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# A Rhapsody of Strife

by Verseidious

## Summary

In which Cloud, worn out from being stuck in a loop of the Planet repeating history over and over, ends up deciding to let history run it's course during this iteration, only to end up having to go on the run from Shinra thanks to Genesis having come along for the ride.

This somehow causes Sephiroth to not lose his shit while in Nibelheim.

## Notes

I've been meaning to write a Gen/Cloud fic for aaaaages, but never got my butt around to it. And while I don't have the whole thing planned out, I do have an idea of where it'll go.

Also, if you see something that doesn't make sense or is inconsistent, feel free to point it out, as knowing me I'll muck something up somewhere.
Chapter 1

It hadn't been the first time Cloud had been thrown into the past.

He never knew why it happened, and the few conversations he had in the Lifestream with Aerith revealed that she didn't know why either.

*It's strange. Sometimes I wonder if the Planet is afraid of moving on into an uncertain future, and because of what Hojo did to you, it's doesn't know what to do with you during each cycle.*

Which wasn't much to work on.

It wasn't *anything* to work on.

Cloud had always tried putting his knowledge of what was to come to use, with varying degrees of success.

But this time...

He tugged at the scarf of his trooper uniform.

He was tired, and really couldn't summon up the energy to care that they were on their way to Nibelheim.

He had half a mind to just jump into the reactor and be done with this particular cycle already.

---

In the end, he decided that this time, he'd let events concerning Sephiroth play out, and simply try to reduce casualties for Tifa's sake.

He couldn't help the nervousness creeping into his system, though.

After all, every other time when he was flung far enough back into the past, he had managed to avert the events at Nibelheim (though, he had learned that doing so was not a guarantee for Sephiroth's sanity; other things could drive him over the edge).

This time, however, he had only woken up in this particular loop en-route from Costa Del Sol, and he had been rather out of it from motion sickness to even think about trying to stop it from happening.

Gazing around the town, his brows furrowed.

How could he get the villagers out of here at a moments notice?

---

The answer had been shockingly easy.
Tifa.

She had been shocked when he revealed himself, especially since he had SOLDIER eyes (somehow, the experiments Hojo had done on him followed him through each cycle).

"But... they refered to you as a trooper?" she had sounded so confused.

"It's... complex. But listen, Tifa. I have something very important I need you to do. The lives of everyone here depends on it."

And so he fed her a fake story, about how he had disguised himself as another trooper so he could come here, because he had overheard something sinister. Something about Nibelheim being used to test a weapon.

"I don't know the full details. I was... caught before they finished talking about it. It's why my eyes are like this, they did some experiments on me. Someone... helped me escape, and so now I'm here, to make sure it doesn't come to pass. But just, please, when I give you the signal, get everyone out of here."

In the end, Tifa had agreed to help him out.

"I'm the Mayor's daughter, Cloud, and well-loved by the people here. If I say something's wrong, everyone will listen."

She even fussed over him a bit.

"But really, Cloud? Experiments? Are you sure you'll be okay? I mean, you do look a bit worn out, if not older than I thought you'd look by now. Though, at least you have grown. You're finally taller than me!"

(He always seemed to be stuck at the same age, looking like how he did after his stay in Hojo's lab, regardless of how far he'd been flung back, and how long he lived for during each loop.)

He finally gave a small smile, "I'll be fine, Tifa."

Cloud really hoped that his plan wouldn't backfire.

---

That night, Cloud had dinner with his mother. At one point, he probably would have been bothered by this, but now...

It felt kind of nice, having this bit of normality in an otherwise abnormal life that his had become.

While she had asked about his eyes, he had waved it away, saying it was from mako exposure in the city.

If she had found anything else about his appearance and mannerisms odd, she didn't comment on it, which Cloud was greatful for.

(Truth be told, Cloud wish he could confide in his mother about how the Planet kept rewinding itself, but he didn't want to burden her with that knowledge.)

---

The next day, they headed out to the reactor, and it went as how Cloud remembered it.
Tifa was their guide up the mountain, some person wanted to take a picture of Sephiroth, the bridge broke, the other trooper vanished, and Tifa even put up a fuss about wanting to see inside the reactor.

What he hadn't expected, however, was for Genesis to appear after Zack and Sephiroth had gone inside.

This wasn't the first time Cloud had dealt with him, whether as allies or enemies, but his arrival threw him off guard.

Since when was Genesis supposed to appear here?

He didn't remember Genesis having appeared here at all.

Hell, his memories of the Nibelheim incident were compounded with some of Zack's knowledge, and he hadn't encountered the volatile man here before, either.

Right?

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Cloud frowned, unsure of what to do now.

(A part of him also wondered why Genesis looked so healthy. As far as he knew, the man should be still degrading.)

While he did move to stand protectively in front of Tifa, gun drawn (though he could also summon First Tsurugi in a moment's notice, if needed, even though he'd rather not), he didn't try to attack the man.

"Well, isn't this quaint? A lonely trooper thinking he can take me on."

Cloud didn't respond, instead focusing on the other man's movements, waiting for anything indicating an attack.

"If you're not going to do anything, I suppose we should cut to the chase, then!"

And there it was, a shift in stance, and the faint feeling of materia being used.

Cloud fired, not at all surprised when Genesis managed to sweep out of the way.

It didn't matter, he was just trying to buy some time right now.

