When Cloud still seems to hesitate, older Zack reaches a hand towards him.

“He won’t try anything, you have my word. We’re friends, right? Trust me on this.”

There’s a minute flinch across Cloud’s face, but then he finally grabs Zackary’s hand and together, they leave towards the living room and towards three Soldiers First Class who he knows have been listening in to every word so far.
“We’re friends, right?”

Right?

Friends…

The soft, plush carpet isn’t quite meeting his naked feet, he’s flying above it, and the walls aren’t the right shade of blue; but he can learn to roll with it for now.

There’s two separate Zacks around him, one walking in front, and one behind. He doesn’t deserve either one giving him the time of day. He’s flying, falling, and he wonders when he’ll hit ground.

“Embrace your dreams…”

“Hang in there!”

Long before they reach the end of the narrow hallway, he can hear them, sitting in the living room, breathing, fidgeting, rubbing against the couch. It’s almost lost under the sound of the static, though, dragging at every cell of his being to stay back and search for safety.

They step into the room and his eyes meet slitted green in an instant. Zack – the old one – bumps into him from behind at his sudden freeze.

Every breath, every muscle, every single nerve gears towards the sleek silver predator draped over the couch in a deceptively nonchalant way. Everything, from the way flowing, perfect tresses cascade past a sharp jawline and over strong shoulders, to the pliant, black leather hugging a firm chest almost sinuously…

It plunges his heart into ice cold water and makes him want to run.

“Cloud,” the man he vaguely recognizes as Zack’s old mentor Angeal starts. “Good to see you on your feet again. Come sit with us.”

Zack’s hand is a warm weight against the small of his back, pushing him forward, and for a brief (long) moment it feels like betrayal. Cloud’s eyes never leave those of his arch enemy, and the stare is reciprocated.

Breathe, he reminds himself.

They settle on the second couch, while the other – the younger Zack, plops down in an armchair. Cloud doesn’t miss the way he unnecessarily exacerbates the noise to break up a little of the tension that has settled on the room at their entrance.

“How’re you feeling?” Angeal continues. Cloud lets his eyes stray over to him for a brief second, eyeing up him and the slightly familiar redhead nestled against his side.

“Fine.”

And then he returns to his staring contest.

In reality, his muscles are screaming in protest at their sudden usage after being bedridden so long; his stomach is clenching around nothing and his temples ache. Little pinpricks of pain stab into the sides of his brain, and he just wishes for some silence. Sweet, sweet silence.
Cloud can feel Zack’s thigh against his own, grounding him. His trust in Zack is the only thing keeping him here, on a sofa opposite the man who tried to kill him multiple times. Zack means safety, even after all this time. The whole, Zack being alive alive living and real here not dead is a curious feeling to be analyzed elsewhen.

Were Zack not here, he would’ve… Cloud doesn’t know what he would have done. He’s in no condition to fight, mentally and physically exhausted as he is, and he has no intel whatsoever about the current status of the three Firsts opposite him. He’s completely helpless.

Not for the first time.

“For Shiva’s sake, I am not going to bite your head off in the immediate future, so stop acting as though I will,” Sephiroth finally explodes. The tone of voice – so different from the low purr Cloud is used to; it helps him focus on the here and now.

Cloud bristles. “The record predicts otherwise.”

“I am not the same man who burned your hometown, Cloud.”

For a short moment, his mind alights in flames, orange-red and all consuming, before Zack’s voice and hand on his thigh bring him out of it.

“That’s right, time to catch you up a lil’ on the action, Cloudy-boy!” The ravenette seems as eager as his younger counter-part to diffuse the obvious hostility, and together, they fill him in on the situation.

Cloud allows his eyes to wander between the men surrounding him, taking in their features. He learns the redhead’s name is Genesis (“Ah, yes. You probably wouldn’t remember. You were pretty out of it, but you did meet Genesis before, back then when we were on the run. It’s a long story.”), and he can feel his pensive gaze on him a lot, though Genesis doesn’t add much to the others’ replay of events.

He finds Angeal has a calm and soothing voice that stays deep even when he’s chiding the younger Zack for an inappropriate comment, and learns about the two Zack’s distinction – Zackary. Huh. That will take some getting used to.

Hearing that his younger self is still a green, innocent little trooper is a relief – the news of a parallel universe is not, however. It’s too much for him to take in all the implications of it just yet.

Through it all, Sephiroth remains silent and unmoving in his seat on the couch, to the far side, like some ancient god’s statue. When looking over to him, the world occasionally blurs before Cloud’s eyes and a cold chill ripples down his back. None of this feels real yet.

“So-oh… That’s what I’ve found out so far here. What about you, Cloud? How do you fit into all this?”

He grows still at Zack’s – Zackary’s – words.

One of his legs has migrated up on the cushion sometime during the past minutes, and he lets the other one join it so he can wrap his arms around his knees, hugging them close to his chest. “There’s not much to say,” he answers quietly. “The world was dying, so I was sent back in time to fix it. From the looks of it though, I screwed up before I’ve even had the chance to change anything. This isn’t where I was supposed to end up.”

“Dying?” Genesis asks. “What do you mean?”
red, bone-dry earth, gaping wide open like the jaws of some terrible creature; the once lush hills turned into a blazing dessert as wide as the Soldier’s eye can see. The skulls of animals, of beasts, on the ground; no time to bury them underground, no strength, no reason. The air burns as it is drawn into his lungs –

Without thinking, Cloud’s gaze is drawn back to the image of his silver-haired nightmare and his jaw clenches.

“Crumbling,” he spits out.

Analytical eyes meet his evenly, remaining unimpressed by his animosity. “During a moment these past few days when your fever spiked heavily, you demanded to know of me why I didn’t have the courtesy of ‘staying dead’. I assume you were speaking about my counterpart. Care to explain?”

Cloud’s nails dig into his arms.

“What is there to explain? I killed you once, in Nibelheim. But then you kept coming back, again…”

“By merging with all the energy of the planet, I will become a new life form, a new existence… reborn as a God to rule over every soul.”

“And again…”

“Shall I give you despair?”

“…and again.”

“Together, let us watch this world burn.”

“And every time you did, the world died a little more.”

“Hey now,” comes younger Zack’s irritated objection. “Stop talking like he’s the one who did all this to you! That was in a completely different universe; it’s not fair of you to take out what happened to you on our Sephiroth, horrible as it might have been!”

His gaze wavers over to the younger image of his best friend, the man he admired with all of his being as a cadet, wanted to be like. The short, spiky hair and tousled bangs framing his face make something in his stomach clench.

“Me? Gongaga!”

The small differences are obvious, especially with the real thing sitting right next to Cloud – but being chastised by the boy wakes buried, unpleasant feelings inside him nevertheless.

He looks back to Sephiroth and decides to give it a try. Focus on the strands of hair cut off just past his chin rather than reaching down to his chest, the lack of crazed madness in the sharp eyes. The ease with which he lounges gracefully on the couch next to his apparent friends.

But it’s hard – how much will the man be able to take before his mind breaks down again? Before the delusions of grandeur reach the mind of this parallel Sephiroth, infecting it? Jenova’s will is neigh unbreakable. Cloud should know. He’s felt it before.

The blonde takes a deep breath.

“We tried to stop – him.” Sephiroth inclines his head at Cloud’s effort of distinguishing. “Avalanche, we called ourselves. We were…” //Family.// “…a team.”
“Alright. Who’s been touching my materia?”

“There ain’t no gettin’ off of this train we’re on!”

“…you look like a bear wearing a marshmallow.”

“Sit down and drink your goddamn TEA!”

He’s ripped out of memory by Zackary’s hand soothing down his back, and he blinks. Cloud can feel the worried eyes on the side of his head.

“But in the end, it wasn’t enough. We couldn’t stop him.” He lowers his eyelids in resolution. “None of that matters anymore, though. All that matters now… is that some people die.”

A flurry of movement follows after Cloud rises to his feet. A step – the three First Class Soldiers tense from their relaxed positions to ramrod-straight battle-readiness in the fraction of a second, he can see the muscles coiling under their skin in preparation and hear both Zacks opening their mouths to protest.

It would be so easy – maybe not easy; more a suicide mission, but one worth it. Just one more step, put his hands around his throat; the silverette is in a prone position, never defenseless after the rigorous training he received, but at the very least at a disadvantage, and he has the moment of surprise on his side. The others would no doubt try to stop him, but it wouldn’t matter if only he got a good hit in first, snapped the spine with one quick, satisfying crack …

He takes another step, and rounds the couch.

Their presence prickles on his neck as Cloud turns his back to the room’s occupants and heads towards the front door.

There’s too much still to do, and Cloud can’t afford to let himself get killed yet. Sephiroth is only a pawn, in the end.

Cutting off the head of the snake, that is the true objective.

“Clou- hey, hey! Cloud! Where do you think you’re going??!”

“To kill Hojo.”

Zackary has taken a leap past him to intercept him at the door, blocking his way. His eyes are wide.

“Cloud, you can’t just go out there like that!”

“Why not?”

Cloud takes a step to the side, Zack mirrors him.

“You just – Cloud, we need to plan this, okay? Sit down and think about – ”

“It’s simple, Zack. Hojo needs to die. So I’m going to kill him. Now let. Me. Through.”

His friend curls his fingers in the air and makes a frustrated noise in the back of his throat that sounds like the unlucky lovechild of a dying rhino and a cat throwing up a fur ball. “Nghh – no.”

“Move.”
“Cloud – ”

“I said, move.”

“I ain’t budging an inch, buddy. You’re in no condition to fight anyone right now, least of all a tower full of Soldiers.”

Cloud prays that Zack didn’t see the little waver from where his muscles threaten to give out, or how he shivers in the thin t-shirt and pants he’s wearing.

“Where’s my sword?”

“Locked away somewhere safe, after the last stunt you pulled.”

Deeming the weapon out of reach for now, Cloud goes to brush past Zack, but the ravenette stops him with an arm around his shoulder. They struggle against each other.

“Cloud, think about this! If you go out there and kill him, what’s gonna happen?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe no more people will be put through excruciating experiments and die under the hands of a madman?!”

It’s pathetic, how easily Zack can overpower him. He’s come this far, gone through hell, only to be stopped by the bouncer? This isn’t the way this was supposed to go.

“Yes, and maybe people are gonna wonder just where the Soldier-strength Cloud-Strife-lookalike came from and put him in a lonely, dark place to be questioned by the Turks, that is if they don’t shoot him on sight!”

They’re face to face, and Cloud fixes the ravenette with a challenging stare. “…I’d like to see them try.”

The self-confidence is meant to be reassuring, but instead he sees a deep sorrow welling up within Zack’s eyes, brow creasing, voice tight.

“I don’t.”

That look, if nothing else, is what deflates Cloud a bit. He slumps back wearily, and Zack is quick to take his weight. He doesn’t allow himself the comfort for long, though; pulling away after taking a deep breath and turning his back on Zackary. Cloud takes a few lost steps into the room, ignoring the other four Soldiers on the couches watching the action with rapt attention.

“I promised her,” he mumbles. “I promised to set things right.”


His gaze trails over the plants on the window sill, but it’s not really what he’s seeing in his mind.

“…Aerith.”

*Her pale, flawless face; pale like the yellow flowers that used to grow in that place. Her gentle mouth stretches into one last wry smile.*

“You came – ”

[[even though you’re about to break]]
"Aerith?! So, you really did know her, huh? True gem, that girl is. How’s she doing? Was she part of this Avalanche group?"

Cloud flinches at his eager tone of voice like Zack just slapped him.

"There is something I need you to do, Cloud. I am so sorry. You will need to stay strong just a little bit longer."


“…she was.”

*Aerith’ blood on his hands.*

"Ugh… what are you making me do!?"

[ while eeEEE EEEHHH--------]

The weight of her lifeless body in his arms. Her warmth, slowly leaving.

"This can’t be real."

“Cloud?”

He shakes his head, grabs it between his hands.

“*What I have shown you is reality. What you remember, that is the illusion.*”

“No…” he moans.

Illusion… illusion. Nothing but a well-thought up illusion, meant to confuse him.

[hrcffkk&kkrrr-----] [vrrr-t-crrzzz] [wheeeeh-EEEEEEHHHHHHHH]

“Cloud!”

How could he have been so blind, so gullible? It isn’t real, none of it is.

‘They are feeding you nothing but lies… come to me, my precious little puppet.’ The words are trickling down his spine like ice-cold honey. He can feel him, lips brushing against his ear, long silver hair tickling his neck. He turns halfway and meets jade eyes in a pale, angular face.

“Shut up… SHUT UP !! Get out of my head!”

A hand touches his shoulder.

With all the force he can muster, Cloud pushes away, shoving against the presence at his back. He stumbles blindly before crashing against something solid and dropping to his knees. The static drowns out everything else.

When Cloud comes to again, he’s on the couch and doesn’t know how he got there.

“ – shouldn’t be long, it’s in Sector 3. I’ll check on Seph on my way back.” He vaguely remembers hearing the beep of a PHS mission alert.

Cloud hears a door slide shut and becomes aware of Zackary sitting next to him, cradling his hand.
He doesn’t quite understand why until he feels the sharp sting on his bloodied left arm, where he seems to have been scratching at the fragmented memory of Geostigma under his skin.

Somehow, even despite the comfort Zackary is offering him, Cloud can almost taste the man’s disappointment under his tongue, something sharp and bitter.

It seems Zack’s younger counterpart has left for a mission on short notice. Genesis is on his other side, watching him thoughtfully, and hands Zackary a clean tissue to clean away the blood on Cloud’s skin. By the time he’s done, Angeal is coming out of the kitchen. The First is carrying a plate with food on it, which he carefully lifts over to Cloud before setting a glass of water on the couch table in front of him.

“Now that you’re up and about on your own again, it’s time you got some more solids into you. Porridge and broth can only keep you alive and healthy for so long,” he announces in a practical manner.

Cloud wonders if they’re simply going to ignore what happened a few moments ago. He regards the simple meal on the plate in his lap, cold meat, cheese and bread, and just like that, it’s too much. Everything is too much.

The offer of food and drink, when both are so, so precious in Cloud’s mind, yet somehow not anymore.

The fact that these people are offering him anything at all, after he apparently hurt someone they hold dear; even though this is Sephiroth – the nightmare, the destroyer of worlds, yet somehow not.

How Zack – living, breathing Zack is sitting right next to him, yet there’s a rift between them as wide as an ocean and suddenly, Cloud is feeling dizzy and overwhelmed, light-headed and very, very nauseous.

He only ever wanted to make things better. But judging by the disappointment the people around him are radiating, if only implicitly, he has already managed to make matters worse.

“Hey now, it’s not poisoned, alright?” Zackary butts in from Cloud’s side, misunderstanding. “You can trust them.”

To be honest, the idea of poison hadn’t even crossed Cloud’s mind. He shakes his head wordlessly, but it takes him a few moments to croak out the next words, eyes far away.

“We… we used to give most of the food we had to the kids. Water was – was precious, after the earth started drying out. The plants were dying, and after their energy returned to the lifestream, he kept it there. With time, more and more of the lifestream fell into his hands, and no new life returned to the planet. The number of stillborns rose, and the wastes and deserts started spreading.”

He swallows around a dry throat, feeling the eyes of the other three on him.

“Then, even the conservables became scarce and you could count the children’s ribs from vision alone. Denz’ and Marlene, they were tough troopers. Never complained, not once.”

No matter how emotionally blunt Cloud has felt himself become over the years, the memory of his brave, brave children is still the one thing that can bring tears to his eyes. There’s bile rising in his throat, and he has to put the plate away, onto the couch table.

“I’m sorry,” he somehow manages. His eyes briefly meet those of Genesis and Angeal. “You’ve been… very kind to me.” I don’t deserve it.
The others have been listening closely and seem horrified by the information, if the wide eyes and creased brows are any indication.

“Of course, honey.” Genesis trails a soothing hand through the blonde’s hair. Although Cloud hardly knows the man, this kind of physical comfort has already grown somewhat familiar from days of being taken care of by him. “Of course.”

Zackary puts his warm hands over Cloud’s kneecap. “It’s weird, right? Spending so long having to scavenge for food, never knowing when your next proper meal’s gonna be, and then – bamph! Suddenly food’s all around, left and right, like it’s the most normal thing in the world.”

That’s right. After their time running from Shinra, Cloud realizes, this must have felt somewhat similar to his friend.

The ravenette suddenly reaches over to a bowl of fruit on a side table next to the couch, and grabs a bunch of grapes out of it.

“Let’s start slow, alright? Try these.” He pushes one of the small, green spheres into his hand. Cloud rolls it around his fingers hesitantly.

Zack eats one of the grapes himself, and somehow, watching him makes it easier for Cloud to push the fruit into his mouth and bite down. A juicy, fresh taste explodes across his tongue.

“See?”

With that, Zack stuffs some more grapes into his own mouth victoriously while pressing some more into Cloud’s hand too. When Cloud manages to swallow a few of them, Zackary gives him a happy smile, warmth in those purple eyes, and squeezes his knee again in encouragement.

He shouldn’t have to be praised for something as simple as eating fruit. But either way, between the two of them, they manage to graze the whole stem. Cloud is glad when one of the others starts up a simple conversation, to take the focus away from the embarrassment of them watching him eat, and settles back on the couch more and more comfortably with his legs crossed.

Sometime later, somebody is poking his cheek – the one that isn’t squished against the back rest of the couch he’s curled up on, still sitting halfway upright. He can hear a soft chuckle, and then he’s being cradled in warm arms and lifted. He’s back asleep before his body hits the mattress.

...  
“Yo!”

Even though the blonde’s back is turned to him, Zack’s super-duper awesome special Mako-enhanced Soldier x-ray vision can pick up on the cute, pouty frown on Cloud’s face immediately at his unnecessarily loud shout across the barracks.

Or maybe he just knows the little guy.

Everywhere, blue and green infantry troopers are busily running about in the hustle-bustle of just another early morning at Shinra. Cloud has turned around from where he was talking to some squad mates by the time Zack has jogged over at an easy pace.

Mm-hm. Spot on with the pout.

Zack reaches out to rub his knuckles over the little frown and is deflected with grace born from years
of practice.

“A wonderful good morning, my ever-charming, most-bedazzling, joyful mister Chocobo!”

“Take your courting rituals elsewhere, please,” one of the guys – Zack is pretty sure his name is Reed, or maybe Rory? – exclaims from the side.

“Shut up, Zack. How do you even work. It’s five in the morning,” Cloud grumbles, apparently too tired to form his sentences into proper questions.

“Gongagan blood and half a liter of coffee,” he replies easily. “Now, if your valiant comrades in arms would be so kind as to let me borrow this Chocobo for half a minute…”

Cloud rolls his eyes but after grabbing his green trooper scarf lets Zack sling his arm around the blonde’s shoulders and drag him away a little and over into a quiet corner. Cloud’s friends whistle a little at them, but it’s all in good spirits. Some of them, the ones Cloud works with on an almost daily basis, have their suspicions about Cloud and Zack’s relationship, but have been able to keep it to themselves. It’s nothing they want to announce company-wide, to prevent any stupid rumors of favoritism. Even Zack’s own connection with the Trinity is little more than a gossip, and one they have strictly avoided giving solid evidence for to the public. Safe is safe.

Once they’ve come to a halt, Cloud wraps his scarf with routine movements, not hindered by the fact that he’s swaying slightly and seemingly dead on his feet. A morning person he is not.

“What is it, Zack?”

Why, a man could almost feel offended. “Do I need a reason to want to see my darling boyfriend?”

When the reply is a grumbly, tired glare over green fabric, Zack is quick to show the hand he was previously hiding behind his back.

He amends, “I brought you breakfast!” with a grin.

“I already ate.” The, ‘**Not interested**’, swings silently in the air between them.

In a slow, dramatic motion, Zack opens the off-white paper bag to reveal its contents.

“Not these delicious, Soldier canteen originated, glazed and sprinkled donuts, you didn’t!”

Cloud’s jaw slowly lowers.

“Chocolate glaze?”

“Believe it.”

“I love you.”

In seconds, the pale hand has ripped inside the bag and stuffed a rainbow-sprinkled donut into his mouth.

“I don’t think it’s the organic stuff, though.”

“Du’m cae.”
After the first donut has vanished, Cloud finally starts eating at a more sedate pace and generously spares his boyfriend a glance as well.

“Oh, I forgive you for trying to spread your icky morning cheer on me,” he says between bites.

“So glad.” Zack comfortably leans against a metal support frame and shakes his head when Cloud offers him a donut out of the bag. “So, patrol soon?”

Cloud nods. “Till noon, they gave the recruits off after so we can train some more for the exams.”

“Well, isn’t that just sweet of ‘em. Anything for Shinra’s future heros, huh? I can probably meet you in the gym around four if you want, be your spotter or whatever you want. And dinner’s at Angeal’s tonight. Sound fine?”

“Yea.”

There’s silence while Cloud chews. Zack crosses his arms and takes a deep breath.

“You missed some action yesterday.”

“…I did?”

Cloud sucks the crumbs from his lower lip while Zack takes a look behind himself to make sure no one’s listening.

“Your… the other Chocobo’s fever broke, sometime during the day. In the afternoon, he was actually out and about and talking coherently. We filled him in a little, then he told us a little of his own story.”

The paper bag is carefully folded around the last two donuts and stuffed inside one of the large pockets of Cloud’s pants for later. Then he’s listening intently.

“I always miss the good stuff, huh? What’d he say?”

“Something about,” he lowers his voice even more, “the end of the world… how the other world’s Sephiroth apparently kept coming back from the dead to wreak some havoc, how Chocobo and this gang of his called ‘Avalanche’ kept trying to stop him, but in the end they failed and he was sent back in time to fix things. Apparently didn’t work out as they planned to, though.”

Zack sighs.

“Then things got weird when hedgehog-hair mentioned Aerith. Chocobo freaked out again, accused Seph of being inside his head or something. Seph left, again. It’s starting to form sort of a pattern, isn’t it?”

Cloud’s brow creases in sympathy and concern. He hadn’t been there for the last time either, but they’d told him about it. News travel fast in their group.

“Dang… I wish this whole thing wasn’t so hard on him. Is he okay?”

“I’m not sure… I got an assignment in Sector 3 right after, and when I came back in the evening I went to check on ‘im. Didn’t answer the door, though. I just don’t want to push him if he needs space right now, y’know?”

The unhappy expression doesn’t vanish from Cloud’s face, and he replies with a sigh of his own.
“Yea. So long as he doesn’t start evading us all the time now… he’s been distant lately, don’t you think?”

Zack nods. It’s become obvious how heavily the situation seems to lie on their silver boyfriend’s mind. Zack can’t imagine what it must be like, coming face to face with another version of a boy you love with all your heart, who actually hates your guts because of crimes you didn’t commit.

He goes to reply something, but in that moment one of Cloud’s COs steps into the busy room and starts yelling orders. Zack settles with giving Cloud a noogie and saying, “We’ll figure it out, okay? We’re not gonna let him hide away forever. Now don’t you worry your pretty little head; you’ve got a taxing day ahead of ya! Show them what you’re made of!”

Cloud dislodges his hand easily (getting better there), but throws him a quick smile before he leaves.

. . .

In a different part of Sector 0, at a different time of morning, a different Zack is sitting in the large, queen-sized bed of Angeal’s guest bedroom and clicking away on his borrowed laptop when quite another blonde starts rousing below the sheets next to him.

The little fidgets, the rolling of eyeballs behind their lids, the twitch of shoulders; they’re familiar. So many times had Zackary observed them in his friend, so many times had he wished the blonde would follow the natural order of things and wake. Instead, he would remain trapped inside his head, unresponsive and comatose, lying on the cold, unforgiving floor or leant against Zackary’s shoulder. The days had been rare back then when Cloud had actually been able to open his Mako-clouded eyes or, gods-forbid, acknowledge his friend in some way or another.

That’s why it never fails to give Zackary a tingly feeling in his stomach when he sees those bright, sky-blue orbs open up to the world, first a tiny slit, then wider. His lips rise into a smile involuntarily at the sight.

Zackary stays silent and lets Cloud become aware of his surroundings in his own time. The blonde gingerly sits up on the bed and, without another word, leaves towards the adjoining bathroom. In the absence of him, Zackary finds a moment to worry.

How is he going to talk to Cloud, now that he’s a little more coherent?

Cloud seems to have so many sore spots, wounds just starting to scab over – Aerith, Avalanche, those kids he mentioned. He doesn’t want to tear old scars open again, but at the same time he itches to know more about what happened, about what story shaped the man into who he is today.

There’s also the matter of telling the Holy Trinity of their unholy origins, something he has not yet forgotten about but still isn’t quite sure how to breach. He desperately wants to ask Cloud if he knows any more on the topic, but doesn’t want to push him – especially since Sephiroth seems to also be one of those aforementioned sore spots; maybe the biggest of all.

When Zackary hears the flush from next door and the brief sound of running water, he decides to start by catching Cloud up on the discoveries he made on the laptop concerning their new home world and hope the topic comes up somehow.

A click of the lock, and then Cloud’s coming out of the bathroom to hesitantly shuffle over the carpet towards the bed. He comes to a standstill a few steps away, dim light painting him like a pale ghost in the room.
“It’s not you.”

“…huh?” Zackary is startled by the quiet words breaking the silence. “What is?”

He desperately hopes that this isn’t Cloud having a moment again, or hallucinating, or thinking this is all a dream. He himself is still having trouble taking it all in; he’s not sure he can handle other people questioning this reality when Zack still feels it wobbling below his feet.

“Zackary.”

The word is drawn out and long, a low rumble, like Cloud is tasting it on his tongue as he speaks. It’s followed by a snort that makes relief bloom in Zackary’s heart with its sheer nonchalance.

“That is so… not you.”

“It’s a bit stiff, huh?” Zack – Zackary – agrees. He’s still trying to get used to people calling him that. Even his own parents, half a lifetime ago, just called him Zack. The only one who used his full name was their stuck-up mayor, the school teacher, and his mum – after he’d gotten into some new kind of trouble. “Still, better than being called ‘old Zack’, I guess. I don’t feel old. Well… at least not that old.”

Cloud shrugs, but there’s a smile playing around his lips. With a drawn out sigh, Cloud lets himself fall face-first into the covers. The mattress jostles.

Zack stretches his arms above his head, and the popping sounds of his bones do their best to belie his words. He sets the closed laptop on the side table before plopping down on the sheets next to Cloud and curling up.

“We still haven’t come up with a good alias name for you, though. So for now, you’re gonna have to answer to ‘old Cloud’.” He reaches out a hand to grab Cloud’s bare foot.

Another soft snort while the blonde kicks at the tickling fingers. “I’m gonna live.”

And for a moment there, it’s almost like before; back when they were young and innocent. For a moment, Zack can almost pretend they’re both back in their teens, Cloud a green trooper, and Zack a slightly scarred, but still optimistic First, having a sleepover after video games.

Even if it’s just a daydream, wishing them back into those times, Zackary is glad to see that boy he once knew is still in there, somewhere.

The rustling of sheets and the light rasp of breathing is loud in the silence as they quiet down, as the atmosphere shapes into something bittersweet and peaceful.

Cloud brings up a hand close to his face and lets the pads of his fingertips gently trail over the fluffy cotton of the covers, eyes following the movement, like the answers he is seeking lie somewhere between the fine lines of green fiber. There’s something trance-like and vulnerable in his face.

“This is real, isn’t it?” Cloud whispers.

Zackary can’t even begin to imagine what is going through that blonde, bushy head, what kind of mysteries and memories are unravelling on the pathways of his mind, but he knows he can’t stand that soft, broken insecurity in his friend’s voice.

He reaches out a hand of his own and gently lets it cover Cloud’s, who is startled out of his musings and gazes over.
He catches that gaze with his own eyes and holds it. “As real as it’s ever gonna get.”

Blue and purple mix for a moment before Cloud turns his head into the pillows with a sigh. He doesn’t reply, but neither does he draw back his hand; they bask in the strange taste of the moment in silence.

Reluctantly, Zackary sits up some time later. He’s not sure if Cloud had fallen asleep again, but either way, he has his attention now.

“Lemme show you something.”

He retrieves the laptop and settles it on his stretched-out legs, back against the headboard. The blonde joins him with an expectant expression.

Zackary enters his counterpart’s password on the screen (‘rubberduckies’; he’ll leave that one uncommented for now), and moves towards one of the news sites he had opened.

“So, I’ve been doing some research, you see? Find out what exactly is different from our old world. If we want to try and change anything here, we gotta know first what we’re dealing with. Now look at this.”

He angles the screen so Cloud can better see what he’s showing.

--- Leading us to a brighter future every day: Shinra Electric Power Company brings online brand new reactor in Modeoheim ---

--- Starting with their first reactor built back in 1968, Shinra Electric Power Company has come a long way in providing all of Gaia with the asset that is clean, regenerable Mako energy. With its never ending pursuit of excellence, Shinra advances the limits of science more and more every day, bringing comfort and simplicity into our lives. The smoldering, sooty coal mines are a picture of the past, giving way to the shining future Shinra promises to bring us all.

Now, one more step towards that future has been made in Modeoheim, where a new reactor has gone online just this week. Scientists claim that its energy output will suffice to supply electricity and heat to the entire settlement, including its outskirts in a ten mile radius. With its natural abundancy of Mako, the Modeoheim area is an ideal location for the new Modeo reactor. At an average temperature of 25°F throughout the year, citizens have been waiting for this moment a long time.

“I’m just so incredibly happy,” 32-year-old Gwen Lauren, mother of two young children, tells our reporter Nancy Clarke. “Ever since the death of my husband, things have been tough. We had to chop firewood all year long to even get slightly warm, and use oil lamps in the evenings. Can you imagine? Like in the dark ages. (laughs) I feel so, so grateful towards Shinra and want to say ‘Thank you’ for all they have done for us, from the bottom of my heart.”

In an interview with the head of Shinra’s Urban Development department, Reeve Tuesti has announced that Shinra will not stop here. The blueprints for a second reactor on the continent of Wutai are already being reviewed, he reveals to our reporter. We can rest assured, he says, that…’---

Zack’s eyes trail off.

“What a load of bullshit.” Cloud shakes his head.

He nods. “From what I’ve seen so far, it’s all like that. All the newscasts praise the metaphorical ground Shinra walks on. There’s some more about how they’re making the world a safer place with their military – never mind the fact those monsters the Soldiers and infantry are fighting stem from
the Mako radiation of their oh-so-glorious reactors. But not a word about that, anywhere.”

“Of course not.” The blonde wrinkles his forehead. “I mean… I can’t believe I’m saying this, but; what are the chances that this Shinra is actually good?”

“Pff. Like, one bazillion to one. Of course, it’s hard to see the real Shinra Company through that biased media coverage; but if anything, the absolute lack of negative information is telling enough. Any truly good company would admit to making mistakes. But not Shinra, nuh-uh. They’re spotless. Besides, I asked Angeal. He says the company is just as corrupt as ours from what I told him, probably even more so.”

“Huh… somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.” Cloud chews his lip in thought. “What else is there? What are the last big events that happened in this timeline?”

“Hmm…” Zack looks through his search history and opens a few more news reports. “Well, apart from the Modeo reactor starting up a few weeks ago, the last reactor before that was the one in Corel – there’s something fishy there, though. You can see they’re purposefully leaving out some vital information, the facts don’t really add up; and after doing some digging I found out Corel was actually burned to the ground a few weeks after the reactor was complete. Of course, they tried to feed the public some bullshit about the fire having been caused by arsonists, some punk kids, but the timing is too suspicious, if you ask me.”

“Arsonists…”

Cloud sounds confused, and Zack prompts him with raised eyebrows.

“Shinra actually sort of admitted to razing the town the last time, but they excused it by claiming Corel had helped terrorists destroy the reactor. Not like they were gonna run around telling everyone about it, but still… it differs. When did you say this was, again?”

He looks up the date with a few clicks. “During the summer of 0002; July 17th. The summer heat and the coal dust all over the town of course fed right into Shinra’s lie of not being responsible for the fire.”

Zack can practically see the wheels turning in Cloud’s head. He mumbles quietly, “Too early…” Cloud huffs, once again focusing on the laptop screen. “What else?”

“Lemme think… the Wutai War is a thing that happened, and they actually built a reactor there afterwards. Though this time it was Genesis who became the hero of ending it by securing Fort Tamblin, rather than me and ‘Geal. Though I guess that makes sense, considering Genesis didn’t degrade and leave Shinra here…”

“Well, that was three years ago. Oh, and then two years ago, in 0001, Shinra tried to launch a rocket into space – it failed, though, and the space program went discontinued. Only a short mention of it, since it’s nothing the company can exactly gloat with. Aw man… I remember hearing about that, in the months before everything went to hell at Nibelheim. I’d really been rooting for that rocket. I mean, space? Actual space? How cool would that’ve been!”

“Already, huh?” Cloud smiles. “Man, Cid’s gonna be pissed…”

“Cid? You mean as in, Cid Highwind? The pilot? Don’t tell me you knew him. I admired the guy as much as I was jealous of him, for being chosen the first man to head into space. Bloody brilliant scientist too, from what I’ve heard.”

“Oh yea, I knew the guy alright. Obsessed with his tea, foul-mouthed but kind-hearted in his own
way. Surprisingly good at poker,” Cloud adds as an afterthought.

It startles a laugh out of Zack. “Wow, Cloudy-boy. You really did get around. Who would’a thunk?” Cloud easily deflects the following attempt at a noogie.

“I guess. I met the fabled Chocobo Sage and the Emperor of Wutai, went on a date at the Gold Saucer and snowboarding at Icicle Inn; explored all the continents and the oceans…” He pauses for a moment, like he’s contemplating something, but then the corner of his mouth twitches into a half-smile. “Space was okay, I guess. A bit empty.”

*You’ve gotta be kidding me…*

“No way in hell.”

Cloud meets his gaze, and by the proud smirk Zack can see that – no, the blonde is *not* kidding.

“Odin’s balls. Spike. I’m proud of ya!” Is that a blush? That is definitely a blush. “Someday you’re gonna have to tell me all about those adventures of yours!”

The smirk eases into something gentler, and Cloud nods. “Someday.”

Eventually, they get up to grab some breakfast – Zackary makes sure it’s something light, something small, but also that Cloud takes frequent snacks throughout the day; and he’s got the feeling that the process of eating is getting a little easier for Cloud bit by bit that way.

Genesis and Angeal are busy on Shinra business around the tower, and Sephiroth still hasn’t returned since he stormed out of the apartment during Cloud’s last breakdown. Zackary tries not to worry too much about it (and kind of fails). They spend most of the time on the laptop researching, but even after they have relocated to the dining table rather than lounging in bed all day, Zackary can see his friend is quickly growing restless from the inactivity.

Despite not being at one hundred percent yet, Cloud has spent much of the past week resting, and Zackary can absolutely understand the feeling of the walls closing in on them. What he wouldn’t give for a bit of fresh air, the crunch of dirt beneath his feet, the sunshine on his face…

But things aren’t that easy. It’s a miracle they have managed to remain undetected from Shinra for so long, and they need to keep it that way – at least until the two of them have a solid plan of action. Unfortunately, it’s during a time when Cloud’s restlessness is flaring up full force again that Zackary makes the mistake of mentioning Sephiroth and what to do about him.

“It’d be simplest to just finish him off now, once and for all.”

Something cold drops into Zack’s stomach.

“You don’t mean that.”

Cloud’s gaze lifts at his tone of voice, from where he was pacing the length of the living room.

“Yes I do.”

Zackary’s lips press into a thin line at those words. It seems there is one thing they disagree on, then. He tries to convince his friend, anyway.

“There’s still hope for him, Cloud. You were out of it most of the time, but Seph’s really an okay guy here, one hundred percent insanity-free. Heck, he even helped take care of you, so long as you
were unconscious! Changed the bed-sheets, made soup…”

Cloud is shaking his head repeatedly, forming an invisible wall between himself and what Zack is trying to tell him.

“I knew him before Nibelheim, Cloud, and not just as my General or some guy I worshipped. He was my friend, and if he hadn’t found out about his heritage in that horrible way he did, he could’ve taken the info!” He has to keep his voice and temper from rising, but it’s hard. On the one hand, this is Cloud, the little ex-trooper he’d walk through fire for; but on the other, he’s so tired of people not seeing Sephiroth for who he is. He was heart-broken at Sephiroth’ betrayal back then, had wished with all his heart things could have gone differently. And here they’ve got the chance to change that outcome on a silver platter.

Why can’t Cloud see that?

“He won’t be able to resist Jenova’s call when the time comes. No one can.”

Zackary narrows his eyes. “…you know something, don’t you? About – ” He checks the room quickly, but knows they are alone in the apartment. “ – about Jenova. Who, or what, she really is?”

Cloud’s mouth opens, but no sound comes out. He’s hesitating, eyes haunted, and Zack wants to know why.

In that moment, they’re interrupted when the door opens.

Zackary barely has time to curse – if it’s a stranger, they won’t be able to hide quickly enough – but it’s only their counterparts strolling into the room and kicking off their shoes behind the door. They close it quickly in case someone happens to be walking by in the hallway.

“Yo! It’s us!”

No, really? I wouldn’t have noticed.

“Welcome back!” Zackary greets instead. His mini-me does seem to pick up on the tense atmosphere, though.

“Um… are we… interrupting something?” he asks.

Zackary spares a glance at Cloud – the old one – but the moment has passed. It hurts, and he wishes Cloud would give Sephiroth more of a chance; is kind of disappointed in his lack of trying. But at the same time, hearing what he’s been through, Zackary isn’t sure if he can really judge the man. He just wishes the topic wouldn’t put such a rift between them, but it seems they both have quietly decided to let it rest for now.

“Nope, you’re not,” Zackary replies easily. Then, noticing young Cloud’s wet hair, “So… rainy patrol, or shower after training?”

“Training,” the blonde supplies. He eyes the older version of himself curiously, and Zackary realizes it’s likely the first time the younger one has seen Cloud up and about, apart from that horrible sword attack disaster. “Are Gen and Angeal not here yet?”

Zackary shakes his head, causing young Cloud to head into the kitchen to get himself and young Zack water bottles from the fridge, likely feeling older Cloud’s eyes on his back the whole time.

They all relocate to the couch, and after a few moments it becomes clear no one’s quite sure how to
break the silence that has descended. Young Cloud twists open his bottle and takes a gulp, trying to
diffuse some of the awkwardness while sinking back into the cushions.

Both Zacks look towards each other, each opening their mouth at the same time in order to start some
form of conversation, when comically enough old Cloud starts speaking.

“Why them?”

It seems the blonde isn’t quite done yet with analyzing his mini-me, who chokes on his water a little
at the attention and stutters a confused, “Huh?”

