Summary

Cloud does his very best to be brave.

This is a little sequel about growing older, wiser and, of course, the trials of love. There will be trust and hope, tears and turmoil. Two people shoved together must fight to stay together, and for what they know as true. Those bent on remembering are in for a world of hurt. Prepare for ups and deep downs, and long bouts of wondering.

Less is more.

Notes

Thanks again for all the kudos, comments, commiseration, and especially the patience! Trying to update more often, unless something else comes up (like more illness, or sudden paralysis, or hysterical blindness, or zombies), until it's done. Good and done. Really, really, REALLY done. For real. Welcome to my labour of love. My best and worst friend. Thanks for reading along! You've made it so far. Good job. High five!
If you JUST got here, a lot of what’s happening in this ridiculous story isn’t going to make sense unless you have some knowledge of act one, Tell All. Unfortunately, a lot of what's happening isn’t going to make sense even if you HAVE read act one. Oh dear. Start there to get the full experience. Plus, hey, that's just more porn and drama and stuff.

Questions, criticisms, and caterwauling are always welcome, yo.
Chapter 1

“Get bent, you rigid dick.”

His expression is wily and his inflection scathing.

He never used to be this way. He was a polite pup, not a vicious mutt. This unfamiliar venom developed out of necessity. It’s been two years since his mother and hometown burned up and blew away, dust on the wind. In that time he has drifted on that same wind, blowing from town to town, doorstep to gutter, and he’s downright tired of it all. Too long has he watched his back and steered clear of the shadows, the all-too friendly voices, the all-too obvious lies.

Here, in the after, in the gutter, there are streets with hands, shop owners with thick boots, children with sticky fingers, pedestrians with no emotion but disgust, and the shoving and pulling, always. The closeness of the bodies and every eye, and intention, and loathing, and desperation, it pushes in around him. It’s the aroma of grease and rotting food, sweat, moist wood, gunpowder, soil, flesh, breath, filth. They’re crammed in as close as you can get. It’s all crushing movement and shouting voices. And it’s only the local marketplace.

Time is subjective. But, if the chaos is any indicator, it’s probably noon. The sky is grey and overcast where it can be seen streaking beyond the sloped rooftops. It’s closing in too, heavy with suspense. It could rain, it could storm, it could blow right through. All he knows, a Cloud as young as fourteen, is that he’s about to be driven from existence and crushed underneath many indifferent feet unless he does something about it right now, right this minute, get a move on.

“Back off!” he growls into the throng.

More shoving, more discord. Nothing changes. He’s scrabbling away. He’s looking for food, for a calm place to stand and look around. Some sort of vantage and advantage. He’s as filthy and moist as the rest of the steaming, writhing cauldron of people crowding and clustering on the flagstone. He’s as much one of them. He’s got to rise above it. He’s got to climb higher.

The town has no name. He's seen no sign and he hears no rumours, only the constant spill of fuck off and get back and what's the price and you're too beautiful to be out here. It’s only been a week since he crawled onto this main drag, but it’s all the same. He's been here before.

He’s hidden under a layer of grime and gross, but they, the eyes, the lies, the sickly sweet voices, they still see only his licked clean lips, red, and his tired eyes, liquid blue. Those on the prowl find his youth and confusion easily. They search him out, give him help, give him work, steal his soul, and use him. Sometimes the reaching, shoving hands grab on and won’t let go.

All he wants is peace. All he wants is rest, comfort, and a full stomach. A place to lay his head. Someone to know his name. Someone to call his name. A sense of belonging and reason. Home. A sense of home, and what it was, what it should be, and what it isn’t anymore. He has nothing left to give, and look, his whole life is still rolling out ahead of him.

The crowd crows and shuffles. He shifts with the slide and stomps to the beat. He feels a firm nudge at his left and then a pull from his right. It’s nothing new. The group thrashes. It’s still nothing new, even as the tug intensifies and he’s quickly drawn to the side by his thin arm.

He lurches and yelps, slipping beyond the void marketplace faces looming on. It’s just another day as he fades from the safety of the crowd and into the streets, dragged and half-carried. He’s free but
he’s caught, he’s spinning and falling, and now he’s hitting solid wall.

Again, he is surrounded, but by tall shadows and plaster partition, not the sickness of survival. He’s been forced into an alley. His stomach aches, his head hurts. He has no fight. He braces and chomps his teeth, hoping his captor loses interest with his lack of spunk and fire, hoping someone will see, hoping beyond hope. Still so much foolish hope.

He starts hearing breathing, his own and the other’s heated gust. Whispers of be quiet and the press of a pocket knife wanting to be known. He starts feeling a roving hand, fingers, panic. He’s being pushed into the unforgiving gritty wall. He's seeing watery glimpses of inky outline. He's being pawed and prodded. In the gloom, tall and glossy posters, ads, propaganda, and other bullshit paste the brick walls, and they stare back, all pale faces and black eyes.

“Stop,” his thin voice finally pleads.

(wake up)

“Are you daydreaming?”

Reno, of course, hasn't stopped talking.

They haven't stopped walking either.

“No, more like... daywalking,” his insufferable bodyguard revises. He promptly corrects, yet again, adding in a snippy tone, “dreamwalking, I mean.” He huffs a short and well warranted breath out from behind Cloud, the annoyance palpable. “Fuck this. For the millionth time.”

Reno's been bringing up the back. He is moving slowly, matching Cloud’s inching pace. His constant stream of thoughts and complaints make his location known always. It also means he hasn't left, he isn't leaving, and they’re only miles out from Gongaga. Cloud would see the truth of it if he only turned his head, but he hasn’t, and he won’t. He keeps staring straight ahead.

The terrain beyond and all around is mild and flat, making his hindered going as smooth as he could have asked for. Trees grow in cozy patches nearby, huddled together off to their sides in enclaves. He drags the sword in an arrow-straight line. It’s not windy along the way like it was up in town, high on the ridge. Those very same rising hills and cut mountain tooth protect them.

“We're the same, you and I,” Reno carries on, filling what would otherwise be the sounds of wilderness. He’s coming through loud and (almost) clear. “My deadbeat dad didn't torch my mom to a cinder though. He split first. Didn’t even look back. Probably doesn't know we were twins. But, we're connected… All three of us, yo. Look what happened with... your boy’s... situation. What's up with that?” He takes a moment to catch his breath and cough a hounding cough. “Was it... fate? Engineered? The fucking Director? Or coincidence? Shit. Either way. Here we are.”

They have a long way to go yet, if they want to get to anywhere at all. There’s still so much open land between them and anything interesting. So much space allotted between each new act. There will be more than enough time to tune him out and dreamwalk.

Or hear him out.

He’d rather tune him out.
What's gonna lose?

Precious memory.

"Damn," Reno barks.

Cloud almost jumps. His eyes flutter wide despite.

"That’s a lotta shit…” Reno drones, lost inside his mutterings.

He uneasily clears his throat. It’s a tumultuous process. The gravel and grime won’t stop him from complaining though.

“I just want a drink... and a shower! No more fucking walking! No more silence!”

Cloud’s still not interested.

“You did this already! I shouldn’t be surprised, should I? I shouldn’t really be angry. This means I can talk all the shit I want and you won’t dispute. Not like you care! Not like you’re listening. I could call your mother a whore. I could praise Sephiroth for his choices. I could…”

Cloud is clenching his fists around the handgrip of the big damn sword.

“I could…” Reno’s getting hung up. “I could… Fuck it,” he eventually finishes. But, not for long. “I need to take this jacket and shit off,” he moans. “My arms are killing me.”

There’s silence for a whole five minutes. Maybe more. In that time, Cloud keeps on walking. He keeps dragging the mammoth sword along and looking ahead. He doesn't entertain why Reno keeps coughing, or why his arms hurt. He is blank. There is nothing else.

“You know what I think?”

Until there is Reno.

Cloud closes his eyes a moment and exhales carefully.

“I’m gonna take the longest fucking shower... ever. In the history of everything. First chance I get. I’m gonna sleep for a week when I see a real bed again. I want it to be known that, priority number one? That’s accommodations. We both need it. I can’t tell you how much I want to have a warm bite to eat... A real fucking meal. And my hair dealt with. And my hurts. And get a properly fitting pair of pants, and a fucking drink, and… It’s the simple things, man.”

How much longer must he listen to this?

Reno has rambled a rush of this and that, often with a giggle and a smirk, since their unceremonious beginning. What was, what is, what could be. Questions and concerns. Displeasure and commiseration. Exhaustion and stubbornness. He rambles the same now.

Cloud does what he would do in the best of situations and ignores him. He ambles, drags and pulls. He leads them on. Reno follows. The longer they go, the farther they get, the more tired Reno gets, the more honest and desperate and sick he becomes, and the quicker Cloud has to add a growing prickle (just a tickle) of compassion to his immense list of awful bullshit already pending. More guilt and guile. For as much as he hates Reno right now, he pities him. For as much as he doesn't want to listen, he must. He’s still his mother’s son after all.

Before he knows it, they're already back at the clearing they left to head into Gongaga. What was
their springboard and last camp the days before. What was their last camp with him.

Cloud toes his boot at the rocks and dust below. It’s midday, cool and crisp. The grass is still depressed from the tent and their moving about. The fire pit remains, just a clustering of large rocks encircling an old animal den to keep the flames contained.

He stands still and looks everything over: the grasses, the dust, the dirt, the general spread and gentle sloping of the land. This is already familiar and dreaded. This is where he healed him. This is where they had their official goodbye. And… it wasn’t good enough. It wasn’t long enough. It shouldn't have been.

“Don’t think about it,” Reno suggests, passing closely by.

Cloud would agree. He knows better than that, than this. But, he's also pissed as hell and looking for trouble. He’s all for flouting good advice, because pain sounds like just the right kind of medicine. Give him twisting torture and rampaging fits over anything else and empty despair.

Don’t. Don’t do it.

Please, don't.

Zack rises from the ashes.

He is untouched, gloriously shining, brilliant as supernova, solar flare, furious and natural and violent. He is reactive and roaring, internal combustion, backdraft, jet stream, jarring and adjusting, and just too much to focus on, to question, or understand, so quit it. Intense friction comes to mind, and buildings buckling, seas rending, earth bending, barren, beaten and divided. Imagine the skies flickering, falling, and sliding on. Think deliverance. He is eternal. He’s alive.

Here he is half turned, all broad shoulders, and about to leave him all over again. Here he is close enough to touch, the rise and bump of his collarbone, the prominence of his throat cords, the sinew of his arms and his long, long stride. Here he comes from the beginning, grinning, head cocked just so, curious, open and sincere. His tendency to scratch the back of his head or neck when uncertain. His every damn cough, and how he always seemed to forget he even had one. How he seemed to forget he was even alive after escaping Shinra and dissection, but would come back online with a roar and a shout. How he harbored a conviction and upheaval Cloud and Reno are still having trouble swallowing down even now.

He’s alive.

In memory.

Stop, stop, stop.

Don't.

“How’re your hands?”

Reno’s concern full in his face.

This is reality. This is the present. Everything come apart.

Cloud wants to tell him: it’s more than just my hands. Instead, he twists and turns away.

“You don’t look so good, yo,” Reno explains, following his escape.
I don’t feel so good.

“Sit down.”

I was planning on it.

Cloud strikes the BDS into the soft ground between them and lowers himself to rest at its wide base. He’s hunching forwards (as usual), bony spine, but not much of his minimal mass, lined up to the more than accommodating blade (and fading handprint). He’s just too damn weighted, too damn depressed, too damn dismal to lift himself any higher and into positive territory.

Reno drifts away to some not too distant place. He can still be heard huffing and puffing and going on about whatever has his feathers ruffled now. It’s not enough to give Cloud the illusion of being alone. He’s still haunted by his tagalong. And everything else.

Reno’s pulling something on the ground behind him when he comes back onto the immediate radar. It’s a sort of duffle bag. It belatedly strikes Cloud as the tent they left behind in the bushes. They hadn’t needed it in Gongaga, so they left it here to be retrieved or forgotten.

Reno drops it next to his rucksack and then drops onto his rear next to that. They’re separated now by air and a few feet of dusty, grassy patch, and all the silence of loss in between.

“This is gonna kill me,” Reno groans, hunched to the extreme.

He’s shirtless and bare but for his fully loaded dual gun holster.

There’s another thing that hits Cloud late.

Reno’s shirtless and his arms are all burned up.

Cloud looks down to his own tired and small hands and finds them sore but perfect. They appear as if nothing at all had happened. They were burned in the fire (the house fire, Gongaga, flames and smoke and suffocating horror), yes. He can still remember the sting and sizzle, it’s just that present, but there’s nothing to show for it. The char has healed. Not a scar remains.

Reno gets to tending his very present and angry burns while Cloud broods and exists and tries not to. He burns the end of a cigarette, *click click click*, and then gets to watching, and existing a little bit more. The smoke screen gives him the much needed distance.

Reno sends him a scowl over an arm as he assesses it. He doesn’t like Cloud’s new habit. Not for a moment. Not a surprise.

Cloud could care less. He’s going to continue. He’ll smoke all of these, find another pack, and then smoke all of those too. That’s how this works, isn’t it? Until the day he dies.

“You’ve gotta stop,” Reno grumbles. “Before it gets outta hand and you’re all pissy.”

Too late.

Reno huffs but lets Cloud alone for the time being. It’s just long enough for him to get the necessary items together in order to start healing his hurts, and maybe, just maybe, putting a lid on some of his blithering. He collects and grumbles and then starts laying a reclaimed washcloth damped by equally reclaimed water onto his damaged arms, easing the burn.

It’s probably the best thing for the problem at this point, rather than ointments or sprays. The flesh
is broken, raw, red and seeping. The coverage is extensive, reaching hand to shoulder on the one arm Cloud can clearly see. This also means there must not be advanced medicine between them. No military issue concoctions today. It’s the primitive route.

“It’s not cool,” Reno mutters, starting up again now that he’s settled. “It stopped being cool a long time ago. Fuck those old movies. It’s disgusting, and foul, and I hate that I’m the anticancer fucking poster child over here blowing my horn, but dammit, you know HE’D hate it. He’d hate it and have it dealt with. He’d hate you being a whiny asshole too. You know what would have happened? You’d sulk and you’d pout for a night but he’d take pity on you and then you’d get shotgun after stupid fucking shotgun in consolation. It wouldn’t even matter you don’t smoke anymore because you’d be drinking straight from the tap.”

And you’d know, wouldn’t you, because you’d be jealously watching from the shadows.

He sees Reno’s wild hair, his wiry white spine, his bandaged throat, his hung shoulder, his ailing arms, his missing fingers, his loose slacks, and his ugly honesty. He sees it all from underneath his own wild hair, muddied and segmented, stiff and heavy. He gets a good overall mental picture and then focuses in on Reno’s pallid and sweating face in particular. He feels nothing but rocks in his guts as a result. There’s nothing there but cutting knives and flaring nostrils.

“You’re gonna find yourself coughing and coughing, and then craving and craving... You’ll be smoking a pack a day before you know it, breathless and edgy. Those things aren’t as easy to come by as they used to be too, man.” Speaking of coughing, Reno has himself a noisome row and then pauses for several stabilizing breaths. “You wanna know something about me?” he asks, picking up right where he left off. “You probably know it already… But, I don’t quit. I just don’t. I’m stupid that way. Makes me tough though. As fucking nails. You? You need to quit.”

Cloud exhales slowly, cautiously.

As much as I need you around.

“What made you such a daisy anyway? Yeah, we know the sob story… We know it was hard, and terrible, and tragic,” Reno singsongs. “Shouldn’t you be imbued with righteous clout, or something, because of that? What keeps you down, man? Why won’t you rise up? You’re not as small as you think you are. You’ll fight for others… mostly—but you won’t fight for yourself?” He scoffs, half coughs. “You’d been on the streets for how long... and you’re still a fucking runt? You’re still trying to be the good guy? You’re still trying to make sense of it all? What a daisy. What a sap. Your story just doesn't add up to me, yo.”

Dry and calm. Cloud’s smoke comes puffing, unfurling. His teeth come quietly ticking and clicking. He’s getting annoyed. He’s a raw nerve. He’s open to the elements, and Reno. He can’t breathe over the smoke and the concentration spent not to burst, or twitch a muscle, or scream his head off. And he really wants to let go. He’d let loose and shout to his heart’s content. Howl at the tree tops. Roar at the sun. He’s afraid he’d never know silence again if he dared. He’d belt it out until he was lost. He’d shout out every last breath and then roll his eyes closed at the very end.

I cling too hard to good things, I guess. I always have. An idea, an image, a lie. I look for hope in everything. I did. My nature isn’t cruelty, or malice, or vengeance. I wasn’t built for this. For... the real world. I can’t be a soldier. I’m supposed to be at home right now. In school. Doing chores. Reading a book. Listening to my mom lecture me about girls. I don’t know. Stuff you’re told to expect. Anything but this. My story doesn’t add up because you don’t know the score. You think you do, Reno, but you don’t. It’s nothing but shit. It doesn’t mean anything. Nothing does.

He sticks with silence, bending Reno further out of shape.
“Well, shit,” Reno spits. “I was born a bastard. Two of a kind. Weren’t orphans then. Not like you might think. My mother, our mother, lived long enough to see what we might have become. Dad was never a figure. He was a shadow. We ran Wutai. We thought we did. But, the truth is… it was burned right out from underneath our feet too. Just like you. Because everything burns. The smell of smoke. The smell of burning. I just can’t stand it. Why do you want to fill your lungs with black when your past is just as charred as mine? They died, my pathetic little village… in the worst way. Just a few of us made it out. We watched houses crumble and smolder for a whole day and then we were orphans. We got the fuck outta there. Joined Shinra. Became something strong. And now… it’s just me. That’s what happened back then. That’s part of it. I can explain recently too. If you want. I can explain away the drinking and the sleeping around… The bad shit I’ve done. The codes I’ve broken. I have no control. I had no control. I guess I thought that was control. I dunno. I drank it all into a slumber. I fucked it into oblivion. It hasn’t bothered me… until now. Just when I’m about to lose another battle, another thing I love… because… I… really… am useless. Nothing’s changed, yo. I couldn’t save him. Not just… my brother, not just Wutai, but Zack too. That asshole. That… fucking guy. I’m only good at… killing things, yo. That’s what I’ve learned. That’s what I know for sure. I’m cursed or something, and that fire’s gonna get me eventually…”

This all sounds like something Cloud’s heard before: pleas, promises and half-truth. He licks his dry lips and draws in his tobacco exhaust. The smoke builds, his mood simmers. He has no other immediate retort. The smoke burns in his throat. It’s a task not to cough.

Reno digs at the growing wound, sounding rather far away, rather distant and muted. “I had better luck reaching you… when the dust was blowing... and Zack was dead the first time.”

It was cold and quiet too, and—was it early morning or deep night? Cloud can't remember. He only knows that Zack is at his feet, bleeding an outpouring of blood, and he’s a real sight.

“Talk to me!” Reno shouts over the dissolving image.

Cloud almost fumbles the remainder of the cigarette. He swallows thickly and recovers. It’s the smoke that’s irritating his eyes, causing them to sting and water, surely.

Reno is at him, close as a breath, ignoring the offensive smell and an unpredictable response to reason with him more personally and fervently. His hair and face are a mess, his smell sour, his arms newly bandaged, stark white; his eyes wild and seaweed green.

He hasn’t heard a thing from Cloud in hours. Not even a groan or grumble. Cloud has disregarded him for the better part of a day. Desperate times call for desperate, yelling measures.

Cloud is collected. He is cool and calculated. He plays his part. The gruesome memory of his former partner is still very fresh though. He's seeing it again for the first time. It's making ignoring Reno all the more probable, and necessary.

He came back to such a shit storm. After the ordeal that was NCB2, here Zack now rests at his feet in the dust of the Eastern continent. They escaped, they’re free, but Zack is damp and dirty on his back. He’s not moving an inch. He's missing his entire head of hair and both of his eyes. He's on the verge of death. He's a waking nightmare. This isn’t like before at all.

Cloud hears himself wail, “What the hell happened!? What happened to his face!?”

And then Reno shouting in reply, “How should I know!?”

Snap back to the clear blue present.
“Just fucking say something! Anything!” Reno bellows. “If you talk, I'll shut up. I'll quit. Just give me an update, a grunt, anything, come on! You can call me names! You can put a fucking hex on me! I've been yapping to annoy you! I've been spinning some fucked up shit just to get a reaction. I've been going for hours! Look how well I'm doing here! Please!”

Cloud is stony, immovable, untouched.

“I know you hear me, asshole. Don't make me beg. I'm not above begging… but don't you make me fucking do it. Come on. Hey. Hey. Hey. Cloud.”

Reno’s a wreck, touching, petting, and now pulling. He's no different. He's anyone before. He's the slithering body in the back alley. He’s the one before that, and before that. He’s just another nagging voice, an intrusive lie, and a needy want with gripping fingers. He’s not Zack.

“Cloud, talk to me.”

Closer now, softer now.

“Please.”

He told you to leave him, didn't he?

He told you to get a move on. He's done for.

“None of this was your fault. You don't have to drag that thing with you. You don't have to be mad, or sad, or empty. Don't go there. Stay out of it. It's done. You said good bye. I'm right here. I'm… I could be better, but I am here, yo. You know. I know what you're feeling. So, talk to me. Talk it out. You know I'm good for it. What reason have I ever given you not to trust me?”

You told him to help.

Help me, help me.

You selfish bastard.

Over and over.

Reno sighs, groans, and clears his throat.

Cloud calmly turns to dash the cigarette out in the dirt.

He left you alone with Sephiroth.

“Geez. Do you blame me? Did I fuck something else up? I know I could have… tried harder to stop him. My bad. His mind was set. That's not on us. He would have gone no matter what. That's my opinion. He did what was right by him, yo. Now we gotta do what's right by us and keep going. He wouldn't want to see you like this, and you fucking know it. Tell me you're okay.”

Reno rests both hands on Cloud’s biceps. He inspects his face, and then begins slow, building all the stronger. He’s unraveling, shaking him, trembling and pitching. He's not being friendly about it. He's all nails and teeth, making Cloud bottle up a cringe as he whips and sways but stays strong.

The force crests. The struggle intensifies.

“Tell me!”
Cloud’s gonna keep it in though. He goes with the motion, loose and limp. He offers no expression, anger or otherwise. He won't give Reno the satisfaction. He doesn't forgive easily, and he won't ever forget. Reno’s second best and he was the enemy. He’s got no shot.

Cloud waits for the storm to pass and then puffs the white-grey breath of smoke he’d been holding the entire duration right into Reno’s too-close and fuming face.

Reno reacts accordingly, wincing and waving the tidal front away. “I’m always the bad guy!” he spits through the lifting fog. “I’m always scraping you back together! You owe me, man. You hear me. You owe me, son of a bitch. And a burning bitch at that…”

Cloud is inert and blank, inactive.

“Fine,” Reno growls at him. “I get it though... I do. I would have had Zack's babies too. Trust me. Even if I couldn't look him in the face… He was… virile. You know what I mean? In a way I don't usually subscribe to. Shit. He was so… ugh. He pushed my buttons, but he was something, and you guys were totally hot together. And… you only cared about him. Which really sucks, because I’ve only ever… protected you… I’ve tried anyway. I left my— I, uh— You know. I finally bit off more than I could chew, yo.” He sniffs and stifles a cough. “You’re my fucking albatross.”

Moments later, their break is over and they're on the move again.

The base camp is left for good.

They head northeast. That will lead them towards small settlements, and the desert sands, and Reno’s rising tower, a place Cloud’s only flown over thus far. It’s also a direction that leads back to bad memories and a town, just a grouping in the hills, filled with the bodies of dead soldiers and remnants of Zack’s psychosis, and part of why Reno must not be too upset by his absence. They don’t have to backtrack that far, but looking out over the land is bad enough.

The hills are golden and shaggy with winter grasses. Every step is a pulsing pain and pinching ache in his legs and back. Cloud’s issued boots are starting to squelch and fall apart. When the fine grit and sand comes, he’s going to have to stop to dump them out every two steps. The sword makes his shoulders and arms stiff too. No matter how many times he switches up arms, it’s a toil. He won’t last to the Saucer, and he knows it. But, Reno doesn’t.

Soon, the direction won't be an issue. They'll be able to look up and see the landmark like a shimmering sun spot, or a monumental mirage, the Gold Saucer, an oasis in the desolation. He will pull himself until he can’t lift himself, and then he’ll drag himself. When he can’t drag himself, he’ll wait until he can. Sweet silence, ugly memories, and nagging phantom hurts until then.

At least the tension has leveled to a bubbling sizzle. Reno has relented and succumbed to silence out of either exhaustion or exasperation. At this point, it could be equal parts of both.

Cloud falls into his dreary and half-dreaming mind again. He senses every step, his forward motion, and the gentle wind, but he doesn't feel any of it. They’re just now cresting more rounded hills, a saddle of them, bringing a winding river into view. Next will come the long drawn-out tongue of the low lying amber valley floor. After that, the southwest edge of the white desert will finally take over for miles and swirling miles. In the dead center of that parched land rises the casino resort, a tree of the dead gilded in gold. But, that’s hours ahead and miles away yet.
The two struggle forward, bringing new fortune closer and leaving the stain of the bad behind. The air chills; birds chirp and flutter. In the distance, herd animals groan and grunt as they pass. Reno starts to complain about temperature, groaning and grunting anew himself. He doesn’t want to put his sweater and jacket back on because of his arms, but he doesn’t want to freeze to death either.

“It almost felt nice in the beginning,” he explains, “now it’s torture.”

The carefree sun is mellow and high, gleaming in thin rays through thin white clouds. The wind is breathy and blowing through the bending grasses. It’s winter weather, but there’s no snow or frost on the ground. Not here. Just the nipping of the mountain chilled air. Cloud can feel it too, that cold breath. He’s frozen to the bone, but that hasn’t stopped him.

He lets Reno suffer and keeps on, pushing, pulling and forcing each new breath.

“We should make camp,” Reno soon offers. “We’re not walking so much as we're stumbling.”

Where Cloud’s response could have (and should have) gone, instead comes an expected bout of silence, and, unexpectedly, the rumble of a distant noise.

They both drop to get low and look about.

Cloud isn’t sure, but it sounds like an engine. Engines mean vehicles. Vehicles means technology, and that means Shinra, which, ultimately, means men with guns. And lots of them.

He looks to the sky, covering his eyes from the minor sun glare. They’re sitting ducks on this hill high up against the horizon and out in the open.

They don’t have to wait in suspense for long. The noise appears as a machine. It flies low to cruise right over their heads, swinging high and pitching back around. It shows in the sky like an oversized insect. The faded red paint immediately becomes familiar. It’s not Shinra at all.

“That’s what’s-his-face,” Reno says.

_Cid._

_Oh._

They progress ahead, trundling down the far side of the stubborn hill and mounting another to finally meet with the plane and its pilot. The machine is revving down as they arrive, its engine audibly ticking and cooling in the open air.

Cid managed to plop the plane right on the prominent point of the mound. It looks like the top half of an aviation trophy. Something regal and proud, even as it’s beat to dents and tears.

Cloud saw the beauty in Zack too, beyond his dents and tears.

“I saw all the smoke,” Cid starts rambling right out the gate, appearing from underneath the plane's right wing. “I got this bad feelin’ as I was headed back from dropping you... I let it grow though. And grow. I drank and slept on it, and when it wasn’t any better, and the missus was moaning at me, I had to come back and look. I saw smoke…” He stops and actually observes them now. He balks. “Where’s my pal? The big guy? Uhhh… _Zack_? The hell happened?”

Reno doesn’t make any quick moves to respond. He suppresses a cough, leans his injured lean and drops his face to hover over his sneakers. He goes so far as to look away, out to the open landscape, putting the whole thing aside. His blood-sucked expression is an unreadable mask.
“The town was deserted,” Cid mutters. “Something ugly went down.”

Cloud looks away now, taking Reno’s lead. He graciously avoids the sympathetic and confused eye contact, and the responsibility of informing a comrade. It’s reflexive. It’s cowardly. But, Cid is focusing all of his questions and concerns to him, and he has nothing for him.

Reno drops his burdens loudly, one, two: the tent and his rucksack both.

“That’s his sword, isn’t it?” Cid asks, pointing to the BDS at Cloud’s side, and then square at Cloud himself. It’s an act of distrust, accusation, and damnable loyalty.

Reno can’t take it anymore.

“Look,” he blurts out, stepping up to Cid. “We’re kinda feeling a little touchy about a few things, okay? We’re kinda tired, and hurt, and a lot outta patience… And then you come along. I might not know you, I might have just gotten here, but fuck off and shut up and just give us a ride, yo. It’s bad. Shit’s been bad. It’s exactly what it looks like and we don’t want to talk about it with you.”

Cid raises his arms in defeat and drifts back one or two steps. “Whoa, whoa, mouthy prick... Only here to help. I just… I liked the guy... I can drop ya as far as the coast...”

“No need,” Reno informs, bristling but disengaging. “Just get us to the damn desert...”

They have to cram into the co-pilot’s seat of the Bronco II once more. It might be easier without a third body this time around, but it’s not very comfortable either. The tent and rucksacks go in an exterior compartment, thankfully, but the giant sword has to stay with Cloud.

It wedges and digs between them. It's not so sharp, as it's well-used and meant more for smashing anyway, but it’s awkward. They end up cramped and coiled around it and each other, hip to hip, thigh to thigh.

The heat of the cockpit is driving Reno insane. He shivers and writhes and shoves. The noise and nearness is driving Cloud insane. He sustains and boils and clenches.

It’s a good time not to think about Zack. On a buzzing flight. Trapped in the air. Shoved so close to Reno they could be the same creature. He’s not thinking of him. Not even his fingers. Not even those. Because then he’ll have to think of his palm, and his wrist, and then what that wrist has done. He’ll think of handjobs and tight openings and slick lips, and everything else, and screaming in the fallout. He’s almost sure he can still smell traces of Zack in this cockpit. Blood and sweat and pine. He can put together just how wonderful it was, and it burns. Oh, it burns and sears.

“Fuck my life,” Reno speaks for the both of them.

Somehow they survive the thirty minute trip and the dry valley and desert edge rolls out below.

As soon as the plane comes to a confirmed rest, bringing itself down vertically, Reno uneasily spills out of the cockpit and gets to work collecting their things from its chipped and rusted fuselage. He’s clearly in a hurry to get to his golden tower and his hot shower.

The aircraft’s engines wind down.
Cid joins Reno, easing himself to the ground to make clipped conversation.

Cloud doesn’t quickly join the party. He stays behind inside the plane, fumbling with the BDS and its impractical size. It’s gotten itself caught beside the seats and the plane’s interior skin. He’s having very little luck extricating it under his current state: bereft.

He leans up from the draining task and spots Reno hovering below, avoiding dialogue with Cid.

Cloud won’t admit he’s taking a break (or considering asking for help). He’s calling it keeping an eye on Reno, his tagalong, his bodyguard, because Cloud’s rucksack is down there too, and what he has left. Reno could double-cross him. He could skim his supplies. He could screw him over. He’s not resting so much as he is fueling his distrust.

Reno suddenly stands upright, pointing a dirty finger at Cid, who is rather close by and yet still caught off guard. “Did you see any soldiers while you were looking around earlier?” Reno asks him. “Like, a group of them? A pretty good sized one. We might want to avoid them.”

“A group of soldiers? I didn’t see shit… but you two,” Cid slowly answers.

Reno nods and then tries, “What day is it?”

“Uh, Tuesday, near as I know,” Cid responds.

Cloud turns back to his task at hand, grinding down his teeth and giving a futile tug.

It’s not moving.

“Do you have a drink? You smell like a bar.”

“Uhhh,” Cid drawls. “No, sorry. I would have… on any other day, but not today.”

“Why’s that?” Reno huffs.

“I’m cutting back… Wife doesn’t like me drinking… and flying.”

Reno snorts a liquidy-sick laugh and asks no more.

Cloud yanks and throttles the sword, growing hot under the collar for more reasons than the unfortunate geographical location. He wants to get on the road. He wants to make tracks.

“Hey. Having trouble there?” Reno directs up at him.

Cloud pulls and wrenches at the giant sword, refusing interaction.

“Ya need a hand?” Cid offers, throwing in his two cents.

Now it’s a show. Now it’s a spectacle.

Cloud shrugs over the blade, ignoring the onlookers.

Cid and Reno say not another word.

It’s Cloud’s burden. He’s going to shoulder it.

He works with it until he has to relent, hands cramped, arms unreliable.

Reno climbs back up to offer a hand, and whatever muscle he has left. With their dwindling powers
combined, and Reno’s shouts of pain, the sword finally wiggles and grinds free, threatening to take them both to the ground too early.

His symbol of regret and toil and something lost. Cloud lifts the sword carefully, easing it to the ground tip first to lean against the plane’s side. He follows after, dropping firmly onto his two feet.

Reno comes down last.

The eerie handprint is all but gone from the sooty blade, but not from tortured memory. What it might mean Cloud still doesn’t know. A sign? A joke? Reno forgetting he touched it? All he knows for sure is that he’s got to keep going, keep moving, and stop thinking. And so, he does. He takes up his burden, Zack’s sword, and he starts forward, headed for Reno’s tower.

Cid barks out a good luck as Cloud shuffles off without another word or hesitation.

Reno mumbles a see you later, collects his gear, and then struggles to catch up.

The pilot lets them go on their way without more commotion or interrogation about his late acquaintance. He watches them trade the rising hills for the sinking sands. It’s the nicest thing he could have done, to be honest. Other than showing his sympathy.

Cloud did not miss his solemn shrug and dark shroud at the mention of Zack’s condition. He wouldn’t have missed the waves he’s caused. He’s helpless to remember. Every last one.

The ground is still solid beneath their feet but it's gone dusty and dry. Very little green remains. The valley floor is stripped and bald, and all the same repeats of the same rocks and twigs and shrubs flit by. Direction would have been difficult to keep because of that, the sameness, but, to their benefit, the mountains are behind and the tower is visible in the liquidy distance ahead. It’s a gleaming place marker, and Cloud’s glued to it. If only to have something to be glued to.

“It’s hot as fuck down here. Isn’t heat supposed to rise?”

Before even fifteen minutes play out, Reno is into his grousing.

“Fuck all this walking. Never walked so much in my life… We should make camp before we get too far into the shit and night drops like curtain fall. I don’t want to be stumbling around in the dark in the sand. These aren’t the greatest shoes for that.”

Cloud unwisely ignores him and keeps his bearing.

“We should stop!” Reno crows.

(stop)

He knows he’s tired, and he wants to listen to Reno and slow down, or refuel, but he won’t, and he can’t, so just keep on walking, and dying, slowly, ever so slowly. This is his entire life. This is the rest of it, one day at a time, one hour at a time, one minute at a fucking time.

He’s not going to make it to the Saucer at this rate. He’s going to expire on the fringes within sight of the gleaming sun tower, choking on the desert heat. And he’s just fine with that.

“I can’t feel my arms! It’s hot! We’re not getting anywhere! Come on!”
(stop)

Cloud sways and stumbles. The sword is so terribly heavy. It’s not sliding anymore, it’s not even dragging, it’s pulling him down. He tries to rise above it, to bring his legs forward, to hang on, but nothing happens. He wavers, the sword remains, and the tower twinkles and slides.

“Cloud.”

He falls, and the tower falls with him, crumbling all the way.

“Cloud, hey.”

He can’t see it winking anymore, he’s sunk to his knees. He’s dropped his head. He’s stopped.

(stop)

“STOP.”

Cloud hears a new voice now, a different kind of voice.

Notes of humanity and early memories from before the fall, from before a town burned to ash and bone, dirt and pebble. The wet alley seems to widen and brighten around him. Here comes his stuttering hope put to body and action and sound.

The pawing shadow on him startles and turns towards the commotion and cry. The pocket knife presses in, biting, and then it pulls away, along with its owner. The fingers clamped around his wrists release, the shadow and hot breath disperses.

The different voice, this strong voice, it howls after, “Stop, stop, stop!”

The outline of a figure steps forward, defying the watery shade and becoming visible in the darkness of their solitude. At the mouth of the tunnel stands a Shinra soldier, a vision of order.

Cloud makes his decision right then, in the damp and the dark, under the eyes of every military poster.

He will become a soldier.

“Hey,” Reno hisses from his side. “Look, I told you, jerk. We need to call it quits, man. Let’s call it quits. Come on. This is seriously unhealthy, yo. You haven’t eaten anything… just cigarettes… You haven’t had a drop to drink… You’re running on empty.”

Reno doesn’t lift Cloud, he crouches over him, pulling him from where he fell on his side. Cloud comes to rest flopped and boneless on his back, and thoroughly undignified.

Reno tries to search his features lost under a fall of stiff hair. After moments with no luck he cheats and reaches out to manually turn Cloud’s head.
“Stay,” he mumbles, cupping his face with his filthy hands, making pointed and forced eye contact. “I’ll be right back.”

Cloud huffs a great breath from his hanging mouth. And then he’s alone.

He was right. It’s already so hot. There is no shade. He’s boiling inside. He’s on fire. His flesh is prickling, his tongue dry, eyes stinging, guts tight and cramping. His fingers, legs and arms are dead and hanging, and because of that, he can’t feel how pained they must be. He’s baking in the open sun, even as it lowers and lowers, the day already largely spent and heading to bed.

He lolls his head back and squints up to the shifting horizon, the yawning, yellowing sky. They’re not even to the desert yet. This is still the outskirts of the valley trapped in between. He can’t understand why his body doesn’t want to take him there, all the way, where Reno will leave him for bigger and better (and easier) things, and all his red delights. Why won’t his body either do as he asks or give up entirely? He can then call it the end or find the owner of this sword.

And then.

“And then…” Cloud grits into the wind, a whisper, a scraping of words lost in the saying.

And then, well, he doesn’t know. He knows he starts rising. He’s not trying to, because he’s not really motivated or fully capable, but he is all the same. He is surely lifting off the ground, inch by inch. The sky is getting closer and the far off tower rebuilding the taller. He rises.

Maybe he’s died. Maybe the world finally crushed him down and his pathetic little broken heart stopped and this is him ascending. This is part one of the other half of his eternal terror.

He’s not dead though. It’s becoming clear what it is. The ground beneath him is rising, not just him. The soil rumbles and pushes up from below, and he better be moving soon.

He strains and rolls to the side, right down the minor slope of the building anomaly. He comes to rest on his stomach half spread out, the sun-baked BDS stuck upright in the ground next to him. He struggles and lifts his shaggy head from the dust to look on.

The dry earth crumbles and bursts open just before him. Something is pushing its way through.

He doesn’t wait another moment, Cloud lurches upright onto his knees. From there, he stumbles higher, pushing off with his hands. He succeeds, only after the second attempt, and using the blade to stand. He’s moving away now, shuffling far, far back, pulling the useless sword with him, heaving it along, adrenaline rushing hard and fast, but it’s not enough.

He looks this way and that. He is still alone. Not even a rucksack was left behind. Reno isn’t ever there when he needs him. He’s all there is, and that isn’t much at all. Not in the flashing, feverish moment. No time for a thrilling, rousing rescue when you’re dead and gone. No room for a knight in shining armour when you’ve already beat your feet and turned away.

The clay cracks, Cloud shudders, and the mystery is closer to being revealed. The earth splits and yawns, clods of hard soil toss and collect. Yellow, leathery flesh pocked with spikes and visible abrasions and scrapes becomes evident. The flesh expands and pours from the growing earthy rend. More and more, a mass of it. It’s as big as a truck. It’s tubular and undulating.

He had been resting atop a sand worm. And, from the looks of it, it probably knows he’s there, and it probably doesn’t much like having been reduced to a bedroll.

The creature breaks from the earth and twists, coiling and rising. Prepare for strong words. Prepare
for body slams and death rolls. If he starts now, he might just get a few feet in before it attacks. If he shouts out now, Reno might just hear his gurgling death rattle upon his return.

The monster climbs erect, blocking out what remains of the diminishing sun and casting a pillar of shade down over him. Cloud has to cock his head back as far as it will go on its root to see.

_I can’t do this..._
Chapter 2

Should he do this?

He doesn’t really want to. He doesn’t want to have to go on and take each new step. Not without him. Not another stride. Not when he had what he’d wanted and asked for and hoped for, rambled late at night, every night, to this day, this week, this turn of events, and now it’s gone.

Because of him.

It was in his grasp. He was allowed to touch it, and hold it, and breathe it in. The taste still lingers, the feeling, the desire and concept, the shape and form. He can’t ask for anything more now. Not ever. That was it, that was his. That was a match, one and only. He just wants to be returned. To follow. To reconnect. To know him again. And that’s that. He can’t do this. He failed as a son. He couldn’t be a soldier. He couldn't stop Zack. He should call it quits for sure.

He's the reason. He's the cause. But, he can’t banish the rage. The anger that comes with surviving. As much as he wants to lie down, to bow his head, to have it ended for him, he can’t.

He can’t do a lot of things. He can’t swim very well. He’s bad at apologizing. He can’t drink carbonated drinks. He can’t reload a pistol blindfolded. He can't avoid blame. He can’t help himself, or those he loves, but he doesn’t have to take it either. He doesn’t have to lie down. He doesn’t have to accept this ending. He can rise up and get to challenging the powers that be. If they want him to suffer, so be it. He’ll give them a show.

Fuck it. Fuck everything.

The worm sways and waves, having risen so tall it can hardly support itself without over adjusting. It swings this way and that, unflagging, unforgiving.

Cloud has what feels like all the time in the world as it wobbles to determine whether he wants to stand or run. It all appears the same, reads the same, ends the same. That’s not the issue. Death has never been the issue, has it? It’s how he gets there. Does he want to fold or does he want to fight?

He can’t lift the damn sword to fight. He can hardly stand. He’s still worn from the walking, the hiding, the fighting, the trying, and the failing of their last adventure. Should he just get to his knees then? Should he say his goodbye’s and his sorry’s? Should acceptance come first?

The worm rumbles and starts its drop at last, careening over and aiming right for him as he continues to stare up. All four stories of the creature buckles and topples and fills his vision.

He stalls, taken, those precious few seconds playing out, and then he rolls clear. He makes it, by the skin of his teeth, but the BDS is not so lucky. It’s lost under leathery flesh.

Now he’s unarmed.

Ah, shit, shit, shit.

He scrabbles and comes to his senses crouched low on his knees. He has nowhere to go. The worm is in front and behind, having twisted and worked in to pen him. It slithers and slicks over the smooth terrain, moving easily and speedily through the dust to creep ever closer.

Cloud is in the eye of the storm, looking up and gaping into the failing sunlight. The day is done,
it’s growing dark. The horizon is on fire with the last dripping rays. Soon, he’ll be blind. If he’s not squeezed to a bloody pulp first.

The worm writhes and whips, revealing the hilt of the BDS from underneath its mass for seconds at a time as it adjusts and contorts.

Cloud takes note and lunges forward, grabbing onto the blade handle as he comes to it. He achieves his grasp and lugs it free, backpedaling into shrinking safety. The door is closing, the window is a sliver, and the worm is all that much nearer.

Wind chill and heat stroke have no hold here. Neither does Reno’s absence. Cloud’s stuck looking up from inside an organic twister, dust and grit and flesh roiling around him. If only he could lift the sword. If only he had the strength to wield it. If only he wasn’t so…

Fuck it.

He doesn’t listen to his racing mind, the negatives and the nay-says, he gives a single and desperate tug, heaving his mass and spirit into it, and manages to bring the sword up from the ground and onto his shoulder. It pummels him down. He can’t move.

He’s gotten this far. He’s not about to stop. He waits and then he swings it upright, using his shoulder for added oomph and muscle. The sword rears its bulky head and draws his arms out to full length, almost staying at glorious attention. It’s not yet crushing him down, but it’s wanting to. Oh, is it. He’s afraid of dropping it, let alone having to swing it or dodge or block something. He can already feel the mass slipping and wanting to drill into (and maybe through) the earth.

“No!” he cries, urging, willing, heart thumping, fingers clamping.

He hoists it, lifting it over his head, higher and higher: a warrior’s stance.

The worm reels in, constricting, all thick flesh and spikes and terror.

He has nothing left but fatal impulse. He stands ready and closes his eyes. He waits and drops his head, readying for the end, if it’s to be his end. His aching hands clench, his jaw sets, his tired shoulders square. May it be quick. May it be painless.

Darkness envelopes. The sun has dipped behind the distant hills. The worm has arrived. It’s instantly dark, deadly dark. Doom is at hand. He’s got no move. He’s got no chance. He won’t open his eyes. He’ll think of Zack in this last moment. He’ll be alive in his last thoughts. His warmth, his smell, his words. They’re all with him. They’re the only good he has.

Swirling heat, dry heat, interlaced and intensified with his panic. It must be the noiseless roaring of a sand worm winding in, causing friction and wind. He feels it, he knows it, and then he knows the sword is bouncing against his straining grip. It might be catching on the beast’s approaching skin, it might just be heavy, but it is lifting, tugging, bringing him with it, threatening his balance, and he can’t hold on anymore. His fingers open and the blade tears away, lost to the swirl.

He is near defeat, calm and clean.

*Here I come, Zack.*

Light, hope, a burst of it flashing electric-blue right in front of his eyes. As he opens them to see, *snap*, there’s the whiff of ozone, *thunderclap*, and Cloud knows he is not alone.

He’s not alone because someone else is standing in the storm with him, right before him, inches
away, emitting that beam, that blue flame, just an outline, a shadow, high contrast.

Cloud squints and raises a hand to shield out the sudden and throbbing intensity. He has to take a step back to make sure he still can. He has to blink to make sure it’s all still real.

The figure is towering and broad, humanoid. Its back is turned, or the blaze is just that blinding that Cloud can’t tell the difference. It has the BDS in hand, a giant and gleaming solar flare.

As Cloud watches, mouth agape, time freezes and then ripples and winds up again, making no haste in returning to normal. His world is thick liquid pressing through a tight space.

The figure moves, coming alive now, becoming more than just a statue, a hallucination. It rotates at the hips and shoulders, turning around to spot him. Bring on the total eclipse, this is a celestial body. Light and dark take shape on its revealing face, forming a smile, a head-cocking half smile.

Cloud can’t breathe. He can’t look away.

He knows it’s Zack.

Zack immaculate and glowing, not a memory or replay. He can make out his hair (bright black and blue, a changeable bruise) and his two eyes (streaming silver and cobalt) and his strength (a sword returned) and his substance (he blocks out his own light to cast shadow) and, most importantly, the whole of him, because he’s right there (right fucking THERE), as he should be.

“Oh…”

It’s all Cloud can muster.

Oh.

Fill him with all the light, all the darkness, all the hope and wonder, and everything else in between in this raggedy, too-bright moment. He can take it. He would. He could. As long as he has him. Because he has nothing else.

He's reached his limit.

Early mornings at home. Mist and low wind, silence. Being called in at night by your mother's voice. Candle light flicking soot to the high ceiling. The smell of firewood burning. The aroma of wet jungle. Scratchy bed sheets pulled up to your chin. Bug bites. Sunlight through a green bottle, an amber bottle, the sloshing sea. Finding seashells in the hills. Turning them over and over in your hand. Wondering how they got so far from the ocean. The ocean you could see if you were tall enough. Being tall enough. Being anxious and strong and bottled up. Writing a letter, hands unshaking. Looking back, leaving. Heading out to find fame and fortune and… him. You. Cloud.

This is seeing yourself through Zack's eyes as they used to be. Feeling his every emotion of being justified, afraid, nervous, ecstatic, and wonderstruck. Because of you. And then, just as soon, just as suddenly, this is him dying, alone, shutting off, closing down. Not afraid, not hurting anymore, just... knowing the sunrise would be coming with or without him, and that he’d done right, he’d done his best. This is acceptance, and then stepping out, slipping away. Gone. Because of you.

All because of you.
It's like a slap to the face.

Reno is slapping him in the face.

It takes Cloud a whole second stinging hit to bring him fully into the present, like a larger pebble sifting to the surface. He blinks his eyes, the most he’s capable of these days, and flinches as the next strike stops just before connecting.

“What the fuck?” Reno blurts from over him.

That’s all he has for the next twenty minutes.

“The fuck? The fuck is this? What the fuck happened? How the fuck?”

And all Cloud wants to say is (but won’t): it wasn’t me. He was here. HE was here.

HE was HERE. That's why we didn't find a body.

Where is he?

“You know what... nevermind,” Reno concludes, stopping still.

He has a flashlight in hand. It must have come from the house he raided in Gongaga.

Cloud groans against the strobing, streaming glare, unable to lift a hand to his pained eyes. It’s dim, dulled, but too bright at the same time. Night is all around them, along with the fleeting glimpses of the pulpy aftermath. And the smell. And what a smell. It must be the same night then. He’s sure of it. He’s not been out too long.

Reno lugs Cloud up into a sitting position.

“Ew. I’m just gonna... act like... this didn’t happen,” he groans as he moves behind him. “I can’t deal with this right now. We’re not gonna make it anywhere useful tonight. I set up the tent... while... you were... Let’s just get a move on. It’s dark and scary and I’m fucking tired.”

If he was boiling hot before, Cloud's getting a real chill now. He’s sopping wet. And, for the longest time, he can’t figure out why. He looks down, he looks up. He looks to Reno, he looks into the flashlight, ouch, and then it hits him. He’s covered head to toe in worm guts and goo.

Reno hoists him to his feet.

“Yuck! What in the fuck?”

Cloud allows himself to be led off. He can’t do much else about it. Reno has the upper hand, and the stability, and the plans. He drags him away from the scene of the crime and towards shelter.

The BDS is lost.

It’s somewhere out there. Cloud doesn’t know where, but he’s sure it is. He doesn’t have the means, or the energy, or the clarity to bring it up. He grumbles and hangs and can't wholly contest. His head isn’t lifting anymore. His arms and legs don’t want to work. His tongue is thick and heavy and probably wouldn’t obey even if he wanted to open up the lines of communication.
He was here. He was here.

He comes to, bobbing his head up, and they’re both safe inside the shelter.

Reno’s first action is to drop the flashlight and strip Cloud’s two soiled shirts off. The formerly blue dress shirt and the white undershirt are pulled over his head and tossed outside into the darkness.

The possibility of something (anything with teeth and a stomach) being attracted to the drying aroma of guts is not lost on Cloud. The thought comes and it goes and he shivers in the cold.

Reno is all too eager to shimmy in and offer his expert services. They embrace, flesh to flesh, close as a breath. Reno hasn’t had the time, or the mind, to put clothing back on. He’s just his slacks, his gun holster, and yards of arm bandage.

Cloud still has no say, verbally or physically. His body is revolting. He is weak, spent, used up. He shivers and quakes and has to lean into Reno, absorbing his heat and starting to accept the possibility of rest. He does so need to rest. As much as he needs answers, and calm, and a partner, and a friend, and a hand, and a new start, and to start listening.

Reno brings his arms securely around Cloud’s middle and pulls him closer.

He was here. I saw him.

Cloud drops into sleep, never considering catching himself.

Real memories. His own memories. Real burned in images. Like Shinra Tower. And stabbing Zack. And Sephiroth’s icy hands and his icier hold, the one swelling in his head, forcing him on, shoving him forward. The dagger heavy and weighted. The rush and the panic, and the action over in seconds. Zack exhaling into his face, just a rush of hot air. Guilt and fear and nausea. Cloud already retreating, backing away, being pulled aside by Sephiroth. Zack dropping again, going to a knee. He isn’t removing the blade, he’s rushing forward, brave as the day he died.

Even if he lost. Even if Zack seemed to lose something every time he fought back—his freedom, his honor, a cat, a voice, a family, his eyes, his hair, his health, his sanity, a friend, and eventually his life—Zack was still brave.

Cloud wants so badly to be brave…

Just like how he felt seeing Zack eclipse the white-out above, leaning over him, perfect and snow peppered. His face expressed all the concern he ever wanted anyone to feel for him. That was the genesis. That was waking up after having crashed into the Northern continent. The helicopter in flames. His head hurting. His body numb. Zack was with him. He never knew fear.

Now, it’s all he knows. No prior victory counts. No former words said. He lost in the end. They all did. He’s listening to Zack’s voice for the first time, the last time, only in dreams.

Just air between his teeth.
Enter the uncertain morning, and Cloud’s sleep fuzziness, and Reno not doing so great. Cloud is awoken by the sounds of it. He’s hacking and wheezing and Cloud is dead weight, unable to help or want to. The guy might have waited the night out, keeping watch. Cloud slept through it.

He leans up, stiff and aching.

The day has begun without him.

“Nothing happened, I promise.”

Cloud glances over, his head swimming, his reaction pure, and finds Reno lying next to him.

“I mean, I could have taken advantage of you, but I didn’t.”

Reno’s deadpan, for the most part. He’s not one way or the other. Inside the tent, his expression is hidden, veiled in part. He is serious. He could be someone else. That doesn’t sound right.

Cloud averts before he shows too much interest. He’s already spent enough time on it.

“Not like I’d really want to right now anyway. Well, you know what I mean…”

It’s hot. There’s no air moving in the tent. It’s just big enough to house two bodies side by side. They’re terribly close. His bodyguard’s consistent presence and being generally ill and bitchy, and talking, always, crowds in, making the heat a treat, and Reno the devil. He’s eager to get away.

As some consolation, Cloud’s limbs are playing fair now, and something important was retrieved for him while he was taking a break. It’s the first thing he sees when he crawls from the tent. **Bam.**

Here’s your immediate reminder for the day, if you didn’t already need one—**Zack really is gone.**

The BDS rests alone in the dirt at the head of the tent.

It doesn’t set him up for a good start.

“Damn, it’s hot!” Reno howls from behind.

He managed to put up the shelter next to a sizable boulder, alongside an old dried out riverbed. It’s a sliver of shade in the monotonous dust bowl. There were no twigs or shrubs or leaves for cushion this time around, to no one’s outright displeasure. The vinyl bottom of the shelter and the unforgiving ground underneath was all the comfort they got.

They’re smack dab on the outskirts of the desert. Cloud can see the tantalizing heat waves in the flat and infinite distance from where they’re situated. The tower is just barely visible beyond that, all but a white-hot twinkle and change on the shimmering horizon.

Whatever the damn desert is called. The Golden Desert. The Only Desert. The fucking hot thing between them and a cold drink. Yeah. Cloud doesn’t know. He never ventured this far on his own. He never asked what it was called. He avoided it like he’d always been told to.

“What burns sunburn? I mean, can burned flesh burn?”

Cloud shakes his head and then tips it down, observing the glinting BDS at his feet. Here’s a sword he swears he saw a figure that looked like Zack holding not a mile away and hours ago.

Had he seen what he saw after all or was it just another dream? Did Reno shoot up the worm while
he was faded and useless and had just been complaining about it, his confusion a product of Cloud’s uncanny ability to play possum and find trouble? Had he only imagined Zack there, glowing as he was, unreal as he was, as if he bolted down from the heavens? Or...

“Hey!”

Cloud turns to inspect, caught by the excited tone alone, leaving the BDS as it lies.

Reno is beaming and pointing at him. “That counts as a response!” he exclaims.

Cloud scowls and turns away. He steps forward and crouches, making to gather up the sword.

“And that’s another!” Reno hoots, but soon notices Cloud’s intentions. “Hey! I don’t think so.”

He advances, not having to go too far, and steps in nice and close to stall the retrieval.

“I didn’t bring that thing back just so you could snatch it up and bounce,” Reno says.

Cloud bolts erect to face him, about two seconds away from furious outburst.

Reno gives Cloud a little smile and then shoves a bottle into his chest. It sloshes delightfully.

Cloud waits for the water to settle, hoping the desire to drink will subside too.

“Come on,” Reno urges, pushing the bottle closer.

Cloud snatches the container away. If only to get it over with. He turns and drinks in semi-privacy, draining the contents in several gulps. He drops what’s left to the ground afterwards.

“Good boy,” Reno prods, kicking the bottle away.

Cloud feels the heat, a flush, angry and sudden, leap to his cheeks.

“You should eat something.”

*Now that’s going too far.*

Cloud again leans down to grab for the sword.

Reno intercepts, leaning with him, his hand blocking his reach. “No way,” he growls.

More heated fury. Cloud’s teeth mash down. He exhales hotly through his nostrils.

“Eat something first,” Reno presses.

*Fuck off.*

Cloud knocks into Reno, pushing his hand away.

“Hey,” Reno barks back, catching Cloud’s wrist and pulling him upright.

He reels him about, rigid and tense, drawing him lover close.

“Don’t think just because I’m *sick* you can take me on. I’m not broken. I’m *vocal*,” he grits. “I don’t know what happened while I was gone... with that... *nasty shit*... and that typical *blackout*, but I *know* I can take your ass. We’ve done this before, remember? I’ll *break* you.”
Cloud sneers and tugs free.

“You wanna do this?” Reno taunts, waving him on.

Cloud answers by lunging down for the sword.

Reno retaliates by catching and repelling him.

Cloud recoils, stumbles, face a twisted scowl.

“It ain’t gonna get any better, short stuff,” Reno explains.

Cloud tries his odds, again storming in.

Reno strikes and grabs Cloud’s thin wrist once more, making to twist it and his entire arm.

Cloud anticipates and goes stiff, fighting back with firm resistance and a challenge.

It's not entirely expected on Reno's end. He almost loses his awkward and loose grip, like Cloud had hoped for, but fortunately for Reno, he's stronger than Cloud, and he easily gains control of the situation, commencing a twisting and a turning, teaching his hard lesson.

“It's for your own good,” he explains.

Cloud starts to panic (and pay). He doesn't have the reserves to get out of this one. He won’t ever again at this rate. It’s all one struggle to the next. His arm is wrenched behind his back, climbing his spine, inching between his shoulder blades, edging into uselessness.

He turns his body, shifting his weight, trying to pull away, but Reno is there. He crowds in and envelopes from behind. Cloud bucks, trying to shake him, stressing his arm, mimicking an action more intimate but no less frantic and fervent.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Reno echos into his ear.

Cloud strains and huffs, nearly soundless. He's losing. He's dropping down. He's being shoved to the ground, urged from above and behind, too weak to resist much longer. Reno is using all of his weight and conviction against him, compacting and folding him onto himself like an over-aggressive animal.

Cloud can hear blood rushing inside his head, the heaving and wheezing of Reno’s respiration, and… he’ll watch out for you… Zack’s voice. Zack’s voice saying: Reno will watch out for you...

Slowly, slowly, slowly Cloud meets his knees, flirting with meeting the tops of his thighs to the rise of his clavicle too. He’s having trouble breathing and thinking. Soon, his forehead will be pressed into the dust and he won’t have any power or play at all. He'll be neatly folded away, his right arm hiked up his back, Reno pushing and pushing. There is no freedom.

“This hurts me more,” Reno groans from overhead.

He stresses his laborious hold, digging his elbow into Cloud’s exposed and vulnerable spine. It makes Cloud see rainbow bursts of stars and swirls. It's an aggressive move, and unnecessary. Like this whole thing. This whole stupid show. This whole song and dance.

Cloud struggles not to make a sound or protest too feebly, just as he struggles to breathe.

“You done? Gonna listen now?”
Cloud holds on another strenuous moment, furious and trapped, the colourful stars flickering, popping, swarming, and then he drops his head to the dirt and goes limp, shutting down.

Reno presses in once more, giving a farewell taste, a last stinging shot (bruising ego and further destroying delicate ties), and then he eases off, stepping up and clear.

Cloud slowly unravels and climbs to his unsteady feet.


Cloud gives him his best glower.

Reno returns it with a flippant toss of his head and tangled hair. “Wasn’t too bad though, was it? Nothing a little silence won’t fix, right? You could do with some more bruises, man. Get you toughened up. Make some scars. It’s a crying shame for someone to be so...”

*Useless.*

“Defenseless.”

Reno cocks his head, unkind smile working. “We’ll get you straightened out though. You can get this mess off your shoulders and then we’ll beat you into something powerful. Rock solid. You know what I mean? Whip you into shape, or whatever. That’s what you need.”

Cloud stands before him, cradling his pained arm, helpless to listen, helpless to look helpless.

“I don’t want to be mean, man. Trust me. Not to you. It doesn’t give me the same kind of satisfaction. Let’s just try to... get along. Let’s try to... get everything off our plates and into the open. Start talkin’ to me, yo. Start telling me what’s up. Don’t go trudging off into doom and gloom without me. Stop being an idiot. Stop sulking and stewing in it. How many times am I going to have to do this, huh? How many more times should I give you my fucking speech? I don’t have unlimited material. Especially if you wanna play nice, yo.”

Cloud says nothing, beating down every livid response swirling in his head. He stares at Reno from under his filthy hair, returning the favour, and getting nowhere.

“You’re a priss. You’re pure. You’re exactly what I wanna drag down with me.”

Reno abruptly coughs and shrugs, curling in around himself and cradling his own arm. When he recovers, he hasn’t really recovered at all. He appears worse, harrowed and damaged. He’s as sick as he sounds. It’s been a progressing thing since leaving Gongaga.

Cloud feels a stab of sympathy alongside an eruption of futility. His emotions are in mutiny.

“I’m not letting you stomp off… until you eat... *and*... put on a damn shirt.”

Cloud has to note his situation though, whether he wants to or not. He diffuses the extended eye contact (more of a luxury now anyway), looks down (there’s the enormous sword and his naked chest), and shrugs. He accepts defeat, yet again, and aggravates his abused arm (injury to insult).

Reno dispenses plastic wrapped cereal bars between them. He has chips and nuts too, and jerky. It's
the only thing Cloud finds he remotely enjoys. Everything else turns to ash in his mouth, but the salted jerky, that makes his mouth run with saliva and his jaw work enough to almost block him out. Between swallowing, and working another piece in his teeth, Reno still comes through.

“I gotta wonder, what was that handprint about?”

He’s not minding that his mouth is full.

“On his sword? I mean, spooky, right? It wasn’t me.”

He swallows and only shovels in more.

“I don’t understand a lot of things, man… You don’t wanna clear anything up for me? You saw somethin’ in the wreckage. You saw what I saw, sure, but. You know something. Something else. I know you know something. And... I know I told you to forget about it, but… I can’t help myself.”

Of course he’s still trying to get him to talk.

Cloud offers nothing but the sounds of him chewing.

“What exploded? And why?”

Each question comes after several beats of silence.

“Where did the soldiers go? Why did they go? What did they see? Are we out of trouble? Could we be so lucky? Where we even *in* trouble beyond what we walked into?”

The finale comes just as they’re finishing their rations.

“Will I ever get laid?”

Before they go anywhere, Cloud is fitted with Reno’s oversized green turtleneck. His shirts were a total loss thanks to the exploding sand worm, and he’s going to suffer for it.

The sweater is thick and constrictive; good for a mountain chill but not this damning desert heat. He has the long sleeves rolled up to his elbows to keep him cooler, but it’s helping little.

Reno dons his plain white undershirt, finding it balled up inside the sweater by surprise. He’s finally choosing modesty, or protection, and covering himself. He still refuses to put his leather jacket back on (Cloud can't blame him).

He exists as just his wifebeater, his gun holster, those bandages bracing his arms and throat, his loose slacks and faded sneakers, and all that mussed and tangled red hair.

After that, the tent is stored and tucked beside the large boulder, they’re packed, their rucksacks are shouldered by Reno, and the sword is taken up.

They won’t need a shelter they can’t secure. The sand won’t be accommodating with or without one, as it's too shifting and hot. It’s less Reno has to lug around too. Anything to keep some of his whining at bay.

He is withered and pale as it is, sweating a rainfall of moisture he doesn’t have.

“Almost there,” he pants.
They’re off into the desert, still miles away from refuge and solace. It's back to the grindstone. The arid scenery is the only thing that’s changed, along with the temperature.

Cloud has more questions now too, to be honest, and a growing desire to have them answered, but he keeps going. He doesn’t want things to catch up. He doesn’t want to think about them too long. He’s got to keep going, and he might never stop. Forward momentum is all he's got.

The molten sand comes, the unremarkable valley ends, and the real challenge begins. If you blinked you missed the unceremonious transition. Now they’re trudging along in the heat and the ankle-deep grit, an ancient lakebed. The going is typically slow, and slower still. It will be tough, pretty damn tough, and take them hours. Miles and miles of shifting land lies ahead.

No shade and no signs of life. The sun is almost at its peak right over their hanging heads and slumping backs. Not a lick of air is moving, and when it does, running right across their path and loftily rustling loose particulates, it’s hotter than a breath.

Out there, across the undulating land, Cloud’s seeing dancing shapes. It’s just the heat playing tricks on him. The distorted shapes dance and circle, just wisps crowded around the base of the tower as if in worship. He hasn’t looked away, and he’s not likely to anytime soon.

He blinks his dry eyes and forces a thick swallow.

Sunlight. Nothing feels better than sunlight. Until it’s all there is.

Out there, across the land, it could be snowfield it’s so bleached out and bright. Cloud can’t tell where the land and the sky begins. There’s no border. Not a single fence between him and reality, and whatever could be on the other side. He’ll fall right through.

He could wake up at home.

He could wake up in a Shinra uniform.

Maybe Zack will walk out of the static, forming from heat wave, and exist again right in front of him like he had the day before. He jumped back into his life, bright as white phosphorus, new beginnings, and left just as quickly. He didn’t say a word. He smiled and saved him.

They’ve been at it for an hour, possibly more. At his back he can steadily hear Reno’s louder and louder gasping and groaning getting farther and farther away as he lags behind. More suffering soon to be expressed through words, curses, and promises of revenge.

Reno has something else in mind for him though.

He groans rather loudly, given their sizable spread now, and then gurgles a sort of noise that all at once perplexes and concerns Cloud. It’s the sounds of heaving and gagging.

When Cloud stops to turn and have a look, Reno’s projecting, emptying his stomach, and wasting all that water and food he inhaled earlier.

Cloud eagerly turns back around, having seen more than enough. The golden tower rises ahead of him, fixed and firm. Infinite, immovable. Its size is becoming more and more evident and dwarfing with every taxing step they take. The yellow-white powder expands. Relief is in sight.

His hands are numb. His legs are numb. His back is stiff. He can’t get enough air through his
nostrils even as he is motionless, waiting for Reno to collect himself and get on. He’s gulping it through his mouth, drying his tongue and throat all the more.

“Oh shit,” Reno distantly groans. “It’s worse than I thought… Low on water.”

Cloud stopped to rehydrate every opportunity Reno took. It hasn’t exactly done the trick. Of course his mouth is dry. His eyelids stick and slide shut uneasily, too. His lips are cracking and peeling. His muscles are sore and complaining. He’s not dwelling on it. They have to make it, to keep moving, to keep their heads down. It’s maybe another hour, or two, no more. He was afraid (or at least aware) that he might not make it, but it’s going to be Reno. His sick body needed that liquid.

He might just get the chance to give him a taste of his own medicine then. For a second time, no less. He’ll leave him flat out on his back in the dust, dying and desperate. He’ll walk on to the resort himself, the gleaming tower, and never give Reno another gaze or lingering thought.

*Leave him*, he said.

*Just leave him.*

“I’m starting to cramp up…”

Cloud again glances rearward.

He finds Reno shrugged over the rucksacks at his feet, hands on his shuddering knees. He’s sucking up every heavy breath through his mouth, spine and shoulders atremble. He's not proceeding an inch. He’s frozen in the heatwave.

Cloud takes in the scene.

“I can’t… Just… Hold on…” Reno gasps, sways, and finally drops.

He first crumbles to his knees, arms falling lax into the hot sands at his sides. Next, he hangs there, he sways, he teeters, soon he’s tilting, slumping, easing his shoulders down and lolling his head backwards. He follows the pulling motion, unable to counter or mark it, and drops flat out into the grit, sprawled face up towards the washed-out sky.

He fits the dramatic setting. He’s showing his true state. Here’s a man out of hope, water, and luck. Here's a man quickly dying.

Cloud moves towards him, drawn in, drifting in on that thought. As he trudges up, legs hardly working, hardly carrying him, the process a process, he can see the horizon behind. On that horizon a dust cloud billows to the blue-grey vault stretching thinly overhead.

He nudges Reno with his boot tip when he finally reaches him.

Reno twitches, groans, and pulls a face. He comes around, eyes fluttering and rolling up to collect and blink at him.

Cloud indicates behind, pointing and nodding.

Reno corrects himself and reaches out a hand for assistance. Cloud catches the offering and they work at hoisting him up into a sitting position. He finally turns to look to the horizon.

At length he mumbles, “Is that... *real?*”

As they watch, the dust cloud advances and grows, becoming a haze, a lifting dragon’s spine, a
drifting dust trail, now a low rumble, a steady rumble, a loud rumble, a louder rumble, and finally shapes and figures.

It’s a large group of motorcycles.

“Oh, hey,” Reno rasps. “Hey, hey!” He comes to life and bounces to his knees, pawing up Cloud's front. “Wave your arms. Get their attention. Hey, hey! Come on!”

He’s shaking Cloud back and forth by his trunk now, half of him still planted in the fiery sands below.

Many bikes shoot by and leave them in the dense fallout. Two, three, six… They buzz and putter, not slowing, and definitely not stopping. Their kicked up dust blinds and chokes.

More pass. More leave them behind. It’s looking grim. It’s looking like they might have to make the trek on their own and suffer the consequences of their choices after all.

They would have, yes, but several bikes come up alongside through the manufactured sand storm and stop at last. The ragtag group are on dirt bikes, small and sturdy. Their tires are huge but thin and spiked with many silver teeth for grip in the unpredictable terrain.

Several more bikes pass and then that’s it, the dust screen starts to settle.

The closest rider has a passenger hanging on from behind. Their faces are masked, hidden underneath bandanas or scarves for protection. Every driver wears a pair of blacked out goggles.

“Yo,” Reno greets, using Cloud to get to his feet.

“The hell you guys doin’ out here?” one of the bikers asks.

They’re all looking. They’re all masked. Idle engines hum. It's hard to tell who the voice belongs to.

“Just out for a stroll,” Reno answers, glancing between them all.

The nearest rider pulls loose their facial scarf, still seated and leaned on an outstretched leg for a kickstand. They snort, shoulders bouncing once, and offer, “Yeah, right… Need a lift?”

They are five strong on four bikes.

Small bikes and small statures. They don’t seem any older than teenagers, and some might be younger than that. They’re not much for conversation and they’re not much for waiting around.

“Hurry up,” one of them barks.

