

## Blooming Disaster

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# Blooming Disaster

by [Thequalityrunaway](#)

## Summary

Au where people Bloom a flower crown as they fall in love.

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“Cloud ... um, are you aware that ...you’re budding?”

Cloud’s head snapped up from it’s dazed stare at the bubbling coffee. “What!”

Falling to his knees Cloud pushed Tifa aside to stare into the oven’s shiny door, he hurriedly parted his hair only to see the same thing as Tifa, the same thing his hands had felt. Buds. Soft little green buds ...

“Well ... shit...”

Blooms. A widespread phenomenon where feelings of love and attraction cause flowers to bud and bloom in elegant crowns out of a person's head. The more complex the crown the more complex the feeling. Couples prided themselves and their relationships with full crowns of Blooms full of deep meanings, and it was common to see many kinds of flowers on many kinds of people while travelling the town or the wider worlds.

But, sometimes, Blooms could be more of a hassle than a blessing. At least, that was Cloud's opinion. He sat in the kitchen of the Committee's house in Radiant Garden, watching Leon walk down the path for an early start on whatever project he was currently devoting himself to.

Like Cloud, Leon had no Blooms. His sable hair fell in tresses across his shoulders utterly bare of flowers. That was not too uncommon either- not everyone was in love all the time, and feelings came and went more inconsistently than Cloud himself.

But, whenever he did arrive, even if Cloud forgot to say hello; Leon always left a large mug of coffee for him when he came downstairs. Cloud pulled it closer and distantly heard the door snap closed, he then spotted the man through the window. *Thank you*, he thought, his early morning thoughts soft and sluggish as he inhaled the warm aroma of the coffee - Leon made coffee - and felt himself relax down to the bone.

*Smells like home. I wonder how he does it? No one else can make it as good as he can.*

Cloud downed his coffee after savouring the first few sips, mostly to be polite, and kept staring out the window, listening to Tifa shuffle around upstairs. Leon was long gone by now, and the empty streets were glistening slightly in the dawning light, dew on every surface.

Fuck, it was too early for this, why had he agreed to help her with delivery today?

Oh that's right. Because she was Tifa Lockhart- the most amazing friend anyone could ask for, with the most terrifying right hook he'd ever seen. Cloud was sure that there were still cracks in the wall from her stern reminder of his promise to help her set up her business ...

He smirked. Leon had been pissed over the poor treatment of his plasterwork.

Even so, it was too early for this. Cloud needed more coffee.

He slouched over the coffee machine as it whirled lazily to life. *I wonder if there's such thing as a Caffeine Materia I could just carry around with me? Maybe Merlin could make a spell that can wake me up in the morning.* He idly stirred a spoon in his empty mug as he listened to Tifa come down the stairs.

"Morning."

Cloud grunted.

Tifa yawned behind him, as tired as Cloud with the early start.

The two stayed in companionable silence for several minutes as Cloud waited for his pick-me-up and Tifa put together a quick breakfast. The smell of toast filled the air and Cloud's eyes slipped shut without his permission, only opening again when Tifa gasped and dropped her knife.

*Clutz.*

“Cloud ... um, are you aware that ...you're budding?”

Cloud's head snapped up from it's dazed stare at the bubbling coffee. *I'm what.*

The blond turned to Tifa who looked at him wide-eyed, cosy jumper covering her body down to her mid thighs, hair messy from just getting out of bed. A hand hovered over her mouth and her eyes did not meet his, fixated on his temples ...

“What?” Cloud asked, realising that he had not spoken yet- it was too early for this.

Tifa bit her lip. After a moment of thought she shuffled closer, her crown of primarily Asters gently swaying with every step and she held up a hand. She paused, waiting for permission, and Cloud, getting more alarmed by the second, leaned forward to let her continue. Tifa's battle and work worn fingers lightly carded through Cloud's hair at his temple and with a gentle twist she plucked something from his head, something that Cloud *felt* to his alarm.

He jerked back like she had shocked him.

*Oh shit.* There it was. Small and green. Soft. It laid there innocently, utterly tiny in Tifa's palm. No shape to it yet, and they both were clueless on what species it was.

However Cloud was not considering the breed of the flower: that was in his hair? That was in *his* hair?!

“The fuck!” Cloud's hands at once flew to his temples! Rough fingers combing through the messy locks of blond where Tifa had touched. Holy shit ... right there, little soft sprouts of buds. He felt slight irregularities in the texture of his hair, thicker stems of foliage against the courser strangs of his spiky hair. Cloud choked.

“What!”

Falling to his knees Cloud pushed Tifa aside to stare into the oven's shiny door, he hurriedly parted his hair only to see the same thing as Tifa, the same thing his hands had felt. Buds. Soft little green buds ...

Cloud was budding.

“Well ... shit...”

---

Blooms frequently appeared in a few known stages. Budding was the very first stage, a sign of developing feelings, denial, or a crush. Immature feelings, new beginnings. The Buds could not be identified at this stage, merely being short green-white stems with a budding flower closed tightly on the end.

Almost everyone experienced Budding at some point in their lives. Often, just as often as reaching full Blooms and realised feelings, the Buds would fade after a time as the feelings that caused them ebbed.

It was universally the most embarrassing stage of Blooming.

People could stare at see the new growth and immediately know that someone was going through something personal. The Buds on full display caused whispers, gossip, joy, sadness, and a lot more things that, frankly, Cloud was no in the mood to deal with.

Thankfully for him there were ways to avoid that while he dealt with this ... development.

Never before had Cloud been more thankful for Tifa than he was now, curled up on her bed in her room as she diligently combed out every last Bud with a special comb- made exactly for situations like this. People who wished to be private with their feelings had the option of removing them every morning to avoid the stares. It was common practice, made slightly embarrassing through having to buy one in public.

But, thankfully, Tifa was an angel in disguise and already had a comb stored away, sparing Cloud the embarrassment of having to get one for himself- he didn't want anyone else to know about this.

Still in shock, Tifa had wordlessly gotten to work on his hair in the privacy of her bedroom and Cloud was forever grateful. Her warm presence behind him grounded Cloud as his mind tried to start panicking all over again.

Buds ... fucking buds ...

*But ... who?*

His guardian angel patted his shoulder "All done."

Tifa picked up the waste paper bin next to her and carefully placed the Buds into it, promising to flush them as soon as the coast was clear. "They must have grown in last night, I didn't see them when we met yesterday."

*Well obviously.* Cloud leaned heavier onto his hand and frowned as she turned one over in her hand, like it held the secrets to the universe. Soft, green, new ... and really starting to piss him off.

"Just bin it, Tifa," he snapped.

Caught, Tifa apologised and set them far from Cloud. She gave him a curious look. "So ..."

"No."

Tifa raised an eyebrow, “Cloud.”

Cloud shook his head, “Not interested.”

A pillow landed in his face, startling him, “Fine fine- after I gave you my comb too.” Tifa turned her back on him and picked up a comb of her own, a different make to the one now resting heavily by Cloud’s side.

Tifa sat before a mirror and pulled her brush through her own hair, taking painstaking effort to not upset even a single flower in her crown with each stroke. It was meticulous work, and Cloud, despite his defensiveness over his own buds, could not help but watch the intimate act.

Her Blooms had also been unexpected. But, unlike Cloud, she was better with the whole feelings thing. She had first attempted to hide them too, but quickly took to owning them in the public eye. Everyone who laid eyes on her now could tell that she was in love ... those who were close to her or well versed in the language of flowers could even hazard a guess at who caused her to Bud after such a long time accepting her life as a single woman.

Cloud knew though, that she had never taken the final step. Those Blooms had remained unchanged for years.

Tifa caught him staring in the mirror and silently flipped him off.

Cloud winced, “Sorry ...”

She tied a red ribbon around her hair and shrugged, “Well, it was a shock.” She retook her place beside him, and Cloud returned her pillow numbly. “Any idea what’s changed?”

Cloud shook his head. He’d not Bloomed or Budded since he was a teenager. He recalled the bright Chrysanthemum’s and the tall silver-haired SOLDIER with an angry blush. Cloud’s messy blond spikes hid the buds that slowly unfurled against his head, popping brightly into flowers of many colours due to his fanboy crush.

Cloud’s team in the barracks had laughed themselves silly at his situation, the meaning of the Chrysanthemum’s obvious to everyone and the smarter of the boys had easily put two and two together. He was a laughing stock for a few days, but he was not the only recruit going through an emotional upheaval. Many First Class Soldiers had fans who grew so enamoured with their image that Blooms were inevitable, Cloud’s case was not special by any stretch of the imagination. After the amusement had faded the other recruits had been happy to lend a hand plucking the embarrassing flowers from his crown every morning.

In a twist of fate for Cloud, it was a crush that faded quickly ...

After Nibelheim and the horrors that Sephiroth proved capable of- the Blooms had wilted and fell from his crown like dead weights, lifeless and shriveled. Cut off like the abrupt end to his feelings.

Cloud had expected that to be the end of it. After such a disaster the last time he'd Bloomed how could he ever expect to feel 'feelings' again when he knew just how hurtful and imprisoning the Blooms could be?

With all that had happened since to land him in Radiant Garden, hunting Sephiroth, serving Hades ... Cloud simply had no time to develop other crushes or think about feelings. He had not wanted to either. He preferred to work alone, he was better off alone. Cloud Strife did not Bloom or Bud, he was *Not Interested*.

Aerith and Tifa would say that he was just 'not ready' - but that wasn't what Cloud meant. He did not want to have to face this again, and was determined not to.

It made the Buds in Tifa's room all the more of a surprise.

Even with the evidence of his emotions sitting in the waste paper bin Cloud simply could not fathom who they were for. Who had managed to sneak inside his defences without him noticing? He'd not met anyone new lately, he'd not been travelling as much lately.

