How To Be A Saviour Without Trying

by Herperlo_D

Summary

Tseng didn’t know which god he pissed off in his past life to deserve this, but he apologised to every god he could think of anyway.

Notes

This was actually suppose to be a one-shot drabble, but it kinda mutated along the way.

I hope that y'all will enjoy this.

Un-betaed and normal disclaimers apply.
Tseng really didn’t know which god he pissed off in his past life to deserve anything like this, but he apologised fervently to every one of them all the same.

A gust of icy wind pressed against him and Tseng hunched into his suit jacket, pulled tightly close to his body, trembling cold. He silently cursed President Shinra for insisting that Turks ‘Must maintain a uniformed front’. In other words, only padded suit jackets and thermal wear under their customary attire for layers are allowed and he absolutely could not wear a winter coat—‘How else would people know that you are a Turk?’

Tseng supposed that without his secretary there, the President didn’t remember that Turks are suppose to complete their missions as discreetly as possible without anyone identifying them as a Turk. Teeth mentally gnashing together in frustration, Tseng wondered how the President could even entertain the thought of sending him to Nibelheim at the end of autumn with so little insulation, let alone expect him to go unnoticed with his horrifically unsuited-for-the-weather attire and survive the damn cold with only said unsuited-for-the-weather attire.

‘Probably wasn’t even thinking at all, Leviathan knew what went on in that blubber brain of his.’ He thought sardonically.

Another burst of freezing air smacked him straight in the face, causing him lose his footing and stagger backwards. His boots crunched the snow and his eyes watered from the sting. This time he did curse aloud, blinking away the dryness and ducking his head deeper into the upturn collar of his shirt and suit jacket.

Veld had given him a sympathetic smile, his eyes holding a look of dread when he handed him the assignment folder and Tseng hadn’t really understood why until the helicopter doors open at the drop-off point and he was hit by a blast of Nibelheim wind. He could remember that that was the exact moment where he knew that he was so fucked.

Tseng gritted his teeth and continued to trudge up the mountain, the cold autumn wind tugging at his loose hair and worming its way through any cracks in his clothing. It jabbed him sharply in reminder that if he didn’t get any shelter soon, he wasn’t going to make it back to Midgar alive.

The sun was setting, streaking the blue sky into a beautiful explosion of orange, pink and purple. Tseng would have taken time to enjoy the novel sight of a clear sunset if the temperature on the mountain wasn’t dropping so quickly that he could feel the ice in his veins creeping up his body. The caves he found so far were all too shallow to act as a proper shelter and he didn’t know how
much longer he could survive out in the cold for. A heavy feeling of dread settled like a dead weight deep in his belly and Tseng swallowed nervously, flexing his hands to get a bit of feeling back in them as he walked a little faster up the snow covered ground.

A few steps past a dense patch of balding bushes and he spotted an opening around the bend of the large trunk of a Nibel tree, the darkness of the hole stark against the thick layer of snow surrounding the entrance. He picked up his pace and hurried across the snow. Hope for a nice warm place to rest blossomed in his chest.

However, in his rush, Tseng realised too late that he wasn’t the only one who thought that the cave was a good place to stay in. A dragon had made itself at home in the middle of the cave. It stared at him, narrowing acid-blue eyes trained unerringly on his, its green scales gleaming softly in the shadow of the cave as it rose to its feet. The dragon growled deep in its throat, huffed out a deep, scorching breath through it mouth, casting a mist of white into the air and displayed a mouth full of razor-sharp teeth in a parody of a smile. Tseng froze in his steps before training kicked in and his eyes immediately diverted away from the dragon’s. That was when he spotted the trio of eggs surrounded by a ring of heat-glowing rocks behind it.

Leviathan help him- it was a nesting mother dragon.

Tseng barely had time to dodge out of the way before a large stream of fire scorched the ground where he had stood, melting the snow clean through to the frozen soil beneath. He scrambled to his feet and sprinted the hell out of there, the mother dragon stomping out of the cave after him. He swerved to the side to avoid another gout of flame, and sped up to put as much distance between him and the over-protective mother as possible. Just as he made a quick turn to avoid the snap of its teeth, Tseng slipped on a patch of ice. Down he went, tumbling through the snow of the steep slope, hidden rocks digging and cutting into his back and sides, and landed with a heavy thump, his head throbbing from the heavy fall. He pushed himself up groaning in pain, when a warning growl beside him had him frozen in place.

Out of the hot pan and into the fire.

Tseng closed his eyes in silent despair.

*Please, for once, please let something good happen to me in this Gaia-forsaken place.* He begged. The feeling of dread increased.

A pack of Nibel Wolves had cornered him against the slope. Nibel Wolves were humungous lupines and one of the largest quadruped land creatures on Gaia. At level 23, they were also one of
the most dangerous, especially with their propensity to hunt in packs and employ strategic thinking in their attacks. At the start of their training, all Turks trainees receive a data package they must memorise on the strength, weakness and abilities of every creature on Gaia. Under the Nibel wolves, they only had a single warning under their weakness.

‘Do not engage.’

Looking at them now, Tseng could clearly see why. Thick, corded muscles were visible beneath thick winter coats, built for speed and strength. On all fours, the smallest wolf of the pack reached his elbows. All of the wolves had a gleam of intelligence in their sharp eyes- eyes that were staring at him predatorily. Tseng got up carefully, cautiously, telegraphing each movement as clearly as possible, body tense and palms sweating. He took a mental inventory of his supplies. His gun was running low on ammunition after taking out monsters earlier in the day. He was quickly losing feeling of his extremities and his head was throbbing from the cold. A quick glance at his phone told him that the mountain had no reception.

Tseng could have screamed in frustration.

The wolves prowled forward, teeth bared and growling. Tseng slowly backed himself against the rocky wall, rocks digging into his back and muscles bunched in preparation to climb back up the slope if necessary. Sweat dripped down his neck and left an icy trail behind. Tseng silently laughed at what had become his life. Surviving a childhood on the streets of Wutai to become a Turk in Midgar, only to die- not by enemy fire like he had always expected, but from being eaten by wildlife.

Desperate eyes scanned the area for an opening swiftly, numb hands clenching around the rocks behind him in preparation. The largest wolf at the center made the first lunge. Tseng pulled himself up on the wall to jump over the wolf, its teeth nearly catching on his thigh as he used its back as a springboard to grab hold of the rock face again with a backflip. Tseng ignored the sharp rocks cutting his fingers through his gloves. Another wolf leaped at him, forcing him to push away from the wall, landing in the snow in a crouch before he had to duck away, dodging and jumping over the attacking wolves, their claws and teeth tearing at his clothes and scratching bloody lines on his arms and legs.

The wolves had him backed against a tree and Tseng leaned against the trunk, panting heavily. He felt sluggish and numb from the cold. Tseng didn’t know if it was good that he couldn’t feel the pain in his limbs or if it was worrying that so little blood was flowing there. Spotting a low-hanging branch, Tseng heavily swung himself away from snapping teeth, arms trembling under the strain. Numb fingers scrambled up the thick trunk, feet narrowly avoiding the swipe of a jumping wolf and he slumped against a thick branch, chest heaving and sweat pouring, shivers running down his spine. Tseng scanned the area again, mentally planning his escape, but he could see none- the trees were too far apart for him to jump safely to the next branch and there was only so
long he could wait before the cold killed him. He fingered his gun. Maybe if he shot just right, he could kill the wolves with his remaining clips. It was farfetched, but he had little choice. His ammo was low enough that if he missed, his chances of escaping drop exponentially. Nibel wolves were notoriously hard to kill. Many hunters had died trying to hunt them for glory and Tseng didn’t have their luxury of near unlimited ammunition.

The sun had set fully, casting the mountain in darkness and Tseng contemplated to say fuck it and start shooting. His vision was blurring at the edges. He also couldn’t feel his lips or his nose and he was shivering so hard his teeth were chattering together. Tseng knew that he couldn’t keep on waiting any longer if he wanted to have a chance at surviving, but just as he clenched his hands around his guns, a voice rang out from the dark.

“Fenrir, what are you doing?” The voice was young and curious.

Tseng snapped his head to the right and saw a young boy emerge from the treeline on the other side of the small clearing. A shout lodged itself in his throat.

What was that boy doing? Was he mad?

Tseng wanted to yell at the boy to leave. He was going to get killed by the wolves, but his tongue was numb and heavy in his mouth and he could only make a low sound of protest. The boy looked up questioningly at noise and spotted him sitting on the branch, glittering sky blue meeting shadowy onyx. Tseng was taken by surprise by the brightness of the boy’s eyes. They reminded him of the eyes of SOLDIERS, their mako-glow was nearly identical. The boy’s brows furrowed and he looked away, facing the wolves again who had turned to look at the newcomer. Then to Tseng’s shock, the wolves whined and backed away from the tree.

The boy huffed and stalked forward, hands on his hips. “Really Fenrir. I’ve already told you that unless people start camping in your territory or try to kill you, you don’t try to kill them.” The boy’s tone was chiding. “How else do you expect not to be hunted down? Don’t you remember what happened last winter with that Kalm backpacker? You nearly died if I hadn’t found you.” He narrowed his eyes in warning and set his mouth in an unhappy line as he stood in front of the largest wolf in the pack- the one who attacked him first, obviously the alpha.

Tseng’s eyebrows rose in silent astonishment when the wolf, instead of killing the boy right where he stood, whined again and lowered his head to butt gently against the boy’s chest in apology. The boy sighed, sounding completely exasperated, clearly not the first time he had to repeat himself, and pressed his face against the wolf’s- Fenrir’s- muzzle in forgiveness, arms wrapped around Fenrir’s neck with fingers buried in the neck of his thick coat.
“Now will you let the poor man down? He looks like he’s about to drop in exhaustion.” The boy looked expectantly at the rest of the pack who obeyed, hands absentmindedly scratching Fenrir behind the ears. Tseng snorted silently. How true was that.

Now that the adrenaline in his veins had come and gone, his limbs were stiff and he could barely feel anything now. The boy looked up at him again, head cocked to the side, and asked, “Well mister? Aren’t you coming down?”

Black spots were swimming in the corners of his vision and Tseng knew that he won’t be conscious for long, but he still had to try. Teeth grinding together, he forced his leg to shift down the next branch and shouted in pain when his numb nerves were assaulted by pins and needles. His weak foot slipped on the icy branch and Tseng gasped, trying to catch himself on the branch, but nerveless fingers refused to close and he fell. A branch clipped his head on the way down and the impact jarred him, the black spots in his vision expanding rapidly, sending him to unconsciousness.

Just as he went under, Tseng felt the tingling of status magic on his skin and then he felt nothing else.
Chapter Summary

Cloud makes himself a new friend and Tseng had just struck himself an in with the biggest game changer on Gaia.

Chapter Notes

Okay, yes, well I lied.

I edited this faster than I thought I would. ^_^'

Still un-betaed, but I'm trying my best to grammar and spell check.

Normal disclaimers apply... as always.

Cloud watched the strange man struggle down the tree curiously, hands still scratching Fenrir behind the ears, the idiot wolf rumbling lowly in pleasure, head pressing against his hand more insistently. Really, this greedy, idiot wolf. Cloud thought, completely exasperated. The other wolves around him whined piteously and nudged Cloud as well, looking for their own ear rubs, but he batted them away with short pats on their snout. His eyes were trained on the man currently stubbornly muscling his unresponsive body into moving. Sharp eyes caught the moment the man slipped and fell and Cloud sighed in annoyance, bringing out a Time materia to cast a Slow and lowered the unconscious man onto the floor. Stupid adults. If he needed help he could have just said so. Cloud stuffed the materia back into his coat pocket and went over to the man, the pack following closely behind him.

Cloud knelt beside the man, quickly cataloguing his injuries- a multitude of scratches and gashes, primarily on his arms and legs, and a nasty looking burn along one calf- met a dragon before this then. So you’re stupid and unlucky. His skin was pale and cold to the touch and judging by his actions, his fingers and toes were numb too. Frostnip edging towards frostbite. Cloud decided and sighed at the stupidity of adults. Who on Gaia goes to Nibelheim with such little clothing?

In his tent in Wutai, General Sephiroth sneezed loudly.

With a grunt, Cloud swung the man onto his back like how his Ma showed him- right arm around his left shoulder and right leg over his right shoulder, body lying across his shoulder blades. Staggering to his feet, Cloud turned to look at the wolves again. They looked back at him, eyes
“I’ll be fine, you worry-warts. If you guys hadn’t attacked him I wouldn’t have to do this, now would I?”

The wolves whined again, ducking their heads with ears pressed against their skulls and their tails drooping low on the ground.

“Yeah, well it’s too late now. I’ll come back tomorrow once I’ve gotten him sorted out and we’ll go hunting together, ‘kay?” Cloud then really rolled his eyes when Fenrir and the rest of the pack perked up excitedly like two-month old pups.

With a last kiss to Fenrir’s snout and a nuzzle to each wolf, Cloud turned to hike deeper into the trees, feet easily travelling through the frozen undergrowth, the man surprisingly light on his back. Cloud walked up and down slopes, around bends and turns, squeezing through closely spaced trees and hopping over frozen creeks until he reached the mouth of a cleverly concealed cave and dropped his cargo onto a bed of soft furs and treated dragon hide. He went deeper into the cave and went about doing his daily routine, picking up a pack of dry twigs from a pile and lit them up with a short Fire in the fire pit. The fire pit had a small opening above to let the smoke out on the opposite side of the rock wall, avoiding attracting predators to his little home.

Cloud started shedding his layers, spreading everything neatly and hanging them in a nook carved out in the corner of the rock face to dry. He dropped the materia from his coat into a satchel with the rest and dug out a Restore, the materia glowing a soft green in his palm. Cloud dragged the man, bedding and all, next to the fire and proceeded to methodologically strip him of his ruin clothing until he was left only in his boxers. He raised an eyebrow at the collection of guns, knives and Shinra-issued phone he found before placing them beside his bag of materia. The ripped clothes were hung up with his. Cloud then got up again to pack a small pot full with snow, heating it above the pit. He left the snow to melt and went about swathing the man in fur pelts, rubbing the man’s hair dry and tying it out of the way with a leather band. Cloud slowly powered up the Restore in his palm, casting Cure on the scratches and Cura on the deeper teeth gouges, watching as the flesh and muscle knit together beneath his hands leaving behind only blood stained skin.

By then, the pot of water had come to a rolling boil and Cloud took it off the fire, placing it on the floor beside the man. Dipping a small towel into the steaming water, Cloud wiped the man down, removing all traces of the dried blood before carefully cleaning the nasty burn and casting a Cura. The wound closed up beneath the spell, but it had gone untreated for so long that Cloud couldn’t heal it completely, leaving a silvery patch skin behind.

Cloud covered the man’s whole body with hot towels, massaging the blood back into circulation in
each limb. Replacing the towels periodically, the man’s skin gradually pinked, and even in his sleep the man groaned uncomfortably at the feeling of pins sticking into his skin. Cloud huffed at the good sign, relieved, and removed the towels on his torso and thighs, wiping him dry and tucking the furs in, leaving the arms and lower legs covered in hot towels.

Warming someone up from the brink of frostbite was not easy and by the time Cloud was satisfied with his efforts, he was exhausted. Cloud only had enough energy left to ensure that the man was tucked firmly under layers of fur and to cast a last general Cure before falling asleep under a dragon hide coat, propped up against the wall of the cave, warmed by the small crackling fire.

Tseng woke up completely- all at once, between one second and the next, just as he was trained to do. He kept his eyes closed, breathing even and muscles loose, not giving away the slightest hint that he was awake. Tseng took in his surroundings: soft prickling against his skin- he was half naked, he noted with a jolt of unease, a hint of warm air breezing across his face- a dying fire to his right, soft breathing to his front, a bit to the right- the boy, he remembered. Tseng didn’t sense any of his weapons nearby, but that didn’t matter. He could easily subdue the boy with only his hands. A small shift told him that all his injuries had been healed and all ten of his fingers and toes are in place. The tingling that remained right beneath his skin told him that they were healed by magic and Tseng vaguely remembered that the boy had also cast a status spell on him when he fell.

The rustle of fabric snapped him out of his thoughts- the boy was awake. Tseng heard the boy get up and stretch, shuffling closer to him and small, warm hands pressed gently against his forehead and his neck. Tseng inwardly flinched at how vulnerable he suddenly felt. The hands retreated and the boy walked a few steps away before stopping again, another rustle of fabric and muffled clacking sounds. Then, a soft whisper before the faint warmth Tseng felt against his face suddenly intensified. He barely stopped himself from jumping instinctively into action, his body twitching slightly at the reflex. More muffled clacking sounds and the boy moved around the fire, the shadow covering Tseng’s face leaving with him, and he sat down.

“Mister, are you going to stop pretending to be asleep now?” The boy asked.

Tseng held back his startled expression and opened his eyes to turn to look at his saviour. A young face stared back at him- six, maybe seven years of age- cute, with big, bright blue doe-eyes and chubby cheeks, topped with a mop of vibrant, spikey blond hair that reminded Tseng strongly of the chocobos in the stables back in Midgar.

“Hello, I’m Cloud. What’s your name?” The boy- Cloud- asked pleasantly, like he didn’t just catch a Turk, even a rookie one, feigning sleep.
Tseng decided that there was no harm in playing along and replied, “Tseng of the Turks, nice to meet you.”

Cloud hummed in response, rummaging through the satchel beside him and emerged with a string-tied package that opened up to show strips of dried meat. Cloud picked out three long ones and held them out to Tseng, who sat up smoothly, wrapping the furs around his shoulders to keep the warmth in and gratefully accepted them. A quick sniff ruled out the possibility of it being cow or chocobo meat, and it smelled too thick to be pig or chicken meat. Tseng glanced back up to Cloud who was in the process of ripping his strips of jerky apart and swallowing them swiftly.

“Cloud, what type of meat is this?”

The boy looked up at his question, mouth still chewing the dry meat. “It’s wolf meat.” There was a silent undertone of no shit stupid in the answer and Tseng came to a fast conclusion that his saviour was a bit of a brat.

Still, food was food and Tseng cautiously brought the first piece to his mouth and bit down. The meat gave away surprisingly easily under his teeth and a burst of smoky flavours assaulted his taste buds. Tseng wasted no time in gobbling down the rest of the food and accepted a skin of water from the boy with a nod of thanks.

“Your clothes and other stuff are over there if you wanna get changed. I tried to repair as many of your clothes as I could, but I think you should think about getting a coat or something if you don’t wanna freeze to death out there.” The boy’s eyes were judging him so hard Tseng could almost hear the question: how stupid can you be to come here like this.

What a brat.

Tseng ignored the silent question and sighed, “Thank you.” He got up to put on his clothes. The small, even stitches along the rips and tears were surprisingly neat for a child, but an occasional stitch out of line showed his inexperience in hemming clothing. He went back to sit on the bedding, pulling on his dried boots and sliding his weapons back into place, out of sight. Tseng looked up at Cloud again and decided to ask the question that had been bugging him since he woke up. “How did I get here?”

Cloud raised an eyebrow at him- he sure was a very judgemental brat. “I carried you here.”
Tseng raised an eyebrow in mirror, “You carried me here by yourself?”

“Yes.” The tone behind that screamed *you idiot* so blatantly that Tseng felt his eye twitch in annoyance.

“Then how did you heal me?”

“I used materia.” *No duh.*

Tseng repressed a sigh and continued, “What did you equip it with?”

Now the face got onto a whole other level of judgmental. Tseng could practically feel Cloud questioning his intelligence, which was actually a very novel experience for him. Even as a Turk trainee, he was considered on par, if not better than most official Turks, bar a few- Veld to name one.

“What in Hel’s name is equip? I just cast it like it is.”

The other eyebrow joined the first, “And how does a kid like you get his hands on so many materia?”

Cloud visibly bristled at the insult. “I’m eight years old- *not* a kid!” He pouted (Cloud would deny ever doing such a thing even years later). “I just find them around.” He paused, turning away huffily. “What’s a Turk anyway? It sounds dumb.”

Tseng smirked in amusement at the pouting face and the childish response. “Turk is another name for the Department of Administrative Research of the Shinra Electric Power Company.” He explained.

Cloud scoffed, crossing his arms. “So what. You Shinra people come to Nibelheim just asking to be frozen to death? How stupid can you get.”
Tseng gritted his teeth at the slight. How does an eight year old rile him up so easily? “I had no other choice.”

Cloud raised a long eyebrow. “No choice? Then you’re stupider than I thought.” He paused again, silently deciding between his options before imperiously naming him, “Stupid.”

Impulsively, the word slipped from his mouth in retaliation, “Brat.” Tseng twitched at the sheer immaturity the conversation had been reduced to.

Cloud gave him a disgruntled look and turned his face away, mouth pinched together tightly, evidently not wanting to continue the argument. Tseng took a few deep breaths to calm himself and stood up. Cloud whipped his head back to look at him in alarm.

“You’re leaving already?” He looked reluctant to see him go. Tseng could sympathise. Despite only being conscious for a portion of their short meeting, Tseng hadn’t ever felt this comfortable with someone in a long time, if ever.

“Yes.” He sighed, “I have a mission to complete.”

Cloud scrambled to his feet and bit his lip, looking away. All traces of their earlier argument were gone from the air, instead leaving a sense of dread.

“Fine.” Cloud said shortly, after a pause and immediately turned to rummage through his stuff.

Tseng looked over his shoulder curiously and was surprised when Cloud turned around abruptly, stuffing a drawstring bag into his arms along with a large fur coat. Tseng juggled the items awkwardly before swinging the bag around his shoulder and tugged on the fur coat- it fit him surprisingly well. He looked at Cloud who mumbled quietly at his feet,

“The coat… was my dad’s.”

Tseng noted the past tense and decided not to comment on that, instead ruffling the silky hair and chuckled softly when Cloud glared at him.

“Thank you, Cloud.” He said warmly. *For saving my life, for healing me and trusting me with something so precious to you.*
Cloud looked away, long bangs hiding his blushing cheeks and Tseng laughed lightly - he had laugh more within the hour than he had in the last few years. How sad was that? Tseng turned to go, footsteps echoing in the cave, quiet, save the merry crackling of the fire. He was just as unwilling to go as Cloud was to see him go, not wanting to lose this feeling of companionship that he’ll probably never feel again, not with Cloud all the way on this side of Gaia. Just as he stepped out into the snow, Cloud called out from behind,

“Wait!” and forced something hard and round into his hand, small fingers closing his much larger ones around the glowing materia. “Take this. Idiots like you probably need it more than I do.” Then he added after a short pause, “Stupid.”

Tseng smiled and ruffled Cloud’s hair again, ignoring the indignant squawk - like a chocobo he mused. “Brat.”