They have to hop to it and separate. Reno to a bike and a rider. Cloud to a bike and a rider. The sword to a bike and a rider. Staying balanced on a small bike with such a huge sword would not be an easy task. It might not be possible with two people on such a bike.

Cloud expresses not a word but still gets across that he doesn’t like the obvious plan. He stands by in the accepting and sinking grit, rigid and unbending, unwilling to make a move.
“Just drop it,” Reno says, already in place on a bike.

Several uncomfortable moments pass.

“Come on, Cloud. Let it go,” he urges.

Cloud glances to the blade.

“You don’t have a choice,” his ride explains.

Cloud has no reply. He bristles and stews, but he knows the truth.

He relinquishes the sword, climbs onto a bike, latches onto its rider, and takes the hit.

As they set off, he keeps an eye on the kid who’s carrying his entire meaning and purpose. Not much else matters to him. Not Reno. Not his life. That sword matters. That sword is important.

He has to get through this desert, through the Gold Saucer, over the ocean, and back to Midgar for that sword. He has to get it returned to wherever it came from. He has to put it to rest.

If anything happens to it, oh, they better hope something happens to him too… He’ll do what became of the sand worm and turn them all into goo and bits. He won’t need a weapon to gnash and gnaw, twist and bend. He’ll use his bare hands. His teeth. His boiling blood.

They’re making good time now. The tower is an oasis impending. It’s beautiful and fucking awful.

Cloud finds he hates it the longer he stares. He’d probably have different feelings if Zack were here. They might have shared their awe. They might have collectively enjoyed its impressive appearance, and how they’re being ushered in on the backs of vehicles almost extinct.

As it is, he can’t stand it. He keeps watch on the kid and his sword. The wind stings his eyes, the ride jostles his aches and pains. He’s trying not to expire. He’s trying not to drop under.

They roll onto the outskirts of the resort grounds beaten but not defeated.

The sun hangs high in the sky.

They dismount.

“You guys look awful,” Reno’s rider comments, lifting her dusted goggles to see him clearly.

“I owe ya one,” Reno answers.

“Just stay outta trouble, huh?”

“Not likely.”

Gliding up on his dirt bike, the kid-sized biker laughs once, short and humourless, and drops the BDS at Cloud’s feet. “Here’s your oversized railroad spike,” he groans.

This callous rider revs his small bike’s throaty engine, shakes his goggled (and boggled) head, and directs his ride back out into the open desert, shooting up a fan of sand.

“Colosseum pillar,” another biker adds, following behind the leader.

“Uncut lumber,” says the next, doing the same.
“A gag,” says Reno’s ride.

“Extension of your manhood,” says her piggybacking passenger.

Reno heeds that, pulling an irked (or maybe it’s abashed) face.

And that’s it. The motorcycle gang disperse just like that, dust haze rising tall.

Cloud accepts the scathing treatment as payment for the ride.

He bends over and lugs the sword up, every joint and sinew screaming.

They don’t move on quickly after that, still too stiff and tortured from the lengthy ride. They share the rest of their water (at Reno’s insistence and shoving) and then gradually move ahead, officially entering the resort grounds on foot.

They’re welcomed by an archway sign covered in creeping leafy vines. It reads, in elegant white script on a faded maroon background:

\[
\text{Old Corel Resort} & \\
\text{Gold Saucer Casino}
\]

Exotic palm trees rise and bend beyond as they pass under it. A stone paved path leads them farther in, turning this way and that. Strings of amber-gold lights hang along the way. Everything is so clean. It’s all so alien and glaring after the other places they’ve been.

Patches of bright green grass line the winding and railed walkways. There are hills and mounds of it spotted with white and blue flowers and lush jungle plants. Bugs flutter and buzz. Water mists the air. Birds tweet and chant. The smell, the pure moisture, it’s blanketing. It’s refreshing and cool. It’s bringing them back from the brink. It truly is an oasis.

Reno perks up for a second time, moving with purpose and ease. He starts taking the lead. He doesn’t just start to either, he jumps in and pulls Cloud after him as he strides ahead.

“Hurry up,” he urges. “Let’s get settled.”

People move everywhere. Shade is everywhere. The tower blooms overhead, so near and yet so far. Cloud has the opportunity to gawk as Reno has a good fix on his hand. He’s dragging him along like a child. He flaps behind, his sword like an oversized toy scraping the ground.

The base of the tower is a thick gold pillar. It’s the transition point. Two elevator shafts run through it, rising to the upper arms above, and where the real fun is.

Down here, on ground level, there are bars, and sitting areas, and many roving, changing faces; many fake beaches, wade-in pools, tiki torches, umbrellas.

Up there, on what look like arms or bloated flower petals, air space is restricted for miles around. Only important people land on the crown. That’s where you gamble and lose and play and fuck and Cloud’s feeling a little light-headed.

All of a sudden, there are too many voices. Too many people. Too much white and green. Too many eyes and ears and thoughts. Too many pressing in bodies. His heart rate is spiking. He’s
gulping in his air. He’s blinking rapidly. He’s starting to fade.

Reno lugs him forwards and pulls him on until the thickness and concentration of the crowd ahead stops them dead. They have to wait. They have to melt in. With everyone else.

Cloud is near gasping, breathless, hopeless and delirious. The closeness is constricting. It’s all he can think about. He needs to get above it. Just like old times. Just like old marketplaces past.

He closes his eyes, forces his breath to slow, and then he hears it.

“...Gongaga…”

That one word.

He stiffens, heart skipping, and forgets about his fears. He strains his ears to listen for more. He looks into the crowd. He looks to Reno, who looks back, brow knitted, maybe understanding. Maybe questioning why he’s sweating so much. Maybe questioning why he looks so terrified.

“What a shitstorm…” says the same voice.

They’re waiting at the civilian entrance (the *common* entrance) of the resort. The line is immense and alive and growing behind them. Security is screening everyone for admission into the Gold Saucer casino above and beyond.

“Couldn’t believe it…”

The entire crowd is jawing and vibrating. It’s hard to pick out just one conversation.

But, Cloud gets lucky.

“Let me tell you…”

Or is it the other one?

“This guy shows up like some kind of one man army and takes on the fucking *Director*…”

The voice is loud and carries well.

“He deflects the whole damn unit! And he’s blind! He walks in there with nothing but a giant sword and a headband. They end up snuggled in this tiny house together. We’re stuck outside watching. They get into it. Smash through walls and furniture and shit. The Director gets him with a throwing knife. But, this guy? This scary fucker? He *pulls* the knife from his arm and *jams* it into the Director’s head! No joke. Right to the brain, man! And then he fucking *jumps* on his chest and starts jabbing his eyeballs out!”

A group some distance up the line cheers.

“I promise you! Most brutal shit I’ve ever seen.”

“Don’t forget how he gored himself first… just to get the Director close,” someone adds.

“Oh yeah. Right, right… This guy, blind as a bat, right? He *sticks* himself to get the upper hand.”

Cloud’s jaw creaks as he mashes his teeth. His fingernails bore his palms and Reno’s hand.

Reno hisses and digs back.
Thumping through Cloud’s head, like a storm wind, a secret, a prayer, are the words:

...they’ll only remember what I DID to you...

“And then he starts smashing the Director’s face into pudding! Really going to town too. All while the place is going up. The Director trapped him. Everything’s on fire, burning up. We’re getting crispy. We’re getting nervous. But, it’s over. He’s finished. When the guy’s done... there’s nothing left of boss man. And this guy, who showed up out of the blue, blind and pissed, he just... crawls away... on fire. The house burns down around them. And that was our last fucking mission.”

“Holy shit.”

“Fuck Shinra.”

The group erupts, fists and voices rise.

Cloud has to get away.

He pulls hard at Reno’s hand and gets free.

He’s off, backtracking through the crowd, the faces, the line. He’s bumping and pushing, almost falling, almost clawing. He’s got to get away. He doesn’t want to know how it went down. He can already taste it, smell it, and he’s starting to remember it too. His guts are hurting and his flesh is burning. He’s starting to see the dimness, the shadows, the fire, the flicker.

“Hey!” Reno shouts, finally caught up.

Fingertips drilled into Cloud's forearm dispel the chaos.

They’re stopped in a sort of courtyard area. Lighted palm trees line the circular perimeter. Water runs in a fountain. The polished tile under their feet is set in a sunburst sort of design.

“The fuck are you going?” Reno growls at him.

Cloud gives him the usual. He stares back, wide-eyed and silent.

“We can’t get up this way. VIPs only, yo,” Reno explains.

The traffic is thin here, and the air is different. It’s not coursing with energy, it’s quiet and perfumed. There are guards set off on the fringes. Staff moves about, poised and pressed. Everyone else wears a suit or a gown. Everyone else is looking at them openly, judging and whispering, clustered in bouquets around tall tables situated in the tiled yard like islands. The fountain bubbles in the center. A U-shaped bar serves tall, fluted drinks.

They stand out like two sore thumbs.

The closest guards look seconds away from intervening.

“This is for high rollers,” Reno explains.

Cloud frowns, his head gathering.

“We gotta bounce before they give us the boot.”

Reno yanks Cloud towards him and back for the way they came.
Cloud wobbles a step but no more, locking his knees.

The whispers are growing louder.


He manages to pull him to the side and out of the center of the yard (and some of the attention).

“The fuck is wrong with you?” he grills, digging his fingers into Cloud’s pounding flesh.

His grip eases only a tick.

“You hear the soldiers?” he asks, pausing long enough to lure (or mock) a response that is surely not to come. “Of course you did. And yeah, okay, I got it. I’m sorry... That didn’t thrill me any either. Shit. But it was just talk, man... That’s it.”

He calms some, jumping right over sad to appear introspective, almost contemplative.

“And yeah, this isn’t… all bad,” he admits. “We should avoid that entrance… Too much activity.”

He tracks his eyes up, beyond Cloud, into the high-class crowd around them.

The many stares are openly covetous now. The onlookers are clearly interested. And hungry.

“I might… have an idea anyway…” Reno murmurs, trailing off.

Things can always get worse.
Chapter 3

Reno doesn’t let go of his arm.

“It’s a good thing you hate me now, ‘cause you’re gonna hate me in a second…”

He stalks up to a male guest dressed in deep purple, jerking Cloud along with him.

The sudden motion catches Cloud by surprise so he doesn’t have the chance to resist or lock his knees again. They’re already there, engaged, and scaring the inebriated locals by the time he corrects himself and regrips the BDS, ruffled and ready to bite.

“I couldn’t help but overhear you were looking for company…” Reno says to the man.

The bespectacled individual lifts his head. The guy is polished and perfect. His hair is dark, short, and combed slicked into accordance over his well-shaped skull. He is composed, cool, and isn’t by himself. Reno chose a group.

Several others stand close by: a man, two bodyguards, and a woman smoking a mile long cigarette. They look collectively surprised. Smoke curls.

“Get outta here, street rat,” a bodyguard grunts, moving to deflect Reno.

As they shift—Reno taking a step back, the bodyguard stepping forward—the confronted VIP makes brief eye contact with Cloud.

“Wait, wait,” he says, lifting a hand to wave off the muscle. “Is he with—”

“Of course he's with me,” Reno cuts in, confirming by jerking a thumb to his puffed chest.

The bodyguard relents, backing away from them both.

“You're absolutely filthy,” the VIP directs around Reno to Cloud.

“He is. And he's mute too,” Reno explains, jumping in again. “But, not where it counts, if you know what I mean.” He winks and grins, tilting his head playfully. “He’s the perfect victim. He's kinda shy. Not unskilled though. Makes for an interesting challenge. Amazing mouth work.”

The VIP looks intrigued, raising his immaculate eyebrows and a gloved hand to finger the purple tie at his throat. He’s loosening the noose. He’s processing.

“Yes, you are rather interesting,” he agrees, nodding to his company.

The man and woman nod back.

“You'll need to be bathed, and dressed… And…” But, he’s not yet sold. “What colour is his hair?”

“Blond,” Reno quickly answers, stepping aside to showcase. “Like, the rays of the sun… We’ve just… had a long week is all. It’s been… an adventure. Just got in today.”

Cloud has nowhere to go. Naturally, he doesn’t know what to do with himself. He knows what’s going on though. He's not an idiot. He’s been doing this longer than Reno would want to believe. He’s just never had the stomach for it.
He looks anywhere but at the man, or Reno. He drops his head to eye the tops of his shredded boots, the fluttering flowers in the grass, the breaks in the tiled ground.

*This better fucking work.* That’s all he’s thinking.

“Where did you get in from?” the VIP asks.

“Outskirts of Cosmo Canyon,” Reno lies.

“What is it you two do that gets you so… *filthy*? Are you bandits? *Grifters*?”

“Monster hunters.”

“Oh?” the gentleman breathes.

His company hums their agreement.

“Damn straight,” Reno confirms. “Look at that sword.”

The VIP’s eyebrows again rise, lifting over the top of his black-rimmed glasses and reaching almost so far as his perfect black hairline. He inspects Cloud openly. He's taking the bait.

“Is that how you got that nasty black eye?” he asks.

Cloud doesn’t offer a response.

Reno shifts on his feet.

“Scrub his head,” the VIP says to Reno.

“Of course,” Reno assures, nodding.

“Indeed.”

The VIP signals his closest bodyguard.

And that's all she wrote.

Keycard in hand, Cloud and Reno are led by one of the VIP’s bodyguards to the VIP elevators. They’re on their way up the tower base. Up, up, up and to the casino inside, and the drinking, and the smoking, and the fucking, and the betting, and losing, and hiding, running, pleading, bleeding.

Time to get clean. Time to relax and recharge.

That’s probably what’s on Reno’s mind, of course.

Cloud isn’t feeling so optimistic. He hangs close, white-knuckling the BDS.

They pass through a series of checkpoints and a metal detector.

That should have caused problems, but nothing is said when the alarms buzz and lights flash. Reno’s guns, knife, and rucksacks aren’t noted. The giant sword isn’t mentioned either.
They’re let through to enter the waiting elevator together. They all three board and rise above the masses of people, fake beaches, palm trees, and fruity drinks. Up the gold pillar they go.

“What’s with the—?” the bodyguard starts, gesturing down to the BDS.

“The big damn sword?” Reno intercepts.

“Yeah…”

“It’s a family heirloom."

“Looks heavy."

“You have no idea…”

The guard scoffs. And he can too, because he’s the size of a mountain.

Cloud glares sidelong at Reno.

“You’ll be fetched in an hour. Follow the hall to your room. Get clean. Every nook and cranny. Twice over. And I mean it. Both of you. Mr. Vause likes order. New clothing will be brought to you shortly. Feel free to use anything you find in your room. And cut your hair.”

Reno shows no reaction to the last comment.

The elevator comes to a stop.

“Will you play nice?” the bodyguard asks. “Will you both play nice?”

“No worries,” Reno answers, making to step through the opening doors.

“I don’t want any trouble,” the bodyguard stresses, eyeing them one to the other.

Reno beams over his shoulder, broad and toothy. He could care less.

That’s what his smile says to Cloud anyway.

Reno could care less. He’s at ease, confident, and hiding very little of it. He'll be on top soon, reaching for new heights. He'll be something to worry about then. The guard can distrust him all day long. No skin off his back. Wait until the next time they meet.

Things couldn't be less okay.

Strike two for Reno.

Security is everywhere.

They shuffle down the red velvet hall.

Reno has made comments about the air conditioning twice now, not nearly tired or sick enough to contain his excitement over their current improved position. No matter the stipulations.

Cloud's considered thinking about what could possibly be on the other side of one of these many
garnet doors, but then he spins on.

The number on their keycard reads 505.

The rose-red door they eventually come to tells them the same thing in looping black numbers.

“Here goes nothin’,” Reno whispers, sliding the keycard through the reader.

The room is huge.

“Shit! No way! Look at those beds! Hey! Coffee and toothpaste!”

Reno darts ahead into the opulence. He crosses the floor in seconds, crowing when he comes to the far wall, and the private bathroom/shower cubicle set into it. He peeks inside and hoots.

“So many towels! Look at the size of that shower! Oh fuck!”

An expansive mirror set into that same wall reflects his image as he inspects the acres of sheer cut, black marble countertops polished to a sterile white shine.

“Grooming tools and shaving cream. That’s not gonna be enough shampoo... Why do they give you two giant fucking beds, a million towels, but only enough shampoo for one person? That doesn’t make any fucking sense to me.”

Reno hasn’t stopped his gushing. He’s hasn’t stopped coughing his lungs out in all his excitement either, but he couldn’t be bothered. He bounces from the counter and onto the closest forgiving slab of mattress, flopping over it, legs, knees, and arms, to land more or less in front of Cloud, who stands still, still clinging to the sword, and nowhere near as enthusiastic.

“No... You have to be kidding me,” Reno marvels, crouching down.

Cloud adjusts his view, lowering his head.

“They have a potion bar...”

Reno is stooped before it.

Cloud shrugs and offloads the BDS onto one of the two king sized beds.

He's familiar enough with magic, potions, mako, and materia. He's heard of them all his life. It's like anything. See: cellphones, airplanes, guns, drugs, or automatic doors. They've always been there, it's just that he's only recently encountered them. Thanks, Shinra.

It's still a bit disconcerting and unknown regardless. Just how far can one go on potions alone? What are the long-term effects? What can't you heal? What is it really doing to you under the surface? He's heard stories. He's wondered his own thoughts. In his experience, potions and materia made him itchy and antsy. He's a novice on so many levels. On levels of pain and pressure, guilt and worry, injustice and vengeance… he is anything but.

“And there's a cherry too,” Reno reveals. “And tons of water. And good booze.”

Cloud does his best to tune him out, sitting down on the edge of the BDS’ shrine.
“I better not get charged for this shit…”

Reno removes several bottles from the mini fridge and sits on the bed opposing Cloud's.

Cloud watches as he uncaps each small bottle, leaning forward to set them out one by one on the edge of the central nightstand. Just as quickly, he’s going down the line, knocking back one, two, three, downing two doses of red potion, and an amber shot of alcohol as a chaser.

He gasps, inhales, and sighs when he’s done.


He starts the task of unraveling his spools of bandages. He picks at the mess still hanging stained around his throat and then works at the cleaner lengths protecting his arms.

“Worth it,” he eventually finishes.

His long arms are near perfect, nothing more than hints of scar tissue wanting to squirrel. His throat gash is much the same story, erased to a thin white line Cloud sees only because he remembers it sneering. No more seeping, angry wounds. No more burns and torturous pain. He’s been knit back together faster than his body could naturally manage. He’s almost good as new.

“Oh, man. Just like magic. I can really enjoy that shower now…”

Cloud observes him get up and walk back to the mirrored counters. The unneeded bandages (and empty bottles) go into a trash bin under the double sinks.

Everything is red, cherry, bronzed, gold, or black. The carpets are plush and accepting. The furniture is all stained wood garishly carved. The art is bad. The atmosphere is stewing.

“Just gotta… do something... about my hair.”

Reno eyes himself in the mirror for a moment.

It’s a long moment.

It's so long, in fact, Cloud decides to lean down and grab a water from that nearby mini fridge situated between the beds, relishing the weight and flavour of his tongue no more.

When he's on his way back, leaning up, uncapping the ice cold bottle, Reno’s sawing at what’s left of his ponytail with the provided scissors, and not giving it another thought.

Cloud balks.

All that hair…

It’s cascading to the floor.

That red, red hair...

Muddy and blackened, brittle and coiled.

He’s chopping it off to the base of his skull.

“Hair grows back,” Reno assures himself.
And maybe Cloud too.

Cloud looks away from the scene, taking his drink. The liquid is glacial. All the way down.

The task is done in a few short minutes, Reno now shorn, the bottle of water now empty. The resulting evidence (several scruffy piles of fluff peppering the ruddy carpet) is collected and tossed into the trash bin too.

“There,” Reno says, standing nearer to Cloud. “My head feels so light now.”

He turns it this way and that, modeling.

“What do ya think?”

His hair is once again red (fire hydrant, dynamite, apple skin). Too red, near glowing, almost obscene, and altogether unique. Most notably though, it's short and off his face. Where it spilled over before, it now retreats to disclose every boldly handsome feature in stark detail.

Reno’s soft tissue and inflammation, his superficial hurts, they’re healed. His cough is quiet, voice gravel and thick no more. It’s the most a few simple potions can handle. He’s saved himself a long and painful recovery either way, and maybe a few hundred gil. He’s shed the old and dead parts of himself to come out altered, augmented, and dangerously unknown on the other side.

Cloud offers no input.

“Okay, buddy,” Reno says, clapping his hands once. “Come on.”

He gestures a pulling motion towards him.

Cloud improves his posture, sitting erect, spine cracking, but only blinks back at him.

“I’m taking a shower,” Reno declares. “Come watch my tired ass. I’m beat. I don’t wanna pass out in there. That’s embarrassing. And for old people. It’s big enough for like... seven people. Come on. I’m not gonna be pressed into your business. I won’t look. Too much. You need it, yo. You so need it. I’ll spot you. I’ve got your back. I’ll even wash it for you.”

He motions to the bathroom door.

Cloud shrugs and looks to the floor.

Reno gives him little chance to hold out though. He rushes forward (not about to take no for an answer, not about to let him have an opinion) and pulls Cloud up from the bed. Working backwards, and digging in his heels, he drags him across the floor with him, passing in front of the flat screen tv, the closet, the reading chair, the mirrors, and into the bathroom.

“You’ll thank me later,” Reno swears, shutting and blocking the door behind.

“Strip,” he orders, jabbing at Cloud's slacks. “Or I do it for you. And I won’t be very gentle.”

The potions have helped Reno, but not Cloud. Reno's more aware and willing and committed. He's like a cockroach on his bad days. He never dies, he only fades. He has endless energy, endless luck, and that's not exactly benefitting Cloud. He can't fight Reno. He can't fight himself. He can't fight the desire to lie down, run away, crumple and cry. He's torn.

He watches Reno work on his wife beater, then his slacks, now his shoelaces, and then finds himself moving to obey. He’s spinning inside his head, about to be crushed by his own fear, and
guilt, and loneliness. He reaches for the bottom of the borrowed sweater, autopilot taking over.

_Fuck it._

Before Cloud knows it, they’re both bare and the shower tap is turning on. The windowless room starts to fill with steam. The rushing of water is all at once too loud, beating off the smooth tiles. His ears are ringing. His guts are alarmingly calm. His panic is alarmingly absent. His self preservation is missing in action. He feels ethereal. He feels like the fly on the wall.

What are they doing here? What’s _he_ doing here?

Reno waits not a moment longer and in he steps, entering the shower stall. He is accepted into the solid sheet pouring down inside, hissing and groaning his immediate approval.

Cloud is pulled in soon after, not given the chance to slink away.

The stream is wonderfully hot. It comes from the ceiling in a mockery of rainfall. The stall is wonderfully roomy, just like Reno had assured. They stand several vaporous feet apart, almost at a comfortable distance.

The walls are plastered in large squares of creamy-grey tiles flecked with fingers of gold. The floors are done in smooth, puzzle-piece-like cuts of natural beige river rock. A lip, or seat, extended for resting and storage purposes, and already stocked with soaps (to Reno’s great delight), juts from the corners on either side. They come to about mid thigh on Cloud.

It’s the single most accepting and indulgent thing Cloud has ever experienced. He’s never been more goaded into relaxing. He exhales, unwinding, looking up into the noble spray, and lets the steaming rain rush over him.

Reno hums happily close by, finally getting his rewards.

The hot rain fall rinses them. All the mud, grit, guts and blood caked in their hair and pores. Cloud lets it wash away. He can soon feel clean. He can soon feel the slight stinging around his eye where he knows a bruise has formed. He can soon feel all his other hurts, cuts, and bruises. He scrubs at his gritty head, and then his face, wanting to rub the memories away too.

Everything happens so fast.

The misty thick air takes on a flowery aroma, and then Reno’s there, drifting in from behind. He’s just a hand, petting and assuring, touching with care, easing and emptying Cloud’s hectic mind, and then he is two hands, massaging and raking Cloud’s neck and shoulders. The sweet aroma rises. His hands slither. He’s soaping up Cloud’s back just like he said he would.

Cloud shivers and makes to pull away, instinct kicking in.

Reno makes him stay put though, merely clenching his fingers to stall the motion.

Cloud too easily calms and allows himself to be lured back into the activity.

Butterflies. He has butterflies in his guts.

Reno carries on, keeping him on a short leash, his hands heavy and pressing, smoothing up and down his spine, working his sore flesh. He lathers and repeats, paying him full respects. He focuses on his lower back, his nape, his shoulder blades, his ass, the backs of his legs and arms, warming Cloud’s flesh in a way the water can’t quite achieve.
Cloud hums and tenses, lifts and stretches.

Reno soothes his beaten body, flattening out aches and pains, drawing them to the surface to be wiped away and silenced. He’s raising heart rate, increasing respiration, and complicating everything. And now, he’s turning Cloud around to face him.

“Can’t leave out the front,” he says.

Cloud doesn’t know him at first.

The short hair, the slim build, the scars, the slanted shoulders, the pallor, the dark eyes.

Through the spray, Reno doesn’t look anything like Reno.

Cloud feels his chest tightly clench.

I don’t recognize you anymore.

He goes with Reno’s ministrations regardless, compliant and grateful, needing the comfort and contact, swept up in the swirl. He allows Reno to rub him over, to clean him, to worship him. The spray quickly rinses any residue and doubt. Reno lathers, lavishes, roaming far and wide. He tracks over chest and belly, behind his ears, along his throat and up to his armpits. It all seems innocent enough at first, sincere enough at first, until Reno comes to a standstill.

Cloud is left untouched, adjusting and collecting, fully relaxed, fully enjoying the heat (a moment of true harmony), and then, all too soon, Reno is back again. His soap slippery fingers find him. He advances and negates any space left between, slick hot flesh meeting slick hot flesh. He’s not rubbing and massaging so much anymore as he is caressing and groping, urging and praising.

Cloud can feel him. Every inch of him. How excited he is. How full he is. How serious he is. His sea storm eyes draw him in, intent and intense, so much like a colour Cloud's admired before. His tall stature, long torso, and square shoulders are almost similar. It’s mesmerizing and undoing.

Those slippery and skilled fingers again, they arrest him, they destroy him, they find him at his core, and the real proof of his excited response proudly jutting from between his legs. They coil around the already throbbing flesh. They slide, pull, and work.

Cloud shudders and whines. He jerks into the glorious grip. He gives himself over to the sensation. He accepts and asks for more. He’s nowhere near shame. It's the last straw.

He’s not sure who moves first, but he knows Reno has to crane down to meet him. Their lips connect precisely, confidently, already waiting, already opened, teeth and tongue glance and dance. Their bodies deflect and slip, wanting to coil and compress.

Reno releases his cock to pull him in, suddenly, heartily. His heaving chest is close, his trembling hips closer. His freed hands rove over Cloud’s rear and sides, sliding and constant. It’s possessive and overwhelming, and Cloud wants for it, he strives for it.

They align, slide and suck. Reno moans, muffled, and there, that’s when Cloud finally remembers he needs to breathe. He pulls from the hungry mouth, glancing away and taking a half-step back.

It leaves him staring dead on at Reno’s defined chest, and his ghostly throat scar.

He inhales and exudes a raggedy sigh, dizzied.
Reno expresses his impatience for the interruption, ducking to take his teeth to Cloud’s throat.

Cloud outwardly groans and arches, even as he leans away, the sensation and reality too much.

Reno follows and grips. He nips and sucks and bites. He presses close, laid in, melded tight. His hands test Cloud's dragon spine, feeling every rising bump one after the other. He handles his narrow hips, testing his hold, their shape, urging them near. He gropes his ass just for kicks, and then for leverage, dragging their centers together, simultaneously sinking his sharp teeth into the span of delicate flesh below Cloud’s ear. Their cocks collide.

Cloud hisses and gasps. He squirms, feeling weak, done over. He needs to sit. He needs air.

“Uhn,” he gusts, faltering.

Reno retakes his yawning mouth, sliding his slithering tongue over Cloud’s lolling one, sealing his claim. He sways his hips forward, rubbing and aligning their bobbing tools. It’s a barrage of slicking and slipping and sliding; angling and delving and lapping. Cloud's head bends far back, his fingers grip Reno's arms. He's holding on for dear life.

It ends this time with Reno grunting and pulling away for the much needed breath. All that blood rushing away from their brains, and the heat, and the steam. They’re both getting so light-headed.

Cloud backpedals, taking a chance, taking a break, head aswirl.

Reno allows it, but not without comment. His smile is wide and wolfish.

“Ya taste so good,” he admits, breathy, looking over him, languid and lurid, casting sparks that ignite deep inside Cloud's fluttering guts.

“Ya feel even better…” He rumbles, vibrating, pushing close. “Wanna feel all of you,” he says. “Wanna fuck you… Wanna take you… I need you.”

He’s swarming in, licking and lapping at Cloud’s parted lips. He rifles through his sodden hair. He presses his palms along hot flesh. He teases him, first sucking a swollen lower lip between his teeth, and then paying him back a favour a long time coming.

Cloud moans, wincing at the pinch and sting of incisors, soon tasting salt and metal.

He sags and nearly slips as they disengage this time, lost to his own exhaustion and needy confusion. Reno has him though, hand on his nape and lower spine, steadying.

“Whoa,” he breathes. “See? Falling in the shower is dangerous, man.”

He moves to walk Cloud back to the tiled seat.

Cloud goes willingly with him, sitting heavily and wetly when they hit the lip together. He takes the precious time to pant and gulp and think, none of which works well, and then he looks up into the drumming stream. His vision is obscured, the rain is falling, speckled. His hair parts.

Reno looms above, infinite, vibrant, volatile.

The height is perfect. They're lined up nicely thanks to the built-in seat. If Cloud moved to the very edge, spread his legs just so, rolled his hips just a bit, and gave himself up, Reno could run him through with that swelling, living, and very ready cock just as he rests, over and over, and nothing would be compromised. He would have to bend his knees only slightly.
“Oh man,” Reno mumbles, taking him in.

Cloud waits the moment out, holding in a breath, bit lip throbbing away, blood throbbing away, pooling at his center, sustaining his madness.

“You’re fucking perfect,” Reno growls, engaging his hips, rocking them precariously close.

He’s illustrating his obvious intentions with every quivering, half-contained stroke. He’s near gusting into the side of Cloud’s face now, mouth agape, a song able to beat out the steady spattering of the falling water around them.

Reno’s had a taste, and he’s alive, and he’s here (or so he keeps saying), and he’s stubborn and stupid too, so he’s not going to change his mind. He’s going to get what he wants at last. What he’s talked about from day one. What he’s asked for. And not much is standing in his way.

He deviously slides a flat hand down Cloud’s throat, and chest, and over-slim belly, to dive lower, lower, lower, until his long fingers again find over-sensitive flesh sprouted from curly hair.

Cloud swoons and mewls, lifting and arching to chant it to the ceiling and the spray above.

Reno lustily agrees, working his thumb over the stretched smooth crown of Cloud’s stalwart cock, gripping his fingers around taut skin velvet and receptive. He eagerly bumps his own hips forward, his own evidence engorged and swaying, wanting and impressive, and getting little satisfaction.

Cloud abruptly answers. He chokes, whimpers, and parts his knees, dropping and spreading his shaking legs. He rolls up into Reno’s hand, inching to the edge, enticing, accepting, and incensing.

Reno grins and hums back, needing no more invitation. He takes the clear cue and draws near, pouring over Cloud as he reclines, attaining his most desired position. He’s already prodding Cloud’s exposed ass cheeks with his swollen hot head. His thick member is a promise, a premonition, and Cloud is more than willing to accommodate it.

“I’ve thought about this…” Reno gasps, rubbing and wanting. “…for so long.”

Cloud only knows need. He only knows that he doesn’t care. He only knows that he’s screwed anyway. So, he swishes his pelvis up, he rolls his eyes shut, and he nods several jarring nods.

“Then fuck me,” he breathes, gusting it into the shower stream, into the ether, and lost forever.

As soon as he starts speaking, no more needs to be said.

He knows what’s coming next. He’s been here. Before Zack, before Sephiroth, before sense. He notes the hands on his hips pulling him closer still. He notes the sudden silence, the collective held breath. Here comes the push, the pierce, the pinnacle: penetration, spiking, spilling, dipping, digging, and drilling. He braces just in time, crying out at the sudden jolt all the same.

Reno is rock solid but his first push is futile. He has to retreat, and then reach forward again, and then back off again, digging deeper on the next push, and the next, wetting and stretching the tight entrance, making his claim. Cloud's tested muscles expand and part for Reno, who slows none at all, digging his tool into him as if the resistance weren’t so.

It’s painful. It’s rushed. It’s too much. And it’s just the beginning.

Cloud has nothing for moments. His jaw works, his lungs seize, his eyes blink. He’s spilling over.
Reno is blurred and shifting, a shadow in the water fall, a hanging on idea, a thread of hope.

*Oh, fuck.*

He's making sure progress. He's reaching his halfway point, the stalled slide easing and constant, Cloud's opening filling and flexing, the pain a distant memory.

Reno pushes on, ever closer, ever shooting for the root, the core, the limits, wanting to be surrounded, wanting to take all of Cloud, to own him, to overwrite him.

"Oh," Reno chokes out. "Oh, *fuck, fuck, fuck.*"

He's crawling deeper, he's almost there, he's dragging it out as long as he can muster, and that's not long. No, it's not long at all, because he's done it, he's filling Cloud to the brim, his body fitting in before him, embracing him, hiding some of the indecent act.

Reno is lost, shuddering and shaking as he sits, enjoying the pressing heat, the reality, the victory, and he should be, for soon he will be mindless.

He retreats and then bores right back into Cloud, packing him full, bringing their hips together in jarring and immediate fashion. His two slippery fingers clamp onto Cloud's right hip. Five slippery fingers work at the back of his neck, keeping him upright, keeping a good grip and sure balance.

Reno's tossing his head and baring his teeth, wild and ravenous. He is large and living. He is all Cloud knows, sees, feels, and wants. They're reeling inside the sensations together, locked together, locking lips, sloppily joining and parting, joining and parting. They're trapped inside the spreading friction and the slide; the rush and heat; the desire, overwhelming and complete.

Cloud gave up when he stepped into this room, into this shower, into the morning after Gongaga. He gives up again now, rushing up and throwing his arms around Reno's neck, holding on just to scream it out, just to manage, just to sustain. He stops being able to hear himself. After the rhythm (and the filling, and the stretching) and the pleasure is all there is.

He can feel that his mouth is cracked wide, unclosing. He can feel the vibrations deep in his throat and chest, unyielding. He can feel the next invasion, solid and deep, spurring and driving them both on. He knows he's helpless. He knows he's grunting out on every new beat, thumping and pumping, solid and surging, but all he hears is rainfall.

He's already made more noise in the last two minutes than he has in the last two days. And he doesn't care. He's making a fool of himself. He's weak. He's already forfeit everything. He can feel his tailbone, back, and elbows hitting the lip of the shower seat, *slap slap slap.* He's being lifted and pushed back. He's going to bruise. He still doesn't care. He wants it *harder, deeper, faster.* He spreads wider and holds strong. He wants this image of Reno to destroy him. He wants to be concluded.

It's hectic, it's absolute.

It's over in moments.

Reno abruptly pulls out, drawing every last inch free. He doesn't return or move away just yet, but he does disengage and leave Cloud to gasp and wonder, empty and needing.

No sooner than Cloud lowers his chin to look level and alleviate his confusion, does Reno grunt and groan, lifting him up from the shower seat.
He turns Cloud around and bends him front first over the streaming shower tiles, his backside presented, now pinned. Reno’s palms glance his trembling sides and his hitching spine, coming to a final stop at his hips. He’s lining up once more, pushing on without hesitation or ceremony, taking Cloud all over again from behind. His warmth is greater than the cascade. His blood-filled head eagerly breaches, splitting, spreading, marching on to his raggedy end.

Cloud groans, long and longing through the delving return. He strains not to clench and seize. His head pendulums. His hair drips. He arches and aches. Every hint of Reno invades, forced in, challenging, pushing him to his tattered limits. He can't catch his winded breath, he can’t escape, and he isn't given the chance to try either.

Reno meets depth, superheated, and then relents.

Cloud cries out at his retreat and howls, shuddering, at his immediate and smothering return. His knees strike the hot tiles, his palms and fingers skid and scrabble for purchase. His every thin breath is being forced free, just as he's being forced down onto his chest, slick and slipping.

Reno hangs on, bangs on, spiked fingers biting into slight and soaked hips. The depth of his reach is greater, fuller, frenzied, and more complete. He rams to the root, his abdomen hitting Cloud's lower back and ass, rushing in, knocking him forward with every re-entry, again and again. The slapping and packing sounds take over. It’s minutes of sensational monotony.

It’s just the motion, and the action. It’s every subtle hitch and bump and readjustment as they dance. It’s the wet smack and the internal rubbing and the stars bursting and Reno bringing Cloud to him with each thrust. He’s threatening to break him. He’s not pacing his assault or holding back.

Cloud returns the favour, flexing around him, making the push all the more intense.

Reno’s an overflow of guttural curses and swears and words building to violent climax.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, fucking—keep that. Oh, do that.”

Cloud squeezes, undulating, swaying his hips and swooning in agreement.

“Yes!” Reno crows, jolting up the pace. “Again, again, again. Oh, fuck.”

Cloud rocks and lifts to meet him, squeeze him, matching his speed, his ragged rhythm and roll. He's hiked up on his tippy toes, opened and accommodating, only sounding like the victim, only expelling noises and breath. It’s becoming too much to follow. Reno isn't slowing. He isn’t making sense. He’s slipping, he’s flowing, he’s falling, and Cloud’s holding on by a hair, knees and back bowed, cheeks spread, caught in the pace, the beat, and taking a beating.

Reno’s already frantic pattern becomes downright manic. He rasps, jerks, and growls, clawing nails over Cloud’s sides and thighs, leaving red lines. He clings and crowds. He bucks and rolls.

“Oh, I can’t… I can’t…” he whines.

He has no restraint. He can't stop. He won't stop. Not until the end. And the end is near. He didn’t have a lot of stamina to begin with. It’s amazing he’s gotten this far.

He drills himself home. The finish line is in sight. The wondrous goal is ahead. He pummels into Cloud, ramming him into the grout, the wall, a howling mess. He plunges, and drives, and seizes, agonizing, slamming straight and true one final, brutal time. He’s peaked. He’s coming apart.

“Oh, fuck!”
Cloud can feel the vibrations, the tension, and then the gruff and abundant release. Reno resonates deep inside his throat, his being. He’s exalting, praising, milking every last lagging thrust, riding the sudden rush, the tidal pull, fluid and vocal. He’s filling Cloud once more, twice more, to the brim, gushing into him, giving him his all, throaty adulation sustained.

Reno’s cock still solid and hot inside him, Cloud still panting, panicked, bent over, and trapped inside his desperate desire for carnal liberation—the water spitting, the steam choking, the moment ending—he thinks of his first time.

It’s not his official first time, but their official first time. And no, not the tub either. Or the airship. Or the inn bathroom. He thinks of the cargo bay of a giant sea ship. And strong fingers.

Reno reels and revels, barely keeping his weight off Cloud's sinking back.

Cloud doesn't have to do much. He doesn’t need to grab himself. He doesn't need the friction or the contact. He only thinks of that moment, Zack’s saliva slick fingers curled around him, tight, right, just perfect. Their lips and tongues twisting. His smell and definition. His smile and devotion.

Cloud whimpers, keens, beaten, stricken, and comes with a wild jump right into the palm of his reaching hand. He douses the already creamy tiles below. Sweet, stunning victory, and utter damning defeat. And all he had to do was conjure a shred of Zack.

Reno moans anew as muscles tighten and release around him.

Cloud slumps and falls, bracing himself (and some of Reno) against the tiled seat and wall. He hangs his head, gasping, gutted, shattered, broken, emptied, and all rung out.

Nothing happens for many beats after.

The shower spray remains hot.

“Gotta wash your hair,” Reno finally mumbles.

They’ve split, spread out, and rinsed off.

Reno is a silvery shadow standing tall and immense before him. He hangs another moment longer, existing in the unknown, the undecided, and then he up and runs away, turning and exiting the shower stall, and the bathroom, leaving Cloud to fend for himself.

Cloud sits alone in the shower stall. He would be having difficulty staying on his two shivering legs if he was upright. His whole body’s in mutiny now. He remains on the tiled lip and frowns to himself. He feels… He doesn’t know yet. He feels he needs to get out of here.

Hair washed, he emerges minutes later in nothing but a towel.

Reno is dressed up neat and sharp, and lying back on one of the huge beds.

Cloud stops dead, dripping and damaged, his sore and swollen lip caught mid-suck.

He remembers a Reno almost like this one. Echoes from the past. He remembers how he enjoyed tormenting him in NCB2. Remembers him grinning and rubbing his cock inside his slacks and sidling up for a stolen kiss that ended bloody. He remembers how his twin held him back. He
remembers them answering to Sephiroth, and the Director, and forcing him on stage.

Reno springs to life, hopping off the bed and standing tall to meet him. He looks Cloud up and down, tilt and reset, his face expressionless and guarded, and all wrong.

“Hey. Your stuff’s there,” he says, pointing over his shoulder. “Someone snuck in and left them while we were in there, I guess.”

He shrugs, cocks his head, commences his injured lean (a new and old staple), and indicates Cloud’s drying hair with that same long and lone finger.

“You’re a blond again...” he mumbles.

He hangs on that very subject, considering. The tiniest of agonized expressions slips through his mask, microscopic, immeasurable. He must succumb to his censored thoughts, his raving wants, his undisputed desires, because he goes so far as to reach out two scissored fingers to twist and stroke a rebellious strand of yellow behind Cloud's wet ear, just brushing soft brim.

The hand drops. His eyes do not.

He is quite dashing. It can’t be missed. Reno's cheekbones are high, his mouth is soft, feminine, and his stare is disarming. His suit is all black, slacks to jacket. There’s not a crease or unflattering fold in sight. His narrow tie is deepest plum over a charcoal button down shirt. His hair is neat, having been cleaned up more while he was away. It’s still damp (and a good enough mimic of his brother’s cut, short and uniform), but still too violently red (to follow his too close mouth).

The only thing out of place has to be his retained teal sneakers, faded and tattered, glaring amongst the order. Otherwise, Reno seems to gleam. Whether that be from the shower, his abating sickness, or something else, Cloud doesn’t know, and he won’t guess.

Cloud glances away, as far as he can manage, spotting the black suit laid out on the far bed. They’re going to match.

*Fucking fuck.*

He needs a cigarette.

He survives getting dressed (suppressing certain thoughts and more bad memories). The suit is remarkably well-sized and comfortable, but that’s it. He tosses the purple tie back on the bedspread, adjusts his tight wrist cuffs, and then he can’t take another moment.

He finds their rucksacks on the floor by the door and goes through them.

“You can’t smoke in here,” Reno chides, following closely behind.

Cloud shrugs and makes for the sword on the bed, cigarettes and lighter in hand. He yanks the weapon up from its rest and swings himself back around, cutting the blade through the air as he goes, using the weight of it to bring him about all the faster. The motion is dramatic, easy, and ingrained, but not into him. No, this is muscle memory on a whole new level.

Reno has planted himself before the main door, arms crossed, lean engaged.

“You sure as shit can’t leave,” he warns. “Not without me.”
They’re trudging back down that yawning red hallway they just came through, glaring with gold and riddled with distrusting guards, having decided to up and leave the room behind them.

They’re lighter and faster, having taken only what they needed from the interior and their rucksacks. Half of them are mostly healed. The other half is running on fumes and delirium and sheer will, and the desire to crash and burn to the tune of nothing matters anymore.

Reno grabbed a pink comb from the bathroom’s countertop, his extra bullets and clips, and a few other things, and then they left everything as it was. Cloud has all he needs in the sword and cigarettes. They shut the door on the whole dirty transaction.

“You know, you’re pretty fucking hot when you’re on a mission,” Reno notes, running that ridiculous comb through his short hair and causing awful contrast: hot pink over a hotter red.

“When you’re all determined and intense and shit.”

Cloud lets him speak, working a cigarette from the crumpled pack as they walk.

“Burning so brightly... It’s hard to miss.”

Cloud puts the cigarette on his lips, ready for lighting.

“Let’s go up to the casino, huh? You can smoke all you want there. I’ll show you how to bet too. We can make a fortune if we do it right, yo. Might attract some unwanted, and familiar, attention... but, hey, I’m looking for that attention right now. I feel pretty damn good.”

Reno pockets the comb. He cracks and rolls his neck.

He appears ready enough to carry out his words. He hasn’t looked this able-bodied since NCB2. His suit is fine, his face is clean, his hurts are healed, his hair is cut. He has no more ailing cough, no more twisted shoulder (just his lean), no more raggedy burns or tears (just some distracting phantoms), and no more reason to fear. And yet, he still looks wrong.

“Have a couple of drinks with me,” he appeals. “Gotta get you loosened up.”

Cloud pockets the pack of cigarettes and keeps his head straight.

“Can’t wait to see what that’s like...” Reno mumbles.

They round the corner, only feet from the elevators, and drinks, and wafting smoke, and.

“Hey, Vegas!” someone shouts from ahead. “Where’s your asshole brother?”
“Long time no see,” a friendly voice greets.

Up comes an elegant male face. The face is attached to a slender body no taller than Cloud, dressed in a sharp black suit. A deep red tie rests over a crisp white shirt. Short, black hair slicks over to be tucked behind either ear. It’s longish in the back but well managed.

He looks disarmingly like the VIP from earlier, sans glasses, and a few years.

“When did you get here?” he asks.

Reno looks stunned, freezing up on sight.

Cloud bounces from his face to the newcomer’s, taking record. He doesn’t find what he expects to see there. The flattering features are calm enough, natural enough.

“Purple? You’re wearing Vause’s colours?” the newcomer asks, instantly confused.

He changes his friendly tune to a concerned one.

“What’s going on?”

Things start to turn.

Reno looks down to his tie.

“You don’t look…” the newcomer starts.

“Listen,” Reno speaks up, leaning forward. “I’m in trouble,” he whispers.

“Is it—”

“It’s Reno.”

“Reno?” the newcomer puzzles.

Realization dawns.

“What?” he squawks. “You cut your hair?”

Reno rears back and waves his arms.

“Yeah, yeah, big deal! Hair grows back, man.”

“Where’s Vegas? The hell are you doing? The hell are you doing wearing—”

“I made a bad deal,” Reno answers, coming back to the point.
His name is Tseng, and he’s not happy. He is also, luckily enough, the head of security for the Gold Saucer. Him and Vegas go way back: a history of favours. Him and Reno have issues that go way back: a history of failures. He might be trustworthy. But, then again, he might not.

He is told everything Reno can manage in one breath (sans a few sensitive details) before huffing into a fit of silent rage. They’re still grouped where they were stopped by Tseng moment’s ago. It’s just a few feet to the access elevators from there, and something better, but more likely worse.

The cigarette still dangles from Cloud’s lips, ready to be ignited and enjoyed. He bounces his leg as they talk, jarring his knee and bumping the BDS. It’s a constant rhythm. His back hurts, his head hurts, his feet hurt, his ass hurts.

“You've been here twenty minutes and you're already causing me problems,” Tseng groans.

“Wouldn't be fun otherwise, right?” Reno replies, his smile easy.

“You know, I feel like I want to help you this time, despite how I know it will end. I should help him… but, I can't do anything. It's not my say. You're going to have to go through with it.”


“Why did you even make the deal?”

“We were in a tight spot…”

“Not tight enough apparently... You're such a nuisance, Reno. And a fool. Now you're proper pinched.” Tseng pauses, then adds, “Don't suppose you remember a gentleman named Deluxe?”

“Nooo…” Reno drawls, pulling a pained face. “He didn't seem…”

“He's an upgrade. Hides it well.”

“Shit,” Reno hisses.

Cloud has no idea what any of this means.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Tseng agrees, rolling his eyes. “Your deal would have been a stupid idea on any normal executive member, but you had to go and choose the worst one.”

*Member?*

“Of the Family,” Tseng answers.

Cloud realizes he asked it aloud.

Reno is eyeing him unkindly.

“The Shinra Family,” Tseng explains further. He looks Cloud up and down too, but not threateningly. “Your pal here just sold a night with you to one of its most deranged followers. They own half of this whole tower, and most of the betting races. But, not me.”

“No. You're paid by the man behind the curtain, up in his tall tower,” Reno jabs.

“And you're, what? A defector?” Tseng fires back, sliding him a scathing look.

“Only on my good days,” Reno grumbles.
“So… where is Vegas?” Tseng asks, looking annoyed as well as bored.

“He’s dead.” Cloud answers, breaking his silence once more.

“Dead?” Tseng questions. He’s definitely interested now.

“Murdered,” Cloud clarifies, voice toneless.

Reno stands by, eyes distant, jaw set.

“Murdered?”

“By General Sephiroth.”

“Oh my…” Tseng mumbles.

He glances down and away. He's either alarmed or working it out.

Reno scuffs his feet, readjusts his hip-cocked, left-slanted lean, and, as backwards as it might sound, now he has an opinion, now he has a voice.

“You'll talk to a stranger but you won't talk to me?” he growls.

“Are you two… You know...” Tseng fumbles, pointing between them.

“No. Well... kinda. Only... no,” Reno mumbles back. “Just... having a bit of a falling out.”

“Well, watch your backs…” Tseng sighs. “I don't know if you're telling the truth. About anything. It almost sounds too ridiculous to be wrong. He doesn’t seem like a liar to me. But, for your brother's sake, I really hope he is. I really do. So... just watch your backs. You’re safe from Shinra here, for the most part. They've been having... issues, so they want to be distracted. They don’t operate normally inside the grounds anyway, but that doesn’t mean they won’t make an exception. Especially right now. And remember... I'll have to clean up after any stupid decisions you make.”

“Really?” Reno scoffs. “That's it?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Here's a hand. Hide here. Sorry your brother's dead. Talk to this person. I dunno.”

“I just gave you advice.”

“It was your opinion, not advice.”

“You're such an ass…” Tseng groans.

Reno shrugs.

“I do my best.”

“Somehow I doubt that…”

“Hey, you never liked me anyway… You can't hold that against me.”

“Yes, I can,” Tseng monotones.

“No, you can't. You never gave me a shot. Not once. Not when Vegas was around. Not when he
was all I could have been but wasn't. You guys were good with each other. Buddies even. Well, hate to break it to you… but, he's gone. It's just me. And you still won't give me a hand?"

“Did you not hear me? Don’t you remember how this place works?”

“Does anyone have balls anymore? My brother’s dead,”

“Not everyone is as careless and stupid as you,” Tseng bites. “And I’m calling your bluff.”

“If only they were, everyone might be happier…”

“I can't help you, Reno,” Tseng finishes, crossing his arms.

Reno quiets to inspect him, giving his response time to stew. He retrieves his pink comb from his back pocket and skims the teeth through his shorter hair, pumped and peevish.

“We’re hitting the casino,” he finally announces, returning the comb in one smooth motion.

“Don't make a scene,” Tseng orders. “I've got my eye on you.”

“I can't help you,” Reno retorts, strutting ahead for the elevators.

Just as quickly, they’re back on their former route.

Tseng strides off and they stride ahead.

Reno calls the elevator, looking rather cold and collected. He’s not himself. He’s not on top. He’s struggling quietly inside himself, tight as a bow, ready to snap. The signs are showing.

They board the lift and head up to the casino floors, silent and tense, and not sure what to expect.

Cloud’s head is tense too, but there’s none of the silence. He’s running through all the spent dialogue, and the possibilities, and the dire repercussions, and the many avoidable injuries, and the blubbered words of regret, and the inevitable and twisted punishment.

The lift reaches the desired floor and the doors chime. As they open, the noise of the casino is just a muffled cry beyond. They'll have to follow another corridor to get to the glorious interior.

They step off and Cloud immediately lights up his cigarette. He takes a puff and exhales.

Reno’s gone when he looks up.

He can’t get this feeling in his guts. No. Not this one. Not the sensation of his syrupy innards dropping right to the floor and spilling all over his new shoes. No, no, no. Not over him. Not over Reno. But, he is so suddenly on his own again, and here the sensation is: reminders of a sand worm, a burned home, a charred wreck. And all the dark alleys in between.

Based off of how Reno and Tseng were talking, being by himself isn’t too good of an idea either. It’s dangerous. It might even be fatal. He’s going to be expected to be in that room in twenty minutes, or less, and when he isn’t, they’ll come looking. When they find him all alone, lugging around a sword he can’t use, they’ll scoop him up and deliver him to a man that’s supposed to be worse than someone named Deluxe. Whatever that means.
Cloud huffs, letting his tired shoulders shrug. Smoke spins and lifts.

He moves ahead for the casino floor. And runs right into Reno on his way back.

“Here,” Reno blurs.

Two small drinks occupy his hands. One is already extended to Cloud.

“They give these out like candy. Want you nice and sauced so you spend more and more money, ya know. What an awesome gimmick. Let's get sauced.”

Cloud accepts the offer, juggling the small glass in the hand governing the cigarette.

The squat glass is half filled with a brownish liquid. It's some brand of smelly something or other sloshing ominously about. Cloud gulps the contents down (no more than a shot) and gestures what remains at Reno. He doesn't care for the taste but he enjoys the burn.

Both of Reno's sweeping cherry-red eyebrows pique. He downs his own shot and then smiles a creeping smile, feeling the effects of the booze himself. His cheeks are rosy enough to follow.

“Let's get you another one,” he beams, reaching to take Cloud’s spent glass.

They get another, and another, and another, until they're both flushed in the face, and Reno is crowing, and Cloud’s full-body warm, and every footfall is a swaggering snap.

Cloud’s mind is free-floating, forgetful and empty. Just how he wants it.

The sword comes along easily. His hurts are deadened. Every unknown face, and every strange eye, and every pending judgement—they aren't a threat or something for him to flee from now, they are challenges, and he challenges right back. He’s staring down anyone willing, and those not, begging them to act, begging for a shot, begging for a distraction. His world is half lucid, shifting by. He is dreamy, heedless, and too warm. He is a ruin. He is basic instinct.

He follows Reno around the crowded floor, around and around again. They see card tables and colourful betting wheels; TV screens filled with chocobo race results; rivers of people; buxom women in gold and red stockings and bowing feathers; men in black suits and coloured ties; flashing arcades and flower arrangements; crystalline chandeliers, and massive mirrors, and bubbling water features. The many mixing aromas of food, and smoke, and chlorinated water, and too many perfumes clog the conditioned air. It's all buzzing with life and excitement.

Cloud's abuzz with anticipation and possibility. He’s finding he's grateful Reno has that shock of red hair to follow. His vision is streaming, doubled and delayed. His legs and limbs are liquid.

Reno’s thrumming with eagerness too, literally bouncing and springing with each step. He’s getting lots of looks. He’s making a racket. But, to be honest, they’re both getting a lot of looks. Or Cloud's just really, really drunk. He is really, really drunk, but he's also sure they're the coolest things in here. And the loudest. And the dumbest. They're not being very subtle. Or very cautious.

Heads lift, eyes track, lips work. Reno hoots and hollers at everything he sees, judging and commenting; damning and demonizing. He points. He threatens. He laughs.
And that's just fine. They're both in pain. They're both trying to fill up or fend off the emptiness at the heart of them. They're both itching for a fight. And they'll be sure to get one at this rate. Drunk as skunks. High in the sky. Above the dry desert. Flouting the day.

They go around the casino floor twice and only end up winded from all the walking and Reno’s hollering. Tired and unmatched, they finally have to turn aside to sit and sulk it out in a bar. No one wants to tangle with them, half crazy and half cawing, and they have no betting money. At least Cloud can smoke his cigarettes, and Reno hasn’t had anything to say about it.

They're by themselves for the most part, sat on a long and low red sofa, side by side, but not too close. The bar's seating area is vast and varied, arranged low into a removed area of the casino floor. There are many chairs and tables, potted plants, ash trays.

Cloud is smoking his umpteenth cigarette and blinking ever so slowly.

Reno sprawls, leaning sidelong over the sinking cushions.

Servers and gamblers thread through.

The day has caught up with them.

“I’m hungry,” Reno groans at length. “And I’ve got a headache.”

It's maybe been an hour since they arrived at the casino. It's about time to get worried. Their contact with a verbal contract should be out looking for them. And they won’t be friendly.

Reno hasn't seemed too concerned about it, having been more eager to leave the room and drink, and fight, and bite, and yowl. He hasn't struck up conversation with Cloud either, offering him the same silence after seeing Tseng that Cloud’s given him over the last few days.

He strikes up conversation now.

Cloud's still fuzzy from the drinking.

“Man, you're fuckin’ hot,” Reno slurs, emphatic and frank. “Just look at you. With your fucking moody cigarette and your moon eyes and pale pale skin and red red lips. And you’re dressed and clean now. Your hair is positively shining. You're irresistible, man. I’d hit that. Repeatedly.”

He shifts to sit up, coming close to peer at Cloud square in the face.

“Your bone structure, man. It’s… You look like a fucking statue or something. A painting. An old painting. When people were better. Refined. Regal. You’re like… something measured and obsessed over and done right. But, not, ya know, cold and flat. You’re living… alive. You’re… Wars were won and lost because of you, man. I can’t even express it. Fuck.”

He's messy drunk, swaying and slurred.

“You know, I feel bad… I’m...” He glances away, fighting for calm. “I’m sorry for…”

Even this drunk, and this lubricated, he’s still having issues.

“I’m sorry for the shower. That wasn’t… okay. That's not… how I wanted things to go down. I promise you. I wanted to… wait. Much longer. And I’d have… taken it slow… and sensual. And not… not... I just saw you… and I… What do I have to do?”
Cloud blinks at him. Smoke peels from his nostrils.

“What do I have to do to get you to talk to me?”

Reno is serious. He’s honest and desperate. It’s almost as amusing as it is absurd.

“I didn't want to jump you, man. I wasn't planning on it,” he explains. “I slipped up. I was relaxed… and beyond excited. We both were. I know that doesn't help, but... I feel like…” He fades into temporary silence only to struggle on again. “I feel like… I’ve given it my best. I feel like… I’ve tried… and I just… keep getting... nothing. For all the work I’m doing, for all the work I’ve done…”

He pauses again, wetting his lips, shaking his head.

“It’s just more pain. It’s just more silence. Maybe I’m not... good enough.”

He's struck by the realization, offering a disgusted sneer and sniff.

“I guess I’m just not good enough then,” he repeats. “You know... I can’t help that I like you, yo. It’s not up to me. Believe me. But, I can help... how I treat you. And I can help... you. I can... redeem myself over a good cause. I can make my heart proud. I will.”

Cloud lets him eviscerate himself right in front of him, too much of a coward to stop him. He has the power to end it. He has the option. He merely watches and smokes his cigarette.

“I know… I... fucked things up…” Reno grumbles, looking steadily at his lap. “I know... I got us into some serious shit. But... I was... always intending to take care of it. I work backwards. I won’t let it happen. He won’t touch you. I’m gonna get us clear. I’m gonna fix it. If it’s the last thing I do.”

He’s keeping his head down and his eyes hidden. He’s working and twisting his long fingers together in his lap. All seven of them. There’s not much left of his primary hand. He’s tormented and not dealing with it well. It’s all rather childish and terrifying.

Cloud knits his brow, fortifying, and tracks up to find Reno’s concealed face. His handsome face; his love and loyalty; his dread and agonized expression written in a turned-down mouth.

“I can't…” Cloud starts, grinding through it, voice thick and sticking. “I can’t…”

Reno perks and lifts his head, eyes wide and wet, and all too sea-shallow blue.

“Yeah?” he urges, badly fighting the desire to reach out and catch him, comfort him, consume him.

Cloud’s jaw audibly clicks shut. He bites his pre-bit lip and twists away to stub the cigarette out in a nearby tray. He doesn’t know what to tell him. He doesn't want to tell him. He couldn't tell him. He'd go mad from the reliving. He’d crack apart.

He turns back and forces himself to stare Reno in his apprehensive face.

Reno waits. He breathes. His shoulders sag. His apprehensive face falls.

Cloud’s guts turn and roll. He wants to get up and run away.

He should have listened to his instincts.

“Hey, you two,” a deep voice and deeper shadow growls from over them.
They both turn and look up to see.

“Come with me,” a familiar face in a plum suit grunts, gesturing a rather large hand at Cloud.

He is very clearly the muscle arrived.

Reno snorts and lifts both arms high, leaning back into the sofa, and stretching long and leggy.

“It’s about time,” he groans.

Cloud’s sober in moments.

Reno is equal parts on top and hitting bottom.

He’s too drunk and tired to manage his fabulous fight. In three viper fast motions, the same guard from the pillar elevators (the same one that didn’t want any trouble, just to play nice), he slams Reno into the sofa’s seatback by his scarred throat, lurches him forward and up by his smart collar, and then slams him down to the floor, spine and shoulder first, narrowly missing the glass-topped coffee table, and the potential shattering fragments.

Cloud’s jumping up and away from the scene in a flash. As he watches, several steps away now, Reno’s slim, slender, and limp body is tugged upright from its forceful repose on the floor. His head is rolling loosely on his neck. His arms remain hanging at his sides. He is deflated and dangling high in the guard’s outstretched mitts like wet laundry on a taut line.

Tseng is sure to be alerted in moments.

That doesn’t defuse the panic.

Cloud is awake and wide-eyed, blood thumping painfully hard through his depleted system. He grips his sword and stands stiff, ready and riled. Before he knows it, before he has a chance to think about it (and cower, and fold), the words, you better let him go, spill from his sneering maw. And he means every last one.

“Huh?” the guard grunts, looking his way.

“Drop him,” Cloud growls.

“Or what? You gonna scream? You’re nothin’ but a runt,” the guard taunts.

Cloud doesn’t move a muscle. He tenses, flexing his fingers around the warm handgrip.

“I’ll chop you in fucking half,” he answers, voice wonderfully even and wonderfully venomed.

Where is this coming from?

The guard scoffs, dropping Reno to his feet but not letting him free of his grip.

“No, no, no,” Reno grits, loose head rolling up.

He’s coming around. He’s lifting those slackened arms. He’s standing on his own feet.
“I got this, I got this,” he insists, murmured, mumbled, almost missed.

“Let’s see it,” the guard goads of Cloud.

Cloud works his teeth together.

He could try to lift the sword, but then the jig would be up. He could try to run, but then he’d be caught. To his immediate fortune, and his utter relief, he doesn’t have to react. He stands his ground long enough for Reno to do what he said. He said he got this. And he’s taking over.

Reno jolts alive and lurches from the guard’s grip. He stumbles back and then advances, throwing a wild punch forward as an angry follow up. It surprises everyone by landing, striking the guard’s lower ribs, sending him off several steps in reverse. When he resettles, readying his two giant fists for a fight, Reno has one of his .45’s muzzles aimed level at his nose.

“No guns,” the guard blurs, hands shooting straight up.

“Why not?” Reno offers. “Because you’ll lose?”

“Those are the rules,” the guard explains.

Reno scoffs, finger ready on the trigger.

“Rules,” he spits.

Cloud holds his breath and braces for the bang.

He can feel it coming.

“Reno.”

But, it doesn’t.

Reno starts and stalls instead. He sways and looks up at the call, skimming over the bar floor.

Cloud follows his lead, sweeping the area.

Tseng approaches from the outskirts. Several suited men follow in his wake.

“What’s this?” he growls once he meets them.

“A hiccup,” the guard replies.

“I told you,” Tseng says, looking to Reno. “I’d have to clean this up.”

Reno doesn’t appear one bit ashamed.

“I told you and still you went ahead anyway. How am I supposed to trust you, and help you, when you don’t even listen to what I ask of you? How is this relationship supposed to work?”

“You wrote me off,” Reno says, only a touch winded.

He lowers and holsters his pistol.

“Excuse me,” the guard interrupts. “We have an appointment to keep.”

Reno huffs an annoyed huff and rubs his raw throat, looking from Cloud to Tseng.
“Still not gonna help me?” he asks him.

Tseng fumes and narrows his eyes, not making a move.

“You,” the guard says, indicating Cloud with a single fat finger. “Come with me. Now.”

“Don’t touch him,” Reno warns.

The guard does not humour his words or cold tone, or wait around to play anymore, he steps over, leaving Reno behind, his hand gesturing and reaching on for Cloud.

“Don’t you put a finger on him,” Reno barks, jolting to intercept.

“Reno,” Tseng barks back.

Reno stops dead in his tracks for a second time. His pale face twists, his hands clench, his teeth flash, but he obeys, knowing this is not the time to fight. This is the time for luck and wits.

“I’ll go,” Cloud speaks up, not wilting at the guard’s looming presence. “I’ll go with you.”

“Of course you will,” the guard says, snatching Cloud’s wrist. “Leave the sword.”

Cloud lets the article sag in his other hand. All too soon, he’s regripping it, tightening those lax fingers, holding on, fighting back, and feeling that fire relight in his guts.

“No,” he counters.

“I am authorized to subdue you...”

*You don’t have a choice.*

“Cloud,” Reno mumbles. “Don’t you do this. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

Tseng crosses his arms, saying, “Should have thought about that before you made the deal.”

“Can’t we talk this out?” Reno inquires, looking between the distracted guard and an unamused Tseng. “Can’t we make a new deal? What if I go in his place? Let him go. He really should stay.”

“The contract is for the blond only,” the guard rebuffs.

“Come on, man,” Reno pushes. “Let me talk to your boss. Work with me here. You can’t do this. Don’t leave me on a bad note. He’s my sweetheart. He’s...” He squares his slanted shoulders and shakes his clenched fists (the most he can drunkenly get away with). “Let him go! I’ll fuck you up, big guy. I gave you that one! I let you get the first hit, yo. Try it again.”

“Not my problem,” the guard deflects.

He strips the giant BDS from Cloud and swivels about to hand it off to Reno rather roughly, shoving him back a step in forced acceptance. He then nods to Tseng, showing his respects, and turns on his heels, pulling Cloud off behind him. Their pace is brisk, their destination obvious.

Reno grips the sword to his chest, momentarily lost for words.

Cloud wishes for the haze of alcohol to return.

“Cloud!” Reno shouts, getting louder, having to bellow after them as they go. “You stupid son-of-
a-bitch. You can't do this! You’re not safe! Cloud! This is bad!”

Strike three for Reno.

To chase after the guard and Cloud, he has to shoulder the misfortune of a sword, leaning extremely under the weight of it like a man truly burdened. He's not letting him out of his sight.

Reno tracks after them as they leave the area, headed for the damn elevators. To his immediate and crushing dismay, he only gets so far as midway down that hallway, and then.

“Hey!” he calls out to them.

He has to watch the metal doors slide closed, Cloud's moon eyes staring coolly out after him, as if to say, *watch that sword*, until they're cut off, and then there's nothing. Nothing but Reno’s dumbfounded reflection staring back at him from the end of the hall.

He's stuck on the casino level with only the BDS, his weapons, and his (lacking) wits.

He's fucked. He can’t wait around. He shouldn't get lost tailing after him either. Sure, he might know the floor thanks to the bright numbered display above the doors, but by the time he got there, and got out, and looked about, they’d be gone. He’d have no clue as to which door they could possibly be behind…

“How had he expected this to end?

He moves to backtrack to the last place he saw Tseng, hoping that he’s still there. He makes it to the mostly empty seating area, the awkward sword helping none at all, and finds Tseng almost in the same place they left him. There he sits, ordering around his nest of grunts from the comfort of an armchair, prodding at his immense black cellphone.

“Hey,” Reno calls.

Tseng looks up at his coming.

“Where is he taking him?” Reno requests, dropping the massive sword blade from off his shoulder and to the gaudy gold and red carpet tip first.

The handle swings back towards him, whipping around, catching him unawares. It's testing his balance and reminding him of too many aggravations, and a pushy late rival.

“How should I know?” Tseng rebukes.

He shrugs in his plush chair, crossing his legs at the knee. He takes in the giant piece of equipment and then glances back to his phone's too-bright screen.

“You *do* know,” Reno snaps, trying to stay cool. “That’s your *job*.”

“I know he’s being taken to Vause.”

Reno sighs.
“And… where is Vause?”

Tseng lifts only his eyes to stare Reno down as he stands before him. He blinks carefully, coldly indifferent and crisply clinical.

“Who is he anyway?” he asks. “That blond? Who do you have doing your dirty work for you now? He’s just a kid.”

“He's…”

“As stupid as you are.”

“You know, I don't think I've called you a single name since I've been here…”

Tseng smiles, tilting his face up to reveal its entirety.

“Give it time. Be just like the old days before you know it.”

“Yeah. The good old days…” Reno drawls. “Speaking of good. He’s too good for this. He’s not… like the others. He’s better… You can't let this happen. You remember what Deluxe was like… Unless you were lying. You know you can't allow this. You can't. Who knows what he'll do. He might—Cloud might not come back. How can you sit there and call yourself security? You're more like a coward.”

“And there's the name calling…”

“Oh, fuck you…” Reno growls, shifting his weight, and the giant sword.

“I'm here to keep the peace,” Tseng says.

“No, you're here because you're too soft to be a Turk anymore. You don't have the tact or the stomach for it. You sure got that ego down pat though. You're a quitter. A real floppy dick.”

“Like I said… I'm here to—”

“Peace. If you wanna feel good about that whole peace statement and pipedream ideal you're gonna have to shove it up your tight ass.”

Tseng’s onyx eyes narrow, his smile hardens.

“You don't have to hold my fucking hand, man, but you do need to help me. We've… been getting torn up. We need a break. Both of us lost somebody. This fucking sword… It's more like a mobile grave marker. I lost Vegas… Cloud lost his better half. I've got to get him back or that better half's gonna haunt my fucking dreams forever. And I want to sleep sometime soon.”

“You play me every time,” Tseng sighs, cocking his head. “You’re a rat. And you're drunk.”

“That's… just how things work out,” Reno admits, shrugging. “It's not always my fault.”

“You unintentionally lie and drink to buffer your odds?”

“I'm not lying. You're just paranoid. And incredibly browbeaten. And biased,” Reno answers. He has the gall to grin, adding salaciously, dramatically, “I am drunk though. With every intention.”

Tseng scoffs, appearing all the more incredulous.
“You’re not doing yourself any favours.”

“Don’t let my past failures damn me, yo,” Reno appeals, losing his smile and humour.

“Don’t come repenting to me…”

“I need your help.”

“You do need help…”

“Come on, Tseng. Please.”

