

Cloud Cover

by Junj

Part 1: Out of the Rain and Into Madness

The light pulsed silently, bathing the crystalline cave with the iridescent glow of materia. The crystal walls caught the light, reflecting and refracting, banishing the darkness from the corners of a cave for a moment, shimmering brightly before the light disappeared altogether. Darkness returned.

She cupped her hands over the small globe of light, the pulse lighting up her high cheekbones and angular face. This was her light. The illumination disappeared and shadows covered her. This was her darkness, summoned here by her. It was not trespassing. It was welcomed. It was her power, her right to wield both light and dark as she pleased. They were her escape and her keys to the world. She would have the world. It would be hers as this small globe of power was hers. The light pulsed.

She breathed in the air which crackled with energy, the light beating with her heart. She was alive. She would get to her paradise once more. She could find the Promised Land as she had before. It was all so simple. Staring into her globe of power, she could see what she needed to save her Planet from destruction. The humans would destroy it. Shinra would continue steal the power of Mako from her Planet, sucking its life away as they had before her birth. It was only a matter of time before they started to leech her Planet of its life. The screams were already starting. And walking through the watery light of her sphere was the key. She could own him as she did the light and rule him as she did the dark. It was all so simple.

He would be hers. He loved her once; he could learn to love her again. He could save her Planet from destruction by destroying those who sought to kill it. They could not kill her Planet. They would die first and by her hand. By his hand. He would be her lover and Destroyer, her Giver of Life. And she could not fail with him by her side. The light grew brighter, shining into the depths of her eyes. He would be hers as he had been Sephiroth's.

The light dimmed as the name grew stronger in her mind. Sephiroth. He had been a fool seeking the Promised Land when it had been underfoot. He had not seen the potential. Destroy those on her Planet and she could have her paradise. Her Planet, without the murdering humans, was her Promised Land. And with her Destroyer she could live in bountiful happiness. She watched her Destroyer, a wicked smile twisting her features.

It is time, the Planet whispered, the screams gone as the small breeze wafted through the cave. Time to take back what was once ours.

Theirs. It was once the Ancients' and would be again.

"Yes," she whispered, watching the globe of light in her hands, a warm tingling of power at her fingertips. "It will be ours. The murderers will pay for their crimes."

She stood, clenching the globe in one hand as she walked from the cave, her long, brown hair blowing away from her features. The salty air bit at her as she emerged onto the beach, greeted by her servant. Constructed of light and dark, its scales shimmered in the night. It stretched its wings wide and far as she emerged from the materia cave, snorting softly into the crisp night air.

"It is time," she declared.

The creature roared in response, its shrill cry breaking the silence as though it were glass, shattering whatever shards of the past remained. This was for the future of her Planet. Her wild laughed joined the beast's, her body breathless with the power that swirled around her.

"Tonight the end begins."

~*~

Cloud Strife stared morosely at the amber glass of beer in front of him, not a drop having been touched. He had spent almost three hours trying to decide how he felt. Well, he knew how he felt, but hadn't a clue about how to tell Tifa. He

needed some advice. He glanced at the blonde-haired bachelor beside him, pursing his lips. No, he didn't need advice that much.

Cid Highwind caught the look, a grin coming to his face. Cloud couldn't help but groan. "What you need is some advice, bud," Cid stated, snuffing his cigarette into the ashtray in front of him.

Cloud shook his head. "I don't think I need any advice from you. I've seen your love life."

The grin disappeared. "You don't mean Shera, do ya? She ain't exactly my love."

Cloud shrugged. "She seems to like you. A lot."

The older man frowned and cursed. "I think I need another cigarette," he declared, pulling one from the pack. He placed it in his mouth, but didn't light it. "Don't even say it."

"In fact, I think I'd go as far as saying she loves you."

Cid had been expecting the comment, but it stung him nonetheless. The cigarette dropped from his mouth, and he caught it before it fell into his lap. He turned on Cloud, his face reddening. Cloud grinned.

"Don't say that, kid. You don't know nothing. Always tryin' to redeem herself," he muttered, subconsciously twisting the cigarette in his hands as he spoke. "Friggin' annoyance." He pointed at Cloud with the twisted cigarette, another frown furnishing his face. "Think you got it easy? Jus' you wait." He gazed landed on the cigarette. "Now, look at whatcha made me do ta my smoke."

Cloud's grin widened, lighting his eyes as Cid dropped the cigarette onto the table. "Let's get out of here," he said, standing. Cid shook his head, stuffing his pack of cigarettes into his leather jacket and dropping some gil onto the bar counter. He pulled the Venus Gospel from where it was leaning against the wall, quickly glancing to see that all the slots still contained their materia. No one seemed very interested in stealing materia anymore. He shrugged and followed Cloud out of the door.

What was left of the Wall Market seemed dead.

The slums of Midgar were always quieter at night. Streets were dark, offering solace for any beasts that might live in the city and warding off any wary travelers. Thieves and muggers ruled the nights in the Midgar slums, attacking those who were unarmed and alone, slinking in the shadows like wraiths and waiting for the right opportunity. As the two battle weary warriors walked by, the local criminals slunk deeper into the shadows. The glinting edge of the Ultima Weapon was the only persuasion they needed to keep away. They would wait for different fatigued travelers.

Cloud stretched his arms out in front of him and yawned. Moonlight filtered down on them through a break in the clouds, and the thoughts from the tavern came crashing back to him. He still hadn't figured out what to do about his "situation" with Tifa. Cid had been little help, but, then again, Cloud hadn't really asked him for any advice, directly. He had to know how to do this right. Cloud bit his lower lip. He'd have to do this before he lost the nerve. Clearing his throat, he said, "Cid, can I ask you a question?"

The older man glanced at him, the haft of the Venus Gospel clicking against the pavement with the rise and fall of his feet. "Shoot, kid."

Cloud cleared his throat again, running a hand through his hair. "Uh, speaking hypothetically here, I was wondering how you would, uh – you would, um..."

"Out with it. I ain't got all damn day."

"Well, if you wanted to, how would you ask Shera to marry you?" Cloud grimaced at the look the pilot gave him. If given the chance, Cid looked as though he would strangle him. "If you wanted," he added quickly. "Or any girl."

"Why would I wanna do that?!" he demanded. He stopped, staring at Cloud. The younger man halted with him. "The hell you talking 'bout?"

Cloud groaned. "How would you ask someone to marry you? How would I – oh, never mind."

Surprising Cloud, Cid started laughing. "You wanna know-" The end of what he was going to say disappeared in a round of roaring laughter. "Oh, God! That is rich. Here I thought you were talking 'bout me." He literally had to use the Venus Gospel to keep from falling over with his laughter. He gasped for breath. Cloud clenched his teeth in an effort to keep from hitting his friend.

"Stop laughing. It isn't funny," he ordained in a futile attempt to regain his dignity. He attempted a malevolent frown but failed miserably and grinned sheepishly.

"It's damn funny," he wheezed, trying to catch his breath. "You asking me how to get hitched. You oughtta be askin' Barret. He's got experience."

"I ask Barret, and he's liable to (a) beat me up or (b) tell Tifa."

Cid shrugged, straightening. "At least then it won't come as a surprise. I mean, she loves you then she won't care whether you screw up the question or not."

Cloud frowned. "No, that's not really what I meant. It's supposed to be special, right? I don't want to spend the rest of my life wondering what would've happened if Barret hadn't told her first. You know, her reaction?"

The pilot tugged his leather jacket down, holding his spear in the crook of his arm. "I dunno, Cloud. You'll have to figure it out on your own." He grinned, holding the spear horizontal to the ground as he started walking again. "I hear getting on your knees is traditional."

Cloud whacked the pilot on the shoulder as he walked by, chuckling good-naturedly. "Next time I need advice, you can bet I won't be coming to you," he declared, falling into step beside Cid.

Cid gave him a thankful look. "Good, 'cause I ain't got none left."

Cloud sighed, shaking his head. He turned his gaze up into the sky as though looking for any answers it might give to him. He shook his head again as he brought himself back to the road in front of him. He looked down at his shoes as he walked, pursing his lips in thought. Getting down on his knees? Wouldn't that shock Tifa. He smiled, his blue eyes bright with mirth. He said nothing, however, content with listening to his boots crunch the loose gravel.

A drop of rain splattered onto his forehead, prompting him to return his gaze above. Where the plate used to be above Sector 7 was only blackened sky, ominous clouds threatening to spill their contents on the slowly reforming slums. As he stepped into the graveyard, cautiously looking at the broken playground, an uneasiness settled in his stomach. His smile disappeared when his eyes wandered to the shadows formed by the debris and rubble strewn throughout the park. His teeth clenched involuntarily, the hair raising on the nape of his neck. Cid tensed beside him, shifting his grip on the Venus Gospel, lowering himself into a fighting stance. Something wasn't right. Thunder growled in the distance.

Cloud's gaze landed on the slide and he found himself unable to look away. He stared at the mushroom shaped slide, remembering when he and Aeris had stood atop of it and the ensuing craziness they had found themselves in shortly after that. Aeris loved this place, he thought, a frown coming to his lips. He was thinking of marrying Tifa, and, yet, she kept popping back into his mind. It was as if he couldn't let go of her, as if he couldn't purge her from his thoughts. She's dead.

And, suddenly, she wasn't.

Cid grunted in surprise, slowly straightening as the young woman came into view. She was as he remembered her, seemingly innocent and young, but wise beyond her years. But it wasn't possible. She had died at the City of the Ancients, murdered by Sephiroth's blade. Her death had saved the Planet. He frowned. She couldn't be alive.

"What?" Cloud asked, glancing at Cid in confusion. The older man only shrugged, his frown deepening.

"He killed me, Cloud," she said, her voice filled with sweetened sadness. "Don't let him hurt me."

Cid's frown became mirrored on Cloud's features. "What are you talking about?" asked the latter.

"Don't," Cid warned, slipping back into his fighting stance with the ease of years of practice. "Something ain't right."

"Help me," Aeris pleaded, an ordering tone underlying in her voice. "Cloud, please."

Cloud glanced to Cid and back to Aeris, confusion lining his brow. "Sephiroth's dead, Aeris."

"Don't, Cloud," Cid ordained, a sudden realization hitting him. She wasn't talking about Sephiroth. He glanced warily at the shadows. "Don't talk to her. Don't even listen to her, Cloud. She's a liar."

"No, don't listen to him, Cloud. He's the one who's lying. It's Sephiroth. Kill him!" Her voice took on an urgent tone. Cloud looked to Aeris, studying her features before freeing his own weapon. He spun it, easily checking his grip. The balance was perfect.

"No," he said, shaking his head slowly. "You're dead, Aeris. Nothing in this world can bring you back. Sephiroth killed you." The Ultima Weapon glowed of its own inner light, creating a silhouetted darkness. Long shadows covered every corner and hiding place.

"He killed her!"

Cid turned to the new voice, surprise written clearly on his face. A burly Shinra commando slashed at him with a long, wicked sword reminiscent of the Great Sephiroth's. He stumbled back, barely bringing the Venus Gospel up in time to parry the slash. He twisted the long spear around, the butt facing his opponent, and lashed out in a quick succession. A blow to the hand knocked the sword from the commando's grip, followed quickly by a jab to the solar plexus. The commando doubled over in pain while Cid brought the butt of the spear up under the man's foot, tripping him. He spun the blade around, slicing through the commando's throat before turning back to Aeris, the spear braced around his arm, the blade glistening wet with blood.

"That all you got?" he challenged, forcing bravado into his voice though the sinking sensation had not yet left his stomach. He grabbed his companion's arm. "Come on, Cloud. Let's get outta here."

"You should not have done that," Aeris declared, stopping his movements with her darkened tone. "You will pay for that. Murderer."

As she spoke, the shadows became alive with the wraiths of nightmares, all of them writhing and emitting the stench of death. Cid swallowed nervously, the time for false bravado having passed. The wraiths moved closer.

"Save the Destroyer from the Murderer!" she ordered, her voice cracking like a whip. The sweetness that Cloud remembered was gone. He grit his teeth and gripped the Ultima Weapon until his knuckles were white. The situation was looking very bad.

"Creatures of darkness... attack!"

The onslaught of monsters was almost too much to handle. Cloud lashed out with his sword, cutting off whatever appendages came too close to him. The dark mesh of beasts surrounded him, cutting him from his companion. Sweat beaded on his brow. The black sky was rumbling with thunder as he made a futile attempt to cut through the creatures. The Ultima Weapon slashed and cut, leaving a bloody wake behind it. The black bodies littered the ground.

Cid was not able to keep up with the onslaught.

He spun the Venus Gospel wildly in a futile attempt to keep the monsters at bay, but the circle surrounding him was slowly closing in. He attempted to turn to meet the rush of a hairy beast, but couldn't make it in time. The monster rammed him, throwing him out of the circle. The air rushed from his lungs as he landed with a dull thud. He laid there, stunned, breathing hard and blinking the stars from his eyes. Using the Venus Gospel as a staff, he pushed himself to his feet. He came face to face with Aeris Gainsborough.

Cloud was beginning to get angry. Blood flowed freely from cuts and slashes inflicted on him by the nightmarish beasts. The Ultima Weapon gleamed with blood, its inner light reflecting a dark crimson over his features. When a small creature tripped him before disappearing back into the clump of aggravating monsters, he decided he had had enough. Raising the Ultima Weapon high above his head, he called upon his highest attack. Thunder rolled in the clouds in response to the bright red light that enveloped him. The red light gave way to other colors, all blinding and bright in the darkness of the playground. Lightning cracked a warning.

In a matter of seconds, the remaining creatures were reduced to bloody bodies. Consecutive blows landed hard and accurately, demolishing and hacking, killing instantly. And, almost as quickly as he had begun, it was over. Corpses littered the ground and silence reigned for what seemed like forever. Cloud slowly began to realize what was happening, shaking off the drain the limit break had put on his system. His gaze landed on Aeris and Cid.

"Cid!" he called, running to where his friend was standing. Cid glanced back at Cloud.

It was a mistake.

Out of air, Aeris formed a weapon. Blazing with an eerie blue light, she brought it downward in an attempt to slice into the pilot's head. Cid barely had time to bring the Venus Gospel up to block the blow. The blue rod sliced through the haft of the Venus Gospel, easily cutting it into two pieces. Cid looked at the pieces in shock. One of his strongest weapons was completely destroyed. He ducked as the blue rod whistled over his head.

"Aeris, what are you doing?!" Cloud demanded, his voice rising over the gale that was picking up in the playground. "It's Cid!"

"No!" she called back. "He's fooled you, Cloud, muddled your brain again! It's Sephiroth! Don't let him kill me! Please!"

Cid brought the bladed half of the Venus Gospel to bare, slashing futilely at Aeris. The blade sliced through her flesh easily, cutting deep into her collar bone. Blood flowed dark red in the dim light.

"Don't let him kill me, Cloud!" she pleaded, fake tears welling in her eyes as the pain from the wound cut through her, cleansing her. "Help me!"

Confusion filled Cloud's mind. That was Cid, not Sephiroth. Aeris was dead; she was dead! This wasn't happening. What was she talking about? "No. You're dead, Aeris."

Cid slashed again, cutting deep in her thigh, the pink cloth of her dress turning red with the new blood. "Kill her, Cloud! Damn it! Stop screwin' around!"

"No, Cloud!" His gaze went back to Aeris. "Can't you see? He's lying!"

She knocked the shortened spear from Cid's hands. He lunged at her with his fists. A square punch rammed into her jaw, hitting her down. His gloved hand caught on the small globe around her neck, ripping it from her.

"Cloud!" she called, the tears real this time. The pain which had cleansed her now sought to control her. She stared into the blue eyes of the pilot, seeing the anger which ruled them. The Murderer. He was going to kill her. She would not die. Not again. Never again. "Cloud!"

The young man stared at Aeris as Cid grabbed the long, slender blade from the dead Shinra commando's body. Cloud turned his gaze on him. No, it wasn't Cid. His vision split and refocused. It was Sephiroth. He was going to kill Aeris. Not again.

"No!"

The word sprang from his locked jaws, anger filling every pore of his body. He had taken so much; he would not take Aeris. Raising the Ultima Weapon high over his head, he stabbed it through Sephiroth, through his long time enemy, the cause of his strife. Sephiroth lowered the sword, falling to his knees, eyes on the blade sticking from the center of his chest. Cloud wretched the blade free.

Cid opened his mouth in shock, looking at the blood pouring from his chest. Funny that there was no pain. He turned his gaze onto Cloud, meeting his eyes. "Cloud..." he murmured, finding there was not enough breath left in his chest to speak. The Masamune fell from his numbed hand and he collapsed in the street, the blood already pooling around him as his own heart pumped his very life from him.

Cloud's eyes widened, his sword lowering in shock. What had he done? This wasn't Sephiroth; this was Cid. He had killed Cid. His friend was gone, murdered by his hand, his blade. Tears welled up in his eyes. What had he done?! He turned on Aeris, but she only had a smile to give him.

"Well done, Destroyer," she declared, her smile widening at his helpless expression. She stood, wiping the blood from a split lip. Kneeling next to Cid Highwind, she watched as he slowly bled to death. She began to pry open the gloved hand that held her globe of power. Cloud watched in horror.

Cid clenched his fist tighter as his life drained away, trying to hold his consciousness, gripping onto life by his teeth. The clouds rumbled above him, cackling with energy. A plume of lightning began to form by his sheer will. Aeris glanced up at the clouds, eyes widening in alarm.

As the lightning came crashing down, she stood abruptly, using the very power of planet. White light swirled around her, blanketing the entire playground, destroying the shadows. The lightning was absorbed into the illumination, adding a burst of energy. When the blinding light dimmed, there was only bloody corpse of the dead Shinra commando and the dying body of Cid Highwind.

The clouds released their fury in a down pour.

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Lucrecia.

The name was a summon and a vanished hope for love and life, a constant reminder of his pain. The name could not be forgotten, but the events that often times connected with the name were too painful to remember.

Lucrecia.

Why he should hang onto that name was beyond him. Someone like him had no right to feelings, no right to love. Anything he touched often moldered and vanished like she had. He had no right for trust and found he had trouble even trusting those close to him. She had betrayed him, and he had not acted fast enough. He couldn't have saved her. His sins. He didn't deserve to love or to trust. He didn't deserve much of anything.

Vincent Valentine sat quietly brooding inside the cave he often visited, listening to the rumble of the water as it tumbled over the cliffs. Her body had tumbled over the cliffs when she had thrown herself from the falls after Sephiroth's death. Lucrecia's Falls. The spray of the water, cooling and refreshing, reminded him of her, of what they had had. And then came Hojo. It was gone in a moment. She was gone. His sins.

For once, he found he could not sleep off his sins in the darkened world of his nightmares. He could not force himself to face those dreams that plagued him when he closed his eyes. It was the first time he feared what he might see. It was something in the air that made him uneasy. A tingling at the back of his mind that made him fearful of himself. He sought solace, a solace no one could give him. He sought a solace from himself. What had these past months done to him? He could not say. He sat quietly.

The roar of the waterfall whispered to him, soothing him as it echoed through the cave, the misty spray slowly permeating through his body. The rock of the walls bit into his flesh but seemed to be the most comfortable chair in the world. He suddenly wished he could sink back into the wall and disappear, fading away from the cruelty this life had to give him. His eyelids dropped, and he shook his head. No, the time for sleeping off his sins had passed. It was time for him to face them.

Lucrecia.

The wind whispered the name over the roar of the waterfall. He opened his eyes.

Lucrecia.

He stood up, staring at the watery mist at the entrance to the cave. The mist swirled slowly, taking shapes. Her form was ethereal, light and vaporous, celestial and divine, yet fleeting. Gone almost as soon as he saw her.

"Lucrecia," he whispered, as though he needed confirmation of what he had seen. Was he dreaming? No. He had been awake for days, fearful of dreams, an incorrigible insomniac. The wind whispered through the cave again.

Lucrecia.

He stared at the starlight sifting through the cave for a long time, casting shadows on the cave and shimmering in the spray of water. He needed to see her again. She would not appear to him but beckoned him to remember her and forgive.

Set me free. Lucrecia.

The breeze wafted through the cooling waters and caressed his hair and skin as she had. She was forgiving him, offering that solace from himself. But she was gone. He hadn't helped her when she had needed him the most. He could not forgive himself as easily as she had forgiven him. His red cape slapped his heels as he began walking, slipping under the onslaught of water as he exited the cave.

He would not find solace in solitude.

Set me free.

She beckoned him to forgive himself and let go of the demons that littered his dreams. He was not ready. He couldn't, not yet. He needed time to heal, though he knew the time to heal had come and gone long ago.

"Soon, Lucrecia," he whispered, as he started walking in the starlit night. He would find her soon and forgive himself. He could continue to repent his actions for longer. As the dark of the night enveloped him, he began the long trek to solace. And for the first time in a long time, he was afraid.

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Tifa Lockhart stared morosely at the water running down the window pane. She frowned. This storm would set them back days. With the help of Reeve, they had begun rebuilding Sector 7, and most of the rest of Midgar, almost immediately after Sephiroth had been destroyed. It was still a skeleton of what it had been, a few buildings almost complete and even more in need of serious construction. Seventh Heaven was completely rebuilt, offering a drink and a warm place to sit to anyone who cared to share their story.

"Don't worry," Barret Wallace said, placing his over-sized hand on her shoulder. "Spike's a big boy. He and Cid can take care of themselves."

Tifa smiled up at him, though it did not carry to her eyes. There was something happening; she could feel it. Something wasn't right. It was unsettling. Thunder rolled in the distance and lightning flashed, the bolt landing dangerously close.

"I wish I could share your optimism," she declared, looking back out the window, wishing that Cloud would just suddenly

appear and return to Seventh Heaven. He had left hours ago in need of solitude. She had sent Cid after him. Either of them had yet to return.

Barret growled a curse. "It's jes' the weather, Tifa. Getta grip. They's probably gettin' plastered knowing Cid."

Tifa shrugged, her stomach twisting with an unshakable feeling of malcontent. Her frown returned. She couldn't stop worrying about them. It was uncharacteristic of either Cid or Cloud to get drunk at a bar, regardless of what Barret said. They left the heavy drinking to Yuffie.