Fuck it was too early for this.

Tifa rubbed his arm, bringing him from his musings with a kind smile. He returned it after a moment, covering her hand as he realised just how lucky he was to have a friend like her to help him. "Thanks Tifa."

"I'm always here for you, Cloud," she returned easily, pulling him into a warm hug.

Cloud returned it, smiling at the familiar feeling her Flora's Bells tickle his cheek. They hung in the crown of Asters beautifully, matching the purple Vervain and creating a contrast with the bold yellow of the Honeyflowers and the single Yellow Daffodil. Cloud touched that last flower sadly; Honesty, Daintiness, Enchantment, Sweet Affection, and Unrequited Love.

Such a beautiful crown, and yet ...

Tifa smiled anyway, placing her Budding comb into his hands. "Here, you'll need this more than I will."

"You're the best," Cloud admitted against her shoulder.

"I'm here for you."

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Almost everyone experienced Budding at some point in their lives. Often, just as often as reaching full Blooms and realised feelings, the Buds would fade after a time as the feelings that caused them ebbed.

Cloud brooded in the dim living room as Leon rummaged through the fridge for their bi-weekly ritual poison. He silently hoped that after a few days of stubbornly removing the Buds and simply getting on with his life they'd wither and leave him the hell alone.

So stuck in his funk he didn't hear Leon return from his perilous quest to the kitchen.

A cold beer lightly clunked against the table top as Leon placed Cloud's share before him. Cloud perked up at the sight of the familiar can of beer, beside it was a shot of something stronger. *I have the best fucking drinking buddy*, this observant man had obviously sensed the mood Cloud was in.

One of Leon's best qualities, in Cloud's opinion, was moments like this. Spontaneous acts of kindness that made Cloud smile slightly, no matter how bad he felt before. He never got them anywhere else, not on the road, not in hotels, not even with Tifa- his best friend had to tease him while she did it, or demand reasons so she could help more.

Leon just helped. That was it. It was such a relief, and comfort. *Yeah, he's the best.*

Cloud gratefully took the shot without ceremony and knocked it back quickly as his friend took a seat beside him, telling himself that the alcohol was the cause of the sentimental warmth in his chest. What else could it be?

"Rough day?" Leon inquired lightly, leaning back to put his feet up.

Cloud sighed, "You don't know the half of it ..." he took a long drink of his own beer and then sighed, pleased with the cold running through his stomach. He glanced Leon's way, giving him a slight smile, "Thanks."

The brunet returned his smile easily. "Don't mention it."

In the dimly lit room, staring at the fireplace happily crackling, they worked on draining their cans. The small lumpy sofa forced them to splay out right next to each other, Leon was always warm. With a strong companion's presence this close Cloud felt himself relax just a little more, a lifetime of tension slipping slowly, slowly away with each passing minute.

Cloud closed his eyes and kept drinking. Leon didn't say anything else until their drinks were finished, it wasn't a time for words. It was a time for solidarity. Leon was good at that, he was a good man, a good friend.

"Any more?"

*Ha, I wish.*

"Better not ..." Cloud sighed out heavily, "And you? Busy day?" He let thoughts of Blooms and Buds fall to the back of his mind as he turned his attention to Leon's words and his amusing vents about the state of repair several of the buildings had been in. Laughs and smirks came easily to his lips as the other man spoke, he laughed so much his voice gave out- he'd not used it this much since the last time they sat here, words not their strong point out in the big world.

They came easier here, in a firelit room all alone and quiet. Like Cloud left them here for safekeeping. And when the words ran out the crackle of flames filled the silence.



Soon, too soon, they began to yawn and grow weary. Unhappily, Leon suggested they get some rest, Cloud cheered him up by promising to do this again soon - definitely before he left.

The slight smile was worth it.

By the time he went to bed he'd entirely forgotten his situation. That was until his eyes rested upon the comb sitting innocently on his pillow ...

*Shit.*

---

Blooms were not restricted to falling in love, or developing love. Some people, with their hearts on their sleeves who gave their affections away at any opportunity would frequently find new and different flowers Blooming in their hair. Complexity of feeling affected the amount of flowers that would Bloom, some newer crushes started with a single flower species and grew to bouquets of variety as the feelings deepened.

Others had a single bouquet crown, or single flower, their entire life for one person. Even if that person could not return their feelings. Cloud thought of Tifa and her Unrequited Love flower with a heavy heart, and of Cid who sprouted little tufts of Rosemary flowers for his deceased wife- loyal in love until the end, but having clearly come to terms with her passing as shown by his single flower.

Blooms were not always a positive thing. Cloud would argue that they were more annoying than pleasing. And the way that this house attracted people with quirky crowns proved to Cloud that, one day, this house was going to be the death of him.

Cloud had gotten used to combing out the ridiculous Buds every day. Several weeks of using Tifa's comb, and relying on her keen set of eyes, Cloud had come to the conclusion that they were as awful as the last time he'd Bloomed. In fact, even more so than the previous Blooms that had matured into full flowers!

Cloud still had no idea who had caused this situation, who had affected him this way, but he swore when he found them he was going to run them through and be done with it. It was too early for this ... he was too stressed for this.

Until then, it was far better to hide them than face them, or even letting anyone outside of Tifa know.

This house had enough Blooming drama already ...

Aerith and her delicate crown of small flowers, clustered into something precious, elegant, and ... hard for Cloud to look at. Forget-me-nots, Periwinkle, Everlasting Immortal Flowers, King's Spear, Juniper ...

I will remember you, Sweet remembrance, Unfading remembrance. Regret, and ... Chastity. A mourning crown, a relationship and love unfulfilled, feelings that lingered to this day for a SOLDIER with eyes as blue as the sky.

*Zack ... she still loves him.*

Cloud was often unable to look Aerith in the face due to the ache it caused him to see her feelings of love for her dead lover on full display. Her love, and his best friend that he was unable to save; the man who had died saving Cloud's life. Every time he laid eyes upon her Blooms he felt *guilt* like a sword through his chest.

But Aerith wore her Blooms proudly, unashamed to still be loving him even though she often received looks of pity and sympathy in public. Cloud knew that she hated their judgement, the way that hopeful romantics promised her new love, to help her forget, and disregarded her feelings for her first Love. They overlooked her pain.

Aerith knew that Cloud had issue with her Blooms- with Zack. They had talked about it before. Cloud brokenly recalling Zack's final moments. Cloud apologising for hours over and over, while Aerith insisted that it was not his fault. Somehow she had forgiven him. "I hope that you can forgive yourself, Cloud," she'd whispered softly.

She never plucked her Blooms for any other occasion than to lay her Blooms upon Zack's grave ...

On the other hand ...

Cloud winced at the creak of wood beside him: Yuffie leaned back in her chair, the two legs wobbling worryingly as she tilted, idly playing with the Crocus' in her bangs as Aerith puttered around the kitchen.

Bang. Creak ... Bang. Creak ...

"Why are you so twitchy this morning?" Yuffie chirped, tilting again despite Aerith's pleas for her to stop. Her fingers found a new Crocus and the idle fidgeting began again. "Did you wake up on the wrong side of the bed?"

Cloud resisted the urge to feel for Buds. Barely.

Not in the mood for any of her mischief, Cloud just grunted. "I thought you had Geraniums," he muttered instead.

Yuffie snorted, crossing her arms smugly, "Not anymore."

Aerith put down the orange juice she'd freshly squeezed, and joined the conversation with a gentle tease, "Oh? Moved on already and fallen again? I thought he was your one true love?"

The self proclaimed Ninja's grin widened, "He was just a phase. You should have seen him the other day, he was such an idiot-" she went on to explain the once endearing quality that had turned her buds to Geraniums that bobbed and nodded when she moved. Now Crocus'

took their place. Yuffie's dark hair making the new purple-yellows stand out as much as the red had previously, and the Clovers before that, and Hyacinths before that.

Aerith's laughter brought him back from recalling the many phases and changes of heart Yuffie had been through.

Aerith giggled into her hand and fondly shook her head, "Try not to get carried away this time Yuffie, you're still so young, you should take time for yourself."

Pouting, the Ninja rocked back on her chair again, "Yeah but, I can't help how I feel. And he's so happy, it's kinda hard not to fall for him ..."

Meeting Aerith's eyes across the table, Cloud silently mouthed 'a week' and earned a playful frown for his troubles. They both knew how hard and fast the girl could fall in and out of love, treating the flowers like badges of pride until the day she cast her feelings aside. Forgotten.

'Be nice,' Aerith mouthed back with a fond shake of her head. She pushed his orange juice toward him. "Is Tifa still asleep upstairs?" she asked instead, changing the subject from Blooms much to Cloud's relief, he wasn't sure if he could resist the urge to check his bangs. *Fuck what if I missed one?*

Before any paranoia could betray him, Cloud answered. "Hm. She went out with Leon, they're fixing up her bar's roof, again."

She'd left him a note and Cloud had spent a few minutes panicking at the realisation that he'd be forced to sort out his Buds alone. He'd annoyed Yuffie with how long he'd locked himself in the bathroom, and spend half the time cursing Leon for being so helpful as to take all of Tifa's time to get her bar open for business- he needed her, Damnit!

*Stupid Leonhart.* He grumbled into his juice. It wasn't his fault ... but sue him; it was way too *early* for this.

Yuffie wrinkled her nose, "Again? This is like the fourth time she's had a leak!"

"He's very kind to help her out so early, maybe we should join them to help them along? We could bring lunch," Aerith suggested.

Cloud twitched when Yuffie leapt to her feet - "Yuffie get your feet off the table!" - and cheered at what a good idea that was. *Please don't have missed any Buds, I don't want her to see- not Yuffie of all people.*

---

Blooms alone did not produce a relationship. They were advertised feelings, but just like feelings (and advertisements) they could be ignored. As Cloud was very much in the habit of doing. The act of presenting a Bloom or bouquet of Blooms to the person who had caused them was the act of Confessing.