"Tifa! Run!"

She didn't need to be told twice, and Cloud could hear her frantic footsteps as she made her way away from the reactor.

He didn't dare look, though, and instead focused on keeping his aim trained on Genesis, firing several more bullets to keep the man on the move.

It only went so far, however, to keep Genesis from eventually sending a Firaga at him.

It had been easy enough to dodge out of the way, especially since Genesis thought he was just a simple trooper.

"Huh, I'm surprised. You're much faster than I gave you credit for. But don't think you can stand against this!" and then Rapier was in Genesis' hand, and Cloud cursed.
It looked like he'd be forced to use First Tsurugi.

He really hope Zack and Sephiroth couldn't hear what was going on out here. He did not want to explain why he could easily keep up with a First Class SOLDIER.

Tossing his rifle to the side and pulling off his helmet for better vision, he shifted his stance, watching and waiting.

"What? Do you mean to try and do nothing but dodge my attacks? I don't think so!" and with that, Genesis dove at him, flat edge of his sword aimed for his side.

Cloud didn't hesitate, dancing back away from the swipe and calling his own sword to him then, a wave of miasma rippling outward as First Tsurugi appeared, and he swept it to the side to block Genesis' attack.

The scrapping of metal-against-metal rang out, before Genesis sprung back, frowning deeply, though with an odd glint in his eyes.

"You aren't just an ordinary trooper, are you?"

Cloud didn't respond, and simply watched the red-head through narrowed eyes.

Genesis glanced to the reactor, before looking back at him, speaking again, "I wonder, do those two know of this?"

Cloud stiffened, and Genesis smirked.

"No, I don't think they do. ...Ah," Genesis suddenly grinned, look becoming contemplative, "your eyes, they glow. Perhaps a SOLDIER seeking to desert Shinra? Or..."

Cloud felt uneased by the look Genesis was giving him.

"An escaped experiment looking to find an opportune moment to get away, without anyone suspecting anything? After all, I've only ever seen Sephiroth summon Masamune in the manner you summoned that over-sized sword of yours in."

Cloud really did not like being reminded of that fact that it was because of the S-cells in him that he was able to do so.

"That's none of your business," he said after a few moments, glaring. He did not need the probably-unstable man to figure out his secrets so quickly.

But he really wasn't surprised, Genesis had always been rather perceptive.

"Or maybe, just maybe..."

Cloud could not fathom where Genesis' train of thought was heading, especially as the crimson-clad man lowered Rapier, taking on a more casual stance.

"Perhaps you simply don't belong here, either. Do you, Cloud Strife?"

Cloud blinked, stared, and tried to digest that comment.

How did this Genesis even know his name?

"What," was all Cloud managed to say.
Genesis shrugged, "I've seen you in other loops, but never like this. I've only ever seen you wield that sword once-- which was back in my original timeline."

He watched Cloud then, waiting for the other to speak.

After a few moments, Cloud finally found his voice, though still trying to sort his thoughts out, "Every iteration of you I've come across has always been from that particular loop," a pause, "how... many times has the Planet done this already, if I've not been around for them all, then?" another pause, "...How many cycles of this have you gone through?"

Genesis shrugged, "How would you expect me to know? It's not as if I'm privy to the whims of the Planet. But, finding myself in the past has occurred eight times, so far."

Cloud grimaced, "Lucky you."

"Gone through a lot more, haven't you, then?"

Cloud nodded, moving to sit on the steps of the reactor and de-summoned First Tsurugi, "I've lost count, honestly. I was just going to let things run their course this time around..."

Genesis followed suit, sheathing Rapier and moving to lean against the railing, "Getting rather tired from having to see history try to repeat itself over and over? Maybe that's why I'm in this loop, the Planet knows you're losing steam."

Cloud thought for a moment, "Or maybe Aerith had a hand in it, knowing that I couldn't go on forever. I don't think the Planet is able to discern anything beyond it's own safety."

"Aerith? The Ancient, right? I've not actually met her myself in any of the loops. Does she...?"

Cloud shook his head, "She can't leave the Lifestream, so every iteration of her is a new one. Actually, both her and Zack are there. They tried to move on, once, before all this started, but then Aerith realized that something wasn't right, and keeps herself in there now. Zack refuses to leave her side."

"I see. Zack always was a loyal one. But, does the Ancient know why this keeps happening?."

"No, she doesn't know why the Planet keeps doing this. Though, she thinks I'm currently unable to actually join the Lifestream due to what Hojo did to me. Something about there being "too much of me," so it spits me back out, unsure of what to do. I wager it's the same for you."

Genesis tilted his head a bit, before shaking it.

"Even if the morrow is barren of promises
Nothing shall forestall my return
To become the dew that quenches the land
To spare the sands, the seas, the skies
I offer thee this silent sacrifice."

"No, I think it's purely my will keeping me from joining the Lifestream. After all, when Zack saved me and I was cured of degradation, I did swear that I would do what I could to protect the Planet. It's why I tried to redeem Weiss, and, I suppose, myself, after Deepground, if you recall?"

Cloud slowly nodded, "Mostly, yeah. Unfortunately, those memories have become a bit vague, due to... how many I have now."
"Better having too many memories than too many missing ones. But anyways. What of Sephiroth?"

