

Cloud Cover
by Junj
Part 3: The Giver of Life

Nibelheim.

It had all begun there, on that day, five years ago.

Today, it seemed to be nothing more than a ghost town, an empty shell where there had once been life. The houses had long since been abandoned, Meteor having scared their occupants from their mockery of homes. They rose like tired soldiers, too weary to go on, too proud to give up. The town was dead. The simple absence of life wasn't the only reason, though the missing children that used to frolic about the old well seemed to amplify the stark silence, which only punctured by the whistling breeze. This town told the story of a great fire and a great genocide of its inhabitants. This town told a tale of a loss of innocence and the ending of life. This town spoke of the beginning of hell.

Nothing it could say would be anything new to the only man standing amongst the houses.

"It always comes back to Nibelheim, doesn't it?" A soft voice carried on the wind that creaked about the houses, blowing the old signs and the old shutters that had been left open. The man pulled his black cape tighter about his shoulders and bowed his head against the breeze. He was too tired to think about it any more. He walked through the town, a lone traveler through the past and present, searching for some meaning to his existence. Everything was dead silent.

He walked steadily, despite the fact he dragged his left leg a bit. Plodding past the well, he lightly dragging fingers about it. The strong, old well. Always left standing. Always protecting the town. In a way, the well was a lot like himself. The moment of memory and nostalgia passed and he continued to walk towards the gate. The sound of his footfalls was amplified a thousand times over. At the gate, he stopped and turned back, squinting as he scanned the town once more.

He could hear the cries in the wind, feel the heat of the flames.

Sephiroth.

He could feel his anger.

But it was over, a lost memory in his lost soul, and he filed it back where it belonged, in a part of his life that existed five years ago.

He turned to the gate and pushed it open. Walking with vehement steps, he left town, heading towards the Nibel Mountains. It was too late to fix the past. He could now only think about the future. He had a promise to keep.

He had to try.

Before it was too late.

~*~

"This is degrading."

Reno stopped walking to turn around and face Elena, his features cold with anger. His eyes narrowed imperceptibly behind his sunglasses as a lock of red hair fell over his nose, whipped there by a small gusting breeze. Elena froze in her place when she saw his look.

"Well, it is," she defended, scuffing one of her feet on the dirt road. "We're Turks! We're supposed to ride in cars, not walk until a hick comes by with a flatbed we can ride on. Hitch-hiking sucks!"

Reno rolled his eyes and started to walk again, ignoring the rants of his comrade. "Nobody told you to come," he declared, his voice rising above hers. "You came by yourself with no questions, no orders, no arguments, and no second thoughts. You have a choice, you know. You don't need me to make all your decisions."

Elena frowned, grabbing Reno's shoulder. He spun sharply, knocking her hand away. He raised his hand, pointing at her. "You can't stop me," he growled. "I don't care what you do. You can jump off a cliff, 'cause I don't need your help. You followed me on your own accord so grow up and accept that."

Elena's face reddened with a mixture of embarrassment and anger. "You look here," she ordered. "You're dragging us all on a wild goose chase just because you had the gall to grow a conscience! Turks don't have consciences. A moral Turk. It's a freakin' oxymoron!"

Reno frowned, his brow furrowing. "You just don't get it, do you?" he asked, though the question was pure rhetoric. He turned away from her. "Nobody gets it!" he shouted, his voice echoing over the rolling hills. He shook his head, laughing smally.

Elena leaned over to Rude. "He's a crack," she muttered. He coolly arched an eyebrow in response, opting not to voice his thoughts.

Reno turned back to her. "O contraire, my sweet. I've never been thinking more clearly. You see, we're all nothing. We used to be something but only because we worked for Shinra. Nobody needs a freelancing Turk," he stated. "But large corporations with protection and co-operatives for their security need Turks. You see? Right now we're less than nothing. We're the scum at the bottom of the rent-a-cops' shoes. I happen to be trying to get us back into something, and you guys shoot me down!"

Rude shrugged. "I didn't say anything against you, Reno," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "You can do what you want. I'll follow you. I've got nothing better to do."

"Well, that makes me feel so much better," Reno muttered, sarcasm thick on his tongue. "I see how important getting back on the up and up is to you."

"Reno," Elena started, her voice rising in pitch.

Reno grimaced. "I hate whiners," he declared. "Look you can follow me and my cracked up conscience, or you can go back to brown-nosing the big shots back at Midgar. You want in? Fine. You want out? That's fine, too."

Rude's lips twitched in a shadow of a smile, an uncharacteristic show of emotion that was somehow out of place on his dull features. "Count me in. Brown-nosing was never my forte. I was always better at the boot-licking."

The other Turk frowned, holding up his foot and the shining black shoe adorning it. "You can start here. I can't see my reflection in them anymore."

Rude looked dubiously at the ground. "I don't know. I may need some water, so I don't dehydrate. Looks kinda dusty down there."

Reno shrugged. "No difference to me." He looked back to Elena, dropping the jests and returning to the subject. She tapped her foot impatiently, her hands locked on her hips. "Are you in?"

She looked off to the darkened skies in the distance, blowing a lung-full of air out into the breeze with a heavy sigh. The skies had been dark since this whole thing had begun. It fit her mood to a tee. "Somehow, I don't think you're giving me a choice," she stated, looking back to Reno. He gave her a cocky self-assured grin, annoying the hell out of her even though she liked that grin so – no, too – much. He was impossible. "Yeah, I'm in."

He smiled widely. "I knew you'd see the truth of the matter sooner or later," he said, beginning to walk again.

"Yeah. You start looking at something long enough, you're bound to make it true regardless if it's a lie," she muttered, falling into step behind him.

"What was that?" he demanded, though she was sure he'd heard what she said well enough.

She sighed again. "Nothing." She could only imagine the completely smug look painted on his features and the one of contempt on hers.

"Well, that's good," he declared, glancing up to the sky as a bird flew overhead. "The Turks are dead, and I think it's high time we had a little resurrection."

~*~

Raindrops thrummed endlessly on the deck of the Highwind, an infinite monotony that was easily symbolic of the current mood emanating from the operations room below it. Wind whistled endlessly over the wings and decks, cutting through the dark clouds covering the sky, creating a swirling mist of black and gray. Every now and then, a thunder burst bellowed in their ears, a dangerously close lightning bolt crackling near the Highwind. And every now and then a particularly gusting blast of wind knocked the ship, screaming passed it with the ferocity of a rabid animal. The entire stretch of heaven was filled with the cries of the storm, the rage of the thunder and the pain of the cold rain that was like tears flowing down from dry eyes. The Planet seemed as though it had been ripped in two, a mirror image to how she felt.

Tifa Lockhart stared blankly at the empty chairs around the large table in the operations room, her throat constricting at the memory of what had happened mere hours ago. The group was down by four members, two of them dead. It was hard to believe that any of them could actually die, the last battle with Sephiroth seemingly symbolic of their own immortality. They weren't immortal anymore; one simple twisted plan of an ingenious man had seen to that. The people of the world needed to be reminded of death every once in awhile just to make sure they didn't start thinking that life was some kind of win-win game. People lost all the time, but what a way to be reminded.

"Well, what do ya wanna do?" Barret asked, breaking the thrumming monotony of the rain with his bellowing voice. He sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin with his one hand. "We jes' can't sit here."

"He's right," Red XIII added. "We have to do something."

Tifa sighed heavily, leaning forward on the table, her head cradled in her hands. "We can't do *&#\$.

"We can find it."

She didn't want to raise her head to look at him; she didn't want to see him standing there near the window watching the rain like he was somehow looking right through it. She didn't want to look into his deep blue eyes and be unable to find him. She didn't want to look at a perfect mannequin of her love and be reminded of how much she lost, of how much she was losing right now with every glance she stole at him.

She looked anyway.

"Find what?" Red asked quizzically, his tail twitching with renewed interest. He didn't seem to care that Cloud's eyes were always staring blankly through a person as he talked, or, if Red did care, he didn't show it.

Cloud didn't shrug, didn't sigh, didn't move his feet from the spot he was standing. He didn't even shift his weight from one foot to the other. He was like a statue forever molded to the spot, unperturbed and indifferent. "We have to find it."

"Jes' look here," Barret growled. "We can't find anything if we don't know what it is we're looking fer."

Cloud blinked and looked to the larger man. "You'll know it when you see it," he declared.

Barret snorted. "We'll know it when we see it," he mocked. "Ya know, I've had just about enough of yo crap. First, ya jes' leave Cid lying there like he was a pile of dirt an' then y'all like 'you'll know it when you see it'. Damn. What's with ya anyway? Ya ain't da man ya used to be."

Cloud didn't respond for awhile as though he was trying to muddle through what Barret had just said. Confusion flickered across his features for less than a second before it was gone behind that indifferent mask. "I have a job to do," he said finally. "You can help me do it, or I can kill you. Am I making myself clear?"

"You wouldn't do that," Tifa interjected, her voice tight with anger. "Stop it with your shallow threats."

Cloud raised an eyebrow dubiously, his mask falling to show the one emotion he seemed capable of having: anger. "Are you sure I wouldn't do something like that? I have a job to do," he reiterated slowly as though he was mocking their intelligence. "If you get in the way, I'm going to have to be done with you, and if that means killing you, then so be it. I'll have no regrets."

"Cloud wouldn't do that," she defended. "He wouldn't kill his friends just because they tried to stop him from doing something."

"Well, I'd say that this was a little different," he snapped, ending the conversation. "We have to find it. You know your options."

Tifa rose from the table, her face tight with her anger. What had the Planet done to him? Why did it always have to be like this? Just when she had had him back, he was snatched away. It was as if there was nothing left in the world for them to have together; so why did they have to be together? Let them find someone else. So, was this a wake-up call or just another one of the cruel practical jokes the Planet loved to play?

She walked quickly from the room, walking through the empty corridors of the Highwind with no particular destination in mind. She just needed to be alone right now. She couldn't stand spending one more minute with Cloud's icy impostor. She couldn't stand one more trite question of "are you alright" from Barret. She couldn't stare at the empty seat that Cid slept in during all the group meetings or the lonely chair that begged for Vincent's weary shadow to darken it once more. She needed to get away from all the reminders of everything. How blessed it would be if she could not worry about anything, think about nothing. Thinking hurt too much. Worrying was worthless.

What price she wouldn't pay for a long night sleep, a deep slumber with no cursing dreams to haunt her mind. Something that would let her wake up in the morning with thoughts of a new day rather than of yesterday's strife. Something that would let her, for one tiny moment, let her forget all the troubles in her world and just let her be alone.

Tifa collapsed against the bulkhead of the Highwind and buried her face in her hands. She slid down to the deck, sobbing in desperation. Who was she kidding?

She hated being alone.