Surprisingly, some romances started with only one person Blooming, confessing, and their non-budding partner slowly Bloomed in turn for them. As had happened with Cloud's parents. So it wasn't like he could compare flowers with those around him and try to guess who was single and ready to mingle- for as much as the Blooms aided people in discovering each other and their feelings, they were also so confusing that it was impossible to guess what anyone was trying to say to each other.

*Maybe I should cross out people on a list or something?* Cloud thought with a frown, strolling down the path to meet Leon for the evening. It was their turn for patrol, and for some time to mull over his predicament in non intrusive company. Plus, he could slack off slightly and Leon would watch his back.

Leon was an ideal partner for patrol. Quiet, sharp, an experienced and clever fighter. Cloud would have been fine doing the rounds about Radiant Garden alone, he was no pushover, but having Leon watch his back was never a burden.

Especially since he never saw the need to start useless smalltalk. Asking how he was doing and about his plans once, at the start of the patrol, was all the talking they needed to exchange most of the time. Occasionally there was an additional question, involving there here and now; Left or right? Early night? Thirsty?

It was a comfortable routine, one that would leave Cloud free to frustrate over his feelings and confusing thoughts in peace while also taking out his building mood on any Heartless that were unfortunate enough to skuttle past his line of sight. He was no state to consider mercy today.

Leon had been giving him more concerned looks as of late; this was the longest Cloud had stayed in months, and he had clearly picked up on the out of character behaviour. Because this man was *the best*, he had not made a move to inquire beyond checking that Cloud was well and left Cloud to his secrets.

Leon did kindly remind him, over one of their late night drinking evenings, that he would be willing to listen if he had anything that was weighing on him. It was incredibly soft of their prideful leader to offer such a thing. Cloud wasn't sure if he should tease him or thank him.

In the end he did both.

Leon rolled his eyes and smirked. He must have known that Cloud wasn't ready. They never spoke about it again, the offer remained though.

*Ah, there he is.* Cloud rounded a corner and relaxed a little.

Leon stood against the wall by the Old Bailey and raised a hand in greeting as Cloud approached, battle ready as always.

"Hey."

"Hey. You good to go?"

“Yeah, you?”

“Always. High grounds first, we’ll end up in the crystal fissure just before dusk.”

Cloud hummed to himself, hoisting his sword onto his shoulders, “Sounds good.” He followed Leon up the path and kept his eyes peeled for anything amiss. Thanks to Sora the darkness had reduced in threat tremendously. But, as Leon said, that was no excuse to get complacent.

Cloud did not disagree exactly ... but he did think that Leon worked too hard sometimes. He insisted on the twice-weekly drinks for a reason after all.

At least all this patrolling was for a good cause, their friends deserve to rest easy.

It was a good break to have from the house too. Plus, if things ever got really boring, Leon would happily turn his blade on Cloud with a smirk and a challenge that got Cloud’s blood pumping. *That sounds great for knocking these thoughts out of my head, maybe if he hits hard enough it’ll knock sense into the Buds and they’ll go away?*

Somehow Cloud thought that facing Aerith with a concussion, even with an argument as convincing as this, would not end well for him ...

Leon did not fear his inhuman strength and speed, the danger that Cloud could easily break him. He refused to back down and used his quick fighting style to give Cloud a true opponent in the times when they craved the ring of steel on steel. Cloud never felt like he needed to hold back when he was with Leon, it was all so natural.

Out of everyone that he lived with, save for Tifa only because he knew her the longest, Cloud was closest to Leon.

He definitely got along best with the man. Even though Leon was very frequently busy with work, and Cloud with his personal hunt for Sephiroth or some other past demon. So these quiet patrols full of meaningful looks and the spine tingling shrill of warrior’s steel were among the longest stretches of time they spend together.

Meaningful time. Times Cloud secretly looked forward too and sought out under the pretense of training, of keeping Leon on his toes. Leon would respond with a smirk, a glint of challenge in his silver eyes, and meet Cloud’s request for a spar with everything he had.

Still ... despite how comforting his companion’s presence was, Cloud could not help but feel awkward around Leon lately.

Due to his recent stress over his Buds, Cloud felt the constant need to check over his shoulder or look in a mirror to make sure that nothing embarrassing had escaped his thorough combing.

The thought of Leon finding out was terrifying for ... slightly irrational reasons.

What if the man thought he was weak for Budding? Would he think less of Cloud? Make fun of him like his fellow Shinra recruits had? Would he be awkward? Would he ask awkward

questions like Tifa?

Cloud truly did not think that Leon would be cruel ... but ... it was hard to tell what his approach to Blooms would be. Leon was from another world, and Cloud had never heard his views on Blooms and had never felt inclined to ask before now. Only, naturally, now he was too nervous to open the subject.

Cloud had seen hints of fondness for Yuffie's flighty-feelings in the rolls of Leon's eyes, and he'd spied a sympathetic softness to him when he looked at Tifa and Aerith and their crowns of unresolved feelings ...

But Leon had never Bloomed as long as Cloud had known him. He had not even shown signs of Budding and never talked about his past.

That being said, Leon was just as much the centre of Bloom related Drama as Yuffie was.

In town, Leon had no shortage of admirers due to his hardworking, thoughtful nature and leadership of the Committee. Yet he had politely, and awkwardly, refused them all. Cloud half smiled remembering the stuttering mess the older man had been reduced to when confronted by a handful of Blooms and an enthusiastic confession.

*For such a proud guy he can turn a really bashful shade of red.*

"Hey, you okay?"

Cloud blinked, head picking up from where he'd been staring for several minutes to look at Leon's confused face. "Sorry, what?"

Leon scratched at one cheek, looking uncertain, "Are you okay? You've been very distant, lost in thought. That's not like you ..."

*Oh ... oh.*

Cloud frowned slightly and crossed his arms, "I said I was fine earlier."

"Well ... you were distant then too," Leon shrugged, turning away from Cloud to continue on their patrol, "I just thought you should know; I don't mind finishing up alone tonight if you're not feeling one hundred percent. I'd rather you took the time to keep in top shape than push on."

*And now I feel bad.* Cloud rolled his eyes slightly at himself. Leon had a way of being nice to him that stimulated these out of character moods, it made Cloud want to reassure him. "No, it's nothing. Just had a lot on my mind," he caught up to Leon and fell into easy step beside him. "Just working through some stuff ..."

"I see."

"I'm trying not to think about it, it's ... I ..."

"You don't have to explain. So long as you're able to stay sharp until the end of patrol ..."

Relieved, Cloud raised his head slightly, “I am.” He refocused his efforts on scanning the shadows.

Leon didn’t pry any further, though he paused at the end of the path, offering Cloud a silent moment to turn in early. Cloud shook his head and they pressed on, thankful when Leon did not bring it up again for the rest of the night.

They walked up and down, and all around, checking alleys and rooftops and hideaways near and far. Then they approached the Fissure with growing anticipation.

Finally ... it was time to fight each other.

Leon was truly a sight to see when he went all out.

Cloud parried his quick blade like it was a practised dance and sent the older man back on the defensive. Sweat beaded their foreheads, ran down their arms, eyes strained in the dark, ears rang with the noise of steel on steel, and Cloud knew that through this darkness Leon’s eyes were wide and his face was flushed with exhilaration that could only be found here and now.

Locked in battle.

“I yield,” Cloud wheezed eventually, snorting in amusement when Leon took that as permission to fall over and pant on his back. “Dramatic much?”

“Shut up- you yielded: I win.”

Cloud poked Leon’s side with his foot, leaning on his massive sword to keep from joining him. Cloud was tempted. It looked comfortable. “Yeah but I’m still standing.” In truth, he had yielded now so that he would wake up early enough to tend to his Buds. *Fucking Buds cutting into my free time like this, can’t spend all night fighting with Leon, always getting up early just in case Yuffie tries something, I’ll can’t fucking wait for them to go.*

Leon flipped him off.

Cloud laughed.

Leon laughed too.

This was nice.

They limped to bed, aching all over after an hour of letting out their stress through their blades. They exhausted each other, pushed each other to their limits, and when he finally got home, Cloud had felt the most relaxed he had since he’d found the first of his pesky Buds. He fell asleep, warm, relaxed, and with a smile.

---

It was unclear to people why the Blooms that were plucked during the day stayed away until the next, reappearing after sleep. What was it about sleep that coaxed them back from

nothingness?

Some theories talked about rest resetting feelings, dreams fueling the Bloom's growth. Maybe they grew in the dark or under the moon unlike normal flowers? The reasoning was unclear, but the fact remained that people all over the worlds who plucked their Blooms and Buds would awaken the next day and have to redo the process.

At least, Cloud thought, they only grew back in the night. He'd have to come up with an excuse for being really into hats if they were liable to pop out whenever they damn well pleased. Pluck them once in the morning with the comb, flush them, done. Don't worry about them until the next morning.

"Any thoughts yet?" Tifa patted his shoulder, assuring him that he was clear of the Buds today. She went back to scanning her stock in the back of the bar, they'd come here early to get more heavy lifting and sorting done.

Cloud sighed. "No."

"It's been a month."

"I know ..." A month and these Buds had neither faded or Bloomed. So Cloud was still stuck, and becoming more accepting of Tifa's attempts to help him face his feelings. He had resorted to retracing his steps around the time of the first Buds. But he'd not been doing anything that different to normal, he'd stayed around Radiant Garden all that time; Patrolling with Leon, drinking with Tifa, talking with Aerith, venting with Tifa while drunk, hanging out with Leon, helping Leon wrangle Yuffie out of mischief, running favours for Cid, Sparring with Leon, getting Tifa's bar set up, punting the occasional Heartless as far as the horizon ...