"Maybe they went ta see that play he's always jabbering 'bout," Barret suggested. Tifa shook her head.

"Cid hated that play; he said so himself. I think we oughtta go looking for them."

Barret groaned and then cursed again. "Jes' stay here, Tifa. Me an' Red'll go lookin'." He shook his head and mumbled another curse.

The large man continued to mutter obscenities to himself as he walked away, motioning Red XIII to come with him. Tifa watched him go, relief finally replacing the worry that had plagued her these last few hours. Barret would find them... if they were to be found. Her frown deepened to her brow.

She didn't know why she worried so much about Cloud; he was a grown man and had proven time and again that he could take care of himself. She shook her head. She knew why she worried. She worried because she cared for him, more than she'd ever openly admit. It was times like these that she realized just how much she cared now and even back when they were both children growing up in Nibelheim.

She loved him.

She could never tell him that; neither of them were good with explaining their feelings to one another, but they both knew what the other felt. She had known that Cloud hadn't truly wanted to be alone tonight and that he needed someone to talk to. Maybe sending Cid after him had been foolish of her. Maybe not.

She knew Cloud went for walks in Midgar. Sometimes she followed him, sometimes not, but he was always back in less than two hours. This particular trip had begun almost six hours ago, starting with the small disagreement they had had over Seventh Heaven. He didn't want her to stay in Midgar; she could not give the city up. The argument had ended with him walking out of the door, silently angry at her stubbornness. She had sent Cid to look after him.

She sighed. Where could they be? She continued to stare out the window as if the droplets of rain held the answers for her. Lightning flashed not far away, and she blinked the after image from her eyes. A dark shape was running to Seventh Heaven. She closed her eyes and opened them again, cursing the lightning. But the shape didn't disappear.

She turned to the door as Barret charged into the room, soaking wet, startling the few patrons. His face was stricken, fear etched in his normally hot eyes. When she saw why he was so distressed, Tifa whitened visibly. Hanging limp in his arms was Cid Highwind.

Red XIII bounded in behind Barret, pushing the large man into the bar room. "Somebody call the doctor!" he ordered, concern lining his voice. Cure hadn't worked, though both he and Barret had cast it many times. Their efforts were not all for nothing; by all rights, the pilot should be dead.

Barret knocked the glasses from one of the many tables around the room, setting Cid down onto the hard surface. Tifa knocked the onlookers from her way, rushing to the table. She pulled Cid's leather jacket open, her fingers coming away stained red with blood.

"Oh, God," she cried, tears forming in her eyes. She had sent him after Cloud. It was her fault. Tifa placed her hands over the wound in his chest in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding. Her efforts were wasting, the crimson liquid flowing through her fingers. She could no longer hold back her tears. "God, no."

Cid stared up at the ceiling of the room, his breathing coming in short rasps. He knew he was dying. No matter how hard and long any of his friends used the Restore Materia or potions of any kind, he wasn't going to live. His gaze landed on the woman crying over him. The face was familiar, but he couldn't put a name to it. He blinked away the oblivion in his vision, forcing himself to focus on her. It couldn't be.

"Aeris?" His own voice sounded alien to his ears. No, she was dead. It came back to him in a rush. "No, get away from me!" His hands tightened into fists, the globe he had pulled from her digging into his hand, but he could not find the strength to fight. "God, Cloud. Kill her! No. Cloud..." He felt the tears leaking out of the corners of his eyes, mingling with the rain water still wetting his face. His heart beat pounded in his ears, quick and weak, but loud. Much too loud. It was all he could hear. His life was slipping away. What was happening? His worries and fears drifted away as the forever darkness closed around his vision.

And then there was the pain.

It ripped him from his peace, pulling him back to life. He felt as though his entire body was on fire, searing agony burning his core. His mouth opened in a silent scream, the burning agony almost too much to bear. He could feel the warmth of his blood against his back and on his chest, the pain of the wound the Ultima Weapon had left when Cloud had run him through, and the cold glances of the onlookers as they watched him die.

Why couldn't he die? He longed for death, the pain driving him towards madness. With each beat of his heart, the fire increased. There was no end to his suffering. What cruel trick had been played on him that he could not go peacefully into the eternal night? His left hand tightened further onto that globe, the cold crystalline sphere suddenly hot to touch. The pain washed away in a wave of cool. He felt his grip lessen on the globe as the pain lessened in his body, leaving him numb, the darkness coming to claim him.

There was nothing.

The globe fell from his fingers as his fist unclenched completely. It fell silently to the floor, dark where it had once been only light. As it struck the wooden planks of the floor, it shattered, its pieces scattering, the scorched shards smashing against the hard surface. The silence was complete.

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Dr. Nygel Huiji slowly spun the small vial, watching the tiny bubbles floating through the blue liquid trapped inside. This was the key to the Promised Land, an insignificant amount of seemingly nothing, but the strongest power in the world, stronger than even the power of Mako. This was Nygel's element. This was genetics.

He set the vial back down into its rack, leaning back into his chair, a grin of triumph on his face. He had succeeded where Hojo had failed. Hojo had been a near-sighted fool and his failure to see that his mistake had been his greatest triumph had been his undoing. He had not seen the potential of his failure. Hojo paid for his heedlessness. Nygel did not mourn his loss.

Nygel was seeking to correct Hojo's numerous mistakes, starting with the cause of his demise. Cloud Strife was not a failure; his very being made him a success. He was the only one of the original Jenova Project that had survived the chaos of the last few years. He would lead the way to the Promised Land, finding the eternal happiness Hojo had finally deemed a legend and unlocking the door to Shinra's Neo-Midgar and all the power the Planet had to give. The Shinra would strive on the power, and Nygel would be the ultimate ruler of all his creations. He would have power to give life and to destroy. He would be the almighty creator, the chief regent of the world. No one could stop him. Not now. He smiled at his thoughts, his eyes landed on his one success so far, his one functioning clone. She would be the first of many and lead him to the Promised Land with Strife at her side. Then she would die.

Aeris Gainsborough sat across from him, legs crossed, her well-manicured nails thrumming against the metal desk. Her petite stature emitted an overall feeling of boredom, but her eyes were tight with anger as she thought through her untimely predicament. A small line creased her forehead. Her gaze snapped to his.

"I need him," she growled, her hand moving to where her globe of power used to sit, a subconscious motion. "Now, our plans are all for naught without him. We need him."

"He is dead," Nygel declared, leaning back in his chair in triumph. She was foolish in her quest for the Promised Land, unable to see something so close to her that it almost touched her, blind in her hate.

Her eyes narrowed and her fist came crashing down on the desk with enough force to make the vials and test tubes rattle in their racks, startling him. "No! Cid Highwind is alive! He has it."

"Damn it, Aeris!" Nygel stood, his own anger taking control of him. "He was run through with the bloody Ultima Weapon! Even Sephiroth couldn't survive that!"

She laughed, shaking her head slowly, a twisted, ironic smile playing her lips. "You are a fool. My power has given him life." Her smile twisted to a frown. How cruel life could be to her, her own power insisting on betraying her. "The power of Holy and Black, the Giver of Life and Death, has presented him with life... which is why we must kill him."

She stood, turning away from him and to the door of his lab, her frown deepening. The simplicity of her plan was beginning to get complicated. Curse the pilot for getting in her way. He would pay dearly for his crimes against her. They all would.

"Whether you like it or not, Professor," she began, turning back to him, sweetly, "he is now a crucial part of our plan. We need him, and I suggest you start looking for him now. Get your Shinra fools on him. I want him, dead or alive." Her eyes narrowed, her hand clenching into a fist. "Preferably alive so I can personally see him suffer."

Nygel's face tightened in anger, mirroring Aeris' expression. "You seem to forget who is in charge here," he declared, his voice cold with his anger.

She met his hard gaze squarely. "I am." Her tone was thick with enough menace to make going against her a suicidal mission. He watched as she turned, her thick hair moving gracefully with her body. He glowered at her back.

"Your plans are nothing without me," he said. She turned her attention back to him, looking at him from the door. "You are nothing without me. Nothing!"

Aeris' face darkened. "You seem to underestimate my abilities," she growled. She disappeared out the door, leaving Nygel alone in his lab.

~*~

What had he done?

Cloud Strife hugged his knees, slowly rocking back and forth on the small bunk that took up almost half of the small cell in which he was trapped. He couldn't believe his memory, but, for once, he knew it was true. He blinked back the tears that threatened to spill forth. What had he done?

Cid was dead. He had seen it with his own eyes, had committed the crime with his own hands and his own weapon. His anger at a dead man killed one of the best friends he had ever had. Why had he killed Cid? It was a muddled mystery, the reasons as clear as mud. He could not believe that he had mistaken the warm-hearted, good-natured pilot for Sephiroth; he could not believe that there was anything in the world that would make him believe what his memories had told him.

He stared down at his hands, his heart wrenching with the agony of his personal anguish. He couldn't be trusted by anyone lest he run them through with his huge sword. When at last he thought he could be the same as he was before he left Nibelheim, he found he was unreliable, insecure. He couldn't trust people to trust him. He couldn't trust himself.

The tears came unbidden and unwanted.

He didn't want to be this way, to be so afraid of himself. What would he do next? Kill Tifa? If he could not live with the knowledge of murdering Cid, of stabbing the pilot in the back, what would he do if he were to hurt Tifa? His actions no doubt hurt her right now. He angrily wiped the tears away, running a hand through his blond hair.

What was he going to do?

Sitting here in solitude, feeling sorry for himself, wasn't going to help him or Tifa. But there wasn't anything else he could do. Guilt threatened to tear him apart. What could you do when you found out you were nothing more than a murderer, killing for no good reason, acting on a whim? He hadn't felt this horrible since Aeris had died.

Aeris.

The name was a curse, given to him by chance. He should have never agreed to be her bodyguard that day. Why had he? All that had come from that meeting was dissension and anguish. The battles it had brought were too fresh in his mind, the personal conflict and Sephiroth's illusionary world. It hurt too much to remember the grief caused by her death and the pain caused by Sephiroth. The events of last night were only another never-ending tale of sadness and anguish, seeming the story of his life. Cloud Strife. His name said it all.

And now Aeris was back from the dead, causing him a pain more acute than anything Sephiroth could have done. He had stopped Sephiroth. How could he stop some one that could make him destroy those closest to him? Not even Sephiroth could have done that. But, somehow, Aeris could and did, and Cid was dead because of his weakness. Never again.

The Planet was laughing at him and his folly. To think that he could stand up against the evil Sephiroth had thrown at him and forget the man after his death was foolish. His hatred made him strong when he fought Sephiroth. It was now his weakness. Aeris had shown him that. Somehow, in her death, she had known.

What trick had the Ancients played on him? He shook his head angrily, rubbing his temples. Aeris was dead, as mortal as any human. She had found her Promised Land and saved the Planet. Why did she live? Had she come back to haunt him because he could not save her from Sephiroth? Was she here to show him the pain Shinra had caused her? Why? Nothing made sense anymore. He bit the inside of his lower lip until he the metallic taste of his blood stung his tongue. Why would she do this?

She is mad. Insanity.

He frowned at the words the Planet whispered to him on the small wind of a wafting breeze. Her smile returned to him. She had been smiling until the end. Did that count as insanity? Welcoming death? She was not the same Aeris, he knew that much. Where Aeris had been warm and sweet, there was nothing but cold and hatred, a demeanor that sourly reminded him of Sephiroth. He frowned. She could be another clone, bred on hatred and driven by madness. He snorted. Not likely.

He looked up as the door to his cell opened, revealing the woman in his thoughts. Aeris. She stood in the doorway, her pink dress clinging to her in all the right places. She was beautiful, her long brown hair tied away from her cherubic face, revealing perfectly shaped, emerald eyes. She was as he remembered her.

But she was dead.

"You died," he said, watching her cautiously. "Sephiroth killed you."

She nodded, walking into the cell, sitting on the edge of the bed opposite from him. "I'm not real," she agreed. "But I am alive. More so than before, I believe. Do you think I'd lose my Destroyer so easily? I still owe you a date."

Cloud's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're not Aeris. You don't owe me anything."

Anger became transfixed on her face. "I am Aeris!" she ordained. "I am better than Aeris. Where she was weak, I now have power!" She pursed her lips. "I have seen the Promised Land and we will have it together, Destroyer."

He stood up, his own anger claiming him. "Stop calling me that! I'm not a destroyer, yours or anyone else's!"

She stared at him, her green eyes sparkling with thought. She noted his reaction, a small smile forming on her lips due to his anger. He would be strong, strong enough to hold up her empire and destroy those who sought to take her power. His

blue eyes gleamed furiously at her smile.

"You already are a destroyer," she stated, her voice simple and nonchalant, her anger gone. She calmly straightened a wrinkle in her dress, her eyes veiled by the long strands of hair framing her face. "You have already killed many."

"No! That was out of necessity. Something you could not understand."

Her smile widened. "When you killed Sephiroth at the Mako Reactor on Mt. Nibel? Was that necessity? It speaks more to revenge and less to chivalry. You can't tell me that when you threw him from that bridge you were thinking about the Planet and those who lived on it. I know what you were thinking. You were thinking that he had taken so much from you. He had burned your town, he had killed Zack, and mortally wounded Tifa for sure. You weren't thinking about the Planet; you weren't worried about the world. You wanted to take something back so you took his life. You were the Destroyer."

He shook his head. "That's not the same."

"Oh, isn't it? Let me try something else. What drove you to chase Sephiroth throughout the world? Were you trying to save the Planet from Meteor? Or trying to take something back? Was it for the world? Or was it for Aeris? For Tifa? It was for Nibelheim. It was for the same reasons you first killed Sephiroth."

He had taken more from you. You were angry; you wanted to kill him for what he had done to you, the torture and pain he had caused."

"No."

"No? Saving the Planet was only a nice, special addition. If you were to be a hero by taking out your wrath, then why not? To defeat Sephiroth, it became your purpose in life. And, when you faced him, you took out your anger out on him, took out your wrath. Your revenge was your passion and your passion killed Sephiroth. You were the Destroyer."

"No, that's not true."

"Isn't it? How about last night? Sephiroth still haunts you, doesn't he? A little suggestion was all your mind needed. You had to kill him again, didn't you? A thousand deaths will never be enough payment for what he took from you."

"No! Just shut up! Shut up!"

"Sephiroth can never give back what he stole. He can never give back that piece of you that burned with Nibelheim, that piece of you that died with Aeris, and that piece of you that he took with his death. Your passion," she spat, her voice cold. "And now you have nothing left, no purpose in life. Your life died with Sephiroth. You have no more pieces of yourself to lose; he has taken them all. It is why you linger on revenge. It is why you continue to destroy. You are the Destroyer."

"Just shut up," Cloud muttered as he sat back down on the edge of the bed, his head buried in his hands. "Leave me alone."

"You have killed your friend because of your hatred. Cid Highwind no longer exists due to a simple word, one insignificant name. Sephiroth. Do you feel the anger boiling in your veins? What will happen the next time you lose control at that name? Sephiroth. Who will you kill, Destroyer? Who will pay for the sins of a dead man? Barret Wallace? Vincent Valentine? Or Tifa? Your beloved Tifa. May she rest in peace, Destroyer."

She stood, walking gracefully to the door. She turned back to Cloud, a small smile playing on her lips as she looked him over. He would learn to harness that anger. She could teach him; she could show him the Promised Land. He could fight, but he would face the truth. Her smile lingered on her features. The truth was cold, biting hard and swiftly, sneaking up on the unsuspecting liars that were bred into each of them. He would come around. He would see the power of the Cetra and the power she could give him. He would see the Promised Land which the Planet would become. He would be her champion of life and destroy those who sought to stop her. He would destroy his friends as easily as he had run Highwind through with the Ultima Weapon. Her smile turned to a frown. The first step to the Promised Land had failed as that act of murder had failed. But Cloud did not know that. Cloud would still give whatever life he had left to her, pledge his sword to

her, and be given the power in return. The Ancients' power. It was hers to give and use. Her ancestors would be pleased.

She turned back out of the room, closing the door behind her with a small click. Cloud didn't look up at the door as it closed, like a door closing on his life. He had killed his friends, and she was right. He was an uncontrollable cyclone of anger, venting his wrath on those who came too close. They would not hurt him as Sephiroth had. He knew he was giving into her by even listening to her words. But how could he ignore the truths she had spoken?

What had he done?

~*~

The throbbing in his head was overwhelming, pounding in time with his heartbeat. His heartbeat? Hell, he wasn't dead. He wasn't quite alright, but he wasn't dead. He took a deep breath, his lungs aching, his entire body aching, and let it out slowly. He blinked his eyes open, focusing on the ceiling of a room he could not remember entering. He tried to sink back into the cushioned surface he was laying on, his muscles tense and sore. He closed his eyes against the dim light in the room, attempting to block away the ache. His attempts were futile.

"God, I need a cigarette," he declared, his voice raspy from disuse. The throbbing continued. He cleared his dry throat. "And a drink." He thought for a moment. "A stiff drink."

Tifa Lockhart looked up from the chair she was sitting in, a smile lighting up her features. It was the first time in days she had heard a sane remark spoken from Cid Highwind, and it almost made her cry in relief. He had been delirious since they had found him, lashing out and screaming despite having been impaled. When Barret had brought him back to Seventh Heaven, she believed he was as good as dead. Something had saved him, a crystal globe, now blackened and shattered. And, then, she thought he had gone mad.

She stood, her chair scraping on the wooden floor of the tavern. Her footsteps were silent as she sauntered to the bed where Cid lay. She gave him a genuine smile, praying to anybody who cared to listen that he recognize her. Her very presence during his fever had sent him thrashing and yelling, struggling to get away from her. It had been unnerving and slightly terrifying. She hoped she would never have to go through that again.

He locked his eyes on hers and she saw relief wash across his face. "Tifa," he breathed. "Get me a cigarette. Please."

She could not break her gaze, her eyes widening in surprise. She couldn't believe what she saw in those eyes and didn't want to look at them for fear what she saw was true. It couldn't be true. "What happened to you?" she whispered on an exhale of breath. The eyes she looked into glowed bright blue with their own inner light. Mako eyes.

He opened his mouth, but didn't answer. He closed it again and shook his head as the memories evaded him. What had happened? Flashes of a battle passed through his mind, tidbits of events that could have been from any time in the past.

"I'm not sure," he muttered, pushing himself up. Tifa attempted to keep him in bed, a slight apprehensive expression on her face. He brushed her away, grimacing with the pounding pain cracking through his brain. He set his bare feet on the floor, the wood surprisingly warm to his touch. "You tell me?"

She didn't respond, watching him flex his left hand cautiously, his face twisted in pain. There seemed to be nothing she could say to him. He was clueless. He didn't remember what had happened before or after Barret had brought him here. He didn't seem to know about the anguish he had caused her, forcing her to stay away from him and to bottle up the guilt she felt. She had sent him after Cloud; it had been her fault he had been run through by the Shinra. She had nothing to say. Silence reigned.

"What happened to Cloud?" she asked, the question hitting her from nowhere. Cloud had disappeared the night they had found Cid with no sign of where he had gone or even if it had been by choice.

Cid's head snapped up at the mention of Cloud, his neck cracking painfully. He ignored the shock running down his back as a flash of memory came back to him. The Ultima Weapon, the bloody blade sticking from his chest. He rubbed his eyes, squeezing them shut, his jaw clenched. No, he couldn't be remembering it right. His heart throbbed where the sword had

cut through it, and he rubbed the spot with one hand, feeling his heart beat beneath the white tunic that had replaced his blood-soaked shirt. Cloud wouldn't have done that.

"What is it?"

Tifa's voice brought him back to the present. His gaze landed on her reddish eyes, searching them. He couldn't tell her what he remembered; he couldn't tell the woman Cloud was going to marry. He just wasn't remembering it right. It had been someone else who had stabbed him. A soft voice drifted through his head, a saddened sound. Cloud killed you, the voice said softly. It was Aeris' voice. He bit his lower lip and looked away from Tifa. No, Aeris was dead. He killed you. I saved you, Cid. He rested his elbows on his knees, taking a shuddering breath. It wasn't true.

"What's wrong?"

It couldn't be true. Aeris' sad face floated before his vision, her large emerald eyes full of tears. Cloud took his sword and ran you through, she said, her lips moving but no sound coming out. Somehow, he knew what she was saying. I am dead, but I could save you. You were dead, and I called you back. Look at your hand. He didn't look, afraid of what he might see, remembering the burning from the globe. From Aeris' globe. Instead, he moved his gaze to the hard wooden floor. Aeris had tried to kill him, tried to trick him. He would not listen to her. I speak the truth. The voice grew pleading. Listen to me, Cid.

He took another breath. "No."

Tifa frowned, shaking the pilot's shoulder, her apprehension replaced with growing concern. Cid's eyes were unfocussed, staring miles away at something only he could see. It was as though he was no longer in the room, sitting on the bed in front of her. She frowned.

"Don't do this to me, Cid," she said, ignoring the one word he had muttered. "I need you."

"No," he breathed. He was cursed. He cupped his hands over his ears, shaking his head slowly as the voice of Aeris pleaded with him to listen. He closed his eyes, but she was still there, her eyes wide and imploring. Her lips moved in silent words. He ground his teeth. "I'm not gonna listen to you." Her words continued. "Aeris, shut up!"

Tifa reeled back on her heels, losing her balance in her surprise, stopping mid-sentence. She fell back onto her behind, her back coming up against the wall. Her chin quivered and she bit her lower lip. What had she done to him by sending him after Cloud? Whatever had happened had driven him mad. Completely mad.

Aeris' lips stopped moving and tears streamed from her green eyes. She attempted to blink them away, but her efforts were futile. Wiping them from her eyes with her knuckles, she disappeared from his view, dissolving into the blackness of his closed eyelids. Her voice left his thoughts, leaving him alone in his mind. He cautiously unclenched his teeth, opening his eyes. The black faded away to the dim light of the bedroom above the bar. His breath caught in his throat.

Tifa was staring at him as if she had never seen him, her back pressed tightly into the wall as if she wanted to disappear into it. He felt his heart begin to pound, his face reddening in shame. Had he spoken aloud? What had he said? He looked down at his hands, rubbing the pulse in his left palm, slowly shaking his head, wishing he could just wake up from this nightmare.