Warm light flickered through the small kitchen, frighten the shadows to only the darkest corners of the room. The crackle of the fire seemed to chase away the distant rumbles of thunder permeating through the air, creating a small shelter from the torrents of wind and rain outside of the house. Though the room was filled with the warmth of the fire and the soothing glow of hot embers within it, she could hardly feel the pleasant radiance blanketing her cool skin in its friendly hands. All she could really feel was a pit of emptiness growing within her soul with every minute the clock's hands ticked by.

Shera wrapped her hands around a delicate tea cup, watching the steam rise in tiny tendrils from the liquid's glossy surface. The scented steam tickled her nostrils with the cordial aroma of cinnamon, but she could not feel comforted by its

therapeutic presence. Not this night, nor the night before. She doubted she would ever feel truly content until he was knocking on her door, or simply barging in the room in his normal brash idiom. She had felt this way for days, a simple gnawing feeling curdling her innards whenever she thought of him. Ever since she received his letter.

That damn letter.

It had been folded three times around a dark piece of crystalline stone. She had thought it was over, had ended with Sephiroth. But they were still locked in this war with those who wanted the power to control. The black shining surface of this implacable materia seemed to mock all those who fought the war as though it knew what was coming to the people of the Planet. How she wanted to take one of her numerous tools and just shatter that smiling plane. But she couldn't; it was needed. If only they knew what they were getting into.

He seemed to know what was happening. She could tell that much by what he told her... and what he didn't. The materia he had sent her didn't seem half as bad as what he had actually wrote her. And, though she had read the letter over and over, muddling through sloppy calligraphy, she found herself wishing she had never seen the wrinkled piece of paper or the horrible penmanship. She didn't want to believe what it said.

She snorted. Lies were so much easier to believe. Or she could just read it as it was written, nothing between the lines. She knew him too well to do that. What he had written was a sure indication of something else. He had apologized to her.

He wasn't coming back.

Already, as soon as that thought hit her mind, she felt the hot tears brimming in her eyes, ready to spill forth at any moment. They had before this night; the ink was bleeding through the paper in too many places from her tears. Each time she read it, she felt as though the ink would smear into illegibility from her crying. She wasn't a crier. She was strong, strong for him and strong for herself. But without him, she was incomplete. Half her strength died with him. She couldn't be strong.

She wished she was wrong, but his words didn't lie. He didn't think he was coming back. She could hear his hesitant sigh that was indicative of any time he had something important to say but had no wish to actually say it. She could see the thoughtful – uncertain – look in his eyes he always had when something was bothering him to an extent deeper than he cared to show. She could hear the words that slowly sprang forth from him, his mouth finally obeying his heart in what he meant to say. Something he had never said to her, but she could hear in the wind if she listened hard enough. The same words he had written down with a pensive sentence. I'm sorry for everything I've ever done to you and all the things I haven't. Her eyes landed on the scrawled letters. I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

I'm sorry.

He had never said those words to her, muttered under his breath or shouted at the top of his lungs, but, somehow, though it was innocently written there, she knew it was true. Maybe that was why she had stayed with him all the years which had gone by. She knew he didn't mean anything by the shouting and the yelling and the angry words. It was what hadn't been said between them that mattered.

And here they were, separated by hundreds of miles, but somehow closer because of two words. I'm sorry.

They were finally together, and now he wasn't coming back. Shera fought the tears again. Ironic cruelty seemed to be the story of their relationship, starting with that dreaded Tank No. 8 on the rocket. She hoped he was wrong. She needed him back here at their old house in Rocket Town, in their un-mowed lawn in the back, knee deep in weeds as they stared up at the glossy night sky, slowly counting all the stars they could see. She wished he would knock on that door and let himself back into her kitchen.

She wiped the tears from her eyes as she admonished herself for indulging in childish wishes and blatant lies. He wasn't coming back. She might as well finish her cup of tea and go to bed while she still had some semblance of peace of mind. If not, she would be up all night with her grief. Why did he have to do this to her?

Her gaze snapped to the door.

And a quiet tapping was barely audible over the rain.

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Yuffie Kisaragi waited impatiently, tapping her foot on the cement walkway in front of the house. She was crowded underneath the protective overhang of the roof, shrinking back around from the pouring rain even though she was already soaked. She didn't like being wet. It was too... wet. It ruined her hair. She knocked again.

The door slid open from underneath her poised knuckles, revealing a young woman hugging a white terrycloth robe tightly about her figure. Disappointment flashed across a sallow and pale face. Her eyes were red and puffy, obviously from crying too hard and too long over something that couldn't be changed, and circled with the dark shadows of insomnia. Yuffie inwardly cringed.

"Did I come at a bad time?" she asked, shrugging as a cold drop of rain slid from her drenched hair down her back.

Shera sighed, rubbing her forehead with one hand. "That depends on what you want," she declared, no trace of scorn or bite in her words.

Yuffie smiled smally. This was not a good time for her to be here. "I'll come back later." She turned and prepared to steel herself against the pounding rain.

Shera watched as the young girl made ready to run through the muddy streets back to wherever it was from which she came. And then she was reminded of the letter once more. The description fit. She took a stab in the dark.

"Wait," Shera said, halting the girl with a mere restraining hand upon her shoulder. "I have what you're looking for."

Yuffie turned around slowly, her small smile of sympathy turning into a huge grin of ecstasy. Could it be that this Shera, whom the old pilot had spoken of so fondly, was more helpful than all of the crazy coots in this entire town? Yuffie had a feeling that she was going to like Shera. Short and to the point. Two character qualities Yuffie admired most.

"You just said the magic words, Ms. Shera," Yuffie declared, sitting through the doorway as the other woman beckoned her through it. Maybe the rain wasn't as foreboding as she thought it to be. Things were looking very bright indeed.

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"I hate rain," Elena whined, stomping her foot indignantly in the muddle of mud in which she was standing. The brown water splashed upward, drenching the bottom of her slacks and splattering over Rude's. The bald Turk glared at her over the top of his glasses.

"I told you once, and I'll tell you again," Reno growled as he stepped over the puddle. "Stop whining, Elena." He opened an umbrella up and stepped out into the rain, the large arching shield preventing the immense drops from hitting him. He stopped when no one followed him. He turned, slightly peeved at the inaction of his comrades. "Are you coming or what?" Rude and Elena exchanged a quick glance. Elena crossed her arms resolutely under her breasts, a grim look on her face. "You ain't gonna drag me out to see some redneck scientist, Reno," she declared, her voice cold enough to freeze the rain. "I've had just about enough of this crap."

Reno seemed unfazed by the bite in her voice, turning his gaze calmly to Rude. Rude said nothing, not even a flicker of

emotion passing over his stone face to betray his thoughts. Reno turned sharply, continuing on to the house that stood tall and proud against the bleak background of dark and dreary rain clouds. He opened the gate surrounding the unattended lawn and sauntered up the cement walkway with finesse and clear-showing confidence, the signature of a well-versed Turk.

He knocked softly on the door and heard a muffled reply from inside the house. He took the time to fold up the umbrella now that he was under the relative safety of the overhang of the roof. After waiting calmly for about two minutes, the door opened to reveal a face he had not had the pleasure of gazing upon in two months. He smiled in greeting.

Shera frowned as she looked over the features of the red-haired man on her doorstep. "Oh, it's you. Not interested," she said simply, slamming the door in his face.

Elena sniggered from behind him, making her laughter easily audible to Reno's ears. He silenced her with a withering glare before knocking again. The door opened.

"Look here, Reno," she growled. "I've had enough of Shinra's dirty tricks and lies. No more Turks, no more executives, and no more silly programs to waste the tax-payers' money on. Go away." She made a move to close the door once more, but he stopped it with his hands.

"Ms. Shera, I'm afraid the situation is a little more severe than that," he stated before she could spit him on a barrage of harsh words. "Can I come in?"

She stared at him, disbelieving. "This is about that, isn't it?" she asked, her face suddenly pale. What had she done?

His brow furrowed in curiosity. "If you're talking about the Black Materia, I'm afraid it is." How could she possibly know what he wanted before he even asked? She was definitely hiding something.

She frowned. "I don't have it anymore. I gave it to someone. A friend."

Reno silently cursed, breaking his gaze. "Who?" he asked, shifting his position slightly so that he could look out at the pouring rain.

"I don't have to tell you anything," she said stubbornly. "Shinra isn't worth it. You aren't worth it."

Her words stung, but he didn't let his impassive mask fall from his features. "I don't need to justify the actions of the company to anyone much less you," he retorted, calm severity in his tone. "But if it would give you some sort of peace of mind, I'm not chasing this thing around the world because Shinra wants to dip its greedy fingers into the pool of power. It's under new management now. I'm doing this to stop the world from literally destroying itself because some crack pot scientist tried to reach the Promised Land. I don't know what the Promised Land is, and you can be sure that I don't give a damn if I'm going to end up there or hell or wherever. But I do know that I plan to be on the god-forsaken planet for as long as humanly possible. I can't do that if the Planet ends up as a lifeless slab of rock. I need to get the Black Materia, so I can do that. If it ends up in the wrong hands, you can kiss this little cottage goodbye."

Shera looked unimpressed. "That's very touching, Reno, but I think that the Shinra's hands are the wrong ones. What have they done in the past twenty years to alleviate the local populace out of their little holes of self-pity and other blatantly worthless emotions? Nothing. If anything, they helped to dig the holes just a little deeper and make the climb back up just a little more slick and slippery. By the time the end of the world rolls around, be it today or five hundred years from now, we're all going to be six feet under anyway, so what does it matter? I gave it to the right people, and that's all I need to know for a good night's rest."

Reno pursed his lips, a frown in his eyes. If only she could understand, if only there was some way to make her see. She was too damn stubborn; she had always been that way. There was nothing in the world that could change her will. "My way works best for me." It was times like these that just made him want to slap some sense into her head. But physical force would only deepen her resolve. If not with blows, then with words.

He sighed. "Suit yourself then, Ms. Shera," he declared, as though he was finally accepting defeat. She saw straight through that ploy. Turks were not known for merely walking away. "Of course, you shouldn't expect your gallant knight-errant on his tiny, trusty bronco to be home ever again." He gave her a small, sad smile. "The wrong hands, Ms. Shera."

He opened the umbrella again and stepped out into the rain. He had gotten the last say whether or not she yielded to his ominous premonition. His reputation as a Turk could not possibly be slandered. Having the last word was always important.

"Reno, wait!" Shera called, her voice breaking with indecision. Had giving the materia to Yuffie Kisaragi been such a good idea? Cid had often talked about her being a greedy girl, willing to lie, cheat, and steal to gain any piece of materia for her hometown of Wutai. Certainly, she was what he had talked about being the wrong hands. She was clearly power hungry. Shinra's new management... Reeve wasn't about to destroy the world with a piece of materia, was he? He was intent on righting the wrongs of the former Shinra presidents. What had she done?

"I need a name, Ms. Shera," Reno said without turning to look back at her. Playing right into his hands.

She glanced about with renewed uncertainty. She should have given it to Cloud or someone from the team who was more reliable. If Reno could get it to Reeve, then there would be no more problems. Surely, Reeve was a reliable part of the old team. He had never truly let them down before this. He was a responsible Shinra executive. He could handle this.