Cloud shrugged, "I'm not sure. The ones I've encountered have always been from that loop, but... sometimes the original does appear, even while there's another one alive. I think it's because he can't drift off into the Lifestream, either."

Genesis whistled, "Dealing with two Sephiroths at once? I think that'd drive any man to insanity, so it's a wonder you've kept yours. ...Assuming that you have."

Cloud shot a glare at him, "I really don't need anyone questioning my sanity, thanks."

"Oh, believe me, I know that. Honestly, I'm hardly one to be teasing others about their own sanity. But anyways, what about Jenova?"

Cloud managed a smile at that, "She's gone for good. Every version of her is just an imitation that only exists to keep to keep things in working order, and otherwise poses no threat. Since she's an alien life-form, the Planet can't actually fully recreate her for each loop."

"Well, at least there's that for some good news."

The two of them lapsed into silence then, unsure of what to say next or do next.

That is, until the sudden sound of the reactor door opening saved them from having to figure that out.

Chapter End Notes

As a note, I do have a couple of one-shots planned out for elaborating on Cloud and Genesis' friendship from the original timeline.

It's just a matter of me getting them out of my head and written down.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Honesty time: I already have a few chapters of this written, but I've been waiting to post them so I have a bit of a buffer. I was gonna wait a bit longer before posting this one, but the first chapter had a bit of a cliff-hanger, so I decided to post this one early.

Also, the amount of kudos this has gotten so far has been amazing, and I really hope I don't disappoint anyone!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Cloud?"

"Genesis!"

The two of them had been too caught up in the moment, too wrapped the wonder that was knowing that they weren't alone in all this, that they hadn't moved from their spots, until both Zack's and Sephiroth's voices rang out-- one concerned, the other angry-- startling the both of them to their feet. Genesis with his hand on Rapier's hilt, and Cloud looking like a spooked Chocobo.

None of them said anything, both parties simply sizing each other up.

Eventually, Zack broke the silence, "What's going on here?"

"A better question would be, what is Genesis doing here?" Sephiroth demanded right after.

Cloud cursed, he did not want to deal with this.

"We were simply having a chat, old friend," Genesis said before Cloud could say anything otherwise, "is that such a crime?"

"Seeing as you should be dead, I think you already know that answer."

"Let's not start a fight here!" Zack moved forward, standing somewhat in the middle, "especially since Spiky wouldn't be able to defend himself if Genesis does decide to attack!"

Genesis snorted in amusement, murmuring, "At least his nickname for you isn't Chocobo's-ass, like--," he cut himself off, tensing, realizing his slip of tongue.

Cloud tensed too.

They were not supposed to be familiar with each other, at all.

(It had been a habit, back in the original timeline, for Genesis to mock Cloud over the chocobo-related nicknames Cid and Barret often called him by.)

Zack looked wary then, and Sephiroth narrowed his eyes, hand on Masamune's hilt.

"Zack, I do believe your friend here has been hiding something from us."
Cloud and Genesis glanced at each other as they took a step back, both coming to the same conclusion.

It would be useless to try and carry this charade on, and they weren't quite sure if Sephiroth was in stable enough mindset-- having just come out of the reactor-- for the two of them to explain that things weren't quite what they seemed.

The sound of Masamune being drawn caused the two to look back at Sephiroth.

"Care to explain yourselves, either of you?"

"Not particularly," came Genesis' crabby reply, "perhaps if you put your sword away, we could talk?"

"Not now, Genesis. We really should get out of here," Cloud hissed, stepping closer to the red-head, and trying to avoid looking at Zack.

He had already caught a glimpse of the hurt and confused expression on the man's face, and Cloud could only hope that he would be able to explain things to him later on.

Genesis sighed as he let his wing unfurl, "Very well then, Cloud," he said, as if Cloud were the one leading him.

Which, Cloud supposed, that he was. After all, this Genesis wasn't from this cycle, and thus was not degrading, and on a deranged crusade in trying to cure himself. This was the one from the original timeline, and, if anything, he was probably looking to him for guidance in all this, since he had gone through so many more cycles than him.

(Cloud absently wondered why there was such a large disparity on the number of loops each had gone through. After all, if Genesis was-- albeit, self-appointed-- a protector of the Planet, why wasn't he the one to endure dozens upon dozens of different loops to the point of losing count?)

Before either Sephiroth or Zack could act, Genesis had moved to grab Cloud under the arms, and hauled the both of them up into the air, several feathers scattering in the breeze.

"Well, as much as I would like to stay and chat, it seems we must be going!" Genesis called out as Cloud scowled at him, rather not liking suddenly finding himself airborne, even if it was the easiest means of escape.

Narrowly sweeping out of the way of a Thundaga Sephiroth had cast at them, Genesis wheeled through the sky, before flying the two of them in the direction of Nibelheim.

Cloud really hoped that Zack would be alright on his own.

---

"Maybe we should continue on, Genesis. I'm... not to keen on appearing here. Especially since I don't have my helmet to hide my face."

They stood on the outskirts of the town, hidden among bushes and trees as they figured out what to do.

"But what of Tifa? Surely you want to speak with her again, to let her know you're safe."

Cloud grunted, "Yeah, but... well, I already spoke with Tifa, before we went up the mountain. I..."
oh, shit."

Genesis lofted a brow at him.

"...I might have told Tifa some things that might make it sound like I've been working with you," Cloud slowly said.