Then he left, steps stronger and surer this time around, fingers wrapped tightly around the soothing hum of magic in his palm - a fully mastered Full Cure if he wasn’t mistaken. Tseng chuckled again. He had a feeling that Cloud would never cease to surprise him. Perhaps after the war was over and he had clocked up a few vacation days he could come back to Nibelheim to visit Cloud again.

Maybe. He couldn’t wait.

Chapter End Notes

The quickness of this chapter update is a one-off thing.

School is getting really busy and I might have the drive and ideas to churn out another chapter soon, but it's the lack of time that's the problem.

Anyway, I just want to thank all my kudos givers and commenters. Y'all have been so sweet! Thank you so much. =D
Interlude 1: Whispers

Chapter Summary

What happened when Tseng wore the coat all the way to Wutai.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys.
I'm exhausted from school, but the story suddenly came to me and I couldn't resist. Here is some extra comedy before I post the next chapter. I really wanted to write out how people will react to Cloud's fur coat on Tseng, but it wouldn't fit into the main plot so I decided to write it as in interlude. Hope that you guys will like it!

Normal disclaimers apply. And this is un-betaed so all mistake are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tseng ignored the whispers that followed him as he made his way through the main camp. He tugged the fur coat closer around him, keeping the Wutai winter air from reaching his skin. Winter in Wutai was cold and the long journey to Wutai through Rocket Town from Nibelheim was even colder, the temperature dropping steadily over the weeks. Tseng was privately grateful for Cloud’s coat. It saved him many frostbitten fingers. But such a crudely fashioned coat from wolf fur made him stand out, whether by its blatant contrast to his normal slim-cut, formal Turk attire or by the fact that it was made out of Nibel wolf fur- for those who can tell the difference. With half the camp consisting of SOLDIERS with enhanced sight and experience in fighting the wolves before, be it in real life or in the newly built stimulation room, many of the men there realised exactly what kind of trophy he was wearing.

Tseng mentally sighed at the unsubtly loud whispers around him, sharp ears picking up every word spoken. The moment he had entered the camp, the conversations closest to him had stopped for a second before they were replaced by furious whispering that slowly spread from one corner of the camp to the other.

By the time Tseng was halfway to the Command Tent, everyone, from trooper to SOLDIER, knew of the Turk draped in the fur of the infamous Nibel wolves.

Soldiers can be such gossips.
Tseng continued walking, letting the whispers fly by him, picking out useful information and discarding useless ones with practiced ease. Let them say what they want about him. If any dare to even touch Cloud’s coat, Tseng wouldn’t hesitate to cut off their fingers, SOLDIER or not.

Tseng strode into the Command Tent with a quick knock on the tent flap pole, lifting the heavy material out of his way and approached the table at the centre of the tent. The warm tent was a relief from the cold, four braziers at the corners of the tent helping to keep the temperature up. Tseng gave a short nod to the only other person at the table, taking off his coat and folding it neatly over his arm.

“Good afternoon General.”

General Sephiroth nodded back, his hair swaying slightly with the movement, shining like spun silk in the low firelight. “Good afternoon, Tseng.” He paused, cataloguing his appearance swiftly with a quick glance from the dragon hide bag on his back to the Nibel wolf coat on his arm then to the ragged quality of his suit, before continuing. “Your report?”

Tseng smiled inwardly, appreciative of the lack of comment on the state of his appearance. “There is a small camp six miles southwest of the camp,” he pointed at the large map on the table, “consisting of approximately fifty men and an unknown number of monsters- minimum twenty. They have a moderate amount of firepower, but signs of worn down paths and changing troops suggest that the camp is mostly used as a drop off and replenishing point, connecting one large camp to another.” Tseng dragged his finger from the point on the map to circle a point on the shores west of the discovered campsite. “A few of the tracks disappeared into the ocean and the others went through the mountains in the north and the west.” Tseng drew a line from the camp to the mountain ranges. “While it is unlikely, there is a possibility for this camp to increase in size and become a threat.” He gestured back to the original point before pointing out a few more in rapid succession. “No other camps were spotted on my way here, but there were traces of pocket troops to the north.”

Tseng withdrew his hand and kept quiet, his verbal report completed. A more detailed version of his observations would be handed in later after he settled into his own tent and got some rest.

Sephiroth remained silent throughout the entire report, glowing green cat-eyes trained on the map. His gaze lingered on different points of the map, constructing and discarding strategies rapidly within seconds, adjusting existing plans and calculating their chances of success and injury between one breath and the next. Sephiroth mentally rerouted troops and attack plan formations and noted down the different orders that needed to be sent out before the next command rotation. There was no need for Tseng to mark out any of the camps he spoke of on the map itself. Sephiroth had memorised and assimilated the information into his own mental map the moment it left his
Tseng found himself admiring the sheer power of the mind of Shinra’s Silver General. There was no surprise that the Wutaians had already dubbed the General as the Silver Demon this fast into the war. His abilities and enhancements truly made him a demon to his enemies, despite only turning fourteen years old that year.

Tseng then found himself thinking of Cloud. He hoped that the brat never aspire to be a SOLDIER. He never wanted to see those vibrant blue eyes dimmed by the horrific actions that formed Shinra’s foundations.

Sephiroth gave the map one last sweep before rolling it up and placing it in a pile of other rolled up maps in the corner. He gestured for Tseng to follow him as he swept out of the tent, a high quality broadsword that probably weighed the same as Tseng strapped securely to his back, and a bangle of equipped materia on each wrist. The pair walked a short distance to the Food Tent, commandeering a table at the corner of the large tent. While they ate, Sephiroth quietly filled Tseng in on the current situation, updating him on major events that happened when he was scouting.

Once the mutual update was done, both of them finished their meal in comfortable silence, having long fallen into this habit through multiple repetitions. However, as they stood to go on their separate ways, Sephiroth stopped and motioned at the folded coat and his bag.

“I’m surprised you made it here.”

Tseng’s mouth curled slightly at the edges, used to hearing what Sephiroth was not saying. He steadily ignored how the surrounding tables had lowered their volume when the both of them stood up, clearly eavesdropping on them.

“I nearly didn’t so I decided to get some souvenirs for myself.”

The wretched whispers started up again.

Sephiroth quirked the corner of his mouth, amused by the deliberate miswording, having already correctly deduced what had happened to him ten seconds of him walking into the tent.

Tseng’s eye shined back in silent laughter and Sephiroth glided out of the tent, long silver hair
following after him like a shiny afterimage, Tseng close behind him.

By the time Tseng was halfway to his tent, everyone knew of the Turk who had come to Wutai wearing only his suit, nearly dying on his way over, so he killed a Nibel wolf and a dragon because he wanted an extra coat and a bag.

There were much more whispered conversations around Tseng after that, much to his consternation.

Chapter End Notes

In this universe, I tweaked their ages a bit, so now Tseng is 19 and Sephiroth and the other Generals are 14. (Can you imagine Sephiroth going through puberty?)

Since Tseng's birth year was never clearly stated, I made him 5 years older than Seph.

Hahaha I keep imagining Sephiroth as a midget before he shot up like a weed.
Cloud raised his bat and braced himself, lunging forward with a grunt while bringing his arms down, propelling the bat through the air like a javelin. The length of wood whistled through the air and its rough surface impacted heavily past the soft underbelly of the dragon with a loud rip. The soft flesh split easily under the force of the nail-embedded wood and the dragon went down with an ear-splitting roar. Blood spurted from the new gash and it flapped its torn wings uselessly, trying to regain its balance.

Cloud ignored the warm spray of blood and took advantage of the dragon’s floundering to pick up the bat and deliver a hard bash to the dragon’s face. The nails gouged deep scores into the flesh, dislodging the scales and spilling glowing blue blood into the dragon’s eyes, blinding it. The dragon snarled furiously in pain and panic, rising onto its hind legs in an effort to seem bigger, now much more desperate to survive.

Its glowing maw gapped open with fire-glow, steam rising as it prepared to spew fire. Cloud quickly ducked under the molten hot stream, the fire singeing the tips of his hair. He sucked in a breath at the searing heat, mentally swearing at the mako-crazed beast. Cloud had to quickly scramble to push himself off the ground to avoid another gout of flame, the heat of dragon fire licking past his face was near blistering. He blinked away the bright spots clouding his vision and darted forward again, now more than ready to finish off the fight. With some fast dodging and acrobatic twists of his body to fly past sharp claws and tail, Cloud slid in close to give one last hefty swing at the dragon’s head, his arms trembling with the force of the blow, and its skull caved under the bat with a disgusting crunch.

The dragon collapsed with a deafening roar, crashing onto the ground and sending soil and gravel flying.
Cloud righted himself tiredly from his half-crouched stance, panting heavily from the exertion and groaned as he stretched out the kinks in his muscles, balancing the nail bat carefully against his shoulder. Hunting dragons alone was no easy business, even with the dragon as young as this.

Sighing, he closed his eyes, tilting his face to the sky to mutter a brief thanks to Gaia for the kill and began clean up. Cloud bundled up the dragon’s body with large swaths of cloth he had stored in his pack- hidden behind some shrubs and rocks a ways away from the fight.

Setting it aside, Cloud kicked back the upturned earth so that it laid somewhat flat and sprinkled some water and fertiliser to encourage plants he had killed during the fight to grow again. He gathered and buried the blood stained soil and rocks in a shallow hole, sprinkling some more water and even more fertiliser onto the contaminated soil before muttering a quick prayer to bless the stained earth.

Plants generally find it hardest to grow on mako-contaminated soil, but those that did were much stronger and longer-lived than those that didn’t. Often times, these enhanced plants also exhibit extra abilities and sometimes even magical properties depending on the part of the plant and the plant type. Cloud liked to pick these plants and dry them for future use. He had a large collection of them stored in a box in his home.

Post-hunt ritual finished, Cloud tied his pack to his waist and hefted as much of the dragon carcass over his shoulder as possible, letting the rest trail behind him on the ground. He adjusted his balance to accommodate the large weight before making his way back to his little cave- the one that he had brought Tseng to all those years ago.

*Gaia, had it been six years already?*

Cloud dragged the carcass up to an empty section of the rock face near the surface through a gentle slope off the side of the main cave. Cloud had found this cavern shortly after finding the main cave itself and spent weeks clearing out the overgrown vegetation until he had a nice flat clearing to himself in the middle of a garden (in the loosest sense of the word). The cavern was shaped like an inverted bell krater and had a naturally smooth bottom made out of rock and soil. Cloud had done a bit of careful digging with a few Quakes to connect the cavern with the cave down below so that he could have easier excess.

Cloud placed the unwrapped dragon carcass onto a large, low sloping platform and dug out his tools from his pack. With deft movements, Cloud de-armoured and skinned the dragon carcass with a small knife, avoiding the sharp spikes on its neck and tail, pulling off a giant piece of scaly skin to be cured and dried for use. The skin was longer than he was tall and three times as wide as him.
Cloud bundled it up into a large roll and placed it to a side along with the removed armour plates.

Cloud tilted the head up and buried the short knife into the underside of the skull, just behind the mandible, slanting towards the neck, and jerked the knife from the right to the left until the head detached itself from the spine with a low pop.

People often don’t realised that dragons are so much more easily beheaded from the bottom- not the top where the joint linking the skull to the spine is protected by thick armour plates.

Cloud sliced off a few remaining tendons and muscle lines trailing behind the skull and set the head down. He pulled the dragon up by the tail to drain the carcass of blood via the severed blood vessels at the neck, letting the blood flow into a shallow drain that he had carved around the platform to pool into a collection bowl.

Cloud wiped his palms against his pants and picked up his knife again, flipping the dragon to work on its wings. He made quick work of them, removing them from the body before moving onto the tail, arms and the legs. Cloud stripped the limbs of all their flesh, placing each chunk and strip neatly in rows near the drains and arranged the bones in a separate pile according to length and hardness. He then went back to the main body, gutting it efficiently, leaving the organs in a separate basket for Fenrir and the pack to feast on afterwards.

Cloud sliced the flesh off the bones of what remained, dividing it between the meat and bone piles. He sorted the pile of meat, keeping the best cuts in oiled paper for himself and wrapped up the rest in wide dried leaves to be dried and smoked into jerky then sold to the other villagers. They may not like him, but not even Cloud’s most ardent haters could deny food, especially dragon meat sold at such a ridiculously low price.

Cloud brought the packages of meat down to the unlit fire pit and stored them in the nook in the wall, freezing the paper-wrapped and leaf-wrapped cuts into two separate solid blocks of ice with a short Blizzara. He went back up to the platform to finish cleaning and begin the curing of the dragon skin.

Stretching the skin itself took him nearly an hour to complete, the skin spanning nearly the size of the entire platform. Cloud had to pierce the skin, scale-side down, along its circumference every two inches to attach it to the hooks embedded in the stone with string, pulling and tying until the whole piece was taut. He then had to go through the disgusting task of tanning the skin- with the dragon brain. Wincing as he went through the scrambled brain, Cloud internally gagged and made a mental note to find another way to kill. Picking skull fragments out of brain matter was not something he liked to do. Cloud spread all of the mushed up brain- eww- across the skin and left it to dry in the crisp Nibel winter air. He would come back the next day to finish the skin off with the labour intensive task of rubbing off the dried layer of dragon brains from the skin by hand.
Afterwards, Cloud dug through the pile of bones, setting aside the bones with a thicker core to be sold for their marrow. He sorted the remaining pile according to their densities- the most hollow, lightest bones were bundled up, some would be carved into jewellery to sell, others would become flutes- he remembered hearing Old Man Hal that his grandson wanted a flute after his previous one had broken under Gephal’s brutish hands.

The teeth, claws and armour plates went into another pile and the narrower, and densest bones were tied together into another bundle to be carved into knives, small accessories and other tools. Cloud ground up the rest of the bones, half into coarse grains and the other half into fine grain, and poured the small mountain of crushed bones into the collection bowl containing the dragon’s blood to set for a day- his fertiliser.

Cloud stood up to dust himself off and stretched languidly, relaxing tense muscles and releasing the knot in his back with a relieved sigh. Hunting and breaking down a dragon was very time consuming and tiring, but Cloud always received a sense of accomplishment from it so he didn’t mind too much, especially with Nibelheim going through a tough winter, full of large snow storms and food shortages.

Cloud strolled around the clearing, stretching his legs and enjoying the soreness of his muscles, evidence of his strengthening muscles and of his hard work. Tilting his head back lazily, Cloud enjoyed the way the cool air pricked against his skin, painting a blush across his nose and cheeks. He admired the clear night sky, the thousands of stars that shone like mako crystals in a cave, so brightly in the darkness.

Cloud closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. Sometimes, he wished that he could be one of the stars in the sky- so small and yet so beautiful.

A brief rush of sadness took him by surprise, but he ruthlessly supressed it and scolded himself for that lapse in control. He couldn’t afford to be weak, not now, not when he needed to remain strong.

Resuming his walk, his feet unconsciously brought him back to the basket of organs he had nearly forgotten. Cloud chuckled to himself at his own forgetfulness and set the basket against his hip, heading down to the main cave.

Cloud changed into a new set of clothes quickly, freezing the blood stained clothing in a new block of ice. He didn’t want to attract predators to his little home before he had the chance to wash them.
Cloud headed out of his cave, bundled up in a thick coat—similar to the one he had given Tseng all those years ago. Thinking about that man sent a pang of nostalgia through him. Cloud often wondered what he was doing now, if he was even still alive. Though with his stupidity, Cloud found it quite easy to imagine that Tseng had come close at least once since they met. He came to Nibelheim at the end of autumn in only a damn suit for Gaia’s sake. Cloud didn’t really believe that there was a way for a human being to be that stupid. Well, now he knew and so, the nickname.

Cloud sure-footedly made his way through the forest, feet placing themselves in front of one another automatically, following an invisible path carved deep into his consciousness from years of walking the exact same route multiple times a week.

Happy yips greeted him once he broke through the cover of the trees and entered the clearing. Small fluffy blurs bowed him over, sending the basket of goodies flying across the clearing. Cloud yelped in surprise and fell straight into the snow. The other wolves descended upon the thrown dragon organs like vultures, leaving Cloud to fend for himself against the wolf pups—who had made themselves comfortable on his chest and legs, pawing at his clothes for treats and nosing at his face and neck. Cloud burst out laughing, an uncharacteristic smile spreading across his face, cooing at the adorable balls of fur. The pups on his chest yapped indignantly when he sat up, falling onto their siblings on his lap, but quickly went back to scenting him. Cloud scented them back, long used to and comfortable with wolf behaviour, and relished the sense of belonging that Fenrir and his pack always gave him.

Fenrir had come over by then, finished with his treat and curled up around his back as he did his own scenting, a low rumbling building in his chest. If he were any other animal, Cloud would have said that he was purring. The rest of the pack made themselves at home around him and soon, Cloud was in the middle of a large pool of Nibel wolf. He sighed, satisfied and content, and ran a hand through Fenrir’s fur and patted the wolf beside him with the other, drawing comfort from their quiet strength.

Cloud knew that he would miss this feeling once he left for Midgar to become a SOLDIER. It had been his dream ever since he saw the grainy videos of the Wutai War and the SOLDIERS on the tiny television screen at the inn. It had also been the very same dream that his mother had told him to hold onto with her dying breath, her once bright countenance wasted away by mako-sickness. That night, the sky had raged outside the walls of their small house, the rain pouring down in buckets for the tears that never marked Cloud’s face. Nor did they leave his eyes when he buried his mother in their little garden behind their house once the storm broke. Cloud had left their little hut behind the next day with all of his belongings to seclude himself in his cave. He never went back to the village unless it was to sell the parts of monsters or animals he had hunted.

Cloud buried his face into the neck of Fenrir’s thick coat, breathing in his familiar scent, and if the sounds that left his mouth sounded suspiciously like sobs, neither he nor his companions made any
Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled mournfully at the new moon.

Chapter End Notes

Hahaaah! I love the nail bat. I wanted to write about it so this chapter ended up being primarily on Cloud.

I didn't plan on it, but this chapter got angsty real quick.

I... actually don't really have any idea where I'm going with this. I was hoping that Tseng was going to pop up in this chapter, but turns out he's too busy being buried under paperwork. The poor thing.

Anyway, I bet you didn't expect Mama Strife to be dead huh? I hoped that I could have kept her on (just imagine her mothering Sephiroth).

The parts on Cloud breaking apart the dragon are adapted from a method to break down a pig- which i bastardised and appropriated for this. (the skin curing too. But that's based on snake skin instead)

This doesn't have as much of Cloud's feelings as I had hoped to convey. I'll try to insert more of his inner thoughts and feelings the next chapter. Which, of course, won't be coming as soon as this one did. Exams are coming- kill me now.

P.S. If you guys haven't noticed it yet, I have an awful habit of going back to edit my previous chapters whenever and wherever so don't be surprised if you realise that some parts sound not quite as how you remembered them to be. The plot generally stays the same. I only changed the way it's expressed.
Start an Adventure

Chapter Summary

Paths are converging and diverging

Chapter Notes

I rushed out this chapter so please cut me a little slack.

Normal disclaimers.

Still non-betaed. Mistakes are all mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Weeks later

Tseng squinted at the papers in his hands, trying to concentrate on the tiny words scribbled across the page. Behind him, the clock struck two. *Tick-tock tick-tock.* The repetitive beats echoed in the empty office. Outside his windows, Midgar’s usual bustle had softened to a low murmur, most of the citizens safely asleep at home that late at night. The bright white lights of his office, mingling with the green glow of the reactors shining through his windows, reflected off the white walls, aggravating his already pulsing head.

Tseng gritted his teeth and made a few quick notes on the papers with a pen, sliding the stack into his OUT tray with a sullen plop. Massaging his temples, he drank another gulp of coffee that had long gone cold, the gross bitterness of the cheap office coffee searing an awful path down his throat. Tseng grimaced at the disgusting taste, but continued drinking. Right now, he would drink anything that contained caffeine- even if it reminded him of Zolom piss.

SOLDIER applications had just opened the previous weekend and the Turk offices were swamped with paperwork. Everyone was working overtime everyday the whole week- especially Tseng, what with Veld busy with a secret project from President Shinra. Tseng felt a curl of irritation well up in his gut, but he pushed it down in favour of picking up yet another stack of applications.

The stress of the massive influx of paperwork had gotten to him, making him uncharacteristically short tempered the entire week. Even Reno, who usually made as much of a nuisance of himself as possible, didn’t dare to breathe a word wrong in Tseng’s presence the past few days. If he had been in a better mood, Tseng would have appreciated the reprieve from Reno’s usual antics. Other Turk
recruits, who were a little slower, fell victim to his sharp tongue and acerbic words.

For some reason, a few Turk recruits had dropped out throughout the week. Why? Tseng didn’t have the slightest clue.

Somehow, his reputation had grown more fearsome over the week.

Tseng sighed for the umpteenth time that night and slid another stack into his OUT tray. All applications had to be screened by the Turks in order to ensure that no anti-Shinra spy had attempted to infiltrate the company from the inside. Why they refused to have the applications digitalised was beyond Tseng. Now, he had to decipher thousands of different handwritings, comparing them and the information they displayed with past profiles of known anti-Shinra groups. If the forms had been scanned into the computer, Tseng could have completed the hundreds of forms within the afternoon, instead of staying in the office until wee hours in the morning, only to go home, shower, grab a bite and take short nap before coming back to the office. Tseng was so exhausted that he could feel the bags under his eyes grow with each passing day and the fuzziness in the corners of his mind rising.

It was dangerous and irresponsible of him, but Tseng really didn’t give a shit.

As he picked up a new stack of the accursed applications, Tseng spotted a splash of blue and yellow at the corner of the page. There, right on the first page of the forms just beside his hastily scrawled name, an older face of Cloud Strife stared back a Tseng, blue eyes and bright blond hair just as striking as he had remembered. The boy looked a bit tired in the photo, no doubt from the long journey from Nibelheim to Midgar. He had lost quite a bit of his baby fat from his face and his hair was somehow lighter and spikier than before.

A jumble of feelings swirled chaotically in his head. Surprise. Dread. Happiness. Tseng stared at the page in his hands, stunned for a second before the sound of his pen hitting the marble floor jolted him from his thoughts. Tseng stood up from his seat, quickly packing his things and strode out of the door, leaving his paperwork lying neatly on his table.

Work can wait till tomorrow- he had things to prepare. Cloud was in Midgar.

Cloud stepped off the train and meandered through the crowded platform, lightly jostling people
out of his way. Overhead, a sign cheerfully welcomed him to Midgar Train Station, the largest train station in all of Gaia. A smaller sign below helpfully pointed out that Shinra Headquarters is five hundred metres away from Exit A. Shouldering his pack, Cloud chewed on some dragon jerky and made his way towards Exit A, eyes scanning the crowd leisurely. As he got closer to the building, it was easier to spot his fellow SOLDIER applicants among the stream of people—namely the ones who look much less put together than the formally dressed Shinra employees. It was the last day of registration and there was a large surge of last-minute applicant streaming into Midgar. Cloud, having arrived very early in the morning, was part of a smaller crowd. Thank Gaia for small mercies.