Normal stuff. Domestic, comfortable, normal stuff. It was unusual in a way, since he was absent more than he was present - but he was secretly enjoying the homely feeling he got whenever he returned.

Tifa pushed her hair behind her ear, the Flora's Bells swung playfully as she thought. "If only we knew what flowers they were, that might give us a clue," she sighed.

*I thought I had to figure it out before the flowers Bloomed,* Cloud kept that thought to himself. *Hyne why are feelings so difficult?*

"Anyone caught your eye lately?" She motioned to a heavy beam and cracked her knuckles in preparation to lift it outside.

"No more than normal. You know I don't talk much to anyone else, you, Yuffie, Aerith, Leon, Cid. Not Merlin if I can help it, he always wants to poke me." Cloud replied, twisting one of his Buds between his thumb and forefinger. It was greener than before, healthier, stronger. Something was changing ...but nothing had changed?!

They hefted out all the heavy wooden planks, leaving the interior as empty as it could be without taking out the ground and ceiling too.



Cloud stretched, yawning. *It's too early for this ... at least this is finished. Leon can sort out the roof and Tifa will be well on her way.* He glanced at his best friend, she hefted another wooden beam outside and dusted her hands off. Cloud cleared his throat, "Coffee?"

Tifa snorted, "For you, my friend, Whiskey. All this work and talk about feelings is giving me a headache."

"You're the best."

---

In a society where feelings and relationships were quite literally on display for all to see there were a few universal dos and don'ts that evolved with the phenomenon. One example being that it was considered highly Taboo too reach out and touch someone else's Blooms. Same for Buds.

Cloud was fine with Tifa touching his Buds while helping him hide them, he trusted her and she always asked permission. But he never attempted to touch hers in return, she did not want him to, for starters; and it would be unspeakably rude of him to reach out and tug on them.

*Can't imagine anyone getting away with touching Tifa's Blooms, she'd break them in half,* Cloud nodded to himself, almost putting his face into his breakfast as he yawned.

Leon kindly moved his plate further into the middle of the table.

Cloud objected. "Noooo my food," he slurred, pouting as it kept moving.

While the girls giggled, instead of helping him because they were evil, Leon lightly patted his arm and offered a reassurance in that lovely deep voice of his, "It'll be back soon, finish your coffee first."

*Oooh Coffee.* "Mmm 'kay." Cloud grumbled slightly at the sight of his food sliding away from him yet again, but was too busy trying to stay awake to fight him on that. Besides, he trusted Leon. So the food would be back.

Other highly controversial behaviours around Blooms included; Dissecting the meanings, a trickier rule to follow since some Bloom meanings were so well known it was impossible not to connect the dots, but it was considered impolite to blatantly say it. Cloud knew that Aerith caught a lot of sad looks as people read the mourning-flowers in her crown, and she was deeply offended whenever someone who was not close to her tried to console her.

Another, in Cloud's opinion the most important one, was that if someone was hiding their Buds or Blooms, it was wrong to expose them. *Clearly* in a world with feelings bared for all to see, if someone was hiding them *they did not want anyone else to know*, and taking away their privacy was ... inconsiderate to say the least, and at worst outright cruel.

Cloud knew that Tifa would not say a thing about his Buds, but there were some lesser people out there with looser tongues and lower morals. *Utter bastards. They should learn to mind*

*their own business.* He resisted the urge to check his hair again, better safe than sorry, but he wasn't alone at the kitchen table.

Cloud crossed his arms. It was too fucking early for this. It was a rare occasion where the entire household had woken up around the same time to enjoy a cooked start to the day; Coffee piled high, toast, bacon and eggs piled higher. Cloud slouched in his chair, cradling a coffee cup against his mouth and sipping reverently.

Leon by his side, being a hero and topping up his coffee cup whenever Cloud emptied it, Cloud might have mumbled that thought out loud- there were several amused laughs following that 'thought'. But whatever, Coffee. Leon made coffee in his favourite mug: perfect.

Tifa and Aerith sat opposite them, tucking into their breakfasts and filling the room with morning chatter. They were dressed cosily, unlike Leon ( *the workaholic* ) who had his typical gear on despite the day and hour. Cloud had been dragged out of bed so ... he assumed he was decent, he wasn't really awake yet.

The thought of him being too sleep deprived to realise he was in his birthday suit was amusing; What a great start to the day that would be.

*Well no one's blushing so I think I'm safe from that- oh nice! More coffee.*

Slowly gaining more awareness, Cloud snorted into his hand as Tifa cheerfully combatted one of Leon's comments about her bar, "I'm just saying, it could be made into a water feature at this rate. An actual waterfall to the heavens."

"That's the worst idea ever and you know it," Leon chuckled, letting Cloud steal his coffee cup because this man was literally perfect. The brunet likely poked Cloud's arm in retaliation but made no move to separate Cloud from his life giving substance, which was a good thing because Cloud really didn't want to have to break his pretty face. "You're going to have everyone walk through the door and drop a cheesy 'did it hurt when you fell from heaven' line, then ask to take a leek."

"Oh!" Tifa swatted him, as Aerith stifled a laugh into a handful of toast. "No they won't!"

"Cid will," Leon pointed out, biting into his bacon strips as Tifa reluctantly conceded. "Then he'll never stop, then everyone will be copying him."

She groaned into her hands. "I hate it when you're right."

Leon refilled Cloud's coffee cup, "Sure you do," he sassed back. *Huh, since when was Leon fluent in sass and sarcasm?* Cloud buried his head back in his coffee cup when Leon send him a quizzical glance- Cloud was staring again. He'd been doing that a lot lately ... clearly more coffee was required.

Shrugging Cloud's strange behaviour off, Leon reached across the table and took Tifa's cup to refill too, "I'll stop by today to fix it."

“Sixth time’s the charm,” Aerith giggled.

“Well you know Leon,” Cloud groaned as he rolled his shoulders to work out the kinks. *Damn, checking for Buds all the time is killing my neck.* “E won’t give up until you’re happy.”

Tifa smiled, Aerith giggled and Leon cleared his throat slightly awkwardly. The brawler leaned forward to regain Leon’s attention, “He’s right. I appreciate it, do you think-”

Upstairs a squeal of delight cut short their conversation. Clearly it was Yuffie- the only girl who was not downstairs and enjoying the Coffee. Her shriek was quickly followed by several banging noises and at least one door slamming.

Cloud raised his head, slightly irritated. Aerith rose to her feet, ready to go check on Yuffie- but pounding feet down the stairs made it clear that she was coming to them. The girl skidded around the corner, still in her bedclothes and a new crown of Buttercups sticking out at every angle, she clutched something tightly in one hand.

“Look look!” she crowed, jumping forward and slamming her hand upon the table.

Cloud pulled his coffee cup - technically Leon’s - back out of range of her excited smash protectively. *It’s too early for this.*

Once certain that his precious coffee was safe, Cloud moved his eyes to the table where Yuffie held a bright orange-red flower in the palm of her hand. It was one that Cloud did not recognise, the petals were soft and the flower itself was medium sized.

A Bloom.

It took Cloud a moment to realise that he didn’t know who it belonged to, no one at this table was Blooming orange flowers ...

Aerith covered her mouth worriedly. As Yuffie smiled widely at the room. “U-um, Yuffie-”

“Leon’s Blooming.”

Cloud’s coffee slipped from his fingers and distantly smashed, “ *What .*”

Aerith gasped.

Tifa dropped her fork.

Leon ... wait ... *Leon-Squall-Whatever-Leon-Leonhart is in Love?*

Cloud’s eyes dragged from the Bloom to stare at the man Yuffie was gleefully pointing to. *No, no way.* Cloud doubted it. He’d never so much as Budded before, never talked about it, never been on any dates or ...

Leon sat rigid in his kitchen chair; face was unreadable in the wake of Yuffie’s overjoyed smile. Cheeks pale, lips pressed tightly together, hands clenched and slightly shaking. Cloud

silently cursed, *shit ... shit shit shit* , it was true.

Leon was Blooming.

This flower was Leon's Bloom.

A Bloom that had been plucked and discovered by ... *oh shit*.

Stiffly, Leon got to his feet and snatched the orange Bloom from Yuffie's hand. He crumpled it in his fist without a word and saw himself out. Distantly, Cloud heard the crunch of Leon's boots as he stalked away down the drive.

Cloud glanced out the window. Just before Leon turned the corner he thought he saw the older man's hand raise to pull angrily at his hair, exactly where his crown would be if he had one.

*If ... he let his grow* . Cloud corrected.

Because he did have one. Leon was in love, and had a crown of Blooms and no one had known about it until seconds ago. He never talked about it, he never commented on Blooms or Buds, refused every Confession and never spoke about his past ...

He kept it to himself.

But now it was out in the open.

Cloud slumped back in his chair. Feeling awful, like this was somehow his fault. *Shit*.

Yuffie glanced around the room, "Was it something I said?" she nervously asked.

Aerith put her head in her hands, "Yuffie ... I think you need to apologise to Leon."

"What? Why?" honestly confused she began to wring her hands, "I-I thought he was in love, w-we could celebrate ... right?"

Tifa got to her feet and stood in front of Yuffie, her face very stern and she spoke slowly, her voice tight as it fought the urge to yell. "Yuffie, he has not come out in public with his feelings or his Blooms, obviously *he was not ready to tell anyone* . That was a very private and personal thing you just announced to everyone here, without thinking about how he would feel about it." she stressed. Yuffie rapidly paled with Tifa's every stern word.

"Of course he's upset now, how would you feel if someone exposed one of your secrets before you were ready? What if you were never ready? What if, now you've exposed him in this way, what if he doesn't want to be your friend anymore? What if he doesn't trust you? Did you even think at all?"

