

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Final Crisis

“We came... to tell you... our memories... Come Planet! Show us your answer!... To the settling of everything!!”
— *Cloud Strife*

Faith.

Sometimes, it's all you have to go on. The distant hope that no matter how unfortunate the state of your situation becomes, things will somehow work out in the end. Faith can be a powerful tool, a far off lighthouse in a storm of grief and misery, or it can be an anchor. Holding one back with false hopes and fraudulent dreams.

Faith for Cloud Strife was his belief in the Planet. The belief that even at their darkest hour, Holy or Lifestream would intervene and set right the scales of destiny. And as he lay there, in that smoldering crater that was once a sector of Midgar, his faith began to waiver.

The tormenting rain drops trickled down his blackened cheeks as he weakly stared heavenward, at the ebony sky above him. All was in calmness now. The tremendous giant, the Onyx Weapon, hovered above the incapacitated bodies of Avalanche as those still conscious waited for the inevitable - their deaths. Cloud watched in quiet horror as the beast looked down upon them with the rage of the Planet. A world which had been pushed too far. The anger of the land.

The Onyx Weapon was no longer under the control of Jenova, as through some welcomed miracle the alien cancer had been eradicated after centuries of struggle. Cloud himself felt the alien's death in his mind, his body still connected by its evil cells. Now that Jenova was gone, all of humanity should be celebrating. But the Planet was not in a celebratory mood. Weapon would once and for all wipe the Planet clean of the contagion of mankind. Starting with these gnats which lay at its feet, like discarded rag dolls strewn about the smoldering crater.

The damaged beast looked down at them, angered by the injuries they had dared to visit upon it. The Onyx Weapon would suffer no more insolence. The time was now to end this conflict so that the Planet may start anew. Mankind would be erased to make way for a new age. The age of Weapon.

The orange skies above Cosmo Canyon seemed far more quiescent than usual. Not even the crickets chirped in disturbance of the overwhelming silence. It was as if the very grains of sand and desert weeds were closely watching the struggle taking place an entire continent away.

The remains of the laboratory of Elder Bugenhagen were as still as the rest of the canyon, only the faint sounds of drums pounded in the distance. Within the wreckage of the lab, a holographic representation of the Planet glistened and crackled with static, as a lone occupant stood vigil over its image.

Red XIII, otherwise known as Nanaki, sat in front of the model in stern silence. The former savior of the Planet watched the colors which danced around the orb's surface, each shade representing an emotion or shift in the life force of the Planet. Something very crucial was taking place at Midgar. Even with Red's recent total memory loss at the hands of Junon Inc., the fiery creature somehow sensed a graveness in the Lifestream. The people that had been here earlier - those who called themselves Avalanche - they were in critical danger.

The crimson beast flickered its fiery tail, staring down at the Planet's image with one compassionate yellow eye. Its mane had been cut short by its recent captors, and it was still weak from the ordeal at Rocket Town. Red did not yet remember his friends from Avalanche, just that he was told how they had saved him from the clutches of the Junon corporation and more specifically, Rufus Shinra. But now Red XIII was returned to the valley he had sworn to protect. Even without his memories, Nanaki felt a deep sense of duty to the people of this canyon, and to those who live outside it. And even though

he had no clear recollection of those who now struggled for the life of the Planet, he offered a silent prayer to the Planet to keep them safe.

Barret Wallace's vision was dim; his eyes were filled with blood and tears. The large miner slowly shifted his head, stabbing pain erupted from his neck as he did, causing the large ex-miner to clench his teeth in agony. A small grunt escaped his lips as he looked down at his body, or rather, up. Barret saw that he had been pinned under several steel girders and other extensive pieces of debris, and was now hanging almost upside down on an incline of wreckage. He shifted his gaze toward the giant hovering high above him.