Cloud stopped at the base of the building and stared up at the sheer size of Shinra Headquarters. He had seen pictures in newspapers and heard people describe what it looked like, but nothing compared to seeing it in real life.

The building was a massive construct of steel and glass. It had gigantic tubes leading from the surrounding reactors to the base of the building. Rows of windows curved from end to end. It boasted a record-breaking seventy stories, the tallest ever building on Gaia with state of the art facilities and technology. The technologies in other non-Shinra buildings were at least two years behind those in the Headquarters because the company guarded its knowledge jealously.

Cloud tentatively entered the building only to be ushered into a whirlwind of admin matters. He was rushed through getting his picture taken and then a pen and application forms were pushed into his hands. The moment he wrote the last word, the papers were taken from him and he was whisked to another booth where he got his bunk number and quick directions to the SOLDIER hopeful barracks. Before he knew it, Cloud was standing back outside the Headquarters, staring rather blankly at the info sheet in his hands and wondering how he had appeared outside again. Shaking off the confusion, Cloud followed the directions to behind the headquarters where three rectangular five story concrete buildings stood dully, surrounding a large quadrangle.

Cloud eyed his new home, gripping the strap of his pack nervously. Now that he was finally here, Cloud felt the doubts start to creep up.

*Is this worth it? Should he just have taken the job in Kalm instead?*

Cloud shook those thoughts out of his head and steeled his resolve. He will finish what he started and fulfil his mother’s last wish. It was the least he could do to repay her kindness.

His room wasn’t that hard to find— it was in the middle building, on the second floor. Cloud was sharing a small room that barely fit the double-deckers of nine other applicants and their lockers. The beds were arranged in a U-shape with the headboards flushed against the walls and a pair of lockers stood beside each bunk.
Cloud was the second to arrive and he nodded at the other boy in the room, smiling slightly, as he claimed the bottom bunk of the second bed to the left of the door. The boy slipped off his own top bunk on the bed opposite and approached Cloud, shaking out his blond hair from his eyes and stuck out a hand, smiling brightly.

“My name’s Julius, but everyone calls me Lee.”

Cloud took his hand in a firm handshake. “Cloud.”

Lee raised an eyebrow at Cloud. “Not so talkative huh? But I guess if I had a name like that I wouldn’t be so eager to make friends either.”

Cloud grunted and shrugged in answer. It was sort of true after all. Once the village kids knew his name they made fun of him constantly. Surprisingly, Lee didn’t seem all that offended by Cloud’s gruff answer. Instead, he beamed at him, reaching out to punch Cloud’s shoulder lightly and gave him a one-arm hug.

“I can totally see it now. You and I are going to be such great friends.”

Cloud stared at him a little incredulously. They had just met literally five minutes ago, so how…? Meeting Lee’s bright grin with a shy one himself, Cloud decided that it didn’t really matter. He never was the one to look a gift horse in the mouth and having a friend to go through the coming weeks of hell with could only be blessing.

Lee cooed at Cloud’s small smile, pinching his cheeks. Cloud scowled at that. Now if only Lee would stop touching him so much the situation would have been perfect.

They spent the next few minutes getting to know each other. Turns out, Lee had just turned seventeen a month ago. He was from Icicle Inn and was delighted to find another ‘winter dweller in this sauna’. He had an older sister who co-owns a small inn in the mountain resort with his dad. His mom had left the family when he was only a baby. Cloud didn’t pry any further- it wasn’t for him to know. He had come to Midgar to try out for SOLDIER because ‘A SOLDIERS’ pay is the best and I gotta find a way to support my family. Heat doesn’t come cheap in the middle of an ice waste.’

Lee, in turn, learned that Cloud was a fifteen year old (though he looked a bit sceptical) from
Nibelheim and he lives by himself in a place a bit away from the main village. Cloud didn’t notice when Lee’s beaming smile dimmed a little at that. He earns enough to tide him over by selling animal parts. Cloud also told him that he signed up for SOLDIER because it was his dream since he was a kid.

Lee’s smile became teasing and he nudged Cloud in the ribs, “A fan of Sephiroth huh?”

Cloud’s cheeks flushed a dark red and he spluttered indignantly, scrambling for a reply while Lee nearly cried with laughter. Thankfully, Cloud was saved from further embarrassment when the door slid open again and another group of boys entered the room.

The day passed by quickly after that as the boys got themselves situated in their bunks and trooped down to the quadrangle where they lined up in neat rows in front of a small podium. Cloud looked around and realised that there was about a hundred boys lining up with him, ages between fifteen (the minimum age requirement) and twenty-two (probably the exam retakers). The more he looked around, the more disgruntled he was to note that among all the boys, he still was the shortest one there. Lee seemed to have come to the same conclusion because he chuckled softly and ruffled Cloud’s hair. Cloud scowled at him and batted his hand away, turning back to the front where Heidegger stepped up to the podium, the medals on his breast glinting gold in the sunlight.

Cloud’s breath caught itself in his throat when General Sephiroth himself stepped up onto the platform behind Heidegger with the other two famous First Classes, Angeal Hewley and Genesis Rhapsodos. Cloud could hear the people behind him whisper to each other in awe. The man looked even more beautiful and intimidating in real life, standing far taller than anyone else in the quadrangle, green cat-slit eyes scanning the crowd, assessing and cataloguing everyone’s threat levels.

Cloud gasped inaudibly when those captivating eyes caught his, hard emeralds catching sky blue in an intense gaze. Cloud automatically reacted like he would when facing down a dangerous opponent- he straightened his spine, drawing his shoulders back and stared back squarely into Sephiroth’s eyes, unblinking and fearless. Inside his head, his brain was screaming something akin to pure terror at him. Before he could look away, Sephiroth’s eyes shined at him with something like mild approval before the penetrating stare moved past him, onto their next victim.

The rest of Heidegger’s speech passed in a haze, Cloud barely noting the propaganda and praises he was spouting for the Shinra Company. Lee was shooting him concerned glances that he ignored, mind fixed on the fact that he had just stared down the General Sephiroth and the man himself had approved. Cloud felt a bit faint.

A Second Class SOLDIER took Heidegger’s place on the podium after the executive ended his speech with a loud Gya haa haa. He introduced himself as Lieutenant Hawk, the man in charge of
this year’s SOLDIER exams. Lieutenant Hawk was brisk and honest, bluntly telling them that they will be going through hell for next months under his tender loving care and by the end of that, they either survive or they will be kicked out. SOLDIER does not accept the weak. He briefed them on the general outline of the training they will be going through and the skeleton structure of their days, as well as the consequences of any rule breaking. The sharp smile he made beneath his helmet made it clear that the punishments would not be fun at all.

Lieutenant Hawk informed them that they have been split into groups for the entire duration of the examinations- their roommates are to be their group mates. Faint murmurs rose around him, and Cloud noted that not everyone were as amiable with their roomies as he was with his own. Already there were displeased looks thrown between some boys grouped together and Cloud made a mental note to avoid the boys shooting the particularly dirty ones. He’d rather take the exams with as little drama as possible, thank you very much.

Lee nudged him and the two friends exchanged grins, happy that they would stay together.

As Cloud laid in his new bed that night, his things neatly put away and new uniform ready to be worn the next morning, he decided that maybe chasing his dreams wouldn’t be as hard as he thought.

Cloud should have known not to jinx himself like that.

Chapter End Notes

Yes! Chapter 4 is out !!!!! *cheering sounds*

This one was a bit harder to write because writing conversations that sound natural is still quite hard for me. (I hope that I got this one right) Characterisation is also another obstacle for me so phrasing what I wanted to say took a while to arrange.

My exams sucked and I'm probably gonna fail at least one because I didn't study for it at all. Sigh.

Anyway, I'm going to be quite busy next week (as usual) so a fast update is unlikely. Hopefully this can tide you over till I can get my mind and my hands aligned with the keyboard.

Cheers to everyone! And have an awesome MayDay.
Cloud hates everything right about now.

Hello everyone!

HSWT has officially passed 100 kudos and 1000 hits! I was so happy when I saw this that I screamed and nearly cried. My family probably thinks that I'm insane lol.

I would like to thank all my supporters and my commenters! I really appreciate every one of you so much. You guys gave me the strength to write this chapter.

Well, right now its 2.30 in the morning and I'm really tired so I'm going to post this chapter first and crash.

Normal disclaimers apply. It's unbetaed so mistakes are all mine.

Cloud never put much stock into the phrase ‘Eat your words’. But now he clearly sees what people mean- like really, really clearly.

Forget what he said about anything being easy. Everything was bloody hard.

Cloud started his first day as a SOLDIER cadet with the klaxons at ass o’clock in the morning. Cloud woke up with a jerk and automatically reached for a knife and a materia he didn't have. He snapped out of his reflexes when his hands closed around empty air and immediately jumped out of bed, tossing on his uniform and stuffed his feet into untied boots. Around him, the other cadets were doing the same, albeit more slowly (Cloud may have spotted one or two nursing their bruised heads, but he wasn't too sure). Surprisingly, Lee had finished around the same time as him and the both of them clumsily herded the other cadets, all half-panicking, half-asleep and half-dressed, clutching the rest of their clothes, out of the building and into the quadrangle- or the Quad as everyone calls it. They jerkily fixed their uniforms while running as best as they could.

There were annoying red flashing lights along all the hallways and in the stairways, and that plus the pounding klaxons nearly drove Cloud insane. The Quad on the other hand, was quiet and bathed in bright white lights from large stadium lights hung atop of tall thick poles, making Cloud squint at the glare as they jogged out of the screaming building. Cloud noticed that they were one
of the first few groups there. There were other cadets in singles and pairs who had ran out of their rooms first, awkwardly standing apart from the groups. Up in front, Lieutenant Hawk was standing at parade rest where the podium had been the day before, observing everyone with sharp eyes under his ever present helmet.

Cloud and his roommates followed the other groups and arranged themselves into messy lines and stood at attention, waiting for inspection. Lieutenant Hawk scanned the whole group, their sloppily thrown on uniforms and hastily tied boots, and gave them a small nod. Cloud sighed softly at that, relieved as the whole group relaxed, stance widening. They imitated Lieutenant Hawk, positioning their hands at the small of their back and spread their legs to shoulder width, standing in silence with the other cadets in the Quad.

Everyone else took a few more minutes to stumble into the Quad, the last cadet dashing in at the ten-minute mark, clothes ruffled and panting harshly like he had just ran a marathon. Lieutenant Hawk watched them with a critical eye over them, noting their blurry eyes and unkept appearances. Some of the cadets hadn’t even bothered to change into their uniforms, standing at attention in their pyjamas. There were others who looked like they had just rolled out of bed- clad in only pants and slippers, and shivering slightly in the cool morning.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” Lieutenant Hawk barked and the whole lot of them jolted in shock. “If this had been an invasion all of you would have been dead by now.” His voice rang clearly across the Quad. No one dared to make a sound, or even breathe too loudly.

Cloud saw the way Lieutenant Hawk pursed his lips into a thin line and it sent a shiver of foreboding down his spine. He had a feeling that things were just about to get worse.

He was right.

“What do you have to say for yourselves?” he snapped and paced along the length of the line-up. “Slow, weak and undisciplined. Completely unfit to be a SOLDIER.” His voice didn’t reach a shout, but it still struck all of them like a physical blow. The crowd shifted uneasily under the intimidating sightless gaze of his helmet. It made them feel as though Lieutenant Hawk was staring right at them. “I want laps around the Quad cadets! Too slow and you run extra. You run until I tell you to stop.” When no one moved, Lieutenant Hawk’s fist suddenly lit up in a crackling ball of electricity and he threw a ball of Thunder at them. “Move!”

Cloud was pretty sure he never ran faster in his life. Gaia damn him- Lieutenant Hawk was a very scary man.
By the second round, there was a clear distinction between the fit and less fit cadets. Cloud and Lee were both keeping pace around the front of the main pack, sweat beading their faces despite the coolness of the morning. The cadets running around them were starting to look tired, panting hard as their feet pounded the concrete. Behind them, Cloud could hear the lieutenant barking orders at the stragglers and throwing low-grade Thunders at their feet. He heard the cadets around him swallow nervously and the entire pack sped up a little.

By the fifth round, Cloud and Lee were leading the main pack. Many of the cadets were unable to keep up with the intense pace and fell behind. (There was an increase in Thunders being thrown). Cloud was starting to get a little tired and there was a stitch growing in his side. He hoped that the lieutenant would end their misery soon because he didn’t know how much longer he could run for. A quick glance at Lee told him that the other boy was feeling the same. Thankfully, as their lap came to an end, Lieutenant Hawk stopped them and the pair gratefully broke away from the runners to jog over to the middle of the Quad where the other cadets have gathered.

Cloud and Lee headed over to their roommates and started stretching- getting a cramp was not something he wanted this early in the day. Cloud looked around and realised that the ones that have been stopped so far were the other groups that had arrived before them, but strangely, the pairs and singles he saw were still running.

Lee happily greeted the their roommates, Cloud giving them a nod. A few had scorch marks on their pants and their hair looked a bit frizzy. Laughing, Lee patted them on the back in congratulations and consolation and nudged them into doing cool down stretches with him. Cloud shook his head at Lee's friendliness and went back to observing the cadets that were still running, leaving Lee to do his stuff.

The seventh round was really taking a toll on the remaining cadets. More than half of the remaining cadets were now gathered in the trailing pack and Lieutenant Hawk was jogging unhurriedly behind them, slinging Thunders at them while shouting more orders and insults without breaking stride- he didn’t even seem winded by the multi-tasking. He noticed that most of the cadets in the trailing pack were running in their slippers. The smarter ones had long kicked theirs off, but there were a stubborn few who refused and Cloud winced at the thought of the chafing going on between their toes.

Lieutenant Hawk kept the cadets running, releasing a group per round depending on how quickly they had come to the quad and their state of dress.

At the end of the eighth round, there were about six groups released and Cloud was becoming a bit bored watching the other cadets run, but he didn’t say anything about it, content to rest after such a rude awakening. Then some idiot had to announce that he was ‘so bored so if the cadets running could hurry up…’
Lieutenant Hawk didn’t even pause for breath before tossing a handful of Thunders at their heads-the entire group ducked hastily- and snapped that ‘if they had so much energy left to complain, they could use it to do push-ups.’

He didn’t mention a number so everyone knew that the push-ups only ended when everyone else had finished running. As one, everyone turned to glare at the idiot- who paled. The cadets who had just completed their run were looking especially murderous. Cloud rolled his eyes and exchanged a commiserating look with Lee who shrugged and gestured at the idiot like ‘what can you do?’ Sighing, Cloud dropped to the ground and started doing his damn push-ups.

The twelfth round came about and there was one last group running- the group of the cadet that was the last to arrive. The cadets were running utterly exhausted, but couldn’t slow down because of the scary ass lieutenant blasting their asses with Thunders. The cadets doing push-ups weren’t doing any better. Their abdominal muscles were shaking and their arms felt like they were seconds away from collapse, but they couldn’t stop either. The first time a cadet had given up and slumped to the ground for more than five seconds nearly had a Thunder to the face. Cloud gritted his teeth and pushed himself up again, muscles trembling with the strain and a small puddle of sweat collecting on the ground. Two hundred and fifteen… Two hundred and sixteen … Two hundred and seventeen … Two hundred and eighteen … When he reached two hundred and fifty, Cloud had thought up thirty-seven different ways to kill that idiot cadet.

It was with a profound sense of relief that the cadets collapsed in a heap when Lieutenant Hawk ordered the last group of cadets to stop running. Cloud was breathless and completely out of energy. Trying to curl his fingers resulted in failure- his arms so weak they couldn’t even shift. Lee was sprawled on the ground beside him, similarly out of breath, but still had the energy to muster up a smile for him.

“That was a nice work out eh, Cloud?”

Cloud closed his eyes and grunted noncommittally. Lee chuckled softly and the both of them dragged each other up reluctantly into their lines when Lieutenant Hawk became impatient and started with the threats.

The whole mass of drained cadets shuffled back to the barracks after a stern lecture from Lieutenant Hawk. He emphasised on the importance of teamwork and always being ready to move at a moment’s notice. They had orders to shower and report back to the Quad at exactly 06 00 where they will be led to the cafeteria, commonly known as the Mess, for breakfast. The orders were delivered with the threat of more running, this time around the entire Shinra compound. Everyone knew that Lieutenant Hawk was being serious. Cloud shuddered. There was no way a man’s smile could be so threatening.
Showering in the common baths was quite a novel experience for Cloud. He had stood awkwardly in the locker room as his group mates stripped unabashedly around him. He fingered his shirt, a little self-conscious of his body after living alone for so long. Lee noticed how nervous he was and hooked an arm around Cloud’s neck to give him a noogie. Cloud batted him away irritably, and Lee smiled widely at him, completely energised again.

“C’mon Cloud just take your clothes off. No one will laugh at you, promise!” he paused. "Unless you have something really embarrassing… like a drunk tattoo.” Lee waggled his eyebrows suggestively and laughed when Cloud shoved him away, mouth twitching at the corners.

Cloud scowled and quickly peeled off his shirt, hating the way he could feel the blush forming from his ears in embarrassment. Lee took Cloud’s shirt, stuffing it into the locker beside his. “That wasn’t so bad, now was it?”

Cloud scowled harder and didn’t answer, pulling off his dirty pants and boxers just as quickly and traded them for a towel. Lee laughed again and dragged Cloud to the showerheads where the rest of the group had already started washing up, trading jokes, conversations and complaints over the rush of cold water.

The rest of the day went along that vein. They eat, Lieutenant Hawk shouts at them, they go through another round of hell, they eat, Lieutenant Hawk shouts at them some more, they sit through an afternoon of introductory talks, they eat, they shower, they have lights out at 23 00. Rinse and repeat, albeit with a more normal wake up time and the klaxons were traded for the reveille- much less annoying but just as shocking.

Cloud went to bed exhausted, both mentally and physically and woke up aching like a giant bruise.

A few things became clearer as the days wore on:

The idiot cadet was still an idiot and often caused them an increase in laps or reps because he said or did something utterly idiotic.

The trailing cadet was very physically weak and usually gave everyone grief because they had to do more reps waiting for him to be done with his laps and do more laps waiting for him to finish his reps.
It was frustrating and completely infuriating. Neither of them were particularly popular with anyone. If Cloud hadn’t had Lee, he was sure that he would have accidentally-on-purpose gutted them during one of their sword spars.

Actually, if Cloud hadn’t had Lee, he probably would have accidentally-on-purpose gutted a lot of people. People like Brute- especially people like Brute.

Brute, as his name suggested, was a complete brute. He was passable in his studies, and takes some time to grasp new concepts, but that’s okay, materia theory wasn’t for everyone. He was also about three times the size of Cloud with hands capable of crushing his skull between their giant digits. Not to mention that he was a bully who like to pick on the little guys- which to be frank, wasn’t that much of a surprise considering his propensity to brag about his accomplishments and physical prowess. One of the ‘little guys’ was, of course, Cloud who was the littlest in this year’s batch of recruits. That guy was obviously compensating for something and trying very hard to feel good about himself.

Cloud was serious when he said that he wanted to take the exams with as little drama as possible, but it was becoming increasingly hard to resist the urge to roast Brute’s and the balls of the rest of his little gang with a Firaga or pound them into the mat during spars.

The bullying started out small- a leg tripping him here, a harder-than-needed shove there for the first week. Then it escalated. The first time Cloud came back from a trip to the toilet with a black eye forming, Lee had snarled like a pissed-off cat and clucked at Cloud like a over protective mother chocobo. Cloud refused to say who did it, but Lee was quite observant himself and he had caught the times where Cloud had “tripped” or when he had “stumbled” so he knew who did it and Lee wasn’t happy at all. Cloud’s group mates had also caught on quickly afterwards, and having grown fond of Cloud from their time together through hell, were nearly as protective of him as Lee. They had taken to spending as much time with him as possible so he wouldn’t be caught alone with Brute, but Brute was smart when he needed to be and he and his gang often found ways to corner Cloud when he was alone.

That was when the strange things started to happen.

The first came after one particularly tiring day. They had a weekly assessment on all of their physical courses, so Cloud spent the entire day sparring with either his fists or his sword. Unfortunately, he was unlucky enough to be paired with one of Brute’s groupies during one of the assessments, and while he had won, the groupie had gotten a few good shots in and Cloud could already feel the bruises forming on his bones.

That night when he came back to his bunk early, someone had left a medium-sized jar neatly labeled ‘Bruise Salve’ on his pillow. Cloud looked at the jar distrustingly, suspicious of the
mysterious gift, and spent a good few minutes nudging the jar with a long stick, just in case it was a bomb meant to kill him. Once he was satisfied the jar wasn't going to kill him via a violent explosion, Cloud had cautiously opened the jar and took a whiff of the cream. The first scent that hit him was the strong smell of green tea, but Cloud hadn't spent most of his childhood collecting herbs without learning what they smelt like. Under the near overpowering smell of the tea, there was a subtle hint of Asfel in the cream. The tension bunched in Cloud relaxed at the crisp scent.

Asfel was a rare, expensive healing herb that grows exclusively on the peaks of the mountainous ranges of Wutai and Mt. Nibel. They only grew on mako-contaminated soil, which makes them extra hard to find and cultivate properly. Ten grams of the herb costs at least three times as much as any other herb on the market. Cloud himself had a small fortune of Asfel stored in a small box in the false base of his locker.

Asfel in any form, being a mako-grown super healing herb, also reacts explosively with all types of poisons so Cloud had no doubts that the bruise salve was safe for him to use. Carefully dabbing a small amount of cream on the worst of his bruises, Cloud watched in amazement when his skin tingled and the dark purple splotches were reduced to a light yellow. Whoever had made the salve had put a shit-ton of Asfel into it. Cloud felt a bit touched, but also wary. Who would willingly spend so much money on him?

When Lee and his other group mates came back from their own assessments, Cloud was already ready for bed, jar of salve nowhere in sight. Lee did his usual end-of-the-day checks to make sure Cloud hadn't been injured further, and he found nothing but unblemished pale skin- the bruises were completely gone. Satisfied, Lee went off to get ready for bed. They laid down in their bunks and talked about their day, swapping stories before lights out. Cloud didn't mention anything a single thing about the jar of salve. He felt a bit guilty, but something told him that he couldn't tell Lee. If this person was resourceful enough to learn his schedule and his daily life well enough to enter his bunk and leave him such an expensive and rare gift undetected, Cloud doubted that Lee would be safe from them if he inevitably tried to investigate deeper into the matter. Cloud would just have to find out by himself.