"I'm sorry, Tifa," he declared, breaking the silence. There didn't seem enough words to express his guilt. "I – I'm sorry."

She took a shaky breath, slowly exhaling as she pushed herself back onto her heels, resting her hand on his knees. She gazed into his brightened blue eyes, searching them. "Why did you call me that?" she whispered, her voice cracking. He stared back, opening his mouth to respond, but having nothing to say.

Tifa hadn't been expecting an answer. She merely nodded and stood, breaking her gaze. Her eyes landed on Barret who stood in the doorway, a frown on his features. Tifa bit the inside of her cheek, pulling her hand from his knee and walking away from him.

Inside his head, Aeris silently cried.

~*~

Cloud couldn't see a thing.

Darkness enveloped his entire line of vision and, for a moment, he wasn't sure if his eyes were even open. He could've sworn they were, but the lack of light in the room was complete. There were no obscure shadows, no indefinable silhouettes that his eye could pick up. There was not even a trace of light, almost as though the entire world had become a lurid black. With the darkness, there was cold.

He couldn't remember getting to this room, the chilling surface behind him cold to the touch, raising gooseflesh on his arms. It was as if the warmth had been scourged from the room, forced away like the light had been. He was reminded of the North Cave, the frigid wind whistling through the darkened snowy tunnels, his personal hell after he had given Sephiroth the Black Materia. He had been more alone then than he had ever been because of Sephiroth.

He felt the blood pumping through his body quicken with his wrath. Funny how that name could still hold so much power over him even now that it was almost a month to the day after the death of that name. It was ironic how that name could still make his heart beat faster, could still make adrenaline rush through his veins. He could almost taste the fear and hatred that name carried with it, it was so tangible, so real. But there was nothing he could do with that fear and hatred; Sephiroth was dead, taking Aeris with him. He could only bottle it up inside him until there was too much anger to hold anymore and he snapped, killing someone. He couldn't hold back a shudder, a realization striking him that was colder than air around him. Aeris was right. He was nothing without Sephiroth. He was a destroyer.

He had spent two months looking for Sephiroth, relentlessly hunting him down. Before that, there hadn't been a day he could remember when he had not thought of the man who had burned his town. Even when he had been wrong in his memories, he couldn't stop thinking of Sephiroth. Aeris had seen the truth before any had realized his folly, before even he had considered his anger his weakness. Why hadn't he seen it? Why hadn't he realized his mistake before it became something that he could not repair? He cursed himself and the stupid misjudgments that had killed Cid. There was nothing left for him but his anger. He would kill with his anger; he could kill others because of a dead man.

His mind almost laughed at the irony of it all. One of the few emotions he had ever truly known was his undoing. He had lived a substantial amount of his life in anger, anger at his father for dying, anger at Tifa for being a relatively happy child, anger at himself for never being given that choice or never taking it, and, worst of all, anger at Sephiroth for taking everything away. To think that he, a man who had rarely known happiness and love should expect to find it after hating for so long... it was ludicrous. His lips twisted at the mocking cruelty of his life.

"I don't think I'd be smiling if I were you," a voice declared, unidentifiable and enigmatic. The man who had spoken could not see his smile if it were dark. He tensed. Why couldn't he see anything?

Cloud shuddered as the strangest sensation rolled over him, prickling his goose flesh. This... this had happened before. He was sure of it. Like a memory surfacing in the tangled knot of the past, the strangest recollection of this occurring once before wracked over him, frightening him more. And then it vanished as if it had never come.

"Just hold still, this'll only take a minute."

Cloud attempted to turn his head to where he thought the speaker could be but found he couldn't move either. He grit his teeth in anger. What did they think they were doing with him? Playing some sort of game? He wasn't in the mood, clenching and unclenching his fists, his twisted smile dissolving from his face.

A cold hand grasped his arm, and he unsuccessfully tried to pull it away. Whatever they were holding him down with was too strong to be broken by even the strongest man's muscles. The cold hand grasped harder, pressing a firm grip over his elbow, preventing his arm from jerking.

"Hold still," the voice growled. "You'll be better than new in a moment."

Better than new?! Cloud wanted to scream at the voice that he was as good as he was going to get, but a sharp pinprick broke his thoughts. And then he did scream, but not out of anger or frustration; his cry of pain reverberated through the room.

It was as if a live fire had been injected into his blood stream, searing and burning him from the inside out. It started in his arm, the fiery agony racing to his fingertips and back again, running to his heart. The core of his being wrenched with the torture as it unknowingly pumped the blazing pain further through his body in a manner of seconds.

He writhed in his bonds as if moving could somehow snuff the flames burning inside his blood. They held tight, unrelenting to his throes of pain, but he struggled anyway, unable to feel the bruising he knew he was receiving by futilely battling them. Somewhere he knew his actions were useless, but his coherent thought had given out the moment the pain had reached his head.

Where there once was dark, now there was red, the crimson color of his blood and of the imaginary fire blazing within him. It was the color that could best describe the rage he often felt against Sephiroth; it was the color of heated anger and the color of the afterimage left by brightened lights. It was the fiery wrath he had thrived on and which now threatened to consume him. Tired of fighting and pain, he let it do so, succumbing to the very thing he had only recently sworn to never let control him again. He would not let his anger kill another. The next victim might be himself.

He laughed, a mad cackle, his voice raspy from the screams he could not remember letting loose. How funny it would be if the thing that had killed Sephiroth killed him in the end. How funny it would be for them both to die by the same hatred. His laugh rose until he had no more breath left to even manage a chuckle. He wheezed for air, unable to get enough into his lungs, but unable to stop his insane chortle.

There was nothing he could do. He could neither escape himself nor his hatred. Why fight an undefeatable foe? With no chance of winning the battle and no hope of a promise from death to take him quickly after his loss, why fight? He envied Cid; he envied Sephiroth. He envied their deaths, wishing that this suffering could end and he would go quietly into the night.

His laugh cut off, tears falling down the side of his face, his chuckle turning into silent cries. What had he done to deserve this? The darkness continued to surround him, choking him and slowly draining the life from the fiery agony. Why should he suffer like this, condemned to drain in a river of his own hate? His cries fell on deaf ears within the darkness. He lashed out with one foot, hopelessly sobbing at his own helplessness.

"Why?!"

The word carried through the halls of the building he was trapped in, carried on a breath of wind. Sitting at a desk in front of the corporation's new president's office, a secretary glanced up as her papers rustled in a soft breeze. After a moment, when no sound followed the cry, she shrugged it off and returned to her work.

~*~

Cid Highwind stared into the steaming, brown liquid Marlene had set before him, a frown painted on his features. He glanced over to the young girl, eyebrows raised in a silent question. She smiled a lopsided grin.

"What's this?" he asked, returning his gaze to the hot drink before him. "This don't look lika martini. I thought you could shake up a good one of those."

"You shouldn't drink any alcohol in your decrepit condition," she declared, her smile not faltering. Cid

frowned at Barret.

"First I'm old and now I'm decrepit," he said, a thoughtful note in his voice. "What kinda kid you raisin' here?"

Marlene giggled and walked away, summoned by a man sitting alone in the corner. Cid watched her go before taking a tentative sip of the steaming liquid. He was unable to hold back a grimace. Tea. When was the last time he had had tea?

The drink was scalding hot, but he took a longer sip, letting the warmth slowly traveling down his throat. He remembered when he had last had a cup of tea. It had been at Shera's. The name made him set the cup back down on the table with a dull thud. He closed his eyes and shook his head, thinking back to the conversation he and Cloud had had in the Wall Market. Cloud... Aeris' voice was softly whispering the name to him, reminding him of the events that night. His jaw set in anger. Why should he listen to Aeris?

Damn it, why should I even think about listening to you, Aeris? You're the cause of all this *&%\$. When the voice was silent in his head, his hands clenched into fists. I'm even talking to myself! I'm going completely nuts! I wish I had never even met you.

You don't wish that, Cid, she whispered. And you're not going insane.

I'm having a conversation with a dead girl inside my head! You don't call that crazy?! I'd say this is a little more serious than Cloud's whacked-out episodes! You're dead, but you were right there.

That wasn't me.

The hell it wasn't! What? I'm blind now, too? He shook his head sadly, unclenching his fists and wrapping them around the cup in front of him. Just... shut up.

"You gonna tell us or what?" Barret asked. "I am a little fond of that spiky-haired freak, and I'm just about runnin' outta patience."

Cid looked up at the other man, carefully masking his surprise. He didn't remember ever agreeing to say anything; he certainly didn't want to say anything about it. He frowned. It was too damn confusing. Nothing he remembered made sense.

Tell them. It's the truth.

His frown deepened before quickly disappearing. He feigned ignorance. "Tell you what?"

Barret almost exploded. "Tell us what?!" He snorted. "Tell us what. What the hell you think we wanna hear? The freakin' story of your life?" He shook his head. "*&%\$."

"What happened to Cloud?" Tifa asked suddenly. She quickly closed her mouth as Cid turned his gaze onto her. How she hated looking into those eyes. The rest of the people sitting around the table pretended not to notice, were not openly affected by it. She forced herself not to look away from him and his sorrowful, Mako eyes.

He seemed to sense her discomfort and looked away from her and down into the translucent depths of his tea, his expression sadly guilt-stricken. "I dunno," he declared. "I wish I did, but I got... I was outta it before that, you know?"

No one said anything, each person mulling over their own thoughts. "Why don't you start from the beginning?" Red XIII suggested, watching him curiously with his one eye.

Cid didn't look up, his brow furrowed. "We went to the Wall Market." Expecting a derogatory comment from Barret or Tifa, he paused, slightly surprised when none came. "We headed back at, uh..." He shrugged. "A coupla three hours later or something. I wasn't exactly lookin' at a clock."

"And?"

Cid ran a hand through his hair, rubbing the place on his forehead where his flight goggles normally sat, suddenly feeling like he was being interrogated. Even the background noise had dropped to an almost imperceptible sound. He looked at the faces of the people around the table. "We, ah, started back through Sector 6."

"Which part?"

Cid's gaze angrily snapped to Red. "For crying out loud! How the hell am I supposed to know that?! It was dark, it was late, and it wasn't exactly under the best of circumstances!"

"Calm down," Tifa said softly, her reddish eyes clouded over in concern. "No one's asking you to remember what color eyes your attacker had. Red's just a little... nit-picky."

Red XIII snorted at the remark, glancing at Tifa before looking back to Cid. The pilot shook his head slowly. "I'm sorry, Red. This entire thing's just pissin' me off."

They were blue. Tell them. Cid's jaw clenched in renewed anger. Shut up, Aeris! he wanted to scream but continued instead. "We stopped at that playground. You know, that one with the big dome slide thing..."

Red nodded. "That corresponds to where we found you. We must've found you relatively shortly after the fight, but the rain washed most of the evidence away. You were almost dead. In fact, I would say that had we not found you when we did, you would most undoubtedly be dead right now. Mmm..."

Cid glanced sharply at the beast. "You wanna hear this or go through the minute details of my death?"

Red XIII's eye narrowed. "Death? Interesting that you should call it that. Now, that I think of it..." Cid rolled his eyes, mouthing a curse as he looked away. Red grinned sheepishly, a gesture grossly out of place on his face. "Sorry."

"Well, did ya see who attacked ya?" Barret asked, taking a sip of the beer in front of him. Cid sighed, slowly spinning the cup in front of him, a troubled expression on his face. "You know who?"

He shrugged. "I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure." Aeris' voice seemed to reverberate in his skull. Tell them! It was Aeris, but not me. It was a clone. Cid snorted. "She's dead," he muttered to himself, as if that was enough to contradict the voice in his head. "It doesn't matter," he said to the group, leaning back in his chair.

Red nodded, slowly soaking up the information. "Okay. Shinra...?"

Cid smiled crookedly. "One. You'd think there'd have been more than that." He looked at the door, then back to Red. "I killed him."

"I hate to break it to ya, buddy, but there must've been more than that. You kill the Shinra, what's left?" Barret asked, his eyes narrowed.

"Shadows." His voice grew cold. "It was black. I really couldn't see what they were, Barret." He looked to Red. "I really don't want to talk anymore. Can I go now?"

"No. Look here," Barret ordered, his face hard. "You're gonna tell us what happened, and you're gonna tell us straight. 'Nuff of this screwin' around."

"Look, Barret. Cloud did that Omnislash or whatever the hell you call it, and they all went down the can. She started screwin' with his head and then..." His voice trailed off as he realized what he was going to say next. His jaw clenched shut. He would not tell Tifa what had happened, not now. He couldn't help the pained expression starting to surface on his face. He couldn't be remembering it right. God, he couldn't.

The truth hurts, Cid, Aeris declared, her own voice pain-filled. Tell it as it was.

I'm not remembering it right! That can't be true! He wouldn't have done that! Not to me... not to his friend. He bit his lower lip to stop the tears from forming in his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he had hurt so much. Why can't you leave me alone?

"Cid, you can tell us," Tifa explained, her hand clenching his arm. "Then what happened?"

He looked at her for a long time, knowing that she had seen the pain reflected in his eyes. I'm wrong. But why did it seem

so right? The gleam of the Ultima Weapon, the warm rush of blood from his body. Cid could still see that horrible expression on Cloud's face when he realized what he had done almost as though it was locked into his memory forever.

"Nothing," he declared, clearing his throat to keep it from cracking. "Nothing happened. I – I don't remember." He stood, his muscles aching. He shook her hand from his arm, attempting a nonchalant shrug

and a grin, but failing miserably. "It started raining." Then he walked away.

Barret frowned at Cid's retreating back, his face tight with anger. "The hell he think he's trying to pull here?!" he demanded, slamming his clenched fist down onto the table. "He thinks he's all that, right?! Like we ain't gotta right to know. Son of a bitch!"

Tifa shook her head, watching the steam slowly drift up from the cooling tea. She had seen the hurt expression on his face when he had suddenly realized what he was saying or going to say. What could possible hurt so much? Who could do that to someone? Her mouth slowly opened in shock, a sudden realization hitting her like a bucket of cold water. She's dead. His words reverberated through her skull, those from a few minutes ago and those from before. Aeris? No, get away from me!... Aeris, shut up! Her eyes widened.

"He thinks it's Aeris," she muttered.

"The hell you talkin' 'bout?"

"What did you say?" Red XIII asked, turning his yellow-eyed gaze to her.

She looked up at them both, looking between them. "He thinks it's Aeris that attacked them!"

Barret frowned again. "Man, you gotta screw loose. You and him both. Aeris ain't alive no more."

She laughed, an insane chuckle. "Can't you see? It all makes perfect sense!"

Barret shook his head, taking a long swallow from his beer. "Damn. I knew that spiky-haired freak wuz a bad 'fluence on ya. Everybody's nuts."

"No," Red stated, his eye narrowed in thought. "Maybe Tifa's onto something. Cid knows Aeris is dead, but somehow remembers her as his attacker. It questions the credibility of the memories themselves which could explain his unwillingness to tell us them. Maybe it's not that he doesn't want us to know, but isn't sure what he remembers is true." Red glanced at the other two people around the table. "Which brings us to the next question: if not Aeris, then who?"

Tifa shrugged, leaning back in her seat with a sigh. "The only probably conclusion we can draw is that Shinra has something to do with this."

"Right. Cid may not think he remembers that right, but no matter what he recalls, we can not disregard the hard evidence. The dead Shinra commando was the only thing recovered at the playground besides Cid himself. I think to answer this question, we may need an informant on the inside."

Tifa nodded her agreement. "Reeve."

Barret pounded his fist onto the hardwood table again, his anger resurfacing. "No way! I ain't understood any of that crap yous were talkin' 'bout, but we ain't bringing the Shinra in on this. Reeve's already shown his double-crossing *%&\$ with that fat cat trick. He ain't to be trusted."

Tifa merely glared at Barret once before promptly ignoring him. "I think maybe we ought to call Vincent and Yuffie to Midgar as well. We're going to need all the help we can get."

Barret's face was turning an ugly shade of dark red. He rounded on Tifa. "Now you want the Turk, too! The hell's gotten into you?! Neither of 'em has stuck their head out where's it coulda gotten cut off. You gonna give up the upper hand we

got by bringing them fools in." Tifa's jaw was set in determination, and Barret frowned at her. She was not going to give into his wishes, not with Cloud's life at stake. His brow furrowed, he buried his face deep into his beer.

~*~

"Tifa, will you marry me?"

Cloud listened to his voice as it bounced off the cold walls, echoing through his head as it did the small room in which he was trapped. He couldn't help the mad chortle that bubbled inside him. How cruel life could be. How completely, utterly cruel. His laugh deepened, reverberating through the enclosure. His laughter converted into sobs.

What had he done to deserve this? Why was he fated to a long life of suffering with nothing to show of it but an increasing body count? Why was he so weak?!

The tears that had run cold with sorrow now flowed hot with his anger. Why couldn't he stand up to himself? He had never been strong, not even as a child. As far back as he dared remember he was weak with his anger, his prejudice, his pride. Damn his pride. He could not swallow it; he could not push it away. It was the worst plague with which he had been cursed, forever returning as though driven by life itself. It was an unstoppable pestilence. It was his sin.

His pride had kept him from any happiness he could have known. What a fool he had been. A fool and his pride. What was it people always said? He frowned bitterly. "Pride goeth before the fall." Definitely not his, but someone else's, someone he would kill out of wrath at Sephiroth, at himself. What a fool he was.

He cried until there were no tears left to cry.

Aeris pulled Cloud into her warm embrace, resting his head against her bosom, rubbing his back as he shuddered with silent tears. She slowly rocked back and forth, humming a song her real mother had taught her, comforting him in his time of need. He was slowly coming around, and, when he did, he would remember her solace, her loving arms wrapped around him in a protective hug. He would remember her, not Tifa. He would remember the woman who had been there when he needed her the most. He would remember Aeris Gainsborough.

"Shh," she whispered, resting her head on top of his, drawing him closer. "Don't cry, Cloud. I'm here. I love you. I won't let anything happen to you anymore."

Her own eyes filled with tears. He had been her bodyguard; now, it was time for her to be his. She could still remember the hurt he had caused her when he had called Tifa his girlfriend all those months ago. He hadn't meant it; she could tell from the look in his eyes when the words had come from his mouth. But they still hurt. He would never make that mistake again. Tifa didn't care about him; her inaction proved it. She didn't deserve him.

Cloud shifted in her grasp, moving his head back to look into her own face. She wiped her tears away from her eyes with her knuckles. He wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb, cupping her face in his hand.

"Don't cry," he whispered, his voice soft from the sobs that had wracked his own body. "Don't cry, Tifa. I love you, Tifa. Marry me."

She stared down at him, unable to stop the tears from reforming in her emerald eyes. God, it hurt. Those words stung her to her core, wrenching her heart until she thought she might die from heart break. I love you, Tifa. How could Tifa love him when she chose to ignore him and his agony? How could she mock even the word "love" while he hurt so? Tifa couldn't love him; Tifa was blind to his hurt. How could he mistake her for Tifa? She closed her eyes to her tears. How could he be so confused?

"Tifa, you will marry me, won't you? You love me."

"You don't mean that," she said softly, running a hand through his hair, her chin quivering. "You can't mean that."

"Marry me, Tifa. You love me, don't you? I've figured it all out." He pulled away from Aeris' embrace, turning to face her. "I

love you, Tifa."

Pain running through her entire body, Aeris abruptly stood, letting the tears stream down her face and drip off her chin. "She doesn't love you!" she snapped, her voice breaking with emotion. How could he be so blind? "I love you, Cloud! Not her! Me!"

She turned, her face buried in her hands, and fled from the room, trembling with her sobs. Cloud let himself fall back onto the hard floor, oblivious to her sobbing. "Why don't you answer, Tifa? Marry me!" Silence reigned in the small room, not even the air daring to move. "Will you marry me? I love you, Tifa. Damn it, Tifa! Answer! Will you marry me?!"

The only response he received was his own words reverberating through the room, silence his only answer. Why didn't she answer him? Where was she? Was his sin that horrible? The hurt he had caused her through their childhood, was it that bad? Was the distance he had put between them that far, so far that she could not love him? Or was that pity he had mistaken for love? Did she view him as a man, or was he a indigent boy with nothing to show for his life but a handful of empty yesterdays and bleak tomorrows?

From her answer, or lack thereof, he could tell. The tears would not come, all of them having been cried long ago. He knew who he was. He was Cloud Strife, the master of an illusionary world where his anger was his power and he was a hero. He was poor Cloud Strife, the man who had lost everything dear to him on the pretense that his pride had been his strength.

~*~

Reeve leaned back into his corporate command chair, setting his feet on top of his desk, completely at ease. He sighed, slouching farther into the large, almost ostentatious, leather chair in his office. The office itself, though quite large, was surprisingly sparse; other than a conference table with chairs around it, there were no other furnishings besides his desk and his chair. The walls were bare, and the carpeting was a dull gray. Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home, he thought, his lips parting in a grin.

He wasn't a looker, in fact, he thought himself as bland as his office. People always said you could tell someone's personality by looking at their surroundings. He hoped not. Reeve didn't exactly think of himself as dull. Intellectual, yes. Interesting, yes. Maybe even handsome, but not flashy and definitely not dull. Conservative, that was the word.

He scratched at his finely trimmed beard, which covered only a portion of his pale face, closing his dark eyes against the light streaming into his office through the large window behind his desk. He could learn to like this position in life, this office. It certainly was nice, especially these quiet breaks when the entire corporation seemed to be taking a small breather. He sighed again, unbuttoning the top button on his dress shirt and loosening his tie, sinking deeper into his chair, giving into the fatigue that plagued him with the rebuilding of Midgar and the problems of finding sources of energy other than Mako.

The phone rang, breaking through his relaxation like a warm knife through butter.

He frowned, his feet dropping to the floor, anger cutting through him. He had told his secretary that he did not want to be disturbed for five minutes. She couldn't even let him alone that long. For about ten seconds, he considered not answering the phone. The thought quickly vanished, and he reached for the phone. Not answering the phone was very unShinra President-like. He picked it up.

"Yeah," he said, buttoning the collar of his shirt again, the phone braced between his head and his shoulder. When the button and collar had been fixed, he grabbed the phone and leaned back into his chair, revolving to look out the window.