Barret noticed that he had been thrown the farthest by Weapon's blast, and it was no doubt miraculous that he was still at least breathing. Then something else caught Barret's eye. In the wreckage next to him - Cait Sith's inanimate form. The newly-rebuilt cat and moogles seemed to be severely damaged to the point that they no longer functioned.

It was then that Barret realized how he'd survived. Cait put himself between the blast and Barret, ultimately saving his comrade. Barret silently cursed himself for his constant torment of Reeve. Shinra manager, spy, rat - words Barret used in slander of the unlikely member of their team. Reeve may have made his mistakes in the past, but he had proven himself time and again. Stuffed body or no - Barret was wrong.

But the one time terrorist had recently learned he was wrong about a great deal of things: Yuffie being one of them. The young ninja sacrificed so much for the Planet - yet all Barret ever saw in her was the same thief that had once taken all of their materia and fled to Wutai. Even with all her faults, Barret secretly respected the young ninja.

The ex-miner paused his train of thought for a moment. Why had he been so reflective at a time like this? The answer came to him almost instantly: It was renouncements like these one made before returning to the Planet. The worst part of it was, he may never see Marlene again. His little daughter - how he regretted once again leaving her in the care of others while he fought for the welfare of the Planet and everyone else on it.

For Marlene alone, Barret prayed to the Planet.

"Cid!"

Shera suddenly sat up in her bed at Godo's house in Wutai. The timid engineer wore a large bandage on her head, and several smaller ones over her arms and face, covering injuries she had sustained in the crash of the Highwind.

"Shera, what is it?" Reeve sat in the chair next to her bed, watching over his friend while the rest of Avalanche fought for the life of the Planet in Midgar.

"Reeve," she weakly answered, "Where's Cid?" Shera carefully lied back on the bed, while Reeve stood up to help her. "I'm okay," she carefully waved him off.

"Well," the mayor of Nibelheim slowly sat back in his chair, "He's in Midgar right now. The guys went to stop Weapon from destroying the Planet."

"What about Cait?" Shera noticed Reeve no longer wore the headset he used to control his robotic cat and moogles team. "Did he go with them?"

"Yeah," Reeve lowered his head slightly, "But I lost contact with him a few minutes ago." Reeve silently prayed she wouldn't ask him the question.

"What happened?" She did.

"Uh," Reeve nervously scratched the back of his head, "The Weapon blasted at the team, and I had Cait jump in front to shield the blast. But then I lost contact."

Shera's eyes grew wide, "Are they - ?" her voice faltered.

Reeve stood up and took her hand, "We don't know for sure what happened. I just lost contact with Cait, that's all." Reeve looked down into her face, the onset of tears forming at the corners of her eyes. "Please, Shera, don't do this to yourself." Reeve knew Shera was one of the strongest willed people on the Planet. But the possibility of losing Cid was too much for even her to handle.

"Godamn Weapon."

Cid Highwind's voice was hoarse and raspy as he silently cursed up at the creature levitating above him. His normally shiny blue flight jacket was charred and covered in grime. His face was coated in filth, his eyes looked like two pearls in a bed of black sand.

He gazed up at the dark, rainy skies above him, remembering how this entire adventure began. A simple flight through orange, peaceful skies to Nibelheim. The reactor "mission". Only this mission was one of peace. He and Shera agreed to redesign the Nibel Makoro reactor to run on Corel coal instead of the life force of the Planet. It was a serene beginning to almost two weeks of chaos. Two weeks. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

Cid could still hear Cloud's question ringing in his head, the one he asked that very first night. It was about Shera. More specifically, it was about the fact that Cid hadn't yet told her how he really felt. He knew Shera understood how he really felt - she was very perceptive that way. He just couldn't bring himself to say the words out loud. And now that it seemed like he may never see her again, Cid cursed each and every second he wasted with her. Countless times he could have swept Shera up into his arms and carried her off into the sunset.

He couldn't endure the thought of life without her - that was too much. Cid had journeyed across the four corners of the Planet and beyond, but one more step without the timid tea servant at his side was an impossible feat.