Then another strange thing happened again.

Chapter End Notes

I had a bit of trouble writing this chapter. I had to keep rewriting because the plots changed so much and I couldn't focus on the screen and my sentences because I kept dozing off.

I'm hoping that the next chapter will come to me more easily.

P.S. I'm happy to announce that I passed all of my exams!!! So a giant thank you to everyone who were concerned.
EDIT: 11.5.16 (Finally managed to finish the edits without falling asleep)
Get Angry, Solve a Mystery

Chapter Summary

Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

Normal disclaimers. Un-betaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Reno was good at being a Turk- excellent at it even. Need to assassinate someone? He’s your man. Need to get information out of a super-secure facility? Give him the name and you’ll have it within a week or less. Need to hack a computer? He could do it right here, right now. Ask, with the right amount of money and he’ll do it for you, and if he can’t, he’d ask (read: blackmail) someone to do it for you. Either way, he'll get the job done.

Being a Turk was easy- it’s nice; a very welcomed change from the slums under the plate. He gets a roof over his head, three meals a day, a steady income and a much longer life expectancy. Not only that, the best thing about being a Turk was that he gets a family he never had- a little dysfunctional, but still a family that he treasures with all the heart he has left. He honestly never thought that he could ever get something like this; not until a scary Wutai dude he tried to pickpocket on a dare picked him off the street and dumped his filthy ass in front of the head Turk.

Gaia bless Tseng.

Reno unashamedly admits that he was a great hellion to everyone those few months into Turk initiation (A.K.A death camp). But in his defence, the initiation itself wasn’t a very nice process either and he guessed that his hellion ways had paid off, seeing that he was here in a Turk suit and the other initiates were either six feet under or locked tight under nondisclosure agreements. He concedes that he may or may not have caused Tseng early wrinkles and grey hair- plausible deniability and all that jazz. The law jargons were mostly Rude’s strong suit.

Other than Tseng (the Bossman) who he totally loves in a completely platonic way, there was Rude, his partner- the bestest partner anyone could ever wish for. Man, Gaia bless Rude too, that big softie. Rude can deny it all he likes, but Reno was a hundred percent sure that he saw him happily playing with the village kids that one time they visited Kalm.
Now, back to the Bossman. A Gaia-sent he was, a saint he was not. You should hear the company gossip about that guy. In terms of sheer intimidation, Tseng was nearly on par with the SOLDIER generals. Reno always loved to use the ‘If you don’t wanna tell me, I could always get Tseng.’ line to intimidate people into talking. Works ever time. (Shut up Rude. If it works, don’t question the method.)

Apparently, if you were to believe the rumours, the Bossman once went on a mission to Nibelheim during a blizzard and survived the sub-zero hostile conditions wearing only his Turk suit. He also defeated a feral, fully-grown Nibel dragon and a pack of mako-crazed Nibel wolves together with only his bare hands. There was a group of cadets who swore up and down that they once saw the Bossman make a notorious gangster boss cry in less than ten seconds then proceeded to single-handedly take on and destroy the rest of the man’s gang without breaking a sweat.

Reno cackled loudly to himself, leaning back on his office chair and spun around obnoxiously with his legs splayed- just because he could. How ridiculous. The Bossman was good- scarcely efficient and horrendously competent at everything- but he didn’t think that any of that was possible for a non-mako enhanced person… Well, except for the one about making the gangster boss cry. That once was quite believable. The Bossman… was very good at making people cry with only his works. Veld always loved to send Tseng when that time of the year for budget meetings rolled around again. There was a reason why the budget for the Department of Administrative Research was secretly the largest behind the Science Department. The Military and Weapons Development Department may pretend all they like, but the Turk’s budget had been higher than theirs for the past three years.

Reno, being the rebel that he was, almost always gets into trouble, which leads him to getting a long rehearsed dressing down from Tseng at the end of the day. Rude, being the awesome partner he was never leaves Reno to get scolded alone. Reno was this close to proclaiming his eternal love for that guy. They must have been soul mates in another life.

Anyway, he’s getting off track. The year after he became an official Turk was one of the most blissful years of his life- until the week of the opening of the SOLDIER applications.


Seriously. It was even worse than that time he had to dress in drag and hide in the Honeybee Inn for five whole agonising days (don’t ask). It had been horrifically traumatic. Everyday was just work, work and more work. Just when he thinks that he’d finished his pile, a gopher comes by to dump another pile on his desk. Gaia damn these SOLDIER wannabes.
When day three of Hell Week dawned, Reno was so ready to set his whole desk on fire just to get away from the disgusting paperwork. But being a total mind reader, Tseng glared at him from his office and very calmly told him to get back to work. Honestly, what must a guy do to get a break around here?

Then something worse happened. The Bossman became *cranky*. It was Reno’s worst nightmares come true. As Hell Week progressed, the Bossman just became more and more irritable. And when the Bossman gets irritated, he gets *mean*. On a particularly bad day, Reno honest-to-Gaia saw the Bossman make fifteen different people cry. He would swear on his custom made electric rod that one of them was a SOLDIER Third. It wasn’t even a sniffling kind of crying, but an all out bawling, questioning-your-usefulness-in-life kind of crying. Turk recruits were dropping out left and right like flies hit with pesticide.

Reno was utterly terrified.

Rude was just mystified at his partner’s sudden good behaviour, but being the greatest partner he was, he just shrugged and went on with his work. Reno was definitely buying a wedding ring for him the moment they get some free time. Do wedding earrings count?

Reno prayed for a miracle to happen every night.

And a miracle came.

The Bossman came into the office one morning with a *smile*. A smile! Reno had shocked himself with his electric rod to make sure that he wasn’t dreaming. The smile wasn’t really noticeable, but Reno spent a better part of the year learning how to read the Bossman’s limited facial expressions and that small tick of his lips was practically a beaming grin. Reno just *had* to find out what made the Bossman so happy.

Did he finally get laid? Find The One? Get the jackpot in the lottery? Reno was dying of curiosity, but he knew better than to snoop around his desk. The Bossman *always* knew when someone touched his stuff. He learnt his lesson from the last time he tried to snoop. (Let’s just say that the sewers are an awful place to do missions in and leave it at that)

He even calmly (not)-shouted at Reno to redo his paperwork only *once*. It was creepy. He asked around, but it seemed like nobody knew why the Bossman was in such a good mood. It doesn’t matter. Reno will be watching him carefully and the Bossman will definitely slip up sooner or later. He could be patient when he wanted to.
Cloud glared at the innocent package resting on his bunk. It dully stared back at him. Cloud rubbed his eyes and slowly counted backward from ten. Nope, it was still there, in all its plain paper glory. Cloud paced from one side of his bunk to the other, examining the package in all directions, but nothing could prove that it was anything other than an ordinary square box wrapped in brown paper and woollen twine. It was ordinary enough, commonly found in any shop above the plate, but what had Cloud so suspicious was the fact that he knew of no reason why someone would give him a gift- and also that he was reasonable sure that this was from the same person who had given him that salve.

Once was bad enough, but twice? This was serious.

Plucking up his courage, Cloud carefully pulled on the twine and unwrapped the package. A thick blanket fell out, as well as six vials containing strange liquids and a weird bracelet that had two semi-spherical indents of about an inch in diameter. Cloud picked up the vials first. Just as he had suspected, the same neat handwriting greeted him. The six vials were each labelled ‘Potion’, ‘Hi-Potion’, ‘Ether’, ‘Elixir’, ‘Antidote’ and ‘Remedy’.

Cloud stared, gobsmacked, at the vials in his hands and boggled at the amount of money that had just been given to him. If he remembered correctly, the Ether alone cost about one thousand and five hundred Gil and the Remedy added another thousand Gil to the whole package.

Cloud… was struck speechless. Just who was sending him these things?

He placed the vials aside- he’d think about it later. Right now he was still in shock. Picking up the bracelet, he turned the odd thing in his hands. It was made of steel and gold with titanium lining the indents, curving outwards like a mini clasp. Cloud slid the bracelet onto his wrist and it rested a little loosely on his bony wrists. Looking closer, Cloud realised that the indents were the perfect size to fit his materia. Fishing one from his locker, Cloud slid it into one of the indents and it fixed into place with a soft click. Almost instantly, Cloud could feel the power of the Fire materia swirling through the bracelet, waiting for his command. He marvelled at the bracelet, popping out the materia and popping it back in just to feel the rush of power, ready for him to use.

A memory surfaced in his mind, unbidden.

A chat beside a roaring fire, feeling more relaxed than he had for a long time- a sense of
annoyance at the strange man-Tseng- sitting across him.

‘What did you equip it with?’

Cloud didn’t know what the Hel he meant by equip so he said exactly that to Tseng, watching with a bit of satisfaction when Tseng’s eyebrow rose in surprise.

Was this what he meant? Cloud took off the bracelet again and turned it here and there, watching the shiny metal reflect the artificial lights above head. The accessory looked brand new and very expensive. Cloud licked his lips nervously, rubbing the smooth face of the bracelet with his thumb. He set the bracelet aside with the vials and picked up the final item from the package- the blanket.

In contrast with the other gifts this one looked the least expensive, but it was still worth a lot, in terms of sentimental value. The blanket was obviously old and home made, soft cotton patches sewed together lovingly to make a beautiful patchwork of colours and material to form a large, thick, cosy quilt. Cloud ran a finger down the stitches. Some of them were uneven and roughly done. There were patches of cloth that were sewn together using the same thread, but they were clearly different than other patches, some looking older as though the quilt was made bits at a time then sewn together. Cloud also spotted some areas where some of the stitches were pulled out and redone or were pulled too tightly. Underneath the patchwork, a different material served as a bottom layer, sealing in the feathers stuffed into the quilt. It was a half-silky half-grainy material that shifted easily under Cloud’s hands. From the stitching at the corners, Cloud could tell that the second layer was only added recently, much later after the original layer was completed.

Cloud folded back the blanket and pressed it to his lap, thinking hard to himself. He picked at the blanket, rubbing it between his fingers. Could it be a gift from a friend? Cloud half dismissed that thought. There was no way that Lee or any of his group mates could afford any of the gifts, even if they had pooled their money together. But then, the was one other…

The foreign silky material became whole easily under his needle and thread. Cloud looked over to the sleeping man laid across the furs not two metres away and went back to mending the torn clothing.

‘Tseng of the Turks, nice to meet you.’

Cloud mentally laughed at the weird name, and offered Tseng of the Turks some wolf meat.

‘Turk is another name for the Department of Administrative Research of the Shinra Electric Power Company.’

Affection, comfort.

Don’t go so soon.

We’ll meet again.
Cloud shook his head and scoffed to himself. As if that was remotely possible. Gaia only knew if Tseng would even still remember that kid from some cold ass mountain he nearly died on.

Cloud heard footsteps coming down the corridor and quickly packed up the gifts, storing them neatly in the false bottom of his locker with the half-empty jar of bruise salve and the box of Asfel.

Not a second later, Lee and his group mates burst the room to drag him out for their next class, chatting happily about how he had finally managed to master that flip he had been agonising over for the past week. Cloud smiled a little under the easy conversation. All thoughts of the gifts were pushed to the back of his mind for later examination.

_________

There was a prickling feeling at the back of his neck.

Someone was watching him.

Cloud casually glanced around him, but couldn’t spot anything out of the ordinary. His eyes narrowed. That was the third time in a day he felt that someone was staring at him. At first the feeling hadn’t been so obvious, but as he settled into his routines and became more comfortable with the area, instincts honed by years of hunting and being hunted zeroed in on the observing presence. The person didn’t have any malicious intent, if not Cloud would have noticed the person a lot sooner, but it was persistent and a complete unknown, which set Cloud on edge. His fingers itched for his knives and materia, but they were still safely stored in his locker.

Cloud’s brows furrowed in mild annoyance. The prickling feeling had come and gone for the past week or two and it was driving him to near paranoia. Lee had taken to following him around more when he realised that Cloud was flinching at nothing during random moments of the day, sometimes acting completely normal for a couple of days before that agitated buzz caught up with him again. Cloud appreciated his concern, but the situation was driving him to wits end. He felt boxed in and suspicious at everything and everyone. The mysterious, expensive gifts hadn’t helped any, even if they were useful.

The prickling sensation was back and Cloud immediately whirled around, ignoring Lee’s indignant squawk at being ignored, and scanned the long walkway. He spotted a person turning away, rounding the corner at the end of the hall, a familiar blue cloth fluttering behind them.
Cloud let out a silent snarl and sprinted after the stranger- his stalker, dodging the other cadets, Lee running after him, shouting out questions. Cloud gritted his teeth and slid past the corner, boots squeaking on the floor as he caught his footing and abruptly changed directions, only to slam headfirst into someone’s chest.

“Woah there! Careful with where you’re going, squirt. What’s gotten you in such a rush?”

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

I'm very pleased to have been able to push this chapter out. This week hadn't been the greatest for me. I had a couple of bad days and two national exams to sit for so I wasn't sure that I'd be able to write this one out. But ta da! I made it! *Jazz hands*

I hope that you guys liked this chapter. Things are about to go up a hill... probably if everything goes to plan.

I would like to thank all of my fans again. You guys have been such a great help and have no idea how happy your kudos and comments have made me. Love you all.
Chapter Summary

Cloud can never ever become an actor. Ever.

Chapter Notes

Gods above. It took me *so long* to get this chapter out. I had a writer's worst nightmare: a writer's block and I was *this* close to tearing my hair out. Luckily it turned out somewhat okay? I guess.

I felt that this chapter isn't as good as the others, but I really can't make myself rewrite it. Gods it should never take this much effort to churn out 3K words. I feel wrung out.

For those who commented, thank you. Really, thanks so much. I'm so happy to see how much you all love this fic. It means a lot. T_T

Normal disclaimers apply and un-betaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*ShitShitShitShit*

*Gaia. May the Hel strike me down where I stand.*

“I- I- uhh... umm. S- Sir!” Cloud stuttered and snapped to attention, mentally flailing for something to say. He had just ran into **SOLDIER Second Lieutenant Zack Fair** and Cloud thinks that now would be a great time for the floor to swallow him up. *Someone save me from this embarrassment.* Beside him, Lee hastily snapped into a salute too, but Zack just waved a hand at them, smiling brightly.

“At ease, guys. No need to be so stiff.”

Despite the reassurance, Cloud posture remained rigid, cold sweat beading his forehead. Gaia his nose was throbbing. Running into his chest felt like being smashed into a wall. His hands clenched tightly behind him in worry. Would Lieutenant Fair write him up for this? He seemed nice enough, but Cloud had seen more than one person effortlessly hide their cruelty behind a kind smile.
Lee frowned at how Cloud was panicking through the haze of his own mental freak out and clenched his teeth, eyes scanning their surroundings for any excuse at all to leave this conversation. Around them, the few people walking along the hallway either ducked their heads and walked faster, or turned to their friends and started whispering. No one made a move to help them. Cowards.

Zack cheerfully continued, either blissfully oblivious or just blatantly ignoring their nervousness. “So, what are your names?”

Lee broke out of his searching and spoke up first, subtly taking a few steps to put Cloud behind him, eying Zack warily. “Cadet Lee Thaur and Cadet Cloud Strife, sir.”

Zack’s smile widened and he rocked back on his heels, leisurely swinging his hands up to rest behind his head. “Ah, just call me Zack. Sir makes me feel so old and stuffy,” he laughed.

Both boys nodded at Zack awkwardly, Cloud shuffling forward slightly to lightly press against Lee’s arm. Lee nudged back in return and leaned a bit to the side to shield Cloud a little more with his body.

“So, why were you guys running in the hallways? I’m pretty sure Jay gave a whole long speech on hallway rules and other stuff like that in the first week.”

Lee and Cloud exchanged confused glances and looked back at Zack in askance. “Jay?”

Zack’s eyes lighted up and he scratched the back of his head. “Oh yeah! He’s Lieutenant Hawk? I think. The super strict SOLDIER that acts like he has a stick up his ass?” He tapped his chin, thinking aloud. “Actually, I can’t believe that Sephiroth assigned him as SOLDIER in charge. That man’s worse than Angeal about rules and regulations.”

Lee and Cloud blanched in horror at the casual way that Zack was insulting Lieutenant Hawk and edged slightly away from the Zack, the dead man walking. Every single cadet swore that Lieutenant Hawk was the devil reincarnate. He was just that awful. They casted furtive glances around as though the man in question might appear out of nowhere and order them to run laps for the disrespect. They had seen many cadets being made to run until they puked for the slightest hint of sass and it wasn’t something they wanted to bring upon themselves.

Cloud bit his lip, thinking hard. He couldn’t exactly tell Zack that he was chasing a person who he
suspected had been leaving him outrageously expensive presents and stalking him on and off for the past two weeks or more. Cloud’s pretty sure that mental instability was a valid reason to get thrown out of the SOLDIER for. But he had to tell the lieutenant something. Fortunately, just as he was about to answer, a distant call broke through the invisible bubble surrounding the trio.

“Cloud! Lee! C’mon we’re gonna be late for Physical.”

Zack jolted in surprised and laughed again. “Oh wow. You guys better get going then. I wouldn’t want to make the both of you late.”

Both boys mentally sagged in relief and saluted, heading off with a sharp “Yes sir!”

“Try not to run in the halls anymore! You might end up crashing into Sephiroth next!” Zack called at their backs, chuckling when Cloud missed a step and stumble over his own feet, his ears burning red at the thought. Lee quickly caught his arm and pulled him up. As they turned the corner, John, one of their group mates, was anxiously waiting for them. They clapped his shoulder gratefully for the save and the three quickly lopped off to class. Captain Kee was pretty anal about punctuality.

Zack watched them leave until they turned the corner before turning away. He nonchalantly strolled for about a minute before casually commenting, “You know, that was a really close call. He nearly caught you there.” Mako-blue eyes cut to the side where a black suit-clad man had fallen into step with him. “Why not just introduce yourself to him? The poor kid looked so paranoid. You’re freaking him out.”

Tseng returned his look, his face blank except for a raised eyebrow. “And what makes you think that he would remember a stranger from an encounter years ago?”

Zack laughed loudly, slapping Tseng lightly on the shoulder that would have pitched a normal person face-first to the floor. “How could anyone forget the infamous Tseng of the Turks? Your rumours are like legendary. Even the people in the slums know who you are.”

Tseng didn’t say anything, but the small twitch of his eyebrow gave him away.

“Seriously? He doesn’t know?” Zack exclaimed, whirling around to face Tseng. “He has no idea
that he has the Tseng of the Turks stalking him around like a baby chocobo?”

When Tseng remained silent, Zack drew back with a loud gasp. “Oh, that’s rich!” He crowed, cackling like a lunatic in the middle of the empty corridor.

Tseng tsked in annoyance and stalked down the corridor, leaving Zack behind.

Calming down, Zack ran after Tseng, wiping the tears from his eyes. “Well, you’d better reintroduce yourself soon or else he’s going to go crazy from paranoia and hunt you down. Then he’ll get mad and you’ll be dead.”

Tseng cut him a harsh glare that completely slid off Zack’s bubbly grin, but did not contradict him. He knew that he should, except that there was a niggling doubt at the back of his mind that stilled his legs whenever he tried to walk over and introduce himself. What if the only person who had ever made him feel so comfortable did not remember him at all? Tseng was pretty sure that it would crush his blackened heart.

Zack slung an arm around Tseng’s shoulder and walked on, dragging him along and whistled merrily to himself, completely oblivious to Tseng’s mental turmoil.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Tseng thought. ‘As long as he is safe I will happily remain unknown, even if he might kill me in the future.’ He paused, remembering a young Cloud being extremely familiar with Nibel wolves and winced. ‘Hopefully he will make it painless.’

Cloud was vibrating excitedly in his seat. They were finally going to be using materia! After two months of mind numbing materia theory and running through hypothetical situations, they were deemed prepared enough to have their first (for most) shot at materia. Of course, there were those who have SOLDIER relatives or had excess to materia even before entering Shinra and so were better versed in using materia. Cloud could already hear some cadets boasting about their past experiences to their group mates- Brute was especially loud, recounting the time where he had managed to produce a Fira. There had also been faint grumblings about the unfairness of it all among some the remaining cadets and Cloud frowned slightly to himself.

Sure, it places them at an advantage, but one of the first things they learnt about materia was that not everyone can use it and sometimes, there are people who can use certain materia better than
others. People can train for years and years, yet still remain less proficient than someone training for a few weeks. Materia usage was only trainable to a certain extent. Their instructor had emphasised strongly that it was all about the potential a person had.

A cadet’s potential in using materia was also one of the qualities that Shinra looks for in a SOLDIER candidate. There was a possibility for an inept materia user to become a SOLDIER, but they must have exceptional skills with a sword, and in very rare cases, with a gun. SOLDIERs are required to be able to use materia primarily so that they could heal themselves if needed. The SOLDIERs who had a large potential for materia were placed under General Rhapsodos while those talented with a blade were placed under General Hewley. SOLDIERs who were not skilled enough in either to specialise were placed under General Sephiroth. However, such positions under the different generals were fluid and interchangeable unless you were an apprentice.

The cadets filed into the classroom, a majority of them rather impatient to try materia for the first time. They lined up at parade-rest in a single row along one length of the room, Lee and Cloud standing side by side. The cadets faced their stern-faced instructor, schooling their faces in a stoic mask as best as they could, their excitement slipping through the cracks.

“Before we begin, there will be three rules that everyone must remember.” Their materia instructor barked. “Number one. Never, under any circumstances are any of you allowed to use materia without permission or supervision.” Sharp eyes scanned the entire line of cadets, sometimes briefly landing on the potential troublemakers for a split second before moving on. “Number two. When using materia, never aim it at another person. The results may be… unpleasant” He narrowed his eyes at them. “Number three. No materia from this case is to ever leave this room.” His hand thumped the long rectangular case resting on the table. “If anyone breaks these rules for whatever reason, I don’t give a damn. You will be placed under General Rhapsodos as his bitch until you take the exam.” If you survive it went unsaid, but everyone understood.

General Rhapsodos was notoriously the fiercest general out of the three. Any cadet punished to be his bitch had an average quitting probability of eighty percent. The last twenty percent either mysteriously vanished or were demoted to infantry even before the exams started. No one messed with General Rhapsodos. Honestly, after the Firaga run rumours, no cadet wanted to even contemplate the possibility of pissing him off (which unfortunately, was a very easy task to accomplish).