“Oh…” Tseng groans. “The P word now…”

“Where is he?” Reno presses. “Where is Vause? Where is he hiding? Where does he hang out? You can tell me. You will tell me.”

Tseng corrects his head, lowers his cellphone, and focuses in on him.

“How can I trust you?”

“I’ll…” Reno starts, reaching for calm and precision and clout; reaching for his waning gumption and lucky crass; reaching for anything.

“I’ll leave… my stuff with you.”

“Oh? Your stuff?”

“My guns, my bullets, this sword, and… my brother's butterfly knife. As proof that… he really is gone… and that I won't, and can't, do anything dangerous.” He rolls his eyes and shrugs. “Too dangerous. I’m just… gonna talk to the guy, yo. Try to… change his mind.”

It's a tough (and stupid) call, but getting back to Cloud makes any decision all that much easier.

Tseng pockets his cellphone, uncrosses his legs, and stands.

Cloud is airy and far away.

He's not sure whether he's here or there, coming or going.

Is this what Zack wanted?

He said Reno would keep him safe. He would be there. He would take over, and watch out, and whatever else… But, those were just more words to calm him. Reno hasn't done much other than complain his ear off, state the obvious, insult him, annoy him, yell at him, throw up, and finally get around to fucking him.

Cloud can't help the thought that things would be better if Zack were here. He knows they would be. Of course they would be. He would be just as fucked, for sure, but he’d also be calmer and saner. They would be tired, thirsty, hungry, and biting each other’s heads off, and somewhere new, or Costa, or Rocket Town, or still waiting to enter the Saucer, still trapped in the common line for the elevators, and still grounded, but he wouldn’t be here.
He wouldn’t be about to be dinner. He wouldn’t be about to be eaten up by a stranger with class. He wouldn’t be drunk again (or maybe it’s drugged). He wouldn’t be weaponless.

They would have stayed together. They would have found another way. They would have tried harder. This never would have happened. It never would have been an option.

The fetid feelings of helplessness and shame (mixed with alcohol and a shot of fear) twist and curl in his warm and heavy guts. They twist and shimmy right down to his otherwise pleasantly filled stomach. He's been fed and watered. He’s been pampered and patted. This venerated VIP, this venomous Vause... has been doing nothing more than enjoying his company.

The guy smiles openly. He laughs. He fixes his sliding eyeglasses. He pays Cloud tasteful and abundant compliments. He introduces and shows him off. He leads him through the Saucer locked arm in arm, nice and snug, bodyguards trailing. He tells him history and theory. He sweeps his hand over everything. He lets him smoke. He doesn’t offend. He is a gentleman.

Cloud looks on, waiting for the bubble to burst.

And it surely does.

Reno always has to make a commotion.

One way or another, verbal or physical, Reno can’t keep himself from the glow of glory. He loves the drama and the pulse beat of possibility and the stinging bite of strife. He’s more than just bored if he came all this way. He got what he wanted from Cloud and yet he's still by his side. Maybe there really is something to him. Maybe Cloud should give himself over.

Get Cloud.

You’re stuck with me.

Reno will watch out for you.

They could be bonds of marriage.

Cloud sees his coming from a long way off. He’s like a flaring up comet or a streaking ball of light headed right for impact.

Is he still that drunk? He could be. Either way, he stands there and he watches Reno as he crosses the gleaming white-gold reflective spread of the wide open floor.

He confronts Vause, right on the spot, right in front of everyone, and the servers, and the guards, and the cameras, and proves just how damned he is, loyal he is, trapped he is.

He is starkly outlined, glowing like bronzed auburn. He is alarmingly present.

“Let's make a new deal,” he broaches.

He and Vause had been roaming the high-roller floors. Shinra is despairingly present too. Cloud noticed their groups multiple times. He was introduced to a handful, and skimmed by several more. Eyes have followed them everywhere, but they’ve been too busy betting, drinking, dancing, and fucking to really notice one suspicious blond kid or another.

Reno comes up, out in the open, in the middle of all this, and calls Vause out.

“Oh?” Vause responds, not ruffled a moment.
“How did you get in here?” a guard grumbles.

Reno ignores him, pushing ahead to say, “He's not what you're looking for.”

“I could almost agree…” Vause observes, looking Reno up and down. “That room did you wonders, my dear. Positively divine. Such an aggressive look. Such bold and intense features.”

He allows the game to continue, asking, “How can you back up such a statement?”


The VIP looks intrigued. He's more likely amused.

“I'll give you a run for your money,” Reno assures. “I'll do whatever you want.”

“Are you the jealous type?” Vause asks him.

Reno balks, walking right into it. He starts to answer but is quickly cut off.

“I—”

“I'm in a good mood today,” the VIP admits.

“I don’t—” Reno speaks up, still trying to recover.

“I get it,” Vause cuts in once more. “I can see it. I saw it from the beginning. You're taken with him. He's important to you. You made a tough call. You were desperate and hurt and scared. I understand. I really do. I’m taken too. He is… exceptional. But, I'm also feeling generous. And I'm feeling fair. And lucky. So, because I'm also in charge, and we did make a deal…”

Reno braces.

“I'll watch,” Vause finishes.

“You watch… what?” Reno asks, still a little too far into his cups.

“As you fuck your sweet heart, of course,” the VIP deadpans, waving a dismissive hand at the air, expressing the obvious. “Too cute to be smart, I suppose… What else should we do? Have dinner? Take in a show? Play chess? We made a deal. You stayed in my room. You used my shower. You’re wearing my clothes. We're civilized though. We’re renegotiating. I still want company. And entertainment. And you two are certainly that.”

Reno feels out his reply, taking too long.


They both look over.

“Oh, hello. You do talk then?” the VIP remarks, sharing a rather pleasant grin. “I thought so…”

“Wait,” Reno disputes.

Cloud slides his glassy eyes away, still more willing to watch himself burn than prevail.

He doesn't have the sword.

He doesn't have anything.
“Then it's settled,” Vause chimes, signalling his two close-at-hand bodyguards.

“Wait,” Reno growls. “You can’t listen to him. He’s drunk.”

Vause only smiles, turning aside from their huddle to make tracks. Still tucked nice and close against him, Cloud has to follow. They set out across the golden floor.

Over his shoulder to Reno, the victorious VIP states, “And what are you, my dear? There's nothing more to be said.”

And with that, Reno’s shoved after them by two expressionless bodyguards, and the chance to bargain is over.
Chapter 5

That doesn’t mean Reno’s going to go quietly.

“Don’t involve him in this,” he pleads. “Don’t.”

Cloud allows himself to be escorted, choosing silence and compliance. It's been proving useful so far. And he's too tired and glazed to think otherwise. He’s too ruined to care.

“Don’t do this,” Reno chants, having to be shoved along. “Don’t, don’t, don’t.”

They are brought to an elevator and taken up to a different floor of suites.

“I’ll do anything,” Reno moans meanwhile, making his sad case all the sadder. “I made a mistake. I’m good at making mistakes. In the past I just ran from those mistakes, ya know, but let me make this one better! I’m supposed to be watching out for him. I’m supposed to have his back! I’m not supposed to be fucking him and whatever else in front of strangers for their jollies!”

“Be quiet,” a bodyguard orders, jerking him forward.

“You be quiet,” Reno drunkenly bites back, dragging his feet.

“Boss?” the guard groans.

Ahead of them, now sliding a keycard into a door’s reader, Vause replies, “Let him talk.”

And hey, there, that’s a good enough cue as any, isn’t it? Reno thinks so, because it’s now or never. He’s all out of luck and wits anyway. He’s back to fighting back. The pulling and the jerking, the snapping and biting, the bleeding and crying. He’s good at that. He was bred to recoil and retort. Let him talk, huh? Let him seize and flail and swing out on one of the guards once he’s free.

“Boss!”

Panic is good. His pain is dulled. His heart is heavy. Bring it on.

Reno drops the first guard with a quick shot to the nose from the heel of his palm and swings around for the other. He finds the other alarmed, on edge, and not fighting the stars in his eyes or dizzy on the floor. He’s standing still, across the corridor, blocking Vause and Cloud from view, who are safe inside the room’s threshold, and receding all the further.

“Don’t leave marks,” Vause orders. “Just grab him.”

He’s not going to fail. Reno is all promise and wonder. The heavens must be on his side. Angels must be smiling. His brother must be watching.

He doesn’t let the guard grab him. He twists and dodges his lunges, and then he explodes outward, throwing himself into the fray. He wheels in his punches and his knees, and he expels growls and curses. He drops hammer after hammer, his fist throbbing and hot, but the guard stands on. He absorbs the damage and keeps coming.

Reno’s right hand is okay, but his left was where it’s at. Where it used to be. He had control and force. He had power. Once Seph snipped his fingers, he pretty much put a damper on any of Reno’s combative balance. Every new fight brings him that much closer to his former perfection.
His right might be in good shape, but it can’t protect his back. That’s what Vegas was for.

Reno springs and sidesteps, takes a hit, slips by another grab, and stumbles back, back, back, giving himself more room to work with, giving himself a chance to collect and ready his next onslaught. He thumps and stops at once, having connected with something solid.

He has the epiphany late coming, oh shit, and then two arms drop down around him. He’s skinny, he’s nothing. He’s got speed and experience, and so much fucking rage, but he’s drunk and tired and paying up. He can’t dodge or break the vise closing in around him.

He fights on anyway, primal, now trameleed and controlled. He growls and grunts and strains, and then gasps a final, garbled utterance, cut off at the source. The guard’s grip compresses his lungs and ribs. He has no air. He’s being made to obey, adjusted, or gotten rid of. He has to stay conscious. But, he has no choice. He’s already struggling less, he’s fading out, he’s dimming. He is fighting to resurface, seeing nothing but pulses and pops of dirty white getting all the dirtier. He’s blacking out. He’s going to leave Cloud. Alone. All alone.

He is released. The two arms disengage from around him and he is able to stagger free and breathe. Brightness yawns wide before him, throbbing and forceful, blooming to an extreme.

Before he can counter or recover, he is knocked off his feet by a firm shove to the center of his shoulderblades. He rockets ahead, stumbles two loping steps, and half collides with the suite’s door frame, bouncing on into the room. He gasps and wobbles, but he doesn’t fall.

“Ow,” he wheezes, holding his ailing chest.

“Are we all done?” Vause asks, standing by.

Reno shrugs and exhales, inhales, exhales.


The bodyguards advance, grouping Reno and Cloud together to pat them down just inside the door.

They soon turn and nod to their boss.

“Okay then,” Vause replies. “Good.”

The bodyguards leave. The door is shut.

Reno and Cloud are left to stand together, two of a kind, black and black, red and blond, right where they were patted down. They wait there like two employees accused of insubordination, or two ignorant kids waiting to be scolded. They’re nothing more than a means to an end.

Vause stands before them, observing and admiring.

Reno makes it his personal mission to put himself between him and Cloud.

It’s quickly noted.

“Don’t worry,” Vause assures him. “I’ll be on the sidelines. You can get undressed now, if you please. Or you can wait. Have a few more drinks. You know, get in the mood. Act as if… I’m not even here. Although,” he adds, lifting a finger. “I will be giving instruction from time to time.”

He retreats deeper into the suite and over the large animal print rug, acting casual and cool.
The room is a set of many rooms. It’s hard to say just how many there are from here. The spread is large, white and gold, furnished with many living plants and hanging fabrics and glinting glass.

Reno remains with Cloud.

Cloud exists.

They watch as Vause crosses into another room through an open archway to come to a well-stocked bar. He selects a rounded glass and several ice cubes from an icebox and pours himself a drink. He returns and sits in an armchair nearby, coming halfway back to where they still stand.

They're stuck between the living room and the (presumably locked) door out. There's a glossy white leather sofa, a low center table, several more armchairs, and two large potted plants.

Vause reclines and watches them watch him.

“How did you meet?” he asks, taking a sip from his glistening glass.

Reno’s oblivious to the question, too busy looking around the rooms he can see from there. He’s checking his surroundings, getting a feeling for things, going through contingencies, noting possible escape routes. Possible weapons. Possible traps.

Cloud tries to drift away as they stand.

Reno doesn’t appreciate the move and stalls him, lifting an arm to block his progress.

Cloud strikes the arm and stops still. He denounces Reno sidelong, expression prickly. He's not going to remove the obstacle. He's not going to back down either. He only wishes to sit.

“Relax,” Vause soothes.

Reno offers silence and a seething look.

It's enough to let Cloud push by and defy him. He glides across the ridiculous animal rug and drops down into an armchair opposite of the VIP.

“You look tired, my dear,” Vause notes.

“Don’t call him that...” Reno growls, following the trend to sit down not too far from Cloud.

Cloud nods his head, showing his agreement.

“Why don’t you speak?” Vause inquires.

“Do you need to ask so many questions?” Reno responds, bunching his shoulders in distaste.

“Does it bother you that much?” Vause returns.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Why are you so defensive?”

“Take a look at my situation and tell me not to be.”

“You don’t need to be anxious,” Vause assures. “You’re quite safe.”

Reno rolls his jaw, and then his head, cracking his stiff neck.
“Yeah, sure. And your bodyguards were just getting a little touchy feely, right?”

“Of course. Because you were being such a cooperative little angel,” Vause states, fully turning to him. He takes the final sip of his drink, pointed and paced. “Why doesn’t your partner speak?”

Reno chooses silence, fuming to an uncomfortable degree.

Vause swallows audibly and licks his lips.

“Or is it just you?” he digs. “Does he have a reason not to speak to you? Did you do—”

“Shut up,” Reno barks, coiling up in his chair.

Cloud watches from the sidelines, eyes sliding from either speaker. He’s wanting for a cigarette. He’s wanting for a bed. He's wanting for this to be over.

“You did,” Vause exclaims, rolling his ice cubes at Reno. “You made him mute.”

Reno abruptly stands.

“He made him mute! Are we here to fuck or talk about our feelings?”

“Whichever makes you more comfortable,” Vause answers, giving Reno a neat smile.

Reno scoffs and tosses his head. He sits back hard in his chair, arms stretched out over their wide rests, lucky number seven fingers clawed and working, clawed and working.

Vause switches to Cloud.

“My dear,” he offers, setting his glass down on the table between them.

Cloud lifts his dipping head, acknowledging the statement out of reflex (and conditioning).

“Will you get undressed for us?”

Reno regards Cloud, stiff and stewing.

A terrible decision arises.

Compliance or complications?

With compliance comes complications.

Cloud waits a beat. He swallows a dry swallow. He chokes down his common sense, and then he lifts just a hand from his lap to meet his throat, starting to undo his tightly buttoned collar.

Reno expels a sharp sniff (as if burned by the action) and momentarily looks away.

“Oh my,” Vause remarks, jumping all over it. “You do so love him, don’t you?”

Reno watches now, tense and toiling, as Cloud continues to strip as he sits.

“You’ve only seemed to screw that up so far… It’s a shame,” laments Vause.

Cloud is down his black suit jacket and now his charcoal button down shirt. He leans forward to unlace his shiny shoes and tug off his dress socks. He has to stand and bend to unfasten and pull off his black slacks. The fabric slides well. The whole process is over in seconds.
“It seems you only objectify him, obsess over him… How about we even the odds?”

Having been commando, unlike Reno (who jumped at the chance for comfortable underwear), Cloud is now bare for them. He rather casually retakes his seat.

“I objectify him?” Reno boggles, looking over to meet Vause’s eyes and challenge his stare.

Here come sour memories of a dying ex-SOLDIER.

“I’m only guessing you two have done this already?” Vause wonders. “Maybe you did before you came to the casino? Maybe in your room? Maybe in the shower? I hear there are cameras everywhere… There are certainly cameras in this room. I can’t risk being jumped, of course.”

Reno works his jaw and fists.

Cloud shivers.

“You like watching, huh?” Reno asks.

“I do,” the VIP answers.

“Is it because you can't participate?”

“Why don’t you have another drink, firecracker? Get loosened up some?”

Reno comes to a grinding halt at that.

Memories of a coastal bar.

“No,” he deadpans.

The VIP smiles a forced smile.

“Alright then… To the bedroom? Our companion here looks rather chilled. I'm sure we can find better things to do in there anyway. If you get my meaning…”

Vause looks again to Cloud.

“After you, my dear,” he dictates, gesturing his arm to a distant doorway.

Cloud has made up his mind. He did when he first started heading here. Of course he knew this place would be a bad idea. That’s exactly why he came. He's not invested in survival. His heart isn't in it anymore. He has no desire for self improvement. He is once again going where the tide takes him. He has every hope for an immediate finish, the final strike, the ending chapter, and he’s rushing to meet it. Maybe, before then, if the weather’s right, and it comes back, and he's able and willing, he might just return that sword.

He stands and makes for the doorway like someone in a dream.

Reno watches him go, feeling more like someone in a nightmare.

“Go on,” Vause urges.

It’s obvious he longs to. He’s staring right after Cloud like the loyal dog. He’s working it out in his faint head. He just can’t let his guard down. He can't be led into another horrible torment.
He stands and follows, regarding Vause as he passes by.

“This isn’t going at all how I thought it would...”

And that gives him a thought. That gives him a **good** thought. An awakening thought. And also a **bad** thought. An **angry** thought. Because, you know, Vause isn't like Deluxe at all.

He isn't scathing or brutal. He isn’t demanding and heinous. He hasn’t given him a real reason to sweat yet, just to stay alert. Nothing’s gotten gruesome. There are no sharp objects unattended, and there have been no ugly insults. No myriads of improperly used sex toys, melted wax, rope, straps, and whips. No disregarded safe word. He’s almost sterile, therapeutic, and doctor-like.

“I'm gonna kill Tseng...” Reno grits under his breath.

This is a fucking joke.

Reno rotates around to stop Vause before he can enter the bedroom behind him. He drops a hand down onto either of the VIP's shoulders. Reno’s taller by a head. It’s more than enough. He has every upper hand. His smile is wicked.

Vause can smell his intentions already.

“Guards are watching,” he reminds.

Reno is ready and wanting to make a move. He could choke out or punch the VIP. He could pull Cloud naked to the door. He could jump and pummel the guards on the other side as they spill through, one after another. He could get their effects back from Tseng. He could save the day.

It’s always in this optimistic moment though—the shining moment of flight or fight; the awesome clinch moment; the glorious bridge before two extremes, light and dark—when he gets screwed over the most. There’s never a chance to be a hero, there’s never a time to be redeemed, not when he’s being dragged by the seat of his pants.

“**Reno.**”

The raw voice is cutting, complete and critical. It’s the familiar driving and twisting in of many blades, filleting and flouting, devastating to the core. It’s freshly sharpened and deeply digging claws. Regret, fear, and shame brought to a boil. Old times. Cloud’s small voice is all of this.

Reno lifts his hands from Vause. He bottles up his plan, and his hopes for escape, and slinks backwards away from the doorframe, and into the welcoming darkness.

“**Reno...**” Vause enunciates, following him inside. “Kind of goes with your whole look.”

“The fuck does that mean?” Reno growls back.

He is an animal circling its cage.

“You’re interesting,” Vause explains. “You’re different, appealing, willful.”

The bedroom is dim and not well lit.

Reno’s eyes have just now adjusted. He does a quick sweep of the area.

There’s a giant bed, standing lamps (only one is on), a few more armchairs, a huge hanging tapestry (ugly and abstract), and two nightstands stacked with bottles and candles situated around
the large room. There's not much else but another door that must lead to a bathroom. It's the most minimalistic room in the place. It's clearly meant for one thing.

Cloud is waiting for him, sitting on that giant bed, nude and natural, ready for that one thing.

Reno gives him a hesitant but lingering look.

It’s not humoured. It’s not even deflected. It’s pointed to the floor.

Reno’s losing more and more leverage. He’s losing all the time. If he doesn’t stop the process now he’s going to bleed out every last drop and then Cloud will hate him. He won’t just be annoyed with him; he won’t just sniff at his comments and intentions; he won’t just refuse conversation; he won’t just have many unresolved feelings of shame and confusion and sorrow brought on by their united failure in saving his boyfriend—no, he will hate him. True and pure, as only Cloud could.

“Get comfortable,” Vause suggests, stepping into view.

Cloud is pushed back and down onto the bedspread. He goes easily, woefully obeying to the very end. He even allows himself to be pulled and maneuvered to the center of the spread.

Reno watches all of this the entire way through from too far away. He very much dislikes how Vause’s hands look on him. He very much dislikes how he can’t do anything about it.

“Do you come too soon?” Reno prods, spewing more hate.

The VIP does not respond, removing himself from the large bed entirely.

“Or is your dick just small?”

“I want you to straddle him,” the VIP says, turning to look on Reno, having every upper hand.

Reno waits a beat, always defiant.

“Straddle him,” Vause repeats. “Or I get someone who can easily persuade you.”

Reno waits longer, pushing his resolve, pushing Vause’s give and suspect patience. This could still turn out badly. He could still surprise them, punish them, destroy and bury them.

The VIP moves to reach for something inside his jacket pocket. Probably a cellphone.

Reno finally complies, striding ahead the short distance to the bed. He decides he doesn’t want to hear Cloud say his name like that ever again, more than he wants to avoid any kind of pain. Pain is temporary, pain is humbling, pain can even be pleasure (and he should know). At the end of the day, another long damn day, it’s Cloud's input that he really yearns for, but not as a curse or a swear or a strangling leash. Never like that. He can't take much more of that.

He climbs up onto the tall mattress, teal sneakers and all, crawling over its accommodating expanse to meet the body waiting there, warm and almost willing. He throws a clothed leg over Cloud's naked middle and lowers himself to his upper thighs.

Cloud looks up to him from below, dormant. His expression is stiff and cracking.

“How did you lose your fingers?” the VIP asks, taking in the view. “Monsters?”

Reno stares down at Cloud, keeping his expression void. He’s trying for cool and collected. He’s going for that fabled strong leadership role. He can't hide how his breath is coming faster now. He
can’t hide the drunken sway and heady flush. He doesn’t get leadership so much as lost cause.

Cloud is so very warm. So very close. So very distant.

What would be so bad about a round two? What would be so bad about having another taste? He’s an opportunist, not a sympathetic. He should stop fighting it. He should just give in.

“I know someone who can make you a glove. Something leather and flexible,” Vause muses.

Reno retains the void, lost cause intact.

“Don’t want to talk now? I wonder…” Vause moves backwards, tucking himself away. “Have you done this before? Have you tried everything yet? Every option? I said you would be fucking your sweetheart... but how about he fucks you instead? How would that make you feel, Reno?”

He is just a voice now. He lets the concept sink in before continuing, laying it out in a rush.

“Do you like being in control? Have you ever been a bottom? Would you fight it? Would it ruin you? Your concept of yourself? Your strenuous relationship? Your know-it-all, tough guy attitude?”

Reno tosses his head, finally offering participation.

“Only one way to find out,” he grumbles.

His uneasy stomach and knit brow says otherwise. It’s not something he had considered. It’s not something he had in mind. Not here. Truth be told, he's been here, he's done this all before… It’s just a long time coming. He always figured Cloud would be the target. Not him.

“Indeed,” Vause drones.

There's a moment of calm. A moment to wonder what’s coming next. A moment to regret every one of his underwhelming life’s choices. And that turnaround. That stupid fucking turnaround.

“Kiss him.”

And now that calm is uprooted.

“Show him how much you love him.”

Reno stares down and blinks.

Cloud is lovely.

That’s all he’s got. That’s the truth. He can’t and won’t ever miss that. Not a chance. Not for one moment from that first moment. That terrible moment. When he first saw him. When they first met. Reno wanted him, Cloud, this creature. He wanted every inch. He wanted every breath and twist and turn. He wanted him to scream his name. He wanted to be his bane.

He doesn’t need much more invitation than that. He knows he loves him. It hurts. It hurts in his bones, and his heart, and his head. He can’t hardly live with it. He wants to save him from it. He wants to smother him with it, and breathe him in. He wants to breathe with him. To sleep and dream with him. To twist and writhe and die with him, for him, by him.

He bends at the middle, coming to hover right over Cloud's smooth face, overcoming his resignations and better sense. Both arms he braces beside his blond head. He brings their bodies
into alignment between them, covering his nakedness.

Two immeasurably blue eyes set into a beautiful too-soft, too-fragile, too-perfect face blink up at him. Immaculate lips part. The subtle smells of smoke and alcohol, soap and warm flesh drifts.

Reno takes a great breath now, giving himself a chance (to rethink, to reset, to reboot), and then he's giving himself over, all of himself, and glides their mouths close, testing and prepping. He should stop. He should protest. But, Cloud tilts his face to better receive him, and then it's all over. He presses their lips one over the other, cracks Cloud’s jaw wide, and pulses his tongue inside.

It’s just begun and it’s already complete.

Cue the foggy, choking insanity.

He's lost inside that mouth. By now, he's more than just drunk and keyed up, Reno's painfully hard. The suit is fabulous, yes, but the slacks are too tight around his middle and crotch. He can't properly feel Cloud beneath him. He's just heat and pressure and a tempting lift and rub. Reno desires him pressed against him. He desires naked contact, flesh and fireworks.

Hot and sliding though, the inside of Cloud's mouth is too welcoming and too wet. He won't pull away. He's addicted to his taste, the shape of him, the smell of him. Their faces fit together as if made to, intended to, and it's intoxicating, it’s instigating. Cloud turns his head just so, he rolls his tongue just so. Reno is lost. He's spinning. He's delighted. He's boiling up.

He reaches a hand to undo his necktie.

“No.”

And is immediately reminded of their audience.

“Let him undress you,” Vause breathes, voice laden but level.

Reno likes the idea. He relents, and Cloud responds, reaching to address his task.

He's willing and able, and he makes quick work of it too. His small hands are shaking but self-assured. They get Reno’s tie loose, his jacket off, and his shirt open, but they stop there, too busy to proceed and finish the job. Cloud’s taking advantage, and a moment for himself, pouring inside Reno’s confines, fingers and palms eating up smooth flesh.

Cloud craves his form and feeling. He requires the human contact, the physical touch, the intimacy.

Reno shivers and groans. He grinds down into him, over him, surging his restricted hips up and back. And that's about when it hits him. It drives in sideways, crooked and loud, burning off some of the wafty haze, and sparks frigid down his spine.

Cloud's hands, his palms and fingertips, they’re smooth and soft. Reno might have missed it in the shower but he's not missing it now. Those hands run easily and eagerly over his flank and shoulders, warming and testing. Not anything like they should be. They should be scarred and healing and reminders of Cloud’s ultimate loss. But, they’re as perfect as the rest of him.
The realization is chilling, confusing, concerning, and then Cloud's biting his lollygagging tongue, and the rogue thought dies, churning up with the last of his self control, self preservation, and self doubt. He jumps into action and helps Cloud undress him, getting a little impatient, getting a little excited, getting bare from the waist up. That's good, but it’s still not good enough.

He reaches south for the front of his slacks.

“Reno…” Vause reminds, tone tense.

He rumbles a throaty return, having forgotten.

Cloud's hands again take on the challenge, squirming downward from Reno’s naked torso, taking the long way, and come to his fly. Once there, he starts undoing the brass button and easing zipper.

They haven't pulled far for this. They've stuck together, sucking in air as they can, nipping and biting, lapping and licking. It’s chaos, and it’s too soon cut off. They have to put the war on hold.

Reno departs to wiggle and tug off his slacks. With his sneakers, socks, and boxer briefs hurriedly taken care of, he is now as naked as Cloud. As he once again mounts his waiting hips, he can experience him for real, full and firm. He is confronted, overrun by Cloud's flesh (supple and silky), his form (sinew and muscle), and his own undying devotion, carved deep.

It’s immediate stunning glory when their cocks meet. They both jump and work and gasp at the surprise, every following touch an electrical charge, an addictive shock. They moan their grateful song in tune, sliding and glancing, clinging and grasping. They jolt on impact, on every return reignited. They're caught inside the heady, drunken sensations, the repeat and repent. Chaos renewed.

“Take it easy,” Vause murmurs.

Sticky hot precome slicks the effort, the only thing making the mewling slide a sumptuous sin. It’s wetting and easing, and mostly thanks to Cloud. He weeps. He flows. He only knows this because he’s watching, looking between them as they spar. He sees it sliding down his swollen shaft, slathering between, painting Reno.

They don’t listen. The pursuit for friction is overwhelming, the only substance and reality. Their blood-filled heads bump and nuzzle. Cloud melts, crumpling and dropping back.

Reno has the lead, rooting and rocking, swaying his jutting tool in for contact. There’s not enough air in the room, in the casino, in the resort, in the world. They’re already sweat-beaded and liquored up. They’re already far beyond rational thinking and the desire to turn back.

“Slow down,” Vause hums.

Reno growls, setting his jaw and showing teeth.

On Cloud’s gasping lips, the ghost of a smile starts to spread.

Reno makes him pay for it. He reaches between them and grips his glimmering cock.

Cloud chokes on his reaction, reduced to a throaty hum and a curving of his spine.

Reno squeezes, ravishes, and dips to confront him face to face once again, not releasing his claim as he goes. He stretches long and lean, a predator aiming for exposed throat, and the kill strike.
He loves this spot. He’s already made note. He’s afforded so many joys as he hums and licks and bites along Cloud’s jawline, below his ear, the span of his nape. The smell of him, the taste of him. Has he mentioned that already? He is basking in it. His senses sizzle with it. He feels Cloud’s heartbeat galloping away underneath moist flesh. He can press his tongue there and map it. He knows every vibrating confirmation. He absorbs him completely.

Reno works his hand, up and down, up and down, stopping to thumb plump head.

Cloud embraces it, lifting his hindered hips. He praises it, wounded, wound up. He gusts and grabs, every breath a gasp, every noise a desperate cry. He’s lost and loving it. He sounds like every injured man left on the battlefield, calling out, bawling out, moments after mayhem.

“I said slow down,” Vause prompts, coming through cool and clear.

Reno eases his activity to just an occasional grip and roll, mouthing Cloud’s throat. His nose and forehead cocoon in white-gold hair. He wallows in his scent. He soaks him up. He reels his hips, eager, but not close enough, not ever meeting, not ever appeasing.

Cloud whimpers his disapproval, clawing his fingers at Reno’s hips, his sides, his every exposed bit. He is dizzy and delirious, gasping and moaning, wanting, wanting, wanting. He is one note, static and pure, counting out the seconds before the next squeezing torture. He’s accepting and angling for more. He’s needing more, nothing but a body, necessity. Nothing but compulsion emptied of pain.

“Reno,” Vause calls. “Give him a little mouth work.”

Cloud’s fingers tense. He hasn’t done more than toss his head and enjoy the show. He has allowed himself to be carried away by every order and movement. He’s a willing vessel.

His soul and mind are another story. He hasn’t dared make eye contact with Reno. He avoids every chance. He’s just trying to buckle down and get over it. He’s just trying to delay the regret. And any pesky remembrance or reason to care. Any meddling of his heart.

Reno gives his throat a final bite and then leans up on his arm, looking down on his partner.

Eye contact still omitted. Cloud turns his head to the side and plays hard to get.

Reno gets the picture. He doesn’t wait around for something that isn’t going to happen. He rushes ahead, momentum sustained, and scoots down Cloud’s slender body. He comes to a hover over his narrow and nothing middle, perched low on his knees, pinning him as he lies.

They finally make eye contact over the rise of his obvious bodily excitement.

It’s fleeting.

It’s anxious.

Reno dives in, the flat of his super-hot tongue coming to rest over slippery smooth crown.

Cloud shudders at the presence. His digits claw and reach. As Reno licks just the tip of his throbbing protrusion, teasing and tasting, Cloud’s hands find their final destination at the back of Reno’s lowered head. He runs them over and through the short hair there, tugging at the longer sections he finds on top, threading and pulling, urging him to take in more.

More, more, more.
Reno doesn’t just yet. He takes his time. He angles Cloud with his hand and laps at ruddy crown, devoting all of his attention to learning and testing and enjoying. It’s pulsing, and pounding, living to the same beat rumbling inside his own chest, his own cock, his own foundations. It’s lubricious and leaking, and Reno’s more than willing to lend a hand (and a mouth) to relieve its state.

He swipes his pursed lips over its swell. He pushes the head past his brim, sucking tightly. He holds back no more and rolls the length down his tongue, slow and steady, unlocking his jaw the wider as he needs to. He eases him in and down and then brings him back out, once, twice, swirling his tongue, wetting the shaft and head.

He tastes salt and heat.

When he looks up for a peek, he finds Cloud a mess. His mouth is hanging and his chest is heaving. His eyes glint and sparkle, watching every moment, every movement, involved.

Reno can’t help but grin. He can’t help but want to look over and check on Vause too, but he doesn’t. He has so much more to worry about right here. He has so much more he’d rather be doing. He’s already shredded his heart to ribbons. He’s already abandoned all reason.

Cloud’s lidded eyes blink, his tongue slides out to wet dry lips, and then Reno’s back to it.

He bumps Cloud over his tongue, locking his mouth around the textured shaft as it slides on. Fluids run and slick and drip. He takes nearly all of him, bobbing his head, sanguine, serpentine. The sound is wet and rhythmic. The cries are corrupting and caustic.

And then he pulls away.

He lifts his chin and his eyes and he catches that liquid gaze set to boiling, and he holds it. He takes several gusting breaths, works several strokes in with his hand, keeping them both satisfied, both on the brink, and he grins. He grins, pointed and piercing, and then dips to tongue that oozing, slitted opening, that bare shaft. He traces long lines, wet and wondrous.

“Oooh,” Cloud whimpers.

Reno sustains his satisfied smirk and drops back to it, swallowing his flesh, his straining mouthful, taking each inch as he can. He loves the twitch, the shudder, and how Cloud’s hips hitch and quake, willing to find his deepest depths on their own. He loves how he tastes and feels on his tongue, in his hands, inside and out.

“Oh, fabulous…” Vause hums, disrupting his whole process. “But let's switch it up. On your back, Reno. And you, my dear, climb on top. Same story. Mouth only. Carry on.”

Reno pulls up and away, leaving Cloud wet and wanting. He turns to look on their moderator.

“Oh my back?” he mutters. “Trying to put me in my place?”

“A little humility goes a long way,” Vause answers.

Reno swivels back around to inspect Cloud, checking in. It's a brief inspection. It’s hopeless. He swallows and adjusts as he looks him up and down. Nothing has changed, nothing is amiss. Reno repositions and lets him free, removing himself from atop Cloud's knees.

He slides aside and lies back, stretching long across the mattress, his head at the foot of the bed. He supports his neck under an arm and gestures to Cloud with the other.
Cloud hovers close by, not jumping to it, not so eager as before. He holds there, a ball of legs and arms and moist skin, having a potential change of heart and obvious hesitations.

Reno opens his mouth and lolls out his tongue, taunting playfully enough.

“Go on,” Vause pushes.

Reno nods, licking his already tenderized lips.

It doesn't take much persuasion. Cloud moves near, walking himself on his knees to crouch over Reno's chest, bringing his best assets, and pre-wet flesh, right to Reno's face and waiting mouth.

Reno yawns wide, lifting his face to meet him, unfurling his tongue, a landing pad. Cloud pushes inside. He hangs there, suspended, dipping his cock passed lips and teeth, pressing on for the wetness beyond. He drops from above, soon thrusting and jabbing down Reno's gullet. Soon surrendering all over again.

Reno braces his hands on the back of Cloud's thighs, his hips, his ass. He can pull him close or push him away from there. He can claw and dig in his every finger. He can choke him down.

He allows him freedom, giving over some control, staying strong as Cloud edges to the rear of his throat, churning out a good pace, fucking his mouth, bucking and boring. Reno relaxes and takes air through his nose in shallow increments, going with the flow, facilitating, humming his accordance.

Cloud lunges into him, meeting him, pushing, probing, filling, giving over to the glide and the glory. He twists his fingers through Reno’s short hair, pulling him onto him, pulling him closer. He strains not to explode. His lewd mouth works and gapes. His voice is raw. His limits are stretched.

Reno has moments without air.


Reno hears him but has to suck Cloud down several more times, used and abused, before he can hold Cloud steady and turn his head away, breaking the rhythm and leaving a viscous trail. Only then can he wipe his ravaged mouth, gasp a huge breath, square his shoulders, and look upon what he’s done.

Cloud is flushed. He is full. He is mighty and glowing. If he was lovely before, he’s something else entirely now. He’s beyond the spectrum of Reno’s comprehension. He is undone, a live wire trembling and lethal. He levitates above him, oversized, imposing, divine.

“I’m…” Reno gulps, having to take another breath first. “I’m really... not… fucking him?”

Vause snorts.

“Afraid not.”

Cloud comes alive at that, resurrecting his small voice.

He pants, eyes locked on Reno, “I’ve never…”

“Never what?” Vause commandeers. “You’re not a virgin. You know all you need to, my dear. Either way, in this position,” he explains, “all you have to do is lie there. He’ll do most of the work. There’s lubrication on the nightstand. But, you know... I think there’s plenty right there.”
Reno’s guts jump. His flesh itches and prickles.

“Are you ready?” Vause offers. “Or do you need more time?”

Reno composes admirably. He feels nothing. He says nothing. He’s not afraid, he’s uneasy. He's trying to read Cloud's face and body language. All he's getting is commitment and approval. Cloud's not protesting or wilting, he's rock solid, he's awaiting further instruction.


Reno looks from Cloud (out of sight, out of mind) and meets Vause halfway.

“Why is th—”

“Reno,” Vause chides, intercepting.

“Don’t say my na—”

“Don’t give me reason to punish you.”

“Punish me? This already see—”

“Tell him.”

“Why can—”

“Tell him.”

He has such a short memory for these things.

“Reno,” Cloud growls.

It doesn’t hurt quite so much as before. It's a different breed of tone. It has the same effect, but there’s a spin on it too. Cloud isn’t trying to rein him in, he’s trying to shove him on. He’s trying to get his own satisfaction. He has an empty head and a hole for a heart. He’s asking for it.

“Lie back,” Vause indicates to Cloud.

Reno looks, and he finds, and it’s Cloud’s cool stare tainted by a flush and dilated pupils that looks right back. He's offering no choice. He's making Reno sweat and fret. He's doing as he's been told and putting himself to rest. Fill him with anything. Offer him anything. This Cloud wouldn’t avoid a cliff edge. This Cloud wouldn’t swim to shore. He’d hit bottom first.

His eyes torment Reno. His cool stare. His indifference. Cloud wants what's coming. He's ready for what's coming. He’s tempting fate and mocking their well-being. He's going to pay Reno back for all his annoyances, and lies, and promises, and it torments him.

Reno isn’t in control.

He needs control.

He needs...

“Tell me,” Cloud commands, breathless.

The only words Reno gets out of him... and they’re recycled.
“Straddle him,” Vause adds.

Reno’s world is spinning. He's overturned. He feels like a bystander, a volunteered participant, a sacrifice. He finds he’s moving on his own, rising up and crawling back to his straddling position, following the call. He's crawling back to Cloud. Their cocks threaten to slide, they jut and pulse.

Reno holds out. He holds his tongue. He finds himself perched atop Cloud’s thighs, chewing the inside of his mouth and steadying his rampant anticipation. He still doesn’t say a word. He even tries to go so far as avoiding eye contact.

What a laugh. What a reversal.

Cloud has his full attention on him, and he’s not being shy or coy. For once, Reno doesn’t want to challenge him back. He’s afraid of what he might find there. He’s afraid of what might stick around. He's afraid of something wanted, something foreign, something real.

“Tell me,” Cloud whispers.

He watches Reno, the whole of him, the whole of his being bent and devoted. He exudes sex, sultry and slippery. He is hungry, dangerous, deadly, and he’s getting impatient. He doesn't wait long for the reply, the confirmation, he lifts up, bending forward at the waist, and grabs Reno by his hips.

Reno allows it to happen. He allows the draw and the pull. He allows him to lift him and move him for his straining curve of a cock. He allows his legs to spread over him, his knees to support, his position to progress. He waits for the press, the push, the whisper of a presence at his opening, heated and needy. He doesn’t flounder or flutter, but he doesn’t ask for it either.

He won’t ask for it. He won’t ask for anything. He’s never asked for anything. He’s not a subordinate. He’s not second. He never wanted to be second. Not second to Zack. Not second to Vegas. He wanted to be first, foremost, and loved the best. Second to none.

“Tell him. Tell him to forgive you,” Vause says.

Cloud bucks and prods from below.

“Tell me,” he orders.

Reno gasps in return, wracked.

It’s getting serious now. He can feel Cloud pulling him down, threatening to spear him. His slick hot fingers urge, his slick hot cock purges and pulses and prepares, never getting beyond the thought, never obliging and indulging.

Reno is being pulled down into darkness. And he's being given the option. But he doesn't need or want the option. He wants every moment of it anyway. Bring on damnation. Goodbye control. Here he comes. Right back to what he knows. Right back to weakness.

“Oh,” Reno breathes. “Fuck.”

There is no freedom. There is no control.

“Please…” he moans. “Please…”

He follows Cloud’s instruction, his intrusion, and eases his whole body lower. He tosses his head
to the ceiling and avoids any gutting glances, or stripping gazes. He sinks down, getting resistance, getting stalled, getting friction. It’s an agonizing process, but it’s slick, and it’s fluid, and it’s hot and solid. He's willing and he's opening.

Reno works himself onto Cloud’s stiff cock from above. The head slips inside, and then each following section. He's accepting more, needing more, deeper. He whimpers and gradually drops his weight and then lifts, and then drops again. He splays and teeters his legs, forcing Cloud to dig on, deep-seated, their hips moments from connection. They both rejoice. The slippery stretch maddens, fulfillment beckons.

“Tell me,” Cloud moans, all but a puff of air.

Reno has no more hold or grip on himself.

“For me,” he finally declares, spread broad.

“Why?” Vause pushes.

Reno groans, engulfed, awash like driftwood beaten against coastal rocks, forced by the headwaters of his voice and Cloud's fleshy invasion. Reno is desperate to move, but he doesn’t dare. He'd fly apart. He'd shatter.

“Why should he forgive you?” Vause stresses.

“For…” Reno blurts, shuddering, sweating, swooning. “For…”

There’s just too much.

There’s too damn much.

He grasps for the closest pain.

“For... hurting you,” he cries out.

He lets go and descends all at once, giving up that last desperate inch, impacting hard with Cloud’s frame, ass to hips, knees to elbow.

Cloud arrives, hot and heavy; a living, loathing jut of flesh wanting to tear him apart.

They both howl.

“Forgive me. Please, please. Please,” Reno pleads, a mantra, a prayer. “I'm sorry! I'm sorry for hitting you! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I didn't save him! Oh fuck! I couldn't!”

He cries it out, bellows it to the afterlife. He doesn't move an inch, impaled and primed.

“Please forgive me. Forgive me. Please.” Rased, cried, verging insanity, redemption, harmony. “Please! Talk to me. Talk to me. Tell me! I can't stand it! Please!”

Cloud gives him an answer. He doesn't speak, he doesn't whisper or groan, he rolls his delicate hips high, promising to fuck him, to take him, to break him, and stokes the fire.
They're completing their first steps, they're starting the dance, and Cloud's new to the sensation. To being on this end (the end in). He never figured he’d get the shot. No one would ever let him, and especially not Reno. He’d never wanted to, because he likes being fucked, frankly, but this. This tension and tightness, this heat and wonder. He might just want to try this again. He might just be enjoying this new side of himself.

Reno is open to him, and he stays put, his knees and legs spread, offering Cloud the leverage to thrust upwards. He arches, changing the way he sits, allowing Cloud new depth, new feeling. They moan and tremble at the adjustment, the flash and flicker, alive with noise and need.

Reno's sweating and swearing, pathetic and pleading.

Cloud ushers him to rise, lifting at his hips. Reno complies and slips off his spire. He is brought back down just as quickly, obliged to drive home that rigid flesh. He throatily heralds its squelching arrival with a crow and a quake. He buckles and whines.

The pace is awakening. The friction is building. Reno lifts up and dips down, rising and sitting. Cloud steadies him with his hands. He confirms and demands. He accepts and denies with every stroke, forgiving and condemning him, pushing him as far as he can go.

Reno’s hearing that dying man. He’s hearing the moaning and wailing and mewling of a lost soul. And it’s him this time, not Cloud. He’s that dying man. He’s been left behind. He’s out of hope. He’s crying out his dismal cause. He's brimming with Cloud, nothing else. He’s overflowing. He's in a position of control but he has none. He follows. He accepts. He balances on his knees, using the rise to bring himself almost to the point of emptiness, and then he slams back down.

Cloud’s fingers spike and pull. The motion is smooth and easy, his body is set and lubricated (in more ways than one). He is truly fucked. Only the heights they could reach, the distance they can go, the depths they can find exist. Reno knows, and only wants to know, this feeling, this urgency, this complete loss of caring. He remembers this. He likes this.

“Pace yourself,” Vause says.

The words drift and dissipate. The room is pitch black. The air is hot, their flesh hotter. Limbs are slicked with sweat, tongues are lolling and dry. Reno’s knees and thighs are getting hotter, but he doesn’t want to pace himself, he doesn’t want to slow. He wants to fly apart. He wants to shatter.

Reno carries on, dropping down, mindless, but Cloud is there to claw and hold him back from retreating and therefore repeating. Cloud makes the decision for him. He keeps him firm on his length, forcing them to stop. Reno doesn’t have the energy to lift himself back up again. He groans and squirms, caught good.

“Stunning,” Vause admits. “How should we finish? Should we finish?”

Cloud’s massive and wet eyes swallow Reno up. He looks down into them and sees the ends of the world, the border between reality and fantasy. He feels all that flesh snug inside him, pulsing and dripping hot. He could be loved in this moment. Maybe even needed. Maybe even wanted. All he can see is the darkness at the depths of two pupils, infinite.

Reno nods, not exactly capable of words.

“Yes, of course,” Vause replies. “Of course the victim would want relief… But, you know, I think he should get the last word. I imagine sweetheart should finish the job. Don’t you think?”

Reno makes the mistake of glancing over to Vause. In a moment of weakness, he lets go. And it’s
not because of what he sees that’s the mistake either… It’s because of what’s seeing him.

Vause is looking right back, as cool and casual as ever. He’s level and unbending. He’s not one way or the other, just… calm. Just sitting. Just watching. Nothing else.

As Reno is about to dart away, and retreat with his tail between his legs (not able to take much of the penetrating gaze, the watching), Cloud jumps in, but not exactly to save his skin any.

“On your back,” he orders.

And it is an order. Those massive and wet eyes are serious. Reno’s seeing the truth in them. He’s seeing darkness renewed. He nods, mouth hanging to catch air. He collects himself, beaten and tired and well-used, and lifts himself from Cloud, wincing wonderfully all the way. Once free, he flops to his side and rolls onto his back, grateful for the break, and the huge mattress.

His thighs are killing him. His stomach is empty. His head is nearly there. His flesh is flushed from booze and pheromones. His ass is going to be feeling it later. And they haven’t even concluded yet. Cloud’s just now reviving himself to climb aboard. He comes to rest between Reno’s splayed legs.

Reno smiles and slides either long leg the wider, giving Cloud more room.

Cloud feels strong, pumped, flushed with power and want and the ability to wield it and enforce it. He wants to invade Reno. He wants to fuck him. He wants to fuck him hard and unending. He wants to take him, remake him, eventually break him. Fuck him into a coma. Fuck him quiet.

Somehow Reno’s able to form words.

“Like what you see?” he hums up at him, eyebrow cocked, sly and slithering.

“The carpet matches the drapes,” Cloud confesses.

It’s such an absurd comment, at such an absurd time, and said in such an honest and matter-of-fact tone, that it catches Reno just right. He squints, makes a baffled face, and then bursts into laughter. He laughs so hard it hurts his guts.


Cloud, on the other hand, is more annoyed than flattered. He lashes out, using his displeasure against Reno, and slides in close. He’s getting ready for part two. The last stretch. The finale. He’s prepared before Reno, cock still showing he’s serious, stiff and bobbing.

Reno has little time to accept the news, and catch his breath, and then it’s pouring inside him, spreading him. Cloud rams forward, impaling to the very root.

Reno cranes and whines. He hisses and gasps his approval.

A new and honest rhythm is established, feverish and unforgiving. Reno’s breath comes as a fluctuating moan and groan, pummeled and stretched out on every far reaching stroke.

He’s hearing that dying man again. He’s losing it again. And it’s not just him this time, because it’s the true dead man too. It’s Cloud. He’s nothing but pain and anger and the sound he’s making, and he sounds like he’s got nothing left to give. This last whimper, that’s it. That’s the one. He’s done. He’s cored out.

The position is traditional. The participants are anything but. They’re marching home now.
They’re on their way to perfection united, the vow for completion overriding.

Cloud can watch as it happens. He can watch as he is injected into Reno, over and over, soaked and slurping, relieved and accepted. He can watch Reno’s every reaction go from subtle to explosive. How he clenches on the release and the draw back. How he rocks to meet the rupturing return, vocal and violent.

Cloud has the lead now, sloppy and savage. Reno is a puppet, his puppet. He is the sinking ship Cloud is riding into deliverance, freedom, liberation. He’s drilling forward, driving Reno across the bed, headed for the edge. It’s so fitting, it’s so real, static, raw.

Vause has one last order.

“Tell him you need him,” he instructs.

And that’s an easy one. That’s a no-brainer. Reno would have. He would have screamed it out until his voice gave out. He would have bawled and whined it too. He was a stroke away from doing so without an order. He has needed Cloud since after Vegas. Since before Vegas. Since he came into this world. He just didn’t know it yet. He hadn't found him. They hadn’t found each other.

But, the demand isn’t for him.

Cloud responds so quickly, completely, and confidently that Reno has no chance to balk or question. His understanding flows on from wonder and into shock in milliseconds.


His gleaming eyes blaze, his hips pump, his cock digs. He bears down from above and dominates Reno’s gaze, never diverting, never diluting. He tells him. He’s giving him his answer.


And Reno comes on the spot.
Cloud follows just as suddenly, with an equally embarrassing cry and mewl, and releases inside Reno, gushing out his want, and fire, and fight as Reno convulses tightly around him. It’s voluminous, it’s long, it’s a new kind of intense. It sweeps them both off their metaphorical feet.

Cloud lifts and stretches and topples. He falls right into Reno, colliding with his bare chest, moist and heaving. Reno reacts and wraps his long arms around him. He wraps him up nice and tight, and they float down together, back to the present, back to the Gold Saucer, back to the dim room.

The deal is done. The act is over. Far from any thoughts of regret, or shame, or weakness, Cloud reaches his peak (once again) with his only ally and friend. The only real and living thing he’s got left. Something tainted, something untamed.

All his.

They split apart and clean up in silence and in relative peace. Before long, they will have to face the reality of their actions and present situation, and figure out what to do next.

“That was fantastic,” Vause exclaims, dropping the veil at once.

They remain prone on the bed, too used up to move, let alone dress or rekindle modesty.

Vause addresses them as they lie, materializing to loom at the edge of the mattress.

“I must ask… How would you two feel about a more permanent position?” he proposes.

Reno twitches and lifts his head.

“Oh yeah? And what, be your fuck toys forever?”

“More or less,” Vause admits, nodding his head.

“As much as I’ve enjoyed this…” Reno groans, dropping his head back. “I like my freedom more. I’m just... glad you’re not... you know, a complete weirdo, yo. It’s kinda weird you just like to watch, I guess. But, it coulda been worse. A lot worse. I’ve seen worse. I’ve... done worse.”

“I understand,” Vause confirms.

“Yeah. So. Thanks for not being a total weirdo,” Reno offers.

It should be more awkward thanking a man that just watched you fuck to completion, but Reno’s been around a few times. Maybe one too many times at that, and this is just another one of the many glaring signs telling him to change, and he’s going to ignore it. He’s not a good person. He’s not been a good person. He’s not going to be a good person. He knows. Get off it.

“My pleasure, of course,” Vause replies.

He turns to face the doorway but doesn’t get far.

“You can stay here if you like…” he suggests, paused in his tracks. “I won’t be coming back. I have my own rooms. Take advantage. Sleep. Drink. Be merry. Have another go at it.”

He turns and gestures his approval.
“As a friendly warning though... I will be watching the surveillance tapes later. I always do. I have a personal collection. I’m a curious individual, and that last display... deserves a replay.”

He stalls, perhaps musing on that.

“So... that’s what it is...” Reno mutters, tone dripping with understanding and exhaustion. “That’s what you do... You’re gonna... make a... load of money off our recording, aren’t you?”

“Anyway,” Vause chimes, smiling a curt smile. “Don’t worry about it. No records ever leave the Saucer. Don’t worry about the suits either. Keep them. Please. Think of it as a tip. I left you ample payment and betting chips on the nightstand. One should have some fun while one can. You can return to your original room for the rest of your duration as well. I have many. Suits and rooms. It’s not a problem.”

“Right,” Reno answers, faded. Too faded to contest.

“Have a nice visit,” Vause wishes. “Hope to see you again before you leave, of course.”

He has the gall to bow low, correcting his glasses as he draws himself back upright.

“Thank you both for a wonderful and most interesting evening. It’s not often something like this comes up. It was educational, liberating, mutually beneficial... and more than a bit of a thrill. Although, I don’t think I ever got your name, my dear...”

Reno can’t help the dismissive scoff. He’s so over this guy.

“It’s...” Cloud starts.

It takes him longer than it should have to realize he was even talking to him at all. He has to wonder if he should humour him, given their pending fugitive status, and generally confused nature, but he’s also unable to think of a good enough reason not to. The guy has his own motives and his own business, and he was kind, and he got what he wanted.

“My name’s... Cloud.”

“Cloud,” Vause repeats, working the name over his tongue. “Wonderful.”

Now he turns on his heels, offering them his back.

“I’m off then. Until we meet again, Cloud.”

With his typical air of importance, Vause strides for the gateway, his exit, the bedroom’s threshold.

“You better do as you say and watch out for him, Reno,” he suggests, glancing over his shoulder.

And now they are, more or less, alone.

They hang in the dimness of the room, soaking up the setting and circumstances around them, accompanied only by the scent of musky flesh and salted sweat. Together again, two of a kind, red
and blond, a total mess. It feels like a long time coming. In reality, it’s been less than an hour since they were separated.

Cloud’s clothes are on an armrest of an armchair in the front room. Reno’s clothes are half on the bed and half at the foot of it. Neither of them have the thought touch their minds.

Seconds ticks away. Minutes stack up.

Reno lies prostrate next to Cloud.

Cloud lies recumbent next to Reno.

When Cloud gets around to looking over, he finds Reno’s eyes closed.

*What a surprise.*

The red-head’s face is smooth and calm, features relaxed. There’s not a single emotion on his colorless visage. His soul is perfectly quiet. There are no signs of distress or anger; not the hint of a smile or a grin. He’s a blank slate open for input. It’s mesmerizing, and as awful an image as the one from the shower. He looks so much like himself, and yet so much like a helpless stranger. He is innocent, vulnerable, novel and natural. He is beautiful.

And dead asleep.

Cloud watches him. He watches him and he thinks. He thinks about where the sword must be. That damn sword. That giant sword. That giant responsibility and glaring reminder. He let it go and pushed it aside.

It’s certainly not here, and Reno didn’t have it with him when he showed up to save the day. He didn’t have his guns either. Not even an empty holster. He came unarmed. He came crawling back, stripped and ready for punishment, and he begged. He begged for him.

Cloud lies still. It's nothing but a constant stream of where the sword could be, and should be, and how he'll get it back. How he'll repay him (or make him pay), and how he fucked up (or was it Reno?). Cloud willingly forgot his obligations, his wrenching heart. He gave up.

He doesn't move an inch, a prisoner in his own head, conflicted and vile. He watches Reno breathe in and breathe out, calm and even. He's never looked so fragile as he does now. No schemes or accusations run under the surface. No personal desires or motives twist and turn. He's turned off, unknowing, just a fleshy, earthly vessel.

Cloud feels odd for seeing him like this. It feels like a violation, something stolen, something wrong. It's a privilege, it's special, and he's not worthy or ready to behold this side of him.

By the second hour, he's feeling protective.

He can’t let anything happen to that sword. He has to return it. He has to honour Zack's wishes. He can’t let anything happen to Reno either. He can’t let more harm find him. He can’t let the fire get him. He’s not good, but he’s not bad. He’s just Reno. He’s his problem. He’s not a replacement. He’s something else. He is important. He *is* essential. He wasn't lying.

By the third, he's adding anger to the mix.

He’s mashing his teeth and digging uncut nails into calloused palms. It's the most he’s moved. The venom is coming bubbling up from his chest and burning along his already raw throat. It’s stinging
behind his eyes and blurring his vision.

Damn Shinra. Damn Sephiroth, and the Director, and his father, and his ever coming into being.

He should have said something sooner. He should have acted faster. He shouldn't have cowered, or faded, or let him go. It shouldn't be so heavy. This shouldn't be so hard. It shouldn't just be recollections and a hunk of steel.

By the fourth, he wants to talk.

He wants to hear Zack's voice. Reno’s voice. He wants to open up and unload. He wants to know Reno’s plans and worries. He can’t do this alone. He never wanted or expected to have to do any of this alone. He thought his mother would always be there. She should have been. He thought he’d have his comrades. He thought he’d have the service, and the missions, and the ranks, and the battles. He thought he’d have Zack. He thought he'd grow stronger.

By the fifth hour, he's rehearsing the guilt.

He got him killed. He got them killed. They're gone, gone, gone, and never coming back. His mom, his dad, his village, his innocence, his hope and wonder, and Zack. His Zack. Cloud's the reason for everything. He didn’t see anything. He didn’t see him. He’s been hallucinating. He’s not well. Zack is just a memory, a voice, a hope and an ideal. He’s just a cold, dead sword. He’s just sand between his fingers. Cloud's gotten everything all twisted and charred. It's all his fault.

All his fault.

Twenty minutes later, he breaks.

“If I were a colour…”

He starts there, with the very same words spoken to Zack in the dead of the night to calm his slipping mind. They come out malformed, grated together and broken. He has to stop.

“I don't know anymore,” he admits, sounding no better.

Reno sleeps on, angelic and undisturbed.

“I know I... saw him. That night. I swear.” He wets his lips. “He was there. He… appeared. I was gonna die. I was… He... I could have touched him. He was so close. He showed up to help me. He came back. And then… he was... gone. Again. It's just that fucking sword. And more bitter memories...”

And that reality will always hurt.

“You asked me what I found in the wreckage,” he mutters, going on. “In the house… what was a house... I didn't find anything. I didn’t find him. All I found was… There was still some evidence of clothing that hadn't burned… It was red. Zack wasn't wearing red. He wasn't. It wasn't him. I know. I know. He wasn't even in the house when it exploded… Not... exactly... He... he…”

His voice has gotten thin and tight in his throat.

“He was the explosion.”

Reno comes alive. Two sea-shallow blue eyes open, blink several blinks, and stare back.

Cloud’s own tired eyes widen out of reflex, but they don’t yet dart away.
“He was what?” Reno rasps, voice thick with sleep.

Cloud regards him for an extended moment. He could slip back into silence and secure his own slipping mind, or he could start getting Reno on his side.

“He was the explosion,” he repeats, glancing away from the all consuming inspection at last, too weak and unbalanced to challenge such a demanding gaze for long.

“He couldn't have exploded,” Reno growls back, rolling and adjusting to his side to slide in close. “It was a bomb... or something. He probably...”

But, he has nothing better to draw from.

“Where's the BDS?” Cloud asks.

“It's safe,” Reno replies.

“Where is it?”

Reno yawns, taking his sweet time.

“Don't worry, yo…” he groans. “It has my guns and knife to keep it company.”

“Reno…”

He deflects the blow with a question.

“How did he explode then?”

Cloud stalls, taking only a moment to reset.

“Think about it,” he answers, keeping cool and steady, and his eyes away. “He said it was too much. Like he was... overflowing. He was afraid he was going to... spill over. I bet you remember. You were there. He was the flash of blue that night in Gongaga. He stopped the rain for that split second. He went... critical. He protected me from injury. He stopped everything. He was... always... protecting me.”

“He went... critical?” Reno gapes. “Like, because of the mako? You think he blew up because of the fucking mako? That shit just makes you dizzy and angry, man. It messes you up. Shinra thinks it makes you fight better. They think it's a drug. And maybe it is. I've seen it. It doesn't make you magical. It makes you an idiot. Damn... You really did worship him, didn't you?”

“What about outside Midgar? And what about the soldiers? It wasn't just what they were saying, Reno. I could feel it. The fire. The house around me. I could taste it. I could almost see it. And I know... I know most of what they said was true. I ran from the memory. I ran from... his memory.”

“You're dealing with a lot of grief, Cloud...”

“I keep hearing his voice.”

Reno sits upright to look down over him.

“You're talking to me. And that's great. I mean, holy shit. You're talking to me. I didn't want to bring attention to it... but, you're not making any fucking sense either, Cloud. And that's not great. Not at all. Take a breather. Take a second to think straight. You're stressed out.”
He gives him a very serious look now, and asks, “How would you know any of this anyway?”

“Because he—”

“Have you slept at all?”

Cloud balks, but recovers.

“I—I’ve slept enough, haven't I? Isn't it time I woke up?”

“Yeah, sure,” Reno agrees, slow and measured. “You just sound…”

“Crazy?”

“That’s the one.”

“I know it sounds crazy…” Cloud mumbles.

“Great,” Reno chimes, striking at the air. “Then let's start figuring out what really happened to your boyfriend and then what we're doing next, because I'm hungry and bored. You can nap if you want. I'll whisper sweet nothings in your ear as you drop off.”

“I'm fine,” Cloud bristles.

“You're far from fine.”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not fine. You’re rambling. You're shaking. You're mad and tired. And more like the Creator's magnum opus anyway... I'm the fine one.”

“You're an asshole.”

“Oh, kitty has claws… An asshole I might be,” Reno agrees, “but this is still about as half baked as your fucking eyeball theory. Nothing happened there. You didn't rampage. You didn't kill anyone.”

Didn't he though?

“That's because he…” Cloud needs to find the right word. “Because Zack replaced Sephiroth. Otherwise, I dunno... You might not have woken up. You could have ended up dead in that tent.”

“You're so morbid,” Reno marvels.

“I…”

“You're such a downer.”

“I’m... a realist.”


“Give it a fucking rest?” Cloud repeats.

He narrows his eyes and looks aside, physically and emotionally pulling from Reno’s presence.
Reno winces and shakes his head. He crowds in, hands waving, pleading and proffering.

“No, no, no. Fuck. Oh, don’t do that. Don’t take me seriously. Please. I *am* an asshole. Don't you stop talking to me again. I can’t handle that shit. You know it’s my weakness. Just—”

“That's *not* your weakness,” Cloud vents.

“Isn’t it?” Reno prods, turning his minor panic into a slippery smile. “*You’re* my weakness.”

“Don't say that…” Cloud grumbles, shrugging deeper into the bed.

“Why?” Reno pushes, too interested to stop, and too close for comfort.

Cloud stews, tonguing his bit lip.

“Because secretly you like it?” Reno asks, slithering closer still, naked and warm. “Because you might feel some responsibility? You might have to feel the very human and very *normal* emotions of remorse, or excitement, or fear? Because you don't have control over it? Because you don't have control over *anything*?”

“Because it's not true,” Cloud explains, looking on him now, firm and forceful.

Reno dims down and lifts a single red eyebrow.

“Explain *that* one to me,” he insists.

Cloud does not divert.

“You are your weakness.”

“Oh, that’s deep…” Reno groans, rolling his eyes along with his shoulders.

Now it’s Cloud's turn to dim and frown.


Silence unfurls.

Cloud didn’t think it would be easy. It was hard getting even Zack to admit the truth, and he could see it. It was hard for Cloud to understand it too. Reno finds it better to deny what’s right in front of him, rather than see, therefore touch, therefore *feel*. Even with all the evidence (the pain, the tears) he’s still more willing to refuse the responsibility of entertaining his situation. *Their* situation. He’s more willing to smile and drown it under a cascade of alcohol, swears, and jeers.

The silence endures.

Reno springs at the opportunity to showcase his inability to live with it.

“Soos…” he drawls. “How *are* you, man?”

Cloud suppresses the desire to say *tired, insane, scared, lonely, angry, mad, livid*.

Reno gives him a generous amount of time to answer.

Cloud gives him a shrug.

“Did you watch me sleep the entire time? Did I say anything weird? Did I drool any?”
Cloud shakes his head.

“You looked beautiful,” he admits.

This stunned silence is rather satisfying.

Cloud can see Reno struggling to stay aloof, above it all, high and dry. He’s struggling with a lot of things. Cloud’s gotten observant and good at reading him, or Reno’s still just that sloppy.

“That’s interesting...” Reno muses, glancing about the room, bouncing around the subject.

“Is it?” Cloud prods.

“You... Don't exactly consider myself... beautiful, to be honest. You? You're beautiful. I'm more ruggedly handsome, right? Someone you'd let ravish you in the woods.”

“The woods?” Cloud asks, sitting upright to join him.

“Yeah... Like, a wild man or something. In the woods. Literally. Not a weird metaphor or anything. What I'm saying is... manly and strong, I guess. You can't resist my cut and physique.”

“I want to be ravished by a wild man?”

“You have been ravished by a wild man, buddy.”

Cloud’s lack of expression propels Reno into action.

“I’m...” he mumbles. “I keep putting my fucking foot in my mouth. I'm not good at not offending, man. I’m not good at this. Sorry. For how much I fucking talk... it’s just a lot of crap. You know this. I just... shoot the breeze and say what's on my mind.”

“Wouldn't expect anything less.”

“That sounds suspiciously like an insult...”

“Maybe it is...”

“Maybe I can dig it.”

“How did you get away from him?” Cloud blurts, his lack of care and angry hurt escalating into dangerous territory. “Away from Sephiroth. He killed Vegas... but not you?”

Reno sobera. His features darken.

“I shot him and ran.”

“Where?”

“To you.”

“No. Where did you shoot him?”

“In the gut...” Reno answers.

“And he survived,” Cloud submits.

“I'll say he survived... He showed up inside a fucking flying lizard.”
“And you still think he couldn’t have been inside my head, like a sickness? How’s that so hard to believe after that? After my whole… state? And my eye. After the fainting? Do you remember Zack hitting you with a bolt of lightning? You might not… but he did. He knocked you clear of Sephiroth. He saved your life. How did he cast magic without materia?”

“I don’t fucking know. You think Seph’s dead...”

“Yeah, I do,” Cloud confirms.

“And if I think he’s dead too… then I don’t get to pay him back for all the shit we’ve been through. I have to… really bury my brother. I have to… I just left him there, man… I have to...”

“I’m sorry about...” Cloud musters, trailing off.

He wants to say more but he’s getting hung up on the guilt, and the ugly squirming in his guts.

Reno shrugs, deflecting the pain.

"Yeah. The good die young and all that.”

“Maybe they do…”

“And maybe we should finally put some clothes on,” Reno suggests.

He groans and rolls away, moving himself to the far edge of the bed.

“Fuck it. I'm taking another shower…”

He stretches long, arms reaching to the ceiling, and then reaching to scratch his scalp.

“Don't suppose you wanna join me, huh?”

Cloud feels his face flush. He feels the heat run so far as his loins, stirring and twitching, reactive. A rash of sweat prickles up his arms. He buffers direct eye contact. He's still an open wound unprotected and sensitive to the world.

Reno shakes his head, seeing his reluctance.

“It's cool if you don't. I'm not gonna… force you. This time. Just an idea. Wanna enjoy it while I can.”

“I think… I'll sit this one out,” Cloud answers, giving him a vague gesture.

“Sure. See you in a few then,” Reno tells him.

He stands and makes to walk across the room, headed for the bathroom, bare from head to toe.

Cloud gets a thought then. A loud one. It screams out before he can pounce on it.

“How do you... explain… my hands?” he asks the back of Reno's head.

Reno stops mid stride.

“You took a potion,” he suggests, not bothering to turn around.

“You know I didn't,” Cloud argues.
“Then… You’re a freak of nature…”

“I healed again,” Cloud says, rolling his fingers over his palms, as if to confirm it himself. “Just like when I was under Sephiroth’s… influence.”

He runs with the thread, the opportunity set, forming his theory as he comes to it.

“But, Zack cured me. He wiped Sephiroth's haze away. He gave up all he had left. And then he went critical. Whatever was left… it's inside me, Reno. He died… and just as he died… he blew apart and… and… the rest collected inside me. Zack’s inside me… What’s left. Like Sephiroth was. Like an intruder. But, it's not… it's not the same. It's more like his… essence and memories. Because of the mako. He comes and goes. It's like… hijacking. Or, I dunno… a possession. I saw him too. He showed up. He killed that sandworm.”

Reno turns now.

“Oh, shit. That's what that was? And whoa, whoa, whoa… Stop right there. How did he show up if he blew up? What did you see?”

“He just… appeared. I can’t explain it. He was so bright. He was... there. I can’t explain anything. I can’t explain how he did it. I can’t explain how I can tell you about his childhood either. It’s just… smells and flashes and half images. I can’t explain how... I can tell you he was in pain at almost every moment. He was so... depleted, regretful and ashamed. He didn’t like admitting anything to you, right? But I can tell you that he really did trust you in the end. He had to.”

“Bullshit,” Reno grits, waving an accusatory finger at him. “That's bullshit. I was just about to believe you until you said that too… No. He never trusted me. Not even a little bit. He never liked me. He was itching to knock me off. They always are.”

“They?”

“People.”

“That's not bullshit?” Cloud accuses.

“Name anyone happy to see me,” Reno challenges.

“Your br—”

“He’s dead. And he was my brother anyway.”

“Me.”

“When?” Reno bites out.

“When I saw you coming across the floor… When you confronted Vause.”

Reno deflates. He has no more to say. He’s processing and debating, waiting for more, wanting more, needing more from Cloud, always. He’s ready to listen, ready to believe.

“You looked ready to kill,” Cloud describes, voice clear and controlled. “You were... glowing. You didn't have to come back, but you did. You were protecting me. I was… happy to see you.”

“If you were a colour, Cloud…” Reno mutters. “You would be gold. The finest there is. Because you’re beautiful and shining, and so sought after... but you’re also soft and easy to manipulate.”
“That’s… a nice thing to say,” Cloud grumbles.

“It’s a true thing to say,” Reno stresses.

“Where’s my sword?” Cloud opts, fending off a familiar wave of anger.

“See? Your sword? What about the handprint?” Reno counters. “Did he do that too?”

“I guess…” Cloud mumbles, groping for calm. “I guess he did…”

“You guess? You don't remember?”