Older Cloud’s brow is creased. “Zack I can understand. But how come you are at this level of
familiarity with two apparently incredibly famous Soldiers First Class?”

Oh. That’s right.

At those words, young Cloud gingerly sets his bottle on the coffee table and let’s his gaze trail over
the rooms occupants in a search for help. “Um…” Somewhere, the beep of a keypad sounds, but
Zackary ignores it, knowing who it’s likely to be, in favor of watching the action. He’s curious how
mini-Cloud is going to go about this. “You guys… didn’t tell him yet?”

“Tell him what?” Genesis asks from the doorway. Zackary can see him and Angeal walking in from
his peripheral.

Younger Cloud looks up and makes grabby hands behind himself over the back rest of the couch.
Angeal, who came in first, walks right into those arms lifted in greeting and lets himself be pulled
forward until his own arms are wrapped around Cloud’s neck and they come face to face.

“About this.” He gives Angeal a kiss on the cheek, which is followed by the First nuzzling into
Cloud’s face affectionately.

It’s… still a bit weird, honestly, seeing them like that. Large, burly, motherly Angeal, who – to be
honest – Zack had almost suspected to be celibate with how little romantic interest he had seemed to
generally express in the old world; and Cloud, tiny, Chocobo-like Cloud, his little Spike with the
anger management issues and the lack of friends and the thin, pink lips pressing chaste smile-y
butterfly kisses over Angeal’s jawline and –

Um.

Zackary looks over to his fellow time traveler to see he’s just as shocked, if not more (definitely
more) than Zack. The memory of his own discovery of the fivesome’s relationship comes to mind,
and the way young Zack had poked his shoulder and asked if they’d broken him. The action seems
tempting, now.

“And where is my greeting, young men?” Genesis asks in a mock-indignant tone of voice. Rather
than waiting for someone to acknowledge him, he takes action himself and – ever spontaneous –
jumps over the arm of the couch to land in both his boyfriends’ laps. They grunt at the added weight,
but Zackary knows the redhead purposefully aimed for Zack’s thighs to take the brunt of it, and
that’s okay since he’s a non-breakable Soldier Second. A Soldier Second who is being soothed for
the attack by an arm around the shoulders and an adorable little nose bump.

“You’re his commanding officers!” Cloud has finally found his voice next to Zackary. And – well,
okay. He can sort of see how that would be a problem.

Younger Cloud disagrees. “They’re my boyfriends,” he simply replies and leans his head against
Angeal’s stomach after the man has stood up and is trailing large hands through Cloud’s hair.

Zackary had heard rumors, back in the day, of higher officers being in relationships with their underlings. Most of the time, however, those involved certain ‘favors’ in return for promotions or other bonuses, and sometimes even a lack of consent that the lower ranked, mostly younger, boys couldn’t speak up against due to the imbalance of power. He’s sure Cloud had gotten wind of those rumors as well.

Genesis seems to notice also the effect of the pose he has struck, stretched out over the younglings’ laps, like he’s walking all over them without a care. He is quick to reassure, “Oh, trust me. Those two aren’t being exploited in any way whatsoever. If anything, it’s them who get spoiled and pampered after giving us the puppy and Chocobo eyes, respectively.”

His hand has reached out to tenderly stroke Zack’s cheek, who in turn looks at him lovingly.

“See? Those. They should be a illegal,” he croons.

“We would not do this if everyone involved wasn’t one hundred percent on board with it,” Angeal adds in. “We take consent very seriously.”

“Besides, Cloud is one kinky little shit. He likes it.”

Genesis rubs his socked toes up and down young Cloud’s thigh suggestively, who yells an affronted, “Gen!” – but doesn’t disagree.

Interesting.

At his side, old Cloud still seems startled and overwhelmed by the news (which kind of makes Zackary wonder how much of a kinky little shit this Cloud is, but that is for another time), though at least he doesn’t seem to protest the very notion of the others’ relationship any more.

Until, of course…

“How many… which ones of you exactly are…?”

His counterpart replies. “These three dorks,” (Zack hits him in the shoulder at the word), “and Seph. Speaking of, where is he? Did anyone see him?”

Everyone seems distracted by the question, but Zackary can feel Cloud’s thigh tense violently next to his. Seems he isn’t taking the news well that his younger-him and his sort-of-arch-enemy are in a relationship.

“I didn’t see him all day.”

“Me neither.”

“…do you think he’s still keeping his distance?” young Cloud asks.

Angeal shakes his head. “Hard to say. I checked inside his apartment this morning; he wasn’t there. Which either means he’d already left for work early, or…”

“I’ll check in with Lazard, see if he’s on a mission,” Gen suggests and stands up. “Why don’t you darlings go ahead and start dinner already?”

They head to the kitchen once he’s left, but Zackary can tell everyone (well, except maybe old Cloud) is worried.
Speaking of, Zackary tries to get him to stay on the couch to rest some more after seeing how his drawn cheeks have barely lost any of their pallor yet, but Cloud blocks him off.

“I’m not an invalid, Zack.”

As it turns out, Cloud is surprisingly adept at chopping onions and other vegetables. When asked about it, he tells them that he used to help out his friend Tifa, who ran a bar-slash-restaurant, during the rush hour.

“Tifa? As in, Tifa Lockheart?” The mini-Cloud pauses in washing the salad.

The other Cloud nods. “The one and only.” There’s a wistful undertone to his voice. “What’s she doing in this universe?”

“Dunno. I haven’t talked to her much since I left home.” He’s aiming for nonchalant, but Zackary can see the blush dusting the pale boy’s cheeks.

Right before dinner’s ready, Genesis shows up; with unhappy news. Apparently, Sephiroth is not employed on an assignment, and the director himself hasn’t seen the man either.

“Let’s not let the food go cold,” Angeal decides, though he sounds torn. “If he’s not back in an hour, I’m heading out there.”

Zackary wonders where exactly ‘out there’ is, since his ex-mentor seems to have a pretty solid idea about the location of their wayward boyfriend, but doesn’t push it. Conversation over dinner is light, but it’s obvious the news have put a damper on everyone.

And then young Cloud mentions the upcoming Soldier exams.

“The practical test is in two days. I still need to get some more routine with the un-armed combat; if they put me up against Collins like I think they will, I’ll be screwed otherwise.”

“You’re… applying for Soldier?” Zackary asks. The blonde startles when he can feel the temperature drop a few degrees.

Then there’s the sound of metal creaking, and he looks over to see the fork Cloud was holding completely smashed in his clenched, white-knuckled fist.

When the blonde stays silent, though, his younger counterpart continues with a confused frown. “Yea… I wanna become a Soldier First, strong enough to protect the people close to me. It’s my dream.”

The words physically hurt Zackary’s heart, like a dagger has been pushed in deep. So naïve, so young and hopeful; like he himself used to be.

“Dreams… dreams are important, Cloud. But… don’t try to achieve them through Soldier.” He directs pleading eyes towards the blonde. “Soldier is a den of – ”

“ – den of monsters. Don’t go inside,” old Cloud finishes the words next to him. He lifts his gaze to lock it on his counterpart, voice deadly quiet. “You don’t know what you’re getting yourself into.”

You could cut the tension in the room with a knife – on the one hand, there’s a Cloud young and ambitious and fed up with people telling him what to do with his life; on the other, there’s his mirror image, eyes haunted and troubled and wanting to prevent his younger version from making the same mistakes that he once did.
Genesis breaks through the silence. “He does know, and it’s his choice.” The words seem final, authoritative, and just like that the issue reluctantly drops and they resume eating, even though hardly anyone is hungry anymore after the tense moment.

The evening draws on, and still no sign of Sephiroth. Zackary can feel the three Soldiers and cadet get more edgy with every minute, with every PHS message left unreplied.

Zack has just pulled out the device to check the message log one more time when the door opens with a beep to reveal a staggering silverette, and all hell breaks loose.

“Seph!” at least two different people exclaim. Everyone is on their feet at once, and Zack, Cloud, Genesis and Angeal storm towards the newcomer. Within seconds, Zackary can tell that something is very, very wrong.

Sephiroth, usually so graceful and steady on his feet, is slumped forward, letting Angeal take his weight gratefully. Fine shivers wrack his frame, he’s even more unnaturally pale than usual, like his body is recovering from shock. At a closer glance, Zackary can see bruises on his skin, and even flecks of blood here and there.

The General lets himself be half-dragged, half-carried over to the couch by Angeal, immediately being crowded by his frantic boyfriends shooting questions at him.

In his peripheral, Zackary can see old Cloud has stood up as well and taken a few steps back to keep his distance and watch the proceedings, for now.

Genesis has wrapped his silver-haired partner into his arms carefully while Angeal is trying to calm down the young ones so they can actually understand what Sephiroth is saying.

When they have quieted down, he asks in a steady voice, “What do you need, Seph?” The man’s eyes are sluggish, blown wide. When he doesn’t respond, Angeal keeps going. “Water?”

A slight incline of the head, and Zack jumps up with quick, nervous energy to fetch him a glass.

Angeal, meanwhile, trails his fingers over a bruise on Seph’s collarbone, and the man shudders. “Osteography, again?”

Sephiroth nods slowly.

“Osteo- what?” Zackary asks. His counterpart returns with the water, which Sephiroth accepts gratefully, though he seems to be lacking the strength to hold the cup. Zack helps him.

“Every once in a while,” Genesis starts explaining with severe distaste and ire lacing his voice, “the dear Professor seems to deem it necessary to test the strength of Sephiroth’ bones by noting down the exact amount of weight it takes to break them. One after the other.”

A gasp sounds from the direction of younger Cloud, and Zackary knows his own face is showing the same kind of horror and disgust.

“That’s horrible! Are you okay, Seph?” the small blonde exclaims, followed by Angeal asking Sephiroth if he needs a Cure. He shakes his head at the question, but angles his reply towards Cloud.

“I’ll be fine, little bird. They cured me after each round and the Mako tank took care of the rest.” His words slur slightly. “The sedative is simply taking a while to wear off.”

“Sedative? Did you… at least get anesthetics?”
When Cloud’s question remains unanswered, the horror and nausea in his eyes grow and his hands curl into angry little fists.

“Son of a…”

“It was worth it, though,” Seph mumbles.

Genesis pipes up, “What on all the continents of Gaia could possibly be worth all that unnecessary pain, Sephiroth?”

“Information.” The silverette takes another gulp of water before continuing, all eyes in the room on him. “The Professor did not take well to find me accessing classified data on his personal computer, and I admit I should have better planned for this particular scenario beforehand.”

“What were you doing snooping around Hojo’s stuff? That just spells trouble!” Zack exclaims.

Sephiroth closes his eyes for a moment when the back and forth makes his head spin. “Your counterpart mentioned something interesting, a word I have heard the Professor use before and became curious about. ‘Reunion’. I wanted to investigate.”

Zackary gasps quietly. He himself isn’t sure what exactly the word means, but knows that it is closely associated with Sephiroth’ mother, Jenova. If the man found out anything about that…

“In hindsight, it might not have been such a good idea to follow through with this endeavor on my own.” He glances over at Genesis at that, looking almost hesitant. However, the redhead only pushes a strand of silver hair from Seph’s forehead with a gentle hand and cradles his face.

“Hypocrite,” he whispers. Sephiroth responds by nuzzling deeper into the embrace.

“So,” Zack asks, “what did you find out?”

Zackary holds his breath.

“Unfortunately, not much. I am not proficient in computer decryption, and it took me a while to reach the core of Professor Hojo’s data files. I did not have much time before he caught me. One paragraph did stand out, however. It talked about something called a ‘Reunion Theory’, which states that Jenova cells, once separated, will seek to reunite and return to the main body. I do not understand, however, why my mother’s cells would possess such a strange feature, or why the Professor was examining it. And what that says about myself…” he trails off.

The following silence is broken from a direction no one was expecting.

“Jenova is not your mother.”

Cloud – older Cloud – takes a few tentative steps towards the couch they have all flocked around. Zackary can see many emotions playing across his face: surprise, hesitance, pity. But in the end, the one that remains most prominent, is resolve.

“Your mother’s name was Lucrecia, Lucrecia Crescent, and I heard she was quite the wonderful woman.”

Chapter End Notes
Lyrics: “New Divide” // Linkin Park. (Will all the lyrics be by that band? Worry not. They won’t ;))

**Question time:**
- Would you rather I keep the chapters this long, or I split them into half and post that way? They might come a little quicker like that, but it’ll always be like, ‘chx p1/p2’ because I already have most of the chapters and their respective themes/song lyrics planned out in advance, and that looks pretty stupid to me tbh. Plus then I’ll have to think of some more cliffhangers T^T Alternatively, I might post the first half of the chapters on my tumblr (lilotea) when it’s done, so you can read it there if you’re impatient and I get to keep my pretty whole-chapter formatting on ao3. Yarw/Narw?
- I already mentioned it on my tumblr a while ago, but I’m always glad about people pointing me in the direction of literature quotes that you could see Genesis using, since I only grew up with German literature and I can’t exactly use that. I wanted to put some of the earlier suggestions into this chapter, but couldn’t really find a spot where they fit :/ Sorry!

**Credits:**
- I think I’ve seen the, “mistake running tap water for Mako”-thing somewhere else before, but I haven’t got a clue anymore which story that was – not my original idea!
- **Edit:** Apparently, it was from Chapter 1 of ‘Green Dreams’ by I-Mushi on ff-net. Thank you, Constanza, for pointing it out!
- Definition of ‘lateral spread’ is from some site I found through Google
- Mooncloudpanther: Using Zackary to distinguish from younger Zack
- Lanturn: Cloud and Gen destroying movie plots
Thank you, sweets! If I forgot you, please please pleeease tell me. I am not doing it on purpose, I am simply an incredibly chaotic person. I’m not proud of it.

Thank you also for all the incredible feedback you guys have given me over the past few months; nothing motivates me to write like one of your kind-hearted comments!! <3
Lost souls swimming in a fish bowl

Chapter Summary

(In which a lot of people talk lots, and hot beverages are mostly ignored.)

Chapter Notes

Yes, this is my normal update speed.
Special thank you to my betas Apfelmarmelade and comebackwhen for helping me out and giving some fresh perspectives. You guys rock <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lost souls swimming in a fish bowl

‘Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?

Hot ashes for trees?
Hot air for a cool breeze?
Cold comfort for change?

Did you exchange a walk on part in the war
For a lead role in a cage?’

“Your mother’s name was Lucrecia, Lucrecia Crescent, and I heard she was quite the wonderful woman.”

Silence follows Cloud’s words and, unwilling to start fidgeting under the combined spotlight of the Soldiers’ and cadet’s gazes, he sinks down on the arm of the plush, grey armchair and rests his forearm on a raised knee.

“Lucrecia…”

Still affected by the last traces of the sedative, the name slurs uncertainly on Sephiroth’ tongue where he is testing it out. One simple word, yet the impact of it being spoken by this very man leaves a crater as big as Midgar. It is the sound of a lost child finding a name to attach to the vague idea of nurturance, to the memory of long hair and a gentle voice and being cradled against someone’s chest, memories so old they have turned into mere myth and legend.

Cloud gives him a moment for the thought to settle.

Observing Sephiroth like this, he doesn’t know what’s changed. But for the first time since waking up in this strange world – earlier even, for the first time since Nibelheim, since flames and smoke and
the painstakingly thorough dissection of Cloud’s hopes and dreams, he’s not seeing the image out of his frequent nightmares. Instead, there on the couch in front of him is a simple, pale and shaky man, with bruises like butterflies up and down his collarbones and a weary look in his sunken eyes. For once, the cackling of static and mocking voices in his head have gone silent.

No matter the kind of deeds this man’s twin has done in a different world, no matter the kind of monstrosities this one, too, is capable of: no one should have to suffer torture under the insane Professor, should feel the touch of his scalpels and syringes and the Soldier-strength leather restraints biting into their wrists. And the sudden knowledge that Sephiroth has, possibly for years, possibly since he was born – that, yes, with a high likelihood the shadow in Cloud’s dreams has also suffered thusly before turning into the usurper of worlds – it makes Sephiroth seem… terrifyingly human.

Human enough that Cloud’s eyes get caught by certain similarities, now that he can look past the murder and bloodshed and alien green eyes. If he concentrates just right, he can see both of Sephiroth’s parents in his features.

“You have her face. The hair, too, though it’s a different color.”

It’s surprising, Cloud thinks, how calm he is now. He can feel his pulse thrumming against his neck, the tips of his fingers tingling, but inside, the large prowling beast of his nervousness, of his indecision and fear - it has finally settled down. This is it. Depending on the outcome of this night, he will either have found an ally in his battle against Jenova, Shinra and all the rest, or he will have to fight his way out as everything goes to burning hell. Smoke and blaze, and the scent of blood and wood and grass under his shredded fingernails… It is up to Sephiroth now.

“You… knew her? You’ve seen her?”

The others remain quiet, silently watching the exchange between their boyfriend and the man who holds answers to questions they never even knew to ask.

“I know of her. But…” Cloud gnaws on his bottom lip absently. “I know someone who knew her. I guess… it couldn’t hurt to wake him up. Gonna need his help before the end, might as well make sure you two have a nice, long chat before that. And also…” He thinks of a cave, of glittering gems and a pale face encased in crystal. Cloud gives small, thoughtful nod. “One day, I should show you. I think it’ll help.”

It’s clear none of the others can follow his quiet murmurs, so he straightens his chin as best he can and fixes Sephiroth with his gaze.

“You have questions. Ask.”

Zackary butts in from the side. “So, you’ve made your choice then?”

Cloud’s eyes swivel over to him, where his friend has taken a seat on the opposite couch. He can see the frown on the ravenette’s face, the hesitance in his eyes. Cloud chooses his words carefully.

“There are some things you never found out about. Some… Don’t get me wrong. I still think this could blow up in our faces spectacularly. But…” He turns back to Sephiroth. “I guess I’m willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, for now. The first time around, you didn’t get all the info straight. Maybe, if things had happened differently… So long as she remains dormant, we might have a chance, if…”

Why do his thoughts all feel so scattered? He needs to get a grip. Cloud shakes his head and steels his voice.
“It’s your choice. I have the information you want, but it’s not gonna be pretty. Once you’ve heard, you can’t take that knowledge back and return to living life as it was. There’s things about Shinra even you didn’t know about. Either way, I will bring down the company, with your support or without it.”

It doesn’t take Sephiroth long to answer, and Cloud thinks he can see the man tighten his long, pale fingers around those of Genesis, who squeezes back in reassurance without second thought.

“Tell me about Jenova.”

Going right for the kill, then. And maybe it shouldn’t have surprised Cloud that the silverette doesn’t begin by asking about his real mother, even though the questions must be burning holes into his tongue. This is the top General of Shinra, after all, and he has priorities drilled into the core of his very being by years of rigorous military training since infancy.

This time, Cloud doesn’t hesitate.

. . .

The blonde is a good storyteller, Zackary thinks as he listens, and watches, and lets the blonde’s rough, yet oddly soothing voice wash over him.

He seems to have a good spot for watching, here on the second couch. He can see where the tense bowstring of Cloud’s spine blends into the forcibly relaxed biceps, fingers gently tangled together next to his knee as though to keep them from drumming against his thigh.

Zackary can also watch the other occupants of the room, mainly Sephiroth in his perch on the couch, nestled between Angeal and Genesis, little Cloud cross-legged at his feet and the other Zack perched on the armrest to the side. For a second, he has to suppress a hysteric giggle – it could almost be a family portrait, if it weren’t for the dire situation. But somehow, in Zackary’s opinion, that makes it even better. He likes this image, of Sephiroth, in his time of need, surrounded by people who so very obviously love him and want to lend him their support. It gives a stark contrast to the first time Zackary remembers Sephiroth learning about his origins, in a bleak, grey Mako reactor, surrounded by misshapen, failed experiments and a creepy alien in a tank; all supports cut. Angeal dead, Genesis throwing biting, acidic words at him, Cloud nothing more than a nameless trooper and Zack…

The Silver General has straightened up a little, a small semblance of control despite the slight leftover slur of his eyes, but Genesis’ hand keeps up a steady, absent-minded caress on his leg nevertheless.

Touchy, that one. Quite touchy.

“I’m not sure what exactly you were told about Jenova, but knowing Hojo, most of it was utter bullshit to keep you in line and keep you dependent on him, so I’m gonna start at the beginning. Roughly two thousand years ago, there was what they called a Calamity, fallen from the skies…”

Cloud is a good storyteller, Zackary thinks, even if it’s not immediately apparent.

The first couple of minutes, Cloud’s gaze keeps jumping about between his audience, lingering on Sephiroth’ form more often than not. But after a while, he finally relaxes a bit, gaze fixed on the carpet, and gets lost in his own thoughts while his voice broadcasts the images that must be running through his head. In a distant thought, Zackary wonders if Cloud ever read nighttime-stories for those little kids he mentioned. It’s so different from the shy and adorably stoic trooper he’s used to.

Aliens, Cetra, forgotten wars… the pictures Cloud’s story paints seem to belong to some kind of fairytale, at first, but then take an ugly turn for reality as soon as Shinra comes into play.
While Jenova is not the mother that carried and birthed you, you do contain a large amount of her genetic makeup due to being implanted with J-cells – Jenova’s cells – in the embryonic stage.

While Zackary knew some facts already (and had thought he’d known some others), Cloud still manages to surprise him. Sephiroth’s mother, a human scientist, sacrificing her own unborn child to the woes of science and the risks of untested, potentially lethal genetic material of a foreign being found deep under some flippin’ rock.

For half a moment, Zackary has to wonder if this isn’t worse than what he’d first assumed to be the truth.

Sephiroth’s own face is an unreadable mask by that point, straight, harsh lines, yet eyes slightly dazed and feverish where they are fixed on some random point in the middle distance. It’s hard to get a read on the others, though young Cloud and Zack’s enraged frowns seem to give away enough of their thoughts on the matter.

The one person who is decidedly not hard to read – is Genesis. Zackary has watched the furrow between his brows deepen steadily during Cloud’s recollection, until at one point, the kettle boils over.

“That gaia-forsaken, lunatic crackpot of a – “

Somewhere between one word and the next he seems to switch into fluid, excited Banoran, and some backwater part of Zackary’s brain feels the need to note that the foreign tongue spilling from Genesis’ lips is oddly mesmerizing. He doesn’t remember the Genesis from his own world ever having spoken in his native tongue – or his mentor, for that matter. Angeal, ever the peace-maker, stands up after a second to calm their frazzled lover down with a well-placed “Gen. Assez.” and a large hand to the shoulder.

“Son propre enfant, Angeal!” Zackary doesn’t understand the words, but from Genesis’ enraged expression, he can take a good guess.

“Gen!”

The reproach – unexpectedly – comes from the younger of the two Gongagans, and manages to snap the redhead out of his tirade for a second. Zack has is arms crossed in front of his chest in his best imitation of his mentor and motions his head in Sephiroth’s direction as soon as he has Genesis’ attention. Now that he’s looking over, Zackary can see the younger Cloud also regarding their lover with a frown.

Sephiroth hasn’t budged an inch, seems to not even have noticed his partner’s outburst.

The fight leaves Genesis with a large puff of air as he calms down, shoulders slumped, and he slinks back onto the couch. He grabs Sephiroth’s hands between his, giving them a light peck with an apology and trying and failing to catch the man’s gaze. The General’s eyes remain glassy, but Zackary thinks he can see him unwind just a tad when Genesis’ thumb rubs over his knuckles gently.

Good.

Soon after that, Cloud’s story takes a skip forward. It shouldn’t be a surprise – Cloud has no reason to know about Sephiroth’s upbringing, and Sephiroth knows more than enough himself. Cloud picks up at the labs, after a brief recounting of what happened at Nibelheim, of Sephiroth being fed false stories by Hojo about being of Cetra ancestry before being killed by Cloud himself in the reactor, and Zackary’s fingers clench.
He’d heard the mumbles, back then during the labs, crazed mutters about ‘Reunion’ and instincts and the possibility of replacing a masterpiece (or lack thereof), and while the involvement of the other surviving Nibelheim villagers is news to him, he had been aware of the fact that the insane Professor had actually injected them with cells from Sephiroth’s body in hopes of turning them into clones of him – but what he really needs to know are the repercussions of that. He knew Cloud had been in a bad place, due to the Mako poisoning, but there was no way of knowing how else Hojo’s machinations had affected the blond trooper, long after the gruesome experiments were over.

So when Cloud reaches the point of time after Zack’s death (clumsily skipped over, and Cloud refuses to meet his eyes for that), that’s when it becomes interesting for him. Cloud’s descriptions turn surprisingly bleak, clinical, when talking about how he joined Avalanche and chased the body of Jenova, mind-controlled by Sephiroth from the lifestream while rebuilding himself a new body at the Northern Crater, across the planet; and Zackary wishes he could throttle his friend, shake some emotions out of him. He needs to know, know that his friend had been doing okay after his death, that he didn’t just manage to survive but to live.

“You mentioned Jenova had the ability to mind-control people, back when she fought against the Cetra,” Angeal interjects at some point. “Isn’t it possible that all that time, the Sephiroth from your world was under her control, then?”

Cloud starts gnawing on his bottom lip thoughtfully. Zackary feels the sudden, irrational urge to make him stop biting the bit of skin.

“It’s hard to say which part of him was Jenova and which was Sephiroth anymore, by that time. Originally, at the reactor, it could have been Jenova influencing his mind… But then again his actions might just as well have been his own, after the story Hojo fabricated about him drove him into madness. Later though, Jenova was no more than a puppet in his hands. He used her, time and again, to fight us. Jenova… she has a way of replicating her cells, transforming, taking any shape she wants to and splitting them into infinite separate entities.

“All that time, I thought I’d been chasing Sephiroth across the continents, when the reality was… I was being summoned. He’d issued the call for Reunion, which basically means all the scattered cells of Jenova were striving to return to the original. The fact that Sephiroth managed to grasp control of that call and instead draw all the cells, and even Jenova’s original body, to himself – it speaks of the kind of power he gained during his five years in the lifestream.

“He called for his clones… and they came. We all came.”

He has to gather himself for a moment, eyes dark.

“With just a sliver of his thought, he bade us all come. The others, they were all mindless shells by that point in time, dark cloaked figures. I didn’t even find out until later that they were in fact my old childhood neighbors of my home village.

“Yet the only clone who made it all the way to the Northern Crater, in the end… was the failed experiment. Me. The one without a number. Hojo was – enraged, about that. It went against any kind of hypothesis he had drawn up.” Cloud gets lost in thought again for a moment, before continuing in a quieter voice towards a rapt audience. “Sephiroth used me to gain the black materia, and with it he unleashed a giant meteor, bound to crash in the middle of Gaia, so that through the lifestream bleeding from the planet’s wound, he’d be able to meld with the planet, become a god and sail the cosmos with this world as his vessel.” At the slightly incredulous looks thrown his way, he adds, “…his words, not mine.”

A hacked, seemingly helpless snort escapes younger Zack’s airways at that admission. “For real?
Wow… talk about a God-complex.”

“What happened? With the meteor?” Angeal asks.

“We managed to stop it, in the end, as well as the planet’s Weapons – large, incredibly powerful creatures that were unleashed by Gaia in defense of it – after they turned on the humans. But… it was at a high price.”

Zackary can almost feel the way Cloud withdraws into his own mind at that, how he locks his heart behind iron walls in a solid fortress to keep from hurting. He wonders desperately what kind of loved ones Cloud must have lost in that fight, and can’t help but think… Aerith…?

Gingerly, he stands up after Cloud has shrouded himself in silence for a minute, and moves over to the blonde’s armchair.

It’s not much that he can do, but as he sinks down on the cushion, he hopes that his firm grip on Cloud’s forearm is enough to keep him anchored in the here and now.

“Sounds like things turned out okay though, in the end, didn’t they?” he asks in a soft voice. “What happened after that?”

Cloud slowly comes back to himself with a deep breath. “Well… time passed, and we thought we were safe again. But when part of the meteor crashed in Midgar, the lifestream bled to the surface of the earth, and the taint of Jenova spread its legacy: the Geostigma. A sickness that weakened people’s immune systems, made them vulnerable and succumb to organ failure in the end. Sephiroth appeared, we fought, I won. Aerith took care of the stigma.”

So then, did that mean Aerith hadn’t died after all? Zackary is distracted from the thought by the clenching of Cloud’s hands, twitching, almost as though he means to reach somewhere. He can feel the flexing muscles beneath his fingers.

“Now, I guess if you were reading this as a book, you’d think it was getting repetitive, but… yes. He came back again. So long as some part of Jenova’s original body remained on the planet, he found a way to return, over and over again. Jenova’s taint spread the lands once again, killing everything in its path and then reviving the dead bodies with her will, though they were nothing but corpse-like puppets in her hands. I lost count how many times we fought, how many battles we lost…” He trails off wearily. “It was a close call. This… this was our last chance. There was nothing left. Go back in time, and change everything before it could come this far, or lose everything.

“If this world is to stay alive, I need to kill Jenova. She’s the root to all this evil, the thing that drove so many insane in their hunger for power, the organism that planted the seed for an army of super-soldiers ready to suppress an entire country and bend it to the will of one fat, lazy old man. She has to die. Otherwise… otherwise, it’ll all have been for nothing.”

A deep, thick silence stretches over the room like a blanket after Cloud’s words taper off, a silence that not even the humming behind the walls or the combined sound of seven people’s breathing and heartbeats can pierce.

Zackary lets his gaze drift to read the mixed expressions all around him. Quiet horror and sympathy on the youngsters’ faces. A familiar furrow on Angeal’s stern brow, a calculating gleam in Genesis’ eyes. A distinct lack of expression hidden behind silver bangs, all the more telling for the absence of emotion that should be displayed there.

It’s Genesis who breaks the silence first.
“At the current moment, how much of a threat is this blasted alien-creature?”

Cloud moves from his position, planting both feet firmly on the ground in front of him and leaning forward, elbows on thighs. “She should be dormant at the moment, locked away inside the Nibel reactor. So unless someone awakens her prematurely, she shouldn’t be much of a problem until I take care of her.”

*Like hell I’ll be letting you take care of that thing alone, Zackary thinks.*

“But don’t get me wrong.” At that, Cloud fixes his eyes firmly on Sephiroth again. Where before, his eyes had almost taken on a dull, resigned pallor, they now gleam with fire for a short moment once again. “If, at any point in time, you start showing signs of insanity or listening to Jenova’s call, I will kill you.” And in that moment, Zackary can’t help but believe that this silent, more deadly version of the Spike he knew would actually be capable to, ridiculous as that might sound.

“You will have to go through me first then, you upstarting little punk!” Genesis immediately defends his boyfriend heatedly. It seems threatening his loved ones isn’t a good idea, no matter if you are in actuality the parallel alternate-timeline-version of one of them – *not giving you any brownie points, Cloudy-boy.*

Angeal once again calms Genesis with a hand to the chest across Sephiroth’s still form, but he also sends a firm glare towards Cloud. “There will be no killing going on between any of us, period. Is that understood?”

It’s obvious Cloud hasn’t spent years under the tutelage of the stern ravenette, because everything in Zackary seems to jump to attention at that particular tone of voice, apology ready at the tip of his tongue; yet Cloud is already opening his mouth for an ill-advised counter. Eager to diffuse the situation, Zackary sputters the first thing on his mind. “What do you know of project G, Cloud?”

The attempt is successful insofar as Cloud stumbles to a confused stop, but he also shakes his head after a second’s thought.

“Project G…?” Angeal echoes.

*Well, sure opened a can of worms there, Fair.*

“Not much,” Cloud admits. “Isn’t it related to project S somehow?”

Zackary feels his heart sink. Throughout the past days, ever since that fateful conversation they had in this very same living room, he had clutched onto the hope that maybe, just maybe, Cloud would have some new facets about Angeal and Genesis’ birth story as well, that maybe this could still take a turn for the better. No such luck, apparently.

“Project…” …*Genesis?*, the redhead in question ends silently, and Zackary can see the glint in his eyes, wondering if he, too, had been worthy enough to have an entire science project named after him.

He steels himself with a sigh, and just for a moment allows his surroundings to be blocked out by the lids of his eyes.

“…Gillian. Project Gillian.” Zackary lets the ringing of the metaphorical bomb fade away before falling straight into his story.

*Project G, pre-natal experiments and implantations, cell injections, the schemes of yet another crazy scientist in a mad struggle for power; mutations, copies and the transferal of abilities, degradation…*
while admitting that he can’t know for sure if all of these still apply in this parallel universe, with so many divergences that he’s seen already, Zackary also doesn’t have much of a reason to suspect differently until proven otherwise. He tells them all he knows.

He might not have known Genesis Rhapsodos well, but from what he has seen of him so far in life, he knows that ‘eerie silence’ is not something he expects after a story like that; after basically being told that nigh his whole life up until that point was a lie, that the company he risks his life for day in, day out has screwed him over well before he was even born, and might still cause a slow and creeping death in him yet.

But ‘eerie silence’ is exactly what he gets.

Before anyone can say another word, Genesis has stood up and leaves the apartment, muttering “I need to blow something up” on the way out. Younger Zack is after him in seconds, promising to make sure that ‘something’ won’t end up being ‘Hollander’.

It’s testament to the turmoil going on in Angeal’s head that he hasn’t hurried after his wayward boyfriend yet himself. Instead, Zackary had to watch over the past couple of minutes as something fragile in his old mentor’s eyes slowly shuttered and died.

…

He’s ripped out of the fog in his mind by the shockwaves of a dull impact, jostling his surroundings. It takes Angeal a moment to realize their little Chocobo has left his spot on the floor to plump down on the couch next to Sephiroth, a warm, comfortable weight that curls up around the still man and stretches a hand across towards Angeal to grasp his hand in a sure and steady grip, stable footing in a roiling sea.

He…

He isn’t quite sure, of what to feel in that very moment, so instead the Soldier First focuses on the sensation of the warm, calloused fingers around his, of the carpet beneath his slippered feet, the hot furnace that is Sephiroth pressed into his side.

Zack caught his eyes on the way out, silently communicating to him with his eyes to stay with Sephiroth and make sure he’s okay, and that’s another good thing to focus on. He knows Cloud would also have loved to head after Genesis, but the boy is aware that he doesn’t even have the right clearance to follow Gen into some of the places he could go, let alone the strength to hold him back in case he plans on doing something fundamentally stupid, as he likely is. Angeal can appreciate the fact that this is by direct consequence giving him something solid to hold onto right now, though.

“You talked about my mother.”

Angeal and Sephiroth share about the same height, so when he turns his head to look over, the silverette’s expression remains elegantly hidden behind the waterfall of hair.

“What about… is the Professor really my father? Or was that just another lie, to bind myself to him?” The words are quiet, distant, yet of no less impact.

“Your father… Hojo created you. Creator and creation, father and son… surprising how blurry lines can become, no?” Cloud replies enigmatically, saying both everything and nothing, and Sephiroth’s brow creases slightly in frustration, yet he seems willing to let the matter rest for now.

They sit in silence for a while, each pondering what they have heard or coping in their own way by stubbornly thinking of other matters, while vaguely worrying about Genesis and wondering whether
they should wait up for him and Zack or not.

The hour has grown quite late, and after a while, young Cloud starts fidgeting and murmurs, “Well, I should probably head back, got an early patrol shift tomorrow…” though it’s clear by his body language that he wants to leave neither of his boyfriends after the kind of announcements the night has brought. He looks torn between following regulations (something the Soldier Commander in Angeal can appreciate) and looking after his lovers (which makes a warm feeling bloom inside the First). Angeal wonders if Cloud has felt through their body contact the way Sephiroth has been sagging more and more in his seat, seen the sheer exhaustion in his still drug-blurred eyes that he’s been trying to hide, and is proud and grateful for the boys subtle intervention.

“Will you be okay getting back on your own?” Angeal asks.

Cloud answers in the affirmative, reminding him that he’s done this oftentimes enough. And yes, while objectively, Angeal knows that Cloud is a grown man and solid fighter, he can’t stop worrying after all he has heard that day, letting the unenhanced trooper run around Shinra Tower on his own at night, unprotected and vulnerable.

Stop hovering, old man, he self-deprecates.

After Cloud has left, the two time travelers seem to decide to give Angeal and Sephiroth some space. As they head off to retire to the guest room, Zackary’s gaze lingers on the two remaining Firsts worryingly. A halting question by Sephiroth, who has leaned forward on the couch gingerly, delays their exit for a moment.

“Cloud… my mother… is she still alive?”

Angeal stills.

“…define ‘alive’.”

After a second, the blonde shakes his head.

“I’m sorry. I know that’s not an answer. I know you want to know whether she left you of her own volition, whether she abandoned you or was forced to, about Hojo – but the thing is… I never found out everything that happened back then, and it’s not really my story to tell. However, I promise I will lead you to someone who can, and I hope that’ll be enough.”

After they’re gone, Seph also makes as if to leave out the front door, but Angeal has had just about enough of his loved ones being scattered into all four winds. Genesis is proving to be unreliable in his temper again, and the young ones are already pulling so much weight, but he needs to keep at least part of his pack together now.

“If you think I’m letting you out of my sight at this moment, Sephiroth, you are sorely mistaken.”

And maybe, so long as he can keep Sephiroth grounded, that will help Angeal pull himself together for the moment. It won’t do to consider the alternative.

For a second, he thinks Seph will fight him on it, claim that he doesn’t need a babysitter, but he only concedes with a slight tilt of the chin, heading to the bedroom in front of him wordlessly, and that alone scares Angeal more than words can tell.

…

He catches up to him just as Genesis is about to enter the elevators. Zack places a light hand on the
paler one hovering over the buttons to the levels housing the Shinra execs, and gently pushes it away before hitting number 49. He pretends not to have noticed the light trembles running through the other’s fingers as he watches the doors close. Silence reigns, and Zack gives the other man some space, merely watching him from the corners of his eyes.

Gods, Genesis used to make him so nervous.

Back when he was a green, fourteen year-old Third, freshly starting out under the tutelage of Angeal, Zack almost shat his pants whenever he had had to remain in the same room as the infamous Red Mage for any prolonged amount of time. Genesis Rhapsodos had been intimidating, and unpredictable, and quite frankly terrifying; and Zack had been decidedly very clueless about how to handle the man.

Thinking back on it, his naivety makes him smile a little. So much time has passed since then, and so much changed… With time, Zack had learned more about the redhead, had slowly figured out what lay behind the countless masks he put on in public. And what he found was a passionate, gentle, caring, if sometimes infuriating or petty whirlwind of a man who stuck to his principles and wasn’t above teaching those a lesson who stood in his way or threatened his loved ones, be it with elaborately snide remarks or a fireball.

Another thing Zack figured out about his boyfriend rather quickly was that Genesis was the kind of person to bottle things up inside himself, rather than talking about them openly; stewing in his own thoughts until it all boiled over, more often than not rather explosively.