Which, while now true in a sense, Zack and Sephiroth would think that he was working with a mad and degrading man, not the... less mad and not degrading Genesis that this one was.

Why did the two of them being shoved into this timeline have to muck things up so easily?

"Infinite in mystery is the Gift of the Goddess-- oh, don't glare at me so. For all we know, it could work to our advantage."

"Or it could send Zack off the deep end as well, by making him think you're trying to take away everyone he cares about," okay, maybe he was projecting his own problems with Sephiroth there, but still.

(Rather, the original Sephiroth, that is. Cloud had actually managed to befriend a few of his other iterations. Unfortunately, though, doing that always seemed to cause the original Sephiroth to manifest himself from the Lifestream, throwing a wrench in everything.)

"I highly doubt that will happen. Zack is tough, after all."

That was true. Zack was a hero, through and through.

"Still, he'll be upset over it."

"Oh, cheer up. It's not like I pushed Sephiroth over the edge this time by clueing him in to his origins."

"I did that a few times myself, when all this started. I hadn't realized how delicate his psyche could be," Cloud paused for a moment, "how many times did you cause that to happen?"

"A couple of times. Accidentally, mind you. The second time, I had good intentions, and simply hadn't realized just how frayed Sephiroth's psyche could become. The first time..." Genesis paused, side-eyeing Cloud now, almost warily, "it was during the original timeline, before all this looping started. While I... hadn't meant for it to be a catalyst to his insanity, I did tell Sephiroth what I knew of his origins at the Nibelheim Reactor, hoping to sway him to my side. It... well, you saw the fallout from that, I think."

Genesis had thought Cloud would be angry, to know that he was the cause for what had happened. But instead, the shorter man just looked confused, "But... my memories of the Nibelheim incident are clear, and I even have some of Zack's knowledge of it. None of them have you appearing at the reactor."

"Of course you wouldn't. I had cast Confuse on you and Tifa before making my way inside. And you said 'some' of Zack's knowledge, so it's possible you are simply missing that tidbit of information."

That... was true, but another question cropped up.

"Why are you only telling me about this now? And not... back in the first timeline?"

Genesis shrugged, "Pure selfishness. I had grown rather fond of the uneasy friendship we had
formed, so I decided to keep that detail out of it, lest it brought everything down."

The red-head may have acted casual when he had said that, but Cloud could see that he was tense, perhaps even nervous.

Cloud... knew what it was like, to feel guilty over such things.

But yet...

"I... know that Sephiroth would have gone insane anyways. A lot of the loops have taught me that. As I said before, Sephiroth's psyche is rather delicate. And besides... if we're going down the chain of who-started-what, I think Hojo would be a good person to blame, in the end."

Genesis looked relieved, "I suppose you're right on that."

Cloud looked back at the town, watching as everyone went about their business. He could even see Tifa talking to a few people. He was glad to note that she had made it down the mountain just fine, though he wasn't all that surprised.

"If you had told me back then, perhaps I would have been mad, but by then, I was too busy focusing on the future to worry too much about the past. But, I guess all that's the past now. In a weird way."

"Weird is an understatement, I think."

They stood there for a few moments, before Cloud turned away, looking out at the forest, "I suppose we should get going, Zack and Sephiroth should be back soon."

Genesis nodded, and the followed in after the blond as he made his way through the trees, though glanced once more back at the town.

"My friend, do you fly away now?  
To a world that abhors you and I?  
All that awaits you is a somber morrow  
No matter where the winds may blow."

Chapter End Notes

The part about Cloud not knowing about Genesis appearing at the Nibelheim Reactor in the original timeline was just me poking fun at the retcon they did of that event in Crisis Core.  
Though, I really do wonder how SE is gonna deal with that come FFVII's remake.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I'm not too happy with this chapter, but it's a needed one, and I'm pushing it out anyways so I don't get stuck on it. Though, on a brighter note, the positive reactions to this fic have made me beyond happy <3

"What do you mean he's... vanished?"

Cloud's mother looked aghast, and Zack felt really guilty about having to break the news to this woman.

(He tried to ignore the guilt he still felt, then, on having vanished on his own parents years ago, and the most contact he had with them since were some letters saying that he was fine.)

"I was hoping you might know something, since you are his mother, after all," Zack said gently, "Did you notice anything odd about him last night?"

The woman clasped her hands together, sighing, "He... did look rather worn out last night, and... his eyes glowed, though he insisted that it was just from mako exposure in Midgar," she paused for a moment, taking a sip of tea to calm herself, "but, I've seen what eyes look like due to mako exposure, they don't glow that brightly. His looked like those fabled SOLDIER eyes. Like your eyes. Maybe even brighter."

"Wait, his eyes glowed?" Zack frowned, confused.

He hadn't been paying too much attention on how Cloud had looked, having been too focused on keeping an eye on Genesis. But, now that he thought of it, the blond had looked different in some way that he hadn't quite been able to pin-point.

"Yes, they did. I was hoping that you would know why. I mean, he said he was just a trooper."

Zack slowly shook his head, "Unfortunately, I don't know why either," was all he said on that, pausing for a moment, "anyways, did he mention anything else? About work? Or about any friends? Anything at all?"

"No, he didn't elaborate on much. He only saying that work was going fine, and that he had made a very good friend, though otherwise kept to himself."