"I need a name," Reno reiterated as though she hadn't heard him the first time. "Give me the name, and I can make sure that this materia is returned to a place where no one can ever get at it again."

Now or never.

"Yuffie Kisaragi," Shera blurted, feeling as though a heavy weight had been lifted off her shoulders, but an even heavier one had been placed on her heart.

"Destination?" he asked expectantly.

Shera looked down from the back of the Turk's head. "Wutai," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Only then did he turn back to her once, gratitude clear in his eyes. "Thank you, Ms. Shera." He turned back to the rain and started to walk out of the town, leaving the other Turks scrambling through the rain to catch up.

Shera closed the door, tears burning her eyes. She had just betrayed her friends in a selfish hope that her actions would bring Cid home to her. She felt like she was less than the muddy water filling the slimy holes in the dirt roads of Rocket Town. She slid down the door, sobbing softly as she shrunk to the floor.

"You did the right thing."

Her teary gaze met with a pair of softly glowing green eyes hidden deeply within the shadows of a velvety black cloak. His voice was coldly soothing as though he could feel the weight suffocating her heart, as though this stranger knew what it was like to have broken a promise by betraying a friend.

But his cold consolation could not help her feel better now. If he knew how she felt, he would respect that. Thunder growled in the distance, breaking the silence between them. The monotonous rainfall continued.

~*~

It searched.

Blindly, coldly, with one purpose in its blackened mind.

To find it.

To have it.

To complete the circle.

To have the power.

Where its master failed, it would prevail. Prevail or be killed. Kill or be killed. Destroy or be killed.

It would destroy. It would obliterate. It would consume the entire populace of the blackened world one by one if need be. It would complete its task. It would do so for its master. It wasn't ready to be killed. Not yet.

Not before it had revenge.

And it would have its sweet revenge.

It could taste the blood already, the crimson rivers of sticky liquid flowing from open wounds.

It could smell the death already, the acrid stench of mauled corpses and burned flesh hanging from pearly bones.

It would have revenge. It would taste it and smell it and drink it deeply as though the death was its life's blood.

It had the power to destroy the people, so it could get the power to destroy the world.

The Planet would feel its vengeance. The Planet would do – could do – nothing to prevent the destruction. The Planet was doomed as long as it was alive. The people were predestined to die, swiftly and by its jaws' fire.

There was nothing anyone could do to stop it. It had the power of anger.

Of hate.

Of fear.

They were all on its side.

They would all reap from its plunder and pillage.

The Planet could not fight the fear and oppression even with the pathetic Lifestream.

The Planet would die.

It laughed, an unnatural, guttural sound from deep within its throat.

And it searched.

~*~

"It's looking," Cloud declared suddenly, turning his gaze from the rain-stricken window of the Highwind. Tifa fought the urge to look his way, and Barret snorted indignantly, crossing his massive arms over his chest.

"What's lookin' fer what?" he growled. "The bathroom?" He shook his head. "Quit using them damn pronouns and tell us somethin' straight fer once. Without yo riddles." Barret looked expectantly to Cloud. The blond-haired man didn't answer. "Damn it, Cloud! This is startin' ta piss me off! Now, I was willin' ta leave the Turk in the City of the Ancients, and I was willin' ta go on and leave the pilot, but I ain't willin' ta go off followin' ya around half-cocked. So, either ya tell us what's goin' on without all yo mumble-jumble crap or else I ain't comin'."

Cloud shrugged indifferently. "Then don't come. I don't need your help. Through some sad, twisted set of morals you follow, you have chosen to come along and help me 'save the world'. In this game, there are no people to save. This isn't for the people; the people can rot in hell. I'm doing this to save the Planet, and I don't need your help. I'd just as soon kill you than ask for your help. It doesn't matter to me, just like the people of this world don't matter to me."

"That's cold," Tifa declared, her tone harsh with disapproval. "How can you be so indifferent to the people? To your friends? After all we've done for you?"

"What have you done?" he snapped. "Friends are too much trouble. Friends don't help you; they hold you back, asking for help, asking for money, taking and never giving. Whoever made the word 'friend' was an idealist set on having people like and worship each other. The day I have friends will be the day the world stands still."

Tifa felt her anger replacing the bitter hurt his words inflicted on her. "So that's what we are to you, huh? Nothing. Well, let me tell you something. We're not following you around because of our twisted morals. We're not following you around because we think you need help. We're following you because we care, and whether you like it or not, Cloud Strife has friends!"

Cloud's eyes narrowed with anger. "And what will friendship get me but another death weighing down on my shoulders because I was too weak to stop it."

Tifa opened her mouth to reply but found she had nothing to say. That had sounded too much like Cloud's reasoning, too much like his old cynicism and bitterness. I never had the strength to save you. Oh, God... was this really Cloud? Was this the man she had loved, had spent five years of her life wishing for? Had it all come down to this?

She turned away from him. He wasn't just the shadow of the man she had once known. He couldn't just be another broken man once more. They had come passed that point. They had learned so much from when he had been captured. He had accepted himself for the first time in his life. He said he loved her.

He couldn't be lying.

He wouldn't have lied.

It had never been a question before these events. She had given him love and affection. She had given him her soul. But even her soul could not keep him with her, could not keep them together. When would she ever learn? She always made the same wrong turns, the same stupid mistakes. Did he love her?

"Cloud..." Her voice trailed off, and he turned away from her.

Was he a liar? Was this what he wanted? Wasn't there something they could salvage between them? He loved her... once. Once.

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room, only an occasional growl of thunder or the frightening flash and crack of lightning signifying the pass of time. No one spoke. No one dared to break the silence that seemed as though it was sacred. There was little time spent pondering the silence when you were fighting for lives.

Barret cleared his throat. "Where are we headin'?" he asked, trying to make it seem as though the last biting comments

between Cloud and Tifa had never been muttered.

Cloud turned to the window, his gaze seemingly sightless as he looked out beyond the churning rage of the heavens. "To Wutai," he declared, his voice a soft accompaniment to the pounding rain. "We can find it there."

~*~

Yuffie held the Oritsuru over her head as she ran through the muddy streets of Wutai to her house, eager to get away from the relentless rain and storms. She ducked through the door, tossing the Oritsuru to the corner of the room underneath the place on the wall where her prized Conformer hung suspended on its pegs.

Clutched in her other hand was a small satchel, a ratty old bag filled with the most wondrous treasure in the whole world. Materia. Enough materia to make herself an invincible machine. Enough materia to take out her revenge on the people who had broken her town, the ones who had broken Wutai's spirit.

Sure it wasn't her materia, but that didn't matter. The materia's former owners didn't have any uses for it anymore. Cid had said so himself. Cloud was all wonky again. What use would he have for it? It was hers now. Especially the shining black orb of power with which she had just been reacquainted. That would be the kick behind her threats. The people of Wutai would be reborn with the spirit of the Black Materia. Shinra would go down, and Wutai would rise to power.

It was all so simple.

Her father would be pleased.

"We're gonna be rich and powerful again," she declared to the dark, empty house. "Wutai will rise again out of the ashes of the old."

"Ashes..." A light flared to life in her house, chasing all the shadows from the corner as each and every lamp was lit. Only one shadow remained, and that shadow was the most malevolent of them all.

Yuffie took an involuntary step back, her eyes widening in surprise. She had not been expecting this. This was not what she had had intended when she meant ashes. A fervent wish flitted across her mind for the lights to go out again and leave the black shadow in its darkness.

Before her, menacing red eyes glared out from beneath the majestic crest covering the head of a decidedly evil creature, its black body as dark as coal. Its teeth were bared, gleaming long and sharp in the light. It stretched wings absentmindedly, tapping wicked talons on the wooden planks that made the floor of her house.

"Ashes will be made of the old," it whispered, a voice that sounded too much like grating gravel. "But nothing new will come of it. Nothing will rise from the ashes of the dead. There will be no more after this."

The dragon rose up on its hunches, extending its wings to each wall of the house. "Give me my property," it growled, "and I will give you a quick and easy death. No lingering pain. Just nothing."

Yuffie clenched her fists at her sides. The materia was hers, and if some overgrown lizard was going to tell her otherwise, it was sadly mistaken. "Your property?" she asked dubiously. "It's mine!"

The dragon roared in anger, seemingly growing larger as it tore the roof from her house and threw it for the wind to catch. It collided with another house as the rain and wind whipped it about. The cries from inside the collapsing structure could not be heard over the dragon.

Yuffie swallowed hard, a sudden realization making her go cold. The dragon was getting bigger, feeding off of the darkness of the clouds, expanding off her fears and anger. This wasn't going to be as easy as she thought. Forgetting the first rule of

combat her father had taught her, she turned her back on the creature and ran for her life.

“Where do you go in such a hurry, little one?” the dragon demanded, bringing its forearms down onto the ground with a loud crash. The earth shook in response, shattering windows in their panes and ripping the muddy ground. Yuffie fell forward, losing her footing on the slick surface and falling into the puddles. Her face was propelled into the mud, and she got a mouthful of the vile ooze. She spit it out angrily, standing and facing the dragon.

Lightning flashed, followed shortly by a growl of thunder. She was not intimidated, her anger seething from her as her weapon. She reached into the small, soaked satchel, pulling a perfectly crimson orb of materia from its depths. It twinkled of its own accord, untouched by the raging rain that was soaking the earth. Yuffie allowed herself a small smile.

“Tidal Wave!” she shouted, her voice rising over the roar of the storm. Blinding light flashed around her as she flickered from existence. Water seemed to collect from the very air itself, gathering up the pouring rain into one large sphere of crystalline ice. It shattered into a thousand pieces, shards of it melting before they hit the ground, to reveal a long, wiry serpent seemingly made from the ocean itself.

It hissed as water droplets fell from its sleek body, sizing up the dark dragon before it. After a few minutes of total indifference, Leviathan struck, roaring a serpentine curse at the black lizard. Water formed behind it, a gigantic typhoon of immeasurable strength wrought from the power of the oceans.

The wave crashed into the dragon, hundreds of thousands of gallons of biting seawater washing over its shimmering black scales. It would have been enough to take the strongest foe down. It demolished Wutai.

And the dragon laughed.

Rain fell upon the creature of darkness as it hissed an ugly chuckle. “Making my job easier,” it whispered. The clouds churned, crackling with power.

Leviathan reared back in fear and anger and was disintegrated. Plumes of lightening more powerful than the strongest materia could summon struck the serpent over and over, picking the being apart with the crack of electricity. There was no smell of charred flesh nor that of death. Leviathan was not alive; it had no flesh to burn, no life to be taken. But it could be destroyed.

And it was.

Yuffie screamed as she was torn back to the rain soaked earth, the materia in her hands shattering. Bits of the crystal sunk deep into her flesh, pain flowing red with her blood. She looked up at the dragon, wide-eyed with panic.