"I ... I didn't ... I didn't mean-" Yuffie looked to Aerith, looked to Cloud.

Cloud put his head in his hand, his thoughts still a mess. *Leon was Blooming ... Leon was Blooming ... Leon spends every morning removing the Blooms just like I do with my Buds*.

*Leon was in love. But who? Who's he in love with, for how long? Why didn't he tell anyone? Ugh, well, it's obvious **why** he didn't tell anyone but ... shit ...* Cloud's thoughts went around and around in his shock. Leonhart was in love.

*Talk about a curveball, I guess everyone in this house really is a Blooming disaster.* He didn't even have it in himself to laugh at his own pun. Leon had gone off somewhere, pissed off or hurt, and Cloud had just sat there.

*I just fucking sat there! What if it had been me? My Buds? Leon wouldn't have just sat there, he's a good man, and now he's left.*

"I- I just saw them and ... Leon's in love, it's a good thing, he should have someone; he deserves it!" Yuffie insisted.

"Where did you find that Bloom?"

"In his bin, on top of all the letters and stuff ... I wanted scrap paper for my love-notes," Yuffie twisted a finger around the Buttercup in her bangs. Cloud felt a pit grown in his stomach,. Cloud had spent weeks terrified that someone would find out about his Buds and cause a scene, if it had been him- his room- his Buds, not Leon's ...

Cloud pinched his nose. "I agree with Aerith," he sighed. He met Yuffie's eyes, "You should apologise ..."

Yuffie burst into tears.

---

Blooms were not like flowers that grew from the earth. Even without the phenomenon of *where* they grew, and *how*, and *why* ... Blooms barely carried scents. Insects held only a passing interest in Blooms for their colours and their similarities, preferring nature's flowers to ones nurtured by feelings.

It may have been a possibility that Blooms were not truly flowers, but resembled them closely- Cloud had never given much thought to their mechanics, wanting to avoid them on a personal level.

But, luckily, Cloud did not need a trace to know where his Blooming friend had hidden himself.

He shouldered the door open, his arms bearing gifts and leaving his feet responsible for kicking the door closed too. Cloud glanced around but already knew that he'd be here, he knew his habits too well. However, the sad corner he'd tucked himself into, arms around his knees and scraps of flowers littering around his feet was ... a punch to the gut to see.

Cloud sighed. *There you are.*

"Hey."

Leon glanced up from his corner in the Old Bailey, he was expressionless and motionless-giving nothing away. Like he was compensating for his earlier exposure, Cloud silently slapped that thought away, feeling guilty for even letting it take root in his mind.

Leon was hurting. Analysing him would just hurt more, and in exactly the same way.

When it became clear that Leon was not going to say anything, Cloud set down a beer beside him and lowered himself to sit beside Leon. "I didn't want you to miss out," Cloud explained, cracking open his can and leaning back against the wall as he tilted his head back to take a long swig of it.

A second crack sounded next to him as Leon opened his can, he hesitated a few seconds before doing so. He was clearly expecting questions, but Cloud wasn't going to ask. He was endlessly curious, but he wasn't going to pry. Leon had been hurt enough, Cloud rationalised that he could suffer not knowing a bit longer.

They finished their beers in silence.

Leon suddenly leaned on Cloud's shoulder, his head resting there heavily. Cloud didn't move, he merely muttered, "I'm not a pillow."

"Clearly. You're far too ripped to be comfortable to lay on."

Cloud snorted, "Ha, I'll have you know that I make an excellent pillow. Tifa's called me a space-heater on more than one movie night."

"It's all that caffeine you drink."

"I think it's the Mako ... or I'm just that hot."

Leon's genuine laughter was music to Cloud's ears. He tilted his head back with a smile, Leon sitting up again and looking more like his old self. Less defensive, less pissed and definitely a lot happier than when he'd found him.

Cloud wasn't sure if it was the events of this morning that prompted him to say it but ... "I'm Budding."

Leon glanced at him, clearly surprised. "Oh."

"Yeah ... 'oh *shit*' ." Cloud smiled when Leon snorted again.

"That's one way to put it," he replied neutrally.

Cloud pulled out his reserve cans from his pockets, cracking open Leon's can first and handing it to him. "I think we need a round two tonight." They toasted, and said as positively as possible "Feelings suck," and downed their cans in a race.

Leon won because Cloud took pity on him. His smirk of victory was worth it, just this once.

---

It was always personal choice to wear Blooms or Buds in public. Cloud refused, but would never push his opinion on anyone else. In some worlds it was a crime to enforce how one dealt with their Blooms, in other worlds there were strict rules and laws forcing and or guiding the populace on how to present themselves regardless of personal choice.

Radiant Garden was one of the worlds that supported an individual's decisions.

That being said, Cloud never in a million dreams expected Leon's choice once his secret was out.

Leon with Blooms was a sight to behold. Cloud, Tifa, the whole room did a double take when the brunet walked downstairs the next day with a flower crown of those orange-yellow-red blooms that Yuffie had found. The crown decorated with smaller collections of tinier white flowers, and the softest splash of purple peeked out from under the vibrant fiery colours.

Cloud accidentally spilled his coffee down his front.

Leon looked stunning.

Ice was Leon's element, but the reds and oranges of this crown gave a lovely balance to his dark hair and silver eyes.

So wrapped up in Leon's Blooms- Cloud had never seen the man with so much as Buds before! Cloud needed a minute to get used to this sight - he almost missed the youngest member of their little family get to her feet and face their Leader.

Yuffie sheepishly stood before Leon, not quite able to look him in the eye due to the guilt she oozed from her every pore. Her lower lip trembled as she bowed very low in apology, "I'm so sorry Leon. I was wrong to tell everyone about your Blooms like that, I was just excited that you had someone that you loved- I always thought you deserved someone nice! But that's not an excuse, I was wrong, and I'm so sorry ..."

Tifa nodded in approval. Aerith smiled in relief.

Cloud managed to look away from the flowers long enough to watch Leon draw Yuffie into his arms and promise her that he was not mad. *Big arms, bigger heart*, Cloud fondly thought. Yuffie's relieved sobs brought a lump to Cloud's throat that he would venomously deny if he was ever questioned on it.

"I hope you learned your lesson," Leon tilted her head up, removing her tears from her eyes and giving her bare head a fond look. No flowers, no crown ...

Yuffie wiped at one eye and nodded, "Yeah ... I think I have."

---

Blooms, should they get to that stage, would only wither on their own for two reasons: One, the feelings go away, the person falls out of love. Cloud was starting to realise that he was not going to be that lucky, he was *not* going to be spared the hassle.

The other way, the harder and most intimidating way, was to very carefully craft a bouquet out of the Blooms and present them as a Confession to whomever they had Bloomed for. False Confessions, presenting them to someone else, never worked.

Should the Confession be rejected, the Blooms would fade. Even if the feelings persisted it was as if the Blooms themselves were sentient and had listened, they would respect the wishes of the one who'd rejected them and fade, fall and die, never to return. Lies of rejection could not produce the same results, the Blooms would persist, as if in defiance.

Clearly, since Leon wore his crown and yet remained single- his previous behaviour of hiding his Blooms backing up this theory: Leon had not yet confessed.

Cloud did not mean to dwell, but Leon's new Blooms were the talk of the town. From how they complimented his handsome appearance to how long they had been hidden for. Everyone speculating on who could have caught their Leader's eye and stolen his heart? Cloud wondered too in private moments in between puzzling his own Buds.

They were larger now.

---

Another early morning, another day asking his best friend to cover all his head with the comb. Cloud had promised more heavy lifting in return for her help with his personal problems.

Tifa held one Bud up to the light, "I think it'll be white," she turned it this way and that, Cloud watching her move and agreeing with her guess. Some Buds were slowly, slowly forming into new and different shapes.

*So it's a complex crown I'm growing. Complex emotions ... but I still don't know.*

Despite his cluelessness, Tifa promised him that he'd reach an epiphany someday soon.

Cloud, however, was struck with a thought that he'd not considered yet. *What should I do if they do Bloom, if I do find out who I've developed feelings for?* Being the emotional-dunce he was, Cloud asked Tifa.

"If they do Bloom ... what should I do then?"

His question was met with silence. Tifa blinking in surprise. She shuffled awkwardly in place, "Um ... that'll be up to you?"

"You can't just brush me off like that, Tifa. I honestly don't know what I'm doing," he took the Bud from her hands and rested it in his own palm. Imagining it unfurling.



“Well, you are emotionally constipated-”

Cloud flicked the Bud back at her, it bounced off of her head and made them both snort with laughter.

Tifa pulled the pillow to her chest and rested her chin on it, the awkwardness returning to the room. Even Cloud started shifting, Tifa’s unease and reluctance and outright discomfort affecting him.

“You really think that I’m the best person to ask about what to do with Blooms?” Tifa’s attempt at a smile was self-deprecating. It was phrased as a joke, but the sad tone of voice brought no laughter to either of them.

Cloud put a hand on her arm, “Have you ever thought to ... try?”

Her eyes lowered. “Every day.”

*Fuck. Nice going Strife.* “I’m sorry ...”

Tifa gave him a half smile, and she finally seemed to find her words, “I don’t have the answers for you, but I do have some ... advice, I suppose. If I’m not being too forward ... I hope you end up Confessing, Cloud. That’s what I want for you, I don’t want you to end up like me- stuck on my feelings,” she raised her hand to touch the obvious yellow Daffodil. Unrequited Love. She squeezed his hand after taking a moment to dwell on her own situation, “Whatever the outcome, I want you to manage to resolve your feelings. It’ll be better for you to just get it over with.”

Cloud nodded slowly, frowning in thought. “And ... you?”