"If you're gonna finish us," the grizzly pilot cursed up at the harbinger of doom above him, "Do it already."

"Cid?" a voice quietly called from several yards away.

Tifa Lockhart slowly opened her eyelids as drops of rain on her besmirched face pulled her from sweet unconsciousness. The former barmaid heard the silent hexes from her teammate above the low rumble of the distant storm, a sound which relieved and saddened her heart. It was good to hear Cid was alive, but neither of them were in any condition to continue the fight.

Where was Cloud? Tifa weakly turned her tender neck to each side in attempt to locate her fiance, but had no luck. She somehow knew Cloud was still alive. There was just some intangible feeling that her hero had not left her yet. She simply knew Cloud was still alive, he had to be. When this was all over, they would get married, with their friends gathered together to celebrate it. Faith for Tifa Lockhart was that no matter how much trouble she got in, her hero would somehow return to save her.

"I'm here," Cid answered slowly. "I'm glad you're still with us."

"Same here," she attempted to smile, but even the effort of that was too much for her. There was one more question she wanted to ask, but she was too afraid of the answer. She simply watched as the Weapon hovered above them like some divine judge, and Tifa Lockhart was helpless to answer for her trespasses.

Yuffie Kisaragi looked up in silent horror at the abomination in the sky above her. It would appear her training would be all for naught. At the very least, the young ninja took some comfort in the pride her father Godo would be feeling at this moment as she made a last stand here, not for materia, not even for Wutai - for mankind itself. Here, Yuffie would meet a noble end. She only hoped that those who asked would be told her tale - but told it truly - the good along with the bad. Yuffie had made bad judgments in the past, and she tried to atone for them, but there was always the feeling she held deep down inside that it would never be enough. The people she stole from, the people she'd cheated - what would they say about the little thief now if they knew how much their survival had depended on her.

Faith for the people of Wutai was their belief in the spirit of Da-Chao and the Water God Leviathan, but for Yuffie, it was a belief in herself. But at times like this, she would greatly welcome any assistance, no matter whose hand extended it.

And now our story returns to Cloud.

The young ex-soldier of fortune lay there, motionless, unable to muster even the strength meet this end on his feet. Weapon stared down upon him as before, but the time for contemplation, it seemed, had long passed. Cloud recognized the familiar concentration of the great beast. Its strain in summoning some inner forces. Even after all it had been through, Weapon had yet more than enough strength to clear this world of mankind for all eternity. Cloud watched in abject horror as the familiar blue sparks of electricity began to form and gather in front of the monster.

The Onyx Weapon spread its wings wide, its arms thrust outward at its sides, a low rumble emerging from its depths. This would be the end of all things. The end as Cloud knew it. There was nothing more to be done. There would be no golden shiny wire of hope. There would be no deus ex machina to swoop in at the last possible second to save them all. This was it.

But even still, Cloud held onto his faith. Just as the Weapon's chest plates parted, ready to unleash his soulless fury upon those below. To seal the fates of those unfortunates whose very lives would be ended in a single, barbarous stroke. But Cloud nonetheless beseeched anything in this life or the next to intervene on the side of angels.

"Planet..." the blonde hero quietly pled, "Please..." Cloud watched as the orb of energy continued to amass at the foci of the Weapon's summons, just approaching the point of release. "Hear us, Aeris..."

Faith.

Sometimes, it's all you have to go on. The distant hope that no matter how unfortunate the state of your situation becomes, things will somehow work out in the end. Faith can be a powerful tool, a far off lighthouse in a storm of grief and misery, or it can be an anchor. Holding one back with false hopes and fraudulent dreams.

And sometimes, you have to make your own destiny.

A white hot bolt of energy burst forth from the heavens and passed through the upper torso of the Weapon like it were made of paper. The blast easily pierced the already damaged hide of the juggernaut, killing it instantly and ending the threat that almost brought about the end of all things.