If lizards could smile, the dragon was grinning like a child with bubble gum. Its red eyes blazed with a fatal beauty as it stared deeply into Yuffie’s horrified face. “Will you give me my property, little one? Or do you want to feel the real meaning of pain as I eat you alive?”

Yuffie’s chin quivered as tears of fright filled her eyes. Something that could destroy a summon. Something that could call upon the strongest power of the heavens. Something that would break her as easily as if she were made of porcelain. She held the bag out to the dragon, hot tears burning streaks down her cheeks.

“Take it,” she whispered. “Leave me alone.”

The dragon snatched the satchel from her hands with one clawed limb, sharp talons tearing through it like scissors through paper. Multi-colored gems of power fell from the bag, falling into the muddy puddles and disappearing into their murky deep. These were of no interest to the dragon. Its eye was for one thing only.

The Black Materia.

The Black Death.

It was the last to fall from the tear in the satchel, the last to emerge like liquid shadow dripping from the light. It caught the light of a burst of lightning, reflecting it beautifully in its unmarred surface, a smooth and shining orb that knew nothing of flaws. The dragon snatched its beauty from the air, enclosing one sharply taloned hand around it. Fiery eyes sought Yuffie's gray.

"Why, thank you, little one," it said gravelly, a wicked gleam glinting within its gaze. "Now, you can die."

With reflexes faster than a cat's, its other hand whipped around to knock into her. Claws raked her flesh, leaving a trail of fire in their wake, as she was thrown back into the remnants of her neighbors' house. She hit the concrete wall with a bone-crunching thud and lay still. Rain ran unheeded into her staring eyes.

The dragon cocked its head, its gaze flickering across the soaking debris, staring through the salty haze that had settled over the town with Leviathan's destruction. It was searching once more. And what it found, it didn't like.

Walking steadily into the town on the main road, one man entered, coldly, calmly surveying the damage it had sustained. Indifferent to the loss of life, the man hefted a large broadsword, bringing it about to hold in both of his hands.

The Destroyer.

The dragon growled its displeasure.

"You cannot take the power from me," it hissed, snapping its jaws together on its last word as though to offer a silent threat.

Cloud's indifferent mask didn't slip; he felt no fear or anger in response to the dragon's words. "I would only seek to reunite you with your master," he declared, his tone as hard as granite. "Surely you would find that acceptably within your range of actions."

"Fool!" it cried, anger seeping through its entire demeanor. This little man could not scratch it, much less reunite it with the dead master. To even suggest such a thing was insulting. "We shall see, Destroyer. We shall see."

Almost before the dragon had completed its sentence, it brought its jaws down to the man in an effort to take off the Destroyer's head.

Its teeth met cold steel.

The Ultima Weapon hummed with power as it held back the lithe jaws of the dragon. Cloud did not strain to hold the jagged teeth back, did not flinch against the sulfurous breath emanating from its open mouth, did not seem to care that he was inches away from a razor death that would cut him to shreds.

He twisted the Ultima Weapon in his grip, and, for a startling moment that would terrorize any man, the teeth came hurtling straight for him. The Ultima Weapon shifted again as he took a step back and cut deep into the back of the dragon's throat. It reared back from the sharp pain, roaring in an almost tangible anger, black ichor leaking from its mouth. "You will pay for that, Destroyer," it declared, cursing him in an unintelligible tongue. "Dearly."

The next few minutes was a flurry of movement, marked only with the ring of the Ultima Weapon as it collided with the hard bone of the dragon's claws. No one gained an upper hand; they both fought to keep a lengthy distance from the sharp edges of the weapons. There was nothing besides the strain of the fighting. No curses, no taunts or jeers thrown at the face of the opponent. There was only the cold ring of metal, the heavy labor of breathing, the grunts of the strenuous work. No distractions.

Just him and his opponent.

The way he liked it.

It didn't last forever.

"Cloud!"

A part of him moved with the call, breaking free from the cold prison of the Destroyer. A part of Cloud emerged.

Cloud turned to look at the source of the scream, and, for a brief moment in time that seemed to last forever, his eyes locked with hers. That was his mistake, for then came the pain, the jarring impact as the talons of the dragon scraped against his ribs, the gasping rush as the air left his lungs, the heat of his own blood as it left his body.

Tifa climbed over the debris, running forward. "Cloud!" she screamed in terror, watching as he stumbled, the Ultima Weapon falling from his numbed hands. Her breath caught in her throat as he doubled over in pain, crimson rivers flowing from the large gashes on the side of his chest. He clutched at the wound as if to stop the immeasurable amount of his life from leaving his body. He fell to his knees.

"Tifa..." he muttered, his voice a mere harsh whisper. He had no breath to say more, no thought to speak, something coming to his confused mind. The lock the Destroyer had pressed on his soul lifted, the murky cloud shrouding over his mind fading for an instant. Where was he? He couldn't recall being there, couldn't recall what it was he was doing there. All he knew was that she was there with him. That was all he needed to know.

He collapsed, his arms still wrapped tightly about his body.

"No!" Tifa shouted, her voice tight with denial and anger. This couldn't be happening, not when they had finally ended all the madness, not when they had finally had a glimpse of the life they were about to embark on, not now... never now.

She pressed her hands tightly together, her face a stone mask of her emotions. Compressing her lips in a thin line, she summoned the power of her anger and the power of her materia. Green light flared to life around her.

"Ultima!"

A detonation of green power exploded around her, encompassing the entire vicinity, leveling all of the town that remained standing. The heat seared in the air, evaporating the rain before it had a chance to hit the ground, obliterating everything into ashes and charred remains. It was the incarnation of her anger, of all the rage that had built up throughout the plight and pain she had gone through with him. It was all the fear and hurt of living a life without him.

It wasn't enough to scratch the dragon.

The creature of darkness turned its bloody gaze on her, snorting its distaste at her feeble attempts to destroy it. The rain, so recently gone for a small respite, returned with a vengeance similar to that of the dragon's. Murder in red eyes, it snapped its jaws hungrily.

"Foolish human," it growled. "You cannot defeat the dark with anger." It chuckled weakly. "I am anger."

Its tail crashed down to the ground to mark its words, shaking the land with the fury of a maelstrom. Muddy water splashed up around the massive whip as it was flicked once again. Tifa staggered as the earth shook beneath her feet.

There was no time for anything but fear.

The tail came crashing into her with the speed of a gold chocobo, knocking the wind from her lungs and sending her head over heels. She fell back into the mud, cracking her head painfully on the ground as she slid through the muck. Her body came to a halt, an aching pain settling in her bones where she had been hit with the dragon's tail. Water sprayed into her face from the rain as she lay prone on the saturated ground among the scorched remains of someone's house. It was as this she laid there, gasping for breath, dazed and confused, waiting for the end to come claim her so that, for once, she could be with Cloud for all eternity. It was as this she lingered in the world of the living, wishing for a quick end to her body so that she might be with him as a soul.

The rain stopped.

The thunder died.

Cloud Strife, blood leaking down his side to pool at his feet, slowly pushed himself to a standing position, reclaimed sword in hand. He could no longer feel the pain of his wounds, nor could he heed the warnings inside his head. There was one thing alive in his body, one thing pushing him far beyond his limits. It was the same one thing that had kept him moving throughout his life. The one thing that fueled his actions. The one thing he would always have to hold dear, even when there was nothing to use it against.

Vengeance.

The hilt of the Ultima Weapon was slick with rain and blood, slippery but not unsure in his grip. His face was grim with his anger. Sephiroth would pay once more for all the hell that he'd been through. Sephiroth would pay once more for all the pain he had felt. Sephiroth would always pay for what had been taken. Sephiroth would die with this creature as he himself had died just a little more with every piece of his battered soul that had been destroyed.

It was time to give a little bit back.

With a wordless cry of anger and rage, Cloud raised the Ultima Weapon high above his head, the blade glinting evilly of its own accord. The sky churned back and ugly, creating a vortex of blue as the clouds slowly spun away from the center above him. Sunlight streamed down to meet him, proud and majestic, disintegrating the shadows around him.

Proud Cloud... never knew when to quit...

Shimmering light exploded around him, a raging inferno of fire and heat, borne of the pureness of Holy and the taint of Black, a force that was symbolic of how he felt. Torn between light and dark, between the heat of his hatred and the cold of his vengeance. It was his purpose to destroy like this... it was what he was supposed to do.

White light filled his vision, blinded his eyes.

He closed them.

And then red filled his vision; his eyesight bled crimson with his rage.

The world melted.

~*~

The fire died.

The rage ended.

The light was brilliant, and the heat wave fierce, and then the violent explosion snapped out of existence. Everything that

had been in its path was charred, burned, ruined. The fires of hell in their rage had sundered the land, counteracted with the good of the Planet. And everything had been destroyed.

Tifa slowly took a breath. The air was charged with power, seemingly crackling, hot and humid. It hurt to unclamp her lungs and inhale, and the air tasted of death and blood as she did. She lowered her arm that had protected her eyes from the brightness and slowly opened them, her heart still thundering, the echo of the magnificent explosion still reverberating through her skull. As the light faded from her wracking eyes, she was able to see again.

She blinked the tears away from her eyes in a vain hope that she was imagining what was surrounding her, that what her mind had refused to accept before was still only a sad figment of her worst dreams.

Wutai lay in ruins, a few walls of the sturdiest buildings remaining upright among the debris. Most were on the ground in heaps of charred masonry and wood. Everything was smoldering, decimated. The dragon was nothing more than a collection of ashes on the ground. The world was dead and gray.

Cloud was the only thing left standing.

The red left his vision, fading away to a dull black that was the entire world around him. It was as though he was locked forever in a vast nothing with no more fears nor anger nor foolish pride to haunt him in the night. It was as though his mind was far too tired to even think much less comprehend the tangled knot of emotions filling his heart and spirit. He had done it again. He had killed again. And for what?

For the Planet. What a joke.

He fell to his knees, wishing that something could come fill the empty spaces occupying his heart and soul. There was no longer even vengeance to soothe his painful wounds. The lack of even the satisfaction of his vengeance was only salt within them, burning like alcohol, mocking his hurt. All he had was cold. There was nothing left to make him warm, no fire in his spirit, nothing left but icy ashes blown away in a gust of the wind.

And the cracks. How many, many cracks had been formed with this terrible turning of events? How many people had he hurt and killed and lost because he was too weak to save them? How many friends cheated out of a happiness they were sure to have owned for the rest of their lives?

He had no right to happiness even if he could find one scrap of it left in his shredded life. All the hell he had put his friends through, all the pain they had to muddle through just so he could be amused. He had no right to happiness; he had no right to life. To think this had happened to all of them because they had sat down and put up with his crap day after day. How they would sit on their asses and nod at the stupid things he said. How they would lean back and watch him as he followed through on another one of his silly quests to regain some part of his conscience. He had no conscience. Whatever peace of mind he had had died on that day, five years ago. And here they all had been, sitting on the crossroads of the past and the future, and putting up with his crap.