The instructor opened the metal case, revealing three neat rows of ten green materia resting in semi-spherical holes pressed into the metal. The entire class of twenty collectively gaped at the glowing orbs, and the whispers started up again. Cloud smiled a bit when Lee nudged him in the side excitedly, bouncing on the balls of his feet as though he wanted to rush forward and grab the materia. He himself felt his hand itch for his own materia locked up safely in his locker, his trusty companions for years. He did not want the materia in front of him. Not when his felt so much better. Even without touching the orbs, Cloud knew that they were manufactured. He could feel that the orbs weren’t thrumming right, a bit out of sync and off rhythm, unlike those found naturally in caves. Cloud had first learnt of this difference when he was travelling, exploring
different towns and weapons shops to sell his wares. Many of such shops had cases of artificial materia bought cheaply in bulk from Shinra. After being chased out of the first few shops for saying that their materia felt wrong, Cloud learnt to keep his mouth shut on such topics. Now the weird thrums of manufactured materia felt nearly as familiar as the soothing ones of natural materia.

Everyone went forward eagerly to grab a materia and a bangle each, marvelling at the beautiful crystal and strange bangle. Cloud ran a finger along his bangle, tracing out the cracks and chips in the metal. It looked as though it had been through many different users before falling into his hands. It seemed that President Shinra was as stingy as always, if this is the type of equipment they will be using. The bangle looked so different than the one his mysterious stalker had given to him. Cloud brought up his other hand to examine the materia next. It had the same discordance as all manufactured materia and Cloud frowned at how unresponsive the mana within it was to his prodding. Fire. It was a fire materia. It almost felt as though it was reluctant to be used, wishing to stay within the small sphere. Cloud scratched the surface of his materia, feeling out the hairline cracks in the orb, the result of years of rough manhandling.

Lee was tossing his from palm to palm, occasionally bringing the materia up to the light to admire its shine. “Say, Cloud. What kind of materia do you think this is?” Lee asked. “Wouldn’t it be cool if it was an ice materia? Maybe we could accidentally freeze off Brute’s face.”

Cloud gave Lee a curious look. “You don’t know what kind of materia this is?”

“No? I mean we did learn that it would normally take a person a lot of practice before they could easily tell different materias apart.”

Cloud pursed his lips. He remembered now- he hadn’t been paying much attention during that lecture because Brute had cornered him again that morning and he was left nursing a throbbing head the rest of the day. It made concentrating in lessons really hard.

He shook his head at Lee. “It’s a fire materia.”

Lee’s eyebrows rose. “You can tell them apart?”

Cloud blushed lightly in embarrassment. “Yeah. Well, I’ve been used them before.” He fibbed.

“Ahh.” Lee nodded, a bit to himself, and went on chatting.
Cloud did not mention that he had always been able to tell materia apart. When he first stumbled upon them, he had gotten impressions of what they were and somehow instinctively knew what they could do. Like a time materia felt slow and a poison materia felt vaguely sick.

Attention is bad. Attention is bad. Attention is bad.

And so Cloud kept silent and gave Lee his usual short replies. No one noticed the troubled look on his face.

Pass the exams with as little drama as possible. You only have one month left to go. One month. One month.

A loud whistle broke them out of their conversation and everyone’s heads snapped up to face his instructor again. “Alright cadets. I will first demonstrate how to make a Fire only once then it will be your turn to do it.”

The entire room fell silent and the cadets watched with bated breath as the instructor gather his mana to the materia in his bangle. He gave them a verbal step-by-step description of what he was doing with his mana as he slowly moulded it to become a Fire. There was a loud gasp when a small fireball about the size of a golf ball shot from his hand and dissipated harmlessly in mid air.

“There. Do it like how I just did. I will be going around to help so keep practicing.” He gave the class one last sweep. “Remember it is all about the potential. Not everyone will get it in this lesson.”

The cadets scrambled to line up properly in a single file, about a meter away from the wall. Cloud and Lee were jostled until they ended up near the tail end of the line. As the cadets started practicing, Cloud came to a horrible realisation that the ease at which he used materia did not apply to everyone else. There had been a few smoking palms and small fires from the cadets that had the opportunity to use a materia before, but that was it. Cloud knew that he could produce a small Fira easy even without the bangle. His frown deepened. This was not what he wanted.

Attention is bad. Attention is bad.

The instructor—really, for the life of him, he couldn’t remember his name—went around giving instructions and congratulated a particularly smug looking Brute for the small flames being
released from his palm sporadically. Cloud started to sweat. Should he fake it?

“Hey Cloud, are you okay?” Lee asked, concerned.

_Attention is bad. Attention is bad._

“Ye- yeah.” Cloud gave him a shakey smile. “It just harder than I remembered it to be.”

Lee laughed, ruffling his hair. Cloud batted his hand away with a huff. “It’s okay Cloud. Just try your best. I’m having trouble too!” And he turned back to the wall.

Cloud looked down at his bangle and carefully drew on his mana, gathering it at the bangle for the materia to convert it before releasing it in a slow trickle from his palm. To his satisfaction only a long, thin wisp of smoke appeared and he had to duck his head to hide his smile.

_Attention is bad._

Lee ruffled his hair in comfort, assuming that Cloud was trying to hide that he was upset by the result. Cloud did not correct him. He resolved to ‘try’ a couple more times before faking exhaustion to make him seem more believable- as that was the case with all beginner users. So Cloud gathered his mana for a second round, getting another long wisp and wiped the sweat off his brow with obvious effort. It took a surprising amount of work to fake not being able to use materia. He had gotten so used to just pumping a set amount of mana that his mana automatically surged to his palm the moment he tried to connect to the materia. Cloud looked at the clock, and realised that the lesson was over. Ten more minutes left. He might just make it through this unnoticed.

Cloud should really stop jinxing himself.

He concentrated again, taking his time in gathering his mana, and split his attention to scan the classroom. Many of the cadets were already starting to sag from repeated exertion of their mana. Using mana was like a muscle, repeated usage would equate to an increase in ease of materia use, but leave it alone for too long and you skills would ‘atrophy’.

Cloud was getting ready to release another wisp of smoke when there was a loud bang as the doors were flung open and a voice boomed across the entire classroom.
“YOU! What the hell do you think you are doing?”

Cloud’s heart dropped all the way to the pit of his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

Guess who that is. *Wink wink*

Cloud should learn to lie better. Hahahaha.

Ta daa! The big stalker reveal (but I'm pretty sure all of ya'll already knew who he was). Haha what an awkward turtle. I laughed as I typed that entire part out. Cloud is going to eviscerate him once he finds out.

I was watching Advent Children to get inspiration for this chapter and I nearly died. I was screaming when Sephiroth appeared (even though I knew that he was going to turn up).

Then I got this impression that Cloud really cannot hide things from other people properly. I mean everyone knew that he had Geostigma and had self-worth issues a mile wide.

Then Vincent. Oh my god Vincent. I went straight to dying when he turned up like a boss. Gods save me.

I was kind of disappointed that they didn't show more of Tseng. (Evidently he is one of my favs) But I will try my best to get him as in character as I can make him.

Goodness characterisations bite me through the ass. Conversations gouge my eyeballs out. I literally walked away from my com once because I was like Nope. But I prevailed! In a way. Now I'm going to sleep and hope that I have energy in the morning. *Crossing fingers*
Cloud has issues that are about to be blown up into bigger issues.

Cloud did not dare turn around.

The man’s voice reverberated repeatedly through his head like the loud gong on the twelve-noon mark at the start of every month, or the klaxons that rained hell upon his ears on his first night in Shinra.

‘He’d been found out.’ He thought with detached horror, the thought colouring his vision with grey. His mind went hazy at that. Cloud could not think of anything other than the fact that his lies were about to be exposed. Just like that.

Stop. I don’t want attention. Attention is bad. Attention is bad.

Cloud stood there, frozen like water at the peaks of the Nibel Mountains; heart pounding a thousand beats per second, closely resembling the beats of the wings of a hummingbird. His heart was hammering the bones and muscles of his rib cage so strongly, he felt that it might beat its way out through his chest. Cloud could feel the sweat beading on the surface of his cold, trembling palms and the icy cold dread that lanced straight through his body like he was impaled upon a spear made from the coldest ice of Shiva’s icy breath. His breath came out in short puffs- wheezing- his throat constricting until he could barely breathe, gasping and gasping and gasping for air.

This isn’t happening. Please, please tell me this isn’t happening. Gaia he couldn’t breathe.
“That one! You, at the- ughk!” The booming voice was suddenly cut off with a choked gurgle and the room doors were swung shut almost immediately after that.

Murmurs rose among the cadets.

“Did you see that?”

“I think-”

“Was that General Rhapsodos-”

“That scared me so bad-”

“Who do you -”

“Did you see who pulled-”

“Man he looked angry-”

“Wasn’t-”

“Hey, Cloud? Cloud? Buddy, c’mon look at me. Deep breaths now.” Cloud was peripherally aware of the soothing tones of Lee’s voice, pitched low for privacy and laced heavily with concern, being directed at him. He was a little busy trying to see straight, his head felt as light as the first time the boys took him out drinking. The hangover felt like a Behemoth was rampaging through his skull.

“Breathe with me Cloud. In six… hold three… out six. C’mon you can do this.” a larger hand wrapped around his, pressing it against a chest rising and falling with exaggerated movements. As if on reflex, Cloud paced his breathing similarly- in six, hold, out six and repeat. Slowly, so agonisingly slowly, his vision returned to him, piece by piece like a jigsaw puzzle. The colours stopped blending, lines becoming more defined until his brain finally registered what he was seeing. He realised dazedly that he was tucked under Lee’s chin in a loose hug, hands pressed
against his chest, turned away from the other cadets and the instructor- who were still quite distracted by General Rhapsodos’ sudden entrance and disappearance. To them, Lee merely seemed to be helping Cloud adjust his bangle. Some of their group mates had also taken upon themselves to subtly position themselves around the pair, blocking other people from seeing them easily. Cloud slowly released a breath, burying his head into Lee’s chest in embarrassment, mumbling out an apology.

Lee pushed him to arms length, “No need to apologise Cloud- happens to the best of us.” He chuckled, but his eyes were still concerned and his hands were still supporting some of Cloud’s weight, as if he was scared that Cloud might collapse on him at any moment. Their group mates nodded in agreement, some ruffling his hair in silent encouragement before quietly moving back to their original positions like nothing ever happened. Cloud scowled and tried with futile effort to smooth his hair back into their normal spikes. Lee laughed, slowly letting go of him then, a bit more confident that he was not about to tip over without support.

Cloud wiped off his sweaty palms on his cargos, “What happened?” He asked softly.

Lee gave him one last sweeping check. “General Rhapsodos suddenly burst into the room like a madman, and then someone outside grabbed him and pulled him out of the room. There was a short fight I think, because there was this giant fireball that flew past the door before the doors banged shut.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully, directing narrowed eyes at Cloud. Are you gonna tell me what just happened?

Cloud shrugged and jerked his head to the right. Later. Back in the room. Lee frowned, but did not push the subject, instead linking his arms with Cloud and half-supported him to the centre of the room where everyone had gathered. Their instructor summarily dismissed them from class for the day. Materia and bangles were returned into their cases, and the cadets warily made their way to the door. A few brave souls cracked open the door and popped their head out into the hallway. Other than the large scorch marks on the walls, the area was devoid of life and evidence that a fight had taken place. Satisfied, the cadets hurriedly split off to their next class.

Genesis was not having a good day.

First, he had to burn his favourite leather coat because he had gotten burnt Malboro guts splattered everywhere when he had gotten a bit too… enthusiastic during his last mission.

Then, he just had to be assigned to watch over a cadet materia class. Like come on, he was a First
Class SOLDIER and a general to boot. Why did he have to supervise a class made up of bumbling greenhorns that were so obviously way below his standards? ‘Picking out latent talent’ his pert ass. More like picking the sub-standard from a bunch of no-standard plebs.

Genesis rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, leaning against the one-way mirror looking over the class of cadets going through their first materia lesson. ‘Pathetic.’ He thought, watching the cadets struggling with the simplest of fire spells. He could have done that spell with barely a thought himself. Genesis scoffed when the useless piece of flesh assigned as the instructor, praise a cadet for accomplishing a display of materia control so horrific that Genesis could barely even look at it. Bored already, Genesis sighed, scanning down the line of cadets and had to double back to zoom into the one standing right at the end of the line- that one, the blond cadet.

He nearly missed it, but when he looked closer at the cadet, there was no mistake- he was clearly faking it. Genesis did not know why he would fake not being able to use materia- which judging from the way Genesis could sense his mana, should come as easily as breathing- but he did not care. The thought of someone disrespecting the art of materia in such a way infuriated him to no end. How dare the cadet make a mockery of his art? If he had the talent, he should be honing it until he made materia masters weep in envy. How dare he hide that skill behind that facsimile of incompetence? He whipped out of the observation room in a flurry of movement, marching a straight line down the stairs to the classroom and banging the doors wide open dramatically.

“You! What the hell do you think you are doing?” He demanded, practically seething in anger. He watched with a hint of satisfaction when the entire room jumped at his loud entrance and cowed away from him. But he will appreciate it better later, after he had finish educating that cadet on the wonders of materia and how he should never ever fake it ever again. Or else…

Genesis opened his mouth, prepared to launch into a tirade when he was interrupted before he even got to finish the second sentence. A leather-gloved hand slapped itself over his mouth and he was hauled out of the room as quickly as he had gone in. Genesis reacted instinctively, hurling a Firaga at his assailant and put as much distance between them as possible. A wave of silver blinded him for a split second and he snarled when Sephiroth dissipated his fireball with a wave of his hand. A new surge of anger rushed through him, burning his blood hotter than before and he hurled a few more Firagas in retaliation. Sephiroth cut through the super-concentrated magical fire with a swipe of Blizzaga and closed the classroom doors behind them with a casual manipulation of Demi.

“Enough, Genesis. I did not request for you to observe this materia class just so you could terrorise the recruits.” Sephiroth commanded.

Genesis bristled in anger at the order, but another voice behind him stopped a cutting remark right at the tip of his tongue.
“Seph’s right Gen. You know we said no interfering with the cadets.” Angeal chided gently.

Genesis ground his teeth in irritation, but backed down nonetheless, forcing his boiling fury into a low simmer. “Fine.” He bit out and stalked towards the staircase that would take him up to Sephiroth’s office where they could continue their talk privately. He needed to blow off some steam before he blew everything sky-high. Angeal and Sephiroth took the lift up instead, giving Genesis some space to cool down.

“This is Cadet Cloud Strife. Fifteen years old, hails from the western village of Nibelheim. No surviving family members or distant relatives.” Sephiroth turned the computer monitor, showing them Cloud’s application picture. “Average grades in every subject. No notable achievements or behaviours.”

Angeal examined the picture intently. “Is it me or does his eyes have a bit of mako-shine?”

Genesis came closer to the desk from where he was pacing a hole in the floor. “They do seem to glow a bit.”

“Research by the science department shows that Nibelheim has the highest concentration of mako within a hundred meters of the surface of the crust. It had been documented that the Nibel Mountains are home to the largest amount of mako springs and mako-drunk animals and monsters on Gaia. It would not be unusual for the residences to be exposed to enough mako that they have some physical characteristics of a SOLDIER.” Sephiroth said, clicking a tab that brought up Cloud’s assessment page.

“The Turk report noted that Cadet Strife had been the victim of bullying since the start of the programme, but the extent of bullying had been mild, some bruising and no broken bones or internal bleeding. Cadet Strife is quiet and introverted- only interacting with his group mates and to a larger extent, fellow Cadet Julius Thaur and works reasonably well with them.” Here, Sephiroth paused briefly, something like uncharacteristic hesitation flashing through his features so quickly Genesis and Angeal barely caught it. They sat up straighter, paying closer attention to what Sephiroth said next. “Cadet Strife also exhibits moments of fearlessness. During the opening ceremony, he did not look away during my customary examinations.”

Genesis blinked, staring at Sephiroth. “Are you saying that this squirt stared down the General Sephiroth?” When Sephiroth gave a short nod in reply and Genesis tossed his head back in uproarious laughter. “Oh goddess. This is great. Why haven’t we picked him up yet? Average
grades or not, this cadet is probably going to go far in life.”

“Gen.” Angeal admonished, “We can’t choose cadets to be our apprentice just because they could look at Seph in the eye.”

“Well, we should. SOLDIER needs people who don’t worship the ground Sephiroth walks on.” Genesis retorted, crossing his arms huffily.

A cough stopped their argument. “There is more. I noticed that there had been evidence of someone tempering with his records. His file was a little spotty for a proper Turk-run background and behaviour search, and there were edit timestamps inconsistent with the rest of the document hidden behind multiple file layers. I had barely managed to dig most of them out.”

Angeal frowned, “Cadet Strife could not have hacked and changed them, could he?”

Sephiroth shook his head. “It is unlikely, considering the technological state of his hometown. I had tried to look deeper into recover his deleted files, but I was forced to stop when I received a personal visit from Tseng of the Turks himself that evening, requesting I cease and desist looking closer into this matter.”

Genesis and Angeal tensed at the unspoken threat.

“Is he being poached by the Turks then?” Angeal asked, hands twitching for the sword at his side. It would not be the first time the Turks poached recruits from the SOLDIER batch. It was somewhat of an unofficial competition between the two divisions.

Sephiroth shook his head again. “No, I hypothesise that it is more of the Turks trying to hide something about him. If it were any other, Cadet Strife’s file would have passed ordinary examination.” He said it in a manner that was so matter of fact that no one could claim him arrogant. It was merely the truth. Spending his childhood in the science labs surrounded by computers and machinery had taught him how to hack a computer as well as the best of the Turks and leagues better than an ordinary hacker.

Genesis perked up when a thought occurred to him and he looked at Sephiroth accusingly. “Why were you looking at his file in the first place?”
Angeal glanced at him questioningly too and Sephiroth looked to the side with a look that on most people would have been called uncomfortable. “In the few times I had observed Cadet Strife’s weapons and hand-to-hand classes, I noticed instances where Cadet Strife would shift instinctively to execute a move that would have brought down a larger opponent, but he would catch himself at the last second and draw back, allowing himself to be defeated.” The words came out slower now, as though Sephiroth was taking care to pick them out individually. “Watching him, I found myself…” Sephiroth stopped, searching for an appropriate word to sufficiently convey the feelings behind his thoughts. “I found myself intrigued by his actions and sought out a reason as to why he would cripple himself as such.”

Genesis raised an eyebrow. “Is this why you ‘requested’ me to watch his materia class?” He asked rhetorically, but Sephiroth, still not educated enough in social interactions to pick out the sarcastic twist of his sentence, responded.

“Yes, and your observations have so far backed up another one of my hypothesis… even if you had reacted to them… explosively.” The tilt of the corner of his mouth softened the blow of the blunt words and Genesis found himself unwillingly smiling slightly in return. He couldn’t begrudge Sephiroth for making an attempt to joke, not when he was the one encouraging such ‘behaviours unfit for the commander of an army’, to quote Professor Hojo- the disgusting man.

“And what hypothesis is that?” Angeal asked.

Sephiroth clicked the tab with the cadet’s photo again. “I had suspected that Cadet Strife had, thus far, purposefully kept the full extent of his capabilities secret and had been constantly holding himself back from achieving his full potential.”

Genesis blinked, “Are you saying that this pint-sized cadet has been holding out on us? But the fact he had appeared so unremarkable and had never slipped up once for the past two months means that…” The control he has over his body and his own self-control is phenomenal. Such an ability to fool all of his instructors and peers for so long told them much of his capability to handle himself in ever-changing situations- something essential for a SOLDIER. That is not to mention the sheer ability he has with materia to control his mana output so carefully that he could make himself seem inept with it. (As angry as it made him, Genesis was reluctantly impressed.)

The three generals paused to contemplate this fact and unanimously came to an agreement that Cadet Strife was someone to be watched and he will become a SOLDIER. They cannot throw away this talent, Turk interference or no. The moment he graduated, they were going to snap him right up and they shall make him one of the best.

But for now, the cadet was not ready for them yet, so they would sit by and wait until an opportune time came for them to act. Cadet Strife has not long left to hide.
Many floors below, Cloud felt a shiver of foreboding run down his spine.

Chapter End Notes

Large herbivore, in this case refers to Genesis because I have this head canon that he's a large herbivore because large herbivores get angry super easily are frickin scary when they're trying to gut you with their massive veggie eating blunt teeth or hooves or super sharp horns/tusks and muscular legs. (Go look up the hippo or a rhino. I nearly shit myself.)

Cloud the poor thing. All this shit keeps happening to him.

Is it me, or does the thing with the generals sound a bit suggestive to you? Eh, eh? *wink wink*

Anyway, that whole Genesis thing was a really close call for him so phew Cloudie dodged a bullet there. But he and Tseng are about to have their hands full soon *smirk*... not that I'm spoiling anything hahaha.

I was thinking if I should post a side story of sorts for short interludes that don't really match up with the plot. I don't know if you guys will be interested in such things, like Cloudie's first outing above and below the plate (to the bars) or even an au of what might have happened if Tseng kept in contact with Cloud through the years or some things in Lee's perspective *sigh* So many plot bunnies.

(I realised that I haven't been paying much attention to Lee lately. More character building for him next chapter promise!... hopefully)
Test Your Luck

Chapter Summary

It's all Zack's fault.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10!!!!! FINALLY

I made it! I thought I wouldn't be able to, but I did. So here you go my precious readers. Enjoy this.

A bit of a time skip. So watch out for that.

Normal disclaimers. Un-betaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Mess Hall doors suddenly burst inwards with a great crash, sending a few unfortunate cadets onto their asses in shock.

“Hey Spikey!”

On the other side of the Mess Hall, Cloud groaned and thumped his head onto the table, narrowly avoiding his half eaten plate of eggs and toast. Beside him, Lee raised his head from the table long enough to pat his back sympathetically before returning to his original position. The rest of the squad continued on with their breakfast like nothing was wrong.

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It had long since become a common occurrence. A week after Cloud literally ran into Zack in the hallway, they bumped into each other again when the both of them boarded onto the same elevator. Despite Cloud’s quiet nature, Zack managed to draw him into a short conversation and surprisingly, they hit it right off. They bonded over their hometowns and their goal to excel in the SOLDIER programme. To be completely frank, Cloud expected Zack to forget about him after they left the elevator. After all, why would someone like Zack remember a lowly cadet like himself? But, luckily (or not. It’s subjective) he was proven otherwise when Zack burst into the Mess Hall the next morning and glomped him enthusiastically.
Apparently ‘Backwater boys should stick together!’

Cloud was just trying not to drown in his tasteless porridge.

Half asleep, the rest of the squad jumped in shock, instinctively grabbing their weapons before they registered that Cloud was not, in fact, being attacked. Instead, the teen himself had sunk so deeply into his seat that the only visible part of him was his blond spikes. The pair made a comical sight: a tiny cadet slumped in his seat with a SOLDIER Second clinging to his shoulders like an oversized monkey.

The squad was surprised, but accepted it easily enough when they heard the whole story—though not without laughing until their stomach cramped. Cloud threatening to gut them did not help matters at all, and they laughed even harder—‘It was a hit and no run!’ They shouted, glancing at each other for a moment before bursting out in laughter again.