“No,” he admits.

And he doesn't. Just like with his own fractured memories, Zack's are incomplete and confused. Thanks to having no reference, no genesis, and sometimes no influence, his are even more confusing. What are original memories? What is Cloud making up? What are just hopes?

“Of course not,” Reno groans.

He readjusts his stance, crossing his hands over his bare chest.

“So... what happened in his house then? Exactly. Can you tell me that? What's the story there?”

“He…” Cloud starts, working through it, stiff and stringent. He’s holding it all in, holding it all back. He’s got to distance himself from it. He has to make a stand. He has to say something. “He killed... the Director… and he… died doing it.”

“Yeah, but…”

“He's dead,” Cloud snaps.

“But you—”

“He's dead.”

“Right…” Reno offers, dropping off.

He looks Cloud over, uncertain. This Cloud is unbending, driven, but he's also breaking (or is it broken, shattered, splintered and been badly rebuilt?). This Cloud isn't a surprise, or a novelty, and Reno has mixed feelings about him. They met before, back in the badlands, Junon, and the planes outside of New Corel. This Cloud was once commanding and sure. He was once rambling and certain. He got Reno to help him drag a mostly dead Zack through the desert for miles. Frantic, fearful, hateful. He once pleaded for Reno to let him gouge his own eye out.

Reno needs a moment to think, process, and ready himself for more.

“I’m hitting the shower,” he declares.

Cloud drops his gaze and nods.

Cloud sits in the empty and dim bedroom and thinks his dangerous thoughts once more. He thinks
about Sephiroth and Zack. He thinks about walking away, right out the main door.

He might struggle and hesitate, caught up in old fear and older loneliness, but as soon as he closed that door shut, and stood on the other side, alone and aware, safe and sound, the going would be easy. He could put his last bloody ties behind him and move on. He could hunt down his sword. He could start fresh. He could disappear. But, he doesn’t.

He gets dressed, sits on the bed, shuts up his tired mind, and waits for Reno to return.

It’s only a ten minute stretch.

“Hey.”

Reno stands naked in the steaming threshold.

“I kept thinking... you were gonna leave...” he breathes.

Reno might say what’s on his mind, and that might make him honest, most of the time, but it doesn’t make him true. He’s being true now. He’s admitting a weakness. He’s lowering his guard. He's submitted a bare statement. And complicating more of Cloud’s whirling mind.

Being tired, being thin and stretched, Cloud has nothing but his essential programs working. He's running on every pure emotion and thought, flouting reservations, flouting hesitations, as changeable as the wind. He gives him an honest answer for an honest answer.

“I'm still here,” he replies, quiet and soft.

He's not ready for what happens next.

Reno stomps over, stripped and dripping, thump-thumping across the carpeted floor, and comes to a stop before him. He yanks Cloud up from the bed, right into a standing position, and waits there. He waits a good, long beat, and then he's hugging him—flesh wet, head leaned down, arms around his shoulders, squeezing tight, almost lifting him from his feet—hugging him.

Cloud is shocked.

He is released after several heartbeats, unable to return the favour. And that's it. That’s the lot. Reno makes nothing of it, moving only to collect his clothing from the foot of the bed. He works at getting dried and dressed, holding his flapping tongue and derogatory commentary for the time being. Cloud can only stand by, damp and dumb.

Suited and proper, Reno collects the gil and betting chips Vause left out for them and then equips his comb, running its pink teeth through his red and wet hair, fixing not much at all. He is tall and proper, a vision, an ill premonition, a sentinel from the past. He’s composed on the surface, but underneath, he must be trembling and tortured.

“Are we... you know, good then?” he asks, motioning towards Cloud.

The sensitive tone proves the theory.

“Yeah...” Cloud answers, breathy as a sigh. “We're good... Good enough.”

"Holy fuck,” Reno exclaims, dropping the smooth air and cool show to expel a held breath and exaggerate a shrug. “I thought you'd hate me forever.”

“I never... hated you…” Cloud murmurs, sitting back on the bed. “I just…”
“Oh my. You're not very good at lying...” Reno says, shaking the comb at him.

“Maybe you can help me with that too...” Cloud suggests, doing forced demure justice.


He drops onto the sinking mattress next to him. Their skinny shoulders rub.

“So... what are we doing?” Reno poses. “Should we eat? Gamble? Splurge?”

Cloud has nothing more to say. He is so thin.

Reno waits long enough (a Reno-sized amount of time), and then on he goes.

“I was thinking... in the shower...” he mutters. “I didn't know Seph was... you know. For real. People talked and shit, and he... with you... but everyone talks, and he was...”

Cloud lifts his drooping head. He’s so tired, he might as well still be drunk. Or dreaming.

“It was a secret,” he tells him. “And they... killed Zack for it.”

“Yeah, well... we didn't work with him for long,” Reno declares. “At all. Guess all my shameless flirting paid off... I mean. Damn. I tried every day. Zack actually got with that? That’s amazing. That’s legend worthy right there. Almost figured Seph was a day tripper. Or just... not interested, you know? Like... any physical interaction was a waste or something. Seph’s next level. Top shelf. A fucking unicorn, man. Kinda like you. Only you're way better. You’re not evil, and scary, and. And, uh. Uh. I mean... Shit, there I go again. Never mind.”

“It's... fine…” Cloud assures, not so sure. “I only... remember... enjoying it anyway.”

Reno stays quiet, giving him the space to dig up and maybe resolve the memory.

“I guess I was made to. So... I would remember. So I... couldn’t block it out. Not completely.”

Reno winces at the thought.

“I can remember... up until... just before the end. It gets... weird after that. A lot is missing.”

“You’re lucky he didn’t... hurt you,” Reno proposes, unable to contain it.

Cloud offers him a scrunched brow.

“Like, really hurt you,” Reno clarifies. “He could have cut you, bruised you, broken you... Left a mark.”

“He... almost broke me. I don’t feel lucky.”

Reno scowls.

“I do,” he says.

Cloud scowls right back.

“Hey,” Reno exclaims, shaking his head. “Don’t take that as something it’s not, yo. I’m not lucky you’re not cut up because you’d be gnarly to look at, or because that might make me feel even more shitty and guilty and responsible about everything. No, I’m lucky you’re not cut up because
I’m glad you’re not cut up. I like you. I care about you. Whatever.” A short pause. “I only hope... he still is alive... so I can kill him for you. I want to. I will. For you... and for Vegas.”

“He’s dead,” Cloud levels.

“I told you... I’m not so sure...”

“He’s gone. I’m sure. I know. I don't feel him anymore. Zack wouldn't have... He...”

Cloud turns his head aside and quits.

Reno does not.

“What really happened in the badlands? Where did he go? What are you blocking out? What really makes you think he was in your head? Other than the trauma, which I think it is... What did you really see? You were a lifeless body one minute, laughing your head off the next, and then to top it all off... once responsive, you flipped out on me.”

“I was having... a strong emotional reaction.”

“Oh yeah?” Reno huffs. “I got that. You called me a bastard. Multiple times.”

“And that upset you?” Cloud asks, looking back just to showcase his growing disapproval.

“It fucking did,” Reno admits. “Because it's... true.”

Cloud’s disapproval dissolves into disgust.

“You're so hung up on yourself...” he growls.

“T'm hung up on myself?” Reno scoffs, throwing his arms out. “I didn't just sulk and pout for the last 48 hours. I didn't just willingly put myself into a situation I couldn't get myself out of.”

“It doesn't matter.”

“Doesn't it? Are you kidding me? You just don't care then? Who gives a shit about what anyone thinks? You're just gonna sling yourself into the next shitty situation? You're gonna make me step in and drag you back out? You're gonna screw up everything he fought for?”

Cloud’s grimace deepens.

“I'm gonna return that sword.”

“You’re gonna— You don't wanna... keep it?” Reno asks, his tone and demeanour changing.

“No. Not really,” Cloud says. “I don't want to... even look at it.”

“Okay then. That's something,” Reno approves, very clearly relieved.

He arches back to stretch his spine.

“Where did he get it again? Where did it come from?”

Cloud answers, “The Resistance in Midgar...”

“Oh... Midgar,” Reno grumbles. “Well. If anyone can protect us from Shinra it should be them, right? Either way, I've got your back, man. Considering everything else you’ve been talking
about… this actually sounds reasonable. We'll do it. We'll make it right.”

Cloud forces a nod, never so sure of anything anymore. He fell into that trap twice now. He dropped his guard and paid for it. And so did Zack. He should learn his lesson.

Reno puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Good talk. Glad to have you back. Seriously. I missed you, man. I really fucking did. It was awful. You were all \textit{fuck you} … and I was like \textit{fuck you too}… It was bad. Now let's... go get somethin’ to eat, huh? What time is it? I'm starving. Tseng can babysit a little longer, yeah?”

He smiles a pleased smile to himself and ruffles his wet hair, coming out disheveled and daunting on the other end.

He cocks his head and winks.

It's endearing, until it's not, and then it's right back to endearing again. He's a handful. He's just Reno.

“Great fuck, by the way.”

They leave the room and the floor of suites. The Saucer as a whole is a maze of levels and floors and elevators and attractions and distractions. They don’t have to look too far for what they want. Everything is labeled and marked and easy enough to find if one knows where to look. Backlit maps and towering advertisements plaster the walls everywhere.

On the main casino floor there is a 24-hour buffet. Without a timeline, or anywhere to be, or anyone waiting for them (other than Tseng), they can take their time. Nothing is pending. Nothing is happening. They know, or at least Reno knows, where their weapons are. They’re safe. They’re accounted for. They can take a detour before collecting them and heading off into ruin.

They find the place surrounded by palm fronds, overgrown ferns, and frosted glass. The line is nonexistent. What staff they see are bored and dismissive.

Reno pays for their table and they enter the roped-off buffet area together. Reno parts with Cloud there, headed for the hot plates and the fragrant spread, and whatever his stomach desires.

Cloud drifts towards the seating area, finding them a booth far from people (which isn't too difficult at ten in the evening) and waits for Reno there. Cloud lazily observes his surroundings, he almost relaxes, and he wishes for another cigarette.

A sluggish but friendly server soon arrives to drop off silverware and take their drink order.

Cloud gets them two coffees.

Reno returns before they can be delivered.

It's almost long enough to enjoy the quiet, and nurse the idea of having come alone.

Reno sidles up, that cocky, self-assured gait doing its saucy thing, and sets two plates heaped with various foods onto the glossed tabletop before him. He slides in across from Cloud, wincing to himself the whole way through.
“Sore?” Cloud inquires.

Reno is taken by the question. He stalls and observes him for a short moment over their short distance. Steam and aromas lift and rise from the plates set between. He eventually reaches out and slides a dish closer, giving his attention over to that instead.

“As a matter of fact, I am,” he answers, taking up a fork.

“I am too,” Cloud agrees. “You were rather… vigorous.”

Reno commences eating, cherry picking the assortment of edible goodies at his leisure.

“The shower?” he asks, muffled by bread and greens and all else.

Cloud nods.

“Yeah…” Reno says, swallowing thickly. “Kinda got… carried away. Like I said. And I also said I was sorry. And what is this? You're not eating? You didn’t get anything.”

The server arrives with a pot of coffee and their mugs. They pause their conversation as she pours them each a steaming portion.

Cloud waves off the cream and sugar.

Reno has a shot of coffee with his.

Once alone, Cloud offers, “I'm not hungry. And you don't normally get carried away?”

“Hey,” Reno exclaims, waving his fork in an aggressive motion. “I can show a certain amount of self control when I want to. I just… hardly ever want to.”

Cloud takes a careful sip of his coffee, eyeing Reno over the brim of his off-white mug. It’s hot in his cold hands. It’s hot on his lips and in his nostrils.

“You bruised my knees.”

“Don't tell me that…” Reno groans.

“Why not?” Cloud asks.

“I'll wanna see…”

“I'll show you.”

Reno clears his throat and corrects his posture.

“You're killing me.”

“And you love every stroke,” Cloud counters, matter of fact.

Reno scrutinizes him. His sharp eyes narrow. His brow creases. His wrist turns this way, that way, the fork twisting this way, that way. The gears turn. The moment stretches.

“Who are you?” he demands.

It’s Cloud's turn to be taken. He balks, mouth dropping open to work out a snide or confident response and getting nothing but dead air as a result.
“You sound like…” Reno muses.

Cloud shuts his mouth and holds his breath.

He's about to realize. Reno could be about to admit and believe. He could be on his side. Things might start to get a little easier.

“You sound like your filter's gone,” Reno says.

Cloud drops his eyes to the dark liquid simmering in his mug. He brings the vessel back to his lips, takes an adventurous sip, and relishes the bitter burn, swallowing his disappointment with it.

“I'm just… speaking my mind,” he offers.

“I know… and it's… unusual... And I'm kinda freaked out right now,” Reno claims.

“Why?” Cloud snaps, putting the mug down and out of his hands. He looks at Reno straight on. “You don't like it? You don't want all of me?”

“Oh, I've already taken every inch, pal,” Reno reminds, calm and cool.

He spikes a bit of fruit with his utensil and pointedly eats it.

Cloud's getting worked up, excited. There's a fire stored in his belly. He's trying to hide it under a veneer of boredom and indifference. The lie is starting to slip and fall. The fire's starting to build and smoke. He's getting more and more careless. He's getting more and more ravenous. And Reno is giving him a decent spar. They might just get everything out in the open at last.

Reno tries his own coffee before striking his next blow.

“You know, I've never come from just anal stimulation before. I was caught up and tired though, and you must have hit a sweet spot. Fuck. Just white light and waves of pleasure…”

“Oh yeah?” Cloud drones, bouncing his chin cupped in the palm of his propped up hand. “Didn't have anything to do with what was said, right?”

Reno grins.

“Very little, I imagine.”

Cloud affords him a twitch of a sour smirk and slides his eyes away to skim the thin crowd, knowing the truth.

It had everything to do with it.

“Should try it again in private. See if it really was a fluke,” he mumbles, sounding positively and profoundly bored.

Reno takes in the statement, staring him down, probably wondering if he heard him right at all.

“Are you… flirting with me now?” he whispers, setting his mug down.

Cloud smiles and slides his gaze back across the table, leveling on his companion.

“Do you secretly like it?” he asks, eyebrows bouncing once, voice devoid of inflection, expression null, attack successful.
“Yeah, I do,” Reno readily admits.

“You know,” Cloud says, not letting up his punishment. “For how much you talk... you’re surprisingly one note in bed.”

“Really?” Reno chirps. “You're saying my dirty talk needs some work then?”

“What dirty talk?”

“Ouch.”

“Not that I don’t like hearing you cry oh fuck, oh fuck, oh—”


He takes a sulking sip of his coffee.

“Yours isn't much better...” he argues.

Cloud mirrors his action, adding a victorious flare with a muted grin.

“Oh yeah?” he digs.

“Yeah.”

They stare each other down.

A server passes.

Cloud blinks.

Reno smirks.

He probably feels he won that one, and he doesn't give Cloud the chance to make up for it either.

“How old are you?” Reno prompts.

“Why?” Cloud counters.

“So I don't feel like a complete creep.”

Cloud scoffs.

“How old are you?” he retaliates.

“I asked first,” Reno reminds.

Cloud gives in, wanting to see where (if anywhere) he's going with it.

“Nineteen. I think.”

“You think?” Reno mutters.

Cloud shrugs, his smile small.

“I lost track,” he admits. “So, how old are you?”
“Twenty-five,” Reno answers.

“Really?” Cloud exclaims.

“Yup.”

“You don't seem that old…”

“I get that a lot…”

Cloud shakes his head.

“No, I mean, you don't look that old.”

“Thanks. You look like… Uh.” Reno stalls but says it anyway. “You look like I should be put in jail.”

Cloud snorts.

“Nineteen, you said?” Reno verifies.

Cloud again shrugs.

“When did your… with the fire… and the…”

“I was twelve.”

Reno nods, considering.

“You joined Shinra as soon as you could?”

“Almost.”

Something doesn't add up.

“You’d have been with Shinra three years?”

“Yes…”

“What department?”

Cloud holds his tongue.

“You weren't always military, that's for sure. What did they have you doing? Paperwork?” Reno asks.

“More or less.”

Reno isn't so sure. Something is fishy, and he's going to sniff it out. He wants to know everything. He wants every last dismal detail. And Cloud won't tell him outright. He'll make him work for it.

“Where you—”

Only, maybe not.

“I made ammunition for a long time,” Cloud says, taking over. “On an assembly line. One of those long conveyer belts. I checked quality. Because I was so good at that, they moved me up to
explosives and measuring powders. After that… I got the paperwork. Checking boxes, matching codes, keeping log. I wasn't a soldier at first, no. I had to work up to even being able to enter boot camp. They… threw me out the first time. I couldn't… hack it. It goes… on your permanent records. It's the first thing they see.”

“They made you wait three years to join their stupid boy's club? That's fucking absurd,” Reno spits, angrily attacking a bit of food with his fork.

“They said I had a place... just not on the battlefield. Not yet. I wasn't what they were looking for. They put me to work elsewhere.”

“Oh, what the fuck?” Reno vents on his behalf.

Cloud sips his coffee, controls his tone, his features, and his angry innards.

“You said yourself: I'm a daisy. I'm small. When I did finally get accepted… and passed boot camp… and processing… my first real mission was a failure. I was injured. I lost an eye. I lost my shot. I should have been…”

“It's alright,” Reno intercepts, stopping him.

Cloud lowers his mug, eyeing it to avoid Reno.

“Doesn't impress you, does it?” he asks.

“Does killing in cold blood impress you? I was a Turk, Cloud. You know what that means?”

“Yes…”

“Are you sure?”

Uncertain silence.

Reno sighs.

“It means, more or less… I lie, I cheat, I hide in the shadows, and then I cut your throat. My only loyalty was getting the chance to do that without any silly or messy repercussions. I enjoyed it. I was even good at it.”

“So what happened?” Cloud asks. “Why aren't you still a Turk? They called you my bodyguard.”

“I got wasted,” Reno mutters. “And I killed the wrong person.”

“Oh.”

“They demoted us both.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. Impressed now?”

“Kinda,” Cloud murmurs.

The slow smile is duplicated.

They quiet to eat and drink.
Cloud steals a cherry tomato from Reno's plate.

Reno acts as if he hadn't seen a thing.

The air is calm, and maybe, if they squint, it could even be pleasant.

“How long were you in Shinra?” Cloud asks at length.

His coffee is gone and his nerves are settled. His exhaustion is no more than a haze. He has been enjoying the silence in the lull between conversation.

“A long time…” Reno returns, leaned back and basking.

He ate just about everything he carried back.

“Where you always a Turk?”

“No… Actually… I wanted... to be a pilot.”

“A pilot?” Cloud stresses.

“Yeah. I like… flying. And whatever.”

“Why didn't you become one?”

“I'm colour blind.”


“Yeah, really,” Reno groans. “Have a hard time seeing reds and greens… certain browns, and oranges…”

“That's…”

“I know, right?” Reno laments, shrugging and rolling his neck.

“What about…”

“Vegas?” he asks, picking it up.

Cloud nods.

“Not colour blind. Go figure. And he… wanted to be... important.”

“Did you always work together?” Cloud asks.

“No. Not at first. That was… my fault. I did my fly boy thing. He went political. He didn't like hurting people. I did. I do… I was picked up by the Turks. They paired me with Rude. That turned out well… I gambled away his money. And his trust. Vegas came back… because he was always watching my ass. Because, what a shocker, only I got demoted. Just me. Got knocked down a few pegs after my… big fuck up. He took the hit too. Stuck by my side, hung it out. Shinra never liked the idea of us working together, but working together started… making me see what I was doing wrong… My brother only ever wanted to… help me. And then you came along.”

He pauses for a beat, eyes skimming the table.

“Vegas and I might look the same… but we've never acted the same. Like I said, he likes girls… I
like. You know. *Other*. He's like… He was like… my personality polar opposite. And he… *liked* girls… Past tense… He used to. He would. If he wasn't fucking *dead*.”

“You miss him?” Cloud spouts.

“What kind of question is that? Of *course* I fucking do… But.” A pause. A frown. A distant stare. “It also feels like… he's coming back, you know? It's like he’s just… away… He's just been… delayed… and he’s only another hour or two away. He'll catch up. He'll give me hell. He'll really chew me out. And then we're good.”

This is news to Cloud. He knew Reno was still mourning, but not this. With how willing he is to write off Zack… and anything else Cloud says… maybe it does make sense. Maybe he forgets Zack to have him all to himself. Maybe he believes it only because he hopes it's true. He’s in denial.

“If I… think about it too long…” Reno mutters.

Cloud suddenly wants to change the subject.

“It'll kill me. I want revenge, Cloud. To put my mind at ease and my brother to rest. You keep denying me that every time you say Seph’s dead… You keep making him stronger every time you say he was in your head…”

Cloud has nothing to come back with. He never considered that either. He rolls his jaw and tongues his lip. He waits for the axe to drop.

“You put your sword to rest… and then I'm… going back to NCB2. I have to… find out what they did with Vegas. His… body. Maybe he’s… still *there*… I have to… *face* it. To *know*. I can't hide anymore, fuck. I gotta… I gotta go get him.”

Cloud hears him, and he nods in agreement, saving any words he might have on the subject to leave the moment unspoiled. But, he doesn't commiserate beyond that. He knows this is the truth. He believes him. He still isn't getting the same treatment. The moment doesn’t stay unspoiled for long.

“If you want me to help you… and keep talking to you…” Cloud murmurs, “you need to start believing me.”

Reno thinks on this, pushing his depleted dishes from him one after the other.

“I’ll do my best,” he answers.

“I hope so,” Cloud replies.

“Do you?” Reno prods, glancing up to make an impression.

“I'm doing my best…”

“You play with fire… you're gonna learn to love gettin’ burned, man.”

Cloud fidgets and looks about, checking their surroundings and marking any wayward eyes.

“Speaking of fire… Do you mind if I… smoke?”

He's not too hopeful, especially given their last subject, but he has to ask. He’d probably lie and cheat for one. The want has been crackling under his skin since before he smelled the coffee. It's the perfect occasion. He might just depart to smoke out of his range if he has to.
Reno waves a dismissive hand.

No.

He has one hell of a time with the damn lighter. The little plastic thing they picked up in Junon is on its last legs and very disagreeable.

Reno takes note.

He watches Cloud pluck his victim from a pack he chose (another addition from Junon) and then watches him strike and strike and strike away the wheel, until, finally, the damn thing sparks and offers enough of a whisper of a flame for him to catch his cigarette.

It’s a no smoking area. The swirl and smell draws plenty of annoyed looks from the staff and other patrons but they don't do anything beyond gawking on and then moving on. They don’t ask him to extinguish it.

The first drag is the best.

Reno surveys, noting and observing. He records how Cloud pinches the item's filter between his index and middle fingers. He considers every drag as it hollows his cheeks, purses his lips, and shuts his eyes. Every motion fluid and measured. Every motion calling attention to itself. And Reno is drawn in.


Shit.

Is it so bad of Reno to not want to believe him? Is it so bad that he resists and denies? Is it so strange to recoil from something you don't understand?

“That really would have made a hell of a threesome,” he says, doing a bang up job at skirting the whole problem.

“What?” Cloud poses.

“You, me, and Zack.”

“Oh.”

“I love that you do that, man... It's fucking adorable. When you say oh.”

“Oh?” Cloud breathes.

“And you're pretty fucking snarky too.”

Cloud draws in long and exhales short, the cigarette losing its battle.

“I'm working on it,” he says in a puff of grey.
“Please do,” Reno encourages.

“Are you done?” Cloud asks out of the blue, a tune too high.

Reno’s thrown by it. He feels the rushing prickle of sweat crawl over his arms, just as a twinge in his left shoulder spikes, cries out, and rolls over. He is switched on. His pulse has caught twice in his thumping heart. He’s ready for action.


“I wanna leave,” Cloud explains.

He wilts and looks down to the cigarette in his hand. The hand resting on its thin white wrist on the edge of the tan table. He’s dodging Reno, avoiding any response.

Reno’s alert and intensity dims. His attention eases. And so does his rigid posture. The concern and the aching remains. He’s still dealing with his residual hurts banging around. He’s still dealing with his foolish heart.

“Okay, sure. You alright?” he asks.

“I’ve got a... headache,” Cloud mumbles.

“You should have eaten more.”

Cloud rolls his eyes and dabs the half spent cigarette into a cold smudge of leftover liquid whatever on one of the two plates. It fizzes right out.

He closes his eyes for a moment, pacing himself, fortifying himself, and then he rocks forward, getting ready to slide from the booth and move on.

“Good talk. Let’s go get our shit back,” he announces.

Reno nods and jumps to join him.

“Yessir.”
They leave the casino floor, and the buffet, and take the long way to reach their acquaintance. Reno again leads them. He has the leash. He's trailing them through the backwoods of the many spiraling and interlacing stairwells of the Gold Saucer. For a change of pace, and for a purpose.

Reno's got ideas. He's always had such great plans. Not good plans, but big plans. He’s going to fix something. He’s got to. If it’s one thing, let it be this one thing. He’ll be able to go to the after party happy. He might even get away with accomplishing something. And something good.

Cloud's checked out. He's slumped and shrugging. He hasn't said much since getting up. He’s worn out. He’s doing his best to keep after Reno, and it’s good enough. He's staying close.

It doesn't change that his colour is off. Rosy undertones are now purpled. His eyes are closed longer than they're opened. They both appear bruised, causing that angry and hanging on black eye to stand out thrice as much. He is a shell. And lucky he doesn't have that sword to lug around.

Without telling him a thing, Reno brings them back to their original room.

Cloud's standing in the corridor now, just looking inside, not making a move.

“What’re we doing here?” he asks.

“Getting you some rest.”

Cloud shifts his weight some and lifts his head. His messy hair slides and settles. It's enough of an increase to bring Reno into his sights. Someone passes by behind him in the hallway. Silence strengthens, trembles, and breaks.

“I got to sleep. Now it's your turn,” Reno explains.

He's already inside 505 and holding the door.

“Come on,” he urges, leaned and languid. “You’re checked out, buddy. So… check in. Come on. I’ll go grab our shit while you sleep. Even if it… sounds like a bad idea. We’re safe here. You’ll be safe here. I’ll feel ten times safer with my guns. You'll feel… safer with the BDS. We need them, and you need to crash. I'll be back in a flash. There's my argument.”

He’s waving him on, reeling him in with an invisible line.

How can Cloud contest? He can't protest. He's so weary he can't keep his head up.

He stands and he looks on. Reno is patient. His face is familiar and friendly.

Cloud doesn't remember much after stepping inside the doorway. He takes that first step, that first fatal step, and by the next he’s being led. Reno has his arm and he’s showing him forward, pulling him along. Things melt and shift and go soft.

This isn’t Cloud giving in. He had nothing left to hold out. Cloud is flowing on the rushing current. He sees and feels his clothing come off again, piece by piece. He sees and feels the mattress rise up to meet him. He comprehends only the physical world. No ugly thoughts pollute. No regrets yet stir.

Reno puts Cloud to bed. He hangs by, accommodating and kind, and even lugs the hefty blankets
over his chest and up to his chin when he's down. Reno is an asset. He is needed. He is also
glimpses all too close, and then all too far, and then gone.

Cloud feels his absence and a lonesome swell of longing (agonizing), until he doesn’t. He doesn’t
feel anything, surrendered to his dreams and his body's frailty.

Now Reno has the stage.

He doesn’t quickly return to Tseng.

Of course not. Reno has a pocket full of gil and chips ready for betting. Reno has a need to sweep
the casino floor, look around, toss a round or two back, lose some money, shake some tail, and then
he’s going to talk to their friend.

He ends up doing only half of those things, to his benefit.

He gets on the casino floor, light and loose, feeling good, feeling lucky, and only roves and
wanders and keeps his head down. He makes no bets and he loses no money. He does knock back
several drinks, and he does flirt with several female servers (and a male one), and he does look
around, but he finds nothing. No one holds his interest. No thrill looks thrilling. His mind stays on
Cloud.

When he’s nice and warm, and sliding too closely to passersby, he drifts away, looking elsewhere
for greener pastures and louder distractions. He too soon finds himself dizzy and ducked against an
exterior wall, the thrumming of music and pulsing of lights around him wreaking havoc on his
sensitive head.

He pushes off and retreats further.

The marketplace is nice and quiet. More quiet than the roaring casino anyway. He stumbles down
a thin lane, curving on into infinity. It's moist and tight, lined and hanging with the shades of
colours he can’t distinguish or appreciate, smells he can’t decipher, and jewelry he still can’t
afford.

He's on the hunt for something special, and he has something in mind too. He browses, being
herded along with a stream of shoppers and drifters. He’s gazing, bleary-eyed, merchandise and
faces blending. Voices call and fade. He’s going to end up lost and hungover at this rate.

He stumbles and twists, finally stepping aside from the living river.

It’s the smell that gets to him first.

A prickle, a pinch, a discomfort.

It reminds him of Zack.

He spins around, and there, before him, is a typical merchant's spread with an open selection and
superfluous awnings dripping overhead. It's a bazaar style shop.

Flat and wide surfaces span, strewn with organized items and eye-catchers. Antique chests sit far
removed but propped open, chalk full of fabrics and junk presented for viewing. Deeper still there
are overflowing shelves, glass displays, hanging lights, and many hand-written signs.

People press in and shift by at his back.

As he looks on, Reno spots a tall bamboo rack amongst the chaos. It’s riddled with butane lighters, plastic and metal, big and small. It houses upside down coils of loose-leaf tobacco, packs of pre-rolled cigarettes, electric cigarettes, and tins of tobacco chew.

He’s stopped in front of a smoke shop.

Jackpot.

“Can I help you?” asks the nearby shopkeeper.

Reno stares on for a moment.

The shopkeeper stares right back.

“Uh, yeah, sorry,” Reno mutters. “Cigarettes?”

“What brand?”

“What ya got?”


“Stop and Slow?” Reno inquires.

“Yeah, you know… Those stupid ads the company ran years ago? *Stop* and enjoy our smooth blend… *Slow* down and relax with a blah blah blah… Shinra got to ‘em early.”

Reno snorts.

The shopkeeper shrugs.

“So?” he presses. “What's your poison?”

“None of the above, actually.”

“Well, shit. I've got weed too. They finally legalized it here. Strawberry Cough, Tonberry Tease, Mako Madness, Cat Piss,” the shopkeeper drones.

“Uh, no,” Reno responds. “Maybe next time though... This is actually… for a friend of mine. What do you suggest? I'm trying to get him to quit… but don't want any tears, you know?”

“Sure…” the shopkeeper drawls.

He moves away to grab something from the precarious display behind him.

“Try these.”

He's holding out a cellophane wrapped pack, clean and white.

Reno takes the pack and looks it over.
Shinra Smooth.

“Thanks,” he says. “Give me two more while you’re at it. Might as well… And I, uh. Need a lighter too... Not that plastic shit either. Something... durable.”

Tseng’s never been very difficult to find. More often than not he's the one finding you.

Reno knows of one place that has always attracted them both. It comes with the territory, and their bleak history. They used to have common ground there, even if they never saw eye to eye. Reno's sitting there now, waiting out the last minutes of his freedom.

Before long, Tseng slides into the barstool next to him. He cozies in on his right.


Reno scrunches his already hunched shoulders.

“He was like… a dirty doctor…” he grumbles.

“I can see it. Vause is a... relationship counselor... of sorts,” Tseng explains, smiling to himself. “He sees people who have particular troubles. Personal. Emotional. Psychological.”

“Did you know he also sells sex tapes?” Reno asks, grinning his grin and rising up to gulp the remainder of his now warm drink.

“Perhaps,” Tseng replies.

“Where's our stuff?” Reno asks.

The empty glass striking the bar adds a nice punch.

“Leaving so soon?” Tseng murmurs.

“Don't like the atmosphere,” Reno offers.

Tseng nods. He pauses and taps his black shoe’s sole on the bar's black metal foot rail, thoughtful, restless, annoyed, or none of the above.

Tap tap tap.

“You might like to know then… I've been having a lot of Shinra guys ask about you two… By name. They've been rather adamant. And evasive about details.”

“You worried about us now?” Reno groans, pushing his glass away.

“Isn't it obvious that I've always been worried?” Tseng mutters. He straightens and swivels, focusing fully on his difficult target. “If you leave the resort grounds you’ll run into trouble. I wouldn't want anything to happen to my pal Vegas.”

Reno tilts his head, inquisitive.

Tseng shrugs his slight shoulders.
“That's who they might think you are anyway, but that won't help you for long. It's just going to confuse them. They'll figure it out. They always do. Cloud? He was a whole different story... He's a little harder to hide.”

“You covered for us?” Reno barks, finally correcting to turn and look his way.

“I might have said a few things that weren't entirely accurate…”

“Oooh, you sly dog,” Reno exclaims, bouncing in his seat and then ducking to give Tseng a harmless cuff to his left shoulder. “I fucking love you. About as much as I hate you.”

Tseng nods, somber and contained.

“Feeling's mutual.”

Reno settles.

“So... where's our stuff?”

“How did it happen?” Tseng opts.

“What?”

“How did Vegas die?” Tseng rephrases.

“His…”

Reno has to do a retake.

“That hesitation is comforting…” Tseng notes.

The comment is not appreciated.

“His throat was cut,” Reno tells him.

Tseng's eyebrows twitch. His face, now in profile, already somber, turns colder still. His whole body freezes and goes tight. He looks like he's taking it well. But, from what Reno knows of him... this is big. He's having a reaction. He's showing a reaction. And he doesn't give him long to consider it either. He’s on him in seconds.

They were already sitting side by side, next to each other, leaned in, close enough for a pat on the back or a peck on the cheek. Tseng needed only to slide and step once and they meet, joining and jarring. The bridge is forded and gapped, and Reno is caught in the middle.

“Throat cut, huh?” Tseng hisses into Reno’s alcohol-warmed face.

It must look intimate from the outside. It must look like Tseng is whispering secrets and desires as he pulls a docile Reno closer. Closer and closer.

It's not intimate. It’s not gentle. No one would stop Tseng anyway. He's the real deal. He's the boss. He’s got his fingers clawed at the back of Reno’s neck and a knife (very likely Vegas’) cold and flat against his rat throat.

“Where's Sephiroth?” Tseng bites out.

Reno stiffens and swallows. He’s been here before. He’s not too shocked, to be honest. The blade
bounces and shifts and then presses in all the nearer, demanding and daring.

“Dead,” he answers, low and stable.

“You better hope so,” Tseng growls. “You didn't do it, did you? You couldn't have.”

“No…” Reno groans, rolling his eyes—rolling them closed to the recollection and Tseng’s smoldering onyx eyes. “I… I didn't get the chance.”

The knife disappears and Reno is pushed back. He sways but keeps his seat.

He doesn't quickly move or speak. He blinks and watches, not sure what to expect.

Tseng is sitting as if nothing happened.

“Where's…” Reno starts to mumble.

“I shouldn't give it back,” Tseng monotones.

He means the knife.

Reno sneers and rocks forward, forgetting his disadvantages so quickly.

“You'll give it back… or I take it back.”

“You're willing to start a fight here?” Tseng counters. “In my casino? At my bar? With just your fists? With your boy toy locked away somewhere? How irresponsible.”

“Don't force me.”

“He really is dead then…”

“Yes, he fucking is. Give me his knife.”

Tseng does not look ready to oblige.

“Give me his fucking knife,” Reno presses.

“You'd be rather easy to get rid of right now, you know,” Tseng divulges, his tone dulled to a low rumble. “No guns, no knife, no fingers, no fight. I could make a lot of people happy and finally take you out of the picture altogether. You've had more than enough time to slither around and poison innocence. You wouldn't be missed. You should be returned to your kin. Be happy knowing it'll be carried out by someone you know. And with your brother's own knife. Poetic. Proper. Easy.”

“Don't fucking go there, man…” Reno growls.

He's on edge. He's throbbing. That familiar rush of sweat is biting along his arms. That swell and ache is writhing deep down in his damaged shoulder. He is turned on, ready and waiting. But. Maybe he should let it happen. Just let it happen. Just suck it up and get it over with. He’s been so afraid of it this entire time. It: death, dying, permanence. Let it come.

This voice might not sound familiar, but it is true, and it’s loud. It’s telling him to let that metal slide long across his throat, like a grin, a twin, a smiling maw. Let that hot, hot blood paint down his chest and drip away. It’s urging him to rejoin his brother. And repent. Repent.
The butterfly knife is again produced, closed and unthreatening. It's small enough to hide in a palm, but it's something irreplaceable. It’s the last thread Reno has of his twin Vegas, other than what runs through his veins, and the expressions on his face, and the red in his hair.

They both look to the item between them.

“Would you die for it?” Tseng muses.

“I'd kill for it too,” Reno swears.

Tseng extends his arm and offers the object.

Reno does not jump to take it.

“You need a vacation, man,” he mutters, rubbing his throat. “I better not be bleeding…”

He retrieves the knife, trying not to show too much haste.

Tseng’s smile is bitter.

“I just need peace,” he says.

Reno gives him an indifferent shrug.

“I just need my guns. And a giant two ton sword.”

Tseng eyes him, nothing of his impending intentions alluded.

“Gonna make me sweat for those too?” Reno prods, engaging his slithering smirk and lean. “Just admit you like seeing me helpless, man. I'll play along. I’ll submit. I’ll give you a messy blow job in the bathroom if that makes you feel any better. You can pull my hair. You can poke me with your knife. You can call me Vegas…”

“You’re appalling, you know that?” Tseng berates, his body remaining rigid and his sterile voice cold. “I should make you sweat... until you couldn’t anymore… but I'm afraid you'd enjoy it too much. I have better things to do besides.”

“Really? Better than this?” Reno purrs. He curves his spine. “How about we have a few more drinks and then you take me up to your office? We can loosen you up, straighten you out. Get you realigned. Bend me over that awful desk of yours. Make me pay.”

“Fuck you, Reno,” Tseng returns.

Reno tilts away and sniffs.

"And here I thought you didn't wanna…”

Love and admiration. That’s all anyone can ask for. That’s all anyone really wants.

Cloud has nothing but bad feelings and burning buildings, and the smoking skeletal remains of what was love and admiration. It's his welcome image: a flicker, a flare, an outline, an understanding. Both his parents’ house and Zack's house at once, overlaid, together, inflamed and
Crumbling.

Cloud knows the score and it still didn’t feel real when he was watching it, the flames overwhelming and torturous, his choices reduced to struggles and strife. He still can't compute or absorb what was happening and he's watching it right now, stock footage.

It didn't feel real when he had peace, staring him right in the face. He didn't get the chance to understand, adore, or tire of it. It didn’t last longer than a blink and yet he'll remember it to his final breath. He had love. He had admiration. He had a single moment, hot as ember, in a mass of moments, pure and clean, and all his, and it wasn’t longer than a few days.

Dust. Just dust. Sand, grit, grain, ash, rubble. Even that’s temporary. When they’re all dead and gone, what will any of his memories of Zack matter? What will any of this have meant? What will he have proved? He wanted to be loved. He wanted to be brave. He never felt brave.

But, Zack never felt brave either. Don’t get it wrong. Don’t think bravery gives you armour. Don’t think it wipes away the doubt, the fear, the hesitation, and the thumping pulse, and the desire to run. Oh, no. Don’t misread. Zack was always fighting the desire to run. He was done by the time they got to Gongaga. He couldn’t anymore. He wasn’t ever brave. He never once felt brave. He just knew how to take a beating. He just stood longer than the rest.

Cloud still doesn’t understand that. He doesn't understand Zack and his devotion. Even when he was being shown. Even when he was being told. His absence might only make it clearer.

I love you. I love you more. I love you most.

Admit it was real, and then come to terms with it being gone. Come to terms with mortality and morality, and knowing there’s not going to be another shot. Come to terms with knowing Zack had to push the thought of him aside as he crawled bloody, gouged, and burning to his bedroom (and he really had to dig deep) otherwise he would have scrabbled out his front door and met him. He would have called out and dropped, and Cloud would have dashed over to hold and comfort him in his last moments. And then Zack would have gone off like a grenade in his face.

If the explosion was big enough to level a house, Cloud wouldn't have known what hit him until he woke up in whatever comes after. Reno would have left Gongaga numb and alone. Or died in the fallout. And that would have been an ending, one way or another. Flashy or not.

Love. Zack stayed away so he wouldn’t hurt him. Them. He left him so nobody else could hurt him. He killed Sephiroth and tested Reno. He killed the Director and bested the threats. He thrashed and warred and made his important choices. Out of love.

He might have accepted death, and that he was loved too, but he couldn’t accept leaving Cloud. After everything they had. After joy and wonder and faith restored. He couldn't, can't, and he won't. His duty might have been done, and he might have felt at ease, and calm, and clear in the end, but he didn't leave him. He swarmed to him. He rebelled. Bits of him are sticking to and filling Cloud. His presence, his memories. They'll make Cloud strong. Or they'll drive him down.

He can’t rest after all. He can’t fade away. And neither can Cloud. Not completely. Not entirely. Not when Zack’s humming in his head. Not when he’s smiling his classic smile, perfect, whole and clean, and as he was the day they met. He's young and unbruised, oozing with promise and hope, fire and fight. Unfamiliar with the taste of defeat and fear. Cocky. Steadfast. Beautiful.

The fire is erased. The flames are gone. There’s nothing but blue sky spanning, smeared with white cloud and vaporous ether. Nothing but the morning sun bursting its glorious rays of translucent
yellow-white around the breaks, blooming. The only thing blazing is the amber-red horizon. There are no burning houses or dark alleys. No visions of death and despair. There is calm and relief and Zack, the only physical presence. He is form and substance at his side. He is motion and matter revolving to face him. He is reaching out and moving closer.

Close enough to touch.

I’m gonna miss you.

“Don’t go.”

“I just got here,” Reno mumbles.

Cloud recoils, sliding sideways across the bed.

“What a wonderful way to greet someone…” Reno whispers, giving off the scent of alcohol. “Especially someone who brought you gifts.”

“Huh?” Cloud grumbles, rubbing the hair (the sleep, and the aroma) from out of his face.


“Oh, you’re too fucking cute…” he breathes.

Cloud blinks up at him.

“Sleepy head,” Reno mutters, leaning down to override his line of sight.

“Did you… get the sword?” Cloud asks, squinting at the dim light, and the blurry face.

Reno sways and points behind him.

There the sword lies on the unused bed.

“Did you dream about me?” Reno purrs.

Cloud shakes his head, causing himself more problems than solving them. His head is airy and angry, and taking much too long to collect. He scoots up to sit, pressing his palm to his left eye, rubbing at the remaining film of fatigue.

“That's a shame…” Reno laments, drawing himself away and out of immediate range. “Get dressed and I'll show you what goodies I got.”

As just more random acts of kindness, Reno brings in Cloud's clothing and shoes from the front room. He sets the shoes on the floor. The rest he lays on the bed next to him.

Cloud does not make comment. He only moves to cover himself. He gets so far as putting his socks and slacks on and then he's sitting back on the edge of the bed, and staring into space.

That's what it looks like to Reno anyway.

“Hey,” Reno mutters.

He approaches to wave a hand at him.
“Anyone home?”

“The sword…” Cloud whispers.

“It’s right there,” Reno assures.

He even goes through the trouble of taking a look, and, nope, everything’s normal.

“What about it?”

“It’s blue,” Cloud hisses.

“Blue?”

Reno looks again. He squints.

Nothing is amiss.

He is rather confused now.

Cloud, on the other hand, he is serious. He looks serious. He's seeing something different. He's not wrong, and he's not lying. He's positive. The sword is glowing a soft sky blue. It's radiating the shade down its entire length, pommel to point, lit from within. It’s drawing him in.

He rises, half naked, and goes to it, passing right by Reno as he stands. Cloud crawls up onto the bed and beside the sword. He pulls it onto his lap. It teeters lengthwise over his thighs, hulking and warm.

Warm. It’s warm to the touch.

“Feel it,” Cloud urges.

“What?” Reno groans, but he's on his way.

“It’s warm,” Cloud insists, hand flat on the face of the blade.

Reno digs a knee into the mattress and leans to rest his hand below Cloud's.

The gleam seems to radiate through their fingers and the tops of their hands, red, white, and blue. Cloud is convinced.

Reno sees only their hands: a contrast of sizes, big and small. And he rather likes it.

“I guess,” he offers, pulling away. “Feels like a sword. Looks like a sword. What's your point?”

Cloud stares on, entranced. He doesn't speak or move an inch. He stays planted, like some kind of human monument of an atrocity. He's blank faced, on his knees, sword over his lap.

“I dunno…” he finally mumbles.

Reno shrugs.

“I honestly see nothing,” he stresses, really trying to be helpful.

Cloud straightens up to look on him, his wide and wild eyes glisten and accuse.

“You better not be fucking with me,” he grits out.
Reno laughs and retreats.

“Hah! You're fucking with me, man! I don't see shit. I promise you. I can see blue just fine too. Even if I've been drinking. Now finish getting dressed and quit screwing around.”

Cloud regards the weapon, expression void.

Reno stands by, calm expression slipping.

Cloud does not go on. He doesn't ramble or complain, insist or faint. He shifts the BDS aside. He doesn't stand tall on the mattress and lift it up to bring down righteously on Reno, no. He scoots away and gets to his feet, leaving the terrible object to rest.

He plucks his button down shirt from off his bed and slips his arms inside the fabric. Leaving the garment undone, he moves to his shoes next, retaking his seat on the bed's edge to do so.

Reno can now exhale.

“You really keep me guessing, man,” he sighs.

“It wouldn't be fun otherwise,” Cloud replies, borrowing Reno's words.

Reno likes the snark and sass, but it's getting to him too. He remains quiet until Cloud comes to rest, fully dressed. He hangs around and waits. He stays away from thinking and wondering.

“Here,” Reno says, coming up to him at last.

He hands Cloud a small something, cold and weighted.

Cloud doesn't comprehend at first. He accepts it willingly, caught off guard. He rolls the object in his fingers and then holds it up in front of his nose for a closer look.

It's a brushed steel windproof lighter.

It strikes him two ways.

One: this is a thoughtful gift. Reno noticed he was having trouble with the plastic disposable, so he got him something more permanent. He went out of his way to find him something useful.

Two: it's just like Zack's. The one he used to light his cigarettes with way back when. The one they lost when Sephiroth and Shinra intercepted him. It’s just another reminder.

He molds a fist around it and looks away.

“Thanks,” Cloud murmurs.

“They don't come filled like that, by the way,” Reno says. “I did it for you already, so… you're good to go. I will have to carry around the fuel though, which is a medium sized container of something incredibly volatile. You know, adds to the whole excitement value… I guess. Annnd… that's not all.”

He drops a small package onto his lap.

Cloud picks it up, his disposition not improving.

“Cigarettes,” he mumbles.
“You were getting low,” Reno explains.

Cloud hangs his head and bunches his aching shoulders. He's being torn in two. He doesn't need this. He can't handle this. It's reminding him too much of what he's missing and needing. What he's trying so hard to forget but only fumbling around.

It's not that he wants to forget. He can't forget, and he won't. But, he can't think about it either, or he'll fold in on himself. He'll freeze. He'll drop. He'll unravel. No matter how it hurts, and how he’s pushed, and how he keeps finding himself entertaining the idea, he can't turn to Reno either. He can't bend for him, rush to him, cry out for him. Not completely. Not like he needs. He can't. He won't. For the sake of his withered heart and his jumbled memories.

He is torn.

“You jerk,” he mutters.

“Knew you'd like 'em,” Reno chimes.

He stands and spins away.

“What did Tseng say?” Cloud opts, putting the items aside and out of sight.

“No hard feelings,” Reno summarizes.

He stretches and reaches back for his pink comb, skimming it over his head and through his neat hair. A habit out of anxiety, rather than function. He preens and preens, burying the truth.

“Can we go now?” Cloud asks.

“Oh,” Reno crows, his grin at full intensity. “I like this. I like you all pushy but asking permission.”

He tucks the comb away and plants his hands on his cocked hips. He is so theatrical, and always more than willing to pick a fight, and jab and prod and pick.

“It's definitely nicer than pushy and spewing insults, or nothing at all. I dig it. Push me around, buddy. Throw me around. I can take it. Just stay away from the self diagnosing, and the… knives, and the fucked up theories, okay?”

“Don't like it too much…” Cloud grumbles. “Probably won't last long…”

“Oh, come on. Don't go crushing my hopes and dreams or anything… We just got over this.”

Cloud sneers.

They're not good.

But, they're good enough.

They’re going to be dead if Reno doesn’t stall them. He's sure of it. He knows what's coming. If they leave the Saucer... they're in trouble. Big trouble. He has to hang on as long as he can. He's got to press his luck, rile him up, sink well beyond good enough, and play for time. All just to keep him here, hold him back, and delay having to admit they’re fucked.

And everything was going so well...

“We can go, but tell me this first… You feelin’ better?” he asks, setting the bait.
“I've been… worse,” Cloud grumbles, following the lead.

“Any bad dreams you wanna tell me about?”

“I don't… remember any…” Cloud admits, restlessly working his hands.

Reno nods.

“Good.”

He waits a beat. He slides his eyes away in careful avoidance. He's not going to enjoy this.

They're just standing here, spread out, two black suits in a hotel room, suspended in that forgotten time between rest and action. Reno has every option to leave on good terms and let them skip into disaster. He has every option to shit on everything and tell him the truth.

“By the way, there's a four year gap… Between you leaving home… and Shinra. I didn't notice it until now. Thought your dad or Shinra was the issue... But you told us those too easily. So… What happened? Before. In that period of time. I'm curious.”

Reno slides his eyes back up and regards Cloud sideways, head tilted. He's expecting annoyance, an excuse, or a lie. He’s not seeing the signs. Cloud just stands there.

“I was fucked,” he answers.

Reno's searching look turns steely. He corrects his tilted head.

“For… the short answer,” Cloud mutters.

“What's the long one?” Reno presses.

Oh, he hates himself. At least he's not sober.

Cloud clears his throat, looks down to their feet, and resettles his weight.

“I didn’t have anyone to watch my back like you did. I got… swept up and paraded around. A fucking summer flower bending under a fucking downpour. A daisy. I was alone. And helpless.”

“Shit,” Reno breathes.

Cloud doesn't allow him the time to recover. He charges on and gives him exactly what he asked for.

“I left Nibelheim and hit the road. I didn’t look back. I didn’t ask for help. I took the trails and closed routes. I didn't stay in one place for too long. I figured that would keep me safe, right? I was even smaller then too. But… sneaking around didn’t help me for long. Some group found me one night… walking between villages. Some fucked up gang. I was so hungry and tired. I was… lured into their camp… and they tied me up… I was fucked. And then I was primped and polished, and made to look nice. They sold me off. I was passed around, bought and sold. Twice. I was a prisoner. Until… I got away. And that was… just the first half… of the first year. For a year and a half after… I didn't dare go outside. I stayed in hiding. And then I… I guess… I just got used to it.”

“Fuck, Cloud… I’m...”

Reno's all sudden action. He’s reaching out for him, closing their small gap and collecting him in his arms. He needs to hold him and be positive he's whole. He needs to comfort him and rub away
the old pain. He can’t imagine his scars. He can’t imagine his trials.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry…” he rambles. “I’m sorry, man. Your life has been so fucking rough. You haven't gotten a single break, have you? Shit. You fucking pitiful thing. You poor guy. I'm sorry. I’m... Fuck, fuck, fuck. How can you still be so… How are you still so…”

Pure.

Cloud gets the hint. He has an idea. He has the steely look now. Even as Reno holds him close and accepts him, his arms warm around him. He’s doing his job well. His embrace is just tight enough. His gentle swaying is calming. But, Cloud can't humour him. He can’t.

“I don't… I'm not…” he musters, trying to pull away.

“Fucking relax,” Reno rumbles, keeping his arms locked.

“Reno…” Cloud groans.

“Relax. Let me fucking process this…” he insists.

Cloud does not. He rears and peels himself away.

Reno relents but stays close. His expression is not that of pleasure. It's downright livid.

“How old were you?” he interrogates. “Fuck. Where did this happen? Could you remember their faces if you saw one? I'll kill ‘em. I’ll fucking kill ‘em. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“It’s over. It happened… seven years ago.”

Reno gapes.

“How old were you?” he interrogates. “Fuck. Where did this happen? Could you remember their faces if you saw one? I'll kill ‘em. I’ll fucking kill ‘em. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“It’s over. It happened… seven years ago.”

Reno gapes.

“Fuck! Like that matters? It’s ridiculous it happened at all! I feel so shitty… I've been nothing but… Fuck. What an asshole. I never thought… You seemed so innocent… Fuck. I'll kill every last one of ‘em. Every last one. I swear. Tell me where it happened. Is it close?”

“It's over and done,” Cloud hisses, looking aside.

“For fuck's sake, Cloud. I fucking… I sold you off. Just like they did. I just… And you didn't say a thing. I thought I might have been expanding your horizons at least… A little danger… a little intrigue. But, I've only been giving you more reason to hate my guts.”

“That's… not true,” Cloud argues, but he’s all out of force and fire.

“You're a liar. You're a fucking minx and a bad liar, man. I thought it was just little stuff… but it's not. You've been holding back a real doozie. I can't believe this. No wonder you didn't wanna talk to me. You really are too good to be true. You're a brute. And amazing. And I'm…”

“You're the best I got,” Cloud interrupts.

Reno sneers.

“The best out of what? No one. There aren’t many options anymore. I don't feel good about that. I don't feel proud. I don't feel smart. I don't feel forgiven.”

“That's not my fault,” Cloud sighs, shrugging his shoulders.
“Oh no?”

“I forgive you,” Cloud declares, looking him straight on.

Reno stands firm.

“For what?”

“Shouldn’t you be telling me that?” Cloud presses.

Reno pops. He blurs it all out.

“Forgive me for the shower, the black eye, the deal. For Zack, and bitching, and talking always. Forgive me for NCB2, and the stage, and the kiss, and the past. And for flirting with you, and not believing you, and for loving you. Forget everything. Forgive everything. Please. Pl—”

“I told you. I forgive you, Reno. I do,” Cloud assures, holding the trembling gaze.

Just a couple of blinks. And then they both look away. That could be the end of that, that should be, that would be, because Reno can’t torture Cloud much longer, but this is also Reno we’re talking about, and he has every intention of keeping them out of Shinra’s hands. He’s going to twist the knife further. He’s going to press and dig deeper. He needs more time.

“You forgive me, you need me, but you don’t respect me, admire me, or hardly care about me… and you sure as shit don’t love me. I wanna… know everything about you. I wanna make your life easier… I want you to come and cry on my shoulder. I want you to feel safe. Like you don’t have to cower or hide… and clutch to bad memories. I’ve only been able to think about you. And I’ve never thought about anyone this long in my entire awful existence.”

“Reno…”

“I love you.”

Cloud groans, pained by the words. He sulks into misery.

“Don’t…”

“I love you.”

Cloud's face shifts and pulls, agonized. He glances away and takes a step in reverse.

“Again?” Reno prods.

They’re just two suits in a hotel room. Two suits tangling for sense. And time.

“I love you, Cloud,” Reno announces.

“Stop it. Stop saying that!” Cloud howls. He backtracks further, retreating, running away, shaking his head, no no no. “Why do you always have to make things so difficult?”

Reno holds his ground, finding he is surprisingly calm.

“Because I'm not gonna die without having tried. I'm gonna live. I'm gonna fight.”

Cloud shudders and shakes, badly containing his imminent outburst.
Reno is unmoved. He remains. He crosses his arms.

“I don’t deserve it,” Cloud moans. “I don’t deserve your love. I didn’t deserve Zack’s. And I can't... love you both either,” Cloud huffs, defeated, relaxing inside the revelation.

“And why not?” Reno counters. “You're a big boy.”

“I can't... _forget_ about him…”

“I'm not asking you to, man.”

And Reno isn’t. He’s just asking for his fair shot. He just wants his equal opportunity.

“I just... want him back,” Cloud groans, offering his hands, emphasizing their emptiness.

“I _know_. And that’s okay,” Reno assures.

“But you're... making me…”

Utter, miserable defeat. Cloud shrugs and curls in around himself.

Reno tilts his head. His fingers dig into his own biceps, betraying his calm.

“Making you?”

Cloud musters and manages. He nods, his wild hair falling over his eyes.

“You're all I've got,” he moans, just two moist lips now. “And I don't deserve it.”

Reno drops his arms to his sides.

“You know, I appreciate the thought... but, I really wish you didn't make it sound like such a... punishments. At least try to make it seem like you had some part in it.”

“I did. I do. I’m still here, aren’t I?” Cloud claims.

“Do you _really_ have a choice?”

“Are you saying... I’m your prisoner?”

“Prisoner? No. But do you _really_ think I wouldn’t follow you?”

“Shouldn’t you be going back to NCB2 anyway?” Cloud scoffs.

“Shouldn’t you be fainting about now?” Reno snaps.

Cloud scoffs and bristles.

“I’m not as frail as I used to be…”

He’s putting up a good enough fight. But, Reno... he’s a natural. And a stone cold killer.

“Oh, yeah? Because of your hitchhiker? If he really _is_ in there... how come he's not beating my ass crooked for, you know... _fucking_ you?” Reno asks, pointing to Cloud’s blond head. “He told me to not even _think_ about you, let alone _touch_ you. I got well beyond that.”

“You haven't given him a reason to be jealous...”
“Bullshit,” Reno growls, slightly thrown.

“He isn't threatened by you,” Cloud explains, glancing aside.

Reno laughs, humourless and short.

“Yeah, okay. That sounds about right...”

“He knows I’ll always… love him... the most,” Cloud stammers. “He knows that because I know that. And I know that... because he knows that... And I know he... just wants me... to be happy.”

Reno bounces on his heels.

“Okay, there. Hah! That’s good sense. He had some good points sometimes, man. That’s what I’ve been saying. So just... listen to him. Just... be happy. Just let it be what it is. Stop... knowing he’s dead but jumping at the thought he might... come back. That’s not gonna work. Trust me.”

“I should just…” Cloud breathes, eyes gone distant. “...give up hope?”

Reno winces.

“No,” he answers.

He lifts his right hand, the less offensive one, and finds Cloud, directing his head to bring their eyes into alignment. He peers on, fingers curled under his chin, eyes intense and challenging, trying to make an impression, trying to collect his full attention.

“Just give up... the responsibility,” he asserts. “You didn’t kill him, Cloud. You say he wants you to be happy, right? Sounds like... he wants you to move on. It also sounds like... I will admit… that he didn’t leave you either. Don’t punish yourself. Stop punishing yourself. Let yourself… breathe.”

“He shouldn’t have…”

“Don’t go there, man,” Reno warns, brow creasing.

“He was—”

Cloud closes his eyes and shivers, rearing his chin away from Reno's reach.

“Cloud.”

Now come the tears.

Reno doesn’t look away. He wants to, oh, he wants to, but he stays true. He watches every single second, start to finish. He’s the culprit. It wouldn’t be a job well done if someone didn’t cry, after all.

“He shouldn’t have…” Cloud snivels, “he shouldn’t have… died... alone…”

It doesn’t sit well in Reno’s guts, or his chest, or his throat. It's acidic and vile.

“I know, man,” he returns.

Cloud does not improve. He descends. He slips and stutters and crumbles. Section by section, foot by foot, he folds and falls. He’s crying and shaking and scrubbing at his face. Trying to stop the reaction. Trying to fight off the tears, angrily, uneasily, and only making them worse.
Reno is stiff and dumb on the sidelines. He’s still kinda drunk and still kinda distant. He's absorbing the scene slower than normal and from rather far away. He witnesses Cloud sink to his knees, and it’s déjà vu, and no less difficult to watch. Reno is being chipped away.

He finally goes to him.

Cloud moved some distance back in his agony, so it's not a simple task. Reno has to work fast or he might catch onto his intentions and flip. He might just shut him out again. He might just go the extra mile and get violent.

He reaches him without contest, his steps long and sure. Four strides gone and Reno sinks to his knees at the very end. The results are positive so far, even as they’re terrible. The damage is done, and all the closer, but Cloud's within reach. He brings his arms around and pulls him into a snug squeeze.

Cloud comes easily. He gulps and whines, muttering, grumbling, groaning against him. He hides his face in his chest. He doesn’t fight or explode.

Reno listens and he hums and he grips. He holds on and strokes his back. He pets and presses until Cloud lets out all he has, whimpered and wet. He braces him through it as he strains and seizes, held dear against his frame, nice and tight.

Cloud quiets and calms after a good jag. His breathing relents from hyperventilation and moves on into gasps and hitches, proceeding from there into huffs and sniffs.

They're still just two black suits in a hotel room, on the floor between two beds, embraced and connected, stuck in a critical moment.

Reno's heart is thumping.

Cloud hasn't made too distressing a sound in minutes.

Reno leans back enough to bring his face into view.

His cheeks are wet with tears. His eyes are lidded and tired. His jaw is clenched solid when it’s not chattering. Reno knows this because it's there for him to see. Cloud isn’t hiding anything. He’s looking at him dead on, offering him the whole awful image, censoring nothing.

If Reno had told him about Shinra, they wouldn’t be here. He wouldn’t be soothing his fears. He wouldn’t be the hero, the protector, the strong shoulder. Cloud wouldn’t be hollow and weak and totally out of shape in front of him.

The real fear Reno has… It’s not about being captured, or tortured, or held responsible. It’s not exactly about Cloud being torn away from him by bad men in uniform, no (but that is one of them). It’s about Cloud getting it into his crazy little head that he wants to walk right out there and meet Shinra, because he wants revenge, and he wants death, and he would surely find both.

Reno will hold him here as long as he has to. He needs to come up with a real plan. He needs to decide whether or not telling him really would be a better idea (or even an option at this point), because he’s lying right now. It’s bitter, bitter bile in his black guts.

Cloud sniffs and clears his throat.

Reno has a choice to make.
He looks down on Cloud’s abused face and runs into the same problem he always does.

Cloud is lovely.

Beaten and dragged out. Gutted and shredded. Smashed and tossed. He’s still lovely. And he’s really been through the ringer this time. This Cloud, the closest Reno might ever get to the real Cloud, is twice as fragile and twice as terrifying. Reno wants nothing more than to defend him.

“Please let me help you,” he whispers.

That look, that face, those lips. The nearness, the smell, the connotations.

Reno leans in and tastes salt.

It’s not an immediate thing. Before any sparks and flashes, wetness, warmth, and tasting, Reno has to move his head down, and their lips connect soft and subtle. It’s sweet and tender. There is no overwhelming rush or urge. No blind lust and gushing fluids. It’s pleasant and sultry in their collective bellies. The sensitive flesh tells him Cloud’s lips are dry. It tells him he deserves more.

Reno just wanted some relief. After Tseng, after the news. The gentle kiss is short, because all too soon, and none too surprising, it’s getting hot and liquid. Reno’s tongue emerges and those dry lips are licked until they gasp and part. Cloud allows him entry. And, oh, does he taste good. He tastes smoky and real. His tongue is steady and receptive. His breath is molten. His flesh is clammy.

Reno pours into him, forcing his blond head back, deepening the depths and lengthening their reach. He slides his tongue inside and back as far as it will go. He lifts his hands to his hair, roaming and pulling. Their teeth click, lips stretch. Cloud hums, groans, and endures the treatment, returns the treatment, and then he turns aside, and the spell is broken.

Heavy breathing. Nothing beyond heavy breathing. Reno does not push it. He doesn't try to achieve anything or force an end. But, he does leave his hands put to pet, ruffle, and enjoy feathery gold hair while they can.

It doesn't last. The intimacy ends. Cloud wiggles and extricates himself, rising to his full height. He turns to stand over his bed.

Reno watches from the floor as he lights a cigarette.

He falters but stays quiet. He sure as shit won’t stop him. He won’t tell him about Shinra either. He’ll hope they can slip by as quickly as possible and be off anyone’s radar by the time the resort starts to stir and swell and breathe. They’re right by the elevators and the desert edge. They can do it. That’s his plan. That’s the best he’s got… Cut and run.

Cloud sits himself on his bed and smokes one of his new cigarettes. Reno rises and slumps onto the opposite bed, the sword at his back, and watches him smoke it.

“Those are awful,” Cloud complains.

Reno doesn't say a word just yet. He doesn't repeat what he said earlier about him not being able to smoke in here. He knows that as soon as Cloud’s done with that smelly fucking thing... they're leaving. That’s it. They're headed off, and this moment will be done. So, he lets him smoke.

“They're lights,” Reno mumbles.

Cloud shrugs his shoulders.
Reno can’t give up just yet. He stretches and groans.

“You sure you don’t wanna stay longer?” he asks.

He's all out of options. The direct route it is.

“Why not stay a few days, huh? We have this room… and we have all this money… We have nice suits and our youth… We could hang out and raise hell and really enjoy ourselves. What’s the rush? Lemme take you on a date.”

“I’m leaving. Whether you follow or not,” Cloud utters.

They pack up and make to depart room 505, and the resort, and the giant golden tower. The first place they could almost call a safe place in a long time, and now they're leaving it. Whether half of them want to or not. They won't be leaving it empty-handed though.

Reno, being Reno (and also being annoyed, and wronged, and wrong enough on his own), he takes it upon himself to go through the place and take anything that strikes his fancy.

He empties the potion bar. He takes all the little shampoos and grooming tools, and several clean towels. He grabs whatever might come in handy later. And some that won't.

Cloud, again, takes up only the sword and his cigarettes, and presently, the windproof lighter. He doesn’t bother with a rucksack.

They're tracking back through the monotonous cardinal red hallway one last time. It's quiet and well guarded, and it doesn’t feel right to Reno. It takes no time at all to reach the main lifts.

Speaking of time, Cloud doesn’t know what time it is. He doesn't have a clue.

The last glance Reno took at the clock said it was too early to be this conscious.

They’re both displaced.

They call the elevator and step aboard. The way down is slow and wordless.

Cloud has the chance to note just how heavy the BDS still is.

Reno has the chance to note just how tiny Cloud still is next to it.

They get back to entrance level below. It’s simple. It’s no big to-do. It happens just like that. Conveniently, the main pillar lift connects directly to their VIP rooms, which connects directly to the tiki torch resort, and the free world on the outside.

The sun is thin and spreading yellow in the wide, colourless sky once they step off the elevator and out into the open. Mist drifts on the morning air. Few people are present. The lush resort is calm. The tension is high. It all feels too easy. Everything is going smoothly. Too smoothly.

They push ahead. They don’t see anything or anyone unusual. They don’t spot a huge amount of Shinra activity, just your typical foot soldiers and resort guards. There are no signs of Tseng or Vause. They might just slip by unnoticed.
Reno is on edge. He’s the one feeling all the stress. He decided against telling Cloud. He figured, well, the less Cloud had to think about the better, right?

He’s not yet regretting that decision.

Nothing has been spoken, nothing needs to be said. They’re on their way to the next stage, moving ahead as planned, foot by foot, passing small crowds and lines, tables and umbrellas, almost to the border of the resort grounds. Almost clear.

It’s looking good. It's looking hopeful.

“Not so... fast,” Cloud huffs distantly.

Reno comes to a halt.

His desire to get out of sight and put as much distance between them and here (and any Shinra associates), as soon as possible, has left Cloud and his giant symbol in the dust. He isn’t next to Reno anymore. He isn’t close at hand. He has dropped behind.

Reno backtracks the few steps to reach him.

Cloud is standing transfixed on the paved and railed path when he reaches him. Here he is, still and striking, hair damp and sticking, surrounded by lush greenery and flowers, the sword loose at his side. He’s peering at a crowd behind them, a dumb look firm in place on his pale face, ethereal and ignorant.

“Hey,” Reno voices.

Cloud’s intense gaze is locked and searching.

Reno looks with him, alarmed and abuzz, hoping not to find what he expects to find there, and he doesn’t. He sees nothing but a string of random people waiting in line. Nothing scary.

“Hey,” he tries again, getting physical.

He nudges at Cloud’s limp arm.

Cloud does not react. Not at first. He’s seeing the crowd, the line, the random faces, but that’s not what he’s locked on. It’s something else. Something specific is holding his attention. Something within the group, remembered, wanted, needed, desired. Not a something either, but a someone.

Cloud’s on his way in a flash, a burst. He’s barreling forward and leaving Reno.

He saw him. He caught a glimpse. The back of his head, the fall of his jet black hair, the curve of his broad shoulders. He knows it was him. It must be him. It could only be him, because he’s slipping away again. He’s turning to leave. He’s melting into the crowd. He’s gone.

Cloud rushes forward, gripping the sword, dragging it along, ready to call out, and forget everything he and Reno just talked about. But, he is abruptly stopped. He sprints ahead blindly only to be bounced backwards and brought still. He settles and stares on, baffled.

He is confronted by a body in uniform.

A crisp Shinra uniform.

“Cloud Strife?” the uniform asks.
Cloud gathers himself and tries to push by.

He has to get to him. He has to hurry.

“Let me by,” he demands.

“Cloud Strife?” the uniform repeats, blocking the way and stepping all the closer.

“Get out of my—”

Cloud is knocked back, the soldier needing only to swing out his arm and he topples. The sword drops. And Cloud does too.

He crashes onto his rear end, meeting with solid pavement. As he sits now, looking up, sprawled on his ass, he can see the problem for what it really is.

There isn’t just one uniform. There are many uniforms.

Shinra soldiers have intercepted them at last.

Cloud is at the center of a ring of faces.

“On your feet,” the most talkative orders.

Cloud obeys.

Thoughts of Reno come to his reeling mind, and then it's all Zack, all the time.

He was there. He was watching from the crowd. Zack was right there. He might have been another ghost, or a hallucination, or a doppelganger. He might have just been taunting him. He might have just been taunting himself. But, Cloud won’t know unless he can reach him. He has to know. He has to follow. He has to get by and find out. He still has hope. He still has faith. He’ll take a ghost, an apparition, a lie. They’re in his way. They’re holding him back.

He has to fight.

He’s willing to fight.

Cloud collects himself, and the sword.

He has no delusions or regrets.

He is seeing red.
Chapter 8

And the final word is...

Shit goes down.

And Cloud gets it only in flashes and glimpses, suggestions and concepts, as he's blind, drunk on visions of retribution and flame. Everything happens in a flash, a burst and bash. He's being carried away, let loose, covered, doused, baptized in blood: the living hot blood of his enemies. Their voices scream and shout, mesh and fade, mixing with Reno’s, mixing with the crowd’s. Time ebbs and flows. Moments rush (frenzied), freeze (to a crawl), and speed up (frenetic).