What a joke. What a stupid, stupid joke the Planet had pulled on them all. He wasn't laughing. No one was laughing. You couldn't laugh when you were dead. You couldn't give a cry of mirth when there wasn't enough breath left in your lungs to sustain the worms chewing through them. The Ancients were sadistic comedians, and all the Planet was their stage. They were all puppets. And he the worst of all.

Because he was destined to cut the others' strings.

"Take me," he uttered, his voice cracking from disuse. "Oh, God, take me. Kill me now."

There was no answer.

~*~

The only thing left standing.

It always seemed to be like this. The Planet would be reduced to nothing, to lifeless rock. All the world could shred itself, and he would always be alone in surviving. Not this time. Not now. The pact had been set.

He was the only thing left standing.

And then he, too, fell to his knees.

"Cloud," Tifa whispered through barely parted lips. She scrambled to her feet, ignoring the shouts of the rest of the team who called to her and Cloud to return to the ship, who called for them to leave this ruin. She nearly stumbled from the dizziness, but forced herself on, bounding over fallen debris and wreckage. "Cloud!"

He dropped the Ultima Weapon, the huge sword falling from his weak fingers into the dirt, scraping along in it. Cloud doubled over weakly, and he collapsed onto the ground, which was incredibly dry and arid, cracks running through it. All the moisture had been boiled away with his rage. All the raining anger of the heavens had disappeared, apparently forgotten.

"Cloud," Tifa said, skidding to her knees beside him. Looking his battered body over, she saw the wounds that beast had inflicted upon him, a large gash in his side gushing blood sticky with dirt. She pressed her hands over the flow as if that had the power to stop it. "Cloud," she said again, breathing hard. His eyes were closed, his face one of agony, his breath faint and raspy. "Cloud, open your eyes and look at me."

Blue eyes, unfocused with hurt and exhaustion, creaked open and trained on her form as she leaned over him. "Tifa?" he whispered.

She took his hand. "I'm here, Cloud," she promised, squeezing his fingers. "I'm with you."

"Tifa..." he said softly. "I can feel myself dying..."

"No," she said strongly, surprised and angry at his words, angry more at herself because, deep down, she knew he was right. "No, Cloud." Unwilling to admit it. "No." Denial. "We'll get the Restore Mater-"

He closed his eyes again. "... it's... too late," he declared softly. "You... you can't heal... this... can't..." He licked his lips, his breathing labored. And Tifa understood. Her eyes filled with tears. Curing his flesh wounds wouldn't help. His soul was shattered, broken into too many little pieces to repair. He was going to die. He didn't want to live. He had nothing left.

The tears slid from her eyes as she held his broken body in her arms. He couldn't mean that. He had to think that she was worth something, that her love – that their love – was something that was worth living for, fighting for... dying for. "No," she whispered, her voice shaking. "No. You can't die, Cloud."

His lips tugged into the weakest of smiles. "... even you... can't stop..." His voice faded. Tifa's lower lip was quivering as she fought the great sobs wracking her. She held Cloud's hand, her arm behind his neck. She couldn't speak. Her voice was lost with the wind, gone in the fight, her strength pouring out of her with each tear. Cloud's fingers tightened weakly around hers. "I'm so... sorry, Tifa..." he whispered, "for all the... times I've never been... there... never been with you... to say this... I've... wanted to ask you... for a long time.... Never had...courage.... It's now or...." He trailed off.

"Cloud," Tifa whispered.

He forced his eyes open and focused on her. "I... I love you..." His voice was a strained whisper. He took a slow breath. "Would... you" He opened his eyes again. Tears were running down his temples. "Marry me..." Then they closed forever. Cloud's hand was limp in hers as the breath exited his body, and he was still.

Tifa held him in silence, staring at his lifeless body in shock, rage, and great sorrow. She couldn't think. She couldn't breathe. Tears escaped silently. Her soul split from her body, anxious to follow her lover's to the afterlife but still tethered by mortality. "No," she whispered, tears running into her lips. Denial ravaged her as she ran her hands down Cloud's face. His skin was still warm. "No," she said louder. "Cloud, no." She drew a short breath and exploded. "NO!"

Her cry was lost in the still air, no ears left to hear it, no hearts left to care. She collapsed over him, oblivious to the blood that seeped into her clothing, her sobs choking the breath from her lungs. "It wasn't supposed to be like this," she whispered, her voice shaking with her tears. "We were supposed to be together forever. I can't lose you."

It was silent beside her crying; the world seemed too shocked to move. Time stood still as Tifa wept with a vengeance, laying over Cloud's lifeless body, holding him. "I love you..." she whispered, her eyes squeezed shut against the sight of his blank blue eyes, his eyes that would never again shine because of his happiness or because of his pain. Why was it like this all the time? Destined to hurt, together and apart. She took a shaky breath, wishing he could still hear the words that flowed from her mouth like a reservoir of feelings whose dam had finally eroded away. "I loved you since the first moment I saw you... You were everything to me... Everything..." The wind picked up, spreading the stench of death and soot.

And something else. Something that was too familiar, no more than a tingling in her nostrils, but an entire lifetime of memories. It brought her a sense of déjà vu, prompting her to recall a time she had lost him before this, one more of the thousands of memories she would give anything to forget.

A soft tickle coiled around her hand, a caress one would expect to come from a gentle breeze or a loving embrace. It was strangely familiar and somehow vaguely malevolent though it showed no menace to her now. Curiosity stifled her sobs, and she raised her head to look at the presence streaming around her.

"Lifestream..."

It flowed up from the cracks within the arid ground in little tendrils, swirling around her and Cloud as though it was dancing to a lethargic melodic tune that no one could hear. Tifa stared at the green coils as it crept around them, wide-eyed with fear. Was this green horror returning to destroy her mind once more? What would she do without Cloud to pull her from the lulling insanity offered by the emerald streams?

But the fear was replaced with an increasing hope. Would the Planet finally acknowledge the err of its ways? Was it trying to repent for destroying a man who had fought so hard to make sure it continued on in peace-filled harmony? Or was it just toying with them once more, another cruel practical joke that could make the funniest clown cry?

Tifa had no time to answer her own questions; the green blanket smothered her.

For the longest moment of her life, nothing but the infinite green exploded around her, filling her vision, drowning the air from her chest, clouding her mind with its swirling endowment of incomplete sanity. And then she could hear them once more, the demonic voices that seemed to be derived from Hell itself, filling her ears with their cries of loneliness and lusty hunger, screaming loud enough to leave an unbearable ringing reverberating through her skull. And then there was blissful silence.

Tifa doubled over with a gasp of surprise when the voices cut out from her mind as quickly as they had come. Still the green encompassed her with its vastness, still it whispered to her with the murmur of a calm spring rustling over rocks. And she knew that this was the Planet, this was the Planet when it chose to cut off the pain and its suffering and exist for one brief moment in gleeful solitude.

The gateway to the Promised Land.

He wanted it like this...

Tifa looked up sharply as sing-song voice came to her ears from nowhere and everywhere, echoing through the green mists without a clear beginning or end. It was omnipotent, godlike in its infinitude, seemingly caring but somehow cold to her feelings and the feelings of all the others who had once sought its help. It was as though it knew that it could never truly be destroyed, as though it was indifferent to the kinds of life that existed on the Planet.

She couldn't believe its words. "No," she whispered, suddenly realizing the meaning of the soft voice. "He didn't want this!" He would not have given up his love for them. They weren't worth it...

Savior...

Tifa felt the tears wetting her cheeks. She was so selfish. Friendship was worth dying for, but love was the ultimate friendship. She hated her thoughts. And the moment they invaded her mind, she hated herself. Of course her friends were worth it. But that didn't make it hurt any less. "Cloud, no..."

Destroyer...

It couldn't be true. How could he abandon her like this after all they had gone through together, after all they had to share, after all the years they had yet to come? What was he thinking? Destroying their destiny together in the name of his friends; his title was more true than any could imagine.

Giver of life...

What had he been thinking?

"No!" Tifa screamed, clutching at the Lifestream as if to choke the life from its tendrils. Her hands grabbed nothing, the green mists dissipated, shooting away from her and her lover's corpse. She broke down into a fury of tears and sobs, clutching his lifeless body in her arms as the warmth slowly melted away from him. "You can't leave me! Cloud... come back..."

And she knew then that she would always be alone.

~*~

Yuffie Kisaragi saw black. It was not the terrifying black one would expect to see when one was slowly dying, but rather it was a comforting infinity that urged her to leave all her worries behind and follow it to the ends of the universe. It made her seem relatively small and insignificant, but that didn't seem to bother her. She was breathing in its endless currents of nothing, dwelling in loneliness but unaffected by her solitude.

It was oddly comforting.

And then the green came and blinded her, filled her vision with the most painful light. Her heart, which had been so blissfully quiet, thudded loudly through her head, coaxing her back to where she belonged. But it was so peaceful here, sleeping silently in the gray area between life and death, teetering over the edge like a wicked seesaw threatening to dump its contents onto the ground with a loud thud.

When she resisted it, it forcefully pulled her back to the light. Pain exploded in her head, a numbing ache filling her body with its dull fire. And then, she remembered something that had been forgotten moments ago, and her brain sent little nerve impulses down her aching spine. Choking on nothing, she drew in a large breath, feeding her oxygen starved body. Sputtering, she drew in air to her aching chest again and again, soothing the fire burning hungrily within her.

After what seemed like years, the fire subsided to little more than the feeling of an overall ache. She felt the warm blood trickling down her temple, but she gave it little heed as she slowly opened her eyes.

No rain.

The world came into focus, sunlight burning holes through the clouds to mottle the destroyed town with tiny rays of light. The rain had stopped, the clouds were dispersing, and a lone meadowlark sung sadly in the distance, crying for the loss of the town and jovial for the start of a beautiful day. A breeze whipped through the shallow plains.

Savior...

~*~

The large cavernous room was silent. There was no monotonous trickle of water traveling over the slippery rocks, no splash of a fish jumping through the serene pool. It was as if the entire world within that room was made of stained glass, and the slightest noise would shatter it. Nothing dared to intrude upon its hollow emptiness.

Green light filtered in through a solitary crack in the wall, slipping through and grasping the air like long, twisted fingers. Its dancing tendrils didn't seem to be in a hurry, skipping across the room as though the situation was merely a game. It had no mind but seemed to have a destination already planned. It was headed for the one thing that was out of place in this peaceful residence.

Rising, lonely, in the middle of the large room was a stone obelisk, grotesquely conspicuous in a room where everything was sterling silver. The statue itself seemed to be carved from life, every feature perfectly captured, every emotion clearly evident on a gargoyle's deformed face. Rage, surprise, hatred... all locked there for all eternity, unable to be carried out by the owner. The green coiled around it; the statue's eyes flashed red.