“What’s all this about me all of a sudden?” Tifa asked, confused, brushing her hair to one side and combing her fingers through it, she glanced at the door- maybe thinking of escaping.

Cloud put his hand on hers, keeping her still for long enough to say his piece: “You’ve been helping me so much lately, and it has been all about me. I wasn’t here when you were going through your Budding and Blooms. And ... don’t you think you deserve happiness too?”

“I ...” taken aback, Tifa lost her words.

Cloud patted her head fondly, “Maybe think on it? I want you to be happy, no matter how they accept your feelings, you deserve the chance to fulfill your feelings or move on.”

Tifa exhaled, surprised. “... When did you get so wise?”

Cloud lowered his head, “I had a pretty good teacher ...” he opened his arms hesitantly. Tifa teared up and crawled over the pillows to hold him close. Cloud squeezed her and sighed into her shoulder. “I’m always here for you.”

“I’m always here for you too, dummy.”

---

Blooms and Buds withered quickly after they had been plucked. They withered and faded faster than any comparable vegetation, and left no trace- like they were dissolving into the air ...

Cloud leaned against the wall as he watched Leon pluck his Blooms from his hair and drop them hap-hazardly across the floor of the Crystal Fissure. He knew he was not supposed to stare, but ...

“You know you don’t have to do that, you can just leave them.”

Leon glanced at Cloud, but did not pause in his quest to free his hair of all the Blooms. He did not even seem phased by the fact that Cloud was staring, “They distract me sometimes. I’m not used to having them on display all the time. I’m not letting you get an edge on me just because I get surprised by the bright colours of my own damn Blooms.”

*Honestly they’d distract me more,* Cloud thought to himself, fighting to draw his eyes away. Leon with his flower crown was still as eye catching as ever, and Leon caused stares and caught eyes wherever he went.

Only when he let down all barriers to spar with Cloud did he still feel the need to remove them.

No feelings, just battle.

It was oddly endearing. But Cloud did miss that fiery crown.

“How is your ... situation?” Leon asked in return.

Cloud wished he didn’t. However ... he had been staring.

*Fair’s fair.* “Still Buds. But they’re not disappearing, they’re getting bigger. So ...”

Leon hummed in agreement. Though what he was agreeing with Cloud wasn’t certain. Leon gave him a slight smile, reassuring. Cloud returned it easily.

Finally Leon lifted his Gunblade from the crystal wall and turned to dispose of the Blooms properly before their spar, with fire- he’d clearly learnt a lesson from Yuffie’s ‘innocent’ poking around in his room and now got rid of them immediately.

*Shame, I’d have liked to examine them.* Cloud immediately slapped himself, Leon looked at him concerned. *Wow, Strife, no such thing as boundaries or anything! That’s personal shit you’re thinking about, knock it off.*

“Don’t beat yourself up before I have the chance to,” Leon snarked, clearly a bit worried for Cloud though as his tone wasn’t as sharp and witty as was typical.

“I’m not I just ...” Cloud shook his head roughly, and hefted his Buster Sword off his back and got into position. “I think we’ve talked enough.” *Less talking, less thinking, more doing-*

*more fighting.*

“Late Bloomer’s first.”

“... Oh you did *not*- !”

---

The act of Confessing with Blooms; Presenting the object of your affections with a literal embodiment of your feelings, the most romantic and intimate of exchanges. Some argue, this act is more intimate than sex ... than wedding vows, than declaring it from the rooftops.

It starred in movies, books, paintings and plays- sealing the love between two romantic partners as often as The Kiss. - *cue the soft piano music and prolonged eye contact ...*

Cloud shuffled downstairs silently. A week later. It was late and he’d sparred with Leon until his ears rang and his body ached. A thrilling, accomplished feeling, and one that left him tired and ready for bed. However, nature called.

Just when he’d gotten comfortable too.

After taking a leak and washing his hands- he spotted one of his pesky Buds poking out innocently from his bangs, displaced from his earlier attempt at a nap. Cloud frowned. *You little shit ... you’re resilient today ... hope no one else spotted it.*

He was too tired to deal with it right now, but tomorrow he’d be extra vigilant with his combing. Cloud tucked it out of the way, by his ear and went back to finishing himself up in the bathroom.

Business finished, Cloud padded back towards his room, but as he passed the kitchen he heard a soft feminine gasp.

“T-Tifa ...”

Cloud blinked. *Aerith? What’s she doing up- and Tifa’s there too?*

Partly suspecting midnight snacks, the blond peered around the door. He was not clear on the scene at first, the moonlight illuminated the room and no lights were on. His view of the kitchen was that of silver highlights and deep shadows, the ambience of the kitchen cool and quiet across the familiar domestic landscape of furniture and surface tops.

There. Standing perfectly in the frame of the window, two silhouettes. Tifa and Aerith.

Tifa’s hands were slightly outstretched, presenting something to Aerith, and the daintier of the two held a hand to her mouth, as if surprised. She was shaking slightly, her hair was down in a beautiful waving waterfall, her large, baggy sleep clothes hung in soft folds off of her narrow frame.

“F-for me?”

Cloud leaned a little closer to listen.

Tifa let out a nervous little laugh, fully dressed looking like she had been waiting. “Yeah, Aer. For you, they’ve ... they’ve always been for you.”

The brawler was clearly embarrassed, but Cloud noted the tilt to her jaw and the moonlight that cut sharply across her chin. Embarrassed, nervous, yet acting fearless.

“Oh my stars ... Tifa, I had no idea.”

Aerith covered her mouth again.

“I know.”

“I ...”

“I know Aerith. I knew you were unaware, you’re too kind to leave things this serious unsaid.” Tifa reached out to place a hand on Aerith’s shoulder, sturdy, capable hands that were worn yet gentle. “When I realised, when I Bloomed, you were still in love ... still *are* in love, with someone else.”

“Tifa ...”

Cloud swallowed. *Zack ... Aerith wears her mourning flowers every day in tribute to him ...*

The were talking again, Cloud listened in, mouth dry.

“I was too afraid to ... to take the chance. But, I’ve been giving some advice to a friend who’s been struggling in love, and it occurred to us lately that I’m really shit at taking my own advice and facing my feelings. It’s a bit hypocritical.”

Aerith’s giggle escaped from behind her hand, Tifa now shyly dipping her head. “No, no. You’re not a hypocrite, I understand. It must have been hard for you when you realised that it was, you know ... me.”

Cloud almost fell over. *Aerith! Tifa loves Aerith! But her mourning flowers- a-and Tifa’s Daffodil ... oh shit. No wonder she was so nervous about Confessing- and she looked at that crown of Aerith’s every day, knowing she didn’t have a chance.*

Cloud hid himself back behind the door, hands over his mouth. *Shit.*

Anxious to make sure that she was okay, he peered through the keyhole, ears sharp as he watched. Long hair shimmered as Tifa shook her head. “Blooming for you has never been awful, Aerith, please believe that!” Tifa took Aerith’s hand in hers. “You’re beautiful, you’re kind, you care so much for everyone, and you’re loyal. You wear your Blooms despite what anyone else thinks, and ... honestly, that’s the best thing about you. You’ve never tried to hide what you feel, you still love him, and I know that you always will, and that’s beautiful. You’re so strong ...”

Tifa knelt. Cloud’s heart leapt into his throat. *Holy shit!*

“Tifa ...”

“These Blooms are for you, Aerith. However you accept them, know that I will always love you as a friend. I want you to be happy, I would do anything to see you smile the way you do every day of my life.”

*Holy shit ... she actually did it.*

Held aloft as an offering, a bouquet and a Confession. Asters, Flora’s Bells, Honeyflowers, Vervain, and a single yellow Daffodil. Honesty, Daintiness, Sweet Affection, Enchantment, and Unrequited Love - though, in this moment, in this composition, Cloud realised, there was a secondary meaning to the flower that had caused so much doubt. Respect and earnestness.

“Tifa ... they’re beautiful ...” Aerith’s voice croaked, her cheeks dampening in the moonlight. She reached out to trace a finger across the very edge of the Blooms. “I just ... How do I deserve you, why me?”

Cloud held his breath, confused, anxious. Had Tifa not said enough?

The brown eyed woman let out a gentle laugh. “You make me feel like I’m home.”

*Home ...*

Cloud blinked, stepping away from the door.

Oh ...

He barely heard what happened next. Aerith’s timid acceptance, “Me too,” and the sound of his two friends crying in each other’s arms. Cloud edged away, worried now more than ever of being caught, especially now his mind was racing.

*Like home ... oh ...*

It was that simple. His feelings clicked into place.

The blond took the stairs two at a time, feeling like he was walking on air. He shut his bedroom door with a soft click and turned to sit on his bed. Cosy drinks on an old lumpy couch, comfort in a companion who would always have his back in battle, the unique drive in them both to match each other strength for strength, the warmth of knowing his little habits and having his memorised in turn. The trust, the care, the warmth. *Feels like home ...*

Something unexpected caressed his cheekbone.

Cloud reached up to brush it away, but it returned in the exact same place. It didn’t feel like hair .. Grasping it, Cloud pulled it away so that he could focus his thoughts on silver eyes and the uneven beat of his heart ...

*Wait ... what is that?*

Cloud lowered his hand, a burst of white catching his eyes. A Bloom.

*The Bud, it's opened. It Bloomed.* Cloud caressed the edge of the flower. Long flower petals in a spidery-star shape with a heart of clusters in gold at the centre. It was somewhat small but brilliant in it's whiteness.

Cloud knew this one, he knew it instantly. He recalled it often being a part of the Blooms that grew for him. It symbolised attribute most recognised in him, most admired and beloved by all who knew him; Cloud no exception it seemed.

“Edelweiss ... Courage.”

---

Plucking Blooms was easier than plucking Buds.