Zack nodded slowly. It seemed whatever was going on, Cloud was even hiding it from his mother. Dammit Spiky, what have you gotten yourself into? Zack thought as he took a sip of his own tea.

He wanted to blame Genesis for this (especially because of what had happened with Angeal), but...

He could have sworn that Genesis was being lead around by Cloud, not the other way around.

And to know that Cloud's eyes had been glowing...
Just what was going on?

---

Sephiroth looked between the Mayor and his daughter (who he was a bit shocked to learn had also been their guide, Tifa; after all, what kind of Mayor let their only child run around such a dangerous mountain enough to be able to lead people through it?).

So far, his own investigation hadn't revealed anything.

Other than that the Mayor did not seem to like Cloud Strife at all, due to some accident that almost killed his daughter years ago (though, he had noticed that the girl had looked really guilty when her father had mentioned that).

"Well, if neither of you two know anything, I'll be taking my leave now. Thank you for your time."

"Ah, before you go. The reactor, was everything fine up there?"

Sephiroth paused. In all honestly, no, not everything up there was fine.

But the Mayor didn't need to know what was going on up there.

"Yes. Everything is in working order."

And with that, Sephiroth spun on his heels, walking out of the Mayor's office and making his way out of the house.

Though before he reached the front door...

"Um, excuse me?"

He paused. It was Tifa.

He looked over his shoulder at the girl, "Yes?"

She fiddled with her hands for a moment, before apparently summoning up her nerves, "Cloud... isn't a bad person, unlike how my father painted him. Whatever he's gotten himself into, I think it's bigger than all of us..."

Sephiroth turned around, watching the girl, "And how do you figure that?"

She hesitated, frowning, "...I don't know if I can tell you. You're with Shinra."

"And what does me working for Shinra have to do with it?"

Aside from pointing further in the direction of Strife working with Genesis, that is.

"It... might be because of something Shinra plans to do, and Cloud not supposed to be knowing. He... said he wasn't even supposed to be here."

Sephiroth frowned, "That is incorrect. Cloud Strife was assigned to this mission."

The girl looked confused at that, "But... he said..." she frowned then, eyes downcast, "maybe I should tell you what he told me, then, if he ran off with an enemy of Shinra."

---
Zack and Sephiroth were back at their inn room, trying to figure out the details of what they had been told.

"So, wait, let me get this straight. Cloud told Tifa that he had been experimented on due to overhearing something he shouldn't have, got freed by someone, and snuck onto this mission posing as a trooper so he could warn the town of some supposed danger Nibelheim was in? What the hell. He was perfectly fine before we left!"

"And what of last night?"

"Well, last I saw of him was after we got here, he went to his mother's-- who also doesn't know anything-- and she can confirm he never left the house after that. Though, she did say that he had glowing eyes, like a SOLDIER's, which he claimed came from simple mako exposure in Midgar.."

"And he stuck with you on the whole trip here, right?"

"Yup. Never left my side. He was also incapacitated for most of the trip due to motion sickness."

"And before we left?"

"I already told you, perfectly fine! No glowing eyes or anything! Hell, while he wasn't happy about coming back here, he was happy about getting to see his mother, and excited to go on a mission with me. Do you know how long he's been waiting to do that! Okay, maybe he was also excited to go on a mission with you, too. But still!"

Sephiroth sighed, "This is all so confusing, and doesn't make any sense. Genesis and Strife seemed like they knew each other on some level, somehow, yet Strife could have had no prior contact with him, as far as we know."

"Man, why does Genesis keep having to screw everything up? First Angeal, and now Cloud..." Zack clenched his hands into fist, "the next time I see him, he's not getting away."

Sephiroth absently nodded, before looking out the window.

He had planned on going into the Shinra manor, after what he had seen in the reactor, but...

It was odd, why the former SOLDIER chosen then to reveal himself outside of the reactor, and then do nothing aside from say a few snarky words before taking off at the behest of someone who was supposed to be nothing but an ordinary trooper. A trooper that he should have had no prior contact with.

Yet somehow, there had been an air of familiarity between the two.

He continued to gaze in the direction of the Shinra manor, and while he itched to go in there and search it for anything related to what he had saw in the reactor...

It couldn't have been coincidence that Genesis had appeared when he had.

Especially considering how Strife had acted, and Tifa's words.

It seemed as if there was something more at play here, and he was being led in two different directions as a result.

One that seemed to be set out for him by Shinra (after all, he had been told his mother was named Jenova, and that thing in the depths of the reactor...).
And then this curious second one, that seemed to have cropped up out of no where, that bade him to figure out what Genesis was planning.

He glanced back at Zack briefly, who seemed to be brooding on the bed.

Perhaps a bit, he could empathize with the man. After all, he had felt like Angeal and Genesis had been stolen away from him, by things beyond his control.

And Zack had lost Angeal, and was now seemingly about to lose Strife.

He turned his gaze back out the window, looking over the quiet town.

He still couldn't fathom how Strife fit into all of this. Beyond some bizarre attempt at...

Sephiroth paused, glancing back at Zack again.

Angeal had been Genesis' best friend since childhood.

Was this some ploy of Genesis' to lash out at Zack for killing Angeal?

It would make sense, in a way, if not for how Strife had acted.

He drummed his fingers agitatedly against the windowsill for a moment, before abruptly turning around, thoughts reaching their conclusion.