Glancing over to the trembling hands, it’s more than obvious that a volcano eruption is imminent, and immediate action required. Zack drums his hands against his thighs.

They each handle Genesis’ mood swings differently: Angeal tries to be the calm rock in rapid currents. Sephiroth tries to reason, yet often ends up feeling hurt when Genesis snaps at him. Cloud usually waits him out, but also doesn’t hesitate if he feels Genesis is being unnecessarily unfair or cruel and needs a dressing down, even if it didn’t happen often. And Zack…

The doors open with a ping, and Zack strides out of the elevator car with confidence, certain Genesis will follow him. The hallways are as good as deserted at this hour.

Zack used to try and make Genesis talk, in the beginnings, or hug him with his usual enthusiasm, even try to distract him; but none of those methods seemed to work. Genesis just blocked him off in these instances, leaving Zack confused and hurt. Was he really too immature, too naïve and flighty to help his boyfriend? But finally, he realized…

Another sliding door, though this time, Zack pauses for a second to type something into the panel off to the side. He doesn’t give Genesis much time to grow restless, just grabs him by the sleeve of his coat and drags him inside, where a dense jungle is starting to take shape.

…he realized that before Angeal can calm his childhood friend down, before Sephiroth can try to rationalize and Cloud can help him reflect on his emotions, Genesis needs to vent.

Zack turns around to where the man is standing, fists clenched tight and tense as a bowstring, and gives him a small, humorless smirk.

Good thing Zack can keep up with Genesis. Because if there’s one thing Zack Fair is good at, it’s burning excess energy.

“Let’s wreck some shit.”
Genesis eyes him coldly, calculatingly for a moment, before something slowly breaks behind those ice-blue eyes, and then crackling flames erupt from his palms as he turns towards the approaching jungle monsters trampling towards them through the foliage with a snarl and a sound akin to the cry of a dying animal.

With a deep breath, the Second lifts his broadsword from his back and joins the fray.

…

Cloud goes to the bathroom first while Zackary pulls on some sleeping pants, and then they switch, and then they come to a standstill when they realize that this is the first time for them to consciously go to the same bed at the same time.

“I… I can take the couch.”

“Nonsense, Cloud.” He can see the deep furrows underneath the blonde’s eyes. Dredging up the nightmares of his past must have taken a lot out of Cloud, who wasn’t even in a good place to begin with. “I will, lemme just grab a – “

“No, it’s okay, I’ll just – “

“Don’t be silly, you need to get some sleep, it’s – “

“Zack, you – “

After a moment, Zack chuckles. He rubs the hair at the base of his neck awkwardly.

“What a pair we make, huh? Well come on, then.”

They end up lying as far apart as the bed allows, and the distance physically aches inside Zackary’s chest. He’s… he doesn’t know where they’re standing, anymore. He wants nothing more than to lay a hand on Cloud’s chest to be able to monitor his breathing even in sleep, the way he has done for so long now, but suddenly doesn’t know if Cloud would even be agreeable to that. In some way, things had been so much easier when Cloud was still recovering and out of it.

The blonde punches the pillow on his side of the queen-sized bed to fluff it up a little, deliberately not meeting his eyes.

“Good night, Zack.”

“Night, Spike.”

It’s a long time before either of them finds sleep.

…

On the other side of the little apartment, another ravenette finds himself in a similar predicament.

His eyes travel listlessly over the rough patches and grooves in the ceiling, looking for patterns. Sephiroth’s breathing is calm and even next to him and entirely light enough for a person feigning sleep. At least he’s not protesting sharing a bed; small mercies. Think small, Angeal.

The door opens, and closes, and then there’s the sound of clothing being shed. The bed dips under the weight of Genesis’ form slithering under the covers on the opposite side of Angeal, next to Sephiroth who is lying rigidly on his back. With his enhanced sense of smell, Angeal can recognize the scent of ozone and smoke under a fresh layer of soap.
“Gen?” he asks, voice heavy. *You okay?* hangs in the air between them silently.

The man in question doesn’t hesitate a second in draping himself over Sephiroth’s chest, not giving a care in the slightest about the silverette’s personal space, and Angeal finds himself strangely grateful. Genesis always was the most tactile out of the three of them, at times almost to the point of clinginess; the one who spoke the most through lingering touches or the small, but significant graze of fingers over the back of a hand; the one who reassured himself and others through physical contact and turned stubborn when it came to letting loved ones distance themselves.

That attribute seems to be coming in quite handy, now. Sephiroth huffs slightly at the movement, a quiet little thing in the darkness of the room, but doesn’t otherwise complain verbally. Genesis’ fingers tangle around Angeal’s and pull him closer towards their man-pile.

The damp tips of Sephiroth’s hair tickle his arms. The General had taken some minutes earlier to clean away the leftover blood from his skin in the bathroom, and Angeal wonders if his bones are still aching; but he can see the casual consideration in the way Genesis is lying on top of him, avoiding all the bruises inconspicuously.

“Zack?” Angeal inquires when his first question remains unanswered.

“You with Cloud. Met in the hallway.”

And then, after another moment of silence, an irritated puff of air and a complaint muffled by skin.

“Sephiroth, stop bloody thinking and cuddle. Chocobo’s orders.”

The General looks away at that, silver hair hiding his face again, but in the same motion wraps his arm around Genesis’ bare waist.

They’re gonna be okay, somehow.

…

The next morning, a poor frazzled technician is called by a Soldier Second to the VR room. The burn marks are distinctive, and nothing entirely uncommon. He knows a certain Soldier First Class will have the repair costs taken out of his monthly pay, and suspects by the frequency of the occurrence that said Soldier First likely couldn’t care less. With a long-suffering sigh, he goes to work.

…

The woodwork glints a fiery orange in the low light of the setting sun, which is shining through brittle glass windows and giving wooden pews and rotting support beams the illusion of being aflame. It’s fitting, Cloud thinks, for the end.

Let it end the way it started, in smoke and ash, fire and flame.

“Cloud,” her voice echoes softly along the stone pillars.

Her pale, flawless face; pale like the yellow flowers that used to grow in that place. Her gentle mouth stretches into one last wry smile.

“You came…” 

[ [ – even though – ] ]

She is sitting right at the edge of the paper-dry well, where once healing water had spewed forth and
flowers bloomed in abundance, even well after the untimely death of their keeper. Her legs are dangling in a bout of childishness life hasn’t been able to take from her, and brown hair falls into her downturned face.

Aerith lifts her eyes from wriggling toes to Cloud, beyond, to where all of Avalanche has trickled into her sacred home. “What a family reunion this is, huh?” She shakes her head sharply when she sees what those words awake in his mind. “No, not that kind. The good kind.” She nods emphatically.

Her smile then moves to Denzel and Marlene, who are too young and too thin and watching the exits with a paranoia unbefitting of their age, but stand tall. To Barret, always keeping at least an eye and a half on his daughter. Vincent, Cid, and Yuffie, standing to the side, deep frown lines etched onto their young faces, but together. To Cait in his usual spot on Nanaki’s shoulders, drawling brogue gone quiet, yet still there, still there even with his puppet strings cut and his master long six feet under. To Tifa, as always a quiet, concerned shadow three feet behind Cloud, as ready to punch something as she is to catch him when he stumbles.

To Cloud.

The white sheen around her form billows in the air as she moves to stand up, the pure light of the Cetra glowing from within. She pulls herself up and takes careful, measured steps in his direction, softly, gently, the way she does just about anything when it comes to Cloud nowadays. Her hand reaches up to caress his cheek and he’s never wanted anything more in that moment than to be able to feel her touch on his skin one last time.

Her eyes shine sadly behind that comforting, familiar fall of brown curls and he can feel his throat closing up.

He just… wants to stop.

He just wants some peace.

Is that really too much to ask for?

Her words belie his wish. “There is something I need you to do, Cloud. I am so sorry. You will need to stay strong just a little bit longer.”

Cloud can feel the weight of Tifa’s hand in his, giving her best to soothe. He wants to send her an assuring smile, yet even now can’t bring his eyes to tear themselves from Aerith’ form in front of him. There is precious little time left of this life, and he wishes he didn’t have to choose who to spend it on.

“There’s one last thing, that we can try; one last defense,” Aerith explains. “But it’s going to take much… it’ll take – all of us. You understand?”

He looks deeply into her eyes, and with a sudden, heartbreaking clarity he does, he does. Cloud nods.

When he leaves, a little later, through the broken grey rubble of Midgar, sword in hand and shoulders as squared as they can be under the weight of the world, marching through empty streets and memories and letting invisible strings pull him forward one last time, not even the whispers of a black-haired ghost can take the sting out of a bittersweet parting and the knowledge of what he leaves behind.

“You were screaming,” Zackary murmurs in a dull, distant voice.
“Huh?”

It takes Cloud a moment to find his way back into reality, to fling off the clinging cobwebs of concrete buildings and orange doom from his mind. It’s still dark in the room, probably the early hours of the morning. The bedding clings cold and wet to his skin, and Zackary’s breathing is quick and light next to him.

He looks over and sees the ravenette lying stiffly on his back, pale and shaky. His gaze is fixed on the ceiling, yet it’s obvious that’s not what he’s seeing. For a second, Cloud wonders if his friend even realized he was talking at all, or that Cloud’s awake, but then Zackary turns his head for a second to catch his gaze, sheets rustling.

“I remembered,” Zackary continues flatly, into the thick silence of the room, and goes back to staring at the ceiling. “I was back on that cliff, and I heard you scream. It must’a been you. I was… I was too far gone, I almost forgot until now. But now I remembered.”

Cloud gingerly turns his body and props himself up on an elbow to better be able to see the other. Zackary doesn’t meet his eyes.

“Zack…” Cloud starts, but isn’t really sure how to finish the sentence.

“All that – ” The man breaks off with a sudden gasp, then clenches pained eyes closed. “All that time, I wasn’t even sure if you’d even find your way back to me, or if I was just lugging an empty body around; all that time hoping you’d just wake up one day and recognize me, that you’d be okay, and then the moment you sorta come back, I leave you all alone again. One hell of a friend I am, huh?” He bites on his lower lip in self-deprecation.

Cloud doesn’t know what to say to that. Did Zackary really just apologize for dying?!

Apparently unable to stand the prone position any longer, Zackary pulls himself up, but simultaneously hunches his shoulders and bends forward.

“I should’a been there for you, should’ve made sure you were okay. I just left you there, poisoned and weak and in an area that was probably still crawling with Soldiers and infantry, and so close to Midgar too.”

Cloud swallows tightly, trying to dislodge the lump in his throat. He… he doesn’t understand. The words seem to fly straight over his head. What is Zack even talking about?

“Were you? Okay, I mean?”

His elbow gives out from under him, and Cloud flops back into the cushions. The mattress bounces under him without a care. “I…” Zackary risked his life, lost his life, protecting Cloud from a sheer insurmountable amount of foes and danger, fought to his literal last breath, until he was barely clinging on by the tip of his teeth, and here he was… honest to god apologizing?

If only the ringing in his ears would stop, maybe he could think. He swallows again.

“…you should get some more sleep,” Cloud rasps, shaking his head gingerly, and turning away.

“Cloud?” he can hear the confusion in Zackary’s voice, and feel the hurt like a tangible thing when he flinches away from the probing hand on his shoulder.

It’s almost a full minute before he can hear his friend’s voice again in the quiet of the bedroom.

“What did you dream about?”
“Go back to sleep, Zack.”

Once again, neither does for a while.

...

“It’s way too early for this shit.”

Zack very carefully balances the two full cups onto the coffee table, one knee on the cushion, before spinning around mid-air and landing on top of the couch with a satisfying ‘humph’. His head plops right in the middle of Cloud’s sweatpants-clad lap.

“…aren’t you supposed to be the morning person out of us two?” Cloud asks drowsily after a moment or two. Zack can only see the underside of his chin and the tip of his nose; the rest of the fluffy blond head has tipped to rest on the back of the couch.

“Coffee intake too low,” he amends and switches to his best impression of a robot voice. “All – systems – powering – doooowwwwnnn….”

Cloud gives a cute, sleepy little giggle when Zack stretches out his arm and mimics the downfall of his robot systems. Zack snuggles deeper into the warmth of his boyfriend. The past days – heck, the past week has been heavy, and this is their way of coping; by indulging in this comforting kind of dopey silliness unique to their bond.

“Man, sometimes it sucks that you’re in infantry.”

If Cloud weren’t in infantry, they wouldn’t have had to wake up at some godforsaken hour in the morning so Cloud could sneak back into the barracks before the lights turned on, since even the alibi note Zack was going to write for him couldn’t justify a cadet sleeping anywhere but his assigned quarters.

If Cloud weren’t in infantry, if he were a Soldier Third instead, he wouldn’t’ve had to answer to his senior officer first thing in the morning.

If he were a Third, they would still be snuggling in bed together right now.

“Preachin’ to the choir, Zack. Preachin’ to the choir.”

There’s a moment of silence before Cloud leans forward and grabs his coffee from the table. The movement jostles Zack’s head slightly from its snug position, and he adjusts his shoulders in protest like a ruffled bird.

Cloud misinterprets the motion. “I’m not gonna feed you, mate. You wanna wake up, you drink your own damn coffee like a human being. Or something.”

Zack shakes his head.

“It’s still too hot.”

Cloud shrugs and slurps noisily.

And besides that, drinking his coffee would mean sitting up, which is something he’s decidedly not ready to do yet, especially with the way Cloud’s fingers have single-mindedly found their way into his hair and are scratching at his scalp just right. The sensation makes him want to curl his toes and stretch his back with pleasure at the same time. If he had a tail, it’d be softly wagging.
“So…” Zack turns onto his side, until he can almost burrow his face against Cloud’s stomach. He likes this, somehow. That they can be on one level with this, that no one has to be the dominant one, or play the ‘guy role’ or whatever. With the Mako, he’s easily ten times as strong as Cloud, could snap his bones like a twig; and yet he’s rarely felt more safe and comforted than he does now, lying in Cloud’s lap like this. The hand trailing through his hair is soothing in a way few things are, like hot cocoa on a cool winter morning, or a warm wool blanket, and makes him drowsy. Between the late night learning about the machinations of Shinra and its evil scientists, and the early rising due to militaristic nonsense, they’ve both gotten a scant couple hours of sleep and his eyelids feel like sandpaper grating over his eyes.

“So…?”

*Mh? Oh.*

He almost hadn’t noticed that he was on the way to falling back into lala-land.

“So… what d’you think about yesterday?”

Cloud thinks for a moment.

“…big clusterfuck of what-the-hell-are-we-gonna-do-now.”

Well.

“Couldn’t’ve described it any better myself.”

“Of course not. I’m the master of descriptions.”

Zack drums his naked toes against the armrest in agreement.

“What *are* we gonna do, Zack?” Cloud asks.

If only he knew. “Take down the entire Shinra Company?” Zack huffs a mocking laugh, then shakes his head. “I don’t know, Cloud… this is just – fucked up. I knew Shinra wasn’t good news, but this? Genetical experiments? Mutations? Shape-shifting *aliens*? …I wonder if we even *can* do anything. I mean, Shinra is… big, Cloud. Real big. What can we really do against them?”

“Throw a dirty sock at the prez’s head?”

“Pff, yea. That does sound oddly satisfying.” Zack sighs. “No but really, I suppose we gotta think small, for now. Make sure the other Zack and Cloud get back on their feet; they seem to know what they’re doing, mostly. Help Seph, Gen and Geal deal with this shit.”

“Be there for them.”

He nods. “Exactly.”

They fall into companionable silence. Somewhere, a faucet is dripping into the sink. It’s peaceful, and Zack decidedly does not want to think about having to stand up soon.

“Hey, noo-no-no. Keep doing that,” Zack protests when Cloud removes his gently-rubbing fingers from his hair and makes to stand up.

“What, sitting around being unproductive? Sorry Zack, but I actually do have a job I need to get to.”

“No, I meant the head-scratches. I need more of those.” He lifts pleading eyes to his boyfriend, who
regards him with a confused frown. “Pretty please?”

Cloud squints his eyes. “I do not head-scratch.”

“Yes you do.” Now it’s up to Zack to furrow his brow, as Cloud stares at his free hand in puzzlement. “You’ve only been like, doing it for the past fifteen minutes? Don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

When Cloud shakes his head in reply, Zack slowly sits up, turning around.

“Here, lemme show you.” And with that, he leans in, one hand on the back of the couch and the other steadying Cloud’s chin as he presses a soft, but insistent kiss against those inviting lips.

The blonde responds immediately in his drowsy state of mind, moving against Zack’s mouth with familiarity and pushing closer. He tastes vaguely like coffee when Zack swipes his tongue against his bottom lip. And as expected, as they deepen their kiss, chests almost touching, it doesn’t take long until Zack can feel the absentminded caress of Cloud’s hands on his hair. Like clockwork.

“See?” Zack asks against his lips, inches from each other. The hand that had been cradling Cloud’s cheek has moved to gently cover the fingers carding through his black mane instead. He can see Cloud’s eyes widening when he notices what his own hand has been up to without his permission. The pure adorability of his expression earns him another peck on the lips from Zack. Too cute. “You always do that, when we’re kissing, or cuddling, or when you’re reading with Gen – with the others too.”

“Huh.”

Cloud sounds baffled, and Zack leans more heavily into Cloud’s hand when it resumes its scratching motions experimentally. He gives a quiet, content little sigh. “I swear, your hands are like magic. Healing hands. It’s like voodoo, or something. Always makes me feel better.”

That draws a smile onto his boyfriend’s face and a hum from his throat. “I guess… I can think of a certain couple of people who could use a healing touch right now,” he ponders.

Zack returns the smile. He can see the beginnings of a plan forming beneath that blond shock of hair and decides to leave his boyfriend to it, finally dedicating himself to his cup of coffee. It has, naturally, grown cold by now.

. . .

The next day starts off surprisingly… normal, all things considered.

Genesis, Angeal and Sephiroth prepare a quick, yet domestic breakfast which the two time travelers join into. Zackary keeps an eye on Cloud, making sure he eats enough, and subtly nudges a glass of water his way. Conversation is kept light and airy, no-one apparently ready yet to discuss the happenings of the day prior.

Afterwards, the three Firsts excuse themselves for the day to go after their own businesses. Angeal and Genesis seem to have gotten shared mission orders, the latter mumbling something about “pest control”, while Sephiroth has some paperwork to catch up on in his office. They leave the two with a warning not to set anything aflame (Genesis, as that is decidedly his job), and to help themselves to the fridge as they see fit (Angeal).

It could almost be normal, if it weren’t for the way Cloud is acting.
Withdrawn and mellow, answering to Zackary’s enquiries with simple one-word sentences or nods. Somehow, he’d been hoping that the last night’s events signified that the blonde was slowly starting to open up more, but apparently – no such luck.

The cold of his nightmare is still stuck in his bones; that feeling of slowly bleeding out on a damp rocky ground while knowing that the one thing more precious than anything, that he swore to protect no matter what, is stumbling around a hostile area with nothing but a sword on his back and it makes him shudder.

He wishes Cloud would tell him what’s wrong, if it was something Zackary said or did – how he can make it better. Does Cloud blame him for leaving him the way he did, back then? He should. He probably does, from how he even refused to answer him earlier. And maybe Zackary deserves that. But as Cloud seems unwilling to talk about the matter, Zackary chooses to leave it be for now; instead focusing on making sure Cloud eats frequent snacks throughout the day and drinks plenty.

The blonde sleeps a lot.

Zackary looks at him, lying on the couch in his flimsy t-shirt, and thinks his friend looks entirely too thin and worn. Breakable. There is certainly some muscle definition there, and even a vague tan beneath the pallor of exhaustion, but it’s not the healthy kind of muscle. Rather, it’s a bony, tendon-y kind of stretched desperation, speaking of strength simply for lack of another option.

He sets down a steaming cup of tea on the couch table with a soft ‘clink’ before sitting down with his own mug cradled between two hands.

“Hng…” Cloud slowly rouses from his nap, blinking around disorientedly at first. Then his gaze lands on Zackary. “D’d I fall asleep again?” His voice is sleep-heavy, and he rubs his eyes tiredly.

Zackary’s own exhaustion flares up at the gesture – he feels like he barely got any sleep last night – but he pushes it away for now. There’s a stingy headache tickling at the back of his head, and it has been steadily growing worse for a few days now.

“Yep.” He watches as Cloud sits up gingerly. “Your body is catching up to all the stress, now that you’re not constantly running on adrenaline anymore.”

The yellowish water creates interesting ripples on its surface inside the cup when Zackary blows on it.

“Drink,” he orders.

Cloud finally grabs his own tea with a quiet nod of thanks, then sighs. “I feel like I’m doing nothing but sleep these days.”

“It’s been the same for me, don’t worry. Just give it some time. We’ve been barely here a week, y’know? How about we just enjoy ourselves for a bit now that we don’t have to watch our backs twenty-four seven, rest up a bit? Don’t push yourself.”

The blonde seems reluctant, but agrees after a moment and takes a sip.

Afternoon has turned into early evening, though it’s hard to tell by the constant green light falling in through the window blinds. It wakes memories in Zackary that he thought long buried, of afternoons spent in Angeal’s apartment to work on mission reports under his teacher’s steady tutelage, or later, when he got promoted to First and earned his own living quarters with an actual window rather than daylight-substitution lamps.

“So…” Zackary draws while leaning back into the cushions. “What do you think our next steps
should be?” He’s fishing for a safe conversation topic, and it’s painfully obvious, but what else can a guy do?

Cloud sucks on his bottom lip in thought. “…I don’t know,” he admits. “I guess… I could go to the slums and reach out to Barret.” He doesn’t sound entirely enthusiastic about it. “If he’s – but, I mean… he might not even be in Midgar yet. It’s too early to really…”

When his friend trails off, Zackary tries to keep the ball running. “Barret? Who’s that?”

“Oh,” Cloud startles. “He… Well, Barret pretty much founded Avalanche. The new one, I mean. Named it after a terrorist group he first learned about in Cosmo Canyon.”

He choke on his tea for a second. “Terrorists? I thought we were with the good guys!”

Cloud fixes him with a look. “‘Good’ is a matter of perspective,” he reminds him mildly.

Well. He does have a point there. With how many skeletons he has occupying his own closet space, how many innocents he has killed himself in the name of Shinra, Zackary isn’t sure he’s one to talk.

“It’s been barely a year since the explosion in Corel, though. He might still be Gods-know-where,” Cloud continues in a mellow tone that Zackary doesn’t like to hear one bit. He feels the insane urge to grab Cloud by the shoulders and shake this strange mood out of him, and blow some fire and enthusiasm into its place.

He suggests, “Well, if regrouping this Avalanche of yours isn’t much of an option, I think we should head to Nibelheim instead, take care of Jenova before she can become much more of a problem, no?”

Cloud stills, and at once seems to sink even deeper into his own thoughts. “Yea…”

It makes him want to pull his hair out.

Different tactic. Change of topic, maybe? There is that one question that has been burning on the tip of his tongue for a while.

“Cloud – why am I here?”

That, at least, seems to serve to snap the blonde out of whatever place his mind has gone to.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean… well, why am I here? You, I can understand. You said you were sent back in time by Aerith to change things. But that doesn’t explain what I’m doing here. So, why?”

Cloud regards the last dregs of tea in his now empty cup thoughtfully.

“I’m not… entirely sure. We were – I was – on the cliff. That cliff. At the end. And when I felt the pull of time going backwards, I dunno. I just… suddenly saw you there, on the ground, and… I just grabbed onto you. I didn’t really think, it was just a knee-jerk reaction.”

“Huh. So, I guess I really wasn’t supposed to be here, was I?”

The sharp click of a porcelain cup on stone makes Zackary’s head turn.

“Don’t say that!” Cloud’s eyes flash sharply into his direction for a second, before fleeing his probing gaze.
“Cloud? What is it?”

The man in question shakes his head before rising in a swift motion. Zackary barely has time to jump forward with a steadying hand when Cloud suddenly wavers dizzily in place and pales considerably, keeling forward.

“Cloud!”

He doesn’t expect a strong arm to shove him back decisively. Cloud takes a step back and tellingly keeps his eyes on anything but Zackary.

“I’m not an invalid, Zack,” he snaps heatedly, then hesitates; “I…”, shakes his head again and leaves the room in a rush.

It leaves the ravenette reeling, where he’s suddenly left alone in a room too narrow and too wide at once. He can feel his eyes burning against his will and rubs a fist over them angrily.

He just… wants to know what to do. Wants somebody to tell him how to deal with this new Cloud, tell him what’s going on inside his head.

Zackary slumps back into the sofa and buries his head inside his hands.

... Two rooms over, a steady stream of hot droplets is raining down on Cloud’s body, yet utterly failing at calming him down with their pitter-patter. His breath rasps heavily to and fro his lungs. His fists itch to sink into the shower wall with force, but he restrains them barely. He closes his eyes against the dizziness, and green shades and skittering centipedes take over his mind, slosh through his clenched teeth and down his airway.

Cloud lets his head thump against the tiles.

Stupid… fucking stupid, Strife!

...

*Pest control indeed,* Genesis thinks.

It is beyond him why by Shiva’s frosty tits the company seems to believe two full-fledged Soldier First Commanders necessary for a simple monster extermination mission. Any Second worth his salt would likely be able to kill those monsters in his sleep and before breakfast, judging by the parameters; but at least it’ll give him an opportunity to let off some steam.

There’s still a strange, left-over tingle in his fingers from when he unleashed so much Mana the day before, but maybe that’s just his imagination. After what he heard, every singly little oddity in his body seems to simultaneously jump up and demand his attention. Was that crick in his neck there before? What is that itch on his upper arm? Is that a looming headache?

It is decidedly nerve-wracking, not knowing if he is about to develop a lethal kind of cell degradation, if his body is about to suddenly turn against him or not.

Genesis clenches his fist against the hot loathing rising up in his throat, like black bile. To think he had once dreamed of **belonging** to this company, had seen it as his one-way ticket to fame and heroism, to grand deeds and acknowledgement… to think of the blood, sweat and tears he had sacrificed to his dream, not to mention the people he had killed in the name of the president, and this
was how he was repaid for his loyalty.

Angeal’s foot suddenly nudges his from his perch across from him on the transport, snapping him out of it. He gives a slight nod at the worried frown, too small to be picked up by the dozing and chatting, clueless troopers around them.

As soon as they reach their destination, they tell their accompaniment of infantrymen to stay out of their way and let them handle it (“Scout the perimeter,” Angeal kindly translates before Genesis can even open his mouth), which the troopers seem only too happy to. Leave the dirty work to those who can handle it.

It’s only a short trek up a hill and into a flat ravine before both Soldiers are able to vent their frustrations on the poor, unsuspecting monsters that have been terrorizing the locals for a little too long to go ignored.

There are a few Elfadunks gone rabid, which he leaves to Angeal for the most part, whose fighting style is more suitable for dealing with the large beasts, and focusses instead on the other handful of grassland creatures and occasional lizard in the area.

A few of the latter seem to have mutated due to recent Mako exposure, developing a few anatomical additions. Those creatures receive particularly violent stabs of his Rapier. Genesis won’t… he will decidedly not concentrate on a certain spot next to his shoulder blades, tickling him with the knowledge of what sort of mutation could sprout from his own shoulders, as well.

A vibration in his pocket gratefully distracts him from the thought.

Genesis one handedly throws a fireball at the scale-y worm thing to his left whilst checking his PHS with the other hand and snorts – apparently he received a mail from the Shinra Maintenance Department, politely telling him in their crawl-up-your-ass-speak that he is going to have to pay for his violation of the training room and to not fucking do that again pretty please and with cherries on top.

He clicks his tongue. “I should have blown up so much more than that, darlings. I should have just set fire to the entire goddamn Shinra Tower, and leave Hollander as a lovely, burning shish kebab on top.” Each word is emphasized by a vicious stab or fireball.

His brain is expecting to hear Angeal complain to him, reminding him of all the innocent, bright-eyed little infantrymen and Soldiers in the Tower, but when the words don’t come, Genesis stumbles to a stop.

They’ve defeated all the monsters in the vicinity at this point, yet Angeal is just standing there on a rocky elevation, listlessly, looking entirely too lost and too shaken. He’s staring at his sword where it’s propped on the dirty ground like it isn’t the extension of his arm.

Genesis slowly walks up to him, sheathing his own rapier, coat flapping behind him in the wind, and regards his lover. He’s rarely seen those proud shoulders so slumped, posture so devoid of the usual strength and vigor that so draws him to the gruff man. Angeal had once confessed to him, in a quiet moment amidst the shadows of Genesis’ darkened living room and molten remnants of mint chocolate chip ice cream, that had they not found the others, and had they both believed in marriage at all, he wouldn’t have hesitated to put a ring on his finger.

Genesis invades his personal space fearlessly, walks up to him until they are standing nearly chest to chest.
“…what are we even doing here, Gen?” Angeal finally asks quietly, distantly, eyes trailing over the misshapen carnage surrounding them. “What kind of honor is there in this?”

And Genesis recognizes the signs with a sinking feeling at the same time as a fierce determination takes hold. No way is he letting him go down that road again, not here, not now, not while he’s there to change something about it. He frames Angeal’s face with the flats of his hands and moves closer, until they’re sharing breath, until Angeal has no choice but to meet his eyes reluctantly.

He thinks for nary a moment, before taking a deep breath.

“Tell me about the dream where we pull the bodies out of the lake and dress them in warm clothes again’,” he commands quietly. “‘How it was late, and no one could sleep, the horses running until they forget that they are horses.’”

Angeal looks to the side and lets his temple receive the welcome weight of Genesis’ warm forehead as the elder leans against him, whispers pictures into his ear.

“‘It’s not like a tree where the roots have to end somewhere, it’s more like a song on a policeman’s radio, how we rolled up the carpet so we could dance, and the days were bright red, and every time we kissed there was another apple to slice into pieces.’” Wide planes of green grass, palm trees swaying in the wind and the shadow of a Banora White arch, rustling and soft like a caress in the morning. “‘Look at the light through the windowpane. That means it’s noon, that means we’re inconsolable.

“Tell me how all this, and love too, will ruin us. These, our bodies, possessed by light.’” He lifts his head a little to stare into mesmerizing, sorrowed deep blue and lets his fingertips brush over the rugged stubble, a thumb on chapped lips. Angeal’s arms have finally wound around his narrow, strong waist, sword dropped to the floor, and Genesis knows his words have taken hold. “‘Tell me we’ll never get used to it.’”

Neither can tell afterwards who initiates the kiss, but for a few priceless, relevant seconds, there’s nothing but the press of lips and skin and tongue, and the taste of battle carnage fading into the familiarity of home.

“Shinra will never know what hit them, my friend.”

. . .

Sephiroth regards the pauldron as though he had a personal vendetta against it.

It is lying there, perfectly innocent, against his dining room floor. Mocking him with its casual aloofness, like it didn’t just slip down from its assigned spot on the high-backed chair just to prove a point.

The pauldron lies out of order, and he itches to put it back in order, to make it perfect, to set it back next to its twin where it belongs, but there’s a silent war going on inside his head. One voice is that of Professor Hojo, whispering to him that nothing less than perfection is acceptable; the other is Genesis’ careless remark from a few years past concerning a scuffle with a Behemoth that had left one side of his bangs singed and off-kilter to the other. ‘Oh, just leave it. Can you imagine the nutjob’s face when he sees this? I bet it’d put him steaming for hours.’

To the outside, he appears incredibly calm, but one of his fingers is twitching, and there is the slightest hitch in his breathing, betraying his façade.

In the end, he hangs the damn thing up (~ no use damaging his armor through improper storage, he
tells himself –), but just a little bit crooked.

Order. Order has so long given him safety. He doesn’t need to be socially adept, so long as he knows the proper way to address a fellow commander. He doesn’t need to improvise a new sword technique, when he has every single one in existence memorized, saved onto his cognitive hard drive in precise arrangement, organized simultaneously by country of origin, range, difficulty of execution, and purpose in combat. Doesn’t need to be spontaneous, if only everything finds its proper place in the mental catalogue of his mind.

His name is Sephiroth, last name undisclosed (unimportant. You are but property); his partners’ names are Genesis Rhapsodos, Angeal Hewley, Zackary Fair and Cloud Strife. He would lay down his life for them in a heartbeat. He measures 6’2”, is ambidextrous, though he favors the left as his sword-hand (a small slap in the face, was proud when he realized the fact forced Him to purchase different writing utensils, re-evaluate tests, had to cross out lines in His precious chicken-scratch notebook), his Soldier ID is 001171-1 and his blood type is…

(unknown [had always wondered-why-different {alien/unclassified}] - - -) –

– he needs order, and tea.

Sephiroth makes himself a cup of Wutainese green and sits down in his study, with the rest of the reports he needs to look over. Order was telling him not to abandon his post in the middle of his work. The gentle spark of humanity a certain group of four people have coaxed into him taught Sephiroth to make himself available for his boyfriends when they need it.

Upon reading Zack’s message to be at the apartment around four-thirty, he chose a compromise – taking work home with him, with ample time to get immersed and productive again during the amount of time Zack might be late due to his usual lack of punctuality (even though quite another voice protests that he wouldn’t be late in this case; not when things are so haywire and the puppy’s instincts will tell him that Sephiroth needs some kind of emotional… cheer-me-up, or whatever it is he perceives in him [a last voice voices concern over the many voices inside Sephiroth’ head. He acknowledges it with a nod and sets the thought aside to be examined later]).

Unconsciously, as he notices, Sephiroth’ hand has straightened the tea cup’s handle to be exactly parallel to the desk’s clean edges. In a flighty fit of rebellion he nudges it sideways a few degrees. Then back again. Order. He shakes his head and lightly swipes his hand against the cup, knocking it askew and causing a few droplets to spill over. He gives the inanimate object a last stubborn frown and turns back to the paperwork.

Then slumps a little.

He has grown up, every single detail of his life dictated by others, to the point where he feels empowerment over misarranging the gods-forsaken tea ware. Sephiroth shakes his head.

Straighten your uniform. Raise your sword two-point-five inches higher. Yes, this is the correct position. This serum will increase the flexibility of your tendons by six percent. Do not flinch away again.

He has grown up in a gilded cage, never questioning his purpose or the ones giving him orders. It simply… was. He was Sephiroth, Professor Hojo’s prized possession, a weapon in the hands of Shinra Company. The food he ate, the lectures he received, the very air he breathed had been carefully arranged by others. All had its order.

And then, Genesis and Angeal invaded that perfectly sorted world and turned it upside down. They
grabbed him by the hand, and pulled him forward, downward, into an ice-cold abyss of uncertainty and novelty. And he, thrown off guard by the tentative amazement of having friends, of having people, peers even, who approached him without fear – let them.

They took apart his carefully constructed order piece by piece, and filled the empty puzzle spaces with uncharted waters. Caramel-swirl ice cream and cinema and hugs, warm and strange inside a tent of unfamiliar Wutai, and ditching class to watch green lights in the distance from the roof and his first kiss and the feeling of tufted carpet under naked feet; all little marvels that made sweet shudders run down his spine.

They have encouraged him, time and time again, to break his habits, break out of his iron shell. The addition of a curious puppy and trusting little Chocobo have only aided them in their efforts.

But… he wonders, what good have all those small rebellions been, if his very genetic code, the core to his very being, have been all… set into order by Shinra, way before his birth? Way before Angeal, or Genesis, or Zack or Cloud, could have had a chance to change him? What if he has been deluding himself all this time, been fooled into thinking he could be his own person when in reality, he has been nothing but Shinra’s pet monster all along?

The latest report is still lying completely disregarded on the table in front of him when the sound of the front door rips Sephiroth out of his musings. He waits a second, two, but the pitter-patter of feet does not turn into the confident, slightly off-key stride of the most canine of his boyfriends. Instead, it’s a blond shock of hair that scampers past the gap of the open study door.

“Cloud?”

His query goes unanswered.

Sephiroth listens more closely as Cloud enters his bedroom at the end of the hallway and noisily starts clattering away in the adjacent bath. Over the creak of a faucet being turned and water flooding into the tub, the rest of the apartment lies silent.

Maybe…

Doubt forms at the back of his mind. Maybe he should not… be alone with their youngest right now. Frightened Mako-blue eyes behind blond bangs flash through his thoughts, images of a sharp, strange blade whistling through the air towards him, rage and loathing on a familiar face.

“Isn’t it possible that all that time, the Sephiroth from your world was under her control, then?”

“…don’t get me wrong. If, at any point in time, you start showing signs of listening to Jenova’s call…”

There are small hands on his shoulder, turning him around, and he startles. Before Sephiroth can even formulate a sentence in his head, baby blues have captured his eyes in an intense gaze, and fingers around his wrists pull him up, up.

He looks down at those fragile, tender appendages wrapped around the ends of his sleeves. It would take approximately 0.04% of his full strength to snap one of the thin bird-bones; just a simple twist as he pinches them between thumb and forefinger, a little more and the cadet might never be able to hold a sword again.

“Cloud – ”

The boy pays him no heed, dragging him after himself with a single-minded determination.
“You –”

“Shush.”

He reckons the look on his face at the interruption might be comical, if it weren’t for the seriousness of the situation. Not many have the gall to ‘shush’ their topmost General. Cloud is one of the few who do, and rightfully so.

Sephiroth stumbles after his boyfriend entirely mystified, retracing Cloud’s earlier path past his bedroom and into the bathroom beyond, in which the air is starting to cling with hot humidity and a very particular smell of roses and a mix of other flowers. He recognizes the scent as that of a certain rare bath oil Genesis religiously stocks up on every time he is stationed in or around Mideel. Cloud must have fetched it from the redhead’s apartment earlier.

Once inside, Cloud closes the door behind him before turning around. It is only then that Sephiroth notices the absence of Cloud’s green trooper scarf, and the lack of shoes and socks.

“Zack –”

“ – did as I asked him to.”

Again, the blonde doesn’t leave him a second’s worth of time to gather his thoughts before those hands are back on him, the boy up close in his space, intimate, and pushing the black leather coat off his shoulders. Sephiroth opens his mouth, but before even the first syllable can pass his lips, “Wh…” it is being held back by the flat of a hand on his skin.

“Shhh…”

Those little fingers… they are soft, so incredibly soft against his lips; young and unmarked despite a few callouses, and he can feel Cloud’s warmth radiating from his body and see his eyes blown wide, so close to his. It is… entirely surreal, and at the same time, more real than anything else.