"Mr. President," his secretary started, her voice sounding surprisingly metallic. "Mr. President, there's some nut on line three, wants to talk to you about cloning. She's called about four times in a row. I told her you weren't to be disturbed, but _"

Reeve grimaced. "Might as well see what she wants, Doloris," he said, frowning. Quiet time's over, he thought. "Patch her through."

"Yes, sir."

Doloris got off the other line. He stared out the window at the skeleton of Midgar as he waited for the call to come through. There was little left of the once majestic city, all the plates destroyed or removed, debris still littering much of the city's limits. The slums were being rebuilt into more comfortable, and certainly, better quality housing establishments. Shinra, Inc., was helping the citizens with the task of rebuilding of their houses and businesses while its technicians worked at a way to solve the power problems. Already, his team of carefully selected engineers and scientists were working on ways to provide power for the people, using Mako energy or not. He would prefer a way to use Mako energy without leeching it from the planet. They were still working on that.

"Hello? Mr. Reeve, can I offer you a glass of beer and the quiet stool in the corner? Free of charge."

Reeve grinned, forgetting that this call was interrupting his break. He turned the chair back to his desk, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the metal. "That sounds almost like a bribe. It would not be suiting for a man of my position to accept bribes. What can I do for you, Tifa?"

She laughed lightly. "It wasn't a bribe. Only an offer. I'm not sure we should speak about this over an open line."

"I've secured this line myself, Tifa. I don't trust my people that much. There are still a lot of them that would gut me for a feather."

"No open vents that lead to bathrooms in your office?" she asked, a joking note in her voice.

"Nope. I prefer to get my fresh air through the window. Now, really, what can I do for you?"

She paused, a muttering on the other end that told him, she had her hand cupped over the mouthpiece while she consulted someone else. She got back on the line. "I suppose you've heard what happened?"

He shook his head. "No, I haven't heard anything about anything. Something happen in Sector 7? You need some help with repairs?"

"Not unless you can repair..." she muttered, her voice barely audible.

"Repair what?" he asked, curiosity overwhelming him. What had happened down there to prompt this phone call?

"Nothing, Reeve. We didn't have an accident on the job. There's been a slight... confrontation between Cid and one of your commandos."

"What?!" Reeve demanded, standing and leaning heavily on the desk, nonplussed. "What are you talking about?"

"Actually, we're not quite sure who was behind this... confrontation, but Cid," she took a deep breath, "Cid got himself run through."

"God," Reeve breathed, sitting back down on the edge of his chair. "Is he alright? He's not dead, is he?"

Tifa paused, as though she was considering her next words. "He's fine. It wasn't serious, but we found one of your commandos there. Cid said he killed him."

"Well, what should I do about it? You know how many commandos this company has under its employment? And there are more that have been AWOL for months. It'd be like looking for the proverbial needle in a hay stack. It's going to take weeks at least."

She grunted in response. "There's one more thing, Reeve, and you don't have to answer this if you don't want to. I was wondering if Shinra was cloning people again."

Reeve was silent. He didn't know what to say. It was embarrassing to him that his knowledge of what went on in the Shinra

corporation was not extensive, or even close to what most soldiers could hear in a day through gossip. He really didn't know what type of people certain wings of Shinra might have hired to work for them. He made a mental note to fix this in the future.

"I have no idea if there is someone with access to Hojo's labs, or what's left of them, that is attempting to make clones," he declared. "However, I have no intention of sitting here on my behind waiting for some fruit loop to start cloning Sephiroth again." He hit the intercom on his desk. "Doloris, get me the employee list. I want everyone with access to Hojo's labs to be on the top of that list." He turned back to the phone. "I'll get back to you as soon as possible, Tifa. And, you don't have to answer this either, but why do you want to know this information?"

Tifa's response was not immediate. "Cid thought he saw a dead woman trying to take his head off."

She hung up with a barely audible click. Reeve replaced his phone back onto the cradle, his lips pursed in thought. A dead woman trying to take someone's head off? He snorted, turning to his computer and back to his work. What was the world coming to?

~*~

Tifa Lockhart cut off the telephone call sharply, leaning against the counter of the bar. Barret looked at her expectantly, but she said nothing. She didn't like lying to Reeve; no matter what his actions had been, he showed himself to be a true friend. Lying to friends was wrong, especially when they took so many pains to help her and Barret and Cloud get back on their feet after Meteor, especially when the friend was taking the responsibility of reforming the entire city of Midgar.

As if reading her thoughts, Barret said, "Ya weren't lying to him."

"Then why do I feel like I have?" she snapped, her voice cold.

"Come on, Tifa," he declared. "Get that outta yo head right now. Ya weren't lying, you was keeping our edge."

"Edge against what?!" she demanded. "I would really like to know because right now I feel like slime."

"'Gainst the Shinra, who else?"

"We aren't fighting the Shinra, Barret. Why can't you see that?" She sat down on a stool. "We aren't fighting Reeve, or Vincent, or Cid either. We're fighting against Aeris this time. Lying to Reeve, or having an edge, is not going to help the situation. We gotta be a team again."

"Team my ass! The hell you thinkin'?! Reeve's a liar, Vincent's a cold bastard, and Cid's already proven he ain't to be trusted. We're lying? Ya oughtta talk ta them. *&\$%, we could take lessons from them."

"No, Barret. You're wrong. Reeve wouldn't have done this. He wouldn't have used something so painful just to get back at Cloud."

"That's \$%&*."

"I'm afraid Tifa's reasoning is more sound than yours," Red interjected.

Barret turned on the creature. "Well, no one's talkin' ta yo furry ass."

Red XIII ignored him. "I doubt that Reeve is unaware of the amount of anguish Cloud feels when he thinks about Aeris and her death." Tifa felt her throat constrict, tears threatening to spring forth. No, she would be strong for Cloud. Red pretended not to notice her reaction as he continued. "To use something so hurtful against him is below even a spy like Reeve. We know Reeve as a happy-go-lucky stuffed cat on a mog. Let's consider that as the real Reeve, and he is not a spy."

"So, what if it ain't? You both are takin' a risk trustin' that guy. You bet Cloud's life."

Red XII gave Barret half a shrug, or as close to one as he could manage. "If Cait Sith isn't the real Reeve, I'm wrong and we lose. I believe that in a situation such as this, we really have no choice in the matter."

"No choice." Barret turned away. "I say we walk in the front door of that buildin', take Cloud, and get our asses outta there."

"We don't even know if he's there," Tifa declared, running a hand through her hair.

"Damn it! Where else he gonna be?! The bloody City of the Ancients?!"

Silence followed his comment, a hurt look easily visible on Tifa's face. "What's the matter with you, Barret? Why can't you just understand? I don't like the Shinra any more than you, but I have to trust them. I have to trust Reeve's judgments and I have to trust Cid's. He doesn't want to tell us something, fine; I don't give a damn. I want to find Cloud. You may believe that that screws up my judgment, but I think that that's my edge over Aeris. I love him and I openly admit that I would do most anything to have him back!"

Her teeth clenched in anger as she looked between Barret and Red XII. Her jaw relaxed as she finally realized what she had just said. She felt her face burning in embarrassment and she looked away, ashamed of her outburst. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

Barret frowned. "Don't be. I'd probably feel the same way if it was Marlene out there, missing. %?*, maybe even if it was you." He glanced out the door. "I oughtta be the one 'pologizing. Where's that damn

pilot?"

Tifa rubbed her brow. "Out working on the Highwind. Trying to get it off the ground again."

Barret frowned. "Maybe we shouldn't visit him. Probably cussin' all those trainees he's got, again. Yellin' and screamin', throwin' them tools all around."

Red XIII grinned. "Does sound like a bad idea, doesn't it?" Tifa giggled. "Well, that leaves one option."

Barret raised his eyebrows in question. "What?"

"We wait."

~*~

"What the hell does this do?!" Cid demanded after carefully scrutinizing the lever. It was unmarked, uncolored, and, furthermore, a new addition to the controls. "Who put this here?!" His eyes darted to each of the pilots working on the bridge of the airship. None of them responded. "Well? I didn't train any idiots!"

Finally, one pilot, a new guy, raised his hand. "I – I did, sir," he stammered.

Cid rolled his eyes at the rookie. "What does it do?! Sit there and look pretty?! Does it have a purpose? Yes? No? Maybe so?"

The rookie shrugged. "I dunno. I just thought that having a lever to pull in an emergency was, you know, mandatory. It should do something."

Cid groaned, slapping a hand to his face. "Find out what it does, you blockhead! It'd be nice to know what the lever does before you pull it."

"Why? You've pulled levers before without prior knowledge of their functions," Jerry said, leaning back into the rail of the ship. His comment prompted laughter from the rest of the crew. Cid frowned.

"Those were special circumstances. I knew what they did."

"Yeah, right. 'Well, there are two levers here I haven't tried, yet'," Jerry declared in an impression of Cid.

Cid's frown deepened as the laughter of the crew was renewed. "That was Shinra. I can't help it if that damn company screwed up my ship. Now, get your asses back to work, you morons! And, Jerry, make a note to me to have you fired."

"Aye, aye, Captain!" Jerry made a mock salute to the other pilot before crouching back down under the control console.

"Find out what that damn lever does!" Cid ordered as he walked off the bridge and into the body of the ship. He sighed as he started across the metal grate bridge over the gap, his shoes rattling the metal. More of the crew was working beneath him, running diagnostics and tests on the new engines which had been added to the ship to replace the two that had been ripped off of it at the North Cave.

He climbed down a ladder into the pit, glancing at the gears and machinery to make sure everything was in its proper place. He watched as the crew worked, his brow furrowed in concentration as he inspected their progress. His presence made the man in front of him nervous, and he glanced back at his boss.

"Can I help you with something, sir?" he asked, licking dry lips. "There's nothing wrong, is there?"

There was no response from the captain as he glanced to his right, frowning. He walked away purposefully, his eyes hard. He pulled the tech away from the machinery with a hard yank, anger in his eyes.

"The hell you doin'?!" he demanded, though he did not wait for an answer. "That goes there!" He pointed. "This goes here! Damn it, you can't even find some decent techs, anymore! Put it back and start it over! @\$#..."

Somebody tapped him on the shoulder, pulling his attention from the first tech. He turned abruptly. "The hell you want?!"

"Sir, we're ready for a test," the tech declared. "On the engines."

Cid angrily shook his head. "A test! We ain't gonna have any tests until this blockhead learns where to put things in their rightful places!"

The tech cleared his throat, lowering his voice. "Sir, you never come down here, and you're, ah, making everyone just a bit nervous right now."

Cid lowered his voice as well though the angry note was still very audible. "I never come down here because I'm a pilot. I fly the ship, but right now my ship don't fly, so I don't fly. And I like flying and so does my ship. My ship is not happy because she is not flying. When my ship isn't happy, I'm not happy, so make my damn ship fly!"

"We will, we will," the tech declared. "But you're making everyone nervous by peering over their shoulders while they work. I can understand you wanting your ship to fly, but our job is down here and yours is on the bridge."

"And just what are you insinuating?!" Cid demanded, his voice rising in anger again. "That I don't know my own ship? I know it like I know the back of my hand!" He subconsciously raised his left hand which was clenched into a fist, cursing himself as he realized what he had just said. His left hand. He let the hand drop back to his side. "Never mind," he said, sighing. He slowly shook his head as he began walking back to the ladder, his anger forgotten and replaced with weariness. He turned back to the tech. "Just call me when she flies."

"Yes, sir. Where will you be?"

Cid placed a hand on one rung, thinking. He didn't want to go back to the Seventh Heaven; he had not received word from Tifa that Barret had cooled down a couple of notches. He did not want to stay here, rotting in the operations room. He had to be somewhere where one of his crew could find him, though, which ruled out wandering in Midgar. His choices were slowly running out. Finally, he turned back to the tech. "I'll be at the Gay Boat."

The tech nodded. The Gay Boat was what Cid had taken to calling the Tiny Bronco after he had found it in a marshy area near Midgar. "Boat" because he could not get it to fly; "gay" because it didn't float very well either. In fact, it didn't do much of anything anymore. The tech watched as he began to climb back up the ladder.

"We'll get you when we're ready."

"Yeah, you better, else I'll have to make another note to Jerry to have me fire you, too."

The crew in the pit watched as he left, bewildered at his sudden change of heart. They contemplated it no further, and quickly returned to their work. Their ship wasn't happy; it needed to fly.

~*~

Doctor Nygel Huiji stared out the window of his office, a paper cup of coffee in one hand, the other in the pocket of his lab coat. His gaze was undefined, his lips pursed in thought. The world seemed to be crashing down upon his balding head, his scheme becoming dust in his fingers. His meticulously thought-out plans were becoming invalid, unusable, miscalculated. How could he, Nygel Huiji, master of genetics, possibly err in such a manner? It was absurd.

The obvious key to his miscalculations was most undoubtedly his first clone, Aeris Gainsborough. She thought that this was her show, that she was going to rule the Planet, make it into her own private Promised Land. As his error in the experiment was plaguing him, so would hers. He drained his cup of its coffee, downing the remains of the warm liquid. He continued to glare out the window, over Midgar, as if the ruins were somehow mocking him in his fault. He would not make the same mistake Hojo had with Sephiroth. He would not give his creation free reign. The ramifications of that had been made clear with the Meteor incident.

But his error made hers all the more unfortunate. She could not honestly believe that she could override his power in this project or anything that was derived from his experiment. She did not hold his power, and her judgment that she could was the epitome of her lunacy. She was his creation. It would be foolish of her to believe she had power over him. Her only role was to manipulate Strife, end of story. If she expected more, she was sorely mistaken. She may be able to destroy, he thought benevolently, but I am able to breathe life into the inanimate creatures the world has shunned. I gave her life, and I can take it back just as easily.

His fist clenched around the paper cup he was holding. It folded inward on itself at the pressure he applied to it, crackling as the rim of the cup bent. He dropped the crushed cup into the trash can, a small, self-satisfied grin on his face. Underestimating him was the greatest blunder of all as she would soon see. There was nothing that could stop him now. As soon as Aeris was gone, destroyed by her own insanity or by Strife's, the Destroyer would belong to him. He would be the ultimate power of the world, and with Strife below him, the people would live beneath him in fear of his power and fear of him.

The door opened a crack and a head popped into the room, merely a mess of shoulder length red hair and an unshaven jaw. Nonetheless, it interrupted Nygel's reverie, and the doctor turned an angry gaze on the trespasser.

"Knock next time, you fool," he said, his voice cold. He leaned forward onto the desk, his elbows locked, his eyes hard. "This had better be worth my time," he growled, the menace thick in his tone. "I do

not appreciate my train of thought being derailed."

"Yes, sir – I mean, no, sir," the man, Nygel's assistant, stammered. "I mean..." He shook his head, anger replacing his fear. "We're ready for you, now. Everything's set up."

"Do you have him on the monitors? I would be such a shame if this were to kill him after all our hard work."

"Yes, sir. We're not incompetent."

Nygel merely shrugged as he walked around the desk and opened the door, straightening his lab coat as he strided from his office. "That, my friend, is a matter of opinion."

~*~

Cloud couldn't see a thing, again. The world around him was that same black velvet that was so familiar. He could not remember it ever being so dark, but he often found that his memories were fleeting, and, more than often, he found that they could not be trusted. But the black he somehow knew almost as though he had lived it before, as if he had lived the darkness.

And with the darkness came the fear.

Why he should fear the darkness was as intangible as why it was so familiar. It was almost as if it was all a nightmarish dream, a dream from which he could not wake up. It was the dark, surrounding him, choking him. He couldn't break free; he couldn't breathe. A shudder wracked his body, chilling him to his core.

"Cease your thermal convulsions!" someone growled. He tried to pinpoint the voice, tried to find some way out of this phantasm and back to the real world. "You're making this hard on us as well as yourself."

Us? Where was he? Who was "us"? What was happening? He felt somehow naked without his sight, cursing himself. He couldn't even tell if he had his eyes closed or not. He couldn't even see the black silhouettes of foes. A foe you couldn't see was a foe you couldn't kill.

"What's happening?" he demanded, though the bravado in his voice was clearly false. He licked his dry lips. "Tell me what's going on!"

"You're becoming agitated," the voice declared. "Hold still, and this will be finished as soon as humanly possible."

"What's happening?! I can't see!" Cloud tested the bonds holding him down, a memory rushing to the surface of his psyche. His heart pounded in his ears. He had been here before with this vulnerability haunting him and this sickening sense of déjà vu. Somebody had hurt him like this before. Somebody had...

No!

"Stop it! You're agitated!" the voice declared. "Hold him down!"

Gruff hands grabbed his arms and legs, pushing the his knees flat and holding his elbows against the table. Cloud shook his head, trying to knock away the voices that filled the darkness inside his head. He was shaking uncontrollably, images and sensations flashing through his mind. Things he had forgotten. Things that had been erased. They were... they were doing this to him again! He couldn't let that happen! "No! Let go of me!" he ordered, panic rising in his voice as he struggled. "Stop! Let me go! Please!"

He jerked his right arm up, breaking the grip holding down his arm. Somehow, he found strength in his mental agony. The bond holding down his wrist ripped from the table with the shriek of grinding metal. His ability to break free was rewarded with a stab of pain.

A sharp pinprick pierced the darkness, a small hurt in a sea of anguish. And then there was the fire.

Another recollection tugged at his mind as the hurt washed through him, boiling his blood. He kicked and struggled, unable to here the cries and protests of metal and the people, unable to hear his own screaming over the thundering of his heart. He rolled over, falling off the table with a thud, in an attempt to snuff the internal flames eating at his body. His foot twisted, still locked in a bond, but the pain was lost in him.

"God, stop it! Please!" he pleaded hoarsely. His throat was dry and rough from screaming, and he kicked the table away from him, snapping the final bond. He struggled in his blindness, knocking away the hands that grabbed him, trying to defend himself from the invisible men that had violated his mind.

Anger filled him, taking control over his actions. "Get away from me!" His own voice was alien to his ears, and the screams that followed were even more so. The black was replaced by a blinding white for a moment before drifting back to the dismal dark, the air crackling with power around him. The hands were gone, and, yet, so was his energy. He staggered to his feet.

Stumbling, his knees buckling and the strength he had found in his hurt dwindling, he lurched spasmodically, futilely searching for an exit from this insanity. He toppled into something, falling over it. Shattering glass was barely audible to him as he fell over the object. He hit the ground with a dull thud, metal clattering to the floor, pain paralyzing him.

He rolled onto his back, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. The burning in his body had not stopped, had not lessened, slowly eating away at his core. Too weak to struggle, too tired to move, he let the tears fall silently from his eyes, his foolish dignity forgotten in his strife. "Somebody stop it, please," he whispered, a beseeching note in his voice. "Stop it, somebody, stop..."

Nygel Huiji rubbed his chin thoughtfully, thoroughly pleased with himself. The lab was in ruins around him; the table was destroyed, glass beakers shattered, inanimate bodies laying where Strife had knocked them in a momentary show of power. A light flickered on and off above him, buzzing as the electrical current was slowly being connected and severed. Nygel felt a smile coming to his lips, the proverbial light bulb illuminating his thoughts in a burst of inspiration. It was all too easy.

He had found the key; the missing link to a newly formulated plan. This time his scheme would not be ruined by anything. The pieces were falling into place, everything working out as it should be. He could and would rule the Planet and all its life by gaining the trust of the one man who had the power to destroy it.

He knelt next to the young man, resting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I can make it stop," he whispered. "Trust in me, and your pain will cease to exist." He smiled crookedly. "I can help you."

The Destroyer would choose him over Aeris, for while Aeris acted on revenge, cajoling and wheedling her way into his soul, he could and would be one step ahead of her. For while Aeris only sought the power to destroy the world, he was acting out of the goodness of his heart.

~*~

The loud barrage of curses coming from the small ship, almost stopped Tifa dead in her tracks. Almost. What she had to say, or rather find, was too important to be stopped by a foul mood and a broken ship.

"Die, you bastard! Damn you!"

Tifa dismounted her red chocobo and tied the reins to the shredded tail of the Tiny Bronco next to a similarly tied blue chocobo. Turning to the front of the plane, the origin of the streaming cursing and every now and then a pounding, her gaze landed on the wing of the red plane, a small smile playing on her lips. Tiny Bronco was crossed out with a large black "x". Written sloppily below it was "Gay Boat". She ducked under the wing.

"So, that what you've taken to calling it," she declared.

Cid glanced up in surprise, a hammer raised in his hand. He slammed it down onto the engine with a clank. "Calling what?"

She shook her head, a grin on her face. Cid nodded in a sudden realization and grinned as well, his face reddening. "It seemed appropriate. It's a happy, little—" the hammer came down again, "—piece of #%&\$. Work, you — you — you..." His voice trailed off as he ran out of curses, unable to find the word that best described his plane. He straightened, clearing his throat, the humor gone from his eyes. "But you didn't come here to see how my little friend was functioning."

She nodded, placing a hand on the wing. The engine sputtered, coughing, and the propellers on the sides of the wings spun spasmodically before coming to a stop as the engine died again. Cid screamed in frustration, his cigarette falling from his mouth, the chocobos warbling nervously. "You piece of junk!" he growled. "Gay Boat is too good a name for you! You should be called Pimple on the Ass of Aviation! Or Stationary Scrap Pile! Or — or..." He slammed his fist into the wing,

cursed again, and waved his aching hand to ease the stinging. He finally turned back to Tifa, his brow furrowed, setting the hammer onto the wing, waiting expectantly for her question.

You know what's she's going to ask, Aeris declared. He nodded, sighing, meeting Tifa's gaze. "You wanna know what happened to Cloud."

Tifa looked away from his Mako eyes and stared instead at the ground. "Yes," she said smally. She saw him turn his back on her, staring at the distant sea. "And I know you know," she added, her voice gaining strength. "And I need to know."

He closed his eyes, shaking his head. "You ain't gonna like it."

Tifa felt tears forming in her eyes. "I don't care, Cid. I need to know."

He was silent, and Tifa had a feeling he wasn't going to tell her anything. The tears rolled down her cheeks silently as she turned away from him. She would ride her chocobo back to the Seventh Heaven and leave him desolate. Her tears turned hot with anger. If he wanted solitude, let him rot alone.