Cloud did not see what was so funny. Gaia damn them, he was mortified enough already.

Lee, the awful friend he was, laughed so hard he had to lean against Cloud’s back to stay upright, gasping out apologies between laughs. Cloud, to say the least, was not amused and pinched him in the side in retaliation. Lee gave a rather high pitch squawk and fell off the bed in a jumble of limbs. To Lee’s horror, a slow sort of recognition spread across Cloud’s face and he cursed, backing away from the bed slowly. “C’mon Cloud, yo-you know I didn’t mean it right? Ju-just stay on the bed Cloud, no need to move at all. Cloud? C’mo- Cloud!” Cloud smirked evilly and pounced on him like a great cat, taking great glee in pinching and poking amidst garbled pleas until Lee was laughing to tears for a whole other reason.

Completely on accident (really), one of Lee’s flailing limbs clipped John on the hip, sending him tumbling onto Fois, who collapsed on a still-laughing Dwohli and the whole squad fell like dominos.

The entire dorm promptly dissolved in an all out war. It was every man for himself and no one was spared. Cloud was pretty sure that he saw someone brandishing his Shinra issued jumbo-sized deodorant stick as a makeshift sword.

“Evil. You are pure evil.” Lee said to Cloud when it was all over, lying side by side in Cloud’s bunk, sharing the pillow. Both of them were still heaving for breath, their bodies sticky with sweat, but they were tired from the exertion and could not be bothered to move from where they had
automatically collapsed together. Cloud let out a breathless laugh, wincing when the over-worked muscles in his sides twinge uncomfortably. “Made y’all stop laughing at me d’nit?” He drawled, tiredness making his words slur together, his Nibel accent coming out stronger.

Lee huffed in response, knocking their shoulders together as he turned onto his side to face Cloud. “You know they’re never gonna let you forget right- the tiny cadet who slammed his face into the Zack Fair’s chest.”

Cloud made a half-hearted indignant noise at the insult to his height and sighed, shifting onto his side too. He shut his eyes exasperatedly. “I know.” He whined (complained- he complained). His hair brushed against the cheap cotton of his pillowcase when he buried his face into his half of the pillow. “I shld’ve just not said anythin’ at all.” He mumbled into the pillow.

Lee grinned bumping his head gently with Cloud’s. “Then they’d have just come out with ridiculous thoeryes. And the squad would get into trouble sooner or later for assaulting a SOLDIER Second.”

Cloud smiled happily to himself, half hidden by the pillow. He had never dreamt of being able to have people- friends- who would willingly get into trouble just to protect him. And now that he does, it felt… really, really good actually.

Now, nobody even twitched at the racket at the end of the table. Even Lee who would at least give Zack a glare when he did things like this was too tired to lift his face from his eggs.

Lee was not a morning person.

Cloud grunted under Zack’s large bulk and pushed a mug of coffee towards Lee who took it automatically, tossing the whole scalding cup back in four gulps. Cloud mentally winced. It must have been an Icicle inn mutation or something because that coffee came from a fresh pot.

“C’mon Spikey. Hurry up and eat. We’ve got plans today and they’ll be ruined if you don’t. Finish. Soon.” He punctuated each word with a jab to Cloud’s side that had him batting his hands away irritatedly.
The squad ducked their heads deeper into their breakfast at the mention of Zack’s plans.

Understandably, here had been some jealousy over Cloud receiving so much attention from the SOLDIER Second. But when Cloud gladly switched places with them for a day, the jealousy was quickly squashed like an ant on the wrong side of a boot. Zack’s plans were as infamous as General Rhapsodos’ habit of reciting Loveless at random times of the day. His plans include sneaking into offices to prank people (There was a heart stopping time where Zack dragged Cloud to sneak into General Sephiroth’s office. Cloud’s heart just about stopped beating while they moved everything in his office two centimetres to the left.) Or training from morning to night in the giant Shinra gym, with only food and toilet breaks, until Cloud’s entire body turned to jelly.

Now everyone tried their best to keep from being roped into one of Zack’s plans, even if it meant offering Cloud up like a sacrificial pig. Lee… well, he was Cloud’s best friend, but there were things that no one in their sane mind would do- best friend or not.

Luckily Cloud had never been all that sane.

Cowards the lot of them. Cloud swore in the privacy of his mind and offered Zack a small sleepy grimace. “Hi Zack.” He proceeded to try and drown himself in his orange juice.

“Aww Spikey, don’t be like that. Aren’t you glad to see me?” He gave Cloud a noogie even as he spluttered orange juice all over his breakfast. “Today’s gonna be awe-some. You’re gonna love it. Scout’s honour.”

“You were never a scout.” Cloud rolled his eyes.

Zack continued as if Cloud had not interrupted him, “So finish it now! We’ve gotta go.”

Cloud cursed the fact that it was a Sunday, which meant a day off for the cadets, and scarfed down what was left of his breakfast before Zack physically carried him out of the Mess Hall.

It happened once and nobody had let him live it down since.

Zack never found out who programmed his microwave to blast raunchy songs whenever he pressed ‘START’.
Zack brought him up to the SOLDIER floor- which was not very surprising at all, and Cloud started to relax a little. Maybe it would not be too bad. Nothing else could top the Sephiroth incident. Zack could not possibly have thought up anything worse than that.

Oh, Cloud. When would you learn.

Cloud started to sweat a bit as Zack headed straight for the stairway. When Zack stopped climbing five levels above the SOLDIER floor, Cloud had a really bad feeling about Zack’s plan.

“C’mon Spikey. This way.”

The level they were on was filled with bullpens and offices bustling with people. Nobody even glanced in their direction as Zack cut a path straight to the restrooms at the end of the hall. Cloud gulped nervously, but ducked his head and followed quickly.

“Zack what are-“

“Shh it’s a secret. I’ll tell you later.” Zack grabbed his arm and pulled him into the restroom after checking to see if it was empty.

Zack locked the door behind them and turned to Cloud with a bright grin that practically radiated mischievousness. “Alright. So, today we are going to prank my best friend.”

Cloud looked at him, confused. “I though Kusel was your best friend? Then what are we doing here?”

Zack laughed. “Nah, that’s my other best friend. This best friend is a bit special. He’s been working super hard recently so I thought that I’d loosen him up a bit before he spontaneously combusts and shoots his minions.”

Cloud reeled back, staring at Zack in horror. “Who the- Spontaneous combustion? Shoot his minions? Zack, who is this best friend?!?” Cloud got progressively louder until he was almost
screeching, his hair bristling atop his head like a chocobo’s crest.

“Shh! Not so loud.” Zack paused to listen if anyone was coming to investigate the noise. Cloud was nearly vibrating in impatience in front of him. “It’s a joke, Spike. He’s a Turk- the second in command. So it kinda comes with the job description. He doesn’t actually do it.”

“Second in command? Zack!” Cloud hissed, looking even more panicked than the day they pranked Sephiroth.

Zack’s smile dimmed a bit. “What’s wrong Spike? I thought you’d love it.”

Cloud stared at Zack incredulously. “Yeah I love to prank people, but not the Gaia damned second in command of the Turks. Do you even hear what people say about this guy? I don’t want my eyeballs gouged out thank-you-very-much.”

Cloud looked a second away from bludgeoning Zack with a nearby soap dispenser when Zack burst out laughing uproariously.

“Oh- oh my god. Wai-wait. Hold on a second Spikey. No need to get violent.” Zack wheezed, hands braced on his knees. “Lemme get my breath back.” Zack sucked in a few deep breaths before he was able to straighten properly, grinning widely again. “He’s not anything like that. Promise. He won’t gouge out your eyeballs for a prank. I mean who even told you that?”

Cloud frowned heavily. “There are rumours about the guy everywhere in the barracks. No one knows what he looks like or his name, but all the cadets are terrified of him.”

Zack covered his face with a gloved hand. “Oh man. You don’t know who he is?” He sighed.

Cloud’s frown somehow deepened and he crossed his arms. “Don’t know what?” He demanded.

Zack waved a hand, “No, no. It’s nothing. I promise that he’s not scary at all. He just loves to make people think he is. You just gotta look past the frown, that’s all.”

Cloud did not look convinced, but left it alone. Zack never got him into trouble or placed him in
danger (the General notwithstanding) for their pranks before. He’ll trust him for now.

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The vents from the office restrooms to the Turk floor were surprisingly spacious. Even Zack, who was nearly as twice as broad as Cloud, could crawl through them easily.

The pair travelled two levels down, through years of dust and dirt until they reached a metal grill identical to the countless others they had passed before. Zack motioned for Cloud to stop and they carefully shuffled until both of them were staring down at an empty office through the metal bars.

“Alright Spikey, this is it. He’s not going to be back for at least an hour because I got Reno to make a distraction just now.” Zack rummaged through his pockets and brought out a bunch of rubber bands, rolls of industrial strength patterned tape, an extra large tube of silicone glue and a-

“Glitter bomb.” Cloud gasped and looked up in awe at a smirking Zack. It was not just any glitter bomb- it was a timed glitter bomb that only exploded a certain time after a force had been applied to it.

“Got it in one Spike. I got this bomb years ago- hopefully it’d work properly. But just in case, I got a back up plan.” He waved the other items in his hand. “The tape’s going onto the keyboard and mouse. The rubber band and glue’s going on the phone. You got it Spike?”

Cloud grinned back, getting excited. “Loud and clear. Lets do this.”

They did a fist bump and unscrewed the metal grill, carefully setting it aside and dropped down into the office, sending a billow of dust onto the pristine carpet.

“Oops. We’ll clean it up later. Can’t have him getting suspicious.” Zack mumbled to himself and got to work, tossing Cloud the stuff for the back up plan.

They worked quickly in silence, almost as if it were rehearsed. Zack attached the glitter bomb onto the top of the door, just out of sight. The attached string went around the doorframe and the trigger at the end was placed just above the hinge. Satisfied, Zack stood back and dusted off his hands, walking back to check on Cloud.
Cloud was making great progress. The phone on the desk was wrapped in a layer of rubber bands and sealed with glue, stuck to the table. The underside of the mouse was taped and half of the keyboard was covered with different tape patterns.

Zack sniggered quietly to himself and helped Cloud finish the rest, making sure that every key was completely covered in tape. Once that was done, Zack grabbed the broom in the corner and swept up all the dust on the floor while Cloud straightened up everything until it was as though they were never there.

Zack returned the broom to its exact position and went back to the table where Cloud had just adjusted the last pen in the holder. He was about to declare that their job was done and it was time to retreat when somebody suddenly appeared at the door, as quiet as a ghost, and pushed down the handle.

Both Zack and Cloud watched, wide-eyed and speechless, as the door opened in slow motion, like the gates of hell were greeting them.

In walked Tseng, looking put together and calm as always in his customary suit.

Then, chaos descended.

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Lee character development!!!! I'm so glad I could write more about him in here. And brief mentions to a few more squad members. Maybe I'll build them more in a separate work. It could be fun.

Zack is as fun as always. Hahahah I think that I'd post a chapter of Sephiroth's reaction in a separate work. It's got to be hilarious.

For the pranks, I actually googled it, so they're pretty unoriginal, but still frikin funny if you imagine it.

Now I'm exhausted so I'm going to sleep. Good night everyone.

P.S. Changing you doc background to pastel colours really help with writing. The eyes don't strain as much.
Seek to Right Wrongs

Chapter Summary

It will be rewarding in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Zack's plans usually go much smoother than this, Cloud thought detachedly as the door gaped open, like the maw of Bahamut, centimetre by tiny centimetre in slow motion.

Say what you want about the bubbly Second, but Zack did not gain such a high rank by having shit for brains. That man can strategize like the best of them and they never had any problems in their pranking outings. Well, until now.

Damn Reno.

Honestly, Cloud actually enjoyed Zack's Plans- not that he'd ever admit it aloud. He liked paying harmless pranks and working out till he could not walk- it helped him sleep on nights where the sound of the city threatened to overwhelm him.

Sure, Zack did not know that Cloud could use materia as instinctively as breathing, or that he could probably take down Brute's entire gang without breaking a sweat. But he never thought badly of him for being a painfully average SOLDIER cadet. Zack, being typical Zack, happily imparted every single materia tip he had in his limited arsenal and purposely set aside time in his busy schedule to drag him to the main gym every other day to improve his stamina and basic sword work.

Cloud felt guilty sometimes, lying to Zack, albeit lying by omission, but just the thought of gaining anyone's attention, however well meaning, nearly sent him into a panic attack all over again. Just one close call was enough, thanks. So he kept his mouth shut and all of his secrets silent.

Secrets like the one standing right in front of him.

Of all people Tseng had to be, he had to be the Turk second in command, bogeyman of the cadets
that haunt Shinra's walls. And of course, Zack just had to be friends with him.

Before this, Cloud had simply (incorrectly, mind you) assumed that Tseng was some middle-class Turk and he was probably never going to bump into him- since Turks typically never interfere with SOLDIER matters unless they were either the leader or the SIC.

Cloud's luck sucked Ifrit's balls.

Now, standing in a pranked out office of said second in command, Cloud felt his stomach churn and shrivel up until he felt his breakfast nudging up his gut. Oh, how he wished that he could meet Tseng again in separate, more pleasant circumstances- not caught red handed vandalising his office. Would he still remember Cloud? Cloud did not want to imagine how devastated he'd feel if Tseng did not.

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Tseng opened the door fully, stepping into the room with a single stride. Cloud saw Zack tensing up in the corner of his eye and sent a silent prayer to the gods that they will make it out of this alive.

“Zack,” Tseng greeted coolly, sharp eyes sweeping the room, picking out the changes in his office and the clear culprits. They stuttered minutely when they landed on Cloud, unnoticeable to most, but Cloud was watching closely.

That boded well for his chances… right?

“What are you-” Tseng barely managed to get the word out before his entire world exploded in a rain of sparkling hell.

*Glitter is like the unholy spawn of hell and rainbows. Lee once told to him. It's impossible to get off you. Stays with you forever, that thing does. Once it's on, no one can ever take you seriously again- not when you look like a unicorn farted on you.*

Cloud had to agree. Lee’s description was quite spot on.
The glitter bomb had done its job, bursting spectacularly in a kaleidoscope of shining flakes, covering everything utterly in a two-meter radius.

It spared nothing.

Tseng was coated head to toe in a layer of glitter and every breath he took made a small shower of glitter rain onto the ground. His eyes were closed, face so completely blank of emotion, he resembled a marble statue.

Cloud bit his lip in worry and shuffled slightly, nails digging crescents into his palms. In the unlikely event that Tseng actually did remember him, Cloud did not think that that one time would protect him from being punished for pranking a superior officer, especially one that was so high in the corporate ladder.

Beside him, Zack tried to stifle a laugh, covering his mouth to muffle the violent snickers. Then the complete hilarity of the situation hit him and he gave up, bending over at the waist with his hands braced against the table, howling with laughter. He laughed until he was gasping for breath, tearing and sporting a stitch in his side.

Cloud swallowed an exasperated sigh, hands twitching to smack Zack. Was he trying to make the situation worse? He peaked at Tseng to gauge his reaction. There was a worrying tic growing beneath his eye and Cloud pinched the thin skin of Zack’s inner forearm viciously, taking small pleasure from his loud yelp.

He hissed. “Zack. This is not the time.”

By now, there were a few Turks peaking down the hall into the office and once they saw Zack and their glitter coated SIC, they wisely retreated immediately, although that did not stop the quiet whispers from cropping up just beyond the walls.

Zack, thankfully, sobered quickly and offered Tseng a sheepish wave. “Uh, hey Tseng.”

Cloud could have slammed his head into the desk. Tseng seemed to have the same sentiment and pressed two fingers to his forehead as though warding off a headache. He studiously ignored the way it dislodged a whole avalanche of glitter. As well as the way Zack giggled at bit at that.
“Zackary Fair. What is the meaning of this.” It was not a question.

“Umm, well funny story… OHlookathetimegottogo!” Zack blurted and took a step back.

Tseng’s eyes narrowed and he said warningly. “Zackary, don’t you da- Zack!”

Tseng took one step forward then another and before his foot touched the floor, Cloud was yanked off his feet and stuffed into the air vent faster than he could blink. Zack followed shortly after, using the table to boost his step up and firmly replaced the grate with a loud clang.

“Cloudy, what are you waiting for? Go, go, go!”

The both of them clambered through the vents as quick as they could, probably scaring a few office workers to death with all the noise they were making.

Before long, they were back in the toilets, sweaty, dusty and panting heavily. Cloud punched Zack’s arm as hard he could, not caring that it made his knuckles throb. “What the hell Zack? I thought you said that Reno was distracting him!”

“Ouch Spike. That was a hard punch. I think that I might even get a bruise.” When Cloud’s glare did not relent, Zack raised both hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I think Tseng might’ve realised something was up.”

Cloud kept up the glare for a few more seconds before deflating like a balloon. Even his hair seemed to deflate with him. “Oh Gaia. We are so screwed,” He moaned, burying his face in his hands.

“Cheer up spikey. He probably won’t get you into trouble.” Zack tried, but when Cloud shot him an incredulous look, his smile wavered a bit. “Probably?”

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For the next week, Cloud twitched whenever he saw anyone with a rank higher than a cadet- which was practically everyone. The dread in him was slow to dissipate and it made his heart clench
every time his superior officer called his name.

When Cloud finally explained to Lee what happened, Cloud had to restrain Lee from stomping over to the SOLDIER Second bunks to give Zack a piece of his mind. Lee only calmed down after Cloud told him that Zack was sent to the Midgar swamp for monster control duty and even that was done with a rather foreboding grin. Cloud decided that he was better off not getting involved in that.

Cloud was not lying when he said that Zack was sent out for a mission that was way below his skill level. Zack was sent out the morning after their prank and Cloud was pretty sure it was no coincidence. The fact that it was well known that the Midgar swamps was one of the worst places for a mission, bar Icicle Inn, cemented the thought. Cloud did not envy Zack. The horror stories of slugs in places that were not meant to have slugs were popular in the cadet dorms.

It was through the same cadet grapevine that Cloud heard of cadets sent for punishment complaining about being made to clean glitter off the carpets in the Turk offices. Rumour had it that the glitter was a result of an assassination gone wrong and the assassin was thwarted by a glitter fuelled punch to the face. Cloud and Lee had to quickly smother sniggers at the thought.

However, as the week progressed, the dread changed to guilt and soon, Cloud found himself walking through the different sectors on a looking for stuff that could remove glitter. It took him several hours, four sectors and a multitude of embarrassing questions in make up stores and beauty parlours before Cloud was satisfied with his loot. The rest of his afternoon was spent packing the oils, hair spray, PVC glue and lint roller into a box with compiled instructions before Cloud was back in the blasted air vents.

Cloud scowled as he crawled through the dust and insect carcasses, gritting his teeth against the urge to sneeze. Curse Zack and his damn pranks and curse himself for being so damn soft. He ignored the small part of his brain snidely considering the chances of Tseng forgetting who he is. He kept the rock growing in his stomach from punching the air from his lungs as his anxiety grew the closer he got to Tseng’s air grate. Thankfully, it was still loose from where Zack had slid it in and Cloud slowly peeked in to check if the office was empty.

It was not.

Cloud cursed and drew back quickly, settling down to think of a plan. It was hard to tell when Tseng would leave his office since Zack was the one with the connections. Cloud was also definitely not going back to the dorms when he had already spent so much effort getting here. But he could not possibly drop the box into the office without braining Tseng or cracking the oil bottles. So, he settled down to wait.
It took a few minutes, but Cloud suddenly realised that the typing had ceased. He was about to peek into the office again when the vent grate was pushed aside and a strong grip around his uniform collar yanked him into the office.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the shortness of the chapter. I know you guys were waiting a long time for this, but between my exams and falling ill, I don't have the time or the energy to churn out a whole chapter.

I'm really sorry to say that the next chapter would only be out in December because school is picking up now and I don't see myself being able to push out 5K of words in between.

In the mean time, you guys can check out It All Started With A PHS (An au of this fic) on my dash.

Thank you so much and I'll see you in 3 months.

EDIT 9/9/16: To all my readers who have commented on this fic, I want to say that even though I've never replied to any of you, your comments always made me extremely happy. Like really really happy you wouldn't believe it. So I'm so very sorry that I've been such a shit to all of you. I will definitely reply all of you even though it might take me a while because all of you guys deserve as much love from me as I can spare. Hopefully you guys won't get too angry at me though I understand. My only excuse was that I've only finally mustered the energy to do this today and I won't blame you all if you don't except it. I really wished that I could have done this earlier.
Chapter Summary

The long-anticipated reunion.

Chapter Notes

Yes! I am finally back!!!

I am happy to announce that I am now on holiday=more time to write. Isn't that exciting? I'm really excited ^^

Right. So I have decided that my chapters will now be shorter than my usual 5K because shorter chapters means shorter updating time which means less stress and everyone is happy all around!

Any who, the time has come! I can't believe that they finally meet after forever like rly guys? Honestly, I expected this scene to happen much later cus of my usual long-winded style of writing. But I surprised myself hohohoho.

I hope you guys enjoy this chapter. I thought that I would croak writing this. It's been quite a while since I've written so I haven't gotten into the groove yet. Hopefully it will come back to me after a while *cross fingers*.

The usual disclaimers apply and it's still un-betaed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Truthfully, Tseng did not exactly know what to expect when he heard unusual sounds coming from the air vents. A particularly large rat or Zack coming back for round two perhaps, but never-except in his weirdest dreams- did he imagine that it would be Cloud he dragged out of the ceiling.

Realisation struck him like lightning and Tseng quickly adjusted his grip on Cloud’s collar, letting him land upright on his office chair instead of sprawling across the office floor, as he had originally intended, and shoved his gun back into its holster.

“Cloud, what on Gaia do you think you are doing?” Tseng demanded and immediately froze.

Shit. That wasn’t what he meant to say.
In the chair, Cloud froze too, his brain taking a few precious seconds to process what he had just heard.

*He did not just-.*

But Cloud *was* sure that he did. There was no way he misheard Tseng calling him by his name. *So that only left…* Cloud gasped softly, his mouth parting slightly under the revelation as he stared at Tseng in surprise and not a little wonder. His mouth moved soundlessly, trying to voice all the things that were crammed in his mind– his elation–his worry–his relief that *you still remembered me, you did you did.*

Tseng, on the other hand, stood in front of Cloud looking uncharacteristically worried, but he did not attempt to move away even when subjected to Cloud’s long stare. His back was ram-rod straight and his face was expressionless save for the downward tilt of his lips as he stared back at Cloud, wondering–not for the first time–if he had overstepped and completely blundered any chance of reconnecting with Cloud.