When he is sure about his lover’s silence, Cloud lets his hand trail down, over the glimpses of a bare chest, and starts on removing Sephiroth’ belts. The silverette closes his mouth slowly. He could get lost in the feeling of Cloud’s hands, in describing their movements, their texture. Cloud is so incredibly expressive in his use of them, in his touches. Those hands are firm and sure against him as they unsnap his belt system and drop it to the floor, then immediately turn gentler when they reach for his pants and slowly work them of his hips, help him slide them over naked feet, until Sephiroth is standing bare in front of him. Only the fall of flowing silver hair over the side of one shoulder dares hide a fraction of his nudity, and Cloud pushes it aside as if in an afterthought before turning his attention to his own clothing.

Inch by inch, Cloud’s own milky skin is revealed. Sephiroth’ gaze trails over that pale throat [arteria carotis communis; if severed, victim will fall unconscious immediately from drop in blood-pressure, impending death by exsanguination within circa two to three minutes], leading around to his neck [a simple snap of the spine, short and painless], down a smooth chest [sharp object of oblong shape, between the gap of fourth and fifth rib, entering through the cardiac notch of the left lung] – up – [a slap on both ears simultaneously causing a rupture in ear drums leading to a brain aneurism that can be fatal] – up – [a hand firmly pressed over nose and mouth, set-in of suffocation depends on victim’s heart rate and general – ] [ – general – ]

He doesn’t notice he has started hyperventilating until his feet are stumbling backwards blindly, until his back hits the cool, foggy bathroom tiles and the sound of flowing water crashes back into his consciousness with a vengeance.
Cloud quickly turns off the faucets before the tub can overflow, then steps back to him, approaching slowly like he is a frightened animal, a cornered, rabid dog and oh, the irony. He flinches away from the outstretched hand at the same time as he can feel bile rising in his throat.

But there’s not much more space to back away, and then the small blonde is standing in front of him, fearless and with a frighteningly lacking sense of self preservation. Doesn’t he realize…?

“Cloud… stop,” he rasps, desperately. Yet he should know words have never stopped the stubborn trooper when he has his mind set on something. Hands, those damn hands again, this time smoothing down his arms in an attempt to soothe, and he feels his body betraying him when the shivers start to ease. “You – I’ll hurt you, please, just go…”

The stumbled words paint a frown onto the boy’s face that he can barely make out through the curtain of his own hair. With slow, predictable movements, Cloud cradles Sephiroth’ face, makes him look at him, at this precious fragile little bird who he could kill so so easily and who he doesn’t deserve and a touch at the back of his head makes him bend down until their foreheads touch.

“I’m a –”

“No,” he says, slowly and insistently. “You are not their creation.” He reaches down, grips Sephiroth’ arms and rearranges them, until they are slung loosely around a lithe waist. He speaks in a very clear and even voice. “You are what you make of yourself. You are Sephiroth, my boyfriend of eleven months, and I trust you, and I want to have a bath with you now.”

Sephiroth’ takes a ragged breath in the silence that is only broken by the sound of their heartbeats, and he finally dares grip a little tighter, gathers Cloud in his arms gently – oh so gently, like you would touch an injured butterfly whose brittle wings will break at the slightest contact, like the reborn god in mortal shell this incredible little being must be, who Sephiroth is barely even worthy to breathe the same air as. He bends down and buries his torn expression in the skin of a soft neck, takes in the unique scent of his boyfriend, and feels fingers soothing through his hair.

Before long, Cloud gently steers him over to the bathtub, and they sink down together. Somehow, the blonde ends up at Sephiroth’ back, legs on either side of him, and draws Sephiroth back to rest on his chest. He gives him a moment to simply… breathe.

His hair swirls lazily in the water in front of him, like quicksilver seaweed, floaty and elusive, like his thoughts. He wonders if, in a different life, he could have been a merman… then quickly bans the silly notion.

This trusting Chocobo should decidedly not be taking time out of his schedule just for him, not now, one day before his practical Soldier exam (perhaps not ever), yet here he is. A silent, living, breathing presence behind him, reassuring him with a steady heartbeat and firm embrace, hands resting just below his sternum.

He feels the copious amounts of tension slowly draining out of him, with every stroke of a thumb over his skin. After a little while, when Sephiroth’ breathing has normalised out a little, Cloud carefully starts washing his hair; first soaking it through with water from a nearby cup, then gently working first shampoo and subsequently conditioner into it.

Sephiroth’ eyes grow heavy under the steady massage of fingers over his scalp.

Maybe… maybe this isn’t so bad.

Those hands, the ones he thinks he’ll never grow tired of, they slowly but surely turn his body into a
gooey, Sephiroth-shaped puddle that eventually slumps bonelessly against the one behind him. Cloud bears his weight gracefully, like anything he does in life. A loving kiss is pressed against his temple.

Later, when the water has grown cold and they have haphazardly towed each other off, Cloud will push his back into the mattress, straddle his lap and sink down on him, with a blind trust Sephiroth might not think himself to deserve but which – he believes as his powerful, yet careful hands grip Cloud’s hips and pull him closer – he might still earn.

Cloud decides to take his mind off it for a while.

...“Zack, you have my thanks.”

*You did well,* swings quietly in the air between them.

– But how could he have done well if the person who means more than anything to him in his short life is lying on the ground in front of him, beaten and bloodied by his very own hands?

Again. And again.

Cloud’s face, so pale against the backdrop of trooper green – so close; just a mere inch from his outstretched fingertips. The distance aches. The coarse metal grid of the stairs under his torso aches, everything aches. Failure.

He’s not responding to him, again, and it scares him because it’s getting worse. Dull, half-lidded eyes stare blindly into the blandness of their cell, unseeing, and no amount of shaking and cajoling will shake him out of it. Zack wonders if they’re going to die in here, and if Cloud’s impassive face will be the last thing he sees.

But he doesn’t have much time to ponder the matter, because then they’re back, the lab coats, and they drag them both out of their white haven and towards the syringes and restraints, and after that, the Mako pods – oh dear gods, please no, not the Mako pods, anything but *those* – every time they get out of them, Cloud responds a little less, seems to slip a little further away from him, leaving Zack all alone, oh *please* –

A scent of blood and burning wood, and a deep, bone-chilling chuckle, and then Sephiroth is walking away from him through fire and ash, leaving him always leaving why

Cloud’s getting thinner and Zack doesn’t know what else to do anymore, other than try to force the smallest bits of meat down his unresponsive throat. He’ll wither away if he doesn’t wake up soon, fade right into the wind through those thin bones and brittle skin.

“You call yourself Soldier? You cannot even protect your own friends,” the white angel snipes, before turning away in disgust.

“Young –”

“You tarnish the Soldier name.”

“Angeal... wait. Wait!”

*Angeal!*
“…an average of 7,632 Newton per bone, which is an increase of… increase of…” …829 Newton in comparison to prior study, dated… “January 24 th, 0003…” which was a cold day, his hands were cold – irrelevant, time since…” …administering serum: forty-three days, should have indicated an increase of at least 25…” percent, however, actual increase is at .122, much too low, calls…” for further – ”

Key card. Where is the damn key card? He shuffles pen and notebook into one hand, pats down his pockets with the other. There. Damn thing, when will they finally implement the retina scanners he demanded over three months ago? Bloody bureaucrats.

( Swish )

“– further study. Secondary note: file complaint concerning scanners. Return to primary subject: note the lateral imbalance…” …of durability; sinistral tibia and fibula, as…” …well as radius and ulna: durability higher than expected by 7.3 percent, indicating – ”

“…had better. You know as well as I do she won’t be happy; the practical exams are tomorrow. Facts, biography, medical history. Family records. I want them on my desk before…”

“– indicating – ”

“Certainly, Mister Vice-President. I’ll make sure – ”

The nerve of…

“For Shiva’s sake, there are people trying to work here, you imbecilic waste of company resources!”

“Professor Ho-”

“I don’t care if you’re the vice-president; you could be Odin himself and I wouldn’t care, take your Turk-dogs and get the hell out of my thinking space!”

_The nerve of that spoiled little brat, who does he think he is? Being the president’s offspring does not entitle him to interrupting my thought processes like that…_

He wastes another three steps down the hallway in discomposure before catching himself. Three steps too many.

Where was he… ah. Yes.

“Lateral imbalance of durability, indicating subject has been…” …increasing use of left hand, despite previously noted ambi-dexterity, potentially due to influence of…

He comes to a stop.

“…Hollander’s brats,” he growls, and ignores the surprised squeak of his secretary. Must be a new one.

Slowly, he enters his office and starts up his computer.

Genesis Rhapsodos, and Angeal Hewley. The two failures. Another waste of precious resources. The kinds of things he could have done with Subject S, had the president had the brains to shut down those failed experiments of his rival from the very start, had given the money instead to him… He scowls. Subject S appears to be spending entirely too much time with these failures.
He’s been watching him.

Seen how they ruin him. Spoiling him, making him soft. Smothering him in sentiment, secretly. They might not know he is aware, but he frequently sees the results of their... their pampering of his powerful, most lethal subject.

His gaze falls down to the notes in his hands.

Like this. S has obviously been indulging in his fanciful belief of ‘left-handedness’, when it is obvious a creation as perfect as this one is quite capable of using both hands equally well. This... is a fit of rebellion, pure and simple. Hollander’s brats have once again been filling his subject’s mind with silly ideas of independence.

And that won’t do. Not when these silly ideas keep his subject from reaching its full potential. Any moment, Subject S could be called away on a mission, and it could be its last; due to a tiny mistake, a tiny distraction. So much work, so much perfection utterly wasted, due to... silly ideas.

And that certainly won’t do.

.

Night has fallen by the time Cloud can drag himself from the lingering, warm tendrils of slumber. Unconsciousness clings to him like a blanket, comfortable and snug, and he can feel the heat of another living body close to his.

His eyelids peel open slowly and he’s greeted by the peaceful sight of a silver-haired adonis watching him adoringly.

Sephiroth is propped up on an elbow, damp silver hair escaping from its messy bun and cascading all around him like liquid moonlight in the pale light shining in through the window; a silent, yet breathing, warm statue of perfection. Green cat-slit eyes shine to him through the darkness, enraptured. Despite it being a picture Cloud doesn’t have the heart to disturb, he can’t resist leaning over and kissing that gorgeous face silly. Sephiroth responds enthusiastically, sinking back into the mattress when Cloud leans over him. The sheets slip down to settle snugly against the blonde’s naked waist.

Nose, eyebrows, temples, those ridiculously gorgeous cheekbones... Cloud peppers them all with little butterfly kisses, then trailing down the sharply cut line of his jaw. Sometimes he still can’t quite believe he is allowed to call this breathtaking creature his own.

When he is done worshipping that flawless face (or at least willing to take a break), Sephiroth stretches out his arm and Cloud pillows his head on it. For a while, they simply regard each other reverently. Time is running out, but Cloud wants to enjoy this just a little longer.

A warm hand is removed from its resting spot across Cloud’s back, only to reappear moments later to caress his cheek in a gentle touch.

“I do not understand what I did in life to deserve you.”

“Good. That makes two of us.” Then, after a second, Cloud adds, “Feeling better?”

Sephiroth nods and kisses his forehead softly. When he remains quiet, however, Cloud prods.

“Talk to me, Seph.”
The man sighs, but responds after a while. “I might hurt you. Not right now, I mean. But sometime.” The lethargy seems to have sapped his usually so refined speech.

“Or I might choke to death on a pumpkin spiced latte, sometime,” Cloud quips back good-naturedly. “Doesn’t mean I’m gonna avoid every coffee shop in the area.” When he sees the frown on his lover’s face, Cloud turns a bit more serious. “Give yourself a little more credit, Seph. Please, for me?”

He thinks for a second that Sephiroth will argue about the comparability of himself and an autumn-themed dairy drink, but then seems to rest his argument. For now.

It’s the night before the big exams, and they’d gotten the afternoon off for some last minute training and preparation on their own, but this – this was more important to Cloud; in all the ways that mattered. It’s not like he hasn’t spent months preparing already.

“You need to talk to the others. You know that, right?” Sephiroth sighs and agrees. “I gotta leave soon, anyway. I need to be back at the barracks before lights-out, I can’t bring up an excuse to my CO. I know you want to,” he adds when he sees his boyfriend’s protesting expression and kisses him. “But Zack already did the other day, and I can’t make this a habit. Just promise me you’ll make use of the evening, okay? Zack’s gone on a mission, but you might be able to catch Gen and Geal when they’re back tonight.” Then, as an afterthought, “And dry your hair. You’ll get a chill.”

Sephiroth reluctantly agrees, and simultaneously tightens his arm around his cuddly handful of Chocobo.

Well… maybe just a few more minutes couldn’t hurt.

…

Coming home will never be a thing that is not comforting, Angeal thinks. His apartment might not be anything big, or special, or extravagant – but it is his. He’s been able to afford it ever since he was a few weeks into the raised pay for Soldier Firsts, and that feeling, of holding the key (well… key card, but still) of his very first own abode in hands, even if it was still technically on company property, it had been a good one.

The small space is filled with his plants, and mismatched couches and chairs at the wooden dining table and little nick-knacks and souvenirs from missions to far places, and a very distinct scent that decidedly doesn’t belong anywhere else but here.

It’s late in the evening, and Genesis has parted ways with him in the hallway to head to his own apartment. To take a good, long shower, he had said, and get some beauty sleep. They all need their alone time every once in a while and he understands. Genesis hasn’t been in his own home in a while, due to recent developments.

After getting rid of the bulkier parts of his armor right at the door, kicking off his shoes and feeling relief seep into his freed, socked toes, it takes Angeal a few seconds to notice the dead-weight figure lying on the couch.

The laptop is still open, if in sleep-mode, on the small table, and the only light comes from the dim floor lamp Angeal switched on upon his entrance. It casts a soft orange light on Zackary’s features.

It’s during Angeal’s inner debate on whether or not to wake the other man so he can relocate to a more comfortable sleeping space or to just cover him with a warm blanket that he becomes aware of the little noises escaping Zackary’s parted mouth. With a start, he recognizes them to be whimpers.
“Hnn…”

“Zack?” he asks, quietly, not sure yet if he should wake him.

Now that he’s paying attention, Angeal realizes how very much not at rest Zackary is. His legs are twitching minutely, fingers spasming. As he watches, the time travelers breaths start rasping in his throat more and more quickly, like he’s on the run and not lying on a plush leather sofa. His brows are clenched.

“Nn… no – ”

“Zack, shh…” he tries to soothe immediately and bends over to rest a hand on Zackary’s shoulder.

“No…” A quiet moan escapes Zackary’s lips, causing Angeal’s heart to clench painfully in his chest. “…eal. Don’t… no – Angeal!”

He starts gently patting the distressed man’s flushed cheek until finally, finally, he surges upwards with a yell stuck in his throat. Angeal barely moves in time to avoid clashing heads.

“It’s okay, Zackary… you’re alright – ” he starts to say, but then his face is full of dark hair and a warm weight is clinging desperately to his shirt. The boy (man, he has to remind himself, even if he appears terribly young in that moment) starts sobbing violently and rambling broken apologies.

“I’m sorry, I’m so – s-so sorry, gods, Angeal I swear I didn’t mean to, I’m so sorry I wasn’t stronger, please, I’m sorry…”

Out of his depth, all the flabbergasted Commander can really do is gather Zackary into his arms and hold him tight while he breaks down, one knee awkwardly on the cushion. He doesn’t even know where to begin to reassure him, but hopes that at least his mere presence can help.

It seems there is a lot this man needs to get off his chest. When he doesn’t appear to calm down after a minute, instead looking to be more and more on the edge of a panic attack and starting to hyperventilate, Angeal picks him up without further ado and sits on the couch in his place, arranging Zackary on his lap so that he can comfort him properly.

Zackary’s trembling has developed into full-bodied shaking by then. Angeal can feel the front of his uniform shirt soaking with tears and furrows his brows, heart reaching out to this young man who seems to have gone through so much.

All throughout the past week, he has noticed Zackary trying to hold himself together, to put up a strong front. There were several close calls, where it almost looked like he was finally about to give in, but in the end he pulled himself together and put on a fake smile for them. Now it appears that admirable self-control has finally snapped, night-terror pushing him past his breaking point.

Zackary’s back jumps under his large hands with every heaving sob that escapes his throat. It’s a while, a long while, before the hiccups ease, long after the rasped apologies fade into wordless crying. There seems to be a lot of pent up emotion inside this fragile man, and a sincere lack of somebody else having taken care of him in recent history, so Angeal tries to provide what comfort he can, holding him close and whispering calming, sweet nothings while he cries his heart out.

He wonders when the last time was that someone held Zack like this, simply held him. From what he knows – the labs, subsequent flight and taking care of Cloud during their journey – it must’ve been a while. It is even likely that the last person to ever do so was himself – or at least his alter ego, in his role as Zack’s mentor, and even then, from what he’s gathered, he hadn’t exactly been doing a great job of it. So all in all, it must’ve been a while since Zackary was able to let go and just hand
responsibility over to a ‘grown up’ to handle things.

“I’m sorry,” Zack once more apologizes with a sigh, slumped against him weakly. This time, he sounds a little more lucid, though. “I know I shouldn’t need this, but… damn. This is just pathetic.”

There are so many things wrong with that statement that Angeal doesn’t even know where to start, so instead he wordlessly hands over the box of tissues from the side table and tightens his grip around Zackary’s waist. The man blows his nose. Spiky hair tickles Angeal’s face, and he has to fight the urge to sneeze.

“Want to talk about it?”

He’s not good with talking and feelings, he knows that, is more of a hands-on guy, but he’s willing to face just about any discomfort there is if it helps this young man who could have been (and in a strange way, is) his mentee.

Zackary drops the used tissue on the floor, out of sight for now, and quietly wrings his hands in front of him before reluctantly burying them back in the fabric of Angeal’s soft sweater. When he doesn’t get chided for that perceived act of ‘childishness’, he gingerly settles down back into his teacher’s embrace, head against chest.

“I just…” Angeal can feel it when he shakes his head. “I don’t – ”

It seems difficult to find a starting point. And that’s natural, given all the things that must be occupying Zackary’s mind at that moment; all the things he’s seen and likely never got around to properly processing. There are a few topics Angeal would love to hear more about himself, but this is about Zack, and him getting better, and he won’t press it if he doesn’t have to. Instead, he starts rubbing absent-minded circles with his thumb and waits for Zackary to gather his thoughts.

Zackary is a bit larger than Zack, but still seems to fit into Angeal’s arms just right, despite the long legs scattered awkwardly across the cushions. This isn’t romantic or even sexual in nature, the way it might be with his younger version, sometimes. This is purely about the bond between a teacher and his student, unhindered by the crossfire gap of dimensions, and it reminds him of when Zack was younger and asked him for guidance, or shed a few tears of homesickness that he didn’t want to admit to.

“Were you ever… sad?”

The question startles him a little. He is about to carefully prod when Zackary clarifies his words.

“I don’t mean like – don’t get me wrong, this isn’t about me.” He shakes his head as much as he can in his enclosed position. “I mean, like… the other you. He… there were just so many things – I wish I could’ve helped him, somehow. Other than – than how I did, in the end.” Zackary swallows. “I mean, he did have Genesis, and I hope that helped, somehow… but he never really did seem to have gotten over what Shinra did to him.

“And I’m not talking about open hostility like what Genesis did. I suppose, in the end, he wasn’t even that mad at Shinra… he was just scared of himself, and what he’d ‘let’ himself become, even if it was never any of his fault. He saw himself as a monster, as something that created suffering and had to be eradicated. I just wish… I could’ve been better; that I could’ve found a way to make him see that he was so much more than that, that he was a good man. Sometimes I’m not sure whether to be mad at him or at myself for what he made me do.”

When Zackary trails off into silence, Angeal tightens his arms and buries in nose in that spiky hair.
“I… I’m sure you did everything you could, for him.” Zack snorts. “No… I mean it. You can try to be there for people, but what they do, in the end, that’s their own decision. Don’t take that weight on your shoulders.”

From what he’s gleaned, it’s becoming more and more clear what must have happened between student and teacher, but… he wants to be sure.

“Zack…” He gently nudges his shoulder until the man leans up enough to meet his eyes for the first time. They look wet and bloodshot, painful. “The other me… he… made you fight him, didn’t he?”

Another swallow, followed by a quiet, but pitiful sniffle. “Yes,” he replies in a very small voice.

“How old were you?”

Zackary stays silent for a moment, unwilling to meet his eyes. He’s got his suspicions, but…

“Sixteen…” He looks away evadingly.

Angeal has to take a deep breath to swallow down some rather very dishonorable words that want to bubble up his throat.

He thinks about what it might have been like, about what must have been going on in his alter-ego’s head. Using your own student, that you raised and shaped into a warrior yourself, to end your own life – it’s one of the least honorable ways Angeal can think of to leave this world. But if that same sense of honor had been warped and disfigured, until he thought himself no longer worthy of living and in need of being put down like a rabid dog, could he possibly have made his own Zack do it?

He tries to imagine seeing Zack at the other end of a blade pointed at him, pointing his own Bustersword at him in return, and not in the context of training but with the true purpose of one of them not walking away alive. Tries to imagine those bright lavender, puppy eyes meeting his over the sharp edge of a weapon while expecting – even yearning for – death at his young hands.

It’s a gruesome thought, one that might give him nightmares for a while to come.

Zackary’s hand on his chest manages to keep the nausea at bay. “Hey, it’s… it’s okay. I just…” He chews on a lip. “You know, you never did answer my question.”

Zackary finally meets his eyes, and Angeal nods. “Hm, I guess you’re right.” He leans back against the backrest with a huff, arm still comfortably wrapped around Zack’s shoulder to keep him balanced. “You asked if I sometimes feel sad. I… I’m not gonna lie. I’ve got my bad days. And I suppose I can sort of see where your Angeal was coming from. But,” he amends when he can feel the other man tense, “I’ve always had Genesis, and then the others. It helps, just knowing they’re there.

“Mostly it’s Genesis, though. He’s known me the longest. Seph… he’s a darlin’, but I don’t want to push my emotions on him all the time. And the youngsters certainly don’t need to listen to an old man’s woes.” He chuckles a little self-deprecatingly. “Gen learned how to snap me out of it out of necessity, I guess.”

Zackary hums in thought. “You know, I think you ought to let the others in, too. Otherwise, you’re just implying that they wouldn’t know how to handle you; it’s like you’re patronizing them. I know they’d want to help you too, if you let them. You might be surprised.”

Hm. It gives room for thought.
“Geal?” He glances down to where Zackary is nestled against his shoulder. “I know you’re not him, and that nothing I can do now will change what happened to him, but… promise me you’ll reach out if you need someone?” he asks gingerly.

The man sounds so incredibly young, once again, that Angeal can’t help but smother him in a bear hug, holding back tears at the care and worry Zackary is showing towards him. “I promise.” And then, because it’s only natural, “Same goes for you, kid.”

It’s quiet for a few moments, both simply enjoying the proximity in the dim living room, before Zackary shuffles a little and speaks again. It’s getting late.

“Can… can I…” He’s biting his lip again, and that’s really not good for his skin. Wordlessly, Angeal reaches for the soft throw blanket on the back of the couch and flings it across the both of them, enveloping them in fuzzy warmth. Then he scoots a little until he finds a more comfortable position that he can hold for a while longer against the armrest, and sinks a hand into Zackary’s downy hair. The man sighs in relief at being understood without further elaboration, yet still apologizes meekly.

“Anything, Zack. I mean it.”

A quiet “thanks” emerges from the blanket cocoon, and then the wearied ex-Soldier gives in to exhaustion and drifts off to the feeling of a warm, safe body close to his and gentle fingers against his scalp.

... 

Angeal wouldn’t be able to tell how much time had passed if you’d asked him, but suddenly he is aware of another presence entering the room through the front door, and then Sephiroth is rounding the corner of the sofa with his usual light footfalls, treading on the carpet with sockless feet. He notices the way the man’s hair, still slick with water, lies in a braid over his simple soft shirt.

“Dreams?” he asks in a low voice when he comes to a stop in front of them.

Angeal nods, and the General frowns before bending down to stroke his knuckles against Zackary’s face in a rare show of affection towards a would-be stranger. Granted, they have been living in close proximity for over a week now, however Sephiroth hadn’t really been known to reach out to either of the two time travelers before. Angeal’s fingers still where he hadn’t even realized he was still carding them through Zackary’s spikes.

“Let’s get him to bed,” he finally murmurs and carefully moves to stand. Together, they manage to carry the man to the guest bedroom without waking him, blanket and all, where he immediately curls up next to the sleeping Cloud. An unconscious hand reaches toward the blonde.

“Come,” Sephiroth steers him from the room with a touch to the small of his back.

They head to the kitchen, where Sephiroth wordlessly starts preparing them both a cup of tea. Ever since the war, Angeal has noted his boyfriend to have developed a love for Wutainese green tea, and to have surreptitiously placed packages of it in each of his fellow Firsts’ kitchens. Once the steaming water has been transferred into the two mugs, the men quietly settle down at the edge of the dining table, ankles comfortably intertwined below. Angeal notices the front of his uniform still sports a wet patch from Zackary’s earlier tears.

“So, how are you holdin’ up?” Angeal asks the other while blowing on his tea.

Sephiroth deliberately folds his long delicate fingers around the cup in front of him and replies after a moment. “I have… a request to make.”
“Did Zack or Cloud talk to you?”

A blink of silver lashes.

“Cloud did. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, it’s just… you’ve got that look on your face, like when you’ve pondered something for a while, and then changed your mind on the matter.”

“…are you implying I am incapable of creating divergent thought without an outside influence?”

Angeal has to chuckle at the wording. The slight glint in those pale, green eyes hints at the mischief beneath.

“Very well. Yes, I did,” he amends when Angeal stays quiet. Sephiroth sips at his tea before choosing his words carefully. “I had worried about the possibility of harm befalling Cloud on my behalf. He tried to reassure me. He believes the likelihood of me deliberately hurting him to be quite low. However, I would like to make the request that, should I ever seem to lose control over my mental faculties, or appear to be controlled by an alien lifeform, or in any other way move to harm the people I… care about, that you stop me. By any means necessary.”

It’s quite a mouthful, and Sephiroth takes another sip to wet his throat when he’s done bringing forward his petition. Angeal busies himself removing his teabag while thinking.

Everything in Angeal yells at him to follow after Cloud’s apparent words, to assure Sephiroth that those things are never gonna happen, that Sephiroth would never hurt his lovers… but he knows that’s not what his boyfriend needs in that moment. Instead, he leans forward and catches Sephiroth’s eyes. The silverette has been watching him quietly, secure in the knowledge that Angeal would think his request over before spouting hasty platitudes. “I’ll be honest. We don’t know much about Jenova, about what her powers are, how strong she really is. It’s entirely possible that when we do meet her, that she’ll overwhelm you, overwhelm all of us. But… if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that your mind is like a fortress, Seph. Brilliant, and ordered, and strong, and she’s not gonna have a fun time trying to break into it.

“And if… if it makes you feel safer, you have my word I’ll try anything in my power to keep you from hurting someone innocent.” Whatever that will entail.

A silent duel of gazes ensues, which resolves with a look of gratitude on Sephiroth’s face. The thanks passes silently between them.

“What about you, Angeal?”

“Huh.” The focus shifts suddenly. “I guess… it’s just a lot to take in right now,” he evades. And has to stop himself from biting his tongue.

Has it really become so natural to him to keep all troubles close to the heart, other than when Genesis nags hard enough? Maybe Zackary’s right.

Well, there’s no better time than the present.

“I don’t know where to even start… it’s all such a jumble.”

He’s about to reach for his teacup again, but Sephiroth beats him to it. Those pale, warm fingers wrap around his and settle in between them on the table in a reassuring hold, thumb rubbing over his
knuckles. Intelligent eyes catch his.

“Try to separate the individual issues in your mind one by one. Categorize them by topic, then try to figure out the links between them. Once you have managed to isolate a single problem, we can work on finding solutions for it,” Sephiroth explains calmly.

And really, why had he ever thought he needed to keep his thoughts from this beautiful creature? Sephiroth’ words seep into him, soothing him with their simple logic and controlled approach. Talk things through, one by one. This is Sephiroth offering himself as a sounding board for his thoughts, as a guide.

Angeal gratefully lays his free hand on that of Sephiroth, encloses their tangle of fingers. And takes a deep breath.

Neither of the men realize when the tea eventually grows cold.

... 

Cloud wakes in two distinct ways: early, and to a nightmare.

He remembered Zack’s death in his sleep; how he’d tried to put on a brave face for Cloud even though he must have been so incredibly scared at that moment.

Zackary is lying next to him in bed, even though Cloud knows he must have fallen asleep on the couch after their little ‘argument’, and he wonders if somebody carried Zackary in here. The fuzzy orange blanket that usually adorns the living room his haphazardly wrapped around Zackary’s lanky limbs.

With a pang, Cloud recognizes the sleeping man’s sunken in, tear-crusted eyes as those of someone who’s been crying recently, and it makes him feel even more guilty and unworthy of Zackary’s frequent attention and care.

All that talk about the night on the cliff – it brought home one important fact for Cloud: Zack had still been alive when he’d left him.

It’s obvious, now that he’s thought about it, that the moment Cloud grabbed onto Zackary while traveling back in time must have been shortly after his younger self had left, dragging the Bustersword after him across the plains of Midgar’s wastelands. Otherwise, it would have altered his memory of the event – if that was even how time travel worked (not like he was an expert or anything). But if that was the truth, and he had been able to save Zack upon his arrival to this new world, then that left only one possible conclusion.

He’d left a still living Zackary by himself on a rocky cliff to bleed out, to die utterly alone.

He’d abandoned him.

The fact that the ravenette is lying next to him now, alive and breathing, is proof that there could’ve been a different outcome. If only he’d checked ; if he’d taken care of Zack, gotten him off that bloody rock, dragged him to safety, done something. He hadn’t even checked to see if the man had still been breathing or not; just left him to save himself instead.

It should’ve been Zack. It should’ve always been him.

Cloud sucks in a breath and bunches the blanket between his fingers as he observes Zackary, lying there sleeping, unaware.
He aches to curl up inside Zackary’s arms, which is one of the few places he’s ever felt entirely comforted, apart from maybe his mom. Usually, he’s not prone to seeking out others’ affection and proximity; but Zack always has managed to break through all his rules and habits. He remembers Zack’s hugs from before everything went to hell; how warm they were, how comforting and unconditional. The distinct, musky smell of his friend. How Zack never hesitated.

But he’s scared to even touch him now, to just approach like that, when things are so muddled between them. Cloud wishes he hadn’t snapped at him, can’t explain those darn mood swings to him when he doesn’t even understand them himself. He wishes his body weren’t so edgy, skittish, his mind brittle and raw. He’s scared Zackary will cut himself on Cloud’s sharp edges – he’s obviously not safe to be around.

There’s oh so much left unspoken between the two of them. Regardless, he can’t resist touching his palm so very softly to Zack’s cheek, drinking in the sight of him like a starved man; and in so many ways he is.

He feels… devastatingly alone, all of a sudden.

Before Zack can wake from the contact, he flinches away again and Cloud slips out of bed.

No one else is up yet, so he creeps into the kitchen. Cloud contemplates getting something to eat or drink, but then remembers how much easier it seems to do either one when Zackary is the one giving it to him, since that somehow makes it feel like a precious gift which shouldn’t be wasted. There’s a lone, browning banana lying on the counter. He remembers a time when people would’ve killed each other over it.

The green tea looks safe, though, and the box it’s kept in shows signs of frequent use, so it’s likely no one will mind the indulgence. The flavor is different enough from the stale water they used to hoard that it somehow doesn’t lock up his throat.

Behind the green smog of Midgar, somewhere in the distance, a lone sun is rising. Cloud curls up on one of the couches with a blanket he stole from the armchair (this one a faded grey color) and waits for everyone else to wake up.

...  

tbc

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from “Wish you were here” // Pink Floyd

assez – enough (French)
son propre enfant – his/her own child

[Yes. Yes. I totally headcanon original Banoran language as French, because… just imagine Angeal and Genesis lovingly talking to each other in French. I dare you.]

So… this is a lot shorter than I announced on my tumblr, lilotea (where, if you didn’t notice yet, I occasionally post updates or snippets of the new chapter under the
#sideways verse tag), but that’s because I decided to split things up last minute. On the
plus side, this means chapter 6 is already as good as written and just needs some tweaks
being done. On the down side, I am busy busy busy and don’t know when that’s gonna
happen yet. But I promise to always try and make the wait worth it. More action next
chapter! =)

Credits (please yell at me if I forgot someone):
- All1sees: Cloud having magical hands that calm the boyfriends down via headrubs
- Affirmedlobster: suggestion of using “Scheherazade” by R. Siken as a poem for
Genesis (the one he recites while on the mission with Angeal), which fits PERFECTLY
<3
- Thank you to everyone who helped me figure out Sephiroth’ hair routine!

Question time:
- Since we’ve got a dialect down for Banora – I’ve been wondering about Nibelheim
and Gongaga. The latter I have no idea for at all (what would fit a jungle town?), while
for Nibelheim I’m wavering between Icelandic and German – Icelandic would fit better
in my opinion, but I don’t know shit about it. I’m fluent in German. What’re your
thoughts?
- What are open questions for you about the plot? As in, what are the things you want to
find out about the most concerning the story, which haven’t been explained yet? I’m
asking because I already know the plot (d’uh), and it’s easy for me to lose track of lines
of action that I left hanging. I guess I’ve got the most important ones on my mind most
of the time, but small stuff is easy to get lost in my head xD
And time goes quicker

Chapter Summary

(The one where Cloud watches too much McGyver.)

Chapter Notes

Special thank-you to comebackwhen for being one kickass beta.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And time goes quicker

‘And time goes quicker
Between the two of us
Oh, my love, don’t forsake me
Take what the water gave me’

The first one to appear, not quite surprisingly, is Angeal; closely followed by Sephiroth, who quickly slips into the kitchen to get started on breakfast while Angeal cares for the multitude of potted plants around the room. The motions indicate a longstanding routine which Cloud is loath to interfere with, even if he could have imagined standing next to his ex-arch-nemesis, frying bacon and eggs and toasting bread. Instead he carefully rubs his thumb over the rim of his empty teacup while watching the dark haired First and his gardening. It is oddly calming.

After a while, Cloud can hear the sound of rushing water from the guest bathroom, and then Zackary stumbles through the door from the hallway sleepily, mumbling good morning. He notices Cloud on the couch, though quickly glances away again. The awkward exchange leaves a bitter taste on the back of Cloud’s tongue.

Zackary and Angeal share a look of significance, one that seems to convey slight embarrassment on Zackary’s part and a mix of acceptance and affection on Angeal’s, and then the former leaves to go help out in the kitchen.

Zackary’s entrance is soon copied by that of his very, very bleary-eyed younger counterpart, who comes in through the front door. Angeal snatches an arm around his waist before Zack can run headfirst into the floor lamp.

“Long night?” he greets and presses the boy against his chest. Zack answers with a yawn. “When did you get back?”

“Ehh… like, three hours ago? -ish?” Zack slurs.

“You could’ve slept in. We would have saved you some food.”
“Nah, today’s a big day. I can catch up tonight.”

His boyfriend gives Zack another squeeze before gently shoving him in the direction of the dinner table. “Sit.” He sniffs the air lightly. “Breakfast’s gonna be done soon.”

Once seated, Zack slumps over bonelessly and pillows his head on his forearms. He could be asleep after seconds, for all Cloud knows.

There’s the sound of cupboards opening one room over.

“Is mini-Cloud coming over?” Zackary asks.

The query is followed by Sephiroth’s deep tenor. “Not for breakfast, but perhaps later. Their instructors will be giving the cadets some important last-minute briefings in the mess hall.”

Cloud stands up to help Zackary set the table wordlessly when the ravenette exits the kitchen with a stack of plates, silverware piled on top. He’s not as good as Zackary at seamlessly fitting himself into other people’s routines, but handling cutlery at least is something he has more than enough experience with from helping out in Seventh Heaven. He misses the familiarity of that bar.

“Briefings?” Zackary asks over his shoulder.

Young Zack doesn’t budge an inch, and Cloud makes sure to set the plate down as gently as possible next to his fluffy, dark shock of hair to keep the noise down.

With a practiced move, Sephiroth carries over the frying pan and a wooden bowl filled with toast, setting down the latter to free a hand for the cork trivet clamped under his arm, which is then put to its rightful purpose of protecting the table from the heat of the pan. “It is the day of his practical Soldier exams today.”

Oh.

Cloud’s hands still for the briefest moment, expression and mood darkening.

“Oh, is it?” Zackary asks diplomatically, though Cloud can see the light furrow between his brows. It feels good, at least, that Zackary’s with him on this. “I forgot, after all the hustle. Are you all going to watch?”

Angeal nods, finally having finished up with his plants and returning from the bathroom where he had washed his hands. “We are. Although we are not directly involved in the judging process, it is tradition for at least one of us to watch over the examination, in case any of the recruits in particular catch our interest. It was that way with me for Zack.” Who chooses that moment to give a particularly loud snore.

“Well,” a new voice drawls from the front door, “I’d say a certain recruit has indeed caught our eye for these exams, hasn’t he.”

“Indeed, though I daresay he would have our heads if we made that fact known and he got accused of favoritism. Cloud can make Soldier without us having to use our sway as Commanders and General.”

Genesis makes an affronted noise in the middle of removing his red gloves, though as it seems not for the reason that would be apparent. He slaps the leather down on a dresser and waddles over to the Silver General currently setting a large carafe of water on the table.
“Seph, honey!” he croons. “If you’d told me you were gonna wash your hair, I’d have come over to braid it for you.”

And – wow, Cloud thinks he must have really been distracted (or perhaps intentionally avoiding studying Sephiroth and getting used to this… domestic image he presented that morning) to not have noticed the man’s hair-do yet. The long, silver tresses are woven into a simple braid, hanging over his shoulder and reaching almost past his waist. This, together with his attire – a simple, grey button-down shirt and black dress pants – diverge so staggeringly from the silver and black wraith Cloud is used to that his breath catches for a moment. Thankfully, no one notices when his weak knees force him to settle on one of the chairs.

“You went to bed with it still wet,” Genesis tuts. He has removed the elastic and started carefully untangling the individual strands, which still look slightly damp in places and start curling in loose waves immediately. Sephiroth subtly leans into the touch like a cat.

“You know how it frizzes when I blow-dry it.”

“Genesis fights just about anyone for the right to play with Sephiroth’ hair. Even Seph himself,” Angeal explains and sits down in what Cloud has noted to be his usual spot.

Immediately, the redhead pounces at the comment. “It’s just… so soft,” he moans and runs his hands through the waves one last time to flatten them, then nuzzles his face against the hair. Sephiroth turns halfway to press a fond kiss against his cheek.

Genesis sighs exaggeratedly in apparent lovesickness, before moving to sit at the table.