"Zack. We're leaving tomorrow."

"Huh? But the truck--"

"Is not working, yes. But someone in this town must have one that we can borrow."

He had far too many questions with no answers, and he highly doubted the old manor would hold all of them.

---

"Man, the mission report for this is going to suck. One trooper presumed dead, and the other..." Zack trailed off, "...I don't want to get Cloud in any trouble. Can we just say he was kidnapped?"

"Zack, if you remember, it was Strife that told Genesis that they needed to leave."

"I know! I know! But maybe Genesis had cast Confuse on him! You know how powerful of a spellcaster he is!"

That was true, Sephiroth mused.

"Fine, but if it does come out that Cloud Strife is working with Genesis..."

"I know..."

Zack looked out the window of the truck then, watching the scenery go by.

It was raining, and it made everything seem all the more dreary and lonely.
And my terribleness at updating things in a timely manner finally rears its ugly head. It's also not as long as I wanted it to be, but my brain was all "nah this is totally a good place to end this chapter." :T

"You know, Cloud, I feel that I helped you dodge a bullet back there in Nibelheim," Genesis said casually, as if he currently wasn't dodging the flames of an angry dragon that they had come across as they made their way over the Nibel Mountains.

"Is now really the time, Genesis?" Cloud shot back as he swiped at at the beast's side, gaining it's attention and having to jump out of the way of flailing claws.

"No, but fighting this thing made me realize something."

"Can't you at least wait until we're done!?" Cloud snapped, now having to dodge out of the way of fire, and not as easily as Genesis had been, due to not having the benefit of flying.

"Well, I can't see what the problem is, I'm having an easy enough time," the red-head shrugged a shoulder as he watched Cloud dance around the dragon.

"That's because you're up there and out of the way!" Cloud shouted as he aimed a Braver at the beast's briefly unprotected belly.

The dragon snarled as it took the hit, lashing out with it's tail, which the blond narrowly avoided.

"I don't know, you seem to be having an easy enough time."

"Genesis!"

"Fine, fine," and finally, Genesis rejoined the fray, throwing a Blizzaga to slow it's movements as he dove down, much to Cloud's relief.

If it had been just a normal Nibel Dragon, Cloud wouldn't have cared all that much.

But this one...

Great, crystalline spikes of condensed mako jutted out from it's back, and it's limbs were elongated, twisted even. The skin of it's maw was highly ragged due to it's overgrown teeth tearing at it, and no longer looked to be able to even close it's mouth even if it wanted to. All of it's scales shone with an eerie, mako shine.

It was highly mutated, yet even more deadly despite the deformities.

And the pain it must have been in didn't help matters.

(Cloud wondered, briefly, what had happened to this beast in the other timelines. Had someone else dealt with it, or had it simply died from it's mutations?)
While the Blizzaga did slow it down a bit, it otherwise seemed unphased and continued to focus on Cloud, though that gave Genesis the chance to go for the neck. However, the mako-sheen to it's scales seemed to be not just for show, as slashing at it with Rapier barely made a dent in it. It wasn't until he put all of his strength into trying to pierce it's neck did he get anywhere.

Unfortunately, the dragon's movements prevented Genesis from hitting anything major, and he was also forced to abandon his sword then, as it got stuck fast, and in the end only seemed to further enrage the beast.

Genesis really wish he could bring out the fire materia, but that wouldn't do any good against the dragon.

Roaring with unrestrained fury, the dragon lashed out to where Genesis had been moments before, flames flickering into the air.

"Cloud! Go for the crystals!" Genesis called out as he swooped around the monster, eyeing it critically.

The only response Cloud gave in acknowledgment was a brief dip of the head, before lunging at the dragon. Swinging First Tsurugi over his head, the blade made contact with one of the mako spikes.

It shattered on impact, shards of it flying through the air, though they quickly dissipated into a thin, grey mist.

The beast gave a shuddering jerk then at the loss of the spike, it's movements faltering.

Cloud found himself surprised it had worked, as even a small sphere of naturally-formed materia was notoriously hard to break.

Something must have been contaminating it, then, to allow it to shatter as it had. Though what, the blond didn't know.

Not passing up this chance, Cloud dove for another spike then. It too shattered and then dissipated.

Genesis' continued volley of Blizzagas further slowed the dragon, allowing Cloud to make easy work of the rest of them.

It wasn't long until the monster was no longer moving, and simply lay on the ground, struggling to breath.

It's scales no longer shined with mako, and Cloud wagered that that had been what was protecting the beast's hide.

Summoning all of his might, Cloud jumped and swung his sword downward at it's neck, flesh and bone giving away shockingly easy beneath it.

With a final, rasping noise, the dragon fell silent and still.

Genesis finally landed then, frowning and seemingly distracted as he stared at the corpse.

"Genesis?" Cloud inquired curiously, watching the man.

"...It's nothing," Genesis said after a long moment, shrugging as he went to pull Rapier out from the beast's tattered neck.

"You know, that would have been a lot easier if you had helped from the start."
"I did distract it at first though, didn't I?"

"You know what I mean," Cloud grumbled, eyeing the dead monster for a moment, before looking back at Genesis, "now, what was that about me having dodged a bullet back in Nibelheim? And how did the dragon remind you of that?"

"It's mutations. A scientist like Hojo would love to have looked at this thing."

"And?"