Taking in a deep breath, Cloud tried again tentatively, praying that he was not imagining things, “What else do you think, stupid? I’m saving your ass from any more embarrassment.”

Immediately, Cloud wanted to slam his head through the desk. *Right… Tentatively. Way to go Cloud you dumbass.*

Without missing a beat, Tseng retorted, “Brat. How was I supposed to know? I thought that you were some mutated rat in the vents for Gaia’s sake.”

A blinding grin stretched across Cloud’s face as he dumped the box onto the desk to throw his arms around Tseng for a big hug, completely over the moon.

*Tseng remembered him!*

Tseng’s stern look gave way to a smile, arms coming up to wrap around Cloud’s shoulders as he returned the hug, just as happy as Cloud was. “It’s great to finally meet you again, brat.”

Cloud pulled his head back to scowl (read: pout) at him, but the smile came back just as quick. “Yeah, it is.”
They settled down on the small couch in the corner of Tseng’s office, trading insults and anecdotes as though they had never left.

Gradually as time passed spent chatting away, Cloud and Tseng relaxed until Tseng was leaning against the corner of the couch, jacket off and hands casually resting on Cloud’s knees feet lying across his lap. Cloud was sprawled along the length of the couch, his back supported by the other armrest as he gesticulated wildly with his hands while recounting one of his more exciting hunts. He had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt and laid his coat over the back of the couch. Occasionally, he would reach out to pick a small piece of glitter from Tseng’s hair, sniggering at the dirty look Tseng would throw at the small plastic disks every time.

That was, of course, the moment when Reno slammed open the office door to rudely barge into the room, Rude following closely behind as always and just narrowly avoiding getting a rebounding door to the face.

“Yo, bossman! I got the files you wante-.” Reno careened to a stop three steps into the room where he was struck speechless by the complete surreal sight in front of him. However, he regained his bearings soon enough and the gaping lips twisted into a smirk “Oh hoo boss, is there something you wanted to tell us?” He leered at Cloud for good measure, leaning forward to give him a slow once over.

Cloud, to his complete embarrassment, squeaked in shock at the suggestion, his face burning red as he scrambled to sit properly on the couch and stuffed his feet back into his boots. Beside him, Tseng tsked in irritation at the interruption and stood up from the couch with a glare, dusting off imaginary lint from his trousers. He held an impatient hand out for the folder as he strode over to his desk, mind immediately switching to work mode. Personally, Tseng wanted more time to speak with Cloud, but work was work and he could not ignore it no matter how much he wanted to.

Reno dropped the stack of papers in the waiting palm and gleefully plopped down in the recently vacated space on the couch, startling Cloud again- who had been hastily tying his laces- and scooted uncomfortably close to scrutinise his face. Cloud gulped nervously, leaning as far back as he could, “Uh… can I help you?”

Reno straightened, smirking widely, “Why yes, little chickabo, yes you can.”
Across the room, Tseng pursed his lips to suppress a smile and ducked his head behind a conveniently lifted sheet of paper. On the other hand, Cloud was not as amused and bristled in reply, cheeks turning a splotchy red. “Ex- excuse me? I am not a chickabo.” He spat angrily.

Reno folded his arms, smirk widening as he dragged his eyes up and down Cloud again. However this time, his gaze stayed pointedly at the mess of blond spikes on the top of his head- or to be more precise, the mess of blond spike atop of a head that only reached his chin.

Blushing furiously now and spluttering madly, Cloud floundered for words to express just how he was not short, thank you very much. And just where he could shove that thought.

Then of all things, Reno cooed and reached out a hand to ruffle his hair and... and that was just not on. (Tseng peered over the papers in his hands in anticipation.)

If he were still in the dorms, no one would even think of mentioning his short stature to his face- let alone the similarities between him and a chocobo- because the last person who had the balls to do so ended up in the infirmary with minus one of said balls. Screw not getting not noticed. No one insults his height and gets away with it.

But sadly, he was not.

Nearly frothing in anger, Cloud reflexively grabbed the offending limb and twisted. Reno yelped in a mix of surprise and pain when he was slammed onto the floor face down, his arm pulled tight behind his back and a bony knee digging into his spine.

At his desk, Tseng’s shoulders shook in silent laughter.

This time, Reno was the one spluttering. “Wha- what the hell was that for, yo? Let me go!” He squirmed in Cloud’s hold, but the grip remained strong despite the struggles.

Cloud bared his teeth and pressed his knee harder into Reno’s back. “Do not call me a chickabo.” He demanded. “Say it!”

Reno yelped again when his arm was yanked further back, threatening to dislocate his shoulder. “Okay! Okay! I won’t call you a chickabo anymore, yo!”
Cloud smiled pleasantly at Reno and let him go, sitting back onto the couch. “Good.”

Reno frowned, rolling his shoulder gingerly to test if he had pulled anything. “What a lunatic.” He muttered to himself. But a quick glance at Cloud had him backtracking immediately. That smile did not bode well for him at all.

“Did you say something?” Cloud asked, voice sugary sweet.

“No- nothing!” Reno forced out, breaking out in cold sweat. There was something dangerous in that voice. Somehow, the atmosphere in the room around him darkened until it felt like there was a squeezing sensation around his heart. Reno gulped heavily and got to his feet, eyes never leaving Cloud’s face. That smile had way too many teeth in it.

Maybe it was time to leave, yes? Yes.

Reno grabbed Rude’s arm and promptly hauled ass from the room, tossing a hasty farewell behind his shoulder at Tseng as the door slammed shut behind them.

The office descended into silence.

Cloud smugly stuck his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. Yup, he’s still got it.

Tseng snorted softly at Cloud’s satisfied grin, quickly schooling his expression when Cloud turned to him with a frown, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. “What.”

Tseng shook his head, looking back down at his paperwork and bit his lip to hide his own grin. Cloud’s frown deepened, but he let it go, choosing instead to sit in one of the chairs in front of Tseng’s desk.

“Are all of the Turks like that?” Cloud asked, eyes hypnotised by the repetitive movement of
Tseng’s pen scratching across the pages.

“Curious? Yes. Like Reno? No.” Tseng flipped to the next page and made a note at the margins. “Reno is very… enthusiastic sometimes. However, he is a good Turk.”

“So he is an annoying shit that gets the job done.” Cloud concluded and laughed when Tseng gave an emphatic shrug in response. “Oh Gaia. I feel kinda bad for you now, you poor thing. Luckily I don’t know anyone like that.”

Tseng raised an eyebrow. “You do know that now he’ll bother you too, right?”

That statement cut right though Cloud’s mirth, causing him to pale as he considered having to deal with both Zack and Reno from now on. He wanted to curl up in a hole forever.

“Oh Gaia, just kill me already.” Cloud moaned, burying his face in his hands. He might just quit the SOLDIER programme if only to get away from them.

“At least you don’t have to deal with him everyday.” Tseng offered.

Cloud sighed explosively and sagged.

Yeah. That is something I guess.

Cloud stayed in Tseng’s office for a few more hours, chatting and soaking up the quiet air until the sun had set completely and the moon was high in the sky. Once the clock struck eight, Cloud stood up with a languid stretch and a sigh of pleasure, his back popping pleasantly.

It was time to go if he wanted to make it back to the dorm before curfew.

Cloud gave Tseng another hug, still completely delighted that things had worked out this great, and made sure that Tseng promised to try out the glitter-removing techniques when he got home.
Acquiescing easily, Tseng gave Cloud his apartment number with simple directions as well as his PHS number when Cloud refused a new PHS, saying that he would buy one himself the next free day he gets.

They parted with unspoken promises to meet up again and Cloud crawled back through the air vents, pleased as a punch despite having to travel through the grime again.

Cloud made it back to his room safely before curfew and neatly dodged all of Lee’s questions about his day with questions of his own, content to hear Lee recount his entire day enthusiastically—not even minding when he obviously exaggerated some parts of his story. The other boys chimed in with their own exciting stories about their day off as well and soon, the night was filled with dramatic re-enactments and melodramatic responses.

Cloud easily slipped back into the shadows between all the commotions and fell asleep contented.

Chapter End Notes

And guys! I have finally created a tumblr account.

Please come and spaz with me or anything at all. I'm very lonely there T-T

Thank you guys so much for all of your kudos and your comments. They supported me throughout my papers.
Make a Fool of Yourself

Chapter Summary

Awkward situations will happen to everyone whether they like it or not.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the really late update -.-"

But guess who got sucked into the Yuri on Ice fandom? Thats right, me! hahaha I'm still struggling with the feels.

Usual disclaimers apply and still un-betaed.

TW: descriptions of bullying and threats of sexual assault (but not carried out) in the first quarter

Cloud hummed tunelessly as he folded his clothes into his duffle bag, his voice echoing in the quiet room that usually housed nine other noisy men. Similarly, the barracks were eerily quiet tonight- most likely due to Shinra’s surprisingly generous decision to give the SOLDIER cadets a week off. It acted as a reward for cadets who survived Streaming- an exam where they were further sorted into skill sets and those found lacking were kicked out before they could waste any more company resources. That, of course, was the unofficial definition for the series of rigorous physical, magical and intellectual examinations that they all slogged through for the past two weeks. Cloud didn’t bother memorising the official bullshit definition Shinra gave.

His squad mates immediately took advantage of their time off to visit their families, leaving him the only one remaining in Midgar for their squad- not that he was upset about it. It was in fact an excellent chance to have a sleepover at Tseng’s apartment. Cloud was quite excited for it and had been looking forward to it since Tseng suggested it a week over during one of his visits to his office. Predictable, Lee and the others had worried a bit, fretting over leaving him alone with no protection for a whole week like mama chocobos. Cloud just barely restrained his eye roll and shooed them out the door, though he did allow his lips to quirk up in a small smile.

Placing a finger to his chin, he considered his locker. Should he bring the blanket? Or no? Tseng would surely have enough blankets. Then should he bring another set of uniforms? Or was two enough? It’s not like he would need to wear them much for the rest of the holidays anyways so he left it. Toiletries? Toothbrush? Pyjamas? Weapons?
Cloud sighed and bent down to open the false base of his locker and took out one of the fur pelts he had taken with him to Midgar, as well as a selection of bone accessories he had made and stuffed them into his duffle too. They should do okay as a birthday slash thank-for-inviting-me-over gift. Cloud thought for a moment before stuffing the blanket, some materia and his knives in as well. Better be safe than sorry.

Satisfied, Cloud zipped up the bag and left the room, making sure that everything was locked up tight behind him. Cloud walked to the elevators as he typed out a text to Tseng to tell him he’s coming and slowly replied to the other messages he got from Zack and Lee, pressing the up button absentmindedly.

Looking down and distracted, Cloud did not notice Brute and his gang coming at him until he was shoved roughly into the elevator door. He dropped his duffle in surprise and reacted automatically, twisting around to elbow the face of the one pinning him. Cloud smiled to himself when he head a familiar crunch followed by a howl of pain. One of Brute’s lackeys stumbled backwards, clutching at his broken nose desperately to stem the bleeding and the pain. Cloud only had a few seconds to feel smug before he was descended onto again. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, Cloud was easily restrained by the two largest teenagers in the group and was forced to kneel on the floor.

Brute stood in front of him, holding Cloud’s duffle in one hand and a pocketknife in the other. Cloud gasped and lunged forward in a last ditch attempt because there was no way he was going to let Brute destroy his things without a fight. Cloud was quickly subdued again, a bruise already blooming on his face and his solar plexus throbbing.

“Why hello there, what do we have here?” Brute smirked and shook the duffle. “It’s itty bitty Cloudy. I wonder where you’re going? Maybe to suck someone’s dick so you can pass Streaming? Someone like you can’t possibly achieve anything without help.” The whole gang laughed along with Brute and he gave Cloud a kick when he started struggling again. “Who knows what’s in here? A bag full of lube and sex toys hmm?” Brute leered and Cloud bared his teeth.

“None of your damn business so fuck off!”

Brute scowled and punched Cloud in the abdomen, smirking at Cloud’s pained wheeze. “Now that’s not the way to talk to your betters.” He tut and lifted the knife. “Why not we find out right now? And maybe we can use some of them on you.” Brute licked his lips suggestively and the whole gang jeered.

Cloud felt a cold feeling spread from his extremities as doubt began to set in and clenched his hands. Shit, things are starting to get very out of hand.
With a swipe down, the knife slit a large hole at the bottom of the bag and all of its contents fell out. Cloud struggled harder in the tight hold and was thrown across the floor and against the elevator.

“Strife, where did you get this from?” The wolf pelt was shoved in his face, but Cloud only glared at Brute and leaped up to punch him across the face.

Cloud exhaled sharply when a boot was driven into his abdomen, all the air punched out of him.

Brute tsked, massaging his sore jaw and shook the bunched up pelt under his nose. “I won’t repeat myself.” He said, “Where did you get this from? Everyone knows that you’re a poor village boy. So where the fuck did you get this?”

“Your mother.” Cloud spat, furious as hell.

Brute’s face turned an ugly shade of puce and he delivered a swift kick to Cloud’s face. It seemed to be an unspoken signal because blows started raining down on Cloud and it was all he could do to curl up in a tight ball against the elevator doors to protect his soft organs. Cloud was then forced to uncurl from his ball by a hand yanking his hair to see Brute holding one of his green materia.

“Let’s see if I can make you talk with this.” He slotted the materia into his bangle and it glowed orange in his hand.

Cloud’s eyes widened in horror as little fireballs spouted at the ends, appearing sporadically but no less dangerous. Brute shoved his hand forward, stopping only a few centimetres from Cloud’s face. “Talk or else.” He demanded and his hand got closer to the tip of Cloud’s nose.

Cloud swallowed heavily around a dry throat and leaned back as much as he could until he was flush against the elevator doors. Fuck, this is really very bad. Cloud’s eyes darted around desperately for any sign of help, but the corridor was deserted and there was no way anyone will be patrolling when it was only eight at night.

Then, to Cloud’s utter relief, the elevator arrived like the Gods themselves had come to save him and the doors dinged open. He quickly rolled away from getting his face melted off to put space between them. Hopefully he would be fast enough to close the elevator doors before he was attacked again. However, his plans were quickly derailed when he rolled right into a pair of booted
feet.

What the fuck even.

Cloud groaned, his sore ribs and abdomen had collided against the steel toes and it hurt like hell. But still, no one with steel-toed boots was someone he could ignore and no matter how much Cloud wanted to lie on the floor to wallow in pain, disrespecting a senior officer would likely make his life even more hell.

The loud gasp and mad scramble behind him confirmed his thoughts.

Cloud struggled unsteadily to his feet, the bruises littering his body flaring to life, and he had to bite his lip to hold back any sounds. Somehow, the floor of the elevator looked rather wobbly and belatedly, Cloud realised that he probably had a minor concussion.

“Cadets.”

The low timbre had Cloud freezing in place, head down on trembling legs.

No. It can’t- it really can’t be...

Cloud lifted his head slowly, taking in the black boots then the boot buckles at the claves and just below the knees, securing the tucked in leather pants. Then up and up and up- the tips of long silver tresses, the pants held up by a thick belt stamped with the SOLDIER emblem and the two thick leather bands strapped across a white-clad chest. Cloud gulped and tilted his head back, looking past a strong neck and porcelain-smooth skin to stare directly into a pair of green slit-pupil eyes.

Oh, fuck me.

Even without his long armoured coat or Masamune, Sephiroth was unmistakable and Cloud’s slow moving brain granted him enough coordination to snap a shaky salute, flushing slightly when Sephiroth raised a thin silver brow at him.

Sephiroth gazed over the scene he had stumbled upon, raising his other eyebrow at the sheer mess
of the area and gestured Cloud to get out of the elevator, following after him.

“Report, Cadet Johnson.”

The voice brooked no argument and Brute puffed out his chest in pride that the General Sephiroth knew his name. Cloud could only sigh at the total bullshit explanation he gave.

Cloud closed his eyes the more Brute talked, mentally preparing himself to be kicked out of the SOLDIER programme. There was no way he could salvage this situation, it’s not like any instructor ever gave him the benefit of the doubt. Anyway, Cloud wasn’t sure if he even wanted to. He had rolled onto Sephiroth’s feet—his idol’s feet for Gaia’s sake. And in such an embarrassing state too. Sephiroth must think him a weak slob by now, Cloud mentally wailed.

Brute finished his story with a self-satisfied grin, his gang sending Cloud little smug looks that made Cloud grind his teeth in frustration.

Cloud mentally grimaced, but kept his gaze forward and his posture straight.

Sephiroth remained silent and continued staring at each of them with intimidatingly blank eyes that seemed to pierce through them until everyone began to sweat nervously. Then, apparently seeing something, he flipped open his PHS to type out a message.

A few awkward seconds later, there were two answering pings and Sephiroth typed out another message before snapping it shut, causing the cadets to jump in surprise.

Sephiroth glanced at Cloud for less than a second, then turned his attention to the other cadets and distantly, Cloud thought that his heart had really stopped for a moment there.

“Cadets Johnson, Key, Mathis, Donovan and Fischer.” The whole gang jumped into a salute, waiting for their orders. “Report to General Hewley immediately for disciplinary action. Bullying is forbidden in the SOLDIER programme.” Sephiroth frowned and added, “You may find him in his office.”

The six of them stared at Sephiroth a little dumbstruck because no one had expected that. When none of them moved after a few beats, Sephiroth narrowed his eyes and tilted his head just so and Brute and his gang clambered to snap another salute before scurrying off in fright.
Cloud numbly watched them disappear around the corner and stiffly turned back to face Sephiroth, waiting for his orders. With everything calming down, Cloud felt his body’s screaming protests at the abuse it had gone through more keenly and he shifted a little to the right to relieve some of the pressure on his twisted ankle.

To his confusion, Sephiroth simply tucked his PHS back into his pocket and crossed his arms. “Cadet Strife, are you in need of medical attention?”

Cloud startled and gave him another salute. “No sir!”

Sephiroth gave him an unreadable look and turned to press the up button for the elevator. “At ease cadet. Pick up your things.”

Cloud blushed in embarrassment and immediately stooped to pick up his ripped duffle, holding it carefully to shove his things in. As he folded the wolf pelt carefully, there was a rustle beside him and a hand dropped his materia and bone accessories into his duffle. Face positively burning now, Cloud squeaked out a thank you sir and picked up his speed, flinging the remainder of his things as neatly as he could into his duffle.

The elevator dinged open again and Cloud stood up with a sigh, cradling his torn bag carefully. He squeaked again when Sephiroth placed his blanket, neatly folded and all, on top of his bag and mumbled another thank you sir as he scurried into the elevator behind the General. Cloud juggled his bag and his blanket until he had one hand free, and turning to press the floor to Tseng’s apartment, Cloud had to stop in confusion because…

It was already pressed.

In fact, it was the only button selected and Cloud had to awkwardly reshuffle the stuff in his arms as he came to a realisation that both he and Sephiroth are going to the same floor, which meant that Tseng and Sephiroth live next to each other what the fuck why didn’t Tseng ever tell him that bastard.

Then, Cloud wanted to jump off a building because he was suddenly aware of the fact that it was going to be such an awkward elevator ride and why didn’t he just choose another floor and save himself the trouble, but he can’t do it now because it’s too late and it would make things even more awkward and, and… there was only incoherent screaming in Cloud’s head.
Cloud stood stock-still with his head bowed, eyes trained to the ground and mentally counted the floors as the elevator rose through the Shinra HQ slowly, but steadily. He gnawed on his lip, acutely aware of General-freaking-Sephiroth standing so close beside him he could feel the heat of his body. Occasionally, Cloud would catch a glimpse of black and silver at the corner of his eye.

50...

51...

Cloud counted eagerly. Not long now… He could feel the awkwardness within the elevator like a thick fog pressing down on him, with nothing to lessen it save for the mechanical hum of the air conditioner. Cloud traced the cracks on the floor of the elevator with his eyes and mentally noted the need for him to get new boots because the threads along the base were fraying.

Ding.

Cloud could have cried from relief. The monotonous declaration that they have reached ‘the sixty-seventh floor’ had never sounded so sweet.

Sephiroth strode out first, silver hair flying behind him and Cloud stared jaw-slack behind him until the monotonous voice declared that the doors were closing. Cloud shook himself and quickly left the elevator, counting the doors he passed in his head.

The corridor was quiet and clean, sleek metal doors against white walls and a thick maroon carpet, lit up by bright fluorescent lights. The doors were bare except for a handle and a keyhole.

Considering the type of people living on this floor, Cloud supposed that the security was mostly a formality. He couldn’t imagine anyone stupid enough to try and break into any of these apartments, especially when the president’s and vice-president’s living space spanned the three floors above this.

Cloud stopped in front of the second door on the right and set down his things to fish out a key, making sure that his whole right palm touched the door handle as he pushed it down.
Looks can be deceiving- the door handle acted as a print scanner so only having the key alone wasn’t enough to unlock the door.

The door opened with a soft click and Cloud shuffled into Tseng’s apartment, heaving a great sigh of relief the moment the door closed behind him. Gaia, he didn’t realise how much his instincts had been screaming at him until he was safe.

There was no way that Sephiroth would stare at a mere cadet… would he? Pfft why would he. It’s not like he knew anything about him right?

But if Sephiroth wasn’t the stare he felt, then who was it?

Cloud grimaced at the thought and pushed it to the back of his mind. There was no point worrying about that now when there were more important things to handle- namely the headache blooming at the back of his head and his screaming ankle.

Cloud toed off his boots and lined them up neatly against the wall, turning to take in Tseng’s apartment for the first time.

It had a rather open concept, the front door opening up to a large space that consisted of a living room and a dining room with the kitchen off to the right linked by a low counter lined with tall stools. The wall opposite the front door consisted of floor to ceiling tinted windows that showed a wonderful view of a section of the plate. There were three metal doors to the left separated by large book cases filled to the brim with books and knickknacks and the kitchen spanned the entire right side of the apartment. The walls were painted a nice cream and all the furniture were made of dark wood which was so unusual in a building that consisted mainly of steel and glass.

Cloud was dumping his things next to the couch when one of the doors opened and Tseng entered the living room clad in only a loose shirt and pyjama bottoms.

“Welcome Clou-.” Tseng stopped mid sentence and his face grew thunderous, crossing the room quickly in long strides and grasped Cloud’s face gently in one hand to examine the forming bruise on his cheek. “What happened.” He demanded, running his other hand through Cloud’s hair to feel for bumps on his scalp.

“It’s nothing.” Cloud scowled, batting away his hands. “I just need a Cure and I’ll be fine.”
“Needing a cure is not nothing, brat.” Tseng snapped and manoeuvred him onto the couch. “And sit down. Dear Leviathan, stop putting weight on that ankle.” He turned to rummage through Cloud’s duffle, eye twitching at the long gash on the bag, to fish out a Cure and the blanket.