He sees many faces, many wide eyes, many wide mouths. The masks of terror, surprise, agony. The separating of flesh and bone. He shuts off and blocks most of it out. He swings in and swings up. He doesn't notice the limbs fly, the widespread panic, the unfolding atrocity, the place clear out, and everyone who can fleeing. He screams and howls. He crashes the sword down. He kicks and thrashes. He is as light as a feather. He flows like water.

Cloud comes out of his blood haze with the BDS wedged under Reno's chin and his fingers clenched in his hair, wrenching his head back. His long white neck is slick and red. He is bleeding a good deal. It's pouring unchecked down his front. It's gushing and flowing.

The sword is sharper than he gave it credit for.

“Cloud, Cloud, Cloud.”

He's chanting his name. He’s gurgling it up. He's on his knees, chanting and choking out his name, hands bloody on the dripping blade, keeping it at bay as best he can.

Cloud gapes and jerks back, releasing his hair and yanking the sword up and clear.

Reno falls flat before him.

The sword falls too, and Cloud lets it go. He tosses it from his presence, shocked. He lets it drop and drift. The metallic twang announces its landing.

Reno does not rise. He's grasping at his bloody throat with his bloody fingers.

Cloud whines. He has no words. He has no sense. His response is a whine, a dismal mewl, a pathetic whimper in his hollow chest. He thumps to his knees and keens it. All thoughts of finding Zack are forgotten. All hope for the day cut to ribbons.

“Fuck,” Reno gurgles, rolling face up.

His tattered teal sneakers dig their heels into the nearby grasses, over the walkway pavement, twisting and skidding, betraying his stoic expression. It’s illustrating his hysterical level of pain and panic.

“That's... that’s,” Reno stutters, his voice trembling, weak, withered. He has to swallow, lick his lips, pace himself. “The second time... today I’ve had... a blade... to my neck... and I don't appreciate it, yo. Shit. This fucking kills. Ohhh. Almost... took my... fucking head off.”

“Your throat...” Cloud mutters.
He can't move. He's trapped watching, witnessing, noting every thick droplet bead, drip, and roll. Rivulets, eddies, streams of it drawing the horrific stain longer down Reno's soaked front.

Reno sneers in his suffering.

“Yeah, I know. Ya got a little…”

He doesn't finish. He looks around them, slashed throat clamped in his clawed hand.

The place is dead. It's empty. Soldiers lie on the path. One is strewn over a metal hand railing. What's left of him. Another is just an upper torso, graciously turned aside, but all too close. No distant crowds or lines remain. No signs of ghosts with black hair and broad shoulders. No bodies that look like a soldier they once knew. The lower resort grounds have been cleared out.

Reno wobbles and stands. His hand clutched in place hides the greater horrors that surely lie beneath. He gawks and looks on.

“Holy shit, there were like… twenty guys,” he marvels. “Twenty… armed guys.”

Now there are none. There are only the signs, the steaming aftermath, the many standing red pools, drips, and smears, globules and splatters. Only the awful human odors hanging dense in the misty air, fleshy and pungent. There is stillness. There is calm after the storm.

He sways to face Cloud.

“You okay?” he gasps, scarlet red flowing over his thin fingers. “You good? Are you… there? I didn't... hear any gunshots… What the fuck? You. Went. Mental.”

Cloud went mental indeed. He killed every last one of the soldiers. He chopped them all down. He didn’t give them a chance to ask questions. They're nothing more than meaty parts, viscous miscellaneous, and forgotten rifles. He doesn't remember a lot of it. And he doesn't want to.

He sits where he dropped, slumped and sore, bathed, encased (head, arms, shoulders, and chest) in blood and sweat (only a fourth of which is his own). He is no longer a blond. He is two gleaming eyes, blank and dazed, peering out from a veil of gore dark as grease. If he listens, he can hear dripping, squelching, moaning. And then he is alive.

He jumps up from his stupor and rushes forward, approaching and fixating on Reno and his grievous wound, only interested in his condition, his torment, his ordeal.

He makes Reno stumble back in alarm.

Cloud presses in close, small and unknown, straining to touch and assess, but he doesn't dare. He doesn't want to cause more damage. He doesn't want to cause more hurt.

They're both shaking like autumn leaves.

“Your throat…” he whispers.

“It's fine,” Reno grumbles, wincing, scowling.

He twists and turns aside from Cloud’s empty eyes and his undead-like reach. He sniffs and groans, hunching his injured lean just the slightest, just enough.

“We gotta… move,” he declares.
And they do, before the guards come back to make sense of the chaos.

“But, your…” Cloud urges, finding more of his voice.

“It's just a little blood. I'm good,” Reno grits.

A little he says. It's made it past his knees. Knees that are wobbling and unsteady.

“It’s…” Cloud hisses.

“Come on,” Reno musters, leaving him behind to lurch ahead.

Cloud follows his escape with his reaching hands and fingers, slick and sullied, groping, wanting, needing, but he has to balk. He swivels about, looking behind. He has to locate the BDS.

And there it is, already found, stark blue amongst the kaleidoscope of reds and greens and greys. He doesn't have to see the carnage, the fingers, arms, guts and bone before him. Not all of it. He can focus on that soft blue glow. He just has to trek over a few feet and grab it.

He steps out, fancy shoes squishing on every careful fall. His legs are stable, confident, and they carry him the entire way without much complaint. He crouches low, grabs the sword’s gooey handgrip, starts to scoop the end up, and slams right over onto his face.

He struggles to his knees.

The sword is stuck.

It must be.

“Reno,” he calls out, no more than a wheeze.

He stands and bends to hang over the weapon, using his legs to manage the heavy lifting this time. He grips and tugs the sticky hilt with both hands. The blue sword shifts. It slides towards him. It's not stuck. It's still just too damn much.

He thought he was over this. He thought he had been doing better. This is impossible. It’s thrice the weight.


But, Reno is out of earshot. He's not looking back or halting. On he ambles.

Cloud has to move. He has to get out of here, whether he follows Reno or not. He can't leave the sword. He can't abandon his duty. And, to be honest, to be true, he can't abandon Reno either, stumbling and damaged. Not now. Not when he needs him the most. Not when he caused this.

Cloud centers himself, takes a breath, coughs, clenches his fingers, and lifts.

The BDS lugs up and up, levering high at the handle, tip down.

He huffs, he winces, he forces himself to take a good look around the grounds. His search comes up fruitless. He sighs, digs deep, and staggers after a teetering Reno. He forges ahead no faster than a few paces at a time, pulling and dragging the giant sword, his burden, beside him.

They leave the scene one after the other, separated by minutes, but together. They pass under the same scrawled maroon sign and head out into the same waiting sands. It's not a victory. It’s retreat.
It's miles to level ground, the coast, Costa del Sol, and a place to lick their wounds.

And that’s nowhere near soon enough for Reno.

Somehow, even so impaired, he manages to clear the grounds, the surrounding perimeter, and get a good distance from the Saucer, and the scene, trudging and trying through the grit, a warrant to his own stubbornness. But, that is surely where his stamina ends.

Cloud trails after him and sees everything. He sees Reno get slower and lower. He sees himself get closer and closer. It won’t take much longer. Reno is about to stumble and crumble and fall at any moment. He’s dripping his life’s blood dry, drawing a line of it with him.

“Stop,” Cloud gasps.

It’s all he can do. He tugs and drags the BDS. He follows. He can’t walk and talk. He soon hangs his head, focusing on the task, putting away his misery. His sides are getting stitches. His feet are hot and cramped inside his fancy shoes.

He engages autopilot, unconscious locomotion, and still he makes little progress. They stay at a set span apart. He tracks after the sequence and Reno, counting the red speckles, the bloody spots in the sand, like fucked up breadcrumbs or markers, just vibrant points to focus his mind on.

*He wasn’t there. You were seeing things.*

Because his mind is threatening to focus elsewhere.

*It wasn’t him. It was a trick. It was your imagination. You're crazy. No one was there. No one was left. No one. You're losing it. You've lost it. Just like… Just like…*

He watches the red droplets march on, and then he watches them dwindle and stop.

“Stop,” he musters, lifting his aching head. “Reno, you can stop now!”

Reno doesn’t. And he won’t. Not until he drops dead. He doesn’t want his help. He doesn’t want to listen to sense. He wants to crawl away. He wants to make this hard.

Cloud has to reach him. He’s got to stop him. He’s right there, but many feet off. Almost too far to yell. It’s over 150 easy, if he had to guess, but he’s not an illusion, or a mirage, or a fragment in time. There he is. There he goes. He has the rucksack, and the potions with it. If only he would stop. If only he’d listen. Cloud would call out to him again (a hail of curses and promises) if he had the breath to waste, but he’s got to use it to keep in step and catch up. He’s got to help him.

The rucksack bounces over Reno’s slumped shoulders in the backpack position. It’s staring Cloud right in the face as he goes, teasing, mocking, ridiculing. Too close. Too far off. Neither of them can hang on much longer. He has to stop him before then. Before he can’t save him anymore.

Cloud has one shot, and he doesn’t think twice about it. He doesn’t entertain his body crying out. He double-times it, picking up his feet, yanking the sword (the damn sword, the thing he can’t leave behind, the heavy thing, the murderous thing) in tandem. He’s giving his last push. Reno is no more than 110 feet off now. He’s almost at a stand still. Cloud can make it. He'll catch him.

Just as they're making progress, just as Cloud is so close to reconnecting, those 110 feet more like 100, 90, 80, 70, and his body is all lugged out… Reno sways to the side and falls.

He's all played out. He’s all bled out. He fled. He avoided help. And now he’s done.
Cloud drops the sword and sprints to him.

“Reno!”

Those first few seconds, and the last few feet, are the worst. They play out the longest. They stretch and thin and extend on and on. The not knowing. The dread and agony. The stomach bile rising. He hasn’t yet reached him. He doesn’t yet know the real damage, the obvious damage. He hasn’t yet gotten to drill it into his soft mind.

“You fucking idiot!”

The sand sucks on his every step. Cloud’s getting nowhere. His shoes are useless, his legs are useless. He’s gasping, dry and damned. He almost careens over twice, and then he’s on him, skidding to a floundering, heaping stop. He has to crawl hands and knees to close the short distance. Both palms meet sodden torso at the same instance.

Reno responds as he is touched: a groan, a gasp, a weak motion.

He’s not dead yet.

Oh, fuck.

Cloud clambers and claws at him, pulling him over into full view, and half into his lap.

No, he's not dead yet, but he's close. So very close. He's not a pretty sight. He's all washed out, blood-drained, blood-soaked, and now he's caked in sand and sweat. The contrast of red and white, blood, flesh, and grit, it’s overwhelming, brash, loud.

Reno's still trying to clutch at his throat. He's still got some fight left. He's still in there, thrashing around and warring. Until he's not. And the hand falls slack against his hitching chest.

Cloud’s right there to cover for him. His small fingers press over the ugly wound.

“You don’t do this. You fucking idiot.”

Reno rolls his unseeing eyes skyward, void and white. He’s beyond understanding. He’s slipping in and out of reality and time. Those sea-shallow eyes, wide and spherical, their lashes flutter and snap. His mouth draws weakly at the hot air. He’s falling away. He’s backing down.

As Cloud grips his throat, feeling his life drain—needing more than anything to be there for him, to comfort him, to support him—Reno comes around to light right on his face. Reno finds a speck of control inside his spiralling regression, his terminal journey into the blazing sunset, the second act, the end, and gazes on Cloud. It's arresting, damaging, and unfair.

Dismal, scared, trapped, torn and trembling. No. His stare is none of these. It's dilated, cold and cool, fearless and present, and almost as Cloud knows it best: defiant.

Reno looks on him at the last, for the last, and accepts his fate, because now he’s trying to leave.

“No, no, no,” Cloud chants.

Reno’s pale face twists and gives over to pain. His glistening eyes clamp shut against it. His teeth mesh and sneer. He thrashes his legs out once, twice, heels spiking white sand.

“Stop!” Cloud begs, panting, heaving, panicked.
Reno seizes, a reflex, a jump, a leap at the sun, just his body fighting back, just his last fading remarks, and then he’s writhing and slumping into Cloud’s arms.

Cloud watches his pain subside and his kicking legs still and wind down. His desperate struggles slow and cease. He cranes no more. He lies prone, breathing shallow. He inhales, liquid and thick, and exhales, long and low, not quite a whimper, not quite a death rattle. He’s going very still. He’s getting very serious.

“Stop, stop!” Cloud pleads.

Reno never listens. He never gives him what he wants. He’s always so selfish and busy doing his own thing. He doesn’t hang on, but he does stop. Oh, does he. He goes slack. His whole face relaxes, his jaw uninges, his brow smooths. His entire body eases into him. Several tears escape the very corners of his shut eyes, sliding slow, sliding long, and that’s it. He stops. He comes to rest.

Cloud is left stunned and frozen, holding his breath and a clammy hot wound.

He doesn’t take it well.

“Don’t do this!” he screams over him.

He lets Reno slide off his lap and into the sand so he can hover over him, so he can fight and protest. He bunches his bloody hands into the lapels of his blood-drowned suit.

“Reno! I can’t do this! Get up!” he howls.

He jerks and shakes him.

“Get up! You can't do this!”

Cloud yowls, he spits, he thrashes.

His cries echo over the wasteland.

They echo far and wide.

Terror, panic, fear, anger.

All the repeated, repetitive emotions of his short and miscalculated life. His blood rushes and pumps. His guts twist. His thoughts are racing and senseless. His fingers aren't working. He’s hyperventilating. He has to do something now. He has to act. Now.

He toils and strains, lifting a quite heavy Reno up to dislodge the rucksack from underneath him. He has to find the potions in the mess of junk he took. He has to do it fast.

He digs and searches through the jumble, locating what he wants at the bottom of the pack after a thundering moment of pure insanity. Now he just has to uncap one of the containers and figure out how to get the contents down Reno’s throat.

He claws and picks at the potion's cap, willing his hands to still so he doesn't fumble or spill the precious liquid. He flicks the top off at last, grunting in victory. He focuses now on the lifeless
body before him. He reaches out with one hand and wrestles to hoist Reno high into his lap. His face, that damn face, waxy and lax. Reno’s returned to beautiful, even as he's dead.

Dead.

“Fuck, fuck,” Cloud whimpers. He angles Reno's head back and then angles the potion to the corner of his slack mouth. He has no idea if this is going to work. He could be gone already, departed, fallen. He's no longer in there. That doesn't mean Cloud will stop. He’s going to give it all he’s got. He’s going to fight for him.

Cloud shakily pours the potion between Reno's parted lips. The red liquid disappears into darkness only to pool and spill out, rushing over Reno's chin and down his neck. It rinses his wound and sizzles as it meets drying blood, adding a new shade of gross.

Cloud jerks and hisses.

“Shit. I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

He fumbles for another dose.

He has to get some inside him. That initial try didn’t seem to work. He has to get it down his throat, but Reno's a boned fish. He's not responsive in the slightest. He's. Gone.

Cloud drops back and gasps, exhausted.

He's dead.

“You're not dead,” he grumbles.

He's surely dead.

“No. You're not doing this to me.”

He grasps another potion. Carefully and calmly he uncaps the small container and takes a sip of the liquid inside. He keeps it held in his mouth and leans over Reno, passing it between their mouths, transferring as much as he can, as slowly as he can. He does this method over and over until no more options are left, no more potion is left, and he has to wait.

And he does.

He sits there, Reno cradled in his arms as he should have done with Zack, the taste of medicine on his dry tongue, his guns digging into his ribs, and he waits. He holds him close under the hot sun and listens for a response, a reaction, anything. He waits out minutes, hours, days. He loses concept and care. He waits. And he hears nothing. He feels nothing. Reno moves none at all. He is stationary in his arms.

Cloud rocks them back and forth. He shuts his eyes tight against the harsh reality and the harsh sun. He crushes Reno close. He whispers and moans. He smells blood, tears, sweat, soap, cherry potion, ashes, cinder, smoke, death.

“I'm sorry. I forgive you. I'm sorry.”
It's hot. It's dusty. They're still within sight of the awful fucking golden tower. Sunlight is blasting off the structure’s east side, a sustained explosion of luminosity.

They're unprotected, out in the open, and there's a black ribbon of dried blood leading right to them.

“I'm sorry.”


Here are all the wrongs he’s done. The booze, the bullets, the blood. Here is every mission, success, and failure. Here is all the shame and anger on his brother’s face. Flashes now. Of home, of flickering fire, of smooth metal, of Sephiroth. Bright red. Bright like life. Like he can’t discern, but he can in dreams, in thought, in death. Everything is soaked in it. The walls, the floors, his hands… Vegas on the floor. He is gurgling and dying in an ocean of red.

He can’t reach him. He can’t move. More flashes, more pops and flares. The nightmare images shift and darken. Blood bursts over his face. It spurts over his chest, hot and sticky. He’s stumbling back, he’s cursing, he’s swearing. He’s never going to get it all off...

He once wanted fame. He once wanted home. Now all he wants is…

The pain, the struggles, the wonder and hope.

Won’t it just end already?

He comes back to the smell of smoke.

He thinks it must be Zack smoking. And then he remembers it can't be, because, apparently, he went off like a fireworks show. He violently exited their realm. He blew the fuck up.

Reno jolts upright.

And right back into the hot desert sun.

It’s Cloud who’s smoking.

Reno swoons and returns to uselessness.

“Reno,” Cloud grates out.

He sounds so far away.

Reno blinks and breathes. He’s staring up at the colourless sky, spread out on his backside. He blinks some more. He lifts an arm, numb and unreliable, and feels his throat. All the blood and sand makes it impossible to diagnose.
He’s still alive. Every swallow scratches and catches. He coughs, that damn cough, and tastes… cherries. Acidic and sour. He’s still covered in gallons of his own drying blood. His awesome suit is ruined. But, he's alive.

“I thought I killed you. I killed you,” Cloud mutters, starting strong.

He is more than a little alarmed at seeing Reno waking up, but he doesn't move to greet him. He's too afraid. He might snap out of it. He might find he’s been dreaming. It’s just been a bad dream. He nodded off. He has sunstroke. Reno’s dead. It’s all a lie. It's all on his head.

Reno huffs and leans up on his wrists and elbows, taking it slow.

“You didn't kill me,” he rasps, his throat and tongue dry lake bed. “I'm right here...”

“I… I…” Cloud rambles. He’s shaking even as he sits, legs crossed, cigarette burning.

“You didn't,” Reno croaks, shaking his head.

Cloud sniffs and scrubs his face one-handed, fighting off the invading tears. They spill and roll and wet his fingers, his palm, washing the last salty tracks clean. They dry quickly, but not quickly enough. He's adding more by the second.

“Reno… I…”

“Oh, for fuck's sake. Don't cry over me,” Reno grumbles, shrugging in defeat and exhaustion.

That doesn't help. Cloud’s moan is miserable. His stubborn tears flow.

“Look,” Reno offers, glancing to the sky and lifting his chin high.

He's showing him his throat.

Cloud watches him come, still locked up, still letting out liquid he can't afford to throw away.

Reno drags himself on his belly. He drags himself the entire short way through the hot sand to reach him, gasping and wild-eyed by the time he arrives.

He fumbles and grabs Cloud's arm, snatching him by his bird-bone wrist. He shakes out his hand—the cigarette held there, pinched in slender fingers—and forces him to drop it into the grit, the world’s biggest ashtray. He then jerks the empty hand to his repulsive neck, holding it fast, making it feel.

“There, see?” Reno demands. “Feel that? Feel my pulse?”

Cloud nods. He's beaten. His globe eyes are vulnerable, wide and wet. The tears have slowed and stopped, but they've left behind their remnants speckled and suspended in long lashes.

“Not dead. Still kicking. I'm... fine,” Reno insists.
He drops Cloud's hand and falls away, slumping boneless to the side.

“Reno,” Cloud barks, finally coming to his aid.

He hoists him upright and out of the grit. He tugs him close, bringing him into a familiar position: half in his lap and half over his thighs. He won't let him go again. He won't push him away.

“I'm sorry,” he moans. “I'm sorry.”

“Just a little… woozy,” Reno groans.

“You lost… a lot of blood,” Cloud mutters.

“Just need… a minute.”

“Take all the time you need,” Cloud urges.

“Well… we can't…”

But, Reno can't go on. He coughs and stops. His eyes roll closed and he just breathes.

Cloud sways over him, blocking the worst of the desert glare. The caked on blood must be protecting him from the heat. He feels wilted, and smells awful, but he's aware and willing. He's got something left in the tank. He's going to do this.

“I couldn't carry you,” Cloud confesses.

Reno hums a chesty rumble, liquid and terrible. He shifts, probably testing himself and checking his limits. He swallows thickly. He coughs. Soon, too soon, he revives and sits upright, still pressed into Cloud, still close, now leaned into his chest and side. He takes in their location.

It's a bright and offensive morning. It's far too hot now that they're too far from air conditioning. They're still in the shadow of the tower, only some miles out, exactly where Reno dropped. Almost. He can see the drag marks from where Cloud tried to move him. They didn't get far.

He waits in his arms, he thinks very little, and then, of course, he forwards the conversation.

“I wanted… you to do it…” he mutters. No chance for eye contact, no connection, nothing. “I wanted you… to kill me. But, I… fought back. I rebelled. And you…” He exhales slow and steady. “I've been called a lotta things… Queer, fag, fairy, coward, cocksucker, asshole, bastard, traitor… But, I've never been called… beautiful… You brought me to my fucking knees, man. Twice.” He takes a breath before adding, “Did you really mean it?”

Cloud can hardly compute.

He couldn't lift Reno to carry him to a more secure location. Not after his mad dash. Not after the adrenaline wore off. How could he have bested him in a fight? Reno the Turk. Reno the Fiery. And what does he mean by brought to his knees? He's just Cloud the daisy. The disaster. The weak. He can't do much but follow a given order, cry himself brittle, and watch the world shift by.

“Did you?” Reno pushes, nudging back into him.

“What?” Cloud mutters.

Reno clears his throat.
“When you... said you needed me?” he expands. “When you called me…”

“What do you think?” Cloud returns.

“That's why I'm asking,” Reno growls.

“You lost yourself... and blew your top... all because you thought... I was lying?”

“Because I hoped it was true,” Reno grits, his voice stripped raw. He groans and shrugs over himself, leaning away. “You surprise me. Every. Time. Every time, man. And... you surprised everyone else too. Everyone. You sprang out and cut 'em down. You... fucking tore them apart. And then you... found me. You knocked me off my feet and dragged me on my knees.”

While I begged you to stop.

Cloud flinches.

“I yelled out…”

It was more like a pitiful cry.

“And you froze... I started ranting your name.”

I was about to sob it.

Cloud grinds his teeth.

“I couldn't stop. Until you... until you snapped out of it... and dropped the sword.”

“What did you yell?” Cloud asks, almost a whisper, almost sure he knows anyway.

That voice, that hiss under Reno's voice, the one that sounds just like Zack’s, it's telling him more than he needs to know. He doesn't want to know Reno’s troubles and trials. He doesn't really like the truth. This truth. He can't handle this side of him. This new and terrible side.

Reno hesitates.

“I yelled out…”

He composes well. He probably doesn't wince or cringe, sneer or scowl. Not once.

“Just... like... Sephiroth.”

They don’t have to wait too long for Reno to come around. He’s stubborn as a mule. He’s dauntless. He's pissed off and on edge. He’s ready to roll the dice and reset their odds.

He fails to stand on his first several tries. He doesn't ask for help through any of it, groaning and swearing in his efforts. He proves his mettle, manages, and gets to his feet. He wobbles and waves but he doesn't crash over. He almost looks ready for the trial ahead. Almost.

Cloud watches the whole thing from off to the side, unable to assist, unsure how to proceed, hurting more and more by the minute. He half expects him to pull his damn pink comb out and
preen by the end of it. But, he doesn’t.

Reno turns around, loses his footing in the sand, almost topples (both arms flailing out in comical counterbalance), and starts off without him.

Cloud takes up the thankfully, miraculously, wonderfully compliant BDS (back to its normal ridiculous weight), the overstuffed rucksack, and, keeping careful distance, follows after.

They head north, to the coast, and Costa del Sol. And more madness.

It’s many miles of desert in the meantime. Along with the possibility that they both might get a tan, and that neither of them will make it, and that they might just get away from Shinra because of it.

They have water and potions, but no ride, no shelter, no stamina, and no hope. It’s going to be a blur getting on. It’s miles of desolation between them and the forgiving jungle coast beyond. It’s three days travel on foot.

Why couldn’t he have stayed and gambled?

Cloud would hope for a swift and painless journey. He’d hope they don’t find trouble. That trouble doesn't find them… They just need to get there unmolested. Just this once. One can hope. One can always hope. If there's light, there's hope. If he has breath, he has hope. The sun is still hot. The day is young. But, he can't do it. He has officially run dry. He knows night is coming. He knows it will always get worse. He knows he's out of breath. He's choking.

Reno swoons and drops several more times along the way, allowing Cloud the opportunity to make up his careful distance. The sand is sly and shifting, and Reno is faded. They are both faded. The grit might pile low around their feet, rising only into bald mounds at the worst, but it’s tricky and relentless, and hot, hot, hot.

Reno doesn’t sprawl out like before. He doesn’t make a scene of himself. He simply takes a knee and pauses. Sometimes he drops and sits on his rear, legs long before him, knees bent, head hanging between, his removed suit jacket draped over his shoulders for protection, relief, shade. Sometimes he just stands, staring out towards the ocean, eyes unblinking.

Cloud waits with him. Every time. Out of sight. His feet are swelling and aching, trapped inside shoes meant to be flashy not practical. His hands, calloused as they may be, are blistering and cracking. His shoulders and back feel permanently skewed. He's not any better.

It’s a process that will never end. They’ll be trapped in desert limbo forever.

Reno's going to die all over again. He'll hit the wall and drop. Cloud's already been there once, won't the second time around be easier? Why is he still so worried, and scared, and wound tight? His fears have been realized. He lost control. He caused irreversible damage. He lost, failed, and burned Reno with the fire with his own damn hands. Every step he takes after him is one drawing them closer to doom. Another trial, another error. He's gone mad. He's lost it.

The desert does end. And it doesn’t take forever, just the rest of the day.

Reno leads them eastward, a straight shot to ocean (and parallel with Costa), opting for the short path out of their bleached isolation. Cloud does not dispute the decision. They enter boggy coast land by nightfall, beat, dragged out, half-clothed, and thoroughly overcooked.

It means they’ll have to take the long way over and around to get to Costa in the morning, which might tack on two more days of travel, but no more blistering sand and heat sounds like all the
difference they'll need to keep going for the long haul. This path has the potential for shade and cool breeze, and, as they've already found, semi-solid ground.

With the day done, and their bodies done too, they make camp for the night. As they sojourn, with no fire to warm them, up to their eyeballs in muck and reeds and grasses and gnats, thankful for the shift in environment, and the moisture, and the chill, Reno looks awful.

In the shade of falling night, he looks like a ghoul. He’s a bloody and hollowed spectre come to haunt Cloud, and teach him a lesson, or damn him eternally. Cloud looks on him, and tries not to look on him. He can’t help himself. He never wanted to before. He doesn't now.

The air is still warm, humid, but cooling all the time. The sun’s been down for a little over forty minutes now and a chill is rising from the moist soil, frigid and foul. Night is tucking in. The rich swamp smells are almost enough to overpower the odor of dried blood.

They slump and recover, fading in and out.

“You should… eat something…” Cloud urges, keeping it toneless.

“No appetite,” Reno retorts, keeping his head down.

“You lost a lot of blood,” Cloud argues.

“Big deal,” Reno grumbles back.

There has been no dialogue otherwise. Reno does not want to speak to him. Cloud won’t push it anymore. He’ll just keep on watch. He’ll make sure he makes it to Costa. And after that? Cloud doesn’t know. He might just leave. He might just slink away. And he might not even do that. He’ll just walk out. He’ll save him the next ugly death. He'll break the fellowship.

It's the start of a long and wordless night. They’ve bed down under the stars, swaddled inside the long grasses, huddled and hidden together like a couple of game hens. Reno ends up inching closer and closer, and staying close. They rest side by side, border to border, blanketed in sea mist and bog smog, and troubles. And they sleep.

Well, at least Reno sleeps. Cloud cannot.

The smell is distracting. The silence is damning. And he’s already started to fall into his despairs again. His eyes are wide open. His mind is racing and jumping and derailing; racing, jumping, derailing. His heart is pounding, but he's perfectly still. He blinks up at the naked stars and lets the tidal wave crash over him.

Sephiroth, Zack, the Director, Vegas, Tifa, and every face that ever called him small, beautiful, kind, gentle, weak. He's deep in the thick of the grassy fen, and deep in the thick of his mind.

He misses Zack the most during these times. It's enough to break him. He doesn't want to cry anymore. He doesn't have the strength.

He doesn't remember falling asleep. He only knows that things feel different from one moment to the next. He blinks, he inhales, and things feel different: slower, brighter, muted.

Reno is still next him, warm and safe under his soiled suit jacket, out cold, alive. They're tucked in the reeds and grasses. They’re on the run. The stars are twinkling and sliding by. It's still dark out, but the moon is full and swollen, bathing all it touches in shadows and uncertainty.
Cloud gets the urge to sit up. He eases erect and looks about.

The distant coastline draws his gaze. The horizon is a milky blue-grey.

A double-take would have been necessary, but he is unmoved at first. He sees the sea, the coast, all the miles of sloping land between. He sees their camp, the bent and flattened grasses. He sees exactly what he wants to see there, on the fringes, outlined in perfect glory. He's so sure it's his mind going again, that it's imaginary, that it's bullshit, that he doesn't have a reaction. He stares. He understands. He accepts. He is at peace, warm and unchallenged.

“Can't sleep?"

Cloud flinches and gapes.

His sentinel, his watchman, it didn't just speak. Constructs don't speak.

They never did before.

“Hello?” the figure asks, leaning towards him.

It's right in front of him, perched on a nearby trampled thicket, kicked back and casual, far off ocean at its broad back, over its broad shoulder. It should be smoking, but it's not. It's sitting by, the BDS close by. It's overlooking them as they rest, clad in a sharp SOLDIER uniform charcoal black in the moon glow, perfect and complete, and everything Cloud wants it to be.

Cloud shakes his head. He lifts his arms and rubs his eyes. He can't swallow enough to dislodge the lump sticking in his throat. He won't take the chance. He's been chasing him for days now. And here he is.

“Are you still sleeping?” the figure asks him, a soft whisper, a gentle prod.

This isn't real.

This is a joke.

“Am I getting through? Hello?” the ghost presses.

A short laugh. A sound that cuts like razors.

“Zack?” Cloud whispers back.

Even that is too loud.

“That's me,” the ghost answers, cocking its head, all of that wonderful hair shifting with it.

“Oh, fuck. No, please, no…” Cloud moans.

“What, what, what?” it chants back in a familiar, well-loved, and stolen voice.

It's rising to stand, to approach, to terrify.

“You… You're…”

“So?” Zack scoffs.

He stands tall over him, looking down as Cloud gawks up, up, up into oblivion.
Zack’s hands rest on his hips. He’s bending at the middle to sway over him, precarious. It's undeniable now. It's full in his face. He's Zack. One way or another. One wish or another.

“Nice to see you too.”

He smells just the same. With a hint of the sea.

Cloud won't cry. He won't.

“You won't,” Zack assures him, straightening upright to cross his arms.

“Why did you…” Cloud stammers, “Why did you... make me think... it was real?”

“Because… that's easier on the mind. And, let's be honest, you need all the help you can get.”

“Easier on the mind? You think I'm doing okay right now? I killed Reno. I'm seeing shit. I'm having a conversation with a dead person that knows he's a dead person. How's that easy?”

“Good point. But... that still doesn't sound as bad as it could be, right? I could be in a distressing amount of denial. I could be acting like nothing happened. I could be bloody and burn—”

“Stop.”

The ghost does, snapping its perfect mouth shut.

“You left me,” Cloud reminds.

“I know.”

“Why? Why have you been... helping me? Why are you torturing me? Why didn't you appear sooner? Why didn't you disappear? Why are you just whispers when I'm awake? Why?”

“Cloud… is this really how you want this to go?”

“I want you to hold me and know it's real. I want to know why this is happening to me. And... I don't… I don't wanna wake up… if you're gonna be gone when I do. I don't have to, do I? Don't make me wake up. I don't want to. I don’t.”

“Cloud…”

Cloud rises to confront him. And he feels strange for it. He feels thin. He'll always be much shorter than Zack. Even if Reno’s a mirror in height, Zack’s build and personality make him appear taller. Cloud has to look up into his waiting eyes. His two bright and gleaming eyes, proper and present. Grasses crunch under their feet. Reno mumbles and shifts for his lost heat.

“I just want you,” Cloud declares, unable to proceed and reach out.

Zack blinks and shrugs. He remains. He closes no gaps. His smile is forced and hopeful. He looks so real. So real. He could be real. He might as well be real. He might as well be a trout. Cloud can't touch him. He can't feel him. He can't hold out much longer. He can't survive.

“Well, you got me,” Zack answers. “And dare I say… you might even be stuck with me…”

“I got…” Cloud mutters, dropping his gaze. “I got… Reno. And a giant… symbol.”

“That's what he's calling it,” Zack sniffs. “It's a nice fucking sword. Little heavy, but…”
“That's what I'm calling it.”

“Do you love him?”

“What?” Cloud blurts, resetting his gaze.

It's no less painful. Zack's no less right there.

“It's okay if you do, Cloud,” he murmurs.

Trying to deny him everything.

“How can you be so—”

“I'm dead,” Zack grunts. He shrugs. He looks away. “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Really. I don't have the same… reservations as before. I had very little when you knew me, unfortunately, and even less now. It's all kinda new to me. It's all… I can't...”

“I love you,” Cloud explains, fists forming.

“It's okay if you love him too.”

Cloud sneers, tasting metal and fumes.

“I love you,” he insists, wanting to reach out and do just that. It doesn't happen. He can't. He still can't. He can't move a muscle.

“I know,” Zack assures, his strong stance slipping. “I... Be happy, Cloud. Enjoy it while you can. Please. For me. Everything's all... confusing right now... I can't...”

“But... I love you. I just want... you.”

Trembling discord. A vibration inside the dream web. Cloud's body's thinness intensifies. He feels like vapor, the wind, a sheet hanging on a line. He's going to blow away at any moment.

A cry, a moan, pain.

And it's not him this time.

“What was that?” Cloud asks.

Their time is over. Zack is fading, fading, fading. He's looking more and more ghostly by the minute—looking more and more like how he left him: bald and bandaged and falling to pieces.

“Speak of the devil...” he mumbles with a mouth no more than a wisp of cobalt and silver.

And then Cloud's getting the urge to sit up.

Reno's in hell.

He's sure of it.

He's caught in a rinse cycle of the same moments over and over again.
The pain, the fear, the understanding.

He's watching Cloud tear the soldiers down. He's watching him spin and swing, lightning fast. He's watching him tremble and shake, bloody and small, and then he's watching him turn on him. He's listening to himself beg for his miserable life. He's feeling his knees dragged over the slicked pavement. He's tasting his own blood. He's knowing he's Cloud's final victim.

He's dying all over again. Again and again. He's died a thousand deaths by now, cradled in Cloud's accepting arms. He's shed every drop, he's taken every breath, reduced to meat and bone, fading to black. And then he's watching Cloud cut through the soldiers.

He's watching him spin and swing.

Lightning fast.

He's in hell.

Reno's sobbing.

Cloud comes around quickly, but it still feels like forever as he listens to him bawl and whimper and gasp next to him. He's frantic, sweaty, sorry. He's asleep but he's sobbing, coughing, straining. He must be having a doomsday, world-ending nightmare too. He is exactly how Cloud never wants to see or hear him again.

He leans over and puts both hands on him. Just like old times. He finds Reno’s tossed off the jacket he had been using as a blanket. He's sweat through his fancy button down shirt. He's moaning and coiling, damp in Cloud's palms.

Cloud clenches his fingers, inhales, and shakes him hard.

“Hey!” he shouts.

Reno jolts up into his face, choking and sputtering on his own cries.

“Oh, fuck. Oh fuck fuck fuck,” he moans.

“You okay?” Cloud murmurs. “Nightmare?”

Reno blinks at him. He blinks and gasps and blinks, and then flops back to the matted down grasses, groaning and writhing. He's squirming himself away and then closer, pressing his damp and solid body flush against Cloud's.


Cloud shivers as the cold prickle rushes over his flesh.

It's not just because Reno's breath tickles, and he’s soaking wet, and his cold nose is nuzzling at his throat, no.

_Bro. Brother. Vegas._

Cloud rolls towards Reno, bringing an arm over his shoulder. They lie chest to chest, aligned on
their sides. Reno's face has tucked itself away, hiding against Cloud's neck and collarbone. Cloud's chin rests on Reno's shoulder, their heads almost matching up in opposition.

Cloud can smell him: his hair, his sweat, his signature. He could turn aside and take a breath. He could indulge his bodily urges. And he does. He turns and jams his nose under Reno's ear and takes a good draw. And then another. The aroma, the rush, the flush.

He squeezes him tightly.

Reno fidgets back.

Cloud wants him.

He lets him sleep.

They pick up at the crack of dawn. Neither of them say good morning or mention their nights. Reno mentions nothing of his relived experiences. Cloud mentions nothing of talking with Zack, or Reno's sobbing and clinging nightmares. Or that he never slept. They both rise and get to it.

It's a long and twisting sort of way to the resort town now. There's plenty of time to think and hold onto nasty secrets, and not improve anything. They left the desert to hit the coastal road, channeling between the two, skirting along sandy edges on either side. Lots of wind, and sea smells, and white birds squawking. The surf is audible. The moisture is a salty mist. They travel along the unkempt path, wordless and weary. Too tired to speak. Too angry to speak.

The way is rather quiet and uneventful because of it, but it's tiring. They carry on, stubborn, half conscious, one foot after the other, through mud and sand, grass and gravel. They slosh and slop over bog and field. They groan and hiss, swear and scowl.

The sun starts its going down after long enough. The glare sinks lower on their left, dropping down behind Mt. Corel in the distance before its time. It gets colder and colder. The eventual dying glow illuminates the darkening sky: a stain of dark blues and oranges, pinks and purples.

It was a beautiful winter's day. They saw none of it.

They're halfway there. They have to be. It's already taken them so long.

Sitting now, back to a tall tree, most of the bog behind them, Cloud rests.

Reno is staying to himself, having found his own sitting place across the way.

They have to bed under the stars again. They can't travel at night. The can't travel anymore. They're bushed. They're blind. Here comes another long night.

Cloud starts the pain early.

“I'm sorry,” he grumbles, saying it loud enough for Reno to hear.

He does not respond.

“I'm—”
“That doesn't mean fuck all right now,” Reno returns, his tone a notch below contempt.

“I mean it,” Cloud offers, his tone trembling, his body trembling, his whole being trembling.

“Did you mean to kill me?”

“No. Of course not,” Cloud mutters, anger and pain contained.

It hurts to speak. The words are thick and sharp, cutting and catching. Not talking might still be worse. All the words he should say heavy on his head, his heart, his chest, instead of his tongue.

“I didn't mean for…”

Nope. Definitely not worse.

Cloud tries to push on. He’s stubborn, he’s stupid, or he’s just tired. He toes his shoes at the weeds and dirt. He rolls and bunches his shoulders.

“I'll leave. I'm going to…”

The words die.

Neither of them want to talk, or exist. It’s painfully obvious. It’s thick in the chilled air. They sit and blink, stare and yawn. They fight off the desire for sleep to fight off the dreams, the nightmares, the difficult conversations with the glorious dead.

Reno gives in first. He falls out of the challenge with his chin dropped to his chest. His distant breathing has gone liquid, rasping, but consistent and quiet.

Cloud follows close after. He ever so slowly slides to the side, inches at a time, over a short time, losing more and more ground, and hardly realizes. He yawns, he blinks. He has his arms crossed, his legs pulled in. He slides and slides, and curls up at the base of his tree.

He's reclined on the sofa in the living room of Cloud's NCB2 rooms. He's trying to get comfortable, and then he's trying to stay awake. He's seconds away from whipping out his phone for a distraction when the knock comes at the door.

He's not expecting anyone.

Vegas’ watch isn't for another five or six hours.

It's the late shift.

The knock comes again, solid and loud.

He groans, unfolds his long legs, and rises. He cracks his neck, shuffles his mussed hair behind his ears, adjusts his gun holster, and goes to answer the door.

He has enough decorum to knock, but he doesn't wait for him to open it before he's pushing inside. Reno's tall, above average, but Sephiroth is still towering, frightening, and more than he can contain, or ever want to.
“General—”

He doesn't even look at him.

All he's saying is: “Stay out of it.”

Vegas told him the very same thing hours before.

And then he's heading for the bedroom.

For Cloud.

Reno just stands there.

He remembers this. This happened already, didn't it? He went through this once.

He just stands there. He just stood there. He acted like it didn’t bother him.

But he won't this time. This is before the fall, before it all, and he's at his best. He's whole, he’s ready. He's going to protect him. He's going to do it right this time. He'll kill Sephiroth now and save them all the bloody, bloody consequences in the future.

He follows right after him. He's got his pistol out. The door is closed, sealed shut. He can already hear the raised voices, the yelling, the screaming. The wet, meaty sounds. The mattress springs. He can already hear it starting. He's too late.

He flings the door open.

On the other side he finds... it's him.

_He’s_ the victim. _He’s_ on the bed. He's prone and naked. He's the one Sephiroth is fucking violently. He's the one getting pounded into, crushed, choked, violated. They're _his_ screams. Reno's screaming, he's pleading, he's backing away, backing up, but he can’t, he's already under Sephiroth, he's already trapped, sweating, full and agonized. He’s already clawing to get free.

He's back in hell.

Dawn again sees them on their way. They rise in much the same manner as the day before: silent and brooding. They don't mention their nights. They don't exchange pleasantries. They get a move on.

Cloud wouldn't have brought up anything anyway. He slept. He crashed. He didn't dream. He might even feel rested. He might be better. He still feels thin. And he missed Reno's most recent writhing, choking, and whimpering attack.

They walk all day, hours of plodding. Hours to ignore each other. Hours for Reno to feel worse, broken, crazy, angry, scared. His mental state is down, down deep, dirty and dingy. His ruined body is revolting and temperamental.

It's hours for Cloud to beat himself up and do the same. He's dragging the depths too. He's pulling his arms from their sockets. He’s filling with hate and shame. He doesn’t lift his head. He doesn't have the want. Not until they come to the river.
Twilight drapes around them, dusk impending. The stream is wide and rushing, flushed with sand and rocks and bits of wood. It looks to be the last obstacle before crossing onto the peninsula the coastal resort town is situated on. They’re so very close now. This is the final stretch.

The river pours out all of its frothing glory to join with the placid ocean, but it’s not deep. They both get soaked up to their thighs in the crossing to the other side. The current runs red after them, cleansing, coursing, ice cold.

The last true border they meet is the palm forest they fled into to get away from the Director during their last visit. It's buffering their roundabout passing. It slows them to a crawl, pushes them to their very last limits, and then... Cloud catches the bright orange tiles of roofs in the last of the dying of the light, just before the curtain drops for good.

*Oh, fuck. We made it.*

It’s a welcoming sight. It’s a sign of progress. Reality starts to sink in.

There could be relief and amends in the town ahead, on the coast of the sun.

If one was so inclined to hope.
They get to the treeless outskirts of town beaten sideways and well broiled. Thankfully, for everyone, the sun is down and the heat is off. No one will see or smell them as well that way.

It’s all too soon much colder than Reno’s ravaged body can handle. He shivers and shakes, wet from the river. His scalp, ears, forehead and back, burned by desert sun, feel like they’re on fire. His joints ache and grind. His throat is itchy. Every dry and difficult swallow is a reminder.

*He almost cut your head off.*

They drag their feet through the underbrush, the dirt, the sand, and over the sandstone streets, looking for all to see like they’ve been through a war: otherwise well-dressed but soaked in crumbling blood. It must be some kind of sight. They must look like two foul creatures hunched and crawling up from the untamed wilds, veiled in darkness, wreathed in stench.

They struggle to the bar.

That very same bar.

The dusty main drag outside is mostly quiet. People in obnoxious colours still drift. Everyone’s still lazy, still happy, all wrapped up in their little lives; all snug in their comfort and luxury.

Cautious eyes watch, but they don’t look for long.

The resort is not over-busy. It’s typical tourist activity. The beach is dormant, speckled with closed umbrellas and empty chairs. The ocean tide is a glimmering white line in the distance. Voices and laughter carry throughout the buildings and streets. Lanterns are lit. The night is young.

Reno meets the bar’s steps first. He stumbles up two, sways, and clutches for the handrail.

Cloud stops at their base, huffing and heaving. He’s giving himself a break before taking on those heights. The stairs are not overly high, or many, but they’re tall. He has a giant burden, no energy, a filled rucksack, and he’ll have to take big steps.

He’s a little worried about that.

He brings the BDS around to his front, using both hands to maintain its weight.

Reno’s already on the porch landing and making his way through the swinging doors. He has to stall though, as someone is knocking into him on their way out.

A stranger. A young man. A mumbled apology, an accident, a hesitation.

Reno’s response is muffled, and probably unkind.

The young man meets eyes with Cloud as he comes stomping down the few porch steps two at a time. His reflexive smile is weak, pitying and almost fearful. It is entirely awful.

He’s no older than Cloud. He’s still innocent. Innocent enough. He’s shiny and untouched, and wholly undamaged. He’s enjoying a vacation. He’s enjoying the sun and the surf and the sand. He’s what Cloud could have been. He’s what he should have been.

“Sorry,” the kid mutters, ducking his head.
He exits stage right, never to be seen again.

Cloud exhales and starts his climb.

There are already too many unsettling signs.

Cloud gets inside and wants to leave.

The building is dim, but he can still see the long counter destroyed in their last adventure is already being rebuilt. The tables and chairs he had to step through to find Reno on the floor (dying the second time) are all back in position and proper. Several of them are filled with drinking patrons.

The rest of the countertop is undamaged and open for business. Three turned people occupy two stools on its far right edge. One of them stands, leggy, leaned over a seated friend.

Heads turn and lift to look at Cloud’s entrance. He hunches under the sudden weight of too many eyes. The whole place seems to blink.

Reno is easy to spot. He’s already at the bar, talking to a large man behind it.

Cloud moves to join him there.

“You drive a hard bargain,” he’s grumbling.

“It’s extra if he's staying with you,” the barman returns.

He nods his head past Reno and to Cloud now standing off to his side.

Reno turns to look, spotting Cloud from the corner of his eye, and no more. He looks back, needing to check, needing the assurance, as if he'd actually forgotten Cloud was there. As if he really left his mind.

It’s a cruel joke, and it doesn't help improve Cloud's dark mood any. It makes his empty guts clench and his bowels tingle. He wants to punch him for it.

He doesn’t move an inch.

“How much extra?” Reno asks the barman.

“No fraternising. And no visitors.”

“You hardly have control over—”

“Four hundred.”

“Shit. Do I look like I have that much?”

“You look like you'll leave a stain,” the barman grunts. “It’s eight hundred or nothing. That’s fair enough. I’ve got a damn establishment to look after. I’ve got all this damage coming outta my pocket. You can always find somewhere else. There's an inn across the—”

“Look,” Reno interrupts, raising his mangled left hand to assist. “It’s bad enough I gotta be in this
fucking town… I don’t wanna be in this fucking town. I definitely don’t wanna be in here. But, I don’t have much choice. And now you’re changin’ the game on me. That ain’t right. You can’t do that. You said four a second ago.”

The barman regards him, unmoved and unimpressed.

“That was before he showed up. Didn’t know you came in pairs…”

Reno shrugs.

“Yeah, well…”

The barman talks over him.


He finalizes by crossing his large arms over his equally large beer keg of a chest.

Reno seethes and bristles, running out of patience and stamina. His shoulders rise, uneven, a rocky, blood-dried ridge. His sneakers dig at the floorboards. He doesn’t want to give. He’s working it out. He’s working that angle. Always that angle.

He’s got no angle.

“Give me a bottle of your strongest shit... and we’ve got a deal.”

He slaps down Vause's prepaid debit card on the thick and glossed counter.

Large arms are uncrossed.

The card is removed.

A tall brown bottle is produced.

Reno doesn’t say another word to the giant man. He grabs the tall bottle by the neck with his left hand (index and thumb encircling), slides the returned card, several gil the lesser, into the palm of his right hand (whole but graceless), and turns to leave.

“Stairs are round back,” the barman calls after him. “Do everyone a favour and get cleaned up before you come back down! Don’t come cryin’ to me if your shit gets taken either! Door won’t lock!” Under his breath he grumbles, “You smell. What a fuckin’ mess…”

Reno is already on his way to the back door, having ignored most (if not all) of the barman's statement. He's moving with a purpose. He's not waiting around. Not for the barman. Not for anyone. And certainly not for Cloud. He's eager to drown his cares away.

Cloud follows, wordless, worried, weary.

He follows him through a screen door and then up a set of driftwood stairs leading to the second floor of the bar, the structure creaking woefully under the BDS.

The mottled driftwood door they find at the top opens onto darkness and shadow. Strings of bare incandescent light bulbs come abuzz and blink overhead after the click of the light switch echoes.
The bulbs all warm and brighten slowly, stained ochre by time, dust, dirt. They all wake up, humming now, and reveal a pre-lived-in mess of a dwelling area.

“We’re staying here?” Cloud mumbles from behind Reno.

Reno uncorks his bottle and takes a healthy swig. He swallows, works all that scorching liquid down, cringes full-body, and licks his lips, not bothering to wipe the excess with his bloodied hand.

“Got any better ideas?” he sputters.

He steps inside and stops on the center of a medium-sized circular rug, right under one of those piss-yellow hanging lights. He takes another messy gulp, his back never turning.

“We can… lie low here… and wait to find a boat…” he gasps.

He does not add a destination.

He staggers away.

Cloud shifts the BDS low in his hands and steps onto the doorstep.

There are no walls separating rooms. It’s all one big chamber cluttered with furniture, boxes, and crates. It’s rectangular and long; a mirror of the bar below.

Reno does not wait around to have a conversation, or enjoy the rustic vibe and tranquility, he combs the wide area, loudly slugging back his bottle as he goes.

The floors are wooden and dry, gritty with beachy particles. Most everything is covered in those remnants, and miscellanea. The decor is distressed and dated. The tattered bed is smallish and hidden. The many naked bulbs give everything an amber glow and long shadows. The smell would have been pleasant, but they’re ruining that with their filth.

Standing at the door and looking in, Cloud can see there is a passage or closet behind a curtain. It’s far removed, situated along a short wall at the leftmost side of the floorplan, and easy to miss.

Reno disappears behind the curtain after several ambling strides through the maze of crates and containers (and only one stop to knock back his bottle).

The squeal of pipes and the rushing of water can soon be heard. There must be a shower or bath tucked somewhere in there.

Cloud steps off the threshold and pulls the door.

The place is like a storeroom, more than a bedroom or workroom. Lived in. Loved in. Covered in discarded clothing, rolled rugs, stacked barrel drums, pallets, blankets, opened magazines, and rubbish. And all that carried in sand.

It’s big enough for the both of them to throw themselves around and not worry. They won’t bump into each other too often. More likely they will the contents of the room. Depending on how long they stay, they might avoid most contact altogether.

It feels too good for Cloud.

It feels too good to last.

He steps forward and stoops to lay the BDS (cutting edge in) lengthwise over the waiting arms of a
faded orange sitting chair placed along the far parallel wall. It’s a straight shot from the main door. It will be easy to grab if need be.

He sighs, relieved to be relieved, and gathers himself for one last push.

All he requires now is somewhere to sit down and settle.

He shoulders off the rucksack, dropping it at his feet as he takes several careful strides on. He heads from the faded armchair, and the BDS, and flops onto the thin and sinking mattress of the sad little bed along the opposite short wall.

It's as far from Reno as he can get.

Papers and things shuffle and crumple. Sand shifts, pools, and falls to the floor, coming off him and the blankets in waves. He sags low. He lets go. All of his hurts, wear, and exhaustion catch up and cry out. Nothing doesn’t complain in its own special way.

He sighs again, deeper, dismal, and closes his eyes for just a moment, just for a rest. He shrugs his arms and shoulders loose. Bones and joints pop and grind. He winces and hisses.

The din of the running water and the running sand is monotonous, static, and too much.

He is so heavy, so tired, so done.

Reno’s moving around the room.

Cloud senses it before he sees it.

Everything is sideways when he opens his eyes.

Reno is a nearly naked body gleaming with thousands of refracted water droplets. The clear beads shimmer and change on his ruddy skin. They slide and drip down his sunburned back and into the waistband of his underwear. They slide and drip down his arms. They slide and drip down his thighs, all the way to ankle. They run off his spiky hair, red like his burns, like crimson, raspberry, like the blood he was soaked in, deep and rich, wild and ferocious.

All sideways.

Cloud blinks and sits upright.

“Don’ go gettin’ that all bloody,” Reno mumbles, his drunken slur spilling forth in good show.

Cloud still has both feet on the floor. His head is filled with liquid, sloshing and heavy. He hasn’t been out longer than minutes. It feels longer. That’s comforting at least.

He pushes off the bed, sways, and stumbles for the safety of solitude, and the hanging curtain.

It's a long and winding walk.

To loneliness.

The one thing he can’t get away from. The one thing that always manages to find him in private
places. The one thing that weighs him down in public ones. The one that erodes and endures.

Cloud’s alone in the tight space, standing over the toilet, looking down into the pink bowl. He sees clear water and the red-orange ring of iron stain. It’s still warm and humid from Reno’s shower. A shower, because that’s what it was. The tiny green stall is looming behind him.

The air is thick and heavy, hard to breathe, hard to manage. His reflection in the cracked mirror is fogged, muted, anonymous. He wouldn’t know the vision anyway.

He strips off his soiled suit jacket and throws it onto a pile along with what could only be Reno’s ruined suit. He doesn’t take a shower. He doesn’t bother. He splashes his face and hair with ice water from the pink sink and then he stumbles back out, dripping and dreary.

He has to cross the room again, winding, twisting, and too damn long, all so he can lie back down and have his break. He has to run the gauntlet if he wants rest. And he does. He so wants to rest.

He makes it through, by the skin of his teeth. Stumbling and blinking, he uses every surface, bumps into every crate, scuffs his boots, cracks his knees and elbows. Very faint now, bruised and battered, he finds Reno lounging on the low bed when he arrives.

He has his arms stretched and lifted high. His hands are folded under the base of his resting head. His body is relaxed, damp, clean, and mostly naked. He is still wet. Still glistening. Both eyes are closed.

He must be done with his drink already.

He’d be easy to surprise. To subdue. To foil.

Cloud only wants to climb in next to him.

He hesitates instead, giving Reno all the opportunity to throw a punch.

“Weren’t you leaving?” he rasps his way, not even bothering to crack an eye. “Having second thoughts?”

Cloud is ready for it, but it still stings.

“Yeah… Just...” he murmurs, failing to recuperate fast enough.

“Zack would love this,” Reno grumbles.

Cloud’s retort is reflexive.

Here comes the fire and fight.

“Would he? I swear you bring him up more than Vegas. I know you bring him up more than I do.”

“Is it so bad I think about him?” Reno replies.

“No, but…”

“But what?”

“Nothing.”

Cloud shrugs.
The fire and fight was just backdraft.

“If it was nothing you wouldn't have said anything...” Reno argues.

“It was just a thought,” Cloud confesses.

Now Reno opens his eyes to look on him.

“It's doesn't bother me. It's probably true. Only because you don't talk, and I talk too much.”

“Do you miss him?” Cloud asks.

What kind of question is that?

Reno’s hesitation makes him angrier, which makes him grind his teeth, which hurts, which makes him sloppy, which makes his next words a coffin nail, no matter if it’s the same one.

“All the time.”

Cloud goes distant. Just like he does. He's running back through a field of memories, touching on every one, and Reno can't quite tell if they're good or bad.

Cloud is set, static, unchanging. He stares ahead, then at the floor. He doesn't need to add the me too.

Reno knows. He knows.

Time to change the subject.

“Are you gonna come lie down or what?”

Cloud waits a breath longer.

He likes being dramatic just as much as Reno. He loves leaving him hanging. Loves to keep him wondering. But, he goes to him. Of course he does. He drifts over and situates himself right next to him on that sagging bed, making sure to leave plenty of space between.

Reno wants for it, and doesn't want for it, and suddenly hates that Cloud is aware of it.

The space, the absence, the reason, the death, the despair, the wedge dividing them.

He shuts his eyes against it. He closes it all out. He doesn’t know who Cloud is anymore. He’s realizing he never knew. He’s realizing his idea was false. Zack probably didn’t have any better of an idea either. They were both wrong.

Cloud is a wreck, and a liar, and a brute, and a killer, and... nothing Reno isn’t.

He’s a wild card, most of all. Not soft and mild. He even warned him. Them. He tried to. Over and over. He insisted. He swore. He’s unpredictable. He's trouble. And, as if to prove the point more, he’s the one who’s continuing their straining conversation. He gets right to it. He’s twisting the knife.

“You drank that all to yourself?” Cloud asks.

“Maybe,” Reno replies.
“What an asshole.”

“You'd taste it on my lips.”

“You should be unconscious. I could have gone for a drink…”

“Woulda been easier to have my way with you,” Reno mumbles.

Speaking of having his way.

Cloud could ask him anything he wants and Reno would spill his drunken, rotten guts. Cloud could rile him up or break him down. He could be his best friend, or his worst enemy. He's asking for trouble either way.

And he still doesn't care.

“After… Vause… You said you'd done worse… What exactly did you mean?” Cloud tries.

Reno is not bashful. He answers in good pace, and doesn’t bother opening his eyes.

“Fisting, rimming, anal beads. For a start,” he mutters.

“Oh.”

“I'm guessin’ you don't... need me to… explain any meanings or mechanics.”

“No…”

“Didn't think so.”

Reno lets himself smile, but he keeps his eyes closed.

It's safer that way. He’s not spinning. He’s not that drunk. The stuff was watered down. He still feels worse than death. There's not enough alcohol in the world gonna numb this one. Oh, no. Not unless he drowns in it. Not unless he’s crushed under it.

“You've got… experience. Ever been fisted before?” he fires back.

“No,” Cloud breathes.

Reno imagines the blush.

It warms his angry guts.

“I'm guessing… you have?” Cloud returns.

“Not received, no,” Reno answers, recalling the memory. “I did it to this guy I met close to home. Happened a couple years ago. He was infantry. Athletic. Oh man. He seemed to enjoy it… Rimming and anal beads though? Administered and received. Many occasions.”

Reno shifts and rolls his hips, readjusting himself. He can't hide much.

“You're small, but... I bet you could handle it.”

“Handle what?” Cloud drones.

“Fisting.”
Cloud squirms and readjusts as well.

Reno can hear it, and feel it, and he is pleased.

That is, until Cloud gets him with the sucker punch.

“Why don't… I fist… you?” he offers.

Reno's two elegant brows pique. Now his eyes open. Now he glances, interested, and finds Cloud showcasing his small wrist and slender arm.

His stomach rolls in reaction. His already hot face flushes. He should be liking where this is going. His guts only twist the more.

“Oh shit. I hate that I know you're serious,” he exclaims.

“You have to admit… it's a better fit,” Cloud hums, glancing his way.

“Nah,” Reno deflects, really trying to stay above it all as usual, and struggling. As usual. “You just don't want me to fist you. Or is it Zack? He doesn't want me to fist you.”

He's being cheeky enough, and Cloud manages to take it as such. He can acknowledge Reno acknowledging Zack's influence. No matter how ham-handed. No matter how scathing. It's a small victory.

There is following silence regardless. The conversation subsides.

“I woulda let... Zack fist me...” Reno eventually drones, lost in the thought.

Cloud sighs.

“That's really… sweet,” he mumbles.

“It's somethin’ alright,” Reno agrees.

“Can we…”

“Quickly change the subject from fisting?” Reno suggests, rolling to face him.

“Yes…”

“Well, then… What do ya think of bondage? Spanking? Role playing?”

“Reno.”

His resulting smile is sly and slow forming.

Cloud's almost sorry he asked.

He was looking for trouble though, wasn’t he?

“Oh, that warranted my name, huh?” Reno purrs. His sly smile is turning wicked. “How about… I throw you over my knee... and I give you a proper reason to call out my name?”

He's very close now, all wide pupils and hot, boozy breath. He's getting closer still, crawling over Cloud, hanging over him, a shadow, a wave of heat, and soap, and skin, and liquid cold drips. He's back to predatory.
“Don’t forget to tie me up first…” Cloud returns.

“You should know better than to goad me on…”

Tension. Familiar tension.

Cloud’s blood is pumping. His skin is prickling. He’s getting short on breath again.

Reno hangs: intent, pressing, wanting.

“What’s stopping you?” Cloud asks, breathless.

“Your…” Reno mutters, losing his spirit and getting serious. “Your face… And your smell. Your hair’s a mess. You’re still a mess, man. You should shower. Seriously.”

“What about my face?”

Reno recedes, dropping back next to him.

Cloud frowns up to the ceiling.

“You healed your hands… but not a black eye.”

“Those were burns. Wounds,” Cloud scoffs. “And I didn’t ask to have them healed.”

“I just think… he’s… taunting me… because I hit you, you know. Among… other things. Several other things. Big things. Like the shower. The Saucer. Gongaga…”

“There you go again…” Cloud groans.

Reno pounds a fist down between them.

“Oh, fuck off. Can’t I have a little guilt?” he snaps.

“Not unless I can have mine,” Cloud counters.

“I said a little.”

“You gonna tie me up or not?” Cloud growls.

“Oh… fuck off,” Reno returns, his irritation pure.

“I’m serious,” Cloud offers.

“No, you’re not. You’re bored. And angry.”

“Stop trying to see what you wanna see.”

“Oh. What a fuckin’ hypocrite!” Reno exclaims.

“You don’t know—”

“I don’t know what? I know more than I want to. I know more than... has ever been good for my fucking health. I know your fucking… your fuckin’ boyfriends… He…”

“You can’t even talk...”
Reno springs up.

“I just drank a bottle to myself!” he howls into Cloud's face. “Remember? Like an asshole. Just like you said. And I haven't eaten! And I just walked for days! And I’m tired! And I’m pissed off! Give me a fuckin’ break. At least I'm trying. And, you know, you don't act like you miss him!”

Cloud wants to run. And he doesn't hide it.

“I'm leaving,” he says, toneless, boneless.

Reno plays it none too cool and too quickly replies. He bites it out: hiss and spit.

“Get on then! Maybe you should. Maybe that would solve both our fucking problems.”

“Not like you won't follo—”

Reno rears away to illustrate with his hand.

“Cause I can’t wait to have my throat cut again?”

His finger draws a line across his neck.

Ouch.

Cloud finally deflates.

He sits up, puts his back to Reno, and hides.

“You're right...” he admits, toneless to fractured.

“I should have listened to Vegas...” Reno snarls.

Ouch. Stop.

“I was just followin’ my dick.”

Stop, stop, stop.

“Got what I wanted though.”

Oh, fuck.

“I'm done. Get out.”

“Reno,” Cloud moans.

“Get the fuck out!”

Roared, boomed, furious in a flash.

He's not kidding around.

When Cloud dares to look, peeking over his shoulder, he finds Reno is two glinting eyes, narrowed and cutting, and a long arm, tipped with less of a hand, and a single pointing finger. It indicates the door, unmoving, unshaking.

Cloud jumps to it.
He finds himself standing on the outside of that closed door, too shocked to move, or yell, or cry, or understand. He presses his aching back against it and listens to Reno howling and raging on the other end. He hears him damn them all, every last one, and then he pulls away. He lugs the BDS along with him. He takes each step down the stairs to level ground.

Still so tired, still so heavy.

Cloud doesn't realize he left his suit jacket back in the bathroom until the wind shuffles his damp hair and claws down his back, disregarding his thin shirt.

He walks away. He walks and walks, always more walking, and finds the ocean lapping at his feet before too long. He gets the thought of just going on, of moving forward and letting the BDS carry him down, under, gone. But, he stands, and he stares at his drowning feet.

He's going to get on. He's not going to go under. Not yet. Not here. He's going to get across this ocean. He'll get to Midgar. He'll do that. He won't give up. He'll keep moving.

The night is cold and the skies obscured. There are no stars. The water laps gently, rhythmically, trying to calm him. He can't hear the voices this far out. He can't feel the warmth. He can't see the lights if he looks this way. He can't see much of anything.

He should have left sooner. He should have split. Here he is again, with the same thoughts, but now he's staring at exactly what he was afraid of. He killed him. He cut Reno's throat. He lost himself. He went too far. What happens next time? What happens after?

It won't now.

They're split, asunder, chipped and splintered.

Reno has every right to be angry. He has every right to rage and curse and wish him dead. Cloud should have left the Saucer without him. He should never have gone to the Saucer in the first place. He should have done this. He should have done that…

He can stop the damage now. He can set a new future into action. He won't go back. He'll let Reno find his brother. He'll let him recover. Cloud won't confuse his objectives, or his heart, anymore.

There's always so much time to think. He could think of Zack and Seph and his past. He could muse for hours, days, decades. He's been there so many times already. He should think on the future, shouldn't he? What's coming around the bend? What's ahead? What's beyond the horizon, the crest? He entertains getting there, but what happens when he does? He should try to look to the things in store, because memories are going to kill him. The murky past. The guilt.

Still so much time to think.

The wind switches. It blasts by, blowing over his back from inland. The draft is warm and almost kind. It carries with it the hint of wood fire aromas and the shifting of voices.

He's not expecting to be interrupted so soon.

The sound is enough to hail his coming. It might not be. It could be a coincidence. It could be someone or something other than Reno. Maybe just a rowdy group. Maybe just celebration.
Chances are, based off their trend, and the sheer level of the racket, it's not.

He didn't have a suit last he saw him. Reno was in nothing but his underwear. He was fresh from the shower, and trying to get in his pants, and then not. He threw him out.

He appears on the resort streets, a distant red marker. He’s facing the ocean. He stops a beat to look out across the beach, the horizon, the pitch, looking out for him. And he spots him.

The great noise is the clamoring and chomping of an entourage he has close by. The many groupies move in tow. He doesn’t get on the beach before they stop him.

From here, Cloud can't tell what the conversation and confusion is about, but based off of their posture under the light of a nearby street lamp, it's not friendly. It's downright aggressive. They’re ascending and concealing, crowding around Reno in a half circle.

Cloud sees it from his vantage point, up to his ankles in ocean water. He sees Reno refusing to stop. He sees the collision, the point, the shove, the first punch fly. He hears the voices spike, high and excited. And then he sees the bodies start to drop and run, or freeze in place.

Reno's not one of them. He’s fending them off as they come. He's making it a show as he's still making his way to Cloud. Every step is repeated. Every punch is progress. He's locked on, leaving carnage in his wake, clearing the field, and the beach. And he’s almost done.

Cloud does not move. He stays at his watch. He observes Reno trek across the sand to him, his groupies left behind to recover and be fretted over by allies, or strangers. His coming is sure and steady. He plows, he sways, he gleams with sweat. He is aglow: amber, bronze, surreal.

Cloud remains.

Reno trudges right up and stops before him, breathing heavily, wild, feral, feverish. His hair is gleaming, flat and wet. His eyes are wide. They blink rapidly. He’s a hot mess.

He left him in his underwear. He arrives in nothing but his underwear.

He might be ready to explode too. He might have a punch primed for Cloud. He might wind up and lay him out. He might be palming his brother's butterfly knife. He might be about ready to pay him back. He might. He might actually do it. And Cloud wouldn't stop him.

“I didn't mean it,” he gasps.

Cloud almost doesn't get it.

Didn't mean what?

Reno stands there before him, trembling and heaving, and says no more.

“Hey!”

Someone across the beach is calling.

The groupies are regrouping.

“Asshole! Coward!”

Neither Reno nor Cloud respond or look.
They look on each other.

There is only each other.

“Didn’t mean what?” Cloud asks, voice no higher than the crash of the waves.

Reno wouldn’t have needed to hear it anyway. He’s going to let several dramatic moments of relative quiet pass, and then Reno’s going to open up. He’s going to clear it. He’s going to let it all loose. He’s going to prevail. He’s going to come out on top. One way or another.

There was only each other, until there is more, and someone uninvited arrives.

“Fucking faggot,” the newcomer hisses.

Reno’s grabbed from behind, a single arm tucking his neck into the crook of an elbow. The arm tightens, Reno gags, and then he is being jerked and twisted to the side, away from Cloud, away from making everything clear.

He’s thrown to the sand and ascended upon. His biggest fan, and the arm’s owner, drops onto his chest, swinging away at his face and deflecting hands.

Cloud has to watch before his brain kicks in.

Seconds go by. Reno struggles and thrashes in the spray and spume with the brute. Punches are thrown, handholds fought over. More people are calling in the distance. It's getting hairy again.

Cloud jumps to it at last, leaving the BDS upright in the surf to reach out for the stranger. There isn’t much to grab onto when he gets there. His hands slip and miss. The guy is shirtless, in a pair of red swim trunks, slick with sand, water, and too much muscle.

“Oh, fuck,” Reno swears.

He's a swirl of limbs and disaster. As fast as he's healed, he's getting bloodied again. He's too close to expiration. His luck has dried out. The true end is coming faster and faster for him now.

With Reno’s manic help, Cloud peels the brute away. He and Cloud stumble and sway into the deeper surf. Cloud can’t match his reach and strength. He grips his middle from behind instead, holding him tight, and swings him around, centrifuge style. Using his muscle and mass against him, Cloud tosses the guy into the coursing ocean before he reaches his dizziest.

It’s nothing fancy, and it doesn't look great, and he doesn’t launch the guy, but he does send him flying out to disappear into the waves.

Another groupie is on his away. He’s coming headlong, loping through Reno’s tracks, soon to arrive.

Reno’s still floundering and grounded. He swears and kicks, half in the ocean, half on the beach. Cloud is the only standard. He is the first line of defense. He is seeing double and ready to duck and cover.

At least they aren't coming in groups.

“The fuck's goin’ on!?” the next newcomer roars.

He is almost upon them.
Mister Red-Trunks is rising from the deep.