"You've been experimented on before, and as a result, quite highly enhanced. I would think Hojo would treat you quite a bit differently, due to that," Genesis said, as if that should have been obvious from the start.

That gave Cloud a pause.

"Shit, I... didn't even think about that," to be fair, he hadn't done much thinking before, from both motion-sickness and the delirium from waking in a new timeline. And once he got to Nibelheim, from simply just wanting to rest.

"Infinite in mystery is the Gift of the Goddess, wouldn't you say?"

Cloud sighed, "Yeah, yeah."

Genesis hummed briefly, before looking in the direction they had been headed before they had gotten distracted by the dragon.

They had been headed for Rocket Town, Cloud intent on taking advantage of the lull between what had happened at the reactor, and what ever would go down in Nibelheim, and then whatever would go down after that.

While Cloud expected things to play out similarly, he wasn't sure what would happen without him actually there.

Though, regardless of what would happen, they did need some supplies, and he also wanted to find something else to wear that wasn't this trooper uniform.

---

They ended up waiting until the next morning before heading the rest of the way to Rocket Town, wanting time to recover after the fight with the dragon.

Genesis had, for a very good reason, elected to stay hidden on the outskirts of town, while Cloud went in and procured some clothes, along with other traveling rations.

Due to the good standing between the town and Shinra at this time, it had been easy to get said clothes, one of the shop keepers more than happy to help out a seemingly lost trooper.

"Just help me take stock of some of our merchandise, hon, and I'll let ya have a pair of clothes that'll last ya until ya get back to Midgar," she had said, "after all, Shinra has done so much for this town, it'd be wrong of me not to give back."

Cloud knew she'd be changing her tune soon, knowing that it wouldn't be long until that botched rocket launch that would end Shinra's interest in going to space.

But he kept up his facade as a Shinra trooper in need, and it wasn't long until he had gotten some
new clothes.

(While going through the clothes racks, he had caught sight of a silken, purple dress that, while in a different style, reminded him far too much of a dress that he had worn before.)

Making his way out of the shop and looking around for a general store, Cloud wondered what his guise of being a lost trooper would get him there.

---

Genesis gave a, perhaps overly-dramatic, sigh as Cloud returned several hours later.

"What?" Cloud asked, raising a brow.

"Your taste in clothing baffles me. It's as if you cling to idea of a SOLDIER's uniform without outright wearing one.

As it was, Cloud was wearing a green, sleeveless turtleneck, a pair loose, a pair of grey pants similar to the ones SOLDIER's wore, and a plain brown boots.

All in all, aside from the colours, not too different than what he usually wore.

"These were the only things that fit me well enough that allowed proper movement. Besides, it's not as if you're any better about that."

Genesis scoffed, "I'm sure that's the case," eyeing the blond once more, he then looked at the bag Cloud was holding, "I take it you were otherwise successful in finding some supplies?"

Cloud resisted the urge to roll his eyes, "More or less. I wasn't able to get as much as I wanted to, but I did get some potions, and enough food and water to last for a few days. Maybe more than a few days if we ration it out right."

Genesis nodded, "I suppose we shall be going now, then?"

"Yeah. Though I don't know yet where we should head to, to lay low for a while," Cloud frowned a bit as the red-head smirked at that.

"I already know the answer to that, Cloud. We are going to head to Midgar."
HI I EXIST HAVE A CHAPTER
a chapter that's mostly amusing filler, but still something >.>

Cloud was half-tempted to tell Genesis that heading to Midgar was a stupid idea. That waltzing right up and into that city was asking for trouble.

...But he knew from experience that Midgar was the best place to keep an eye on Shinra's doings, as well as, paradoxically, hide from them.

With a sigh, Cloud gave the red-head a tired look, "Hopefully your plan isn't to set all of Midgar on fire."

"I tried that once. It didn't go well," the man replied nonchalantly.

Cloud was about to ask what happened, but before he could even open his mouth, Genesis spoke again.

"Anyway, Midgar does provide the best vantage point to know what's going on. It's only logical."

Cloud really couldn't argue with that, and was still too caught up on the fact that this Genesis had tried to set fire to Midgar to give any more of a response than, "Let's get going, then."

---

Thus they found themselves in Costa Del Sol some days later, hiding among empty shipping crates as they waited for a soon-to-be-leaving freighter to be clear of anyone that may see them sneaking on board.

Surprisingly, the place was almost devoid of guards. The few patrolling around seemed to be there purely to dissuade anyone from trying to get on board without authorization.

"Oh, Shinra, so secure in your supposed superiority that you don't even guard your things correctly," Genesis mused.

Cloud gave Genesis a flat look. Like he was one to speak about egos.

The red-clad man merely looked amused by this.

"What? It's-- shit! Get down!"

Before Cloud could even blink, he found himself being dragged down the ladder they both had crowded on to.

"Genesis! What are you--"

"Quiet! Sephiroth's on that boat!"
Cloud stared at that, flabbergasted, "What?!"

"Seems that what we did there ended up causing things to change. And seeing as we've heard no yelling or sounds of fighting, it seems that Sephiroth did not lose his mind."

On one had, this timeline had changed. Which meant that what happened from here on out would be uncertain in some regards.

But on the other, Cloud was glad that Nibelheim had not happened, that they would not have to deal with a crazed Sephiroth down the line.