"Tifa," he called, his voice pained. She turned back to him, her eyes landing on his. There was a hurtful, pleading look surfacing there. Her anger melted in shame. "Tifa, Cloud loves you."

She snorted, turning to lean on the wing of plane as her anger returned. "I know. Somehow, I've always known. You tell me something I already know. I asked you a question!" She was unable to keep the bite out of her voice. "And when you're in trouble, I hope to God that someone treats you like this!" She didn't have to look to know that her words stung him. She didn't want to look at him, to see that God-awful, hurt puppy look in his eyes. He didn't respond.

Tell her. Cid shook his head as if the action could dislodge Aeris from inside his mind. Why? he silently yelled. So she can live with the knowledge that the man she loves almost killed me? I wouldn't want that. He opened his mouth to apologize to Tifa, but Aeris' voice stopped him. You want to live with the knowledge that she doesn't know?! Which is worse, knowing you can help him, or not even knowing he's alive? Think for once, Cid, about what she must be going through instead of what's happening to you. His anger snapped. You think telling her's gonna put her out of her misery?! The answer was one word. No.

Cid turned to Tifa, leaning against the engine of the Gay Boat. "Tifa, I don't want to hurt you," he said, finally.

She turned to face him, tears streaming from her face. "I don't care. I've hurt so much these past few months, I don't think I can feel the pain any more."

"You'll feel this pain. Damn, I feel this pain deeper than anything else that's ever happened to me. For once in my life, I've been ordered to look at the truth long and hard, and I don't like what I've seen."

Tifa crossed her arms under her breasts. "Tell me what you see that makes you hurt so much." The bitterness had returned to her tone.

He ran a hand through his hair. "I see myself standing there in front of Aeris, and she has this strange look in her eye like she knows I'm going to die. I never saw it coming."

"Saw what?" Tifa asked, although she had a feeling she knew what he was going to say next.

"Saw my death. God, he was right there. He could've helped me kill her. He could've done something!" His chin quivered, and he looked away briefly and then back again, tears in his eyes. "Tifa, he loved you."

"What happened?"

Cid shook his head. "He ran me through," he whispered. "Damn it! He took the bloody Ultima Weapon and ran me through."

Tifa could feel the blood draining from her face, her eyes wide. She collapsed against the wing of the Gay Boat, sobs wracking her body, her tears no longer silent and no longer able to wash away her agony. Cid cursed and looked away, blinking back the pain and the tears that accompanied it.

"Is this what you wanted?" he asked, his voice inaudible to Tifa. Aeris did not respond, struck wordless by his actions. He buried his face in his hands, leaning heavily against the other wing. Metal shrieked and he felt himself falling.

He hit the ground with a crash, pain cracking through his head, the wing digging painfully into his stomach and chest. The hammer slid from where it had been perched and the plane tilted with a screech.

He rolled over, looking up into the cloudless sky. Laughter filled his head.

Groaning, anger at the stupid plane filling him, he attempted to get up. The curvature of the wing prevented him from completing that task. "You %*(?@\$@ piece of stupid @%\$#! Rot in hell! Die, you son

of a bitch!" he yelled, pounding the ground with his clenched fist, the tears leaking unheeded from his eyes. It was then he realized the laughter was not from Aeris.

Tifa, her eyes red from crying, was laughing uncontrollably, her breath coming in choked gasps. Cid looked at her, unable to stifle the chuckles boiling up in him. In a manner of seconds, they were both laughing uproariously, letting all their hurt out in their noisy hilarity. The chocobos warbled from where they were tied to the plane, almost as if scrutinizing the humans' behavior. The laughter continued, riding up into the sky, simply because there were no more tears left to cry.

~*~

Cloud stared darkly at the door of his cell from where he lay on the small bed shoved to one wall. The bed was too low to the ground to be of any use to him and bolted to the floor too strongly to be moved by mere muscle. It was, however, surprisingly soft and a nice, comfortable place to lay and watch the door. The door was smooth; there was no knob.

Against the other stark wall was a plain wash bowl and a toilet. Water dripped from the faucet, sliding down the sides of the bowl before disappearing down the drain. The pipes were rusted and weak but, as a previous test discovered, were still too strong to be broken and used as a weapon. The bowl and toilet were both metal instead of the porcelain which adorned the bathroom of his house in Costa del Sol. There were both affixed tightly to the floor and the wall. There was no mirror.

All four walls of the small cell were a plain, gloomy gray, marked only by one small ventilation shaft toward the ceiling above the door. The shaft was too far above the door to reach by hand and too far away from any of the stark furniture to reach by climbing. The vent was built as part of the wall as well; there were no screws nor nails that Cloud could see. The walls were not drywall; they could not be broken. There were no windows.

There was no place to run and no chance of escape.

It was just the type of cell Cloud liked best.

He stretched and set his arms behind his head, resting comfortably on the small bed. And he waited.

~*~

Vicks Rolon stretched and leaned against the wall, slouching restfully in his chair, his rifle braced across his knees. Guarding the all but empty cells was a thankless job, leaving him alone for twelve hours a day only to go home to an empty apartment to eat a lonely dinner, sleep in an desolate bed, and return to his thankless work the next morning. The pay wasn't worth it; the boredom was, at most times, overpowering. One of these days, he vowed to quit this job and open some sort of shop, but he knew he never would. He was destined for boredom.

Piette Garrette was his only companion. Vicks glanced down the hall, running a hand through his black hair. Piette had left moments before on a trip that Vicks guessed was to visit with their only captive. The young man had found Cloud Strife to

be one of the most interesting prisoners they had ever had. Considering the fact that they had only had two, and the other had been a corporate shark named Reavey – or Reave, or something like that – it was fated that the bored young guard be drawn the man who had destroyed Sephiroth.

Vicks shook his head. Socializing with prisoners could cost a guard his job, but, then again, this job wasn't worth its weight in dust. He stood and stretched, glancing at his watch. Play time's over, he thought, setting his rifle against the wall and unsnapping the button holding his handgun in its holster. He started down the hall, stopping in front of the door holding their solitary prisoner. He sorted through the keys on his key ring, stopping at the right one. He pushed it into the lock.

~*~

Cloud heard the keys jingling in the lock, and, slowly, he pushed himself off his cot, careful not to make a sound. This could be what he was waiting for and he didn't want to blow it. He stood, silently walking to one side of the door. When that door opened, he'd be ready.

~*~

Vicks glanced down the hall, grabbing the door knob and slowly turning it. He slowly began pushing it open, one hand dropping to his gun, ready to draw and discharge it if the need aroused. He doubted it would, but it was better to be prepared.

~*~

As soon as the door was open far enough, Cloud grabbed its edge, yanking it in into the cell with all his strength. The guard stumbled forward with a surprised yelp, staggering into the room and fumbling for his gun. Cloud grabbed the guard's head, pulling him off his feet and to the floor where Cloud violently twisted the guard's neck. A barely audible crack filled the silent room. It was all over in a matter of seconds.

Cloud leaned down, pulling the handgun, an automatic, from where the dead guard had attempted to free it. He ejected the magazine, glancing at the bullets within it. It was fully loaded. Coldly, he slipped the magazine back into the gun and left the room.

Piette Garrette slowly walked back down the hall where both he and Vicks were assigned to watch a solitary prisoner, a cup of coffee in one hand. He whistled cheerfully as he walked down the hall and back to his post, although he found his job to be quite boring. His cheerfulness disappearing in a groan, he looked to Vicks' chair, expecting to find the other man sitting just as he had left him. Vicks was nowhere to be seen.

Setting the coffee down onto his chair, Piette picked up the rifle leaning against the wall, glancing cautiously down the hall. "Vicks?" he asked, licking suddenly dry lips. "Vicks, where are ya?"

There was no response. The hall was empty and seemingly as he had left it, but Vicks would not have left his post, especially when they had a prisoner as dangerous as Cloud Strife. He checked the rifle to make sure it was loaded, hefting it up into the crotch of his shoulder and glancing down the sights.

"C'mon, Vicks! This ain't funny no more. Where the hell'd ya go?" He peered down the hall, taking a tentative step, slowly viewing everything through the sight of the rifle. He began down the hall, his boots making a hollow sound on the metal floor. He never saw it coming.

~*~

Cloud heard the guard before he saw him. He peered around the corner of the hall, tightening his grip on the handgun when the blue-clad figure came into view. The guard was obviously a rookie and a nervous man, his movements jerky. He jumped at any sound he heard. Luck had looked out for Cloud this day.

He turned out into the hall, coming up like a black wraith stalking its prey. He slowly raised the handgun, aiming down the sights. He pulled the trigger. Once. Twice. It was over. The dead body of the guard dropped to the ground, blood pooling from the remnants of his skull. Cloud stepped over the body, ignoring the lifeless gray eyes staring into eternity.

He walked down the hall.

He approached the vacant chairs, the coffee slowly cooling in the paper cup, and continued on toward his freedom. He felt no remorse. He would not be used any longer; his freedom was at the end of the corridor. Nothing would stop him now.

A gunshot exploded in his ears. He spun toward the sound, his own gun raised, but staggered as a bullet ripped through his leg. The leg refused to hold his weight, and he collapsed, clutching the wound, blood pouring through his fingertips and staining his pants. He dropped the gun as he fell, watching as it skittered from his hand. Now it was truly over. He had lost.

The enraged face of Aeris Gainsborough loomed over him, her lips tight with anger, her eyes narrowed with hate. She pressed the gun to his forehead, her mouth curving in an almost feral grin, her white teeth wicked against the red paint on her lips.

"You would seek to escape, Destroyer," she growled, her voice low. "I want to kill you for your crimes, but I would not settle my efforts in vain. Let the pain you feel remind you of this."

She stood, her pink dress following her curves and the gun clenched tightly in her hand. Her lips pulling back in that horrible grin, she brought the heel of her shoe down into the wound in his leg. A strangled cry of pain escaped his lips as the numbing agony washed over him. The harrowing vision of his evil enchantress faded into the black.

~*~

For once in his life, Bugah had no idea what to do.

Deemed an elder because of his extensive experiences and wisdom derived thereof, there was rarely a time in which he had no plan, no course of action. With Bugenhagen and Hargo at his side, Cosmo Canyon had never reached state of total confusion, Seto's presence even furthering the peace. He had never thought that there would come a time where Cosmo Canyon was ruled by this thoughtless cacophony.

He was torn from his thoughts as an explosion kicked up dirt and rocks near him. He ducked behind an outcropping of boulders, the earth from the explosion beating down on him mercilessly. When the rain of earth stopped, Bugah tentatively glanced out from his hiding place.

Cosmo Canyon was in ruins. Where the town had once stood, there were only burning buildings and dismal debris. Smoke curled up into the gray sky, red flames reaching for the clouds like the bloodied fingers of a murderer reaching for a victim's neck. The stench of burnt flesh filled the air, its distinct aroma mingling with the stench of death. In the midst of the smoke and chaos was its cause.

An obsidian dragon, seemingly made from the darkness itself, raised up on its haunches, letting loose a shriek. The cry resounded through the canyon, the echo shaking loose gravel and dirt from the rock walls. The fire roared in response, crackling and hissing as it devoured the town in a mad attempt to ease its bottomless hunger. Thunder growled in the sky.

The dragon spread its wings, their large span engulfing the town. The light from the flames reflected on the crystalline surface, the black neither scorched by the heat nor burned by the blaze. Blood gleamed on pearl teeth, the same crimson marring the surface of its long, wicked claws. It heaved itself up the pinnacle of the town, its long tail swinging wide for balance, oblivious to the damage it caused to the canyon and to the town.

Bugah watched in horror as the observatory on top of the cliff was slowly crushed under the immense weight of the creature. The beams cracked, the roof collapsing in on itself, the treasure contained within its walls destroyed. Bugah swallowed in remorse, his throat constricting. All that Bugenhagen had loved, a small memory of a crazy, old wizard, was gone, ground into the canyon floor. It was destroyed forever, never to be replaced by even the hardest work. What was Cosmo Canyon now, but a small amount of crushed hopes and dead bodies, a run-down town, no man's land.

The dragon raised its head into towards the clouds, stretching its long neck to reach the dismal gray. It let loose a trumpeting call as if it was broadcasting its victory to the sky. The ground shuddered under its cry, a frightened bit of earth. The remaining denizens of Cosmo Canyon hid from the creature's fury, running for cover in a futile attempt to escape the roar. It echoed through the canyon, reverberating into every crack and niche within its cliffs and ridges. Nowhere was safe from the call. When the dragon cut it off, the echo shouted in reply.

Pushing itself from the pinnacle of Cosmo Canyon in a fury of wings and muscle, the dragon hoisted itself into flight, embracing the clouds. It circled once, its wings picking up a gale that blew dust and smoke into the air. It shrieked again and was gone.

Quite shaken and ashen with the knowledge that he had just survived the passing events, Bugah stood, shaking the dust and dirt from his clothing. The situation was bleak, most of the people of Cosmo Canyon lying dead on the ground, their blood staining the otherwise bland, brown, dusty earth. A smoldering weed crumpled to the ground, disintegrating into ash as the embers slowly ate it. The remaining denizens of Cosmo Canyon slowly crawled from their hiding spots.

Bugah took a deep breath. "We need a protector once more," he whispered, his voice barely audible. He looked at the people staring at him wide-eyed, anger filling his core. This thing had taken away everything that meant something to the elders of Cosmo Canyon. He would not stand for this. "Send for Nanaki."

~*~

Cloud groaned, letting his head fall to the side, slowly opening his eyes. The pain exploded in his leg, a burning throb that accompanied his heartbeat. He set his jaw against the pain, trying to blink away the double images spinning in front of his eyes. His attempt to block the pain and climb to his feet was feeble, nausea forcing him back down on the comforting surface almost before his head left the pillow. It was nicer where he currently was, anyway.

Dr. Nygel Huiji raised his eyebrows in concern though he made no move to assist the young man in getting to his feet. He rubbed the goatee on his chin, scratching at his black hair, deep in thought. After Aeris had so inconsiderately left Strife bleeding in the hallway, Nygel had brought him back to the cell, stitched him up, and wrapped a bandage around the wound. He had seen his opening. All he had to do was play his cards right now.

"Does it hurt much?" he asked, remaining seated on the toilet, his make-shift chair. "I can get you something for the pain."

Cloud's eyes landed on the man on the opposite side of the room, his eyes widening slightly in surprise. This man seemed so familiar, yet Cloud could not recall ever seeing him before this day. Suspicion gnawed at his core. He frowned, forcing himself to sit up on the bed.

"Does what hurt?" he asked, pushing a nonchalant tone over one that was filled with pain. He clenched his teeth as he swung his feet over the edge of the bed, the agony returning in a prolonged ache.

Nygel snorted. "I'm a doctor, not a fool. I can see right through that façade of yours, so you might as well not use it."

Cloud's frown deepened, his eyes narrowing. "I don't know what you're talking about, and I don't know who you are, so you might as well stop pretending to be my best friend 'cause you sure as hell ain't."

The doctor merely leaned back, shrugging, a smile tickling his lips. "Your best friend? And who is your best friend? Tifa Lockhart?"

Cloud spit the man a cold glare, forcing himself not to do anything stupid. "Why do you care?" he asked, keeping as much emotion out of his voice as possible.

"You are a very interesting man. The world would be a better place if there were more men like you."

"Yeah, well, there are a lot of people who are interesting, but that's not what I asked."

Nygel leaned back forward in his seat, placing his hands on his knees. "Why do I care who your best friend is? Mmm... a very interesting question, indeed." He pursed his lips as if in deep thought. "Well, it seems to me you have had a friend in the past. An Aeris Gainsborough, perhaps?"

Cloud visibly stiffened at the mention of that name. "Aeris is dead."

Nygel gave Cloud half a shrug. "Maybe. Depends on how you define 'dead'. I suppose the true Aeris Gainsborough died eight months ago." He sighed. "Shame. But, you see, I managed, using the samples from Hojo, to clone her. Perfection achieved."

Cloud straightened in surprise. Clone her? he asked himself, incredulous to this idea. Somehow, however, he could remember thinking the same thing himself. It hurt, like a knife jabbing into his back. To see something so dear to him reduced to an animal... Cloud's anger ran deep. "She's as mad as Sephiroth. That isn't perfection; it's insanity," he snapped, his blue eyes narrowed dangerously.

Nygel sighed, shrugging again. "A slight setback. Yes, my clone is a box of fruit loops. She has no perception of any reality other than that she creates herself. She's the one that shot you, you know. I just wanted to make sure you were alright. She can be a sardonic bitch, can't she?"

He stood, stretching, feeling his muscles loosen and tendons pop. Running a hand over his balding head, he started to the door, his lab coat slapping at his heels. "If you need something, just yell, but, ah, no more escape attempts. The body count on this little project is too high as it is."

"Project?" Cloud asked, standing. His leg refused to hold his weight, and he sat back down quickly, unaware of his discomfort as he watched Nygel open the door and start out of the room. "What are you talking about?"

Nygel turned back to him, lines creasing his forehead. "I can't disclose any information at this time, my friend. But believe me, I have so much to tell you, Cloud." He smiled slightly, waiting for that to sink in. Cloud stared him down dubiously, torn between a need to know and suspicion of the man who had cloned Aeris. "The project is secret, and I'm not sure that Ms. Gainsborough would find it in her cold heart to forgive me if I told you anything. Especially about certain events that took place, oh say, five years ago. After your trip to Nibelheim with your friend, Zack."

Cloud's eyes were suddenly blazing with energy as they snapped up at the doctor. He took a step forward, but his leg buckled and he went down onto his knees with a wince. Cloud held out his hand. "Wait!" he called. He desperately wanted to know, he needed to know what had happened to him. What had been done to him in that five year period that was missing from his memory. He suddenly couldn't let another moment slip by without that knowledge, without filling that gap and regaining a part of his past. "Don't go!" he pleaded. "I need to know!"

Nygel only smiled, watching the other's reaction with silent glee. "If you don't try to escape again, I may tell you a portion of my secrets sometime during another visit. As it is, I can't really say anything right now." He walked out the open doorway, pulling the door shut behind him. At the last moment, he stuck his head back into the room, a small smile in his black eyes. "Before I go, let me give you a little peace of mind. I just want you to know that you should not listen to Ms. Gainsborough. She is a compulsive liar. When she told you that Cid Highwind was killed, allegedly by you, she was not correct. Mr. Highwind is very much alive."

"What?!" Cloud demanded, standing in surprise. Cid was not dead? What was happening? The only thing to answer his questions, however, was the clicking of the door as it latched shut. Cloud winced, unable to stand, exhausted by both the pain in his leg and the mental anguish. His head was buzzing with questions. Aeris cloned? Five years ago? Cid wasn't dead? What was going on?!

~*~

Cait Sith cleared his throat, wringing his hands nervously in front of him, his eyes darting around the room. Beside him, Barret Wallace frowned as he scrutinized the cat and mog, murder in his eyes. Cait Sith swallowed the lump forming in his throat.

"So, uh, how are all of you?" he asked, forcing the shaking out of his voice. Barret's frown deepened.

"We're all fine, thank you," Red XIII declared, giving a menacing glance to Barret. The large man rolled his eyes in response. "Have you found anything useful?"

Cait Sith smiled, shifting his position on the mog. "Sure have. President Reeve has been looking through all the files practically non-stop. He works too hard, sometimes. Where's Tifa?"

Red glanced at the door and then back to them, his eyebrows raised. "I don't know. Probably at the Tiny Bronco with Cid."

Cait Sith glanced almost nervously between them. "Where's Cloud?"

"None of yo business," Barret snapped, his large, brown eyes narrowed dangerously on the toysaurus. There was almost murder in his gaze.

Cait Sith smiled weakly; the little cat was almost quivering. "Oh, okay." The little cat perked up, suddenly remembering Cid. "Say how is Cid? I heard there was trouble." Red XIII exchanged a glance with Barret, a question in the look. Barret shook his head in an almost imperceptible manner. Cait Sith watched the exchange with growing dismay. "Okay... I can see we don't want to talk about that either. Alrighty then, no problem with me. So, how's business been lately, Barret?"

"Look, shut yo trap," he growled. "I ain't got nothing to say."

Cait Sith looked taken aback, his eyes wide. "All I did was inquire about the nature of the business in the Seventh Heaven!"

"Ya don't give a hoot anyhow! What's it ta you?!"

"Maybe I do care. Is it illegal to wonder about the well-being of those persons considered 'friends'? Or is that a crime I should know about?!"

"I sure don't consider you my friend, foo'!"

They both turned their heads as the sound of a clearing throat reached them. "What?!" they demanded, their voices shouting in unison.

Tifa placed her hands on her hips, fixing them both with a reprimanding glare. Her foot tapped the wooden floor of the Seventh Heaven as she coolly arched an eyebrow. Both Barret and Cait Sith looked away, slightly ashamed of themselves.

"Hello, Cait," she said as sweetly as she could, a forced grin on her face. Barret visibly squirmed in disgust.

Cait jumped to his feet, grabbed Tifa's hand, and kissed the back of it. "My Lady," he said graciously, "you look lovely tonight."

Tifa smiled again as she pulled out a chair and sat in it. Glancing at Barret, she saw his face was red. He looked like he was about ready to explode. Trying to soften the tense situation, she turned to Cait. "Did Reeve find anything on that dead Shinra commando?"

Cait looked sad. "Very little. There are just too many soldiers that are AWOL to identify him. And all of Shinra's records were destroyed during the Meteor craze. It's one big dead end."

Tifa looked crestfallen at this, staring with forlorn eyes at the table. Silence reigned for a brief moment, no sounds in Seventh Heaven besides the aching emptiness. Cait Sith glanced around the table. "What's going on here?" he asked softly, shaking his head. "Why's everyone so upset?" Nobody answered. Cait was beginning to get irritated as he said more forcefully, "Look, I'm a member of this team, too. I deserve to know what's going on. What happened? Where's Cloud?"

Tifa suddenly looked at him with teary eyes. "Cloud and Cid were attacked a week ago. Cid was nearly killed. Cloud disappeared. Cid..." She trailed off, conjuring up her strength to say what needed to be said. "Cid says he saw... Aeris. She

was the one who attacked them. And, somehow, she... she made Cloud nearly kill him."