“Boots, Gen,” Angeal chides.

“Boots, Gen,” the very mature First mocks, but does rise again to leave those knee-high, three-inch-heel leather monstrosities at the entrance. “Puppy’s still wearing his, though.”

Angeal runs a soothing hand over Zack’s slumped back to wake him up. “Puppy’s had a long night.”

“How come that excuse never works for me?” Genesis grumbles.

“Sorry, Gen. You just don’t have those irresistible puppy eyes,” Angeal apologizes. Then adds, “Don’t forget to wash your hands.”

In passing, Genesis playfully slings his arms around his mothering lover’s neck from behind and brings their faces level. “I’ll show you irresistible.”

. . .

It’s halfway through breakfast that a knock and the swish of a keycard announce younger Cloud’s presence. The meal itself has passed under a relatively light atmosphere, light quips being exchanged left and right between the four present lovers. Zackary feels like he is very slowly getting used to it, to the easy camaraderie, to the sight of his younger, brighter self surrounded by these powerful men so effortlessly, to the notion of Sephiroth sitting two seats down from him eating scrambled eggs. To Sephiroth being embraced affectionately by another human being, of being surrounded by friends. Being… loved.

The thought does not however distract him from the uncomfortable silence hanging in the air between himself and Cloud, or the way he looks at the crumbly bread like it’s trying its best to crawl back up his throat when he tries to swallow it down; how slowly he is chewing. Zackary can’t help but worry at how little Cloud is eating, and makes a mental note to make sure the blonde has some
fruit later that day.

“Good morning, sunshine!”

The younger Cloud greets his boyfriends in turn before being pulled into Genesis’ lap, where he is lovingly fed bits of toast after admitting he couldn’t really down much breakfast due to nerves.

“Don’t worry, Cloud.”

“Yea, you’ll do fine!” Zack finally seems a little more lively, even if the dark circles remain stubbornly beneath his eyes. “I’ve seen what you can do with a sword. Those VR sims don’t stand a chance against you.”

Everyone continues to encourage the little Chocobo, and a warm feeling rises in Zackary’s chest. This is how it should have been, he thinks, back when he saw his own Cloud take the exams. “Man, what I wouldn’t do to watch you this time.”

“You already saw me failing the exam once, wasn’t that enough?” the elder Cloud asks quietly then, effectively bursting his bubble. He can see the others stilling.

“Who says he’s gonna fail?” Zackary challenges.

Cloud drums his fingers against the table top. He’s been getting more and more restless the past half hour, he’s noticed; twitchy. “I’m not saying he will, I’m saying he should. Failing to get into Soldier was one of the best things that ever happened to me. All that strength, the enhanced senses, it’s not worth the fallout.”

Yes, he knows that, but still… something about the decisive way Cloud says it irks Zackary. “And how would you know, exactly? You never did make Soldier, Cloud.” It’s a low blow, but…

“That isn’t –”

“Excuse me,” a voice pipes in from the other side of the table. “In case you didn’t notice, I’m sitting right here, so could you maybe stop talking over my head like that?”

Zackary sighs apologetically. “Sorry, Cloud.”

The young man ignores him in favor of fixing his elder twin with a stare. “Look. I know you’ve had bad experiences with Shinra, and yes, I know this company has enough skeletons in its closet to fill an entire graveyard, but… This is my decision, and I’ve made it. Even if you gained it in a horrible way, you do have Soldier-level strength, so I don’t know – you might be forgetting what it’s like to go without. But the world’s changing, Shinra’s going down, and if I wanna help turn it for the better, I need to be in the best shape I possibly can. And this is my way of getting prepared. So please respect that choice.”

The other Soldiers have gone quiet around the table, each studying the little blonde and the fire in his eyes, and making their own observations. But what Zackary needs to know more than anything is the elder Cloud’s reaction, so he looks over to the other blonde.

The time traveler is staring at his younger counterpart with something akin to sorrow in his eyes, but then slowly, a pained smile steals onto his lips and he looks down with a huff. “Eh… I almost forgot how stubborn I can be.” He’s quiet for a second, then sighs and catches younger Cloud’s gaze again, speaking in a low voice. “For what it’s worth, then… good luck, Cloud.”

That seems to release a bit of the tension that has started to accumulate in the dining room. Zackary’s
Cloud checks his watch and slowly rises from Genesis’ lap. “About forty minutes until I need to be there… enough time.” He cards a hand through his lover’s red hair absently. “That’s right – before I go, I’ve been meaning to ask. What are our next steps gonna be?”

“Next steps?” Zack asks.

Cloud gives a wide, helpless gesture. “Well, concerning… everything.”

Angeal hums thoughtfully. “Seph and I were talking about this last night, actually. We’ve been thinking, we really need to get more info before we do anything.”

Sephiroth nods. “Indeed. Rushing into action without gathering all the intel available would be foolish. There are several issues which require further investigation and possibly action in the immediate or foreseeable future, the first being the matter of Jenova. The way you explained it,” he fixes Cloud the Elder with a gaze, “she might pose a significant threat to the planet and everyone on it, should she awaken from her dormant state.”

The addressed blonde picks up the topic. “That’s right. I need to get to Nibelheim as soon as possible to get rid of her, before she can start any trouble. The thing is, travelling incognito, it might take weeks to get there, a time during which Shinra could get up to all sorts of shenanigans. I either need to get a faster manner of transportation, or I gotta take out Shinra first. That should be goal number two, anyway.” Cloud explains with a sweeping hand gesture. “and not just because they’re a bunch of sniveling liars. If Shinra keeps going with their reactors the way they are, there won’t be much of a planet left for Jenova to conquer.”

“So, you mean… that whole shmoop with the lifestream, the energy stuff floating around the planet, that’s all real?” Zack asks.

Cloud nods. “It is. I’ve seen it, on some occasions. It would take too long to get into the details of it, but essentially, the lifestream is like a river that flows through the planet, containing the essence of the planet and the memories, emotions and knowledge of all who have lived on it. Some places, where it’s close to the surface, the lifestream erupts as Mako springs, and by refining the Mako into electricity, Shinra is draining the planet of its energy. Look around Midgar, look at the Wastelands. That’s our future, if they keep going with it.”

A gloomy silence settles on the room.

“The company, unfortunately, does have the common folk on its side. PR were quick off the mark in turning matters to their advantage, when they dethroned the old-fashioned coal burning from its energy monopoly in favor of the oh-so-much cleaner Mako energy,” Genesis admits grudgingly.

Angeal’s deep bass speaks up from the side. “The majority of Soldier might remain loyal to us, when it comes to it.” He turns a heavy gaze to Sephiroth at the head of the table. “They will follow their General, to whatever end.”

The words elicit a strange feeling in the pit of Zackary’s stomach. It has been so long since he could think of his old friend as what he used to be: The infamous Silver General, military commander of Shinra’s troops, hundreds of warriors willing to lay down their lives in a heartbeat at his command. He earned not only their respect, but their trust.
Zackary remembers that, once upon a time, he himself had been one of those starry-eyed Thirds to deify him. Looking upon the somberly nodding man now, even knowing of his flaws and weaknesses, his humanity, he realizes that respect has not diminished a smidgen.

“If it comes to that, we’re risking a civil war,” the younger Cloud whispers, voice for once showing his age. No one at the table speaks up to refute the bleak statement.

“Lastly,” Sephiroth concludes after a moment, “we need to learn more about the divergences of our two universes. Some events seem to have played out differently, which might render your knowledge of future events inaccurate,” he says towards Cloud and Zackary. “So long as we don’t know about the source of the divergence, predicting changes will be difficult at best.”

A thoughtful hum escapes Zackary’s throat. Sephiroth does have a point there.

Cloud beats him to the chase. “Nibelheim originally was a set-up for you by Hojo. The fact that he didn’t seem to feel the need for it last year means he either has different plans, or he didn’t think it was gonna work for you. So what’s different?”

“I guess the most obvious change is that you two,” Zackary points to Angeal and Genesis, “are still around. They weren’t there to support you in the other universe. Neither was Hollander at that point, to keep Hojo in check. So let’s pretend for a second that that’s at least part of the reason – the question is, what happened to make you two stay around? In our world, Genesis defected after an injury triggered his degradation and he found out about his origins, and then Angeal followed him a while later.”

“What kind of injury?” Genesis asks.

Zackary thinks for a moment. “I remember Sephiroth talking about a spar the three of you had and which didn’t end well. Something about a shoulder wound, and Mako seeping into it due to a materia cast… that must’ve been what triggered it. Did you sustain any major injuries during the past years?”

“Nothing I’d consider ‘major’, no. Not since the War. A couple of scrapes here and there, but nothing with Mako in any way involved.” Before anyone else can comment, the redhead makes a brusque movement with his hand. “Regardless of that, you don’t honestly believe we’d just leave Sephiroth behind if we were to abandon Shinra?” He reaches across the table to grab gentle hold of the silverette’s hand, who looks at the entanglement of fingers with an unreadable gaze. “We’re in this together.”

“So basically,” their youngest blonde speaks up, “what you’re trying to say here is – some things might be different in this world because Gen and Geal didn’t leave Seph behind in Shinra?!” He reaches across the table to grab gentle hold of the silverette’s hand, who looks at the entanglement of fingers with an unreadable gaze. “We’re in this together.”

“So basically,” their youngest blonde speaks up, “what you’re trying to say here is – some things might be different in this world because Gen and Geal didn’t leave Seph behind in Shinra, be it because that spar never happened or because they didn’t have the same kind of bond between them; either way – what you’re saying is, their degradation could still be triggered by a different event, then?”

Zackary can feel the weight of six pairs of eyes on him.

“Theoretically… yes. If the similarities between our two worlds reach back that far, then Angeal received Jenova’s cells naturally through his mother. Apart from the wing, he didn’t really show signs of change or degradation until…” He trails off for a bit and swallows. “Until the very end. Genesis on the other hand was pre-natally implanted with Gillian’s cells after she was injected with J-cells, and the mix-up with human DNA is what caused the cells to not really settle inside his body and eventually turn against him, exacerbated by the creation of all those copies,” Zackary explains, remembering Professor Hollander’s words from that fateful day in Modeoheim. He stretches his arms
and sighs. “But I’m no scientist, and all this DNA stuff is way above my head. For all I know, it’s possible a similar injury could trigger the degradation process, and I have no idea how to reverse it.”

Zackary can see the way Sephiroth’s fingers tighten around those of his partner as he joins into the topic. “I believe it is indisputable that we need to look more into the concept of degradation and find out the exact repercussions of the genetic tampering that happened to all three of us. Genetics are a fickle thing based on probabilities, not on determinants, so anything is possible.”

“So, like, you guys could even be randomly sprouting tentacles?”

Angeal cuffs Zack behind the head. “Not funny.”

“Well then, how are we gonna find out?” the younger Cloud asks. “It’s not like we can just walk up to Hollander and demand an explanation.”

At that, Genesis brusquely pushes himself up from the table and starts walking around agitatedly. “And why exactly is that? He got us into this mess in the first place, he’d better be able to get us out of it. And I can be quite convincing when I want to be.”

“And how exactly will you explain your means of obtaining that information in the first place?” Sephiroth asks with his usual cool, unflappable logic, leaning back in his chair after being bereft of the warm hand in his. “A time travelling bird whispered it to me?”

Genesis explodes at that. “Well excuse me if I don’t want to just sit around and wait to see if I will die a creeping death soon.”

Zackary frowns. The redhead’s change of mood is startling, until he realizes with a pang what a good actor Genesis really is. It seems like the man must’ve still been reeling from the recent developments without any real outlet to vent, yet he has put on a lighthearted façade all morning for his lovers, and most of all to calm down Cloud, who was nervous due to the examinations. But really, what kind of strain must it have been putting on him not to know if his own body is going to turn against him at any moment? Zackary shudders at the feeling and tries offering a different approach.

“What about… Gillian?” he asks carefully. “She must’ve known something of the experiments.”

Zackary can visibly see both Angeal and Genesis deflating at the reminder.

“No,” Angeal whispers simply, and his heart clenches for his mentor. This is Angeal’s way of saying he’s not ready yet to face his mother about her life-long betrayal.

Surprisingly, Sephiroth picks up the thread and gives support to his boyfriend’s plain rejection. “Seeing as Gillian has played no part in your recent medical history, the chances of her knowing specifics about your current condition are quite low. Besides, we do not currently have a safe way of reaching out to her without alarming the Turks.”

Everyone thinks in silence for a bit, before Zack huffs exasperatedly. “Gee, I say we just sneak into Hollander’s labs, hack into his computer and see what kinda files that dirty old man has stashed away there. He’s gotta have some sort of documents about you guys’ genetic profile, right?”

Genesis looks up thoughtfully, but before he can speak Angeal gently chides with a glance at Sephiroth, “Yes, because breaking into someone’s computer worked so well last time.”

“Well, that’s because it was reckless, and impulsive, and he was on his own.” If Zackary didn’t know better, he could’ve sworn he saw a pout on Sephiroth’s lips in reaction to Genesis’ blithe
“That’s right,” Zack continues. “If we all work together, we can figure something out. We just need to make sure we don’t get caught. Let’s do sneaky spy shit!”

Angeal is quick to shoot him down. “Like hell I’m letting you wander around Hollander’s labs on a secret espionage mission, puppy. What if you get caught? You’ll never see the light of day again.”

“Better us than if he catches you and Gen in there. With you two it’ll be obvious what you’re trying to do there. At worst, we can pretend we got lost or something,” Cloud says.

Zackary can see that Angeal wants to continue arguing – and he can understand, really. Knowing what he knows of Hollander, he doesn’t want to see the youngsters anywhere near the man’s laboratories, especially while doing something blatantly illegal. The risk of detection is too high. Sephiroth speaks up in an attempt to reason.

“Regardless of who would be the one to do the infiltration, how do you imagine they will get into Hollander’s private office to begin with? If he is anything like Professor Hojo, he will have key card slots and passcodes barring entry at any crucial location, not to mention the actual security on his computer itself.”

“Easy,” young Cloud says, and adds one more word, as though it’s obvious. “Reno.”

Another blond head snaps up at that. “I wouldn’t trust Reno as far as I can spit,” Cloud growls. And – wow. Yes, Zackary knew Reno could be a bit of a dick, but he can’t help but wonder what warrants that kind of dislike.

Mini-Cloud shakes his head. “Don’t worry, he owes me. He might be a Turk, but I know him, and he’s not gonna stab me in the back about this. He’s probably gonna pester me after the exams anyway, so that’s as good a chance as any to ask if he can do anything about this.” Another glance at his watch, and he adds, “Which reminds me, I really need to be going. Let’s talk more later.”

And that… pretty much concludes the conversation. Nobody seems willing to argue any longer, or at least is willing to post-pone further discussions until after the Soldier tests. Cloud needs to concentrate now, and that takes definite priority. Zack, Genesis, Angeal and Sephiroth all give their goodbyes and good luck wishes to Cloud in private before letting him head out, then follow after giving him a bit of a headstart to avoid suspicion.

And then it’s just the two of them.

... 

“Not like restricted access ever kept you out of anywhere you’re not supposed to be, eh, Fair-weather?”

The kid turns around at the quip and approaches Colonel Griffin with an easy smile at the side of the observation deck. No – not a kid anymore, Angeal has to remind himself. Zack’s a grown-up young man of nineteen years and no longer under his tutelage, yet in some cases the youthful image Zack has left in other people’s heads comes in quite handy. Technically, only the General and his highest ranking officers are permitted to witness the annual Soldier exams, yet there is not a soul in the entire Shinra Tower that hasn’t grown used to the spiky-haired Second trailing after his mentor like a lost puppy. Angeal listens in with half an ear as jibes about mutts and leashes are made, followed by squawks and good-natured laughs, then turns his attention to Genesis and Sephiroth standing at the window.
Seph’s hair is still slightly wavy, despite Genesis’ diligent attempts to smooth it, and the General has put it up in a high ponytail on the way here to distract from that. Really, most of Shinra’s employees are probably used to Sephiroth’s hair’s various states of immaculacy by now, but he knows he has an image to uphold should Sephiroth spontaneously be asked to speak to the fresh recruits. And this style does bring out his sharp cheekbones and jaw rather nicely…

“Really? The blond, grumpy one?” someone laughs, and Zack immediately goes off on a tangent about that when the door slides open once again and a new presence enters the room. The even steps approach the Trinity from behind.

“What a pleasant surprise to meet all three of you here today, General, Commanders,” the First Class greets and gives them a nod.

“Colonel Noda,” Angeal returns the courtesy, while Sephiroth inclines his head towards him and Genesis regards the newcomer amicably.

“Anything worthy of note about to happen that has brought the famous Trinity up here?”

Noda has a calm voice, with a slight lilt that betrays his Wutainese heritage. He and Sephiroth go way back, and Angeal knows him to be one of the few out of the higher officers that the General trusts unconditionally. Angeal can appreciate the man’s serene, collected attitude and ability to keep his composure under high strain.

With a jolt, Angeal’s own words from earlier and Cloud’s subsequent remark come back to him. If push came to shove, how many of these men would follow them blindly in a revolt against Shinra? How many would turn against them? Where would the infantry stand? Could they really risk starting a civil war over this?

Sephiroth hums in reply and turns back to his view of the Virtual Reality room below, ripping the ravenette First from his musings. “Oh, you never know, Colonel. You never know.”

. . .

There’s a crack in the flower pot.

No longer than half an inch, right at the rim. Cloud traces it with his thumb, feels the rough edge rub over his skin. Again. The rest of his fingers start up a drumming rhythm against the pottery.

Quiet.

Something moves in the window and Cloud spins around, hands in fists. The living room is empty, safe for the panting ravenette doing sit-ups against the couch, but he could’ve sworn he saw a pale figure reflected in the glass. Cloud’s breath catches.

“Everything alright Spike?” Zackary asks.

He nods absently as his heartbeat slows and turns back around, fingers splayed on the window sill while chiding himself for his jumpiness.

Cloud can’t help it.

Below the sounds of Zackary’s workout, the white noise seems like a constant. Like an incessant ringing in his ear caused by explosion, refusing to abate into the gentleness of silence.

Somewhere in this building, his younger self is deciding over his future with Shinra. Somewhere, a
crazed professor is on the loose, torturing innocents and acting out his evil schemes, unchecked. Another continent over, Jenova is lying inside her tank complacently while waiting for her chance to take over the planet. And here, in this room, the tension hangs thick in the air like tar.

A prickling feeling spreads across his neck and Cloud turns around to face the room once more. The more he lets his mind wander, the more he feels like he can hear a deep voice chuckle inside his head; but there isn’t a whole lot to distract himself with inside Angeal’s living quarters. It’s not that he dislikes the apartment itself, but the fact that he simply can’t go outside without risking serious consequences makes him feel trapped.

Cloud detains himself from pacing like a caged animal and instead plops down on one of the couches. Zackary glances over to him.

“We should… ask the others… about using the… training rooms… sometime…” he pants between lifts. “I’m going… stir-crazy in here…”

To keep it from getting soaked through with sweat, Zackary had taken off his shirt earlier, revealing the bullet scars on his chest. Despite the disturbing sight, Cloud is definitely not staring at the way Zackary’s powerful muscles ripple under his skin. He used to be very self-conscious about his own physique back then, even jealous of the strength corded through his friend’s broad shoulders, the large biceps and firm abs, whenever the ravenette took off his uniform top during their sparring sessions, compared to Cloud’s own scrawny frame. But that’s faded recently after the kind of events that brought out Cloud’s own muscles over the years. He realizes with a jolt that a certain admiration still hasn’t faded completely, though.

Nope, looking at the curled hands in his lap, now.

His knee starts bouncing.

One more huff, and then Zackary stills on the ground, arms still crossed in front of his body and legs bent. Cloud realizes belatedly that Zack’s staring at him, a small crease between his eyes. In the sudden silence the static threatens to take over again.

“Okay.” The ex-Soldier suddenly jumps up and grabs Cloud’s arm, pulling him with him. Cloud can feel the touch burn through his t-shirt. Zackary drags him towards a side of the living room, then releases him to push away some of the furniture, creating a decently clutter-free space on the hardwood floor.

“Zack…?” he asks haltingly.

The man spins around to face him and settles in a spot about five feet apart.

“You remember katas, right?”

Surprisingly, he does. Vaguely. Cloud thinks back to his training sessions with Zack, to the sword stances the elder had taught him in preparation for trying out for Soldier again. Katas were basic positions and movements needed during sword fights, which were taught to recruits early on to get them used to the fluid patterns. First slowly, then speeding up more and more until they could blend seamlessly into one another.

“Well, I’ve got a feeling they might help me get my body back into shape,” Zackary explains after Cloud has nodded, “but doing them alone is kinda boring, so why don’t you join in?”

There’s an easy grin on his face, but Cloud isn’t fooled for one second. His restlessness has been picked up on, and this is Zack’s attempt at helping him work it out without seeming patronizing.
“Come on then, first kata. Just watch me if you’ve forgotten one.”

Zackary adjusts his feet and easily falls into the first, and most basic pattern. His eyes are closed, making him appear vulnerable, and it makes something clench inside Cloud. He hurries to follow after his friend, who is moving through the kata slowly enough for Cloud to catch on before moving on to the next.

Slowly, Cloud can feel the tension drain from his shoulders and his own eyes slip closed while his mind drops back into the comfort of habit and memories of better times.

.

If nervousness were a color, and it would decidedly be a very yellow-ish kind of puke-green, Cloud decides, then the whole hallway would be dripping in a slimy sort of yellow-green.

*Chartreuse*, the voice of Genesis chides in his head.

Yea.

Chartreuse walls and chartreuse floors and light bulbs and even the collapsible benches some poor soul set up for them along the side would be shaking on their flimsy metal supports in fright.

He takes a deep breath and balls his hands into fists.

“…heard the General *himself* is watching today!”

“Yea right. As if. That’s what they say every year, to get us extra flustered so we mess up. You bet he’s got better things to do in his day than watch us.”

“No man, I’m telling you, this is *legit* – ”

“Dude, I heard somebody saw the whole goddamn Trinity heading to the deck!”

“Pf. You heard that somebody saw them walking someplace. Are you even listening to yourself?”

It’s hard to keep himself from grinning at that, knowing exactly the reason for the Trinity’s presence at this year’s practical examinations. At the same time, it makes a new wave of the ugly chartreuse bubble up his throat.

They’re all watching him today, and he absolutely mustn’t screw this up. He’s trained so hard for this, for so long, and he can’t let them down now.

The voice of director Lazard crackles over the speaker system. “Next up: Cadets Powell, Robinson, Ross, Scotts, Stewart, and Strife. Please enter the training room.”

Cloud slaps his thighs before standing up.

He’s got this. He can do it.

.

A shadow slinks into the dimly lit room. The man in suit sitting in front of the monitors barely pays him any attention, though, long used to the other’s presence.

“Anything interesting, so far?” The newcomer catches the back rest of another swivel chair and pulls it closer before sinking down with a petulant sort of elegance.
The first man’s sharp eyes wander across the screens, taking in the multitude of faces and actions on display with his usual efficiency. “Not much yet. A certain few have shown promise, but nothing above the usual.” He hears the other sigh. What a child. “However… you might like to know that the Trinity has deemed it necessary to attend personally today. All three of them.”

“Yes that so…” The white-clad figure leans forward, cold blue eyes glinting. “Now, what is it that could have caught their interest…?” he muses. “Well, you know what to do once they announce the results.”

“Certainly, sir.”

The figure stands up and leaves without further comment, and the man in suit leans back in his chair, gaze returning to his work.

A child, perhaps, but a dangerous one.

…”

“Zack I swear, if the next words out of your mouth are, ‘my adoring little cirrocumulus’, I will punch you.”

They trickle into the apartment one after the other and kick off their shoes.

“Ooh, don’t be such an altostratus!”

Stormclouds and lightning flash around Cloud’s head. The wind picks up. His eyes start glinting forebodingly.

“Forget what I said about punching. Zack, I will end you.”

Angeal wraps his arm around Cloud’s chest just as he starts marching towards his boyfriend with all the menace of an enraged thunder god. “Please no ending people in my living room. Do you have any idea how hard it is to get bloodstains out of carpets?”

At the other end of the room, Zack can hear his maxi-me (what else is he supposed to call him?!) snort ungracefully. “Okay, what?”

“Zack has figured out how to use the Moogle-net,” Cloud laments. And hey, totally not fair – he did know how to use a computer, he just didn’t know it could be so much fun before. He’s actually looked up the terms weeks ago, and was just waiting for the opportune moment to spring them on his adorable boyfriend.

“Cloud needs cheering up,” he explains and slouches onto the sofa between Genesis and Sephiroth. Cloud seems to look quite cozy, leaning against Angeal like that (and really, who wouldn’t be?). In just that moment, the older Cloud appears through the doorway to the guest room and starts listening in.

“You mean…”

Pff.

“Nah, he got through.” Zack hopes his voice is bringing across the massive amounts of d’uh he’s feeling. “But then just after Lazard announces the results to everyone in the auditorium, he trips over his own feet on the way to the front.”
“Za-ack!” Goodness is Cloud cute when he gets pouty. A flush starts to spread across his cheeks anew, quite similar to the one he displayed earlier in the middle of his fellow rookies.

Angeal, the spoilsport, seems to have mercy on their youngest though. “I think that’s quite enough of that. Cloud did it, and we’re all very proud of him.” A tight squeeze. “Now let’s get some food into you.”

“Yes,” Genesis hisses and rises to tackle the blonde in mad glee. “Let’s feed the little bird.” The three vanish into the kitchen chattering away.

It’s gotten quite late, now that Zack thinks about it. The examinations started at ten-hundred and took up the majority of the day; afterwards, the judges had to consult on the results, and then the big assembly in the auditory, where of course Lazard had to hold a speech that went on forever, and after the results got announced, it was expected of the present Soldiers (now also the regular Seconds and Thirds on top of the Firsts and himself, ever the exception) to mingle with the crowd and greet the newcomers, make them feel welcome while trying to subtly ignore the unlucky ones slinking out of the hall in dejection.

It had been hell not being allowed to give Cloud a giant smooch right then and there, when they finally ran across each other, but at least it hadn’t seemed too conspicuous to glomp him. He can only imagine the pain Seph, Gen and Angeal had gone through.

He throws an adoring grin to his silver-haired boyfriend at his side and entangles their fingers on Sephiroth’ thigh. The First smiles back softly and Zack nuzzles into him, earlier sleepiness finally catching up to him after the excitement has worn down. Sephiroth’ chest is soft… and warm… “Aww, wish I had a camera.”

He grunts and snuggles further into his heated pillow, burrowing down to evade the voice trying to drag him out of slumber. Then the pillow rumbles. Chuckles. Oh. Living pillow. Right.

“Ngh?” Zack blearily looks up and comes face to face with a fond gaze from green eyes. In the corner of his eyes, he can see the other Zack, the older one, standing with a grin and arms propped against his hips. “Sorry.” He yawns and stretches. “D’d I fall ’sleep on you?”

Sephiroth helps the waking process with some glorious fingertips scratching down his back, and Zack arches into the touch. Poor man must’ve gotten so stiff from trying not to jostle him in his sleep.

“Dinner’s ready,” Gen announces in that moment and starts carrying dishes through the kitchen doorway, Angeal hot on his heels (and when is Angeal ever not hot? Focus, Zack ). He must’ve been out for a bit if he missed the whole dinner-making process; kinda like a time skip that leaves him disoriented.

They sit down and eat. As it seems, the two native Banorans went all out in the kitchen, and a glance inside the other room showed the multitude of pots and pans used. Somehow, the two freeloaders (a.k.a. time travelers, because obviously the youngsters Cloud and Zack are anything but freeloaders, they pull their weight, thank you very much!) get roped into doing the dishes that night. They chat about the examinations (Zack notices the older Cloud clenching his fists under the table, but he remains quiet on the topic), each congratulating mini-Cloud once again until he’s a hot blushing mess and feels the need to distract by recounting his conversation with Reno, who he managed to catch after the ceremony.

“He’s agreed to help us, but I’ll owe him at least another beer or two afterwards for all the strings he’s gonna have to pull,” Cloud explains. “There’s a vent system spread throughout Hollander’s labs
and surrounding levels, he can get us in two levels above it. However, he’ll have to rig the video feeds on the security cams and find out the passcodes for the doors. There are motion sensors in the rooms that contain cages for his experiments, which can only be deactivated with the right keycard or through a manual mechanism on the inside. And also, he can’t help us with any lab assistants walking through there. Once we’re in, we’re on our own.”

“Well, doesn’t that just sound fun?” Zack remarks. Secret spy mission is a go!

“I’m supposed to meet him on Basement Level 10 tonight at twenty-three-hundred with two others at most.”

Angeal gasps. “Tonight?! Hasn’t it been enough action already?”

Cloud sighs and leans back in his chair. “I know, but the opportunity is too good to pass up. Everyone will be too busy with the aftermath of the exams. And besides, Reno’s on monitor room duty tonight, so he’ll have enough time to fiddle with the records.”

No one seems very happy at that, but at the same time grudgingly accepting of the facts that are staring them in the face. Zack’s tired, and even if he weren’t he’d much rather have celebrated Cloud’s victory in quite a different way, but he rubs his eyes with his wrist and squares his shoulders. Can’t be helped then.

“Alright, that means we’ll have a little over three hours to prepare. I think I’ve got my helmet lying around somewhere in the back of my closet.”

“Zack, you can hardly concentrate at the best of times. Over my dead body am I gonna let you stumble around in hostile territory while you’re dead on your feet with fatigue.”

And okay, that stings. Yes, he knows he can be a little distractible sometimes, but. He’s trying.

He almost jumps when he feels Angeal’s apologetic hand on his thigh below the table. He doesn’t push it off, but at the same time doesn’t give the man the satisfaction of reciprocating the touch. He turns away to listen to young Cloud speak.

“Well, we do need to make a choice here, though. I’m a given – I’m Reno’s contact man. He doesn’t know you guys the way he does me; if I’m not there he’s gonna blow the whole thing off and pretend he’s never heard of the plan.”

Zack can see the way Seph, Gen and Geal form an instant dislike against the idea the moment the words leave Cloud’s mouth, and he can certainly sympathize.

“Then Angeal and I will be coming with you,” Genesis decides. “We know our way the best around Hollander’s labs.”

Zackary leans forward with a frown. “No. Hollander more than likely knows how much both of you abhor the labs. If he caught you in there without him explicitly having called you down, he’ll know something’s up.”

Genesis moves as if to argue – of course he does; Zack knows him, and he knows how much the man wants to settle his score with Hollander – when he’s interrupted by Cloud senior, who has been quiet through most of tonight’s discussion.

“You draw too much attention. All three of you.” His gaze encompasses the Trinity. “If any of you get caught down there, there’ll be hell to pay.” After a moment of silence, he continues in his low, sedate voice. “They don’t know me yet. I only need to change my hair a little and I could pass as any
random trooper. …besides, if I don’t get out of this apartment soon, I’m gonna go crazy.”

“No way!” Zackary explodes.

He and Cloud engage in a battle of stares across the table. “And why, pray tell, not?”

Zackary sighs and rakes an agitated hand through his hair. “What if you get caught? What if they do a DNA-test and realize you are a who-knows-how-many years older, identical twin to one of their own infantry members? How exactly are you going to explain that, huh? Whoops, I’m a time traveler, please don’t mind me?”

“You seem to forget that between ‘catching me’ and ‘taking DNA samples from me’ lies the unhappy endeavor of trying to keep me. And I’m not really planning on sticking around.”

“Like they’d just let you walk out of there.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I’ve broken out of a Shinra holding cell.”

“Boys!” Angeal interrupts their squabbling. Zack has been following the pair with his eyes like ping-pong balls. It’s obvious Zackary worries about his Cloud – and yea, it’s understandable. But this is getting them nowhere. “Might we come back to topic, please?”

Once again, an explosive sigh escapes Zackary’s lips and he leans back in his chair. When he looks up again, his gaze is resolved. “…alright then. I’m coming with you.”

Angeal has many kinds of frowns (all of which Zack has had the pleasure or displeasure to be on the receiving end of over the years), and this particular one seems to be of the I-don’t-like-where-this-is-going-but-it-feels-like-I-already-lost-the-fight-and-I-don’t-like-it-one-bit frown variety. “You were right though, Zackary, in that if you do get caught, we might have a big problem on our hands.”

The man in question nods. “I know, but we’re still your best bet. And tonight will be a good opportunity – if it’s anything like I remember, half the infantry will be three sheets to the wind by tonight. So if we get caught, we can always pretend we’re drunk and got lost in a very catastrophical way. Or if shit hits the fan we can cause some havoc and head to the slums.”

Angeal slumps. “Catastrophical indeed.”

After that’s settled, the real planning begins. They clear the table and the two native Banorans draw up a map of Professor Hollander’s laboratories, detailing what they know of the layout and which places they remember seeing vent grids in the walls and ceilings. Once they’ve got the gist down concerning the planning of tactics, obstacles and materials, mini-Cloud slips out to filch some trooper uniforms in the barracks while he knows their rightful owners will be hanging out in Midgar’s local pubs getting wasted, and Genesis grabs some hair gel from his own place to help tame Cloud and Zackary’s hairstyles into something less recognizable.

The darling professor himself, they assure Cloud and Zackary, won’t be much of a problem – seeing as he is the kind of high-rate scientist who clocks out at eighteen-hundred on the dot in order to make himself a TV-dinner and watch his favorite soap (as they have found out through Hollander’s incessant rambling during check-ups and through medical emergencies concerning the two Firsts after hours).

The flurry of activity dies down eventually, with still a little time to spare, and Zack watches their two resident time travelers doing the dishes side by side through a crack in the kitchen door while his boyfriends smother their Chocobo in affection off to the side. Next to Genesis’ lamenting and Sephiroth’ deep bass and Angeal’s tutting and the clinking of glassware, he can’t hear much else; but
he wonders if those two are working things out between themselves.

...“Zaaaack...”

It's almost surprising how easily the quiet whine slips from his lips, despite this being an older, more grown up version of his friend. He's glad some things don't change.

“There’s probably not even microphones on the cams here,” Cloud hisses. Besides, the corridors are deserted at this time of night. At the same time, that fact makes Zackary’s fake drunken rambling almost soothing, laying itself over the eerie echo of their footsteps against metal. Cloud allows his mind to slip a little further into their made-up scenario under the comfortable weight of Zackary’s arm slung over his back. He wonders how his elder counterpart is faring on the ravenette’s other side.

“Well, well. Aren’t you guys just havin’ way too much fun with this, yo.”

They stumble to a stop at the sleek drawl and take a turn towards where the hallway branches off into a dead end. Out of sight of the main corridor’s security cameras, they drop the façade and stagger to a stop in front of the suited redhead slouching next to a grid in the wall.

Reno eyes them up silently, sharp gaze immediately honing in on the younger Cloud, easily recognizable despite their helmets by his shorter stature (and well sue him, at least looking at his older version gives Cloud hope for one last growth spurt). He doesn’t ask who Cloud’s two friends are, or why they feel the need to break into a high security area to begin with, and Cloud doesn’t offer. That’s the way their odd friendship works – favors for favors.

Instead, he takes a step forward as Reno reaches into his pockets.

“Look-y here what I found,” he introduces without wasting time on pleasantries, dropping a worn-looking keycard into Cloud’s hand. “Don’t ask where I got this, yo. Should get you through the old keycard door locks just fine.”

Knowing the other two won’t want to give away their voices, Cloud asks, “All of them?”

“No guarantees, kid. I’m a Turk, not a bloody salesman. Dunno if they changed anything down there lately, but I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” A little more security would have been nice, but it can’t be helped. Cloud nods, before being offered a second object. “Stick that in Hollander’s computer and it’ll both give you access and download everything it comes across. Nifty lil bugger. Again, don’t ask, trade secret. Naturally, it’d be in your best interest to not randomly leave that one lying around, if ya get the drift.”

It’s a small flash drive, barely as long as Cloud’s hand is broad, and exactly the kind of thing he’d normally misplace because it’s just too gods-damned small.

Lastly, the Turk clicks a pointy fingernail against the grid beside him. “Usually, exits to the vent system are bolted shut and can only be accessed by maintenance. This one’s the only one that’s both broken and in a dead corner. I trust this will stay between us. We’re two levels above funky man’s office, so here’s what you’re gonna do...”

Cloud is a little taken aback by the... semi-professionalism Reno’s showing, but then again, he knows there must be a reason the redhead’s among the veteran Turks in his division.

“Remember, ten minutes.”
He turns to leave and take care of the video feeds, but Cloud grabs his shoulder before he can go. “Thanks, Reno,” he says in reply to the lifted eyebrow.

“You owe me, punk,” Reno shrugs him off. “Have fun, ladies.” Then he’s gone.

Together, they manage to get the grid off, and Cloud hands over the two gadgets to the pair of time travelers. He’s somehow managed to convince his four (extremely) overprotective boyfriends to let him come down here, but this is as far as he can go. He promised. Now, the least he can do is make sure the two spies on a mission have a safe exit spot upon their return and don’t get caught with their hands in the cookie jar – or, well... vent grid. Same thing.

Zackary and elder Cloud slip inside the ventilation shaft, he wishes them good luck, replaces the grid, and settles in to wait.

The metal is smooth all around him. Smooth, and shining in the dim light of their helmet lamps, casting flickering shadows all around. Mako has given them enhanced vision, but that’s still not worth much in the absolute pitch black. Cloud can hear their breaths echo and hopes they’re quiet enough.

For the first time since landing himself in this universe, the simple-complex reality of time travel has really had opportunity to hit him in the face like a sledge-hammer. Sneaking around Shinra Tower, being out of those four walls of the Commander’s apartment for the first time – it’s surreal. This truly is a world in which Shinra is still standing and thriving, like a living, breathing organism with a heartbeat behind its walls and a clever, sleepless mind hidden behind the upper levels of the elevator numbers.

And now, slipping and sliding through narrow vents in search for a high-level clearance science laboratory led by a mad professor, it’s like a dream, like he’s back with Avalanche and they’re going to rescue Aerith and stumbling across Nanaki or listening in on conferences, and any moment, there will be bloody trails and an empty Jenova pod.

She’s in Nibelheim, he firmly tries to remind himself. Don’t think about it.

Instead, Cloud tries to let the familiarity wash over him and calm his racing heart. This is familiar ground, it’s what he’s good at.

They head downwards, Zackary taking the lead, even though it irks Cloud a little. He desperately hopes he can snap Zack out of that mindset of being in need of his protection soon; it is starting to turn really tiring. There are steps in the sides of the vent chute ahead of them leading down, and he’s glad that the system seems to double for maintenance purposes, since otherwise the tubes would be barely large enough for them to fit through.