Cloud hadn't been able to sleep the previous night, but as soon as dawn arrived he went outside to breathe the new day. His head was bare, but ... for a better reason that merely hiding his emotions. Someone else deserved attention because of their Blooms, Cloud could wait. He was still reeling with his realisation, on one level. On another he merely wanted to finish absorbing this warm feeling. It had started when he'd seen his first Bloom, and lasted even to now like he was carrying a small sun in his chest.

He did a few errands in the early morning, and returned before anyone else was up. He bumped into Leon, who was surprised at how early he was awake. Cloud shrugged and accepted his morning coffee with a smile, thanking Leon as the older man went off to work.

Cloud watched him leave with a smile, his smile brightening when the brunet glanced back at the house and saw him. He waved awkwardly and kept walking.

*Dork*, Cloud thought fondly. He went upstairs.

He slipped a note just inside Tifa's bedroom door, leaving a little bottle of her favourite chocolate drink on top of it to ensure it was found. *I'm proud of you Tifa xx*

Then, he took himself to his room and hauled himself there, fortified the door, and opened his parcel. A book of flower meanings. For the next hour he matched each of his Blooms to a meaning and smiled. *Yeah, that's him. There's so many too, how did I not realise that I was falling for Leon when he makes me feel so welcome and accepted? Like home.*

Clearly, Cloud summarised, he was an idiot. *But* , he brushed his fingertips across the vibrant new Blooms, *I'm a lucky idiot.*

---

The next day, Tifa came downstairs with a blush and shy but happy smile on her face.

Cloud smiled at her warmly, no Blooms still. Someone else deserved the love and attention for them first. Plus, if he was going to tell anyone first, it would be Tifa. His best friend.

Then finally, *Finally* , she arrived.

And she was beautiful.

Tifa glowed in her bedheaded glory, cosy jumper, sleeping shorts, bunny slippers that Leon had gotten her last christmas because he had a weird sense of humour and Cloud loved it. Her cheeks were red and she walked nervously into the room, head a little down as if to hide - but she was too strong, nerves would not defeat her.

Upon her head was her crown. Blooms of Asters, Flora's Bells, Honeyflowers, Vervain all bobbing their lovely colours in the morning light. As always, they looked absolutely lively and bright next to her dark hair.

Leon gasped, and a smile grew on his face. One that briefly robbed Cloud's attention until Yuffie screamed a second later. "Tifa! Your Blooms!"

She rushed into the older woman, arms holding her tight as she stared at the white, beautiful bellflowers that hung from her crown and swayed in perfect harmony besides the pink Flora's Bells.

Cloud pushed his coffee back into Leon's hands, no time for that useless liquid, and went to hug his best friend. Tifa held him back tight, almost crushing the delighted Yuffie in the middle of them.

"You did it," Cloud whispered, gently pulling on a lock of her hair to make the pretty white bells sway in place, they were as strong as the Yellow Daffodil that they had replaced. Cloud recalled from his book yesterday the meaning of this new Bloom, and almost felt his eyes tear up.

Lily of the Valley: Happiness.

No one was more deserving, in his opinion.

Tifa grinned, holding back her two oldest friends, "I took my own advice," she whispered back.

"Congratulations," Leon added from a comfortable distance away.

Tifa held a hand out when Cloud did, "Come on fearless leader, you're not getting out of this."

Yuffie tugged him closer by his belt and Leon rolled his eyes when Cloud snorted. *I told him they were extra handholds*. Leon joined a little awkwardly, but he seemed happy. He told Tifa that they suited her and almost brought the happy woman to tears with his kind words.

"Who's the lucky guy?" Yuffie chirped eventually, having held off her questions long enough. Her newfound patience and sensitivity allowing them to share a moment before she eagerly asked who had made Tifa so happy.

Leon looked interested too, though there was a slight smirk to his expression and Cloud just had to wonder if he'd figured it out already. *Leon is very smart, I'm sure he already knows.*

"I ..." Tifa blushed.

"I think that would be me."

All four sets of eyes turned to the last member of their household, and three of them could not believe what they were seeing.

"Holy shit."

Cloud echoed Leon moments after that.

Aerith waved at them, hair neatly brushed and a blue dress sweeping from shoulder to knees, complete with those oversized boots that she refused to throw away. Upon her head the tiny little Periwinkles, sweet remembrance, poked out proudly from a crown of Valerian, Snowdrops, Snapdragons and tufts of Yarrow flowers.

*No fucking way ...*

Accommodating Disposition, Hope, Strength, Healing - Cloud knew just by Tifa's crown remaining that Aerith must have returned her feelings, but for her to embrace them so wholeheartedly to have a whole new crown already was beyond words. Four new flowers for Tifa, with the proud pink Periwinkles for Zack, a love she would never forget.

Yuffie screamed.

Leon was saying something over her yells.

Cloud just swore again and slammed a hand on the table "Fuck breakfast! Leon, get the drink!"

"Omg omg when did this happen!?" Yuffie bounced around them, chattering about cakes and parties and wanting to know everything- Leon scooped her up and let the two blushing women have their moment.

Aerith took a breath, and took a few steps forward until she was within Tifa's space. Then, in front of the entire room, with happy tears on her face she whispered; "For you," and plucked a bouquet of Blooms. Once gathered, she pressed the four flowers that held her affections for Tifa into the woman's hands.

Yuffie was vibrating, both hands over her mouth.

Cloud rubbed at the dust in his eyes.

Leon just smiled.

Tifa was sobbing as she lifted Aerith off of the floor in a hug, Aerith pulling her head up to kiss over her cheeks and touch her crown. Tifa accepted Aerith's bouquet though she was too



teary to speak, holding the flowers to her chest as a precious treasure. Holding Aerith up with one arm and causing the Snapdragons, Strength, to bounce in Aerith's Crown.

Leon fetched glasses, Yuffie kept yelling, Cloud brought out a bottle of something festive, the new couple kept hugging in the middle of the room. *It was perfect.*

---

“Hey.”

“Hey, sorry to pull you away from your future wife.”

Tifa blushed, “Oh shut up.” she elbowed him in the ribs as she set down their usual drinks on her bar. The grand opening was only days away, but that did not stop her and Cloud using it at their personal private lounge in the meanwhile. Glasses glittered behind the counter and overhead on the rack, alcohol caught the light in the locked cabinet, the newly installed beer taps still smelled a little of the packaging they'd dragged them out of, and the bar was so polished Cloud could almost see himself in the wood. It was an exciting time, but when it was just the two of them it was cosy like a second home.

Cloud smirked and raised his hands in mock surrender, “Just saying, you'll break Yuffie's heart if you don't walk Aerith down the aisle.” He picked up his whiskey before Tifa could snatch it back.

As if reading his thoughts, Tifa moved the bottle away and shook her head. With a grin she sweetly countered his teasing; “Right, I guess I'll have to let her down gently when she learns it'll be a private affair.”

Cloud snickered, imagining her face. Yuffie's wails of disappointment would be heard on Destiny Islands. But it was just the two of them tonight, and they had a lot to catch up on.

Cloud and covered her hand. “I'm happy for you Tifa. You did good.”

Her smile was worth every sunrise. “I should thank you, Cloud. All this talk about feelings made me realise I should face my own after so long,” she raised a hand to play with the Lily's, a sweet little habit she had picked up over the week.

*She needed me for 'feelings' related advice? What is she on about?* Rolling his eyes, Cloud shook his head, “You didn't need me for that.”

“Accept the compliment you, dummy, or I'll swap out your coffee with decaf.”

“You're a monster,” Cloud gasped.

Tifa giggled, “I know your weakness, that's all ...” she rolled her wrist, making the ice chink in the glass. They drank in silence for a few minutes. “So ... it's been a week since we last spoke about your situation. Any news?” she sipped from her fruit drink as she mentally made plans for the final touches to her bar- the decorations were coming along nicely now the roof

had finally been waterproofed seven times over. - in honour of that she was calling it Seventh Heaven.

*Ah, the big question.* Cloud looked away bashfully, “Well ...”

Catching his tone, Tifa’s attention snapped to him. “Oh my lord, what’s happened?”

Cloud glanced around the place, the bar was empty and locked, and it was late at night, but ... Ninjas existed.

Satisfied that they were alone, he reached into his pocket for the sample Bloom he’d carefully saved for this talk. The Bloom sat comfortably in his hand and it’s white colour drew all attention to it’s petals. It laid upon his palm as he offered it for Tifa’s viewing, slightly crushed, but recognisable.

His best friend made a sound torn between a sob and a coo. Tifa cupped his hand and stared, her expression soft. One of her hands was cooler from holding her drink, and she made no move to touch it.

Tifa’s smile was very warm. “Ah, I see.”

Cloud blushed a bit, he’d freaked out a lot more than she was at this reveal. He turned his head away, “Something tells me that you saw this coming.”

Tifa giggled and released his hand, “Maybe.” She leaned on the bar with a smug glint in her eyes, “But it is nothing to be ashamed of. You’re not the first to have fallen for our fearless leader.” She sipped her drink again, “You’ll be in good hands, Cloud. I’m happy for you.”

Cloud picked up the Edelweiss and nodded, “Yeah ...”

-

Making his way to their usual meeting spot, Cloud felt like he was pushing through water. His feet moved but not quickly enough, or was it too quickly? Cloud was nervous, and he had to constantly remind himself to keep his grip on the Blooms loose to not destroy them. They were tucked up his long sleeve to keep them a secret from the town he was walking through, because he wanted one man only to have the honour of seeing them.