For the most part, he was glad that that entire crisis had been averted. The tired part of him was upset on realizing that he wouldn't be able to rest, even for a little while, because now he had to pay attention to what was going on.

"I'm... glad, I think. Though that makes things a bit trickier on our end. They'll notify Shinra of us."

Genesis made a humming noise in response as he climbed back up the ladder and peered up over the crate.

Cloud leaned back against the crate, head bumping against the side. He was half-tempted to just fall asleep here.

(He knew he should be worried about why he was so tired, that this was unnatural and had never happened before. But he couldn't bring himself to worry, because some part of his brain insisted that, no, being tired like this was fine. And he was too tired to argue with himself on that.)

A sudden, sharp inhalation of breath caused Cloud's eyes to snap open, jerking his head in the direction of the noise.

Genesis' hand instantly went to rapier, which almost caused him to lose his footing on the ladder.

Zack stood not too far off, staring in shock at the two.

No one moved, both parties watching each other warily. Uncertain.

It was Zack who acted first.

"Sephiroth! I need you to get over here now!" Zack's yell was loud enough that Cloud was certain most of Costa Del Sol had heard it.

Seeing as fighting Zack and Sephiroth among a bunch of empty shipping crates, right near a town, was the last thing that Cloud currently wanted to do, he shot Genesis a look.

"Plan B, taking that helicopter we saw on the docks earlier," Cloud murmured.

Genesis grinned madly, "Now this is a plan that I can get behind."

Cloud snorted, but otherwise made no comment, opting instead to jump to his feet and start weaving his way through the crates towards the docks.

Genesis took off after him, and judging by the shouting, Zack was following, with Sephiroth quickly catching up to them.

The sudden hum of materia flaring up near him almost caused Cloud to lose his stride as he instinctively went to dodge out of the way.
But, no, it was just Genesis, holding a red materia.

"I'm going to summon something to slow them down and keep them occupied!"

"Genesis, no! We're causing enough of a scene already!"

Of course, Genesis didn't listen, and Cloud could only watch as that "something" ended up being Bahamut.

Of course it was Bahamut.

It was always Bahamut.

The dragon descended towards Zack and Sephiroth, and it was a testament to Genesis' control that the beast didn't actually attack, instead mostly doing fake-outs and making itself more of a nuisance than something that could probably level all of Costa Del Sol if left unchecked.

Cloud forced himself to look away from the impending mayhem, and he could already hear the screams of terrified townsfolk.

Getting to the helicopter, they all but threw themselves into it, quickly going about getting buckled in and starting it up. However, it quickly became apparent that it wasn't going to be just a simple manner of just flicking a switch to get the thing going, and Cloud was forced to admit that perhaps Genesis' choice of distraction was for the best.

...Even if Cloud didn't exactly approve of how Genesis had instructed Bahamut to go about it, as it had started to act like it was going to go after the town. And while it did force the two SOLDIER's to focus on it, that method of distraction reflected rather poorly on Genesis, and by extension, himself.

"By the Goddess, couldn't luck be on our side just this once for this and have had this thing simply set to stand-by?" Genesis grumbled as he fiddled with the console, "though, I suppose I should be glad that this model doesn't require a physical key. Hot-wiring these things is such a pain."

Cloud half-listened to what Genesis was saying, and half-kept an eye on the battle between Bahamut, Zack and Sephiroth. While the two had managed to get closer, the summon was still doing a good job at keeping their pace slow.

A beep followed by the whirring of the helicopter starting up drew Cloud's focus back to Genesis, who was looking rather smug.

"The idiot who owns this has the pass-code carved on the underside of one of the panels."

Cloud stared at the mess of wiring spilling out of the console, and at the pried off plate now sitting discarded on the ground, a series of numbers on it.

"...I hope that by doing that, it doesn't cause this thing to crash later on."

Genesis snorted and looked away, looking affronted now, "We're both "failed" experiments, Cloud. If we can survive what Shinra had thrown at us then, we can survive a helicopter crash."

"That's not the point, Genesis!"

The man simply laughed in response as the helicopter took off.

And just in time too, Cloud noted as he looked back at the town, as Sephiroth landed a blow that caused Bahamut to dissipate.
Reclining against the seat with a sigh, Cloud closed his eyes, mind going over what had just happened, and the possible ramifications from it.

After a while, he opened his eyes to glance at Genesis, a frown tugging at his lips.

As much as Cloud would like to trust his memories of this Genesis, and his memories of Genesis' other incarnations, that there was still eight other timelines that this Genesis had gone through. Eight timelines where Cloud had little-to-no knowledge of what this Genesis had done during them.

Because during the travel between Rocket Town and Costa Del Sol, Genesis had been rather bland about what had happened during them, if not outright evasive at times.

And while Cloud hadn't expected the red-head to share everything, he couldn't help but feel as if he was missing the most important parts.

Closing his eyes again and slumping back against the seat, Cloud wondered just how much of a wild card this Genesis was going to be.

(A part of Cloud realized that this must be how people in each loop felt, when they picked up on the fact that he knew a lot more than he was letting on-- that he knew a lot more than he should. Perhaps, because of that, he wasn't going to fault Genesis for not telling him everything.)

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, life kiiiinda kicked my butt for a while, making it hard for me to actually get shit written.
Next chapter: Midgar and Genesis' PoV. Hopefully it won't take me over four months to write it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!