The numbers pass them, black on grey – B 10, B 11... B 12, and they come to a stop.

“The ventilation system inside Hollander’s labs are separate from the rest, ‘cause he’s a paranoid lil’ fucker. Gimme ten minutes to head back up and drop the power on the alarm system. I can give you a one hour window, if we’re lucky.”

Cloud checks his watch. 23:18.

“If you fuck up, I never knew you guys.”
They break in.

Having done so much breaking and entering during his early twenties, Cloud has gotten a good spatial memory. What he remembers from the map on the dinner table matches the view of the rooms through the occasional grid pleasantly accurately as they head deeper. He tries to focus on that, and the view of the back of Zackary’s boots in front of his face, rather than the claustrophobic feeling in his chest. Fortunately, they had the presence of mind to take off the clunky knee pads right at the beginning; he can’t imagine wearing those while sneaking quietly through thin metal tubes. It’s hard enough as it is, but the laboratories are for the most part deserted at this hour. Every once in a while, Zack looks back at a turn and they silently communicate the direction – always in agreement. He’s glad the First can keep up; it makes things easier.

They pass above general examination rooms, which soon give way to a complicated maze of hallways and smaller offices until they reach Hollander’s main one and the vent exit directly above. As expected, the room is empty.

“Tsh…” Zackary mumbles, already trying to pry the grid off. “Damnit, it’s rusted shut. It won’t budge.”

“Lemme try.” Zack crawls ahead, Cloud on his heels, until the slanted metal stripes are below his chest. The view confirms what he’s feared already. Cloud grabs the screwdriver from his pocket and tries once again to lift the grid, to no avail. “Would’a been too easy,” he whispers exasperatedly. “Let’s try the next one.”

Rather than try to turn around in the narrow space, they continue on in silence, moving as fast as they can without alerting anyone to their presence. They have to take a turn when toxic fumes waft over from ahead – it is a ventilation system in use, after all, and there are likely all kinds of chemicals being handled in the laboratories. Better not to take any chances.

The next exit, from what they can see, leads to one of the large, cavernous storage rooms containing multiple cages for Hollander’s various experiments. That means they’ll have to find a way to switch off the motion sensors on the ground somehow, but it’s still a better bet than wasting more time finding an easier exit point. At least the chances of being seen are low here.

“Pass me the screwdriver, Cloud,” Zackary murmurs. Zack’s no mechanic, but even he should be able to handle a screwdriver, right?

It’s the weird position in handing it over, it’s the slick sweat on Cloud’s palms, it’s Zack not seeing much in the sparse lighting – it doesn’t matter. Cloud barely resists closing his eyes in exasperation when his friend accidentally drops the tool on the metal plates below.

They wait with baited breath.

Nothing. It seems no one took notice of their little mishap, and the creatures remain asleep in their cages.

“Sorry, sorry…”

Cloud pointedly does not sigh.

After a moment, the grid lifts off and to the side under the leverage of the flat end on the slotted screwdriver and they switch off their headlamps before carefully sliding down onto a pile of crates below.
The room seems deserted, so Cloud allows himself the quiet, sarcastic comment. “Ever played ‘the floor is lava’?” They climb from box to box along the wall, heading to the closest door. It should be the one leading back out into the hallways, while the other one, hidden in the darkness and depth of the other side of the room, blocks the way towards further storage areas with even higher clearance and more dangerous monsters.

Cloud takes careful note of the motion sensors he can spot in certain places, likely creating an entire net just a few centimeters above ground. Triggering the alarms would be disastrous.

“There!” Zackary exclaims and points towards the door. “See that switch? That’s gotta be the manual interface for disabling the alarm, in case the automatic system in the doors malfunctions.” Which is… great, except for the fact where the lever is a good solid distance away from them, far out of reach of their arms. In that case…

“How good of a shot are you?” Cloud asks.

He sees the other man’s mouth swish to the side calculatingly beneath the visor, already starting to pat down his pockets in search of a projectile. “I used to hit a touch-me frog at the other end of the pond with a stone blindfolded,” Zackary states matter-of-factly.

“Show-off.”

“You were the one who asked.” There’s a smirk in his voice.

Cloud finds an expired ration bar at the bottom of a pocket in his uniform pants (which probably went through the wash too) and hands it to Zack. “You’ve got one chance at this.”

“I know.”

Zackary takes careful aim, holds his breath, pulls back his arm and –

…the switch makes a quiet ‘click’, ration bar dropping to the ground without a fuss, having proudly done its job. Cloud sags in relief.

They carefully climb onto the ground, again trying not to wake up any of the experiments. Small, large, feathered, scaled; most of them lie quietly inside their kennels and glass cages, likely drugged up to the gills. Something moves in the corner of his eye, and still shaky with adrenaline, Cloud turns towards the Mako tank at his right and sees nothing but –

A crossbreed between fish and reptile bobs lazily in the liquid, bubbles slowly drifting past too many eyes upwards towards the surface. Surface… bubbles

in the dark, in the green… – slipping past him –

– in his lungs, invading his body, his mind, until all he can think about is the green, and the dark, and the vise choking his throat, pulling tight numbness cold [[static]] –

can’t let them take him again no not the labcoats – there’s a flash of white in his vision and footsteps approaching and his breath rasps in his ears please no he can’t not again no NO not the green don’t – why can’t he move there’s arms around him pulling him
hand over his mouth let him go – can’t breathe, he can’t

lips against his face, rough and familiar, against his cheek and then the scent. The scent hits his nose and suddenly he knows he’s safe, they won’t take him, He won’t let them. He’s safe. It’s okay, he can relax, safe.

Relax.

“Shh…”

A whisper in his ear, barely the hint of a sound, but he knows he’s safe now, that it’s safe to come back. He clenches his eyes shut against the green in front of them and lets the panicked rasps in his throat die down, lets himself quietly lean back against the warm weight pressed against his back.

The sound of footsteps reaches him again, but they’re receding; stopping for a moment, as plastic wrapping is wrinkled, picked up, and then doors slide open and shut and it’s quiet.

Zackary’s hand slowly drops away from his mouth and he can hear him surreptitiously wiping the saliva on his fatigues; takes a deep breath himself, a moment to steady his heartbeat, his shaking hands, shake the numbness out of his tingling fingertips, before he can open his eyes.

“That’s right… Cloud. He is Cloud.

The blonde can feel Zackary’s eyes boring into the side of his head after asking him if he’s okay, but he only nods curtly. Without further words, he draws away and takes off.

…

…what in heaven’s name was that?!

Zackary can’t help but eye Cloud worriedly the next couple of minutes, as he’s fiddling with the lock system at the door. He’s still trying to shake the adrenaline from almost getting caught, from trying to bring his struggling and bucking friend back from the verge of spacing out in the middle of enemy territory while one such enemy was walking right by the other side of the Mako tank that he quickly pulled them behind and it’s pure luck they weren’t heard.

It seems like Cloud is drawing back into himself again, but now isn’t the right time to press the issue. They have a job to do, after all. The door slides open with a light swish and they slip past.

You’d be surprised by the spaciousness of it all, until you remembered that these are the basement levels of Shinra Tower, which are basically built inside of the plate and thus have the advantage of being wider than the rest of the Tower. …well, advantage, unless you had to navigate the large maze towards a specific office in little time on a secret espionage mission.

He hopes they’re heading into the right direction, that the layout Angeal and Genesis sketched down is accurate enough, that they won’t get lost. They should be getting closer to Hollander’s office when they hear noises up ahead and quickly dive into a branch to the side.

Zackary has to suppress a chuckle after a moment when he identifies the noise to be that of a coffee machine doing its diligent job. The urge dies down and he starts frantically looking for hiding places
when again, footsteps (same weight as earlier, he recognizes) draw closer, then enter through another door at the last moment. Phew.

They slip past and Zack chances a glance through the door left slightly ajar. The lab assistant is obviously settling in for a longer computer session – his coat is haphazardly thrown over the back of his swivel chair, and he’s in the process of throwing the lanyard with his keycard onto the desk next to a steaming cup of coffee to better stretch his neck. Then, he picks up their ration bar-turned-projectile from earlier curiously and wriggles it by a corner.

The motion draws Zackary out of his fascination and they continue on. Just a few more steps and another bend and they’re in front of the door to Hollander’s private office. They can only pray that it’s still as vacated as earlier when they looked through the grid, though in theory, none of the lab technicians should have any reason to have come in there.

They slide Reno’s keycard through the lock and –

Nothing. Door doesn’t budge.

Damn.

So much for ‘no guarantees’. The card reader, upon closer inspection, looks a little more modern. Maybe that’s why the old keycard didn’t work? According to Genesis and Angeal, all of Hollander’s assistants have access to his office, since the only thing of relevance inside of it is the computer, which is password-protected anyway.

Zackary catches Cloud’s eyes, wondering if they’re thinking along the same lines, and tips his head back in the direction they came from, forming his hands into something vaguely card-shaped. Cloud nods, scrunches up his face for a second, then motions for him to follow.

They sneak back down the hallway and into the nearby kitchen, where Cloud immediately takes off his helmet and kneels next to the coffee machine in the corner. His blonde spikes for once lie flat and boring against his head, not springing up the way Zack is used to – kinda like a Chocobo caught in the rain. A brief smirk flits over his lips at the image, though he knows he likely doesn’t look much better under the helmet.

Keeping an eye on the hallway and their little friend next door, Zackary watches as Cloud takes off the panel as silently as he can manage and starts fiddling with the machine’s insides. What…?

Before he knows it, Cloud has the helmet back on and is pulling him outside, down the way they first came from, to hide around the corner, small smirk on his lips. And not a moment too late, for in the next second, a large BANG! reverberates through the corridor and they hear a crash followed by the labcoat running towards the noise.

“No, no! ” he wails. “Not the coffee, oh sweet Shiva, why do you hate me? What did I ever do to you?! Not my coffee!”

They leave him to lament the premature passing of his coffee maker and hurry on to Hollander’s office. A quick slide of the card, and they’re in.

“You… are evil,” Zackary whispers to his friend as they plug in the flash drive and a window pops
up, tracking the download.

. . .

“Hey… hey! You! Trooper, what are you doing here?”

He mustn’t flinch, mustn’t flinch… act natural. What would Zack do?”

“State your name, rank, and division!”

Cloud bends over and gives his best impression of being about to puke his guts out. “Ugh… I think I’m gonna – ”

“Ehh, wait!”

He’s grabbed roughly by the arm and pulled towards the nearest restroom, where he’s shoved towards one of the cubicles. The guy uses a lot of force, actually, so Cloud doesn’t even have to act much like he’s losing his balance. He turns his back to the burly office worker who caught him moments earlier and starts making retching noises. Again, bent over a public toilet like that, not much acting is needed. It leaves him red-faced from embarrassment anyway. Thank god his boyfriends aren’t around to witness this.

“Tch, you bloody punks, using every excuse you have to get wasted and then ending up in places you’re not supposed to be in. Look… you done yet?”

Another bout of fake-retching, and the man clucks disgustedly. Good, that makes two of them.

“Whatever… just make sure you get the hell out of here when you’re done, got it?”

He nods weakly, keeping up the charade until he’s sure the guy is far enough away. Damn, that was close. Cloud waits a few more minutes, then hurries back to his little alcove, hoping Reno still has the cameras under control. It’s getting close to when the alarms will turn back on… he prays Zackary and the other Cloud didn’t screw up.

. . .

Whoever invented loading bars must’ve been a sadist, Cloud decides. 97%... 98%... 99%...

...is that a canned Banora White juice? Nevermind –

99%...

99%...

Hello-oh? Is that thing even moving?

100%.

Finally.

They grab the drive, and they’re out of there. Obviously, the vent above is still stuck, so they try to sneak back the way they came, hoping they have a little more time before the alarm systems go back online. Coffee-worshipper guy seems to have given up (possibly on life) and has locked himself inside his office, which leaves them free to take the turns back through the maze of corridors towards the storage room. Just two more bends… one more – damnit!
Cloud grabs Zackary by his shirt and pulls him back around the corner at the last moment when another lab tech shows up in front of them, hopefully not having noticed them. They take off into the opposite direction – the next turn is too far away, the footsteps getting closer. Side door – yes, the new keycard works its magic once again. They both tumble inside and Cloud draws the door shut as quietly as possible. Turning around, he sees Zack with his helmet light on already climbing up a counter to check – thank the Gods! – another vent grid above. Cloud almost goes weak in the knees with relief when he sees it slide open easily.

Five seconds – Zackary slips through the opening like an eel, then slides backwards until his upper body is back above it. Another three seconds – Cloud throws the lanyard to the side and follows after Zack into the tube. One second – a beep from the lock outside, Zackary slides the grid back into place and switches off his lamp. The door opens. They hold their breath.

A light turns on, and Cloud can imagine the guy looking around in confusion, drawing closer, closer, until – a rustle, and a scratch of plastic against plastic. The light goes out. Silence.

Cloud thinks he’s ready to go to bed now.

. . .

To say the welcome when they enter back into the apartment is joyful would be a gross understatement.

Overcome with relief, Cloud the Younger is soon buried underneath a pile of happy Soldier Firsts and lone Second, getting the lights squeezed out of him and having several mother Chocobos fussing over him heavily.

“Yes, yes… I’m fine. Zack, my butt is fine, you can stop groping it!”

“Gotta make extra sure, Cloudy!”

The exchange makes Zackary smile. Finally, the group lets off their youngest and gives them all a little space. The elder Cloud takes a step forward to hand the flash drive over to Angeal and Genesis, who completely bypass the extended offer in favor of giving the flabbergasted blonde and ravenette time travelers a hug as well.

The motion surprises Zackary for a second, before he gratefully relaxes into his mentor’s hold. Over the man’s shoulder, he can see Cloud hanging just as dumbfoundedly inside Genesis’ embrace. The redhead is a lot… warmer than Zackary remembers his counterpart to be, he thinks, while Genesis busies himself checking the newcomers for injuries. It strangely suits him.

“That’s it. No more excursions to high-security facilities in the foreseeable future, my nerves cannot take it. You will have me grey-haired before I’m thirty!” Genesis laments.

“Yeah. No.” Little Cloud yawns. “I’m done. Can we all just celebrate we’re all alive and go to bed?”

“We can celebrate alright, little bird,” Genesis purrs and snatches Cloud up into his arms. “Welcome to Soldier, Third Class Cloud Strife.”

The boy amends, “Not a Third Class yet, Gen,” and has to stifle another yawn. “…still got th’sens’t’v’ty test’tmorrow…” He snuggles deeper into Genesis’ chest and presses a small kiss to his neck.

“I had better bring Zack to bed,” Sephiroth voices from where he’s standing off to the side, and Zackary realizes with a chuckle that his younger counterpart is pretty much asleep standing, leaning
against the silverette who has his arms wrapped around the boy protectively.

Angeal agrees with him. “Let’s head to bed. We’ll have time enough to look at the files the next few days.”

Younger Zack is carried off by Sephiroth, likely towards his apartment where he will make sure the tired Second is well cared for, while Genesis, Angeal and (now walking on his own feet) younger Cloud head off for their own victory shenanigans. Elder Cloud and Zackary politely excuse themselves once they see the trio starting to exchange warm touches and promising smiles and head to the guest room.

The awkwardness doesn’t really hit until both are in their pajamas and settling onto the mattress.

“Um… goodnight, Zack,” Cloud mumbles.

“Night.”

Zackary switches off the bedside lamp and tries to find a comfortable position. Next to him, he can hear Cloud doing the same.

Memories of the day’s events pass behind his inner eye, as they usually do right before sleep. A lot has happened. He worries about Cloud, as usual. He can’t stop thinking about that little episode the other had, in the storage room full of Mako tanks. The sight of them had made something twisted and ugly rise inside his own chest, too.

Cloud fidgets again, jostling the mattress.

“…come here,” Zackary murmurs after a minute, and opens his arms towards the blonde.

Cloud turns over and regards him quietly. Even in the near-dark, Zackary can see the quietly shaken look inside those blue eyes, blinking at him. A moment passes, but then Cloud is curling up against his chest reluctantly and they settle down. The familiar, warm weight against his body feels like a balm.

“Your hair smells funky,” Zackary says. He can feel leftovers of the sticky hairgel in Cloud’s strands where they are tickling his chin.

“You’re one to talk.”

Zackary wonders if tomorrow, they’ll be back at point zero; but for now, he lets the smell of hair product and something distinctly Cloud lull him to sleep.

. . .

It’s been too long since the last time he saw this place, familiar but tinged with bittersweet memories. He’s feeling lost, a little out of place still, out of breath; but… long, leather-clad fingers reach forward, exposing the pale line of a wrist. She will know.

She will guide him, as always.

. . .

tbc
Chapter End Notes

Lyrics from “What the water gave me” // Florence and the Machine

"Cue dramatic infiltration mission – they get the data." - that's all I ever planned before sitting down to write the last 5k words x'D

Credits:
- Janna: Genesis cooking something with tons of pots and pans and then shoving the dish duty onto the two time travelling freeloaders
- There was one nonny in my tumblr inbox who gave me the idea of Zack calling Cloud 'cirrocumulus' and the like? But due to tumblr's crappy messaging system I dunno if that person gave me a nick to credit them with >.< please yell 'here’ if you see this!
  EDIT: crownedprincestark =)
- (kick my butt if I forgot someone)

Question-time:
- I'm soon getting to the point where Barret's gonna join the crew. I suck at writing Barret, Big Time. Can anyone help me with getting his dialogue right when I get to it? :/
The path less traveled by

Chapter Summary

(A change of place and something sweet.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The path less traveled by

‘My best friend gave me the best advice
He said each day’s a gift and not a given right
Leave no stone unturned, leave your fears behind
And try to take the path less traveled by

That first step you take is the longest stride’

A nameless poet once described the Midgar slums as a beast that does not sleep.

Blinking lights, shade, smoke, eyes watching from the dark – anyone who ever had to make their way across the Wall Market could certainly agree with the fittingness of the comparison. Merchants yell across the hustle and bustle, the scents of spices and copper permeate the air, and a dark throng of people pushes evermoving past the stalls.

Two figures glide through the crowd seamlessly before coming to a stop in the shadow of a small alleyway, surveying the chaos in front of them. One hooded head turns to the other.

“Ready, Fenrir?” he asks, a small smirk playing around the corners of his mouth.

The other gives an amused scoff. “Never more so, Odin.”

They tighten their cloaks around themselves and move forward.

~*~*~

Cloud stretches against the sheets like a well-fed cat, content and luxurious. He lets the cool comfort of silk soak up the last of his sleepiness before grudgingly sitting up in bed to watch the smog pressing silently against the bedroom windows. Somewhere beyond, the sun slowly rises; but as usual Midgar’s toxic atmosphere swallows all the light before it can reach her citizens. Oh, how Cloud would have loved to sleep in today.

“Mmh…”

A fine-boned hand gropes the warm depression Cloud left behind in distaste before it gives up and weight is shifted grumpily. Warmth envelopes Cloud from behind soon after, in time with arms
slinging around his naked waist and a rough voice rumbling next to his ear, early morning hours
sapping it of its usual sophistication.

“‘The green smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes, licked its tongue into the corners of
the evening, slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, and seeing that it was a soft October
night, curled once about the house, and fell asleep.’”

“It’s September, though. And morning besides.”

Next to them, Angeal gives a hearty snore.

“Oh shush, honey. You completely missed the point.”

“Which would be?”

Genesis tightens his arms around Cloud and draws him back into the sheets. “That I am a very
romantic boyfriend, and you still have ten full minutes. So shut up and snuggle.”

.

The door falls closed with a quiet ‘click’.

“Sooo… Spill.”

“…”

The nurse’s footsteps fade into the distance.

Ninety minutes later finds Cloud sitting on a very uncomfortable plastic chair in a room that smells
decidedly too much of disinfectant for his liking. He rubs the two tiny pinpricks on his arms gingerly
– one from the shot with a miniscule amount of Mako, the other from the subsequent blood drawing
– which have started stinging and itching slightly. A single pale eyebrow lifts.

“…you do realize you’ll have to give me little more to go on than ‘Spill, Cloud’. Right?”

Zack fist-bumps his side gently (for Zack, that is) and rocks on his heels. A good night’s sleep (no
less in Sephiroth’s arms, as Cloud assumes), seems to have done the energy levels of the bubbly
young man a world of good.

“Sooo, what is it really that you promised Reno?”

“Mh?”

“Oh, come on. You don’t honestly expect me to believe ‘a beer or two’ is all he asked for in
exchange for all that risk he put himself at yesterday? If he’d been found out, Reno would’a been
Malboro chow. So what was it?”

Cloud is suspiciously silent for a moment while they leave the room. He signs out at the counter
manned by a bored secretary and is reminded once again to expect his test results sometime the next
day, but that still only lends him a distraction for a few more seconds before they start heading down
the deserted hallway of the labs towards the elevators.

He could’ve very well gone to his Mako sensitivity tests on his own, but Zack had resolutely refused
to let the cadet into ‘Hojo’s creepy vampire lair’ on his own. Not like any nurse could resist his
charm, anyway.
“…remember that one time Sephiroth saw that one dress online while looking for new cufflinks for the gala?” he eventually asks in a low voice, apropos of nothing.

“Uh… you mean the pink, frilly one, with the cute little white bows?” Cloud nods. “The one Genesis saw over his shoulder while vacuuming, bought in secret, and then presented to Seph as an early anniversary gift?” Nod. “…the one Gen and Seph subsequently dressed you up on, before taking a few compromising pictures and having their evil way with you?”

Another nod.

“Cloud…”

“I managed to bargain it down to three pictures, okay? No one else is visible on the photos except for me,” he bursts out. Then adds with a disturbed expression, “He promised they’ll never leave his possession, and I am not ever never gonna ask what he uses them for.”

“Well – ”

“I don’t wanna know.”

Zack remains quiet for a minute while they walk. Then he erupts into hearty chuckles.

“Spiky, I am never gonna understand that weird friendship between the two of you.”

“…well, that makes two of us,” Cloud mumbles.

Their echoing footsteps come to a halt in front of the elevator and Cloud presses the button to go down.

Zack ponders, “…Seph really did like seeing you dressed up like that, come to think of it.”

A smile twitches its way onto Cloud’s face. “Honestly, I think Seph appreciates me in any kind of dress, or un-dress, by this point.”

“True, that.”

Zack stares at him with a quiet, strange expression for a moment.

“What is it?” Cloud asks.

His friend catches himself, then shakes his head, smiling again. “Nothing, nothing. It’s just. Cloud… He really loves you, y’know?” he says, voice going soft. The elevator opens behind them and they step on board. “Just makes me happy, is all.”

For once, Cloud only makes a half-hearted attempt at evading the following noogie, cheeks bright red.

. . .

As the door closes on the two chatting figures, a third steps out of an adjoining hallway, clipboard in hand.

“Interesting…” its nasal voice drawls. “Isn’t that… so very interesting.”

. . .
A few floors up, a mirror of the earlier pair sits with their heads bent over a coffee table, ruminating over a laptop screen.

“Hoo boy… this might take a while,” Zackary sighs.

Cloud nods. He and Zack had agreed to look over the files, seeing as they both had more than enough time on their hands whereas the others had actual jobs to attend to. As promised by Reno, the encryption of the files had been taken care of. However, at first glance the professor’s notes may as well have been written in Wutainese for all the scientific lingo they include.

The rest of the apartment lies quiet around them, its owners long gone on their daily missions. Cloud folds his hands under his chin, foot itching to drum against the carpet, the silence beating on his eardrums unnervingly. He hasn’t heard any static in his head in a while now.

*It's too peaceful.*

...*I don’t trust it for a second.*

Cloud tries to lose himself in the research as best he can; willfully ignores the pointed glass of water and plate of snacks Zackary sets in front of him after a while, or his friend’s wounded expression at his flinch when Zack unconsciously reaches out to touch him in a comforting gesture.

He’s just gotta… shut this all out, for now. He can’t keep thinking about the shadows of the past or accusing eyes or the guilt settled low inside his gut. The lines in front of him might hold the key for saving lives, so he’s just gotta concentrate on that for now and… not fuck it up, for once.

‘Cause these are two lives he still *can* save.

…”

“Ross?”

“February 27th, 1982. Midgar native, first name Thomas. Bloodtype B, right-handed, results average. One sister, working in Urban Development – no record of unusual conduct, both parents alive and living on-plate."

“Any connections to the Trinity?”

“None that I can see, Sir,” the rookie replies.

Tseng’s left eyebrow twitches half a millimeter, the only outward sign of his puzzlement and certainly not enough to be noticed by the young and inexperienced Turk at the desk in front of him. Something must have caught the Commanders’ and General’s attention at the annual Soldier entrance exam.

One of them attending is to be expected, two might be coincidence. Three… three is suspicious, and unheard of.

An unoiled swivel chair squeaks to his right.

“Keep tabs on the sister, I want any conversations between the two monitored. Scott? Spiazzi?”

“Pass, neither made it.”

A quick note on his clipboard.
“…what can you give me on Strife?”

“Let’s see…” The voice trails off, and sheets of paper are ruffled. “Strife Cloud, born in Nibelheim 11th of August, 1986. Bloodtype AB, right-handed. Of the recruits that made the cut, he was slightly above average; though nothing outstanding.”

“Family?”

Squeeeaak.

“Mother: Claudia Strife, resident of Nibelheim; father deceased, no siblings.”

“Anything additional?”

“Hm… seen frequently around Second Class Zackary Fair, isolated sightings together with Commanders Hewley and Rhapsodos. Though those may be coincidence, seeing as how Fair is friends with practically everyone.”

Tseng hums thoughtfully…

“Ohhh, Rhapsodos? Lucky bastard. You know, I’d totally tap that.”

…before closing his eyes for one short moment. Showing annoyance is entirely unbecoming of a leader of the Turks.

“I mean, if I wasn’t too scared shitless of losing my fingers, yo. Did you know there’s a rumor they call him the Red Banshee in Wutai? After – ”

He flicks the cigarette Reno was about to lift to his mouth out of the raised fingers with an ease born of practice. Tseng knows he can’t constantly keep the redhead from breaking regulation while on duty, but at the very least the rookies shouldn’t be left to learn such behavior.

Plus, he doesn’t like the smell.

“Put the mother under observation; I want copies of all correspondence.”

“You got it, bossman!” Reno drawls, resuming his noisy circles with the desk chair.

Claudia Strife – Nibelheim… Claudia…

Where have I heard that before…?

“Teganu?”

“First name Ignis, born March 15th…”

…

The mountains lay quiet, apart from the howling wind and flurries of snow. As though they were silently judging for the bloodshed that had happened in their midst. Sephiroth stands at a precipice, looking over the deep ravine and quick, jagged lines of rock.

They had been sent to dispatch a small eco-terrorist group – one of many that had sprung up in the wake of Avalanche, only to be quickly decimated and subsequently slandered on Midgar’s biased news channel. Shinra’s dense intelligence system had intercepted the group’s plans of destroying the brand-new Modeoheim reactor and located their hide-out in a mountain cave, where they had been
mercilessly slaughtered by the group of Soldiers sent out to stop them before they even had the chance to act.

President’s orders.

Sephiroth grinds his teeth.

This was who they were. Mercenaries, nothing more, nothing less. The President wanted something, you went and got it done. Even if that meant murdering those who tried to protect their homes and the health of the planet. And for so long now, Sephiroth had simply followed those orders.

His senses tell him of the approaching presences long before the words reach his ear.

“Jinsei ni shūchaku suru mono wa shinu…”

..., shi o imu mono wa ikiru,” Sephiroth finishes once Colonel Noda pulls up to his height, sword drawn in a last sign of respect.

_Those who cling to life die, and those who defy death live._

Sephiroth still remembers vividly the moment the proud Wutainese had laid down his sword at Sephiroth’ feet in defeat, a grudging respect in his eyes. The Wutainese soldiers had been given a choice: Surrender, or be killed. Those most proud of their country chose a warrior’s death, but not Noda Keiji. Some of his kinsmen would have called it cowardice, but Sephiroth acknowledged it as a means of staying alive in trying times. Regardless of any affiliation to Shinra, Noda had yet to betray his loyalty towards Sephiroth.

“They fought well, for being desperate,” Lieutenant Gabriel notes; a recently promoted Second Class and protégé of the Colonel. His two Third Class friends, Summer and Jun, come to a stop next to him.

A dozen men and women, barely organized or properly equipped except for the desperate gleam in their eyes, ready to defend their cause. “They fought for what they thought was right,” Sephiroth replies quietly.

He can feel his Soldiers watching him expectantly, awaiting orders, eyes trained on the General’s still silhouette against a backdrop of white. Closing his eyes, Sephiroth can hear the approach of the chopper in the distance.

Making up his mind, Sephiroth turns to his men, sizing them up one by one. They stiffen at the scrutiny and meet his firm gaze with shoulders squared. “Times are changing,” the General murmurs. “Think carefully about where you stand.”

One by one, hands raise in salutes.

...  

“I wonder what side Lazard would be on, if it ever came down to it.” Zackary randomly asks after a few hours of pouring over the laptop, trying to break a bit of the tension and tired of staring at the unintelligible numbers on the screen.

Ever since they started, Cloud has been weirdly focused on the task, not letting himself get distracted by anything. Not the need for food or drink, nor Zack’s well-meant attempts to lighten the mood or getting Cloud to stretch his muscles after hours in the stiff position. The only disruption Cloud had allowed was when Zack commented on what he saw on-screen. He would like to believe his friend
is merely intrigued by the data – give the guy something interesting to use his brain on, and he’ll forget that he’s cooped up inside an apartment with no way out. But something feels... off about the whole thing. And to be honest, the way Cloud kept leaning away from him to get out of his personal bubble kind of hurt – which didn’t make working at a laptop together all that easy.

Even now, the blonde ignores him.

“Do you remember him?” Zackary prods some more, getting a little fed-up with the treatment.

“…Rufus Shinra’s secret half-brother?” Cloud finally rips his gaze from the numbers and diagrams.

Zackary chokes on his spit. “Wait, you know about that? I thought it was just a rumor. You mean it’s true?”

“According to his brother, yes.”

“Well, that’s certainly black-mail material.” Zack whistles. “And if things are anything like in the old world, Lazard might have been working against Shinra this whole time.” At Cloud’s questioning gaze, he elaborates. “He ended up funding Hollander’s army of Genesis copies, though I dunno how long that had been going on. Might not have happened yet. Either way, I heard he’s originally from below-plate and worked his way up, so he has a soft spot for the slums. Might be a powerful ally.”

Cloud leans back on the sofa, mouth puckering in thought. **Zack Fair: Mission Cloud Strife Clandestine Distraction – Success!**

“Reeve too,” Cloud muses.

“Tuesti?” The name sounds familiar – one of the department heads? Urban, maybe? But Zackary had never cared much for all the ever-changing suck-ups in the board, apart from perhaps Hojo or Lazard. Maybe he should have paid more attention.

The blonde nods. “He’s a coward, but has his heart in the right spot.”

“What about the vice-president?” Zackary asks.

“I wouldn’t trust Rufus as far as I can spit,” Cloud growls. “No, Reeve and maybe that Lazard guy seem to be prime candidates of rebuilding the organization after we’ve taken Shinra down. Rufus is our very last option.”

Zackary hums and drums the fingers of one hand against his thigh. He hears footsteps approaching but recognizes the distinctive clack-clack immediately. When the door opens off to the side a quick glance reveals him that there’s no danger. “That’s right...” he returns to the conversation. “We’ve only been planning up to getting rid of Jenova and the company, but what after that? Seems people actually... like Shinra here, due to all that ‘clean energy’ propaganda they’ve been fed.” He raises his hand in quotation marks.

Cloud nods in agreement. “There’s a lot of different parties to take note of – Soldier, the infantry, all the non-enhanced workers in the departments...”

“Don’t forget the Turks,” the newcomer says, walking over and leaning on the back of the armchair. “Blasted creatures.”

...
(remember), and something sweet. That’s what Gillian used to say, at least, and Shiva knows her words helped him often enough when Genesis was young.

It’s just past two in the afternoon when Genesis steps inside the apartment. He closes the door, but doesn’t move to take off his boots and coat yet, instead heading further into the living room (and ignoring Angeal’s nagging voice inside his head. The carpet will live).

“How’s work?” Zackary changes the topic, stretching and popping joints.

“Tedious and unnecessarily full of paperwork, as always. I’ve come to abduct you.”

Cloud closes the computer and jams it under his arm, then they let themselves be shooed towards the door. “Abduct us?” Cloud asks.

“All the fascinating way down the hallway. Thought it might do you some good to get out of this plant-and-bug-infested hellhole.”

“Do we… need to get into uniform again?”

“No need,” Genesis explains. “As soon as we found out the hallways are under surveillance, I kept accidentally firaga-ing the cameras until they gave up on trying to replace them.” Hah, the memories.

“He clicks his tongue. “We do value our privacy up here.”

Genesis further goes on to explain how some higher-ups used to have accommodations on this floor, but gradually fled after the Trinity gained more of a reputation. Then he relays the reason for the sudden apartment move as he leads the guests towards his own humble abode at the other end of the corridor.

“Sephiroth had been wanting to make a lemon meringue cake for gods know how long, but somehow there’s just never been the time until now. Angeal doesn’t have the right appliances in the kitchen – I swear, that man can make the best casseroles and stews in all of Midgar, but when it comes to the intricacies of dessert he is entirely lost.”

He slides the keycard through the slot at his door and decidedly doesn’t tell them how he might’ve been giving Sephiroth a little push on his idea in order to have an excuse for those two to get out of Angeal’s apartment for a bit.

Not that it’s not a nice apartment, mind you – they all know by now Genesis’ complaints about the vegetation are more token than anything. He did grow up on an apple farm himself. But he can only imagine what it must be like to be locked inside the same four walls for days on end while knowing to leave means risking exposure, capture and almost certain death.

Already he can feel Cloud’s eyes brightening up a bit from the change of scenery, and Zackary is rocking on his heels unconsciously.

“I’d offer you coffee, but the machine’s been broken for weeks now and I just can’t be bothered to file a maintenance complaint,” Genesis remarks over his shoulder while switching on an ambi-light and ignoring the bits of daylight streaming in through the curtained windows.

(He’s got an ambi-light, and by Odin he’s gonna use it, Seph’s raised eyebrow be damned.)

Genesis takes a deep breath – the apple and cinnamon smell is distinct, yet starting to slowly fade already. He’ll have to stock up on scented candles soon.

All the Firsts’ apartments sport the same layout, yet each has been given quite a personal touch.
Genesis drops on the couch and lazily removes his knee-highs, dropping them off to the side to be sorted out later. It’s not that he is *messy*, per se; he just prefers cleaning up at the time that suits him, and not a second sooner. Zackary sits down next to him, eyes roving the living room space with its creamy walls and dark red and gold accents curiously.

“Ever been in here?” Genesis asks, nagged with a sudden curiosity.

Zackary shakes his head. “I’d never even realized the other you and Angeal were friends until they’d both gone missing. It’s very… you, though. Not in a bad way,” he is quick to amend.

“Oh?”

The two chat amicably for a bit, when suddenly there’s a call from the kitchen where Cloud has wandered off to without them noticing.

“Do you have a screwdriver?”

Genesis walks into the other room to investigate. Cloud has hopped onto the kitchen counter next to the coffee machine and is examining the panel at the side.

“…do I look like it? Ask Angeal.”

*What am I, a mechanic?*

Cloud sends him a Look, then toes open a nearby drawer seemingly at random. He gets lucky. Plucking a butter knife from it, he starts on working the screws loose and taking apart the coffee machine.

“Do you… know what you are doing?”

“You’re not gonna make it explode again, are ya?”

“– explode?! Take your hands off that – ”

Cloud is quiet for a moment, rummaging around inside the machine, before he mutters, “Are you bloody kidding me.”

His hands fumble about and unidentified parts make weird squeaky noises, and then he’s ripping (surely that’s not meant to be removed so brusquely?!) something out, and holds the slimy, brown thing off to the side. “This isn’t broken, this is testament to a complete lack of maintenance. Did you *ever* clean that thing? At all?”

Zackary snickers to himself, earning himself a slap from the enraged redhead.

... 

For a second, with Cloud covered in grease and hands stuck inside some machinery, he almost seemed like Zack’s old friend with the sass and not-taking-your-shit attitude again, back when he was a green-eared cadet and Zack his overly hyper Soldier friend. The thought punches him in the gut like a sledge-hammer; a deep-set, sharp ache of longing for things to go back to the way they were.

Zackary mentally shakes his head. Those days are long over, and will never be coming back. There’s worlds between them now.

The thought stays in the back of his mind, even after the others slowly start trickling in; it’s hard not
to. All this – the easy camaraderie between military personnel in their off-time, being back in Shinra Tower, the hum of Mako all around them and a smoggy green city down below – it all brings back memories that Zack thought he’d long since buried.

Sephiroth does somehow, in the end, manage to produce a lemon meringue cake – even if it doesn’t go very smoothly. At the first sounds of struggle, Zackary is about to dash in for help, but it seems Genesis is faster. “No, no, no! Not like that! You need to stir it gently, doucement, comme ça!”

“But it clearly stated in the recipe –”

“Cooking is an art, my friend, not a science!”

He talks with Angeal instead, who agrees that a joint training session sometime in the near future might do them all some good, while Cloud is back on the computer again. Zackary wishes he could share with his mentor how weirded out he is by Cloud being so focused on this, but... Soldier hearing and all that. They are soon joined by Zack and Cloud (the younger ones, that is), who chat about their day. Cloud got the testing for his Mako sensitivity done before his morning patrol and is awaiting the results sometime the next few days.

Once the desert is done, mini-Zack and Angeal commandeering the kitchen for the making of a quick dinner and soon everyone is sat around the small dinner table. It’s cramped; there’s a reason they usually all eat together at Angeal’s, but they make do.

“Pass me the sauce please?”

“You were right about the procedures they used. Gillian was injected with the Jenova cells first, neither Genesis nor Angeal received them directly.”

Zackary freezes in handing his mini-me the dish across the table to stare at Cloud, before catching himself. The blonde is staring at the corner of his plate with a single-minded intensity, food forgotten.

He continues, “That’s why the project was called Project G, even if Hollander never outright states it. Her cells were transplanted into Genesis pre-natally, but the artificial manner of it caused the J cells to not settle properly. So they improved the procedure on the next try. Angeal received the cells through her naturally, by being her biological son. There’s something off about it though... reading between the lines, you might get the feeling that part two of the project wasn’t exactly planned for. There are no preparatory examinations, no hypotheses, nothing; the recordings start a few weeks into her pregnancy, like they hadn’t been expecting it.”

The clanking noises of cutlery have quieted, all the attention shifted on Cloud. Genesis directly across from Zackary lays down his fork, looking like he lost his appetite. His brows lower. “Oh, so only one of us was meant to be a test tube baby?” he snipes.