Cloud grabs the BDS ahead, and then Reno below, finding his slippery, gritty hand in the darkness and swirl. He hoists him to his feet, and doesn’t pause a beat. He destroys any chances of retaliation and drags Reno clear, somehow bringing him and the sword into line.

They turn and make tracks up the veiled beach, leaving the commotion to figure itself out.

“Hey!” the newcomer cries after them, all caught up to his pal. “Fucking cowards!”

And maybe they are.

“Cowards!”

And maybe they’re not.

They're still lucky. Lucky enough.

They aren't beaten to a pulp, and they aren’t pursued, and Reno doesn't want to fist fight anymore. He allows Cloud to lead him, stumbling and loping, and they end up miles down the sandy ribbon, out of breath, out of their minds, and holding hands.

No longer able to run, they’re walking, every step heavy and unstable.

Cloud hangs his head and lists to the right, surrendering to the BDS. Reno is mostly naked, soaking wet, rubbed raw with grit, and dragging his feet. He has dropped steps behind Cloud, pulling their locked arms long and level between them.

They come to a staggering, swaying halt.

Reno lets go of Cloud’s hand to sprawl flat out onto the beach.

Cloud lingers upright, leaning on the BDS like a too-tall cane.

“The fuck is going on?” he exclaims when he can.

“He threw the first punch,” Reno gasps, not bothering to divulge anymore.

“Did you... ask for it?” Cloud grills, breathy.

“Of course I did!” Reno eventually shouts, an explosion of limbs and fire and specks of sand. “The asshole told me to put clothes on. I told him to eat a dick. His friend didn't like that. He followed me, and threatened me, which is okay, but then he decided he wanted to prod me. Which isn’t okay. I knocked the guy on his ass. It was outta my hands after that. They didn’t wanna leave well enough alone.”

“You're… a handful,” Cloud sighs.

“You're right. Are you comin’ back with me?”

“I…”

“You forgot your jacket.”
“Yeah…”

“You know I'm sorry.”

Gleaming eyes, shrouded, real, right there.

“I… uh,” Cloud stammers. He pats his pockets with his free hand. “I... need a cigarette.”

Reno sits on the beach with his knees pulled in.

It’s full night: a deep, deep dark; a soul-reaching sort of dark. There are no resort streetlights to keep the glow on out here. There is no moon either. The clouds are thick and low. There is only deep blue shadow (inky, bruised), muted white sand, rolling surf (hissing, voluminous), and wind blowing. It's moody and mysterious.

The perfect backdrop.

Cloud stands, leaning his weight into the BDS.

He lit his cigarette using the silver lighter. The lid clanked shut with a fantastic clang.

Smoke curls and clears. The air is filled with the smell of it, dry and acrid.

They're both filled with the smoke of bad memories.

“How do you even do that?” Reno asks, grit and gravel, just like the loads still on his skin.

“Do what?” Cloud groans, dropping his shoulders just enough to show his displeasure.

“Carry that thing?”

Reno points: the BDS his victim.

“I dunno…” Cloud mumbles, shifting it closer, to the side, flat and invisible against him.

“So informative,” Reno sighs.

“I just… focus… or forget about it.”

“Those are two entirely different answers.”

“I said I didn't know.”

“You're like… you know, those women…” Reno gestures. “Those mothers that save their children from impossible situations by lifting a house off them or something? You've got, or get, mom strength. It's like your… parental instinct kicks in on turbo.”

“Mom strength,” Cloud deadpans, inhaling his smoke deeply afterwards.

“That's what I said.”

“Right.”
A puff of smoke gone in an instant.

Cloud nods his exaggerated agreement several times.

“You really *do* care about me, yo,” Reno notes, semi-sarcastic flare intact.

“You're an idiot,” Cloud retorts.

“I've gotta be… if I'm still here…”

Cloud knows it’s true. He’s starting to hate the truth.

He smokes it burning into his lungs.

“Stop causing problems,” he suggests.

“Stop giving me reasons to,” Reno counters.

“Reasons to?”

“You really want me to—”

“Alright,” Cloud blurts back, quick and snippy.

“I thought so,” Reno says, smiling enough to show a flash of white teeth.

Cloud shifts on his aching feet. The uneven sand sinks him too far down on his right to give him the suave he was hoping for. He’s wet up to his waist. He’s starting to shiver. His second wind is fading. He’s starting to fade too.

“I don't know what happened, Reno.”

“I know…” Reno murmurs, shivering like a dog himself. “And that... *really* doesn't help any.”

“I was so... angry. I thought I… And then I… All the blood and the screaming and the… the…”

“You saved our butts,” Reno offers.

“I killed you,” Cloud gasps, gawking right at him.

“Impossible.”

“If I hadn't given you—”

Reno quiets him with a tut-tut and a raised hand.

“You *can't* kill me, yo. Here I am. In all my... half naked, drunk, and wet glory. You can't shake me so easy. Even when you're tryin’ to, man. Tough as nails. Like I said.”

“You still… you… You *died* in my arms…”

Cloud has to glance away, to his feet, to his hands, to the sea.

Anywhere, everywhere.

“And you looked… *ready* for it,” he moans, his voice tight, tighter, tightest. “You didn't just... give in... but you *did*... accept it.”
“I accepted it a long time ago,” Reno explains.

Cloud returns his gaze to give him a digging look, shrewd, unkind, and then nothing but tired.

Reno doesn't have to see it. His imagination is all he needs.

“Sit down,” he growls at him. “Stop standing over me like fucking lord and master. Get down here.”

Cloud shrugs lower, irritating his sore shoulders and arms, but he leaves his distant post. He goes to sit on Reno’s right. The BDS he leaves stuck in the soft sand before them. A focus point. A marker. A grave marker. The cigarette he brings with (to Reno’s great displeasure).

“I'm sorry for yelling at you,” Reno starts.

“You sound like mom,” Cloud groans.

“Fuck you. I'm trying to apologize here.”

Reno pulls his long legs in the tighter, folding them snug to his chest, hugged in his arms. He's all rib bone and angles. Shivering and white. He looks very small. He looks very fragile.

“I didn't mean what I said. I was pissed. I was just tryin’ to… hurt you… like you hurt me.”

Cloud cracks a sardonic smile all for himself.

He takes a slow drag.

He stokes silence.

“You'd have to cut my throat,” he exhales, smoke and venom.

“Yeah, well…” Reno sniffs, “I didn't want the blood on my hands. Clearly. I punched some blond beach stud out for you. I punched his friend. And his other friend. Because I can't stand…”

“Me hating you?” Cloud mutters under his breath.

“...you upset. Especially if I'm the cause. Fuck you hating me. Go ahead and hate me, yo. Go all out. Just... don't go and do something stupid because of it. I can’t stand the thought. I didn't even last an hour... Fuck. I didn't even grab a shirt. Or my guns. Or my fucking knife.”

“You don't have to keep—”

“Shut it. Lemme finish.”

“I don't know if I should...”

Reno shakes his head, dismissing him.

“It's not like it's news. I'm not perfect. I'm not... you know, a certain shining individual... but I'm no less serious either. How lucky are you? You've had two hot guys mindlessly chasing after you.”

“Lucky?”

Reno winces. It’s his turn to look away now. He’s looking for a hand, a pause, a little help. He only ends up seeing flashes of the BDS in the blackout before them. And that's no comfort at all.
“I never say the right thing… And you had to go and kill my rhythm too. I can never… I never express it right, man. It always gets fucked up… I always fuck it up. It’s always... negative. It’s always...”

“Try being honest,” Cloud suggests.

Reno's eyes return, wide and bright in the low light.

“I've been nothing but honest with you.”

“Oh really?”

Cloud pitches the spent cigarette for horizon. It sparks into nothing.

“I've been honest about my emotions,” Reno corrects.

“You've been… difficult,” Cloud says.

“Hate to break it to you, but I haven't tried very hard not to be.”

“Exactly,” Cloud barks, jumping with the force of it.

Reno tosses his hands up. They slap back to his sandy knees.

“I still love you,” he confesses.

Cloud says nothing in return. He glances out to the surf, the outlined and dormant BDS, just a colourless silhouette; the unseen horizon, just a promise.

“You're an idiot,” he tells him.

Reno finds Cloud’s hand in the dim and sand between them.

He squeezes it.

He’s right there when Cloud looks back. He's right there, lifting his free hand, sandy as it might be, and cupping the otherwise pristine side of Cloud's face. His half-hand, his damaged hand (a palm, a thumb, and a pointer), cold and wet, laid over the right hemisphere of Cloud’s already cold and wet face.

His missing fingers. His scars. His baggage. His lies. His lust. His life. All for him. What's left. All for him. Reno holds him there. He stares him down. Closed in. Collected, not caught. He can’t see the bruise. The reminder. The trace of damage. The blemish. He only sees Cloud.

“Actions speak louder than words, right?” Reno mumbles.

Cloud does not offer a visible response, knowing quite well his own recent actions.

Reno slithers those two fingers around to the back of Cloud's neck and draws him closer. He doesn't kiss him. He doesn't ruin it. He pulls him into his arms, into his chest, and Cloud accepts it, going with the pull, no matter how sudden, sodden, and awkward. He allows himself to be moved.

It takes a long time for him to return the embrace. He hangs limp in Reno’s arms for as long as he can. By the time he does move, turning his head and crossing his arms at Reno's lower back—his mass laughable, nothing, negative—Cloud is double-crossed.
Reno pulls him full into his lap.

Cloud wants to protest and jump up, but he can’t. Nothing really happens. He just slumps into Reno’s body. His hip digs into Cloud’s side, and his knees protrude. He is long and leggy, and a bit too bony, but they reach an agreement, and Cloud comes to an eventual rest.

Reno soothes his back and coils around him. His grit and damp transfers. His heat. His hope.

They stay half in and half out, on the edge of everything, and nothing, for some time. The clouds thin overhead, the skies clear, the stars come out, the BDS mirrors gauzy moon glow. The world rests, breathes, and starts to make no more sense, but at least it’s not quite so loud out here.

Somehow they still have each other.

“We need to find you somethin’ you can carry that thing with,” Reno mutters.

Cloud already knows what he’s talking about.

“Some kind of holster or sheath would be nice,” he offers, muffled by bare flesh.

“Yeah. Except I don’t really think they make ‘em that big…”

“I don’t either…”

“Gotta find a tailor, or a tanner, or a leatherer, or whatever the fuck they’re called.”

“Leatherist.”

“Is that really it?”

“I have no idea.”

“Hah,” Reno laughs.

“They can make you a glove too,” Cloud proposes. “For your hand.”

“Yeah, sure. I guess,” Reno mumbles, deflecting the idea. There’s a minor lull before he speaks again. “I can’t feel anything.”

“We should get back,” Cloud recommends.

“That’s a great idea,” Reno breathes, squeezing him in agreement, and then opening his arms.

Cloud slides himself from his lap, already missing the heat and closeness.

“We should get back…” Reno repeats, groaning, stretching. “Before someone steals my shit from that room... and I’ve gotta go on… an arduous quest of revenge to find my brother's knife, and my expensive guns… Starting with that fuckin’ barman.”

So, they head back.

It’s twice as quiet when they get in. The last crowds have dispersed. The streets are empty. Everyone is off to bed, to rest, and to recharge. No signs of Reno’s groupies remain. They enter
town quietly.

Fortunately, they don't have to enter the bar itself to get upstairs to their room. They only have to swing around back and mount the steps to the unlocked door.

Reno is scanning the area before that door even shuts closed behind them.

The place doesn’t look any different to Cloud.

The many naked bulbs hanging long from the ceiling commence their sick flicker every so many feet. The room brightens, swells, and welcomes them back. The grit remains. The rubbish and crates. The bed. The armchairs. The rucksack.

Reno expresses no alarm.

Everything must be good then.

So to speak.

Cloud moves forward and offloads the BDS onto the same orange armchair, making sure to, once again, turn the sharp end in, just to be safe. Rather than sorry.

Oh so sorry.

“Hey,” Reno gusts.

He's standing at the back of the extended chamber, leaned in the narrow bathroom doorway, burgundy curtain held open.

“Shower time,” he sing-songs.

Cloud stares on. Over the boxes and clutter.

“You need a shower,” Reno declares, his voice carrying well. “I happen to be freezing my ass off. If you hadn’t noticed. Let's kill two birds with one stone. I won't bother you. I won't touch you unless you ask. There's my usual disclaimer. Seriously though, don't take me seriously. I wanna be on you always. Even if I'm exhausted. But, I'll do my best. I promise. I swear. Turk's honour.”

He raises his right hand: an oath.

“You'll feel so much better,” he urges, dropping the hand to shrug once.

He stands there. He holds the curtain. He stares. Mostly naked. Mostly his.

“Come on, bud.”

Cloud goes to him.

Of course he does.

The water is steaming hot. The stall is cramped and the floor slippery. There are green tiles galore (and some sort of citrus fruit motif) among old stains, and cracks, and mildew crawling up the pea
green shower curtain.

They have to share the stream, just an intermittent sputter of liquid from a grimy, tiny shower head hardly tall enough for Cloud to stand under.

Cloud rinses himself clean. The water runs red at their feet, swirling around the drain, gone. The only available soap is a cream-yellow bar, cracked and gummy. It must be older than either of them, but it lathers, and it smells of chamomile and lemon. The shower fills with the aroma.

Reno keeps his word and stays off him. He picks his nails and scratches his head while he waits his turn. Who knows? Cloud doesn’t. All he knows is that the water feels fabulous. The sting is fabulous. The way his sunburns stretch and pull is fabulous. He knows he has to scrub his head three times to get all the shit out. He knows the smell of blood will always make his stomach turn.

They have to switch eventually.

They slide by each other, flesh rubbing wet, slick, sultry friction for all of a beat.

It’s enough to change the mood.

Reno takes the spray and rinses the sand and cold clean from his burned skin. He starts to feel better. Just a bit. Even if he has to crouch to fit under the stream.

Cloud watches from the opposite end, drip-drying, waiting, withered, wasted, but warm and clean. Too close, too far away. Always the case. Always at odds.

Reno has his back turned. He's rinsing his hair and face. He's half and half, white and red, sunburned and pale. He’s all spine, long torso, and shifting shoulder blades; jutting but narrow hipbones, slim legs, undulating and compact muscle.

Long torsos such as his make that point where the spine meets the ass look downright elegant.

Cloud can't look away, and he can’t think of a good enough reason to. He's getting all worked up. His blood is boiling. His heart is thumping, flesh tingling, guts rolling. His head is filled with nothing but steam and heat. He can’t breathe. He gasps, he struggles, he wheezes.

Reno turns to straighten up and meet him.

He is surprised by what he sees.

Cloud looks… serious.

And he looks scary.

Scary-serious.

He looks like he’s two shuddering gulps away from losing consciousness.

Or from springing and biting his throat out.

“What?” Reno asks, hating how weak it sounds.

Cloud pounces on him before he can utter another sound.

Porcelain squeaks. Water splashes.
Cloud pushes Reno back under the spray, and then beyond it, into the far wall. They meet the chilled tiles with a solid wet thud. Cloud’s naked and demanding body smothers and locks him there.

He's too tall for Cloud to reach like this. He settles for mouthing Reno’s collarbone, his throat, his jawline. They stand with the hot/cold spigot low between Reno's bent knees. The struggling shower spray sputters just to the side of his head, speckling them both.

Reno rolls with the punches. He was alarmed, but now he's not so sure. He might be loving it. He moans and grips, clinging on, confirming and requesting. He looks to the ceiling, offering Cloud all he can reach. He claws Cloud's spine, pulling him close. He keeps them upright. He holds them steady.

Cloud crushes all of himself into Reno. He runs his teeth across dripping flesh, and then bites, sucking, licking, lapping. It hits him late that he's licking and sucking along a scar, his scar, the one he branded there, but it doesn't stop him. If anything, he feels more determined. He feels ignited. He wants to please him. He wants to ease him. He might just consume him.

Reno moans on, approving of the treatment, and showing it well. His mouth hardly ever closes. He arches and writhes. He exudes compliance. He wants for it.

His only complaint? He can't rub, lewd and longing, chest, belly, hips and cock, like he really wants to. He wants to buck and crash. He wants to go wild, but he's trapped. He shudders and groans. He might even whine. He wants more. He needs more. He’s going to let him know at any minute. Before he goes mad. Before it’s official. He can't take the punishment. He’s too weak. So weak.

Cloud hums satisfaction into his throat, loving his helplessness and growing frustration.

Reno doesn’t so much tell him as he takes over.

He gives Cloud a one for one and pushes him back for the opposite side of the stall.

They almost don’t make it.

Cloud loses his footing, surprised, dulled, and Reno very nearly barrels right over him. Avoiding the unfortunate outcome though, Cloud catches his feet, and the side wall, and stiffens. Reno helps, and then he doesn’t. They hit the far tiled wall with a slam, Cloud’s shoulder meeting first.

“Ow,” he groans.

Reno doesn’t show his condolences. He grabs Cloud by his soaked hair, rocking his head up and back, stretching him long before him. He sends him flat into the tiles and drapes over him, killing their already minimal distance.

He takes his mouth, messy and sharp, teeth pinching, biting. His tongue slips and slides, far reaching. Muscles and burned flesh meld. Limbs reach and pull and press.

Reno tenses his fingers at the root and Cloud gasps, opening the wider, letting him wallow deep inside. Reno lavishes with his every inch. He rocks his hips forward. He brings them into madness. They suck on each other's tongues. They gasp into each other’s panting mouths. They moan together. They tighten together. They glide together. Sticking, sticky, wet; hot and meaty.

The thought and sensation undoes Cloud. He slumps on every connection, melting, molten. He breathes helplessly into Reno's mouth.
And Reno indulges in his work, his play, in every of Cloud's desperate whimpers. He swallows every one. He grins and exhales, gusty. He holds Cloud up, supporting him, rewriting him, keeping him smashed into those solid tiles.

The water soon runs cold.

They have to get out.

It’s not enough to dampen their desire.

The bed is too damn far. It's at the other end of the room. They stumble and clash, sopping wet. They twist and turn, colliding and compressing, dodging and careening, just trying to get there.

Reno's hands pull and tug at Cloud’s everything.

He wants everything. He wants it now. He’s not going to make it.

He stops Cloud cold, catching up and pushing him into a stack of wooden crates tall enough to handle the treatment. He wants to taste him. He needs to taste him. He pours over him.

The crates creak and sway, not nearly as stable as they looked or should be. Their lips clash, open. Tongues tangle and hips strike. Bones and flesh roll and shift.

Cloud grunts and shoves him back.

“Oooh,” Reno purrs, toothy grin turned up to full blast.

He claws his fingers at him.

Cloud staggers away.

Reno follows.

They make it more than halfway, about as far as the orange armchair. With sand coating both their damp feet, and water dripping into pools at every pause, leaving tracks, evidence—Cloud makes a mistake. Gasping and mindless, he trips up, landing a hand down on the armrest of the chair for support.

He bends fully forwards at the waist in the process.

Reno doesn't help at all this time.

He is slick and hot and right there behind him. He sees his chance and swarms in, shoving Cloud further over the chair, sending both his arms down. He bumps and pushes him, forcing him, folding him, getting him right where he wants him.

“You wanted it dirty, right?” he breathes in his ear. “You wanted dirty talk?”

He’s bearing down and pushing in. He’s containing him. He’s licking his shoulders and biting the back of his neck. He’s caressing his inner thighs, stepping his legs apart, feeling every inch of him that he can. Tracking and mapping. Taking and tempering. He’s following every shiver. He’s conducting each one.

“Gonna fuck you. You want that?” he gusts.

He works their bodies flush: a copy. Cloud struggles for a hand hold, for a better position. He’s not
going to get one. The BDS rests on the chair with them. The blade is large and takes up most of the space. Cloud fumbles and trembles, trying to avoid it, trying to stay upright, trying to hang on.

Reno is spreading him, rubbing into him, making his intentions known.

“Fuck you from behind. Like an animal.”

His breath comes hot and moist with the nuzzle of his head, his crown, the tip of his solid want, the weight of his absolute need. They’re both slick and wet, dripping from the shower. They’re both fired up, rock solid, ready and willing. Reno sways his hips. He prods and promises. He’s got him in his sights.

Cloud has nowhere to go. He digs his fingers into fabric. He anticipates.

Their difference in height makes standing easy enough. Cloud has only to set his legs and crane his back. Reno is doing all the rest. And quite eagerly. He’s never been one to waste too much time on ceremony. Function and friction come first.

He lines up, he pushes. He guides his slippery way inside with a shaking hand. He meets little resistance, but he’s still not gentle. With a grunt and a gasp, a bump and a thrust, and seven fingers spiked into Cloud’s hips, they join all at once, slick and hot, jarring, fluid, filling.

Cloud groans long and lasting. He rocks forward, shoved forward. His knees meet the chair. He steadies on the BDS. He can’t avoid the hot blade now. He can’t help it. He can’t stop it. He feels it scorch under his palms. He watches it as Reno bends down to kiss his back, as he hovers over him, anchored to his hips. He watches it as Reno draws out. To crown. To absence. And then returns, deep and swift, full to bursting, a sensation like worlds ending.

Cloud contains his cry, choked and miserable.

“I’ll make you mine,” Reno rasps.

Cloud clenches his teeth and stares down on himself mirrored.

Reno presses over his arms and hands, into the BDS, into the heat. He drapes over him. Their heads align. Their skins layer. His mouth by his ear rasps, a gust, a gasp. He gives him no quarter. He shows no honour. He only wants. He only takes.

He makes Cloud shudder and whine. He makes his narrow hips snap forward, his head sway, and his fingers claw and paw the blade. Reno’s trying to flatten him. He’s trying to crush him. He’s trying to redeem him, to top him, to smother him. He rams into him. Again and again. Ruthless. Brutal.

The packing sounds fill the air.

The slippery wet thump, solid, repeated, repeating, reaping.

Cloud can’t hold his cries back any longer.

They dribble out, they stutter out. They're both moaning and rocking and loud now.

Anyone in the bar below will hear them.


Reno seals over Cloud’s back and straining arms.
So near the blade that took his life.

“You're mine. All mine,” he’s chanting.

Taking him, replacing him, breaking him.

All mine.

Cloud whimpers in return. He claws his fingers. He closes his eyes.

Knowing the truth.

Maybe he is.

Fade to black.

Fade away.

Far away.

Where Cloud feels nothing.

Where he is nothing.

And that’s pleasant enough.

He must have passed out. He must be dreaming again.

“We can't fall asleep like this,” Reno groans, distant, dampened.

No, he’s on his way to a dream...

He thinks he moans. The world is dark.

He doesn’t feel anything. Not a thing.

“Hey,” Reno whispers.

He’s feeling him poking his ribs.

That’s something.

He feels his body shifting, sliding, dropping.

But, then, there is so quickly nothing again.

Until, the next thing Cloud knows…

He’s getting that familiar urge to sit up.

The lights have been left on but the room is lit now by the beam of early sunlight.

Reno’s snoring next to him, turned away, naked and knocked out.
And Zack is sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting to have a conversation with him.

Nothing will ever be the same.
Zack doesn’t say anything just yet. He’s sitting at the foot of the bed, on the edge of the sinking mattress. He’s in profile, moody. All shoulders, spine, and black hair, and now he’s turning.

He’s turning Cloud inside out. And all Cloud wants for is to wake up. He wants to sink through the bed. He wants to snap out of existence.

“Have fun?”

Cloud doesn’t readily answer.

He doesn’t want to stir shit up.

But, he does.

“You should know,” he mutters.

He doesn’t have much choice, even if it is his dream. He lets the time pass. Dream time. Milliseconds. As long as it takes a primal thought to come and go. He lets the chance to make a better impression melt away. He doesn't say a thing. His mouth stays shut.

“What are you doing, Cloud?” Zack declares.

Buzzing resonance in his ears.

Cloud shifts and fidgets.

“What do you mean?”

“Where are you going?” Zack clarifies.

“You know where I'm going…”

“Why don't you keep it?”

“Because it's… heavy. And you told me to return it… It wasn't yours…”

Those two eyes. Not quite looking at him. Just like Cloud remembers them. Just as kind and knowing. Just as lethal and agonizing.

“Please don't... take what I said when I was alive too seriously. Other than… you know… the obvious. That hasn't changed. That won't change. Everything else has... Just… listen to what I'm telling you now. You're headed into trouble.”

Cloud shrugs and glances to his resting companion.

“More trouble than if I idle with Reno?”

Now Zack isn't looking at him at all.

Now neither of them are looking at each other.

“What about your parents?” Cloud offers.
Zack's tone turns tight, just enough, just a twist.

“What about my parents?”

Cloud tears away from dream-Reno, and gets ready again for dream-Zack.

He hardens. He numbs. Because it’s a punch in the gut. Even if he’s not real. Even if he’s turned away. Cloud has to summon all of his strength just to look at him.

When he speaks, his voice is still so small, wavering, and weak.

Everything and nothing has changed.

“Don’t you wanna know they're safe?”

Zack sniffs and shrugs. He shuffles his booted feet on the sandy floor.

“That's an advantage of being dead, Cloud… I know they're safe. They're just fine.”

“Then where are they?”

Cloud stares at him, as difficult as it is, he holds him there. The curve of his spine, the lean of his shoulders, the back of his neck, covered in hair now longer than Reno's. He takes all this to memory, even as it comes from memory.

Zack is solid, not wispy, not fly-away. He really has him fooled, and he wants to give in. He wants to believe. He wants to relax, relent, and feel better. But, it’s stinging, hurtful, and Zack isn’t going to humour him with a response either.

It riles Cloud’s uneasy temper.


“I know you ask a lot of questions…” Zack answers.

He always had an answer.

And it was never the right one.

“Why won't you just tell me?” Cloud pries.

Zack turns to look on him. Fabric whispers, the bed creaks, sand shifts and falls. It feels strange. It feels real. It feels dangerous, outrageous, absurd. A wave of energy pours off him. He disrupts the very dream air around them with so little effort. He controls the show. He controls the flow.

“Would knowing really help you?”

Cloud can’t control anything.

He loses his top.

“Are you really trying to help me? Or is this just… personal? Am I gonna be in a lot of pain? Is it embarrassing? Is that why? You're here to save me, again, from some awful and gruesome end because you're guilty you gave out too soon and can't protect me anymore? You'd have to go an
eternity knowing you made the wrong choice. Instead, here you are… looking like a… SOLDIER recruiter… and fucking with my fucking head.”

Zack doesn’t appear surprised.

It doesn’t make Cloud feel any better. He’s fighting to pull away. He’s fighting to keep cool. He’s fighting the desire for flight, the tears, and the swarming in guilt, and the mounting shame.

“We already went over this…” Zack tells him.

And they did. Oh, yes. Zack told him he was done for. He had no future. He was a pending disaster. He was dying of mako poisoning. He was unstable, unpredictable, wounded. They had no chance. He died the moment he came barreling into Sephiroth’s room to save him.

“Oh dear. You’ve spent far too much time with him already…” Zack continues. “I’m here because I missed you. And I need to help you. And… also… I don’t know why. But, here I am.”

“Here you are…” Cloud drones.

“Here I am,” Zack states. “And there he is.”

He points to Reno.

And Cloud reacts badly.

He spills all of his worries.

All of the bile and vile in his guts.

“Does he do something then? Is Reno the problem? Is he plotting to get back at me? Does he want to restore his Turk title… and avenge his brother, and his own death? Why tell me to get closer to him then? Why push it? Why even suggest the idea that I love him? I cut his throat. Why not warn me? Why not—”

“Cloud.”

“No, no, no,” Cloud rambles, waving both hands out in front of himself. “Don’t say another word. I’m a fucking idiot.” He shakes his head, drops his hands, and chuckles to himself, sour, sad, ugly. “I’m so fucking stupid…”

How did he not see it before?

“You did it,” he says. He has no more trouble looking at him. He might even be glaring at him. “Of course you did. You killed the sandworm… you killed the soldiers… YOU killed Reno. It’s all been you.” Cloud points to his ghost. “You’re still jealous,” he accuses.

A suspended moment.

A miserable grumble.

A mountain range of shoulders shrugged.

“No big surprise there,” Zack admits.

Zack emits his own bitter half-laugh. A cracking sort of sound, like brittle wood splitting, or maybe just his inner soul. It's terrible enough to go along with Cloud’s seconds before.

“He's always been good at that…”

“Do you regret anything now?” Cloud growls, feeling very much betrayed.

“No,” Zack insists. He stiffens up, bringing his head high. “He would have crucified you.”

“Who?” Cloud gusts.

Zack does not reply.

It forces Cloud to come to his own conclusion.

”Are you serious? The Director? Like… crucified… for real? Like… on a…”

Zack shakes his head.

“Benefits of being dead… In the worst possible case… after branding you a traitor, accused of the murders of Sephiroth and the President... he would have done a public execution, front and center, outside Shinra Tower, for everyone to see, in any number of ways. At the best... he threw you in a holding cell to go mad, and rot, and be forgotten. He had to be stopped.”

“And Reno? What happened… to him?”

Zack's tone remains dry.

“Same.”

“We couldn't… beat him? We didn’t? The three of us? Not even—”

“No.”

“You really—”

Zack's voice rises, strong, authoritative, beating Cloud down into silence and submission.

“I regret nothing. If it wasn't me… it was Reno. If it wasn't me… it was you. In no variation do we ever leave Gongaga together. And, before you ask… if it wasn't Gongaga, it was Costa. If not Costa, Midgar. Gongaga was the… great equalizer. It was just supposed to happen. In one possibility… in one outcome… it's just… me… and… neither of you make it out of town. Neither of you. You both die… Soldiers shoot you down. You don't even get— I have to hear it. I can hear it.”

Misery.

Tangible, and radiating off him like a sickness.

Cloud can taste it.

He can smell it.

He becomes it.

“I would have preferred if neither of us made it,” he mumbles.
Zack sighs.

“You have so much in common.”

“We're both—”

“You like making things difficult,” Zack interrupts.

“I think we all share that one,” Cloud retaliates.

They descend into a simmering silence. A stand off. A full stop. It's broken by Cloud, the growing tightness in his chest making the words difficult to produce, the silence intermittent, in and out.

“You know… I didn't know... someone like you… could get... this jealous.”

Zack doesn't take it well, but he doesn’t move a muscle to illustrate any of it.

“Someone like me?” he returns. “Do you really think I want him touching you? Did you really think it wouldn't bother me? Just because I'm dead? Do you remember anything I said?”

Cloud can hear movement now.

He can hear Zack's gloves creaking as he clenches his hands.

The air simmers and warms.

“I don't want him touching you. Not even a pat on the shoulder. Let alone balls deep. You're mine.” He calms and sighs. “You're mine, Cloud... But. Someone should touch you. Someone should love you. And I can't. Not properly. So, shit... You deserve to be touched, loved, comforted... And so does he. And he loves you. He does. He fucking worships you. It's killing me. Killing me. It's a good thing I... already beat it to the punch, right?”

The joke is not appreciated.

"Yeah, no shit. You're dead,” Cloud bites out. “And it's because of me. And you killed him. Because of me. You cut his throat. You did it. Through me. For me. He died in my arms. He... he... I had to watch it, Zack. Every second. He didn't deserve that. He just...”

Zack shifts and shudders. More sand falls. More time lost to the hour glass.

“He's too unpredictable. He willingly led you into danger. He brought you where he could take advantage of you. He lied to you. He sold you out. He wants—”

“He's just...” Cloud moans.

“He's just...” Zack finishes.


“Fuck! You're fucking with my head!” Cloud shouts. “You say one thing... and then another... It's okay to love him? You couldn't let him die in Gongaga? I need to be loved? He's selling me out? You can't stand him touching me? You're repeating yourself. You made me think you trusted him... What the fuck is this!?"

Zack does not offer a reply fast enough, and Cloud carries on.

“So you died jealous? Are you cool now that you... got him back? Now that you spilled blood? Do you feel better? Or is something else going on? You wanted to kill him. Your anger was my anger.
Or the other way around… You saw him, and you… wanted to pay him back. *You* fucked up.”

“I’ll admit I got… carried away. I just wanted you safe. It wasn't supposed to... go that far.”

“*Carried away!*?” Cloud howls. “Fuck. Can't you see? Can you see it now? What I was afraid of before? What I'm still afraid of now? I have no idea what I might do… I have no control. My body has... hardly ever been my own.” He shrugs over himself. He’s losing his fight. He’s giving in. “You know that better than anyone. You know me better than anyone. *Especially* now. You can't stop me from dying... What does *any* of it matter? Why can't I just... *join you*?”

He meets those eyes. He faces the pain. He blinks the scalding tears away.

“I can… stop you from suffering,” Zack murmurs.

“What's so bad about *suffering*?” Cloud bites out, low and seething.

“You tell me.”

Zack focuses his blue flame eyes on him.

He’s not letting him go.

“It makes you stronger,” Cloud mumbles.

“Do you *feel* stronger?”

Cloud sniffs and wipes at his face.

“I feel... like shit.”

“My point exactly,” Zack urges. “Just listen to me.”

It doesn’t inspire confidence.

It only inspires a nasty twist in Cloud’s guts.

“I tried that already,” he says.

“Did I ever mislead you?” Zack asks.


“No…”

“Then listen to me.”

He's got a point.

“Don’t go to Midgar,” Zack stresses.

But, when will Cloud ever start listening to *himself*? When will he be able to stand on his own? When will he stop hurting those he loves? When will it ever get easy?

“What happened if you stayed?” Cloud asks him. “What happened… if you had listened to me and Reno, and we all left together? You said it happens somewhere else? If it doesn't happen in Gongaga… where then? Did we get back here? To Costa? How long did we get?”
“A few days…”

“Were they good days?”

“Cloud…”

“Let me know. Fucking tell me! What's the point of this if I can’t benefit from it?”

Zack just stares at him. Those eyes. That face.

Cloud can’t think properly. He can’t cope. He won’t. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want to feel like vapor anymore. No more thinness. No more fluttering away. No more shutting down.

“You don't want to tell me. There's something… There's always something you assholes won't tell me.”

“It's for your own good,” Zack assures.

“I don’t know what's for my own good!”

Zack gives him a pointed look down his nose, chin tilting to chest.

“And, no. That's not fair,” Cloud fumes. “Don't give me that look. It's because everyone else makes my decisions for me,” he explains. “I don't know myself… And you won't let me try. Reno's been the closest to... helping me figure out... who the fuck I am.”

“Reno…”

“Honestly! What's so bad about—”

Zack levels his stare, lifting his chin.

“He's gone bad.”

“What? He's never really... been good.”

“You need… to watch yourself around him.”

Zack’s pointed expression does not change.

Cloud feels his eyebrows bunching, his forehead creasing, his whole body shaking.

“That's rich, Zack.”

“It's the truth.”

“Fuck the truth! You're dead. And a jealous jerk.”

Zack sways back, as if taken by the statement.

“And you never fucking listen,” he growls. “I had to do what I had to do. I had to… end it there. It happened. It's done. It's over. It's okay.”

“It's not okay,” Cloud cries out. “Nothing’s okay! I don't know that. I can't know that. I won't know that. I just know… you... left me.”

Zack’s jaw sets, his teeth work: all of it audible.
“I came for you,” he grits out.

“You left me.”

“I’m here.”

“You’re dead.”

“Distant.”

“Zack…”

“Cloud.”

“I know,” Cloud whimpers. He drops his shoulders and head and slumps in around himself, losing the last hope of staying strong, and keeping him in his sights, and his emotions in check. “Okay… okay. I know you gave up everything when you... came for me. They caught you, they hurt you… and they killed you. You were already dying. You were… in so much pain. I know.”

“I’m not anymore,” Zack offers, tone softening, cooling. “I don’t hurt. I don’t have that physical connection. It hurts watching you hurt though. It hurts watching you still struggle. And I have to watch. Because I won’t look away. I won’t leave. I have to do something about it. I have to try.”

Cloud heaves a great sigh.


Zack adds an exhausted scoff.

“It fucking does,” he agrees.

Cloud wants for comfort, for relief, a breather, a break, a recess. He wants to reach out, but he doesn’t feel his body respond when he tries. He doesn’t move at all.

“Why… can’t I touch you either?”

Zack looks to the side, to his gloved hands, to Cloud’s lap, to his chest, and up to his face. He considers his answer longer than expected. He looks uncharacteristically uncomfortable.

“It’s just… not a good idea.”

“Not a good idea how?”

“Well… You wouldn’t embrace the virus trying to take you over, would you?”

Cloud scoffs now.

“Virus? You’re not a virus.”

Zack drops his shoulders and twists himself away. The whole room seems to dim.

Perhaps the dream-sun is just hiding behind a dream-cloud. Or, more likely, it’s all that doom and gloom building. Doom and gloom, and a heavy sword, and forgotten words, and moist flesh, and blood, and words of possession, and the unwillingness to care, and Reno.

“Do you… hate me?” Cloud mutters.
A quick answer.

“No,” Zack replies.

There is honesty, there is relief, and a shuddering sob that follows.

Cloud tries to swallow it.

Zack turns to confirm it.

“If I…” Cloud starts, stuttering, sniffling, calming as he goes. “If I had to... choose... all over again... from the start... it would be you. Every time. Over and over. You have to know that. I'd rather it be you next to me. I’d rather... be dead than you. Every time. Because you were... worth a damn. You meant something. You mean something.”

“I know.”

That drills in like a spike.

It digs deep to the core.

“Why do you... have to keep saying that?” Cloud whimpers.

He keeps his head down.

He can’t look at him like this.

“Because I know. I don't know all of it... but I know that. I know you love me. And I…”

“You haven't said it back once,” Cloud accuses, lifting his glassy gaze a fraction.

“I…”

Zack scratches the back of his head.

“You haven't even said me too…” Cloud mutters, watching him from under his fall of hair.

Zack looks trapped. He looks unsure.

“I can't say it enough. If I start…” he explains, trailing off.

Cloud jumps up, he jumps out for him. It’s a sudden explosion of movement, and it’s as far as he's gotten to date. It’s as close as he can get. All his anger, all his shame, and guilt, and want, and need. He still stops dead. Zack is still inches away.

He feels faint, sick, saturated, sedated, sunken. Here’s all that doom weighing down.

He’s right there.

He’s warmth and substance and breath and blood and blinking.

He's a lie, most of all.

And you can't touch a lie.

“I wanna hear it,” Cloud utters, right to his false face in profile: too perfect, too composed. “Give me a morning of it. Give me a night of it. I don't care if you're still blabbing... song lyrics, or
whatever... the next time I'm here. You might be happy. You might have a smile on your face. And
I might forget... it's a dream... What's so bad about that?"

"Nothing," Zack answers.

He doesn't give him the precious time to recover. He destroys him as he struggles to retain. As he
hangs, trying to touch him, trying to hold on, trying to breathe imaginary air.

"I love you," Zack announces.

It makes him make the sorriest of faces.

Cloud regrets it immediately.

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, wanting to take it back. "I haven't been... very... I'm..."

He recoils, drawing across the bed in reverse.

He feels no farther from destruction.

He's back to watching from the fringes.

"It's fine, Cloud," Zack vows.

"I miss you," Cloud moans. "I miss you. And how you... look at me... and say my name..."

That affords a faint smile.

That affords more pain.

"Cloud," Zack says, mouthing it out.

The smile lessens.

Cloud sets his jaw.

Zack repeats it.

"Cloud."

It's in more a doting manner this time, but his face stays serious.

The mood is tense.

"I'll watch out for you always," he swears, casual and confident, and soothing soft.

Now here's a flash of his perfect smile. Here's brilliance. Here's the head cock. Here's worlds
colliding, tectonic shift, combustion, and bones contorting. Oh, the chaos.

Cloud manages to return it: the chaos, the brilliance, the smile. It's wavering but growing. It's far
off, far away, soft, honest, bashful, melting, sliding, gone.

The sensation leftover is electric, thick, too much, too soon. A scorching gust, pyroclastic cloud,
and just smoke and mirrors, because it's fading, fading, fading...

"Don't do that," Cloud orders, alarmed, springing up.
Zack is withdrawing.
Zack is losing substance.
“Don't go!” Cloud shouts.
He can see through him.
He can see he’s drifting.
“Don’t!”
And Cloud is drifting too.
“Please, don't go!”
“Cool it,” Reno’s voice croaks.

He's naked next to Reno.
Cloud's stomach rolls.
He sits up and has a good glance around.
The lights have been left on but the room is lit now by the beam of early sunlight.
Déjà vu.
He blinks.
No Zack.
Not even a depression on the mattress.
“Bad dreams?” Reno mumbles.
Cloud sighs and breathes.
“Zack was…”
“Blowin’ guys in the afterlife?”
Cloud balks. He sneers. He thinks he wants to cry again. He wants to scream. He recovers in sharp form and swings out, punching all of his bony little knuckles into Reno's bad shoulder.
“No, you fucking prick. He was… right here, talking to me. He was on the edge of the bed.”
Reno hisses but remains prone. Hair dented, spiked and flat, eyes blinking, bleary, clearing, he rubs his mistreated shoulder and starts his waking up.
“And you just… talked?” he groans.
Cloud isn’t given a good start.

He resists giving Reno a second shot.

“It’s not the first time,” he explains.

Reno cracks his neck.

“Say anything nice about me?”

Cloud’s head thuds a spike of pain. His heart leaps and settles.

“You know already… He…”

He turns and reaches for his throat. His scar.

He might miss everything else, but he doesn’t miss that Reno tenses. He doesn’t miss his pulse thumping under his palm. He doesn’t miss how delicate the skin is, and how wrong the scar feels. So light. So faint. Too much. He doesn’t miss how Reno looks up to him and watches, unblinking.

“Thought you said... he wasn't jealous…” he mutters.

Cloud rolls his eyes closed.

“I was… wrong.”

He removes the hand.

Reno exhales.

Cloud swallows thickly and opens his eyes.

“He told me… to love you. And to avoid Midgar.”

“Well, no shit,” Reno drones up at him.

“He also said… you lied to me.”

Reno sniffs and clears his throat.

“Okay…”

“That you're only out for yourself.”

“M’hm,” Reno hums.

“That you took me to the Saucer… to take advantage of me… To… sell me out.”

“Yup.”

Cloud glares at him.

“You're denying none of it?”

Reno shakes his head. His expression is even.

“Fuck, no. I did all that. I did it. I’m doing it. I didn't tell you about the soldiers either. I lied. I lied
right to your beautiful, gullible face. Didn't want you to freak out... and charge in there... Didn't matter though. Doesn't matter now."

Cloud clenches the blankets, curls his toes, mashes his jaw, tense and tingling.

"Doesn't... matter?"

Reno can't possibly understand how hard it was for him to watch him die.

He waves a hand at him. Reno waves it all away. Reno shrugs it all off.

"You're good at freaking out, man. I imagined you running in there to get yourself killed because..." He drops the waving hand to let it lie still. "You miss him more than you want to start over with me... But, it doesn't matter anymore... because what’s done is done."

"I don't..."

Reno sniffs. He scratches his scalp. He frowns.

"Freak out? Miss him? Look, I know you miss him. It's just a cheap shot I take. I'm cheap. I'm nasty. You do freak out though, buddy. You flip right out. It's kinda... your specialty."

"I don't..."

Cloud stares into space.

"Like long walks on the beach?"

"I..."

He sees nothing.

"Don't know how to finish sentences?"

"I don't..."

He sees nothing at all.

Reno sighs and stretches.

"I don't mind... you using me... you know," he says.

"That's not..."

Cloud blinks his gaze clear and knits his brow.

"It is. It totally is," Reno groans. "Whatever. That's cool. I can do that for you, man. I'll do it all night long if it makes you any lighter in your step in the morning. I'm not offended."

Cloud sighs.

"It... It does. It does help... But it's..."

"Hey, there are worse jobs. I should know. You're hot, and nice, generally, and you're always totally into it. Plus, I make a great fuck buddy, yo. There's probably actual documentation on it too. Somewhere a paper reads: Reno's an asshole, but he's a great casual lay. Look him up."
“Oh dear,” Cloud moans.
He rolls his eyes and everything.
“That's a new one,” Reno notes.
“What?”
Reno prods him.
“Oh dear. Been listening to ol’ grandpa Zack?”
Cloud pulls himself away.
“Does it matter?” he asks.
“Nope. It's pretty fucking cute actually. I bet you haven't noticed it either, but you talk differently now. Than before. Than when we met. You know what I mean?”
Reno has the gall to smile at him. As if they’re recalling good times, innocent times.
“I don't...”
Cloud gives up.
Reno doesn't mind. He takes over the conversation, and he continues to smile.
“You were so… I dunno. Proper before. Now you're like... a perfect blend of you, me, and Zack. I got you lazy and rolling things together… Zack got you smart and snapping back with style. You got the sass and the class going on. It’s very appealing.”
“I'm just… introverted. And used to you now.”
“Yeah, sure, used to me. I'm outroverted. Blurt it out. Force it out. You're a…”
Reno pauses, thinking, maybe even second guessing.
“What?” Cloud pushes.
“A sexy beast,” he tries, shrugging.
“That's not what you were gonna say…”
Reno shrugs deeper.
“A sponge,” he admits.
Cloud scowls.
“The fuck does that mean?”
“You soak up everyone around you. You’re… not authentic. You're… hiding behind it all.”
“And you're a clingy, self-conscious whiner.”
Cloud slides down to the far edge of the bed.
Reno scoffs at his turned back.

“Is that boyfriend talking?”

“No, it's me. And I don't care... I don't care what I am, or what you are. I want you as you are. You're fine just the way you are.”

The fastest known way to shut Reno up?

Compliments.

The following silence stretches thin.

“I don't hate you, Reno,” Cloud confirms, defying it, breaking it.

“I know...” Reno replies, unaware he's repeated Zack again.

He always does.

He's always managing to find a way.

“Only he hates me. Just the ghost.”

Cloud turns just enough, just to catch Reno from the corner of his eye, and no more.

“A ghost sucking dicks with Vegas in the afterlife,” he bites back and turns away.

He can be petty too.

He can also feel Reno's eyes burning a hole into the rear of his head.

“Oh, you're lucky...” he rumbles. He chants it, “Lucky, lucky, lucky.” And then he sits upright. “Lucky I deserved that... and lucky I'm in a good mood. And that I like you. A bunch.”

“Why?”

Cloud swings back around to stare at him.

Reno avoids the confrontation.

“Shit. Can't I... wake up first?”

He pushes out of bed and staggers away.

Cloud stays on the edge, slumped and raw, in the last place he saw his false icon, craving for a cigarette; craving for calm and control.

They don't bathe together this time around.

Cloud sits naked and sulks in silence. He waits for his turn. He chews the inside of his mouth. He listens to his stomach growl, the bar breathe downstairs, and the shower running. He listens to his thoughts race and toil and tangle and split and crash and dance, dance, dance.
After showering, they’ll have to dress themselves. That is, if they want to go anywhere. And they do. At least so far as the bar below, and the clearing out back.

Reno reemerges, tall, and dripping, and swinging in the wind, all flesh and limbs, before Cloud can get too lost inside his own mind. And Cloud leaves him just as quickly as he arrives, running right back into his brooding, twisting thoughts, and the twisting, brooding maze.

He ignores the bathroom mirror, he ignores the cold tiles, and the nearness of the walls, and the biting loneliness. He turns on the shower tap and steps in, not waiting for it to heat up, and not having to strip down.

The water falls stinging hot, already to temperature from Reno's short visit. It sputters and steams, loud in his ears.

He let Zack down. He let himself down. He doesn’t want to be alone. He can’t be alone with himself, and the regrets, and the fears. Not for long. He is beyond fucked up and confused. He doesn’t know where bottom is anymore. He's spiraling through darkness and the unknown.

He stands under the spray.

He tries to quiet his mind.

It runs cold before he knows a shred of peace.

Reno is dressed and decent when he's done.

He finds him sitting on that damn bed, decked out in a ridiculous over-bright button down short sleeve shirt, boasting a stylized tropical floral pattern, opened to the first two buttons, loose and worn, likely two sizes too big.

It’s mostly crimson, loud enough to match his hair, and all awful. Crimson, orange, yellow, green and gold. It might not be so bad, but he has it combined with a pair of tattered cargo shorts, tan as the sand.

He fits in with the crowd.

Cloud snorts and laughs to himself.

“Those turquoise sneakers really set off your whole look…”

“Teal. And I can’t really tell, man.”

“Right… Sorry.”

“Oh, whatever. So I can’t appreciate how ugly this shirt is…”

“It’s…”

“Probably not as ugly as yours.”

There’s an assortment of mismatched clothing piled on the bed for him. The best option for a shirt is pink, slinky, and torn in the back.

Think strawberry sherbet or early sunset. A splash of anemic coral over curls of yellow and baby blue. It’s supposed to have a pattern. It doesn’t. It looks random.
“That’s hideous,” Cloud exclaims.

“Just wait until you see the rest,” Reno assures.

He doesn’t have to look far.

“Where is the rest?” Cloud notes.

His shorts might as well be briefs.

“I swear… I looked over this entire place. I couldn’t find anything else.”

Cloud glances up to him.

“First come, first serve,” Reno mumbles.

Cloud shrugs, water shimmering off in droplets.

There might be a shower, but there are no towels anywhere in the place. At least Costa is tropical and warm, and drying naturally isn’t as cold, or as awkward, as it could have been.

He could always try to wash his slacks. He could probably get their suits back in some sort of working order in a day or two. But, for now, he can’t do much about it.

He pulls on the thin shirt, right over his wet back, feeling the press and the chill anyway. He shimmies into his tiny grey shorts, and suffers the stifled laugh, and ogling eyes, and curling lips.

“You know…” Reno draws out, looking him up and down. “You’ve got some nice legs.”

“Thanks,” Cloud groans.

He might as well be naked.

He drops back onto the bed.

Oh, he wants that cigarette.

“So,” Reno says, “you’re having conversations with dead people then? Is that why you’re especially suicidal and crying out in your sleep?”

Cloud cocks his head, more liquid droplets falling.

“I’m… crying out in my sleep?”

Reno slithers close, shoving up into his side.

“I sleep pretty light. When you do sleep… you’re always tossing, man. You’ve been doing that as long as I’ve known you though. Restless and worried. But, the crying out? That’s kinda new.”

Cloud could be good. He could be bad.

He could sympathize. He could demonize.

“You’re having nightmares.”

A nice balk. A nice deflection.
Reno runs his fingers through his wet hair.

“I might be having... unpleasant visions, yeah...”

“You sobbed. And whimpered. And called me bro.”

Reno clicks his tongue.

“You’re not giving me a break...”

“Why would I?”

“How does Zack look in your dreams? Is he a crispy critter? A walking fucking fire starter?”

Cloud keeps his momentum. He stays smooth. He skips right over it. He feels nothing.

“He looks… normal. And everything is the same... Like, we're just stuck in a moment. I just… sit up. And he's there. As if he always was. But, like he... used to be. But, more like... he should be.”

Reno nods.

“Am I in your dreams?”

“Yes...”

“Can you touch me?

“I haven't... tried...”

“Can you touch him?”

“No...”

“Next time... try touching me.”

“Why?”

“We'll find out.”

Cloud catches wind of something.

“You just wanna... start something, don’t you?”

“I just wanna... see him again, man. If I can. We have unfinished business.”

It must just be that he’s unfamiliar with sympathy.

Cloud deflates and struggles on.

“I'm sorry... I'm just. I'm trying to... deal with everything... and learn you.”

Reno rolls his eyes.

“Well, that's not the way to do it.”

“I’m...”
“No, you're not. No _sorries_. Let's just…” He pauses only a second. “I have an idea.” He prods Cloud, sending him leaning, sending him thinking. “Let's go downstairs and get another bottle. I'll share it. I promise. We can get warm and happy and talk. We can _really_ talk. And stop taking shots at each other. No bullshit.”

“You started it.”

“Well, I'll fucking _end it_,” Reno exclaims.

Cloud slowly nods.

He gets a thrill of anxiety.

They should.

No more hiding. No more help.

He can still do this on his own.

The thrill passes.

“Oh…”

“Awesome.”

Reno rocks up and pulls his pink comb from his back pocket. He flicks it through his damp hair and then jabs it square at Cloud’s thin shirt and equally damp chest.

“Can I fix your hair? Shit's been bugging me…”

Cloud looks on him in mild surprise.

It quickly subsides.

He shrugs.

Reno puts him on the edge of the bed and sits behind, crouched on his compressed legs. He angles and situates Cloud, pulling on his shoulders and tilting his head, getting him just so, getting him just right, every touch light.

The comb slides through to scalp. It doesn't get far. It catches and pulls as he eases it downward, making Cloud wince on reflex.

“Oh, fuck, man. You've got baby hair. It's so soft. It's so blond. This is so disgusting.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” Reno grumbles.

He tugs and pulls.

“Ow,” Cloud returns.
“Sorry. So many tangles too, man.”

It's the last comment for some time.

Reno carries on. He is disarmingly gentle. He takes his time. He enjoys the motions. He gets the job done. He finds himself sliding the comb through easily and smoothly just to watch it go.

And Cloud doesn't mind. If he could be purring, he probably would be. He closed his eyes and gave himself over to the sensation long ago: head tilted back, spine and shoulders to Reno’s chest, breathing even, mind void.

“All done,” Reno says too soon.

He checks his work and gives the hair a ruffle.

Cloud hunches down and pulls forward.

“Messy blond hair, big, wet blue eyes, short-shorts, a tight pink shirt, and bare feet… That's actually kinda hot, man.”

“I feel like an idiot,” Cloud admits, brushing the hair from his eyes and forehead.

“Well, you look like an idiot.”

Reno disembarks before Cloud can react.

He springs upright onto the bed, shoves Cloud over his own lap from behind, leaps clean over Cloud's head and back (like a damn frog), lands on the other side, both soft soles rebounding off wooden floor, and skids towards the door.

“Hey!” Cloud exclaims. “Asshole!”

He snaps up and chases Reno out of the door, and to the rickety stairs.

“Get back here!” he shouts.

He follows him down the stairs and along the building’s side, right around the building’s corner, and up into the building’s front entrance, not far behind, but not close enough. Not yet.

He rushes up the stairs and crashes smack into the back of Reno as he passes through the swinging doors. He slides right up into his spine and ass, snug and sudden, a jarring connection.

All those eyes again.

Wide and watching.

“Caught me,” Reno breathes.

He takes Cloud's hand and leads him to the bar.

“Yo. Gimme another bottle,” he calls to the barman as soon as they reach the counter.

He changes his own game.

He throws down the debit card first thing.

“And it better have a kick this time,” Reno adds.
The barman slides over, none too quickly.

“I said no fraternising. We could hear—”

“Don't worry about it.”

“You two—”

“I said don't worry about it. Take my money.”

The barman eyes him.

“Is that my—”

“You don't learn do you? Take my money. And don't water down your shit.”

“Don’t fuckin’ talk to—”

“Don’t give me a reason—”

“Reno,” Cloud mutters from his side.

Reno shudders, a chill running through him. He jerks and squeezes Cloud's hand.

What Cloud really means to say is: no.

Reno, no, no, no.

Saying his name makes you sneer and show teeth. And Reno knows this from experience. And, because he's in no little amount of denial over how much of a sucker he is for how it not only makes Cloud sound, but how it makes him look, too. He either loves it or hates it.

He’s not sure.

Either way, Cloud has to purse, push, and spread his lips around the letters, the final vowel like the start of a kiss, or the end of denial.

On the other hand, saying “Cloud” makes you flick the roof of your mouth. That's enough reason for Reno to like it right there. The sudden D doesn't make it any stronger either. Not even a little bit. It's a lazy sort of name, for a zoned out sort of guy.

“Cloud,” Reno returns, eyeing him back.

It's as if to say, there, fuck you too, now he knows both our fucking names. Happy?

“So, blondie’s in charge?” the barman grunts.

“Yeah, he is,” Reno counters. “And I bet he's got a bigger dick than you too. You fucking—”

“Reno,” Cloud again warns.

“Mother fucker!” Reno shouts over the bar.

He drops Cloud’s hand to jab a finger at the guy.

“So. Fucking. Irritating.”
He opens that jabbing hand, an offering.

“My booze?”

The barman gives him a look, and then he gives him a bottle, and his debit card. He doesn’t offer another word, wanting to avoid all the trouble altogether. Wanting the money more.

“Thanks, asshole,” Reno chimes.

“Crazy jerk off...”

Reno spins away.

“I think he likes me,” he says to Cloud.

Cloud snorts and allows Reno to lead him back outside, hand in hand, close as a shadow.

All those eyes watch them go.

“Ohhh,” Reno crows, releasing Cloud to jolt ahead and bounce down the few front steps to the dust below.

Cloud descends in tow, carefully, fluidly, getting a twinge of angry guilt at the sudden realization of the ease and speed of the motion without the BDS dragging and lurching behind him.

They meander round to their staircase.

“Why do dangerous and inappropriate situations make me so fucking horny?”

“Because you're twisted,” Cloud answers, swiping the bottle from Reno's very hands.

The liquid contents scorch all the way down.

Cloud coughs and gags.

“So are you then, pal,” Reno remarks, patting his back, and retrieving the bottle. “I recall you jumping me earlier. I recall a raging boner. I recall no reluctance.”

“We're twisted,” Cloud sputters.

“That's better.”

Reno stops to take a thirsty drink.

Cloud watches him lean far back.

He watches his throat work.

He's already feeling hazy, loose, disconnected; warm and wicked.

“I actually think… it's because you appreciate being alive more afterwards. Having been… near death makes everything… brighter, you know? Like… hunger is the best spice.”
Reno cringes and nods.

“That could be it. Or? We’re just twisted.”

“You just like... being intense… and mysterious.”

“So you're saying I'm—”

“You're like... a split lip. Or a... low-grade headache.”

“Low-grade? Hey, thanks…”

Reno offers the bottle.

Cloud accepts it, takes a swig, winces, and wipes his dripping mouth.

“I can’t stop... tonguing my split lip,” he breathes.

Reno accepts the bottle back.

“You say the kindest things.”

He takes a deep drink and then eyes him from over the back of his shaking hand.

“You hungry?” he asks.


They swing back in the opposite direction and head for the tall structures, the blinking lights, the swaying canvas, the hanging signs, the steaming kitchens, and the happy voices.

The bottle is emptied and gone, disposed of eagerly along their way. They’ve been meandering, wandering, eating on the go; fingers greasy and wiped off on clothing, or sucked clean.

They don't need much (everything gotten shared between them, touristy and too sweet, wolfed down in moments). They drag and slide across the sandy streets, staying to themselves, left to themselves, pulling at each other. They swear and hiss and complain. They use each other for stability.

Cloud wants for that cigarette.

Reno wants to sleep.

They move on.

Somehow, they get back to their room only flushed and warm, shoulders swaying, and no worse for wear. They both stumble up the steps and into the waiting space together, smashing shoulders, and finally the doorframe, crashing and coiling, falling over each other, into each other.

The BDS remains. The rucksack. The clutter. The despair. The loss. The whole lot shimmers, distant, trapped behind the gloss of booze.

“Did you… forget your…” Cloud slurs, unable to speak well.
“Fuck off... We’re on... vacation,” Reno returns, just as sloppy and incoherent.

Cloud shuffles and twists around the clutter, the despair, the loss, around Reno, and his own dragging feet. He reaches out for the bed and falls into it, face first, full impact.

“Did that guy… on the street… look familiar?” Cloud asks, muffled inside blanket.

“Look at you… all talkative n’ shit. And what guy?”

Reno follows right after him, bouncing and knocking in close as he settles onto the mattress. A solid body, and a solid reminder, and a solid problem.

“Never mind,” Cloud mutters, shifting and rolling over to get comfortable.

“Stop looking for ghosts…”

Cloud looks at him, and he just now notices the full extent of the bruise over his too-close, too-pale face. The one he collected from Mister Red-Trunks on the beach.

It’s a good one, right over his high cheekbone, on the right hand side, deepest purple, and getting deeper all the time.

He’s lucky he didn’t get it straight to the eye. That might have caused issues. And lots of complaining. And lots more headaches.

“Stop not listening to your own advice,” Cloud suggests.

“Stop fighting me,” Reno counters.

“Stop being an asshole,” Cloud sniffs.

“Stop being important.”

“Stop repeating me.”

“Stop telling me what to do. And you repeated me first,” Reno barks. “Stop being a fucking poser, copycat.”

Cloud huffs.

His head is swimming, limbs light, sense gone.

“Change the subject,” Reno groans.

“Would you have… let Vause sleep with me?” Cloud asks.

“No. Fuck no.”

“Even if he…”

“I would’ve handled it.”

“You were still… drunk.”

“That only helps...”

Cloud knocks their shoulders together.
Reno hisses but does not pull away.

He pushes right back.

“You're incredibly... brave,” Cloud admits. “But, that's also just a byproduct of... being incredibly stupid.”

“Thanks.”

“Always.”

Cloud nods and gets serious.

He pushes on, slipping deeper, and asks, “Why didn’t you tell me... about the soldiers?”

Reno plays it off, nodding right back.

“Didn’t want you to... freak out. Said that already. Figured… the less you knew… and all that.”

“So… they’re still after us?”

“Well, duh. They're very clearly out for you. They'll probably... sweep the entire fucking continent to find you. They're gonna be doubly pissed after… that little incident. They could be ready to knock on the door right now...”

They both look to that door.

Nothing happens.

There is no immediate worry.


“Alright then,” Reno chirps. “Just... putting it out there, man. Just… remember what happened last time.”

“I know.”

“Excellent.”

There’s a slight pause.

A silent struggle for moments.

“Losing steam again,” Reno grumbles.

He takes a gamble.

He’s too drunk not to.

“What happened? The first time? You and Sephiroth?”

Cloud stays quiet. He looks off. He licks his lips.

Reno tries more.

He has so many more.
“Why hasn't Zack... transferred to me? You were all over me. You came inside me, yo.”

Cloud shrugs.

“I don't know. Maybe he has.”

Reno shuffles his feet. He shifts his hips. He feels Cloud there, warm and static.

“Do you... feel bad?” he asks.

He doesn't know how else to put it.

“Huh?” Cloud groans.

“About... you... and me...”

Cloud physically illustrates the realization as it strikes him. He flinches and frowns.

“You gave in so easily...” Reno recollects, trying to make it clear. “You didn’t even try to stop me. You told me to do it. And you say you need me, you keep claiming to, but... you still push me away.”

Cloud's frown remains.

“You don't act like you miss him either, you know. Vegas. Your own brother. Your other half. You've been pretty aloof. You've been... tagging along... all too helpful... more interested in me.”

“You don't remember,” Reno growls, suddenly alight. “You don't know what I went through, yo. You were checked out. You had yourself a little episode.”

“When?” Cloud demands.

He makes a wrong move out of anger.

He knows it as soon as he says it.

“Shinra Tower, you piece of shit,” Reno bites out.

“Shinra...”

Cloud's head hurts. A twinge. An ache. Like a mile long needle sliding in (or out).

He's remembering.

The hum of the entire building.

The plush carpets.

The glossy black floors.

Oh, it hurts. His eyes water. His breath shallows.

The helicopter.

The red room.

The angry tears.
Reno and his dismal tears.

“You… cried,” Cloud exclaims.

When he says it, it becomes fact, and hurts the more. He winces anew. He contains the groan.

“Yeah,” Reno breathes, breaking apart, opening up, unhinged. “For fucking days. Because my fucking brother died. Because he was murdered. Right in front of me! I… I… and I've... had to get away from it. Had to push it away. Can't think about it. Not for long. Can't do it.”

Reno's struggling now. Shaking his head, shifting, clawing his fingers, hunching his back.

“You were lucky,” he hisses, making fists with both hands (as best he can). “You just… ran away… and blocked it all out… You didn't even remember boyfriend when he showed up. I thought he was crazy. And a liar. Some kind of trick… I never met Zack. But, I’d seen him before. Plenty. He looked… Shit. He looked like shit. Not even close. I still think he's crazy…”

Reno straightens up. He sighs, and flexes his fingers. He has no hope for composure.

“What do you remember anyway?” he asks, pinning Cloud with a snide and expectant look.

“Everything,” Cloud replies.

It’s just that he doesn’t want to.

He doesn't want to have to.

He doesn't.

“Everything. I remember everything!” he howls into Reno's face, sending him back inches. “Why did I think I could save him!? Why!?"

Cloud rises up and shouts it to the ceiling, the sky, the stars, and higher still.

“Why!? Why did I think I could have him!?"

He crumples back and whines into his palms, bubbling with tears and fears and alcohol.

Let them come.

Let the shaking and trembling come.

Let the insanity and nonsense come.

Let the arms and pressure come.

Let Reno come.

“Heroes don't exist,” Reno snarls. “They're just dead people we tell stories about.”

Cloud whimpers at that.

Reno tightens his hold and squeezes him closer.

“Why couldn’t you save him? Why couldn’t I save him? Why couldn’t I fucking do it? I'm the professional here. I have to remember every time I lift my arm. Every time I look at my hand. Every time I look at your face. I remember it. It's all I can do. I fucking failed. I failed again. And
again. It’s what I’m good at. It’s expected. It’s fate. It’s shit. It’s not… fucking… fair.”

His voice breaks on that last word. That fatal word. He follows it up with a laugh. He laughs at himself. He laughs at the reality. He laughs at the pain. He keeps laughing. He's laughing and shaking them. He's holding them. He's crushing Cloud to his chest. He's rumbling sour laughter. Laughter into tears. Angry tears. They're falling and falling, and wetting and dripping superheated onto Cloud's flesh, his shoulder, his cheek, his neck.

Reno’s crushing him close, laughing and crying, and trying to hide it all, miserable and ashamed.

Cloud had to hold him as he died.

Now he has to hold him as he cries.
Chapter 11

It's Zack and the booze that get him going.

It's his brother and the booze that keep him going.

Reno cries until he's weak and empty and laughing again. He cries until it's just a chuckle, just a giggle, a wheeze, and all he can manage, gasping and drunk and wounded, scraping bottom, scorched earth, so far gone into darkness, into oblivion, into his guilt, he is nothing.

There should be something to say for this. Some sort of revelation to be had by the end. Here’s a new beginning, a new outlook, but (and there’s always that but, that pause, that hesitation, that great divider) all Reno can see before him now, when he blinks and blinks, and the veil lifts, is what he’s seen from day one—blurry smears of images running together. All he sees is a world he’s not fully getting. All he sees is his best guess, diluted and deluded.

Early on, in the early days, the gleaming days, Reno became aware that he was different from the rest. He learned, personally, that he was wrong, he was busted, he was defective. He had to. When they were little, and Wutai was strong, and their village was thriving, Reno had been under the impression their hair was average. That remained his truth until other kids started picking on them. Vegas had to break it to him. Had to tell him in private.

No. They’re right, Reno.

They’re right.

You’re wrong.

Our hair is bright red. Like they say.

Now everything’s red. And he still can’t see it.

Reno sniffs and pulls away at last.

Cloud stays his tongue; his tears dried some time ago.

Reno stays his arms; his tears are still quite fresh.


“I only cry around you, dammit,” Reno moans, laden and thick. “Shouldn’t that tell me something right there? That's a sign. That's proof. It's bad enough… you're… so…” He doesn't finish. He slumps his forehead onto Cloud's bony shoulder. He groans and sniffs.

Cloud resists the urge to pat Reno’s trembling back. He couldn't be more ready for a break himself. He’s had just as much (pain and booze) as Reno. He’s wandering through the wilderness right beside him.

“Mmm,” Cloud hums in response, the words not forming at first. “I uhh…” He restarts, clearing his sticky throat. “I need ah… smoke… I uhh… really want… to smoke… If… you...”

Reno perks and peels away.
They separate.

Cloud doesn't want to have to look at Reno anyway. He already knows Reno is keeping his eyes down and his head turned aside. He's hiding. He's sniffing. He's licking the tears from his lips, swallowing all that gooey hot despair down good. He's recovering. Or content being broken.

Easing himself to the edge of the mattress, Cloud then forces himself to stand. All that simmering booze rises up with him, burning its volcanic trail upwards. He burps, levels his swimming head, and urges his feet forward.

He leaves Reno as he is, used up and dried out (just the shell, the meaty case he came in), and sways onwards for the back room, sloshing and unbalanced.

Those cigarettes and metal lighter are still in the pockets of his suit slacks. And those are still on the tiled floor of the bathroom, in a mess of a state, right where he left them.

Cloud feels like he should join them at the very least, if not smoke them all, every last one, to the last thread and fiber, to the dry and brittle filter. Sprawled on the freezing tile floor and staring up at the stained ceiling, he would be saturated in smoke, no air. Reno’s complaints would fade into the background, the wallpaper, the grout, the grime.

Cloud stumbles back from the journey, sick and distant.

Reno watches as he comes, those glassy eyes lidded and wrong, and locked on.

“I need more alcohol,” Reno moans as Cloud flops down onto the low bed next to him.

“No, you don't,” Cloud rejects, leaning up to struggle with his cigarettes.

The metal bed frame creaks around them. Sand shifts and falls to the floor. They shift and settle. They glance and connect. They drift and distance. Voices and laughter rise and fall from the bar below, the streets outside, the nearby beach. The joyous soundtrack plays.

“You don't need that,” Reno notes, gesturing at Cloud’s fumbling.

“Yes, I do,” Cloud explains, finally extracting his desire.

“No, you don't,” Reno sniffs.

Cloud pauses. He thinks. He blinks. He flicks the metal lighter’s lid open and shut, twice, thrice, contemplating. He purses his lips, dry and then licked moist. He eyes Reno and his wet cheeks, and his played up disinterest, drunk and drained. Cloud eyes the cigarette pinched between his fingers, so much more appealing than submission, sympathy, and awful safety.

“How did I manage to find two of the same kind of asshole?” Cloud asks the room, and makes to light the cigarette.

“No, no, no,” Reno protests, nasally and wet. “You go outside with that shit.”

Cloud lowers the lighter and shrugs his shoulders. The cigarette droops on his lips. “But, we can't —”

“It can wait. I can wait,” Reno growls.

“Reno…” Cloud mutters, rolling his eyes but removing the offending piece from view.
“Ugh. Fuck off,” Reno grates back, twisting aside, deflecting the blow.

“Reno,” Cloud again calls.

It’s not enough.

Cloud receives nothing but radio silence.

“Reeeno,” he drawls, adding on the syrup and going for the kill.

“Stop!”

They’re now outside in the offensive late afternoon light, nearer to the madness of the dying day.