With the speed of a snake, one of the many branches of green lashed out, cracking into the perfectly smooth stone. The impact echoed through the empty room, threatening to break the peace with its ferocity. A piece of stone clattered to the floor from the crack in the statue, hitting the marble with a resounding clamor. Then the silence reigned, broken only by a whispering breeze.

Destroyer...

The green dispersed as the crack in the stone expanded, shattering the still life trapped within the rock. With a cry that screamed only to the ears of the deaf, the statue exploded in a hail of tiny shards of stone that could cut into flesh as easily as any sword. The shards fell to the floor with the tinkle of ice on glass before disappearing, melting to a deep blue and melding with the marble of the floor.

When the cacophony had ended and the silence returned to the room, only one thing remained in the space where the statue had been located. Huddled, cold with grief and sorrow and shadowed with the darkness of his heart, a man shivered though the air was warm and soothing. His long black hair whipped around him in a slight breeze that no one could feel. And for the first time in a long time, Vincent Valentine cried.

The green moved on through the empty corridors of the vast city, searching. It became more desperate, its time was running short. It had to finish this for him, it had to carry out the work of the Destroyer. It had a purpose to fulfill before returning to the veins of the Planet just as it had had a purpose months before. This time, however, it seemed as though so much more was at stake.

It rounded the corner of the corridor, entering an empty room that was silent except for the sad dripping of water emanating from somewhere in the corner. It was devoid of any kind of life. But this did not dampen its resolve, if resolve was what it had. The eerie green light chased away the shadows from their comfortable niches and bathing the room in the eternal bright.

The wind picked up as the green light drew closer to the one thing in the room that seemed out of place. The one thing that shouldn't be there. The one thing that it had come to vanquish from the peace of the city.

Death.

It didn't belong here, not again. That foul word that spoke of the stench of rotting flesh and the sight of bloody tears was not supposed to be here again. It was not supposed to take away another loved one, it was not supposed to sneak up on them to snatch away another friend, to bring more hurt, to leave with a little piece of someone's soul. It wasn't supposed to happen to them... to him. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

Icy blue eyes seemed to stare out from the green for a fraction of a second, gone almost before they could be seen.

Giver of life...

The green wrapped around the body, hugging the corpse compassionately as though they had once been best friends in the world, clutching it as though the pain of losing him was far too much to stand, and saving it because there was nothing else left to do.

The green glow disappeared into an explosion of light, which raged far brighter than any stars speckling the sky. The shadows within the room that had been hiding deep in the cracks and crevices within the walls were driven from their concealment, destroyed by the brightness which had come over the entire room.

And when the light died once more, there was nothing.

No green light to fill the cold room with ghostly warmth. No death to curse the ground that the room covered. The shadows crept back to their niches, and the water continued on its journey from the ceiling through the chilly air to collect in a crystal pool on the floor.

There was one rasping breath.

Another.

And a muttered curse.

The water continued to drip as though the room was weeping.

~*~

"Cloud..." Tifa whispered, holding his rapidly cooling hand within hers. There were no struggling breaths, no lines of pain and hurt wrinkling his face, no tears of sorrow. Wherever he was now, locked behind those closed eyes, had to be better than what he had left. There was one thing that he had in this life other than the pain he felt too often.

He had had her love. And he would continue to receive her love even though he was not there. He reciprocated her feelings; that was all she needed to know to be at peace with herself. All the unspoken words and missed opportunities... that was in the past now. They had shared one moment together with all the walls broken down and forgotten, a moment that would live as long as she carried it deep within her heart. All the rest was history.

She fell over him and cried for her loss.

A warm hand grasped her shoulder, clutching it with soothing gentleness despite its massive size. She glanced at it before turning her teary gaze up to meet two mild, brown eyes gazing upon her with the compassion of someone who knows the pain of losing a loved one. And as she gazed deeply within his eyes, she knew that she would never be truly alone with friends like those she had, but she would never again know love like that which she had felt for Cloud.

"We lost so many good people to the Planet, now," Barret said softly. "It's high time we got somethin' in return 'sides the satisfaction of knowin' the world was safe from power hungry monstrosities."

Tifa broke her gaze, shaking her head slowly. "Isn't that enough? This life isn't fair." She let out a breath of air. "Cloud saved us from death. Cloud saved them, Barret."

The meaning of her words seemed to be lost on the larger man as Red XIII and a bruised and battered Yuffie walked slowly to where they were all gathered around the body of one of the best friends any of them would ever had. Tifa slowly stood, gazing sadly down upon the incarnation of her love's death.

She smiled smally. It was almost as though he was quietly sleeping, eyes closed peacefully, cherubic in his silent slumber, oblivious to the debris that was scattered around him. Tifa smiled through her tears. This would be how she remembered him. Goodnight, my angel. She leaned over and kissed him gently one last time, pressing her lips against his. Then she ran soft fingertips lightly across his forehead, down over the heavenly eyes that would never glow again, across his cheek... A tear dripped down onto his lips. Goodnight.

Barret bent over, picking up Cloud's limp form with a little difficulty and cradling him. He turned from the spot where the scorched remains of the dragon scarred the ground. "Let's go," he declared as he began walking.

The others followed him, slowly sauntering back to where the Highwind was rising majestically against the crystal blue skies. Tifa took in her surroundings once more, the broken houses, scattered debris, cloudless skies, salty air. A small breeze whipped around her hair carrying with it the smell of the ocean.

The ashes scattered in the wind.

~*~

A man walked into the scorched ruins of a once perfectly ornate town, favoring his left leg considerably. He was oblivious to the sweet-smelling air that blew over the debris from the surrounding plains. The stink of death was too new at this place to be merely covered up by sweet grass and pungent salts. Underneath the rubble that lined the ground were bodies, crushed and battered, taken out while they were blissfully unaware of the war that had briefly raged outside of their homes.

It made him sick. The ignorance of people. How could they be so blind to the fact that their world was dying, slowly but surely? Or maybe they were blind because they didn't want to look. He snorted disdainfully, unable to not envy their misguided ignorance, wishing that he could feel the same way. But he was cursed with a promise.

The breeze sent his black cloak slapping at his heels, whipping the fabric around his legs in a particularly violent gust. An intricately folded piece of paper was blown across the dusty ground at his feet, tumbling in the wind, a crane with shattered wings that was still trying to fly. The story of mankind.

And it was destined to happen again and again, an infinite circle that would continue for as long as man lived upon this world. And when they no longer dwelled on the Planet, there was bound to be some other corrupt creature capable of thinking too much for its own good. And then it would start again.

So he did the only thing he could do. He delayed the inevitable. Keep away the means and all that will be left are the crackpot ideas. The ideas would always be there. But materials could disappear back to their origin. They would again.

He kicked up the ashes of the dragon, smudging the soot into the ground as he searched. His foot hit something solid in the remains, and he crouched to examine the black piece of rock his search had found. He wiped the dirt from its glimmering surface, a frown on his lips as he straightened.

"All you're killing is yourself," he declared softly, though there was no one around to hear his words much less heed them. He knew the Planet had heard. He just wished he could understand why it would always happen, why it would repeat itself like a bad saying.

Satisfied with his finding, however, he just shrugged off the incomprehension and limped away, out of the dead town, leaving the dead corpses and sickly smelling debris to the carrion birds.

~*~

And thus it ended.

The world had nearly been shattered by anger and hatred and violence. It had nearly been destroyed once more. Yet, that seemingly inevitable obliteration of all life had once again been prevented.

The sun rose and set.

The winds blew.

And life lived.

It would all grow again. Defeat and destruction are a momentary state. No matter how hard one tries to beat down life, to snuff out its seemingly fragile existence, it always rose again, like the green of spring bursting from the desolate cold of winter. To some, it is the greatest gift. To others, it is the worst curse. The trees would rise from the ashes, sprout from saplings, grow with fervent energy towards the heavens. The flowers would bloom from the Planet, filling the air with pollen and pungent aromas. The animals would eventually return, crawling out from their refuge and once again populating the world. And man would rebuild what he had lost, regain what was nearly stolen. And he would continue to, in fact, take for granted everything that had nearly slipped through his grubby fingers.

The endless cycle would continue. The pattern regains itself. The rise and fall of power would forever rise and fall because it was meant to do so. Lifestream filled the Planet with illustrious and heavenly life, and until that Promised Land was empty, life would always rise again.

People don't know that they cannot kill life. They can only kill themselves.

So what, then, was it worth? Why had those that fought, and that continue to fight, sacrificed themselves to preserve life when life would always preserve itself? Why struggle to snuff out power and hate and anger when it would only embody itself again and again, take a new form, a new shape, but the same old lust for hurt would remain? Why was it worth saving humanity, when humanity didn't understand the magnitude of what had happened? It couldn't comprehend that power was a momentary status. It didn't understand that the petty wars and violence only hurt itself. It couldn't understand that life was indestructible. One can kill a man, but one cannot ever kill life. Life finds a way.

Why, then, had he sacrificed himself?

Because all life, in its basic most generic state, was worth fighting for.

Perhaps men weren't meant to understand that life was indomitable. Perhaps humanity was unable to comprehend that the Promised Land is a promise, a promise that life would continue after they had gone. Perhaps man was destined to live in a life he had no control over. Man sees life through a very narrow perspective. There is a war, a struggle for power. Good triumphs over evil. Man thinks that is where it ends. He sees a finite sequence of events. He does not see the cycle. This one victory was not the end to evil. It would rise again and fall again.

Maybe one fought to preserve man's right to live in the dark. To not understand the greater scheme and not be troubled by the cycle of life and death, of good and evil. Maybe the satisfaction one receives from knowing one had defeated the evil for the time being was enough to make that fight worth while. Life would always go on. Those that fought fought so it would not be troubled with the understanding of the violence of nature. The sun would rise. The winds would blow. And man would live. Life would live. It was over.

Thus it ended, and life continued to continue in blessed ignorance.

~*~

Yuffie Kisaragi was sitting alone on the cold stone floor of the City of the Ancients, her thoughts a muddle. So much had happened, so much had been lost and regained, and she hadn't known how important it had been until it was gone. She had one person to thank for her life, and she couldn't even do that anymore.

If only she had said something to him earlier. If only she had given a damn when he had been captured instead of stealing his materia and leaving him for dead. If only she had cared for anything other than her greed.

She was such a fool. She felt the tears stinging her eyes and bit her lips to stop their fall. She didn't want to cry; crying was for little babies and people who couldn't handle hurt. Crying was for people who had too much self-pity to handle and for people who weren't strong enough to withstand the pain of loss. She wasn't like that. She wouldn't cry. But she was so stupid.

She ran her finger along the smooth edge of the Ultima Weapon, wishing that it would flash brightly with that inner light that always appeared in it when Cloud would hold it, wishing that it would flare to life with the brilliant white. But it didn't, and it never would again. Her silly antics had seen to that.

How could she have been so blind?