Angeal shoots him a conflicted look, not knowing what to say. Luckily, Cloud continues.

“Like I said, the files aren’t clear on it. However, dating a few months later, there were a couple of mentions about Project S.” His gaze swivels to Sephiroth at the head of the table. “Apparently you were injected with Jenova’s cells directly, which yielded much better results in terms of the cells settling into your DNA. Hollander was... quite incensed about that fact. Scientifically, of course. He suspected Hojo had been spying on him to learn from his mistakes.”

“So, what does that mean?” Younger Zack asks, listening intently. “About now, about that degradation stuff and everything?”

Cloud shakes his head apologetically. “I don’t know yet. Hollander’s notes are strictly chronological,
he doesn’t go back to rectify them or even really organize his files by topic. I’m sorry, but I’m no scientist and don’t really understand half the words Hollander uses. I managed to get to the recordings of some medical exams around when you two were around seven and eight, after which there’s a long hiatus for a few years. I hope I can find something more useful in the younger files.”

He actually seems really upset about it, in that quiet way of his; and Zackary almost feels guilty. While Cloud was trying his best to decode complicated files, he could only sit and watch and waste time. Though Zackary does wonder at how much more Cloud was able to understand from the gibberish than himself. He tucks the thought away for later.

“It’s alright, Cloud,” Angeal is quick to amend. “You’re doing the best you can, that’s more than we could ask for. So long as –”

He is interrupted by Sephiroth suddenly raising a hand, and then they hear it: Approaching footsteps, followed by a knock on the door.

Everyone at the table freezes.

All seven of them are present, and even if they weren’t, none of their group would have to knock. Silent gazes are exchanged, and then things happen very quickly. Chairs are pushed back, and the two time travelers plus younger Cloud grab their cutlery and hurry towards the hallway, hiding behind the closest door while Zack rearranges the leftover plates and knives and forks into something more natural; a mere quick dinner between three First Classes and one of their protégés.

Zackary’s heart pounds in his chest in sudden adrenaline as he leans back against the door, despite the ridiculous image the three make in what appears to be Genesis’ master bedroom, each holding glasses of water and plates littered with spaghetti in their hands. The front door opens, and Zackary strains his ears.

“Uh… sir. Um.”

“Speak up, precious. I don’t have all night,” Genesis goads in a sniding voice. Zackary’s shoulders unclench a fraction. All signs so far point to their unexpected visitor being an army grunt or low-level message boy.

“Um, sir. P-Professor Hojo, he um… he said he would like to speak to General Sephiroth, sir. Said I might find him here if he’s not in his own quarters, sir.”

“Well, kindly tell the dear Professor to stick his summons up his –”

“Genesis, it’s alright.”

There’s a tight silence after Sephiroth’ words, and Zackary can imagine the glances being exchanged one room over. Finally, Genesis relents.

“I’ll come over later,” he promises. A few more seconds, and the door swishes closed.

. . .

Night-time always has been Tseng’s favorite time of work. Not that Turks ever really rest, but it’s quieter, less of a mayhem during the night when the rest of the Tower is asleep. It gives his head more space to think. Such as about…

He dismisses the rookie Turk with a nod, their words seeming to echo quietly across his empty office as though mocking him.
“Sir, there seems to have been a breach in security.”

A mole.

Some of their equipment had gone missing – a certain high level technology memory stick. Right before Professor Hollander reported his office as having been tampered with, together with a most curious incident involving a coffee machine inside his laboratories. The Professor has been known for being disproportionally paranoid concerning his research, and yet…

He leans back in his chair, fingers stapled. Something is afoot, and Tseng resolves to get to the bottom of it.

. . .

Sephiroth isn’t sure how exactly he made it back to his quarters.

The journey is a blur, likely full of raised eyebrows and curious glances, but he remembers none of it. The bedroom tilts, it is only by a small margin that he doesn’t miss the mattress entirely as he slumps down on it. None of it matters, none but a single thing –

*His father’s eyes are cold and analytical, like a five-year-old curiously staring at the worm they are crushing between their hands. Sephiroth ignores him (or at least pretends to); stares at the flickering neon lights overhead from his prone position, lying on a slab of metal in the center of the room.*

*The needle burns something fierce as it pierces his veins, but it’s nothing he’s unused to. Sephiroth barely strains against the metal cuffs capturing his wrists and legs; so little the lab assistant to his left almost doesn’t flinch away.*

*“Side-effects may include severe dizziness and disorientation, nausea, abdominal or cranial pain, loss of vision…”*

Sephiroth thinks he will throw up. Or at the very least, retch up some stomach acid. Maybe he already did, if the taste in his mouth is anything to go by. He turns over on the bed, seeing the color of his curtains blur with the light mauve of the walls and the grey of the carpet. Which way is up, again?

*“The chances of the serum increasing your reaction time and general cognitive capabilities stand at 78.3%,” the voice drowns on apathetically. “You will report back should any abnormal symptoms prevail after 36 hours.”*

The Professor opens the restraints with a few practiced flicks after Sephiroth has forced his body back into stillness. Already he can feel the effects of the new drug settling in as he sits up on the table, but he is still able to put back on his coat and start making for the door. For the task of getting out of the labs, he is usually able to summon enough strength.

*“Sephiroth…” The sharp tone draws the General to a stop. “You will keep your distance from Hollander’s brats.” Sephiroth’s face becomes an icy mask as he looks over his shoulder, meeting that of his father.*

*“Whose company I seek remains up to my own discretion, Professor.”*

He’s almost out the door by the time the most unexpected and unwelcome words make him freeze, sending a shiver down his back.

*“Like that little blonde one?”*
Anything. Gods, please, anything but that feeling of –

Whatever Hojo injected him with, it majorly messed with Sephiroth’ brain chemistry. It feels like the feet were kicked out from under his nervous system, like he’s freeflying through the air with nothing to hold on to. Up and down, left and right, they all blur together in his mind as his motion sensors tell him there’s nothing below him, no comfy bed-sheets, no solid ground. It makes him incredibly nauseous.

Stupid. I was so…

Tongue loosened by the drug, he as good as confirmed the Professor’s suspicions.

A moment of stillness too long, a minute freezing of muscles that gives him away. “I know not what you – ”

“Strife was his name, no? Five feet, five inches, hailing from Nibelheim, seventeen years old. You sure like them young, don’t you, boy?” A tongue is clicked disdainfully. “I see his reports say he is considerably sensitive to Mako. He will need the special drip treatment if he ever is to become a Soldier. Wouldn’t do for something to accidentally happen to your boytoy while he is coming over for a visit, no?”

Sephiroth can still feel the ice water flowing through his veins at the memory of those words, or maybe those are just foreign molecules playing tricks on his heat receptors. He’s lying in his darkened apartment for gods-know how long when he hears another presence drawing closer.

“Seph?” The familiar voice feels welcome, even if it makes his head hurt by echoing around the room in dizzying circles. The other moves into his bedroom, pace picking up when he sees Sephiroth lying listlessly, arms drooping over the edge of the mattress and boots still on his feet. He’s not sure when he closed his eyes. “Seph?” the person asks, quieter now after noticing the frown lines of pain on the General’s forehead and elevated breathing.

Sephiroth can feel his footwear and clothes being removed and hands checking him over for injuries before he’s being fed a glass of cold tab water from the adjoining bathroom. The mattress dips, and then Genesis’s fingers are carefully stroking the hair away from his forehead, rubbing over the knuckles of his hand soothingly.

. . .

“Do you need anything?” he asks, rather than the redundant question of what happened, or whether he could kill the bastard. They’ve long learned that ‘Are you okay?’ isn’t really a useful question in this situation.

Sephiroth shakes his head the slightest bit, as though the movement itself pains him.

“Do you want me to call Cloud?”

Genesis knows that when his lover is feeling at his lowest after a stay in the labs, having the little blond Chocobo in his arms is a healing balm that always makes him feel a little better. And usually he is not too proud to ask for him after Cloud told him for the umpteenth time not to feel bad about the need.

That’s why he raises a thin eyebrow in surprise when Sephiroth shakes his head again.

They sit in silence for a while, Genesis soothing a gentle hand down Sephiroth’ back, before asking softly, “Am I making it better or worse?” A moment of contemplation, and then Sephiroth jerks his
chin to the side, indicating the unused half of the bed behind him. Even just the small motion seems to bother the man as his head starts swaying disorientedly.

Quietly, Genesis removes his own boots and coat and moves around the bed to lie down behind Sephiroth. He wraps a careful arm around his waist and pulls the man against his chest, hoping to ground Sephiroth from whatever is happening inside his head. The General swallows convulsively, before starting to talk in a slur.

“He knows… Hojo knows. That Cloud’s w’th us.” Genesis grips him tighter at that. He can feel Sephiroth’ heart beating away rapidly under his hands. They’ve tried their best to keep their youngest safe and out of the eyes of Shinra, but now it seems all their efforts have been for naught. “He said he’ll… ‘f I don’t, he’ll… the drips – I can’t…” he mumbles disjointedly. It hurts Genesis like a physical blow to see his usually immaculate lover reduced to this, but the news he just heard scare him even more.

“We need to tell Cloud. Find a way to keep him safe –”

“No! He’ll… He can’t give up on his dreams. If I… stay docile, he won’t…”

Genesis slumps, touching his forehead against Sephiroth’ hair. A docile General… mindless and picture-book, following the Professor’s and President’s orders to a T, destroying every bit of obstinacy and willfulness Genesis had carefully tried to instill in his friend.

“Seph… we don’t keep secrets,” he whispers.

“Dun’ tell him… Don’t take that choice from me.”

Genesis sighs and presses a kiss against Sephiroth’ neck before starting to gently braid the mane of hair in front of him. “We’ll figure it out when the time comes. For now, try to sleep a little.”

Sephiroth does try, and maybe the soothing, familiar motions help a little; but the effects of whatever Hojo did to him seem to make resting difficult. He keeps flinching periodically just when Genesis thought the man had finally settled, shudders coursing through him. Finally, Genesis turns him around in his arms and cradles Sephiroth’ face. The other’s eyes fly across the room before settling on calm teal.

“Shh… eyes on me, pretty.” Genesis wraps his legs around Sephiroth’ own, to give him something to hold onto. It takes a bit, but Sephiroth manages to ground himself in those strong, gentle eyes, until his shuddering breaths abate.

... 

Afterwards, when the General is fast asleep, Angeal comes into the room and sees Genesis lying there with a weak, shaky, sweating Sephiroth cradled in his arms. He sits at the edge of the bed and lays a hand on each of his boyfriends, before kissing Sephiroth’ hair and touching foreheads with Genesis.

He doesn’t need to ask what happened; it’s obvious.

“Tseng passed me in the hallways when I grabbed something from the office, he wants to speak to you. About the new recruits.” They would enter Third Class within the week, and thus fall into Genesis’ area of jurisdiction. Angeal looks at Sephiroth. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t wake up alone.”

Genesis nods gratefully and gently disentangles himself from the man in his arms. “Hojo’s onto Cloud; we’ll need to move carefully from now on.” The news are received with a deep frown.
He waits until Angeal has settled down behind Sephiroth and wrapped a protective arm around him before turning to the door.

“Gen…” Angeal’s halting voice stops him. He hesitates for a moment, then says, “about what Cloud said. You do realize what that means, right? We’re basically half-brothers.”

Genesis regards him quietly for a moment, then treads across the room with a few whisper-soft steps and leans over the sleeping General. Their glowing Mako eyes meet inches from each other before Genesis very deliberately bends down to touch his lips to those of his lover. Angeal sighs as the other effortlessly takes control, as always, with a quiet confidence.

The warmth lingers for a sweet moment before they disengage with a quiet, moist sound and Genesis once more catches his eyes with a defiant glow. “This… is what we are.”

“You have requested my presence, Chief?”

Genesis doesn’t even try to look apologetic at the mess of fluttering papers on the floor as he sits on the newly freed office desk space. He’s no stranger to the Turks’ intimidation techniques – calling him in late at night after-hours, the buzzing of bland neon lights, steepled fingers and a cold stare from the Head-Turk sitting on the other side of flawless mahogany. They are leaving him quite unimpressed.

“…we’re basically half-brothers.”

Besides, if there’s one mood Genesis isn’t feeling towards the company in that moment, it’s forgiving.

“Indeed,” Tseng finally begins after studying him for a moment and leans forward in his leather chair. “I merely meant to inquire after the preparations for receiving the new Soldier Third recruits. There is quite a handful this term, and I received note that a few of the instructors are currently off base. Are you sure the –”

“They’ll be fine. Now cut to the chase, Tseng. What is it that you really want?” Genesis furrows his brows.

The Wutainese leans back, eyes dark and unreadable. He gives no sign that the interruption ruffled his composure – ever the Turk. “Of course Commander, my apologies. You must be tired, I shall try not to keep you long.” The false pleasantries make Genesis want to retch, but he hasn’t survived in this company for years by his good looks.

(Well, not only.)

“I must admit, I was curious if any particular recruit has caught your eye during the practicals. Seeing as all three of the Great Trinity seemed to have found it prudent to attend them, which to my knowledge is so-far unheard off. If there is someone with particular potential, the company will naturally not spare any expenses in making sure they may unleash that potential to the fullest.”

The sick feeling in Genesis’ stomach grows stronger.

Unleash their potential. Of course they would. And likely never leave Hojo’s labs again after the process. He does his best to keep the thought of their young, innocent, wide-eyed Cloud in the Professor’s grasp out of his head – it won’t do to show weakness now.
“Funny, that; yes,” he quips instead and lifts a random paper weight from the desk to inspect. It’s a statue of Leviathan. “There is actually a story behind that, all three of us being there I mean. It involves a cactuar and a lot of tangled hair, but I would so hate to bore you, Chief. No, I am quite afraid the new recruits are as dull as ever.”

“And there’s another of their favorite techniques – a quick switch of topic to loosen their target’s tongue. Genesis slides a glove-clad fingertip down the smooth stone statue in his hand. The Turk underestimates him.

“Oh dear, I can barely remember what I had for breakfast yesterday, and here you are asking me about something that happened over a week ago?” he sighs with fake exasperation.

“After all, the three of you had been noted to be outside Midgar, training, during the occurrence of the event. I am sure you can forgive me for jumping to conclusions.”

“I may… have been testing out a new summons that I found on my mission to Cosmo Canyon,” Genesis admits.

“You are, of course, aware that you are under obligation to inform the science department of any new materia you find and leave it there for further inspection…?”

“On second thought, it may just have been a particularly powerful cast of Blizzaga.” He sets the paper weight back down and slides off the table. “Terrible memory, I have. Truly terrible. Must’ve mistaken it for that command materia I found last month and of course most dutifully presented to the labs. If that is all, commander… I do believe you mentioned not wanting to keep me from my sleep.”

Morning breaks, and Sephiroth’s legs barely seem to want to support him on his way to the office. He parts ways with Angeal at an intersection and smiles at his secretary. She’s still too starry-eyed to see the brittleness around the edges, the sharply clenching hand behind his back.

Green, foggy twilight rises over Midgar, and Angeal sits at his office desk, staring at a light-green aloe vera to his right, frown deeply set on his face.

There’s a picture frame in his drawer, of Genesis, his mother, and himself, standing in front of his family’s house in Banora on a warm autumn day. He doesn’t take it out.

A paperwork filled dawn settles over Shinra Tower.

Genesis is staving off a migraine and trying not think about what that means. Tells himself it’s the mission report swimming in front of his eyes, the weather, the lack of sleep.

He may have walked out of Tseng’s office head held high, but a Turk’s interrogation wears on the best of them. He’s tired of the lying, and the snooping, and the general unpleasantness of the company. If they could start with its merciless deconstruction anytime soon, that would be mighty
fine with him.

...  
Zackary rolls onto his side, surveying the mess of tangled, empty sheets in front of him. His eyes itch, testament of another sleepless night spent trying not to toss and turn – a mutual endeavor. Cloud’s side of the bed is cold; Zackary heard him stand up a while ago, way before propriety should have allowed it.

He finds the blonde as he expected: bent over Angeal’s couch table with the laptop screen painting eerie shadows across his face. Zackary heads into the kitchen and brews two of the strongest coffees he knows how to make, sets one of them next to Cloud’s computer, then watches it grow cold from the side of the room. Taps his fingers against the window sill. Takes a sip himself.

Zackary exhales slowly and leans more fully against the window, looking outside. Another nightmare visited him the previous night, though he can’t quite remember what it was about. Maybe it’s for the better. There’s a cold feeling inside his bones and a sharp ache in his heart that reminds him of failure and abandonment. The room gradually grows lighter, though all that serves to do is accentuate the deep shadows beneath Cloud’s eyes.

When he thinks a decent amount of time has passed, Zackary pointedly sets a banana next to Cloud’s left hand and plops onto the couch beside him. Cloud pointedly ignores the fruit. Zackary pointedly wonders when everything started turning to shit between them again.

“So… understand any of that?” he asks.

“A little.”

Zackary hums.

“You seem to have a lot of medical knowledge. How come?”

For a moment, he thinks Cloud will keep ignoring him, but then he reluctantly distances himself from the screen for a bit. His brows furrow. “Remember when I talked about the Geostigma?”

Zackary nods.

“…Denzel caught it.” And really, that’s all he needs to say about it. Zackary’s eyes widen a fraction.

“It was like a disease, right?”

Cloud’s gaze drifts back to his work, though he seems to be lost in thought, right hand coming up to rub his arm absent-mindedly. “…right.”

Somehow, Zackary doesn’t think that Denzel was the only one to catch the sickness.

Either way, the numbers on the screen flitting past are way above Zackary’s understanding, so he spends the rest of the day squatting away, doing katas, exercises, trying to get Cloud to interact with him when he thinks the guy needs a break – causing Cloud to violently snap at him.

We both need to work off some of this darn tension, Zackary thinks grimly.

He rifles through the kitchen instead, making lunch and accidentally making way too much, but it turns out that’s not a bad thing when the others trickle in around noon, since all of them somehow had the simultaneous idea of checking up on them during their lunch break.
“Avian wasn’t the only kind of DNA contained in Jenova’s cells – honestly, it’d be almost easier to name the ones that weren’t. Feline, canine, insectoids, all kinds of sea creatures, different predators… All of your genetic codes are incredibly layered due to that. It doesn’t say in the files exactly, but I’m guessing it’s because of how Jenova is a shape-shifter, and she took on the shape of lots of different animals during her war with the Cetra, all of which embedded themselves into her genetic code. It was just a matter of chance that wings were the one thing triggered in the old world; theoretically, you carry all these traits inside you dormantly.”

“Wait, so basically I was right that Ang’, Gen and Seph could sprout some nice tentacles?!” Zack snickers, interrupting Cloud’s explanations on some older files he finally managed to make sense of. Angeal slaps him on the head, resulting in a kicked puppy look and said kicked puppy biting into his sandwich with a pout.

“Theoretically, yes,” elder Cloud amends, though he is swift to add, “though practically, I believe epigenetics would play a part in letting only the most relevant genes for survival manifest themselves, like wings, claws, reflexes, sense of smell, cat eyes…”

He trails off, and all their gazes are involuntarily drawn to Sephiroth, who blushes and clears his throat. “What about the degradation?” he asks, to switch the focus of conversation.

“Well…” The elder Cloud’s expression darkens slightly, causing Zack to bite his lip in worry. “I managed to advance a little further in the files, closer to the present day, and apparently Genesis’ body has been showing signs of fluctuation. Nothing too obvious yet, but there was a certain instability in his DNA samples, as well as increasingly out of the norm values concerning heart rate, blood pressure, blood cell generation…”

“The nerve…” Genesis hisses, a dangerous spark in his eyes, and Zack wishes he could just take his spit-fire lover into his arms. “My body’s falling apart around me, and that charlatan of a medic hasn’t even deemed it important enough to inform me?! What about Angeal?”

Cloud shakes his head. “Nothing, not yet. His levels seem fine in comparison. I wouldn’t completely exclude the possibility of something happening in the future, though.”

Genesis narrows his eyes, glancing at his boyfriends. “I swear, if even a single one of you starts hovering, I am going to throw a fit.”

The half-eaten sandwich settles like a heavy weight in Zack’s stomach. He knows theirs isn’t the easiest profession; that they face the possibility of a mortal injury every day. But this isn’t some random monster he can slay – this is a silent, creeping danger locked in the very depths of his lover’s DNA, and he feels incredibly helpless in the face of it.

He doesn’t doubt Genesis throwing a fit over their impending hovering, but he also doesn’t see a single future where they might not care about this threat.

Zack’s older counterpart goes on to explain Genesis’ attempts in the old world of curing his degradation, what did and didn’t work – would injecting Genesis with Angeal’s or Sephiroth’s cells help, since none of them seem to be in danger of degrading? But in the end, they have to accept that none of them are scientists, and that they don’t know any scientists they can trust to help them at this moment. The only lead seems to be that dingy cave in Banora, but they’d need to provide the company with a solid reason to travel all the way out there on a mere hunch.

The discussion (which grows more and more heated as tempers shorten) finally is broken up with the
arrival of Zack’s best buddy, his bro, his cuddle-boo, his Cloud. The kid jumps into the room all excited but comes to a stop when he feels out the atmosphere.

“Is… now a bad time?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine. I just figured out my cells will start eating me up from the inside if I so much as get a papercut, but what else is new?” Genesis snipes, raising his jaw defiantly.

“Gen…” Angeal tries to soothe.

Cloud sits on the redhead’s lap. “I’m sorry, Genesis.” He carefully pushes Genesis’ tresses back behind his ears, and the motion visibly calms their lover. *Again with the hands, Zack* thinks.

“What’s new with you, little bird?” Genesis finally relents and wraps his arms around his waist. “You seemed excited.”

As it turns out, Cloud received the results of his Mako sensitivity exam right after his morning patrol and ran all the way up here to tell his boyfriends the good news.

“Basically, I’m hypersensitive to Mako, so they’ll be giving me some… special drip treatment-thingy, but I’ll still be able to become a Third,” he says, with a big smile on his face.

“That’s great, sweetie!” Even though Genesis mirrors that smile, Zack can’t help… thinking there’s something fishy about it, something strained in the clench of his teeth, the slight frown above his eyes. Eyes that… flicker over in Sephiroth’ direction…?

He’s apparently not the only one to notice. Cloud’s smile drops, and he turns over to Sephiroth, who has a blank look on his face, and fixes him with a hard stare.

“Spill.”

The others around the table grow still. Seph absolutely doesn’t fidget, because strong Soldier First Class Generals don’t fidget in the face of a tiny angry blonde, but… yea.

*Seph is totally fidgeting.*

“There is nothing wrong, love. We are all proud of your accomplishments,” he says in that diplomatic voice that raises at the very least fifteen warning bells in Zack’s head.

“Bullshit. Tell me what’s going on here.”

It takes a while of back and forth, and a quiet, disappointed “We don’t keep secrets, Seph,” from Genesis that somehow sounds like a repetition until Sephiroth finally admits to his experience in the Professor’s labs the other night. About how Hojo found out about Sephiroth’ relationship with Cloud, the threats. Staying docile. The words make shudders run down Zack’s spine, worsened by the sight of dark circles under the man’s eyes, the slight slump to his usually proud posture.

“I… would endure any hardship imaginable if it ensured your safety while under his control.”

Cloud takes a few moments to take in the information, face hardened. Then he decides. “I’m staying in the infantry.”

Seph’s reaction is immediate. “You bloody well will do no such thing!” he says, features twisting. “I will *not* have you giving up your dreams for my sake! Whatever it is he wants to throw at me, I can handle!”
The small blonde stands up, finally done with all that shit.

“If the only way I’ll survive that drip treatment is through you getting yourself tortured, then I am not entering Soldier. And that’s the end of it.”

“You cannot just – ”

“Can and will.” Cloud steps over to Sephiroth and grabs his shoulders in a firm grip, exceedingly fearless even in the face of an unhappy, silver-haired killing-machine. “This relationship is a two-way street, you know?”

Sephiroth expels a sharp breath of air, slumping in his seat and looking to the side.

“You know what we all need now?” Genesis asks apropos of nothing and catches Angeal’s gaze. “Something sweet, and sometime after that, maybe a change of place.” With that said, he goes to retrieve the previous day’s meringue pie from the fridge.

In the evening, when the rest of Shinra Tower is asleep, they all sneak into the Virtual Reality room to spar. Spare Soldier Second uniforms curtesy of Zack hide the two time travelers from the security cameras’ view while giving them a believable alibi to hang around the illustrious Commanders and General. Sephiroth is quiet, yet the fact that the younger Cloud is walking next to him hints at a temporary truce.

It was… surprising, to Cloud the Elder, to see the kind of lengths the General was willing to go to in order to protect his younger boyfriend. He has to admit, their relationship had bothered him, before. So easy it was to see manipulation in each of Sephiroth’ movements, to see the puppet master behind the man. But this – Cloud did not expect this. And neither did he expect younger Cloud’s reaction. It has given him much food for thought.

When they reach the VR room, Sephiroth uses his override to switch off the observation cameras, then chooses their scenario. The black coat swishes around his ankles as he steps into the Wutainese-style doujou.

“We came across this in a small, hidden village in Wutai, once. Their soldiers were brave men. Fought to the death, all of them,” Genesis explains, hand elevated and doing something swishy and unnecessary.

Cloud has never set foot inside a VR room before, and glances around curiously after removing the helmet. There’s no sign of the metal plating and wires behind the illusion, only meticulously lacquered wood paneling and paper walls, tall pillars spanning the perimeter of tatami mats. The others slowly trickle in behind them.

“Alright! Show us what you got, Cloudy-boy! I wanna see what you can do with that ridiculous sword!” Zack gripes. It takes Cloud a moment to realize he’s not talking to his younger counterpart, but rather himself. He lets his hand wander behind him, to finger the handle of the Fusion Sword holstered on his back. It’s a solid, comforting weight and he must admit that he’s itching for a good fight, to let off some steam. But against who?

“Well, what do you say?” Angeal asks, and exchanges the Bustersword for a simple training sword at a rack to the side. Cloud wonders why he brought the big, unwieldy weapon to begin with, but guesses at a long-standing habit. “Care to show this old man some moves?”

“Now where is the fun in one-on-one?” Genesis song-songs and unsheathes his Rapier. “I’d like to
see you dance, little bird!”

“Genesis…”

“I told you, no bloody hovering! Have a little faith, for Shiva’s sake.”

“Oh, oh! Why not let Seph join in too?” Zack exclaims from the side. “If all that you told us is true and you fought him so many times, winning against three Soldier Firsts should be easy, right?”

Angeal immediately jumps in. “Now, now… let’s not get ahead of ourselves – ”

Cloud’s eyes fall on the man in question, contemplating. Sephiroth is eyeing him with no small amount of curiosity, and Cloud can imagine that Sephiroth would like nothing more than to face the man who claimed to have bested him several times over.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. No – ” He can see Zack beginning to pout. “Don’t get me wrong. You couldn’t seriously harm me,” he says with no pride or arrogance; it simply is. This man is still but a shadow of what he might one day become, especially now after his recent run-in with the Professor. “See it as a well-meant warning. In a fight with you, I wouldn’t be able to guarantee not to get caught up in my mind and accidentally kill you. Stay out of this.”

Maybe, before the events of today’s dinner, he wouldn’t have issued that warning.

Sephiroth regards him for a moment, then acknowledges the words with a nod.

That said, Cloud steps into the middle of the training mats and lets the Fusion Sword swing into his hands, where it separates into a second blade. Dual-wielding usually comes in handy against multiple foes. After Sephiroth, the two Zacks, and younger Cloud have moved off to the sidelines, the combatants face each other and the fight begins.

It’s good, to be able to stretch muscles Cloud hasn’t used in so long. The swords are natural extensions of his arms, strong and familiar, nary an afterthought as he ducks and shoves and twirls his way around Genesis and Angeal. The two are obviously used to fighting against a common enemy from the battlefield, but Cloud hasn’t spent the past few years constantly fighting for his life with little else but the sword on his back for nothing.

And yet: from the very first moment, something doesn’t feel right.

He can’t shake the ominous feeling that’s been gripping him for days now. The tension between him and Zackary; feeling Sephiroth’ DNA so close in his proximity while fighting and yet not fighting him; being on display in the middle of the room; knowing the danger that a wound could trigger Genesis’ degradation, when he’s spent the past couple of days doing everything to prevent that from happening – it’s all so much.

His shoulders are tense, his ears full of white noise that distracts him from the sound of Genesis’ footwork behind him, and then there’s that damn headache – probably just from lack of hydration, but who knows. Headaches have bad history with Cloud.

“Don’t go soft on me, I dare you!” Genesis exclaims when he notices Cloud pulling his punches, and the tension in his shoulders rises. “What, aren’t the two of us enough of a challenge? Take us seriously!”

That is when Zackary jumps into the fight and everything goes wrong.

...
Watching Cloud is hypnotizing. The way he moves... like he already knows where the blow will connect long before his opponent even thinks of it. Effortless. Yet forceful. The blonde is definitely a force to be reckoned with.

And yet Zackary can see that he’s holding back, and it irritates him.

He can feel that there’s so much more potential behind Cloud’s fighting style, and suddenly a part of him wants to force Cloud to show all that is hidden. Maybe that’s the masochistic part. All this strength, the skill, the ability to wield blades as though they were mere butter knives – Cloud owns it all because he had to fend for himself, because Zackary abandoned him when Cloud needed him most.

He wants to see the entire magnitude of what his mistakes brought.

So he grabs a practice sword from the stand next to him, and jumps into the fight.

Normally, you would not interrupt an ongoing spar in such a way – every trainee knows that. But Cloud only warned Sephiroth off joining, and it’s obvious their two younger counterparts aren’t skilled enough yet to hold their own in a fight like this. There’s no such obvious reason for the older Zack not to join, though. And besides, Cloud seems more than able to handle it.

He sees a moment later how wrong he was about that.

It’s all over very fast.

Cloud blocks Zackary’s sword once, twice, counters Genesis’ slash and side-steps Angeal’s attack. Before Zackary can dash ahead, Cloud is on him again. Zackary barely raises his sword in time to block the swipe from the larger of Cloud’s sword parts and the strength behind it rattles his bones. He only has a moment to witness the dazed look in the blonde’s eyes before the second sword is up and moving, fast to the left, and Zackary tries to block again. It’s sloppy, and something slides and gives, a sharp pain in his left upper arm, and before he knows what’s happening Cloud is backing away with the Fusion Swords limp and pointing at the ground.

Angeal and Genesis come to a confused stop. Zackary spares enough of a glance at the sluggishly bleeding cut on his arm to see it’s nothing serious, before swiveling back to Cloud, who has gone very pale, chest heaving.

“...Cloud?”

The sound of his name rouses him, though the blank look doesn’t leave Cloud’s eyes.

“Why the fuck did you do that.”

Zackary startles. “I’m sorry, Cloud. I know I shouldn’t have jumped in like that. But look, it’s just a small – ”

“What the hell is wrong with you, Zack?!” Cloud yells. Zackary flinches back like he’s been slapped. “I could have killed you!”

“Odin, Cloud, chill! It’s barely a scratch.”

“Just a – ” Cloud keeps backing up, like a cornered animal. There’s something wild about his eyes, which keep staring at Zackary’s arm. He shakes his head and drops the two sword parts as though they burned him. “Don’t ever fucking do that again!”
The chastisement hurts, but what hurts even more is when Zackary tries to approach and Cloud backs up even further, finally reaching the edge of the training room.

What is going on here? Zackary furrows his brows.

“I know, and I’m sorry, okay? Next time I’ll give you a warning.” He bends down to pick up the Fusion Sword and turns the handle in Cloud’s direction. “So, how about a proper rematch?”

Cloud slaps his hand away. “I can’t fucking do this!”

For a moment, the silence in the dojo is only broken by Cloud’s unsteady breathing. Zackary’s shoulders slump and he bites his lip.

“…are you mad at me? Is that it?” Cloud’s eyes widen. “’cause if it is, I can understand. I get it, okay? Just… can we please talk about it?”

The man in front of him stares at Zackary uncomprehendingly. “Mad at you…? Why would I…”

Zackary rubs a hand over his eyes and takes a few steps back. “I left you there, Cloud. You were all alone, and hurt, and needed help, and I just left you there on that damn cliff.”

Tears suddenly well up in Cloud’s eyes, and he shakes his head before starting to sob. “You bloody idiot.”

“C-Cloud – ”

He’s absolutely at his wits’ end, but at least Cloud doesn’t push him away again when Zackary cradles him in his arms and sinks to the ground with him. Cloud’s sobs start taking on a hysterical note. Peripherally, Zackary is still aware of the others watching in silence, and the slight trail of blood trickling from the wound on his biceps, but at this moment there’s nothing more important than the distressed man in his arms.

Hugs cure (almost) anything.

“I could’ve saved you. I could’ve saved you. I could’ve saved all of them, but I didn’t.” He feels Cloud grip the back of his shirt tightly.

“Sh, it’s okay.” He runs his fingers over Cloud’s head soothingly. “What do you mean, Cloud?”

“At the cliff. I could’ve saved you, but instead I just saved myself.” Cloud’s breathing hitches and he chokes on saliva for a second.

“But you did save me – ”

“I didn’t then! Don’t you see it, Zack?” He lifts his head to look at Zackary, and the sight of the bloodshot, teary eyes pains him. “You were still alive when I left. The fact that you’re here now, it just proves I could’ve – could’ve done something back then.”

“Cloud, you didn’t…” Zackary shakes his head in disbelief. “You were barely alive yourself, what the hell were you supposed to have done?” He cradles his friend’s head back against his chest. “You did more than enough, Cloud.”

They sit together for a while, and it’s only now that Zackary notes that Cloud is basically on his lap. The blonde’s breaths remain shuddering, but slowly start calming down.

“Here.” Genesis is somehow on his knees beside them, holding out a Cura, and his blue eyes twinkle
like he was expecting it when Cloud snatches the materia from his hands to tend to Zackary’s wound. His fingers are warm and careful around Zackary’s arm.

He sniffs again. “I don’t ever want you to get hurt again because of me.”

Genesis chews on his lips in thought, then smacks them together and helps pull the two up off the ground. “Well, come on then, darlings. I have a feeling –” He walks a few steps and picks up a couple of wooden swords (bokken, Zackary’s mind helpfully supplies), which he tosses at the two time travelers. “ – the both of you need to learn how to not hurt each other.”

Cloud looks at the weapon as though it might crawl up his arm and bite him.

“Go on, then. Don’t be shy.”

Genesis takes a few steps back and Zackary takes his place facing Cloud. He secures his grip on the handle, but doesn’t urge the other. Cloud’s eyes shift, from the sword, to Zackary, Genesis, to the others leaning against the wall halfway across the room in silence, back to his sword. He wipes his gloved wrist under his nose, rolls his shoulders, and gives a half-hearted blow in Zackary’s direction. He blocks it easily, none of them using their Mako-given strength.

They trade a couple light blows at first, work on their steps, test each other’s limits, then slowly start getting more and more into it. Somewhere in between… Cloud almost seems to start having fun again, in a way sword fighting hasn’t been in a long while.

“Nice one, Cloud!” Zackary says, then – “Oi, the hell was that, buddy?!” – when he feels the impact of a bokken on his bum.

Finally, Cloud starts letting loose a little, and the line of tension in his shoulders lessens. Genesis and Angeal join in with slow, measured steps that give plenty of forewarning, but soon have to give it their all to keep up against Cloud’s excellent swordsmanship. Genesis laughs in delight at the challenge, and Cloud mirrors it with a grin of his own.

Zackary feels something heavy drop from his chest at seeing Cloud unwind like that. They both end up having a round or two with their younger counterparts, who have been starting to grow impatient to join in on the fray, and Sephiroth snickers at their antics.

The mock fight starts taking on epic proportions, with grand gestures, dramatic speeches, and Cloud showing off with his high jumps and twirls, and only the sound of the Bustersword being knocked from its perch on the wall by a clumsy Zack can draw it to an end.

“Oops, my bad!” Zack chuckles, and Angeal sighs, but before Zack can pick it back up Cloud the Elder next to him.

He lifts the Buster reverently and touches the flat of the blade to his forehead. The others grow still around them. “Be careful with that,” he admonishes after a moment and sets the sword back down where it belongs, but his eyes are gently now.

…

“Hey, Zack?”

“M-hm?”

“I think… I think I’m gonna head down to the slums tomorrow.”
“Yea?”

“Yea. I wanna see if I can reach out to Barret, if he’s there. And even if not, I can sniff around a bit, see what else Shinra has been up to.”

“Sure thing. Maybe we can even earn a couple gil of our own, get us a few weapons.”

“You mean you…?”

“D’uh, of course I’m coming with, Cloud!”

“…okay, Zack. …thanks.”

…

_tbc_

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics: "If today was your last day" // Nickelback.

Credits:
- “Red Banshee” is a loving reference to Amarissia’s Not Wrath of Gods
- Animal DNA in Jenova’s cells from a fanfic I read once (pls yell if you know which one)
- Genesis’ poem in the beginning is from T. S. Elliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”, which somebody recommended to me, but I can’t remember who (sorry, pls kick me if u read this)
- “Cooking is an art” idea by LadyAvalon
- Possibly others, again, pls kick me if I forgot giving you credit

Please read: Basically, to keep it short: I have lost pretty much all interest in ff7. But I did promise I would finish this story, and I do have it planned out and there are scenes I definitely want to write, but the devil’s in the parts in between. I’ve thought long and hard about it, and I’ve decided that from here onwards, I will gloss over the scenes I don’t really care about and focus on the ones I do like. Yes, the quality will suffer, a lot, (most of this chapter was already written before my hiatus) but I don’t see myself finishing the story otherwise and I’m tired of this thing constantly guilt-tripping me in the back of my mind. I hope y’all can understand. I bit off more than I could chew, and for that I’m sorry. If by the time I’ve finished this someone would like to adopt the story idea and make something proper of it, we can definitely talk about it.
In the glass of her boudoir

Chapter Summary

(Of new (old) faces.)

Chapter Notes

From here on out, I will stop trying to get this story perfect and instead try to get it done. I apologize that the quality will suffer, but I feel you might rather have a half-arsed story than no story at all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the glass of her boudoir

‘My mama told me when I was young
We are all born superstars
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on
In the glass of her boudoir

There’s nothing wrong with loving who you are’

“So, where to first?”

Cloud pushes the rim of the black hood back slightly to survey the chaos of the slums in front of them. The fabric of the cloaks they bought is scratchy, but does its job at hiding their identity.

“Let’s ask around a bit. We need money, first. There’s always someone willing to offer work,” he replies and steps forward confidently. Zackary follows behind, adjusting his own cloak.