"What?!" Barret snapped, leaning forward.

Red shook his head. "That's why he wouldn't tell us what happened..."

Cait sat back in shock. For a few moments, they were all still, none of them had the courage to speak nor the knowledge of what to say. "Cloud..." Cait said finally, shaking his head. He looked up at Tifa. "You think he was kidnapped?"

Tifa just nodded, unable to speak past the lump in her throat.

Barret stared Cait down coldly. "Well, you would know, wouldn't you? Big Shinra exec! For all we know, you the one who planned this entire thing and now you got Cloud and is doing who knows what to him!!"

Anger flared into Cait Sith. "Now, wait a damn minute! Cloud's my friend! There's no way in hell I would hurt him!" Tifa winced.

"Well, ya coulda fooled me!"

Red interrupted, standing on his hind legs with his fore-paws on the table. "Barret, Cait, please. This isn't helping us or Cloud," he pleaded in a desperate attempt to diffuse the situation.

Barret stood, glaring with murder in his eyes at Cait. "You were never on our side, ya traitor! You were always using us for your own \$&%#&@* gains, you bastard!"

Before Cait could retort, a voice cut over the dim. "Why can't we all just get along?" Cid wondered aloud, a sarcastic note in his voice, as he entered the room, calmly smoking a cigarette. He pulled a chair over and sat down in it. "Oh, yeah. That'd just be too damn easy, wouldn't it, Barret? Wouldn't it, Barret?"

Tifa shook her head, her emotions in a jumble. Her anger was rising, and she was beginning to lose her patience. "That's enough. We're all going to get along starting right here, right now."

"We can be one big, happy family!" Cid exclaimed, the sarcasm still thick on his tongue. "Won't that be fun? Huh, Barret?"

"Stop it," Tifa ordered.

"You liar!!" Barret demanded, standing and slamming a fist down onto the table. "Cloud woulda never hurt you! Damn it, he would never hurt any of us!"

"I said, stop it."

"You think I made that up?!" Cid replied hotly, also standing, ignoring Tifa. "You think I like what I saw?! Huh?! You think it didn't hurt me?!" Cid's face was enraged, his eyes full of pain. "Why would I lie about that?! Huh?! Cloud stabbed me! He ran me through! How do you think that makes me feel?!"

Barret's face hardened, his tone dropping in anger. "Well, maybe you deserved it. Maybe you ain't as saintly as you lead us to believe. I mean, when have you stuck your neck out fer Cloud or fer any of us?!"

"SHUT UP!"

Both men turned to Tifa in surprise. Cid abruptly sat back down in his chair, his teeth clenched in anger. Barret merely frowned, sitting more slowly than his antagonist. They both glared across the table at each other, engaged in a silent argument, neither willing to let the other win. Tifa promptly ignored them both, sitting down as well.

"That's better. Now, I don't care what any of you believe, but this is my show, and no one – and I mean no one – is going to ruin this with petty arguing. That goes twice for you, Barret, seeing how you can not keep up relations with two other

members of my team."

"Relations?!" he barked. "I'll show ya some relations! How 'bout foreign?! That fat ass has probably got Cloud locked up in his basement and he-" He stabbed an accusing finger at Cid. "He's a lying sack of

*&%\$!"

Cid snorted, his rebuttal cut short by a glance from Tifa. "Don't even attempt one of your smart remarks," she ordered curtly, "or I'll whip you both into shape so fast and so hard you won't know what

hit you."

"I've no doubt you could do that, Tifa," Cait Sith agreed, nodding.

"Shut up!" Cid and Barret shouted, turning their angry glares onto the cat.

"Don't make me kick yo ass, foo'!" Barret said, his voice hot. "Don't go thinkin' I won't."

"That's enough, all of you. And to think that you're all grown men." Red XIII shook his head sadly.

"I am not a man; I am a cat!" Cait Sith declared.

"Yeah, a skinny, wuss-cat on top of an overstuffed teddy bear," Cid muttered, lighting a cigarette.

"That's a mog to you, propeller-head!"

Cid looked truly thoughtful for a moment, holding the cigarette in one hand. Then, he shrugged. "Never heard that one before." He put the cigarette back into his mouth, taking a long drag off of it, blowing the smoke into the air.

"Are you finished now?" Tifa asked coldly, her arms crossed.

Barret turned to her. "No, I ain't! I wanna object to this entire course of action! We ain't bringing in that fat ass!"

"Who are you callin' 'fat', you big Buddha?!" Cait Sith demanded, standing up on top of his mog. The mog puffed out its chest proudly. "I am not 'fat'. I may be festively plump, but I am not 'fat'!"

"Big boned," Red XIII muttered before clearing his throat. "Barret, Cait Sith, maybe we can find a way to resolve our differences in a more... mature manner."

"What about him?!" Cait Sith demanded, pointing to Cid. The pilot glanced up from where he was staring. He showed his hands, palm up, as if in surrender, and shrugged before returning to his thoughts. "That ain't fair! He called me a wuss!"

Cid shook his head, exasperated. "Would an apology be in order?" he asked, glancing over to Tifa. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"What're you thinkin'?" Barret asked. "Mr. Mood-Swing?"

"You gonna share your thoughts with the class?" Cait Sith asked, hands on his hips.

Cid's eyes widened as he leaned back in his chair. He stood and shook a fist at Barret. "You &%@\$#@*% @##\$%#@\$@#\$*\$!"

Tifa stood in front of them, stopping this before there was a brawl. "That is enough!" she bellowed, glaring them each down with enough hate in her gaze to start a war. "Cloud's life may be at stake and all you three can do is fight! Selfish! Either you three calm down or I'm going to kick the crap out of you all!" She leaned in close to Cid who was staring Barret down. "And don't think I won't do it!! Cloud needs us now and I'll be damned if I let some petty squabbling keep this team

from helping him!" She clenched her teeth, breathing heavily, her chest heaving in ire. "This fight is over now. If you don't end it, I will. Understood?" It was silent for a moment as she gazed malevolently around the table. Finally, she was met with a few nods. Tifa only gave a sideways glance to the motion. She sat back down with a heavy sigh. "Okay, now that we've settled our differences, I would like to carry on with what's truly important here. Cait Sith, what has Reeve found out about the cloning?" she asked tiredly and calmly, turning to the stuffed cat.

Cait Sith ceased wringing his hands, glancing about the room. "Well, after many extensive hours at the tedious work, President Reeve has found some people – well, mainly one person – under his employ that has both the knowledge, the access to the facilities, and who is capable of such a feat as cloning Aeris: Dr. Nygel Huiji."

Tifa glanced at Cid. "You have anything to add?"

He looked up, confused. "What? No."

Cait Sith glanced at her sharply before continuing in Reeve's voice. "Anyway, this guy is Hojo's predecessor. Don't ask me how he ended up under my employ. I don't readily recall ever taking this guy under my pay roll."

Cid shook his head. "Look, so this little weasel cloned Aeris. Sephiroth was always makin' Cloud go loony. Could be she can do that, too."

Reeve shrugged, scratching the back of his head. "Anyway, he works in Hojo's old labs. They're deserted, no longer used by Shinra. He hasn't shown himself lately; if Cloud's anywhere, it's undoubtedly there."

"You didn't ID the commando, then?" Cid asked.

Cait sighed tiredly and was about to snap some quick retort, but a sharp glance from Tifa stifled it. "Nope. There are too many commandos that have been missing since Meteor hit. Especially those that were in SOLDIER. I know that it wasn't any of the commandos that I know are still working for me, though that only narrows it down to about four or five hundred names."

"This is great," Barret muttered. "So we got some mad scientist running around cloning people, and Cloud's gone all wonky again... I still say we jes' break down the door, grab Cloud, and haul ass outta there."

Reeve nodded, despite his anger towards Barret. "I second that approach. It's still Shinra property, but the full frontal attack has worked before this."

Red XIII grinned. "Sounds like a plan. Not a very good one, but it beats waiting around here."

Tifa glanced over to Cid who shrugged. "I dunno. You guys do what you want. I'm not going."

"What?!" Barret asked, incredulous. "You ain't chickenin' out, are ya? I mean, you got Cloud into this-" Tifa silenced him with a sharp glare.

He shook his head. "I just... don't want to go there right now. I don't think I could face that."

Tifa sighed in worry though she hoped it came off more toward aggravation. She knew why he didn't want to go; she had been wondering how she could face Cloud herself. Somehow, she knew she'd be strong simply because she had to be. "Fine, do what you want. You can hold down the fort, protect Marlene, whatever. I'm in."

There were nodded agreements all around the table. "Okay, Reeve, find out all you can about security there."

"I can hack into the system to get you in," Reeve declared, an air of vanity evident in his tone at which Barret smirked.

"That's good. We'll take Cait Sith along with us as a relay." The toy cat gave a mock salute to Tifa, a signal that Reeve had become Cait Sith again. She nodded, more than slightly relieved to see the team coming together again. "As soon as Reeve's ready with the security information, we're going to move. Let's bring Cloud home."

They nodded agreements once again as she glanced around the table. Her gaze landed on Cid who gave her a worried look through the smoke rising from his cigarette. She attempted to give him a reassuring smile, though she wished she could somehow be reassured herself.

~*~

"No escape attempts," Nygel declared as he walked into the small cell. "I award you with a smile of gratitude and my thanks."

Cloud didn't respond, suspiciously watching the doctor as he walked into the cell. He was sitting the long way on the bed, his injured leg stretched out before him in the most easeful manner which was far from comfortable. The hair on the back of his neck prickled.

"Tell me about Cid," he ordered, his voice full of menace. "Tell me about what you did to me five years ago."

To his surprise, Nygel laughed. "What I did to you? First of all, I did nothing to you, by dear boy. Hojo was in complete control of that. I don't think this is the time or place to talk about that, anyway."

Cloud clenched his teeth in an attempt to control his anger. He wanted nothing more than to jump off this bed and pummel that smile off that bastard's face. He suddenly went cold, a chill rushing over him. Cloud rubbed his face with a hand that was shaking. What's wrong with me? Why am I so angry? Why can't I think straight?! It was like he was a different person, and the real him was watching this stranger in his body. What are they doing to me? He took a deep breath and tried to shrug off his feelings. "What about Cid?"

Nygel smiled, not missing his companion's disorientated moment. "Highwind? There's not much to tell I'm afraid. You ran him through with your big and mighty sword. He's still alive. First Sephiroth, now him. They sure don't make those swords like they used to."

Cloud frowned, his eyes narrowing with his suspicion. "How do you know about that?"

Nygel shrugged and smiled. "I know all about you," he said simply. He stood and began to pace the small cell, hands clasped behind his back. "I know how your father died when you were very young. I know about Tifa, and how you felt about her when you were kids. I know about her accident, when she fell off the bridge to Mount Nibel and you were unable to save her." Cloud stiffened. "I know about that promise you made to Tifa under the stars at the well. I know about why you left to become a SOLDIER and how you never made it in. I was practically there at the Nibelheim incident five years ago when you came home, too ashamed to show your face. I was almost with you when you killed Sephiroth, when you pulled the sword from your chest, your blood spilling from you, and hurled him into the Mako Pit." Cloud

shook his head, almost shaking. Nygel smiled. "I know about AVALANCHE and the Reactor Five Mission. I've been watching you very carefully these past years. I know all about Barret Wallace, Vincent Valentine, Yuffie Kisargi, and your Cid Highwind. I know about how you would gladly give up your life for any of them. I was beside you when you put Aeris' body to rest at the City of the Ancients. When you were trapped in the Lifestream, I was there too, coaxing you back to reality. I was with you when you destroyed Sephiroth. I know everything about you."

"You're lying," Cloud stammered.

All Nygel did was smile. "Am I?"

Cloud licked his lips in the silence that followed, shaken by the man's words. Finally, he asked, "What are you doing to me?" he asked. "What do you want?"

Nygel grinned widely as if he was silently laughing, though Cloud could discern whether it was at some inside joke or at him. "Not so fast, Mr. Strife. Don't you even wonder who I am? After all that I just said, don't you wonder?" He sat down onto the toilet again, returning to the perch he had claimed in his visit before this day.

Cloud spit him an icy glare, his frown deepening. "No, not particularly," he lied. "I'm not sure I want to know a man who clones dead women as a hobby."

Nygel laughed, again finding something funny in the comments Cloud had meant as biting. "You're a very funny man, Mr. Strife. I think you missed your calling; you should have been a stand-up comic." His

smile disappeared, and, suddenly, he was all business again. "As you may have figured out, I'm a genetics engineer. Nygel Huiji. How do you do?"

Cloud snorted, shaking his head. "Cloud Strife, but I'm sure you already know that, seeing as that you've got my entire life down day by day." The venom in his voice was intense.

Nygel shrugged absentmindedly, running a hand over his balding head. "I confess, Cloud, I know more about you than you do about yourself. But, with that, comes the fact that I still don't know what makes you tick. Here is a man who has lost almost everything in the world, yet he still carries on with his life, almost indifferent to the hurt that has been sent his way. I'm wondering if that hurt has been so unbearable and so much that he has forgotten how it feels, that he has somehow become numb to the pain of life."

Cloud raised one eyebrow, coolly analyzing the man sitting before him. Was this man insinuating what Aeris had told him? Were they somehow working together, despite this man's insistence that his clone was a crazy fool? His mind raced with the possibilities. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?" he asked coldly. "I'm getting tired of these games."

Nygel was oblivious to Cloud's remarks, scratching at his goatee in thought. His brow furrowed and his lips pursed as he planned his next question. He raised his eyebrows as he said, "Tell me, Mr. Strife. Do you linger on the pain? Does it haunt you?"

"There isn't a day that passes in my life in which I don't remember what it feels like to lose it all," he growled, his voice ice. The indifference in his voice surprised himself. "But, no, I do not linger on the pain, and nor it does not haunt me. I do not shield myself with my hatred as your delightful clone suggested. If I did, I doubt it would hurt as much as it does now. It does not haunt me, nor does it drive me."

"Then what does it do?" Nygel asked, slightly unnerved by the freeness of which Cloud talked to him. His misgivings were furthered by the answer Cloud gave him.

"It helps me." A small smile played on his lips, the slightly insane smirk that Nygel had seen on Aeris' features. "It helps me deal with the little things I encounter in my life every day that make me think that I am undeserving of happiness."

Nygel's brow furrowed in confusion. "And what do you mean by that? That is not an answer."

Cloud shrugged. "I dunno. If I've gone through all this suffering, maybe it's about time I saw some happiness in my life. Maybe the fates have finally decided to come down from their lofty thrones and give me peace. I don't know."

Nygel stared at the young man's bright blue Mako eyes, slightly unnerved. What was he talking about? And then, it hit him. All of his work was not perfect; none of it could give happy lives to those who emerged from it. All the clones, all the failed experiments, all they could ever be were the crazy men and women lining the corners of the streets in the slums. They would never find this peace that Strife talked about, they could never find happiness in a world where idealists were shunned and those who were different were pursued by malevolent bigots, and they would surely perish in this twisted world where everything was preconceived and the lines between right and wrong were a dim gray. They would never find their Promised Land.

And his work furthered that. The insanity that plagued his creations was not through some frivolous flaw that dealt with the process; it was there because the clones wanted something more from a lifetime of hard work and sacrifice than a lousy pension and a cheap gold watch. Aeris sought perfection through the destruction of the bigots and the narrow-minded. Strife just wanted happiness.

But who was right?

He frowned. Surely it was not himself. Standing up slowly, watching Cloud intently for any sign of emotion that could flicker across those eyes. There was none. Nygel Huiji pulled on the open door and walked from the room, and for the first time in many years, uncertainty plagued him.

Cloud watched him go, staring blankly as the door shut and locked behind him. He closed his eyes and took a deep, shaking breath. He trusted Nygel about as far as he could throw him. Still, the man held the answers to all his questions, the key to unlock the doors to his past. And he wanted to let out that pain. What was wrong with him? He felt like he was coming apart at the seams, like a thousand personalities were invading him and he was losing his own in the maelstrom. Cloud shuddered and scrubbed his hands through his hair. What were they doing to him? Why was this happening? He looked to the ceiling with teary eyes. Oh, God, Tifa... what's happening to me?

~*~

Red XIII stared blankly at the message before him, unsure of what exactly he could do about it. Cosmo Canyon had been destroyed by a creature so powerful that it had thoroughly leveled the entire town, leaving only a skeleton of the buildings that had majestically risen from the canyon walls. The observatory was gone, crushed beneath the weight of a black dragon. All that remained of his grandfather were simple memories of laughter.

He didn't know what to do.

He was torn between righting two wrongs. He was needed at Cosmo Canyon as the son of Seto. He was needed to protect the town should the horrible creature that resembled Ultima Weapon return to wipe out the remaining inhabitants. But what use was protecting the town against an undefeatable foe? Alone, he could not destroy the evil that had ravaged the town. Why bother trying?

He knew that his reasons were wobbly at best. He could not neglect his hometown because he knew it was impossible to do so. He would do it because it was the right thing to do, regardless of the price of imminent failure. But, he was needed here.

Cloud Strife needed him to help get free from the clutches of a mad scientist and his equally mad creation. Tifa needed him there, if only for the moral support that she could gain by merely having his presence at her side. His friends needed him, and his friends were more like a family than anything Cosmo Canyon held for him. The town was only a few acquaintances who loved Bugenhagen more than they would ever love him.

He was torn between love and friendship and an ever-increasing sense of duty toward the remaining denizens of Cosmo Canyon. Both sides needed him, and he could not decide who needed him more, those who had already lost everything or those who were sure to lose things in the future to come.

It suddenly became clear.

He could do nothing at Cosmo Canyon, at least not anything besides easing a few frayed nerves with his presence. Even Bugenhagen had said that he must follow his own destiny, that he was the son of Seto, not Seto himself. And then, he knew that his destiny was no longer within the confines of a small town locked within a canyon. It was something much bigger than that, something that could not be housed in that town. He would protect the canyon; it was his duty. But he did not need to protect it now. There was nothing there now but a few dying dreams and shattered hopes. He was needed here.

He was needed to help save Cloud. He was needed to save the love that Tifa held for the young man. He was needed to save the friendships that he had come to realize he could have. His friends needed him more than any strangers he could ever meet. He would not abandon his friends as they had not abandoned him. They were the only family he had, and he would be damned if he were to lose them now.

He stood up, letting the small piece of paper fly away in the wind and out into the debris of the buildings of Midgar. He watched as it floated on a breath of air before it disappeared into the darkened shadows marring the rubble. Clouds crept over the sun, darkening the world. As thunder rumbled deep within the confines of the clouds, he dismissed the letter, wishing he could forget it ever came. His destiny was no longer locked by a few words hastily scrawled on a torn and

scorched piece of paper. He slowly walked into the Seventh Heaven, the place he now knew he belonged.

~*~

Reeve stared at the readouts on his computer, though he was not thinking about that. He was pondering over what he had told Tifa and the others... and what he had not. He was wondering if keeping the little secrets from them made him no better than the original Shinra employees, if it made him just as bad as Palmer, or Scarlet, or – he shuddered – Heidegger. He hoped not.

What he had not opted to tell them would no doubt have nothing to do with their little escapade into Hojo's labs. Shinra was unofficially split down the middle. There were those employees who wanted him to change Shinra and supported him in his decisions for the company's reform. On the other side, there were static characters who would much rather have another Rufus or Heidegger to run the company. It hadn't been serious for a long time.

Now it was.

The static employees were now threatening to split apart and take most of Shinra with them. With Reeve at the company's head, it would be hard for them to get away with little more than a few funds and the thousands of employees that supported them. Of course, if they were to find a way to take him down from the chain of command, problems would start. They could easily place one of their operatives as president in his place, and the world could end up with another President Rufus on their hands.

This trespassing on Shinra property was just what the static employees wanted; it was a legitimate excuse to get rid of him, a way to expunge him and all his work from the company for good. They could arrest him on breaking and entering, either give him a trial or not, and put him away for the rest of his life. This little operation could provoke the worst case scenario for Shinra and Midgar.

All they needed was one little, tiny excuse and move on it before he could cover his tracks. The alternative, of course, was leaving his friends out to dry. He couldn't do that, not when they had finally opted to trust him. Which was why he needed to be extremely cautious. He wouldn't get caught, especially when he was needed as he was now. He could not afford to get caught.

The red light emanating from the computer monitor blinked to a more cheerful green. Reeve broke from his dismal thoughts, cracking his knuckles and stretching his back. "We're in," he whispered. Only the silent office answered his words.

~*~

Reno stared at the balding man in front of him over the top of his sunglasses, his brow furrowed in skepticism. He promptly ignored a lock of red hair which fell over his forehead and into his line of sight. "You want us to do what?"

Nygel wrung his hands as his gaze drifted to each of the four Turks in front of his desk. The one which had spoken, attired in a dress shirt with the collar open and a bland, but meticulously cared for, navy blue suit, Nygel guessed was Reno. He carried about him a roguish air that went well with the careless way he wore his suit. A small glint in the light when he shifted position revealed what Nygel had already surmised: he was armed and dangerous.

"Say what, old man?" Elena asked, brushing a hand through her blond hair. Unlike her compatriot, she was prudently dressed. Her jacket was buttoned instead of hanging open, and the collar of her shirt was neatly pressed and buttoned. Her hair was cut short to her ears and at an angle. A bulge near her waist suggested she was also armed.

Rude did not say anything at all, nor did he hide that he was armed. Seated in a chair against the wall, he rested his feet against Nygel's desk, wiping clean a handgun with a piece of white cloth. He glanced at Nygel through his sunglasses once before returning to his task.

The newest Turk, Raice, also kept his mouth shut, opting to let their new leader, in light of Tseng's little accident, to handle all the business. He looked back to Reno, his eyebrows raised in a silent question, barely visible in the long locks of hair

framing his face. He ran a hand through his light brown hair, scratching at the shorter hair toward the back of his head as if to ask "Is this guy for real?".

Nygel cleared his throat. "I would like for you to break into my lab and steal a small piece of Black Materia from its confines – "

"No, no, no, no, no!" Reno exclaimed, exhaling sharply. "The last time we got into a little charade with that stuff, we lost Tseng. This is a totally unacceptable job. We cannot afford to lose any more of our numbers."