The titanic creature lifelessly drifted to the chasm that was once Sector Four, crashing with such a force that the Planet trembled minutes after it landed.

Cloud was speechless. Had the Planet heard his plea? The very heavens themselves opened up and intervened on behalf of humanity. The ex-soldier weakly mustered up the last of his strength and struggled to his feet, as the rain above him began to end and the sun caressed the distant horizon. It was as if the Planet were in a state of relief. Cloud saw some of the others making their way toward him. Tifa and Cid helped Barret along as the ex-miner limped toward him. Yuffie slowly walked to them as well, her little face covered in cuts and soot.

"Is everyone alright?" Cloud was the first to find his voice after the miracle they had just witnessed. A series of weak nods told him they were none the worse for wear. It looked as if the crisis had passed.

"You're welcome!"

An icy chill washed over the entire group as an arrogant voice called through the peaceful air. Cloud slowly turned to the source - Rufus Shinra. The arrogant executive stood proudly on a small mountain of debris, his hands casually tucked into his pockets. The light breeze flicked the errant strands of blonde hairs on his otherwise perfectly groomed features. Cold, blue eyes mirthfully glistened in the sunset as the pompous head of Junon smiled down at them.

Behind him, the blades of a sleek, black Junon Inc. helicopter slowed as the vessel powered down. The pilot carefully stepped out of the vehicle and stood behind Rufus, the dark visor on his polished helmet glistened in the sun's rays. "Rufus?" Barret looked up and growled at the new arrival, "Get lost."

"Now, now," Rufus smiled, "Is that anyway to talk to the man who single-handedly saved the Planet?"

"What?" Cid's eyes went wide at this proclamation.

"That's right," the Junon CEO held up a small black device as he continued grinning. "The Junon-1 took care of the Weapon infestation."

Cloud couldn't believe his ears. The last thing he ever thought possible has happened - Rufus Shinra saved the Planet: "Why?"

"Is it really that surprising?" Rufus raised an eyebrow, "I've no desire to rule over a dead world."

"You ain't rulin' \$#^&@ !" growled Barret.

"On the contrary," the Junon CEO smirked, "My Junon-1 will ensure an absolute grip on this entire Planet. And you, Avalanche, are helpless to stop me."

It was then that Cid let out a soft chuckle. Tifa and Barret turned their eyes upon him first, followed by Yuffie and Cloud, and finally Rufus. Cid's low chuckle continued for a few seconds, his lungs weakened by the exhaustion of the fight against Weapon, not to mention the years of heavy smoking.

"What's so blasted funny?" Rufus spat.

"That... fancy satellite of yours is a lemon, Rufus," Cid smiled weakly as his eyes glared up at the smug industrialist.

"What are you talking about?" Rufus scowled. He did not appreciate being toyed with. "The Junon-1 was built by some of the most brilliant minds Shinra had to offer."

"Yeah," Cid wheezed, "But remember when I told you adding coolant to the fuel wouldn't hurt it?"

"Yes," the color from Rufus' face began to drain.

"I lied." Cid sneered up at the now-shocked and speechless CEO. "I figured if you were telling the truth... about me goin' into space, I could fix it up there." Cid chuckled again. "If you weren't," he nodded, "She'll break orbit and drop like a sack of shit within the next few days, with me safely in the escape pod."

"No," Rufus began to tremble, "No!! You -"

"Oh, I'm sorry Rufus," Cid's tone was saccharine and condescending, "Did I lie to *you*?" The rest of Avalanche couldn't help but try to stifle their snickering as Rufus looked upon them with wide eyes.

"No matter," he finally collected himself. "I'll use it to rid the Planet of at least one of my problems," Rufus produced a small black remote from his pocket, "Namely, Avalanche." The weary adventurers looked up at him with contempt as he began pressing a sequence of buttons.