Reno stands drunk, dazed, and starting to collect a headache. He stands on the staircase landing just outside their door as Cloud smokes his damn coffin nail and looks all moody and attractive and tiny, and too bright to stare at for long, and all of Costa watches.

“I fucking hate you,” Reno grumbles, rubbing his arms.

The smoke, the glare, the attraction, the queasy stomach, the sore muscles.

“No, you don't,” Cloud counters, his unkind and minimal smile clear enough.

“No. I don't,” Reno bites back. “Probably.”

But, he does need a distraction.

He needs a lot of things.

He leans in, and he doesn’t have to go far, pressing right up into Cloud’s unprotected side. He leans in, and he isn’t shy, pressing right at Cloud’s dick through his short-shorts. Learned but graceless fingers snake into the fold, seeking the trapped warmth barely hidden there.

Cloud’s not wearing underwear. And Reno knows it, and then he feels it. He also knows Cloud can’t stop him. Because he won’t. And Reno has him caught. He has him dead to rights. He meets all soft flesh. He curls and caresses. He gets to churning things up.

Cloud startles and flinches, but stays strong.

It doesn't take long. Reno’s fingers are kind and composed. The flesh responds and fills. The cigarette smolders and smokes. Their breathing mingle, becomes quicker and thicker.

“I fucking hate you,” Cloud gasps.

He lets the words gust hazy hot into Reno's face.

“No, you don't,” Reno purrs back, gripping all of him. He lets the smoke break and dissipate.

“I try…” Cloud mouths.

Cloud struggles to clutch the remainder of his cigarette, and the metal lighter. Without pockets, he’s had to hang onto it. He struggles for calm. He struggles for cool.

“Thought you wanted to... talk,” he blurs.


“You're a dog,” Cloud groans.

Reno’s too-close face cracks: a sick smile the product. “And you like it from behind... if I recall.”

Cloud can't win.

You can't bring Reno down for long.

You can't beat him at his own game.

He’s gotten Cloud stiff and wanting.

“You're... a... a...”

Cloud’s moaning it now.

He’s hissing it.

“Stop,” he pleads.

“No,” Reno replies, just vibrations over skin. His hand is firm and tight, hot and solid.

“Reno,” Cloud tries.

But, Reno simply nips at Cloud's ear, his throat, his jaw. He grips him. “Do you really think... that works... when I don’t want it to?” He gusts it over Cloud’s flesh. “You really think... you can control me?” he wonders.

“Stop,” Cloud demands.

“Make me,” Reno challenges.

Cloud moves to shift sideways, taking action in the form of retreat, but only spreads his legs the wider.

Reno follows, hanging on by the root.

Cloud slides them both across the unstable hand railing bordering either drop off from the landing. He meets the closed door with his shoulder, and then his back, stopping dead.

“Reno, back off,” Cloud growls.

Reno doesn’t, of course. He ducks in and gives Cloud a rough kiss, knocking his blond head off that door. Twice.

Cloud doesn’t have the muscle on him. Not naturally. Not in an even fight, hand to hand. They’re
two different kinds of creatures. Cloud can’t use strength. He can't use training. He can't throw Reno down the stairs. He has to use his wits. He has to use his remaining luck. Before he calls upon a shred of that jealous darkness sleeping deep within. He has to try.

Cloud’s head and face twist away. They break their contact. He hangs onto the cigarette and palms the lighter. He pushes flat into that door, trapped on all sides. The booze in his system still pumps hot in his blood, assisting and crippling. He’s dizzy. He's breathless. He’s falling. He shuts his eyes. And asks, “You really... wanted to come out here then?”

Reno nuzzles and mouths Cloud’s throat, his long body draping, shadowing, pushing.

“You might… *not* have wanted to deck the bartender?” Cloud presses.

Reno’s gripping hand grows still.

“Does that mean,” Cloud groans out, his voice breathy, catching, caught. “Does that mean... you might *not*… have wanted to escape Vause? You might *not* have wanted to... resist him? Or you're just… *lying*? As usual? So I don’t use it against you anymore?”

Reno squeezes tight.

Cloud sucks in a front of air.

“Did you... take orders from Sephiroth... or the Director?” Cloud exhales.

“Both,” Reno answers, tugging and pulling at him, stirring up those thoughts.

Cloud stammers, “What did they... What—what did they... *tell* you... about *me*?”

Reno sneers, not appreciating the topic.

“What did…”

But, Cloud need not continue.

Reno releases his mutinous flesh and steps back, one, two.

“They said you were… fresh.”

He really does want to talk then.

Cloud corrects himself. He fixes his tiny shorts with a shuffle and shimmy, pulls away from the shut door, and towards Reno, and ashes his dwindling cigarette.

The booze smooths and waits. His head is light. His blood is heavy. His back is sweating, and the hand curled around metal lighter. His tongue is too dry and too wet. His senses are slipping, settling, slipping. People continue to move and play and talk nearby.

The world spins on.

“You were brand new,” Reno states, shrugging. “Important. But new. You were involved in something they wanted to keep on the down low. They gave me that impression, because they didn’t give us details.”

“What were your orders?” Cloud presses.
Reno sighs and crosses his arms. “I was… Man. Do you really wanna hear all this shit? It’s not interesting.” His already distasteful expression scrunches. “I could be pulling you off right now. And no one would know. Except for maybe… that guy. That guy down there can probably see your balls…”

Cloud can’t see the guy in question.

He can only see Reno avoiding the question.

“Tell me,” Cloud pushes.

Reno huffs, uncrossing his arms and shifting his weight onto an opposite heel. His eyes wander. “They told us… to keep you under our thumb.”

“No shit,” Cloud retorts. “But there’s more.”

“Yeah. There’s more,” Reno answers. He brings his eyes level and plants his hands on his cocked hips for a simmering stare down. “Of course there's more. Sephiroth told me… he told me to…”

He groans and looks aside. “I don’t wanna start—”


Through the smoke Reno waves away he shoots a dirty look.

He pauses a beat.

And then, “He told me to muddle you up. Because... Okay. Everyone knew about my reputation, right? He was no exception. He pulled me aside, just before you arrived… Scared the living shit outta me, yo. Holy fuck, that man was a tall tree… He looked right down on me. And he...”

Cloud lets Reno go on at his own pace for now, the words running together as he speaks: a product of their collective drunkenness, and the static sea, and the buzzing voices, and the cool breeze. Cloud needs all the help he can get.

“He told me to… uh.” Reno bunches his shoulders. “Knock myself out. Basically.”

“What?” Cloud snaps. “What were his exact words?”

“I don’t… remember… exactly. I just… got the impression he wanted me to… mess with you. You know, like only I could. Like only a sadistic, degenerate, binge-drinking lowlife could.”

“You don't remember? You said no bullshit.”

Oh, he remembers alright.

Reno laughs once, loud and humourless. “Binge-drinking lowlife, Cloud. Memory’s not really my bag. Unless it’s something that helps me. And yeah, okay…” He sighs, exhaling through his nose. His jaw is set tight. He's not nearly lit enough for this. “I was...”

He shuts back up, letting the noise of the day take over.

Cloud exudes his namesake, grey and growing.

The sea salt on the air mingles with tobacco smoke.

“What?” Cloud asks.
Reno doesn't move at all.

“What?” Cloud leans forward to prod him. “The fuck does Reno, of all people, not wanna say?”

It’s expelled as Cloud leans away.

“I tortured people, man.”

Cloud’s not sure he heard it right. He takes another drag. The white-grey exhaust unfurls from his nose, slow, controlled, contemplative.

_Torture?

_It's not like he hadn’t already made that simple connection based off of Reno's claimed past occupation. It's not like that wasn't already an understood part of the Turk agenda. Cloud might have guessed it after one glance, but after experiencing Reno’s personality, and their past, he can’t see it anymore. It just doesn't add up. Reno’s no worse than he is. He won't believe it.

On the other hand, what kind of torture could Reno be referring to? Because Reno's been torturing Cloud for some time. Every time Reno opens his mouth. Or looks his way. Torture.

“I did some serious shit,” Reno groans. “How many times do I have to repeat myself? I didn’t hallucinate this conversation, did I? I took things too far. Seriously. I killed loads of people. I killed the wrong people. I got… mixed up… I took out a lotta evil in a lotta bad ways. And. I was lit most of the time. It took the guys upstairs way too long to catch me…”

Reno clears his throat.

Reno stands there.

Reno goes on.

“So. Uh. Sephiroth. Yeah. He wanted to… use that. He wanted to get you to break. Or stray from Zack. Whichever came first. Probably. Because, in retrospect, the guy was jealous. It wasn’t business. It wasn’t the job. I wasn’t following orders. It was personal. I thought they wanted info. And you were just a day-tripper. But. I wasn't ever gonna hurt you, I swear. I wanted to help you, man… I asked Vegas about you, yo. He told me a little bit. Only because he… made me promise not to get involved. It wasn't just that you were the hottest fucking thing I’d seen… I needed to help you. I had to start getting on the right track.”

“What did Vegas tell you?”

“Not enough. He said… You’re taken. Untouchable. And that. Just egged me on.”

“How did you know about Zack?”


“About what?”

“That you bagged a genuine SOLDIER.”

Cloud sniffs.
Reno shrugs.

Cloud grumbles, “How did you know where Zack was anyway? Vegas again? And you really tortured people? For information? For them? For real? You said you were caught though… I mean… That means… That’s…”


Cloud focuses in on Reno. “You're lying,” he announces.

Reno takes a single step forward, the wooden landing hardly three. He fills Cloud’s view in a blink. “You don't believe me?” he asks. “You say I’m no good… You say you know what a Turk is… But. Hey. You won’t acknowledge it when I admit it? Well. They didn’t take kindly to the bad either. I’m lucky they didn’t get rid of me. I’m lucky they didn’t lock me up.”


Reno has nothing to say for himself. Not yet anyway. He is frozen before Cloud, right before his bare toes, right before any contact can be made or forced. He doesn’t defend. He doesn’t protest. His face alludes naught. But (and this is more than enough of a sign for Cloud), Reno is holding his breath. Reno’s got himself prepared. He’s got himself braced, on edge, nothing but two red-threaded eyes and a colourless face.

“You're a liar, Reno,” Cloud repeats, subduing all the emotion he can manage. “I bet you were always just a bodyguard… I bet you couldn’t do better than that. You never made it anywhere. The Turks wouldn’t have you. The air force wouldn’t have you. You don’t belong.”

They both stand so calm, so still, so civil.

No one would suspect a thing.

Nope. Not a thing.

No violence pending here.

Cloud disrupts the eye contact and looks down to his hand, his cigarette, his knuckles. “But,” he mutters, “I don’t belong either. I’m a liar too. In my way. I made it to Shinra, sure. I was never a soldier though. I never made a difference. So… I don't care… I don't care what you think you need to say to scare me… or impress me… or whatever. I don't care.” Cloud flicks the cigarette over the railing and down to the alley below. “And that’s not bullshit.”

Reno follows the cigarette’s glowing trail, and then he follows Cloud back inside.

He offers the next statement as he’s closing that door behind them.

“You don’t care, huh? That’s it? Now I know you've been lying too.”
“What else do you want?” Cloud grumbles.

“Something better.”

“This was your idea,” Cloud reminds.

They don’t make it to the bed this time. Reno remains by the door, and Cloud moves only a few feet inside to stand over the BDS as it rests on that ugly orange armchair.

He gives Reno nothing but his back. He’s not so much shutting him out as he is offering him a free shot. Animals do this as a sign of trust. It's a sign of submission too. It's also a closed door. In this case, it's a confusing cocktail of all three: trust, submission, and a closed door.

I trust you to open that door.

I trust you to take advantage.

I trust I’ll submit.

“I didn’t make you ask that question,” Reno retorts. “We’re supposed to be making progress, and learning truths, and getting things out, and hugging, and whatever... Not trudging around in the past. And getting defensive. I don’t like it back there. I don't want to go back there.”

“That’s your problem though,” Cloud says. “You keep running from it all while bringing it up. You were giving Zack so much shit about something you've been doing the entire time.”

“Whatever, man,” Reno sighs. “But… You were right about something.”

“And what’s that?” Cloud groans.

“That guy on the street did look familiar,” Reno tells him. “That’s because we’ve got a shadow. That’s still old news though. We knew we'd be followed. We knew this wouldn't be easy. It's not like we've been trying to stay outta sight anyway... Like you said: let ’em come. And blah blah blah. So... You were right. Now. Back to the... deep sharing and hugging.”

Cloud only listens, the fluid in his head like the ocean outside: loud and rushing, crashing, constant. His thoughts are no quieter. His heart is no calmer. His breath is no easier.

“Since you asked a fucked up question… Here’s mine,” Reno says. “If you were… you know... the R word... when you were like, twelve... why don’t you have more issues with intimacy?”

Cloud finds himself responding without his full permission. “Because... sex is easy for me... It's the... other stuff. That's hard.”

Reno sniffs in distaste. “The other stuff?”

“Love. Affection. Trust.”

“Okay. Yeah, yeah... Fair enough.”

“Sex is easy. But. I have a hard time... trusting... anyone. You know that. You hardly give me much reason to most of the time. You shouldn’t be trusted. You could be in communication with... them. I don't know... But, you've also... given me every reason to trust you, and I'm...”

“Stupid,” Reno snaps.
Cloud lifts his head: a jerk and a stop. “Stupid,” he repeats.

“You're stupid,” Reno confirms. “Really, really stupid. And beautiful. That's not the only reason people... nasty people mostly... want to fuck with you. It's your purity, to be honest. You got a lotta heart. You got a lotta life. And you're weak. And easy. And always in the wrong place at the right time. And they want all that. They want to corrupt it. I want to corrupt it.”

“Why?”

Reno snorts. “Why ask why?”

“To learn more,” Cloud insists.

“Would knowing really help you? I mean... you know everything. You said so yourself. You just don't like the answers.”

It's the drop in tone coupled with the first statement that makes everything clearer. And, it might just be the booze talking, but that metal lighter gets awfully heavy in Cloud’s hand too.

More echoes. More repeats.

Is Cloud still just looking for a ghost?

He can already hear the alarm bells ringing. The drum beats. The countdown. Reno sounds defeated, eroded. His voice is flat. They're in danger of going flat too.

“How did you get away from them anyway?” Reno asks, careless, faithless, bored. “Is that another one of your half-lies? Or is that how you've lived with it? You played along?”

“I made them trust me,” Cloud answers.

“So you did become one of them...”

“I made them think I was... harmless.”

“Did you hurt ’em? Did you hurt anyone with them? Did you run with the pack?” Reno drills. “Or was it strictly pacifying blow jobs and quickies all around?”

“No. I told you. I ran away. And hid.”

“You weren't afraid of them finding you?”

Cloud's not sure he wants to indulge Reno this, but, it's better than the alternative. He starts quietly and slowly. He rolls the lighter in his hand. “Of course I was. I stayed in hiding. I told you that. And that's the truth. I watched my back. And... I heard... I heard later on... their party was wiped out anyway. Every last one.”

“Oh?” Reno breathes.

“By Shinra.”

“No shit. Shinra took them out?”

“Just a band of robbers and killers to them.”

“So then... you didn't have to hide anymore.”
“Not as much… but. I got lazy. I was so… tired by then. I just wanted somewhere warm and safe to
sleep…”

“No kidding… You tucked your tail between your legs and joined the government.”

“Every sign pointed me there…”

Reno finally shifts and moves, stepping away from the door. He passes by Cloud’s turned back
(and his perfect shot), and moves deeper into the store room, away from any potential conflict, and
any brewing brutality. He chooses to ignore the advantage, if only to play it elsewhere.

“And now here we are;” Reno remarks.

“And here we are,” Cloud confirms.

“It’s all starting to make a little more sense now.”

“Is it?”

“Almost.”

“I’m not ruined,” Cloud insists.

What a joke. And Cloud is trying to make himself believe it just as much. He was just a victim.
He’s always just a victim. Sad, sorry, simple. Stupid.

“Yeah, okay,” Reno replies. “Says the guy who is still struggling with the idea that his only friend
is a complete jerk off, and a murderer, and really his friend or not.”

“Says the guy who is willfully forgetting his dead brother. Just following your lead, buddy. Still
think I’m so pure? I’m just too good to be true?”

“I need some more air,” Reno grumbles. “Think I’m... gonna puke.”

“We need to split,” Cloud blurts out over him.

As if to punctuate the stupidity even more, someone in the bar downstairs guffaws.

“Still itching to run from me?” Reno mumbles.

Cloud inhales and shakes his head. He catches Reno palming over his throat. Cloud won't miss it.
No matter how subtle the motion or the scars. He's the cause. Everything. All of it. How can he
want so badly to run and fix it at the same time? He is torn. Oh-so-torn.

“No, dumbass. I’ve given up on that too. We need to leave here. The two of us.”

Reno coughs.

It might have been a laugh in its early stages.

“A dumbass, an asshole, a bastard, an opportunist, a dog, and a liar,” he croaks.

Cloud balls his fists, metal lighter and all, and answers, “If the shoe fits.”

Reno rebukes, “Use it to kick your teeth in?”

Cloud lets his head hang, his shoulders hunch. The BDS drops from his view.
Reno hums, “Red's your colour.”

The BDS comes back into view.

“How would you know?” Cloud asks. “Thought it was gold anyway. Thought you had to puke.”

A scoff, a shuffle, a hand run through short hair.

“Fuck, but I like you,” Reno groans under his breath.

It’s sounding less authentic the more he says it though. It used to be obvious, undeniable, but now. Now it's laced with an unpleasant truth. It’s more like an insult any day.

“While we’re at it…” Cloud adds, turning aside, that damn sword staying a sliver in his sights. “While I have some of your attention, and you so conveniently bring it up... and we're having such an honest talk… It feels like, lately, you don't. You don't like me. You don't love me. You blame me for everything that's happened to you.”

Cloud continues to say his piece, just as he tries not to fail and flop.

“You have… every reason to blame me. I get it. I understand. You should hate me. I bet you do. More than anything. Maybe more than you wanted to fuck me. You're a liar. And… you're sly. And you’re just… waiting for your moment to get back at me. You're gonna… I dunno…”

Cloud falls silent. His stomach hurts. His throat hurts.

“Maybe I do,” Reno says.

Cloud’s brow creases.

Oh, yes. Pain.

Even his body is telling him he should be feeling pain.

Cloud all at once feels nothing.

“Maybe I do hate you,” Reno announces. “Maybe I really think you're the responsible party. Not Zack. Because… You draw people in. You hooked Zack like you hooked me... And if he hadn't chased after you… If he hadn't snubbed Seph in the process... If I'd stuck around and given Seph a piece of my fucking mind… If you had never shown up that day… We wouldn't be here. We'd be somewhere else. Maybe Vegas… would… he would… But, then again… maybe I don't hate you. And you’re being stupid again. I just wish... Ah, fuck. Fuck this.”

There's still so much day left, and Cloud is already so much more drunk than he should be. And his guard is down. And his self preservation is AWOL. And he’s seen Reno stripped to the bone one too many times. And when did that start to matter?

Reno said they should get things right.

He said he'd settle this.

Cloud mutters, “I've been... an asshole. I've been… in denial. I need to apologize…”

“What for?” Reno asks.

Oh, he's got him on that one.
Cloud feels his entire brow bunch, the corners of his mouth turn down. His body is going through the paces, but his being is still in lockdown.

“For telling you… to shut up, for… throwing you out in Corel, putting you in shit situations, always forgetting to thank you, not believing you more, not talking to you, denying I ever cared about you… and for your brother, and your fingers, and your love… and. For recently.”

“Oh…”

Cloud focuses on the floor, the dust, the cracks, now his feet.

He won't look at Reno. Not yet.

He forces himself on, over the edge, the last ledge. He lets go.

“I care about you, Reno. I… might… love you back. A little. You annoying bastard. I can't help but love you. You're loud, and dismal, but also… so positive, and loyal, and funny, and… I think your hair is beautiful. And your eyes. The first thing I noticed wasn't your hair. Or your eyes. Just so you know. It was your stupid smile… Your stupid fucking smile. You light up a room. And… you know, because I know you know... You're amazing too. You are. Somehow. You're so strong. And… you've done so much for me. Too damn much. I'm sorry. So fucking sorry. I’m...”

Cloud looks up to see it. His vision has to settle and clear first, but.

There Reno is. There’s his grinning. From not-so faraway.

A wide grin. A pleased grin.

“Oh, okay,” Reno confirms.

Like he'd known all along.

That's irritating.

Always so irritating.

“There it all is,” Reno says. “Finally.”

“Finally?” Cloud snaps.

Their small distance is regrettable. Cloud would have hit him.

As it stands, Reno’s untouchable and leaned against a wooden crate. “Took you long enough.”

Cloud scoffs and flexes his folded and aching fingers, almost dropping that lighter. “Don't act like you knew all along,” he growls. “The truth is I'll never love you back, right?”

“Sure. But I'm irresistible, man,” Reno explains, opening his arms wide to shrug. “And a liar.”

“You're irresponsible,” Cloud counters.

“Irreplaceable.”

“Irritating.”

“Irr… everent?”
“We can both agree on that one,” Cloud groans, losing his spark.

“Fabulous,” Reno sniffs, losing his too.

They simmer in the semi-silence, not so silent.

Reno clears his throat.

Cloud can hear his pulse thumping.

What does any of this matter? What does getting it all out and aired even matter? What will that achieve? So what if Reno hates him? So what if he doesn’t? So fucking what? Zack’s gone. Zack is still just a hint, and a sense, and a smell, and a fading voice. This is still The After. They’re still fucked up. Cloud’s still weak, and wrong, and twisted.

So what if, in the end, it’s an accident that takes Cloud out of the equation, and not Reno, or Shinra, or some final, and awesome, and cacophonous climax? So what if he slips and breaks his neck as they leave later today? So what if he chokes on his tongue as he sleeps?

Cloud knows, and he has been told, that he can’t change anything. And he can’t trust Reno. But, he can’t let Reno go either. His gut tells him to run. His heart tells him to hold on. Hold on tight and fight. Fight for him. Help him. Stick it out. He’s all he’s got. He’s all that’s left.

“So… you… forgive me?” Cloud asks.

“I do,” Reno confirms.

“Can you…”

“I forgive you,” Reno mutters.

Cloud stares at him.

Reno stares back.

They’re divided. They’re separated by all the bullshit between them, literal and figurative.

“I forgive you, Cloud,” Reno repeats.

And Cloud can’t tell him how little that means.

He doesn’t have to.

He doesn’t feel forgiven.

Reno told him that once before too.

“Of course,” Reno remarks, pushing off from his crate and coming in, step by step. The floorboards creak on his approach. The grit crunches. “I do require… something in return. To seal the deal, so to speak. Maybe a kiss. For each one. For each apology.”

“Each one?” Cloud poses, turning to focus on the BDS and ignore Reno’s arrival.

Creak, creak, slide, pause.

Reno has stopped at his side. “Yup. I counted eleven.”
“You were counting?”

“Eleven wet ones.”

Reno is towering, and taller than Cloud will ever be. As great as a memory. An impossible feat.

“Shit,” Cloud exclaims, the excitement subdued to a whisper.

The mood changes right there.

The sword lies, reflective, sooted, dusty, rusty.

The lighter waits in Cloud’s hand, heavy and hot.

What should have been their usual dissolve into kindness becomes… something alien.

“Actually… I have something else in mind…” Reno mutters.

Cloud has little time to put the pieces together. He's nowhere near caring or cautious. He has turned away from the BDS to watch Reno’s lips and mouth. He is ready to listen to his voice, slurred and slick and raw. He's smelling him, and the booze, and the smoke, but mostly him, underneath all that, unmistakable, unshakeable. And Cloud has no idea. He gets no notification.


He pulls Cloud near, a single arm reaching low.

Reno doesn't know what he's thinking.

He lets the booze do the thinking.

He lets the anger and the past do the thinking.

“Let me really give you something to remember me by,” he murmurs.

And he leans in and he bites him.

He bites Cloud as hard as he dare, savage, sudden, and on an already split lip. Reno bites until the split there opens like a spring and pours out hot blood, and Cloud scrabbles and rears, trying to escape, trying to stanch the wild flow, sputtering and spitting, eyes wide, arms repelling.

The damage is done. The metal lighter is dropped to the floor at their feet. The living, liquid red spills down Cloud's white chin, throat, fingers, and his ugly pink shirt. It flows on as a joke, a gag, a spoof. Blood for blood. And Cloud swings and swivels meanwhile. He lunges forward and down to grab a leftover shirt from off the bed, pressing it over his mouth. He stands, turned away from Reno, stiff but shaking, crisis subdued.

“You're mine,” Reno quietly explains. “And everyone else will know it now too. And you won’t forget either. I'm in charge here. I'm calling the shots. I'm still here. I’m right here.”

Reno licks his own lips and tastes a signature there. Cloud’s signature writ in blood.

Left to its own devices, the wound will pain Cloud for weeks. And then for months. And then for
years. And then to his final breath. Regardless of intervention, it will scar.

Reno’s positive he shouldn’t be excited by that. He’s sure that’s not a good sign, but he also doesn’t give a damn. He doesn’t fight it. He knows this. He embraces this. He snags his own lip in his teeth and watches Cloud struggle and swallow. He watches Cloud stand bent and hunched, his hair a mess, his face halved, his thin shoulders shivering, too slight, too small.

Here’s a monument to all the things wrong in his life. All the bad bubbling over.

“That doesn’t... sound like you,” Cloud heaves, muffled and muddied.

“Doesn’t it? You don't know me,” deadpans Reno.

Cloud doesn't. He can't. Won't. Too soft. Too gentle.


“You're an idiot,” Reno groans, dismissing him with a wave.

As quickly lit as the bulbs above their heads, Cloud is enraged. The volatile sensation snaps on and only brightens. It overrides the pain, the shock, the fear.

“Does that make you mine then?” Cloud snarls, lowering the shirt. Every tooth is outlined bright and unreal. “When I cut your flesh? When I almost took your fucking head off? When I saved your sorry ass?”

Reno's look is incredulous. As if the idea were impossible. “You didn't save me,” he corrects.

Cloud tosses the bloodied shirt right at Reno’s face.

Reno deflects it by simply ignoring it. The shirt strikes him and then squelches to the floor.

“Fuck you,” Cloud says. “You held me back from Zack.”

“You cut my throat,” Reno easily counters.

“You sold me off to Vause.”

“You distracted me from my brother.”

“You distracted yourself from your brother.”

“You bit me.”

“Fuck you! Are you kidding me? You just bit me!” And as if to prove it, Cloud stops to lick his damaged lip. All the swollen flesh and gore. He spits red at the floorboards. At Reno’s torn teal sneakers. “Who really owes who here?” he asks.

Cloud’s face aches, along with his head and his stomach and his throat and—

A thought emerges.

“No more talking,” Cloud mumbles. “No more confusion. No more lies. I’m done. I’m gonna do something,” he lisps, voice rising to a throaty rumble as it goes, sputtering and spiking. “I'm gonna give you something, Reno... Something that Zack promised you not too long ago. I’m gonna finish some of his business and get us settled.”
Blood still rushing down his chin and chest, lips gurgling and bubbling ribbons and strings red and rosy, teeth bare and brazen, Cloud proceeds to play his hand.

Reno’s expected answer comes as a cool reply.

He says, “Try me.”

Cue the foggy, choking insanity: part two.

Beyond Cloud’s precarious lack of caring, his pain and unease, his better sense, his mother's faded and forgotten words, his old hope and light, his childish love and adoration, the blood always on his hands—he had found the strength, and the energy, and the will to carry on. He was in control, even as he had no control.

He had a plan. He had a path.

Now he is lightheaded and vile. He's too angry. He's too damned. He’s blood soaked. He’s seeing red. He's too far from anything kind and bright and safe. Now he will be exacting.

Reno doesn’t stand a chance.

Cloud takes steps forward and kicks the lighter dropped on the floor right under the bed.

Maybe Reno's just good at playing the part. He's just too good at hamming it up and following along. He's seen worse. He's done worse. He’s not anywhere he doesn’t want to be. So to speak. As far as that goes. As far as that ever gets him. But it also could be that he's still weak from the blood loss. And the long trek. And the longer days and restless nights. Maybe he wants Cloud to throw him around and make him wonder. Make him scared. Make him hurt. Reno wants Cloud to make him fight. Plead and beg. Bend and break. Make him feel. Live. Reno wants Cloud to slam their faces together, bloody and painful, stinging and hot, but lusty most of all. So maybe he also wants Cloud to force him back down to the bed.

Reno isn’t trying to escape. He is almost accepting of the rough treatment. He goes with the aggression and allows Cloud to pin him as he crumples and falls. Reno groans and hisses when Cloud rushes over him and tugs his hair. Reno squirms. His face is just as red and stained as Cloud’s is stained. Their situations are just as sad and hopeless, a mirror.

It could be that Cloud was never in control. This is his weakness. This is cowardice. This isn’t control. This is just Zack, angry and stirred up, taking over, having taken over. He's the want coursing in Cloud’s system, pumping and thumping. He's the desire clouding his head, his reason, his morals. This is his power in his slender limbs. He's the vengeance and verve.

All Cloud knows is…

He will test Reno. Best Reno. He will make Reno pay.

On the red blood rushes.

On the khaki sand falls.


Cloud has mounted Reno. He has subdued him flat onto the overused bed. He struggles from there, trying to get Reno where he wants him. And he wants him on his damn belly. What he intends to do with him hinges on getting him onto his front, facing away, and contained.

Reno rolls up to meet him though, thwarting his plans. Reno just doesn’t have the pep, or the heart, or the reserves to back it all. He gets himself nowhere. He groans and drops down limp.

Cloud rises over him, every bone and muscle pressing and pinning him where he lies. “Not much fight left in you?” he taunts, rolling his hips, stressing his small victory.

Reno wheezes, bucks, and writhes beneath him. He glares and growls. He lifts his arms and gets them pinned in returned. He kicks his legs and gets them tired and cramped. He’s got too much knowing weight on his bad shoulder. He’s got all fifty pounds of Cloud on his upset gut. He seethes and growls, gritting aching teeth.

Reno doesn’t like this. Not like he would have, could have, should have. In a better light. In a better life. On a better day. This is right up his alley. Cloud is different though. And not in a pleasant or interesting way. He’s strong and scheming. He’s smeared in salty blood again. He’s determined. He’s well into scary territory and cause for concern, if not panic, if not retaliation.

Reno can’t deny he’s different too. He’s always been unreliable, and unpredictable, but now those traits are turning against himself at last. Reno doesn’t know what he might do. He doesn’t know what instinct will be shaken to the surface and engaged. He might just fight back against Cloud. He might just spill more blood. He might just lose for good.

For now, Reno grumbles and strains. He tests his bonds. He waits Cloud out.

“What, don't like the taste of your own medicine?” Cloud asks.

Reno relaxes, he grins, and then he goes for his expected and scathing reply, but, the words don’t come. They garble behind Cloud's hand and palm instead, because Cloud shuts Reno off, containing the impending lies, and the poison, and any possible pleading. He locks Reno’s words fast inside his gullet.

Reno rears and his throat works and vibrates. His eyebrows rise and bunch. His free hand darts up to latch onto Cloud's thin wrist. He tries to defy and rise, he tries to pull and tug, but Cloud is immovable. He holds Reno’s weakened body in place.

Reno whines and huffs his frustrations and again drops back. His pulse has doubled, his breath is uneven. He’s realizing he can’t get away. He can’t stop Cloud. He can’t turn and run. He can't hold back because he can’t let loose. He can’t protect himself. He can’t protect Cloud. He can't.

More of those long ago days come back. More of those frozen places in time. Reno was a child, no more than five, and he ran with a pack of kids and his brother. They scrounged the back streets.
The side alleys. But that didn’t make them safe. If you got caught, it was up to you.

The kid that did catch him (stealing, of course) must have been thrice Reno’s age, and twice his size. He snatched and lugged little Reno up by his loose jacket front, lifting him high into the air to meet snarling face. The jacket’s fabric bunched under Reno’s armpits. The hateful words began to spill. The feeling of weightlessness, helplessness, hopelessness, filled Reno’s guts.

Those old memories. Those feral thoughts.

“Ow! Fucking…”

The stinging of needle points makes Cloud jolt and retract his entire arm.

He bit him.

Reno bit him.

Again.

“You fucking…” Cloud hisses.

The statement dies, the wonder dies. Cloud’s off-the-cuff response is not to pout, or whimper, oh no. He doesn’t sit and sulk and baby his bitten hand, just like he didn’t sit and sulk when Reno bit his lip. Nope.

Cloud clambers up and over Reno’s chest and jams his many fingers for Reno’s unsuspecting face. He shoves them three, thumb, index, and middle, past Reno’s lips, forcing his jaw to open up and choke the digits down. His sputtering lips split and part, Reno chokes, and Cloud relishes the pure shock on his face. And then Cloud grabs for tongue.

Reno gags and gurgles. He struggles and strains into Cloud’s hand. He struggles and strains to still himself in order to avoid causing anymore damage. His eyes widen and water.

“You’re always talking, Reno,” Cloud growls down at him, that slippery talking muscle firmly gripped in his slippery fingers. “You're always hiding behind a smile, a joke, a pass. You're so broken. And wrong. You know that, right? I'm—”

Teeth on flesh.

That already too-familiar needlepoint sting.

Reno takes the risk of biting his own tongue to chomp Cloud’s tugging fingers.

Cloud lets off with a compulsive cry and reels away, reactive, right to the head of the bed.

He might not fight his desire to die, but he can't fight human nature. The push to survive, to recoup, and exact himself, it's still so much more powerful and ingrained than all the hate, the sorrow, the doubt, and the fear he has experienced. The most basic of instincts will always have Cloud flinch, step out of harm's way, and second guess.

He has such a bad memory for pain.

He has such a bad memory.

“Fuck!” Reno barks, finally able to rise, arms, legs, vengeance, and red blazing hair.
He retaliates promptly, all fury and fire, whirling around, growing large, ascending. He rushes up and then swings out, socking Cloud in the side of the head with a big balled fist.

Cloud snaps to the side, head first, knocked clean off the bed. He careens and crashes, meeting the wooden floor with a wonderful thud and crack.

“That the best you got?” Reno spits after him.

He has leaned himself over the edge of the mattress and put his elbows on his knees, bending to look on Cloud as if he were addressing a child.

Here comes the rush of sobering blood, and then the draining dizziness, and finally the complete lack of gumption, and drive, and desire. Stars and lights, and then Reno's hateful eyes. His pale face. His bloodied face. His dried sweat and tears. His fresh bruise. His best image of unholy wrath. Clear as day. No more guessing.

Reno stays on the bed, withered and drunk. He goes nowhere from there. He hunches, wipes his mouth, and works his jaw.

The blood haze has lifted.

“Acting no better than the fuckers that ruined you,” Reno says.

His voice is so different, so tired, so broken and busted: two chunks of flint striking, two bits of charcoal colliding. He seemed to drain away all his lovable aspects when he died in the desert. He bled all his final hopes away. He is skeletal husk. He is lost.

Cloud places a hand to his aching head and blinks. Still spinning, he mutters, “You asshole.”

“Oh geez, take a potion and get off my back...”

“You said—”


“They didn't ruin me,” Cloud whispers.

Spittle and blood drip.

“I beg to differ at this point.”

Reno looks aside to assess his face. He fingers his tongue and touches at his mouth. He smears the red there. He really can't see it all. How drenched in red they both are. And have been. Well and truly. From the moment they met. From well beyond.

Cloud hasn't done much more than lick his wounded lip. He certainly doesn't bother to pick himself up. He stays as he was forcefully put, laid out on the floor like laundry or garbage.

“You're fucking crazy. You can't remember shit, or you remember wrong. You don’t know shit.”

“I'm not crazy,” Cloud growls.

All that smelly blood drying and bubbling up from between his lips. It's everywhere. The smell is metallic. The taste is heavy. He’s been lisping. He’s been swallowing again and again.

“It's for your own good. I came for you,” Reno sing-songs. “I'll watch out for you always...”
The words part the air.

Reno can’t physically fight Cloud now. His body is too weak. He has to use his words.

It takes only moments for the meaning to dawn.

“Bullshit,” Cloud whispers back.

It can’t be. He didn’t just say that. Those aren’t his words.

“You know it’s true,” Reno counters, pointing to Cloud. “You’re so easy. You're so simple.”

“Shut up,” Cloud breathes. Now his face and head are really starting to hurt.

Reno laughs. He looks down on him. He snaps his good fingers. “Oh, you didn't seem to mind it then. Didn't seem to mind it when I forgave you. Didn't seem to mind—”

Cloud jolts up, standing on his shaking legs. “Shut up! You’re lying!”

Reno does not react. He sits. He sighs. He explains, “It’s pretty simple to fake being asleep. Just fucking with your head, buddy. Even in the waking. It’s really sweet you still stick up for me though. You can say the nicest things.”

“You’re a… You’re...” Cloud rambles, struggling with the desire to proceed or crumble.

Reno’s lying. He doesn’t know. He can’t know. Zack was a dream. His dream.

“An asshole? A bastard? Which one is it this time?” Reno wonders.

“You’re heartless,” Cloud confirms, locking eyes with the enemy: a Reno he knew existed, a Reno he has contended with before. A cornered creature, an ill will, a twisted thing.


Cloud waves on his unstable legs, offering his hands as a plead. “What the fuck? Why?”

“I just want to... stop you from suffering,” Reno answers, twisting the knife once more.

A version of Zack told Cloud those things. Only now it seems he didn’t. It wasn’t even his own memory of Zack at all. Cloud was talking to Reno. Whether he was dreaming, or hallucinating, or something else, Cloud doesn’t know. But he knows he has doubt now. He doesn’t want to. But he does. And that's almost worse than the knowing. Hope is ruinous.

“You couldn’t have been… You couldn’t…” Cloud mumbles.

“They’re just dreams, Cloud.”

“But he told me about… about...”

“What? What could have happened? Crucifixion? The good days? That he’s jealous? I’ve gone bad but I still need love? I worship you? Don’t go to Midgar?”

“You were just…”

“Making you feel like you still had hope?”

“He really is…”

“You made me… You made me think he was talking to me? But… but he knew…”

Reno nods and crosses his arms. “Oh, the conversations we’ve had… Proves my point, doesn’t it?”

Cloud storms forward, inches from Reno’s ineffectual and arrogant and handsome face. “What!? What’s your point? What the fuck is your point, Reno?” he howls.

“You’re nuts.”

Reno doesn’t even blink.

Shock, surprise, hurt, shame.

Cloud is thrust into cold silence.

Reno fills it with more bile.

“You chose to kill me. You chose to. You did. Vegas died because of you. And you watched Zack kill himself. You did. You don’t get to feel better about this. You don’t get to blame it on the dead boyfriend. Not if I don’t.”

Every you is punctuated by a gust of breath. A hot and humid fluttering across Cloud’s face.

Cloud blinks and retreats. “How do I… have his memories?” he asks.

“You’re nuts.”

“How did I remember being in the house fire?”

“You’re nuts.”

“How do I feel him there, like… a thought in the back of my mind? Like a part of me?”


“How can I lift the BDS sometimes… and other times not?”

“Adrenaline.”

“How do I—”


Bloody, so bloody. Bloody and lightheaded.

And lost.

Always so lost.

Cloud needs to feel clean.

“Oh, fuck,” he croaks. “No. How could you…”

“Crazy like your daddy,” Reno mutters.
“Oh fuck. Oh fuck.”

Panic and a rush of blood.

So light. So distant.

“No. No...”

He’s never there when he needs him the most.

He’s not there. He wasn't there.

“I need that air...” Reno drones.

And that’s about the time Cloud decks him.

That’s right. A one for one. Revenge. It leaves the whole world blind. But, he does it. Cloud advances. He rushes in. And he doesn’t regret it. Not yet. Not in the now. He rings Reno’s bell, but Reno, being Reno, being irritating, and all that other sludge, he takes the punishment like a brick wall. His body doesn't move, but his head snaps and turns aside.

Cloud again retreats and shakes out his aching hand.

“That's better...” Reno exhales, turning his head back to eye him, to touch his chin and lick his teeth. “Ow. Bit my fucking tongue... What backwards poetic justice.”

Cloud stands by, trembling and panting.

Reno lifts his arms off his knees, he straightens his back, he unfolds his legs, and he makes to rise. And probably to leave. To leave this all behind. Once and for all.

“Don't forget your shit again,” Cloud reminds him.

Reno’s unguarded look says all it needs to.

Fuck you.

“Enjoy your potion,” Reno offers, the smile forced and unpleasant.

He had to get in the last word. Now he moves forward, avoids any contact with Cloud, collects his few things, and walks straight for the door, stepping out into the evening air. The door closes with an abrupt thud behind him.

They separate.

Cloud stands behind in the not-so middle of the room, snifflles, and wants so badly to feel clean, and weightless, and free.

He had those once. He knew them. He can still remember what they're like. He knew the comfort of a friend. His mother. His home. He knew their presence. He knew kindness. He knew being needed. He knew honesty. He knew loyalty.

He knew.

He's reeling. He’s collapsing. He’s gone into system shut down. He holds his tightened breath and hears Reno pause on the landing, and then he hears him thunder down the stairs.
Cloud now knows the cool breeze in the air. He feels the sweat on his skin, the emptiness of the room, the full sting of his bit lip, the pinch of a headache. He smells the blood, the tears, the end of friendship, love, need. He feels the throb of the present. He aches from all of it.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispers.

He stumbles and sways to the bathroom.

Here comes the stark, suffocating loneliness.
Chapter 12

Cloud is near sober now.

It’s minutes, hours, moments, a lifetime. It’s the dripping of the rusty shower faucet behind him. It’s the static rush in his ears, an echo in his head. That usual soundtrack.

Cloud is standing in the humid and cramped bathroom of their shared room, their safety zone, the storeroom, frozen still, unmoving, unbreathing, waiting for the horror, the pain, and the confusion to subside, and finding nothing, no relief.

There is the emptiness of the room, the mild chill in the air, the muffled noise downstairs. It’s not even evening yet. It’s still day. There’s still light left, and something to be said. There’s still the cigarette lighter under the bed, and the BDS on the armchair, and the filled rucksack on the crate, and the bloodied suits at his feet. But it's the emptiness most of all. That’s everywhere.

If he closes his tired eyes.

He can almost see Zack's unmarred face.

If he focuses well and clears his mind.

He can nearly hear Zack's voice.

If he rubs his fingertips together.

He can just about feel Zack's touch.

How can Cloud be so drunk and so sober at the same time? How is he so open and so closed? He’s numb to the core and yet throbbing alive, staggered, filleted. He’s a fresh wound caught by the breeze, but he doesn’t feel it, or fold, he stands alone in the bathroom.

He stands unmoved.

Reno’s gone. Reno betrayed him. And why? Why did he do it? He didn't hug and caress him, he bit him: brutal, unforgiving, damning. He led him astray. Played him. Like he feared. Reno made him think he was talking to Zack in his dreams. He stayed awake, or rose on his own, to muddle with Cloud’s broken head. To prove a point. To cause trouble. To help Cloud in his twisted way.

How will Cloud ever know?

He'll never speak to Reno again.

He'll never give him the chance to wriggle and worm back into his heart.

That uncertain night that Zack appeared on the seaside. And they actually talked. Reno slept close by. And just what was that? Cloud saw Zack twice before that with no dialogue, but this time, they spoke. They were interrupted by Reno and his nightmares. And the next time? Zack appeared after something sexual Cloud started with his rival. Zack arrived to lecture him. As if expected. And then Cloud woke up where? Right next to Reno. Always there with Reno.

It’s not impossible.

Reno whispered to him. Reno spoke with him as he dreamed uneasily, helpless, impressionable,
caught in better memories. Reno had been lying. He replied to Cloud's mutterings. He tainted the truth. He had been ghost-Zack. Just another lie.

Cloud’s loosed blood is drying to his lips, his chin, his throat, his ugly pink shirt. It’s gone from red to rust just like that.

Where is his ghost now?

They’re both gone.

They’re both lies.

Reno is shit-faced.

And there are no more beautiful things out any door. No more white horses. No more sun sets. No more laughter and singing, jokes and games, booze and smoke, blood and bonds. No more.

Reno couldn’t be more wasted, twisted. He is deep into the drunken, hateful haze he has created for himself. And he hasn’t stopped moving. He bolted down the drift wood staircase and urged that momentum to carry him forward from there. He almost fell on his face too, and he almost wanted to, but he kept going. He carried on. He’s gotta get out, get going, get back.

NCB2.

To Vegas.

There isn’t much town to this coastal town. Not enough dark alleys. It doesn't suit him. It’s a resort place for the rich enough, the bored enough, the lucky enough. He’s not the target consumer. Everytime Reno finds himself here, he’s unlucky enough. He isn’t going to get lost amongst the few buildings, or the crowd. And he isn’t going to get far either.

He stumbles ahead, feet away from the bar now. He’s not making good time. He sways and waves his arms, narrowly missing a human body coming his way down the uneven path. He grumbles and sneers in reaction, unwanting of the contact or distraction.

“Hey,” the human body says as they pass.

Reno keeps moving on, sliding by the statement, the body, and farther still.

“Hey, you,” the voice calls after him.

Reno slows and listens, that caustic booze buzzing in his guts a familiar friend (his only friend).

“Hey. Redhead.”

The voice is a rumble from a hole too tight.

Reno stops and makes a fist. “Why’s it always the hair?” he groans.

“Most defining feature on you,” the voice replies.

“Clearly ya don’t know me well...”
“Know you gotta big mouth. And a little blond friend.”

Reno carefully turns around.

This human body, now a face, it’s becoming a new memory. It’s leaving a mark, a tear, a ripple, and Reno will have to deal with it one way or another, present, past. He can dip and dodge, or he can take it head on. He’s not moving now, but he will be soon, any minute, right now.

He steps forward, towards the voice, now a stronger memory. “What do ya wanna know?” he asks. “That he’s alone on the second floor of that shitty bar back there?” He waves a dismissive arm in the appropriate direction. “That he’s five foot nothin’ and prettier than your sister? That he’s fucked me up harder’n anyone before and my selfish, dead brother?”

The following silence is satisfying.

Reno’s half expecting the voice, a face, now a decent memory, to turn tail and make for that bar, and the probable objective, because that’s what this individual is after, no doubt, that’s who he wants. They all want Cloud, everyone: Zack, Sephiroth, Reno. And now it’s Shinra’s turn.

But this voice, a face, now an annoying memory, doesn’t turn tail, it stares on unchallenged.

“I’m not Shinra,” it says.

Reno’s eyebrows pinch and bunch. He doesn’t have an immediate response, or a reason to believe. He must look like an idiot, mouth-breathing and everything. He eventually says, “Huh?”

They’ve stopped on the path, one of many, that directly leads out of town. It’s a dusty and flat trail dug into bare and earthen surface: the western exit. The border of the surrounding jungle sits meters away. The gritty stage Zack had a clumsy stand-off with Vincent is behind.

Reno got close. He got so close. He almost got away.

“I don’t look familiar to you?” the rumble asks.

Reno shakes his head, and wishes he hadn’t. His vision swims, scatters; he sways and settles.

“You were drunk then too,” the voice remarks.

The voice, a face, now a curious memory, strikes Reno as a real but milky and filmy mental playback. This isn’t a stranger. This isn’t a blurry nobody. This isn’t a tourist. This is connection.

“Where’s your friend?” the voice asks.

“Told you,” Reno assures.

“Why you drunk?”

“I drank.”

“Why you still in town?”

“You stopped me from gettin’ the hell out.”

“You’re leaving without your sweetheart?”

“Fuck yes. He can do his… fuckin’... sword thing. Whatever. I don’t care. I’m out, yo.”
“Sword thing? That giant sword?”

Reno huffs chestily. “The fuck you want anyway? Why you botherin’ me?”

“Keeping an eye on you. Both of you.”

“So you been our shadow?” Reno accuses, pointing a long (but shaky and clawed) finger.

“Corre—”

“That’s ah relief,” Reno sighs, slumping his shoulders forward and dropping his arm. “Shit. Been kinda wonderin’, ya know... Off my game, sorry. If you had been Shinra... you guys were bein’ awfully... patient and careful. That’s not really your style. I’d know.”

“I’m not Shinra.”

Reno stomps his foot. “The fuck are you?”

“I’m with Vause actually.”

Of course he is.

This human body, taller than Zack on any given day, clad in a smart black suit, with hair cut too short, and fists too big, he lifted Reno from his feet back in the golden casino, just under three days ago. He brought Reno up and then almost dropped him down onto a glass coffee table.

Cloud was there. Cloud had watched it all. He would have remembered him already.

Reno snorts. “Well. Thanks for admittin’ it. That doesn’t usually work... The fuck does Vause want with us now? Thought we fulfilled our little agreement? We made his... little movie.”

“He has a debt.”


“Your brother.”

This could be enough to start sobering him up. But, to be honest, that’s the last thing Reno wants. No. Reno wants to be raving mad. To have an excuse to boil over. He wants to be two sheets to the wind, gone, and with no goodbye. He is in a state of rebel. He is anarchy. He is forest fire. He is pestilence. He is sea surge. He is morality, fate, the truth, the end.

It's always about his damn brother.

Reno stiffens, he winces, he finally bursts forwards and uneasily shoves the henchman out of his way. He’s making to go back to the bar. He didn’t even get out of eyeshot of the damn thing.

“Oh, you’re staying now?” the henchman calls, following closely behind him. “You seem pretty stupid for a renowned defector...”

Reno makes it all the way up the bar’s front stairs, through the swinging doors, and to the bar top, before realizing he left that cash card upstairs with Cloud. And that just sucks.

He turns.

The henchman is there, looking down on him.
Reno tilts his chin up and says, without pause, “Buy me a drink.”


“Because I’m handsome. And broke.”

The henchman shakes his head. “Not a good reas—”

Reno rolls his eyes. “Because I’m handsome and I’ll listen to your whole, entire life’s story.”

“Still not appealing.”

The barmen arrives to take their order.

“Because I’m handsome, I’ll listen to you snivel... and I’ll choke on your enormous dick.”

The barman sniffs in distaste.

The henchman does not readily reply. He looks to the barman and then back to Reno.

Reno drops his chin, tilts his head, and smiles, slow, easy, obvious. His mismatched outfit does little to subdue his luster, intentions, and high cheekbones.

The henchman mutters, “Thought you were—”

“Forget what ya know,” Reno interrupts. “He can do his thing. Buy me a drink and I’ll tell ya what ya wanna hear.”

“I’ll buy you one…” the henchman admits, pointing a rather parental finger in Reno’s face, “but... that’s it. Nothing else. Not like you need it, shit. I just happen to be thirsty myself.”

Reno steps aside, giving the henchman the bar, and a sweep of his arm, just for show. “Drinkin’ on the job, but no sexy time?” he asks. “What a fuckin’ drag. And a contradiction... It probably wouldn’t ah been very good anyway. I’m better at receivin’.”

“Is that so?” the henchman monotones, rolling his own eyes now.

“In that particular department, absolutely. Ask blondie… I’m a giver where it counts.”

The waiting barman clears his throat. “Fuckers gonna squawk or what?”

“Two tall ones,” the henchman replies with a glance and a nod.

And now Reno can rekindle his descent into madness, fire, and unholy anger.

Once upon a time.

In the beginning.

Way back when.

Cloud doesn’t know where to start. He’s trying to retrace it all, follow his footsteps, see where and how things got so fucked up. So maybe he can understand. So maybe he can do better.
Was it before Zack? Was it after Reno? Was it in between? Did Sephiroth leave a deep and permanent scar? Or was it something else? Something from well before? Something he can't remember? Was he simply too weak? Too small? Too innocent? Did he give in too soon?

Cloud’s breath shudders and catches.

His entire face hurts.

He smells blood and piss and mildew.

Why? Most of all, why?

Zack tried to save him from Sephiroth.

Zack sacrificed himself over and over.

Sephiroth only wanted to break them.

Reno stayed after Zack fell. He always stayed.

Cloud lost it and, effectively, killed Reno.

Reno came back... different.

That’s all Cloud’s got.

They’ve come so far. And lost so much. How much longer until that relief washes over? How soon will Cloud get to unload this sword, and all its weight, and be left at peace?

When Zack was whole, and proud, and sure, nothing was right either. They still struggled and failed and fought. The world was no friendlier. The pain was just as immense. Things were just the same. But, Cloud had a glimmer. There was hope then. Zack was unbeatable, unbelievable, and Cloud was inspired. He felt as though he could be somebody after all, even in his shadow.

Cloud had many incredible moments with Zack, but there’s one he readily calls back. All of them together incredible on their own, amounting to hours, a few days, good days, bad days, worse days, and now just memories, barbed and painful. But, this one...

Cloud had saved Zack from the robot.

He rose up and did so. Back then. An age ago. A recollection ago. But, he can’t save himself. So, in the end, when they were up against the wall, all over again, and it needed to be done, he couldn't save Zack. He went back to his old tricks. He simply cried. He curled up inside.

Where are those gut feelings now?

Where is his god-like figure?

Cloud is alone.

Reno is seeing double.
Two tall ones become four.

Four becomes six.

Six becomes Reno again having to remember the last drink he had in this bar.

He’s had four to himself by now, and he’s feeling heavy and light, liquid and solid. He needs to puke. He needs to piss. He’s no better and no worse. He’s in a state of hold.

His drinking partner, a rather large fellow, could probably have had all six to himself with little more than a tingling in his fingers as a result.

They’re sitting at a table Reno likely tossed over when he was trying to dodge death via an angry past employer with gunblade. He probably crawled along the floor right by this set up, sick to death, guts boiling with poison, the last drink he ever should have had laced with the stuff.

“You often hide in such choice locations?” his drinking pal asks.


“Last time it was a casino.”

“Have a taste for the finer things,” Reno drones, sarcastic. “Shoulda seen our last spot…”

“Sure. You murder your brother?”

It happens so fast Reno doesn’t have the time to be shocked or offended. He feels the anger bubble and spit, and then he comes to some ramshackle reason.

“Is that why you’re here?” he counters. “Payback? Vengeance? Tseng didn’t believe me? Had to drag you in? He wants me dead too? Our whole damn bloodline?”

“No,” the henchman assures. “Consider it... a personal inquiry.”

Reno rolls his jaw. He eyes his empty glasses, the shimmering pools of condensation left on the scuffed table surface. He moves the soles of his high-tops over the smooth wooden floor.

“I don’t feel like... I should have to answer that.”

“Fair enough.”

Reno sighs, groans, readjusts. “You been with what’s-his-face long?”

“Long enough.”

Reno is still able to have conversation, disappointingly enough. He’s not blotto. Not deep enough. Even after several bottles, and now several glasses, he’s too clear, too present. He’s gotta go farther. By all means. He’s gonna sink straight to the sandy bottom.

“You... like your job?” Reno asks the henchman.

The henchman takes a slug of his remaining drink before answering, “Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Reno echoes, drawn out.

He would have taken a drink too, but he’s dry.
“That it? That all ya got?” Reno sits upright in his chair and leans over the table, elbows propped, face closer to his drinking pal. “I used to. Got all kinds ah reasons why an’ everythin’. Could spin you some weird and scary shit.”

“I’m not saying I couldn’t either,” the henchman counters. “I have stories.”

“Don’t doubt it,” Reno agrees, leaning back to wave his hands.

The world is hazy, hard to make out, smearing and mixing colours; watercolours, oils, acrylics, pastels, primaries, neons, vibrant, gleaming: a slew of things Reno can’t put his finger on. Everything is a shade or hue he has to guess at. Every single one could be false.

“What is the story then? What brings ya to the beach? Clearly not the sun… We’ve been sittin’ here for… what? Forty minutes now? My ass is beyond numb,” Reno complains.

“I told you.”

“You’re followin’ us,” Reno confirms. “Yeah. And blah blah blah, not Shinra.”

“Yup.”

“Great. Anythin’ else?”

“That floppy dick, Shinra, cleared out of the casino right after you two made your quiet exit. Everyone. They picked up and left. No more presence or sense of operation.”

“So they don’t like the gaudy atmosphere anymore. There is a frightenin’ amount of gold and crystal and high prices in there…”

“They’re on the hunt.”

Did the room just dim? Did people hush to whispers? Is the temperature colder now?

Danse continues, low and slow. “You’re bad for business. You’re trouble. Either way, Tseng told us to make sure you two got on a boat outta here. As soon as possible. That’s it.”

“Bad for business? Ya know, that's not the first time I've heard that... Did he also tell ya to get me ravin’ drunk? To sneak about? To be a bystander? To fit in?”

The henchman might have smiled.

If Reno’s unstable vision is any indicator.

“Sneaking? No. Observing. And he might have said you’d be more… agreeable once lubricated. But you already beat me to it. Now you're no contest. Tired, dumb, and drunk.”

Reno nods and snorts. “That’s true… But what about… what about… Blondie?”


“Right…” Reno mutters.

“You guys fight or something?” the henchman asks.
“Or somethin’,” Reno replies, looking down and away. “We’re about two seconds from maimin’ each other all the more than we already are. This blood? Most of it ain’t mine.”

“That’s inconvenient.”

“Tell me about it,” Reno grumbles, stretching in his seat, lifting his arms over his head and pushing all his weight into chair back. “And I started it this time too.”

You know, come to think of it, he still doesn’t know why either.

Why did he do that?

Why did he say that?

Any of it?

Danse sighs. “You should get him. I have a boat waiting.”

“Can’t do that,” Reno deadpans, dropping his stretched arms.

The henchman finishes his beer, knocks the glass onto the wooden table, and eyes him. “Why not?”

“Because he won’t come with me.”

“You two are inseparable.”

“How do ya figure that?”

The henchman gives Reno a blank look.

It’s all he need remark on the matter.

Reno rolls his eyes away. “He won’t. I walked out on him. I hurt him. Pretty damn good. He won’t trust me anymore. If he ever really did…”

“Then I’ll go get him.”


The henchman pushes out his chair and stands. “You two have to get out of Costa. You have to watch your backs. You have to survive this.”

“Why? Survive what? And not together we don’t,” Reno retorts, glowering up at him.

“Knew you would be a pain in the ass…”

“Why would I be any other way?” Reno asks, the smile forming just as it’s fading. He stands now himself, swaying precariously. “How long… ya been followin’ us anyway? Since the Saucer? You see what Sunshine did to me?”

“I saw… a widescale disturbance.”

“Hah! Disturbance? Sure, sure… And Papa Tseng and Uncle Vause made you follow after. Why? Just more personal inquiries? Have a score to settle too?”
“It’s part of my job.”

“And ya like your job…”

“Yeah, I do. So go get him.”

“Then you'll stop followin’ us?”

“Once I know you're on that boat.”

“Hmm,” Reno hums.

The henchman is patient.

“No,” Reno blurts, and turns to leave.

The henchman reaches out an arm.

The whispers again. The cool waft.

The henchman wrangles Reno still.

“Hey,” the barman calls at them from across the floor, wise to the potential commotion. “None o’ that! Not inside! Lost enough of my bar already to have some cocksuckers fuck it up again!”

Reno scowls and twists, but he's caught good.

“You heard him,” the henchman urges, flexing his grip. “Outside, buddy. You've had enough.”

He shoves Reno forward by his arm, stumbling and leaning, herding him towards the exit, the swinging doors, and somewhere likely more dangerous, and more life threatening.

Reno trips up as he goes but is held aloft by the henchman's grip and muscle. “What's your… name anyway?” he asks him on the way.

They make it across the bar floor, through the double doors, and onto the exterior landing.

Reno pulls at the arm holding him a little too hard then, gets loose, and tumbles hands first down the four front steps, clearing all but one wooden stoop.

“Ouch,” he gusts, a heap of drunken limbs settled onto the dirt path below.

“It’s Danse,” the henchman answers from high on the landing.

“Danse?” Reno groans, rolling up enough to glare at the introduced. “What a stupid name.”

“Oh, yeah? And Reno and Vegas are common names? Probably not even your real names. Those a Shinra souvenir?”

“You're… an asshole.”

“Well then,” Danse says, descending the steps easily. “We’d make a lovely couple.”
Cloud comes back to himself and finds he's still in the bathroom.

He’s holding a health potion, and it’s already been opened. He’s staring at the empty container in his small hand, his still hand. He’s sinking into the scene. The taste is already on his tongue, too sweet and too sharp.

He swallows and swallows.

The lingering pain in his lip becomes less and less.

If he wanted to look up into the milky mirror hanging above the sink he’s at, he would see he is no longer bleeding. He doesn’t want to look up though. He would have to recognize that he’s sickly pale, thin, and his hair is flat and damp against his neck, temples, and forehead.

He drops the potion bottle. It bounces and rolls. And then he drops himself, right to his bony knees. Their suits are with him, piled up together on the tile. They smell. They wait.

Cloud slides himself over. He doesn’t have to go far. He starts pulling the garments apart, the pieces: the shirts, the slacks, the jackets. Like threads of a story. The layers of psychosis.

He begins making a separate pile: one clean, one not-so-clean. Then he stands and tosses the cleaner pile into the empty tub.

The process stalls his thinking, his questions, his uncertainty and fear.

He turns on the tap and wets the tub. He gets down on his knees again and uses his hands and nails to agitate and wring out the soaked fabric, rubbing away the crumbling blood stains.

He rinses the entire mess twice and then hangs what remains over the metal shower rod, stepping back to inspect his work.

It’ll take some time to dry, but all he has is time.

He will soon get dressed, get loaded up, and be off.

Off to Midgar.

Memories. Splinters. They move under the skin. They shift and slide out of view only to come back and surface, causing suffering a new day. A bruise that keeps bruising. Stitches that tear.

Midgar. Shinra. The Big Damn Sword.

Zack was like a dream even in the waking.

He was too good to be true.

Never meant to last.

A taste too pure.

And then Reno whispered into Cloud’s ear, into his dreams, and told him what he had wanted to hear, even when it wasn’t. Reno strung him along. Like prey. And then he bit him. Oh, did he.

Is Cloud really crazy? Has he lost it? What did he have to lose? What happened to Reno between agreeing to get drunk, admitting the wrongs, and nearly chewing Cloud’s face off? What happened at the Saucer, before and after? What happened to Cloud after Zack?
Cloud had been pushing Reno that entire drunken conversation, edging him to break and bite. He shouldn’t really be surprised if his only ally doesn’t show back up.

Cloud hadn't lied.

He doesn't care.

Not like he did.

And now Reno could be on a boat, on his own merry way to somewhere far, or near, or home. Wherever that really is. If that even is Wutai. Or he's hoofing it, hoping to hook up with the people Cloud fears will eventually find him.

Shinra.

Reno's old stomping grounds.

He could be anywhere.

He can go anywhere.

Cloud leaves the bathroom. He drifts, and paces, and frets, eyes wide, fearful, searching. He decides to check the rucksack. Before he succumbs to a cigarette. Or seven.

Reno left the pack behind, as well as the cash card. He left everything but his two guns, a few clips of ammo, his pink comb, and his knife. What remains is a bounty of healing potions (in many colours), a bright yellow container of liquid lighter fluid, many loose .45 caliber bullets, two extra cigarette packs, hotel ephemera (towels, nail clippers, tissue, and more), two plastic bottles of water, a jar of water-based personal lubricant (curiously), and many bad memories.

Cloud isn’t sure he even wants to take the pack with him. He has enough to contend with in the giant sword. He will have pockets again once the suit is dry and wearable. Plenty of room for his cigarettes. Without the rucksack, he would be lighter and faster, plus, no bad memories.

Either way, before anything can be decided, it's all about waiting for the suit to dry to some degree, and his heart to stop racing, and his mind, and his breath.

Or is it really all about that? Is he waiting for a suit to dry? His racing heart? His mind? His breath? His nerve? Or is he waiting for a certain red-headed prick?

Too many damn questions.

Cloud comes to the chair the BDS adorns. He lifts the dinged and dusted sword from its resting place and takes a seat. He repositions the long blade back across the chair’s armrests, inches above his lap. From there, he’s left staring at the driftwood main door that won't lock.

If Reno were to come back (beyond probability and hope and logic), Cloud and the BDS would be front and center, in any given state of disintegration.

Cloud rests.

He closes his eyes and takes a breath.

He feels the warm blade under his palms.

He almost sees an unmarred face.
“You like shovin’ people around?” Reno growls. ”Hey. That how you get your jollies off? You're just a bully. Always been a giant? You gettin’ stiff?”

“Quiet down,” Danse demands.

“No. Fuck off.”

“Move.”

“Where?”

“You know where.”

“No.”

Danse makes to grab for him again.

Reno ducks, dodges and squawks, “Abuse! Abuse!”

He’s quickly caught as he turns to flee, a giant arm wrapping around his throat and mouth.

“You want me to hurt you?” Danse coolly asks.

Reno garbles into the barring arm, muffled quiet.

“You’re mental. Abnormal,” Danse assures, lips nice and close to ear. “Don’t think I need you to tell me your story. I know the score, pal, and others just like you. All the same. You wouldn’t be so fucking cocky otherwise. Makes me sick.”

Reno shakes his head.

Danse scoffs and starts walking them around to the back of the bar.

Reno resists, making it slower going.

“Stop,” Danse suggests.

Reno groans loudly, kicking and jerking. He bucks and howls, muffled.

Danse bodily answers, swinging Reno to the side by his head and laying him out in the dirt.

One swift move and Reno is eating soil. “Ow, shit,” he sputters in the wake.

“Told you,” Danse says. “Now get up and go.”


Danse quietly fumes. But, it’s all under control. He has an idea. He's an idea man after all. He’s a real fixer, as well as an enforcer, and a brick wall. He has no reason to fear.

He makes for the driftwood staircase. The very one between them and Cloud. And he's closer.
Reno, of course, rushes forward to stop him.

Danse uses that forward momentum against Reno and clocks him in the nose as they meet.

Like a button pressed, Reno crumples.

Danse, and all his enormous self (and sober thinking), barrels up the staircase as Reno's reeling at the bottom, down, but not out.

While Danse ascends, reaches the pinnacle, and opens the small door, their door, Reno is not far behind, having clambered to his feet, butterfly in hand, ready to bite.

They both stall on the landing.

They both peer inside.

Reno has to blink and clear his watering eyes. His ears are ringing and his face hurts, he tastes metal, he smells heat, but he's getting the picture. He can really see it.

There Cloud sits, BDS in lap, eyes far off, distant. He's just sitting in that ugly orange armchair. That's all he's doing. Nothing wrong with that. But then, there's everything wrong with that.

Cloud is blood-drained, blood-caked, not smoking (there isn't even the fading smell of it), and nobody's home. He's a blank slate.

“Hey,” Danse says first.

Reno hisses, annoyed and concerned. He shoves up from behind, butterfly forgotten but still in hand. He is shoulder to shoulder, bumping for room, Danse on his right.

Cloud has not reacted to their unceremonious entrance.

“Hey,” Danse again says.

Cloud does nothing.

“What did you do to him?” Danse growls.

“What?” Reno snaps.

Danse knocks his shoulder. “He's checked out. And all fucking bloody. The fuck you do?”

“I, uh…”

The hesitation is deadly.

Danse has Reno pinned against the wall beside the front door in the next moment.

The butterfly knife is jarred and dropped.

All Reno sees now is an angry face.

Danse’s big, angry face.

“What did you do?” Danse repeats.

“Nothing!” Reno howls into that face. But, because he's trapped, he tries to explain. “Well. I
mean... Ya know... I bit him. I fucked him—"

Danse shoves him hard into the wall, all weight on Reno's chest cutting off the following words.

*I loved him.*

Reno gasps and wheezes, dropping low.

And still Cloud sits.

"You should be *locked up!*" Danse exclaims.

"I don't... disagree," Reno bites out, winded. "But... get off me! Fucker! Let up!"

Danse does not.

Reno grabs at his giant arms. He tries to push forward. "Let me go! Let go! Step the fuck—"

More pressure on his chest, and stars popping. Reno's lungs compress, empty, burn. His left shoulder all at once cries out, knives biting, and then he's crying out too. Agony. Despair. Wild.

He doesn't care for the sound.

Danse seems to disagree, pressing on. "I don't believe you," he hisses.

That weight lessens just a touch, just enough to allow Reno a gasp, but the arm only rises, becoming a hand, a massive mitt, reaching upwards, higher, for Reno's bare throat.

What painful nuisance it once was becomes fresh panic.

Reno scrabbles and struggles against the wall, wrecking his shoulder and his lungs.

"I bet you killed him. Your own brother."

Danse's massive mitt finds Reno's skinny throat, just as Reno's hand finds his pistol's grip.

And then, Cloud moves.

Danse abruptly lets off Reno, releasing him.

Reno slumps right down to the floor, an immodest affair, taken by surprise.

The towering henchman steps back and turns.

There Cloud is, out of his chair, and looming small.

It gives Reno the chance to see the problem, the cause for the interruption, and the knife in Danse's very back. Reno's knife. His brother's knife. The butterfly dropped, now jammed to the grip below lowest rib, through black suit jacket, and an awfully strange marker.

Cloud stuck him.

He got up and stuck Danse.

"Oh, shit," Reno gusts, lifting his retrieved pistol to Danse's turned figure, and broad back, but soon panning left, left, left, to what he knows is the real threat.
Cloud makes no comment, gesture, or noise, and ambles from the scene. He doesn't acknowledge Reno pointing his barrel at him. He is going to the bathroom.

Reno follows him with his precious pistol aimed, watching from behind the sights. It doesn't feel right how comfortable he is doing this to Cloud. He's got him in his eyeline, a compression away from having everything violently but quickly ended.

Cloud would never know what hit him.

“Did he just…” Danse says, faded a bit.

“Yeah,” Reno answers, lowering his pistol. “He sure did.”

Danse stumbles and reaches back for the blade.

Reno holsters the pistol and tries, with all he's got, to stand upright. He is graceless, but successful, leaving Danse to bleed and ponder what to do next while he follows after Cloud.

Reno has to step over the BDS on the way. And the pooling blood. And the desire to just leave.

He's getting close. He'll soon see the horror. He'll confront Cloud. He’ll get the real story, and hopefully it won’t sound too much like anything that’s already going through his head; a mantra (oh, he’s back, he’s back, he’s back) formed over the last several events.

The blackouts, the distance, the healed hands, the Gold Saucer, the lack of care, the murderous rampage. For all the denying and deception, Reno still entertains the thought.

Is it really Zack?

Or is it Seph?

Reno pulls back the bathroom curtain.

Cloud's putting on his suit. The suit from Vause, deep purple and lovely and damp but clean.

Reno doesn't know what to say.