"But I need your help! If she gets a hold on this materia, it would be the end of the world for sure!" Nygel insisted, standing up from his chair.

"Look, the last time this stuff got out into the world, it didn't all go to hell. What makes you think that Strife and his cocky friends won't stop it again this time?"

"They won't be able to. You don't understand – "

"No!" Elena declared, her voice cold. "You don't understand. Tseng was killed in the search for your Black Materia. That isn't going to happen again."

Nygel ignored her comments, his gaze boring into Reno. "They won't be able to stop the destruction this time," he said curtly, his voice dripping with menace, "because one of their own will be the cause."

"What are you talking about?!" Elena demanded hotly, glancing to Reno and back to the doctor. "You crazy, old coot!"

Reno glanced once at Elena, silently cursing her before he slowly nodded, a realization coming to him. Nothing showed on his indifferent face, of course, but he was stunned nonetheless. He wasn't entirely sure what this loony doctor had done to Strife with his genetics lab full of funky fluids and mad scientists – he didn't particularly want to know – but he also knew it wasn't his business. Turks were to do the job, no questions asked.

"We'll take the job," he said slowly. Elena glared at him but did not speak, unable to bring herself to disagree with her leader in the open. Her arguments would come at a later time. "We'll get you your Black Materia."

"Don't bring it to me," Nygel urged, panic filling his words. His mind raced as he attempted to find the name of a man who could keep the materia safe without using it to his own ends. "Bring it to... bring it to Reeve!"

Reno arched an eyebrow, clearly dubious, but he shrugged. "Reeve, right." He turned away from the doctor, heading to the door of the small office, Elena at his heels. Rude and Raice both stood up, the former leading the rookie through the two chairs and to the door first. Rude followed suit, his handgun now shining in the florescent light.

Nygel walked from around his desk, knocking into its corner. "W – wait!" he said, reaching a hand out as if to stop the Turks by his sheer will alone. "You're going to do this job for me?" he asked tentatively, slightly unnerved when Reno ignored him and walked out the door. Elena glanced back at the doctor and frowned before walking out. Raice didn't even give him a glance.

Rude stopped and looked over his shoulder, his gun in hand. Sliding a clean magazine into it, he gave the doctor a small, twisted smirk. "How good is your security?" he asked quietly before following in his compatriots footsteps and out the door, leaving Nygel alone.

~*~

Tifa glanced at the people seated in the small room underneath the bar of the Seventh Heaven. They were all impatient and apprehensive, all ready to go. That is, of course, except for Cid. The pilot was sitting in a chair leaning against the wall, snoring softly. Tifa shook her head. Always sleeping at the most anxious times.

She wrapped tape around her left hand, flexing her fingers experimentally. When the tape was to her liking, she ripped it

off with her teeth and set the roll of tape. The action won the attention of her comrades, both Red XIII and Barret looking to her expectantly.

"Alright," she said, sighing as she stood. The rest of the people stood in unison. She stretched her muscles and heard a slight crack. "Let's get outta here and get Cloud."

There were nodded agreements and mumbled, but spirited, statements. Barret grinned as he grabbed his gun arm with his other hand, his muscles bulging. Red XIII had a feral grin painted on his face as he headed to the ladder. Cait Sith jumped up and down on his over-sized mog, his megaphone in hand. The only one missing was Cid. And, of course, Cloud.

The pilot leaned forward in his chair, letting it come to rest on all fours with a dull thud. He stood noiselessly, running one gloved hand back through his hair, oblivious to the fact that it settled in a total disarray. He held his other hand out to Tifa. She took it warmly.

"Good luck, you guys," he declared, his voice grim. "Come back alive and well."

"Don't worry," Tifa responded. "We will. And we'll have Cloud with us." She looked away as the hurt broke through the bright shining in his eyes. She tore her gaze away from him. As she mounted the ladder and climbed up toward the bar of the Seventh Heaven, she whispered, "Let Cloud be with us." Not for the first time since his disappearance, she doubted the validity of her own words.

~*~

Cloud almost jumped out of his skin when the door to his cell burst open, hitting the wall with a resounding clang, the noise ripping him from sleep with a startled yelp. Doctor Nygel Huiji rushed in, gasping for breath. He did not close the door, but instead sunk to his knees in front of Cloud, his head clutched in his hands.

"Forgive me so that I may end my cursed suffering and die in peace," he pleaded, his words slurring as he panted.

Cloud frowned. "What are you talking about? You're not making any sense."

Nygel shook his head, slumping dejectedly, staring forlornly at the floor. "I have destroyed the hopes and dreams of the children of this world. Forgive me so I will no longer carry such a heavy weight upon my shoulders and promise me that no one else in this world will sink as low as I." He sighed, a miserable exhalation of breath. "Promise me that you will see that the children are birthed in light and live there happily and die there happily. No more failed experiments, no more insanity. Promise me you'll stop this madness." He looked up into Cloud's blue eyes. Surprising the young warrior, he grabbed the other's hands. "Promise me this, and I will repent; you will know the little black secrets that plague me."

Cloud did not answer, staring at the broken man kneeling before him that was grasping him as though he were a life-line. "I can't make promises that I might not be able to keep," he said at last. Cloud thought he saw a tear trickle down Nygel's cheek. "I can only promise that I will try, that I will do whatever is in my power to carry out your wish."

"Thank you," Nygel declared solemnly, his gratitude more heart-felt than the simple words would allow. He closed his eyes against the bright light of the cell, wishing that he could close his eyes against the horror that the world was now, the horror that was the future he no doubt had created, and the horror that plagued the past. If time would stop, he could shrivel up and die, silently disappearing into the eternal black and allow one man to have peace. The world would be without happiness because of him. The world would be forever cursed to wallow in its own river of hate and insanity because of his meager existence, the journey he had made to make it to this day, and the mistakes he had made along the way. He would not let the insanity win.

He would not create another Sephiroth.

"You are a puppet..."

~*~

"Security on the first floor has been nullified," Cait Sith reported, glancing up once as the small red light on the security camera blinked before settling into an unlit hue. Tifa nodded, skulking around the corner of the hallway, glancing at the many doors lining its walls. This could be an endless search, completely futile. The entire mesh of laboratories and offices was a maze of infinite corridors and stairways. They could be lost forever. Fortunately, getting lost wasn't a choice.

"Which way?" she asked, her voice barely a harsh whisper. Cait Sith shrugged apologetically.

"President Reeve wasn't too clear on the layout of this place. I don't think he knows," he responded, sitting down on top of his mog.

"@\$\$%*," Barret growled. "Ya tellin' us ya don't know where ta go?"

Cait Sith nodded slowly, shrugging. "We'll eventually wind up somewhere." Barret cursed again and

barely kept from rounding on Cait.

Red XIII's tail twitched in thought as he glanced down both sides of the corridors. "Where would they be holding Cloud? In some sort of cell block, wouldn't you think?" There were nodded agreements. "I've been here before, when I was Hojo's prisoner. He built in low-security cells in the eastern wing of the facilities."

Cait Sith nodded in agreement. "That's right," he agreed. "President Reeve was held there during his imprisonment by Shinra. He never got a good look at his surroundings, though. He won't be able to direct us there."

Red XIII walked to the front of the group, his paws padding softly on the hard floor. "I can get us there," he declared, glancing up to Tifa.

"Go, Red. We're counting on you," she said, her eyes wide with hope. As Red XIII started the group down the hall, he suddenly knew that he had made the right choice. His destiny lay in wait for him with his friends, not in a ruined town. They needed him. His lips pulled back in a tight grin. He had finally realized how much he needed to be needed.

~*~

Yuffie Kisaragi slowly walked through the debris, quiet as a cat and as careful as a mouse. She placed her feet tentatively, her black eyes scanning the shadows around her, seeing everything, missing nothing. She was on the hunt, determined and grim, letting nothing stand between her and the wealth she sought. She was looking for materia.

Her shoes crunched unexpectedly on shards of glass littering the floor of what she guessed used to be a laboratory. She stopped, her keen ears listening to the silence. She could only hear her own breathing. She continued her task. This one little trip could make her rich. All she needed was to find the stash.

The Oritsuru clutched tightly in her hand, she slowly opened drawer after drawer, searching them quickly and efficiently. And, finally, she came across one of the greatest caches she had ever found. Nestled tightly into make-shift slots in the desk drawer of the small office connected to the laboratory were sixteen shimmering globes. Sixteen little spheres that meant money and power for herself and her father. Wutai would be prosperous again.

She quickly stuffed the materia into her small backpack, glancing at each of the glimmering globes. They shimmered in greens, reds, yellows, and blues, each alive with their own little magic or summon or command. And each and every one of them mastered. Her heart raced as she glided from the darkened room and back into the hall.

~*~

"Aeris Gainsborough is using you to an extent far greater than that of anything Sephiroth could have done," Nygel declared, his voice low. "She is using you to attain all of her evil needs; she is using you to make the Promised Land."

Cloud frowned, his brow furrowed. "What are you talking about? I don't get it. How?"

Nygel sighed, his eyes still staring into the floor of the room. "That's where my little deed comes into play. I cloned the materia." At Cloud's incredulous look, he continued. "It is possible. I cloned the Black Materia that Sephiroth used for his little charade with Meteor. Aeris uncovered it, and now she has had me clone it."

Cloud's frown deepened further. "What happened to the original? She didn't like it?"

Nygel chose to ignore the sarcasm dripping from Cloud's tongue. "You are the original. At least you are now. You were infused with it."

Cloud's mouth dropped open in shock. He had been infused with the Black Materia? What? He groaned, letting himself fall back onto the cot, his head in his hands. How could that be possible? Why had life played such a cruel deed on him as to give him the cursed gift that had nearly destroyed the world? It couldn't be true. But a little voice in the black of his mind, the voice he so easily dismissed as his own little piece of insane psyche, told him it was. He knew it was.

"Why?" he asked, searching the bland ceiling for any trace of an answer. None came. There was no rational explanation for this course of actions. There could never be a rational explanation for any actions that were done out of pure lunacy. "Why me?"

Nygel shook his head. "You were the only one left of the Jenova Project. Hojo devised such a procedure in which a subject would be heavily infused with Mako to the brink of poisoning. It was necessary for the subject to be able to withstand the infusion with the Black Materia."

Cloud's eyes flashed hotly with anger. "You... you did that to me?"

Nygel nodded. "Five years ago. You and your friend Zack were taken from the reactor and brought to Midgar. You would have surely died from your wounds had we not found you." Cloud was too shocked to say anything; he couldn't think. Nygel took a deep breath. "The loss of Sephiroth meant the loss of the Jenova Project, of all the hard work, and the loss of the Promised Land. Hojo wasn't willing to accept that. I devised a new project on a whim, based on an Ancient's text that spoke of a Destroyer. Hojo chose you for this experiment because you had killed his son. He deemed you extremely powerful."

"I didn't-"

Nygel raised a hand. "It didn't matter. Hojo had his mind made up. The next five years were spent slowly infusing you with highly concentrated amounts of Mako. It destroyed your memories, ate into your mind, which at the time, we considered a nice side effect. Your friend, Zack, helped us to keep you under control, and helped you to keep a grip on reality. Before we could complete the experiment, before we could infuse you with the cloned Black Materia, you escaped with Zack's help. Hojo was not pleased.

"After you were gone, we tried a number of other failed experiments. Nothing else seemed to work. For some reason, you seemed to not only survive the infusion process, but retain your sanity. After Hojo's death, I knew that I had to finish his work. The only way for me to create the Promised Land was to reacquire you and finish the job. I cloned Aeris to help control you. And now... I've created a monster." He didn't look to Cloud, wondering at the thoughts of the evil the young man was thinking. God, how could he be so blind? What had he done? "You asked me why," he said. He cleared his throat sadly. "Because you are a puppet," he reiterated, his voice cracking. "Because you are to abuse the power of the Planet to destroy the Planet. Because you are to be the murderer of mankind and kill all those whom you love and those you'll never know. Because you will become-"

His voice cut off in a gunshot.

" – my Destroyer."

Cloud glanced at the source of the new voice, finding himself staring into the cold, hard face of his tormentor once more. Nygel fell to the side, blood pouring from the large hole where a portion of his brain had once been. Cloud felt the bile rising in his throat and forced himself to look away from the bits of brain and fragments of skull littering the floor lest he find himself sick. Blood pooled on the metal floor.

His gaze wandered upward, pausing on the smoking revolver held within the hand of a woman who had once been sweet and caring. It was not the same woman he had known. She was merely a clone, a shadow of the love that that woman had carried. His blue eyes found her green, and he found himself almost unable to quell his fear.

Aeris cracked a smile.

~*~

"Which way?" Tifa asked, her eyes darting down the narrow corridor. Red XIII seemed to be leading them in circles, though they were no doubt following a trail seen only by his keen eyes. He didn't respond, only turning sharply down an identical hall. "Where are we going?!" she demanded.

Red glanced back at her over his shoulder. "There's a small cell block near the laboratory Hojo once held me in. It's the only establishment I know about in this building which is capable of holding anything larger than a dog."

Tifa shrugged. "Sounds like the place," she commented, absentmindedly. Cloud was in her reach, only a little further and she could be reunited with her love. But why did he almost kill Cid? her mind asked. She had no answers for the question. What if he's insane? No, she would not think about it. If he was insane, she could help him. She had helped him before this and she would again. It was her duty to him, her obligation. She would not live to see her love suffer, and, if he truly regretted the action, she could help him deal with the pain. She loved him. Nothing he did could ever change that.

Was she wrong for loving the man who could run his friend through without blinking? She shook her head sadly as she continued on down the corridor. She didn't know.

~*~

"You guys ready?" Reno asked, glancing behind him. He rubbed his eyes, letting the sunglasses which had sat on his forehead fall back over them. He adjusted the glasses, setting them straight before turning to his colleagues.

Elena nodded curtly, cracking her knuckles in anticipation. He frowned. He hated that. Ever since Tseng's unfortunate "accident", Elena seemed intent on annoying him. Nothing outright, of course. Just the little buzz of a mosquito in his ear every now and then. He made a mental note to pull her aside for a small conversation after this job was done.

Rude grinned grimly, loading shells into a mean looking shotgun, his bald head gleaming in the florescent lighting. He had been ready for this since he had left the humble doctor's office. He glanced down the sights before nodding. "Ready."

Raice, their new rookie, just shrugged, straightening the jacket of his navy blue suit. "Ready as I'll ever be," he muttered, his voice low. Reno frowned, attempting to look through the dark glasses covering the young man's eyes. His gaze was met only by the glare from the lighting. He wondered what the man could possibly be thinking.

"Why are we doing this?" Elena growled, her hands planted firmly on her hips. Her cheeks were rosy with anger, a frown marring her near perfect features.

Reno gave her a sharp glance, silencing her as he pulled his handgun from the holster nestled in the folds of his jacket near his waist. "Elena, my dear, when are you going to learn?" he asked, unable to keep the irritation from surfacing in his voice. "Ours is not to question why; we just take out the garbage." He glanced at the remaining Turks once more before heading to the door of their office. "Let's go."

~*~

Aeris motioned the guards to grab Cloud with the nose of her gun and an air thick with menace. They walked around the dead body of her creator, oblivious to their bloody footprints as they stepped into the red pool forming around it. They hauled Cloud to his feet and pushed him to the doorway.

"Just cooperate with this," she hissed to him as he began to struggle, pointing the gun at his temple. Cloud drew a short

breath. "I wouldn't want to have to shoot you." With that, the guards dragged him out the door.

Aeris did not tuck the gun away, for she knew that something was happening. The balance of power was slowly shifting and not in her direction. The fools actually believed they could rescue Cloud. Her grip tightened around the handgun. She would not give him up, not this time.

"Hurry up," she growled. "We're going to have visitors, and, by the time they get here, I want us to be gone."

The guards pulled Cloud down the hallway and into the laboratory where the doctor had previously spent his time and came face to face with their adversaries. Aeris frowned, raising her gun up to the level of her eye.

"Too late."

~*~

Tifa stopped short when she entered the laboratory, almost choking in surprise. Barret ran into her, pushing her further into the room, Cait Sith coming up behind him. Red XIII walked around her legs, his tail twitching in menace, a growl emanating from his throat.

"Aeris," Tifa hissed, her teeth clenched. He was right, she thought, looking over the woman standing across the room from her. She looked like Aeris down to a tee, but there was something different about her entire demeanor that was reminiscent of Sephiroth. The first conversation that they had had pertaining to this incident came back to her in a rush. "You know who?" "I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure." This was not the Aeris she remembered. Where Aeris had been spring and summer, this woman in front of her was the bleak winter. She was a complete stranger.

Tifa turned her gaze to the entire meager group standing in front of her. There was another familiar face in that group. Her eyes found Cloud's and his hers. There was hurt in those eyes, the hurt she had promised herself she would relieve, even though she was unsure how to do that. She glanced at the bloody bandage wrapped around his thigh, her jaw setting in anger. What had this witch done to him? She raised her clenched fists.

"Is that all you got?" she asked, nodding her head to her gun and the two guards intent on restraining Cloud.

Aeris merely shrugged. Her hand came down on a small button hidden on an experiment table. Immediately, red lights flashed and an alarm blared. The frown on her face inverted into a wicked smile. "No."

~*~

Yuffie's head snapped up at the sound of the alarm. She couldn't have made a mistake. She was the best materia hunter in the world! How could the best make the mistake of setting of a simple perimeter alarm?

She began running. There was no time to find out how she had tripped the alarm. This place would be crawling with Shinra any minute. She rounded the corner, her eyes flicking to a red sign above a door.

Exit? Far too easy! She knocked the door open, and stopped mid-stride, almost falling over in surprise as a dozen guns trained on her with the simultaneous click of hammers being cocked. She frowned. "Something tells me this ain't an exit," she declared, hefting up the Oritsuru.

Using the materia, she cast a fire spell, letting the flames catch on papers and the bodies of guards who got too close. The sprinkler system turned on, an automatic precaution against fire, and a new set of alarms rang through the building.

And then, all hell broke loose.

~*~

Reno silently cursed as the alarm resounded through the empty corridors. What fool was attempting to break into the laboratories? What could possibly be of any value to any people other than those obsessed with the secrets of genetics?

He groaned, forcing himself not to slap his forehead in his stupidity.

"Okay, people. Look's like our merchandise is a little hotter than we thought," he declared as he slowly rounded the corner, making sure the ejection chamber was clear on his automatic handgun. He pushed open the door to the laboratory from which they were contracted to steal the Black Materia. "Let's get in there and grab it during all this \$@#&."

Nobody responded with affirmatives or negatives or even a nod or frown, everyone taken aback by the sight that lay before them in the laboratory. Smoke filled the air, and water pelted down on them as they entered the large lab, another alarm ringing over the perimeter alarm. Guns began firing, a constant volley though no one knew who was firing at who, and all the Turks instinctively ducked for cover, bringing their own arms to bear and shooting back at their unknown assailants.

All hell broke loose.

~*~

The room was dimmed to the point where it was mostly shadow, mainly dark.

Its lone occupant didn't mind; he liked it that way. The light was often times an annoying, persistent irritation, especially when he was trying to sleep. But he had dimmed it to the point where it was not an intruder, but a warm friend with whom he could share a comfortable rest. It was at the point where it ward away few shadows, yet it guarded the room in a silent vigil.

It did not ward away enough shadows.

Skulking deep within the dark, two shadows lay in wait. They had been given a mission; they would carry out their mission in the dark, where they liked it the best. Light revealed identities and truths, but the darkness hid all from prying eyes. The shadows raised their weapons. It would be over soon. The mission gone. And they would lay in wait for the next. They never failed.

They pulled the trigger.

The occupant fell to the floor, emitting a strangled yelp of surprise.

Shots fired. Once. Twice. It was over.

The victor stood alone in the doorway, a red cape, the color dark maroon of blood in the dark, slapping at his heels. In his hand was the smoking gun that had destroyed the shadows and earned him his victory. He stepped into the room. The door closed.

~*~

"Tifa!" Cloud called, an urgent note in his voice. He struggled to get away from his guards, oblivious to the water running down his face and dripping off his chin. "Tifa, help me!"

The guards would not relent, holding him tightly even though they were all thoroughly soaked. One brought the butt of his gun jabbing into the gunshot wound on his leg in a quick, decisive action. Cloud fell to his knees with a cry of pain, his leg refusing to hold his weight up any longer. He collapsed into the puddle of water covering the lab floor, a red tint slowly taking over its lucid clarity.

Tifa's head snapped to Cloud when he called her name, and her first reaction was to get to him. There was only one thing standing between her and her love. That obstacle was her hate.

"Why are you doing this?" Tifa asked, the menace so thick on her tongue that it couldn't be cut by the Ultima Weapon. Aeris merely gave the other woman a shadow of a smile, her gun not wavering.

"I like Cloud, and I don't like you," she declared curtly. She slowly cocked back the hammer on the revolver. "I could say that knowing you was a pleasure, but I wouldn't want to have to lie to you."

Tifa grit her teeth. "Bite me."

The strange shadow returned to Aeris' face. "No, I won't bite you, but I will shoot you. May you never find peace after death." Her finger slowly squeezed back on the trigger. A shot rang out over the din.

~*~

Reeve cursed, reading the text on the monitor as quickly as he could before the words were scrolled off of it. The system had locked him out shortly after a perimeter alarm had begun to blare. All pretense of stealth gone, he now attempted to manually enter the password, though he had no idea what it could be. He had no time to use any number of illegal programs to find the encryption key; his friends needed him now.

How could he let his friends down like this? The entire facility was now crawling with Shinra troops and guards, and he could do nothing to even hamper their arrival. No locked doors, no jammed elevators, no obstructions. By pushing him from the system's main CPU, he had no access to any functions. But he couldn't abandon his friends, even if it meant that he would get caught with them.

He typed in another password.

ACCESS DENIED.

Reeve cursed again, pounding his hand down onto the tabletop. He had run through all the most common passwords, trying to break into the lab's systems. What could possibly be the mad doctor's password? His jaw set, it didn't even have to be a word, just a string of characters. His search was fruitless.

He cracked his knuckles. Only a few more tries. He would have to get out of the system after this, lest they track him back to his own personal computer. He frowned as another password was rejected. One more, and he would leave.