Suddenly, the helicopter pilot standing behind Rufus reached around him and slit his throat with a knife. Streams of blood burst forth from Rufus' neck, staining the front of his normally pristine white suit with rivers of crimson. Rufus' eyes were wide with shock. The remote to the Junon-1 dropped out of his hand as he fell to his knees, finally collapsing on the debris in front of them.

The team were rendered once again speechless. They stared up at the pilot with astonishment. The pilot simply dropped the blade on the ground next to Rufus' lifeless body, and slowly reached up to remove his helmet. Reno flashed a cocky smile at the group of stunned faces.

"Tell your Turk we're even," the assassin announced evenly. Without another word, he turned back to the Junon helicopter and fired up the engines, leaving Avalanche to piece together the unbelievable events of the past few minutes.

Springtime found the inhabitants of Rocket Town well.

Everyone had moved back into their homes with the complete dismantlement of Junon Inc. and any threats therein. Merely a month after the events that almost destroyed everything found Cid Highwind back in good health, in front of the Shanghai Inn barking at some of the townsfolk to straighten the banner that hung overhead.

Inside the luxurious establishment, ribbons and bows adorned the walls and ceilings, streamers crisscrossed every possible location not already occupied by some manner of decoration.

Yuffie Kisaragi stood near a large punch bowl filled to the brim with a pinkish drink, sitting on a large table against the wall of the clear pub area of the inn. The little ninja made quite the bridesmaid in her yellow sun dress, complete with large bow on the back, and matching yellow flowers in her hair in the stead of her normal headband. She carefully looked around at the crowded reception that filled both floors of the inn. When she was sure no one was looking, she hastily removed a small steel flash from her handbag and was about to empty the contents into the bowl before a massive hand closed on her tiny wrist.

"Not so fast," growled a tuxedo garbed Barret Wallace. Little Marlene Wallace giggled up at the ninja as she clutched the pant leg of her massive parent.

Red XIII and Reeve stood at the doors of the inn and directed the guests to the rows of seats that had been arranged in the lobby area of the well decorated establishment. Red smiled at the sight of the well-wishers from Rocket Town, Nibelheim and beyond, his memories returning slowly at the passage of each day.

Cid stormed into the inn dressed in his best suit - a lima-bean colored number he bought during his academy days with the Shinra. Shera had begged him to rent tuxedos like Reeve and Barret, but the pilot's sense of style was only magnified by his stubbornness.

"You clowns get everyone seated yet?" the pilot barked and Reeve and Red XIII as they stifled their guffaws at the sight of the green suit.

Cloud Strife stood in one of the corners near the window, nervously adjusting and re-adjusting his bow tie. There was very little he hated more than wearing a monkey suit like this one - even if it was still a million times better looking than the puke-colored one approaching him.

"Nervous, kid?" Cid Highwind grinned at the younger man.

"Heh," Cloud fidgeted with his tuxedo collar, "I'd rather jump back into the Northern Crater and fight Sephiroth all by myself."

"Ahh, don't worry about it so much," Cid playfully slapped Cloud on the back. "Just think about this," the old pilot looked around the room before continuing, "I got you the best room this dump has for a whole damn week after the wedding." Cid winked, "But if you don't want to go through with it, you can always stay here alone for the week - I could use some help putting in a new hot water heater."

"Cid!" Shera walked up and took the pilot by the lima-colored arm, "Don't go filling his head with ideas, you'll make him nervous." She tenderly turned to Cloud, "You'll be fine." With a nod from Cloud, she turned back to Cid, "Come, Mr. Highwind, it's time to take your place as best man."

Everything was perfect. The air was fresh and smelled of wild flowers, the temperature was just right for a Rocket Town spring day. The gathered guests watched in gladness as the beautiful bride made her way down the aisle. Tifa Lockhart wore a stunning white gown, her long locks of hair tied at the back of her head, her face covered by an elegant veil.