*This seemed so much easier in my head.* Cloud forced himself to breathe deep and patted his stomach to soothe the agitated butterflies that were building with every step closer to Leon. *Ah shit, there they go again, just at the thought of his name.*

Any thought of Leon sent his heart a flutter and his insides to goo. On the one hand it was so gross, but on the other it was physical proof that his feelings were not a whim. *He can affect me this much by just crossing my mind. I can’t believe I didn’t know at once, I don’t feel so much like myself, so comfortable around anyone else but Leon- ah, damnit, nerves again.*

Cloud rounded a corner and; there he was in the flesh, leaning idly against the wall.

“I hope I didn’t make you wait?”

Leon opened his eyes and smiled, Cloud returned it easily and his heart skipped a beat- how had Tifa done this so calmly? He felt like he was about to combust on the spot. "You good?"

"I'm fine, you ready?" Nodding slightly, Leon moved to start walking, assuming as always that they would be ready to set off on patrol immediately. Cloud seized his chance with a heart that felt like it was about to burst in fear, and took hold of Leon's sleeve to stop him.

He at once came to a halt.

"Cloud?" the older man turned around, his back to a sunset as vibrant as the Blooms in his hair. Cloud did not know their meanings, he had guesses- however it was rude to look them up and he'd anxiously skipped each flower that looked even vaguely orange while he was researching his own Blooms.

Thankfully, none of his own were orange or red.

The blond realised he was still holding onto Leon's sleeve. He let go without a word.

The abnormal behaviour had peaked Leon's interest. He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "Is everything alright?" Leon asked, worried.

"Everything is fine. I just needed to tell you something," Cloud gave him a half smile and brought his other hand out from behind his back, "My situation has ... changed." Edelweiss, Lilac, Kennedia, Ivy and yellow Iris; Courage, Pride, Intellectual Beauty, Friendship, Passion. Cloud's head was bare of a crown, but that did not change that the Blooms were in his hands.

"Ah ..."

*Well that's not a convincing noise.* Cloud looked up. Leon's smile was a little tight.

"Congratulations."

A stiff well wish. Cloud analysed it worriedly; *Not a refusal yet- should I keep going? Is he hinting that I should stop? But why does he look so sad?* Cloud's eyes narrowed slightly. Leon had never Confessed to anyone ...

*I can't stop now.*

"Thanks, it's been a long time coming according to my favourite bartender," Cloud leaned against the wall and looked down at his Blooms, "I overheard something the other day and it put things in perspective for me. The next thing I knew," he gestured at them with a roll of his eyes. "They're much easier to pluck than Buds."

Leon snorted softly, "I'll bet. Your spikes probably hid all the Buds for the first few days." he was looking everywhere but Cloud.

"Yeah ... so ..."

Cloud took a step closer.

"Well, since you know who they're for now ... what are you going to do?" Leon asked.

*Oh ... oh! Could he ...*

Did he not think that this was a Confession? That Cloud was merely showing him to share news? The nervous eyes, the refusal to look at the Blooms, the sadness. No blush, no gentle refusal as he had done to many admirers in the past who had approached him with Blooms.

He must not have realised that these Blooms were for him.

Cloud ducked his head with a slight snort. *Oh Hyne this man ...*

“Well, first I’m going to call you an idiot.” Leon finally looked at him again, annoyed frown on his face making Cloud grin. “I haven’t even said anything yet and you’re already jumping to conclusions.” *Here we go. I can do this, Tifa will break my arm if I chicken out now.*

Cloud held them out to Leon, a clear, obvious, unmistakable gesture.

“I’m not sure I should have Bloomed Kennedia for you- you’re a dork.” He turned the flowers in his hand and admired them. The Lilac bowed its many heads gently, the Ivy’s translucent white petals looked like a star.

Leon’s choking noise made Cloud look away from his Blooms, the older man was red across his face and even his ears. *Ok, that’s fucking unfair*, Cloud wanted to make him do that every day now he knew that look existed.

“Me?”

Cloud took one of Leon’s hands and pressed his Blooms into them, “Yeah, Lee. For you.”

*Now for the hard part.*

“Do you accept?”

Leon’s fingers curled around the stems and he brought them, and Cloud’s hand closer to him. He squeezed just the once, then, with Cloud holding his breath, reached up to his own Blooms and easily plucked away one of each flower- like he had practised this, like he had done this for a really, really long time.

Cloud did not dare look away. *Wait ... they’re for ... they’re for me?*

Leon held his Blooms to Cloud’s hand, Cloud took them immediately.

“Yes,” Leon might have whispered, Cloud wasn’t too sure- he’d covered his mouth an instant later and then all he could think of was how nice it felt to kiss this man, and how stupid he was for not noticing this before.

---

Lightly tugging on Leon’s Blooms was both intimate and fun, it made Leon lightly blush and he would go slightly cross eyed trying to see which flower had caught Cloud’s attention.

Cloud was easily addicted to the caress of the Blooms, smiling as Leon sleepily blinked away on the pillow beside him.

*Which looks better?* Cloud wondered, just as sleepy though it must have been well into midday. *Bruises on your skin, or Blooms in your hair?* His hand curled through long silky strands of brunet hair, then fingers traced the slender column of his throat to count the marks left from the previous night. *One, two, three, four, five, six-*

Leon reached up to catch Cloud's hand when his indulgent touch made him shiver. The older man brought Cloud's hand to his mouth, planting a kiss to his fingertips and palm. "Mornin'."

Cloud smiled, nuzzling closer. "Good morning."

They laid together several minutes more. Sheets still twisted, Bloom petals almost faded away from the bedspread, pulled by accident by passionate hands, decorating their bed like a monument to last night.

Cloud shivered when Leon ran one such faded petal up the crease of his arm to his elbow, he smiled and nipped at Leon's bottom lip in harmless retaliation. "Tickles."

Leon returned his smile.

Several minutes later found Cloud standing before the bathroom mirror. In one hand was his comb, the other fluttered at the top of his head. His crown of Blooms was full and strong, unchanged too.

Almost out of habit he reached up to tug one free ... he had disposed of them every day for months now, just a little twist and-

He caught sight of Leon in the mirror's reflection.

Leon strolled past, his fiery crown there as always and mesmerising to Cloud. He would deny that his cheeks grew hot to match the fire when he recalled, for the thousandth time, that those Blooms were for him. Because of him. Cloud Strife.

Cloud lowered his hand. *Should I ...?*

As if sensing his eyes, Leon looked at him. He tilted his head, silently asking him if he was okay, but said nothing.

Cloud gripped his comb a little harder. *Should I ...?*

He met Leon's eyes and brought the comb up to his head, silently willing Leon to watch. *Okay, carefully, like Tifa does it.* He ran his comb through the bedhead and spikes, cautiously, slowly; Leon never once looked away as Cloud kept his eyes on him.

The blond set the comb down and finally ducked his head, blushing all over at the intimacy they'd just shared. Despite his embarrassment he happily sunk into Leon's embrace when the

older man wound his arms around Cloud's hips, caressing the protruding hip bones as he did so.

Cloud chuckled nervously. Leon just smiled and pressed a kiss to his temple, the crown lightly caressing Leon's cheek in turn. "I ... I don't think I'll be needing this anymore," Cloud murmured after yet another long moment merely soaking up each other's presences.

Cloud threw the comb over his shoulder, not caring where it landed.

Leon squeezed, blinking rapidly- suspiciously, and turning Cloud's head to capture his mouth yet again in a kiss that Cloud was quickly becoming addicted to. *Hyne, I love this man.*

Cloud stepped away briefly to tug on his clothes, tempted to steal Leon's t-shirt.

He declined just this once, he didn't want Leon to have to walk around half naked- that view was for Cloud. But next time, when Leon had a few spares in his closet, or on the floor, or under the bed ...

Cloud leaned on Leon's shoulder as the older man finished using the bathroom sink, the blond's hand cascaded through his locks fondly. "Ah, that's new." The Blond gently touched a white flower that had replaced one from yesterday.

"My heart doesn't ache anymore," Leon replied, pink across his nose again as he set down his toothbrush and leaned back into Cloud's embrace.

Cloud was blushing too, but he pressed his head into the man's shoulder and just smiled, heart skipping a beat again, "So that's what it meant? Pining or something like that?"

"Something like that," Leon agreed, reddening more.

Cloud placed a light kiss to his neck, upon one of the love bites he'd left last night. Leon smiled at him and subtly tilted his head for more ... Cloud obliged. They'd never leave the bathroom at this rate ... Cloud was fine with that though. "Hey ... what do yours mean?"

"My Blooms?" Leon was surprised, "I thought you would have looked it up."

Cloud snorted, "That's rude, why'd I do that?"

"I just assumed ..." Leon turned his attention to the mirror, eyes moving away from Cloud's to look at his crown. He pointed at each one after he'd gathered his thoughts; "Salvia blue, Ivy, Nasturtium-"

"Well that one's a mouthful," Cloud snickered. Leon lightly elbowed him for the interruption.

"Tuberose and Jonquil. They mean; I think of you, Friendship, Conquest, Dangerous Pleasures-" Leon gracefully endured the new fit of laughter that Cloud let out, rolling his eyes and elbowing him again until he was able to turn and face him. Leon's lips were excellent at shutting him up, he tasted like coffee and toothpaste. *Mmm, he must have nipped downstairs while I was getting dressed .*

Cloud sighed, sated, “And?”

Leon brushed a hand over Cloud’s cheek. Infinitely tender in a way Cloud had never seen, or experienced, but was becoming enamoured with. Leon pressed his forehead to Cloud’s; “Jonquil. Love returned.”

“Ah, that’s the new one. It’s my favourite,” Cloud admitted, hands resting comfortably above Leon’s hipbones. It was white, with a yellow centre, it was a little like a daffodil, but softer, smaller, and happier in Leon’s crown.

Leon hummed in agreement, hands massaging Cloud back. “Come on, your coffee is downstairs.”

“My hero,” Cloud smiled, leaving Leon’s room with their hands linked and matching crowns upon their heads.

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