What would a crazy cloning doctor want? What would be his purpose? What had been Hojo's purpose? He bit his lip, keying in the first thing that popped into his mind.

PROMISED LAND.

The text stopped scrolling passed the screen and a cheery, smiling face greeted his efforts, the red lights on the monitor reverting back to their normal green. Reeve's frowned inverted into a grin. Access Granted, he read silently. Thank you, drive through. He set back to work.

~*~

Reno stood, his wet sunglasses holding back equally wet hair and pulled off a well-aimed shot at his target. If he hit, he could be a savior. If he didn't... well he didn't want to think about that. He followed that shot with another just to make sure.

Aeris felt the revolver being ripped from her hand, followed by excruciating pain. She instinctively clamped her bloody hand against the side of her abdomen, her gaze landing on her assailant. She watched him raise his gun to take another shot at her and finish the job. She frowned, gaining up the energy to snuff him from his meager existence. She never got the chance.

Tifa rammed into her from her side, knocking her to the ground. Reno hesitated, moving the aim of his gun back and forth as Tifa and Aeris rolled and slipped on the wet floor. He frowned, becoming angry enough just to shoot at them both, regardless of who he killed.

The decision was ripped from his grasp as one of Strife's guards saw his intentions and opened fire on him. A round of

bullets from his machine gun sprayed over him, a few hitting their mark. Pain enveloped him as he fell backwards, hitting the ground with a thud muted only by a splash and the chaos. He did not cry out. He did not acknowledge his pain, nor did he attempt to claw his way to cover. He let the warm water from the sprinkler system fall over his face and into his open mouth. His sunglasses fell from their perch on his head. Blood as red as his hair fanned out beneath him.

His gun skittered from his reach.

~*~

Cait Sith cowered behind the largest desk in the laboratory, unable to attack an enemy with a long range weapon without getting shot himself. So he used materia. Even the use of that was limited. He didn't want to hit Tifa or Barret or even any of the Turks that had joined the fray, apparently on their own side, with a stray bolt of lightning or a fire spell.

He was vaguely aware that Reeve had given the AI part of Cait Sith, him, the brunt of the control. There was rarely a moment when Cait Sith didn't know what to do. In this type of chaos, he had found one of those moments. He was caught between using his materia freely and possibly injuring friends or just hiding. It seemed as though he had no purpose.

From his vantage, however, he did see Aeris holding Tifa at gunpoint, and he did see the roguish, red-haired Turk standing near him, taking careful aim. He fired two shots, distracting Aeris. Tifa tackled the other woman as the Turk attempted to correct his aim as the women rolled on the floor. Bullets spit at him before he could attain his aim or duck for cover. The Turk fell, the gun skittering to Cait Sith.

I gotta do something! he thought, his mind racing. He checked the materia in the slots of his glove. Restore... I can help him. He picked up the gun. Slightly apprehensive, he lead his mog into the fray, ducking as bullets whizzed over his head. He jumped from atop the mog and into the puddle which now served as a floor, glancing at the Turk.

Calling on the power of the materia, he cast Cure, allowing the green aura to envelope the unconscious man laying in the water. The gunshots slowly began to heal, the blood-soaked portions of his suit the only evidence that they ever existed. He was not aroused.

"What are you doing?!"

Cait Sith looked up at the new voice, startled as the loud sound of the backfire of a shotgun filled his ears. The shell missed him, almost clipping an ear as it sailed over his head. The mog gave a distressed "ugh" before falling to the floor, the smell of burnt, wet stuffing filling the air over the scent of discharged gunpowder.

Without looking back to the bald-headed man with the shotgun, Cait Sith turned around back to his mog, the unconscious Turk forgotten. Tears filled the cat's eyes as he saw the gaping hole in its stomach, the stuffing of the big animal falling out of it. Cait Sith could only hug his mog and cry.

~*~

Tifa landed a punch square on Aeris' jaw, feeling satisfaction when the latter's head snapped back with the blow. Nonetheless, she grabbed a handful of Tifa's long, brown hair, latching onto it and pulling hard. Tifa couldn't stop a cry from emerging from her lips as she kicked the other woman away.

"You bitch!" she screamed angrily as Aeris fell backwards and let go of the handful of hair. She stalked over to Aeris who was slowly standing, the water dripping freely from her disarrayed hair and pink dress. She smirked.

"I'm a bitch?" she asked, her voice twisting with malice. "You're the one who doesn't have the good will to admit Cloud loves me and not you. Why don't you go back to Johnny?!"

Her words stung Tifa to the core, hurting her deeply but fueling her anger. She frowned, her face set hard in her anger. "What did you say?"

Aeris' smirk widened as she straightened up all the way. "You don't have the grace to go crying back to Johnny!" A blue rod

materialized in her hand, and she lunged at Tifa, swinging wildly with it. Tifa barely managed to jump out of the way, almost losing her head in the process. She hit the ground hard and rolled up onto her knees, a sinking sensation hitting her in the gut.

"Get him out of here!" Aeris shouted, her staff dissipating in a swirl of blue light. Cloud was hauled, struggling to his feet, his mouth open in a silent yell for help. The guards pulled him from the chaos into a fire escape, Aeris running out after them. The doors burst open, Shinra guards filing into the room.

Tifa looked for any member of her party. "Barret!"

~*~

Even in the system, there was nothing he could do.

Reeve found he could not hinder the Shinra guards coming into the laboratories without also hindering Tifa's escape. Locked doors swung both ways. Cait Sith was no longer in any position to do anything; the AI was not responding to any of his commands. There was no communication between them and no way of letting them know the danger in which they were entering. All he could do was watch.

The monitor in front of him displayed everything the security cameras were recording at the moment. The battle in which his friends were engaged was not leaning towards their favor. And it was about to get worse. Much worse.

In the hallway outside the door to the lab they were in, more than a dozen Shinra soldiers were milling. Their commanding officer barked a silent order, and they knocked open the door. Every soldier that could fit into the large lab did, immediately taking both Cait Sith and Reno, by the looks of it, into their custody.

Reeve could do nothing to help win their battle. He could, however, do something to win his own fight against the remnants of Hojo's genetics faction. Quickly he began to upload a virus into the system, a virus that would crash the entire CPU of the laboratories. He was vaguely aware of his own door, which he had locked, being knocked on rather violently. There was no time to pay attention to it.

His eyes watched the small bar fill in on the message box, silently urging it to increase faster. The door rattled in its frame. Reeve glanced up at it, sweat rolling down his forehead into his eyes. His gaze returned to the monitor.

"Come on," he whispered, wringing his hands, wishing there was some mystical force which would make the upload time decrease to nothing faster. There was no such force. The lock broke, and the door fell into the office with a crash.

Reeve reached for a gun, shooting at the door until there was no more ammunition left to shoot. There were no cries of pain. In the silence that followed, the only sound that could be heard was his own haggard breathing. The bar slowly continued to fill.

Guards filed into the room, their own guns drawn and ready to kill anything that moved. Reeve stood, tossing the gun to the floor at their feet. The guards flanked him and pulled him away from the computer, letting an all too familiar figure get to it. Reeve's eyes narrowed.

"I should've known you would be behind this," Reeve declared, his teeth clenching in distaste.

Scarlet merely laughed. "Yes, you should have known." Her eyes landed on the computer screen. VIRAL UPLOAD STATUS: 98% COMPLETE. She frowned, grabbing the mouse and clicking the cancel button. The message box disappeared. "Uploading a virus into Shinra's —" she smiled, "into our mainframe? Naughty, naughty." She ran a hand through her hair, setting it back into its place. "Take the traitor away. Let him wait for his friends when they arrive."

~*~

"Barret!"

Barret looked from their impending deaths to Tifa as she called his name, the rapid fire emanating from his gun arm cutting off and leaving a ringing in his ears. Red XIII growled a warning beside him. Barret's eyes found Tifa's.

She jerked her head to the fire escape which was slowly swinging closed. He nodded, aiming his gun arm at the guards coming in from the door. "\$@#!" he shouted, watching as even more flooded into the room.

"I can agree with your profanity," Red declared, futilely shaking his fur free of water. Only more rained down on him from the sprinkler system. The guards surrounded Cait Sith and the unconscious Turk laying beside him. "It's too late for them now," he said, barely blinking his eye. "Let's go."

"You're a cold bastard sometimes, ya know that?" Barret asked, though the question was purely rhetorical. Red merely shrugged. "Yo, Yuffie! Haul ass!" Yuffie Kisaragi had been the last person Barret had expected to haphazardly run across during this mission. Her appearance, however, had proven to be the distraction they needed to escape from Aeris' stalemate. He made a mental note not to yell at her later.

Yuffie looked up at the mention of her name, giving the Shinra in front of her a slash of the Oritsuru across his throat. The body toppled to the floor, the head barely hanging onto the neck. She nodded her understanding, jumping over the body of the dead guard and heading to the steel door at one end of the laboratory. Cait Sith was already surrounded by the Shinra, but she had no time for remorse.

Her eyes landed on the glittering black sphere decorating the floor where a desk had been toppled. Materia? She couldn't tell. She had never seen materia that color before which meant that it was decidedly rare. It was on her way to the exit. Surely it wouldn't hurt for her to pause, pick it up, and then leave.

She palmed it before following Barret and Red out the door and into the dark night.

~*~

Elena frowned when she saw someone who looked remarkably like Aeris pushing Strife out the fire escape. Her frown deepened when she saw Tifa and the rest of the AVALANCHE pussies follow her. Why weren't they given the order to leave? What was Reno trying to do? Let the Turks take the blame? She traded angry glances with Raice.

"Reno!" she bellowed, barely able to here her own voice over the alarms and gunfire. "Reno!"

Rude pulled her to her feet, startling her considerably. His face was calm behind his sunglasses, apparently oblivious to the beads of water that ran down them. In his other hand was the shotgun. She pulled her arm away from him.

"What's he trying to do?! Get us all killed?!" she demanded, ducking as a bullet shot by her head too close for comfort.

In response to the shot, Rude nonchalantly brought the shotgun up, aimed quickly, and fired a shell into the swarm of guards entering the room. When he saw a guard go down, bringing a buddy with him, he began to walk to the fire escape. Raice turned decisively and followed on his heels.

"Reno's out of commission," Rude said coolly, not turning to face her.

The blood drained from Elena's face as her gaze ripped to the ground. Bodies littered the floor, adding a crimson tint to the water that rained down from the ceiling. Most wore the green of Shinra guards. All were dead.

Then, she saw him. He was surrounded by the Shinra, laying on the floor next to the blubbering Cait Sith character Reeve was always playing. Her throat constricted, and she could feel the tears burning her eyes. She ignored them as she hurried after Rude and Raice. Now was not the time for tears. She would cry later and in private. A Turk did not cry.

Now there was only time for anger. Tifa and her cronies had caused Reno's death by their appearance during a simple breaking and entering. When the alarm had gone off, Reno had not been correct in assuming it would be a proper distraction to divert the attention off of their own actions. If Tifa hadn't shown up, there wouldn't have been an alarm. No alarm meant no guards, and no guards meant Reno wouldn't have died.

Elena ground her teeth in anger. Someone would pay for his death. Tifa would have to answer to her, and when she got through with Tifa, she would beg for her own death. Now was the time for vengeance. The tears could come later when there was only anger and nothing to use it on but herself.

She opened the door and walked out of the room.

~*~

Cloud stumbled down the metal steps of the fire escape, stepping awkwardly on the side of his combat boot. Pain flowered through his ankle as he fell forward, struggling futilely to maintain his balance. He knocked into the guard in front of him and hit the steps.

They landed in a heap on the parking lot's hard concrete floor.

Cloud rolled over, a groan escaping his mouth. He scrambled off the guard and onto the cold concrete, gasping for breath and closing his eyes against the pain canvassing every pore in his body. He was going to feel that little fall in the morning. He was really going to feel it. He let his head fall to the side, trying desperately to ignore the soggy clump of hair marring his vision. His hair was ruined. He groaned again. It would take days to repair.

He hoisted himself up to a sitting position, pushing the drenched lock of hair behind his ear. A bead of water ran down his forehead, and he wiped it away indignantly, his eyes landing on the guard laying face down in front of him. The man's neck was twisted at an impossible angle, his eyes wide and unseeing. Cloud blanched.

Licking suddenly dry lips and thanking his lucky stars, he stood, grabbing the metal railing of the fire escape for support. The other guard was noisily clumping down the steps, his rifle to bear. Cursing, Cloud began making his way along the fire escape. When he ran out of railing, desperate to escape, he ignored the jolts of pain running up and down his leg and began to run. He would make it to the road if it was just by pure will.

It wasn't really running, but more like limping in the general direction of the main road away from the laboratory. Hunched over, his face twisted in agony, he dragged his right leg in a futile attempt to run. He could probably walk faster when he wasn't injured. The voice at the back of his mind seemed to mock his futile attempt. A dead slug could beat me to the road. Can't even freakin' run! He frowned in disgust at his thoughts. What was he thinking?

"Gonna make it," he muttered over and over again, mostly in spite of that twisted voice filling his ears. The twisted voice which was painfully reminiscent of Sephiroth's. You weak, pathetic loser. Can't do anything. Can't fight for anyone, only for yourself. Can't even do that anymore. You're going to die here, you weak, pathetic, weak, weak, weak-

No! He would make it. He would beat the voice in his mind as he had beaten Sephiroth. "Gonna make it!"

With each word he was a step closer to freedom, a step closer to destroying all that which was once Sephiroth. The voice would lose to him. He was the eternal winner. No one could defeat him.

A spray of gunfire startled him, and he tripped, the wind leaving his lungs in a rush as he hit the ground. Ignoring the teeth jarring pain in his leg, he pulled himself along, the scraping of his wet clothing against the concrete filling his ears. Obscurity began closing in on his vision. He set his teeth in determination, reaching forward for the surface of the concrete, somehow finding the strength to get his feet under himself and push himself up.

He... would... not... lose.

I own you. If I want you to lose, you will lose. You puppet!

He wanted to fight. Cloud screamed in anger as he stumbled to his knees, his hands squeezing his temple as if that could somehow snuff the voice in his head. "No!" He wanted to fight...

The laughter reverberated through his head as the blackness overran his vision. He had let Sephiroth win. His head

dropped to the concrete.

~*~

Tifa slammed the door of the fire escape open, oblivious to the fact that it almost swung back and clipped her in the head. She grabbed the railing and started down the stairs, skipping most of them freely. She almost tripped and stumbled down them more than once, but she did not care. If they didn't get Cloud now, she wouldn't know where to even begin looking. Losing him was not an option.

"Tifa, wait!" Barret called, pushing the door open again before it had time to latch. He ignored the water beads covering his entire face as he ran down the stairs, his large boots making more than enough ruckus to wake the dead. Red XIII ran through the open door, pausing only once to shake the water from his fur in a spray. He kicked the excess water from one of his hind legs before bounding down the stairs after Barret. Yuffie, a grin painted on her face due to her success, skipped after.

"Tifa!" Barret called, a curse coming to his lips as he saw the flashing lights of the Shinra reinforcements coming to the laboratory. She ignored him.

Her gaze landed to where two Shinra guards were loading Cloud's unconscious form into the back of a fairly small van. Aeris, a sloppy bandage wrapped around the wound on her hand, was loading a clip into a handgun, obviously confiscated from one of the guards. When she saw Tifa coming, she raised the gun and aimed.

Tifa instinctively ducked as the bullets crashed into the railing of the fire escape and into the brick wall that was the side of the Shinra building. Aeris kept them all under cover, firing freely at them as she backed into the truck. Cloud was thrown rather unceremoniously into the back before the guards hopped into it after him, slamming the door shut. Aeris gave a final shot before jumping behind the steering wheel and driving off.

"No!" Tifa screamed, jumping from the fire escape and onto the concrete parking lot. She ignored the jarring pain that ran up her legs as she began running after the truck. She pushed herself to her limits as the truck pulled away. Her lungs burned, her legs pumping as she reached for the doors of the van.

Her fingers brushed it.

It pulled away.

She staggered to a stop, her breathing harsh and heavy. They had fought so hard. She would not lose him now. Her gaze landed on the guards coming into the parking lot, their motorcycles rumbling as they sped across the ground. Tifa raised her hands in apparent surrender, her mouth moving in a silent spell.

"Tornado!" she yelled, her voice barely rising above the howling wind she had summoned. The blast knocked the Shinra guards from the motorcycles, sending the machines falling to one side and sliding toward her. Even before the spell had worn off entirely, she was running to the fallen vehicles.

She ignored the bloody Shinra guard on the concrete, fumbling for his gun, as she pulled the motorcycle up and mounted it. She revved the engine, pushing off and starting toward the exit of the parking lot.

"Tifa, wait!" Barret ordered, his voice rising above the sirens. She screeched to a halt and motioned for him to hurry up, an urgent expression on her face. He ran, hopping onto the motorcycle behind her.

Yuffie pulled up beside Tifa, having recovered her own personal motorcycle from where she had stashed it. The side car, normally reserved for her father or her stash, depending on which was present, was now occupied by Red XIII. The red beast looked only slightly uncomfortable and more comical than anything else, sporting a black helmet on his head. Yuffie wore a similar helmet, her backpack tightened securely on her back and her small tinted goggles over her eyes.

"Let's go and bring Spike home," she declared, pulling away from Tifa and speeding out of the parking lot, oblivious to any traffic rules she had just broken. Tifa was chasing her almost before she had started out of the parking. The two

motorcycles sped after the van holding Cloud, leaving behind the flashing sirens, alarms, Shinra building, and Cait Sith. Tifa only glanced back once.

~*~

Elena followed Raice and Rude down the fire escape, ignoring the squishing of water in her shoes with every step she took. She tried to be nonchalant about leaving Reno behind in the hands of the Shinra, but found that the more she thought about what they had done, the more she felt her calm slipping away. Outward calm defined a Turk. She would not let her anger show through; she would not let her sorrow be evident.

She clattered down the stairs of the fire escape, silently thankful when her feet touched the solid concrete of the parking lot. She was closer to leaving and closer to forgetting about Reno. Guilt gnawed at her, and she felt the uncontrollable need to go back into the laboratory and get him, single-handedly if need be.

But from the amount of blood that had stained through his shirt and his jacket, she knew he couldn't be alive. Not many people could boast they got up after receiving wounds like that. He hadn't moved; he hadn't even taken a visible breath. He had to be dead. The thought did not lessen her guilt. She didn't know if he was dead. She wished she did. She had a fervent wish that he was. What the Shinra might do to him if he wasn't...

She holstered her hand gun, slipping it under her coat. She wouldn't think about that. She began walking, running a hand through her wet hair. Water droplets splattered to the ground, darkening small circles where they hit the concrete. She stopped walking as Rude and Raice both turned to her.

Rude breach loaded two more cartridges into his shotgun, glancing up at her above his sunglasses. He was oblivious to the fact that water was still beaded on them and the fact that it was night. Elena frowned. Come to think of it, she had never seen him without his sunglasses covering his eyes. She dismissed the thought.

"What do you want to do?" he asked, closing the chamber of the shotgun with a click. Raice glanced at him before turning his gaze to Elena.

"What are we supposed to do?" Raice frowned. "We don't have a leader anymore."

Elena gave him a sharp look, cutting off his next words. She bit back her regret and guilt, a grim tone forcing its way into her voice. "This is where we walk away."

And they did.

~*~

"Watch where yer goin'!" Barret screamed, ducking behind Tifa as best he could as she haphazardly sped down the deserted highway. "Foo' woman driver! @*&!"

She ignored his bantering, engrossed in catching up with the van. The motorcycle she had stolen from the Shinra guards did not seem to go fast enough, ever behind the dark van as if an invisible shield kept them apart. Ducking into the wind, she pushed the motorcycle to an even faster speed.

"@#&%" Barret couldn't prevent himself from clutching Tifa tighter, engulfing her waist in his large hands as they almost clipped an old bug puffing along the highway. He glanced over his shoulder as the bug grazed into the protective railing and grimaced. "You're gonna get someone killed!"

Tifa shook her head, her long brown hair flying in the wind. "I'm trying to save someone!" she shouted, her voice barely audible over the noise. The motorcycle inched closer to the rear end of the van.

They were almost there. They were in a hair's-reach of the rear doors. It wasn't like that particular fact made a difference, but it somehow seemed to symbolize that they were attaining their goal. They could not stop or even slow the van from the rear, but somehow they would stop it. They would stop it.

Tifa would not let him go, now. Not after they were so close to be reunited and not because some crazy clone had decided to make him her prize. There wasn't anything that could stop her; she was the unbeatable foe, and nothing could stand in her way.

Or so she thought.

A dark shadow covered the moon, breaking the flow of the pale rays of light and darkening the ground. And at the same time, Tifa could almost feel the desperation and despair as though it were a tangible thing. She could almost taste the foul putridity rising like bile in the back of her throat. And for a moment, she lost herself in this gloom as though she were drowning in the stagnate waters of a fetid swamp covered in the decaying matter of all those who had preceded her into its depths. An uncontrolled shudder wracked her body.

The shadows thickened and the wind picked up, carrying on it the stench of death and the intoxicating aroma of fear. The motorcycle screeched to a halt, and Tifa found her hands shaking too badly to do anything about it. She had not felt this much hopelessness, she had not felt this much evil, since the Northern Cave when Cloud had given Sephiroth the Black Materia. She never wanted to feel this way again. Never again.

And, yet, here it was.

Tifa, tears brimming her eyes, could only watch as the source of the unrealized horrors of the world unfolded before her, sailing in a downward spiral to the ground, the phantom of the night. Obsidian talons enclosed around the van, ripping into the metal, before the evil incarnate pushed itself off into the night, taking her enemy with it.

Taking her love with it.

There was nothing she could do except watch as the horrific nightmare carried her love into the black, a sense of emptiness filling her core. She had lost her love to a phantom. She had lost Cloud to another. Tears burned her eyes. She wouldn't cry.

Her heart wrenched painfully within her breast. He was gone. They had lost.

But she would not cry.

~*~

Author's Note:

Whaddya think? Personally, I thought it sucked. Comments are welcome, but flames will be ignored. (Don't worry, Aeris Fans, we don't hate her. She gets a lot better later.) If you feel the need to tell us how bad it was, e-mail us at satheis@ix.netcom.com. Thank you, drive through.