

CLOUD stirred, and opened his eyes, slowly taking note of his surroundings. Wood-panelled walls and ceilings, he noticed; a roaring fire – not that it seemed to be doing much, he was absolutely freezing; Barret, sitting beside his bed with a grim expression that sharpened into surprise as he took in the fact that Cloud was awake.

“Shit!” Barret exclaimed. “Back with us, then? Thank the ...” He trailed off, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What happened?” Cloud mumbled.

“You got too cold,” Barret explained. “Started shiverin’ real bad, then your lips was goin’ all blue ... we got you here, but I don’t think you was really with it. I guess you don’t remember. Fainted soon as we walked in.”

“Oh,” said Cloud, a little embarrassed. “But the others are OK? You’re all right ... the girls?”

“Think they’re glad to be outta the cold,” said Barret evasively.

It had just been him, then; he turned away from Barret, ashamed, and thrust his head back into the pillow, looking up at the parallel strips of wood in the ceiling. Why me, he thought. Why am I so weak. Hard to believe I was in SOLDIER at all, when –

But you weren’t, said a voice in his head. He automatically retaliated – I *was* – but even as he thought it, something felt wrong. It was happening again, he realised: the sound of static in his head, louder and louder; the smell of mako and

charred wood; the blinding light; the voices – Sephiroth’s and somebody else’s, somebody who always sounded familiar but whom he had never succeeded in identifying –

He had raised his hands to his head, pressed them against it in an attempt to make the excruciating sensation go away; gradually, he became aware of the coldness of his palms, and realised that meant he was returning to reality.

He looked towards Barret again, and physically flinched with surprise to find him gone, replaced by a middle-aged man with a bouffant head of grey hair and an alert expression.

“Who –” Cloud muttered.

“Call me Holzoff,” the man said; he had a deep, calming voice. “Here.” He handed a steaming mug to Cloud; Cloud sat up, took it, and sipped. Hot chocolate, with more sugar than he had ever tasted. It wasn’t his normal drink of choice, but the warmth was certainly a relief; he drank the rest down quickly, barely pausing to look up until the mug was drained.

“That helped, then?” said Holzoff.

“Yeah,” Cloud replied, and then became embarrassed again. “Thanks. Sorry to trouble you.”

“Not at all,” said Holzoff cheerfully, “it’s what I’m here for. Been helping the idiots who try climbing that cliff for years – I’m well used to it. Can’t say I’ve ever seen someone react like *that* before, though.”

It took Cloud a moment to realise he was referring to the episode he had just experienced; he brushed it off with a shrug.

“Oh, no – that wasn’t – it’s just a, um, a condition I have.”

“Right!” said Holzoff. “I suppose that’s why the cold affected you more than your friends. Unusual to see a whole group of healthy people in here – they must be made of strong stuff.”

“They are,” said Cloud. “Look – thanks for looking after me, it’s very kind of you, but – we should get going.”

Holzoff chuckled. “Steady on. You’re not going anywhere just yet – you’ll freeze as soon as you get out there. Got to wait until you’re back up to a normal body temperature, at least.”

“I’m fine,” Cloud protested.

“I doubt it,” said Holzoff, and he reached out to take hold of Cloud’s hand, pressing their palms together. Holzoff’s own hand was missing the fourth and fifth fingers, Cloud noticed; he didn’t think it right to ask, but Holzoff had clearly registered his look of morbid fascination, as he said, “Frostbite.”

“Ah,” said Cloud.

“Years ago,” Holzoff clarified. “Still got the thumb on this one, so that’s a blessing. But, see – that’s what’ll happen to you if you go out there too soon. Better to rest up.”

Cloud shook his head, ready to protest again; Holzoff leant in, lifted Cloud’s hand, and briefly pressed his lips against it. “Can’t tell so easily with my hands,” he said, in response to Cloud’s questioning expression. “Frostbite does that – I don’t feel the cold as quickly as I used to. Which comes in handy out here.”

He let go of the hand. “Pretty clear, though – it’s hypothermia. You might not have made it if your friends hadn’t brought you here. Good thing they noticed the signs.”

“Yeah,” said Cloud, who had given up on arguing. “They’re good people.”

“It’s important to have friends you can rely on,” said Holzoff.

Cloud nodded; he still wasn’t sure whether he could really *rely* on them, though. There were still things he had to work out for himself, he knew: quite apart from their quest to recover the Black Materia and put an end to Sephiroth’s wrongdoings, he needed to understand what was wrong with him, and why his memories were so vague and confusing. He was adamant that that was something he would have to do on his own. His friends couldn’t possibly help him there; but, he realised, they could at least be trusted to support him. They had brought him here, after all; Barret had been there at his bedside when he regained consciousness; they had apparently made no complaint about needing to wait here while he recovered. That was a comfort, at least – he permitted himself a small smile as he sank back against the pillow again.