He had been so nice to her. He had never hurt her, never yelled at her, never cursed her off for her own foolish stupidity. How could she have ignored her feelings? There was some small part of her that loved him, as much as any girl feels for the friend who was always there for her, and there was the larger part of her that cared for him. But she hadn't been strong enough to save him. She hadn't been able to overcome her greed for power. She was no better than the old man that used to reside in that big office on top of the Shinra tower. She was a selfish brat.

And it was too late for amends, too late for apologies, too late for one muttered "thank you" to the man who had gone through too much trouble to save her time and again. There was nothing she could do to repay the debt he had placed on her, but somehow she knew that he didn't want her to even attempt to repay that debt. Maybe he hadn't seen it as a special care for her, maybe it was all an obligation, all duty...

Regardless of what it had been and regardless of what it was now, he had given her a gift that she was going to keep forever. He had shown her what she was, he had somehow given her a way to right her numerous wrongs, given her a second chance at doing the right thing in life. No more greedy fingers, no more corrupt morals.

A small smile appeared on her lips. "Stealing is wrong," she whispered, setting the Ultima Weapon down on the cold stone of the floor. "May no grave robber ever come here, and may you sleep here undisturbed for all eternity."

She stood slowly, stretching her legs. The water reflecting the light on the ceiling as she glanced about, and for a fraction of a second, she could have sworn that the mighty sword laying upon the stone picked up the light and glowed briefly with it, all of the materia glimmering for one glorious moment.

"Thank you, Cloud."

Following the old friends from the time before this tragedy, she walked out of the room they had vacated hours before and began the long trek home, leaving behind a friend but carrying all those warm memories deep inside her heart.

~*~

Tifa Lockhart watched from a distance as Yuffie walked slowly from the City of the Ancients, wading through the tall

grasses. The young woman quickly disappeared from her sight in the dark night, and she turned her gaze back to the starry sky.

It was a breath taking sight, comparable to only one other night that she remembered vividly. Well, Cloud this is no well, she thought sadly. No more promises that we can't keep, no more vows to live and die with and no more pain. She shook her head, falling back into the grass, feeling the blades pierce into her skin through her thin clothing.

She couldn't help but think that they had lied to each other that day. She couldn't help second guessing her decision when she told him that he had kept his promise. Was it really true? Had he ever saved her from his pain? That was the one thing from which he couldn't save himself. He couldn't have saved her if he was slowly dying.

And look what his pain had got him. He was dead. He could no longer save anyone, he could no longer love her, he could no longer be with her. He was with Aeris now. Tifa frowned. Did he love Aeris more than he loved her? Was it physically possible to love two people at the same time? Or was she just trying to fool herself?

Damn promises.

Life was full of things that couldn't be kept. No one could ever keep a promise. No one would ever want to. It was just a bunch of words sworn with fingers crossed behind your back. No one ever meant anything by them. No one ever cared.

But as she stared up at the black velvet sky that was speckled with little teardrops, she knew that he hadn't lied to her. He loved her, he had said so in his dying breath. He had said the words, he had sworn that he'd be her protector and savior, and he had meant every syllable. It was not just a wasted breath, it wasn't just a bunch of pretty paper hearts glued on a cheesy love letter. It had been real. It had been the truth.

She sighed. There had been no closure of that truth, though. No end to the promise. The stars blurred together as her eyes grew teary. What had he meant when he asked her to marry him? He had known there would be no way she could do so. He had known he was going to die. He had made that choice. He had made the decision to use whatever power had been invested within him to bring back his friends. That must have been one last attempt to heal his hurt.

He hadn't been weak.

He had enough strength to save them all.

A star streaked past in the black sky, falling down to the earth as though it was wishing her luck without him. Or maybe it had been just one more falling star. She wondered if it had been Cloud's star, finally breaking loose from the dark seas of nothing to plummet through space and join the rest of the forgotten heroes. The star winked out of existence.

~*~

Cid Highwind looked away from the falling star, no wish in his mind and no dreams left in his heart. They had all died on that night, bled from his soul like the blood from his body. All his lifelong desires and wants had been run through, had been destroyed, had been wiped from existence. There was nothing left to live for when you had already died.

But then there was her.

Cid sighed as he turned back to the small house in Rocket Town, his eyes wandering to where warm yellow light seeped from behind the window's curtains. Somehow he had known, somehow Cloud had been able to read him like an open book. And for some strange reason, had valued what he read more than what he had felt.

Why give his life for an old pilot who had little time on this forsaken planet to grow older with rusting planes and a woman who must hate him? Why make the ultimate sacrifice for someone who had little enough going for him as it was?

And then there was Tifa. Goddamn Cloud for leaving Tifa. She was all alone now. She couldn't even turn to him. He shook his head sadly, taking a long drag off his cigarette and exhaling the smoke unto the breeze. She never said it, but he could tell. She couldn't even look at him now. She didn't want to blame him, but she did. Every time he caught a glimpse into her eyes, he could see it hiding there like an untamed beast. She hated him. She hated him for taking away Cloud's life for his own.

If he had his way, he would've stayed dead.

There was nothing left on this Planet now except a few people who had nothing left to lose. Every single time it was rebuilt, the Planet found new and exciting ways to destroy it. They ought to just leave the debris as it was to stay upon the earth forever as a constant reminder of what happens to people when they get too damn cocky. He didn't know why the Planet didn't just blow them all away and save itself the trouble of having stupid people exploiting it, of rebuilding their shattered lives upon it, of living on it. The people on this world could just carry on, walking over the ruins instead of salvaging something from them.

And here he was, being a hypocrite. Here he was, standing alone outside his front door, ready to start the long trek back to how his life had been, ready to rebuild what had fallen and make it stronger for the next time. He was no better than the last.

And here he was, a velvet box tucked within the pocket of his black slacks, ready for the future but unable to keep his eyes off the past. What good was it to move forward if your eyes were always turned back? You couldn't see what was ahead, only what you'd left behind. It was time to look forward again.

Cid steeled himself for this moment, his hand poised to knock on the hardwood door that had been set squarely within its frame, to change his life forever. But he stopped. Something stopped him. He turned away from the door. She must hate him. She must hate him even more now that he had actually apologized. But she could find a fault in that, too. He didn't have the courage to say anything to her face.

"I'm such a coward," he declared to the night sky. Who would have thought that popping the question would be so hard? What if she no? What if she said yes? He muttered a curse. And he didn't even have Cloud left to ask for advice.

How would you ask someone to marry you?

Cid grimaced. Their last conversation had been spent on something as idiotic as that. Asking someone to marry you. He snorted. Two bachelors trying to figure out how to woo their honeys. They probably should have just written to Abbey.

He set his teeth and turned back to the door. This was what Cloud had given him. A second chance. Another try. He couldn't screw things up now. He wouldn't squander this. He wouldn't just walk away like he had all his life. It was time to take some action, and, regardless of the answer, at least he wouldn't have Cloud's death beating down on his conscience. I hear getting on you knees is traditional.

Cid nodded as he pulled the ring case from his pocket and knelt down, one knee barely touching the ground. He knocked twice on the door, the hollow sound reverberating through his skull. Soft footfalls were muffled by the door. He could practically see her stepping lightly to the door.

This was it. This could change his life forever.

The door opened, and the warm yellow light floated out onto the darkness to melt away the shadows.

~*~

Barret peered through the open door, watching the light skitter across the floor and until the sleeping face of his daughter. Her young face was relaxed with her dreams, dreams he could only hope were peaceful. There would be no peaceful

dreams for him for a long time, not after what had transpired.

The last few days made the entire ordeal with Sephiroth seem like a piece of cake. It had been relatively simple back then; he had had one reason for fighting. He had saved the world for Marlene. He wanted her to grow up in a place where the people could live without the fear of being exploited by those who thirsted for power. He had fought for her. But what had he been fighting for this time? They had won their freedom, they had won their lives back.

So why had he risked his life for nothing? He stepped into the room, slowly closing the door behind him. His footsteps were soft on the wooden floor, too quiet to disturb his sleeping daughter. He stopped at the window, the pale moonlight streaming in sadly.

And with the pale light, came the answers to his questions.

He had done it, he had fought and killed out of friendship. For perhaps the first time since Dyne, he had had true friends, friends that were willing to stand by him and fight for him. He hadn't known that in a lone time. He hadn't known loyalty like that, he hadn't known care like that in years.

And now he had lost it again.

A man he had deemed to be so cold and uncaring had actually been more kind at heart than he. And now that man was gone, dead. His death had split them all up, destroyed the team, sent them all on their own way possibly never to see each other again. All they would have were the memories, and memories were a sad comparison with the real compassion. So many things were lost in memories. They would fade with time like the friendships often slowly withered away like so many rocks upon a stream's bed.

Nothing could last in a world where the people who cared were the ones who were killed. It was as though the entire scheme of things was to be as mean and bitter as possible within a lifetime. But a lifetime of bitterness wasn't worth a second of concern. He would never find friends like those he had once had again.

He didn't know if it was for better or for worse. At least now there would be no more hateful words between them to drive a wedge of ice into the stone. The rocks had already crumbled. But that didn't make it any less painful or make him any less angry.

He didn't know who was at fault, so he blamed the same men and women he had always turned the fault on. His eyes found them in the night sky. "Damn you, Shinra," he whispered softly, though the hate and disgust that was often held in those words had been replaced with the pain and hurt of someone who had lost just a little bit too much.

Rising high into the sky, the large Shinra tower seemed to glower at him, silhouetted by the sad face of the moon.

~*~

Reeve frowned as the pale sphere within the black sky glowered at him, seeming to place the blame directly on him. It wasn't his fault that the world had almost gone to hell once more. He had had nothing to do with it.

He turned from his window and leaned forward at his desk, hitting a button on the tape player before him. The monotonous voice of Dr. Nygel Huiji filled the large office with the emotional register of a man who has accepted the fact that he was going to die.

"I have made a terrible mistake.

"I started on this long journey on a quest for science, and yet as I finish this final leg of the trek, I have discovered that the science has gotten lost at some time along the way. Where it was lost, I have forgotten. Why I never reclaimed it, I do not know. All I do know is that this has all been one long nightmare of misguided folly and lunacy which has been

masquerading as a fruitful dream of glory and power.

"I once swore never to be like Hojo. Never to be a sadist. Never to be a fool. I, too, have been misguided. I, too, got lost somewhere along the way. I have looked back upon my actions and have only seen all the transgressions which mar my past. There are few little things that have done correctly, few things which can be counted to be in the name of science, or, in this case, the name of mankind. I am no better than Hojo, if not worse. I have taken the life of one man and twisted it to do my bidding. I have wheedled my way into his mind and soul, bending his words and thoughts. I have disregarded his life. I have used him and abused him and broken him so that he would fit into the grand scheme of things.

"The fit was tighter than I thought.

"Perhaps, in the end, I was right. The Destroyer was created to protect, not to destroy. Perhaps, he should have been given a more fitting name, yet I know of no other word that the Ancients would have used to describe him. To kill to protect the Planet, that is what the Destroyer must do.