They spend most of the morning doing odd jobs for shop owners, obliterating pests in the train graveyard, playing delivery boy and so on to earn some gil. They use the money to buy Zackary (who had been using a side-blade of First Tsurugi until then) a proper sword and grab some spicy skewers at a stall while planning their next move.

“Sounds like no one down here’s really all that happy about Shinra,” Zackary remarks.

It’s true; whereas the general populace on the upside of the plate seemed to have been thoroughly brainwashed on the benefits of the company, the poor and homeless in the darkness of the slums had been left by the wayside and reacted to mentions of Shinra accordingly.

“Bloody bunch of sniveling, greedy bastards! Off with their heads, I say,” gripes an old man with few teeth standing next to them. Zackary nods in agreement at him, but lets himself get pulled further
towards a nearby building and out of earshot by Cloud. He’s glad Cloud is finally having fewer issues eating food – it’s seems like he can almost ignore all the negative feelings conjured up about his old world so long as he doesn’t pay too much attention to the action.

“We’re gonna try Seventh Heaven next. I haven’t heard about any underground organizations yet, but maybe we’ll find Barret.”

... They slay some more monsters throughout the afternoon in order for Zackary to get used to his new blade before heading to Sector 7.

“Wait a sec...” Zackary slows to a stop, Cloud following suit a few steps ahead. The name had been niggling at the back of his mind for a while now, but finally he realized why. “Are you kidding me? I helped name that bar!” He laughs, staring at the worn establishment up ahead.

Cloud gives him a puzzled look and listens to Zackary’s story while they approach the building.

They head inside and order a couple cheap beers at the bar, glancing around from under their hood inconspicuously. The location is already filled with patrons, despite it being only early evening.

“Hey,” Cloud grabs the bartender’s attention when they are handed their beverages. “Know anyone called Barret around here?”

The guy, maybe in his late forties with prematurely grey hair, rubs his hands on a dish towel. “Barret? Yea, sure. ‘round that corner over there. Broody fella, not much for talking. Got here a couple weeks ago, me thinks.”

Cloud thanks the man, grabs his beer and turns around. Zackary hurries after him.

They clear the corner the old man indicated and Zackary feels his companion suck in a quiet breath, faltering momentarily. With hesitant steps slowly growing firmer, he heads towards a bench in the back and slides in on the opposite side of a table occupied by a large, bulky, dark-skinned man. The first thing Zack notices is the large tattoo of a skull on the bulging biceps, the second the way the man’s right arm ends grotesquely not in a hand, but in what appears to be a gun lying threateningly on the table top.

Nothing about this brooding man seems to be inviting. Cloud invites himself anyway, and Zackary follows suit.

“Hello Barret,” Cloud starts.

“Piss off.”

Well, that’s concise, at least.

Cloud doesn’t let himself be deterred. He folds his hands on the table in front of him. “So, I heard you have an ax to grind with Shinra.”

The man, Barret, growls and bangs his metallic contraption against the wood. From this close up, Zackary can see three scars marring his cheek. He sits back quietly and watches the conversation unfold. “And if I do, what’s it to you, punk?”

“I’m just saying, you’re not the only one. There’s strength in numbers, y’know?”

“In case I wasn’t clear before.” The man leans forward and hisses through his teeth. “Piss off.”
“Don’t you want revenge for what happened in Corel?”

If possible, Barret’s features darken even more at those words. He bares his teeth, shoulders raised and eyes squinting. If the man weren’t so intimidating by his mere size alone, Zackary would have compared him to a cornered animal.

“Just who the fuck do you think you are?” Barret roars. “The hell do you even know about me? Think you can just walk in here, spouting nonsense!”

Cloud lifts his hands soothingly, keeping his voice low. “I’m Fenrir, and this is Odin,” he introduces with their code names while waving at Zackary. “All I am saying is that you and I both know that Shinra needs to be stopped. And maybe I am recruiting.”

“Recruiting?” Barret yells. Zackary glances around, hoping the noise of the bar will swallow the words. “You’ve got some nerve, not even showing your face under that bloody hood.”

With a short sigh, the blonde lifts his hands to push the fabric back a little, still keeping his hair hidden. After a second, Zackary follow suit. “Seeing our faces is not gonna help you decide,” Cloud says.

Barret squints some more, before his eyes widen comically. “You’re one of them! You got them eyes, like those fuckin’ Soldiers! Bastards, I’m gonna – ”

In a motion too quick to follow, Cloud pins Barret’s gun arm to the table before the man can fully lift it. Zackary grabs the man’s struggling left arm, narrowly avoiding spilling their beers. Barret is strong, but no match to two enhanced Soldiers.

“Listen to me, and listen closely,” Cloud hisses, bent forward. “I have as much reason to despise Shinra as any of you. They kept me and my friend over here in a lab for years, experimented on us. They killed people I cared about, my friends, my family. Shinra is full of liars and murderers and I will bring them down, even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Barret finally breaks free of their hold and pushes back with a sneer, yet Cloud presses on.

“Don’t you want to get revenge against the people who took your arm from you, your home, your wife?”

Something shuts down in Barret’s eyes at the last word and he stands up slowly to loom over the pair.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are, or what game you’re playing, or how you know about my life. But there’s one thing I do know: If you keep meddling with me, you’ll regret it. I’ll make Shinra pay, and you two will stay the fuck out of it.”

With that, he leaves.

. . .

It’s disheartening, seeing the gloom Cloud fell into after that conversation. That tiny bud of… something that had bloomed after their fight in the training rooms seems almost gone as they sit nursing their drinks in silence. Zackary thinks of how best to comfort his friend.

“Hey, maybe he just… needs a little time to come around? Sounds like he’s lost a lot, like he’s still grieving.”
Cloud nods absently, staring into nothing. “He was one of my best friends,” he mumbles.

After a moment of contemplation, Zackary grabs his hand and starts pulling him out of the booth. “Come on, Cloud. I’ve seen what kind of food they serve here and this place is not where we’re getting dinner.”

He drags his morose friend back out into the cold night air, which is a relief after the stuffiness of the bar. It’s only now that Zackary notes his slight headache retreating. They grab some kind of meat-stuffed pita a few corners away and start wandering the sector, Cloud no more than listlessly picking at his dinner, lost in thought.

They’re about to start contemplating where to stay for the night when their enhanced hearing picks up on the sound of a baby crying. Cloud and Zackary trade a glance, before shrugging and going to check it out.

“Oh, oh, I know… your daddy can be a bit of a big dumb, huh? I know. Hush, sweetie.”

Drawing closer, the young female voice turns clearer and clearer until Cloud suddenly stops in his tracks.

“Damnit… What is it that you need, sweetie? You know I don’t have much of a singing voice.”

Down the alley stands a figure silhouetted by the blaring streetlights. After letting his eyes adjust a moment, Zackary can make out long, dark hair and a little baby cradled in the woman’s arms, half-turned away from them. Beside him, Cloud starts walking as though in a trance, eyes fixed on the pair.

“Cloud?” Zackary hisses and follows him.

The sound of their steps makes the woman spin around. From this angle and distance, Zackary can see how young she is – barely out of her teens, likely. She’s wearing a frown and an apron. Something about her seems familiar, but he can’t quite put his finger on it.

“Who’s there? Don’t you go sneaking up on a lady with a baby, wearing those hoods. It’s bad form, y’know?” she says.

“A-apologies,” Cloud says, voice sounding hoarse. He clears his throat. “Are you having trouble?”

At her suspicious gaze, he goes to elaborate. “We don’t mean any harm. We just want to help.”

Zackary wonders about the relationship between Cloud and the woman. They obviously seem to have some history, even if only one party is aware of it.

His quiet tone of voice must’ve been enough to soothe the woman, because she slowly lowers her shoulders and sighs. The little baby, who stopped screaming at the commotion, now starts anew.

“I don’t know what else to try. She won’t stop crying. I already changed her diaper and gave her food, but nothing’s working.”

“Is she yours?” Zackary asks, curious.

She laughs. “Oh, hell no. I’m too young to have kids, trust me. I’m just looking after her for my friend Barret.”

“You don’t happen to mean the guy with a gun for a hand?” Zackary asks before he can stop himself, and then goes on regardless. “Skull tattoo, bit of a temper?”
She snickers again, though it sounds weary against the crying of the little one. “I see you’ve met him. Yea. Showed up here at Seventh Heaven a few weeks ago with a baby and too much baggage. Something happened to his hometown, Corel; I think maybe his wife died? I don’t know, he’s not much of a talker. But he seemed pretty overwhelmed with caring for a small child, so I offered to step in so long as he pays for lodgings above the bar.”

During her explanation, the girl waves a haphazard hand towards the row of buildings to their side, and finally it clicks where Zackary has seen the apron before. They’re standing beside the back-entrance to the bar they only vacated a little while ago.

“I could… try calming her down,” Cloud says, re-entering the conversation. “I know a song up from that area.”

He has one hand half extended as though moving unconsciously, and the young woman backs away in suspicion. Cloud’s flinch at that is almost too subtle to notice.

“I’d – never harm her. I swear on my life.”

After a moment of hesitation, she hands the screaming bundle over to Cloud’s gentle arms. “How’d you know it’s a girl?”

“I… guessed.” And then he asks a question that Zackary is sure Cloud already knows the answer to, carefully stroking the baby’s scrunched up cheeks. “What’s her name?”

“Marlene.”

Zackary is surprised he recognizes the name. Wasn’t that one of those kids Cloud was looking after?

“Hey, Marle’…”

Cloud steps a little to the side and starts softly humming a tune Zack’s never heard before. He doesn’t think he’s ever heard Cloud hum, and it’s mesmerizing.

Even more surprising is that Marlene actually starts calming down and gurgling happily in Cloud’s arms.

“Wow, she’s never settled down that quickly,” the woman (Zackary seriously needs to figure out her name) exclaims. “You’ve really got a hand for children.”

Cloud shrugs a little awkwardly and goes to hand the baby back. “Here, T– Here you are,” he stutters. Marlene seems discontent at the change though, and latches onto Cloud’s pointer finger with her tiny fist.

“She’s a fighter,” the woman remarks merrily, and Cloud nods.

“Yea,” he says, sounding strangely wistful.

“Oh, I’m Tifa, by the way!” Oh, wait. …the girl from Nibelheim? Our tour guide? "If you’ve got the gil and are looking for a place to stay, you can spend the night here at the bar. I’m sure Marlene would love to see you again.”

“I’m Odin,” Zackary replies, “and that’s Fenrir. We would love to!”

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“You sure you want to keep those hoods on? Kinda suspicious, y’know?”
“I’m sorry, but we have our reasons.”

“So what’s your story, anyway?” Zackary asks.

The night has settled, most of the patrons vacated the establishment and a fire is roaring warmly next to some comfy chairs off to the side. Tifa had put Marlene to bed in Barret’s room and returned to them with a couple of those rather disgusting beers, which Zackary tries to put on a brave face to. It’s the thought that counts, anyway.

Tifa goes to explain how she grew up in a small village in the Nibel mountains yet eventually grew sick of the laid-back carelessness and ignorant attitudes of the population. And so, with the help of her martial arts teacher, she set out to Midgar to see the ‘Big Life’.

“All… there was a friend I used to have, back when I was a kid at the village. I knew he’d travelled to Midgar too, to become a strong and mighty Soldier worthy of meeting that Sephiroth guy he adored. I was hoping I might run into him while I was here.”

Zackary glances sideways at Cloud, who keeps his head bent and hidden beneath the hood of his cloak. Many puzzle pieces are starting to fall into place.

Upon her arrival, she had been too poor to afford lodgings on the upper-plate, and so she had to take up a job down here, in the slums. Seeing first hand the lack of care of Shinra towards half its populace and then hearing from Barret about what happened in Corel, Tifa doesn’t sound like she has much of any good will left towards the megalomaniac company.

“Do you… have kids, Fenrir?” Tifa asks carefully. “You seemed so sad, yet so natural with Marlene.”

The man in question is silent for a moment. “I used to,” he says then, and leaves it at that.

“You know,” Tifa tries to cheer him up, “there’s a little, run down theatre that offers plays at the back of the sector, like a community project that gives the slum kids something to do and a warm meal a day. I wanted to go with Marlene sometime soon. Feel free to join me.”

Cloud quietly thanks her for the invitation. They head to bed soon after.

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“So… Tifa, huh?”

Cloud blushes and throws a pillow at the other’s face. “Shut up, Zack.”

“What, did you have a crush on her?”

He shakes his head slowly with a sigh, staring at the mottled ceiling in thought. His mind seems miles away. “We raised the kids together. She – ” The breath catches in his throat, hitching.

“Which is it? A memory, or us?”

“Hey.” Zackary extends his arm under the blanket, scraping over the stiff sheet. “Come ‘ere.”

After a moment Cloud moves over to press his face into Zackary’s chest, who tangles his fingers in
the blond hair. Cloud inhales with a shudder.

“It’s okay, buddy. It’s okay now.”

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Cloud still seems rather down the next morning, and doesn’t open up to Zackary’s attempts to make him talk. Zackary tries to put himself in Cloud’s shoes – he’s in an entirely different universe and everything he’s used to is gone; the girl he apparently raised several children with doesn’t even know him, the leader of Cloud’s group is hell-bent on starting a solo campaign, and who knows how many other familiar people of his makeshift family Cloud is missing.

(He realizes it is uncomfortably easy to put himself in Cloud’s shoes, seeing as he’s in much of the same situation.)

All these thoughts grind to a halt once they reach the market place and Zackary stumbles into Cloud, who has frozen in place. Ahead of them, a commotion is taking place as several buff men carry a sedan on their shoulders. On top of it thrones a red-haired girl in fancy clothes, though it’s hard to make out her expression across the distance.

“No,” Cloud says.

Without any heed to Zackary trying to keep up, he runs after the sedan, pushing through the throng of people. Up ahead, the men lift their burden through massive gates and vanish.

“Oh no,” Cloud says. His eyes swivel around, searching for something frantically yet coming up empty. “Oh… no.”

“Cloud?”

“…would you happen to know where we can find a dress?”

Cloud side-eyes Zack.

Zack side-eyes back.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” says a smooth voice behind them.

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Of course it’s him.

Of course Genesis followed them into the slums to check up on them, and of course he knows exactly how to circumvent their dilemma on how to find a dress years before a certain dress shop will open.

“Follow me.”

Genesis, clad in a casual turtleneck and vest and wearing a dark beanie over his hair with sunglasses, leads them on a winding trail through the clogged alleyways until they find themselves somewhere in the back of Sector 7, where a large building looms above them. Though run-down, the wood-paneled and gilded details on the window front speak of glorious days in the past. A large, worn sign above the main entrance reads ‘Poseidon Royal Theatre’ in bold letters.

Rather than stepping through the front, however, Genesis walks down a side alley until they come to a stop in front of an inconspicuous wooden door, which he opens with a key from his pocket.
“Lil’ side-project of mine, you could say,” Genesis explains. “I’m an anonymous benefactor, and anonymous I shall remain.”

As he leads them through several narrow corridors, Genesis tells them about how the theatre had lain unused and unoccupied for decades before somebody had gotten the idea to reopen it. When Genesis had found out, he’d been ecstatic and immediately helped fund the project, which now involved subtle anti-Shinra themed plays by some of the drama-inclined slum dwellers as well as a program for slum children to learn reading and acting.

They reach the theatre’s fundus, filled to the brim with costumes of all colors, shapes, and sizes. “Knock yourselves out, darlings,” Genesis says with spread arms. “Not that I am a nosy creature, but I must admit to a slight curiosity as to why you would seek to acquire a dress. If you’d wanted to feel pretty, you should have said; I could’ve lent you one from my collection upper-plate.”

Cloud frowns. “Somebody I know got kidnapped by Don Corneo. He sometimes has women brought to him to choose from, someone to spend the night with. I gotta get her out of there.”

“So…. why the dress?” Zackary asks.

“Brute force would attract too much attention, and the guys at the front gate won’t let anyone in other than pretty women right now.”

“What does it sound like you know that from experience?”

Cloud blushes at the teasing tone and turns away. ‘Blame Aerith…” he mumbles and decidedly does not stay to witness the numerous expressions Zack’s face flips through.

“So, do ya reckon green is my color?”

Cloud spins around to where Zackary is holding a deep green dress in front of his chest, waggling his eyebrows. Genesis, sitting on a crate in the back, is making no show of hiding his snicker. Cloud’s brain freezes for a moment.

“Zack… there’s no need for you to get involved.”

“Aw, c’mon Cloud. I’m not gonna let you be the only one who gets to have fun dressing up.”

“Zack, this is serious!”

“I know, which is why I’m not letting you inside the Don’s mansion by yourself.” Zackary frowns.

“I can handle myself!”

“Cloud… we’re doing this together, or not at all.”

They engage in a staring match.

Genesis sighs. “I must say, I am jealous. There was this dashing red ensemble somewhere lying in the back, gold trim, black, glittery tights. I’ve had my eye on it for ages. But alas, I doubt my person could ever hope to go unrecognized by the Don, so I’m afraid he will have to make do with you two.”

It breaks up their eye contact, and for a moment, Cloud frowns at the parquet. Then he huffs and grabs something blue from a nearby stand that he searched through earlier, thrusting it in Zackary’s direction.
“At least go with something that matches your eyes better, idiot.”

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“So, who was that girl, anyway?” Zackary asks while trying to slip his feet into some stockings. What’s the point of those, anyway? Material this thin is just gonna rip, anyway. And who even understands how to wear a garter belt?

Zack sure doesn’t.

“Jessie? …a friend,” Cloud responds from behind the curtain in the dressing room. “From Avalanche, back when they started out.”

“Oh yea? Were you close?”

“Not really… she… she died when the prez blew up the pillar holding the sector 7 plate.”

Zackary stops in his fumbling. “Wait, what?!?”

“Come on Zack, we don’t have all day. What’s taking you so long with that dress?”

“I dunno what to do with this damn garter belt.”

“Well, you’ll have to figure it out yourself!”

A few minutes later, Zackary calls it a lost cause (not like he’s gonna give the Don much of a chance to look below his skirt), lets the bunched up fabric fall down his legs, and steps outside to where Cloud is already bent over the makeup table. He straightens up when he hears his friend approach, and Zackary’s breath catches in his throat.

“You…”

“Zack?”

“You look… good.” He clears his throat.

Genesis makes an amused noise somewhere in the back, as usual, and Zackary tries to ignore the most confused boner he’s ever had.

This is Cloud, his bestie, a fierce warrior, and yet – somehow, right now, that is also a gorgeous young lady in a tight purple dress, accentuating curves and offering a glimpse of tight calves stretched all the more alluringly for the black high-heels on the man’s feet. Cloud’s face looks even more finely boned than usual with the makeup, subtle but for the black kohl lining his eyes. Somehow, Cloud even managed to wrestle his hair into a straighter form, reaching his bare shoulders with how long it’s grown.

He swallows around his dry mouth and randomly grabs for the closest makeup item as a distraction.

“What are you- Ugh, no Zack! Not like that,” Cloud gripes after a few minutes and drops his rouge brush in favor of a wet wipe from the dressing table and removes the disaster Zackary unleashed on his lashes with the eyeliner. “Hold still,” Cloud says and leans over to fix it.

Zackary closes his eyes to prevent them from being poked out with the pencil, and the lack of visual input makes him keenly aware of Cloud’s closeness. He can feel his breath on his cheek, the very warm hand holding his chin steady, the subtle smell of perfume.
The soft brushes on his eyelids come to a halt and Cloud says, “There you go. Let me see.”

He opens his eyes and whoa, okay. This is… not intimate at all. Nope. Cloud blushes subtly when he finally seems to notice their proximity, eyes widening and grabbing for some lipstick quickly.

Finally, Cloud rubs a thumb over Zackary’s jaw in thought. “Good thing you don’t grow much stubble… is it okay if I cover the scar? You’re already looking rugged enough even without it.”

He nods his agreement and watches Cloud squeeze some foundation onto the tips of his fingers before rubbing it on Zack’s cheek tenderly. Overall, this version of Cloud, which Zackary has never seen before, seems… softer somehow. Expression relaxed, eyes hooded, voice low, hands gentle. It’s not that he thinks Cloud would be any less capable of killing him in under three minutes if he wanted to, but there’s a certain vulnerability in this side that Cloud’s showing him.

“You seem pretty good at all this,” he remarks.

“I… might have had some practice.”

A few minutes later, Cloud is done, they find some boots for Zack (who is very much not as used to walking in heels as Cloud seems to be), say goodbye to Genesis, and head off.

. . .

It doesn’t take long to reach Wall Market again, though Cloud keeps stealing glances at the man at his side every once in a while.

If anyone had told him he would see Zack Fair crossdressing as a woman, he would have laughed at them. As it is, he’s still not quite sure how he feels about Zackary finding out about Miss Cloud. He’s a little embarrassed, for sure, but so far Zack hasn’t done anything to give the impression of being weirded out.

However, Zack – Zack… in that pale blue, long, flowing dress, the long dark hair shaped into ringlets with a curling iron, with the perfect rendition of a cat wing eyeliner making his eye color pop even more than usually… The outfit, all in all, gives Zackary an ethereal sort of beauty that Cloud can’t tear his eyes from, and it makes something flutter excitedly inside his stomach.

Focus on the mission, he chides himself. You’re here for Jessie, not to fawn over your best friend.

“Not sure I can fight in this,” Zackary murmurs, pulling a bit at the collar.

“Let’s just hope nothing’s gonna rip.”

The men in front of the Don’s mansion don’t give them any trouble, dressed as they are. Cloud does the talking, slipping comfortably into Miss Cloud’s persona and silky voice. Luckily their eye color is deemed as ‘exotic’ by the guards, who likely haven’t seen a real Soldier their entire lives.

It’s noon by then, and the Don is still out on his day business, so they get shown to a lavish room to ‘refresh themselves and have a little fun before the Don will choose one of the lucky ladies’. Which is where, rounding a corner, they finally run into the redhead they were searching for.

“Jessie? Are you okay?” Cloud yells without thought.

Jessie startles and spins towards them from where she was inconspicuously snooping through a drawer. “How the hell do you know my name?! I-I mean. That is not my name. Why would you think my name is Jessie? It’s not,” she stammers. “Wait. You – since when is the Don into
crossdressing?” Her face twists. “Ugh, maybe I don’t want to know.”

“Uhh,” is Cloud’s very eloquent reply. Next to him, Zackary fidgets. “I, uh… somebody asked me to, uh… to see if you were doing okay? They saw you being abducted by the Don. What happened? Are you alright?”

Jessie eyes him suspiciously. “Someone? Who’s asking after me? Was it Kara? I swear to the gods, if she’s snooping in my business again, that nosy old – ”

“No uh – I mean. It doesn’t matter. Let’s get you out of here!”

“Get me – Now wait a moment, mister whoever the fuck you are! You can’t just – I’m on a mission! I mean,” she stutters, “I’m not. I’m… looking forward to my night with the Don. Very much so. Now, if you could please leave me alone…”


“I said I’m not on a mission! You really need to learn to listen.”


Zackary stares at him.

Jessie stares at both of them.

“Please tell me you didn’t use being the Don’s bride as a ploy to get into the mansion and search for information about Shinra.”

Jessie opens her mouth. Closes is. Opens it again. “I…” She draws out the vowel. “…no?”

Cloud stares some more. Closes his eyes. Nods his head. “Okay then.” He looks around the parlor. “Anything in particular you’re looking for? I’m guessing you’ve gone through this room already?”

It takes the woman a few seconds to catch up, but then she’s walking after Cloud, who’s heading for the nearest dresser and looking through the contents. “Wait, who’s side are you on?”

“Currently? Yours. I’m on the side of whoever is opposed to Shinra,” Cloud explains while checking behind some decorative drapes.

Jessie seems to make up her mind. “Well, in that case… nothing particular, no. But everyone knows the Don is involved in some crooked business, and that he’s in cahoots with Shinra. I just need some dirt on him, find out where he’s vulnerable…” She shakes her head. “I’ve got some payback to do.”

Cloud turns back from where he checked the wood paneling. “I doubt we’ll find anything like that in here… any sensitive material will be locked away in his office. Let’s go.”

Jessie shakes her head. “You know, you’re a weird one.” She looks to Zackary. “And what are you, his sexy side-kick? The eye-candy of the secret operation?”


“Back in my day, the Don had a BDSM dungeon… pfs, parlor…” Cloud mutters, heading for the door. The other two decide not to comment on it.

“Hey sweetie, what can I do for you?” the guard asks as soon as Cloud throws open the door.
“Well, you see…” He walks closer to the leering man, dropping his voice to a seductive whisper. “There’s something I wanted to show you…”

The man’s eyes are immediately drawn down to Cloud’s cleavage and thus don’t see the punch coming until too late.

“It’s my fist. Did you take a good look?” The guard’s legs give out, and Cloud drags the sagging, unconscious man back inside the room.

The sneak their way down the hallway and Cloud presses his ear against Don Corneo’s office door, confirming that the Don must still be out on his business. They hurry inside (Jessie proving herself as a skilled lock picker) and look through the various drawers and folders, snatching up any documents that look like they could be important and stuffing them in their cleavage, for lack of pockets.

They’re nearing the end of their search when Cloud and Zackary’s enhanced hearing picks up on noises from downstairs.

“The Don is back, we gotta hurry!”

“How will we get out?”

“Hopefully not through the sewer system…”

“Shit, there’s bars in front of the windows.”

“Lemme see. Oh, easy-peasy. Fenrir, come on.” Together, they each grab a bar through the opened window and pull it to the side, creating an opening large enough to squeeze through.

“That was… wild, bro,” Jessie remarks as they’re hurrying down the street, heels clacking against the cobblestone.

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Jessie had left her normal clothes at her apartment, but agreed to follow the other two in order to get some answers. Not seeing Genesis around, they have to use the front entrance of the theatre, which is surprisingly crowded.

“Hm, I wonder if there’s a play coming up soon…” Zackary wonders.

That’s when they run into a few familiar faces in the foyer. “Cloud?!”

“Tifa? Uh, I mean…”

“Hey wait, I recognize those damn voices, and the eyes. You’re the two weirdos from the bar!” Barret shouts with his booming voice. “Fenrir and Odin!”

“Fenrir and – wait, what? Cloud, what the hell are you – ”

“Jessie!”

“Biggs? Wedge? What are you doing here?”

“Why, hosting a theatre play, of course! Didn’t you come to see the performance? Who’re your friends?”

“Cloud, would you explain what’s going on already? Did those Soldiers feed you steroids or
something? And why are you dressed like a girl?"

Marlene starts crying loudly.

“Okay, nope.”

Cloud grabs Zackary by the arm and drags him off in the general direction of what he hopes to be the dressing rooms.

..."Gods, did I miss pants,” Zackary drawls.

Cloud can’t help but agree. He tries to focus on wiping off his remaining makeup, but remains very aware of a half-naked Zackary behind him in the mirror, stretching his arms above his head before slipping into his shirt.

“Here, you look weird with all that eyeliner.” He throws another wet wipe at Zackary’s face. *Or more like, way too eye-catching.*

He brushes the gel out of his hair, which had already begun poofing up again on its own. No wonder Tifa recognized him at first glance. Now that was certainly a situation Cloud would’ve liked to avoid, but they’d have to make do with what they had. Running into Wedge and Biggs had also been an unforeseen surprise, even more so as they seemed to be running a theatre rather than bombing Mako reactors. The sudden sight of them, alive and well, had been like a punch to the stomach.

Funnily enough, Cloud had never asked Jessie, Wedge, and Biggs what they’d done with their lives before their career in terrorism.

“Ready to go?”

“Yea.”

They don their hooded cloaks and retrace their steps through the maze of hallways towards the foyer and from there into the main auditorium, where the play is already taking place. Zackary and Cloud slip their way into the back, trying to stay quiet while some kids jump around on the lit stage up ahead, past the dark seats crowded with people. He thinks he can make out Barret’s lurking form off to a side, and it’s not hard to find Tifa and tiny Marlene next to them.

Before he knows it, Cloud is so engrossed in the story that he doesn’t notice a silent figure approaching until it addresses them.

“Why you just have to love the subtle analogy.” Cloud tries not to jump at Genesis’ voice. “Building up to the Dragon being Alfred’s main antagonist, when it is really the evil King pulling strings in the background. There’s certainly a resemblance to our dearest President, no?” He flicks his upper lip in imitation of a mustache.

Cloud’s gaze travels from Genesis (who is still carefully wearing his sunglasses and beanie) towards the stage. “Hm, I guess.” Interesting, that the theatre was able to openly criticize Shinra without repercussions. Then again, the company likely didn’t care much about what happened down in the slums, or was too dense to see the allusions.

After the last curtain drops, the three applaud together with the rest of the audience and are sure to leave a few gil in the basket one of the kids carries through the hall. Some time after, they all end up
in a side room with Barret, Marlene, and Tifa. They are soon joined by Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie, who filched a jacket somewhere to cover the cleavage of her rather bawdy red dress.

The latter trio turns out to be old childhood friends, who are keen to catch up with each other. “I love what you’ve done with this place!” Jessie gushes.

“I didn’t want to see this dumb play to begin with, why am I even still here?”

“Shush Barret. Cloud, tell me finally what’s going on here!”

“Cloud, Fenrir; could you just fuckin’ stick to one name, already…” Barret grumbles.

“So why were you two running around as women, and how do you know Jessie?” Biggs asks.

Finally, a question Cloud feels comfortable answering. The whole bickering is giving him a headache already. “Jessie got in trouble with Don Corneo.”

“You got what? Girl, you’re supposed to stay out of trouble, not look for it!”

Jessie scoffs. “Stop acting like you’re the boss of me, Biggs. Besides, the trouble was worth it. What with all the files I filched from his office, I’m sure I’ve finally got some dirt on the Don, maybe even enough to knock him down a peg. …speaking of, out with it.” She reaches out a hand towards Cloud and Zack, who hand over the documents they found hesitantly.

“You’re gonna let us know if there’s anything juicy in there, right?” Zackary asks.

“Hm, maybe. You’re against Shinra too, right? Maybe we can team up.”

“Wait, against Shinra?” Tifa interrupts. “Cloud, I thought you went to Midgar to join Shinra!”

“Hah! I knew you two were Soldier scum!”

Cloud bends his head and rubs his forehead. “What a mess… Tifa, I’m not… your Cloud.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

It takes him the better part of the evening to explain the situation. Yes, his real name is Cloud. No, he’s not the Cloud who grew up with Tifa. He and Zackary time travelled from a parallel dimension (“What the fuck? Are you trying to be funny? Cause you’re doing a piss-poor job at it.”) and are trying to fix things with their limited knowledge of the future. Shinra is an international threat that is endangering the entire planet, not to speak of the evil alien entity bent on world annihilation.

“You guys, all of you, you were a team before. We called ourselves ‘Avalanche’, after an earlier eco-terrorist group.”


“Well, this Avalanche did.” Cloud spreads his arms. “We managed to do a lot of good in the world. Which is why I need you guys in it again. Let’s fight against Shinra together.”

“Fight? Bro, I think you’re confusing something here. We’re drama specialists, not terrorists,” says Biggs. “Actors, performers, thespians. Badmouthing Shinra is one thing, but going to actual war against them? We’ve got too much to lose, and too little to gain. Sorry, I’m out.” Wedge nods in agreement.

Barret punches the wall he’s leaning against with a frown. “Not like I’d need wimps like you to slow
me down, anyway! As soon as I’ve got the materials for my bombs together, I’m gonna blow shit up, and you lot aren’t gonna get in my way!

“Gee, go ‘blow your shit up’ then! Just leave us out of it, we actually like living. Thanks.” Biggs waves his hand in condescension.

Jessie sighs. “I don’t know guys… I’m so mad at Shinra after what they did to my dad, I just wanna – ugh! But… but blowing things up, jeopardizing innocents, that’s not the right way.” She lets her pointer fingers meet, visibly upset.

Tifa seems similarly torn, and likely still unsure on what to think about the whole affair. She keeps sneaking glances to Cloud, sizing him up.

“What about you, then?” Jessie asks, pointing his thumb at Genesis who is leaning against a table in the back, munching popcorn. When he left to grab that, Cloud has no idea. “How do you fit into this story, anyway?”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m just here for the show.”

“Bullshit. Get that ridiculous headwear off, I have a feeling like I know you,” says Barret.

Genesis sighs and complies. It takes another ten minutes until Barret calms down enough from his tirade about ‘Soldier scum, the lot of you!’ to lower his gunarm and actually listen to Genesis’ reasoning for hating Shinra’s guts.

“You’re our ‘anonymous benefactor’, aren’t you?” says Biggs.

“Yea, the guy who keeps leaving envelopes with a shitton of money around!”

“You didn’t seriously think we didn’t see you sneaking around, right?” Biggs wonders, seeing Genesis’ incredulous expression.

“Oh well, in that case… I hope I have given you incentive enough not to spoil my identity towards any… unwelcome parties.”

“Do what you want, but I’m outta here,” says Barret, fed up, and leaves the room without a glance back. The fact he didn’t even bother to ask after Marlene, who has somehow fallen asleep during all the talking, speaks louder than words to Cloud about his current mental state.

...  

“Cloud?” Tifa asks. “Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with. I’m still not sure if I believe your story, but for what it’s worth – I’ve seen how people live down here, thanks to Shinra, and I’m not okay with it. I have Marlene to look after, but if there’s anything you need, you know where to find me.”

With those words she, too, exits the room, the little one snoring against her shoulder. Biggs and Wedge say their goodbyes and head out to deal with the aftermath of the theatre performance, looking after their little actors, cleaning the auditorium and the likes.

“What are you gonna do, Jessie?” Zackary asks.

“I’m sure you would be a great contribution to the Poseidon, darling,” Genesis says. “I shall see you around then.”

He, Zackary and Cloud leave. Cloud is quiet as the three aimlessly walk through the streets in search of food, disguises back in place. Zackary bumps his shoulder. “Alright, Cloud?”

It’s a long moment before Cloud replies. “I just… I’d hoped… never mind.”

“What?"

Zackary thinks about what it must be like, being blown off like that from people he once knew as something close to family. He sighs, wishing there was something he could do.

“Just because… things didn’t turn out the way you were expecting them to, doesn’t have to mean they won’t turn out okay, you know? We’ll find a way, I promise. After all, you’ve got a true hero backing you up, ay?”

It makes Cloud smile if only for a moment.

“Chin up, sweetie,” Genesis pipes in.

Cloud sighs, trying to cheer up. “I don’t really know where to go from here, though.”

“Well –” Genesis is interrupted by the chiming sound of his phone notification. He reads through the new message and stops in his tracks.

“What is it?”

Genesis frowns. “It would appear… the Gods have been listening in.”

“Huh?”


He doesn't really know what he was expecting to find. He didn't even really plan to actually go inside the church. Something just lead his steps here, be it mere gentle curiosity or an urge for closure, he doesn't know.

But then he is inside, and there she stands, in a light blue sundress and all of her 5'3" glory, hair braided down her back to keep her hands free and tresses out of the soil in the cracked flooring. She must be around eighteen now, if he did the math right.

“Yea, there’s just… one more thing I wanna do before we leave.”

“Oh…”

“Do you… wanna come with?”

Silence for a moment. An awkward, painful shrug before he turns away.

“Not interested.”
They’d both agreed not to drag her into all this, for now, for safety’s sake. And he didn’t mean to leave the hood down, knows the consequences of his actions could be bad, that she’s not supposed to know, but this is Aerith, and really, how can he not? This is the woman he had vowed to return to, the woman that kept him sane during his captivity with her mere memory, even if she is not her.

After a particularly bad nightmare, in the dead of night, Cloud had finally opened up about Aerith’s fate in the old world, though sometimes Zackary still wishes he hadn’t.

“Sephiroth… he stabbed her through the chest while she was praying for the planet, working on stopping the meteor. And all I did was watch.”

A creaking floorboard makes her look up, and then it's too late anyway.

The two freeze simultaneously, like chocobo caught in headlights.

Aerith – dear, precious Aerith, never one to lose her composure for long – is the one who moves first, rubbing the dirt from her hands and standing up to face him fully. With only slightly hesitant steps she comes closer, until the distance between the two shrinks to a mere few yards.

“...Zack?” Her voice is unsure, but steady. “Is that...”

She moves even closer, close enough that he could have seen the streak of soil smudged across her forehead even with unenhanced eyes.

“You're not Zack.” In this, she sounds secure now. She nods. “Not my Zack, anyway. Maybe you are... a Zack?”

Aerith looks pensive for a moment, as though listening to something in the distance.

“You shouldn't be here,” she declares.

It's like a punch in the face to the man in question.

Suddenly, he realizes how wrong this is, how bad an idea it was to come here to begin with. He's gonna ruin everything, chasing after a dream of a woman long lost to the whims of a dying planet.

Seeing his wince, Aerith' face turns apologetic and she takes a step forward, but for every one of hers, Zack takes a step back, until suddenly there's nowhere left to go, there's a pillar in his back, or maybe some rubble, and now Aerith is stretching out her hand towards him and this is all so, so wrong.

He doesn't realize his breathing has picked up and his eyes start leaking until the brunette girl's hand is brushing the moisture away with confident, gentle hands. He can't help leaning into them.

“Shh... you might not be my Zack, but I can see that you are hurting. Did you lose someone?”

Zack can only nod, staring into those familiar-but-not-familiar green eyes, seeing those handful of freckles across a petite nose and little dimples from laughing too often on a face he never quite expected to see again.

Can I really call it ‘losing her’ when she lost me first? Either way... she’s gone, now.

The girl I made all those memories with, she’s gone.
“It's okay. This church is a place of healing. It's a little broken, but sometimes people come here just to sit in peace and I've heard it helps. Why don't you come have a look at my flowers? I'm sure you'll like them.”

Zack numbly let's himself be dragged forward by the hand and then pushed down, until he's sitting cross-legged and the achingly sweet scent of tiger lilies fills his head.

Once upon a time, he sat in this same spot, back turned to the white and yellow beauty, and received comfort while sobbing over the death of his mentor.

Now, he cries for the loss of that very same, comforting woman right next to him.

. . .

My dear boy...

“...who - ?”

Cloud. It is time.

“...for what?”

Time... to watch them burn.

Chapter End Notes

Lyrics: “Born This Way” // Lady Gaga.

If I built in an idea I got from one of your comments and forgot to credit, please kindly kick my butt.

I am very much behind on replying to comments, which is in part because I don't really care about this story anymore and when y'all gush about certain plotpoints or ask questions I feel like I wouldn't do your effort justice. I'll still try to reply to as many of you as I can, but please don't be disappointed if it's not very detailed. Rest assured that I am honored by and treasure each and every one of your reviews.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!