That strikes him as the norm around Cloud. Reno’s always reaching for the right thing to say, watching his words, the potential interpretation.

He wants to say everything.

And nothing.

He should apologize.

He should repent.

But he's done with that.

He should be careful and watch his ass. Cloud is... just as Reno knows him best. Half-crazy, half-dead, and not wanting anything to do with him. That's the Cloud that Reno first wanted to help. That's the Cloud he fell in love with.

Reno starts first with—
“Hey. Cloud…”

Cloud stops what he's doing.

Reno forces himself to breathe, always aware of the two .45's at his hips, always ready to go.

It's bitter comfort.

“You're…”

Cloud freezes still, fingers stopped on his collar.

“Purple suits you. I mean, ya look good in that purple. Based off what I can tell anyway. And it's not much. But. It's rather flatterin’. You…”

He's rambling. Like nothing happened. And Danse is stumbling, making a noise behind, flailing around with a knife in his back. A knife he can't reach. A knife Reno will need to take with him...

“You…”

Reno's reaching for anything meanwhile, looking at the floor, the tile, the pile, finding his torn sneakers, an article they picked up while Zack was playing dead. An article he has all to himself. Something separate from Vegas. A genuine article.

“You... hate me?”

Cloud says nothing. He finishes with his suit and steps into Reno to leave. He steps into his chest, shoving in, nice and snug, his slender and slight frame and bird bones a passive challenge.

Reno doesn't move.

Should he?

Cloud's posture says he should.

Reno's guts say he should.

His head says he should.

But, his heart, far beyond doubt, is enjoying the heat and closeness, for what little it is.

“I… never back down,” Reno reminds, graved and thick, serious and sad. “But… I can't tell you why I did what I did either. Any of it. Except for… listening to my brother. I know that, yo… But now. I don't know why I… I didn't… It doesn't make any sense when I look back. So. I'm really drunk. And stupid. Or I'm just as crazy as you are now. I can't… help you. I'm hurtin’ you. Over and over.” Reno steps aside. “So. It's… okay. Like I said.”

Cloud slips away, into the room beyond.

Reno watches him go, and says to his back, “Go ahead and hate me.”

This is all fucked up.

He's all fucked up.

If his recent dreams and actions have told him anything, Reno should be far away from Cloud. If
Cloud's recent actions have told him anything, Reno should be continents away at that.

Cloud's old hate.

Cloud's terrible loathing.

It would make this all so much easier.

“You… you…”

Danse is rambling now. He's rather pale now, and slumped against a crate. He's holding a cell phone aloft in one shaking hand, as if it were vital. “I wanted… to help,” he musters.

Cloud ignores him to collect his few things.

Reno watches on, drifting closer, and closer.

“There's a… boat waiting…”

Cloud pays no mind.

Reno listens.

“Don't... trust...”

The hand and cell phone drop.

Reno now stands over the fallen henchman, Danse. He looks down on him, and all his useless muscle and love for his job. Reno's own face bruised, his nose bloodied; his long throat, chapped lips, and chin stained an old red; his hair tossed and tangled.

Danse blearily blinks up at him.

“I guess…” Reno remarks, in his best detached voice, his best professional voice, “the barman was right. Shouldn't ah had guests, man.” He bends down low now, leveling with Danse. “Nothin’ personal,” he assures him. “Well. No. Never mind. Not really... That's my brother's knife. Right there. In your… And I... kinda… need it... back.”

“Don't trust… him,” Danse rasps.

Reno shrugs.

He diverts to check the dropped cell phone.

The screen is locked.

He probably didn’t have the chance to alert anyone.

This is more like him. Reno’s used to this. His job was all he had too. It's what he was good at. They called him one of the best. They had praised him. And he almost feels better, comfortable, okay, right here, right now, with that thought. He feels like, when some of this agony and defeat and booze ebb, he'll be just fine, right where he left off, spick and span, no more Cloud calling his name, as vile and corrupt as he ever was.

He slides the phone aside, across the floor, and stands.
The smell of fresh blood is thick in the air.

He assesses the situation and then toes Danse's shoulder with a sneaker, urging him over and onto his side, more or less spreading him out onto the floor boards. From there, Reno nudge Danse around until the knife is mostly visible. He bends down again.

“Now, this is gonna hurt. Ya could be too close to passin’ out to notice, but I'm just puttin’ it out there. Hopefully for me…it comes out in one go. Okay… Cool? Let's do this.”

But, before Reno can, something nudges into him.

He starts and looks up.

Cloud is passing by on his way to the bed.

Reno's nerves sizzle. He is very much on edge.

Cloud drifts and reaches the bed as Reno watches.

The kid gets down on all fours and starts swishing an arm under the cot, reaching around for something lost. He seems to find it quickly and then gets right back up, drifting off to acknowledge but not move their shared rucksack.

The BDS is still on the floor nearby.

Reno knows Cloud won't leave without it.

He still has time.

Reno refocuses on his task.

He leans over and firmly grabs the butterfly knife's grip.

He exhales and braces off Danse's shoulder.

And he wrenches Vegas' token free.

Danse grunts but remains floored.

“Man down,” Reno mutters to himself.

He rises and swipes the bloodied knife across his crimson floral shirt, cleaning the blade.

He folds the item up and pockets it once more.

Time to go.

Same town, same path, similar intentions, different directions, altered players.

This time Reno feels like the shadow.

He's following after Cloud as he directs himself away, straight as the crow flies, dressed well, lugging his giant sword, bent like a boy in a windstorm, more than likely headed for the beach, the
tide, the gulls, the docks, and where they should find Danse's waiting boat.

Or so he said.

“Ya know, you probably killed him.”

Reno doesn't waste too much time screwing the pooch and getting into the shit, attacking Cloud with all he's got, while he's got it, while he has the lingering chance, the motivation, the guile, the gumption. Because he’s fucked. So very fucked. So fuck it.

_Don't hate me now?

_Here's some food for thought._

“And he seemed worried about you.”

Reno starts his infernal digging.

“Like, genuinely worried.”

Deeper and deeper.

“Do ya know why he was choking me?”

He picks up the pace to walk alongside Cloud.

“He saw what I did to you,” he breathes.

And then he drops back.

He's not sure why he's still following him.

He should split.

He should make it so.

But he follows.

Force of habit, maybe.

Has to get in the last word.

Has to be victorious, vicious.

Has to be a shit.

And maybe he's just nuts.

And stupid. So stupid.

They walk. And Reno follows, silent and stewing now that he had his fume and set the mood. They walk. And Cloud hunches and drags the BDS behind him, saying nothing.

They drift away from that infamous bar, the hotel across from that, the main strip struck between, the paved streets beaten smooth along the berm of the beach, and the calling, crowing crowds always streaming through, rising and receding.
They hit warm sand, slowing some. Passing under a bending archway of jungle palms, they meet the sunbleached wooden docks beyond. The ocean opens wide and rolling, crystalline.

The smell of salt, rot, decay.

The smell of opportunity.

Reno takes a deep draw inwards and coughs. “I used to like the ocean,” he groans.

Cloud continues down the planked pier.

Reno ignores the fact that he’s seeing double and trails after, every foot fall heavy.

There is only one seaworthy boat moored, and it's not what Reno is expecting by a long shot.

At the far end of the spread, and at the very last dock, just before the stairs rising up to the helipad for high rollers, bobs a large fishing trawler with many webs and entanglements of rigged booms and hanging yellow and blue nets.

Scrawled on the boat's peeling, barnacled hull in giant looping black letters reads: Ragnarok. Those hull sides are a faded red, or coral, or beige. It's old, ancient even, and it stinks too. It's downright overwhelming from here.

Could this really be Danse's boat?

Or did it leave already?

It's too late to investigate now.

Reno's scorched senses tingle. His stomach rolls, sweat prickles his arms and neck. He looks up and back, across the short pier. He sees what he was hoping he wouldn't see.

They're not alone.

A small group of men are steadily closing in on them as they loiter. And it's not offended tourists or angry barmen to be concerned about this round. These men are wearing black suits and have stepped out from the lining palm trees to spill down the narrow planked drag behind them.

Men dressed as Danse, or Shinra: black and proper, business-like. They issue forward as a unit and spread to enclose them where they stand at the large, stinking trawler. They've blocked the way back into town, three individuals strong (or six, if you're blasted, like Reno).

Given his state, and the circumstances, Reno throws caution out the window and draws his pistols, one and two. He puts his back to Cloud and the boat and takes aim at the threat.

“Don’t fuckin’ move,” he suggests, a splintered noise.

His barrels are unsteady; his hands tremor. He doesn't have any advantage.

The suits freeze their crawl on cue, still several paces from contact.

They say nothing.

They watch and wait.

A quick glance over his shoulder tells Reno all he need know and demand.
Cloud has already moved down the extending dock and onto the boat, making his choice.

Reno has little choice too.

Even if he wanted a different one, he's damned and paying for it. He would tuck his tail between his legs and follow every time. He only has to look at his history, his track record, his failures. He can't seem to fight his nature on any front.

He steps backwards, making careful motions, and moves parallel with the big boat. His high-tops meet loose and sagging gangplank, his pistols train on the ominous interlopers. He boards the fishing boat in reverse.

Just as quickly as he does, relatively safe on deck, the trawler comes to life, gas engines churning, readying to depart.

Reno kicks the thin gangplank spanning from the boat's deck to the dock's lip into the frothing sea below, making sure the suits can't move up and invade their vessel at will.

He offers them a farewell gesture too.

A rude one.

They collectively soak it in, silent and stiff.

“What's this?”

A voice from behind that isn't Cloud's.

Maybe the boat's captain. Or a deckhand.

“What in the hell?” the voice says.

Reno turns to face the fuss, pistols down. “Oh fuck,” he swears, and turns right back around to the docks, and the solemn trio shrinking as the boat shoves off and makes way.

“You two again! What luck!” Cid shouts.

And, to Reno's great dismay, Cid commences laughing his thoroughly drunken ass off.

“Yeah, yeah, luck…” Reno grumbles, slowly holstering his pistols both.

The statue-like suites shrink smaller and smaller.

Cloud sits on a crate, in his (almost) perfect plum suit, among many crates and gear and fishing traps and nets, with his giant totem, swishing with the seaswell, blank and silent and awful, looking, by all means, like the lost and forgotten child he essentially is.

Reno doesn't want to look at him at all.

“So what is it this time? Still on the run?” Cid asks, standing on deck with them.

He's glancing them over, hands on his hips.
“Of course,” Reno answers.

The white coastline is guiding them. They cruise along, moving at a crawl, feeling the cooling breeze, no heading just yet. The sun is setting, dipping, nodding off on the horizon.

The docks of Costa del Sol are long gone. And with them, the three black suits, and Danse, and whatever help he might have offered.

“To Junon?” Cid asks, leaning forward.

He smells of booze.

He looks sun-fried.

“No,” Reno quickly answers.

“Midgar,” Cloud cuts in, finally joining the conversation.

Reno scowls and bunches his tight shoulders (scowl deepening at the twinge of pain). “No.”

“Oh?” Cid huffs, his stare lingering on Cloud.

“Take me north,” Reno demands.

Cid rocks on his heels. “North? How far?”

“The continent.”

“The Northern Continent?”

“Yup.”

“Why?” Cid prods, tilting his head.

Reno shrugs. “Unfinished business.”

“Take me to Midgar,” Cloud reminds.

Reno bristles, visibly shuddering.

“Oh, slow down…” Cid groans, closing his eyes for a moment. “Just slow down.”

“Didn't do us any good,” Reno mutters. “Trust me.”

“Midgar,” Cloud drones.

His crate is situated to Reno's right, and close enough for a quick kick, or a cuff to the ear.

Reno could make it so.

Fortunately, Cid has more questions. “You…”

But Reno is out of patience. He brings out his pistols.

The speed of the motion makes Cid jump.

“...are going to get me north,” Reno orders, dipping into that badness he knows, and finishing the
statement from behind the ease of twin barrels. “All the way, right now, or I shoot you. Twice. And take my damn self. And crash your stinking fucking boat onto the rocks.”

“Hey. Fine, fine, north,” Cid assures.

“I need to get to Midgar,” Cloud again reminds, just as dull and drained, just as near and far.

He won’t be forgotten.

Reno hisses, reels, stumbles, and realigns his pistols on the kid, Cloud, his former sweetheart. “You need to pipe down, little boy… Before I do it for you. I’ve got the fuckin’ guns.”

And no one can dispute that.

Cid scuffs his shoes on the deck.

Cloud doesn't bother lifting his head.


And he does feel sick. All at once.

He doesn't get the chance to holster his weapons, or drop the rucksack he shouldered, he dives for the side of the boat and retches out into the open water.

The splash is unmistakable. The gagging continues.

Cid makes a noise of displeasure.

After most of his puking and hissy fitting are done, they now stand at the wheelhouse, Cid within, Reno leaning outside on the fringes, wanting for the cool, clean air.

It's near night. The trawler has many lamps lit to see by inside the wheelhouse and out on the open deck. The vessel has drawn away from the coastline and into deeper waters.

Cloud is a swaying ghost behind them. He is in the very same spot, still perched upright and rigid on his wooden crate, anchored in place by the BDS.

Reno's stomach rolls and protests.

“So… What's the story?” Cid asks.

“North,” Reno replies.

Cid sighs and takes a swig off his nearby bottle.

He's been hitting this little brown bottle every so often (in between cigarettes), keeping his nerves calm, and his buzz buzzing. Lest he really think about how dangerous his situation is.

Reno offers no more and stumbles back to check on Cloud, the lesser of two evils.

Or maybe not.
He staggers and comes to stand before the kid.

He looks down on him.

He summons his demons.

“He’ll do his best to help ya out,” he says.

No comment.

“Danse would have helped ya out…”

No comment.

“Here you go again.” And here it comes too, spilling out as if memorized. “Causing shit because someone wanted you for themselves. How many people ya killed now? More than Zack? As many as me? Coulda ended up followin’ that newcomer around. Mute. Or not. And eventually he’d have fucked you. And protected you. And adored you. For a little while… until he was killed too.”

Reno does not dampen a thing.

“Because that’s what you do.”

And Cloud has nothing to say.

“That coulda been, of course. But he’s probably been dead an hour by now. Probably bled out right there on the damn floor, cold and alone. His name was Danse, by the way. Shoulda just let him snuff me. Saved the time. He claimed—”

“Shut up.”

Reno pauses.

“Shut up. Or I hit you.”

It’s a venomous whisper and a promise.

Cloud’s talking so soon after. He’s opening up. It feels like hope and terror balled into one.

Reno is delighted. “With those tiny fists?” he asks.

“Why wasn’t I born like Zack? Big and strong? So I could stop people like you.”

Cloud looks right up into Reno's unsuspecting eyes.

“Like me?” Reno grunts, aghast, and a little taken for a whirl. “There are worse, please.”

“Hardly,” Cloud assures, glancing away.

“Look at yourself. And have a good look. Ya wouldn't dare hit me anyway.”

“Shut up.”

“You're afraid to. If ya started, would ya stop? Could ya stop? Would ya only hit me? Or would ya stab me? Hack at me? Over and over? Until I stopped screaming, pleading, gurgling? Until there wasn't anything left? You'd finish the job this time? Huh? Right?”
Cloud is white-knuckling the handgrip of the BDS.

He is grinding his teeth away.

It should be heard over the sea and the boat.

“Stop, stop! You're killin' me!” Reno cries, playing it up, singing it out, calling back a cruel instance. “Please! Don't kill me! I love you! I love you! Stop!”

“Shut your fucking mouth!” Cloud roars, standing straight up in a jolt.

“Okay, okay. Hey, boys!”

Cid to the rescue.

“Calm it! Calm it!”

But calm is hard to find.

“Did ya know he just killed someone?” Reno bites out, stepping back and away, finger wagging, condemning. “He stabbed him in the back.”

“None of my damn business,” Cid answers.

“Why are you even here?” Cloud demands.

Reno scoffs. “Because I needed a ride. And I didn't have a fucking choice.”

“Hey. What the hell happened?”

Cid wants to know.

“What happened to you? And the big guy?”

But Cloud and Reno are not too quick to indulge the subject.

Reno makes his claim and switches gears. He quiets and crosses his arms. He calculates. He contemplates. He focuses his attention on Cid.

Cloud regards him unkindly.

“What went down? Honestly?” Cid asks. “I need to know if I'm gonna help ya. And I need to know because I have interest in what happens to decent people. That guy didn't seem to have any luck.”

“He's dead,” Cloud says.

“And I'm the replacement,” Reno adds.

“No, you're not,” Cloud growls back.


“Yeah,” Reno answers, moodily cocking his hip.

“Shinra,” Cloud says.

“Bullshit,” Reno retorts.

“The Director of Shinra's military elite,” Cloud explains, speaking deliberately, “and redhead’s boss, killed him. Foul play. Lies. And fire.”

“Nah. Nope. He killed himself,” Reno corrects. “And he was your fucking boss too, sweetheart. More or less. Don't make me the only villain here. ‘Cause I’m not.”

“Killed himself?” Cid ponders aloud. “He didn't seem like the type… Even for a soldier.”

“Would you wanna live without eyeballs?” Reno asks.

Cid contemplates all the more. “It'd sure put a damper on things…”

“And whose fault was that?” Cloud asks of Reno.

“Yours,” Reno confirms, not missing a beat. “It's all your fault. And then Mr. Wonderful killed himself.”

“It was not my fault!” Cloud insists, shrill and urgent, forfeiting control, denying his true fears. “He was… We were… We were captured. We were screwed over from the beginning. We tried. We were helpless. He was murdered. It was Shinra.”

“Right,” Reno agrees, glowering at Cloud, and his ideas, and his distress. “And I do balloon animals. And children's shows.”

“Shit,” Cid exclaims, throwing his hands up. “I see this ain’t gettin’ us anywhere…”

“You—” Reno starts, and abruptly stops.

Cid and Cloud stare on in suspense.

Reno again bolts for the side of the boat.

He retches into the blackout.

The discussion is put on hold.

“So…” Cid drones, turning away from the scene to face Cloud. “Midgar, huh?”

Cloud slowly nods.

Full steam ahead.

By deep night, Cid starts trying to usher a rather belligerent Reno below decks to rest.

Reno can't really dispute, but he does complain plenty while on his way there. He grumbles and swears and threatens harm. He circles the boat like a big cat caught. He mutters and scowls and rubs at his ailing shoulder, his throat, his hair.

Cid tells him, “Go on. Get right.”

“Tryin’ to get rid of me?” Reno asks, looking rather frail, pale, sweat-soaked, and on edge.
“Of course,” Cid replies. “Though ya better not puke on anything electrical. Most of this shit is exposed, and rewired by yours truly, and my wirin’ is dodgy. Wouldn't wanna short while we're out to sea.”

Reno grumbles and wobbles. He grits out something low, seething, and lost on the wind (shoulda just shot ya), and then he slinks below deck, taking the metal stairs located behind a bulkhead door in the wheelhouse straight down to the boat’s moist innards.

He disappears.

And the outing becomes quiet.

Cid stands at the helm awhile, setting the course and easing his mind, and then he wanders, leaving the boat on its heading. He wanders the entire deck, the rigging, the ropes, the nets, and then comes to a final stop before Cloud.

“Ya good?” he asks.

Cloud answers with a throaty vibration.

“Cold at all?”

Cloud shakes his head, nope.

“Yer shivering,” Cid notes, gesturing at him.

“I'm fine,” Cloud insists, shrugging.

“Yeah. Sure. Let's talk about that.” Cid drops onto a crate right next to him. “‘Cause yer clearly not fine. Not by a long shot, buddy.”

Cloud stiffens and grips the BDS.

“Calm it. We're okay,” Cid assures. “Nothing to fret about. Just wanna talk. Don't usually get much conversation out here by myself.”

Cloud does not release the handle. He anticipates. He braces.

“So… He's really dead, huh? I still can't believe it. He was tough. What's redhead's story then? He jumped me at Corel. Wanted a ride. Big guy didn’t seem to care for him much. I can understand. He's a... handful. And missin’ most of a hand.”

“Don't call him that. Redhead. Not to his face.”

“Oh, okay then. Little touchy, I see.”

“Colourblind.”

“Oh yeah? That's a shame. Me too.”

“Oh?” Cloud breathes, not terribly interested.

“Sure am,” Cid confirms. “Can't get a handle on blue, yellow, purple. It's rather rare actually.”

“Blue,” Cloud mutters, recalling a certain shade.
He looks out over their stage.
It's dark.
It's light.
It's Cid next to him.
“All you guys are Shinra?” Cid asks him.
“We were,” Cloud mutters.
“Yeah. Same here too. Long time ago.”
Cloud sniffs and smells salt. He reaches for his interior jacket pocket and produces the crumpled and damp cigarette pack. He draws a cigarette out, smooth and steady.
“He get you doin’ that?” Cid ventures. “Don’t remember ya doin’ it before…”
“No,” Cloud replies, torching the plucked cigarette with Reno's silver lighter.
“Did... redhead get ya doin’ it?”
“No,” Cloud claims. “He doesn’t smoke.”
His exhaust curls.
Time passes.
The sea rolls and pitches.
“Did redhead give ya that scar there?” Cid points to his lip. “Don’t remember that either.”
Cloud takes a long drag.
He exhales nasally.
Cid tries a different approach. “He really seemed to care about you.”
Cloud knows he means Zack.
Without a doubt.
And it hurts.
Cloud is that open wound again, now salted, prodded, bleeding anew, and he shudders, his breath catching, his throat tightening, his eyes stinging. He bites down on any pitiful sound, and the cigarette filter. Smoke peels.
“He stayed at your side,” Cid recalls.
Cloud holds his breath.
“He was the real deal.”
His chest burns.
“I'm sorry he's gone. Real sorry.”

He exhales carefully, slowly.

He's not gonna cry.

He's not.

“This new guy… redhead, between you and me... Has he been... good? Has he done anything… ya know, bad? Anything big guy might have wanted to know about?”

What hasn't he done?

Cloud shakes his head, nope, and several hot and stubborn tears fall. He drops his head low, hiding his face from view. The tears streak.

Cid hums his confirmation.

“What… are you… doing here?” Cloud asks thickly, surprising himself.

Cid snorts. “Fishin’. Do it every year.”

“Did a man... in a black suit... talk to you?”

“A suit? Other than you? Don't recall. Don't think so. Saw a few though. Not unusual.”

“Think I…”

Cloud doesn't finish.

He doesn't know if he can admit it aloud.

He never has.

Cid waits.

Cloud sniffs and sits. He takes a shaky drag.

The moment passes.

“Think yer gonna be okay out here?” Cid asks.

Cloud nods, keeping his eyes on his shiny shoes.

“Alright then. I'll leave ya to it,” Cid says.

And he disappears too.

He pats Cloud on the shoulder, gets up, crosses the deck, checks a loose rig, taps a flickering light bulb, rounds the soft bend, passes into the wheelhouse, and moves out of sight.

He might descend below too.

Down to the depths.

And Reno.
Cloud exhales and shivers.

*Think I…*

He pitches his spent cigarette overboard.

*...killed another innocent.*
It's all his fault.

Woozy, reeling, disconnected, pathetic, rent, and yet frenzied. A good ol’ dose of frenzied and frantic, hyperventilating panic stewing right under the thin surface. Add a pinch of turmoil. A sprinkling of tumult. And terror. And his heart is thumping with it, the fatal mix bumping and straining, wanting to fly out of his chest and be gone.

He’s pouring with sweat, boozy and sour. He’s gasping for any breath, shallow and quick, swallowing gallons of hot saliva in the sticky process. It sloshes deep down a driftwood dry throat, dropping into guts spitting and bubbling.

The damage is done. He’s done. He’s been done. He promises. He assures. He hurts. He throbs. He feels. Like he never wanted to feel. Ever. All of it. Everything.

Shame, guilt, sorrow, regret.

The weight, the shape.

The taste, the smell.

He stings. He hums and rings. It’s clamoring and clanging around in his head, in his aching ribs, in his sore flesh. It bangs and punctures, and he’s done. Oh, fuck. So done.

So why?

Why won’t it end? He’s bled out everything. Every last ounce and dribble. Drop the curtain already. Add that final punctuation. Call it quits. Throw in that fucking towel. Do it.

He staggers, he sways, not yet having reached the base of the metal stairs to the boat’s moist insides. He can't hear. He can’t see. Not his hands, or feet, and not the bottom. His eyes sting and blink.

He’s descending into the darkness of a cell he doesn’t yet know the limits of, trapping himself inside a steel box with two people who want him dead.

Cloud.

And.

He takes a shaky step down, trusting in nothing but the universe to lay him out. His equally shaky left hand slips from the slick railing, right on time, and he lurches. All the sweat between. All the salt and tears. All the red, red blood.

He stumbles but catches himself, hands latching onto the railing at both sides.

Skin squeals. His bent knees connect with metal. The clang echoes. But he doesn't fall.

Instinct saved him the trouble.

“Oh,” he gusts. “Fucking ow.”

His tongue thick, his palms hot, eyes blind, stability fading, slipping, sullied, head pounding now,
thanks to the rush of adrenaline, right at the temples, sharp and pulsing.

Right where his brother used to massage.

When he was little.

When they were little.

When Reno would cry.

When things seemed impossible.

Two fingers, each side, four in all, pressing and pressing.

Vegas pressing it all away.

The fear, the fury, the fire.

Ingredients for a botched childhood.

Pain, panic, penance, protracted hope.

The leftovers.

Reno reaches the bottom, both teal sneakers touching down, thump, thump.

Exhausted, ill, and sniffing like an infant, he somehow finds the toilet first, relieving the pressure on his bladder, gaining some kind of ease and comfort, but not for his conscience.

He stumbles and tumbles on, feeling out walls, slamming shins into low crates, almost stepping off a staircase landing, into a net, wincing at every flickering yellow light bulb. Lost.

The first cot he bumps into becomes his final destination.

He topples, drops, and stays down.

Darkness replaces darkness, and he drifts.

Silence would be a mercy.

The void would be a reward.

Give Reno nothing.

Cloud shivers.

He's on cigarette number six.

He's breathing ash by now.

He's going to need to keep count.

Or he'll be out soon.
His healed lip, his lungs, and his skull burn.

He's gritting his teeth to fend off the chill.

His suit is still very damp.

He won't go down there.

No, no, nope.

Not going to, never, nope.

He'd be in an enclosed area with a beast.

A predator.

A false figure.

Reno clearly doesn't want to play nice anymore.

And was that all he was doing? Just playing nice? To get what he wanted? To fuck him? To humiliate him? To what end? Revenge? A thrill?

Just as he's about to toss thinking to the wind, and clear his mind (of Zack, and Danse, and Reno, and all the muck in between), and light cigarette number seven—lucky number seven, the thing already pulled and prepped—Cid reappears to give role model another try.

Cloud glances up from under his lashes, leaving the cigarette unlit on his lips.

“How ya holdin’ up?” Cid asks, not waiting for an answer before continuing. “That new guy's... interesting, isn’t he? Pretty loud. And bossy. Ya should try to get some sleep. There are plenty of places to tuck away on the lower decks. She's a big lady, my Ragnarok. Loud too.”

Cloud shrugs and removes the cigarette from his lips to inspect it.

He turns it over and over.


“It’s also warm and mostly dry,” Cid says, “and I'll check on ya every now and then.”

Cloud shivers, deflates, retrieves the crumpled pack from his inside jacket pocket, and puts the cigarette back. “Gonna give me a drink of water and tuck me in too? Or is it warm milk?” he asks.

“You gettin’ cheeky there?” Cid replies.

Cloud shrugs lower.

Cid scoffs and claps Cloud on the shoulder.

It's much warmer below deck, and there's no wind, of course. It is loud, like Cid said it would be, due to a giant gas engine and other living, moving parts chugging away. That might mean
decreased reaction time, and little wiggle room, and maybe a headache, but it also means he won't freeze, or hear Reno. Hopefully.

He lugs the BDS along, lifting it in places where he must. Over a step, over a pipe, through a bulkhead, around hanging nets. The way is narrow. The way is tight.

He goes along a switchback hallway, through several more bulkheads, and down several metal staircases (banging, banging, banging the sword after him), until he can't go down anymore.

The grated floor is damp. The air is moist, warm, and too close. It's dark, inky, hard to see. It smells. Oh, does it smell. A miasma of dead fish and wet metal and hot oil.

He finds a pocket, a mostly empty storage shelf, drops the rucksack, and in he slides, setting the BDS down first. It barely fits with him. He has to cock it at an angle, most of his spine flush with it as he rests.

It's not comfortable, but it's not outside either. It's going to have to do.

He rolls to his side and faces out to keep watch.

He didn't see Reno anywhere on his way. He saw bunks after bunks, and cargo, and nets. He saw wear and tear, leaks and cracks, pits and bends. Cid's boat is almost a ship, big enough for a full crew, and tons of cargo, but he saw no Reno.

He could, once more, be anywhere.

Where does that leave Cloud?

Scared in the dark and dripping belly of a fishing boat?

At least he's not a zombie.

Or trapped in Shinra.

Or with Sephiroth.

After an hour of breathing, enjoying the heat, and steering clear of gloomy thoughts, almost, he knows where Reno is.

Cloud stares out into the darkness, the blank, the solid space, and he listens.

He holds his breath.

He can hear it.

He can hear him.

An echoing throughout the boat, embedded in the atmosphere, inside the metal and pipes.

For some time, Cloud is sure he can ignore it.

He can drop out of existence.

But…

He can hear him.
Crying.
Moaning.
Calling out.
Reno tortured.
Reno suffering.
And soon Cloud can understand.
He can hear his words.
He can make out phrases.

_Sorry, I'm sorry._

Reno is whimpering…

_I'm sorry._

And Cloud can't take it.
He can’t stop it either.
He won't.
He stares into the blackout.
He listens to every plea.
He soaks it in, hoping it will fade on its own.
He doesn’t sleep.

_I'm sorry._

_I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry._

He hates the smell of smoke.
He can't stand it.
He can't take it.
It reminds him.
He started a fire.
Once.
To watch it burn.
He ended up.

Watching it spread.

And crawl. And consume.

And it.

Took away his life.

The smell of it.

The din rising.

The screaming.

The orange light.

The structures crumbling.

*I'm sorry.*

He started a fire.

Just to watch it burn.

And…

*Hey.*

I'm sorry.

*Hey, wake up.*

“*I'm—*”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it. Sorry.”

Reality nosedives home.

The orange fades.

An outline, a figure, a shape.

Cid comes into view.

Reno blinks up at him.

“*Dreaming,*” Cid readily explains.

Reno pulls away and sits up.

The cot and the boat are around him.

He's not in hell.

Burning.

Oh, Reno would love to go back to sleep, and just sleep. But the dreams, and the memories, and the sabotage and confusion. He can't trust sleep. He can't do it. But, he's so exhausted. He's twisted and coiled up, webbed and netted.

No. No, he can't sleep. But, if he stays awake, he will think. And thinking will only dig his grave the faster. Thinking brings him no closer to resolution. Thinking always brings up the question. The damn question.

Why?

What's wrong with me?

“Feelin’ better?” Cid digs, crouched low on his knees to see below the top bunk.

Reno ignores him, making sure his pistols are where he left them. And they are. Within arm's length, safe and sound at the foot of the cot. His knife is still in his pocket, and his comb.

“Your pal is gonna smoke himself to death.”

“Let 'im,” Reno grumbles, lying back.

Cid hangs around. He hovers longer than might be good for his health. And then he opens his mouth once more. “So what are ya sorry about?” he asks.

Reno shrugs his shoulders and scratches his head, wanting the dreams to quickly dissipate (along with Cid), even as he goes barreling back into them.

He yawns.

He closes his eyes.

“Fuckin’ everything up…”

I'm sorry.

He always fucks everything up.

He can't fix anything.

He can't drown the memories.

The guilt.

The shame.

He only dragged his brother down.

And numbed parts of himself.

He started a tally.

To see how far he'd fallen.
He's so exhausted now.

He pulled fingernails, cracked knuckles, broke wrists, jaws, noses. He punctured lungs, dislocated limbs, ruptured organs. He lied, he cheated, he swindled and deceived. That soldier he said he fisted? Well, it wasn't for pleasure.

Most of them talked.

All of them died.

Every last one.

Reno started a tally.

And he lost count.

He's so exhausted.

_I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm—_

Two nights on the fishing ship pass.

Cloud is busy trying to keep it together.

He doesn't sleep, he doesn't leave his shelf, his tiny corner of safety, his hollowed out home, and he doesn't dare see or ask about Reno. He brews inside his own self-made torment.

He sits awake. He thinks. He remembers. He tries to forget. He listens to his former partner intermittently whimpering, complaining, chanting, swearing, and thumping around the berth, the ship's belly, like some kind of haunting.

Cloud sinks into a haze, a glaze, and slides. He's going through his film reel of recent and old memories. He's digging up all the dirt. He's crying himself dry. He's wondering why. He's withering and wilting. He's losing.

Cid relays information, food, water, bullshit, jokes, words of wisdom, and of comfort. He is a light in the dark.

Cloud is allowed to rest. But, as much as he’d like to, as much as it is, he can’t. He is so tired. All the same. All the time. It's in his bones. It's in his flesh. It's all he is. A vessel trapped in a vessel, with a too-heavy sword, and a duty, and a living ghost, and a faded one.

But, he can’t rest.

On the third night, he just can't sit still anymore.

Maybe it’s the lack of sleep, or the memories, or the constancy of howled terror and pain, as Reno mutters, chants, curses, on and on, into the void.
Fuck, fuck, motherfuck.

Like any other night. Like every night.

Fuck you.

Or, maybe, it's his last dregs of humanity flaring up, but he can't do it anymore. A lifetime of can't. He can't do this either. So, Cloud tries to focus on the engine noises: the clanking, the dripping, the hissing, the undulating, the swelling.

No, no, no...

It doesn't help.

Reno's voice carries. He stabs through the distance, a cutting knife, making the near walls seem nearer. And he's getting louder, more frantic. He is flirting madness, almost screaming, almost breaking, sending chills down Cloud's spine, turning Cloud's aching guts, testing his resolve.

It's getting worse.

Your fault.

All your fault.

Reno’s nightmares progress.

And Cloud has a choice to make.

Please.

He is ascending, going up two levels and down a corridor. He's stepping sideways and shimmying by a cluster of hissing pipes. He takes a left, he ducks, moves down another corridor, side steps by a crate, a fire extinguisher, and comes to a wall of bunks, and the dread that is Reno.

Reno is chanting, moaning, and writhing by the time Cloud has gotten to him. He's panting and straining, all screamed out, feebly swatting the air, fending off whatever it is attacking him. His face is twisted and pulling. He's soaked through with sweat, sunburned flesh gleaming and tight.

Cloud takes in the scene from a short distance.

He has calmed some, or quite a bit, based on the banshee screams of before, and Cloud is just about convinced he can go back to hiding, and not even deal with it, hands washed, when the choice is taken from him.

“Ya got this?” Cid asks.

And now he's strapped.


Cid offers, “I'll be close by,” but leaves him to it, going back down the way he came, gone in moments.
Cloud waits out long enough. For Cid to get far enough away, and for his gumption to return. He would have waited longer, too, so much longer, days, weeks, years, but the immediate shitty situation motivates action.

Reno chokes, rolls, and moans.

“Please, please. Pleeease.”

Cloud slowly moves forward.

Reno writhes and hisses just ahead, just below, situated on the lowest cot in a stacked row of two. *Please, please.* He rolls this way and that. He is no longer panicked, riled and fighting, he is only pained, pathetic, and pleading.

*Please.*

Cloud reaches the low bunk. He leans over it, he pauses. He's not thinking, only doing. He places both his hands on Reno's damp, hot, and heaving shoulders, holding him down, holding him at bay, readying for the incoming storm.

There is little overhead room.

There is little chance for quick escape.

There is less good faith.

“Reno, hey, hey…”

Reno cringes and coils, his entire being reacting, retracting, pulling away.

“Wake up!” Cloud demands.

Can't a guy fight with his demons in peace?

Can't a guy emotionally melt down in peace?

He doesn't want to open his eyes.

He doesn't want to come back to this existence. Even so fresh from sleep and terror, he knows that voice. That soft voice. That meek and deadly voice. And he sure as shit knows his choices.

He anticipates the torment.

He winces and croaks, “What?”

Cloud looks too serious.

Reno sniffs at him and glances away.

Still in the boat, on the cot, not doomed.

Almost.
It's moist, it's noisy, it's dim, it smells.

“You were screaming,” Cloud says. “Having nightmares.”

Reno's doomed all the same. He shakes his head and hoists himself onto his elbows, and far from Cloud.

Cloud stares on, crouched beside the cot. He doesn't get any closer. He doesn't move at all.

“You want somethin'?” Reno grumbles at him.

“I heard you,” Cloud whispers.

Reno scoffs.

“For nights now,” he adds.

The tension simmers. The gloom expands.

Cloud's expression remains serious, even, steady, safe. “What's your problem?”

He's thinking one thing and doing another.

He should have left him to it.

“I dunno,” Reno fully admits, sitting upright. “If I knew, I'd resolve it.”

Cloud shakes his head. He takes a steady breath. He shifts. He comes out with it. “You love me. You save me. You hate me. You hurt me. Make up your fucking mind.”

Reno hangs his head, dropping his eyes, and then closing them altogether. “My mind is fucked.”

“Don't give me that,” Cloud chastises. “Don't even try. Don't avoid the blame. Don't expect any pity from me. You're the crazy one. You're always playing me.”

“Then why are you here?” Reno asks.

Cloud does not answer.

“I'm not asking for anything,” Reno urges, lifting his head, eyes wide and unblinking. “What if... when Zack headbutted me... back on the Junon boat... I got brain damage? You're all just in my head. This has all been my imagination. Or... I died with Rude. I shoulda died with Rude. That woulda been the perfect poetic end to a fucked up partnership. Me. Freezing and terrified. Drowning in the deep. No body to bury. Nothing to remember but a record filed away somewhere in an office. But... of course... that woulda been too damn easy. Too convenient, huh? Plus...”

Reno again diverts his round, wet eyes. “He's not done with me.”

Cloud blinks. “Who’s not?”

Reno runs unsteady fingers through dented red hair.


Reno shudders. “No, no, no. Not even close.”

Cloud's seriousness finally ascends into worry. He leans closer, despite knowing better, despite
knowing how it ended last time. He rises on his knees. “What do you mean? Who?”

“Never mind. Just some cryptic shit.”

“No, not never mind. What do you mean? Who?”

Reno sits there for a moment. He frowns and chews his lip. He looks off into space. “You remember… when I asked you why Zack hadn’t… ya know, transferred to me?”

“Yes…”

“Well… I think… I probably know why.”

“Why?”

He doesn't give it up easily.

He makes Cloud wait.

And wait.

“Because…”

And wait.

"Somethin’ else… is already there.”

“Something else?”

“I… the nightmares… the hate… the, the…”

“Reno.”

Reno laughs at that, longer, fuller, entirely humourless. “I am fucking crazy, yo. I've burned every bridge I've ever crossed. Payback is worse than hell. Dying’s a vacation.”

Cloud frowns.

Reno falls apart. Just like that.

He busts at the seams right before him. All the ugly hidden inside comes spilling forth. With very little warning. The thread peels and pops, and anything inside pours out.

He lunges forward and grabs Cloud by the shoulders. He shakes him. He bruises him.

Cloud locks up, freezes.

“I'm sorry,” Reno moans, not letting go, not done marking him. “I don't know what I'm doing anymore. I don't fucking know! I can’t… I can't remember. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sor—”

“Reno,” Cloud manages.

This isn't Reno at all.

Hitching, gasping, trying not to lose it, but, if he's right about anything, Reno has already lost it. Or never had it. Way back when. Before the fall. Before Shinra.
He's fighting not to sputter and cry, to completely give over to failure. He's shaking, slicked with that sour sweat, laden with illness, fading booze, deception.

He shutters away from Cloud, letting him free but shoving him hard. His hands claw and then drop. He slides away, back to the wall, back to what might be safe.

Cloud falters, steadies, and stares on.

If he licked his lower lip, he would feel an imperfection, a scar. It hasn't healed like his hands healed, clean and smooth, untouched, as if never burned by ember. This scar is livid and real. He retains Reno's reminder.

He hates him.

“Go away,” Reno orders, pointing.

Cloud loves the idea.

He rises to his feet.

He steps back.

“Oh, fuck, no. Don't,” Reno pleads, crawling forward, daring to look, daring to beg. “Don't listen to me.”

Cloud hesitates.

He wants for the BDS.

He wants for quiet.

He wants for an end.

“Don't leave. Don't leave me alone.”

Don't listen to me.

It's the best advice Reno could have given.

“Then don't sleep,” Cloud offers coldly, “I haven't.”

And he leaves him there.

He leaves him sitting there, needing him, pleading with him, sick and weak, all the friend, the ally, the enemy, and bane he'd ever have or want.

Reno knows and remembers.

He lied and withheld.

What Sephiroth said that night.

In NCB2.
As Cloud slept under his watch.
Safe
Sephiroth knocked on the door.
And Reno let him in.
Tall, tenuous, tremendous.
And he said, “Make you a bet.”
Reno was intrigued.
And he had listened.
“Bet I can break him in five.”
Break him.
Break Cloud.
Reno grinned.
He had fucking.
Grinned.
And took that bet.
Because Reno always joked about it.
How long it would take.
“Bet you ya do,” he said.
Sephiroth nodded.
Reno let him in.
He let him go.
He took the bet.
He lost the bet.
He lost his place.
He lost his brother.
He had to clean up after it.
He was not acclimated to that.
To the after.
The reality.
But he took that bet.

He caused harm. He caused destruction. And rarely did he have to see the aftermath, the drudging on, the picking up, the carrying on, the scarring, healing, fracturing, cracking.

Almost never.

Maybe he wiped the blood from his hands, but when you torture someone for information, and then silence them, forever, they become a number and a level of usefulness.

There is no after for them. Only for you.

Reno didn't dispose of bodies.

He never washed down the floors and bits.

When it was said and done.

Sephiroth told him to knock himself out.

And left him behind in the aftermath.

Knock yourself out.

Reno thought he knew Sephiroth.

Thought they shared a darkness.

A desire.

A secret.

Cloud naked on the bed, just a body.

Cloud sleeping in the Tower, just a shell.

Cloud tucked in the tent, tortured.

Next to him in Costa.

Cloud was.

Always.

Helpless.

Reno didn't like what he saw.

He doesn't like what he sees.

He didn't want his job, his role, his choice.

He doesn't want it.

He sees what Sephiroth did.

He touches Cloud's body.
His cold flesh.
His drying sweat.
And.
He's knocking himself out.
He's ignoring disgust, terror, shame.
He watches himself use Cloud.
Much as he had in the Tower.
A shell, a mute, a lukewarm body.
He uses him up.
He cores him out.
He buries himself deep inside.
His mind is fucked.
No escape.
It's all his fault.
This is hell.

Cid ambushes Cloud while he's out smoking on the open decks on the morning of day four.
He waits for him to just light it too, so he has ample time to administer his sage advice.
Cloud releases his first drag via his nostrils. The smoke curls off in two distinct directions until a salty gust clears it all in one breath.
“So… Why the cigarettes?”
Cloud takes a long pull, lips puckered.
“Because you miss him?”
Cloud looks out to sea. His hair tousles. His eyes squint.
“Did he work in Midgar? Have family there? That where you're taking his sword? To return it?”
Cloud sniffs and clears his throat. He turns back but doesn't offer eye contact. He takes another drag, long and languid. “It wasn't his sword,” he finally says.
He hasn't spoken for so long now, it's difficult to hear his cracked voice struggle and stick.
“I see. Borrowed? He wasn't given one?”
“He wasn't supposed to be alive.”

“And why's that?”

“Shinra.”

“Hmm,” Cid hums.

Cloud shifts his weight, crossing his legs. “He died that day. When he came for me.”

“When?”

“Shinra Headquarters. After you dropped us off.”

“Then who was that at Corel?” Cid asks.

“A ghost.”

It dawns on him then.

“Why do you want to know?” Cloud wonders.

Cid cocks a hip and crosses his arms. “Well. You're on my boat. I'd like to know who I'm dealing with. And… this might surprise you... I care. First time I saw you, big guy was losing his mind trying to find you. He revolved around you.”

Cloud takes a puff.

Cid tilts his head. “Who is redhead?”

“Baggage.”

“He's… He said he's sorry for fucking everything up. What's with that? What did he do? What didn't he do? He’s… dangerous.”

Cloud looks him square in the face. “So am I.”

“I find that har—”

“He was right. Reno. The redhead. I did kill a man. Stabbed him in the back. It's my fault.”

“Sure you had your reasons...”

“He was trying to help me.”

“Hmm,” Cid hums, probably not sure what to say.

Cloud takes his last drag and pitches the leftover filter into the sea.

“I need a drink,” Cid exclaims.

Cloud perks.

He pushes the mess of hair from his face, allowing his hollowed blue eyes to shine through. “Can I have one too?” he asks, voice a chipped wheeze.

Cid makes a face.
But he nods.

Reno jolts awake with a grunt.

He grabs the nearest thing on instinct, furious, vengefully, causing his own bones to crack, his breath to hiss, and then he melts, eases, realizing, understanding.

This thing is a body.

He collects the body, something that had been hovering there, ready to make a move, now unable to, and he pulls it into a tight hug, trapping, needing, begging forgiveness.

Just more scenes for him to relive.

Just more torment to take.

“Please, please, fuck.”

Cloud, the unfortunate body, is stiff, drunk, drawn and locked into the crushing embrace. He knows he shouldn't have come. He shouldn't have tried to help. If that's what this is. But liquid courage brought him right back here. So here he is.


Cloud listens and readies.

“I didn't. I'm sorry. Oh. Sorry, sorry, sorry. He'd fucking kill me. He should have. He should have killed me. I wish he had. Fuck. Fuck. I didn't touch you. Didn't. Honest.”

Cloud sniffs and coughs.

Reno hugs him all the tighter.

It's starting to hurt.

“I'm fucked. I really am this time. It’s over.”

Cloud tries to adjust. He pulls his head back. His arms are folded and trapped between them, starting to become a numb pain. He can't do much but nod.

Reno finally eases, and Cloud stretches, but doesn't retreat. Instead he brings his arms up and around Reno.

Reno shudders and sinks into the renewed hold. He slumps entirely. He becomes limp. He quiets and calms.

The boat cruises on, the engine breathes.

The day dies.

“Didn't touch you,” Reno chants. “I didn't.”
Zack was so damn tall.

Even Reno had to look up at him, and the Director. Just enough. But not Sephiroth. He never did.

Now Cloud's looking up at Reno, not quite as tall. Only he's not really looking up, because he’s looking down.

Reno has fallen right on out of Cloud’s good graces, and right onto his knees, in the damp, the dirt, the blood, the base of a dead golden tree, crown spread wide.

He is moments from his last, his messy end, his probable and impending messy decapitation. His voice is rising, falling, bubbling up over the edge of a mile-long blade.

He's begging, he's moaning, he’s dying.

Cloud hears the rushing of the hot wind.

Cloud feels the weight of the hot sword.

This isn't him.

He wasn’t there.

He stepped out. Something took over.

When he came back, it was already too late.

The BDS bit, blood flowed.

Reno said he didn't save him.

He hadn't saved him with that potion.

He was beyond saving.

And, you know.

Cloud's starting to believe him.

It was something else.

It was something stronger.

*He's not to be trusted.*

Zack told him long ago.

His words were a warning.

And those words remain.

*You're the toughest person I know.*

*I regret nothing.*
I'm here with you.

He's in the blood.

He wakes up, still at sea, warm, comfortable, and tucked into Reno's accepting side.

He doesn't remember staying, or falling asleep.

He pulls away, almost falling on his ass and right onto the grated floor below.

Reno stirs but sleeps on.

Cloud doesn't look back.

He slinks off to his storage shelf.

And the BDS.

And the remembering.

The shape of a smile.

The tone of a voice.

The singing of a blade.

Day five.

They're halfway to their destination.

Reno has spent most of his time below deck.

Cloud only crawls from the confines to smoke and breathe.

Cid takes care and keeps watch.

Two or three more days and they'll be at their destination, getting into the next trauma.

And Reno's volatile understanding of where they are.

Because he still doesn't yet know.

This boat isn't going to NCB2 at all.

Oh, that's going to be exciting.
He's trying not to sleep.
He's trying not to think.

At least he's not sick to his stomach anymore.

Reno's staring at the underside of the bunk above, night five.
And he's… alright.

He's not good, that’s for damn sure.

If you really want to know, he's shit.

He's vile, unforgivable, underwhelming, deplorable, defunct, vainglorious, infamous, treacherous, sadistic, sad, sorry, lonesome, and so many other things. He is trembling, straining, putting up a losing fight, but alright.

He’s fine.
Just fine.

Until the bunk above him creaks and sags.

And he's positive someone is up there.

That he's not alone.

“Yo?” he tries.

His voice is loud even in the loud ship.

He waits a beat.

He's moments from trying again, or dismissing the thought, when.

“Where did you pick that up?”

Reno's heart jumps into his throat. His breath catches, chokes, he coughs, and swallows. His fingers claw. His skin crawls, tingles, burns.

“The fuck?” he blurts at last, stretched thin.

“From a movie or something? Your favourite character? Or someone from your childhood?”

Reno takes a breath, paces himself, and says, “I didn't have a childhood.”

The cot creaks, groans, and Zack, the fucking asshole, leans over the side, upside down, from the bunk above—long, loosed hair falling into his masculine face—to look down on little Reno.

Reno stares back at him, eyes wide, mouth unhinged, terrified.

One, because he's dead. Zack is dead. And two, because Zack's looking at him. Upside down. With eyes. Two feline eyes. Aglow in the half light. And they shouldn't be. Because he's dead.

“You're…” Reno mumbles, attempting to remind him of this.
“A movie then,” Zack murmurs.

“I don't remember,” Reno replies, off the cuff, yet still having to edit out the yo, lest he appease the ghost.

Zack leans back up and out of view, saving Reno the horror. “You remember what I promised you? Back then, outside Gongaga, at our camp?” the ghost ventures.

“A diamond ring?” Reno grits out.

“That's after the proposal,” Zack assures.

“Right…” Reno mutters.

He looks about. His pistols are still there, ready and waiting.

Can’t shoot a ghost though.

The boat is there, in all its rusting detail.

But he must be dreaming.

And this is the worst one yet.

This is the pinnacle.

Or is it the other one… nadir?

The perfect opposite to zenith.

“It was something you wanted,” Zack says.

“A new fucking life?” Reno grumbles.

“Nah. It was a coma.”

And it dawns.

And it cascades.

Acidic, scorching, terrible.

I'd fuck you into a coma.

“Cloud wasn't successful,” Zack explains. “He tried, but he didn't quite get there.”

“Don't…”

But, Reno doesn't have any right to say the rest.

Don't talk about him. Don't say his name.

“He was too emotional. Wanted to hurt you too much.”

“And you don't?”

“I never wanted to hurt anyone.”
“Tell that to Shinra. Tell that to the Wutai. Tell that to your fucking title, First Class murderer.”

The cot creaks again and produces the same figure. Except, now Zack climbs down to him. His boots thud metal grated floors. And, of course, he's in full uniform. He's decked out. Pristine and awful. Just as he used to be. Just as he should be. Just as awesome and inspiring.

Cloud wasn't kidding.

“You're… a real fucking sight,” Reno marvels.

Zack smiles, cheeky, lovely.

A smile that could strike Reno down right there.

“Like a man in uniform?” the ghost asks.

“Always.”

“You like it rough too?”

Reno hesitates, but answers, “Ya know I do.”

Zack is going to snuff him out.

Reno can feel it.

He should be ready for it.

But, he's not ready.

To tell the truth, Zack scares him.

He scares the snot out of him.

He recoils as Zack reaches out.

“Touchy?” the ghost asks.

Reno scoffs. “Just threatened to fuck me unconscious. I might be a little cautious, yeah.”

“No worries.”

What a gas.

“No worries?” Reno repeats, panic rising.

Zack again smiles.

It's nothing like the first one though. And it's even farther away from the real one he gave him when he was alive, and they were making progress. No. This one reminds him of a bet he made. This one reminds him of darkness, and silver hair, and he is entangled.

“Just makes it a challenge.”

“Okay, fuck off,” Reno growls, but it's much too late to call it quits and run. “Just fuck right off.”

Zack flows over him, onto him, pressing into him and forcing him down into the cot below, using
all his weight to trammel and catch Reno. And Zack is heavy.

He once said *all muscle*, and Reno believes it now. He can feel him firm and solid against him.

He wiggles and squirms.

He can’t get free.

“All you got?” the ghost inquires.

“Get off me.”

“Not enjoying yourself?”

“Get off! You’re fucking dead!” Reno screams.

Zack seems to be amused by the outburst. He says no more. He just gets to unraveling Reno.

“Stop, stop! Wake up! I need to wake up!”

But, no such luck.

Zack is exact.

He is silent.

He crushes him.

He folds him.

He pins Reno’s torso to the cot with a strong arm. He tears clothing free. He pushes from above, as hard as Reno can take. And almost beyond. He has to hold him down, or Reno will kick and bite and punch and elbow and thrash. And is this how Cloud felt with Sephiroth?

Zack sways over him, godlike, smiling, always, prepared for the splitting, slipping, pounding, and pushing. And he does so. He opens Reno up. All at once. He makes him fret and fear. He makes him cower and hurt. He makes him regret it. He makes him cry for everyone, anyone.

Vegas.

Cloud.

His mother.

His eternal soul.

And then, when Reno thinks he's done, and the ghost has had his fill, Zack gives him what he wanted, what he asked for, and what he meant, whether Reno knew the dire connotations at the time or not.

Zack fists Reno’s hair, he wrenches his spine, he bites his flesh, and he rides Reno into oblivion. Every thrust damning. Every thrust counting down to eventual blackout. The waking is like the dreaming, and the dreaming is the waking.

He’s fucked, fucked, fucked.

Reno can’t take more.
He must get to the base.
To Vegas, to the end.
To the red room.
As soon as possible.

Day six.
Cloud is startled from the shadowy edges of uneasy sleep.
It's dark, dim, dripping.
He can't see anything at first.
And then he does.
A disruption.
A shimmer.
A copper and bronze glint.
A figure stands over him.
“Cid?” he breathes.
No answer.
No change.
It must not be him.
It must be his living ghost.
“Reno?” he tries.
The figure remains.
“What the—”
“He's laughing at me. Laughing at me now,” Reno rasps.
It's a whisper, a secret.
“I'm not used to…” the voice continues.
Cloud holds his breath.
“Not used to... being alone. Was never alone.”
Cloud never had anybody, on the flip side. He grew up on his own, by his own. He's been used to
it. For some time. Adding a second, a third, or more, never works out.

Reno, standing beside Cloud's hiding place, he always had his brother. He had a twin. An opposite, a mirror image. If he ever needed advice, or a slap, or a hand… he had Vegas.

He had a cell phone once too. With pictures, conversations, and bullshit. Artifacts of his brother. But, not anymore. If he ever wanted to reference a picture, and see his face, he need only look at himself. No matter how bruised, broken, and blue, Vegas is right there.

Reno needs someone.

Cloud needs someone.

Cloud's never been the needed.

The wanted, yes, but not the needed.

Reno needs him.

And Cloud has no plan of action.

He has no idea how to proceed.

“I can't… do this alone,” Reno moans. “They're all laughing at me. Reno the redundant. Reno the fuck up. And I can't wake up. I can't see what I'm doing. I'm... I'm...”

And then he leaves.

He just walks away.

Cloud stares into the blankness where he once stood.

The shadows are thick and changeable.

The air is dense, the ocean smell heavy.

The copper haze is gone too.

“Reno,” Cloud says, softly, carefully.

There is no answer.

They are approximately twenty-four hours from the port of Midgar.

Reno still has no idea that they haven’t been heading to the Northern Continent at all. Oh, no, not even close. They haven’t been headed to NCB2 this entire awful time. They’ve been headed to somewhere better, or worse. Depending on the angle. Midgar is either a haven or a hell.

Cloud is indifferent.

He’s going to cross that raggedy bridge when he comes to it.

Reno will emerge from the depths, realize where they are, and explode.
It’s happened before.

It’s bound to happen again.

Hopefully he’s too depleted to give it his all.

No fists, no guns, no bullets, no sharp edges, even sharper words.

He’ll take it on the chin and wait his damn turn.

That forsaken hole in the frigid ground isn’t going anywhere.

“Are you going to tell him?”

Cloud doesn’t regard the ship’s captain. He sits and smokes, perched on a crate, knees up, body swaying with the ocean. He watches Midgar grow larger and larger on the coast. Their journey is coming to a close.

“Should I?” he wonders.

Would that change anything?

Would that stop disaster?

“I guess it probably doesn’t matter at this point. It is what it is.”

Cloud exhales.

His throat hurts.

His head.

His feet.

His guts.

He looks down. Down to the BDS.

It’s too heavy to slide around on the ship’s deck so it just lies there. Motionless. Unhelpful. Under his shoes.

“Do you think he’ll get… violent?”

It’s gotten sort of amusing to Cloud how Cid dances around certain subjects.

Still.

As if he didn’t know their whole dirty story already.

As if he couldn’t pick Zack out of a crowd.

As if he doesn’t remember who the fuck they are.
“Maybe,” Cloud sighs, smoke drifting, lifting, gone. “Regretting your decision?”

Cid coughs, laughs, clears his throat.

“What’s this?” he says. And he means it. “We’ll see.”

“Yeah,” Cloud agrees.

They’ll see indeed.

The final day. Day seven.

Cid tells him they'll be in port by daybreak.

And Reno has been asking Cid about their destination.

And about Cloud.

That old, noxious anxiety begins to prickle.

Reno will find out soon.

And when he's finally let out of his cage, what will he do?

When he realizes?

When it clicks?

Cloud doesn't like the idea of babysitting. Or doing damage control. Or doling out discipline. He has to find whoever this sword belongs to. And after that, well, he doesn't know. Maybe they can reconcile and live happily ever after. Maybe they can split and live happily ever after.

Cloud can only see as far as the sword.

Zack gave him a chore, a task, just as Vegas gave Reno a task. But Reno won't commiserate. He'll injure Cloud as often as he can. Those thousand cuts he inflicts daily (his venom, his barbs, his thorns), for his own gain, might finally be enough to finish the job.

Cloud might have denied it then, to Reno and Cid, but he believes it's true. He knows it's true.

He killed Zack.

He killed Vegas.

He killed everyone at NCB2, and those soldiers at the Gold Saucer. And Rude. And Reno. And Danse. And probably more. He had a hand in everything. He killed them all.

It is his fault.

He has to find the owner of this sword.

He has to set the balance, make something right.
He can still do this.

“What the fuck is this?”

“The port of Midgar,” Cid explains.

Reno sets his jaw, claws his fingers, and shouts at the air, “Are. You. Fucking kidding me!?”

He kicks and stomps his feet. He wheels and paces the upper deck, tense and steaming. He shakes a fist at Cid. He glares and glowers. His fingers must itch for his knife. He must be seconds away from drawing a pistol. Or two.

“I told you fucking NORTH!” he bellows.

“Did you?” Cid considers.

“Fucking—! Ohh!” Reno howls. “You made me think we were going the right way! The entire time. I was losing my mind! I was—” He growls and squarely kicks a nearby wooden crate, busting it into splintering pieces.

“I never confirmed,” Cid replies.

Reno gives up trying to argue, and make sense. He again yells at the top of his lungs. At Cid, at Cloud, up to the glowing sky, a furious, frustrated sound, loud and long.

Someone in the distance yells back: fuck off.

“Enjoy your stay,” Cid offers.

Reno bursts forward and shoves Cid out of the way (and almost off his feet), disembarking the boat. He’s gone in seconds, stomping the dock below, heading for civilization.

Cloud turns to Cid. “Thank you,” he says.

“Stay outta trouble, kid,” Cid responds.

They both nod.

They both turn away.

Reno fumes and rants. People working the docks part around him. They look up, shuffle aside, they stare after.

“Day and night, tortured,” Reno hisses.

He hunches his head, bunches his shoulders.

People whisper, frown, watching close.
“Fucking torture. Fucking dreams. Fucking sick, and tired, and pissed the hell off, and forgotten.”

Cloud lets him go. He lets him lead. He lets him stomp and tirade. He lets him ramble and curse and spit more bile. He lets the people talk and stare and wonder and keep their distance.

“So you get to do your little thing, but I gotta come back to a city I'd rather burn? A city housing the greatest threat? Thanks.”

“Wait your turn,” Cloud replies, stepping by him.

Reno stays there.

Oh, that boils him up.

“Are you fucking kidding me!?” he shrieks. “You gotta be. You fucking dick. You little shit.” He clings to the edges, keeps pace. “All I've ever done is be second in fucking line. Or last. All I ever get is the edge of a sword. The bottom of a boot. Trampled, trod on. But I keep putting myself back out there, back into the fire. For what?” He halts, he lags. “Wait my fucking turn? Fuck that. Fuck this. Fuck you!”

Reno rushes up and shoves Cloud from behind, causing him to trip up and stumble. Unable to stop the sudden surge of momentum, Cloud's breath skips, and he falls forward, his knees striking hard dock planks.

Reno doesn't stop with a simple push. No, he's got Cloud wrapped and coiled up from behind, arms high at his throat. Reno's forcing him down, forcing him to buckle, making to choke him out, or tear him apart.

Cloud grunts, groans, and flounders, throwing his hands out to catch himself before it's too late, before he's pushed to his belly. He's already caught though, in a scuffle he had no energy for, and didn't instigate.

Reno presses and pushes, heavy and stressing. He's always got the advantage. He's always got Cloud under his thumb.

Cloud drops and rolls at the last moment, the right moment, tossing Reno off and over him. The situation's no better than before though, as now Cloud is wiggling on his back, prime for the taking. He uses his feet to kick and put precious space between them.

The push for freedom doesn't work.

Reno snatches his foot, his ankle, his thigh, and, clawing up to his torso, he climbs atop Cloud, scrabbling with his protesting limbs, pinning him down.

Cloud meanwhile, indignant, too small, thrashes underneath. He soon has to drop back, limbs cramping, useless, nothing to give. His head and spine thunk dock boards. His chest heaves. He has lost.

Reno leans over him, bringing their faces into alignment. He studies him well. He grins that damn grin. Pressing two shaking fingers to Cloud's face, he grabs, he pinches, holding him steady. The digging thumb and index on either side force Cloud's pale lips to part, pucker, part. Fleshy inner cheek mash sharp teeth.

“Can't best me,” Reno hisses over him.
Here comes the real pain and punishment.
Here comes unholy vengeance.
Cloud's body tingles with anticipation.
Only it doesn't come.
Reno retracts and releases him. “Fuck” he swears, shaking his head, shaking a fist at the air.
With Cloud still laid out on his ass, Reno rises, stepping, swaying, moving away. He turns about, hands on his head, distressed, telegraphing every dirty second. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” drips from his mouth.
And then, he swings around, wobbles, and says, “I didn't… I didn't mean to do that.”
Cloud levers himself to his feet. He stares back. He makes sure Reno's done, that's it, that's the entire song and dance, and then he retrieves the BDS, and straightens his jacket. “Leave,” he tells the fretting and fumbling figure across from him, no eye contact to be found.
“Leave? Leave?” Reno shouts back. “I didn't even want to come here!”
They have a small audience by now.
People pointing and talking.
Groups on the outskirts.
“You even realize how dangerous this is? Just being here?” Reno’s voice stays forceful, chastising.
“You even know where you're going?”
“The slums.”
“Even fucking better…” Reno groans. “The worst part of a shitty fucking place.”
So, they collect themselves.
And they head to the slums.

It's not much different than the last time Cloud was there, although they're already within the city's boundaries and not slithering in from the surrounding badlands.
It's dim. It's dark.
“Why couldn't we go to Junon?” Reno grumbles.
They're minutes into the task.
“Man… All the right assholes like me over there. All the assholes here have an excuse to kill me. I never liked this place. Stupid fucking metal pizza. One day it’s gonna crumble in on itself. And all this shit, all these slums, will be gone.”
“Owner’s not in Junon.”
“How do you know?”

“Zack told me.”

“Oh, right. Boyfriend. Mister Can-Do-No-Wrong. And meanwhile, I don't really care. I just want to get north, yo. Or, at the very fucking least, have some fun on the way. This isn't fun. Or smart. People *are* following us. I saw 'em.”

“Why I brought you.”

“Cause I'm fun and smart?”

“Sometimes.”

“Huh.”

The momentary silence is welcoming.

“Still don't know where you're going, do you?”

Cloud sets his jaw and grips the BDS closer.

This is better than the venom at least.

And the truth.

And the shared trauma relived.

They can both act like nothing happened.

Nothing at all.

“Excuse me,” Cloud mumbles. “Do you know where I can find the owner of this sword?”

Many people don't know.

Several don't respond.

Some get angry.

Cloud is getting tired and agitated himself.

He lights a cigarette, lugs the BDS, and keeps asking, keeps looking, keeps going.

Reno helps little.

He adds irrelevant commentary, sniffs and coughs at the cigarette smoke, and occasionally jabs him in the gut, ribs, or rear, for no other reason than to be an annoying shit.

“No dice. What now?” Reno chirps.

“We ask around,” Cloud answers.
"We've been doing that, pal. For like, the last two hours. It's no use. I’m hungry, thirsty, tired. We should find a place to chill and sit, and not look like idiots. Or religious fanatics."

*We should*, he says.

*We.*

Now that boils Cloud up.

He hunches his shoulders.

He lifts up the BDS.

He turns away and strides ahead.

He's pretty sure he's alone.

“You look like a deranged businessman,” Reno mutters.

Until he's sure he's not.

More hours pass.

The slums are too big for one person to handle.

“Yo!”

Reno's doing most of the talking now.

“You seen this sword before?”

Cloud’s throat has gone too dry.

He's forgetting what he should be asking.

The reply is always a shake of the head.

A quick no.

Reno flips the guy off.

Cloud walks on.

There are not enough cigarettes for this day.

“Yo.”

Cloud blinks.
The world comes back with a flash and flutter.
The handle of the BDS comes into view.
The tops of his shiny shoes.
Where had he gone?
“You're staring at a trash can, man,” Reno explains.
Cloud starts and turns.
“We gotta stop,” the redhead urges.
We again.

We.
Like that's all it's ever been.
Just the two of them.
Just Cloud and Reno.
Just anger and sorrow.

Cloud scowls and steps forward.

He steps forward and brings the BDS with him, hot and heavy, muscles screaming and protesting, bones grinding and clicking. He stops at Reno's toes.

Reno flinched.
On his very first step.

“Afraid of me?” Cloud asks.

“You can be scary.”

“You're a Turk.”

“I have feelings.”

“I doubt that.”

“Wanna bet?”

“No.”

“Hit me then, small fry,” Reno orders.

“No.”

“Who's afraid now?”

“Fuck off.”

Oh, Cloud wishes for a muzzle.

A drink of water.

A cigarette.

A hug.

“I wish I could.”

Cloud scoffs at that.

Reno scoffs right back. “Yeah. Every time I try, something or myself stops me. Last time, it was Danse. Time before that, it was me. If I tried to leave this time, I’d come right back. If only to prove I'm right. I can't fucking leave.” Reno takes a breath. “When will you realize that?”

Cloud shakes his head. “When you realize I'm going through the same thing. I couldn't leave you alone. I can't watch you suffer. I have to get involved. I'm stuck too.”

“Fine.”

Cloud makes fatal eye contact.

Sea green, turquoise waves, cracked crystal.

“Fine?”

Reno shrugs, “Yup.”

Cloud sways, leaning heavily on the BDS.

“We need to crash,” Reno finalizes.

Yes, they do.

The space they find to crash in is small, cramped, dirty and rounded, but it's also surprisingly snug and warm. It's an access pipe, one of millions coming from the innermost bowels of the city, and their latest resting place. Free of charge. And witnesses.

These massive pipes maze and criss cross and meander all over the place. Most of them on this low level have been converted into shelters or storage for its resourceful inhabitants.

“Must you have this thing between us? Can't you move it?”

The BDS draws a fat line down the middle of the laid out cardboard and old blankets, keeping Reno on one side, Cloud on the other.

“No.”

“Why not?”
Cloud does not answer.

His stomach growls.

Reno snorts. He rolls to his side. He eyes Cloud intently.

They shouldn’t be so close.

But it can't be helped.

“Did you train with a sword?” Reno asks.

“No.”

“What then?”

“Firearms. Mostly submachine guns.”

“So you'd be familiar with one of these?”

Reno indicates his .45 caliber pistols.

“Yeah. I made the ammunition too.”

“Interesting. But you never touched a sword?”

“Not really.”

“Huh. I trained with one. With something a lot smaller. How heavy is it really? In combat?”

They're both looking at the BDS now.

The big damn sword.

A mile and a half long.

“Heavy,” Cloud says.

Reno reaches out his mangled hand and makes to grab the handle of the object in question.

Cloud smoothly catches him before he can.

His hand over Reno's, smaller yet again.

“Don't do that.”


Cloud closes his grip, compressing Reno's hand to almost fit within his own.

Reno grins. “Come on… Why?”

Cloud makes a mistake.

He glances down at the blade.

The distraction is used, and Reno yanks his hand back with a quick jerk. He groans, he preens his
hair, he says casually, “So fucking touchy, man. Just like boyfriend.”

“It's not yours.”

“Not yours either.”

Cloud glowers now, up from underneath his long hair. Strands and tangles, parts and slivers.

Reno stares right back, unfazed.

Silence passes between them.

Between the sword and the distrust and the pain.

“What if I just... took it?” Reno offers. “And got rid of it for you? Don't even have to lift a finger. Don't have to drag it around anymore. Don't have to worry. I'll make it disappear.”

Cloud can't deny his first thought is for the idea. And the relief. And the ease of it. His second one though, is not.

“Don't touch it,” he growls.

“I'm just trying to help.”

“Don't believe you… I shouldn't, I can't.”

“I get that.”

“Do you?” Cloud insists.

Reno rubs at his throat. “Yeah, I do.”

Silence again.

But for the noises outside.

The people with lives go on living.

“Do me a favour…” Reno mutters.

Cloud again locks eyes with him.

He's not the fastest of learners.

Turgid sea, turquoise turmoil, shattered dreams.

Reno's beautiful.

Reno's deadly.

Reno's still tapped out.

“Don't let me fall asleep.”

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