"No one else shall attempt to create the Promised Land. He will see to that. I will see to that. With my death, goes the knowledge and the science. I have found the science once more and now it will be lost again. I can only pray that no one shall uncover this science. May it rest in peace, never to be sought for by mankind again.

"I'm sorry."

The tape stopped with a click, nothing left to be heard. Reeve reached forward and ejected it, pulling the little black cartridge from the player. He held it up for a moment, staring at it as though it had all the answers to the world. His gaze moved from the tape to the man sitting in front of him.

"I want you to be my witness to this," he declared, pulling a lighter from his desk's drawer. He flicked the flame to life, watching as it flicker in unseen air currents. He brought the small fire to the edge of the tape, holding the flame there until the tape caught the blaze. He dropped the tape into the metal waste can, letting the papers within it catch and feed the fire. "This tape never existed," he said softly. "The knowledge died with him."

Reno leaned back in his chair, oblivious to the smoke rising out of the can. His eyes found Reeve's. "Maybe," he commented. "Someone knew what we were looking for. It was gone before we could even get a whiff."

Reeve turned back to the window, staring out at the depthless, black sky. He sighed, shaking his head. "May God help us."

His eyes searched the horizon but found nothing to focus on. Where the huge observatory had once been cradled neatly on top of Cosmo Canyon, there was nothing. There was a hole, another reminder of Nygel's slander. The Planet may forgive, Doctor, but I never will. The emptiness of the canyon's high walls, the barely discernible bit of rubble, seemed to second his thought.

~*~

The debris was all that was left. A few collapsed walls, a couple of scorched scraps of metal, shattered glass. It was the all the scattered remains of Bugenhagen. It was gone. Everything. Gone.

Red XIII blinked the tears forming in his one eye. He had lost his grandfather and his father and his friend. He hadn't been strong enough to defend Cosmo Canyon. He was a failure. He was just like his father.

A memory came to him. Seto, locked in stone, cold as ice, had cried upon seeing his son. He had been proud. What was there to be proud of now? Nothing. He had failed his father and his town. He had even failed Cloud. He had stayed with them to help save him. His death had been the last mark on a record full of marks. He had failed his friends. What was he to do now? Rebuild what little scraps of a life this dead town had left? No one would stay; no one would live under the protection of a failure. He couldn't protect them. They would leave him.

He turned from the debris and began to run with no destination in mind. He just had to leave this foul place. He feared the bad wishes of the dead to come upon him and suck the life from him as sweet revenge. He deserved it. What kind of friend was he that couldn't be counted on? What kind of friend would want such a friend who did nothing but fail all those who counted on him?

He thought he had made the right choice. He thought he had followed his own destiny. He thought he had followed his heart. Maybe he had. Maybe he hadn't. But one thing was for sure. Heart had little bearing in a world where the wicked ruled and the kind were crushed. He should have come home. He should have been the son of Seto, not this foul failure, Red XIII. He was nothing.

And it scared him.

No one would care if he left the world forever. No one would take note that he was gone. Perhaps only the wind blowing through his mane would miss him. Only the sandy ground his light footfalls tread upon would notice his departure. They didn't care that he had failed them all. He couldn't fail the stone. He couldn't fail zephyr. They would always be there as his companions. That was not the truth of anything else.

Maybe he was destined to be alone. Let the demons come up behind him and kill him. He would find his grandfather when he died. It would be better to have love and compassion in death than solitude in life. But he would stay here on this world. If someone had something to say about that, they could say it. He wasn't afraid of dying. He would have to go sometime. Any day would do. It didn't matter.

He stopped running, his breath coming in short gasps. He sat back on his haunches, panting heavily, uncaring as to how far he'd run. The canyon had disappeared, the long grass of the prairie surrounded him. Cosmo Canyon was far behind him now, dwelling miles behind with his past. He would keep moving if only to forget.

Remembering was too painful.

Remembering was too hard.

Red XIII began to walk slowly, stalking through the wild grass, glowing in the dim moonlight. In the distance, the roar of a waterfall could be heard, breaking over the silence of the night.

~*~

The water flowed over the edge, crashing into the pool below, flowing over the rocks. The spray dampened everything, enough to fully saturate the ground surrounding the falls, enough to create living shapes from the mists, enough for ghosts.

Vincent Valentine sat at the edge of the crystal pool, his eyes wandering across the lake to where the waterfall hid the entrance to the cave they had found so many years ago. How he missed the days they had been together, longed to see her beautiful face shining through the darkness. They were little more than fleeting memories now. How he wished for something more.

"Why did you bring me back?" he asked quietly, snapping a twig before he threw it into the water. It floated away on an unseen current. "You had more happiness than I can ever have."

There was no response to his question, the whisper of the waterfall holding no more morbid answers to tell him. He was truly alone. Her soul had forgiven him and had left him here on this plane to find forgiveness for himself. He couldn't forgive himself, especially not now. There was some part of him that felt even worse now, even more like he hadn't done enough soon enough.

He had failed Tifa, too.

He had been given a duty to help protect the world, had taken on the task of bringing Cloud home to her. And what had happened? He had stolen Cloud's very life for his own. He had brought her home a corpse.

Tifa would never forgive him for doing that to her. He had more obligations, more sins for which he had to repent. He couldn't repent for these sins; he couldn't sleep through them, muddle through them like a blind man. They were the sins that couldn't be forgotten or repaid. These were the sins that he would live with forever.

They were somehow different from his obligations to Lucrecia. She had forgiven him for his transgressions. She had found a way to see it so that he was not responsible. She had somehow seen it as the fault of the Planet, as some wicked suicide scheme of the Planet. He wasn't so sure about that. And Tifa was more sound than Lucrecia had been. She surely would see how blaming the Planet was worthless.

Just like blaming myself.

But there was nothing else he could do. Blaming himself seemed only natural, some kind of second nature to him. It was like Sephiroth's fiery rage and Cloud's guilt-stricken vengeance. All was for nothing. All was worthless.

His fingers skittered across the surface of the water, chilled by the cold. Perhaps it was destined to end like this with nothing left but a few empty yesterdays and bleak tomorrows filled with endless pain and little hope for the future. Maybe not. He wasn't planning on living to see if the Planet would try to kill itself once more. He could only hope that death would come to claim him before it happened again.

He wished he could see her face.

He remembered it well. Perfect features surrounding by chocolate colored hair. Flawless, ageless, majestic. Full lips, smooth, creamy skin, beautiful. And her eyes. Beautiful green like twin emeralds sparkling in the sunlight. He could see her. Her face within the water where she had died, her eyes still glowing brightly with life.

The green swirled, and the reflection was gone.

~*~

Churning light, verdant with an eerie emerald, swirled endlessly, forever moving through the Planet like blood through veins. It was a constant, it would be there forever, the only thing to keep the men's actions in check and prevent the total destruction of life. It had only one purpose; it was a drone though it had thoughts living in it.

One voice was the most prominent.

And she was crying.

Her love had been lost. Twisted by the Planet's will and then lost. How cruel it was of the Planet to lock him away forever. How cruel it was of the Planet to use him and then destroy him. He was gone. Forever.

How cruel.

Her tears weren't real though they were cried with fervor unmatched by any real sobs. She was lonely. How she longed to see him again. Or anyone she had once loved and lost. Like her first love had been lost. Only the Planet knew what had become of him on that day, five years ago, and the Planet wasn't about to tell her. It had its own agenda. Heaven forbid it should ever reveal its intentions.

It was as bad as the men who sought to control it. Her tears were no longer of sorrow but of anger. "I hate you," she

whispered, chanting the words over and over, louder and louder. But her screams were lost with the other screams and shouts of pain and hurt and loss as they always were.

"I wish you would die," she snapped. "DIE!!"

And she could shout until her anger was gone. She could yell until eternity. She could scream until the most insensitive man on the surface would hear her. The Planet didn't cry because it had been leeches of its life by the stealing of Mako. It was dying because it was too hurt to live. All the Ancients' pain was here, all their sorrow was here, the burial grounds of an extinct race.

And no one wanted to carry on in its endless life. No one had the strength to carry on with no passage of time. And now she would go on alone once more. The Promised Land was nothing more than broken promises.

The green churned on, hissing with her pain as though to ward it off. Surely, it didn't want her hurt. It bubbled once before continuing on, flowing through the veins of the Planet once more.

~*~

The stream ebbed slowly, winding its way through the City of the Ancients. He sat by its edge, the black cloak discarded long ago. He had no need of it anymore. There was no Reunion; the Planet was just playing with his head again.

He sighed. If he had it his way there would be no more Reunions, no more crazy men dressed in silly outfits chasing their own tails for nothing, no more ways to destroy the world. The Planet would have no way to destroy itself, not as long as he walked its shores. He would see to its long, and prosperous, life.

Standing slowly, silently cursing his stiff leg, he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small sphere that caught the starlight for a brief second. He frowned at its flawless surface as it gleamed at him. He shook his head.

"Nygel, you stupid bastard," he muttered. "You've killed us all."

Reaching back, he threw the materia as far as he could into the green river of life. It hissed as it licked up the materia, disintegrating it into its tiniest parts, not to be crystallized again for a long time. The others were down there somewhere. The White, the Black, the Holy. They were all swirling within its depths, taken from Cloud by the Lifestream.

There they would remain, hopefully for all eternity.

He turned, flexing his left leg before he began to limp away, the black cloak left behind, the Black Materia destroyed. His job was complete. His promise was kept.

He swore he would never leave him, he swore that they would always be together, friends until they were finally killed. When one bled, the other would, too. And it had been so. He had followed him for what seemed like a lifetime, a shadow to always watch the play and never be a part of it. The only spectator for the puppets.

If only Cloud knew how long he had watched the play. He was sick of seeing the same thing happen over and over again. He was sick of how the same puppets were killed. He was sick of everything. And now he had finally turned the table, if only for a little while. It was more than he had ever done before this. It had been about time to do something.

And should Cloud find his Promised Land, then he would find it free of strings. No more materia, no more Mako, no more silly games with stupid scientists, no more. It was his gift to his friend. It was his obligation, his duty.

It had been promised.

It had been kept.

He limped out into the long grass, coming up behind a figure he had known for only a brief period of time but one he was likely never to forget.

Tifa felt a familiar presence behind her, the same feeling she always got when one of the black-cloaked men had come near to them. Only now, she had a feeling she knew who this mysterious stranger was.

She hugged herself against the cold bite of the night air, watching the clouds skirt along the horizon. Here they had come so far only to be back at the beginning once more, starting again with nothing but hurt. Cloud had never come for her at Nibelheim, had left her so disappointed, and yet had saved her at the same time. He had been there for her, and she had never known it. And now, even in death, he was still protecting her, to show up as just another one of those guards, to show up as the most successful failure.

She didn't turn to this familiar stranger, her eyes forever on the clouds. "He kept his promise," she decreed softly.

He nodded absentmindedly. "So did I."

The dawn broke through the cloud cover, and sunlight streamed over them. It was going to be a beautiful day.

~*~

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