The suited man that walked her down the aisle was none other than Zangan - the man who had been so much like a father to Tifa when she was growing up in Nibelheim.

Little Marlene walked in front of them carrying a bouquet of flowers as her father, Barret, looked on with teary eyes from the front row.

Cloud's heart skipped a beat when he saw her slowly approach, his anxious feelings washed clean away by the sheer beauty of Tifa and the love he felt for her.

Cid himself beamed like a proud father while these two met at the makeshift alter, where the front desk would usually be in the Shanghai Inn, in front of the priest. Cid's gaze moved past the happy couple to the flower girls on the other side of them - first to Yuffie, then to Shera. She was angelic to the pilot's eyes.

Reeve couldn't help but smile widely as he watched this most blessed event. Red was at a loss for words to describe the happiness he possessed on this day. Even Yuffie couldn't help but brim at the sight of Cloud and Tifa together at the altar. And on this day, the Planet cried. But truly, these were tears of joy.

The ceremony went off without a hitch. Well, all except for one.

When it was over, everyone partied until sunset at the Shanghai Inn, and most stayed later. As Cid Highwind looked out at the orange sky over the sea beyond Rocket Town, he couldn't help but smile. The deck on the back of the inn was empty of any other wedding guests, as the sounds of celebrations wafted out to his ears on the gentle breeze. He leaned against the oak railing and puffed contentedly on one of his soothing cigarettes.

Cloud Strife walked out onto the wooden patio and stood next to the pilot, leaning on the same railing as they both looked out to the calm sea.

"Well," Cid finally spoke up, "Ya finally did it."

"Yeah," Cloud grinned, "I think I'm finally going to be happy."

"Heh," Cid took a drag of his cigarette and pondered, "I think I agree with ya there."

"So when will you be this happy?" Cloud turned his head toward the serene pilot and grinned.

"There you are!" a voice called from the doorway. Shera walked out onto the deck with the two men. "Cloud, your wife is looking for you."

The blonde adventurer nodded sheepishly as Cid mumbled something about a ball and chain before he made his way back into the festivities.

"Some ceremony, huh?" Shera stood next to the relaxing Captain as he carefully butted out his cancer stick.

"Yup."

The two stared out at the orange sky for a small eternity before Cid finally turned to her, "Shera?"

"Yes, Cid?"

"Will you marry me?"

The seas were as calm as the air on that peaceful spring evening. And if one were to look really long and hard from the shores of Rocket Town, one might have seen a tiny Wutai junket adrift on the tranquil water. Had one enhanced vision, a figure could have stood upon the tiny vessel as it made its way to the open sea and watched the festivities unfold at the Shanghai Inn. But one would be watching at a great distance.

There was in fact such a traveler that day, observing his friends for one last time. But it was nonetheless from a distance. For what business had he with pleasure? What right had he with joy? The distant ocean would be his only home, loneliness his only companion.

Thus it was like this the story ended, Cloud and the others never knew for sure what became of their friend. They only knew that he had sacrificed so much for the sake of the Planet, and that he would be remembered as one of the greatest heroes ever to live.

And so ends the Crisis From the Sky.

Final Notes: I'm not sure what to write here that hasn't already been said in one of my other notes. If I'd known what an experience this would have been when I first started this story over a year ago, I'm pretty sure I would have been overwhelmed.

I was going to list all the people who made this possible, through inspiration and constant feedback, but I'm too afraid to leave anyone out. Suffice it to say, if you have given me any kind of support any time during the writing of Crisis, I am forever in your debt. You know who you are.

I would like to thank you all for reading this right to the end. It was a blast to write and hopefully almost as good to read.

I'd be lying if I said I didn't have any ideas for a sequel to Crisis, but with my duties to Rocket Town, the "Emerald Orb" and that pesky real life I lead, I'm not sure I could do it justice. But then again, you never know what life brings you. Sometimes all you have to go on is faith.

Keep watching the skies,

The Captain (reese1@geocities.com)