Cloud sagged when a Cura washed over him, relaxing into the fluffy couch cushions contently. The throbbing pains all over his body had disappeared and a cool pack was secured around his ankle to bring down the rest of the swelling. “Thanks Tseng”, he mumbled, turning to curl up against Tseng’s chest when he reclined on the couch next to him.

Tseng casted another Cura on Cloud just in case and wrapped him in the blanket, tucking the corners until he became a Cloud-burrito with only his head sticking out on one end, mushed against his warm chest.

Cloud sighed again, feeling warm and comfortable and drowsy as Tseng turned down the lights around them and turned on the television at a low volume. He started purring when a warm hand slowly combed his hair, gently untangling the knots and lightly scratching his scalp.

“So how was your day?”

Cloud hummed sleepily, “It was fine I guess. I hung out with Zack at the gym this morning and…” He trailed off, but a light tug on his hair woke him up again.

“And?” Tseng asked.

“Hmm? Oh, n’ we went explorin’ in sect’four.” Cloud slurred, eyes blurring with sleep as he snuggled deeper into his blanket cocoon and warm pillow.

“Did you buy anything?” Tseng was stroking all the way down to his neck now and Cloud gave a soft huff, arching into the touch.

“Yeh… like a few book n’ stuff. Zack gave me a couple’a shirts.” Cloud yawned.

Tseng rubbed the base of his neck and Cloud hummed louder, sinking into the touch. “And who gave you the bruises?”
Cloud scrunched his nose. “Oh it was jus’ them ‘gain. Nothin’ special.”

“They?” Tseng kept his voice soft and levelled even as the rage in him was threatening to boil over.

“Yeh, them. Y’know-.” Here Cloud paused and shook away the hand in his hair to glare groggily at Tseng. “Nooo. I already told you.” He pouted. “I can handle these things on my own.”

Tseng frowned. “But-.”

Cloud shook his head again. “But no, Tseng. Leave it.” When Tseng opened his mouth to protest again. Cloud narrowed his eyes. “Unless you want me to rag your ass about your gifts.” Tseng’s face turned carefully blank. “Yeah, I figured it out. So, if you don’t want me to give you grief for the amount of paranoia your very expensive gifts and your stalking gave me, you’ll drop it.”

Tseng wisely closed his mouth. “You’re learning way too much from Reno.” He laughed, stroking Cloud’s hair again.

Cloud sniggered. “Nah, that was from Rude.” The hand in his hair paused for a second before resuming their patting. “He’s pretty open once you get to know him.”

Tseng made a disbelieving noise above him. “Should I be afraid of you stealing my Turks from me?”

“You can keep Reno.” Came the reply, but it wasn’t a no.

Tseng’s lips twisted into a small smile and he hiked Cloud further up in his arms so he could rest more comfortably in his chest.

Soon, soft snores filled the apartment, just a bit louder than the late night soap opera playing on the television. Tseng waited for a few more minutes before carrying Cloud to the guest room and leaving his duffle at the foot of the bed. Closing the door quietly behind him, Tseng walked to the kitchen and sat at the counter after making a fresh cup of tea, flicking open his PHS to make a few calls.
It didn’t matter that Cloud refused to tell him who kept picking on him- Tseng already knew. All he wanted to find out was how discreet he should be. Luckily, Turks were made to work in the shadows.

Perhaps it was unfortunate that the cadets had picked the one person many of the Turks were very fond of to bully, but Tseng didn’t care. Things had been going on for way too long and Tseng was not going to stand aside and watch Cloud get pushed around- no matter what Cloud insisted.

_The little brat. He’s lucky he’s cute._ Tseng thought wryly.

Chapter End Notes

Come join me on my [tumblr](https://tumblr.com) account!

You can scream FFVII or YOI things at me ^^
The door to the apartment closed with a soft click, locks whirling into place behind the handle. Sephiroth pulled off his boots with short, jerky movements and left them sagging in place next to the door. The apartment was dark, only illuminated by the light pollution coming from the city lights and the reactors, bathing the room in a pale green glow. He stacked his key cards and wallet onto the dining table, and crossed the room to the floor to ceiling windows spanning the length of an entire wall.

Sephiroth stabbed a switch with a finger, the metal groaning under the pressure as the automated system dragged the thick curtains to cover the windows. The entire apartment was plunged into darkness and Sephiroth let out a short breath in relief when the pounding behind his skull lessened to an annoying, but bearable pulse.

Slumping across his ridiculously comfortable sofa (it threatened to swallow him into its cushion-y depths), Sephiroth pinched his temples and let out a groan of pure aggravation. Gaia, the entire day had been such a clusterfuck. He did not have words in any of the languages he knew that could sufficiently describe how annoyed he felt. Only years of training and strict punishments kept him from throwing his entire desk out of his office windows. It would no doubt have been extremely satisfying, but the resulting property damage and paperwork quickly crossed the thought from his mind.

Still, despite not doing any physical exercises in the day, Sephiroth felt tired to his bones. He felt stagnant and sluggish. When was the last time he went on a mission? Other than training the Thirds, when was the last time he had gone on a simple mission alone? Even Genesis and Angeal go on occasional missions together. He should know. He was the one who signed off on their requests.
Gaia, sitting behind the desk and dealing with the board members day in and day out was slowly rotting his mind. It barely took any brain power to complete his paperwork. They were simply tedious to do. Sometimes, when he was desperate enough for any kind of mental simulation at all, he would volunteer to complete Genesis’ paperwork for him when he inevitably puts it off to the last second. As for the ShinRa higher ups, he treated them as SOLDIER cadets. They were influential and rich, but they act as immature and short-sighted as teenagers. (Other than Tseng, of course, who was always a pleasure to deal with- especially during budget meetings. Sephiroth left the board room feeling invigorated after months of tedium every single time.)

Thankfully, this round of SOLDIER applications was the most interesting one yet, providing him with an interesting mystery: one Cadet Cloud Strife of Nibelheim. Sephiroth stared at his ceiling, lips pursed in thought as he rubbed the material of his couch blanket between his fingers. The cadet had been a mystery since he entered the programme. Seemingly average, but interesting enough to warrant the attention of Tseng of the Turks. Not to mention that the Turk liked him enough to personally ensure that whatever secrets were on his profile would not be exposed. Sephiroth could understand his fascination, but not his degree of investment in a mere cadet. Well, until he observed on of his classes.

At first, he had watched it with a sense of bewilderment, because why would Tseng be so interested by someone so painfully average? It was when the cadets were partnered together for spars did he see it. Strife and his partner definitely had no love lost between them. In fact, the partner was definitely overly hostile for a simple spar. Sephiroth’s gaze narrowed as he took in the rest of the class. A few cadets were clearly worried for the smaller cadet, most from Strife’s squad. A few others were only a little less hostile than the other cadet… Cadet Johnson he guessed.

Sephiroth tilted his head.

The instructor was clearly turning a blind eye to the conflict occurring less than five metres behind him. Standards have obviously dropped if the instructors themselves were reduced to accepting such behaviour within SOLDIER halls. Evidently, Sephiroth was spending way too much time behind his desk when he should be patrolling his SOLDIERs and SOLDIER-hopefuls.

Sephiroth went back to observing Cadet Strife, watching closely as Cadet Johnson made to thrown him to the ground. It happened in less than a second. Anyone not watching as intently as he would have missed the twitch of Strife’s elbow. Sephiroth’s breath hitched in surprise. He could not understand. The move Strife aborted would have broken Cadet Johnson’s hold of him. So why didn’t he do it? Sephiroth’s eyebrows furrowed and he went closer to the windows of the observation platform.

There, there it was again. A twitch in his leg that was supposed to be a kick to Johnson’s ribs because he left his side wide open, but Strife stopped it and let himself be pinned to the mat brutally. Sephiroth’s frown deepened. Why is he doing that?
There was a strong urge to go down and take over the training session, especially when the instructor – Second Lieutenant Wilson if he wasn’t mistaken – said nothing about the holes in Johnson’s defence or about Strife’s hidden competency in fighting, but Sephiroth resisted the impulse. He would observe a little longer before doing anything rash.

The next few sessions went about similarly, despite it being on different topics with different instructors. The SOLDIER curriculum was definitely getting an overhaul once Sephiroth was done assessing the instructors and their supervisors. It was utterly disgraceful that standards were dropping like this. No wonder Genesis was complaining about the new batch of Thirds more than usual. Sephiroth had ignored him, thinking that Genesis was being his usual overdramatic self.

So, though everything started with simple curiosity in a cadet, it quickly snowballed into a department-wide evaluation and the tightening on SOLDIER policies. Sephiroth was swamped with work now and everyday brought more tedious sheets for him to deal with than before.

It was for the future of his SOLDIERS, Sephiroth reminded himself. His head gave a painful throb, as if in protest, and Sephiroth closed his eyes in a futile effort to lessen the pain. Such a shame that typical anaesthetics are metabolised by his body too quickly to be of use.

Sephiroth exhaled sharply through his teeth.

One of the few regrets he had with this increase in workload was not having any more time to watch the cadet. He had instead delegated the job to Genesis because Angeal already had his hands full with his extremely energetic and enthusiastic student. Luckily, after the explosive reaction from the first time Genesis observed the cadet, the man had acquiesced to waiting until the time was right to swoop down on him. Thinking back on what he had stumbled upon ten minutes ago, Sephiroth was relieved that Genesis had agreed. Imagining the sheer damage Tseng would have wrought if they had actually dragged Strife kicking and screaming into the spotlight sent shivers down his spine.

Sephiroth knew that Tseng liked the boy, but he had not realised how highly the man regarded him. Curling up, he drew the couch blanket around himself, feeling the silky material slide over his bare skin. Sephiroth pinched the blanket between his fingers and resumed rubbing it between them. He felt his thoughts settle a little. This, this was what made him realise how much Strife mattered to Tseng. Well, not this blanket exactly, but what material the blanket was made of. The blanket was actually given to him by Tseng after their return from their first campaign together in Wutai.

It had been one of the happiest moments of his life.
The material was the same one the Turks used to make their suits. It was lightweight and bulletproof, able to regulate body temperature, and resistant to wear and tear. No one, save the Turks, has access to it. And even then, they don’t give it willy-nilly. They certainly don’t give it to any random cadet who caught their eye, let alone in a form as large as the comforter Strife had in his duffle.

Sephiroth scoffed at the memory of Johnson cornering Strife against the elevator doors and using materia that obviously did not belong to him. Honestly, he did not understand the allure of bullying. It wasted time and resources one could have used to improve oneself. Though he supposed that he should be grateful to come across the situation. It finally gave him a reason to begin his crack down on bullying. Once Genesis and Angeal were done with the five cadets, the rest would surely not dare to step out of line. It also gave him the additional benefits of drawing attention to Strife without it looking suspicious and providing him with a few more pieces for the giant puzzle in his mind.

The wolf pelt. The dragon bones. The fully mastered materia. Sephiroth could not have found a clearer answer to his questions. Now, the only question remaining was: Why is he hiding?

He shall have to tread carefully from now on.

Cloud woke up to a face full of sunlight and a head full of regrets. He took a minute to stare at the white ceiling, his mind roaring in his ears and his heart beating double time. The events of the previous night played on repeat in his head like a demonic record player. Groaning loudly, he pulled the blankets up until they covered his head to block out the world. He didn’t want to think about it. Things are so awful right now and Cloud didn’t think that he could deal with it unless everything would stop.

Of course, that never happens. Cloud rolled onto his front to scream his frustrations into his pillow. Only, he misjudged how close he was to the edge of the bed and fell onto the floor in a giant heap. He shouted in surprise, disoriented by the sudden change in position.

He must have been loud enough to be heard from the kitchen because the door opened shortly after. Tseng, dressed in his usual attire sans jacket, poked his head into the room. He laughed at the sight of a disgruntled Cloud sprawled on the floor struggling with his blankets. That was, until Tseng realised it was real distress on Cloud’s face and he rushed to help Cloud out of the jumbled mess at once. Placing a hand on Cloud’s arm, Cloud struggled for a little longer before flopping in place and lying still, allowing Tseng to untangle him.
“Tseng. It’s no use.” Cloud whispered.

“Hmm?” Tseng asked, propping Cloud up against the side of the bed and tucked in the disentangled blankets around him properly. The both of them knew he wasn’t talking about the blankets.

“I fuck up. Ruined everything.” Cloud said, grabbing two fist-fulls of the blankets in a white-knuckle grip. “Oh Hel, I should have been more aware when I was walking to the lift. I knew they were going to try something with the others out of the building- I fucking knew it! But I had to be so stupid. And now it’s all gone to shit. Everything- all wasted.” Cloud grit his teeth and glared at his lap so hard you’d think that the patches on his blanket were the ones responsible for all the shit going on in his life.

Tseng sighed and knelt in front of Cloud, gently but firmly prying his fingers away from the abused blanket and replacing it with his hands instead. A tug had Cloud curling forward to rest his head on Tseng, his face buried in the light cotton of his shirt.

“I fucked up- I’m fucked up. I don’t know if I’m more upset over General Sephiroth knowing who I am or that I looked like absolute shit in front of him or that I’m not even upset over being upset that General Sephiroth probably thinks of me as a weakling in the first place!” Cloud cried and crushed Tseng’s hands in a vice-like grip, his breaths getting progressively shorter the more he panicked. “I mean I want General Sephiroth to know who I am. Who doesn’t? But I also don’t want him to know who I am. Because he’s not supposed to- not until the time is right and now I completely ruined all of my plans and everything is going to shit and I’ve brought all this shit to you and I’m so sorry, Tseng. I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.” Cloud was sobbing at this point. They were ugly, heaving sobs which did nothing to help with his mounting panic attack.

Tseng was increasingly confused and alarmed, and his first instinct was to demand to know what he was talking about, but his Cloud-senses kicked in and he was quick to pull Cloud down so his ear rested against his chest.

“Calm, Cloud. You are with me in my apartment. There is no one else here except for you and me. You are safe. We are alone here.” Tseng kept his cool and spoke steadily, keeping his hands wrapped around Cloud’s firmly. “I want you to breathe with me. In: one, two, three, four.” Tseng breathed in as he counted. “Out: two, two, three, four.” They breathed out. “Good. Now, again.”

Tseng kept up with the counting and gave Cloud’s hands a gentle squeeze with every count. He tried to relax Cloud with funny anecdotes, like about the secretary on level three who was busted for keeping his cat in the bottom drawer of his desk. Or about the office worker who was so badly
shocked by Rod, she threw her stapler at him.

Cloud actually laughed at that one. It was hoarse and weak, but a laugh all the same. Small successes. Slowly calming down, Cloud managed to catch his breath and his sobs were reduced to occasional sniffles. Then, the emotional exhaustion struck him like a brick.

Cloud slumped deeper into Tseng’s hold before reluctantly pulling away and grabbed a few tissues to rub away the mess on his face. “Sorry.” He mumbled, thoroughly embarrassed.

“No need to apologise.” Tseng said, as he did every time Cloud apologised for having a panic attack. He never thought less of Cloud for having panic attacks, even if they were set off by something as small as seeing his collection of kitchen knives magnetised against the wall above the counter. These days, they were either kept in a drawer or in a knife block. There was no way it was ‘something small’ if it triggered Cloud.

“Do you still want to go into the office with me today? You can stay here if you wish. I won’t mind.” Tseng asked, careful to not touch Cloud until he initiated it.

Cloud shook his head in negative and blew his nose.

“Okay, then. How about you go clean up and I’ll get breakfast ready? We can head out afterwards.”

Cloud nodded, still looking miserable. As Tseng made to get up, Cloud reached up to grasp his hand. “Thanks,” he said softly, still not looking up.

Tseng gave him a rare smile. “It’s nothing.” And bent down to give Cloud a tight hug before leaving the room.

Breakfast was made up of a type of rice-porridge filled with frog meat and a few long sticks of some type of fried dough. When asked, Tseng pointed to the congee and told him the 田鸡粥 was a common breakfast food in Wutai. Sometimes, the frog was replaced with century egg or any type of meat. Congee was usually paired with some 油条.
Cloud looked at the food dubiously, but steeled himself and took a bite. He trusted Tseng enough to not give him anything that tasted awful. The few rare times they ate together, Tseng would expose Cloud to different Wutaian foods (expensive as they are in Midgar). The last time they had a meal together was dinner the week before and Tseng brought Cloud to a hole in the wall restaurant in sector eight that sold authentic Wutaian food. Everyone in the restaurant had given Cloud’s white skin and blond hair suspicious looks until Tseng stepped into the place behind him. Then, everything was well and all of them went back to whatever they were doing. It was unsettling.

Tseng ordered for them some needle-thin noodles and dumplings in soup, prawns wrapped in thin rice noodle sheets, spinach with eggs and sesame seed-covered baked buns filled with minced pork, pepper and scallions. Cloud’s taste buds died and went to heaven that night. All of the dishes were so delicious and the both of them ate until they could barely move from their seats.

They ate breakfast quietly, Tseng normally not prone to talking a lot and Cloud was still recovering from his attack. The congee was flavourful and the frog meat was surprisingly good. Though, Cloud’s favourite was definitely the fried dough. It was crispy on the outside and the inside was soft and fluffy where the dough had expanded in the hot oil. Sinfulness in every bite.

Still, the quiet had an undercurrent of awkwardness. Cloud was keenly aware of the elephant in the room and he was reluctant to broach the subject. Of course, he couldn’t escape it for long and when they were washing the dishes side by side, Tseng was the one who cut straight to the point.

“Cloud, what did you mean General Sephiroth was not supposed to know who you were?” Tseng asked, as cool as a cucumber. Cloud fumbled with, and nearly dropped, the bowl he was drying.

“Uh… I- uh. I don’t know?” Cloud tried and cringed when Tseng only gave him the side-eye. “I mean it’s complicated? And I hadn’t meant to say that?” Tseng raised an unimpressed eyebrow and Cloud cringed again. “I- oh, fine. I’ll tell you, but I’m warning you first okay. You might not believe me.”

Cloud took a deep, calming breath and started his story. “It was about two months before I left for Midgar. I was looking through the old ShinRa manor to see if I could stay in one of the rooms for a week or two. Winter was pretty bad last year and Fenrir’s pack recently had three new-borns. So, I couldn’t rely on them to keep me warm when they had to take care of their babies too.” Cloud paused, as if bracing for impact, and took a wet plate from Tseng. “I was looking into one of the rooms when I was attacked by some monsters. My first instinct was to attack, but it wasn’t a smart idea when in a house full of rotting wood and all you had was fire materia. You can guess that it didn’t work out well at all. I killed the monsters sure, but the floor below me gave away and I fell into the basement levels of the manor.” Here, Tseng was too in control of his reactions to jerk in
shock, but he could not keep his heart from twisting in dread. Cloud seemed to have sensed it as his lips thinned in a mirthless smile.

“Yeah, I landed right in the middles of one of the labs. There were surgical instruments lining the walls and everything. Couldn’t get out either. All the exits were sealed and there wasn’t anything to stack so I could climb out of the hole in the ceiling.” Cloud sighed and resolutely kept his hands from shaking.

“I think I was stuck there for about three days- time was a bit hard to gauge down there- until I got desperate and rammed the exits with a gurney.” Cloud said and laughed in relief at the next part of his tale. “It was a good thing I did. All that noise woke someone up from a room behind one of the doors.”

Tseng nearly dropped the cup he was holding as he lurched around to face Cloud, his mouth gaping. He seemed to scan Cloud for any injuries as though the incident happened only an instant and not months ago.

“I was fine. Relax, Tseng.” Cloud rolled his eyes and continued with the story. “The door was blasted open a few minutes later by this guy with a huge gun and a fucking golden claw. Scared me shitless at first and he probably wasn’t expecting me either because he nearly dropped his gun when we saw each other. But everything turned out okay in the end. He helped me make a way out of the manor and lent me his warm coffin to stay for the winter. Turns out, that guy was pretty eager to explore after I told him what he’d been missing when he was asleep.” Cloud placed the dried plate aside and slanted his head towards Tseng, who had gone back to soaping up the cup. “Can you believe it? He’d been asleep for twenty years. And he’s still alive- he didn’t even know that General Sephiroth was a general. How crazy is that?”

Tseng hummed, unsurprised. He’d seen a lot of things after working with the science department for so long. There was a reason why no one likes to interact with Hojo more than necessary. The man was disturbing.

Though, something about Cloud’s story wiggled in his mind and Tseng asked, interrupting Cloud who was about to continue, “Cloud, who was that man?”

“Hmm, what? Uh, let me think.” Cloud tilted his head to the ceiling in thought. “Oh, yeah!” He snapped his fingers. “He told me his name was Vincent Valentine.”

This time, Tseng really did drop the cup in his hands.
There are a few things I want to say about this chapter (other than the fact that it took me so much effort to complete it and I'm so sorry it's so late):

- I hc that Sephiroth is somewhere along the autistic spectrum. Sometimes stimming helps to stop him from getting overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information he processes on a daily basis. He prefers soft and/or silky things to stim with. Rougher stuff makes it worse.

- I also hc that Tseng was Sephiroth's first real friend. And Sephiroth both loves him and fears him because he'd seen what Tseng would do for people he cares for.

- Cloud is a very stressed potato. But he trusts Tseng to make it all okay because (tho he don't know this) Tseng would go against ShinRa to keep him safe.

- Cloud doesn't know he is one dangerous mofo. (read above point)

- I hc again that Wutai is a Gaia version of Chinese culture- mixed with other asian cultures, but predominantly Chinese. So there is gonna be some references to Chinese culture when I talk about Wutai (like the food from there).

- Wiki says that the dot on Tseng's head is a tilak, but I don't think so because the shape is totally wrong for a guy. I have decided that it is a religious mark, but one for a new type of religion within that universe. I'm not going to discuss about it in the story.

- About the food,
  田鸡粥 (tian ji zhou) is frog porridge (Legit. I'm not kidding. Frog is not code for another type of meat.)
  油条 (you tiao) is a strip of dough that you fry in hot oil. Something like donuts but fluffier and without the sugar coating.
  水饺拉面 (shui jiao la mian) is chinese dumplings with hand-pulled noodles (either in soup or dry)
  鲜虾肠粉 (xian xia chang fen) is a type of rice noodle rolls filled with prawns
  金银蛋浸苋菜 (jin yin dan jin xian cai) is spinach and three types of eggs in soup
  胡椒饼 (hu jiao bing) is a type of sesame covered, coal-baked bun containing meat (usually pork) and scallions or garlic chives.

I suggest that you guys try these foods at least once in your lives. They're all so delicious. My favourite is the rice noodle roll with prawns.

(If i wrote anything wrongly or missed something important about panic attacks, autism and stimming, please don't hesitate to tell me. I don't have autism and I have researched about it, but I cannot guarantee that I'll get everything right. So I'm doing my best to respect everyone.)

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